

Where's The Kiss?

by

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A Note On The Collection

Revolving around breaks in normalcy, this collection of short stories is linked thematically by love, death, and loneliness. In these stories, the corporeal has magical powers, and specific body parts serve as catalysts for each story's thematic exploration. Lips take on supernatural abilities, the brain houses the reality of the afterlife, and heartlessness becomes a medical condition.

Thank you for reading.

Kisses Safe Like a Safety Deposit Box

I have been buoyed by the burden of kissing since my first kiss. It was not as simple a milestone as I would have hoped but rather was a tutorial in the hazards of kissing. Strife with my very own lips.

First kisses with Bobby Deitchman

On a spongy May afternoon underneath the pine tree in my parents' backyard, my lips tucked into those of Bobby Deitchman. It was at my urging, our kiss. His lips were too much like traps, thick sheaths over his teeth and pink gums, to appeal to my twelve-year-old desire, but still I tracked him down, brought him to my house, and there we sat cross-legged.

Before the kiss, my first and his third, Bobby Deitchman, slightly chubby, his body booming forth from his over-stretched smile, asked me about my favorite teacher. It was Mrs. Troast—his, too, it turned out. Our fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Troast was a French woman who had moved to the American suburbs for a reminder of home. She made us cookies shaped like maple tree leaves in fall, and in the weeks before summer vacation, she gave us each a journal to keep during our time off from school. In the front pages, she wrote a list of books that she felt we would personally enjoy. Her curved handwriting anchoring our lives with titles of adolescent fiction, molding our pre-teen imaginations. And while I sat, my toes picking at the glowing green grass, I tugged on my two side braids, reminding Bobby of these facts about Mrs. Troast. Bobby sat bobbing his head and licking his lips, readying himself for his role of man for two minutes.

“Shall we begin?” That year Bobby had taken to speaking in a perfectly practiced British accent. His cousins from London had visited the summer before, inspiring Bobby to only reply in the accent that our school now bullied him for. His lack of a British upbringing and his newfound snobbish behavior was the ideal mixture for the burning elbows torture that the older boys gave him. Rubbing the skin so rapidly that Bobby could feel his bones act like kindling on fire. He continued with it, though, convinced that they were too brainless to appreciate his intelligence.

Our kiss was a quick spurt. Bobby Deitchman pulled away not in disappointment, but rather with a message for me.

“I stole three of my brother’s nudey magazines and look at them when I’m home alone. And I’ve learned the rub and do it as often as possible.”

Fearful of the touching beyond kissing, my stunted little self was still somewhat bedazzled by our contact. But I became startled by Bobby’s confession. Not sure how to further direct us, I shrugged my shoulders, leaned in for another meeting, and let Bobby’s lips grab my own. His lips were like fingers pinching hard, hard.

“I’ve showed them to Herbert Brown, too.” His lips were restless, pushing out his British drawl. “He ripped seven pages out. I charged him 5 dollars for the set.”

With this confession, Bobby Deitchman did not seem to be worth a third kiss. Under the prickly pelt of the pine tree, even at twelve, I could sense that he had received too much psychological stimulation from our encounter.

I did not feel the need to kiss another boy until four, almost five, years later. By that time, I had stopped wearing two split braids and instead opted for one side braid in an attempt to assert my independence. I avoided the twirling bottles and the secluded shelter of the basement coat closet that invaded the repertoire of school parties. I

watched others partake in such acts: their eyes squinting, mouths clenching at my refusal. Often, I never even entered the parties but instead took walks around the Cider Hills, California neighborhoods, convincing Whining Audrey or Stacey the Confrontational or Marsha Minton, my almost best friend, to walk with me. We would sneak around each neighborhood that was almost identical to our own, peeping into windows and concocting stories about the inhabitants. And when the subject eventually drifted to musings about the boys that we knew, I was the one that tried to navigate us back to our spying on strangers. Always promising that our walks outside were more valuable than the saliva swapping that went on inside. More often, I would wander alone, peeking into bird feeders or listening beneath the windowsills, memorizing the conversations overheard until the party seemed to be over. I'd wait for my mother at our designated meeting spot two blocks away, a spot carefully selected because it gave me enough distance to maintain my independence from my parents and my classmates. I had not learned to drive and my mother encouraged me to attend the parties, fearful of my self-imposed alienation—the words of her friend, a school guidance counselor.

A jock for his ego, not for his talent

I sprinted into and out of crushes. At the age of sixteen-verging-on-seventeen, my first true and outlandishly simple infatuation with a boy, Sam Thompson, was underway and so my condition became all the more apparent.

High school was a ritual that I enjoyed for the enforced learning but panicked about the social hours. Yet math class was the time when I found myself disengaged with school and was the brief moment when I studied the boys in my grade. Math class led

me to inspect the formula of Sam Thompson instead of the Pythagorean theorem or any of the other mathematic principles that infected my high school experience.

I took to flirting with Sam Thompson, a blue-eyed boy with honey brown hair and a tendency to scratch the tip of his nose, in our shared math class to the best of my aptitude. Sam was a jock for his ego, not for his talent. I liked this façade. It made my situation all that much easier for us both to handle when later prompted. Although fairly stunted in the area of coquetry, I was able to giggle when provoked, prod for details about his life, and often offer him slices from a red apple that I had burgled from the lunchroom hours earlier.

Like all good math class crushes, Sam and I became intertwined. And as most everyone began to pair up in our grade, our math class status metastasized into a school-wide fact. We went to see a movie about a Frankenstein figure that sat on his victims, the monster always munching on potato chips during the death scenes. After the movie and milkshakes, we went for a drive where Sam's hands unfastened the roadway of buttons on my shirt with the speed and satisfaction of unwrapping a special-delivery package.

What I had not noticed before, in my post-Bobby Deitchman naiveté, was that beyond the confines of math class, and school, and hand holding, and first dates, Sam had an invested interest in our bodily contact. Starting in the alcove between my right eyelid and cheekbone, Sam led a trail of tightlipped kisses. This crusade of pinpointed, circular swipes from my eye to my cheek, my neck to my nipples, Sam, seventeen, was already eager with skill. He had had two girlfriends: Sarah had moved away and Betty had not been as extensively invested in Sam as he would have liked. But my routine apple slices and calculated chuckles had been enough to provoke Sam's current attention. Sam campaigned from the pink spheres of my nipples, tickling them with his

lips in a much softer kiss than I would receive later on my mouth, to my lips themselves. I swooped up his head to meet my own, pairing his nose with mine, his lips puckered ovals. His kiss was dry and felt more like a requirement than an amusement. And with that meeting of our mouths, Sam choked up a garbling of words.

“I hated Betty because she wouldn’t let me take her. You seemed like you would, so I let her fly. Sarah had moved away and who wants a girl that lives two states away?”

Following this statement, Sam was without words, a symptom that all proper bouts of honesty should induce. Resolute, he retreated back to his newfound fortress beneath my bra. Avoiding lips altogether, this time he tickled my nipples with his swift paced tongue. Encouraged by the ghost of Bobby Deitchman and his admissions, I gave a hovering kiss. My lips met Sam’s and again he splattered out truths.

“It was either you or Sheila, but Sheila froze more when I talked to her. She always blushed, which made her body flush and whenever I’d say her name, her left eye would twitch. Freaky. You have a little sauciness to you.”

With hands paused palm up, Sam relinquished a cough. I sealed my gray button-up shirt and also coughed. Our congested howls, throaty and faked, eased the anxiety of the scene. Sam’s cheeks were shaded red by the appearance of his capillaries, Sheila’s vengeance. I stamped one kiss on his forehead for humiliation’s sake. My sauciness. Sam was quick to keep his lips locked, fearing further confessions produced by my lips.

Mr. Franken

Once I turned seventeen, only shortly after Sam Thompson, Mr. Franken ruined me with wishes. Twenty-five years older than I was, Mr. Franken took me and made me believe that I was a woman. When we first kissed, he told me that he had thoughts of

me, that he would change his world, that he would do it all for me. In the front seat of his car, we shed our roles of the boss and the babysitter. Our lips pressed and our worlds fractured, birthing a new one, ruled by our infatuations with one another. Mr. Franken, whose kiss lingered like the sting of chili peppers, made a promise to me. His lips hovered so close to my own that I was tempted to kiss him again, to suppress his confession, but I wanted to hear it. I needed to hear it.

“Whatamouth,” he whispered. “I’d leave my wife for that mouth.”

Ours was the kind of encounter that girls wish out of the pages of romantic novels into the doldrums of their suburban confinements. But I was too young to handle these promises. I knew that it was not about us, but the act of us. The strange amalgamation of lust and attention manipulated our lives into a series of bad news headlines. Mr. Franken was yet another casualty of my lips.

Jake Newbower and a few more

I followed the Mr. Franken incident with a sequence of conditioned experiments, sequestering boys of my liking, indulging in kisses. Tongues met, weighted breaths, and a cough. Each kiss was followed by a cashing-in of guilty revelations.

It was a difficult thing learning that my lips could undo a man just like that. That something as easy as a kiss, the just like that, could possess the same trauma that accompanies a visit to a confession booth. It was a habit that I cultivated early after discovering my ability. I would visit the confession booth at the Pickenborough Church, a town away by bike on Saturdays. Against my Jewish upbringing, I would tell the figure on the other side of my confessions. And following a kiss, I would describe the boys’ confessions, converting them into my own stories, my own sins.

I was trying to seem like an average kind of girl. I performed well in school, aside from in math class, was involved in the arts club, in the book-making club, and on the soccer team. I embedded myself into the normal world of my classmates as best as I could.

I could have used my ability to torture these boys. I could have taunted Sam for his malicious flirtations with anonymous phone calls or made Bobby Deitchman shriek out in class at the sight of flashes of my handmade drawings of naked women with \$5 signs and his mother's name, Camille, sketched over the images. I could have told my three allies—Marsha, Audrey, and Stacey—about Jake Newbower's love of epic poetry, which I could make him recite at my lips' will. But I chose against it, all of it. I decided that only the men, my prey, would speak their confessions to the world. Yes, I disguised them as my own in the confession booths, but this was my way of coping with my special talent. Their stories became my stories. My amusements.

My lips continued to unburden men of all kinds. Although, I often had very little lip contact at all or merely taunted the men like lab rats without emotion on my end. My lips became leeches and my life became threaded by their parasitic tendencies but that was not until after I experienced the trauma of real love, years later.

James Shapiro

I avoided men for most of college. But three years in, I fell for James Shapiro. James, with his sharp green eyes and perfect handshake, appeared to be incomprehensibly free of confessions. The kind of boy that is ripe for boyfriendhood, handsome, gentle, attentive, but too focused on his personal successes to succumb to any simple washrag of a girl. At twenty-one, he had never been in an established

relationship, a main source for his lack of confessions. We met in an art history course on Venetian architecture, sharing a conjoined desk. James was studying to be an architect, and I had hopes of working for a museum. When added to James's other apparent virtues, our kisses, always confessionless on his part, and all that followed made James into the perfect mate: an anomaly against the power of my lips.

We took to having lunch on Tuesdays and Thursdays before class at the cafeteria, which soon evolved into studying and dinner after class. James would take me to the river by campus, making picnics of my favorite foods: grilled cheese and tomato, dumplings, and blueberry muffins. I always brought a picnic basket of silverware, napkins, and a blanket. He was the ingredients, I was the amenities.

James and I lasted through our final year of college, through star-spangled kisses at graduation, and through the habits of daily life for two years out of college. Integral to one another, we were a stream of kisses. Each kiss primed us for a life together.

We lived in San Francisco, I still live in the apartment we shared together. A one bedroom with a half kitchen and an elongated bathtub that stretches out like a canoe. James was working at Engels and Bright, an architecture firm, and I began teaching art at the nearby elementary school, uncertified, so my pay was not what it could have been. After our first year in the apartment, James had the collection of the children's artwork that I had slowly siphoned off from the class, a fact that he did not know, framed. The works still hang on the apartment's walls.

We became habituated with the routine of young people recently graduated. Sunday mornings, I made us omelets. Saturday nights we journeyed through the city with friends from college, Evelyn, Herbert, and Daisy. Weekdays we worked for a meager salary battling it out with harmonic perseverance.

James was the man that rescued me from the perfunctory waves of my early life, creating a current that brought me into the world. In my own way, I unveiled James, forcing him out of the hardened shell of the model human. We were grateful to one another for this bit of life, this willful fluttering of reality.

James and his father sailed the tropical waves of Saint John for a week, yearly, in September, preserving the kind of stoic familial ritual that New England families perform so freely. I sucked up our last kiss before James left for the airport with a week's worth of concern. James, like all great lovers, became shipwrecked. During Hurricane Escobar, his father's boat had been trapped by the ocean's forceps. Grasping Shapiro boat, father, and son, the ocean slapped them around, attacking the boat like a piñata, taking great pride in the late summer tempest it produced.

I became a lip-tainted, loveless curmudgeon in the costume of a freelance Arts columnist. I stopped teaching after James's death.

A sequence of strangers

A few times while aboard San Francisco public transportation, trolley, train, or bus, if I was particularly attracted to one man especially, or more often if one man caught my attention specifically, I would tilt out to his side, press us together, and seize him with my lips. The routine babble was followed by declarations, a degrading dose of honesty.

"I dream of screwing and unscrewing my neighbor. Oh how sweet she is. Oh Kara, how sweet you are!" "HOW TERRIFIC." We were at the bus stop and the wind was sweet against this strange man's hair. He brought his hand through his clean and

dark hair. The movement shredded his hand into fingers. I could not resist this kiss. He was not as pleased, preferring to be the lovesick type.

“Thinking of movies is what makes me really feel it.” “OH MY,” I cried to the public before us at the Smithsonian and Garland gallery opening. I made brief reference to the outbreak in my review of the show for the *San Francisco Press*. “What I mean to say is, I can only climax when replaying the plot of a movie—gangster movies.”

“I bought a gibbon to impress my last girlfriend. She loved gibbons. Kept in it our bedroom. She’d sing the monkey to sleep. We called him Arnold. Spent five grand on the thing. When she left me, she took it to a zoo. Asked me how could I buy a gibbon? How could I have been that cruel?” “I AGREE,” I told the man who stood outside of my apartment building weeping over the loss of his girlfriend, my neighbor. “How could you have done such a thing? How cruel of a human being are you? Why would you buy an exotic monkey in exchange for the love of your girlfriend?”

I possess my special talent for a reason and what better time to reveal the secrets that each man stumbles the earth with than in front of strangers? It is an unburdening that wrenches the wretched out. And the absence of James left me eager for a choir of confessors.

In my very early thirties, or perhaps more likely in my late twenties, I took to performing trial runs early on in my meetings with men, which often accelerated into remnants of nothing. Nothing when weighed against James. James was my ideal, and his disappearance left me unable to truly connect with another man. Choosing to forgo the pleasures of dating that lead up to a kiss, I initiated a courtship in reverse. First the kiss. Then the date. Across a landscape of settings in the streets of San Francisco, I pecked

each suitor with a taunting revelry. Celebrating my ability to instigate delight, panic, and bewilderment with the mere press of my lips. Each attack in homage to my James.

And as these mystery men spilled their secrets, I simply, slowly detached myself from their confessional grips. Following each encounter, I spit out their truths told into the safety deposit box deep inside of me. I believed it to be located right near my appendix, or more precisely located inside of my appendix. When lingering on the horizon between asleep and awake, I wailed wishes for my abscess to burst with facts so that it would necessitate an appendectomy.

While waiting in line at the grocery store, basket plugged with pasta and limes, kimchi and wafers, I snatched the mouth of the man in front. He wore a striped blue-and-white shirt, and his smell mimicked peppermint leaves freshly smashed between forefinger and thumb. With eyes open, the stranger yielded to me. My breath lingered, and for the smallest instant between lips parting and words forming, I was hopeful.

“I did it for Pamela. I freed the minks, fifty of them from the lab. They scattered like embers sputtering off of firewood kindling. Pam loves minks. I was going to propose when the newspapers reported on it. I would be that *anonymous activist*. But Pam wasn’t happy when she read the article. She told me that they would die out in the wild. I defended the actions of the *anonymous activist*, but she left me three days later. Told me that she didn’t have the time for a poet. I’m still a poet. She became a PETA activist. I saw her on Third Street a week ago splashing mango salsa on women wearing leather. I was the one that suggested mango salsa!”

The stranger slapped his hand to his mouth, worried about the aftermath of his oh-so-public confession.

“Disappointing,” I whispered, and moved to the next cash register line. The woman in front notified the cashier that she did not want any of the remaining items on the checkout belt. There was a package of authentic kosher hot dogs, two loaves of bread speckled with flour, and a packet of salad bandaged together in tight plastic that had been waiting to leave the store with her. She would not look me in the eyes, and I was pretty sure that I was the reason for her rapid checkout.

“Surely, you want the bread?” I said.

Charles Baxter

Half a decade or maybe more since James and a few years more since Mr. Franken, I met a man that was persuasive enough to enter my mind, my bed, and my life for almost a year. I had slept with and dated a handful of not-worth-mentioning-types. Mostly, I treated them to sparse kisses and tolerated their meek bouts of honesty. If they were willing to invest in me a series of their darkest mysteries, I could not snub them. Not for those five or so years. Like the poorest of lovers that shout nonsense during moments of deep sexual engagement, I allowed them their confessions.

I met Charles at my neighborhood bookstore, the one named after the clam and the shoe that is some elegiac reference to a beloved author. Charles was round at his edges, the cellulose of his body inflated by a schedule of elegant meals, the omission of exercise, and his Austrian heritage. But he was cute enough, and a food columnist for the city newspaper, which made him desirable. Sheltering us in the Biographies aisle of the bookstore, I swept up Charles. After our kiss, he freed a solemn groan and released his truth that needed to be told.

“I had wanted to marry Martija. I met her while studying abroad in Mumbai. We lived in a small apartment above the spice market. Her hair smelled of saffron and cumin. Her tangles worked like a sponge soaking up the scents sold beneath us. She could not move to America out of devotion to her home, and I had meant to return, to visit, to remain with her, but I was admitted to Harvard, and you know what happens when *Harvard* interferes with *Love*.”

Charles became a collection of filaments, which I felt it necessary to unravel, and so I propositioned him for another kiss and an outing. Three dates at three of the city’s most elaborate restaurants spit Charles out into my apartment for a deeper investigation of me. He slid off my blue dress, the one that makes my hips do that my-curves-make-you-want-to-squeeze-me-but-what-you-really-want-to-do-is-undress-me kind of thing. I wore it only on nights when I wanted to be undressed by a man who was not only worth the effort of stripping but also whose confessions were worthy of tolerating. There had been no one else who warranted this wearing since James.

And although our lovemaking did not represent the ever-pleasant melody of my time with James, and although it was ladders ahead of the starchy fucking that I had tolerated since James, when Charles began in his rather raspy, sloth kind of way, I refused to kiss him. I did not want to tarnish our affection with the penalty of my confession-causing lips. Charles emitted sounds of glee and looked at me with a determined grin. His smile, a set of yellowed envelopes lit by my tableside lamplight, seemed to offer me the comfort that I craved. Charles had caught me in a way that was new, and he spoiled me with his fineries. I had the salary of a freelance journalist, and Charles was an excellent conversationalist, so I remained with him for as long as I could.

And after our moments of indulgence, spectacular meals, fine sex, and content company, a friend from Charles's newspaper called me with the news that just three blocks from his apartment Charles was killed by a taxicab. The cab plagued with brake-failure crashed, causing Charles's internal hemorrhaging.

I needed someone to quickly occupy that thick sliver of a space that Charles left empty. I could not take the outbreaks of tears that haunted me while waiting for a cup of coffee and a salad at the corner bistro. I became convinced that the salad prepared there was frozen and then thawed for the wait staff's entertainment of watching my body tremble with grief. I would often clench the salt and pepper shakers in my palms in an attempt to force my brain to concentrate on agenda other than lost loves. But this grasping prompted me to rock against the table, my tears dripping, each one staining the laced paper tablecloth. It was my brunch time ritual, and the corner bistro became my location of grieving, as public as it was.

For two years, I went back and forth from New York to Paris and Venice to cover a sequence of museum openings in my campaign for independence. The time littered with confessions in different languages, a sequence of discarded encounters. This break from linguistic comprehension neared the correct dose of what it would require to cure me of the weight of the deaths of two lovers. I needed James, and missed Charles, and San Francisco became too much to cope with. But money dwindled to mere shavings after the two years, and so work and habitat lured me back to the homes of my former loves.

I coped and I coped and I kissed and I kissed. And each one was as frigid as an ice pack pressed against a bruise, until Michael.

Michael, this Michael

But back along the coast of San Francisco, I found another man, a final man. I was on an island outside of the city for the day searching for a roll of fabric saturated with pink peonies, my favorite. The cracked paint of my bedroom's ceiling was a perpetual reminder of the years since James had painted it. I decided that I would upholster the ceiling with the fabric for a boost of life sans-James comfort. I had read in the fabric's catalogue that this textile shop on this particular island, a ferry ride away from my home, was a carrier.

Devoid of the physical James and the physical Charles, ill from the barrage of garbage men, I was crusading for a new love interest. And so I traveled by boat and met a man and became receptive to opportunity. This man, this Michael treated me to a slice of tart lime pie at the Blackbird Café. The pie was a shapely lime one with bulbous currents of crust. The yellowed crust matched the hue of Michael's hair and his green-blue eyes seemed to suit the pie's sharpness. It tasted as if someone, perhaps this Michael, had taken a bite out of my tongue. And so, looking for solace, I took up his lips in the lingering bitterness of my own.

“I've tested love but am a cruel kind of addict. I become deeply dependant, shaky with need and then suddenly am on to the newest rush. It really never is the girl though. You have to understand. I am as hollow as a pumpkin inside. I am the kind of man that leaves women with a note slipped under the bathroom door for early morning notification.”

And tall, tall Michael kissed me back. And he was not James. He will not be James, but he was wearable.

We returned from our day on the island to the city where we both lived. We shared a taxi to his place and then a taxi to mine. Two different taxi fares in one evening. We did not separate because we could not separate. Michael was seeking what I was or so this sequence of taxicab journeys seemed to say. Detached yet together we had connected with one another and would continue to fuse together. There is an amusing pleasure in returning from a day trip with a suitor, some fabric, and the remaining aftertaste of lime custard pie filling.

Michael moved into my apartment because I could not bare to leave it. He, the city planner, helped me to plaster the ceiling with peonies. A metropolis' garden.

I make Michael omelets on Sundays, and many Saturdays we take the ferry to the island outside of our city for custom's sake. And during the week, we work like middle-aged people. And Michael keeps me from being lonely, and now a week before our wedding I am satiated.

We brew a life together.

More strangers but just Michael

A kiss, a cracked kiss. In sleep, I press "sorrlys" onto Michael's neck for abusing my talents. In the disguise of love, I whisper words deadened by sleep. He swerves around to hold me in his quiescent state, his brain sold to the land of the subconscious. He tells me in dozy reply that he is also "sorry." I tell him of the men that I kissed that day. I do this for the necessity, and sometimes for the thrill, of the strangers' responses. And he responds with a sequence of "sorrlys."

Travel Funds

The Franken family hired Bailey Cohen on a Tuesday night in September. On the phone, Mrs. Franken asked Bailey about her qualifications, seemed quite pleased when Bailey mentioned her Red Cross Babysitting Certification, and then settled on a seven o'clock arrival.

Bailey lived twelve blocks from the Franken family. She left the house at 6:40 p.m. and walked past the stream of medium sized houses in her medium sized town. It was still too early in the season to wear a jacket. And so with arms exposed to the night's air, Bailey marched block after block, her body's temperature lowering steadily and her arms forming bumps like icebergs of frosted skin. Bailey took great pleasure in leaving her arms bare. She was the type who set up challenges for herself to test her breaking point. She was the kind of child who would walk across gravel barefoot to develop calluses on her heels and who would stand too close to the fireplace allowing her skin to feel like it, too, was on fire.

Bailey wrapped her hair, the chocolaty color of Brazil nuts, in a side braid. Her slim fingers twisted her hair into three sections, interlacing her curls into a network of folds. It always bothered Bailey that she could not see the outcome of her braid without the hassle of coordinating a set of mirrors to view the back of her head. Bailey kept her hair in a braid most days because she enjoyed the self-consciousness that came with the not knowing how exactly her hair looked. At school, at her desk, Bailey would braid her hair to keep herself on edge. At this moment, while she walked, Bailey thought of the double helix when making her braid and considered how many double helixes were packed into her locks.

The Franken home, 225 Deer Run Road, was painted Prussian Blue with Desert Sand shutters. Bailey's older brother, Stuart, a stalkier version of Bailey yet plagued with pimples, had worked at the local Pick and Paint last summer. The front seat of his car was frequently cluttered with paint chip samples, and when Stuart gave Bailey rides she would quiz her brother on his mental storage of the paint chip classifications. Bailey recognized the Prussian Blue and Desert Sand hues from the paint chip samples. After knocking, Bailey nuzzled her face against the painted paneling, the tip of her nose pressing against the family's front door, her lips almost meeting the surface. She wanted to determine if the family splurged on three layers of varnish, rather than the generic two coats of lacquer. The Franken's door had three coats. She would charge \$11 an hour.

Billy Franken was twelve years old, almost too old for a babysitter. The boy, with his sandy blonde hair, short chin, and seaweed-tinted eyes, was the perfect age as far as Bailey was concerned. He was content to remain in his room playing video games or, merely out of curiosity, to inspect his father's Viagra supply, which Mr. Franken kept in an old sock beneath the bed.

When Billy met Bailey, she watched him move like a broom sweeping across the floor, methodically quiet. Billy insisted that they play his version of twenty questions, a game in which he asks his subject twenty questions.

"Whatsyourfavoritefood?" "Fruit Loops." "Favorite-colored loops?" "Blue, definitely because they make the whole bowl blue." "Howmanysiblingsdoyouhave?" "One brother." "Whatshisname?" "Stuart." "Do you want a sister?" Billy experienced a moment of comfort with this question, slowing his words. "Never, girls are too difficult. I'm glad that you're a boy, Billy."

“Howaboutalittlebrother?” “Nope, never. Stuart’s enough.” “Where do you go to school?” “Cider Hills Senior High.” “What grade are you in?” “12th.”

“Whoisyourbestfriend?” “Marsha Minton.” “Doyouhaveaboyfriend?” “Nope.”

“Billy always seems to speed up when meeting new people,” said Mrs. Franken, a tall woman who reminded Bailey of a statue. “His words become so gurgled.” Her words were succinctly lethargic, although they did manage to possess enough stamina to stop their game at ten questions.

Billy talked to Bailey twice more that night. He came downstairs to ask whether Bailey wanted some chocolate pudding on his way to the fridge, she did not, and Billy told Bailey that he could easily clear the stairs of the Cider Hills Middle School on a skateboard. Of course, he had never tried such an act. Bailey teased out a smile for the attentive twelve-year-old.

Billy Franken was the perfect age because Billy left Bailey to read, green pen in hand, her body pasted to the Franken’s navy blue corduroy living room couch. Billy left Bailey to think about college and about her life away from her microcosm of a world. Billy left Bailey to be a seventeen-year-old babysitter in a house just a few handfuls of blocks from the home that she grew up in.

Bailey did not realize that Billy watched her from the top of the stairs. He observed her as she pet the pages of her novel, squeezing each page to mark that she had read it. He grinned as she released sequestered gasps when reading sentences that she particularly liked. She did not know that he moved his lips with her own in mechanized unison.

At ten o'clock, Bailey told Billy to go to bed. She knocked on his bedroom door twice. And before her third knock, Billy tugged on the knob, opening his bedroom door having changed into his pajamas. Bailey waited in the hallway as Billy brushed his teeth. She stood in the doorway as Billy slid into bed and turned off his bedroom overhead light. Bailey said, "Good night." Billy waved in response.

Mrs. Franken paid Bailey fifty-five dollars for the night dispensed in two twenties, one ten dollar bill, and five singles. She handed Bailey a sealed envelope with *babysitter* inscribed in blue ink on the front. Bailey guessed that Mrs. Franken used the fountain pen that she noticed on the family's mail table after locking the front door for the Franken's evening out. Bailey kept track of such things. Her friends teased her about the habit.

Bailey rewrote the night for Stuart over a bowl of Fruit Loops around midnight.

Bailey watched Billy again on Friday night. Mrs. Franken told Bailey on the phone, as she zipped her green-checkered sweatshirt in the hallway, preparing to face the crisp fall air on her bike ride to the Franken home, that the family had been without a babysitter for the past five months and that they were so pleased to have her.

During the bike ride, Bailey thought about how babysitting enabled her to make a constellation of judgments about her employers. Bailey liked playing the astronomer. She thought of Mrs. Franken and her red 1950s starlet painted fingernails and of Mr. Franken and his assortment of striped, slender silk ties. She thought about how Mr.

Franken always stood by the front door waiting for his wife to kiss their son goodbye and about how, throughout the ritual, he kept his hands in his jacket pockets.

Bailey brought over a movie about teenagers in high school who play pranks with each other and only speak like gladiators to watch with Billy. It had been Stuart's favorite movie when he was twelve.

Bailey made popcorn and sprinkled it with paprika—"the way they do in Brazil," she told him. Billy set up the movie in the living room and the two sat on the couch and shared his grandmother's quilt. After the movie they played three rounds of gin rummy.

Bailey put Billy to bed at eleven, an hour past his assigned bedtime. She waited in the hallway as Billy brushed his teeth and closed the door of his bedroom while he put on his pajamas. Bailey said, "Good night." Billy waved.

Bailey used Mrs. Franken's envelope to store her babysitting money. She crossed out Mrs. Franken's script and wrote *travel funds* above it in purple ink.

The envelope was becoming plump over the weeks that Bailey watched Billy. He never nagged Bailey or resisted her requests, and Bailey liked that Billy always spit on the hallway carpet after his parents left the house. "Good riddance," he would holler.

She did not mind forgoing her weekend fun to watch Billy. Billy was gentler than she remembered most twelve-year-old boys being, but still he tried to show his bravery. When he heard sounds from outside, Billy would swoop over the couch to the front door and shout a line from the gladiator movie, "Gloria, grab my mace!" This made Bailey squeal.

Mr. Franken, attractive and in his early forties with dark hair and hazel-green eyes that made him seem years younger, drove Bailey the twelve blocks home in the family's

wine colored sedan. Mrs. Franken, tipsy from her evening out, had insisted that it was too late for Bailey to ride her bike home. Mr. Franken and Mrs. Franken had gone out to dinner and a performance of *The New York Philharmonic*, which was on tour. He attached Bailey's hand-me-down bike to the car's bike rack. Mr. Franken asked Bailey about school and opened the passenger seat door for her.

During the five-minute drive, they spoke about Bailey's plans for travel to Brazil. She explained that Brazil was the most enticing place to visit because it was cosmopolitan, had beaches, and was the only place left on earth where there were tribes that had yet to be affected by modern society. Mr. Franken, a patent lawyer, had traveled to Portugal during college. "It was the cheapest flight to Europe," he said. Mr. Franken appropriated his son's tendency to quicken his words, at least in front of the babysitter. He traveled the country for two weeks never venturing to the rest of Europe and returned to the United States never leaving the country again. The Franken's had honeymooned in Denver.

Mr. Franken parked the car in front of Bailey's house, 65 Porter Street. Mr. Franken opened his black leather wallet, flipping out its innards like a deck of cards, and placed each \$10 bill in Bailey's open palm. He set the sixth bill at the top of the pile and clutched Bailey's hand, crunching the bills and folding her fingers in his grasp. Mr. Franken looked at Bailey, pressing tightly.

Mr. Franken kissed Bailey. He nestled his face into the babysitter's. There was no resistance. Mr. Franken poked his tongue through the babysitter's lips and into the vestibule of her mouth. There was no refusal. Mr. Franken slipped his hands around Bailey's chin and while pulling his lips away, traced the outline of her own.

“Whatamouth,” Mr. Franken whispered. “I’d leave my wife for that mouth.” His words etched their way through the silence to Bailey’s ears. Bailey sucked in her words, freezing them inside of her.

Mr. Franken unlocked the car and Bailey stepped out. Mr. Franken said, “Good night.” Bailey waved.

Bailey entered her house, entered her room, and pulled out the *travel funds* envelope from her second desk drawer. Bailey scattered the bills across her yellow carpet. She lifted the first bill, kissed it, and placed it on the carpet. Bailey made four piles of bills, kissing each before setting it inside of one of the four quadrants of babysitting currency. Bailey undressed, redressed in her pajamas, and slipped into bed. And while she performed her nightly process, she considered how Mr. Franken’s kiss was unlike the ones from the boys that she had kissed. It was longer and sensual and carried a promise. She whispered lines from her book, the one about the children camping in the wilderness near the Native American burial ground, before entering sleep.

At school, Bailey wanted to confess to Marsha Minton, her best friend, about the incident with Mr. Franken. Or she wanted to tell Stuart. Or even her mother. But buried inside of her were the ice words that she had already frozen. She liked their mystical lingering and the way that the secret remained within her. And besides, she told herself, it would just hurt Billy too much to find out that his father is a sleaze. And she whacked her right palm to her forehead, catching herself only after the act had been through its

cycle. “Good riddance,” she whispered, echoing Billy in the locker hallway of Cider Hills Senior High.

Mrs. Franken called Bailey to babysit on Friday. Bailey accepted.

Bailey and Billy watched a comedy starring a monkey and ate mint chocolate chip ice cream in teacups with spoons that looked like stubbed out cigarettes. “Modern art tableware!” Bailey laughed. Billy pretended to speak like a monkey. Billy’s teeth chomped on his words. Bailey laughed.

At ten, Bailey told Billy to go to bed. Bailey walked through Mr. and Mrs. Franken’s bedroom as Billy dressed for bed and brushed his teeth. She heard Billy spit three times into the sink and the flush of the toilet. Bailey touched the Franken’s bedspread. It was almond orange patterned with green diamond embroidery. Bailey left the bedroom before Billy opened the bathroom door.

Billy climbed into bed. “Can you give me ahuggoodnight?” Bailey walked from the doorway to Billy’s bed. She sat down on Billy’s purple comforter, her jeans squeezing her knees. Billy unfolded his arms. Bailey wrapped her own around his chest. Billy laid down, supine. Bailey placed her knees on Billy’s bed, the boy’s torso remained enveloped by his bed covers. Bailey kissed Billy, pressing her own lips lightly against his yielding mouth. There was no resistance. Bailey retracted her lips and Billy’s lingered, stationary. His lips were so thin and his mouth so tiny. Too small for such kissing, she thought, but still the babysitter kissed the boy again. There was no refusal. Bailey opened her eyes to meet Billy’s electrified stare. She walked to the doorway and turned off the overhead light. Bailey said, “Good night.” Billy waved in the darkness.

Bailey did not return Mrs. Franken's calls until the third week that the telephone sounded for the babysitter. Its bell chattered like teeth pressured with nerves and cold.

"Saturday, sure." "Sure!" "Sure." Bailey awaited seeing the Frankens again after her quick hiatus.

Billy answered the door when Bailey rang the doorbell. A hand extended. Billy squeezed it. Billy smiled. Immediate contact for them both.

Billy wanted to kiss the babysitter. At that moment. He had missed her lips and repeated their kiss in his mind most mornings before school. He woke up craving the soft cushions of her mouth and could only subdue this desire by pressing his own against his forearm or his bedroom wall or his pillow. His forearm was too cold to be lips, his wall too stiff like a cover of a book, and his pillow too much like a pillow. He had wanted to practice on the girls in his grade, to use them for lips, but it seemed to Billy to be too much of a commitment and he feared the consequence of a kissing proposal.

Bailey felt poisoned when Billy touched her. Bailey, too, thought of the kiss and matched each thought with feelings of guilt that became coated inside of her. It was a green kind of guilt that resembled bacteria. A cure for cancer, she decided. When Billy clenched her hand, Bailey's guilt released a pang of pain in her stomach. It was the guilt seizing more of her.

Mrs. Franken told Bailey that Billy had been more eager lately. His teacher called home about Billy having a change in his sociability. He was more outgoing. She caught him twice performing skateboard tricks on the ramps in front of the school. He had borrowed it from one of the taller boys in the grade, Tyler Hendrickson. She did not know that he had traded his math homework answers for the joyrides.

Billy had wanted the news to travel to Bailey. He missed her and his tricks seemed to him to be the ultimate love message, an act in blood.

Both knees scraped, scratched elbows, and a bloodied chin.

The children cheered for Billy. The girls even took notice, and Billy convinced himself that this was his chance to kiss girls his own age. But Billy loved Bailey and always would. After all, she was his first kiss.

Bailey thought about Billy most days at school but thought about Mr. Franken every day at school. She wanted Mr. Franken to call her, or to pick her up after school, or to drive by her house with excuses of a sweater left behind. But he did not.

When Bailey returned to the Franken's house, Billy told her that his father was out playing poker with his friends. "The Devilssport, my mom calls it that. Itsajoke," he said. Mrs. Franken was setting out to have dinner with the Bellows, Bailey's next-door neighbors.

Mrs. Franken took to calling her husband's poker adventures "The Devil's Sport" because it was the title that her mother gave her father's nights out. Her father had been a philanderer and Mrs. Franken saw the same symptoms in her husband's oh so recent behavior. Indications that sprouted a few weeks after the babysitter came about. But the babysitter seems innocuous enough, she told herself. Always wrapped in a braid and jeans, too bland for her husband's liking, she was sure of it. Mrs. Franken liked Bailey because the babysitter was stranger than she was at the age of seventeen. But still, Mrs. Franken knew that Mr. Franken began to kiss her differently on the night of Bailey's first arrival. He pressed her lips harder with his own since then. And this to Mrs. Franken signified BAD NEWS. Words she would use with Mr. Franken when Billy

disrupted their marital routine with the wailings of his newbornhood, bullying at school, his first book report. BAD NEWS for the Frankens.

Mr. Franken began to kiss his wife as if she were Bailey. It had started the first night that he met the babysitter, but he did not know it then. The thought had invaded his mind after he drove her home. After he kissed her. After he wanted her so badly that he could not resist. That night, he arrived home and took his wife to bed. He opened her moonlight white nightgown and spread her over their bed, the green diamonds of the bedspread winking at him. Cheering him on. Kiss kiss.

Mr. Franken decided that his wife could not be the babysitter.

Mrs. Franken decided that her husband kissed her with a desire for The Devil's Sport.

Billy decided to grow his hair longer for Bailey. The added inches shadowed his young face like leaves over a tree trunk.

Billy had them play seven rounds of gin rummy, but every two rounds he would catch Bailey's hand in his own, letting his fingers linger.

Ice cream, pajamas, and brushed teeth. Mrs. Franken returned home that night without Mr. Franken before Bailey put Billy to bed. She paid Bailey with twenty-dollar bills that Bailey added to the *travel funds* envelope. Mrs. Franken told Bailey that she liked her braid. Mrs. Franken touched the curled edges of the human embroidery and gave it a gentle tug.

Bailey dreamed of the beaches of Brazil. In the dream, she walked them, but the sand had more of a crunch than she imagined when conscious. It was made of popcorn

sprinkled with paprika. Mrs. Franken held her hand as Bailey picked up a handful of popcorn with the other. They munched and crunched and walked more. They found a bridge and on the bridge was Mr. Franken. Mrs. Franken slipped over the bridge's edge, falling into water made of plastic. She bounced and bounced until she fell through the water's sheath. Mr. Franken took Bailey's hand and they walked back to the beach, now littered with popcorn kernels. The sunlight made the popcorn kernels glow and Bailey ran towards the sun, toting Mr. Franken with her.

Bailey shook in her bed. "Where's the kiss?" she asked in weighted sleep, willing herself to return to her dream.

Mr. Franken did not dream of Bailey exactly, but he did loop by her house on the way home from The Devil's Sport. He parked two houses in front of her own and first looked in his rearview mirror, searching for her bedroom window. She had pointed it out to him right before he kissed her. Next, he stepped out of the car and walked past her house on the other side of the street. He wanted to be close to Bailey. Bailey wanted to be closer to him.

Bailey did not babysit for the Frankens for another two weeks. Mr. Franken had tried to will Mrs. Franken out of the house, but Billy had caught a cold at school. Billy had tried to disguise it from his mother, stuffing his coughs in his pillow and flushing his load of tissues into the toilet. He also wanted to see Bailey. But when Billy would not eat his meatloaf or berry cobbler, her mother's intuition set in. And her mother's intuition began pointing fingers when Billy vomited three times that night. And vomited three times that next day and the next.

Billy was out of school for the rest of the week, and Mrs. Franken insisted on watching over her son for a week after that to ensure his renewed health.

On his office computer, Mr. Franken bought two plane tickets during Bailey's winter vacation. He had called Cider Hills Senior High to find out the dates. Mr. Franken pretended to be Bailey's father, a man that he now noticed many nights at the grocery store. Both men stopped for milk at six, suits still pressed, ties loosened. Mr. Franken did not acknowledge Mr. Cohen, and Mr. Cohen did not recognize Mr. Franken, but Mr. Franken did play Mr. Cohen on the telephone convincingly, he told himself. The secretary at the high school asked about Mrs. Cohen, and Mr. Franken replied, "Oh, fantastic as always. Thank you for asking." Mr. Franken, delusional with purpose, hung up the phone and did a series of push-ups. Grunting after each, he felt liberated. The two plane tickets would cause a fracture on his credit card bill, but the charge would not be mailed to their house for another month. Time. There was time.

At work, Mr. Franken daydreamed about Bailey. Her slice of a waist. Her pink lips that were never soured with red lipstick like his wife's. The breasts that linger beneath her t-shirts and sweaters. Her single braid demanding to be taken seriously. He decided that she could only be described as delicious.

Bailey did babysit that weekend. Mr. Franken took his wife to visit the Jacksons who lived two blocks from Bailey. Mrs. Franken hugged Billy, stitching him in her arms in front of her husband and the babysitter.

"Mom." "Mom." "Mom!" he shouted.

Standing next to Bailey, Mr. Franken took sharp breaths. He was trying to empty his mind of thoughts of the hours that he spent thinking of her, of the thoughts that he

thought about her, and of the plane tickets that he kept in his desk's top drawer. Mr. Franken wanted to take Bailey right then, that now. Bailey too transformed her heavy breaths, translating them into swift inches of air, while poised beside Mr. Franken. She wanted to push Billy and Mrs. Franken out of the house. "To the movies!" she would shout. She wanted to take Mr. Franken upstairs to his bedroom and to keep him there like a toy. Mr. Franken turned his lips towards Bailey, just a bit, a movement unnoticed by his family, and let out a hollowed, "ooooooooooooooooo."

Mr. and Mrs. Franken left the house. Mrs. Franken's hands squeezed her clutch bag, and Mr. Franken kept his stored in his jacket pockets.

Billy hugged Bailey when they were alone for whole minutes in the hallway after his parents left the house. She tugged at his hair, nothing. She pinched his shoulders, he pressed tighter. While Billy squeezed, Bailey wondered about Mr. Franken. What would happen to them if he let her have him? Would he let her have control of him? Would he be her little man-doll? She would bite him on his earlobes, she decided. Would he bite back?

"How about some cards?"

"Nocards. Let's watch amovie."

Billy pulled out a love story from beneath the couch. His friend Robert at school said that his parents watched it all of the time. Robert had smuggled the movie out of his house, and Billy promised to return it the next day. He had borrowed it for Bailey.

The movie was about a man who chased the woman that he loved, his high school sweetheart, to New York City. He found her in Central Park walking with another man and pleaded with her to marry him, to travel the world with him.

The movie began with the high school sweethearts kissing in the backseat of a long, red car. Their kisses sound like drops of water, said Billy. From then on, during every kissing scene, Billy dug his elbows into Bailey and tried to kiss her. The babysitter pushed the boy away each time. Again and again. He draped his grandmother's quilt over her.

“No,” “No.” “No!” “No!”

The Frankens walked into the house as the television screen moved from Black Box to Electric Fuzz. Bailey and Billy stood up from the couch abruptly.

Mr. Franken kept his hands in his jacket pockets and offered to take Bailey home. Bailey hoped that she was not blushing. Mrs. Franken pushed her son up the stairs, shielding her son from *The Devil's Sport* before them. She was sure of it now.

Bailey and Mr. Franken walked to the family car. Mr. Franken waited for Bailey to step inside, settle in, and buckle her seatbelt before he opened his door.

They drove two blocks, and then Mr. Franken asked Bailey if he should keep driving. Bailey nodded and smiled and then repositioned her braid from her left shoulder onto her right, away from Mr. Franken. Mr. Franken questioned the subtext of Bailey's movement.

He drove them to the nearby quarry and parked beneath two pine trees. He slid down the car windows and the scent of the pine tree needles entered the car's atmosphere. Will pine tree needles always remind me of Mr. Franken now? Bailey wondered.

Mr. Franken pushed his lips onto Bailey's lips. She kissed him back. Her tongue swam over to his own and splashed inside of his mouth. She retracted. He smiled. Again another kiss and his hand touched her leg. She moved him to the car's backseat. And

from there Mr. Franken was a young man again, Bailey's age. Or Mr. Franken was his own age, still young enough for another life. And Bailey was seventeen, but she was also a young woman.

The movements returned like no time had passed. That backseat duet. He had never done such a thing with his own wife. He pressed Bailey against the toffee leather seats. Their swift actions collected into a choreography, and soon Mr. Franken had taken Bailey.

Afterwards, Mr. Franken and Bailey remained in the backseat. Bailey settled in his arms.

To make her more comfortable, in the chilled fall air, Mr. Franken fumbled in the trunk for the extra blanket.

When he returned, they remade their positions. The quiet of the woods assaulted the car, breaking through the windows until it permeated every metal barrier the car held. Silence.

Silence leaked out more silence.

Mr. Franken was a beaker filled with guilt and excitement. The ratio of guilt to excitement fluctuated because the beaker was quaking. Its current was still unsettled. Bailey was another kind of current. She was a wave splashing a beach. She was a rational wave, unthreatened and rhythmic. Mr. Franken was taken with shivers, a sign of his nervousness; the shivers commanded his body. Bailey was excited to be a woman with a grown man embracing her.

"I've bought us both tickets. Airplane tickets." Mr. Franken paused. "During your winter vacation."

Silence. Silence. It was as if Bailey had told him to hush.

“Tickets for us? What? For where?”

“Tickets to São Paulo.” Mr. Franken ran his fingertips over Bailey’s braid, tracing its curves.

“What? No. No way. You can’t be serious.” Bailey pulled her hair out of Mr. Franken’s reach. “Are you insane? Are you crazy? Just me and you?”

Mr. Franken threw his hands into the air, as if he was cursing the pine needle smell. “They’re paid for. They’re expensive.”

Silence.

“Don’t you want to come? Don’t you want to come with me?”

Again, silence. It gathered into a humming force.

Bailey kissed Mr. Franken. She wanted to quell his words. She wanted them to be together like lovers unbound. She wanted to play with Mr. Franken. He was her toy. She did not want to travel the world with him. She just wanted him for right now. Right then. Just them. Not for a long time.

Mr. Franken took in Bailey’s kiss with desperation. He squeezed her lips with his own too hard. “Too hard,” she said. Mr. Franken was frantic. “Why are you being so desperate?” she said. He had done it already. They were paid for. The time was now. She could not refuse him.

“Bailey, I’ve bought them. Come with me. We’ll travel. I’ll say that it’s a business trip. That I’m researching a new product.”

Mr. Franken grabbed Bailey’s hand. Bailey refused it, shaking off his hand like a piece of rotten lettuce from a fork.

“No way. I’m sorry, but no. What’s wrong with you? You’re crazy, Bill.”

Silence. Silence. The pine tree needle fragrance began to smell sour to them both.

“You have to come with me. You have to! It’s your dream, right? And my dream now, too.”

Mr. Franken took Bailey by the shoulders, but she pushed him away.

“You’re insane! What about Billy? What about Mrs. Franken? What about my family? It’s Christmas! No one takes business trips during Christmas!”

“Bailey, come with me. It’s for us.”

Bailey turned towards the front of the car.

“Take me home! I hate you! You’re more than twenty years older than me. What are you thinking?”

Mr. Franken leaned closer to Bailey.

“I’m only forty-two,” he whispered, too near to her ear. She swatted at it while he continued. “Don’t you want me? Don’t you want us?”

“Us! Us?” Bailey waited to speak. “Never.” Bailey sighed. “You’re married.” Bailey paused. “What about Mrs. Franken? I’m going to tell her. I have to.”

“No fucking way.” Mr. Franken clutched the front seat headrest. “You can’t say a word. How ungrateful are you, Bailey?” Mr. Franken smacked the front seat headrest.

“What’s wrong with you?” Bailey screamed. “How could you do this to me? How ungrateful are you?”

“I’ve bought you your dream and you’re going to tell my wife? My wife! Ruin my family!” Mr. Franken hit the headrest again.

Bailey was quiet. Bailey did not want to understand. Bailey’s world had frozen, and inside of it her will.

“Home, now. Take me home!”

Mr. Franken started up the car, and began driving.

“I’m going to tell them both!”

“You ungrateful--”

Mr. Franken did not see the other car turn from the wooded intersection. It was not until the headlights of the other pair of lovers, true high school sweethearts, became entangled in their own that he noticed. Rays of headlights matching rays of headlights. And when Bailey shrieked and Mr. Franken put his right arm against her chest to protect her and the cars impacted with one another, Bailey did not shout “I love you” as Mr. Franken did, and wished that she would, as the cars collided.

Curtis, I'm Inside of Your Head!

This is what I grew up knowing: that I would die of cancer. My grandparents on all sides had died of cancer: lung, bone, pancreatic, and breast. My father had died of lung cancer and my mother of breast cancer, inheritances from their own parents. Their deaths were short, only two years each, following diagnosis. My sister was obsessed with cancer, constantly getting check-ups and genetic screenings. I chose to never take a test. I didn't want my instincts to become truth. It was like learning that my hair would turn curly after puberty, as my mother's and sister's had. I saw the evidence in the photographs: their bobs like a batch of stick-straight twigs evolving into weighted masses of curls, becoming thick, brown spaghetti. Or like always knowing that I would be strong in the Sciences, weak in the Humanities, and average in the Social Sciences, like my father. It resembled that same inkling that I would never get divorced, which accompanied the feeling that I would get married. But it was the dying that worried me.

Swinging on the tree swings in middle school I would wonder, is there cancer inside of me now? Not yet? When will there be? Learning to drive, driving to school, driving to work, parking my car—how about now?

When we went to see the migrating monarch butterflies in the mountains of Morelia, Mexico, I was the only one who knew that I was dying, aside from my doctor, Dr. Norman Charles, an internist with a subspecialty in oncology. Curtis and I built our vacation around seeing the butterflies. We wanted to migrate like them. We liked the idea of nature transplanting, and so we traveled the 2,100 miles to find ourselves in foreign

mountains surrounded by elements that we took for granted at home: the monarchs and the fir trees.

In the butterfly sanctuary, we became a part of the tropical snow globe. Twenty million butterflies fluttered above us, aching for sunlight and searching for the sunniest lilac bushes and fir tree bark to nest on.

This is what I had found out six weeks before I died: I had an incurable case of leukemia. The cancer had already made an agreement with my body, leading my body to complete its arrangement with death. My diagnosis came about late, too late to cure the cancer. Even once I found out about the leukemia, I continued my life's routine. A dermatologist myself, I visited my doctor a few times, and began to discuss chemotherapy, but I was still not ready to fully acknowledge my nearing death. So when our dream vacation date arrived, we hopped on a plane to Mexico City, and I left it all for later, but by the time of my death I still hadn't told my husband.

Curtis and I had been quite happily married. Even before we were married, we began planning our month long Mexican vacation. It was December when I died, and by that time Curtis and I had been married for three years. I intended to tell him after we returned home. That perfect instant when I would be able to say, darling I have cancer—leukemia, actually, stage four—the worst kind, just never showed itself. When was there time between our long walks along the promenades of San Miguel de Allende, the barrage of guitar concerts, Aztec dancers, and art museums, the cheese tostadas, and chiles rellenos? This was the vacation that we had dreamed of having, our belated honeymoon.

As the butterflies flickered above us, flapping from the collection of fir tree branches to the hundreds of cocoons, Curtis and I held hands and absorbed the science before us. “It looks too much like magic,” I told him.

“It really does,” Curtis said. He paused and then asked a question that I could tell had been bubbling inside of him, mimicking a lava flow.

“Honey, are you ok? You haven’t been drinking. You haven’t had any tequila this trip, and I know how much you love margaritas. I thought that it was part of the vacation plan.”

“I love that you’re thinking of me and tequila,” I said to deter Curtis from asking more questions. “Yes, a trip related delight. I’m ok.”

“You’re not pregnant, are you?” Curtis said immediately.

I laughed awkwardly, which made Curtis pull up his eyebrows. How could I tell my husband that I’m not pregnant but dying of cancer? I wondered if maybe this was the right time to tell Curtis, but instead I kissed him. The kiss was desperate, foreign now to us. It resembled our dating days, the days when I liked Curtis more than he did me.

“Do you remember our first kiss? Do you remember how much more into you I was?” I asked him, jokingly.

He laughed and shook his head. “That’s not true. I just wasn’t ready for you.”

I’d made a sweet potato marshmallow pie the first time that we met. It became Curtis’s favorite dessert. We were at a potluck, the both of us, together but not. Curtis made bruschetta. I was eating a piece when he approached me. I crunched the tiny lifeboat of bread, survivor tomatoes, basil lifesavers, and garlic ice floes in my mouth while Curtis told me that he couldn’t resist. He couldn’t wait for the dessert course to try my sweet potato marshmallow pie. “I’d marry you for this pie,” he had told me. I didn’t

like this comment. I didn't like that he could push around the subject of marriage so easily. Instead of arguing with him, I impulsively leaned in and kissed him. There, in front of the other partygoers. He was stunned, and then I asked him out on a date. I knew that he wasn't immediately attracted to me, but I thought that if I surprised him enough times he might find me alluring.

I took a photograph of Curtis next to a patch of the monarchs. He persuaded one to move onto his hand, and there he stood, monarch posing on his palm, with a smile directed at me. I realized that the monarch was actually dying, its wings shriveled more than the others, its body slowly refusing life, but I did not want to slaughter Curtis's delicious, vacation-laden smile.

Curtis was cute then, still is with his sharp hair, straight and fine like each strand was sketched on his head in orange-red pencil. His vibrant blue eyes, the shade of bright that can only be brought out by contacts. I was so convinced that Curtis wore contacts when we met, but he didn't and still doesn't. We attended the same college but didn't know each other. We were in separate majors, Biology and History, and lived in buildings, four of them, that never overlapped. There was no possibility that we would have met until the night of the party because he had just that night been introduced to my friend, Amanda, the party host. Mark, his friend, urged Curtis to come along. Mark, Curtis, and Amanda all worked at the same law firm, Hamilton Piers.

"We've both been working so hard," Curtis said. "I think that we've really earned this vacation."

I squeezed Curtis's hand and kissed him again. This kiss felt normal, fluid and familiar. He no longer seemed suspicious, which made me relax and almost presented

me with the moment to tell him about the cancer. We sat on a fallen fir tree trunk, barely moving, to attract the monarchs. Minutes later, one alighted on my shoulder.

It was true; we had both been working so diligently since we married. I was devoted to my dermatology practice. I grew up loving skin. I would beg my childhood friends to let me slather them with sun block, or inspect their pores with a magnifying glass.

Two months after we moved in together, and ten months before we got married, Curtis allowed me to map out his freckles. I thought that it would be a nice gift. In the office, I often used the black light fluorescent, a device much like an x-ray machine, to photograph my patients' freckles and to detect subcutaneous cancerous melanomas. The black light fluorescent printed out a glowing portrait of Curtis's skin. He looked like he'd swallowed Christmas tree lights. His skin puckered with pockets of electricity; his freckles kisses directly from the sun, solar love. It was his magic, his solarity, his health. I framed the photograph for his birthday, and he hung the portrait above our bed.

If Curtis equals the sun then I equal the moon. My hair was dark, still is, and was always the darkest in my grade. My skin was pale, faint, and Victorian. Harper, my boyfriend before Curtis, told me that I looked like a Velazquez beauty. Harper was nicer than Curtis, and, perhaps, was a more doting boyfriend, but Harper moved to Los Angeles, and I could not leave my office practice out of my devotion to my patients.

"I knew that I loved you after seeing your skin," I told him. My words sent the monarch flying.

He kissed my forehead and stood up, taking me up with him.

"You're burning up. Are you feeling all right?" Curtis held onto my shoulders.

“Yes, I’m fine, Curtis. Really, I’m fine,” I said as I grabbed both of Curtis’s hands.

But I did feel hot all over, and my blood seemed like it was hotter than it had ever been. I can feel it now, I thought. I can feel my cancer.

Curtis laid me down on the ground, which scattered a cluster of monarchs into the tree-lined blue above us.

“Amelia, you’re really burning up!” Curtis pressed his palm, the one that held the monarch earlier, onto my forehead. “Just rest here, I’ll go get someone.”

We were alone in the sanctuary, so I tried to persuade Curtis not to leave me.

“No, don’t. I’m fine,” I told him again. But Curtis is the stubborn type.

“Maybe you don’t even know that you’re pregnant?” Curtis laughed, confirming to himself that I wasn’t pregnant, and walked into the tapestry of fir tree trunks. I clawed at the air, wanting to shout: Curtis, I have cancer! It’s not my blood. It’s just my cancer, that’s all. Come back! Instead, I closed my eyes to rest.

It seemed so poetic, my dying at the exact spot where the monarchs travel to replenish their kind. All that I remember is lying very still, so still that the monarchs clustered on top of my body. I didn’t feel frightened. I wasn’t overwhelmed by their weightless bodies, the fluttering, the twitching of their antennae. It was beautiful. They were beautiful, and I felt like I was part of them. I wanted Curtis to find me covered by the orange and black butterfly blanket. I wanted him to see me with the monarchs.

This is what I did not realize at that moment: I had died.

Death has a sound, like the buzzing of poor radio reception. No one greeted me except a threatening voice, speaking in monotone, with my choice: heaven or earthly

haunting. I was not ready for heaven and swimming through clouds of permanent pleasure. I needed to know that Curtis forgave me.

We all know that once you die you have a choice: either you can move straight to heaven, or you can linger for a while and watch over your loved ones until they go, too. I decided when death forced me to choose to, of course, pick Curtis. I would remain with him as long as he would have me. I would be his wife, even in death.

This is what I did not expect: after I died, I entered into Curtis's literal brain cavity. I became a microscopic me inside of Curtis's mind.

I chose to inhabit Curtis because death does not bring about great resolution. Upon realizing that I had, in fact, died, I felt more guilt than I thought possible when alive. Death amplifies all emotions, so my guilt quota increased and all that I wanted to do was to console Curtis. I knew that I'd betrayed him. I should have told him right away, the day that I found out. I should have come home from work with take-out sushi in one hand and a bottle of red wine in the other. I should have lit a fire and told him the truth. We were still happily in love, and I owed him that much. But I was too selfish, and we seemed to be too young for such drama. And I didn't want to ruin our Mexican vacation. We'd planned it so carefully. I just kept repeating to myself that at least I had another year with Curtis.

It took a few days for me to enter into Curtis's mind, my new squishy red heaven that enabled me to stay connected with my love. When I first arrived, I felt like I was trapped inside of a constantly glowing orb. But I was immediately comforted by the beauty of Curtis's brain. Its interior, a rainbow of red, made me think that the human brain was decorated by the devil himself. I spent the first day in Curtis's brain, pushing

my hands and lips against the plush coils of Curtis's mind, but Curtis did not seem affected by my touching. I expected to hear the vibrations of head scratching or complaints of a headache, but there seemed to be no change in Curtis's brain. I slept standing up the first night. I only knew that it was bedtime when I heard Curtis's snoring; his gurgled, sizzling breath booming from his temporal lobe. And so by the time that I opened the door to his brain, got settled inside of my new habitat, a curled sequence of Curtis's brain cushions, and figured out where to sleep (his brain stem), and where to see the outside world (his occipital lobe), Curtis had already flown back from Mexico, taking me with him in a hand carved mesquite coffin that he bought in Morelia.

He had me buried in the plot that we loved to walk through while spotting the sunset. I remember that Saturday when we first walked through the cemetery. We expected our inevitability to take decades more to hit us, and so that day we walked through the patches of green, cracking jokes about the bones below us. We settled on a section of green that reminded me of my father's garden when I was a child. He'd had trouble growing vegetables: the seeds never sprouted, and so he just plotted out a patch of grass, separated it with a seam of stones, and maintained it. It was the greenest segment of grass that I'd seen in my life: each blade like a knife made of emeralds. Curtis sent out death announcements to our close friends instead of hosting a gathering and posted an obituary in the local paper for those not cherished enough to receive a note.

This is what Curtis's brain smells like: milk, slightly soured. The atmosphere inside of his mind is thicker than the air outside, musty and humid like a steam room.

This is what I know now that I am dead: Curtis and I would have had children if I hadn't always known that my life would birth a miserable death. I convinced us both that it was for the sake of our careers.

This is what I still don't know now that I am dead: why I died the moment that I died when the doctors said that I would have at least another year. Who built Stonehenge. Why caterpillars produce silk. Why Americans love hamburgers. The coordinates of where Amelia Earhart's plane went down. Why Spaniards love bank statements. How far Jupiter is from the Sun. Also, the reasons for life on Earth.

Every morning since I died, I have woken from my bed inside of Curtis's brain stem, the part of the body that controls the sleep schedule, and have jolted Curtis awake earlier than he would normally get up when we were both alive. He was always late for work, which I hated, and now I kick and kick until his eyes flicker and his brain activity starts to splash electricity like a pinball in a pinball machine. Bing! Bing! Wake up, my love! I have begun to wonder if Curtis hears my voice, or if he thinks that I am haunting him, or about how much he thinks of me at all.

Curtis first itches at his eyes, a habit I would often scold him for, and then turns to my side of the bed. I can't quite tell if it's a tendency leftover from my presence in the bed, or if he has yet to come to terms with my sudden death, or if it means that he misses me truly. That perhaps with this swift turn of his body, still dewy with sleep, Curtis has forgiven me for not telling him the truth.

This is how our house has changed since my death: Curtis rarely uses the kitchen now; he used to love to cook with me, and he had the white porcelain kitchen sink replaced with a steel one. Steel! When I peek at our house from Curtis's occipital lobe, I miss the photographs that are dispersed throughout, and my butterfly patterned rug, and my nightgowns. Sometimes I wish that I could decorate Curtis's brain. But I know that the puddle of brain fluids will get the butterfly rug soggy, and I worry about piercing nails into Curtis's brain to hang the photographs. Still, when he looks at the relics from

our life together, I massage his deep limbic system, which is puckered like a walnut, to make his thoughts linger on me.

It would take two weeks for the forensic pathologist to diagnose why I died. Curtis called Audrey, my sister, to see if there was any suspicious activity in my life. She only wanted to talk about her likelihood of catching cancer. He spoke with the secretaries in my practice, too, but they did not reveal anything because they did not know anything. And once the two weeks passed and the forensic pathologist confirmed my cause of death as leukemia, Curtis called my doctor, Dr. Norman Charles, to confirm the diagnosis. I crept into Curtis's temporal lobe to hear the call. Dr. Norman Charles assured Curtis that I did know about the leukemia, that I had been seeing him, and that I knowingly went to Mexico, a cancer victim. He ended the conversation with a tender, "I'm sorry."

Curtis became a truly different man after my death. He became detached from his life's routine, yet continued to work excessive hours in the office. And after speaking with Dr. Norman Charles to corroborate my knowledge of my impending death, Curtis packed up all of my possessions that night and sent them to Audrey in Ohio the next morning. He bought Egyptian cotton sheets for the bed and went on vacation to Hawaii for a week two days later.

During the flight to Honolulu, I snuck into Curtis's pons, careful not to wake him, and tried to change his dream's scenery. He kept dreaming of the monarch sanctuary, of the fir trees, and of my body buried beneath the butterflies. I kept trying to coax his pons into taking him to Tortellini, our favorite Italian restaurant, or to Camp Orange Hills, his childhood summer camp. But my pinching was not strong enough, and so poor Curtis was trapped in his airplane seat dreaming of my death. But once Curtis

arrived at the hotel and settled onto the beach that afternoon, his demeanor changed. He lifted his cheeks to the sun, and the sun returned the attention. By the late afternoon Curtis's face was bright red. I would not have stood for his not wearing sun block. I couldn't believe that Curtis did not bring sunblock when I had taken such care to keep our house well stocked with bottles of SPF65.

I spent the Hawaiian vacation watching him slurp piña coladas and munch on roast pig straight from the spit. He bribed one of the cooks to let him slice the pig himself. I guess this was his vengeance for my withholding the cancer from him. I had been a vegetarian, and Curtis tended not to eat meat in front of me.

Then Curtis began seeing women, which surprised me. I expected a significant grace period between my dying and his fucking. But no, Curtis was attractive and settled financially, and during the vacation, I had to watch him slip in and out of various women who were also vacationing solo. One blonde (single, stock broker), one brunette (married, flight attendant), and one red head (recently divorced, school teacher). I sat inside of his mind, listening to him grunting away. I didn't feel like I had a choice. I could have moved to the cerebellum, that soundproofed pink pod, but I wanted to know what it was like for him to sleep with someone else. I needed to see it happen. I needed to see that he was inside of someone else. But Curtis groaned and kept his eyes sealed each time with each woman. The only saving grace was that he never tucked them inside of his arms afterwards like he always did with me. And one time, the last time, with the red head, Curtis even shrieked "Amelia!" My name roared through his temporal lobe, and I was almost comforted. I was still stuck living inside of Curtis, the result of my agreement with the monotone voice of death. I tried kicking his neurotransmitters in desperate attempt to cause instant sleep during his forays, but no luck. I squeezed his

hindbrain tight to curb his erections, but still no luck and no cigar. Was this Curtis's way of mourning me?

What I learned on vacation: Curtis was not a very good lover.

What I knew for certain when I returned from the vacation: Curtis still loved me. I could tell by the beating of his amygdala when he looked at the photo of me that he kept in his wallet on the airplane ride back home.

Betsy, Curtis's secretary, took Curtis out for dinner the next day at the nearby Chinese restaurant where I often met Curtis after work. He ordered bok choy and spareribs. Betsy ordered wonton soup. That was all, wonton soup. She stroked Curtis's back and told him that he must be so devastated about my death. When the waiter arrived with the spareribs, Curtis asked for vegetable dumplings. I always ordered vegetable dumplings and Curtis never ate them: he said that they tasted like paper-mâché. I was surprised and wondered if he missed me and if he was thinking of me at that moment. I listened closely for any whisper of my name. Maybe his brain would talk to me directly? But all that I heard was the sound of Curtis munching on his spareribs. The waiter returned with the vegetable dumplings and Curtis stuffed them, two at a time, into his mouth. He seemed to be devouring my memory with all of Betsy's talk of his missing me. I didn't trust Betsy, and I wanted to get Curtis out of the restaurant. I tried biting his hindbrain to get him moving, but my teeth were too small. I made my way to the cingulate sulcus, his aggression center. I kicked the pink fleshy walls desperately and that was when he punched Betsy. And that was when she screamed and Curtis went running out of the restaurant, yelling that he was sorry. And that was the moment when I knew how exactly I could control Curtis.

Twenty minutes after Curtis got home from the Chinese restaurant, Arnold, our neighbor, rang the doorbell. Oh how I remembered that bell! I'd bought it and installed it myself. The repeating chimes made me realize how confined I was and how much I missed Curtis: the chimes sounded so muffled from inside of my home in his brain. I crawled into Curtis's occipital lobe: my eyes peeking through his own. Curtis was at the door and Arnold, his muscles bursting from inside of his shirt, was at the other end of the door.

Arnold, a truck-driver by day, was the neighborhood representative. Curtis and I always joked that it was funny that the most hulking people always seemed to want to represent the general public. Curtis opened the door, and Arnold said that he was just checking in. He wanted to make sure that Curtis was still all right living in the neighborhood, now that he was without me. Curtis said that everything was fine, that of course he would stay in our house, but that he really missed me, and that he was thinking of going to a widowers support group. Arnold said that he had stopped by when Curtis was in Hawaii, and then he said that the support group sounded like a good idea. He asked about Hawaii and asked if Curtis traveled alone. That was when I let Arnold have it. I sliced my fingernails through Curtis's cingulate sulcus, which made him punch Arnold in the face. I wanted Curtis to feel pain, too. I wanted Arnold to punch him back. I wanted Curtis to know what it was like to feel powerless and alienated. Arnold let out a wail, cradled his nose, and then retaliated with his own punch: the power streamed from his massive muscles up through Curtis's nose. I could see his brain light up after the punch; his brain's synapses flickered like tiny fireworks, processing the pain. The red shade of Curtis's mind morphed into a darker red, an almost blue hue, and I, too, felt the sting of Arnold's punch. I felt like I had been enveloped by a volt of electricity, which

made my body buzz. Once the buzzing stopped, I checked Curtis's brain for any internal bleeding. Curtis's nose would not stop bleeding, so I hugged his motor cortex in order to make Curtis tilt his head back to end the gushing. "Ouch!" he screamed and ran inside of the house.

"Curtis, are you all right?" I whispered to myself over and over as I squeezed the motor cortex, the blood slowly ceasing its flow. Then Curtis pressed his hand to his own bloody nose.

We were both sweaty, so I was grateful when Curtis hopped into the shower. I peered through his occipital lobe down at his wet body, which reminded me of our happier moments. I just couldn't understand why Curtis would have abandoned me so quickly. Why didn't he mourn me more? He washed the blood off of his face, and I fiddled with his frontal lobe to lessen his pain. He inhaled deep breaths of steam from the shower, which sent steam up his nostrils and into my new home. I took off my shirt (at least I died in my favorite one), my jeans, my belt, and my hiking boots. In my maroon bra and matching lace panties, which seemed to me to be the most ridiculous attire inside of Curtis's humid and red cushioned mind, I stood, letting my skin absorb the steam. How peaceful we both felt now. How strange.

"Amelia," he said. "Are you in there?"

I pinched my skin and bounced against Curtis's pillowy temporal lobe, then stammered, "Curtis, you can hear me?"

"Yes, I can," he said, and then paused. "Are you really in there?"

"Yes, Curtis. How's your nose?"

“After the punch, I could hear you. I could hear you caring for me. That’s incredible! You’re inside of me.”

“I am darling,” I said. Curtis paused and suddenly seemed afraid. He pressed his body against the shower’s tiled wall, his skin pink from the scalding water.

“I didn’t mean to be so cruel after you died,” he said. “I was shocked. It was all a terrible mistake. I’m so sorry, Amelia. God, I miss you.”

“I miss you. Curtis, I’m sorry, too,” I said as I put my shirt and jeans back on. “I’m so sorry! I love you.”

“I love you!” He paused, took more breaths, which sent more steamy puffs towards me. I was really sweating now.

“I’m so sorry. I meant to tell you. I just wanted to wait. I needed to wait until after the vacation. We’d done so much planning. I never thought that I’d die like that. I never thought that it’d be that quick.” Speaking with Curtis made any possibility of fighting seem ridiculous.

“I always felt so lucky with you, A.”

“Me too, Curtis. Always.”

Curtis started to cry. He wiped his eyes, and then his nose while the shower ran.

“I’m sorry about Hawaii, Amelia. I missed you. I wasn’t sure if you really loved me. You were always so busy working. We weren’t connected. But after Arnold’s punch, I felt you! It seemed like you were right here with me.”

I didn’t want to argue with Curtis, but I couldn’t help pushing him a bit further during his apology. I ran over to Curtis’s hindbrain and kicked it. But then I realized that I was the one to blame, and so I said, “I know that you’re angry with me. I kept my cancer from you. I’m sorry. It’s my fault. Will you forgive me?”

“No, I’m sorry,” he said. “Will you forgive me?”

“Of course, I already do.”

“I just couldn’t believe that it’d happened. That you were dead. I missed you so much. The whole thing just made me crazy.” He paused and smiled. “I just can’t believe that you chose me over heaven.”

Inside of the humid climate of Curtis’s brain, I just wanted to hold him again. I couldn’t bear to be stuck inside of the soft cushion of his mind, trapped inside of the sticky, red insulation.

“I’ll make things right. Will it be better if I make things right? I just don’t want to live without you.”

“Curtis, what are you talking about? What do you mean?” I stammered.

Curtis stopped the water. He grabbed and wrapped himself in a towel. He slipped, intentionally, against the slippery shower curtain. His head met cold, white bathroom floor tile and blood leaked out.

“I’m sorry, Amelia. It’s better this way.”

Then the radio reception buzzing started up again, and, before I could gain my bearings, Curtis and I were just centimeters apart. I was no longer a miniature version of myself. I curled up next to Curtis, still in his towel, on the bathroom floor. He’ll die in what he’s wearing, I thought.

“I love you, Curtis.”

Curtis took me in his arms, and that was when we saw the flashes on the bathroom ceiling. A light projected pictures of memories from our past: cutting the

towering, strawberry shortcake at our wedding, the two of us reading in bed, the two of us cooking in the kitchen—me chopping cucumbers and Curtis munching on a carrot—and then it settled on the two of us sitting on the plane to Mexico.

“Is this what dying’s like?” he asked me.

“This isn’t what happened my first time around,” I told him.

After flipping through our entire life together, the images focused on moments that we hadn’t lived. We saw ourselves holding newborn babies we hadn’t had: babies with his red hair and my L-shaped nose. We were at the beach with them, years later, and the kids were wearing floaties to face the waves. We saw ourselves, proud parents, at a stream of graduation ceremonies, middle school, high school, college, and graduate school, and then we were at their weddings. The last image was of the two of us by a fireplace, in our late eighties, in a log cabin during a snowstorm. We saw the snow collapsing on the house, and we knew that we were buried inside.

“Was that how we were supposed to die?” Curtis asked.

“Could it really have taken that long?”

The image of the log cabin shivered in and out of focus, and then the radio reception buzzing settled on a high-pitched whisper.

Swollen Heart, Car Crash Love

It was the way that the needle hit the page that meant that she was dead. That thin black streak without the jumpety jump, pitter pat, heart beat thickness that thumped through the rest of the hospital rooms. The way that the needle struck, limp and sluggish, slicing through her name, through her twenty-six years, through her.

He had killed Natalie Pine that morning on his way to the grocery store to pick up a pre-packaged turkey-and-swiss-cheese-sandwich to bring to the office. Even though the grocery store was not on his route, Dr. Norman Charles, an internist with a subspecialty in oncology, always bought a turkey-and-swiss-cheese-sandwich on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. He did this because he and his wife, before her death, would roam the aisles of the store every Sunday, stocking up on lunchtime ingredients for the week. This was the third time that Dr. Norman Charles had been at the deathbed of a woman.

The first deathbed belonged to his mother. She died of breast cancer when he was fourteen. He remembers her in see-through glimpses. He remembers her fingers paging mystery novels and scattered newspapers across her bed. He remembers ironing her socks so that her feet would stay warm. He thought of the scorching socks as a substitute for the cold blood that circulated to her feet, her blood stream already abandoning its owner. Most of all, he remembers his father calling his mother *Oscar Madison*, a nickname left over from when his mother used to eat pastrami and mustard sandwiches in bed, burying crumbs beneath the covers. He remembers how his father hated to find the specks on his side of the bed and how he would flick them one by one towards their salivating pet dog. It was a vestigial nickname and his father still used it

when he touched his dying wife. When he fixed her blankets into a cocoon, preparing her for reincarnation free from himself and his son, he cooed, *my lovely Oscar Madison*.

The second deathbed belonged to Sophia, the doctor's wife, who died two years before the doctor killed Natalie Pine. Hers was the deathbed that he knew most intimately. Sophia Charles had been diagnosed with a swollen heart five years into their marriage. He had always known that she was able to love more than others could, he would joke. When they cuddled in bed, he would stroke the line that grew over the stitches on her chest, the protruding streak of raised skin, the mark of her body's rejection of itself. They called it the love line. The ventricles of her swollen heart expanded and became engorged with blood, a diagnosis that was as difficult to process as the struggle to acknowledge death during a plane crash. *It feels like love*, he told her. But they both knew that she was dying. He had rushed home from work to be with her when she died. She could sense it. She called him and he came. She pushed her fingers through his own, he kissed her, and then she said, *Norman*.

I love you, he had told her, but it was already freezing in their bedroom.

For Dr. Norman Charles, Sophia's death hit like the coldest air on a winter's night from an unexpected snowstorm. "The worst kind of snowstorm," he would tell his friends. The kind that you want to shed when you take off your winter boots, but that feeling stays the whole night through. Your bones ache from it.

He stood in his neighbor's hospital room. Name: Natalie Pine. Age: twenty-six. He could not read further down her chart. The doctors had told him only that she was dying, that not much was left of her, that now was the time to say goodbye.

"But shouldn't I talk to the police?" he asked.

"Sure, sure. But it was an accident right?"

“Of course, yes. Of course it was.” Dr. Norman Charles wanted to cry, but he held in his sobs, preserving each wail in long, throaty pauses.

When the car of Dr. Norman Charles hit the body of Natalie Pine, the earth cried out. Just towns away from his own, at Semianta Creek, an earthquake erupted, fissures forming like the cracks on her leg bones, the slits on her lungs, the rips on her skin. He was like a parasite that took over her body. He had destroyed her. He took the life from her while she was on her morning run. He was one of those lethal infections that require quarantine. He was death incarnate.

The earthquake hit and Dr. Norman Charles heard about it on the radio in the hospital waiting room. The earthquake took down the town bank, the grocery store, and the local women’s clothing boutique. Seven injuries, two deaths, thank goodness it was a small town, thought Dr. Norman Charles. He considered rushing to Semianta Creek to assist at the local hospital, but the local news station had done a report, which was picked up by a San Francisco news station and the victims were heliported to a hospital in the city. Nevertheless, the earth had cracked open at the precise moment that tire hit sneaker, when melted rubber met rubber sole, when Dr. Norman Charles reached down to retrieve his pager, which had wedged itself behind the break pedal, the moment that Dr. Norman Charles was reacquainted with Natalie Pine.

When Dr. Norman Charles first met Natalie Pine at the neighborhood potluck, his mind said, she’s too lovely to live alone in our silly little suburb. His body sighed, ummm. When he looked over the body of Natalie Pine tucked in her hospital bed, life leaking out of her, Dr. Norman Charles could not think such things. Not then, not after he was the one that did this to her. Would you have forgiven me if I had hit another one of our neighbors? Not you, but another one? He wondered if Natalie Pine was

compassionate. Her breaths seemed compassionate. She inhaled and exhaled with such precision. And at the potluck, their one true meeting, she had offered the doctor a slice of her spinach and cheddar quiche. 'There's nutmeg in it, can you tell?' she had asked him. He searched for the nutmeg so intently that night, taking longer to eat that slice of quiche than he had with any other pastry-crusting food item in his life.

Neither the hospital nor the police could track down the family of Natalie Pine. Dr. Norman Charles could not accept the possibility of an unresolved memorial for the woman that he had killed.

"Her father is dead and she never had siblings," said the policeman who itched at his belt buckle repetitively during their conversation. "Not sure where the mother lives. There are three women with the same name, so we have three possibilities: one in Detroit, one in Austin, and one in Sarasota. She worked at a bank, California State National Bank, but that's all that we've got in our records."

The coroner took the body of Natalie Pine to the morgue. "Number 7113," he told Dr. Norman Charles, "in case you're interested. Let me know when you want to make the funeral arrangements."

"But I'm the one that killed her," said the doctor.

Dr. Norman Charles took a taxicab home. His car had been confiscated as evidence, and the doctor encouraged its temporary inspection. He returned home and heated up a pre-made dinner from the supermarket: curried chicken thighs, boiled beets, and mashed potatoes. He picked up the day's newspaper, but could not read it. He flipped on the television, but could not absorb it. He clicked it off and tried his record player, a jazz album. But jazz would not do. The crooning tune of the trumpet had no compassion for the murderer, and so the doctor could not forgive himself. He sat on his

couch in silence. The quiet of the room reached for his joints: it tried to squeeze his knees and his elbows. It made Dr. Norman Charles feel uncomfortable, unsettled. Like he had taken a life.

He checked his answering machine and listened to the six messages from Susan, his secretary, who reported his patients' complaints. He had not called the office to tell Susan about the death. Upset at his disappearance, his patients were furious with him, she relayed. Some were moving to another doctor, others noted how unlike him this lateness was. They wondered what possible emergency could have kept him from the office. By four o'clock Susan stopped calling. No more messages. He both hoped and did not hope that she heard the news about Natalie Pine.

He sat for another few hours, and at ten o'clock he reached for a bottle of red wine in the back of his pantry. Sophia had bought the bottle. Now its vintage had surpassed her. Aged out of her death, the vintage was a reminder of the disasters in his life. This wine is meant for mourning, he decided.

The bottle gone, the doctor's mind felt clouded, and his eyes ached from crying. It was then that Dr. Norman Charles decided to visit the home of Natalie Pine.

He turned one corner and then another to find her house. The neighborhood, called Passionfields, was one of those suddenly sprouted suburban complexes where people buy stock in plots of land. A place where houses are grown like potted plants. Nursed through a summer and a winter, developing with the aid of plant food and photosynthesis, a neighborhood is born. While walking, Dr. Norman Charles thought about how peculiar it was that most of the residents had no ties to the streets. He considered how not a single child had been born in the complex yet. He wondered if Natalie would have had a child and if she would have remained in the neighborhood. He

considered that she could have been the first pregnant resident, and he imagined the other residents crowding into her living room during her baby shower, sprinkling the floor with gifts. He envisioned the neighborhood excitement when the baby came home for the first time. Most of all, he thought of its first birthday and wondered if the date would have retained a special significance, some sort of unofficial holiday for the neighborhood.

The key. Dr. Norman Charles found the key where most people leave their spare house keys. He found the key in the bronze sculpture shaped like a frog that sat next to the first stone in the seven-stone pathway leading to her doorstep. He slipped the key into the door, painted the color of wintergreen bark, and entered Natalie's home.

They do not subscribe to security systems in Passionfields as a symbol of the trust between the neighbors. However, the complex keeps security cameras hidden in the lampposts without the residents' knowledge. Dr. Norman Charles's body flashed across the security guard's television, but the security guard, on a bathroom break, missed the invasion.

Dr. Norman Charles walked into the home of Natalie Pine and exhaled deeply. He began to cry, but tried to subdue his tears. *She's gone, I did this to her. I've got to make this right*, he told himself. He took off his leather wingtips and left them next to a pair of Natalie's running sneakers. He remembered seeing Natalie often running around the neighborhood. He walked into the living room next and took another breath. He was developing a sense of Natalie's smell. This made him nervous, but he wanted to remember her. He knew that she needed to be remembered.

Natalie Pine had decorated her house with photographs kept in frames of various sizes. The people in the photographs were all strangers to Dr. Norman Charles,

except Natalie. He picked up a set of three miniature frames, each painted gold. One displayed a photograph of a ponytailed Natalie with mountains behind her. The other two gold frames held photographs of girls that looked just like Natalie, with ponytails too, mountains in the background, and cheeks red like Natalie's. There were four framed photographs of Natalie with a dog, a stout schnauzer. The doctor did not remember any dog. He lifted a picture of Natalie with the dog at a beach out of its frame. Nothing was inscribed on the back. He tried the photograph next to it, the one of the dog eating a hot dog. He separated it from the frame sewn with pink stitches on flower fabric. He liked taking the photographs out of the frames that Natalie, most likely, once touched. He liked knowing that she was the last person to feel the innards of the frames. That she was the one who had placed the cardboard behind the pictures, and the one who had fastened the silver backings to keep the frames closed. It was a comforting contact with the girl that he had killed. This seemed strange to the doctor.

The doctor stood in the doorway of Natalie's bedroom for a clear section of an hour. He observed the vestiges of her room from the distance of her doorway. The closet door was perched open showing her black suit jackets and matching black pants, grey suit skirts for variability, and three pairs of jeans folded directly in half on one shared hanger. When he walked into her room, the doctor moved straight to her bed. He laid down on the peanut butter brown bedspread, his back kissing the fabric, thanking it for welcoming his body. It was the first time that day that he felt a bit of relief. The doctor wished that Natalie had sanctioned the moment of reprieve.

At her desk in her bedroom, the doctor found Natalie Pine's address book. The cover showed an image of long blades of grass. He wondered why Natalie chose this particular address book cover. The grass in Passionfields was always trimmed at three

inches. This service was part of the luxury of living in the complex. He wondered if Natalie craved the freedom of lengthy grass and if she hated the maintenance of nature on her own property.

He walked to the living room where he extracted the photographs of the girls on the mountains. The back of one read Stacy in Machu Picchu, and the other had Emily in Machu Picchu scrawled on the back. At Natalie's desk, the doctor searched for Stacy's phone number in the address book. Once found, he dialed. When Dr. Norman Charles called Stacy to tell her about Natalie's death, Stacy hung up the phone.

"I'm glad that you called again," she said. Stacy, Natalie's best friend from high school, asked the doctor to tell her about Natalie's death. He did. And then she talked to the doctor about Natalie.

"Natalie wanted her body to be donated to science. She wanted to be a cadaver that was picked and poked and loved and teased by medical students." Stacy was a doctor. She had told Natalie about how the medical students dressed up their cadavers for Halloween, and about how they thanked the body each time before they inspected it, and about how she really grew to love her cadaver, Harry, and even kept one of his metal fillings. She told the doctor about how she had lifted her necklace chain from beneath her black velvet shirt and pulled out the back molar filling that had belonged to Harry. Do you tell people where you got it? Natalie had asked her.

"Natalie was always digging for the deepest truth," Stacy said. "She was always testing people to see how far they would go. I loved her for that. She hated her job at the bank, and she hated Passionfields. I was supposed to visit her next month. Have you told her mother yet?"

By now the doctor wondered if the police had tracked down and notified Natalie's mother, the correct Mrs. Pine. He worried about her reaction to her daughter's death. He thought about where the pain of Natalie's death pierced her, about how deeply she cried, about the sounds that she made, and about what she was doing at that moment. He wondered if she was coming to Natalie's home.

"Let me call her. Thank you for telling me, Dr. Charles."

The doctor wanted to stress again that he was the one that had killed Natalie, but Stacy had already hung up the phone. He wondered how this best friend could remain so calm. He attributed it to her poised detachment as a doctor. He concluded that Stacy was probably a very good doctor. Before calling Emily, like he had planned, the doctor fell asleep on top of Natalie's bed. As he slept, the doctor dreamt of his wife. It was Sophia before she was sick, when she was still eager to exist in the world. He could not speak to her, but she said, *you're not to blame, Norman. You're not to blame.* The doctor woke with her voice booming in his head, but he could not believe her dream words.

After waking in Natalie's bedroom in the morning, the doctor hurried out of her house and rushed to his office. He saw his patients in tiny spurts, taking breaks to cry in Examining Room D. The room was the one with the heater that sounded like an impending tornado. He convinced himself that his patients could not hear his wailing and that, after patting his eyes with squares of gauze, his patients would not notice that he had been crying. By three o'clock, he so craved the gentle touch of tissues that he sent Susan, the secretary, to buy fifteen boxes. Only one patient brought up Natalie's death. It was Howard O'Neil, who lived four blocks from Natalie.

“Doctor, I know how gentle you are. Don’t blame yourself for Natalie’s death. She was a sweet girl.” As Howard O’Neil patted Dr. Norman Charles on the shoulder, he said, “Maybe too good for this world. Whether you like it or not you gave her relief.”

The doctor nodded his head and said thank you in as many ways as he could to deter Howard O’Neil from continuing. In and out of examining rooms for three more hours, the doctor sped from diagnosis to prescription pad to make the hours move faster. At the end of the day, Susan, the secretary, tried to hug the doctor, but he would not concede to her affection. Inside of his chest, his heart began to swell. When Susan’s fingers wrapped around his shoulders, his heart began to pulsate too quickly, the blood began to shoot in too promptly, and his heart released the blood in slow bursts, retaining measurements to mourn Natalie Pine.

He decided to postpone making his nightly calls to his patients. He did not feel up to speaking with his patients about their prognoses, progress, or any other ailments. His heart continued to flutter too quickly. It felt like it was swollen with air. He tried holding his breath while he checked his patient list, hoping to release the pressure, but the pain continued even after he exhaled.

The doctor made dinner in his kitchen, penne pasta with frozen pesto, but he wanted to eat it in Natalie’s living room. He kneeled in front of the sculpture frog with pasta balanced in his left hand and scooped out the key with his right. He hoped that the neighbors did not see him. He sat in the silence of Natalie’s home and staked each piece of pasta with his fork, allowing the minutes to pass into cupfuls of hours. While pasta met teeth and made its way down throat to stomach, the blood in the doctor’s heart collected in the pockets of his left and right chambers. Pumping, thumping life.

I couldn't save her, he told himself. She was dying, nearly dead by the time that the ambulance arrived. He cried and then he sobbed as he pressed his fist to his heart and called out, "Natalie, Natalie." Then he wept for Sophia. He missed his wife more than he could have predicted. He knew that she would have known how to comfort him. The doctor's life had been a struggle without her already, but he could not have planned for this misery. He could never have forecasted his evolution from widower to murderer in two short years.

"Sophia, forgive me," said the doctor. "I miss you."

He repeated his words, and then repeated them again. The doctor felt all of the blood in his body speeding towards his heart.

"I love you, Sophia." The heat of his body turned hot like boiling water, and as the blood returned from his heart, streaks of pain radiated down his left arm.

"Sophia, I need you." He wanted to dream of her, to speak to her in his dreams, to merely speak to her at all. "Sophia! Sophia! Sophia!" he shouted.

*

In Natalie Pine's living room, the doctor stood after hearing a knock. He peeked out of the window, but no one was visible. Although he was nervous about his trespassing, he impulsively opened the door. There stood Sophia Charles. The doctor cried out, but Sophia put her hand to his mouth, stopping his sounds. She would not let her husband cry at their reunion. She doesn't look dead, the doctor thought. She took him into the bedroom of the woman that he had killed and perched him on the bed. "It's not your fault," she told him. "It was an accident, you know that Norman." He hugged her, and then kissed her, and felt his blood morphing into flames. The flames reached from his chest and left arm throughout his entire body. He saw the flames once, but

Sophia would not let him look at them again. She gripped his chin, keeping his focus on her own face.

“You’re dying, Norman,” she told him. “It’s just a heart attack.”

“Oh no, oh no,” he said. “Oh good,” he decided. He wanted to die and with Sophia there he was calm. “Will you be with me after I die?” he asked.

“One can never tell,” she said.

“Will Natalie be there?”

“Most likely.”

He squeezed his wife’s hand and kissed her lips. “I love you,” he said but the air was already cold.

She Was Born Without a Heart

After hearing the news of the Humphrey daughter born without a heart, I, like the rest of the town, became curious about her. She was the closest thing to a living monster that the town had ever known. Soon after her birth, I began to record the girl's life, hoping to sew my log into a publishable work.

Weeks before Elizabeth's birth, I moved into a meager house next door to the Humphreys' lavish, turn-of-the-century home. Painted milk-white with blood-red shutters, its white coat never soured over the decades of its existence. The chimney choked out plumes of chalky, grey smoke with the rapidity of a heartbeat.

Dr. Humphrey was the only doctor in the town and extremely well respected. I remember meeting him, before the birth. Dr. Humphrey knocked on my front door, dressed in his uniform: a black suit and white dress shirt, tieless. The suit tamed his body's musculature, making him appear more doctor-like. Dr. Humphrey smiled with a dish of almond cookies baked by Mrs. Henrietta Humphrey, and I was struck by his jovial demeanor and the sequence of handshakes upon which he insisted.

"So wonderful to meet you," he said. "My wife would have come along, too, but she's due any day now." I searched for some fatherly doubt hidden behind the red curtains of his smiling lips but could not find a trace of hesitation.

On the night of Elizabeth's birth, the snowfall stuttered into the town, leaving tufts of white along the streets. From my own living room, I could hear the birthing taking place. Dr. Humphrey commanded, *Push, that's it! Push!* as he coached his wife's labor. I will not forget Mrs. Humphrey's agonized cries that resembled the moan of an orca whale weeping to locate her young in the ocean's depths.

The night after the birth, while discarding my trash in the yard, I came across Dr. Humphrey, injected with too high a dosage of bourbon. Squatting on the snowy ground, he was gurgling long forgotten songs from his two years in the Navy, and once he spotted me, he rocked from his elbows to his knees and then onto his feet. As he followed me, he swayed, and the amber liquor in his glass splashed the ground below. He offered me a taste of the drink. Out of neighborly obligation, I took a sip, noticing the miniature icebergs of snow that drifted at the top. I commented on his clever use of snow, in place of ice, but instead of responding, the doctor shouted that he hadn't suspected his daughter's abnormality. He promised that he'd heard a heartbeat when listening to his wife's stomach. "I'm cursed," he slurred, splattering bourbon onto my cheeks. I hoisted the doctor onto my shoulders, my own smaller than his, and we waddled toward the house. I suspected that Mrs. Humphrey was upstairs with the infant, and so I brought the doctor into his office in the basement. He had showed it to me the week before, when I came over to return the cookie dish. I saw the culprit, the bottle filled with only an inch of whiskey, on his desk. As I sat the doctor in his office chair, I debated about whether to remove his suit jacket but decide to leave it on him. He slouched in the chair, looking like an inebriated king on his throne. "My daughter," he whispered, "she's not well. You know, don't you? Don't you, dear friend?" I nodded. Then I poured the remainder of the whiskey into his glass and sat in the patient's chair, watching him sip it. Soon his eyelids sealed together and sleep fell upon him.

Ruled by my own curiosity, I could not leave the house without seeing the girl. I stepped up the stairs, careful to prevent the floorboards from crying out. I ventured into the child's nursery and observed her. Caught in sleep, the newborn whispered her breaths. I placed my hand on her chest and felt for the stillness. The child whimpered,

but she did not seem to mind me. I picked her up from her white wicker cradle and held her, pressing her silence against my own thumping chest. I stood with her for a few minutes, fascinated by the immobility of her life's chamber. Was she a miracle or a monster? Holding her made my nerves run cold, which compelled me to set her down and leave the house. I cautiously moved down the stairs and out the front door, the child's eeriness still haunting me. My dreams were rough that night.

The next morning, Dr. Humphrey awoke with much of his hair turned freshly grey, resembling blades of grass that suddenly shed their pigmentation.

The Humphreys became hardened after Elizabeth's birth. Dr. Humphrey continued to practice from his office in the house's basement, yet Mrs. Humphrey did not leave the house for months, as might be expected following such a fragile birth. Instead, a parade of her friends visited the home.

Whenever I was caught with a writer's lull, I would peek through the window of my second-story writing studio at the Humphrey's home. My desk faced the east window, and my trusted binoculars enabled me to see into many rooms in the house, such as the dining room and Elizabeth's bedroom. Dr. Humphrey's bedroom, office, and the kitchen remained out of sight. I kept a record of the visitors' reactions as they left the house. After closing the front door, Bethany Silver, a frail mother of four, often would make the sign of the cross over her chest, as if she had been in the presence of the devil. Mayor Selden Swallow, who recently had had a daughter of his own, visited the Humphreys several times to ease the town's fears about the Humphrey child. I spied him opening the front gate, juggling the bouquet of white lilies that he had brought for Mrs. Humphrey.

A young woman named Olivia Ignatius often would inhale deeply after her visits, and then press her hands into the indentation of her waist and run them over her voluptuous curves. One time, I scurried into the Humphrey's yard to meet and console Olivia about her concerns for the deformed child. We then began courting, and soon we realized that our lives were quite compatible. Olivia took to reading my published stories and even began giving me notes for my novel. The story follows a woman, who, upon dying, enters the mind of her husband. She lives within him, observing his new existence without her. Olivia helped me shape the book's ending. I was so moved by her devotion to me that I knew that we could spend the rest of our lives together.

Mere months later, Olivia became my wife. I watched her from my writing studio's window as she flapped out her arms after leaving the Humphrey's home, as if ridding herself of a ghostly possession. We made a game of waving to each other after her visits to the Humphreys.

November stretched into December, and one year extended into the second. The Humphreys' self-imposed alienation inclined the town toward isolating them. The Humphreys stopped having visitors altogether, although Dr. Humphrey maintained his practice. The doctor's patients often told stories of overhearing Mrs. Humphrey crying, and some swore that she moaned into the ventilation system to project her melancholia throughout the house.

On Elizabeth's second birthday, Olivia baked a white cake and sprinkled sliced strawberries on top. I staked three red candles into it and we carried it next door. I hadn't spoken with Dr. Humphrey since the first months after Elizabeth's birth. When Dr. Humphrey opened the door, he did not shake my hand, nor did he invite us into the house. Instead he called his wife downstairs. Mrs. Humphrey walked down the staircase,

thinner than I had ever seen her. She was dressed in what seemed to be the same starched, white nightgown she usually wore when I peeked into the Humphrey's home while writing. The little girl bobbed in her mother's arms as she moved down the stairs. When she spied my wife, Henrietta passed Elizabeth to her husband. I hadn't seen the girl in two years, and her head now boasted red locks that resembled the first flames of a fire, the same color as her mother's hair. Dr. Humphrey's hair had become a meadow of grey. My wife and Henrietta grasped each other in an embrace. Both began to cry, which finally prompted Dr. Humphrey to invite us inside. When we walked in, the home looked like a jungle of shadows. Sharp outlines jutted out from the living room corners onto the cream-colored carpet; their image made me think of knives slicing through the pale flesh of turnips.

Olivia and Henrietta moved to the kitchen to make tea. Dr. Humphrey sat with the girl on his lap and petted the beginnings of her tresses. He smoothed out the girl's birthday frock, made of white lace, and plumped up the fat, red ribbon looped around her waist. We did not speak. Instead, he hummed to the child, and I tried to make out the tune but was unable. From the kitchen, we overheard the sound of glass breaking and Olivia screaming, "she's fainted!" Dr. Humphrey rushed to the kitchen with the child, and I followed. He handed Elizabeth to Olivia and scooped up Henrietta, who was now unconscious. He carried her up the stairs to her bedroom, and Olivia followed with the girl. She looked back at me, terrified. I walked to the kitchen and picked up the broken shards of the tea mug, my hands quaking. I moved upstairs to the bedroom concerned about the scene that I would see.

Standing in the doorway, I watched as Dr. Humphrey pressed a wet cloth to his wife's forehead. He was silent. Olivia sat at the end of the bed, resting Elizabeth on her

knee. The girl began to whimper, so Olivia bounced her from one knee to the other. The child took up with tears, which made Dr. Humphrey yell for Olivia to put the child in her nursery and for us to leave the house. Olivia did so swiftly, but not before pressing her hand to the child's silent chest. As she left the room, I watched as her mouth struggled to remain closed to hide her shock. Henrietta still had not woken by the time that we left the Humphreys.

For the next few hours, I tried to peer through the window to see if she had stirred, but even from my perch in the attic, I could not see inside the Humphreys' bedroom. I crept as close as I could. I hid the binoculars in my desk drawer before returning to my bedroom. When I walked inside, Olivia seemed suspicious of my pants, speckled with dust. I lied and told her that I had been checking on the house's insulation and immediately changed the subject to Henrietta. I begged Olivia to call Dr. Humphrey, but she refused. Olivia tried to distract me by convincing me to help her make dinner. I basted the turkey, while Olivia chopped celery, carrots, and yams. Checking on the bird periodically, we crowded over the oven, swiping our fingers over the animal's flesh and sucking the excess roasting juices off of them. When it was finished, Olivia watched as I sliced the turkey. We did not speak about Henrietta, or Dr. Humphrey, or even the little girl for the rest of the night, although I knew that we both were preoccupied with thoughts of Henrietta's decline. In bed that night, I watched Olivia sleep, her body quivering with nervous shivers.

The newspapers called the next day and asked me to write about Henrietta Humphrey's suicide. The town had begun to recruit me for odd reporting jobs. My editor suggested that I go over and speak with the doctor. I knew that he wasn't having

visitors, but I decided to try anyway with the hope of comforting him. I slipped a half-full bottle of bourbon into my coat pocket. After my fourth time ringing the doorbell, Dr. Humphrey came to the door. In his hand was the same glass that had held the snow cubes two years earlier. I handed the bottle to him. We sat in his living room for a while in silence. Elizabeth was nowhere in view. I refilled his glass whenever he set it on the table. I told the doctor about my assignment for the newspaper, and he began to sob. Conjuring his lucidity, he opened his mouth and his first words were *off the record*. I nodded, and then the doctor proceeded to tell me of yesterday's events. After we left the house, Henrietta had remained in bed for hours more. Around four o'clock, she had taken Elizabeth into the bed with her, pressing her ears to the silence of Elizabeth's chest. He said that he overheard her saying, "It's just so empty, Elizabeth. So empty!" Dr. Humphrey had then gone down to his office to read over a medical journal that had arrived in the mail a week earlier.

He stopped his retelling and walked into the kitchen, leaving me in the stillness of the living room. When he returned, he continued. The doctor relayed that he had been preparing dinner for the family. He had heated up a bean stew, and then climbed upstairs to gather his wife and daughter while it boiled. The doctor had heard his daughter's whimpers. When he walked into the bedroom, he saw the back of his wife's white nightgown and bed sheets stained with blood. He rushed towards her and, as he turned her body over, he saw the knife erect in her chest. The doctor confessed that Elizabeth sat next to her mother with blood on her hands and red fingerprints on her face.

I promised the doctor that I would write up the cause of death as unknown in the newspaper.

Once home, I asked my wife about the stillness of the girl's chest. All that Olivia could say was that she had felt as if she had touched death itself.

The town chattered about Henrietta Humphrey's death for a month afterward. Many believed that she had overdosed on medication stolen from her husband's office. Others said that she died from lack of nutrition during her bouts of depression. Dr. Humphrey became consumed by his work but did not hire a nanny for Elizabeth. After the death, the Humphreys hardly ever left the house, except on Sundays to attend church. From what I could observe from the window, the doctor barely spoke to his daughter. From behind my binoculars, I watched them sit in silence during their meals, and I often saw the girl wandering the house with a doll in one hand, looking like a shadow.

Eight years later, my wife and I had a child of our own. Dr. Humphrey told us that Benjamin was the heaviest baby whom he had delivered. During the delivery, and visits beforehand, Dr. Humphrey retained a doctor's distance.

Olivia woke me one morning screeching that I should come see: "Elizabeth is off to school!" The girl left the house, dressed in a school jumper, holding her father's hand. He clutched a dark, canvas backpack. The doctor had told Olivia, during one of her recent visits, that he had been home-schooling Elizabeth. She wondered why he had decided to send the girl, age nine going on ten, to school midway in the semester.

That afternoon, after Elizabeth returned from school, I watched the Humphreys move about their house. Before dinner, Elizabeth sat at the dining room table, her pencil moving rapidly across her notebook. I peeked closer with my binoculars and swore that I could make out mathematics problems. Dr. Humphrey came in to check on her, patting

the girl on her red head after reviewing a few equations. While he went upstairs to nap before dinner, I watched Elizabeth disappear, and then reappear minutes later. She was carrying something that resembled a rope. She scooped up her notebook and stuck the pencil behind her ear, as her father had while checking the problems. Then she walked upstairs to her room. I had promised myself that I would never watch the girl in her room, but I was so intrigued by the mysterious object that I followed her into her bedroom with my binoculars. Elizabeth pressed one end of the rope to her chest and split the other end in two, placing each part into an ear. I refocused the binoculars and then realized that the object was a stethoscope, one of her father's. Elizabeth pushed the disk of the instrument to her chest and froze her movements to listen. After minutes of remaining motionless, the girl pressed the disk to her bed and waited. Then she turned on the radio and pressed the instrument to it: the sounds made her jump. Her father must have called her downstairs to dinner, because Elizabeth pushed the contraption under her pillow with rapid ferocity and left the room.

The listening became a ritual for Elizabeth. Most evenings, while I sat writing, and periodically watching her, the girl sat cross-legged on her bedroom floor with the instrument pressed to her chest. Sometimes she cried, and oftentimes she threw the stethoscope across the room. Not once did I see Dr. Humphrey enter her bedroom, and I wondered if he heard her crying. I tried to imagine what the quiet of her chest sounded like, and I wondered what had sparked her interest in her own soundlessness.

I decided to walk by the school during recess to see how Elizabeth was playing with the other children. I found it odd that she always arrived home from school promptly at 3:30 p.m., with just enough time to walk home, and that no child ever came over to play. I assumed that her father had set such restrictions. In the schoolyard, I

expected to find the children engaged in the chaos of child's play, but instead saw them all arranged in one straight line, like an arrow pointing straight at Elizabeth. I moved closer to the gate and watched as they took turns pressing their ears to the girl's chest. After listening, many of the children would giggle, and then rip one of their friends from the line to play. Periodically, Elizabeth would grab one child and push her own ear against the child's chest. Some would pull away and point a finger at Elizabeth, while others remained, stoically, as the girl processed her own deformity. Often after hearing their beating chests, Elizabeth would shove the children to the floor, shaking her fists, tormented by the stillness within her. I returned to the scene for the next week and watched as she pushed more children away from her each day. I was surprised by the growing fierceness with which she grabbed her victims to listen to their chests. Months passed and I watched as, each night, Elizabeth escaped to her room to cry and to listen to her own chest, sometimes doing both at once.

I did not tell Olivia about Elizabeth's new habit. Elizabeth began arriving home a half hour later each day. One day she returned home with leaves stuck to her hair, and I watched as Dr. Humphrey pulled them from her red locks and dropped them to the dining room floor. He seemed to be growing angrier with each late arrival. I realized then that Elizabeth had probably been spending her solitary hours in the woods, just two blocks away from our street. I imagined her lying on the leaves with the stethoscope, listening to her silence.

That night, while finishing a chapter of my book about a doctor who mistakenly murders his neighbor, I peeked over at Elizabeth and saw her empty out her backpack onto her bedroom floor. Curious, I grabbed my binoculars and watched as she fingered what seemed to be sticks. Elizabeth began breaking the twigs and gluing them together. I

looked away to continue writing, and, after an hour, I watched as the girl pressed her creation to her chest. I pushed my binoculars closer to the window and remained frozen for quite a while. I felt the frost from the cold outside chill the lenses, while I watched her stroke her sculpture. Shocked, I comprehended that she was creating a heart for herself. She thrust her stethoscope against the rugged, wooden skin of the sculpture organ and beat the piece against her chest. She began to laugh and seemed to be singing. It reminded me of an African witch's ritual, from Madagascar, that I had recently read an article about.

She carried the figure with her for the next month, before it began to crumble. When attempting to mend the sculpture, she threw the glue across the room; Elizabeth had realized that she could not keep her wooden heart together. The next time that I watched her pour out her backpack, sheets of aluminum foil fell to the floor. She crushed the foil between her palms, and once sliced her pointer finger, sending blood dripping down. After the brief pause to wrap a band-aid across it, Elizabeth finished manufacturing her new heart. She kept the heart with her for a few weeks, but eventually it became crusty from wear, coated in soil, food particles, and lint.

One night, Elizabeth placed the heart on the dinner table as her father entered the dining room. Elizabeth tried to snatch it up and hide it in her pocket, but Dr. Humphrey had already spied the glimmering metal. I observed as he made her give him the heart. She pressed the sculpture into his palms with fierceness. Afterwards, she threw down her napkin, smashed the dinner plate against the floor, and ran to her room, shouting all the way up the stairs. I tried to see into her room, but she turned off her bedroom light.

That night I dreamt that I lived in a city populated with metal skyscrapers that jutted out like nails. I stood atop the tallest skyscraper, looming over the sparkling city before me. The city thumped with the melody of a heart beating. I was trapped inside of my writing studio, peeking down at the Humphreys' home. Lightning pierced the house, and, soon, blood spurted forth from it. Elizabeth ran out of the house, and I reached for her. Blood spilled from her chest, and I cried out to her, but she did not look at me. I jumped through the window, glass crashing around me like icicles, stabbing the earth. Elizabeth stood by the front gate and I tried to run towards her, but the distance between our houses elongated, taking on the length of a desert.

Moments later, Olivia woke me from my nightmare, and I pressed my heart to her chest, eased by its steady beating.

The week passed without any evidence of a new heart. It seemed that Elizabeth had stopped speaking to her father. They no longer conversed over their meals, and he no longer watched as she finished her homework. One Sunday, after church, she dug beneath her bed and pulled out a red ball. I thought that it was just a toy, until I saw her peeling stripes of red, beginning a new sculpture. I watched as she molded the wax into a heart, modeling it after a diagram from one of her father's medical books. She added sprouting cavas and aortas, too. She walked around the room with the newest replica, and then scooped up a metal music box from her bureau. She cranked its handle and began to cry. Then she fell to the floor, still clutching the heart and the music box. I focused my binoculars closer and watched as she stuffed the music box inside of the heart, the handle sticking out like a vein. She twisted the handle and stopped crying;

instead she began to laugh. The next time that I checked on Elizabeth, she was lying in her bed, churning the heart's handle and smiling.

The next morning, before school, I spied Elizabeth outside of her gate, waiting for her father to walk her to school. I watched as she grabbed a stick and sketched shapes onto the pavement. I snatched up my binoculars and realized that the forms were bulbous scribbles shaped into hearts. When Dr. Humphrey saw Elizabeth's pictures, he threw out his hand, demanding the stick. The girl would not relinquish it. Instead, she slapped his open palm with it. Dr. Humphrey said something to Elizabeth that I could not make out, turned towards the house, and rushed inside. I watched Elizabeth, stunned by both of the Humphreys' actions. Elizabeth grabbed another stick, thrashed it against the gate, and set off for the walk to school.

Worried about Elizabeth, I visited the playground later that day during her recess period. The children no longer gathered in a line to listen to her silent chest. Instead, they formed a circle around her, and I watched as she raised her heart into the air, showing the children her newest design. They pointed and laughed, which prompted her to crank the heart's handle. They quieted and listened to the heart, and then laughed some more. She put the heart back into her dress pocket and pushed her way out of the circle, knocking down two children, one blonde boy and one girl with brunette braided pigtails. Next, she pushed another child, a small girl with red curly hair like her own. The girl sobbed, but Elizabeth didn't seem to mind. She seemed to enjoy this new authority. She sat on a playground bench, twisting the handle some more, periodically shouting, "Listen! Listen! Listen." When the children did not respond, she threw the sculpture at a small boy, grades younger. He cried. The other children stared at her; Elizabeth continued shouting, this time sounds, not words. One little girl grabbed the heart, and

then walked right up to Elizabeth. I thought that I recognized the girl. She looked like the Mayor's daughter, Abigail Swallow. I was pretty sure that it was Abigail. Abigail was the most beloved child in the town and was often featured on the front page of the town newspaper. As I left the playground, the girl was wrapping her arm around Elizabeth, consoling her, as Elizabeth slowly cranked the heart's handle.

I watched for Elizabeth to arrive home from school that day and was surprised to see Abigail walking with her. By that time, I had checked back issues of the newspaper and confirmed that the girl from the playground was Abigail. They entered the house and scurried into Elizabeth's room. Elizabeth showed Abigail a puzzle that she had been working on and her collection of dolls. Then the girls went to work on a puzzle.

Elizabeth seemed nervous when talking to Abigail; she did not look her in the eyes, until right before dinnertime. After Dr. Humphrey called them to dinner, I watched Elizabeth smile right at Abigail. I refocused the binoculars onto the scene in the dining room. At first sight of Elizabeth, Dr. Humphrey grabbed his daughter and hugged her, out of remorse for his neglect earlier in the day. Dr. Humphrey seemed to be relieved to have a visitor at the table. Elizabeth sat Abigail in Mrs. Humphrey's seat, and Dr. Humphrey didn't seem to mind. Dr. Humphrey made conversation with the girls, and I was pleased to see Elizabeth and her father chatting away again.

While I watched the Humphreys, Olivia knocked on my office door to tell me that our own dinner was ready. She opened the door, with Benjamin cradled in her arms, before I could hide my binoculars. Olivia told me that she hadn't realized the severity of my obsession with the Humphreys. She said that it made her sick to know that I used binoculars. I tried to convince her that spying was a product of my curious nature as a writer, but she remained skeptical, and so I promised to retire my binoculars. She urged

me to stop watching them altogether, but I confessed that I could not, that the girl was too intriguing to my writer's eye. She continued to beg me, and so I accused her of dismissing my privacy. Olivia left the office in a huff. We sat in silence over our dinner of squash soup and roast ham. Olivia fussed over Benjamin's every babble, choosing to ignore my interjections about my writing progress.

Elizabeth and Abigail Swallow remained friends for another decade. They became intertwined in friendship: Abigail stayed over at the Humphreys' house on most weekends and often came over after school. I frequently spotted Mayor Swallow picking his daughter up, and sometimes I ran out of the house to speak to him. I tried to get him to give me some quotes for the newspaper, but he insisted that all of our conversations remain off the record. Once Elizabeth reached puberty, I stopped watching her from my window, as I wanted to give her the privacy to which she was entitled.

Yet still, I could not help paying notice to any visible interaction between the girls. Each year, I attended their school plays and watched with hearty satisfaction as Elizabeth and Abigail held hands, while playing sisters one year. I clapped with exuberance after each performed monologues as a wicked witch, longing to steal the souls of children, at the age of fifteen. This year, I nearly wept, and would have if Olivia had not been present, while Elizabeth, now seventeen, performed a song, which described the torture of being different. She sang about the torment of being a foreigner living abroad. She clawed at the chasm of her chest, which I found to be breathtaking, yet it disturbed the remainder of the townspeople that were in attendance, as they still resisted Elizabeth because of her irregularity. I observed Abigail in the stage wings and swore that the girl was crying. Abigail then sang a song about the devotion of friendship,

as she performed the role of a friend found in the new country. I was so grateful that the Mayor's daughter, this perfect creature, had been a friend to the town's heartless child. I thought it a miracle that Abigail even acted out her alliance in the school play.

While leaving the newspaper's office later that week, I spotted Abigail, walking with levity. She seemed to glide over the grey cement, as if almost flying. I appealed for her to stop, she did, and then I commended her on her recent performance. I also told her of my pride in her friendship with Elizabeth. I said that I saw them together, often. My words seemed to disturb her, though, so I thanked her for her time and briskly walked away.

I often reflected on my happiness about the fact that the girls had remained friends. At the age of seventeen they continued to have sleepovers, as they had done since the first month of their friendship.

But a few times, upon briefly gazing out of my window, I spotted the girls sitting on Elizabeth's bed. Elizabeth would press her father's stethoscope to Abigail's chest, and then Abigail would do the same. This was the game I had noticed them playing as little girls, and I was surprised to see them continue it at seventeen. Elizabeth pushed the stethoscope to Abigail's chest so eagerly, almost enviously. She seemed haunted by the beating heart before her. As a child, Abigail would often giggle after listening to Elizabeth's silence, but now she seemed uncomfortable with the game. Abigail visited Elizabeth less and less, and I could sense Elizabeth's constant jealousy.

The most recent time that I peeked over and saw Abigail in Elizabeth's room, the girls were playing with the stethoscope at Elizabeth's insistence. She shook the stethoscope at her friend and thrust it at her chest. I watched them and, as night set in, Elizabeth rapidly shut her curtains, concealing them both.

I imagined that the girls slept, backs pressed, with the familiarity of best friends. Both of them were safely preserved in their dream worlds, puffing heat into the bedroom's chilled air, warming the spots before their lips and noses. I allowed myself to envision Elizabeth's dream. Elizabeth's unconscious was playing the tune of a music box over and over. Her body began to quake, and she turned toward her friend, ripping their bodies apart. Elizabeth was dancing with the music box, but the music box was really Abigail. Elizabeth tossed her body to face her and pressed a sweaty hand, damp from sleep, against the girl's booming chest. Elizabeth felt Abigail's heartbeat pulsing through her dream body. That was when Elizabeth remembered, although she was not awake, that she did not have a heart inside of her chest. In her dream, Elizabeth's hands were pushing against the music box player, suspending it in the air. She cranked its handle to make the music faster: her mind replicated the beating heart before her. Abigail began to cry, yet she was still laden with sleep. Elizabeth's fingers clawed at Abigail with each imagined twist of the handle. To Elizabeth, the chords were melodic hums and not Abigail, shrieking. In the illuminated white space of her dreamscape, Elizabeth was performing a symphony with the music box. Elizabeth hit her own silent chest and expected to hear an echo. She wanted to hear the music box from inside of her. She wanted to feel her body's hum.

I relate this vicarious dream now with specificity, as it eerily predicted the actual crime that would follow just hours later. I pictured Elizabeth slicing open her chest with her fingernails, blood flooding to her feet, evoking the sound of waterfalls. Elizabeth pushed the music box inside her chest and sealed the instrument in, pressing her skin back together. Elizabeth smacked her chest to the tune of her music box heartbeat, and

now she was crying with love for her body's new music. Abigail cried, and still she did not wake. Elizabeth cried out again with love for the vibrations inside of her. She again pushed her palm to her friend's chest. Elizabeth whimpered again and again, and her moaning released her from the fantasy. As she departed from her dream world, the truly heartless girl woke with the desire for a heart of her own. Her eyes flashed open, and that was when she decided to steal the heart that beat before her. Abigail was still wading through the thumping of her own mind. She did not know that her murder had been designed in a dream.

The events that followed are well known now. The news would all come out later at the trial. Elizabeth testified, and I wrote up my own personal transcript as she spoke. Elizabeth, still half asleep, had an urge so great that she knew that she had to indulge it. She left Abigail to continue sleeping, and crept down into the basement, entering her father's office. She picked through the drawers and collected the silver weapons necessary to perform the procedure. Elizabeth walked up the stairs, cradling the instruments in her arms. She opened the door, opened the heart of her best friend, and then opened her own chest. She reached into the girl's chest and pulled out the organ, still pounding. She parted the flaps of her own chest and stuck the stolen heart inside. There was silence. She closed the flaps, and then the beating started up again. She shrieked with pleasure and felt the pulse coursing through her body. She felt her own blood travel into the stolen organ and felt refreshed, as if she had spent her life drained. She imagined that her hair was growing redder and imagined that her cheeks were developing a perpetual flush. She had always been so pale and hated it.

Elizabeth brought Abigail's body to the forest where Elizabeth had once listened to her own silent chest. She carried Abigail with a strength that she didn't know that she could summon, and she attributed it to her new heart. After Elizabeth buried the body, she sprinkled leaves on top of it and thanked her best friend.

The next day, Elizabeth did not go to school; instead, she stayed home, hidden in her father's house, to listen to her heartbeat with her father's stethoscope. She told her father that she felt sick, and when he came upstairs to check her temperature, she tried to push him away, but he noticed the beating upon his brief touch. He screamed at a pitch that he hadn't reached since wailing after his wife's death. He grabbed the stethoscope on Elizabeth's bed, and pushed it to her chest, horrified at the sound of the pounding. Elizabeth tried to convince her father that it had just, that morning, sprouted inside of her. He ran out of the room, locking Elizabeth inside.

That morning, Mayor Swallow visited Dr. Humphrey asking about Abigail. The Mayor's wife was growing worried. He asked to speak to Elizabeth, but Dr. Humphrey reported that his own daughter was ill. The Mayor suggested that, perhaps, his Abigail was ill, too, lost somewhere, perhaps, in the woods. She didn't make it home yesterday, he said. The Mayor sent the police to search the woods, and it only took them two hours to find her buried body. The Humphreys did not learn of the discovery until the next morning, when the town newspaper reported the murder. The town was aflutter with news of Abigail's carved-out chest.

When I found out that Abigail's chest had been sliced open, and hollowed of its heart, I knew that it was Elizabeth who killed Abigail. I told the Mayor about my suspicion, even though I realized that the truth would take Elizabeth from me. I watched

as he turned away from Dr. Humphrey's front door, and then I raced to catch him. Inside of my living room, I watched him clench his fists when I told him about the girls and their stethoscope game. He sobbed and begged me to leave him be for a minute. He used my telephone to call the Police Commissioner.

The Mayor arrived at the Humphreys' house to arrest Elizabeth. He brought six police with him, and, when they knocked, Dr. Humphrey let them in and led them directly to Elizabeth's room. I could not resist watching Elizabeth walk down the stairs handcuffed and dressed in one of her mother's white nightgowns. Before she stepped into the police car, I swear that Elizabeth looked up at my window and smiled.

The trial was quick and most of the town dug elbows at the courtroom door, fighting to get inside to watch it. The verdict was guilty; Elizabeth was locked up in solitary confinement. On the second night of her imprisonment, Dr. Humphrey died of a heart attack. The Mayor had stopped by to check on him and was the first to discover the body. Dr. Humphrey was sprawled out on the staircase, his hands clenched at his chest. When Elizabeth heard the news, she slammed her metal chair against the prison bars for five nights straight. The chair became so battered and bruised with indentations from her pounding that the prison guards confiscated it and replaced it with a wooden one. Elizabeth smashed three wooden chairs before stopping her nightly beatings.

The Mayor proposed an initiative for the children of the town to listen to Elizabeth's heart. He wanted them to hear the last vestiges of his daughter's existence, and he convinced the town that the sound of the pounding would serve to show the children the terrors of jealousy. During the town meeting, some of the townspeople whispered about the Mayor's growing obsession with Abigail and his mistreatment of Elizabeth. But still, the townspeople voted on the initiative with fervor, their hands

racing into the air. Daily, the children lined up at Elizabeth's cell to listen to the beating using Dr. Humphrey's stethoscope. He had begged the Mayor to let Elizabeth keep it. One child at a time slipped the stethoscope through the prison bars and listened to the pounding.

Some swore that they heard the organ thumping, A-bi-gail! A-bi-gail! Others said that it pounded the sounds of Abigail's last shrieks. Still others said that they heard Elizabeth's heartlessness in each beat. They said that her heart sounded frozen, forced to beat its icy call of jealousy.

I was one of the first adults to visit Elizabeth. I had never listened to the silence of her chest, as I only felt it, so when the opportunity came to hear the heart beating, I could not resist. I went near the end of the visiting period and slid the stethoscope through the bars. Elizabeth looked up and smiled, never speaking to me. She was under direct orders not to speak to her visitors, but still the children swore that she cackled or burst into screams, or often spent the visiting periods laughing to herself. I became haunted by the sound of the pounding, and the rhythm looped through my mind most days.

Many more visited Elizabeth, and soon the townspeople swore that they could hear the beating in their dreams. Everyone seemed consumed by the pounding, or by conversations about Elizabeth, or by the Mayor and his misery.

Olivia visited Elizabeth once, and then swore to never visit the girl again. Still haunted by the deaths of Dr. and Henrietta Humphrey, she could not tolerate the trauma of seeing how the jealous girl had crumbled. Worried about my infatuation with Elizabeth, Olivia made me promise not to visit her again. But I could not keep myself from her, and so I snuck away to see Elizabeth a few times each month. Once, when I

arrived home, Olivia and Benjamin were not there, and Olivia had left a note announcing our impending divorce.

Over the months more people claimed to hear the beating, and some said that it was so bad that they threatened to take their own lives; some did. After a batch of suicides, some of the townspeople moved away. Others still chose to continue visiting Elizabeth, becoming her dedicated fans. Soon, the Mayor put a ban on the visitations.

I begged him to let me see her one last time, and he obliged. I just wanted to make sure that she would be all right, alone in her solitary confinement, with one nurse as her only visitor. I asked Elizabeth if she minded, but she didn't respond. I heard that she had been mute for months. She sat with the stethoscope pressed to her own heart and laughed. She continued laughing, listening to her heart's pounding, and then clapped her hand to her chest to replicate its beating. The prison bars were between us, and she held the stethoscope out for me to listen.

Elizabeth and I looked at one another while I listened. All that I heard was the sound of perpetual beating.