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Torches In The Ashtray

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by

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Wrestle Mania

It starts with something happening. Maybe a death in the family. Maybe a fight with your husband or wife or child. It’s in the way a stranger looks at you. The way that little things are off. The way your rearview mirror is tilted dramatically to the left and you don’t remember tilting it. The way that small objects, stuff that you always always always keep in the same place, turn up elsewhere or don’t turn up at all. It’s when you make up reasons for all these things. When your mind races through dozens of possibilities until it completely forgets what the thing was in the first place and you try to keep track so you can explain it all to someone but you can’t keep track. Can’t keep a thought for six seconds. Write single words down but forget. It’s when cars start to honk rudely because you’re going 35 miles per hour on the freeway and you didn’t even realize you were on the freeway. And now that you realize it you’ve completely forgotten where you’re going. What you did yesterday. What you did five minutes ago. Your hands shake and you wonder whether they are shaking because it’s happening again or if it’s nerves. Maybe what’s happening is just nerves. Maybe it’s just too much caffeine. Maybe a beer will mellow you out. Maybe you’re just flighty and distracted like your mother. Maybe that lyric on the radio that you turned to at precisely the same moment when she called didn’t mean anything. Does she really call that often? Didn’t it ring once before she hung up? Or was it blocked number? Didn’t it ring? It’s when you can’t walk normally or you can but it’s weird to walk because people are looking and in your head you’re saying I’m walking normal. Stop walking weird! Why are you walking weird? Walk normal! And you can’t remember if you said that out loud and now you have to get away from people.
From music. From cars. Synchronicity. The talk back: Why am I so sensitive? Why are you? I’m too sensitive. You’re just tuned in again, that’s all. I’m fine. You are fine. I’m gonna be fine. The magical thinking starts but you know better. Know that it’s impossible to intuit other people’s thoughts. Impossible to have a headache because the whole world is hurting and you’re a vessel. But you can’t not believe and believing changes all.

Reasons, secrets, theories. Pop, pop, popping in your head. All answers. To all mysteries. This, because this, because this, which is exactly precisely the same as that. That that just happened, what was that thing? And it’s impossible to ignore just how perfectly each fucking thing/thought/answer feels like just undeniably, certainly, positively like someone else has placed it there. Because someone else has placed it there. You find a piece of paper with the word “mirror” written on it in your handwriting. You didn’t write that. Who does that? Maybe it’s a clue. So you rush to find your reflection. You, staring back at you. Staring back.
Torches In The Ashtray

The white car is following us. I’m sure of it. My brother, Dick, is driving. He’s speeding, cutting everyone off, even big rigs like he’s God of the 405. I don’t know where we’re going but I hope it’s safe. Strange things have been happening, things too difficult for my straight-laced brother to ever understand. He was a military man turned cop, but now he’s working as head security guard for the gated community he lives in. Who does that? I ask him if he sees the white car but he just looks at me. His eyes are always bloodshot; even when we were kids they were, from allergies, I guess.

“Charles, you need to fucking calm down and shut the fuck up.” It’s the first time he’s talked to me without threatening to kick my “faggot-ass” all morning. But I know they’re following us. Recording us, I’m sure of it. I whip my head all around checking blind spots, mirrors, everything. I still don’t know who they are, why they’re after me. But as my brother exits the freeway in some part of town I don’t recognize, I suddenly realize, he might be one of them.

I’ve got the shakes. Probably looks like I got Parkinson’s. My heart’s fluttering like hummingbird wings. Jesus, there’s a helicopter. Someone must have called the press. Did I call the press?

I don’t know how many days it’s been since I’ve slept. I just haven’t felt tired. But now, even though my mind is ready for a marathon, I can barely keep my eyes open.

We pull up to some hospital. Maybe he thinks I’m coming off drugs, with my limbs flailing like they are.

“What are we doing here?” I ask.
“Shut up Charles,” he says.

What does he know? I gotta be sick if we’re at a hospital. In the waiting room there’s a TV mounted in the corner that’s blasting an episode of Sponge Bob Square Pants.

“What does he know? I gotta be sick if we’re at a hospital. In the waiting room there’s a TV mounted in the corner that’s blasting an episode of Sponge Bob Square Pants.

“Do I have cancer?”

“No,” he says, not even looking at me.

“No,” he says, not even looking at me.

“Do I have any terminal illness? Like, that you guys kept from me because you knew I was gonna die today. Fuck I’m dying. Aren’t I? I’m dying. Am I dying?”

“No, goddamnit.” He shakes his head then leans back and rests it against the wall.


My head is heavy, heavy like my eyelids. I can’t stop nodding out but I can’t stop shaking either. Dick’s wearing one of his hundred-dollar Hawaiian shirts again. And he’s got on that giant waterproof watch he wears even in the shower. Such a dork. We’re nine years apart so he’s mid-30’s but dresses like a senior citizen. Acts like one too. Can’t wait to be middle-aged. You can’t trust that. Plus, as a cop he killed people. And last Christmas with his hot peppermint-schnapps breath right in my face, he told me he liked it too.
Some sort of white-lab-coated authority comes and talks with Dick. Then goes away and comes back with one of those big old needles like in the horror movies. I don’t even care what’s in it; I’m too exhausted to fight this guy right now.

The juice from the needle runs up my bicep and my arm tingles and then I swear I can feel that juice running all through my body, and it’s great. This must be what heroin is like. My shakes stop. Before really conking out my last thoughts are: Must have more of this. Don’t forget to get more of this.

A nurse wakes me up. There’s a big window in the room where I’m sleeping and the sun’s coming in. I can’t see through it, it’s the kind of window you’d find in a bathroom. But I can see shapes that look like people smoking. The nurse tells me that everyone else is out on the patio. I walk out of the room to the hallway and see a whiteboard with the day’s schedule. I know I’ve seen this handwriting before. Someone I know has written it, someone knows I’m here. They must be sending me a message.

Out on the patio she hands me a cigarette and lights it for me. The patio is just two dead planters and a couple of cement picnic tables with hard plastic umbrellas—the kind they’d have outside hamburger joints when I was a kid. But the most noticeable thing is the chain-linked fence that surrounds the small space, including overhead, like a chain-linked roof. I imagine climbing the fence and clinging to the roof upside down like Spiderman and laugh a little.

“What’s so funny?” A girl whips her head in my direction. Her arms are speckled with tattoos that are so bright they look fake.
“I dunno I was just thinking of climbing the walls and hanging upside down.”

“Mike’s already done that, huh Mike? But the nurses freaked out, and threatened to put him in with the East Wingers.”

Mike seems pleased with the story and laughs loud with a big goofy smile. A yellow smile, with a few rotten teeth. Meth-mouth. His laugh is just a bunch of rapid nervous breaths and it’s so disturbing that when he laughs everyone on the patio laughs a little.

“What wing are we?” I ask.

She takes a long suck on her cigarette. “This is the West Wing.” She exhales mini-clouds with each word.

“How presidential!” I say, starting Mike’s laughter and the whole thing again.

The girl’s not laughing. “They’re the violent ones, those East Wingers, the ones that can’t be appeased with benzos and opioids. The real crazies.”

She’s wearing bright red lipstick. A little round munchkin girl sits next to her, mimicking her movements. The tiny chubbster hands the girl some lipstick.


I’m tired and hazy and feel like I’m in one of those dreams where you’re stuck in slow-mo. Like running under water.

As she puts the lipstick on her protégé, the tatted girl asks for my name and tells me hers is Rose. Abby Rose, like a real life cartoon character.

“My mom was a fucking hippie,” she says.
She asks what I’m in for. I still have no idea and tell her so. She nods like it’s a common answer.

“Pick a number,” she says picking up a hardbound book that lies by her side.

“Any number 1 thru 455.”

I pick 69, so she turns to that page and begins to read. The book is The Grapes of Wrath. Everyone is quiet while she reads. Her voice is low and soothing and she doesn’t mess up, even with all the country bumpkin slang in the dialogue.

“A committee of dogs had met in the road, in honor of a bitch. Five males, shepherd mongrels, collie mongrels, dogs whose breeds had been blurred by a freedom of social life…”

I see the cotton fields she reads about. And a barn surrounded with countryside, suggesting an everlasting openness in every direction. And for a few moments I am somewhere else. When she’s done with that single page, she snaps the book closed with one hand. Everyone applauds. She glares at me for a reaction, acts like she just read my horoscope.

At first I figured that I’d been put in rehab to lay low for a bit. But with the way people are talking over the smoke break, I realize that I’m not just surrounded by recovering addicts. This is a full-blown psych ward.

Lunch is served on Styrofoam trays with none of the foods touching, which I like, and we get these little cartons of orange juice and cranberry cocktail that are so cold
there’s slush in them. I make sure to sit next to Rose. When she talks, everyone listens. When she’s done with her food everyone else decides they’re done too.

After eating, my brain begins buzzing, just how it was before the shot. Ideas pop and fizzle rapidly. Racing through my head in a steady stream, keeping pace with my accelerating heartbeat. I’m me again.

Some sort of therapist-lady comes in and spreads out a long sheet of butcher paper and announces that it’s time for arts-and-crafts. Rose tells me how the cafeteria is also the arts and crafts room and the group-therapy room and where we listen to 12-step panels. I ask her what a 12-step panel is.

“Groups of people who are in love with their sober selves and wish everyone in the world could have a piece of their sweet, non-alcoholic, drug-free pie,” she says.

After the paper is set on the long table of the “Everything Room” the lady tells us to make a mural, to draw whatever we feel inside. Me and Rose team up and try to draw a swimming pool and African animals. I look at everyone’s drawings. Everywhere I look the sky is white. Just white all over. And if you look down there’s a field of crops all yellow, bright yellow, like, Big Bird! They even sort of look like feathers. And in the white sky is a white airplane. It’s a long tube with round windows, and round faces in each window with round open mouths on each face that are screaming. They’re screaming because they can feel the tube tilting downward. They’re screaming because there’s dark smoke on both wings that some of them can see. But most of all they’re screaming because they have no idea that there’s a nice soft Big Bird featherbed to land on!
A riot of laughter starts when Mike finishes his airplane. We love it. We love it all. The whole mural becomes a magical thing that we’re all a part of. A gorgeous sight. But then the therapist-lady sees the plane going down, and she snatches the magic markers out of Mike’s hands. She talks to us like were a buncha big babies, about how we can’t draw such negative things. It’s too late though. Even the most self-centered suicidals and downest depressives you’ve ever seen share the laughs.

There are a few people who have trouble drawing. A big black guy rocks in his chair and whispers into his fist, and that little munchkin girl Monica says that she wants to draw a mansion but keeps seeing skeletons everywhere.

Then I guess Mike says something to the therapist-lady, something bad. I don’t hear him but suddenly the old hag tells us, “That’s it, you guys are done,” and ends the group early. But she lets us put our masterpiece on the wall and we stand together, looking, smiling. It’s our mural. All of ours. And we feel like we’ve pulled a fast one getting out of group early.

But it doesn’t take us very long to realize that being out of group doesn’t even matter if we can’t smoke. That hag, warden and so-called therapist actually stands in front of the doors, blocking us from the outside patio. But it’s okay cause I have an idea. I tell Rose we’re gonna steal a trick from Edward Bernays, the greatest P.R. man since the Apostle Paul. Rose has three packs of cigarettes just waiting for her in the nurse’s station. She explains how in the hospital it’s sorta like the more your family loves you the more packs of cigarettes you get. So me and Rose pass out cigarettes to every last patient on the West Wing, and if they don’t know what to do with them, then we ever so gently put
the ciggie between their lips for them. Me and Rose are in cahoots. We’re rallying the troops.

“These are freedom torches,” I say holding a single cigarette in her face.

“Ha! Freedom Torches!” she says. We march around from room to room making sure everyone has a ciggie. Then we announce: It. Is. Smoke time! When in fact it is not. All seventeen or twenty-five—I don’t know exactly how many—all of us march to the patio doors. And since we are so many, the one nurse guarding the door simply can’t stop us! We are free! We high five and deeply inhale our first drags of smoke, basking in the glory of our achievement. But as the nurse continues to light cigarettes, we have to move quickly to swipe some people’s smokes right out of their mouths, as there are several who either don’t remember or altogether don’t know that they do not smoke. We agree that these people’s continued gagging and coughing would be extremely detrimental and in general very bad P.R. for the Freedom Torches Campaign.

Later that night we’re all on the smoking patio. It’s the last smoke break before bed. Mike confesses that he’s a suicide case and he laughs first when he tells us how he guzzled carburetor fluid to do it. His laughing makes it okay for all of us to laugh. Rose reapplyes her lipstick and I ask her why she does that right before bed.

“What if there’s a fire or something? A lady has to look her best.”

This makes me like her even more.

Mike gives her a drawing. It’s a mouse with a basketball that’s making a slam dunk. In disturbing cursive it says: To my little bug, at the top of the page. He likes her too, but not in the same way I do. She's just a girl, and Mike clearly has other intentions.
Before we all leave the patio for bed, Rose reads us page 325 from *The Grapes of Wrath* and once again, I’m carried away from the hospital. For a moment I feel okay and almost believe it.

*

A few days in, I finally meet my doctor. He looks like me, slightly balding but still in need of a haircut, with the same blue eyes as me and my brother. I feel inadequate because he’s a doctor and what am I? A fucking mental patient.

“The therapists and your case-worker told me about your paranoia. Do you still feel like you’re being followed, or that you’re part of some conspiracy?” he asks.

Of course, I said no. I mean I don’t want to look like a nut job, but part of me still wants to believe that there is something bigger going on because if there was then I wouldn’t be crazy. I’d be a victim of circumstance and everyone would have to apologize. He tells me my official diagnosis, goes over the new meds he’s gonna start me on and asks how I’m doing with the one’s he’s already gave me. After he leaves, I go out to the patio. It’s almost time for visiting hour and we’re allowed to wait for our families wherever we want.

I find Rose out there. She’s laying flat on the cement with her shirt rolled up so she can tan her stomach. It’s like she has no idea that she’s on a funny farm. She shades her eyes from the late afternoon sun. But even with her eyes covered she still senses my restlessness.

“What, did those A.A. people psych you out? Now you think you’re an alcoholic or something?”
“It’s my diagnosis.”

I tell her that it’s bipolar disorder, rapid-cycling with psychotic tendencies.

“Okay. So what? You’re bipolar. Big deal, everyone is. Join the club, move to Hollywood, make your whole life into a fucking screenplay for God sakes.”

“With psychotic tendencies? Sounds like a I’m a fucking serial killer.”

She sits up Indian style and looks in my eyes, squinting, searching for what’s really bothering me. She pouts her red lips to the left and to the right, to be funny. Failing, she shrugs.

“Charles. Everybody’s got something. Every family’s got something. That just means that when you go up, you go way up. You cross over. So you have to take different stuff. Probably the same meds that I take.”

She talks about how she’s schizoaffective and how the two can be very similar, how there is a lot of overlap but one crucial difference.

“Bipolar is one thing, it’s normal enough that celebrities can actually admit to having it. People even throw it around as a joke. ‘Gosh I’m so bipolar!’ Ha. Ha. Ha. But add schizo- to a diagnosis and people get scared.”

Then she explains that this is the third time she’s been put in this hospital.

“All you can do is find something to be happy about. Like me. I called my boyfriend earlier and he said he wants to take a break. Imagine that, the person you love totally dumping you while you’re in a place like this. But you know what? He still said that he’s coming to visit me. He’s even bringing me some menthols. You gotta look at what you got.”
All I can do is nod. Rose smiles and reaches for the book, it’s always within arms reach. This time she reads her favorite page: “Look Al, I’ll tell ya one thing—the jail house is jus’ a kind a way a drivin’ a guy slowly nuts. See? An’ they go nuts an’ you see ‘em an’ hear ‘em, an pretty soon you don’t know if you’re nuts or not.”

Rose stops and looks up into my eyes reciting the next line from memory: “When they get to screamin’ in the night sometimes you think it’s you doin’ the screamin’—an’ sometimes it is.”

Visiting hours start. My brother comes and talks at me. Says he’s got a meeting with my caseworker tomorrow. I can’t help staring at Rose when he’s talking. She and Monica are on the floor, sitting against a wall. Rose is just staring and Monica looks excited just to be next to her, like Rose is her special visitor. The hour goes by and it’s pretty obvious that Rose’s guy didn’t come. After Dick leaves, she rushes up and pushes me against the hallway wall.

“You should know, Charles, this place is a fucking game. A puzzle factory!” Her eyes shift toward the nurses’ station but nobody looks up. “All they say is sleep and structure and diet and exercise and a life of balance and boredom and pills three times a day for the rest of your life. Do you hear me? The rest of your life. Every day. Like you’ve got diabetes or something.” The initial anger drains from her voice and her eyes become glossy.

“But you know what? You know what they don’t tell you? You know what they don’t say? They don’t mention how even if you’re a good boy and you wake up and take
those meds just the way they say, on the dot, at the same time, faithfully, robotically, after three or four years, five if you’re lucky, one day you’ll wake up and like nothing they’ll just stop working.” Her chest was heaving like she had just gone for a run, her body edged closer to mine.

“That’s what they don’t tell you and that’s why there’s so many different kinds, so many different kinds of the same fucking ones. And that’s why I’ve been here more than once and that’s why you’ll be back.”

Rose walks away, uninterested in my response. I realize, I haven’t been that physically close to a girl since high school, back when I was still trying to make that whole thing work, now they were like foreign beings to me.

Mike watched the whole thing. He’s got the grin again. I think he’s happy that the boyfriend didn’t show. He tells me that tonight is the night. Later on he’s going to take his chances with Rose. I don’t say anything because I don’t know what to say.

The next morning I wake up late. Every morning they take our vitals at 5:00 a.m. Usually, I can’t get back to sleep, but for the first time I can’t even remember them taking my vitals. So I decide that Klonopin is my friend. I’m the last one to show up to breakfast. There are two trays left in the cart. The other one is for Rose. I wait but she doesn’t come. Mike sits across from me; he has a square bandage right under his eye on his left cheek. I ask him what happened to his face, and he just smiles and says, “Bug bite,” and snaps his jaws hard, over and over, so I can hear the click, click, click of his teeth. I don’t care, I don’t wanna know. Where’s Rose?
Everybody’s talking about the screaming they heard last night and how it woke them up. Monica says a ghost came into her room. That’s when I stop listening. You think the least these docs could do is rid these nuts of their auditory and visual hallucinations, but I guess not everyone is med-compliant.

After breakfast, everyone goes to change out of their pajamas and get ready for another day just like the one before. I throw away my tray and sit back down in the “Everything Room.” The mural is still on the wall. It’s a mess. Nothing makes any sense. Chains of letters had been sprawled across the page spelling nothing. Failed attempts at drawings are blacked out with what looks like violent scribbles. It’s chicken scratch, kindergarten stuff. The only somewhat recognizable image is the airplane going down. It’s freezing in this room, like a meat locker. I cross my goose-bumped arms and start to feel sick to my stomach. I’m med sick. You learn the difference between the med-induced lightening-bolt nausea and natural stomachaches pretty quick. The sickness makes me realize that whatever adjustment the doc had made was working. I see a big book sitting on the back counter. It’s Rose’s Grapes of Wrath. I take it back my room and put it in the drawer of my nightstand.

The day goes on but things seem different. I don’t feel so zombified and am finally realizing how much everyone else is. Had the half-dead always shuffled the halls like this? Have they always mumbled nonsense? Do the nurses in the Easter-colored scrubs seem hopped-up on amphetamines everyday or is this over-the-top enthusiasm the norm? It’s like my blinders have been removed. Now I see what’s really all around me.
I wait in the hallway for my brother so we can meet with my caseworker. Looking at the white tile floor I notice the little flecks of green in them that look like dirt and fuzz balls. The walls of the hallway were supposed to be white too, but taking a closer look I can see every hand and footprint, every dent and scratch. All the marks left by wild patients who’d been unkindly escorted down the corridor and transferred to the East Wing. When my brother finally comes, he says I should move in with him. I tell him it sounds good, even though it sounds horrible. I just want out.

*I*

I skip the last smoke break of the night. As I walk by the door to the patio and back to my room, Monica comes up and tells me she saw Rose. And how Rose was wearing the red lipstick and everything. I don’t say anything; this is the same girl that had a ghost waltz into her room the previous night. The same girl who at one point wanted us to believe she was an Olympic swimmer. I tell her I have a headache and need to go to bed.

Back in my room I take Rose’s book out of the nightstand. For a second I want to pick a number, I want think of what number Rose would pick and to turn to a page that will contain a secret message about what happened to her, with a clue about where she went. But I acknowledge that it is impossible, even though I want to believe that it isn’t. I open it to page one and begin to read, like a normal person. Through the window I see dark silhouettes out on the patio. One of them is Monica, I can tell because her shadow looks like that of a child. Then the silhouettes walk away and a few minutes later what seems like different, slower ones file back out. Their feet shuffle as if in restraints. I
wonder for a moment who’s out there before I realize that it’s the East Wing, out for their last smoke before bed.
Being Found

Her birth has been scheduled. You’re notified via text message. How does one physically prepare for a C-section? Where’s the sports movie montage for that? You like to think of yourself as a gestational benefactor. Tell people you’re a surrogate when they don’t mind their own business.

So even though you’ll technically be overdue, the adopting couple has slated July 20, 2022 to be the best day of their lives. Shawna says it will be the worst of yours. She knows from experience and mentions it every day, like you don’t already know.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. You were supposed to be something. Supposed to go places. Twelve years ago you were on fire, had finished the first two years of college in one. You were going to study abroad, learn Arabic, write a manifesto and work for the ACLU. Twelve years ago you dated guys like Zachary who you’d find at Greenpeace rallies or anti-“Bush War” protests and their adjoining 9/11 conspiracy-theory meetings. Guys who were vegan/atheist/medical marijuana advocates majoring in international relations or comparative literature or any number of majors populated by those who didn’t seem to value things like a livable income or job security. That was back when you hated the mere thought of people solely concerned with things like livable income or job security. Back when you entertained ideas about going to law school. When your MySpace name was “Rebillita Without A Cuz,” and you apparently didn’t give a shit about typos. When romance meant walking and arguing about religion before athletic sex in the middle of a Noam Chomsky documentary. Because that’s how much
goddamn energy you had and how alive you felt there in Zachary’s dorm room, black light posters ablaze, velvety portraits of Che and Bob Marley staring down at you from the ceiling.

The things that defined you were different then. You hated sorority girls, domestic beer and business majors. Were unabashedly proud of your vote for Arianna Huffington in the California recall. Brazen and big into feminism, though you constantly thought you were fat and homely and boring. Thought your skin was bad and in general had no idea how good you really looked.

Then, like so many others, your dreams were gradually narrowed down. In 2008 you were twenty-four with a political science degree and shackled in debt. Who wasn’t? All those professors had been lying all along. Preparing an entire generation for phantom careers. Speaking knowingly and with certainty about jobs that simply didn’t exist. So instead you went on to become the only waitress in Newport Beach who was also well versed in Foucault, structuralism and Kant.

Even after the restaurant closed down, you still clung to your divine aspirations. Told family you were studying for the LSAT to buy you some time. They didn’t know that you actually spent most days at Tang’s Donuts, abusing the free refill policy while playing chess with homeless men for twenty-five cents a game. That’s when nights got lonely. When the self-imposed isolation seemed temporary. When internet poker and drunken Facebook messaging became your idea of nightlife. When the white glow from your black Mac Book was the best distraction from the quiet darkness of your rented
room. Back when you spent hours friending complete strangers to get your Mob Wars numbers up. Right around when you stopped wearing make-up and let your eyebrows grow in. Stopped shaving and let the days between showers stack up. Let your hair tangle into thick nests before you dealt with it. Let your cell phone shut off and watched as the mail pile spread into a wide circle of white beside the door.

Soon sleep became your favorite pastime, an ephemeral asylum from your own disappointment, back when denial was still the path of least resistance.

An official diagnosis soon followed. Like giving it a name made things any better. Six ineffective weeks of Zoloft begot six weeks of Wellbutrin and when that didn’t work either it was another six on Depakote. It was a year of staggering weight gain, nightly dry mouth, and physical exhaustion. Any previous ability to concentrate waned fiercely and any inkling of motivation seemed to be nothing more than fleeting figments of the person you used to be. A suicidal brand of depression, the first of several bouts. A state that most people will never experience, though they attempted to commiserate anyway--like your parents who suggested exercise, journaling, meditating and a slew of other Chicken Soup For The Soul type shit they sent along with the heavy onslaught of self-help books. Meanwhile, you wished for migraines. Wished you could trade your dilemma with something that was tangible, quantifiable, understandable. Something they could cut out of you. Something that would urge them to leave you alone, shut off the lights and stay away.

Eventually they did anyway.
This was when the dreams started, the violent fantasies and visions of quiet endings. In one you are drunk and choke down handfuls of pills. In another you scale the outer fence of the Vincent St. Thomas bridge. The gentlest of them is a serene image of your body out at sea. Such fatal ideations began to strike at random, luring you away so your existence became a walking black out that you’d awake from suddenly-- in the frozen food aisle, stopped at a red light, or during Dancing With The Stars.

After three years of this half-life, you decided to meet with a different pharmacologist. Watched him behind his mahogany desk as he wrote down non-responsive and then underlined it methodically as you kept talking. That was the day you became a candidate for electroconvulsive therapy. On Facebook, your peers were contemplating marriage, children, car buying, home equity loans. As they earned good driver discounts and graduate degrees you were suddenly McMurphy from Cuckoo’s Nest. Except unlike McMurphy(108,686),(144,719), you had a choice.

So you took matters into you own hands. You simplified your diet: cigarettes and energy drinks before noon, whiskey as soon as it got dark. By then, your body was so accustomed to sedation it seemed unaffected by the alcohol. But subsequent shifts in mood were radiant. Every night you drank for that one irresistible moment where you were once again invincible. Sometimes whole hours would go by where you felt capable of something.

And you were right, but in reality that something turned out to be an admin job at Roto-Rooter, which eventually became the longest job you’d ever held. Workdays started with a Big Gulp of beer to get you through rush hour. Lunch was a refill and hot
dog. Then in the car on the way home your shaking hands would reach for one of several eco-friendly containers of whiskey that you kept stocked in the backseat. Soon even the faintest clank of the metal bottles was enough to make you salivate. Over every speed bump, at every stop sign you were Pavlov’s bitch--anxious and pathetic--with an insatiable lust for the sharp burn of that warm liquid slicing down your throat.

You were good at your job. Maybe even great most days. Great on the phone. Great at the office small talk. And an eventual master at nursing hangovers and diligently covering the undeniable scent wafting off your clammy skin. Like paper to rock, you recognized the lingering sweetness of Djarums as the perfect mask to float over the stench of grain alcohol. And in the same vein, discovered microwaved chicken broth to be the perfect weapon to crush lingering notes of vomit, like rock to scissors.

You thought of them as remedies but they were more like superstitions, rituals you clung to that yielded minimal results in everyone else’s world. Including the world of your boss who pulled you into his office for several final warnings, always lingering and looking you up and down. There’s nothing wrong with your work but you smell like shit. A substantial statement, from the mouth of a fat grease ball that’d been Roto-Rootering his entire adult life. You were too proud to give him what he wanted. One of the few times your boozy confidence actually saved you, though you didn’t realize it at the time.

That’s what got you to your first AA meeting. Greasy Dave’s succinct assessment and the persistent threat of unemployment without the blissful catharsis of unemployment benefits. Yes, before officially being fired, you mustered up what you thought was all the strength you had left and faked the desire to quit. Went to a handful of meetings. Three
days of meetings in a row to kick things off, but the shit didn’t take. Though you did
drink less for a moment, before you took a stab at all the “half-measures” the AA
disciples told you wouldn’t work. Only beer and wine. Only on the weekends. Just one a
day like a multivitamin. You had to try.

But it felt more like sobriety was a relapse. Drinking was the thing that brought
order back to your life, rather than the other way around. Better to be a functional
alcoholic than a sober pile of shit. Even if you did drink too much, at least you were
facing life head on, instead of hiding out in AA. Ducking for cover in those stale rooms
where romantic tales of exaggerated past lives spun through the air. Where each story
ended with the same obligatory burst of optimism slapped on at the last second, begging
for applause.

So you did the opposite and started drinking in bars more than ever before. That’s
when you met Mike, the too-tan forty-something with a barbwire tattoo around his bicep,
just like Pamela Anderson’s. Mike, who had just quit his job as a roofer to study
underwater welding. Who in the interim was living off the small inheritance that came
his way when his father died but spent most of his time volunteer bar-backing at his
favorite dive. This is how the Liquid Lounge became your living room. How nightly
blackout sex with the same generous drunk got you by. How you kept drinking long after
Roto-Rooter. After you maxed out that last credit card, sold your car, broke your lease.
But no matter how much time you spent with Mike--how many blurry days turned nights,
turned weeks and months--most days when you woke up on his futon or his floor you had
no idea where you were.
When Mike moved on to meth, back to meth you later realized, you returned to AA. Spent whole days at the Alano Club until you finagled a couch to crash on. You put 30 days together, in a row, how it’s supposed to be done, got a sponsor. The sponsor who introduced you to Julie when she needed help with her cleaning business. The same hardass linebacker of a woman who Shawna worked for then. In a team of three, you cleaned other people’s houses day and night. Sometimes more than twenty houses a day. A number that swelled and waned with Julie’s habitual firing and rehiring of Shawna.

You didn’t have much. But you had to work hard. Had to get on your knees daily to reach around to get at that awkward space behind toilets. Had to bleach out the shit stains that were only visible at odd angles. Even when there wasn’t anything to scrub or wipe off you still did what you were supposed to. Broke a sweat on a daily basis and became accustomed to the strong scent of the vinegar Julie insisted on using. And the three of you became friends. And it felt like you earned those two friendships, earned their respect and loyalty. And finally you had perceptions besides your own to go off. Women to listen to and talk to who didn’t expect a co-pay at the end of a conversation.

By the dog days of your sobriety--that endless abyss between ninety days and six months--you had gathered enough money to rent a room from your sponsor. On your third night in her home, you decided that her live-in boyfriend was attractive. On the fifth night you slept with him. And with that one indiscretion you killed the most popular couple in West Hollywood AA. Communal scorn soon followed. So you drove to the other side of town for meetings. Felt every morsel of guilt for the first time in a long time, but you didn’t drink.
Shawna consoled you: *Honey, the dick had it coming and you did sober Barbie a big fucking favor if you ask me.* That’s when Shawna began to transition from best friend to family. When she took you in like she knew what was coming. Like she was already protecting the child inside you. The baby girl she would beg you to keep.

*

For some people, life is an unending sequence of ever-greater hopes achieved and happiness experienced. For others it is a constant struggle to keep above the vagaries of life and personal demons. This is why you will do all that you can to keep her life from being like yours. Why you pray nightly for nurture over nature. Some days, you think this will be the kindest and most noble thing you’ll ever do. Other days, you just think you’re selfish.

Your baby girl arrives on her own time, before she is scheduled to. And your body does what it’s supposed to. No pitocin, no analgesics, no anesthetics. Shawna is next to you in the hospital. She cries uncontrollably when the doctors take the baby away. For her it is a scene that hits much too close to home, but for you it’s like you’re not even there. It’s like you’re floating above your body, like it is a foreign being beneath you for those few precious minutes while you hold her, still wet and ravished below, still running on endorphins. This is what kills most mothers, this is what killed Shawna when she was the one in the bed all those years ago, the three maybe four minutes when she’s all yours before being swiped away and taken to another room where her real parents wait for the greatest moment of their lives. That’s what kills most of them, the smell of newborn skin
and the sound of crying ringing in their ears before it fades to the near silence of humming medical machines, nurse whispers and footsteps.

But for you it is the milk. No one tells you about the milk. In the hospital they do a good job of keeping you loaded enough not to care, drugged up enough to quiet all your instincts, guilt and longing. It isn’t until well after signing the papers, then leaving the hospital, isn’t until after that first night alone when the doctor’s special cocktail of painkillers and mood stabilizers begins to wane. You are sitting in the dark, in a hotel room--the suite at the Courtyard Marriot where the adopting parents have put you up. The same room you’d spent the entire last month in, all expenses paid by the faceless couple you decided not to meet. You are watching Let’s Make A Deal when you notice the big ring around your nipple, a dark gray circle growing wider on your t-shirt, wet and round. That’s when you take off your shirt and sit there topless—with Wayne Brady schmoozing in the background—and spend what seems like hours pinching each nipple and then watching each tiny spray of milk squirt into your hand. Some of it drips. You watch it run down your big belly like teardrops. It is in this moment while squeezing and prodding and tugging at your breasts that you begin to imagine the life that you won’t be a part of. The baby book you’ll never fill, the first day of school you’ll never know about, the tantrums, the dirty diapers and then first dates and high school sporting events you’ll never fight with her about.

Then you realize maybe you won’t have to miss it all, that maybe there is a small chance that somehow you will find part of this life that you so willingly surrendered. You remember the pictures that Shawna has shown you of her lost little girl, the ones she was
able to find after some minor stalking on Facebook, how the adopted mother uploaded her daughter’s entire little life and absent-mindedly friended Shawna after her persistent requests. Maybe there will be something there for you, just like maybe one day you will be there for her to find, in decades of forgotten photos and usernames. They say yours was the first generation to have most of their lives recorded digitally, thousands of pictures and videos and words uploaded personally and crammed into servers. Memories that exist in “clouds” are all there for anyone with a motive to check on, scroll through and discover.

And when these feelings come again, when the curiosity won’t subside, that’s what you will focus on--how to make yourself found. How you will keep up with what a general search of your name brings. Ancestry websites, census data, Google Earth, old blogs and LiveJournal posts, submission managers, failed social networks, dating profile pages. These are the things that will bring you comfort. And you hope that one day they will bring her comfort too.
I had known Shawna for approximately eight minutes and already knew her story. That’s what happens when you get tossed from mental ward to rehab to sober living and back again enough times; you get good at summarizing your life over the length of exactly one cigarette.

We compared our self-inflicted battle wounds. Exactly one week after Shawna gave her daughter up for adoption, when her body still had that pregnant silhouette to it, someone asked when she was due and she just couldn’t handle it. The hospital called it a suicide attempt but she swears it was a total accident. She didn’t mean to cut into the flesh as deep as she did, but her slight over-indulgence made her pass out pretty quickly. She was in a bathroom stall at McDonald’s of all places, that’s where they found her, slumped between the toilet and the wall. Red blood on white porcelain. She had even gone out of her way to find a McDonald’s that didn’t have a jungle gym and the scads of children that came with it. She was on her way home from what felt like a religious confession to her therapist and she knew what tiny voices of laughter or the presence of a screaming toddler could do to her. You can’t hand over post-partum depression to an adopting mother the way you can hand over a baby. That’s how she ended up in this particular outpatient program here in Costa Mesa, even though she lives in Long Beach.

“I shouldn’t take the bandage off, but that’s where this one came from.” Shawna opened the snaps of the thick leather bracelet that covered her wrist. The wound was
barely scabbing up and had yellow pus around the edges. It was almost directly in
between two similar lines of raised pink skin. Scars with their own stories, from similar
moments of equal desperation, I know, because I have them too.

I nodded and lit a cigarette, “That’s why I got this,” I said showing her the tattoo
of Drake’s name across my wrist. “So I could remember him every time I thought about
doing it again.”

“Your son’s name?” Shawna propped her giant red sunglasses on her head so she
could look closer. These cat-eye glasses and her entire ensemble, down to her pink
shoelaces dotted with skulls, looked like a Hot Topic clearance sale. Her thick ball and
chain necklace was straight out of 1998.

“Yeah, I like the lettering but it sucks now though, cause everybody’s gonna think
I named him after that rapper,” I said. The truth is I wasn’t the one that named him – it
was his dad, Anthony, who picked it. Anthony is also the one who takes care of him. I
really shouldn’t even call myself a mom anymore, that’s the real truth.

Shawna laughed at the rapper thing. “I like it,” she said brushing her thumb over
the letters. It was unbearably bright outside. The sun was at its highest point so she put
her glasses back on. She mentioned her seven-year-old son Micah briefly before going
back to talking about the adoption. “Susan and Bill ended up naming her Hope. Fucking
irony. I’m still glad I did it. The cutting I mean, I mean I’m still okay with the adoption
thing too, but yeah this stupid wrist thing was a better decision at the time, than, you
know, getting loaded and starting that whole thing again.”
I nodded and chewed on my cuticles, secretly wishing I would have chosen adoption.

“That’s the difference between cutting and using I guess,” Shawna continued. “You can only really hurt yourself, you know what I mean? Like you don’t have to drag other people into your shit.” Shawna flicked her cigarette so hard the burning tip flew off the end of it.

“Yeah, I guess, I’d still rather get loaded, fuck that,” I said.

You make friends fast in these kinds of places. I had barely met Shawna that morning and here we were sharing what therapists would call our “darkest moments” on our lunch break that same day. I’ve been in the program for a little over two weeks but she had just gotten transferred in from the main part of the hospital. They call it a “partial hospitalization program,” a sort of middle ground for people who weren’t fucked up enough to be under 24-hour surveillance in a full-blown mental ward but not yet normal enough to integrate themselves back into the real world. People like Shawna and me who weren’t ready to deal with work or school or whatever it is you’re supposed to do as a well-adjusted, healthy member of society. It’s basically like going to school, a short weekday program with a shitty cafeteria lunch provided. Except this school takes place in the one sunny wing of the mental hospital, the one without any locked doors. Group therapy, smoke break, group therapy, lunch break, group therapy, and in between all of that, nurses send you to the lab with slips of paper to get blood drawn or piss in a cup. Then they drag you out of group to meet with your shrink once a day, meet with your case-manager, meet with your therapist, meet with a social worker if you need one. A
one-stop shop for all things mental health related. It seems like the only thing they don’t do for us is feed us meds, which is sort of a big deal, a major difference compared to the “West Wing” that we all transferred in from. Your medication is your responsibility, even the “as needed” prescriptions like Vistaril, which are always tricky. Sometimes I look around the table and try to guess at who’s compliant and who’s not, it’s usually not hard to tell.

The program isn’t just for drug addicts so you can’t call it rehab, but all the alcoholic/addicts usually get thrown into the same group. They call it dual-diagnosis when you’ve got a mental disorder and some form of addiction. I’m only twenty-three but it still feels like it’s taken an entire lifetime to come to terms with the fact that I’ve got both. There are also people with OCD, anxiety disorders, recently released suicide attempts, people trying to get their short term memory back after ECT, depressed people, people who suffered from PTSD though they’d never been to war, cry-for-help-cutters who weren’t really suicidal, bipolars, schizophrenics, borderline personality disorder folks, the whole shebang.

“How many days do you have?” Shawna asked me.

“Thirty days sober this Friday.”

“No wonder you want to get loaded. That sucks. Do you have a meeting on Friday nights?”

“Not really.” I gnawed on my cuticles even more.

In the last month I had already hooked up with three different regulars at the meeting my sponsor recommended, though one of them was a job so it doesn’t really
count. It was just quick cash, a stupid idea really. All of which I haven’t exactly told my sponsor about yet. I know she’ll just fucking lecture me and tell me to get tested again. She swears that’s how she got Hep C, from whoring around in AA her first few years sober, even though contracting it is like fucking impossible. Still, she’s right in a way. It’s probably like the worst segment of the population to fuck.

Shawna started to tell me about her Friday night meeting, but Matthew the blonde therapist guy poked his head out of the doorway, “Two minutes ‘til group,” he announces, like he’s so excited to get started. I’ve been staring at him all day trying to figure out how old he is. He can’t be more than a few years older than me, but he looks so young and angelic it’s hard to imagine him having sex or smoking a joint or having body hair even. He looks like one of those Calvary Chapel types or one of those other huge Orange County churches, the type of guy who plays guitar at bible studies and spends his weekends picketing in front of Planned Parenthood.

I smashed my cigarette butt against the bottom of my sneaker and put it in my jacket pocket, before going back inside. I’ve been weird about throwing things away lately.

We, Shawna and me, we’re different than the rest, I decided this almost immediately. We talk about these things like they are nothing, like everyone we’ve ever known hurts themselves, slams speed and gives up babies. Like self-destruction is a reflex. There are other people in group who are soft. They breakdown and cry and identify with each other’s struggles and get discharged after a week, but that’s not us. We
have a long way to go still, at least that’s what they would say, maybe not to our faces, but I’m sure similar notes are scribbled all over our case files. *Long way to go, this one.*

*Abby shows little improvement. Third week of non-med compliance.* I swear to god, I’ve de-coded all these phrases in the upside-down loopy handwriting on the notebook my case manager occasionally holds unguarded in front of me. Shawna and me are tough and stubborn, and we’ve seen this all and done this all before. We know how typical our circumstances are considering where we’ve come from, how predictable our misbehavior is, how young people with these sorts of problems either learn how to play it straight or kill themselves, accidentally or otherwise.

2

I agreed to go with Shawna to her Friday night meeting in Long Beach, and she agreed to come all the way to Santa Ana and pick me up because I don’t have a car.

Shawna is a few years older than me and has three-years sober off meth, but prefers AA to NA, which, well I sort of don’t blame her. Apparently, all that stuff messed up her metabolism and that’s why she’s really overweight, besides the extra baby weight. It’s easy to see how someone could mistake her shape and think she’s pregnant. I remember it took my stomach like a month to stop protruding like that after I had Drake.

She picks me up in her old-ass gold Saturn and has a diet Rock Star for me, which she knows makes up like fifty percent of my entire diet. The cloth seats are ripped to shit and the whole car reeks of cigarettes, which makes it smell like home to me. We joke about how caffeine is all we have left and she tells me how every Friday she buys herself
a Red Line energy drink (the crack-cocaine of energy drinks) and a pack of cloves to trick herself into feeling like she’s “going big” for the weekend. So we chain smoke cloves and listen to X while we speed down the 22 towards the LBC. The sun is setting so the whole sky is amber and warm summer air rushes loudly through the windows, sucking away our swirls of smoke as we drive.

The meeting is called “Under The Bridge” and that’s where it is, beneath a bridge in a huge marina. As we walk up to the meeting there are like thirty people standing in front of the building smoking and talking loudly. It looks like a high school quad during break, but with old people. A lot of them have that same style that Shawna does, tattooed, punk rock, lots of Converse and lots of pageboy caps. Shawna seems pretty popular. She introduces me to like fifteen people. I don’t remember any of their names, though they shake my hand hard each time and seem so happy to meet me. My sponsor’s meeting was not like this, even though it wasn’t that far from here.

Somebody starts ringing an actual freaking cattle bell and the herd of old punks heads inside. The room is long and rectangular and there’s a table in the middle with a cake and a tackle box on it. The box is filled with little metal coins that they call “chips” and key chains that have different denominations of sobriety on them 5 years, 1 year, 6 months, 30 days, 24-hours. They’re the same kind that are in my jewelry box at home, where I have way too many of all the wrong denominations. I stand up to get my 30-day chip and say the words “Abby-Rose alcoholic” and as the chip girl gives me a hug, everyone replies “Hi Abby!” and claps, just like in the fucking movies.
I was eighteen the first time I got thirty days and remember how it was actually exciting. The whole AA thing was exciting. You get to meet so many new people and are invited to so many things, birthdays, barbeques, holiday get-togethers, it almost feels like church, like being sober is actually fun. Suddenly you’re a part of this giant secret society of deviants and feel like you’re kind of badass for being so fucked up that you have to get help. But this is not my first thirty days, and the novelty and all that shit has worn off, now it just sucks. Sobriety is no longer some mysterious dreamland of endless possibilities, instead it’s nothing more than the smaller half of the cyclical nightmare that is my life. Get sober. Get a job. Get a boyfriend maybe. Get loaded. Lose job. Cheat on boyfriend. Repeat. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

After the meeting, Shawna takes me out to eat with her pack of friends. And for a brief second after we hop back into her Saturn and join the caravan of cars heading downtown, it actually does seem like we’re gonna “go big” on this Friday night. I pocket a yellow Bic liter I find in Shawna’s car to remember the feeling.

The weekends are hard, I never know what to do with myself. I wake up at noon and take an Ativan, even though I only have twelve left and am supposed to be saving them. I know they’re not going to give me any more, since they recently realized that they’ve been supplying a potential drug addict with potentially addictive drugs. I was supposed to throw them away, but that seemed like an absurd waste. So I take one of the tiny pills and my Wellbutrin, then smoke on the balcony and watch re-runs of “16 and
Pregnant” and “Teen Mom 2” on MTV and just kind of tune out for a while. There’s something about the combination of benzodiazepines and teenage reality tv that makes me feel better about my shitty life. It somehow keeps me from imagining all the things normal twenty-something’s might be doing or getting ready to do on a Saturday evening. Sometimes I go on Facebook and look at people I knew in high school, girls mostly or I guess I should call them women. Seems like all of the sudden everyone has just finished college. Does anyone not go to college anymore? Jesus. The ones without kids always have, like, action shots of themselves out in the sun, kayaking or snowboarding or running 5k’s for breast cancer. Or there’s the perfectly posed group pictures from nights spent in clubs or restaurants where they get moderately intoxicated off drinks that end in suffixes like, -tini or –bomb. But they do look sophisticated and glamorous in a way, I’ll give them that; dressed up in outfits from shopping sprees at South Coast fucking Plaza, each ensemble picked precisely for each occasion, with their make-up counter faces and big smiles made brighter with $32 dollar lipstick and glitter-gloss. Then there are all the Mormon and Calvary Chapel girls from high school, the one’s that got married quick just so they could finally have sex (or in some cases move on from anal-only intercourse). The ones who all have kids or pictures showcasing their huge alien-like baby bumps. Their pages are filled with cutesy updates capturing funny moments and photo after photo of the same child each captioned and “liked” and commented on. Soooo adorable.

Too cute. He’s getting so big!

Meanwhile, I can barely keep my pay-as-you-go-phone activated.
It’s hard to imagine that there are people in this world who have their shit together enough to worry about things like the whiteness of their teeth, calorie intake and washing their fucking cars. People who review their life insurance policies annually, who preventatively take baby aspirin daily and get irked when the grout on their tile floors isn’t clean enough. It’s almost unbelievable, but if there are commercials for all that shit then it must be true.

I call my sponsor.

Every conversation begins the same. “Hey, I’m just calling to check in.” I nibble on a sliver of thumbnail waiting for her daily dose of disapproval and demands.

“How are you doing?” Her voice is flat and she always speaks slowly which makes every question seem serious.

“I’m alright, just antsy, can’t really focus on anything, anxious I guess, bored.” I shouldn’t have said bored.

“Well how about starting your 4th step? That’s something to do…”

I fucking hate my sponsor sometimes. I say yeah. She knows I’m not gonna do shit, especially not my fourth step.

“Well if you’re not going to do that, you need to get busy with something. Do laundry, go get a cup of coffee, watch a movie, go for a run, call that girl you told me about from the hospital see what she’s doing. You can’t just sit there and feel sorry for yourself,” she says.

“I don’t feel sorry for myself, I just feel like shit.”

“Did you get dressed today?”
“Not yet.” I look at the clock, it’s 4:32.

“Are you taking your medication the way you’re supposed to?” she asks.

I quickly consider how technical I should get in terms of answering. “Yeah, but the main one makes me sleep for, like, twelve hours and then I feel all out of it when I wake up, like hung-over almost.” Seventy-five percent true seems fair enough.

“Well, that’s something you need to talk about with your doctor. For now you need to take a shower, get dressed, put on make-up and get out of the house. If you still feel anxious after all that, call me back. What you should really do is call three other people in the program and reach out a little, stop thinking about yourself so much, but I know you never do that when I ask. So yeah, just get your day started and be constructive. I know it sucks, but you have to pull yourself out of these moods. There’s no fucking easy way. You just have to get moving. Okay?”

“Yeah.” I bite into a fresh new fingernail.

“Okay, call me later if you need to.” This is how she ends every conversation. She should really say: call me if you’re going to drink or cut those same slits down the inside of your thighs. That’s what she actually means.

The real problem with my sponsor is that she’s “high-bottom,” one of those people that like almost lost a job or almost lost a husband or got one DUI and then ended up in the program like that. A control freak who barely teetered and then ran for safety. Lots of white-collar prescription pill addict types make their way into a twelve-step program like that, when things are still relatively okay. Not that I have experienced a crazy “low-bottom” or anything, but I feel like we’re just too different.
At the hospital on Monday during the first group we talk about identifying feelings. And identifying the feelings under our feelings, whatever the fuck that means. The therapist passes out worksheets. They feel like the kind of worksheets a substitute teacher would photocopy out of a book and then give the class, except these are even more patronizing because we’re fucking adults. On this one there are two columns of puffy clouds with a line inside each where we are to write how we’ve been feeling, then in the second line of clouds we’re supposed to write the “feeling” beneath that current feeling. Then at the bottom of the page it says: Please list the all the coping mechanisms you can think of to make each cloud evaporate or keep from growing bigger. I don’t know what kind of Care Bears theory of psychology this is but it’s pathetic. I don’t write anything and the therapist lady notices.

“Are you all done, Abby?” she asks.

“I don’t feel like it.” I uncross my arms to appear more agreeable (they always notice shit like that).

“Okay well, why don’t you go ahead and write a note on the back that explains why you don’t feel like it. Or how you are feeling, okay?”

“Isn’t that basically the same thing?” I ask.

She just looks at me.

I start filling in my clouds wishing I’d brought one of those last twelve pills. Next to me is an eighteen-year-old guy with severe anxiety. He switches off between rocking his head back and forth like that “walk like an Egyptian” song and bouncing his legs up
and down like crazy. I count five bounces a second. Across from me is a tiny woman in her thirties who looks incredibly frail, like she might be anorexic. She has colored pencils out and is neatly coloring in each cloud, seemingly unconscious of her head, which slowly tilts back and forth in a slow rhythm that is somehow in time with the pace of her scribbles. We make eye contact briefly and from the glazed over look she gives me, I’m pretty sure she’s on some type of pain meds. Next to the skeletal coloring lady is a redheaded girl who is also a cutter. She writes with her left hand and holds a plastic knife in the other and slowly rubs her thumb over where the blade should be. They call that replacement therapy. It doesn’t ever work, but she seems really into it. Time drags on so incredibly slowly in these groups that the half-day feels like eight hours or maybe more. When I’m finished with my clouds the paper looks sort of like this:

Anxious ------→ Guilt
Sad----------→ Guilt
Defeated-----→ Guilt

It goes on and on, but I don’t fill in any coping skills. I ask her if smoking is considered a coping method. When she says no, I ask her what the difference is between that and deep breathing. She changes the subject. It’s hard to keep my eyes open while people share their stupid “feelings clouds.” I look at the clock we still have twenty minutes left. Before group is over the therapist draws a triangle on a piece of paper. At the tip of each point, she writes a word. Thinking, Feeling, Behavior. She talks about how they are all connected, how if you consciously alter your thinking, the behavior and
feelings will follow. Or if you alter your behavior the thinking and feelings will also fall into place. It seems like the first time she’s ever made sense.

At lunch I sit with Shawna and we talk about how much we hate the place and how much we hate the therapists and some of the other patients. The sun is out and we sit at a picnic table on this little strip of grass near the parking lot with our Styrofoam trays of breaded chicken over egg noodles with soupy Ragu. We sip from the tiny cartons of orange juice and cranberry cocktail they give us and smoke the whole time. The food grosses Shawna out and she wonders why we can’t leave to eat somewhere else and then come back. Even high school kids get to do that, she says. I notice that she eats all of the food anyway, and picks the bread roll off my tray to soak up the left over spaghetti sauce on hers. She knows I won’t eat any of it. I pick at the metal ashtray instead. It’s all rusted out and cracked at the bottom and I manage to break off a sharp sliver.

While I test its sharpness on my index finger, we talk about our weekends. Shawna talks about spending time with her son and asks how often I talk to mine. I mention that Drake turns four in a few weeks and shrug when she asks what I’m going to do for his birthday. Honestly, I know it’s fucked up but I try not to think about him more often than I do. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, or why I don’t have any of those instincts or any of the motivation all the other AA people with kids seem to have. I’m not fighting to win back custody or spend more time with him. But everyone else in the program seems to pine for permanent reunification with their children. I don’t know why those feeling and desires aren’t there, but they just aren’t. When I do think of him I just
feel trapped, like his little existence is my own personal life sentence, but I’ve never told anyone.

5

I’ve been staying with my dad since I got out of the hospital. I was admitted on what they call a “5150” in California. That’s what it’s called when the police bring you in for a 72-hour psychiatric evaluation because you are either being harmful to yourself or others, or if you’re considered “gravely disabled,” whatever that means. My boyfriend was the one who called the cops. He came home after visiting his family back east and freaked out when he saw how I had ripped apart the whole house. He said it looked like a crack house after a drug bust. Every drawer was dumped out, every closet torn apart, mattresses and pillows slashed. I had also started opening up the wall in our bedroom by prying off pieces with the backside of a hammer. But he was the one who’d started that part of it, in a way, I mean he punched the damn hole into the wall in the first place. In the days leading up to my time at the hospital, I couldn’t sleep. The days and nights went by in a blur. I had no concept of time whatsoever. It’s hard to explain, but minutes felt like hours and sometimes whole days were like hours. It felt like I’d crossed some kind of threshold, like I’d stumbled upon the secret behind everlasting life and dismantled the illusion of time. It was like I was constantly waking up from a dream at random intervals, something would snap and I would find myself in the middle of something or my hands in some kind of motion without knowing why or what happened in the seconds before, or in hours before even. Before Dan got home, I could’ve sworn I heard this
bizarre, faint flickering sound, like a digital camera taking a picture, that fake shutter sound. Or the sound of a computer turning on and off. And the whisper of a lens adjusting, zooming in and out, and I couldn’t figure out where it was coming from, though I searched everywhere. I didn’t start off going at the wall with a hammer, at first I just picked at the cracked plaster, chipping away piece after piece like picking the shell off of a hardboiled egg. I never did find what I was looking for, but I’m still sure it was there somewhere.

They’re calling it a “mixed episode” with “comorbid anxiety” and say that I probably experienced at least five days of full-blown psychosis. Needless to say, my boyfriend Dan hasn’t been answering any of my calls since then. The last time I talked to him was weeks ago when I called him from the pay phone in the psych ward. I told him about visiting hours and he promised to come and then he never showed up. Even though he won’t answer my calls I still need to go get my clothes and stuff.

In the hospital they ended up keeping me for a little over two weeks. It looked like I was going to be discharged until this random guy came into my room in the middle of the night. He tried to get it going, like, while I was sleeping, but somehow I woke up. They say I bit his face and gouged an eye but I don’t really remember. I just remember waking up in restraints, in the other wing of the hospital. It felt like a year before they finally put me back with the mildly fucked up people.

Anyway, so that’s basically why I’ve been sleeping on the couch at my dad’s apartment in Santa Ana. Every day is the same. He makes coffee and turns on Good Morning America at 8:00 a.m. to wake me up and then gets in the shower. I put some
jeans on and smoke my first cigarette of the day on his tiny balcony. Lately in the mornings, I’ve been reading from this terrible women’s meditation book my sponsor gave me. It’s all about focusing on one spiritual need or goal for the day. It’s like the worst parts of Dr. Phil and the most preachy parts of the bible rolled into one. Then we leave the house together and he drops me off at the hospital down in Costa Mesa before backtracking inland to go to work at The Home Depot by our apartment. He used to be a contractor, updating kitchens and bathrooms and shit like that until the recession put all that to a standstill.

Later in the week, right after Shawna drops me off, I get a voicemail from my mom. The last time she called she invited me to drive down to San Diego and stay the night with her at one of those Indian casinos. I let her talk on and on, long enough to figure out that she’d basically been living out of her car in the parking lot of one of them. She said she knew a bunch of people who frequented the casino who were “high rollers” that would give her the free meals and free cash and sometimes even the free rooms that they were comped. I didn’t like thinking about her actually living this way, even though she truly sounded happy for a change. I asked her about her disability checks and if she thought I could get disability too. She’d been on disability for as long as I could remember. She kept saying that she got it for all the problems she had with her neck after the big car accident she’d been in when I was little, but my dad she’s full of shit. He says the real reason she gets them is for being a total schizo. He used to tell me stories about
how she thought the mob was after her, and would sometimes confront strangers on the street and accuse them of following her. He said that’s what her accident was really about, that she ran a red light trying to get away from a truck she swore was after her.

I decide not to call her back. I call Dan instead and leave another message.

7

Setting and meeting goals is a huge part of the Coastal Communities Mental Health Center’s Treatment plan. After almost a month being in this place, this is the first week my goals actually matter. Up until now they’ve only been to take my meds like I’m supposed to, go to at least one meeting a week and actively participate in group. All of which is total bullshit because it’s so easy and really doesn’t even make a difference. This week I’m supposed to 1) Fill-out disability paperwork to see if I can get benefits, 2) Get my stuff out of Dan’s house, and 3) Start my fourth step. Apparently this is how I’m supposed to get my shitty life back, three things per week, one week at a time. So now I have an official reason to keep calling Dan. I keep a tally of every call I make. I get so nervous before each call that I make up a routine. I light a match and hold it in one hand while the phone rings. Then I put the match out on my upper arm when it goes to voicemail and quickly light another one. I let the second match burn while I leave a voicemail. Then I put the second match out right next to the first when I hang up. Soon the baby-soft skin the inside of my upper arm is speckled like an egg. Two, four, six, eight, ten by Wednesday.
The social security paperwork is a pain in the ass. It’s a lot of forms with question after question about stuff like work history and W-2 forms and tax returns. As well as lists of medications I’ve been on and the names of all the doctors I’ve seen. Insurance questions, workers comp questions, waivers that allow them access to all of my medical records. I take the bus to the library and spend hours filling everything out. I won’t find out if I’m eligible for months.

Time starts to pass faster in the partial program at CCMHC. I try to make most of the changes the tag-team of mental health professionals suggest. I help clean up after the meeting with Shawna on Friday nights. I start my fourth step. I go for walks. I take my meds as advised for the most part, minus half an Ativan here or there from my stash of leftovers.

On Drake’s birthday, I’m approaching sixty days sober. I think about him all day but can’t bring myself to pick up the phone and call. But it doesn’t even matter really because his dad Anthony calls me instead.

“What the fuck is wrong with you.” This is how he greets me on the phone.

“I know. I fucking suck, I know,” I say.

“I’ve honestly considered just telling him you’re dead. Do you know that? I think about it every time he asks me ‘is mommy still sick’.”

“Tell him whatever you fucking want, then.”
“What I want is for you to give a shit about him, just give a shit, get your head out of your fucking ass and get it together, everybody else in the world does. I don’t know why you think you’re any different.”

I can hear him breathing into the receiver waiting for me to respond. *I am trying.* I want to say this out loud. I sound it out in my head. *I am trying.* I’m about to speak, but I can’t, he’s heard these words before.

“Is that all?” I finally say.

That’s when Anthony hangs ups on me. That’s when I grab the paring knife stuffed in between the couch cushions that make up my bed and go to the bathroom. I turn on the shower and take off my clothes. I turn my back to the warm stream of water in the shower, and make four shallow slashes, sliding the knife slowly and as straight as I can for each. I do it in the same small area of plump, tender skin that’s speckled with the residual brown spots from the matches. I watch each cut pool up with blood and watch as the small drops start to slide down and drip off my arm and then follow each little speck of color as it slides down and disappears in the drain. And somehow everything is okay again, even though I know it’s the wrong way to be okay.

Instead of calling my sponsor I call Shawna. She says she’ll be right over. I stop the bleeding before she gets to my dad’s apartment and tie one of his tube socks around my arm, gently, like my arm suddenly belongs to someone else, like I am a different person from the one who just mutilated it.

When Shawna pulls up, she does one long continuous honk until I come outside. Her friend Kat is with her. She jumps out and gets into the backseat.
“Suicide case gets shotgun!” Shawna says pushing the passenger seat back into place.

We all laugh, though tears are starting to form in my eyes for the first time today. I never cry when I’m alone but as soon as someone else is there, I just can’t hold it back. It’s weird.

I tell them everything as we drive through a long series of dark suburban streets. Shawna’s car has blown a fuse; every window except hers is rolled up and stuck, but we all say fuck it and chain smoke anyway, and soon all our eyes are watering from the clouds of smoke that fill the car. I look out the window and tell them how much I hate Drake and how all the things Anthony says are true and how I secretly wish my son had never been born. Shawna insists on driving thru the Dairy Queen so she can buy us all banana splits. We sit in the parking lot and eat.

“I felt the exact same way about Micah for a long time,” Shawna says. “I hated being around him, how he’d call my mom “mommy” and cry for his dad constantly. I hated looking at baby pictures and having no memories of that time because I was so strung out.”

“Yeah, it’s like this constant inescapable guilt already, and then hearing from Anthony or seeing him just makes it even crazier and completely unbearable.”

“And it never really goes away,” Shawna says.

“I keep trying to distract myself --” I start to say, but my voice cracks.

“--but it’s always there.” Kat says. “It’s like, one of the reasons we’re supposed to be sober is to be able to be with our families, but in the beginning nothing will make you
want to get loaded more than time with your family, it’s like this big paradox or whatever.” Kat digs through her purse for a lighter. She has been sober almost as long as Shawna.

I hand Kat my lighter. My banana split is turning to soup. I put the top back on the container and open a new pack of cigarettes. Shawna’s ice cream is gone. Kat’s in the backseat taking bites in between puffs of an unfiltered Pall Mall.

“So what’s up with your sponsor, what does she say about all this?” Kat asks me.

“I haven’t really talked about it with her. She doesn’t even have kids, anyway,” I say.

“And her sponsor is an evil old cunt, that’s the real problem,” Shawna chimes in.

“Yeah that too,” I laugh.

“Well do you ‘want what she has’?” Kat does a snooty voice for the bullshit AA cliché piece of the question.

“Not unless she wants the hiv, a frigid sex life and daily meetings even after a fucking decade of sobriety,” Shawna says.

“It’s not the hiv. She has Hep C,” I say.

Shawna rolls her eyes.

“I don’t know what I want. I mean she’s been sober forever and she’s like rich, went to college. I’m supposed to want all that kind of stuff, right?” I bite my cuticles.

“Who’s your sponsor,” I ask Kat.

“Don’t have one. I guess Shawna’s the closest thing.”

“Low aspirations, this one,” Shawna says.
I find out later that Shawna’s mom was also a drug addict and crazy abusive. In group she says her mom would lock her out of the house when groups of people would come over to get loaded. A couple times she even spent a few days at a time living in the space underneath the wrap-around porch with her pet Rottweiler. When her mom’s friends tried to crawl under to get her, the dog would attack them. She was the only person who ever fed him or gave him water and he would protect her. During the days she stayed under the porch she’d drink from his bowl and cuddle up next to him to sleep.

The skeletal anorexic lady is next to me again drawing a picture with her colored pencils. The picture is of a green dog and a smiling little girl and the lady slides it across the table to Shawna when she finishes her story. Shawna thanks her and gives me a look like what the fuck?

For group therapy they wheel in these big grey divider things to break up the main room that the partial program is run out of. If you listen closely you can hear every sob, every raised voice, every breakdown basically and every therapist reassuring their latest victim. When the dividers are gone the room is huge, with high ceilings and tons of skylights. It feels like a church in a way, except all the furniture looks like it was purchased in the 90’s. Bright yellows, pinks, purples and turquoise. With dusty fake trees and plants in every corner. I talk about my mom, how she’s never been diagnosed but obviously has a bunch of psychiatric problems. I speak softly because I hate the thought of all these strangers listening. When I participate the group goes by way faster, so I learn to participate even when I don’t feel like it.
The rest of the day I work on my fourth step during group. It’s called an inventory and my sponsor wants me to do two versions of it. First is a sexual inventory, which is a list of every person I’ve ever had sex with. Out of the 48 people, 36 were guys I hooked up with completely under the influence. I try to figure out what percentage that would be with the calculator on my cell phone but I can’t remember how to do the math. Even if you can’t remember the person’s name you are still supposed to include them. Some of my favorites:

#41-Guy I got coke from at the Flamingo, Las Vegas
#14-Blonde kid that tried to use a Ziploc baggie as protection in high school
#7-Kroq Weenie Roast Guy (fucked in port-a-potty during Big Bad Voodoo Daddy set)

I still don’t know if I’m gonna have the balls to include the three most recent guys from my sponsor’s Friday night meeting. Andy, Stephen, Dave. I write the three names and then erase them. The other inventory list is of all the other people I’ve harmed, family members, co-workers, friends, but I’m not onto that just yet. After all the lists are done the 5th step is to read it to your sponsor.

When Shawna drops me off at my dad’s apartment, there’s a huge pile of trash bags and boxes blocking the door. I start to go through them and quickly realize that Dan has finally acknowledged my messages and dumped all my stuff here. It takes me a while to drag everything in. I can only go through a couple of boxes before I get frustrated and just start crying. It wasn’t supposed to go down like this, I was supposed to go back and at least talk to him about us. He was supposed to say how he missed me and how he’s felt
terrible about calling the cops and having me thrown in a fucking psych ward, even if it was “the right thing to do,” and apologize or wish me well at the very least. Instead I get this, my entire life thrown haphazardly into trash bags.

I call my sponsor but she doesn’t pick up the phone.

I take two Ativan and smoke and cry quietly on the balcony until I can feel the pills pouring their gauzy haze of indifference over me. And I continue to sit there staring at the crowded parking lot of our apartment complex and all the gleaming cars shining bright in the early afternoon sun, all of them looking way nicer than then actually are. I let the woozy nothingness of the pills wash away all the terrible things I’m thinking and feeling and wanting to do to myself. Now I only have two pills left, but I try not to think about that or anything really and instead turn on MTV and am happy to find a marathon of the show True Life to take me away from mine for a little while.

Shawna asks me to go on a panel with her at this rehab type place in Long Beach called the Substance Abuse Foundation. We joke about how her speaking to the people there is kind of ridiculous, like the blind leading the blind. But crazy or sane, impatient or outpatient the girl does have an impressive amount of long-term sobriety and a hell of a past, and you can’t take that away from her. What I don’t realize until we get there is that she is expecting me to tell my story in front of the group of people there too. So it’s Shawna and me and this guy Jared who organizes the monthly panel of speakers for SAF.
The three of us have an hour to explain “*what happened, what it was like and what it’s like now*” to a group of about fifty homeless people who are living in the facilities at SAF and trying to stay clean and sober and make some type of life for themselves. It’s similar to the partial program. The only difference really is socio-economic status. I remind Shawna and her friend Jared that I only have sixty fucking days sober and they tell me that the people we’re speaking to have no more than thirty days and that they’ll be able to relate to me more than anyone.

I’ve never been on a panel before and start freaking out and they tell me that they’ll go first and try to take up most of the time. Shawna goes first and talks about her horrific childhood and how she ran away from home and got caught up in the El Salvadorian gang in East L.A. when she was only thirteen, how she used everyday from that young age and did whatever she had to do to stay loaded. How she fucked strangers for drugs or money until she figured out that robbing Johns at gunpoint was easier. And how she spent time in jail and mental hospitals and was in and out of AA and NA constantly for years and pretty much ruined the first years of her son’s life before she finally got sober for real. Then she talked about what it was like now, how she had held down the same job for over two years and fully supported herself, saw her son regularly and had real friends and a real life now. She left out all the stuff about currently being in the outpatient program and the accidental pregnancy and giving her daughter up for adoption and her cutting “relapse” but it still felt like the most important shade of the truth was there.
Jared went after her and told his story in the same way. He talked about robbing his family and about all the friends he used with that started dying all around him and how that scared him into getting sober at first, but how it wasn’t until after his third DUI that he finally realized how fucked he was. His happily ever after was about how he was now finishing up his classes to become an electrician and was about to be promoted to journeyman, after two years of waking up at 4:00 a.m. to go to work each morning and long classes at night, something he would have never even imagined being capable of when he was drinking/using.

Then it was my turn. I can’t remember ever in my life being so nervous. I felt like as soon as I started talking, people would yell out that I was full of shit and be able to sense the fact that I had been taking the Ativan inappropriately and therefore wasn’t really sober. But I fucking told my story even though I was terrified. I talked about my first time drinking at age nine and how I was a daily drinker by high school though nobody really noticed, how that led to other worse shit, coke and then speed, and how I started trying to get sober at nineteen. How by the time I was twenty, I was able to put a year together but was still more or less out of my fucking mind and how I was finally diagnosed with a “mood disorder.” I say mood disorder because psychotic disorder is still too hard say, even in a place like this. I explained how I wanted to believe that this was my real problem and ended up relapsing because of it. Then I talked about all the stupid little things I’ve been trying to do different, that I guess seemed to be working so far. By the time I announce that I had just recently gotten sixty days, the entire room erupts in applause, and my time is just about up. To end the panel, the whole room stands up and
gets in a circle and holds hands and together we all recite the serenity prayer. I’ve never been so relieved to pray in my entire life.

Shawna and Jared and I smoke with some of the SAF people right after and they thanks us for coming and tell us pieces of their stories. The sun is setting and the sky is orange. Everything looks golden, our skin and even the buildings are all glowing. I feel so high and relieved that it is over and I have this absurd feeling of accomplishment. It’s like floating, it’s like how it feels whenever I finish cutting, like everything is suddenly somehow okay, like where I am is exactly where I’m supposed to be. All that corny shit.

Jared walks us to Shawna’s car. He has a little plastic box of fuses. Shawna pops the hood and he gets into the fuse box to replace the busted one.

“Now try it,” he says.

I press the button and Shawna’s windows slide up and down with ease. She gives him a big bear hug and actually picks him off the ground for a sec. Then Jared thanks us for coming and says that I was the perfect addition to round out the panel and thanks me for not sugarcoating everything like people tend to do. We talk for little a while, while Shawna runs back into SAF to pee, and I can’t really tell if Jared is flirting or just being nice. As we drive off I imagine adding him as the final name on the list for my fourth step.

On the way home from SAF, Shawna tells us all the things she omitted from her story. I tell her she did the right thing though, that she didn’t really lie or anything and
she shouldn’t feel bad. I think about thanking her for taking me, but I’m still kinda pissed she didn’t tell me I was speaking until we freaking got there. Instead I ask her what was different for her, what she specifically did differently that she thinks worked to keep her sober all this time.

“You get to a point where you just get tired of suffering,” she says. “You have to really make a conscious decision to just fucking grow up, and finally accept all the things everybody’s been telling you all along,” she says.

I gnaw on my nails and look out the window and watch the streetlights slowly illuminate as we drive through Long Beach back towards the freeway.

“It’s like, you can go off your meds again and spiral out, you can continue drinking or using or whatever even though you know you’re an addict, you can do ultimately whatever you fucking want, but you’re gonna keep ending up in that place where you just want to be fucking dead again and again.” She pulls into a drive-thru Starbucks and says she’s getting my coffee to thank me for going on the panel with her. Says she’s sorry for tricking me into the panel but that she knew I wouldn’t have come otherwise.

We are quiet as we go through the drive thru. Shawna pulls out a Specials CD from the case attached to her visor. “I always think of this fucking song every time I tell my stupid ‘story’.” She turns it up and she sings along: *You’ve done too much, much too young now you’re married with a son when you could be having fun with me…*

“Isn’t that so us?”

“I guess.”
“And the currant buns for tea…” she says. “What does that even mean?”

We laugh.

When we pull up in front of the apartment, Shawna turns the volume down.

“Change is instantaneous. I guess what it all comes down to is just making up your fucking mind.” She lights her next cigarette and shrugs.

I grab my purse and thank her--for the ride, for the coffee, all of it.

12

After a shower I go out to smoke on the balcony and start the second part of my fourth step. I realize that maybe I was wrong about Shawna, that maybe we don’t actually have as much in common as I thought. Maybe she is better than me and healthier and wiser and all of that.

Maybe her latest stint in the hospital was actually an accomplishment, maybe making that one cut was the best possible thing she could do when she woke up in her own personal nightmare.

I spend the next three hours going through the boxes and bags of my stuff. I end up making five separate trips to the dumpster to throw shit away. I toss the bottle of Ativan with its two pills rattling inside and the paring knife in with the last trash bag of my crap. Around nine o’clock I take my night meds, and then set three daily alarms for all my goddamn medications.

Before I go to bed I call Shawna. I tell her that I think she’s right and that I should fire my shitty sponsor. Of course she agrees and congratulates me for finally figuring it
out. I ask Shawna if there is any way she would be willing to be my temporary sponsor—just until I can find another one—she says sure, and that she’d love to talk down to me and boss me around for awhile.

Maybe it’s ridiculous to change your sponsor to someone who is technically still in a mental hospital, especially if that person doesn’t even believe in sponsorship in the first place or even have one themselves. And maybe to some people it looks like we, Shawna and me, are in almost the exact same place in life. But even if we are living in some weird state halfway between normal life and total chaos, I still want what she has, even if I don’t exactly know just what that is yet.
Paper Marriage

Kat had barely known Sergio a little over a year, but agreed to marry him anyway. She was twenty-two at the time and had began to feel the need to do something with her life after blowing off community college and getting fired from the restaurant she’d worked at since she was a teenager. Marrying a friend so he could stay in the country seemed like a noble deed. “Friends” was what they agreed upon but she knew it was more than that. Hoped it was more than that.

Technically, she lived in Santa Ana with her grandparents at the time, though she rarely went home. The back seat of her shitty old Hyundai was covered with dirty clothes, empty packs of cigarettes, fast food containers, Ziploc baggies of make-up, toiletries, and tangled up thrift store jewelry. Everything she needed to crash here and there. She spent most nights with one of the assortment of guys she rotated through. It was the only way she knew how to keep from appearing needy. She thought of it as female empowerment, thought that she was using them the way a heroine in a movie might use men. Thought of herself as the type of woman that Angelina Jolie would play. Sexy, mysterious and sharp. Before Sergio offered her his marriage deal there was Trent in K-town, Andy in Beverly Hills and Javier in the South Bay.

What she didn’t know was that they all knew each other. Trent had pretty much prescribed her to the other two. She didn’t know how he talked about her, how he told them about how easy she was and how you could do anything with her, anything as long as you offered to pay for gas when she said her usual line: *Yeah, I totally wanna hangout, but I only have like ten bucks to get through the next three days.*
But Sergio was different than any other guy Kat had ever been with. They first met when Kat’s friend Claudia took her to one of his shows at a small club squished between The Roxy and The Whiskey on Sunset Blvd. For Kat and Claudia, it was a night fueled by vodka Redbulls and lines of cocaine snorted off a CD case in the car. They danced all night to the soft rhythm of the cajon and Sergio’s voice rolling flawlessly through each chain of Spanish lyrics. There was a small pack of Latin women swarming the stage night. Their curvaceous bodies were all stuffed into tiny jewel-toned dresses, with sequins that shimmered under the moving lights. They were like Hispanic Barbies in their four-inch strappy heels, with hips swaying constantly and long black hair whipping around like Shakira’s with every twirl. To Kat, these women were the epitome of femininity, and she watched as they stared up at Sergio, singing every word with him, smiling and gyrating and admiring him all at once. There was something about the way the women did this that angered Kat, though she couldn’t quite figure out what it was. Maybe it was because they seemed so desperate and indistinguishable from one another. Either way, the adoring fans definitely made Sergio seem important, like someone who would soon be famous and appear regularly on MTVtres or tour with Pit Bull, someone who could be the next Juanes.

Kat’s friend Claudia was also the one who set her up with Sergio a few months later. On their first date, they walked from his house to Venice Beach and ate empanadas, laughing at all the terrible art for sale and the clueless tourists buying burned CD’s for $10 a pop. They walked all the way to the end of the pier in Santa Monica telling stories. He told her about growing up in Bogota, the inception of his band and his decision to
move to the states. Kat expanded on her laundry list of ex-boyfriends and how much she hated her parents. The mother who left. The father who reached out and then retreated. The grandparents who were dying right before her eyes. Sergio listened patiently and asked questions and held her hand tightly in his as they walked back.

They’d been walking for hours when they finally arrived at the house where he rented a room. His roommate was Charlene, a fifty-year-old pothead and former actress who owned a record studio in Santa Monica. The house was just as used up and worn down as she was, and its décor reflected the same aesthetic as the Stevie Nicks wardrobe she loved. Candles everywhere. Purple velvet drapes and a giant red sectional covered in tattered throw pillows, all of which were drenched in the smell of weed, cigarettes and sage. There were baskets filled with various noise makers--bells, castanets, metal guiros, tambourines-- that anyone with a pulse could jerk around to play along with the musicians who visited and drank and jammed on a nightly basis.

Sergio played his music on an acoustic guitar and Kat drank, relishing in the warmth that his voice and the whiskey seemed to pour over her. She drank until everything around her was exquisite, then she drank more. She didn’t stop until she found herself staring on his long nails as they plucked the silk strings, just to keep from spinning. It wasn’t the first time she’d been in this position, drunk and high on a Tuesday, with no better place to go. It was there in her inebriated mind that Kat decided she could fall in love with Sergio, and she began to imagine their grand life together, how they would travel and live in Europe someday and buy a home in the Hollywood hills. But her daydream dissolved quickly when she remembered the women from his show and instead
she wondered how many of them had sat in the very position she was in now, how many of the Latin Barbies had been on the same walk and heard the same stories that Sergio had shared with her. She was still trying to push these thoughts out of her mind when he took her to his room.

Sergio’s room was also filled with instruments; an Afro-Colombian drum from Bogota, acoustic guitars he couldn’t afford to fix, amps, microphones and notebooks filled with lyrics in Spanish and English or a combination of the two. It was so packed that he had to lean his twin mattress up against the wall just to be able to move in it.

*There’s no room in your room,* she exclaimed when she saw it. When they finally lay down on his bare mattress on the floor, she couldn’t help but notice how he touched her like a boyfriend, slow and delicate and like he cared. How his arm wrapped around her waist, pulled her in close, holding her as though she might be torn away from him at any moment. Or the way he slept with his leg thrown over her, securing her underneath him.

But even with the surprising state of bliss that first night, more than anything it was the morning after that did it for her. She got up and found him at the kitchen table with toast and coffee waiting for her. They ate and talked and read from different sections of a week-old newspaper for hours before leaving the table. They showered together and she stayed with him for three days straight. While he worked on his music she pretended to read, but most of the time she just watched him and listened. Sergio never asked her to leave, didn’t even hint at it and Kat thought she had found someone just as lonely as she was. And they fell into a pattern of sorts: a few days on, a few days off, and soon Kat
begun cutting ties with the other men she’d been seeing, confident that she didn’t need them anymore.

Claudia was the first one to mention the marriage thing to Kat a few weeks later when they met for coffee to talk about her date with Sergio. “You know, he needs to get married to stay in the country, has he told you yet?”

“Sort of. It comes up, then he gets uncomfortable and changes the subject.”

“Yeah, he’s got like two months left on his I-20 visa and then he’s illegal.”

Claudia sipped her coffee, her words hung in the air. “I’m surprised he hasn’t asked you yet. He won’t be able to work or do anything.”

“I thought he had an artist visa or something.”

“No, it didn’t get approved. The marriage thing is his last option. He asked me if I’d do it but I told him there was no way – my parents would freak.”

Kat didn’t like the idea of Sergio asking Claudia for such a personal favor, no matter how close they were as friends. The jealously distorted her thoughts.

“You should do it,” Claudia slowly stirred more sugar into her mug. “I mean it’s not like you’re the kind of girl who even believes in marriage. And you’d be, like, saving his life.”

“Can’t you get in trouble?”

“Not really, I mean people around here do it all the time. He’d probably pay you too.”

“I couldn’t charge him, that’d be too weird.”
“Well you should think about it. I’m sure he’ll ask you.”

Kat did think about it. She thought about weddings and flowers and dresses and how stupid all that shit was. How precious most girls thought marriage was and how sacred it wasn’t. She imagined actually sharing her life with Sergio and tried to be realistic, but romantic visions bohemian living kept resurfacing. Then just hours after Claudia had primed her, as if on cue, Sergio called her and asked.

He was still hesitant. He said they had a few weeks before they’d have to decide. If she did do it would be the biggest commitment she had ever made and in her mind the most selfless and kindest thing she’d ever done for someone else.

He sounded calm but she knew he was desperate. He had finished up his degree in music composition six months ago and now his student work visa had expired. In April his application for an artist visa was denied. Whatever talent he had the U.S. didn’t need. He was dispensable, but not to Kat.

He promised her a deal that seemed generous and fair. According to Claudia, the going rate for this sort of thing was supposed to be around $5,000 but all he could offer her was a place to live. They could share the tiny room he rented in Venice, she wouldn’t have to pay rent and she could walk to the beach and he would take care of her more or less, then later on when he had the money, he’d pay her. He knew that she had been crashing on couches all over the city, and thought the plan might center her, even motivate her to try to do school again or do something.
I just don’t feel like I’m done here. That was the line he kept coming back to. The line that always crept in and punctuated their conversations. She’d been with “creative” guys before, a dancer, a tattoo artist and a poet to be exact, and knew he was different than the other L.A. hopefuls. Different from the flocks of aspiring actors and writers and bands that trudged through clerical work or customer service jobs to chase a dream. Telemarketers with headshots. Waiters with monologues. Valet parkers who knew how to stretch canvas. Many of who lived partially on the lovely check-filled envelopes that would come from back home, wherever back home was. Sergio didn’t have that, he was hard working and in Kat’s mind somewhat established. Every cent that he had, he’d made from playing, writing or recording music, even if that meant running the sound system at church in Compton every Sunday or playing with a tribute salsa band at weddings in the spring.

They were drunk on Sunset when they finally promised each other. After last call, they walked out of The Rainbow smiling like two teenagers with a secret. Under the streetlights they sauntered down the boulevard with the relentless optimism and unmistakable enthusiasm of beginners.

Kat believed that there was an unspoken bond between them, that their relationship was beyond conventional labels, beyond monogamy even. Evolved. But it still hurt when she would find pieces of his past stored haphazardly around the house. The first time it was a coffee mug. A photo of him smiling--his dimpled cheek pressed against that of sweet-faced girl--wrapped around the cup. Kat was doing the dishes one
morning when she became fixated on it. She wiped away the soapsuds and traced her finger around the heart shape created by the tilt of their heads. The girl on the cup had skin the color of coffee with cream that was clear and shiny in the right places. Her smile was real, like she was laughing instead of posing.

She imagined the girl on the cup to be one of those women with a delicate floral scent. A soft, clean fragrance that would linger after you hugged her. A smell that would leave her in your sheets and on your jacket all day. A girl who’d politely laugh at a guy’s stupidest jokes. Who would whisper secrets in your ear. Who seemed so chaste and innocent that men felt like they’d won a prize when they finally slept with her. Kat hated the girl on the cup. Because she knew she’d never have that kind of beauty or kindness or self-control. It was the cup that made Kat begin to realize there’d always be an inauthentic feeling between her and Sergio. There would always be phone conversations and songs in a language she didn’t understand, and ghosts like that girl, waiting for him on another continent. She’d always suspect any expression of love to be nothing more than misplaced gratitude. She looked at Sergio’s face in the picture one more time before she shoved it behind an overflowing collection of grocery bags under the sink.

On the day of the ceremony, Kat got ready at her friend Shawna’s house. Kat was hung over and started drinking from a bottle of Korbel as soon as she woke up. It was around 10:00 a.m. when Shawna started straightening her hair and doing her make-up.

“So how fake is this fake marriage, anyway?” Shawna asked.
“I’m just doing him a favor. I’m sure you’d do the same thing if you had a friend in the same situation.” Kat tried to wipe away the grease stain on the front of her silver dress.

“Right, you mean like if I was in love with somebody and wanted them to stay in the country?”

“I’m not in love with him. It’s like a really deep friendship. Something like that,” Kat said.

“You are so full of shit.”

Kat cracked a reluctant smile. She had started to view her citizenship like virginity, something she could give away only once in her lifetime.

“You don’t have to do this, you know.” Shawna ran the straightener down Kat’s hair so slowly it began to sizzle, and the whole room suddenly smelled like burnt hair and electrical fire. “If it’s as fake as you say it is I don’t think you’d be trembling,” Shawna said.

“I am going to do it,” Kat said. Even though the wedding was a sham, nothing more than a photo op to show proof to immigration, she still tried on the dress and stood sideways in the mirror every night of the week before. Sometimes with a hairbrush as flowers. One time she even fake-kissed the air.

Kat looked down at her shaking hands. “Oh fuck the ring.” She was supposed to buy herself one.
Shawna shook her head. She sighed as though defeated and put the straightener down so hard she almost burned herself in the process. Then she pried the thick Onyx ring off of her middle finger.

“It’s too small for me anyway.” Shawna dropped it in Kat’s sweaty palm. “I guess you have my blessing.”

They were married in the makeshift chapel of a travel/marriage/divorce agency in east L.A. It was one of dozens of similar storefronts that lined Caesar Chavez Blvd, with the same black bars on the front windows. If you blinked driving by you would miss it.

The wedding was on a Monday; since that was the toughest day to book, they got a discount. Walking from the car to the chapel, little Mexican kids pointed at Kat. Mami, mira, se va a casar. Her strapless dress was the same one she’d worn to her senior prom four years earlier. She carried a dozen deep red Gerber daisies that she’d picked up at a grocery store at the last second, their color chosen in an effort to make the grayish silver dress seem whiter. After some quick paperwork, the ceremony began. Sergio’s bass player and Claudia were the best man and maid of honor. Shawna walked Kat down the aisle with the enthusiasm of a headless mannequin. There were less than fifteen people in attendance. Kat knew everyone except for one woman in the back of the room who came in late and left early. She was the only person standing besides Kat and Sergio and the obese Mexican lady who said she was a minister. The mystery woman looked old to Kat, at least a few years older than her fake husband, who was barely approaching thirty. She also looked familiar, but Kat couldn’t place her.
After the ceremony, and two hours of traffic, everyone went to Charlene’s house in Venice to drink and celebrate. It was another moment that Kat had fantasized about. She was sure Sergio would offer a toast in her honor, or maybe confess his love, or at very least his admiration. Maybe he would offer her a gift in front of all of his peers. But no such thing happened; instead everyone drank beer and shots of aguardiente, a Colombian liquor that tasted like black licorice. All the guys swatted at a donkey piñata stuffed with 99-cent store condoms, pregnancy tests and candy. When everyone got hungry they walked down the street to Fat Burger. Later they all went to see a friend DJ in Silver Lake, where Kat saw Sergio exchange numbers with some girl in pink knee-high Converse. It wasn’t at all the night she expected, but she was relieved and happily drunk. Too faded to care. After all this was over it would be just her and Sergio and that was what was most important.

Back at the house, there was still a small group of people hanging out in the living room. They were all plastered, but continued to smoke weed and play music until one by one people passed out or attempted to drive home. By the time Sergio and Kat went to bed they were exhausted and ready to fall asleep in their clothes. Sergio pulled her close and whispered Thank you, thank you, thank you and kissed her forehead. Kat couldn’t help but say I love you, to which Sergio answered: You too. Te quiero mi amiga querida. And Kat felt safe again the way she did those first nights. Even though she wasn’t exactly sure what the words meant they felt like what she’d been waiting to hear.

In the months after the wedding, the fell into a relatively normal pattern, like a real couple. They made dinner and did laundry together. Kat would go almost
everywhere with him, to band practice and gigs, and she’d hang out for hours at the studio where he worked as a sound engineer. They immediately got to work on the mountain of paperwork involved with his permanent residency application, and creating the supporting evidence. But there were always conversations in Spanish and women’s voices she could hear when he was on the phone. And there were always the same female faces at his gigs all across town. It didn’t matter where his band played, The Conga Room, The Cat Club, Crane’s Tavern, there were always beautiful Latin women singing and buying him drinks and inviting him to parties she was never asked to. She would stare at them and wonder if they knew Sergio the way she did. She was almost positive that they did. After every show they would hug him and linger and only speak to him in Spanish even when he responded in English for Kat’s sake. They’d smile and ignore her after the obligatory quick kisses on both her cheeks. *Ella entiende espanol?* No.

Kat didn’t want to admit it, but she knew that marrying him was a way to distinguish her from the rest of them.

Soon she started avoiding his shows, and instead hung around the house drinking alone, often ruminating about what hell she had gotten herself into. And when he came home she would lash out, always the same line of questioning. *Who the fuck were you with?* And as soon as he answered: *Have you fucked her?* He’d never really answer, never engage in her accusations but she’d press him anyway, sometimes she’d scream until he left, which only made it worse, because then she’d wonder endlessly where he went. Sometimes she tried to follow him. She didn’t know what she’d do if she ever knew for sure.
Only a few weeks before their interview with immigration, Kat woke up before Sergio and searched through his phone. She counted photos of fifteen different naked women. Twenty-two pictures total. Some with the heads cut off so that only breasts and hips and soft bellies filled the frame. Others with fully nude girls, sprawled-out awkwardly on bathroom counters holding their phones to the mirror. Girls who looked much younger and women who looked much older than her. Fat. Thin. Knees parted. Cupping their breasts. Sucking in. Smiling.

Kat was enraged.

She rushed into their bedroom.

“What the fuck are these?” She threw the phone at Sergio’s head.

“What?” Sergio asked, barely waking up.

“These fucking sluts on your phone.”

“They’re old, they’re all old pictures, I’ll erase them now if it upsets you,” he said.

“If it upsets me? Of course it upsets me.” She could barely get the words out.

“What do you think this is?”

“I know, I mean I can see why you’re mad, but I promise, I never look at them or anything,” he said.

“Don’t I mean anything, what I’ve done? Doesn’t that mean anything?” Her voice began to crack.

“Of course. I care for you very much, you know that.”
Kat covered her entire face with both of her hands and sobbed into them, she could barely breathe. An uncontrollable sadness consumed her. He wasn’t supposed to see her like this. She was supposed to be aloof and unattached, but all the qualities that she had prided herself on were gone.

Sergio put his arms around her. The words rang over and over in her head: *I care for you very much.* She didn’t need him to care. She needed love. She was just another stupid girl, another example of the rule when all this time she believed she was the exception.

“I’ll delete them. I’ll get rid of all of them right now,” he said, picking up the phone.

“It’s not about that.” She wiped at the liner racooning beneath her eyes. “I thought we had more.”

“We do, you are my dearest friend. I love you, you know that,” he said.

“I don’t want to be your friend!” her yelling surprised them both. “Fuck.”

“You are more. Look at me.” He pulled her hands away from her face. “You are.”

Their embrace turned to kissing, turned to caresses, turned to sex and they spent what felt like the entire day in bed together. It was overcast that day, but they walked to the beach and drank margaritas anyway. Damage control. When the sun did finally show itself there was only an about hour of light left. A toxic sunset of red-orange and lavender colored the clouds before the bright ball plunged back behind the water.
Now they are here, ten days later, sitting in the immigration office in downtown L.A., clutching each other’s hands, waiting. It’s a long rectangular room with a dozen other anxious couples, all of them speaking in low tones, acutely aware of the gravity of the moments that await them. Some of them are threesomes if you count the lawyers. In those couples the women wear bits of jewelry and the men who sit next to them are in suits. Kat looks down at her flip-flops and then to the yellow stained armpits of Sergio’s white T-shirt. It’s just an undershirt. He has a plaid Pendleton to wear over it, one of the few collared items he owns, but it’s too hot out to wear it.

She thinks they look ridiculous, sitting there with their ten-dollar “sterling silver” wedding bands, which are gradually spreading green rings around their fingers. When they went through the metal detector as they entered the courthouse, Sergio took his off then put it back on the wrong hand. His ring was different from the one he’d worn for the ceremony. That one was too small. It had to be lubed with saliva at the knuckle and forced down to the base of his finger. Kat’s wedding band is held hostage under Shawna’s big Onyx ring. Both sets of hands tremble. They are clammy, hot and sticky with residual gel from each of their failed attempts at formal hairdos. They are same anxious, rattled hands they had at the wedding, but this time it is for real. This time they have to convince a real live person that they are a happy young couple in love.

From the waiting room, they are ushered into a small office. They are told to stand with their right hands raised. The Filipino woman in front of them is stout and soft all over except for her face of stone.
“Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?” she asks.

After their yeses they sit down, each folding their hands in their laps and maintaining perfect posture, like they would in church. Kat crosses her legs tightly under her skirt and Sergio’s sneaker taps uncontrollably against the tile floor. Kat puts her hand on his knee so he will knock it off, but he starts the tapping again in a few seconds. The woman’s office consists of two folding chairs, two tall filing cabinets and a cold metal desk. There are no personal items, no degree hanging on the wall, no family photos. Overhead, two squares of florescent white drown the room in an artificial brightness.

A quiet panic flutters inside of Kat. It is the same rush that arrived with the interview notice. The same inability to swallow that came with each glance at the Department of Homeland Security return address.

“Evidence of co-habitation, please,” the woman says.

Sergio reaches for the blue folder that houses of every shred of proof of their lives together. The phone bill, cable bill, leasing agreement, marriage license, his entire application for permanent residency, his I-20 and student visa, their joint car insurance policy, passports, letters of employment, bank statements from their shared account, birth certificates, and photos. Pictures taken from a disposable camera held in his outstretched arm, hovering above them. Capturing their smiling faces on the beach, at the park, in a restaurant. And finally, a little white album of photos from their pathetic wedding ceremony.
He hands the stern-faced lady all of these documents that they’ve spent months filling out, photocopying and neatly collecting into a thick pile. The lady glances at the top few pages then slides them across her cold metal desk and back in front of him. Kat and Sergio briefly glance at each other, confused as to whether or not their collection is sufficient.

“So, how did you two meet?” The woman leans back in her chair, barely feigning interest.

They glance at each other again before Sergio begins his rehearsed response. Kat sits still and focuses on regulating her breathing into a steady natural pattern, which is difficult with her heart flashing in her chest the way is. Kat knows the “how they met” story. The first date story. The proposal story. Just as she knows the excuses for why they didn’t have a honeymoon, why they didn’t tell her parents, and why a married couple like them would rent a single room in house crowded with other roommates. She knew the color of his toothbrush, what time he usually woke up and what he wore to bed. Just like she knew how he took his coffee, the names and birthdays of his immediate family, and the only dish he knew how to cook. And he knew all the same things about her.

They had made notes about these things and studied them together. It was a collection of questions he’d gathered from a couple of his friends who had already done what they were attempting. His friends said it was easy as long as they kept both of you in the same room. There were horror stories about couples that’d been separated and then interviewed. Two months ago, a popular Mexican actress had been charged with perjury. Friends of friends said that she was busted because all of the couple’s answers had
matched up too perfectly. The same friends also told them that they didn’t really have to move in together because the government didn’t have the time or money to conduct random home visits like they used to. But living together made them feel safe.

As they practiced their answers, Kat realized they were essentially living two lives together as a couple. There was the part that was rehearsed and planned meticulously, the story that they thought sounded right, like the normal procedure for a loving relationship based on mutual respect and an overt desire to be together. It was a story of ambitious young love. Then there was the real story. In that story the “I love you’s” were implied. Kat would keep track of them. If he calls before I fall asleep he must. If he holds me. If he tells his father about me. If he wants me to move in with him than surely this is something real.

“So, what do your parents think of him?” The woman had asked a few questions, all of which Sergio answered on his own, so now she looked directly at Kat.

“My mom loves him. She likes his music, too, even though she can’t understand Spanish.” She looks at him and laughs a little, it’s an unbridled nervous laughter, she hasn’t spoken to her mother since she was twelve. Sergio keeps the big dumb smile across his face as they continue.

“And your father? What does he think?” The woman leans forward and places her forearms on the desk, interlocking her fat fingers.

“Oh well, um.” She stops to clear her throat, feels her voice shake. Sergio looks at her, nodding slowly. This was different. She actually did talk to her father occasionally.

“Well, actually my dad doesn’t know,” she said.
The three of them sit in silence for a moment. With her hands still in her lap, Kat wraps her hand in a fist around her other thumb. It’s a job interview technique she learned in high school – you’re supposed to channel all your nervous energy into your fist. She squeezes harder as the quiet continues but can’t stand the silence.

“I was too scared to tell him. He’d say I was too young to get married and that we haven’t known each other long enough. I know I’ll tell him someday. It just that, I’m his only daughter.”

She looks to Sergio for help but continues to ramble.

The woman’s eyes widen and she purses her lips. Silence hangs thick in the air, a cloud of smoke Kat cannot fan out. She feels the distance between her and the woman growing. She continues: “Plus, my dad is, well, kind of racist. I’m mean, not really racist like he hates people, but I know he would probably want me to marry a white guy. Or at least someone with more stability or security or something. I just know it. Even though he might never admit that.”

The woman’s eyebrows go up.

“I thought it should be about us, not him.” Kat’s eyes shift to Sergio’s “I didn’t mean to ruin it.” She shakes her head, “I didn’t want to ruin it.”

The woman says nothing. She picks up the phone, dials an extension and asks the person on the other line if she can speak to them in their office. She quietly hangs up the phone, excuses herself and leaves the room.

Kat’s flip-flop feel slick against her sweaty feet. She feels caffeinated, jittery. Sergio’s heel taps incessantly; his whole thigh bounces to its rhythm. This time she
doesn’t tell him to stop. She is afraid to say anything, paranoid about hidden cameras or voice recorders, even though everything in the room looks like it’s been there since the 70s. She knows it’s over; why didn’t she just say her dad liked him, or say it took him a while to come around. Anything seemed more appropriate than the run-on answer she gave. Kat realizes that the woman’s silence must have been tactical. Keep quiet and watch the liar squirm.

The office door opens and Kat braces herself. She’s sure they are about to be separated and unraveled. The women’s heels click the tile as she moves to her desk. A deep wrinkle appears between her eyebrows. She stares at her computer and her fake nails softly tick the keyboard. Kat’s eyes bounce, quickly scanning the women, the rest of the office and Sergio. His chest rises slowly with each heavy breath. Kat has already blinked away tears when it strikes her – nothing will be the same after the next few minutes – he will never again need her the way he needs her now. It is the beginning of his new life here, but also the end of them.

“Ma’am. I just need you to print your name here and sign.” The woman has placed a set of forms in front of Kat. Then the woman speaks to Sergio like he has just bought a car, “You should receive your permanent residency card in about six weeks along with your work permit. Of course, your permanent residency is conditional at this time. After you have been married two years you’ll be able to have this conditional status removed.”

Kat manages to cut off the tears while they sign the forms, shake the woman’s fat hand and thank her.
They hold hands as they walk out of the office and back through the waiting room. Keep their fingers tightly interlaced in the elevator, past the metal detectors and out the door. When they get to the sidewalk, Kat sees how ecstatic Sergio is. He squeezes her hand and swings their arms. They walk briskly down the street, moving so fast it’s almost a jog. The afternoon sun creates a series of golden patches where it is able to sneak out between the tall buildings and their shadows.

It is still warm outside but not as humid. They cross a bridge over the freeway and Kat can no longer stop her tears. Beneath them a steady roar rises from endless lines of cars. Vehicles attempting to move forward are all at once frozen in the rush-hour traffic. She fights an urge to grab the blue folder and throw it off the bridge. A warm gust of Santa Ana wind flutters through her skirt and his t-shirt, uncovering flashes of skin. It whips her hair about so much that she can feel it on the back of her neck. She imagines all of their papers swirling in the breeze before landing amongst the gleaming cars.

At the next corner waiting for the light to change, he flips her hair back in place and brushes it off her shoulders. She wipes her eyes. He must think she is as happy and relieved as he is. He smiles and takes her hand. Removes her rings and gently rubs the mold-colored stain that his has left behind. He takes off his ring he gives them all to her.

As they enter the crosswalk, he pulls out his phone out and immediately starts shouting out the news to whoever’s on the line in Spanish. He’s still on the phone when they reach his truck. Kat waits in the passenger seat while he finishes his conversation outside. She holds her hand out in front of her, looking at the back of it where his ring had been. The green around her finger has already begun to fade.
The System Of Things

She was almost eighteen and hopelessly naïve the first time he touched her. Instead of sitting on the other couch, he joined her on the smaller one when he was “babysitting” her brother one night. The babysitting thing was pretty ridiculous considering that Rebecca was old enough to menstruate, drive and almost old enough vote—even though as a Jehovah’s Witness, she wasn’t actually allowed to do so. But her parents felt safer knowing that Brother Matthew Brash was at home with their innocent offspring, especially with all the “sickos” out there in the world. Technically they were sitting on opposite ends of the couch, but she positioned herself in such a way that when he sat down he had to prop her feet in his lap. He was however, the one to initiate the foot rub, and that was the beginning.

Rebecca told me the story right after it happened, when she was supposed to be studying the bible with me. My mom had recently stopped going to AA and decided to become a Jehovah’s Witness instead; one cult for another, her boyfriend said. She said I didn’t have to go to all the meetings with her as long as I agreed to study the bible with Rebecca, the daughter of the woman who was basically like her sponsor for the Jehovah’s Witness thing. So every Saturday morning for an hour, Rebecca would come over in church clothes, these terrible old lady sweaters and long flowered dresses and read out of this book titled *The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived* (try and guess who it was about--ding ding if you said Jesus). It didn’t take very long for us to abandon the book and move on to my mom’s Glamour magazines instead. We’d either do that or each other’s make-up or sometimes she would try on my clothes. It was like she was from a foreign country, I
swear. She had never seen an R-rated movie, not even Pretty Woman, had never even seen the Wizard of Oz, because of the witch. If that wasn’t enough, she had never heard of Nirvana, let alone Kurt Cobain, and one time she thought I was talking about Marilyn Monroe when I mentioned Marilyn Manson. I guess that’s what happens when you’re home schooled from the sixth grade on and forbidden to watch MTV. She and her brother weren’t even allowed to play Mario Brothers because it had “magic” in it, like getting flower power and shooting fireballs were a way of practicing the dark arts. To them Bowser’s Castle was Satan’s hell incarnate. All of this stuff was why the Matthew thing was pretty major in her world. I remember when she told me about Matthew sitting on the couch with her like that and the way she described how it felt--like a flash of heat that pounded through her--it reminded me of my first kiss, like first real kiss in the seventh grade. I had forgotten about all that, how exciting kissing used to be, how intense all that stuff was when it was still new.

The second time Matthew touched her instead of her feet, her head was in his lap. Not like gross or anything, just her head on a pillow on his thigh or something like that. The only thing he did then was brush her hair behind her ear. Then he sort of rested his arm on her, his hand grazing her hip, his fingertips moving in mindless circles on her skin. That reminded me of the seventh grade too. Back when we all had Disneyland passes and we’d go every weekend to make out in the Haunted Mansion and pretend to get drunk off whatever small amount booze we managed to sneak into the park with. Our parents took turns picking us up at midnight and then making the rounds to drop each of
us back at our houses. Well, all of them except my mom. On the way home I would lie against my boyfriend and pretend to sleep, wishing he would do the hair behind the ear thing, but he only did it once. Finger-banging he could do, no problems there, but hair behind the ear and handholding were entirely different, things that seemed to fall by the wayside after the one month mark in the world of junior high relationships.

It was April when Rebecca and I started “studying the Bible” together. We were both getting ready to finish high school and it was an exciting time. I got a job as a hostess at a fancy restaurant and was starting classes at Orange County Community College in the summer. Rebecca was excited too, but in a different way. She was getting ready to get baptized and become a pioneer for her church. A “pioneer” is a person who spends more than a hundred hours a month knocking on doors and bothering people with Jehovah God talk and promises of everlasting life on a paradise earth. All that stuff about how we’ll live in peace and have tigers for pets and never grow old. Brother Matthew was a pioneer, of course, and someday he was going to be an elder in the congregation. Rebecca was absurdly proud when she told me this, like he was already her husband. Like him being rich in terms of righteousness was the same as being a millionaire.

Then one Saturday when she came over, she had this stupid smirk on her face. “He kissed me. I’ve been kissed. I now know how to kiss!” She was crazy excited.

“How was it?” I asked.

“It was like, well, like melting. Like something warm pouring all over me. All like, tingly, you know?”
“Wait. How old is he again?”

“Like forty-two, I think,” she said, like it was nothing.

“Jesus Becca! That’s kinda fucked, don’t you think?” She used to hate it when I called her Becca.

She shrugged. “I mean it’s not that bad. I’m sure we are going to get married and all that, so it’s really not that big a deal.”

I wanted to shake her and tell her that she was crazy and too naive and that things don’t just work out like that. She had that uncompromised confidence that religious people always have, like there was no doubt in her mind that good things were in store for her, like she was so fucking immune to all the shit and turmoil that the rest of us know is inevitable. As if divorce, adultery and perverts were these strange things from another realm that she’d never have anything to do with. It made me want to hurt her, just to let her know that evil did exist and that it was all around her. That it wasn’t Mario and Luigi that her parents should worry about.

But instead I said nothing, except, “Wanna see what color I’m gonna dye my hair next?”

She said sure.

I was only 18 and didn’t know how to say the things I knew I should have.

Three weeks later Brother Matthew went ahead and slept with Rebecca. She was quieter about this than the kissing and the cuddles and the groping that came before it.

“Did you bleed a lot?”
She nodded.

Then she asked me what my first time was like and I told her about being drunk and getting fucked my ex-best friend’s older brother freshman year. When I explained how it was horrible and scary even though it was definitely not rape or anything, I knew that she knew exactly what I meant, even though she acted like she didn’t. I could see it in her eyes, how she got caught in that same place I did, where she wanted it to happen but still felt wildly out of control when it finally did. Wanted to take it back on one hand but felt relieved that it was over on the other.

We decided to go swimming that day, when she told me about Matthew following her up to bed and sliding off her Old Navy pajama bottoms. It was 96 degrees outside and my room was all stuffy and it felt hard for me to breathe while I listened to her story as we sat there cross-legged on the carpet, painting our nails lime green. The ceiling fan did nothing but spin the hot air and fumes of nail polish and acetone all around us. It gave me a headache.

The pool at my apartment complex wasn’t heated but when it got this hot it really didn’t matter. I had to lend her a bathing suit. All I had were bikinis and she’d never worn one before. I wasn’t much taller than Becca but she was way curvier. She pulled her long, flowy dress over her head, revealing giant boobs smashed down by an overworked sports bra. From high on her waist down to the top of her knee she had on a silky ivory slip trimmed with lace. Apparently her mom wouldn’t let her wear any dress or skirt without a slip on underneath. I honestly didn’t even know what the purpose of a slip was.
My mom didn’t give a shit about what I left the house in, let alone what was on underneath.

It surprised me that Becca was comfortable getting naked in front of me. I gave her the least stringy bikini I had, which was a little bit big on me. It was blue with underwire in the top, which she would obviously need. When she took off her cotton granny panties to put on the bottoms I couldn’t help but notice her big black bush of pubic hair.

“Jesus Becca, don’t you think it’s time for a trim?”

“What?”

“You’ve got a full-blown 70’s muff going on.” I hooked one finger and pulled at the top of her bikini bottoms. She flinched. I pulled down the top of mine a little. “See, landing strip only.” It dawned on me that Becca had probably never seen another naked woman outside of her and her mom.

She turned away from me and tried on the top. “Oh crud, it’s way too small.” She turned back toward me and tried to arrange the thick mounds of flesh that poured out over the top of the bikini.

“Holy shit, no wonder Brother Matthew couldn’t keep his effing hands off you.” I untied and then retied the straps trying to make it work.

She laughed a little and looked at herself in the mirror from different angles. And once again that feeling came over me, that protective hatred or whatever it was. It disgusted me to think of a grown man pressing up against her body. How the slimy perv must have slid one hand down, must have had some moment of recognition when his
fingertips finally reached that soft tangle of hair. He had to have realized that he was about to trespass upon a completely untouched territory, and had the audacity to do it anyway.

This time when I thought about it, I started hating her mom too.

I gave Becca a big black t-shirt to wear over the too-tight bikini and we headed out to the pool.

The seafood restaurant I worked at was called Harpoon Harry’s but all the servers referred to it as “The Hairy Poon.” I had been working there for about a month when one of the waitresses gave me an I.D. some twenty-two-year-old girl had left at one of her tables. I waited a week and then when nobody came to pick it up I started using it to go out with some of the servers who were all in their twenties and working their way through college very slowly. They would get off at 11:00 and take me out to clubs in L.A. and then a handful of after-hours spots. We’d dance and they’d put little pills on the tip of my tongue and then make sure I drank enough water like some warped version of a protective older sibling. One of the guys would always bring a Vicks Vapor rub stick and blow it in everyone’s face when we were rolling. The minty burst of air around the eyes would immediately re-awaken each of us and leave an icy tingling sensation. Then we’d go back to somebody’s apartment. By that time the loud ringing in our ears would drown out most attempts at conversation, so we’d smoke weed and crash, or drink, snort lines and make out with each other. When that happened there would always be threesomes or foursomes crowded onto the only bed or futon in somebody’s one room loft or downtown studio. There’d be people on the bed doing it and then a couch full of onlookers taking in
the shenanigans before nodding out. All this while tracks of house music blended into one another on the stereo, until the sun finally became bright through the windows. Then at high noon everyone would head home--the raver version of Cinderella’s midnight--to nap before heading back to the next four-hour shift at the restaurants and bars they called work.

It was so different from the high school or college parties I’d gone to all over Anaheim or Long Beach or even Fullerton all my life. Parties with wannabe KROQ bands playing, red cups everywhere and the occasional keg of shitty beer. House parties with people throwing up on someone’s lawn after shots of 99 Bananas or whatever random bottle there was to drink from. The restaurant people seemed so glamorous and sophisticated compared to the north Orange County people I knew. They knew about drugs, wine, food, art and endless styles of music from decades before they were born. More than anything though, I think it was how they just didn’t give a shit that impressed me most. That particular brand of recklessness that people in their early twenties associate with “being alive.”

_Drinking life to the lees._ That was what one of the servers called it.

_Like the Greeks,_ she said. _The like, real Greeks…_

It was on one of these weeknights out with the servers that I first met Trent Navajas. It wasn’t until way later that I found out his name wasn’t actually Trent or Navajas but rather Thomas Johnston. Trent Navajas--according to Colombian slang, which Trent swore he was half-Colombian--translated roughly to Trent _Blades,_ which he
must’ve thought was a stealthily awesome stage name of sorts. I’m embarrassed to admit that I was impressed when Trent told me what he did for work, I mean, being a dancer is kind of cool, that’s one thing--but actually playing Aladdin in a show at Disneyland is quite another. It was like hanging out with some sort of celebrity. And of course he was gorgeous. He had to look like Aladdin after all, fully capable of constant shirtlessness with that perfect brown skin. He was the kind of pretty that makes you feel great-looking just from being around it. Strange, infectious beauty. I slept with him the third time we hung out, but we both realized it was better to be friends. Instead, Trent became one of my favorite dance partners. Together we’d hop in and out of places all up and down Hollywood Blvd, from The Playhouse to King King to Rock Bottom to The Echo, and knew enough bartenders, bouncers and DJs to drink and get in free almost everywhere, especially if the bartenders were gay. Gay men couldn’t resist Trent, and he always flirted back. Always ready to shout his phone number over the music or fill out a cocktail napkin if it meant potential drink hookups later.

It was the summer of foam parties and glow sticks. Neon condoms and cyber sex. Besides going out at night Trent also showed me all the best places to shop on Melrose and how to fray my cutoffs. I spent every meager paycheck getting wasted and buying dumb shit like slinky halter-tops, glittery hot pants and crazy stripper platforms. Stuff you really couldn’t wear anywhere else besides a club. It wasn’t very long before I stopped coming home on weekends and started missing my “bible studies” with Becca, which my mom didn’t like, mostly because she didn’t want Becca’s mom to think she was a bad parent. So I played good girl for a while and made sure I ended up back at home on
Friday nights or Saturday mornings and would pretty much just lie in bed nursing a hangover when Becca came to hang out in my room.

Most of the time we talked about sex, because I was obviously the only person she could talk to about that stuff. Sometimes she would ask what I did last night and I would tell her and she would try not to act shocked. I kept a running list in my head of all the things she had never done. She had never taken one puff of a cigarette, never had a sip of alcohol, never worn a mini skirt, never worn eyeliner or red lipstick, or dyed her hair. And she’d never had a friend outside of church except for me. There were two things, though, that Becca swore she knew for sure. One was that she was in love, 100% in love with Matthew and completely ready to spend her life with him. The second was that she was 100% positive that she had had an orgasm, several orgasms even. Both were hard to believe, but the orgasm thing just seemed crazy. I’d been doing it since high school and had never had one. Even when I was rolling, I hadn’t had one. That didn’t seem fair, but I was pretty sure she didn’t know what the fuck she was talking about.

Even though we didn’t really study the bible, I still learned a lot about “the truth.” That’s what they call it, being “in the truth”. Or if you were not a witness, then you were not “in the truth.” Becca told me that the world was going to end soon and that anyone who had been exposed to the Jehovah’s Witness religion and then rejected it-- anyone who rejected “the truth” in other words--would end right along with the “system of things.” That’s what they call the world outside of “the truth.” We are all a part of the “system of things.”
We were out on my mom’s balcony one time talking about this stuff. I was smoking one of my mom’s menthols. She hadn’t had a drink in over a year, but still couldn’t bring herself to quit smoking, and cigarettes were my latest accessory.

“So what if you’re not exposed to the truth, then what happens? Like what if no one ever knocks on your door? What if you’re some kid in the middle of nowhere in Africa or New Guinea or something, then what?” I asked, careful to exhale away from her.

“If you’re never taught the truth, then you still get resurrected and get to live in the paradise on earth,” she said. “You’re safe.”

“Then why don’t you just leave people alone?”

“What do you mean?” She asked.

“If people never ever get to know anything about Jehovah, then they get to go to heaven right?”

“No, they don’t go to heaven. They just get to live in the paradise. Only the anointed 144,000 get to go to heaven.”

“That’s what I mean. If they never know, then they get to go to paradise. Right?”

“Yes.”

“Well then why don’t you just stop fucking preaching to everyone and shut up, so we can all go?” I smashed my cigarette on the metal rail of the balcony, watched it fall to the ground after I flicked it off the edge.

Becca just kind of looked away and I could tell she was trying to figure out an answer.
Something itched in my throat and I started coughing uncontrollably. When I stopped she finally said something.

“I guess we just believe that the way we live is the way that brings the most happiness, so we want everybody to learn about it and be happy like we are, that’s all.”

As she said this, I pictured an overweight, hairy old man on top of her, his face inches from hers, his breath hitting her skin which each grunt and groan.

What did she know about anything.

I lit another menthol.

*

Three months later I got a random call from Becca on my cell phone. I hadn’t ever given her my number but I guess my mom gave it to her mom. She asked if I could pick her up. Whatever it was that she had to tell me, she didn’t want to talk about it on the phone. I knew it was going to be about Matthew and on the way there I tried to plan what to say to help her feel better.

When she got into my car she handed me a turquoise envelope. It was a wedding invitation. Matthew had gotten engaged to another Jehovah’s Witness woman from a different congregation. It was hard to believe that she was so shocked. Hard to believe she was that out of touch and so convinced that they were on the brink of being engaged when he was banging another woman the whole time. Then I realized that he probably wasn’t sleeping with the other woman. The other woman got all the things Rebecca was missing out on. Regular couple stuff--dinners out in public, day trips, talks about the future—things Rebecca didn’t even know she wasn’t getting.
Part of me wanted to say welcome to the fucking club, princess and part of me wanted to help her run away, from Matthew, her family, and the entire crazy religion. I expected her to start gushing tears and snot after she told me, but instead she just sat there in the passenger seat of my car and cried silently, with dignity. I only knew she was crying for sure when the shine off one of her slick tears caught my peripheral vision.

There is something about sitting alone with someone in the patient near-silence of a dark car that provides a tremendous illusion of safety that somehow makes it easier for people to say the things they need to. Maybe it’s in the way you don’t have to directly face the person you’re talking to. Most of my worst memories have taken place in the quiet privacy of a passenger seat. It’s a way of being there for someone but not being there all at the same time. I found out that my father wasn’t coming back, that my mom had relapsed, and that my grandma had died, all in the safety and protective blackness of a passenger seat. And in that way I knew how Rebecca felt while she sat there, staring out the window. I knew the same pangs of nausea that were making waves inside her as constant as the brief bursts of suburban streetlight that flashed by as we drove. Except in my case, it was usually my mom in the driver’s seat, sloshed out of her mind with a cigarette dangling from her left hand. I remember I could always feel it when her eyes were on me, and could always feel the loneliness that came instantly when she looked away. All this as the cool night air swooshed in from her window, while the stench of vodka fought the black pine tree air freshener to be the dominant scent to later recall the memory.
But this was the first time I was the one who was driving, taking us in circles and turning at random just to keep us moving. The first time it was someone else who felt like they’d been ripped open to have their insides shuffled in a way that could never be reconciled. I hated that it was Rebecca who ended up in the passenger seat that night, but I knew that she needed that devastation, too.

Though I had tried to rehearse, ultimately there was nothing for me to say and nothing I could do to comfort her. I drove us to 7-Eleven and bought a pack of cigarettes and two cups of coffee. I smoked almost half a pack as I drove us toward the coast and then south down Pacific Coast Highway to Laguna before backtracking to her parent's house in Tustin.

That was the night we finally became friends. She stopped trying to preach and I stopped judging. Stopped thinking she was a naive religious idiot just long enough to see where we were the same in terms of just being girls trying to make sense of things.

* 

The next Saturday was Halloween, so I invited her to go out with me. She lied to her parents about spending the night at another witness’s house and I picked her up in the early evening so we could get dressed at my house. I was going as a gypsy with my face painted like a sugar skull. For Becca’s costume, I pulled out all the funky club attire I owned to figure out some kind of outfit for her.

Then it hit me. “Britney Spears! You can be like a Goth Britney with the school girl thing and all that.”
“What’s Goth?” she asked.

“You know those people that wear all black and are really into The Cure.”

I could see she had no idea what I meant by “The Cure.” I guess people in “the truth” aren’t interested in “The Cure.” I gave her a plaid mini-skirt, a fitted white dress shirt that she could barely button up, and knee-high fishnets. Then I had her try on three different kinds of platforms before deciding to go with my favorite clunky lace-up boots. Next, I smeared on thick black eyeliner for her and smudged it just right. Then I lined her lips with a deep cranberry color before adding the black lipstick and two 80’s-style diagonals of blush.

“What happens if I get cold?” she asked.

“You won’t. As soon as we get a few drinks in you you’ll be fine.” I said this partly just to see how she’d react. “Trust me, if you’re as crazy depressed as I think you are and if you truly want to forget about him, a few drinks is totally not a big deal.”

She sighed, suddenly overwhelmed. I could even see her eyes water, before she seemed to blink the feeling away.

“Trust me.” I rubbed her arm briefly, trying to console her without making a big thing of it. Then I told her how pasty white she was and gave her some self tanner to slather on while I did my make-up.

I painted my face white and used black eyeliner to paint in the skull teeth along my lips. Then I slicked on a pearly maroon face paint in wide ovals that covered my eyebrows and the entire area around my eye sockets. I stopped to help Becca part her hair so she could work on the Britney pigtail braids.
When my face was done, it looked just how I pictured it, skeletal, angular, androgynous. A web pattern spread across my forehead while elaborate symmetrical embellishments accented the dark shaded areas that suggested the basic skull shape.

Before we left I doused Becca in shimmery glitter gel. Chest, arms, face, thighs, basically every inch of skin that showed was accounted for. At the last second, I had her change into a bright red bra and taught her how to bend forward and position each breast for maximum cleavage.

It was still light out when we stopped at 7-11 before getting on the freeway. All eyes were on Becca and me as we walked past a short line of men by the counter. I could see she was trying her best to maneuver in the chunky platforms and also struggling to ignore the men’s eyes on her. Sometimes you can even feel where they are looking, the upper thigh, the back of the knee, the line from neck to shoulder, eyes that move quickly, shifting away and then back. The sensation of a man’s peripheral vision stealing glances is a feeling most women are accustomed to. When we get in line, there’s a young father in front of us holding hands with his little daughter dressed like one of the Disney princesses. I think she was Sleeping Beauty. When I smiled at her she hid behind her father, frightened.

I bought two red Gatorades and a bottle of Raspberry Smirnoff with my fake i.d. In the parking lot we drank down some of the Gatorade so I could pour the vodka in. It smeared off the teeth I’d painted on my lips. “Fuck, I’m gonna have to keep re-doing them.”
Becca jumped out and went back inside.

She came back with a Slurpee straw.

“Thanks.” I said.

We parked at a friend’s house in Venice. One of Trent’s roommates had to agreed to drop us off in West Hollywood on their way to work. I introduced Becca to everyone and they all complimented her costume.

“Uber-hot,” said Kendra.

“Britney meets bondage,” said Charles.

“Fuckable,” said Trent.

Trent was in his Aladdin uniform. His gay friend Charles was a landlocked pirate, which meant Cowboy clothes, an eye patch, and a fake Rooster duct-taped to his shoulder. Kendra was a butterfly, or maybe a fairy. She was already so fucked up that when I asked her she just gave me this smile like it was a secret. Her wings were so giant, she had to take them off for all six of us to fit in the roommate’s busted-up Bronco.

That’s when I told Becca to close her eyes and stick out her tongue.

“What is it?” She asked, rolling her tongue along her teeth.

“You’ll see.” I said.

“It doesn’t taste like anything.”

I handed her the vodka Gatorade to wash it down.
Everything was crazy in Hollywood. The street was closed and packed with people. It was like a Disney parade, but with nudity and drugs. The costumes were astonishing, hundreds of intoxicated, walking works of art. I could see Becca slowly coming into her own. She eventually stopped adjusting her outfit and began to stare directly back into the faces that turned in her direction and looked her up and down. She looked happy and sexy and fearless. I hooked my arm around hers and was glad that I brought her out for her first Halloween, first holiday, first everything.

We ended up at a club. Inside, neon lights dashed bright spears of color throughout the warehouse-sized room. High towers of speakers provided a deep bass pulse for the large organism we all became on the dance floor. Each individual unit of the beast swirling and gyrating, coming together and then breaking apart, cells bumping against one another under a microscope. A proud DJ orchestrating all of it behind a complex system of machines, wielding his influence over us through manipulations of sound like some kind of puppet master, the variant frequencies his strings. I felt hands on my hips and warm breath blown onto my neck. My skin became salty and slick with sweat. I moved quickly but my limbs seem to flail in slow motion under the flashing strobe lights. All of those intricate costumes and countless faces plastered with dramatic make-up looked otherworldly under the black lights, something other than human. All of them--zombies and fairies, monsters and super heroes, devils and angels-- became a mess of glitter, wigs and skin.
We were still at the carnival walking down the street when I blacked-out. I had vague, pieces of memories of being outside in cool night air. Then I came to again at the rave and remember dancing with Becca and feeling happy about the look on her face, and enjoying the way she moved. I also remember seeing her make-out with Trent on the dance floor.

Then I blacked out again and didn’t come out of it until way later when we were back at Trent’s house. I woke up in the middle of being skull-fucked in a bathtub, by a guy dressed as Batman. His dick was pulled out over the top of black Speedos, his entire body covered in silver paint. I remember ‘cause I struggled to get him off of me and got the metallic paint all over my hands and forearms from pushing his thighs. He didn’t put up much of a fight, just slumped down in the bathtub as I walked out. I searched for Becca and couldn’t find her. Started checking the bedrooms. Just as I got to Trent’s room at the end of the hall I could hear someone banging on the door and jiggling the doorknob like they couldn’t get out. The door swung open and Becca rushed out and into the bathroom across the hall. I looked in the room and saw Trent fully naked over another guy. I only knew it was Charles because of the bright red cowboy boots I noticed under the mess of blue jeans that were pushed down around his shins.

I heard Becca dry heaving in the bathroom. The door was wide open. It smelled like piss and bile. She hadn’t eaten anything that night. Nothing was coming up. Then she looked at me knowingly, with this horrifying dead expression on her face. Her lips were dry and cracked, the eyeliner smudged like she had tried to wipe it away, her white shirt ripped open. There were scratches near her throat and blotchy patches of red on her
thighs and stomach where Trent’s hands must have tried to force to her stay in place. Her pigtail braids looked more like natty dreads than the locks of a pop princess. She’d been ravished. It was obvious by her physical state, but even more so by her expression when she looked up at me. It was a look of utter devastation from someone who’d just been railed upon against their will. A look I’d seen before in my own reflection, glaring back at me through the foreign mirror of a stranger’s bathroom. An expression that routinely appeared on my mom’s face when she’d get home after another night of relapse and come back from the darkness of that same lonely abyss I was beginning to know too well. This was the look that Rebecca’s family fought to keep off of their children’s faces. Something she was never supposed to know but here she was.

She put her head back in the toilet and that terrible sound came from her again. There was no way I could rearrange the facts. This was all my fault. Some sick vindictive desire I’d been hoping for since she first tried to save me. I held her pigtails back. Crouched down and rubbed her back. When she was done and finally laid down on the cool tiled floor I went and got her water, found a t-shirt and sweats in a pile of clothes. I wiped off the urine down her legs and removed her soaked, ripped underwear. I noticed there was hardly any hair on her this time, the opposite of what I saw that day in my room. After taking off what was left of her costume and putting on the other clothes I found for her, I eventually fell asleep next to her on the bathroom floor. From the tiny square of dark blue in the bathroom window I couldn’t tell if it was late or early in the morning before I drifted off. But when I woke up the sun was beaming through the same small window and Rebecca was gone.
I found out later that it was Matthew who came all the way from Orange County to pick her up in Hollywood that morning. There was no one else’s number she knew besides his. She must have told him everything because only a few days later she was disfellowshipped from her congregation. Or maybe she finally threatened to tell her and Matthew’s secret and that was how he retaliated. They do the disfellowship thing to keep their “flock clean.” My mom was the one who told me what had happened to Rebecca and what it meant. When a person is disfellowshipped no one in the congregation is allowed to communicate with them. Not their friends, family or their parents even. Just when the person needs them most, they’re cut off. I thought for sure that she would call me when my mom told me this. I practiced what I’d say to her in my mind all day, then the days turned to weeks. It was like Rebecca just disappeared. When my mom asked her mom where Rebecca was she wouldn’t say anything. She didn’t even have a cell phone or anything, so it would have been easy for her to runaway.

Later on I told my mom about what happened with Matthew. She stopped going to meetings after that, and after seeing how the whole clan went along with shunning the wayward eighteen-year-old. I didn’t have the heart to tell her about Halloween though, how I had served Becca up on a platter for two drug-addled sexual deviants. For a long time I’d think about it everyday, but now when I think of her I’ve trained myself to imagine that only good things happened to her after that night. That she went to college and found a man to marry and became a mother--things like that. But there is another voice in me that whispers what is more likely. *Probably put a fucking gun to her head.* It
says things like that, things that I have to try hard to push far out of my mind. Things that I sometimes cannot stop thinking about and that I hope are not the truth.
The Writer

The writer went to one of those fancy schools on the east coast, he’d graduated magna cum whatever you call it. He was long, tall and angular and looked as if you could fold him up like a table and slide him under a bed. His voice sounded like death, but in a good way. His hair was in the midst of graying. He had a full beard, unkempt, the kind that makes people uncomfortable. She noticed that he wore terrible shoes. Sneakers that were all black that an old man or a custodian would wear. Someday when they’d been together long enough she would bring it up to him. Those are terrible! She would say and they’d laugh and he’d be so grateful to have a woman in his life at last.

After the first time seeing him read, she friended him on Facebook and Goodreads and followed him on Twitter. She bought his book and read it, read every interview he’d ever given, gazed at every photograph, then read the book again. He’d only written one but even if there had been a million she would have read every one of them.

She underlined all the saddest passages in his stories. Anything that hinted toward loneliness or longing.

She Googled every person in the acknowledgements section. Thirty-three people total. Most of the woman didn’t seem threatening.

The writer had a smile that would sneak up on you. His mouth would spread suddenly and then there it was all out in the open. She discovered this from a YouTube video, re-ran the footage of him cracking a smile enough times to memorize every frame.
In the video he wore a sophisticated overcoat. Except for the shoes and the beard he was rather neat, and stylish to the point that maybe he was gay, she thought.

But that didn’t matter.

The writer was everything she never was and everything she wanted to become.

Someday they would be together and he would see things in her that she wasn’t able to see in herself. She sprung at the thought of being under his observation, his skillful eye watching her, his brilliant words swirling in his thoughts of her.

Her fiancé went with her the next time she went to hear the writer read. They sat at the back of the room and her heart pounded as she stared at the back of the writer’s head, pounded at the stress and excitement of being in the presence of both men at the same time.

She tried to act natural.

Before her obsession with the writer it seemed as though her whole life was planned out. Neat squares of feminine milestones were lined up to create a path that fanned out into the distance like a board game. She would marry and have children and be taken care of by her husband. She would be happy and grateful for her life in the suburbs--the luxury SUV in the driveway, her children’s perceived athletic prowess--all of her good fortunes.

She liked to believe that thinking of the writer during the day would somehow bring her closer to him. She would try to imagine what he might be doing, or thinking or
working on at various points during the day. Would the writer be awake at this hour? Would he have had breakfast by now? Would he have watched the news, read the news, or ignored it? Sometimes she would find the answers to these questions on Facebook, but other times he would go days without a status update. She checked her news feeds like a meth addict picks their scabs, it became an unconscious tick though she never knew exactly what she was hoping for.

She liked to believe that maybe the reason she couldn’t get him out of her head was because somehow he was also thinking of her. Maybe he was writing a character like her and that was why she felt so possessed by him so often. Maybe he had admired her from afar the way she had him.

Then one day the writer “liked” the profile picture she posted on her Facebook page.

Then she “liked” one of his reviews on Goodreads.

Then he “favorited” one of her tweets.

Then she “re-tweeted” one of his.

Then nothing.

It was just enough to sustain her imagination. She pictured them as two people desperate to reach for each other but overruled by shyness.

She was not love sick as much as she was simply nauseous at the thought of her tiny life, her meager existence. Though she did not realize it at the time.

It was not about sex. The writer would not entertain one-night stands, she was sure of it. He was not the type. The girls that he slept with were women, they had short
hair and bangs and glasses. They did not have fake boobs. They could discuss at length books like the “Infinite Jest” and “Finnegans Wake.” They were adorable whenever they argued about anything, especially literature. That’s what really got the writer going: good book talk.

The next time she went to see the writer read. He recognized her. He tried to initiate eye contact from a few tables away in the dark room but she ignored him. Though she could feel his eyes on her and see him in her peripheral vision. She tossed her hair and even whispered in her fiancé’s ear throughout the evening, in an attempt to make the writer jealous.

When the reading ended she went to smoke in the alley behind the bar. The writer approached her, asked her for a cigarette.

She was digging in her purse when she saw his hand reaching towards her. Then he gently pulled out a strand of cigarette ash that was tangled in her hair. She handed him a cigarette and they smoked in silence. No matter how many likes, or comments, or favorited tweets this simple gesture topped them all. Some things in life are irreplaceable; the feeling that came when the writer’s fingertips touched her hair was one of them.

The next day it felt like a dream. She had been drinking the previous night and couldn’t discern whether it had actually happened or not, had the writer actually touched
her? She was immediately frustrated that there was no timeline of the moment to scroll through and confirm.

She direct messaged the writer on Facebook:

“Did you touch my hair yesterday? Because I think you touched my hair but I can’t remember. It might have been a dream. It was either a dream or I’m crazy. I don’t know which is more disturbing. I really can’t remember and I feel like I’m going insane. (smiley face)”

Two hours went by and the writer did not respond. Though he did finish a book on Goodreads and had retweeted links to two articles during that span of time.

She messaged him again:

“I know it’s a really odd/weird/random/strange question but hopefully you’ll understand. If not no big deal. Don’t sweat it. God I hope I’m not bothering you! Sorry if I seem so like, super-duper lame! I’m not a weirdo I promise! (smiley face, smiley face)”

Two days went by and she still hadn’t heard from the writer.

Two days turned to two weeks and then it was two months and still nothing. She felt embarrassed, rejected and alone. And it pained her to think that she’d never know whether that moment had actually happened.

Then one night the girl and her fiancé were walking to the movies.

They were holding hands, when her fiancé asked: “What’s with guy’s picking stuff out of your hair all time?”

Her face immediately got hot. “What do you mean?”
“That writer guy did it that one night and then there was another time your friend Jay pulled something out of your hair.”

“I don’t remember that.” She lied.

“Yeah it’s like what the fuck? Don’t touch my girlfriend, I’m standing right here!”

They walked in silence for a moment.

She shrugged and smiled. “Maybe you should pick stuff out of my hair before somebody else does.”

“I would.” He lifted her hand and kissed it. “I just didn’t see it.” He said.

That night after the movie, she went home and put pen to paper, determined to become the thing that she had wanted so badly.
In California, unless it’s fire season, meteorologists’ don’t give a shit about the wind. Sure they keep records on the speed of the gusts but it’s not like sunshine or the temperature. No one counts the number of windy days it seems, except for pool men. Pool guys can’t afford to underestimate the weather. The amount of sun determines chemical costs. Cloudy days save money. A good rainy day can cut your route time in half. But the effect of the wind is the most immediate, it can add hours to your day in a matter of minutes.

We would bid new accounts and plan as much as we could to get the pricing right. We’d calculate the average chlorine cost, the amount of gas it would take to add a new pool to a guy’s route. But no matter how careful we tried to plan for the business a big wind or a major heat wave could throw everything off.

The spring after my uncle Scott died was the windiest season my father could ever remember and he had been cleaning pools since he was 16 years old. We went to dad’s favorite bikini bar, The Filling Post for Opening Day that year. It was the first time we had ever watched it somewhere other than our house. Since my Uncle had died the house was too quiet and too empty, and we couldn’t stand being there anymore than we had to. When Grandma and Grandpa were alive the Dodger’s season opener was like a holiday in our house. Grandma would bake Polish meat pies and make “Soviet Margaritas” which consisted of Vodka, triple sec and fresh juice from Grandpa’s lemon trees. I wish I would’ve learned that meat pie recipe, but like so many things in that house the instructions seem to die right along with them. Now I can’t even remember the name. It
was something that my sister might have known, she used to cook with Grandma but she was already too good for us by then. Living with god knows who in LA, doing god knows what. She didn’t even text me back when I told her that Scott had died.

Opening Day was about new beginnings, hope and the silly assumption that this season something might possibly go right for the Dodger’s. At first it was sort of sad being at a bikini bar for Opening Day, in the same way that all those types of places are pretty sad, but then again there’s nothing like half-naked girls to shatter wholesome family memories and nothing like frosty schooners of Coors to further eradicate them. We did pretty good. Only talked baseball for the first several hours and Dad didn’t get sentimental until he switched over to bourbon later that night. I was lucky to get him out of there almost immediately after his first loud rambling toast to the dead. I knew what was coming if I let him keep going.

It was still pretty early when we stopped at the liquor store on the way home. He’d been a heavy drinker all my life but he was becoming more anti-social about it, he’d stopped drinking in the family room, instead he’d just take a twelve pack to his room and shut the door. Uncle Scott had been a fall-down drunk but he was friendly and could function just fine or so it seemed, my dad was starting to look like the opposite.

Later that night I woke up to the sound of bushes rustling and my dad’s heavy grunts. I found him in the back yard shirtless, teetering on Grandpa’s old wooden ladder.

“What the fuck?” I asked.
“I can’t sleep with all these freaking Avocados plopping on the goddamn ground every minute.” He was halfway through sawing the narrow trunk of the small tree.

“Just do it in the morning, you crazy ass.”

“It’s not that late.”

It wasn’t that late but we had been drinking since eleven a.m.

“How can you even see?” I asked.

“Will you just give me a fucking hand?” He said.

I held the ladder steady for him.

“The rats climb up in the trees to eat them, and I can hear those fuckers too, it’s terrible.”

He had me tie a rope to the tree so I could guide it away from him when he lopped the top off. He was up there with a handsaw, breathing heavy and sweating bourbon.

“Why don’t use the sawzall. You nut.” My words fell on dead ears. He insisted on doing things his way no matter how time-consuming or inefficient.

“Pull it now, pull, pull, pull.” He said.

The small trunk of the Avocado tree cracked and the leaves rustled as the heap of flimsy branches fell upon the grass.

Dad stumbled as he hopped off the ladder and tried to hide it. “That was the tree Grandpa had his first heart attack in.”

He stopped to catch his breath and I watched his hard beer gut shine under the porch light.

“He was two years younger than I am now,” he said.
“I know.” I said.

My Dad had always been a work-hard-play-hard kind of guy and that was how he approached grief. After the initial shock of his younger brother’s death he made lists of things to do and buy and fix and whatever else he could think of to keep us busy. We were cleaning out the rafters in the garage when I came across his old incubator. It looked like something that had been around since the turn of the century. As soon as I showed it to him he was like a kid again. It was the same incubator that he’d used in his middle school science fair. For that project he timed the hatching of pheasants to coincide with the day of the fair so the crowd really had something to see. It looked like a big plastic popcorn bowl turned upside down with a can-opener-looking-mechanism that provided a gentle stream of heat for the eggs. We tested it and it seemed to work, so he had me order two dozen mixed breeds of quail eggs off the internet that same day.

When I was little hatching pheasants was something my Dad and my Grandpa and I did together. It was fun at first but there was one memory of that time that stands out from all the others. My dad had miscalculated the size of the mesh covering that we needed to put around the coup to keep the bird safe from predators. The squares of the mesh were just large enough so that the pheasants could poke their heads through, but even that was dangerously too big. I remember walking out into the backyard as a child and finding the heads of our birds scattered all around the grass. The decapitated bodies were still in the cage. Something had tried to pry the birds through the bars and yanked
all their heads off in the process. Grandpa made us take a break from hatching after that, maybe that’s how the incubator ended up in the rafters.

All this was during the first year that I had my own pool route. Dad had two other guys helping him at the time but he gave me the best route, a series of virtually spotless backyard pools along the coast. Newport Beach, Huntington, Laguna. It felt like I had moved up to the next rung of manhood when he gave me the route. According to my Dad a successful pool man is all at once a chemist, an engineer, a plumber, and an electrician and it felt like I was well on my way. The only other time he’d made me feel like a grown up was after I made varsity baseball, when he started calling me Dan instead of Danny.

We ran the business out of our house--my grandparent’s house-- in Santa Ana, one of the forgotten cities of Orange County California. A place that resembled the Inland Empire more than anything. It was only 15 miles in from the coast but it might as well have been a 1,000. Most of the time when people hear of Orange County they think of that T.V. show. They think of beaches and rich people, blonde surfer dudes and chicks with deep tans eating avocados. And it’s true there is a lot of that, but for us that was the segment that we knew little about, aside from what their backyards looked like. The Orange County I grew up in was different. For every blonde person in our part of town there were ten Mexicans or ten Vietnamese depending what block you were on. The people in my neighborhood, painted rich peoples nails, waxed their eyebrows, cut their grass, cleaned their pools. If you were white and lucky you might even get a chance to valet park their cars.
We were the only white family on our street, the whole neighborhood was Mexican but we fit in pretty good. The most Mexican Polacks ever. The houses around us were just like ours, overpopulated with multiple generations sharing beds and sleeping on coaches or floors to get by. A lot of the families had grandparents who were not unlike mine, who had grown up on farms and were used to maintaining land, with a skill set that seemed useless in their new suburban lives. In school I always felt singled out. Hated the sound of my own name when the teachers took roll: *Juan Padilla, Elena Pena, Jesus Perez, Daniel Przyblowski?* I went red every time. My sister got it worse than me her name was Katarina but they all called her Chlorina, the street’s reining princess of sodium chloride

The day the first set of quails hatched my dad had me cover a fecal incident at one of his pools in Tustin so he could stay with the chicks. My dad always gave himself all of the nightmare pools. The ones that were filled with children and broken toys, at apartment complexes that couldn’t afford heaters. Pools that were the most likely to go green with algae and cloud up with all the sweat and sunscreen and filth that washed off of the germy children. The call had come from the property management company and there was no one onsite to shut the pool down. When I got there, there were still about ten kids swimming in the deep end. Some little kid had pooped in the shallow end and that was the only part people cleared out of. Walking up to the pool I saw a handful moms, thirty kids, and at least a dozen Health Department violations happening simultaneously. I told everyone they had to get out and that the pool would be closed for the next 24
hours. You could see the frustration in the eyes of the mothers and the instant sadness of
the little kids. I said it again in Spanish and they seemed to appreciate it, I hated to think
of them thinking of me as some asshole white guy there to complicate their day. Besides
their tiny apartments, there were few places for the children to play in that part of town.
The parks were skeezy and the apartment complex was so tiny and worthless there were
no backyards, no patios, no balconies even. Just the occasional patch of dirt lining the
walkway where grass was supposed to be.

I scooped up the tiny chunk of shit with a sand net, shocked the area with granular
trichlor and balanced the rest of the chems with two gallons of liquid chlorine and a
splash of acid. Put chains on the pool gates and made an impromptu “Pool Closed” sign
from a piece of cardboard I found in the pump room. Fecal incidents were usually really
good money, but accounts like this place hardly ever paid their shit on time, let alone any
extras.

When I got back to the house, my dad had setup an elaborate little coup for the
chicks to stay in until they were old enough to make it through the night without having
the temperature regulated. He rigged a low-wattage blue light bulb to provide heat
underneath a little plastic hut they could huddle under if it got cold.

It was hot out and still for a change, which was good for the business but
exhausting, I grabbed a beer out of the refrigerator and sat at grandpa’s workbench while
my dad picked up two little chicks in his giant calloused hands.

He introduced them to me in a creepy baby-talk voice.

“This is your new brother, Marvin,” he spoke through clenched teeth.
He handed me the other bird with his trembling hand. It was so small I thought I might break it.

“How do you know it’s a guy?” I asked.

“You can’t really tell yet.” He said in his normal voice. Then he addressed the chick: “Are you a boy Marvin? Are you a boy?”

I wanted to give him shit but it was the first time I had seen him happy in a long time.

The incubator was on the workbench and it was still full of the tiny speckled eggs.

“I need you to take the top of the incubator and use your other arm to keep the hatched ones from hopping out, so I can grab the empty eggs and the ones that are ready to move to the box.”

I did what he said and watched his shaky hands handle the tiny chicks and egg shells. He said he still had a lot he needed to set up for the chicks. The nearest Feed Store was in Midway City, he was too stubborn to go to a regular pet store. He was the son of a farm boy and insisted on going to a real feed place.

“I want to get a catalogue of chicken and pheasant eggs,” he said.

“Okay, I guess, how are we on chems?” I asked.

“Shit. Goddamnit…”

“You forgot to go to the pool store?” I said.

“Fuck.” He looked truly disappointed.

“It’s fine, I’ll go.” This meant that I had to unload my entire truck, then fill it with empties, drive in rush hour and then back, unload the chems and then reload my truck if I
wanted to get an early start. An early start in spring meant that you were in front of your first stop when it was still dark out.

I started the process and chucked all my buckets and poles and nets on the side of the house. I opened another can of Coors for the road.

“You know what I say about drinking and driving?” he said, smiling with a tiny white chick in his hand.

I couldn’t help but smile back at the giddy bastard. “Don’t sip your beer in intersections…” I said. It was one of his all-time favorite Przyblowski sayings and a sign that in this moment anyway he wasn’t thinking of all the dead people who taught it to him.

With my beer can in the cup holder, the A/C blasting and Vince Scully’s voice on the radio, I took side streets to the pool store, still happy that he seemed happy for a change.

The birds soon became the reason to clean up the backyard or get an early start and some days even a good enough reason to leave the bar early. A whole slew of bird related chores became an important part of dad’s daily life after that first hatching. There were things to buy, coups to construct and predators to protect them from. Before the birds, the side of our house and most of the backyard was nothing more than a cluttered graveyard of old pool parts. Broken motors, filter grids, PVC, leaky hoses—a myriad of things that should have been thrown away or scrapped for metal—all of it was thrown back there to die a long drawn out death and fade in the sun for years, before being
properly disposed of. Dad couldn’t bring himself to throw anything away, which was one of the few things he and his brother seemed to have in common. The inside of the house was the same but different. All the furniture in the family room was gone; instead my uncle had set up a Stairmaster and a set of weights in front of the TV. The whole house smelled like a swamp with all the mildew and garbage Scott had starting piling up in each room. In the family room the ceiling was gradually rotting away, it made me think of a smoker’s lung every time I glanced up at the black, charred look of the mold that was taking over. Instead of fixing the roof, my dad and Scott had set up a series of kiddy pools and plastic bins to collect the leaks when it rained. It’s crazy how rooms change like that--from a place of childhood memories, to the last stale room where my grandparents awaited death, to whatever the fuck it was now.

We were in the middle of summer when the first round of quails started laying eggs. It only takes nine weeks for them to reach adulthood and start reproducing.

“I’ve done the math, they actually reproduce faster than rats,” my dad said. He was setting up a brand new $200 wooden coup. Unlike his homemade coups and cheap wire cages this one was made of cedar, he called it the honeymoon suite.

He opened the little door and dropped in the two birds that were mostly brown.

“Okay now go have sex!” he said.

“How do you know which one’s a guy?” I asked.

“The guys make a different kind of crowing sound, but you can also tell because they jump on the girls’ backs.”
“Just like humans.” I said.

He had the first round separated by color; there was a cage for white birds, a cage for brown and a cage for the speckled ones. He didn’t want anything attacking the birds so he kept all of the cages off the ground. He had them on stilts and hanging off trees with a series of straps and pulleys.

My dad had never been great about paper work, whether paying bills or billing customers but the birds made it even worse. I didn’t really blame him though, the mere sight of the mail addressed to our dead relatives was instantly depressing. I started taking over some of those aspects of the business for him, then one day we got a letter from the county with the word urgent in red block letters. Apparently Scott or my Dad or whoever was in charge hadn’t paid the property taxes in a few years.

I went to the backyard to show my dad. He had latex gloves on and a quail in his hands. There was a bald patch on the bird, near the tail feathers and a red sore on its skin. It looked like something had tried to bite the quail. My dad had cleaned the wound with a damp washcloth and now he was rubbing Neosporin over the cut.

“Have you seen this property taxes shit?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” he said.

“Why wouldn’t you worry about it?”

He took a deep breath, frustrated that I was wasting his time with nonsense while he had a potentially fatal wound to address. “I made a payment like a month ago, maybe they didn’t put in it their computers yet.”
He put the quail back in the cage with the other white ones, picked up the BB gun that was resting against his lawn chair and sat down.

“Now, what are you doing?” I asked.

He took a gulp of beer.

“Waiting for that hawk to come back,” he said.

It was the summer of the great fires in Orange County. Record forest fires sprang up in south county and the Santa Ana winds fed them every night. It was so bad there was ash in the air near some of our accounts. It would land on the surface of the pools and the only way to get rid of it was to throw circles of tile soap. The soap would attract all the ash and dust into neat little piles so you could dip a sand net in and skim it off the surface without having to net every single inch of the pool.

In August, I counted 80 birds in the backyard. Dad had bought a second incubator and started selling the extra quail eggs to our neighbors, who would eat them raw in licuados. He loved the idea of the birds paying for themselves. They had changed him somehow, certain things that he used to obsess over like getting his truck washed or tracking down the cheapest chems, seemed to fall by the wayside. He let his beard grow in, started drinking earlier in the day, and would finish his route impossibly fast to go home to the birds. Even though he had almost twice as many pools, he’d beat me home everyday.

More letters from the county arrived, I took it upon myself to call and see what the status was, how much my dad had paid, how much we owed and all that. I found out
that both of my dad’s partial payments had been returned, they would only accept full payments at that point.

The next time I brought up the tax thing we were at The Post. It had always been a place of refuge for us. We were regulars, undistinguishable from the other guys who frequented the place, with the same sun-damaged skin, stubborn dirt beneath our fingernails, worn out work t-shirts covered in sweat. “No-collar-workers,” my uncle used to call us. We all returned regularly for the same momentary contentment that came after downing a few cold ones at the end of a scorching summer weekday. A fleeting joy that never lasted longer than the early evening, with the realization that in less than twelve hours we would be back up and outdoors, doing the same backbreaking work as the day before. It was like God was a mean older brother, the kind who pushes the reset button on the Nintendo right after you kill the big boss. It was The Post that made the monotony of our lives bearable.

“I talked to the county, they don’t take partial payments, they want the whole thing.” A blonde girl in tiny top put our fourth round of beer in front of us. My dad smiled at her, tried to flirt by thanking her and saying her name, but he got it wrong.

“Hello?” I tried to break his trance when the girl walked away.

“We don’t have it,” he said. He took a long drink from his mug and put it down, his eyes stayed fixed on the game.

“How did this even happen?” I asked.

“It was Scott, he was supposed to take care of all that but he fucked up, I just didn’t know how bad it was,” he said.
“What if we had an estate sale and sold off all the stuff inside the house, that could help.”

“Yeah, that’s a cute idea but all that junk wouldn’t even put a dent in it,” he said.

My friends used to joke that my dad was so cool and calm about everything, we could fucking murder somebody and he’d help us hide the body, no questions, no comments. This time his calm was pissing me off.

“So what? Now we have to sell the house, because Scott was a fuck-up.”

My dad took his eyes off the game for the first time and looked at me. “Don’t, speak of him, like that.”

No matter how petty the argument there was always a moment between us where things would turn and then suddenly something evil would stir within him. Most of the time I knew when to shut up or at least how to wait out the storm.

“I don’t understand how you’re so calm out about this.” I said.

He shrugged. A waitress bounced past us, my dad stopped her and ordered a Crown on the rocks. Her unsupported bikini-clad breasts swayed as she wiped off the table next to us. Before she jiggled away the smell of coconut on her skin cut through the strong scent of bleach that permeated the bar.

“Look, Scott did the best that he could, he was sensitive you know that, when Mom died it was too much for him.” He took another long, dramatic drink from his mug and downed the rest of his beer.

“It was too much for all of us,” I said.
At that point his anger was palpable, when my dad got mad he looked like a bad actor trying hard to pretend he was angry.

“Regardless. He did what he could,” my dad said, attempting to channel Clint Eastwood.

“Well it wasn’t enough. Now we’re fucked and you don’t even care,” I said.

We sat in silence, until the waitress came back. Dad tried to flirt again, but this time he decided against trying to address her by name. He used a different voice when he talked to woman. I imagined him using the bird voice on the girl and laughed at the thought of it.

The girl left our table and dad tried to change the subject. “Are the Rams playing tonight?”

“Fuck the Rams,” I said.

He raised the glass of Crown to his lips. “You’re acting like your mother.” He said, before taking his first sip.

*Well you're acting like your drunk fucking brother.* I wanted to say this to him but I was scared.

That was the first night I seriously thought about leaving.

By the time my dad got to 200 birds, I started to worry even more. The backyard was disgusting, he had made some effort to deal with all the bird shit but not much. Everyday he would put new newspaper in the cages, but when he took the paper out he just shook all the shit onto the ground. Then he’d put the paper in a pile that he must have
intended to throw away but never did. So underneath it, each cage had it’s own distinct pile of shit, each with it’s own colony of flies swirling around it. The cages were so crowded it would take him forever to move all the birds in one cage into another to clear the paper and refill the food and water.

We started getting 30-day notices from a few property management companies saying that they were changing to a different pool service. All the business calls went directly to my dad’s cell phone so every time I found one of these letters it was news to me. I looked at the routes to see who was to blame. In the summertime most commercials accounts require at least three visits a week, so sometimes more than one guy will be responsible for the same pool, but in the case of these three cancellations my dad was the only one servicing each account.

It was a Saturday when I drove out to check on some of my dad’s stops. The first pool was bright green, like when they dye a body of water for Saint Patrick’s Day, that kind of green. The surface was covered with leaves, the stairs and walls of the pool were covered with algae. People had started throwing trash in the pool; there were food wrappers, a dirty diaper and a dead rat floating on the surface. There were chains and locks on the gates that didn’t belong to us. The Orange County Department of Health had condemned the pool indefinitely. I drove to the two other stops on my dad’s route, the other pools weren’t much different.

When I got back to the house my dad was in the backyard with his shirt off and a giant straw hat on his head, I could smell the bourbon on his skin. I didn’t know what to say.
“Why didn’t you tell me about your pools? I could’ve helped you, you know?”

“Huh? What pools?” He reached his hand into the back of a cage filled with white quail. The birds swarmed to get away from him and kept crawling over the spot he was trying to reach.

“The accounts you lost,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter, they were shit customers anyway.”

“It matters.”

He got his hand on what he was reaching for and pulled out the stiff body of a dead quail. It was supposed to be white but it was filthy, shit and blood had stained its soft feathers. The dead body had been mashed onto the bottom of the cage by the other birds.

“I don’t think I can keep working for you like this,” I said.

My dad threw the dead bird onto the mound of shit under the cage. I hadn’t noticed before but there were several dead birds scattered amongst all the shit piles.

“Like what? Can’t work for me like what?” he asked.

“You need help. You’re losing it. Like grandma did after grandpa, like Scott, now you’ve got it. It’s hard to watch.”

I looked at the bird on the top of the pile, one of its eyes looked like it’d been popped out by a tiny quail claw, it was only thing that seemed to perfect size to do so.
“You don’t know anything. You just have no idea.” He looked like he was going to say something else but he stopped. Took a drink from his plastic cup. “Good luck finding work, fucking prick,” he said.

He went inside.

I thought about what I could possibly do besides working for my dad. I started working for him when I was a little kid and had never done anything else. I thought about college, had even taken a few classes but the thought of being indoors during the day made me sad. I don’t know how anyone can stand it. I liked my job, it was peaceful and it was simple and I had never planned for or thought of doing anything else.

Later that night my dad came into my room and woke me up.

“Son.” He whispered as he shook me awake. “Son?”

I sat up in bed. He was more drunk than usual and slurring his words.

“I killed him, I killed Scott,” he said.

“You’re drunk, go back to bed.” I tried to brush him off, afraid to hear whatever it was he needed to say.

“I stopped his life. I stopped it.”

We sat in the dark. I could only see the outline of his face from the blue light of my clock radio.

“I left him, Danny.”

His voice cracked and he kept pausing to hold back tears.
“It was the middle of the day and I was near the house and I had this feeling come over me, like I had to go there, it was a brief thought that entered my mind and then left, but then suddenly I was parked in the front of the house and walking up to the door.”

He wiped his nose.

“Then I saw him on the kitchen floor. His face was completely black. He wasn’t breathing, but his face wasn’t blue or purple it was black, completely black.”

My window was open and I could hear the neighbor’s ranchera music blasting, it seemed unreal that my father could be confessing something so precious while people were partying next door.

“I didn’t touch him. I didn’t call anyone. I just looked at him and thought, what if I just left him?” In the faint blue glow I could see his face twist up again but he kept going. “It was just thought, it just came into my head and then I walked out of the house.”

I didn’t know what to say. What are you supposed to say when someone tells you something like that? When your father tells you something like that? I couldn’t shake the idea that if it was reversed he would know exactly what to say, exactly what to fucking do, he always did.

“You didn’t kill him,” I said.

“I let him die.”

“He didn’t want to be alive. He stopped living as soon as they were gone and now your doing the same fucking thing.”

“Everybody is gone now.” He said. “They’re all dead or gone. Your sister won’t speak to me. Your mother doesn’t call anymore.”
The music from the neighbors stopped, the sound of cars passing was the only noise, even the birds had gone silent for the night.

“We are still here.” I said.

The truth of these words sank within us, what they meant made us pause. We were alone but together and that would have to be enough. It was in this moment that I knew I would never leave my father, I would stay with him until he was gone, not the other way around. I was all he had and I might be all he would ever have. For me there was still hope, I was young enough that there was still a chance that I wouldn’t end up alone. But for him, I didn’t know, that’s why I could never leave.

After that night things got a little bit better. The business slowed down for the winter months and we worked on the house. One item at a time on Craig’s List, I slowly sold all of our dead relative’s possessions. We attempted to fix the roof and cleared out the backyard. Most importantly, I finally convinced my dad that we needed a change, convinced him that the fog of grief and loneliness that hovered over the house wasn’t something that would go away. It might never leave, but we could.

By the next Opening Day, the house was on the market, the quail were gone and in their place we kept three Golden Ring-Necked Pheasants. We watched the game at The Post and for the first time in three years the Dodger’s won their season opener. It was a cloudy day and there was no wind or sun to combat the lingering marine layer. It was
perfect out if you were a pool man, and we were, so it was. I still haven’t left him and that is one of the few things I’ve gotten right.
Recycling

Have you ever apologized to anyone? Like in your whole life have you ever said sorry when you hurt somebody? What about grandma and grandpa did you say it to them? Did you apologize for being a fuck-up when you moved back in with them at age thirty? Did you ever thank them? For supporting you and raising your kids for you. I bet you didn’t. I know because every time I mention them your voice shakes and you don’t blink for a few seconds before you take another sip of your drink and then one of us changes the subject.

You’ve choked both of us before, each of us one time. I’m pretty sure there were two choking incidents and zero sorries. Katarina was on her bed and you held her down and got in her face. I remember because I was scared for her but too afraid to say anything. Mine happened on the stairs, at night. You pushed me back at the bottom of the stairs and I used my hands and feet to back up and get away when you tried to get close. You finally got me at the top of the stairs, held me in place by the neck and raised a fist but didn’t actually swing.

You called the cops on our Mom once because she hit us. We were visiting for the weekend and didn’t want to go back to her, so a policeman came to grandma’s house and looked at our arms and legs but the marks had faded. The cops only let the off-parent keep the kids if the marks from the other parent stay for over twenty-four hours. She never called the cops on you because we never told her anything. That was our secret. That was how you would know that we loved you more than her.
I am tired of saying sorry, especially to you. You are the only one I disappoint. The last time you said you were proud of me is when I got student of the month in February of 1998. Maybe it’s because I’ve become you in so many little ways. Maybe Kat is right, maybe I should just cut ties and not talk to you anymore. But maybe she’ll feel bad later though, when you are dead. Maybe she’ll wish she was nicer. Maybe the only reason I put up with you is so I won’t feel so regretful when you are gone. I can see what that has done to you.

Today I thought you wanted me to drop off the recycling quickly, just to get the errand out of the way for you. I asked if you wanted me to wait in line and put each bottle in the machine, you said no just drop them off. When I came back with no money you yelled. You threw a beer bottle and kicked a chair. You used every conjugation of the word fuck and several other words to communicate how little you thought of me. You don’t hit me anymore but you still make me cry, it’s not very often but the tears strike at random, it doesn’t make any sense.

The total amount I was supposed to bring back was around $7. The whole situation is a joke, laughable when I tell other people, but not to me. I’ve grown soft somehow.

It’s taken my whole life to convince myself that I am not a disappointment. But sometimes I still don’t know. If I was smart I would stop helping you and stand up on my own two feet. But I haven’t. It’s been two decades. We have these fights and I say I’m sorry and I say sorry and I say I’m sorry.

Have you ever apologized to anyone?