

# Finding lost things

by

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Ellen Coomey Schwed

## DEDICATIONS

I am indebted to so, so many.

For my family, because without you these words, your words, my words would never have been put to paper. I love you all so very much.

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And finally, for Nick, the one who came after.

*The little girl held a yellow bucket that swung crookedly in the breeze. The moldy pennies rattled together at the bottom and a single snail left a silvery path across the coins. "Come here, see what I found." And a white plastic spoon dug into the soft earth, revealing slithering pink worms and colored wires from the nearby telephone pole. She pinched the worm together, let it squinch across her palm: "Hello little wormie."*

## CONTENTS

### How nice this is

Good and No and Lots	6
Plane Rides	25
Alexander	26
Two Carriers and One Negative	27
The Christmas Card	28

### The five I was born into

How They Met	32
B.N. (Before Nell)	33
Jaws	38
Armadillo	40
Man in the Moon	42
Ship in the Night	43
This is Jeopardy	44
Pane of Glass	50
Fur	52
Brass and Bone	53
My Father was Never a Bobby	55
These Words	63
Ovaries	64

### She is all wonk

The Littlest Hobo	66
Danny the Hamster	75
Blue Envelopes	76
Curtains	78
How We Didn't Meet	79
Special	80
What My Sister Doesn't Talk About	81
The Others	82
Queen of UTIs	94
Your Mother is Fish	96
Paper Hats	104
Outside In	106

### In the loud and the quiet spaces

Time	120
Corkboard	122
Quiets, Louds	123
They Drove South	126

# How nice this is

*“That’s all we have, finally, the words, and they had better be the right ones.”* – Raymond Carver,  
“A Storyteller’s Shoptalk”

## Good and No and Lots

Denise, our mother, said afterward: “I ever get that bad, you take me out back with a shotgun.” She was afraid her brain would rot, synapses twist, the fat die, the platelets loosen. It was a disease that belonged to someone else, but she still felt it in her blood, her cells, her being. She was afraid to end up like her mother.

“My mother is dead,” she said and sipped her Kir Royal. I wanted something sweet too, but I wasn’t brave enough to order one from the waitress. Her black and white outfit looked loose around her neck, one button mismatched. I counted the months until I would be legal and asked for just water.

The restaurant was in a converted barn, the banisters low and filled with wooden pegs. Our parents had spent their first married night in the attached inn, on the third floor, with a window that rattled, ice on the glass, and our mother, drunk on champagne, had said: “Goodnight Lynne” to our father, as she fell asleep. There were other families eating, the scrape of metal on plate, the clink and tap of glasses against wood, Christmas Day toasts.

“She’s clean and safe,” Bob said.

“The chart said no biting,” Caitlin said. She tucked her hair behind each ear. “But some scratching and swearing.”

“The other day she was in the game room playing cards with the other ladies, and she got so upset she threw the cards into the air and said, ‘Now, if you don’t listen we’re going to play sit down and fuck!’” Denise said.

“How do you play that?” Adam asked, trying to smile. They all looked away, to the ceiling, to the floor, to the candle mid-flicker in the center of the table. Denise

thought, again, “My mother is dead,” and looked at her three children and her husband and her eyes were dry.

\* \* \*

Francis and Jeanne sang in choir together, in purple robes, and almost held hands. He first saw her from across the parking lot wearing a fur coat. She first saw him leaning against his black Buick. She thought he was rich and he thought she was rich, but neither was rich.

On their first date Francis tried to teach Jeanne how to drive.

“Now, one foot on the clutch, one on the gas,” he said.

“I’m trying,” she said. The car spluttered forward, catching along the pavement.

“Jesus, Jeanne, we’re not going anywhere.”

She let go of the wheel and reached in her purse for a cigarette. She had it lit for a second, but Francis pulled it from her lips and tossed it out the window. “Franny!”

“Not in my car,” he said and moved her hands back to the wheel, lacing her fingers through his own. “Now, foot back on the clutch.”

When they were married he would make her a painted sign: If You’re Smoking in This House, You Better Be on Fire. She would take the hint and throw her packs out, make a big show out of it too, but she would always smell a little like smoke, the scent of teenage-rebellion sunk into the folds of her Grandma skin and puffed white hair, which she had washed every week at the hair salon in Auburn.

“Take this turn up here, slow, slow,” he said, his fingers still laced through hers. Her heart beat steady against her chest, and it was hard to breathe, her lungs heavy. She looked at the corner of his chin, her eyes slanted, but his eyes were on the road, straight ahead; he never faltered.



“A little gas now, turn, turn, you got it!” He smiled, laughed a little, and pulled his hands away. Jeanne drummed her dark pink polished nails against the steering wheel. “Now what?” she asked. “You drive, Jeanne, you’re in charge now,” he said. She turned back to him, his eyes still on the road, fixed; she leaned in and kissed him on the cheek, quick and darting, a little imprint of dark pink pressed to his face. She was eighteen and he was three years older and she couldn’t believe that someone like him would have picked her to go driving. She was a little sweaty, nervous, but she had kissed him and she felt braver and his cheek had been soft against her lips.

They would have three children: a daughter and two sons.

Franny would work at Oxford Electric and make a lamp for the den with extra parts from the plant. He would sit in his La-Z-Boy, pull the lever back, and flip through instruction manuals after work. Jeanne would bring the children to school and play bridge with the other neighborhood wives. She would call her sister Barbara every Wednesday at 4:30 in the afternoon and ask her about Vermont and her cats and her husband. Every morning she would eat a bagel with cream cheese and jelly and always manage to smear a thin line along her lip. Franny would sit across from her, sip from his cup of steaming coffee, and gesture to his own lips. “You got a little something there, Jeanne.”

\* \* \*

When we went to the nursing home I wore an orange dress with flowers and my mother’s black sweater, the sleeves loose, a little white cat hair along the edges. My sister said, “You look nice,” but her voice was flat and her eyes said something else.

We crowded into the elevator, our faces mirrored in the panels along the wall; we touched elbows, and no one said a word. We walked out into the hallway and our mother turned and said, “I don’t want any of you to be surprised. She’s not doing well.”

The Alzheimer’s wing was beige and carpeted, the air stale. There were other women, one pushing her walker forward, her pants tucked into her socks, her face a little crumpled. “Are those for me?” she asked, pointing to the gift bags we carried.

Our mother smiled. “Do you know Jeanne Coomey? Maybe she’ll share with you.” Her voice was patient and soft, the first-grade teacher coming through. We all continued on, and the woman and her walker stalled at the nurse’s station.

“Mom?” our mother said, walking into the corner room – a little dim, the bed so low to the ground it could have been a mattress on the floor. Jeanne, our Grandma Jeanne, was standing against the wall, her white hair cropped close to her head and her skin folded, dimpled along her jawline.

“Barbara?” she asked, her hands shaking, nails bare and clipped short.

“No, Mom, it’s Denise, your daughter,” our mother said, walking closer to her, “and these are my children and my husband, Bob.”

“My daughter? I’m too young to have a child!” she laughed, but still shaky, eyes wide.

“How about we just visit for awhile. Let’s sit. Here, do you want a cookie?” So we sat down, Bob in a black folding chair, grandchildren on the low bed, and our grandmother, tucked in the corner, nibbling along the edges of a ginger snap. I looked at my siblings’ faces, their eyes red and watery, and then I couldn’t anymore. We left after twenty minutes; Grandma Jeanne curled into the bed, her knees folded, eyelids closed. Our mother draped a blanket across her, kissed her forehead, and dimmed the lights.

\* \* \*

On their second date they went dancing. Franny drove to her family's white-trimmed green duplex in his black Buick. He parked along the curb and thought about honking to get Jeanne's attention, but saw her mother at the window, and thought better of it. Jeanne had told him they lived on the second floor, she liked to watch the light filter into her bedroom in the mornings, and her mother would leave root beer on the sill to cool. Franny took the steps two at a time, his shoes slipping against the grain, the stairs at once familiar and strange, because he too lived in a walk-up duplex.

Franny met Jeanne and her mother, Katherine, at the door. Katherine was good with her hands, sewed all her daughters' dresses from patterns she cut out from magazines. Jeanne had been voted the best dressed two years running. She was wearing a dark green skirt, a white blouse, and shiny baubles on her ears. She smiled, wide, when she saw Franny. The mole at the corner of her lip curled, pink and blended. He remembered how it had felt, smooth and cold, against his cheek. Franny took her hand and promised they would be back by eleven. "Ten," Jeanne's father, William Kelley, coughed from his chair. William stuck his head around the corner of the door, the newspaper folded in his lap. He had been a semi-professional baseball player, a second baseman, but now worked at the Heald Machine plant in Worcester, his fingers nimble on the assembly line. His back would always be a little too hunched, shoulders rounded. In 1978 he would light his last cigarette, fall asleep in his chair, and die in the fire that burned down the duplex apartment. But for now, he watched his youngest daughter leave on her second date with her future husband.

The bar was crowded and smoky. He pulled her along to a table near the jukebox. "Here, I told them we'd be at the back," Franny said, and let Jeanne slide in

first. "I'll get us some drinks. What'll you have?" And she thought of her mother and her gimlets, her poised fingers lifting a small cup of green to her lips, or her father and his brown glass always tinkling, ice against the edges, hands shaking. Her mother would cut dress patterns from the magazines and her father would read the paper and the clock would tick-tick behind them and nothing ever seemed to be said aloud. "Well, I don't know...something sweet."

He brought two brown glasses with orange slices and maraschino cherries. Hers had a few extras. They didn't wait for their friends to join them at the table, but downed their drinks and went to dance. By the end of the night Jeanne had a run in her nylons (her mother would be upset) and Franny had a line of sweat down his back. He swung her around, again, and she laughed into the crowd. He drove her home with the windows open, while they broke his own rule and smoked in the car. Franny watched her at each stoplight and checked his wrist. They were late. "Don't worry, I'll just tell him we had a flat," Jeanne said.

"We're here," he said, pulling to the curb. She opened her eyes and turned the radio down. The block was dark, except for the light in the bedroom she shared with her sister. Jeanne opened her door before he could put the car in park. She leaned in through his window, eyes flickering, and he felt that smooth mole, for just one second, on his skin.

He asked her to marry him a year and a few months later. It was simple, easy, he thought, but the day of the wedding his feet had ached, swollen into his black loafers, and when his own mother saw him, rubbing his rounded bones, she took him to the corner of the chapel. They stood next to the font of holy water and Franny dipped his

fingers. The water was too cold on his skin, but he crossed himself and his mother Hannah followed. They were more religious than Jeanne's family.

"Jeanne is a wonderful girl," Hannah McNamara had said. "You'll be very happy." He nodded and said: "Just nerves is all."

He stood in front of the priest, waiting, and when Jeanne walked down the aisle, his feet didn't feel quite so swollen and his heartbeat slowed a little, timed to the way she walked, her arm looped through her father's. She was beautiful and smiling and he kept his eyes only on her.

\* \* \*

"We took the Mass Pike, so much traffic on the Mass Pike!" Grandma Jeanne said, unfolding herself from her puffy jacket. Franny was right behind her, "Hullo! We're here! Did you hear about the traffic?" He laughed and dragged their suitcases to the den.

It was Christmas Eve, or a few days before, but it always went a little something like this: Poppy and Grandma Jeanne slept in the den on pull-out twin beds and we opened their presents and decorated the tree on Christmas Eve. Poppy liked to sleep with the window open and one year his head was topped with a perfect crest of white snow. Grandma Jeanne was always anxious about presents and mealtimes and no one but Poppy could ever seem to calm her down – "Give it a rest already" – and her hands would go to her hips, eyes narrowed and wrinkled, and then he'd say, "All right Anna Jenanda," and lace his fingers through her fingers and only then would she breathe easy. Franny had names for everyone. Jeanne was Anna Jenanda for a cashier at their local pharmacy, an older woman with dentures who spit on every customer, especially when she was excited and used a lot of Ss. Grandma Jeanne did not enjoy the comparison and

took special care to floss her teeth, pulling the white thread through each tooth every night before bed. She would not succumb to a dentured fate like that of Anna Jenanda.

“Hey you finks! How’re my grandchildren?” Poppy asked, stomping into the sunroom, his frame filling the doorway, his shoulders broad and his stomach a gentle paunch against his navy blue shirt. He always wore navy blue and khaki pants and brown shoes. He said he liked to look coordinated.

His hands were bigger than mine would ever grow to be: layered and muscled, almost purple with spots and bruises and pulsing veins. They were working hands. He liked to build or mend in his workshop, sawing and sanding. He always smelled a little like paint or dust or the comfortable smell of a mildewed basement. When Poppy died and my father was charged with the task of writing his eulogy, he would ask what we loved best about him and I said only: he could fix anything.

“How many deer you think we’re going to see this time? Do you have a red or a blue ticket? Will these children ever get out of bed?” Poppy liked to pretend he gave out meal tickets, red or blue, or you wouldn’t get a plate. My mother bought him a roll of carnival tickets one year before the holidays. He had pulled them from the bag and smiled, his teeth a little layered in the front, and coughed, “Windy!” No one understood this joke of the red or the blue tickets’ because you always got a plate, you were always fed, ticket or no.

The three of us slept late on Christmas morning, always, and always our grandparents couldn’t believe it. Our parents would have to call to us from downstairs, cajoling: “Come on now, for your grandparents, look alive.”

We stumbled down the stairs, hair bed-headed, eyes still slightly crusted with sleep. And there they would always be: Grandma Jeanne on the small couch with our

mother and Poppy in the blue chair by the corner. He would be dressed and she would still be in her robe, but hair perfectly coiffed.

“I’ve already seen three deer,” he said and pointed out toward the field, “and Windy and I refilled the bird feeders.” A cluster of winter birds clung to the green metal grate and picked at the block of food. They were black and white with peach colored bellies. “That’s a chickadee,” Poppy said, following our eyes.

Grandma Jeanne smoothed her robe and crossed her legs. She ate a bite of kringle and sipped from her mug: “Well go on, open some presents. Santa’s come.”

\* \* \*

In the summers, Franny and Jeanne took their children to the shore. They rented a shingled cottage, The Dog House, and ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on the sand. They let the children take themselves to the beach, one wheelbarrow for the three of them. Denise dragged her youngest brother down to the shore, the wheels clipping the edge of the sidewalk, Mikey sucking his thumb.

They slathered themselves in baby oil and let their skin crisp and crinkle. Decades later Denise would have moles removed from her back, brown and muddled, not yet pre-cancerous.

Franny and Jeanne invited friends to the beach, mixed drinks back at the Dog House, and one summer, when their children were in high school, asked their middle child to buy some marijuana for them and their friends. Jeanne would later say that she hadn’t felt anything, that smoking grass was nothing like a cigarette, but she wasn’t telling the exact truth. One night Franny took a little bag from his suitcase, crumpled bunches of brown, and placed it on the table. The adults had watched him carefully, counting each pick, pinch, twist of his fingers as he rolled a slender joint. “Looks just like

a hand rolled,” Jeanne said. They passed it around the table and when it was Jeanne’s turn, she pinched it between her fingers, just like a cigarette she thought, and then coughed into her hands, the moment over. She reached for her glass and sipped eagerly, her throat too dry.

The night washed over them: warm and sweet. It was 1969 and the world felt larger; Jeanne knew there were things happening outside the walls of the shingled Dog House and beyond the lapping waves at the edges of the beach. She watched Vietnam on the television in her living room while her children were away at school, and was amazed by the number of trees that looked exactly like the scragged pines in the backyard. She felt her children and their friends fidgeting, itchy; Franny’s fingers drummed on the kitchen table and the countertop and their bedside table at night. She counted the rhythms of his unstoppable fingers, the thump-tap-tap of the pads of his index to middle to ring. It lulled her to sleep some nights and kept her awake others. She knew his mind was in Korea and on the men he met there, before they were married, and when he saw the birthdates and numbers pulled from a glass jar, he could not forget the lost. Jeanne could not escape the war in her living room or the moon and the steps left there in dust or the drowned girl in the trunk of a young senator’s car that no one could stop talking about.

So when she inhaled, coughed, she found herself outside of the circle and the Dog House and the warm night. She was both in the room and outside it; she listened to their heartbeats and their breathing and then sunk deeper into the back of her chair. She smiled when they smiled, laughed when they laughed, but she could not say what they had talked about. She looked down at her hands, the plump fingers, and thought how large she had become, a rounded housewife, and wished for the tiny girl she had been.



The girl with scrawny chicken legs and knees that crackled, but she could run, run down the block after the neighborhood bully when he stole her Halloween candy, dance at the smoky bar with Franny on their second date when she ruined her stockings. She could run faster and dance longer than anyone. She felt older and fuller and could feel her body quicken, and then slow, on that summer night. When they went to sleep, she had curled into Franny, lay her head against his chest, settled into him, and stayed silent in their bedroom, listening to the waves against the rocks and the breeze on the shutters. She could not see the moon from their bedroom window and she fell asleep thinking of it, wondering if the footprints were still there, if they even existed at all.

\* \* \*

I sat with her in the den and she asked me how school was going and if I had a boyfriend and what classes I was taking. In a few minutes she would ask again or she would tell me about the traffic or how delicious the dinner had been. I sat there and listened to her mind rewind, stop-start, a looped tape of questions and answers. I sat there, picking at the knitted blanket and told her: good and no and lots, like English and math and chemistry. She would tell me she went to the Christmas Tree Shoppe and ask if I liked my present. It had been a green and pink mirror, glass, with a thick handle, and cold against my skin. I had held it to my face: shining, braces and small pimples and crinkled bangs. The mirror caught the light from the tree, shimmered, and I turned the handle to the windows.

I had looked behind me into the blackness of the outdoors, the outlines of trees and the empty bird feeder and the small pile of wood by the side of the house. All of it smears of black and gray and almost white. It was quiet out there, the snow coming down in clumps and flakes, thick and sticking. If you wandered out, you would get lost,

be swallowed whole by the deep white. They wouldn't find you until spring, until it thawed, until the world was green again. Inside it was bright, colored lights that burned your fingers if you touched the bulb (seven years prior I had burned my right thumb on the bigger, brighter bulbs of a retro set of lights, the skin taut and red; it had felt smoother ever since, one less layer of skin). My grandmother asked me again and I told her, good and no and lots.

My mother watched us from the doorway. We would never talk about it, how she stood there and looked at us – her mother and her daughter – talking in circles. I never asked her about it because it hadn't felt like a moment I would remember. When I thought of my grandmother's Alzheimer's and the way her voice slowed and brain slowed, I would only remember the particular way her lips curled and the smell of nursing home, already embedded in her skin and hair, and her steady shuffle, a white walker, tennis balls on its legs, gripped between her hands.

\* \* \*

Denise stood at the threshold, her feet barely on the line between inside and out, and thought only of the tornado in the summer of 1997. She looked at her mother and her daughter and the pink knitted blanket. The room was warm, almost amber, and her mother's eyes were wide, open and bright. Her daughter was nodding along, picking at the blanket on her knees. Denise watched Jeanne reach for Nell's hand, hold it, shaking.

They had sat out on the porch with root beer in plastic cups and turkey sandwiches. Nell had a smear of mustard on her lip and she was babbling about Pine Cobble and winning a prize for Biggest Leaf (a rhubarb from their own patch; they had picked it the day before, the stem purple and its green veins stretched wide). Denise had smiled and looked out at the lawn and the trees, counted the birds that flew close, and

then were suddenly silent. They sat in the sunroom and watched the edge of the woods and the clouds gather, darkening.

“It looks strange out there,” she had said and Bob had only nodded, antsy for his Sunday Times. He glanced at the clouds and said, “It’s nothing.”

“Turn the radio on,” she said. Nell watched her father fiddle with the dials. She sat on the floor with a plastic toy, studied her mother’s face, how it turned to the windows and back to the radio and the windows, over and over.

“Tornado warning, did you hear that?” Denise asked. Bob turned the volume up and they listened. A deep voice invaded the sunroom. The voice talked and they listened and Nell tried to hold onto the words. Her father stayed seated and her mother stood, hands on her hips, eyes on the gray and the swirl of clouds.

“We’re going to the basement,” Denise had said.

“You’re being ridiculous. It’s beautiful out.”

She gestured back at the clouds and lifted her daughter into her arms. “Let’s go. Bob, don’t blame me if you get blown away.”

“There’s no storm for Christ’s sake.”

But they went into the basement, Denise holding her daughter to her chest, Nell’s blonde hair (that would later be brown, dishwater, dirty) pressed to her nose: grass and soap and a smell she could never name but found on all three of her children, a smell of spring pollen and knee scrapes and blue-blue eyes.

They sat in the far corner of the basement, the earth cold, dirt packed beneath their hands. Later, when Denise did the laundry, she would find smears of light brown across their clothing, clots of spider webs and crumpled leaves. Denise had waited in the basement, checking her watch, the one with the black leather strap, the one her children

would always see tied around her beach chair when she went into the water, and listened close enough to hear the ticking of the second hand. They waited for the howling and the wind and the tornado. Nell let the word twist around in her mouth, tor-nado. She imagined a funnel of black and white and thought maybe it would be small, chase her across the lawn, that she could outrun it if she tried. Earlier she had told her mother: “Rocks are falling from the sky.” And when Denise had come to the door, she’d seen hail littered across the yard, pellets of ice on the most beautiful summer day.

Denise pressed her back closer to the corner; she closed her eyes and Nell squirmed in her lap – “I’m cold.” The lights were low and the air stale and the water heater clicked. The water was always too hot at the house; you couldn’t hold your hands under the tap for longer than ten seconds without getting burned. They had been buried into the earth, surrounded on all sides, the cellar a last stop before the house was uprooted and they were pulled into the sky.

They sat until Bob came to the top of the stairs. “You two better come up here.” He had gone for the newspaper, too antsy after an hour, convinced that the clouds had cleared, that the warning had ended. He wasn’t able to drive more than ten minutes down the road. An uprooted tree lay across his path, its roots tangled, clumped in loops of black earth, with a green barn door beside it, chipped paint, hinges rusted and ringing.

They climbed the basement steps two at a time, the light from the den cutting across their foreheads, faces flushed. Denise felt the air change, the earth left behind in the basement. Later, when she kissed her daughter good night, Denise would smell the earth still on Nell’s neck, like it was stained into her skin. They went to the car, crunching across the gravel, the grass, the melted pools of hail.

“You have to see this,” Bob said as he started the car. The road was pitted, gray, and they traveled down it. He drove them to the tree and they stepped out. Denise hesitated and looked at Bob and watched her daughter’s eyes move, watched her little hands reach out to touch the roots. “Be careful!” Denise looked at the flattened trees and the barns and the roaming animals. There were no other people.

“There might be wires,” she said. “Don’t go over there, Nell.” Her daughter had looked back at her and nodded. “Tornado,” Nell said again, whispered it to herself; she liked the way it tasted. They had brought a disposable camera and Nell took it from her mother’s hands. She would take pictures and when they were developed she would hide them in different drawers around the house. When her older brother studied extreme weather in school, he gave a presentation about tornados and made one in two soda bottles filled with water, one upright, the other upside down, and shook them. Nell told him – “Bring me in too. I’m a tornado survivor.”

Denise had survived two tornados, one as a small child with her father traveling home from work, hail pouring down, electrical wires snapping. She would never remember this first storm, she was still in a stroller, but she would be told the story later and imagine her father running, making it home just in time, rushing to the basement where his wife, his three children, huddled in the corner, and her mother saying, “Franny!” Her second tornado was that summer of 1997, when the day had been beautiful and long, until the clouds gathered and rocks fell from the sky and they had gone to the basement, to the far corner, their bodies backed against the earth.

When she had watched her mother and her daughter talking in repetitions, in the same words, a pattern of syllables twisting in their mouths, she had been reminded of the funneled storms and the way they cut across the landscape, ripping trees from their

centers, exposing their insides, the earth made bare and vulnerable. She could smell the dirt, the basement, following her mother in a cloud. It trailed after Jeanne from room to room, folding itself into her clothes and hair and the gathered skin at her knees and elbows and neck. Denise would never tell anyone that at that moment, from the doorway, surrounded by the smell of stale earth and the lights from the tree and the soft tones of music from the radio, that she could see decay, that death had a face and it was soft and slow and too human. Her mother was dying and she was the only one who could see.

\* \* \*

“The green alligators and the long necked geese, the humpback camels and the chimpanzees, the rats and cats and elephants and as sure as you’re the born, the loveliest of them all was the unicorn,” Grandma Jeanne sang, her hands tapping on the steering wheel as they drove to the dollar store. Nell was in the backseat, blonde head bobbing along. The list of animals would become a prayer she always remembered, a tune perpetually stuck in her head, a piece of her grandmother, a song that had no other verse she ever learned.

The dollar store had six aisles and Jeanne held her granddaughter’s hand as they walked down each one. She was only allowed one prize, but if Poppy was there, sometimes two. They left with a set of miniature bears and their pink and blue furniture, so that the bears could sit and have breakfast and sleep in their beds. Nell had also asked for an orange ping-pong ball gun, but Grandma Jeanne had said, “You know the rules. Your mother wouldn’t like that kind of toy.” But when they came back later in the week, her older cousin in tow, they would be allowed to get the guns and they would wage a war in the backyard, firing shot after shot of white plastic at one another, until,

inevitably, one hit her cousin in the eye and he cried, so the guns were taken away.

“Don’t tell your mother,” Grandma Jeanne would tell her, while they ate Bugles on the couch, one salty chip on top of each finger, like an edible manicure. And she never would.

Nell stayed with her grandparents in the summer for only a week, or a little more, but it always felt like the longest, nicest vacation. She had the run of the house and could sleep in any room and stay up as late as she wanted. She would watch *Unsolved Mysteries* in the den and then tiptoe back to the children’s room with airplanes that dangled from the ceiling and a toy chest shaped like a yellow school bus and her grandfather’s smaller, second work table in the corner. There was a poster of a cat dangling from a tree – “Hang in there!” – that she thought was funny and looked like Ernie, her grandparents’ nice cat, not the mean one, Wibby (he had hidden under her covers that week and bitten her, hard, on the hand). She lay in bed and thought of the missing girl from the show and the alien abductions and then tried not to think about how her uncle told her this room was haunted. He claimed that he had heard a child’s laugh from the closet and the lantern at the far end of the room had swung back and forth and then the room had gone cold, but no windows were open. Nell shivered and burrowed deeper into the covers, but every creak became a ghost, every slight breeze a ghost’s touch on her neck and the top of her head. Often, on nights where she let her mind get away from her, the beating of her heart a pulsing roar, she would run to her grandparents’ room, wake Grandma Jeanne, and ask to sleep with them. When Nell stayed in Oxford, after Poppy had died, Grandma Jeanne would ask Nell to stay with her in the big room. They would watch *Degrassi* on the small bedroom TV set, a show about troubled Canadian youth, and Grandma Jeanne would ask about each plot point: “So they’re dating, but she doesn’t

want anyone else to know about it? But why's that boy putting up with that kind of behavior?"

Nell loved to look through her grandmother's old things: fine china and glassware, jewelry, papers and yearbooks pushed down into cardboard boxes. She counted the Xs above her grandmother's classmate's composites; each face with an X had blue script beneath: dead. When Nell first discovered these books and their collection of Xs, she had snapped the covers shut, ashamed. She left the books and returned to the fine china and glassware in the living room off the main house. It was colder here, no heat, but the rugs kept the floorboards insulated, circular ropes of green and blue and gray. Nell would lay the china out, place settings and napkin rings and little silver goblets. She spread it all out before her, a sea of white plates and glasses with stems.

When she was older, her Poppy dead, her Grandma Jeanne forgetful, she found a picture of herself in that living room, a scene of extravagance and lace and cluttered china. She wore a large tee shirt with a printed cat on its middle and she was smiling, her eyes red in the picture (too blue), and then she started to cry and laugh and coughed on her own salt. She would never be that little or imaginative or in that cold, cold living room ever again. She had grown too big and old and tall and Oxford had been sold and her grandmother lived in a nursing home, with other women who had forgotten their names, their keys in the freezer, dates on their calendars, their children's faces.

\* \* \*

At Thanksgiving, Denise told Adam something in the kitchen while they prepped the turkey, and he left the room crying. Nell knew it was about Grandma Jeanne. She knew it was about how her grandmother was sick and dying and forgetting everything



and wouldn't ever get to see her grandchildren grow up, but Denise and Adam wouldn't tell her. And when she remembered to ask later, her mother had only said: "Oh I don't know, who could remember something like that?"

So her grandmother's words became something larger and Nell could never get it out of her head – her brother's face leaving the kitchen and her mother setting the knife down, spools of an onion's skin unfurled on the counter, her back slumped, eyes to the window, to the empty bird feeders. Nell could still hear the stretch-thump-pull of her brother's strides to the bathroom, the creaks the house made in his wake, and the click of the door, a slant of light just visible beneath the frame. Adam had turned the water on and let it run, burning his fingers, until the room filled with steam.

## Plane Rides

They dressed up for the plane. The mother wore a navy blue pantsuit, an ivory blouse, and a silk scarf loose around her neck. The father wore a blazer and tie and brown shoes with tassels. The children dressed up because their parents had dressed up. It wasn't common yet to fly in sweatpants; it was a special occasion to be blasted into the air, launched from point A to point B, and to descend, tires shaking. The cabin would burst into applause and the children would ask and their parents would say, "Because we've landed, because we've made it here safely." When they grew older, they stopped dressing up for the plane and they stopped clapping.

## Alexander

Alexander Eugene Schwed weighed 170 pounds and was 73 inches tall. He was skin and bones, back slightly hunched, with one knee that clicked. His grandchildren would call him Jed, for the Russian, but that was too far for him to see just yet. It was November 18<sup>th</sup> of 1942 and the Warrants Office had called his name. They baptized him Private, slapped his shoulders, and put him on a boat to the Continent.

“I’ll see you,” he said to Marjorie, who loved the color pink and knitting and who would die on the table at seventy-seven from heart complications, while their two sons, Robert and Alan, wrung their hands in the waiting room.

“I’ll be here,” she said.

On D-Day Alexander handed out packets of money and felt the callused hands of thousands. They looked at the packets, eyes cloudy, and could not remember numbers.

On Jed’s 95<sup>th</sup> birthday his son took him out to dinner at The Manor. It was Jed’s favorite restaurant. The soup hot, not like the nursing home where they favored lukewarm liquids and dry turkey.

Alan pulled into the parking lot across the street. The car faced the front entrance of a funeral home and Jed balked. “Not yet!” he said and slapped Alan’s back.

“Okay, okay, not yet.”

## Two Carriers and One Negative

“His blood was heavy,” their mother said. The three children stood on the stairs, crouched on the green-rough carpet, their fingers digging into the felt. The oldest thought of a blood-filled Mason jar, thick and weighted with red syrup. The middle child was still purple-puffy eyed and imagined the wind at her window was her grandfather saying goodbye. And the youngest didn’t hear a word, just fixated on the ground, the green and her pink hand.

“What happens now?”

“We’ll have a funeral in Oxford and say goodbye,” their father said. Their mother’s face was broken and pale-stretched.

“It’s genetic, right?” the oldest asked again. He liked to watch medical shows and babies being born. In fifteen years he would be a trauma surgeon, stick his finger in the perforated vena cava of a gun shot victim and patch the kid’s body back together. Blue scrubs soaked red.

“Yes, so you’ll all be tested.”

“Needles?” the youngest had spoken, blue eyes watery and unfocused.

“A cheek swab, won’t hurt,” their father promised.

The oldest and the middle stared at their blue-green veins, the crossed sections of their pale wrists and the pebbles of iron they could already feel gathering in their blood.

## The Christmas Card

There were, at last count, about twenty-eight remembered Christmas cards. All sealed in thick envelopes and sent off to friends and family and the odd teacher, with Forever stamps licked to each top corner. Jed collected them all and lined each one along the TV cabinet in his small, urine-stained room in the Connecticut nursing home. He would look at the oval faces of his grandchildren and drift into the gently curved noses and rounded nostrils and those bright blue eyes which had been passed on three times over. He was a retired insurance man who collected newspaper clippings gone orange and rubbed ink-smudged, and when he turned a hundred and met the Mayor, he had only managed a gruff, “Who the hell is this?” while shaking the unknown man’s right hand.

\* \* \*

In 1988 there were only two (the Test Tube Babies) and they were pudgy, one still cooing with her soft baby head of downy blonde hair. She clutched a green Gumby doll to her chest, its legs bent at an obtuse angle, shouting at the camera. Her brother, now the oldest child, smiled back, princely and poised. Behind the gray backdrop, child photographers waited with rattles and snacks and little cups of cool water. They wrangled the pair into blue corduroys for Boy and white puffy baby bloomers for Girl. First there were tears. Red screaming tears and kicking baby legs and little bunched fists. The girl screamed so loud her father started mumbling, “No more girls, never, no more.” And the mother said, “Two and through.” But later there would be another one – pink, wriggly, round – and during the ultrasound the father would ask, “Are they sure?” and

they would look at the screen and see white-black fuzz, maybe an arm, or toes, or a nose, but it had definitely been sure.

\* \* \*

For 1994 they wore green, not to match the red-chap underneath each of their thin (inherited) lips, but Christmas-appropriate nonetheless.

\* \* \*

“I swear to God if you don’t stop blinking,” their mother said, crouching along the sand, her hair sheared short and blonde-going-gray. It was 1999 and they wore white shirts and khakis. A year before they had worn dark wash blue jeans with metal buttons that pinched. The sand was hot on their feet and the dog – Cooler, named for the 80s cartoon *Pound Puppies* – was misbehaving. The sun had been in all of their faces so the picture captured is in grimace: tight grins and squinched eyes, barely open. They just couldn’t stop blinking.

\* \* \*

In family moments a pervasive fear lingered in all three children, a fear that they would be wrangled into poses and smiles, forced to be willing members of the Christmas card’s production.

“Not this year,” the brother would say.

“We’re too old,” the middle sister would say.

“Some of us are in college,” the younger sister would say.

But their pleas fell on deaf, determined ears.

\* \* \*

One year their father hired a child photographer based in Brooklyn. Her Yelp reviews spoke charmingly of her ability to soothe simpering babies and her secret stash

of granola bars: “They really just do the trick!” The youngest of their children was about to turn twenty-one.

But they trudged to Prospect Park nonetheless to meet the photographer and tried to smile naturally.

\* \* \*

“That’s it, we’re done,” the middle one said, crossing her arms and sneering at the latest card. Her overbite was accentuated in the picture, her face tightly stretched.

“Did you have to pick the ugliest one?”

Their mother stared at her children. “Do you know how special these are?”

“Do you know how terrible we all look?”

“How would you feel if we picked an awful picture of you and Dad and mailed it out to all our friends?” they asked.

Their mother stared again. “You don’t know. You don’t how nice this is.” And she left the kitchen.

# The five I was born into

*“My children were of me alone, of the wild blood boiling along the earth, of me and of all that lived; of none and of all.” – William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying**

*“It was times like these when I thought my father, who hated guns and had never been to any wars, was the bravest man who ever lived.” – Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mocking Bird**



## How They Met

They met in a bar. It wasn't smoky or crowded or even last call. She was out with her girlfriends from Wellesley, their hair curled and shiny, wearing matching ballet flats, tap-tap-tapping against the wooden floor, impatient. They felt stifled from the all girl dorms and the all girl classes and the all girls, all the time. They were out looking for men. She thought about David, the dentist with the imperfect smile, who had bought her a yellow bicycle. The housemother said she had no new messages. She had asked three times already that week. She sighed and sipped her beer.

She had seen the flyer on one of those pushpin boards around campus. She had managed to convince a group to go to the bar, by way of the downtown bus, to a party where they were promised new, exciting people. It was a mixer for law students: suits that were more wrinkled than pressed, some missing cufflinks from both the right and left sleeves, most lousy with a few too many beers. The door had one of those bells that jingled. My mother, now, but not then, would say those bells signaled her fate.

She looked at the door, paused, and then: "I'll take the lumberjack."

## B.N. (Before Nell)

Before Nell the house was upside down and the gray cat Quincy still had two eyes and there had been one fire, in the kitchen, when Muriel, the Italian grandmother-housekeeper, had accidentally left one of the burners on. And the first two children would accuse her of returning to her Blue Parliaments and she would wave them away, her voice roughened by years of nicotine abuse, "*Lasciami in pace, dai!*"

The master bedroom Nell would come to know – the floral wallpaper, the pink curtains, the yellow-green rug embroidered with would-be monsters – did not yet exist. It was still the playroom; the walls marred by crayon drawings done by unstable, cramped hands. The carpet a strange, filmy color, stained in one corner by leftovers of some stomach bug that did not make it to the toilet bowl. The green wicker furniture that eagerly doled out splinters, leaving her siblings' feet and hands patterned with green scratches and the slow burn of the paint's dissolution into their skin.

Before Nell they spent weekends at the Hundred Acre Wood: a farmhouse in upstate New York, which her brother named for Pooh Bear. Her siblings played croquet in the backyard, her brother's collar tightened with a bow tie, her sister wearing a Ninja Turtle tee-shirt (having refused to wear the sailor striped dress), and her mother sitting on the back porch stirring a glass of iced tea. They had what their mother called Skips, just two pulls of Sweet Purple, for dinner and then bedtime. A fact their mother would later deny.

"Two and through," her parents had said. A perfect paired set of two Boys and two Girls. They had planned it just right.

Before children, there had just been Bob and Denise. Denise and Bob. A trip to Italy and a picture in front of the Trevi Fountain, father still with thick-black hair and mother still with a top lip mole. They were smiling at the camera and poised in their perfect 1970s regalia. There was a summer spent in a guesthouse on Nantucket, their own screened-in porch where they drank coffee, his black, hers a little cream and sugar. They had looked out onto the garden and watched the hydrangeas change white to blue to purple. “One day we’ll have a house here,” she had said.

And then later, the trouble had all started.

\* \* \*

“We’d even take a girl,” Jed had said, his glasses askew and tie not quite tied (he’d been pulling at it throughout the dinner).

“You know it’s perfectly natural. Your Aunt had a few. I never did, but you ask my sister, she knows,” Jeanne had whispered in the kitchen. Denise had been washing one of the plates, letting the bits of turkey and gravy swirl down the drain. She kept her back turned.

The couple had lain in bed that night, not talking, in the dark. Both on their backs they stared at the ceiling, both searching for a pattern to count.

“There’s always adoption,” he finally said, brushing his shoulder to her shoulder.

“Yes, I know,” she had said.

“We can keep trying,” he said, “it hasn’t been that long.”

“Yes, I know.”

\* \* \*

And then finally, wonderfully, there was The Prince. The firstborn, eight pounds and more of Big Head Schwed, he made his way into the world. And then another,

barely three years later, a girl to complete the set. The era of the Test Tube baby had arrived.

\* \* \*

Before Nell there had been a family road trip to visit America's historic battlefields. Her brother was attacked by a rooster alongside a rest stop. The gas station had doubled as a small farm stand and Adam, keen to pet, had unknowingly antagonized the rooster.

"Mommy!" he had cried, "the rooster!" And Denise had turned just in time to see her son chased down by a bundle of orange ruffled feathers. The mangy rooster crowed and hollered and scratched at Adam's legs, finally nipping him in the left ankle, which would leave a small but bumped scar.

"I think you'll have to get a tetanus shot," Bob had said, examining the wound.

And Caitlin, not yet fully three, strapped in her stroller, had said, "I see the rooster Mama."

Later she would sing the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," a song she had never heard before, while she skipped through the flat plains of Gettysburg, clutching a fattened Snoopy doll, a tape deck neatly folded into its belly. And Bob and Denise would stare at her, wondering what kind of anomaly Science had brought into this world.

\* \* \*

Before Nell, the basement was still a dirt-packed cellar and her siblings snuck below the house, crawling on the dirt, hiding from the monster beneath the stairs. Their faces were dirt-streaked and pink and smiling. They left their handprints across the walls, marking the passage of time, a roadmap for their return above ground. They would hear Muriel calling: "*Piccoli bambini*, time for lunch!" And they would begin the crawl back to

the stairs, dragging their limbs, shushing one another. When Muriel saw their dirt-covered bodies, brown and ringed in grime, her mouth turned and she started yelling and the children ran, tumbling through the house, leaving smudges across the walls.

\* \* \*

“You know what that means?” Caitlin said, eyeing her mother’s rounding stomach.

Her mother had just told her the news: a baby.

“What does it mean?” Denise asked.

“The F-word,” she said, crossing her arms, her Ninja Turtle tee stained with a smear of chocolate ice cream.

Denise looked at her daughter, chopped-awkward bangs (a moment of exhilaration with stolen, secreted scissors) and two crooked front teeth, “What’s the F-word?”

Caitlin cracked her knees, “I can’t tell you. It’s a bad word.”

“C’mon, now,” her mother said.

“I’ll whisper it,” Caitlin said, cupping her hand to her mouth to her mother’s ear, “It’s F-A-T. Fat.”

\* \* \*

In the before Denise was left waiting. She waited two full weeks past the circle on the calendar, dreaming of cheeseburgers and coffee milkshakes and popped bubbles. She ran her hands along her sides, seams bursting, feeling the slow, steady rhythm of fetal feet and hands; an alien in her center. “You were a surprise baby, a happy-accident baby,” she would whisper, “But we’re ready, so just come on out now.”

In the after, Denise would look down at the newborn (“Are they sure?”) girl and wonder if the baby’s head had been covered in Mylanta. “Not Mylanta,” the nurse had said, laughing, “Just the caul, you know. Maybe she’ll be a seer.” But Denise hadn’t heard the last bit, just kept looking at the milky-white new, wondered how they always had such blue eyes, and felt her heart itch, burn, and bruise.

## Jaws

In the old Dreamland Theater Denise held her new husband's hand and felt her seat shift and creak. The floors were sticky, layered with years of melted candy and buttery popcorn, and to walk down the aisle she had had to peel each foot from the floor. A young woman was on the screen, taking a night swim in 1975, and that dun-dun, dun-dun, dun-dun began to play.

She turned to whisper to him, but he tapped her hand, *Shh*. She closed her eyes and just listened to the beats and that single horn and then a piercing scream. After, he told her it was just a movie, relax for Christ's sake, but she kept seeing the dark ocean and that poor woman being swallowed whole.

The day after she refused to get in the water. He beckoned at her as she sat on the beach blanket. She looked down the line of bathers – What idiots, she thought, don't they know. But her husband came up onto the sand and pulled her along. The Jetties was cool, a soft sandbar and green tinted water.

“See?” he said. “Not so bad.”

She slipped in deeper, soaked her head and floated on her back, toes pointed up towards the sun.

“Not so bad,” she agreed, but kept her eyes open, searching for fins. She turned quickly, “Bob?” But he was gone, bubbles where his head had been. “This isn't funny.”

And then she was screaming, something wrapped around her left leg, tight and restricting. “Jesus!”

And there he was, her new husband, the man who'd asked her to marry him across the breakfast table: "So, this is going pretty well. Should we make it a more permanent situation?" And she had said yes.

He was laughing, teeth glinting in the sun's reflection, "I had you there."

Yes, she thought, you had me, but she wasn't thinking of Jaws or the swallowed woman, or even the dun-dun, dun-dun. She looked back towards the beach and the yellow piles of sand and laughing families with their brightly colored beach umbrellas, struggling in the breeze. That, she thought, just that.



## Armadillo

Her father's best friend was a former college roommate from Texas, all paunch and bravado, named Seymour. They reunited on Nantucket with their families – Seymour's three sons and Bob's one son and two daughters – for days at the beach and late-night cocktail gatherings. Their reunions were the only times that their children could remember seeing their fathers boogie board, sliding up onto the sand, surf-tumbled and salt-skinned, eyes half-crazed and bodies too old, too dimpled, for such an energetic, exaggerated activity.

In college, Bob and Seymour cooked steaks in their fireplace over a halved metal shopping cart and set the fire alarm off. They drove for hours to meet girls at Vassar and Skidmore. They broke wooden squash racquets and hit home runs at away baseball games.

At bedtime the youngest of Bob's children, Little Nell, asked for stories about Seymour and his sons.

"The armadillo!" she often requested.

Bob would tell her about a drive they had taken, omitting the Vassar girls a few miles away and the beers they had hidden in the trunk. He told her about the winding road, the headlights cutting across the woods and the dark. A small animal had scurried out into the road, and Seymour had shouted, "Oh my God I think I hit a armadillo!" And Bob shouted it then to his daughter. She cackled and demanded just one more before lights out. She always wanted the armadillo story, but when she grew older, she forgot what had been so funny about it. She saw an armadillo once when she was in Texas. She was standing in the streets of a Dallas suburb, three stoned boys beside her,

wondering where they should go next – the 7-Eleven, the pond, someone’s basement with their parents upstairs – and she saw a hunk of scales and slithering skin rush across the road. “Holy shit it’s an armadillo,” she had said. And the three boys looked at her, red eyes glassy and strange. She started laughing at the awkward, prehistoric animal and how it waddled and twitched. They could not understand her laughter and so they stood apart. She stayed in the road and watched it walk away, pointed, with its ridged skin, and she wished that it had stayed a little longer, wished she could remember its face.

## Man in the Moon

My father carried me on his shoulders down a cobblestone street. He pointed to the moon and said, “See? See the Man?” And I couldn’t see any cratered or pockmarked face, but still said, “Yes,” and tapped my feet. The moon was above us and we were on earth, sneaking along its rounded edges, like the globe in Mrs. Schulhoff’s classroom, a Swiftly Tilting Planet of grass and sand and people, not losing our balance.

“We’re here and he’s there,” I said and he said, “Yes, Silly.”

I kept looking for the Man and wondered why he was there and we were all here. The globe we stood on was still, we weren’t spinning yet, but clinging to my father’s shoulders, I waited to slip.

## Ship in the Night

Bob “Like A Ship In The Night” Schwed has one ritual. He walks down the block on Saturday nights to the corner deli. He talks to the man behind the counter about the Yankees or the neighborhood or the new Barclays Center. His hands, wrapped around the cover of the *New York Times*, soften the black-white letters, and ink stains his fingers. He goes home and opens the Magazine, turns to the crossword and begins. He uses a black pen each time, scratches through the little white boxes, and moves his head, like Stevie Wonder, itching at a nerve he cannot scratch. He will compare answers with Caitlin, who holds her own puzzle and black pen, but writes in perfect capitals, boxy and assured. They will chuckle over the wonders of innovative clues, shared boxes, and overlapping words. Bob will leave his finished puzzle on the nightstand, the green one with the white painted knob, the one his youngest used to have in her room and whose drawer she pretended was a secret compartment. Caitlin will sit at the kitchen table and stare at her copy, waiting for 18 Across to figure itself out. In the morning the two puzzles will sit, side by side, on the kitchen table, little white boxes filled with black.

## This is Jeopardy

My mother should be on *Jeopardy!*, but she claims, at least by way of Mom Reality, that it would be a conflict of interest. It used to be our family ritual to be occupied in front of the small kitchen TV set – a gray old thing that went static at any touch – from 7 to 7:30 on weeknights. The blue-gold lettering washed over our oval faces and Johnny Gilbert’s triumphant voice rolled over the words: “And here’s our host...Alex Treeeeebek!”

The kitchen was always warm with heavy food and ambient lighting (the electrician still needed to be called). The dinner table conversation filled with the patter of “What is” and “Who are” and “Who is” interspersed with talk of school and the overgrown garden and the urinating cat who not a one of us truly loved, besides our mother, who fed him scraps directly from her plate, while he, The Urinator, purred beneath her chair.

My mother tells me to keep my hair off my face, to take the garbage out, to change the cat’s litter, to use protection. My mother asks how long I’ve been sexually active, if I’ve taken my clothes out of the laundry, if maybe I should use the oil thickened Water Babies sunscreen instead of spray on, watching while I pat my sore shoulders with green aloe. She likes to tell me a lot of things, but she can’t seem to understand a word I say.

“What?” she will squawk at me, “What did you just say?”

And when I repeat myself, she will counter: “For the love of God stop mumbling.”

My father mumbles and maybe I mumble too. The words get caught on the tips of our tongues, to roof, to palates, to lips, thickened with slow saliva and the tapping of muscle to teeth.

When I told my mother about my third boyfriend, she said: “You sure do run through them. Like water, you do.” And I had wanted to say: “Where do you think I get it from?” But I knew she wouldn’t hear a word. She would keep her hands angled on her hips and say: “What? Do you ever stop mumbling?” And my eyes would roll so far back into my head, she’d tell me again: “They’re going to get stuck that way, you keep at it like that.”

My mother retires early. She says “Goodnight all!” but what she really means is, “Goodnight to socializing, goodnight to shared space, I’m going to read my book alone.”

When I’m home from school, before dinner, I go to her room. She is usually watching *Jeopardy!* in bed and I crawl next to her. When I was little I would rest my head across her chest, a flattened expanse of smooth-soft flesh.

“What is the small intestine?” she will say and, “Who is Putin?” and then later, “What is the European Space Agency?”

I will lie there and look at her; eyes fixed to the blue-white screen and only see Rosie Perez from *White Men Can’t Jump*. She is thumbing through flashcards, racing through foods that start with the letter Q: quail, quiche, quahog, quince. She is in a world of daily doubles and buzzing in. Her stage is slick, shiny in the white lights. This is her Jeopardy.

During the commercial break she’ll turn to me, “I’ll get dinner ready.” And I’ll say, “There’s no rush.” And then, “You know that new one? He’s marriage material.”

Number three is blonde. I think she likes him because our children would be blonde and blue-eyed and sweet. People would ask if we were Swedish.

I wait for her to finish.

“Marriage material, but tiny,” the “ny” held one second too long.

“He’s just skinny.” And she’ll look me up and down, but leave it at that.

\* \* \*

My mother wears a fancy pedometer clipped to the inside of her bra, because that way, it won’t fall through the subway grate. My father asks her, “How many jiggles per mile, Denisey?” And she will dig into her cleavage to retrieve the FitBit, gleefully pressing its buttons to calculate her total mileage, “Guess how many miles I’ve walked in two months? Over 250 miles! Can you believe that?”

She uses the pedometer on her Pep Steps. She marches to Carol King and swings her arms, hips bouncing, feeling the earth move under her feet. She will Pep Step down the block, across a field, along the sandy beach. Each step will be counted by the slow tick-tick of her expensive, cleavage-protected pedometer.

“I used to be stick-thin,” she’ll tell us all at cocktail hour, “Cheeseburgers and milkshakes for lunch, but T-H-I-N.” She pinches her waist for emphasis.

\* \* \*

My mother doesn’t believe that I can do basic math. She is convinced, from the day I was born, that math has never been my strong suit. “You were the example in a childhood development meeting once. Did you know that?” Every time I ignore her.

“The highest reading scores coupled with the lowest math. And they said, ‘Who is this kid?’”

I don’t answer her.

“Come on, tell me what seven times nine is...you don’t know, do you?”

“Your sister on the other hand. Genius, but, you know,” she says and twirls her finger in a lazy circle, just above her right ear.

My sister took multivariable calculus as a fifth year high school senior, with a man named Dr. Kolb, who wore a black fanny pack and thick glasses strapped about his head. She would sit in the back, surrounded by four other classmates, all of whom would go on to MIT, and she would doodle.

\* \* \*

My mother’s Edge came from her grandmother, Hannah McNamara, who was a practical, brusque, man of a woman, and who didn’t believe in soft fabrics.

“She was taller than her husband, too,” my mother told me.

The Edge is like a carefully sharpened knife, filed and ready to point. She swears she doesn’t have it, promises she doesn’t mean the words that spill out of her mouth and onto our smoothed kitchen floor, but they touch my skin and bruise yellow-purple.

“You should listen to me. I’m always right,” my mother has said, often and repeatedly.

The Edge passes through the women of our family, like an extra chromosome, a gene expressed through criticism and curled mouths. We don’t always say what we see, but it’s there, lurking just beneath a crinkled brow and widened eyes, a judgment, that with a little liquor – gin or vodka preferably – will spill onto the floor.

\* \* \*

I curled into my mother’s bed, the mattress worn from years of partnered sleep, on a Sunday afternoon in my junior year of high school.



“Have you seen this yet?” She asked, patting my head and pointing to the movie onscreen. Two robots fall in love in space and try to save a post-apocalyptic Earth.

“No,” I tried, “that might be nice,” but it came out mangled, my voice too dry.

“I wish I had been the one to tell you,” she said.

I had walked into the house while my mother told my sister about the boy in my class who had killed himself. I had looked at them, their eyes reflecting into mine, and how for that instant of watching me come home, unlock the door, stash my keys on the radiator, they had thought I didn’t know, thought my whole world would change in one second, with my mother’s words, when it had already been changed, three hours before at an SAT practice test.

“I shouldn’t have stayed,” I managed, but she shushed me, “Let’s just watch this, okay?”

So I nestled into her. School on Monday would be quiet and strangling and like a ghost I would wander the halls and classrooms, trying to find a place to be. It would feel wrong to smile or laugh or talk. I would sit in the cafeteria with five others and we would stay silent, pick at our cuticles, twist napkins into bits, and never manage to articulate the feeling of a dwindling class, from eighty-three to eighty-two in one weekend.

\* \* \*

She had heartburn for three weeks, her chest burning and rattling, before she went to the school nurse.

“My tongue has been dyed black from all the pepto I’ve been drinking,” she said.

“Denise, I really think we need to get you to the hospital,” the nurse said, pressing her stethoscope to my mother’s chest, a breath in and out.

“Take a cab, not the subway,” the nurse said, as my mother left.

They told her about a blockage and her aorta and not enough blood trickling through. She pressed her hand to her chest and tried to feel the irregular beats they told her were there.

They slipped a thread through her veins, from thigh to ventricles to the blockage. They placed a stent and the blood flowed through, thick, and her chest finally stopped burning.

She woke and they told her, “Everything looks good. Rest up, you’re going home.”

“Thank you for sharing,” she said, falling asleep.

\* \* \*

“I wouldn’t be able to get my words out,” she said, after I asked again why she wouldn’t try out. “I’d garble them.”

“You have to be fast,” she said, “It’s all about strategy.”

I have never thought of my mother as blending her words, switching her vowels and consonants, not being quick on her feet. She is never tongue-tied.

Alex Trebek returned with the final clue and the contestants scribbled at their podiums. The theme played, thirty seconds of that famous tune, and we waited.

“Go big or go home,” she said, and then, “What are *Tootsie* and *Some Like it Hot!* For Christ’s sake, that’s an easy one.”

## Pane of Glass

My father loves that his two daughters are the varsity athletes. My sister played ice hockey for years as the goalie. I always imagined her as a box, thickly padded in the net, her movements sharp, but calculated. Her equipment smelled awful: sweat and body. She kept the bag in the closet under the stairs and we all avoided opening the door.

I started playing squash when I was nine. I wore swishy sweatpants so I could slide on the floor and the racquet felt bigger than my body. I played girls who had private live-in coaches. They were from Greenwich and had blonde hair and wore jewelry while they played. I still preferred shorts to skirts and always felt like puking before each match. The other girls I played were, my mother joked, “from the school for the blind.” I would never be a star player, but rather a “good little one,” my parents said.

My father watches my matches from the corners, while I try to stay in the world of the court: four walls, T at the center, red lines. “How do you stand it?” they all ask. It’s claustrophobic and stifling and sometimes I’m not sure I love it anymore, so I only tell them – “You just learn to.”

My father tried to teach me to golf the summer before my senior year of college.

“Keep your head down,” he said, and then, “No, not like that. Don’t bend your elbow. Eyes steady.” He told me I swung like I was playing squash. He told me to imagine a pane of glass from my head to my knees to the white ball. He said to watch him. He stood a few feet away, held the club firmly in his hands (one gloved gray), squared his shoulders, twisted his hips and let go. The ball flew, a perfect arc and swing and shot.

“Well, now you’re just showing off,” I said.

My father and I don't speak that much. Our phone conversations are short, our emails terse, to the point, like the lawyer he is. I'll ask him about politics and mortgages and golf. I've only seen him cry three times: at my sister's graduation, his father's funeral, and once when he accidentally watched an entire episode of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. He is a Quiet, like me, but he still fears salamanders and caves, even though he was an Eagle Scout, and he loves to read *NCIS* fan fiction (though not the explicit kind).

We played a few more rounds. "That's better. Next time we'll get you on a real course." I am not good at keeping my head down, at bringing the club back gently, or hitting the white ball. I smack the fake grass a few times, knock the tee off its center. "Keep trying, you'll get it." I don't entirely understand how he watches this sport on T.V. but I keep swinging, the club sliding through my hands, one gloved gray, the other pale, blinding white, but almost steady, almost like a pane of glass.

## Fur

The mother wanted a fur coat. She wanted to feel the soft suppleness of animal against her cheek and wrists and the curves of her calves. She wanted to be enveloped into another skin, a skin once layered with fat and meat and ligaments, but now stripped and thinned down. She waited each Christmas for her husband to surprise her, but the baskets of lotion and soap were always under the tree instead, wrapped in yellow paper and tied with ribbon. Her own mother had had a mink coat and worn it to church on Sundays. Father Mark, whenever he shook her hand after mass, would say, “Oh Mrs. Coomey, don’t you look so warm.” And she was.

The mother just wanted to be warm. And so when the mink coat finally arrived, she clutched it to her chest, pressed her nose into the folds of dark-light brown and shook with excitement. The mother wore her mink to school and when her youngest daughter saw her drenched in brown fur, leading a tour of prospective students, fulfilling her role as Head of Admissions, she stopped and could not move. “Mom,” she said later, “you can’t wear that to school.”

And her mother had stood in the kitchen, still wrapped in her mink, and said: “I’ll never be cold again.”

## Brass and Bone

Their father almost cut his finger off while slicing a dead tree branch in the backyard. He yelled, “My golf hand!” And the youngest had pressed her face to the kitchen window, looked down to see her father’s index finger as it dangled from its phalange, pale and bright. Her mother pushed past with a dishtowel and went to him, hands reaching. They wrapped the dangling finger against the cloth, tight, and her father held his fist of fingers together. His own grandfather had been missing a few digits, wounds from a Waterbury brass mill, the ridges and crags of his mutilated hands their father’s guide to church. He remembered the crunched stubs of absent bone and flesh, but never felt fear. He had wondered at the ghostly fingers, did they still feel pain and did he miss them. Their father had held his grandfather’s broken hands to his own, pressing into the empty space of leftover joints and wrapped cartilage.

“My golf hand! I’ll never fill a glove again,” he cried as they walked to the car, to the hospital, to a doctor with stitches and anesthetic. Their father had the softest gray golf glove, perfectly fitted to his hand, soaked with years of long eighteen holes and too close to call shots. He worried he would lose his finger and his swing.

Their father took the youngest golfing ten years or so later. They putted on the green, betting for quarters, who could get closest to the hole. He told her not to hit so hard, to be gentle: “Stop whacking it. Look at the slope.” And she learned to look closely, the bend of green turf and the way her club slowed, quickened just before the ball. Her father still had his finger and his swing and when he was nervous, worried, he would count the crosshatch of faded stitches, search for the scar in his pale skin, and

think only of his grandfather and the brass mill and the crunch of bone and metal and machine.

## My Father was Never a Bobby

It was morning, yellow light on my pillow and birds only just chirping, when he woke me. He stood at the base of the small staircase that led to the loft bedroom and rested his hands against the white banister. His face was still.

“Your grandfather died last night,” he said.

“What?”

The light shifted across the patterned pillowcase and thin blanket. The loft was warmest in the summer, heat rising to the top of the neatly peaked roof.

“Last night. Your grandfather,” he said again, “Died.”

Another moment.

“Are you okay?”

\* \* \*

My father was never a Bobby or Robby or even the formal Robert. He was just Bob, like apples or waves or an awkwardly short-sheared haircut. In high school he was voted Most Likely to Succeed and wore a mauve velour suit in the (now unframed, almost crumpled in a cardboard box) picture.

The first time I heard him sing we were in church and my pink stockings were itching, so I crouched on the floor, digging my fingers into my skin. The church was filled with incense and I wanted to sneeze but couldn't and when I looked up I saw my father's mouth moving. His pointed lips rounded over each Psalm and if I concentrated hard enough, all I could hear was his voice.

My father caught me looking, watching him singing, and grabbed my wrist, pulling me back onto my feet. He pressed the small book of songs into my hands and



ran his finger along the score, waiting for my voice to join his. Later he would show me his mother's rosary and teach me how to count each gnarled bead. I would say three Hail Marys and forget one Our Father.

We always dressed up for church and I always begged not to have to wear tights. I plucked at the sheer fabric, pulling my skin, my mother's skin, away from our legs, releasing it to fit again. My mother bought outfits from Hanna Anderson. They were always pink or green, with little printed flowers or swirls or polka dots, and they always itched. When we sat in the church's pew as a family of five – siblings half asleep, father mumbling the psalms, mother smiling – I felt small and overwhelmed. Church became too much. When I finally had a choice, after being forced through communion and confirmation, I slept in. I never went back. I gave up church for late Sunday mornings and incense-free air and a quiet little top floor bedroom, until the sounds of the door unlocking, my parents coming home, the creaks and scraps of the door turning, how the wood heaved, woke me from a dreamless sleep.

\* \* \*

“Your brother asked me the same thing,” he said. And I asked again.

\* \* \*

My father taught me to ride a bike with the wheel stuck between his legs while I wobbled for balance. We were just outside the house and the pavement was hot and the helmet slipped over my forehead. I worried my elbows and knees would patch with centipede scabs and I would get blood on my shorts. He told me to just wait and let my balance take over and that he would grab me. The handlebars were slippery under my palms and I could feel the grip trying to catch. I said no wait I'll tip and please just can't we put the training wheels back. And he told me they were broken, someone had stolen

them, they're lost. I could feel the wheel grinding against the pavement. And then he was asking me if he could let go and I was saying yes.

\* \* \*

When he was a boy his father would take him fishing in the Moss Farms Pond. Bob would loosen the rope that tied their rowboat to the dock, the braided cord running through his hands, burning, and push off. He always worried he'd miss the jump and slip into the cold lake water below, his heart beating an extra second every time.

Jed sat there and chewed on his lower lip, winding the twine into the smaller fishing rod. My father dipped his fingers into the loose water, making small ripples. It felt good on his hands.

"Here, hold this," his father said, reaching for a beer. He popped the tab and my father watched him take a swallow, the beer fizzy and hoppy on his tongue.

They sat in the middle of the pond and let their rods dip below the surface. Every now and then each would feel a slight pull, but never a real bite, on the end of their lines. They were both quiet, just watching the water.

\* \* \*

"We'll have to take the ferry over," my mother said.

My father sat on the couch looking at his hands, "I should call Alan." And my mother went to sit beside him.

\* \* \*

Alan was the second son and had never won a varsity letter or been voted Prom King or come home before curfew. In high school he grew his hair long and wore bellbottoms. He had dreams of growing a curled mustache. Later he rode motorcycles and drove trucks for a living.

He lived on a houseboat on the Connecticut River with his girlfriend The Kindergarten Teacher. He answered the phone on the fourth ring, "Hullo?"

\* \* \*

He watched a small group of ducks paddle past the rowboat. They looked at him with their beady eyes and ruffled their feathers. His father took another beer from the cooler.

"You want one?" Jed asked.

\* \* \*

My father was seventeen and he already knew that he liked the taste of beer. He and Alan had each snuck some from the fridge in the garage and spent some evenings sitting on the edge of their dock, sipping from red-blue cans, and piling the empties in their neighbors' recycling.

Alan had set his fourth or fifth can down and started chucking rocks across the surface of the lake. Each rock skipped at least three times. He kept flicking his wrist and Bob had just watched, entranced.

"You set on going to college, huh," Alan had said, staring out at the water, counting the skips.

"You could too, Al," Bob had said, reaching for a rock of his own. "You and me both."

\* \* \*

He kept watching the family of ducks, counting the babies, as they moved farther away. "Well? You want one or not?" his father asked again.

\* \* \*

I was fifteen when I first lied to my parents about drinking. I told them I was at the movies and then dinner and I would be home late. My mother told me to make good choices and my father just watched me lock the door. It was only later when I tried desperately to not creak on the steps and walk quickly to my room when he grabbed my wrist from the darkness. You're drunk he said and I said no I'm not I'm just fine and he told me to go to bed and we'll talk about this in the morning. I spent the day in bed, aching and smelling of vinegar and floor polish. He brought me buttered toast and we never told my mother.

\* \* \*

"He was a hundred and one," my sister kept saying. We were sitting on the ferry and it was gray and misty outside so we were on the cushioned benches inside. Our parents were outside. My father leaned over the edge of the ferry and I imagined that he was counting the white-capped waves. My mother had a hand on his back and she whispered something. No one threw a penny as we rounded the lighthouse.

\* \* \*

My father would hold my hands in the ocean when big waves crashed to shore. He would lift me above the crest and for an instant I could see clear-cut across the water to the other side of the world. He never let the waves grab me and pull me under the turns, smashing me into the salt and sand and rocks. I never swallowed seawater.

\* \* \*

The small boat drifted to the edge of the lake, but neither of them had noticed. Their lines were loose and still no fish had been caught. The sun was high enough in the sky that they had most of the day to wait. Bob took the last sip from his can and untied the laces of his shoes. He thought about hanging his legs over the side of the boat and

dipping his toes in the water, but he stared down into the depths instead, tried to see through the murk of brown and green to the bottom of the pond.

“Not getting any bites today,” his father said.

“Looks like,” Bob said.

“Your mother is making shepherd’s pie for dinner.”

Bob thought about the mashed potatoes and the peas and the hamburger meat. He liked salt and he knew his mother would be at the stove now with her faded pink apron and the potato masher in her left hand, looking out at the yard and to the lake beyond. He knew Alan would be sitting in the kitchen too, pretending to do his math homework, but really just scribbling along the sides of his paper.

“You think we should head back?” Bob asked.

“Give it another minute,” his father said, reaching for a hard candy in his pocket, tucking it into the crease of his cheek. Bob recast his line and sat still. He could hear his father’s mouth loosen around the bit of butterscotch. His own mouth soured at the thought of its sweetness.

\* \* \*

My father went to the funeral home and we were left sitting in the lobby of the hotel. The floors were white and too reflective. I heard the sounds of breakfast from the other room. “Will it be open?” I asked. And no one would answer.

\* \* \*

The room is empty and cold. It is still early, Alan says, people are coming. There is a Russian Orthodox priest because my grandfather was Russian Orthodox and it feels like a mistake because I didn’t know he was religious. The priest is wearing black

vestments and a pointed hat. I will learn later it is called a Klobuk. He starts to get the incense ready and I go to plug my nose.

\* \* \*

His father was a little tipsy. Bob could tell by the way his lower lip drooped slightly to the left and his fingers were less shaky.

“You’ve always been easy, Bobby,” his father said.

Bob concentrated on the tackle box and pressed the tips of his fingers gently against the hooks. He moved slightly and nicked his right index finger. A tiny spot of blood appeared on its tip.

“I’m not a fisherman,” Bob said.

His dad had given him a long stare, “There’s plenty of time.”

Bob rowed them back to shore and Alan met them on the bank, a piece of crumpled loose leaf in his hand, blowing gently in the breeze.

\* \* \*

The day of my christening was interrupted by a swarm of vicious raccoons. They crawled over the hedges and gnawed on the patio furniture. They clawed so fiercely on the window screens that little raccoon nails and bits of fur were stuck in the leftover, sheared threads. They had watched from the living room as Animal Control approached in their van. The doors slid open and the two men pulled long poles with plastic circles at the ends from the back of the car. My father told me I dumped an entire bottle of baby oil on my head, christening myself with oil not water, and he figured I’d be baptized one way or another that day.

“It took three washings with dish soap, the kind they use for animals in oil spills, just to get that stuff out of your hair,” he told me.

I would ask where they took the raccoons and when I was younger he would tell me they went back to the forest.

\* \* \*

My father stands at the podium and tells a story about fishing and a beautiful spring day and drifting in the middle of a pond. I try to hold onto his words, but they slip through my fingers and I am left wondering. My brother holds a tissue to his nose and tries very hard not to look directly ahead. My sister sits next to me, her eyes are closed, she won't look at the casket. My mother's legs are folded, one crossed over the other, and she watches the sunlight patterned on my father's face. He squints and steps further to the right.

I won't think about the hardwood floors or the cloying smell of flowers or my father squinting. Instead, I will be with him in a small rowboat in the middle of the Moss Farms Pond, legs dangled over the sides, loosening our limbs into the cool water below.

## These Words

When their mother looked in the mirror she shook the flab of her arms, her batwings, and grimaced. She had had three children and held them in her body, the bend of her back, the curve of her hips and splays of her stretched feet. Her body had been displaced, shaped into a new being by new beings, and she did not recognize herself. She thought she was a ruined monument, a shape layered over, moss covered, but she wasn't ruined and she wasn't strange. She was their mother.

She had carried each nine months, give or take, and brought them into this world. She hadn't needed an epidural, had pushed through each contraction, shaking with the pain. She held on, strong, and thought of the Irish gynecologist at her feet, looking into the abyss of her body, and how she would never, in all her life, get such a view.

Their mother had read *As I Lay Dying*, in a college English class and given her copy to her youngest. It was filled with cramped, blue inked notes on the cyclical and the empty spaces and she had circled, bolded, Addie Bundren's treatise on the lack of a word for motherhood. Neither woman had needed these words.



## Ovaries

They took an ovary, but left the rest. And in ten months to the date of her cloth-covered body and the closed wound at her pelvis, she held him in her arms. The Last One, she promised, and thought: “Where in God’s name did you come from?”

And my own mother told me of the misbehaving ovaries in our family, passed down through generations: tangled tubes and mistimed ovulations.

“My grandmother thought she was going in for a hysterectomy,” my mother said, “But ten months later she came home with your Poppy.”

“Like me and the wonky ovary?” I asked.

“Yes, like you and my wonky ovary.”

# She is all wonk

*“I am this one, I am that one, I breathe in and become everything I see.”* – Jo Shapcott, “Def’t”

## The Littlest Hobo

The Littlest Hobo drank chocolate mulk through a blue straw and grated her teeth against the pink-white of melonwater. It took four years for her to pronounce the word guitar. Her mouth would tremble over the consonants; guttural and caught, stuck in the folds of throat and palate and tongue.

She had the Barking Cough and sucked her pacifier (Nook-Nook) and held her baby blanket to her cheek (Silky). Her sister Caitlin stuck a video camera in her face while the Littlest Hobo watched cartoons. A gray vaporizer sat on the table beside her. She sucked in the cool air and slipped a plastic penguin into its watery depths. She felt the mist fill her lungs – coughed once twice – and watched the penguin swirl to the bottom. The vaporizer’s gentle hum became her lullaby. A Rock-A-Bye Baby Goodnight.

Their mother fed them Sweet Purple when their noses were stuffy. The Littlest Hobo craved the thick-sweet grape taste and almost drank a whole bottle.

“Did you drink it?” they asked her.

“Yes,” she said. And then, “No, I didn’t.”

“Tell the truth now,” they said.

But they took her to the hospital anyway. Pumped her stomach with gray-black charcoal and she threw up. She won’t remember, but is told this story later, in verse and rhyme. A prose poem for baby’s first stomach pump.

\* \* \*

The dog barked at her, nipping at the baby carriage when she came home from the hospital. “Cooler!” they said, “Cut it out!” He sniffed her and couldn’t place that

copper-earth smell, old change and dead leaves. Of new birth, of the pulsing fontanel, the cracking of bones and caps and joints into place, wrapped over with cartilage and ligaments and skin. She was too new for him, so he kept barking. They dragged him back across the floor, his claws against the wood, leaving light marks on the grain, splintered over.

When the Littlest Hobo is almost four, Cooler will save her from drowning. He will bark again, not in fear, but to draw attention to the wandering babe. She had made a break for the water, feet stumbling over the slick grass, arms reaching for the pond ahead. “Oh my God!” they will shout, and come running with kisses and concern, and Cooler will nip at the baby once more, but this time to pull her by the straps of her overalls, to keep her pinned to the grass, and she will coo softly, letting her Papa Dog kiss her skin, “Oh baby my baby.”

\* \* \*

When the Littlest Hobo was a toddler they liked to put her in things: boxes, pillowcases, the dryer. Caitlin guessed the weight of a pumpkin, orange skin indented and swollen, and won it as a prize. They carved it on the kitchen floor, newspaper spread beneath to catch the clumps of orange guts and seeds. They sliced a smiling face, jagged teeth and twisted nose, into its orange skin and they put the Littlest Hobo in the pumpkin when it was finished. She gripped the orange sides, wet and cold, and began to cry. At Christmas time they bought an extra-large stocking to hang from the staircase. They put the Littlest Hobo in that too, but this time she looked out at her family and slipped deeper into the knitted sock, determined, even at four, not to cry out again.

The Littlest Hobo liked to play in her backyard, a small square of berry soaked, moss covered brick with a plastic house shaped like a log cabin (brown door, green roof,

yellow windows). She dug into the earth with a white spoon and scooped worms into a cup. She and her friend Chandler cradled the worms in their palms, watched their bodies squinch forward, then back. They collected snails and lined them along the black railings of the metal stairs. Caitlin sprinkled salt on them at night, watched until the snails pulled back into their shells, shriveled and dead. She hated snails, couldn't stand the idea of their slick bodies against her skin, the gentle pull-tug of their muscles. The Littlest Hobo collected the dead snails and buried them into the earth. She said a whispered prayer, something learned in Sunday school.

\* \* \*

The Littlest Hobo had met Chandler at Children's House, a school where they counted beads to learn their times tables, mixed mango lassi, and printed silver fish on colored construction paper. They learned with their hands to pour blue tinted water from one pitcher to another and to mix cornmeal into muffins the Pilgrims would have eaten.

Chandler pulled her aside one morning after sing-along, "Do you know what sex is?" The Littlest Hobo shook her head and listened, enraptured, while Chandler shared. Her parents were doctors and she had been told early how babies came into this world, no stork story for her. The Littlest Hobo could only think of the body puzzle they had out in the playroom: the pieces of girl and boy that could be piled up to skin, or stripped down to bone, the layers of body collected into pieces of colored cardboard. She touched her own skin and imagined the layers, the muscle and veins and bright white of pure bone.

When the Littlest Hobo returned from school, she told her mother. And her mother had said, "Yes, that's about right. Do you have any questions?" And the Littlest

Hobo hadn't said a word, just shook her head. The next day she went back to the puzzle at Children's House. She pulled the cartoon boy's body apart, layer-by-layer; she unclothed his skin, his muscles, his bones. She was looking for something. She piled the pieces back, made the cartoon boy whole again, until he was naked, with sloped knees and straight thighs and an outline, a small, gentle U-shape, that was meant to be his penis. "What is that?" She asked Chandler, calling her over to the puzzle.

"That's his penis," Chandler whispered. The Littlest Hobo covered the boy again, dressed him in his jeans and orange cap. She couldn't believe that that was what it really looked like. Chandler pulled her back to the water station. The Littlest Hobo spent the rest of the day pouring blue water from one pitcher to the next. She did not spill a drop.

\* \* \*

Her siblings went to another school, one on the Upper East Side, which required a test to get in. They were smarter than she was, prepped in a way she didn't understand. Her sister's friends didn't believe that the Littlest Hobo existed. She couldn't be real if Caitlin never talked about her.

"Why are you lying? You don't have a sister. No way."

So she became a hologram, a faded face in a sepia toned photograph, the one Lie of Two Truths. She is a happy-accident kind of baby from the one wonky ovary. "The left one, I think," her mother tells her, "my wonky side."

And she thinks of a confused curve, a pipe that has wandered off course, and the little eggs left behind to rust and turn to ash. The Littlest Hobo looks at her skin and arms and legs, the stretch and pull of her milky-Mylanta white form. She is all wonk.

\* \* \*

She put her head on the table and squirmed, right arm heavy and weighted. Teacher asked if she needed to go to the nurse and the Littlest Hobo trudged across the school, arm dangling at her side, red ants careening across her skin, burning and crisping her flesh.

Later they took an X-Ray and then an MRI. The technician let her listen to the radio and told her, again and again, “Don’t move.” The machine thump-whump-thumped behind her head and she clung to the radio’s notes.

“There’s a shadow,” they told her mother. “We won’t know for sure.”

So they made an X on her arm, a Yes and a No. They slipped her under cool blue sheets. She only remembers talking about Sea World and the sweet-sour smell of bubblegum and then nothing.

She tried to read after, in the bed with the white sheets and the IV drip of Benadryl, but the Wrinkled In Time words were doubled. They told her the stitches would melt into her skin. She looked at the bandage and its purple stained corner. She squirmed. She will always have a scar and will be afraid to touch it. The soft-smooth creases of once open flesh.

“They took some stuff from your hip and some extra bones and mashed it all up. Then put it in your arm. Isn’t that cool?”

“Whose bones?”

“Well, you know, people who’ve died.”

“Dead bones?”

Her right arm will always be part dead, part dead bones, slow bones, old bones. When she sleeps, arm flung across the pillow, above her head, she can hear it creaking, like the Tin Man in need of oil.

\* \* \*

Often, “You really should brush your hair.”

And repeatedly, “Why aren’t you talking?”

Later, “You’re helpless.”

She will tell them: “Attention people it is my turn to speak,” and then nothing more. She will spit orangeless Cheetos at the table and dream of a thousand green worms patterned across her mother’s wallpaper.

\* \* \*

“I’m going to throw that Nook-Nook overboard,” her mother said.

“Don’t!” the Littlest Hobo said, Silky draped across her shoulders, hair ratted together in the back.

“Your teeth,” her mother said. “It’s worse than sucking your thumb.”

The Littlest Hobo counted her teeth, tongue filling the gaps in the front two slots. She fell, she knew that much, on the pavement and there was a blood patch on the cement before it rained. She had waited, in a white tiled room with a rounded staircase that smelled of new books and ink, for her mother and the dentist and the bubblegum medicine.

\* \* \*

“FARTY QUEEN,” her sister screamed, shrill, hitting the high notes.

“It was one time,” the Littlest Hobo said, almost crying.

“No, Faer-ty Queen,” her brother said, a Scottish accent warbling in his mouth.

They chased her around the house and tried to get her to stand still. They grabbed



pillows to sit on her head, smothered her until she admitted to the title of Farty Queen, Queen of All Farts, The Smelliest in the Land.

The Littlest Hobo does not remember the Fart of All Farts that landed her in this predicament, only the act of crawling across the dining room table and letting go in her brother's face. That fart, she thought, has ruined my life.

\* \* \*

Her brother taught her to swing dance in the dining room of their brownstone. She went upstairs to change so they would match: beige pants and white shirts. Ran from the dinner table, Littlest Hobo legs carrying her up the carpeted steps, and into her baby bedroom with the plastic dress-up table and the pink-blue striped wallpaper.

“Show me how, Adam,” she had said. And he had lifted her into his arms, stretching her hands from the ends of her wrists and swung her, faster and faster, until the world blurred together, until the white of his shirt became the flowered wallpaper, until their limbs melted. She thought it was swing dancing, she thought all couples did it just like this, spinning and not twisting, feet in the air, nowhere near the floor.

When the Littlest Hobo was thirteen she attended her first girl-boy party. Her brother picked her up the next morning, from Olivia's house on Joralemon, and asked how it went. She told him, “It must be like I'm speaking a different language.” He let her sit in the front seat and change the radio. He doesn't get distracted by the buttons, like their mother when she carpools to school. They pulled over to a fire hydrant when Adam started to feel sick and puked on the sidewalk. The Littlest Hobo stayed in the car, fiddled with the dials, and thought about the heat of two hands meeting and the sweat of dancing, finally catching on a song. “Come on Adam, you can do it.” Her brother heard and laughed from the sidewalk, but heaved again, chunks and liquid hitting the

pavement. They drove home, sitting in the car that smelled too sour, like old, rotten oranges, and she never told their parents he was hungover.

\* \* \*

They told her she'd be a woman. They told her she'd be a woman when she bled, but they never said when or how much or if it would hurt. The first time, in a farmhouse in Roxbury, Connecticut, the Littlest Hobo went to the bathroom and looked at the rusted stain in her underwear. She sat there for a minute, in the tiny room, which smelled like crayons and mildew, looked out the window at her friends in the pool and thought about where she was headed.

The Littlest Hobo had wanted her period and now she had it. The secret among her friends, the hidden folds of just in case underwear, the bunched pads, some even had tampons, kept her out, excluded her from the bleeding club, and now she was in. Girls would clutch their stomachs, moan their way out of gym class, and the Littlest Hobo would stand there, knees patchy, idly bouncing a basketball – a sport she was tall enough for, but no good at – and pray that her turn might come soon. Now all she wanted was for it to go away or for her mother to be there to explain it. But the Littlest Hobo was afraid, afraid to say what had happened to her, that she was changed in some way, so she reached for a tampon and tried to figure out her body.

When her mother asked her how the weekend went, the Littlest Hobo said, “It thundered the last day, so we couldn't go swimming.” She didn't tell her about the blood, she left it unsaid, wishing her mother could just see it in her face, her walk, the way she left the room.

The Littlest Hobo lied to her mother a second time, an old lie, but they pretended the truth.

“Just wait until you’re married,” her mother said, on the other end of the line, while the Littlest Hobo paced around her dorm room, the words two months too late.

No one had ever told her what it would be like. How two bodies meet at the eyes and the hips and don’t break apart. He stumbled into her, anxious, soft; she wanted to tell him to take a breath. The three times it took to get it just right, to fit, to move in a tandem, left her wanting. Their bodies pressed together, bones to bones, and she traced the graveled scar along the crease of his arm with one steady finger. She had forgotten how cold early December could be, like there were icicles at her feet and neck and the backs of her knees. And how the warmth of his shoulder felt collapsing into hers, the tears pricking at his eyes, because he wasn’t a man yet, and she would think, Isn’t that what I’m supposed to do? But no one would tell her.

Instead she would go to the bathroom stall, gray and creaking, sit and stare again at a tissue paper smear of bright red and think, God, is that all there is?

“Yes, don’t worry, I’m waiting,” the Littlest Hobo said.

## Danny the Hamster

Danny the Hamster drove around the top floor of the brownstone in a pink Barbie convertible. The dog almost ate him, twice, but he managed to hide in the back corner of Nell's closet, till they found him, shivering and wet with urine.

"I named him for Grease," Nell said, stroking his light gray fur.

Danny's cage was decorated with Olivia Newton John and John Travolta, singing and smiling, greasing it up. He became a spoiled hamster, fat on little green pellets.

Denise found him one morning, sleepy and pink-eyed in the tissue cardboard box, nibbled on the corners.

"Danny?" Denise asked. The hamster didn't move, just blinked his crusted eyes and pushed his palm into the air.

Denise cradled the fat rodent in her hand, fed him droplets of PediaLite from an eyedropper and tried to nurse that little fucker back to health. He made it three more days, hobbled around the cage, and then slept that Final Hamster Sleep.

They buried him in the backyard, in an old shoebox, red and white striped, and patted the earth with the flats of their palms.

## Blue Envelopes

Our mother told all three of us on the days she left us at college: “Remember to add water before you mix Tang and vodka.” She had been drunk, more than once, on the Boston T with her Wellesley compatriots, and thought no one would know they were drunk because they believed that vodka was scentless.

Denise and Lynne met in Massachusetts at Wellesley College, one of the original Seven Sisters, and bonded over their working class backgrounds and shared love of knitting. It was the early 1970s and girls wore loose sweaters. Denise and Lynne knitted their own with belled sleeves, their hair curled and parted down the middle. Denise took art history classes and Introduction to Drawing. She always met Lynne after for lunch with charcoal on the edges of her fingers and rich descriptions of bodies – “Rubenesque, Lynne, the largest, plumpest women you’ve ever seen! That Rubens liked them big.” And Lynne would cackle into her pile of salad, shreds of carrots flying onto her plastic tray, while Denise kept chatting, rubbing gray charcoal across her skin, her hands waving, unaware of the gray smears along her fingers and chin and nose.

When Denise married, Lynne was her maid of honor. The bridesmaids wore green dresses, long sleeved with hoods, their hair still parted and curled. They took pictures in Denise’s childhood home in Oxford. The women stayed in the living room off the house, which was unheated and cold in December. Lynne rubbed Denise’s hands between her own, blowing onto her palms – “You’re shaking!” Later that night, Denise would be drunk on champagne, tipsy and forgetful, as she and her new husband made their way to bed. When they told this story later, when they remembered their first night

together as a new couple, they would tell their children: “Your mother was so tipsy she said, ‘Goodnight Lynne.’”

When Lynne visited Denise in Brooklyn, in the brownstone she and Bob had bought in 1978, they sat at the kitchen table and sipped from cooling cups of coffee. “This house is beautiful,” Lynne had said. Lynne wasn’t married yet, but she always said, “I’m still looking! He’s out there.”

“God, it’s such a mess right now,” Denise said and, “But look at this progress.” She showed Lynne pictures of the renovation: the stacked ladders and empty cans of paint and piles of splattered tarps, Denise’s hair tied back with patterned kerchiefs, splashes of white and green along her blue jeans, and one of Bob, glasses too round and big for his face, laughing. “You’re happy?” Lynne asked, and Denise told her: “Oh yes.”

When Lynne married, she moved farther away and sent Denise letters in crisp, blue envelopes. Lynne only wrote in cursive, the letters looped and old fashioned. Denise pulled her letters from the other mail – bills, coupons, magazines – and went to her bedroom, closed the door behind her. Her children never read the letters, never knew, really, who wrote them. When Nell was older, she would look through her mother’s drawers, searching for a piece of jewelry or a scarf or an extra pair of tights, and she would find a small pile of blue envelopes, still crisp, with gentle tears at their tops, but no letters. The blue envelopes were empty and she could never find the insides.

## Curtains

The youngest wore her father's sweaters and stretched the sleeves far past the length of her arms. She wore them to sleep and to school and on long car rides, bundling her knees into the fabric. When she grew older, she hid her lopsided curves in the sweaters, swallowing her body whole. Her breasts, hips, thighs were layered and obscured. One boy called her a curtain girl: "I never even knew you had big boobs." And she turned from him, red and blazing, furious at her body and his words and the need to hide. She had started wearing training bras in the fourth grade and boys had snapped the straps. Her mother bought her bras with pink roses clipped to the centers and she had snipped them off and hid them around her room. She put one in with Danny the Hamster and he took it in his palms, tried to nibble at the silk. She stared at her body in the mirror for hours: folds of pale skin, lines along her thighs, too broad shoulders. Her hair would always be a rat-tangled mess and skin freckled and one front tooth too far in front of the other. She had never felt beautiful.

## How We Didn't Meet

We didn't meet in a bar or in class or even in line at the cafeteria. There weren't any jokes about vegan crab cakes or the white fat pieces in salami. I never said don't yuck my yum. We never shared an awkward walk to class. We didn't take coffee breaks or pee breaks or water fountain breaks or no more studying breaks just to catch a glimpse of the other. We never did anything. There were others – the ones my mother says I ran through – where we met that way or one way or some kind of way. But they never seemed to matter in comparison to the one that came after.

He said, "You always look so beautiful in the morning. How do you do that?" and he closed my window when it was cold, leaning across my bed, sliding the glass back into place.

And I didn't say anything because I couldn't. I don't know how to take compliments.



## Special

My first kiss was in a movie theater with my seventh grade boyfriend Philip Coleman. He kissed my forehead, my cheek, and then finally, puttering around the main event, he touched his lips to my lips and it was warm and wet and gross.

“How was it? What did it feel like? Are you going to do it again?” they asked me, and I said: “No, not ever.”

My mother wouldn't tell me about her first kiss or her first boyfriend or her first-First Time. She would tell me, later, that I ran through boys, and wouldn't I just stop to find someone I really cared about, “because it's more special that way.”

## What My Sister Doesn't Talk About

My sister doesn't talk about love. I heard her, one night in junior high, on the cordless phone with a boy named Charlie. She kept shushing him and laughing in that high-pitched giggle that you sometimes hear on pre-teen TV shows. I imagined her in a pink dress, one she would never actually wear, walking the hallways at school and making eyes at him. They would go to a party and play spin the bottle. Nervously twisting the glass, trying to aim, to time it just right, praying it would land on her or him and not someone else. They would meet in the middle of the circle, lips quickly brushing, and everyone would clap, laugh, crack dirty jokes. My sister would blush then, but never after. I've never seen her turn red.

When she finally hung up and put the phone back into its cradle, I went to it. She was gone from the room, but the imprint of her cheek had left her warmth behind. I pressed the receiver to my ear, listening to the dial tone. And I wondered if that's what it felt like, a little warmth on your cheek, a little sweat, and a steady beating in your ear.

## The Others

Caitlin told her there was a boy once named Tyler and he kept snakes and played football. He was a big guy, she said, but he stopped seeing me and started seeing this other girl and things got complicated, but she didn't say how it ended. She didn't say that they stopped talking and when she saw the two of them on campus, holding hands as they walked down the path, just in front of her, she could watch the straps of their backpacks swing and tangle, and she had never felt so alone.

They were drinking white wine and eating little bites of pear tart and Nell had never felt more grown up. They were sisters with six years between them, a wide gulf, which led to fights about stolen clothing and bruises from punches to the face and kicks to the leg in a shared queen-sized bed for family vacations.

"So, your boyfriend's coming to visit this week?" Caitlin asked, foot tapping under the table.

"He's taking the bus," Nell said, and told Caitlin about his love for Kerouac and baseball cards, but wouldn't say how he liked his ears kissed. Nell said he makes me smile, and Caitlin said just wait, soon enough he'll make you cry.

Her parents met the first one, the archaeology major, post-bus ride, in the living room, the lights in every room turned on, bright like a signaling beacon: You are now Here. Her father opened with a description of a sex scandal at a rival college: "Do you know what a fuck-saw is?" And her mother jumped in: "Well, was it battery operated?"

The first one laughed, but she could tell he was still scared.

Later her mother asked, "Whatever happened to Indiana Jones?" And Nell wouldn't know how to explain it, how you can spend one moment swimming naked in a

pool, the water cold and glistening on your forearms, your eyes closed, the sticky southern night on your skin. But then suddenly, you are walking through a hallway in the middle of a blackout, only the emergency lights turned on, and you don't recognize the face that walks past. Your arms are empty. "We grew apart," she said, finally.

\* \* \*

Adam made afterschool phone calls on his parents' bed, his head hanging over the side of the flowered coverlet, slowly turning pink as the blood rushed to his cheeks and ears and forehead. He talked for hours to his best friend Eva, as they compared notes on the girl who wore only bubble wrap to class and the growing piles of forties along the sides of the school building.

His youngest sister would screech into the room: "How's your girlfriend?" Giggling and stamping her feet, she would end with: "K-I-S-S-I-N-G!"

Adam would push her out and close the door behind him, so she could only hold onto the whispers and mumbles, the layered patterns of their friendship-only kind of conversation. Adam would always be the too tall boy with braces and Eva would always be the nerdy brunette. Eva would read a Frank O'Hara poem at Adam's wedding. She would stand in the shade of a white tent, dressed in green, and say, "I look at you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world." And her words would be just for them, still caught in the corded phone and Adam's reddened face and the way they had known each other for so long and so thoroughly, that his scars and her scars had melded into one patterned crosshatch. But they had never even kissed, because it was not that kind of love. Adam would be looking at his new wife, Caroline; hers the only face in the room, the only one he would ever kiss again, because it was that kind of love.

\* \* \*

“I dated a Yalie once,” their mother told them, as they sat in the hotel barroom, a sparkling glass of wine in her hand. They were in Philadelphia for Adam and Caroline’s medical school graduation.

Their father checked his watch; they were waiting on the middle child, still in her room, doing God knows what.

“We broke up though because I found out he was trying to sleep his way through the Seven Sisters. We only got to second base,” she said.

The oldest and the youngest looked at one another across the table. They rolled their eyes and sipped from their matching glasses.

“All right Denisey,” their father said, glancing back at the entrance. He was always waiting for the middle one to make it to the restaurant, to the airport, to the car. She would walk in, not even rush, her hair pulled back into a ponytail after being blow-dried, and only say: “What?” as they waited for her.

“Your father and I went to a baseball game for our second date. He even brought his glove,” Denise said.

“I could have caught one,” he said, checking his wrist as the middle one walked in, sat down and said, “What are we drinking?”

They toasted to the new doctors at the table and the white coats they would wear and trying to live by the Hippocratic. Dr. Adam and Dr. Caroline, or as Denise called them, her personal traveling physicians: “Did you know my son and my daughter-in-law are both doctors?” She would begrudge them the move to California – “How will I ever see my grandchildren?” (The grandchildren who had yet to appear but who had already been named Wyatt and Virgil Earp for Caroline’s ancestors. Denise and Bob singing,

“Wyatt Earp! Wyatt Earp! Don’t you know the O.K. Corral?” Their children did not, not in the same way their parents did, on the early television sets with the swelling music and the Western gunfights and cowboys).

“And six months later you had your third date,” the youngest said.

Her father’s face flushed and he chuffed into his wrist. She had found an old picture of his high school girlfriend in a cardboard box after her grandfather had moved into a nursing home, and she knew there had been other girls.

“Months he didn’t call after our second date. Thought he was a goner, but that couple you had been friendly with...” Denise said.

“The Dennings,” Bob finished.

“Yes, them, they invited you to their wedding and they said you had to take me as your date,” Denise said.

“Really?” the youngest said.

Her mother nodded, “Yes, absolutely” while her father signaled the waiter for the bill, his finger twirling in the air.

\* \* \*

The first time the brother met Caroline it was raining in New Haven. They were seniors in high school and both trying to decide between sunny Stanford and rainy Yale. He thought for sure she was going to California, because she was a California girl, so he said goodbye to her and watched her blonde head weave through the other students, yellow disappearing into gray. It never occurred to him that his girl would be among the cute girls upstairs that one of his suitemates had been talking about: “Let’s go meet them!” And she was there: still blonde and a little tanner from her summer as a swim teacher. They would be friends and later a little more and he would take her home for

Thanksgiving, his little sister checking to make sure they really did sleep in separate rooms. He would tell her, “Let’s just see what happens,” and they would let it. At their wedding they danced to Sunday Kind of Love and closed their eyes on the pier. They became lore, never able to separate themselves from the rain and the girls upstairs and that one chance encounter.

\* \* \*

The second one, Ethan, took Nell canoeing across a lake and she trailed her fingers in the water. A baby goose watched them from the shore, fluffed and gray, and she wondered at its smallness, how it wobbled, left alone too long. They paddled to an island and tied their boat to its dock. They had a fire: stacked a pyramid of twigs and lit a match, watched it burn blue-orange, and rolled logs, close, to sit on. She had searched through the shrubs for long sticks, crooked and pointed. They roasted marshmallows, watching the white sugar burn, bubble, twirling them in the air when they caught fire, black and crumbly.

“I don’t like them so crispy,” he said, and pulled his stick further away from the flames, rotated his carefully, spinning, white to beige to brown.

She pulled the bubbled skin from the roasted marshmallow and swallowed it whole, ash and sugar, burning sweetly on her tongue. She grabbed another and pushed her stick further into the flames. She liked to watch them catch.

Her family told her that Ethan was a good listener, and she had said, “He talks too you know.” Once Ethan said he was like an onion, you just had to pull the layers back, peel the papery skin, and you would see flesh, yellow and almost clear. She tried to learn his layers, count the freckles on his shoulders, measure the depth of the dip in his sternum, but she could never get it quite right.

Adam sat next to Ethan on the couch in Nantucket and tried to get him to talk. Adam's mouth kept moving, mile a minute, flashing teeth, cracking smile. He waved his hands in the air, comically timed, and waited for someone else's words to take over, but the room stayed quiet and still.

Later, Adam would tell her, "That guy of yours, he might be a dud."

Her brother would buy her a red velvet cupcake as an apology. She would refuse to eat it until after he had gone four days later, when the frosting was smeared along the box, clumped and cold. She ate it in the darkness of the kitchen and wanted to throw up after, but couldn't. She worried that something had changed between them, something she couldn't name.

She met Ethan's parents in the parking lot of a seafood restaurant near the river, and they had said, "It's good to date a goyim once in college." She was just for college. She asked him after, "Am I a goy or what?" and he smiled at her, mouth closed, and then said, "Yes, shiksa-goyim." When he told her loved her, in her back bedroom, the lights flickering, night outside, she had turned away to the window. She felt the lie twisting in her stomach, but she gave it sound. He tried to wrap his arms around her, kiss her neck, touch her skin, but she pulled away, not now, not tonight.

She counted the days until the New Year, the numbers like a whispered catechism around a string of beads, thumbed over, but rough, like peppercorns. She did not speak until he was gone, across the country on a road trip, and she still at home. When she did, finally speak, finally think about whom she had been, it was to say how cold she was, how empty and strange, how it wasn't like the first time, how there must be something wrong with her. They told her sometimes it just doesn't work and you



don't know why. And she breathed again, finally, her lungs stretching, pinkening, and she thought, maybe I'm not so bad awful.

\* \* \*

"I just want my children to be happy," Denise said.

Caitlin threw herself down the stairs before the second day of junior year in high school and asked to stay home, the left side of her body bruised from tumbling down the carpeted steps. She didn't talk about her relationships; she kept them close to her ribcage, an expanse of pale skin that would later be inked over with a great white shark, mouth open, sharpened teeth rising to bite.

"Mom thought I was a lesbian for a long time," Caitlin said.

"You've never brought anyone home," Nell said.

Caitlin looked at her, eyebrows slanted: "Do I look like someone who brings someone home?"

She read *Ebony* and *The New Yorker* on the subway. She collected sneakers and kept the cardboard boxes stacked in her closet for "authenticity." Adam called her Imelda Marcos, but Nell had always heard Esmeralda, and thought of Notre Dame and gold coins. Caitlin would sell some shoes on Ebay and collect a few grand. She wore the same pair of jeans for months at a time, the denim raw, breaking them in herself ("Just look at this perfect crease"), and she would fold them in the freezer to kill the smell.

"How long can I wear these till people think I'm homeless?"

They never told Nell the truth about her sister and her time away from school. All she could remember about those long months was the quiet of the basement and the closed white door and a doctor's name she couldn't pronounce. She imagined him as small, rounded with glasses, a deep voice, but he wasn't that at all. They wouldn't tell her

anything about her sister and therapy and the medical leaves of absence, they left it unsaid, and she could never write about it or talk about it or say it out loud, because she had been told nothing, but she knew it made her sister something else, brilliant, but an enigma, a puzzle that would always be missing a few pieces.

\* \* \*

Her father took them to the Brooklyn Fish Camp on Fifth Avenue and the corner where Lincoln Place turned into Degraw. They ordered beers from Connecticut and tipped their glasses to pour, no foam.

“So you’ve graduated?” her father asked him. Nell watched her father closely, waiting for a repeat of the first time: the sex and the toys and the burning redness of her cheeks.

“Yeah, I’m working at a small company, energy policy, all that kind of stuff,” said Nate, the third one, pushing his hair to the right, his widow’s peak a perfect triangle. She would tease him later: “Maybe you should get some Rogaine.” And he would slap at her, “It’s been that way forever!”

They met playing squash and exchanged numbers when she lost her pelican water bottle and he went to look for it. He always had a girlfriend and she always had a boyfriend, until the winter she didn’t and lived with him over the break. They shared an apartment and when he came home from practice, she would shriek – “Don’t come in the bathroom! I’m naked.”

She woke up one morning, throat nearly closed, tonsils so swollen they looked like golf balls when she twisted her head. He drove her to the walk-in-clinic and waited in the car while she was tested for strep. He made her soup and grilled cheese with a fried egg on top. She had tried to swallow, barely opening her mouth, as he watched her

eat. “That okay for you?” She could only nod, spooning the liquid to her throat: “Can I get you anything else?” She shook her head and ate slowly. He went to meet his then-girlfriend and she thought how lucky some people could be. She didn’t know yet that one year later they would be holding hands at a party and she would kiss him and he would tell her afterward, “That was unexpected.”

Nell would tell him she loved him in two years, while they lay in her bed, one Sunday morning her senior year. They had stared at each other until she said: “Penny for what you’re thinking?” and he said: “For my thoughts you mean.” And then just silence, until he had broken it, “I think I love you.”

“You think?”

“I love you,” and “I love you too,” and “I love you.”

They had pulled the sheet over their heads, his chin on the crown of her forehead, her cheek to his chest, their bodies and flesh and bones touching until it was too close, until they needed air to breathe.

“This one tells me you’re interested in oil?” her father asked him.

“Well, yeah, I wrote a thesis that looked at the opening of Russia and their oil deposits,” Nate said, running his finger along the lip of his beer glass. She sat there while they talked oil and Yergin’s Prize and rigging.

“I could be an oil rigger,” she said. The two men looked at her. At her frame, broad shoulders for a girl, but curved, weak upper arm strength. They both smiled and her father said – “All right Nelly-Belly, we’ll see.”

They ate lobster rolls: the pink-white meat piled in toasted hot dog buns, the mayo dripping onto the brown paper, leaving spots of oil across the table.

“I’ve never felt more like a third wheel,” she said later, wrapping her hand around his. They were waiting on the corner while her father bought his Sunday *New York Times* on a Saturday night.

“Never, Nelly-Belly?” he asked.

“Don’t even,” she said.

He quick kissed her on the cheek and pulled her along the sidewalk, back to her house. Her father was just behind them, the newspaper already soaking into his palms, pink hands turning gray.

\* \* \*

“How did you know you wanted to be a doctor?” Indiana Jones asked him. Adam was sitting at the table, cheeks a little sallow; he had lost some weight in his face and just beneath his chin. He was working over seventy hours each week, running through white-white hallways where the nurses called him Dr. Schwee and he was always over-caffeinated and over-stimulated, saying: “It’s like a five-act play and the fourth act is always weird. Your brain does weird things when you’re that tired.” He didn’t answer the question.

It was the summer before sophomore year and it would be her first boyfriend’s last visit to her house, but Nell didn’t know that then. They would drive to Connecticut, both of them sitting in the backseat, surrounded by pillows, suitcases, a mirror, and when she reached for his hand through the piles, the layers of other things, he wouldn’t see hers open and waiting.

Her brother blinked and said: “Oh, how did I know?” He apologized, this was his first vacation in weeks, all he wanted to do was sleep for hours and then watch television, turn his brain off.

“I guess you could say it was a kind of epiphany,” he said. And he retold a story Nell had heard a thousand times: the college friends upstate, The Hundred Acre Wood, and how they’d played games, gotten wild, and Adam went out into the field and just knew he wanted to cut, to heal, to be a doctor. But it was different this time. Her brother added things that hadn’t been there before and her boyfriend’s eyes were lighting up and Nell felt separated from what was once the truth.

\* \* \*

On Nantucket Ethan had had to drive her family home from a dinner out. Her parents had been too drunk to drive and her sister didn’t have a license yet (though she was twenty-five, had an expired New York State learner’s permit, and was also drunk). Nell sat in the middle seat between her sister and her mother, while Ethan drove and her father directed him.

The headlights cut across the cobblestones, obscured through the misty fog. Ethan was patient and slow, head nodding, his hands at ten and two on the wheel. He had taken Nell driving a few times, near school in an abandoned trucking company’s parking lot. He had made her back up in circles around a pole, her neck craning and his hands on her hands on the wheel at ten and two. Her mother whispered: “This would make a great story.”

Later, Ethan would tease her and get upset when she fell asleep halfway through *Animal House*. “You’re missing all the good parts,” he said, shaking her arm. But she couldn’t stay awake. They broke up months later and when he left her, sitting in her living room, on a chair that still smelled like cat pee, she felt relieved. She did not cry. She could only think of the drive from the restaurant, her father and her boyfriend in the

front seats and her mother whispering and her sister laughing and how she had only stared up at the moon, just the smallest sliver of yellow, and stayed quiet.

## Queen of UTIs

No one ever told her that you had to pee after sex. And when she felt that awful burning, the hurrying need to go, but the pressure of not being able to, she knew that something terrible had happened.

The first time she went to the health center and peed in a plastic cup. The nurse told her: “Remember, wipe with these three times,” and pressed thin packets of cleansing wipes into her hands. They smelled like dish soap and nail polish remover and she could only use one before she felt herself about to go on her hands. They gave her a small bottle of antibiotics and told her to increase her fluids.

The summer before junior year of college she had three more. She sat in the emergency room, a plastic cup of bright, radioactive urine in her hands, while children played with beads and coloring books and stuffed animals around her. She felt their parents’ eyes on her: messy hair, loose sweater, the cup of orange liquid – she had taken pills that morning, which promised to numb her urethra, and also turn her pee extra bright. Her friends called her the Queen of UTIs and she felt in that moment that it could not get any worse.

Her gynecologist told her to take cranberry pills or drink a small glass of natural cranberry juice every day. “Not that sugary cocktail stuff. The natural kind.” The juice was too bitter for her, so she took pink capsules instead. They stuck in her throat.

She trained her body to jump from the sheets, to rush from the bed, hair sticking up, a tee shirt or towel or extra large sweater draped across her body, running to the bathroom. She refused to continue her reign as Queen and so gave up post-coital cuddling.

The last one was in August, just after her second boyfriend had visited. She told her mother in the kitchen and had started crying. “What’s wrong? Did you break up?” Her mother told her not to be so embarrassed, that when she was young and just married she had had an awful case of honeymoon cystitis. “We were in Italy and I just kept ordering *acqua minerale gassata*, over and over. It’s the only thing I remember how to say.” They drove to the hospital the next morning before her shift at the library and she waited in another waiting room for the third time. Her father would tell her later: “That guy of yours is so quiet, like a monk. But I guess he doesn’t lead such a monastic lifestyle.” They were sitting in a restaurant when he said it, in front of her family, her pelvis still aching, and her father laughed so hard at his own joke that he choked a little on his bread roll.



## **Your Mother is a Fish**

You, little girl-child, are dressed in a brightly colored Speedo with a whale-tailed strap, which will leave an awkward sunburn on your shoulders. You will look in the mirror and see red divided in part by pale, pale flesh, one brown mole slightly off center. Your back will be singed for two months and one day and a single second until it finally fades, your skin whitened clean.

But for now you are on the banks of a wide river and you are looking down at the water as it tumbles over rocks and logs and dark green moss. Your mother is waiting for you at the front of the car. And you keep looking over the edge and she tells you, “That’s where Sassy fell in.” You are obsessed with the movie *Homeward Bound* with its lost, talking animals and you are in love with the cat Sassy, because her tail is fluffy and her cat eyes blue.

Sand Springs is the swim club in the Berkshires, with the cold groundwater pool and the hot tub and the baby pool with a mural of a tree house and ladybugs. The inside of Sand Springs smells like grilled cheese (frying butter, bread) and that is what you will eat for lunch, pulling the sticky bread apart, watching the yellow stretch. You will get a pickle too, but won’t eat it.

“You have to share your toys if you want to bring them to the pool,” your mother says. There is a plastic woven basket with white straps: a small shovel, a pink-yellow watering can, a Ronald McDonald from your cousin’s Happy Meal. You are watching the bag and you think, I don’t like sharing my toys, maybe this time she will let me bring it in, maybe this time I won’t have to share. But she closes the car door and you are forced to leave your toys behind. You have not yet learned *The Golden Rule*.

Your mother is tall and her skin so pink and like a sponge you cling to her. She will let you have one ice pop and you can't decide between pink or blue, strawberry or blueberry, you think, or maybe watermelon and some alien berry that is blue. She, your mother, is a strong swimmer and she does laps in the pool while you sit on the edge and watch her back ripple. You slurp on the bright blue ice and strain to see if it matches the pool water.

She swam in college and would eat three cheeseburgers for lunch. She wore a bathing cap – white and blue, her school colors – that puckered her forehead, tightly gathering her skin. She could swim for miles, the breaststroke her favorite, but when she taught you to swim, she called it The Frog. Watch how I kick my legs, she said, watch my hands, see how they scoop. And you had let her take off the orange floaties, puckered against the tops of your arms, and you scooped the water too, pulling yourself toward her.

The water is cold and clear. When you slide under the surface, you can feel the current, filling the pool from the natural springs nearby. Your mother tells you there's no chlorine so don't pee in the pool. You make sure to hurry-waddle every time to the restroom with the green carpet and the pine-sweet scent. The doors of the stalls have little hooks that keep them closed. Your mother waits just outside the door, and you can still see her toes when you sit.

Your mother is a fish. She spends all day in the pool floating on her back, face tipped to the sun, ankles gently crossed, toes pointing forward. She tells you a story about a large man who liked to swim in the pool too. He had a potbelly and wore a Panama hat and liked cigars. They let him float around in his inner tube and smoke in the pool. You will learn later it is Tennessee Williams, but for the in-between, you

imagine he is like your grandfather and when you visit Poppy's house, you look for the inner tube and the Panama hat, but you never find it.

When your mother was a teenager, she lifeguarded for the local pool. She wore a red bathing suit and never enough sunscreen. You ask if she ever had to save someone at the pool, and she tells you no, but when she does, she stares at the water and her eyes are blue and wet. You are too young to see the difference.

Her brother Mike had a friend named Timothy who was, they said, a little slow. He lived down the block and his father worked with theirs. He once crawled up the chimney and they weren't sure how to get him out. They had called up to him and Timothy kept sneezing, the ash getting in his nose and mouth. When they had finally pulled him loose, his skin was a dusky gray, ringed in grime and soot. Mike would play trains with him, even when he had outgrown the set, and he stayed patient, even when Timothy threw the caboose across the room, screaming.

She was lying out by her family's pool and she had just turned fifteen. She loosened the straps of her top, her shoulders warming in the sun. She was trying to read, but instead tipped her head back, dozing, when Timothy came to the screen door.

"Mikey here?" he asked, pulling at his buttons and chewing on the fingers of his left hand, so the question came out a little garbled.

She looked up. "No, he's out with Dad."

"Can I swim?" Timothy asked, looking at their pool, eyes locked on the clear blue.

"You know how?" she asked, sitting up a little. Timothy stepped out onto the patio. He was just twelve and still a little twig of body, all elbows and pointed hips.

“All the time,” he had said, dipping one big toe over the edge, giggling when he hit the cold water.

“Okay, go ahead,” she had said and then went back to her book. She watched him walk to the shallow end of the pool, down the ladder, one foot after the other. He looked small and so pale against the green pool siding and the water. She let her eyes drift over the words. Timothy was splashing in the water, flapping his arms and legs, laughing. His wet hair plastered to his forehead, eyes closed against the sun. She had thought he looked sweet and normal.

She had let her eyes close for just one second, just one second, but when she opened them, the pool was silent, the water still. She could hear their neighbor Henry McGraw cutting the grass and his dog Scooter barking and some kids playing across the street. She thought she could hear the sprinklers crackling in their vegetable garden and the mulch loosening and even the little worms moving. But she couldn't hear Timothy.

When she ran to the edge of the pool and looked down, there he was, looking back up at her from the bottom of the deep end. She could feel the urgency and the fear but her mind was blank. She still doesn't remember hitting the water and pulling him onto the sun-soaked concrete and pushing on his little chest. She only remembers the after, where her own mother has wrapped her in a white towel and is rubbing her shoulders and saying it's okay, it's okay, everything is all right now.

Your mother doesn't tell you any of this because you are still too young and your feet are splayed like a duck's and you have never been left alone. But when you go swimming, she watches you, her eyes never leave you, and sometimes you can feel a burning on your shoulder, but you think it is only the sun.

Your mother is telling you about the time she dyed her skin purple with homemade bath salts from the Girl Scouts. She tells you her own mother still made her go to school and the kids called her Purple Murple for a year. You have heard this story before, but your mind is on the campgrounds just outside Sand Springs, and the little tents that overlook the river.

“What are they there for?” you ask, interrupting your mother and her purple skin.

“People who like to pick up and leave real easy,” your mother says. And you think about what it would be like to live in a tent and be ready to go at any moment. You think about living out of your backpack, the one that is small and shaped like an animal, but you worry there wouldn’t be enough room for all you’d have to bring.

“I’d like to do that someday,” is all you will say. Your mother will brush your hair back from your forehead and adjust the twisted strap of your suit. “Is that so?” she will say, as if she doesn’t quite believe you, but then, “I wouldn’t expect anything less from the Littlest Hobo.”

Before you leave, the sky now a dull gray, storm coming on soon, she will let you have one more ice pop, having been convinced by your wide eyes and bunched lips. You will get red this time, which will stain your tongue and lips and edges of your teeth.

You will stand at the edge of the river and look out and ask your mother again, “Did Sassy really fall in here?” And she’ll tell you yes of course, why would she lie. The drive home will feel short and you will watch the twisting mountains from the back seat. You will suck on the ends of your fingers, leaving them tinged with pink, and try not to think about Sassy.

Your mother will let you watch *Homeward Bound* before dinner, but when it comes time for Sassy to fall, you start to cry, like every time, so she will fast forward the tape. The screen will be fuzzy for just one instant and then the man who lives in the wooden cabin will find Sassy. He will give her a small bowl of milk and you will be happy that she didn't drown. Your mother wants to tell you that it's a movie, that it never changes, no matter that you've seen it a hundred times by now, but she will always fast forward the tape.

For dinner your mother has made macaroni and cheese and hotdogs. The cheese is thick, creamy, so it sticks to your fork in a yellow paste. You smear ketchup across your plate and paint – yellow-red – while your mother phones your father. He is still working this week but maybe he can drive up for the weekend. To you he is all ties and dress pants and those brown shoes with tassels. Some times he lets you stomp around the house in them, your feet sliding from back to front.

After dinner your mother will sit on the back porch with a cup of tea while you play in the grass. She will get lost in the setting sun and humid, summery air.

Your mother is fifteen again and her bones are unbroken and one mole still presses onto her upper lip. She will have it removed later, when it is no longer fashionable to have a mole on your lip. Her mother will be offended, because she too has the same mole, a beauty mark, a butterfly kiss. When you look at her wedding album and ask where it went, she will tell you she fell asleep and it disappeared overnight.

Your mother learned to swim in her own pool, her father at the far end, beckoning to her. She had kicked her legs and twisted her arms and scooped the water and felt herself go. She was fast and uncatchable and no longer bound. She could feel the water propel her forward and she imagined herself as a fish, breathing the water. She has

always loved the water, staying in so long her skin wrinkled and pruned, loosening on the tips of her fingers and toes. She tells you she was born swimming and you wish that you had been too.

“It’s time for bed baby,” she tells you, the sun starting to fade, the mosquitoes buzzing quietly in your ears, the flash-blink of fireflies slowly peppering the backyard. You want to tell her just one more minute, let me stay out here and play a little while longer, but you listen, because she is your mother.

You pad back across the almost-wet grass, your feet a little slick, and onto the porch. She pulls you onto her lap and pats your moist post-bath head. You both watch the fireflies a little longer. In the morning, both your arms will be spotted in little bites, but they won’t ever itch. Slowly they will fade from your skin.

When she tucks you in, pulling the sheet up to your chest, pinching the sides, she will tell you a story. But you won’t remember the words, her voice is too shallow and light, and you barely hold on to a single syllable. Eyes closed, sleep comes, and it is a little darker now and quiet.

Your mother will leave the hall light on, because like all little children, you still fear the dark and what’s under the bed or in the closet or crouched by the bookshelf. Your mother will walk to her own bedroom, with the sloped wooden ceiling and the sun stained wallpaper, and she will sit on the edge of her bed, now tired.

She is thinking about the bat that was trapped in her bedroom last summer and its large, black wings, how it seemed to unfold from the lampshade into which it had tucked itself. She remembers running terrified from the room and waking you with her hurried footsteps. She dressed in a hooded polar fleece and a pair of orange ski goggles so tightly strapped about her head that they pinched her nose. She chased the bat around

the room, swatting at it with your crumpled butterfly net, a few burrs still caught in the lining, trying desperately to guide it to the open windows. You were crouched by the edge of the door, peeking in and laughing, chewing and drooling on your fist, because she looked so silly. Your father wasn't there that weekend but she called him on the phone later, the one with the stretched out cord because you've twirled it around your fingers too much, and you and she will both yell at him across the static and say it was as big as a house a bear a monster the pine tree you are afraid will fall on the house while you sleep. Your words and her words will twist and he, your father, won't understand a second of it, but he'll laugh along anyway.

She climbs into bed and pulls the sheets up around her. She closes her eyes and tries to dream about the spot on the bed, a little depressed with empty body weight, or her other children at sleep-away camp or the littlest one in the room down the hall, but she is always pulled back under the water. She is in the deep end of her parents' pool and the green murk is piled high above her, the sunlight barely cutting through the clear waves. She isn't choking or gasping or drowning. She is just floating in the green and breathing, real easy, like a fish.



## Paper Hats

They wore paper hats for Christmas Eve dinner. They popped them from the cardboard crackers at their place settings, silver or gold, a cardboard strip slipped between their fingers. They read the jokes to each other, puzzling over the coy innuendos and humorless juxtapositions.

“What do you call a woman who stands between two goal posts?” (Annette.)

“What’s furry and minty?” (A polo bear.)

“Did you hear about the man who bought a paper shop?” (It blew away.)

The father chuckled softly into his napkin, the purple crown on his big head crinkling at the seams, too big of a big head Schwed. The youngest stared at the lobster staring back at her. Earlier, she had watched them crawling on the counter, still dark and uncooked, antennae twitching. She had tickled them with a pink feather duster – an early Christmas gift – and screamed when they nipped at her. In the morning she would use the same feather duster to be a maid and serve tea to her family.

The brother, hands deft, surgical, took a silver lobster cracker and reached for a red-burned claw. He dunked the lobster in butter, slurping back the pink-white meat. His eyes, perpetually hungry, looked around the table: “You going to eat that?”

In two years the older sister would be absent from the table, but the hats would still be worn and the jokes read aloud and the set of candles lit along the table in pairs. Caitlin would be in the hospital, lips puffy and body bruised over, blood dripping from her right ear. They said her body was attacking its own platelets and they would put a crank in her chest, turning, pulling marrow from her bones. But for now, her blood was

still clotting and she was only smiling, looking at the Christmas tree lights and the old ornaments, her Ninja Turtle globe tucked into the pine.

Their mother folded her green crown onto her head and sat in Poppy's usual place, facing her husband at the head, the mirror behind her. Her crown, too, crinkled around her wavy blonde-gray strands and stretched against her head. She braced her hands along the arms of her chair and wished her father were still alive.

## Outside In

Denise was sixteen when she first went to Nantucket on a daytrip with her high school boyfriend. They had rented a bicycle built for two and she took the backseat. She barely pedaled, too absorbed in the gray-white houses and the absence of traffic lights and the blasts of the slow ferries taking leave to move her feet.

“God, isn’t this beyond beautiful?” she asked her boyfriend, but he was too busy pedaling, feet stamping, sweat dripping, to hear her. “You’re missing everything,” she said, not caring if he had heard. She looked around more instead: the twisting bike path, the blue horizon, the sprays of hydrangeas and piles of lost sand along the curves of the road. She had never felt more at home.

On the ferry back she watched another woman toss a penny when they rounded Brant Point. “What’s that all about?” she had asked. The woman had smiled at her and said, “So I’ll come back.” Denise took two pennies from her purse, tossed them at the lighthouse, and watched the copper metal glint and disappear into the blue. For luck.

\* \* \*

The summer after they were married, Bob and Denise took a week’s vacation on the island. They stayed at an inn off Main Street, the roads cobbled from the stones that had balanced the whaling ships and were difficult to bike down, making your hands sweat-itch as they vibrated against the handlebars.

“Did you know Herman Melville stayed here once?” Bob had asked her, sipping his black coffee on their screened in porch, flipping through a thinning guidebook.

She was still angry with him for the scare on the beach. He had grabbed her leg under the water, pretending to chomp at her like Jaws, and she had screamed so loudly the lifeguard on duty whistled at her, angry for causing a commotion. She hated scenes.

“Oh yeah, I heard Melville based Ahab off of a Nantucket whaling captain,” she said.

In later years she would tell him of the Essex and Nantucket Sleigh Rides and the men beat down by an enraged whale. She would tell him how the first mate, Owen Chase, lost his mind and hoarded food in his attic, how Captain Pollard, Ahab’s inspiration, fasted one night every year, locking himself away in the dark, in remembrance of those they lost.

But she couldn’t tell him what she had yet to learn, so she only said, “I have an Ahab joke,” even though she always felt awkward telling jokes.

“Okay, shoot,” Bob said.

“Ahab used to sit out on Main Street and do you know what he would say? If you asked him if he knew someone, maybe a relative on one of the ships?”

Bob looked at her and shook his head.

“Know him? Know him? I ate him!”

\* \* \*

The summer with children it rained for four days straight. The baby had escaped on the plane, crawled away under the seats, little and blonde and lost. “Whose baby is this?” a man’s voice had called from the front of the plane, “Has anyone lost a baby?” And Denise had snapped to attention, her Littlest Hobo, not yet a year old, dangling from a stranger’s arms, legs kicking, hair a mess.

They ate a take-out dinner of Chinese food from plastic containers. The oldest two smacked their lips and pressed their faces to the rain soaked windows. The rented cottage was barely big enough for a family of three, let alone five, and so they crowded, one on top of the other, into layers of noise and stacks of books and piles of damp clothing.

They came back every summer. First to the little house and then to the one on Mill Street, until finally they bought one of their own: Outside In.

Her brother had named it for the outsides. The shingled roofs and one shuttered window and the No Trespassing sign on the kitchen wall, that were all inside when they should have been out. The house stood at the curve of Vestal Street, across from a Quaker cemetery with only a few headstones and heaps of buried bodies. “They didn’t believe in coffins,” her mother told them, “just stacked them all up and covered them with dirt.”

“This is a junk house,” the littlest had declared, seeing piles of dirty dishes, pieces of mismatched vacuum cleaners, and a hammock for a bed. Junk where her mother had seen potential.

Her father almost fell out the door to nowhere on the second floor, catching his foot on the landing in a heart-rushed second, one limb out onto a precipice of near death. “Jesus! Denise, come here,” he had called. And they stood there, looking out into the brambled backyard, the piles of earth and broken bottles. “Really, this?” he asked again, but Denise had stayed quiet and smiling. They signed the papers the next day.

Their parents liked to tell the story of their house as a pair, sitting in the living room, cocktails and cheeses and small cuts of salami spread before them. “It was an artist’s house. He sawed it off its planks down by the wharf, all by himself. Hauled it

back here on a flatbed.” And they would show their guests the pictures: parts of the house on wheels, the door to nowhere open and Bob poking his head through, the roof on stilts with a kiln underneath, wrapped with plastic tarp. They loved to tell the story of their youngest and how when she was still young, bright blonde and clutching Silky, she was afraid to sleep in her loft bedroom. They would find her in the mornings, curled at the foot of their bed or on the floor or in the rocking chair, sleeping lightly, palms pressed to her cheek. “What are you doing?” They asked. And she could only say: “I’m afraid I’ll fall off the roof.”

\* \* \*

The fifth day the rain finally broke.

A young boy came to their door and knocked, “Are there any eight-year olds here?”

Denise answered the door and looked at the boy. He wore a tie-dyed shirt and rounded owl glasses and said his name was Greg Stein. Her oldest, Adam, bounded to the door, “Yes! I’m an eight-year old.”

They started a lemonade stand that would make over \$100 during a heat wave. As new teenagers, Adam and Greg would dig clams out of the sand with their toes, crack the shells and slurp back the salty goo. At seventeen, they would try to buy beer from the one liquor store on island and when Adam’s fake was taken away, he would say, “This is bogus, man.” Each would be the other’s best man and raise glasses of champagne, crack a joke, adjust a microphone, and say congratulations to the bride and groom. In the summer before they graduated from medical school, one would confess: “I’ve never been able to stomach the sight of blood,” but would see an open chest cavity in two month’s time, a heart still beating and open to the room’s eyes.

But that first summer they were just eight year olds who mixed lemonade and pretended not to know how to make change.

\* \* \*

Denise wove her first lightship basket in the same summer that she broke her left leg in the rocks at Dionis beach. She and her father Franny wove baskets together, sitting at the same workshop table, glasses perched on the ends of their noses, their faces pure reflections of the other. She completed her lid – scrimshawing her own ivory pieces of conch and starfish and sea scallop – a year before her father died of iron-thickened blood and broken kidneys. She finished the second half of Jeanne’s basket in late August, the following year, when her father was no longer there to complete it. She had sat on the deck and had run her fingers against the grain of the basket’s skeleton: half woven, half finished. His weaving was tight, precise against the shaped frame, and she could almost see his delicate fingers moving around each stave, the quick tug-pull of the cane, positioned and pressed into place. She had let the basket sit for one day before she touched it.

Her father had always smelled like woodchips and turpentine and pennies. He had been good with his hands, which were bulged over with veins and purple bruises, but still strong, delicate, fixed on a task. He had restored a Ford Model A, had built half their house in the New Year of 1962, had crafted airplanes and dollhouses and rocking pigs from scratch. He didn’t believe in kits. Every tool had a labeled hook and proper place.

“Hey Windy, come here,” Poppy had said to her.

She had gone to the garage and balanced on one foot, breathing in the sweet soil and ripe tomatoes of the garden around back.

“Hold this, will you?” he had said.

She held the thick metal of the fender in her two hands, leaning into its frame, and counted the clicks her father made with a tool she couldn't see.

She kept weaving the basket and she didn't stop until it was dark outside and her fingers were invisible, moving from one stave, to the next, to the end.

\* \* \*

“Snow goes to Tah, sand goes to Chiner,” the woman said to Denise.

Denise came back to the car, laughing. They were driving out to Great Point and they had taken some air out of their tires, flattened and smooth against the grains of crushed sand. Bob and the children were waiting in the green minivan. For years, the youngest would believe in a place called Tah, magical and nonsensical, a place that snow went to for inexplicable reasons. It was only later, when Nell remembered to ask, that Tah became tar and Chiner became China.

“I still don't get it,” she would say to her mother, while they talked on the phone.

“You know, snow goes to tar, there's a stopping point...” Denise said, and, “You really didn't get it after all this time?”

“And sand goes to China because it's never-ending?” she asked. And her mother told her, yes, because it's never-ending, there is no fixed point to stop, it just goes and goes, all the way to China.

Denise had grown up in Oxford, Massachusetts and spoke the same patterned, ah-filled language. She yelled at hesitant drivers, “Pick a lane, asshole!” And her children would parrot her, often in front of her more conservative in-laws, and all she could do was shrug her shoulders.



They went to Great Point for beach picnics with lobsters and to surf cast. They got stuck in the sand once, had to dig themselves out with plastic buckets from the sand toy collection. When Franny was still living, he would ride in the passenger seat with Bob driving, gripping the handle above the window – the “holy shit bar,” he called it – and shut his eyes, nervous and a little sick to his stomach. He did not like being so close to the water with his grandchildren in the car.

It was always windy at Great Point and cold when it got dark. The lighthouse still operated, swinging its light across the northernmost point of the island, cutting and refracting along the sand. One year Denise brought a plastic bucket of cosmos – you just had to add vodka to a mix – and she and Cool Aunt Kim got drunk on the sand. When Denise stood to surf cast, she wobbled into the waves, soaking her pants. She had to borrow her daughter’s sweats and changed in the dunes. Later, she would develop a small bull’s-eye rash on her butt and have to take blue pills for Lymes.

\* \* \*

When she was fifteen, Nell and her best friend Lena got drunk on Captain Morgan rum. They drank straight from the bottle, lips pursed, the rum burning their tongues. They had met two boys in town, standing between Stubby’s (famous for popcorn shrimp) and the Juice Bar (an ice cream parlor that had white screen doors and always smelled like waffle cones cooking). The two boys had wavy hair, one wore a green baseball cap, and the other had a shark tooth on a braided leather string. They had names, but neither of the girls would remember. The boys had buried a bottle of Captain Morgan in a parking lot and they convinced the girls to come with them, to walk down the cobblestoned streets on that Saturday night, and stand in a circle drinking.

Lena looked older than Nell. Denise liked to use the word “developed” to talk about puberty, but Nell could only think of Lena’s long blonde hair and the tri-colored pattern of moles along her neckline and how she was the most beautiful. Boys always talked to her first and Nell became her second, who boys only looked at sideways, their eyes squinting.

They went back to Vestal Street and made the boys wait while they snuck into Outside In. They stole more liquor from the cabinet, mixing water in with the gin and vodka, until the bottles became so diluted that when Denise made herself vodka tonics (heavy on the lemon) the rest of the summer, she would look at the two girls, twist her lips, and only say: “This doesn’t taste right.” The boys stood against the fence of the Quaker Cemetery, waiting, but the girls forgot to come back for them.

“Let’s go swimming tomorrow and get sand in our swimsuits,” Lena said. They were standing in the kitchen still, the fridge humming and the windows open and the house dark. Lena moved closer, brushed her arm along Nell’s skin. They stood for a minute, touching, hands on hips, arms along shoulders. They were both warm, damp from running back to the house, worried they would be late for curfew. And then Lena kissed her in the kitchen. Lena pulled Nell’s face closer to hers and they closed their eyes and their lips met and their arms fell slack. And then suddenly it was over and Lena was feeling sick and they were in the bathroom, whispering, and Denise was coming up the stairs, her eyes half closed, her hair mussed in the back.

In the morning, they were hungover and curled into twin sofas, wrapped in sea-shelled patterned comforters, an old VHS tape playing in the background. They never talked about the kiss or their arms touching or their faces meeting in the darkness of the

kitchen. Instead, they clutched their stomachs, groaning, and picked at pieces of too-buttered toast and sipped at cups of lukewarm water.

Later, Denise would say, after she found Lena in the bathroom, still drunk and puking and pale: “That was not her first rodeo.”

\* \* \*

The youngest and the oldest worked at the Atheneum six years apart. The other librarians asked about him often: “How’s that brother of yours? He a doctor yet?” And Nell wouldn’t say, Yes, he cuts people open, slices into their skin, and I can only picture his too big hands reaching into someone’s ribcage and cracking. She only said: “Yes, he’s a surgical resident.”

The Atheneum was a white building, broad, with a pair of ionic columns. It sat on the corner of India and Federal streets, stretched long and imposing. They told her it was once a church, but in the 1830s it became a library. Frederick Douglass had lectured in the Great Hall, which now housed a row of Microsoft computers and one finicky printer. The books came back with sand in the plastic bindings and they would shake them, upside down, over the trashcan. “We know where this has been,” Alice, one of Nell’s fellow librarians, said, rolling her eyes. Alice collected Dare Wright picture books about a bear and a lonely doll. She had an orange tabby named Agatha and often had fluffs of cat hair stuck to the back of her skirt.

“Come here, you giant you,” said Eileen, an older, retired librarian, who always stopped in to gossip on Tuesday mornings. “Stack these records. You’re good and tall.” So Nell would stack them, alphabetically, separated by genre (opera or classical or jazz), the cases thick and gray, her fingers dyed with ink.

It was crowded when it rained and empty in the sun-soaked afternoons. She twirled in the desk chair, the sun spotty on the glass tabletop, and searched through their catalogue for poetry. She liked to walk through the white bookshelves, trace her fingers along the spines, count the Dewey Decimals and see how many titles they had for each writer she loved.

They had blue library cards and called their visitors patrons. The cards were free if you owned property in Massachusetts or lived in Massachusetts, otherwise it cost twenty-five dollars for a year. She made the cards quickly, fingers moving across the keys, the mouse sliding. The other librarians told her she was fast; they liked the way she moved.

There was a patron they nicknamed Daddy Long Legs. He was older: back crooked, hair white, the skinniest chicken-legs. He liked to wear too-short running shorts, yellow or orange, that cut just at the tops of his liver-spotted thighs. Paula would say: "Get your sunglasses ready. Daddy Long Legs is on the prowl." The slightest breeze would ruffle his shorts, blowing them to the side, and the librarians would raise their faces to the ceiling and pray.

The two summers Nell worked there, she learned how to make new labels for the books, how to hide late fees, how many stacks she could hold in her arms and still walk. She became an expert at picking sand out of the bindings. She learned to love the smell of old ink and yellowed pages. They always asked her to find the lost books, the ones the computer said no longer existed. And she would find the missing, the crumpled pages, the stained bindings, tucked behind shelves or mixed in with the large print when it should have been three shelves over. She was good at finding lost things.

\* \* \*

Every summer they went to the Boston Pops with the Steins. They took chairs and blankets and three coolers of food. The children waited in line starting at two o'clock to mark their places on the beach with bright blankets and a ring of chairs. They always ate fried chicken – Denise made it in a paper bag, shaking the milk-dipped meat in flour and spices – and potato salad, extra mayo and eggs.

There was always a theme to the concert: John Williams' scores or Broadway musicals or Billy Joel because everyone loved Billy Joel. They listened while they ate and drank and sat on the beach until it was dark. At the end, they had fireworks. Some years they couldn't have them because of the nesting clovers in pockets of sand on the beach. The fireworks scared the endangered birds, so on these years the crowds left in the darkness, the sand gray and the boardwalk dark.

\* \* \*

Nell's roommates met her parents, not for the first time but one of the times, in the living room of their Nantucket home. They were having cocktail hour – drinks, goat cheese and blue fish pâté spreads, small bowls of green and purple olives – which was an institution in the Schwed household.

“What can I get you all to drink?” Denise asked, and they had all looked at her, hesitating. “Well, come on. We have beer, wine, dark and stormies, vodka tonic, gin and tonic, Tom Collins...” Her voice trailed off, but they knew she could keep going, keep mixing drinks in her mind.

“Bob, be the bartender,” she said, and he would go to the kitchen, stand at the black-gray countertops and mix. Tess, Ben, and Nell had dark and stormies. Nell helped her father in the kitchen. She sliced thick pieces of lime and pinched them into three warped glasses. Her father poured brown rum into the bottoms. They added extra ice.

Elizabeth and Julia had gin and tonics, the liquid clear, sparkling. They sat and drank and smiled. They picked at the cheeses and spreads and meats, their fingers greasy and covered in salt.

“Please, help yourself,” her parents said, noticing the five empty glasses, the slowly reddening faces.

Tess talked about birth control and teaching Catholic schoolgirls sex ed. She said that their church – St. Boniface in Brooklyn, where Tess had gone and Nell had gone, and their families still went – was making an effort to provide their neighboring Catholic schools with the proper equipment.

“I mean, really, our church is pretty liberal. Condoms in the classroom and all that,” Tess had said, on her third drink.

Ben asked about the olives and how they were so sour and sweet and seemed to melt in his mouth. “Olives taste like dirt,” Nell said and Denise looked at her, laughing a little, “Yes, we know. You and your brother too.”

Elizabeth talked about abortion and escorting women into a clinic in Connecticut. She told Denise and Bob how when she and Nell were freshmen, they had stood outside the clinic, waiting for women to escort – coming off the bus, walking from around the corner – and how to distract themselves from the protestors and fake dead baby signs, they talked about food. “That’s when I learned how much Nell loved pulled pork,” Elizabeth said, “outside the parking lot of an abortion clinic.”

Nell had told her parents about the escorting and her mother had said: “Don’t put that on your resume. You don’t know people’s politics.” So her one-time service, her arm looped through a stranger’s, the early morning cold on her skin (she hadn’t worn enough layers), the walk along the sidewalk and through the parking lot to the white

door of the clinic, would be omitted. She never told her parents how it felt to be asked what her mother might think of her being there, to be told that she was going to hell, to have fragmented pictures of baby shoved in her face. When she started having sex, she researched the nearest abortion clinics, the prices, the procedure she could expect based on how many weeks she had missed her period. She did not tell her parents about these numbers: the total mileage, the price of gas, the hundreds to thousands for a pill or a vacuum aspiration. She had asked her boyfriend: “Would you want to know?” But she kept the other things to herself. She stayed quiet in the Nantucket living room, her mind spinning over the numbers again and Nate’s face frowning: “Of course I’d want to know.”

Julia couldn’t stop talking about the arctic char after dinner. “It was so pink! Almost fluffy!” She continued: “And the wine, oh my god. It was perfect. It was magical.” They had left dinner shining and tipsy and went to a bar in town, on the south wharf, so they could watch the fishing boats and the yachts bob in their holdings.

They ordered more drinks and sat at a rounded table.

“You eat like that all the time?” they asked her. And she didn’t know how to explain the ways she had been raised: cocktail hour at six, dinner at eight, and dessert at ten. Their mother always asked for an extra spoon and their father always had black coffee.

The next afternoon they stood along the beach, their feet sinking into the sand, toes freezing in the waves. “On three, let’s go.” And they braced themselves, ran screaming into the cold and salt and spray. They dove under, and for those few seconds of eyes closed-not breathing-water-on-all-sides, they were somewhere else entirely.

# In the loud and the quiet spaces

*“They are the we of me.” – Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding**

*“That was when I learned that words are no good; that words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at.” - William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying**



## Time

The sheet was light purple and too large for their small pocket of grass, but they crowded to the corner, her head on his stomach, moving up and down with his every intake. It was warm and the sun still high even at six o'clock. Summer, or just the beginning of it. They were reading, so not talking, but every couple of minutes they would entwine their fingers, or he would press his palm to her forehead, or she would fling her arm across his abdomen and pick at the edge of his shorts. She looked up at him and their eyes met. He smiled at her and said, "What?"

They had brought a picnic to the park: a blue plastic cooler of sandwiches and glass bottles of Coke.

"I used to collect these," he said, turning the bottle in his hands, holding it up to the sun, the brown liquid turning amber.

"Your room is covered with them."

"Oh right," he said, eyes crinkled and blue and forgetful. He loved her, but couldn't form the words yet.

Her mother, Denise, had said he was marriage material, after she had asked him to install the air conditioner on the third floor. Denise had held his belt loops as he balanced the metal box on three wooden slats. "I can't have you falling out of the window," she had said.

"Do you remember meeting me?" she asked, popping the top to her bottle, the liquid fizzing onto the grass. Later her hand would be sticky with the sweet-dried droplets.

"No," he said, "we didn't talk much."

“I asked you to find my water bottle,” she said and then took a sip. She looked across the field and counted the kites in the sky, the children running, the other couples. The soda sunk into her teeth, stinging.

He folded his book over, the brown pages creased against the purple sheet, and reached for her hand. “With the pelican.”

And they sat, silent lovers in the park, the summer closing in, time knotting between their palms.

## Corkboard

The green minivan sliced across the ash, a breach in its hull, a ship pulled to its religious port: St. Boniface on Willoughby, near the Fulton Mall where girls bought gold hoops and romance novels on the tables outside. The sky was gray and she held a kerchief to her mouth. “They’ve ruined my birthday.”

There were hands reaching on the other side of the East River to grasp and to join together over the empty space and the orange-red embers. She will remember crackling saltines and the gray sky and in the before, looking up and up, head tilted, to see the Twin Tops as they drove down the highway. She will wonder about her signature on the corkboard, left when they reached the top of the South Tower, and how her mother had given her a black pen to press her name to the wall. Soot and burned papers and the tendrils of old faxes had floated across the river and into their backyard. The paper smelled like charcoal and plaster. She wondered which backyard her corkboard signature had flown to. Whose hands were holding her name now?

## Quiets, Louds

I am a Quiet, though I started off as a Loud – Yellin’ Ellen, they said, the loudest newborn in the nursery, tightly wrapped in a pink blanket, little baby beanie on my head, mouth open and screaming.

I do not know when exactly I became a Quiet. I don’t talk that much and when people ask why, why don’t you raise your hand, why can’t you contribute, why are you so awkward – I burn, blushing fiercely, because I don’t have the words. I think too many things, mind whirlpool spinning, and I don’t know how to share what’s running, flying through my brain. My family has divided us into two groups: Quiet or Loud, introvert or extrovert, in or out. My father and I are the Quiets, while my siblings and our mother are the Louds. The Louds gesticulate with their hands, they tell long, rambling stories, and only take pictures with their mouths open. The Quiets speak with their eyes, scrunch their noses in thought, and only share pieces of themselves in little nuggets, deliberate and perfectly formed. The Quiets sit patient, legs crossed, one foot swaying while the Louds bounce their knees and rapidly blink their eyes.

When I finished my first year of college, my family told me I had become sassy. It all started with Frank. My friends call me Frank because they say I get frank when I’ve been drinking, and that I say things, do things that would probably be better left unsaid and undone. It reminds me of my mother’s Edge – the sharp comments, the looks – and I realize I am becoming her. I feel one thing at school, one thing at home, caught between two families and two kinds of living and too many ideas of who to be.

But when it’s raining in Connecticut, misty and damp along the green, mud-soaked grass, my second family and I drink tea in our living room and read novels. We

use a white-plastic electric kettle, fill it to the brim and wait till the water bubbles. We pile into each other, hovering and close, and read to one another from a black notebook in which we've all written tiny secret things to remember later, to read from while we finish our mugs of tea, our bottles of cider or beer, glasses of wine. And I can't explain it. I don't know how to write about my family and this family and have it all fit together. I am a Quiet, I am a Loud, I am this thing and that thing and so many other things they tell me I am.

I live with four Louds. In the privacy of her room, Tess dances quietly, looking at her body bending in the mirror (she asked to borrow mine; white frame, fingers printed across the glass). But when she comes out, I've forgotten the quick, sharp huffs of her breath and the beating of her feet against the tiled floor; she is only loud. She once told a boy eating a prosciutto sandwich to go fuck himself because he had kissed her with his mouth closed. Tess had walked away, the boy's mouth now open, and she did not look back, not even once, to remember his face. Julia's forehead wrinkles and her eyes squint almost-but-not quite shut when she's laughing or excited or smiling-happy. She untangles her curls of blonde with quick fingers and once used olive oil to treat her split-ends. She is loud in a bright red coat, biking or striding across campus, and surprised me once by flapping her arms, ca-cawing like a bird as we passed one another, and I nearly stumbled, shoes caught against the granite steps. Ben sings everywhere, but is loudest in the shower, his voice ricocheting off the walls, booming. He leaves the bathroom steam-filled and glides back to his room, still singing, mouth opened wide, the concert always ongoing. And Elizabeth, who taught me how to French braid and cries so easily in movies or while reading, is maybe the loudest of all: tumbling from speakers and

dancing on countertops and standing, vulnerable and pale, reading to us from an orange notebook, all the words that have run through her.

And if I am Quiet, then with them I can also be made Loud. Quiet in the way I curl into my bed, lumped into my covers, loud in the way my face moves, too elastic and stretched, quiet when I sleep, loud to touch, quiet to the core of my bones but loud skin, hot and burning. I exist in the in-between, in the loud and the quiet spaces, the gaps between the fence and the hits of a hammer against wood.

So I think of all of them – the five I was born into and the five that I found or that found me, however it happened – as a we, as an us, one family or two, into infinity until I can't count anymore, until I've forgotten the numbers and the words and whatever it means to be a we.

## They Drove South

They took the van at seven, when the ice still crackled on the ground and the telephone wires dipped a little too low and their breath came out in small gray clouds. They piled in and shivered, the engine still cool. They waited for the last of them to leave the house, the green house with the sagging porch and the peeling white pillars, and they pressed their arms closer to their sides, slipped hands into their armpits, trying to find the warmth. The last one shut the front door behind her and twisted the lock, her hands shaking and white with cold. "Hey!" she called, and they turned to look at her from the driveway and the waiting car, only the left side cracked partly open; they shivered.

They drove south and listened to Simon & Garfunkel and finally felt the heat on their skin, their faces, their lips. Tess wrapped herself in a cowboy blanket, crossed her legs, and turned to look at her. "So, tell us already." And Nell reddened, already embarrassed, though she hadn't even spoken. "We know you were still in bed," Tess added, and the others laughed. She glanced out the window at the Connecticut River and the morning light on the water and felt more than awake. She could not remember her last sunrise.

She and Nate were friends first. They met playing squash and they talked about his other girlfriends. She had always thought he was cute, the way he smiled, the dimples in his chin and cheeks. They had already kissed, had already been on a date to an Italian restaurant where she ordered *Cacio e Pepe* and had gotten pepper caught between her teeth. Last night they had slept holding each other, their arms pins-needles and tingling, and in the morning he had left through the back door, walking across campus to his house and his empty, colder bed.

She wanted to tell them about him and his crinkled smile and the way he said her name and she said his, as their bodies met and pressed, in the darkness and warmth of her room, how he touched her forehead and kissed her neck, how she only had to think about it and him and touching for her body to wake up. But she couldn't say how it happened, how for one instant he was just the way he was and she was just who she was. So she only said: "It was...I mean – just, finally." And they let her keep those secrets. The words she didn't have yet, hadn't learned or would never learn, abstracted, impossible things. They drove on.

In Pennsylvania the trees changed into stretched, scraggled poplars, and she thought of Elizabeth Dalloway, the poplar tree, and said – "Reading Mrs. Dalloway on the train was something else." And she could say things like that and have them understand, because they too had read Virginia Woolf on the train, had spilled coffee and tea and drool on their crumpled book pages, and had had to leave the books, folded, over the heat of a radiator to dry. They stopped at a Waffle House for lunch. Their waiter smiled, brought large cups of water and eggs that were perfectly fried. They ate quickly and asked for paper hats on their way out. They asked a stranger for a favor in the parking lot of the surrounding strip mall: handed him the camera and gathered together, mouths open and smiling, arms stretched wide, waiting for the wind-up, the snap-click of the plastic. They waited to be caught on film, just as they were, laughing, arms linked, and close.

There were five of them, altogether, crowded in the mini-van, a light blue metal box with a broken right door, and brown paper bags of chips and chocolate kisses and still frozen, hardened Peeps on the floor. Someone would tell her, later, "You're kind of



like a family,” and she would nod, smile, “Yes.” But it wouldn’t really set in until after, when it was ending, slowly, that they were more than a kind of.

\* \* \*

On the first day of freshman year, she met Elizabeth in their shared double room. She was wearing a yellow bra and had tied her hair back in a bun; two or three tendrils of dark brown, loose ringlets of trapped humidity, framed her face. The fan rotated, clipping the edge of the desk and Nell counted the clicks before she spoke. “What’s up?” Elizabeth turned, smiled, and said, “It’s just so hot.”

Later that night Nell sat on the floor and folded her laundry and they talked. She wouldn’t remember what they said to one another in the comfort of their room in West College, a stretched brown-bricked building with a reputation for being the naked dorm and hallways that smelled perpetually of smoke, but something solidified as she sat on the floor, in the space between their doorways, and folded shirts and pants. She had been nervous, but while she sat there with Elizabeth, still in her yellow bra, with the fan twisting, the windows open and the night coming on outside, she felt herself settle.

At the green house, The Pearl, in their third year at school, Elizabeth stood in front of them all, shirtless again. It was late and she was reading her poetry from an orange notebook: “To the water, to the water.” She read again, her voice clear and rising in the living room with only one light on. The darkness outside enveloped them and they rested on the couch, looped through each other’s arms, listening and thinking only of water and waves on their toes.

“You’re the person I’ve lived with most,” she said to Elizabeth as they lay in her bed, months into their last year of school. Their hair was spread across the pillows, blended dark and light, and they pulled the sheets closer. It was late in the evening and

the apartment was quiet. The blue lights from the kitchen reflected from under the closed door, and Nell thought about the blueness of their living room, the spread of light and dark, the way she would later wander to the bathroom and pause in front of the window, watch the snow fall.

“Not family,” Elizabeth said, “the most who’s not family.”

“I guess,” Nell said, closing her eyes. And they kept talking, but holding onto the words wasn’t easy and she couldn’t help but let them go. When she woke up the room was dark and Elizabeth was gone. She listened for the snores, the intakes and outtakes of the other sleepers in the apartment. She stared up at the ceiling, counting the slopes of the shadows, and tried to return to her dream.

\* \* \*

They stopped for dinner in Staunton, Virginia at a place called Mrs. Rowe’s. They pulled in across the street and looked at the white building, a family restaurant, and they tried to imagine the sweet-kind Mrs. Rowe and her homemade pies. They ate pork chops and creamed tomatoes and spoonbread. They watched the other diners, older couples and groups, and imagined their lives outside the restaurant. The five of them were the youngest in the room by at least twenty years.

Tess laughed so hard and long that tears streamed down her face, pooled in the dips under her eyes; she gulped and coughed and tried to hide under her napkin. They all laughed until they choked on their spoonbread, which was served in a yellow pile on a white plate. It was savory and delicious. They licked their plates clean and the waitress smiled when she cleared the table, “Y’all were hungry I guess.”

The sun had begun to set by the time they started to drive again. The headlights cut across the highway and they watched the trees thicken on both sides of the road.

Nell fell asleep in the backseat, listening to their voices and the music and the thump of the back wheels on the pavement. They talked about what it feels like to cry, how your throat constricts and contracts, how your voice comes out in spurts of choking breath and waves of wetness. Julia started to feel her throat close and then Elizabeth and then Tess, but Nell was asleep and Ben was driving, so her eyes stayed closed and his eyes stayed clear.

When she woke up, the windows were foggy and the sky even darker. The moon was out, the sun gone, and she looked down the length of the van. She saw a flash of pale skin, the smooth crossover of thighs, and asked, “Are you all naked?”

She took off her shirt, pants, bra, underwear, to match them. She looked down at her self and the paleness of her thighs and crossed her legs. She watched the road pass through the windshield.

They sped down the highway, bare flesh on leather, sticky against their skin. They pulled over to the side of road, over the crest of a small hill, through to a deserted rest stop. They ran from the car, limbs stretching, skin cold and clean against the night air. They ran naked to the edge of the woods and hid behind the trees; they watched a few cars pass, speeding red-white lights into the distance.

“Virginia is beautiful,” she said, crossing her arms against her chest. Her back pressed to the rough bark of the tree and she was reminded of being held in a room with stale air, a room surrounded on all sides with dirt, hard packed and cold. She pressed deeper into herself to try and remember fully the beautiful summer day with rocks that fell from the sky onto the green-green lawn.

They sprinted back to the car, their lungs filling with air in gulps and stop-starts. They counted four honks, their bodies exposed to the highway and passing drivers,

strangers they would never see again, before they had settled back into their seats and their clothes and the still night in the van. They drove further south.

\* \* \*

Tess's hair always smelled a little like incense, or like a crumpled, sweet, slept-on pillowcase. She was tall, lithe, stretched. She moved her body in arcs and sways, her hands twisting, rounded as she danced. She said, often, "I have ugly feet." And the five of them would look at her toes, the way they layered over, the fine nails and the one extra, protruding bone in her ankle, and could never see what she was talking about.

Nell met Tess in Sunday school, but they wouldn't be close until the first year of college, when they sat on the floor of the library and puzzled over probability and stacks of playing cards. In the pale light of the Sunday school room, Tess had held a large green pencil to her nose, scratched her writing across their worksheet – name the apostles, list the sacraments, put these stations of the cross in order – while Nell couldn't remember which came first, His meeting with Mary or the wiping of His face. She had sighed and squinted at her classmate's paper. She ruffled her own sheet and had slid her face to the table, rested on her arms. She watched Tess raise her hand and say, "I'm finished, Mrs." And Nell sighed again. In her head Tess would always be Mary, like the Virgin, because she was smart and had all the answers and long blonde hair braided down her back. We could be friends, Nell had thought, but we don't see each other outside of church. I'm here and she's there.

Later, when they were older, away from the gray stone steps and the oil on their foreheads (greasy, shining), Nell would want to tell her, I always thought of you in the way you raised your hand and how your eyes tilted a little to the ceiling, your voice older than your body, dusty and sun-streaked like the curtains. But she couldn't think of the

right words, as they sat on the floor of the library, and Tess said, “So you throw the cards into the air and what’s the probability that...?” She trailed off and Nell let her mind wander further into the dim, darkly lit windows of the library.

\* \* \*

Nell directed them in circles through Asheville, North Carolina. They passed through three times before they finally pulled over, frustrated, snapping at each other, the map spread across the hood of the van, rustling in the breeze. Elizabeth highlighted their route with a pink pen, cutting across the yellow-green expanse of printed country. Nell and Ben sat in the car while the others smoked cigarettes by the side of the road. The three girls crossed their arms, balanced the lights between their teeth and lips, and blew the smoke into the air, ash and tar disappearing into the wide expanse of blue.

Nell and Ben kept the doors open, put their feet up on the dash, and leaned back into the deep leather of their seats.

“I’m not the best at this,” she said, watching the three of them, the line from mouth to hip to thigh, the tap-tap of ash to the pavement. The three of them moved in snippets, quick flashes of fingers, curled mouths. They were sick of seeing signs for Asheville, NC. She thought of her sister and the color yellow. She once snuck a cigarette from her sister’s coat pocket and coughed on their stoop, spit-hacking, until someone called down to her. She remembered colored clove cigarettes in her backyard, sitting on the black metal grate, letting her high school self be someone else for one night. She would never smoke again.

“I could never smoke,” Ben said, as if he had heard her thoughts.

“Once and I didn’t like,” she said, and they watched the other three. Elizabeth was wearing jean cut-offs and a loose white top, red-blue flag stitched across her chest:

sun too bright, windblown, Marlboro Reds, she laughed back at them, “Ain’t that America!” Nell wanted to take a picture, wind the plastic and capture them on film, but she didn’t move, she watched them until they came back to the car, eyes wide and glistening, and said, “Good bye Carolina.” They rolled the windows down, turned the radio up and let their hands hang out. The air buffeted through the van, shaking the metal siding, and they yelled out into the highway, their voices rising.

\* \* \*

Julia told her: “I hope you’re ready, America’s Next Top Model.” And Nell pulled at the blue velvet on her thighs, the fabric tight against her chest and shoulders. Her arms dangled, fingertips grazing the thick blue, and she looked into Julia’s mirror. It was a dress they had all worn and pulled from their bodies in arcs, smooth against their skin and curves, and then left on a morning-after floor, a pile of dense blue. Julia had found the dress in the bargain bin of a thrift store in the Fulton Mall. They called it the sex dress and traded it between themselves for nights out. They believed it was lucky.

Nell wore it to Tess’s 21<sup>st</sup> and kissed Nate for the first time. He had pulled her close, running his fingers along the hem. “This is so soft.” And she had looked down, watching his fingers move across the blue expanse of fabric. Yes, she thought, and I hope you’re not bad at this. She would always remember how Julia’s face had lit up at the sight of them, “canoodling,” upstairs.

Julia had hung a sheet behind her bed, pulled the blinds down, and set up a light on a tripod. She was twisting it into place when Nell walked in. Julia smiled at her, lips and cheeks always pink, her nose unlike any nose Nell had ever seen. Julia told them, once, that a girl in middle school said that her nose looked like a hammerhead shark and

it had been the meanest thing anyone had ever said to her. “Your nose is elegant,” they had told her, “That girl’s blind.”

“I’m not sure I’ll be good,” Nell said, sitting on the edge of the bed, hands nervous, sweaty. They hadn’t spent much time alone together and the room felt different with only two bodies: cold tiled floor and damp sheets and the empty blue couch. She could still see the imprints of their friends, arms and legs pressed into the cushions. She pushed her hair back, picked at her split ends and counted two clicks before she looked up. “Just checking the light,” Julia said. And Nell nodded, glanced out the window, and thought how the others might have looked in Julia’s camera: how Elizabeth smiled, her eyes downcast (her bedroom look they told her) and how Tess laughed, open and wide, Ben with his shoulders back, eyebrows and lips heavy, serious until he started talking.

“We’ll talk and I’ll take them,” Julia said, moving in front of her, eye pressed to the camera so that her face was a quarter metal, plastic, and lens. They watched each other through the looking glass; she felt larger. She wondered what they’d say to each other, what would be asked. They were friends, but there was still a little bit of space, a break of lines between them.

“Tell me about the break-up,” Julia said, and Nell scrunched her nose and lips, they called it her thinking face; too many of them had said, “You make this face,” and they’d move their noses, lips, eyes squinting. She started to talk and Julia took pictures. Her mouth moved, faster, faster, stomach burning, lips dry, and they both kept going, one talking, one taking.

“I never hated anyone before,” she said. Julia moved farther to her left, pushed the blinds a little higher. She paused.

“What would you say to him?” Julia asked, pulling the camera away from her face. Her cheeks and lips were still pink, still bright. Julia told her to yell, so she did. She yelled and felt less pressure on her chest. “Again.” And it went again. She felt it on her chest, the awkwardness of an empty room and cold tiles and the depressions in the blue couch. Her face burned, embarrassed. And Julia moved the camera back to her eye. She clicked through the film, wound and cranked. Her room became smaller and Nell filled the space, her eyes wild, face slack and long. Until Julia was out of film and they both went silent.

“I have another roll, if you feel like getting...” Julia said, trailing, and turned to her desk. More clicks and snaps. Nell knew she meant naked, like the other pictures she had taken. Elizabeth on a baseball field, dark hair hanging down, arms stretched above her head, smiling. Tess in the light, a glass of water at her lips, her eyes focused on something farther away. She slipped the dress over her head, unclasped her bra, kept her underwear on, but closed her eyes for a minute, and Julia turned back to her, raised the camera and finished the last roll. The clicks slowed but somehow the outside world went on, the light disappearing, the people walking. In Julia’s room, in the dying light of one day in the second year of school, the world went a little slower. “That’s it, I’m finished,” she said.

Later that week, Nell was walking back to her room, when she saw the picture tacked to the top of her door. She paused in front of it, looked at her face, eyes, body. One eye larger than the other and chin tilted in the light, the creases of the blue dress along her curves. I have never looked like this, she thought, and left the picture to hang, so that others might see.

\* \* \*



They reached New Orleans at two-thirty in the morning. It was humid, dark, too tropical for what they had imagined. Elizabeth was curled into her seat, pale and spent, almost dead. Ben was driving still, hands shaking; his eyes slowly blinking. Tess clutched her stomach, moaned, and asked them to open the windows more: "I think I'm going to puke." And Nell looked for a plastic bag in the back seat. She was awake now and sweaty. Julia was in the front passenger seat, navigating for Ben, the map in front of her, saying: "It should be here, maybe on the left. Wait, I think we passed it." They went around the block three times before they found it.

It was purple and too large and barely had any furniture. They wandered through its twisted hallways and opened all the doors. A layer of dust and black grit coated the glassware and countertops and wooden panels of the cabinet and its sideboard.

They went to bed and fell asleep quickly.

\* \* \*

"I wish that I could make myself feel differently," he said, and Nell nodded. "How do I fix myself?" He picked up their glasses and refilled them at the tap, ice clinking, and settled them back on the table. He stood for a moment and she didn't say a word, she let him think. Ben was tall, so he hunched a little, his shoulders more rounded than straight. He always looked handsome, lashes long and jeans neatly pressed. He sat down again, but lay his head on the table, cradled in his own arms, and sighed. He started drumming his fingers and then sat up, picking at his skin; the side of his right thumb had bled a little, hardened to brown.

"You'll feel better," she said and sipped from her glass. The kitchen was the only cold room in the house. Its glass door looked out into the brick backyard, where squirrels and raccoons gathered, gnawing on berries or the occasional bagel retrieved

from the neighboring alleyway. Ben picked at his sandwich – turkey, avocado, sliced tomato, salt, pepper – the one he had made, flying around her kitchen, somehow knowing what each drawer held, where he could find the fancy mustard, the olive tapenade. At school he led each meal they made, stirring and frying, flipping the pan. He had made the best roast chicken for one of their last dinners, the meat soft, almost sweet.

“How did you do it?” he asked her, again. And she took a minute before she spoke. She told him about one morning, after it had happened, when she woke up earlier than her alarm. She heard a noise from the corner and, still half asleep, thought maybe it was just him, moving. She had forgotten, for those few seconds, that her room was empty and she was alone. For those seconds she didn’t feel it, but when she opened her eyes, the blinds still drawn, Tess moving in the other room, it came back, that dull ache. She stared up at the ceiling, counting the pockmarks in the insulation, and thought about that April afternoon when they had held each other, closed their eyes, and pretended her bed was a beach and the rustling sheets the waves. And when she was fully awake, she remembered those other things between them, and she resolved, in the early morning of her second year, to be different.

Ben looked at her, his eyebrows wrinkled. “That’s awful.” She laughed a little – “But then it’s over.” And Ben thrummed his fingers louder, hummed under his breath. He started to tell her about his own mornings, waking up in an empty bed, arms loose and warm. How the light in his summer apartment always caught the corner of his bedroom mirror, reflected along the walls, the shapes almost like children’s shadow puppets: a rabbit, a frog, a turkey. He watched them change, until he couldn’t separate the shadows from the walls from the light.

They sat in the kitchen and he kept talking. He kept talking until his voice was almost gone and she sat there, listening.

\* \* \*

They drank and they ate, felt their stomachs stretch and fill. They walked through quarters, down streetcar tracks, across a cemetery. They drove down the highway and saw the rounded dome. They passed wards and broken houses and pressed their bodies to the walls of jazz clubs. Their clothes were soaked in sweat and smoke, gray tendrils sunken into their skin and hair. They felt the cool dampness of their own bodies. They dreamed of doing their laundry.

They stayed five days and when they left the city behind them, it was morning, clear and bright. She picked up the last camera and turned its plastic lens to the purple house. She caught Julia and Tess carrying their suitcases down the steps, stuck mid-frame with almost smiles and hair hanging loose. The house filled the lens, large and sun-spotted and quiet. They looked too small beside it.

They started north again, left the tropical and the humidity behind, following the pink route homeward. They stopped in Alabama for pulled pork and flat sodas. They sat at a picnic table, sweating in the damp heat, and wished the air conditioning worked in the van. They passed through Virginia a second time, the hills purple and green and glowing in the afternoon light. They played games and sang along with the radio. In other moments they were quiet, watching the scenery change back to what they knew.

In New Jersey they scrambled to pay each toll, collecting wrinkled bills and small piles of change from their pockets, the cushions, the floor. The van was littered with paper and clothing and the one cowboy blanket. They had greasy hair and faces and couldn't wait to escape the stale air.

Their road trip ended on Canal, in tangles of people and cardboard signs and cold, cold air. They left her at Bergen and she rode the train a few more stops. It pulled out of the tunnel and into the afternoon. Nell could see across to the Manhattan skyline: the glass and concrete, or, if she turned her head, the green lady, arm raised, rippled sheet draped across her body. The train crawled along Smith and then 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, before dipping back into the tunnel's depths, until it was dark again. Metal clicked against metal, the vibration, the stiling push-pull of slow, gentle rocking; the train kept going.

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In May they would graduate, walk along marble steps, raise their arms, red robes swishing at their sides. But they weren't there yet. It was still early and they still had time and they tried not to think about it, because it was already almost gone.

"Let's move to New Orleans, or Austin, or Portland," they would say, or, "Let's just travel for a year, to wherever." And they'd all agree to think about it. Their plans took on heat, as they crowded around one another, piling on the floor or the couch or one of their beds. They stayed close. They tried not to hurry, but time moved too fast, they were always reaching, hands sore, tired from grasping.

One night, before it was over, they sat in their living room, circled and close and talking. And Nell asked them would it be okay if she used their real names for her writing. "God, yes. The names you picked were awful," and "They couldn't have been worse."

So she sat down and she started to write them. How they met, how they learned each other, how easy it was. The way they could sit in a room and run away with a joke, a routine, an impression. "Who else could handle this?" they asked, and they could think of no other.