

*Running Towards Nothing*

A Novel by Mike Heppner

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I.

1.

I know you. I know everything about you.

I also know *her*. I know her because *you* know her. And you know everything about her.

Give the person an identity. Somehow it all starts with male or female, or something else.

Walking feels like floating. There are times when you leave your house and walk two or three blocks down the road. Sometimes you push directly into the woods. You like to pretend someone is following you, chasing you down. They want to catch and hurt you. The woods threaten danger; inhuman movement rustles in the leaves. Someday maybe you'll succumb to it, whatever this danger is. You want your last moments to be a panicked blur. It's nothing you can explain to people, or even to yourself.

The thought is always this: to lose yourself in something that's too much for you.

The woman you're thinking of is not you. Her experience of the world is not yours. She's married and has children, both boys. The boys are teenagers, and she's in her early forties. Her husband is a sturdy and rugged type, tall; maybe his name is Ken. But you're not interested in her family—that is to say, you're not primarily interested in her family. They're there, shaded and faded in gray. You can put the focus anywhere you want.

There's something this woman does with her time that no one else knows about. Her wicked secret. But maybe it's all just in her head.

You think of her as someone's boss; she organizes, issues reports, conducts performance reviews. Her husband does something well-paying and practical with his hands. They're intelligent people but not terribly intellectual; most of their books are leftovers from college, work-related. At night she wears reading glasses to bed and makes notes on books in her field. An occasional restlessness comes over her, leaving mild depression in its wake.

Both her sons are jocks, like their father. The one who's a freshman is already on the football team, and she's forever sticking smelly uniforms in the wash.

Her name is Liz.

2.

Liz picked up a pot pie on her way home from work. A big pot pie to feed the whole family. She wanted something she could just pop into the oven and forget about. Getting off the highway, she stopped into the place—the pot pie place. That was all they sold, homemade pot pies, with or without vegetables. Liz believed in shopping local, supporting the community. They'd lived in town for fourteen years, and she gave importance to being involved in the neighborhood. She and Ken had brought the boys here before they'd started school. It was a quiet suburb huddled around a cloverleaf interchange where two major expressways crossed each other. Something boring about the place—there wasn't so much as a little park or a lake—but she liked her neighbors, who were doctors and CPAs and political lobbyists for left-leaning causes.

A light rain was just starting as she pulled into their cul-de-sac and made the rounds past her neighbors' houses, a curve to the left and a curve to the right, then home. The subdivision had the feel of a gated community without the actual gate. The houses were all designed by the same architect and built within two years of each other. They stood on wide sloping lawns, looming high on landscaped hills, three thousand square feet of suburban fancy.

Pulling into the garage, she shut off the car and sat a moment, letting the day slow to a stop. Ken's car was already home, a matching RAV4. Davis, her oldest, would want a car soon; there was space enough for it in the garage. Everyone in their subdivision had a three or four car garage. Liz's eyes met themselves in the rear view mirror, and she thought, *Bath or shower?* A bath might be nice, and she didn't need to wash her hair. They'd just had a whirlpool tub installed last summer; Ken had done the contracting himself. Sometimes she liked to take a glass of chardonnay and a stack of catalogs and float in the warm water for a half hour.

The boys were in the basement when she came into the kitchen with her briefcase and purse and the pot pie; she could hear them on their video games. Ken was lying on his back on the floor of the kitchen, and a flush of shock rushed to her cheeks. *Accident? Heart attack?* Then it passed: he was fixing something under the sink.

“Fucking... goddamn... shit...” One leg straight, the other bent at the knee. Whole body shaking, then, “Got it.”

He scooted out from under the sink, wrench in hand, and smiled sweatily to see her there. “Oh, hey,” he said.

“What’s wrong with the sink?” she asked, setting the pot pie on the kitchen counter.

“Nothing’s wrong with it anymore. I got tired of the faucet wobbling around all the time, so I tightened it.”

He hopped to his feet and kissed her; Ken smelled like he’d been working hard outside all day.

“Woo, baby,” she said, leaning away.

“I know, I’m gonna take a shower. You pick up something for dinner?” he asked, going to the fridge for a beer.

“Just a pot pie from Wilson’s. I figured it was easy.” Noise from the basement, the orgasmic rise of male voices getting slaughtered at Super Smash Bros. “Shouldn’t they be doing their homework?”

“I dunno, I just got home. I haven’t even said hi yet. Davey came up for some chips.”

She pressed a button to start pre-heating the stove. “Oh Ken... they shouldn’t be snacking this close to dinner.”

He twisted off the bottle cap. “Try telling them anything these days.” The beer foamed around his mouth as he took a first sip. “Ooo,” he said.

She watched him, amused. “Don’t drip on the floor. Why don’t you take your shower, because dinner will be ready soon. I just have to heat it up.”

Ken nodded and bounded off upstairs to the master suite on the second floor. Opening the door to the man cave in the basement, Liz called down twice to the boys until Taylor, the younger, called back, “Hi Mom!”

“Did you two have a good day?”

There was a pause, more panicked laughter at the video game; still laughing, Taylor said, “Y-yeah!”

Liz shook her head at the futility of getting through to them and shut the door. Davis and Taylor were both good kids, but they were at the age when they preferred to do their own thing. Davis even had a girlfriend who lived in the same subdivision, a fifteen year old named Clara.

Sweet kid, pretty and polite, always said “Thank you, Mrs. Keller” when she came over for dinner. Of course Liz worried about them having sex, but she supposed she couldn’t stop Davis from living his life. It would be weird, wouldn’t it, to have no interest in sex at his age. She just wanted everyone to survive adolescence. Maybe she’d feel different if she were the girl’s mother.

At dinner, she asked the boys about their day in school.

“It was school,” Davis said, and his brother snickered.

“I don’t know what that means,” Liz said.

“School is school,” he said, just teasing, not really being snotty. Neither of the boys were disrespectful like that. “We had classes and gym and band practice, and lunch sucked as usual.”

“Davey,” Ken said in his stern, remonstrative voice that never really rose to anger, “I think your mother is asking you a real question. And don’t say ‘sucked.’”

“Sorry. Lunch was, uh, of poor quality.”

“It shouldn’t be. We pay a lot for those lunch supplements every year. What did you eat?” Liz asked.

“Chips.”

“Just chips? You’ve got to eat more than that. You’ll get sick.”

Grinning, he put an elbow on the table. “Ma, the food was seriously horrible. All I had to do was smell it and I almost threw up. It was this, like, tan mush. I don’t even know what it was.”

“I had it,” Taylor said, devouring his pot pie. “I thought it was pretty good.”

Davis laughed. “Yeah, that’s because you’ll eat anything.”

“No, it wasn’t bad. It was like tuna casserole, but all mashed up.”

Liz wondered about her own school’s food. She rarely wandered out of the district office to check out the high school’s cafeteria, but the food looked good enough the times she had. She didn’t really get involved on that level.

The boys cleared plates and loaded the dishwasher after dinner, and Liz slid over to sit closer to Ken. “Might go to bed early tonight,” she said, rubbing her leg against his. Ken had taken to staying up late recently, which she told herself didn’t mean anything. She’d go to bed

and answer work emails while he took a beer down to the basement and watched whatever on the flat screen—Marvel movies or SportsCenter.

He smiled at her. “Yeah, I could do that.”

“Even though it’s only Thursday?”

He took her hand and held it close to his mouth. “Who said it has to wait until the weekend?”

“Ew, Mom and Dad are kissing!” Taylor cried out from the kitchen.

Davis shoved the side of his brother’s head, laughing. “You ass!”

“Boys,” Ken boomed before the scuffle devolved into full-scale rolling around on the floor.

“Ah, let them wear themselves out,” Liz said, taking her hand away and putting it on Ken’s leg.

“Dad,” Taylor said once the dishes were put away, “You have to see the level we unlocked today on Macroblast—it’s totally hardcore!” Davis was already halfway down the basement steps.

“Sure no homework?” Ken asked.

“I did mine during study hour,” Taylor said.

Ken looked at Liz. “I’ll go down for a few minutes?” he asked.

“Sure, have fun. It’s only seven o’clock. I probably have an hour of emails,” she said.

He kissed her and grabbed another beer on his way to the basement, closing the door behind him. Liz sat idle at the table for a minute, not wanting to check her emails. The school superintendent, Dan Wheatly, usually had something that needed her urgent attention this time of night. As his assistant superintendent, Liz was used to being suddenly deputized to run meetings or draft a memo.

Pouring herself a second glass of wine, she set up her laptop on the dining table. The boys sounded like they were having fun with their father; a part of her wanted to join them, but she knew her presence would inhibit them. They wouldn’t cheer as much at the TV; they’d be polite instead of rambunctious. She’d ask novice questions about the game that no one would want to answer. It was better to give Ken and the boys their time together, then meet Ken up in

the bedroom. The boys needed different things from their mother than their father. You showed off to your mom, but you didn't actually *do* things with her.

After spending time on her emails, she brought her wine upstairs to the bedroom. She could still hear Ken and the boys, still cheering and shouting at each other: *Oh! Oh! Oh! No way! No way, dude!* They didn't sound like they were winding down, but that was okay; it wasn't quite eight, and the boys usually didn't go to bed until after ten.

Slipping off her shoes, she leaned back in bed and sipped her wine. The cleaning people were coming tomorrow; she'd have to leave a check in the morning. They were a husband/wife team from some town south of Boston, Quincy or whatever. The man called her "Miss Elizabeth," though they actually crossed paths only two or three times a year, on days when Liz might coincidentally be working from home.

Liz was still in bed when the boys came up to say goodnight. She kissed them both on the cheek, hugging them close.

"Don't stay up much later," she said.

"Ma, we're going to bed right now," Davis said. She hoped he'd never lose his wide, sloppy grin.

"I know, but don't spend too much time on your phones. I know you."

The boys promised, and Ken said from the bedroom door, "I'll be right up. I'm just going to check work messages and close up downstairs."

Ken and the boys left, and Ken closed the door on her. Liz wondered if she should change into something sexy or wait to let him take the lead. She didn't want to put too much pressure on him; on the other hand, maybe that's what he needed, a little pressure.

After a half hour of waiting, she gave up on her husband and started thinking about someone else.

We'll get back to her in a bit...

3.

You don't have to be interested in other people. You could spend all day exploring this space with your body, and not just with your hands. You want to drag the full length of your body across the floor, touch the walls and floors with your clean bare feet. Move like a spider, or a slow moving dervish. Take measure of the space.

Folding in your legs, you sit in the middle of the floor and let the space be a tent around you. How would all this be different if you were naked? You might have a different relationship with the outside world. Because you're not, you can receive visitors without making either them or yourself uncomfortable. But maybe we're in a world where nudity doesn't make people uncomfortable.

We think there might be two 'you's; one is naked and the other is not, and those two 'you's co-exist not exactly simultaneously but close to. Obviously there's no real way to explain this. There's a naked you and a not-naked you, and they're both present but as a kind of existential continuum, one flowing in and out of the other according to a principle that may be intentional on your part or not; maybe it's imposed. That part's not so important. Whether you're naked or not matters only if you want it to; and maybe you don't have to be consistent about it. It's possible we're in a world where people take no notice of another person's nudity. It might be incidental information, not even worth bothering about. But we're not sure we like that, and we only want to do things we like. We're not sure we like the idea of nudity being incidental information. We want to be in a world where the naked body at least arrests attention. Maybe, let's say, you have the ability to be naked and not-naked at the same time and just leave it at that, even if it doesn't quite make sense. It's just a physical property we have to accept on trust. We like this about you: you're like water that can walk.

Unfolding your legs, you crawl to a stand and pose at the window. The naked you shows your body to the world. Against the wall there's a small dresser, white, and a hamper for your laundry. Some shoes lined up beside the dresser, a standing mirror. We'll be nice and give you a little bathroom, just a toilet and a sink crammed next to a bath so small you have to sit in it with your knees bent. You do most of your reading in the bath. You'd probably take baths all day if you could.

As you bathe, you drape your right leg over the side of the tub, and steam comes off it. You think of the bathroom as a womb, warm and snug. The toilet with the seat down makes a handy table where you put your glass of wine and your reading materials. When you get out of the tub, steam breathes on your body. You like to air dry in the warmer months; you'll pad out naked into the bedroom, leaving wet footprints on the hardwood floor.

The property goes back for acres into the woods; you've walked some of it. You like walking the woods by yourself, particularly in the hour before nightfall. The woods are spooky at night; you've gone out there a few times at three in the morning, because you like to scare yourself. You pretend you're lost in the forest, being pursued by some malevolent, breathing *thing*. The possibility of getting lost after dark thrills you. Your enemy is out there; it wants to see you suffer. Someday you'd like to stay out all night. The forest at night disorients; there are no landmarks, no points south or north. A black shape groans in the close distance, and something, maybe just the whisper of a fearful thought, skirts past your legs. You think about this as you lie naked in bed, feeling the cool sheets against your buttocks and shoulder blades, the backs of your legs. It's easy to drift off like this, and sometimes you dream about it too, the ominous forest at night.

4.

*What are you reading?*

You show the man, and he smiles like he's read it too. But you're willing to believe he hasn't. You don't think too much of other people.

When you were younger, when you were a small girl, when you were a teenager on the cusp of adulthood, you wanted to do something creative and meaningful with your life. To draw favorable attention to yourself. Men frightened you, boys. You didn't want to get stuck in a relationship. You believed your life had a purpose, and that purpose was something you had to pursue on your own.

*I don't see how you can concentrate on reading in a bar like this. I need quiet, I need silence.*

Your mother was different. Your mother was conventional. You still remember her as a younger woman, the way she wore high heels to the grocery store. Maybe she had some job, not that you'd notice. You spent your teenage years discouraging conversation. You kept to yourself. A boy once grabbed your ass in the hallway, and you told the principal.

*I wrote a book once. Never got it published. I just wrote it for the fun of it. I'm not ambitious like that. I just like to try new things. Have you ever gone zip-lining? I just went zip-lining the other Thursday. Spur of the moment, and I had the day off. Not recommended. It's a lot of money and a lot of effort, and then you get up there and it's all over in about ninety seconds.*

The man babbles away, and you blink and fiddle with your book. It's a hefty paperback with fine, small print. You've got hundreds more like it at home.

At home you make dinner for yourself, a plate of pasta with red sauce. You eat half and save the rest for later. When men come over they comment on the Mexican serape hanging on the living room wall. Everyone's got to comment on the serape. Often they don't know the word—they just call it a blanket.

*Love the blanket. Did you get it in Mexico or Guatemala?*

*Actually I got it in Panama, you lie. You really got it at Target.*

Sometimes men make bad jokes and think it's genius. They wear on your nerves. You have limited tolerance for the male of the species. There's a certain kind of man who can't have more than two glasses of wine before his face starts sliding off the side of his head.

You once had a boyfriend who liked to quote lines from the movie *A Clockwork Orange*. You lost patience with him eventually.

Shapes scare you at night. Murky shapes, shapes of things that aren't really there. You're not sure whether or not you believe in ghosts. You believe there's something that lingers after a person dies, even if it's only for a short period of time.

Now that you're not young anymore, you think about death more often. Life used to seem infinite—it was a constant *there*—but now it's a countable number of years. You know you won't be around to witness the end of the world.

Sometimes you feel like you've lived more than one life, like you've been a man and a woman and then two other women and another man. You've been black and white and Chinese

and Iranian. It's like other people's lives come to you in dreams, and you can't work out what they're trying to say to you.

Men can't figure you out either. You've always had a hard time accepting their compliments. It's hard not to suspect an ulterior motive, or an unstated but implied criticism. According to your mother, it's why you've never had much success with relationships. Men fall in love with you, or they say they do, and right away you get suspicious. It's because you don't really want to be happy—again, according to your mother. It's not worth arguing about anymore; she has her feelings and you have yours. She's never really understood you. She's the kind of woman who absolutely can't stand sitting in a room by herself. It's like she needs other people to validate her existence.

You're not like that at all. No, you don't mind being alone. It's not that you're allergic to people, but there's something to be said for a quiet and empty room, unruffled by another human's presence. You like reading—you like looking at your books. You could spend twenty minutes or a half hour just looking at the many books on your many shelves and saying to yourself *Yes, I've read that one*, or *No, I haven't read that one yet*. A bit obsessive-compulsive about it, but lowercase *o*, lowercase *c*. Men get nervous when they see a woman reading a book. It's like a form of cheating. Women need to be available and on-pause at all times. They need to keep their hands empty, their gaze steady, neutral, and straight-ahead. There's something alluring about the vacant female presence. Men like it when you nod and say something vacuous but appreciative. It's a need you have a hard time accommodating. There's too much *you* in you—you can't just shut it off.

Men consider you both intimidating and irresistible. They've used those exact words, sometimes in the context of dumping you.

At work you put on a plain face. You touch your hair a lot. You're always fiddling with yourself—you do things like change out of your pantyhose in the middle of the day. It's hard for you to land on a decision. You know all these things about yourself and have decided not to let it bother you. You've spent enough years grappling with low self-esteem. It's time to love you for what you are. You've probably got too much damned intelligence for your own good. You read more books written by men than women, which doesn't necessarily mean anything. Women

authors annoy you; they write about an experience that hits too close to home. They know too much about you; they understand the homicidal potential percolating in a woman's soul.

Men smirk at your little apartment. You like staying at home; there are weekends when you never leave the house except to pop in and out of the grocery store. You like baths, multiple baths on the weekends. One in the morning and one before bed. Maybe, when you're feeling decadent, you'll pour a glass of white wine and take a hot bath at two in the afternoon. You like bumbling around the house naked. You're not a nudist, but you like the incongruous feeling of doing household chores in the nude. Bare feet on the hardwood floor, the flutter of excitement as you slowly stroll past the open drapes in the living room.

You're a fit person, flexible, in good shape. It's nothing you really have to work at, it's just your natural metabolism—you burn hot. Other women find you quirky and hard to pin down. They ask if you ever plan on getting married, and no matter what you answer, they look at you with doubt and mistrust.

*I always see you in here reading. You must be pretty smart. Most people just look at their phones. Are you a college professor?*

*No, I'm not a college professor.*

*I just thought—with the reading. What do you do?*

You tell him, and he smiles like you just said something provocative.

*I've always been curious about that sort of thing. But I could never work in an office. I like to work with my hands. Anyway, I'll let you get back to your reading.*

Inevitably, they all wind up saying this, "I'll let you get back to your reading." It's a male thing; guys always like to think it's up to them. Sometimes you wonder if you've got the right attitude for a healthy relationship. You don't like men quite enough. You like sex, but not the commitments and lifestyle adjustments that come with it. Men think they're capable of just being interested in sex, but they're more sentimental at heart than women are. They try your patience. Your mother thinks you're being too particular—your standards are too high. You've been warned repeatedly not to think too much of yourself.

*I don't mean to bother you. I just noticed your book.*

*Yeah? You noticed my book? What did you notice about it?*

Another ill-advised attempt at humor expires and flumps to the floor.

*Don't you find it hard to concentrate in here?*

*I'm good at filtering things out. Distractions.*

*I'm not. I'm probably distracting you right now.*

*Not really. I'm actually still reading. I can read without looking directly at the pages. I've got excellent peripheral vision.*

*You're funny. I like a woman with a sense of humor.*

*It helps.*

*What does?*

*Having a sense of humor. I've often found it handy.*

*Heh.*

*And life keeps sending me such great material.*

He laughs and tells you his name. *I'm Katie*, you say, though no one calls you that anymore. At work you're Kate. You've always been Kathleen to your mother, sometimes (when you're in trouble) "Kathleen McKenzie." But today you've decided to regress back to Katie. It's not quite like a middle-aged man calling himself "Ricky."

At thirty-six, you feel like you've finally stabilized. At least you've held onto the same job for more than five years. You like the women at your work, the way they get snippy and impatient with their husbands over the phone. You try to have normal conversations with them. They stand in your cubicle and let their eyes wander over your desk. They see a ceramic coffee mug filled with pens, the handle broken off. One woman once said to you, *Bet you never thought you'd wind up here.* The job pays well—you haven't worried about money in ages.

Your mother still thinks you could be doing better. *Why don't you try for a promotion?* she asks, and you don't have a good answer for her. You'd like to spend the rest of your time together not engaged in these pointless, simmering arguments. They drain your energy. You'd much rather go to the bookstore café down the street and nurse a paper cup of tea and watch the twenty-something store clerks flirt with each other. You've become quite a people watcher in your old age. You like to invent back stories for people you don't know; most of them involve

nymphomania and bad relationship decisions. You'd probably make a good romance novelist if you knew how to get started.

5.

You've seen women like Kimmy Bench before. You've had thoughts about them, made assumptions. It's easy to be right half the time. You've seen them standing at their mall jobs, selling watch bands and fancy flavored popcorn. Always overdressed like they're on their way to a fundraiser or an awards show. The hopeful way they greet passing faces in the mall concourse. Women on their feet, women who haul stock in three inch heels.

Kim looked around the bar: tables empty, a trio of middle aged guys in untucked T-shirts walking on peanut shells and playing darts. "I thought this place would be busier. We should find somewhere better to go," she said.

"It's easy. It's convenient," said her friend, Dana. Somehow Kim and Dana had stayed in touch even though the boys had stopped hanging out in eighth grade. Kim was eleven years younger than Dana; she was a good ten, eleven years younger than most of the moms in their group. They'd never had much in common beyond having had kids at the same school, but they'd fallen into the occasional habit of meeting for drinks after work.

Kim sold tennis bracelets and engagement rings three days a week at a Kay Jewelers in the mall; she'd been hoping to go up to full time after Scottie finished high school, but the only place that had the hours available was a ninety minute drive away.

"Yeah." Kim shrugged. "I guess the beer tastes the same wherever. It's just depressing being around a bunch of men who look like my husband. Any family plans for the weekend?"

"Robby's coming home for a couple days. He's probably there now."

"Still liking Amherst?" Kim couldn't remember if Dana's son Rob was a sophomore or a junior; since her own Scottie never went to college, it was easy to lose track of time.

"I suppose. I think he's a little lonely there. He comes home at least once a month."

"No girlfriends?"

Dana shook her head at her wine glass. "Not that he tells me about, anyway."

"I would think he'd be real popular with the girls. He's handsome, smart."

“All those things, yeah. He’s just so shy.”

“Aww... still?” Kim smiled thinking of Robby Sims, whom she’d known since he was five.

“Yeah, still—but he’s always been hesitant around girls. I practically had to get him a date to prom. I think he’s just very intent on his studies, and he doesn’t want anything to distract him.”

“Mm. I wish Scottie was like that.” Mentioning Scott dropped a brick onto the conversation, and Kim tipped back a swig of her beer. “I’d go out with him,” she said, not serious.

Dana smiled. “You?”

“Yeah, whaddaya think—I’d ruin him for life?” Dana nodded, and they both cracked up. “I probably would. It’s been known to happen.”

“Oh, stop. You haven’t ruined anyone.”

Kim turned her attention to the guys playing darts. She wished Rick had a group of guys he could go out with every now and then, instead of coming home straight from work every night and moping on the couch. He used to like to do things before his back crapped out. Sometimes, whenever she needed to feel sorry for him—because the alternative was worse—she told herself his problem was purely physical; that if it wasn’t for the meds and the arthritis, he’d be an entirely different person.

“What would you do,” she asked, her eyes still on the dart players, “if you could do absolutely whatever you wanted? You know, like, no responsibilities, nothing to hold you back?”

Dana answered quickly, “Probably what I’m doing right now.”

Kim laughed. “I knew you’d say something like that. No, but I mean if you had perfect freedom. Maybe it wouldn’t be so good. What would I do with my time anyway? It’s a question.”

“It is a question,” Dana agreed emptily.

They ordered another round of drinks, and Dana asked about Sheila, Kim’s oldest. “She just started law school. UMass gave her a full ride. She’s living downtown and interning at city hall.”

Dana whistled. “Hot shot.”

“Don’t tell her that, she’s got a big enough ego as it is. We hardly see her anymore. But I’m so glad to hear Robby’s doing well. He’s such a cute kid, with those dimples and those big brown eyes. Does he know what he wants to do yet?”

“He goes back and forth. He’s always been bookish, interested in reading. He’s an English major now, but that’s subject to change.”

“That’s all right. He’s young. He doesn’t have to settle into anything yet.”

“I know. Jim and I make a point not to pressure him. He puts enough pressure on himself. Can you imagine a kid these days reading a book a week? Not because he has to for school, but just because he’s interested.”

“Puts me to shame. I never did well in school,” Kim admitted.

Truth be told, Kim was a bit of a trouble maker as a kid—nothing as bad as Scottie. But she’d get in fights with her mother every day, and her dad would have to break it up. She was a decent enough student, good in math, good at accounting. If it wasn’t for getting pregnant with Sheila, she would’ve gone to college to become a CPA. But she was average in all her other subjects; she’d never been a great speller, which embarrassed her now.

After one last drink and a shared plate of chips and humus, the women called it a night. They hugged goodbye in the parking lot, which glowed under the blue security lamps.

“Hang in there,” Dana said.

“You’re nice to put up with me,” Kim said, pulling away but leaving her arms around Dana.

“You’ve always got friends. Come over for dinner sometime—with or without Rick.”

“I will. We’ll look at our calendars. And say hi to Robby. I’m so happy to hear he’s doing well.”

In the car, Kim changes the channel on the radio with a shaking hand. The classic rock channel now plays songs she remembers from when she was growing up; somehow Pearl Jam got to be classic rock.

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I like it when you think of me. I don't want you to talk to me and I don't want to talk to you, but I want to weigh heavily on your mind. I want our connection to be distant but intense.

I set my bare foot on muddy ground and make a footprint. Come back an hour later and you'll still see five distinct toes, my heel and the ball of my right foot, a caveman's impression, only now filling with rainwater.

What I'm turning into is a shapeless old man. I'm strangely okay with it. I want to be meek and invisible, unmanly, soft. I want to invent a word for what I am and apply it to myself.

Would you like some context? These days you'll usually find me in one of two places: on my front porch at home or some random room or hallway at work. Thinking about Katie and Kim and Elizabeth—Pam too. These people have entered my head, and for some reason they're all women. I would seem to be an unlikely host. But I don't have any control over them. It's not my fault they're there.

We live in a big blue house on a busy street a few hundred yards down from a zoo. The house is a bit of a local landmark; it's "the big blue house near the zoo." The house used to be a different color—dark green, I think—years before we moved in, and no one cared about it then.

Amazing the attention you can draw to yourself just by wearing a striking color. I want to wear pink sneakers and a floppy tie, lemon-checked.

Sometimes you can hear the zoo animals, though rarely. The wolves will bay at the moon but only if the conditions are exactly right. They don't bay at it just because it's there. One evening every year the zoo stays open late to adult visitors, and you can buy a glass of white wine and wander past the flamingos and black bears. It's a fundraiser. The animals look harassed at these events, like we're keeping them up. I'm sure they have their routine too.

We tend to get a lot of road rage on our street because it's so busy and winding, and the Boston drivers like to go way too fast whenever they get a chance. I've been honked at just for signaling to turn into my driveway; people can't believe someone actually lives on this street, which looks like a service drive to the highway if that's your only connection to it.

When the traffic at the light backs up three blocks away, I get to hear people's car radios, the loudness set to stun. Lots of hip-hop, lots of metal and grunge from the early nineties. "Classic rock" is now music that came out when I was in college—but who cares.

In the morning my wife walks the dog. It's her dog—I don't have anything to do with it. The dog crowds me in bed. It thinks it's a person, body stretched out, head on the pillow. The bedroom reeks of wet dog hair. The thing's in love with me, apparently, though I do nothing to encourage it. It's mainly a tongue—it licks me mercilessly. My skin has a salty taste the dog enjoys. Sometime it licks my pillow until it's soaking wet.

When I'm not teaching, I'm a hall monitor. Kids ask if they can use the bathroom, and I grunt dismissively, implying I don't care. This startles them, I think. Adults are supposed to care about things like that, whether or not some fifteen-year-old kid uses the bathroom. Sometimes they vape in the stalls, and I don't care about that either. I draw the line at the bathroom door. At a certain point you've got to let people live their lives. But we're supposed to log the kids whenever they enter and leave the bathroom. There's a whole spreadsheet for it. Press Control-Shift-Semicolon and it records the time down to the second. Maggie Green entered the john on the first floor at 9:07.11 and left at 9:13.55.

( )

6.

Kim spotted Robby Sims walking out of CVS with a bag in his hand. The CVS stood across from the Kay Jewelers where she worked in the mall. It was Saturday, early afternoon, about four hours into her shift, and so far she'd done nothing but pose behind the counter and smile at her customers. The other woman on shift, Delia Thomas, sold a Bulova men's watch to a woman

buying it as an anniversary present for her husband. Kim couldn't remember the last time she'd exchanged gifts with Rick on their anniversary. When was it? May 24th. Kim kept getting it mixed up with Scottie's birthday, which was May 22nd.

Kim waved to Robby from across the counter, and he squinted before haltingly proceeding her way. She hadn't seen him in maybe two years; it was when the boys were still in high school, around graduation. He and Scottie hadn't been friends in a long time—he used to come by at least once a week to play when they were little, but then Scottie drifted into a bad crowd and Robby to his credit didn't follow him.

“Mrs. Bench?” he asked, approaching the counter.

Kim smiled brightly. She didn't know why, but it just made her feel so good to see him again. “Robby Sims. What are you doing here?”

“Oh.” He showed her his bag from CVS. “Just buying some stuff for school.”

“Home for the weekend?” He nodded. “That must make your parents happy. How long are you home for?”

“Today and tomorrow. I've got class Monday morning at ten.”

“Good for you. Your mom says you're liking school.”

“I am. It's a lot of work. I just switched to a double major, English and European History.”

“Impressive. We'll probably be calling you Professor Sims in a few years.”

Robby gave an odd smile. Maybe he wasn't sure why Scottie Bench's mother was talking to him. “I don't know if I'm good enough to get my PhD. And the market for full-time professors is really tight. But I'm trying not to worry about that now.”

“No, don't worry about it now,” Kim agreed.

“I'm not.”

“And don't work *too* hard. College is also about having fun.” Robby had no response to this. Kim couldn't tell if he was enjoying talking to her or wanted to go. “What are you up to now?”

“I'll probably just go home. I've got a hundred pages in Western Civ to read by Monday.”

She looked at her watch; it was a Citizens with a stainless steel band and certified diamonds on the dial face—a gift to herself for her birthday last year.

“Listen, I’m about to go on break. Do you want to walk over to the food court for a drink? I’d love to hear more about school and what else you’ve been up to.”

The question seemed to startle him. She supposed it *was* a little weird, her asking him like that; but the food court was right there, and a quick soda was no big deal.

They stood in line at the McDonald’s and bought a couple of Cokes, diet for her. She paid. “You’re the poor college student,” she said when he brought out his wallet.

As they took their drinks to an empty table, he asked, “Didn’t you want anything to eat? It’s your lunchtime, isn’t it?”

“I’m okay. I’ve got a sandwich in the break room if I want it. I don’t usually get that hungry at work.” She tapped her straw against the table to break through the straw paper; he tore his carefully and wadded the wrapper into a neat ball. “Do you miss still being in high school? You probably don’t. You’re on to bigger and better things.”

He sipped his drink. “I never really liked high school. Some of our teachers were better than others.”

“Oh, I know it. Did you ever have Mr. Billings? Scottie had him for English—eleventh grade, I think. Maybe it was tenth. He was so mean. Scottie got caught cheating on a paper once—which was wrong of him—but the teacher treated him like a criminal for the rest of the year.”

“How’s Scott doing, anyway?”

Kim’s smile froze; she wished she hadn’t brought him up. “He’s okay. You know... he’s doing his best. He’s struggling with a few things. But we’re all hoping for a good outcome for him. Life’s hard at that age—I mean, not for *you*; you’ve always been so put together.” Robby smiled modestly. “Really, seriously, even when you were a little kid, you seemed destined for great things. With Scottie, it’s more about staying focused and keeping out of trouble.”

“I always liked Scott. I never thought he really liked me.”

“Oh, no! You were one of Scott’s best friends—not later, of course. But that had nothing to do with you. I wish you two could’ve stayed in touch. You would’ve been a good influence.”

All her praise was starting to make him blush, and she realized now why she'd asked him for a drink: she wanted to know what it was like talking to a nice young man, not a delinquent like her son.

"And what about Mr. Bench?" Robby asked.

Kim tried to look blasé. "First of all, please don't call us by our last names anymore—call me Kim. You're old enough now. Rick's fine. He still welds out in East Boston. He's had problems with his back."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"He'll get through it. We both will. It's no fun, getting old." With a resolute sigh, she waved the subject away—enough about the sad characters in her life. "I'm glad I caught your eye across the concourse. It's nice talking to you, Robby, it really is."

"It's nice talking to you, too."

"Is it? It's not strange sitting here with your old friend's mom?"

His head shook slightly. Maybe the strange thing was thinking it was strange to begin with.

"By the way, what do you go by these days? Is it still Robby or have you gotten too old for that?"

"Most people I know call me Rob or Robert, but... you can still call me Robby if you'd like."

"Nope—I don't want to call you by the wrong name. Rob, is it?"

"Rob's fine."

"Okay, but only if you call me Kim."

A stretched silence, and they both laughed.

"God," Kim said, "Robby Sims. Rob. All grown up."

"Getting there," he said.

"Yeah you are." Another awkward pause; Kim wondered if Robby was still a virgin.

They finished their drinks and sat with their empty wax cups until it was time for Kim to go back to work. Robby's car was parked in the back lot, so she walked him as far as the south entrance.

“Well, this was fun,” she said, not wanting to leave him.

“Good seeing you again, Mrs. Bench.”

She grabbed his hands. “Kim, damnit—call me Kim.”

“All right, all right. Kim.” They laughed, and he noticed with some surprise she was still holding his hands. She let go.

“Have fun at school. Work hard, play hard. Let me know if you ever want to talk about life and the big picture. I’m a wealth of knowledge,” she said, leaning back dramatically and pressing her wrist to her brow.

“I will. I’m sure my mom has your number.”

“I’m sure she does. Here, so you don’t have to bother her.” Digging into her purse, she pulled out a scrap and a pen and wrote down her cell number and email. He took it.

When Kim’s at the grocery store, she finds herself stalling to get everything on her list. Never so much has she wanted to linger in a grocery store. She likes looking at the cheeses, the pre-packaged deli trays. You can get an assortment of ten different kinds of olives—green olives and black olives, kalamata olives, some with pruny skin and some with smooth. She doesn’t really know the names of them. There’s a bright green olive that almost looks like a miniature apple. She could see herself getting into olives. Sometimes you only want one of them, and then you’re stuck with the rest of the jar. Then, next to the olives, there’s the marinated artichoke hearts, the peeled garlic cloves in olive oil and seasoning, sliced salami (which they spell “salume”), sliced pepperoni, sliced sopressata. She almost wants to buy one of everything.

In the chip aisle, she hesitates before putting a family size bag of Doritos in her cart.

“Why do I even bother?” she mutters.

After dinner, Kim insisted on Scottie clearing the dishes, which he did with minimal whining.

“Where are you going?” Rick asked as she got up from the table.

Kim pulled another beer out of the fridge. Between the two of them, she and Scottie had already gone through half of the 12-pack.

“Back porch. People can join me if they want.”

The view from the screened in porch wasn't much, just their chewed up yard where Rick kept some of his miscellany, a ladder and a rusted out tool cart and some half empty cans of paint. She left the lights off as she kicked back on a wicker recliner. She liked the dark—it calmed her mind a bit, and she found herself thinking about Robby Sims. She could privately acknowledge this little crush on him. It was a harmless fantasy she could take out whenever she was bored. Robby wasn't like her husband: he wouldn't order her around or make her feel like garbage. He'd listen to her talk about her day, dull as it was, and then he'd tell her about all the interesting things he'd been reading in school. Maybe there'd be room for both of them on this recliner.

Behind her, Scottie cracked open a beer. The sound startled her. "You out here?" he asked.

She nodded, which she realized wasn't audible. "Yes," she said.

He sat on the step leading down to the porch. She couldn't decide whether he smelled like marijuana.

"Thanks for dinner, Ma," he said.

"You're welcome." She went quiet again, still preoccupied with thoughts of Robby. "Hey, guess who I ran into today? Robby Sims. You remember Robby?"

She heard him smile in the dark. "Oh, yeah! How is that kid?"

"He's doing very well. He was just home from school for a few days. It sounds like he's enjoying college. He's studying English and something else... I forget."

Scott snickered. "Yeah, that sounds like him. He was always a dweeb."

He tipped back his beer, then coughed. "Shit," he said, apropos of nothing. Kim could hear Rick thumping around in the kitchen, probably hunting for another drink.

7.

What goes through the boy's mind? Should you even think of him as a boy? You want to be his relief. It doesn't really matter how much he notices you're even there. You could be giving and loving and get nothing in return, just a warm and soft feeling about yourself.

When he does something clever, you're the first person he looks for. He beams at you, and you feel your heart lift into your neck. You don't mind him staring at you with lust in his eyes, grabbing your butt in public. God, you love it. You need it. You haven't felt this good in years. You're getting in shape—you've lost five pounds without even trying and toned up your muscle mass. If you laugh or sneeze when he's inside you, your pussy muscles give him a little squeeze.

8.

Kim was at work a week later when she got a call on her cell phone. She didn't recognize the number and let it go to voice mail; she was with a customer anyway. It wasn't until her break that she went outside to play her messages. The call shocked her—it was Robby. She hadn't seriously expected him to call.

“Hi, Mrs. Bench, this is Rob Sims. Hope you're having a good day. I don't know if you remember, but you gave me this number last week, and I—I'm actually back in town. Just for tonight and tomorrow. I've got school on Monday, but I thought, if you weren't busy... I had questions about some stuff, like, related to life after college. Just thinking about my 'next step.' I thought maybe you might have some good advice, if you wanted to meet for a quick coffee or something. I saw there's a Starbucks near where you work. It's next to the Best Buy off the highway.”

He left his number and some garbled addenda before hanging up. Kim stood for a few minutes with the phone in her hand. He wants a date, she thought. He's asking you out. Cute little Robby Sims. The brainy kid who used to pal around with Scottie when the boys were eleven. Not so long ago. He wants to see you, wants to spend time with you. He wants to put his hand on your arm and say something soft in your ear. Or maybe he really does want to talk about “life after college.” It was too much to take in at three on a Saturday afternoon, and she found herself shaking a little and getting warm under her arms.

Dialing him back, she nixed Starbucks in favor of a drinks and dessert place near the park-and-ride to the airport. She and a friend used to go there years ago until they decided the drinks were too expensive. No one would know her there.

The rest of the shift went by in a blur, and before she knew it it was five o'clock and she was walking back to her car.

Phoning Rick: "Hey, I'm going to be a little late tonight. I'm having a drink with someone from the Peabody store. She thinks she might have some hours for me starting in June. They're waiting to see what happens with this other woman. Anyway, we might just wind up staying for dinner if it gets late. You and Scottie should be okay. There's still all that pizza left."

When she arrived at the cocktail lounge, she took a minute to freshen her makeup. She wondered if she looked like she came straight from work, with her off-the-rack blouse and skirt and saleslady pumps.

"I think I'm pretty," she told herself in the rear view mirror.

Rob had already taken a table near a tinted window at the back of the bar. He was wearing chinos and a long sleeved T-shirt, and he stood when he saw her.

"Oh, sit, sit. Have you been here long?" she asked as she sat at the small, round table across from him.

"Just a couple minutes. I ordered a soda. The waiter should be back soon."

Kim looked around the dark room. It was a weird time of day, and the bar seemed to be changing over from afternoon drinkers to the evening crowd. "Isn't this nice? I thought you deserved something more than Starbucks. You're probably used to the cafeteria at school."

He nodded. "It's so dark."

"Is it too dark? We can go somewhere else."

"No, this is great." He let out a breath; maybe he was nervous too. "Thanks for meeting with me like this."

"Oh, please. It's no problem. I was happy when you called. It's nice to stay in touch with people. I always liked you the most out of all of Scottie's friends."

"You did?"

"I did! I was so sad when you two stopped hanging out. I'd ask Scott, 'Where's Robby?'"

"Yeah? And what'd he say?"

She laughed, hanging her purse on the back of her chair. The waiter came round before she could answer.

“Madam,” he asked: bald, brown mustache.

“Oo, uh.” She thought as the waiter put down Robby’s soda. “Just the house chardonnay. Is it oaky?”

The waiter shrugged. “I can give you a taste.”

“No, I’m sure it’s fine.” The waiter went away, and Robby tapped his straw through the wrapper. “So, do you not drink because you can’t do it legally, or because you don’t like it?”

“I like it okay. Sometimes I’ll have a beer at a party. They’re really tough about carding at school.”

She lowered her voice, mock aghast. “Do you have a fake I.D.?” He shook his head. “Good for you. You’re an honest young man.”

*Oh, God, she thought, listen to me. I sound like an old lady. I sound like a friend of his mom’s.*

“Well, I’m sorry for having a glass of wine in front of you. I just don’t want to take up the table without ordering something. Maybe we should get a little snack. Are you hungry? This is on me.”

“Oh... that’s...” He went for his wallet, as if it was already time to pay.

“No, it’s on me. You’re the poor college student.” She cringed inside: *you said that last time.* Maybe he didn’t remember.

Kim sipped her wine when it came. “Not particularly oaky, but that’s all right. I’m flexible,” she said, looking at Rob.

They ordered the twenty-two dollar charcuterie board, and she asked about his so-called “next step.”

“I guess I’m just nervous about my future. The economy’s so bad right now, and I know I’ll have to get a job. I don’t want to go to college and wind up working at...” He caught himself. She wondered if he was about to say, “at the mall.” That was fine; she didn’t particularly want to work there either.

“You’ve still got a lot of time. What are you, only a sophomore?”

He nodded. His 7-Up had a lime in it, and it looked like a gin and tonic. “What did you do when you first got out of college?”

She blushed. “Well. I didn’t... I didn’t go to college.”

He looked surprised. It was possible he knew absolutely nothing about her. “You didn’t?”

“No, I didn’t. My life took a different course. Do you know Sheila? That’s Scottie’s older sister. I had her when I was pretty young, and then Scottie came around a few years later.”

He was quiet for a bit, solemn. “That must’ve been really tough.”

She laughed, and it was almost like crying. “It was. So I already had a lot to do when I was your age.”

“My mom had me when she was in her thirties. She got her Poli Sci degree, and then she went for her PhD, and then she wanted to wait until she got settled into her first job.”

“Yeah. Well, your mom’s a pretty special person.”

His eyes flashed, mortified. “I didn’t mean... I mean...”

“Oh, it’s okay, Robby. I’m a big girl, and I got through it. There’s more than one way to live a life.”

“That’s true,” he said vacantly.

“As long as you can respect yourself when you look in the mirror. Or at least *understand* yourself. Life is long, and we don’t always make the right decisions. I’ve done some things I’m not too proud of. But you have to forgive yourself and move on. Sorry, I don’t mean to get heavy.”

He laughed. “That’s okay.”

“But you wanted my advice, and that’s my advice. Brilliant, huh?” She winked, something starting to buzz between them.

“Mrs. Bench—Kim. Can I pay you a compliment? And I hope you don’t think this is weird.”

She smiled, pleased. “I’m always open for compliments.”

“It’s just...” He hesitated, keeping his eyes on his drink. “When I was growing up, I always thought you were sort of attractive. I mean, I thought you were really beautiful.”

“Oh, Robby—thank you!” Reaching out, she gently lifted his chin. “That’s so nice of you to say.”

He still looked anxious, though maybe also relieved. “I told you it was weird.”

“It’s not weird at all, it’s sweet.” She squared her shoulders, joking, “Though I hope you weren’t having inappropriate thoughts about me.”

He protested, “I wasn’t, I wasn’t. Everything was strictly proper.”

They laughed, and she took a calming sip of wine. “Well, I have a confession to make, too, since we’re into that now.”

( )

Just when you have something, you don’t want it anymore.

The way a woman takes off her coat and puts in on the stool next to her. The arm and wrist mechanics of her signaling to the bartender. She transfers her cigarettes from the pack to a gold cigarette case, leaving the case on the bar next to the paperback she’s reading.

Meeting women was never easy for me. I always felt strange coming up to them. What could I say or do and still play it cool? Guys were forever walking around with their tongues out, and women knew it. I wondered if they ever got sick of it, that constant, objectifying attention. There was a dive bar I went to, and the same woman always sat at the end of the bar reading a book. I wanted to say something to her, but I didn’t want to interrupt. Generally speaking, a person reading a book doesn’t want to be disturbed.

Kids ask if they can use the bathroom, and I say go ahead. Sure, go tinkle, go wee-wee, take a leak. Do something fantastic with your two minutes of freedom. I’ve been told by the people who sign my paychecks to go into the bathrooms every few minutes to make sure kids aren’t doing something they’re not supposed to do.

But I’m not doing that. If my presence in the hallway isn’t deterrent enough, I’m not up to the task.

If I look at my spreadsheet, I can see that a boy named Dylan Griffin, who currently has class with Mr. Reddington in Room 110, entered the bathroom on the first floor at 8:49.21. I'll let you know when he gets out.

When I was young, I probably asked adults if I could use the bathroom, too. You can't just get up from your desk and leave, I suppose.

Sometimes after work I like to go for hot and sour soup and gin and tonics at an Asian place down the street. I say "Asian" not to be ignorant or imprecise but because it would be wrong to call it strictly Japanese or Chinese or Polynesian. It's all those things—so maybe "Pan-Asian." You could call it "Fusion" and be a prick. The counter of the bar is gray marble and the bartender is female and white. Somehow it affects the taste of the food, like not using chopsticks. She must be new to the job because the drinks she pours are enormous. Only the food's Asian; the sport on the TV is European football and the music's Fleetwood Mac. I'll stay for an hour, down two drinks and read twenty pages of my book, then go home to my porch and five toilets.

Dylan's finally out of the bathroom: 9:00.14. Over ten minutes! But often the technology lags behind. You can't know everything absolutely at the moment it happens.

A kid with attitude flicks his hair as he strides down the hall. I was never him. If I ever went back to my old school I'd probably dematerialize and leave a circle of dust on the floor.

So much of life is walking down halls. Take a right, take a left. It's right around the corner. Do you know where the drinking fountains are? Walk down a tiled hallway in bare feet and you might as well be nude.

You can be glib, you can be sarcastic. You can have a fleeting, uncharacteristic moment of kindness. Tell yourself you're a woman and make it true.

( )

9.

Most nights Kim sleeps alone. Rick seems more comfortable on the couch where he can watch TV as late as he wants, and it's easier for him to get up if he needs to use the bathroom in the middle of the night. Watching him struggle to stand, she almost feels sorry for him. She doesn't blame him for being crabby with her. Being in pain sucks. She can't remember the last time she's seen him clean-shaven, with his hair combed neat. Rick always looks like he just woke up, or like someone just asked him a question and he can't remember the answer, and it's pissing him off.

You want to steer clear of a guy like that.

Eventually they wound up at the Holiday Inn Express just up the road, the sun low in the sky. People all around Boston were having dinner, mowing their lawn, reading the paper on the back deck. They arrived in separate vehicles. Kim acted like she'd done this before, going in first to pay cash for a room, then waiting for Robby by the elevators. He took his time, and she began to worry maybe he'd changed his mind; maybe his rational sense had kicked in between the bar and the hotel.

The hotel room was dark and cool, with a smell of carpet deodorizer. "Robby, do me a favor and turn off the A/C. Unless you like it on."

"No, I can do it," he said. As he went to the A/C unit, she dropped the keycard on the bureau and took a moment to check herself in the mirror. With a flash of mild horror, she realized she was still wearing her name-tag from work. He wasn't looking, so she snatched it off and slipped it into her purse.

"They always like to blast it," Robby said, and the A/C clicked off.

"That they do," she said, smoothing out her skirt, aware of her heart thumping in her chest. She hadn't had sex in—what'd it been?—maybe five years.

Turning away from the mirror, she smiled at Robby across the room. "Well," she said. He stood behind the bed, looking like his knees might give out.

"You're so far away," she said, and he reluctantly came closer. She reached for his hands. "What do you think about trying a kiss?"

He bent closer and kissed her softly on the cheek—his lips felt nice—but she said, “Robby, not like that. Like this.”

She put her arms around his neck and pulled him down for a longer kiss. She felt the tension in his jaw, could almost hear his surprise when she slipped her tongue inside his mouth. Then something clicked, and he reached around her waist and drew her up against him.

They fell back onto the bed, and soon he was on top of her, grinding against her hip. She could feel how much he wanted her, his wild, adolescent need. It was going to be impossible for him to make love to another woman from now on without thinking of her first.

( )

The way we dream ourselves into each other’s lives. When you were a girl, you slept with your stuffed animals until you were sixteen. There was a tatty old teddy bear you liked to hug; it had a red ribbon on its chest that fell off at some point. Nowadays you’re lucky if you sleep through the night. Something calls to you through the window—it’s a ghost in the trees, making the limbs shake. You wake with your mouth dry and your bladder full. A doctor you were seeing at one point told you not to go back to bed if you woke up in the middle of the night. Instead, make productive use of the time. Read a book, exercise. Take up a hobby, something to do with your hands. But it never worked for you—you felt like a social deviant for having the lights on at three in the morning. Instead you’d stay in bed and play a movie inside your head. The usual one about being lost in a forest. Sometimes you’d imagine being a man—what wearing his shoes felt like, and having short hair. Looking down at yourself and seeing a man’s body. All the little physical differences that somehow added up to something huge. Peeing standing up, being tall, having to shave. You could think about this for hours, just in time to fall asleep ten minutes before the alarm went off.

If you were a man, you’d be a complete bastard. You’d say misogynist things and use women for sex. You wouldn’t give a shit about anyone but yourself. You’d chew with your mouth open and belch and go to male pride rallies. You wouldn’t just be “you” with a penis.

I sometimes make the mistake of believing the best in people. It's a naïveté, or just sheer stupidity. Is this the wrong place to admit women in spandex turn me on?

I have a voice inside my head that issues non-stop criticism. But somehow I don't let it get to me. I'm good at distracting myself. I can spend an hour inside a grocery store just spacing out. Shopping's impossible when you need something specific. Signage suspended from the ceiling blows liquidly back and forth beneath a vent. *Aisle Eight: International Foods*. I don't like going to the deli counter; there's always a line, and the chatty conversation seems to go on forever. I prefer to wander without purpose or intent.

A woman in a lavender cardigan bends at the waist to pick up a can of soup. Her cart's full of paper products. She's one of those people who buys more non-food than food.

Often I think my students sense my disappointment in them. I try not to let it show. What's needed in the classroom is more warmth and humanity. I like to think people can tell me anything.

I've never gotten angry in class, not visibly, not that I can remember. When I'm upset I become quiet and remote. I answer questions succinctly. I retreat into myself.

It's hard to tell I'm smiling when I'm wearing a mask. I don't smile with my eyes like some people. I'm not a very expressive person overall.

I wish I could be expressive, like a woman. Being male means wearing tan pants.

( )

10.

Kim whistled out a thin breath, pressing the back of her hand to her forehead. "Wow, I'm a mess. I think I'm going to need to take about three showers," she said, looking down at the sticky stuff on her chest.

Robby lay next to her, still breathing hard, his right leg around her waist. "Did that feel good?" he asked.

“Oh my God, baby, didn’t you hear me? I’m fucking floating right now. I don’t think I can get up.”

“Don’t get up.” He put his arm around her, careful not to brush up against her chest. Weird how guys could be about things like that. “I can get a washcloth.”

“It’s fine. Let’s just lie here.” Rolling onto their sides, they faced each other and kissed. “Are you still hard? I need at least twenty minutes. You’re younger than me.”

He blushed modestly. “Thank you.”

“Why are you thanking me? I should be the one thanking you. I can’t believe how fast I came. I just wanted you so much and had to get there. Next time we’ll go slower.”

There was a look in his eyes of wanting to say something—something bold and irrevocable—but he wasn’t quite sure of it. This was all new to him.

“What is it, Robby?”

She wasn’t used to being stared at with such naked admiration. It was almost more than she could handle. “I just feel so close to you right now,” he said.

She kissed his cheek. “I feel close to you too.”

He nodded, his eyes straying to vacant space. The room was starting to get darker, and she cautioned herself not to fall asleep. “What are you thinking? You look serious all of a sudden. Are you sad about something?”

“No, not sad—not sad at all. I guess I’m just scared about what all this means. With your husband and all.”

Kim rolled her eyes. “*Robby*, baby... don’t worry about him. I can handle my husband. Besides, he’s never gonna find out.”

“You’re not going to get in trouble?”

“Hell, no. Look, Rick’s an abusive asshole, and he can go to hell as far as I’m concerned. I just want to enjoy you and this thing we’ve got together—for as long as it lasts, okay? You don’t owe me anything. You’ve got school and girls your age-”

Robby shook his head. “I don’t care about them.”

“You do, though. And that’s how it should be. You’re such a special person, Robby. You’re smart and good looking and kind to people... and you’ve got a great penis.” They

laughed. “Really. You’re gonna have an awesome life. And this can be whatever. If it’s just a few weeks or months, I’m fine with that. And then I can go back to being ‘Mrs. Bench’ or ‘Ms. Wardowski’—that’s my real name—or whatever you want to call me.” She rubbed his chest. “You’ve just made me so happy, Robby, just by being here, and I want to make you happy too.”

“You do make me happy. You make me more than happy. That’s what I’m trying to say. I know this is fast, but when I look at you and I look at us together... this feels right. Kissing you and being alone with you and being naked together, touching each other. It’s all I want.”

She didn’t know what to say; it’d been a long time since she’d confronted a young man’s ardent emotions.

She tapped him lightly on the lips. “Hold that thought,” she said, sliding out of bed.

“Kim?”

“No, I’ll be right back. Conversation to be continued. I’m just going to wipe myself off.”

She scurried off to the bathroom, and a fan came on with the light. She was startled to see herself in the mirror, and she stood on her toes to get a better view. Not bad. She still had a younger woman’s body. Her breasts hadn’t started to sag, and somehow she’d managed to keep the weight off without trying too hard. Wetting a cloth under the sink, she wiped off her stomach and the undersides of her breasts. It made her laugh doing this—wiping Robby Sims’ sperm off her tits. She felt warm and good all over. This was what she’d been missing all these years—not just sex, but being *present* with another person. Being looked at, and being permitted to look.

11.

You’ve been having the forest dream nearly every night. It begins with you alone, as it always does. You want to stop moving, but you’re afraid someone or something evil will catch up to you. You’ve lost all sense of north and south, east and west; the stars tell a story, but you’re dumb to their language. A harsh autumn wind rakes across your breasts, and you hear a man’s heavy footsteps in the leaves. He calls out to you, but you’re hesitant to answer back, being in a vulnerable place and not knowing his intentions. The man speaks slowly and clearly; there’s kindness in his voice. *I know you’re scared. I’m scared too. But we can help each other. Please.* His “Please” confuses you—you don’t know what he’s asking. His kind voice begs you to join

him—you can work together, give each other comfort and aid—but you say, *I can't*. Aching with frustration, the man says, *Why not? Because I'm naked*, you say, arms over your breasts. You can't see him, but you sense a smile. *Oh*, he says, then your name—somehow he knows it—*I'm naked too*.

And that's when you wake up with your hand between your legs.

12.

Scottie and Robby were good friends, at least up through seventh grade. Scottie lived near the school, and Robby would walk home with him and have a snack and play video games until Robby's mom picked him up on her way home from work. Scottie's mom didn't seem to work outside of the house. She was pretty and seemed a lot younger than either Robby's mom or most of his other friends' mothers. She'd give Scottie and Robby cookies and go back to some household chore. The TV was always on in the living room; Scottie's mom liked to play it loud so she could hear it from the other rooms in the house (though Scottie's house was small, maybe half the size of Robby's). When the boys were younger they did team sports together—Scottie played forward on the community soccer team and Robby played defense—but Scottie quit in sixth grade, so Robby only really saw him for an hour or so after school, and then they mostly played video games in Scottie's room in the basement. By the time the boys hit middle school, Robby noticed some changes in his friend. He swore all the time—never in front of his mom or their teachers—but as soon as he and Robby were alone it was “fuck this” and “fuck that.” He seemed addicted to swearing—he'd shift into a mode where he'd say “fuck” once, and then it was “fuck” every other word until Scottie's mom came down to the basement with some folded laundry for him to put away.

And Scottie wasn't always very nice to his mother either. When she wasn't in the room, he'd talk about what a “bitch” she was, and it made Robby uncomfortable. It wasn't like Robby was a perfect angel—he'd say “fuck” too, though not nearly as often as Scottie. But it bothered him to hear Scottie say mean things about his own mother. Mrs. Bench seemed like a nice person. She was always rubbing her hands together, like she was cold or nervous about getting a phone call. Robby didn't see Scottie's dad much, and he guessed Scottie's mom spent a lot of

time alone. Once he had a long conversation with her about school—just her, Scottie wasn't even in the room. She asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, and he said “a writer,” which sounded cool. Then she told him to work hard in school and study and get good grades or else he'd wind up like her, and he didn't know what that meant. Maybe it meant she didn't like herself. Whatever, it made him uncomfortable. But he liked how Scottie's mom always gave him an extra warm smile when she made them a snack after school. Robby's own mom was a nice person too, but so busy at work. Mrs. Bench seemed to exist for the moment her kids came home from school (Scottie had an older sister, but she was almost in college). Sometimes she'd pause downstairs in between chores and watch Robby and Scottie play video games until Scottie said in his fake not-very-good British accent, “Yes? Did you want something, Mother?” and she'd get the hint and leave. Robby wouldn't mind her watching them play video games; but she wasn't his mother to order around.

One day when Scottie's mom was out of the house and his older sister was away at a debate competition, Scottie wanted to play double-dare. Robby didn't really like to play double-dare, but he usually went along with it. Double-dare often involved doing something you didn't really want to do, or making someone else do something they didn't want to do. There was nothing “double” about it—that was just what they called it. A lot of Scottie's dares involved profanity: *Dude, I dare you to go out on the front lawn and scream “Fuckin' shit!” at the top of your lungs.* But today he said, “Dude, I dare you to steal a pair of my mom's underwear.” Robby almost gasped. He was only twelve, but he was pretty sure stealing Mrs. Bench's underwear was disrespectful and inappropriate. “Man, I'm not gonna do that. Pick something else.” “No, man, that's the dare. Do it or I'm gonna punch you wicked hard in the back.” Robby didn't know what to say; he couldn't believe Scottie would even think of something like that. Robby would never ask another boy to steal his mom's underwear or even touch any of his mom's stuff. Not even as a double-dare. “Come on, she's not even home. She'll never find out. Bitch is so clueless anyway.” Robby felt his face grow hot. He wanted to tell Scottie off for being such a creep to his own mom, who was a perfectly nice lady so far as Robby could tell. But he'd learned to be a little scared of Scottie lately, particularly when he got like this, so he said, “Steal, as in take them for good, or steal as in take them and put them back?” Scottie had to think about it; he hadn't

considered the details. “Steal as in take them and put them back, I guess. Yeah, you can put them back. But you have to hold them for at least thirty seconds and stare at them super close up without blinking. I mean, you can blink, but you have to keep your eyes wide open and not look at anything else.” Robby weighed all this as his friend grinned evilly at his discomfort. It didn’t sound so bad the more he thought of it. Mrs. Bench would never know, and the moral burden would weigh on Scottie anyway for making him do it.

Leaving their video game on pause, the boys ran upstairs to Mrs. Bench’s room. Robby supposed she slept here with her husband. The room was a mess, with the sheets unmade and shoes all over the floor. “Dude, let’s just go,” Robby said from the door. “Naw, man, you’re committed. Thirty seconds,” Scottie said. Robby looked weakly around the room. “Where is it?” he asked. “Fuck do I know. What do you think, I go digging through my mom’s underwear drawer all day? What kinda pervert do you think I am?” Scottie marched Robby into the room, and Robby went to a dresser by the closet. The top of the dresser was covered with loose change, earrings, receipts from stores; a curled and unframed picture of Mrs. Bench with her family leaned against the base of a table lamp. Wanting to get it over with, Robby pulled open the top drawer. “That’s it. Now take out the laciest, sexiest pair. Not no cotton undies,” Scottie said. Holding his breath, Robby reached into the drawer. Mrs. Bench’s underwear felt cool and smooth, silky smooth; it was almost like putting his hand in a drawer of cool water. “Come on, don’t take all day. I know you love it, you fucking horndog,” prodded Scottie. It took all Robby had to say, “Hey, man, don’t talk that way about your mom.” Scottie cackled. “Ha! You can’t talk shit, man. You got your hand in my ma’s underwear drawer. Now grab a pair and hold it right up to your face.” Squinting his eyes, Robby closed his hand around a puddle of silk and lace and pulled it out of the drawer. Scottie oo’ed appreciatively. “All right, now—so *that’s* what the slut wears around the house all day. Come on, get the fuck close to it.” Robby’s jaw hardened. “Not until you take that back about your mom. Don’t call her a bitch or a slut.” Scottie sighed, still just having a good time. “Only if you give ’em a good sniff.” Robby began to panic. “I’m not gonna do that!” “Then I ain’t takin’ back nothin’.” Robby peeked at the lady’s underwear in his hands. They were thin, with barely more than a strip to cover up in the back. Somehow it wasn’t what he pictured when he thought of Mrs. Bench, not that he ever thought of her in that way. “Are you

gonna take it back?” “Dude, why do you care what I say about my mom?” “Just, I’m asking—are you gonna take it back?” Scottie laughed meanly. “Yeah, okay, I take it back. She ain’t a bitch. She’s the most wonderful woman in the world. Now sniff ’em!” Without bringing the panties any closer to his face, Robby breathed in through his mouth. It didn’t really smell like anything, just air. “Oo, Rob-Rob sniff my mama’s panties! I’m-a tell my dad,” Scottie said, and Robby threw the underwear back into the drawer. “Don’t, you *ass*,” he said. Scottie just grinned. “Yo, I won’t. You take shit way too seriously. Hey, let’s make some pizza rolls. I’m fucking hungry. I couldn’t eat the lunch at school today. That shit is poison.” The boys went to the kitchen to nuke some pizza rolls, and ten minutes later they were back to playing video games. Robby wanted to go home. He missed his mom and dad and his room, his own stuff. He wanted to sit quietly at his desk and read a book. The pizza rolls were still cool in the middle; they should’ve nuked them another minute. Scottie’s voice came from far away: “Dude, that guy just *annihilated* you.” Robby blinked and saw the aftermath of his game character’s head exploding, a cloud of bloody dust above the shoulders. That was what he felt like right now. “Aw, shit,” he said, “I just remembered, my dad wanted me to help him move some things in the garage. I gotta go.” He’d reached the age when his parents let him walk the ten blocks home instead of picking him up. Scottie hardly reacted, just kept playing his game. “Yo, see ya,” he said, and Robby went back upstairs, taking his half-eaten plate of pizza rolls with him.

Mrs. Bench was back from her errands, and she smiled to see him. “Oh, hi Robby,” she said. He stayed at the top of the basement stairs, holding his plate with both hands. “Hi, Mrs. Bench,” he said, cringing inwardly. He couldn’t help seeing—it was impossible not to—her lacy panties with the thin strip up the back. He wondered if she was wearing something similar now under her denim capris. His gaze sank to the floor; Mrs. Bench wore thick soled sandals with a cork heel, and her toenails were painted some deep shade of red. “I can take that plate if you’re done with it,” she said, and his eyes darted back up. “Oh... n-no, I can take care of it. Where do you want it?” he asked. She reached for the plate. “Here,” she said, and he gave it to her. “Staying for dinner?” “Nah, I gotta go home. I got homework,” he said, adding, “But thank you.” “Wow, you do *homework*. What a novel concept. I wish more people around here would do their homework.” She laughed, and he laughed back; it felt good to share a joke with her at Scottie’s

expense. He picked up his backpack, which he'd left slumped in a corner of the room. "Well, have a good night." "You too, Robby. I can give you a ride if you'd like." "Oh, no—I don't mind walking. It's just a few blocks." "You sure?" she asked, and he nodded. "Okay, then. Tell your mom I said hi. I need to call her for a girls' night." Robby promised he would and left the house in a hurry.

As he walked home, he thought about how badly he'd abused Mrs. Bench's trust. From then on, he knew he wouldn't be able to look at her without thinking about the dirty thing he did. He was a bad person for letting Scottie talk him into it. He didn't want to hang out with him anymore if it meant doing bad things to a nice person like Mrs. Bench.

13.

You can stay here or go on to something else.

Doors that lead nowhere, or doors where there usually aren't doors. An open door sticking up out of a hill of red sand, or a door lying flat on the cold compacted earth of a forest path somewhere in the Northeast.

Stepping through the door takes you to another place. You're on an elevated tram that runs the length of an enormous shopping mall, and there are no seats, just straps to hold onto, and a swarthy man in an open trench coat glares down at you as the tram glides along the rails. He's got menace in his eyes; he wants to do something bad to you, but he probably doesn't have the nerve. The artificial light inside the tram grays his skin. He has a long face, a prominent forehead, and his hair's something like a thinning mullet. The tram glides and sometimes bounces, like a hiccup. You and the man both go up and down when the tram bounces, and this seems to amuse him. You wonder if he'll get off where you get off.

You could speak to him, really blow his mind. He's not used to people taking the bait.

The tram comes to a stop, and the doors make a gassy noise as they part. You step off the tram, and the man stays behind. Maybe he's relieved. Now he doesn't have to be a creepy menace anymore. Riding the escalator down to the main level, you step across the white marble

concourse; the tram glides on overhead. Tram is another word for shuttle. There are other words. You enter a store, pick up a blue basket, and gather your purchases. At the check-out, another man with a thinning mullet runs your purchases over a scanner; an infrared line winks at the bar codes. Objects are transferred from basket to bag. You'll pay for them in two weeks when the credit card bill comes. You're someone who likes to pay off your credit card balance in full. You don't like the idea of paying interest on menial charges.

Leaving the store with your purchases, you step back out into the concourse and veer toward a fountain. There's a lottery ticket on the floor covered with shoe prints. You leave it there. Stepping out of your shoes, you take off your clothes and leave them in a neat heap at the base of the fountain, shoes on top as if to keep the garments from blowing away. You feel air on your bottom, the clammy stick of the white marble against the soles of your feet.

You continue along the concourse, opposite the direction of the tram. Monorail is another word for tram. Some people stare at you, but most do not. Being naked has made you invisible, or at least a thing not to be noticed. You're a smeared glass. Eventually two strong hands pull your arms behind your back and haul you away.

14.

You don't know why, but you've always been drawn to such dark places. It's a predicament you've put yourself in; maybe you're under the influence of something, but you've come here on your own will, more or less. You want to know what it feels like, this out-of-controlness or whatever you want to call it. To feel the terror lurch in your chest, to realize too late what a colossal and avoidable mistake you've made.

Or maybe it's not quite that. Maybe it's not a choice. But what else would it be? You remember reading about a woman who put out a personal ad asking a man to sexually abuse her and torture her to death. No one took her up on it, and you wonder what must've been going through her head.

Wind rakes your bare arms. Twist your ankle and you're probably done for.

Someone's been leaving pieces of mirror out here, Idaho-shaped shards propped up against tree trunks. They're not litter—they're too intentionally placed. And not just mirrors—

doors as well, usually just the frames. There's a guiding aesthetic that maybe you understand. All the world's an art project. But you can step through a door, just like you can walk down a flight of stairs. Someone wants you to think about these things when you come out to the woods.

A shadow crosses your face, your naked body. All you want's a good scare—and then maybe you'll get over it. That deciding moment when excitement turns to regret. Now you're *really* alone, left with your mistake.

The woods both soothe and scare you—you can't explain it, so you don't try. The mirrors look beautiful, like open holes in air. Their wavy irregularity, like shiny glass-fused water. They're almost more like windows than mirrors; they reflect your body but not your face, nothing from the neck up. Your bare feet pass close and skip away. Walk straight and you might merge with your own reflection.

15.

Another bed in another hotel, 8:30 on another Saturday night. Kim kissed Robby's chest; this was the third time they'd been together. Sometimes he'd phone her at work during her break, and she'd take the call out in the concourse. *I've got class in ten minutes. Can we meet up this weekend? Just for a few hours. I need you. I can't stop thinking about you.*

"So when was your first time?" she asked, and his eyes smiled at her in the dark. "Are you serious? It was me?"

He rolled on top of her. "My first, my only."

They kissed; it was nice to hear these things, though she knew she shouldn't encourage them.

"Am I squishing you?" he asked.

"It's okay. I like being squished." She adjusted to a more comfortable position. "Robby, are you sure this isn't taking time away from school?"

"It's Saturday."

"No, I know." She brushed his thick, dark hair. "I just don't want you missing out on anything. I know how important your studies are to you."

"*This* is important. Nothing else."

She rolled her eyes, but smiled. She knew this was just bedroom talk. “If you ever have something to do, like a paper to write or a test to study for, I want you to do that first. I’m always here for you, but I’m not expecting you to make time for me every weekend.”

“It’s not making time. I told you—I love you.”

Kim laughed in frustration—she wasn’t getting through to him. “And I love you, too. But I’d be a bad girlfriend if I took time away from your work.”

Soft kisses: a little peck here and there. “Girlfriend. I like the sound of that.”

“I like the sound of it, too. And are you my boyfriend?”

“I am.” His kisses slowed, and he looked thoughtful. “Sometimes... I think about it, and I-”

“What, Robby?”

“I just wish we could do more. Like, it didn’t just have to be for a few hours once a week.”

“I know, baby, but that’s the way it is right now. I’m kinda stuck.”

“But isn’t it fun just to think about it? Like, if you weren’t married, and we didn’t have to worry about people getting mad.”

“How mad do you think people would get?” she asked, not really wanting to know.

“*Really* mad—my mom especially.”

“What do you think she’d say?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I’m an adult. I know she wants me to meet a girl who I can do all those normal things with. Like get married and have kids.”

“But Robby, it’s so early. You don’t want those things now.”

“I *do* want them. I want them with you.”

“Oh, no you don’t. And I’m pretty sure we wouldn’t be able to anyway.”

“No?”

They held a look. “Well, technically—maybe. But that would be very bad, so we’re going to take all the necessary precautions.”

He slowly pushed her legs apart with his knee. “I want to make a baby with you,” he whispered.

“Oh, Robby... you’re crazy. Hey, are we doing this? Because you need to take care of something first.”

Holding himself back, he rolled onto his side and took a condom from the nightstand.

“I hate these things,” he said, putting it on.

“Let’s wake the fucking neighbors,” she said, bringing him onto her.

Kim remembered the first time she went on a date with a boy. She might’ve been a junior in high school; her older brother was already off to college, making Mom and Dad proud. Mom and Dad were less proud of Kimmy—she’d come close to failing two of her subjects in the first quarter, English and U.S. History. The only class she was any good at was math. Math was like doing a logic puzzle; the pieces started out scattered, but you worked through the possible solutions until you found the right one, and then it was easy. Kim liked easy. According to her mother, she was intelligent but rarely made the effort. Hanging out with friends was more important to her than studying. She also had a temper, which resulted in a few after-school calls from the assistant principal. She’d been sent home early a couple of times for violating the school’s dress code. *Why do you always like to push people’s buttons?* her mother asked, not angry, even a little amused. That was the weird thing about her mom: you never knew if she was really angry or just going through the motions, acting like a parent.

Before her date, her mother said, *I hope you’re not going to corrupt this young man*, which sounded like a joke. Kimmy scowled; she’d wait to do her lipstick until she got in the boy’s car.

At the pizza place where the boy had brought her for a slice and a Coke, Kimmy said, “I hate school. I hate that we *have* to go. It just feels like a waste of time. I mean, I get it: you need to learn about things and shit. And if you don’t graduate and go to college you’re never going to get a good job. But it’s just so much pressure, this year especially.” “Oh, I know,” said the boy. “Isn’t it? Mrs. Kane totally gave us four hours of homework over the weekend—and that’s just one class! I’m *so* not doing it.” The boy buzzed his lips, like *Fuck no*.

After pizza, they drove aimlessly around town for about a half hour. The boy was cute—a senior, the kicker on the football team—but Kimmy wasn’t sure if she wanted to make out with

him. Football players always talked, and she didn't want to get a reputation. Then again, if she *didn't* make out with him, word might get around that she was a prude or a tease. So there was no good or correct choice.

Parked under a tree, she asked the boy if he liked her. She was wearing a jeans skirt that showed off her tanned legs. "Sure," the boy said, keeping his eyes on the steering wheel. He sounded like he didn't mean it—maybe she'd spent too much time complaining about school. Kimmy was good at making herself sound stupid—she knew this about herself. It was something she normally did to push people away; but why now? She didn't want to push the boy away; she wouldn't have said yes to him if she didn't like him at least a little.

"Just so you know, I don't sleep around. And I won't go down on you, if that's what you're thinking," she said. The boy didn't say anything, and she crawled over the gear box and kissed his cheek.

But what still stuck with her wasn't the date itself; it was what her mother said to her when she got home. The boy left her off at eight-thirty—earlier than planned—and when she came into the house, she could smell whatever her parents had made for dinner, maybe steaks. Her mother had that amused look on her face, the same as when she would scold her for having a bad attitude or doing poorly in school. *I didn't expect you home so early*, she said, which was innocent enough, nothing to it, but it hurt Kimmy all the same. She thought, *Oh? What did you expect, Ma? What did you expect?*

When they were finished and showered and dressed, they spent a few more moments sitting together on the bed and holding hands. Neither wanted to leave.

Robby stared moodily out the window: another parking lot a quarter filled with cars. The sound of the highway filtered dimly through the window.

The silence settled, and Kim started to feel uneasy, insecure. "What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"About how much I wish we could spend the whole night together."

"Maybe we can, someday. I can think of some good excuses."

"A whole weekend?"

“Maybe. Where would we go, what would we do?”

He turned to her. He’d obviously spent some time thinking about this. “I have this dream where I pick you up and we drive out of state, like just over the border. And we’d rent a house in the woods or someplace isolated.”

“Oo, sounds nice.”

“Yeah, and we’d get real dressed up and go out to a fancy dinner.”

“So... it’s near a town but not right in town.”

“I guess. I mean, it’s a fantasy. It doesn’t make perfect sense.”

“It doesn’t have to be a fantasy. We could do all this. I just have to figure out a few things. This is good—it’ll give me something to think about at work.”

He gave her hand a squeeze. “Do you want to hear more of it?”

“Please, tell me. Though we should get going in a few minutes.”

He told her the rest of it—how they’d spend the weekend together staying in an isolated house in the woods, and they’d go into town during the day and window shop like a married couple or at least two normal dating people, and at night they’d get naked and make love outside in the moonlight.

“Sounds nice,” she said. A kiss, and they left separately, ten minutes apart.

16.

Doors in earth. Doors lying pressed flat against the forest floor, leading straight down. A door standing straight up on top of a sand dune: if you walk around it, nothing, but if you walk through it, transformation!

We’ve come a far distance to reach this place. The air is red and smells of blown chalk. Our expressions show amazement and fatigue through the tinted visors of our helmets. We want to strip naked but know our bodies would implode. Each step is a challenge; each step takes its own time.

Everything changes when you open the door. It appears without warning in the unlikeliest of places. Sometimes it doesn't "appear" at all; you'll be walking across the street or through the forest and the landscape will shift, and you'll know you just passed through an invisible door. But this is rare. Usually the door plays fair. It's not trying to deceive you. You understand something is bound to happen when you enter one. That's part of the contract between door and person. A door promises change, maybe escape. You can walk through a door and leave it open or close it behind you; normally it's up to you. Some doors don't quite fit their frame; you have to monkey with them, put a little muscle into it. Passing through a door almost always requires a thought, some conscious or semi-conscious decision. You walk through a door because you want something—or maybe you *don't* want something, and that's why you walk through it. You can think of it as entering or exiting—it doesn't really matter. It's possible to "enter" the outdoors just as it's possible to exit a building. Going outside doesn't necessarily mean you're "leaving."

Doors are transitions. Some have handles or knobs. There's a sky blue door in La Junta, Colorado with the paint flaking off. I've seen doors in parking lots, a chemist's office, floating in the hot wake of a departing 747. If you enter a door by mistake you can usually back right out. There's no defined etiquette; or, if there is, you don't always need to follow it. Sometimes it's nice to hold doors open for other people. On the other hand, you've probably had doors slammed in your face more times than you can remember. A door can be a metaphor, of course, but we prefer our doors literal and concrete. They can be weird, they can be impractical. They can be aesthetic or "strictly for show." Doors can open into the floor or hang from the ceiling. A door has a right to exist even if you have no use for it. If a door's purpose eludes you, it's possible you just haven't figured it out yet. A door is a challenge. It requires at least temporary commitment.

The air here is copper red. It's polluted. The air is thick with dust. There's a door standing upright on a raked sand dune, and if you pass through it, your body turns to shimmer.

The man in your bed kisses your hair. The nights are getting cooler, and you've got the top sheet and comforter pulled over your bodies. Suddenly you want to tell him about your forest dream,

the one that's been waking you up every night for the past week. But you're not sure he'd understand.

"Do you ever have strange dreams?" you ask.

"What do you mean, strange?"

"Dreams that you keep having and you don't know why. Sometimes when you're sleeping, but also sometimes when you're awake."

"Daydreams."

"Sort of. I guess they're like daydreams. It's more like a kind of vision. And sometimes I wonder if it's not a dream at all, but a memory. A memory of something I did a long time ago and now I've forgotten."

He nods, making an effort to understand. "I used to have a dream of a mountain exploding—near my home town. But that never happened."

"Oh, God, I *hope* not! No, I'm pretty sure this never happened either. But for some reason it's just stuck in my head."

You decide to tell him. After all, the point of intimacy is absolute honesty. He needs to know everything about you, and you need to know everything about him; at least all he's willing to share.

The dream's hard to describe, to make it a linear narrative. It's *not* linear, not the way you experience it. Time compresses: it's a 3-D diorama pressed flat under glass.

"It's a helpless feeling, really. Not like I'm drowning. I'm not panicking, really, but I *am* scared. I'm aware of being alone and having nothing on me, no possessions of my own. I'm just naked—that's the point. No jewelry. It's like everything's been taken away from me. I feel like I've been thrown out or turned loose. Someone's abandoned me here. A man, probably—I don't know. But it's like I'm an unwilling part of someone's sadistic game. Like... I'm *alone*, but they can still see me. They want to watch me suffer."

"Sounds horrible," he says. He's on his back, talking to the ceiling.

You shake your head: *horrible*'s not quite the word for it. "I'm probably explaining it wrong. It's mainly just images and fragments. It's night, or getting on toward it. Late dusk? And

it's cold but not freezing cold. Survivably cold. The ground's wet and cold under my feet. Not a numbing cold."

"Just seasonably cool."

You laugh; he has such a funny way of putting things. "Yeah, I guess. Just enough to notice it."

"Are you on a trail?"

You squint; the dream's both vivid and maddeningly vague. "No, I don't think so. I'm just lost. Can I put it a dumb way? This just occurred to me: I feel like a *denuded victim*. And I'm too frightened to have a single thought about it. I just keep moving, pushing through the trees, aware of someone tracking me from behind. Footsteps."

"Are you hurt?"

"No. No, I'm not hurt. Even being hurt would be too much like wearing clothes. The point is I'm *nothing*. I have nothing, I *am* nothing. I'm a body and that's all. Maybe that's why I don't really feel the cold, except faintly. Everything's dim, everything's faint. And the sun's almost all the way down. I'm looking for shelter, but the forest goes on forever. I'm scared of creepy things in the woods coming to get me. Sometimes I stop and crouch and listen, and then I go on. Always this constant moving." You roll onto your side and put your hand on his chest. "And then I see you."

"Me?"

"At least I think it's you. It wasn't always you—I've been having this dream for years. Sometimes it's a man I know, sometimes a complete stranger. I guess it depends what's going on in my life."

"Am I naked too?"

"You're naked too. I don't know that at first. I don't even see you right away, because of the trees and it's so dark. I hear you before I see you. First it's just a rustling noise, and I ask, *Who's there?*"

"And what do I say?"

You don't answer—you don't know what the man in your dream says. Talking through the dream makes you realize how imperfect your sense of it is. Some parts you just always space past.

“Good question. You must say *something*, because eventually we start talking. I still can't see you, but I hear you coming closer. You want me to come with you. There's an insistence in your voice. It's almost like you need me more than I need you; but not exactly. The feeling is that we both need each other—we can help each other just by not being alone. *Come with me*, you say—*come here. I won't hurt you*. And I can't move. *I can't*, I say. I feel drawn to your voice, but I'm still scared. You're a man, and I don't know whether to believe you or trust you, though I want to: I need to be able to trust someone, after what's happened to me.”

“Happened?”

“Yeah—before. The thing that happened to me before I wound up here, in the forest. *I can't*, I say, and you answer, *Why not?* And then I almost laugh, because it sounds so absurd: *Because I'm naked*. And saying it *really* makes me feel naked. And that's when you laugh too, though it's not really a laugh, just a release of some tension, and you say *I'm naked too*.”

Or maybe you just thought all this. Maybe you're still alone in your bed. Whoever this person is, she doesn't talk like you. You don't know what “denuded” means; it just sounds like being nude. You're still working a lot of this out. You've always had a hard time explaining things, even to yourself. You're not a good public speaker. Your words, which express your thoughts, dither into fragments. So maybe it *is* you, this dithering woman. You can use words like “denuded” and not sound like a total idiot.

You wake with your hands between your legs. Outside it's still night, and you rise and move to the window. A pulsing wind fills the trees. A doctor once told you not to go back to bed. Do something productive. Maybe it means rearranging your shoes in your closet. You could sort them by color or by function (though don't *all* shoes serve the same function?). In some fantasy alternate existence, you're going to hire one of those people to redesign your closet. A closet consultant. You pay them two thousand dollars to draw up the plans, and then you do all the work yourself.

Is a “will-o’-the-wisp” a real thing? It seems like a long name for something that doesn’t exist. Maybe it’s just someone standing the woods with a flashlight. Everything supernatural always turns out to be a hoax. You once believed in magic, but now you realize it’s all just sleight of hand.

The clock on your dresser says 3:14, which is both too late and too early for anything. No one’s making love in Essex County. The only creatures still awake are truck drivers and possums. And you. Your eyes pivot in the dark to perceive a nude man in your bed. His body’s long and he sleeps soundly; nothing disturbs his rest. You should be there, lying with him, but instead you’re awake.

Creeping on bare feet, you slip into the perfect darkness of the other room. You feel like you’re haunting someone else’s personal space. This apartment isn’t yours; it belongs to the woman who says “denuded.” The naked man belongs to her, too. Those are his shoes on the floor. They’re the kind of couple who undresses in one room and makes love in another. With his long body, he must smush her in bed.

The light in the forest seems too big for a flashlight. It’s a natural emanation, gas produced. Milky green. Gases rise from a stagnant pool and sizzle in the night air. It’s the beacon in your dream.

Someone else, another woman, would go to it, but you just can’t. You’re too inhibited. You could do it drunk, but what’s the point in that? All you can do is stare at it from afar. The milky green light of the will-o’-the-wisp—call it that—seems to pulse, though maybe that’s just an effect of the wind. It’s like a motorcycle parked in the woods with its headlight on and engine running. The man who owns the motorcycle is a tattooed brute who abuses his girlfriend. Likes to choke her in bed. It must be some sort of hatred or aggression he feels toward her. You wonder why some women stay with men like that.

17.

It was the middle of the following week when Robby’s mom texted about getting together for drinks. Kim and Dana hadn’t had drinks in almost a month. Honestly, Kim had been putting it off. It was hard to keep something so important from someone and still be friends with them.

“Where’d you meet this person?” Dana asked. They were at their usual place, Kim with her beer and Dana with her white wine.

“At work,” said Kim, not exactly lying.

“And...? What’s he like? How old is he, what does he do for a living?”

“I don’t actually know how old he is. Young, in his twenties. He’s a teacher, I guess. We’re trying to keep it simple. We don’t want to know too much about each other.”

“Does he know you’re married?” Kim nodded. “That’s probably for the best. And does this person have a name?”

Kim kept her eyes steady on Dana. “Robert,” she said.

If the other woman noticed the coincidence, she didn’t react to it. “Is he cute?”

“Gorgeous. He’s got these sexy dark eyes and a strong body, tall. He can pick me up and hold me over his head. But he’s not macho. He’s sensitive, and he loves to cuddle.”

“Oo, sounds like a keeper. And the sex is... incredible, I’m guessing.”

“Out of this world. I can’t get enough of him. It’s really turned me into a bird brain. I zone out at work all the time, just thinking about him.”

“And about *it*.” Dana held her tongue between her teeth.

Kim laughed. “Yeah, and about *it*. It’s a lot to think about.” Dana gives her a playful swat, and Kim asks, “Am I being a bad person?”

“Of course you’re not being a bad person. I’ve always wanted to say it but I didn’t want to offend you, but Rick doesn’t deserve you. You deserve a lot more.”

Kim could feel the tears coming, and she blinked them away. “Thank you.”

“You just have to be careful. Men are strange. You never know how they’re going to react. You might think Rick doesn’t care anymore, but that doesn’t mean he won’t get angry.”

“I know, I know. Everything you say is true. That’s why it feels good to talk about this. I know I can trust you.”

Dana gave Kim a reassuring pat, and she found her nerves settling. She didn’t feel like she was keeping a secret anymore.

“It’s hard,” she said, “finding time for it, because the only thing we can do is sneak off to some hotel room for a few hours. I know he’s getting frustrated. He’d like to spend more time together, but I don’t know how.”

“What can I do? How can I help?”

“Nothing. It’s my problem. Sometimes he talks about going away for a weekend, but I don’t know where we’d go or what I’d tell Rick.”

Dana thought. “Maybe you can tell him you’re with me. Tell him we decided to go on a trip. Women do that all the time. Haven’t you ever had a spa weekend with your friends?”

Kim almost laughed; she wasn’t really the “spa weekend” type.

“Hey, I know. My sister and her husband own a summer place up in Wolfeboro—you know, near the Lakes? They usually don’t go up there until July. I could tell her I’ve got a friend who wants to use the place for a few days.”

“Oh, that’s... that’s too much of a favor,” Kim said.

“It’s not too much of a favor. She’d be happy to have someone check up on the place. You and your guy friend could spend as much time as you’d like. I doubt you’ll run into any familiar faces this time of year.”

“What if Rick finds out you’re not with me?”

“I can’t imagine how he would, but if he asks I’ll just say I had to come back early for work. Think about it, Kim. You deserve this, after all the shit you’ve put up with.”

Kim still wasn’t sure. It felt like too much of a risk. “Well... maybe you could just *ask* your sister.”

“Done. I’ll talk to her tomorrow.”

Kim hobbled around the hi-top table to hug Dana. “Thanks so much, Dana. You have no idea what this means to me.”

“No problem. Sisters gotta stick together.” Dana patted Kim’s back, and Kim returned to her stool. “Speaking of the *Roberts* of the world...”

Kim froze. “What’s going on?”

Dana gulped down the rest of her wine—time for another. “Oh, nothing. He just doesn’t seem like himself lately. You know Robby—he’s always so responsible. Always puts school first.

But now he just doesn't seem interested anymore. He used to talk for hours about *this* random event in European history or that obscure Russian novel from the nineteenth century. I haven't seen him read a book in weeks. And when he comes home to visit, he spends all his time hanging out with friends. Well," she signaled across the bar for another round, "I just hope everything's okay."

"Sounds like he needs the school year to be over. I know he must feel he's under a lot of pressure. He needs the summer to recharge."

"Yeah, maybe. Or maybe he's having some secret love affair. That would be just like Robby. He always keeps things to himself."

Silence, and the bartender finally came by with their drinks.

Later in the parking lot, Dana asked, "What are you doing next weekend? Oh—you're probably spending time with your guy."

"No plans yet," Kim said, thinking it might be a good idea for her and Robby to take a break, especially if he was neglecting his schoolwork.

"Let me touch base with Jim. We could have you over for dinner, with or without Rick."

"That sounds nice," Kim said. Rick usually wasn't very good company, but it was probably a shorter conversation just to bring him along.

Dana gave Kim's hand a departing pat. "If Robby's in town, maybe you can find out what's going on. You're good at squeezing things out of people."

18.

You can pick this door or that door or stay right here.

You can stay on the subject of doors.

Because there are people, and people are often in conflict with each other, and you can explore those conflicts and see how they pan out, and you can always do that.

The woman happily makes dinner for her family. She bakes warm and flavorful casseroles, and her children love her for it. They come up behind her at the stove and kiss her on the cheek. They say *Thanks, Ma!* and *Smells good!* The woman loves being a mother. It makes her feel full and

warm and appreciated. Her kids are almost grown now, and she's not looking forward to them moving out of the house. She hopes they'll stay in touch. She doesn't need a phone call every day, but once a week would be nice. Maybe twice. One every Sunday and then a surprise call in the middle of the week.

She wonders what her husband thinks of all this.

A door is a door. A door is rarely a slice of salami. There are more actual doors in the world than metaphorical ones (or maybe there aren't).

Some doors rotate. There are male doors and female doors. Organic doors, biodegradable doors. Doors with herpes, doors with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

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I've said enough about me—let's hear about you! This can't be entirely one-sided. I want to know where you got that scratch on your cheek, just under your right eye. Put some ointment on it if you don't want it to get infected. I love your sweater. It's one of those great loopy and droopy sweaters you could hide a boat in. I can't get away with wearing things like that. I've never liked the way I look in pants. Maybe I need to hire a fashion consultant. I buy pants too loose and six months later they wind up too tight. I like how you sit with one foot tucked under your knee—it's like you really want to be here. How long does it take you to brush your hair in the morning? It just looks so perfect. I don't like my hair—I'm sorry if I'm being self-critical. It's just the rainy mood I'm in today. I don't like how my hair slants to a point at the top of my head. It's conical—it's *almost* conical. Whatever it is, I don't like it. I don't actually have a pointy head, it's just my hair. Maybe if I grow it out more, it'll start to lay flat. It's not like I do anything to maintain it. I get my hair cut about once a year, and always at one of those cheapy, eighteen-bucks-a-cut places in the mall. I suppose it's like anything else, if you want nice hair you've got to pay for it.

Who drew that heart on the knee of your jeans? You must be in love. Is it a guy or a girl? I never assume. I get excited for people when they fall in love. I want to root them on. It's so

hard to stay in love. It's not hard simply to stay with a person, but it takes work to keep it fresh. It's so easy to slip into lassitude. Promise me you won't do that. Tell him or her you love them every day, every hour you're together. Make love as much as you can—it's really more than just a biological function. It's how you show you're special to each other.

I used to date a girl who drew her homework assignments on her hand. Not the actual work itself, but *Read p. 83 - 97*. She'd cover her binder with her first name and my last name together. Young girls are so conventional. Their mothering instinct is the strongest when they're still in their teens. This girl wore a leather jacket two sizes too big for her; her hands would get lost in the sleeves. All business when she brushed her hair—eyes locked on the mirror. I'd pick her up in my borrowed car, and we'd go out for sodas and sandwiches. It wasn't that we were so innocent, but kids that age have limited options. If we could, we would've driven by ourselves two hundred miles away and cuddled up in some rented house in the woods.

Remember how much you *wanted* things at that age? And you never grew numb to it. You never said, "Okay, that's enough." Or "I get the idea." Everything hit you hard. Now when you bite into a tomato, it tastes like vague water. Mahler's 2nd makes you wince with fatigue.

Mahler's 7th is the one I never can remember. I've probably heard it a dozen times and it still hasn't stuck.

Do you scratch yourself in your sleep? I'm still worried about that cut under your eye. Let me see your fingernails. I like when women keep them short. Painted's nice, like yours. I wish I could paint my nails a deep and somber shade of red. But I'm not ready to make that kind of statement.

Do you believe we were put on this earth to make each other happy? I think I do. Your hands would make me happy—I'm sorry, I didn't mean that to sound crude. I just like the look of them. Curl your fingers for me—make a claw. Beautiful. I like the downy hair on your forearms. No, it's not unfeminine! Don't be one of those women who has to have everything perfect.

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19.

The assistant principal's in a philosophical mood today. He wants to talk about Little Kimmy Wardowski's future, which isn't looking too bright right now. He's got her file on his desk, thick and dog eared. She wonders what it says in it. *Kimberli Wardowski showed up ten minutes late to first period with an iced coffee from Dunkin' Donuts. Kimberli Wardowski has been told three times not to write her social studies homework in purple ink.* Generally small things—the kind that teachers usually don't notice unless they're already on your case.

Today the assistant principal thinks Kim is “spunky,” which sounds gross coming from him. Something vaguely sexual about it. She wouldn't be surprised if he has sexual thoughts about her. The older guys who work at this school are all perverts. “Spunky, what's that mean?” she asks. He smiles his fake, self-impressed smile. “Spunky, it means you've got a lot of spirit. That can be a good thing. You don't like people telling you what to do.” “Yeah, so?” “Watch your tone, Wardowski. You're in a lot of hot water as it is.” Kim's eyes go to the wall behind the his desk. He used to be in the military—the Marines or some thing—and he keeps various citations for bravery and valor hanging in his office. Highlight of his life. “The thing about being spunky is, it gets old real quick,” he says. “You know what I think? I think you just like saying ‘spunky.’” “That's two,” he snaps. “Two what?” “Two strikes. One more smart word and I'm calling your parents.” Sighing, he neatens the pages of her file. “What I don't understand is where the attitude comes from. Your brother wasn't like that. Your brother was an honor student.” “Yeah, well I'm not. I'm stupid. I keep telling people and they never believe me.” “You're not stupid, Wardowski, you just do stupid things. You could've really hurt that girl in the hall.” “I didn't push her. I got pushed *into* her. Why don't you talk to Mary Connelly? She's the one who pushed me.” “Somehow I doubt that.” “Why? Because she's the head of the debate club and her dad's the mayor?” The assistant principal hesitates; more than anything, he hates it when a kid guesses right. “You want to know about Mary Connelly? She's not as perfect as she seems. Everyone knows she throws parties every weekend at her parents' summer house in New Hampshire.” “We're not here to discuss another student.” “I'm just sayin'. Some kids are good at fooling y'all. They seem so wonderful, and it's just an act. That's how it is with Mary. She's the fakest girl in our class.” “As opposed to you, huh? With Kimmy Wardowski, what you see is

what you get.” She sinks lower in her seat. “Look, are you gonna give me a detention or what? I don’t mind a detention. I mean, I’ll take it.” “It’s not your choice, Wardowski. What I’d like to hear from you is a willingness to take responsibility for your actions.” “I *said* I’m sorry.” “Right, you’re sorry. You’re going to be sorry in a couple years when you finally get out of this place—that’s *if* you graduate—and realize you should’ve taken your high school education more seriously.” “But that’s my problem, isn’t it? Why do people care? It’s my life.” “I just think it’s sad,” he says. She doesn’t know what else to say; anything that comes to mind would just get her more in trouble.

Detention’s almost like jail; it’s a room where they put you by yourself, and you have to sit there for the rest of the day and do nothing, not even homework. It sucks—it royally sucks. They don’t exactly lock you in, but there’s a window that looks in from the main office so they can keep an eye on you. The detention supervisor asks for her phone, and she has to admit she doesn’t have one. Mary Connelly probably has the fancy, super expensive Nokia that came out last Christmas. The first thing Kim’s gonna do when she’s eighteen and gets out of high school is save up for her own phone—a car, too. That’s after she gets her own apartment. She can’t wait. No more of this bullshit. No more having to ask people if she can use the bathroom, or getting bitched out by middle aged women for what she wears to school.

Twenty minutes into her detention, she pokes her head out of the room. “Yes?” one of the school secretaries asks without looking up from her typing.

“Can I go to the bathroom?”

The woman points. “Hurry right back.”

Using the bathroom kills off five minutes, but soon she’s back to sitting in the detention room. She’ll probably be grounded for part of the weekend. There’ll be some compromise—maybe she won’t be able to watch TV on Saturday. There’s not a whole lot they can take away from her anyway.

A hand raps on the window, bringing her out of a daze. It’s her Western Civ teacher, Mr. Davies; he sticks his tongue out at her and he wiggles his fingers behind his ears. Thinks he’s real funny. Kim wants to flip him off so bad.

There are things you want to do and you never do them.

Lying alone in bed, Kim thinks of all the things she's never done. Rick's passed out in the living room; the TV's still on, barely audible. The energy it takes to get out of bed and turn it off is beyond her. She wishes she'd gone on a big trip by herself, maybe when she was eighteen or nineteen. Just start in Boston and drive west. She's only been to a handful of states, most of them in New England. Florida a few times. But to drive without destination, without plan. Just her with the windows down and Stone Temple Pilots blasting on the CD player.

She wishes she were a stronger woman. The kind who could go up to Rick and say, "You know what? I'm not gonna put up with this anymore. You can't call me names and yank my arm and make me feel like a cheap loser. I'm not a cheap loser. I'm a hard working mom and a good person, and you've got no right to treat me that way. You're lucky to have me. I'm leaving." The kind of woman who *really* says this, instead of just thinking about it in bed.

Turning onto her side, Kim watches the light of a passing car trace across the wall of her bedroom. Where's that person going at this time of night? It's probably a man. Women don't just drive around at two in the morning. Women stay put. You plant your seed in them and roots grow out of their feet.

Kim rolls out of the bed to use the bathroom and gasps. It's Rick. He usually stays down all night. He's reeling—still drunk. Kim doesn't know what he wants. He seems to cast a shadow, even though the hall behind him is completely dark.

"Rick," she says. Her voice sounds dry.

"Kim."

She can't gauge his mood. It can't be good, whatever it is.

"I need to use the bathroom," she says, because he's in her way.

"My back hurts so bad."

She squints at him in the dark. He looks drunk but sounds sober. "I'm sorry. What can I do?"

"Nothin'. Nothin' make it better."

"Do you want me to rub it?"

This annoys him; she's always saying things that annoy him. "That ain't gonna do any good. I got a problem, Kim. You know? A real problem."

She looks at the floor, her bare feet. "I know."

"You think it's nothing. You think I'm making shit up."

"I don't think that, Rick. I-"

"Yes! You! Do!" Rick shouts and stumbles to his knees. Kim takes a step back. She can hear he's crying. "Oh, it hurts. I'm trying. I don't want to be like this. I'm trying but it hurts so bad."

"I know, Rick," she whispers.

"Everything I do just turns to shit. Everything. Somebody should just... Somebody should..."

He's passed out again. In the morning he won't remember any of this. He'll just wonder how he made it from the couch to the bedroom floor.

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When the summer's run its course, when the furnace turns on for the first time in six months and fills the house with the smell of dust, I put on a light coat from The Territory Ahead and go out onto the front porch with a book and a gin and tonic. The coat from The Territory Ahead isn't really a coat; it's more like a thick shirt. We're out of limes, so I've doctored my drink with pomegranate soda. It's still rush hour, but I've already been home for an hour. The dog howls in sympathy as an ambulance and a cop car part the stalled traffic with their sirens and speed through the red light. After a while my daughter comes out and asks if I'd help her with her volleyball drills. Volleyball's a new sport for her; she prefers football but doesn't want to be the only girl on the team. Taking my drink with me, I set it precariously on a banister post and help her with her serve. "Help" means I catch the ball when she serves it to me and pass it back to her. I'm always anxious the ball's going to get loose and sail into the busy street. It's happened a few times.

My daughter's at the age where using profanity feels dangerous and boundary-pushing, like smoking cigarettes. She likes to see what she can get away with, which isn't much. She thinks the profanity doesn't count if she's just quoting a movie or a TV show or something someone else said. Those are freebies, as far as she's concerned. Quoting someone else's profanity is just being a good reporter.

Kids ask me questions, and I tap my chin. The questions range: some veer into abstractions. One wants to know if she's making the right choice by putting off going to college. I can't help her. I *can* attempt to relay my own personal experiences, but I grew up in a different world. My anecdotes are stuck in time.

Think about the men and women, boys and girls, who've seen you naked. They're thinking about *you* right now.

Do you mind if I slide a little closer? We can sit and chat, our knees touching, and you can call me a girl and I can call you a boy.

If I'd been born a girl, my parents had planned on naming me Brittney. I don't know how they would've spelled it, though—whatever was trendy in 1972.

Being named Brittney is like growing old with a phoenix tattoo on your back.

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20.

Kim's parents were the third to know. She'd told her older brother Dean first; not the obvious choice, but she knew she could trust him not to judge her. Dean wasn't a judgmental person. His first words were, "That sucks," then, uncertainly, "... doesn't it?" Next she told Rick, who wasn't exactly thrilled. Of course he blamed her; guys always did. "So I guess this means we're gettin' married," he said, not sounding too happy about it.

Kim's parents came from a different world than Rick. They weren't especially "cultured"; they didn't go to the symphony every weekend. But they both felt a person ought to have interests. Books, art house movies, that sort of thing. Kim felt it was all mostly talk, at least on her mother's part. She'd never seen her mom read anything other than romance novels, and the junk she watched on TV was the same junk everyone watched. This crap about "having interests" was just an excuse to make Kim feel inferior.

"You never gave yourself a chance," her mom said; her dad had already left the room to have a moment to himself. "Early on, even before high school, when you were ten or eleven years old—you don't remember, but somewhere along the line you decided you weren't any good. I don't know where you got the idea. I always tried to encourage you. I always tried to stay positive." "Yeah, Mom, you're perfect. You're perfect and I'm a failure." "See? That's what I mean. You never had any self-confidence. You could've *been* something, Kimberli. You could've gone to college." "Yeah, and paid off student debt for the rest of my life." "Your father and I are not poor people. We could've helped." Sticking his head in from the other room, Kim's father said, "Let's not go into all this now. Everyone has enough to think about." Her mom bit back whatever she was going to say and put up her hands. Her husband's "Let's all be friends" routine always annoyed her. "Where are you going?" he called after her, and Kim's mom answered back from the kitchen, "I've got a headache. Just leave me alone, both of you, before I say something I'll regret." "Dramatic," Kim said under her breath, and her dad frowned at the floor.

One day many years later, when Sheila was in the fifth grade and her younger brother Scottie had started to do full days at school, Kim's mom asked her if she ever thought about getting a little job, something part time. Kim was twenty-eight; Rick's back problems hadn't started up, and his drinking was still limited to a couple beers at night.

"I don't know. Scottie needs to get picked up at two, which is right in the middle of the day. Maybe once he's old enough to walk home by himself. Besides, I don't know what I'd do."

"You could go back to your original interests," her mom said.

Kim laughed bitterly. They were out to lunch at some Olive Garden or Chili's—one of those places. "Yeah... all those great interests I used to have."

“You were always good at math. I remember you thinking about getting into accounting.”

“For about five days. Then life kinda happened.” Kim hated talking to her mom about this. “I never know what to order at this place. I want to get a salad, but I don’t like the salads here.”

“Kim, I know being a mother of young kids is difficult... and Rick can’t be much help.”

“Rick works hard.”

“Rick does work hard.” This was something they both agreed on. You couldn’t fault Rick for not going to work every day. “But do you *like* it? Being a mom, I mean. Ignore the hassles for a minute. Do you like it... in the larger sense?”

“In the larger sense. I suppose I do. Of course I do. I love my kids, even though they give me a pain in the ass about ten times a day.” She thought about it. “I’ll tell you what I don’t like, what I really can’t stand. The other moms. Not all of them—some are nice. I’m friends with some of them. Scottie’s got a pal from school, and his mom and I go out for drinks about once a month. So there’s that. And I don’t expect to be friends with everyone. But some of these women are so goddamn stuck-up, with their Teslas and their briefcases full of paperwork. Everyone’s about fifteen years older than me, and they look at me like I’m too young to be a mom.”

“You’re certainly not too young now,” Kim’s mom said.

“No, not of, like, a newborn baby. But a ten year old in fifth grade? Even Sheila’s noticed it. She’ll ask me, ‘Mom, how come you’re so much younger than all of my friends’ parents?’ It’s embarrassing to her.”

“I’m sure it’s not.”

“It is. I know because she’s said it.”

“In those words.”

“In those exact words.” Kim laughed. “Big word for a fifth grader, huh? ‘Mom, you’re embarrassing to me.’”

“But why do you care so much what other people think?” The waiter skirted by, and Kim’s mom said, “I’m thinking of changing to wine.”

Kim waited, hoping her mom would forget the subject as she upgraded from a Diet Coke to a Pinot Grigio. She was always doing things like that, changing her drink order in the middle of a serious conversation.

The waiter left again, and her mom said, “Things time out differently for different people. The fact is, women are having kids later in life. That doesn’t mean it has to happen all the time. You had Sheila early—it’s not what anyone planned, but we’re all happy she’s here.”

“Yeah, but Mom... you should hear what some of these women say. ‘Are you the nanny?’”

Kim’s mom laughed. “No...”

“Yes! I’ve heard that more than once. They know I’m not the nanny. No one at that school has a fucking nanny. It’s just their way of saying, ‘Oh, I get it. You slept around in high school and got knocked up senior year.’”

Kim’s mom spread her hands helplessly. “Women judge other women. It’s just the way things are. And in a few years it won’t matter anyway. You’ll all be middle-aged and worrying about your own daughters.”

21.

The boy makes you happy. You don’t mind thinking of him as the boy. He *is* a boy.

It was a Saturday night, and Robby went to a party off campus. Some girl from his Comparative Literature class, Monica, had invited him. Monica and her roommate lived way out in the Berkshires on a winding stretch of road between little country towns. It was eight o’clock and already nearly dark; as he pulled up with his high beams on, he saw a half dozen cars parked on the lawn and heard jam-band music rising over the house. Parking next to Monica’s VW, he grabbed the six pack of Sam Adams he’d picked up with his new fake I.D. on his way through Northampton. Warm late spring air filled his shirt; the breeze smelled nice, like fresh trees.

He wished Kim could be here with him. This was the kind of country place he wanted to take her to, some remote cottage in the woods where they could hide out and wish the rest of the world away.

Some girl he didn't know let him in without breaking away from her conversation. About twenty other kids were spread out between the kitchen and living room, with a few more on the deck looking out over the last fading bit of sunset behind the house. Searching for a place to set down his beer, he found Monica in the kitchen where she was peeling the lid off a tub of humus. She hugged him around the neck.

"Hey, you made it!" She sounded slightly high, but not off the planet yet. He wondered when the party had started. It looked like it'd been going on for some time, judging by the number of empties piled in the recycler.

"I wasn't sure where to put this," he said, wanting credit for the beer.

"Just leave it on the counter. It'll be gone in ten minutes anyway. Here, let me introduce you to people."

She led him into the living room and showed him around. He knew about half the kids already, and the ones who knew him looked surprised to see him.

One kid said, "Sims! You *do* have a social life."

"Kinda," he shrugged—what do you say?—and drifted with Monica onto the deck. Looking down, he noticed her feet were bare, a hemp bracelet around her right ankle.

"Do you smoke?" she asked. He wasn't sure whether she meant pot or cigarettes until she produced a joint.

"Sure, a little. I might have to crash here if it gets late."

"Count on it," she said, lighting the joint and taking a hit before passing it to him. He'd smoked pot twice before and wasn't expecting much of it.

"Nice," he said, tasting the nutty smoke flavor on his tongue. "It's beautiful out here."

"This is why I love living off campus. I wish I could sit out here all day and just chill with the animals. You see some pretty wild shit out here. I once spotted a baby black bear right by that stump over there."

"Crazy."

"Yeah, I totally freaked."

They found a couple of unoccupied Adirondack chairs and put their feet up on the deck rail. "I like your bracelet," he said.

She turned her ankle. “I got this at a concert up in Burlington. You ever been?” He shook his head. “You should go. It’s only a couple hours. I drive up there all the time. I could show you around.”

They smiled at each other through the pot smoke, and Monica covered her giggle with her hand. “Burlington, isn’t that where Phish is from?” he asked, dodging the idea of going to Vermont.

“Yeah, and Ben & Jerry’s... or maybe Ben & Jerry’s is somewhere else. I dunno. They’re both in Vermont.” She paused: a shy half-grin. “So... who’s this ‘sort of’ girlfriend you were talking about earlier?”

“I was...?”

“Yeah, *you* were—after class. You know, Thursday? Don’t play dumb. Is she someone you know from back home?”

“Yeah... in a way,” he said.

“In a way. Everything about this girl is ‘sort of’ or ‘in a way.’ Does she ever come out to visit?”

“Oh, no. We really haven’t been together long.” Realizing he was being evasive, he said, “She’s actually quite a bit older than me.”

Monica brought her legs down from the deck rail and scooted forward in her seat. “Older? What’s older? Five years?” He upped the number with his hand. “Ten? More than ten?”

He laughed. “I don’t actually know how old she is. But yeah, more than ten.”

“Fifteen? Twenty?”

“Something like that.”

“Which one is it, fifteen or twenty?”

“Twenty. Ish. Give or take.”

This blew her mind, and she stared at her lap. “Wow. That’s... different. I didn’t know guys did that.”

“Did what?”

“Dated older women—like really older. I mean, I *knew*, of course... I’ve just never met one. Normally you hear about older guys with younger women. But that’s cool. Are you guys

gonna...” He raised his eyebrows, and she explained, “You know, stick together, get married and all that? Do what people do. Or maybe you’re not looking for that.”

Now he wished he hadn’t told her. Maybe it made him sound strange. “I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m looking for. That’s the thing about college—you go in thinking you know what you want, and you just wind up getting confused. Like, I was so convinced I wanted to get my PhD and become a professor, and now...”

“Yeah?” She nudged his leg.

“Now I don’t know what the fuck I want. Just this.”

“What’s this?”

“My life right now. I like my life right now. You know, the future’s important, but...”

“You gotta live in the moment.”

“Yeah! That’s it. You got it.”

“I’m like you. Boy, am I *so* like you.” She looked over her shoulder at a cluster of kids crowding their chairs, one of them telling a rowdy story that held the others’ attention. “Hey,” she said, “it’s kinda loud. You want to go for a walk?”

“Now? Isn’t it too dark?”

She nodded up at the sky. “There’s a moon. We’ll just go up and down the road.”

Monica ducked inside for her sandals and met him around the front of the house with a couple cans of beer. “Sometimes I like to walk out here by myself—not when it’s *super* late. Just around this time. I’m gonna live in the country when I get out of school. I’m gonna be one of those old ladies who lives by herself in a house full of cats and needlepoint, and I’ll can vegetables and do all that hippie shit.” She laughed at her own half-baked idea.

They walked past the cars and up a grassy hill to the road. The crickets had come out, and the stars. Monica lit a cigarette, and they gazed down at her house.

“Pretty,” he said.

She winced. “Yeah, pretty noisy. But who’s gonna complain? Come on, let’s go this way.”

She led him around a curve until the lights of the house crackled out of view. “Doesn’t it creep you out, walking here at night by yourself?” he asked.

“Not really. Maybe a little. Maybe that’s why I like it.”

“You like to creep yourself out?”

“Sometimes. I guess,” she said, cracking herself up. “I mean, not in a big way. I don’t do stupid things. I’m not reckless. I don’t want to get hurt or in trouble. But I like a little excitement.”

“Excitement,” he repeated to show he was listening.

“Like I have this fantasy of being in the woods, and I’m all alone, and it’s pitch black out and I’m totally lost.”

“I wouldn’t want that.”

“No, I don’t either. That’s why it’s a fantasy. But I guess I’m just drawn to that helpless feeling of being in a crazy situation and there’s nothing I can do about it. Don’t you ever feel that way?”

He thought about it; he supposed he did.

For hours you walk on dirt and come to this place. You could be naked and no one would care.

The way they argue at night. Rick will say something like, *Bitch, why you tellin’ me this now?*

“Because, Rick, what else is a good time? You take off at six in the morning-” “To make money, so you can have shit, that fancy car you wanted.” “Oh, don’t give me that. It’s *our* car.” “You’re the only one who drives it.” “You want to drive it, Rick? You want to drive it more often?” “You can have the fuckin’ car. You can have everything.” “What’s that supposed to mean?” “Pf.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Rick?” “Bitch, don’t start on me. Just don’t. My back kills at this time of night.” “Rick, I swear, you call me that one more time and I’m going back to my mother and you can deal with this shit on your own. I ain’t your bitch. You push it, you gon’ see *bitch*, ’cause I can do it. Don’t try me, Rick.” “Pf.” “What, you got nothin’ to say?” “What do you want me to say? I’m sitting here, you’re screaming at me, and I’m in fuckin’ pain. Are you trying to kill me, Kim? Because that’s what this is doing.” “Don’t be a baby. I’m not trying to kill you, I’m trying to have a normal conversation. And I’m not screaming. You always think I’m being hostile when I’m not.” “All you ever do is yell at me. Do you know how hard it is just for me to make it

to the end of the day? And then what these pills do to my liver.” “It’s not the pills doing it to your liver.” “Don’t start that, too. What do you want me to do, sit here in agony all night? I know I drink too much! Wouldn’t you?” “I don’t know what I’d do, Rick. Whatever it is, hopefully I wouldn’t take it out on you.” Rick changes the channel. “Something good on TV?” she asks; he doesn’t answer. “Rick, I’ll say it again. I’ve got to work tomorrow night, so you’re gonna have to pick up something for you and Scottie to eat on your way home. Or order in. I don’t care what you do. I don’t see why this has to be such a big deal. This came up last minute, otherwise I would’ve gone shopping yesterday.” “Why’ve you got so much work all of sudden? Every Friday night, Saturday night.” “It’s not every Friday-” “Or there’s some ‘business engagement.’ Kim, you work in a store. In the fuckin’ mall. Ain’t no ‘business engagements.’” “Well, what do you think I’m doin’? I’m workin’, Rick! First you get mad at me for not having a job, and now I’m working too much. I can’t win with you. I might as well just pack up and leave if you hate me so much.” “And live on what? Don’t make me laugh.” “I’ll do it. Don’t you underestimate me.” “You wouldn’t last five minutes. After the car payments and the mortgage payments and all the shit I pay for every month—and then you gotta have *this* dress and *those* shoes and all this goddamn stuff.” “For *work*, Rick.” “I don’t gotta get dressed up for work! I wear what I’m wearing right now.” “Because you’re a man. And you don’t work with the general public. People come into the store, they want to see me dressed professionally. Because otherwise, Rick? They don’t buy from me. A woman’s appearance matters. Maybe that’s not true for you, but it’s true for me.” “Right. No one cares what *I* look like, so long as the job gets done.” “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” “That’s right you don’t, because you don’t pay one bit of attention to my life or the hard work I do. All you care about is yourself.”

And on and on. Boring, isn’t it?

22.

You can be blank, and you can be distant. You can be whatever people want you to be.

Sometimes on weekends you drive out to the country with your gun and shoot at far-off fence posts. You’ve been questioned by the state police, but you’ve always charmed your way out of

trouble. The weekend trips sometimes turn into overnights; you'll take a room in a motel off the interstate and bed down with a glass of wine. You like these trips; they make you feel like a different person, not that you particularly want to be someone else. You like yourself okay.

You're not sensitive; you don't care what other people think. You don't like the idea of doing normal things at the normal times. You like taking baths in the middle of the night, having pancakes for dinner. You lurk on Facebook but rarely post. You give the impression of being more sexually active than you really are. It's because you're still single, and all the women you work with have been married for years. They like to imagine a life for you that involves taking home a different guy every week. The only guys you can usually bring yourself to date are much younger men, men in their early twenties or even younger. You don't like men your age—not that you don't *like* them, but you prefer the edgy innocence of a nineteen year old boy.

The guys themselves are interchangeable. They're all good people: college students, recent college graduates. You love the puppy-dumb look they get in their eyes when they gaze at you. Guys who know nothing about grown women, the names of the things they wear: the difference between a negligee and a peignoir.

You tell one of them in bed, "You're always going to remember this. Even years from now. You'll think about it every night before you go to sleep, and sometimes when you wake up in the middle of the night. I'll always be in your head."

Your problem is, you don't know what you want out of these relationships. You're certainly not looking to get married. It might've been important to you at one time, but not anymore. You don't need a man in your life. There are times when you've wondered about your own sexuality, but there doesn't seem to be a term for what you are: sexually attracted to men, but not really drawn to them in any other way. You can't quite picture yourself in a relationship with a woman. You like being feminine, but it's not a quality you find especially attractive in others.

When you shoot your gun, you imagine firing it at someone's head. The scenario you're preparing for involves a home intruder sneaking into your bedroom in the middle of the night.

You know you're not strong enough to fight someone off (you once took an eight week women's self-defense course at the Y, but you can't say you got anything out of it). Being able to fire a gun at a real person, even someone who intends to hurt you, involves a certain lack of conscience. You can't think about it, can't take time to second guess. Just squeeze and shoot. But at the same time, you're too afraid to keep your guns loaded in the house. So it's a conundrum. You once read a story about a woman who stabbed her attacker in the eye with her high heel, and you thought, *How perfect. That's the way to do it.*

23.

Kim was hoping for an early night. Rick was tired, as he always was toward the end of the week. But sometimes he surprised her. Tonight he'd shaved and put a wet comb to his hair. She hadn't seen him wear a tie in ages—it looked old even though it never got any use. He was in a reasonable mood on the way to Dana and Jim's, almost cheerful. It infuriated her, how he was willing to make the effort for other people but not for her.

“We won't stay long,” she said in the car. “I know you're probably exhausted. We'll just have dinner and leave.”

“There's no hurry. What's the point in going if we're just gonna rush off?” Rick said as he steered onto Dana's street. He looked older when he got cleaned up. Without his three day beard, she could see the pockmarks on his cheeks, his bad skin.

“Thank you for doing this,” she said softly, and she supposed she meant it. The night would've been easier without him; but then maybe Jim would've wondered why he hadn't come. Dana knew all about Kim's problems with Rick, but Jim was as clueless as most men were about each other.

“What's doing? I'm not doing anything. I'm not a shut-in. I like going out too.”

*Could've fooled me*, she thought. A sign for a landscaping company stuck out of Dana and Jim's front lawn. Out of some habit Rick parked in the street, even though there was plenty of room in the driveway.

Dana waved to them from her open front door. “Hi, neighbors!” Despite his feigned good mood, Kim could sense Rick shudder inside. He normally hated this kind of thing—having to make conversation for two hours across someone’s dining table.

“Are we late?” Kim asked, leading Rick up the fieldstone path.

“Oh, *five* minutes. We’ll still let you come in.”

Dana kissed Kim at the door, then gave Rick a minimal-contact hug. Most of Kim’s friends were similarly awkward around Rick; they sensed he didn’t like to be touched.

“This is for you,” he said, handing Dana the box of little marzipans Kim had insisted they bring.

Dana guided Rick and Kim into her living room. Kim had been trying not to think of Robby all night, but it was impossible. This was the house he grew up in—the room where he threw his backpack when he first came home from school (though he probably hung it up in the closet). She and Rick had been here before, of course, but everything was different now. She felt like she was tempting fate. At least it was Thursday and Robby was still on campus, probably cramming for a test.

“What a week, huh?” Dana said.

“It’s not over,” Rick said, groaning as he sat on the sofa without waiting to be invited. It was fine—everyone knew he had a bad back.

“I’m taking Friday off—Jim and I both are. I haven’t played hooky in five years. Kim, sit.”

“It’s supposed to be nice tomorrow,” Kim said, sitting next to her crippled husband. The mantel over the fireplace was covered with holiday photos; they were that kind of family—lots of pictures, lots of memories. Kim looked away.

“We’re driving up to Portland, though we might lose our ambition and stop in Portsmouth instead. Depends how early Jim can drag me out of bed. We made hotel reservations at both, just in case. Jim?” Dana called toward the kitchen. “You gettin’ drinks together?”

Jim’s familiar voice: “What’ll it be?”

“Beer,” Rick said, and Kim echoed him.

“Two beers for the Bench family,” Dana said. She was dressed in a lovely pantsuit, all white, with matching pumps. Dana had one of those walk-in closets with an island dresser. Kim had been in it a few times; women liked to show these things off. It was the kind of closet you’d expect to find in a much larger house, though the Sims’ house wasn’t small.

“My father grew up in Portland. His dad worked on a salmon boat for thirty years,” Rick said.

Kim looked surprised. “Did I know that?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what you know.” He smiled harmlessly, and the moment passed.

“My uncle worked in the commercial fishing industry in Gloucester. That’s a hard business, I’ll tell you—loses money every year. But everyone’s feeling the pinch these days,” Dana said.

“No, I wouldn’t want to be a fisherman now,” Rick said.

“God bless ’em,” agreed Dana. Watching them, Kim felt her resentment rise. Why couldn’t Rick have a civil conversation with *her* once in a while?

Jim came out with a tray of drinks. “I assume Sam Summer is okay,” he said.

“Anything,” Kim said, taking her beer and rising to give Jim a kiss: a tall, boyish looking guy with a full head of black hair and a tan from playing golf. Kim caught her breath at the resemblance.

“Don’t mind if I don’t get up. It takes some doing,” Rick said.

Jim set Rick’s beer down in front of him. “How you been, Rick? Dana says your back’s still giving you trouble?”

“Eh. I have my good days,” Rick said, which was news to Kim.

Dana and Jim offered cheers with their wine glasses, and Dana said to her husband, “Is Robby still in the shower?”

“I don’t know. He’s a real slow poke these days,” Jim said.

Kim heart stopped. “Is... Robby’s here?”

“Yeah, we kidnapped him for the weekend. What does he have, one class on Fridays?” Jim said, checking with Dana.

“We thought it’d be fun to go out of town as a family. It took some convincing. Suddenly Saturday nights are off-limits as far as Jim and I are concerned.”

“This is the mysterious girlfriend...” Jim said, eyebrows raised.

Dana laughed. “The rumored, *alleged*... mysterious girlfriend. Who seems only to exist on weekends.”

“And who can’t be introduced to Mom and Dad.”

“Oh, never. Never ever.”

Kim tried to smile. “He’s... dating someone?”

“We’re guessing. Who knows? Maybe he’s joined a Saturday night bowling league,” Jim said.

“It’s a good thing. We’re very pleased. It’s just...” Dana trailed off.

“Mysterious.”

“Yes.”

The four adults sipped their drinks as a shower on the second floor clunked off. Rick said, “That was a good age—nineteen, twenty. I can remember being young like that. Before Kim and I met.”

“Was that why it was a good age?” Kim couldn’t help asking, and the others laughed it cheerfully away.

Rick, who’d decided to be talkative tonight, took the question literally. “It’s a good age because you’ve got so much in front of you, and you’ve got a healthy body and you can drink as much as you want and not feel it the next morning. I can remember not wanting to go to sleep—every day was an adventure. I didn’t want to miss anything.”

“And I’m sure you had more than one girlfriend,” Kim said.

Rick smiled broadly, Mr. Sociability. “Well? I’m sure you had more than one boyfriend.”

Jim and Dana chuckled; maybe they recognized something in the conversation, things they’d said to each other.

*No, Rick, not really—not if you don’t count a couple guys from high school. Ice cream dates, pizza dates. Making out at the movies. I didn’t have a lot of boyfriends because I met you*

*when I was eighteen—seventeen, actually—and you came in me after a concert when I told you not to, and it's been high times ever since.*

“Oh,” she said to no one, for no reason.

Robby finally came down for dinner. He didn't look especially surprised to see Kim, just nervous. He wore a short-sleeved Oxford Kim had never seen before, and his hair was still damp from the shower.

“Robby, you remember Mr. and Mrs. Bench,” Dana said.

Robby swallowed as he shook Rick's hand. “Sir,” he said. Then, to Kim: “Mrs... Bench.”

“Hi Robby,” Kim said, not making eye contact.

Big Jim threw his arm around Robby's shoulder. “Robby's graciously condescended to spend some time with his parents this weekend.”

Robby squirmed as Dana and Jim laughed. “Dad...”

“We've just been talking about your mysterious Saturday rendezvous—rendezvous-ses? Is that how you say it?” Dana asked.

A hint of a smile broke out. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“That's funny,” Rick said, all booming good humor, “Kim's been gone a lot on Saturdays too. Maybe we should...”

The others chimed in with hoots and groans. Kim felt alone in the room. “Sure, Rick, sure.”

Robby and Kim kept their distance as they moved into the dining room. Dana set out a roast—she looked busy with the electric carving knife.

“What can I do to help?” Kim asked.

“Oh, nothing—actually, if you want to bring out some waters. Robby, could you show Mrs. Bench where the water glasses are in the kitchen? And help carry.”

As if they were destined to be alone, Robby and Kim crossed through a long, walk-through pantry to the kitchen. Robby bumped the swinging door closed, and the happy sounds in the dining room diminished.

“Well. Funny seeing you here,” Kim said brightly, a hitch in her voice.

Robby's lips tightened; he looked like he'd been thinking of what to say to her all afternoon.

"I didn't know you guys were coming until, like, two hours ago. They sprung it on me. I never would've—"

"It's okay, I'm not mad. Just a little startled."

Robby opened one of the top cupboards and started bringing down water glasses.

Watching his back, Kim asked, "Should I just fill them at the tap?"

"I think there's bottled water in the fridge."

She opened the Sims' Northland fridge—*aren't these things twenty thousand dollars?*—and looked for the water. Dana kept her refrigerator neat, everything labeled and sealed away in Tupperware, no spills on the shelves.

Robby stood close behind her. "I've missed you."

She lowered her chin. "I've... missed you too, Robby."

"How long has it been, two weeks? That's too long."

"You know where to find me." Feeling weak on her feet, she took an inadvertent step back, and he held her up.

"I need you," he whispered.

"Oh, Robby... someone could come in here."

He moved his hands down to her hips. "When can we get together again? Let's sneak off."

She laughed. "What, tonight?"

He nodded, nuzzling her hair. "During dessert... go up to my room..." Fingers on the lower buttons of her blouse, actually trying to unbutton them. "With my parents downstairs..."

Eyes half-closed: "Robby..."

*One button loose.* "Make love completely naked in my bed..."

She squirmed free. "Robby, please. Someone's going to wonder what's taking us so long."

"You've got me so fucking hard..." His hands found her stomach, and she gently batted them away.

“Robby, now that’s really it.” Reaching for the gallon jug of Poland Spring, she carried it past him and to the counter. She felt sweaty, out of breath. Fixing the loose button, she said, “Let’s keep it together, now. Let’s just get through this. You’ve got to help me, Robby. This isn’t easy. Here, I’ll fill the glasses and you bring them out. Is it five or six? Five.”

They made two trips with the waters and joined the others at the table. Jovial Rick was already regaling them with another story Kim had never heard before.

“...so the chief comes in, and we’ve all got our heads down like we don’t know any better. And the guy working next to me says, ‘I thought it was right here!’”

Big laughs from Rick and Dana. Kim and Robby just sat.

Dana raised her glass. “We need a toast. To old friends and staying in touch. We might be getting older, but...”

She couldn’t finish the thought, so Rick said, “Beats the alternative!”

“*That’s* right, that’s right. Cheers, guys. Thanks for being here.”

As Kim ate, she cringed at the sound of Rick chewing next to her. “This is an excellent roast, Dana,” he said.

Dana covered her mouth with her cloth napkin. “Oop, Jim’s the cook, not me.”

“This is an excellent roast, *Jim*,” he said, modulating his voice, making it a joke.

Kim sneered at her plate. Everything about Rick tonight seemed so fake. Dana was probably thinking Kim had made it all up—the verbal abuse, the yanking on her arm and shoving her in the back. All not true. *He seems like such a nice guy!*

“Robby’s coming to the end of another busy year. Still no summer plans, though—eh, champ?” Jim said, turning to his son.

“I don’t know. I think I might just take it easy this summer. Feeling kind of burnt out,” Robby said, keeping the side of his face to Kim.

“They work you hard at that place?” Rick asked.

“I’m kind of doing a double major. It’s not exactly twice the work, but... it’s a lot.”

“I think we’re going to be calling Robby ‘Professor Sims’ in a few years. Though...”

Dana looked at Robby, the teasing smile always on her face. “Is it ‘Robert’ or ‘Robby’? *Professor Robert Sims.*”

Taking the joke, Robby said, “I don’t know. Least of my problems.”

“I probably should’ve gone to college. We weren’t college educated in my family. Our daughter, Sheila, she’s got a good brain on her,” Rick said.

“Oh, Sheila’s a genius,” Dana agreed.

“Yep. Don’t know where she gets it from,” he said, pointedly looking at Kim, who didn’t respond.

“Kim, remind me,” Jim asked, “what did you study in school?”

Dana harumphed to cut off the line of conversation, but Kim said, “No, it’s okay—Jim doesn’t know. I didn’t go to school either. I mean, I went to *high school*—I guess that counts. But then...” She beamed at Rick, throwing it back at him. “...I met this lovely fella, and *boom*. Whaddaya know?”

Rick laughed; maybe she’d hear about it later. “Match made in heaven.”

The others tittered awkwardly, and Kim caught Robby watching her across the table. She wondered what he was thinking, if he was remembering the same things as she. She wished they could be alone, drifting off in bed, waking each other with kisses.

Without quite knowing why, she said, “I want to know more about this girlfriend, Robby.”

He blushed, and his mom said, “Good luck with that. He won’t even give us a name.”

“He’s being a gentleman. I can respect that,” Jim said.

Kim smiled at Robby. “You don’t have to. I don’t want to put you on the spot. I didn’t like taking to my parents about that stuff either—all those old boyfriends Rick mentioned. Oh, you weren’t here for that.”

“A *name*, though, Robby—is that too much to ask?” Dana said good-naturedly.

Kim shrugged, said to Robby, “Well... maybe you can whisper it to me later.”

Code flashed between them—no one else noticed.

After dinner, after coffee and dessert, Kim helped Dana clear as Rick and Jim moved to the living room and Robby pounded back upstairs. “It’s not that I love cleaning up, but the boys don’t know how to load a dishwasher,” Dana explained as she rinsed the dishes in the sink.

“Robby looks like he’s doing great. You and Jim must be so proud,” Kim said.

“We are, we are... speaking of...” Dana shut off the sink and closed the swinging door to the pantry. “What about *your* Robby—the one you mentioned? Wasn’t that his name?”

Kim busied herself with a dish towel, wiping down the counter. “Oh, yeah. It’s okay.”

“But it’s still a thing, right? I wasn’t sure. To be honest, I thought you might’ve straightened things out with Rick, the way you two were acting tonight. He seemed more sociable than usual.”

Kim left the towel in a wad. “It’s an act, Dana, believe me. He’s putting on a good show. As soon as we get home, it’s gonna be *bitch this* and *bitch that* all over again.”

Dana gave her a sympathetic look. “I’m sorry, Kim. What can I do to help?”

Kim felt herself start to cry, which she willed away. “Just be patient with me.”

“Patient with *you*? Why would I need to be patient with you?”

Dana hugged her, holding her wet and sudsy hands so as not to drip on Kim.

“Because I don’t do well with stress, and I’m feeling under stress right now. It’s Rick, it’s Scottie... I feel like my head’s in a vice. So if I say dumb things or even *do* dumb things, it’s just because I’m under stress, and stress makes me stupid.”

“Okay, honey. I’ll file that away for future reference.” Dana let go. “I take it you’re still interested in the place I told you about? Up in New Hampshire?”

Feeling like a nuisance, Kim said, “If it’s still available.”

“Just give me some dates. June’s nice in the Whites—though I don’t suppose you’ll do much hiking.”

Kim laughed, but it was awkward talking about this. “Probably not. Oh... your bathroom—it’s down this hall?”

“Second door on the right. There’s extra toilet paper under the sink if the roll’s low.”

Dana went back to pre-washing the dishes, and Kim wandered off down the hall. More family photos—Jim and Robby on a camping trip (Dana must’ve taken the picture), Robby’s senior year photo, looking a bit more thin in the face. He had a man’s face now, with the fleshed-out firmness you’d expect in a grown adult. But sometimes he looked like a boy too, in those moments when his eyes bolted wide open as if with a question, something plaintive and urgent, and she was the only one who could help him, give him relief...

She waited until Dana went back into the dining room for more dishes, then snuck back up the hall and quickly lofted the carpeted steps to the second floor. She didn't know what she was doing—what she'd say if someone caught her; she wasn't thinking about that now. The second floor was dark and maddeningly vast, too many choices for rooms. She couldn't remember which was Robby's, and then she did. There was a room at the end of the hall with the door closed and a light on, and she floated toward it, knocking once, hoping the world wouldn't hear.

If she got caught, she'd say she had a "female emergency," and maybe that'd do. Or she'd blame Robby—she'd say he wanted to show her a picture of his girlfriend, and when Dana asked, she'd say, *She's cute! Looks like a very sweet girl.*

The door opened, and Robby was there in his room. Kim stepped in and closed the door behind her.

"We have to be quick," she said. "Just don't kiss me—I don't want to redo my makeup."

He moved on her. Outside, in gray light, BMWs and SUVs passed down the dark suburban street.

II.

24.

There's someone else you know. Her name is Pam.

You know everything about her. So I know everything about her too.

The complex, seen from above. Doesn't have to be by helicopter. Maybe the complex can see itself. A cluster of trapezoids. Parking lot one-quarter full. Automatic sprinklers misting at six in the morning. Signs of nature on the periphery: a lone female deer, wandering in from the highway. There's a person staying here in room 105. Of course there are others. The person in 105 has one piece of luggage, a rolling suitcase. She usually sleeps with an eye mask and white noise playing on her cell phone. Nervous on the road, nervous back at the hotel. What do you think is going to happen? If the place catches fire, you've got a quick run to the parking lot. The person in 105 used to smoke—used to do a lot of things. Now she just chews gum.

She's in between places. Hard to say if she's running from something or heading toward something else. Traveling makes her nervous. Always thinks she's going to forget something, like a hairbrush. She doesn't like having to use the hotel's wireless network to get online. First floors make her nervous too; she almost asked for a different room but didn't want to be a pain. Someone can break into a first floor and not suffer a single pang of conscience. Breaking into an upper floor requires commitment. Women get raped on first floors. Up just one level, the whole building protects you.

But she knows she's kidding herself. She's not safe anywhere.

*It's on Route Five. Do you know the way you came in? Just go back up the road where you saw the sign and make a right at the light. It's on that road, about a mile. Not even. You'll know you passed it if you see the Sunoco station on the left. It's good! You can get a nice burger or a salad and sit with your phone, and no one will bother you.*

*Thank you.*

At dawn she rises and parts the vertical blinds to check the parking lot. Her car's still there. The first thing a nosey neighbor might notice is the pine tree air freshener hanging from the rear view. If they're really nosey they might spy all the clothes and paperwork heaped in the back seat. She keeps her car a mess—it embarrasses her, but many things do, and she can't help

it; she doesn't have an instinct for neatness. Her sister used to criticize her for it. She's not neat about packing, the way some women are. Just throws everything in the bag. Mess accumulates to the ankles, then the knees. But she's neat about her personal appearance, always takes time on her makeup and hair.

Nope, too old for bad habits. Used to smoke, used to drink—more than she does now, anyway. She still drinks, but she can control it. It's not good to lose your bearings. She once drove home drunk when she was nineteen and bashed in her front fender—didn't cause damage to anything else, just brushed up against a utility pole. In the morning she told her roommate someone plowed into her at the grocery store. (At two in the morning?) But that was a long time ago, nearly twenty years. She's better about that now.

*You here for the trade show? We've had sellers come in all weekend. Not that I'm complaining, it's good for business. Wifi passcode's on the bottom of the menu. Take your time, it's a lot to look at. Let me take care of these two gentlemen, and I'll come back to top off your coffee.*

A burp rises in her chest; she can still taste dinner from last night, though she brushed her teeth before going to bed. There's a car parked next to hers, which means someone must be staying in the neighboring room. She's always curious about her neighbors, whether they're men or women, traveling alone or in pairs. Single women spend a long time talking on the phone. If the hotel's got thin walls, she can sometimes make out the details of their conversations. It's almost like sharing a room—it makes her self-conscious about flushing the toilet or watching TV. You wonder what the other person can hear, whether it's everything or nothing. Then again, she pays more attention to these things than most people do; she could probably blast the TV all night and no one would care.

Odd that they'd put a person in the room right next to hers when half the place is empty. Maybe it makes it easier for the cleaning staff.

You'd think she'd get used to it, being on the road six months out of the year. At some point you'd stop being afraid of forgetting your laptop back at the hotel and having to look over your shoulder a thousand times to make sure it's still on the floor of the backseat. But things like

that are important; the laptop belongs to the company, and she couldn't afford to replace it if she lost it. She could *afford* it, but there'd go her commission for that month.

Mainly it's a lot of standing. That's half the job—standing and looking professional. She's learned to be a little more aggressive over the years, though it's still not really her personality. *Whaddaya mean, you don't like to bother people? Ha ha ha!* At least people actually *want* to be at the trade shows. The sales pitch is expected. And some of the salespeople are really amazing. During her break, she'll wander the sales floor and watch the other pitches. She doesn't like to think of them as her competition. Men tend to have a smoother pitch than women; they can afford to lay back. One guy at a show in Connecticut half-whispered his whole pitch; he had a headset microphone, so you could hear everything, but he never once raised his voice or hurried his words. Smooth, like he already had you: he was almost creepy, but undeniably charismatic, like (she imagined) a cult leader or a serial killer.

Ask her about serial killers, she'll tell you. Reads those books all the time, watches the hourlong shows on cable. *Why are you doing this to yourself?* But that's the thing about anxious people—they can't help it, they have to make it worse. The one that really gets her is Ted Bundy: how he could kill that many women, get arrested, then somehow escape and get away with killing women for many more years. Like, wouldn't it be easier to track him down once he was already in the system?

Still at the window, she watches a family load up their car across the lot. They probably have a long drive ahead of them. The father looks like he's got a system—he's got the trunk and all four doors open, the luggage lined up on the sidewalk. Every piece is non-negotiable, just ask the wife. He puzzles it over, fingers to his mouth, not moving, just staring at the various square and rectangular objects that need to fit. Bringing all the luggage out first seems like something a man would do.

Pam's never been married—it's not something she really understands. She's dated before, even been in love, but she can't imagine having to adjust to someone else. It's hard enough keeping track of her own life. Some of the women on the circuit ask her about it—maybe she seems conspicuous, thirty-eight and never married. Maybe if she was ten years older they wouldn't ask so much.

*Being independent's one thing, but at a certain point, don't you want to think practical? You're not gonna want to do this job forever, and some things are just harder without a man. My Steve drives me crazy sometimes, but I wouldn't want to still be single. I mean, hats off to you, and I'm not being critical.*

*No, of course not.*

*I think men get a bad rap, I really do. Creeps aside. There's always gonna be creeps. But most men mean well. They try. I've been married for twenty-two years and I wouldn't trade a day of it. Steve and I go down to Key West every February—we've been doing it for fourteen years. It's a good time of the year to go, before all the spring breakers come down and tear up the place.*

*Sounds nice.*

It's easy enough to meet a man on the road. In some ways it's ideal—everyone's on the lookout. It's just the marriage part that gets her. Maybe it's because her parents weren't a very happy couple, though they stayed together until her father died at sixty-one. When she thinks of marriage, she pictures matching recliners with two silent people sitting in them. First dates, fine. Fleeting encounters between strangers. But Pam needs her own life. She doesn't want to get on someone's nerves and have them decide they don't like her anymore.

*What book are you reading? Never heard of it. Is it good? What's it about? Sounds interesting. I should read more. I like to read, I just don't have time—you know how that is?*

The line at the restaurant was out the door last night, so she took a stool at the end of the bar and ate there, recognizing some faces from the show but not enough to say hi. Meg must've done takeout. Probably a good idea. At the end of the day you just want to eat your Caesar salad and turn in.

*I remember that guy—back in the seventies, right? And he killed something like a hundred women. Sheesh. Some people, I hate to say it, just should've never been born. You know what I'm saying? Like, what purpose did all that serve? All that misery and unhappiness. Each one of those young girls had a mother and father who loved them—or maybe they didn't. Maybe that's what led them down a certain path—I'm not saying I blame them. I don't. But maybe if they*

*had a bad experience growing up, it might've left a mark on them. Something a guy like that could recognize and pick out. I don't know. What do you think?*

Ted Bundy—didn't they call him "the preppy killer"? Or maybe that was someone else. "Preppy" was an eighties thing. It meant you played tennis and your parents sent you to prep school. Pam was too poor to be a preppy. Preppies wore pink shorts with little ducks on them, and shoes with no socks.

Her salad arrived, and the man at the bar put his hand on her knee. *Please take that off*, she said, not unkindly, and he did.

Sometimes a man bugs you all night, and other times he loses interest and goes away.

She was engaged, once. They never set a date. This was back in her mid-twenties, when getting married seemed the natural thing to do. The guy was older, in his thirties. He'd been married—he'd "been down that road before"—and crabbled about his ex-wife all the time. Pam never met the woman but she felt like she knew her from all the stories he used to relay. From what she could tell, the things the ex-wife did to get on her husband's nerves were pretty harmless—they were things she did herself—and it made her wonder if the guy secretly disliked her, too; if, five years from now, he'd be in bed with another woman complaining about this irritating person he almost married. *Check it out: this is how she ate. This is how she held her fork. Drove me crazy. The way she ate a salad? She'd cut it up with a knife and fork, two hands, like it was a... I don't know. But who eats salad like that? You don't cut it up. You just eat it. And she ate everything like that. Always cutting stuff up—like, pasta. Spaghetti, right? How do you eat spaghetti? Show me how you do it. Good, you eat it like a normal person. But she'd cut that up too—knife and fork, two hands, cuttin' up the pasta like a dipshit—and I apologize for my language. But it just absolutely drove me crazy. It wasn't the only thing—I'm just saying as an example. That's not why we split up. I can still see her doing it, with the knife and fork, like it's engrained in my mind. Everything's got to be cut up into the smallest pieces imaginable—so goddamn dumb, and sorry about my language, but it's just common sense: if you cut up the pasta small enough, you won't be able to eat it. You won't be able to get it on your fork—unless you want to eat it with a spoon, like it's soup or something. Heh. That's the kind of intelligence you're dealing with. But also—like, I'm not crazy, right? This is a reasonable reaction to irrational*

*behavior—but if you cut up your food into small enough pieces, it won't taste like anything. This is true. You know how diced tomatoes lose their flavor? Not lose it entirely, but the flavor's not as intense as a whole piece of tomato, like a wedge. Because that's what happens when you cut the food up into these infinitely small pieces. I'm sorry... it's like, I'm sure I had my faults too. We all do annoying things, and you have to be patient with other people and just deal with it, particularly in a marriage. But the eating, the fucking cutting it all up into tiny pieces. Like, where did you learn that? Did someone teach you that when you were growing up? It's pathetic. I dunno... I suppose I shouldn't be so critical. She was real good when my brother was dying of liver disease. It's just little things like that get to me. Eating habits, you know? Just do it. Don't make a big performance out of it—no one cares. You're not that important. We all get that you know how to use a knife and fork. Proud of you, babe—yay! Standing ovation!*

Engaged to the guy for about a year, year and a half. Eventually they called it off. There wasn't much to cancel—they hadn't booked a venue or sent out invitations. It was really more of an unofficial thing. They weren't even living together, though he stayed at her place three or four nights a week. Bill. He was always good to her, which eventually got to be part of the problem. She just couldn't reconcile his hatred for his ex-wife with the overall decent way he treated her. It made her feel sorry for the woman. So what if she ate her salad with a knife and fork? Sometimes you have to cut up the pieces if they're too big. Not everyone's got this giant mouth. And besides, who made *you* the eating cop? Give people a break. You don't know what else this woman is going through. Maybe her teeth hurt. Maybe she has trouble swallowing. Or maybe, just maybe she thinks she's being polite. Some people would actually consider it good manners, cutting their food into small pieces. Some people would find it rude otherwise. It's all subjective.

In some countries it's considered good manners to make noise when you eat; it's rude not to. Making noise is a way to show appreciation to the cook, the slurping and all that.

When they broke up, Bill told her she was a dark person, whatever that meant. Too dark for him, apparently. Not her complexion, but her attitude, her overall view of life. The way she read true crime books about spree killers—it wasn't ladylike, somehow. Women weren't supposed to be drawn to violence. It creeped him out, seeing those paperbacks on her shelves with their black spines and blood red print. He found it morbid, and finally told her so—it was

her equivalent of eating salad with a knife and fork. Women shouldn't be interested in reading about men who hurt other women. Stories like that should repel women, should horrify them. *They do horrify me.* Then why do you read them? *Because it's fascinating.* No, it's not. It's not fascinating, it's disturbing. *Why can't it be both?* Because it can't. I don't get it. Is this some dark fantasy of yours? *No, Bill, I don't secretly dream of being abducted and tortured by a serial killer.* You think I'm kidding—I'm not. I'm trying to have a serious conversation.

In the end, the true crime books won out. Nowadays she reads them on her phone; they're not worth taking up the shelf space. We're not talking great works of literature. Some you can even download for ninety-nine cents. She'll blow through one in a couple of sittings, just reading on her phone while having dinner at a hotel restaurant in Hartford or Portland, Albany. She doesn't just read about serial killers; any sordid crime will do. She likes crimes that took place in the seventies and early eighties; to give it a frame: between 1971 and 1983. Certain years have a strange, seedy allure. 1975. 1979. She wishes she were alive at that time. D.A.s with their big wavy hair, escorting the suspect up the courthouse steps. Wide tie, mirrored sunglasses. The shirts people wore! Crazy prints: bicycles, chimpanzees. Bell-bottomed trousers. Dirty, greasy, ugly, dark. Wild men with hell in their eyes.

Moving away from the window, Pam turns to the sitting area in her suite and wonders if it's too early to make coffee. It's a traveling day today, and check-out's not until noon. She could always go back to bed. She's both tired and not tired—she could just as easily imagine sleeping another three hours as jumping into the shower right now. The dawn air crackles—it's brittle. Out on the highway, truckers up-shift past Exit 38.

"You up?" a low voice calls from the bedroom. It's not actually a separate room, just a nook off the sitting area. It's a stretch to call it a suite, but they can get away with it because it's got a sofa bed and small square dining table.

Pam remembers last night and decides not to hate herself. On the table there's a pile of keys she doesn't recognize, and two empty plastic cups with red wine residue at the bottom.

"Yeah, I'm up," she says. She doesn't like the way her voice sounds, dry and ragged. "You sleep."

Sneaking on bare feet into the bathroom, she fills a paper cup at the sink and pours it into the coffee maker. As the coffee maker burps and burbles, she stares at her tired face in the mirror. *What was his name?* Matt. The guy who put his hand on her knee back at the restaurant. She remembers more conversation and an invitation to come back for another drink. They took separate cars to the motel, Pam feeling committed to the sex. You couldn't just tell a guy to leave in the middle of the night. Besides, it'd been over a year, and that was long enough. She liked the man's hard set jaw, his dimpled chin, the stern brown look in his eyes. Sitting closer to him at the bar, letting him leave his hand on her knee this time, she anticipated his long body dwarfing hers in bed.

The coffee maker huffs out a final puff of steam, and she can hear him stirring. She can't remember if she told him she was heading out today, but maybe it's obvious.

The man's feet hit the carpet, and Matt rounds the corner, naked, smiling, and hard.

"Oo, babe," she says, "I need to wake up first."

"Sorry," he says, being a good sport, and retreats into the blue-brown gloom to pick his clothes up off the floor, returning in his boxer-briefs and a T-shirt from an auto show. "Smells like coffee," he says, wrapping his arms around her from behind and lifting her an inch off the floor, setting her down.

"You want one? I can make another cup," she says.

"Nah. Maybe later," he says, moving off to tour the room. Maybe he didn't get a good look at it the night before. Pam quickly fixes her hair in the mirror, fluffing some life into it. She feels naked in her teal wife-beater and bikini bottoms.

Stirring half-and-half into her coffee, she brings it around to the sitting area. Matt's standing at the window looking out at the parking lot, just as she was moments ago.

"Looks like we've got the place to ourselves. I've driven past here dozens of times, hundreds of times," he says.

She wants to ask him what he does for a living, but wonders if that's something she's already supposed to know. "First time for me," she says.

He turns his head away from the window and smiles at her. "No..."

She laughs. "I don't mean that. But I've never stayed here before. It's nice. I mean, it's like they all are."

"You stay in motels a lot?" he asks.

"Motels, hotels. Depends on the town and how much my company's willing to spring for it. They don't like to waste money."

He sits at the dining table and slings his long leg over the edge of the chair. He's still half-hard, and he wants her to notice. "You look beautiful this morning," he says.

She's pleased. He's saying the right things, which is nice. "Thank you. Glad we ran into each other."

"I didn't think you liked me at first."

"I didn't think I liked you at first either."

"But I guess you changed your mind." He brings his leg down. "Honest now. You probably meet a lot of guys on the road." She shakes her head. "So I'm special?"

She laughs harshly; her voice still has some grit in it. "Yeah, you're special."

They look amused at each other, and she wonders how this is going to go.

"You're funny," she says, and he raises his eyebrows.

"Yeah? And what else?"

She sips her coffee, and it bites her upper lip. "You're funny and sexy and you've got a great body. I like the way you make love."

This gets him. "I like the way you make love, too."

How old's he, twenty-eight? She can't tell anymore. "You big lug," she says, and he just shakes his head in a daze, almost loving her.

"So is this gonna be one of those things where we never see each other again?" he asks.

"I don't know what 'one of those things' is. Do you think I'm gonna blow you off?"

"I don't know," he says, and he sounds modest, shy.

"You just have to know how it is with me. If you're needing a girlfriend, I'd advise you to look elsewhere. I'm not too reliable as far as that goes."

He nods, accepting this. "I just like you, Pam."

"I like you too, Matt."

“I’ve lived in this town my whole life, and it’s just so fuckin’ boring. And the girls—they’re nice. But they don’t know anything. You can’t talk to ’em—or *I* can’t.”

She wants to say something kind to him. He’s a big handsome guy who spends his nights alone in bars. “You’ve got a gentle soul. I don’t know you that well, but I can tell these things. I’m a pretty good read of people.”

“Got to be.”

“In my line of work, yeah. You’re a seeker. You’re looking for something.”

“I’m looking for you.”

“Maybe. Well-” She reaches her arms out to him, wanting him closer. “You got me when you want me.”

He comes to her on the sofa. His T-shirt has a small rip on the shoulder seam. “And what if that’s all the time?”

She kisses his cheek. “That’s gonna be hard.”

He ruffles her hair, and she likes it. “You just a ramblin’ woman.”

“I am, darlin.” They kiss awhile, and his hands move up to her chest. “How long you got today?”

“I got as long as you got,” he says, his breath warm in her ear. “I don’t want to let you go.”

She lets him lead her back to bed, feeling passing regret at having had only one sip of her coffee. The sheets are all wadded at the foot of the bed, and he pulls them up. It’s still dark in this part of the room; it could be three in the morning.

“You know what I like about you?” He’s up on one shoulder, and he kisses her mouth. “What I *love*. You like to talk. Some girls don’t. I’m not saying you talk too much—you talk just the right amount.”

She doesn’t know what to say. Matt seems younger the more she gets to know him, maybe twenty-five. “Oh, Matt... you’re so romantic.”

“Am I? You make me like this. You’re making me feel all kinds of things.”

“Mm, me too.” She smiles through a kiss. “You kiss with your eyes open. I guess that means I do too.”

Softly, he says, “We really shouldn’t talk like this.”

“We really shouldn’t.”

“Definitely not a good idea.” He moves a hand up her shirt, his thumb on her nipple. “Or we could just give into it.”

His voice, his hand on her breast, makes the sides of her neck tingle. “I’ll think about it.”

There’s a sound at the door, not a knock, and her shoulders jump. Matt breaks away from a kiss to go look.

Coming back, he says, “It’s just motel service, sliding the bill under the door—or the receipt. Whichever.” He grins at her. “Hey, nervous.”

She laughs, feeling dumb. “Sorry. I get a little jumpy.”

“It’s okay.” He takes off his shirt before sliding next to her. “You got me here. I’ll protect you.”

“Good.” She kisses his chest. He’s well-built, so maybe he works with his hands. But he doesn’t seem the type to do manual labor. “Matt? I got a question. This is embarrassing...” She asks between kisses, “I mean... It’s not that I don’t remember—I remember everything, and it was wonderful. But last night, did we use anything?”

He looks puzzled, then he says, “Oh. Don’t you remember? At the end, I...”

Some of it comes back to her now—something they did on the couch, something else they did standing up in front of the vanity mirror. “Oh, right. Of course.” She smiles at her own stupidity and apologizes with a kiss. “Well. Just remember to do that again.”

Making love’s better in the morning. An angle of light slowly moves up the wall, and it catches his eyes. He likes missionary—they both do. This isn’t something she’s going to forget in a day or a week. The man’s giving himself to her, his whole self—it’s too much—she almost doesn’t deserve it; or, not “deserve,” but she’s not sure she’s worth it. It’s more than she can give back.

And after: breathing. Always the irrational need to apologize after sex—but she suppresses it. “Goddamnit, Matt,” she says, pleased, wiping her stomach with a corner of the sheet.

“I love you,” he says.

She hears, but says nothing. It's like averting your eyes from a nasty scene on the highway—you just have to pretend it's not there. "I feel sorry for the cleaning people. We'll fold up the sheets and leave them at the foot of the bed—or *I* will."

He clears a strand of hair from her face. "I love you."

Finally she stops fidgeting and stares at the ceiling. "Oh, Matt."

"I do. I'm sorry, I can't help it. I'm in love with you."

She smile-frowns. Wanting to hurt him a little, or at least push him back an inch, she says, "Sure it's not the sex talking?" It sounds mean, not worthy of her, and she feels bad. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I don't do good with these sorts of things. I'm not used to men thinking of me like that. And you're so young and good-looking... You don't want me. I'm never gonna be around, Matt. Don't you want to be with someone you can spend more time with?"

"I want to be with you," he says, not budging. *Maybe more like twenty-three?*

"You can be with me—the three times a year I'm in town." She kisses him gently, like a friend. "I just don't want to promise you something I can't deliver. You can understand that, can't you?"

He swallows and nods. "Tell me it was making love, at least. What we did. Tell me it wasn't just a hookup."

"No, it wasn't just a hookup, Matt. It was making love. And I'm gonna come back and get you for seconds someday." She sighs. "I just don't know when."

They sleep for an hour, and he's in the shower when she wakes up. She likes hearing a shower through the wall of a hotel room—something settled about it. *Matt's taking a shower. Matt can't come to the phone right now, he's in the shower.* It's easier to feel in love with him when he's not in the room. But then she's always loved men from a distance. When she's alone, she can imagine the things she'd say to them, how they'd position together in bed, holding hands, drifting off.

Out of the shower, Matt leaves to pick up some breakfast and better coffee. She throws on jeans and the teal wife-beater while he's gone. Check-in at the next place isn't until three—it's a four hour drive if there's no construction. She should probably do some laundry. No time for

lunch; she'll eat on the road. She still has a couple granola bars stashed in the glove compartment.

He comes back with a McDonald's bag and a tray of coffees. "Gonna be hot out today. Hot and humid," he says, setting the bag and tray down on the dining table.

She takes her coffee. "Thanks for going."

"Sure. Gotta take care of my woman." He smiles, and she tries to. It's hard not to think of him as some poor kid, never in love before. She wonders if this is the part where he whips out a knife and stabs her to death.

They sit, and Matt wolfs his breakfast sandwich. There's an energy crackling about him that feels almost sexual. He looks ready to take on the day, whatever that means for him.

"What do you normally eat on the road?" he asks.

"Whatever I can get. I try to eat healthy, but it's hard—Evidence A," she says, holding up a hash brown. "I'm so out of shape. I need to lose five pounds."

"No, you don't."

"I *do*. But I'll take it off when I get back home."

He asks where she lives, and she tells him. The name of the town means nothing to him. "So, do you, like, own your own place?"

"Hate to say it, but I do. It's a condo, actually. Worst of both worlds. We need to put up a new roof, but the people in the other units want to wait until next year. Everything's a negotiation."

"You're probably pretty good at that—negotiating."

She has to laugh; everything he has to say about her is so upbeat and positive. "What?" he asks.

"Just you. You're so sweet. Wish you could come with me," she says, just to hear herself say it.

"I can. I'll come if you want. Carry your bags."

She can't tell if he's being serious. "Oh, no... I'm sure you got other things to do."

"Nothing important. I could ditch and leave this morning."

She puts the rest of the hash brown into her mouth, and her chewing slows. “Matt, can I ask you a question? And please don’t take this the wrong way. There’s just so much I don’t know about you, and I’m curious about you. I’m curious about your life.”

“You want to know about my job,” he says.

“Not just that—oh, Matt, I don’t care. But... what you do with your time, how you spend your days. Are you an artist? You seem like an artist to me. If we’re gonna be friends... *close* friends.” She brushes his leg with her bare foot. “Friends with benefits...”

“No, I’m not an artist. I mean, I write a bit. And I used to play guitar. But what I do... it’s nothing, Pam. It’s stupid. It’s not who I am. It’s just what I’m doing right now.”

“Well, sure—of course! That’s how it usually is when you’re starting out in life—and you’re such a young guy. How old are you, twenty-two?”

He nods but admits, “Nineteen.”

This jolts her, though she tries not to look shocked. The anxious voice inside her starts whispering: *You have to end this. You have to let him go. Thank him for a wonderful night, give him a kiss and a wink and a pat on the butt... and run.*

“You thought older?” he asks, peeking with one eye.

“Uh... a little. You’re just so mature... for your age.”

“I’ve lived a lot,” he says, and she believes him.

“It’s okay, Matt.”

“I’m almost twenty. I’ll be twenty in a month.”

“It’s *okay*. You don’t have to explain. I like you just the way you are.”

He looks at his sandwich. “Even though I’m just a kid, and I work at...” He spits out, “KFC.”

It takes her a second to sort out what he’s said. KFC. Kentucky Fried Chicken. *You just slept with a nineteen year old who works at KFC.*

*And it was amazing.*

“There’s nothing wrong with working at KFC. I worked at places like that when I was your age. I worked at Old Navy when I was in high school, and I *hated* it.”

“Yeah, but now you’re this successful saleswoman, and you own your own house—”

“Condo.”

“*Condo*, same thing.”

She takes his hand. “Matt, it doesn’t matter. Let’s just enjoy what we have right now. What happens in the future... who knows. But you should let me pay for this breakfast.”

“No, *no*. I’m not that poor. We get paid pretty good as assistant managers, that’s the scary thing.”

“I’m sure you do. So you’re a m-”

“*Assistant* manager. Please, don’t... don’t try to sound impressed. It’s not impressive. It’s just temporary. I’ll find something better. Life’s not all about work, anyway.”

“It’s not.”

“It’s about what you believe and your values and how you treat other people.”

“It is—don’t I know it. Believe me, there’s more to life than working your tail off to pay your mortgage. Or there ought to be. Sometimes I think that’s all I do: drive from town to town, chasing after a paycheck. And it’s a lonely, empty existence.”

He smiles, and she’s grateful to have it back. “So? Now you got me.”

They kiss across the table. She says, patting his cheek, “And thank God for you. Thank God for you.”

The next day, in the next town, Pam tells Meg about Matt during their break. Meg’s this woman she sees from place to place, another sales rep. Their schedules overlap so much, they’ve joked about traveling together and sharing a hotel room; but Meg works for the competition, and that wouldn’t be cool.

“Nineteen? Fuck, girl.” Meg takes a swig of her diet soda. They’re outside the convention center—men and women in suits smoking and chatting each other up. The whole thing’s a big hookup, if you want to know the truth. “Isn’t that still high school?”

“No, it’s not high school. And he’s almost twenty. He’s gonna be twenty in a month.”

Meg laughs at her. “Big whoop. So what are you gonna give him for his birthday? A blowjob?”

Pam gives Meg’s arm a playful pinch. “Oh, stop. It’s not like you’re any better. What about that guy down in-”

“Chris?”

“I don’t know his name. Down in-”

“Chris down in Fredericksburg—yeah, but he was twenty-five. And *I* was thirty-five—that was a long time ago, Pam.”

The women laugh. Pam misses Meg when she’s not around. Many of the other women are too young for her; they’re the kind of single women in their twenties who think socializing with other females is a waste of time.

Matt has been calling Pam—not too much. She’s taken two of his phone calls and let another go to voicemail. She tells herself she’s not avoiding his calls, and she’s not, not really; the times she hasn’t picked up, she’s been at work. She’s just not used to a guy showing this much interest in her. She likes it, but it’s hard not to be a little suspicious of it. What could possibly be so great about her?

*Did you think about me last night?*

*You know I did, Matt.*

*What did you think about?*

*Oh, I can’t say.*

*Sure you can.*

*I’m in a public place.*

*That’s okay, so am I.*

*Where are you?*

*I’m on break. They asked me to come in at two. I wanna quit this job, Pam, I swear it. I wanna quit this job and be with you.*

*Well you can’t do that.*

Meg finishes her soda and sets the empty can on the ledge of the flower box they’re sitting on. Some of the reps are streaming back into the convention center, the men holding doors open for the women. Pam doesn’t want to go back to work, but she’s got a presentation at three and another at four-thirty.

“Just have fun with it, Pam. Don’t overthink it.”

“I can’t help it. Overthinking’s what I do best,” says Pam.

“What are you worried about? Hassle-free sex with a nineteen year old—what could be better? Now you can draw a smiley face on your calendar every time you go to Syracuse.”

Pam stands and straightens her skirt. “I guess. Yeah, you’re right. I’ll stop being negative.” Something’s still on her mind, about Meg asks her about it. Pam hesitates. “What do you think it means when a guy tells you he loves you?”

“He told you that?” Meg blows out her cheeks. Her expression’s hard to read with those giant sunglasses she wears. “Well, you never know... *maybe* he means it.”

“After one night?”

“After one night, after one hour—one minute. These things happen.”

“Not to me, they don’t.”

Hobbling to her feet, Meg says, “What do you want it to mean, then?”

“Does it matter?” Pam asks as they start back to the convention center.

“Sure it does. Women tend to be in charge of these things, if you haven’t noticed. You can be amused by it or ignore it or take it seriously. It’s more about perception than intention.”

There’s a vacuum-suck at the entrance to the convention center that pushes them two steps into the air conditioning.

“It just seems kind of soon,” Pam says.

“Honey, I once had a guy—the first thing he said to me was ‘I love you.’ That was his pick-up line!”

“What did you do?”

“I laughed. I gave him credit for having the balls.”

“And did you go out with him?”

Meg frowns adamantly. “No. I let him buy me a drink—it was fine. I think he was mainly kidding.”

“Mm. Well this person was definitely not kidding. I just get worried. How do I know he’s not only talking about the sex?”

“What if he is? That’s love too. You can love having sex with someone. At least it’s a start.”

Pam nods. Meg's right—of course she's right. Pam's not sure what she wants from Matt anyway, if anything.

Before they split up, Meg pulls her in to whisper, “Before we go, tell me—how many times?”

“Times? Oh. Two—no, three. Kind of three and a half.”

Meg bites her own knuckle. “I hate you,” she squeals.

Work's a blur—Pam's on auto-pilot by now. She's been on auto-pilot for years. With her headset microphone pushing down her hair, she talks to crowds of fifteen and twenty about battery life, range of coverage, industry ratings. She takes questions, hands out cards and brochures. She tells the joke about the squirrel and the old lady, which usually gets a laugh. In between presentations she stands next to the product and smiles and tries not to look bored.

At five o'clock, a text from Matt: *I did it.*

*Did what?*

Ten minutes pass. Pam folds up her signage, puts the product back in its hardshell case, neatens a stack of leftover handouts for next time. Her phone buzzes on her hip.

*No more KFC.*

She calls him in the parking lot. He sounds like he's talking outside. “I wasn't a dick about it. I gave 'em notice. I told them I'll work through to the end of the month. It felt so good, Pam! Like the biggest relief of all time. Finally I realized, this is what's holding me back—this dumb job that eats up all my time and energy.”

“That's great,” she says, trying to sound excited, meanwhile hoping Matt's not really a flake. It's getting to feel more and more like those books she's read: the charming stranger who seems perfect at first, and then...

“What are you going to do next?” she asks.

“I don't know. I've got the rest of the month to figure it out. And don't worry, this has nothing to do with you. This is my own responsibility. I've been wanting to do this for a long time, and today it all just fell into place. I was in the back room entering payroll, and I thought, ‘Matt, man. This is *so* not you.’ I'm serious, it was like a scene in a movie. I'm never going to

wax a floor again or use a deep frier or say, ‘Would you like to upgrade to a Bucket for an extra dollar?’ I mean... I *am*, but only until the end of the month.”

“Good for you. You’ll work it out, Matt. I wish I’d taken more of a risk when I was your age.”

“Exactly.”

He pauses, waiting for more. She’s not sure what else she’s supposed to say.

Off the phone with Matt, she drives back to her hotel, telling herself it’s not her problem. So she slept with the guy—she even liked him a little. And anything’s theoretically a step up from KFC. She shouldn’t be critical just because he wants to do something with his life. She’s not his mom. She’s not even really his girlfriend.

Tonight’s motel is part of the same chain as the previous one; sometimes it’s easier to book a trip that way. The room’s exactly the same. It’s even got the same number, 105. 105 must be where they put middle-aged saleswomen traveling alone.

Stepping out of her stiff pumps, she pads across the room—same sofa, same dining table—and flumps face first onto the bed. She’s famished but doesn’t want to drive around looking for a place to eat. There’s usually an Applebee’s or something a quarter mile from the motel, but those places are terrible. Maybe she’ll just get McDonald’s and bring it back to her room.

*McDonald’s. Matt.*

Rolling over, she thinks about the other night—how she blinked out of a fitful doze at four in the morning and saw him smiling down at her, watching her sleep, then quickly closed her eyes because she didn’t want him to know she was awake. She hates to admit it—she’s always thought of herself as a go-it-alone kind of girl—but she misses him. She wants him here with her, now, in this motel bed just like the other motel bed. She wants to bring him on the road with her and pay for his meals and take care of him for a while.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“What are you doing?”

“Starting to panic.”

“Why are you starting to panic?”

“Because I fucked up. I shouldn’t have quit my job.”

“Matt.”

“I should’ve thought it over first. I’m always doing things like that. I get into a situation and then I fuck it up.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I do. I mean, not that KFC was so great—it wasn’t. It sucked. But it was better than nothing. Now I’ve got nothing.”

“You’ll find something. I believe in you.”

Lying on her side, she brings her knees to her chest. She wishes she could go to the window and look through the vertical blinds and see his car parked next to hers.

“Matt. Baby. I’ve been thinking about you all day. I miss you. I wish you were here.”

“I could get there,” he says right away.

“No... it’s so far. It’s a four hour drive. You wouldn’t get here until almost eleven.”

“Tell me the address and I’ll be there.”

She sighs—she shouldn’t have said anything. It’s not fair to him. She should know by now he’d do anything for her.

“Just dream about me,” she says.

“I love you.”

The digital clock on the nightstand changes to 6:38.

“Would you really do it?” she asks.

“Give me the address. I’ll be there by ten.”

“Oh, that’s driving too fast,” she says, though secretly she’s pleased. She likes the idea of a man racing through the night to get to her.

Now that she knows he’s coming, she finds the energy to go back out for a quick bite. Her mind’s all over the place; she can’t concentrate enough to read on her phone. It almost hurts to eat, that’s how worked up she is.

*You want a box for that?*

*No, I’m traveling.*

Somehow he manages to turn up by quarter to ten, bringing a wildness with him in from the road—long miles driven, speeding in the fast lane.

She kisses him madly at the door. “Thanks for coming. God, it’s good to see you. Let me get you some wine. You must be exhausted from driving.”

She leads him by the hand into the room—she doesn’t want to let go of him now that he’s here—and pours him a glass of red blend. He’s even more handsome than she remembered. She’s never been this manic over a guy before. It’s his age, his easy innocence. She wants to pamper him and make everything okay.

He sets the glass aside without sipping it and presses her lightly against the wall. “You’re making me fucking crazy,” he grunts.

“Yeah? Then fuck me. Like crazy.” It sounds corny, and they both laugh.

“I will. Over and over.”

Eager as she is, she doesn’t want to rush it. “Do you want to take a bath? That’s the only difference from the other place, the bath’s a little bigger.”

“Weird. Yeah, I’ll take a bath with you. I’ll do anything with you.” He kisses her, hands on her body. “I just want to be with you. All the time.”

They bring their wine into the bathroom, and she starts drawing the water. It’s the least romantic bathroom of all time, with an annoying fan that comes on automatically with the light. The tub makes for a tight fit, but that’s what she wants with him, a tight fit.

“Let me undress you,” he says, his fingers already undoing the buttons of her blouse. He’s remarkably good at it, even though the buttons are so tiny. The wings of the blouse breathe open, and he slips it over her shoulders. “You undress me too,” he says. It’s awkward, but she helps him take his shirt off over his head. This is something he wants them to do together, *to* each other, undressing.

Soon they’re naked and standing next to the still-filling bath. She’s happy—smiling’s not sexy, but it’s hard not to smile.

“I look so old,” she says out of dumb, insecure habit.

“No you don’t. You look beautiful.”

She can tell just by being near it that the water's probably too hot, so she runs the cold for a minute, tracing her hand in the bath to test the temperature. He watches her, running his hands up and down her smooth backside.

"Mm. I like that."

"You do?" He gives her left buttock a gentle squeeze, and she wriggles against him.

"I think it's ready," she says, turning off the tap. It feels late to be taking a bath, but she doesn't care. "God, that fan's loud."

"We could try turning it off." Matt flicks the switch, and both the fan and the light cut out. It's not quite pitch black; in the light seeping in from under the door, they can just see the gray outlines of their bodies.

"Kind of nice," she decides, and he helps her into the tub, sliding in behind her. Displaced water rises to their armpits. "Is it too hot?"

"It's just right."

"Hand me my wine?"

He works his hand around her back and reaches for her glass on the closed toilet lid they're using for a table. The red wine is drugstore cheap, and it tastes sweet on her lips. "Sorry, this was all I could find. Stores close early in this town."

"It's fine," he says, and she hands the glass back to him.

"It's weird being in the dark like this. I feel like we're in some forest grotto in the middle of the night."

"Sounds nice."

"And we're bathing together, and we're all alone in the world."

"No one else—mm, let's go with this fantasy."

They laugh, and she likes how it makes a low sound deep in his chest. "I think that's as far as I can take it. I don't have a good imagination. You come up with something."

"Me?"

"Yeah. For our forest fantasy."

He thinks for a moment, his hands stirring in the water. "Okay, imagine this. It's nighttime, and we're both lost in this forest. And we come upon each other in this place."

“Together?”

“No, we’ve been wandering apart. We don’t know each other at first. We’re wandering strangers, and somehow... we’re both in trouble.”

“Someone’s been chasing us.”

“Yes.”

She stiffens against him, because she recognizes something in his words. She’s had this dream before. She’s been having it for years.

How did he know?

“And are we naked like this?” she asks.

“Yes. We’re naked and scared, and we find each other in the forest...”

“And somehow we know...”

“We know we need each other.”

She turns her head to kiss him, and suddenly they don’t need the fantasy anymore, it’s real. “Oh, Matt. Thanks for being here. Thanks for coming for me. I feel...” She hesitates; maybe it’s not worth trying to put it in words.

“Pam?”

Squirming around to half face him—her eyes have adjusted to the dark, and it’s easier to see him—she says, “I feel so lucky to have you in my life.”

“I’m the lucky one.”

“Then we’re both lucky. And I know things are hard for you right now—you’re going through this transition, and the future’s scary. And it’s just the nature of reality, we won’t be able to be together all the time. But I want you to know, whatever I can do to help...”

“You’re helping already.”

“I mean *really* help—this isn’t helping. Because you’re helping *me*, Matt. You really are.”

“How am I helping?”

She smiles. “You found me in the forest.”

He kisses her twice, ardently. Impossible to make love in the tub, though she’d be up for trying.

Tracing his jaw with her finger, she says, “You know, when I was at work today, I kept thinking how nice it’d be to have you waiting for me when I got home. *Home*.” She rolls her eyes at the place. “Whatever this is. But it was such a strange and nice feeling to have in the middle of the day. I’m not a very lonely person, Matt. I mean, I don’t mind being alone. I’m not one of those women who absolutely needs to be with someone. Most nights I’m fine by myself. I get scared sometimes—I can be a pretty jittery person. I think it’s maybe why I took a traveling job, just to force myself to deal with new places, new situations. I’m almost more anxious when I’m at home, though I don’t know why—it’s perfectly safe.”

“Why are you nervous? You don’t need to be nervous with me.”

“Oh, I know—that’s what I’m saying. I don’t feel nervous.”

“What do you feel?”

“Loved. Appreciated. Cared for.” She swallows. “I’ll take another sip of wine.” He hands her the glass, and she says, “I’ll just hang onto it this time. Anyway, I’ll stop talking about myself. I just wanted to say thank you. It’s easy to get into a rut when you’re my age. I think I needed you to shake things up.”

They stay in the tub until they finish their wine, and she pushes down the drain with her toe. In the brownish dark they pat each other dry with the same big towel. Leaving it damp on the bathroom floor, they emerge into the ugly light of the motel suite. The bed’s still fully made, with just a little impress where she’d been lying on it earlier.

“Did you bring condoms?” she asks, and he nods. “I can go on birth control if you’d like. I don’t love it, but it’s okay.”

“Only if you want.”

“I do. I want to feel you, all of you.”

She pulls him down onto the bed, and he rolls onto his back so she can touch him. She smiles at her fingers girding his penis, and he works his own fingers through her hair. “I love hearing you moan like that,” she says.

“I love looking at you. I love being with you.”

Their eyes find each other’s, and she grins in a way that feels reckless and good. “You want faster? I can do faster.”

“It’s perfect, but I want to be inside you.”

“We’ll get there. We’ve got all night,” she says, trying to fight off the awareness that she’s due back at the convention center at nine. She’s going to pay for all this tomorrow, big time.

She asks him to get the light, and he does. The dark’s bluish, twilight; they might be the only people here in the whole motel. Even the help have gone home for the night.

“Come back to me,” she says, and her voice leads him to her. His body’s skinny in the dark.

Lying next to her, he asks, “Do you want to get under the covers?”

“I’m fine either way,” she says. Really, she’s indifferent to things like that.

“Tell me something you want me to do,” he says, rubbing against her legs. There’s a tempo to it, a beat.

She smiles. His face looking down on her is entirely in shadow, light picking out the blue margins of his hair.

“Anything. Anything you do is perfect,” she says.

He says, almost as if he hasn’t heard her, “Tell me. Make me. Make me do something.”

Her heart’s a butterfly winging on her chest, and she reaches out half-blindly for some part of him, his neck, his cheek.

“I can’t make you do anything, babe,” she says, and he insists, his voice tight, “*Please.*”

Wanting him closer to her, she moves her hand to his back, warm skin still damp from the shower. It’s almost cold in the room, the A/C set to sixty-eight.

“Kiss me,” she says, and he does, on the lips.

“What else?” he says.

Taking back her hand, she points to her left breast. “Kiss me here.”

He does, lowering his head. His tongue grazes her nipple, and she holds her head tight to him with both hands. His right leg bends at the knee, foot pointing straight up, and she can hear him breathe through his nose.

“What else?” he asks.

“Now the other one.”

He doesn't go to it right away—he wants to be led but he's slow to follow. She turns her head on the pillow, wanting just to feel, not needing to see him.

“Do you want me to touch you some more?” she asks, bringing her hand down to make a cup around the head of his penis with her fingers and palm. His whole body shudders and tightens.

She asks if it feels good, and he answers in his throat, “Yes.”

“Good, because I like doing it. I love touching you.”

“I love when you touch me. Where else can I kiss you?”

“You can kiss me wherever you'd like.”

He needs guidance, so she tells him to kiss softly down her belly, and then along the inside of one thigh, his breath warm between her legs like a haunting in the dark. She tells him to kiss the toes of her right foot, and he does, taking each one carefully into his mouth.

A sigh flutters in the pit of her diaphragm. “Oh, that feels so good, baby. I've been standing all day, my feet are so tired.”

“Make me kiss the other one.”

Getting good at it now, she guides him over to her other foot, and he spends his time on it. He looks far away, just the hint of a face in the distant dark. Her breath comes hard; she feels like she's sprouted a second heart inside her chest. Already she's come twice—just little ones that she hasn't shared with him, she's kept them to herself.

“Your whole body tastes so good,” he says, his voice shaken with need.

Her arms drop and thud on the mattress. “Oh, God, Matt—I can't take it anymore. Come here.”

He moves back up to her, but, just as he's about to push inside, he hesitates. “What is it?” she asks.

“Just... the condoms are way over there.”

She pulls him down. “Forget about the condoms. We'll be careful.”

She gasps as her body spreads around him, and she locks the backs of his legs with her ankles. She thinks, *I won't hold anything back this time*. Because always there's been this guardedness, and not just with him; with every man she's been with. A need to protect herself, to

stay in her shell. But there's something different about Matt—she believes it. She believes him when he says he loves her. She's almost the only thing he has going for him.

He drove over three hours just to be with her.

"We're in the forest," she says.

"We are. We're alone in the forest."

"And no one can see us or hear us."

"And we're lost and we're scared and we don't know where we are."

"I'm scared."

"I'm here. I'm here for you. I'll always be here for you."

"Be with me."

"I am."

"Stay with me in the forest. Stay with me, Matt. You're all I have."

"You're all *I* have. Just us. Two people. Naked."

"I'm naked for you."

"Open and exposed and totally vulnerable."

"But safe with each other."

"We *are* safe. This is all we need. You're all I need—just us and our naked bodies and nothing else in the world."

"...inside me, inside me..."

"I'm inside you. We're inside each other."

"Oh, we look so beautiful in the nude together."

"We're nude. Let's always be nude. I love you, Pam."

"I love you. I love you so much." Against all hope of holding it in, she lets out a cry, and he heaves back with his whole trunk. "*Matt!*"

"Pam, I need to come."

"So do I. Stay here. It doesn't matter."

The night rings, and they come together, panting, their locked bodies rocking to a stop. Then he rolls aside and holds her like that.

“Closer,” she says, reaching back for his leg. He tightens around her. Her body’s a puddle, and she wants to sleep.

The room hums. Nothing: a breathing space. Black air’s cool and quiet. Dusky brown shapes of furniture, the square outline of a shaded window. Matt’s warm body against hers.

“Pam?” he asks, as if to see she’s still there.

“Mm? Just gotta catch my breath. What time is it?”

He lifts his head to squint across the room. “It’s 11:20. 11:23.”

“Whoa, late. Gotta get some sleep.” She rolls in his arms to face him. “Thank you. That was so wonderful.”

“Was it okay at the end?” he asks. He sounds tentative. He’s gone back to being a boy.

“Was what okay?”

“When I…”

“Oh.” She smiles and kisses his chest. “Yeah, it’ll be fine. Maybe we should get under the sheets. I wonder if we can turn off the A/C? I want to sleep naked, but I’m kind of cold.”

He climbs out of bed, feels the wall for the thermostat, and presses a button twice. “You want some water?” he asks, and she says, “Please. And some more wine, if there is any. Just a little sip.”

She turns down the sheets as he busies himself in the kitchen, coming back with two glasses. “That’s all I could carry. We can share them,” he says, setting one glass of wine and one of water on the nightstand.

“That’s okay. Come back to bed. Get cozy with me.”

They snuggle under the sheets, their feet finding each other’s for warmth. Some of her energy’s back; she wouldn’t mind staying up a little longer, maybe doing it one more time before real sleep. Work’s nothing to look forward to.

“What do you have going on tomorrow?” he asks.

She groans. “Oh, I don’t want to think about it. I should set the alarm. I need to be up and out the door by eight-thirty at the latest. At least it’s the last day of the convention, so it should wrap up early. What about you?”

He laughs softly—maybe she shouldn't have asked. "Nothing. I'm not on for another couple days. But I'll get out of your hair."

"Oh, no... I want you here. Can't you stay another night? I'm not leaving until... what day is this? Friday. Sunday morning. I'll take you out to dinner. I don't know where, but we can do some research."

He doesn't answer, just shifts and adjusts his arms around her. Pam wants a sip of wine but doesn't want to reach for it. These motel beds are always so huge, even sharing them with another person. She likes to be able to feel both sides of the bed with her hands and feet. She gets lost in a big bed.

His voice comes to her in the dark: "Pam?"

"Mm?"

"I want to be good for you. I mean, I want to be a good person. I want to do good things."

"You will—you are."

"No, I'm not. Not yet. I've just got to find the thing that clicks."

"I'll help you."

"You will?"

"Of course I will. I don't know what good I'll do. But you've got time. I have complete faith in you."

Suddenly he's all keyed up. "Sometimes I think I could just be a... whatever. Just drift. No one's ever really expected anything of me. Didn't do well in school. My dad said, 'Maybe you could be a weatherman on TV. They don't have to know anything.'"

She's outraged on his behalf. "That's not true. Weathermen have to know lots of things."

"Well, the people who actually predict the weather. The meteor..."

"Meteorologists?"

"Yeah—I can never pronounce that word. But he meant the people who stand in front of the weather map on TV and say, 'Today it's going to be partly cloudy with a...'"

"But they're meteorologists too. I think. Everyone has to know something."

“You’re right—no, I know. His point was that I wasn’t smart enough to do anything worthwhile, so I might as well do something where I just have to smile and look good and say, ‘*Hey there, what’s going on?*’”

“But you *are* smart. I’m sorry, but I think your father was being very unfair to you.”

She squirms closer, and he rests his chin on the top of her head. “It’s okay, it doesn’t matter anymore.” Before she can ask, he says, “I killed him.”

She holds her breath. Maybe *this* is the part in the book where the charming young man turns out to be-

“Kidding! I’m kidding—not that I didn’t think about it once or twice. No, I stopped caring a long time ago. Let him think what he wants. I’ve moved on. And now I’ve got you-” He kisses the part of her hair. “-and I feel like I’ve finally got a reason to try.”

As much as she likes hearing this, it worries her. She wishes she were fifteen years younger, even ten; but then maybe he wouldn’t be as interested in her.

“You do have me. Just remember... there’s the age difference.”

“I don’t care.”

“I know you don’t, but I do. I’m really *old*, Matthew.” She has to laugh at herself. “I’m almost forty. And I’ve seen so much you wouldn’t believe, because you’re not there yet. A young man has to have experiences.”

“I don’t want experiences. I want you.”

He’s being impossible, and she loves it. “I’m just saying... I’m not forcing you.”

“I don’t feel forced.”

“Good.” She settles her head on his chest. “And you’ll let me know the *moment* you do.”

“I will. It’ll never happen. But I will.”

Time passes as they sip their wine. They talk about old relationships and how ridiculous they were. Scariest moments, weirdest dreams. Things they love most about each other. They kiss and casually touch each other’s private parts, and soon it’s past midnight. Finishing their wine, they find another few gulps in the bottle. Everything feels good now. He tickles her and chases her around the room until she’s laughing and out of breath and purrs at him to stop. Then they make love again and collapse for the night.

When she wakes, it's still dark out. Matt's sound asleep; his breathing's like the softest snoring. It might be three or four in the morning—she doesn't want to raise her head to look. In any case, she can't sleep anymore.

As it often does in the middle of the night, her mind starts churning over those lurid stories she's read about serial killers and the hapless women who fall victim to them. It all seems so obvious when it's not happening to you; almost without exception, it's the woman's naïveté, her gullibility, her sheer good nature, that gets her into trouble. *Sure, I'll drive you to the gas station. Sure, you can change in my hotel.* And the men are such obvious creeps! Is Pam not seeing it? Is she being hopelessly naive like all those other women, memorialized in black-and-white high school pictures from the seventies? Because it also happens that two strangers fall abruptly in love with each other and nothing bad results. Maybe they date for a few months or years and eventually get married or part on friendly terms. The woman's not necessarily destined to wind up cut into eight pieces and stuffed into a suitcase.

He's still in bed when she pops into the shower and gets ready for work. She's running low on clothes; with some Woolite she might be able to stretch it to the end of next week when she gets home. She'll wear the same skirt three times without washing it, but that's where she draws the line.

Keys in hand, she creeps over to Matt and gives him a soft kiss on the cheek. His eyelids flutter.

"Taking off, babe," she says. His hair's a mess, and some trace of beard has grown in overnight.

His voice creaks. "Wha...?"

"You sleep—it's still early. I'll put the Do Not Disturb sign on the door when I go out. In a couple hours I'll call the main desk and tell them your car's with me."

He smiles, head heavy on the pillow. "Stay."

"Don't tempt me. I'll hurry back as soon as I can—it should be around four-thirty. There's an extra key card on the table, so don't feel like you have to stay here all day."

"Come back to bed," he says, flinging back the sheet, his long body gloriously nude. Pam tries not to look.

“Come on, Matt, play fair. You know I’d stay if I could, but one of us has got to work.”

She feels bad as soon as she says it. His smile fades, and he pulls the sheet back up.

“Okay,” he whispers.

“Babe, I’m sorry—you know I didn’t mean that. I wasn’t thinking. It’s first thing in the morning, and I’m half out the door...” She crouches to kiss him, and he half-heartedly kisses her back. “Do you forgive me? It was a dumb thing to say, and I’m sorry. Dumb Pam—stupid, stupid.”

He croaks, “It’s okay.”

“Don’t forget, I’m taking you out to dinner. That shirt you wore last night should be fine. I’m sure it won’t be anything too fancy.” She doesn’t want to go—things still feel weird between them—but she has to. “I’ll try to call around lunch. If business is slow I might even duck out early. Oh... I don’t want to leave you.”

“It’s okay. Gotta do what you gotta do.”

He still sounds half-asleep, so maybe he won’t even remember. With a last kiss, she hurries out the door.

She’s a few minutes early when she gets to the convention center, so she finishes doing her makeup in the car and buys a coffee from a lunch cart near the vendor’s entrance. It’s her favorite part of the day, the quiet before the crowds come rushing in. Today won’t be hard; the convention’s winding down, and a quarter of the sellers have already packed up and gone home. She could split by four and no one would even know.

The morning yields one hard sale and three solid contacts—she’ll be able to make a good report to her boss. The temptation to give Matt a poke continually buzzes at her fingers, but she resists. He’s had a stressful few days, and he needs his sleep.

Around noon, she asks Meg, “Where’s a good place to go for dinner around here? Something nice.”

“You want to meet up at Donleavy’s? It’s in the Sheraton. Pretty decent steakhouse,” Meg says.

“Actually...” Pam hesitates—she knows there’ll be questions. “I’ve kinda got company tonight.”

Meg's jaw drops. "That guy? Wait—he's here?" Pam nods excitedly, and Meg cackles. "Oo, girl—you must really be good in bed."

"Meg!" Pam cries, pretending to be shocked.

"I'm just sayin'. I've been on the road for twenty-five years, I've never had a guy cross state lines for seconds." Done teasing, Meg smiles at Pam with real affection. "But yeah, take him to Donleavy's. It's over-priced, but he'll think you're a big spender."

"Thanks, Meg." Pam hugs her. It's hard not to wonder what Meg thinks of her now. Some women don't like it when good things happen to other women.

"Don't thank me—I'm just doing my job. I'll make myself scarce. I think there's a Chili's down the road." Meg walks away, doing the "sad violin" thing with her hands, and Pam smiles after her.

Looking on her phone, she finds the restaurant's website, makes a reservation for six-thirty, then calls Matt as promised. She gets his voicemail.

"Hi babe, it's me. You must still be in bed, or out exploring the wonderful world. Good for you. I've got a few minutes before I have to get back to work. Call me if you get a chance, but don't stress it. I just wanted to let you know I made dinner reservations. They're for six-thirty, so we might have time for a little fun before we leave."

She's standing in a recessed doorway, and she turns her back to the hall.

"I could use a little fun right now. I've been thinking about you all day. I don't know what it is about you, Matt, but I feel like a sixteen year old again. I just want to be with you and kiss you and hear your voice and look into your big beautiful eyes. Touch your body. Feel your hands all over me."

She has to bite her lip. Voices pass down the corridor; there's a presentation about to start in E-5.

"I'm just so grateful for you. The way you kiss me and make me feel like the sexiest, most beautiful woman in the world—which I'm not! But it's a nice illusion. I hope I make you feel good too. And like I said last night, I don't ever want this to get to be a hassle. You let me know when you need a break. I'm here for you as a friend or a lover or whatever you want me to be. Use me as you see fit. I just love you, Matthew. I really do. I really love you."

Sighing, she fiddles with a button on her blazer.

“That’s it.”

Her thumb hits ‘9’ when she tries to hang up, and she leaves him with a beep.

In conversation with a colleague later that afternoon, she says, “My boyfriend’s up for the weekend, and we’re having dinner tonight.”

“That’s nice.”

“Yeah, he drove in last night. I wasn’t expecting him. My boyfriend’s kind of a spontaneous person.”

The colleague looks at her strangely. Maybe she’s got lipstick on her teeth. “Nice to have a little bonus time.”

“It is! I feel like we haven’t seen each other in months. You know how it is, being on the road. And my boyfriend’s real busy too.”

Finally the day comes to an end. No more sales, not that she was expecting any. She’s not a saleswoman per se, more a walking advertisement for the product. Clients come to see her demonstration then call a week later to buy from someone else. It doesn’t matter—she gets the same cut either way.

There’s a liquor store near the hotel, and she stops off for a bottle of wine. She wants to make the night special, so she opts for the higher price point. That’s how she knows her wines, by cost. There’s casual and fancy, cheap and expensive.

Matt’s car is gone when she gets back to the hotel, and she wonders if he had the same thought she did about picking up wine. It’s getting on toward five—if he’s back soon, they might have time for a drink and quick soak in the tub (it feels like tradition by now). Pam hums a little tune from her high school days as she opens the door with her key card. It’s strange, but she never knew what was missing from her life before Matt came along. She used to get lonely, but it was nothing she couldn’t manage. Most nights she actually preferred being alone. The nomad’s life suited her; its simplicity appealed to her. She had her Two Buck Chuck and her downloaded books about serial killers and that was enough.

But now she has Matt. And Matt’s way better.

Dropping her purse by the door, she sees the bed's been made, though it's still a wrinkled, lumpy mess. Guys think making a bed means just pulling the comforter up over the pillows.

Smoothing the comforter with her hand, she sighs, "Matt... Matt. What am I going to do with you, my boyfriend?"

His voice comes back to her from last night: not something he *said*, but a sound he made. Something a neighbor might hear through the walls. She was touching him, or they were making love for the second time. It sounded like... like inspiration. Like she'd inspired him.

His bag's gone. The bag's gone and there's a note on the square dining table. The extra key card's on the table next to the note. She doesn't want to read it—she knows what it says already.

Going to the kitchen, she rinses out one of the juice tumblers and pours herself a glass of wine. A big glass, a third of the bottle. Standing at the window, she peers through the vertical blinds and takes a sip, then another. More cars are in the lot than last night, all on the far end. Maybe it's one big group traveling together.

She's all alone in 105.

She picks up the note, written on motel stationery, and reads it.

*Pam.*

*I thought about it, and I decided I should probably head back home. I thought a lot about what you said last night and this morning. This just isn't fair to you. I need to get my shit together first. I don't want to mooch off you, and that's what I've been doing. I've got all sorts of things on my mind right now, and I need to be alone for a while. I shouldn't have quit my job—I'm not going to ask for it back, but I shouldn't have done it without thinking it through. Now I've got nothing. I want to be the kind of guy who deserves a real woman like you. I'm just not there yet. I don't want to be a loser—you deserve better. Pam, you're such an amazing person, and this isn't goodbye forever. Maybe I just need a little space, a few days. I want to be with you, just please be patient with me. I need to use this time to come up with a plan. I don't want to be in this same situation in three months. Please please please, I hope you understand. It's just wrong of me to sit around and let you do things like take me out to dinner when I need to be doing so much more.*

*I'll call soon, and feel free to reach out. I just might be "off the grid" for a little while.*

*Pamela, I love you. I want to spend my life with you. I want to make babies with you. I just need to sort this out first.*

*Love, forever,*

*Matt*

She drops the note and lets it flutter back to the table. Motel stationery, thin as tissue. It's a note, it's whatever. It's information. That last part bothered her: *I want to make babies with you*. Like a lovestruck teenager, dreaming out loud. She wants to say, *You know what? Maybe you already did*.

She looks at her watch, but the time tells her nothing. She supposes she'll have to cancel the reservation now.

The room's more than quiet—it feels like silence sealed in a box. Sitting at the table, she drinks her wine like it's water and she's thirsty. *I want to spend my life with you. I want to make babies with you*. All fake, all lies. If that's true, why not make it a conversation? Why leave a note and zip out of town? And spare me "off the grid." Does that mean you're not going to pick up when I call? I can hear the voicemail now: Leave a message at the beep. Oh, but maybe in a few days you'll "feel better." You'll find a job at Hardee's or Burger King or even go back to KFC, and you'll get some money in your pocket and come sniffing around again. Easy for you, not so easy for me. And here I am, all alone—and I might be carrying your baby. Not likely, but it could be. Probably didn't even cross your mind.

She picks the note back up, gives it a glance, and tosses it down again.

On the other hand, maybe he really means it. Maybe he just needs a few days to sort things out. After all, she'd always been the reluctant one. She'd all but told him not to take her seriously; to think of her as a fling, a fuck-buddy. Was it his fault he took her at her word? *A young man has to have experiences. I'm not forcing you*. Those were her words. *Use me as you see fit*.

What the hell did she expect?

Mainly she's disappointed. She'd been looking forward to a nice night. It's nice hearing someone tell you he loves you, and to say it back. Driving a man crazy just by crossing your legs

a certain way, or touching his wrist. Yes, she's hurt, but she'd take him back in an instant if he changed his mind.

Guys are confusing. She wants to feel used, but she can't.

*Hi, it's Matt. I got my hands full at the moment, but text me or leave a message and I'll get back to you.*

Stripping out of her work clothes, she brings her wine into the bathroom and takes a shower, leaving the lights off. In the dark, with the hot steam billowing under her arms and around her shoulders, she feels like she's bathing under a waterfall in a warm jungle pool. She's always wanted to go to Costa Rica, even by herself. She wonders if they have pools like that in Costa Rica, where you can get naked and bathe under the stars. Probably not—it's probably just another fantasy of hers. There's probably no place in the world where you can go naked outdoors and stand under warm running water.

Out of the shower, she wraps a towel around her and sits listlessly at the foot of the bed. She needs to paint her toenails—the polish is starting to flake. Hating herself, she checks her messages, but there's nothing from Matt. She tells herself she's not going to spend the whole night waiting to hear back from him. If he calls, she might not even pick up. He made his decision, and now she's made hers. He's not the only one who needs a little space.

It's just before six, and she decides to keep the reservation. She'll go out to dinner by herself at the fancy Sheraton steakhouse, and she won't feel conspicuous or ashamed. She won't feel like everyone in the room is staring at her, wondering why she's a woman eating alone in a nice restaurant. She won't even read her phone at the table; she'll enjoy her food and sip her wine, and she won't give a damn what anyone thinks.

Putting on the black dress she'd planned on wearing for Matt, she drives to the Sheraton and tells the hostess, an anorexic-looking twenty year old with honey blonde hair, "The reservation's for two, but my friend can't join me tonight."

"Oh, that's too bad," the hostess says.

The girl leads Pam to the table, which is a half-circle and up on a riser. One of the romantic tables. In haste the hostess clears the second place setting and leaves Pam with the menu. The menu items are written in an ornate calligraphy that's hard to read. She doesn't want

to, but she pulls out her reading glasses; her near-vision gets a little blurry after she's had some wine. The entrees are expensive, though she has the money. There's something for thirty-eight dollars, and something else for thirty-two. Hard to spend much over a hundred bucks when it's just one person.

It takes ten minutes, but finally a waiter comes over. She's expecting this. She knows she's going to get rotten service. She's never understood why waiters treat single women so poorly. Don't they know women tend to be more generous than men?

"I'd like a glass of the Frank Family Cabernet. And a water."

There, that should get his attention: order the twenty-eight dollar glass of wine. The waiter goes away, and she resists the temptation to look at her phone. Maybe it's the double pour of wine back at the motel, but she's feeling in a reckless mood. *Go on, stare at me.* Judge me. I don't care. I'm not going to pretend I've got a million friends all texting me at once. I just ordered the second most expensive wine on the menu, and I've got as much right to be here as anyone else.

"Thank you. Yes, which do you recommend, the porterhouse or the filet?"

"They're all so different, ma'am. The filet is very tender, very flavorful, with a velvety, almost buttery texture—that's probably my favorite. And the porterhouse is served with the bone in, which some people prefer because it gives the steak a richer flavor."

"Yes, I'll do that."

"The porterhouse? Excellent. And how would you like that prepared? The chef recommends—"

"Medium-rare. No, rare."

"Very good. I'll put that right in."

He doesn't like me. I'm one of those women who asks a hundred questions and turns everything into an ordeal. High-maintenance. But I don't care. I don't care about anything.

What would Matt have ordered? Probably something inexpensive. *I'm not too hungry, I think I'll just have a salad.* Trying not to take advantage. He'd ask about the beer and settle for a Corona. And they'd sit close to each other right in the middle of the U-shaped bench and hold

hands under the table. *Fancy place*, he'd say, and she'd stroke his leg and say, *Anything for my baby*.

She sips her wine; it has a bitter molasses taste she doesn't like. She could be a real creep and send it back, but she won't. Honestly, she preferred the wine she had earlier. Must come from a lifetime of drinking the cheap stuff.

*Matt, it's Pam. At least text me. Let me know you're all right. I miss you.*

Her steak comes out in a hurry—they couldn't have spent much time on it. It smells wonderful, but suddenly she's not hungry. Eating seems like a project. She would've done better canceling the reservation and snacking on pretzel sticks in bed.

"It's excellent. Thank you."

Her phone pings, but it's a text from Meg.

*How's it going?*

Pam can practically hear her friends's insinuating tone of voice. She doesn't know how to respond, so she doesn't. Let Meg think she's too busy being kissed and admired.

As an excuse to avoid checking her phone, she looks around to see if she's the only one eating by herself. There's a bar with a piano player just now coming off break. His music shades the ambience, turns it purple. The men at the bar are all well-dressed and middle aged, or at least in their thirties and forties. Her crowd. Grown-ups come here, businessmen and investors, not recent high school graduates earning minimum wage.

Matt would've felt out of place.

*I'm not upset, I just want to understand.*

One man gets her attention—or she gets his. He's balding but handsome, and he stands with his back to the bar, drinking something in a glass with a straw. A gin and tonic. He's looking right at her, which must take guts. Women can be intimidating when they want to be.

She forces herself to look at her steak; she's made her way through half of it. It's more medium-rare than rare, even medium. Maybe the waiter didn't hear her.

Her text pings—it's Meg again.

*Pam, you okay? I think this was meant to go to someone else.*

Shit. Stupid! Still, not for the first time in the history of the western world...

Pam texts with both thumbs:

*Sorry, I was trying to text my sister. She's going through a mini-crisis back home. Things are great here! I'll tell you about it on Monday, if you're going to be in Rochester.*

Finished with her steak, she's about to ask for the check when the waiter circles around. He seems more interested in her now—he's all smiles, and he stands at waiterly attention, hands behind his back.

"Ma'am, there's a gentleman in the bar who would like to join you for dessert."

Somehow she's not surprised. "Who is it?" she asks, as if it matters.

"The older man with the red necktie." He doesn't say "balding," though that's the most obvious thing.

She appears to think about it, but it's really just a dramatic pause.

"Tell him yes," she says, and the waiter takes away her plate. Pam feels like she's wading through the thick murk of a nightmare.

Keeping her eyes on the bar, she watches the exchange between the waiter and the balding man. The waiter whispers in the man's ear, and they trade a grin; it's like someone's lost on a bet, or won. Finishing the last of his gin and tonic, the man sets his glass on the bar and moves toward her. Pam can feel the whole room watching them—you read about these things, but you never actually see it happen.

It takes some play-acting, but she keeps a level expression, staring at him.

"May I join you?" the man says—seems like a pleasant person. His chest is level with the edge of the raised table.

She looks down at him. "Okay."

The man climbs the two steps and sits far across from her. He looks nervous, but keeping it together. Maybe she really *is* attractive to men. It's hard to know these things about yourself.

"I'm Barney," he says, an old-fashioned name.

"I'm Pam."

"It's nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you."

“I’ve never been here before, but I’ve heard the cheesecake is delicious. Would you like to try some?”

“I don’t like cheesecake,” she says.

The man laughs and blows out his cheeks. “Okay. Don’t like cheesecake. What about something else?”

“Sure.” She makes him wait for it. “How about the cheesecake?”

The man grins and blushes. “That’s good, that’s good. I like that.”

Pam raises her chin at the waiter, who comes to take their dessert order. He’s at her service now.

“And I’ll take another one of these,” she says, tapping the rim of her glass.

“Make that two. Whatever she’s drinking,” Barney says, and Pam wonders what they’re going to do about the check. She decides she’ll let him pay for her dinner if he wants to.

“You have good taste in wine,” he says.

“No, I don’t. I just like what’s expensive.”

He loves this. She’s giving him exactly what he wants. “Sometimes the two things go together. Do you have expensive tastes?”

“In what?”

“Oh, in clothes, shoes.”

“Girly things.”

He nods but says, “I didn’t say that.”

She watches him across the table. Her phone pings a third time—either it’s Meg or Matt. Or a weather update.

“So, Barney—is this usually how you pick up women? Buy them dessert?”

“Who’s buying?” he says, and they both laugh. Maybe she likes him a little. “No, I don’t usually do anything. Usually I have dinner and a couple of drinks, then go up to my room.”

“Is this a nice hotel?”

“You’re not staying here?” She shakes her head. “I’ve got a suite on the seventh floor. Skyline view of the city.”

“Such as it is.”

“Right. But it’s got nice thick walls, so at least I can’t hear my neighbors.”

“And they can’t hear you.”

He swallows, anxious for his drink. “Right.”

Their wine arrives, and the waiter says, “Your dessert will be out shortly. Two plates?”

“Oh, yes, I think so,” she says, and the man dutifully hustles off. Barney and Pam raise their glasses to each other; it feels like a date, like something actually happened before this, a first encounter.

“So where are you staying?” he asks, and she tells him. Barney makes a face. “Ugh. I’m sorry. You should see my room. You’ll never go back to a budget motel.”

She sips her wine; it tastes different from the first glass, better. “Yeah... well, unfortunately it’s not *my* budget.”

“So you travel on business?”

She smiles, and it has a visible effect on him. “Barney. You don’t actually care what I do, do you?”

He coughs into his hand. “Well. It’s not that I don’t *care*.”

“But it’s not why you came over.”

“No.”

“Why did you come over?”

He leans forward; he doesn’t want anyone to hear. “Because I think you’re an absolutely beautiful woman.”

“Thank you,” she says, lowering her eyes. It’s always nice to hear nice things.

“I’ve think I’ve got an instant crush on you.”

She snorts. “That quick?”

“That quick.”

“So you want to take me up to your room. Is that why you mentioned it?”

“No, it’s not why I mentioned it,” he says, though he looks guilty enough.

“It’s okay. I’m flattered. Just don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“I won’t.”

Finally she can't take it anymore and checks her texts. Barney continues, though she's not really listening. "I haven't seen a woman like you in a long time. I mean, I don't think I've *ever* seen a woman quite like you. You know what I mean."

"Mm."

*I'm home. Thank you for being so understanding. You don't know what you mean to me. Call me when you can. I LOVE YOU.*

Barney's saying, "... right?"

She jolts up. "What? I'm sorry, I missed what you said. Just the last part."

His eager smile freezes. "Just that... when you're traveling all the time. You get sick of talking about business. And it's lonely."

He's trying to open up to her, but she's not sure she wants to hear it.

"Are you lonely, Barney?" she asks.

"Sometimes. What about you? Are you lonely?"

How old is our Barney—maybe forty-five? Probably divorced, or even still married. Who cares.

"Not right now," she says. She doesn't know what she's doing anymore; she's just doing it.

The dessert comes, and two plates and two forks. The cheesecake has raspberry glaze that puddles on the plate. Pam wonders what Barney said to the waiter before he came over: *See that woman over there? The redhead, the one sitting by the window? God, I want to screw her so bad.*

Again, Pam realizes she's been zoning out. The cheesecake's already half gone, though she's only taken one bite.

"...and I got to this point in life where I'm like, what am I doing, you know? Has that ever happened to you?" he asks.

"Oh. Yeah, sure."

"And I feel like both of us, with our experiences and what we've seen of the world... we have this in common. Am I wrong? I mean, I know we don't know each other well—or really at *all*—and I don't want to seem like I'm being too forward."

"Barney..."

“But I feel like we have this connection, strange at it seems. And I felt it the moment I saw you, like I’d met you before.”

“Barney.”

“Have you ever been to Tallahassee? This would’ve been around 2018, ’19.”

“Barney, no, I haven’t—well, I *have*. I’ve been to Tallahassee, but not in 2018 or 2019.”

“It might’ve been earlier.”

“No... I’m sure we haven’t met before—but Barney.” He stops talking. “It’s okay. You don’t have to try so hard. I like you. You’re a good-looking man. And if you’re not against the idea, I’d like to go up and have another drink in your room.” He’s speechless, so she helps him out. “You don’t need to talk me into it. I’m a big girl. I don’t do things I don’t want to do.”

He laughs like he can’t believe his good luck. “Of course. We’ll order a bottle. We can get it from the bar and bring it right up. I’ll ask for two glasses.” The cheesecake’s down to a couple of bites, and he waves for the check. “May I pay for your dinner?”

Her red lips smile. “Thank you. That’s nice of you.”

Barney pays with his AmEx—he’s got a black card, the one they call “Centurion”—and helps her down from the table. Heads turn to watch them leave: the men are jealous while the women show practiced disinterest. Pam waits out in the lobby as Barney goes into the bar to negotiate for a bottle and two glasses; technically you’re not supposed to bring anything out of the restaurant, but it’s really just the same as calling down for room service.

Emerging from the bar, he brandishes the wine and glasses. “Success,” he says.

Another text pings, and she turns off her phone.

They’re in the elevator; lights outline the mirrored ceiling. He could kill her here. Maybe this is the part of the book where the man pulls a machete out of his sport coat and chops off her head.

“You need a special key to get off on seven. So there’s not a lot of foot traffic,” he says. *Oo, impressive.*

The doors open on seven, and soon they’re in his suite. Pam never knew Sheratons could be this nice. She’s more used to Comfort Inns and Ramadas. Here the furniture’s white leather, and the bed’s in its own separate room.

“Sorry about the mess,” Barney says from the kitchen, where he’s opening the wine. The room’s not remotely a mess; there’s just a stack of paperwork on the glass coffee table and an open briefcase on the floor. Parted drapes reveal lit-up skyscrapers in the distance; it’s not a city Pam knows on sight.

She’s breathing quickly; she’s nervous. She doesn’t know what she’s doing.

Barney comes back with the wine. He’s taken off his shoes and loosened his tie. Handing Pam her glass, he says, “To us.”

She says nothing, just clinks glasses with him, takes a sip, and sets it on the coffee table.

“May I sit?”

“Please.”

She sits on the white leather sofa and crosses her legs toward him. It’s possible she’s still doing what she wants; sometimes it’s hard to tell.

Barney sits next to her, throwing his arm around the back of the sofa.

“So... what would you like to do?” she asks.

He looks surprised. “Do?”

“Yeah, do—you and me. We’re here.”

He gulps back his wine. Maybe he’s drugged it—just her glass, of course. Maybe this is the part where the man slips the hapless female victim a drug, then rapes her and drowns her in the jacuzzi, making it look like an accident.

*Pamela Ryan never knew what was coming. Like a fly trapped in a spider’s web...*

(Graduation photo, class of ’01: that red blouse, those bangs, those big earrings.)

“We could talk,” he says.

“We could. What would you like to talk about?”

He scoots closer to her. “How about how unbelievably gorgeous you are?”

She smiles but says, “I don’t think that’s much of a subject of conversation, but thanks. Why don’t we talk about our fantasies? I don’t mean our sexual fantasies—well, that too, I guess.”

“Fantasies...”

“Dreams, you know? Something you’ve never done but would like to.”

“Like sky-diving.”

She winces. “No, not like sky-diving. No one wants to go sky-diving.”

“I do.”

“No, you don’t. That’s just what people say when they can’t think of anything else. Sky-diving or bungee-jumping or... running a marathon. Those are dumb things. Why would anyone ever want to sky dive?”

He looks helpless, outclassed. “Just... the feeling of freedom.” Giving up, he says, “I feel like nothing I say is going to be the right answer.”

Maybe this is the part where the man finally gets tired of the woman’s attitude and closed-fist punches her to teach her a lesson. Then rapes her and strangles her and waits until two a.m. to smuggle her dismembered body out of the hotel in four canvas laundry bags.

“I’m sorry, I’m just being difficult. So... do you really want to go sky-diving?” she asks.

“No, not really.” A smile dawns, and they laugh. “But I thought it sounded good.”

“A-ha. I thought so.”

Screwing up his courage, he asks, “Can I kiss you?”

She nods, and he does. It’s a nervous kiss, no tongue. Barney kisses like he hasn’t done it in a while.

“That was nice,” Pam says, and he leaves his arm around her.

“Your turn. Tell me yours.”

“But you didn’t even tell me *yours*. Just some stuff about sky-diving. What’s your real fantasy? It doesn’t matter if it sounds good. Something that keeps you awake at night. It can be big or small. All that matters is that it’s important to you.”

“Okay. Promise you won’t laugh. I wish I was taller. And more handsome.”

“You’re handsome, Barney.”

“I mean *really* handsome. I have to work at it. As you can tell, I’m follicly challenged,” he says, running his hand over his bald head. “And I try to work out. I finally got my weight down to 160, which is healthy for my height.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks. But it’s something I’m self-conscious about. Girls were never interested in me

when I was younger. I thought, ‘Well, someday I’ll be rich and successful, and then it won’t matter.’”

“Women don’t only care about things like that.”

“They don’t?” he asks weakly, like he wants to believe her.

“No. It’s more important to feel comfortable with a man, and compatible.”

“Do you feel comfortable with me?” he asks, touching her cheek. With a shock, she realizes something: she likes this guy. The whole point of Barney was to—what? Punish herself? Get back at Matt for leaving her? Go home with a creep? But here she is, enjoying this man’s company.

And more and more, he’s making Matt seem like a mistake.

“I do,” she says. They kiss again, and this time Barney relaxes into it. Pam finds herself doing the guessing game with his age, like she did with Matt, but in the other direction. Now that she’s had a better look at him, Barney seems closer to fifty than forty-five, but a healthy fifty. A robust fifty. He might even be in his mid-fifties, which would put her roughly in the middle between him and Matt.

She laughs softly to herself, and Barney asks, “What?”

“Oh, nothing... just thinking.”

He scoots closer and puts his hand well up on her thigh. She wonders if she ought to tell him to ease off, just for form’s sake, but she likes it there.

“Okay, I spilled my guts. Now it really is your turn,” he says.

“My fantasy? Oo, I should be able to answer this, since I asked it.” She fortifies herself with a sip of wine. What’s it been, a bottle since five o’clock? At least a bottle.

“It’s hard to put in words. I used to have a dream when I was younger. I still get it every now and then. But in this dream, it’s nighttime and I’m all alone in a forest—not on a trail, just in the middle of nowhere. I’m lost.” She doesn’t tell him she’s always naked in the dream.

“Sounds like a nightmare,” he says.

“Sort of. But a nightmare in a good way. It’s scary but it’s also exciting.”

“You like being scared,” he says, and she pauses. This is the part where the man overpowers the woman and holds her in bondage until she finally succumbs to relentless sexual torture forty-eight hours later.

“I guess—not for real. I told you, it’s only a fantasy.”

His hand goes slack on her leg. “So what happens? Do you finally find your way out of the forest?”

“I don’t know. The dream usually peters out. Sometimes there’s a guy.”

He’s curious. “Is it someone you know?”

“You mean in real life? Hard to say. That part’s vague.”

“But you and this guy... you’re together, or...?”

“No, we’re not together. We find each other—that’s how it feels, anyway. We’re both lost, and it’s dark or it’s getting dark. He feels like a stranger. It’s our first time meeting. And he’s as scared as I am.”

He shakes his head, trying to figure it out. “This ‘being scared’ thing—what does it mean?”

She laughs. “I don’t know. What *does* it mean?”

She feels like she’s said enough, but he asks, “And then what happens? Is that the whole dream?”

“More or less. You know how dreams aren’t quite like stories? There’s no beginning, middle, and end. At least not in mine. It’s more like it’s *all* middle.”

As before, she’s leaving things out. She doesn’t want to tell him about being naked in the dream—she doesn’t want to put that image in his head just yet. Or that the man in the dream is naked too. Or how they usually wind up making love, if she doesn’t wake up first. She doesn’t know Barney well enough to share those things with him.

“Do you think you’d actually like something like that to happen?” he asks.

“Ooo. Good question, Barney. You’re smart. You ask the right things.” She sways a little, his hand still on her leg. “I think I’d actually be terrified out of my wits—so, no, probably not. There’s something about feeling helpless, though... and then finding someone else who feels helpless too...”

“...and then working it out together.”

“Or just being together. Not even working it out—just being in the moment. Being scared together. Because when you’re scared, you want someone else to be scared with you. Don’t you?”

“I suppose,” he says, then, “Yes. I know what you’re saying.”

“Do you? Because you seem like a pretty ‘together’ person, Barney. You don’t seem like you’ve ever been scared. I have. I feel like I’m scared all the time.”

His hand starts moving on her leg, and he leans in for another kiss. He says in her ear, “You don’t have to be scared with me.”

The red face of a monster. Fangs, arched eyebrows. *Get your fucking clothes off.* Something tightening behind her, a strap—she can’t see it.

Maybe *this* is the part—maybe right now.

Coming out of the kiss, she asks, “May I use your bathroom?”

“Please. It’s right down the hall.”

She takes her purse and peters off to the bathroom. The fan comes on with the light, and she has to laugh. Maybe all bathrooms in all hotels are like this. Sitting on the edge of the tub, she turns on her phone and waits for it to power up. Barney’s bathroom things are neatly laid out on the sink counter—his toothbrush, his razor. He’s the kind of person who moves in when he checks into a hotel; he’s even got his robe hanging on the back of the door, silky and wide-striped. A good man; plausibly a prick under the right circumstances. But he’d be good to her. It strikes her—and maybe this is just her trying to impose some sense or structure on her life, unstable, always-in-transit—but Barney could’ve been Matt thirty years ago. Unpopular with girls for some weird reason, but idealistic. (Was Barney ever idealistic? Maybe he’s idealistic *now*.)

*Are you okay?*

*I’m fine, Matt. I just need to go to bed. I’ve got a lot of driving to do in the morning.*

Backs over *I love you*, changes it to *Have a good night*. Checks her email, all either junk or work-related, turns the phone back off. Lifts her dress and rolls down her pantyhose for a quick pee. Washes her hands. Goes back out to Barney.

This is the part of the story where the woman realizes she's made a mistake. There's the evidence left behind, a text sent to Matt Williams at 9:07 pm. *Do you know Pamela Ryan?* A car left behind in the parking lot, an abandoned motel room three miles across town. Leads, things to go on, but not much. *Yeah, I waited on her table. She left with some guy. Here, I'll get the credit card receipt.* Of course it's a fake name—a dummy account set up under an alias. Not hard to do. No one knows the man's real name, just the woman who vanished. It might've been the last thing she ever heard.

“You okay?”

“Sure, fine. I think I had a little too much wine.”

“You want to lay down? I'll take the couch.”

“No, I'm all right. It's just a lot for my...” She hesitates—she doesn't want to sound old. “Bladder.”

“I understand. I'm like that too.”

She joins Barney on the couch. She's pretty sure she's not pregnant. She's been pregnant once before, and she knew almost right away.

“Barney, can I say something?” She rests her arm on his chest.

“Please.”

“I'm really attracted to you, and I'd like to spend the night with you, but...” How to say it so it doesn't sound like a lie? “I can't make any promises. You might do better just to send me away.”

He kisses her fingers. “Oh, I don't want to send you away.”

“I don't always make the best choices. I guess it's all part of... wanting that feeling.”

“Feeling?”

“The feeling of being lost, helpless. Alone in the forest.”

“But you're not alone. I'm here too.”

“Are you?” She smiles; she likes the idea. “So we're lost together.”

He starts unbuttoning her blouse. “Hopelessly.”

“And it's dark and we don't know where we are.”

“Are you scared?” he asks, nipping at her neck.

“Yes.”

“Don’t be. I’m here.”

“But you’re scared too.”

“I am, but we’re together, and we’ll take care of each other.”

She pulls away, looks at him. “You’ll take care of me?”

“I will,” he says, though he looks like he’s not sure what he’s agreeing to. She can tell he’s trying, but something feels off. Matt did this part better.

“You’ll protect me in the forest,” she says, going back to kissing his cheek, his neck.

He doesn’t answer, just flips her onto her back and pulls off his tie. “Lady, I want you. Right now. You’re gonna fucking get it.”

He puts his full weight on top of her, making it hard for her to breathe. “Baby, go slow. I’m here, but go slower.”

“Where do you want to go, the bedroom? We can go to the bedroom.”

“Here, there, it doesn’t matter. But Barney, honey, I can’t breathe.”

There’s a disorganized scuffle. Barney’s shoulders sag, and he lifts himself up. He looks ashamed. “Sorry. I just... I get excited.”

“It’s okay. Nothing wrong with getting excited.” Seeing his defeated expression, her eyes widen and she covers her mouth; this isn’t what usually happens in the forest. “Oh. All right, then.”

He turns away, all but spits out, “Fuck!”

“No, it’s fine. It happens. Really, Barney, I understand. We can take a break.”

“I don’t want to take a break!” Bolting up from the couch, he rages across the room, hands like ape fists. “I was right there. Goddamnit, I was right there.”

“You *were*,” she says, holding a throw pillow in her lap.

“This never happens to me. It was the wine. It was the—what’s it?—the tannins. The stuff that makes you sleepy. I should’ve stuck to what I was drinking.” He shakes his head at the floor. “Fuck. Why am I so stupid?”

“You’re not stupid. Look, I’ve had too much to drink too. Why don’t we just sit and talk and then see what happens? No pressure at all.”

“No... I don’t want to do that. I’m a failure. I act like a big deal but I’m really a failure.”

She gets up and goes to him. “No, you’re not—why are you saying that? Barney, it’s nothing. What can I do to make it better?”

He keeps his head down, even as she takes both his hands. “Nothing. It’s not *your* fault. I did it. See, I can’t control myself. And I really wanted to be good for you.” She touches his face. Is he crying? My God, he’s crying. “I spend so many nights all alone, Pam. In Chicago or Boston or wherever. Just dreaming about having someone with me. Someone beautiful and sweet and sexy. And then I get a chance and this is what I do with it. I guess I’m just too old now. I guess I can’t do this anymore. Is it just me or is it all men? I can’t take the pills because I’ve got high blood pressure.” He sags forward, letting her hold him. “I hate myself, Pam. I used to be able to do it three times a night. I probably shouldn’t be telling you this. When I was thirty, I could go for hours. Forty, even.”

“Shh. I’m sure you could,” she says, patting his head.

“I’m so ashamed.” He straightens, wipes his eyes. “Look, I’m sorry. I’m not going to be any fun tonight. I think I just need to be alone. Is that all right?”

“Of course it’s all right.” Secretly she’s relieved. She doesn’t want to go to bed with him anymore. She doesn’t like it when men cry. Some women do, but for her it’s a big turn-off.

Twenty minutes later, she’s driving back across town to her motel. It’s still not particularly late, not even ten on a Saturday night. The lot’s jammed outside Applebee’s. Suddenly she’s tired. She feels like she’s dodged a bullet. It’s just so much better not to get involved. Sleep with a guy and they turn you into a—a what? A symbol. Maybe not even that. But not a real person anymore, at any rate.

Chili’s, TGI Fridays. Which is the one with the good nachos?

Kid on a bike outside a gas station. A cop talking to someone. Pam turns on her radio, keeping the volume low. Classic rock means Nirvana nowadays. No one even remembers the Beatles.

Back at the motel, she pours another juice tumbler of wine and strips down to her bra and panties. Air feels cool and nice on her bare legs. She probably shouldn’t be drinking like this if

she's really pregnant. And would it be so bad if she was? It'd be harder for Matt. Maybe she wouldn't even tell him. She's pretty sure she'll never see him again.

She thinks she could handle taking care of a kid by herself. She's making good enough money, so that's not a problem. And her boss would probably let her spend less time on the road. Almost anyone can work from home these days; and her sister would probably be willing to spell her if she got in a jam. *Aunt Sue*. Wouldn't that be a laugh.

At least if she *is* pregnant, she'll know whose it is. No ambiguity there.

Another bath with the lights off. She wonders why she doesn't feel like masturbating. Seems like the thing to do. Maybe she will, just to finish herself off.

Her body dissipates in the dark water.

Again she finds herself alone in the forest. The trees aren't scenery; they're a spindly menace. Reality's different, of course—it always is. In reality she'd panic, she'd think about wild animals. She'd worry about someone finding her, some dishonorable man. And every sound, every screech and cry in the dark would make her jolt and freeze in an arrested crouch. Cold rocks and leaves under the bare balls of her feet.

Raising her right foot, she's reassured by solid wall, solid tile. Now that she thinks about it, she's not so sure about Matt. About not seeing him again, that is. Maybe she will. It doesn't have to be some huge official thing. You can sleep with someone every now and then and just enjoy their company. It's part of being alive and loving life. And Matt really does seem like a good person. He's just trying to do the right thing. That's better than some men.

In the forest she folds her arms over her chest to get warm. She wonders how she got here—she can't remember the past hours for some reason. The moon is full and cracked. It cloaks her skin in gray.

If she's pregnant and it's a boy, she'll name him Devon, which is a name she's always liked. If it's a girl, she'll name her Margaret, which was her mother's name.

The bath's turning cool, so she adds some hot water. When she was young, her sister used to get mad at her for spending too much time in the bath. By now her eyes have fully adjusted to the dark. She can see the toilet, the ledge of the tub. It's getting harder, but she can still sense the

humid air on her back, can perceive the vague form of her body creeping under the trees. She's moving because she has to. There's no place to stop and rest.

"Hello?" she asks the room. No one answers.

Getting out of the tub, she dries herself with a towel and reluctantly flips on the wall switch. The light's offensively bright, and she squints her way out of the bathroom. The rest of the suite's just as she left it, her clothes heaped on the floor. Because she's naked, she still feels connected to the world of the forest. Dropping to a crouch, she creeps across the room. The bed's a shelf of rock, the topside of a cave, some shelter. It's starting to rain, a light mist. Water drips from her chin, the tips of her fingers, her nipples. The skin on her naked stomach tightens and prunes. The dark unknown of the cave frightens her, so she pushes on.

"Hello?" she asks. Maybe there's someone in the world who can help her.

Past the bureau, the flat screen TV, the sitting area, she keeps her eyes on her feet. (Still needs to paint her toenails.) Lightning sparks in the distance. There's a presence out there, animal or human, watching her. Eyes blink in thickets. She moves forward, and wet ferns rake her shins.

With a start, she realizes the vertical blinds are half-open, so she hurries over and yanks them shut, killing the lights for good measure. Now it's dark again, and the rain is warm and constant.

A voice calls to her from a nearby stand of trees—*Hello?*—and she gasps; she can't see who it is. "Hello, who is it?" she answers, trying to sound brave.

The voice is male; she doesn't recognize it in the forest, but in the motel room she knows who it is. *Hello, are you okay?*

"Who are you?" she repeats, her voice shaking. She turns around in a full circle. The voice feels like it could be anywhere.

*It's all right, I won't hurt you. Are you lost?*

She nods stiffly, her chin buried in her shoulder. "I think so," she says. "I don't know how I got here, I don't know where I am. I think I'm in big trouble." She peers deeper into the dark woods. "Where are you? I can't see you."

*I'm right here.*

“Where’s right here? Why are you hiding?” No response. “You sound male. Are you a man?”

Her hair’s soaked. Pam’s hair always looks black when it’s wet.

*Yes, I’m a man.*

Pam takes a step back and trips on one of her shoes. “Should I be scared of you?”

*No, you don’t have to be scared of me. I’m not going to hurt you.*

Curious, she wanders back into the living room. The night air’s brightened from black to deep gray. “But why can’t I see you? Can you see me?”

*No, I can’t see you. I can see you a little.*

She covers herself with her arms. “What can you see?”

*Nothing, really. I just know you’re there. Look, why don’t you tell me your name? I’m Matt.* He waits in his hiding place, but she’s silent. *What’s yours?*

Looking away from the source of the voice, she says, “Pamela. It’s Pam.”

*Pam. That’s nice. I like your name.*

In the barest whisper, she says, “Thank you. I like yours too.”

The bushes rustle; maybe the man’s getting closer. He sounds cautious, like he doesn’t want to frighten her. *It’s hard talking to you like this. I’m here and you’re way over there. Can I come closer?*

She shakes her head; then, realizing he probably can’t see her, she says, “Please don’t.”

*Why not?*

Her voice is thin; it’s almost not real speaking at all. “Because I’m naked.”

There’s a pause. Through the slapping sound of the rain, she thinks she hears the man let out a sound—a breath—either of relief or amusement. *Oh, Pam,* he says, *I’m naked too.*

Pam almost stops there—the forest sometimes loses her attention as her mind drifts onto other things—but she wants to stay with it a little longer.

The man continues, stating his case. *Listen, I know this is awkward. You’re scared... and I’m scared too. But maybe we could help each other. Maybe we can work together and find our way out of this. And then we won’t need to be scared anymore. Pam?* he calls out into the dark, and she lowers her arms. *I need you. Please.*

She says nothing, which isn't "No." The rustling builds, and the thicket's dark olive-green vegetation parts around the pale form of a man. Pam straightens, her body on alert. She feels seen, exposed. The man takes another step until he's fully in the open but still keeping his distance. He has a smile for her, though it's a hesitant, peace-making smile—he wants to be her friend. He's soaked through and, like her, utterly naked. Making a decision, she relaxes her stance and lets him look at her, as she looks at him.

*Hi.*

Pam smiles faintly. "Hi."

The man stands, hand on his hip. It's Matt, how she remembers him. Cautiously they move towards each other as the rain continues to fall.

*I'm here,* she hears him say.

"I see you."

*I won't hurt you.*

"I know."

They're close enough now to touch. She doesn't know why, but she feels comfortable with him. She can almost forget about the forest, which is good. That's the whole point of the forest, to forget about it.

*You're beautiful,* he says.

"Thanks. You're beautiful too. I can't believe this is happening. It's almost like you're not real. May I touch you?"

He lets her, and her fingers reach out and close around nothing. Matt breathes. "Are you sensitive?" she asks.

*A little,* he admits. Her hand feels warm against his hip. *I'm sorry, I-*

"It's okay, I don't mind. You can touch me too, if you'd like."

His hands go to her, and for a while there's just touching and holding. His touch stops her shivering, and she draws closer to him.

"You feel nice."

*So do you.*

"I've been so scared. So scared and alone."

He whispers soothing things to her as her arms cradle his shape. If she shuts her eyes, she can almost see him. His body's wet and solid, his chest firm against hers. A warm night wind pushes them together, and he swells against her, responding more to her closeness than just her touch. She's ready—they're both ready. There's nowhere to go, nothing else worth doing, only this.

“Oh, Matt. I'm so glad you're here. You've saved me, you've saved me.”

*You've saved me. We've saved each other.*

Then, when she opens her eyes, her will gives out; her attention breaks. The dark's not dark enough. Instead of a forest, there's a picture in a frame, a thermostat, check-out instructions on the door. No trees, no rain, no night sky.

No Matt.

This is where it always ends. It's just like waking up.

Dropping her hand, she picks up her shoes and the rest of her clothes and stashes them in the closet, leaving the door open so she won't forget to pack them in the morning. Rooting through her belongings, she finds a terrycloth nightshirt and puts it on; the towel-like material clings to her damp skin. Suitably dressed, she flicks on the lights. It feels like a weight has been lifted from her shoulders. That's another thing about the forest—it takes work. It's not like real life. You have to think about everything, keep the script running in your head.

A week later she's home again after nearly a month on the road. A neighbor's been taking in her mail; Pam's bought her a desktop sized cactus plant as a thank-you, which she hasn't given her yet. Some of the mail's a little damp; it must've rained that particular day. The catalogs should keep her busy over the long weekend. She's decided to take a couple days off, though she'll probably wind up working from home, knowing her.

It feels good being in her own bed again. She's thinking of splurging on one of those adjustable mattresses that vibrates and goes up and down. The Sleep Number beds—they've got them at the Raddison. They're ridiculously expensive, but Pam's reached the point in life where she can buy pretty much whatever she wants. And she doesn't want much.

The quiet at night makes her nervous; she's used to highway noise, neighbors arguing or having sex or watching TV. She's grown so accustomed to sleeping in motel rooms, her condo

seems huge to her, though it's only nine hundred square feet. Even that's too much. She's got an empty room on the second floor she's thinking of turning into a guest room or a home office; or else she'll do something entirely out of character with it—but what would that be? She's not the frivolous type.

Maybe she'll make it her forest room and leave it empty.

When she's not peeking at emails, she spends her long weekend going on walks around the condo complex. The weather's not very nice, but she's not adverse to walking in the rain. The complex borders a few hundred acres of woodlands, and sometimes a fox or a wild dog will wander onto the walking path. Residents know better than to let their pets go unattended.

Pam doesn't have a pet. It's not conducive to her lifestyle. Instead of owning a pet, she plays card games online. And reads those stupid books. It fills up the time.

“Hi Pam, welcome back. When you come in on Wednesday, let's take a look at your schedule for September/October. We're thinking of sending you down to Charlottesville/Richmond/Norfolk, that area—but maybe it's too soon? Think about it, and get some rest. You deserve it!”

*A baby would've been nice*, she thinks, starting over the screen of her laptop. Something to do with the empty room on the second floor. But babies always wind up taking over the whole house.

No further word from Matt—he feels gone from her life. Sometimes she reads over their texts, then gets embarrassed and forces herself to stop. Enough time has passed, she can almost laugh about it now: *What was I thinking?* She probably won't even remember him in a month or a year's time.

As for Matt—she's pretty sure he'll remember her forever.

III.

25.

Some doors swing in and some swing out. Doors are swingers.

What happens when we open a door? Air flows from one space to the next. A wild-haired woman with a hopeful gleam in her eyes yells “Surprise!” A gun held by someone whose name we will never know shoots us in the face. It’s best to leave doors either permanently open or permanently closed.

Walk through a door and something bad might happen. Something’s hiding on the other side. Don’t open it, don’t even touch the handle—it’s hot!

You carry the weight of depression around you wherever you go. Trees blow in the morning air. There’s a forest behind the backyard that swishes this way and that.

These dreams sometimes last all night. You dream without falling asleep. The man at the Wendy’s Drive-Thru has to prompt you a second time if you want a drink with that. Sudden questions intimidate you; you don’t want to sound dumb or give offense.

The car behind you at the Wendy’s Drive-Thru honks at you to move up; there’s a fifty foot gap between you and the car at the window. *I know, I know*, you say to yourself, and drive ahead.

When you were fifteen, a boy tried to hold your head under water. You remember the tom-tom rumble of water in your ears, your mouth and chin in mud; but eventually the boy’s arms relaxed and let go. Maybe he never really meant to hurt you.

You didn’t dream about the forest then. You tried to be a happy, agreeable child. You went to school and completed your work on time. You did what was expected of you. Adults praised your obedience. *They’ve got you well trained*, they’d say.

The man at the Wendy’s Drive-Thru hands you your dinner through the window. The car behind you is pulled right up to your rear bumper, headlights on. Both you and the man at the window peer back at it. *Eager beaver*, the man says, and you laugh in gratitude.

A female colleague notices the distant look in your eyes at work. She thinks of herself as your friend, and maybe she is. *Are you all right?* she asks at least once a week. Her concern is almost more about her than you.

Sometimes when she's bored, she'll tell you about a trip she just went on with her boyfriend. She and her boyfriend are always going on these little trips up to Maine or down to Florida. They like going to the Florida Keys. There's a town where they let chickens run wild in the streets, and there are thousands of them, always flocking and blocking up the traffic. The cats at the Hemingway house in Key West have six toes on each paw. But she might just be getting this stuff from online.

The woman at work invites you out for a drink, and there the talk gets more personal. She tells you about her boyfriend, what he likes in bed. The more she drinks, the more graphic it gets. Hearing her talk makes you squirm, but you can't bring yourself to say anything. She might be the only friend you have.

The dream slips into you at weird times—driving home from work, standing in line at Wegmans. The people who have abducted you and let you go have retreated into the sky. A drone hovers, watching you. Its buzzing propellers clip the tops of the trees. You're a pale shape on the ground, always pushing forward, hunkering for protection. Downed trees bark your shins. You take a blind step ahead and your leg sinks knee deep in cold muck. The drone slows, takes a picture. You're alone, but your humiliation feels public. You're a broadcasted event.

Your co-worker's boyfriend is wealthy and self-employed, and your co-worker lives in constant fear of him getting bored with her and leaving her. He pays for everything, and she's starting to feel dependent on him. She doesn't like it. The relationship sounds like a nightmare, but you don't say anything. You're the last person to judge.

*We went out to dinner last night, and he made me order an eighty dollar steak. I didn't even want it. He said, "Order the most expensive thing on the menu." Said he likes to spend his money on me. I felt silly. I didn't even eat half the steak—it was huge! Think of the waste. I almost cried at the table. If you want to be nice and take me out to dinner, at least let me get what I want. Why does it have to be the most expensive item on the menu? All I wanted was a salad. Even the salads were thirty dollars.*

You don't understand men, though you think you might be one. You know what a penis looks like. But nothing excites you anymore. You wish there was a place where you could stand naked and feel the breeze on your body, but you know that place doesn't exist.

*I don't want to get married. I always want to have a job, even if it's part-time. My boyfriend wants to lock me up inside his castle and never let me out. He's that kind of guy. He's an evil prince. We're going to Montreal in November. It's just for three days. Hardly worth it when you consider the travel time. But there's this bridge he wants to see. And I'm sure we'll have the most expensive steak on the planet. I'm kind of dreading it. Still, hotel sex is the best sex. Have you ever had a man choke you in bed? It sounds awful, but it's not!*

You're usually good at blotting out this kind of talk. It's not that you don't care, but your mind's on other things. Work's always an hour too long. When you get home, there's no energy left for anything. You want to get back into cooking, but shopping for groceries takes time.

*He doesn't really choke me. He just puts his hand on my neck. I think my throat's an erogenous zone. You never hear about erogenous zones anymore. They used to write books about them—you'd see 'em at the airport. People used to care about things like that—orgasms. Where they liked to be touched. No one cares nowadays.*

You ask your co-worker if you ever choke him back. She can't tell you're kidding.

*Oh, no. He wouldn't like it. It seems like something only a man should do to a woman. He doesn't even press down. It's more like pretending. I really don't mind it! I know he's only play-acting when he degrades me in bed. He doesn't mean what he says. Sometimes I degrade him too. We're never just "us." Have you ever been to Strega? It's that big steakhouse right off the highway. We're going next Thursday. I don't know why he always needs to wave his money around. He once gave our waitress a three hundred dollar tip. We got in a fight about it in the parking lot.*

You've never had a man choke you, but you don't think you'd like it. Something unkind about it.

*It doesn't really bother me. I don't experience it as an aggressive gesture. He probably couldn't really strangle me even if he wanted—I'd just push him off. I've got good upper body strength. I took a women's self-defense class at the Y a few years ago. I recommend it. There's*

*about fifteen different ways to kick a man in the balls. But I'm not worried about him. I wouldn't even really call it "strangling." I shouldn't have put it that way. It's more like he puts his right hand on my neck when he's about to climax and squeezes. Just the thumb. It doesn't hurt. I like it because it intensifies my pleasure. Most of the time.*

Some days you leave work twenty minutes early to go for a jog. You're not a habitual runner; the mood just takes you, and you want to throw on some Spandex and hop through the puddles. It's a new way of seeing the same old town. But running hurts your ankles, and you're not about to spend two hundred dollars on a pair of running shoes.

*He doesn't do it all the time. Usually we're both pretty conventional. He's one of these guys who's terrified about birth control—terrified about it not working, that is. He wanted to take a movie of us with his cell phone, but I squelched that. You never know about technology. Things get out and you can't take it back. I'm not just paranoid—it's true. He pouted about it a little, but I made it up to him. Maybe I shouldn't encourage him so much. Some of the things he says can be borderline creepy. And he grabs my butt in public, even though I've told him to stop. At a bar's one thing, but not around my parents.*

This town you live in—it's like a cocoon, a wet cocoon. It rains four days out of five. The leaves on the ground are constantly soaked. Maybe you'll drive your car into a bank, or a taco stand. You have a needling fantasy of driving your car into things—not to hurt anyone, let alone yourself, but for the aesthetic satisfaction of watching people scatter in a panic.

( )

My daughter's changed her mind about what she wants to be for Halloween. Last year we didn't do Halloween, so this year all the kids are excited for parties and trick or treating. She originally wanted to go as an M&M candy; I don't know if she wanted to be a single M&M with arms and legs, or a bag of them. The idea never got that far. She and her girlfriends all wanted to go as candy. But now it's changed. Something to do with a TV show. It always has something to do with a TV show.

I like handing out candy on Halloween. I never used to. Halloween used to strike me as the most American of holidays. *Give me free stuff, and I'll mutter thank you.* But I find the kids are nicer these days. Maybe it's just because I'm older—I look like the kind of person you're supposed to be nice to.

You don't have to thank me, just limit yourself to one candy, two at the most. Don't take a whole fistful so I'll run out in twenty minutes. I like staying on the porch with a drink and a slice of pizza as the kids troop past with their neon green glo-sticks. I think I like Halloween more than Christmas these days. It's relatively low stress. You don't have to plan for it for weeks, and it's over in the time it takes me to drink two Tanqueray and tonics with lime.

Supposedly my daughter already has a Christmas wish list, but she's not showing it to anyone yet. We have to beg for it.

My daughter runs me ragged. Twenty minutes of playing catch, and my heart's thumping. But I'm no longer worried about dying of a heart attack. That's not to say it won't happen, but I'm not worried about it anymore. Same thing with dying in a plane crash. It's that immortal feeling you get when you're pushing fifty.

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26.

*You don't appreciate how much pain I'm in. No, Kim, you don't. Just to pull myself out of bed and work ten hour days so you can have nice things. (Nice things? What are you talking about? I pay my share, Rick.) You didn't pay for your brakes last month, and that was eight hundred dollars. (Well thanks for helping me out every now and then. I thought that was what married people did for each other.) You didn't pay for that goddamn fancy washer-dryer-whatever-it-is you just had to have because your friend Dana has one, and Dana has everything. (Yeah, and I use it to wash your filthy clothes every day.) Fuck you, Kim. You should talk. The way you slump around the house in those slippers and dumpy sweatpants. The only time you bother to look halfway decent is when you go off to work. Maybe there's some guy at work you're trying to*

*impress. (You wish.) I don't wish, I'm asking. I wouldn't be surprised. I know I can't make you happy like that anymore. It's not my fault! I have arthritis in my back. (Always blame it on the back. You know, there are ways around things, Rick. If you really cared. If you really wanted to make the effort.) It's not about making the effort. I'm in pain, you stupid bitch. What part of that don't you understand?*

“I feel like we’re a million miles away from home. Look at the trees up here! They’re so beautiful. I can’t remember the last time I was in New Hampshire. You never think of it being right next door, but it’s just a short drive away,” Kim said.

Robby smiled at her, driving with his hand on her leg. She liked being with a man who couldn’t keep his hands off her. And here, a hundred miles north of Boston, he could put his hands on her whenever he liked.

It was late when they got in, near six o’clock, so they dropped their bags off at the house and drove into town for dinner. Robby felt a little nervous about staying at his aunt’s cottage, but Kim reassured him they had the place to themselves. As for his mom, all Dana knew was that Kim was spending the weekend with a man named Robby.

Not which one.

The restaurant wasn’t crowded when they got there; they probably wouldn’t have needed the reservations, but it felt special to make them. Putting in their orders, they watched the light fade in gold bars over Lake Winnepesaukee. A nice silence, if a little pregnant. She realized she and Robby had never really had time for a leisurely conversation.

Taking his hand, she held it over the table, wanting the few other people in the restaurant to know they were a couple. She didn’t want anyone thinking he was her son.

Halfway through dinner, her phone buzzed—Rick. “Shit, I have to take this. He’ll just call back,” she said, excusing herself to go outside with the phone. The evening temperature had dropped, and she felt exposed in her thin dress.

“Took you long enough,” Rick said when she finally picked up.

“Sorry, I was in a noisy room. I had to step outside. What’s up, what’s going on?”

“Nothing’s up. I’m just calling to check on you. Is that okay?”

He sounded hurt, which startled her. “Sure, Rick. It’s fine.”

“Are you and Dana having a good time?”

“We are,” she answered levelly.

“Where’s Dana now?”

“She’s in the bathroom. We’re out for dinner. What are you having for dinner?”

“Oh, I’ll just find some crap in the fridge. Don’t worry about me. I can take care of myself. I’m good at that.”

“What’s wrong, Rick? You sound a little...” She wanted to say “drunk.”

“A little what?”

“Just a little off.”

“I’m fine. I took a pill. I should be groovin’ in about... fifteen minutes.”

“That’s good. Be careful, though. You know what happens when you-”

“I’m sticking with beer tonight. I bought a case of Sam Summer on my way home from work. That was my little treat to myself.”

“And what about Scottie?”

“He’s in his room. Everyone’s here.”

There was an edge to his voice, but she felt reluctant to engage it. If he took a painkiller, he wouldn’t remember much of the conversation anyway.

“I should get back to my table,” she said, the wind in her hair as she looked to the door.

“Yeah. Don’t want anyone to spit in your wine.”

Hanging up, she stood for a minute with her guilt, resenting him. He had no right to make her feel guilty for anything. Robby Sims was the first good thing to happen to her in twenty-five years. She wasn’t going to let Rick spoil the weekend for her.

It was dark out when they got back to the house, and she took Robby’s arm on the front path. “God, it’s pitch black out here. You really know you’re in the country. I guess we should’ve left a light on,” she said, fumbling with the keys to open the door.

Robby found a wall switch in the dark foyer, and Kim blinked in the sudden light. “What time is it? I feel like it’s the middle of the night.”

“Just past nine,” he said, putting his arms around her.

“Good, it’s still early. We still have a lot of time. I keep feeling the minutes slip away.”

“Don’t,” he said, kissing her. “Just enjoy. We have all weekend.”

“Mm. All weekend and part of Monday. A miniature eternity.”

Stepping out of her shoes, she wandered ahead into the living room. It felt like *their* house. These were all their things—that blue and black throw blanket over the back of the sofa, and the worn wood mantel over the fieldstone hearth.

They made love twice that night; once in bed and a second time, spontaneously, in the back yard. She woke him at some unknown time—two, maybe three in the morning—and led him naked down the dark steps to the first floor.

“Where are we going?” he whispered when they got to the sliding glass doors to the porch. The woods past the back lawn looked dark and densely packed, crowded. The moon was off hiding somewhere, and the sky was as black as paint.

Easing the door open, she said, “Come with me,” and led him by the hand out to the deck, carefully closing the door behind them.

“Do you think anyone can see us?” he asked.

“No. We’re alone.”

Half-awake and drunk on each other, they walked to the edge of the deck and stood looking out over the black lawn. A warm breeze, possibly in advance of a late spring rain shower, blew across their bodies, and she tightened her stomach.

“It’s beautiful at night. Listen, how quiet,” she said.

He looked up at the sky, as if the source of the silence was there. “Peaceful,” he said, and she hummed in agreement.

“Come here,” she said, drifting with him down the steps to the lawn. The grass was cool with dew; she felt it on her bare feet.

“Makes me feel like dancing,” she said, passing ahead of him and spinning in a slow circle, two slow circles, her arms spread to take it all in. He watched her.

“I love you, Kim.”

She stopped spinning—she felt woozy, unsteady on her feet, but in a nice, intoxicated way. “I love you, Robby. I love you, I love you.”

He stepped closer, just out of her arms' reach, a naked man in the darkness. "I'll always love you."

"I know you will. I'll always love you, too."

She was filled with such feeling for him, it almost made her cry. She didn't care what happened next. She didn't need anything more after this. It was enough to fill her up for life.

She lay back in the grass, and he stood over her.

"It's nice down here," she said, and he lowered himself to his hands and knees. She pulled him down the rest of the way.

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I can be open, I can be honest. I can try. I worry about boring you. I've always been worried about that.

You can spend all day asking yourself unanswerable questions.

The Halloween decorations on our porch and front lawn look like a production concept halted by budget concerns. There's a nautical-looking chain that doesn't necessarily scan as scary. And a motion sensitive raven that caws and lolls its head. Halloween is mostly about being silly and laughing at our id. The dog likes to pee on all the decor when I take it out into the lawn. It knows it doesn't belong there.

Kids aren't supposed to fish in the pond across the street, but they do it anyway. They're also not supposed to swim in it. Sometimes I feel like we spend too much energy telling kids what not to do. There's a little girl who rides laps around the block all day. She lives on one of the side streets. She looks like she's trying to break some record, all clenched determination. And the kids from the high school run in bunches, training for a meet. Boys with their shirts off, boys with sweaty chests.

Three dogs, two black and one white, look happy to see each other. They bob and leap like popcorn, like wacky punchlines, zingers. In two months the ground will be covered with gray snow.

What do women listen to on their headphones when they jog? They're always listening to something. This one's long-limbed and seems to run in slow motion. Another woman, older, looks up at our house from the passenger seat of the car she's riding in. They're always looking at our house, taking mild interest as they wait for the light to change. There must be something to it.

If I were a woman, I'd be small and easily wounded. Cold hands, slender ankles. I'd be one of these women jogging back and forth past our house. I'd go out for two short runs a day instead of one long one. I'd let people go in front of me in line at the grocery store—if, say, they had a small basket of things and I had a whole cart. But then I'd only be shopping for myself. As a woman, I wouldn't know what to do with a man. I'd know how to attract one—that's relatively easy—but I wouldn't know how to keep him interested. Relationships might last a year; more likely a few months. And when he left me, I'd sit up in my dark bedroom and wonder what I did wrong.

It's so easy to imagine. It's pretty much how I am anyway.

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27.

Kim sits in a dark room by herself. The things you do when you can't sleep. But what's keeping her awake can't be wished away. It's just hers—a part of her now. And maybe that's okay. Maybe she likes it, or she'll learn to.

After all, she's been through this before. She knows what she can and can't do.

Three weeks later and back in Boston, Kim suggested going for a ride. It was a Friday afternoon, and he picked her up at home; Rick was at work and Scottie was partying with some friends in New York, so she was able to leave the house unobserved. Robby beamed when he saw her.

“Where do you want to go?” he asked as she buckled in.

“Just drive. Maybe there’s a park somewhere.”

To distract herself, she stared out the window at the houses in her neighborhood. Small ranches with vinyl siding, kids’ toys in the yard. She’d felt more connected to the neighborhood when Sheila and Scottie were younger. Then she’d get together with the other moms and watch the kids play in the park. White wine or Gin & Juice in a thermos. Of course she was much younger than the others, which felt awkward. Many were on their third or fourth child while she was on her first. Sheila didn’t like to play; she preferred sitting on the swings and staring at her sneakers as if she expected them to talk to her. Scottie was the rowdy one, but a good kid, kind to his peers. They were both good kids.

“Haven’t heard from you in a while,” she said.

“Sorry, I’ve been so busy with my classes. Summer school’s not as easy as people think. This is the first Friday in a month I haven’t been buried in homework.”

“Take this right,” she said, pointing at a traffic light up ahead. There was a town park two blocks down the road, the same one she used to bring the kids to when they were little.

They pulled into the park, and he stopped in the lot.

“Kim? What is it?” he asked.

She told him the truth. It wasn’t much to tell, but it seemed to take an hour. Robby looked confused, like he didn’t quite get it.

“When did it happen? Was it up in New Hampshire?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. It might have been the time before that, when we-”

“Oh.”

“Right. It’s my fault. We’d made love so many times before, and we’d never had a problem. I guess I thought we’d keep getting lucky. But I’m old enough, I should know better. I’m still the same stupid, irresponsible person I was when I was a kid.”

“Don’t say that. It’s my fault too. I knew what I was doing, and I could’ve been more careful. I just... in the moment... I felt so close to you, and I...”

“Did you *want* to get me pregnant, Robby?” He stared into his lap. “Look, it doesn’t matter now. But we need to decide what to do. I’m going to start showing in a few weeks.”

“Showing?”

“Yeah, *showing*, Robby. Don’t you know what that is? When a woman gets her baby bump. Rick’ll know it’s not his—we haven’t done it in five years.”

“So what do we do?”

She took a breath, fiddling with the strap of her seat belt. “I can probably get it taken care of. It might be hard without Rick finding out, and I don’t really want to say you’re the father. You never know what happens to that information. But I’ll figure it out. And then we should probably stop this—what we’ve been doing.”

Unbelievably, he started crying, and she touched his cheek. “Robby, why are you crying?”

Wiping his eyes, he said, “Because I don’t want to lose you.”

“I don’t want to lose you, either. But I don’t see where we go after this. I’m just not prepared to leave Rick right now. Maybe in a year, if I can swing it financially. But that’s a long way off. Maybe this is the reality check we both needed. It’s not healthy. It’s not right.”

“But I love you!” he stammered.

“And I love you too. Look, I can’t do this right now. Let’s go back. I need to be alone for a while. I can’t control myself when I’m around you.”

He drove slowly back to her house, his shoulders slumped behind the wheel, his eyes wet and vague. She wished she could be more of a reckless woman; then life would be easy. Instead all she seemed to do was make bad decisions and spend the rest of her life regretting them.

Robby turned onto her street, and she told him to pull over. “Right here, in front of this house.”

“But I thought you-”

“Just stop the car!”

He did, and for a while they sat with the car running in neutral. Robby didn’t know what to say to her; he didn’t have much experience with women.

“Turn the car off,” she said, and he obeyed.

“What’s happening?”

“Walk me the rest of the way. Just... stay a little. Rick won’t be home for another couple hours.”

They walked the half block from the corner to her house and went inside. The living room was dark and smelled like a damp carpet. Rick’s huge slippers by the sofa.

“Come in,” she said, leading him through the living room to the kitchen. Someone had left a cereal box on the table.

“No one ever puts anything away,” she said, returning the box to the cupboard. “Look at this. Half this stuff needs to be tossed. I just never get around to doing it. The amount of food we waste in this house. Look—four boxes of spaghetti, all of them half empty. It gets to where you can’t see what you’ve got, and then things go to waste. That can of chili’s been in there for two months. Someday I’m gonna go through the whole kitchen and throw everything out.” She closed the cupboard. “You want a beer or something? You can have one of Rick’s. Take a look, I’m sure the fridge is well stocked.”

He put his arms around her. “Kim.”

She laughed miserably, not meeting his eyes. “Look at me. What a mess.”

“You’re not a mess. You’re beautiful. I love you. Let’s have this baby—I mean it.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I’m totally serious. You think I’m not serious but I am.”

“How can you be serious? You’re practically still a kid yourself. You want to have a baby with me? I’ll be fifty in a few years. I’m almost a senior citizen.”

“Kim.”

“I’m not worth it. You don’t want to waste your life on me. I’m confused, Robby, that’s what it is. I think... I don’t know... maybe I’m having a nervous breakdown. Maybe this has been a long time in coming. I can’t tell right from wrong. I just feel like I’m living in my body and I’m along for the ride. There’s some psychological term for it. Take a beer, I’m serious. I want you to drink from my husband’s stash.”

“I’m fine. Maybe I should-”

“Maybe you should what? Maybe you should do this.” Pushing him against the wall, she kissed him hard, and his jaw weakened and his mouth opened—

—and now the kissing’s mutual but it still seems more like her than him. “Maybe you should screw me in my bed. For once, Robby. Not in a hotel room. Not in a stranger’s house. Mine.”

“But your husband.”

“Fuck him. Seriously, fuck him. I’m too tired and beat up to care anymore. I just need you and your arms around me, your hands on my body. I can’t look at that bed and think about anything other than being sad and alone.”

They scuttle down the short hall to the bedroom, and she leaves the door open because the room feels too small with the door closed, and she wants a large, open place to make love in, no walls and no doors, just undefined space.

They undress in a hurry. The need to rush doesn’t need to be spoken of—it’s everywhere, it’s a poised fist about to pound on the front door. She thinks: Maybe if we fuck one more time, I’ll see things clearly again. I’ll be able to proceed in a calm and measured fashion. But not now, because now she’s all over the place, she’s unstable. She can’t trust herself anymore, not to say or do anything right.

“Robby, baby? This time you can go hard on me. I can take it.”

She pulls him on top of her, and now he’s inside and they’re both already on the verge—he’s careful to go slow at first; it’s something they both have to wake up to anew each time. Each time’s the first time, the sudden but gradual dawning of connection and awareness, the other person’s full attention on your face and lips and what your eyes are doing, the way they widen and shut, the blossom of rose on your chest and how your arms shake, the wonder of sound in your throat, open and honest and thoughtless, this shared selfishness, a moment of giving in, of suppressed explosion, the future already in the past, your heart and his heart, or her heart and yours.

*Oh God, Robby!*

And then he’s gone, or he’s not inside her anymore—he’s lifted up and away, and there’s a new weight in the room, a new presence, rough and denim-clad, and it has knees and knuckles and feet in boots, and Robby’s up and away, he’s mid-air, he’s a flying white feather.

“Well, what do we have here? What the *fuck* do we have here?”

Kim shrieks—*Rick!*—and pulls her knees to her chest. Robby’s on his feet, his hands out, stop signs.

“Mr. Bench!”

“What the fuck we got goin’ on here? Looks like we got ourselves a party!”

Rick shoves Robby into the dresser, and the boy goes down. Something wood breaks.

“Don’t hurt him!” Kim shouts, looking wildly around for her clothes.

“You shut up, bitch. I’ll get to you later. Right now I got some shit to deal with.”

His raises his boot as if to stomp Robby in the chest, but Robby manages to scoot away and pull himself up to a stand.

“Mr. Bench, I can explain. We weren’t... I mean, I wasn’t-”

“You wasn’t what? You wasn’t just fucking my wife? That’s what you wasn’t doing? I oughtta kill you, boy!”

Getting to her knees, Kim rips off the top sheet to cover herself. “Rick, don’t! Just let him-”

He shoves her away and tells her again to shut up.

“Hey, don’t hit her!” Robby yells, getting some courage back.

Rick laughs. “You gonna tell *me* what to do? I don’t think that’s a good idea, boy. *Now* all this shit is coming together. All those late nights and long weekends? Now I get it. Aw, yeah.”

Before Robby can bend to pick up his clothes, Rick slams him hard into the wall. “You get the fuck out of my house right now or I’m gonna rip you in two.”

Begging, the wind knocked out of him, Robby says, “I am, I just-”

Kim wails from the bed, “At least let him get dressed, Rick!”

“NOW!” Rick shouts, ten years of back pain putting a strain in his voice. Robby’s scared, white-faced, afraid for his life—just a frightened animal surprised in the dark.

Rick chases him out of the bedroom and down the hall, Kim stepping behind with the sheet clutched to her chest.

“Rick, don’t! He can’t go out like that! It’s not fair!”

Robby trips in the living room, falls on all fours. Something else breaks, and he claws his way back to his feet, falling toward the open front door, the screen door shut, angry sunlight on the lawn.

“Get out before I kill you!” Rick shouts.

Bursting through the screen, Robby high-steps naked across the lawn, blind and mindless, just a blur of petrified motion, a huddled and weeping Kim watching from the front step as he lurches and spirals into the oncoming path of something that can’t stop, the driver not paying attention, already thinking about the next thing, what’s for dinner, what’s on the radio, and now: this.

28.

Night’s a fog, a brown ruin. She’s in a bed, not her own. She still has her body, her feet and hands. Headlights pulse against a sheer curtain, blue or maybe light blue. It’s two a.m., four a.m. It’s no-time. Then a man at a table pushes a piece of paper at her. Places to sign. Her body’s on loan, whored-out. She gives partial answers to explicit, fact finding questions. No one likes her.

And then it’s two days later, and another two days later. She eats an egg. She eats a piece of toast. She’s in another bed, still not her own. Her mother comes in to check on her. She feels her forehead, lowers the lights and backs away. The sound of someone running the dishes on another floor of the house.

“You look better this morning,” her mom said. Kim blinked in the hard sunlight coming through the drapes over the kitchen sink. She was sitting in the breakfast nook in her mother’s tiny house on the North Shore near Newburyport, wearing a robe she couldn’t remember putting on.

“I do?” her voice cracked.

“Much better. You’ve been sleeping so much. But I think we’re finally making progress. I made some scrambled eggs for you.” Her mom put the plate down in front of Kim. The eggs smelled good; Kim was almost ashamed to admit it, but the eggs smelled good.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice a weak monotone. The fork weighed heavy in her hand; she wasn’t sure how to hold it.

“Take it slow. I think maybe we’ll go for a walk today. It’s beautiful out—the perfect temperature. Today’s the first day all week it hasn’t rained.”

“What day is it?” Kim asked.

“Thursday. I’ve been so worried about you, but you’re finally looking like yourself again.”

Kim took a bite of eggs, held it in her mouth, and swallowed. Her stomach growled, taking in the food. “I hate myself,” she said, and her mom was quiet.

That afternoon they brought a couple of folding chairs to the beach down the road. It was warm out but the breeze coming off the ocean was cool.

“Sheila’s been staying at the house with Scottie. She’s a real help. And Rick’s living with his brother in Revere for the time being. He says he needs some time to himself,” her mom said, bringing her up to date.

“Has he been in touch?” Kim asked, pressing her bare feet into the sand.

“Only indirectly. Obviously you’ll want to get a lawyer. Sheila has some ideas.”

“I’m sure she does.” They were quiet as a pair of beachcombers passed by, taking their perfect, worry-free lives with them. Kim sighed. “Why am I so messed up? Why do I always do everything wrong? I don’t try to. I think I’m a reasonably okay person at any given moment. But what it all adds up to... is nothing.”

Her mom sat up straight. “Kimberli, it’s time to stop feeling sorry for yourself and move on with your life. This is a terrible tragedy, and you bear responsibility for a large part of it. But it’s not all your fault. Rick had a role in it too. And Robby himself, I’m sad to say. All of you.”

“But me most of all. I know it. I’m always the reason.”

Her mom settled back into her seat, and for a minute there was just the rising and falling roar of the surf. Kim felt like she was intruding on her widowed mother’s calm and organized life here on Plum Island.

“Dana wants to speak with you,” her mom said.

“How do you know?”

“She called me. We’ve all been involved in this, while you’ve been,” she hesitated, “away.”

Kim could feel the old nausea return, the one she'd been fighting off for days. "I don't think I can do that."

"Kimberli, you have to. You owe her that much."

"What would talking do? It'd just make everything worse. I'd be too embarrassed to face her."

"So be embarrassed. She's asked twice. I think it really matters to her, and it should matter to you, too. The woman has lost her son, her only child. And you... you were important to him. That means something, Kim. Even if what you did together was wrong. You were important to Robby, and now you're even more important to his mother. You're a link. You're all she has left."

Dana was already sitting with her wine when Kim arrived, the bar mercifully empty at four in the afternoon. Seeing a new customer, the waiter veered over to take Kim's order.

"Just a club soda, please. With lime," she added in a soft, humble voice.

"Not drinking?" Dana asked, and Kim shook her head. Dana looked tired and thin, and she'd fallen behind on getting her hair colored; shafts of gray showed at the roots. "I've probably been drinking too much. It's something to get through the day."

They waited in silence for the waiter to return with Kim's club soda and a thin red straw. Neither knew what to say, where to begin.

"How long has this been going on?" Dana finally managed.

"Not long. A few months."

Dana nodded slowly. "So you and Robby were... together... when you and Rick came over for dinner?"

"Yes," Kim whispered. *Not just together—we made love in Robby's bedroom while you and Jim and Rick were downstairs.*

Dana expelled a breath. "Oh, Kim. How could you?"

"I know. I'm sorry."

"With my son? I mean, I knew you and Rick were fighting, and I knew you were seeing someone, but I never could've imagined."

“Would it help if I said I really loved him?”

Dana’s eyes flared, and Kim braced herself. But the anger quickly passed. “Maybe. A little.” Her hand trembled as she gulped her wine. “Even if you’d just told me.”

“You wouldn’t have been upset?”

“Yes, I would’ve been *upset*. But you would’ve been honest. You know what the worst of it is? You used me. Here I let you borrow my sister’s house, thinking I was doing you this big favor. I even let you tell Rick we were in New Hampshire together, having a ‘girls getaway.’ All so you could be alone with my son.”

The two women fell silent again. Coming here was a mistake, though perhaps unavoidable. If Dana wanted to throw darts at her for an hour, that was probably her right.

“How’s Jim?” Kim asked finally.

Dana brought a Kleenex out from her purse. “He’s devastated. I’m really worried about him. Last night he told me he felt his life was over. He and Robby were so close. And he’s furious at you. He didn’t even want me coming here.”

Bowing her head, Kim sobbed once into her hand. No tears came, only an ache in her throat.

“Don’t you have anything more to say? Just ‘sorry’?”

Kim took a moment to compose herself. “Dana, for as long as I live, I will never stop regretting this. I know it’s just words. I know I can’t do anything to help you and Jim. All I can do is say it, and say it again, how deeply sorry I am.”

Dana looked unmoved. This was Kim’s life now, an endless series of apologies falling on deaf ears.

Eyeing Kim’s club soda, Dana asked, “Sworn off booze?”

Kim said nothing, just folded her hands in her lap. A beat, then a gasp.

“Oh my God. Jesus, Kim. How far along?”

“Eight weeks, I think. Still early.”

“And it’s...?” Dana couldn’t say it, but Kim nodded. *Yes, it’s his*. “Have you seen a doctor?”

“Not yet. I’ve been putting it off, and I... I still don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m still working it out. I’m forty-three years old. I’m too old to be doing this all over again... and Rick’s lawyers will have a field day if they find out. I’m all alone, Dana. I don’t even know if I’ll have a place to live when this is all over. I can’t deal with all that stress and also...” Her will finally broke, and she burst into tears. “...have a baby.”

Dana just sat and let her cry. This was all Kim got from people these days, silence and a lack of compassion.

“Did Robby know?”

Kim nodded. “I told him when I was sure.”

“And what did he say?”

“He was shocked at first. I think he was scared. But then... I don’t know. He changed his mind.”

“He wanted you to have it,” Dana said—a statement, not a question.

“Yes, he did.”

Dana watched, some inscrutable look of curiosity on her face; then she reached into her purse and handed Kim a fresh Kleenex.

*Why do women always keep so much Kleenex in their purses? Surely there can’t be that many reasons to cry.*

“Thank you,” Kim said, and Dana was quiet. “Sometimes I wish I’d never been born. What good have I ever brought to the world? I’ve *tried*. But then I just wind up fucking everything up. It’s because I *want* too much. I want people to like me, and I try to do the right things but... I have nothing to give. Nothing real. Nothing that really matters.”

Dana waved this away. “Kim, stop. We need to focus on what’s important right now. This isn’t just about you. It’s not even just about Robby. This is serious.”

“I know it’s serious.”

“So let’s have a serious conversation about it. I need to understand what you’re telling me. You’re saying you’re two months pregnant.”

“Maybe longer. Maybe nine, ten weeks.”

“And you’re sure about that?”

“I’m sure.”

“And you know Robby’s the father?”

Mild resentment bloomed at this, but Kim let it go. “I know.”

Dana leaned forward in her seat. “Listen, you need to see a doctor right away. Obviously not today, but tomorrow if possible. You need to get these things nailed down.”

“You’re right, I know. I will.”

“And then you need to make a decision... because Kim? That’s my grandchild.” Dana’s voice broke. “I never thought I’d say this to another woman, but if you’re healthy enough and you’ve been to see the doctor and the doctor tells you there aren’t any risks—I mean real risks, not just the usual ones—you *need* to have this baby, Kim. You need to. I mean, obviously it’s your body and it’s your choice—but think about what you’d be doing. Think about what you’ve already done.”

She didn’t say “You owe me,” but Kim heard it loud and clear.

Out in the parking lot, the two women lingered by their cars. Dana seemed reluctant to leave. “You know, I almost wouldn’t have minded. If I’d known, if you’d told me in time. Things happen, don’t they? People fall in love. And Robby was a grown adult, in charge of making his own decisions. That’s not the part that bothers me.”

“What’s the part that bothers you?” Kim asks, not sure she wanted to know.

Dana grimaced, a precursor to crying. “That he’s not here.”

Kim held her, and it felt good for both of them. “I miss him too,” she said.

Later in the car, driving back to her mother’s house, she considered turning around and looking in on Sheila and Scottie, but she knew they probably wouldn’t want to see her. Scottie might, but she didn’t want to deal with Sheila’s wrath right now. Sheila lived in a perfect world where strong women always made the right decisions, and life rewarded them with success.

It wasn’t a world Kim knew.

These are the places we come from. We once called them home, or maybe we still do. Some of us struggle to escape. We have an attitude about our point of origin. Our origin story. We think we're better than everyone else.

Men and women in houses, men and women living together or next to one another. We see our neighbors' cars parked in their driveways. Everyone's home. There's no reason to go out.

A house is a stack of rooms. Things sitting on top of other things. We're reluctant to identify one person as male and the other as female. It feels like too much of a commitment.

Someone smiles at the sexless you.

So what happens is this:

The next day Kim goes to the doctor. And yes, she's nine weeks pregnant. There are hard questions, but Kim's honest: she's carrying a dead man's child. And she wants it, this baby she and Robby made together. She wants to have it and raise it on her own, to do it right this time. And when the child's old enough to ask, she'll tell it the truth. She'll answer proudly. She's not ashamed of herself anymore. There's no reason to be ashamed. Other people should be ashamed—the whole world should be ashamed. Not her.

Later that year Kim gives birth to a healthy baby girl, whom she names Bronwyn, or Bronnie. She's gone back to using her unmarried name, Wardowski, which sounds better with Bronnie anyway. She and Rick are divorced; she wants nothing from him, nor does she get it. She's content to leave the past firmly in the past, and all its cast of characters.

In time she's able to go back to work; when Bronnie's one, Kim finds a job at another jewelry store up the coast, and after five months she's worked herself up to full-time. By the end of the year she'll be a manager and earning more than she ever did when she was still with Rick. During the day she leaves Bronnie with her mother, who adores her. Bronnie's a real North Shore girl, the sound of the surf always in her ears.

Rick dies of a heart attack a year after Robby. Kim goes to the funeral but doesn't sit with her kids; it's the first she's seen either of them since the divorce. Sheila's always been weirdly loyal to her father; they'll never see eye to eye.

Kim's mother dies when Bronnie is eight and Kim is fifty-two. They're still living in the house on Plum Island, and now it belongs to Kim. Kim shifts her work schedule around Bronnie's various after school activities, most of which involve sports. It's hard but not impossible. Kim finds she likes keeping busy. Unlike Kim when she was growing up, Bronnie's not a problem child. She's polite and responsible and does well in school; math and science are her favorite subjects, and she has an interest in creative writing that keeps her dreaming on the page for hours.

At night, Kim lies in bed with the window open to the salty ocean breeze and thinks about Robby. He would've been thirty by now. No doubt a university professor. With the advance of time, the age difference wouldn't matter as much. They'd both be on either end of middle age, neither of them young anymore, neither of them old. Just people, partners, a man and a woman coexisting together, doing their shared best.

No more dating for Kim. Maybe when Bronnie's grown and off to college. Kim's come to appreciate being alone, the absence of drama that men often bring. No one's called her a nasty name in years.

Bronnie's ten when she asks about her father. She's asked about him before, of course, but for the first time it feels like a real question. In the past she's put her father in the same category as Santa Claus—a half-believed myth, fun to dream about. But now she realizes he must've been an actual person at some point.

"He was smart, like you. And kind and curious about the world, just like you," Kim says. They're sitting on the same patch of beach where she and her mom used to stare at the waves.

"How did he die?" Bronnie asks, drawing in the sand with a stick.

Kim needs to be careful. It's not that she's embarrassed, but she doesn't want to speak ill of the dead. Rick hasn't been around to defend himself in a long time.

"It was an accident. He was hit by a car. This was before you were born. Such a good, gentle person. He would've loved you. He would've loved all this."

Crossing her legs, Bronnie knocks the sand from her bare right foot. It's summer, and her feet are brown from the sun.

“Sometimes I think I can hear his voice. It’s not like he’s talking to me, it’s more like he’s on the phone in the other room. What was his voice like?”

Kim squints. “God, Bronnie, it’s been a long time... soft but strong. Expressive. He would’ve been a good teacher. He had one of those voices that was easy to listen to. Know what I mean?”

“Mr. Taylor’s voice is like that,” Bronnie says; Mr. Taylor was her English teacher last year. “Tell me a funny story about you and Dad.”

“A funny story?”

“Yeah! Something funny must’ve happened.”

Kim smiles, but it doesn’t last. She wants to say, *Not really, hon. Nothing funny ever did.*

Some mornings she wakes up feeling old. It takes more work to keep her body in shape. Fortunately there’s the beach to run on, and long walks around the island with or without Bronnie, depending on her homework. When Bronnie comes along, they talk about her social group at school; a nice bunch of girls, not the burnouts Kim used to hang out with. When Kim’s alone, she tries keeping her mind still, though the silence is tempting. You can spend the rest of your life dwelling on how great the world used to be when you were younger.

Dana comes up one weekend when Bronnie’s thirteen to spend the afternoon with her granddaughter. She does this about once a month; she’ll take her out to lunch and buy her a book at Jabberwocky Bookshop in the Tannery. Sometimes Kim tags along, sometimes she just lets Dana and Bronnie have some alone time together.

Today the three of them decide to drive out to the bird sanctuary on the far side of the island. In a few weeks it’ll be too hot, the air over the marsh cloudy with biting insects. Today it’s perfect, and not too many tourists.

Bronnie walks ahead on the trail as Kim and Dana keep to a slower pace. Dana’s in her sixties now, a widow. Jim’s been gone ten years; technically a fast-metastasizing cancer of the bladder, though Dana still claims the life ran out of him the day Robby died.

“God, she’s getting to be so tall,” Dana says as Bronnie rounds a corner of the trail, slipping briefly out of view. “If she’s like Robby, she’ll sprout up early. Robby was already close to six feet in ninth grade. Has the interest in boys started?”

“Not really, but I’m dreading the day. I just want to hold onto *this* forever—this moment, this age,” Kim says.

“It slips away.”

“It does slip away.”

Dana slides her arm around her friend. “You’ve done a good job with her, Kim. And I know it’s been hard.”

“Oh, it hasn’t been so bad. I’m just trying to make up for…” She takes a breath.

“For what?”

“Mistakes made. I don’t mean the obvious. I was a bad kid growing up. Gave my parents hell. So I’m just trying to be patient and…” She slowly slices the air with her hand. “…keep an even keel.”

They catch up to Bronnie, who’s found the remains of some sort of nest in the reeds.

“What used to live here?” she asks.

“I don’t know, but look at all the cigarettes,” Kim says, pointing out one.

“Good way to start a brush fire,” Dana agrees.

Bronnie’s more interested in the nest, and she nudges it with the toe of her Keds.

“Careful,” Kim says, “something might still live in there.”

“Like what, a snake?” Bronnie asks.

“Yeah, maybe. Or a beaver or a… wild duck.”

The girl makes a face, though she’s amused. “A wild duck?”

“Yeah! You know, a duck that lives in the wild.”

“Don’t all ducks live in the wild?”

“Yeah, but there’s a certain kind of duck called a ‘wild duck.’ I don’t know, you’re asking the wrong person.”

Bronnie smiles at her grandma. “Mom’s crazy,” she says, and they all laugh.

When they get back to the house, Bronnie goes off to spend some time online with her friends, and Dana and Kim have a drink on the warped wood deck behind the house. Kim’s been thinking about building an outdoor hot tub, but she doesn’t have the money to run the plumbing right now. At Bronnie’s age, all of Kim’s spare money goes to saving for college.

Dana asks about Scottie and Sheila, though she sees them both once a year when the families get together for the holidays.

“Scott’s wife is having another baby,” Kim says, and Dana gives a little coo of pleasure. “Yeah, *right*—though three seems like a lot.”

“You had three,” Dana points out.

“True. But Scottie and Sheila always felt like a separate thing to me. When I think about it, it’s like my life’s been split in half. There was Scottie and Sheila... and Rick.” She sighs, then brightens. “And then *now*. And it feels like it’s always been now.”

Dana raises her glass. “Here’s to now.”

It doesn’t take much to convince Dana to stay for dinner. They have some cheeses in the fridge, and a nice loaf of French bread from Figtree in town. Kim doesn’t need to be at work until one, so she can afford to stay up.

“Bronnie, are you looking forward to school next year?” Dana asks. They’ve come inside; the island gets buggy around dusk.

“I don’t want to think about it yet. It’s still only July,” Bronnie says. She knows her father was Dana’s son. None of it’s weird to her; it’s the only truth she’s ever known.

“I think she’s looking forward to her English class—aren’t you, Bron? We’ve heard some good things about the eighth grade teacher,” Kim says.

“Oo, what are you going to be reading?” Dana asks.

Kim answers for her. “I think next year’s when they do *To Kill a Mockingbird*. They really push the kids at that school. We read that book in eleventh grade.”

“Whatever it is, I’m sure you’ll do well. You’re a smart kid—not like your mother,” Dana jokes, and Kim pretends to look shocked.

“School was not a priority, I admit.” Kim ruffles her daughter’s hair. “So Bronwyn can learn from my mistakes.”

Dana slices herself a piece of cheese and lays it on a cracker. “Have you started to think about what you want to do when you grow up?”

“I want to be a writer,” Bronnie answers immediately, which surprises Kim.

“News to me,” she says.

“Not like a *story* writer. I want to write about science and nature.”

“Like a science writer.” Dana squints, trying to picture it.

“I want to write about all the interesting plants that grow around here, and what gets washed up with the tide. I think I’ll write a book about seashells.”

“A guidebook?”

“No, not a guidebook. More like a real book people can read because it’s interesting, not just skip around when they want to look something up.”

Dana smiles at Kim. “Sounds like she’s got it all worked out.”

“Sure does. Well, you’ll have to go to college—that’s the first hurdle. So you better work hard on that field hockey scholarship. That’s one thing I spared my parents, the cost of college.”

Kim refills her glass and Dana’s.

“No more,” Dana says, weakly putting up her hand.

“Just a half glass. You can stay here, you know. I can sleep on the sofa. Or you can sleep with Bronnie. Bronnie, you don’t mind sharing with Grandma tonight?”

“I don’t mind, Grandma,” Bronnie says.

“I’m not kicking anyone out of their bed. Just this last one, and then I’ve got an hour drive home.”

Dana nurses her drink as dusk deepens to purple and then black. Kim gets quiet after the third drink, introspective. She feels like she’s been drinking this same cheap red wine her whole life.

The island settles at night. Kim once saw a couple on the beach having sex under a blanket, and she thought: *How nice.*

You have to like it when people do things. No one does anything anymore.

Bronnie and Kim wave at Dana from the road as she drives back toward the causeway to the mainland. As always, there’s the kettle drum bellow of the surf, and night insects.

“My girl,” Kim says, putting her arm around Bronnie. The girl rests her head on her mother’s shoulder, and the scene fades.

One person stays and the other goes. There's a separation in the house. A girl sleeps with her mouth open in the lower half of a bunk bed. The upper bed is for toys and stuffed animals. The girl is the product of will and intention. Two people labored hard to make her happen, and now she's a person who doesn't put her socks away.

People do nasty things with their bodies. They masturbate at four in the afternoon. The recycler by the two car garage is full of bottles. Expensive IPAs, IPAs that come four to a pack but cost the same as a typical six-pack.

Shoes in the living room, shoes in the entry way. Nothing's ever where it belongs. There's a man's tie draped over the back of a dining chair. These are people who breathe each other's air, share the same space. Someone has a penis, though we don't talk about that.

Nights years ago we stayed on the deck until two a.m. and drank and conversed and enjoyed the warm night air on our bare toes. One night a coyote came within sight of the back yard, then thought the better of it. Hunched animals with jewel black eyes, night creatures spending their lives in edgy fear. Here in the tamed wilds of suburbia!

Husbands and wives come home to each other. They rub each other's shoulders and feet (or pretend the other person doesn't exist).

Oh! Remember Liz?

31.

Just after lunch, Liz decided to call her husband.

"I don't know why I'm in such a rainy day mood. It's not even raining," she said, looking out the window at her car next to the superintendent's. "It's nice to hear your voice. I've been talking numbers and statistics all morning. Next week's going to be hell, and the week after that. Let's take a trip when this is all over. Maybe leave the boys off with my mother."

"You think? The boys can probably handle themselves by now," Ken said.

“Davis can, Taylor can’t. Even Davis—he’d probably try to sneak Clara over, and I don’t think I’m ready for that.”

“I guess we could send them down to your mom. She can stuff ’em full of junk food.”

“Sounds good. Because I need some time alone with my husband. I miss you.” In a lower voice: “I miss you inside me. I know we get so tired at night.” She left the thought hanging; she hadn’t meant to get into it over the phone.

“You don’t get tired. I get tired. We need to get a new mattress—I know we keep talking about it. But my fuckin’ back.” Something mechanical groaned in the background. “Liz, I gotta go. The mixer truck just showed up.”

“Yeah, I should get back to work too.”

They hung up, and Liz swiveled around to look out the window at the parking lot: typical public high school, a big brick and glass box surrounded by acres of pavement. Maybe not exactly where she’d pictured working twenty-five years ago, but not a bad gig. It was clear from the time she was in college that she’d wind up succeeding at something. Some women were just born with a certain competence; things might fall apart around them, but they somehow managed to stay steady on their feet.

Women in makeup, women in suits. Life as a presentation. You can smile and do your best. Accept constructive criticism. Be steady and reliable. Do the shopping for your family. Accept blame, accept burdens. Take on additional work. Stay late. Speak carefully and keep your impulses under control.

Never surprise anyone.

Liz at the grocery store: a woman just coming off work. You can see fatigue in her shoulders and under her eyes. There’s a butcher’s special on pork chops, but the boys won’t want pork; they like red meat, bloody on the plate.

Liz at the gas pump: a tired woman leaning up against her car, slow-moving at day’s end. Her calves ache, and she absently slips one foot in and out of her high heel as the counter on the pump climbs. She always tries to guess the total; one time she got it right within fourteen cents and it made her day.

Liz in the bath: knee bent in foamy milky water. Husband and teenage sons not due home for an hour. An octagonal window over the deep tub—Ken’s custom redesign. Helps to have a handy husband. Catalogs and a glass of white wine on the sill.

Liz blinked and saw her office, her forearms flat on her desk. She wondered: *Could it still be the same day?* The superintendent, Dan Wheatly, was leaning in from the hallway, dressed in his overcoat.

“I’m going to pop over to the Lamb to see how the roof repairs are coming along. Wanna come?” he asked. The Lamb was one of the district’s three elementary schools, about a mile down the road.

“I’m good. I think I’ll just finish drafting out this email to Wayne Peters. He’s been bugging me about next month’s PD all week.”

Dan smiled wryly, some shared joke between them. “You know Wayne. Have a nice weekend, then. Plans?”

Liz answered something about Ken and the kids, and it was enough to satisfy him. “No more staying past five, you hear? Makes the rest of us look bad.”

“I’ll try.” Liz smiled, turning back to her computer, and a minute later Dan appeared at the window, tossing his briefcase into the back of his car. The school day was almost over. A line of buses queued in the pick-up lane, waiting to transport eight hundred high school students back home.

Liz spent an hour finishing her email to Wayne Peters, the district’s Digital Learning Director, then stood to stretch her legs. Wandering out into the hall, she saw that most of the office had already gone home for the weekend. Only the Head of Payroll, who always worked late, was still at his desk. With a weary sigh, Liz went back into her office for her briefcase and purse and cut out the side door to her car.

Liz at a red light: her eyes naturally fall to her hands on the steering wheel. Ken gave her wedding ring an upgrade last year for Christmas—she’s almost embarrassed to wear it, it’s so over-the-top. She doesn’t like what age is doing to her hands. They used to be so soft and smooth, and now they’re bony and dry. Then the light’s green and she goes.

Liz on a murder rampage: dressed in a camo jumpsuit and a purple beret. Pops out of the back of a jeep, screaming slogans. Another life. Bullets fly and the bodies go down. Liz laughing, her eyes fierce with hate. The killing is quick and indiscriminate. Blood smeared across the side of a white panel van. No consequence, no conclusion, just an open moment of life.

“Sorry, the ATM’s out of order. Ran out of cash about an hour ago. I can take you at the counter if you’d like,” said the man at the bank in the grocery store. Five other customers were already in line, checkbooks and receipts in hand.

“That’s okay, I’ll just charge it,” Liz said, taking a cart and pushing it back toward the produce section. She used to like grocery shopping, back when everything was simpler and less fraught with challenges. Now she just wanted to get it over with. Something quick and easy, something pre-made. Maybe the gang would go for frozen pizza.

“Does everyone have this problem?” she asked aloud. Realizing the woman next to her in the produce aisle couldn’t read her mind, she said, “What to make for dinner.”

“I know *that’s* right,” the woman said.

Brandishing a purply head of lettuce—like the object in an object lesson—Liz said, “How much of our lives do we spend in the grocery store? And we go into the store simply intending to buy dinner for our family, and we wind up spending two hundred dollars. And everything’s so bruised and banged up. Look at *that*, and look at *that*. I mean, I know people are working hard, and times are difficult. We have to be patient with each other. But I just wish I didn’t have to do this *literally* every night after work. And I’m not one of those people who can shop for the entire week. I’m sorry, I just can’t do it. Some women are great at it—they know what to do with leftovers. They can make three meals out of one. I need to focus: one dinner at a time. And then I keep worrying I’m making the same thing over and over again. The kids don’t complain. Sometimes I think they don’t even notice. It’s all just food to them.”

Or maybe she just said that to herself. Liz always had this quaking, quivering conversation going on in the back of her throat.

Parsley, Stove Top stuffing. She wondered what it would cost to buy everything in the store. A million dollars? Maybe more than that.

Land O’Lakes. Hot Wheels.

“Why is this making me horny?” she asked the empty aisle.

Liz on a stripper pole: a recurring fantasy. She wished there were things she could do once and only once and then walk away from them and never have them come back to haunt her. She couldn’t do those things now, not anymore, maybe not ever. Everyone wants to be physically admired, to be lusted over. *Liz in a slingshot bikini and six inch stiletto pumps*. A flash of nipple, and the guys go wild.

“I honestly can’t remember a single thing I bought,” she said to the windshield as she pulled out of the grocery store parking lot. *Oh, right. Salmon croquettes*.

The house was dark when she got home, and she unloaded the groceries and popped upstairs for a bath. Ken and the boys wouldn’t be home until after six; Davis had an away game and Taylor was at a friend’s house. Ken was usually pretty good at doing his share of pick-ups and drop-offs. He wasn’t one of those husbands who expected his wife to do everything.

Letting the water run, she padded out in stocking feet to pull some comfortable clothes from the walk-in closet. She loved the cedar smell of her closet, the abundance of space, the built-in rack for her shoes. Ken had done a good job designing it.

The bathwater was too hot when she came back, so she let the cold water run while she undressed and threw her work clothes in the dry cleaning bag. Naked in the spacious bathroom, she extended her right leg to do a pirouette. She’d taken ballet for a few years in middle and high school, and it only ever still came out when she was naked and waiting for the bath to fill.

“Shit,” she said, realizing she’d forgotten to bring up a glass of wine. Peering through the window over the bath, she saw the empty driveway and wondered if she could get away with running downstairs without having to throw on a robe. Ken usually didn’t come home early if he had to pick up the boys.

Feeling a little thrill in her chest, she creaked down the stairs without hurrying too much and poured herself a glass of chardonnay in the kitchen. She found she liked being naked like this, in a random room on the first floor. It made her look at the world differently, or at least the kitchen. She’d once read an article about a naked yoga class in the Boston area, and it sounded interesting. But that was something else she couldn’t get away with doing.

Forty-three years old. Dr. Elizabeth Keller, EdD. Not on your life.

“Jackson Browne,” she said, then couldn’t remember why she’d said it.

Oh. To play some music in the tub.

Slinking back upstairs, she walked down the hall once, then came back and tried it again. She peered into Davis’ room, Taylor’s room, the boys’ bathroom. She went into her office and touched her desk. Then she walked back to the master suite and took her bath.

Sharper Image. Athleta. Jackson Browne had one song her father always liked to listen to, “Lawyers in Love.” Such an odd topic for a song. But maybe the actual song was about something else. Sometimes the title’s just a title.

Raising a leg, she pointed her toes and watched the bubble bath drip from her heels. Someone watching through the window from outside would see a woman’s bare foot pointing straight up, steam rising from it.

But you’d need binoculars.

“So many great songs,” she cooed to herself, laying all the way back in the bath, keeping her long hair out of the water. Her father loved all that singer/songwriter music from the Seventies and Eighties. Jackson Browne, James Taylor, Joni Mitchell. Jackson Browne had the unfortunate luck of bland, undistinguished looks—he really didn’t look like anything. You had to look like James Taylor—you had to have a face to remember. (Though at some point James Taylor morphed into an entirely different person. The old James Taylor bore no resemblance whatsoever to the younger one.)

“James,” she whispered, closing her eyes to the music, trying out other men’s names: “Robert. Daniel. Philip. William. Oh, William!” In her closed-eyes fantasies, she preferred calling men by their full, formal names. More intimate like that, more romantic.

Though she never called Ken “Kenneth” in bed. It was too hard to say in the heat of the moment.

Opening her eyes, she realized she must’ve nodded off. Jackson Browne was still playing on her phone, but a different song, one she’d never heard before. She really only knew two or three songs by Jackson Browne. Just the big hits, the singles.

“Liz?” Ken’s voice came up from the first floor.

“I’m in the bath! I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

Pulling the drain, she carefully eased out of the tub and patted herself dry with a towel. The tips of her hair had gotten wet, but just the tips. Throwing on jeans and a thin cotton sweater, she went downstairs to find Ken standing with a beer in the kitchen. The boys had already gone down to play video games in the basement.

She went up on tiptoes to kiss him. “Happy Friday,” she said.

He smiled, putting his hand on her butt. “You smell nice.”

“I just got out of the tub. I bought some salmon croquettes, if that’s okay.”

“I think the boys are jonesing for pizza. Why don’t we save the—what are they?”

“Salmon croquettes.”

“-for tomorrow and we’ll order in tonight.” Opening the door to the basement, he called down, “Davey, Taylor! Come up and say hello to your mother.” A voice answered, and he said, louder, “Now! Come on!”

“It’s okay if they’re busy with their game,” Liz said, but the boys appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Hi, Ma,” they said, more or less at the same time, and she kissed them both.

“How was school?” she asked.

“Sucked,” Davis said, and Ken yelled, “Davey!”

The boy clarified, “I did poorly on a test.”

“Oh? In what class?” she asked.

“In the wonderful educational experience known as English Language Arts,” he said in the faux-formal voice he used when he thought he was being funny. “But everyone did bad on it. Mr. James’ said he might not even count it. So, yeah—that.”

Liz turned to her younger son, hoping for better news. “And what about you?”

“Lunch was awesome, Ma,” the boy said.

“And?”

“And gym. Great gym class.”

“Got a couple of smart alecs here tonight,” Ken said, though amused. Ken was just like them when he was their age. Never took anything seriously.

The boys went back downstairs, and Liz refilled her wine. “I’ll call for the pizza soon. Let’s just sit for a minute. I feel like I’m still in motion, though I don’t know why—I’ve been home for an hour.”

They sat at the dining table, where she’d set the mail. “You’ve got paint on your face,” she said.

“Primer, actually. Yeah—probably. I’ll take a shower. I hate doing basements, particularly this time of year.” He didn’t explain why, but she took his word for it. Ken knew his business.

Picking up her phone, she asked, “Are we just going to do Armando’s?”

“If they deliver. I’m done driving.”

She found the menu online, and they called for the pizza. Liz put her feet in his lap. “This okay?”

“Sure, get comfortable. I’ll tell you, I earned this weekend.” He began to rub her feet with his thumbs, and she groaned appreciatively.

“That feels good.”

“Yeah? What about this?” Raising her right foot, he placed a warm kiss on her toes.

She laughed and squirmed away. “Don’t. The kids’ll come up,” she said, adding, “You can do that later.”

Taking her foot back, he resumed his rubbing. “Yeah, I’ll do that later. I’ll do a few things later.”

Liz just smiled. She knew he was eager to make up for conking out in the basement last night. These days there were more disappointments than successes, but that was okay. Just part of getting older.

“How’s that sound?” he asks, as if he needed some verbal confirmation or encouragement.

She shrugged playfully. “I’ll be there.”

His hands worked up to her ankles, her calves. “Because you really got me going over the phone today.”

“I did? What did I say?”

“You know what you said. So get ready. I’m gonna make you scream tonight.”

She laughed at his bluster. “Oh, you’re not going to make me scream. You can make me scream when the boys aren’t home.”

“They’ll be downstairs.”

“They’ll still hear. And I don’t want them staying up until past midnight tonight, even though it’s the weekend. Taylor hasn’t been getting enough sleep. Neither of them have.”

On cue, the boys popped out of the basement, Davis first followed by his younger brother. “Is the pizza here?” Davis asked.

“We just called for it. Come sit with us. I haven’t seen either of you all day,” Liz said.

Davis plunked down next to her while Taylor went to the refrigerator. “Mom, Dad said I can go up to New Hampshire with Clara’s family next weekend. They’ve got a place on Squam Lake.”

Catching a look from Liz, Ken said, “I didn’t say definitely. I said we’d discuss it.”

Peering into the fridge, Taylor said, “Don’t let him go, Ma. You know he and Clara are just going to have sex all weekend.”

“Screw you, ass-wad!” Davis snarled, and Ken barked, “Davey! None of that language, or no one’s going anywhere.”

“I assume Clara’s parents will be there,” Liz said.

“Yeah, and her brother. I’m really going because of her brother. We’re friends, too.”

“Yeah, right. No one believes that, dude,” Taylor said.

Before Davis could yell at him, Liz said, “Let’s not fight about it. Taylor, what are you looking for?”

“Where’s the Sprite?”

“Water for now. You can have Sprite with dinner. Come and join us.”

Taylor slumped against the fridge to close it, then dragged his feet to the table. “Don’t look too excited,” Liz said, and the boy smiled.

“Mom, I just decided this afternoon what I want to do when I grow up,” Davis said.

“Oh? Am I going to like this?”

“Seriously. I want to go into Sports Medicine. You can really make a lot of money at it. I could get a job working for the Patriots.”

“I think you’d have to work up to that, champ,” Ken said.

“What’s Sports Medicine, anyway? Isn’t it just giving people vitamin shots on the sidelines?” Taylor asked.

“It’s a lot more than that. It’s a whole major in college. You can study it at BU. That’s where I want to go now,” Davis said.

Liz weighed this; it was just nice to hear Davis express an interest in something practical. “BU’s a good school. We’ll look into it.”

“Clara’s thinking of going to BU, too,” Davis said.

Taylor laughed. “Ah, that’s the real reason he wants to go.”

“No, it *isn’t*. I didn’t even know she was applying until today.”

“Whatever the reason is, it’s good to have a goal in life. I’m proud of you for thinking proactively, Davis. Good job.”

Not wanting his brother to get all of the attention, Taylor said, “Hey, guess what I did today, Ma?”

“You mean besides pick your nose?” Davis said, and Taylor drilled on.

“I broke up a fight in the cafeteria. You know how you’re always saying to be the peacemaker? So Steve Marley and this other kid were getting into a fight, and I stepped in and broke it up.”

“Just so you know, Ma, absolutely none of this happened,” Davis said.

“How would you know? You don’t even eat during second lunch.” Taylor turned back to Liz. “I heard them yelling across the room, and I walked over and got right between them. All the kids saw it. Mr. Johnson saw it too. He was like, ‘Good job diffusing the conflict, Keller.’”

Liz agreed with Davis, the story did sound slightly made up, but she let Taylor have it. “That was very brave of you, Taylor. It takes courage to stand up to your peers.” She reached for both of her sons’ hands. “My boys did well today.”

Ken went up to take a shower, and minutes later the pizza arrived. Davis and Taylor helped Liz set out the plates. They were good boys, well-trained if rambunctious. Liz had always wanted sons, not a daughter. Somehow it felt like more of an accomplishment, raising all that height and muscle and wild masculine energy.

After dinner the boys went back to their games, and Ken and Liz sat in the living room with their drinks. She wished it was later than eight-thirty; she wanted to go up to bed now. In two hours neither of them would have the energy for sex.

Snuggling against Ken, Liz asked, “So... what do you think about next weekend?”

“Mm? Oh—Davey going up with Clara? I guess it’s okay. Rob and Diane’ll be there. I’m sure they won’t let things get out of hand.”

“True. Other parents just seem so chill and permissive compared to us. Though I suppose we’d let Clara go up with us.”

“If we had a place in New Hampshire.”

“Which we don’t.” Smiling, she kissed him. “Not that I’m jealous. I’m just scared of Davis getting too serious with a girl while he’s still in high school. And I *know*—don’t say it—I know I’m being hypocritical.”

He laughed. “You sure are.”

“We got lucky. Most high school relationships don’t end up like ours.”

“Clara’s a good kid.”

“Oh, she’s a doll. I just want Davis to find himself first. All this about ‘Sports Medicine’... and last month it was something else.”

“Maybe he means it this time.”

“Maybe. Some people just need more time to explore. You and I weren’t like that. I remember the day we met—well, maybe not the actual day. And I thought, ‘It’s him. That’s the guy I’m going to spend the rest of my life with.’”

“Simple as that.”

“Simple as that. Well, was I wrong?”

“No, you weren’t wrong. I’m sure I thought close to the same thing. But I thought you were dating that kid, Bob—remember him? Bob something—he had some dumb last name.”

“Peeps—his last name was Peeps. No, we never dated. He had a little crush on me and followed me home from school once.”

Ken grinned, loving it. “Followed you home, huh? And what’d you do?”

“I... got very embarrassed and explained to him that my parents didn’t want me to date boys.”

“Your parents *didn’t* want you to date boys. I can tell you that for sure.”

“My parents liked you.”

“Your dad did. I think your mom had her doubts.”

Reaching for her wine, she said lightly, “Well, she’s long since gotten over them.”

“I should hope so. I suppose I wouldn’t have trusted me either when we were kids. We’re lucky we never got caught.”

“We’re lucky I never got pregnant. That’s what I’m worried about with Clara. And then you get into a situation where the parents get involved. I mean, I like Rob and Diane, but I don’t necessarily want to see them every year for Thanksgiving.”

“Let it go, babe. Kids are gonna do what they’re gonna do.” He watched with pleasure as she sipped her wine and set the glass down on the end table. Even after all these years, he still enjoyed the sight of his wife. “Come here,” he said, and she rested back against him. He breathed into her ear. “Let’s go upstairs.”

“Now? What about the kids?”

“The kids are otherwise occupied. I don’t want to wait until everyone’s in bed, and then we’re too tired. I want you now, while I’m still awake and sober enough to enjoy it.”

It wasn’t exactly the most romantic thing he’d ever said to her, but she took his point. They both had a tendency to drink up to the eleventh hour, especially on the weekends.

“Should we tell the kids we’re going to bed?” she asked.

“They’ll figure it out. I don’t care about them now,” he said, kissing her more fervently, and she laughed.

“Okay, let me put these glasses in the sink. I’ll meet you up there.”

Ken skipped upstairs while she dropped their glasses off in the kitchen, suppressing the urge to call down to Taylor and Davis. She felt bad about going upstairs without at least saying good night. She could still remember tucking them both in with a kiss when they were small and still slept in the same room. Not so long ago.

But her husband needed her too.

Ken was already naked when she came into the bedroom. He seemed in a hurry, like he had a limited quantity of sexual energy to spend on her before it ran out.

“Oh, hello,” she said, mildly startled as she closed the door behind her. He moved toward her, arms open, leading with his hard-on. “Who’s this gorgeous naked man in my bedroom?” she asked, touching his chest, tracing her fingers down to his stomach.

“Gonna throw me out?” he smiled.

“I might let you stick around.” She felt gently down between his legs, and he sucked in a breath. “That okay?” she asked.

“Very okay,” he whispered.

“You want me to keep doing it?” she asked, though she needn’t have bothered. Ken closed his eyes, loving her touch. “Come on, let’s go over to the bed.”

They held hands and dropped onto the bed, Ken on his back and Liz on her side. Still in her jeans and sweater, she kissed his chest and continued to handle him. In some ways this was good enough—making him happy, making them both happy.

“God... you’re rock hard tonight. You look so hot like this,” she said, knowing it gave him encouragement.

“It’s because I want you.”

Her pace slowed, taking longer, more determined strokes. “I could just do this,” she suggested.

Ken stared dully into her eyes, as if he didn’t hear her. “Liz, I love you.”

“And I love you.”

“I want to make love. Get naked with me.”

Settling in, she crossed one leg over his, trading her right hand for her left. “I will,” she said—a promise, nothing more.

He said it again, more like a whispered groan. “I want to see you. I want to see your whole body.”

“You will. Just lie back and let yourself feel good.”

“But-”

“Shh. Let me touch you.”

He looked confused but willing, and she admired her strong and still-handsome husband, this man she’d known and loved almost her entire life, now naked for her, all edge and trembling nerves.

His back stiffened and he thrust out his chin.

“There’s my sexy nude man. Just let yourself go. I’m right here. I’ve got you.”

“Liz...”

“You like when I touch you?” she asked, and her hand quickened. Ken’s body stretched taut on the bed, and his legs shook as he pointed his toes.

“Oh, yes...”

“I love touching you, making you feel good. That’s all I want to do.”

He stared at her, a question in his eyes, and she realized to her own surprise she didn’t want to make love, not right now. She didn’t want to get undressed and lie with him there—not because she didn’t love him or didn’t still desire him. She didn’t know *why* she didn’t want to do it. She just didn’t.

She wanted to do this instead.

“Liz...”

“What, baby?”

He swallowed hard, dabbing his lips with his tongue. His breath came quick through his nose.

“I...”

She leaned in to hear. “Tell me.”

“Liz, I’m gonna come.”

She smiled. “I know. It’s okay.”

He grunted, forgetting the need to be quiet, and a powerful jet shot across his chest—it made a soft but audible sound, like *wert*, the sound of a small but strong muscle contracting—then another, reaching his own cheek, the pillow above his head.

Her hand slowed, and she smiled with twenty-plus years of affection at his quivering, perspiring forehead.

“Oh, wow,” she breathed, finally letting go. Ken didn’t speak; his voice was all breath and strain. “That was amazing. Are you okay?” she laughed.

He also laughed, wrung-out and relaxed. “Oh, my God. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to come so quick.”

“Don’t be sorry. I loved watching you. Thank God the boys were in the basement.”

His eyes slitted open, and he smiled through a fog. “Was I loud? Shit.”

“It’s okay, I’m sure they didn’t hear. But you looked so sexy.”

He blinked twice, only now noticing the mess. “Do you want me to get a tissue?” she asked, then wobbled off to the bathroom without waiting for an answer. She felt light on her feet, unsteady, something fizzy inside her head.

She returned with two tissues, and he used them to clean off. Holding the tissues in a bunch, he stared down at his big feet. “Liz, I’m sorry.”

“Why ‘sorry’? *I had a good time,*” she said.

He rolled onto his side. “I had a good time, too. But we were supposed to make love. I can touch you too, if you-”

“No.” She kissed his forehead. “You just relax and enjoy it. I don’t need anything right now.”

“But don’t you want-”

“Really, Ken, I’m fine. That’s all I needed tonight. You can get me some other time.” She looked over at the clock; it was still only a little past nine. “I might go back downstairs and have one more glass of wine. Do you want to join me?”

His head rocked in the pillow. “I don’t think I can move.”

“Just stay here then. I’ll be up soon.” She gave him another quick kiss. “My sexy man.”

“Liz,” he said to her at the door, and she turned. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” she said. The soles of Ken’s bare feet were pale and smooth.

“I feel bad. I wanted to make you feel good, too.”

“You did make me feel good. It felt good watching you. Now you just lie there. I don’t need anything more.”

Back downstairs, she washed her hands at the kitchen sink and thought about what had just happened. Why hadn’t she wanted to make love? The question didn’t bother her exactly. It was more just something interesting to think about. Even getting undressed had seemed like work, and she was comfortable enough in her sweater and jeans. She’d wanted to give him something and get nothing in return except for the satisfaction of giving.

But now she wasn’t sure—she questioned her own motives. Maybe she’d just wanted to be “the giving one.” More generous, more loving, more focused on her partner’s needs and not her own. She didn’t know. Given a second chance, she would’ve gladly made love to him. But it didn’t feel right at the time.

It was that he was in a hurry—like he had to prove something to himself. It had nothing to do with her.

Drying her hands, she poured another glass of wine and stood at the sink. She felt restive, not ready for bed. One of the boys in the basement, it sounded like Taylor, yelled at his video game. His voice reminded her of Ken’s, but then she realized it wasn’t Taylor but Davis; Davis had the deeper voice.

Opening the basement door, she called down the stairs. “Mind if I come down?”

The boys were too wrapped up in their game to respond, so she brought her wine down to the basement. They’d remodeled one side of the basement a couple years ago, and now it was where the boys spent all their free time. There was a 75” flat screen TV, an Xbox Series X gaming console, a wet bar with a fridge full of sodas. Liz rarely came down except to cut through on her way to do the laundry.

“Would it disturb the order of the cosmos if I watched for a few minutes?” she asked.

“Uh... sure, Ma,” Davis said, not looking away from the screen. Taylor was taking a break, kicking back in a beanbag chair and drinking a soda.

“What’s Dad doing?” he asked, and she laughed to herself.

“Oh, he’s just lying down. I think he had a long week. What game is this?”

He told her—the name blew right past her.

“Are you playing online or just by yourselves?” she asked, which seemed like a reasonable question. She didn’t know anything about video games, except they all looked violent. She tried not to let it bother her. She’d always told herself to trust her boys to know the difference between fantasy and reality.

“Online—except D is getting his *ass* kicked!” Taylor jeered.

“Ignoring you, dude,” Davis said, his thumbs manic on the game controller buttons. On the screen, some multi-tentacled creature was throwing what looked like metal packing crates at a man in a commando suit. A loud, bass-heavy voice intoned: *Your mission is doomed!* and Liz gave a little jump.

“Do you need new sneakers?” she asked, seeing Taylor’s ice blue Nikes on the floor.

“If he gets new shoes, I get new shoes too,” Davis said, and howled when the man in the commando suit’s head exploded. “I can never get past that part.”

“That’s because you *suck*,” said Taylor.

“Dude, you can’t even get past Omega. What’s your high score, minus seven?”

Taylor just grinned. The boys liked to tease each other, but they rarely actually fought.

“We can go shoe shopping tomorrow, if you boys aren’t too busy doing other things,” she suggested.

Throwing down the game controller, Davis went to the mini-fridge for another Coke. “I’m-a get the new Nike Dunks,” he said.

“As long as they’re not too expensive,” she said. Shoes for both Taylor and Davis plus lunch at the mall would probably run about \$400; but she wanted to spend the day with her boys.

“Last soda, okay? For both of you. You won’t be able to sleep.”

“Caffeine free, Mom. It’s just like drinking water,” Taylor said, and his older brother snapped, “Dude, don’t argue with Mom! If she says no more soda, no more soda—where the hell’s the bottle opener? What’d you do with the bottle opener? The bottle opener was right here.”

Taylor pointed at the opener in its obvious place, and Davis popped open the soda. “Last one, Ma. *We promise.*”

“Thank you, dear. It’s nice down here. You’ve got your own little hideout,” she said, like she’d never been in the basement before.

“Hey, Ma, you wanna play Macroblast?” Taylor asked, suddenly excited.

That was the name of the game—Macroblast.

“Oh, no... I’ll just get killed right away.”

“No, you won’t. The first few levels are wicked easy,” Taylor added, and Davis added, “*Do it, Do it, Do it.*”

With both boys chanting *Do it*, Liz said, “Oh, I’ll try—but I won’t last long. I’m no good at games.”

She set her wine aside, and Davis passed her the game controller; it was still warm from his hands.

“What do I do? Oh!” she exclaimed—the game had already started.

“Just shoot at anything that moves—unless it’s got a gold cross on it. You don’t want to hit those,” Davis said.

“And save your shield until you get past the portal,” added Taylor.

It was all lost on Liz, and she laughed as the screen filled with bursts and explosions.

“Am I doing it right? I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“You’re doing all right, just get out of there. You don’t wanna-”

“OH!” both boys shouted, and Liz dropped the controller into her lap. She was right—she got killed right away.

( )

The only thing I can tell you about myself is gibberish. I’ve never had a coherent thought in my life. What I do is make a mess and sort it into piles, and that’s as far as it goes.

Want to talk about candy? Here, sit on this bench with me. I want to hear about your favorite gum—the brand, not the flavor. I don’t like gum—it’s like chewing a tongue. It’s a gross habit. Spit it out! There, that’s better. I’m glad I brought a sweater. Your legs must be cold. Let me know when you’d like to go in. I love this time of year in New England. I like dressing in

layers—it adds some fun to the day. Isn't it nice when something small and easy can make you so happy? Like a single scoop of ice cream in a tiny bowl. And example and example and example.

I wish more things were like that. I wish more things gave pleasure. For some people it doesn't take much. It's just hard for me to lock down and concentrate—so I keep going and going, and maybe something happens. Things that should amuse me only piss me off. I don't do games, I don't do puzzles. My daughter kids me because I fall asleep at the movies. It's because she always gets to choose—they're not my kind of movies. My kind of movies have yellow boxes in them, and a slowly closing hand. But she likes superhero movies, with noisy action sequences that make the walls of the theater shake. Normally I drift off somewhere around the twenty-five minute mark, then snap awake a half hour before the end. Middles must bore me. Sometimes she'll nudge me awake, though I don't see why she cares. Maybe I'm snoring—or maybe it's embarrassing to sit next to a sleeping father.

I wonder if you can make good money driving for Amazon.

Two Amazon drivers just honked at each other at the T-intersection. They must know each other.

I like your shoes. I wish I could wear shoes like that. Everything I wear always has to be so dull-colored and boring. But you get to be a flower—it's your one reward in life.

The thing is, I've been sick for a long time. The thing is, it's been ten years since I've listened to R.E.M., *really* sat down and listened to them. I'll watch the baseball game tonight if I can make it up past ten. Most games are over by the fifth inning anyway. Sometimes I feel so sad and lonely, like an aging princess. And men used to be so nice to me! They'd buy me things and take interest in what I had to say.

I'm glad you're still my friend, though. I'm glad you haven't given up on me. I'm still good for an hour's worth of company. People tell me I'm a good listener, meaning I'm good at being in a room, sitting in a chair. I'm good at not having too many feet. People compliment me

on my breathing, the number of blinks per minute. The way I fold my hands and hold them in my lap. The exceptional care I take of my socks, how I don't hang onto them to the point of wearing them out. I know when to retire a pair of socks. And when a sock loses its mate, I give the other a week to turn up before calling off the search.

People ask me questions, and I answer them. Most of the questions aren't specific to me, meaning anyone could answer them. The answers I give are helpful but stupidly phrased. I stammer when I speak. I say too much, which obscures my meaning. I jump out of my skin to offer assistance, but I just wind up looking like a foolish nuisance.

If I weren't me, I'd run me over with my car.

I'm good at saying simple things. I can say "hi" and "thank you." It's taken time and hard work and perseverance, but I'm now capable and certified to set one foot in front of the other.

When I was fifteen, I followed a girl home from school. She was so pretty, and I liked her tan legs. I don't know what I meant to say to her—I just wanted her to notice me.

I'm the same person now.

( )

32.

You've known all these things before. It's all coming back to you from another life, the other side.

There's a woman who walks by this time of day. You're always there to see her. She's got a destination in mind and she's determined to get there. You can't read the expression on her face—it's guarded, maybe; or maybe she's just preoccupied. She's thinking about something she needs to do in an hour and forty-five minutes.

The men in her family look up when she comes into the room. These growing boys with their smelly socks and underwear. Sometimes she feels like the only female on earth. Everyone is a man—the people she works with are all men, the man who works on her car is a man, the man who trims her lawn in the summer and rakes her leaves in the fall is a man. Her pastor is a man, her accountant is a man. Her husband is a man and the boy she lost her virginity to when she was fifteen is now a man. She's the only one who can't reach the top shelf or open the jar. The only one who has to ask for help. Men never need help—they certainly don't need her help. They can lift the box just fine by themselves.

What they *do* need is her presence, and this they need desperately. Her witnessing eyes. They can't do anything unless she's there to watch them.

Her butcher is a man, and the man who blows out her in-ground sprinkler system before the first frost is a man.

The world caters to her. She bundles up to walk the dog. On weekdays she comes home during her lunch break and walks the dog in the park across the street. Sometimes she eats her lunch in the car, just a granola bar. The dog has a vile temperament toward strangers.

Her family gathers around her on the sofa, her four sons. Her husband comes in and out with a drink. A TV's on in the other room, *Sunday Night Football*. All of the boys are jocks. Everyone's so huge in this house, size thirteen sneakers.

At work she sits at her desk and watches numbers change on a monitor. Her boss—not her boss but her immediate supervisor—steps into her office, and she looks up with her eyes. Another man. The man who empties the wastepaper basket under her desk is a man, and the man who buzzes her into the building each morning is a man.

At work she listens to music at soft volume, a classical music sampler, Mozart and Haydn and Debussy. She likes classical music—it's restful. And she knows a little about the history of it. Haydn wasn't the *only* Haydn, as it turns out; there was another Haydn, a Michael Haydn. But Joseph's the only one anyone still cares about.

Two Haydns, a whole bunch of Bachs. Only one Mozart, only one Beethoven (in France they called him "Louis"). Only one Debussy. Debussy was a man. The man who was Beethoven was also a man.

During her lunch break she races home to relieve the dog. She's been known to run the occasional yellow light. Men honk and curse at her whenever she bends the rules of the road. All the other drivers are men, at least the ones she notices. Other women tend to be invisible to her. She knows they're there, but they merely flicker on her consciousness like a weak and dying signal.

The dog, whose name is Barkley, is not a man, but it is male; she still thinks of it as male, although it came to them fixed. She gets embarrassed when it barks at other dog walkers and their dogs in the park. Invariably it feels like a bad reflection on her. The dog was her sons' idea, but of course she's the one who always winds up walking it, driving it to the vet, driving it to the dog groomer. Her husband won't even feed it unless she's really got her hands full. Secretly she's looking forward to the animal's demise—it's seven—though she would never do anything to harm it. She just wants it to live its natural lifespan and then die peacefully and without pain.

And soon.

Not *soon*-soon, but. Within the next three years.

At work she crosses her legs and taps her pen. Men objectify her without realizing it, although sometimes they *do* realize it. Most look afraid or at least hesitant to talk to her. She tries to be nice, she tries to be approachable. She can't help what she is.

The man who runs the newsstand in the lobby is a man. The person in charge of the shipping department used to be a woman, but she left the job two years ago. Now it's a man.

Her husband calls her at work to ask how she's doing. He asks what she'd like him to pick up for supper—he calls it “supper,” not “dinner.” Most of their conversations are about food. Before they met, she'd never known anyone to call it “supper” except jokingly in a fake British accent. It's always annoyed her, this supper business, but it's not important enough to argue about. She probably says things that annoy him too.

At work she crosses her legs and taps her pen and leans back in her ergonomic chair. There's a photo of her four sons on her desk, and a separate photo of her husband. She likes looking at them; it's nice to see a friendly face. All day men stream by her office. Some of them objectify her intentionally and others do it without thinking. The ones who don't objectify her right now will do so later in the day.

She's too tired to resent them, these men. Most of them are harmless—they're just stupid, they don't know any better. They act without thinking.

Occasionally a woman will flicker back into her consciousness, a shimmering light that eventually resolves into the solid form of a female human being. Many of these women are around her age, in their early and mid forties. They're established professionals with husbands and growing kids at home. Smart, impatient, well put together. Their names are Doris and Sharon and Monique. Sometimes they objectify her too, but for other reasons. She likes talking to them, though she never seeks them out—she wouldn't know where to find them if she tried. They just come upon her as if by magic and according to their own schedule. A quick chat about weekend plans, and they flicker away. You can have a different conversation with another woman than you can with a man. Men don't understand anything about women and they never will.

At work she stands from her desk, walks over to her mini-fridge, and takes out a Diet Coke. There's also a sandwich in there, which she might eat later if she has the time. Often she doesn't. The dog always needs walking, and sometimes it's twenty minutes before the thing finally takes a shit. You never know—it's unpredictable. Sometimes it shits right away, and then she has time for a real lunch. There's a correlation between the two, how much time she has for lunch and how quickly the dog shits.

At work a man rushes into her office, objectifies her, and rushes back out. He's in a hurry—he does a half-assed job of it.

At home no one objectifies her—or else they *all* do, constantly, all of the time.

At home she works out on the motorized running track in the basement. It's important to keep in shape, especially at her age. At some point her life became all about the numbers. She counts her calories, counts her steps. That's one good thing about walking the dog—each time it's like a thousand, two thousand steps. It adds up.

At work a man on a rising platform outside her building washes her office windows with a bucket and a squeegee. He objectifies her on his way up to the next floor.

It's a good life, an easy life. Easy but busy. There's always something to do, but none of it's particularly hard. She's got it down, this being-a-working-mother business.

At work she sends emails, labors over spreadsheets. Nothing absolutely needs to be done *today*. When she needs a break, she takes her hands away from the computer and listens to Debussy. Debussy never really sounds like anything. It's all texture, no melody. You can't hum it. All of these great composers died so young. Debussy made it to fifty-five, but others died in their twenties and thirties. Schubert, who died at thirty-one, must've written music every waking moment of his life. Sonatas! Songs! Symphonies!

At home she takes a bath before dinner. The kids have after school sports, and they always wind up eating late. Sometimes she just makes a big pot of spaghetti, which is easy and about all she has energy for at the end of the day. How some women work fifty hours a week and have time for baking is beyond her.

In the bath she thinks: In seven years I'll be fifty. How old was I seven years ago? Thirty-six. More numbers.

At work she keeps her desk drawers filled with stuff. A desk is like a big purse that takes four men to lift. She keeps pens and cosmetics, business cards, breath mints, stress relief balls. Extra boxes of tissue—you'd think she was some kind of neurotic. A bottle of aspirin, a tube of moisturizer. She's camped out and she's not going anywhere. Scotch tape, Wite-Out, a sewing needle and thread. A whole deep drawer of shoes, sneakers and flats, pumps with three inch heels, three and a half, four inches; ankle socks, extra pairs of pantyhose, clear nail polish for runs. Then another drawer for yellow writing tablets (bought in bulk), a calculator, AA batteries, boxes and boxes of paper clips and Post-Its and staples for the stapler. There's not an empty drawer in the desk, and she never knows where anything is.

She apologizes for herself—*I'm not a very organized person*—and some man objectifies her for it.

At home she lies in the bath and watches the steam rise up from the water. Sometimes, when they're feeling romantic, she and her husband take baths together, but she likes the water hotter than he does. The tub is deep, and she needs a step stool to climb up into it. She has a horror of falling in the bath.

In the bath she lets her legs float on the surface of the water. She's an archetype, a mythic eternal.

She's just this woman. Give her a name but what's the point.

In the bath she thinks of her big house, this constructed shell with walls and windows all around it. It's her happiness, or part of it. She comes here to collapse.

At home she asks men questions, and they answer her. The answers they give are usually short and to the point. But sometimes a great gush of words pours out—you never know with men. Everything always has to be on their time.

She knows not to push. She understands how fragile they are.

In her car, she flips through the radio and settles on news. There's nothing worth knowing, but it fills the silence. Some man in Revere raped his cousin, and then there's an ad for Nationwide Insurance.

At work men look her up and down. They hesitate and wind up not saying anything. She doesn't blame them for not being exactly perfect. They have their own stresses at home.

At home she makes bean burritos for her family. The boys always eat so much. Their table manners are so-so; Logan's getting better at eating with his mouth closed. When dinner's over, her husband tells them to help clear the table. Already it's past eight and almost time for bed. Days often end with TV or a book, sometimes a second bath.

In the bath, she watches her legs drift in the water. She wonders if she drinks too much. She worries about things like that—she's critical of herself. She worries about not being a thoughtful enough wife and mother. The boys never seem to want anything from her. Whatever it is, she'd get it for them, but they never ask. Kids never want anything anymore. Maybe there's just nothing left to give them.

In the bath, she holds a loofah on a stick until it goes limp in her hand. Her husband's prowling around downstairs. He's a big man, hard to buy clothes for. Back when he was still alive, her father-in-law used to call her "the little lady" and expected a big laugh out of it.

In her car, she drives past a car wash, a tailor, a nail salon. She's racing back to work—the dog took its time today. The pine tree air freshener hanging from the rear view mirror has lost its scent. In her dark glasses she feels indomitable, impossible to stare down.

At work she Googles “Claude Debussy” to see if he was ever married. She’s surprised: twice, once to a woman named Rosalie and then another named Emma. She’d expected him to be a bachelor. His music sounds like it was written by a lonely man.

But you can be married and still be lonely.

At work she stands at the window to stretch her legs. It’s a little like being in a prison cell. Her office is on the fourth floor of an eight story building. From her window she can see her car in the parking lot. She’s done a bad job of parking it; the back end’s sticking a foot out into the aisle. She’s always had a bad sense of depth perception.

In her car, she zips back home to walk the dog. The dog’s always waiting at the door, doing its gotta-pee dance. Sometimes when she’s walking the dog she thinks about how dogs urinate to mark territory and even send messages to other dogs. How interesting, she thinks, to smell another dog’s urine and be able to tell what dog urinated and when and, who knows, maybe other things too like what the dog was feeling, warnings about wild animals in the neighborhood, canine gossip, plans to meet up.

Or maybe it doesn’t get that complex. Maybe all the urine says is, *Hey. I was here.*

At work she sits in her office and thinks about her feet on the floor, her butt in her chair. She looks up at the ceiling about once every four months. One whole wall is all glass so she can look out at everyone else on the department floor.

At home the boys hug her around the neck and say, *Love you, Ma.* They want her to sit and relax, take the weight off her feet. They get her things—a glass of wine, the TV remote. Maybe it’s her birthday.

In her car, she keeps her head straight and both hands on the wheel. Her husband once complained about her driving, saying she “lacked peripheral awareness.”

She wanted to say, *Honey, I’m the mother of four teenage boys. Ain’t nothing wrong with my peripheral awareness.*

Is it enough of a life? It sure feels like enough. But then the day comes to an end and you’re left with nothing, just your thoughts that drift a foot above the bed and pass on as if they never belonged to you.

At work she looks at the pictures of her husband and her four sons. She's always the one who takes the pictures. It's possible no one cares about the family as much as she does.

At home she lies in bed on top of the covers and reads through a stack of catalogs. She's still dressed for work, though in her stockinged feet. By the end of the day she's desperate to get her shoes off. The boys are in their rooms and her husband is working on something in the basement. The catalogs have been collecting all week; she usually saves them for Friday. There's Garnet Hill and Athleta and Soft Surroundings. Everything's aimed at her.

At work she closes her office door to indicate she's busy and would prefer not to be disturbed. It sends a subtle signal. Sometimes the room feels like a prison cell, sometimes like a big glass box. With the door closed, she can hear the classical music better. She knows the eras of music, the Baroque Period, Romantic and Contemporary. "Classical" is also a period, but it's *all* classical. You could say that "Classical" is a *kind* of classical music. Haydn and Mozart. More flowing and melodic than Bach, but not as intense as Beethoven. "Romantic" is also misleading; it doesn't mean "romantic" as in people kissing and being in love. Music of the Romantic Period—that's Liszt and Brahms and those guys. Those romantic guys, Schubert and Schumann and Chopin. Cheerful cast of characters.

At home the boys listen to hard rock and hip-hop. She doesn't like it when they listen to rap; the lyrics are so coarse and hateful toward women. But none of it seems to rub off on them. They're good boys, and she's only ever known them to be polite and respectful. Some day they'll move on to other things. There's a whole world out there waiting to be discovered.

*Just look at these fabulous prizes!*

In her car, she drives past a Denny's and an International House of Pancakes. KFC, Midas, Five Below, The Paper Store. Then past Exit 90 and the state line, the two buck tolls and the mountains and lakes to the north. She doesn't know where she's going. She has nowhere to go.

In the bath, she thinks about all the places she and her husband used to travel before the kids—Santa Fe, the California coast; and even *after* the kids—there was the trip to Montreal where Brad fell in love with the subway. It makes her sad to think about it. They never do anything anymore—it's just a cycle on repeat.

At work she crosses her legs and taps her pen and gets up and goes to the window. The door's closed; she can hear music—Brahms, if she had to guess. But she's usually wrong. Outside her car waits for her in the parking lot. There's a bottle of sparkling water rolling around on the floor of the back seat that she keeps forgetting to take in.

Slowly, as if doing a yoga pose, she raises her arms over her head. She doesn't care if she looks ridiculous to the people outside her office. With her back turned, it's almost like they don't exist.

She breathes. She takes a moment for herself.

( )

I hope I haven't wasted your time. I have no way of knowing these things. For all I know my words are falling on deaf ears. When I was little, people praised me. I did a nice thing with my hands. I looked cute in a three-piece suit, micro-sized to fit a four year old.

I accepted this praise the way a prince would, with lowered eyelids. I practiced good eating habits. Sometimes I'd come to the table in my footie pajamas.

I wanted to be looked at, noticed. Now I don't care.

At least I'm not obnoxious. At least I'm not cruel. I'm intrigued by the idea of cruelty, but I'm not sure I have the capacity for it. I'm not the world's most compassionate person. I don't give to charities. I click "No thanks" when the charge card reader at the grocery store asks if I'd like to round up to support local veterans. I've always thought of life as a pile of money growing smaller by the day. When I die, I'll have forty-three hundred dollars to my name which I'll leave to my daughter, who won't know what to do with it.

If I were a woman, I could be cruel. I'd either be very nice or very nasty. I'd experiment with both. I'd wear fuzzy white sweaters that showed the contours of my breasts. Men wouldn't know what to make of me—I'd be a frustrating but compelling riddle. My cruelty would take the form of idle whimsy. I'd be a sweetheart one day and a Gorgon the next.

Finish up quick and take a walk. It's maple syrup weather. My family and I spend most of our waking hours apart. They know me as a piece of furniture that sits on the porch. Sometime I get up to use the bathroom, and the dog takes my vacated seat.

I am a mild and soft-bellied old man. I wear dumpy cardigans and sit with my hands in my lap. Kids ask me if they can use the bathroom. I have been put in a position of great responsibility. I really should consider it an honor, what with the rate of unemployment.

When I turned forty, I found I could get people to like me and engage their trust by keeping my mouth shut. I was not going to be the kind of man who was afraid to look another person in the eye. I could purse my lips and cluck in sympathy and hold my hands in my lap. I could make my body a shapeless lump, and you'd sit with me and tell me about your top ten dating peeves.

*Oh I know, I hate that!*

Now I go for late lunches at the hibachi place in town and drink my mug of pale beer. I don't talk to the other people at the bar. Sometimes they'll ask about my book—not the one I wrote, but the one I'm reading. I'll stammer my way through some careful plot description that attempts to respect my interlocutor's intelligence, and they'll squint at my forehead and say, "That sounds interesting. I need to read more. I used to read all the time when I was in college. I'd go through a book a week. But I don't have the time for it anymore. Don't you hate it when you don't have the time? It's great that you make the time for it. I've seen you here before, and I've always been curious to ask what you're reading. You look so *intent* on it. But I didn't want to bother you—I hope I'm not bothering you now. Is that the hot and sour soup? It's too spicy for me. Well, I'll let you get back to your reading. Maybe you could suggest some books for me. I'm usually here on Thursdays unless I gotta pick up my son. I'm Dawn by the way. It's nice to meet you. Keep reading. Don't ever stop doing what you want to do. The doctors told me I'd never be able to get pregnant because I had Tamoxifen for my breast cancer, but they were wrong. Doctors are always wrong, don't you think? Well, not *always*. My cousin Paul's a doctor—but he's a pediatrician."

*Family Feud* on the TV. The host's intricate patter is a distraction. *A hundred women were asked, "How can you tell when your husband is lying to you?" Beep. Christine!*

My daughter carries her drumsticks to school. She's in the jazz band. She finds jazz boring, or that's what she says. She likes to disappoint us, underwhelm our expectations. She doesn't want us getting too excited about her.

When I do the laundry I can't tell my daughter's underwear apart from my wife's. Half the time I'm wrong, and then *boy*, do I get it!

Students wave to me in the hall. They know I'm a nice guy.

It makes me sad to see my students go downhill. A boy who was in my class last year has taken an emotional turn for the worse. He keeps forgetting his trombone in school, leaving it behind at the end of class or in the hall. Something tells me he doesn't want it.

We all have our trombones we don't feel like carrying around anymore.

My daughter's nervous because she's taking two tests today, one in math and one in French. Technically the one in French is just a *quiz*, which doesn't sound as bad. Quizzes are friendly tests. They're more like questionnaires than tests—something preliminary about them, or half-hypothetical.

The dog's shivering on the porch. He's from the South—he thinks fifty degrees is cold. I don't know why my wife put him out here with me. I don't need the company.

It's starting to look like we set the Halloween decorations out too early. Everything's settled in. The cheesecloth ghost hanging from one of the two trees in the front yard is soaked limp with dog urine.

My hands are so cold right now—I should probably go inside. I have a whole house behind me. Dishes in the sink. My daughter takes her socks off and throws them on the floor. She gets it from somewhere.

My daughter, like all twelve year olds, always underdresses for the weather. What's wrong with wearing a pair of long pants? It's like a concession, like doing your chores without an argument.

We do what we can. We try not to hurt each other. I've never punched or slapped another person, never kicked or tripped. I've yelled a few times. I've said things I later regretted, and sometimes I've apologized.

I'm critical of, but not insecure about my body. I wish I was a couple inches taller, but I don't feel inferior about it. I don't mind not being handsome. I would describe myself as average looking. There's no part of my face or body that's top-of-the-line *great*. I don't stare at myself in the mirror—I know what's there.

When I picture myself as a woman, the person I see is equally ordinary. I don't need to be sensationally beautiful. Who needs that kind of hassle. I'm sure it makes some things easier, but at a cost.

As a woman, I used to work in a bank. I had my own desk and a real glass door that pulled shut. My clients were grown men and women who looked to me for error-free assistance. I kept to myself and did not socialize with my co-workers, except at the annual Christmas party. We didn't call it a Christmas party, but that's what it was, a Christmas party. We'd lock up at five and exchange Secret Santa presents in the bank lobby—one year I got a waffle maker. We'd drink wine out of paper cups in case anyone was watching from outside. *Drinking on the job!* People would look at me and wonder what I did when I went home. I never mentioned a husband or kids. I didn't keep family photos on my desk. As I say, I kept to myself. Maybe I held myself a bit aloof. You could say I had a superior attitude, though I tried not to let it show. I'd always thought I'd wind up doing something extraordinary with my life, but it never happened. Instead I drove to work in my leased sedan with leather interiors and temperature controlled ergonomically adjustable seats. I drank coffee from a \$22.95 insulated travel mug. On weekends I met up with men in bars, took them home, had sex with them, and strangled them to death. It was a humdrum, unexceptional existence, but it fulfilled my need for comfort and security.

That was when I was a woman. But I've been other women too, and other men. What I've never been is myself. I know I'm there—I can see me standing inside my upright glass box, dressed in a dark suit, eyes closed, arms stiff at my sides—but I've never really inhabited that person. He's never meant that much to me.

Remember when you were little and people used to speculate about what you were going to be when you grew up? Did you ever listen to them? Or were you too young to care?

When I was little, I toddled across the shag carpet in my saddle shoes, and adults would halt their academic conversations in the upper climes to look down with an admixture of tenderness, wonder, and pity.

My daughter rides in the front seat now—she's been lobbying for it for years. Somehow it feels like it ought to change the nature of our conversations, but it really hasn't. I guess I feel less like her chauffeur. We talk about how stupid various things are, and I make fun of the crappy pop music she listens to. Sometimes we pass a building and pay it no mind. We always have a place to go, and half the time it's home.

Yesterday I got lost on the way to the grocery store. And I've made this drive hundreds of times, thousands of times. I guess I just wasn't paying attention—I'm not a very attentive driver. I space out at stop lights, forget to change lanes until it's too late. I get on people's nerves. They say mean things to me and it hurts my feelings. But yesterday I don't know what my problem was. Too busy fiddling with the radio or something, and before I knew it I was in the middle of a huge park. It might've been Yosemite—what's the one with the trees? Anyway, nowhere near the grocery store. The dirt road tipped me off, and the dust blowing over the hood of the car. I was well and truly lost, and the sun was starting to edge toward the horizon. So I stopped the car and sat with the keys in my lap and thought. I tried retracing my mental steps. I could remember leaving the house with my keys and a shopping list. I still had the list in my pocket. It said:

S.O.S. pads

Chocolate, any brand

Healthy cereal

A loud-mouthed man

A new lease on life

Parsley, though not if it looks wilted

Tomato soup

Tomato paste

Canned tomatoes

Canned corn

Creamed corn

Cream

Milk

Sugar

Ben & Jerry's "Oat of This Swirled" ice cream

A yellow box, exactly 6" x 3" x 2.5", with a wire handle, made of 50% recycled material, and a crushed corner like someone handled it too roughly, and a melancholy air about it, inscrutable but palpably there

Dreams

So I knew I wasn't crazy. I mean, I knew I'd left the house with a purpose. I just couldn't remember where I might've made a wrong turn.

And then I started thinking about all the wrong turns I've made in my life, figurative or otherwise. It put me in a mood, and I stepped out of the car, took off all my clothes and wandered off into the forest as the sun continued to hurtle down. I wanted to end my life like that. I wanted a bear or some other wild animal to find and eat my helpless body. It felt somehow apt at that particular moment in time.

Soon it was near dark, and the gathering chill snapped me out of my trance. Fortunately I hadn't wandered far from the road, so I was able to find my way back to my car, put my clothes back on, and drive away. After another mile the wild woodlands turned suburban again, and I realized my mistake: I should've made the second turn at the roundabout, not the first.

I'm coming to the realization I have no head.

You can babble or you can break down. You can attempt to make a friend.

If you really stop and think about it: why aren't you naked right now? There's no good reason for it. Maybe you're in a public place—so you'll get arrested! Maybe you're in a library—though it's probably safe to assume you're not, right? Come on, you're not in a library! But maybe you're in a grocery store—that's a safer bet. Just get naked. First one button, then another. Take off your clothes and walk away. I bet you'll be a sensation. I bet you'll make the local news. Public opinion will be divided. Some will condemn, some will admire. But such is the fate of all politicians.

I take baths at odd times of the day. The water in our deep tub has a yellowish tint. We've had it tested, and apparently it's safe. I sit in the bath and I read, and sometimes I peek through the Venetian blinds to make sure both cars are still in the driveway. Out of habit I always lock the bathroom door, though I know no one's going to barge in on me. Such things aren't done in our house.

I'm a water sign—I'm a Scorpio. Scorpions have the only distinct personality in the Zodiac. We're always the bad guys. Everyone else is just amorphously *there*.

What else would you like to talk about? Nothing's off-limits. We can be distant or up close and personal. I don't have to sit in your lap. Here: I'll stand over here and you can stand over there.

Now you wave to me.

And I'll wave to you.

I like your shoes. I like how you stand with your hands crossed in front of you. I guess it's a protective thing. I stand like that too.

Now I don't know what to say. I don't even know who you are.

( )

In the grocery store, you buy dates and walnuts. You lose yourself in your purchases. You buy those snack-sized applesauces that come in squeeze-packs. They're meant for infants, but you don't care. You buy a make-your-own ramen kit, not even checking the price. Probably a fortune. But you can afford it.

By the time you're forty, you realize something about yourself: you're no good at relationships, just like your mother always said. You've tried longterm dating, but it hasn't worked out. There have been plenty of boyfriends over the years, and finding someone to have sex with is so easy, it's sad. But inevitably the men wind up wanting more, and you run out of things to give them.

You become annoying. And then they go away.

It almost doesn't bother you anymore. You've turned into a hard, practical woman. The only kind of relationship you value or understand is the transactional type. An even exchange of basic needs. But no pretense at love, something that passes for actual affection.

At forty-five, you feel lost. Your mother's gone, and she was the only person you could really talk to. Sometimes you just sit alone in the kitchen and suffer the weight of your heart.

You wonder when it happened, what triggered the change. Because you weren't always like this. Maybe it's, whaddayacallit, menopause. Maybe you're just pissed off at the world because you didn't have a kid when you had the chance. But that doesn't sound like you. You never wanted kids anyway.

You're boss at work now. Not the big boss but one of the second-in-commands. There are three of you; the other two are men. No one really likes you; they think you're cold and short-tempered, which is fair enough. You've got no time for nice. Nice is what gets you into trouble.

*I was saying to Shari the other day, this really has to stop. Because it's a bad reflection on the entire department. If we can't fire him, if we can't demote him or otherwise get rid of him—and I know, for obvious reasons—we need to at least have someone else clearing those purchase orders. Do you not agree? Give him something else to do. Maxine needs help down in Compliance, I'm sure she won't mind—and even if she does, she owes me.*

You're still an avid reader—it's one of the few things you still enjoy. But you've got no patience for the movies. Turn on the TV and your mind automatically starts wandering. You hate

those cooking shows, the holiday baking competitions they always run around Christmas. Everyone's so fake and shrill. At least reading a book is a quiet activity. You're finding your hearing's become more sensitive as you've gotten older. Maybe you've got tinnitus.

The people at work throw you a fiftieth birthday party. Participation feels enforced, but they're friendly enough. The cake's from DuMouchelles—it probably ran the company three hundred bucks. You spend the hour nursing a chardonnay in a plastic cup and making yourself smile at the speeches and well-wishes. Then you go home and get good and drunk.

That old serape is still hanging on the living room wall. You could afford nicer, but you're too lazy—too busy, too lazy. You could afford a nicer place overall, now that you're earning the big money. A full-fledged house instead of these six tiny rooms.

But you like it. The place suits you, so you'll stay. You don't belong in a big house. You don't have enough to fill it up.

You're like a comet, drifting across space, away from the rest of us.

At fifty-five, your voice sounds raspy. You sound like a lifelong chain smoker, even though you haven't smoked since college. You're losing weight, too; your breasts have dropped a cup size. You feel like you're accelerating toward some terminal point in the future, a collision with destiny.

The good thing is now you can read in bars and cafés without men harassing you constantly. Though your eyes are crapping out, and you don't like the way your reading glasses make you look and feel old.

The men who do still come up to you are all invariably the same, shy guys in their twenties and early thirties looking for Mama to stroke their hair and make it better. Shy, but not around you. Women their own age scare them; they don't want to get married, not yet, they don't want kids, they don't even want to run the small risk of getting someone pregnant. And they don't have to worry about that with you, do they?

*Where's your girlfriend, is your girlfriend around?*

*I don't have a girlfriend. I had one but we broke up.*

*Aw, that's too bad. I'm sure you got plenty of backup, though. No? Cute boy like you?*

*I guess I'm just taking a break.*

*Don't take too much of a break. How old are you, twenty-five, twenty-six?*

*I'm twenty-four.*

*Oh God... I remember that age. Barely. Let me see your hand. You know I can read palms. Why are you shaking? Do I make you nervous?*

*Just... it tickles when you do that.*

*It tickles—I bet it tickles. Are you ticklish? Does it tickle when I do this?*

*Stop.*

*Okay, okay. Give me your hand back. Hey Donny, two more over here. One for me and one for my friend.*

*Oh, thank you.*

*Ah, it's nothing. I got nothing else to do with my money. Let's see... I like your hands. They're so big and strong. I like a man with big strong hands.*

*Thanks.*

*I should get it on a T-shirt. "I like a man with big strong hands." Joke. Anyway, let's look into your future. I see a long life—which isn't necessarily a good thing. It depends what you do with it. But you'll make good in the world, I can tell. I'm seeing happiness and good health and...*

*What?*

*Oo. Interesting. Are you a naughty boy? I think you are. I think that's what I'm seeing.*

*Yeah?*

*Right there... and there... and down there. Thanks Donny! You're a doll. Donny, this is... what was your name?*

*Mason.*

*Mason, that's right. He's my new gentleman friend. I'm just reading his palm. I can read yours later if you'd like. Donny's great, he's been here for twenty years.*

*Wow.*

*Long time. Since before you were born—or not quite. But let's go back to what we were doing. Oh, and cheers.*

*Cheers.*

*Good times. Here's to new acquaintances.*

You take his hand back, but now it's just to hold it. You're not even pretending to read his palm anymore.

*Thing is, Mason... do you mind if I ask you something?*

*No.*

*It's kind of a favor. This is embarrassing but. I took an Uber here and... my phone just ran outta charge. Would you mind—do you have a car?*

*Y-yeah.*

*Would you mind—we'll drink up here, and then would it be too much trouble if you gave me a ride home? It's just about a mile away, take you five minutes.*

*Oh, okay.*

*Five minutes tops, probably more like three. If you've got time, you can come up for a quick nightcap. I've got this really good brandy I've been saving since last Christmas. How's that sound?*

*Sure, fine.*

*Oh, good. That makes life so much easier for me. Cuz I've got a car, but my car's in the shop. You know how it is. You sure it's no trouble?*

*It's no trouble at all.*

*Good. We'll just drink up. Take your time—I've got a few drops left. The drinks are always so small in this place. Are you normally a beer drinker?*

*Yeah, sometimes.*

*Sometimes. I like you, kid. You've got a good head. And so handsome.*

*Thank you.*

*No, thank you. Thank you for doing me this favor. I'll have to think of some way to repay you.*

*You don't have to repay me.*

*No, I want to. I'm always good at settling my debts. "Neither a borrower nor a lender be." That's Shakespeare—one of my mother's favorite quotes, God rest her soul.*

*Your Mom's not...?*

*Oh, God, no. My mother's been dead for years. How old do you think I am?*

*Oh I- I don't...*

*If you had to guess.*

*I can't.*

*No? Want me to tell you?*

*If you want. You don't have to.*

*Would you believe fifty-seven? That's old, right?*

*It's not so old.*

*Come on, it is. It's okay. Because you know, they say women get better with age.*

*Yeah?*

*I mean, that's just what they say. I wouldn't know. Donny, we're leaving. This is for you.*

*Be good, hon.*

*Don't forget your book.*

*Oh, right. Didn't get much reading done. But this is better.*

*And he takes you home. Rare exception, though.*

Periods of loneliness, periods of not much happening. At dark moments you realize you're almost sixty and still can't picture anyone coming to your funeral. Fifty didn't sound old, but sixty *sounds* old. More and more you regret the past. You should be a grandmother by now. You've had your chances and you screwed them up. Why does everything always have to be a struggle with you? You could've been nicer, more patient. Now you're just a drunk old woman staring at her bloodshot eyes in the mirror.

Sixty's depressing as advertised. A doctor asks you if you have someone to drive you to chemotherapy, and you just shrug.

*Why have you come here?*

*I don't know. I was walking past the other day and... I've always been curious.*

*Do you not regularly go to church?*

*Oh, no. I haven't been to church since I was twelve years old, not counting weddings and funerals.*

*And any particular reason?*

*No particular reason. I just...*

*Yes? It's Kathleen, isn't it?*

*Kate. Did I say Kathleen? Sometimes I'm Kathleen, sometimes I'm Kate, sometimes I'm Katie.*

*Whatever you're most comfortable with.*

*You'd think by my age I'd know.*

*Some people call me Philip, others call me Phil.*

*What do I call you, Pastor Phil?*

*I'm fine with just Phil. I'm not technically a pastor. I'm the vicar here.*

*See, I don't know these things. I don't know anything about it. My parents made me go to church until I was twelve and that was it.*

*What made you stop?*

*I guess it didn't really speak to me at the time. I didn't want to hear about it. I was young and stupid and my mind was in the clouds. And then when I got to be older...*

*Take your time.*

*When I got to be older.*

*Just when you're ready.*

*I'm sorry. When I got to be older, I thought I knew everything. I thought I was heaven sent. I guess I had quite the big ego. You couldn't get close to me back then. I didn't have room for anyone else in my life.*

*You've never been married?*

*Not married, no kids. I'm a one woman show.*

*Any close friends?*

*Heh. I know people, if that's what you mean. If I want to go out to dinner and I don't want to sit by myself, I can usually find a date. I've just had a hard time sustaining relationships. I get impatient with people, you know? They get on my nerves. I'm not a very tolerant person, and I wanna change that. I don't want this to be it for the rest of my life.*

*Take your time.*

*I'm sorry.*

*It's okay. We can just sit. Just sit until you're ready.*

*I know I've been a jerk. There's a word for people like me—I probably shouldn't say it in church, but I'm sure you know. And now I'm sixty-three, and I'm thinking... is it too late? I want to be a nicer person, it just doesn't come naturally to me. And I almost feel...*

*Yes?*

*That I'm not worth it. Not worth saving, that is. Not worth giving a second chance. It's like when I look back on it, what I've done and the person I've been... it's unforgivable.*

*God always forgives if you come to him with an open heart.*

*Yeah? Well that's good to hear. Cuz what I really need is a do-over. A full reset. All debts forgiven.*

*Here.*

*Thanks. Heh. Not that easy, though, right?*

You don't go back. They call a few times, send you a pamphlet or two in the mail, and eventually give up. It's the way of everything with you.

Seventy and yelling at parking meters. You can't get the goddamned thing to turn. Keeps getting jammed.

At least you still get out, at least you still drive. People look at you and think you're fifty-five, sixty at the oldest. You've got a grip on things.

You can feel yourself drifting away, about to be shot into space. You wonder if this is it, the final lap. Next time you'll be better. Next time you won't make it so hard for other people. You're looking forward to being a child again.

Remember being young and small? How people always stared at you with that admiring smile. They saw something in you, something special. And you had those stiff black shoes with the one inch heel that you wore to fancy dinners. Your poor father thought the world of you. It was enough just to smile, just to smell good. You didn't have to *do* anything to win approval. You were an object, a holy relic. You played girls' softball all the way through tenth grade.

In the past now, slipping away. Seventy-five can't come quickly enough.

Maybe you'll be reborn as a constant beam of light.

Next time you'll be a man, or a meek submissive woman. You'll know your place. You won't talk back. You'll do everything you're told.

The lamp on the nightstand hasn't moved in twenty years. When did you stop dusting? And how hard is it to get decent lox in this town?

*Hey sugar, hey looker. Did you just touch my behind? Caught you with your pants down, didn't I? But that's okay—Mama understands. You don't need to look so nervous. Why don't you just follow me up these stairs... and into this room... that's good. That's a good boy.*

Or sometimes you don't say anything. You just look at your hands. You're seventy-eight, but your hands look ninety-seven.

*How are you, Katie? How you doing this morning? Looks like you've got your water. You need anything? If you want breakfast, you better order now—the kitchen's gonna close in twenty minutes.*

*Nothing.*

*You're not hungry? Maybe a little oatmeal. You like oatmeal. Why don't I order you some oatmeal, and you can have a few bites of it. I'll make sure they don't make it too hot. It's not good not to eat anything. Where's your magazines—you want your magazines?*

*No. I want a bath.*

*You want a bath? We can do a bath. Let me find some help. We'll do your hair too. You look so pretty when we do your hair.*

*I'm pretty?*

*You're very pretty, Katie. You're beautiful.*

*Oh, no.*

*You are, you are! With a little makeup.*

*I used to be beautiful.*

*I know, I've seen the pictures. You were... a hot little minx.*

*Oh, no.*

*Gave the men trouble.*

*No, no.*

*You did!*

*Some of them.*

*Some of them, right.*

The distant buzz of the television. You can barely see without your glasses, just shapes and blurs. Your eyes are ancient. Your eyes are eighty years old.

You used to be someone else. Now you feel like you're almost there. You need to get ready. You have so much to do.

Maybe it'll be easy. You think it will be. At least you think it won't be too hard.

Everything gets lost, forgotten. You can't hold onto a thought for more than a few seconds. But you like it when people talk to you. And here you thought you'd die old and alone.

( )

Come with me. We're going away now. We've stayed long enough.

Outside there are cigarette butts and coffee cups, a cat carcass, a page from a newspaper three days old. But no one reads newspapers anymore.

What happened to all the *things* in the world?

We used to think time came in endless supply. We could waste an entire year and it wouldn't matter.

But now it's running out. Think of all the things you're going to miss.

Outside there's a street, a straight state highway with no breakdown lane, just a thin gravel edge. And a marsh by the side of the street that sometimes floods the road.

It's taking us away.

You've been good for hanging on so long. We've all been so good.

What do you wish? I wish there were more doors in the world. Even doors that go nowhere. Those are the best doors of all.

When I was a very little boy, eight, nine years old, I thought I was so cute. I thought I was really something. I had shoes and pants and shirts to match. My mother liked to dress me in turtlenecks. And I was obsessed with myself! I thought I could get by on good looks alone. I'd stand naked in the bathroom and just stare at myself in the full length mirror.

I liked having a penis. It looked like it meant something.

I guess I'm the same person now.

Outside there's a boy staring at the clouds through the window of the backseat of his parents' car. Though maybe that's not really "outside."

We only want good things for people. We want to do no harm. Maybe we should've been a doctor.

Can you get the lights? I think I left one on in the other room.

When I was a very little boy, the things I said were so charming. I was witty beyond my years. Adults looked down at me and smiled and laughed. Older women pinched my butt and I knew enough to get a hard-on.

Wind in the trees, heavy. Leaves full of rain. There are places in the world where you can run and run and no one can stop you.

Wouldn't you just love to do everything?

But that's what sociopaths think. So maybe we're a sociopath. Overall we'd rather be a sociopath than a psychopath. Sociopaths at least *mean* well.

Have you enjoyed your time here on Planet Earth? Planet Earth would like to thank you for stopping by. Thank you for not littering too much. Thank you for only being angry sixty percent of the time.

Outside there's sky and quiet and dusk.

Stay with me until the light fades. Don't you love it when everything's purple, and the air feels thick? But it's so much better with you here. You're a good friend. I love your voice, and the way you sit with your feet tucked under your legs. The sound your hair makes when I run my fingers through it. I could never describe that sound—it's beyond my capacity as a creative artist. And how you eat an apple—I usually hate it when people eat apples, but you do it right. You do everything right.

Can I kiss you? I even love it better when we *don't* French kiss, when we just use our lips. Not that I don't love it when we French kiss, but you give such nice, tight, closed-mouthed kisses. I'm trying to compliment you, and I guess it's coming out wrong.

After all this time, I still don't know who you are. Maybe we're the same person.