

Winter 12-2015

An Un-linked Collection of Short Stories

Michael Brelsford

Sarah Lawrence College, mbrelsford@gm.sl.c.edu

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Thesis

An Un-linked Collection of Short Stories

Michael Brelsford

“Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Fine Arts degree at Sarah Lawrence College, December 2015”

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“Best Friend”

After paying for her dinner and her six drinks, we were behind my house, peeing in front of the galaxy. A clear night.

“You pee really loud,” she observed.

“You know what they say about guys who pee really loud.”

She slurred one laugh, like when the brush slips and you streak vermilion outside the line.

“Remember the last time we peed together?” I said, zipping.

“Wait, I’m not done,” she said.

“Do you remember?” I snuck a look. She held her crumpled jeans in one hand, her feet flat and apart, the moon blueing her ass, her pee barely audibly landing on the fallen leaves, as if it was coming from an almost rusted shut watering can. She went at the dive, so this was for the thrill. Hard to tell in this light, but her long hair is the color of bright rust.

The moon was an alabaster screen on which she replayed even a second, which drove me off a beautiful cliff. “Of course I remember. We had sex after.” She proffered another laugh up to those three most often personified craters.

“We did, didn't we.”

“I love having sex,” she said. “But at least that was before he was my boyfriend.”

“And now is after,” I pontificated. Now he was teaching on an island, as far as you can get from JFK before you start getting closer. Saving the world, smugly too good for her, objectively too good for me.

“He didn't even wish me happy birthday this year, not even an email,” she had said before I had insisted on the tab. “Friends wish happy birthday.”

She was pensively zipping now, mumbling, “I can’t tell who you’re least loyal to, me or him.”

“Let’s go inside,” I said.

After the back door creaked open, she said, “You were the only one he forbid by name.”

Then we were in my bed, and I could smell every part of her. “I know. I know, I know. It’s silly and crazy. We’re done, we’re finished. I have to act like it. He can’t control me from ten thousand miles away.”

“Good.” I was high on the fresh smell of latex. Then how it tightly unravels with the sound of smacking wet lips.

“But he can. He is. I’m so. I can’t.”

“But I just paid for dinner.”

The transparency was funny to her, thank God. I hate when I whine, and I know it in advance, but I sometimes can’t help it, not this tantalized. Her white flag laugh was like when you actually win the fucking lottery. “You did just pay for dinner.”

Outside the cold window, after, I was reminded that sometimes even the shadowy tops of naked branches can make me emotional. And the moon was exposed with the light that was also falling on Micronesia.

“Lunch on Northern Boulevard”

Pop wouldn't give Danny money for McDonald's. Pop, what a righteous man, better than everyone 'cause he has a job, even if it's wiping the city's ass with his garbage truck. White crew cut with pink skin and always so tough 'cause he lived first and lives to tell about living. Said something again about being a grown man and something about using it for drugs. Little did he know. But then Pop offered, with unusual and maddening softness, “Go get a haircut. I'll go with you and treat. I'll take you to McDonald's after.” He wanted neither judgement nor tenderness, just the silent exchange of five bucks. He didn't need a haircut, god fucking dammit. It was his February shag. So to hell with him—Danny had then gone for a walk with a sheet of looseleaf and a Sharpie. First, at the little desk with the imprisoned pens, he wrote the sign: GIVE ME ALL THE MONEY. Then he gave the sign to the ugliest girl teller who trembled out at least enough for McDonald's. He didn't count, but there was plenty. He could buy McDonald's for a long time. He could buy more than McDonald's—ha, ha. But what he really wanted was to see Pop in court and say, “See? I just wanted lunch.”

Now here he is in McDonald's, across the street from the Citi, eating a Big Mac and fries. The cops are swarming! They brought the S.W.A.T. team and the dogs and the F.B.I. All of McDonald's is watching, all excited. He is their everything, from warrior to jester. He sees his February reflection with the flashing lights in the glass as he takes another bite of the Big Mac. He licks his salty fingers. Then he sees the ugly little teller in the blue vestibule of the Citi, pointing at McDonald's for all the neckless feds. Danny stands up straight, still chewing. Not every patron notices his presence getting so big until he yells, “Come get me, you pigs!” But

they were running at him even before his voice hummed back off the thick smudgy McDonald's window.

“Murph”

Murph had been trained not to jump, but sometimes he couldn't help it because he loved Susan so much. He was a golden retriever, weighing two thirds of Susan. “Down,” she said, firmly. He got down, tail sweeping the immaculate gray plank floor.

They had decided Murph would be their child, at least until George made partner at the accounting firm in twelve to twenty-four months. Then they would revisit the conversation. Murph had been their child for the last five years, half their marriage.

Susan closed the front door of their new white colonial and took off her shoes. The floors were coated in soft beeswax, but even in the townhouse she had maintained a no-shoe rule. Susan and George had moved a month ago from a townhouse that was also in Westport. Susan had talked the colonial's last owner down from one point six million to one point four. Once she had gotten out of school back on that spring day, she called George at his Times Square office and he said, “Do you want it?” and she suddenly couldn't answer. She said, “Do you think we need it?” “Susan,” he said, impatiently. “Jesus Christ. Do you want it? I don't have time. It's a good deal. If you want it, take it. Do you want it?” “I don't know. Do we need it?” “Jesus Christ. Do. You. Want. It?” “Yes, very much.” “Buy the house, then. I have to go.”

Now, in the early twilight of late October, she scratched Murph's ears. Bending to hug him tight, she said, “Oh, I love you. Yes, I do. Who's my crazy boy?” Murph insisted he was her crazy boy. “Where's Daddy? Where is he? Is he coming home in a while? Do you love Daddy? He's makin' the bacon. Yes he is, yes he is. Oh, I love you. You are my baby. Yes, yes, yes. Thank you for the kisses. Thank you, my baby.”

A wedding portrait hung on the wall. They were both still blonde, though George didn't have to die his hair. The wedding was four years after college. She was now thirty-six.

George worked late, even when he left early. After three o'clock, Susan's grading and planning could be done from home. Usually, she began her grading and planning around four o'clock, after making a pot of coffee. George would drink what she didn't. Today she spread her papers, files, grade book, and twenty-five stiffened watercolor paintings out on the coffee table in the living room. She sat on the big couch from the townhouse. She and Misses Habansky were preparing the two third grades for a trip to the zoo. The watercolors were of twenty-five favorite animals, and there must have been twenty dog portraits.

Most of the rooms still needed painting, and they were waiting on the rest of the furniture she had ordered. George did not allow Murph on the couch, so he took a place on the rug, laying his head across her feet. Her grading and planning took an hour today. Then she hung khaki curtains in the kitchen, which had been painted white. Then she put the butternut squash soup on the burner. She had made it yesterday and let it sit overnight. After slicing the bread, she looked out one of the kitchen windows at the falling leaves. It was windy. The house was surrounded by them. They had five acres, and she didn't know how many trees. That's something one of her third graders would take the time to find out. She pictured T.J. or Meggie or Jessica roaming her property, counting trees importantly. She poured more coffee. It warmed her belly and her mind. Her students were always prepared for the fourth grade, and they were always sad to leave her. Every June, she was also sad. She reminded herself not to rush October.

George's train left Grand Central at seven, and he arrived in Westport at eight-ten. He walked the half-mile to the house. The door could be heard. "Who's home? Who's that? Who's

here?” Susan considered the beeswax, but kept on. “Is that Daddy? Is Daddy home? Where is he? Where is he? Yes, go crazy. Go nuts. You love Daddy. Is he here for you?”

Murph scratched to a stop in front of George, leaning back on his haunches, bouncing his front paws up and down, fighting himself. With George, he won against his instincts.

“Say, Hi Daddy. We’re glad you’re home. I’m a bored puppy all day, yes I am, yes I am.”

George put his backpack in the closet and, facing it still, removed his black suit jacket.

“How was work, Daddy? Lots of numbers? Lazy new kids?” Murph fell at George’s feet and rolled onto his back. “Oh, scratch my belly. I’m such a bored puppy all day.”

As George turned around, he stepped on Murph’s tail and Murph let out a cry that was half whimper, half growl. Susan’s heart sank. “Jesus Christ. Don’t fucking growl at me.” George looked at Susan. “He fucking growled at me.” Murph pranced around in an anxious half-circle, amping himself up again with love, returning to George. “You’re always under my feet. Jesus.” George did not pet him, so Murph went to Susan. George, taking off his shoes, noticed Susan had begun to cry. “Now what’s wrong with *you*?”

She wiped her cheeks. Standing there in his navy socks, George put his hands on his hips, taking in the still unfamiliar space. She wiped one cheek once more. “I made soup. Are you hungry?”

“Yeah.” He looked at Murph, who was seated between them, guessing at George’s next move. George, almost warmly, said, “What?” Murph cocked his head. “Are you a bored puppy all day?”

Hope filled Susan.

But George said, “Me too.” He headed for the kitchen, unknitting his tie.

“f”

College on the horizon, and this is how everyone is getting to know roommates and classmates and, well, mates.

My whole family, except my parents, has beaten me to Social Media.

Even my little brother and sister. Ninth and eighth grade, respectively.

f

Welcome. It will always be free. Find your friends. They like,
it explains. You like them and they like you.

Well, naturally.

Take a picture. I figure this out before I figure it out, suddenly seeing my smooth cheeks and elongated face and unprepared eyes, and I smile just in time for the screen to go white and come back with my surprised smile, like a comet of teeth headed for earth, dragging my nose and brown eyes and brown hair in its wake. Facebook asks, Do you like it?

A melody comes to mind. Chingedy-ching, hee-haw, hee-haw, it's Dominic the Donkey. I click “re-take,” and put my white Macbook on my desk to get a better angle.

Find your friends.

I type in a few names.

Alyssa (sister), Dan (brother), Cousin Susan, Cousin Lori, Cousin Richard.

Facebook suggests sending them a message too. My message: Finally, I'm cool.

They lol back. My brother's lol: lolololol LOLOLOLOL LMAO ROFL

Michael, where do you live?

Stratford, CT

Single/Married/Divorced?

Single

Interested in?

Women

What's your religion?

I start to put Roman Catholic. That's not entirely honest, so I go with Spiritual but not Religious.

Except I bet everyone puts that, so I go with

Religious but not Spiritual

Where do you work?

AAA

What do you do there?

Summer help

When did you start?

Last summer, 2006

Do you still work there?

Yes

Where else have you worked?

Baskin' Robbins

When did you start?

2005

Do you still work there?

No

When did you leave?

2006

Where do you go to school?

University of Connecticut

What's your major?

Undeclared

When did you start?

In two months. Actually, one and a half

Where did you go to high school?

Fairfield Prep

Is this Fairfield College Preparatory School?

Wow, yes

Tell us more. What are your favorite books?

Catcher in the Rye, The Great Gatsby, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

What are your favorite TV shows?

1

What's this?

Alyssa accepted your friend request.

My favorite TV shows...

24, Lost, The Office

1

Dan accepted your friend request.

What are your favorite movies?

2

Alyssa likes your profile picture.

Susan accepted your friend request.

1

Susan likes your profile picture.

Michael, what are your favorite movies?

Hook, Pirates of the Caribbean, Home Alone

3

Susan commented on your profile picture: welcome to the club

Lori accepted your friend request.

Richard accepted your friend request.

1

Lori commented on your profile picture: exact replica of Uncle Don

1

Dan commented on your profile picture: gay

Dan is in the next room so I say, Don't say gay to mean something negative, but what's quote-unquote gay about it?

He says, You look too happy.

Kids these days. What's wrong with that?

He says, If you don't know by now, I can't help you.

1

Steve sent you a friend request.

Accept.

He says, Yo!

I say, I caved

He says, haha

Steve Cedeño

18 years old

Lives in Stratford, CT

Steward at Pootatuck Yacht Club

Steve recently added University of California, Irvine to his education.

1

Find more friends.

Wait, I think. Before I do that, maybe I should adjust my joy.

Maybe a smile is problematic. No smiling without impetus.

Actors don't smile in head shots. Monarchs don't smile in portraits. Authors don't smile on their inside jackets.

I retake, not smiling, but not unhappy. Pensive.

It says: if you are my classmate, you will hear intelligent things; if you are my friend, I won't embarrass you in public; if we hook up, I won't be clingy.

1

Peter sent you a friend request.

Accept.

1

Find more friends.

O.K.

Wow, they're really all on here. In a few minutes, I've friended a big chunk of my high school class, and in a few minutes a bunch have accepted. In the last ten minutes, a bunch of them have already sent me requests. Already.

Already.

Brassy Pomp and Circumstance was already a month ago.

1

Peter tagged you in a picture.

South Dakota. There we are, the dozen of us with Father Ryan and Mr. Galligan, the alabaster Badlands at high noon falling off the edge of the world behind us.

1

Steve tagged you in four pictures.

The first, a black line divides what's actually two pictures. It's labeled, Before: Steve and me, in sun-scorched orange harnesses, both smiling uncertainly for his girlfriend, Amy, a big steel arch behind us. After: two siamese superman silhouettes, a hundred feet above Six Flags, the summer sun like a communion wafer slipping into the lavender dregs of the chalice

The second: me under the volleyball net, lying on my back in the sand, playing the guitar, managing to cross a leg. The game went on anyway, the foreground to Long Island on a clear day

The third: Pete and me on neighboring blocks like insects touching our toes, faint ripples reflecting on our bare chests, and synesthesia: gray and white mosaics echoing the crowd

The fourth: Pete and Steve and me, faces bleached and uninhabited, the embers of the bonfire breathe blue like a gas burner. I'm the only one that sees Amy is snapping a picture. Amy titled the picture, "The Three Musketeers lol Summer 2007"

1

Update your status!

Michael is...

...thinking Facebook is actually pretty cool.

1

Susan liked your status: "Michael is thinking Facebook is actually pretty cool."

1

Lori and Susan liked your status: "Michael is thinking Facebook is actually pretty cool."

4

Peter and 2 others liked your status: "Michael is thinking Facebook is actually..."

Richard commented on your profile picture: yup, uncle Don

Dan commented on your status: LOL

Susan commented on your status: watch out, it's addicting

1

Jennifer sent you a friend request.

Who's Jennifer?

She's cute. She has straight brown hair, and apparently girls are allowed to smile.

But what else?

18 years old

Lives in Philadelphia, PA

Spiritual but not Religious

Server at Bertucci's

Past: Hostess at Bertucci's

Favorite TV Shows: The Bachelorette, The Bachelor, Survivor, Lost

Favorite Movies: The Notebook, Mean Girls, Pirates of the Caribbean

Favorite Books: Harry Potter, Anything Nicholas Sparks, The Great Gatsby

Jennifer recently added University of Connecticut to her education. Undeclared

Single

Interested in: Men

1

Jennifer poked you.

“Footnotes”

I remember the smell of something that was moist its whole life. And there was a drip somewhere I never found, like that dream you keep having but can't totally remember. During the day the light would sneak in like I did, but at night it was dark, like are my eyes really open dark. And the EXIT signs were out, like leaving was not an option. The old marquis looked like it had been through a fire, though it had not. It still told you its name: The American Festival Theater. I called it Feste.

Feste, in the middle of the greens and empty parking lots, was my favorite place on earth. You could find me there after school or, yeah, instead of it. A ginormous baby blue place, I used to go inside through a busted window in the lobby that didn't look busted so no one fixed it. It smelled green, deciduous, shedding something every season. The seats had been torn out. A moldy cement floor sloped down to the wood stage where I sat, my feet dangling. From the back I might have looked like I was fishing off a dock, a jealous kid trying to catch history. Big names were there like Katherine Hepburn and Christopher Plummer, way back in the day when my parents went on field trips, without a clue that the other existed.

June of my senior year, I had lines to memorize. I sat on the edge of that stage with a flashlight. I'd act. I'd really get into it, shaking my arms at the gutted beast. I was Jonah in the whale. I was Plato in the cave. I was Gatsby with his green light.

There was a bum (he preferred vagabond) who also frequented the place. He said his name was Shakespeare and I thought, Why not. When I first met him—my freshman year of high school—we were outside Feste on a bench, facing Long Island Sound, and he was sitting at the end by the

statue labeled The Thinker. He was posing like the statue, in deep reverie, a hand beneath his long gray beard supporting his chin, another hand resting on the opposite crossed leg. He always had crud in that beard and on that black trench coat. And a twinkle in his eye. And very long, yellow finger nails. Every time I saw him, he asked me if I knew the difference between a bum and a vagabond. I said no because he liked to tell me over and over. He said the difference was pride. He had an old man voice, in need of some WD-40. At other places in town, I've seen mothers steer their kids away. Sometimes he spoke in circles or just to himself. He shared private things like nothing so one day toward the end of my senior year after he was, again, telling me his uncle used to touch him, I said my first blow job had been from another guy, earlier that spring. He said he didn't mind gay people at all. Like lightning I said I wasn't gay. We were both looking at the sparkling Sound, fixed on it. Then he started on about freight trains and I knew my secret was safe.

A group of us from the high school did Hamlet on our own that summer, after ending our days of school shows with Hello Dolly. I wasn't the only one with low tolerance for stuff that was too smiley. Hamlet felt like amelioration, but we had trouble getting a theater. Nothing could be performed at Feste and our own alma mater had some bad excuse for turning us down. So we did it at the JCC, where every chair had gum like hemorrhoids, but it was free and we were eighteen. This epoch will always be remembered as the summer I had a thing with Em (Ophelia) and a tug of war with certain rhetoric.

One day our priest had a roll of duct tape and he asked for volunteers from the youth group. A bunch of us lined up. We each put a strip on an arm and then kept passing the strips along until

they'd barely stick, totally covered with dead skin and hair. The priest, an unhealthily fat man whose voice and MO were like sand paper, had us hold the tape strips up to the people, their necks craning, and he took two strips and tried to stick them to each other. They dropped to the foot of the altar, landing apart. With a tone of complete ruin, like *eloi eloi lemi sebachthani* ruin, he said, Young people, this is what premarital sex will do to your ability to love. This was like a week after Graham and I were in Graham's car and he said it feels the same so I watched his head conceal my cock, over and over like something on a conveyer belt. After mass, my tail shot between my legs and I told my parents I'd walk home. The priest and I went into one of the booths once people cleared the church. I confessed. He was sad for me. He spoke like you would to a two year old who tripped. He said, Did you cry? I said no. But his question was like a crack in the dam. I said, I just don't want it to hurt my ability to love. Then, like mid sentence, I cried my eyes out. The priest looked at me like all was now well and said, Ah, the healing power of Confession. I cleared my throat and he handed me a tissue. I said, What about with a girl? He said, Imagine you can see your future wife. Picture her, right now. She is beautiful. She is the girl God destined you for. Now, the camera pans out and you see she is with her current boyfriend. She hasn't met you yet. He's trying to get her to go as far as he can. How far should she go? I said, Not an inch. He said, Right. That's how far is too far. Maybe a kiss is fine, but no tongue, young man. I thanked him and he gave the benediction.

Graham was Hamlet. I, always a bridesmaid, played Horatio. There were about twenty of us, led by Ryan and Chris and sort of Graham. He chimed in a lot when they directed, but he knew what he was talking about. He belonged to the world of theater like a proscenium. By that time he had a steady boyfriend and the two of them started ditching the rest of us as soon as rehearsal was

over. We rehearsed at the JCC every day after graduation. We billed the play for the first weekend of August and we were determined not to cut anything. We started lots of days at nine or ten in the morning and didn't stop until close to midnight. A lot of people started romances or vendettas or both.

It was during some downtime when Em and I were lounging in the seats, waiting for people to come back from lunch, when our own romance first started. She was slumped low in the seat next to me. She had her ankles over the seat in front of her. A single bulb was the only thing lighting the room, sitting high on a thin yellow pole on the stage, reminding me of that eye in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Em was from a rich town. Connecticut has them like freckles. She knew us through Ryan, her cousin. Though I never wound up really loving her, her face was pretty. She had blonde hair, and the sort of sex appeal that I think worried her parents since long before I met her. And as for her parents, they weren't the sort to hold back on whatever it took to make their princess a princess. She got a new car for her sixteenth birthday AND her eighteenth. (A lease...but still.) She was a yoga "pants" girl, so I guessed this meant a thong, at least for the early days when I had to guess. At night she wore sweatshirts, inside out, from colleges she had visited that year, and the only one she wore right was UConn. She never used much makeup, and one time toward the end of the summer I had said she didn't need any at all and she responded that she liked wearing it, was that a problem? She said things like that a lot, usually playfully: Was that a problem? Whatever happened to please and thank you? I don't know, can you?

What do you want to be when you grow up, I asked.

We heard a noise in the lobby and both looked but it was nothing.

She said a trophy wife like her mother, and then she said, Oh I'm so wrong.

I looked at the stage and said acting was in my future. When I said, Acting chose me more than I chose it, Em smiled and said, That's cute. I said, I know. She got more serious and said she was going into business.

But you're so talented, I said. I gave her a look and hoped it wasn't ridiculous.

She considered me for a moment. Then she said, We could make out. We've probably got a good ten minutes, I said.

One afternoon when I was back at Feste, trying on the speech where Horatio tells Hamlet of the apparitions, I heard shuffling in the darkness.

Keep going, squawked the unequivocal, old man voice of Shakespeare. Don't mind me.

So I kept going. Shakespeare then made his attendance a regular thing. He had always been there, but previously he stayed outside. He'd pace around the moldy floor. He never said anything about my performance. He kept his face in its usual Tragedy frown where the bottom lip covers the top. He nodded much about nothing.

Em started coming back to my house after rehearsals. It was the first week of July, when the end of summer was as far off as Life. Since we normally missed dinner, we'd eat leftovers and toast marshmallows on the still-warm grill while we ran lines. It was magic. Summer lovin'. I believed love could have been possible for us. I was focused on retaining her. My big brother lived in

California, and I hoped she would meet him sooner than later. He'd show there was virility in my future.

She and I went out by the pool. The deck that surrounded the above-ground became our spot. The towels draped around the banister gave us privacy, more than my bedroom because that would have been obvious. Mostly, after running lines, we'd share a lounge chair. She liked kissing, she said, as if that was anomalous, and she would start it which I wasn't used to. She felt older, especially the first time she reached into my jeans. I thought of what Father said, but I knew God was in the business of forgiving. She buried her head in my shoulder as her hand went to work, like she was afraid to look, despite how confidently she reached for it in the first place.

It was mid-way through the summer, a few weeks before the show, when we were at the beach walking a dog Em was taking care of. We found a bench and she said, We've done everything but sleep together. She gave one of those palms-to-the-sky shrugs on sleep.

Ready when you are, I said.

The Fords are gone all summer, she said.

That could be perfect, I said. But if you fast-forward an hour or so, you'll see me on a bed in her neighbor's house, naked and holding my stomach. I kept saying I felt fine earlier, and I was working it like a total mystery. She was playing along, listing everything we'd eaten. Her eyes got big when she said, Mister Softie. I said that must have been it.

Then one night a week later, fewer than two weeks until the show, no one was home at my house so we were in my bed. My room wasn't air-conditioned, hot as hell. The ceiling fan was rattling.

The lights were off and the summer air had sucked the curtains out the window, pressing them flat against the screens. We had no clothes on at that point.

I want you to make love to me, she said, her weight on her elbow. Her blonde hair was stuck to her face.

I want to, I said.

So, she said and descended to her back.

I don't have anything, I said, though there was a pack of Trojans in my sock drawer. It had been there a week, since the day after I framed Mister Softie.

We have to plan better, she said. Then she thought about something and said, Are you a virgin?

I looked at the curtains.

Fine if you don't want to say.

I am, I said. Are you?

She sat up again and kissed me.

See. Not an easy question.

I'm not a virgin, she said. But there was just one guy. I'm not a slut or anything. Who?

She smiled, slow and silly, like a little girl. Graham, she said.

You're kidding.

No. It was three years ago, right before he came out.

Didn't you want your first time to be with someone you loved?

Graham's hot, she said. Listen, I get it. You're not ready.

I don't think so, I said. I don't know why.

You don't need to know why, she said.

I want it to feel right.

That's fine, she said. Then she said, But here, and she bent over and used her mouth while I had déjà vu because they both really knew what they were doing.

The next day we had two run-throughs and after the first one Em went home because of her neighbor's dog. She asked if I wanted to come. The neighbor's house, she reminded me, was empty, but I said I was going to pay a friend a quick visit. I wanted to tell Shakespeare what I'd learned the night before. I thought, walking to Feste, that Shakespeare was like a priest without the judgment. I was happy to have an arrangement like that, but when I saw him that day he was standing behind a tree near The Thinker, his pants down and jerking himself off...or trying to. He was staring into a patch of grass between half a dozen trees, the Sound and sky in the background. His legs and butt looked weirdly young, reminding me he walked everywhere. He saw me and started grumbling. You little shit, spying on me. I reminded him he was in the wide open. He was very upset and I felt awful. He kept scolding, his hands on his hips, but he didn't pull up his pants. His penis was like roadkill. He said, Call the cops, see if I care. I never said anything about cops, I said. I turned and walked back to the JCC, his voice fading.

Graham threw a cast party after the last show. There must have been thirty kids there. His parents stayed on a little porch. His mother, a Positive Person, came over every twenty minutes or so to tell us what a good job we did or to ask if we needed anything. Graham sent me a text that there was something to drink under a towel in the garage, so Em and I made a few trips. I couldn't find

Graham as it got closer to midnight. Em was texting him. She looked at me and said, Come on, and we went upstairs where she knocked on a door she said was his. Graham opened it. It's all yours, he said, buttoning his jeans, his boyfriend satisfied with him, with their sex, but frowning at Em and I like he knew. Graham winked at me and they left. I looked at his empty, ruffled bed. I looked at Em once the door closed and said, Hell no, so we walked down the hall and found his parents' bedroom and then what looked like a guest room.

Em was drunker and she said, Fuck me.

We're drunk, I said. Our noses were touching. My hands joined behind her neck.

She took two of my fingers down and slid them up into her hot wetness and said, Do you not want to?

She tightened her pussy around my fingers, both of her hands on my wrist like a dagger. Are you kidding? What guy doesn't want to have sex?

So..?

It's just, we're drunk, I said. There was only her breathing for a few seconds.

I'm starting to feel stupid, she whispered.

Yes, I was up to something. Em came with me to Feste one day in mid August, the day before she left for Storrs. We hadn't talked much since the night of the cast party, a week before.

She had a skirt on, the first time in a long time because we weren't out of a rehearsal, in one, or on our way. Her beret was red like the dress, a hot color to match the weather. It was almost dinner time, and I had never seen Shakespeare there that late. I gave her a tour. We went

backstage and gazed up into the dusty flies that must have been a hundred feet high. The wings were littered with costume pieces: medieval armor and gowns and weapons, fake Renaissance art, curtains that were bunched but maybe could have spanned the stage. We went down into the orchestra pit and looked at the big cogs that needed some serious TLC before they'd raise the platform again. I showed her the green room and the dressing rooms and then the balcony, careful for holes. Then we wound up back on the stage.

You know what we could do here, she said. If you're ready. Alright, I said. But not here. But here could be so fun, she said.

Can't we go to your neighbor's house?

Rod, she said, looking down, finally giving up.

I started kissing her. I pulled her skirt down quick. She asked if I had something. With a grin like someone who knew all along, I took the Trojans out of my pocket. We knelt downstage center. How many beautiful Shakespearean lines had Christopher Plummer uttered on that spot? Lines with ringing words like anon and hark and whence? Once I got situated and started a rhythm, our movements seemed to resound in the hollow space under the stage, the rolling of my knees on the wooden planks.

I came with the alacrity of a sneeze. And despite my resolve to see the thing through, there was still a twinge of past-the-point-of-no-return that sank in my chest. I held my position and said, That was quick.

Em said, You're just getting warmed up.

I knew we were only footnotes in each other's histories of experience, but I pressed on. There were two more condoms. She smiled compassionately as I changed. At one point I asked her if she heard something. She said, No, keep going. Then she said to look at her and focus. I heard it too, I lied, she said. It's probably a raccoon. Just keep going. Probably, I said. When we stood up after, I could see dust on her naked back even in the bad light. She curtsied once she got her skirt and bra back on, first to me, then to the crowd. I had imagined Shakespeare in one of the boxes, observing, but I saw on our way out that that box had no floor, and I hadn't heard any sounds except from there. Sex didn't make me love her, and we were like two hundred miles away, so I broke it off when we settled at our schools. She was mutual about it. I haven't been inside Feste in the twelve years since that day, but when I'm home, I drive by him, each time noting the further rot.

“Roman Saturday”

It was two in the morning. Mark had begun to cry in the chapel at the Jesuit curia, his face tight and hot. The lights were off. Just some candles were burning near the altar, far from Mark. The smell of incense lingered. The pews were made of a very thick wood, very smooth, and cool from the air conditioning. You could see the flames reflected in the white marble floor. The alabaster walls near the flames became a weak golden color. His crying was quiet, suppressed.

The curia consisted of two adjoining stucco mansions on a hill, right outside the Vatican walls. A terrace outside Mark’s guest room looked down into Saint Peter’s Square. It was amazing at night. Before going into the chapel, he’d stood out there. It was Friday, well, Saturday. On Sunday, he would fly back to New York, his home—also where the novitiate was.

His knees hurt from kneeling. His breathing was heavy. His tears were reaching the bottoms of his cheeks, then falling to his lap, or rolling down his neck. The flames cast wobbly light on the mosaic that took up the whole wall behind the altar. The mosaic was beautiful, a rendering of the nativity. He did not want to be a Jesuit, though he was scheduled to enter the novitiate in one month. He was still laity, just staying for free where he had the connection. It was good that it was so late. He did not want to draw attention. The curia was the headquarters of the order, globally some twenty-thousand strong. Many Jesuits stayed there when they came to Rome. All week, he had been meeting Jesuits from everywhere in the world.

He had admitted his true feelings to himself once he hung up the phone with his grandmother earlier. He was telling her all about Rome, and she was asking questions, and at times her fragile, happy voice sounded identically like his sister’s. In that moment, he encountered his need to have his own children, a fresh, chilling thing. He had gone to the chapel

and knelt and silently but firmly apologized to God. Now with his mind changed, he marveled at how he could have ever thought the vocation was doable.

Mark had gone to Jesuit schools his whole life. After graduating from Fordham, he kept in touch with the order. About once a month, he saw his English professor, Ernie Timmons, SJ, for spiritual direction. Mark had been teaching English at a New York public high school, not far from his alma mater. He had thought about becoming a Jesuit since his own high school days. The eleven-year process to become a Jesuit priest was long but seemed wonderful. Two years were spent in the novitiate, traveling the world and serving the poor, learning about the order. Then you earned a master's in philosophy and another in theology. Between the two degrees, you spent three years working in a Jesuit apostolate. If you earned a doctorate after ordination, the process of formation would have taken you over seventeen years.

The Society of Jesus was founded by the mystic Saint Ignatius of Loyola in 1540. They were not monks. Ignatius said that their monastery was the world itself. Mark liked that Ignatius had been in trouble with the Vatican. Ignatius was jailed by the Inquisition multiple times. Mark, like Ignatius, loved the Church—the whole Church including the magisterium—but also like Ignatius, Mark saw its flaws and myopia. Many Jesuits were liberal, and it was exciting to think that a synthesis of religion and reason was not only possible but thriving in these circles.

Ernie Timmons was the perfect example of this; he was a priest and a Joyce scholar. He had a doctorate in literature from Harvard. He was pro-gay rights and voted pro-choice. He had been very popular on campus. Even conservative faculty and students loved him because he was authentic. He was a skinny old man with curly gray hair on the sides of his bald head. He had

large glasses and a beaky nose and he seemed always ready to laugh. Ernie beamed when Mark told him that he wanted to join the order.

When Mark first pictured himself as a Jesuit, he had seen his life fringed with purpose. It was possible they would keep him teaching high school, but there were a million positions they could give him. Usually the only people who stayed in one job were the professors, especially if you earned tenure. For the majority, it seemed more varied. You might teach high school for a few years, then be stationed at a Jesuit parish like Saint Ignatius on the Upper East Side; then you might become the principal of a school; or work in the vocations office. Some Jesuits were medical doctors. Not just a few were lawyers. Many were scientists, philosophers, artists, writers, or historians. Jesuit astronomers worked in the Vatican observatory. Mark knew one Jesuit, Bob Harding, a retired man at Fordham, who was once the head of the JRS—Jesuit Refugee Services. He had traveled the world, overseeing JRS involvement in refugee camps. He often reported to the U.N. and the Vatican. Pope John Paul II once sent him to Cuba to meet with Fidel Castro about human rights and religious freedom. Mark asked him if Castro had offered a cigar. Bob laughed and said that he had. Bob said, “I, of course, accepted.” And most recently, the first Jesuit Pope had been elected. That was one surprising part about Mark’s trip to Rome: he had booked the trip before Francis’s election in March. It turned out that the Friday of the trip was July thirty-first, the Feast of Ignatius. Pope Francis had said a mass for Jesuits at the Gesù, to which Mark had been invited by Henry Larson, SJ, the curia’s rector, another American. It was history. No Pope had done this before. Popes often had a certain skeptical attitude toward Jesuits, but here was one who was not only full of appreciation, but he was a Jesuit himself. The Gesù

was full of Jesuits. They were giddy with excitement. Mark had been in the third row. Several hundred Jesuits concelebrated. The music—organ, choir, timpani, trumpet, strings—was astounding. Pope Francis processed right by Mark. The Gesù was ornate and big, but nowhere near as big as Saint Peter’s. There was a paradoxical feeling of grandiose intimacy. The sanctuary floor was packed with lilies. One priest was incensing the altar, and the incense was filling the air of the sanctuary and then the nave. The Pope’s security paced the aisles and pews before mass and occasionally during mass. Maybe they would not need to, except that Pope Francis had allowed the public into the back of the Church. Mark was excited at first. This was before he admitted that he no longer felt called to religious life—though it was the morning of the day he would change his mind, and the seed was in his heart. He felt the majesty of God when the Pope processed to the sanctuary, stood maybe fifteen yards from Mark, turned, removed his mitre, and began, “En nomeni Patri, et Fili, Spiritus Sancti,” making the sign of the cross, and the rest followed, and all said, “Amen,” and it echoed throughout the lofty golden space. Their voices were absorbed by the walls and bounced off the stained glass. The mass was in Latin and Italian. Mark could not understand the Pope’s homily, and it was during the homily that a sense of disappointment welled up in him. He looked around at the joyful faces, and he thought of his grandmother, of how she had dementia and was not speaking to his mother. He thought of how life could be disappointing, and he wondered if he had been erroneously wishing that entering a religious order would make his life easier. He did his best to ignore the thought.

In the chapel, he wept harder, with hatred for his life and life itself. He prayed for forgiveness. Ignatius said that the most common sin was the sin of ingratitude, and it was the route of all sins.

Ever since a homily at a Sunday night mass his freshman year, Mark often recalled these questions: *Who am I? Whose am I? Who am I called to be?* He tried to understand their application as broadly as possible.

Who am I? He was someone who loved the seasons in a way that seemed exclusive, as if no one else quite felt as attached to the seasons as he did.

He was five foot eight, with brown hair, handsome enough that romance was not impossible. He'd had girlfriends. He'd been in love, though not since high school.

Mark had dated Lauren, a girl he thought he loved. They'd met in October of their senior year of high school. They went to different schools. It seemed portentous that they met at Church. He felt strongly for her, initially. But then, after dating her his entire senior year, he had steadily found himself out of love with her. They were young, and youth had masked their blossoming differences, differences in their souls that were inexplicably incompatible.

Whose am I? He wasn't Lauren's. She was married now, and pregnant last he heard. Or maybe he was hers—in the sense that they were indelible footnotes in each other's histories of experience. He belonged to his parents, his brother, his sister. His sister was in medical school in Arizona. His brother was a police officer in New Haven. His parents were teachers in Fairfield County. He belonged to his grandmother—who did not speak to *anyone* in the family but him and his brother and sister. She was their last living grandparent. She thought their mother had broken into her house to steal old newspapers from her attic. She claimed her own mother arbitrarily rejected her, but whenever she said this she did not seem to notice the parallel. A lump the size and shape of a football was jutting out from her waistline. She would not go to a doctor. Mark brought it up once and she claimed she had no idea what he was talking about. "You'll

have to carry me out feet first,” she said whenever Mark or his brother or sister addressed how difficult it was getting for her to keep living alone in her little cape.

Who am I called to be? The stage of formal discernment was known as “candidacy.” You were a “candidate” once the vocations director—Chris Franklin, SJ—approved your continuance after an interview. Chris was relatively young, around forty, with neat black hair. Mark liked Chris. After a few months of the order getting to know you, you were invited to apply. The application stage was also considered part of candidacy. Candidacy took, for most people, about a year. It entailed come-and-see weekends at Jesuit residences, silent weeklong retreats, meetings with Chris, and a reading list: books on the history of the Jesuits, writings of Ignatius, and books on how Ignatius was applicable to the modern Church and world.

Mark had gone to the New York province headquarters on the Upper East Side for his monthly meetings with Chris. Chris needed to know as much about Mark as possible. Mark would take the subway from his apartment in Queens. The loud subway rolled into the station, but it sounded like it was stomping. As he’d board, Mark thought about how everyone on the platform and in the subway belonged to God, and he thought about how much God loved them all, and he felt sad that they did not know God’s healing love. Maybe some did. But he was sure most people, like himself, did not accept God’s love often enough. He’d cram into the subway. There might be music from the headphones of the person next to him. If there was a woman with a baby, he’d offer his seat. The subway stomped loudly across the river and into Grand Central, and then he’d take the 4 up to the province headquarters. The city inspired him.

On their first meeting, Chris told Mark that he had a great spiritual director for him, a man who lived there at the province headquarters and often saw candidates for spiritual direction. His name was Father Bill Johnson, SJ. “Bill is very objective,” said Chris.

“Actually, I’ve started seeing Ernie Timmons for direction.” Then he remembered: “Oh, wait I *do* know Bill.” Mark had eaten lunch with him at a come-and-see weekend. He had a good conversation with Bill. Bill taught philosophy at Fordham. He was another young Jesuit, in his forties, recently tenured. He was a handsome, exceptionally tall man with parted brown hair and a deep voice. He did not wear clerics like Chris, but like most Jesuits who taught at the university level, he wore a jacket and tie. Mark had been impressed by the way Bill spoke frankly and humbly about the order, God, and his own life. He was also impressed by the fact that universities all over the world invited Bill to lecture on Heidegger. The way Bill had worded this felt modest. Bill had seemed to radiate with objectivity. “But I like Ernie, and we already started.”

“Well,” said Chris, shrugging, “You *could* continue with Ernie, but your spiritual director should not be your friend. Ernie should know that. You need someone to be as objective as possible.”

Mark didn’t like the suddenly admonishing tone Chris had toward a much older Jesuit.

“Go ahead, though. I’ll leave it up to you. Think about it and shoot me an email.”

Mark decided, later that evening, that he wanted to keep seeing Ernie for direction.

Chris called Mark on the phone instead of replying to Mark’s decision in another email.

“I’ll say this one last time, just to cover myself. I think you need someone more objective than Ernie. I love Ernie, Mark. I love him to death. But every time I see him, he corners me and tells

me what a great Jesuit you'll be. How do I know he's being objective in your sessions? How do I know he isn't nudging you toward this? I'm going to trust you, but if at any time you want to switch, let me know and you can meet with Bill. I really think you—listen, you're an adult. You're twenty-four. I'll stop insulting you. I've covered my bases."

Mark paused long enough to make it seem like he had considered Chris's words. "Chris, I appreciate it," Mark said. "I do. But I trust Ernie. I think he's objective."

"My instinct is to trust you," Chris said. "How could I be trusting you as a Jesuit if I can't trust you with this? So I trust you."

In hindsight, in Rome, Mark saw that Chris had been right about Ernie, and admitting this brought on more tears. It felt too extreme to say that Ernie coerced him. But Mark knew which answers would please Ernie, no matter what questions he might have asked. When Ernie asked, "What did Jesus say when you asked him if you should be a Jesuit?" Mark answered, "I imagined that I was in the garden of Gethsemane. I asked him about my vocation and he laid hands on my head and prayed over me," and that had been true; that's what he saw in his prayer. But when Mark said this, Ernie had smiled, and Mark then gave a flawed interpretation: "That seemed like an affirmation of my calling."

"I agree with you," said Ernie. Then his face grew, would grow, sober and he said, would say, "You can see how you arrived at that on your own. You can see I didn't give you the idea. I'm not suggesting this vocation to you."

"No, of course," said Mark. "Of course."

He did not feel tired at all. He prayed fervently. He recalled the scene of the storm at sea, and he was slipping into the water, Christ still asleep in the boat. He felt nostalgic for God's voice, for what little he felt God had ever said to him. He felt lonely and ashamed and he cried harder. He remembered the words of a great book he'd read a few months earlier, *Reaching Out* by the priest Henri Nouwen: you must convert your loneliness to solitude. So he tried to do that. He knew Nouwen had been profoundly lonely. Almost every book Nouwen wrote dealt with loneliness. Probably Nouwen had been as lonely as he himself felt now, but Nouwen had soldiered on—but it wasn't about soldiering on; it was about being called to it or not. Nouwen, though lonely, probably still felt called to the vocation. Or could you feel not called to it while being actually called to it? Recently, in the whirlwind of his anxiety, Mark had felt so many unusual fears. He felt afraid of open spaces. When entering Saint Peter's, he'd walk along the colonnades rather than across the Square. And once inside, he did not feel much better. It seemed he had to concentrate on gravity; otherwise he might wind up on the ceiling. The ceiling did not seem like something above him. It was like being in a space station and the limestone buttresses and golden arcing squares were just another surface you could float to. He felt claustrophobic on the Scavi tour beneath the Basilica, which he took back on his second day. The air was so dank and entombed. It was a tight labyrinth of ancient brick graves. He had gone down there with a guide and a group of tourists, families and people on their honeymoons. He toured the Vatican museum that same day. Fathers had children on their backs, or in pouches on their chests. Sunlight shined through the windows of the corridors as he walked next to families. One father, pushing a stroller, had bottles strapped to both hips like guns on a cowboy. His wife walked next to him, looking at a map. They were in a pleasant but quotidian mood. Mark wanted to tell the

man how lucky he was. He realized this thought that had welled up out of his unconscious, but he decided it was a natural thing to feel, and it should not deter him from the vocation. Mark soon lost sight of this particular family. The museum was immense. No one could have prepared him for how large it was, though everyone had tried. Then he was in the Sistine Chapel. The crowd was thick and taking pictures, and security had more or less given up on telling them not to take pictures and on hushing them, reminding them it was a sacred space. Mark had always wanted to see the Sistine Chapel, but as he looked up at God and Adam, they were not almost touching but pointing in accusation. He blinked this away, blinked to see the fresco as Michelangelo had intended. Before the second-to-last night, he kept turning away from thinking that to be in Rome with a woman he loved would be like putting on a different set of eyes. On Thursday he had seen the Trevi fountain after the Piazza Navona. Couples everywhere. He walked among those amazing scenes, the terra cotta roofs and stucco walls and cobblestones. At lunchtime, the outdoor restaurants were full at the Piazza Navona. He was surprised at how small the little square around the Trevi was, crowded and hectic. He passed both piazzas around lunchtime, then again near dinner time before heading back to eat at the curia. He looked at the flowing blue water and smooth handiwork of Bernini and Salvi. The sun cast thick European shadows, and people were eating gelato, and the air was balmy. Back home he had broadcasted his Jesuit plans, as if that was a way to ensure that he would stick to it for fear of embarrassment. But when on Thursday one couple at the Coliseum asked about his purpose in Rome, after he took their picture for them, he said he was just visiting. Technically, that was true. Why should he have felt compelled to say that he was just visiting because he could eat and sleep for free? And that he could eat and sleep for free because his hosts thought he would soon be one of them?

In the chapel, at two in the morning on Saturday, he realized he'd taken the trip to test if he could enjoy vacations alone. He went to bed knowing he couldn't.

Mark's eyes were sore when he woke up. For Saturday, he had planned: breakfast in the curia's dining hall, daily mass at Saint Peter's, a visit to the Piazza del Popolo, one last visit to the Gesù, packing, and then more time in the chapel, ending the night with the cocktail hour he had been invited to by the curia's rector. The dining hall was empty except for one table of three retired, very old Jesuits. (The curia also functioned as a Jesuit nursing home.) Mark made a plate with sausage and French toast and sat with the three retired men. Aids brought them their food, cut up into very small pieces. They nodded to Mark, but they only spoke Italian and Spanish—not that they even conversed much among themselves. Mark guessed that they had all known each other for a long time. Their bones looked enormous in their saggy skin, arms like lethargic backhoes. The hall was two stories high, with floor-to-ceiling doors that opened into a courtyard garden, a fountain among palm trees and Mediterranean flowers. The dining hall tables had red and white checkered table cloths and little revolving stations of olive oil and salt and pepper. At dinner, the attendants would bring out little dishes of parmesan. Mark noticed another person entering the hall's foyer, where the buffet was. He did not pay much attention to this person at first. In the back of his mind, he was aware that the person was moving around freely, unlike the way the nursing home residents moved around. It might be another visitor, because the younger men who lived in the curia ate much earlier. Mark heard the sound of a plate leaving a stack of plates. He heard the serving spoons being lifted and then put back down. He heard footsteps going toward the napkin cabinet, and then he saw who it was. He must be lecturing somewhere in Rome, but

on that Saturday morning Bill was in shorts and a t-shirt. Mark felt necessarily bold. He knew his Saturday plans had just been altered. Bill sat with them, and he remembered Mark happily, and, yes, sure, he would be glad to speak with him after breakfast.

“Mr. Nice Guy”

Ladies, are you sick and tired of that boy in a man’s body? Are you fed up with one who pretends to listen while ogling the pair of legs that just walked by? Are you ready for someone who’s finally going to treat you right? Love you for you? Be there when you need him most?

I enjoy long saunters on the beach, star-gandering, theater. My favorite color? *Hm*, come closer. Earthy green...no *you’re* adorable. Fall or spring? Fall. Because: apple picking, pumpkin-spiced everything, forfending you from Freddy Krueger. Winter or summer? Winter. Because: totally not letting you beat me in a snowball fight, followed by a cuddle sesh near the hearth, followed by getting blizzarded in together. Favorite song? “Vivo per Lei.” Any animal at all? A blue whale, unequivocally. They have the biggest hearts. In February of 1911, Captain Emile Small of Nantucket slew one of these gentle giants and weighed its heart at over two tons. My mother, winking proudly, likes to say I’m full of useless information. I prefer a different phraseology: I’m a passionate autodidact. By the way, you can predict how a man will treat his girlfriend by how he treats his mother, and Mother pines for naught.

Why am I so sensitive? What has tenderized me despite my firmer sex? For one reason or another—perhaps the way I was raised—I’ve looked inwardly, rather than outwardly, for what qualities I bring to the table for two. (I must say, however, that my beard is a certain source of outward pride. It’s inspired by Grant, the subject of my master’s thesis. I also have the honor of playing him in the reenactments.)

I’m a dreamer, and you could be my circadian rhythm. If it was a competition, I’d be the Hulk Hogan of romantics. (FYI, I stopped following wrestling. It became far too disrespectful to women.) Like everyone, I do have a type, a certain Girl of My Dreams. But is that unreasonable?

It seems I see The Girl of My Dreams often. One day I think I see her boarding the M60 in front of me as I run some errands before the first day of school. Her white-dotted black dress is tastefully to her ankles, and her burgundy lipstick goes well with her brown hair. She's very pretty, perched between six and nine. (As the old adage goes: never marry a ten.) But oh! She forgot to get a ticket! "The cops come on here and that fine'll break your piggy bank," warns the driver.

She says, "Crap! I'm a mess today."

Little does she know such a nice guy is here, ready to help.

"I remember the first time I rode the bus," says an asshole right behind the driver. The assholes are pervasive and often distinguishable by their virility. I think to insult his Mets but I can't recall how they're doing.

The Girl of My Dreams looks up at him as he reaches for something in his pocket.

"Wait!" I say, before he can redeem himself. I back up a few paces and swipe my Metrocard again for another ticket. I hand it to her. I fib, "It's your lucky day. My card expires soon."

"Aw, thank you." She ascends the stair and sits next to Prince Un-charming. He doesn't even tell her to! He doesn't even suggest it! He displays his asshole feathers and voila. In less than a minute, he has her all giggly and vulnerable.

But hope is not lost. The Girl of My Dreams is many women, variations on a theme. At Gristedes, she, in a black professional skirt and light pink blouse, smells for the freshness of ground beef. A white halter keeping her cool, she sits across from me in the New York Public

Library, her lips in a book. During lunch with her mother, she bespeaks the school year with the help of her hands, her red checkered dress like the bistro's table cloth. In a silver sliver of a slip, maybe for hosting friends, she scours the wines in the tight, high-ceilinged purveyor across from campus. She's almost six feet tall like me, or her pate doesn't reach my chin. She's wide-ish or thin-ish, Irish or Finnish. Her features sharpen like Frida or dull like Mona, and that hair is curled, straight, long, short, up, down, but always brown. If this is oedipal, fine. I am not above the rules of psychology.

I exit the one at One-sixteenth and fall upon an outdoor book seller. In a beach chair, Aphrodite pinches the pages of Aristotle, Grand Canyon'd by three folding tables of books. Her black tank top is modest, not like some which are basically two tenuous hammocks, precariously joined at the sternum. Her hair is in a prehensile ponytail, constricting the idea of passing by. Within earshot, I say, "School starts in a week. Let's see if I need any of these for class." This implies, rather than boasts, that I attend the University across the street. Unless she has a monograph on Grant, it's not likely anything here will be of use, but I say, "Aristotle, huh?"

"I'm taking literary theory this fall." An undergrad! Fed up with boys and ready for a man.

"Cultural Studies. Some consider it a casuistic field, but not I."

"Haters gonna hate," she says. I observe her nose ring for the first time.

"You have a nice nose ring."

"Thanks..."

"Curses. I just remembered I ordered my last books on Amazon." Forgive me, but I cannot abide the look on Mother's face when she sees that...decoration.

Lo and behold! I then spot her in the most ideal place. The Girl of My Dreams turns out to be one of the housemates, the last of the six to move in. We are abutting seeds in this Big Apple, surely not just because we had the same connection—my sister-like friend Angela who rounded everyone up—but because the stars mustered or the gods bequeathed. Why five women would want a man with them was, at first, beyond me. I know Angela from undergrad at the same University. We always lived in the same hall. (She work-studied for residence life, and I asked her how we always wound up together. She said coincidence.) Maureen and Francine—twins—know Angela from yoga, and Mina knows her from the anime club. Angela brings The Girl of My Dreams with her suitcases into the foyer where the lamplight creates a nimbus around her straight brown hair. Her name is Jane. (*Angela, nota bene*: an appellation not only portentously assonant with but downright eponymous of those denizens of the empyrean, God’s adjutants.)

I beat my chest, say, “Me Tarzan, you Jane.”

She laughs! “Nice to meet you, Tarzan.”

Angela says, “His name is Herbert.”

“Is it really?” Jane laughs at this more than she did at ‘Tarzan,’ but that’s O.K.

The three of us have a seat in order to socialize. Maureen, Francine, and Mina come down. Maureen and Francine are both studying environmental science. Mina is studying Renaissance literature. Jane and Angela are beginning their master’s in nursing and I say I’m writing my master’s thesis on Grant, who I visit from time to time, a short walk from the apartment. I explain, “My beard, actually, is inspired by Grant.”

“That’s neat,” Jane says.

Angela says, “He’s had that beard since we met, exactly five years and one day ago.”

I say, “Look at the memory on you.”

“Sorry. I just remember that undergrad move-in was the day before this. Wow, so sorry.

Oh my God, that was weird. The way I said it. Sorry.”

Jane clears her throat and says she’s from New Orleans.

I say, “What do I know about New Orleans? Oh, a great word is attributed to New Orleans. And actually, Jane, you and I are currently sitting catawampus.”

“Catta-what?” Jane says.

“I ought to have said cattywampus, because that’s closer to the colloquial pronunciation you’d recognize.” I gesture to our position on the couches in relation to the right angle they form.

Angela starts laughing breathlessly.

“Easy there, Angela,” I say. I silently forgive Jane for not knowing her own colloquialism. I humbly say, “I’m full of useless information.”

“No, that’s interesting. So where are you from?”

“Bumblecopulation, Massachusetts.”

Angela snorts. Jane arches an eyebrow.

“I don’t swear in front of ladies,” I declaim.

I Google: how to make a girl fall in love with me. This returns three hundred and six million hits, as if almost every citizen in America has posted their thoughts. It’s all more or less the same conclusion: be myself. Well then, who am I? I am a nice guy. My heart is pure gold. I think that’s rare these days. And I think in time Jane will realize what a gentleman she’s got living under the

same roof. I hear through Angela—who I’ve put up to some investigating—that Jane is happy to have a guy friend, just that brother she’s always wanted.

“Angela, are you telling the truth?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Sometimes I don’t know about you, Angela.”

She rubs her elbow and looks at the floor.

“So Jane wants me in a brotherly way, huh?”

“Yup. Have to look...elsewhere...for a girlfriend.”

Jane and I happen to be getting home from class at the same time. I think most men would agree that she is an ideal eight, maybe a seven which is better, still in range but with increased odds. Her thighs are on the wide side and her breasts seem maybe one standard deviation to the small. Her hair is in a ponytail, her sneakers noiseless on the large cement squares. Blue scrubs broadcast compassion. “Howdy!”

“Herbert.”

“Arriving home together? How serendipitous.” I walk faster to hold the door.

“Thanks.”

“Looks like chivalry isn’t dead, after all.”

“No. Thanks again.”

I make dinner that night. I keep it simple: macaroni and meatballs. Though Jane’s across the table and I’m closest to the pasta bowl, I insist Jane is served before me. I take her plate and

fill it up, way up, because I know how self-conscious girls can be with eating and whatnot. She says, “I can’t eat that much in a million years.”

“I’ll finish what you don’t want.”

She shrugs. “Alright.” I wind up with three extra meatballs and half a plate of macaroni, but that’s why they invented Tupperware.

The next day, I preheat the oven and start slicing potatoes. She enters before long. “What are you doing? It’s my turn.”

“Sorry. I’m in the mood. May I please cook tonight?”

“Is this a swap?”

“No. Really, *you’re* helping *me*. Cooking releases stress.”

“I’ll do the dishes.”

“That wouldn’t be fair. I’m scheduled for the dishes and you did not ask for that trade. I must insist on the dishes too.” After dinner, as I’m rinsing and loading, I overhear Jane and Angela. Angela is upset that a strip club has opened nearby. She says it brings down the value of the neighborhood. I can’t help but chime in. “I think the problem with strippers is not that one sees too much. Rather, one sees too little, overlooks the heart and soul.”

“That’s beautiful,” Angela says.

I look at Jane. She says, “That’s nice.”

The next day, Jane comes home with half a dozen grocery bags, and I realize I should have told her but I wanted it to be a surprise. “What’s all this?” she says, standing in front of the pantry.

I leap off the couch. “Oh boy. Looks like I confused my weeks.”

“Now there’s five loaves of bread here for five people.”

O.K. I admit that was stupid. In the evening, I buy flowers for the dining room table, timing it so that when I enter our house with them, Jane is making dinner. I hold all the books from my backpack so that I’m ostensibly struggling. “Hey, would you mind taking these dozen roses for a second?” Jane receives them and looks for a vase. She comments that they’re beautiful.

That night, when she passes by my door, I ask if she wants to see my swords. She does!

“Most I had to leave at my parents’ house, but there’s my Samurai above my bed and my Paramerion over the closet. I keep a Sabina in my nightstand.”

“You really like swords.”

I see her eying my *Casablanca* poster, the melancholy Rick and conflicted Ilsa. “Hey, let’s play Name That Movie. Ready? ‘Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks into mine.’”

“*Casablanca?*”

“Ding, ding, ding. You’ve made it to round two: ‘Here’s looking at you, kid.’”

“Also *Casablanca?*”

“Bingo! Last one: ‘We’ll always have Paris.’”

“*Casablanca.*”

“You’re good.”

Angela knocks on my door to remind me how happy she is that I moved in. She is standing there, smiling. One similarity Angela and I share is our paper-white skin. Other than that, she’s short,

and her black hair is too long. I'd be worried about it near the subway doors. She asks how my thesis is going, and I get excited and tell her about it, and I'm amazed after a while that she's still listening. Then I can't help but change the subject. "Hey, so do you think Jane has moved beyond the brother/sister phase yet?"

"Oh, I don't think it's a phase."

"You don't?"

"I think she's just not interested."

"I fear you may be right."

"I know I'm right. But Herbert..."

"Leave me, please. I need to think. Curses!"

Again I Google: how to make a girl fall in love with me. All the same results as last time, so the conclusion remains: be myself. I am still a nice guy, but what else am I? I am my thesis, in a sense. It's a huge part of me, and women love a man with knowledge. I'll add this to Mr. Nice Guy. Erudition and tenderness...who can resist?

At dinner I say, "The thesis is nascent, but expanding by the day. One would see, after even a page, that clearly I have genuine scholastic ambitions. But in this life no man is a machine. Humans have bizarre little reasons for even the most erudite and grandiose undertakings. Grant won my heart not by victory, reconstruction, or any of those predictable magnets, but in their juxtaposition with one fascinating personal detail. While reading his memoirs, I was flabbergasted that he couldn't stand the sight of blood! He even charred his steaks. Can you honestly believe that?! The soldier from West Point, the brute that conquered the

south, migrated the carpetbaggers, convinced the scalawags. No more of a stomach for blood than a schoolgirl. When I read this I mysteriously knew this man should be my degree's *raison d'être*."

"Fascinating," Angela says.

Jane says, "It's good you have such a passion for something."

Francine says, "It was an important period of history."

Maureen says, "Yeah."

Mina says, "I love history. Renaissance is my, as you said, *raison d'être*, but the Civil War...that was a big one."

At the start of dish duty, as everyone is still clearing plates, before Jane says she has a lot of work to do, I say, "Did you know that, after he requested two hundred sixty-thousand troops from Secretary of War Simon Cameron, Sherman was denounced as bonkers? Cameron removed him from the post of commander in Kentucky. But then, a year later, Grant forgave him and put him back in command, saying he wasn't crazy but brazen. I fancy this erring. I also think the ability to forgive is an asset in a person."

Jane says, "It is. Definitely."

"That's so interesting...about Grant and Kentucky and Sherman," says Angela.

The next morning during cereal: "Did you know President Grant's name at birth was Hiram Ulysses Grant? He didn't like that his initials were 'H.U.G.' so he changed his name. Half of me respects the decision; the other half of me is disappointed by his aversion to sensitivity."

Jane is reading the paper. She spoons some Cheerios into her mouth. "Hug? That's wimpy for a general. I'd change my name too."

I confess this caught me off guard and I stammered a bit. “Oh. Well, yeah, I mean, mostly I feel respect. The sensitivity thing is...you know...yeah.”

That night is Angela’s turn to cook, and Jane is mapping out the new dinner schedule on the fridge. I say, “While president, Grant got a speeding ticket for riding his horse too fast through Washington. I’m sorry, but that’s just awesome.”

Jane says, “What a wild man.”

Angela says, “You’re an Encyclopedia!”

“Did you know the Civil War was also referred to as ‘The Brothers’ War?’ This gives me the beginnings of lots of thoughts. I’ll get back to you.”

Angela says, “Yeah let me know what you think.”

Mina says, “Did you know that John Milton was blind?”

That was very random, so we all just politely thank her and move on.

Then as we’re eating, I say, “I often wonder what the air was like during the Civil War. Did it smell like fear? Righteousness? I suppose it probably varied, was probably different in the North or on the battle field. And it was probably evolving as the war itself evolved, as victory got closer. Then, no doubt, Lincoln’s assassination changed the spirit of things, especially right after such conclusive victory. But I do suspect that one pervasive wartime mood was the conviction that there’s something worth dying for. Maybe anything less than such a cause is not really living.”

Francine asks if I keep a journal.

Mina says she keeps a journal.

I say, “No, but I’ve heard they can be cathartic.”

Jane says, "Yeah, you should write all your thoughts down."

"I should. Actually I scribbled a thought in the margins today during a lecture on the Thirteenth Amendment."

They wait.

"My thought was that the only problem with *The Red Badge of Courage* is there's no love story."

"Good point," says Angela, enthusiastically.

Speaking of *The Red Badge of Courage*, I'm way overdue for a reenactment. They don't have them in the City. I guess hundreds of muskets firing in Central Park would be unsettling for people. I'll have to wait until spring break at this rate. Come to think of it, I may have a need for my uniform that hasn't been used since Shiloh in July. I will have Mother send it along. Though over a month away, the University sponsors a Halloween dance you must dress up for. (Students have nicknamed the dance "Drunk-or-Treat.") The day the uniform arrives, I knock on Jane's door. She says, "Is it Halloween already?"

"Nice guess. I'm going to wear it to that dance. It's from my reenactments. I was Grant in Shiloh over the summer. It's *extremely* competitive to be Grant. I climbed the ranks forever, always a bridesmaid. Then Clint Reilly, a legend in our circles, retired for Florida."

"Good opportunity."

"The uniform's an antique. Cost me three thousand dollars."

"And you plan to Drunk-or-Treat in it?"

"Go big or go home."

At dinner that night, Angela asks how everyone's day went. I wait patiently for everyone else to go first. Then I say, "Today I met an idiot."

Jane, intrigued, says, "What made him so stupid?"

"He said Grant was a less-than-average president."

Jane says, "Yeah, well, the guy like totally won the Civil War."

(As general, but never mind that.) "I knew it! Someone on this planet has a brain. Thank you for being intelligent."

"You're welcome."

There's nothing but the sounds of eating for a while. Then Angela says, "What's everyone's favorite neighborhood in the city and why? I'll start: mine is actually right here on the upper west side. I've got my job, my school, my apartment. Basically my whole life."

Jane says, "I like midtown. Forty-second street. It's the magic of New York."

Maureen says, "The L.E.S. for me."

"Brooklyn," says Francine.

I say, "Brooklyn spawns hipsters like subway rats!" Maureen and Francine are hipsters, if I've ever seen them. They've tried to convert me to their belief in kale. They cut it into squares and bake it, but I tell them to keep their Wiccan crisps to themselves. Ha!

Mina says, "I like the financial district the best, actually. The buildings there are the oldest, the most European."

I say, "Gosh, such a hard question. And actually, Mina, Staten Island has the oldest properties in the city. I know what you mean about Wall Street, but most of those buildings are merely from the eighteen hundreds. To get back to the settlers, you need to branch out a little

more, with few exceptions of course. There is a European nostalgia in Wall Street's architecture, I'll grant you. Anywho, I think my favorite also must be midtown. The theater district. You're right, Jane. It's what the world thinks about when they think about New York City. The glitz and glamour. It used to be quite the red light district, of course. It was very sketchy in the eighties. Not that I would remember, being born in eighty-nine. But it was a cesspool. Now! Now! It's the most prime retail real estate on earth. It all began with the musicals, which all began with *Oklahoma!* back in the early forties, with Rogers and Hammerstein. It gave our troops hope as they crossed the pond to defeat Hitler. Who knew an art form was engendering? When you make a splash in the pool of time, there's no telling the number of ripples—and a war is a cannon ball. O.K. pun totally intended! Ha!"

"You're so right," says Angela. "That's a great point. You're really smart."

"Thanks, Ange," I say.

"Hey I actually like Ange."

"Do you?"

"Yeah, I'm realizing just now."

"Wunderbar." I wink at Jane, who no doubt picks up on this vibe I'm getting from "Ange."

Ostensibly, Jane's not as impressed with my erudition as I'd hoped. Once again, I Google: how to make a girl fall in love with me. Be myself! Be myself! Oi. Well, what else is there? One article says women love a sense of humor. Here goes nothing.

In the mid-October morning, I close the dishwasher as Jane is loading. She has no reaction and simply opens it again. I pour myself orange juice and close the dishwasher as she leans away to the sink. She turns back to the washer, holding plates. “Um...”

“Must be the poltergeist.”

Later in the morning, Jane asks God where her shoes are. She’s running around upstairs and I hear her from the living room.

“Gee, no clue,” I say loudly.

“Listen, I’m late.”

“Maybe we should name the poltergeist, if he’s going to be this busy. I’m thinking ‘Robert E. Lee.’”

“You’re not funny at all.” Her tone is a little shocking.

“They’re under the oven with the pots and pans.”

“Wow.”

Later I knock on her door. “Did everything work out this morning?”

Her eyes are trained on her homework. “I missed the bus, actually. I was late to class.”

“That’s not good.”

“No, it’s bad.”

“Sorry,” I say.

She looks up and seems very tired. “It’s fine,” she says, giving a little forgiveness smile. I surmise that it wasn’t so much that my prank was unfunny; rather, the timing was bad.

The next afternoon, she is studying in the living room. I sit next to her, read her Nursing book for a second. “I never knew there were so many different types of herpes.” I close the behemoth book before placing it back down. “Oh sorry. Lost your place.”

“Great.”

“Did you know Florence Nightingale remained chaste her entire life?”

“I didn’t.”

“I’m full of useless information.”

“Maybe that’s not useless.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Did Florence Nightingale have bizarre ways of flirting?”

“Ha! Who knows?”

Chastity indeed fascinates me. Or, more specifically, celibacy. I’m pretty chaste myself, but not celibate because someday I will be a dad, have a little guy to take with me to reenactments. I think of Florence Nightingale and her vow. I can’t imagine willfully committing to loneliness.

Before you know it, it’s time for Drunk-or-Treat. It takes place in the dining hall. The already spooky lanterns are hung with spider webs. There’s a live band, which impresses me. DJs are a waste of money. The band is all dressed up like skeletons. Black lights make them look like revived bones. Angela has gone as Morticia. Francine and Maureen are Thing One and Thing Two. Jane is Cinderella. I spend most of the dance with this group. Each slow dance, I try to get to Jane first but other men beat me to it. When the night feels to be winding down with the second “Monster Mash,” I make sure I have my sights set on Jane.

“May I please have this dance?”

“Oh, Herbert, I already said yes to that guy.” She points at some asshole. (Why didn’t I think to reserve her? Imbecile.)

“You can’t blow him off for your pal?”

She shakes her head. Then, to make matters worse, what happens by the end of the night but she has agreed to go on a date with him. On occasion I find that I do understand how a country could declare war on itself. There are times when a war wages in my heart and the sides are: life is worth living/no it’s not.

Angela taps me on the shoulder. “Want to dance?”

“I suppose.”

“Great. I was hoping we’d dance together. Herbert, can I confess something to you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Really? Not a quick heart-to-heart?”

“Not today.”

“Okie dokie.”

Jane says, Hey listen. I need to talk. I really just need to talk. With reserve, I say, O.K. You can always tell me anything. We’re friends. She says, Well that’s exactly what I’ve come to talk to you about. (Oh?) Yes, I think...gosh, how to say this? I say, Well, like I said, Jane, you can tell me anything. She says, Really? I say, Yes. She says, Alright, well, I think I’ve made a mistake. You do? Yes, my date was horrible. All he wanted was my body. He didn’t care about my soul. Jane, that’s terrible. Did you...give him your body? She says, No! No! I...all I could think about

was you! All I could think about was how great you've been to me since we've known each other. Seeing the lust in that asshole's eyes helped me know the love in yours. (My, how the tides have turned.) She continues, So, listen... but I cut her off. Jane, you listen. I take her hand and say, It's not meant to be. She looks teary-eyed. She says, What? What are you talking about? You have feelings for me, I know you do. I say, Jane. Look. She starts crying and I touch her shoulder. I say, I can't change how I feel now.

It goes on like this for a while. Alright, maybe a whole sleepless night.

A terrible week passes. On Friday night, while Jane is out with the luckiest asshole on earth, Angela knocks on my door, asks how my day was.

"Less than great."

"Mine too, actually. But hey, you know, that's life."

"Life."

"Tomorrow we are going to Coney Island for dinner. It'll be obviously too cold to swim, but we'll eat at the boardwalk and hang out."

"Have fun."

"You're not coming?"

"I need to give more attention to the thesis."

"K. Listen, Herbert. I have to be honest with you. I like you. I think you're handsome. I don't think you feel the same way about me, but I had to get that off my chest."

"I kind of always knew. It's alright. You'll get over me. I promise."

"I don't want to get over you."

“Give it some time. Wait, tomorrow is the whole house going?”

“Yes.”

“Just wondering.”

At Coney Island, Angela says, “I’m glad you came.”

“Needed some fresh air.” The five of us walk the boardwalk, ride the Ferris wheel, and eat lots of junk. Look at Jane. Look at her! She observes the Atlantic. I’m not sure what I’m going to do without her heart. We’re sitting here on benches, not talking much. I’m full from corn dogs. All the different booths beckon with their wafting smells of dessert. The sand stretches out to the water that stretches to other continents. I feel like a beached whale. Then I get an idea, warm and consoling like churros: at least no one like Captain Small has once-and-for-all carved out my heart. The wind in Jane’s hair reminds me that it was not an engagement. It was just one date. I haven’t even asked her how it went.

“Sheila”

“Herbert, wait,” says Mom as I round the staircase. A Golden Oldies PBS special underscores my footsteps. *Hit the road, Jack, and don't you come back no more, no more, no more, no more.* She knits in her recliner, to the left of Dad in his. “I went shopping.”

The tournament begins at eleven. In my haste I almost forgot a snack.

I say, “Oh, gracias,” and make a one-eighty to a dozen moments of my life history, magnetized to the fridge. From birth to college graduation this past spring. I notice again the one of sixteen-year-old me—thinner, no beard—standing behind the counter at my first and, well, so far only job: Sprinkles in the center of town. Commuting up to Storrs allowed me to keep the job during undergrad. The picture was taken when we opened, my junior year of high school. In it, I am flanked by the family, Mr. Sprinkles—real name John Paul Junior—and his now, as of May, ex wife Sheila bookending Munson, Alistair, Deborah and me. (I look closely at Sheila, at her blonde pig tails and white tennis skirt and think: was she unhappy even then?) He still loves the nickname. The little kids started it, or rather, the grandmothers and au pairs. *Tell Mr., um, Mr. Sprinkles what flavor you'd like.* It stuck like chocolate on a kid's fingers. He, or his appearance anyway, hasn't changed. He's the same old, lovable, six-foot, five graying baby boomer with the voice of a tuba, the protuberant mouth of a giraffe, and the girth of a soft-serve machine. (I'm one to talk about girth, but really I'm a fraction of him.)

I open the freezer to discover a new bounty of french fries, egg rolls, Stouffer's lasagnes, and a quart of vanilla. I take out the egg rolls.

Dad says, “Stay a while.”

“Tournament starts soon.”

“How was work? How’s Mr. Sprinkles?” asks Mom, putting down her needles to fix the lavender quilt around her shoulders. Once dangling to her shoulders, the back of her gray hair has been recently tapered like the stern of a schooner.

“Good as he can be, I guess. He wasn't in tonight. Would the egg rolls come out crispy if I use the microwave?”

“Hmm,” she says.

“Are you still in the top twenty-five?” asks Dad.

“Top ten now,” I say, humbly.

“Wow,” says Mom.

“Very cool,” says Dad.

I look at the clock on the stove. 10:55. “O.K. I’m going to risk it with the microwave.”

Upstairs, I minimize my graduate school application. I’ve certainly never dreamed of getting a master’s, but becoming a therapist without one is like trying to beat the boss without playing the level. I’ve allowed myself only one year off from the real world. I can’t work at Sprinkles my whole life. Or can I? No. No, I can’t. But the application isn’t due until December fifth. I put on my headphones and bring up *Mob of Myths*. A silver aegis appears before me, the ominous cello throbs, and I find that the egg rolls, despite the microwave, are crispy.

John Paul Junior makes an ice cream delivery the next day. It’s noon, but I don’t mind waking up early to help. Our fall hours are one to nine, ten on Fridays, closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The delivery takes about twenty minutes, an old routine series of hand truck trips from John Paul Junior’s pickup in the presently deserted lot out back.

It's the week before Halloween and John Paul Junior has gone all-out with the decorations. The store's two display windows are covered in spider webs and decals. A life-size zombie couple sip milkshakes in the window to the left. Jack-o-lanterns grin on bales of hay. Orange signs advertise pumpkin and pumpkin caramel cheesecake flavors.

Most of the delivery is carried out in silence. He seems moody today. It makes me uneasy, because he's been oscillating between extremes since the spring. Then he finally speaks up when we're almost finished. "By the way, do me a flavor. No more volunteering the butter fat percentage."

We pause by the back door on our last trip out to his truck. I say, "What if they ask?" Our homemade ice cream is sixteen percent butter fat, the highest percentage legally permitted by the state of Connecticut.

"Do they?"

"Not typically, but when they say the ice cream is amazing, I feel like I owe an explanation."

"Let's keep it to ourselves. Anyway, we need to talk about something else entirely." We walk outside again to the empty lot. Browning weeds surrender from the cracked pavement. He stands still by his pickup truck, arms at his sides. "Are you opposed to me selling marijuana out of the store?"

I laugh. "My D.A.R.E. officer warned me about...wait, really?"

"Yes."

"Wow." I try to let it sink in. "You're serious."

“My friends and I have had too many secretive rendezvous with too many sketchy characters in too many sketchy locations.”

“Yikes.”

“It’ll be a very small operation. The clients will only be friends and acquaintances. But I want you to feel alright with it. You’re like a son to me. And you’re going to be here when, you know, well, you’re going to have to make a few of the, um, hand-offs.”

“I had no clue you did...that you smoke.”

He stares off. “It numbs the pain. Anyway, what do you say?”

“Just some hand-offs of unmarked, otherwise innocent and small packages? Could be anything in there, right?” *Detective, people lose stuff here all the time. I thought it was car keys, an engagement ring, earrings.*

“Great.” He puts out his hand, and I’m still shocked enough to just shake it. The hand is enormous and, though he’s been retired almost a year, still calloused from forty years in construction.

This explains a lot. I previously thought his ice cream binges were because he was depressed from the divorce. I’ve never done drugs myself, but I know one of marijuana’s most famous side effects is hunger. John Paul Junior is prone to coming in around closing—or, God, even before dinner—and plopping a tub of pumpkin caramel cheesecake on his lap in the back.

On a dead Saturday afternoon last weekend, he took the seat of one of the zombies and when patrons did trickle in, he started waving like an animatronic. This scared the heck out of unsuspecting people, and he laughed until he cried.

The next day, he did the same thing but in his pope costume, giving blessings. It had the same effect. People jumped backwards, or ran, or slapped the display window, and he bent over with laughter.

Many times back in the summer, he would come in, ask anxiously if everything was alright, and stand behind the register, bending back his head to add drops to his red eyes. Sometimes he would go into the back and spray himself with way too much cologne. I'd lean behind the partition to observe. He'd look up in a fog of cologne and say, "I smell pretty again." I figured he'd been gardening or riding his motorcycle. After eating too much ice cream, he'd stand up, belch, and ask if I wanted to split a calzone. Of course I'd want to split a calzone. So we'd have a calzone delivered and he'd draw a line down where he felt the center ought to be. He bought, so what did I care? At the end of a busy night in the summer, he'd count the register, looking mesmerized. I'd ask if the sale was really that good, and he'd say, "The dinero is very verde." Once he gawked at the store's decor, craning his neck at the sprinkles he'd painted onto the white aluminum ceiling. "It's a galaxy of sprinkles. I wish I could lick the sprinkle stars." On this particular occasion I asked if he was alright. "Don't mind me," he said. He looked at his watch. "The space ship will land soon." I did consider, at this point, that he was possibly on drugs, but it just seemed so unlike the conservative Republican I'd always known. I kept chalking it up to extreme sadness, like you'd either laugh or cry in his shoes so he was laughing. Sometimes he'd help me if it was busy. One regular, in with his two little boys, asked him how he was and he said, "Pretty shitty," and started giggling to himself. The customer eyed the sons, both looking up at him with spoiled innocence. "Boys, that's a word adults can say but you can't,

right?” They nodded, as if they’d sinned just by being present. The man eyed the still privately giggling John Paul Junior with disappointment and gave me the order.

I’m thinking. My cichlid tank is the only thing presently lighting my room. I can’t believe this. John Paul Junior, of all people, a druggie? Is that why they divorced? He said they had simply fallen out of love.

Sales start the next week, another otherwise refreshingly autumnal Saturday. I disagree that “Sheila” is a good alias for the marijuana, but he says it’s only natural for people to still ask for her, unaware they split.

Removing a small black garbage bag and a sheet of paper from his glove compartment, he says, “Here’s our updated list.” He passes it to me. There are photographs next to names.

“These clients are cool with us having their names and likenesses?”

“This is strictly for you. I know them all. There are three new ones.” He points.

“Number three, Stanley Johnson—doesn’t ring a bell. Four, Bob Higgins—Pastor Bob?”

He nods.

“Five, Martin Mitchell—that’s familiar too.”

“Zoning commissioner.”

“Oh. Six, Dorothy Henderson—Mrs. H?”

“You know her?”

“My kindergarten teacher.”

“Dot’s my cousin. I see this bothers you.”

“What—no.”

“The whole thing scares you.”

“Nope.”

“I don’t want you doing anything you're uncomfortable with. You're like a son to me.”

“I’m not uncomfortable. I’ll get used to it.”

I check the roster for the first week, but it doesn't take long to know all six clients by memory. If John Paul Junior is around, he handles it. Martin Mitchell is the first transaction, near closing time that first Saturday. He’s a pot-bellied but otherwise debonair man in a felt vest bearing the town’s insignia.

“John Paul,” he says, as I look busy scraping down barrels.

“Marty,” says John Paul Junior.

“Here for…” he pauses, “Sheila.”

“Let me get her for you, Marty.” He goes back to the safe.

When he returns, Martin says, “Say, what happened between you two anyway?”

“Fell out of love, I guess.”

“Just fell out of love?”

“After thirty-three years, there was no more adventure. And a little birdie just told me she’s already seeing other people.”

“Too bad, John Paul.”

“It is,” he says, as if it’s simply exhausted him. “But it is what it is.”

Mostly they come in during the day and he's only in at night.

When Pastor Bob enters and sees me, he does a double take and almost leaves. Two young girls are paying and no one else is in line. They return to their bikes outside. "Herbert," says Pastor Bob, swinging his arms, tightening his jowls. He's a white haired gentleman with a tidy white mustache, warm blue eyes, and a gregarious smile.

"Pastor Bob."

"How long have you worked here?"

"Since high school."

"I've never been in...until now. My first time."

"Thanks for coming in."

He nods once, still smiling, looking at our menu board. He claps his hands into a rub, as if for heat. After a silence, he says, "Well, Herbert, I'm, I'm here for Sheila." He's serious now, looking straight at me, still warm and gregarious, but as if about to receive some new solemn sacrament. In the safe are a bunch of packages with the various names already written on them; each package is a cardboard box wrapped in white wax paper. I hand him the one that says, Robert Higgins. He says, "In the future, maybe it doesn't need to say our names on them?"

"I'll pass that along."

He gives the pastoral smile. "Thanks."

"You were never here."

He thinks about this. "Isn't the point that we can say we were just buying ice cream?"

"Oh, right." Darn nerves.

“Just so you know,” he adds, pausing before the door. “This is for my wife. As you are well aware, she has cancer. They don’t allow this yet, legally, but you’re doing us a service.”

His wife does have cancer. “Glad to help,” I say. Am I? I don’t know anything anymore.

Stanley Johnson has only come in once. His son is over in Iraq and he says he wants the weed for emergencies—in case he gets unsettling news, or the worst news. Mr. Gentile, owner of the hardware store, comes in and announces that he’s had to close his hardware store because of Home Depot. The other two are: Smitty, who John Paul Junior rides his motorcycle with, and Mrs. H. Smitty gets his order directly from John Paul Junior, but his profile is on my sheet just in case.

Mrs. H! Oi.

In her late seventies now, she walks fine and smiles but some vigor has dwindled, naturally. As she enters, she looks around Sprinkles and gapes at all the effort put into the store: the ceiling, the wallpaper, the old fashioned soda machine, the pristine oak cabinets that were all made by John Paul Junior. I recall how she once gaped at our arts and crafts. “Herbert,” she says, the smile unwavering.

“Mrs. H.”

“John Paul is so kind to do this. I don’t know how he’s making money. He sells for the cheapest around. He can’t possibly be making money unless he grows it himself.”

“He’s usually a savvy business man.”

“I’m not complaining.” She gets a sundae in addition to Sheila. She asks for the sundae to go, adding, “For the munchies.”

A lady I've never seen before comes in. It's a rainy day, and we aren't busy. She's a boomer with long silver hair, wearing a black trench coat. "I'm looking for Sheila," she says, uncertainly.

"Sorry, she's not here."

"Oh."

"Can I ask how you...found out about her?"

"Found out about her?"

"Who referred you?"

"I'm her sister. We haven't spoken in years, but I know she just went through a divorce and I want to patch things up, let her to know I'm here for her. I know she owns this store. I don't have any phone number or email or address."

I give her these things and clarify that she does not own this store but her ex husband does. "Any ice cream today?"

"No, but thank you for this."

"Sure thing."

A man enters one afternoon when I am, again, alone. He's a thirty-something white male with straight black hair down to his lower back, maybe six-foot, light beard growth, a mole on the left side of his chin. One hundred, eighty-five pounds. "How's Sheila?" he asks, knowingly.

"I haven't seen her since the divorce."

"No, dude. The other Sheila."

"I know no other."

"Don't jerk my chain, dude."

“There’s only one lady I know by—”

“Wheres His Holiness? He never told you who he gets her from?”

“No.”

“Shakespeare. Nice to meet you, dude.” We shake. “Tell the pontiff I stopped by. He owes me a grand. No rush, but don't let it wait a year either.”

“I’ll pass that along.”

“So what’s it take to get a cone in this joint?”

“Two seventy-five.”

“You want to subtract it from that grand?”

“Oh, oh, sure.”

“Cool. Mint chocolate chip, please.”

We are totally dead on Halloween because kids are out getting free candy. John Paul Junior is in his pope costume again, and I notice that he’s outgrowing it. On his laptop by the register, we watch videos of tarantulas fighting scorpions, American soldiers testing high powered assault weapons in the desert, and Billy Joel music videos. “By the way, Shakespeare came in today. I thought you were done with sketchy characters?”

“Eventually. For now we need him.”

“How do you plan on breaking away?”

“Growing my own.”

“By the way, you owe him nine hundred, ninety-seven dollars and twenty-five cents.”

He cocks an eyebrow.

“He had a cone.”

“O.K. It’s alright. I’m good for it.”

“Where do you get marijuana seeds from?”

“I don’t know.”

“Seems it would be counter productive for a drug dealer to sell the seeds. Unless they really jacked up the price.”

“Yeah. I’m sure I can find them somewhere.”

“Are you actually making money off this?”

“Let me worry about that. Can’t you watch ‘Uptown Girl’ without asking so many questions?”

“Sorry.”

We watch ‘Uptown Girl’ for a moment, and then he asks me, “Do you ever miss her?”

“Sheila?”

“Yes.”

“Do I?”

He waits.

“Yeah, sometimes.”

He looks at his hands. “She’s with other guys.”

“You mean before the divorce?”

“I don’t think so. But now she is. I saw her leaving McCoy’s with a guy. He looked younger.”

“It makes you upset?”

“It devastates me. Somehow, even after the divorce, I hoped we’d find our ways back to each other. But now that’s impossible. She was my wife. My *wife*, in another man’s arms.”

“I wish I had some advice.”

“It’s alright. Nothing can be done. Don’t counselors just listen anyway?”

“Mostly,” I say. “I think.” He clicks the next video: “The Longest Time.”

I’ve still never tried marijuana. I don’t need it in order to stare into space, or to be fascinated by the mundane. On All Saints Day, the rain beads up on the windows and some of the beads grow too big and run down, catching more beads and growing bigger. Then they start dodging some other beads. No seeming rhyme or reason. The window looks like a moguls trail and the falling beads like skiers. I take the black garbage bag out of the safe. My parents warned so much about this stuff. Teachers, parents grandparents, all warned like it really brings the end of the world. And here it is. Right here. Doing nothing in this bag.

I should submit my graduate school application.

November is early for snow, but it happens, is happening. If it weren’t for the Sheila sales I imagine we’d close on Columbus Day like the other years.

I go into the safe again and remove the black garbage bag. I remove the plastic sandwich bag John Paul Junior divvies from. I open it. The smell is truly unique.

If I smoked some, would John Paul Junior know? I can’t smoke because I can’t. It would feel like the end of the world. This stuff looks like oregano. I spread the lips of the bag. Yeah, definitely just like oregano. I pinch the oregano. This stuff that grows out of the earth is so bad?

It spreads out on my sweaty fingers, sticking. My heart speeds up. I already feel guilty. Everyone said, “Don’t touch the stuff,” and that’s literally what I’ve just done. I try rubbing it off my sticky fingers. Dammit, it’s still on my fingers like flakes of fish food. I rub as much off as I can but there’s a green dust. I close the dime bag, close the garbage bag, and lock the safe. I wash my hands. There are two cameras but they’re decoys. I should not be this scared of a plant that grows out of the dirt like tomatoes.

“How was work?” Mom asks as I wash my hands at the kitchen sink. We’ve just concluded our second week of Sheila sales. While locking up, John Paul Junior said I was right: he isn’t making money off of it, but he said it takes time to build a business. I almost asked why he doesn’t try to expand his client base, but I didn’t want to encourage him. With the lights off, the sprinkles on the wallpaper and the ceiling and the actual ones in their plastic little cubbies were so colorless. There was no difference between chocolate and rainbow. I should submit my graduate school application.

“Herb? Are you alright?”

“Oh, work was good.”

“Are you hungry?”

“No.”

“We have ground beef. I could make a cheeseburger.”

“No thanks. I think I’ll just have a root beer.”

“Is there a tournament tonight?”

“Yes, in fifteen minutes.”

“Alrighty. Good luck.”

“Thank you.” I open the can. Root beer has always been my favorite. I take a big gulp.

A long time ago, Seamus O’Neill was my best friend. We’d ride our bikes all over, play N64, go fishing, you name it. Until he got in with the wrong crowd in seventh grade. I knew a new school would bring new friends, but I’d figured this didn’t mean anything would have to end. We still hung out, but a little less because he was often with the skaters after that summer. One day, under a smoky October sky, out on a dock on the river we fished from, we were nursing our root beers and waiting. He lit up a white cigarette, but one that had been sloppily twisted into formation, not one of those perfect cylinders from a pack—though I would have been against that too. The charred smell filled the air. After his first puff, as he let his chest swell, he pinched the thing and held it out to me, exhaling. My heart was racing. I shook my head and he shrugged. In minutes his heavy-lidded eyes were red, and his freckled cheeks were paler than normal. Tuned to the frequency of some other, new world, he puckered his lips and exhaled again. My curiosity was inflating. “What do you see?”

“What do I see?” He puffed again. “What the fuck?” He grinned and I felt like a mackerel. “Am I hallucinating you mean?” The grin grew, and I seemed to be the one hallucinating: specters of his new friends had appeared around him like a menacing Greek chorus, sharing and augmenting his scorn. Girls would somehow forever know I asked this. Or the same naive me that asked it in the first place would continue forever on the path of not getting life. “No. I don’t see anything.” He inhaled, exhaled and looked out at the water with a wry smile.

We didn't catch anything, and we parted where our two streets forked, him standing on his pedals, a fishing pole gripped between the left handlebar and his palm, the back of his blue hoodie to me.

With two weeks to go until it's due, I should be submitting my graduate school application, but every time I call it up from its minimized place at the bottom of my screen, I can only stare at it. To fill in the remaining boxes, to type responses to the last few questions, seems forbidden. I cannot do it. I just cannot bring myself to do it. Nightly, it comes to this inaction. And it worsens to the point where I am not doing things instead of the application. I'm simply doing nothing, or rather, as close to nothing as one can get. I let the air out of my office chair hydraulic, sink, lean and let the air back in. Repeat. The chair gives a little squeal as I descend. I pop some pimples in the forrest of my chest. I floss my teeth for the hell of it, spitting blood into the porcelain sink. After a total excavation, I peer into the recesses of my nasal cavity.

I sit down at the computer on a Monday afternoon, a whole open day of play ahead of me. I double click on the icon for *Mob of Myths*, but as the aegis appears and the ominous cello begins, I close out. I suddenly just don't feel like it. I gaze for a while at my PC wallpaper: scabby Odysseus with his flaming saber unsheathed, his shield at his waist, his focus on me.

The day before Thanksgiving marks one month of Sheila sales, and as I arrive at the store's front door—the windows having retained the fall decorations which aren't Halloween-specific—I see a new sign on the glass door. “CLOSED UNTIL BLACK FRIDAY AT NOON.” It would have been a very slow day anyway. The woolen gray sky has its own way of illuminating the fallen

leaves that skip and fly and crab-walk around town. The smell of rain is in the air. I see the back light is on. John Paul Junior never told me not to come into work, so I decide to check in with him before leaving.

It only briefly crosses my mind that we might be in the process of a robbery.

I unlock the door, and make my way to the back, noticing that the lids that cover the ice cream at night have been removed. One of the dip wells is filled with water and two scoops, and I smell hot fudge. I smell something else, a mad man's potpourri. Behind the partition, the laughter of two people rolls down a hill into pensive quietude. As I get closer, John Paul Junior says, "Are you seeing other people?"

"Oh, you have to go there."

"Are you, Sheil?"

"We can't just have fun."

"I have to know."

"No you don't," she says, harshly. "Herbert," she says, happily. "Long time, no see."

"Yes. What a surprise," I say.

She passes a smoking joint back to her ex husband who's frowning, but amusement dawns on his face as he sees me. She looks good. She's put on some weight, straightened her hair. Between the two of them, on a little snack tray table, are two of our largest empty styrofoam sundae bowls.

"We're just catching up," says John Paul Junior, inhaling.

"I wanted to make sure we were actually closed. You never said anything..."

"Yes, I apologize. I wasn't aware Sheila would be dropping by."

“No, it’s fine, really. I need to submit that graduate school application.”

“Good for you,” says Sheila.

“Do you have time for a quick smoke?” asks John Paul Junior.

My heart races. I think back to that day with Seamus. “Sure,” I say.

He gestures to a folding chair.

I sit. “So what do I do?”

Sheila is glassy-eyed and giddy. “Breathe it in,” she says. “As if it were air.”

I take the thing in my thumb and middle finger. It’s smoking only very slightly. I put it to my lips. I take the brimstone into my lungs and cough my head off.

They laugh, and Sheila claps her hands in delight. I go to hand it back to her, but she says, “You’ll need to do it a few more times.”

“Let’s just see how that one sinks in,” I say. “John Paul’s turn.”

John Paul Junior takes a hit, then Sheila takes another, then it’s my turn again rather quickly. My pulse is racing. I shouldn’t be doing this. I have to drive home. What if I get pulled over? What if my employer some day requires a drug test? What if Mom or Dad notice?

“Not quite ready yet,” I say, and Sheila passes the joint to John Paul Junior.

As the ember glows at the tip of the shrinking thing, I stand up. Maybe I’m being a little too abrupt because they look suddenly concerned. “Herb?” says Sheila. “Come on, hang out. We have to catch up.”

“My graduate school application is due today,” I lie. More coughs continue to pop out of my lungs.

“Oh, boo! Party poop.”

“No, no,” says John Paul. “You better go. That’s important.”

“It was great to see you again,” I say, back tracking toward the partition.

John Paul Junior, almost angrily, says, “He’s talking to you.”

She looks flustered, focusing on not burning herself. She looks up, “Oh, Herb, no, you too.” She pinches the joint to her lips and the tip glows orange once more before I turn.

At home, I sneak past Mom, knitting in her recliner. Dad’s out. Mom hears me on the stairs and says, “What happened?”

“Nothing!” Thankfully I’m more than halfway up, behind the wall.

“Well, you’re not at work.”

“Oh...uh...power went out.”

“Does this mean you're home for dinner?”

But I am upstairs. I feel no different, but the taste of ashes has burrowed into my tongue. I shower, brush the hell out of my teeth, gargle with Listerine until I can’t feel the insides of my cheeks. My teeth have a blue tint. I finish the application at light speed, and before I click SUBMIT, I decide to calm down, go for a walk around the block, and then I’ll come back and check the form once more for errors.

I pass Mom. “Are you home for dinner?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Outside, the sky is even darker, and a few drops linger. Most of the trees are bare, and the leaves spin up into tiny tornadoes. The brittle yellow leaves crackle and conceal my feet on the

sidewalk. Two boys toss a football on a front lawn. I notice a fine exhaust from my breathing. At the end of four blocks, a breeze sends me back. The smell of kindling fills the cold air.

Inside again, I see there is a fire in the fireplace I didn't notice before. "Herbie," says Mom. "Can you add some more wood to the fire?"

"One sec," I say.

Upstairs, I decide against looking it over. I click SUBMIT.

“When in London”

My hand trembled as I added the last ten-pager to one of three finished piles, then stacked the piles left, right, left. What genius assigns all three sections a ten-pager due the same week? Perhaps only the can't-tie-his-own-shoes type, a category I fear I don't objectively belong to. (Ach! See? Ending with a preposition.) I swallowed a half-Xanax with the dregs of my coffee. (What would Dr. Wong say? Did I *need* it? Could I have mitigated the agita on my own?) I feared my comments had been too homogenous, but what's done was done. Fear of a shoddy grading job was of course not the reason for the pill. What was? Oh, to know! As I lowered my head and closed my eyes, I heard my roommate ascending the rickety stairs to our Bloomsbury flat, a brick dorm that was crumpled like osteoporosis. Matthew burst in. He said, “Ready for dinner?” Then he noticed me. “You look like hell.”

“I'm perhaps experiencing a bout of homesickness.”

“Missing New Haven?”

“Well...missing the Great Wall.” Our Great Wall of Books, our compounded cultural capital, was a deep source of pride for us, a better way to visualize our education than the diplomas, though Universitatis Yalensis was its own eye candy. Especially when they've recently hired you back, tenure track.

“We're halfway there,” he said. “Two more weeks.” On Rate My Professor I was “adorable” whereas Matthew was “a miracle.” One young arbiter even deemed his blonde hair and blue eyes “proverbial.” We had become good friends. I called him The Renaissance Man. He called me The Woolf Man. He said, “Remember three years ago? John Denver?” (This was my second trip to London. Three years ago during the thesis-writing, I spent the better part of a year

in Bloomsbury. Matthew had taken a break from his own dissertating in Oxford to visit me. We had done some drunken lyrical appropriating at the George Inn, whence Chaucer's pilgrims once departed and Dickens supped.) He sang, "Room of my own—take me home—to the lighthouse—Ramsey's roam—it's Virginia—Modern Momma—take me home—room of my own."

"Nostalgia," I said. "What a useless emotion." I observed the brown paper bag he had in one arm. "Did you buy more beer?"

"Vino," he said, giving his flat belly a pat. "You've got to watch the empty calories, Herbert." He was one to judge lifestyles. Back home, in addition to his girlfriend, he had been sleeping with Jaimy, a brunette bank teller from the Chase on the New Haven Green. Living alongside a perfidious lover reminded me of my father's adultery; the parallel made me, well, sad. Matthew's girlfriend Christina was a sweet elementary school teacher, deserving of only the best. She had claimed she couldn't visit us because she had a fear of flying. I told her that if I could do it, anyone could do it, but she said there was no use talking about it. I let it go, knowing full well what it was like when people couldn't wrap their heads around your strange fears.

"I don't feel like dinner tonight. Not with your brother and his wife."

He groaned. "I told Maisy you're coming." The plan—before arriving and realizing how busy we actually were with Yale-in-London—had been to form an ex-pat cabal with Dom and Maisy. They'd been in London two years for Dom's job, but it was two weeks into our July and the cabal kept not happening. "Maisy thinks we don't like her. Of course, she never thinks anyone likes her."

I sighed. Matthew's confidence in me, as my own had flagged steadily over the recent months, was a propitious salve. Neurosis had beleaguered me into a corner where I marveled at

the people like Matthew who were not bogged down by epistemological quagmires: *over-analysis* he and Dr. Wong both said. Astute analysis was good. Fastidious scholarship was necessary. Feeling the need to delineate every neuron that fired in your brain was not good, superfluous. And where did the superfluous need come from? I was putting my eggs in Dr. Wong's basket for that one. He had asked me during our first session and all I could think of was a postcolonial scholar's seminar I'd taken. He talked about the evil of trying to inspire someone, and I had thought, *yes! It's an evil, domineering impulse! Everyone should be left alone to think for themselves!* I explained to Wong that I kept a circumspect guard against any inspirational tendencies in me. Wong asked if I thought it was possible to inspire in a balanced, authentic way. I told him I'd think about it. (I did, ostensibly, believe so, had believed so my entire life. Why else would one get into scholarship and teaching? But there's something exhilarating about radically un-learning things you've held to be true.) My new M.O. was derailing me in class—where I was supposed to be a locomotive! A pig in mud! *Deconstruction* was my creed, but my pupils did not easily catch on to how seriously I wanted them to take it. I lamented their moralistic thinking, but the discussions, as a result, were fizzling. Discussions cannot fizzle in our profession. The more discussions fizzled, the more I began to deconstruct, to un-learn, thinking that I just hadn't dived deep enough, but eventually I stopped trusting in even the most basic principles. (I once wrote an essay titled, "The Fallacy of Truth." It was anthologized in the *First-Rate Northeast Disquisitions* series.) My avowal of entropy as the only "true" thing made me nervous to distraction—like I said, especially in class. But even with quotidian business: grocery shopping, going to the library, the movies, or driving. My mind ran laps around my own impermanence in the check-out line. I'd crumble inside as the shopper before me would fumble

with coupons, wondering if at any minute the illusion of quantum stability would unravel, my body commencing its rapid degeneration particle-by-particle, detail-by-detail, limb-by-limb. *Herb, you've just explained the whole thing!* I have, but The Yellow Brick Road is only half of it. See: Stockholm syndrome. According to Wong, I was an accomplice to my own suffering, afraid to be unafraid. Also of interest: he said I was still affected by my parents' messy divorce, that, although over twenty years prior, it had made me too cynical. I conceded; that was part of it. (My parents' tryst *post-ex-divorce* never led to remarrying. Allison—my little sister, the surprise of all surprises, now twenty-two—considers the tryst fortunate, obviously. *Everything happens for a reason*, she believes. In her case, and only in her case, I abide that dark lord of platitudes.) But, as always, there was Matthew, believing in me. “Liz arrived today, so she'll be there. She's a looker. And she's fun. You'll like her.”

I guffawed. “If I go, it's not for Maisy's sister who I've never met. I've met Maisy once.”

“Liz might cure what ails you,” he said, winking.

“Oy. Manic Pixie Dream Girl, anyone? The debutante emerging from behind her curtain of solitude, hungry for culture and romance, and possessing the Special Something that can lift the man from his melancholy?”

“Or just a cute, fun, smart girl, complex and rounded as anyone else. Don't forget that there's always a variation on the theme. For example, she's hardly a debutante. She's a year younger than us. And she's in law school. Manic Pixie Dream Girl is myopic hyperbole in its own way.”

“Maybe I *could* use some intimacy,” I said, with my usual empiricism. Matthew started laughing, and I briefly espied myself. I cringed.

For those first two weeks—since Maisy told him Liz would be visiting—Matthew had been assuring me that I'd find a connection with her. I wanted to believe him. I'd lie awake. Who was this girl (Manic Pixie—God forbid? *Lead me not into Projection...*) that would descend so auspiciously on London and my life? She had no Facebook—my only glimpse of her was from the coffee table in Dom and Maisy's Chelsea flat. There were three pictures that included Liz. One was of Liz and Maisy as little girls with their parents, a faded Christmas photo from maybe the early nineties. The second was taken probably a dozen years ago: a senior portrait from high school. The last was from Maisy's wedding, a little over five years ago. Liz was in a vermilion bridesmaid dress, her effusive brown coiffure woven upward and speckled with tiny white flowers, her cheek pressed to Maisy's. She was, forsooth, cute. Would I *flirt*? In recent months I'd been acting like a celibate. But Matthew had given me hope. I occasionally felt I could pursue her. I also quickly felt the opposite. Committed exclusively to Virginia Woolf.

I think, therefore I go crazy. But the half-pill had worn off and I knew we'd be drinking so I grinned and bared the nerves. (It's a highly un-recommended cocktail.) Dinners tended to trap me. People want—or pretend to want—to know you, and vice versa. I don't know which felt worse: dishing out disingenuousness or having it served to you. But what was there to know about me? The thrill of having gone to Yale and been hired there had, for the most part, worn off, and that had been largely due to the outcomes of many dinners much like the one Matthew and I were headed to: encounters with people who couldn't possibly understand how wonderful you thought your own life happened to be. When people hear *Yale* they get a little interested, but then

you talk about your field. The ears that perked soon wilt. *You've published where? Oh, I think I've heard of it.* Of course, they haven't.

Dom and Maisy's capacious flat was like Buckingham compared to our quaint hole-in-the-wall. It had the same amount of rooms as ours—two bedrooms, one bath, a kitchen, a dinette, and a living room—but everything was swelled in size and dignity. Liz greeted Matthew and me at the door. Maisy had planned a night on the town for after dinner, and Liz was dressed for it: a black halter with a glossy black leather skirt. Steep black heels sat by the door. Her hair was up, though not quite as ebullient as in the photo from Maisy's wedding. To Matthew she gave a wan, "Cheerio," and she hugged him and saw me. Arms akimbo, she said, "And is this your professor friend?"

He cleared his throat, affected an erudite persona. "This is my roommate and esteemed colleague, renowned Woolfian scholar, Doctor Herbert Bradford, MA, PhD, Yale University."

"Herb," I demurred.

"Well, I wasn't going to call you all that," she said, shaking my hand.

I grimaced, feeling the blood stampede to my face.

Maisy wore a sequined shawl that looked like a disco ball had been melted into a liquid and poured over her shoulders like an ice cream topping. She had short, hospitable, Demi-Moore-in-*Ghost* black hair. "Matthew! Herbert! Lovely to see you!" Her voice was full of London; the city had rubbed off on the Connecticut native in lush locutions. She repeated something she had said on our first visit: "Mi flat es su flat." (What is it about the gringo's *recherché* embrace of Spanish? We all do it.)

"English please," said Dom. "After all, it's *England*, where they invented it."

Maisy looked insulted. She said, "It was just an expression."

"Welcome," said Dom. We shook hands. He was even more puissant than his little brother, and he was a partner in one of the Big Four. Maisy was close to Dom in age, still young enough to have kids, but as Matthew put it they had *decided against children*. Macabre phraseology if you ask me, though I get not wanting that job if you're not ready. *But can one really say no forever?*

"Well, dinner's basically ready," said Maisy. "You can all sit down. Sit anywhere."

I sat across from the empty chair. Matthew sat across from Liz. Dom and Maisy sat at the ends. The settings were silver and china, shiny and angelic.

Maisy said, "I tried my hand at every Brit's favorite: bangers and mash."

"Are we going to say grace?" asked Dom, a little sheepishly but sincerely.

Matthew had started to eat, pausing in surprise. He said, "Since when do you say grace?"

"Oh, let me tell you," said Maisy. "Our butts are in the pew every Sunday morning. We went for the first time about three months ago. Out of the blue. He was stressed at work or something—" She trailed off, uncertainly.

Dom bravely said grace while the rest of us were silent. *Bless us, O Lord...*

Maisy thanked him diplomatically. Then she said, "Liz, are you tired?"

"Long flight," said Liz. She forked mashed potatoes into her mouth and focused on the salt shaker. One does not *chew* mashed potatoes, I observed.

Maisy rose to pour wine for everyone. "How was the flight?" Matthew asked.

"Not bad," Liz said, looking from the salt shaker to her bangers.

"No turbulence?" said Maisy, pouring her husband's glass.

“No.”

“No obese person next to you?” said Dom, gulping.

“No.”

“Thank God,” said Dom. “That happened to me last week when I went to Switzerland. I thought Europeans were supposed to be healthier than us.”

“What are you most looking forward to?” said Maisy. She corked the wine and sat again.

“Oh, I don’t know.”

Silence. Maisy looked ready to shake her saturnine sister. I figured law school had taken its toll. On my respites from the tumult of academia, I practically hibernate. To Liz Maisy said, “The club will be fun. Are you ready to dance?”

“I’m ready to drink,” Liz said, wryly amused at Maisy’s concern over her quietude.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” said Maisy, waving her hands. “Nothing, nothing.”

I hoped I wouldn’t see any students. The drinking age is eighteen in London. Maybe if I was proud of my didactics, an encounter would be welcome. We went to Temple of Sound. It was early and not crowded, and the wonderful hoppy smell fills one’s nostrils even outside the vestibule. The lights were swirling around in what seemed like a warm-up stretch. Liz looked uncomfortably at the empty dance floor and said, “It’s only nine o’clock.” Dom and Matthew were placing the first round of frothy cask ale pints on the table of our wooden booth. I’m not much of a dancer, but I was looking forward to the chaos—lights, noise, alcohol—clubs purvey. Though patrons were sparse, the music was thumping. It was hard to hear.

“Twenty-one hundred,” said Maisy, righteously, gathering her shawl.

“Military time, right,” said Liz with the teaspoon of satisfaction that comes from having remembered and then voiced a fact.

“London time,” corrected Maisy.

Liz looked at her phone. “*London* time,” she said, tilting her head and scrunching her eyes with a defensive condescension. She removed her hair clip, shook out her hair, and put the clip back in. Her bare shoulders dully reflected the flashing lights.

“I propose a toast,” said Matthew. “To Her Majesty, the Queen!”

To Her Majesty, the Queen! Clink! After that first ale—coupled with the wine from dinner—I was sitting in a wooden batter. I bought the second round and Matthew joyfully helped with the transportation. With an uncharacteristic intimation of giddiness, I proposed a second toast: “To adventure!” Suddenly, there were bubbles everywhere, moving toward us like a weather system, hundreds of flashing Temples of Sound bouncing around and popping. *To adventure! Clink!* Liz’s face told me she thought the toast was corny. But she was smiling, lovely, though the smile was laconic, and she was soon staring off into nowhere. Later, with our third round, a drunken Matthew made a toast to “man’s muses.” (I’d come to realize he had his eye on a girl one table over, and she’d had hers on him.) Liz seemed not to hear at all. She was gone, on a spaceship. Dom hesitated but joined in, just the two brothers. After the toast, Maisy took her husband’s pint and gulped at it—an action that, ostensibly, made her delighted.

He said, “I can buy you another if you’re so thirsty.”

“There’s something about stealing yours,” she said. “It makes me feel naughty.”

On occasion—as I mentioned earlier, not in a long while—I’ve gone out with Matthew or others with the hopes of finding...I almost said love...a little romance. Yet, sparks fly nearly always on the nights when I don’t have any expectations. Not all the expectationless nights: no, that would be too easy. Then I’d go around trying not to have any expectations, which in itself would mean having an expectation. It’s just that whenever any romance has blossomed, I haven’t been hoping, let alone trying. Also, something about trying—hunting—made me feel absurd and self-loathsome. Way too visceral. Setting sights on a female recalled my father, and since I’m flesh of his flesh it had begun to feel too close to reenactment, though I had no wedlocked commitments. The sight of Liz back at the club—her bare shoulders, her buoyantly clipped-up hair, her ennui, all drenched in the spasmodic lighting—had engendered this manner of thinking, and it was lingering through the night. Back at Dom and Maisy’s flat, I discovered myself in an inscrutable mood. The alcohol had wrung out my brain’s feel-good chemicals. I felt dutifully platonic. “Man’s muses,” scoffed Liz. She sat next to me on their living room couch’s pullout bed. We were in a pool of blue TV light. *Doctor Who* was on. Liz clapped and said, “I love this show.”

I admitted that I’d never seen it.

“You don’t know what you’re missing,” she slurred. She rolled her head from me to the TV. A young attractive woman walked into a mansion’s drawing room where a slightly older attractive man stood among an ad-hoc workstation of computers. Liz muted the sound. “Welcome to alien watch,” she said in a cockney accent. The man had a seat at his workstation, put on headphones, and began speaking into a microphone while the woman watched him nervously. “We’ve found some aliens. They’re trying to communicate!”

Would I comply? In my own cockney attempt, I said, “What are they saying?”

“We come in peace.”

“They lie,” I said. “Bloody aliens.”

“Would you like another drink?”

“I’m still quite besotted,” I said.

She raised an eyebrow, dropped the accent. “I guess Matthew went home with that girl.”

“Perhaps he encountered a confrere from Oxford.”

“Doubtful.” She yawned and looked at me, the water in her eyes plentiful and sticking to her eyelashes, gathering in the corners. “My bed is more comfortable than this couch,” she said, her words mushing into a composite.

“Is it...” I said, rather nonplussed. This was outrageous fortune. My heart cavorted, but I thought: *No—retain the platonic vagary*. I ran my hand across the white suede armrest of the sofa. I had a sad flashback to a day when I was a little kid, a day I spent hours running my hand over our white living room carpet. The carpet was light when you swiped your hand one way and darker when you swiped it the other.

“Do I have to spell it out for you?”

“Your sister wouldn’t mind?”

“Ha. My sister,” she said, gazing up at the ceiling. “No, my sister wouldn’t mind.”

“It’s very late,” I said. For the first time in my life, I was overcome by a need for chastity. Like being abstinent had the power to unlock the profound truth—*er, idea*—of not needing someone else to feel good about oneself.

“So?” she said, with an enticing crescendo.

“So we shouldn’t,” I said, flatly, but proud as a priest inside.

“No, we shouldn’t. You’re completely right. And you probably just saved us both a lot of stupid embarrassment.” She was smiling with a new resolve, smiling back on what she seemed to now think was such a fatuous penultimate thought, as if the thought had come from someone else. She rose and said, “I better say goodnight before you change your mind and, you know, take me into your arms.” She offered a high-five. I high-fived her.

Then I dreamt I told Christina about everything: Jaimy the bank teller and the girl from the club. Matthew was corybantic, his indecipherable, elongated admonition so loud that it toppled our Great Wall of Books behind him like a waterfall. Curiously, shrapnel of chewed fast food sprayed me in the face. I woke recalling that I had blown the whistle on my father, long ago, not that I had forgotten my mother choking up and saying, “He sells houses but he wrecked our home.” Though things were cool between Dad and me, though we had dinner still on Wednesdays back in New Haven, history was not a palimpsest. As he said in the Burger King parking lot after shit had recently hit the fan, *I could have kept my mouth shut*. I also woke with illimitable regret. What Real Man turns down such a pulchritudinous creature? It seemed, in my hangover, like that door would now be closed. I conjectured I’d insulted her. Hangovers are the worst for nerves; the sensation that morning—a physical sensation, felt in the muscles of my legs and arms and stomach—was that the earth was flat and someone was lifting it to let us all slide off. I took half a pill.

Maisy had made eggs and sausage and French toast. It was warm on the stove. Everyone was in the dinette, waiting. Maisy wouldn’t let us eat and she wouldn’t say why. She was in a

terrible mood. Matthew, who had come in earlier looking like a tourist released from a kidnapping, said, “What are we waiting for? Let’s eat!”

“If you don’t love Christina, you should break up with her,” said Maisy, carefully, as if to not augment her already volatile plight.

“Where did that come from?” said Matthew, a little peeved but with a soupcon of shame.

“Honey, where *did* that come from?” said Dom, like *kids say the darndest things*.

Maisy said, “Matthew, when I met you I was so impressed with you. I thought you were such a gentleman. And when I met Christina I was happy you found such a nice girl.”

Liz said, “New subject, por favor.” Arms folded and mouth pursed and shoved to the side, she looked as awkward as I venture we all felt. She was swallowed up in one of Maisy’s robust white bathrobes, caressing its soft sides. Her hair was damp, and she had no makeup on. There was a beauty mark on her left cheek, and a thick strand of hair was hanging down in a way so gorgeous I hoped she wouldn’t fix it. I remembered Matthew said she lived in New York. I imagined her apartment, the shampoos and soaps in the bathroom, the light colors used to market things to women. A painful thought entered my mind: that other men had known what it was like to wake up in that apartment, and other men would continue to find out. I imprecated myself for the last night. I couldn’t possibly remember my motivation, or continue to sympathize with it anyway. I wanted to beg forgiveness, take her into my arms as she had warned.

Maisy said, “I’ve said what I needed to say.”

“Glad you said it,” said Matthew, pouting.

When the doorbell rang, Maisy sighed and said, “Let’s all answer it.”

Christina was smiling like a bride, blonde and pretty and decked out in white-hot pants and a white blouse. I was the first one behind Maisy. “Our surprise visitor is here!” said Maisy.

“Woah,” said Matthew, behind me. I realized her fear of flying was a diversion. Liz had never met Christina, so she stayed behind all of us until Maisy would introduce her. I noticed her, back there. It seemed she was, as the previous night at the club, mentally elsewhere, watching the scenes of another world unfold—or perhaps replay.

“Surprise!” said Christina. The smile on Matthew’s face was enough to make you—I don’t know, look away. I’ve never seen something so contrived. Wait...never mind.

She stayed with Matthew and me, logically. She called the airline to switch her flight so that she’d return with us too. Only one more weekend stood before us in the middle of what we knew would be another quick two weeks. *Class, class, class. Books, books. Bloomsbury.* On Monday, I decided to lecture; blank stares from interlocutors are infernal, but from an audience it could mean rumination. I’d come in from teaching and see Christina sitting on our couch, watching TV. Or she’d be at the dinette table, reading. Often she was cleaning up after Matthew. She was doing his laundry or his dishes left in the sink. Back in New Haven, she’d vacuum the rugs and Windex the windows and mop the kitchen. I guess we didn’t have enough time in Bloomsbury to mess these things up too badly. “Hi Cinderella,” I’d say. I’d remind her I didn’t feel bad because she had volunteered. She’d laugh and call me a slob, and like clockwork follow it up with, “But that *boyfriend* of mine is the biggest slob.” Matthew didn’t like her doing his laundry or any other sort of cleaning because he felt it was her way of controlling him, or raising the bar of what she expected back. Also, she’d find clues. Once in New Haven she found a grocery receipt that

included flowers he'd bought Jaimy. Christina inquired, skeptically, and I thought she had him, but he said they were for his mom. If it was me, I would have then asked why he didn't just buy them in Boston where his mom lived, but it wasn't me.

And, anyway, what did anything matter? All of language and experience and reason had become ambivalent in our post-postmodern eighth circle of hell: The Realm of Equivocal Meaning. *Wasn't even love relative?* There's the zeitgeist, kids. Scratch, sniff, and remember: the stench of our epoch. (Ach! But look at what I've just done! *I know better.* Weltschmerz is not endemic to millennials. And we've had nihilism, at least in practice, long before Nietzsche or Count Bazarov. But in my error I think I've hit the nail on the head: our solipsism perceives every generation's woes as somehow only our own, or that we've got it the worst because we've evolved, après some Unique Affliction, to ululate our ennui with our tweets.) Of course, the fact that Weltschmerz, ennui, and solipsism are found in every age also does not mean that we feel their sting any less. *Save the world*, I thought. *Save every generation that is to come; quench the fires of our collective neuroses.* But how? *Commit!* Yes—isn't that what we stand accused of? Our fickleness? Generation D—for desultory. *Find something—someone—to live and die for—and your example will precipitate into your species' posterity!* But I thought of Matthew and Jaimy. I thought of my father coming home to my mother after a visit to a flickering red VACANCY sign. (The rain, the floozy, my glistening handlebars, my tears. *My rage.*) I try not to be too misanthropic. Alas, I'd fall asleep after prolonged bewilderment at how nothingness had transmogrified into such complex things.

On the next Saturday morning, Matthew and Christina and I walked over to Chelsea. Maisy was excitedly in charge of the itinerary. She had typed it on her iPhone and emailed it to everyone. It was titled “Going About on Saturday.” It listed: the Imperial War Museum, the London Eye, dinner c/o her and Dom, and Entertainment TBD. Matthew and Christina were watching TV. I loitered for a moment in the doorway to the kitchen, where Dom and Maisy were. Dom said, “Was the list necessary?”

Maisy furtively warned him, “Don’t rain on my parade.”

Liz had left her door open, so I knocked and entered, cued by her, “Hey.” I waited on the unmade guest room bed while she sat at the vast bureau mirror and applied her makeup. Her eye was like a golf ball dropped in pink mud as she ran a pencil along the ridge of her bottom lid. I thought of my parents, before the divorce, when we took vacations together. How they would use the hotel bathroom at the same time, one in the shower, the other on the toilet. How my father, a de facto mate despite the cheating, thought nothing of seeing my mother’s underwear, razors, tampons, deodorant, lotions and medicines. I saw these things in Liz’s open suitcase next to the bureau. Her pristine white running shoes with light sand on the bottoms, her fuzzy lime slippers, and a scuffed pair of All-stars. Fashion-wise, London was like New York’s SoHo. It seemed to be an entire sprawling hoi polloi of fashionistas, a locus classicus for avant-garde. Liz looked like she’d done her research; or *au courant* was how she dressed, *connaturale*. She wore white jean shorts with blue leggings, and her gray sleeveless tee showed a black lacey bra through its low-cut arms. Could her hipster wardrobe complement my Kohl’s motif?—a pair of khaki shorts and a white polo. I felt suddenly sub-par; as if my fashion sense was linked to my quiet classroom. It seemed in that instant like she had been the one to turn me down. “Ready?” I said, as she stood.

“Ready as ever,” she said, gloomily, but then caught herself. She looked at me and flashed a smile, as if to conceal whatever she feared she was unscrupulously revealing.

“What do you think of Liz?” Matthew asked, as we went into a public “toilet” outside the London Eye, the breeze whipping off the choppy Thames. The Imperial War Museum had left me more discouraged about homo-sapiens than usual. “Is she the keep calm to your carry on?”

“Why should I believe there is anything but nothing in this world?”

“I knew she would be good for you,” he said, omnisciently, like my father.

As we all loaded into one of the large glass bubbles, I predicted that The Eye was going to be a problem. On our ascent, the bronze Parliament and the gray Thames were diminishing. Soon we were higher than Big Ben. Huge white gulls coasted by us, some perching on the wheel’s frame. They seemed to taunt me with each staccato head movement as we rose with planetary quiet.

Liz noticed first. “You good?” she asked.

“I don’t like heights,” I said.

Dom said, “You look a little squeamish.”

Maisy said, “Yes, is everything O.K?”

Matthew said, “He’ll be fine.”

I took a full pill, all of them watching me.

Later in the evening, before dinner, Liz and I sat on the outside patio at the busy Hyde Park café. Maisy and Dom walked the pond, shards of sunlight ricocheting off of the tiny waves in cosmic

glory. People were on the pond in those pedal boats, floating along with ducks and swans. Willow branches draped regally above our table, shushing the café clamor with the breeze's help. Matthew was also at the café, a few tables over, writing in a notebook, Christina frowning at a map. I wanted to extend the weekend; the thought of teaching again on Monday was encroaching on the good mood I had tried to cultivate since the Eye. I recalled the days when I dissertated in Bloomsbury and New Haven cafés. I'd bring a stack of books and my computer, somehow feeling bulwarked by the sounds; the scraping of chairs, the clinking of utensils, and the hiss of the espresso machines.

“What's the meaning of life?” said Liz. She furrowed her eyebrows and crossed her ankles, where the blue leggings stopped to reveal her olive skin for a short space before it was concealed again by her All-stars. She slurped her hot coffee and then removed her hair tie.

“How acquainted are you with nihilism?”

“I think life is about finding peace,” she said. She sat in something like a lotus position and drew up her hands, palms skyward like Buddha, her eyes closing and a funny little smirk stretching her lips.

Feeling that she was addressing recent events, I said, “What transpired on the Eye was a curious thing.”

“Anxiety?”

An unexpected sense of pride blazed in me, as if neurosis was the cachet of an intellectual. But because it seemed like the thing to say, I said, “Makes me feel weak.”

“You are not weak,” she said with magnanimous compassion. She broke the almost-lotus position, her shoes clapping the concrete emphatically. “I need to tell you something. I need to tell *someone*.”

I folded my hands. She galloped her knuckles on the aluminum table. She laughed at something, then grew sad. The wind picked up. She delivered her next words to the sky behind me. “No one knows this. *Maisy* doesn’t know this. I dropped out of school after this last semester. I don’t want to be a lawyer.”

What to say? I went with honesty. “I don’t blame you.”

She returned her eyes to me. “I’m relieved, but I don’t have a plan yet. I was an English major. Then I spent eight years doing everything. An internship for a film producer in New York; then a copy editor in Greenwich where I spent the most time; then I tried things out at a law firm and thought *I could do this*, but I couldn’t. And damn, I’m glad. And I’m glad I told someone. Thanks for being my shrink for like two seconds.”

I nodded. She clipped her dark hair up. The ends of her hair hovered prettily over the back of her head. “What am I going to *do*?” She sat forward, then leaned back, then sat forward. She fiddled with her red coffee stirrer. She laughed at something she seemed to notice in her heart, something she’d seen there before. “I want to be a nice little housewife.”

“Interesting.”

“I want to do nothing! Nothing! I’ll cook and sew and clean. I want to read all day. I need to spend more time just being. Sometimes I’m completely overwhelmed, and I cry because of how beautiful everything is. I couldn’t *feel* like this if I was a lawyer. Look. We’re in London,

and there are flowers, and someone's riding a horse over there. I haven't been this happy in my life."

"Good," I said. Then I had a splendid thought, half-memory, half-epiphany, half-full glass. "I read all day."

"Livin' the dream." She drank her coffee. "I have a lot of shit to figure out." She said this in tandem with a groan that morphed into a tender smile. Another inward glance, now redolent of catharsis. "Why do I have a weird feeling that you actually might know everything?"

"Plato would agree," I said, admittedly flattered.

"Really? You and Plato are friends?" She laughed, looked down, then back up, and fixed her smile on me. I considered explaining but looked over at Matthew and Christina who seemed ready to leave.

Maisy and Dom rendezvoused and we dined at a place I was glad to not be paying for. Once the sun dragged the train of its golden robe across the London sky—so I'm giving the sun pre-Galilean efficacy, what of it?—we went to a pub and then played drinking games back at their flat. Matthew, with an inebriated gesticulation, spilled beer in the dinette, suds like broken surf rushing out over the table and dripping onto the floor. He attempted to sop it up with Kleenex. Maisy said he did a bad job and the place would stink like Dom's frat house; she grabbed a towel and cleaned it again. When she stood up around midnight and announced she was going to bed, Dom said he'd soon follow her. "You can if you want to," she said, stirring glances between the rest of us. He looked annoyed, if not a little embarrassed.

On the Friday before departure, we went to the Tower of London. The medieval fortress was schlepping with school groups and tours. It was more like the Tower of Babel; people were speaking every language. We were not talking much—with the exception of Christina. Even if she was in a less loquacious mood, you could find her with your eyes closed by listening for the electronic sound of her camera. I watched Liz when she read exhibit signs; she read them silently, but her mouth moved. She traced with her finger the gritty carvings from the prisoners in the different towers.

“I still don’t know why they call it a *tower*,” said Christina. “To me, the Empire State Building is a tower. This looks more like a castle. I’d want my wedding here.”

“They’ve executed half of western history here,” said Matthew.

“There were executions as recently as the forties,” I said.

Liz looked at the armor in the display cases. She looked at the swords. There was a two-storey dragon made out of armor. She peered up from a spiked metal ball dangling from a wooden truncheon and caught me looking at her. She smiled at me. I smiled politely and looked quickly away.

After we’d seen most of the Tower, we were standing outside where some of the paths intersected. Maisy was dressed in all black that day: black jeans, a black blouse, and black loafers. She gripped her purse in one hand and her tour book in the other. The wind came from behind her, pushing her short hair toward her face. She shifted the tour book to her other hand and poked at her tears. Dom stared blankly at the gravel path.

“I’m sorry,” sobbed Maisy. “I don’t know why I’m so funny out of nowhere.”

“It’s alright,” said Christina. She smoothed Maisy’s hair.

The tableau held like this for a moment before Dom said, "Let's all have a siesta."

Matthew and Christina had gone for a stroll around Chelsea. Maisy and Dom went into their room. Liz and I were in the living room. Liz turned on the news and sat next to me on the couch, the bed tucked away under the cushions. I crossed a leg as she sat on both of hers, her toes in their pink socks pointing toward me. I was feeling disconsolate, for the exact reason she voiced: "I can't believe we're leaving tomorrow." On TV, there was a story about a local man who made it into a national cooking competition. He was in a studio kitchen with the local channel's anchor, a tall, zealous woman. The contestant was garrulous, waving his knife around. He had big arms and a long ponytail. I muted it. I said, "He killed my family so I cut his heart out."

"Give me all your money," she said, beaming. "Or I stab the cameraman."

"Want a magic trick? Now you see, now you don't."

I un-muted it. "So," said the anchor, "Why *that* charity over all the others?"

We could hear Maisy and Dom arguing in their room that was next to the living room. I held out my wallet to her, pre-flipped to the pictures. She saw the picture of Allison and me that was my mother's Christmas card when I was in college; I in a green jacket and ten-year-old Allison in a purple dress, a doll's thick brunette hair, deep dimples. Liz said, "This has to be your sister. She looks just like you."

"Allison," I said. Next was the picture of my parents and Allison and me, when Allison was a baby in my mother's arms. We were in front of the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree.

"They're divorced," I said.

"This was before the divorce, obviously," said Liz, not looking for my reply.

“Yes,” I lied anyway. She saw my pill pouch tucked behind the photos. “I wish I didn’t need it,” I said. “Do me a favor: take my pills and just go toss them off the Tower Bridge.”

“Mine are divorced too—” she started, not seeming to hear my request.

The door to the living room was open, but Maisy stood out of sight and knock-knock-knocked on the paneling. “Lizzy, you haven’t gotten to Westminster Abbey yet,” she said, moving over. “It’s free if you go for vespers. That starts at five.” Dom appeared sullenly behind her. We stood and walked over to them. Though she was smiling in her tour-guide way, Maisy’s eyes were red and fissuring like heat lightning across a white July sky.

Inside that juggernaut cathedral, vespers had already commenced. Choral music wafted up with the incense. There were no pews in the nave. The floor was a shiny marble in which you saw your oblique essence. Maisy led the charge to the sanctuary which seemed far enough to be considered in a different city zone. I felt uneasy, like I had in the Eye, and I was checking for EXIT signs. We stood in Poets’ Corner. Someone was at the pulpit to read from scripture. I was sweating heavily, adding a second item to the list of things I’ve prayed for: that my diaphoresis wasn’t seeping through that day’s polo too much. (Oh, the first thing was snow, that Christmas years and years ago, on Madison Ave with my family, as if snow would have helped my parents fall in love again.) I descried the illustrious busts. *Geoffrey Chaucer, Charles Dickens, John Dryden, Alfred Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, W.H. Auden, Jane Austen*. Some had floor stones or wall tablets, or bigger coffin-like (or actual coffin) monuments like Shakespeare’s that was behind me. Liz glanced at me nonchalantly.

Why was a church, of all places, roasting my nerves over the open flame? I did not believe in God—ever since the truth about Santa, I decided if one was fake, so was the other; both mere artifice to distract us from the abyss—though I’ve usually found churches peaceful. *Tomorrow*, I thought. We’re leaving tomorrow. Back home. Back to the place where I did not know Liz. I looked at her again. She was dazzling. She seemed to give me peace, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that back home our paths would cease to cross. And yet, that in itself was not the cause of my panic. Damned if I knew what was. I flipped through my wallet, but I could not find my pills. I ran my hands through the pockets of my khakis and my breast pocket. Nothing. I excused myself past Liz.

Outside, the square was busy with pedestrians and cars, driving on the wrong side. I looked into the weak sun, a dull orange ornament resting on the church across the street. *Look at how half the planet can behold the same object together—not the idea of it or its broadcast image, but the actual thing. A terrifying sense of unity.* It was noon back in Connecticut where my father was maybe showing a home. Where my mother was overseeing her library. My mother had been a librarian for thirty years, the anniversary—her longest anniversary thanks to Dad—occurring that June, before I left with Matthew. We had a little cake for her, Matthew, Christina, Allison and I. Maybe Allison, recently graduated and ready to begin a career as a biologist, was checking out a book and in on Mom at the moment I beheld the sun. Mom’s love of reading made her ideal to me, such a marvelous thing that she of all women was my mother. She had always kept books all over our house. I tested at a high school reading level when I was in fifth grade.

“Everything alright?” said Liz, behind me.

“Walk with me,” I said. We walked down the side of Westminster, stopping before Parliament. “I lost my Xanax,” I said. “If I don’t find it, I’m not getting on that plane tomorrow.”

“You *didn’t* lose it,” she said. “Here.” She held out my pouch in one hand.

I blinked. I slipped the pouch back in my wallet.

“Oh my God, that was the worst idea.” She put her hands over her face. “I’m crazy about you,” she whined. “I’ve known you for two weeks and it’s made me a crazy person.” Traffic was stopped for a car entering Parliament. “You’re not saying anything.”

“I’m processing.”

“But do you forgive me? I might love you,” she said. “Say you forgive me.”

“I forgive you.”

She kissed me. She pulled back and smiled but stopped smiling. “You’re weirded out.”

That night, I drank to the point of scarcely knowing my own presence. I saw things through the lens of shaky and bleeding colors, tenebrous in the dim dinette light at Dom and Maisy’s. After one last round of *Kings*—the game where you slide the cards under the beer can tab until it pops and the tab-popping person has to drink the whole thing—Maisy’s card was the last straw and the tab popped. She stood and shrieked in celebration, pulled the tab fully, drank half the beer, and then poured the rest over her head. Dom guided her to the bathroom, then to sleep.

Liz got up for a drink of water and upon returning to the table, sat on my lap—and then we were in her bedroom, and then we were naked, and then her head was moving at my waist and my intoxication did not inhibit my, *ahem*, alacrity. “Was ‘I love you’ too much?” she said

playfully, forgetting that when you're drunk it wasn't so easy to treat something that worried you as if it didn't. She sat up and wrapped herself in the sheet.

"Don't overanalyze it," I said.

"It *was* too much. I just meant I like you."

"That's how I apprehended it."

We made love. I don't know what to say about it. It was amazing. But after, staring at the old ceiling, my libido drained like a sorry cask, I had an urge to see her back at Temple of Sound, traced out in a silhouette by the multicolor flashes; wanton for other men, never having considered me.

I woke up on the morning of departure with a hole in my stomach and a triturating headache. Liz was sadly asking me, "Why don't you have the right? You said, 'I have no right.' You meant I had no right to hide your pills?"

Beyond the billowing white curtain, London was saying goodbye. Birds were chirping in the cool English air. The sun was bright and bursting through the diaphanous leaves that lined the cobblestone street. I held my head. "Zounds," I said. "I don't remember." She gave a weak smile. I touched her arm, then her lips. I said, "If I profane with my unworhiest hand."

"Sounds like Shakespeare," she said, winking. "English major, remember?"

"Right. You poor thing." She giggled. I kissed her. We made love again. When we stopped, I said, "They were divorced in the picture at the Rockefeller tree." She was so out-of-the-loop that her face wasn't even confused, just waiting. I explained the whole saga: "My father

used to cheat on my mother. I told her and she divorced him. But then, a year after the divorce, they conceived my sister while cleaning up from my tenth birthday party.”

“That’s actually kind of beautiful. Wait, how do you—did you walk in on them?”

“No. My father shares easily when tipsy.”

“What time is it?” She leaned away from me to see the digital clock. The comforter lifted with her. Red lines were imprinted on her back, from her shoulders down to her butt. She sat up and dropped her hands in her lap. She was, permit me, an angel. “It’s seven. Will you call me?”

“I will,” I said.

“Are you going to call her when we get back?” asked Matthew as we were taxiing in our behemoth bird of steel. Christina, between us, looked up at him suddenly. He continued, “I’m not supposed to talk about this, but Liz is not convinced you will.” I had not taken a Xanax; partly out of a desire for working through it on my own but partly, I suspected, out of a masochistic tendency. *What would happen if I let panic get the best of me? Would I scream? Flail? Make global evening news for all—for Liz—to see?* I glimpsed the other jets taking off before us. I had been assigned the window, but Matthew let me switch for the aisle. I wanted to know what was going on with Dom and Maisy. I conjectured infidelity, but given Matthew’s history, I didn’t want to discuss it in front of Christina. “What do you think?” he said. The engines thundered. Matthew was flipping through the *Skymall*, London falling away behind his head. “Are you afraid?” I thought he had changed subjects to the flight. He looked as serious as our angle that was cutting into the sky. I gripped the arm rests. Christina patted my right hand. They both were

so undisturbed by the speed, the height, the angle. Matthew didn't notice it was bothering me until he looked at my hands, opened the *Skymall* again, and said, "Deep breaths, Woolf Man."

I nodded hopefully, took a deep breath, and said, "I really like her."

"Aw," said Christina.

"Jolly good," said Matthew.