

Ordinary Saints and Monsters

Ellen Bauer

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2014

Committee:

Rebecca Brown

Sarah Dowling

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, University of Washington Bothell

Creative Writing and Poetics

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University of Washington

Abstract

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Ellen Bauer

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Rebecca Brown, M.F.A.

Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences

Ordinary Saints and Monsters is a collection of short stories all centered on the topic of abortion in North America. The stories of clinic workers, patients, volunteers, and others connected to the topic are included in this work, based partially on the author's own experiences. The contentiousness of the abortion debate is serves as background to this collection, as it addresses both very good and very bad providers who have been in the news in recent years, as well as numerous ordinary doctors and clinics.

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I Won't Say That I Told You So

September 21st, 2008

I had finally convinced Amanda that the world didn't need another Jake Cheil. But it had taken me six months, and Jake was coming home from Iraq soon. Throughout the entire process, Amanda had been thrilled at the idea that she was having Jake's baby. At first my reasons for why she needed to have an abortion—that she had no job and Jake was constantly lying to her and he had broken up with her before and would do so again—were pretty useless. All she'd say was, "But Sophie, it's his *son*. He'll *love* being a father."

When she said that, I looked around their apartment, at the two rabbits hopping around pooping everywhere, the clothes strewn all over the floor, the broken CD cases, weeks-old dishes piled in the sink, the lidless trashcan with some stench emanating from it, and thought about how *bad* of a father Jake would be. I didn't think Amanda could handle this, either.

As the months went by I had to keep reminding Amanda of her doctors' appointments, usually driving her to them or riding the Rapid with her so she wouldn't skip them. She had always refused to get a driver's license, even after I offered to pay for classes. On days when I had to work during her scheduled appointments, it didn't matter how many times I would remind her beforehand, she just skipped her appointments--and missed doing tests that should've happened much earlier in the pregnancy. She finally got an amniocentesis, though, because I insisted upon it, even though she thought there was no point. The fetus tested positive for Tay-Sachs, and I looked up that condition online and told her all of it, focusing on the fact that her child wouldn't live past the age of five and might even die sooner.

“Some people say that in this case having an abortion could be merciful,” I said.

Her face grew worried, nervous, frantic, and she whispered, “But Jake’s pro-life.”

I sighed. Jake’s position on abortion had gone back and forth three times since I met him. He wasn’t “pro-life,” he was pro-*him*. “He doesn’t even know about it, Amanda. He doesn’t need to.”

She started crying and whining about what she ever did wrong. “Nothing, girlywhirl,” I said, using the nickname our dad had given to her before he was taken away. “It just happens.” I hated it when this happened, when the reason that she was upset had anything to do with Jake. She cried all night and refused to get up that morning, and I had to go to work. When I was sure that my boss was nowhere around, I went on a search for abortion providers on the Internet.

I knew that by now she was in her third trimester. But I hoped that with the defects her fetus had, we would be able to find someone who would help us out. And we would, but not in Ohio. We’d have to get to Kansas somehow, which would be difficult because my car was notoriously unreliable. It had broken down going to Youngstown once; there’s no way that it wouldn’t last all the way to Wichita.

I looked into Greyhound buses, Amtrak trains, and discount airlines, trying to work out something on our budget and wishing we could take some of Jake’s Army money, or money from any of the million careers he had invented for himself but had never done, but I knew we couldn’t. Whatever Jake made, Jake spent. And until he went off to Iraq, there wasn’t much that he was making, just money he talked about making. I hated Jake then even more than usual.

“So what’s in Wichita?” someone asked from behind me. I spun around, my fists raised. I dropped them quickly. It was only Charlie. “Relax, Sophie,” he said. I exhaled.

“Sorry,” I said. “Just nervous.”

“There’s something nerve-wracking in Wichita? Or are you just scared of flying?”

“I’m scared of how I can’t afford to fly,” I said. “Wichita’s fine, I’m sure.”

“My sister lives there,” he said. “She’s kind of weird, but my parents like it when we try to get along. I could take you.”

“It’s not me who needs to get there,” I said. “It’s my sister.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Amanda?” He had met her exactly once, very randomly, at the Beachland Tavern, when Hot Cha Cha was playing. We went to the Grovewood Tavern together to get some dinner afterward, where Jake met up with us and spent fifteen minutes talking about his “former job” at a strip club, not letting anyone get a word in edgewise, after a girl walked in who he was *sure* used to work there (wherever “there” was). Jake’s voice is incredibly loud, so there was no way the girl and her companions didn’t hear him, and when Charlie (anxious and concerned about peace-keeping as Charlie is) told him to keep it down, Jake talked even louder and then kept turning the conversation back to him whenever possible. So Charlie hated Jake, and, by extension, Amanda, because Amanda-with-Jake is needy, clingy, and laughs at Jake’s rudeness to other people.

“Yeah,” I said, “Amanda. But Jake won’t be there.” I considered for a moment, but then decided to go for it. “I’ll be there.” He raised an eyebrow at me, and I blushed. *How conceited can I be?* I thought. So I said: “She’s not that bad. She’s my sister.”

“Why does she need to get to Wichita anyway?”

I stared straight at him, reminding myself that he was a good person, that we had always agreed on politics before, and that he might be our only chance of getting there. So I said it: “Amanda needs an abortion.”

He stared at me for a few seconds, then said: “Amanda’s pregnant?” He seemed shocked.

“She’s in her third trimester,” I said. “The--” I didn’t know what to call it, whether I should use the word “fetus” or “baby” or what. Neither of them seemed right because if everything was going the way it should have, then what Amanda would have was a baby. But since *nothing* was going right, it would never be more than a fetus. But from the minimal research I had done, I had figured out that a lot of women in Amanda’s position-- “fetal indication patients,” as they were called—still referred to them as babies even though they would never be such a thing. “—*it* has Tay-Sachs,” I said finally. “It wouldn’t live long.” I looked at my feet, because this was *Charlie*, and I didn’t want him to be disappointed in me. “I’d love a niece or nephew, but I don’t want another Jake in the world, Charlie. I told her that the second she found out she was pregnant, I’ve been bugging her to have the abortion for months, and right now I feel guilty but so relieved that she’s finally listening even though it means that something that’s so close to being alive never will.”

He nodded. “It’s all right.” He touched me on the shoulder, a comforting gesture, one that I welcomed. “I guess we’re all going to Kansas.”

WE had met Jake at a bar during my senior year of college. He was standing there showing off his new tattoos to a bunch of guys who were much bigger than him. Amanda thought he was hot, and while he made me wary I could see why there might be something magnetic

about him. We struck up a conversation, and he stuck around, and when he and Amanda started dating I was happy for them. I dated Jake's friend Kevin for a while, and the four of us hung out all the time.

The stories Jake told us about himself were believable at first. At first he only named Ohio, Texas, and North Carolina as places he had lived, which I could understand. He started adding others later, whenever any of us told him about someplace we had visited or wanted to visit. According to him, he had lived in Wisconsin, Connecticut, California, Norway, Japan, and Kentucky, but nothing in his stories added up, and when we met some of his relatives it became clear that he had never left Ohio in his life.

I was glad when he left for Iraq. I would go out with Amanda almost every night in the early weeks before she knew she was pregnant and point out every cute guy in the room, letting her have first dibs even though I was single and she wasn't. She never took the bait, even when Jake would go for weeks without calling.

When she found out she was pregnant, she argued about it with herself (and with me) for the first month about whether to tell him or not. This was before she even began considering her options. I told her it would be best to not do so, mostly because I was also encouraging her to terminate. But eventually she just decided that the baby would stress him out too much while he was in Iraq and it would be best to keep it a surprise.

I ran to Amanda's apartment and up the rickety stairs after getting off the bus. I knew I was getting stares from people—twenty-five-year-olds do not normally run at full speed through Collinwood in skirts and heels. I breezed into the apartment, stopping in my tracks and nearly retching when I saw a giant pile of rabbit poop sitting in front of me the second I

walked in the door. Amanda was lounging on the couch, mutely pushing the 'Up' button on the remote, being met with static at every station. *Didn't pay her cable bill again*, I thought.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey."

"So, do you remember what we discussed last night? About you having...a... termination?"

"Yeah."

"I found a clinic, Amanda. I made an appointment. But it's in..."

She cut me off. "I don't care. I'm not going. Jake would want a kid."

"Amanda, we've talked about this. I know--" *I don't want to say this*, I thought, but I did anyway: "I know that you and Jake want to start a family together, but giving birth to a child who will only live for a few years...how is that...how can you want that?"

Amanda shrugged.

"Fine," I said. *Call me when you regain your sanity*. I left her apartment before I said anything bad. As I walked down the stairs, I thought: *Jake is an asshole who doesn't know what he wants, and he can't support a kid on his career as a musician/actor/truck-driver/stuntman/bouncer/construction worker/karate instructor that he never had!* I left before I could say this, though. Amanda always refused to believe that he was lying about all of this—she thought that he just hated all those jobs too much to go back when they needed money, that he was just too nervous to play the guitar for her, et cetera. It was all lies, and it all made me sick. And I knew what would happen next—when she finally told him she was pregnant, as she would have to very soon if she didn't want him denying that the kid was his—and when she told him there was something wrong with the child, he

would leave her again. This wasn't a burden he could take on. It wasn't something he would want to take half of the responsibility for. This was something he'd blame Amanda, me, our whole "fucked-up French-Canadian family" (as he liked to call us) for—or he'd accuse her of cheating anyway and just leave her to deal with this sick child. It was typical Jake.

SHE called me a few hours later, her voice even deader than before. "I told him," she said.

"And what happened?" I couldn't read what was going on in her voice. Had he said to keep it? Terminate? Give it up for adoption?

"He said he doesn't want a retard baby," she responded. "And he told me I must've drank too much." She started sobbing. "Or you know that job I used to have at the pet store? He said it was the animals maybe—God, Sophie, he has three degrees, how can he be so stupid?"

Jake did not have three degrees. If I had to wade through all the lies to make a guess, I'd say he was a high school drop-out. But all I said was: "Don't know."

"I need to get rid of this thing. If I don't, he's going to break up with me again."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Do you want me to come over?"

She sniffled. "You hate it here, I know that. Just call that place in Kansas. I want to get this over with as quick as possible."

"Okay," I said. Then, "Amanda, are you actually okay with this?"

"Yes," she said. "I don't mean just to keep Jake from leaving. I mean--" *I've been pressuring you and I know it.* But I didn't say this. She'd know what I meant. "It's fine," she

said. "I know you don't like Jake for whatever reason. I get why you've been pushing. You're right about everything, you always are." She hung up.

But I don't need to be right about everything, I thought. I was lying to myself, though. I needed it completely. And this time I had gotten my wish.

"THE trip's on," I told Charlie the next day at work, coming in behind him as he fed old mail from July through the shredder. I was trying to be covert, some of my co-workers are more religious than Charlie and I are and I didn't want any of them overhearing.

"Oh good," he said. "I told Julia. She says we can stay with her."

"That's great," I said. "The first appointment is next Tuesday morning. You sure you can miss that much work?"

"I'm seeing my family. Kansas is gorgeous at this time of year. It'll be fine."

"Well...thanks for taking us," I said softly.

"It's no problem." He went back to his cubicle then and as I watched him walk away I exhaled.

"SO how are we getting to Kansas, anyway?" Amanda asked me later that night when I went over to her apartment to help her get some essentials together. The clinic staff had given me some suggestions of things to bring over the phone, and I had gone on a trip to the drug store to pick up things that I knew Amanda didn't have, such as a heating pad and a journal. "Has Wanda magically been completely fixed?" Wanda is her name for my car.

"No," I said. "Charlie's driving."

She wrinkled her nose. "I hate Charlie."

I shook my head. "How do you hate *Charlie*?"

"He's so *annoying*," she said. "I don't want to be stuck in a car for sixteen hours while the two of you make googly eyes at each other and talk about all your weird music or whatever."

"You've only met him once, Amanda, don't be so judgmental." Inwardly I wondered when Charlie had I had become "the two of you," and remembered how during the day I *had* thought of the two of us as "us," "we," et cetera, in the context of "we are taking Amanda to Kansas." It was weird. We had never been "we" before.

"Whatever. I don't want to be an accessory to your romance."

I looked down at my feet, inwardly raging. "I'm doing this for you," I said. "We both are." And there was that "we" word again.

"I don't need to be a charity case."

"Well, you can't get yourself to Kansas, and even if you could, you need to have a companion with you. It's the clinic's rule."

She turned away from me for a moment to throw some clothes in a suitcase. "I hate that I have to do this," she said when she turned back around.

"I know," I said.

"Can you promise that Charlie won't be mean to me?"

"He's not going to be mean to you." *He's never mean to anyone. It's his fatal flaw.*

"How long will we be there?"

"Four or five days. It's a process."

"Why can't it all just be over quick?"

"I don't know, Amanda. I'm not a doctor."

“Where are we staying?”

“Charlie’s sister’s house.”

She glared at me. “So not only do I have to deal with him, but I have to deal with his *family?*”

“Just one sister. Apparently they don’t even like each other very much, so who knows, you might get along with her.”

“Why would his sister live in *Kansas?*”

“I don’t know. I’m just glad I don’t have to pay for the hotel.”

CHARLIE drove over to my apartment at seven Sunday morning. I was already waiting outside with my bags. “Hey,” I said.

“Hey. You all ready?” he asked. He didn’t look as sleepy as I felt.

“Yeah,” I said. “Amanda probably won’t be, though. She lives on Waterloo.”

I put my bags into the trunk of his reliable-looking Pontiac and we started driving through the side streets until we reached her apartment, which was above an abandoned bike shop.

I was right about Amanda, of course—she was awake, but obviously stoned, and in her pajamas when she let me in. She had probably been awake all night getting high. Charlie had tried to follow me up the stairs, but I stopped him. “Believe me, you don’t want to go in there,” I said. “It’s seriously gross.”

“Um, okay,” he said. “I’ll be in the car if you need me.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Get dressed,” I told Amanda the moment she opened the door.

“I don’t want to,” she said. “I feel sick.”

“You’re okay, you just smoked too much weed. You can sleep in the car.” I grabbed her cloak, the one she had sewn herself out of dark red velvet. “Just throw this on.” I grabbed her toothbrush, sneakers, and pillow, and a couple of books that I didn’t think she had read yet. I also found some old plastic bags in case she got sick in the car.

“Where’s the rabbit food?” I asked.

She waved her arm in the general direction of the bedroom. I sighed and began searching beneath all the piles of literal and figurative crap. I eventually found the bag hidden in her bed, food pellets spilling out among the sheets. I poured it into the food dishes that I found in the kitchen, but I figured that Amanda had probably been hand-feeding them. I worried about those animals.

“You seriously need to clean this place,” I said. “Does your landlord know you live like this?”

She shrugged. “He was the bike shop owner,” she said. “I don’t have a landlord anymore.” That explained the dilapidation. She stumbled down the stairs, holding her stuffed wolf in her arms. I followed her, and she climbed into the backseat without saying a word to Charlie. She was asleep again before we even hit I-90.

“She’s like a little kid,” Charlie said.

“She can be,” I said. “Our childhood was a bit—disrupted, and Jake...he doesn’t help with that.” I left it at that and he didn’t press me, just sat quietly until I was ready to talk.

FOR a little while, Jake had a fairly steady job at a factory doing rubber stamping work. He didn’t like it and was eventually fired. He had been saying for a while that he wanted to

quit, which caused a lot of tension with Amanda because she was waiting tables at an old Italian restaurant rapidly declining in customers, and Jake was clearly the breadwinner. They fought almost constantly.

When he was fired, he came home and broke up with her. Told her to leave their apartment, “take all of your stupid baby shit and go.” He wouldn’t speak to her as she pleaded with him and begged to know *why* he didn’t love her anymore. She called me, begging me to help her, and I watched her trying to reason with him in tears as he catatonically watched TV.

His actions right then screamed to me that he was using his size, his strength, his connection to reality, everything about him that made him more powerful than her, to disconnect from her. She could not harm him if she tried. And she didn’t want to try, because as angry as she was she was still so in love with him and only wanted him to talk to her. Simply by caring less than she did, he could win any fight they had.

So right then, I wanted to pick him up, carry him outside, and beat him to a pulp. But I couldn’t. He’d win that fight too. There was nothing I could do but get Amanda’s stuff and get her out, take her to my apartment.

For the next three weeks, Jake refused to call her. He sent her one e-mail blasting her for her “immaturity” and her “inability to confront reality,” which was pretty bold, coming from him. She called and left messages and got nothing but an e-mail telling her to stop calling him. So she withdrew a bit. She stopped calling him and I tried to get to the root of what was going on. I called Kevin, whose immediate reaction when picking up the phone was to ask, “Is this a booty call?”

“No,” I replied. “What’s going on with Jake?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Jake and I don’t talk *all* that much anymore. I mean, we weren’t *that* close before he hooked me up with you. We only really hung out as much as we did because we both wanted to bang both of you.”

If he had said this a year before, I would have been surprised, but I wasn’t right then. This was typical Kevin, typical Jake. “Whatever,” I said. “Just tell me what’s going on with him and why he broke up with Amanda, because she’s really upset.”

“All I know is that he thinks she’s really immature and he got fired. He’s thinking of going back into the Army.”

This was something Jake talked about *constantly* but I had never really believed. It didn’t make sense to me that someone so shiftless had been a soldier. But it fit with why he left Amanda—he wasn’t with anyone else, and he was ready to do something she wouldn’t like. He didn’t want to deal with the confrontation and the possible arguments, so he left. “Thanks,” I said. “That’s all I needed to know.”

The next day, Friday, I took Amanda to a party thrown by a guy named Dave, who Amanda thought was cute. Dave lived in Tremont and played the trumpet in a traveling jazz band. They had just released an album on an independent label. After Amanda had a few drinks, she danced with him. It was swing dancing, which Amanda isn’t very good at, but she tried, and for the first time in weeks she seemed happy. I saw Kevin there too, but I ignored him while he flirted with some horsefaced girl who I knew already had a boyfriend.

On Saturday, we drove up to Geneva and watched the waves crash on the shore, sat on the beach and threw rocks into the water, ate doughnuts, and shopped along the boardwalk. Amanda’s side of the conversation was as peppered with Dave as it was with Jake. Mine was filled with encouragements.

On Sunday, I saw Amanda looking through some old pictures she had saved on her computer—of us when we were a foursome, mainly. Her and Jake and me and Kevin, all of us so happy and friendly and cute. There was one video Kevin had taken of Jake kissing her and fondling her breasts at the beach. She watched it over and over again without the sound on. I thought maybe she had deleted it afterwards—at dinner she talked a lot about Dave.

On Monday, Jake finally contacted her. It wasn't anything huge, just another e-mail saying he "needed" to meet with her. But she was excited, and when they *did* meet up, he told her everything, a huge story about how he couldn't stand to disappoint her and couldn't stand to lose her, and didn't want to see her dating "some black guy."

So she got back together with him, moved back into their shithole apartment, and watched as he went back into the Army and eventually shipped out to Iraq. The whole time, I was furious. I didn't speak to Jake. Amanda and I saw each other only when he wasn't around. I hated that she went back to him. He treated her worse than before.

But I know why she stays. She stays because she lost him once, and when he threw her away he purposefully destroyed her confidence, and she doesn't want to face the world without him again. Her confidence is still gone now, even though she has him back. In the last few days of their breakup, she was starting to stand on her own, and she could have healed, if he had only stayed away. But she got all wrapped up in him again and now he's the only thing in her life—just like he wanted.

CHARLIE was silent after I said all of this. "Do you think she would have left if he had just said he was fired and going back into the Army?" he finally asked.

“She might’ve. Eventually. She definitely loved him, but she might’ve been able to pull herself up enough to do it. I would’ve told her to.”

“That was some real passive-aggressive bullshit,” he said.

“I know. And she still thinks he couldn’t stand another week without her. But I wonder how many girls he’s fucked in Texas and Iraq.”

He shook his head. We were somewhere near Columbus now—I had been telling Jake and Amanda’s awful story for nearly three hours—and on any ordinary Sunday I would have still been asleep. I envied Amanda slightly right then—stretched out all over the backseat, holding onto that wolf, her huge belly spilling out over the edge of the seat. She was probably dreaming another one of her fairy dreams.

I was hungry, but I hadn’t packed much to eat for the road, just a few apples. I didn’t *have* much, in my apartment. Grocery shopping had fallen by the wayside what with knowing I had to pay for the abortion. I rummaged through my bag and grabbed one of the apples, and the noise must have been enough to wake Amanda up.

“Where *are* we?” she asked from the backseat.

“Columbus,” I said.

“How’d we get here?”

Charlie laughed. “We drove.”

“What’s so fucking funny?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said.

“You’re a jerk,” she observed.

“Amanda!” I exclaimed. “Don’t--”

“You’re such a bitch,” she said, and started crying. She loved to do this—be the little girl, freak out about nothing, get everyone’s sympathy. At moments like this I could almost understand Jake’s cruelty to her, because she was frustrating and she needed a lot of care. But I didn’t want to be her mother right now. I let her cry, waited until she stopped, and asked if she was hungry. She nodded.

“What do you want to eat?” I asked.

“Something good,” was all she said.

“I know a place near here that has good falafel,” Charlie said.

“Well *that* sounds good,” I said.

“Cool,” he said. “I think we get off at the next exit.”

“No we don’t,” Amanda said. “I do not want *falafel*.”

“Well, what do you want?” I asked.

“A cheeseburger,” she said.

“That’s so boring,” I responded. “Can’t you try something new?”

“Falafel is good, you’ll probably like it,” Charlie said. “It’s just fried chickpeas.”

She made a mocking face. “I don’t want *fried chickpeas*.”

“Well, we both do,” I said.

“Since when are the two of you ‘we?’” she asked, echoing my thoughts from the other day. “God, Sophie, I’m six months pregnant, I have a craving for a fucking cheeseburger, and I wish you’d quit taking his side all the time.”

I knew I was blushing and I hated that I knew that. I peeked over at Charlie, but he didn’t react, just kept on driving. *What is wrong with me?* I thought. “Whatever,” I said.

“We can get burgers.” *Not that I believe for one second that you’re having anything more than a hissy-fit.*

But we had our burgers (Charlie’s was a black bean burger) and then drove on to St. Louis. Amanda slept about half the way there, uninterrupted. When she slept, Charlie and I talked about everything from transcendentalism to whether Obama or McCain would win the upcoming election to Renaissance art. Throughout everything, all I could think was *he gets me*. When Amanda woke up, all of that stopped and we turned on the radio and she whined about whatever—she was tired, I didn’t bring the right books for her, her feet were swelling, the scenery in Indiana and Illinois was boring.

When we finally hit Missouri, I started looking around for a cheap motel to stay in for the night—it was almost seven-thirty. We found one on the outskirts of town called The Mark Twain Inn. “Let’s hear it for Samuel Langhorn Clemens,” Charlie said as he parked.

“Who the fuck is *that*?” Amanda asked.

“That was Mark Twain’s real name,” I said.

“You guys are so *weird*,” she said. She opened her door, then gasped. “Sophie, help me get out!”

I went around and offered her my hand. We got our room keys and went upstairs. As soon as we walked in, Amanda said, “I want to call Jake.”

“Okay,” I said. I flopped down on one of the beds, ready to at least take a nap.

“No, in *private*. Could you guys get out for a while?”

I groaned. This was typical Amanda. She had the whole backseat to herself all day and then wanted the whole hotel room as well.

“Please?”

"Fine," I said. "Charlie?"

"Y'know, I'm pretty tired from all the driving. I think I'm going to go to sleep." He sat down.

"No, get out," Amanda said. "I want to call my boyfriend in peace."

He stood up, and walked out without a word, slamming the door behind him.

"He's so gay, Sophie," Amanda said. "I don't know why you're so into him."

"I'm not into him," I said, looking at the door, wondering whether to stay or follow him out.

She snorted. "Yeah, sure. I've seen the way you act around him. There's no accounting for taste, I guess.

I looked around the room, this cheap motel room that Charlie had given up his vacation days to drive us to, looked at the suitcases on the bed that he had done most of the work to lug up, and thought about how Amanda's so-called wonderful taste had never propelled her towards guys who went out of their way to do nice things for her—she liked the liars who treated her like shit, the ones who would dump her but never apologize, never work to make things better, run away to Iraq instead. She liked the guys with the electric blue eyes who spent all their time working out, the conventionally good-looking muscle worshippers. And me, I thought I was the same way, because Kevin and everyone else I had ever been into fit that profile. Charlie was a hairy, nerdy giant yet I could not ignore the fact that I was attracted to him. Something about the way he laughed, the way he said my name, the way he listened to me talk, was pleasing to me, and I knew he was a better guy than any Amanda had ever dated.

“My taste is fine,” I said. “Call Jake, I’ll be back later.” I left the room without looking at her again, thought about where Charlie might’ve gone. I wouldn’t’ve *blamed* him for taking his car and leaving—but I knew that as pissed as he was at Amanda, he wouldn’t leave us—wouldn’t leave *me*.

I found him by the pool, outside. It hadn’t been cleaned in a while—not too many people swimming in October in Missouri. He was sitting on one of the lounge chairs—it was missing a few straps. I sat down next to him.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey.” He looked glum.

“I’m sorry about Amanda,” I said.

He shook his head. “Not your fault.”

He was right—Amanda was not my fault, and she shouldn’t’ve even been my responsibility. Most people stop expecting their big sisters to solve all their problems by the time they’re twenty-three.

“She still shouldn’t’ve been so...” I said.

He nodded. “It’s okay. I’m not mad at you. I just needed some time by myself.”

I stood. “Oh, sorry. I’ll go,” I said.

He grabbed my hand. “You don’t have to leave.”

So I sat back down. “So...” I said. “I liked it when Amanda was sleeping earlier and we got to talk.”

“Yeah, it was nice,” he said. “You’re pretty cool, you know that?”

I shrugged. My heart was beating *very* fast, my mouth felt dry, I hadn’t eaten enough and my hands were shaking. The chilly air didn’t help. “You okay?” he asked.

“Just cold.”

“We can go back inside,” he offered.

I shook my head. “No. It’s more private out here.” I inched closer to him and our shoulders were touching and I shivered again, this time due to the excitement as much as the cold. I felt his arm move, wrap around my back. He was so tentative but I was glad he did that because I was terrified of making any kind of move. I looked at his face. He was smiling, halfway, nervously. “You’re pretty cool too,” I said. I swallowed. His eyes were very wide then, very brown.

“So,” he said. “Now that we’ve established that we’re both cool...” He leaned into me then and said, “Would it be okay if I kissed you?”

I nodded, and before I could start completely freaking out, he brought his lips down to mine. I grabbed him around his stomach and pulled him closer to me, pressing my lips back into his.

“Yeah,” he said after pulling away. “Okay, that works.” And then we kissed again, a bit harder, and he opened up my lips with his tongue. His body seemed to radiate warmth. His big arms wrapped around me and we lay back on that dilapidated lounge chair, surrounded by nothing but the night air.

AMANDA didn’t say much the next morning. Though she had clearly seen that Charlie and I had slept in the same bed, and clearly saw the light kiss that he gave me as we put our suitcases in the trunk, she didn’t comment. But as tired as she was acting, she didn’t succumb to sleep like she had done the night before. She stayed wide awake reading *The Bluest Eye*, one of the books she had whined was “boring” yesterday. Her eyes would peer

at us over the top of it every so often—she was like a Victorian chaperone in leopard print pajama pants. I knew that she didn't like the idea of me dating Charlie. Outside Columbia, Charlie reached for my hand and I let him hold it. She glared but I held on until I was ready to let go. She said nothing but I knew Amanda well enough to know she was just gathering strength for a later explosion.

We reached Julia's house by mid-afternoon and as usual, Amanda didn't do much more than say hello before saying, "I have to go call my boyfriend," and shuffling off.

"Where *is* this boyfriend of hers?" Julia asked after she left.

"Iraq," I answered. "He's in the Army and he's a total dickhead."

"Lovely," Julia said. We sat in her living room amid all of the oddly-shaped pieces of homemade pottery, in various stages of being painted, and sipped wine until Amanda rejoined us. As before, she refused to speak, just poured herself a glass and opened up her book.

"Are you sure you should be drinking?" Julia asked.

Amanda glared. "I'm getting rid of it anyway, right?" she asked. Julia shrugged.

Amanda muttered something under her breath and I decided to distract her. "How's Jake?" I asked.

"Why the fuck do you care?"

I shut up, but Charlie decided to intercede. "Could you try being a little nicer?" he asked. "We're all here for you, you know."

She put the book down. "First of all, you're only here so you can hook up with my sister, so stop being such a fucking martyr. You got what you wanted."

"Amanda--" I tried.

“Shut up, Sophie. You hate Jake, I get it. Stop pretending to care. He’s not going anywhere, he asked me to marry him.”

I sighed. “Okay,” I said. I couldn’t think of anything else to say. I knew I would just end up getting angry at either her or Jake, and that wasn’t going to solve anything. I could only deal with one problem at a time, and right now I was just looking at the next few days. Amanda stood up and wordlessly went back upstairs. Charlie reached for my hand and I let him take it. Julia engaged him in small talk about pottery and then cooked some frozen mushroom ravioli.

IN the morning, just hours before the scheduled abortion, I went downstairs to make myself some tea and found Amanda sitting there already.

“I’m nervous,” she said. She looked small again, like she had two mornings before. I put my arms around her shoulders.

“It’ll be okay,” I said. “The doctors there have a lot of experience.”

She nodded, and then started crying just a little. I held her until she stopped. She felt as small as she looked. “It’s okay,” I said.

I sat with her on the drive to the clinic, and in the waiting room. I held her hand through all of the blood work, informational sessions, ultrasounds, and the digoxin injection. We had lunch with the other patients and the doctor and though she had been subdued the entire day, she began to open up to the other women.

Four days later, when everything was finished, we met with the chaplain to have a memorial service for this baby, and as we stood with him, Amanda said her goodbyes to a child that could never have thrived.

The Lighthouse

October 10, 2009

THERE'S not much to say about my volunteer work: the protesters were mean and angry; my fellow escorts were friendly, for the most part. The patients were scared, nervous, sometimes angry. I got used to it, and it was only a commitment of one or two Saturday mornings a month. I got into it because it fit well with my political beliefs and some of my other friends from school did it too; it wasn't any gesture of compassion or a call to help, though part of it was because hearing about the protesters' actions made me mad. I won't claim total badass-ness, even though it could be awful in the winter. But when it got to be too cold, we could stay inside and watch for cars in the security monitors, and I always had tea with me. It was my fault that my boots weren't waterproofed and my feet froze on Valentine's Day. Like Tony said back then, I could have just gone home. He kept saying that even after May, when I had the weird dream—that something bad would happen, that it would have something to do with this *thing* I did--and three days later George Tiller was murdered. I couldn't quit after that. That's when things went from "maybe useful" to "definitely important."

TONY and I dated on-and-off throughout my sophomore and junior years of college. Here are some things he did.

1. Said he "didn't care" that escorting might be dangerous. (I eventually stopped worrying about the danger, but the orientation was a little alarming.)
2. Said he didn't understand why the clinic couldn't just hire someone to do what we did.

3. Said that starting an online store in order to support Med Students For Choice in the wake of Dr. Tiller's murder might be too controversial.
4. Compared murders of doctors to lost basketball games.
5. Told me he shouldn't be my "In Case of Emergency" contact on my phone.

All of this adds up to the reason why I left him.

AFTER breaking up with Tony, I met Mark. Mark was in my Poli Sci class, and he always acted weirdly happy around me. He was kind of the opposite of Tony, who usually interrupted me and looked bored whenever I'd talk, and didn't seem to care about whether we spent time together or not. Mark seemed to care about my opinions, and he called me awesome all the time. I wasn't attracted to him at first, but then our short conversations after class turned into lunches together a couple of times a week, and I started liking him.

He always complained about the girl he had *almost* dated during his senior year of high school, someone who never returned his feelings (her name was Jennifer). I made sympathetic noises and he responded by giving me millions of compliments about how nice and "classy" I was.

Of course I thought he had feelings for me. But I thought that he was probably too shy to do anything, and that if I wanted something to happen, I would have to do it myself. So after making this determination I decided I would ask him out on the 12th after class, just to get things over with.

But the Saturday before that, I was shot.

IT happened quickly. My escorting partner, Josie, was with a girl who had brought what looked like all five of her sisters with her to the clinic. They were standing around their car in the back of the parking lot, smoking. The protesters were still shouting, even though they couldn't *see* them, but knew they were there. Josie was smoking too; she usually doesn't, but when other people did it, she sometimes joined them.

Dr. Weiss stepped out of his Honda Accord. Amidst all the shouting about baby-killers and hell, the biggest protester, a guy named Earl, ran towards us with a gun in his hand, pointing it at the doctor. He shot. I jumped. I didn't think about it, I wasn't trying to be some kind of hero, I just heard the noise and went toward it. I went down, Dr. Weiss didn't. Earl escaped. None of the other protesters stopped him.

Josie ran into the clinic. Dr. Weiss stayed outside and called nine one one.

The bullet hit my liver, but an inch higher and it could've pierced a lung.

THIS is how my parents found out about my volunteer work. I didn't tell them when I started escorting, but they didn't disown me after I was shot, as I feared they might. They wanted me to be moved from Metro Health on the west side of Cleveland to Mercy, closer to them, but they listened to me when I said no. Mercy's Catholic, and I got the feeling that a Catholic hospital in the middle of a bunch of farms wouldn't be helpful for someone who had been shot by an anti-choice protester. I probably went against their "conscience clauses."

HERE'S what recovery consisted of:

1. Constant monitoring by nurses to make sure I wasn't randomly bleeding.

2. Multiple insertions of tubes into my abdomen to drain out all the blood and bile (which left some *lovely* scars).
3. Surgery to remove the bullet, followed by another surgery to remove the necrotic tissue from my liver (apparently I was lucky here too, as the bullet hit not just my liver instead of my lung but missed the bigger blood vessels and struck on the left side instead of the right).
4. Figuring out what I could eat and drink without getting sick while a giant organ in my body regenerated.

Oh, and one more thing: waiting for a visit from Mark every day and never seeing him.

AT the time, Mark was living at his parents' house in Parma, only a few miles south of Metro Health, just off of route forty-two. It would take twenty-five minutes *at the most* to get to me. Considering that he had to drive to the east side for class and work all the time anyway, it didn't make sense that he didn't come. My parents came *all the time*, all the way from Vermilion. But Mark didn't even call.

I made up some theories why:

1. He couldn't stand to see me like that, it would hurt him too much.
2. I was being lauded so much for my bravery in the media (mostly, but I'll talk about the bad articles later), and he didn't think he was worthy anymore, I was now *too* awesome.

3. He didn't hear *which* hospital I was at from my other friends (and hadn't checked Facebook, either, even though I knew this was ridiculous since he was posting on there all the time about his literary magazine submissions.)
4. I accidentally said something about loving him as I was shot, and Dr. Weiss, the only one who could've *possibly* heard it, found out who Mark was and somehow contacted him and now he was too embarrassed, for one reason or another.
5. Or maybe I was mumbling about in in my sleep, and a nurse heard it?
6. Certain facts printed about me in the paper may have acted as some sort of turn-off. Maybe the fact that I forgot to list Neil Gaiman when one of the reporters from *Scene* magazine asked who my favorite authors were? (Which I thought was a really weird thing for them to ask since it had nothing to do with the shooting, but I guess that's the kind of standard boring question you're supposed to ask when you find out someone's an English major?)
7. Maybe he hated me all along.

THE newspapers got things about me wrong from the start. The first article listed my dad's job as "lighthouse keeper." Vermilion's in Erie County, not in the eighteenth century. A few days later, they printed a correction, but no one reads those. After that, I was referred to as "the lighthouse-keeper's daughter" dozens of times, and everyone back home probably thought my family was crazy: my father was the one who advocated for the lighthouse's restoration, but not its "keeper."

They'd interview anyone. When they found Tony, I was angry. He said a bunch of bullshit on TV about how we had such a long and wonderful relationship and he knew

things would work out in the long run. He conveniently left out the multiple break-ups and fights. So then I had to write in to the station about how they were wrong, so that the truth would be out there.

Okay, so it wasn't as noble as that. Really, the main point in me doing so was so that Mark wouldn't think I had feelings for anyone else and use that as an excuse to get even more shy and weird.

Tony called me, after one of the anchors read my letter on-air. I didn't answer of course, and my voice mail box was full. Everything followed the same pattern as the day I left him the last time—which really meant I was just treating him the way he treated me throughout most of our relationship. I filtered all of his e-mails to spam and blocked him on Facebook. You get what you give.

A week after I was shot, I saw someone from school: Maureen, a friend of mine from the campus feminist group and the literary magazine. She arrived at the hospital with her arms full of books and notebooks. She sat them down on the table by my bed and said, "Hey, Joanna. How are you?"

"I've been better. Just regenerating an organ and all."

"Okay." She seemed like she didn't know what to say.

"Relax," I said. "I'll live. I think. Unless Earl finds me."

"Aren't the police looking for him?"

"I guess. But they don't have him yet. He could be anywhere. He could be the next Eric Rudolph."

"Who?"

I stared at her. “He blew up clinics and gay bars in the south in the 1990s, and also set off a bomb at the 1996 Olympics. He hid in people’s homes for months.”

“Oh.”

I realized then that while Maureen and I might’ve shared the same beliefs, there was a huge rift between us. I was mired in a world of murders and bombings now, and she was still safe in her on-campus Take Back the Night marches and reading “eye-opening” books. I couldn’t really hold that against her, but I also knew I would end up doing so if we kept to this conversational thread. So I changed the subject—or rather, I asked what I had been wanting to ask her since she stepped in the door (which I realize shows that I still had one foot firmly in her world). “How’s Mark doing?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t see him?”

“We aren’t really friends. We had class together, last year. But not now. Before you started hanging out with him, I just thought of him as that strange guy who ate lunch by himself.”

“Right.”

“You haven’t heard from him?”

“No.”

“Wow, Joanna. That’s not nice. I think I *may* have to have a talk with him.”

I nodded, and then a nurse entered the room. “Time to take some blood samples,” she said.

I knew how much Maureen hated blood, so I told her, “It’s all right, you can go.”

“Thank you.” As she was walking out the door, she said, “Don’t forget—we need to critique the literary magazine submissions this week. E-mail your thoughts to me and I’ll tell Rick.”

“No problem,” I said. And then she was gone, and I was alone in my weird new world again.

AFTER the nurse left the room, I turned on my laptop and downloaded all the compiled files of literary magazine submissions. The poetry file contained more than two hundred pieces, so I started with the prose: a measly ten. I had submitted a piece myself, written immediately after I had escorted the first time, which I felt somewhat embarrassed about now. Josie had been the one who trained me: she had been escorting for five years, knew everything, and told a lot of jokes. There’s a whole section of the essay consisting of us riffing on Earl’s fanny-pack, something that made me uneasy now that he had practically killed me: would people reading it think I deserved what I got, for being such a bitch? I needed reassurance that someone had written a piece which was better than mine.

A few were pieces I recognized from class: my friend Lianne had edited her piece about being twelve years old and obsessed with *The Legend of Zelda*, and it was even better than the first time, so I marked down that it should be included. As expected, some of the social justice club people had written about their immersion experiences in Guatemala and New Orleans, and I bumped them up to the top as well. Then Maggie from my Contemporary Brit Lit class wrote a short piece about a disastrous first date. By this point I was satisfied that I would not be getting in.

The piece after Maggie's was the longest, a short story about a guy who works at a pizza shop and is obsessed with the owner's beauty school-dropout daughter to the point of writing love poetry about her and getting punched in the face by her abusive asshole bartender boyfriend. Following this he goes to "new student orientation" at college—*my* college—sees another pretty girl, and becomes immediately enraged when a. she talks to a guy who is not him and b. believes this other guy when he says he "really care[s] about the environment." Then he gets punched again, and the story ends. I downvoted it and moved on to the next piece, which was all about a girl whose brother dies in a car crash.

The last time I had worked on the literary magazine, I found going through submissions to be tiring and monotonous, but this time it provided the best relief I had gotten from the endless blood tests, surgeries, physical therapy, and discussions with doctors, nurses, and my parents.

Once I finished that, I did what I had been doing every day since I had been able to: looked online to see if there was any new information about either myself or Earl released publicly. I took screenshots of a few comments on newspaper articles which called Earl a hero and e-mailed them off to the detectives: there was no such thing as being too cautious here.

. Lots of the antis were creepy in one way or another, but Earl was...shifty. Quieter. He didn't usually yell; he just stood on the crack between the driveway and the sidewalk, just *barely* legally, holding up a variety of signs and glaring. He had a lumbering way of walking, usually wore several layers of clothing, and always wore a hat and a fanny pack. He wasn't exactly fat, but he was formidable. Occasionally, though, his creepy brooding would give way to aggression. He'd step over the crack, standing in the path of whatever

car was trying to enter or exit, and scream a mixture of incoherent profanity and discernible threats. It happened maybe once a month, sometimes less. In the last few months I had been there, almost every one of his rants happened on days when Dr. Weiss was working, as his car tried to pull in. I thought of those rants every night when I fell asleep. It was obvious that Earl's rage had found a specific target...which I had then thwarted. I just hoped that someone found him before he went on another rampage.

ABOUT a month after it happened, I got an e-mail from Maureen saying, "I know you won't want to see this, but I read it yesterday and I thought you shouldn't be in the dark." She linked to an article from a website I wasn't familiar with; the last part of the URL was just a bunch of letters and numbers. Maureen had never really bothered with things like embedded links.

These are the thoughts I had while clicking on that link:

1. Earl killed, or tried to kill, someone else.
2. Mark was getting married to some celebrity.
3. My parents disowned me.
4. *Another* anti had done some sort of violent act.
5. Tony was talking about me again.

But it was none of these things. Instead, it was an interview with Josie, my fellow escort, the one who had shown me the ropes in the first place. The one who I had hung out with so many times over the past year, who had come to visit me six times during my first two weeks in the hospital. (But then had stopped.) It was titled, "the *real* story of Joanna

Seppala” and she used every word in it to excoriate me. According to her, I hadn’t been doing this work long enough, and all I wanted was attention.

Is that what I want? I thought. I haven’t exactly told anyone to go away, of course. But would they have? Or would they have just found more people like Tony to tell my story for me?

I looked at the line “She’s just doing this for attention” again, and shuddered. *But I had to save Dr. Weiss, I thought. It was the right thing to do. No I didn’t. I had a choice in the matter. I could have not jumped. Did part of me really just want attention?*

No. I tried to remember back to the exact moment when I decided to save Dr. Weiss but I really couldn’t, because I didn’t “decide.” I just simply jumped. Because I was there, and I was the only one who could do anything? Because my instinct is an attention whore? I had no idea. Would she rather I would have let the bullet hit Dr. Weiss because she was too busy smoking? Would she have done what I did? She couldn’t have. But I thought she liked me. I thought we were friends. What did I do wrong?

My stomach lurched. I staggered over to the bathroom, grabbing walls the whole way. After a few heaves of stomach acid into the hospital toilet, I made it back to my bed. I had always been planning to go back to my volunteer work, once I was healthy again. I had never considered otherwise. That was the only place where I had felt useful, and now that I had saved Dr. Weiss I felt that even more. This was the first time I questioned whether I should return, now that I knew there were people there who hated me for this for some reason. I thought back then to what Josie did right after I was shot—she didn’t run over to help. She went right inside. I rationalized it, later, as something that made sense—she was

getting the patients to a safe place. But then I remembered that she didn't even *react* beyond her initial movements. She made no noise.

At school, it was Mark who I usually vented to. Maureen was cool too, but she was such an optimist that it was hard for her to get what I meant, sometimes. But we did this in person—he wasn't good at picking up the phone. The few times I had ever called him, he didn't get back to me until hours or sometimes days later.

This time I picked up my phone expecting nothing, but knowing that he was the only one who could possibly say the right things about this shitty situation. The phone rang and I crossed my fingers, hoping he would *somehow* pick up this one time. But as expected, he didn't.

Two miserable hours later, though, as I was trying to decide whether to write Josie a private e-mail or respond in the comments to the article, my phone began playing Mozart.

I picked up the phone. "Hello?" I said. I didn't know why I was pretending as though it was a question when I knew exactly who it was, and he knew that I knew who it was, since he was calling my cell phone and knew I had his number saved.

"Hey, Joanna. I saw you called me?" Mark's voice sounded tired or depressed or something,

"Yeah. What's up?" I said.

"Oh, nothing much...you?"

He still sounded down, but I tried to put that out of my head. If he didn't want to talk about it, that wasn't my problem, and I had listened to him talk about his problems a

million times. I was the one who he had completely ignored for the past month. "Well, I'm still in the hospital," I said.

"Oh. Right. Everything okay there?"

"I guess. It's kind of boring."

"I'm sorry."

You should be, I thought. Then I told myself: *Shut up. He's probably just busy.*

"So why did you call?" he asked.

"Because...you remember me telling you about that girl Josie from my volunteer work? The one who trained me?"

"I think."

"She said some...pretty bad crap...about me...online."

"What kind of crap?"

I didn't want to tell him. I didn't want to tell him because I didn't want him to agree with Josie, or to know anyone thought things like that about me. I didn't want *him* to think them. "Just some trash-talking," I said. *No details. Good.*

"She's probably just jealous."

"Maybe." I hated when people used that as their first explanation for anything. It was so easy, so self-aggrandizing, to believe that anyone who didn't like you must be jealous of your own awesomeness. I'd much rather dissect the myriad reasons that Josie might have for gradually growing to despise me over time than call her jealous. And Mark certainly couldn't know the reason. "I don't know why she would be," I said.

"Because you're getting a bunch of attention?"

“Maybe...I never thought she cared about those things is all.” But I remembered how she used to begin her parties with ceremonial shots of Jameson, and bring the conversation around to her failed marriage to Eli every time anyone else was having relationship problems. She did love attention. I just didn’t think she would take it this far.

“I’m sorry she’s saying things like that. You don’t deserve friends like that.”

“Thanks. Maureen said the same thing.”

“Maureen’s a good person. I’m glad she’s there for you.”

“You’re a good person too,” I said.

“Thanks.” There was a pause, and part of me wanted to ask him to come see me at the hospital, but I didn’t want to push him. I had already said I was still there, that was probably enough.

After a few seconds, he said, “So, did any of your stuff get into the lit mag?”

“A poem,” I said. It had been a surprise, because I didn’t think it was my best work, but it was a better pick than my essay. The only thing I didn’t like was that it was basically me whining about how awful Tony had been—which I thought was fine when I wrote it, but now it seemed trivial.

“That’s great,” he said.

“Did anything of yours get in?”

“No,” he said. The depression came back into his voice.

“What did you submit?”

“It was a short story. Something I thought of when I was working at Pizzazz and have been revising for a while.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah...I mean, it was about this girl I used to like, and I haven’t seen her in years, because she got married to that douchebag she was with. But it was really personal. Did you read it?”

I knew then which story he was talking about, and I instantly felt embarrassment. “I don’t remember it,” I said. “I didn’t have time to read everything.” I wanted to get off the phone right then. I didn’t want to continue this conversation. But I had to know some things first. “Who was this girl?” I tried to make it sound as though I cared like a friend, that I was not jealous of some stranger. Like it was pure curiosity.

“Her name was Larissa. She was eighteen. She was about five-foot-two, and had really silky hair. Her body was perfect. I don’t know...she was just so small and seemed so sweet...she was made for more than that job. She wanted to go to beauty school, but didn’t get in for some reason. I don’t know why. We didn’t talk much, just about work stuff, but she seemed nice, kind...and then Nick started working there, and he was all over her...I gave her a poem but she ignored it. Nick was a senior, and when he graduated, they moved in together and she stopped working there.”

“But you still can’t shake her?”

“No. She made me forget about Jennifer for a while, but now it’s like they’re both living inside my head. I just want another chance with them.”

I didn’t know what to say. Part of me wanted to scream at him, but all I said was, “I’m sorry, I have to go. My doctor is here.” She wasn’t. No one was. I didn’t want to lie to him again, but I couldn’t keep talking to someone who had just disappointed me so much. There was something unreal about the person I had imagined him to be, and I no longer wanted him to visit me. I no longer had the illusion that he would. He didn’t and couldn’t

love me. He was too much in love with someone who didn't really exist, and he'd keep searching her out in other people. He didn't have room for anything else.

I was discharged from Metro the day before Thanksgiving. It had been two weeks since Josie's article came out. I hadn't talked to her or Mark since then. Barb, the volunteer coordinator from the clinic, did e-mail me, wishing me an easy recovery. Because of the timing I knew it was related to Josie's words. I was required to go back to Metro for more tests and monitoring and therapy, but the doctors said it was okay for me to live at home in Vermilion. There was no point in going back to campus right away: despite Maureen's best efforts, I wasn't going to be able to take exams for classes that I had missed half the meetings of. I would be graduating a semester later than I had planned, but I didn't really care about that the way I would have before. Even my dad was okay with me needing an extra semester to graduate in this circumstance. "You did a brave thing, but from now on you need to be more careful," he said. I didn't tell him I had every intention of going back to the clinic.

Earl was still on the loose. There were detectives assigned to find him, and my family and I got updates every few days on what they were doing, but there was nothing concrete, really. The police departments in Cleveland and Vermilion were all aware of what was happening, I trusted them to varying degrees, and I had certain officers' numbers on speed-dial, but they hadn't been there when Dr. Weiss was fired at and I couldn't depend on them to be there if something *else* happened. I had heard a few reports of Earl being "sighted," but none of them were confirmed. It was nothing I could trust. He was probably hidden in some other anti's basement. It was the right environment for him. But despite all

of this, I was supposed to be “relaxing” in Vermilion from Thanksgiving until the middle of January.

ON Thanksgiving, my dad told me that he was going to throw a big party for everyone who had been part of the lighthouse restoration committee at the house the weekend before Christmas. This was the kind of thing my parents usually did: my whole life, they had been involved in Erie county “society,” if there was such a thing. It annoyed me when I was younger, to always have people coming through the house or to have them leaving to go to one event or another. I just wanted to be left alone.

Much like with the magazine though, any relief from the combination of boredom and anxiety was welcomed this time. My mom met with decorators and caterers throughout the next few weeks, and my dad and I figured out relevant bits of Vermilion history to make into dioramas and posterboards to display inside the actual lighthouse. It was too small a place to hold the actual party, but we figured out that a major feature of the party would be walking from my parents’ house on Huron street over to the beach and touring around the inside. We filled it up with the history, but we also filled it with red and green lights spiraling up along the walls, matching the red light that would burn in the tower. It would be the first time it had been lit in decades.

INSIDE the lighthouse on the night of the party, surrounded by neighbors in heavy winter coats after a walk made longer by the foot of snow that had fallen all day, I started feeling a bit nauseous and light-headed. *Your fault for drinking wine with a messed-up liver*, I thought, smiling through a few more conversations with people whose kids had gone to

elementary school with me. They all asked me about school. None of them asked me about the *rest* of my life. I didn't know whether to be happy or infuriated. I eventually just excused myself and stepped outside, taking my glass with me and easing myself onto the snow covering the grassy overlook onto the beach. I let the cold pass over me and tried to relax, to ignore the sounds from inside. Behind me, on top of the slope, the Maritime Museum was dark. There were a few lights coming from the houses in the Lagoons, but almost everything I saw was illuminated by my dad's giant lighthouse.

My phone started ringing in my pocket then, and I picked up, hazily. It was a restricted number.

"Ms. Seppala?" a serious-sounding male voice asked.

"Yeah?" I responded.

"This is Sergeant David Mortenson of the Cleveland Police Department. I wanted to inform you that there was an incident outside of the city of Charlotte, North Carolina this afternoon."

"What happened?" I asked. I wasn't quite processing everything that was happening.

"A bomb was found underneath a doctor's car at one of the abortion clinics down there. An employee noticed it and their bomb squad disarmed the device, but security footage revealed that the person who almost certainly planted the bomb there matched the description of Earl Goggins almost perfectly."

"Do...you know where he went?"

“No. My only guess is that he went back to whoever has been giving him shelter these last couple of months. The police departments in the surrounding area have all been given notice, and of course the FBI’s following any leads they have.”

Sergeant Mortenson hung up. I sat down in the snow, hugging my legs to my chest. He had crossed state lines. *Multiple* state lines. Had he hidden in the back of someone’s car? And how did he just go to another clinic in the middle of the afternoon to plant a bomb? And then leave without being stopped?

I stood up, shakily, and walked over to the water, which had begun to form a thin layer of ice in certain places. I lay down beside it, my boots just touching where the water lapped up onto the snow. Despite all of my constant searching for updates on Earl and slight anxiousness about what was going on, I had somehow lured myself into a false sense of security in the past few months that he would want to stay hidden to keep from being arrested. That we were all safe due to his desire for self-preservation.

But that wasn’t true at all. He seemed to lack that sensibility entirely, and no matter how much I had fought to live in the hospital, and how much I was trying to heal now, he could decide to end that whenever he wanted to.

I stared up at the stars over the dark cold lake and finished my glass of wine before walking back inside.

The Only Thing We Can Have

November 20th, 2009

MY apartment is freezing cold in the middle of November because the super refuses to turn on the heat until Thanksgiving. I pile my bed with blankets, take as many hot showers as early in the morning as I can, which means 3 a.m. sometimes, when I have to work late—and then I'll hear the voices: *we had dreams for you, Darshana*. Every one of my relatives crowds into my head at the end of an interminable work day and I can only answer *I know I'm a fuck up* as I step back into my igloo of a home.

But even the days when I get a decent night of sleep can be the worst of all, because then it's a cold shower at eight a.m. and I need to pick up Verde soon, when I don't have time to wait for the tank to *maybe* heat itself up while I worry about whether Hernando has resorted to hitting her or the babies. I didn't work yesterday. Diane and Carolyn were there instead, and I try to work with them as little as possible. It usually works.

WE'RE the first to arrive, the first to open up the front door. This doesn't make sense—Clarissa usually gets here first, so that she has the greatest opportunity to glare at other people for being "late." The answering machine light is blinking. "I'm not fucking listening to that," I tell Verde. She shrugs. We've both gotten enough bad messages in our lives.

We sit at the desk, spraying disinfectant everywhere first—though of course it's just a drop in the bucket—and begin trying to make some sense of last night's scattered papers. I point some numbers out to Verde. "Carolyn's doing it again," I say.

"I already told him about her," she answers.

"Tell him again, he likes you better than me."

“He likes Diane the best, fucking beauty queen.”

“This is serious shit, though. Life and death, remember?”

“Death and death, Darshana. He doesn’t care about the other side of it.”

Jessie walks in. “Hey,” she says. Her face is looks strangely washed-out and tired. She seems to be hiding within her own body.

“Don’t you have school today?” Verde asks. It’s Friday and since next week is a holiday, if Jessie says no then we know she’s lying. But Jessie lies a lot. There’s nothing we can do about that.

“Called in sick.”

“You’re not sick,” I say. *Is she?* She might look a bit tired, but more than anything she seems scared.

She shakes her head and then slumps away towards the back of the building.

Verde finally gives in and presses the “play” button on the answering machine. Four messages. The first three are the usual requests about money and appointments. The last is a garbled string of words in a language I strain to understand. All I can tell is that the speaker is extremely angry and may be crying.

“What the fuck?” Verde asks.

I shrug. “Wrong number.” But I write it down anyway. I work the syllables though my mind. It’s useless. I know I’ve heard these words before but I can’t think of what they mean now.

Jessie rushes back into the front office. “What was that?” she asks.

“The answering machine,” I say. “What else would it be?”

She falters. “People.” She tries to walk away again but Verde stops her.

“Jessie, what the hell is going on? You’re acting like Alejandro after he accidentally killed Ofelia’s goldfish.”

That’s when Jessie starts crying and I remember the meaning of a few of those words and I realize that everything has just changed.

THAT night, everyone who had been at the clinic the night that Devyani Ashwari had died—or had been murdered, as some people were saying—was arrested. And for the next few weeks, with no work to go to, I hid in my house for a while. Watched the days get colder, waited for the first bad snowstorm, for the other shoe to drop, and for my name to finally show up in all the articles which were being written about this. I waited to be synonymous with evil, with murder. I never answered the phone, and didn’t listen to the messages, hiding in the bathroom whenever the phone rang until the box was full.

I had only seen her briefly. She had a dignified walk—that of someone who has taken too much already to give up. The name “Ashwari” didn’t even register to me as being familiar. I try not to get too involved with them. I used to, when I first started, and it became impossible to function knowing how little I could do, how there was no chance of things changing, how the most I could do was not do things *as* badly as Diane or Carolyn. When I couldn’t stand it anymore, I began working only at the front desk as some method of removing myself from the horror.

When I hear knocking on my door, I assume it is the police. I look through the peephole to see Verde. As soon as I open it, she rushes in and shoves me into the nearest wall. “You have to help me,” she says.

“What?” *Help you with what? Getting out of jail?*

“We’ll be state’s witnesses. I am. You need to be. Tell them everything you know. You know we were good, Darshana.” She is crying. “I can’t leave them alone with Hernando or they’ll grow up like *Jessie!*”

“Verde, I can’t talk to cops, I--”

“Fuck you, I have a longer record than you do! They want cooperative witnesses! Do you *really* think Carolyn or Diane will say *anything*—Diane’s *sleeping* with him!”

I wriggle away from her, down to the floor. “What?” The thought of *anyone* sleeping with him disgusted me. He looked like a walrus. “Does Opal know?”

“Opal’s a bitch. You have to back me up, Darshana, *please.*”

“What about Jessie?”

“What *about* her?”

“She was there, we weren’t.”

“She’s a *kid.*”

“I barely saw Devyani Ashwari, Verde.”

She gives me a disgusted glare and I have trouble believing that she is my best friend. “Do you *not* read the paper?”

“No.” *Since when do you?*

“This stopped being about Devi-whomever *days* ago, Darshana. This is about *him*, now. Sure the Ashwari trial is going to be the first thing to go off, but it’s so much bigger now. This is about all the shit *we’ve* done, all the shit *we’ve* had to take.”

The numerous legal violations I had committed in the past ten years crowded my brain. Forget the stolen car—this was worse.

“How?”

“That Patel guy—I guess he’s the family’s lawyer—he is quite the tenacious little mofo. He’s investigating *everything*. They found out all about the illegal prescription stuff.”

Everything. I think about the almost-Devyanis—the ones who we didn’t kill, but left broken—sterile or infected or hurt. The little drug addict falling off the operating table, the one who I knew could have been me, fifteen years ago, before I was sober. Dragged to us screaming about how she would be a good mother, obviously in addict-rage. Meth or crack probably, I didn’t know. She only kept the anger up for so long until Carolyn took a long look at her and delivered the most powerful medications we had into her arm.

“What *is* that?” I remember her mother asking. Desperate face, lined from the years of dealing with this difficult daughter—she could have been my own mother, I remembered all of those looks.

Carolyn didn’t answer her. Carolyn couldn’t answer her because Carolyn didn’t know the answers. Carolyn didn’t know the answers because she thought she was better than everyone, thought that all these drugs addicts, immigrants, and single mothers were beneath her. They couldn’t speak or scream or cry in her presence *or* his—they were unworthy of their attention. Give them drugs and let them drift to nothing-world. Let the combination of the legal and illegal in their non-controlled doses cause them to practically die, and then we could do nothing for her.

Did she die?

Or the ones he couldn’t finish, the ones he sent home with their insides torn apart—how many of them ended up just like Devyani or close to it?

There was nothing good that I did for these people. *Stop kidding yourself, Darshana.* By hiding out up front and not doing anything to stop what happened, I was just as bad as Diane or Carolyn.

I knew his history—first in the family to go to college, one of the few doctors in this neighborhood, working with addicts and these poor indigent women—everyone knew his public persona. But I had been to the hospital; I knew how the doctors there would whisper to each other about him and his bad prescriptions, screw-ups, malpractices, when they saw what I had written under “employer.” *What are you doing there, Darshana?*

Twenty-five years old, just out of prison, Hepatitis C diagnosis making me want to do nothing more than claw out my own eyes. I knew that my family was sick of my antics, my ex-boyfriend was dead, no one wanted me in any of the ways there were to want someone. The woman in the seat in front of me on the subway in her nurse’s uniform looked like a model of perfection, but she was yelling at the man standing next to her and her words sounded familiar. I watched her. When he said her name I realized I knew her, or knew *of* her—Maria “Verde” Lopez, someone from my old life. Never a friend, but not quite an enemy. But now she was a nurse, I supposed.

“Verde,” I said to her as we neared my stop. She swung around.

“How the *fuck* do you know my name?”

“It’s me,” I said. “Darshana Desai.”

She gave me a hard stare. “I know you, right? You were one of those junkie bitches of Javier’s—he died, you know. Something with the liver.”

I grimaced. Of course I knew.

“What do you want?”

“A job,” I whispered. “Where do you work? I’ll do anything.”

“And you’re asking *me* because--”

“You have one. And you have my same bad record.”

I knew I was begging, but Verde’s reputation was twice as bad as mine had been, in the day, and I was desperate.

She sighed. “You’re sick too, right? From Javier?”

I nodded.

“Don’t tell anyone. How do you feel about blood?”

I shrugged. It was to be expected.

“I’ll tell my boss about you,” she said. Then—“Darshana, just be prepared.”

I tried, but nothing could have prepared me for the smell. It was like every vile thing there was had been stuffed into one building: urine, shit, dirt, blood, vomit—and a new one. It was unidentifiable to me then, but I know it now—amniotic fluid. But despite all of this, the worst part still were the blank gazes from the faces of strange poor women, my women, Verde’s, Alexis’.

I stayed because there was nothing else. I watched Verde do exactly what Diane and Carolyn would become so famous for once they arrived: overdrugging patients. I watched her freak out as a girl’s eyes rolled back in her head and then stare at her for the next hour to make sure she didn’t die, trying to be a hero in some tiny narrow sense because she couldn’t have saved her. And now she’s found an even *less* useful way to save the day—hindsight, apologies, second thoughts delivered to throw the people who were only slightly worse than we were under the bus.

But I can't turn my back on her now. So when she waits for my answer about what to do about the lawyer I finally say, "Of course, fine. I got your back."

I used to know Navin Patel. Our parents were acquaintances. Occasionally, at parties, we would talk. We weren't friends by any means—he was the tiny moody little boy with the bug eyes and the lispy voice. I was one of the cool tough girls, I had my own friends who weren't at all like my parents' friends, I never wanted to be at those parties, and I'd mock Navin and the others mercilessly for actually being interested in what the aunties and uncles were saying. So I'm hoping he doesn't remember me, as I walk into his office to begin questioning.

He's still small, still lispy, still bug-eyed. A gold band sits on his finger, marking him in a way I never will be. A thick mustache graces his upper lip and his suit looks tailor-made. I half-expect him to pull out a pocket watch.

His first words are, "Do you remember the Ashwaris, Darshana?" and I know I haven't changed as much as I thought I did.

The truth is that I do remember a family with that name, if I think about it hard enough, all mixed up with all the other friends of my parents who I didn't ever want to meet. The Patels were at the center of this crowd—they were the rich ones, the ones who had been here a full generation by then, who had all the connections. My parents were also at that center. The Ashwaris were new, always poor, always talking about their family still back in Mumbai. I knew they were related to the Patels somehow, but I never quite had it all figured out—doing so would've been hard in a crowd where everyone was aunty or uncle something and I had eight unofficial grandmothers. Mr. and Mrs. Ashwari didn't have

children—therefore, they held no interest to me, at that age. Devyani wasn't one of the Ashwaris I knew—she must have been one of the cousins left behind in Mumbai, must have been come over very soon before my brief meeting with her—and before her death.

I shouldn't lie. My "meeting" with Devyani was nothing more than a raised eyebrow at her and whoever the man was who she came in with, to indicate that I wasn't speaking whatever they were speaking and couldn't they speak English, please? For years it had irritated me when other Indians expected me to still be fluent in one million mother tongues that were never my mother's tongue. Fact of the matter was, I did still know a few words of Marathi. It's hard not to when that's the language you grew up hearing and you live in a city full of immigrants. Parts and pieces of other languages had seeped in as well. But I was still useless as an interpreter. I answer Navin's question with a quick "Yes."

"Good," he says. "You're not completely corrupted, then." I glare at him. "I apologize, Ms. Desai. I should not have said this. On the other hand—let me tell you something. Devyani Ashwari and her husband spent the last twenty years trying to get to America. You'll never know—their lives in Bombay were very difficult. They lived in one of the slums, of course. They had three children. One of them was nearly murdered by some half-crazed—well, I'd rather not go into it. The point is that Devyani and Rahul had already gone through all their hard times once they got here. Rahul got a job at one of the factories fairly soon after they arrived. And then, as I'm *sure* you know, Devyani got pregnant again. And how she ended up at *your* hellhole of a clinic rather than some *proper* establishment is an utter mystery to me, but there we go."

"Money," I say.

He glares at me, bug-eyes narrowing to tiny notches. “What do you mean? That madman cared about nothing *but* money--”

“And he was less expensive than anyone else.” *While paying for nothing*, I think. Paying us almost nothing, using out-of-date broken reused dirty crap, and doing hardly any of the work himself.

“You--” he stops, breathes. His hands are shaking. “I’m the youngest partner ever at Buckman and Fine,” he says, by way of explanation for *something*, though I’m not quite sure what at the moment. “My wife is active in all sorts of social causes around the city.” *This*, I really could not care less about. “Devyani and Rahul could have come to us, to my parents, to *your* parents, to anyone for assistance. Why--”

“Shame,” I say.

I know all about that, of course. The expectation of perfection. It was alive and well in my household growing up. Grades and friends and clothes all had to be pre-vetted by my parents, and if there had ever been a boyfriend or a one-night stand leading to a forbidden unwed pregnancy, there would have been no way I would have been able to tell my parents if I had wanted an abortion. Abortions didn’t *happen* in their house. Even as an adult, there would be no way—but then again, I could tell the difference between a good and bad clinic. No matter what my situation was or how alone I was, I wouldn’t have stayed in there after seeing and smelling the waiting room for what it was. But I imagined that Devyani’s story was true for many of our other patients, too. Shame and no money can make people end up places they wouldn’t be otherwise.

He nods. "Fine. So tell me what you know, Darshana. What happened to Devyani Ashwari after she walked through your doors that first day? Since I understand you *luckily* weren't there the second day?"

He is mocking me, which I can't stand, but nothing good can come of starting a fight. "Well, she was in her second trimester," I say. "So when she got there, Carolyn did the ultrasound--"

"Carolyn VanDevere?"

"Yeah."

"Go on."

"Carolyn also probably tested her blood for Rh and went over some paperwork."

"How? Devyani Ashwari couldn't read in English. Did *you* translate?"

"No."

"It's common practice in medicine to hire an interpreter. Did she have one?"

"No. The guy who was with her knew some English."

"That was her son Achal. He knows barely enough to work in a fast food kitchen."

"You know Navin, you're really quite disdainful."

"Of course I am. A place of business such as the one which employed you deserves nothing but my disdain. What else?"

"When the doctor came, he inserted laminaria and told her to come back the next day."

"Well, there's the first normal thing I've heard."

I grimace.

"And what about the next day?"

“I already said I wasn’t there.”

“Come on, Darshana. You and I both know that this *isn’t* just about Devyani Ashwari. This is going to the grand jury. Tell me what *probably* happened—you know what happened to the others.”

“Can I have some coffee first? It’s a long story.”

He calls his secretary in and tells her to brew a pot while I think about how to begin.

WHEN I was hired to work for him, they said I’d be working mainly in the office, which is where I did eventually end up. For a time, though, Verde and I were the main people working in the back of the clinic. Verde and I did the now- infamous poorly-measured ultrasounds, we worked in the recovery room, gave misoprostol, diazepam, meperidine, promethazine. So Navin is right when he says I’ve seen everything. I’ve seen the half-dead, half-naked women laying on cots all day with their cervixes softening to cream cheese moaning at varying levels of audibility until we shut them up with *more more more*—what the doctor called the custom dosage. Nothing was written down.

I saw babies falling out of the women’s bodies. Onto the rug, in the toilet—when you’re half-dead on drugs it doesn’t matter that your baby is drowning. But I saw some of them move, before they stopped breathing.

Devyani would have been fed drugs at doses her body couldn’t handle. When I saw her, I thought she was small; the next morning when I looked at her chart I read that she was only 105 pounds and four foot eleven. She slipped into a coma around midnight, midway through her extraction. I wasn’t there but Jessie says that Carolyn and Diane

rearranged the room before calling the paramedics. Removed her IV. Pretended that they didn't do anything wrong.

When the paramedics arrived, she was dead anyway, but they still tried to save her, and give her the kind of hope that she never had with us. But it was futile.

"THANK you, Darshana," Navin says. He can't take his eyes off the desk.

He takes a small bottle out of his pocket and pops a pill into his mouth, then rests his elbows on the desk.

"What's in the bottle?" I ask him

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

I knock my knee into the desk leg and he drops the pill bottle onto the floor. I grab it. Alprazolam—generic form of Xanax, anti-anxiety, benzodiazepine. Something I'm pretty used to seeing. People will pay a lot for this kind of thing. The doctor used to prescribe them all the time, and then people would re-sell them on the street. It was big business for us. I turn the bottle over. My old boss' name stares back at me and I drop the bottle.

"You're so full of shit," I say.

His face turns to gray. His phone begins ringing, playing "Norwegian Wood." He picks up. For the next few moments the room is full of the sounds of promises and affection. But his skin is still clammy and his hand is still shaking.

"You might want another one of those," I say when the conversation is over. "But then again, you might want to conserve your supplies."

“Go home. You’re dismissed. We’ll discuss the rest of this at a later time,” he says, standing up before I can, letting me follow him outside of his own office and make my way downstairs alone.

I drive to Verde’s, hoping Hernando isn’t there. His car is sitting right out front and I can do nothing but groan. From the first time I met him, I’ve felt that he was wrong, off, volatile in a way I didn’t want to deal with after years of dealing with similarly volatile drug dealers.

Not that he *isn’t* a drug dealer, but it’s only pot, something I can resist easily. By day he works at his mother’s florist shop. Neither job earns him very much money. Hernando always complains, and the one time I tried to ask Verde why she didn’t just leave him she told me that I would never understand their relationship, because I didn’t grow up like they did, and I don’t have children so I *really* don’t get it. I try to ignore Hernando and tell Verde: “I had my first meeting with Navin today.”

“Who?”

“Patel. Rahul Ashwari’s attorney.”

“Right,” she says. “Didn’t know you were on a first-name basis with the guy who’s trying to throw us in jail.”

“Not *us*, Verde. Just the doctor and Diane and Carolyn.”

“And Opal and Clarissa. But whatever. What did you tell him?”

“Everything I could,” I say.

“Didn’t throw the blame on us at all?”

“Well, it’s not like there was any way *not* to,” Hernando says. “You were working there for *ten* years. Like I said, we should’ve just moved to Canada or something.” I ignore

him, but then he addresses me directly: “Have you started looking for any more jobs yet, Darshana?” I hate the way he says my name.

WHEN Hernando starts going on his rants, I just remind myself that at least Hernando isn’t quite as bad as Alexis’ husband Paul was. He was a meth user, and he beat Alexis every night, usually in front of Jessie and Kyle. Alexis wore long-sleeved shirts under her scrubs even in the summer. She played the perfect wife at work, and never said a word against him. No one knew anything was wrong until he shot her in front of their children.

The kids ran to the doctor’s house—took refuge in the home of a monster since he was the one with the home security system, the one in the gated community. He let them stay there a few days, use his phone to call 911, drove them back to their house and offered Jessie a job. Paul will spend twenty years in prison. Jessie and Kyle had a young public defender representing them. Paul’s lawyer convinced the jury that Alexis was having an affair—cheating on Paul with her boss. He got off easy because he was “provoked.” The doctor didn’t testify. It was bullshit. The only good thing is that by the time he does get out, the kids will be legal adults and will never have to be in his guardianship again.

One of the charges the boss is facing now is corruption of a minor. It couldn’t be more deserved. Jessie used to be sunshine, air, light. Her grades were perfect, and in this neighborhood, in that kind of family, that’s unheard of. She *never* skipped school. Now she walks through the back hallways of the clinic silently administering misoprostol, cleaning the remains of precipitated babies, and watching people die. She saw Devyani Ashwari’s heart fail. She gave her at least one dosage of those drugs while Diane and Carolyn were on

their extra-long cigarette break. She reminds me of what I was like when I was in prison—I didn't live so much as I existed.

But then again, that's what we all do around here. We latch onto the first thing that looks good, that *acts* good, that seems right for us or like the only thing we can have. Our job, my drugs, Hernando. And we stay even as it turns bad or sour or evil because what else is there for us in this city? Cold, unemployment, hunger, death. My meager savings are dwindling and I don't have any kind of husband to fall back on, even an underemployed pot dealer.

All I ever wanted to do was escape my parents' demands for perfection. I found the bad kids, the drugs, the bad parts of town, the failing grades, and the criminal life. I still got a reduced sentence based on my family's reputation. They wanted me to come home but I *couldn't* deal with all of the disappointment on top of their earlier pressures, couldn't deal with the scaled-down career suggestions which no matter how much I excelled still wouldn't be the doctor/engineer/businesswoman they had always wanted from me. *You could be so much, Darshana.*

But I never was. And now, still, all I want is an escape. Give me a new city and a new name and a new past. No one can do that, though. No one can remove the fact that I spent the last ten years serving a monster. So I'll continue to search and Verde will continue to cling to Hernando so that she doesn't have to face the nightmare that is stabbing me in the gut: that I don't have a way out. After Navin calls me to set up our next meeting and his voice sounds almost intentionally shaky, I decide to make a stop before going to his office.

EVERYONE knew Bruce. He was a dirty, gangly old man with a few tufts of white hair on top of a balding head. He walked stooped over and never seemed to make eye contact. He would come in a few times a month with big boxes full of drugs: prescription medicine that we would sell at lower prices, and without the restrictions. By day, he dispensed all sorts of drugs to anyone who'd ask—oxycontin, Percocet, Adderall, Vyvanse, Wellbutrin. Alprazolam, obviously. Verde said he also had a stock of Rohypnol, which I'll believe.

I find Bruce at a bar that I had heard the doctor mention a few times. I march up to him and say, "I want to be your new distributor."

He looks at me, hard, and says, "You're one of doc's girls, aren't you?"

Being described this way sickens me but I have to say yes. I nod instead, then manage to choke out, "Darshana Desai."

"Where are you from, anyway?"

"Here," I say. It's an old reflexive daughter-of-immigrants snotty answer, and he just leers at me until I change my answer. "Mumbai."

"That's more like it. So...how do you plan on being my distributor, Darshana?"

"Twelve years ago I was a junkie," I tell him. "I have connections. My best friend is married to one of them. And I know a man who's dependent on alprazolam to function."

He invites me to sit down. And as I sink back into the world I never wanted to revisit, I know I am saved.

NAVIN'S hands shake as we sit in his office. I have a bottle of his pills in my pocket and I don't intend on saying anything about them until our conversation is finished. His cell

phone begins buzzing almost as soon as I am seated. He grimaces as he picks it up. “No,” he says. “I’m not sure. No I don’t hate you. Soon. Yes. I love you too. Bye.”

“Problems at home?” I ask.

He scowls. “Not your business. I’m sure you know that your former boss, his wife, and your co-workers Diane Jackson, Carolyn VanDevere, and Clarissa Dinkle have all been arrested.” I nod. “As expected, you, Maria Lopez, and Jessica Roberts will not be charged due to your cooperation with the prosecution.”

“Good.”

“Right, *wonderful*, Darshana. People who are wholly complicit with a terrible crime and a corrupt organization will face no retribution because you’re ratting everyone else out. Real heroic.”

I drop the bottle of Alprazolam on the table. “Have fun with that.”

He picks it up and immediately puts two pills into his mouth. “Thank you,” he says. As he begins talking about the upcoming hearing, I tune him out. I don’t know why he can’t get Xanax from his doctor like a normal person, but I know that I’ll be seeing more and more people like him in my life, as long as I don’t screw up like I did the last time. The last ten years of my life have been hell, and now that they’ve ended the only way I can preserve myself is by going back to a worse one kind of hell. It doesn’t matter if I do everything right. There is nothing good in me.

Television Blues

February 24, 2010

I parked at the far end of the parking lot, away from CVS' side of the shopping center. I took off my coat despite the fact that it couldn't've been more than 15 degrees outside. The sweater I wore underneath was one I seldom wore anymore since it had a hole in one elbow. I pulled on a winter hat which didn't fit well—it had always been too tight for my head. The fact that I was all the way out in Elyria should have been enough to make me feel confident that I wouldn't be recognized, but you can never be too careful.

I walked across the parking lot and walked inside, grabbing one of the tiny carts immediately—they were annoying to push around the carpeted floor, but I usually used a basket. I threw a bag of Cheetos, a few bottles of nail polish, and the newest issue of *Entertainment Weekly* into the cart before moving on to the aisle I actually wanted, then grabbed my intended item as surreptitiously as possible. At the register, I asked the cashier for a pack of cigarettes. She didn't ID me. I paid, got back into my car, and drove back towards Cuyahoga County.

I took off my weird layers and was back in my usual clothes as soon as I found a parking spot on campus and walked inside the student center to where my friends were camped out. From my shopping bag, I pulled out the Cheetos, tossing them to Freddy, who was always hungry because he commuted an hour to campus and an hour home nearly every day and didn't have a meal plan; then I gave the cigarettes to Shannon (she needed to quit smoking, but I knew she wasn't going to until we won, and besides, they *were* her brand). I spread the nail polish down on the communal coffee table. Someone would want to use it. I had purchased a few different colors, which fit with the general theme of

everything we were doing here. I put the magazine down by Kyle's sleeping head—things like that were his guilty pleasure—then I dropped my messenger bag and coat onto the giant fuzzy rainbow-colored chair that Danielle had found who-knows-where, and carried the remaining item in my bag off to the bathroom.

I sat on the toilet, willing myself to pee and simultaneously willing there to be some other great explanation for why I hadn't gotten my period and was feeling so sick nowadays. I waited three minutes for the results before even moving my hand from the bowl of the toilet. But of course when I finally looked at it, that second line was there.

I stood up and walked out of the stall to look at myself in the mirror. "Nope," I said to the face there. But I had been denying this to myself for a week. I had been looking at myself in this mirror every morning and saying "you're not pregnant," blaming the morning sickness on nerves, or on the fact that I actually wasn't eating enough. Blaming it on the "rationalists," the anti-gay rights group that had sprung up in opposition to our encampment in the student center. *You're scared, that's it, remember your first two years with Roger? How nervous you always were around him and how sick you sometimes got? That's all this is.*

That was all a lie, though. And I finally had to make myself face it.

I looked at my phone when I got back to the encampment, to see a text from my mom. "Laila, we're having a small party at home on Saturday for your brother's birthday, do you think you can come? You can bring Roger if you want, but I don't know if he likes lamb."

I laughed just a little seeing that. Roger didn't like lamb, because Roger had never had lamb and had no desire to try it, and so whenever my mom wanted to preemptively

prevent Roger from coming to dinner without seeming rude, she would serve lamb, which was really one of her best dishes anyway.

“Hey folks?” I asked the others.

“Yeah?” Freddy asked.

“Do you have enough coverage here for Saturday evening? I think I have to go to Summit County.”

Freddy clicked a few keys on his computer and said, “Yeah, I think we should be all right. Are you spending the night there or coming back here?”

“I don’t really know—it kind of depends on the weather.”

“Fair enough. Try to come back if possible, though, okay?”

“Sure.”

Seeing my parents would be a good thing: I would need them behind me no matter what I did, and seeing them without Roger there would be the best thing possible. A stronger girl wouldn’t need to go to her parents for advice about an unplanned pregnancy at the age of 22. But a stronger girl wouldn’t still be dating Roger Fetterman after four years.

THE first time I went to Planned Parenthood during my freshman year to get on birth control pills, I had to fill out a big history form. One of the questions on it was “what would you do if you became pregnant?” I almost circled the “parenting” option before writing in “I don’t know!” exclamation point and all. Roger was looking over my shoulder as I filled it out, and I didn’t want him to think I had any ideas of starting a family right then. I *didn’t* have those ideas—that’s why I wanted birth control—but I imagined that if I got pregnant,

I'd keep the baby. We'd move in together. Maybe some of our friends would move in with us too and we could raise the baby in a communal method. I'd still finish college.

Later, when I hypothetically mentioned communal child-rearing to him, he dismissed it as unworkable. When I mentioned the possibility of midwife-assisted home births and water births, he laughed in my face and called me a freak. When I returned to Planned Parenthood for my most recent pap smear and birth control renewal in October, I had to fill out a new history form. In response to the pregnancy question, I circled abortion, with no hesitation.

But now Roger talked about babies, and moving in together, and the future, more than I had at any point in our relationship. And I couldn't imagine it. My life used to be entirely wrapped up in him, but it was so much bigger now. For the past month, every single minute that I hadn't been in class or at work, I had wanted to be in the student center, in our encampment, trying to get people to sign our petition and just maintaining a voice for employment equality on campus. This was the kind of stuff that Roger didn't even like to hear about, and he hated that it was keeping me away from him. At the beginning I told him he should just stop by to hang out with us, but he just glared at me as if to say, "Idiot. Freak. Why the fuck would I want to do *that*?" When I mentioned joining the Middle Eastern Alliance, he just scoffed and changed the subject. It wasn't something he could process, even though the Egyptian-ness was all over my name: Laila Mustaffer. He said race didn't matter but wanted to look only at my light-colored skin and ignore my actual heritage completely. I didn't understand his impulse to produce offspring with someone whose ethnic background he couldn't even come to terms with.

So this pregnancy terrified me. But did that mean that I should give up on the baby itself? Maybe I could just break up with Roger, then have the baby and keep it a secret. Or move. Or give it up for adoption.

All of this thinking about this one problem over and over again was too aggressively circular for me. So I texted my mom back and settled into that fuzzy rainbow chair to do some reading for class. It was for Post-Colonial literature class: *In the Heart of the Country* by J.M. Coetzee. It was thin as anything, which was a blessing as the last thing we had had to read had been Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*. I just hoped it would be good enough to distract me from everything else that was going on.

The book was divided into many tiny chapters of often a few sentences or one paragraph. The protagonist was angry, bitter, and unfulfilled with her lot in life, which all took place on a farm in the South African desert with her father, after the death of her mother. Everything in it suggested she might have been having a break with reality—in one scene she murdered her father, and in the next he was still alive; a new woman came to the house and at the beginning of the book was presented as a stepmother and a while later as the servant's young wife Anna. It is all very strange until I come to this passage, a description of the main character's mother: "*in the bloom of her tentative young motherhood, the woman must have died trying to give birth to a third child, died as she feared she would, afraid to deny the man his detested relentless pleasure in her, her death a hideous storm of terror.*"

I flipped back to the previous page of the little book, where there was a description of the father that also gave me a twinge of recognition when I first read it, but which seemed even more important after the description of the mother: "*My father is the absence*

of my mother, her negative, her death. She the soft, the fair; he the hard, the dark. He has murdered all the motherly in me and left me this brittle, hairy shell with the peas of dead words rattling in it. I stand in the empty kitchen hating him."

None of these descriptions of a childhood, or a life, sound at all like what I grew up knowing. But I imagined another person, the one living inside me, sort of, maybe. I remembered the various times I was sick when I was young—constant ear infections, flu every year, chickenpox, strep throat twice in one summer, whooping cough despite being vaccinated—and I began to shiver. It wasn't limited to my childhood, either—I had caught swine flu just that past November, and I remember my mother panicking about how it might turn into pneumonia. Nothing so drastic had happened, but from that moment on I was terrified that if I continued with this pregnancy, I wouldn't live to raise the child it resulted in. And that would mean that it would then be Roger's responsibility.

I knew I would do everything in my power to be a good mother, if given the chance. And imagining the aloof, bossy, pushy, frustration-prone Roger left in charge of a small child—*my* small child--made me shudder.

I put the book down and grabbed my laptop out of its case. I searched for "abortion" and my zip code, and thought, *I'll just get the abortion pill, or RU-486 or whatever it's called. It must be cheaper. The morning after pill is only \$30 or something, right?*

On Planned Parenthood's website, the price was listed as "287-410 dollars." There was a bigger range of numbers for surgical abortion, but the base price was still 287. There was a note that the lower prices were for people who qualified for assistance from a special fund. *You'll qualify*, I told myself. *You have to.*

At that moment, my Philosophy professor walked by and waved to me. I minimized my browser window in case she came closer, but she continued walking on, probably headed to some kind of staff meeting. *There was no way she could have seen your screen from where she was*, I thought. My paranoia was getting the better of me. Never mind that Dr. Sandoval was one of the most progressive professors on campus and didn't even *know* Roger. *Calm down*, I thought. *You're safe here. That's the whole point.*

THE protesting and the encampment started when the powers that be on our campus refused to include a clause about employment equality for LGBT employees in their revised anti-discrimination policy, something the small community of queer rights activists on our campus had been trying to accomplish since before I was a freshman. We had been nice, kindly petitioning every year, writing letters and op-eds in the school paper, bringing up the issue in public forums, et cetera. Nothing was accomplished. 2010 was the year everyone got fed up, and with gay marriage becoming legal in several states that *weren't* Ohio the previous summer, we were finally sick of being left behind. Employment equality at our one small university seemed like a tiny step in the right direction.

It started with about fifteen people—Freddy and Danielle, the unofficial leaders, among them—interrupting halftime of a basketball game and singing old 1960s protest songs. I couldn't be there—it was Roger's niece's birthday, and any birthday party in the Fetterman family is an event of great importance. The protest ended with everyone being escorted away by the campus police, but not actually arrested.

But in the week that followed, nothing changed. So we decided to change it, making signs and banners and rearranging furniture to build our little camp, making sure that at

least a few people were there around the clock to get people to sign petitions or plan for the upcoming rally we were having the night before the board of directors met to decide many things, including whether to ratify the new anti-discrimination policy.

For the first couple of weeks, things were pretty peaceful. Some people wrote fake names on our petitions, but we were also getting a lot of real signatures. But the previous weekend, we gained opposition in the form of a bunch of freshman and sophomores who had never had their beliefs challenged before; people who got drunk every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night and were too hungover to make it to church Sunday morning but claimed their Catholicism was so important that they couldn't condone things like gay rights or abortion.

The "rationalists" were anything but. They were circling their own petition, which they used to claim superiority over our "methods"—because of course basketball is more important than employment equality, and a little rainbow painted on the snow with colored water was vandalism. They said they weren't against what we actually stood for, but their actions said otherwise.

We discussed them at our meeting on Tuesday. The general consensus was just to not engage with them. It didn't stop them from throwing out rape threats on Facebook, or from one of their members presenting himself to us as a "changed man" and then writing a letter to the school paper about how awful we all were.

TWO hours later, it was five o'clock and I was still reading about the merits of the abortion pill—which was actually *two* pills, taken two days apart—versus surgical abortion. Neither sounded pleasant. I felt a faint buzzing in my pocket, pulled my cell phone out, and saw

Roger's name flashing. I sighed. He was the last person I wanted to talk to, especially since he probably wanted to see me this weekend and now I had my familial obligations.

But right then, my friend Katrina walked in from the snow and walked over to me. I closed the phone and switched it to silent mode. "How long have you been here?" she asked.

"Two hours or so," I said.

"You should have called. I was in the library, we could've gotten something to eat at the café there."

"I figured you were with Danielle," I said. Danielle was her new girlfriend, someone who despite our similar politics, I hadn't really warmed up to yet. She was a little passive-aggressive at times, always trying to one-up everyone when it came to activist credentials, which was a game I didn't particularly want to play, especially given that Danielle and I grew up 15 minutes away from each other and went to the same high school, meaning that there was nothing remotely badass about her.

"I'm sorry for not texting you or something," she said. She looked a little guilty and I really couldn't figure out why, she hadn't done anything wrong.

"It's okay, seriously," I said. "I'm not feeling well, I probably wouldn't be up to eating now anyway." I looked around. Everyone else was bent over their laptops, or painting their nails rainbow colors, or listening to music—completely occupied with their own stuff, in other words.

"That's not good," she said. "You shouldn't starve yourself if you're not feeling well, though. Come with me, let's get a sandwich or something."

"I'll be okay. Not having nutrients might *help* this, actually." If I could somehow fast myself into a miscarriage, that would be the perfect solution. I wouldn't have to tell anyone or spend any money and could just pretend it was some weird period.

"Why?" she asked.

I shook my head. "It's stupid. I shouldn't have said that. It's just..." I couldn't even choke the words out so I opened up a word document and typed *<I think I might be pregnant.>* Then I minimized it and showed her the websites I'd been looking at. She stared at me, and opened up the word document again.

<Is it Roger's?> she typed, her fingers stumbling on the weirdly-angled keyboard.

"Of course," I say, finally having my words.

"What are you going to tell him?"

"I don't think I want to tell him *anything.*"

"WHAT if I don't want kids?" I had asked Roger in January.

"You do." He didn't take his eyes off the TV, where an old episode of *King of the Hill* played.

"But I don't think I *like* kids. I always feel awkward around them."

"You won't when they're yours. When you're spending all your time with them..."

"*Some* time."

He shrugged. "Whatever. I'll be fire-fighting. What're your plans?"

"You know I want to go to grad school."

"You can do that while taking care of them."

"Maybe, but I'll need time to write. And maybe I want to be a professor."

“Okay. Whatever.” He was still staring at the TV. I remembered the family that had lived down the street from my parents’ house when I was growing up. They had four kids, all a few years younger than I was. At their house, the TV was always on, and I resolved to never be *that* sort of parent, and that if I had kids they would only watch small amounts of TV, and instead read, draw, imagine things, act out crazy stories the way my brother and I did growing up. If I had kids with Roger, I would have no choice in that: I mentioned my theory on kids and TV to him once and he looked at me like I had just asked him to grill his neighbor’s dog. He gave me a similar look when I said that if I didn’t live in an apartment owned by the university, I probably wouldn’t get cable. His face said to me, “that would be the end of the world.” And maybe it would, if the only life you’ve ever known consists of staring at a box.

After that conversation was over, I had thought about it on and off all night. He was right that I did, actually, want children of my own. I always had. But could I stand to have them with *him*? Someone who would constantly undermine me? And who wouldn’t allow me to cook Egyptian food for them? But if I told Roger I was pregnant, he would think it was a sign. That I was supposed to have his kids, and we were supposed to be together, and he would never change. I knew I had to break up with him. But first I had to have an abortion.

THE rest of the day was fairly miserable. I read about abortion for a while longer, but then I tried distracting myself with Coetzee again, and finally broke down to Katrina’s goading and had a sandwich while hanging out with her, Danielle, Freddy, and Kyle. After that I felt grumpy, knowing I had just nourished Roger’s zombie offspring. Around 1:30, Roger got

off his EMT shift and started texting me to see if he could come over, but I just ignored the texts. I couldn't deal with anything right now, and really I didn't even want to go back to my apartment. I had packed some extra clothes in my car in case I needed them before I had driven to Elyria, and I was fine with sleeping in the nest of blankets, pillows, sleeping bags, rugs, and couch cushions that we made every night in the student center. Roger didn't know that I sometimes slept here. I didn't want to deal with either of his two possible reactions, which were:

1. Turning everything into a giant weird orgy for his own titillation, and
2. Getting possessive because other men would be sleeping there.

So I just turned my phone to alarm-only mode and went to sleep.

I woke up at seven the next morning and proceeded to vomit again in the student center bathroom, the same as I had been doing every day. Then I ate a granola bar and got dressed—again in the bathroom—for class, a lab course on genetics that I was taking now because I had avoided science labs for my first seven semesters of college. At least genetics interested me, though whenever I tried to talk about how awesome it was to Roger he always interrupted me to try to make me watch whatever was on the TV.

After class, I finally buckled down, gathered up my things from the student center, and walked through the piling snow to my car so I could clear it off and drive to Roger's house. (Really, it was his dad's house.) All the other cars were slipping on the road like out-of-towners.

Roger's dad and stepmother weren't home and when he let me in I collapsed on the couch. Roger crawled over to me from the other side of the sectional. He kissed me and

started moving down my body. When he reached my stomach, I froze. But he kept moving.

“Stop,” I said.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just feel tired.”

“You can’t be tired, you went to bed so early last night.”

“I’ve been feeling sick lately,” I said.

“You probably got sick hanging out with those friends of yours all the time. You should stop doing that.”

“I promised I’d help them, Roger.”

“You also promised you’d hang out with me, but now you just want to lie there.”

“I’ve barely eaten anything all day.”

“That was your choice.”

“I’m sorry. But I’m--”

“Why did you come over anyway if you don’t want to do anything?”

“Because we had plans to get together.”

“So I’m just some kind of obligation to you?”

“No, that’s not what I meant--”

He sighed. “Fine. Whatever. Do you want to get lunch?”

“Sure.”

We went to Geraci’s, the Italian restaurant around the corner from the house.

Maybe I could find something safe for my poor stomach. I studied the menu and decided that salad was probably the safest idea. Roger got some huge pasta dish and laughed at me for eating like a rabbit.

When we finished eating, he looked at his phone and asked, “Can we go to your place?”

“Sure.”

As soon as we got there, he turned on the TV, flopping down on the couch and flipping through the channels until he found *Family Guy*. I left the room. I hate that show and he knows it. He only put it on to punish me. I stayed in my room for the next half hour. I read more about abortions online, delving into the history—stuff I didn’t need to know to have one, but which interested me.

I looked at the clock on my computer and realized *Family Guy* would soon be over, so I closed my tab and lay on my bed to read more of *In the Heart of the Country*. Roger walked in about five minutes later and sat down at my desk, turning in the chair so he was facing me. “So what do you want to do this weekend?” he asked me. “I have work again on Sunday, so I guess it might just be tomorrow?”

“Well, I’m having dinner with my parents tomorrow night...” I said.

He glared at me. “Seriously? What are they cooking?”

“Lamb.”

“Well, I don’t want to have any of *that* shit. Do you *have* to go?”

“It’s my brother’s birthday.”

“Why can’t your family ever have something normal to eat?”

“It’s a cultural thing, Roger...”

“Whatever. So I guess we’re blowing another weekend, then?”

We slept in the same bed that night, and for once I was glad that he wasn’t the type to put his arms around me during the night, because even though I knew that the little

zombie embryo I had inside of me wasn't going to be making any movements or giving any indication that it existed yet, I didn't want even the faintest chance of it to occur to Roger. I still had no energy (or desire) for sex before I drifted off, but placated his pleadings with a blow job.

I woke up far earlier than he did the following morning, and made my way quietly down to the basement of my duplex, cell phone in hand. I called the number of one of the local abortion clinics, requesting a surgical appointment, finagling my schedule until I found a time that fit. Next Friday and Saturday would be my days, just a few days before the rally but with a whole weekend to recover.

I walked back upstairs. Roger was still asleep, as I had expected. I sat out on the living room couch and began reading more Coetzee and drinking tea. I checked my phone for messages—there was one from Freddy about more online “rationalist” bullshit, but nothing out of the ordinary. I wanted to be over there then. I wished I could stay there all day until I had to go see my family, but I knew it would just send Roger into a rage, and I couldn't risk something like that, now.

My love and trust in Roger had been gradually eroding over the years. When we met I had just gotten out of my first, terrible relationship and he seemed like a welcome change—he was bigger, stronger, older, and seemed less needy and pushy. He kept up this façade for a while, and when I started to see the lack of similarity we had, I tried to brush it out of my head and simply focus on what *was* there, what *could* be good. Truthfully he exhibited many of the same behaviors that Stephen, my first boyfriend, did, but they were slower-boiling, only fully kicking in once he had flunked out of his college and I had started making a lot of friends at mine. Then his rages began, and his frustration, and his

ridiculous rants and over-the-top requests. It didn't help that when he had flunked out, he had lied to me about it for weeks, or that I caught him going through the text messages on my phone that past summer. Or that nearly every time I was with my friends, he called or texted somewhere between five and 20 times to ask if I was done yet, where I was, when I would be coming "home" (meaning *my* home), et cetera.

It was the phone-snooping that worried me most right then. I didn't want to cause him to have any suspicions about me. I didn't want to ramp up his jealousy any more, or cause him to suspect to an even heavier degree that I was carrying on a secret affair of some sort. If I broke up with him he might've gone off the deep end. I just had to get through the next week and then I could peacefully leave with no repercussions.

HE asked me three more times that day if I really needed to go to my brother's birthday party. I tried to be patient, but when he mentioned that Farouk lived so close to me that it didn't make sense to drive an hour away just to celebrate his birthday when I could see him all the time, it was hard to keep my cool. Farouk *did* live close; but he was also in his second year of medical school and had almost no free time; and all of *my* free time was filled to the brim with Roger, because that's what Roger himself demanded I do. And I couldn't see both of them at the same time, because Farouk wasn't content to sit on the couch channel-surfing, and Roger had no interest in going to bars, or actually hanging out and getting to know Farouk's future-doctor friends, or taking part in my brother's Restaurant Exploration Quest (which essentially meant going to every non-chain restaurant in the greater Cleveland area, asking the server for their best dish, and eating it, no matter what it was).

I knew if I said any of that, though, that Roger's response would be to ask why I didn't give up on going to the encampment so I would have more free time. And I couldn't get into that again, couldn't get into a multi-tiered discussion of what was more or less "important" to me which always ended with him yelling and making weird accusations, so instead I said, "All of your relatives live pretty nearby, too. You still want to celebrate their birthdays."

"Yeah, but those are actual *parties*. This is just going to be you, your parents, and your brother, right?"

"Yeah, I think so. But that's how we do things in my family."

"Whatever," he said. And then he turned his gaze back to the TV and sulked for a while before it came time for me to leave.

THE roads were icy on the way to my parents' house, but I managed all right. I stopped at Whole Foods on the way down to buy Farouk a bottle of wine—I hadn't really thought much about his upcoming birthday what with all the crazy stuff that was happening in my own life lately.

My parents were glad to see me, and I tried to present a veneer of similar happiness, but I felt worn out. Farouk seemed happy with the wine I had chosen—he immediately opened it and poured me a glass. My parents' and brother's conversation looped around me as I steadily drank and gathered my nerves for what I knew I'd have to somehow bring up.

"You all right, Laila?" Farouk asked.

"Mmm," I said. "Just tired. You know."

He laughed a little. “All that fighting the good fight getting to you?”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

I ate another bite of food right then—I had no desire for more questions. Of course, my mom was curious about everything, and asked, “Have you been making any progress? How many signatures do you have so far?”

“A thousand, maybe, the last we checked?” I said. I hadn’t asked Freddy and Danielle about that in nearly a week. “But who knows if all of them are actual people.”

“Well, why wouldn’t they be?” my dad asked.

“There’s this group that’s against us--” I sighed, and then explained the story to them. “Anyway, they said they’ve been signing our petitions with fake names, and we’ve weeded out all the celebrities and cartoon characters, but who knows, some of them might’ve been sneakier than that.”

“Well, that’s awful,” my mom said. I nodded, not knowing quite how to respond to that, and again ceded the conversational territory to everyone else, which was fine, because Farouk was more than happy to take the lead and talk about the fabulous all-grilled-cheese restaurant he had found on the west side.

Later, I was helping my mom clear the table so we could bring out the cake, and she cornered me in the kitchen. “You were quiet tonight,” she said. “You say everything’s okay, but I can tell something’s up. Is it Roger?”

I looked down at the counter and took a deep breath. “I don’t think I love him anymore,” I said. “I think I want to break up with him.”

“Well...” she said, “I had a feeling this was probably going to happen soon.” I nodded. “What are you feeling?”

“Scared. He’s been getting meaner lately, making all sorts of weird demands, and I’m...pregnant.” I whispered this last word.

My mom slowly reached for the bottle to pour herself another glass of wine, then asked: “Well...what are you going to do about *that*?”

“I already made an appointment...”

“Mmm. And I take it Roger doesn’t know anything about this?”

“No. And that’s the way I want to keep it.”

She stepped closer to me and gave me a quick hug. “This is not the kind of thing I hoped you would ever have to be dealing with, Laila,” she said. “I never understood the appeal of Roger to you, and I understood that first boyfriend even less. You’ve been putting yourself in these difficult situations...”

“I know.”

“Will you *promise* me to stop doing these kinds of things after this is all over?” she asked.

I nodded.

“Good.” She paused, then said, “Stay here. Get the cake out of the fridge, I need to get something from my bedroom.”

I guessed that it was one of the prescription tablets she took for her migraines, and started feeling guilty while putting the necessary 25 candles into Farouk’s cake. But when she came back downstairs she placed a handful of hundred-dollar bills on the counter next to me. “That’s five hundred dollars. Put that in your pocket. Don’t lose it,” she said.

“You don’t have to do this,” I said. “I have some money saved.”

She shook her head. "You're not allowed to refuse this." She turned away from me, and called out into the living room, where my dad and Farouk were watching the Olympic women's hockey final, "Cake's ready!"

A considerable amount of the weight I had been feeling before sitting down to dinner floated away by the time I finished dessert, and I drove away that night feeling that things might actually turn out all right. Katrina welcomed me into the student center around midnight and I fell asleep in the pile again.

THE next few days I kept Roger at bay by answering my phone whenever he called, telling him what was going on in my day while he vegged out and watched TV. He wanted to set up plans to see me over the weekend, but I used the fact that we had the whole rally to plan as an excuse, and then threw in the excuse of having to write a paper for Dr. Sandoval's class for good measure. It wasn't due until a week later, but for all I knew it might actually be a decent way of getting my mind off of whatever would be going through my head after the abortion. He knew that there was no use in actually fighting with me when school stuff was at stake.

On Wednesday night (or Thursday morning, I suppose), I went to sleep sometime around one a.m in the nest of with everyone else. I was on the left edge of the pile, which I preferred because as warm as it was, I didn't like feeling squeezed. To my right was this little guy named Kyle who had lived down the hall from me freshman year and used to be named Kayla. As far as I knew, he was the only trans person in our group, and usually just stayed quiet, nodding in agreement with whoever was talking. We had decorated some posters and banners together on the first official day of the protest, and art seemed to be

his biggest gift, which made me wonder why he was even at our college in the first place, since we didn't have a great fine arts department. He was majoring in Spanish.

Sometime later—I think it might have been five a.m. or so, but I'm not sure--I felt Kyle move and get up from his place in the nest. I settled back into sleep without much of a problem, and was only awoken when I heard some loud voices coming from the canvas chairs in the corner of our encampment. I checked my phone and it was 5:30 by then. I sat up, grabbed my purse, squirted a stream of eyedrops into my lids, and then looked over to see what was going on.

In a tight circle, Kyle, Freddy, and Chad, our group's computer expert, were sitting, talking in increasingly-agitated voices. "It's because we haven't fought back hard enough!" Chad exclaimed. "If we had crushed those fuckers last week instead of just *ignoring* them, maybe this wouldn't've happened!"

"Or maybe it would've been *worse*," Freddy said. "I've been getting messed-up comments and looks thrown at me my whole time here, do you really think they'd've gone easy on anyone if we actually called them on their bullshit?"

Kyle was just quiet, but I saw him shivering even in the dark. I got up and walked over, wrapping one of the blankets around me and carrying another. When I got to their little circle, I saw that Kyle was soaking wet. "Hey guys?" I asked. "What's going on?" I sat down on the radiator next to them and offered the extra blanket to the freezing Kyle.

"Kyle?" Freddy asked. "Do you want to say this?"

"No, you do it." His teeth chattered some more, but he draped the blanket all over himself and curled up in his chair.

"So, a little bit ago Freddy and I were coming in from...ah..."

I shrugged. “You don’t have to lie to me, I know you guys smoke pot outside all the time.”

Chad smiled. “Yeah, so we were walking past the restrooms over there, and we heard all these weird noises, like thumping and a little bit of yelling. So we went in to hear what was going on, and when we walked in there was this dude who I think I recognize from the Rationalist Facebook page, and Kyle here was covered in water, and there was blood coming out of his nose.”

I looked more closely at Kyle and saw that his nose was an unpleasant shade of purple, and there was a little bit of dried blood on one cheek.

“Where did the water all come from?” I asked.

“Some jackass janitor left a fucking bucket in there,” Kyle growled. “It’s *mop water*.”

I’m not sure I had ever heard Kyle swear before, and something caught in my throat.

“Do you know who did this?” I asked.

Freddy answered, “I think his real name is Henry, but everyone calls him Ziegs.”

We were all silent for a few minutes. The others were still asleep. Katrina and Danielle were curled together inside of one of the sleeping bags, and I envied their peacefulness. They’d find out about this soon enough—everyone on campus would—but for just a few more hours or so they could remain innocent.

“So...what’s the plan?” Chad asked.

“We need to report this to the campus police,” said Freddy. “Maybe even the city.”

“Fuck,” Kyle said. “Really? All I want to do is go to my apartment, take a shower, and get all this disgusting water off of me.”

“You know the campus police are assholes,” Freddy said. “If you look the way you do now, they won’t be able to deny that something happened.”

Kyle nodded. “Fine.” We walked downstairs to their office with him, wordlessly, and waited in the lobby area while he went into one of the inner rooms to file a report describing what had happened. When he came out, Freddy and Chad went in together to give their accounts as witnesses. Kyle slumped over in his seat, head in his hands, and said, “This is gonna suck.”

“The worst part’s over,” I said, trying to be helpful.

“Yeah, I know. I hope. I guess. But now I have to walk all the way over to Coventry Road looking and smelling like crap.”

Finally something I can help with, I thought. “I’ll give you a ride,” I said. “My car’s right outside.”

“I don’t want to cause trouble--” he said. “I feel like I’m always just a giant nuisance to people.” He shook his head. “It’s ridiculous. Like, my parents wanted a boy, and they got a girl, and so they’re all disappointed and just treat me like the girliest girl ever but I never even *felt* like a girl. And they were fine that I was so into art, because that meant they could buy me all these glitter pens and whatever, and meanwhile I’m asking for anatomy books so I can learn to draw more realistic animals, but my parents won’t buy them for me because they’re full of skeletons and that’s such a ‘boy’ thing. And then the older I get the more and more I feel like I *am* a boy.” He laughed. “And every time I say anything like that, or ask them to call me Kyle, they say that they can’t believe in that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. It’s life. I’m just trying to maybe move somewhere else when this is all over. Another country. I read an article once about this one town in Mexico where boys in families with no daughters turn into girls to take care of their mothers. And this phenomenon in the Dominican Republic with all these kids who grow up thinking they’re girls but then end up having testicles that don’t show up until puberty. That’s why I picked Spanish to major in. So maybe I could move somewhere where I wouldn’t be *such* a freak.”

I put an arm around him. “You’ll figure it out.” Chad and Freddy walked out of the office then, and we all walked out of the office, with the two of them going back to the encampment to prepare for whatever would happen next, and Kyle and I to the parking lot.

AFTER class, I went back to the encampment and met up with Katrina and Danielle. “Hey,” I said. “Did you hear about what went on?”

“Yeah,” Katrina said. “I’m worried.”

“I kind of wish Ziegs could just die in a car crash or something,” I said.

“You can’t say that!” Danielle exclaimed. “You’d feel terrible if something happened!”

I’m not so sure that’s true, I thought.

“Can I ask y’all for a favor?” I asked.

“What’s that?”

“Can you give me a ride to Buckeye-Shaker on Saturday? We can use my car, but I can’t drive...”

“Is this—what we talked about last week?” Katrina said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Oh, I feel so *bad* for you,” Danielle exclaimed. “It must have been such a *difficult* decision.”

“Um, thanks,” I said.

“We can take my car,” Danielle said. “I drive through there all the time when I have to go to the Catholic Worker project.”

“Cool,” I said. “Thanks.”

I figured out the minute I met Danielle that encouraging her at *all* after she mentioned her volunteer work was a sure-to-be-irritating project. She only brought them into the conversation so that she could simultaneously brag about herself and pretend that she was nothing special. So I just let the conversations drop. My phone started buzzing then, and of course it was Roger. I didn’t want to talk to him, so I hit ignore, but not before Danielle could see the phone. “Is that the father?” she asked.

“That’s the one who contributed the sperm,” I said. I was exhausted. “There’s not going to be anything to be a father *of*.”

“But you’re still bonded by this, right?”

I shook my head. “Danielle, one of the main reasons I’m doing this is because I don’t want to have any kind of bond with him at all.”

“But--” she said. But that was when Katrina stepped in, thankfully, asking Danielle to come look at an e-mail she had gotten from the lead guitarist of one of the bands we wanted to play at the rally. I walked off and settled onto one of the couches to read more Coetzee.

I put my bookmark in and closed my eyes. I imagined a future, someday, far off, when maybe I would find someone who understood me far better, and the baby that could

come out of that union. Someone I could accept into the world, despite my possibly-irrational fear of my own death, because I would know that whatever happened to me, there would be someone who would *not* ruin that child's life. If Roger's zombie-baby was born instead, that child would never exist. Instead there would be a Magda, someone who would grow up resenting her life, and possibly become a murderous spinster convinced that airplanes were speaking to her in Spanish.

This is for the best, I thought.

ON Friday, I drove myself to the clinic for the first appointment, which was all about signing consent forms, getting an ultrasound, being asked about my feelings, and making my first payment. I was seven weeks pregnant, which meant that I had probably conceived during winter break, one of the times when I had thrown Roger a bone and had sex with him after driving from my parents' house to my apartment in one of the many blizzards we had during those four weeks, since he wouldn't come down to Summit County. It also meant that I had somehow gotten pregnant while on the pill and had had my period even while all this was happening. *But January's was awfully light...and quick...*

After that, I returned to the encampment. Kyle still hadn't returned yet, but Chad had gotten in contact with him. "He told me Ziegs has a hearing before the student court," Chad said. "I looked online to see who all was on that committee this year, and it's kind of a split—a lot of people in the Right-to-Life group, but then also some Amnesty International folks, who are probably on our side, plus a few random RAs and some of the Safe Ride Home people, and who knows who they'll pull for."

"But there's nothing to debate," I said. "Ziegs beat Kyle up, that's all there is to it."

Chad shook his head. “Apparently Ziegs is challenging whether Kyle even had a right to be in there in the first place. And even if they decide Ziegs was wrong in attacking Kyle, they could still recommend to the dean that nothing should actually be *done*.”

“Oh.” This was an altogether likely possibility. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Write a letter of support? That’s what everyone else is doing.”

I sat down on the floor near one of the coffee tables and grabbed a sheet of the same stationary that Amy, one of the few freshmen in the group, was using, and got to work.

Roger called me six times that day, but I ignored every single call. I was well on my way to being done.

SATURDAY morning I awoke feeling apprehensive. After finishing my support letter for Kyle, I had written a different letter, in a blank Word document on my laptop, one that I knew I’d be sending later that day. It was my letter of freedom, the final words I hoped to ever say to Roger.

He had called me three more times during the night and then had sent me a text saying, *<I want to see you.>*

<I can’t see you,> I said. *<Way too busy with this paper today.>*

Then I turned my phone off and changed into the most comfortable clothes I had. I had finished *In the Heart of the Country* the previous night, and now, to relax myself, I was reading poetry from one of my favorite books, a collection of Rumi’s poetry translated by Coleman Barks. I stayed in this meditative state until Katrina’s cell phone alarm went off and we began the process of getting ready to go.

The whole way to the clinic, my stomach was churning, despite my previous preparations. I was afraid of the surgery itself: how much would it hurt? How would I feel afterward? Would I be utterly useless? And I was afraid that Roger would somehow be waiting for us at the clinic—I didn't know how, but I feared everything about him right then. I checked my purse over and over again as we rode, just making sure that my phone was off and that I had the remainder of the money my mother had given to me.

I wasn't at the clinic as long on Saturday as I had been on Friday. I paid the remainder of my fee and was then called upstairs where I went to a small room, undressed, and then was greeted by three women—one to start the IV, one to do the procedure, and a third who stood there saying nice things about how everything was going to be okay and trying to get me to talk about my life. But I didn't really want to talk. The medicine made my voice sound weird, so I just focused on the pictures on the ceiling—they looked like a tropical island. I imagined myself there, with my friends, where no one would ever hurt us and there was no one like Roger to worry about.

I wasn't on that island long enough before the third girl, the one who had tried to talk to me, began lightly shaking my shoulder and saying, "Laila, Laila, time to get dressed. The procedure's over, everything went fine."

"Hmm?" I asked. I felt some faint soreness between my legs, and I knew something was seeping out of me—blood or the disinfecting solution they had used, I wasn't sure.

"It's okay, the medicine's just making you tired."

"Hmm." One thought raced through my head then. "Can I see it?" I asked.

"Yeah. Stay right there." She opened the door and called across the hall, "The patient would like to see the tissue." A moment later someone else opened the door just a

crack—I could only see her gloved hand--and passed her a small silver cup, which she held out to me. It wasn't much to see—a mass of pink and red, mostly. I couldn't see a human face there, which meant the things I had read online about its tiny size were right. I had no idea if it was male or female, what it would have turned out to be. But it would never be Roger.

“Thank you,” I said. I slowly dressed then, stumbling, leaning on the examining table or my helper's arms most of the time, until we walked down the hall to the recovery room. After half an hour sitting in there taking small sips of juice, a nurse walked me downstairs where I met up with Katrina and Danielle in the waiting room.

“Do you want to go back to the encampment or to your apartment?” Katrina asked as we neared the campus.

“The encampment. Some of my stuff is there...and I sort of don't want to be alone.”

When we got out of the car, she gave me a hug, while Danielle walked inside. “Are you going to be all right?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“And Roger?”

“I'm leaving him. I'm sending him a message now, and then that will be it.”

BUT when I got back to the encampment, the effects of the medications I had been given utterly overwhelmed me and I sunk into one of the couches, falling completely asleep. I woke around midnight, feeling hungry, but since all of the food options on campus are closed at that hour on weekends I just fell back asleep until Sunday.

As soon as I turned my computer on that morning I had an angry e-mail from Roger about how I couldn't just ignore him, it wasn't okay, he *needed* to see me, et cetera.

I copied and pasted my entire pre-written breakup e-mail into the "reply" window and walked downstairs to get some cereal.

I kept my phone off for the rest of the day as we prepared the student center for Monday evening's rally, decorating the windows in rainbow streamers and finalizing all of the plans with bands, speakers, and food vendors online. It was a good way to distract myself from everything else, but I still needed to run off to the restroom a few times just to cry a little bit—as much as I had come to dislike and distrust Roger, I had been with him for so long that it was strange not to have him around anymore. But I tired myself out enough to go to sleep, and when the sun rose Monday morning, it bathed those of us sleeping in the nest on the floor in a prism of multicolored light. I felt renewed. Freddy and I walked off to postcolonial literature class together, ready to discuss everything in *The Heart of the Country*.

On the way across campus, we passed a girl with curly black hair who was sitting on the bench outside a statue of Mary, and when walked by her, she glared at us. "Does it feel good?" she muttered.

"What?" I asked.

"Come on," Freddy said. When we were out of earshot, he whispered to me, "Tina Fratelli. Ziegs' girlfriend."

I inhaled. Tina was a sophomore, and one of the originators of the Rationalists. I didn't know what her deal was, but from what she had posted online, she seemed to have a

lot of issues with even the most basic of equality measures. And I guess Ziegs was her muscle. “What does she mean by ‘does it feel good,’ though?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe something happened with Ziegs’ case, although the hearing isn’t supposed to happen until next week.”

After class, when we got back to the encampment, the room was buzzing. Shannon rushed over to us. “Kyle called Chad while you guys were gone,” she said. “Residence Life has decided to not allow Ziegs to live in the dorms anymore, because of his violent behavior.”

“That’s something they can *do*?”

“I guess. I’m not an R.A. But guys—he’s from *Atlanta*.”

I inhaled. “Wow. So that’s why Tina was mad.”

“Tina Fratelli? Oh god, she was all over Facebook with her bullshit.”

And that was really when everything seemed to be going our way.

KYLE showed up around 6 o’clock, and then people began slowly trickling in—professors who were on our side, other students (some of who might have only been there for the music and food, but whatever), and other people from the city who had heard about us on the news and supported what we were doing. Farouk and his roommate arrived around 7, just before the first band, made up of Chad and some of his housemates, went on.

“Guys!” I exclaimed. “I didn’t think you’d be here!”

“Of course we are,” Farouk said. “How could we miss this?” His roommate Rahim was sauntering over to a gathering of girls who I sort-of knew from Philosophy class.

Farouk laughed a little. “So mom said you were going to break up with the rug?” I giggled

and nodded. “The rug” was his nickname for Roger; it had started off as “Rog,” but then he decided that Roger’s total boringness made “rug” much more appropriate. “Got that done yet?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Yesterday, in fact.”

“And how’ve you been since then?”

“Fine,” I said. “Just fine.”

We leaned back against the wall and listened to the band play some Ramones covers. Katrina and Danielle were near us, arm-in-arm, and even if I didn’t like Danielle very much, I could tolerate her long enough for Katrina to see that things probably wouldn’t work out there in the long run, just like my entire family had managed to do with Roger. I sipped fruit punch (which Rahim explained wasn’t *real* punch since it only had three ingredients; he had asked, of course).

The second band was composed of four women in their thirties and forties. The bass player looked strangely familiar to me somehow, and when they started playing and I heard her voice on the background vocals, it hit me that she had been the one in the room saying all the nice things on the day I had my abortion.

“You okay?” Farouk asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I like this song, is all.” They were covering “Modern Girl” by Sleater-Kinney, and I tried to focus on the words and not panic. *She’s works at a clinic*, I thought. *She’s not allowed to reveal how she knows me. Patient confidentiality, remember?* And I settled back in. After “Modern Girl,” the band started playing songs I hadn’t heard before—their original material, probably.

Then the door opened and Roger came barging in, spotting me immediately somehow, even though there was quite a crowd of people standing between the stage area and the back wall. He stormed over and spat out, "What the *fuck* is your problem, Laila? You give these people all your time so you can sit here listening to music, and I want one thing from you and you respond a whole *day* later with a fucking breakup e-mail?"

"Yeah," I said. "It wasn't working, Roger. It wasn't for a while. You know that."

"No, I don't. I was happy. You could have been too if you stopped spending all your time with your fucking friends and started doing what you used to *love* more than anything."

What, hanging on your every word? I thought. "We're not in the same place anymore. You don't respect me, or who I am, what I believe in..." I said. "It's all in the e-mail. I really can't talk right now."

"I'm not leaving unless you come with me," he said.

"Yeah, *that's* not happening," Farouk said. He and Rahim stepped in front of me, staring Roger down, and from all around I could see other people looking over, as we distracted them from the music. A song ended and the singer launched into another that had the word "misogyny" displayed prominently in the first verse.

"Hey, asshole in the back, this isn't your night!" yelled the drummer, a big lady with a mohawk.

Katrina and Danielle joined me then, and Freddy and Kyle rushed over from where they had been stationed at the food table. "Hate isn't welcome here," Danielle said. "Please take your heteropatriarchal views elsewhere. This is a safe space."

He just looked at her in disgust. “Fine,” he said. “Have fun with your freak friends, have fun writing me out of your life. Just don’t expect another chance.” He turned and stormed back out the door.

As soon as he was gone, I sunk down, with Katrina on one side of me and Farouk on the other. “You okay?” Katrina asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I will be.”

The band launched into a cover of “Rock the Casbah,” in which they all shared vocal duties, and I saw Kyle, Shannon, and Freddy dancing near the front. I smiled. After a whole month—a year, really—of complete shittiness, things were looking up. I joined my dancing friends.

Burning Bridges

April 5th, 2012

I am sitting in Prosperity, around a table with Ted, Calvin, and Vince. I walked in here quickly, hopefully quick enough so that no one else saw me clearly. I know it was Rahim's car parked outside: how many Honda SUVs with Minnesota plates can there be in Cleveland? Rahim was sitting in the front room with some other guy. I have no idea why he would pick this bar of all the possible ones in Cleveland. He's an east-sider, and this is *my* part of town. My friends and I come here every Thursday. Calvin, Ted, and I all live near here, and even though Vince is an east-sider, he used to date the bartender.

I order one of their new special drinks, some minty-fruity thing that doesn't belong in this dim place with old wooden chairs and a bowling machine. It's strong, which is just what I need, though hopefully not strong enough for me to do something stupid. I drink it slowly, pacing myself with the water glasses that the waitress brings to all of us. Calvin is trying to flirt with the two bros who are playing the bowling game. They keep mussing his hair for "luck."

I halfway listen to a conversation Vince and Ted are having about the bar's selection of music as Rahim and his friend walk outside to the patio—probably so that Rahim can smoke one of his cigars—and then return. In my many glances towards the front room after this, I don't see them and I assume that they've left. Ted orders a big plate of fries and I am glad because now I feel calm enough to eat. I'm about to grab a fry when I feel a hand on my shoulder. I turn around, expecting one of the bowling bros, but instead there's Rahim. His huge eyes stare down at me.

"Hey!" he exclaims. "It's been so long!"

I stand and let him give me the hug that he's holding out his arms for. He's wearing a weird green wool jacket that vaguely looks like something a soldier in the Soviet army might wear. It's annoyingly stylish, since I'm wearing the same skirt I wore the last time he saw me nearly a year ago.

"We should hang out!" he says once we pull away. "Come to my place tomorrow! I'll cook you Indian food!" Rahim is a whirlwind. He's still talking, about Washington D.C. of all things. I shouldn't go. I'd be a fool to, after last year.

But there's something in his face that makes me say: "Sure. I'll come over after work."

"Do you remember the address?"

Yes. "No. What is it?"

He gives it to me—same house in the Heights from a year ago—and I type it into my phone. "I gotta get going," he says. "See you soon, babe." Immediately, it's like it's last winter again, and I'm texting Tatiana to ask her what it means to have him call me babe. That was right at the beginning. The biggest answer I could give anyone now would be "nothing"—that no matter what Rahim Mansouri does or says, he means nothing by it.

"Who was that?" Vince asks.

"One of my exes," I say, to simplify things.

"Is he the one from last year?" Calvin asks.

"Yep." Vince wasn't really around last year—he had just moved here from London, and while he and Calvin had already met at the university where they both worked—the *same* university where Rahim went to school—he wasn't coming with us to the bars yet.

"So why are you seeing him again?"

“It’s complicated.” Mostly by the fact that I don’t quite understand it myself, and Ted’s the only one who knows about Vladimir, other than Tatiana. But Vladimir isn’t even really part of it—unless he is. I’m fine with what I did. I’m not fine with his way of not handling it—or rather, not handling *me*. He didn’t even know there *was* a Vladimir, for the brief time there was—sort of. And even though it’s Calvin and Vince, and I see them all the time, getting into this with anyone is difficult. Even Dr. Lee freaked out at our first meeting, and she has to deal with this stuff all the time, I’m sure. I order another drink and just let the guys get back to their uncomplicated conversations.

RAHIM and I dated without labels for four months last year. I never had the guts to ask what “we” were, and even within my own head I argued about whether I should refer to him as my boyfriend or not. Things seemed good, and I was afraid of jinxing everything by either saying or thinking more than what was, so I just let things happen. He was in med school, and busy all the time, so we saw each other once a week at the most. He always said he would make me Indian food, but never did. That he just called it “Indian Food” was also weird—*he’s* Indian, he could tell me the name of a dish. Even though I’m no expert on Indian food, it’s not like I would’ve questioned anything he did back then. I never asked him about certain things, like the bottle of women’s shampoo in his shower, or why his roommates were never around when I was. But we got along better than I had with anyone I had dated before. And he was quite affectionate, in the privacy of his home. So I was happy to keep it going, whatever it was, and letting everything else happen however he decided it would happen. He was constantly asking me questions about my life, my family, my favorite foods, where I had traveled, that kind of thing. He asked my opinions about

whatever sort of wine or tea we were drinking, since he had decided I was the expert on these things. I was slowly falling in love.

On May 20th, he stopped returning my phone calls and text messages. My explanation for it was my own presumptuousness: I had sent him a Facebook invitation to a party Tatiana was throwing, and that wasn't okay somehow. He hadn't said it was okay. Why should I expect him to want to meet my friends?

A week later, Vladimir appeared. Vladimir made his presence known to me at various times for several days before I investigated him. Two lines on a tiny stick were my formal introduction to Vlad the Impaler. I tried calling Rahim again but he still wouldn't answer. I wanted to go to his house but I kept picturing him exploding at me if I did, even though I had never heard him raise his voice, and I couldn't handle that. And my request seemed pathetic, after a day or two. Rahim and I only dated for four months; I couldn't expect him to go with me to my abortion appointment, and I shouldn't use something like *that* as a reason to see him one more time, or get him to love me. Tatiana accompanied me instead. Everything was fine, but I still felt tortured about what I must have done to Rahim to make him hate me.

Dr. Lee said that it wasn't what I *did*, but what I *didn't* do that made him leave. "You never gave him your opinions. You never told him what you wanted," she said. "Next time you can't be afraid of that."

Three days after my abortion, when Ted's girlfriend Hannah started berating him at a party that she arrived to late (because he was talking to Tatiana and I), I decided Ohio held nothing for me and that I was going to make plans to leave. I wanted to go to graduate

school, so I began researching programs on the west coast and in England—anywhere, as long as it was far away, and I could have a life without the reminders.

But Rahim still exists for me as a strange curiosity. I still wonder why he pulled away; if Dr. Lee was right or not. And why he's back, why one quick glimpse of me in a bar would make him want to reestablish contact when he wanted nothing to do with me back then.

I don't know whether I should tell him about Vladimir. But I have so little time left in this state and nothing to lose that I think I owe it to myself to try to some of this out.

THE next day is Good Friday. Calvin has posted Lady Gaga's "Judas" video on Facebook, and I consider re-posting it on my page because it's so appropriately inappropriately appropriate, but I don't, because Rahim might see it and think it means that I'm still literally in love with him, which sounds creepy and isn't true anyway, I don't think. Plus I wonder if implying that he is Judas Iscariot could be offensive in some way, since Judas was Jewish and he's a Shia Muslim. Instead I listen to a bunch of Yo La Tengo songs, since they were the band we first connected over. "Stockholm Syndrome" could have been my thought process last May, but "Damage" feels more appropriate now—I could've sung it last night if I replaced the word "east" with "west."

Rahim texts me in the middle of work to make sure we're still on for that night. I wait a half hour before responding. Finding his house after work is as simple as I remember, it's right off of one of the main roads. This time, his roommates' cars are both in the driveway. I park in the street and he comes outside to greet me.

So it won't be like the last few times when he left the door unlocked and I came in to find him napping half-naked, I think. That'd've been too weird. For a moment it goes through my head that maybe he doesn't just want a hookup, maybe he's throwing some big nonspecific-Indian-food dinner party and decided to invite me. Maybe other people are showing up too. Maybe I'm underdressed for the occasion. But he's just wearing shorts and a yellow t-shirt. He hugs me hello again, and we walk inside, where a springy-haired guy is sitting on a couch covered with books, typing on a laptop.

"This is my roommate Farouk," he tells me. Farouk waves, smiles, says hey. Rahim leads me up the stairs where there's another guy just stepping out of one of the bedrooms. He's wearing a suit. "This is Khalil," he says. Khalil waves shyly. We go into Rahim's room. There are no chairs, so I sit on the edge of the bed. Rahim asks me if I want any wine. Obviously I do. I can't deny that he still looks good to me, and all of this will be easier on my brain if I have something to drink first. He goes downstairs, and Khalil walks by again, giving me another shy glance and wave. Rahim comes back with red wine that is oddly cold. He doesn't ask me my opinion on it, which is too bad, because I'd begin with the fact that red wine doesn't belong in the fridge and possibly save him some future embarrassments. I finish my first glass while we catch up on things—I don't tell him about Vladimir, but I do tell him I'm moving at the end of the summer and we talk about that for a little bit. He asks me what music I've been listening to lately. I don't want to say that all day today I've been listening to a constant Yo La Tengo stream, so I mention Vampire Weekend and The xx and a few others Ted. I then regret this because what if he somehow knows that "Campus" reminds me of him? What if he knows how many times I slept on my balcony last summer?

He throws on Pandora, and it begins with the Arctic Monkeys' Fluorescent Adolescent. "Sorry that we have to stay in here," he says. "The other guys are nice, but they both come from really conservative Egyptian families and have no idea how to act around unmarried women." I nod, thinking that Farouk didn't seem fazed in the slightest and that Rahim probably does stuff like this all the time. "Do you want another glass?" he asks. I nod. He pours me one, but before I can drink he starts kissing me. Things proceed from there, but this time I make him wear a condom. The music has changed to Green Day's song "Brain Stew," and I think that this is definitely one of the more absurd songs that could be playing. It's as rough, but somehow not as fulfilling as I remember it. I am not in love. I do not *need* this.

When things are finished, Rahim gets up and puts his clothes back on. I don't want to move, I just want to lie there with my feelings. "It's okay, stay there," he says. I curl up under a red blanket and drift off.

When I wake up, his cat is sniffing around my head, and now The xx's song "VCR" is playing and I realize that the blanket covering me is actually a fitted sheet. Rahim walks back into the room. "Hey," he says. "Man, you must've been tired. You were out for a while."

"Yeah," I say, "I got to bed kind of late last night."

He nods quickly, then says: "My cousin just called me. He's flying into town earlier than I thought. So I don't think I'll have time to cook? Do you want to go get some takeout?"

I expected this. "Sure."

"Does Thai food sound good?"

"Yeah, Thai's fine."

We drive to Coventry, and the whole time he asks me questions about what kinds of food I like. I know we've had this conversation before, last February. We were on our way to get pizza from Mama Santa's, and he started grilling me on whether I liked Italian pastries, too, which led to a stop at Presti's for some cannoli. And now he's asking me if I've ever been to Little Italy. *We went there together several times*, I want to say. *And you asked me that question before we did*. Now he's asking me if I'd rather have pizza, but cheese seems like a terrible idea right now. "Thai's fine," I say.

We park on one of the side streets, walk to High Thai'd, and order. We walk along Coventry—the same street where we first met—while the food cooks and he asks me my opinions on every restaurant we pass. It's weird. I understand why he'd care about Tommy's, since it's such a hippie Cleveland thing and has been around since Tatiana's grandmother was a kid, but why Chipotle or Jimmy John's? Those are the same everywhere. Finally, having exhausted all the culinary options, he asks, "So what are you doing tomorrow?"

I blush slightly, since my answer is so typical of what he knows of me. "Tea shopping," I say.

"Oh, you like tea?" he asks. I nod, thinking. I've told you this so many times. "Do you like Earl Grey? It's difficult to find really good Earl Grey in America, it usually has too much bergamot oil."

I nod again, though asking a tea fanatic if she likes Earl Grey is like asking English majors if they've ever heard of Shakespeare. Instead I tell him about the shop that I like to go to in Vermilion, and I'm about to list off some of their good varieties when he interrupts me. "Oh, Vermilion, is that where you're from originally?"

“No, I’m from Summit County.”

“Oh, right. I’ve never been down there, except when I drove to Columbus. Have you been *there*?”

Asking an Ohioan if she’s been to Columbus is like...never mind, I think. “I have some relatives there.” Who I told you about the last time you told me that you only go through Akron to get to Columbus last year.

“You know, it’s interesting here in Ohio—this is very much a city, but if you drive a little way out you’re totally in farm country. I’d probably get shot there.” I wince, because it’s entirely possible that he’s right, and the sympathy for him that I’m feeling right now doesn’t fit well with the annoyance I’ve felt all evening *or* the attraction I felt during a few brief moments. He laughs, though, seeming to not even notice my reaction. “I’m going out that way with my cousin, to Ashtabula? Have you been there?”

“Not for a few years.” July 5th, 2008, actually, but I don’t specify. “What are you doing there?”

“Fishing.” I remembered that he fishes—he told me once that it was the only topic he could use to relate to his white geriatric patients at the Clinic. We pick up our food and drive back to his house. Farouk and Khalil are sitting in the living room watching an old episode of *30 Rock*. We go upstairs and sit on Rahim’s bed again to eat—my dish has huge chunks of lemongrass in it, just like I hoped it would. He pulls up an episode of *The Daily Show* on his laptop, but continues to talk over it. “So what else are you doing this weekend?” he asks.

“Probably heading to my parents’ house for Easter dinner.”

“Oh, is it Easter this weekend?” I nod. He then starts wondering out loud why none of the black nurses at the hospital mentioned this to him. This leads into him telling me how his parents always have to remind him about Muslim holidays since he always forgets. I get through this with nods and shrugs. Then Jon Stewart mentions abortion and Rahim asks me what I think about it. I chew slowly and swallow before telling him I’m pro-choice, wondering how far to go.

“Same here,” he says. “But I’d feel heartbroken if I caused someone else to have an abortion.”

Then why did you want to have sex with me without a condom? I think. Why didn’t you return my calls? I’m not saying I would have kept him if you had wanted me to, but if this is so important to you, why didn’t you try...

I realize then that I could hurt him somehow, the way he hurt me. I can tell him about Vladimir, and maybe elicit from him a sliver of the emotion I had spent on him, and on Vladimir himself, last year.

But I can’t get the words out. I just nod again. He’s using pretty emotional words, but I can’t believe the sincerity of them. I don’t know if heartbreak is something he could feel. Instead he changes the topic once again, asking me what my family does for Easter.

“Well, my middle sister won’t be there this year, since she’s finishing up her senior year of college down in North Carolina,” I say. “But my mom usually cooks a ham, and she still hides Easter baskets for us even though it’s pretty silly now. And we pretty much just hang out. It’s nothing fancy.” I realize now that I’m actually quite looking forward to spending the evening with my family tomorrow night, and the morning after that, which is

quite unusual for me. Since I'm going to Vermilion first I decide I'll get them each a bit of tea, as my own Easter offering.

I'm still nibbling on lemongrass when he looks at his phone and says: "Shit, it's eight-thirty! I have to get to the airport!" He hugs me again after walking me out to my car and makes some vague promise that we'll see each other soon. When I'm halfway down the Shoreway I realize that I don't care at all if we do.

THE first time I went to Decidedly Different, the tea shop I like in Vermilion, was right after my abortion. I wasn't supposed to be driving, but the Valium haze had drifted away and I drove along the Erie coast, trying to catch glimpses of the lake between the huge McMansions built right up alongside it. I stopped in Vermilion because I was tired, and bought several varieties of loose tea and a cup to drink. It was a tropical green with lemongrass in it, which the ladies at the store said was good for menstrual cramps. Since then I've come to adore that flavor. I walked out on the beach. Spring was slipping away, and I was alone and confused. I tried to leave my thoughts of Rahim there, but of course they followed me home.

This time it's easier. He's not a mystery. He didn't leave because of my actions or inactions—he doesn't even remember half the things I said or did. Everything is a game to him, and now I'm no longer in it. When I drive to Vermilion on April 7th, it's easy to leave him—and Vladimir—there, easy to leave behind that false family that I never really had and then drive away towards my real one.

THE next few days pass, filled with quiet reading, tea-drinking, and time with my family. I agree to go with them to North Carolina in May for my sister's college graduation. I don't think about Rahim until Tuesday when I meet with Dr. Lee.

I found Dr. Lee last year when I couldn't banish Rahim from my head. We've seen each other every two weeks week since then. "So," she says when we sit down. "What's been going on with you?"

She is 69 years old, from New York City, and walks with a cane.

"I saw the four-month guy again," I say. This is what we call Rahim. I don't know why his name has never been spoken.

"Oh. And how was *that*?" There's an edge in her voice that I don't usually hear.

"Weird."

"I see. What's his name again?"

"Rahim."

"*Rahim*?" The way she pronounces it makes me flinch.

"Yeah. He's Indian." Now I feel defensive, and this annoys me, because I don't *want* to defend him.

"All right. What happened?" she asks. I recount the story of the invitation to come over for Indian food. "I see," she says. She's being cold, colder than she's been since I insisted I didn't regret my abortion. "And what will you do now? Do you want to see him again?"

"I don't know. If he asks, I might, but I'm not going after him."

"Well, why would you? Was it that good?" I shrug. She's being very weird. I try to explain to her that this was a good thing, that now I know I didn't fuck up last year, and that

I don't want an actual relationship with him anymore because I'm moving, but she doesn't seem to hear it. "Well, if he *does* call again, you should insist on something better than takeout. You should go on a real date to a restaurant." *But that isn't what this is*, I think. The rest of our session is stilted and awkward, and I am left wondering how she could go from her old view that Rahim and I were equally responsible in things not working out to everything being his fault somehow.

Near the end of the session, someone knocks on the door and Dr. Lee yells, "Go away!" before telling me that it's the building's cleaning lady, who always comes too early. "Come back at nine! I'm working!" I know she expects me to laugh but I actually feel embarrassed. I leave wondering how abnormal it is to feel angrier at the end of a therapy session than at the beginning.

MY next meeting with Dr. Lee starts out with discussions of work and my upcoming move, and at first things seem okay, but then she starts in again, asking, "So how's the jerk? What's his name again? Abdul?"

"Rahim," I say. He did contact me on Thursday, but I didn't go out with him because I had my standing bar-date with the guys, and I tell her about this.

"And what if he calls again?"

I shrug. Because if I hadn't had plans, I very well might have let him come over and distract me for a while. And I might in the future. Dr. Lee raises an eyebrow. "I don't know," I say. "Maybe I'll say okay, or maybe I'll let him have it." I know I won't do this, but I know she wants to think that I'm more angry than I am, and that I might very well tell Rahim about Vladimir, and about how much he hurt me; that I might tell him to fuck off. More than

anything, though, I just want to do what I intended on April 7th and move beyond him. I don't care if he's an occasional hook-up for the next few months or not, but I don't want him to be the focal point of all of my conversations with my therapist. He already got that last summer. My heart has moved on, whether my body has or not remains to be seen. And I want this conversation to move on.

But Dr. Lee doesn't take my comment as a hint toward finality. Instead she says, "but you didn't do that the last time. Instead, you...*let him have it.*" I know that expression, that tone. The same one my high school "best friend" used on me after I told her my first boyfriend and I had sex that first time. The judgment, the need for control, the righteousness I can't take. Dr. Lee continues in a monologue about self-respect and honoring my soul and not being the kind of person who has pointless sex. The euphemisms and code-words don't matter: she's calling me a slut. I haven't felt this way since I was seventeen. We set up the next appointment and I write out my check.

As I am doing this, the cleaning lady knocks again, and once again Dr. Lee yells at her. She apologizes in her thick Eastern European accent, and I feel even angrier. I am paying far too much for this bullshit. I hand her the check and walk out numbly, waiting until I get to my car to unleash profanity. I don't want to go home. Instead I drive to Vermilion, picking up the last traces of sunlight on the beach. I know I never want to see her again.

ON the last Saturday of April, I drive to the east side again for a party Tatiana's throwing. I am able to relax there, goofing around with her and her new girlfriend Jamie. Ted shows up and I pour out everything that happened with Dr. Lee to him. He laughs at my rage about it,

which calms me down somewhat, and having someone validate my reasons for anger is just what I need.

As I drive home, I pass by the brick wall at the corner of Euclid Heights and Coventry where Rahim and I met. Every time I've passed that spot since last May, I've felt guilty and sad, and sometimes try to avoid it entirely (though most places on the east side caused me at least some pain). But this time I feel nothing, and in fact don't even realize I'm passing it until I'm already beyond it, driving on towards Cedar Hill. Then I remember Rahim, but I'm okay with it. I know myself far better than Dr. Lee ever could.

I'm not going to tell him about Vladimir. I'm not going to see him again.

Two days later, at midnight, on the border of Monday and Tuesday, of April and May, I send Dr. Lee an e-mail telling her that we won't be seeing each other again, and why. After sending it I drive out to Vermilion: the border of Lorain and Erie counties, of water, land, sky, and maybe fire too, if you go by the region's nickname. I listen to the Arcade Fire on my iPod and let their instrumentals wash over me as the waves do, imagining a future I can't know yet.

After three more weeks of this same sort of peace, spending as much time as possible with my family and friends, I wake up on the morning of my drive to North Carolina feeling optimistic and untethered from any of my past concerns. The eight-hour drive south feels like nothing.

Running from Carousels

WHEN I was seven, a carnival came to town. I remember waiting to ride the carousel—I had never seen one before. My cousins Bob and Ashley and their parents still lived in town, and our parents gave us enough money for three rides each while they sat under some trees and sort-of watched us. They weren't really paying very much attention. When I climbed on the first time, Tim and Bob rushed off to find the grizzly bears and lions, and Ashley climbed onto a large rabbit, while I found a small panda who appeared to be eating bamboo. About midway through the ride I felt someone tapping on my shoulder, and there was our neighbor Lowell Cartwright, grinning in my face. "How are you doing?" he asked.

Lowell had lived in Yellowknife for the past three years. He was from Whitby, Ontario, but didn't talk much about his life there. We found out over the years that he had gotten divorced right before moving here. But I never remember him displaying any sort of emotion about these things. Those first few years he lived here, he was always giving me candy—this was before he inherited a bit of money, when he was working at the drug store. He never gave candy to Tim, and treated my family like any other when my father was around, but when it was just my mother and me (which it often was, since Tim was in school and my father was at work), he would treat me like I was special.

I told him I was doing fine, but he kept asking me questions--"Where did you buy your dress? What's your favorite thing to eat here? Are your parents around?" There was something strange about the way he looked at me, something I could see now that I spent most of my time at school around people my own age. After he followed me from the panda to the tiger on my next ride, and asked the same questions, staring up into my face with that same grin, and setting his hand right on the haunches of my mount, not far at all from

my own bum, I spent my third ride on the bench seat, the boring seat, the seat for old grandparents to watch tiny kids from. I felt cheated. Ashley was several rows in front of me on a flamingo this time and Tim had found my tiger. I had wanted to try the flamingo on my third ride. But I didn't want to talk to Lowell anymore and after begging my parents to ride the carousel, I couldn't merely ride twice if they paid for three rides. So I scrunched my legs up in one corner of the bench seat, watching my brother and cousins and what seemed like every other kid in Yellowknife ride around and around, prancing up and down on animals that didn't really go anywhere. Lowell passed by my bench seat, his gaze towards the air—at the height of the prancing animals—but not bothering to gaze down to where I was hiding until his second time circling around, as everything was slowing down and the ride was almost over. He laughed when he saw me sitting there. “Aw, did you want to play hide-and-seek with me?” he asked. “Well, I found you! I'll always find you!” He continued laughing as I scurried off the ride and sat in-between my mother and my aunt underneath the tree, in an effort to keep myself both hidden and safe.

DURING grade nine, a new girl arrived at my school. We had been the same bunch for the last ten years, so a newcomer was exciting, to say the least. Her name was Wendy, and for the first week or so, the most popular girls gathered around her, trying to figure her out, find out if she was worth anything to them. Once they found out that her parents were just here to open and manage the new organic grocery store, and she was only from Moose Jaw, they lost interest.

This was when she started eating lunch with me.

I had always had friends, obviously: Tammy and Leah, girls I knew from church. We could eat together, study together, whatever. But they weren't the sort of people I could tell *everything* to. I didn't tell them when I got my first period because they never talked about theirs, and I'd've thought none of us had gotten it if I hadn't seen a pad inside of Leah's knapsack once. They came from families like mine, and I got the feeling that they had no problem with that. I also got the feeling that despite the outward similarities, the cold silences and angry outbursts at my house didn't happen at theirs. They were blithely happy, and I pretended that I was, too.

Wendy was different. She didn't dress like everyone else. She wore very bright colors most of the time, and long skirts that looked like they came from a different time period. The only things she wore that looked like anything else in Yellowknife were her flannel shirts—but even these were usually paired with more of the weird vintage skirts, not jeans like anyone else would wear. She wore big clunky boots—everyone here wore boots once winter started, but hers were black and not fur-lined, and she wore them from the start of the year. Most of her outfits didn't match, exactly, at least not in the normal way. I couldn't imagine what this might feel like to Leah—her entire bedroom was laid out according to complementary colors and all of her outfits always matched perfectly. I mentioned this to Wendy once and she said it made sense since Leah's birthday was in early September.

Wendy and I got closer as the year went on. She was amazing at biology, and ended up being my lab partner. She invited me to her house to watch Japanese cartoons—anime, something I had never heard of before. Our conversations grew more and more full of

inside jokes about these shows, and discussions of the “weird” bands I would sometimes listen to on the internet when my parents weren’t home.

Leah and Tammy starting drifting away from us. Wendy and I became our own private little gang of two through the rest of grades nine, ten, and eleven.

Twelve was when things changed.

The summer before, I went away for a week to visit my cousins Bob and Ashley in Toronto. Bob was five years older than me, Ashley was one year older. They were the cool ones, the city cousins, the ones I had always looked up to. So when Ashley said she was taking me to an all-ages club downtown with her boyfriend, I was excited.

The boyfriend brought a friend along for me. He had played basketball for their high school’s team and was going to U of T in the fall to study business. He was over six feet tall, with short, gelled-back hair. His name was Steve. A nice, good-looking boy, as Wendy’s mother would say. He was kind to me, and danced with me. He tried to kiss me, but even though he looked a little bit like Sanosuke from *Rurouni Kenshin*, I didn’t want him to do that. I told him I needed a minute and walked off to the washroom. Everything about this place felt fake, like I was trying to be someone I wasn’t. I thought about Wendy, and about all the times we had just hung out on her bed watching anime, and wished I could be back there right then. I didn’t dance anymore after that, just kind of zoned out and let Steve find other girls who might actually want to dance with him.

That night, when we got back to my cousins’ house, I called her. I knew she was surprised I was calling since it was already so late in my time zone. I didn’t say anything important, just that I wished she was there and I had had a weird night. She listened and told me everything would be okay. She sounded tired throughout the conversation and I

wondered if I had woken her up, even though it was two hours earlier back home. Though that would have still meant it was midnight.

When I got back to Yellowknife, things were normal between us. We talked mostly about applying to the same universities and becoming roommates, though my parents didn't want me to go away at all. They couched everything in objections about money, but the store was doing fine, I knew. They just didn't think an education would be worthwhile for me, even though they hadn't opposed Tim going to school (to major in business and take over the store one day). After every argument I had with them, I'd call Wendy and she'd help me get my hopes up again. We sent our applications off at the same time, in December.

In February, we both started getting acceptances to universities. My father threw a fit. "It isn't right for you to leave, Martha. You'll become a different person in the city."

"No it won't," I said. "Wendy will be there with me. We'll keep each other safe." My parents' conception of Wendy was far different than the reality of her. We usually hung out at her house, and the few times she had been over to mine, she had dressed far more conservatively than she ever had at school. The fact that her parents' store was called The Garden of Eden was equally fortunate.

He sighed and said: "I'll think about it."

"Thank you," I said, knowing I'd have to be perfect in order to convince him, but confident I could do it. I ran over to Wendy's house.

"My dad said he'd think about it!" I exclaimed.

"Yay!" she shouted and we both jumped into the air and hugged. As we came down, I noticed she wasn't letting go of me—but I didn't want to let go of her, either.

“Come upstairs,” she said. I followed her up the steps, into her bedroom. We sat on the bed, where we had sat so many times before. But something was different. The house was silent. Snow was falling outside, adding to the thick blanket that had covered the ground for four months already. We lay on the bed and she reached for my hand, gripping it, pulling me to her. Our lips met, and I rolled on top of her. It was exactly what I had been wanting since the summer. I moved towards her again and let her reach her hands under my shirt and drag her fingernails down my spine. After months of working as hard as I could and thinking of nothing but the future far away from here, I allowed myself to enjoy the present moment for a little while.

After maybe an hour or so of kissing, Wendy smiled at me and said, “Just think, next year we can do this all the time.” She giggled.

“Yeah...” I sighed. We snuggled up a bit more, but somehow I started feeling uneasy. It occurred to me all of the sudden that while her parents weren’t home, they could arrive any time, or mine could, and we were being reckless. That I was tricking myself if I believed we were safe here, or that we would be anywhere. If my parents found out that I had spent the last hour kissing the girl who I had been spending most of my free time with for the last three years, they’d never let me leave. Ever since I was young my dad had been saying that his spies were everywhere in Yellowknife and that if I crossed any sort of line, they’d report straight to him. When I was in grade four, he managed to convince me that Leah was among these spies, and since he got upset whenever I came home with what he viewed as “too much” homework, I always lied to my friends about what I had finished during the school day and what I hadn’t, and then rushed through the remainder before my dad came home, hidden under my bed. I eventually figured out that Leah probably wasn’t

one of his spies—but there was no way my formerly-close friends would be okay with any of what Wendy and I were doing.

I looked over at the clock on her bedside table. 6:00. “I should go,” I said.

“See you tomorrow?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said, not even looking back at her as I ran down the stairs and outside into the darkness and snow. But I wouldn’t. It was Friday, and I didn’t answer her texts all weekend. I barely spoke to my parents and stayed in my bedroom except Sunday morning when we went to church. I didn’t want to somehow let it out that I had kissed Wendy.

Sunday night, I was studying in my room when I heard a Ski-Doo going down our street. I looked out the window and saw Duncan Smith, wearing a reflective blue coat. He was another of Wendy’s mother’s “nice boys,” and a longtime neighbor. He was a hockey player—not the best on the team, but good enough. He had been moved up to starting goalie this year. His hair was bright red and always stuck up all over his head because of the different helmets he wore what with all the hockey and the Ski-Dooing.

When he rode back down the street again, he noticed me in the window and waved. I waved back. We had had classes together for years, and he’d always been nice to me, never going through the pre-adolescent nastiness that a lot of boys did. Maybe I could learn to like Duncan the way a normal girl would. My parents wouldn’t be thrilled that I was dating a boy, either, but at least that was normal. At least they would think I was following an ordinary path, that way.

One of the other shows Wendy and I watched together was *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. It’s not *really* anime, but it’s inspired by it, and by Asian cultures (including Inuit cultures, which is pretty relatable up here). There’s a scene in the first season when Suki, a

female warrior, boldly kisses Sokka's cheek right before going into battle to save her village. So when I walked into school on Monday, I was thinking like Suki. I was in a battle for my future, for my normalcy, for my education, for not being found out.

Convincing Duncan wasn't at all like fighting a war. All it took was hanging out with him and his friends for a few days during lunch for him to casually ask me what I was doing that weekend, and if I'd like to go to the party his friend Marcus was having. "You know, like a date," he said.

"Sure!" I said. I told my parents that night that I was spending Friday evening hanging out with Wendy. The fact was, however, that I had been ignoring Wendy all week. I pretended not to notice her, but it was nearly impossible. On Wednesday she had ceased looking towards me with those hurt eyes of hers during lunch and had gone somewhere else—maybe to the library, I didn't know. It was for the best. We couldn't have what she wanted. I hadn't let on that anything was wrong, but my mother, who wasn't ordinarily the most perceptive of people, had asked why I wasn't spending as much time with Wendy as I usually did. I excused it with busyness, but I could see she had been worried, and I could also see that she was happy when I said I was going over there again. We didn't get to talk about this much, though, since Lowell rang the doorbell then and my mother had to let him in. Lowell owned a lot of rental properties in town by then, around the Great Slave Lake. I always made sure to be in my bedroom, safely upstairs, when he was around. His constant creeping presence was another reason I had always wanted to leave this place.

ON Friday I put on my cutest outfit (which, considering the fact that my parents thought I was going over to a girl's house, was just a moderately-tight pink top with some

rhinestones on it and jeans) and walked down the road in the direction of Wendy's house, to the corner where I had told Duncan to pick me up. It was a chilly night, but far from the worst—maybe in the -10s. I had on my knee-length, quilted down-filled coat, a scarf, hat, mittens, and boots over my “cute” clothes—the usual stuff for a Yellowknife winter. It was dark, of course—it had been dark nearly all day.

This didn't mean that Wendy didn't see me when she drove past in her mother's pickup truck. She stopped and rolled her window down. “Hey,” she said. “What's up?” Her face was a mix of guardedness and hope.

“Nothing much,” I said, trying to keep the nervousness out of my voice.

“What're you doing here?” I knew what she wanted me to say and I didn't want to hurt her, but I also couldn't give her what she needed.

“Waiting for a ride.”

“Well...where are you going?” she asked.

I sighed. “To a party. Duncan Smith invited me. I think it's with the hockey team.”

“Duncan Smith, eh?” she asked. “When did *that* happen?” She was blinking a lot now, a habit of hers I remembered from watching *Nana* with her. She was holding the tears in, even as her words projected a façade of coolness, the way she might have spoken before we kissed.

“Well...” I said, “he rode by my house on his Ski-Doo on Sunday. We've been hanging out all week.”

“I've noticed. I'm just wondering why.” I thought I saw her narrowing her eyes.

You're determined, aren't you? I thought. “Well, he's cute--” I began, but then Duncan himself rode up, again on his Ski-Doo.

“Hey,” he said to me, then noticed the truck and said, “Oh, hey, Wendy. Are you coming to Marcus’ party, too?”

“No,” she said. “Have fun.” She was trying for lightheartedness—the same tone she used when she didn’t get into the school play last year—but I could hear the catch in her voice as she shifted gears and drove into her parents’ driveway. Hearing that hint of the tears that were likely to come, I wanted to run after her and hug her. But instead I got on the back of Duncan’s Ski-Doo and we rode off to Marcus’ house, snow piling up behind us the whole way.

Marcus had a keg set up—his older brother was home for the weekend. Duncan and I each had a couple cups of beer, which was enough to make me bold. I grabbed Duncan’s hand about two hours into the party and pulled him into the back hallway, which was where I thought the bedrooms were. I pulled him down onto a bed, on top of me. I thought about some of the normal movies I’d seen, when Wendy and I had nothing else to do. The scenes we’d make fun of. She would do this goofy man-voice—“*come to me, darling, fire of my loins*”—*stop thinking about Wendy*, I reminded myself. I kissed Duncan. He moaned. His hands were inside of my shirt. I imagined he was Kenshin. I started unzipping my jeans.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes!” I said. But of course I wasn’t. I shouldn’t have been having sex, I knew that. We had only just begun dating. I knew what my parents would say if they found out. But somehow the recklessness of this felt so much less dangerous than the same sort of actions I could have with Wendy. I didn’t feel pulled towards Duncan, that was why. I could end this with him at any moment, after doing what I needed to do at a party where almost

everyone was too young to be drinking and half the people would do the same thing we were by the end of the night and so we all had something to hide. I wasn't going to be in an all-ages club in another city someday and see another person and think of him instead. He wasn't dangerous.

"But you're a virgin, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yeah, but—doesn't this feel right? You've been so *nice* to me. I like you."

"Thank you," he said, smiling, and blushing, I thought, though it was hard to tell in the dim lamplight. "I like you too. And I'd like you to be my girlfriend, if that's okay?"

"Yes!" I said. "Of course!"

"Cool," he said. "So..."

"Yeah..." I said. We took the rest of our clothes off and began to do what I had only heard about before. It didn't last long, thankfully, and after he finished inside of me he flopped onto the bed, exhausted.

"That was awesome," he said.

"Yeah," I replied, without really meaning it. It hadn't felt like much of anything, really—just pain, at first, and then some pressure. I didn't understand the big deal, and I didn't feel closer to Duncan, a fact that really just solidified everything in my mind, but I cuddled with him for a little while and responded to him when he got dreamy-eyed about how "great" the sex was, until it was time for him to take me home.

He kissed me when he dropped me off at the corner and said he'd call me tomorrow.

"Okay," I said, and walked off down the road, my arms wrapped tight around my chest, trying to blend into the trees that lined the street so Wendy wouldn't see me. But as

soon as I passed her house, I noticed one of the upstairs lights turning off out of the corner of my eye. Almost certainly it was from her window.

OVER the next few weeks, Duncan kept meeting up with me after school on the days he didn't have hockey practice. We'd have sex, then we'd do some homework, during which I'd usually have to help him with ideas for literature papers and he'd correct my French pronunciations, since he and his family had lived in Quebec for a year when he was in elementary school. It was relatively fun.

But after about a month of that, things started changing. I felt sick to my stomach all the time and had to run to the washroom a few times throughout the day to barf.

Wendy found me in there one day. "Are you okay?" she asked, not in the tone of voice she'd've used in the past, just mild interest, like I was any other sick classmate.

"Yeah," I said. I didn't even want to stand up.

"Is this why you had to leave Mrs. Okpik's class?" she asked.

"Yep."

"You should see a doctor."

"Yep."

She stopped asking questions, but she stayed in the door of my stall until I said, "Pardon," and stepped past her to get to the sinks. She walked out the door then.

I splashed some water on my face. *Nothing about this is right*, I thought.

For the rest of the day I barely spoke. I barely *thought*. Duncan had practice after school, so I steeled myself and walked into the drug store on my way home. I looked around for the "family planning" aisle—Leah, Tammy, and I used to make fun of the fact

that condoms and pregnancy tests were kept in the same place—“So when one breaks it’s easy to find the other!” Tammy would exclaim. But Duncan and I didn’t bother with condoms the first time. Too many other things were happening, and Duncan didn’t have anything with him, probably because he didn’t expect to have sex. So it wasn’t worth it to him to buy them.

I found the right aisle, and was going to grab a pregnancy test and get *out* of there, but then I noticed that Lowell was standing there, examining boxes of condoms. I slid around the corner, and walked over to a rack of magazines, trying to hide. I wanted to stand outside of myself and kick myself for making a mistake as giant as this one in the middle of doing the thing that was supposed to make my entire future better. I knew what I had to do. There was no decision I would have to make after peeing on some dumb stick and wasting money that I couldn’t make right now in this store. I started walking towards the door.

Lowell was waiting outside, and as I walked towards the road, he called to me, “You’re growing up just great, Martha!”

I just walked faster.

THE next day I found Duncan in the hallway and said, “We need to talk.” I tried to keep my voice light, but I think he could see the urgency.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I don’t know. When do you have a free period?”

”Fifth.”

I shook my head. "I have French class then. Can we have lunch alone? With none of the other guys?"

"Sure. Hey—coach said he wouldn't be here today. We can talk in his office."

"Okay. Fine. That'll work." I started feeling sick again then and jolted off towards the washroom.

For the rest of the day, I pretty much ignored everything. At lunchtime, Duncan met me at my locker, and we walked down the athletic corridor. Coach Parkinson's office had a small window facing south, not doing much good in the winter. There was a swivel chair behind the desk and a metal folding chair to the side, which Duncan sat on. "Coach's chair is more comfortable," he said. "You should have it."

"Thanks."

"So..." he said.

I put my head in my hands. "I don't want to do this," I said.

"Then don't."

"I need to." I was starting to feel sick *again*, and I hadn't even eaten anything all day. I needed this to be over quickly and with the fewest number of words possible. "Duncan, I'm pregnant."

His face got even paler than usual. Even the freckles left his skin. "I'm so sorry," he said. "Oh my God. I am so, so, so sorry." I reached for the wastebin. This wasn't going to wait for all of his apologies and feelings. "Are you okay?" he asked after I vomited. He didn't flinch, though; didn't seem bothered by the smell. My father had always hated dealing with that sort of thing whenever I was sick as a child. Duncan just reached into his knapsack and pulled out some Kleenex.

“Thanks,” I said. When I felt clean again, I turned to him. “I know you have a scholarship to Université de Moncton already,” I said. “And like I told you before, I was accepted to four different schools. And I don’t want to sabotage any of that. Last night I went online—I used private browsing, don’t worry--and I found a clinic downtown. It looks nice. I’d need two different appointments for the surgery. But spring break is starting soon, so we should be able to figure that out--”

He was nodding through all of his, but when I said surgery his face changed a bit. “Does it hurt?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “The website says they sedate you.”

“Okay. Okay. Wow. Are you sure about this?”

“Yes,” I said. In truth, I wasn’t. I knew everything I had done after being accepted to college was selfish and wrong. But I also knew I couldn’t stay here with my parents the way they were. For the longest time I had thought my family was “normal,” but after three and a half years of hanging out with Wendy and even a month with Duncan, I knew how wrong this was. Normal shouldn’t mean hiding like this, and being scared the way I was, even if I was screwing up sometimes. It shouldn’t mean wrapping myself in a mess of badness just to escape their anger. It shouldn’t mean the kind of cold, boundless anger I had seen from my father so many times. I dreaded the coming weekend when I would have to go to that clinic. But I dreaded staying in Yellowknife even more.

FRIDAY was our first day of spring break, even though the snow wasn’t even melting yet and it was still bitterly cold. I had my first appointment that day, and rode on Duncan’s Ski-Doo as usual. It was a lot of answering of questions and paperwork. Saturday was when I

had my actual surgical appointment. As usual, I told my parents I was going to Wendy's house, and met Duncan by the corner instead. Every time I lied like that, I was a little bit more terrified they'd find out. After all, Wendy didn't know anything about my plans: if my parents called her house looking for me, she wouldn't know to lie.

Duncan tried to make small talk with me as we drove downtown. We were in his mother's truck that day, instead of the Ski-Doo—the fumes made me sick and I knew that coming home on that would hurt a lot after having someone's hands and tools up my lady-parts.

Of course, the old truck spat out almost as many fumes as the Ski-Doo did, and we had to pull over so I could vomit before we were even three clicks down the road.

The clinic wasn't much to look at—just a gray building at the end of a street downtown. Inside it was prettier, with pink couches in the waiting room. And the people were nice, or at least they were trying to be nice. The day before, I had been frozen with fear. But everything was so normal and modern, and it eased my mind.

I signed in again at the front desk. Other girls were already there, waiting. Duncan kept trying to make small talk with me, but I was so focused on *not feeling pain, not vomiting, and not saying anything about Wendy*, that I didn't really feel like conversing. Eventually I was called back. Duncan asked, "Can I come?"

The nurse looked to me for the answer. I scrunched my nose at her and she said, "It won't be long. You can see her after the procedure."

I could already feel myself drifting away from him. I didn't know how much longer I'd want to hang in the relationship, and he seemed to have gotten even more attached

since finding out I was pregnant, like he had done something terrible to me that he had to make up for. I couldn't stand it.

In a small operating room, I undressed, and then the nurse came to insert the IV line. When the doctor entered, I just stayed still and let the drugs carry me away. I still felt some pain, but I didn't think about it, or about anything really. *I wish I always had this drug*, I thought. When it was over I got dressed again. It felt like a lifetime and like no time at all.

After some time in the recovery room—when all I could think about was how messed-up it was that I was going to these sort of extremes to get away from the only life I had ever known—I rode back to Duncan's house in silence and napped on his bed for two hours or so. When I woke up my head was still a bit foggy, but things were finally starting to come together and I said, "We can't do it anymore."

"What?"

"We...aren't good for each other. I don't feel right anymore. I'm sorry. I just need to be alone."

He tried to protest it, but I just stayed silent. So he drove me home and we didn't talk again. His face was stony.

WE didn't talk for the next two weeks. My days were virtually solitary. I spent the rest of spring break holed up in my room. When school resumed, I went to the library during lunch. Wendy and I still weren't really talking.

One evening during supper my dad started talking about how this summer would be a good time for me to learn how to run the store. "It's not our *busiest* season, and since Tim will be home for a few months you'll be able to see what it'll be like working under him

someday. It'll mostly be people coming in to buy new fishing lines and bait and maybe some camping equipment. That kind of stuff."

I just stared at him. "Dad, I don't really have a problem working there this summer, I guess, but you know it'll just be a temporary thing, right? University's just a few months away."

They exchanged glances. "We're not so sure that's a good idea for you, dear," my mother said.

"We've let you have too much freedom, spending all your time after school with your friends whose parents don't even go to church. And we know about that music you've been listening to. If we let you go away, this would only become worse," said my father.

"No, it wouldn't--" I said.

"That's easy to say, but if you're halfway across the country, we won't be able to see you," my father said. "You know what happens to people when they go away into the cities to study—you know your mother's sister." They were talking about my aunt Julie, Ashley and Bob's mother. She was a year older than my mother, and had gone to college before getting married, unlike my own mother, who stayed in Yellowknife and got married at age nineteen. And then when Ashley was nine, Aunt Julie left her Uncle Fred and took the kids to Toronto, and Fred got drunk one night and drowned in the lake. She was my parents' ultimate cautionary tale.

I willed myself not to cry. *This is not the end*, I thought. *This can't be the end*. There were words said after that, but I let them pass over me. I felt dead.

OVER the next few weeks, Wendy started talking to me again in class. At first she just asked how I was feeling; but then one day she said, “hey, can we talk after class?”

“Why?” I asked her.

“Just...please? I don’t really want to talk about this in front of everybody.”

I shrugged. I drew in my notebook throughout class; I couldn’t focus. All of my doodles were of various characters in *DeathNote*. The morbidity of that series, and the usage of deities and impossible crimes to solve one’s problems appealed to me. It’s not that I wanted to kill my parents, but part of me fantasized about it a little bit, just as a way to get out of that house, where creepy Lowell was always around now, and their strange optimism pervaded everything.

When I met up with Wendy after class, *that* was what she immediately dived into. “I was at the Noodle House the other day with my parents, and Lowell Cartwright walked in,” she said.

I shrugged.

“I think he has a crush on one of the waitresses,” she said. I refused to react. “The owner’s daughter? Lin Thu? She’s in grade nine?” I kept my face blank. I was angry, though. He disgusted me. I wondered if he would try to work out a business deal with the Thus soon, and if the Thus would be smart enough to see him for what he was. I didn’t really know them; my parents didn’t like “ethnic” food, so I only ever went to the Noodle House on the rare occasions I was allowed to stay at Wendy’s for dinner and Wendy’s father didn’t feel like cooking. Her parents knew them well; I guess Mr. Thu bought a lot of his supplies for the restaurant wholesale from Garden of Eden. Wendy sighed. “You told me he used to follow you around when you were younger?”

I nodded. When Lowell came into his inheritance and bought up a bunch of properties along the shore of the Great Slave Lake to rent out to summer tourists, he started meeting with my parents. They owned a store that sold outdoors equipment—mostly camping, fishing, and hunting stuff, along with other sports gear. He directed his guests over to their store and they worked out some sort of complicated deal of referrals and discounts. He came over to our house more and more often for dinners in the following years, and would always pick up some type of cheap baked good at the grocery store on the way, and then he would goad me into tasting them, and ask me over and over again if I liked them, if they were better than whatever he had brought the week before or the week before *that*. One time I ate a chocolate cupcake with pink icing and sprinkles on it, and one of the sprinkles got on my nose when I was taking a bite. He reached over and plucked it off. I felt as though I could feel the pressure of his big fingers on my nasal cartilage for weeks, and I didn't like it. Whenever I thought of it consciously, I wanted to sneeze. "You should tell the Thus to not let their daughter spend any time with that...*creep*," I whispered. "I don't trust him at all. You know that. I don't even like being in the same building as him. That's why I used to come to your house every time he showed up at mine."

"Okay," she answered. "I'll talk to my parents." We stood there awkwardly for a few moments. I didn't really know what to say, but I also didn't really want to walk away from her. She cleared her throat and said, "So...are you feeling better lately?"

"I'm fine," I said. But I couldn't lie to her about this. I had been keeping it in for weeks, and I had to tell *someone*. "No, I'm not fine. My parents aren't letting me go away for university after all. I don't know what I'm going to do." I slid down the wall to the floor.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Is it because of Duncan, or--”

“They don’t know about Duncan. It’s the same old shit about not wanting me to turn into my aunt and changing.”

“But everyone changes.”

“I know. And now I have to figure out how to do it without them. Meanwhile I have creepy Lowell breathing down my neck all the time.”

She sighed. “You know, you could always avoid him the old way.”

I let myself smile a little bit, but it was a weak one, I knew. “I should get to my next class.”

I started walking away and she called out to me. “If something goes wrong—or if you ever need to talk—or you need any help with anything, really, you know I’m here, right? My parents, they’d help you. I know you were freaked out by what happened between us, but we don’t have to do anything if you don’t want to.”

I wasn’t freaked out by what happened, I thought. I was freaked out by what could happen. All I said, though, was, “Okay,” and resumed my walk.

Whenever I passed Wendy in the hallway at school after that, she gave me encouraging smiles. I dreamt about her one night—nothing unusual, just the two of us sitting on her bed the way we used to, watching anime, except the image on the TV was an unusual one of a girl continuously drowning in a lake.

“SO Lowell wants to come over tomorrow night for dinner,” my father said one night. It was a Thursday, which was odd: Lowell usually only came over for dinner on Sundays.

“That’s wonderful. Do you know what he would like to eat?” asked my mother.

“I’m sure he’ll be good enough to bring a fish for us.”

This conversation continued for the next ten minutes and they didn’t even seem to realize I wasn’t contributing, and wasn’t eating anything, either. I couldn’t take having him around all the time. I couldn’t take thinking about him following Lin Thu around, preying on her the way he had on me, sneaking around her world, convincing everyone to trust him until home became the furthest thing from safe and the only thing she wanted to do was flee.

During the summer I was ten, he came over for one of the usual dinners. I was away at Tammy’s house when he arrived, and when I got home, maybe a half hour after he got there, I went upstairs to change my clothes (since Tammy and I had been playing soccer in her backyard and my jeans and runners were a bit muddy), to find Lowell standing right in the middle of my room, sniffing my pillow. “What are you doing?” I asked.

“Um...” he said, “uh, um...” These speech patterns weren’t unusual for him. He usually took a beat before answering anyone’s questions and often halted mid-sentence. But the expression on his face was new—his cheeks and forehead were absolutely red, his eyes narrowed, and his lips parted just a smidge in the middle. “Your...mother...she wanted me to see the new kind of laundry detergent she was using...”

“Doing the laundry is one of my chores. We’ve used the same brand since I can remember.” I was scared, but I didn’t want to let him lie. I was better than that, I thought. I wanted him to leave me alone forever, and maybe if I could scare him he’d stop talking to me.

“Well...uh, maybe it’s not new, but she wanted me to smell the detergent. She said...um...it smells really good, and...my guests might like it.”

“You could have gone to our laundry room.” I stared him down, waiting to see what he’d say next, thrilled that I was outsmarting an adult.

That was when my mother walked in. “Martha? What’s going on?” she asked. “Oh, Lowell, what are you doing in here?”

“I was upstairs...using your washroom...like you said I should...when I heard Martha come home...so I came in here to talk to her,” he said.

“That’s not true,” I said. “He was in here before I came home. He was holding my pillow.”

“Martha!” my mother exclaimed. “We do not accuse adults of lying.”

“Change out of those muddy jeans and come downstairs for dinner,” my mother said, dismissing me, then turned to Lowell and said: “Arnold found those catalogues of new equipment to show you.”

“I hope you liked the detergent!” I called out as they departed. Nothing more was ever said about that. My parents and Lowell had become too close. Even Tim liked him, because of how good he was at fishing.

I started clamming up in his presence and deliberately avoiding him. Those were the only defenses I had. Tammy and Leah saw a lot more of me, even though I couldn’t quite explain to them what was going on. As in everything else, their families were so *normal*. I didn’t trust them. The only one I ever trusted with everything was Wendy. And she was the only one who could make me safe now.

When the meal was over I snuck back up to my room, citing homework, and waited for my parents to fall asleep. Then I grabbed my bag and snuck down the stairs and out the front door. I ran down the street, in the dark, through the trees, to Wendy’s house. I gazed

up at her window, which was darkened. I set my bag down and rolled up snowballs to toss at the glass. The light turned on and I saw her face peering out. Her hair was ruffled from sleeping on it awkwardly. She disappeared for a moment and then was at the front door, in her pajamas, calling me inside in a loud whisper. I ran to her and we scurried upstairs. We sat on either end of her bed, and she offered me a quilt so I could warm up.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I think so, now,” I said.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“You have nothing to be sorry for.”

She reached out her arms to me and I just lay there, my head on her chest, knapsack at the foot of her bed, as the wind whipped around outside. I wasn’t going to leave this house until I was ready, and when I did, it would only be to move on to a better place.

Brunch, 1978

On Sunday morning, my roommate and I walked to a restaurant I had heard of before, but never been inside of. Todd had told me once that he went there every week, and that I should “stop by sometime” to meet up with him and his friends.

He didn't tell me I could bring anyone, but I didn't have the nerve to go alone. Petula and I weren't close, but she was the nearest thing I had to a friend after Todd. The only problem was she didn't *like* Todd, and didn't understand why I did.

“Aren't the two of you broken up anyway?” she asked.

“Maybe. I don't know.”

“He hasn't called you in a while. I thought he was back with his ex-girlfriend.”

I froze. Was it true? Was that why I'd seen Betty around his office?

It didn't matter. I needed to talk to him regardless. Betty was meaningless in the long run.

The restaurant was called The Juniper. Everything in the entire room was made out of hardwood, and there were flowers and art and white tablecloths everywhere. A man standing behind the desk as we walked in asked, “May I help you ladies?” He looked at Petula longer than he did me, then asked, “are you together?”

“Yes,” Petula said, before I had a chance to speak, as though daring him to turn her away. “We're meeting Todd Matthews' party.”

“Really,” he said, looking us up and down as though not quite believing it. I was wearing a flowered skirt that I thought looked nice, and Petula was in a suit, but I began wondering if either one of us was dressed properly for this sort of restaurant. “They're this way.”

He led us to a table in the middle of the restaurant where Todd was sitting with three other people on a couch on one side of one of those white tables. There was a huge vase of purple flowers in the middle of the table.

Todd sat in the center of the four, which meant I had no hope of grabbing a word with him in private. His ex-girlfriend Betty sat on the side of him closest to the aisle. We had avoided her all throughout the fall semester while we were dating because of her emotional volatility. On Todd's right was a short guy with brown hair, sitting with a curvy girl with extremely pale skin who looked only half-conscious. She was hanging onto the short guy and didn't really make sense there because while both Todd and the other guy were wearing sport coats and Betty was in a suit very similar to Petula's, this other girl was dressed in a very short skirt and an almost see-through shirt.

"Hey!" I said.

"Um, hey," Betty said.

"Daisy? Petula?" Todd asked.

"Yeah, hi," I said. "We were...hoping to find you here."

"Yeah!" Todd said. He turned to his friends. "I've always told my classes that I came here for brunch every Sunday *with my girlfriend*, and they should feel free to join me! And it's so nice that you're finally taking me up on it," he said, turning back to us. The emphasis he put on those three words in the middle made me want to retch. *Petula was right?* I thought.

Betty laughed. "You must be dedicated. Sit down. Are both of you planning on majoring in Biology?"

“Yes,” Petula said. That was weird. She had always told me before that she was undecided between bio and chem.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m just a freshman, so I’m just taking a bunch of classes and trying to figure things out.”

Betty nodded. Todd had told me that he wanted a wife who paid attention to his needs, and cared less about her own—and that that was what led him and Betty to break up in the first place. She was *really* serious about botany. If I had any chance of winning Todd back in this one little window of time, I couldn’t care about *anything* other than him.

We sat down. A waiter came over and asked us if we wanted what the others were drinking, which looked like fizzy orange juice, so we said yes. Then he brought a huge chocolate cake, one that was fancier than any I had ever seen.

“Is that for *me*?” asked the other girl, whose name I still didn’t know. She grabbed the platter and tried to pull it towards her until her boyfriend laughed and said,

“No, Crystalline...that’s for everyone. Those people will cut it.” When the waiter came over to cut each of us a slice, he kept eyeing Crystalline’s glass, which by that point I had realized was not regular orange juice. I only had a couple of sips but I immediately stopped drinking it. Petula, on the other hand, who typically *never* drank, had already downed the entirety of hers and was being poured a second.

“So how do you all know each other?” I asked.

“Jerome and I grew up together,” Todd said.

“In Massachusetts?” I asked.

“Uh, yeah, he only grew up in one place,” Jerome said.

“And I grew up in Philadelphia and we all met when we came up here for graduate studies,” Betty said.

“And how did you meet Crystalline, Jerome?” I asked.

“At a bar,” he said, at the same time Crystalline herself said “Snorting coke.” Petula glared at me.

“Well, yeah, sure,” Jerome said.

“Excuse me,” Petula said. “Daisy, would you come with me for a second? I just have a quick question.”

“Can’t this wait?” I asked, louder than I wanted to.

“Not really.”

“It’s not a problem,” Betty said. “We can wait to eat.”

We walked back into the lobby.

“*Snorting coke?*” Petula hissed at me without any pretext.

“What?” I asked. “*I didn’t say it!*”

“You can’t just *say* things like that in public!”

“I didn’t! That was Crystalline! I’ve never met her before!”

“What is *wrong* with that girl?”

“I don’t know. Like I said, I don’t know her. Why are you yelling at me?”

Petula opened her mouth, closed it, shook her head, then said, “Whatever. How long is this going to take?”

“I don’t know. I need to talk to Todd alone.”

“Okay. Do that, get the money, and let’s get out of this place.”

I couldn't imagine how I was going to do that. How does one broach the topic of needing money for an abortion? Of course, that wasn't *really* the point of this whole brunch anyway, it was just what Petula *wanted* the point of it to be. What I really knew I had to do was to marry Todd, and then he would become a professor, and then I would drop out of college if need be but then go back after the baby was old enough. Once I was able to tell Todd everything, he would have to leave Betty and marry me, that was all there was to it. He didn't really *love* her, not after avoiding her for a whole semester. His behavior made no sense. I just had to figure out how to get him alone so I could snap him out of it.

When Petula and I got back to the table, everyone else was sitting in front of pieces of uneaten cake.

"Now that they're back, we can stuff our faces!" Crystalline said as soon as we sat down. She leaned in and took a huge bite straight off her plate, no fork needed.

Betty was right—it was good. The frosting was richer and darker than anything I was familiar with, and the cake itself was dense and more like fudge than the birthday cakes I remembered. "I'm surprised you eat like this and maintain your figure," I said to Betty. Todd had said she was sensitive about this kind of stuff, and that he hated hearing her complain about it. Maybe this would remind him that I never complained about anything.

Betty smiled. "I've learned to accept myself. Everyone deserves sweets once in a while. I run for fun."

"Cocaine also helps you lose weight," Crystalline said with a laugh.

Jerome smiled and said: "Well hun, you need more help there than Betty does." He nodded to Todd.

Petula cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, but could you please stop talking about drugs?" she asked.

"Petula, don't worry," I said.

Betty smiled. "Crystalline, maybe she's right. This might not really be the place."

"Well then, *excuse* me." Crystalline stood and walked towards the bathrooms, stumbling a few times along the way. While she was gone the conversation turned to the research Todd, Betty, and Jerome were doing that semester, and I relaxed a bit. I found myself liking these people, even Betty. It was obvious to me that Crystalline didn't really belong in this group, and that Jerome would eventually break up with her. Maybe after I told Todd the news that I was pregnant and Jerome dumped Crystalline, Jerome would stop using drugs and begin going out with Betty—she wasn't very tall herself and probably wouldn't mind that he wasn't—and we could all live together on the same street, and the three of them could all conduct their scientific research until Betty was *finally* ready to start having babies too, and then all of our kids could get along together.

Crystalline came back to the table and planted a giant kiss on Jerome's lips. Petula nudged me under the table with her knee, which made me remember that there was actually so much I had to do before I could have the life I wanted. Betty stood up then and said, "Excuse me, I'll be right back," and just as she did, I felt my morning sickness kicking in. I didn't really have much of a choice but to follow her down the hall to the restrooms, willing her to walk faster, because I would have run if I could. I briefly considered going into the men's, but the potential awkwardness of that would probably still be greater than the awkwardness of vomiting in a private stall, even with Betty nearby.

After trying to puke as quietly as possible (though I suspected Betty would be too proper to ask about it if she heard), I caught up with her by the sinks. Each one had a small basket filled with lotions, soaps, mouthwashes, breath mints—everything I could have wanted at that moment. I took a few breath mints, not wanting to gargle in front of Betty, who I noticed was wiping down the counters for some reason.

“Why are you doing that?” I asked.

“Because when I came in there was water, mouthwash, lotion, and who knows what else spilled all over the counter. It’s Crystalline’s idea of fun. I need to make sure I got all of it.”

“I’m pretty sure you did.”

She sighed and stared at the ceiling. “I don’t understand why he’s dating that awful girl.”

“What?” For the briefest moment I thought she might have somehow been referring to Todd and me, and suddenly I got very nervous about being alone with her.

She turned to look at me. “Jerome? I don’t understand why he’s dating Crystalline?”

“I thought she was your friend.”

She shook her head. “No. We barely know each other. She’s a bartender.”

Her second statement didn’t seem to quite follow the first, but I just nodded.

“Most of what Jerome *does* doesn’t make sense,” she continued, “but *this...relationship...or whatever it is...he said he doesn’t want to marry her. What’s the point of going out with anyone if you aren’t thinking about marriage?*”

“I don’t know?” I responded.

“He’s just using her. And she’s just *taking* it.”

“Todd wouldn’t do that,” I said.

She stared at me. “No he wouldn’t. After four years...he’s not perfect, but at least he makes sense.”

“*Four years?*” I asked.

“Yeah.”

I tried to formulate the question carefully, watching my words. “You never...split up...at all?”

“No. Did *you* think we did?”

“I’m just...” I lost my train of thought and finished the sentence with, “a freshman. I guess I thought Todd seemed kind of down last semester and assumed he was going through a breakup.”

“Oh. Well, no, that didn’t happen. We were as together then as we have always been.”

I didn’t know what to do or say. Betty excused herself and left, and I stared at myself in the mirror, trying to make sense of what the last few months of my life had *actually* meant compared to what I *thought* they had meant. I wanted to run away, but if I did Petula would kill me.

The cake was almost gone when I walked back into the dining room. “I’m still hungry,” Crystalline said as she finished the last piece.

“We can order more food--” Betty began, but then Crystalline grabbed the flower vase from the center of the table and started chewing on the blossoms. Jerome laughed.

“These are *wonderful!*” Crystalline exclaimed.

“Is that *safe?*” Petula whispered to Jerome. He shrugged.

Betty didn't even look up from her drink and said, "Petula, they're orchids. They're safe."

"You're sure?"

"Vanilla comes from orchids."

"Wonderful!" Crystalline said. "You *all* need to try them." She took the flowers out of their vase and started pouring the water out onto the carpet.

"You shouldn't do that--" Petula started to say, touching Crystalline's arm lightly as she reached across the table. But Crystalline snatched her arm away.

"Get your dirty hand off me," she snarled, and splashed some of the water onto Petula's suit.

Petula set her glass down on the table, more roughly than she had before. "*Just stop,*" she hissed. "Everything that comes out of your mouth is vile. You're living a lie." She looked around the table. "Actually, you all are. But you—you didn't even know anything *about* plants, did you? And when your supposed 'boyfriend' sees you eating some strange flower, while *completely drunk*, he just sits back and laughs. It's *Betty* who tells us they're not poisonous. And all of your *drug talk*, your public drunkenness, your messing up restaurants—it just makes you look dumb."

"I don't really care what any of these assholes spending a ton of money on fancy crap think of me," Crystalline said. "And I *definitely* don't care what *you* think."

"Fine!" Petula exclaimed. "You don't have to care, but you're still being incredibly rude. Who do you think's going to clean it up if you spill water everywhere? It's not *them*. It's the waiters." Then she turned away from Crystalline and locked eyes with me.

"No," I said.

“Daisy’s pregnant,” Petula announced. “And it’s Todd’s. That’s the real reason we’re here today. We just came here so that Daisy could ask Todd for money for an abortion. We didn’t know that any of the rest of you would be here or that you and he were together again, Betty. And I wish I had never met any of you.”

She ran out. Crystalline called, “See ya later, bitch!” at her back. I didn’t know what to do. Follow her? But I still didn’t know what Todd was thinking. So I watched her leave over my shoulder and when she was all the way out the door I turned around again to face the others.

“You’re *pregnant?*” Betty asked.

“Didn’t you hear that girl? She’s not keeping it,” Jerome interjected.

“That’s stupid,” Betty said.

“What, you really want her having our baby?” Todd asked.

“Well, it wouldn’t be *ours*, just *yours*.”

“Well, I don’t want *hers*.”

“But she wants *yours*,” Betty said. “Don’t you, Daisy? You made that *so* clear in the ladies’ room when you were asking all about my relationship with Todd. I knew then that *you* were the one.”

When I heard those words, my hope sparked. For one second I thought that Betty might’ve meant something different than “the freshman you had an affair with last semester.” I still imagined something beautiful for Todd and me, and for this baby. But then Todd said, “You always knew? Why didn’t you *say* something?”

“I didn’t want to ruin things between us,” Betty said, and I knew that no matter how hard I had tried not to complain about my weight or his habits or how much time he was or

wasn't spending with me, I would never be what he wanted. I would never be Betty. I stood up and walked out.

Todd didn't even call to me. Betty did—quietly, pitifully. But I knew she didn't really care. She just wanted to make things look good without taking care of the real problem, like she would do her entire life with Todd.

When I got outside, it was cold and rain had started to fall. I walked in the direction of my dorm, but I had no idea if I would go inside or not. Everything I wanted was gone.

Artist's Statement

"It's one thing to write short stories and another thing to talk about writing them [...] The more stories I write, the more mysterious I find the process and the less I find myself capable of analyzing it."

--Flannery O'Connor, "Writing Short Stories," Mystery and Manners

Part I: Patterns

I never intended to be a writer, but I have been writing since I was very young. I began at age seven, but prior to that my sister and I were inventing stories and acting them out either by ourselves or with toys. We never wrote these down. But soon my already-burgeoning love of books got the better of me and I could not limit myself to the worlds we could effectively create with concrete objects anymore, and I therefore began to fill journals, composition books, random pads of paper, index cards, the blank pages at the back of my fifth-grade planner, and whatever else I could get my hands on, with stories totally of my own creation. Thus, the process of writing crept up on me somehow and by the time I was in middle school it had fully consumed my identity.

From the start, I never wanted to show my work to others. At first I was well aware that there was nothing much worth showing and no one who would want to see it anyway; it was massively narcissistic, optimistic, and futuristic, most of it focused on a future in which my sisters and I would be involved in a fight to save the planet from invaders from Saturn. (This fight to save the planet would be spearheaded by the emperor of Japan.) I was comparing my initial efforts with my favorite books, and I knew I could not measure up. Yet it was continually drilled into me by curious acquaintances that if I wanted to do anything with my writing, I would have to show it to *someone, sometime*.

Gradually I grew more cautious and paranoid about the possibility that my process was being spied on (it occasionally *was*), so I hunched over my notebooks and used tiny

sky-blue writing when transcribing things onto the computer. I saved my files under opaque names such as “equilateral triangles” (the most boring thing I could think of).

In October of 2012, I finally came upon the obvious solution for solving my paranoia problem. Due to other strains of my paranoia, I had created a language/code when I was twelve. In the ensuing years I had used it to write small notes to myself that I did not want anyone else to see, or to talk to myself while I was in my car (usually about writing-related matters), and it was perfect for the short poems I often wrote. But in 2012 I realized that not only did writing in this language assist me with my paranoia and anxiety issues, it also helped me to not analyze every single word I wrote against the rubric of however Margaret Atwood, Kazuo Ishiguro, or Kiran Desai might have made it sound better. After all, the words I was writing would appear to be utter nonsense to the majority of people who saw them, and therefore there would be no chance of judgment until at least the second draft.

Nearly all of the creative work I have accomplished in graduate school thus far has been written using this method of translation and re-translation. Therefore, through all of this obfuscation and translation, the writing that I do brings me both closer to and further away from any potential readers I might have, and without this technique, the words might have no way of *ever* coming into being. If I did not have this language to prevent me from worrying about what might happen if my words were seen by the wrong person, or that I was representing certain facts incorrectly because I had yet to properly research them, these stories would not exist. Ultimately, therefore, despite seeming otherwise at first glance, my strange writing process brings me closer to potential readers in every possible way.

Alongside being fundamentally paranoid, I also have always been shy and introverted, and the combination of these factors means I have a tendency to listen more than I talk. This was something which was generally considered to be negative when I was growing up: I didn't have "enough" friends, and I didn't make it easy for people to get to know me. Once I got to college and began taking creative writing classes, however, I realized that this had allowed me to develop a talent for dialogue. One of my chief concerns when writing dialogue, and in fact when writing anything, is making sure that nothing feels forced. When I read, I prefer to be transported into the reality of another world.

The first person is something which is both an aesthetic preference and an issue of convenience for me. It always has felt the most natural to me, as it allows me to feel closer to my characters than third person does, and to put myself inside their heads and live *as* them. First person allows me to develop the connections between myself and my protagonist with greater honesty and ease, and in some cases to question whether the writing decisions I am making *are* honest ones. When I am in the midst of writing a story I often go about the mundane necessities of my day (cooking dinner, running errands, making tea, showering) with the character's internal monologue and emotions running inside of my head. This is how my plot trajectories often develop, in the quiet spaces when my hands are occupied with things they've done hundreds of times before. When I worked in abortion care, one of my duties was in the Products of Conception room, cleaning instruments, preparing them for sterilization, and tissue examination, which altogether created a peaceful continuous pattern of my hands and feet moving from sink to sink, across the room, and back again; while my mind performed the creative processes that it does now, creating characters from the sounds and smells all around me.

Then there is the issue of convenience. I prefer my writing to be as comprehensible as possible, and one of the problems with third person is that the protagonist often will share the same pronouns with other characters, making for awkward repetitive uses of characters' proper names within sentences. By having an "I" to fall back on in narration, this problem is frequently circumvented.

Part II: The Form

In her essay "Writing Short Stories," Flannery O'Connor details the persistent trend of people who cannot write short stories well, yet persist in trying to do so due to a conviction that writing good stories requires nothing more than fitting together complex pieces of a puzzle. She writes,

"I've heard students say, 'I'm very good with plot, but I can't do a thing with character,' or, 'I have this theme but I don't have a plot for it,' and once I heard one say, 'I've got the story but I don't have any technique.' Technique is a word they all trot out. I talked to a writers' club once, and during the question time, one good soul said, 'Will you give me the technique for the frame-within-a-frame short story?'" (89).

Yet a good plot with flat characters won't get a writer anywhere, and characters stuck in a story which goes nowhere are just as useless.

While I never quite struggled with inventing plotlines and characters the way O'Connor's students did, I have struggled with the short story form. When I took my first formal fiction writing class in my sophomore year of undergrad, my professor was a fan of my writing, but her most memorable response to my 20-page short story was the backhanded compliment that I had a "novelist's voice." Throughout the rest of undergrad, I continued to struggle with fitting my longwinded rhizomatic ideas into 10-20 pages, but

since no part of me wanted to complete an entire novel for my thesis when I began graduate school, I set out to correct this.

O'Connor posits that the people exhibiting the aforementioned bad short story writing behaviors are the ones who try to improve their writing by reading solely *about* writing. Yet the only method I've found particularly useful to improve my writing is to read books written in styles I wish to emulate. I began graduate school feeling about 90% certain that I would be completing this current project as my thesis, and this only grew stronger as classes began and the first two stories I was inspired to write for class fit very well into my fledgling idea. Since fall 2012, I have read 28 collections of short stories, both by writers whose styles are similar to mine, such as Margaret Atwood, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Alice Munro; as well as authors with wildly divergent styles such as Neela Vaswani and Sherwood Anderson.

Part III: Composition

With one exception ("Brunch 1978"), every story in this collection takes place within the past decade, from "Kansas Burial" in 2008 to "Running From Carousels" in 2014. Three stories are set entirely in my homeland of Northeast Ohio; three are set entirely in other cities ("The Only Thing We Can Have" in Philadelphia, "Running From Carousels" in Yellowknife, and "Brunch 1978" in Providence), and the seventh happens on a road trip.

Because "Kansas Burial" began in such a forceful, declarative way with the sentence "I had finally convinced Amanda that the world didn't need another Jake Cheil," and then immediately confronts the reader with a plot related to a late-term abortion procedure while also focusing on the "saint" side of the equation, this seemed like the best way to

begin my collection. From that point forward I followed in a mostly-chronological order. This allowed me to put the most disturbing story, “The Only Thing We Can Have,” in the relative middle, rather than having it stand out on either end.

Originally there was to be an eighth story in the collection, “1925,” set in its eponymous year. It too was intended to go near the middle of the collection, between “Television Blues” and “Burning Bridges,” thus further breaking up all of the Ohio stories. But it had some characterization errors and plotting problems, and while I may develop it further in the future and include it in this collection at a later date, it was not ready at this time. Therefore, the rest of the collection followed in chronological order, up until “Brunch 1978” at the end. The reason I chose this as my final story was the exact opposite of the reason why I wished to begin with “Kansas Burial.” Aside from being removed from the others by not only space but time, its ending is abrupt and jarring, and gives the reader no answers. It unsettles me in a way. Daisy spends the entire story trying to find the easy answer she had been hoping for all along, but is left with nothing: a microcosm of life told in the space of a short meal. I preferred to leave my readers with this uncomfortable end rather than the easier ones found in “Burning Bridges” or “Television Blues.”

While “Brunch 1978” concludes the thesis, the final story that I was inspired to write was “Running From Carousels,” and it went through a great number of changes as it progressed from the shadow of an idea into what it is now. I first got the idea at the beginning of October 2013. At the time, I was reading Margaret Atwood’s novel *MaddAddam*, a section of which is set in the Canadian arctic; as well as Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni’s *Oleander Girl*, which includes among its cast a man who controls his daughter’s life to the point that he causes her death, eventually lashing out at his

granddaughter in the same manner. I also found myself recalling a conversation I had once with my ex-boyfriend about the town in Ontario where he and his dad went fishing every summer, and the middle-aged man who they would rent their cabin from. In 2006, this man became engaged to an eighteen-year-old girl, something that continued to disturb me despite his reassurances that they were in love, that the man had her parents' permission, and that it "wasn't like she had any other opportunities."

My first conception of this story was very closely based on the reality of my relationship to what inspired it. The protagonist was the girlfriend of a man whose relatives live in a small town in Ontario, and the protagonist's boyfriend's young cousin has just become engaged to a much older man. It was initially only tangentially related to the abortion theme: my narrator was someone who works in an abortion clinic, but the story's actual timeline would not have touched much on clinic issues.

I eventually realized, however, that having a protagonist who swept in to save a near-stranger from a bad situation wasn't really the story I wanted to tell. It felt disingenuous in many ways and separated from the other stories in an uncomfortable way. I also saw that my story could potentially be more interesting if told from the point-of-view of the girl who was thought to have no opportunities.

In my first draft, I had gotten the idea to give Martha a best friend who she was very close to and who shared her interest in anime. I had decided against making their relationship an explicitly romantic one in that version due to my fears about the difficulty of writing it when talking about Martha in the third person, but once she became the narrator it felt like a much better idea. I also decided that if Atwood's arctic was what had partially inspired the idea in the first place, I might as well set the story *in* that area, rather

than a fictional small town in Ontario. I chose Yellowknife because of the presence of the lake, something which in my second draft became somewhat important. It ended up being a good choice after I had fleshed-out the character of Duncan, as there is an abortion clinic in that city whose website explains their methods of care in full, and it allows snowmobiles (ski-doo) on most city streets.

I wanted to explore the idea of parental control over children, and using religion as a way to do this made sense. In her notes to me, Sarah told me that it might work better if the parents didn't explicitly use their religion as a cudgel but instead were simply dismissive of the outside world. This also worked well both with my initial inspiration of a girl who is thought to have "no other opportunities" aside from the life she has always known, and Rebecca's suggestion to remove some of the major stressors from Martha's life. So Martha's parents stayed strict and overprotective, and they remained the sort of people willing to put their desires over their child's well-being, but the plotline about them finding out that Martha had an abortion and forcing her to marry Lowell was removed. Lowell therefore went from Martha's fiancé to simply her lifelong malignant stalker, and a friend of her parents'. He remained a major driving force for her desire to leave, but more due to the fear of what he could *become* rather than the fear of what he already *was*. Martha's cousin Bob also reappeared near the end of the second draft, as a person who she saw as a potential protector but who in actuality didn't want to offer her anything. He mirrored the arguments provided by my ex-boyfriend for why the marriage to Lowell was a good idea somehow, but if the actual engagement was taken out of the story, then his presence could be isolated to a few mentions in the first part.

All of this led to an elevation in the importance of Bob's mother, Julie, a character who previously had only been briefly mentioned. The demise of her marriage and her ex-husband's suicide became Martha's parents' stated reason for why they couldn't allow their daughter to move away and become educated.

Bob's excision from the second half of the story also meant that Martha's execution of her escape plan was something that she had intended to be entirely up to her from the start. She dreads even sitting next to Lowell for one more dinner, she doesn't require a forced marriage to give her the impetus to run away.

Part IV: Inspiration

During my junior year of college, I began volunteering as a patient escort for two different abortion clinics in Cleveland, Ohio once or twice a month. My work consisted of working with one or more other volunteers to walk patients and any companions they brought with them from their cars into the clinic and talking to them in an attempt to block out the shouting of the protesters who stood on the sidewalk. My volunteer work would shape the course of my junior and senior years, and I would continue escorting after graduation, alongside applying for actual employment at a different clinic.

On a Sunday during the summer between my junior and senior years of undergrad, I woke up fairly late after a night out drinking with some of my friends, made some tea, and checked my e-mail, only to see a message from one of my fellow escorts: just a link to an article stating that abortion provider George Tiller had been murdered in his church in Wichita.

Immediately my entire outlook on life changed from that of carefree summer fun to paranoia, fear, and sadness. I stayed up late every night that week watching recorded episodes of *The Rachel Maddow Show* and drinking concoctions of vodka mixed with whatever else my parents had. I wrote a lot of poetry. I wanted to both never leave my parents' house and to get out of there forever. My boyfriend at the time was unsympathetic to the extreme and the only people who were truly helpful to me were my fellow escorts, who I was communicating with almost exclusively through e-mail.

I had heard of George Tiller before I had gotten involved in the world of abortion—my parents had been fans of *The O'Reilly Factor* when I was growing up, and his name had been mentioned on that program many times throughout the years, where he was infamously known as “Tiller the Baby-Killer” and was a frequent target of Bill O'Reilly's rage. Since I had gotten involved in the pro-choice cause, however, Tiller had become something of a hero to me: the doctor who was willing and able to perform procedures which few other doctors did, and who was willing to fight numerous legal battles in order to continue serving his patients. I knew he had been shot before, but hadn't given up, and I could identify with his principled stubbornness. The names of O'Reilly, Laura Ingraham, and others continually popped up on Rachel Maddow's show and on the blogs I read during the following weeks as Scott Roeder's motives were sussed out. I felt intense anger at all of them for partially contributing to the death of someone who was near-saintly for me.

There was a sense of catharsis at the beginning of 2010, when Scott Roeder was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison. The defense had tried to use some disturbing strategies as the early stages of the trial progressed, but the judge had held his ground, and

it felt as though a small modicum of justice had been served. But little did I know that another injustice had already been brewing for decades.

Abortion is a contentious issue, illegal in many countries and inaccessible in much of the United States. 1/3 of women in America will need an abortion at some point in her childbearing years; some will need more than one. Yet the number of doctors providing this service is small and is dropping as many providers are in their 60s and 70s, trained in the days prior to *Roe v. Wade* when the need for legalized abortion was readily apparent due to the women left dead or seriously injured from unsafe illegal procedures. Many medical schools do not require their students to learn this procedure. And some doctors steer away from learning how to provide abortions because of the perceived (and sometimes real) danger of working in the field.

It is too expensive for many women, and many states have waiting periods and gestational limits in place restricting access further. All of these factors leave the door open for predatory actors to take advantage of desperate, vulnerable people. If someone cannot speak English, does not know of their rights within the United States, or does not know what a proper American medical facility looks like, this opens that door up even further.

One of these predators was Kermit Gosnell, a rogue doctor from Philadelphia who had been performing dangerous abortions on poor women at all stages of gestation, but mostly in the third trimester, for decades, giving them large doses of opiates and benzodiazepines, and using scissors to kill babies who had accidentally been born alive in his facility. This clinic was filthy, he didn't have the proper training for the complex procedures he was doing, and he refused to call 911 immediately after making his myriad mistakes—sometimes he would try to fix them himself; sometimes he'd simply send

patients home with their organs perforated. He reused disposable single-use instruments and didn't sterilize metal instruments, transferring diseases between patients. He had no licensed staff employed and his entire business practice seemed based on gathering as much money as possible from vulnerable women while providing the barest minimum level of services. It was capitalism in one of its most evil manifestations. At least two women died in his "care." One of these was Karnamaya Mongar, a Lhotshampa refugee from Bhutan, who had been directed to his clinic after being turned away from three others. At Gosnell's clinic, she was given no Nepali interpreter and was therefore unable to express any of her concerns. Her story continues to haunt me.

George Tiller's death had been a motivation for me to commit myself to my work even more strongly. Gosnell's crimes shook this, though. They made me even more paranoid, if that was possible. I had nightmares. Certain words became deeply uncomfortable for me. In any conversation with a stranger I feared they would ask me about my job and then mention that *thing* they had read about in the news.¹ I worried about every single patient we had whose pregnancy's gestational age was measured beyond what we could see at our clinic. I feared our protesters in a new way since I was terrified that they would compare me to him, and that made me sick. I also feared that people on the other side of the aisle would use Gosnell's actions as a justification for enacting even more restrictions on legal abortion. Already in January we had seen an abrupt change in Ohio's Mifeprex restrictions and a new spate of videos from Lila Rose.

¹ Though I should have known that news related to abortion providers is only of interest to ardent pro-choicers and anti-choicers. Everyone else lives pretty happily unaware of these issues—unless they themselves are currently experiencing an unintended pregnancy. Abortion care is a stigmatized field, and when I was compelled to discuss it with strangers I was met with every reaction: disdain, excitement, gratitude, fascination, awkward silence, curiosity, supportive distancing, and sadness at the realization of what my duties actually were. However, specific providers and laws were rarely a topic of conversation.

While the Pennsylvania Grand Jury's recommendations were reasonable, I knew that reason often didn't go very far with the antis. And I feared that these restrictions would create the exact opposite of the situation a naïve person might think they were intended to create: I feared another Gosnell. One of the blogs I read around this time inadvertently set me up with the idea for my thesis, six months before I even began applying to graduate programs, by stating that this was what the antis wanted: "Kill all the Tillers," they said, "and all you're left with are the Gosnells."

More restrictions *have* been enacted since then, not just in Ohio and in Pennsylvania but also in Texas, North Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas (particularly devastating) and a number of other states. The crimes of Stephen Brigham, another similarly malignant doctor, were uncovered at the end of 2011, in New Jersey.

To some ardent pro-choicers, those of us who have worked in clinics are seen as near-saintly people who risk our lives to provide care to women who need it. To the protesters on the sidewalk, and to anti-choice politicians and media personalities, we are monstrous, greedy "baby-killers." The truth lies in neither of these beliefs. While I did feel as though I was helping people, my co-workers and I all had days when we were grumpy. We played favorites and played mind games, talked about people behind their backs and sometimes within earshot. There were ever-shifting alliances. It was a stressful environment and we took it out on each other. But we still did our best for the patients in our care. We still tried to help as many people as possible, giving patients discounted fees and fitting them into already-crowded schedules if their situations demanded it.

So because of everything I absorbed through my own experiences and because of the stories which were inspired by my hero and his nightmarish shadow, when I decided

that this would be the topic of my thesis, I could think of no title more fitting than “Ordinary Saints and Monsters.”

Part V: Realism

In the time I have been writing, I have experimented with different genres, and while I’ve always been primarily focused on fiction, I spent entire semesters in undergrad trying to focus on poetry or Creative Nonfiction, both which involved expressing my actual lived experiences. But I’m not a reporter or a journalist, and I do not have the talent or interest in poetry that I do in fiction. When I look for something new to read, I ultimately gravitate toward fiction, even strange fiction filled with symbolism, unfamiliar words, non-linear storytelling methods, and obfuscations. I have the motivation to read widely in fiction in a way I do not with poetry. I love poetry, but it will probably never be a form I feel fully comfortable with. Prose gives me room to move around, to tell a full story, including every detail without feeling like I am destroying the effect the lines, words, and the entire poem might have.

While I enjoy Creative Nonfiction and have used it in some of my classes in graduate school, working with it felt too immediate when it came to the topic of abortion. I myself have never been pregnant, and if I were to rely on the experiences of women I met while I was working in the clinic, it would feel like a violation of HIPAA even if I were to change the names. Fiction gives me the option of changing any and all details as I may choose, creating new characters out of whole cloth, and making use of time periods I haven’t lived through and places I haven’t been to while still creating stories that *could* be real.

I also was much less interested in making a concrete political statement or exploring complicated feminist theories than I was in exploring the lives of my characters. While reproductive rights are an issue I feel strongly about, there is already a strong contingent of people who are doing this work in the political realm. When I myself was involved with this work in my day-to-day life, one attitude that sometimes disturbed me among my colleagues and co-volunteers was the dismissiveness toward people who felt ambivalence, sadness, or guilt about their abortion experiences. Anti-choicers frequently like to position abortion as a terrible tragedy that every single person ultimately regrets their entire life. Some pro-choicers have therefore adopted the opposite tactic: embracing the goodness of the choice to have an abortion, which can sometimes manifest itself in very good ways (such as the sympathetic pro-choice post-abortion counseling service Exhale) and sometimes in the aforementioned bad ways.

These were the kind of stories that I wanted to tell: those that illustrate the importance of legal abortion without promoting a universalized proper response to being pregnant or having an abortion, alongside stories of workers at good and bad clinics.