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How to Grow Old: Essays

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

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by

Andrea Marie Gutierrez

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For Dad
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HOW TO GROW OLD

Grandma’s preparations for her death began in 1975, some years before I was born. Grandpa Roland had just died of a heart attack while golfing in Griffith Park, and she made funeral arrangements at Mirabal Mortuary near her house in Lincoln Heights—not only for Grandpa, but also for herself. She ordered her casket, a limo for the procession, and a double plot at Resurrection Cemetery in Montebello, where so many Latino Catholics in Los Angeles bury their loved ones. All that was left to do was to arrange her Mass. Once Grandpa was in the ground, Grandma awaited her turn. Her name was already on the tombstone.

*

In a normal year, Grandma’s house pulsed with life on Christmas Eve. Her four grown children—Romaine, Greg, Al, Dad—and their families filled every seat. But this was no normal year. It had been only six weeks since Uncle Al died, and Christmas had almost been called off.

I was seven years old, and Alex, the newest of my three younger siblings had just turned one. My sisters and I could not help the excitement that bubbled up inside of us as we saw Grandma’s Christmas tree from the street, sparkling through the sliding glass door of her balcony with a hodge podge of ornaments and lights that dated back to the ‘70s. We bounded up the stairs, resisting the urge to lunge for the tree once the door opened. Grandma met us wearing an apron and a wan smile. “Merry Christmas!” she said, her silver tooth echoing the colored lights.
The piney tree smell was no match for the White Shoulders perfume that permeated the house; the cigarettes and alcohol, however, were, punching through Grandma’s musk with ease. I looked nervously at Dad, knowing how much this upset him, remembering his rants in the previous weeks about how a lifetime of drinking and smoking caused the heart attack that killed both his father and now his brother. I held my breath as I delivered hugs and kisses to my aunts and uncles, each one with a lit cigarette behind their back in one hand, and a tumbler of liquor in the other.

“Do you want to eat first or open gifts first?” Grandma asked my sisters and me, as she did every year, bowing down to our level. Any other time, our eyes grew wide and our shrieks of “Gifts! Gifts!” were immediately drowned out by Dad’s furrowed brow and stern announcement: “Mom, they have to eat first.” This time we sat down at the table without protest. “She only makes it once a year,” Dad reminded us, his gaze heavy and sad.

One bowl of posole, that was the rule. Eat one bowl of posole, then we can open gifts. A hefty stew of hominy, pork, and dark red chile, it was a dish passed down through the generations in Grandma’s native New Mexico. Like one of Santa’s gifts, Christmas Eve would be incomplete without it.

I waited for the sound of jingle bells outside on the stairs, hoping to see Uncle Al dressed as Santa bounding through the door when it was time to open gifts as he had the year before. I didn’t want to believe he wasn’t coming back, and yet I knew it was true. There was no waiting for his cue this time.
We ripped open packages, and mountains of wrapping paper soon littered the living room. Little hands tore toys out of boxes and opened books to lay upon the floor. Dessert was ready. A few kids trickled towards the dining room table. Fruit filled empanadas fresh from Grandma’s cast iron pan lay stacked on a plate, a paper towel soaked with oil. We cradled them in our palms like tiny baby dolls, our hands pink with warmth. As we ate, our eyes darted around the house, sneaking peeks at the grown-ups and wondering if anyone would crumble into tears.

Tears, like Grandma at the funeral. I was still scared of her, frightened of the sight of her being led out of the church by her friends, arms linked to keep her upright. Grandma’s cries echoed through the anteroom, one long wail that continued to hold a note in my memory, and she looked as if she might fall if not for the women around her. For the first time in my life, Grandma looked fragile.

* 

Dad wanted Monica and me to learn how to make tortillas and sent us to stay the night at Grandma’s house the following summer.

Grandma’s daily routines did not change when we visited. She woke early in the morning—six, maybe earlier—and switched on the coffee, which she always took black. The sound of KFWB on the old analog radio in the kitchen usually roused us from sleep, and we listened to her shuffle around the house until she came into the guestroom. “Andrea, Monica. Time to wake up. We’re going to Mass.” A pious woman, she never missed a day.
Stand, sit, stand, sit, kneel, stand, kneel, sit, stand. That’s how I first learned the
order of the Mass, as Monica and I fidgeted in the pew next to Grandma. She knew the
words to every hymn and sang them loudly, off-key, with all her heart. Right before
Communion, she slowly tore a page from the hymnbook, quietly tucking it away in her
purse, and I stared at her with my mouth agape. Isn’t that stealing? I wondered. Before I
could say anything, Grandma threw me a stern glance and I snapped my mouth shut.

We returned to Grandma’s house and headed to the kitchen. As we washed our
hands, Grandma prepped her ingredients. A brand new package of Quaker Oats Masa
Trigo sat on the counter next to the radio, the little Benjamin Franklin lookalike smiling
back at us from the label. When she poured the masa into a mixing bowl, it puffed in the
air like Dad’s body powder that fell in small specks on the smudged bathroom linoleum.
“You mix this with water, and it will make a dough,” she said as we watched. She added
water straight from the faucet, never once measuring her ingredients.

Grandma worked the powder and water together until it stuck to her wrinkled,
knotted fingers, and kneaded the dough until it was even. When she was done, she pulled
out the built-in cutting boards from the counter and handed each of us a short piece of
worn wood, like a chunk of a broomstick. They were smooth from years of use. “These
are your rolling pins,” she instructed. “Your Grandpa Roland made them.” I stared at my
rolling pin in awe, the same way I always did whenever I held something from this man I
never knew.

We floured our boards as she taught us, and pinched small balls of dough to mash
down with our palms. Grandma rolled her tortillas big and thin. Monica and I made them
small and thick, unable to press down hard enough without making the dough stick to our rolling pins. As we worked, I kept checking on Grandma’s tortillas to compare them to mine. “Yours are better, Grandma.”

“No they’re not, they’re just different. You’ll just have to practice if you want them like mine.” When we finished, Grandma took our stacks of tortillas and started heating them on the comal.

Our family returned that evening for dinner. There was a pot of beans, fried potatoes, and a side of red chile, as Grandma usually served at our monthly dinners. But instead of store-bought tortillas, the orange foam warmer held small, thick delicacies. Monica and I couldn’t wait to see what everyone thought. “They’re not the same as Grandma’s,” Monica tried telling Dad, but he only smiled and spread a pat of butter on the tortilla in his palm, so thick that it would tear if rolled, and stuffed it in his mouth. He grinned with chipmunk cheeks.

As we readied to leave, Grandma packed up the leftovers for us to take home. She placed warm, weighty Tupperware into paper bags from Vons, and implored us to pluck some lemons from the tree outside. When she placed the Masa Trigo into a Ziploc bag to tuck away with the other containers, Dad interrupted her.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Masa,” she replied, matter-of-factly.

“Mom, I wanted them to learn how to make masa from scratch.”

“You didn’t say that. This is quicker anyway.”
“That’s not the point. If I wanted them to learn from a package, I wouldn’t have brought them here. They came to learn from you.”

“Oh, Harry. It doesn’t matter.” Tired, she handed us the bags and waved us on our way.

*

Already a teenager, I left my siblings—now five in total—to count gifts around the tree while I hobbled behind Grandma to the kitchen, my ankle fresh out of two months in a cast after I’d attempted and failed to steal second base in a softball game. The windows were foggy with steam and the Christmas lights that trimmed the frame of her house glowed in a haze through the glass. My gaze darted from the mixing bowl to the cutting board to the frying pan. “Empanadas,” I said.

“Yes,” she replied as she washed her hands under the scalding hot faucet. She wiped her hands on her apron and turned to the counter. “Watch me.”

It was the first time I had actually seen Grandma make them. I had eaten plenty of empanadas in my life, but never seen the process. She had already made the warm, sugary fruit filling before we arrived and had moved on to preparing the dough for frying. Like the tortillas so many years before, she pinched balls of dough and rolled them into small flat circles, sprinkling flour on the board and Grandpa’s rolling pin to prevent stickiness. She scooped a bit of the filling onto the dough and folded it over to form a pocket, like the cheap fruit pies in the supermarket, only tastier, fresher. “You have to pinch them like this,” she said, her fingers deftly working the edge of each pastry until she was satisfied that it was completely shut.
I noticed her hands more than ever before. Her knuckles and joints were huge, her pointer fingers appearing permanently bent. The skin was wrinkled and freckled, the spots dark and hairy. She complained regularly of a tingling in her hands and pain from her sciatica. We had started refusing her offers to do the smallest of favors. I volunteered to fill and pinch the rest of the empanadas while she fried them on the stove.

“How’s your ankle?” Grandma asked as she dropped empanadas into the hot oil.

“It’s better, but stiff.”

She chuckled. “Like me. Everything’s stiff.” She held her hands out in front of her, pinching the air with her fingers. “It’s the arthritis,” she said.

I pinched the dough wistfully. I wasn’t yet sixteen, and already my body was failing me. Or was I failing it? “The doctor says I should regain my movement in a few months.”

“Well, the doctors don’t always know what they’re saying.” She turned towards me to pick up a pile of raw empanadas.

As I stood there watching her shuffle back and forth across the kitchen, it was hard to imagine Grandma back in Albuquerque playing softball and running relays at my age. I knew that someday I’d be just like her, complaining about the pain in my joints while cheering on my grandkids from the bleachers.

Aunt Romaine and our cousin Mary Anne arrived unannounced, their hands filled with gifts. My siblings and I always tiptoed around Romaine’s visits, not knowing how she and Dad would get along. She was fourteen years older than him and still spoke down to him as though he were a child.
“Merry Christmas, Mama,” she said to Grandma. The last of the empanadas were on the stove, and we were getting ready to set them out on the table. When they were done, Grandma and I joined everyone in the living room.

The visit was short, just long enough to exchange and open a few gifts. Romaine and Mary Anne had to return home to the rest of their family. As they stood to leave, Romaine turned to Grandma. “Do you think we could take some empanadas?” I hoped that Grandma wouldn’t cave into her, just this once. But she did. Within minutes, Romaine and Mary Anne carried half the empanadas to the door on foil-covered plates.

“Merry Christmas, everyone,” Romaine said and headed towards the stairs.

“Mom, did she just take the empanadas?” Dad yelled to the kitchen.

“It’s okay. We had a lot of them,” she said as she stirred the posole.

On the drive home, Dad was fuming. It was one of the rare moments in which he cursed. “Mom put all that work into the empanadas, and goddamn Romaine just waltzes in there for five minutes and walks off with them.”

That was the last time any of us had Grandma’s empanadas. Within a few months, she had surgery on her neck to relieve her sciatica. As she healed and worked towards regaining mobility, her perfectly coifed, dark dyed hair turned gray. She’d eventually return to the hairdresser for the curls, but the silver locks remained.

* 

I had just returned home from studying in Madrid and had two months before leaving again to Germany when I decided I wanted to learn how to make posole. Dad
dropped me off at Grandma’s on December 23. We would wake the next morning and get to work.

I slept in, still jet-lagged. The blaring of the TV jolted me conscious around noon, and I stumbled out of the guest room in a panic. Grandma sat in her chair in the living room, remote firmly in hand. “Good morning!” she trilled.

She didn’t always look so old. It had been a few years, but I still missed her old hair, the way her locks were dyed the color of dark chocolate. I didn’t like this gray hair and the way it made her look her age, made her look weak. Grandma is anything but weak.

I stood at attention. “Sorry. It’s late. I overslept. I’ll get dressed. What do I need to do?”

She sipped coffee from her old brown Denny’s mug. “Nothing now. It’s already cooking. There really isn’t much more to do but wait.”

I slouched and leaned against the old wooden chair next to the Lladro cabinet.

“Nothing to do? Grandma, I thought you were going to wake me.”

“Oh, that’s okay. You were tired. You had a long trip.”

“But it’s not okay,” I mumbled to myself. I shuffled back into the guest room and sat down on the bed. Am I going to regret this? I wondered. There was always a chance that there would be no next year. I was finally old enough to understand this.

* 

I sat next to Grandma at the square dinner table, her neighbor Martha and Martha’s middle aged son in the other seats. The servers had just brought us soup.
“Did you see the game?” Martha asked. The old woman’s eyes sparkled like the Jumbotron at Dodger Stadium. “Pretty exciting, eh?” She slurped down her soup, a few drops dripping down her chin, and her son—detached, sedate, and completely silent—handed her a napkin.

Grandma circled the inside of her bowl with a spoon, dragging the soup into a whirlpool. “I did. It sure was. And that home run,” she said, less an exclamation than a point of procedure. Shortly after I arrived to the sound Vin Scully blaring on her TV, Grandma admitted to me that she didn’t really care so much whether the Dodgers won or lost, just that she had something to discuss with Martha, an avid baseball fan and endless talker, at their daily dinners.

Residents at the Alhambra were assigned seats at meals, and so it seemed that Grandma and Martha were in it together for the long haul. “Mary, my son is so sweet,” Martha said. “Robert came all the way out here to visit me today, and he did my laundry and watched the game with me and he comes here every weekend. Don’t you, dear?” Robert’s expression was unchanged, his mouth somewhere between a frown and a grimace. He only nodded, his stiff demeanor suggesting that he was somehow disabled.

“That’s wonderful,” Grandma said, her soup now developing a film from the cold. I didn’t know how she could eat the slop they served. When I told my parents earlier in the day that I was having dinner with Grandma, they both said only one thing: “Salt, and lots of it.” “Salt?” I repeated. “Yeah,” Mom continued, “the food is so bland. That’s why she hates it so much.” And they were right. There were no redeeming qualities to the
food—an overdone steak, mashed potatoes, canned corn, and of course the soup—unless drenched in salt, which the servers kept with them in small packets like contraband.

Grandma looked at me. “Isn’t that wonderful? Her son visits her every weekend.” She might as well have tacked on *I wish I were so lucky* to the end of that. I, like the rest of my family, had a litany of excuses for not visiting more often, though my best one—that I didn’t have a car and taking public transportation from my apartment in West L.A. to Alhambra was damn near impossible—had ceased to exist when I finally got a car six months earlier. *Yes, Grandma,* I thought to myself, *I could visit you more.* That’s why I had come.

It was Grandma’s choice to move to the Alhambra, an old folks home that smelled of Vicks VapoRub and steamed veggies, on the other side of the 10 Freeway from her old house in Lincoln Heights. She sold her home in a classic fit of stubborn independence four years earlier—she refused to consult Dad or Romaine on the sale until the ink was already dry so that no one would talk her out of it—trading in the house my grandfather built for a little more assistance and many fewer stairs. Dad kept begging her to move to a home near my family in Orange County, but she declined every time, not wanting to deal with the hassle. But she still reserved the right to complain of loneliness.

We returned to her room after dinner, settling back in to visit with each other before it was time for me to head home. Her studio was smaller than the living room at her house and crammed with much of the same furniture: her pink cloth recliner, two wooden chairs that were nearly as old as Dad, and a china cabinet with her prized Lladro collection. From her old bedroom was a headboard with shelves that crowned her twin
bed and a large midcentury modern dresser. Ernest J. Gaines says in his novel *Of Love and Dust*, “All old people who move from the country to the city live in rooms like these.” Except Grandma had long ago quit the country, had left San Marcial, New Mexico for Albuquerque as a child in the early ’20s, and ended up in Los Angeles, jobless, married, and pregnant during the Depression. No, Grandma had not moved from the country to the city this time; her “country” was her house on Avenue 33 whose backyard was the undeveloped hills of Lincoln Heights, her “city” this cinderblock room that she expected to die in.

Almost out of nowhere, I asked a question. “Grandma, how do you make red chile?”

Grandma sat forward in her recliner and smiled, staring into space. “Chile. I wish I could make it now. I wish I had my kitchen.” She lay her hands in her lap and looked at her fingers as she moved them, as though imagining herself in front of her stove or the cutting boards where she rolled tortilla dough. “Sometimes I wish I hadn’t sold my house.”

I bit my lip, trying not to cry. I missed her house and the smell of the kitchen, the way the light shone through the windows in the morning and how the only snacks she ever had for us were rice crackers and black licorice that we hated. But she had to know she did the right thing selling the house, even if I didn’t believe it myself, even though I was in Germany when escrow closed. It pained me to think of her living with regret. “I know, Grandma. But it had to be done. You couldn’t manage it anymore.”
“I wish I could write a book,” she said, looking down at her hands, “for people like me, called *How to Grow Old*. No one tells you how hard it is. No one prepares you for your body not working anymore or for living this long…” Her voice trailed off and I imagined she thought about all the family and friends she had outlived. “No one tells you how to live when you’re as old as me.”

I leaned forward and took her hand and smiled. “Maybe you could write that book. You’re the perfect candidate. I’ll help you.”

“Yeah…” she said and chuckled. She paused, meditative, and sighed. “Boy, I wish I could cook again.”

* 

I fought my way through rush hour traffic on the 10 to the Alhambra. Couldn’t stop thinking of Dad, sitting in the chair in a hospital gown, tubes hanging from his belly, one of them leaking on the floor. “I’m sorry you have to see me this way,” he said as the nurse changed his sheets. I was checking my phone, and rolled my eyes as he said this. “Oh, god, Dad. I don’t mind at all. It’s fine,” and I looked up to see his face crumple into a sob as he attempted to cover his tears with a pillow. I jumped across the room to hug him tight, stroking his hair and neck as he heaved in my embrace. “When you’re an athlete, you’re used to your body doing certain things, and when you can’t do them anymore, you don’t know what to do,” he said. I cried with him.

It was almost a year since I’d moved to Berkeley, and more than a year since I had dinner with Grandma at the Alhambra. I knew I needed to visit her. Dad had tried to explain to her what was going on, about his cancer and the surgery, but she only
countered with her own complaints, about the retirement home and the bland meals and how lonely she was, even though he, Mom, and my siblings all visited as much as they could. “No one loves me. I’m just waiting here to die.” She knew he was in the hospital, but she didn’t understand why.

Grandma was atwitter when I arrived at her room. “So good to see you. I don’t get many visitors.” She leaned on my arm as she ambled slowly back to the recliner. I was struck by how tiny she was, a woman who once crouched to meet my eye now stood barely at my shoulder. “Are we going to see Harry?”

I slumped down in the seat next to hers, the same wooden chair from her house. “Today’s not a good day, Grandma.” I shouted loud enough for her to hear. “He’s not feeling well today.”

“Oh.” She fingered the worn beads of a rosary held together with a paperclip, though she could no longer feel them. I had spoken to her the day before, said I would bring her to the hospital today, but she already guilt tripped me once when I called her from the freeway—“I’m just waiting here. Always waiting here”—and dammit, I was not adult enough for this stuff.

“Where do you live again?” This was the first time that she remembered that I’d moved. Progress.

“Berkeley, near San Francisco.”

“San Francisco! That’s so far away. And you live there by yourself?”

“I have roommates, but yes, I moved there by myself.”

“Oh! Isn’t that something? You’re so brave.”
“Well, Grandma, you did the same thing. You moved here from New Mexico
when you were young.”

She smiled, and looked at me from the corner of her eye. “Oh, but I was a married
woman. I was not alone.” Her eyes fell upon the carpet, and she went quiet, as though
recalling the memory of the honeymoon coin toss that led my grandparents to L.A.
instead of Denver. “I don’t know how you do it, but I hope you’re happy,” she said. “It’s
a long life, and I hope you’re happy.”

After an hour, I got up to return to the hospital. I bit my lip, so sorry to say, “Aunt
Romaine will take you tomorrow, Grandma.”

She nodded. “Take your father a rosary.” A box filled with beads, she plucked
one to hand to me. “This one, from Lourdes.”

*

Only bad calls come in the middle of the night. It was Dad.

“Grandma passed away tonight.”

She had become more difficult for the staff at the Alhambra to manage, her mood
swings disruptive, her ailments increasingly complex. Dad, almost a year out from his
surgery, was still on the mend and unable to deal with more than his body could allow.
He and Romaine decided it best to take Grandma out of the home and prepare to move
her somewhere with more hands-on care. She’d been living at Romaine’s tony San
Marino home for two weeks when she let out her final breath as she slept, cradled in
Romaine’s arms.
Dad and Aunt Romaine had to immediately search for her papers. Somewhere existed a small box that Grandma had kept for years that held the aged carbon copies from the mortuary, as well as her life insurance policies and any other documents required in case of her death. When they found it, the most important documents were not alone. On stationary and scraps of paper were strict instructions in Grandma’s jagged scrawl. “To Whom It May Concern,” they began. “Do NOT have an open casket,” read one. Alongside the notes were hymns torn from church missals, sometimes more than one of the same songs, with a note written on the top: “To Whom It May Concern: Play this at Mass.”

Monica and I volunteered to be pallbearers because we knew no one would ask us. There would be six of us altogether. We thought it only appropriate that women carry her to her rest. “Can they do that?” Romaine asked the funeral home director.

“I’ve never seen it, but there are no rules against it.”

“Harry, I can get my boys to do it if you don’t have anyone else.”

Dad preempted Monica. “Romaine, they want to do it.”

We wore white gloves as we carried her, and placed the gloves on her coffin before they lowered her into the ground.

*

Mom tried. She really did. But she’s not a cook and she could never get the posole quite right. It was too bland, or it lacked spice, or she put the pork in too early, or she didn’t know that the chemical reaction with a giant metal tamalera pot caused the posole to go bad immediately if left out overnight.
“Mom, I’m going to make the posole this year,” I told her. I knew she would be relieved.

I didn’t really know what the hell I was doing either, but I needed this. Grandma was gone and someone had to keep it going. All I had was my memory and a few scant notes in my notebook. I thought back to previous visits with Grandma and the recipes I managed to get from her.

“It used to be that summer meant green chile and winter meant red chile,” she explained. She liked green chile, but Grandpa Roland didn’t care for it. Perhaps that’s why we only ever got red chile from her—it’s what she was used to.

I experimented in Berkeley before coming home and invited friends over to taste. I couldn’t find fresh hominy, so was relegated to using the canned stuff for the trial run. At the carnicería, I purchased the posole mix without realizing there were feet and snouts in it. Definitely not Grandma’s pork. But it was the chile I was most concerned with. The consistency, the color, the spice levels, the heat—they all mattered if I was going to make Grandma’s chile. My friends loved it, but it still didn’t taste right. Something was off.

When I got home, I recruited Monica as my taste tester. Dad could no longer eat spicy food, so she was the next best expert on Grandma’s chile. As a child, Grandma always gave Monica her own bowl of chile at our dinners.

“Try it,” I said, holding out a wooden spoon.

She licked the spoon and pondered. “It’s missing a spice or something,” she said. She stepped away, and I kept working, readjusting the levels of each ingredient. When I finished, I called her back. “It’s good, but it’s still not Grandma’s.”
“I know,” I said to myself as Monica walked away. It could never taste the same. Yet somehow, I could accept that. Somehow, I had to believe that Grandma’s food wasn’t better, just different. It was now mine to carry on.
THE CROSSWALK

My hometown, Garden Grove. They’re always up to the same old shit. I’ve long suspected it, but now it’s official: only assholes are allowed to run the place. In June 2011, I learned from the local rag, the Orange County Register, that the City finally gave the go-ahead to developers to build a water park on Harbor Boulevard, mere blocks from my childhood home where my family still lives, as well as a 19-story hotel that would tower over my family’s neighborhood. And this, after almost two decades of coming up with stupid-ass ideas for how they would cash in on Disneyland and its tourists just up the street—movie multiplexes, a Latino-themed amusement park, even an Indian casino—ideas that would never come to fruition. The Garden Grove City Council, bless their hearts, was still convinced that the city could become a tourist destination.

“Did you hear about this?” I asked Mom.

“Yeah. A 19-story hotel. And they’re gonna bulldoze houses.”

“Do we know anyone affected?” She shrugged. I seethed. “What part of ‘people live here’ do they not understand?”

And my family wondered why I stayed away, wandering about the Golden State since high school—first it was college in Claremont, then post-college living in Los Angeles and Berkeley before moving to Riverside for grad school—as though the Orange County border were some invisible dog fence. Shit like this made me never want to live in Orange County again, made it hard for me to determine if any good came of growing up there. I learned early that my city didn’t care about people like us, with our 900
square-foot homes and working class incomes. Almost twenty years later, none of that had changed.

“Maybe this time they can reinstall the damn crosswalk.” I said.

1996. There was this crosswalk. It stretched tight across Harbor Boulevard like a belt on its last notch, one city block south of Chapman Avenue. A dreary median of brick and cement divided three lanes in each direction, the steady waves of traffic pulsating south towards the beach or north towards Disneyland only one mile up the street. The crosswalk stood alone without a stoplight and was the only path to the local junior high for the kids from my neighborhood.

My walk to school was increasingly under threat. Traffic on Harbor was suddenly on the rise and my sister Monica, a year younger than me in the seventh grade, and I were always worried that we would get caught on the island between waves of traffic, only to get hit by a motorist not paying attention to the road.

Before junior high, I hadn’t walked to school since the second grade and it was something I had long missed. I spent the rest of elementary school as a gifted student, traveling everyday by big yellow bus to a new school every two years. But in junior high, there were no more buses. I didn’t have to wait an hour to get home, snaking through the city until the last stop, my stop. It was a nice ride, City of Garden Grove, with your vast sea of post-war cardboard box houses and abandoned strip malls where someday they’ll build a Starbucks or Wal-Mart. I no longer had to depend on anyone but myself.

The increase in traffic did not come from nowhere. By that time, Disneyland had been talking about expansion for a few years already, and I had been reading along about
it in the Garden Grove Journal, the free newspaper that was always available at both the public library and the Dairy Queen. Disney’s earlier theme park idea, WestCOT, a west coast version of Walt Disney World’s EPCOT, was already dead in the water by the time I started junior high in 1994. Growing financial problems at EuroDisney had rippled across the Atlantic and led Disney to cancel WestCOT.

Which is not to say that Disney dropped this whole expansion idea altogether. They knew they could make it happen sometime in the future, it was only a matter of when; in the meantime, they would put their effort into cleaning up the area around Disneyland to prepare it for that bright, shiny day up ahead when they could spare the change to build a new theme park. The idea was still there; it would just require a smaller budget.

This proposed expansion sounded like a great idea to me for one completely selfish reason: I already spent a ton of time at Disneyland. We all did—my family and so many of my friends from school and softball. During the two weeks between my twelfth birthday and the day I got braces in March 1994, Dad used his yearly bonus to buy Disneyland Annual Passes for our entire family. At only 99 bucks a person for southern California residents, parents (not just my own) saw the Annual Pass as a worthy investment in yearlong entertainment for their children and young teens.

The initial pricey start-up cost of the Annual Pass didn’t stop our parents from being cheapskates on our frequent visits to the Park. After all, we all had the same ginormous Costco jars of mayonnaise and peanut butter in our fridges. Our parents knew how to stretch a buck, even if they weren’t so good at saving for the inevitable rainy day.
If I was lucky, Dad would give me ten, and on the rarest of occasions twenty bucks to spend on visits to Disneyland. Five bucks was for the kids’ meal at Tomorrowland Terrace—chicken strips, fries, and a small coke. It wasn’t much for growing teens, but it was enough to keep us going until closing. And it was cheap. The rest of the money went to quarters for epic games of air hockey in the Starcade and calls to friends from the phone booths at the exit of CircleVision.

During the school year, my sister Monica and our friend KJ were my usual accomplices on afterschool trips to Disneyland. KJ’s mom loved us because we were good girls and thought we’d be good influences on her son who was always on the verge of falling in with the wrong crowds. Not that we didn’t push our luck while hanging out at Disneyland. We always had one primary destination, Tomorrowland, the futuristic themed area of the Park that was at least twenty years out dated. There were few rides here to pull in the tourists—Space Mountain and Autopia the only ones to have queues longer than five minutes—which I can only guess is how middle schoolers came to rule the place.

We were everywhere. On the slow moving PeopleMover ride, where we yanked the “Exit Here” stickers from the cabin doors and slapped them onto walls as we passed through the room where a clip from the movie Tron played on a loop. On the Submarine ride, where we girls flirted mercilessly with Greg, the cast member with a sweet smile and whose butt looked adorable in his Navy costume and who was at least 10 years older than all of us. In the Captain EO 3-D movie, where we sat in the front row and jumped up at that part when the spaceship crashes and ran around in circles through the fake
smoke that shot out from the bottom of the screen and only KJ was brave enough to get up and dance along with Michael Jackson while waving a plastic lightsabre in his hand—lit up, of course. As far as we were concerned, we owned Tomorrowland. It belonged to us, and we were prepared to lay claim to any new parks that came along.

One day after school, further down Harbor Boulevard, a woman appeared at the crosswalk with a makeshift Stop sign to help us cross the street. Monica and I recognized her. She was the mother of a seventh grader, a boy with whom Monica had gone to elementary school. Like everyone’s moms, we called her by her first name, Candy.

“Are you a new crossing guard?” I asked.

“No, I’m just a mom fed up with you not being able to cross here.” She kept her eyes on the passing traffic as she spoke. “And I’ll keep coming until it gets better.”

There was an opening, and she led us across the street. We thanked her, waved goodbye, and continued home to tell our parents about Candy. Dad was thankful. He let us walk to school because we were so adamant about doing so, but he didn’t like that we were spending so much time waiting on a street known for catcalls and late-night prostitution. He picked us up from school the next day so that he could thank Candy directly.

As the end of eighth grade grew closer, the traffic on Harbor Boulevard got worse, and Garden Grove grew increasingly desperate to cash in on Disneyland’s coming expansion. Although Garden Grove had initially protested the increase in traffic, the City was now eager to attract Disneyland tourists. Its eyes were set on the Harbor-Chapman intersection, a stone’s throw from the crosswalk and our junior high.
“What do you think of speaking at the Traffic Commission meeting?” Dad asked Monica and me one night. Candy got our cause onto the agenda—she was pushing for at least a crossing guard—and Dad thought that we should represent the student voice. I was already accustomed to Dad taking part in these civic processes, that newspaper photo of him gesticulating while making a point at a neighborhood meeting for a nearby skate rink coming to mind. This is how things change, I thought. Monica declined, and I said Yes.

This seemed like the right thing to do. If you see something that’s wrong, tell an adult who can help you fix it, and hopefully it’ll all be put right again. It worked before, anyway, in sixth grade when my best friend Heidi (“Tall Blonde Heidi?” Dad would say, as though I had other friends named Heidi) started acting all weird after her house burned down over the summer. The worst of it was her sudden obsession with matches. So I told Mom, who sensed that something was amiss. She scheduled a meeting with the school psychologist so that I could share my concerns about my very best friend, and within days, Heidi was required to meet regularly with the psychologist. As far as I was concerned, this was a victory. Me speaking up led to a wrong made right.

So I waited my turn to speak before the Traffic Commission. There were only few of us in the audience, each waiting for the public comments portion of the evening. An older man spoke first. Ornery and belligerent, the kind of man who might yell at the kids to get off his damn lawn, he demanded speed bumps on his street to prevent cars from speeding through his neighborhood. The commissioners, unfazed by the vehemence of his demand, told him they would look into it and he returned to his seat. It was our turn next.
It had been months that Candy had been standing guard at the crosswalk. In that time, we learned that she worked for the DMV. She stated this to the Commission and reminded them that crossing guards are required at crosswalks within a certain distance of an elementary school, of which there were two nearby. Dad approached the mic next and explained how as a parent, he felt unsafe sending his adolescent daughters to school everyday across a busy street if there wasn’t even a stoplight to lead them across quickly and safely.

Dad nudged me towards the mic next. I hadn’t prepared any notes, but I knew I needed to say something. Shy, but determined to be heard, I took my turn. As the Chair instructed, I stated my name and address.

I explained what the experience of crossing the street was like. The whistles and catcalls, the occasional “fatass” or “bitch” epithet thrown out of a speeding window. Some days my sister Monica and I would wait minutes to cross from the island, no single car stopping to let us through, cars whipping our hair in their carbon wakes. The walk home did not differ from the morning journey.

The Commission considered each of our statements. “The traffic is only going to get worse,” reasoned the Chair. “With Disneyland expanding, we can expect more cars on Harbor.”

The only woman on the panel considered our concerns. “I know that crosswalk. It is busy.” She wondered if they might find another way to create a safe means of crossing Harbor without necessitating a traffic signal. “Maybe a footbridge?” she offered.
The Chair told us to expect a reply in a few weeks. After the meeting, we spoke to the female Commissioner, who seemed receptive of and sympathetic to our concerns. “We’ll see what we can do, see if there’s funding,” she said.

With less than two weeks to go before the end of eighth grade, we received a reply from the Traffic Commission. Not only would there be no light, but the City would instead remove the crosswalk altogether. For many students, their walk to the junior high would double, and their time spent on what was becoming a mini-highway, Harbor Boulevard, would increase exponentially.

The City cited the Disneyland expansion as their reason for removing the crosswalk.

A few months later, just after I started high school, the City announced its first redevelopment scheme: E-Street, a cute pun on Disneyland’s old ticketing system that required coupon books to ride attractions like at carnivals. E-Street would have brought a full-scale entertainment center, with a movie multiplex, fine dining, shopping, and nightclubs to Garden Grove—a first. The city was in talks with a developer for this project when they decided to start clearing out the southwest corner of the intersection, including some of the businesses we frequented the most: Michaels, Belisle’s, and Mile High Comics.

But it was not only the businesses they wanted to clear. Next to the shopping center was a mobile home park for senior citizens. Almost overnight, the city decided to take it over by eminent domain and started relocating its residents.
And then, before the last resident had moved out, E-Street fell through. It was not happening after all. But it was too late to stop the relocation, and Garden Grove was in no position to give up that valuable land, bad press be damned.

In the years that followed, Garden Grove stubbornly clung to the belief that they had a potential goldmine on their hands, and all it would take was one failsafe idea to set the plan in motion. Developers were quick to exploit this bloodlust, making promises they could not deliver, and taking the money that the city seemed to throw away like tokens in an arcade.

By the time the Disneyland expansion had a name—Disneyland Resort—and the new theme park was in the planning stages, Garden Grove finally managed to do something with the southwest corner of Harbor and Chapman, as well as the parking lot of the Hyatt. Within a span of five years in the late 1990s and early 2000s, no less than eight new hotels went up. Garden Grove, ever the geniuses they had proved themselves to be, practically gave away the land to developers.

Developers promised the city only bed taxes. They would pocket the rest of the change.

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If there’s one thing I’ve learned since leaving Orange County—really leaving Orange County—it’s that it’s nearly impossible to return. Sure, they’ll take me, but why on earth would I go back?
But maybe I’m being unfair. Maybe this applies to anyplace that anyone has ever called home. A hometown is like a member of your family: it has the capacity to bring you pain just as much as it brings you joy.

Every time I drive away from my family’s house in Garden Grove to turn out onto Harbor Boulevard, I’m taunted by the “No Pedestrians” signs that now brace the intersection where our crosswalk used to be. Nick, the baby of my five younger siblings is no longer a baby but is now a student at the same junior high I attended on the other side of Harbor Boulevard. “You know there used to be a crosswalk there?” I once asked him. He only shrugged.

I sometimes think that it might be worth fighting for again, that maybe I can help bring back the crosswalk, new and improved, with a yellow sign and flashing lights on the pavement.

But it seems like the idea is not dead. The Orange County Register article about the 19-story hotel mentions a proposal for a footbridge at that same intersection, “for the safety of children crossing the street to get to school.”

And who proposed it? The hotel’s developer.

We’ll see about that.
If Donald Rumsfeld could have kept his mouth shut for one more goddamned day, I wouldn’t have been standing in front of a stern, mustachioed immigration officer trying to explain why I didn’t have a student visa.

“But I don’t need a visa.”

“You’re here to study?”

“Yes.”

“Then I need to see a veezuh.”

“But I just told you. Das hab’ ich nicht. I don’t have one. Germany doesn’t give them. I’m supposed to go to the Auslandsbehörde when I get to Heidelberg.” I was tired. I needed to sleep. My friend Anja drove from an hour away to pick me up. I did not travel for sixteen hours from LAX to be turned away at the door.

“I’ll just give you a tourist veezuh.” He stared at me, unamused, as he unceremoniously stamped my passport and sent me on my way with a smirk.

This semester was already so different from the last. I felt calm and at ease, an expert traveler as I walked through Frankfurt International, smiling at the yellow German language signs guiding my way to the baggage carrousel. I was ready to get into verbal fisticuffs with that officer, but I wasn’t always so bold. I spent my fall semester in Madrid, and when I arrived there I was spooked and utterly terrified. It had been my first time outside of the United States, and I immediately felt so alone in the world, so lost. I no longer had my family to fall back on, my parents to shelter and support me. I was on
my own for the first time, and though excited, I felt ill equipped for the rigors of the world beyond suburban southern California, where I also went to college. I had to figure it out for myself.

I gathered my luggage and slowly passed through what was supposed to be Customs—an empty counter with no officers. Other travelers slowed, looked around, and continued through to the arrivals lobby. I shrugged and walked through the sliding door, the happy grin of Anja the first to meet me. We embraced.

“Willkommen in Deutschland!” she said, throwing her arms up, as if to present the escalators and souvenir shops behind her.

“Finally! I can’t believe I’m here.”

“Your dad already called me,” she said, holding up her Nokia phone with a look of disbelief.

I rolled my eyes. “Sorry ‘bout that. Can’t go anywhere without giving him a number. Them’s the rules.”

I’d met Anja—“Ani” we called her—the previous year at my college where she was visiting from the University of Heidelberg. In my mind, I held her up as inspiration the same way that other girls might put magazine photos of supermodels on their fridges as a constant reminder of their diet and exercise regimens. I wanted to speak German as clearly and accurately as Ani did English. I marveled at her near-perfect American accent. If I assumed a regional German accent, my goal would be practically achieved.

As we walked to the parking garage, I told her about my incident with the immigration officer. “Why would he do that? Germany doesn’t even have student visas,”
I asked when we climbed into her car, my two overladen suitcases in the back of her cramped hatchback. We swirled down through the parking structure and lunged towards the Autobahn for the hour-long drive to my home for the next six months.

Fast cars zoomed past in a blur and red Deutsche Bahn trains traveled alongside us. “It was Rumsfeld,” Ani said, annoyed, as we flew down the Autobahn. “He threatened to withdraw the U.S. military from Germany. Everyone’s talking about it, and everyone’s upset.”

I was silent for a moment, a news report from Südwest Rundfunk intoned softly in the background. I could not imagine why anyone would want to keep another country’s army from leaving their own, or what reasons they would have for not kicking them out decades ago. I imagined loud, brash, cocky Americans taunting the locals, asking for ketchup, and driving gas guzzling American cars all over the German countryside. Isn’t that how Europeans saw us? “What’s the big deal?” I finally asked.

“Germany makes a lot of money from the military.” It suddenly made sense. Heidelberg was home to one of many American military bases in Germany. It’s where older students from my college used to go to buy Kraft Mac-n-Cheese in the commissary, before 9/11 restricted civilian access to U.S. military bases worldwide. “They just want to punish us,” Ani continued, “because we took a stand against them about Iraq.” I was quiet, embarrassed. I didn’t know anything about this news, Rumsfeld and his posturing. Of all the hours I’d spent in front of the tube in the two months that I was at home, I must have missed it, right? It must have been in there somewhere, amidst all the buzzing about Iraq.
I had spent fall semester in Madrid, returning home at Christmas to spent two balmy months in southern California. I wasn’t particularly excited to be back, to my family’s grip before leaving again to Germany. I lived with my parents and five younger siblings in a basic three bedroom, 900 square-foot home in Orange County. Unlike most other students at my college, I had parents who could not afford to bankroll my travels. I returned to my part-time seasonal gig at Disneyland, the big neighbor down the street, where I worked every available day shift throughout winter break, feverishly stockpiling the small change. At night, I was in front of the TV.

After hearing us kids whine about it for years, our parents had finally purchased satellite television. My siblings and I were sucked into its endless orbit for hours at a time. Independent films and reruns of “The Daily Show” gripped me when I wasn’t watching the news networks. This was a welcome addition to my news sources, which had thereto been limited to the Orange County Register, a paper that Dad and I routinely mocked for its poor writing, and my occasional turn at Dad’s work laptop, the only computer in the house with internet access, albeit a painfully slow dial-up connection. While channel surfing, images of Colin Powell at the United Nations flickered through the screen. He was making the case for war.

The words “yellowcake,” “uranium,” and “Iraq” were still ringing in my ears when I first stepped off the bus at Bismarckplatz shortly after my arrival. I tugged my coat tighter to brace against the icy chill, a lavender pashmina from Spain draped artfully
around my neck. I’d never seen zero degrees on a thermometer before, but it was at least a small comfort that it was in Celsius.

I was in search of an internet café and wandered down Hauptstrasse, the main pedestrian throughfare, to find one. I stared at the buildings in awe, fascinated about living in a city that survived most Allied bombing in the war, its centuries-old structures and famed castle ruins still intact. That quaint, cobble-stoned Heidelberg had avoided the fate of neighboring Mannheim, with only one full block and its university still standing at war’s end, could be attributed to either chance or design, depending on how much of an issue one wanted to make of the U.S. Army taking up residence in Germany’s oldest university town. Never before had I considered war’s cost on a place of residence before.

A sandwich board advertised one hour of internet for only two euro, and I followed the arrows to a side street. I immediately logged on to AOL Instant Messenger to see if any friends were online. I sighed, knowing that this was when the loneliness crept in. The internet was the quickest and easiest window to friends and family, and as much as I took pride in my ability to embrace the differences between my new surroundings and home, even I had to admit to myself that I was not immune to nostalgia for the familiar. It was hard to be cocky when it was just me and the computer. In that windowless backroom, away from the midday bustle of the Altstadt Heidelberg’s old town district, I was desperate for a connection to someone, anyone. Aaron, a New Englander friend still studying in Madrid, was online.

“Como estás en Alemania?” he asked, wondering about Germany. It was good, I explained to him, and Heidelberg was lovely. I could hear my voice in my head as I
typed, dictating to myself carefully and deliberately, as though I were convincing myself as much as him. I realized that no matter how much I wanted to get away from home and to leave the stifling cocoon of my family, I still felt like I’d been dropped in the deep end of a pool, hands and feet tied, and forced to swim on my own. I looked at my sparsely populated friends list, and my heart fluttered. I dreaded having to make new friends.

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A few days later, I met up in the Altstadt with Jade, a college classmate who was also studying at the university and had just arrived in town. In the middle of Bismarckplatz, near the ticket booth, circumscribed by the chaos of buses and trams, a folding table and chairs stood quietly alone. As we inched closer, I noticed tiny wooden blocks the size of two fingers stacked and strung together to form a six-foot long wall. Names and phrases and sketches were etched on the sides of these blocks with markers. Stefan. Ingrid. Katja. Pax. Friede. Pace. Peace. NO WAR.

“Was ist das?” What is that? I asked the woman at the table.

“It’s the Schutzwall,” she replied in German. A protective wall, the same word East Germans had used to refer to the “antifascist” Berlin Wall. “Against invading Iraq. Do you want to add a brick?” She gestured to the pile of wooden blocks on the table, colorful markers dotting their landscape. There was something very romantic to me about opposing a war, like Dad being there—there! In Laguna Park! In East L.A.!—during the Chicano Moratorium of 1970. I didn’t really think about what it meant, just what it represented, and it was for this reason only that I stopped to scribble my name in blue and dropped the block onto the sticks that held the wall together. Jade simply watched.
I was in the third grade during Operation Desert Storm, the first war in Iraq. That’s when I first heard of Saddam Hussein, a real life villain on par with every villain I had ever seen in a Disney film. My best friend at the time was a Muslim Iranian girl named Zeinab who at eight years old wore the hijab. Her white headscarves always made her stand out among our peers, especially to the crew from the Orange County News who came to film a piece about schoolchildren’s reactions to the war. In the finished report, Zeinab’s answers to the well-choreographed questions made her appear sad—her eyes dropped to the ground, her mouth melted into a frown—even though she didn’t know a soul in Iraq. Like many Americans, she simply did not like Saddam, but her reasons were more personal as her family had fled Iran during their war with Iraq in order to, well, not die.

But I was now older, and I felt that I learned a lot from cable news before leaving for Germany, though I could never really articulate what exactly the news reports taught me. Iraq has weapons of mass destruction. Or do they? Does the United States just think the Iraqis have them? And who is “the United States”? The media or the government? It was all a blur. Still, I believed whatever reasons the “United States” gave for going to war in Iraq, and with very few reservations. Sure, there were some protests—when aren’t there protests?—but the American people were largely behind it.

Still, there was something very romantic about being a young person opposed to war. My sister Monica and I had an affinity for the 1960s as teenagers and we made signs proclaiming “Make love, not war” in our bedroom when the United States bombed
Bosnia (or was it Afghanistan? Yugoslavia?) because we saw student protestors on the nightly news. It was all a game back then, and we didn’t understand it, but this Iraq stuff was real. 9/11 was still a fresh wound and the fear that surfaced in the wake of those attacks had barely subsided. I was terrified about landing in Madrid on September 11, 2002. My dad was this close to flying with me, just so that I wouldn’t be alone. “What idiots are making you fly on 9/11?” he asked. “This is asinine.” War is bad, I thought, but maybe this time it was necessary. If Iraq really was developing nuclear weapons, then shit, we better do something about it, and quick.

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Along the streets, against light poles, and plastered onto walls were posters touting one event or another. Mixed in among ads for clubs like Nachtschicht and Halle 02, and films like Matrix Reloaded and Just Married were posters announcing an upcoming march for peace. As we passed the Schutzwall on the way back from class each day, the wall itself growing and snaking across more of the platz than the day before, volunteers gave flyers to passers-by. The flyers gave no specific date for the peace march, only a vague “the day after Iraq is invaded,” because it was inevitable—Iraq would be invaded. Wary of any political activity in a country that wasn’t my own, unreasonably worried that my hard-earned residency permit, the Aufenthaltserlaubnis, could be revoked if I got in trouble, I never took a flyer.

“Was denkst du über den Irak?” What do you think about Iraq? Nils, a tall bespectacled German medical student asked me. He was one of the locals leading our group of international students around town on a tour. We were walking back from the
Alte Brücke, the famous Old Bridge that had been repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt at the hands of war and Mother Nature through its centuries of existence, when he heard my accent and gleaned that I was America. The moment anyone found out where I was from, there were so many questions about Iraq. By the time Nils posed the question, I had come to expect it. “Ich weiss nicht genau,” I replied. I didn’t exactly know, which was only partially true—I was too afraid to commit to one side or the other. If I admitted that I understood the reasoning for going to war, would these potential new friends reject me? I couldn’t afford to alienate anyone. And even if I were against the war, did that make me look like I was ashamed of my country? As an American, I wanted to put my best foot forward. “I guess I just don’t know enough,” I continued.

The first few times I had this conversation, I expected a bomb to drop. I momentarily regretted not pretending that I was Canadian for fear that I’d be rejected as an American. I knew that Europeans were largely anti-war, and that Dubya was a persona non grata among them. But Nils was only politely curious. He explained that he was against the war and planned to march in protest after it started. “I’m interested in your opinion, though,” he said. “You can’t always believe what you hear.” I was pleasantly surprised at the nuance.

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The University was full of international exchange students, and many of us were enrolled in a month-long German language course until the semester began after Easter. I delighted in the wealth of cultures around me, with classmates from as near as England and francophone Switzerland, and as far away as Senegal and New Zealand.
Of course, it could never be a perfect melting pot. There were differences, disagreements between students based on history and politics. The women from China and Taiwan sat across from each other, separated by a carpeted divide between the tables that lined the edge of the room. One day, Herr Wassermann, our instructor, had us talk about where we were from. Xue started. “In Taiwan—”

“Taiwan gehört China!” Taiwan belongs to China! Peng, the Chinese woman screeched, before continuing her tirade in Mandarin. Xue sat stunned, her eyes large but her mouth still. The rest of us glanced at each other nervously. It was bizarre. I couldn’t comprehend such level of devotion to one’s home and country that could result in classroom outbursts such as this. Was it like this during World War II or Vietnam? During the Cold War, did students accuse each other of being Communists during college seminars?

“Meine Damen und Herren, ladies and gentlemen,” Herr Wassermann interrupted. “We respect each others’ opinions in this classroom.” He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Let’s continue, shall we?”

“Aber Taiwan gehört China. She’s wrong!” Peng insisted. A quick look from Herr Wassermann quieted her. He resumed tales of conducting orchestras in France, with the occasional mention of the dative and accusative cases.

That was only the beginning of the classroom as a battleground. Politics and current events had a way of infiltrating even the most basic lessons. I was in a pronunciation course with other German language learners later in the semester, whose instructor, Frau Doktor Zimmermann, very noticeably avoided and ignored the
Americans and Brits. Pippa, one of the English students, elbowed me one day and whispered, “Watch, when she goes around the room, she’ll only correct us.” I nodded, rolling my eyes knowingly.

“Let’s practice,” Frau Doktor Zimmerman said to the class. “Gehen. Gehhhhh-en.” She pressed her lacquered fingers to the corners of her mouth and stretched her lips into a wide smile as she said it. “Now each of you.” Each student repeated after her, and each received compliments. Except for, as Pippa predicted, the British and American students. “Nein, gehen. Look at my mouth. Gehhhh-en.”

Maybe we were paranoid, maybe we weren’t. We had been feeling the heat of our countries’ politics and didn’t like it a bit. Still, how could I argue? The Germans took war seriously. They knew it only too well. Frau Doktor Zimmerman’s final oral exam required us to read an excerpt from a story about Germans soldiers who hid in the hills around Heidelberg at the end of World War II. Perhaps they were the same soldiers she told us about who destroyed the Alte Brücke during the war—which we crossed every day for one of our courses—to prevent the American advance on Heidelberg. It was hard to say whether this was a cautionary tale about war’s destruction, or simply a way to stick it to the Yanks and Brits in her class.

Either way, the Germans were unsuccessful in preventing the eventual arrival of Americans, just as I was unsuccessful at obtaining an A grade in the course despite all my efforts. I thought I had spoken the best German of my life in the oral exam. Frau Doktor Zimmerman felt it wasn’t good enough, reasoning that I clearly did not practice with a native speaker. “She’s a bitch,” my program’s tutor Silvie, a native Heidelberger who
helped me prepare for my oral exam, would later tell me, breaking her promise to only speak German with us. “She’s not being fair.”

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“Was denkst du über den Irak?” Petr asked one night over beers. He gulped down a half-liter of local Hefeweizen, his eyes deadly curious but his demeanor muted and decidedly Scandinavian. My classmates and I routinely gathered in the evenings. Petr was from Norway, Neepa from England, and Leslie from Chicago. Each of our countries had taken a stance on Iraq, but Petr wanted to know what each of us thought for ourselves.

“Well...” I stammered. I’d seen the Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung headlines in the street, seen glimpses of the Tagesschau newscasts while watching TV, listened to the discussions among German friends. This would not be a just war. The reasons were lies, fabrications, yarns spun to sway the American people and a handful of sympathetic countries.

Even the countries opposed to an invasion were bound to be sucked into it. I watched The Daily Show – Global Edition every week on CNN International. Jon Stewart quipped about the Turkish people’s overwhelming opposition to war and the United States’ mobilization to military bases in Turkey: “So ninety-five percent of the Turks are opposed to the war, which puts the U.S. in an uncomfortable position. In order to bring democracy to Iraq, we first have to take it away from Turkey.” The case for war stopped making sense pretty quickly, and a comedian was one of the few media figures ballsy enough to say so. Had mainstream media deteriorated so much back home that Jon Stewart was the voice of reason?
Above all, I realized that Germany had a more realistic vantage point than almost anyone else in the world at the time, save for maybe Japan or Italy. Just before I returned home from Heidelberg, I would see Eddie Izzard’s *Dress to Kill* for the first time on a VHS tape that my friend Lily brought back from her visit home to England, where Eddie so elegantly put it, “Japan and Germany should be the peacekeepers of the world. They should be parachuted in whenever something breaks out… ‘We’ve done this before! Look, we’ve done the killing. Take it from us, just chill out! All right?’ Then they all organize peace really efficiently, really quickly.” If anyone would understand why war should not be taken lightly, it was the Germans. Maybe it was worth it for Americans to listen to them “*Well, I feel like my government is not providing a realistic picture of Iraq,*” I said, finally. “*And Americans need one. Most of us have no experience with war.*”

Petr smirked, an expression that suggested that I had figured something out that everyone else knew all along. “*Ja, das glaub’ ich auch.*” He thought so, too.

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I tried to put thoughts of war aside as the ides of March approached. My twenty-first birthday was coming up and I was determined to not spend it alone. “*Your birthday!*” Scott, the Jamaican-Chinese-British bloke in my language course gushed during a class break one day. I had a minor crush on him, with his dark curly hair, sparkling hazel eyes, and a voice to melt steel, but would soon feel foolish when I realized that women weren’t his type. “*A dinner is in order,*” he said, excited.

Ten of us had dinner at Café Journal in the Altstadt, preceded by a film outing with fellow language course students to see *Good Bye Lenin!* at an old cinema in town.
“Thank you for coming, everyone,” I said graciously as we toasted. “Even though my 21st birthday does not mean the same as it does in the U.S. Here I can already drink!” We searched for a bar after dinner, all of us chatting boisterously, my friends holding on to each of my arms. “We’re going to get you sufficiently pissed,” Neepa said, promising me a drink. After cocktails, we stumbled back to Bismarckplatz, passing a dozen rainbow PACE flags draped over windows and balconies. They fluttered in the cool breeze of a coming spring, their numbers increased in recent weeks.

The Schutzwall stood loudly alone in the middle of a darkened Bismarckplatz. After the volunteers left for the day, it remained in its place every night, untouched. My friends and I approached our respective bus stops, but I lingered behind for a moment. I dragged my finger along the tops of the bricks, much of the colored ink smeared along the wall’s sides and washed out from its short exposure to the late winter elements. In a few short weeks, the wall had grown to almost 20 feet long, and by the time I would leave Heidelberg five months later in summer, it was twice that.

At the bus stop, Jade and I bumped into an American girl who was also in the language course at Max-Weber-Haus. A native of Louisville, she made no secret of the fact that she knew no German but had mysteriously been allowed to study in the University, which baffled everyone because we knew that the university had strict rules requiring exchange students to have advanced German language abilities. She bragged about it. “I don’t know how I’m gonna take courses for my major!” she’d drawl. That night she awaited the bus with a muscular blond, his local affiliation unmistakable to us by that point. He wore wrap-around shades on the back of his head, skater shoes, and a
closely shaved head. He was one of the many U.S. soldiers from the base in Heidelberg. As the bus drove up, he looked across the platz at the Schutzwall, part of his conversation becoming audible to us. “Those fuckers. Fuck that wall! They don’t know what they’re talking about,” he spewed, the girl laughing as he held up his middle finger. “What an asshole,” Jade whispered to me as we followed them onto the bus.

I returned to my fifth floor walk-up a bit wobbly, but sated. I did not spend my twenty-first alone.

I awoke the next morning with a headache and flipped on the TV. I’d seen these green colored shots of Baghdad before. We were at war.
I have this problem with moving. I always underestimate how hard it will be. In my mind, it seems simple enough: Pack my shit, put it in a truck, haul it to the new place, unpack. “Seems” being the operative word, of course, because moving to a new home is never a simple task; it’s amazing how quickly the mind forgets. Packing your things always takes longer than you remember, and something is bound to go wrong in the process.

I launched into my move for graduate school in southern California with the kind of gusto one normally reserves for a dentist appointment. It wasn’t about the process of moving—renting a truck and schlepping a million boxes always sucks—but it had everything to do with where I was leaving and where I was headed. I knew that moving there was necessary, I knew it would ultimately be good for me, that I finally had the chance to scrape free the plaque that had gradually built up throughout my brain in the six years of working fulltime since college, but I just couldn’t bear the thought of leaving behind the life I had so carefully carved out for myself in the three years that I lived in Berkeley. The Bay Area was cool. There was so much for a young person to do, so much weed to smoke, the radical politics suited me well, and I had even grown to love chilly summers and the fog that came with them. Riverside, where I was headed in southern California, was very much not a cool place. Throughout my childhood and adolescence in Orange County, Riverside and the rest of the surrounding Inland Empire, known for its sprawl, smog, and meth-heads, was as “country” as it got for us. Not the way that New
Yorkers talk about the country, as though quaintness and quiet were sins, but the way that Carla Thomas accuses Otis Redding in the song “Tramp”: “You know what Otis? You’re country. You straight from the Georgia woods. You wear overalls and big ol’ brogan shoes, and you need a haircut, tramp.” Riverside was our Georgia woods, and woe be the high school senior whose only University of California acceptance letter came from the Riverside campus, “UC Rejects” as it was known.

But I wasn’t a reject. Even though UC Riverside was the only grad school acceptance I received that year, I wanted them just as much as they wanted me. I mean, they were paying me to go to grad school, not the other way around. This was a cause for celebration! I should have been happy! But, well, y’know—Riverside.

On the day of my move on the last Friday of August, when the low mumble of public radio woke me at seven a.m., I could only muster a groan as I pulled the covers over my head and curled into a ball. “I can’t believe we have to move today,” I said.

My boyfriend Marc stirred next to me and dragged his palms over his face, waking and distorting his features. “God, I know.” Neither of us had gotten much sleep. We were up into the wee hours packing and purging the last of our things. Mostly my things, really. He had moved in with me five months earlier after a short stint working in Singapore with little more than two beat-up suitcases of clothes and a ukulele that he often played the same tune on, a piece I liked to call “Marc’s Jam.” It was still new for us, and especially for me, this co-habitation, this being in a stable relationship, this depending on another person to pay the bills. And now we were moving, together.
“Do we really have to?” I had been saying this for weeks, as though I weren’t the one calling the shots in my own life, as though I were being coerced into leaving.

“You know we do,” he said. And it’s true, we had to move. The owner of our house, one of the tiny divinity schools on the hill across from us, had thrown a lot of relocation money at the five of us who lived there so that the school could move their new president in. They strong-armed us into leaving by September 1, more than a week before my anticipated last day at work. The divinity school had already planned a huge bash at the house in October and needed time to make the repairs that they had long neglected to make for us. And though it seemed like a no-brainer to simply leave my job early, I needed the extra money that those few additional days would bring. I had a meager grad student stipend in my future, and Marc was unemployed. I wasn’t about to let a pushy landlord fuck up my savings plan. So yeah, we were not excited about moving to Riverside, and we definitely did not look forward to the 72 hours ahead that would take us down south for the move and back again to crash with friends in Berkeley by Sunday evening, but we had no better options.

With my head still under the covers, I rolled over, throwing my arm around Marc’s waist, and buried my face in his back. “This is good for you,” he said. “We’ll get through this together.”

I sat up on the edge of the bed, mind muddy from a restless sleep, and ran through the day’s tasks in my head. We lived on a hill, so I needed to move the truck and turn it around so that were loading our stuff down into it rather than up. We had to load the truck of course, which I remembered taking only a couple of hours the last time I moved
and figured we’d be out of here by nine, ten at the latest. Then I had to pick up my Craigslist rideshare from the BART station, a guy named Tim who had been on a video job in San Francisco and was pitching in gas money for a ride home to San Bernardino, just up the freeway from our new home. I expected that we would arrive in Riverside by four-ish, where we would pay our first month’s rent before the management office closed at five. Then we would get our key and be in our new apartment by six. It was a tight schedule, but I was pretty confident that we’d manage it.

I opened the shades next to the bed and stood staring out the window. I hoped for sun, but instead got a glimpse of a typical Bay Area summer: a gray sky and fog-laden Golden Gate Bridge. This view was nonetheless a big part of the reason I moved into this house after leaving Los Angeles. But every so often, when I stared out over the Bay from my house, I thought of James. I hated to admit even to myself that sometimes, I wondered where he was, wondered how he was ever part of my life.

It was with him that I saw the Bridge from this side of the Bay for the first time, back in my last semester of college when I flew from Southern California to Berkeley to visit him one weekend. James was an old high school friend who I lost my virginity to in my dorm room a few months earlier and whom I hoped would become my boyfriend by the end of that trip. But it wasn’t to be. We rode together on his motorcycle on a strangely balmy day in March, winding through the Berkeley Hills to the overlook at the Lawrence Hall of Science high above the city. Standing along the wall and looking out across the Bay, the water blinding us with the sun’s reflection, the Golden Gate Bridge then fogless, we were silent. I wanted to know what he was thinking, but was afraid to ask. I knew,
deep down inside that he did not want any more from me than what he had already so selfishly taken, and that I had so carelessly given. He had used me. He had used me. And that day wasn’t even the last of it.

Marc grabbed his glasses from the nightstand, cleaned the lenses with the edge of his shirt, then reached for his khakis puddled on the floor. “Hon, I think we need to get a move on,” he said. “We have to watch the time.”

I dressed, grabbed the truck key, and left the room. Our roommates were still asleep and though I padded quietly down the spiral stairs of the foyer, I knew that the banging and plodding of furniture and boxes would soon rouse them from their slumber. Not that I really cared. Marc and I looked forward to being rid of housemates. I had had it up to here with their fussiness; Henri and Stéphane, both French, were walking stereotypes of their countrymen. Henri was fastidious about cleanliness; Stéphane complained about everything in the U.S. that differed from its counterpart in France. Meanwhile, Maria had grown increasingly bitchy in her frantic last minute search for housing, snapping at me for taking a mixing bowl and stock pot that I didn’t even know she wanted or needed. Marc and I looked forward to being the only two people cooking in our kitchen, to having really loud sex, to smoking weed in our living room, to having an entire fridge to ourselves. But more than anything, we looked forward to creating a home together—a home all our own.

I stopped a moment near the front door, looking around the nearly empty house in admiration and awe. I had long dreaded moving out since the day I moved in. Every ceramic tile and wrought iron railing, mission lamp and aged hardwood floor took on a
new meaning in these last few hours that we lived here. *This is where we fell in love*, I thought to myself. This was the foyer where Marc and I first hugged, our room was where we first danced to Sam Cooke, the same room where Marc told me he loved me and where I, so terrified of getting hurt, nonetheless said it back. This was where we started our life together, and now it was time to bid farewell, to go it alone in our very own one-bedroom apartment. “This is probably the nicest house we’ll ever live in,” Marc had said while we packed the night before. I hoped he wasn’t right, but reluctantly admitted that he probably was.

I stood in front of the truck, staring it down with a furrowed brow. It was a behemoth, and I didn’t look forward to moving it. I mentally plotted my course back to the house: down the steep Arch Street hill and a series of turns on downtown Berkeley streets that would lead me back up over the same rise. I got into the truck and after making my way through the streets, my heart thudded in my ears as I embarked on the final ascent, Arch Street feeling claustrophobically narrow, the leafy trees hanging lower than I’d ever seen them.

As I reached the top of the hill, another moving truck was parked at its peak two doors down from our house. The road that remained was a tight pass for cars, and even more pinched with me in this second truck. I crept past it, with no more than six inches of breathing room between our mirrors. I was about to hoot and a holler at my driving prowess when a loud bang rocked the truck and echoed through the metal roof. “The fuck?”
The voice of the man who rented us the truck started on a loop in my head.

“You’re in Berkeley? Watch out for those low trees. The top of your truck is not insurable.” I parked in front of our house. A jolt of pure, unadulterated panic surged through me. Please universe, don’t let there be damage, I thought. Maybe it’s a scratch. Maybe it’s not noticeable. Maybe, maybe, maybe—

Shit. I took one look at the top corner of the truck and knew my goose was cooked. It was as though the Incredible Hulk had punched a hole through the fiberglass while standing on top of the truck, crushing part of the metal roof like tin foil. When I looked beyond the truck I saw a chunk taken out of a tree branch that only barely stuck out from among the others. I burst into tears and hurried inside the house.

Marc was pulling the sheets off our bed when I found him. “I hit a tree with the truck,” I said, my voice weak like a child in trouble.

I’m not sure how I expected him to react. I knew he wouldn’t yell at me; we had discussions, never arguments. But maybe my panic would rub off on him and we would become one quivering glob of anxiety. I just didn’t think he would be so calm. “Oh no,” he said, enveloping me in his arms as I heaved a few sobs into his shirt. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“I dunno. I didn’t even see it.” I sniffled. Wait until he sees it, I thought. “It’s like it was waiting for me and jumped out the moment I passed by.”

Marc took my hand and led me outside. He walked around the front of the truck to assess the damage. “Oh yeah,” he said. I could tell that he realized it was just as bad as I made it sound, that I wasn’t overreacting.
“Fuck, I’m gonna have to pay so much money for this. I can’t afford this.” I started running calculations in my head. A thousand, two thousand, all of my savings. I would need a new job just to pay it off. They were going to take me to court. My wages would be garnished. Maybe I’d just quit school before it even began. I would be paying this off for the next ten years and—

“Hon, I don’t think it’s all that bad. Maybe a few hundred. I’m sure this happens all the time. That’s why they won’t let you insure it.” He shrugged and put his arm around my shoulder. I couldn’t believe how calm he was. It was usually the other way around, with me the more levelheaded between us. I remembered his breakdown last week, a patented Marc freak-out where he lay curled up on the bed, wrapped around a pillow, crying over his continued unemployment, another denial letter from another college dean’s office having just arrived in the mail. “There’s no place for me,” he said through tears. And though in that moment I was the calm one, I also tried not to get annoyed, to brush away his disappointment as nothing ore than a flourish of melodrama. Instead, I pursed my lips as I lay beside him, holding his hand as he tried to plan his next steps. Maybe Marc though I was being dramatic now. Or maybe he just wasn’t as cynical as me.

“I guess we should start loading,” I said, breaking the silence, wiping away tears. I told myself I couldn’t look at the gash in the truck until moving day was over. We didn’t have time.

The house smelled of toast when we reentered the foyer, and I knew that one of the housemates was awake. “Hey,” I said to Henri as we walked passed the dining room.
He held an Ikea mug of coffee and was reading the French news on his Macbook. “Allô,” he replied. “Ready to move?”

“I guess,” I said curtly, gliding past his view to the furniture and boxes that Marc and I had moved downstairs to the living room the night before.

Marc followed. “Yep, moving day. Lots to do.” He made small talk with Henri, asking how his move was going, as I tried to decide which boxes of books to load onto the dolly first. The mountain of belongings seemed like it had multiplied overnight, and I grew red with embarrassment knowing that most of it was mine. Each box a different set of keys to my past. One was full of framed photos, each one wrapped in whatever free newspaper I could get my hands on, mostly recent issues of the Daily Cal or East Bay Express. Another box held my CDs, some of them going as far back as high school when I used to save my lunch money to buy them at the local Tower Records. One of the smaller boxes held many knickknacks, the sentimental doo-dads whose only use was purely decorative but I could not bear to part with: a small metal Eiffel Tower from my European travels in college, a three-legged pig made of clay that my sister brought back from Mexico, and a miniature garden gnome who usually stood guard on my desk, among many other trinkets. This little guy was mini-gnome #2, identical to the first one that I trashed the previous year, not long before I met Marc.

Mini-gnome #1 had been a gift from James, sometime after I moved to the Bay. In the few years that followed my first visit to Berkeley, while I was living in Los Angeles, James and I had gone through a long stretch of silence—a year, maybe two. But when a mutual friend of ours died in a car crash, it felt like time to forgive and forget, so I
extended a hand of friendship to him. And then I moved to Berkeley. And then we ended up in bed again. And then he was apologizing for leading me on again. And then I was saying goodbye again. And then, against all reason, I was saying, I want you in my life again. By that time, I had been in Berkeley less than six months and there were few people I could call friends. James was a toxic presence in my life, but I was lonely and figured that he was better than no one at all.

As I stared at the boxes stacked before me, I wondered if I could have given myself more time to pack for this move, if I could have worked harder to sell and get rid of more of my things that I didn’t need anymore. I remembered what it was like moving from L.A., loading nearly of my shit into boxes, leaving behind very few things for my roommate to haul off to Goodwill. I realized that back then, it wasn’t just the physical objects that I couldn’t part with it, but the baggage too, that emotional stuff that gets stuck behind ears and in between toes, the gunk that coats knickknacks and miniature garden gnomes in a thick layer of goo. How much of that baggage had made its way into my things now? Was a new mini-gnome that I bought for myself enough to wash it all away?

“What’s wrong?” Marc asked, as my hands clutched my cheeks in disbelief.

“I can’t believe I have so much shit. This is ridiculous,” I said, just beyond Henri’s earshot.

Marc sighed. “Hon, you’re a grown woman who’s lived on her own for a while already. People just accumulate stuff.” It was so easy for him to say this. His belongings could probably still fit in the two suitcases he brought home from Singapore. The rest of
his things—a closet full of clothes, many shelves of books, a fancy stereo system that took him years to accumulate—were still back at his ex-girlfriend’s house in Phoenix. He had tried a few times to go back to retrieve his stuff, both before and since his stint in Singapore, but she always had an excuse why he wasn’t allowed to come back. Sometimes it was the trauma of her parents’ divorce that the picking-up-stuff time would undoubtedly invoke for her. Other times it was because her new boyfriend was visiting from out of state and she didn’t want him and Marc to meet. But usually it came down to her not wanting him there, period. She was holding his shit hostage, and Marc was pretty damn close to packing it all in and forgetting about it.

We loaded up the dolly, some of the boxes a little worse for wear, destined for this to be their last trip. Marc had found them in the Free section of Craigslist and had to fend off another comer in order to claim them outside someone’s house in South Berkeley last week. The boxes were the easy part. Just stack them against the back of the cargo area, their sizes uniform, and place the oddly shaped furniture in front of them.

My phone beeped. A text message had arrived. It was eight a.m. Leaving SF soon. Should be at Berkeley BART around 9. It was Tim, our other Craigslist find, the guy I would take back home to San Bernardino. I replied that we seemed to be on track and on time.

“Seemed” was, again, the operative word. The loading continued, yet as much as we prepared for it the night before, moving all but the bed downstairs for quicker transport, the two of us weren’t moving fast enough. By nine o’clock, all furniture
remained and we hadn’t yet taken apart the bed. “I thought that nine or ten was optimistic,” Marc said.

“I don’t remember it taking this long when I left L.A.”

“You didn’t have as much stuff.”

“Touché.” And it was all this stuff that had seemed so important, that I couldn’t live without when I swapped Koreatown for North Berkeley, and a tedious, soul-sucking job reading admissions applications at UCLA, for an invigorating, soul-nourishing job advising undergraduates at Cal. Los Angeles is not where I wanted to be. No one talks about how out of place a twentysomething is in L.A. who has no interest in any part of the entertainment industry. There are more aspiring ingénues waiting tables and crashing on friends couches while hoping for their big break than you can shake a stick at, and these are most of the people you have a chance of meeting at parties, clubs, and on dates. I didn’t want any of that, and I certainly wanted none of the life that awaited me as a working schlub like many of my thirtysomething co-workers: countless hours of one’s life spent on SoCal freeways because the most affordable homes in the least dangerous neighborhoods are far from work. One of my co-workers at UCLA rode the vanpool to and from Pomona daily, a grueling fifty miles, while another co-worker lived in the San Fernando Valley and was always at the mercy of the perennially congested 405 Freeway, more commonly known as the 405 Parking Lot. To live in L.A. was to sacrifice a quality of life that I was not willing to make. But L.A. is where I settled for, where I lived and worked in the meanwhile, always in the meanwhile. L.A. was never a long-term prospect for me.
So I sat tight in Los Angeles. But when my childhood best friend Cindy died in a car accident, and James called to tell me, and I went to her memorial and her father got up to deliver the eulogy and said that he was comforted that she was happy when she died, I despaired that no one could say the same of me in that moment. I needed to change my life. Six months later, I loaded a truck and said goodbye to southern California, vowing never to look back. I swore then that I would not quit the Bay Area without a fight.

And yet, here I was with Marc, loading a bookcase into a truck that was soon headed back down south. What was it that I once said to a work friend at Cal? “I don’t think I’ll leave the Bay again without someone at my side. Otherwise, why would I leave?”

Tim called around nine-thirty. “Sorry I’m running late. I just arrived in Berkeley,” he said, panting.

I stood inside of the truck as Marc went back into the house. “Don’t worry. I should apologize myself. We’re running a little behind, too.” An understatement. We had at least an hour, maybe more to go. “I’m thinking ten-thirty? Is that all right?”

“Oh yeah, take your time. I’m in no hurry. I’ll just get some breakfast while I’m down here.”

“Perfect. We’ll see you—” A beep, and the phone shut off. Dead battery. I climbed into the cab of the truck to plug it into the car charger and texted Tim. “Sorry, phone died. See you soon.” I locked the door behind me, my wallet, phone, cameras, and iPod safely protected as we continued loading.
It was eleven when we loaded the last straggling pieces, and I made a final lap through the house. Vacuumed our bedroom, made sure all nails were pulled from the walls. I walked out onto the deck off our room to look out onto the Bay, the fog barely lifted, the sky still gray. Gray like the day I went to the Lawrence Hall of Science to think, to decide if I was going to say goodbye to James for good, to figure out if it was worth it to still be friends while he tried to patch things over with his ex. Again. No, it wasn’t worth it. I had lived in Berkeley for a year at that point. I was a big girl. I could do fine on my own. That night, I met him at our favorite brew pub, ordered my pint, and said, “You realize that when I finish this beer, I’ll walk out that door and you’ll never see me again.” And I did. Today’s overcast was not picture perfect, but I couldn’t change it. I thumped downstairs, left a stack of books in the now barren living room to sell at Moe’s or Half Price Books when we returned, and headed outside.

I stood on the steps of the courtyard, leaning on the broken green fence as I announced to Marc, “And with that, we’re ready to go.”

He had been rummaging around in my car, securing loose items for the journey ahead. Marc would drive my Oldsmobile while I took the truck, and we would return to Berkeley together in my car on Sunday. He closed the trunk. “Are we going to get there in time?”

“Good point. I should find out what happens if we get there late.” I turned to grab my phone from the cab and found the door locked, just as I’d left it. Reaching into my back pocket for the key, I found nothing. Nor in the other three pockets. Panic.

“Where’s the key?” I asked.
“You had it,” he said. “You just had it, I remember."

“Fuck.” I retraced my steps in my head, just as Dad always taught me. I had it in the cargo area, when we were strapping everything down. Placed it on the floor as I pulled on the green straps, and what did I do next? Is it still there?

I ran to the back of the truck, threw open the cargo door, and jumped inside. No key on the floor or the furniture. I jumped out, silent, and ran into the house. Marc followed on my heels.

Maria and her boyfriend Victor, also French, were drinking coffee at the dining table. It wanted to tear off their faces, so calm were they as I tore through the living room, passed by them in the dining room, and started rummaging through cupboards in the pantry. “Have either of you seen a key? Attached to a blue plastic keychain?”

Victor looked sympathetic, for once in his boorish life, but Maria gave me an unaffected shrug. “Nope, haven’t seen anything.” I tried not to scowl as I threw a glance her way.

Marc stepped in. “It’s the truck key. We can’t find the truck key. Can you keep your eye open for it?”

“Oh man, that sucks,” Victor said. “Yeah, we’ll let you know if we find it.” Maria sipped coffee from her Harvard mug.

I ran to and fro, upstairs and downstairs, inside and out, and came up with nothing. The time was barreling close to noon. “We’re not going to make it on time, are we?” I said wanly as I plopped down inside the truck.
“We’ll be lucky if we make it by seven or eight, and that’s only if we find the key now,” Marc said, standing in the street. Sweat had started collecting around his neck, and though he was concerned, he was still calm. “Let’s think about this,” he said. “What are our options?”

We just needed someone to take a check to the management office. How fucking stupid was this? I should have taken care of this days ago and FedExed it to them. I had thought I was a pro at this whole moving thing. I had done a long distance move before, how hard could this one be? Plenty. I was a total amateur and now it was time to throw in the towel and ask for help. “It’s time for the Hail Mary pass,” I said. I didn’t want to do it, this really was our last resort; we had no other options.

“Yeah?”

“I need your phone. I’m calling my Dad.” My father was the only person who lived within fifty miles of our new apartment who I knew would help me out in a pinch. Marc’s father would help, but Oceanside was too far. I bit my lip as I dialed, trying not to cry. I hated asking for help. It felt like a defeat, like I was regressing to the same stunted stage that some of my twentysomething homebody siblings were in. I was a grown-ass woman! I could take care of myself! I could move to a new home hundreds of miles away and I didn’t need anyone to do anything for me. Or so I thought. This was like being in college all over again, many years before I ever got a car of my own, back when I would call home to ask for a book or a blanket and Dad would drive thirty-five miles to bring it to me.

“Dad? It’s Drea. I need your help.”
“What’s going on?” I knew that he could hear the tears in my voice. He sensed that I was in trouble.

I explained the situation, asked him if he could take a cashier’s check from my bank account to the office in Riverside. “If we don’t do it this afternoon, we can’t get into our apartment until Monday, and if we have to wait until Monday,”—my voice wavered—“this entire trip will be a waste.”

He was silent, considering. Dad had a soft spot for his children, even for me, the most independent of the brood. “Okay,” he finally said. “Where do I have to go?”

I fully expected that someday I would wake up and find that I had turned into my grandmother. Dad’s mom was so intent on staying independent that she sold her house without consulting her two living children and checked herself into an old folks home so that she didn’t have to burden her family by living with them. And until the day she died, she remembered—and resented—the moment that Dad had to finally take her car keys from her because her sight had degenerated so much. I always suspected that part of my aversion to help was genetic. Like Grandma, I took pride in living on my own and taking care of myself without anyone’s help. Allowing others to help me when I needed it was no easy task.

With the rent fiasco now in the resolution process, we could refocus our efforts on finding the goddamn truck key. “Maybe it’s in the cab. Maybe I locked it in there and it’s on the floor where we can’t see it.”

Mark looked doubtful. “I dunno. Do you really think it’s in there?”
“Where the hell else could it be?” He shrugged. “Either way, we need to get inside.” I still had his phone and called Triple A. The operator told me that help would arrive by one p.m. One hour.

“Fuck.” I clenched my fists and cocked my knee, ready to kick a tire. I set my foot down on the ground instead. “And Tim’s still waiting, and I don’t have his number because it’s in my phone, which is locked in the goddamn truck. Fuck.” I glided slowly into the house, my legs and arms finally starting to feel the morning’s strain, and plopped down into the single remaining armchair in the TV room.

Marc leaned on the doorframe. “You want something to drink? Water? Tea? Maybe Maria has some we can use.”

Slumped in the chair, I stared glumly at the TV, Henri’s “$30” price tag still taped to the screen. I’d brought this on myself, I knew it. One of those things where if you don’t have a positive attitude, it’ll all turn to shit. I didn’t want to move, and now I’d made things hard for myself. Poor Marc didn’t know what he got himself into, did he? I felt bad that he was moving with me. He didn’t have to put up with this. “Yeah, water.”

He returned with a glass for each of us. “Do you think maybe we should keep looking for the key, in case it’s not in the cab?”

“I just need to sit for a moment.” The tears started welling along the lengths of my eyes. “This is just really hard for me. I’m not ready to leave yet.”

Marc sat on an armrest and rubbed my back as I wiped my eyes. “I know, sweetness.” He wasn’t as in love with Berkeley as I was, but he knew how important it was to me. He set his glass on the floor. “This is where you grew into yourself.”
It sounded hokey and painfully cliché in those terms, but it was true, though I’m not sure if Marc understood just how true it was. It wasn’t so long ago that I stood in this room with James, watching him run his hands over the wood paneling as he fawned over the high quality of the craftsmanship, an obvious stalling tactic to delay having a serious what-the-hell-are-we-doing type of conversation with me. Was I really that woman standing in this room with him? Was she me? Those days felt so distant, and yet they were burned into my being in a way the body never quite forgets. I had depended on James, despite all protestations to the contrary. I called him when my car started smoking under the hood, when I wanted company while grocery shopping, even as far back as when I needed a ride after dropping off my first moving truck. In the end, I could see how good it was to release him from my life, how it forced me to not only fend for myself, but to be myself. I no longer had to impress him.

Marc and I sat there for the next hour, half in silence, half in conversation. Triple A called right on time to say they’d arrived, and not a moment earlier. I ran outside to the yellow tow truck.

The driver opened the truck cab, got my signature, and headed back to his truck. I climbed through the passenger side, my legs hanging out the door as I rummaged around for the key. Nothing, still nothing. “Fuck, no key.”

Marc sighed. I knew he was thinking, *I told you so*, but he held back. “Okay, let’s look for it.”
“Lemme call Tim first.” My hands shook as I unplugged my phone from the charger, a voicemail and many texts waiting from him. I returned his call and explained what happened. “The key’s still not here, but we’ll be there just as soon as we find it.”

I expected annoyance, but Tim just chuckled. “Oh man, that happens to me when I go to Burning Man, like, every year.” I smiled. A Burner. I had at least seven hours ahead of me with a dude who spends a week each year covered head to toe in dirt, wearing elaborate costumes and probably dropping a shit ton of acid while having lots of sex with lots of people. Mishaps aside, this might actually be fun. “I’ll be sitting here by the BART,” he said. “Just let me know when you’re coming.”

Marc and I resumed the search. He looked in the house, I looked in the truck. I deserved the hard job. I landed us here in the first place. I started reaching further back in the truck, looking for crevices where a key might be hidden. When I grabbed a canvas bag full of hangers to move it aside, I heard a familiar clink. The key.

I jumped out of the truck and pulled the strap to roll the door shut, placing my junior high P.E. lock on it for added security. Victor stood at the gate watching me as he dragged on a cigarette. “You find it?” he asked.

“Yes!” Marc emerged from the house. “I found it!” I exclaimed, waving the key at Marc. “Let’s go!”

I wrapped my arms around him and held him close. “Thank you for being the sane one today,” I said in his ear. “I needed someone to lean on.”

He squeezed me.
Marc got into the Olds, and I climbed into the truck cab. I smiled at the house before we drove away. Though the ghost of James showed up from time to time, it was my relationship with Marc that truly lingered. Like the night he walked me home after our first date and I hugged him tightly in the foyer. “I sensed something there,” Marc would say much later. Our relationship started there, and now it was continuing elsewhere. We were not meant to make our home here forever.

Tim should have been far more upset that he waited five hours for me, but when I arrived at the BART station, he was surprisingly chill. I guess I could expect as much from a Burner. We hit the road, and before we even made it through Oakland, the conversation went from jobs to drugs to relationships. “Does he have a job?” he asked about Marc.

“Unfortunately, not yet.”

“But he’s just moving with you? From Berkeley to Riverside?”

“He is.” I smiled.

“Wow, that is love. That’s love.”

We stopped to eat in Kettleman City, the halfway point. Tim finally met Marc when we sat down in a booth at the diner. Marc had always thought me slightly crazy for picking up rideshares on Craigslist (“It’s just… weird”), but I could tell he didn’t mind this one. Tim seemed like a misfit for the Inland Empire. He explained that his work took him to San Francisco often, but he lived in a house his parents owned to save money while his wife got her belly dancing costume business off the ground. I asked why San
Bernardino, why not move to the Bay. “That’s where her work is. And I’ll be wherever she is.”

Marc ordered his favorite plate: pancakes, hashbrowns, country fried steak, and biscuits with gravy for four-thirty-nine. It was too much for one person, so we shared it. Tim liked this. “It reminds me of when me and my wife went to Japan. We did this Love Café thing. You ever heard of it?” Marc and I shook our heads. “Well, the idea is that you eat everything in your meal together. You feed each other. Real collaboration. At one point, they bring you a soup in a bowl, and you’re supposed to drink from it together. But how do you do that?” He leaned closer across the table and held his hands up. “You both hold on to the bowl and tip it to one person, then to the other, and back and forth until you’re done, until both are satisfied.” He sat back, cleaning his teeth with a toothpick, and put an elbow on the top of the booth. “It’s beautiful,” he said.

Marc and I looked at each other, smiling faintly, and he reached down to squeeze my knee. Tim watched us. “You’re good together, I can tell,” he said. “I hope everything works out for you.”

We headed out on the last stretch to our new home, the summer heat of the Central Valley dissipating as the sun set. Marc drove straight to our apartment to retrieve the key from the building manager who had been waiting for us all evening. I took Tim home. “Good luck with everything,” he said. “I hope we meet again.”

“Me, too,” I said, and drove away.
I arrived in Riverside around eleven, finding Marc in our empty apartment. “Home,” I said. We climbed into the truck to grab pillows and blankets, resigned to unloading everything in the morning.

I lay the linens on the floor where the bed would go, outlined as they were in our Berkeley room that morning. We lay down on our respective sides, and I threw my arm around his waist, holding him close.

“Thank you for coming here,” I said in his ear. “It means a lot.”
TWENTY-MINUTE EVALUATION

My boyfriend Marc called me a few weeks before my 29th birthday. I could feel his excitement vibrate through the phone. “Baby, I just figured out the perfect birthday gift for you,” he said.

“What’s that?” I crouched on my apartment balcony watering a new tomato plant. I was careful to never let the soil go dry, mentally crossing my fingers that it wouldn’t die like the tomato plants that I had brought with me from my last residence in the lush hills of Berkeley to this parched desert of Riverside six months before.

“You ready for this? You’re going to die.” He was smiling.


“A medical marijuana card.”

I stood up from my squat and stared out across the street at the evening sky above the Blockbuster Video. A goofy grin burned quickly across my face like a flame on rolling paper. “Holy shit.”

“That’s what I’m talkin’ ‘bout,” he said.

“You are the best boyfriend ever, it’s official.”

“Someone’s a little excited about this.”

“Damn fucking sure I am. I’ll be able to buy card weed legally.” I set down my watering can and came back inside the apartment. “Good timing, too,” I said. “We’re damn near out of our stash.”
I sat down at my desk, pulled out a repurposed plastic make-up bag from the bottom drawer, and investigated the contents. “We’ve got, like, half a bud and some stems,” I said, crinkling my nose at a near-empty glass vial. I tried to remember where we got the weed. Did I buy it that time my sister Monica and her ex-boyfriend visited me while I was living in Berkeley, when her ex and I wanted to test out our newly purchased souvenir glass pipes from the Haight, and I called my friend Kelly whose bags of weed featured little round smiley face stickers, the kind that teachers use on attendance charts? Or did Marc pilfer it from the ever-present kitchen drawer stash at his Uncle David’s house in Berkeley, where his uncle regularly kept large bags of pungent, potent weed to sell on behalf of his friends in Mendocino? Yes, this. “David’s stash brought us a long way.”

“It sure did,” Marc said.

“Goddammit, I’m gonna have a card,” I said. Finally, a gift that keeps on giving. This was going to be a good birthday. This was going to be a good year.

*

Marc and I have been talking about getting medical marijuana cards for close to a year. Though cannabis is legally available in the State of California for people seeking a prescriptive alternative to manage the symptoms of their medical ailments, it is common knowledge among anyone with a vested interest in buying weed that a prescription—colloquially known as a medical marijuana card—is easy to come by for those willing to pay for it, and that just about any minor medical issue qualifies.
Medical marijuana is not like the weed you buy with a couple of crinkled up twenties from a friend of a friend of a friend on the street. I learned this while living in Berkeley, where marijuana is as abundant as alcohol at parties and other social events. Once, a friend showed up at a party with pot from a medical dispensary and offered it up to those of us sitting around the room. One drag, and I was in the zone. I was stoned yet alert, and this excited me. If it were liquor, it would have gone down smooth with a robust finish, no bitter aftertaste. “Man, this card weed is the shit,” I said to Marc. He took another drag, held his breath, and nodded. “Y’know, maybe one of us should get a card when we move to Riverside,” I said. “Who knows what the cost and availability is like out in suburbia.”

“You serious?” he said, an incredulous look on his face. “Meth capital of California? Riverside? They have weed.”

“Whatever. I’m looking for an excuse. I want a card.”

But we put off getting cards, at least for the time being. For most of 2010, Marc was confident that Prop 19 was going to pass. Finally, a proposition to legalize and tax marijuana had made it to the California ballot and the vote was set to take place during midterm elections. Pollsters backed up Marc’s assertion throughout the summer, but as November crept ever closer, the margin by which voters expected to approve the measure grew ever smaller.

I started making calls. Not to my friends—every single one of them (with the exception of the anarchists who refused to participate in elections that they felt only served to legitimize a government that they sought to undermine) planned to very
enthusiastically vote yes on Prop 19. But rather, I called my siblings, the only people within my orbit who were not slam-dunks on the “yes” side of the vote and whom I felt could possibly be swayed.

Loren was the easy one. She is the only sibling I’ve gotten high with. “Dude,” I said to her on the phone. “You still registered to vote in California?”

She was living with her boyfriend and his family in Georgia. “I think so. Why?”

“Prop 19, man!” Suddenly, I heard the Dude from *The Big Lebowski* in my voice. I was coming dangerously close to crossing the line from casual enthusiast to connoisseur of the wacky tobacky. I cleared my throat. “They wanna legalize and tax marijuana. You have to vote yes.”

“Really? Wow. Okay.” Yeah! One vote in the “yes” column.

I moved on to Alex (“Pothead!” “Shut up, fatty”) and Cynthia (“Imagine all the brownies, C,” “Ooooh!”), who also handed their votes to the right side, the “Yes” side. At twelve years old, not only was my youngest brother, Nick, too young to vote, but there was no way I could sully his young mind with a vice like weed. I had standards, after all. The only person left was Monica.

“Why would I vote for that?” she said, a tinge of skepticism in her voice.

I sighed. I had an idea where this was going. “Look, the point is not to have a statewide pot-fueled bacchanal upon the passing of this proposition. You know how many people smoke weed already. The idea is to make it legal, tax it, and make some money off of it.”
“You know that pot broke up my last relationship,” she said. Bingo, there it was. I could not believe that she was still toeing this line. Her selfishness and his youth broke up their relationship, not his occasional pot smoking.

“C’mon, Monica.”

“I hate the smell of it. Hate it.”

“No one’s asking you to smoke it. They’re asking you to tax it.”

“Fine, whatever. I’ll vote for it.”

I could not help but take offense at these barbs that she threw about people who smoked marijuana. On the face, she was not attacking me personally, but at some level I could not shake the feeling that in some small way, she was. I knew she made assumptions about me, that perhaps she thought I was stoned out of my gourd most days, when in reality I could stretch out an eighth of an ounce of weed over the course of a year. Besides, did any of this really matter when I paid my bills on time, drove only while sober, had a successful career working at UC Berkeley, and managed my finances so well that my only debt was my student loans? Monica, like so many people in the world, assumed that getting high meant being the traditional stoner, a person whose appetite for marijuana overwhelmed their desire and ability to function as a responsible adult. People like me are a threat to this tired D.A.R.E program rhetoric.

Marc started calling me a weed evangelist, though we both knew it was based more on my moral outrage to the stigma of marijuana than any heavy use on my part. Still, I had a deep appreciation for cannabis, especially for what I felt were its many healing properties in my life. My best friend smoked me out the day my father had a
major surgery, on 4/20 of all days, her only means of drying up my tears after learning that Dad might have cancer. I have smoked to soothe headaches and back pain, to enhance the taste of food, to intensify the experience of sex, and like so many folks, to just chill the fuck out. But most of all, I did not see what the point or purpose was of rendering marijuana illegal. Who the hell was it hurting anyway?

Election day rolled around, and the results were clear almost immediately. Proposition 19, despite everyone’s best efforts, hopes and dreams, did not pass. Marijuana remained illegal.

Our only options were to continue purchasing from friends of friends of friends, or to move forward with the plan that was still on hold: getting medical marijuana cards.

*  

Marc is already thumbing through the L.A. Weekly when I wake up the day after my birthday.

“Fuck. My back,” I say, squinting against the light. I lie on my stomach and stretch in place on his twin bed.

Marc and I met up with friends for my birthday dinner last night, but we have saved the medical card adventure for today, Saturday. He has no work, and I plan to spend the weekend with him in Los Angeles before returning to Riverside for class on Monday. To end the day, we have dinner plans with my parents and siblings downtown at Philippe’s.

He looks up from scanning the classifieds at his desk. “You need a doctor,” he says, grinning.
I open one eye and hug a lumpy pillow. “Yeah I do. You find one?”

“A lot. Trying to find the best deal.”

I slowly reanimate and sit on the edge of the bed to peer over Marc’s shoulder at the paper. Mingling among scantily clad women hawking their escort services are ads for medical marijuana evaluations. There aren’t just a few of these weed ads—dozens of them litter the spread, one after another after another, most of them featuring some shade of the color green. Suddenly, this all seems too easy. I’ve spent weeks rehearsing a list of ailments in my head—back pain, insomnia, stress, even menstrual cramps if I really have to throw it in there. It is true that most of these plague me, the back pain being particularly acute in recent months and the meds that treat it not to my liking, but nothing to the point of being completely incapacitating. That’s what the medical card is for, right? For people who have run out of options, people for whom Advil and Motrin and Xanax just can’t cut it anymore, or that make them sick or otherwise incapacitate them further. Or am I one of these people? This is all too easy.

Marc flips back and forth between pages and settles on one of them. “This one,” he says, pointing at the middle of the page. “This is the best deal. Second person, half off. Cards included.” He folds the paper and passes it to me. A beautiful raven-haired woman in a white lab coat smiles up at me. Hanging above her head is the joyful proclamation, “20 Minute Evaluations.”

“They get right to the point, don’t they?” I say.

Marc chuckles. “At least we know it’ll be quick.”

“Jesus, it’s in the Valley. Should we get porn with our weed?”
“It is your birthday weekend.”

I am only too eager to leave the house, to get the show on the road, to throw down our money, to walk away with our hard-fought ticket to a new life. I will never again need to sniff out the local dealers when my stash runs out and wonder if their dubious goods will be worth whatever I pay. Of course, this would all change if I left California, but why on earth would I do that? Our economy has imploded, but we’re still the best fucking state in this country.

“My pothead girlfriend,” Marc says with a gleam in his eye. We’re flying down the 134 Freeway to Reseda, and I smile at him as I drive. I know he is joking. A heavy week of smoking for me is two small bowls many days apart, which in our world hardly qualifies as official stonerdom. Sometimes I think that living in Berkeley desensitized me to this whole marijuana thing, like the time I saw a cop who stood by watching while some hippie dude lit up in front of him. The cop didn’t do anything, didn’t say anything, just stood there. Maybe it’s the rest of the world outside the Bay Area that’s off their rocker.

We exit at Reseda Boulevard and Marc keeps an eye out for the place. Boy, are we ever in the Valley. The wide streets, the apartment buildings with courtyards and pools, liquor stores and check cashing places that anchor the many strip malls. The medical marijuana doctor is so natural an addition to this landscape that one wonders how it went so long without.

“You kidding me?” I say when we pull up to the curb to park. “It’s actually called 20 Minute Evaluations.” It’s a small boxy stucco building tucked between a crusty
apartment complex and an empty lot overgrown with weeds. There is no door facing the street; a sandwich board identical to the ad in the L.A. Weekly points patients to the rear entrance of the building.

“Good thing we have a coupon,” Marc says, gesturing his head toward the sign. “It’s gonna cost us about half that.”

“Hells yes,” I say, holding up my hand for a high-five/fist bump combo. “This is awesome.” Marc folds up the classified pages of the L.A. Weekly and tucks it into a manila envelope. “Remember, what are your ailments?” I quiz him.

“Um, insomnia, back pain, stress.”

“Good job,” I say.

Marc and I walk around the building to the rear entrance. Two twentysomething bro-dudes sit on the ground outside the door, filling out forms on green plastic clipboards. One of them looks at us nervously, the same ashamed look one might give a co-worker or a neighbor when spotted in a strip club. He feels he’s been caught; he obviously has not considered that we are there for the same reason he is.

Inside is a waiting room like any normal doctor’s office. People wait in chairs huddled around a coffee table that is littered with magazines. But this being the weed doctor, normal is not a word befitting of the situation, and it’s in the details where it all goes a little screwy.

We step up to the window, where a young blond guy sits behind the counter. He looks like every stoner manchild of every Judd Apatow film ever made, but this dude wears a white lab coat. The woman working with him also wears a lab coat, a transparent
attempt to lend something of a respectable air to the somewhat shady operation. I have almost bought into this fantasy when Marc nudges me to get my attention. He gets close and speaks into my ear.

“That’s the girl in the ad,” he says, an amused grin wide across his face. I flash a quick look at her and open my eyes to the size of dinner plates when I turn back to Marc. He is right.

The woman steps out from behind the counter with a few green plastic clipboards and calls the names on them. She is tall and thin, but not sickly, with long legs bookended by a short skirt and high heels. Her lab coat extends beyond her skirt, and from behind one might believe—or fantasize—that she wears nothing underneath. With her straight, shiny black hair and smooth, blemish-free skin, I can only assume that she is not one day over 22. It is clear that she is as vital a part of the success of this office as the doctor himself.

“Can I help you?” The dude behind the counter says.

“Oh,” I say, remembering that I am here as a patient, not simply a gawker. “We’re here to see the doctor.” The dude asks for our I.D.s, hands each of us a green clipboard, and tells us to fill out the forms. Marc hands him the coupon from the L.A. Weekly.

The dude looks at it and looks at us. “Lucky you, today’s the last day of this promotion,” he says. Marc lives for discounts. He looks at me and grins.

The two of us squeeze into a narrow space on the squat brown pleather sofa next to a pudgy middle-aged woman clutching her purse. She’s whispering to her friend on the chair next to the sofa, the two of them glaring a quick up-down at each person who walks
through the door. Perhaps they are trying figure us out, hoping to ascertain whether we are respectable types with steady jobs and mortgages, or degenerate slackers looking to score the next hit. Or perhaps they are just as amused by this place as Marc and I are, seeing us as the newest additions to the freakshow. They want to judge us, but it is a futile task; they are sitting in this office, too, waiting their turn like everyone else.

I start filling out the sheet on my clipboard, which reads like a standard medical intake form—name, birthdate, gender, profession, history of illness—but I quickly get distracted. My eyes are wide open. The lime green walls remind me of a sweater I owned in high school, and a black collage photo frame that hangs directly across the room from me displays the sample photos that came with it. There is a distinct lack of eye contact in this place. No one wants to admit they are here in this room, waiting for a doctor to give them a prescription for cannabis, even though we are all witnesses to each other’s presence. When I notice Old Respectable White Guy seated in the corner nearest the hallway to the doctor’s office, wearing a ball cap down to his brow, I start to start to think that I am in a room full of hypocrites, the lot of them. He has been focused on his clipboard an uncomfortably long time, since before we arrived. He’s telling himself that he is not like us, that he has real medical reasons for being here. They are abusing the system, not me, he thinks. Everyone is telling themselves this. The middle aged black woman next to him, the woman clutching her purse next to me, the guy with the Ed Hardy shirt who walks in and speaks Russian to the dude behind the counter—all of them.
I want to drink this place in, remember it for the rest of my life. I suspect, I am convinced, I hope that at some point in the future, it won’t exist. Not just this doctor’s office, but the whole industry, “Medical marijuana.” We’ll look back on this time when pot was legal only for those with “legitimate” health issues as antiquated, old fashioned, terribly silly, and completely ridiculous.

I’ve returned to filling out my form when the dark haired woman from the ad steps in front of the photo collage and calls a name. The woman next to me raises her hand, her other hand still clutching her purse. “The doctor will see you now,” she says, a vaguely Slavic accent tingeing her speech. I start to wonder if this is some kind of Russian mob outfit, the kind that could be raided by the D.E.A. at any moment, but I realize that I am slipping into hypocrite territory like these folks around me and quickly put these thoughts aside before I get too carried away with fear.

I gesture to Marc to let me see his form. He furrows his brow, not too eager to give it up. He likes his privacy, and I guess I don’t blame him. But I point to my form, to the section listing my illnesses and disorders that require medical attention. Instead of blank lines or a blank box are simple checkboxes with the ailment listed next to it—insomnia, back pain, menstrual cramps, stress, anxiety, glaucoma, cancer, among others—and I can’t help but recall my earlier proclamation that this was all way too fucking easy. This as a game, a farce of a process. I find it hard to take it seriously. “They’re doing all the heavy lifting for us,” I whisper in Marc’s ear. He nods with a tight-lipped smile.
We return our clipboards to the woman in the lab coat and wait our turns. Marc shuffles through the magazines on the table, settling on a thick tabloid sized publication called *JEMM*. I pull the latest issue of *The Believer* out of my purse and turn to Nick Hornby’s column. I don’t notice the young woman who checks in at the counter, but I overhear the woman near me speak to her. “You been here before?” she asks quietly.

I glance at the newcomer from the corner of my eye and realize she could only answer in the affirmative. Her hair is a stringy, dishwater blonde, her teeth decaying, her sweatpants threadbare and stained. She cannot be a day over twenty-five, yet her face is etched with all evidence of a recovering meth addict. “Oh yeah,” she says to the woman. “I mean, I haven’t had a card in about a year, but it’s real easy. Fill out your form, talk to the doctor, get your card.”

Marc taps my arm. He holds open *JEMM* in his hands. “Look,” he points. “Coupons!” He flips through the pages, most of them featuring ads for medical marijuana dispensaries with coupons luring readers to bring their prescriptions to them with the promise of freebies and two-for-one type deals. Again, my eyes grow wide, and Marc smiles at me, giddy. The ads and their discounts speak to him.

“Marc,” the dark-haired woman suddenly calls, a green clipboard in hand. Marc raises his hand, and she directs him to the consultation room. I grab a piece of hard candy, remove its Russian wrapper, and pop it in my mouth as I wait. My turn is coming. Ten minutes later, Marc reemerges and steps up to a counter off to the side to speak to the dude in the lab coat. The woman calls my name and leads me to the consultation room.
She hands my clipboard to Dr. Goldstein. He greets me from behind his desk, his chest hair peeking out from under his white coat, his balding head reflecting the harsh fluorescent light. It feels as though we are vacuum-sealed in this windowless room, so far is it from the world outside. “Please, have a seat,” he says.

The walls are cream-colored and bare, the furniture limited to only the doctor’s desk, his chair, my chair, and an examination table with a few manila folders scattered lazily across it. Only my intake form and a blood pressure cuff festoon his desktop. This entire office—the waiting room and reception area included—could be cleared out and moved in half a day. I assume this is by design.

Dr. Goldstein starts reading through my form. “A graduate student,” he says. “You must be stressed out.”

“Very,” I say. My heart is pounding. I realize that I have not already ticked off the “Stress” checkbox as the doctor does it for me.

“When do you graduate?”

“Next year.”

“Worried about finding a job?” He flips over the page and holds his pen poised to write over a blank box marked as “Staff use only.” He waits for my answer.

“Uh, yes, I am.”

He writes in the box, and flips the form over to look at the checkboxes. “Back pain? Insomnia? Have you taken medications for these?” Before I can answer, he says, “Yes, you have, but it interferes with your studying.” He scribbles on another line. He
takes my blood pressure, which he says is a little higher than normal, and I tell him this has happened before when I was nervous. “I’m not too worried,” he says.

The doctor starts explaining the potential side effects of my new prescription. “It may cause drowsiness, so you might not want to drive. It may also cause an increased appetite,” he says with all sincerity, and I try not to laugh. *Otherwise known as the Munchies*, I think to myself. It has been barely more than five minutes since I entered this room.

Dr. Goldstein wishes me luck with my new medicine, and leads me to the door. The dude at the counter takes my photo, prints my ID card, and hands me back my driver’s license. The dark-haired woman hands me a manila envelope with shiny star stickers sprinkled on it. “I put these on girls’ envelopes,” she says, smiling brightly, proudly.

“What’s in the envelope?” I say.

“Your certificate,” the dude interrupts. “You take this, your card, and your I.D. to the dispensaries.” The woman is still smiling at me.

I step out into the waiting room, and Marc gets up from the couch, clutching his own manila envelope and a rolled up copy of *JEMM*. Armed with our new cards, we step out into the light of day and continue our adventure in the wild underworld of marijuana dispensaries.

*
“That’s it!” Marc says, pointing across the street. I slow the car down, pull into the turning lane, and make a U-turn in the middle of the block. I park on the street, and we both grab our certificates before getting out of the car to enter our first dispensary.

“Coupon?” I say. Marc holds up a page torn from *JEMM*. He spent the entire twenty-minute drive from the doctor’s office scouring the ads for dispensaries, hoping to find a good deal, and he settled on this one that offered an eighth of Afghan Kush with the purchase of any other eighth, which to us neophytes sounds pretty fancy. It took him a while to settle on this one, with other dispensaries offering free joints or an eighth of shake, the trimmings often used to make baked goods and other edibles. One place even offered a vaporizer, for a smokeless high, with the purchase of an ounce. But the good feeling didn’t last too long, with Marc’s excitement simmering into disgust when he came across the ad for a dispensary on Hollywood Boulevard. It featured Snoop Dawg as the spokesperson. “Jesus Christ,” Marc said. “I don’t know about this medical marijuana thing. It’s so commercialized.”

“Dude, you love Snoop Dawg.”

“But he’s hawking merchandise.”

“Did you think all these people are involved in the industry out of the goodness of their hearts? C’mon, I’d be shocked if Snoop weren’t plugging someone’s weed,” I said as we cruised along the 101.

But I guess he had a point. The ads offer goodies with a minimum “donation,” a word that we have quickly surmised is a legal euphemism for “purchase,” which to law enforcement probably sounded too close to being an illegal drug deal for purposes other
than medicine. Yet this is exactly what it is. No wonder the City of Los Angeles is so intent on shutting down dispensaries. When they are so brazen as to feature Snoop Dawg in their ads, who are they kidding anyway?

Marc and I step up to the building armed with our cards, certificates, and the prized coupon. The dispensary is housed in an imposing structure in North Hollywood, painted white, tucked behind a wrought iron gate with barbed wire curled along the top, the kind of place that might double as a brothel or sweatshop or gambling den. Someone buzzes us in before I even press the button, and we pass below a security camera when we enter.

We find ourselves in another waiting room. But this one is empty, the walls stark white, the chairs and coffee table appearing to be mere decorations rather than serving any real function to visitors. We step up to the counter and Marc speaks to the guy on the other side of the bulletproof glass. “Hi, we are, uh, new patients,” he says.

The guy asks for our prescriptions and I.D.s. This is the part I worry about. Marc has an Arizona I.D. from the few years that he lived in Phoenix, and since it expires in 2047 when he is sixty-five years old, he sees no need to get a California license that must be renewed—and paid for—every five years. The dude at the doctor’s office explained to him that he might have trouble at the dispensaries if he cannot prove he is a California resident, as only California residents are allowed medical marijuana cards in this state. But Marc came prepared, and after reading online about the ins and outs of Prop 215, the 1996 voter initiative that approved marijuana for medical use, he knew that a copy of his apartment lease should do the trick.
“Do you have California I.D.?” he says to Marc.

“No, but I have my lease.”

“Sorry, man. You have to be a California resident. I can’t take this.”

Marc gets flustered, his tongue tying in frustration. I realize that I am terrified to go into further into the dispensary by myself, and I speak up. “But he has a lease. He can prove he is a resident. He just doesn’t have a California I.D. yet.”

The guy, who looks like someone who might be found playing beer pong at a house party, grows testy. “This is serious business! We are not messing around here. We cannot allow a non-resident in here. I’m sorry, but he cannot go in.” Marc takes back his documents quietly, gently. I grab mine off the counter and turn quickly on my heel to the door, my annoyance simmering under the surface. As we return to the car, I cannot decide who I’m more upset at—the dispensary guy for not letting Marc in, or Marc for refusing to get a California I.D.

I slam the car door, and I can feel Marc looking at me as I stare out at the street ahead.

“What do we do now?” he says.

“Fuck, Marc.”

“What?”

“Are you convinced yet that you need a California I.D.?”

“You’re blaming me for this?” he says, sinking back into the passenger seat.

“I don’t want to go in there by myself. You see how sketchy that place is.” Marc remains silent. It feels silly, to be afraid of this place, especially considering that I have
given thought to working in the industry. I was not too long ago that I gave serious consideration to interning at Oaksterdam University, an educational institution in downtown Oakland that offers training in the cannabis industry, an opportunity that would have allowed me to take classes in horticulture, legal issues, and management at no cost. Now that I am faced with the very real prospect of walking into my very first dispensary alone, it has become all too clear to me that medical marijuana is a dangerous and, yes, sometimes sketchy business.

We sit in silence for a minute, and I realize that going it alone is the only real option at this point. Marc’s I.D. is not going to magically transform itself, and there is no guarantee that the next dispensary we hit up won’t give him the same run-around about his residency. Suck it up, Drea. This is now a one-woman job. “Fine,” I say. “I’ll do it.”

The guy buzzes me in again. I show my documents, and he tells me I’m set to go. He buzzes me in through two more doors, and I find myself alone in another white room with a glass counter along the back. It reminds me of the prize counter at Chuck E. Cheese or an arcade where kids redeem tickets won at Skee Ball for cheap plastic toys that break on the drive home. Instead of toys are three long rows of jars, each one filled with a different type of bud, all of them cannabis. It is hard to believe that this is real and that though it is legal in California, the Drug Enforcement Administration, a Federal agency, could legally bust this place at any time. The disconnect between state law and federal law is sometimes too incredible to believe.

A man in a hoodie, possibly the other guy’s brother, stands behind the counter. “Can I help you?” he says.
“Yes.” I stand tall, try to exude confidence and act like I know what I want, but there is no way to do that convincingly when I say, “This is my first time at a dispensary.”

“Really?” he says, a look of surprise on his face, a tone in his voice as though he is shocked by this revelation. Really? I think. You mean to tell me no one has walked in here and admitted it was their first time?

“Yeah.” For a moment, I worry that he might rip me off, but I look at the dry erase board on the wall next to the counter and see the prices listed for the two dozen or so strains in stock. Strawberry Kush, Skywalker, Jack Herer, Herojuana, Yum Yum Purple. Each strain is named and branded like a car in a showroom. I notice the enormous magnifying class hanging above the counter, and realize I might be in over my head. I have no idea how much I do not know.

“Can you explain to me the different strains?” I ask. “Like, what is the difference between indica, sativa, and hybrid?” I know that only a complete noob could ask this question, that it probably pains the budtender to hear it, but I have never been in a position to be picky about my weed purchase. I usually just take what I can get. Now that I have options, I’m not quite sure what to do with them.

He explains that indica gives more of a body high and sativa is more of a mental high. Hybrids are a blend of the two and vary from strain to strain. I nod, mulling this over in my head. I tell him that there are times when I would like to take my medicine while working on schoolwork, which means that being knocked out of commission is not too desirable. I ask him about the sativas that would fit my needs; he removes two jars
from the display case and places them on the glass countertop. I take a whiff of each of them like I would a glass of wine, not really sure if this means anything but pretending like it does, and I point at one of the jars. “I’ll take an eighth of Jack Herer,” I tell him.

He grabs a medicine bottle with a childproof cap, the kind that pharmacies use for pills, and places it on the counter. It is labeled and filled with green buds. I show him the coupon for Afghan Kush and ask for an eighth of shake. The budtender grabs a bottle of each, and puts all three in a classic Rx paper bag, stapling it at the top for added security. I hand over the money and turn to leave, but stop immediately before I reach the door.

I notice a refrigerator near the counter. I realize that I passed it up without so much as a glance when I first walked in, and I feel only too lucky that I have now discovered it. Stacked on each shelf of the fridge are various baked goods. Brownies, lemon bars, cookies, slices of pie—just about anything someone with a sweet tooth could want, all of them laced with a heaping good deal of cannabis butter. No experience with a magic baked good has yet been as good as my first, when I shared a brownie with friends purchased from a blond plaited hipster girl in Golden Gate Park, yet I am already sold. “How much are these?” I ask.

“Five bucks each.”

My hand reaches in and grabs a lemon bar. I don’t even think about it. “I’ll take this.”
Marc and I return to his house and lock ourselves in his room, careful to not raise the suspicion of the landlord and his family. “I’m hungry,” I say. I rummage around in the bag that I’ve brought in from the car, looking for something to munch on.

“We’re going to eat soon,” he says.

I crinkle my nose as he steps into the bathroom. So far, my only options are a squished pan dulce from the Super A Market this morning, or the pristine, untouched lemon bar in a clear plastic box. Mmm, lemon bar. It looks so delicious, I think to myself. Maybe a little, just a little. I want to celebrate our new cards, and a nibble seems appropriate. And how can I resist a lemon bar?

My body goes on autopilot and all reason flies out the window. I eat one third of the pastry. It is delicious, its flavor rich with weed. By taste alone, I can tell that the pot density is far more than what was in the cake that I had at Oakland Art Murmur last summer, or in the popcorn “Buddha” balls that the transman with a beard was selling at the Dyke March in San Francisco last year, or even what was in that first brownie from the Swiss Miss in Golden Gate Park two years ago.

Marc walks in and sees bite marks in the dessert and crumbs on my lips. “Oh my god, what did you do?”

“Sorry, I’m bad,” I say, a mischievous smile on my face. Marc must be disappointed that I did not wait for him. “I got a little ahead of myself. The lemon bar was calling me!” The lemon bar vibrates in my chest, so potent is its medicine. I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt that I will not be waiting hours for this to kick in.
Marc is still staring at me slack jawed, his hands hovering, about to pull out his mess of curly hair. As he mumbles, “I can’t believe you just did that,” I pull my phone out of my jeans pocket to check the time. I immediately find a text message from my sister Cynthia.

“We’re almost in downtown.”

“Oh my god,” I say to Marc. “Oh my fucking god, they are almost here.” I was not expecting them until hours later. My parents are perennially late to every event, and this, of all days, is the one time they arrive early.

“Yeah, I was going to say—“

“Fuckfuckfuckfuck. What the fuck was I thinking?”

“Baby, you were asking for a world of hurt with that.”

“I CANNOT BE HIGH AROUND MY DAD.” My heart is racing. If Dr. Goldstein were to take my blood pressure right now, he would have plenty of cause to worry. “I need to throw this up. I’ll throw this up. I need to throw this up.” I stand in the middle of the room, panicked beyond comprehension. This is the moment that I have been carefully avoiding and preventing for years, the moment where what I think of as my grittier, realer self crosses paths with my parents’ vision of an upstanding, “with-it” oldest daughter, a vision that I keep packed away like a Halloween costume. What will Dad think of me? Will he disappointed? I almost cannot bear to think of it, yet it is all that is on my mind.

My feet remain grafted to the floor and I find myself unable to make a decision. I keep saying that I’m going to throw it up, I’m going to throw it up, I’ll throw it up. Marc
stands in front of me, brings my hands to his chest, and says, “Baby, calm down.” I look him in the eyes. “Don’t throw it up. It’s probably too late for that to make a difference anyway,” he says.

I pull my hands to my face and cup my cheeks. “Fuck, what am I going to do?” I can still feel it vibrating in my belly. The THC is coursing through my body already, laying in wait, planning its sneak attack upon me. I know it is there. I know it will be intense. I know that I will be powerless to fight it.

“I think you’re just going to have to deal with it,” he says, smiling sympathetically. Inexplicably, I want to get upset at him, but I know that he is right. What on earth was I thinking anyway? This is not a joint, where I can take a quick puff and know that I will have a mild buzz for X amount of time. Edibles are unpredictable; medical grade, even more so. Some have more weed content than others, and it can take the high hours to take effect. Whether my family was on their way to dinner now or two hours from now made no difference. In two hours, I will be peaking. Right now, I am just waiting for the launch.

Marc convinces me not to throw up the lemon bar. I grasp his hands somewhere between his palms and his wrists, and lock my eyes with his. “You have to help me through it.”

He gives me the kind of smile like he feels sorry for me, and pulls me close into a bear hug. “You’ll be fine, sweet,” he says. “You’re the least high person when you’re high anyway.” We each grab sweatshirts and I grab my bag, and we head off to Philippe’s. As we drive down Arroyo Seco Parkway, Marc at the wheel and me
crouching, waiting in the passenger seat, I am vigilant about every sensation I feel. The
vibration in my belly, now more of a pulse, is radiating from my core, as though a nuclear
reactor is on the verge of meltdown inside of me. “Fuck. This cannot be happening,” I
moan.

We drive through Lincoln Heights, where Dad grew up, and I wonder if he ever
smoked weed in his youth. Surely, it was an expellable offense when he was a student in
the mid-1960s at Loyola, an all-boys Jesuit high school in what is now known as
Koreatown, but what about the years when he bounced around from college to college?
From UCLA to Cal State L.A. to East L.A. College in the late ’60s and early ’70s, I
cannot imagine that he did not puff-puff-pass with his Chicano movement friends. And
even if he did not, how can he not remember what a person who is high looks like? I am
convinced that he will find me out immediately.

Meanwhile, Cynthia keeps sending me text messages. “Nick has headache.
Stopped in East LA for drugstore.” My anxiety is the only high I feel so far, and I realize
that the more time that passes before I see my family, the more chance there is that I will
be smack dab in the middle of an epic high, more than I have ever felt in my life. Still,
Marc and I have no option but to waste time until their arrival.

We park at Philippe’s and head a couple of blocks away to Broadway to stroll
through Chinatown while we wait. I grab hold of Marc’s arm and he flashes me a
sympathetic look, though one that barely hides his lack of envy for my plight. The many
shops are a welcome distraction and I stop at almost every one of them, trying to
convince myself that I’m going to be okay while I inspect money trees, tea sets, and two-
dollar umbrellas. Marc keeps quiet, watching me closely while I rummage through shelves and bins. He is helpless to do anything.

I am looking at a wall of key chains of red cord and jade when it hits. My body constricts itself, my field of vision suddenly turning into a widescreen film in a movie theater. I cannot see above, below, far right, far left. My head has turned in upon itself, my body now floating one inch above the ground.

I stand still. “Oh my god,” I say to the ether. “Here it is. This is so intense.” An arm slides around my waist and leads me out of the store.

Cars whoosh, whoosh, whoosh along Broadway, and I am certain that I will be swept up with them. The arm on my waist connects to a body, and now Marc stands in front of me holding my shoulders. Words fall from my mouth. “This is so intense.” Arms envelop me, mich umarmen, abrazarme, m’embracer. My hip vibrates. Words on a telephone read, “Getting off the freeway.” And now I am in the street. And now I am on the sidewalk. And now I see roasted ducks hanging in a window. I float along, one inch above the ground, and when the neon rises up and screams “Philippe’s French Dip,” I know we have arrived.

A white Chevy van pulls into the lot across the street and for a moment I think I might call and say I am ill. This medicine is making me ill. Medicine, ill. Ill medicine. The illest. A tiny voice rises out of me as I stand on the sidewalk, watching the van unload. “I can’t do this,” it says. And the arms squeeze me again, and this time I turn my head and I smile, soothed to see Marc looking back at me. He speaks. “I’ll help you. Don’t worry.”
Four robust figures in the distance grow ever bigger. Dad. Mom. Cynthia. Nick. They are in the parking lot. They are in the street. They are in front of me, throwing their arms around my pulsating body and saying, “Happy birthday.” My birthday? Yes, it was my birthday. I am 29. Dad kisses me on the cheek. I do not look him in the eye.

We step inside the building. The din crashes down around me, and for a moment I think it might knock me down the stairs. There are lines, queues, colas, people waiting to order their food. We stand at the end of one.

I offer to find a table. Somewhere in this labyrinth, there must be one suited for our purposes. For eating, for sitting still, for the large metal claw to drop in that keeps plucking me from moment to moment. Dad comes along. Dad comes along? No, no, you cannot see me this way. If you don’t know, you will soon know. But okay, he cannot stand for long and he tires quickly and how can I ever get around to suggesting that he try some of this medicine to treat his aches and pains? You are a cancer survivor, Dad. You will pass your twenty-minute evaluation with flying colors. No, you cannot see me this way.

I am glued to Marc. Without him, this whole operation will fail. The only available table we find is in the rear-most dining room, and I chain myself to the bench. “Do not leave me,” I say, and I mentally cuff my arm to his. Dad goes to the bathroom. Nick sits down. “Nick, get us some water,” I say. My little brother cannot see me this way.

There are photos on the walls. One wall of trains. One wall of circus photos. I watch the elephants as the giant claw comes down and keeps moving me from one

Dad returns. I go to the bathroom. He cannot see me this way. I pee. I look at myself in the mirror. I look normal (normal?). Except for my eyes. Red, puffy, glassy. Don’t look in their eyes. Your eyes give it all away.

The food has arrived. Boxes of French dip sandwiches. Fries. There is a massive piece of chocolate cake, the size of my head. Happy birthday, happy birthday. Words tumble from my mouth. What am I saying? Am I coherent? I am. I am. Do not look in their eyes. They cannot see me this way.

At some point Marc squeezes my knee. At some point he rubs my back. At some point he gives me a knowing look. The giant claw keeps plucking at me. I do not know what is going on, yet somehow I have yet to give up the game.

The food is gone. Everyone has eaten. I am full. No, I cannot finish the cake. You have it. And everyone starts gathering their things. And I pick up my bag from the floor. It is covered in sawdust. Oh yes, we are at Philippe’s.

We walk them to their car. Hug Nick. Hug Cynthia. Hug Mom. Hug Dad. Do not look in his eyes. He cannot see me this way.

Wave goodbye. The van pulls out of the driveway and the arm around my waist leads me back to our car. “Holy fucking shit,” I say. “That was the most intense hour of my life.”

*
I wake up to darkness. The alarm clock reads 5 a.m. It has been thirteen hours since I ate the lemon bar, and I finally feel normal again. Tired, yes. High, no. Marc sleeps soundly next to me, teetering on the edge of his twin bed.

I roll onto my back and stare at the ceiling. I can feel the weed hangover already, sleepy and restless at the same time, a strange oxymoron I’ve never understood. The guy behind the bulletproof glass at the dispensary was right. This is serious business. This lemon bar was playtime for me, but what if I were seriously ill? What if I needed to be knocked the fuck out, laid out on my back, a vibrating core of THC pulsating from my chest just to live through the day? I’m playing with fire.

I close my eyes. Respect the medicine, I remind myself. Always respect the medicine.
Two weeks after I lose my father, my boyfriend loses his job.

This is a pretty crappy way to start my last year of grad school (yes, an understatement). It has been just about a year since Marc and I moved from Berkeley to Riverside and now everything is falling apart. There were things I anticipated during these two years—I made sure I had enough in savings in case my car finally bit the dust, which it did quite spectacularly a few days before Christmas—but I wasn’t expecting this. I’m a planner, the kind of person who keeps two extra bottles of shampoo on hand at all times, or small tubes of sunscreen in the purses I use often, or a tool kit in the trunk of my car. When I left my fulltime job for grad school, I left with a clear plan for how I would make my way back to a regular paycheck.

So of course I worry about what we are going to do. In these few months since my father had the surgery that would eventually kill him, I’ve done absolutely no work on my thesis, a scary realization considering it is due in June. And Marc is pretty comfy in the knowledge that he has thirty-seven weeks of unemployment ahead of him. “I’m gonna suck off the government teat!” he says, mimicking a child suckling a breast.

It’s not so much that I’m worried how we’ll make ends meet. My teaching stipend and his unemployment will more than cover our bills, and though his money is scheduled to run out in spring, he isn’t a big spender and we know we’ll make it until summer. But I worry about what Marc will do doing the day, and how much whatever he does is going to interrupt me and my desperate nine-month rush to Get Shit Done. I know he isn’t eager
to find another job. He was more relieved than anything when the principal of his charter school called to tell him that he wasn’t invited back to teach for the new year. And Marc often looks to me for ideas of what to do with himself. I wince every time he bounces around my desk as I work, when the evenings come near, saying, “What do we do now? What do we do now?” I anticipate that ahead of me lays a year of Marc playing his off-tune ukulele in his boxers while I try to write a book.

But then Occupy happens.

*

*Occupy Wall Street is a leaderless resistance movement with people of many colors, genders and political persuasions. The one thing we all have in common is that We Are The 99% that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1%. We are using the revolutionary Arab Spring tactic to achieve our ends and encourage the use of nonviolence to maximize the safety of all participants.*

The #ows movement empowers real people to create real change from the bottom up. We want to see a general assembly in every backyard, on every street corner because we don’t need Wall Street and we don’t need politicians to build a better society.

- occupywallst.org

*

Marc has already bought plane tickets to visit friends in New York City when the first sleeping bags hit the ground at Zuccotti Park on September 17, 2011. At first, it appears to be yet another symbolic protest that only Democracy Now!, Indymedia, and other independent news outlets are covering. The most hardcore of activists, those who do it fulltime, are among the first wave of folks who set up camp in this park near Wall Street. Within a week, Occupy Wall Street, as it comes to be called, starts seeping into the mainstream media. Most major networks and newspapers draw comparisons between
OWS and the Tea Party movement of the previous few years, another seemingly grassroots protest movement on the other end of the political spectrum that many believe was actually funded by the billionaire Koch Brothers who sought to make the economy even more amenable to the richest among us. But those of us who are sympathetic to OWS balk at this comparison. The entire point is that this movement is owned and operated by no one. Everyone is a leader.

By the time Marc arrives in New York on October 2, the whole of Zuccotti Park, now known as Liberty Plaza, is chock full of all matter of folk. College students, college dropouts, high school dropouts, former professors, the unemployed, the underemployed, the undocumented, men, women, people of color, the disabled, queer folk, and yes, even those people who have already long been living on the streets of Manhattan, folks whose only home address is that of the stoop where they sleep on any given night. But in addition to the traditional homeless folks, the ones whose eyes the rest of us try so hard to avoid when walking down the street, so many of them living with addictions and mental illnesses, there are still more folks without homes, the ones who’ve lost jobs and depleted their savings, the ones who never expected to be living out of a suitcase, the ones from whom the American dream was all but snatched.

“This guy I met,” Marc says to me on the phone one day, “has been living on friends’ couches since he lost his job a few months ago.” I can hear the exhaustion in his voice as he speaks slowly and deliberately against the hum of Lower Manhattan. He has just spent his first night in a borrowed sleeping bag at Liberty Plaza. The guy Marc met is young and educated like himself. “So when Occupy started, he just packed up his shit and
came downtown. This is where he lives now.” That day, Marc volunteers to cook that
evening’s dinner, a free meal offered to all comers to the OWS outdoor kitchen, and
tarries off to a Brooklyn apartment with a handful of other twentysomething men.

A week later, not long before Marc returns from New York, the first
announcement for Occupy Riverside hits Facebook. We figured that Occupy Los
Angeles, by now two weeks old on the lawns of L.A.’s City Hall, would be our closest
Occupy site, but the possibility of this new movement finding a home within our own
community is almost too good to believe. I am excited, but skeptical. Finally, here was a
way for us to get to know the people of Riverside who live and work beyond the campus
bubble. And yet I wonder how many people will show up to the first General Assembly,
or G.A. as most folks refer to it, if it is only a passing curiosity or if we have the energy
and will power to sustain it.

The evening after Marc returns from New York, we head to downtown Riverside
for the first Occupy Riverside G.A. We see a few people we know—an alum from my
department, a grad student from another department—but the majority of them are people
we’ve never seen, people young and old, from near and far. In total, there are easily one
hundred people there. “Jesus,” I say to Marc.

“Did you ever think you’d see this many people in Riverside gathered for
something other than, well something… actually, anything?” he says.

* 

Marc facilitates his first G.A. a few days before Halloween. The Occupy
Riverside encampment, by now heading into its third week, has taken up residence on a
pedestrian mall in downtown Riverside, within spitting distance of City Hall. Around thirty occupiers camp in tents each night. On weekends, this number nearly doubles. But outside of normal sleeping hours, Occupy Riverside is a thriving community unto itself.

There is a First Aid table, a Media table where members of the media committee works on laptops, a Sign Making table covered in art supplies, another table and numerous cardboard boxes full of books for the People’s Library, and of course, something that occupiers take much pride in, the People’s Kitchen. A few tables covered with an easy-up shade, the People’s Kitchen, much like the kitchen at Occupy Wall Street, provides free meals to anyone who wants them.

I arrive early at the Occupy Riverside site, just in time to catch the tail end of the facilitation committee meeting. In addition to Marc, there are three other people in attendance tonight. Nathan, a tall black dude with a mustache like everyone’s dad sported in the eighties, wears a white sweater with a huge, spaghetti red stain smack dab in middle of it. “This is embarrassing,” he says with a laugh when Marc introduces me. “Of all the days.” The other two people say “Hi” but I still don’t know their names: a twentysomething brunette in a red bustier, satin panties, thigh-high fishnets and a leopard print coat, and a dorky middle-aged man with a mustache and a baseball cap who can’t seem to shut up.

Tonight is the first night of Ghost Walk, a popular Halloween event that brings thousands of people to Downtown Riverside every October. “I really think we should meet over here by City Hall because of Ghost Walk,” Dorky Guy says.
Nathan has grown weary. He only placates the guy, telling him that the committee could propose it to the G.A. before they get on with the rest of the agenda. “We have to follow process,” he says. Marc looks like he could strangle the man. The woman only bites her nails, careful not to smudge the fake blood on her face.

The facilitation committee wraps up its meeting and moves towards the Martin Luther King, Jr. statue where G.A.s are held. By 7 p.m., the official start time of the G.A., about 40 people have assembled around the statue. A few people bring lawn chairs from home. One woman holds her infant.

Marc starts. “Mic check!”

“Mic check!” the rest of us call back.

“Mic check!”

“Mic check!”

“Welcome to the Occupy Riverside General Assembly!”

“Welcome to the Occupy Riverside General Assembly!”

He reads from a script. The woman in the bustier, Maura, alternates with him. They explain the consensus decision making process and the hand signals—fingers wiggled in the air indicate agreement or approval, a hand waved in front of the face signals dissent, arms crossed above the head indicates a hard block, that one would rather leave the movement than go forward with the current proposal—and start off with Dorky Guy’s proposal to move the meeting across the street for the evening. “Can we get a temperature check on that?” Marc says.
Among a sea of waving hands, there is only one set of spirit fingers. Dorky Guy bolts out of the group towards the nearby parking lot. “Okay, that’s fine, see you tomorrow,” he says curtly, waving goodbye as he walks.

Nathan shrugs from his chair. “It was his proposal anyway,” he says to the group. “We’ll see him tomorrow.”

Marc and Maura continue with the G.A. This is my first time seeing him in action with this crew, so busy I’ve been with school and teaching that I haven’t been around here as much as I would have hoped. He leads them through the agenda, making sure that everyone who wants to speak has a chance to do so, and keeps the potential drama to a minimum—I’ve heard that things have a way of getting out of hand during the sections designated for individual proposals and free speech—so that the meeting ends barely more than an hour after it begins. I wonder if this is what Marc was like as a teacher and earlier as a professor. I wonder when he might get the chance to teach again, or if after all this Occupy stuff dies down—if it dies down—whether he would even want to.

In many ways, I’m relieved that Marc has found a passion, something worth getting out of bed for, something that keeps him marching on, marching forth, but at the same time, I am jealous. Instead of excitement, I feel a deep well of sadness. Dad would have loved this, I often say to myself, about Occupy, about me teaching this year. I’ve decided to build him an altar for Día de los Muertos, even though my family has never celebrated the holiday and I don’t know the first thing about altars.

I need Occupy, too, but it’s already slipping away from me and I’m not sure I can catch up with it before it’s too late.
The possibility of arrest has hung over Marc ever since he jumped headfirst into the Occupy. That’s what we’ve been calling it for months now—“Occupy,” like it’s a place or a state of mind. But really, it’s no one place and no one state of mind. Not that it matters to city officials. After only a few weeks of camping in early November, Riverside Police swooped in to shut down the occupation on a rainy Sunday afternoon. They were successful, if only for a moment, but the ensuing media backlash to YouTube videos that showed cops pushing peaceful protesters to the ground and arresting them ensured the occupiers’ return to their camp that same night. Marc and I were out of town that day and only witnessed the aftermath. But if he had been there, Marc would surely have been scooped up along with our friends and hauled off to the police station just down the street.

A few weeks later, folks at Occupy Los Angeles used their Facebook and Twitter bullhorns to alert the world that they would be raided and shut down that night. This came on the heels of a few days’ worth of threats from L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa that he would send in the LAPD to clear the occupation from the steps of City Hall. Marc and a few other Occupy Riverside folks packed a car and headed out to L.A., hoping to create a critical mass of people to prevent the shutdown. Before he left home, Marc took a thick Sharpie and wrote a phone number on his arm. “NLG,” he said. The National Lawyers Guild, for his possible arrest.

The Mayor’s minions shut down Occupy L.A. that night. It was certainly no coincidence that police raided Occupy Riverside and shut it down that same night while
so many Riverside occupiers were in L.A. Marc made it home the next morning. Our friend Marni, one of the primary organizers of the People’s Kitchen, did not. She had been separated from the Riverside group shortly after LAPD officers stormed out of City Hall to start their arrests, and no one had any way to contact her, her phone dead and gone straight to voicemail. For 24 hours, her husband made frantic calls to L.A. County jails and detention centers. No luck. With each hour that passed without a word from Marni, the more her husband wished she was in jail and not worse off. Finally, Marni called from a holding center way out in the San Fernando Valley. Her bail: five thousand dollars. With five hundred bucks going to the bondsman, five hundred bucks that they’d never see again, Marni’s husband had no idea how they’d make rent in December. “And with Christmas coming up,” Marc said plaintively.

He felt terrible about the situation and offered them fifty bucks to help out. “She left us because she didn’t want to get arrested,” Marc said. “And then she’s the one they pick up.” Of anyone in the group that went to Occupy L.A., Marni was the only one trying her damnedest to not get arrested. She had been arrested at Occupy Riverside earlier in the month and already had charges to fight.

With each new round of Occupy-related arrests, the stakes got higher. Bail went from one thousand, to five thousand, and eventually to ten thousand dollars during a rainy day shutdown of West Coast ports in December. Paul, a teen just barely graduated from high school, was new enough to this kind of direct action activism that when he barely turned his back to the line of cops staving off a thousand or so Occupy protesters, they
grabbed him and arrested him. Marc had been right next to this kid. “It could have been me,” he said. “I just knew not to turn my back on the cops.”

*

The University of California Regents have decided to hold one of their bimonthly meetings at the UC Riverside campus, likely counting on the perceived apathy of the Riverside student body. Regents meetings have always attracted protestors and detractors, which is why the meetings are rarely on the more politically vociferous campuses like Berkeley and Santa Cruz. But the massive fee hikes and budget woes of the last several years have emboldened a new generation of student activists, and every one of them in Riverside and many others at UC campuses throughout Southern California have mobilized for this two-day meeting. And though the cops broke up the Occupy Riverside camp in December, they haven’t squashed the group completely. A new camp springs up at UC Riverside in protest of this meeting.

Marc catches up with me on the backside of the student union building where I stand among an angry, chanting crowd. “How the fuck are you not arrested?” I shout over the din.

“I know, right? Cops just got tired and walked away.” Marc was on the inside of the Regents meeting. I had been there as well, but I left after he and his fellow Occupy UCR protesters started their mic-check at the end of the brief public comments period, their attempt to take over the meeting and open up a dialogue with the Regents, and the cops threatened to arrest them if they didn’t leave. They only sat in a circle and linked arms. Marc already warned me this morning that he might end up in the pokey by the end
of the day, and with instructions not to bail him out, but now he seems a tad disappointed that his arrest might not happen at all.

We are caught up in a crush of student protestors outside the Regents meeting trying to block the Regents’ exit from the building. The crowd pulsates, people move in, people move out. And then screams. “Oh my god!” And the crush eases, a few dozen people run away. Students carry a guy with orange splatters on his jeans to the curb. Marc and I walk by on the outskirts of the crowd, wondering what the fuck just happened. We see a friend. “They just shot that dude,” he said, bewildered. “A pellet gun or something.”

More chanting. “Shame, shame, shame, shame.” Students yell at the cops. Others stand around, taking photos and shooting videos on their phones. Nearby, a drum circle starts. And then the th-th-th-th-th-th of a black helicopter hovering above. We watch it circle our heads, five minutes at least. A woman wearing a motorcycle helmet and a black hoodie marches through the parking lot towards the protestors. And then the crush starts running past us, around the cluster of buildings next to the student union. “They’re leaving! The Regents are leaving!” people shout. Marc runs ahead of me and disappears around a building.

I hurry along with the others, cautious to not get too close, but still wanting to see how this all plays out. I don’t want to get arrested. I never wanted to get arrested, not the way Marc is gunning to do. I am in school, I have students to teach, I have a thesis that is definitely not writing itself. Marc doesn’t have to worry about any of that.

Marc doesn’t have anything to lose.
What I don’t see when I round the corner of the building, what I later see in a video that student journalists post to YouTube, is the moment after the Regents are whisked away in unmarked vans, when Marc sits down in the middle of a walkway as a platoon of campus police march towards him like Imperial Storm Troopers, like something out of a nightmare. “Go around him,” an officer yells, only to be disobeyed by someone farther back in the pack. The officer plucks Marc up by his shirt collar, like a claw in an arcade game, and drops him in a planter on the side. A friend who saw the video later comments, “Your boy needs to work out.” “I don’t think that’s the point, dude,” I say.

With the Regents headed back to their hotel, the cops disperse. So does most of the thousand-student crowd that has gathered. But folks still linger, decompressing and debriefing the day’s events with each other. I find Marc among them. “Still here?” I say, half smiling.

His face is flush. He puts his arm around me and says, “Yeah. Still here.”

* 

It’s closing in on 4 a.m. and our last guests are still here. Nathan is lounging in the springy Ikea chair. Michael has just sat down on the ottoman with a bowl of lukewarm beans and two uncooked tortillas. He moves a few half-drunk red cups aside on the coffee table to clear a space. “This is great,” he says. “Thank you for this.”

I offered to warm the beans and tortillas, but Michael refused. He is, as far as anyone can tell, homeless. A home cooked meal is more than he can ask for, though it’s
not more than I’m willing to offer. Occupy does that to you. If I’ve got something you need, lemme give it to you.

It’s been only a few hours since our one-bedroom apartment was packed with 30 or 40 anarchistish, punkish, counterculturish Occupy folks. They stood smoking cigs among the plants on our balcony, huddled around the coffee table rolling joints and packing bowls, dancing and sometimes moshing to YouTube tunes playing on Marc’s netbook hooked up to the TV. Now everyone’s left to occupy their beds or the newly-erected tents on campus. This newest occupation is on its fifth night, and with it, just about everyone we know has a renewed sense of purpose.

Michael scoops beans onto a tortilla while Nathan talks. I assume Marc knows more about these guys than I do, but I keep finding out that he doesn’t.

I lay down on the couch. It’s been hours since my last drink, but I am stoned on someone else’s weed and find myself ready to nod off. Marc sits down next to me and I lean my head on his thigh.

“Aww, you look ready to knock out,” Nathan says.

I can’t keep my eyes open anymore, but I’m listening. “I am, but don’t worry about me. Stay as long as you need.”

I catch only snippets of the guys’ chat. Nathan is a talker. It’s funny, how all this time I assumed he was somewhere in his 30s, with that big ol’ mustache. But I learned only recently that he’s just a few years younger than me at a wee 25 and is waiting to see if he got into law school. “Did you know?” I said to Marc. “No idea,” he said. How can
he people spent so much time with these people and still not know much about them? And do they know just as little about Marc as he does about them?

I pull a throw blanket off the back of our couch and wrap myself in it. “But you know,” Nathan says, “she came to Occupy broken.” He’s talking about someone we know. “I think we all did, in some ways.”

I force my eyes open.

Michael and Marc nod. At least I think they do, or maybe I just imagine it because I’m fucking high and it’s hard to remember anything even though I am definitely paying attention at this point because maybe this is not a sleepy indica after all and Nathan said we were all broken.

* 

Broken. Broken. Broken. This word is on a loop in my head. It haunts me throughout my day. It keeps me awake at night. I want to know everyone’s stories. How can I not? Everyone has them. Some of them, I can only guess.

* 

I think of Michael.

At our party, he saw me messing with the computer, and he chatted me up with the same intensity he’s come to be known for. “Can you Google something?” he said. “San Diego Trashlamp District.”

“Like the Gaslamp District?” This is the only San Diego neighborhood whose name I know.

“I knew you were a smart one. That’s why you’re in school.”
I ran the search. An article from the San Diego Reader, the weekly alternative paper, popped up. Michael lived in San Diego for some years, homeless, but nonetheless something of an entrepreneur. He organized a recycling collection program among hotels and restaurants in the area, making money for himself and helping out the businesses by removing their waste. But a new bad boy of a hotel came in, considered Michael’s business little more than a nuisance, and found a way to get rid of him. I read the five-page article in a few minutes, engrossed by Michael’s story and curious about everyone else’s around me.

“Thanks so much for reading it,” he said. “Most people don’t take the time.”

*

I think of Jeff.

When he showed up at our apartment, I recognized him. He kept popping up throughout the final day of the Regents meeting. “May first! General strike! May first! General strike!” He would shout it randomly, a non sequitur, though not really because if there’s anywhere to promote a future strike, it’s at a thousand-student protest. But this was UC Riverside, the least politically charged college campus I’ve ever been to (the passionate organizers of the day’s events notwithstanding), and I’m pretty sure that most students merged with our mob then blocking the Regents’ exit primarily for the sheer spectacle of it all, their camera phones held high about the crowd.

But Jeff. He was a tall, lanky black dude, his height and hand-painted “MAY 1 GENERAL STRIKE” tee making him stand out in the crowd. When Marc finally came
out from inside the meeting, I asked who this guy was. “He’s from Occupy L.A.,” he said. “I think he’s one of the vets.”

And here he was standing in my living room, just arrived with a whole mess of other Occupy L.A. folks. “I’m Jeff,” he said, shaking my hand and staring into my eyes. Uncomfortable, I broke our gaze, so intense was his stare.

With him were Shane, a white dude with a long face, blue eyes, and a newsboy cap, as ready-for-TV as they come, and a shaggy bearded guy who calls himself Mr. Boobies, so-called because of his substantial man-boobs, though he’d finally relent as the night wore on and tell me that his name is really Carl. Although they were from Los Angeles, all of these guys were living at the five-day-old camp at UC Riverside.

By this point, I was on fulltime, hardcore hostessing duties. Keeping snack dishes full, maintaining paper plate and napkin supplies, recycling beer cans and liquor bottles, even doing a mic-check announcement to let folks know we were running out of red cups (“Mic check!” “Mic check!” “We are almost out of red cups!” “We are almost out of red cups!”) and they could use my purple Sharpie to write their names on the cups they already had. We didn’t expect so many people and I certainly didn’t want to wake up hungover the next day to a trashed house, so I kept up on the cleaning.

Still, there were moments when I could relax, when folks were gathered around a new bowl of hummus and idle red cups were emptied and trashed. A pipe was making its way around the coffee table, and I pulled up a chair next to Jeff to join in. He puff-puffed and passed it to me, watching as I lit the bowl. I sucked in and held my breath for a
moment and blew the blue tinged smoke out into the thickening air of my living room.

Jeff still stared at me.

I looked at him and giggled. I didn’t know what else to do. He smiled and laughed, too. Was he hitting on me? It was hard to say. He wasn’t really *doing* anything, just looking at me. God, I sucked at this, flirting and all that. Jeff had seen me with my arm around Marc earlier, right? Not that it means anything in this group. So many of them were sleeping with multiple partners anyway. Kathryn and Jack and Ben. Paolo and Juliet and Vanessa and Marco. I could have been any one of them, really. No one had any idea who I was.

At some point I ended up chatting with folks in the kitchen. I don’t know who, it’s all a blur. Weed and gin & tonics and shots of swanky tequila. Jeff was next to me and before I knew it, we were all getting mushy with each other—Omigod, I’m so glad we met, this is amazing, I love this party—and drew into a group hug, maybe five of us, and Jeff had his arm tight around me. When everyone pulled back, Jeff held me still, tighter, both arms, he towered over me. He was not crying, but he could have been.

He was not hitting on me. He just needed to be held.

And then we hear about it the next day. How Jeff returns to camp with the others—Mr. Boobies, Shane with the long face, the countless other nameless folks who warmed our apartment—and they hang around for a awhile, still awake in the middle of a chilly night on this college campus at the edge of the desert. Camp is not for sleeping. Camp is for family, for love and not-love, for smoking cigs in lawn chairs, for shooting the shit under the starts. Some retire to their tents. Others sit around, as though waiting.
Jeff starts screaming.

Uncontrollable, inconsolable screaming.

In the middle of a hazy, comatose campus, Jeff just screams. No one knows why. They try to calm him, like he’s a teen on a bad acid trip. “Shhh,” and “Dude, come on, calm the fuck down,” and pats on the back and maybe an attempt to hug him. Maybe he’s drunk or stoned. Maybe he’s neither. One thing’s for sure: all of this is too much.

It’s ten minutes or it’s an hour. Jeff still screams.

“Fuck, man. These vets,” I’ll say later when I hear about this.

“Yep, shit’s intense,” Marc says.

“Where are they from? I mean, where do they live?”

“Dunno.” Marc will shrug. “I think they live at Occupy.”

*

I think of Mr. Boobies, and I think of Chris.

A few weeks later after class, I meet Marc at the Getaway, a shitty little sports bar type of deal across the street from UC Riverside. He hangs around the entrance, chatting with someone on the phone, and I kiss him quickly before heading inside to grab a pint of cider. When I come out to the patio, Mr. Boobies and Chris, a grad student, drink their beers and have a smoke. “Hey man, how’s it hangin’?” Mr. Boobies says. It is be dark and unseasonably warm, but he is still wearing his sunglasses and thick winter hat.

“Not much, man. Came to have a pint with you. Any word from the admin today?” The Regents meeting is a few weeks past, and some of the University top brass have started coming by every few days to ask what the camp’s demands are and when
they will be leaving. Some of the Occupiers have already left—most of the Occupy L.A. folks, certainly anyone from other UC campuses who were in town for the Regents meeting. A few UC Riverside students and many of the staunchest Occupy Riverside campers remain. And of course, among them, Mr. Boobies, whose affiliation is stuck somewhere between L.A. and Riverside. At this point, he belongs to everyone.

Mr. Boobies continues his discussion with Chris about what it might be like to go to jail in Riverside if the cops come in to break up the camp. “If they put you in solitary, it’ll suck. Trust me, I’ve been there.” He mentions Iraq and Afghanistan and one of his buddies getting blown up and how he tried to shove his buddy’s guts back into his body and when he chuckles, there will be a tingle along my spine. “That kinda messed me up for awhile,” he says. “I told my C.O. to go fuck himself.” That’s how Mr. Boobies knows about solitary. That’s how he was dismissed from the army. That’s how he ended up here, blowing in the wind.

Marc returns to us. A bro-dude leaves his crew at the pool table and heads out through the patio toward the parking lot. Chris slams down his pint and gets up without a word to follow the guy. I say to Marc and Mr. Boobies, “What the fuck? He’s not gonna get in a fight, is he?” because Chris is the most white bread, all-American, boy next door-looking dude I’ve met in just about any activist circle I’ve been in, with his foppish hair and slight belly, and I can’t imagine him taking on the beefy bro-dude who just passed us by. “Who the fuck knows?” Marc says, and talks about how much Chris hates these guys, the Fiji dudes, the college one-percent, and I ask, “What the fuck is Fiji?” And he
explains that they’re date rapist scumbags, a frat infamous for forcing pledges to roofie girls’ drinks, and Chris hates their fucking guts.

The Fiji bro returns. Chris follows shortly after with a huge grin on his face. “I found out which car is his.” My mind flickers back to the story I once heard about an Oakland anarchist who tried to shoo away an unwanted guest at a party with a baseball bat he called Mr. Smashy. I hope this is not one of those moments. “I’m gonna leave him a note. Anyone got a pen?” Chris says. Relieved, I hand him mine, and he grabs a napkin and starts scribbling.

Fiji raped my sister. We don’t forgive, and we don’t forget.

“Rapist motherfuckers.” Chris jumps up and saunters triumphantly to the parking lot.

* 

I think of myself.

I am busy.

I am staring at a blank computer screen unable to type one word.

I am lying in my bed crying silently while Marc watches Al Jazeera in the living room.

I am standing at the foot of my father’s bed, watching him die.

I am broken.

I am otherwise occupied.