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Yardstick, a Novel

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by

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Summer 1976: No Surprise

“Bitch!” Augie said, or something like it. “Get out! You ain’t ridin’ back with me! You can hitchhike back to St. Louis!”

I was stunned. But why? I had only myself to blame. Anyone would say so, and as I recall they often did. But what credibility did they have? Most people didn’t even know about these scenes; they would say it regardless. There were plenty of other strikes against Augie, his race being the main one. Still, I had told myself “never again,” yet wound up in this same confounding place, not even sure what was happening or why, just bludgeoned into numbness. Not physically. Never physically, although there was the time he banged my head against a wall (just once or twice), and on the night in question there seemed to be a bruise on my arm where his thumb pressed each time he grabbed me, sat me back down. So not “never,” I suppose. I need to own up to that now, own up to all of it.

I wept throughout. I have no memory of that, though. I only know because Reida said it had broken her heart, listening to me from outside the room, where she and the other women of the aborted bachelorette party held guard with a wrench wrapped in a dishtowel. They told me about the wrench afterwards, but they didn’t say why they had it. He must have been doing something that was freaking them out. But I rarely remembered the details of these episodes once they were over. In my otherwise exhaustive journals of the time, I didn’t record even one.

“Okay,” I said, hauling myself up, wobbling, not looking his way, “I’ll do that.” Anything to get out of that little room he had led me to at the back of the house. But as
soon as I got up, he jerked me back down. It happened again and again. I don’t remember much about the room itself. Seems like it was storage or something, lots of stuff piled around. I don’t remember how we got there from the bar, either, where I’d gone with the rest of the ladies after the rehearsal dinner. I know there were four women with me in the booth, Reida and Kelly and two others whose names and faces I’ve forgotten. Why I remember Reida so well even decades later I don’t know, with her sleek dark hair and stylish, body-hugging clothes, rings on every finger clinking against her glass.

Augie just materialized next to the booth. He was supposed to be bar-hopping with the boys. I had watched him go off with the groom, Jim—one of his dearest friends, he always said—as I left with the bride, Kelly, and the rest of the girls. How did he even know where we were? But there he was, gripping my elbow. “Let’s go,” he said. I shook my head no, studied my drink.

Reida tilted her face up at him. “Augustus, darling, sit down, let’s talk.” And then something new happened. Augie screwed up his lips, fluttered his eyelids, and threw her words back at her, high and mocking, voice thick with alcohol. “Ah-guss-tuss dah-ling, shiddown, lit’s tawk.” (Reida was from London.) A jolt of horror skittered through me. These scenes had always been private before, just us, no one else even overheard—which is why so many people thought me flakey, even cruel (I was with him, then I wasn’t, then I was again …). He was charismatic, interesting, accomplished and beloved, you see—a poet. And not just any poet. In the revolutionary 1970s, when the coming together of blacks and whites was thought to be a good thing, at least among the vanguard, he was one of that rare sought-after breed: a crossover, a black man rising in the ranks of the
white world (the academic part of it, anyway), a black man whites could relate to. And he adored me. If they knew nothing else about us, they knew that.

So I got up and went with him, to keep it from getting worse, to contain it to just me. After that we were in the little room.

The bludgeoning was with words. “Runnin’ after some nigger in stack-heeled shoes.” That’s a line I remember. But, no, that was from another time, from Riverside. There was no man there in Boston that night he could accuse me of coming on to, just for happening to stand next to him at the chip-dip bowl, just for happening to speak to the man. Not that Augie’s instincts were entirely wrong in that regard; by then I had probably already begun to hope for a rescuer.

“What’d you come here for? They ain’t yo’ friends! They think you stuit!” he said. Augie didn’t normally talk this way. He tended to slip into dialect only when his mood was exceptionally good or exceptionally bad.

“You asked me,” I said, one tick above a whisper. “You wanted me to come.” That’s the kind of thing I would hazard to say only early on, before any hope that he could be called back from the depths, see reason, had been crushed.

“’Yew assed me, yew assed me.’ Shut up. You a liar. You saw a free trip. ‘Ah never been ta Boston...’”

I lowered my stinging eyes, blood rising to my face, hands and armpits sweating (I often grew hot before I went cold). He wasn’t wrong. In those days I took any opportunity to go somewhere I’d never been—especially if it meant escaping my parents’ house, where I was staying that summer—and I never let lack of finances stand in my
way if I saw a way around it. We had driven to Boston from St. Louis with a friend of his named John from his days at Williams College. John picked us up on his way through from Kansas City and feigned sleep on the passenger side when Augie stuck his arm into the backseat to finger-fuck me as he was driving. I don’t remember who paid for the gas. I doubt it was either of us.

“You think you special. You special all right. Slippery-ass hustler.”

That was where I started to freeze up. I could feel what was coming. Augie knew me so well, better than anyone ever had (or ever would). And when things escalated to where they did in that little room, he would reach into the core of what mattered to me, the thing I cherished most about myself, clung to as I felt my way blindly through the thicket of my early twenties with no light from behind. He would yank out something I cared about or was sensitive to, ridicule it, destroy it—that seemed to be the point—accuse me of the most heinous deeds and character traits. Usually it boiled down to me being a liar and a whore. And he had already called me a liar.

“Mo’er fuckin’ user. Mo’er fuckin’ tease. You been jerkin’ me roun’ long enough. Get out!”

I didn’t bother standing up this time. I kept my head down, looked at the floor, tried to lose myself in the blur of my vision.

Now Augie leaned in nose-to-nose and lifted my chin with a curled finger. I could feel the nail digging into the triangular hollow between the bones. My eyes were still cast down, seeing nothing. The nail dug deeper. My attention narrowed to that one sharp point.
“Look at me,” he growled.

I raised my zombie eyes to his.

“Who you been fuckin’? You tell me. Now.”

I held my breath and stared into the eye that couldn’t see, the blind one, focusing on it instinctively like I did at such moments. I wouldn’t answer. That would only give the merry-go-round a push and send it flying, liar-whore-liar-whore-liar-whore… Augie was the first and only man I’d ever slept with. Somewhere behind that ugly, hardened, pulled-down mask he was pushing up in my face, he had to know that, even though we’d been apart for most of a month, incommunicado, after Riverside. I could only hope he knew. Should I beg him to? Augie, please… Would he come back to me? Humiliation licked at me with hot-tongues, and I felt a burn of anger deep inside. What if I had slept with someone? Didn’t I have the right? I let my eyes cloud further, tried to keep the spark of hatred out of them, tightened my mouth. I wouldn’t answer.

“You jus’ took off ‘n lef’,” Augie said.

My eyes jerked a little, left and right. What was he talking about?

“‘Come right away or not at all!’ he said in a disgusting simper. “Then jus’ took off ‘n lef’ me standin’ there, holdin’ my dick.”

Oh. He meant Riverside. A steep mountain seemed to rise up out of the floor in front of me, made of words and incidents, over a year’s worth, he was bound to resurrect now and distort. How far back would he go this time? Were there any unscathed memories left to ruin?
“Now you think you gone be followin’ me roun’ campus peddlin’ yo’ ass, blinkin’ yo’ little blue eyes…”

“I won’t!” It escaped me. A mistake. I felt the tiny flame of rankled pride go out, doused by a cool instinct for survival. I had just been accepted to Wash. U., where he was studying and teaching now. It was something we had celebrated. I’d rushed to him when I got the news, found him at Blueberry Hill. I saw him now, raising his glass to me with a wink and a grin. The vision made me feel sick, shaky. I pulled the curtain on it, steeled myself against the onslaught to come. He had demolished our past. Would he reach into my future?

But maybe the mountain had risen up for him, too, because he seemed to deflate. I saw his congested expression slacken, felt the dig of his finger loosen. “Forget my number,” he said. “Forget my name.”

*God, if he would let me.* Maybe he would this time. He was *telling* me to forget him, it was *his* idea. But I would not respond to anything more. It wasn’t what he wanted, a response. What he wanted was my humiliation. He needed it as fuel to set fire to his own.

“Bitch,” he said, with waning energy. He tipped my head back as he drew his hand away; the nail scratched the soft skin. So, yeah, not “never.”

He had been banking it for hours, that fire. It started earlier, at the café. We had been to a museum with Jim and the few other out-of-towners. We’d looked mainly at the Dutch painters, our favorites, leaning into one another, twining fingers, awestruck. There was a portrait by Frans Hals. I remember gushing over the rendering of the man’s coat in
magnificently rude and wispy strokes of black and white, red and gray. It came up after that, over cool drinks at a wrought-iron table in the middle of the leafy August afternoon. I don’t know why I said it. I must have been emboldened by the presence of so many others and by Augie’s jovial humor since our arrival in Boston. I knew by then—or should have—what brought out Mr. Hyde. I say “know,” but of course it was all unconscious. I’m making it conscious only now, from the vantage point of 30 years, only because I have to.

“So, hey, Sham,” Augie said. We were in a bubble of togetherness, the other conversations in our spread-out group focused away from him for a moment. He ran his index finger—that same one—down the back of my hand, squeezed the tip of my middle finger, lifted it to his lips for a kiss. I smiled, warming all over. When he let go of my hand, I starfished it over his knee.

“I didn’t tell you, baby,” he said. “I ran into Frenchie ‘fore we left. He mentioned a place he saw over on Pershing. Two bedrooms. Second floor.”

My smile wavered. We had spoken of moving in together a week before in a lush moment after lovemaking. But I wasn’t keen, wasn’t ready. I had not forgotten Riverside. Moving in was still a ways off, something to work toward if things continued to go as well as they had of late.

“I was thinking…” I hesitated. “I might get my own place first. For a while.”

He started as if slapped. His eyes narrowed. He was shaking out a Camel and his hands halted for an instant, then carried on with self-conscious smoothness as if nothing
had changed, although even the careless crinkling of the pack seemed muted now as he tossed it on the table.

“It doesn’t mean I don’t love you,” I said, reaching for his hand with both of mine. I didn’t say, *It’s because you overshadow me, make it hard for me to get to know anyone, have them know me.* I didn’t say, *I need to live somewhere I can make you leave.* I couldn’t have said those things, because I didn’t know them yet. I knew only that the walls were closing in on me, and I had to do something to keep from being crushed between my overwhelming desire to be with him and my desperate need to be on my own.

“I still want to see you—often,” I said. He didn’t take his hand away, which was a good sign. He stayed quiet, which wasn’t. “All the time,” I said, voice lilting up, hoping. I meant it. I was full of revolutionary fervor in those days. I believed in change and, despite my fears, in the all-conquering power of love. This was before I learned that in order to survive, I had to lie.

I looked at his long, tapered fingers in my lap, an encapsulation of the whole of him, I always thought. They were strong yet elegant, with their own intelligence, though faintly twisted, with hard nails never fully groomed, the skin around the knuckles rough and ashy. I stroked the blue-black backs of them, felt the dry warmth of their tan undersides. I looked up at his face, the tall forehead sloping back, the cheeks narrowing like blades into the cup of his chin, the huge lips with the small discolored patch just right of center on the lower one. It was a face I knew as well as my own. A face that had compelled me from the first time I saw it. A face that haunts me now.
Augie frowned at his cigarette, tapped it against a glass ashtray in the middle of the table. When he put it to his lips, his eyes met mine. I saw the hurt. Saw him looking ahead to everything my separateness meant, my freedom, the prospect of losing me, the possibility of other men. Looking back, I think he put a lot of stock in being my guide through the snarls of early adulthood. I think I did, too, and never fully intended to let him go unless I was forced to, unless and until I was ready. I had no one else, really, and would only become more isolated as the years went on. A pitfall of being in the vanguard.

“I want to try having my own place.” I shrugged one shoulder like it was no big deal, but my stomach clenched.

Augie’s features stiffened. He drew on his cigarette and turned to signal the waitress for another beer, holding up his empty Narragansett can. Then he got up and ambled across the brick patio to Jim, who was standing with some others in the mottled shade of a sweetgum tree. I turned to Reida sitting nearby and talked to her about London. I think asked her some dumb question, like were there really double-decker buses (in 1976, I had yet to leave the country). Soon there were shouts and laughter coming from Augie’s corner. I could feel the force of his personality filling up the space like always. The subject seemed to have been dropped, but later Jim gave me a disparaging look, made some remark (“Don’t people who love each other generally want to be together?” Was that it? As if to say I wasn’t normal), so I knew Augie had said something to him. What? That he loved me so much and I was driving him crazy. Had to be along those lines.
Still, I didn’t think things would go the way they did, with me sequestered in that little room, holding myself rigid, trying to disappear, Augie’s hot, beery breath in my face. I thought the worst was behind us, in Riverside. The rehearsal dinner that night had been fun, mostly. We were a smallish party. Augie was in his familiar role of court jester, commanding all eyes and ears. Even Jim’s parents leaned in, eager to catch his offbeat one-liners and trenchant come-backs. “To the groom and future widow!” he cried at one point, holding his glass high. Raucous laughter. Look of pride on Jim’s face: He’s doing it. My great black friend, the Amazing Augustus Brown. Only I could tell that the caustic edge to his humor was being stropped to razor sharpness. No, that isn’t right. Reida knew. From two people over at the long table, she saw. Augie was making dark asides in my ear, I don’t remember what, and my eyes met hers. I looked away. She didn’t.

I didn’t know what the women were doing on the other side of the door of that little room, but I was afraid they would call the police. I didn’t want them to. Augie was on probation for carrying a concealed weapon, and was not supposed to have left Missouri. They must have, though. I could see out a side window to the street through the space between the clapboard houses of the Portuguese neighborhood Jim and Kelly lived in, and a police car drifted by at one point, but didn’t stop. That’s pretty much it for what I can remember. I don’t know how long it lasted. Augie brought me back to the house from the bar, and the women came I don’t know how long after that. They abandoned their plans for the evening and tried at first, I think, to talk to Augie through the door (had he locked it?), in tones you would use with an animal made dangerous by its wounds. Then their strategy must have been to find Jim and buy time until he got there. It was
another age, no cell phones. They must have called from bar to bar looking for him. I had my own strategies, ones I would slip into unconsciously when these things occurred, and I probably ran through all of them that night: pretending and cajoling, placating and reasoning, agreeing and apologizing, feigning catatonia—although perhaps I wasn’t feigning. I think I was inert, though, eyes closed, when Jim finally arrived. I heard a car door slam, crisp footsteps drawing near, a sharp knock. “Augustus? Can I talk to you?” And the spell was broken.

“Sure, man,” Augie said, and opened the door, making no move as I slipped out into Reida’s reaching arms. I called my father collect, voice shaking, asked if he could buy me a plane ticket, crying partly because money was something I never asked for, something seldom, if ever, offered. Kelly had already found me another place to stay.

Before dawn I was in a cab, ready to flee to the airport after spending what was left of the night on the floor of a stranger’s house. Reida was there, extending her arms through the rolled-down window to place her hands on my shoulders, turn me gently toward her.

“Leave him, leave him, leave him,” she said, looking me full in the face to drive it home.

“Don’t worry,” I said, croaking, throat raw from weeping.

Reida gave a short, involuntary laugh, the way you might react to a child trying to sound grown up. She saw right through my false bravado. And she was right. I was nearly a year and a half into my time with Augie, but I still didn’t know what I was talking about. How she would have known that, I can’t say.
She kissed me on the cheek and held my face for an instant, then stepped back up on the curb, releasing me to the driver and the shredded remnants of that night. I held up my crumpled hand in a pitiful gesture of farewell. As the cab pulled away we passed Jim and Kelly’s house and I caught sight of Kelly on the front porch, watching me go. Her hair looked messy, head drooping from too little sleep on this, the night before her wedding. A terrible dread coursed through me. *We’ve ruined it,* I thought. *She’ll remember this for the rest of her life.* I didn’t know her—these were all Augie’s friends from Williams—and, with the exception of the previous ten hours or so, she had not been particularly kind to me. Like Augie, Kelly was seven years older than I. She seemed to find me ridiculously young (at 21, I was). My pain was not so much for her as for my own disgrace. We were supposed to be cool, Augie and I. But this was not cool. This was fucked up. I sank into the back seat of the cab and closed my swollen eyes. What could I have done to stave it off? Not opened my mouth? My brain stuttered to a halt. There was no taking any of it back; the damage was done. After a disaster all that’s left is to rebuild, better prepare against the next one, move away from disaster territory altogether.

Head lolling back, face to the window, I stared at the pools of artificial light elongating into bright streams flying past, and saw the pink cast creeping over everything. The sun was coming. I felt carved out, weightless, not up to it. That was when—right there in that cab, I believe—I began to suspect that I was sick, damaged. Like I must have some pernicious defect, a rotten core, or this would not have happened. Like maybe he was right about me, or everyone was right about him. But how could all of it be right? The pieces that came at me from him, about him, were totally
contradictory. I think what I was really feeling was a deep, unconscious guilt, the guilt I felt (and maybe still feel) just for being me and wanting the kinds of things that I wanted. Like freedom. Total freedom. To be a girl and white and from the country and not have anyone tell me what those things were supposed to look like—or punish me for behaving as if they didn’t matter. But it would take me decades and a marital crisis to figure that out. There in the cab I knew only that things like this never happened to anyone else I knew. But I also knew there wasn’t anyone I envied. Except for maybe Reida.

My head throbbed. My stomach spun out a hollow growl. I had not eaten, but was unable to imagine any food I could keep down. I reached across the seat for my orange and black brocade bag and fumbled in it for whatever reading material it might contain. My hand closed around the funny little book hand-bound by friends of Augie’s, fans of his, people I had never met. It was a blank book, but not all of its pages were blank. There was one from a dictionary, another from a phone book, some of graph paper, others of linen, onionskin. Augie had given it to me the previous fall, on our first night together in Riverside. His friends had meant it for him, but he had gifted it to me, “Because,” he wrote on the inside cover, now open on my thigh, “I love you and because you’ll know what to do with it.” I had flipped through it once and begun filling it with thoughts and poems and drawings. “See?” he’d said, smiling with pleasure and a fond, almost paternal pride.

The cab jolted across an intersection under a swinging yellow light. I sat motionless, not wiping away the tears or any of the images that came flooding in now, though I knew they were dangerous, had been my downfall times before. I turned to the
poem we had been taking turns composing, a line at a time, well into the volume. *There are always falls but always leaves*, it began. I touched the words with my fingertips, closed my eyes. I saw us in bed, reading to each other; saw us on the sun porch of his apartment, laughing at the action in the street; saw us listening to music, dancing, kissing. Saw us walking in the variegated light of towering sycamores past the mansions on Westminster Place, chattering, teasing, climbing over a locked iron gate blocking the straight path home to our part of town, the funky side, Augie lifting up the hem of my tiered, rick-rack skirt to keep it from catching on the spikes, and the private police pulling up half a block later. *Where you folks headed? Can I see some I.D.?* (I must be a prostitute, he must be a pimp or—without me—the purse-snatcher, the burglar, the rapist.) But we were happy, didn’t care, times were changing, we were right and they were wrong and they could say and think what they liked because we were pure of heart. I saw Augie’s face, the depth of his gaze. It was mainly this, the quality of his attention, the way studied, understood me, the way we made our own world, that fueled my misery. I knew the best of him, steeped in a joy and reverence, an abiding affection, for the world and everyday life, and felt already the staggering weight of what I had to do. But I would do it this time, give him up. I had to. I would stoke the hatred such scenes provoked in me once I grew strong enough for it, and make it my shield. I felt a sting in my chin, soreness near my elbow. I knew there was a bruise there, but I didn’t look.

How had it come to this? This didn’t happen to smart girls, and smart was the main thing I’d been my whole life, my redeeming feature, my lifeline. I have been a teacher now, and I know the seductive, affirmative power of the engaged, successful
student. The strokes withheld from me at home by parents who didn’t believe in praising children, who disapproved of me on principle, I got at school from teachers responding with warm relief to my arm jutting up above the heads of others, eager eyes standing out in a sea of expressionless faces. It didn’t happen to pretty girls, either, I didn’t think, and I was pretty enough, people said (though never at home), and I chose to believe them. I could not escape the conventionalized torture of insecurity about my looks—never good enough—suffered by every other female of my generation, but I grasped with both hands the gift of permission held out by a feminist movement born not long after I was, and took it deeply to heart: permission to behave, at least, as if I could define beauty on my own terms, to believe that what mattered was style, and style was synonymous with authenticity. Once girls were allowed to wear pants to school, then jeans, I dressed to please myself and reveled in being able to pull off anything I had a feeling to wear: painter’s pants with leotards; mini skirts with fishnets and poor-boy sweaters; beads with tie-dye and bleached-out bell-bottoms; trim, shoulder-padded suits from the 1940s—and that long dress from Afghanistan, with its reds, purples, blacks and oranges, its mirror-flecked bodice. I wore it out to some park and was approached by a man who could barely contain himself, some guy, middle-aged and Middle Eastern, who begged me to meet him later, for a party or something (“You will come, you will come…”), wrote a number on a piece of paper, pushed it flat into my hand. Yes, I was pretty enough. And as soon as he was out of sight, I threw the number in the trash, because I was no fool, either. I had boundaries, options, confidence (though it turns out the kind you get at home is the
only kind that matters). Despite all this, it had been impossible for me to stay away from Augie for good. *What was wrong with me?*

I looked down at the little book on my thigh and slipped my finger under the open leaf, turned it. A blue ink drawing of a single eye filled the page. Augie had written across the lid, “Whose wild eye is this?” and drawn a pair of puckered lips beside it. He was never coy about the way my looks affected him; he was generous, rhapsodic. To him, my long-lashed eyes weren’t blue, but “violet-blue,” “cerulean;” my skin not white, but “ochre.” And my Dutch-Irish features—slope-tipped nose, raised forehead, thick brows—had character, he said, “undiluted by generations in the American stew.” (How he could talk.) Augie did more than love and affirm me; he named me and all of my parts. He was everything to me. And now I had to make him nothing.

I looked out the window just as the sign for Logan airport passed overhead. Tight-chested and trembly, despairing of being able to marshal the necessary resolve, I clapped the book shut, stuffed it deep inside my bag and swore, “This is it, this is it.” I closed my eyes and pressed my hands between my thighs. “Please, please, please,” I said, “Leave him, leave him, leave him.” I pictured Reida’s face, her penetrating eyes. She knew. Knew the need to impress her words upon me, knew how slim the odds were of my adhering to them. Reida knew everything. Maybe that’s why she’s stayed with me all these years. Others, if they didn’t excuse what was happening or pretend it wasn’t there, would see me as weak or sick for my attachment; at worst, a discredit to my race, fair game. Reida saw it like it was, knew how much of myself I stood to lose either way, and didn’t judge me. In the years to come, she would surface in my memory from time to
time, a messenger, a ray of clarity, a picture of who I could be but was far from becoming, and a symbol of the support and understanding I utterly lacked.

* 

My father picked me up at the airport in the blue Nash Rambler. His expression was grave as I sleep-walked out of the jet-way, his hug perfunctory, though he gave me two pats on the shoulder blade. Now he was all business. Pulling out of the parking garage, he turned on the radio, forestalling conversation. The warm, sincere twang of Hank Williams ballooned up, competing with the noise of the engine.

\begin{quote}
Your cheatin’ heart
will make you weep
You’ll cry and cry
And try to sleep
but sleep won’t come
The whole night through
Your cheatin’ heart will tell on you.
\end{quote}

A sympathetic lament, I thought, but there was no telling what her side of the story was. I shifted, cushioning and concealing my sensitive elbow with my hand, and rested my forehead on the glass, staring out. Of the world of anguished lovers I wanted no part. My heavy eyelids drew down. I dozed off.

I woke slumping gently forward, then back, with the deceleration of the Rambler exiting Highway Forty. In the moment it took for me to orient myself, I registered only white light streaming from the top of the sky onto the dashboard in front of me. Radiant energy bounced from every surface in the car. I felt soft and loose, cocooned in deep,
vibrant warmth. Instantly the events of the past 24 hours began barreling toward me like a sound of unknown force. I scrambled upright, pushing away from the window with a jerk. My neck convulsed in a searing spasm. I rubbed it, eyes squinched, grimy with sweat. Where my legs met the seat, my white jeans were soaked through.

My father spun the wheel deftly with one hand, turning the car onto the outer road. We drove past the recently constructed Fieldbrook Mall, which had been dropped onto the top of this bucolic ridge like a space ship filled with greedy developers whose ambitions spread across the entire Missouri River floodplain nearby. I turned away from it, a blight on the horizon we could see from miles away on the roof of our house, spoiling irrevocably a refuge my brother and I had stolen away to often as adolescents, sharing musings and confidences. The sight of the mall never failed to elicit a surge of impotent rage in all of us, but I was too spent to indulge it.

“Thanks for picking me up,” I said. My voice caught. I coughed, taken by surprise. I should have known better than to allude to anything relating to my current circumstances. I tucked my chin, conscious of the scratch, and turned away, glimpsing Dad’s startled look as I did so, his eyes darting at me then fixing on the road.

He cleared his throat. “Did you get some rest?” he said in his Johnny Cash voice. He and his brother Lorton both had that echo-y bass-baritone, the sound of deep Americana.

“Yeah.” It came out as a hoarse whisper. I swallowed, determined not to add the insult of tears to my shame. But as we turned onto Wild Horse Creek Road and began gliding under the cool elms and tall cottonwoods lining it, I felt myself release to the
redemptive expansion they always offered me, and by the time we reached the straight-away near home I was wiping away quiet sniffles with the back of my hand.

Dad pulled into the long dirt and gravel driveway that led up the hill to our house and stopped the car. As the dust settled around us, I believed in my aching brain that he had stopped to offer comfort, and I turned and raised my arms to him.

My father held up his palm, blocking his face. “I have enough,” he said. He climbed out of the car and walked off toward the big red mailbox across the road. I sat there, sucker-punched, nauseous with self-recrimination. Again I felt I should have known.

But I didn’t. Not exactly. I have enough? Did he mean I’d caused him so much trouble he barely had the wherewithal to deal with it, let alone take on the burden of my pain through so much as a hug? If that was what he meant, I had known, since I’d been drawing air, though he’d never made it so plain. But as I sat haggard and blinking on the scorching blue vinyl, it dawned on me that my father’s way of being—the deep-seated anger of dispossession he carried with him, the way he shunned emotion, had to always call the shots—was no longer the water I swam in. In the two years since I’d first left home, I’d begun to adopt a new cosmology, or I’d never have turned to him that way. And if I had, I knew, it was because of Augie. Augie, for whom no one was a burden, who opened himself so wide to love it nearly killed him, and me along with him (and maybe it has, in its way). He had exposed me to an emotional generosity, a coming-at-you-with-it, open-armed, that would have been incomprehensible to my father.
In the even rhythm of my father’s footsteps treading pavement, crushing gravel, I heard his intransigence. An acrid bile slipped up my throat, the bitter taste of derision. I despised him for his impenetrability, then myself for my untenable reaction. If there was anyone to align with here it wasn’t Augie, but my father, who had responded to my call, no questions asked, and got me out of there, brought me home. What must he be thinking? I was suddenly unsure that he had ever liked Augie to begin with, though at first I didn’t see how he couldn’t. They had so much in common, writers, thinkers, lovers of words. My father was out of the Oklahoma Dust Bowl, self-made. He never completed high school, but gained enough through books and military service to make a 30-year career as an electronics engineer after the War, ending his tenure at the local aerospace manufacturer in management, Quality Control. His was the first generation of his family to do anything besides farm, make brooms, or work for the railroad, and it was an uneasy fit. But he held his own with Augie. The few times they had sat together over refreshments in the living room of our house, my father in his high-backed armchair (“the throne,” we called it), Augie expanding on some topic from the couch, legs crossed, hands waving, the conversation hadn’t lagged.

I heard the screech of the mailbox lid on its metal hinges, a sound as jagged and excoriating as I felt, and looked over at my father’s bullish back, bending before the dark opening. He was the most liberal man I knew, an anomaly in our rural surroundings. It would never have occurred to me that race was any kind of issue. The struggle for civil rights was the vivid backdrop to our lives, and we all knew where he stood even before he sat us down, the three of us, when I was maybe nine, my brother ten, my sister seven,
looking each of us in the eye so we’d feel and not just hear him. “People will tell you Negroes are not as good as you,” he said, “but that’s not true.” Yes. We felt the righteousness of his words, the depth and purity of them: All men were created equal—even if women were another story.

And maybe that was the crux of it between my father and me. I had never done anything but thwart his ideals of femininity (he liked Lee Remick, hated Lucille Ball), and though I hoped and believed he admired me, deep-down, for my brains and bullheadedness, and knew he appreciated my independence (one less burden), once I began spending nights with Augie down in the city, then quit college and ran off to Riverside, it seemed less likely. It would be decades before my parents revealed to me their true feelings about Augie. When they did, their expression of retroactive dismay at seeing their daughter take their egalitarian convictions to the next logical level—as if the possibility had never occurred to them—upended everything I thought I knew about them. Back then, though, I thought race was the least of it. In the end maybe it was. I had kept the events of Riverside from them, and they were hazy on the details of last night, but they knew enough now to be unremittingly, if silently, opposed. It was a rare point of unity between them. But as I watched my father briskly close the mailbox and head back toward me, a drop of resentment burned in my still-childish heart. He doesn’t respect my choices!

My father slid into his seat and dropped the mail between us, slammed the door and released the parking brake. As the car moved forward, words spoke themselves to me, sat in my mouth: What did you mean, ‘enough’? Why couldn’t you hug me? Why are
you the way you are?! Saying them was out of the question. I hadn’t the strength or inclination to go up against our deepest family taboo: challenging him. Thinking the words was triumph enough, withholding them a way of writing him off, punishment meted out from a position of impotence, a well-worn strategy of women, one that didn’t serve anyone in the end.

I looked down at the mail. Windowed envelopes, typed addresses. “Mr. and Mrs. Roy Ewing, Wild Horse Creek Road, Fieldbrook, Missouri.” No smaller rectangles addressed in elegant, slanted strokes with green or brown fountain pen ink. He could not have written yet. Today’s the wedding; he hasn’t even started home. I sucked in my lips and stopped breathing, frightened by the prick of longing I felt. I stiffened my jaw against it, spun it into something reasonable. We’ve meant a lot to each other; we deserve a better ending. I don’t want see him, just hear him out if he apologizes. (As if he ever had.) What I didn’t know yet was that the bottomless hurt Augie had inflicted on me would devour me internally until he took it away. I was incapable of neutralizing it myself, and until I was, some kind of reconciliation was always in store. No, the times I went back to him, it wasn’t just because I loved him.

I looked out my window, past the neat rows of leafy vegetables and battalions of tomato plants at the tan brick farmhouse with its rounded dormer roof—a half-open eye—nestled in among the lanky elms and fat spruces. Over the 20 years my family occupied it, our land lost the last of its farm remnants, but we presided over their brief revival—and last gasp—by growing, for four summers, ten acres of vegetables to supplement my father’s salary ahead of my brother’s and my college aspirations. But, for
my father there seemed to be more to it than just the additional income. There had to be, given the time he put in during the dark hours of the morning before heading off to the Dungeon, as he called his corporate grind. Now he was exposing himself to the routine risks and heartbreaks known by every generation of farmers—lack of rain, lack of buyers, the unfair pricing of the middle man—even though his own generation had sought, or been forced, to flee all that. I think his roots were calling him, crying out, the plaint of the self-made man done out of his birthright to an independent existence in close relationship to the earth. All of that was at play in everything, too.

There was no one in sight. I didn’t expect there to be. Tom would be in the back fields, bending down to reach beneath broad, sticky serrated leaves and sever squash from low-lying stems, his face stoic against the heat, transistor radio tuned to a Cardinals game, presaging a career in sports broadcasting. After journalism school, he will move to California for the climate, only to wind up in the searing summer heat and demoralizing winter fog of the Central Valley, career hamstrung, in order to stay close to his son following a divorce. Chrissie would be off with her boyfriend (later, her abusive husband; later still, her stoner, deadbeat ex) or talking to him on the phone, coming to terms with a recent abortion. She will eventually have three, and battle a cocaine addiction to her mid-thirties, then put herself through school and earn good money as a paralegal. My mother, Beatrice, would be working at something in the kitchen or in her bedroom, quiet to the point of invisibility, doomed to decades more of emotional estrangement and disparagement by my father until, twenty years into his early retirement to start a software development company that will fail in just one year, the mutations of
Alzheimer’s mysteriously dissolve his lifelong chauvinism, transforming her at last, for the final five years of his life, into the loyal, competent “sweetheart” she never wasn’t.

We drove past the neighbor’s worn, grey barn. I saw myself at ten, pausing on my way to the school bus in a home-made jumper, metal lunchbox banging against my skinny, hairy legs, to make friends with the latest crop of Spring piglets, imitating their squeals and grunts until they came running over, eight or nine of them. They would push up against their side of the fence for some inter-species communion, wriggling their pink backsides with the black patches and stiff white hairs, looking up at me with squinty, friendly eyes, and I would give them rhyming names. I saw myself at five, climbing the fence to stand giggling in their midst, freezing in terror as the sow rounded the barn, charging, heart soaring in hallelujah as I was whisked into the air by my father, my ribcage firmly clasped in his strong hands.

The barnyard was barren of critters now, just hard, grey dirt baking in the summer sun with scruffy green and yellow weeds poking through. On a day like this, any pigs would have found themselves a shady hollow, and that’s what I planned to do, if it meant only lying under the yellowing canopy of the bed I shared with my sister. We climbed to the top of the hill and I felt my limbs grow slack as I slipped into home’s dark waters, heavy and cool. I looked at my father, now with grudging gratitude for his neutral expression, the fortress of him. When we got inside he would no doubt pull on overalls and go back out to cull tomatoes for sale downtown. The seriousness of what had happened—something bad with Augie, so bad I’d needed a plane ticket home—would be
alluded to only by the fact that he had left work to meet my plane, and by a dog-whistle
tension tuned to a frequency only slightly higher than usual.

My stomach grumbled. I wondered what lunch there might be, thought of a
sandwich of soft white bread with mustard and baloney, tomatoes and fresh corn, and
hoped I could stay awake long enough to eat it. We ground to a crunching halt outside the
house. I got out, feeling leaden and scraped out and safe as the grave.

*

I forgot all of that, pushed it all away, everything that had to do with Augie, the
good and the bad. People urge you to throw off bad memories, lock them up and throw
away the key. “Get on with your life,” they told me, “put it behind you,” until I stopped
mentioning his name. But people don’t know. If they did, they’d warn you against the
good times. The bad times were terrible, and I did forget them mostly (or repress them),
sooner than expected. And once Augie was safely out of the way, those memories lost all
their hold on me. Besides, I always knew how to feel about the bad times, how to use
them. Whenever their dark music reached me, I made quick work of them: *He fucking
terrorized me. The bastard*. They tidied up the story, justified all the decisions that came
next.

The good memories were deadly. All those bright moments—they refused to
settle into anything I could understand. And they never lost their power. Allowed in,
given into, they might take me where I needed to go for a minute—to that place in myself
that was AWOL in my current life—but they always left me bleeding and bereft. They might ruin my life, I thought, or at least my chance for happiness, and I wouldn’t give Augie the satisfaction. (Before it was all over, I had plenty of practice denying him that.) I had to throw them off, but I couldn’t eradicate them entirely, so I balled them up into something unrecognizable, beneath my notice. They were the problematic part of the story. I made them manageable, which is only another way of saying they were managing me. And as the life I made in spite of him unravels, I feel those memories rushing toward me, their strange energies demanding their place.
Spring 1974: The Appointment

“Susanna! It’s your time to shine!” says Augustus.

He’s dressed in white, an Indian tunic with a fillip of shiny embroidery around the neckline forming a stark, narrow V against his dark skin, revealing the tiniest, blackest coils of hair I have ever seen. They are sparse, but they look soft, and I haven’t imagined that—the softness—so I must be staring, which is probably why he’s calling on me. He doesn’t often.

“I… what’s the… could you repeat the question?” A red-hot flush streaks up my neck. Don’t spread across my face, not now.

“Don’t worry, baby, this is all review. What jazz recording figures prominently at the start of Ellison’s Invisible Man?”

Baby. The heat swoops up again and spreads all over. But I’m worried about something else now, so it evaporates quickly. My eyes move over the room, gauging the mostly white faces around me. It doesn’t mean anything, I know; he says “baby” like other people say “dear.” But is this the kind of thing people interpret as “race baiting?” I’ve heard he was reported for that, though I’ve never noticed anything like it myself, not in the entire semester.

Augustus is half-sitting on the broad sill that runs the length of the classroom beneath the windows, one leg supporting him on the floor, the other swinging lightly from the knee. Does his leg stop moving then, for a fraction of a second? He tamps the filter end of his cigarette against the pane, then against the sill next to him, making it bounce. Thunk-thunk-thunk. Tap-tap-tap. A familiar gesture. It puts me at ease.
“What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue. Armstrong.” I get it out quickly, eyes down. An easy one, thank God.

“That’s right!” he crows. “And why is it supposed that jazz had so little literary influence during the Harlem Renaissance?” Another easy one. I open my mouth to answer, but he says: “Marcus! It’s on you, brother!”

“Still considered the devil’s music, even by middle-class blacks,” Marcus says, world-weary. One of a handful of African-Americans at Williams Liberal Arts College, the dashiki-clad Marcus often sounds as if he is just barely putting up with something. What? I wonder.

Outside the window a flurry of students from the Fine Arts building spills into the clover-filled quad, signaling the end of class.

“These are the kinds of questions you can expect on the test, along with a brief essay on a topic you’ll choose from among three options,” Augustus says, raising three fingers, along with his voice, above the swish and clatter of paper-gathering, book-stacking, chair-scrapping. “But—listen please!—your grade will be based mainly on your theme paper, so if you haven’t set up a time for a conference yet, I’m here for the next few.”

I move sluggishly, tugging down on my shift as I stand, shouldering my heavy leather book bag, but not so slowly as to be the last to leave. I have thirty minutes to kill before my conference slot and I plan to spend them sipping something cool in the shade of that massive maple outside, gathering my wits. This will be my first time speaking to
Augustus one-on-one. He’s going to give me feedback on my paper. No big deal, really, but…

He is at the front of the room, lighting up again, one ear tipped at Marcus, who is saying something low. I pass them unnoticed and am just outside the door when I hear him call out, “Susanna!” Marcus edges past me, not making eye contact. When I peep at him, though, his eyes are slanting back at me, with a hardness in them.

Augustus is sliding records into their sleeves. “Marcus had to cancel, so you’re my only conferencee today. Take these?” he says, handing me a stack of albums.

“Okay,” I say, absorbing the change in plan. *No wit-gathering.* I stand marooned as Augustus bustles around gathering up. Taj Mahal is smiling up from the cover of “Recycling the Blues and Other Related Stuff” on the top of the stack. Next to him is Mississippi John Hurt, who is smiling, too. This is Taj’s latest album. He’s spicing things up with the conch and the Pointer Sisters, but I prefer the harder-core blues of his first album, the one that starts off with that audacious harmonica and the driving, intractable beat of *Leaving Trunk.* I hear it now, and feel a tiny swoon of regret.

I look across the desks pointing every which-way around the room. I’m going to miss this class. It’s been my one elective this freshman year, my only bright spot, really. I had room for it only after dropping my major, Theater. I knew all about Howlin’ Wolf and Jimmy Reed and Muddy Waters before, but I have this class to thank for introducing me to Taj Mahal and so many others, like Charlie Parker—though I’m not sure what’s so great about him yet. Of course, Darrell doesn’t even get Taj. I smirk, picturing his freckled face, eyes crossing as I turn up the volume on “Statesboro Blues.” “I’ll school...
you this summer,” I told him (I love using “school” as a verb), my elbow knocking into his ribs. My last teenage summer. Will it be like last summer, riding bikes under the moon to cool off in Wild Horse Creek, lying out on the grassy hillside puzzling out the meaning of life under a sky pearly with stars? No. Back then we were just friends. Now it will be even better.

Augustus unplugs the record player and wraps the cord loosely around his fist, stuffing it into an open slot in the rear of its suitcase carrier. Piling books and folders on the lid, he hoists it up, motions with his head toward the door, and starts walking, cigarette dangling from his lips. I swing the bumpy weight of my bag onto my hip and follow in his acrid, smoky wake, happy to be out of his line of vision. Not that he was really looking at me.

Perspiration pricks my armpits, wetting the openings of my sleeveless dress. On no. A stain is growing. It will show, too, on this light green. I should have worn a darker color. But why am I so nervous? True, Augustus has fascinated me all semester. I’ve even told my parents about him, relating the things he said and did that tickled me the most. Like the time he gave the class a “hambone” demonstration (he’s really good at it), and the time he said, to a girl who was surprised he could get sunburned, “This is some real, live shit from Africa, baby, but it can get darker still.” I felt like applauding, because why was that girl surprised? It’s skin, isn’t it? Human skin? Maybe she’s the one who accused him of race baiting. He said “baby” then, too. But was that race baiting? What is race baiting? Is it the mere mention of Africa?
A lot of students seem suspicious of Augustus. They don’t understand him. *But I do,* I realize. He would never believe it, because I’m white and from a place that’s about as different as you can get from his brick and asphalt turf. But it’s true. I wish he knew. It might make him feel better about Williams, might encourage him to offer another course next year. But from all I can tell, I’m pretty much invisible to him. Which, actually, is good. I’m not sure why, but I can barely keep it together when he turns his focus on me. Something about the way he looks at a person is too intense, even though his eyes don’t exactly match and it’s hard to tell just what they’re looking at. It isn’t his eyes, though. It’s just… *him.* Maybe this is what people call “animal magnetism.” If it is, he has more of it than anyone I know in Fieldbrook, which, though only 20 miles away, might as well be another country. It *is* the country.

I think of my family’s 14 acres just a few “crow miles” back from the edge of the bluffs dropping down into the Missouri River bottoms. For most of my childhood, wheat and cornfields flowed downhill from our yellow brick farmhouse hunkering comfortably under the trees; in other years, like this one, row upon row of vegetables. Behind the house, beds of tulips and irises, the product of my mother’s sole creative endeavor, are just coming to the end of their glorious bloom cycle. I moved back home, relieved if chagrined, after just one semester of living on campus, and I still don’t know why. I thought of myself as mature, even sophisticated, when the year began. I’m bored by most people my age, who don’t share my taste in music and haven’t read half the books I have. In summers, I checked them out ten at a time and lugged them home from the Bookmobile, stacked in my arms, the full mile along Wild Horse Creek Road from the
parking lot of Ascension Catholic Church. I finished them all in a few days, leaning back against the broad branch of a giant sliver maple, lying on a blanket under an elm, or stretched out in a “chaise” of woven plastic at the roadside stand my family operates.

I spent my last two years in high school craving the stimulation of an urban environment. I pictured romantic Williams College, with its Brontë-esque spires, as the place where I would finally get the opportunities and recognition I deserved as a developing actress, and meet kindred spirits who would engage with me in passionate dialogues about Dostoyevsky, Lina Wertmüller, Sartre and Beauvoir. But those conversations never materialized. Worse, I came to dread acting—not so much acting as everything you had to endure to get to do it: the minefield of egos to be negotiated daily, the cutthroat peers who saw me not as friend but competitor. Nothing in my quiet life weeding the cucumber, green bean, and bell pepper patches, had prepared me for it, or for my roommate—forever pointing out “negative hues” in my aura—or the Resident Assistant, a senior art major who used to invite me to his room on some administrative pretext and massage my shoulders as he showed off the latest addition to his thesis project: a set of molded dildos in various sizes, colors, and textures. I hated to admit my lack of cool, but I wasn’t up to it. When I was not excruciatingly uncomfortable, I was downright spooked. So I dropped Theater and started commuting from home where, for the first time in my life, I have been able to tune out the atmosphere of silent, chronic hostility between my parents and simply absorb the smell and feel of the earth and the weather, whose shifts I can sense before they arrive, looking out across the valley to other
hills, green in summer, white in winter, richly variegated in fall, blossomy in spring, and beckoning and restorative always.

I hug the albums to my chest and hurry down the corridor after Augustus, crossing bright parallelograms of light streaking out each classroom door. Passing the rooms, I catch glimpses of the green Williams campus. It isn’t the country here, but it’s not so urban after all. It’s leafy in the way of an old and settled inner suburb. Just five miles north and east of here is North St. Louis. That’s where Augustus lives and that is as urban as you can get, with robberies and shootings and boarded up houses—and fantastic music in dank dives, like the Moose Lounge at the corner of Pope and Rosalie.

I’ve had tastes of those ravaged neighborhoods, with their plywood windows and weed-choked lots, on my way to concerts—Jethro Tull or Neil Young at the Kiel, Grateful Dead at the Fox—and on nighttime cruises with my “running buddy,” JS, three years older. We drive around in his pickup, or one of his hundred-dollar cars, steering away from the strip malls and drive-in burger joints where the local teens congregate, to traverse the twenty miles and hundred light years between Fieldbrook and the Big City over streets like Olive and Delmar that get raggedier the deeper you go, all the way down to the Mississippi where the newly built Gateway Arch gleams high against a hazy sky, stars swallowed up in the man-made light. We might stop so I can press my cheek against one of the silver legs and peer up the swooping taper, light-headed, to the slender top. We might drive south to the brewery to look for the gargoyle of the fox eating the chicken leg, talking and laughing nonstop as we drink in the ruined surroundings, captivating, beautiful, to us, running forever on an empty tank, driving up on the sidewalk once when
traffic got in our way, and listening to Sonny Boy Williamson, Elmore James, and BB
King on the eight-track all the way.

One night we even made our way north from Olive to the Moose itself,
negotiating the labyrinth of smaller streets where the caved-in roofs and charred-out
windows make the houses look as if they’ve been bombed. But for the bit of Sensimilla
JS scored, we might never have been so bold. It wasn’t as if we could get in, or even get
out of the car, in that neighborhood. But at that moment it seemed like the best idea in the
world.

“Let’s just go see!” I shouted. “Let’s drive by, see if we can hear the Bosman
Twins from outside!”

“Hey, Paradise, don’t ask me twice!” JS drawled in his silly baritone, spinning the
wheel due north.

“Whatchoo callin’ me? ‘Paradise’ or ‘Pair o’ Dice?’”

“Yooouuu bet-ter hush!

“Hush!”

“Hush!”

“Hush!”

“Somebody’s callin’ my naaaame!” we bellowed, our delivery faltering only as
we drew near the place, a dark brick building on a darker corner, light and music
streaming out the door in a widening strip.

“Hey, listen!” I cried, and clapped, tilting my ear toward the sound of the dual
saxophones spiraling toward us. I looked at JS, my eyes gleaming in that demonic way
they do when I’m super excited. “There’s no bouncer,” I said, and clutched at the door handle, on the verge of insisting we go in. But then I saw two men and a woman out on the sidewalk looking our way.

“Hellooo,” said the woman, turning her Jerri-curled head, then the rest of her show-stopping body, in our direction. She was wearing shiny yellow platform shoes, white short-shorts, and a silky top that showed lots of bosom when she leaned down to get a look inside the car. “What are y’all doin’ here?”

“Hi!” I said. “We, uh, we’re just…”

“Do you know where we can buy some weed?” JS said, ducking to make eye contact.

The lady’s black-penciled eyebrows shot up. “What…? ‘Some weed,’ he say!” She whooped, slapping her thigh and looking over her shoulder at her male companions. They were leaning against the building smoking, wearing white creased trousers and looks of high amusement. “Y’all, better, you know, turn it around?” She made a twirling motion with her hand. “The eagle flies on Friday, don’t ch’all know!”

“Oh, yeah, we know!” I gushed. “And Saturday I go out to play!” I sang it, like a fool, too loud, but more or less in tune. I flashed JS a look—Isn’t this great?—then caught sight behind him of a group of young men approaching the car. My face dropped. The hairs on my arms seemed to vibrate. Everybody knew about North St. Louis. “Okay, nice meeting you!” I called to the lady. Then, to JS, “Maybe we should…” I flicked my eyes at his window.
He followed my gaze. “Oh!” he said, and lurched the old black Falcon forward, sending me smacking into the dashboard.

“OW!” I hollered, and we burst out laughing, sliding down in our seats, squealing away, weak with hilarity and relief.

I love those escapes, especially on nights when the stillness of home seems sinister and the tension of the unsaid squeezes all the mystery and possibility out of life, my father closed up in his reading, my mother sitting somewhere in the dark. JS is fleeing something sad or ugly, too, I never know what; we don’t talk about that. We talk about New Orleans, how we’ll go to Jazz Fest next Spring, what he’ll do when he moves down there, how I’ll go to France someday. So far, though, soaking up the view from the windows of the Falcon, listening to music and talking like mad, have been adventure enough.

But now I know someone who lives in those intriguing downtown places, someone whose world is much more vital than my own. Maybe Augustus makes me nervous because I’m afraid that, when we sit down face-to-face, he’ll see through me to the blank canvas of my inner world, the world of a girl from Fieldbrook who doesn’t know anything and hasn’t lived anything yet, only wants to. Beads of moisture dot my hairline. I lean down as I walk, swiping my forehead against my upper arm.

We exit the building. I squint, blinded, as the afternoon heat slaps me like a giant hand. The classroom windows were open, but the thick brick building retained the morning coolness, withholding from me the true nature of the day, which has changed within the hour. It hums with bees and locusts and soporific fragrances that nearly
overwhelm me. I stumble in a moment of eclipse, see only white light, feel only a faint thrum building in intensity. I gulp as if emerging from water, open my eyes. Augustus has not broken stride. I run to catch up.

His pace is quick, yet smooth as a cat’s in his black canvas shoes with thin soles. The tiny gold ring I’ve often noticed glints in his left earlobe. Up close, I am surprised to see that he is only a few inches taller than I am. He looms larger in front of the class. Today he wears no hat—it’s too warm for that—and on the back of his head I see a tiny hairless clearing in his scalp, the slash of a scar. His shirt, so thin I can make out the muscle ridges under it, hangs down over the top of his linen draw-string pants. The hem of it sticks out behind him where it drapes against the thick shelf of his backside. I’ve often noticed that, too. Unlike Darrell, with his near-hairless chest, all of Augustus’s features are bold and unambiguous. I’ve been transfixed by his differentness, but now I realize I’m drawn, too, by his familiarity. The music, the poetry, a fun-seeking fervor that seems to mask a brooding nature, and now, his size, so close to mine… Isn’t he the kindred spirit I hoped to find at Williams? I feel a spasm of happiness.

The door to the Fine Arts building is propped open. We enter its stillness and descend through progressively cooler layers to the basement where the teaching assistants have their offices. I plod along in an agreeable daze, feeling my blood pressure drop with each step downward. By the time we reach Augustus’s office, I’ve entered a state of cool surrender.

Augustus stashes the record player in a corner and places his cigarette butt, still burning, in an ashtray atop piles of papers on his desk.
“Spring!” he cries, stretching up to poke open a window near the ceiling. “Yes, ma’am. Yes indeed.”

He takes the albums from me and stacks them on the floor against his scuffed-up desk, gesturing toward a tall, stained armchair, midnight blue, a few feet off. I sink into it and eye the swiveling wooden office chair in front of me. When he sits down and turns to face me, our knees will be inches apart. I inhale. It will be a few moments before that happens, though—he is rifling through the clutter for my paper—so I let the air out and look around. Floor-to-ceiling shelves are stuffed with books, stacks overflowing by my chair: *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, by Leroi Jones; *The Life of John Keats*, by Charles Armitage Brown; *Paradise Lost*, John Milton… Rusty shears are nailed to an exposed patch of wall. A tiny troll doll, pink face smudged with black ink under a wisp of purple hair, dangles at my eye level from the shade of a floor lamp. And a strange little instrument lies on a stack of manuscripts at my elbow. I pick it up, plunking my thumbs against its thin metal strips. The sound that comes out, if not tuneful, is cool and mellow. I feel the box quiver in my hands.

“Move your thumbs around over the hole,” says Augustus, turning.

“What is it?” I ask.

“A kalimba,” he says, reaching. “Here.”

Floating my paper into my lap, he takes the kalimba and sits down in his chair. It squawks like a parrot as he swivels toward me. I look down quickly for the grade and see a big green A-. I smile. Now he’s playing, and the air vibrates with pure, resonant tones, the sound like something in a dream. Augustus moves his thumbs over the hole and
waves the instrument up and down to modulate the notes, draw them out. Then he stops and places the kalimba on his desk, reaching for the last of his cigarette.

“Are you a musician?”

“No, I’m not,” Augustus says, his voice velvety, quieter than in class. “I studied flute, but I don’t really play.”

“The same for me with guitar.”

“Oh? Guitar, eh? Well, well.” He leans back, one arm across his middle, the elbow of the other propped in his hand, and brings the cigarette stub to his lips. He sips in smoke noisily and sighs it out, picks at his lower lip with the nails of thumb and ring finger as if to remove an invisible fleck of tobacco.

“My father plays. I took lessons. But I don’t practice.” I shrug and fall silent. This close, I can see his eyes clearly. Though both are brown, the iris of the right one is rimmed in milky purple, and points almost imperceptibly upward. Immediately I see it isn’t focusing. He sees only out of his left eye.

“One eye to see, one eye to believe,” Augustus says.

“Oh!” I flush, force a laugh. It’s just as I thought: he can see right into me. I hesitate, but he seems at ease, so I ask, “Has it always been like that?”

“Nope. Had a baseball batted into it when I was nine. I was pitching. Aaaand, by the time my mother got me to the hospital,” he turns and presses out his cigarette, “it was too late.”
I gasp. “I—” But my rush of sympathy is quelled by how easily he shared this painful memory, his long acceptance of it. When the heavy black phone jangles sonorously on his desk, neither of us jumps.

Augustus reaches back and picks up the receiver.

“Yes,” he answers softly.

I look at my paper and smile again, face relaxing. I’m pleased by the grade and proud of the subject, “Blues Rhythms in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks.”

“Hey,” he says into the phone. Then, “Yes, I did.”

Brooks. What a discovery! I have yet to read a poem of hers I don’t like. My paper analyzes the obvious choices, “Queen of the Blues” and “We Real Cool,” but it is Brooks’ earlier poems, deemed “traditional” by the critics, that really stick in my mind, like “Kitchenette Building:”

*We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan*
*Grayed in and gray. ‘Dream’ makes a giddy sound, not strong*
*Like ‘rent,’ ‘feeding a wife,’ ‘satisfying a man...’*

“Yes I am,” Augustus says.

The involuntary plan. I know what that is, though I’m only 19. I know that if I’m not careful, I might end up like those people in the poem, blinkered so by daily survival that getting into a shower of lukewarm water is the highlight of my day. I consider my future: one more summer of fun in the sun, and then a big, black void. I don’t even know what I’m majoring in anymore. I worry a finger, frowning. Money is always a problem; my parents don’t have much. Since I’m not studying Theater anymore, next year I should go to the cheaper state school and take the kinds of courses Williams doesn’t offer, cover
all my bases, until I know what I’m doing. Unpleasant thought. I reposition myself on the
soft, deep cushion, extinguish it.

“I’m with a student now,” Augustus says into the phone.

I pick up my paper again, turn its pages. I love Gwendolyn Brooks, an
accomplished poet and a real lady, but I secretly aspire to be like Carolyn Rogers, another
of the course’s revelations:

they say
that I should not use the word
muthafucka anymo…

But how ridiculous I would sound using a word like that!

...I say,
that I am soft, and you can subpoena my man, put him
on trial, and he will testify that I am
soft in the right places at the right times...

The voluptuousness behind those words is thrilling. But I could never say “my
man” about a boyfriend—Darrell, for instance. The very idea of it has me stifling a grin.
Darrell or no Darrell, I doubt you can call anyone your “man” until you’ve had sex with
him, and I haven’t had sex with anyone yet.

“I’ll do that.”

I look up. Augustus’s voice has lost its neutrality. He replaces the heavy receiver
with an irritated clatter and reaches for his pack of cigarettes, a dark scowl twisting his
lips. He leans forward, elbows on knees, hands clasped, the unlit cigarette jutting out of
his fingers. The phone call has been about something, and not something trifling, either.
He sits up. “Sorry about that,” he says. “The paper’s good. If you want to bump it up to a flat A, make the additions and corrections indicated. Otherwise you’re complete.”

Is that it? Our conference is over? I’ve just started to unwind. Aren’t we going to talk about Gwendolyn Brooks or anything else?

“Oh, I say uncertainly, but don’t move to leave. Augustus leans on his elbows again, glowering. He doesn’t seem to know I’m here anymore.

“So, for the test…” I say, delaying the moment of withdrawal from this enchanted cave and the sense of possibility I always feel in his proximity.

He looks at me abruptly. “Do you have somewhere you need to be right now?”

“Now? Not really. I was just going to stop by the bookstore then head home.”

“Where’s home?”

“Fieldbrook.”

“Fieldbrook… A country girl. You grow up there?”

“Yes, but I’m only staying with my parents temporarily, to save money.” I force myself maintain eye contact, pretend my face isn’t reddening.

“Want to go for a drive?”

“Sure. I mean. Where?”

“Fieldbrook!” He’s already up. “Show me some fields and brooks on this fine

Spring day!”
“Okay…” I say. What to make of this about-face? I don’t know, but Augustus’s reversion to his gregarious classroom persona puts me back on familiar ground. “I’d love to,” I smile.

Yes, I realize, I really would.
Spring 1997: Two Teas

I stood in front of the door, key ring dangling from my pinky, and jumped, lurching backward, flipping the chinking keys, snatching, missing again. I was pressing three library books to my chest with my forearm, shoulder sagging under the weight of a heavy gym bag, bicep wedging a CD holder against my ribcage. In my other hand I clutched a paper bag containing half a dozen apples and some cheese sticks for Harry, horseradish mustard for Larry, and a coconut treat and jar of artichoke hearts for me. My purse swung from my wrist, hoodie draped across my arm, to which Irma’s leash was also tethered. She looked up, swishing her tail, adorable, that one eye ringed in black in her snowy, whiskery face. She was thinking of her water bowl and the rocking chair in the corner of the living room with the plate glass windows on either side, her favorite spot. I was thinking of a bath and making it to my meeting on time, and then—yippee!—over to the City to meet Larry for lunch, stopping if I could at Baker Beach for a quick walk with Irma before heading home to pick up Harry from school.

I waggled my torso to reposition the books, propping them on my jutting belly. As of that morning, I was in my second trimester. I should do the reasonable thing and put something down, but I was too heavy-laden. If I bent over too far, everything would crash onto the brick path; there’d broken glass, oozing artichoke brine. Still, I shouldn’t be jumping around like this. I was showing already, but that was natural with the second child, they said. According to Dr. Sakamoto, this was the “normal” part of the pregnancy, by which he meant that I was 41 and considered high-risk and things could get dicey as we approached the third trimester. Eventually he would want me on bed rest, he said, but
I was going to do everything I could to avoid that. Just back from a weight-lifting session, I felt oxygen-infused, fantastic.

Pushing in close, I used the edge of the unfinished redwood frame as leverage to manipulate the keys, finding the right one by feel. There. I pressed my chest to the door, turning my head sideways to keep from smashing my nose, pushing my hips back to keep from gouging my belly on the tongue-latch sticking out below the keyhole. I needed to be careful not to scratch the lovely Craftsman door Larry and I had recently replaced the rotting, peeling, original with. That old door had been the last vestige of the funky shack swathed in orange shag carpeting we bought five years ago and began transforming into the cozy 1,200-square-foot cottage we called home. We finished the lovely cherry wood of the door ourselves and fitted it with art glass—“we” meaning Larry, technically, although of course I was the one to choose both stain and glass. “You’re design. I’m execution,” Larry always said. It was a good arrangement, although sometimes I suspected it had been engineered by Larry to duck the discomfort of expressing an opinion.

I placed the first joint of my forefinger over the tip of the key, feeling for the keyhole with my bent knuckle. Larry was long used to the occasional scratch I inadvertently bestowed on the cars, but a scratch on the new door, I knew, would be harder to forgive. Not that Larry ever really got mad. I remembered the night I decided to marry him. He’d flown from Texas to meet me at my parents’ house to take me on a trip to the Colorado Rockies (knowing already the way to my heart: travel). His plane arrived in the middle of the night. I forgot to leave him a key and his tentative knock roused the
entire household—dog barking, me screaming when I realized my mistake, parents routed from bed on the night before the worrisome hospital procedure I was there to accompany them to. Poor Larry; putting him in a position where he was forced to cause trouble as the worst thing you could do to him. When I opened the door, there he stood under the porch light, hands on hips, biceps protruding, his hair’s red highlights shining orange in the yellow light. I saw that he was both supremely annoyed and sheepishly glad to see me. *This is it, I thought. This is as bad as it will ever get with him.*
“You like to drive?” Augustus asks as we approach his faded blue Volvo. “Yeah!” I answer. Like to drive? Driving means never having to see the pain in my mother’s eyes, though her lips remain passive always, as she considers my latest request as if it will require her to push a boulder up a cliff. It means, “I guess so. When will you be back?” instead of an anguished “Oh, I don’t know...” It means play rehearsals, ballet lessons, babysitting jobs—and smoking pot with the windows rolled down and the music turned up—instead of confronting the stifling inertia that presses all the air from the house and forces me out to the trees. “Nice somebody still likes to,” Augustus says, extending his keys. I take them with an uncertain smile and scoot into the driver’s seat, doing my best to behave as if being asked to drive—being asked to go anywhere with Augustus—is perfectly normal, though I am buzzing all over with the strangeness of it. I have never driven a Volvo, but I can handle a stick. I learned on the tractor, then later on that old turquoise truck JS calls Mabel. JS was way more patient than my father; he only laughed when I ground the gears. So I’ve had plenty of practice, not that Augustus even asks. “Pull up over here for a minute,” he says, pointing ahead to a liquor store. I park. Augustus gets out and makes his feline way across the parking lot. The glass and metal door closes behind him with a flash of reflected sunlight. I look around the car, consider opening the glove box, but don’t. The floor on the passenger side is littered with papers. More papers clutter the floor in back, but a Panama hat, a pair of black shoes, and a brown leather bag, zipped shut, sit neatly on the seat. I turn back and
watch for his return, muscles taut with the thrill of the unknown and the fear of it. I’m out for a drive with the colorful, worldly, intelligent Augustus Brown. The raw fact of it is incredible. But it doesn’t sit right. Why is he suddenly interested in me? Is he interested in me? Or is this something else? As soon as we left his office, he began peppering me with questions. What was my favorite Gwendolyn Brooks poem? “The Mother,” I said.

“Oh? Why?”

“It’s… complicated. And real. She’s really sad and it’s really hard—you know, she’ll never ‘wind up the sucking thumb or scuttle off ghosts that come’—but still, she doesn’t regret it.”

Augustus bobbed his head.

“Abortion must be horrible!” I volunteered, quick to add, “Even though I’m glad it’s legal now and all. Finally.” My classmate Georgia flashed through my mind at that point. Georgia’s mother, it was darkly rumored, flew her to New York for an abortion a year before we graduated from high school. Georgia grew quieter after that and lost most of her meanness. A permanent vertical line formed between her eyebrows. But at this Augustus frowned and I saw a shadow of the scowl that had crossed his face earlier, after the phone call in his office, so I groped for a change of subject, asking him the first question that popped into my mind.

“Do you have brothers and sisters?”

“I do. Two of each.” Augustus was the youngest; his eldest brother, Edgar, was 15 years older, he said. His father, whose name was George, worked at a steel mill. I pictured him shirtless with bunched up muscles, an older version of Augustus sweating
rivers as he hammered on an anvil, molten steel leaping up behind him in white-hot sprays. My own father works at a desk, which is uninteresting, so I didn’t mention it.

What do men do at desks? Does anyone know? When Augustus asked about my family, I told him about Tom and Crissie, 13 months older and 3 years younger, respectively.

Augustus said, “My, my, Irish twins. Mama’s busy.”

Was there anything strange about that conversation? No. We’re getting to know each other, that’s all. Maybe this is the kind of unplanned, unorthodox thing that happens all the time in Augustus’ world. Isn’t it the kind of spontaneous thing I long to do more of myself? This is exciting! I squeeze the steering wheel and bounce a little in the seat to dissipate my tension.

Augustus exits the liquor store with a cold soda for me and a six-pack of beer for himself. He takes an opener from the glove box and pops off the cap of my 7-Up, then slices two opposing triangles into the top of a Colt 45 malt liquor. I take a sip from the cold, green bottle, wet with condensation. I hand it back to him, my mouth filled with spritzy sweetness, and blot my lips on my wrist. As I pull out of the lot, Augustus tilts back his beer for a long, sucking draw. He huffs out a “Whew!” and draws his thin sleeve across his sweaty forehead. I’m glad he hasn’t offered me any beer. I’ve never liked even the smell of alcohol, and anyway it’s illegal before age 21. Isn’t there some law about open containers in cars, too? Or is that just for the driver? Relax, I tell myself. This is fun.

We’re whizzing along now at 70 miles an hour. Augustus has finished one beer and opened another, holding it lightly between his legs with my 7-Up, not drinking from it. He stares at the green blur of Highway 40, jutting an elbow out the open window. I
glance at him. Has he ever been west of the city before? Where should I take him? Out across Wild Horse Creek past my house, of course, then maybe over Kehrs Mill, Strecker, or Shepard roads. Those are the places I wander when I need to free my mind. I wind through the woods and past the fields until all my knots come undone. I tap my fingers on the wheel. I can’t wait to show him how beautiful it is. Will he feel his imagination expand the way mine does, every time I penetrate deeper into the wild? Will my places be as foreign to him as his are to me? There’s mystery out there—will he feel it?—in places like St. Albans, the strangest, most tucked-away little town I know. Maybe he’ll have a theory as to why its few buildings are painted the same creamy yellow with green trim, as to who lives in the stone mansion hidden around a bend in the narrow, leaf-strewn lane that leads to it from the main road. Thornfield Hall! A madwoman in the attic! I always think when I drive past it, fighting for a better view across the shady ravine running next to the road. But it’s obscured, even in winter, by dense, towering trees. Should I take him to St. Albans? We could go to Tavern Rock Cave. I could tell him how Meriwether Lewis nearly lost his life when he slipped on the rocks above it, saving himself by digging his knife into a crevice in the limestone bluff.

At the thought of Tavern Rock, my insides swirl. I’ve been there with Darrell, who loves caves. What would Darrell think if he saw me now? But Augustus isn’t interested in me like that, I’m certain. He felt like getting away from the city and is a naturally curious person, like me, game for anything. He’s my teacher, after all. And I want him to feel comfortable, want him to know that not everyone at Williams is the same. I’ll tell Darrell all about it—can’t wait to. But maybe I shouldn’t go all the way to
Tavern Rock. There probably isn’t time anyway. I should just drive him over Wild Horse Creek, out and back. That makes more sense.

The decision lands with a thud, the same thud I feel each night returning to my parents’ house. But this time it lands cold and hard in the pit of my stomach. No, I think. I’m always doing that, or being asked to—pulling back, playing it safe. When will I step out into the world I know is there for me? When will I make it real? Even Jane Eyre, shunned orphan, lowly governess, had adventures out in middle of nowhere, at isolated Thornfield Hall. Jane followed her heart, her conscience. She exercised her intelligence. And that was so long ago—this is 1974! Women can do whatever they want. The decision to limit the drive to the main road comes as an unwelcome pressure, hideously familiar, and I want no part of it today. I have to break free of it—now—before it drags me so low I can’t get up.

I look over at Augustus’s profile, his long forehead sloping up from the serious ridge of his brow, soft round nose and big lips, and feel a fluttering of the same fascination he’s stirred in me since I first laid eyes on him in January. His lower lip is pinker and protrudes further than his upper one. They’re so big they would fill the palm of my hand with their softness. Behind those lips, I know, are tobacco-stained teeth with gaps in the back you can see when he laughs. His head seems too large for his medium build, which is probably why I thought him taller than he is. Those things, and his mismatched eyes, lend him a hint of the grotesque, like a beast in a fairy tale, or … Mr. Rochester! Mr. Rochester, with his dark secret and burden of pain calling out for Jane’s goodness to redeem it, his desire so great he would betray her to satisfy it and seize his
chance to live—to love—at last. Yes, there’s something about Augustus that reminds me of Mr. Rochester; maybe that’s why he seems so familiar. I press my lips together and push down on the accelerator. The lush mystery of St. Albans, and the thrall of Augustus’s aliveness: I want to feel both those things at once, and this might be my only chance.

As we speed past the stand where I sell vegetables in summer, I nod toward it and the house on the hill above it. “That’s where I live,” I say.

Augustus turns quickly. “Oh? Slow down!”

“I will on the way back, if you want,” I say, looking at him sideways, surprised by his interest. “Right now I want to show you something. It’s kind of far, though. Do you have time?”

“An unknown destination. I like that,” he smirks, scooching back in his seat. He doesn’t even look at his watch, just takes another sip of beer. “The gazebo back there. That your family’s?”

“Yep, that’s our vegetable stand. We grow about 10 acres and sell some of it there and the rest on Produce Row, or directly to supermarkets. We sell all of our zucchini to Schnuck’s.”

“Well, well. Produce Row, hauling all the way down to the river.”

“The Mississippi, yeah. The Missouri’s just a mile or so over that way,” I say, slinging my thumb to the right. “If you cross the fields behind our house and go another half mile or so, you come to the edge of the bluff and can see all the way across the bottoms.” I stop. Can this possibly interest him?

“You name it.”

“Peanuts?”

“No not any more, but we did the first year. They didn’t do well.”

“Strawberries?”

“Yep.”

“Bell peppers?”

“Yep.”

“Parsnips?”

“And turnips!”

“Ha-ha!” Augustus laughs. “No wonder you’re so fresh and corn fed. You do grow corn?”

“I’ll bring you some, if you want. It gets ripe midsummer.” I feel my neck grow hot. Where will I be seeing Augustus midsummer? A distressing image springs to mind of myself in overalls and a straw hat showing up at Williams with a grocery bag, brown tassels peeking out the top. My mouth twists and I brush it from my thoughts, along with the echo of the words “corn fed.”

“My dad’s not actually a farmer,” I say. “We do it to pay for college. He’s an electronics engineer at McDonnell Douglass.”

“A Renaissance Man.”

“Yes. He is.”
I wipe the perspiration from my forehead with the back of my hand and struggle against the feeling that I’m out of my depth with this man, who sees me as a hick and a youngster—not who I really am at all. I cast about, looking for surer ground.

“So… do you like all kinds of poetry, or just…?”

“Or just Black poetry?”

“No, I mean… Do you like Keats?”

“Keats? Sure I like Keats. Do you like Keats?”

“I love him. I even memorized Ode to a Nightingale.”

“Oh, yeah? Let’s hear.”

“No, I wasn’t going to…”

“Lovely poem. ‘My heart aches…”’ he begins, lowering his head and tipping his palm toward me. He shakes out a cigarette from the pack on the dashboard.

“My heart aches,” I begin, radiating heat, “and a drowsy numbness pales / My sense as though of hemlock I had drunk, / Or emptied some dull opiate to the brain / One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk…”

“‘Tis not through envy of thy happy lot…” Augustus chimes in dramatically, crossing his legs and waving his cigarette expansively.

“…But being too happy in thine happiness…” I trail off. Is Keats bourgeois or old fashioned or something? He seems to be laughing at me.

“Do you know what Lethe-wards are?” I ask, his student again.
“Lethe-wards? Oh, let’s see, now,” Augustus says, cupping a hand against his forehead. “Greek. River of forgetfulness or some such. Theme of death. You like poems about death?”

“I never thought of it as being about death.”

“Course not. You’re all about youth and greenness,” he says, shifting to lean back against the door so he can see me. “Where did you learn so much poetry?”

I feel a jab of annoyance. “I just read it. We have all kinds of books at home. My father... Well where did you learn it? I mean, I’m not that young. How old are you?”

“I’m 26,” he says, flicking ash over his shoulder. His smile hardens for an instant, then releases. “What else have you read?”

“All kinds of things. My favorite book of all time is probably Jane Eyre. I like Wuthering Heights, too, and Vanity Fair...”

“Nineteenth century all. The Romantics!” he crows.

There it is again: that amusement. No sooner do I steer the conversation to safe currents than I find myself back on the shoals, feeling a fool. “Have you ever thought of teaching a course about the Romantics? Maybe next fall?”

“No, no. I’m just tying up loose ends at Williams. My coursework ended in December. I start the doctoral program at Wash U. in the fall, where I’ll do some teaching as a T.A., but nothing like the course you’re taking.”

“Wash U.?”

He looks surprised. “Washington University?”
“Oh, that’s right! I know,” I say, desperate. “Wow, that’s… Wash U. is so respected. So… no more Williams?”

“No more Williams,” he says. “That. Is. It.” He takes a long draw on his cigarette and blows out in a long stream, massaging his forehead with thumb and middle finger. He drops his hand. “Have you attended any poetry readings this semester? I don’t remember seeing you.”

“I was at the one last month at Loretto Hall.”

“Were you? There’s another one next Wednesday at 7 o’clock. I’ll be reading with Don Hindley. You should come. I’d be interested in your opinion.”

I shoot him a suspicious look. “I don’t know much…” I say.

“More than most,” he says.

Our eyes meet for an instant, then Augustus leans forward to stub out his cigarette. As he turns to look out at the passing trees, I think I hear him say, “…in your pretty green dress,” but I may be imagining it.

We arrive in St. Albans and pull in near the front of the general store, the only business in town. “Look at this now,” Augustus murmurs, handing me the 7-Up. He seems in no hurry to get out. He sits back, taking in the surroundings and finishing off his beer.


Now that we’re no longer moving, the air lies on us heavy and still. The rushing car sound is gone, replaced by the ticking of the cooling engine and the lazy scree of insects. Not a soul is in sight. It’s always like that here. St. Albans is a ghost town, but
one whose population seems to have deserted it only moments ago. I think I might go into the store for another cold drink, but I don’t feel like moving. From the car we can see past the store into the back yards of the few houses lining the main road. A meadow of lawn stretches out before us, unbroken by fences, green and inviting, thick with leaning clover, buzzing with bees. Tall trees trail long, twiggy tendrils with heart-shaped leaves. Beneath the insect drone, I can hear a creek burbling at the bottom of the ravine, which is blooming thick with bramble flowers, pink and white. The sound of the water calls to mind the image of it, and I feel cooler. I close my eyes, absorbing it all, waiting for what happens next, for what might come of what I’ve done by bringing two such discrepant worlds together.

I lay my empty bottle at my feet and lift my hair, holding it against my head and fanning the back of my neck with my other hand. It’s exceptionally humid, less Spring than Summer, as the barometer of my hair testifies, swelling in volume with the thickening atmosphere. Augustus swings up his beer can and presses it against my neck. I move away reflexively with an awkward smile. There isn’t much coolness left in it anyway. Confused, I decide to pretend he hasn’t done that.

“There’s a cave over there, Tavern Rock,” I say, pointing out the driver’s side. “You follow the railroad tracks and climb a little way up the bluff. It’s cooler there.”

“In a minute maybe.”

Now, in the quiet, the strangeness and excitement of the situation surfaces again, along with a creeping awareness. There must be black people in St. Albans, but I’ve never seen any. The black boys and girls I went to school with live in an isolated area
people called Little Africa, or in the small log houses of Hellwigs’ Farm in the river flats. That’s where Wanda lives. She used to get on the bus each morning smelling of wood smoke and bacon, with a button pinned to her jacket: “Say it Loud! I’m Black and I’m Proud!” Those were song lyrics, I knew, because my brother, Tom, and I love James Brown, used to try to imitate him, the screams, the cape, the splits, all his moves. But we never hung around with Wanda, or any other black kids. Why not? I wonder now.

I was thirteen when Martin Luther King was assassinated, ten years old when Malcolm X was shot. Sitting here now, I feel coldness in the center of my spine, my body hair seems magnetized. Have I made a mistake, bringing Augustus to St. Albans? What if someone comes out of the store and sees us? A black man drinking beer in a car might seem out of place. A black man doing so with a white woman might even seem provocative. I shake my head. No. You can’t think that way. Things will never change if you do, ignorance will prevail, and that’s wrong. I have pride, too, enough to override my uneasiness. Is it enough to override any trouble that might come? I don’t know. For now, we seem safer in the car, where we preserve the option of a hasty exit. But what about the cave?

I look down the tracks that run along the foot of the bluff rising 300 feet from the floodplain, then back at the store. St. Albans is as beautiful as ever, just as mysterious, but now it has a different cast. Who lives here? Maybe its residents aren’t rednecks, maybe they’re interesting and enlightened, but there’s no way of knowing. No way of knowing what kind of chance I’ve taken by bringing a black man here. I turn to Augustus. He seems sedated by the beer. He looks idly back at me, waving off a fly. I
look past him, tangled in my thoughts. Is this what it’s like to be him? To come to a sleepy town like this, under a blue sky adrift with clouds, lost in a profusion of leaves and sounds that beckon eye and ear through intricate layers into secret places, only to find that the dark recesses hold not enchantment, but danger? *Lynching*, I think. I sit up straighter, eyes wide. How could I be so thoughtless? I feel diminished, ashamed. If Augustus thinks me a young “corn fed” fool, he’s no doubt right.

But Augustus doesn’t seem to be afraid. Does that mean I shouldn’t be? Wouldn’t he have a clearer notion of the presence or absence of the kind of danger I’m thinking of? He’s been around for seven years longer than I, and been black all his life. *Black all his life—ha!* A little laugh escapes me. I turn to him, smiling, eyes settling on his.

“What’s got you tickled?” he asks, grinning. I say nothing, just look away and shrug. When I turn back his face is warm and relaxed, his smile sensuous.

“Hey,” he says softly.

My smile flickers eyes, moving between his, as I absorb the new twist to the events of this remarkable, disorienting day. It’s easy now to tell which eye is looking back. His irises are a rich, wheat-flecked brown, the lashes short and curly. He’s quiet, focused. I want to say something to stave off what’s coming, keep us where we are, not cross further into unmapped territory. I fight for words, the more mundane the better.

“So, have you ever…”?

“Hey,” he says again, quieter still. He curls a finger under my chin and slowly draws my face toward his. Then he leans in so smoothly I don’t think of resisting or complying, only *He’s going to kiss me*. I want to understand it first, but here are his lips,
warmer and silkier than anything I’ve felt before or imagined from my reading. He tastes
of beer and cigarettes, and of something else, deep and mineral, like well water. I slip into
the kiss, going liquid myself. Gone are the mysteries of St. Albans, lush or lurid. This
gentle, unhurried kiss is its own world, and I disappear into it without a backward look.
My lips soften, part, the tip of my tongue touches his soft, wide mouth, pokes into its
corners, meets his tongue. His breath is on my cheek, his arm around my waist, his hand
presses lightly into the small of my back, its shapely fingers spread. I touch the hand
beneath my chin with my fingertips and feel the soft veins on the inside of his wrist with
my thumb. I reach my arm across the back of his neck, rest my palm on his shoulder. It
feels, through the thin fabric, as smooth and warm as a sun-baked stone.

Augustus sighs and pulls back, both arms around me, murmuring, “Now this is
what Spring is for.”

I open my eyes. The world of the kiss evaporates. That world was mine—I knew
my way around it instinctively—but this one is a rolling sea. I look away, then lean into
him clumsily to hide my face.

“Hey,” he says, taking my shoulders and leaning back to search my face. “I’m
sorry, baby. You all right?”

I feel my mouth contorting. “I don’t know,” I say through the knot of my throat.
Then tears roll down and there’s no hiding them. I cover my face with my hands,
mortified.
“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have…”

“No, it’s all right. I liked it,” I say into my hands. I swallow hard, fight for control. “I like you. A lot,” I say. I cross my arms over my chest. “I just don’t understand. Why did you bring me here?”

“You brought me, remember?” he says, floating a smile, though his eyes look sad, regretful. He takes my face in his hands, wiping my tears with his long, curved thumbs.

“I don’t know what you want,” I say, husky-voiced.

Augustus raises his eyebrows. “What I want?” He squeezes my hands and places one on top of the other on his thigh, patting them. He reaches for his cigarettes and lights one, shaking out the match. “I don’t want the deed to the ranch. I don’t want fifty head of cattle. I don’t want the combination to the safe.”

“Well… that’s a relief,” I say. But it isn’t. I’m even more confused. I know now that it’s hopeless, that the world that calls out to me is impossible for me to navigate. However much I yearn to ply its waters, I’ll be forever stuck on a sandbar.

“Look,” Augustus says, taking one of my hands with his free one and settling back against the door. He inhales deeply on the cigarette and turns his head to exhale out the window, then meets my eyes directly. “You should know some things about me.” He takes another puff and blows it out. “I’m married.”

“Oh.”

“Separated. Over a year. Divorcing, actually. That was her on the phone back there, telling me to sign the papers.” He sighs out smoke and scowls briefly again. But
when he looks at me the scowl is gone. He places my sweaty palm against his thigh and rubs the back of my hand, stroking the veins with his fingertips.

“I have a kid. Jeremy. He’s five. Lovely little rascal.”

My body feels heavy, sticky with congealing sweat. The scowl, the drive, the beer: they all make sense now. But the kiss… had he planned it from the start? One more thing to take his mind off the phone call? And why did he say these are things I should know?

“You don’t need any of this,” he says, pushing a stray, damp lock back from my temple. “You don’t know a thing about that kind of ugly nonsense. And that’s the way it should be.”

I smile half-heartedly. It isn’t as if I don’t know about ugliness between couples, but this is no time to bring up my parents. I’m spent. I’ll think about all of this later.

Right now, all I want is to go home, climb the walnut tree with Jane Austen or somebody, and forget any of it ever happened. “It doesn’t matter,” I say.

A bee buzzes fast and close to the windshield, then veers away. As I turn my head to follow it, my eye is caught by a man standing near the entrance to the store. He wears blue overalls, a white T-shirt, and a Caterpillar cap. His posture is alert, legs apart, arms away from his sides, face turned on us like a searchlight. I slide back in my seat and put my hand on the key in the ignition.

Augustus sees him, too. He looks at me. “You nervous?”

“I don’t know. Are you?”

“Should I be?”
“No one should,” I say, turning the key and pushing in the clutch. “You should—we should be able to go wherever we want.”

Augustus laughs cheerlessly. “Should and is don’t always meet.” He reaches down and sweeps the empty cans into the rumpled bag with the rest of the six-pack. “And I sure don’t need to be anybody’s Civics lesson.”

His words sting. I take in a shuddering breath, shame burning in my veins. “I’m sorry. St. Albans is nice. It wasn’t until we got here that—”

“It occurred to you that it might not be as nice as all that?”

“Let’s go back. It’s late.” I back up the car, stoic in my disgrace. Shifting into first, I look at the man in front of the store and see his frown deepening. I pause, staring back at him. What has his frown got to do with me? Or any of the other scowls I’ve seen this afternoon? I face Augustus.

“Unless you want to go to the cave,” I say, looking at him squarely.

“The—?” Augustus starts, taking in my intensity. Then he throws back his head and laughs. I see the gaps in the teeth at the back of his mouth. I see his thin-soled shoe as he lifts his foot and puts it down, slapping his knee, his thigh smooth and lean under the thin lavender linen of his pants. I don’t understand and I don’t care. I’m just glad that what I like about him has survived this awful day intact. I take the car out of gear and pull on the emergency brake, giving in to shoulder-shaking laughter.

“Didn’t you say you wanted to go to the cave?” I shout above our laughter.

“That was you!” he laughs, shaking his finger at me. “O Susanna.”
He slips his hand under my damp hair and rests it lightly on the back of my neck, looking at me with a smile like gratitude. A current flows from his fingers all over my body. I put the car in gear and check the mirrors. Augustus leans over and plants a fat, wet kiss on my cheek.

“No, baby,” he says. “The cave can wait.”

Leaning back, Augustus’s eyes fall on the man at the store, joined now by another man, both watching. As the car eases onto the road, crunching gravel, Augustus keeps his eyes on them. He touches his fingers to his forehead and brings them forward in a hat-tipping gesture.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” he says.
Spring 1975: NOLA

It’s an early March morning and the air is heavy with moisture and the juiced-up odor of tropical flowers mixed with garbage and stale beer. I am returning to the hotel, relishing the quiet of the hour, the air still tinged with the coolness of night. My black leotard—I’ve washed it out in the sink before bed each night this week and put it back on in the morning—clings to me damply, its crotch thick with drying juices. My feet are filthy in my sandals, my hair is tangled. I am gritty and eager to bathe, but light-headed from love and lack of sleep. Everything around me shimmers.

“What are you looking at?” I asked André toward the end. We’d made out for the past hour without speaking, pausing only to catch our breath and look into each other’s eyes. It was time for me to go and we were sitting on the edge of the bed. André was tracing the lines in my hands as if hypnotized. Every nerve quivered under the tickle of his touch. It made me want to scream.

He raised his eyes to mine. “Nothin’. Makes me feel close to you is all.”

I had never felt so naked under anyone’s gaze, or so willing to be. I drank him in, committing the softness of his eyes, their bottomlessness intensity, to memory. So this was the “Look of Love.”

“I never met no one like you,” he said. “I can’t believe this.”

“I can,” I said. If I couldn’t trust feelings this powerful, what could I trust? “It’s so real.”
When I get to the hotel, I pause before entering and lean against the wall outside the door, drinking in the magic one more time before heading inside, sighing with happiness.

It isn’t a nice hotel. Our room contains no more than a crooked lamp on a chipped particle-board nightstand next to the lopsided bed JS and I have shared for the past week. It’s Spring Break for me, and we’ve come to New Orleans by Amtrak for the Jazz and Heritage Festival. The train put us out on Loyola Street, and we began walking toward the Quarter, entering each hotel we passed to ask, “How much for one night?” We chose the cheapest place, returning there only to sleep. The rest of the time we spent at the festival, the Maple Leaf, Tipitina’s, or the French Quarter, dancing and roaming through the streets in search of music, more music, more and more music, splitting a muffaleta or an oyster po’boy whenever hunger gnawed at us enough to make us eat.

We have gotten to know a number of street characters—it’s so easy to make friends here!—one of whom is a wino named Mookie who throws down his hat and dances for tips on the edges of whatever crowd might collect around a brass band playing on a corner. We’ve had fun with him. It was he who told us about the restaurant where we met André. Mookie came back with us once to the hotel to shoot the breeze and sell us a dime bag. As we walked through the narrow lobby, the eyes of the older creole man behind the front desk followed, and a negative charge seemed to sizzle through the air, causing all of my muscles to contract. Anyone would think we were up to no good. Why would a black man be hanging around with two young whites if there were no drugs involved? A drug offense could wreck your life, and I was unable to loosen up until
Mookie finished the Mad Dog JS served him in a paper cup and went on his way with the bottle. I’m glad we had the dime bag, though. At 20, I can’t legally drink. Not that that’s the reason I don’t.

Now the week is at an end. Our train will leave in only a few hours. It’s been like heaven should be, I think, remembering an ecstatic moment under the festival’s gospel tent, pushing in as close as I could get to the piano. I smile as I climb the worn stairs, each one dipping slightly in the middle, to the room. My only regret is that I didn’t meet André sooner. He walked me partway back, although I kept insisting, laughing, bumping him around with my shoulder in a playful circle, that he go home to get some rest before getting up to work the lunch shift. Some distance shy of the hotel, he relented, and we lingered for a moment, kissing under a streetlight, before saying goodbye and promising to write.

I let myself in as quietly as possible, but as soon as the door closes, JS stirs.

“Hi,” I whisper. “Go back to sleep. I’ll wake you when it’s time to get up.”

“Where were you?” JS mumbles, sitting up, rubbing his ear.

I pause, puzzled. “I was with André,” I say, cocking my head. Why doesn’t he know that?

JS and I spent most of the evening at the restaurant where André works, a small, open place where you can nurse cheap drinks without missing any of the action unfolding on Bourbon Street a few feet from your table. André waited on us all night, sitting down next to me on his break when JS ran out to follow a wandering guitar player whose loud chords reached us through the drunken tourist din. He took an immediate shine to my
friendly chatter, and the two of us talked more every time he came by. He asked about JS, and I told him we were just friends. When he got off work, the three of us met up and talked some more as we wandered along, André pointing out places like the Café Beignet on Royal Street, a much better place, he said, to get the famous powdery pastries than the overcrowded Café Du Monde. I plan to stop by there before heading to the train station.

But JS has to know all this. I distinctly remember exchanging goodnights with him, him watching me go off with André. Is he so hung over that he can’t recall?

“But where were you?” JS hoists himself up on an elbow and squints at me through limp, blond bangs.

I’m not sure how to answer. “We went to his place. Not far. Above some shops on this cool little back street…”

JS stares at me, groggy. I stare back. He slumps down onto the rumpled sheets with a sigh. “I’m glad you’re all right,” he says.

“Of course I’m all right! We talked all night. He’s… a really neat guy.” I blush as a foolish smile spreads across my face. I look down at my feet. I’m glad JS isn’t looking at me because there’s nothing I can do about the smile. I glance up at him with my chin down. He’s lying back on the pillow with his hands behind his head staring up at the ceiling.

“I’m not mad…” he begins.

“Mad?”

“… but I didn’t know anything about that guy and neither did you. When you want to do something, you don’t hear rhyme or reason, so I never try to stop you. But
when you didn’t come back last night, I didn’t know what to think—what to do. I didn’t know what might have happened, even where to start looking.”

I take a deep breath. A wave of guilt for worrying him moves up my middle and passes away. So that’s all it is. I exhale through my mouth. It never occurred to me that I was being careless or insensitive, but look at him: JS was really concerned. I smile and go over to the bed, sitting on the corner. The opposite side of the mattress bows up. JS doesn’t react. “I would never have gone off with André if I wasn’t sure of him. You should know that.”

I believe it. My connection with André is so strong. Didn’t JS see it, feel it? I set my bag on the floor next to the bed. JS is still staring at the ceiling. An uneasy suspicion arises, as it does from time to time, that he isn’t happy just being my friend. He’s never said so, or made any kind of move on me, but if that’s true, I can’t face it. The idea of it frightens me so much I bury it whenever it comes up. JS can’t be in love with me. I need him too much. And now there’s André.

“And that guy Mookie introduced you to before we went to the restaurant?” JS says, propping himself up again. “The one who asked you where your man was? He wasn’t being friendly. He’s a pimp. A pimp! Mookie introduced you to a pimp!” He looks at me, jutting out his chin, eyes hard, waiting for the impact of his words to sink in.

“How do you know? Why are you…?”

“I know. He looked you up and down…”

“No he didn’t!”

“…and decided you were too young or something.”
“Mookie is our friend!”

“Mookie is nobody’s friend,” JS says. He lies down in disgust.

My skin goes cold, crawling with a deeper kind of fear, the worst fear of all:

What if my instincts are wrong? What if nothing’s been as it seemed, the people not fun, but predatory? André not in love, but one of those guys who romances girls just so he can…? No, it can’t be. He could have pressured me harder to go all the way, but he didn’t. He backed off when I told him I was a virgin, when I said it didn’t feel right. He respects the female right of refusal, which is still the norm, though the sexual revolution rages. (No one I know is on the pill—I don’t even know how to get it.) But now I see myself as JS did, alone with André in that little room, and my spine feels hollow, my knees like jello. He could have done whatever he wanted. I blink at the threadbare floor.

But, no. No. If I’m wrong about André, I’m wrong about everything, including the belief that guides my whole life: that if you are as honest as possible, as real as possible, if you love as deeply and openly as you are capable of loving, things will always turn out right. If my maxim is wrong, the world is incomprehensible and I’m lost, and that’s too horrible to allow. But it isn’t wrong. My night with André has proven it.

“It was beautiful, all of it,” I say. “Go back to sleep. I’m going to take a shower and pack. Then I’ll wake you up and we’ll get some beignets at that place on Royal Street André showed us.”

“Yeah, okay,” JS says. He turns away and pulls the sheet over his head. I look at him, and open my mouth to speak. But there’s a heavy emotional residue in the room that can’t be dispelled by the prospect of beignets or any words that I can think of. My night
of love has taken on an ugly hue, and I’m glad now that we’re leaving New Orleans. I want to get away from this unfortunate surprise ending and my anxiety over this strange reaction on the part of JS, who has never been anything but fun and happy and in my corner for all the years I’ve known him.

I hurry into the bathroom, closing the door, undressing quickly. Stepping under the rusty showerhead, I turn on the water and make myself think of nothing, not even André, as I wash myself clean of the past few hours.

*

I spend most of the 13-hour train ride sleeping, opening my eyes just once as we roll through the Delta flatlands to glimpse cotton fields studded with hard brown stems, hemmed in by thick, kudzu-laded trees. JS is sleeping, too, or acting like it. By the time we screech to a halt at Union Station and begin making our way over to Mabel, parked under a swooping overpass I can just see against the black sky, we have not spoken for hours. Skirting oil-slicked puddles, I barely manage to keep JS in view, his long, loping back bobbing ahead of me in its damp white T-shirt and red suspenders. When I come alongside the pickup, he is already behind the wheel. I toss my bag next to his on the wet ridged metal of the truck bed and climb into the cab, pulling the heavy door with both hands, taking heart in the familiar squeal-and-groan of its rusty hinges, the solid chnk! as it closes next to me. JS is squeezing his pockets, pulling out his keys. But their friendly jingle, prelude to the countless nights of cozy adventure that has made our friendship
what it is—the warmest place in my life—only underscores our current estrangement.
The silence between us tears at me like an undertow of doom. I have to break it, but how? Pretend nothing has happened? He’s too unlike himself right now, and anyway that’s not my way. But I can try.


JS’s fingers pause for a nanosecond as he fumbles for the ignition. He arches his eyebrows briefly but doesn’t look at me. I don’t usually treat, and probably don’t have the money to, and he probably knows that, but I’ll pay him back with interest if he says Yes tonight.

“Nah,” he says. It’s like the crack of a gavel. My heart cracks with it.

JS turns the key. Mabel roars to life. He guns the engine a few times, then stretches his arm across the top of the seat, twisting to look out the back window.

Working his way out of the parking spot, he says, “I better just get back,” and never meets my eyes. I look at him miserably, then feel a spike of irritation. I have an urge to press him to reveal himself, lay his cards on the table, but think better of it, look away.

It’s only been a day. Best to let this blow over, as it surely will, though how many more chances will we have to shoot the shit together at some drive-in? JS is planning to move to New Orleans in the Fall. I scoot around and look out the rain-soaked window, the glow of far-off streetlights refracting in a dozen directions from every drip.

At the top of my parents’ driveway in Fieldbrook, we leave each other with a smile and a hug. But as I watch him swing backwards into the turnout by the barbed wire fence, I feel the rift between us open up, yawning wide as his red taillights jiggle down
the hill. Now I’m alone with the dread that’s grown heavier each day of this semester. With Spring Break behind me, the end of my second year of college is bare on the horizon and I’m no closer than I was a year ago, after dropping my major, to finding the direction I need to go forward. The math and science courses I’m taking at the state school fill the gaps in my transcript left by a year of Theater and Liberal Arts at Williams, but now what? My geology professor is urging me to consider a degree in the burgeoning environmental sciences. “Your generation is the one to save us,” he says. That appeals to the crusader in me, but I know it won’t work. I’ve loved studying plate tectonics and determining the size and distance of a star, but the coursework is becoming ever more abstract—chemistry and higher-level math. With no more ties to the visual realm, the “music of the spheres” is fading for me, too, and for the first time in my life my grades are falling.

I turn and drag my feet across the spongy, clean-smelling ground. Low grass wets my toes, green weeds sweep my legs, soaking the hem of my jeans. Nearing the house, I stop next to the old peach tree. Its gnarled branches droop over the walk. It’s filled with bud clusters, drops of water glistening on them in the light of the back porch windows. The peaches it gives now are small and spotted and slightly shriveled, but they taste better than the fruit from any other of our trees. I picked one for Augustus Brown last summer when he came to the house to retrieve the albums he dropped in my arms on my last day at Williams. He brought me some poetry by Ishmael Reed. My father remarked on the books he was carrying and the two of them had a short conversation in the living room, my father in his overalls, poised to go work on the tractor, my mother setting down
tall glasses of iced tea in front of us before retreating to the kitchen in her everyday apron. Something about all this had pleased Augustus.

“I like that,” he said, after my father left the room.

“What?” I said, still shy with him, so recently my teacher.

“Folks just being they selves and going on about they business.”

I smiled, not getting it really, but glad he was at ease, and we finished our lemony tea and went outside. Augustus lingered, taking a few steps at a time, slowing down to chatter, pausing next to the peach tree. Unlike tonight, on that summer day its old branches were bowing with fruit. I remember looking past him and seeing his car, the blue Volvo he kissed me in the day I drove him to St. Albans. On the day of the peach, the kiss was still fresh in my mind, unsettling. The Augustus of the kiss seemed so different from the Augustus of the classroom, the one I believed I could talk to for hours. But was he?

He stood by the tree, holding the albums he’d come for loosely under one arm. *Eric Dolphy/Far Cry!* was among them, the artist’s profile facing left, eyes closed, blowing, the bump on his forehead prominent, the image steeped in blue. Augustus had played the title cut in class. It had made me think of honking cabs in New York City—Harlem—on a Saturday night, though of course I’d never been there. He loaned me two albums by Charlie Parker, too, that I have since purchased for myself.

“You listen to the Parker?” he asked me that day, tilting his head in mock appraisal.

“Lots of times.”
“And?”

“Badoobadooba DOO doobadooba!”

“Aha! Ornithology!” He lifted a finger to stroke my cheek and stopped just shy of it.

“I can hear what he’s doing now, it’s crazy, I mean I just didn’t get it before, but now...”

“Didn’t get…? Go on, girl, I saw you tapping your foot in class.”

How was it that he made me blush so hard? I had never blushed so much in my life. I remember how much I wanted him to leave that day, no stay, no go—it was too much for me.

“I’m sorry I never brought the albums back,” I told him.

“Nah. I meant for you to keep ‘em a while. It’s good to see you.”

I studied the ground. “You, too.”

“You never told me what you thought of Don Hindley.”

I looked up, mind empty.

“The other poet at the reading?”

“Oh.” I shrugged. I started to speak and wrinkled my nose instead.

“Ha ha!” Augustus leaned in close with his hand to his mouth. “I think it’s doggerel,” he said, breath in my hair.

Now in the dark by the wet peach tree, I shake my head slowly as I remember how I took a step away from him when I felt his breath, a surge of panic in my chest, and spotted the tree over his shoulder. “You want a peach?” I asked him.
“Sure I want a peach.”

Closing my fingers gently around a few of them, barely touching, I felt for one that was ready to slip off the tree. When I found it, I pulsed my fingertips, applying a featherweight of pressure to the fruit around the stem, and it dropped into my palm. I rubbed off some of the fuzz on my cutoffs before holding it out to Augustus. When he bit into it, the juices squirted out the corners of his mouth.

“Mm!” he cried. He pulled a red bandana from his back pocket and wiped his lips, then finished off the peach in a few bites, sucking his fingers. “Damn! That ugly-ass peach is the best I ever ate!” He examined the pit as if amazed.

I leaned back in a belly laugh. “You’re used to store-bought,” I said. “I’ll run and get you a bag.”

Standing by the Volvo, turning toward me after stowing the albums and peaches in the back seat, Augustus took a scrap of paper from his shirt pocket. There was a number written on it. “Call me,” he said, holding it out. But I stuck my hands impulsively in my back pockets.

“I won’t use it,” I said, not thinking, just blurting it out. His face collapsed. I tried to take back the words, stammering. “I’ll, I’ll be working this summer.….” There was Darrell, too, but I didn’t mention him. By then I knew we wouldn’t last; he already seemed too young.

Thinking now of Augustus’s hasty departure, the way he stuffed the paper back in his pocket, kissed me on the temple (“You be easy now”), I wince. I tap a dark bud
cluster with my fingertip and watch the drops shower from it, pierced by embarrassment. I watched him go as I just watched JS, baffled as always when his interest in me was revealed, relieved to retreat back into myself. Now I wish I had taken his number. I would call him up and say hello. I know now why I didn’t. It was that poetry reading. I had gone and listened to him read a long poem about the Mississippi River, or that mentioned it, at least. *The river stumped down from your house,* it began, and ended, *You drowned on dry land.* In between was a soup of watery images, splashes and shells and mud and catfish. There was a girl in it, too, and sex—I got that much. He had read it in a hollering voice, pumping the air with his hand. It was electrifying, put the other poet to shame. But I hadn’t understood the poem, and afterwards he hadn’t spoken to me, only looked in my direction once, as he was leaving, accompanied by a quiet, curvy woman with blond hair. His wife? I doubted it. When I saw him in class some days later, he apologized (“I was just… people-people-people,” waving dismissively), but I had wanted only to escape.

In the eight months since then, I have unearthed the moment of the kiss at St. Albans from time to time, remembering the feel of his lips. Now the thought of it fills me with a peaceful warmth. Augustus Brown would never judge me the way JS just has. He’s a different kind of man, no one like him, standing out on the precipice of a new era, where I want to be. André reminds me a little of him. I’ll have to look Augustus up, ask him how things are going at Wash U.

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Two weeks past NOLA, in the early afternoon, I am curled up with the barn cats, leaning against scratchy bales of hay stacked around a small square, glassless window at the top of the loft in the green-roofed, white-washed, barn in my backyard. I’m studying for my last final, knees up, heavy textbook propped on my thighs. I look up from the book out the opening at the giant silver maple tree across the pasture. From up here my eyes meet it three quarters of the way up the crown. Tender leaves sprout all over it, pea green, still unfurled. The air is cool and dense, suffused with the flat plumb light of midday, but smelling of musk and rain. I close my eyes and breathe in. When I open them, I look at my watch. It’s time for the mail.

“Off, now, Precocious,” I say, nudging a gray-and-white mama cat from my feet. She ambles off a few paces and collapses on a dozing pair of her nearly grown offspring. I get onto my hands and knees and begin making my way through the hay bale tunnel. Distantly I hear the rattling ring of the kitchen wall phone and stop mid-crawl. But no one yells for me, so I keep on, sliding my textbook in front of me. I’ve given up thinking JS will call, and have stopped leaving messages with his mother. It’s not as if we’ve never gone two weeks without a hang, but I feel our time shrinking. If not for André’s letters, I would worry his silence like a bone, maybe track him down to see whether to be sad or angry.

But André is lighting up my days. I had forgotten how sweet it is when someone loves you. I pour my psychic energy into my letters to him, which are never about my family or my worries for the future, only art and poetry and music, the love of nature, the
nature of love, the meaning of life. Covering the narrow green sheets of a Stenographer’s Notebook, depleting one yellow Bic after another, I propel myself toward the precipice. *There can be no rules,* I write in one 14-pager, *How can there be? No one has been where I have been, where I AM.* In another I declare my desire to “experience EVERYTHING before I die.” To which André makes no reply except, “*You are one passionate lady.* Write on, my beloved. I hate the word “lady,” which reminds me of “ladylike”—all that crap I’m admonished for not being—but being called his “beloved” gives me butterflies. I don’t think of him as *my* beloved, my one and only—I don’t want anyone like that, I want to be free—I think only of the magic between us and refuse to qualify it. I try to make that clear—that I don’t know where this is going and love it for just that—but my long walk down the driveway to the mailbox is putting a shine on every afternoon, and I don’t want it to stop.

I push my textbook over the edge of the loft and hear it land with a crispy thud on the pile of worn straw below. I climb quickly down the ladder, the wood warm and smooth against my bare feet, and run out into the grassy yard on tiptoe, watching out for bees. Now I pick my way down the driveway. The callouses on my feet that have softened over the winter are already toughening again. Clenching my toes against the small white gravel in front of the mailbox, I close my eyes and yank down the lid, letting it crash against the post below, fanfare, I hope, for what might be inside. I open my eyes. There it is, atop the bills and catalogues: an envelope with André’s awkward lettering. I snatch it up and turn it over. “SWAK” it says across the seal. *Corny!* I think, and grin and tuck the rest of the mail beneath my arm. I start up the hill, tearing open the letter as I go.
I get as far as the middle of the first page before stopping in a patch of dust. *I’ve got enough for my bus ticket now and I want to come. Tell me you want me and I will next week.*

I stare at the letter, then look up, startled, at the house on the hill. Its dormer eye looks back at me above the wide blue spruces. The wind is picking up and long elm twigs, just greening, wave like sea grasses from the trees. I try to imagine the scene through the eyes of a young black man who has never been out of the South, never been out of New Orleans, but I can’t. My brain is paralyzed. I feel a surge of desperation to talk to JS, but I know that avenue is closed to me, especially in this instance. I feel the loss keenly, crying out.

* 

André sits on the edge of the couch in the midafternoon, hands folded loosely in his lap. A glass of iced tea sweats on the coffee table in front of him. I see a pool gathering under it and reach for a rumpled *Newsweek*. As I slip the magazine beneath the glass, my eyes catch on the cover. Vietnamese people, some with babies in their arms, crowding up a set of portable metal stairs leading to an open airplane door where a white American sits, legs dangling from the opening, a woman hanging from them. The steps are being pushed away. Some people are falling. A banner across the top right corner reads, “The Sorrow and the Pity.”
Frowning, I look at André, but he is looking at my father, who stands there in his overalls, half turned to go. It’s he who’s brought us the iced tea. My mother has not entered the room. I hear her in the kitchen, sloshing in the sink, and flash on the day Augustus came, nine months ago. Why is this so different?

“Did you have a nice trip?” my father asks. “Manage to sleep?”

“Yes, sir,” André says, “I got some shut-eye. It’s a long ways up from Nawlins, though.”

“I’ve never been there,” my father says, arms dangling at his sides. I see his fingers twitch. “Well. I’ve got some work to do. Enjoy your stay.” He leaves the room, the house. I hear the screen door bang.

André stares in front of him. “Let’s go someplace,” he says.

He’s wearing a blue button-down shirt with short sleeves, frayed around the collar, dark at the armpits. His eyes are bloodshot. He is tense, glowering. When I picked him up in Ellisville he seemed nervous, too, but not like this. Mainly he was hungry. I took him to Steak n Shake and got him a double steak-burger. That seemed to help.

“Thanks, baby girl,” he said, and smiled, and leaned his head back on the seat and closed his eyes.

“Okay. Like where?” I say now.

“Is there a park we can go to?”

“There’s Babler,” I say, “It’s a state park...” I wonder if it’s a good idea, decide it will be all right. It isn’t nearly as far as St. Albans. I often see people I know there.
“Less go,” André says. We stand. He snatches up his bag and carries it with him as we walk to the car. It strikes me as odd. Where’s he planning to spend the night? Tom is away at school; my mother and I put clean sheets on the bed in the attic room. But I don’t say anything; maybe he just wants to keep it with him. We get in the Rambler and slam the doors. Before we reach the end of the driveway, André looks back over his shoulder at the house, and then at me. “So what was that all about?” he says.

“What was what all about?” I’m genuinely confused.

“Man comes to see their daughter, they don’t ask him a damn thing?”

“Huh? You mean, like, ‘what are your intentions?’” I laugh like it’s a joke, but when I look at André, his mouth looks ugly.

“It ain’t funny,” he says. “Just let you go off with me?”

“What’s the matter, can’t you be trusted?” I flash him a smile, but he’s making me jittery.

“They don’t know that.”

“Well maybe they trust me.”

André grunts. “You ain’t even 21,” he says.

I don’t know what to say after that. I don’t know this side of him, don’t understand what he expects. I need to find his sweet side again, the one in the letters. I turn on the radio. “Tell me when you hear something you like,” I say, and start pressing silver buttons, all set to my favorite stations. “We’ve got good music in St. Louis. Not like New Orleans, it’s… more R&B, more Blues. There’s a big rock station, KSHE. You
like rock?” Snatches of music surge from the dashboard, jumbled with truncated advertising jingles and the voices of keyed-up announcers.

André puts his hand over mine and brings it to his lips. “Okay, baby girl, you show me,” he says. “You the guide."

As we near the park I recognize him, face softening, as the man I spent a few hormone-fueled hours with in a magical city some weeks ago. We are more at ease, but I can’t seem to unclench the muscles in my legs. Why was he so upset by my parents? What does he want? I’m afraid to ask.

We pass through the park’s stone gateway and arrive at the bronze statue of Dr. Edmund Babler just off the main way. There’s not another car in sight, just lots of trees, spring green, half filled out. I breathe a small sigh and park. We get out and stroll towards the statue. Without warning, André scoops me up, one arm around my shoulders, the other under my knees, and pulls me into him, kissing me hard. I stiffen, push away. When he sets me down, I see it in his eyes: he knows I’m scared, and it pisses him off. Over his shoulder I see a black car approaching and move instinctively as if to run. He sees that, too, and glares at me, mouth open, incredulous. I see the whites of his eyes. His hands are at his sides in loose fists.

“Take me back,” he says, in strangled voice, and turns away, striding back toward the car. I follow on shaky legs. This is all too fast. I should stop him, say, “Wait, no,” interpret my behavior for him in a way that makes sense. But I don’t understand it myself. And taking him back is exactly what I want to do.
I ease the car back just as the black car pulls in. I don’t look to see who’s in it. I just drive.

“This ain’t the way folks behave,” he says.

“What isn’t?”

“Why’d you act that way back there? You ashamed?”

“No! I was scared, I don’t know. You’re not the same!”

“I’m not the same?”

I don’t answer, lips twitching.

“What’d you tell your folks about me?”

“Just because they’re nice enough to leave us alone doesn’t make them…”

“What?”

“I don’t know, racists or whatever it is you’re…”

“What’s nice about that? Who am I?”

I say nothing, heart hammering.

He turns his body to face me. “Who am I?” he says louder, poking a finger in his chest.

“You—you’re a friend of mine.”

“Is that what you told ‘em? A friend? Like your buddy in Nawlins? You write him letters like that, too?” He slams his back into the seat and turns his face toward the window.
I stare at the road and grip the steering wheel, leaning into it, red-faced, stony, mad now, too. “One night doesn’t make me your fiancée,” I say. “Or even your girlfriend.”

He speaks to the window. “I must be out my mind, comin’ up here.”

“I thought you were coming to hang out. Have fun together.”

“Some fun,” he says. “Take me back.”

“There won’t be anything out of Ellisville until tomorrow or the next day,” I say, voice quivering. “I’ll take you to the Greyhound station downtown.” A noxious stew of guilt and anger churns in me. But I can’t think about it now, there’s no easy way to understand it. *It’ll be over soon* I tell myself. *Just hold on.*

“You led me on,” he says. He’s still angry, but I can hear the hurt around the edges of it. It makes me frantic.

“I didn’t! I didn’t mean to at all. I just don’t think the way you do. You should have known that!”

He shakes his head and turns back to the window. I press down on the gas and will the car to fly. I need to get away from him, find someone who understands, doesn’t hate me.

*

I drop André in front of the raggedy Greyhound station. He gets out without a word, pulls his bag from the back and stalks off. I watch his stiff, upright back, waiting,
hoping we can salvage whatever just happened with at least a wave, but he doesn’t turn. I pull away and go west on Delmar, the tenseness in my legs softening into a just-under-the-radar tremor. As the distance grows between me and the bus station, I pick tentatively at the tangle in my brain. *JS was right, he was right.* He tried to protect me and I fucked up, putting myself out there the way I do. I can’t keep doing that. I’ll never do it again. I’ll call JS, tell him that, find a phone right now. I feel a pinch between my shoulder blades. My shoulders are all hunched up. I force them down, take a hand off the wheel and squeeze the back of my neck. When I stop at the light at Skinker and Delmar, I unclench my fingers from the steering well and drop them helplessly in my lap.

André was so accusatory. What did I do wrong? Led him on, he said. Hadn’t JS implied the same thing? I do what I want to do, JS said, and don’t care how it affects anyone else. But I’m as open and honest as I can be, with him and everyone else. I don’t know how else to be, what else to do. I rub my eyes and put my hands back on the wheel. When it comes to men and women I don’t seem to know the rules. The light changes and I move forward. *No,* I think. I know them, all right; I just refuse to follow them. I can’t. If people like André think I’m crazy, so be it. I’ll do him and JS a favor and stay away. Not everyone’s like they are. The very thing that so upset André—the iced tea, my parents’ respectful reserve—put Augustus at ease.

I look left and right, taking in the brick storefronts, lamps glowing white and yellow in the apartments up above them. The Delmar Loop. *Augustus lives around here.* I see a man with long hair and bellbottoms coming out of a store. *Streetside Records* it says on the marquee. I turn my head as I go by it, and see a narrow restaurant next to it, with
Swedish ivy in the windows: *Our Daily Bread*. Just ahead on the left is the huge vertical neon sign of the Tivoli Theater. JS and I went there once to see *Reefer Madness* and *Fantasia*, stoned and giddy along with everyone else in the theater. A block past that, I know, is Blueberry Hill, a bar frequented by Wash. U. students. I lean forward and make out the blue awning with the white drawing of a couple jitterbugging, stars sparking up from their feet. As I draw near, I crane my neck but all I can make out in the half-curtained window is the head of a bearded man in a black beret. I see a parking space ahead, pull into it.

When I push open the broad wooden door, the man in the beret is sitting up in the window on a folding metal chair that looks too small for him. His belly overlaps his thighs. His skin is a smooth, creamy coffee color that makes his black goatee stand out, dark and lustrous. He is on the door, and welcomes me with an enigmatic smile, hand out, eyebrows raised in perpetual serenity over black, round eyes.

“Hello, sweetheart,” he says, his voice both rough and sonorous. I’ve never heard another voice like it. “Can I see your lovely ID?”

“I’m 20,” I say. “I won’t try to pass for older.” The corners of his mouth turn up and his eyes twinkle as if I’ve just told him an amusing secret. I feel a deep sensation of warmth and realize my hand is encased in both of his large, soft ones. The light is blue around us. Ribbons of smoke hover, blinking white at intervals from the neon outside.

“Do you know Augustus Brown?”

“AB? Why, yes, young lady, I know him. He’s here tonight.”
My stomach jumps. *AB. Cool nickname.* “Could you tell him Susanna Ewing is outside?”

“I’ll tell him. But you don’t have to wait outside.” He leans toward me. “I’m Frenchie, by the way.” That voice. How does he manage to make a croak sound so deep and sweet?

“I’d rather,” I say, and turn, surging with adrenalin. Once outside, I can’t slow down. I keep on all the way across the street, jumping up on the concrete curb, fidgety. When I turn to watch for Augustus, he’s already coming, taking long strides, barely glancing at the traffic. He doesn’t stop either, walks right into me, hugging, laughing, swaying, like I’m someone back from the war, which is what I feel like.

He leans back, cupping my elbows. “I thought I’d never hear from you again!”

“I was just driving back from the bus station. Downtown. I saw Blueberry Hill, and I thought you might be... I had a terrible day, really bad. This guy came to see me from New Orleans, his name was André, if that was his real name.” Words spill out. *I should stop talking,* I think, but the more I say, the better I feel. Augustus doesn’t seem to be taking in the specifics. He beams at me, just one long smile.

“No. I don’t mean that. It’s true, but the more I say, the better I feel. Augustus doesn’t seem to be taking in the specifics. He beams at me, just one long smile.

“Your face looks like butter,” I say impulsively, and touch his stubbly chin. He grabs my hand and presses it flat against his cheek. “But it’s all over now,” I say, “especially now. Being with you expels the whole thing.” It’s true, but I feel reckless saying it. I put my arms around his neck and squeeze him into me. Over his shoulder I say, “That’s why I wanted to see you. You’re different and people don’t understand you.” I feel his chest heave, his shoulders shake, his laughter in my ear. “And I’m different and
people don’t understand me. I wrote him all these letters and he didn’t understand why I would do that. He thought it meant something particular, but it only meant that.” I soften into him. “I think I’m finished.”

Augustus pulls back, clinging to my hand, still laughing, then stops, as if something’s occurred to him.

“There’s something you should know about me,” he says. He holds both my hands now, and looks down at them, brow creasing.

“You’re married?” I ask, remembering the day in St. Albans when he started a sentence the very same way.

It takes him a second, but he remembers, too, and laughs in spite of himself.

“Are you still married?”

“No, I’m not,” he says. His face draws in, serious. “But I’m a drunkard.”

“What?” I say, voice frilling with laughter. Do I catch of whiff of his Wild Turkey then, hear the slurring lisp in his speech? All I know is that being with him feels like home, here or anywhere, but especially on this sidewalk on Delmar across from Blueberry Hill, with the evening gathering around us, streetlamps lining the avenue glowing brighter as the darkness deepens, headlights and taillights moving up and down, neon making halos in the air.

It’s late April and though the day has been warm and humid, there’s a chill in the air. I shiver. Augustus rubs his hands up and down my arms. I feel each of his fingers distinctly even in the swift motion, thrilled by his frictiony touch. His eyes are lost now behind his smeared, transition lenses, and all I can see is a hubbub of reflection in them,
but he’s smiling. When he grabs my hand and says, “Come on!” pulling me across the street right past Frenchie into Blueberry Hill, I’m ready.

For the rest of the night until closing, we sit on the same side of a dark wooden booth, not an inch of space between us, in the dim light of a bell-shaped sconce above a small mirror on the wall beside us. Enclosed by high-backed benches, I feel as if we’re in a litter borne by fate. Guys he was drinking with stop by—painters and poets, students and construction workers—and sit opposite us for a quarter of an hour, curious about the too-young, uncategorizable girl with the love beads and sandals and hip-hugger jeans, hair thick and wavy worn in no particular style, not Augie’s usual type. I don’t drink except for ginger ale, and he has just one Wild Turkey more, and it never occurs to me that alcohol is not something he can dispense with at will.
Spring 1997: Two Teas, Continued

Larry cared about things like scratches, took pride in his handy work, which graced every room in our house (those gorgeous polished redwood cabinets he built for me). No worries about the door, in the end. Though blindly, I managed to insert the key into the lock without marring even the hardware. Inside, I propped as much of my load as possible on the half-wall that backed the couch and defined the entryway, and let the purse and leash slip from my wrist, the gym bag from my shoulder, leaping back as a pair of little soccer cleats clattered out. I swept them to the side with my foot and ran the groceries to the kitchen, shelving them hastily in fridge and cupboard, snatching the coconut goodies back out. Nibbling a macaroon, I jogged to the sliding glass door leading out to the front yard.

“Come on, then,” I said to Irma, and ushered her out. She needed to relieve herself before we took off again. I paused, snagged by the view of the deep blue bay visible between the branches of the huge deodora cedar that dominated our little yard. San Francisco gleamed on the opposite side of it. I hardly ever got over there anymore. When we moved out here from Texas, I wanted to settle there, but Larry’s job was on this side of the bay, and anyway, it was beyond our means.

I felt a strange plummeting where the baby was. I rested my hand on my belly button and closed my eyes, breathing it away. *Hope it’s a girl.* That would complete our family, make it perfect. I ran to bathroom, pulling off my sweaty top as I went. I tossed it with my damp socks, yanked off in spastic hops, into the hamper, and started hot water running in the tub. *I’m going to the City today!*
I drove the mile over winding streets to the block-long strip of 1930s-era shops that defined “downtown” Framington, and parked in front of its only café, Common Grounds, run by fellow parents at Harry’s school. When I got inside, Karen was waiting, warming her hands around a mug of tea, minting stream rising from it.

“Hi,” I said, sliding into the slat-back chair opposite her. “Sorry I’m late.”

Karen smiled tightly and shifted on the seafoam cushion of the bench lining the wall. Her movements were jerky; her jeans seem a pinch too small. She wore them with a flowy purple top and a plain, unbuttoned cardigan. Her medium-length brown hair was undyed, streaked with natural silver in the way of women on the cusp of middle age all over nearby Berkeley.

I flipped the tail of my silk scarf over my shoulder, careful not to snag it on my dangly earrings, and pulled open my laptop. “Okay. So, just tell me everything you do, month by month. I’ll take it all down and mull it over.”

Karen looked at her tea. “Well, in August, you hold your first board meeting and organize the parent orientation for the first day of school.”

I nodded, typing quickly.

“Then in September you hold your first general meeting. We usually just have a Q&A with the principal. And of course, before that, you hold the kindergarten ice cream social. I’m sure you remember.”
I did. Coolers full of Häagen Dazs ice cream bars at one end of the cafeteria, kids clamoring as brittle mothers grabbed them by the grubby wrists to keep their sticky hands off the neat stacks of handouts on the tables (“Join the Dads’ Club!” “Sign up Now for Movie Night!”)—and Harry, clutching the book he dragged from home, *The National Geographic Picture Atlas of Our Universe*, hunching over a little (it’s too heavy for him, but he won’t let me carry it), gaping at the room. “There’s no place to read, Mommy,” he said, looking up at me in bleak confusion. *My baby is a freak,* I thought in horror.

My fingers stopped moving. My heart sped up a little as if I’d forgotten something I really needed to remember. *Why was I doing this?*

“Then in October there’s the Halloween Parade—I can e-mail you the task list for that—and the second general meeting. We usually get the district superintendent to speak at that.”

“District superintendent… Oh yeah, Dr. Holding.” I smiled, rolled my eyes. “God, is there anyone who hasn’t seen that slide show by now?”

Karen stiffened. She’d been PTA president for two years, but now her term was up. In the year since Harry started school, she had run it with a harried lack of interest, never deviating from what had been done before. She seemed to have no interest in the organizational or political potential of the PTA, or in anything it did at the state or national level. She chaired meetings apologetically, leaving the business until after the main program (“A Review of District Standards,” “Is Homework Really Necessary?” “Building Self-Esteem”), when most parents—including the quorum needed to legitimize any votes—had already left. I disapproved of this blatant disregard for parliamentary
procedure, but I didn’t criticize—beneath the veneer of self-deprecation she projected, Karen radiated rage—I just thought I could do better.

“I mean, there are school board elections next year,” I added quickly. “There must be some burning topic we can debate instead.” I went back to typing.

“I appreciate that you’d like to change everything about the PTA, Susanna. But it doesn’t matter what you do. The same old eleven people will show up regardless.”

I looked up, taken aback. Karen was eyeing me steadily. “What do I want to change?” I asked.

“Never mind,” she said. She lifted her mug to her lips, concealing a terse, knowing smile. “Let’s get through the list.”

I looked at her for a second, then nodded and turned back to the screen. She doesn’t like me, I typed.

“In December there’s the teachers’ holiday luncheon. You need to start planning for that early. In January, you have the fourth general meeting of the year…”

I typed Dec. Holiday Lunch, Jan. GM, then: No one in Framington likes me. It was something I’d felt before, but always seemed to forget until the moment I was confronted by it, this uneasy feeling of being… left out. Like the people around me knew something I didn’t, something I needed to know in order to fit in but never would.

Below my wrists I caught sight of the green jeans with the dark paisley pattern I was wearing. I had found them at an out-of-the-way shop on one of my last visits to St. Louis. I was wearing them with a black, low-necked top that had three-quarter-length sleeves and a fitted bodice (too tight for 12 weeks?). But it couldn’t be the way I dressed.
Sure, there were all those eclectic extras—scarves, belts, boots, and conspicuous earrings acquired living in foreign places Framingtonians didn’t seem to have visited or want to hear about. But deep down, I thought, what set me apart as where I’d lived in this country, among the kinds of people who were easy for those parents to avoid up there in the hills, at least during the early years of their children’s lives. Not forever, though, if they stayed in public schools.

It was confusing at first. Framington was *progressive*, like everywhere in the Bay Area, supposedly. Nothing like the conservative place I grew up in, where just the opposite was true. (Although even people of radically opposed viewpoints seemed to talk to each other more there than they did here.) But I knew the signs. How many meetings had I sat through, trying and failing to understand the desperation fueling these parents’ push to expand Framington Elementary School from five grades to eight so they wouldn’t have to send their kids to Ygnacio, the local middle school? “Safety!” they said, but the number of police calls was no greater at Ygnacio than it was at Stradford—the public middle school of choice (those who couldn’t transfer there often turned to private schools). “The achievement gap!” they said next, but test scores for whites and Asians (Framington Elementary’s main demographic) were roughly the same at Ygnacio as they were anywhere else. “Cultural differences”—that’s the one that tipped their hand.

Cultural differences were supposed to be good; Framington patted itself on the back for its diversity, considered the wasteland between New York and California as segregated, segregated. But at Ygnacio their children would be in the minority for the first time, elbow-to-elbow with blacks and Hispanics from crime-ridden Richmond to the north, and
“cultural differences” wasn’t a positive anymore. I got a sick familiar feeling when it sank in, and spoke against every effort to convert Framington to a K-8 school—a move that earned me some quiet enemies. Not that anyone minded my taking over the thankless PTA job, which focused mainly on organizing meetings and socials and the Spring Carnival. *They’ll see.* I frown.

“Then in June, you hold the final board meeting at Rosita’s. I usually get gag gifts for everyone, like a giant pencil for the secretary.”

I looked up blankly. “Giant pencil?”

Karen sipped her tea.

“Rosita’s Mexican Restaurant,” I said. “Good margaritas, that’s important. So is that it? What about facility-use permits and meetings with the principal?”

“I’ll still be on the board, I’ll help with everything. You’ll do fine.”

I powered off my laptop, snapped it shut. “Thanks,” I said. “I’ll think it over and let you know, okay?”
Summer 1975: Bright Moments

A few days after our night of fusion on that Delmar sidewalk, Augie takes me to a party. It’s the kind of party I’ve longed for without knowing it, the kind that is unknown in places like Fieldbrook—and almost everywhere else in our dissonant land, in those days. All sorts of people who have never mingled socially before are hurtling together in that time and place. Mostly young, they are black and white, artists and academics, writers and musicians, blue collar workers, all of them summoned by a force that transcends ordinary consciousness to blather days and nights away, dancing to Smokey and Aretha and the Blue Notes, yes, blaring from the stereo, but also the likes of Miles Davis, Sun Ra, and the Mahavishnu Orchestra. The dances are strange, improvised, exploratory, trance-like; sexual, cathartic, individual. I will attend hundreds of parties like this one before my time is through. Like this first one, they will often start late in the afternoon and go on late into the night. Like this first one, they will take place in spacious, run-down, urban dwellings built for a more gracious age. It doesn’t matter who lives in them. We take them over for hours at a time, make them stages for the death of an era, proving grounds for the trials and aspirations of a new age.

Augie and I arrive via the back fire escape, climb to the third floor and walk through the open door into the kitchen. It’s crowded with folks, mostly women, shoving bottles of beer into tubs of ice, filling bowls with chips, stuffing cream cheese into olives, poking toothpicks through Vienna sausage links. Across the room I see a black man, tall and meaty, long-limbed, leaning into the wall by the doorway leading to the rest of the apartment. He’s talking to a woman at the sink through a wide smile that shows all of his
teeth. Between words he laughs and sips from a brown bottle. “Hih-hih,” he says, 
wheezing. He laughs like he’s gasping for air.

Augie sits near him on a chair whose plastic-covered cushion matches the grey 
Formica table next to it. He pulls me onto his knee. “S’up man,” he says, face and hand 
turned sunny-side toward the tall man. They bring the palms of their hands together and 
slide them apart, catching at the fingertips. I feel the light go on in my eyes. Witnessing 
this gesture, the salutation of an exclusive brotherhood, feels like an initiation.

“Y’all right, AB?” says the man.

“Susanna, this here’s Billy,” Augie says, cinching his arms around my waist. I 
sling my arm across his shoulders.

“Hi, Billy.”

“Susanna. All right all right. How y’all doin’?” Billy says in his gravelly voice.

“Fine.” I chew my lips. The standard response is too tame, too unimaginative.

A girl comes through the doorway holding a bottle of Miller. She stutters to a stop 
next to Billy, staring at Augie, looking me over. The corners of her mouth twitch. She 
seems very young, with her thin honey shag, flat-chested under her halter top—*maybe as 
young as I am*, I think hopefully.

“Hey now, Trish,” Augie says quickly. He pats his free leg. “I got two knees!

Susanna, this is Trish.”

Trish takes a big swig from her bottle and holds it in her mouth, eyes not leaving 
his. She swallows hard then turns on her heel and walks out. The woman at the sink, who 
has twisted to watch, throws Augie a look of disapproval and goes back to her work.
This is the second event I’ve attended—if you count the poetry reading at Williams the year before—where some woman has shown up appearing to have a claim on Augie. Today it elicits in me a bashful pride, quiet exultation over my privileged status in this apparently irresistible man’s affections. In just over a year, such incidents will trigger a more complicated reaction—a flash of hope, even desperation *(Is she my way out?)*—and a sinking realization that the nature of my privilege is nothing to crow about.

“Hey Bev’,” says Augie.

“Hello Augustus,” the woman says, keeping her back to him.

“Susanna this is my friend Beverly.”

Beverly turns her head briefly to the side and nods without looking at me, leaving me to say hello to her broad backside, draped in a calf-length denim skirt, a bow of yellow apron strings at the waistline.

Augie and Billy exchange looks. Augie pulls me close. “What you want to drink, babe?”

“Anything, I don’t care.”

“I’ll git it,” says Billy. “Y’all want beer?”

“Bring me a Colt 45,” Augie says, leaning forward to see what’s in the tub.

I hook my arms around his neck up to the elbows to keep from slipping off his lap, feeling my blood rush as our cheeks press together. The feeling of his skin, warm and slightly oily, with bits of stubble, and his fingers cradling my rib cage, cupping my buttock, set off a low buzz in the parts of me that are in contact with his legs.
“Susanna’ll have one of them… Canada Drys,” he says, leaning back and taking me in. “All right?” The sensuality of his smile is unmistakable, unnerving. I bite my lip and nod.

“Canada Dry, huh?” says Billy. “You got it.”

Billy heaves up off the doorframe and I see through it into the living room, but I don’t spot Trish in the crowd. I hope she’s left, but if she hasn’t, no big thing, no threat. She’s obviously from before—before me—even if it’s only a week before. Whatever has gone on between her and Augie is over now. He made his preference clear, I think, though he did offer her his knee. I look into the other room again. I don’t see her.

Billy trudges back clutching the necks of two dripping bottles in one soft paw, a silver bottle opener in his other hand. He pops off the caps and sets them at our elbows. Clattering the opener onto the table, he resumes his place against the door jamb.

“Malinké in there,” he says, gesturing with his bottle. He drinks from it and wipes his mouth with the back of his thumb.

“Bob’s here?” says Augie.

Billy chokes, and presses the back of his hand to his lips to keep from spitting. He manages to swallow, then drops his hand. “Hih-hih-hih!” he says. “Ha-ha!” He pushes his shoulders into the wall, belly shaking. “Man, don’t do it!” he says. He bends forward, laughing too hard to say more.

“Motherfucker got his megaphone with him?” Augie says.

“Ha-ha-ha!”
“Here let me go try that motherfucker out, see if he put some juju on it.” Augie half stands, but Billy is on him, still laughing, pushing Augie back down with a hand on his shoulder.

The commotion brings me to my feet. I pick up my Canada Dry. “Who’s Bob?” I ask. “Who’s Malinké?” I look from man to man, but they don’t look at me. Billy’s in convulsions.

“Shee-it,” Augie says, crossing his legs, swinging his foot. “Motherfucker ain’t foolin’ nobody.”

“Oh yeah?” says Billy. “Check my boy out.” He waves his bottle over his shoulder again, then tips it to his lips.

Augie gets up and puts his hands on my waist, guiding me in front of him, duck walking. We cross a narrow hallway, but before I can step through the wide arch leading into the living room, he pulls me to the side of it, easing his head around the opening. I peek, too, with an eye out for Trish.

The music has stopped. Across the room, a thin young black man with Popeye muscles and a huge ‘fro that bobbles as he moves stands by the record player flipping through albums on a shelf that runs the wall. People stand in twos and threes, sipping drinks, conversing loudly, indistinguishably, an exuberant din.

“They he is.” Augie says just above my ear.

I twist toward Augie to see where he’s looking. His grin is maniacal, an expression I haven’t seen before. I follow his eyes to the right and see a cluster of women around the couch in the center of the room, one straggling white male on its fringes.
There in the middle of the couch sits a square black man in a bright dashiki and green Igbo hat, an ivory horn tooth dangling from his neck on a leather string.

“That’s my man. There be Malinké.”

Malinké is sitting so straight his back doesn’t touch the furniture, feet flat on the floor, knees wide apart. He makes sweeping gestures, chin elevated, eyebrows raised. He seems to be lecturing, or at least talking in a way that commands attendance without inviting participation. A skinny white girl sits next to him with lank brown hair and cutoffs that don’t extend below her crotch. She leans back, legs drawn up, studying the ends of her hair.

“Is he a professor?” I ask.

“Puh,” Augie says. “He a motherfucker name of Bob White, grew up in Alabama. When he come up here, he joined BAG, started calling himself Malinké Kenyatta.”

“BAG?”


I shake my head slowly. Am I supposed to know these names?

“They’s some crazy-ass niggers had a performance room down on Washington. Avant-garde, jazz, poetry, dance, a little theater. They lost it a couple years ago and more or less disbanded. Bunch of ‘em in New York now.”

“Were you in it?”

“I tried to be. A little while ago somebody got hold of a flatbed truck when Julius was in town and tried to get something happening down on Laclede’s Landing. They had Fontella Bass—”
“Oh! *Rescue Me!*’

“—and I got a call from Shirley LeFlore and went on down—is Shirley here?” He scans the room, comes up empty. “She’s a poet, husband Floyd’s a trumpet player. We did a reading up on the truck with Floyd and Julius and some other players, then some dancers got up there and I ran alongside with some other folks in the street—Billy was there, taking pictures. Malinké got up on the truck with the dancers, had a megaphone, styling himself a *griot*. Then he put it down and started doing a jig—”

Augie demonstrates, head down, then up, down then up, leaning forward in a crouch then straightening his legs, arching his back, arms bent at the elbows moving like he’s running. Each time his face comes up it has a different expression, eyes bugging, tongue lolling, lips puckered... I lean against the wall, laughing. Augie falls into me and we laugh in each other’s arms.

“So I picked up the motherfucker’s megaphone and used it. He damn near lost his mind when he heard me, almost fell off the truck snatchin’ it back, talkin’ ‘bout ‘This is my *symbolic object*! You want to be in this, get your own thing!”’ Augie shakes his head. “Had Fontella up there hoopin’ and hollerin’...” He turns me around and peeks into the living room again. “Look at ‘im.”

Malinké is still holding forth, narrowing his eyes, peering into the faces around him. I can’t make out his words in the babble of the room, but even without the story I’ve just heard, I’d have picked up on the air he projects of an African sultan, though I’d have been oblivious to the politics of blackness Augie’s introducing me to. The white girl on the couch winds a strand of hair around her finger and looks at the bookshelves nearby,
resting her other hand idly on Malinké’s back. When she stretches her legs out, I see that she’s pregnant.

A loud tick and a crackling sound makes me look toward the record player. The young man with the ‘fro has just set the needle down and is reaching for a partner. The first guitar strains hit me, unmistakable, and then the words, “It’s My Own Fault…” It’s a song I know by heart. Cries of approval rise from different parts of the room.

“I love this,” I say, clapping, bouncing on my toes. But when the voice comes out, it sounds both familiar and brand new. I turn to Augie. “Isn’t this BB King?”

He’s pulling me out on the floor. “Yes, indeed, young lady.” He holds me against him, swaying.

“It sounds different,” I call into his ear.

He steps back and spins me under his arm. “Then you been listening to the wrong BB,” he yells.

I think of the tapes JS and I have listened to so many times, how we love them. I know this song from Live at the Regal, but this… the voice is unmistakably BB’s, yet with an urgency, a clarity I haven’t heard before. A young BB, that’s what it is. It gives me gooseflesh. What else have I been missing?

“It’s… wow!” is all I can think of to say.

“That’s right. You can leave that other shit alone now,” Augie says.

“You have to show me this album! Do you own it?”
But Augie is through talking about music. “Look here,” he says. “Do like I tell you. Feel me. Step back on your left foot—your left—never mind, go ahead and step up on your right, now rock back on your left. Now back on your right and up on your left.”

One. Two. One-two. One. Two. One-two.... that’s the step Augie shows me. He didn’t invent it. He knew it from before, from forever. I never see anyone else do it, at least not the way he did, outside of some version by a member of his family at a gathering like the Fourth of July. It’s probably very old, might have come up from Mississippi with his mother, Jay. I didn’t know he was teaching me the man’s part; as the woman I should have started off by stepping back. But it doesn’t matter; there’s no question who the leader is.

Right hand in his left, left hand on his shoulder, I slide into his rhythm, to the dirge-like snare of that please-take-me-back song (TREAT me the way you wanna do...), dipping and swaying to fill in the spaces between the nodding beats. As it goes on, BB’s voice straining with feeling, Augie pulls me in. His fingers spread across my sacrum, pressing my hips to his, pelvic bones touching. We fit. Totally in synch. I scarcely breathe. I do more than anticipate his movements; I make them my own.

There are other dancers, but in my peripheral vision I see onlookers, too. As Augie holds me in the clinch, turns me, leans me back tango-style, one leg between mine, I sense that every female in the room is seeing herself in my place. At the end of the song, Augie dips me to the floor and kisses me. I hold him tight and kiss back. As he pulls me up, I hear a smattering of applause. I look around and slip my arms around his waist for a sideways hug, ducking into the crook of his neck. Augie kisses my head. The
women who were listening to Malinké are on the edges of the dance floor now, clapping. Malinké sits, staring forward, hands on his knees.

I look over and see Billy leaning in the archway with his beer. When we join him, he tilts his head and looks me up and down as if seeing me for the first time. Meeting my eyes, he gives me a lopsided smile and an upward nod. I’ve never been happier.

But the floor is filling with dancers jumping to *Catfish Blues* and I sping around to join them, plunging into the crowd. I turn and reach a hand back to Augie, but he waves me off, yelling, “Go ‘head!” I twirl and stamp and shimmy, and when I looked back, he’s holding up the wall with Billy, talking and laughing and slugging on his beer. They seem to be studying the crowd. I see Billy lean forward laughing and conclude they’re making fun of us all, so I rush over to chide them, shouting “Y’all are *mean!*” and draw backwards amid the other dancers, shaking my finger at them. But they just stand there with blank looks, mystified. When I join them later, listening as they contrived all manner of crazy commentary from people’s dress, hairdos, and dance moves (“We’re just talking,” they say, when I look at them askance), I realize it isn’t gossip—at least, not what stands for gossip in the world I come from. It doesn’t have the stink of maliciousness, the self-serving animus that no amount of unctuous inferences to altruistic motives can conceal. I didn’t know what to call their running patter, but whatever else it was, it was their brand of fun, this trading back and forth, sharpening wits, making each other laugh (and laugh they did—wherever Augie and Billy are now, I know they’re together, laughing). I will come to learn that it’s also their brand of love—for people, life—big enough for the whole world. I hadn’t known that it was possible to make these
kinds of observations—big-hearted, brutally honest—to see all of a person’s flaws and love her anyway. They taught me that. It was a big thing to learn.

I bob and weave, singing along—...swimming IN the... DEEP blue sea... I’d have ALL you women... I’m still bowled over by BB’s glistening voice. You can hear the roots in it, so much more of a holler. I’d always loved BB King, but he’d never seemed sexy before.

The skinny guy who put on the record sidles up next to me. “I like the way you move!” he shouts.

“...fishin’ after me, fishin’ after me... Thanks!” But he can’t mean it. I can dance, but look at these people. My moves are good, but they’re mostly in the feet and knees. The moves of the people around me, including this guy, are in the hips and shoulders. He faces me, arms raised, hands half closed, not quite touching, at the level of his forehead, hips swinging. He wears a tank top, wide red and blue horizontal bands. I can see the coils of his armpit hairs, smell his musky odor. I turn, dauntless, raising my arms, mimicking him. “...stay home with you, stay home with you...”

“I’m Luther!” the skinny guy shouts.

“Susanna!” Moving our hips one way, shoulders the other, we mirror one another, then rotate in our own little circles until we face each other again. The song is ending, drums quieting (...your house no more, your house no more...), leaving only the tinkling growl of the piano answering BB’s words. I stand still to catch the last of it, the goofy, grumbling voice of the piano tickling my ears. When it’s over, I leane back laughing and
look over at Augie, locking eyes. He bows and brings a twirling hand forward from the
top of his head.

“You like music, huh?” Luther says. “Hold on, I got something for you. Come
look at this.” He touches my elbow and motions toward the record player. As I walk
ahead of him, I feel his hand in the small of my back.

“I work at Streetside. You ever go there?” Luther picks up an album from a stack
on the floor by the record player.

“I’ve been there with Augustus Brown a couple of times, looking through the jazz
stacks.” I glance at Augie. He’s lighting a cigarette, listening to Billy talking in his ear.

Luther’s eyes follow mine. “Well this juuust came out, just came out. Look
here.” He hands me the album. It’s the Isley Brothers, “The Heat Is On.” All I knew of
them was Who’s That Lady?

“Cool. Put it on,” I say, handing it back.

Luther has made eye contact with Augie. “Hey man,” he says, raising a finger,
tapping the air. Augie takes the cigarette from his mouth, shakes out the match, and
returns Luther’s greeting with a curt nod, unsmiling, eyes squinting against the smoke.
Luther slips the record from its cardboard sheath, still looking at Augie, then turns to put
it on.

I feel the opening bars to Fight the Power enter me like a cyclone. Impossible not
to dance. “This is great!” I say, and spin around. But Luther is making his way across
the. I see him move up alongside some other girl. I wonder about it, but the music was
too good. I make my way to Augie, dancing, but he’s surrounded by new arrivals to the
party, slapping hands. I see Frenchie among them and call his name. “Come on!” I yell, but they don’t hear.

Five minutes later, happy and sweaty, the opening strains of For the Love of You (Well, well, well…) make me turn back to Augie. I catch his eye and hold out my arms, I won’t take no. He says something to Frenchie, who turns and sees me, raises his hand, smiling that sweet-tempered cinnamon smile of his. Augie reaches across Billy to an ashtray on a bookshelf and crushes his stub in it.

Melting into me, he says, close to my ear, “Havin’ fun, baby?” But I’m lost in the swoon of the song and don’t answer, just dissolve into him feeling every one of his muscles like a gift. We dance the Step, cheek-to-cheek, like we’ve been doing it for years. I don’t want the song to end, don’t let go when it does, and stay by his side for the rest of the night.

The Step would become an intersection at which we met easily, a consolation, a reprieve. Whatever else might be happening between us, we could always dance. Alone at his place or mine, at parties or bars, when something came on the stereo or jukebox that moved either of us to our feet, we came together, fused. It would be our only way of making what was between us visible, public, of allowing what others saw as an implausible, incongruous love to be whole in the world, for the duration of a song.

*
My father usually drops me at the state university on his way to work near the airport, and picks me up at the end of the day. But I begin taking the bus after class to see Augie instead. I love these bus rides, feel I’m finally getting somewhere, out into the world. Across the northern part of the county I ride—over Lucas-Hunt Road, past the white pillars of St. Peter’s cemetery, with their strange flying buttresses, green hills sloping off behind them resplendent with flowering crab-apple trees—on through the eviscerated landscape of Wellston, with its sketchy lawyer billboards, old store fronts occupied by check-cashing places and scruffy churches with names like “Refreshing Spring Redemption Center”—wondering at St. Louis’ lines of racial demarcation, the way skin color clusters so uniformly, changing abruptly within the space of a block. Only at the end of the line, in University City, do salt and pepper mingle. Pulling into the terminus two blocks from Blueberry Hill in the Delmar Loop, so called because it was once the end of a streetcar line, I feel an easing. I’m home.

Augie shares an apartment with a fellow Wash. U. grad student from India named Rana. His place is only a 15- or 20-minute walk from where the bus lets me off, but it’s across the city line, east of Skinker, well into the urban landscape that has made St. Louis the nation’s murder capital for years running. Not a good place for walking, Augie says. So we meet instead at Billy’s, off the Loop.

A few days after the party, we get together there with no other plan than to spend our winding-down hours driving around doing nothing in the Volvo, after which we’ll eat at the Hill and Augie will drive me home. Turns out the Volvo isn’t his; it belongs to his ex-wife, Donna, who lives close by in the labyrinth of three-story brick apartment
buildings north of Delmar. Augie and I sit on the sofa, playing with each other’s fingers, waiting for her to bring it around. Billy lies on his stomach on a faded Chinese rug reading the Post-Dispatch, his big body taking up most of the floor. He rarely looks up as he growls his one-liners back at Augie in his chewed-up voice.

“You work with Jason today?” Billy says.

“His father. Shearing sheets of 12-gauge stainless steel,” says Augie. This is only the latest of the odd and odder jobs Augie worked sporadically to keep body and soul together over the years.

“Yeah?”

“We used a huge machine—a shearing machine—‘bout 13 feet long, four feet high, three deep. On a count of three, Cut!, and the person in back has to stoop—a thick bar goes down as the shearer cuts—and he’s gotta catch the cut piece, stepping back at the same time.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah.”

“Is it safe?” I ask, webbing my fingers through his, pulling him near.

“It ain’t. But it’s money.” He kisses me.

Billy glances at us and goes back to his paper. “Why you always got that silly smile on your face?” he says. He means me.

I’m still getting used to the way they jab and parry constantly, Augie and Billy in particular, and all the other males of their acquaintance in general, but this is the first time
the tip of the blade has been pointed at me. My smile vanishes. What am I supposed to say? Is this a challenge, part of my initiation, or just plain rude?

I look Billy over, regarding him critically for the first time. He’s as big as a whale and his feet are flat. He has a curly fringe of hair across the top of his head and wears smudged glasses that lie crooked on his nose. I could say something back with the word “silly” in it, too, but I don’t dare, because Billy is cool. He’s a photographer who shows his work at galleries. He wears berets and smokes black cigarettes. All of the people I’m meeting on this planet I am half-inhabiting now are cool and tough, and I don’t have the thick skin and sharp tongue needed to hold my own with them. But the thing of it is, I feel seen by them—really seen—as if, before, I was invisible. It’s exhilarating. But sometimes, like today, being so exposed leaves me chafing.

Augie looks at me, conciliatory. “Billy,” he says.

“Yeah?” says Billy. When Augie doesn’t say more, he looks up and sees my face. He grimaces as if inconvenienced. “Aw, now,” he says, and flips the page of his paper.

Three stories down, we hear the rubbery squish of tires on concrete, a car pulling into the space behind the building. The engine cuts out, dying with a moan. The Volvo. I stand up and move toward the door leading out to the fire escape, but Augie jumps up and sticks out his arm, blocking my way.

“What?” I’m confused.

He looks down, uncomfortable, and slide his arm around me. “Just wait a minute,” he says, pulling me to him. My scalp prickles. He doesn’t want Donna to see me.
“Why?” I say, pulling away. I look toward the door. The glass in it is covered by a sheet of steel mesh, but it has no curtain. If she walks the keys up, she’ll see me. Will he lie about me? Does he want me to hide? I look at him, daring him to say it.

Billy grumbles into his paper, just loud enough for me to hear, “Better get used to it.”

I stare at Augie, not wanting to believe it.

“Billy, Billy, Billy,” Augie says, shaking his head, not meeting my eyes. Billy looks up in surprise.

“Get used to what?” I say.

“Nothing, baby,” Augie says and draws me in again. I stand there stiffly. He’s stalling, I think. But he says, “We can go.”

We go down, but Donna is nowhere. We find the keys under the seat, where she’s left them. After our ramblings that night, with hours of laughter and affection behind us and an agreeable smoky burger and mustard taste in my mouth, I feel brave enough, in the dark and rumble of the car, to go to the heart of it.

“How do you feel about… Donna. Now.”

Augie’s skin glows eerie yellow in the dashboard lights. His expression is blank. He slips a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket with a rustle, shakes one out between his lips, replaces the pack and pushes the lighter in, all before answering.

“How do I feel?” he says. He presses the glowing orange coils of the lighter to his cigarette and sucks in. It lights with a tiny crackle. He replaces the lighter and exhales.

“She’s… family. She and Jeremy. My family.”
My skin goes cold. “Family” sounds a lot closer than girlfriend. Am I even that? Do I want to be? A worm of uneasiness wriggles through me, the same queasiness I felt at the end of our trip to St. Albans, wondering what he wanted with me.

“Well, whose idea was it to get divorced?”

“Hers, I suppose.” He pauses. “She had her reasons.”

“Like what? Do you mind telling me?”

He draws on his cigarette, taps it against the sooty metal ashtray, leaves it burning there.

“I don’t mind telling you. We were students. She got pregnant. We got married. We were open—‘sposed to be.”

“You mean, other people?”

“Yeah.”

“Both of you?”

“Yeah.”

“So that’s why…”?

“She said I got upset about things that didn’t bother other people. She moved out, took Jerry.”

“What kinds of things?”

His face is composing itself differently, eyebrows raised ever so slightly, mouth in a straight, unreadable line. When he speaks, his voice seems too calm. “I got upset when she didn’t let me see Jeremy, yeah, I got upset. I came up one day, banged on the door.”
I’d been drinking. Broke the glass. She called the po-lice. I had a leather bag with me, had a gun in it. They took me in.”

My hands are clammy. I think of the zipped leather bag I saw on his back seat a year ago and look, startled, behind me. It’s not there.

“Why’d you have a gun?”

Augie is staring into the distance. “What, baby?” he says.

“Why…”

He looks at me. I don’t know what my face is doing, but he says, “Hey, girl,” and reaches over, squeezing my thigh. “I brought the bag with me because I didn’t want it stolen. I had no intention of taking anything out of it. She knew that. But they wanted to charge me, so they did. Concealed weapon. Five years’ probation. That was the end of it between us.”

Augie picks up his cigarette, drags on it, and sets it back down. I sit quietly, my hot, damp hand in his cool, dry one, waiting for the howling in my ears to die down. I know what the police are like. They pull over long-haired white boys for no reason; I have no trouble believing they treat Augie unfairly. I already love him so much the thought of him pointing a gun at Donna, whom I’ve never met, or anyone else for that matter, is unimaginable. I believe—no, I know—that he loves me as he has never loved before, which is the only way to love. That was the real problem between him and Donna; they weren’t right for each other. How could they be, when we are? Donna doesn’t understand him, pure and simple. So I ask the only thing I really want to know.

“You said ‘family.’ Don’t families belong together?”
Augie stays quiet.

“Do you ever want to get back with her?” I say. And then I lie. “Because I’d understand if—”

“I’ve thought about it. I got a son I don’t see much of. But, no, I don’t want to get back with her.” He puffs again on his cigarette and puts it out.

I stare out the windshield at the insects streaming through the headlight beams. We’ve already left the highway and are turning onto Wild Horse Creek Road. I trail my fingers out the window, lean my head out, watching for stars through the oak-leaf canopy. As we turn into my parents’ driveway, I bring my head inside and reach for his hand. Augie stops the car at the top of the driveway and cuts the engine off. He turns to me.

“Hey. I’m with you now. And someday, when you’ve done some of the things you need to do, I may want you for my woman.”

“Your—” I gape at him. “What did you say?”

Augie begins to laugh. “Oh, now. Have I offended your feminist sensibilities?” He pronounces the words fussily, “fimmynist” and “sinseeibilities.” He strokes my cheek with his finger, tickles me under the chin.

I push his hand away. “Stop it!”

“Look at choo! You damn near apoplectic! Ha ha!”

“Damn right I am! What—are you gonna knock me out with a big ol’ club, drag me back to your lair by the hair?”

“’Lair by the hair.’ That’ll work.”
I smack his shoulder. He grabs my hand and fills it with his lips, kissing with a suction sound. “Come here,” he says, and kisses me, pushing his tongue into my mouth. I suck on it, body infused with heat, mind evaporating.

I kneel on the seat, leaning toward him, my face above his. “Close your eyes,” I say, and tilt his face toward mine. I lick his eyelids, running the tip of my tongue lightly over the lashes, poking into the corners by the bridge of his nose. He holds my hips, fingers spread over my ass. When we begin kissing, he puts his hand between my legs and caresses me through my jeans. I put my hands on his shoulders, gasping. I feel the gear shift press into my thigh. When he takes hold of my nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, I whisper, “Let’s get out.”

I drag him to a knoll of matted grass sheltered from the house by a bushy spruce whose pungent odor reaches me just as we lie down. We kiss, my shirt pulled up over my braless chest, nipples so taut the entire breasts feel erect. Each of us has a hand inside the unzipped jeans of the other, writhing, panting, flushed with the sweaty musk and juices of early love. Augie knows I am a virgin, and though his hands have been all over and inside me, his penis has always stayed right where it is now; in his pants. If this frustrates him, he never lets on. So far we have approached each other like strange new species, not quite sure the other is real, afraid to scare each other off. That night, though I have no clue what I’m doing, I bring him to orgasm with my hand. He grasps my breasts in his hands sucks them hard, doing the same for me, his knee in my crotch.
Lying with my head on his chest, hair streaming across his neck, I close my eyes and feel for his cheek, laying my hand against it. I didn’t know whether I’m melting into the ground or hovering above it.

“Damn,” he says, a half-whisper.

“I know,” I say. “I’ve never…”

“Oh, me, too, baby, me, too. But, no—that. *This.*”

I feel his arm raise. When I open my eyes it’s pointing straight up, perpendicular to his body, at the cloud-like stretch of stars spanning the sky from horizon to horizon. On that moonless night each of its billion luminescent points scintillate, hard and bright, and even the gauzy clusters glittered.

“Damn,” he says again. “What *is* that?”

“What’s what?” I lie still, watching for the tiny moving dot of a satellite or something.

“All that.” He sweeps his arm.

“You mean—the Milky Way?” I sit up and look at him. “You’ve never seen it before?”

He drops his hand to his chest. “The Milky Way, huh? So that’s what that motherfucker is.”

“On a night like this, it might even cast a shadow.” I stretch my arm above the grass. Augie sits up and peers at the ground. The world is colorless, yet each feature is distinguishable in endlessly varying shades of burnt sienna, deep gray. And there in the
ghostly light of the stars, just visible, is the thin shadow of my arm, one shade deeper than dark chocolate against the slate gray of the ground.

Augie looks from it to me. “I never knew that,” he says. He holds his arms out from his sides, looking for their shadow, moving them like slow fan blades. “Check this out,” he says. “I’m blocking the light of the Milky Way with my body.”

He hooks an elbow around my neck and kisses my temple. We collapse on the ground, looking up.

“Hey,” I say. “What did you mean ‘things I need to do?’ What things?”

He strokes my hair. “You’re just starting out. There’s things everybody needs to do.”

“Like…?”

“Like whatever they need to do. I’m at a different point in my life. I did my things.”

“So I’m too young.”

“Or I’m too old. Sometimes I feel jaded next to you.”

“You’re only 27.” It does seem old to me. “You said you’d want to be with me after I did some things. There’s one thing you can help me do.”

Augie’s hand stops moving. I wait for his reaction, but he doesn’t say a word.

“Augie?”

“I’m not sure I know what to do with a virgin.”

I reach for his hand and place it on my pubic bone. “I bet you do,” I whisper. He slips his hand inside my jeans again, his middle finger curling inside me. I inhale sharply,
pull his hand out. “What about Friday? Will your roommate be home? Can I spend the night?”

Augie’s shoulders start shaking and I hear him chuckle softly and then louder. He folds his hands on his chest and gives into it. “Boy, boy,” he says.

“What?” I say. I’m leaning over him. Augie pushes my hair back from my face and laughs some more. I put my hand on top of his. “I have to get rid of it.”

“Get rid of…?”

“And you’d be a good person. You won’t get all… hooked on me.” It’s the first time I have articulated this aspect of Augie’s attraction for me, even to myself. I think of JS, of André, and of Darrell’s sad face when I told him I wanted to be just friends. They wanted more from me than I wanted to give. It’s not like that with Augie. I want to give him so much it scares me. And I’ll take everything he has to give and ask for more. I don’t know it then, but by treating our consummation like a transaction, a favor he’s doing me, I’m casting him in the role of older guide, not lover, construing his worldliness as invulnerability to unburden myself of the responsibility for men’s feelings that has ruled the lives of every generation of women before me. At the time, he did seem invulnerable. If things didn’t work out between us, I knew he’d have his pick of replacements, anyway, a thought both terrifying and liberating, both stoking my insecurities and flipping them on their head.

“Listen to you,” Augie says. He brushed my cheek with his knuckles. He seems subdued, sad, even. A minute passes. “See you tomorrow, babe? I’ll be by about ten.”
I nod. “What about Friday?”

“You can spend the night anytime you want.”

*

We’re both free all the next day, but Augie doesn’t make it to Fieldbrook until noon. When I finally hear him rattling up the drive and pull back the ruffled curtain to look out, it isn’t the Volvo I see, but Billy’s dusty red Volkswagen. (I wish I had made it a point to watch Billy shoe-horn himself into that thing at least once; I never did know how he did it.) I run out and met Augie getting out of the car. I slap my hands against his chest and lean into him.

“Where should we go?” I ask, nestling my head under his chin, fingering a rusty gap above the driver’s side door. “What happened to the Volvo? Is that why you’re late?”

Augie kisses my head and pulls back, leaning into the car. He doesn’t say anything, just takes my hand in his and looks at it. By his drained expression I understand that he’s told Donna about me.

“So… no more Volvo?”

“Probly not, but you don’t need to worry ‘bout it.” He smooths my hair. “I’d like to get something from my mother’s,” he says, threading the fingers of both hands through mine. “Then we can go wherever.”

Augie’s parents live on the North Side on a little street called Newcomb, one block long. It’s lined with red brick shotgun houses, with bars on all the doors and
windows. Augie was born in the house, he said, delivered by a doctor named Augustus, whom his mother named him for. But the neighborhood has changed. His father George was held up just two blocks from home. The assailant came up from behind and put a pistol in his back, saying, “Gimme your wallet, Mr. Brown.”

“Ain’t that something?” Augie says as we hustle north and east from Delmar through rundown neighborhoods I’ve seen only once or twice before, and then only at night. There are more people around in the daytime, mostly men hanging around on street corners, out in front of liquor stores. “‘Mr. Brown,’ Augie says, shaking his head. “‘Took his paycheck.”

“It was somebody he knew?”

“Some kid from the neighborhood. Never did find out which one. Jay’s started carrying a hammer in her purse.”

A story like that gives me the shivers, but I think of myself as fearless, put on my game face. Besides, I want to meet his mother, see him in her face and gestures. I want to know everything about Augustus Brown.

“Did your parents grow up around here?” I ask.

“In the neighborhood? No.” He shakes his head. “They came up from Vicksburg, Mississippi, ‘bout ten years ‘fore I was born, after some kind of trouble George had.”

“You mean, like…?” But I can’t even guess.

“I never did know what it was. They had to leave is all. Some kind of threat he was under. Could just have been the general situation. We still have people there. They took us down once.”
“How old were you?”

“How old were you?”

“Mmm, five or six—‘bout Jeremy’s age. Aside from that, they’ve never been back. Jerry’ll be over there, by the way.”

“At your mother’s?”

“He’s off school today. Jay keeps him while Donna’s at work.”

“That’s cool,” I say. I am 20 years old and don’t know a thing about children, not even how to talk to them. But I for sure want to see Jeremy. It doesn’t occur to me to ask why Augie doesn’t keep him on his free days. There are plenty of days like today, when he doesn’t have classes or work to go to. It seems strange now, but it didn’t seem strange then. For a man to keep his child—that’s what would have seemed strange.

Augie parks in front of the house, which is dwarfed by a huge elm. Though small, it has a simple old-world elegance. The bricks are painted tomato red, the trim and dentil moldings crisp white. The upper window trim is lightly arched, even on the basement window, with a row of bricks set vertically above it, following the curve. Steep steps, painted gray and flanked by wrought iron railings, lead to an inset porch on the left. The curtains are closed on all the windows.

Augie pulls a record album from the backseat and we get out, passing through a screeching metal gate into a clean, though patchy yard.

“What’s the album?” I ask, tilting my head to see it under his arm. He hands it to me as we reach the door. The cover is white. “Miles in St. Louis,” it says, with a sketchy negative image of Miles Davis looking clean-cut and serious, raising his arm in the black power salute.
The door to the house is covered in a steel grid, bars mounted on top of that. Augie leans on the bell. We hear its far-off angry buzz. He leans again. The door opens a few inches, and a gold chain with most of the gold rubbed off it stretches across the crack at eye level. The face of a little girl, maybe eight years old, appears some inches below it. “Hi, Ray,” she says.

“Hey now, Fleeta,” Augie says.

Fleeta closes the door. We hear her scratch and fumble and then the door opens wide and we step in. Augie bends to tug a tuft of Fleeta’s hair. Her head is covered in them, clasped in plastic barrettes in a rainbow of colors.

“How you doin’ cutie pie?”

Fleeta stares at me with the fingers of one hand in her mouth. She wears a blue-and-white-checked dress, gathered at the waist, trimmed at the neck in white eyelet.

“Get your hand out your mouth!” Augie says. He pulls her hand out and Fleeta snatches it back, putting it behind her. She moves a few steps away and returns her fingers to her mouth. “Devil,” Augie says. “This here is Susanna.”

“Hi, Fleeta” I say.

Fleeta stares.

“Where’s your grandmamma?” Augie asks.

“She in the basement.”

“She washin’ your clothes? What did you do, take a bath in a mud puddle?” He pronounces “bath” as “baff.”
“She not washin’ my clothes. My own mama do dat.” Fleeta turns and runs down the hallway, screeching, “Je-re-my! Yo daddy here!”

“What did she call you—Ray?” I ask.

“My family calls me by my middle name.”

We hear a clatter and make our way toward it down the narrow hallway with dim green walls. I try to take in the pictures on them, glimpsing a young Augie in cap and gown, but Augie is moving too fast for me to stop.

Jeremy comes out of a doorway on the right and jumps into Augie’s arms. “Ulp!” Augie says. “You ‘bout knocked the wind out of me, son.”

They disappear into the room he has come out of and I follow, glancing across the hall at a small, dark kitchen with a high, barred window over a shallow porcelain sink, red curtains below it with a black and gold fish pattern. Augie and Jeremy are wrestling on a black vinyl couch against the back wall. A tall, narrow window above the couch is covered on the outside with the same steel grid and black bars as on the front door. It’s a bright day but the lights are on. The room is small and crammed with furniture. I see a record player opposite the door I’ve just come through. Perhaps six inches from the couch sits a dark brown coffee table with sharp corners. On the other side of that is a recliner in the same black vinyl as the couch. A green upholstered chair with wooden arms sits next to the recliner, with a combination side table / magazine rack wedged between them, topped by a tall lamp with a yellowed, cylindrical shade. The walls are covered in green contact paper with a gold fleur-de-lis pattern. I lay the album on the coffee table and sink into the recliner.
Augie sits up on the couch catching his breath, laughing. Jeremy crawls over him.

“Jer’, boy,” Augie says, “You need to climb up off me. Say hi to Susanna.”

He pushes Jeremy off his lap and turns him around to face me, holding him from behind by the arms. Jeremy regards me curiously, pushing out his prodigious lower lip—just like his father’s, only plummy pink. I’m caught off guard by how beautiful he is, his eyes a warm golden brown, his muddy curls a springy cloud around his head, his skin a creamy wheat color. I forget to speak for looking at him.

“Hi,” Jeremy says, flipping up his hand. He turns back around and puts his hands on his father’s thighs, leaning in, urgent, murmuring. Augie leans to one side and lights a cigarette, holding it up in the air between puffs, away from Jeremy’s face. He rests his other hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Mm,” he says intermittently.

“Okay, Ray, okay?” Jeremy says louder. He puts his nose to Augie’s.

“What’s he sayin’?” comes a woman’s voice from some other room. The words have force behind them, reverberating like a bell, but with a squeal on the end of them, like an ungreased wheel.

“He say you smacked him upside the head, Jay,” Augie calls back.

Jay appears in the doorway in a faded pink housedress, hands on hips, facing Augie. “I don’t be smackin’ nobody upside the head, less they ain’t listenin’.”

Jeremy stays between Augie’s knees, hands still gripping his father’s thighs. He doesn’t look at Jay. “Please, Daddy?”
Augie’s expression is amused, non-committal. He takes Jeremy by the shoulder and turns him toward the wall, away from Jay, then puffs on his cigarette and blows the smoke toward the ceiling.

“Jerry, give your father some room,” says Jay, “Before I…” She reaches for the boy, who scuttles away and wedges himself between the arm of the couch and the wall. Jay takes one big step toward him, stretching out, then freezes with her arm in midair. She twists her head and stares at me as though she’s seen a ghost.

“Mama, this is Susanna,” Augie says.

“What?”

“Susanna.”

“I’m happy to meet you,” I say. I raise my hand an inch or two to shake hers but put it down again. She doesn’t seem happy to meet me.

“How old are you?”

I look at Augie quickly.

“Susanna’s twenty, Jay,” he says.

“Twenty?” Jay squeaks. “Look like sixteen to me,” she says under her breath. She looks at me. “You want somethin’?”

“I…?” My brain goes numb. I have no idea what she’s asking.

“Naw, that’s not what I mean, whatever you thought. I mean like tea or somethin’.

I don’t have no coffee.”

“I don’t drink coffee. But I don’t need anything, thank you.”
Jay frowns. “I got whatever you might want. I got—Jeremy, get back out from behind that…”

“Daddy let’s go someplace!”

“Go someplace? I got tea, I got. I don’t know what I got. I don’t have no coffee.”

“I… don’t drink coffee.”

“What do you drink?”

“Water?”

“I got water.” She turns to Augie. “Ray, do you remember that man. Ohh, what is his name? Mr. Gold-fob, somethin’ or other. The one ‘Reen made the pies for?”

“I don’t believe so.”

Jay turns to me. “He loooved ‘Reen’s pies. But she made him some, uh, uh, punch one time an’ he turned it down! She spent all that time—it had, uh, orange sherbert—and I thought maybe it was some kind of—you know, they got them rules—”

Jeremy crouches on the floor by the side of the couch, out of Jay’s view. I feel a sudden urge to join him there. “Daddy…” he says in a stage whisper. Augie’s mouth twists in amusement. He reaches over and taps his cigarette over Jeremy’s head. I’m horrified, disoriented, can’t understand a word Jay’s saying. Jeremy rubs the top of his head with the flats of his hands.

“An’ he…” she turns back to Augie, her arm stretched toward me. “Look at how she be lookin’ at me. Just like Mr. … oh what is his name?”

“Susanna’s not Jewish, Jay.”
“Well she act Jewish.” She turns to me. “I will get you some wa-ter. You want some ice in it?”

“Yes, please.”

“Yes please. Mmm hm.” Jay throws Augie a look I can’t see. She pinches her housedress out from her sides and lets it flop, then goes out the door.

_You didn’t tell her I was coming?_ I want to ask, but Jeremy springs from his hiding place onto Augie’s lap. He presses his head to Augie’s chest, clinging to his neck. Augie reaches around him to the coffee table and drops his cigarette in an ashtray.


Augie frowns. “You know your mama spect you to stay here.”

“You can bring me back.”

Augie’s frown deepens. He looks at me and pushes up his lower lip, considering.

“I don’t mind,” I say. Jeremy looks at me with huge eyes, surprised that I can speak, but with a glimmer of hope.

“You need to stay here, boy, do what your grandmamma say.”

“I do do what she say.”

Jay comes in with two tall glasses of ice water and sets them down on the coffee table.

“But she always got to hit me.” Jeremy ducks his head and looks up at Jay through curly lashes. Jay scowls, glaring down at him, fists on haunches, elbows pointing back at me. She’s wearing a different housedress now, with a swirling green and purple
Augie looks up at Jay. “What’s he doing he got to be smacked for?”

“First off. Listen. I don’t be hittin’ nobody. If he be jumpin’ around like a – I don’t know what – and I tell him to stop and he don’t, I got to let him know how I feel is all.”

Augie drags on his cigarette and returns it to the ashtray. One arm around Jeremy, he massages his forehead with his free hand then lets it fall, looking at Jay as if he doesn’t know what to say.

A rattle at the front door. The door opens and slams, keys jingle, quick footsteps grow louder.

“Is that Man?” says Jay.

“Is Man coming?” says Augie.

Jay goes into the hallway, but steps back immediately to make way for a skinny white woman, who strides into the kitchen and stands on tiptoe to rummage in a high cabinet to the right of the window. I see her pale thin hand take down a jar of peanut butter.

“Mama!” Jeremy shouts. He bolts past Jay and wraps his arms around the woman’s legs. Jay stands in the doorway.

“Hello, son,” says Donna. She puts a hand behind her, briefly touching Jeremy’s hair, then unscrews the jar and opens a drawer with a bang, looking over her shoulder at Jay. “They canceled that meeting, so I’m off this afternoon. I thought I’d—” All I can see
is Jay’s back, so I don’t know what she’s doing, but Donna stops talking and turns around, seeing past Jay to me.

Jay steps into the hallway and gestures at me, head lowered. “Uh, this is Miss uh, uh…”


Jay goes to the sink. “I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout it,” I hear her mutter. She begins pulling plates out of a cabinet. Donna doesn’t move. [STOP HERE?]

My body feels hot, rigid. “Hi,” I say, lifting my hand and putting it back down.

Donna seems unable to assimilate me into her surroundings. I’m having trouble putting it all together myself. I don’t know how I pictured Augie’s ex-wife, but it wasn’t this skinny, bosom-less woman, small eyes behind thick glasses, hair in an old-fashioned ‘do, with two side strands clipped to the back of her head, pulled with the rest into a low ponytail. Her clothes—a white blouse with a Peter Pan collar tucked into a navy blue A-line skirt that goes below her knees—only adds to her school-marmishness. I look at Augie. I know they’ve fought this morning and am acutely uncomfortable, yet intrigued. I’m learning something about him that makes him even more interesting.

Fleeta runs in. “Grandmamma, can I ha’ some peanut butter, too?”

“Say hello to your Aunt… to Donna,” Jay says. “And go wash them hands ‘fore you try to eat something.”

“Ray can I talk to you?” Donna says.
Augie stands and puts out his cigarette. The two of them disappear toward the back of the house with Jeremy in tow, hands tucked into the waistband of Donna’s skirt. Jay pulls out a loaf of bread from somewhere and goes to work making sandwiches. I’m left alone in the cramped, stuffy room, and relieved to be, though I feel completely out of place. I consider going out to the car, doubt anyone will notice, but think of the boy with the pistol. *Give me your wallet, Mr. Brown.*

I go back over the past fifteen minutes furtively, as if afraid to be caught at it.

*Sixteen. Jewish.* I touch my nose. What was Jay talking about? Obviously I’m not the first white woman she’s ever met, but am I only the second? Or one more in a tiresome string? I stir uneasily in the squishy recliner, thinking of how at home Donna is in this house, letting herself in with her own key (even Augie doesn’t seem to have one of those), helping herself to the contents of the cabinets, calling Augie Ray. Will that ever be me? If today was is anything to go by, it doesn’t seem so. Do I want it to be? What’s the alternative?

I picture myself as a looser, beer-drinking, halter-top-wearing girl, hopping onto Augie’s extra knee at some party. That’s not me either. I don’t know if I’m playing for keeps with Augie, but I know I couldn’t stand being anything but number one—to him or any other man. Does that make me possessive, insecure, uncool? The question makes me miserable. But sitting here like part of the furniture, almost wishing I were, feels like number nothing. I feel hollow, the same lost feeling I’ve had all year, nowhere to belong. *My family.* The three of them are back there now, reunited. Where do I fit in? And who’s this “Man” Jay thought was arriving? I reach for the glass of ice water, grateful for the
coldness against my hot palm. I take a sip and swallow, press the glass to my cheek, then set it on the coffee table and wipe my face with both hands, flopping them into my lap, slumping.

I look down at the magazine rack. It’s stuffed with newspapers, all in the same small format. I pull at one and several came up with it, so I pile them willy-nilly on my lap, ready to read through every one of them if I need to.

*THE EVENING WHIRL*, reads the nameplate, *An Uninterrupted Publication Since 1938*. Across the top of the front page is a series of mug shots of black men under lurid headlines: *WOMAN IS RAPED BY HYENA; MAN MEETS HIS MAKER AFTER GUNMEN DECIDE HIS UNHOLY FATE; PREACHER HAS SEX WITH HIS 3 DAUGHTERS, 14 GRANDDAUGHTERS, AND 8 NIECES*. But the garish headlines were mere prelude to the purple prose that followed.

*Investigating officers said Nelson was full of dope when he leaned over into Pringle’s car to blow his foul breath into his face and argue about nothing...*  
*Edwards became so enraged he pulled out a butcher knife and threatened to gut her like a hog...*  
*Pruitt says he found more joy in making love to the stray dog than he did his wife...*  

Is this for real? I turn the paper over. The back pages is covered with ads for a well-known downtown hat store, a 24-hour bail bond service, Willie Gardener’s Hideaway Lounge, and Madame Mae, Spiritualist and Advisor. The ads appear real enough. As I read on, the stories do, too, but whoever is writing them is taking “poetic license” to a whole new level. *PROMINENT ATTORNEY CAUGHT IN BED IN HOTEL WITH HIS LOVER. AS HER HUSBAND ENTERS WITH GUN, HE KNEELS AND PRAYS*. The story tells of a husband who, having reason to “suspicion the fidelity of his wife,” trailed her and the lawyer to a hotel room and “smashed through the door like a
football player on the Dallas Cowboys… And there they lay, buck naked in bed, all absorbed in a love duel…” It ends with a poem of seven stanzas, among them:

Daddy, oh daddy, I love your stroke,
You conjure my soul with every poke;
Love me this morning till the cows come home,
Carry on fool, you’re real gone.

“Haaaaaaaa!” My laugh is all air. JS would love this! I look toward the kitchen and put my hand over my mouth to smother a guffaw. “Hmhmhmhm!”

The angry buzzer sounds, followed by loud knocking.

“They he is,” says Jay, and goes off to the front door.

I peruse the blurbs sprinkled throughout the Whirl under the one-word headlines WHO and WHY.

WHY didn’t Primus Oden, 18, of 3916 N. Florissant, pick up a gun and mow down the robber that invaded the P.M. Gas Wash at 3720 N. Kingshighway and robbed the place of $250 cash? Make yourself valuable and useful.

I pull down the corners of my mouth, nodding in approval. Tell it like it is.

Jay appears in the kitchen followed by a youngish man in a green army jacket, bell-bottomed jeans and desert boots, his shiny afro short and neat. He hands Jay a wrinkled paper bag.

“I been waitin’ for this!” she says, and pulls out a mason jar packed with liquid and something I can’t make out.

“JV’s finest,” says the man, and turns to leave the kitchen. His eye falls on me sitting in the recliner, the open newspaper in my hands.

“Who’s this?” he asks.
“She came with Ray,” says Jay.

“Hi, Came-with-Ray,” says the man. He catches himself, sucks in his cheeks.

Jay gives him a dark look, then smacks his arm, hard, smiling. “Go on, now,” she says.

“What?” he says, shrinking from her blows. He takes a step across the hall toward me, reaching out his hand. “I’m James.”

Augie arrives in the hallway with Donna and Jeremy.

“Hey, Man,” says Augie, “I heard you’d be over.”

I hear Donna and Jeremy behind him, talking in the hall.

James backs up and settles against the sink. “Had to bring Jay her delivery.”

“Pig’s feet and sow’s ears?” Augie steps into the room where I’m sitting, but takes one look at me and falls back with his hand on his chest. “Jay got Susanna up here readin’ the Whirl!”

Jay pokes her head around. “She readin’ my Whirls?”

I look at Augie as if I have a juicy secret to impart, pointing at the paper in my lap. “This is…..” I turn my palms up and shake my head. He rocks forward, laughing.

“Maybe she likes scandal,” says James. Augie’s laugh stays on his lips but dies in his eyes.

“Well what’s wrong wid it?” Jay comes into the room, pushing Augie out of the way. She sets down a plate stacked with sandwiches oozing dark purple jelly and a peanutty odor. “They calls it a scandal sheet, but I tell you what. It’s a crime fightin’
paper, look here.” She grabs the issue I’m holding and opens it to the second page, then drops it in my lap and pokes at it. “Read that!”

I look where her finger’s pointing. “‘Credo,’” I begin. “The Evening Whirl is a weekly newspaper dedicated to the exposure of crime and civic improvement. Our chief aim is to keep the public well informed of interesting happenings in our community. We specialize in exposing rift-raft...” I look at Augie, barely able to contain myself. “That’s what it says, rift raft.”

“That’s what they is,” says Jay. “Jerry! Somebody go tell Fleeta an’ them they’s samwiches out here.”

James sticks his head out the doorway. “FLEETA!” he yells.

I giggle then compose my face, moving my finger over the text. “… ‘exposing rift-raft to a point of embarrassment in an effort to help reduce crime.’” I grin at Jay. “I think it’s great!”

Jay sits next to me in the green chair, her hands clutching the arm. “It’s the onliest paper that will tell you what’s goin’ on. You go to the, uh uh, Argus, or you know, the other one—”

“The Post-Dispatch,” says James.

“It don’t matter what it is, what I mean is, you go to them papers and they only gonna tell you about the crimes if they’s white people getting’ hurt.” She blinks at me. “I’m tellin’ the truth.”

“I know that’s right,” James says.
“Lemme see some a them ‘interesting happenings in our community’,” says Augie, squeezing in between me and the record player. He takes the paper from me and looks it over, reading:

*Long live Nancy my angelic dog*
*If she ever quits me I’ll screw a frog*
*No woman in the world can take Nancy’s place*
*She has trained me how to keep the pace.*

“Oh my God,” says James. He leans on the door jamb and pats the pockets of his army jacket. I bend over, laughing. Fleeta pushes into the room. She grabs a sandwich from the plate and licks the jelly from the sides. As she runs back out, James swats her behind.

*I kiss the darling’s tongue and lips*
*And kiss on down till I reach her hips;*
*There’s a little something there that I like,*
*It turns my tongue into a spike.*

“Ha ha!” Augie folds the paper and claps me on the shoulder with it. “And people wonder why I became a poet.” I put one hand on his leg, laughing too much to speak, waving my hand to make him stop. Jeremy darts in and picks up two sandwiches, holding them double-fisted. He takes a bite out of one and stands listening.

Jay snatches the paper from Augie. “Child,” she says to me. “Look here. They puts in the men, look …” She rummages through the paper and points to a column titled, *Wife Beaters and Sweetheart Mistreaters.* Under the byline is a sketch of a woman holding a rug beater or some other cleaning implement, it’s hard to say. A big-booted foot is crashing into her rear end.

“’Oh Daddy Don’t,’” I read in the subline, “’Be Good and I Won’t. Dedicated to Men who Like to Beat Women and Those Who Strike Back.’”
Augie leans over. “‘Linell Charleston, 26…””

“I like that name, Linell,” I say.

“Why?” says Jay, drawing back her head.

“… ‘of 4361 Argyle, wrote to lovely Myrtle Tapscott, ‘Honey I will never give you up. I can’t stand seeing you with another man…””

“Oh-oh,” says James, lighting a cigarette.

“They puts they picture in,” says Jay, tapping the paper, “so they don’t get no play, nowhere!”

I look at Linell’s menacing mug shot and grimace. Jeremy leaves the room with his sandwiches.

“Oh, you don’t think they get any play?” says James. “What do you think, Ray? Think they get any play?”

Augie lights a cigarette.

“Scuse me! Excuse me! Ah’m sorry, but I don’t b’lieve women was put here to get beat!”

“What about children, Jay?” says Augie, blowing smoke. “They put here to get beat?”

“Oh you done done it now!” says James, laughing. He leans over, reaching out a long arm to slap hands with Augie. Augie returns the slap half-heartedly.

“I never took a hand to any of my chirren…”
“Belts, bottles, coat hangers …” says Augie, gesturing like he’s presenting each item, alternating hands with every word, smoke trailing his movements. “Frying pans…” I suppress a gasp, glance furtively at Jay.

“’Member how you just be walkin’ by when she be on the phone and bap!” says James, snapping back as if smacked in the forehead. I wince and look at Augie.

Augie sinks into his knees, laughing. “Them old phones be hard, too!” The two men touch hands, rocking and laughing “Ki-ki-ki-ki!”

I steal a look at Jay. Her face is bunched up, furious. I lean away from her surreptitiously.

“WHAT I’M TRY-ING TO SAY,” she hollers above the men’s laughter. She waits for it to subside. “Is we wouldn’t know half this shit—“ She lays a hand on my arm.

“’Scuse me, Miss uh…”

“Susanna,” we all say.

“…if it wadn’t for the Evening Whirl.” She jabs the paper again.


“Mmh,,” says Jay. “You like that name, too?“

“Kind of,” I say.

She does a double take, nonplussed.

“The Evening Whirl,” says Augie. “Yes, yes... Hey, we gonna have to slide, Jay.”

The air seems to get sucked out of the room. I look to Augie for some clue to this abrupt announcement, but I don’t see one.
“You through with that ‘Trane I left you?’ he goes on. “I brought you some....” He reaches for the Miles Davis on the coffee table, but Jay intercepts.

“What’s this?” she says. “Miles in St. Louis.” She turns it over. “I Thought About You. All Blues. Seven Steps to Heaven. Like Someone in Love. Four songs on the whole damn thing. Is this like the other one, on and on and can’t dance to none of ‘em?”

“You might be able to dance to Like Someone in Love,” I say.

Jay looks at me. James looks at Augie, eyebrows raised. Augie smokes.

“Might, huh?” Jay says. Though Augie’s closest to the record player, she hands the album to James. “Put it on. Play the one she say.”

James sets his cigarette in the ashtray. While he slides the album out and fits it onto the spindle, Jay hands the ashtray to Augie and moves the sandwich plate and water glasses onto the side table between us. James sets the needle on, and then turns, flipping the coffee table onto the couch. I settle in to watch him dance with Jay, but as the piano tipples through the first few bars of Like Someone in Love, James reaches for me. I look at Augie, who is backed into the corner now with his cigarette. I can’t read him. But he holds out his palm and lowers his head in a be-my-guest gesture. I stand, smiling, nervous, then give my hands to James and let him lead me in some kind of jitterbug.

“Hey, hey,” says Jay, watching. She bobs her head, taps her foot. “She keepin’ up. Put down them smokes, Ray.” She stands and they join us in the cramped space between the furniture.

Jay is an enthusiastic dancer, snapping her fingers, thrusting her hips, stepping this way and that, but her energy outmatches the song. It’s not her thing, I can tell, though
music and dancing are. I keep looking over at her and Augie, first to see how they move, then because James has started pressing into me, his hand on my waist moving lower every couple of seconds, the back of it brushing my backside in the turns. I look to Augie for a key to this behavior *(Is this how people act on this planet?)*, or at least some complicity, solidarity with me. But Augie doesn’t meet my eyes, let alone rescue me from my confusion. He has retreated into himself, his distant focus suspended beneath everyone’s eye level. He wanted to leave earlier and, as the conflict heats up between what my instincts are telling me and what my brain doesn’t want to believe, I want to leave, too.

A few minutes into the song, the piano and drums drop away into a bass solo, and Jay and Augie’s movements wind down. I seize the opportunity to back away from James. “Phew,” I say. “That was fun. Which way is the bathroom?” James holds onto my hand a second too long, eyes steady, holding mine, a little smile on his lips. A hot, primitive impulse to flee the room mingles sickeningly with pride in his apparent approval of me.

I turn to Augie. He looks at me as if waking up. I lay my hands on his forearms.

“It’s the next room down, baby, on ya right,” says Jay. *Baby.*

“Let me say my goodbyes to Jeremy,” Augie says, “And we can go.”

“Wait a minute,” sats Jay, “Less put on somethin’ *hot!* I got this—what’s his name?”

“You put on somethin’ hot, Jay. We gonna leave you to it.” He escorts me from the room with his fingers on my back.
When we go into the hall, I hear a woman in the front room. Donna, on the phone. I feel a stab of dread at the thought of running the gauntlet past her on our way out. I don’t know what to expect. A polite goodbye? An oblique insult? Or more of the subtle ostracism she’s conveyed by simply not speaking to me? Anything is possible. As I slip into the bathroom, I see a sun porch at the end of the hall, TV soap opera sounds coming out of it. Augie walks past me toward it.

When I come out, James and Jay are in the kitchen. I can hear Donna still carrying on a one-sided conversation in the front room, Augie nattering away with Jeremy in the back. I hesitate, decide against horning in on Augie’s time with his son—or doing anything else that might delay our departure—and go to the kitchen to take my leave.

Jay has opened the jar James brought and is pulling some of its dripping contents onto a plate with a fork. James already has his plate, and is biting into something pinkish gray, otherwise indiscernible. I stand in the hallway and give them a low salute.

“I guess we’re going,” I say.

“You didn’t eat nothin’!” says Jay. “Y’all can’t go without havin’ some a this. Come on over here and taste this. You ever had pickled pig’s feet?”

My tongue thickens, filling the back of my throat. I swallow. “No,” I say. “But I’m not hungry now.”

“She afraid of it, Jay,” says James.

“I’m not afraid of it,” I say, reddening. I’m starting to hate him.
“Well go on and try it then. You gonna see,” says Jay. She holds out a flat piece, wet and rosy, on the end of a fork, balancing a small white plate beneath it to catch the drips. It doesn’t look like a foot. Maybe this is just a piece of… pickled pork.

Augie comes up behind me, puts his hand on my shoulder. “Can I get that other album from you?” he says to Jay.

“Oh! Lemme see what I done with it,” says Jay. She clunks the fork onto the plate and hands it to me, leading Augie out of the room.

I hold the plate in one hand, the fork in the other to keep the slippery slab from sliding to the floor. It doesn’t have much of a smell, just briny.

James stands there, chewing and grinning. “Don’t feel obligated,” he says, gnawing at what seems to be some poor animal’s hoof. I look away. My eyes fall on the jar. I quickly avert them, but not before I see toenail. My throat make a clicking sound as I swallow. I look toward the window, breathing to calm my roiling stomach. It’s just like chicken, I repeat like a mantra.

“You don’t eat pork?”

“Sometimes,” I say. I look at the plate in my hand. It’s just a square-ish piece of meat. I want to try it now, see what the fuss is about, wipe the cocky smirk off James’s face, and not be so… white. I pick up the fork and bite into a corner of the pinkish material. It won’t detach. I bite harder, tugging with the fork. It feels slimy on my tongue and lips, the texture gristly… horrible. Teeth sunk into the cartilage, I realize what it is now—an ear—and panic, but when I open my mouth to release it, the meat just clings there. I rush to the sink and drop the plate in it. I wrest the sow’s ear from my mouth and
throw it, still attached to the fork, in the sink. The flabby sound it make against the porcelain makes me gag.

James sets down his plate. “You fixin’ to heave?” he says. He comes over to me and puts his arm across my shoulders, trying not to laugh. But I hear him.

I lean with both hands on the porcelain, catching my breath. “Why would anyone… eat…?”

James laughs out loud and turns me toward him, pulling me into a loose hug.

I back up instinctively, wiping my hands on my jeans. “It’s like eating a shoe!” I put my hands to my mouth to keep from gagging.

“You’re all right,” says James. “You tried it. Now you don’t ever have to try it again.”

I don’t know what to say. Little tears sting the corners of my eyes. I start to move away, but James’ hands are on my shoulders. As I move off, he moves in. “Gimme some sugar, girl,” he says low, and kisses me, his tongue slopping between my teeth. Every cell in my body screams, but I stay and let it happen. To do otherwise, I believe, would be to expose an unthinkable truth, one no one will believe, and make everything different.
Spring 1997: Two Teas, Conclusion

Crossing the Bay Bridge, I let out a squeal. I felt as if I’m airborne. God, it’s beautiful. I caught a glimpse of a giant container ship gliding past Alcatraz, with light-burnished, wind-feathered, deep blue water streaming in its wake. Thank you, Association of Bay Area Sewer Service Companies, for having your meeting over here this morning. I exited at Fremont, crossed Market at 3rd, and headed a few blocks north on Kearny, parking in the underbelly of the Chinese Cultural Center. I dug an organic, vegetarian, yak-milk chew out of the glove box and tossed it to Irma. “Be good, sweetie,” I said, and went out into the brilliant day.

I was meeting Larry at the House of Nanking, where I’d taken Harry many times for noodles after an hour at the Cultural Center playground. Though far from home, it was my preferred playground—old guys playing mahjong, grandmas looking after red-clad toddlers, passersby smiling with crinkly eyes at Harry—his rusty-blond curls a stand-out amid all that straight black hair—as he rushed, laughing hysterically, into a clutch of strutting pigeons to scatter them, flapping, chirping madly, in all directions.

I spotted Larry easily in the throng, at the end of one of the long Formica tables crowding the little restaurant. He leaned on his elbows, his large freckled hands loosely framing a tiny, handle-less porcelain cup on the table before him. I pushed past the other diners and slipped into the metal chair across from him, settling my purse on the floor beneath it. We touched hands across the table.

“Hey,” he said, smiling.

“How was your meeting?”
Larry shrugged. “Same old. Wanna know more about the Manhole Assessment and Certification Program? I’m an expert now.”

“Sure, tell me more.”

“Nah,” he said, reaching for a stainless steel teapot and the other porcelain cup. “How was your meeting with Karen?”

“Short and sweet. Thanks, hon’,” I said, taking the tea cup from him with the tips of my fingers on the rim. I slurped. The taste of hot, liquid jasmine mingled pleasantly with the aroma of fresh garlic and ginger hanging in the air. “I thought maybe some other board member would show up and put the pressure on, but it was just Karen. I think I’m the only candidate. They must assume I’m going to do it.”

Larry raised an eyebrow and reached for menus. “Sure you want to? It’s not like you don’t have enough to do, what with your job and Harry, and now…” He gestured at my belly with a menu then slid it across the table.

Well, this was different. Was Larry weighing in? Was he concerned? I had an eager impulse to unburden myself to him.

“Not 100%, no. It’s mainly the people, really. I’m not sure I... I feel so…”

Larry studied his menu. “Was Karen on her good behavior?” he asked, not looking up.

“No,” I said. “She was classic Karen. But she wouldn’t be in charge, I would. She’d just be the head of a committee, like Carnival. Don’t worry.”

“I’m not.”
“Oh.” Five minutes in and I was already dispirited, my disappointment like an unwanted guest at the table.

“What’s good here?” Larry said.

“Harry gets Chow Mein. I always get the Garlic Eggplant. There just isn’t enough eggplant served in restaurants in America, unlike India or Japan, so I order it at every opportunity. In case you hadn’t noticed.”

Larry looked up, a hint of alarm in his eyes, but I looked away for the waiter. That was my job in restaurants; Larry left me to deal with the wait staff. He left me to deal with a lot of things, in fact. The PTA thing was a case in point. It hadn’t occurred to me to discuss my conflicting feelings about it with him because he’d only say, “Do what you want.” Abruptly I felt a panicked, realizing that it was the beginning of our meal together and the interesting part of the conversation, such as it was, was already over.

My hands felt stiff. I shook them lightly to release the tension and rested them on my belly. Glowering a little at the top of Larry’s head bending over the menu, I saw a thinning patch in his slate brown hair, rogue white hairs mixing in with the fading red ones. The sight released a wave of regret and fondness in me. Wasn’t Larry’s underwhelmingness the very thing that had attracted me to him six years before, after seven years of short-term affairs that ended badly? I could hardly fault him for it now. I’d wanted someone I could respect. I’d wanted a normal life, a solid base to build from, and that’s what Larry offered. Whenever I felt the edgy terror of dissatisfaction building, I remembered what my therapist said: “This is what a healthy relationship feels like. You’ll get used to it.”
I relinquished my mood to the bustle of the restaurant, with the bright, clear light unique to sunny days in San Francisco streaming in through the windows. Outside I saw a couple, each of them of undecipherable race and gender walk past, arms linked, jabbering away. They brought to mind New Orleans. I smiled and rubbed my stomach. *I’m in the right place.*

“When are you supposed to make up your mind?” Larry said, closing his menu.

“What? Oh, I should tell them by the end of the week.”

Larry nodded. “I’m sure you’ll be good at it. We’d better order,” he said.

I held up my hand, caught the eye of the waiter.