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Coastal Erosion in the Intertidal Zone

by

Marguerite K. Weisman

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Introduction

As legend would have it, when asked how he created his sculptural masterpiece, Michelangelo responded, "I could see David within the block of Marble. All I needed to do was chip away everything that was not David."

I believe that this logic applies to the formation of people as well. We are all born relatively formless. We go throughout life, allowing the world to crash against us, rub us away, and file us down. We find who we are, not through addition, but through what is left of us after life has had its way with us. All aspects of life have the capacity to mold us: places, people, and experiences.

I lived exactly one half of my life on the Western coast of this country, in Los Angeles, and exactly one half on the Eastern coast, in Boston. I believe this dichotomy has had a profound effect on me; not only as a person, but also as a writer.

In this thesis, I use the medium of short fiction to explore the concept of formation as erosion rather than development. All of my protagonists are experiencing formative periods and coming of age in there own way, whether they are twelve years old or twenty-two. They are also all experiencing loss, in the same way that are coast lines are using a few inches every year, shaping the ever-changing American landscape.

Cece, Brookline, MA – 6.8 square miles

The barista looked like he was lost in time, like he should have been a greaser or something. Only his eyebrow ring and his ugly band t-shirt, gave him away. The shirt was for a punk band Cece knew from the area and had a picture of a dead goat on it. The girls were actually surprised that Starbucks let him wear it. It didn't seem to go with their individually wrapped Madeleines and their Joni Mitchell albums.

Cece sat in the corner, right next to the window, chipped at her glitter nail polish while Olivia talked to her about her rabbit. It was having babies. And as Cece stared out at the parking lot, she wondered what the word was for baby rabbits. She knew that baby horses were called colts, but when she heard that word she only really thought of guns and malt liquor. A car with its bumper hanging low pulled into the parking lot. It looked like it was frowning. A pretty girl walked in so the little Christmas bell on the door jingled. Cece watched to see if the barista would flirt with the girl, but he didn't seem to notice her at all. Cece thought this made him special. Olivia said he was probably gay. He was making a cappuccino and he steamed the milk as though he were punishing it. When he was done, the foam seemed full of resentment.

Cece bit her cuticles and Olivia told her not to bite her nails because it was unattractive. The girls were late for Klal Yisrael group. It was winter vacation, but they still had to attend Prozdor classes and, that night, there were Klezmer bands at the Hebrew College. Olivia had a funny saying she made up. "Jews," she would say, "we put the Klein in Brookline." There were very few Christian kids in their

suburban town; still, though, it felt like Christmas was everywhere. Someone had drawn a puffy paint scene of Santa Claus and his elves steaming and stain-removing in their workshop on the window of the dry cleaner's next door.

While the Christians were ordering their hams from Williams-Sonoma and spraypainting pinecones and pears with Martha Stewart, the rest of the townspeople – the Kleins – were lighting candles every night and attending talks to fight anti-semitism in the Divest-from-Israel campaign. It was the first night of the holiday, and Cece and Olivia would have to sit through services and kindling followed by "lively" Sephardic music. The only bright spot would be the apple and poppyseed paczki afterwards. Every year at Chanukah, Cece's grandmother made over three hundred. She brought then to every temple event. Then she would never cook them again, all year, until it was the holidays again. All the young Rabbis looked forward to it, and flirted with her, hoping this would not be the year she stopped her fecund baking.

"Doris," they would say, "How can such a beautiful and slender woman make such delicious pastry?"

Every year she said she would not bake.

"I'm an old woman. These people don't care about me. They only care about stuffing their faces."

But every year, at the beginning of Decemer, she would infiltrate Cece's mother's kitchen with her tubs of stewed prunes and rose-petal-jam. She would toil around the clock, singing Lucky Millinder under her breath, until she had enough doughnuts to feed a small army. It was Cece's mother's ultimate nightmare. Doris

referred to Constance as “that woman.”

“Why did that woman have to pass her ugly shiksa name onto my granddaughter?” She asked Cece, rhetorically, every time she saw her. Cece would just shrug. She agreed. She hated it. That was why she went by her nickname. But she knew she was supposed to try and smooth the rift between her mother and grandmother.

For a weekend during their vacation, before the holiday, Cece and her little brother went to stay with their grandmother in upstate New York. Constance would call every evening to say goodnight to her children, while Doris and her friends played penuckle.

“She’s *verring* a cross,” Doris would say, exaggerating her old country accent for the benefit of the other biddies. “I can hear it dangling.”

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Olivia was drawing hearts on her jeans with a purple pen.

“I think I want to get a tattoo,” she said.

“My father would kill me,” Cece said. He was definitely Doris’ son. He idolized Philip Roth, and wanted to become the next most important American Jewish writer. No daughter of his would ever get a tattoo.

“Yeah. Mine too.” Cece knew that Olivia’s parents were reformed, but still, very strict. They didn’t let her watch movies that were R-rated.

A woman in one of the big comfy chairs read *Lolita*. Cece and Olivia still found this to be endlessly amusing.

"I think she's blushing," Olivia said. Cece rolled her eyes.

Cece heard the voice of the barista: a lizardy voice.

"Hey, Mike. I'm going on my break."

He took of his apron and slung it over his shoulder. As he walked towards the door, he hit a pack of cigarettes against his palm like he was shuffling cards.

"I'm going to talk to him," Cece said.

"Talk to who?" Olivia asked. Cece figured Olivia was probably still thinking about the rabbit.

"The barista. I'm going to ask him for a cigarette."

"But you don't smoke."

Cece narrowed her eyes.

"I do. You just don't know that I do."

Outside the snow began to pixelate, coming into view like a photo emulsion – agitated silver crystals. Cece saw the boy trying to light his cigarette on the side of the building. He leaned into the brick wall as though he were leaning into a lover, shielding from the wind.

She walked up to him quickly, trying to lick the chap away from her lips

“Can I borrow an extra cigarette?”

“You want to borrow a cigarette?”

Cece nodded her head.

“You mean, you’re going to give it back when you’re done with it?”

It was a funny thing – her choice of words – but he pointed it out venomously and failed to smile.

Cece laughed. The boy took a long drag and gazed West like a cowboy. He scanned the parking lot as though it were majestic terrain – as though dreams hung in the air, riding the wintry mix. There was a long silence.

“Fine. Can I just have one?”

This time he smiled. He extracted a cigarette and lit it with maestro fluidity.

“So, you’re in high school,” he said. Not a question.

“I go to Beacon.” Her school was Kindergarten through twelfth grade, but she did not tell him that she was in the eighth grade.

“So, you’re rich.” This was also not a question. Cece felt snowflakes melting on her face.

All her friends’ parents drove the same cars, and they all had nice houses with two stairways. She had no idea if she was rich. She was only normal.

“That’s not what I said.” She crossed her arms. The boy just laughed.

“Well, are you in high school?” she asked

“Sometimes I’m in high school. Usually I’m in hell.”

Cece found this to be incredibly accurate and incredibly profound. In school, there was no agency. This is what Cece imagined hell to be like.

“Well. Do you have a name, then? Or are there no names in Hell?” Cece blew some smoke upwards and into his face. He did not flinch.

“Nick. My name is Nick.”

Cece wondered if he was Jewish, but didn’t want to ask him what his last name was. Nick flicked his cigarette into the street and it melted a crater in the snow with volcanic speed.

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The inside of the Starbucks felt warm and filled with nutmeg after the snowy parking lot.

“So,” Olivia asked, “when’s the wedding?”

Cece held up a flyer with a graphic of a dead goat on it.

“That’s disgusting.”

“It’s his band. He invited me to a concert.”

She waved the flyer in the air like she was Miss America, waving a handkerchief. Outside, the snow quickened, recruiting troops until the world was a

mess of blinking white light. Cece explained what Nick had told her: that they were influenced by the Dead Kennedy's, but more modern, like Tool.

"Sounds incredibly boring." Olivia was firm. "What are we going to do for New Year's?"

"I don't know. I don't care."

"I think we should go ice-skating."

"Great. We'll go ice-skating," Cece said. She twirled her finger in the air. "You can bring your bunny."

Olivia threw a crumpled up straw wrapper at Cece's head. "You can bring your boyfriend."

When Cece got home, Doris was in the kitchen, her hands covered in grease. Her face was falling downward with age. Cece thought she looked like a melting candle.

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The snow died on the ground. Cece ran down the street with her eyes closed, leaving footprints that disappeared right away, like the one ghosts made on *Scooby Doo*. She wondered if she was a ghost. Would she know that she was? She thought maybe she could run so fast that she would dissolve and leave a wake of her own atoms. Her feet sounded like applause in an empty auditorium, but the street wasn't empty. Olivia, and their quiet friend Lauren, ran behind her. But it was so dark that they could pretend to be alone. They were in private rooms, listening through the

walls.

"Cece!" Olivia's voice echoed in the spaces between the Victorians and the Georgians, grey paint and potpourri and eggnog.

Cece wheezed and let out a strangled laugh. She let the snow rush into her mouth.

"Just making sure you're still there."

"I'm here." Cece's foot hit a twig and she stumbled forward for a few exalting and heavy steps. She laughed, and it echoed in a terrifying way, a villainous laugh. The neighborhood was sleeping and they were running through this prohibited area: the strange, cold middle of the night. Cece was for some reason reminded of a book she'd read in third grade, about kids spending the night in a museum. The keen, white beams of a headlight scanned the corner. The three girls all ran to stoop behind an elderberry bush in someone's front yard.

The car didn't even turn up Kirkstall Ave, but continued towards the highway, the groan of its engine expiring in a feline whine.

Without saying anything, they reached for each other's hands. Lauren fell back on the old lawn in a fit of whispering laughter. Cece and Olivia joined her and they looked up at the stars.

"Oh wow," Lauren said. The stars seemed to be gasping for their last breaths, drowning behind the falling snow. Cece thought they looked like little flashbulbs, a hundred cameras taking pictures of this night. They were famous. Olivia's parents

were asleep. *Home Alone* had still been playing on the television in the master bedroom when they snuck out. But Olivia's father was snoring so loudly they could hear it over the movie. Cece and Olivia and Lauren had siphoned some Glenlivet from the liquor cabinet. They'd spent the night chasing it with Diet Dr. Pepper and listening to the Sex Pistols, lying on the bedroom floor, with their feet up against the wall. They'd talked about divorce, different boys' tongues, and what they wanted their prom dresses to look like. Around eleven, they snuck out through the basement door.

The next thing they knew they were running down the street. They moved quickly towards the part of town where there would be streetlights, where they would be protected by little ellipses of yellow. Lauren threw her head forwards and then back, whipping her hair like a horse's mane. Olivia slid a lip-gloss out of her tight corduroy pocket and daubed it on her mouth with the little white wand. It had glitter in it and it made her lips look like she'd just devoured diamonds, like she was a diamond-eating monster. The flavor was called vanilla frosting and it smelled like birthdays. Olivia smiled wide, baring her canine teeth.

"Good?"

"Hot," Cece said.

The Milky Way Lounge and Lanes was only about a mile from Olivia's house. The air felt different, as the residential neighborhood became streets of houses interspersed with bagel shops and yoga studios, and then they passed Blanchard's Liquors and, quite suddenly, found themselves on the threshold of the city.

The Milky Way was nestled between Herrel's Ice-ream and a second-hand electronics store which had TVs and VCRs and electric mixers piled up high in the window. They could hear music coming from the inside, muffled like a heartbeat under a sweater.

Inside, the bowling alley had become something different from the place where they had spent so many birthday parties. It had become an adult space. Every aisle boasted groups of middle-aged men, holding big plastic cups brimming with beer. There was the predictable din of rolling wooden crescendoes, punctuated by the hollow cackle of ball against pin and gruff voices cheering.

In the arcade, right in front of the giant claw – which Cece had never succeeded at – a small stage had been set up where Nicks' band, Constructive Chaos, was playing. Seeing him there, Cece felt lucky. She wanted to go try the claw, sure that tonight, of all nights, she would secure one of those Carebears, or at least an Elmer Fudd.

The band was loud. And they kept their eyes closed like they were trying not to look at their instruments, heads down like they were praying. Nick shooed at his bass guitar. He stamped around the stage, frenzied and teetering, not unlike a dying goat. When he moved his head, sweat came flying off his face, and Cece wanted to collect it like coins. She wanted to wish on it. She became obsessed with his height, and her distance from the stage: the hypotenuse of desire. It was a line she wanted to tightrope walk.

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After the show, the boys in the band sat on their amps and talked in the hushed tones of a campfire story. One of them kept a beer balanced between his thigh and the inside of his coat, stealing kisses every few minutes.

"Can we leave? Somebody got stabbed in this neighborhood once last summer." Lauren had not even taken off her coat. She had one of those mothers that wouldn't let her stand in front of the microwave for fear that she might get cancer. And so, Lauren always had horror stories preventing anybody from doing anything fun. She ate big handfuls of Reese's Pieces out of a bag from the vending machine, the smell was a mixture of peanut butter and permanent markers, nauseating.

Cece approached the stage, anxious as a hider being seeked.

"Cigarette girl." Nick pointed at her, like Uncle Sam.

"Yes, that is me. My name is Cece." She held out her hand to be shaken. The bandmates all laughed.

"Cece the cigarette girl," one of them sang. The drummer played a sting – flam and rimshot.

"Why doesn't Cece the cigarette girl come back and party with us?" the drummer asked. "And bring her friends." Cece saw a wink between them.

Nick looked at her.

"Yeah. Why doesn't she?"

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The drummer's car was an eggplant minivan. The floors were littered with empty bags of Cheetos and soggy matchbooks. There was an old, torn-up copy of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* on the backseat. There were five boys in the band and two, older-looking girls so Lauren and Cece had to sit on some of the boys' laps. Cece could tell Olivia was mad that she wasn't sitting on anybody's lap. The lead singer was driving. He was wearing a black shirt and a belt with bullets on it. He had pock-marked skin and a sparse, Brillo-ish beard that made him look ruddy and unkempt. Cece was sitting on Nick's lap. She noted he smelled just like so many other boys smelled: a mixture of log cabin-y cologne, detergent, mushroom and green pepper pizza, and something sweet and young.

They started to drive and were listening to an upbeat punk song that Cece had heard in a Hot Wheels commercial. She felt Nick slip three fingers into the back pocket of her jeans. They drove through backstreets that Cece didn't recognize before arriving at a small house with a low chainlink fence around the yard and a plastic nativity scene out front.

There were four big bottles of alcohol on the kitchen table and in the living room some boys were sitting around the coffee table, trying to bounce quarters into their shot glasses.

One of the boys only had one arm. When the girls walked into the room, he got up to introduce himself and extended his stub for a shake, grinning like a crocodile. Olivia buried her face in Cece's shoulder.

"That is disgusting," she whispered.

Nick handed a beer can to Cece, “Drink this.” She did as she was told, forcing big mouthfuls into her stomach and breathing through her nose. It was warm. It reminded her of being sick: flat gingerale.

There was a movie playing on the giant television nobody was watching. A princess in a feathered dress led a little girl through a long hallway, the hallway was lined with cabinets each displaying a different woman’s head. The heads turned to watch them as they walked. Cece turned away, not wanting to have dreams about disembodied heads.

The music seemed to get louder as more bodies shuffled into the small house. There were pictures on the walls of the family that lived there. There was a picture of a little girl playing with a dog on the beach, one of a mom and a dad and some children floating on inner tubes in a lake. The ground was littered with chew toys, and there were post-it notes on the fridge, remnants of a real life.

One of the boys – this one with two arms – poured a ring of tequila shots into little glasses. Cece noticed Lauren was moving farther and farther away from the table. She reached for the shot and tried her hardest to drink it all in one gulp.

A gush of venom seeped through her sinuses and deep into her chest. She remembered falling into a swimming pool once before she knew how to swim, and instinctively sucking in giant breaths. The chlorinated water rushed into her nose and throat. That was how it felt. Tequila over beer, though – that was like swimming in the rain. Cece noticed Nick was staring at her thighs, so she tried to lift them off of the chair to make them seem thinner.

“Let’s go upstairs,” Nick said. All of Cece’s words scattered like marbles, so she didn’t speak. She looked around. Olivia and Lauren were not in the living room. She nodded. They walked towards the stairway. She watched the stairs as they seemed to spread out, flattening like an accordian, stretching farther apart, hanging like a ladder.

They walked into a bedroom with a “Private Property” sign on the door.

It was dark, and every shadowy object looked like an open mouth. It reminded Cece of a scary story they learned in Hebrew school about the demon Belphegor. Belphegor seduced his victims by promising them great discoveries that would make them rich and powerful. Sometimes he appeared as a beautiful, naked woman, and other times, as an open-mouthed monster with a giant beard and twisted nails. The young boys always made gross jokes about Belphegor because he was to be worshipped on a toilet using offerings from the residue of human digestion. Belphegor was sent from Hell by Lucifer to see if there was such a thing as married happiness. Convinced that people were selfish and disloyal, he began devouring them.

Cece was thankful when Nick turned on a black light. She saw then that there were many glow-in-the-dark posters on the wall. One had the words to a poem on it with a picture of the grim reaper holding a lantern. That sort of picture would give her nightmares as well.

Nick used a remote control to turn on the stereo, a song came on that was just a slow, minor guitar and a man’s voice. The voice sounded full of charcoal and metal forks.

“Do you like this song?” Nick asked.

Cece nodded.

“Mmhmm. I love it.”

He took her hand and led her over to the bed.

“It’s okay. I won’t bite.”

Cece wanted to tell him about Belphegor. Belphegor would bite.

When Nick took his shirt off, Cece saw that there was a big tattoo on his chest, drawn to look like a hole had been ripped in his flesh, but instead of blood and bones and heart, there was a bright blue cytoplasmic background with planets and asteroids and stars floating around inside. She had the urge to jump into it.

As Nick took off her clothes, Cece watched the snow churn outside – the inside of a washing machine – and felt very cold. She listened to the lyrics of the song and the charcoal man kept asking, *Can you feel my love buzz*? She wanted to answer, she could not.

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Cece waited a week for Nick to call. Every night, after dinner, Olivia would call. Cece knew it wasn’t Nick because her brother would run to answer the phone and if it had been, he would have made sure to announce to the whole house that there was a boy on the phone.

“Did he call?” Olivia would ask.

"No."

"Maybe he's Jewish and maybe his parents are, like, really strict and don't let him use the phone during Chanukah."

"Yeah." Cece watched her brother throwing foam balls at the wall in the living room.

"Just think of the Maccabees." Olivia laughed.

"Why?"

"They had to wait eight days for new oil."

"Oil?" Cece asked. She twisted the chord around her finger until it turned purple.

"I don't know. Just think of them."

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It still had not stopped snowing and Downtown Crossing was empty. People walked their dogs in the street and there were no other customers at the Pin Cushion Tattoo Parlor. At the front desk, they looked at Cece's ID for a very long time. She prayed they would not ask her for Jennica Kurzweil's address, as she had barely memorized it. But the apple crates acting as chairs in the backroom belied the scary paperwork. They didn't seem to care.

"Happy birthday," the man said. Cece sort of laughed and made a hand gesture like a clown. The man had so many tattoos and big muscles, and he reminded

her of a cartoon – like Popeye.

Cece showed him the picture she had photo-copied at the library. He looked her up and down. He looked at her hair, which was braided with red ribbons tied at the ends.

"This is what you want?"

"Yes. That is what I want."

The needle pressed in her back like a jackhammer, with the incisive hum of a steel bumblebee. Cece felt like he was recording a techno drumline into her capillaries, banging out rhythms loud and reverberating. In her spine, there was a paralyzed pain. She could not breathe or talk so she closed her eyes and saw men shooting glass bottles off a fence with rifles. She saw drums. She saw people having sex in alleys. This, she could feel. This was a love buzz.

After two hours, he lifted his hand away. Cece could see his blue latex glove was smeared with blood and ointment.

"Okay, you're all set."

She tried to say thank you but she had not spoken the whole time and her voice was asleep.

"You're a brave little toaster."

He handed Cece a mirror – the kind that princesses gaze into while they brush their hair – and sent her over to the full-length on the wall so she could look at her

back. There, right in the space where the other side of her heart was, was a bloody, bearded open mouth, a mouth sent right out of Hell.

Angie, Azusa, CA – 8.9 square miles

The sun rose over San Bernardino like a body rising to the surface. In this manner, the day began like a detective movie. Weather – and even that had its limited elements – offered the only drama and variation to life at Apple Valley. Angie awoke in the calmest, most distinct possible ways when she slept in the bed in her small, grey room. Eyes rolling open like doll. Lashes separating from one another. She felt the molded hump of the Sears polyester pillow propping her neck. Let the hospital-grade sheets rest over her like a snake's shed skin – dry and itchy. And she did not move; no matter the sweat that swelled around her shins, thighs, kneecaps. She often awoke clenching her teeth. Dr. Jakoby attributed this to stress.

"Thank you, Doctor. What a brilliant and completely novel diagnosis," she had said.

In their first meeting, Dr. Jakoby asked Angie why she thought she was brought to Apple Valley.

"Because," she said, "I got sick of playing and I wanted to sit out."

"Sit out?" he asked.

"Yes. If life is a soccer game, all I want to do is sit on the sidelines and eat oranges."

"But you won't eat unless forced to," Dr. Jakoby said.

"It's a metaphor," said Angie. "My mother was sick of watching me disappear."

The Apple Valley Institute was constructed under the Kirkbride hospital design. Long, staggered wings created what psychiatrist Thomas Story Kirkbride referred to as "an echelon." There was plenty of fresh air and natural sunlight, and the inhabitants of one wing could not spy on those of another from their windows. Kirkbride was sure his design had a curative effect – it was a special apparatus for the care of lunacy. The building erupted as a ridge of towers and buttresses reminiscent of a Danish castle.

The trees on the lawn looked like stiff, fancy adults, loitering at a party. They were coiffed and frilly, creating a topiary ballroom. As the property ambled to a farther radius, away from the care and control of its gardeners, it descended into a dusty and prickly Armageddon of Yuka plants and dying weeds, around which harmless corn snakes would slither, searching for chipmunks. It was the site of a battle between the earth and the sun: one trying so desperately to grow, and the other always determined to kill it.

If you walked to the very edges of the property – a special privilege awarded to patients making progress – there were orange groves with rogue lemon trees scattered about. And if you walked farther, clusters of avocado trees at in circles, like old Ahuilla men, smoking Black Hawks and complaining about the heat.

She could make the avocado trees become anything she wanted and imagined. Sometimes they were eggs, hanging in clusters, ready to hatch hundreds of baby dinosaurs. The grounds of Apple Valley would be so much better if brontosaurus populated them. In the first grade, her class had to conjecture and illustrate what had

killed the dinosaurs. Angie said that an early mammal poisoned all the eggs, so they didn't hatch, and all the mother and father dinosaurs died of broken hearts. Her teacher deemed this morose. Angie imagined a Big Foot creature sneaking around the wilderness of Apple Valley at night, injecting the avocados with syringes full of putrid, purple liquid.

Or they were the breasts of a mythical beast. A brown, mushy Medusa. But instead of snakes for hair, she had hair made of leaves and at least twenty bosoms. Little changeling babies that crawled from the dens of prairie dogs at night would climb the stumpy trunks to nurse at the dimpled fruit. They would go to sleep glowing green.

Farther than the trees, where Angie never saw, were the private farms where Apple Valley grew most of their food. Sometimes, if Angie was walking out by the groves, she could hear rock n' roll music coming from the radios of migrant workers, playing at full volume from the beds of their trucks. She tried to recognize the songs but she could only hear the drums, and the thrashing and threshing of electric guitar swirling with the sounds of automated harvesting devices. And when she could make out words, they were in Spanish. The one she heard a lot – the one she knew the meaning of – was corazon.

Once she was allowed to, Angie walked the grounds all the time. Most of the other residents wouldn't eat the fruit right off the tree. Too paranoid. Angie didn't care. She grew up with these trees. Plucking an orange right from its stem and eating it right there gave her a sense of control she had not had in years. Cutting out the

middleman and plastic segmented cafeteria trays. Angie discovered there was something wrong with the lemons. They didn't taste sour. They tasted like those candies you could get at the movie theater, that were shaped like real fruits, but covered in sugar.

When she realized that nobody was really watching, she became bold. She would climb the avocado trees, and try to see past the mountains, into a world without walls. She knew, that over that ridge, there was Joshua Tree, and farther South, San Diego. And if she looked just slightly west, to where the sun descending stairs in brilliance like Scarlett O'Hara, there would be Los Angeles. And. The ocean.

As a child, Angie saw California as a giant map lain out on the floor. She could walk all over it, from county to county, scaling cliffs and fording rivers. It was all open for the taking. Frontier. She wished she could see it that way now.

Her parents took her to Joshua Tree once – before her sister Lucy was born, before the divorce. She didn't remember how old she was but she remembered the carride. How rain speckled the windshield and how her father's plaid shirt itched when she touched it. Her mother packed a basket full of snacks: grapes, granola bars, and wheels of cheese with smiling cows on the package.

When they got there they parked their old station wagon at the Cottonwood visitor center. Her father held her hand as they walked but Angie remembered her legs catching and flailing, unable to keep up with the adults. Angie was prone to wandering but her parents trusted her to return. They sat under a boulder, singing

songs, as Angie set out across the hot sand. She spent all day looking for a turtle and never found one.

She dreamt about Joshua Tree at Apple Valley. She dreamt about everything. In one she was a little girl but she was in doll's clothes and they were too small. She was in a big room of mirrors, surrounded by cakes and cookies and pastries of all sizes, covered in white frosting. A man with no face – Dr. Jakoby said they were usually faceless – in a harlequin suit kept telling her she needed to eat more of the cupcakes or her family would die.

In another, she was in a world of ice just like a book she read when she was little. All the houses were frozen over into igloos, and the streets were skating rinks. Everything shone but from what light she did not know because it was always night. There was an ice princess – there had been in the book too – but she didn't look like your usual princess. She was thin and pale with diamond rings on every finger and thin, short dress made of starlight. She had dark circles under her eyes and blood on the corners of her blue lips. She told Angie that she would safe her. She knew a secret way out that nobody else knew. Angie said okay, and got on her crystal carriage drawn by white horses. Just as they were about to ride out of the world of darkness, the princess unsheathed a giant icicle and stabbed Angie in her eye. She would wake up, hot, sweating, because this was San Bernardino. And a snowball had the chance of, well, a snowball in Hell.

Breakfast was at 8 AM. All of the patients with history of disordered eating – which most of the girls had – were sequestered in their own dining room. It looked

more like Angie's grandmother's kitchen than a hospital cafeteria. The wallpaper was printed with teapots and ladies' Sunday hats. Big brown jars with words like "Sugar" and "Flour" lined the counter and Angie wondered if they actually had anything in them. Quilted potholders hanging from hooks and little ceramic cow creamers on the windowsill.

Nobody was allowed to serve herself. Everybody's plate had the same amount of food. Mashed potatoes covered in a thick glaze of gravy and broccoli wilting in butter. Meatloaf that wiggled and steamed on the plate. You were not allowed to play with your food, push your food around on your plate, excuse yourself during the meal, or leave anything uneaten. Many of the girls licked their plates dry in a show of a gauche normalcy. Those that did not finish were made to drink cans of liquid meals – the kind that old people keep under their sinks. They were the ones who sat and would not look at their food like dogs who have done something naughty. They watched the clock or counted the little boomerangs on the Formica table. Some of the girls – the newer ones – cried while they ate. They wept like widows over the grave of their starvation. Angie watched their tears inch down their cheeks and into their open mouths.

Angie sat in the recreation room with the other residents. Angie wrote down her thoughts on postcards so as to appear that she had friends. Two very damaged souls played nightly rounds of Monopoly but they didn't understand the game. They gave personalities to all the little boots and lanterns and acted out plays atop the game board. The television was always turned to *Twin Peaks* or *M.A.S.H.* or some other show that was on before Angie was born. The theme songs became permanently

twisted into her head, though. And, for years, whenever she heard a dark and dreamy melody that was reminiscent, she would hear the wheels of the nurse's medication kart on a linoleum floor or smell the insidious odor of unrest: somewhere between sulfur and human hair.

In their last session Dr. Jakoby asked Angie if there was anything she was going to miss about Apple Valley. There was but she wasn't sure they were the sorts of things she should tell him. She would miss not having to see her stepdad Glen. She was going to miss being watched while she bathed. Before the hospital, Angie dreaded undressing. It made her anxious. It was nice having someone to talk to – it helped defy the shame that came out when her body did. The nurse that usually sat with her during bath time was barely any older than she. Her name was Carly and she wore a gold-plated locket everyday. During their last bath together, Angie asked Carly about the significance of the locket.

"My boyfriend is deployed in Iraq."

She flipped open the locket with her thumbnail and showed Angie a picture of a handsome boy smiling in a baseball cap.

Angie couldn't contain her gasp.

"I'm so sorry. That must be terrible."

"I miss him terribly," she said, "but I have to trust that he'll come back to me soon."

"How long as he been gone?"

“Seven months,” she said.

“What do you miss most about him?” Angie asked.

“I miss the space he takes up in our apartment. And I miss having somebody to go to the movies with.”

Carly smoothed out the front of her uniform as though she was reminding herself to stay composed in front of the crazies – not to show emotion.

“What are you going to do when he comes back?” Angie asked.

The slight shine of a tear was gone from Carly’s eye now – like a silver guppy flickering into the light of the moon and out again around your feet.

“We’re going to move to Hollywood,” Carly said, smiling a very Hollywood smile. “He wants to be a songwriter.”

It made Angie miss America: Carly and her soldier, and the thought of them driving West on the 10 in some fabulous convertible the color of an M&M, Carly’s blonde hair flying and a song following them all the way.

Geographically, Apple Valley was in California, part of the United States of America. But, really, it wasn’t America. It wasn’t anywhere.

On her last night, Angie dreamt of drive-in movies and roller-skates, kisses that tasted like cherry Chapstik, the smell of sunscreen, and the way grass feels under the floor of a tent. There was a world moving underneath her. She had to get to it.

The morning she left, Angie folded all her clothes very carefully. Most of them she hadn't even worn during her stay. A red peasant dress with tiny blue flowers and a bodice that lased up the front had just hung in the closet for months and months like a girl waiting to be asked to dance. It fluttered with the wind and collected dust. Her fancy black satin shoes just sat in the corner and sulked.

A few of the girls made cards for Angie out of construction paper and glitter. She cried when she said goodbye but, once she got to the lobby, she threw the pile of cards in the trash. The sign-out book at the front desk was much too elegant, resembling a guestbook at an Inn and not a detailed log of people's almost-deaths and mental misfortunes. Angie signed her name with a flourish and walked into the outside, bright as a breaking flashbulb.

Her mother waited in the circular drive, standing in front of the old Cadillac with Lucy and Glen. Angie hated Glen. He was from Nashville and he was Nashville through and through. He loved barbecue and country music and would often pat Angie and Lucy on the rear, which Angie found completely disturbing. He owned an air conditioning unit store. When he proposed to their mother he wrote her a song called "Natalie" and sang it to her in the middle of a family dinner at The Golden Spur steakhouse. He even got his buddies from his softball team to come and play guitar and harmonica. Natalie cried. Angie just stared down at her mashed potatoes. She'd made them into a little volcano with gravy lava, and now she wished it would erupt and kill them all. Lucy just kept on sucking down her Shirley Temple. She was five at the time and did not grasp the horror of what was happening. Glen and Natalie got married at the First Love Calvary Chapel in Whittier. Angie hated

this because this was not Natalie's first love. Her father was the first love. They took the girls on their honeymoon to Disneyland and four months later, took Angie to Apple Valley.

Lucy came running up to Angie and gave her a big hug -- her little body squeezed tight against Angie's legs.

On the drive back to the house in Azusa Angie sat in the back seat with Lucy. Natalie and Glen held hands across the center console in the front. The radio was turned up loud so Angie couldn't hear what they said when they spoke to each other. Lucy had a doll with heavy eye-makeup, a sequined belly shirt, and platform sneakers – she was making it dance across her lap. As they got closer and closer Angie began to feel sick. She made Glen stop at a gas station.

"Here you go, babe," he said, as he pulled into a parking space at the Quick-Stop at the Mobile station. In the bathroom, Angie tried to throw up but there was nothing in her stomach. She was empty. She looked in the mirror, wiped her forehead with a wet paper towel, and stole a box of Tic-Tacs on her way back out to the car.

The house in Azusa was a stucco split-level the color of Pepto-Bismol. There was a low chainlink fence around the property and Glen's red dune buggy sat in the open garage. Somebody had planted chrysanthemums along the front of the house and there was a brand new satellite dish on the roof.

"We get Nickelodeon now," Lucy said. She tugged on Angie's hand with fingers wet from being inside her mouth.

Natalie opened the door and Angie walked into the front hall that still seemed foreign. She closed her eyes and tried to remember what their old house smelled like.

Lucy clutched Angie's hand and dragged her into the living room.

"Let me show you the Nickelodeon, Angie," she said. "It's channel thirty four."

Lucy kicked off her jelly sandals and told Angie to do the same.

"Glen doesn't like our shoes on the carpet."

When she walked into the living room, Angie noticed there was a new bookshelf against the back wall next to the television. It was almost entirely filled with giant gold trophies and silver tiaras. Angie walked over to it. On top of the trophies' fake marble columns were little plastic figurines of girls in dresses holding bouquets of roses. The bases were engraved with things like "SoCal Dream Girls USA – Tiny Miss" and "California Gold Coast Little Talent Winner."

"Lucy, what are these?"

Lucy dropped the remote on the couch, did a lop-sided pirouette and curtsied, holding the hem of an invisible dress between her thumbs and forefingers.

"Those are my crowns and my prizes."

Angie stomped out of the living room, trying to make her feet as heavy as possible. Her mother was in the kitchen reading the recipe on the back of a packet of McCormick chili seasoning.

"Mom," she yelled, making her mouth into as big an O as possible. "Moo-oo-oom."

"What, honey? Keep your voice down."

Angie slammed her fist on the counter.

"I can't believe you are entering your daughter – my sister – in these redneck beauty contests like she's a fucking show pony."

Natalie turned and pointed her finger straight at Angie's face.

"I did not teach you to use that kind of language, young lady."

Angie screamed even louder.

"Daddy would hate this. And you know that."

"Well, Angel," Natalie said, with a furious clenching of her teeth, "your father isn't here. And as far as I'm concerned, he has no say in how I choose to raise the two of you."

Angie stared at her mother. She was looking so hard for the mother she remembered – from the days of Joshua Tree. Her mother was so beautiful and it was a fact that had laced Angie's disposition with a strong dose of anger from the time when she first knew what beauty was. Her hair cobwebbed out in a soft halo around her ears and her widow's peak, and her eyes were an unreal Easter egg blue. Angie could tell Natalie had once been incredibly desirable, both by the faint eraser marks of vernal delicacy that still covered her face and by the thin and overdrawn pride with

which she carried herself. Angie had seen pictures of her mother with her high school cheerleading squad: Natalie with one knee on the grass, blonde bangs swept sideways, mugging for the camera. But it seemed that Natalie's aging had sped up while Angie was away – like one of those time-lapse videos she watched in science class where the flower grows, shooting towards the sky like a rocket.

"Now," Natalie took a can of kidney beans from the cupboard and began twisting the crank on the can opener around the top, "Why don't you go get cleaned up for dinner? Glen went out to get ice-cream for dessert and he'll be back soon."

"I'm not hungry," Angie said. She spun around and walked down the dark hallway towards her bedroom.

"Young lady," Natalie called, "you *will* eat with us or so help me God I will send Rooster to your grandma's."

"You wouldn't," Angie screamed.

"I would. I would until you start acting like a person," Natalie said.

Angie walked in her room and slammed the door so hard that the wooden A-N-G-I-E hanging outside bounced against the door in a way that sounded like a knock.

Her room seemed to be exactly as she'd left it. Above her desk was the bulletin board covered in things she liked or wanted to remember: a photo of Angie holding a newborn Lucy at the hospital, her soccer team picture from freshman year, a ticket stub from the time she went to see Sheryl Crow at the Hollywood Bowl, a picture of Johnny Depp torn out of a magazine, a picture of her and her girlfriends all

laying in a line on the sand at Emerald Cove with their sunglasses on. Angie took the picture down and looked at it.

"I look like an insect," she said to herself.

All of Angie's Cabbage Patch Dolls were lined up on her bed along the wall. And in her stereo was still the same Mix CD she'd been listening to obsessively the week she was sent away. There was one song in particular on it – about a boy in the summertime who gets his first guitar and finds his first love – that Angie wanted to listen to always. She wanted to go to the part of America where she could live in that song. Hanging on the front of her closet, still wrapped in a plastic garment bag, was the dress she would have worn to the Junior Prom if she hadn't gone away. It was the perfect blue color – almost white – with lots of tulle underneath the skirt. It was strapless and the bodice was all covered in silver glitter. Lucy helped her pick it out and told her she looked like Cinderella.

"Angie, it's dinner time," her mother called from down the hall.

Angie put the picture back and pulled a sweatshirt over her head.

At the table, Glen said grace and Angie had to hold his hand. As soon as it was done she yanked her hand away and discreetly wiped it on her napkin.

"Angie, baby," Natalie said, "Glen's decided he's gonna organize a welcome back barbecue for you."

Angie watched the cheddar cheese on top of her chili melt and congeal into an orange lump.

"Right here at the house."

Angie put down her spoon and looked up at her mother from behind bangs that had not been cut for months.

"Baby, get your hair out of your face. A barbecue. Isn't that nice?"

"Yes," Angie said, without touching her hair. "It's nice."

"Mommy, can I get a lizard?" Lucy asked.

"No, baby, you can't," their mother said.

"Why not?" Lucy pleaded.

"Good chili, sugar," Glen said. He reached over and rubbed the small of Natalie's back.

Angie watched the cat clock on the wall as the cat's eyes went suspiciously from left to right, left to right, left to right.

That night, Angie dreamt about swimming pools. There must have been millions of swimming pools in Los Angeles. She dreamt she was a bird, flying over the city, counting kidneys and rectangles of chlorinated blue. In the dream, she saw Lucy drowning in one of the pools. She tried to fly down and save her but there was a window between her and the rest of the world. She woke up crying, her lips gummy and stuck together with sleep and tears. She got out of bed and put on her slippers, padded quietly down the hall to Lucy's room. Lucy was sound asleep. Her clothes from the day before were thrown over the back of a rocking chair. Her

Barbies and all their clothes were strewn about the floor, yet to be picked up after playtime. In the dark, it looked like a battlefield littered with carnage from an army of thin, rubbery, bullet-breasted girls. In the corner, the humidifier was on for Lucy's asthma and it made a pleasant sound like a snoring animal. Angie got under the covers and put her arms around her sister, memorizing the smell of her hair at this precise age, and trying to fall asleep.

On the morning of the barbecue, Glen went down to the Mexican street vendors and bought a big piñata shaped like a multi-colored donkey. When he brought it back Natalie ooh-ed and aah-ed over it and gave him a big kiss.

"Say something, Angie," she said, her arms draped around Glen's big neck.

"Thank you," Angie said.

Glen took perverse pleasure in setting up his grill. He talked about his grill the way most men talk about cars or beautiful women. He dumped a big bag of charcoal into the barbecue and rubbed his hands together with his tongue sticking out as he waited for it to heat up. Natalie hung streamers up around the pool and put a big bowl of punch and a plate of crudités and ranch dressing on a card table.

All of their neighbors came and so did most of Angie's classmates. The two most popular girls in her grade showed up in short, white sundresses with their bikinis on underneath. Angie wasn't really friends with them. They handed her a cellophane-wrapped basket of lotions and scrubs and misting sprays.

"We missed you," they whined in unison.

Angie tried to be inconspicuous and sat in the corner under the Jacaranda tree near the back gate. A stoner who had been in her art class walked up to her with a hotdog in one hand and a hamburger in the other.

"Yo, he said," studying her with sunburned eyes, "So you like went away because you went crazy or some shit, right?"

Angie nodded. She picked at a scab on her knee.

"So like what kind of crazy?" he asked.

"I killed a man," Angie said. "I plead insanity."

"You're a trip," the boy said. "But for serious, why'd you go away?"

Angie studied him. His cheeks and chin were covered in prickly brown stubble and he wore pants that rode way too low and had patches of mushrooms or the Grateful Dead bear on them, but he had nice features. He seemed gentle. He hadn't grown into his looks. Angie thought that he would read some Jack Kerouac in college and then his drug-fueled rants would be infused with longing and eloquence and he would become somewhat of an enigma to girls who had grown up in towns where Jack Kerouac's books were banned from the library – real American towns.

"I didn't want to eat. I wanted to check out," Angie said.

"If you really want to check out, I can help you," he said. He drew a joint from his pocket and twirled it in front of her face. Angie was not interested in drugs, especially those that made you eat uncontrollably. But she wanted to leave this place.

Angie and the boy went out the back gate and began walking West towards the Christian college.

Azusa was the kind of town where every other block had a strip mall with an identical Xerox store, and tanning salon, and Panda Express. They passed the library. A homeless man sat on the steps drinking from a plastic jug of milk. He stood up as they passed but neither of them looked at him. Outside the Catholic high school, girls smoked cigarettes and chewed gum, played jumprope, wearing their big gold bamboo earrings and rolling up their plaid skirts. Every so often, a group of beautiful gangster boys would cruise by in their bright green lowrider and hoot at the girls from their window.

"I don't even know your name," Angie said, as they walked.

"It's okay," the boy said. "I didn't know yours until today."

"Why did you come then?"

"My mom made me."

"Oh," Angie nodded. This was the answer she expected.

The boy exhaled and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Actually," he said. "My mom could care less. She doesn't even know where I am. I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Oh," Angie said. She smiled.

The sun was setting. The more they walked towards it, the farther it seemed to slip away, like a dream you can't remember.

When they got the Azusa Foothill Drive-in Theater, Angie stopped short.

"Ohmygod," Angie said. "It can't be."

"What?" the boy asked.

"They tore it down," she said. "I can't believe they tore it down."

Where the last remaining drive-in west of Oklahoma once stood, now there was only a parking lot and, in front, the old sign and marquee which had been deemed a historic landmark. All the words on the marquee were in Spanish and Angie couldn't read them. She began to cry.

"I can't see what it says? What does it say? Why did they tear it down?"

She felt her stomach drop like she was in an elevator and she felt herself leaning into the boys arms.

"It's okay," he said. "Shh, shh." He stroked her hair with a soft and trembling hand. "They tore it down about a month ago."

Angie would not stop crying.

"It's okay," he said. "Let's sneak in and pretend."

They walked over to a place where there was a big boulder in front of the chain-link fence so the boy could climb up to the top and jump down.

“It’s times like these when it pays to be a vagrant youth,” he said.

Angie laughed. She slipped through the small opening where the fence was padlocked with little effort, bending down to get her head through.

“It’s times like these when it pays to be malnourished,” Angie said. She tried to laugh but it got caught in her throat.

The boy took her hand and led her over to the far-side of the parking lot. There stood one remaining pole where individual speakers had once hung, broadcasting lines of frothy dialogue and notes of dramatic score. Now, only a wire, ripped, its frayed end coiled in the dirt like an earthworm after the rain.

It had gone completely dark and Angie was sure her mother would be worried but somehow she was relaxed, floating through the warm and fragrant air. The boy took off his jacket and lay it on the ground.

“Your seat, Madame,” he said with a bow.

“Why, thank you, young sir,” Angie said, curtsying, playing along.

They both lay down, side-by-side, barely touching, feeling only the tingling proximity of atoms between them and the faint run-off of one another’s breath.

“Now,” he said, “the sky is our movie screen. It’s the greatest movie of all time.”

Angie closed her eyes. She made believe that the starlight on the other side of her eyelids was actually the flickering light of pictures projected at a dizzying speed.

And the rushing, hissing sound of the cars surrounding them on I-210, I-605, and Route 57 were actually the whispered sounds of the narrative, the volume turned down really low, telling a story of California.

Mary, Chatham, MA – 24.4 square miles

Olivia and Marnie were in the master bathroom bathroom and Olivia was trying to teach Marnie to throw up using a toothbrush. Marnie insisted she did not have a gag reflex. It looked like a game. They were taking turns, trying each time to perfect their technique, laughing when one of them made a noise like a stuck blender.

"The bristles like agitate your throat. Makes you convulse," Olivia said.

They went back for another round over and over again, closing their eyes and kneeling – bobbing for apples. Mary was sprawled on her stomach, on the tiled floor, in the bathroom with them, making a list. She loved making lists.

- ice
- cups
- ping pong balls
- Twister
- limes
- Diet Coke
- Cigarettes
- M&Ms
- Condoms

She circled the word "condoms" over and over again, and then wrote the word "apples" over it. Olivia said in sixth grade to write the word "apples" over the names of boys in notes passed during homeroom.

I heard Toby Tierney got a woody when Ms. Baker drew the fallopian tubes on the blackboard.

Now try writing apples over the name. She said no one would be able to decipher the names that way. I didn't want anyone to be able to read this.

It was October. Virginity was an albatross Mary was sure people could see dangling from her neck. A town legislation against franchises relegated the kids to an independent market with little more than beer, pizza bagels, and chocolate-covered cranberries – this was cranberry country after all. They did not sell condoms. Mary called Finn on the drive up, both of them speeding specks somewhere along Route 6, and told him to pick up condoms. Mary didn't talk to Olivia or Inslee about her decision. Inslee was too stupid to understand, and Olivia too perfect.

Mary and Olivia had been best friends even before they went away to the Academy. They used to take dance classes together. They would sit in the dressing room for the hour between Jazz and Pointe, sipping Fribbles and working on pre-Algebra. They studied each other. Olivia's hair was flat against her head and rippled like a river, loose around her ears and above her widow's peak, like a soft halo. Her cheeks were perfectly flushed and her lips never really closed over her long teeth. A sedimentary mascara smudge stained the space under each dark eye. Her body was the beach, pulled off the earth.

Their feet screamed like pink runts in their toe shoes, ribbons undone. They stretched sometimes, practicing splits. They watched themselves in the mirror, and watched one another, peeling away leotards, skin, muscle, fat, bone, and blood with their eyes. They talked about the Academy, what it would be like, and spun dreams of cable-knit sweaters, bonfires, and the crooks of boy's necks that smelled like woodsy cologne. Inslee didn't dance. She played field hockey.

The whole damn summer town was coated in autumn, quiet and mummified with a dark cape of vampirical gauze falling over everything. Gulls picked over the sand to find nary a droopy french fry, shutters were shut, parking lots empty. Townie kids sat on the rump-numbing stone of the Civil War monument outside the library, flicking ash and burrowing into their black hoodies, their friends' bands scrawled in Sharpie over duct tape on the front.

The house was fleeced of all the accoutrements of a waking life. There was no halibut in the oven, no video in the circa 1989 VCR, and no reedy beach towels fermenting in the dryer. The rugs were rolled up and we could see the places on the floor where storms had warped the wood and where clicking claws of Cocker Spaniels had left shallow scratches. All framed photos and oil paintings of fields of heather were placed in drawers. The empty spots on the walls glowed like the skin under a wedding ring. Olivia spent all afternoon trying to carve a pumpkin with a nail file, nearly stabbing straight through her palm. Inslee wore fuzzy black cat ears on her head. Mary put blue duct tape over cracks between the floor and the trap door to the basement, nothing down there but a boiler and dead moths. The last thing they wanted was some kid stepping right into the cavity and landing in a heap on the stone

floor. One time when she was little, Mary jarred drew up the door and discovered the bones of a baby mouse, a perfect delicate skeleton, resting on one of the steps of the ladder down. Since then, she'd never opened the basement door again.

Mary couldn't stand hearing single voices echoing in the throbbing, toothless house. The guests began to arrive much later than she expected.

AJ came first. He was both rich and a criminal. He wore black leather shoes with silver buckles and could build his own computer out of parts found in a dumpster. He brought a bottle of vodka and a quart of orange juice.

Heather was next, with her boyfriend Gideon and Julie.

Heather played saxophone. During jazz concerts, she hypnotized the audience. She would stand there on the stage in her red cowboy boots, Catholic junior high uniform skirt, and glasses, puffing on that sax with gales of innuendo, her sensuality so un-ironic, hair matted against her temples in thick blonde strands that so many boys (sixth grade through senior year) were excusing themselves into the pious Autumn air, digging up visions of their mothers in the morning.

Gideon was slim, with broad shoulders and chest you wanted to lie your head on. His mother was half Jamaican and so his skin was the sweet brown of NesQuik and milk. He wore moccasins in every kind of weather, and white undershirts like Marlon Brando. He skateboarded everywhere and made girls' stomachs do flip-flops when they heard the gravely sound of his wheels on the pavement behind them.

Julie led a rather unfortunate public life. She was underestimated, having the kind of looks that girls mooned over enviously and called pretty, though no boys

noticed her. She was fastidious and organized—everything had to be color-coded. She always wore black and grey, yet it appeared much more classy than solemn or Goth or Puritan. She lived in the Dormitory known for its cutting, coke addictions, and bulimia. Years earlier, Julie had tried to commit suicide. She was carried out of the Dormitory on a stretcher, into an ambulance on the middle of the quad, during lunch period on a Tuesday, in gorgeous frigid sunlight.

Gideon brought four cases of Pabst Blue Ribbon and two of Miller High Life. He stacked each one on the kitchen counter, proudly laying them out like prize bass. All six, now, sat around the table listening to shitty, sandy Cape Cod radio and waiting.

At night, out of town and in houses, they were all different people. Mary was dressed as Dorothy, Finn as a skeleton, Olivia as a Pink Lady, Heather as Lolita, Gideon as Kurt Cobain, and Julie as Wednesday Adams. Nothing outside the party mattered. It became a little world. When you hold a conk shell up to your ear, you think you can hear the ocean inside. The universe was inside this little house on the elbow of Massachusetts, all glassed in like a snowglobe. The glitter and confetti thickened and quickened.

Someone threw up in the sink. When Mary was drunk, she lost her sense of smell, so it wasn't until she ambled over to the counter to find some waterproof matches (the kind that you can never get to light) that she noticed a chowder-y liquid filling up the sink halfway. She pushed thoughts of the morning, rubber gloves submerged in vomit, out of her mind, grabbed the matches, and stumbled outside.

Autumn was gracing the coast with its presence for one last evening. Everyone was used to muggy New England summers wearing out their welcome, dragging out in sweaty pontification, until finally smothered by violent New England winters. They enjoyed the feeling of drunkenness, for once letting themselves be young and stupid. Mary drew as much joy from the crunch of leaves under her feet as she did from pulling the bubble wrap out from parcels when she was younger and laying it on the floor to stomp around on. The air was perfect, rang with the perfect pitch of biting cold and the perfect smell of sea salt, spice and burning something. Instead of hearing the faint descant of parties somewhere, some street over, the only noise in the night was coming from these children. With a pendulant rhythm, the beam from the lighthouse washed over the back yard every few moments, illuminating their faces in a snapshot breathing.

Heather and Julie sat on one side of the patio table (Gideon was inside, arousing squeals from underclassmen girls by showing them how he could light his arm hairs on fire). AJ was leaning in close between them. It was so obvious he wanted both of them. At once. Yet they remained so unaware of him sexually. Next to Julie was Finn.

Mary thought Finn was really good at ignoring her. It seemed to come effortlessly to him. For some reason, it was okay though. He wrote her apoem. And submitted, anonymously, to the literary magazine. There was one line, "she is the fractured light that you see coming from a white stone under a green wave." Mary thought maybe, if they united, she would feel what it felt like to be that light.

Mary pulled up an empty chair and sat down, cold metal burning through her white stockings. Finn handed her a Darjum Black and, after watching her wrestle with the waterproofs, a lighter.

"Give me the minutes of the meeting. AJ, are you wooing them with your knowledge of expensive and arty magazines?" Mary asked

AJ bared teeth.

"Actually," he said. "We were talking about sex."

He's a mind reader, Mary thought. She took a long hard pull and let her senses marinate in smoke and alcohol.

"What about sex?'

"At the Academy."

Finn emitted a sharp loud cackle. Everyone looked at him and turned away. Everything he did was a joke that no one else got but him. That way they never knew if the joke was on them.

"Did you hear about what happened right before the holiday?" Heather asked.

Mary shook her head. Heather bent towards her, eyes watering, and AJ pulled her back by the shoulder.

"No, no. Let me tell it. You'll fuck it up."

Heather pouted, then crawled her fingers up AJ's arm like a spider.

“So there’s this chick. Sophomore girl – maybe you’ve seen her around. Her name’s Jess. Jess from New Hampshire. Long blonde hair, cute little rack, always wears black tights. New sophomore, just transferred.”

The screen door squeaked and Olivia and Inslee walked out. Olivia was packing her Parliaments against her palm. Mary watched her walk towards the table and loathed the way her body cut through the dark, cat-like. She glanced at Finn. He was watching her too.

“Are you talking about Jess?” Inslee asked.

“She knows the story too?” Mary kicked one leg in the air.

“Everyone knows,” Inslee said.

“Shh. No,” AJ said. “Not everyone. So let me finish. Okay so Jess. You’d know her. Always eating Twizzlers.”

Someone in the dark on the other side of the table giggled. Olivia? Inslee giggled as well. Mary hated the way they giggled together. She hated the way Inslee always looked at Olivia whenever she spoke, even if she was speaking to a whole group of people, like a student giving an oral report in front of a teacher. Boarding school could make you hate your friends.

Finn had his guitar leaning against his chair, a blue guitar, named Maude. He began strumming Velvet Underground, his head tilted back, eyes closed, clove snarling his lip like a fish hook. He strummed out a low and lilting thread of “Run, Run, Run.”

AJ was getting excited. The Darth Vader masked he'd pushed up onto the top of his head began slipping over his brow. Julie brought a flask to her lips – she must have been holding it in her lap. She took a hard swallow and let her head fall on AJ's shoulder. He winked at Mary.

"Now where was I…So, Jess arrives, fresh off the farm, and it doesn't take long for her to morph into a little whore."

Julie's eyes were closed but she was listening and she jiggled her head a bit, making a barely audible 'tsk.' Jess lived in Julie's Dormitory, on Julie's floor actually, and the older girls always felt protective of the younger ones – especially when they all resided in a place rife with such a bad reputation.

"The little whore develops this system for sneaking out of her dorm to go do the nasty in different guys' rooms. First she would just go hook up with different boys – you know, various flirtations, but then it became this whole complicated ruse. The boys tear out dirty pictures from Maxim, GQ – you know the kind they tape above their beds – only, when they're feeling horny, they tape them to their windows. Jess goes around at night and uses the fire escape to get into the rooms with nudey pictures. Word gets 'round, and eventually there got to be so many boys there just weren't enough hours of darkness. Instead of taking her sweet time – you know, making out vertically, moving to the bed – she just gives them all blowjobs. Every day, the boys would gather at lunch and try and figure out how many she'd done that night. Groups of them would organize it so they'd all put pictures in their windows, try to see how many she'd suck off in a night."

“It’s like the Oreck challenge,” Finn said. Only AJ laughed. The girls stared at him, drunk, blank.

“Jesus Christ, get on with it,” Heather said.

“Some boys from the soccer team made a deal one night – five of them – to all put pictures in their windows. When she was done with one of them, a star goalie – let’s call him Joe, he gets this brilliant idea. She’s in there, wiping her face and dusting her knees, and Joe’s all like, ‘You should come by the locker room after our next win and celebrate with me and my buddies.’ Jess, having about as much self-esteem as the desert does water, is all like, ‘Yea sounds great.’”

The breeze picked up and its cold on Julie’s cheeks must have begun to sober her up. “Seriously, AJ,” she said. “Please, this is disgusting. Just stop.”

“No,” Heather lightly slapped her shoulder. “I wanna hear.”

“Okay so, being the monstrous beasts that they are,” AJ continued, “and having ‘Joe’ strapped to the goal like a chastity belt to a virgin, the Elks win their next game two days later.”

Finn looked at Mary when AJ mentioned the word ‘virgin.’ They both turned away, looking out at the dark and rolling lawn.

“After the game, ‘Joe’ approaches Jess who’s on the sidelines cheering her fucking heart out. He says something like ‘Still up for that celebration?’ Does something lewd like…you know.”

AJ mimed the “something lewd,” probing his tongue against the inside of his cheek. Julie rolled her eyes and sunk deeper into her shoulders.

"I guess Jess freaks out a little like she didn't know that's what he meant by celebration. I guess she was thinking free alcohol and hot upperclassmen soccer boys. I guess one of the boys had anticipated such ambivalence. He'd gone online and learned how to make GHB, using basic substances -- potassium hydroxide and the like in chem lab. The boys shower and preen their junk, or whatever it is fucking athletes do when they think they're gonna get some. The five of them meet in the locker room. They've got a bottle of Popov, some red cups, and the nerd's got a tube of DIY GHB tucked inside his sleeve. I think you can pretty much imagine how the story goes from there. Jess walks in, nervous like a fuckin' bride – hell, a virgin bride. She's downing vodka like a champ and, unwittingly, the GHB. Eventually they've gotten her to the perfect level of compromised consciousness. She can still move a little bit, and keep herself from falling over, but she's pretty much out. The boys stand in a circle, Jess kneeling in the middle. They each get their oral, taking like minute-long turns, rotating her in the center like a fuckin' lazy Susan. They're playing this game, 'Stoneface.' Whoever finishes first is, essentially, a joke. Whoever finishes last is the man. Just another way for macho dudes to unleash their repressed homo-erotic urges – like wrestling and group showers. So they're all goin' off, one after another, like fuckin' fireworks, or synchronized swimmers, or, I don't know, like something. I can't think of a good metaphor right now.

"By the end, she's gotta be pretty tired but maybe she shouldn't be lying on the fucking floor like she is. They can't get her to walk out on her own. Never occurred to them. She has a huge egg, that's gonna turn purple, on the side of her head from

where she flopped over when they were finished and she couldn't keep herself up anymore. They don't know what to do. They're fucked."

"Figuratively, and orally," Finn said, his fingers making spider motions on the strings, but no music coming out.

Mary glared at him. He scoffed. Oliviae giggled.

"Two boys take her by the armpits and they help her back to her dorm. The front door is locked and the fire escape's all chained up. They leave her lying on the reading bench out front. This is like 5 AM. By 6 AM, she's still out like a light. The dorm parent on duty finds her, hair fuck-matted, breath smelling, and panics. She rushes her to the hospital in the city. Of course they find traces of semen, see the bruise, etcetera and amen. They put the fuckin' pieces of the puzzle together. It doesn't take long to find the boys either because it's not as though very fucking member of the soccer team wasn't jeering about it for days after."

Heather's mouth was open and she didn't even realize it.

Gideon had come outside, trailed by a few younger girls. He was shaking his head, smiling, and the girls were looking rather miffed, arms crossed over their chests or biting their cuticles.

"Here's the money bit," AJ said, snapping his fingers. "The boys never went to disciplinary committee. The decision was made completely dictatorially by the headmaster. They were expelled, immediately, hands down, pants down, no questions about it. No one was happy about this, not the other little sophomore sluts – no offense, girls – and the athletic department didn't want to lose five soccer

wizards. Nor did the board of trustees. They love their championship darlings. Plus it makes the Academy seem like a brothel, the whole thing. Now these boys, star athletes and trust fund babies, their futures are over. Imagine their parents. The thing might go to court and they have to write letters of apology to the family."

"Can you imagine what would happen," Olivia mused, "if the papers found out about this? 'ELITE PRIVATE SCHOOL COVERS SOCCER SEX SCANDAL.'"

"For sure," Heather said. "I mean, fuck me gently with a chainsaw."

"The end," AJ twirled his hand in a mock little operatic bow. Nobody spoke. Mary felt guilty, like she'd just gobbled up the wedding cake of someone who'd been jilted at the altar.

"Horrible," she said. Just the word. The rest of the sentence had gotten lost in her lungs somewhere, cavernous and clouded with smoke.

"Oh come on," Gideon said. "It's not that fucking bad. It's a melodramatic telling, first of all. And the school acted irrationally. Everyone's gonna hate her now. You have to consider her history. She's a runaround Sue. She would have done it, sober or otherwise. I mean let's all just acknowledge the elephantine slut in the room."

"You fucking pig," Julie threw the waterproof matchbox in Gideon's general direction and stalked, swervily, into the house.

Heather's tone was sympathetic, "Gid, what were you thinking?" She was trying to defend Julie, but she was so bad at pretending she could ever be mad at Gideon.

Mary felt for her shoes under the chair, couldn't find them, and ran after Julie barefoot.

Julie was sitting at the kitchen table pouring more rum into an already rummy Diet Coke. She'd only been inside a minute, but she was already crying.

"Julie, he didn't mean it. And really since when do we care what Gideon thinks, right?" She was trying to make her laugh.

Julie hiccuped. Her lips were gummy and stuck together with saliva and tears.

"I know but, I mean, damn it, Mary. Is that really how they think? They're monsters. And we are too. The fact that we're so fucking far away from her, that we can sit there and jury her story. Gets us high. Makes us feel good. What the fuck?"

"I know."

"No, you don't know, Mary. I don't see you giving Gideon the old fisticuffs. That would take a semblance of self-respect. The truth is, Gideon's hot, you wanna be more like Heather, and you're a drunk, depressed little girl."

Mary felt the tingling in her face like she was beginning to cry, but no tears.

"I'm sorry." Julie wiped her eyes with her sleeves. She threw away the line. "That was mean."

She coughed and tipped her head backwards and drained her drink.

"Just…we're all so – I'm scared," Julie said.

"Me too," Mary said, although she had lost what it was they were talking about. "When did everything get so hard?" Julie began to chew on the edge of her cup.

"I can't even remember…God, we're all so -- this isn't like some movie or something. Can't just sit and watch and not care."

"We care," Mary said. "I care."

"Right. That's why you're with Finn." Julie squeezed her cup into a crumpled mess of plastic

"No. What? I mean…what?" Mary focused on the shine from the patio light, reflecting off the pots and pans hanging above the stove. It was easier than thinking about Finn.

"I hate to be the bearer, but that whole fucking thing is just sad and ridiculous and just…sad."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, Julie."

"Finn. Finn, Mary. Finn. You and Finn. Why do you think Finn's never had a girlfriend? He runs on hedonism and poetry. He's a fucking hologram, you're never going to be able to touch him. And he's gonna…you're gonna…you'll just keep getting smaller. You'll see. And I don't even fucking know you that well."

Mary looked out the kitchen window. In his skeleton costume, Finn looked like he was disappearing, into an ether, and the black blended into the dark until there

were only glow-in-the-dark bones. She wanted to march out there and kiss him, but they never kissed in front of people.

Mary shook her head.

"No. That's right. You don't know me." She was trying to argue, but couldn't muster it and the words drifted along the ceiling like dying balloons.

Mary took the open bottle of rum and drank straight from it. She dragged Julie back outside. The rest of the group was still talking about sex. The wind had died down again.

"Finn, do you have a clove for Julie?" Mary asked

He pulled one out of his coat pocket but didn't look at her. He was pretending to be preoccupied with the conversation, interested in whatever Olivia was saying.

"I just feel so bad for her," Olivia said. "I can't believe she feels like she has to do that stuff to get guys to like her. It's not worth it." Fucking hypocrite, Mary thought. Images of Olivia, hunched over the toilet seat or in front of some guy's unzipped fly, flashed through her mind.

"I don't know," Mary said. "Everybody does things they're ashamed of. Doesn't make her any sadder than anybody else."

Mary tried to make eye contact with Julie but she was methodically twisting her hair around her fingertip and watching it turn blue.

"Boys are overrated," Heather said. "Soon they're going to figure out how to reproduce without men and then…I mean, it's not like they can even get us off anyways. They'll be moot."

Finn picked Maude up again and started in with a verse of "Jesse's Girl."

"Oh, I wanna tell her that I love her but the point is probably moot."

Finn couldn't really sing for shit, but the girls were still rapt. When he sang at the open mic night at school he danced with the microphone just like Mick Jagger would. He's singing to me, Mary thought. She loved knowing that every girl in the audience was staring at the back of my head with a strong force of jealousy.

"I don't see what the big deal is." Gideon wouldn't shut up. "Not to be a predictable chauvinistic jerk, but the girl's a regular strumpet. No two ways about it. She just was going after what she wanted. She brought it upon herself."

Inslee wrung herself out of gin-soaked silence to say a few words.

"Oh my god. How hard to you have to work to be so fucking simplistic. She's hiding behind her sexuality. Do you think a woman actually derives any pleasure from performing oral sex on five guys in a row? It's an act," Inslee stood up and took her pulpit at the edge of the wrought iron patio table. "She's a scared and insecure soul. I mean, wouldn't you try to hide that kind of vulnerability? None of us want to believe we're that human."

Finn began playing "The Monster Mash."

Without much warning other than the sudden humidity, a thread of lightning ripped across the endless sky. Thunder. And it started to rain a very cold rain.

"Deus ex machines," Finn said.

"Hallelujah," AJ said shook his hand in the air mimicking an Evangelist. "I think that's the sign to turn in. The estrogen was pumping a little too mightily."

Everyone went inside, dejected as wet dogs. The kitchen reeked of vomit. Most of the bottles were empty. No food left. A few spare beers floated like shipwrecks in the huge tub of melted ice.

The rest of the party was in the living room where someone had put on an old Joni Mitchell record.

A few couples were swaying to the music, embracing tightly and kissing. A group of seven was playing Clue on the floor. About two were still drinking from closely guarded airplane liquor bottles. Four that had been outside smoking came in from the rain, blunt barely touched. One boy was braiding some girl's hair -- probably didn't know how to -- more of an excuse just to touch her.

The group made their labored way up the stairs, couples looking for empty beds, and singles looking for spots on the floor to lie out blankets and sleeping bags.

As the party was dispersing, Mary began superficially cleaning the kitchen, apprehensive of the moment when she and Finn would have to deal with sleeping arrangements. She was putting half finished liter soda bottles into the fridge when he came up behind me, wrapping his arms around my neck. He'd finished his cloves and moved on to his pipe that his grandfather had bought him in Amsterdam. He lit it in front of my face.

"You smell like cancer," I said.

"Where am I gonna sleep?"

"I don't know."

"That's cute." Finn tipped his pipe to her. No, seriously, where?"

"With me. Don't be stupid. I locked my brother's room down here, for us."

"Are you sure that's okay?"

She turned to face him.

"Is the Pope Catholic?" she asked.

"How the fuck should I know," he said.

Mary pulled the pipe from his mouth and began walking towards the living room. Finn reached for her to give it back. She walked slowly, backwards, through the living room, towards the bedroom, looking at Finn the whole time. He followed her just as slowly.

When they reached the bedroom Mary closed the door and locked it. She removed Finn's pipe from his lips and placed it on the nightstand. She wanted what she wanted. She was going to let him see what she looked like without anything on. She reached up and firmly dragged her palm down the side of his face, smearing away the black and white cake makeup. She couldn't remember whey she'd let him scare her.

It was dark. Mary lay on the bed with her legs bent sideways and arms outstretched.

"Well, you're making me an offer I can't refuse," Finn said.

He kneeled over her, hands planted on either side of her head.

"I'm not gonna kiss you until you ask me to," he said.

"What if I don't?"

"Then I'm not…"

Mary reached for his head and pulled him toward her. Her lips were cold. Finn never took her shirt off when they were alone together. It was something he didn't bother with. Mary didn't know why so she took it off herself. Her skin looked day-glo pale in the light, two hours to sunrise. She reached for his belt.

"Wait," Finn said. He put his hand over hers. She let her hands drop.

"What?"

"I don't know, just wait." Finn came down from above and rolled over to lie next to her.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." Mary ran her fingers through her hair and felt the tightness on her scalp.

"Dude, just chill."

"I don't get it."

"I just…I don't think we should do this."

"Wow, okay, this is really a situation I never expected." Mary hastily sat up and put her shirt back on, backwards and inside-out.

"I know, I'm sorry. I just don't think it's a good idea," he said.

She felt oddly sober all of the sudden, and cold all over.

"Okay. Why not?"

"It just doesn't seem right, like, here, and now, when we're drunk."

Mary's face was hot, but her arms and legs had goosebumps.

"Finn, when, like, ever again are we going to be alone, together, in a bed, in an unchapheroned house, with condoms?"

He turned his head away from hers.

"I don't know."

"I just don't really get what the fucking problem is." Mary stared up at the Wayne Gretsky poster above her brother's bed. She wanted the cool ice against her face.

"I don't know. I just feel weird. I mean, like, you're a virgin and stuff."

"So are you."

Mary felt Finn tense beside her.

"Finn, look at me. What's going on?"

He turned and faced her.

"Nothing."

"What are you talking about? Nothing?"

"Mary. If I told you something…"

"What," she screamed, too loud for the house, the street and the autumn night. "Tell me what the problem is."

"Mary." He choked a little bit, "Mary, I had sex with Olivia."

Something in her head snapped. Though it wasn't shock. It was as though she'd been expecting this, devised a plan in her mind, and the plan was triggered. The flint struck.

"I don't believe you."

"I'm sorry."

"Oh my fucking unbelievable Jesus Christ," she whispered into the polyester lace collar of her Kansas dress. Mary curled up on her side and tried to make herself as small as possible.

Finn groped for her hand in the dark, but she pulled it into her chest. He took his other hand and put it over her cheek, pressing her gently towards the pillow. It was the first time he'd ever done something like that, touched her like that, but she pushed his hand away.

Finn told her they'd gone to get coffee one evening, a Friday – somewhere between the time when the air turned from clear to gold to grey. Mary had gone on a trip into the city. They walked into town, kicking rocks and holding their mittens in front of their noses to keep them from going numb. On the walk back to campus they held hands, for warmth, leaves falling around them. They decided to walk back through the cemetery that was adjacent to the rear of the campus. They had done it there, in one of the remote recesses, perhaps in a family plot with gravestones so old that nobody ever visited them, the geese sleeping in the pond waking to watch. There was no good excuse for it. Olivia had simply asked him if he wanted to fuck her. Any boy, including Finn, would have been lying if he'd said no.

"Was it good?" Mary started crying but tried to keep the tears out of her throat, out of her voice.

"I don't know," he mumbled.

"Oh, fuck, Finn, you know," this time she gave her voice a serrated strength, cutting to the truth.

"I don't know." Finn grew exasperated, forcing the words out.

"Was it good? Was it hot? Does she look better naked than I do?"

"Mary. Stop," he said.

"Do not tell me what to do," she said, trying out the voice of a strong woman – maybe a lawyer.

She bit on the tip of her thumb for a moment, trying to stop crying. "What did you say afterwards?"

"I don't remember."

"Remember."

"I said that I thought it was a mistake."

"I don't believe you."

"I said…"

"Liar." Mary remembered sitting cross-legged with Olivia on her Laura Ashley comforter, talking about bodies in library voices. "What did she say?"

"She said – she said, 'Don't tell Mary'."

"Hypocrite."

"Who?"

"Everyone," she said. "You know Olivia's my best friend."

"Yea, Mary, I know. I'm not stupid."

"Yes you are. You're stupid. Olivia's my best friend. You fucked my best friend. Did you know Olivia and I took ballet together since we were two? You…oh my God."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"No you're not. And you know that you're not. Did you know we used to take baths together, and we share clothes? Maybe she was wearing my bra when you fucked her in the graveyard. Did you know we taught each other how to kiss?"

"Fine."

"No, don't do that." Mary wanted to fight harder, more blood. "Did Olivia tell you she throws up? Like, all the time. And she's a slut. Do you know anything about her? Her favorite food is pink icing, out of the jar. Who's a better kisser?"

"Mary, you need to fucking stop." Finn inched away from her on the bed.

"I don't need anything." Her tears finally broke into a sobbing nor'easter.

She just lay in the bed, silent, not knowing what to do or say. Every so often Finn would reach out to touch her or ask if there was anything he could do. There was a knock at the door but neither answered.

"Should I get that?" Finn asked.

Mary shook her head. "Who is it?"

"It's Olivia, sweetie, we can't find any pillows. Where do you keep the extra pillows?" She tried to stop crying. "Just keep looking around in the closets," Mary yelled.

"I really am sorry," Finn whispered.

"Jesus, will you stop saying that." Mary closed her eyes, trying to play the old Joni Mitchell record in her head. Trying to remember the words.

“But I am,” he pleaded.

“But you’re not.”

They lay there for a while. A vague while. Both alcohol and distress had robbed Mary of her sense of time. She became so dazed that she almost forgot what was going on. She almost forgot that she was upset and instead became comforted by Finn’s presence and heat next to her. She wanted him to tell me that it would be fine, that Olivia and she would never get old and none of them would ever leave each other. She tried to match her heavy breathing up with his. In that split second where she forgot how mad she was, Mary wondered if she loved him and that was all there was.

They lay there for a while. Mary finally got up. She put on an old Red Sox sweatshirt that was on top of her brother’s dresser.

Finn sat up. “Where are you going?”

“Outside.”

“Why?”

“None of your fucking business.”

“Want me to come?”

“Ha.” Mary glanced in the mirror quickly and placed her fingers under each kohl stained eye. “No.”

As she passed the bed, she opened the nightstand drawer, took out the box of condoms, walked out the door.

Olivia was sitting on the floor against the wall. She looked up at Mary with distended eyes, like she’d heard the whole conversation, though that was probably

impossible. Her breasts pushed up against the white of her sweater, rhythmically and heavily. She seemed scared. *This is the moment when we figure out if we are still going to be friends or not*, Mary thought. Neither of them folded.

"Here," Mary shoved the box of condoms into Olivia's lap. "You clearly need these way more than I do."

She just turned the box in her hands and examined it like a broken teacup, then put it down on the floor next to her. She looked up at Mary with big, wet eyes. Her eyes grew impossibly larger. She crossed her arms over her chest and shivered like she was cold.

"Mary."

"Don't," Mary covered her ears.

She walked past her, into the hall, and out the front door onto the porch. The sun was just hooking its fingers over the horizon. Two used condoms, an apple core, somebody's butterfly mask, and a million cigarette butts littered the front lawn.

Mary sat out on the wet grass, letting the cold numb her joints, her fingers, her knees, her eyelids, her temples, her back. She could hear Finn's voice, through a window somewhere. She didn't know what he was saying or where he was or to whom he was talking. She realized that soon she would never know what he was saying or doing. She thought maybe she missed him already and tried to push that gnawing feeling out of her stomach. She thought about Olivia, the pictures they'd taken of each other in their underwear, how she would look at her on Monday morning in school, their birthdays, what went through her mind when she fucked, whether she had a mask. If she did, what did it look like and what was she

hiding? She tried to think about Finn's and what his was. He was easy. Olivia she wasn't sure about. She thought about Jess. Jess was still young. Mary wondered if she knew how her life would turn out. Wondered if she went and sat outside when she got back from the hospital that day. And, afterwards, did she cry? And afterwards, did the sunrise still seem to her like something so magical that it couldn't possibly happen every day. Or was it just the earth, spinning, spinning, all the time?

Us, Los Angeles, CA – 498.3

The wide, dirt trench behind the Oakwood School was no place for kids to play, but we played there anyways. We called it "the gully," and that's exactly what it was: a dusty, shallow gulch that separated the school from the rest of the world, from out there, from North Hollywood. It was full of refuse, old Slurpee cups and used syringes, and the public park was likely crawling with predators, but these things were above our consciousness. To us, it was just our own version of the places we found in so many of the books they read: Oz, Terabithia, NeverNeverland, The Kingdom of Wisdom. We did not have snow days. We had rain days. Sometimes, maybe once a year, it would rain so hard that the gully would fill up with water and flood the entire school. I imagined my classmates swimming through it, being carried away by a muddy current of acid rain, floating down Tujunga aboard upside down umbrellas. The gully was a dusty sepia snapshot of what had existed before – before evaporation.

When it was nice out we built forts out of dried out palms and bamboo shoots. We made arrows out of sticks and pointed rocks and string, and pretended to be the Native Americans who once ruled the West. The smart aleck often took on the business of narrating playtime and gave everyone Yukian names and totem animals. My animal was a deer but the names were just callow interpretations of things we'd heard in Western movies, like She Who Looks At Stars or Hungry Caterpillar. In the games, someone was always bitten by a rattlesnake. We learned in Social Studies about tying a tourniquet above the wound and sucking out the poison. The girls were relegated to weaving tall grass together or preparing meals out

of berries and silver dollars. The most popular girl was always trying to orchestrate a romantic subplot between her and a certain boy – she would be a captive pioneer girl and he a brave buckaroo who would come to rescue her.

Everybody was on the side of the Indians – because of everything we'd learned in school, sitting cross-legged in a circle in the classroom, about California history. Of course none of us were native – we weren't even pioneers. Our grandparents had come here on boats, in wool coats, had their names changed, and tried to be a part of the cinematic Goldrush-redux that was taking place in Hollywood. And it was our parents who grew up on Wonder Bread and John Wayne, but we felt like those movies belonged to us too. The West was entirely developed but, for some reason, she still clung to the notion that there was this frontier out there, all this stuff we hadn't even seen, and it was ours for the taking.

Now we barely speak. I know that one of us has gotten very into drugs, another's mother died and they made an *E! True Hollywood Story* about her. One is a model. Another, in a band. The last time we saw each other, at some big New Year's Eve party a few years back, we could not get enough of that old-school talk. Every sentence began with, "Do you remember…" or "How about when…" The Tomagochis, the video games, Alanis Morisette casettes, and iridescent Skechers sneakers. We were the first generation to define ourselves by the things we consumed. Now we only wish we could remember better what actually happened.

In fifth grade, we studied ancient Egypt. All of the students tried to walk like Egyptians, one hand in front and one hand in back, feet turned impossibly sideways. We sat in trailers converted to classrooms, jiggling our knees and waiting for recess.

Once Pogs were banned, we spent our recesses playing endless games of tag, kicking up dust and skinning our knees. Oakwood didn't serve lunch so we would wait in line at the snack truck up on Magnolia Avenue, sinking our teeth into Sloppy Joe's wrapped in foil. Some of the boys started bringing squirt guns to school, eager to soak our chests and see which of us have started wearing bras. We pretended to hate it, screaming, "This is dry-clean only!" At the end of the day, we kept our eyes downcast. We dreaded this time apart.

In second grade we studied the pioneers and the history of California. Our entire class went on a field trip to Knott's Berry Farm to go panning for gold. We watched the Wild West Show in wonderment. Every two hours in the ghost town, the "cowboys" get into a showdown, shooting at each other from atop horses or through saloon windows. I wanted so badly to be like one of the saloon girls in her lace and ruffles and have the handsome cowboy save me from the corrupt saloon owner.

At the end of the day, we were allowed to look around in the gift shop by ourselves for a half an hour. We cooked up a scheme to hide in one of the shops in the ghost town and get left behind. Then we could stay forever at Knott's Berry Farm and live the lawless life of the old West.

When we went back to the ghost town, the streets were quiet, the dust was settled, and the doors to every building were locked. Finally we found an open door, to the barbershop. We went inside, tip-toeing the way we'd seen the characters on Scooby Doo sneak around. Once we got inside, we realized it wasn't a barber shop. There were couches and chairs set up, and a television. There was a kitchenette with a coffee maker and a box of donuts on the counter. One of the

cowboys from the fight was sitting on the couch in his shirt, hat, and boxers. His boots were on the floor and his chaps were hung over the back of the couch.

"What're you kids doing here," he asked. We didn't answer.

He put down a piece of pizza he was holding and stood up.

"Are you kids from the school trip?"

I nodded.

At the Visitor's Desk, they called our teacher over the loud speaker to come get us. On the bus ride back to school, we barely spoke, just counted cars with our heads against the windows.

We all grew up on movie sets the way fishermen's children grow up on boats. We were used to the darkness, the necessity for quite, and the slap-clap-trap of the marker when the scene was announced. We knew that the movie sets were fake but we wanted to pretend for a little while that we didn't. Many of us grew up in houses that were used for movies, giant estates like something out of The Temple of Doom, nestled in the extreme corners of various canyons.

In one backyard, beyond the tennis courts, the pool, and the little brook filled with coy fish and bullfrogs, there was the Jungle. We had no idea how far it went. To us, it never stopped. We could play there until dinner time every day after school and still have acres and acres left to excavate. The Jungle was a quagmire so stones moved underfoot and sometimes what looked like a rock or a plant was actually some amphibian searching for a stream of water. Asian tiger mosquitoes the size of our ears descended upon our arms like spacecrafts and inserted their invisible siphons.

Pollen drifted through shafts of light like fairy dust. Sometimes we found ancient artifacts in the Jungle: the wooden planks from a sunken ship, the porcelain feet and basin of the princess's bathtub, plaster appendages of crumbling statues that once stood outside the palace, silver spoons, pocket watches. We carried them back to the house and washed them off in the laundry room, dusting them with watercolor brushes. When we went to the Jungle we brought things with us: pillowcases to collect stuff, walking sticks, Fruit Roll-Ups. And we always brought a compass.

At some point, it stopped being cool to play make-believe.

We would rather watch the Friday Night Line-Up (*Family Matters, Sabrina the Teenage Witch, Boy Meets World,* and *Clueless*).

We wanted to be in groups of boys and girls, without our mothers lingering at the next table reading Stephen King. To old to pretend but too young for the vagaries of adolescence.

We did a lot of hanging around: in bookstores near the magazine rack, in movie theaters hours after the movie has ended, on the curb outside somebody's house, on the swings at school. That's when boys started skateboarding and girls started grooming themselves.

It was the hanging around age.

If somebody was lucky enough to have a parent who wasn't completely in another solar system, we could get a ride in their Range Rover to Universal City Walk.

At night, Universal City Walk was like an extra-terrestrial Champs-Elysees, all neon and flashing lights, and tourists with fannypacks and Zinc still fading on their

noses. The sun had set completely but was still casting a faint glow over the city from behind the hills, like a flashlight under a sheet. Everything was purple, the color of Grape Kool-Aid. Skinny girls in tube tops with boys in un-tied shoes crowded the tables at the Hard Rock Café, shooting spitballs at each other through their straws. Families waited in line for the Back to the Future ride or E.T.'s Adventure. All the stores, Quicksilver and Magnet Max and Chocolate Loco, were starting to bring down their metal padlock gates. The very last store before Studio City becomes the freeway was Adobe Road, a Native American gift shop. The walls were lined with bamboo flutes, dream catchers, and airbrush paintings of wolves and eagles.

We all funneled into some movie or other – rated PG of course – all the boys throwing popcorn at one another and the girls sucking somberly on their Diet sodas. For two hours, we were given the opportunity to have our own lives. We experimented with one another's rough, sun-scraped lips and tried to quell our curiosity, to be satisfied, by sweating hands sitting simply side by side on the armrest. None of us would speak outside, but here, we were starting something.

When we got outside it had usually started to rain a little bit, but a warm rain, and it smelled like gasoline, as the rain always does in Los Angeles. We'd walk all the way back, down City Walk, nearly silent, watching the pavement become slick and shine under the streetlights.

Meg, Hull, MA – 28.2 square miles

Right after I graduated from college, I moved into this wonderful third floor walk up right off the L train in Greenpoint. It was just what I'd always imagined my early twenties would be like. There was a living room in the middle with a long green couch that folded into a futon. Instead of a coffee table, we had a giant, lacquered stump that must have come from a tree the size of an elephant – we bought it from a Benedictine abbey in Bethlehem, Connecticut. Piles of heavy hardcover books: books on Andy Warhol, and pictures from the cover of *LIFE* magazine. No television – we were so above television. I had a degree in English and my roommate one in Gender Studies.

We were not above a bar though. A shiny black bar in the corner with a mirror behind it. The mirror had the Miller High Life witch painted on it. Me and my high school pal Susie stole it from our town's local dive, the Gun Rock Tavern.

Decided not to touch the walls—they were just too cool. Painted yellow and decorated with posters and poetry. My favorite poster was one that I put up of Jeff Buckley – the tragic Hamlet figure of nineties alternative folk. Around the creases of the room, the pain was stained with water marks that made it look like the walls were crying, mascara running. In places, the treatment was so badly damaged that the plaster sagged softly like the earth on a fresh grave. And there were massive chips in the paint where rings of different color in many layers showed underneath: a topography of past tenants. We were really into authenticity. Someone had gotten really drunk at our house party and gone to town with a Sharpie. In the corner they

scrawled, “angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavily connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of fight.” They screwed up the quote and gave it this entirely new meaning.

When I saw the kitchen I freaked out. This wonderful footage of this new, wonderful adult life. The kitchen represented the best parts of somebody’s day. The first cup of coffee, coming to your lips like a dizzying kiss. Morning spent naked in bed eating whole wheat toast. Getting drunk at one in the afternoon on the first day of summer. Too many margaritas and too much gazpacho turning your stomach into a crazy acidic fiesta. The preparations for a baby shower: cupcakes in the oven and marshmallow tea steeping loose-leaf in our Mother Goose teapot. The first dinner you make together with a lover, of pesto and linguine, and the dirty wine glasses you leave on the floor by the stereo, Astral Weeks on repeat. Eating ice cream in your underwear at 2 AM. This was a life that revolves around allowance and fulfillment and digestion. This was a real life.

My roommate and I were lugging a lamp we found on the street up the last flight of stairs. The lamp part was meant to look like an old fashioned gaslight, and underneath, attached to the base, was a little statuette of a man and woman dancing – all elegant in a tuxedo and ball gown like Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. We were lugging up this lamp when we heard the telephone ringing inside our apartment. We had just set up the landline.

“Who the fuck would be calling us?” my roommate asked.

I unlocked the door, lifted up the front of my shirt to wipe the triumphant glaze of sweat from my forehead, answered the phone.

"Meg," my sister's voice sounded so young and sweet on the line like cotton candy.

"Katie?" I said.

"Meg. Meg," Katie broke into tears. But, I mean, she was seventeen. And it had not been so long since I was seventeen. And I recalled the incidence of tears to be as regular and disruptive as the planes flying overhead to and from Logan International.

"Meg. Mom's dead. Mom killed herself."

My roommate came in behind me, slammed the door shut.

She walked into the bathroom and didn't close the door. I could hear her peeing.

"What do you want to do about dinner?" she yelled.

I felt myself break like the spine of a book. The pages all coming loose and flitting to the floor, landing in a pattern of randomness, shuffled and nonsensical. But it did make sense. I should have known this. If I had flipped to the back pages, I would have known this. It wasn't the first attempt.

I would never really know, but I think the first time was when I was about four. I remember sitting on my parents' bed. I remember the pattern of quilt they no

longer had: there were different squares with different scenes of the town embroidered on them.

My mother was playing an old Patsy Cline record on my father's Bang and Olfsen Beogram. And she was crying. They were gentle, graceful tears – movie star tears.

"These were a sweet sixteen present," my mother said, in her smooth amber voice. She held out a pair of tiny diamond stud earrings. I remember they were the most sparkly thing I'd ever seen. She put them in my little hand and closed hers over mine in a fist, the studs poked into my chubby hands.

"This was your grandmother's." She held up an elegant cameo in olive green and cream.

She closed her jewelry box. The little ballerina that spun in front of the mirror on the inside collapsed with a mechanic tinkling, and the tinny lullaby ceased while Patsy Cline sang on. My mother put all of the jewelry in a little velvet pouch and told me to hide it somewhere really safe in my room. I ran down the hall, tiny feet on hard wood. In my dollhouse, there was a fireplace that really had a flue that went all the way up through the chimney on the roof. I shoved the parcel down inside, like Santa's sack of presents.

"How did she do it?" I asked.

"She hung herself," Katie said. "She hung herself while Daddy was away fishing and I was at camp."

I reached up and touched my neck. It was instinctive. I don't know—maybe I was checking to physically reassure myself. I wasn't like her.

"Where's Dad?" I asked.

"He's at the Gun Rock. Meg, he won't talk to anybody. You have to come home."

My freshman year at Amherst, there was a girl who killed herself. She jumped off a roof. I didn't know her – she was a senior. But all the pale, philosophical students – as thin and fumbling as baby birds – gobbled up that tragedy. They were all so hungry and they needed the sadness to fill them. Suddenly, people who had never spoken to the dead girl before were moved to write poems about her.

The school held a candlelight vigil outside the chapel. I could not bring myself to attend. I felt I would be robbing this girl of her Mecca and her design if I pretended that I was somehow a part of it – even if I were only an indistinguishable yellow flicker on a dark lawn – one tiny filament in a jar choked with fireflies. My freshman roommate – randomly assigned, a very serious scientist – gave me all sorts of looks down her long, straight nose. I knew what she was thinking. *Selfish, selfish, selfish*. But didn't she realize that I was being selfless? After all, I knew suicide. Suicide was something I knew.

Before I moved to the city, I sold my car, so I had to take the train back to Massachusetts. I had no idea how I was going to get all the way out to the shore. In truth, I didn't even know if Katie had her license, so I didn't know if her picking me up was a possibility. It had been twenty-eight hours since the phone call and I hadn't

eaten, showered, or slept. I sat on the cool marble floor outside the track 26. I watched the police dogs being walked back and forth along the concourse, their tongues flapping with heat, hung out to dry on their teeth.

The train chugged up the coast, through quaint Colonial Mystic and rugged, homespun Providence. From the train, everything looked miniature. And I thought, *What if it was*? What if this was all just a pretend country and I was circling around and around it in this model train? Out the window, I watched the desolate beauty of industrial Massachusetts. The smokestacks emitted a hymnal of screeching and steaming. No-name towns with whole lives unfolding like secret notes within their borders. Each with its own fire department, its own scandal, its own little league team, its own mansion on the hill, and its own diner where all the fishermen came for their apple donuts in the morning. Three boys, with pencil-smudged faces, holding sticks waved to the passing train from their backyard. Rain began to spot the windows like the opening notes of improvisational Jazz – landing wherever they felt like.

I forgot to bring a book – which was stupid. I tried to sleep but all I could do was think of my mother, her feet floating above the floor, hands limp as fish, and tongue swollen like a sponge full of water. I did not want to cry on the train. There was a man – not much older than me – in very nice leather shoes sitting across from me doing the crossword. I was sure if I cried that he would try to talk to me and that was just the very last thing that I wanted. I realized I didn't know what she had used, to hang herself, and the thought tip-toed along the back of my neck like a mosquito.

I closed my eyes and tried to remember a time when I did not have to worry about these things – when death only meant the best parts of horror movies and the fluttering cessation of an orgasm. I thought of college, of Amherst. The lazy evenings spent baking banana bread and watching some beautiful boy sitting cross-legged on the kitchen floor, butchering Bob Dylan on the guitar. The very late nights at the library, when we all silently banded together and a siege against our fatigue and our aching fingers. We were like pirates, trying to loot the stacks and our own minds for some trinket of genius. The informal club of studiers who would wander out to the steps out front, lean against a column, and smoke the shit out of their cigarettes as though they were going to tell them something they didn't already know.

I remembered parties. Halloween. The foliage fanning itself in bold colors with operatic opulence. Beautiful little freaks. All dressed up in glitter and feathers and liquor mingling with their blood. The line outside some fraternity house zig-zagging out like human exhaust, all the way across the street, all the way to the falafel cart that parked itself there every night, preying on the drunk munchies of co-eds with drunk money to burn. The smell of spiced fava beans and oil mixed with that of cigarette smoke and Marc Jacobs perfume and somewhere, underneath all of that, maybe, the smell of autumn.

When things began moving a little too slowly, my friends and I would sneak up to the roof and use our dorm keys to take small pumps out of a little plastic baggy of cocaine. We would sit so close to one another, cross-legged, and talk intently about things that were so important. We went home with boys who wore plaid and had paint splattered on their shoes.

When the weather was nice, we packed hummus and crackers and chilly bottles of Blue Moon in cloth bags. Bummed a ride to Puffer's Pond. It had usually been some time since our bodies had come out. We looked newly hatched, a little furry and very white, blurred along the outside, not yet firmed and formed by the certainty of summer. The bravest would jump in first, ignoring the mushy mysteries that lingered at the bottom and what their feet might feel.

This all seemed so completely stupid now. I knew that I should not have left Hull. But of course, I had to be somewhere important and bucolic for four years.

"You'll be the first in our family to graduate from college," my father had reminded me.

My mother's parents had pulled her, by her double-strand of pearls, from Wellesley, because of her unspecified mental issues. They moved from Beacon Hill to Plymouth County, not anticipating that taking their daughter out of school would free up her time to fall in love with and marry a local boat-builder – my father.

Their story was romantic, but as the train pulled into South Station, and I leaned my head against the window, I realized that this is where it ended.

Katie was idling in the taxi lane, her face blurred like a watercolor behind the dirty windshield of Daddy's old Dodge Rambler. I walked toward her, my duffle bag pressing pink ridges into the skin of my shoulder. I had packed so much – I didn't know how long I was staying.

I opened the passenger door. When Katie saw my face she started crying again. Or maybe she had never stopped. I threw my bag into the backseat and climbed in. The truck had not worn the years well. The words Daddy had painted on the side, that read, "O'Hallahan's Boat and Canoe," had almost entirely faded away. The little pine tree air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror had completely lost its aroma of chemical forest. There was an open box of graham crackers on the floor.

"Oh, Meggy," Katie's voice wavered between pitches like water flowing over rocks. She reached out and threw her arms around me, burying her wet nose and mouth in the collar of my sweater.

"What are we going to do?" she squeaked.

I could say nothing. Here are the things I learned at college: how to make garlic bread and lasagna, how to put on a condom, and what to do after, how to roll a joint, how to read *Ulysses*. I did not learn how to save my seventeen-year-old sister from this – the worst the world had to offer.

She looked much older. I had not seen her since two Christmases ago, when all she would talk about was ballet. My father had told me over the phone, some time since then, that Katie quit ballet. She looked thinner now though. She had filled in the whole space between her eyelashes and her eyebrow with shimmering blue, and lined her eyes sharply in black. But it was all running now. She was wearing a pink tank top with very thin straps and I saw the hair on her arms was rising.

"Didn't you bring a jacket?" I asked her.

She looked at me and put her hand over her mouth.

"I guess I didn't think of it," she said. She sniffed loudly and revved the engine. It coughed like an old man rising from an armchair. And we headed south towards Hull.

We drove closer to the water and my ears began to take on the feeling of being filled with cotton balls. I'd forgotten what it was like to live where the air was so salty. Katie and I barely spoke. There wasn't much sound at all, save the carburetor snapping like a beatnik. I watched her drive, staring straight ahead, hands clutching the wheel, knuckles bald as monks.

The sign that read "Welcome to Hull, Founded 1644." Then three liquor stores in two blocks.

First was the rotary, a sign in the middle announcing pancake breakfasts at the Church of the Holy Redeemer and upcoming hay-rides in September and October. There was the high school parking lot where Susie and I used to sit for hours, sucking on Tootsie Pops, watching the boys we liked performing spastic, indistinguishable tricks on their skateboards. Right before the Town Hall was New England Pizza where we used to go with our boyfriends every day after cheerleading. They would have just come from basketball. We loved the tart and salty smell of their skin like seafood. Susie was always trying to lose weight. She'd soak up the grease on top of her slice with a paper napkin, hold it up in front of our faces to show us how gross it was. The paper, sodden with oil, became the thin, transparent film of moth wings and I could see Susie's face right through it. I said it reminded me of a poem we read in

English class that week. *I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight I got from looking through a pane of glass…and held against the world of hoary grass.*

Thinking back on those memories, as we drove to a mother-less home, I felt just that way. I was looking through something, a window to the world, and I couldn't rub this strangeness from my sight.

As Katie turned up the driveway, I felt myself become unhinged. The rumbling of tires on gravel and broken seashells made me sick. The house was smaller. The lawn no longer sprawled out into an uncharted geography of magical places. It just was, spoiled by errant dandelions and spots poisoned brown over time with dog piss. The shingles of the house were mossy with the peat of neglect. The weathervane spun occasionally, still clinging to the delusion of direction.

"You tore down the blackberry bushes?" I asked.

"Mom did," Katie caught herself. "You know, before. She said they made her claustrophobic."

I remembered blackberry summers. Picking blackberries used to be Katie's favorite. We'd take our old yellow Labrador Captain outside, and let him run around while we tried to find the good bits in a sticky arsenal of thorns and bees. After hours of picking, there were stains of blood and juice under our baby nails. My mother taught us how to make pie. She let Katie stand on a stool over the counter while she stood behind her. She put her hands over Katie's, guiding the rolling pin back and forth over the expanse of floured dough.

"Is Daddy home?" I asked.

"I doubt it," Katie said. "I told you. The bar."

She unlocked the front door and helped me carry my bag into the front hall. I saw my mother's bathing suit, slick black like a whale's back, still wet from the beach, hanging in the front hall. And I had to get out.

"Katie, give me the keys. I'm going to get Dad."

I had spent so many nights at Gun Rock with my family. We'd gorge ourselves on clam chowder so fresh that we'd find grains of sand between our teeth. My father would show us how to eat steamers.

"First you take of its pants. And then you give it a bath," he'd say, swirling the shiny, grey lump in a little bowl of melted butter. Katie and I would squeal and say it looked like alien snot.

Katie and I drank Shirley Temples and argued over who got more cherries. We played endless games of knuckle-bleed foosball in the back room where the walls were covered in license plates and bras hung from the light fixtures. My father would always play "Tupelo Honey" on the jukebox. When he came back to the table, my mother would take his hand, twist his wedding ring on his finger, and say, "Oh, honey. You remember."

I had never, however, been to Gun Rock to try and black out the past. To sit at the bar with the other unfortunate year-round residents, recounting each play of that one baseball game, or each spitting, biting word of that final argument. I had never

wrestled my keys from the bartender's hand, convincing him I was okay to drive the three-quarters of a mile home. I had never been the way my father was that night.

I saw him slumped over his glass. He was so tall that he could sit on the high bar stool and still keep his feet flat on the ground. We used to call him "the Gentle Giant" when I was little. Riding around the house on his shoulders was the closest I would ever get to being an angel. But now, his shoulders seemed to be melting, disappearing into the folds of his old fishing jacket. I saw the empty space where the mirror we stole used to be and my pride buckled under memories of youthful folly.

I hoisted myself onto the stool next to him and motioned to the bartender.

"Can you close up his tab, please?" I slid what was my very first credit card across the varnished wood.

"No," my father grasped at the air, trying for invisible strings. "No, I am not done."

"This young lady says you are, Mr. O'Hallahan."

My father turned to look at me with briny eyes.

"Meggie," he reached up for my face. He put his hands all over my cheeks and my nose as though he was blind and making sure it was really me. I realized that maybe he'd come to not count on anything.

"Dad, I'm going to take you home," I said.

I felt his strong builder's fingers find their way to my arms and clasp strongly around my wrists.

"But where is your mother?" he asked.

The bartender looked at my sympathetically from under his Red Sox cap. He continued to wipe the same spot on the bar with a dirty rag.

"He's been on quite a bender," he said. He must have heard about my mother. He was trying to explain.

I led my father out into the wet and clumped night air. Putting him in the backseat of the truck, I was careful to push down his head, to make sure he didn't hit it on the doorframe. By the time we got home he was sound asleep, his snoring rising and falling like the dissonant flicker of a wave.

When I got inside, Katie was sitting at the kitchen table, a faint overtone of lamplight illuminating her face. She was flipping through an old book.

She looked up, her eyes swirling and immense like galaxies.

"Where's dad?

"I'll let him sleep it off in the car. I couldn't lift him."

Katie nodded and focused her attention again at the pages in front of her.

"What is that?" I asked.

"It's mom's old college yearbook," she said.

"Scooch over," I said, and squeezed in next to Katie on the bench. I suddenly felt at rest – like there had been a pinball game going on inside my heart and finally the ball had just…fallen, between the little metal flippers. Being close to my sister – it was like my antennae had finally rested on a spot that stopped all the static in my head.

Katie smelled like cigarettes and I wanted to tell her not to smoke, ask her where she was spending her evenings. Then I remembered about our mother, and wondered if there was any way now that I could possibly keep Katie from growing up too quickly.

I leaned over her shoulder to see the place where the lamplight smiled on the pages of the Wellesley College 1977 Yearbook. There was our mother, smiling and sober, in a little box in the middle of the page. Her hair was feathered around her face.

"I wonder if it was red like mine," Katie said. But the photo was in black and white.

She wore a beaded necklace and a billowy white top with little daisies embroidered on it. She could have been any young, beautiful woman but she wasn't – she was our mother.

"Most likely to marry royalty," Katie read from the caption below the picture.

I laughed, even as my eyes began to brim with tears. But there was something else. Underneath the superficial prophecy -- assigned by people too concerned with committing fragile nostalgia to paper – there was a favorite quotation which read,

“For I have had too much of apple-picking: I am overtired of the great harvest I myself desired.”

I did not want Katie to read this. She did not need to know that her mother -- who bathed her naked in the sink before she could speak, and lovingly nailed each of Katie’s worn out toe-shoes by their ribbons to the border of her bedroom walls, and heat up onions wrapped in cheesecloth when we had earaches – had always known that she would someday leave us. Sooner than we’d hoped.

“Come on,” I said. “I think it’s time to go to bed. We can go through all this stuff in the morning.”

I kissed Katie on the head and turned off the little lamp, ready to climb the stairs towards sleep. Just some human sleep.

Carly, Encino, CA – 10.59 square miles

Boys always looked at Carly like she was about to disappear, and God forbid they had any dirty thoughts because then she would burst into flames. They treated her body like a newspaper, holding her delicately, as if she might rub off on him. Unfolding her. Trying to look at everything at once, leaving sections unfinished, letting pieces of her fall, tearing corners and staring intently. They looked like they were learning something, like the whole world was rushing through their fingers. They read her skin like news that hadn't even been an inward breath the day before.

Carly sat alone in Dino's Diner, watching the parking lot intently for motion. The August heat licked dry the quivering hood of someone's yellow car in the parking lot. The whole lot glinted like a mouth of false teeth. Dino's used to be a honest-to-goodness diner. Now it was just kind of worthless, not the sort of place you'd ever pull over to have a meal at. Dino's attracted mostly regulars and a few wanderers who seemed dismayed that Southern California shut down so much at night. It wasn't so much of a diner as a convenience store that happened to make suspiciously moist egg rolls, burgers, bagels, and pie. Dino's sold tobacco, toys (things like Oscar Meyer whistles, and tiny plastic parachuters), magazines, and other souvenirs and novelties. At the front, there was Dino, a great big stegosaurus hunched over the first "D," his paint peeling, the purple of his spots turning the deep and dangerous charcoal of exposed aluminum. Inside were numerous oversized potted plants, meant to evoke a savage and tropical atmosphere. At Christmas time, Dino wore a threadbare Santa Claus cap and the prehistoric greenery was updated with fragile and glittering round

ornaments. The owner used foam paint to render his own elementary illustrations of snowflakes on the Plexi-glass windows.

"Way I see it, that high school is like a prison," the boy who owned Dino's said to Carly. He was wiping down little bolts and bits of the frappe machine with lavender polish and a sponge that, Carly thought, looked like one used to put make up on actors. Carly had just told him that she wanted to be a movie star. She hated school.

The boy – or man – boy-man was tan and serious and looked almost Cherokee with his greasy purple war paint – smudges of polish on his face.

"You know what you really need in here?" Carly asked.

"You're gonna tell me." He pulled a heavy tin of malt powder from under the counter. His veins rose like roots.

"You need a jukebox."

"Fuck you."

"I'm only saying."

Carly spent most of her time at Dino's. She ate about seventy percent of her meals there. When she did homework, she did it there. She listened to the radio there. She sat in the back room sucking on Red Vines and listening to Bonnie Tyler while the employees filled ketchup bottles. Sometimes she filled ketchup bottles while the boy-man argued with the meat supplier on the phone.

She didn't like her house. When she was little, she told people she lived right on the line between Tarzana and Encino, something she'd heard Nina say. And when she said this she imagined the two cities coming loose from one another during an

earthquake, her house falling into the chasm between two wastelands. It still felt that way to her, like everything was sinking. She didn't like how it smelled of citrus air freshener. She didn't like curry or grape leaves or tofu, all things Nina used frequently in her cooking.

Living right on the Freeway 101, noise was always swarming her bedroom. Light shot past the window and cars ran below her street in constant and hollow tunnels of safety and purpose. She had dreams that fish were swimming through her. She felt like she always had to be running to the outside of things. If there was anything between her and the sky, she might crash into it. During the day, she'd smoke cigarettes on the black top at school. At home, she sat, in a crocheted bikini top and a pair of gym shorts, in a kiddie pool full of cold water and dead rolly polies. She ate Corn Nuts and Pop Tarts and pretty much any other kind of food you could find at 7/11. She watched the Channel 11 News with Nina. She sat on the couch, her mouth opened a little to let out her hot young breath, her legs spread out all over. She drew things on her knees and wrote arbitrary sentences that she thought of ("Love is an industry"). Rotten cumquats fell on her roof, sometimes rolling off the edge and sometimes congealing into a rancid marmalade. She loved wheels and round things and anything that rolled. Someone in her neighborhood left a wheelbarrow on the sidewalk for the trash and Carly dragged it back to her front yard.

It was mostly at night that she endured a constant need for velocity and dirty air. There were plenty of places that she could go. She'd learned Los Angeles' map of constellations of people that stayed awake what seemed like all the time. She could go to any head shop or piercing parlor. Those stayed open late. She'd befriended a

young chiropractor (met him at a concert) that worked out of his home and hosted his tantric hippie friends and their bizarre pets (Chihuahuas, large tortoises, ferrets, Siamese cats) nearly every night. They watched movies like Bladerunner and Purple Rain and drank Sapporo. There were usually dropouts and older kids doing shrooms on the golf course at El Caballero Country Club—she could tell from a distance by whether or not she saw glow sticks twirling through the air. Some coffee shops stayed open late. There were weird Goth kids that seemed to never leave the concrete corners of the Encino High School campus. If there was nowhere else to go, Carly turned on the fan in Nina's room (Nina took sleeping pills but sometimes she woke up, sweating and screaming with nightmares, if it got too hot) and walked the mile and a half to Dino's, open 22 hours.

Carly's life was so nocturnal, and her nights were practically choking on sex. Carly's time became divided into sections, sex and not sex, inside and outside, or light and dark. Her days were just things made of the time that wasn't night and she was putting them off until later and later as the summer wore on.

One day, in one of the last few weeks of the summer, Nina burst into Carly's room in only her underwear, her breasts hanging like the tongues of neurotic beasts. All the rooms (except the basement and the bathrooms) in their house were separated only by bead curtains or hanging tapestries and Carly was always lamenting their lack of locks. It was early and Carly had spent the whole night with her armpits over the window ledge, dangling a length of string down the side of the house, too bored to sleep and too tired to take the bus anywhere. She had probably only slept for about seventy minutes but she had a dream that went on for seven years. There were

Amazons with silver fangs and cotton candy hair. There were blue fish that jumped out of the water and bit off the heads of swimmers. There were school corridors full of students whose feet didn't touch the floor. Nina picked the foils from Reese's Cups and the rings from Ringpops off of the deep, tan carpet.

"Honey, I really would rather you not eat this stuff. I don't think you want to put on weight."

Carly barely broke a hundred pounds but this was Nina's way. Nina hurried about Carly's room, ignoring her bare breasts. Every time she came into the room she seemed to search for secrets. Carly had a cigarette stash but she was pretty sure Nina knew she smoked, and smoked too. She kept a picture of her birth parents in a copy of "Swiss Family Robinson" on her shelf. Nina was Carly's mother's sister. When Carly's parents died, Nina stepped in so that Carly would not become a ward of the state.

"We're going to the museum today," Nina said. She stopped suddenly and stood naked at the foot of Carly's bed. Carly folded her legs underneath her in bed. She had that sense of needing to curl up, of never wanting to touch the floor again.

The L.A. County Museum of Modern Art was a sprawling property on Wilshire and Fairfax, in a happy and modish semi-urban area. Carly had been there twice: once on a school trip and once with a friend whose mother made them iced tea and had a Chanel compact in her purse. Nina never really took Carly anywhere. They went on a lot of short road trips with no destinations. Even when Carly was little and Nina took her to the movies, Nina would leave the theater to go sit on one of the mall benches and read Anais Nin. Nina grew up in Arizona and wanted to come to L.A. to

take advantage of the burgeoning community of poets at the time, in the seventies. Instead she spent a semester at Pomona and dropped out with a coke addiction. After rehab she moved to Tarzana, which, at the time, was being sold as an isolated suburb full of greenery and low property values. She worked as an administrative assistant at the Encino-Tarzana Regional Medical Center. She found other addictions: chalky coffee from the dispenser in the mess hall, the news, sleeping pills, those different colored lollipops (that all have the same flavor) that they keep in baskets at places like hospitals, stupid fads like acupuncture and raw foods, serial dating.

One time Carly had discovered that Nina kept every medical document from Carly's childhood in a box next to her bureau. It was full of papers on strepp throat, bronchitis, pink eye, chicken pox, broken shin, and penicillin allergy. There was a record for a time when Carly had gotten eleven stitches on her right shoulder. It was from a car accident when she was three, something she didn't even remember, and Nina had never mentioned it to her.

Carly hated getting in the car with Nina. She hated the furry and suffocating feeling of the heat filled with dust particles, the spare change on the seat that burned her legs when she sat down, the lollipops melted in kaleidoscopic patterns on the upholstery, the Spanish stations on the radio. Carly got in and buckled her seatbelt and grabbed something from the floor to read -- an old *People Magazine*.

"Why are you making me go to the museum?" Carly asked. She was sweating already.

"You're going to meet my new boyfriend. He wants to meet you. I know, I think it's weird too. I knew you'd think it was weird. I don't really like him that much. I

don't know why he wants to meet you. Just don't swear too much. He's going to buy us lunch. I haven't decided about this guy." Nina didn't look at Carly when she said any of this.

"I can't believe you have an actual boyfriend. What about the really old guy, with all the colorful dress shirts? I liked his smile." Nina turned to Carly to understand what she'd said but Carly was staring out the window at a store with huge metallic balls sticking out of its façade.

"I don't know what happened to him. I think he got back together with his ex-wife. She was extremely young and living in Oregon. I don't know if she moved back, or if he moved to Oregon. And I really don't have a boyfriend but he's taking us to lunch."

"What's his name?"

"Gabriel."

"What does he do?"

"He's a writer."

"Like an actual writer?" Carly pushed in a tape that was protruding from the player, Pearl Jam.

"Yes. He writes treatments for corporate instructional videos but he's working on a brilliant screenplay." Nina switched the music back to the radio. Carly's legs were sticking to the seat and it was painful to pull them off. She rolled down the window. She wanted to let her white blond hair trail in the wind. Nina said something Carly

couldn't hear because the air was rushing past her ears. It was probably, "I wish you wouldn't do that."

Nina parked in a garage. When she got out of the car, she felt around at the bottom of her purse for an old and oily piece of gum (another addiction). She found a few pennies and tossed them on the ground. Carly loved the little numbered aluminum tabs they gave you to put on your shirt collar when you were inside the museum. When they entered the courtyard, Carly was curious enough to look around, try to figure out who among the people was Gabriel, the writer. It could have been the man eating a Klondike bar, or the one with the strong Roman nose, or that one rubbing the pages of a magazine between his fingers. Children with balloons tied to their wrists climbed on a modern sculpture made of colorful scraps of metal. Sitting in front of it was a man who looked like an aging rock star. His hair was like the silver snow sprayed onto aluminum trees, and cut to a quick. He wore a tan leather jacket with fringe, and he sat, still, as though his picture were being taken and that was exactly how someone had told him to sit. He had lips like Anthurium, waxy.

Carly squinted. The sun surrounded her, fractured and sore, with the bright metallic crackling of tinsel, and she became stuck in the gaze of this bizarre man, sitting as the children scurried around him, hickory dickory dock. The courtyard opened like an egg. The sun was spilling all over the place.

The rock star man walked towards them.

"Carly, this is Mr. Gabriel Green," Nina said, flicking her lilac acrylics out of nervousness.

Gabriel didn't extend his hand. Carly didn't find this rude. She still wasn't used to the custom and found it uncomfortable, but she had never met an adult before who didn't shake hands. He just winked at her.

"Just Gabriel. Wouldn't want the whole world thinking I'm some sort of grown up or something."

Carly also never laughed at the dull and would-be charming quips of adults.

Gabriel reached into the pocket of his blue jeans for a tube of banana Chapstick. His jeans were immaculately worn, faded, shredded, and whiskered. An embroidered dragon ran along the outside of one knee.

Carly watched Gabriel spread the Chapstick over his red, curling lips. That day at the museum, Carly watched Gabriel carefully – the way he liked to curve his hand against the back of Nina's neck, as if steadying her. He knew a lot about Japanese art: black clay teapots, inky blue scrolls, red silk kimonos. He seemed more real, somehow, than Nina did. Nina's transmission was always slightly static-y and she moved in and out of focus. Gabriel walked with sure and strong steps. Carly would always remember him as wearing sunglasses that day, even though he did not.

In one of the Japanese display cases, they came across some brightly painted, swollen and cracked, wooden puppets labeled ningyos. The placard explained that the figures were used in Bunraku, a traditional form of Japanese puppet theater. Gabriel launched into an extensive report on Bunraku. Carly found it difficult not to listen to him. He was methodical about his descriptions and his rhetoric. He was not particularly interesting but he demanded Carly's attention. His teeth were much too

sharp, his lips too dry, and his voice reminded her of sharp barnacles on a rock, slimy with algae. Still, there was something in his voice, like the narrator of such morbid and fascinating television segments that attempt to look behind the lives of celebrities, or look into historically infamous murderers. She could not stop listening. He talked about the insides of the puppets, how they're manipulated by handles in the hollow of their bodies. The puppeteers wear black hoods but the hope is that, the audience will become so transfixed by the story and the characters that they will cease to notice the humans operating the dolls.

When they left the exhibit, scratching and blinking, born into the sun and the smog, Carly felt Gabriel's hand against her neck. The sun buzzed like an admonishment.

Gabriel took Carly and Nina out for coffee once they were done with the museum, their feet aching and they themselves tired of pretending to care about anything other than their own desires. They went to a place with white metal chairs, and red vinyl cushions in the shape of hearts, outside, with glass tables. Carly peeled of flakes of dough, trying to reach the chocolate of her croissant, and Nina ordered a Diet Soda. The exhausted several topics including movies, travel, and absolutely everything even tangentially related to Gabriel's life up to that point. They talked about movies and characters, the difference between fiction and reality.

"So," Gabriel said. "How about you ladies tell me about your life."

After that, Carly made a point to do something real with her time. Gabriel was impressive. Carly wanted to be impressive. She became excited to try and prove

herself to her teachers. On the first day back to school, Carly barely spoke to anyone. During lunch she gorged herself on lime Jell-O and read John Steinbeck. She kicked at bits of gravel on the blacktop and waited to see someone smoking so that she could ask for a cigarette, but, as most students were registering or catching up with friends, nobody came. That night, Nina made enchiladas and the house was filled with the sour perfume of tomatillos. Carly's eyes watered and her stomach churned. At dinner, Nina told her about a girl, her age, which had come in for an ultrasound. Her parents had kicked her out of the house.

"Twins," Nina said, raking the rice on her plate into designs with her fork.

Carly thought about what it would feel like, the weight, to carry two children on your back. Later, she woke up sick. She sat over the toilet until 6 AM, when she left early for school.

Carly would feel a distinct hiccup in her stomach with every new assignment. She wanted to become a student, but when she sad down on her bedroom floor, with a notebook in front of her, she found that she was completely useless. After about two weeks of trying to do well in school she stopped trying and took a strong interest in Wicca.

By October, Nina and Gabriel had broken up. He took her out to a restaurant where they sat on deep satin pillows and ate vegetables and lamb with their hands. Carly knew, when Nina came home crying, what had happened. She didn't want to be there when Nina was the one over the toilet, soggy white pills sticking to the edges of her mouth like bits of cotton, orange plastic bottle lying in the sink. She went

around back to climb up the trellis to the roof. She put on her headphones and watched the reverberate pulse of the light of the stars on the insides of her eyelids. She thought it was part of one of those half-dreams (the kind you talk in your sleep during), when Nina got into the car and pulled out of the driveway with frightening slowness.

The first two days that Nina was gone, there was a discernable difference in the house, but Carly pretended as though she did not notice. She didn't go to school. She tried on Nina's paisley mini-dresses and big furry llama boots. She put her giant rhinestone rings on her fingers. She took Polaroid pictures of herself in Nina's full-length mirror. She slept on the living room floor with the television on all night. She made tiny drawings on the edges of the walls in pencil. She made macaroni and cheese and left all the doors and windows open when she was in the house. On the third day, the first phone call came for Nina. The moment the person on the other line (Carly did not even take the time or consciousness to decide whether man or woman, she was too panicked) asked for Nina, she hung up. Carly flashed on a time, when she was eight, when Nina had accidentally slammed her fingers in the car door. Carly had cried. Nina had been unsympathetic, and so Carly ran away. She packed three pears, a coloring book, and some gemstones from The Nature Company in a blue knapsack. She went and camped out under an orange tree in a neighbor's yard. She stayed for five hours until the neighbor found her while he was taking his dog out. He scooped her up and brought her home. Carly remembered the feeling, of being scooped. It was a good feeling. But Carly also knew the feeling of walking down the street alone. It was something she was good at.

Carly put on a flowered sundress and called a cab. She took forty dollars from a Romeo y Julieta cigar box in Nina's closet. She rode the cab over Mulholland, watching women in Spandex walking their Golden Retrievers, Eucalyptus swaying like dying elephants, smoke rising from the center of the canyon like a car wreck. The cab pulled up in front of a wooden cottage in Laurel Canyon, overhung with weeping willows. There was a tent in the front yard and wind chimes and stained glass ornaments hanging from the branches. There were smells and music coming from the windows that Carly thought she liked. She liked them better than those that came from the windows of her house.

Gabriel opened the door after Carly knocked. She, at five feet, came up to his bottom rib. He just smiled softly and asked her in. Inside, the desks and carpet were simply littered with papers. Gabriel didn't ask Carly what she was doing there and instead asked her how she was.

"Fine," she said. She scanned the inside of his house. He had a shelf full of kachina dolls in different warrior stances. He had a full bar that ran along the far side of the den and, in the middle, a conversation pit.

"I wanted to see where you lived," Carly said.

"This is it."

"You must love spending time here. You must really love it."

"I like it. I do," he said.

"I can't imagine that you'd want to leave or change it."

Carly turned to look at the photos hanging on Gabriel's wall. They were all of American icons: Jim Morrison, Edie Sedgwick, Richard Nixon. Carly could feel the heat of Gabriel's breath and body. He was close to her. He brushed her hair down with the back of his hand. Carly knew that it was a bad idea to let Gabriel touch her. But she knew before it even happened that he was going to touch her. It was a little clip of time that she would always be able to rewind over and over again. It would leave something permanent behind if his hand touched her. But she let him kiss her and she let him shuck her clothes like dry petals. She let him lift her, two hands splayed on either side of her spine, suspending her, offering her up to the mouth of the giant African mask mounted above his headboard.

When another cab dropped her off at home, Carly thrust the money through the driver's side window and sprinted into the house. She began throwing things onto her bed: dresses, sweaters, leather boots, red lipstick, an old Raggedy Ann doll, the picture of her father, The Beatles' "Revolver" on tape cassette, a tape recorder, some half-filled notebooks, a box of Nilla Wafers, her wallet. The lyrics to "L.A. Woman" were sounding shrilly in Carly's head. It had been playing at Gabriel's house. *Well, I just got into town about an hour ago. Took a look around, see which way the wind blows, where the little girls are in their Hollywood bungalows.* Carly pulled an old Army Corps duffel bag from under her bed. All that was inside was an empty Jose Cuervo bottle and all of her old expired passports. She wasn't sure where the current one was, but she got the chills, seeing all of her old faces there, collected in little booklets in the bag. *Are you lucky little lady in the city of light or just another lost angel, city of night.* Carly couldn't stop her breath from escaping in seismic bursts.

She couldn't breathe easily. *I'm forgetting something*, she kept thinking. *I see your hair is burnin.' Hills are filled with fire. If they say I never loved you, you know, they are a liar. Drivin' down your freeways, midnite alleys roam, cops in cars, topless bars. Never saw a woman so alone.* Carly caught her reflection in the mirror. She saw her face and her hair, so pale, floating like petals on water. She looked like she might burst or fade away. *Motel, money, murder madness. Let's change the mood from glad to sadness. Mr. Mojo Risin,' gotta keep on risin.'* She could feel something slithering up her stomach, from between her legs. It was something new and a little evil. The feeling of restlessness was rising through her stomach and her chest and her throat. *L.A. Woman, Sunday afternoon. Drive through your suburbs, into your blues.* Somewhere, a car door slammed, but not so near. She knew it was her imagination but thought she could smell Nina's gardenia perfume. She zipped her bag, crossed her fingers, and closed her eyes.

The mountains encroach the city in a looming and murky majesty. They are crowned by a band of smog. There is a valley and a canyon and a mountain in between. The freeway licks up the time and the days with its long black tongue. A poison runs through the aqueduct, a chemical cocktail. Men sell burritos in small kiosks with orange awnings. Kids in wool caps spray paint the outside of the Griffith Park Observatory. There are still particles of gold germinating in the ground. Even when the sun dissolves, and the only light left is in squirming neon geometry, the glittering of a skyline, the spate of evening traffic, and an abacus of headlights – even when the sidewalks are empty, and sparkling with mica, people are still whispering. There are people trying to be famous, people buying souvenir key chains, and people

trying to cross the border. There are girls standing in driveways, like sentries, stunned as if the house behind them has spat them out, staring into the green, sticky and desolate quiet of their neighborhoods, with suitcases in their hands.