

GRAVITY FAILS

by

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ABSTRACT

Gravity Fails is a collection of four short stories and two memoirs that explore the ways in which characters adjust and fit into to a world that is destructive, fragmented and sometimes alien. Many of these pieces deal not with the moment of crisis, but with the aftermath. In "Gravity Fails," the young Danielle struggles to feel safe after the violent murder of her mother. Eliza Morrison negotiates the disappearance of her husband in "More Colors." "Following Rebecca" chronicles a woman's return to normalcy after her alcoholic husband divorces her.

These characters are not happy; they are not healthy. Their lives have, in some way, been fragmented. But they find ways to move on by whatever possible means, and at their core, they are searching not just for a way to survive, but for a way to put themselves back together and find wholeness.

For Tara

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GRAVITY FAILS

Sometimes she ties herself to trees. She gags herself with knee socks. She pretends she's a slave. Sometimes she wonders what it would be like to have nails driven through her palms.

In May of her fourteenth year, a full two years after she stopped sleeping, Danielle and her father moved away from Dayton, Ohio in order to escape the memories associated with Danielle's mother's death. They ended up in Antioch, a small farming town in Maryland marked by its two-lane highway, which lay just past the edge of their front yard. Corn grew beyond the backyard fence, and the high school boasted only five hundred students. The only restaurants were a McDonald's and a mom and pop diner called Rich and Sue's. The diner served stuffed pork chops and open-faced turkey sandwiches with a fluorescent, unnaturally thick gravy. Danielle wasn't a picky eater, but McDonald's made her sick, and Rich and Sue's cooking frightened her more than a little. She would've given just about anything for a Taco Bell – something open later than ten.

After two months in the new house, Danielle's father gave her a telescope before leaving for work in the morning.

“You can probably see a lot with this out here away from the city.” He stirred powdered creamer into his coffee.

“What should I look for?” She opened the box and slid the scope out, holding it by the fat red barrel.

“Whatever you want, honey. It’s a good night hobby though. It should help keep you busy on nights when you can’t sleep. Don’t you think?”

Danielle shrugged. “Sure. Thanks.”

His lips puckered as he tried to drink the coffee, which was still too hot. Her father’s routine was the same every morning. He shuffled out of bed, eyes squinting against the light, and poured his first cup of coffee half-blind. She had learned back in seventh grade, back before her father forced her into home-schooling, how caffeine affected the body. She observed her father’s response to his daily dose—he smiled and moved more quickly as his capillaries expanded and blood flow increased. Sometimes Danielle wanted to snatch that part of her father that longed to crawl back into bed and save it for her own use.

Danielle didn’t have much interest in the telescope, but it gave her an excuse to sit out on the deck in the middle of the night. For the longest time, her father had forbidden her from going outside at night. But the telescope meant that he was willing to give her more freedom. She was, after all, not a child anymore. She had become, as he liked to say, a “young adult.”

That night, even though she had no intention of looking at the stars, Danielle set up her telescope. It was August, and the temperature didn't dip below eighty-five all night long. Danielle wore red shorts and a tank top. Her feet were bare. She stood next to the deck railing where she'd placed the scope. It wasn't the darkest night – the sky was clear and the full moon allowed her to see the willow tree at the back of the yard and beyond it the fence and the first rows of corn. She moved past the telescope and went to the steps leading down to the back patio. Hesitating for a moment, she wondered if having the telescope gave her permission to go into the yard itself. She had, to some extent, internalized her father's irrational fear that something unexpected would happen. Maybe she would fall and break a bone in the middle of the night and be unable to rouse him with her frantic yells. Or maybe someone would wander into the back yard and murder her. His over-protectiveness smothered her sometimes, but she knew where her father's fear came from. Loss.

She stood at the top step, imagining herself stumbling in the dark on the fifth stair and pitching over onto the cement below. She would certainly break an ankle, or perhaps a wrist, trying to stop her fall. She'd lie at the foot of the steps in agony, unable to even muster the strength to yell. She'd be trapped – a prisoner, bleeding, easy prey. She squinted, trying to feel it, the rough cement abrading her shoulders, the hot throb of a broken limb, and then bounded down the steps.

The back yard was a lot bigger than the fenced-in square they'd had behind their townhouse in Ohio. Her father told her it was nearly an acre. What they needed it for,

Danielle didn't know. Her father had planted tomatoes the week they arrived, wanting to take advantage of the new yard. And also to remind himself of her mother. But he'd planted them right near the house, by the concrete foundation. And along the chain link fence between the front and back yard, he'd planted tiger lilies and snap dragons. By the end of June, tomatoes crowded their vines and the flowers bloomed, the abundance crowded up next to the house, leaving the nearly one-acre yard with nothing more than browning grass, a dilapidated shed, and a young maple in the very back by the fence.

As Danielle advanced to the edge of the patio, curling her toes over the edge of the concrete, she saw a glowing red dot at the edge of the corn. It moved horizontally, bobbing up and down just a bit. Then it rose in an arc, glowed brighter, and fell again. Danielle took a step into the grass and then froze. A person with a cigarette walked along the edge of the cornfield. Danielle squinted, trying to make out details, but got nothing more than the burning cigarette. Soon the person had traveled the length of the yard and disappeared around the edge of the corn field. Danielle jogged to the back fence and stood by the maple, slightly out of breath. She inhaled, trying to get a whiff of the cigarette smoke, but it had already dispersed. She moved to climb the fence and then stopped. Leaving the yard with no shoes seemed like a bad idea. Instead, she stood at the fence for an hour, her back straight against the trunk of the maple tree, her hands around the back of the trunk, as if hand-cuffed there.

The following night, Danielle set up her telescope at two o'clock and left it sitting by itself in the dark. She wore a pair of old red Chucks with jeans shorts and a black tee shirt with the sleeves cut off. Sweat beaded on her neck in the August heat as she crossed the yard. In the distance, past the corn field and the woods beyond, heat lightning jabbed at the clouds.

Danielle hopped the low, rusted wire fence that ran across the back of the yard. The corn loomed three feet in front of her, the sweet scent a wall almost as tangible as the plants themselves. She crossed the path and stepped into the corn, slowly moving back, two, three, four rows. Facing the path, she waited for the nightwalker.

From the cornfield, Danielle's house lost its defining features in the darkness, becoming a solid shape, solitary. From her vantage point, it seemed like the only house in the world. She stared at the brick edifice until her eyes blurred. Her hands tightened around stalks of corn, cool, green. As her fingernails sank into the flesh of the plant, cool green juice bled out of the stalks. In the breeze, the long flat leaves of the corn abraded her face and arms. If only they were sharper.

The house had become a dark, blurry hulk in her vision. But she knew its fragility. She knew what most people did not. Gravity could stop working. A single step could propel her skyward, with nothing to stop her. The house would drift apart slowly, dissolving into space with the rest of the earth. People would float by each other waving, suffocating, as the world's oxygen dispersed. She'd seen it happen before – or something like it. Solid things end – certainties are illusions. Mother.

Footsteps. Danielle closed her eyes and opened them, focusing in close on the path in front of her. She held her breath, listening to the soft, slow padding of the approaching nightwalker. After a moment, Danielle caught sight of the cigarette's glowing cherry through the straight rows of corn. This time the smoke drifted on the breeze past her face and she caught a lungful of it. She licked her lips as the figure passed directly in front of her, completely unaware of being watched. Danielle's heart quickened. Her father would burst a blood vessel if he knew she had willingly come so close to making contact with a stranger in the middle of the night. Danielle stretched out her arm toward the passing nightwalker, wondering what would happen if she made contact.

In the dark, Danielle could just barely make out the curve of breasts as the nightwalker went by. Immediately, Danielle wanted to know the woman—her age, her name, her city of birth, her marital status, everything. The footsteps faded on the path. Danielle stepped out of the corn and stood in the path where the woman had been. She knelt and ran her fingers over the powdery dirt. It didn't seem right that the corn should be so green while the dirt was so dry.

Inside, Danielle closed her bedroom door and lay on the bed. She yawned and arched her back. Fatigue pulled at her eyelids and she let them fall shut, hoping sleep would come. But as soon as her eyes closed, she floated, drifting off her bed toward the ceiling, which had come loose from the house's frame. She groped for the ceiling which remained just past her reach as both she and it tumbled into empty space. Her body

picked up speed as she rose out of the house and into the night air. She fell upwards, watching, as below her trees, grass, and chunks of pavement from the street dislodged themselves from the surface of the Earth. She groped for something, anything to anchor her. Debris sped past her, always inches from her fingers. Her body contracted as everything solid and real evaporated into nothing.

Danielle's eyes snapped open and she sat up, clutching the sheets. She glanced at the clock.

"Fuck," she whispered, her heart pounding. "Only three minutes." Falling asleep so quickly and coming awake after such a short time always left her dizzy and a little nauseated. After watching random neon polygons form and dissipate in front of her face for a few minutes – a sure sign she absolutely needed sleep – she pulled one of her pairs of Sonny's Surplus gunmetal handcuffs from under her mattress and lay them on her pillow. Her father didn't know she had them – had taken a pair away from her in Ohio when he caught her handcuffed to the bed one morning, sound asleep. But they weren't hard to get, and she needed them.

She removed the terrycloth tie from her bathrobe and bound her feet with it, making the knot tight, but easy to undo. She lay back and pulled the blankets up over her head. In the warm cocoon of her bed, she snapped the handcuffs onto both wrists and closed her eyes. Soon the heat under the covers stifled her. She writhed for a moment against her bonds, but they were secure. Satisfied, she went still, and burning, she slept, dreaming in high definition. She held a green bell pepper in her hand, cold

and crisp, and sank her thumbs into it, tearing it open. Green mist burst onto her face, and she took a bite of the bitter seeded heart. And then she awoke, three hours gone in a moment.

On Saturdays, Danielle's father slept in, and she cooked pancakes, maple sausage, and eggs for him. He usually emerged around ten, still in need of coffee despite the extra sleep. The Saturday after the cigarette had floated along the edge of the corn, her father awoke in an especially good mood. He ate his breakfast in large, lusty bites. A shiny bit of pancake syrup dribbled down his chin.

"So how's the telescope working out? Seen anything cool?"

"Mars."

"Yeah?"

Danielle nodded, pinched the end off her sausage, and placed it in her mouth.

"Well? What'd it look like?"

"It's like the moon, but red. And further away. It's neat."

"Maybe you can show me tonight."

She shrugged and got up to put her dish in the sink. "Sure. If you want."

"Have anything planned today?"

Danielle finished rinsing her plate and set it on the counter. Without facing her father, she said, "I was thinking of taking a walk in the cornfield."

"What? Why?" His fork hit the plate with a loud clatter.

She didn't answer right away. In the sink, she wound the washcloth tight around her wrist. "I don't know. I've seen people walking around the edge. I think it's a place people take walks.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?" Her hand darkened, and she relaxed the dish rag just a little.

Her father sighed. "It's private property. I just don't think you should go wandering on someone's private property, okay?"

"Sure. Whatever."

He was silent for a moment, and then she heard him eating again. She turned and leaned on the counter, staring down at yellow, ringed coffee stains on the white Formica.

He glanced up at her. "Hey. Why don't we go to the movies or something? We can go to the late show. What do you think?"

"Sure. Sounds good." She forced a smile. He liked to stay up late with her on Saturdays. He usually lasted until two or three before apologetically retreating to his bedroom. Danielle appreciated the gesture, but wished he would stop. She cherished the night as the only time she could be free of his constant supervision.

Of all of her father's parenting quirks that had developed since her mother's death, hiring someone to stay with her during the day stuck out as the most humiliating. It was bad enough that he made her home school with a tutor. He insisted

it was because she couldn't be expected to maintain a normal schedule with her insomnia, but she knew it was more about keeping her in the house than anything else. That she almost understood. But for her father to employ what amounted to nothing more than a babysitter seemed extreme.

The woman he'd found when they moved to Maryland attended an art school in Baltimore in the evening and had her days free. She was taller than Danielle and prettier. Her auburn hair never became frizzy when it rained, blemishes never dotted her skin, her teeth stood in straight white rows, and her body fit perfectly into size six jeans. Sometimes Danielle's father looked at Jerri like she was a plate of barbecue chicken.

Danielle resented the supervision, and Jerri seemed to know it, so she left Danielle to herself. Sometimes they went to the town pool or to the mall, but for the most part, Jerri worked in her drawing book and Danielle stayed in her room. Danielle didn't want to acknowledge that her father had arranged child care for her, and she suspected Jerri, whose previous charges had been toddlers, understood Danielle's embarrassment.

As a result, Jerri afforded Danielle plenty of alone time. Sometimes Danielle would spend it reading or shooting hoops in the driveway, but more often she'd lock herself in her bedroom and pretend she belonged to an evil Sultan who wore outrageous red satin pants. He treated her horribly and kept her deep in his castle under lock and key. Guards armed with scimitars stood by the door. The Sultan kept

her on a bed, fastened to the wall with leather cuffs. His cruelties were many, but he did afford her a few luxuries. The leather cuffs were lined with fur for her comfort, and he always brought her cream puffs and sweet coffee before unleashing his own hungers on her.

Sometimes the figure of the Sultan shifted in her fantasy. He might be an ancient vampire or a medieval queen. Once the figure was a blue-skinned demon with fangs and a tail. But one thing was always constant in her afternoon daydreams: she had no hope of escape.

Four nights later, Danielle sat on the deck in the late afternoon reading a fat Stephen King novel, when movement at the edge of the cornfield caught her eye. The corn in one of the rows parted, and a woman emerged with a bulky burlap sack. Danielle rose, setting aside her book, and stood by the railing, watching.

The woman dropped the sack and reached into her front shirt pocket, producing a pack of cigarettes. Danielle skipped down the stairs and stood on the patio watching the woman as she placed one in her mouth and struck a match. She wore badly faded jeans, threadbare at the knee, and a button-up, long-sleeved shirt. Danielle fingered her own shorts and imagined sweat dripping down the woman's back. She took a step forward and then stopped. The woman stowed her lighter and cigarettes and hefted the sack over her shoulder. She looked like she was about to leave, but she paused for a moment.

Before starting off, she turned her head very slowly. Danielle thrust her hands behind her back, clenching her left wrist with her right hand. The woman's gaze stopped on Danielle. Danielle blinked. Behind her eyelids, she saw herself standing at the back of the yard by the fence with her palm raised, just inches from the woman's palm, as tiny bolts of lightning arced between their fingertips. In the electric light, the woman's dark auburn hair flickered in the breeze, but her green eyes remained solid, steady, as if composed of polished glass. They saw things Danielle could not. Danielle inhaled ozone and opened her eyes. The woman's gaze lingered for a moment, and then she looked away, took a puff off her cigarette, and trudged off down the path toward the edge of the corn.

Danielle's father arrived home at ten-thirty, tired and guilty over having left Danielle at home alone so long. That always meant he'd be a complete jackass for the rest of the night and then buy her something on his lunch break the next day. The last time he'd come home late she'd gotten season two of *Buffy* on DVD, which she watched in one fifteen-and-a-half-hour sitting that ended with a two hour crying jag. After he barked at her for leaving the front door unchained, and then complained that she hadn't done near enough homework, she became excited at the thought she would soon be watching *Buffy* season three.

Danielle paced the kitchen waiting for him to finish wolfing down his dinner and stalk off to bed. In most instances, Danielle could tune her father out if she wanted to

focus on something else. But as she tried to focus on her brief encounter with the nightwalker, her father spoke in fast, loud bursts, breaking her concentration.

“And my boss expects me to be like Blaine. He asks me constantly to come in on Saturdays even though he knows I’ll always say no. Then he makes some off hand comment about how Blaine closed some deal or scored some big new lead. He’s a complete prick.”

“Sorry, Dad. That sucks.”

Then nothing. More chewing. More scraping of stainless steel on Pfalzgraff. More tapping of his sole on the linoleum. The nightwalker wore strange clothes for the summer – why the long pants and sleeves? Maybe to protect her from the corn. Danielle wanted to see her fingernails. They were probably dirty and jagged, and her fingers were probably yellow from smoking. It seemed obvious she was the owner of the corn, the keeper of the rows. A person like that had to have strong, fluid fingers. She could probably tie a mean knot.

By midnight, Danielle’s father had finally stormed off to bed. After getting him tucked in and settled, she headed out to the deck to wait for the nightwalker. She brought two bungee cords with her, wrapped around her hips and hooked at her pelvis.

Normally, Danielle didn’t mind being inert. Insomnia demanded she tolerate long hours of inactivity. But tonight the waiting seemed impossible. She paced for a while and then actually looked into her telescope. She didn’t have any idea what to look

for so she focused in on the obvious target – the moon. She easily made out some of the moon’s topography, and for a fleeting moment she considered going inside to check the Internet for lunar viewing tips, but immediately dismissed the idea. Going inside would cause her to miss her window entirely.

Instead she walked down to the back of the yard a full forty-five minutes early and fastened herself to the maple, the bungee cords tight around her waist. A few bugs, likely ants, crawled over her feet and up her ankles, but she didn’t move. The gentle, constant breeze caressed her skin, and she could almost imagine she was on an island somewhere in the Pacific – a small one very far away from industrialization. A bamboo house filled with coconuts and banana stood on one side of the island. On the other side sat a monstrous rack that she could be suspended from, arms and legs pulled tightly apart while the nightwalker brought laundry from the house and pinned it to a clothesline pulled taut between two trees.

Danielle’s head sagged for a moment, her eyes falling shut. She was in a bright, concrete wasteland. A faceless woman walked between two columns of naked, sexless people with hands the size of baseball mitts. As she progressed, some of them reached out to touch her. Soon they all wanted to touch her. Hands grazed her shoulder, her hip, her face. Then the hands began to grab. One pinched her arm off. Another came away with a solid chunk of thigh. Again and again, giant hands removed bits and pieces of the woman until she fell to the ground. The figures crowded around her. Blood pooled

on the concrete, and soon the red, advancing in thick rivulets, pooled around Danielle's feet and soaked into the grass, pressing toward the roots of the maple.

Danielle snapped her head up and bumped it on the tree trunk. Her heart pounded, and her hands shook. She groped at the bungee cords. They were still secure. Her breath slowed. She blinked a few times and wiped a slick of sweat off her brow. From around the corner of her fence, the nightwalker drew near, her glowing cigarette bouncing up and down in the dark.

Danielle watched her approach. The nightwalker passed.

"Hey."

The woman stopped and turned slowly, squinting into the darkness at Danielle. She took a puff off her cigarette and then dropped it in the path, mashing it with her foot. She came up to the fence and leaned on it. "I saw you today."

Danielle flashed back to the vision she'd had of the nightwalker staring into her with her hard, green eyes, and shivered. "Yeah. I was up on the patio."

"What're you doing out here so late?"

"I have a telescope." Danielle fidgeted with the hooks on the bungee cords, trying to release them without the nightwalker noticing she was tied to the tree.

The nightwalker leaned over the fence, looking at the ground. "Where?"

Danielle quickly unhooked the bungee cords and moved toward the fence, her hands behind her back. "It's up on the deck."

"Does your mom know you're still up?"

"She's dead."

"Oh."

Danielle squeezed her wrist behind her back and felt her hand go hot as the blood collected in her fingers.

"I'm sorry," the woman said, digging into her shirt pocket for another cigarette.

Danielle didn't say anything.

The woman held out her pack of cigarettes. "Do you smoke?"

"No."

The woman shrugged and lit up. "You should probably get to bed."

"I don't really sleep. Not much."

"You too? I can't ever really get to bed before four or five, myself."

The woman took a drag from her cigarette, exhaled two columns of smoke through her nostrils, and turned her head sideways, glancing back toward the rows of corn.

"Can you show me where you walk every night?" Danielle asked.

"I just circle the fields. It helps me clear my head."

"Oh." Danielle released her wrist and put her hands on the fence, the left one tingling as the blood flow normalized. Over the woman's shoulder, lightning bugs brightened and then dimmed in the tall trees past the corn.

"They're your fields?"

"Yep."

“Neat.”

“Not really.”

“Oh.”

The woman turned toward the corn. She raised her hand and pinched one of the leaves. “It’s rough. The leaves can cut you if you aren’t careful.”

“I know.” Danielle crossed the fence slowly, hoisting one leg up and over and then the other. She dragged the edge of a corn leaf across the pad of her index finger, leaving a tiny cut. She held it up for the woman to see.

Blood beaded. The sky behind them lit up with heat lightning. Danielle put her finger in her mouth and tasted salt and iron.

As the woman turned to go, she glanced over her shoulder. “Come on,” she said. “I’ll show you the way.”

It turned out there were actually two cornfields. One sloped upward away from the house, and the second sloped down the other side, touching the first only at the northern corner. The path wound around both in a figure eight, and after two laps, Danielle and the woman lay on the path between the back of the second cornfield and the tree line. Frogs croaked their mating songs. A rock poked Danielle’s spine. She shifted a little, moving in such a way that left her bare shoulder in contact with the woman’s flannel shirt.

“So you moved in just a month or so ago, right?”

“Uh huh.” Danielle bit her finger.

“Have you been up to the school yet?”

“No.” Danielle paused and turned her head toward the woman. In the moonlight her profile glowed. “I don’t go to school. My dad gets me tutors.”

“Weird.”

They lay in the dirt in silence. Danielle’s head swam for a moment. She blinked, and the sky seemed to rotate. She bit her lip and wished that a wicket could be tapped into the ground over her wrists and ankles, and maybe one over her neck. The one over her left wrist could hold both hers and the woman’s down to the ground, keeping them both from falling into the black that hovered all around them.

The woman fumbled for a cigarette again. As she dug into her pants pocket for the lighter, her shoulder rubbed Danielle’s.

“My mom got murdered,” Danielle said.

The woman went still, and turned her head toward Danielle. She didn’t say anything at first. Slowly she removed her hand from her pocket, leaving the lighter there, and pulled herself up to a sitting position. “Shit,” she whispered.

Danielle rolled onto her side and remained silent for a moment. She picked at the woman’s bootlace, pulling the end until it untied, and then she wound it tightly around her index finger. “She was missing first. The police thought she left us, but Dad knew better.”

“God. What happened?”

“These guys at her work. They cleaned up at night and stuff. My mom complained that they left cigarette butts around and didn’t vacuum enough.” Danielle stared down at the woman’s boot and the tip of her finger, which looked like a dark, purple grape. She poked at the tread of the boot with the swollen end of her finger, and it throbbed as she picked mud out of the woman’s sole.

“They did it?”

“Yeah. They took her one night when she was working late. They kept her in their basement for three weeks. When they were done with her they dumped her body on the curb outside her office.”

“Holy fuck,” the woman said. She held Danielle’s hand in place and unwound her finger from the bootlace. A mosquito landed on Danielle’s hand just then. They both stared at it as it extended its proboscis and pierced her skin. A lock of Danielle’s hair fell into her face, but when she made a move to put it back behind her ear, the woman gripped her hand harder. The stray hair dangled as the mosquito drank, taking blood and leaving behind an itchy sting. The woman hooked the lock of hair with her index finger and tucked it behind Danielle’s ear. Gooseflesh rose on Danielle’s arms and legs as the rough skin of the woman’s finger brushed the tip of her ear. The mosquito drank. Danielle waited, biting her lip, tasting her own blood again. The woman’s fingers trailed away from her ear and traced her cheekbone, pausing at her lip. At the touch, Danielle relaxed her jaw and prodded the inside pulp of her lip with her tongue. She let

her eyes fall shut. The woman gripped her harder, and in a quick motion smacked the back of Danielle's hand, smashing the mosquito.

Danielle jumped but didn't withdraw her hand. "What's your name?" she whispered, trying to catch her breath.

"Melissa." Her grip on Danielle's hand relaxed. She touched her thumb to her tongue and used it to rub the mosquito off of Danielle's skin.

"I'm glad I met you," Danielle whispered.

"Me too."

Danielle rolled onto her back and let out a deep sigh. Her eyes burned, and after blinking a few times, her eyes remained closed. The back of her hand stung where Melissa had crushed the mosquito

Beside her, Melissa stood. "You look tired."

Danielle opened her eyes and sat up slowly. "Actually, I am a little." The moon had disappeared behind dark clouds.

"Let's get you home."

Melissa held Danielle's hand, helping her cross the fence into her yard. The leaves of the maple rustled as the breeze picked up.

Melissa looked up at the sky. "It's going to storm."

Danielle nodded. Melissa backed onto the path and turned to go as the first fat drops fell.

Inside, chilled from the light coating of rainwater, Danielle wrapped herself tightly in an afghan and lay on her bed. Her clock's bright LED display cast a red glow over the room. She stared at the numbers.

Lightning flashed outside, brightening her room for a second. She hoped Melissa had made it back to her house before the clouds had opened up.

Then the clock went dark and the steady hum of the air conditioner went silent. Rain continued to beat on the roof and windows, and as Danielle hunkered down into the afghan, the thunder rolled overhead. Her stinging eyes fell shut. Four and half hours later, Danielle's eyes opened on a room full of sunlight for the first time in two years.

The next day, Danielle asked Jerri if she could go out for a walk. Her father probably wouldn't have allowed it, but Jerri simply said, "Be back before your dad gets home."

Instead of going out back, Danielle went out the front door and walked up the road to Melissa's house. It was a white house with green trim and a splintery swing on the porch. The steps creaked as she went up to the door. Melissa's boots sat by the door, and faint music played somewhere deep inside. The screen door wasn't quite shut, and Danielle took a step forward, looking inside.

A coat rack draped with flannel shirts and ball caps stood just inside. A hallway ran out of the foyer back toward the kitchen where Danielle could see a wooden trestle

table. A few dishes were out on top of what looked like junk mail. Danielle moved closer to the door and touched the screen. She ran her fingers along dry metal mesh and found herself wanting to retreat. Melissa, among the artifacts of home – furniture, mail, music – became suddenly fragile. Nothing contained in a box of wood and nails could be guaranteed. Melissa belonged among rows of corn, solid, strong.

Danielle slowly backed off the porch, glancing over her shoulder to avoid falling down the steps. Before she could be assaulted by a vision of the house dissipating into space, carrying Melissa away with it, she turned her back on the house and ran and didn't stop until she was in her bedroom.

Her chest heaved and sweat dripped down her back. She turned the lock on her door and tore into her sock drawer. She jammed a pair of ankle socks into her mouth, fastening them in place with a bandana drawn tightly over her mouth and tied behind her neck. Her eyes watered as she struggled to get enough air through her nostrils. Her hands shook as she whipped her bathrobe tie out of the loops and snatched her handcuffs from under the mattress.

Kicking her shoes off, she lay on the bed and looped her robe tie around her ankles, knotting it tight and then fastening it to a post on her footboard. She bit down hard on the sock in her mouth, grinding her jaw back and forth. After a quick glance at the nightstand to verify the handcuff keys were accessible, she fastened the cuffs on one wrist and lay back, looping the handcuff chain around her headboard pole and tightly cuffing the other wrist. She pulled against them briefly, the metal biting into her wrist,

and then yanked against the terry cloth tie around her feet, tightening the knot in the process. Every few seconds she spasmed again, testing her bonds. Slowly, her breathing went from desperate gasps to quick inhalations, and then evened off to deep, aching intakes of the stale air.

Visions of something dark with glowing eyes coming to split her in two faded into a sweaty, furtive dream of Melissa, arms like thick electrical cables wrapped around her, holding her fast. She stayed that way, fastened to her bed, secure, until she heard her father come through the front door.

That night Melissa brought a blanket with her. It was one-thirty when she arrived. She didn't say anything as Danielle climbed the fence and fell into step with her. She offered up her crumpled pack of cigarettes, Danielle shook her head, and Melissa put the pack back without lighting one. Lightning bugs flitted in the corn with bright, busy intention. Danielle and Melissa paused at the spot where they had lain the night before, and after a moment Melissa spread the blanket on the ground.

They stood on the blanket for a moment staring into the woods where the silent orchestra of lightning bugs was nothing short of spectacular. As Danielle stared, her eyes slipped out of focus and the sharp points of yellow light became fuzzy blurs. The humid air clung to her skin, and when Melissa put a hand on her elbow, a shiver shook her. Her knees weakened and buckled, and she collapsed onto the blanket. Melissa crouched slowly and lay on her side, gently pulling Danielle into the curve of her body.

Danielle sniffed, and her eyes filled with heat. Lightning arched overhead. Danielle clasped Melissa's hand and placed it between her breasts. Her heart strained for the touch, and Danielle cursed the flesh and bone between hand and heart. Melissa tightened her grip, and they closed their eyes. When the sun came up, drying the cool dew of the early morning, they were still asleep.

BROOM CLOSET SAINT

The music throbbed in The ER, a hole-in-the-wall dance club that used an EKG reading in its logo, but was really named for Eleanor Roosevelt. Madeline leaned on the bar, gazing out over the mass of dancing bodies.

“Hey, Maddie.” It was one of the bartenders—Jody. A friend. One of the few.

Madeline turned. “Jody. Hey. Don’t they ever give you a night off?”

“Hell no. They own my ass.” Jody handed Madeline a club soda. “So, you doing okay or what?”

“Yeah. I’m good. On the prowl as a matter of fact.” Madeline held her palm out. “Help an old lady out.”

Jody smirked and shook her head. “Old? Right. You don’t need any help from me.”

“Come on, Jody. Give it up. I’m in no mood.”

Jody stood firm.

“Why are you giving me crap tonight?”

Jody sighed, shaking her head. “I’m sorry... It’s just...”

“What?”

“I found some pictures this week—us at Rehoboth. You and me and Felice.”

Madeline closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Jody, that’s not fair.”

Jody stared at Madeline, her lips pressed together in a flat frown. After a few seconds she shook her head and pulled a key off her key ring and set it on the bar. "I'm sorry. But one of these days, you have to stop." Without a word, she turned her back on Madeline and wiped wet beer glasses with a rag.

Madeline tucked the key in her pocket. She looked down into her fizzy drink and then took a gulp. The bubbles burned as they tumbled down her throat.

Felice. Four years ago, Madeline and Felice had been in the yeasty warmth of Shell's Bakery on Georgia Avenue. In the middle of laughing, huddled in the booth together, feeding each other wispy pieces of croissant and sipping coffee, Felice's heart had stopped. It was a rare thing for someone so young. The EMT had said so after failing to revive her there on the brown-tiled bakery floor. Madeline could only stare, her mouth open, at her lover's unblinking eyes gazing at nothing.

Felice's death almost killed Madeline. It was the ring that saved her. After the funeral, Jody dug it out of the drawer in Felice's nightstand. Here, she'd said. Felice bought this for you a few months ago. She wanted you to know that you were hers forever, but she was working up the nerve to give it to you. Madeline bought a chain to wear the ring on. She wanted it close to her heart. For the first few months after Felice's death, Madeline would lie on her side in the center of their bed at night, pressing the ring to her chest, and stare at the wall with moist eyes. Gradually, simply wearing it

was enough. But when she started seeing women again, she took it off. She didn't want other women touching Felice's things.

The small dance floor was packed tight with bodies. Groups of women holding wet beer bottles clogged the bar, laughing, jabbing each other with amicable elbows. Easy seductions. Madeline's eyes swept the club for unfamiliar faces and found a small tangle of them at the end of the bar. College girls, it looked like. The ER attracted women from Catholic, James Madison, American, Howard, Maryland. There were five of them; two were a couple. Of the three singles, only one stood out as worth any attention. She was slim, with bright eyes and a short shock of spiky brown hair. It wasn't her looks so much as the way her hips worked to the music even though she was nowhere near the dance floor. And there was the smile, wide and easy on this girl's face – natural.

For a moment Madeline hesitated, wondering if perhaps this girl might deserve better than what she had to offer – sticky nights, late breakfasts, hot showers – a whirlwind and then over. It was a game. Madeline impressed women with her sculpted body, her upscale Church Street studio, her prowess in the kitchen, her prowess in the bedroom, and sent them home after a few weeks, reeling, pleasantly bruised, wondering what the hell had just happened.

But her hesitation evaporated, leaving resolve in its place. Madeline moved toward the group and pushed her way to the bar behind the girl, brushing against her

ass and thigh along the way. The girl turned at the touch. Madeline looked up into her face to find her still smiling. Placing her hand on the girl's arm she said, "Sorry. It's so crowded in here." Turning back to the bar, she motioned to Jody for another drink. With her back to the girls Madeline listened.

"Dolores is such a skanky bitch."

"You know she called me at midnight to invite me to her party."

"No shit."

"Yeah. We were in bed already. I was, like, why are you calling me so late? She was all, 'I thought you'd be up.' Whatever."

Madeline shook her head and turned again to find the girl still looking at her. Grinning, Madeline took a sip of her drink. The girl raised her eyebrows and jerked her head toward the dance floor. Madeline's eyes widened for a second. She didn't get asked to dance much. It wasn't that she wasn't attractive. She was. Silky hair, green eyes, a slim tight body. It was almost that she was too attractive – intimidating. And if someone did ask her to dance, it was never one of the college kids – they usually stuck to girls their own age. As a rule, Madeline preferred to do the asking. It set the stage for the rest of the night. But this girl had asked. Madeline figured she wouldn't end up taking this girl home – her boldness made her a less than ideal mark. Still, her bravery intrigued, and a dance or two wouldn't hurt. Placing her glass on the bar, Madeline nodded, hooked her pinky through the girl's belt loop and let herself be led into the throb of music and bodies.

The song wasn't the best for platonic dancing – a sluggish melody backed by a slow pounding bass . Madeline put her hand on the girl's hip and asked her name.

“Sarah,” she answered, using her fingers to move a stray lock of Madeline's hair out of her face and tuck it behind her ear. “You?”

They danced through one song, and then another. Madeline had considered breaking from Sarah at that point, but the girl could dance. She wasn't at all shy or reserved, and Madeline found herself unable to break away. Their hands strayed from hip to shoulder, to back, to neck. Fingertips eager to participate in the dance ached for bare skin. Sweat glossed their faces, necks, chests. Hands explored further and then gave way to arms, encircling, clutching. And still their hips moved with the music. Pressure. Eyes – roving, darting, open and then closed and then open again – found each other and became transfixed. Mouths shared breath. And still the music rained vibration on their skin. Heat. Their lips grazed. Once. Again. Madeline mused over how Sarah would look in the morning, her hair mussed, her naked body stretched out under the deep red sheets. It was an alluring prospect. Madeline toyed with the idea of bringing her home. The song faded and Sarah yanked Madeline out of her reverie, pulling her from the dance floor. “I'm thirsty,” she said.

Madeline stood at the bar with her arm around Sarah's waist, her thumb hooked in the top of Sarah's jeans while Sarah massaged the nape of Madeline's neck. Jody set a bottle of water on the bar. “So Maddie, who's your new friend?”

Sarah grasped Jody's outstretched hand as Madeline introduced them.

Jody leaned on the bar. "Sarah. What do you do?"

"I'm a junior at Catholic."

"A junior, huh?" She threw a glance at Madeline and then looked back at Sarah. Jerking her thumb toward Madeline she said, "Look out for this one, kiddo. She's a dirty old woman."

"God, I hope so," she said, pressing her free hand on Madeline's stomach. Madeline flinched. Sarah seemed to think she was an equal participant in this. Dancing with her had been a pleasant mistake, but it was time to end it and find someone else to take home .

Jody shook her head, a sour grin on her face. A woman further down the bar waved a twenty in the air and shouted, "I need a Sloe Comfortable Screw down here."

"Ah, duty calls. Nice meeting you, Sarah."

Sarah watched Jody leave and then turned to Madeline. "So. Did someone sleep with the bartender?"

"Jody's a friend."

Draping both arms over Madeline's shoulders, she asked, "Should I take her warning seriously?"

"Absolutely. In fact, if life was a porn flick, I'd have you in the broom closet already," Madeline answered, hoping to scare her off.

"Plus we'd have stockings, high heels, and a man in there with us jacking off."

Madeline chuckled and handed Sarah the bottle of water. She suspected Sarah didn't really know what she was in for. "Drink up. In real life, we have to dance for at least another forty-five minutes before we hit the broom closet."

Sarah laughed. "You're not getting me in any broom closet."

It was the response she'd been hoping for – the blow off would have been easy then. But her pride crept up on her. Her track record was perfect – she'd never failed to seduce a woman into a broom closet. The blow off would have to wait.

"I guess we'll see about that." She ran her index finger down Sarah's cheek to her chin and kissed her on the mouth. When their lips touched, Sarah closed her arms around Madeline, pulling her in close. She almost recoiled from the tight embrace, but Sarah's mouth tasted fresh and cool from the water. She couldn't remember kissing a woman in The ER who didn't taste like alcohol. Sarah's hand slipped up the back of Madeline's shirt, and Madeline finally pulled away. She put two fingers over Sarah's mouth, still half open, and said, "Save some. Dancing now."

Madeline pulled Sarah near one of the speakers, drowning out the opportunity for words. She suspected too much conversation with Sarah might put her in shaky territory – a place she hadn't been in since Felice, a place she never expected to go to again.

As they danced, the thump of the bass vibrated in their chests, in discord with the natural rhythms of their bodies – their heartbeats, their respiration. As one song bled into another, Madeline slipped slowly into the warm vapor of their movement.

Sarah had one hand planted in the small of Madeline's back and the other cupping the back of her head. Their foreheads touched, their lips hovering an inch apart. Madeline couldn't think – the music was too loud for forming words, even on the inside. But she felt. Sarah touching her stomach. Sarah's hands wandering up her shirt. Sarah holding her fast. It was time to take control.

Madeline leaned in, cupping her hand around Sarah's ear. She whispered, "Follow me."

They went down the dim corridor that housed the restrooms, one ostensibly a men's room, but really a backup women's room. A couple leaned against the wall, alternatively kissing and giggling, drunk. Laughter spilled out of the bathroom as the door opened and three girls tripped out into the hall, heading back to the bar. At the end of the hall Madeline led Sarah around the corner into a much shorter and darker corridor that housed two more doors.

"Where are we going?" Sarah whispered.

Madeline backed her against one of the doors. "Shhhhh.... It's okay." She kissed her throat and chin. Sarah tipped Madeline's chin up with her finger and kissed her, slipping her arm around Madeline's waist. Pulling back she whispered, "Why don't we get out of here?"

Madeline fumbled the key out of her pocket. "Don't need to."

"Where'd you get that? Your bartender friend?" Sarah stepped out of the way.

Madeline nodded and turned the key in the lock.

“The broom closet. I thought you were kidding.”

“Nope.” She reached out for Sarah’s hand. “Come on.”

“I don’t know. Why don’t we just…”

Madeline put her finger over Sarah’s mouth and kissed her cheek, her jaw, her neck. Sarah’s hands went up in defense, pressing against Madeline’s shoulders, insistent at first, and then less so. Madeline’s tongue, her teeth, teasing Sarah’s skin, coaxing soft moans from her throat. And when Madeline’s hand slipped up the front of her shirt, finding her breast, Sarah shuddered and whispered, “Okay, okay, stop. Not out here.”

Madeline smirked in the dim light and ushered Sarah into the room, throwing the deadbolt behind them. As she turned back, Sarah was there, amid the smell of antiseptics and wet mop, pushing her against the closed door and crushing her with kisses. Madeline’s sense of victory evaporated in the heat of Sarah’s aggression.

Sarah’s hands clutched at Madeline’s face and head, her fingers lost in Madeline’s soft brown hair. Her lips were generous, first on Madeline’s mouth and then drifting over her face and throat. She ran her hands down Madeline’s neck and shoulders to her hands and, clasping them, raised them above Madeline’s head and pinned them to the wall. Gooseflesh raised on Madeline’s arms as Sarah’s teeth grazed her neck. She reeled. Her abdomen fluttered and she gasped.

Madeline pushed away from the door and spun Sarah around, pinning her instead, holding her fast, not with her hands, but with the pressure of her body. She

locked her mouth over Sarah's and pulling her hips back a little, unsnapped Sarah's jeans and fumbled with the zipper. Sarah dropped her hands to Madeline's waist and un-tucked her shirt. Madeline pushed her hands away and shook her head, grinning. "No. My turn now." She grasped Sarah's face in her hands before she could protest and kissed her with more force than Sarah was probably used to. And then without a word she turned Sarah so she faced the door and from behind slid one hand down her open pants and the other up her shirt. Madeline rested her head on the nape of Sarah's neck and felt her chest rise and fall, slowly at first, and then faster, and then a sharp inhale. Madeline raised her head and watched Sarah's profile as she bit her lower lip to keep from making too much noise. Her eyes were squeezed shut, her face flushed, her palms pressed against the wall, and then the long exhale.

They stayed like that for a moment, Sarah breathing slowly again, her eyes closed. She licked her lips and opened her eyes, her lips curling into a lazy grin. She turned toward Madeline, her smile broadening. "Now you're mine."

She turned Madeline, pressing her to the wall, and unzipped her pants. Madeline closed her eyes and curled her hands into fists. Her muscles tightened in resistance. Sarah slipped Madeline's pants down past her hips and knelt, kissing her belly, her fingers hooking the elastic of Madeline's underwear. For a moment she let it happen—she let her eyes close, her tightened muscles relax. She let Sarah's lips move lower, she let her fingers drift through Sarah's hair. And in the relative quiet of the closet, she thought she might let Sarah have her. Once would be okay. Sarah slipped her

underwear down. Her breath and lips teased Madeline's thighs, as she slid her hand down to push her knees apart. Madeline told herself it was no big deal. She'd let Sarah do this at home, so why not here? Why not? For the first time she knew. Because she wanted it. She really wanted it. And to want it so much betrayed Felice. The thought of Felice, the stab of guilt, shook her from the moment. She lurched away from Sarah, falling sideways.

"Madeline?"

"Muscle cramp."

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Just need some water. All that dancing and the gym today... what can I say? I'm an old lady."

Sarah helped her to her feet and nibbled at her ear, whispering, "Don't worry. It happens to lots of girls."

"Ha. Ha." Madeline's hands shook. A close one. Too close. Time to ditch.

"Let's get out of here," Sarah whispered, her mouth still hovering over Madeline's ear. "We can pick this up later."

Madeline spoke, intending to blow Sarah off. Instead, she said "My apartment isn't far." She followed Sarah out of the club, picking up a glare from Jody as they passed the bar. If only Jody knew that, for the first time in four years, Madeline was not in the driver's seat.

The two emerged on the sidewalk, the chill night bracing their warm skin. Madeline licked her lips as Sarah's nipples hardened in the cold and wished for a split second that she'd let Sarah have her way in the broom closet. Something about Sarah encouraged recklessness. Maybe it was her seeming insistence that she deserved equal footing with Madeline – that she was entitled to it. Maybe Madeline was entitled to something also – something she'd been denying herself by strictly restricting herself to flings. This spiky-haired college girl, a decade her junior, had somehow needled into a part of her she'd locked away. Even as she followed Sarah into the taxi, she recoiled at the idea of bringing her home. It was the guilt again. Guilt because Sarah felt like more than a toy. Guilt because she didn't care.

Twenty minutes later Madeline sat next to Sarah in Chipotle with a burrito the size of a brick in front of her. Sarah handed her a bottle of water. "Hydration is the key to avoiding muscle cramps," she said in a mock soccer coach voice.

Madeline chugged a few swallows and looked down at the monstrous food item on her plate. "No forks?"

"You kidding? Hands are the only way to go." She picked up her burrito and bit the corner off. Holding her burrito up, she smiled as she chewed, nodding at Madeline's plate.

Madeline lifted hers, raised her eyebrows and wondered how she was going to maintain her sexy mystique while eating it. She took a ginger bite from one end and got mostly tortilla.

“No, no, no.” Sarah put her burrito down and wiped her chin with a napkin. You’ve got to overstuff your mouth with all the juicy goodness inside. Take a big bite.”

“Juicy goodness?”

“I know you’re familiar with the concept,” she said, squeezing Madeline’s knee under the table. “Now eat. Like a real person. You’re wasting away before my eyes.”

Madeline chuckled and took another sip of water. “All right. Here goes.” She grasped her burrito in both hands and took a bite off the end. Juice from the tomatillo salsa rolled down her chin. Sarah, quick with her napkin, dabbed up the liquid as Madeline chewed and swallowed. “Well?”

“Juicy goodness.” Madeline took another bite.

“Told you. I live on these things.”

And as they ate, they did something Madeline hadn’t done with a woman in a long time. They talked.

“Catholic University, huh?” Madeline squinted at Sarah.

“I’m not actually Catholic.” Sarah shrugged. “But they have a great theater program.”

“I’m Catholic.”

“No shit.”

“Not practicing. Obviously.”

“Bollocks.” Sarah hit the table with her fist. “You’re a saint. Saint Madeline of the Broom Closet.”

“Bollocks?” Madeline laughed. “Haven’t heard that since I was in Glasgow. You know it means ‘balls,’ right?”

Sarah laughed. “No. I didn’t. But I watch a lot of British television.”

“Ah.” Madeline nodded. “Peachy.”

“Peachy?”

“I’m old.”

“When were you in Glasgow?”

“Long story. Save it for tomorrow.”

Silence for a moment as they chewed, and then Sarah giggled to herself. “Wanna hear something funny?”

“What?” Madeline took a sip of water.

“I never told my friends I was leaving. They probably think I got kidnapped by some sex starved maniac. Oh. Wait. I did.”

“Hey now.” Madeline grinned and poked Sarah with her elbow. “Kidnapped. Jeez... Just when I was about to ask you how often you go out and seduce thirty-something women.”

“Seduced? As if I could.”

“You’d be surprised.” Sarah and Madeline’s eyes locked for a second and then Madeline looked away, her cheeks burning.

“I thought that was your gig.” Sarah picked at the label on the water bottle.

“I guess so.” Madeline took a bite of her burrito. The food thing had thrown her off. The routine she usually adhered to did not allow for pit stops, but it didn’t matter — the routine had gone to shit the second Madeline had agreed to dance with Sarah. Still. It hadn’t turned out all bad. And the pit stop wasn’t really the problem anyway.

“Can I ask you a personal question?” Sarah picked a green pepper slice out of her burrito and bit the end off.

“You can ask. I may or may not answer.”

“Do you have a thing with that bartender chick?”

Madeline laughed. “No, I was being straight with you at the bar. We’ve never had a thing. Why?”

“She seemed pissed at you. That’s all. ”

“Oh, she was pissed. You didn’t get that wrong. It’s a really, really long story.”

“Maybe you’ll tell me sometime.” She took another bite.

“Maybe.” Putting her burrito down, she turned to Sarah and watched her eat, how her jaw moved under her skin. How she licked her fingertips after every bite. How she squeezed the burrito in order to get the maximum amount of food in her mouth. How she licked her lips. In the bright light of the restaurant, her eyes were almost shocking — bright gray surrounded by a ring of dark blue. Madeline’s skin broke out in gooseflesh as she relived, for a brief second, the feel of Sarah’s lips on her belly.

“What?” Sarah swallowed, glancing sideways at Madeline.

“Come here.” Madeline slipped her hand around Sarah’s neck and kissed her once on the lips, lingered for a moment and then pulled back.

Sarah grinned. “What was that for?”

Madeline shrugged. Sarah linked her fingers through Madeline’s and they sat like that, silent, picking at the remnants of their burritos. Sarah’s thumb moved back and forth across the top of Madeline’s hand.

Pots and pans clanked in the background, and the tinny speaker of a cheap boom box hammered out oldies. One of the men in the back sang along, his voice not able to put out anything much better than the crappy speakers. Madeline barely heard any of it.

Sarah fumbled with her keys in the dim hall. As she wrestled with the lock, Madeline clung to her arm. In the cab, Madeline couldn’t believe her own mouth as it suggested they go to Sarah’s place. It was the moments after letting new young women into her apartment she cherished most. She enjoyed casually dismissing their awe at the vaulted ceilings, the fireplace, the Jacuzzi, the Dom in the fridge. It was, she suddenly realized as Sarah kicked the door open, why she kept gravitating toward college girls. But Sarah was different. She wasn’t intimidated by Madeline, and it was unlikely she’d gawk at Madeline’s things. But there was that elusive something else throwing Madeline off her game. And the more she thought about it, the more she began to think that something had nothing to do with Sarah .

Sarah flicked a light switch on and crossed the room to close the curtains. It was an efficiency, the kitchen divided from the rest of the apartment by a high counter and some stools.

“Okay, the tour,” she said from where she stood. “Welcome to Sarah’s Place. This,” Sarah indicated the area where she was standing, “is the living room.” She pointed rapidly, “The sofa, books, a chair, a lamp.” She turned to her left, and with a flourish, pointed to the opposite corner of the room. “That is the bedroom. Bed, night table, rolling cart, and hark, a television. I like to watch TV in bed. So,” she said, pulling her shirt over her head, “what do you think?”

It was small. The walls needed paint. It desperately needed matching furniture. There was a smell. But what did any of that matter when Sarah stood topless in the middle of it all?

“I think all tours should end like that,” Madeline said, moving toward her, her skin coming to life under her clothes, and that low throb.

“Do you? Well, I’m not sure that would fit into the Smithsonian tour.” Sarah backed away as Madeline approached, unhooking her bra as she retreated toward the bed.

“I think it would fit in just fine. In fact, I think a lot more people would make time for museum hopping if the tours ended like that.”

Sarah unbuttoned and unzipped her pants then turned to the nightstand and lit three candles that looked more like waxy lumps. “Turn off the light.”

In the candlelight Sarah's pale skin glowed. Madeline moved toward the bed but hesitated for a moment. It wasn't too late. She could walk away, could still spare Sarah the fallout. Doing it now would be more humane. She would hardly be hurt – no chance to get attached. It would just be a one-nighter. Nothing important. Madeline's eyes fogged over.

"Hey," Sarah said, unbuttoning Madeline's shirt. "Where's the Saint of the Broom Closet?"

Madeline stepped back, reeling. Suddenly the room was too hot. The candles threw their shadows on the bare wall – Sarah's tall silhouette towered over hers. Sarah caught Madeline's shirt in her fist and pulled it off, letting it fall to the ground.

"Wait," Madeline said, firmly pressing her palm to Sarah's bare chest.

"What now?" Sarah murmured as she moved Madeline's hand aside. Madeline struggled to answer, but Sarah had moved in close. She held Madeline fast, biting and licking at her neck. Madeline wriggled for a second, almost in a panic. She couldn't let this happen. When Sarah loosened her grip to unhook Madeline's bra, she pushed Sarah away, bending quickly to pick up her shirt.

She moved toward the door, holding the shirt over her chest.

"Hey," Sarah said, taking a step toward Madeline and then stopping. "Are you okay?"

"I can't do this. I have to leave."

"You're joking, right?"

Madeline just stood there. She'd expected Sarah to try and comfort her. Or at least show some concern over her obvious distress. Instead, Sarah stood there, incredulous, a hand on her hip. In the candlelight she'd become a dark shape with a smoldering yellow aura, a specter almost. In the darkness, she could have been Felice. Madeline gasped and batted at the light switch.

"What the hell?" Sarah glared at Madeline and bent to pick up her shirt.

"I'm sorry... I just have to go, okay?" She didn't want to fumble with her shirt in front of Sarah, but it had become clear that Sarah wasn't going to make this easy. She held the shirt out in front of her, her hands shaking, and struggled to turn the sleeves right side in. She slipped into it and buttoned the bottom button. Sarah had moved a little closer, and after watching Madeline struggle to get her shirt on, she looked more defeated than angry.

"What happened?"

"I just think it's better if we call it quits now and go our separate ways."

Sarah laughed. "You're supposed to say that after the sex." She took a few small steps and leaned against the wall, facing Madeline.

Madeline didn't look at her. Instead she inspected her shoes. "I don't even know what I'm doing here."

Sarah came closer and laid her hand on Madeline's shoulder. "I know why you're here. And you do too. What I don't know is why you can't do it." Sarah leaned in and kissed her neck lightly.

Madeline tensed. Sarah didn't stop.

“Let me kiss you,” she whispered.

Sarah touched Madeline’s chin. Madeline groped for the light switch and turned it off again. She let Sarah tilt her face upward. One of the candles had burned out. Sarah’s face had become less distinct, and the halo surrounding her burned with less intensity. Madeline closed her eyes and let Sarah have her.

When Madeline woke up, the candles had burned out. The clock read 3:24 AM. Sarah was pressed up against Madeline’s back, her arm resting on Madeline’s waist. She sat up. The smell of sex still hung heavy in the air. She glanced over her shoulder at Sarah, still, limp. For a moment Madeline’s heartbeat quickened and she put her hand over Sarah’s half open mouth. Feeling Sarah’s warm even breath on her palm, she took a deep breath and stood.

In the dark it was difficult to tell what clothes belonged to her, and as she walked around the bed, picking up pants here, a shirt there, she was thankful she hadn’t brought Sarah home. She could just disappear.

As she slipped into her underwear the floor creaked, and Sarah stirred. “Hey,” she whispered, her eyes opening just a little. “You leaving?”

“Yeah.” Madeline sat in the dark, listening to Sarah breathe, wondering how long her breath would last.

“Stay.” Sarah’s eyes fluttered open and then closed again. She reached her hand out, searching for Madeline. Madeline stood by the bed, watching her grope at nothing.

She slipped her pants on and then held up both of their bras, wondering how she'd be able to recognize hers without turning the light on. They were almost identical. She sighed.

Madeline looked from the clock to the indecipherable bras in her hand and back at Sarah, who appeared to be asleep again. Felice — the days, the weeks, the months after her death, living as if she was deep underwater, cold, isolated, vision a watery blur, sound nothing but a murky echo, wanting to fill her lungs, wanting to drown, but too afraid. And now, in the shadows of a cheap efficiency apartment, still afraid, she dressed. Madeline checked her pocket for her keys and then paused. She climbed into the bed and lay her head on Sarah's shoulder, resting her hand on Sarah's chest. Sure of the steady rise and fall, she rose and left, uncertain of tomorrow.

A DYKE AND HER BOYFRIEND

The Drunken Boat is a dump on the outside and the floorboards creak, but the linen tablecloths and candles fancy it up enough for me to feel underdressed in my jeans and t-shirt. I am with a dyke and her boyfriend. They have already dubbed me a lesbian – an insult – not political enough. Plus I'm not hardcore; I only keep three of my fingernails clipped. The dyke is my best friend's sister. Her given name is Buffy, but she changed it to Diana to avoid the sorority chick stigma. So this woman, who I've known since she was eight, hits me every time I accidentally call her Buffy. And her boyfriend, David, who is a woman by the way, also gives me a dirty look if I slip up on the Buffy thing. It's confusing.

We're sitting there eating chocolate mousse and drinking Amaretto and coffee. The mousse has been in the refrigerator for too long and has a skin. They're cute, across the table. David has his arm on the back of Diana's chair and she's leaning into him. She feeds him mousse, him leaned back, easy, relaxed, her with her legs crossed and back straight.

He has a coke and he puts milk and sugar in it and I think "yuck," and then I realize suddenly that it isn't Coke. It's coffee and ice. So I'm in mid-sentence with Diana and I say, "Holy shit, I thought she was drinking Coke, but it's coffee," and I think, "Holy shit, I just called him 'she.'" He looks at me with his soft, round stubble-free face,

just a glance really. The corners of his eyes sink and his grin fades for a second. What do I do? Do I apologize? But then he's back in the conversation, offering me a sip of his coffee with the voice of a woman. I say no thanks.

He's used to it. It isn't what I call him that makes him a man.

Later, my best friend gets all pissy. He says, "They're just stupid. I mean if David's a guy, then how is Buffy a dyke anyway? What the fuck? Why can't they just be queer girls? Why do they have to make everything so complicated." He pauses. "Jesus Christ. I don't get it."

"You don't have to," I say.

BULLET HOLES

The first time I saw a gun was the same day me and my dad went to my grandfather's house to transplant a marijuana plant. I was eleven. It was summer, July I think, Natick, Massachusetts. We'd started the morning by playing tennis. The previous day I'd discovered that Meg, my dad's girlfriend, was now Meg, my dad's wife. I was pissed that he remarried without inviting me to the wedding. They didn't even tell me right away. I had to notice the ring on my dad's finger. Being oblivious, they assumed I was angry because he'd gotten married at all. But Meg was cool, young, and pretty. I was okay with it—just mad they didn't tell me. My dad always kept the wrong secrets.

The plant came up to my waist and lived in the spare room closet under a UV lamp. My dad showed it to me and said, "Don't tell your mum." I knew what pot was, but I'd never seen a pot plant. Every other day he mixed a pitcher of Miracle Gro and watered it. But Meg wanted it out of the house, so after tennis that morning he showered, shaved, placed a garbage bag over the plant, and carried it out to the car. "C'mon," he said. "We're going to Papa's while he's at work."

I hadn't showered. In fact, I was on a bathing strike. I thought my mom was overly concerned with me being clean, although looking back she probably had just the right amount of concern. My dad rarely made me do anything I didn't want, so I went four full days without a shower. Acne ensued. As did raging BO.

I was on my third day of stewing in filth when we took the pot plant out of the apartment. My dad didn't want to open the windows because he was afraid the plastic bag would fly off the plant, leaving us with illegal fauna waving around in the back window. So even though the AC needed a shot of Freon, we drove with the windows up, sweating. Fleetwood Mac blared out of the stereo, my dad singing along. My armpits went slimy.

We pulled into my grandfather's driveway, my dad releasing the clutch before coming to a complete stop, stalling the engine. He pulled the keys out of the ignition and got out of the car, his rendition of "Rhiannon" trailing into an off-key hum. He jammed a key into his ear and scratched, walking back to the trunk. Wiping a chunk of earwax on his corduroys he looked at me and said, "You stink."

"So?"

"Just saying." He lifted the plant out of the hatchback.

Wooded areas flanked my grandfather's house on two sides. He had a neighbor to the south, but north of the house was probably about an acre or two of woods that stretched around to the back yard. We walked up a small incline to the side of the driveway, my dad looking for a nice sunny spot. He put the plant on the ground and went back to the garage for a shovel. "Go ahead and unwrap it," he said.

I stared at the plant for a second and then pulled the bag off. It seemed so harmless. I plucked four leaves off the bottom and shoved them into my pocket.

My dad was short and bald with a hook nose, but he was strong. The muscles on

his forearms bulged out under thick red hair. He pulled his shirt off after fifteen minutes of digging, and even though he had a well-developed beer belly, his pecs and biceps were pretty ripped. I remember thinking it was weird that he had muscles, being an old guy and all, and otherwise funny-looking. It took about an hour for him to dig the hole, arrange the plant to his satisfaction.

“Here – go fill this with water.” He handed me a gallon milk jug with Miracle Gro powder in it.

I ran off to the hose, trying to be quick about it. The spigot was tight though, and I couldn’t get the water to come on. Sweat coated my hands, so I went to the garage for a rag, and when I came back out my dad was coming down the hill after me.

“What the fuck are you doing? I just asked you to fill up the fucking jug.”

I didn’t think I’d been gone that long. “I just needed to get this rag. I can’t turn the water on.”

“Jesus Fucking Christ,” he muttered and stalked to the hose.

The spigot opened with a squeak, and he turned and glared at me. I shrunk back a little, my cheeks going hot. The tears were coming, and if I didn’t stop them, he’d yell some more.

“Sorry,” I said.

“What?”

“I’m sorry.”

He turned without saying anything and went back up the hill with the jug. I

blinked a few times, clearing out the tears that had been welling up. I wiped my face with the rag and sniffed a few times. I usually didn't cry when he yelled, but sometimes the things that made him mad caught me off-guard.

After a minute or two he came back down the hill with the shovel and the empty jug.

"Here," he said, handing me the jug. "Put this in the car." I kept my eye on him as I went to the car, trying to gauge his mood. In the garage, he put the shovel up against the wall and opened the beer fridge.

"Fuckin' Schlitz. Papa must be hiding the good stuff." He downed a can, and when I joined him in the garage, he handed a beer to me.

"Drink up." He winked and grabbed three more beers for himself, and we headed inside. By the time we made it to the kitchen, he'd chugged another can and handed me the empty while popping open a new one. I sipped mine. Schlitz was not my favorite, but at least he wasn't angry anymore.

"Chess?"

I nodded. "Can I be white?"

"Not until you win." He winked at me and unfolded the chess table. Sometimes it amazed me how quickly he could go from fire-breathing pissed to happy-go-lucky.

"Pick out a record," he said and went into the kitchen, humming.

I flipped through the collection, an eclectic mix of my grandfather's stuff and various albums left behind by his five kids. I picked out *Sgt. Pepper's* and put it on. My

dad clanked around the kitchen, boiling water for tea. He'd once told me that chess was not a beer game. It was a tea game. He came back halfway through "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" with a pot of tea and tea cups on a tray. He poured my tea, dropped three cubes of sugar in it and stirred in a little cream while I set up the board.

"Lemon?"

I nodded, and he dropped a lemon slice into the creamy brown tea, where it floated on the top, bright yellow.

Pouring his own tea, he said, "If you can last thirty moves today, I'll show you something cool."

"Easy. What are you going to show me?"

"Last thirty moves first."

We didn't talk much during chess. He hummed a little and would sometimes warn me if he thought I was about to do something stupid. But my chess strategy was evolving through experimentation, so I'd usually hold up my hand and tell him to keep silent. When he first taught me how to play, I was awed by the power of the queen. My game revolved around her, and so to counter, my father ignored the king and spent the first part of the game taking my queen away from me. My demise was quick after losing her, even if I had all my other pieces. Could I get a pawn down to the other side to get my queen back? Not a good strategy. Soon I learned to expand my attack — to stop thinking of all those other pieces as protection for the queen and as attackers in their own right. On that day, I was experimenting with the awesome offensive coverage of

two knights in tandem. It was going well. I actually lasted forty-six moves and managed to capture his queen, both rooks, and one bishop. Still, he won, but I was getting better.

“Not bad. Not bad.” He looked at me for a second, squinting. “Will you flip out if I smoke a joint in front of you?”

“No.”

“C’mon.”

We went out to the car where he pulled a bag of weed and a pack of rolling papers out of the glove box.

“You can’t tell Meg, and for God’s sake, don’t tell your mother.”

“I thought Meg knew you smoked pot.” I followed him around the side of the house to the lawn chairs in the back yard.

“She does, but she doesn’t want me spending money on it. That’s why I’m growing. But it’ll be a while before I can smoke that plant up. Wanna see how to roll a joint?”

I nodded, sitting on his lap. He laid the stuff on the table and pulled out a rolling paper.

“The secret to a good joint is to make it tight.” He pulled a fingerful of buds out of the bag and set them on the paper.

My first whiff of the pot wasn’t what I’d expected at all. I always thought it would have a sweet spicy smell – cinnamon and nutmeg, but it wasn’t like that at all. It

was stronger – a little sour almost. He rolled the paper over the weed, keeping it tight, and then pinched the ends closed. “Spit is the best glue.” He slid it in and out of his mouth a few times – a “joint blow job” he called it. “And that’s that.” He lit it up and took a deep drag, holding it in his lungs until his eyes began to water.

“Can I try it?”

He choked the smoke out of his lungs, laughing. “Fuck no. You don’t wanna do this shit. It’ll fuck you up.” He kissed me on the forehead. “Go feed the birds. And bring me a beer.”

I chuckled on my way to the garage, fingering the pot leaves in my pocket.

My grandfather was a fan of birds, especially canaries, which he got a lot of. A clothesline ran from the house to a tree at the back of the yard with about six or seven birdfeeders hanging off it. Two of the bright yellow birds sat on one of the feeders, their tiny heads darting in and out of the feeder holes. Crows and pigeons pecked at some corn and seed spread in a large bare area at the tree line.

In the garage, I filled the bucket with corn, inhaling the clean-smelling corn dust. As I approached the trees to spread more corn, the birds took flight, settling in the trees above. Standing at the back of the yard, I spread the feed, loving the feel of the smooth, chalky corn falling through my fingers. My dad reclined in his chair, eyes closed, holding smoke in his lungs. He had the joint pinched between his thumb and forefinger, and when he exhaled, a shroud of smoke surrounded him, thick in the sunlight.

He only smoked half of the joint before snubbing out the smoldering end and

slipping it into his shirt pocket. He staggered to his feet and shuffled toward me. “That is some fuckin’ good shit. Damn. It’s beautiful out here.” He leaned back, gazing up at the sky. He stayed like that for a few moments, silent. One of the crows came down out of the tree and eyed me as it pecked at some of the corn I’d spread. I knelt down and it hopped sideways, away from me. I stayed very still and watched it peck. The bird wasn’t black. Its feathers reflected a deep purple, something I’d never noticed before. It watched me as it ate, cautious – ready to take off at the first sign that I’d try and hurt it.

“Hey!” my dad bellowed.

I jumped a little at the sound of his voice, and the bird took off again.

“I’m hungry. Let’s make chicken nuggets and popcorn,” he said, heading for the screen door. We went inside.

“Show me something cool,” I said, as he dumped a whole bag of frozen chicken nuggets on a cookie sheet. I was half afraid that he’d forget what he was going to show me, or that maybe the joint was the cool thing, which would have been the ultimate in cruelty – look but don’t smoke.

“Oh. Yeah. Upstairs.” He left the nuggets sitting on the counter and shuffled toward the stairs. In the hall, he tripped on the rug, which sent him into a fit of giggles that quickly evolved into jagged laughter. Tears formed and rolled down his face in painful glee. He was bent at the waist, expelling much more air from his lungs than he seemed to be inhaling. His shirt slipped up his waist, revealing butt crack.

“Dad.” I started to giggle too. “Get it together. I’m seeing parts of you no pre-

teen should see.”

He straitened up, still giggling, and twisted, craning to get a view of his own ass. He looked down at me, struggling to put a serious face on. “I may have neglected,” he paused, snarfing a few times in an attempt not to laugh, “to put undies on today.”

I slapped him on the back of the head. “You’re gross.”

“At least I know how to use soap.” He loped up the stairs, choking back giggles.

“You pick your nose while you’re driving.” I countered, following him.

“You fart in your sleep.” He continued up the stairs, clinging to the banister.

“You fart when you’re awake. And they smell.”

“You have a massive blackhead in your ear. And lots of whiteheads.” He stuck his butt out and punctuated with a fart.

“Ew! Dad, that’s sick. You’re... you’re bald.”

He paused at the top of the stairs, turned, the dull pot smile on his face, his eyes red and half shut. He raised his middle finger. “Fuck you and the horse you rode in on.” We stared at each other for a second. I wasn’t sure if he was actually angry or not. And then he burst into laughter again and turned down the hall. I shook my head, waving away the fart odor, and followed.

My father, as a rule, was a liar. But when he said he had something cool to show, he was always telling the truth. He reached up onto the top shelf in the closet of his old bedroom and came down with my surprise. The last thing I expected was a rifle.

“This is mine, but Papa keeps it for me. Meg doesn’t want it in the house, even

though it's just a .22." He fumbled around on the shelf some more, reaching toward the back, and produced a box of bullets. "Wanna shoot some cans?"

Ever since the age of five, I'd spent more time playing with Star Wars figures and GI Joes than with Barbies. My favorites were Boba Fett, the Hoth Stormtrooper, and Snake Eyes. The only difference between me and them in my fantasy world was that they all had guns. I'd used a lot of substitutes – my mom would never buy me toy guns. Broom sticks, baseball bats, pistol-shaped tree branches all served as adequate makeshift firearms, but right then, I had the real thing. The second my dad put it in my hands I took off down the hall with it and charged down the stairs, pulling up at the bottom step and then jumping down into the landing, pointing the rifle one way and then the other. "All clear, Captain," I called to my dad who was following me down the steps.

"Take it outside."

I tore out the back door and flopped on my belly, dragging myself along as if crawling under barbed wire. My dad followed, having scooped up empty cans from the kitchen on the way out.

"Listen up. When I load that thing, you have to stop spazzing out, okay?"

I nodded and leapt to my feet. "Freeze!" I pointed the gun at his chest. He walked toward me and snatched the gun out of my hand.

"Don't point a weapon at someone unless you're going to kill him." He started sliding bullets in and then handed it back to me. Picking the cans up, he walked to the

end of the yard and arranged them on a rotten log by the tree line.

“Okay. Just aim at the can and squeeze the trigger.”

I fumbled with the rifle, tucking the wood-grain stock under my arm, and looking down the barrel. It felt heavy and awkward, not quite right. I was suddenly nervous, holding a real, loaded gun in my hands. I put a little pressure on the trigger, and then a little more. The gun went off just before I expected it to. The crows and pigeons in the trees took off and then settled again, squawking at the gun’s report. I looked at the cans. No hit.

I tried again, and then again, and I missed all three cans. My dad laughed at first, but by the time I’d missed all three on the second and third tries he was pissed. “How’d you get to be such a suck shot?”

I shrugged, trying not to cry. I’d expected shooting to be fun, but instead I was just making him angry again.

He snatched the gun out of my hand and popped three rounds off, missing only the last can.

“You missed one.”

“I’m stoned,” he snapped. “What’s your excuse?” He went to set the cans back up to give me another crack at it, shaking his head, muttering under his breath. As he walked away from me, I raised the gun to my shoulder and looked down the barrel at the back of his head.

I managed to hit two cans in about fifteen tries. It got harder and harder, my

hands sweating, my dad snapping, "Squeeze, don't pull," the sun getting hotter and hotter, my shoulders beginning to ache.

Finally he said, "Forget it," and took the gun from me. "Maybe we'll stick with chess." He bent down and picked up the spent shells, dropping them in the empty ammo box. After a few moments without a gunshot, a crow braved a landing in the yard and began pecking at the corn I'd sprinkled on the ground. Its head darted up and down, gulping up the feed. I wondered if it was the same bird I'd fed earlier. I took a step forward, meaning to try and get closer to the bird, but before I got very far, my father took aim and shot it dead.

I jumped at the sharp report of the gun, not expecting it at all. A brief burst of red clouded around the bird, and then it fell over without a sound. He turned to go, but I just stood there. One moment the bird was there pecking at the feed I had laid for it, and the next moment it was dead.

"Let's go in. I'm hungry as shit," my dad barked over his shoulder, sliding the screen door open.

I hesitated. It didn't seem right somehow to leave the bird like that, lying in the dirt. With my father inside, the yard had become silent. I took a few steps forward, wanting to do something for it but not wanting to see what a dead, bloody crow looked like. I forced myself forward, feeling responsible, even though I hadn't pulled the trigger. I stood over the dead bird and flipped it over with my foot. A small hole in its breast led to a larger, messier hole in the back. Blood dotted the pale dirt, and the bird's

glazed eyes stared upward.

I had to do something for it. I couldn't just leave it there dead. I went to the edge of the woods, gathered some leaves, and lay them over the crow's purple body.

I spoke quietly, not wanting my dad to overhear. "Goodbye, poor crow. You were just minding your own business. You never hurt anyone or did anything wrong. And you never saw it coming." I sprinkled a little corn on the leaves to finish off its tomb.

Inside, I could just make out my dad's silhouette in the kitchen as he made popcorn, his arm yanking the Jiffy Pop pan back and forth over the burner. I didn't want to go inside and face him while he was still angry at me. Instead I went to pick up the cans we'd shot. Even with me doing most of the shooting, my dad had managed to leave bullet holes in all three of them. And one in the bird. If the bird had just been bigger, maybe it would have lived. People got shot all the time, and they lived. They could stand more bullets than something small. I carried the cans inside, taking them straight to the garage to avoid my dad. I spent the rest of afternoon wondering how many bullet holes a person could take.

FOLLOWING REBECCA

1

Today I became nervous that she might have noticed I've been following her. I'm not a stalker. Not really. I have a lot of money just now, so I'm following her – observing her. I have been for about two weeks. I don't lurk outside her office. I just ride the same bus. I always sit in front of her in the seats that face toward the center aisle, so I can glance sideways at her without being too obvious. Every day she sits in the back corner of the bus by the window. She sticks her forehead to the glass and peers out at the sidewalk. From time to time, she bites the inside of her cheek. I want to tell her to stop. But I think that would be invading her space.

My husband was an alcoholic. *Is* an alcoholic. My *ex*-husband *is* an alcoholic. There is a misconception about alcoholics – that they are deadbeat losers that beat their wives and children. My alcoholic never hit me. Never. I guess that might be part of the reason I had a hard time believing it – that his drinking was a problem. I always thought it was something else. Like he drank because I was moody. I drink when I'm moody, so why not him? Apparently though, he drinks because he is an alcoholic.

He is currently in rehab. He's drying out at the Shady Pines Rehabilitation Center in California. It's very expensive, but he is often very drunk, so I think it's worth the money. Fortunately, money is no object; my husband is very successful. My *ex*-

husband *was* the best at what he did. He's currently in rehab though, so he's not doing it very well now. Luckily for me, he has a lot in savings. But since the divorce, only half of what he used to have. The other half pays my bills while I follow Rebecca Orne. And as I said before – it isn't real following. Real following is what my private investigator Mr. Douglas Kelley did, complete with photographs and taped conversations. What I'm doing doesn't even compare.

This particular woman caught my eye because the first day I saw her, a dryer sheet was hanging out of her sleeve. It was right after Tony left for rehab. The divorce had been final for a few days, and it was finally sinking in. But still, at least I didn't have a dryer sheet hanging out of my sleeve.

I had walked down to Starbucks to get a coffee – none of that whipped-cream latte-mocha nonsense, mind you. Just a coffee. I found myself wandering down the street with my coffee, blowing across the top to make it cool enough to sip. It was morning, around seven-thirty or so. I don't normally get up that early, but I was newly divorced so I couldn't sleep. I don't normally walk farther than I have to, but I was newly divorced, so I figured I could keep walking and sipping my coffee if I felt like it.

Rebecca Orne came bounding out of her building in front of me. She was in a state of disarray. The dryer sheet aside, I think she needs more time in the morning. She rarely appears altogether ready to take on the day when she emerges from her brick apartment building doorway. But that Thursday she was especially ruffled. In addition to the ill-fated dryer sheet, there was something off about her hair. It was as if, for the

first time ever, she'd tried to create ringlets with gel. The rings were, well, ringy, but perhaps a bit too stiff. They swung back and forth about her head like marching Nazi legs.

Her outfit was nice enough. Grey pants and a pink short-sleeved v-neck. She had a leather bag slung over her shoulder – one of those enormous purses that are capable of doubling as briefcases. I have one, but since I quit my job after I married Tony, I haven't had occasion to use it. It's overkill for a wallet, keys, a checkbook, a brush, a pack of gum, and a tampon. I'm not a messy purse woman. My mother is. She once emptied the contents of her purse on my kitchen table. Among many, many other things, she had a geode in there. It was a small one, but a geode nonetheless.

Tony and my mother got along quite well. I think, now that I have been married to an alcoholic, that my mother may be one as well. Rebecca Orne, I think, is not an alcoholic. She doesn't seem to go out much. She could be a drink alone type, but I don't think she is. It's a feeling I get. My private investigator told me over lunch that a good investigator works on instinct – the first feeling is usually the right one. I'm no P.I., but I'm pretty sure she doesn't drink excessively.

Today I thought she noticed me. Last Friday she looked at me twice in a funny way, but I chalked it up to paranoia. The guilty are always paranoid. But today, she most definitely took note of me. It isn't odd to see the same person on the bus every day, so that isn't why she noticed me. My fatal error might have been following her home yesterday.

I badly needed to know her name, so I followed her into the lobby of her apartment, hoping she'd get her mail. I pretended I was looking for a name on the mailboxes. She went about opening her box, sorting, slipping the good mail into her enormous bag and tossing the junk mail in the trash can at her feet. I walked behind her and peered over her shoulder as I went by – Rebecca Orne can't be more than five feet tall. Her Sprint bill was in her left hand, and there her name was, printed underneath the plastic envelope window.

The act of peeping at her mail made me feel suddenly vulnerable to discovery, so I spoke to cover myself. "Do you know where Michael Bryant lives?" Michael Bryant is my brother, so I knew he didn't live in Rebecca Orne's building. She shook her head, still looking at a piece of mail, and then turned to face me. It was the first time I'd ever seen her face really close up. As it turns out, her eyes are extremely striking. Dark gray with rings of deep blue around the outside.

Her lips, however, could use some Blistex. She has nice skin though. No blemishes or acne scars. I had a brief flash of Tony kissing her. Really kissing her. Not a Hollywood kiss that's gentle and sweet, but a full on mouth-locked, tongue-pumping kiss – the kind where breathing becomes an issue after too long. She stared at me for a brief moment – recognition?

"I don't know. Sorry." She flashed a half smile and turned for the elevators. She lives on the fourth floor. Apartment 416. That was underneath the plastic envelope window too.

When Tony drank, I became upset at him. Not after we first got married of course. We would go out and drink together, dance, have a good time. But when this whole alcoholic thing came out, I thought it was probably better if he didn't drink. So he would drink, and we would end up fighting. At first he would just stalk into his office and slam the door, and I would leave him to his wet bar. Then I started thinking that was a bad idea, so I would follow him into his office. Finally he started leaving the apartment. Sometimes he wouldn't come home for days.

The first time he wasn't home by morning I phoned the police, but that line on television – "We can't investigate until the person is missing for twenty-four hours," turns out to be true. It also turns out that when it's a woman's husband, they aren't very interested even after the twenty-four hours is up. So I never called the police again. I did call my lawyer though.

When I left Rebecca Orne's building yesterday, I couldn't stop smiling. It wasn't a "my-what-a-pleasant-day" smile. It was more like an I-can't-believe-I-just-did-that smile. I had the same exact feeling once after going on a roller coaster. I'm not a big fan of such frivolous thrills usually, but Michael (my brother who doesn't live in Rebecca Orne's building) goaded me into going on it.

I hated it. The whole time Michael had his hands in the air and was screaming silly things like "Woo hoo!" and "Oh yeah!" and "Who's your daddy?" I kept thinking over and over, *Camille, this is just a little over the top*. But when it was over and I climbed out of the car, the smiles came over me. I didn't even notice at first. We stumbled down

the ramp and Michael slapped me on the back and engaged in his more often than not one-sided dialogue.

“See, Camille? That rocked, didn’t it? You’re glad you went on. Admit it. Man, that first hill kicked major ass. Damn. C’mon, Camille – tell me you loved it.”

I was as shocked as anyone to discover that, yes, I actually had liked it. I couldn’t stop smiling, and I even had to suppress a giggle or two. There might have actually been a bounce in my step. Once I got a shot of epinephrine for a bad asthma attack when I was a child. Almost immediately I could breathe, and I was boiling over with giddiness. It was the same after the roller coaster, and just yesterday after exiting Rebecca Orne’s apartment building.

But it was a mistake. Because this morning, when I followed her onto the bus, she looked at me. We actually made eye contact. She squinted her eyes just a smidge and cocked her head for just a second, and it was over. Before I could look away, embarrassed by the exposure, she’d turned and let her forehead drop to the glass. She recognized me as the woman in her lobby looking for Michael Bryant. She must have.

That isn’t all though. Normally, when I’m going to ride the bus with her in the afternoon, I take a cab down past her office building and catch the bus so that I’m already seated when she boards. But I was so thrown off by the fact that she’d noticed me that I decided not to ride the bus. Instead, I sat on a bench across the street from her apartment so that I could watch her go into her building. I arrived about fifteen minutes early. When our bus arrived, she didn’t get off. It was unmistakable. The door opened,

one passenger got on, and one got off. The one that got off was a tall bald man in a long brown coat. She did not get off the bus.

That threw me a bit, but I decided to wait for the next bus, thinking maybe she was working late. The buses run thirty minutes apart, so I went into the CVS and picked up a *Ms* to read while I waited, along with a Diet Coke. But I found I couldn't read. What if she'd noticed I was following her around last week? What if she decided after seeing me in her building last night and on the bus again this morning to take a cab to work? No. Ridiculous. She doesn't even realize I'm following her. She only looked at me this morning because she recognized me from last night. During one of my lunches with Douglas Kelley, I asked him how he was going to follow my husband without him noticing. He assured me that the average human was an unobservant beast. Obviously Rebecca hadn't recognized me. It was absurd to think that she had, so I sat with my *Ms* magazine in my lap and sipped my Diet Coke slowly so I wouldn't run out.

Rebecca Orne didn't get off the next bus either. Perhaps she got off work early or left early because she wasn't feeling well. Perhaps she had a date. I told myself these things and they seemed more than reasonable. *Think like Douglas Kelley*, I thought. He had certainly proved that my husband, if not all of humanity, as he asserted, was an unobservant beast. But then my husband was usually drunk, so one can only expect a minimum amount of outward awareness.

Rebecca Orne could not have surmised that I was following her for two reasons. First, I am not following her really, just riding the bus simultaneously. Second, she wouldn't assume I was following her on the basis of seeing me in her apartment lobby, and then again on the bus. Crossing paths in such a way is nothing more than coincidence. And if she thinks anything at all about our encounter (and she probably doesn't) it's that we bumped into each other coincidentally. I went home and made dinner, disappointed but not discouraged.

Eating alone across from the stained placemat that was once Tony's is difficult. One of his most endearing traits was the reckless abandon with which he ate his food. He was forever staining his shirt, his napkin, his placemat. I think it would be nice if after all he has done to me, I could, sometime soon, stop loving him.

Fortunately there is Rebecca. Tony may have abandoned me in favor of his addiction, but I will not let Rebecca slip away so easily. She didn't get off the bus. What does it mean? Nothing. It means nothing. And even if it does mean something – even if she saw me and believes me to be following her, so what? It would be difficult to continue observing her under those conditions, but I have nothing but time and enough money to live comfortably for a few years without working. If it comes to it, if I have to see her, observe her in a new and different way, I will.

I've come to a decision. It happened while I was at lunch with my writer friend, Brian. He drives a black Miata and has full lips and splotchy skin. I was eating grilled salmon and capers, garlicky red potatoes and asparagus, sipping Chardonnay. Salmon is the perfect food. Its pinkness reminds me of youth—the freshwater of its birth evident in every oily, flaky bite. I never tire of salmon. Capers, however, while not detestable, I could live without. One of these days I'll remember to order the dish without them. Brian was eating his usual curried couscous and lentils. He has such a tender heart. Since the age of fourteen he's been stricken with a type of mortified vegetarianism. He can't bear to kill, which one would never guess by reading one of his novels.

Brian is quite unlike Tony, who takes great relish in eating dead things medium rare. He harasses vegetarians. When I called my lawyer about Tony's little "trips" away from home, it wasn't because I was thinking divorce. Not right away anyway. I really just wanted to tell her that the police hadn't been able to help me. I was worried about him—about what he was doing. Many people say that they know someone who is as "charming as the devil himself." That cliché doesn't quite cover it for Tony. Tony makes the devil look like a socially inept reject in need of a shower. It's why he's rich. So, whatever mischief he wanted to get himself into, he'd be able to get into it with no problem whatsoever. I was unsure of who to turn to, but it seems for now that my lawyer was the correct choice.

I have a crisp and cynical lawyer, which is a blessing. It is hard to watch a week of late night television without hearing some joke or wisecrack at a lawyer's expense. But I see my lawyer as a blessing. I pay her to be cynical so I don't have to. It is her job to think of every possible legal scenario in which someone might attempt to screw me over. So when she said, "You should have Tony followed," I was outwardly incredulous, but internally wondering how expensive private detectives were. I was hoping that they weren't so expensive that Tony would notice the missing money. Looking back, I realize I could have spent a million dollars and he never would have noticed, but as I've mentioned, the guilty are a paranoid breed.

Unless they're very drunk. Tony, it turns out, was not very careful to conceal his activities. In a filing cabinet at the law offices of Marlow, Jenkins, and Lambert, there is a folder with my name on it. Inside the folder is, among many others, an eight-by-ten glossy black-and-white photograph of my husband in the early morning hours, taking a prostitute from behind on a hotel bed. The logistics of acquiring this photograph undetected astound me, but Douglas Kelley assured me that it has to do with angles and lenses and the fact that mini blinds are largely ineffective if one is standing right outside the window peering in from the side.

Douglas watched the whole transaction, which began on a street corner in Baltimore and ended with Tony showing the prostitute the hotel room door. He paid her one bill – Douglas thinks it was a \$100 but couldn't be sure. He said it would be in

line with the services rendered – oral, vaginal, and anal sex, all expertly photographed for use in a court of law.

I was only able to look at one of the photographs. I didn't want to see it, but I had to because I didn't believe it. And there he was, plain as day. But there was something with his face. His forehead was tight, and he was baring his teeth like an angry dog. Everything about him was tense. It almost wasn't him at all. It wasn't anger he was expressing. I knew his anger. But this I'd never seen from him, and as I put the picture back in the manila folder, I knew what I'd seen. It was cruelty.

According to Douglas, he hired a prostitute almost every night he was away. According to the esteemed Mr. Kelley, he rarely wore a condom.

Brian and I hadn't seen each other since the divorce. We went to Café 23, our favorite restaurant, one that Tony didn't like. Brian was sitting there next to me with his knuckly hand resting on mine, looking at me with his round blue eyes. We'd been chatting, him vaguely alluding to the divorce, me deflecting, talking about the weather and thinking about Rebecca. It was about a week after the "discovery" incident, which as I'd ultimately decided, turned out to be nothing at all. I was rambling nonsensically about the drought and the depressed water table. He pursed his lips and shook his head, clearly tired of beating around the bush. He wanted to talk about the divorce; he wanted me to talk about it.

"Camille. This is an opportunity for you. You've always complained that you don't know who or what you are. With Tony out of the picture, you're free to find out."

Brian often says things that sound like a horoscope. I am fairly certain I have never said, "I don't know who or what I am." But Brian has interpreted. Perhaps I expressed ambivalence over a handbag or a shade of lipstick while shopping with him. Brian listens. Brian watches. He squints his eyes, and he decides. Days, weeks, months later, he has concluded. I don't know who or what I am. That's Brian. Much like a horoscope, Brian is rarely wrong.

But when he said it, it struck me as both true and vindictive. He'd never liked Tony, mostly because he'd encouraged me to quit my job. But it seemed too soon for me to be embracing my freedom. There was another issue, though, that was perhaps at the heart of Brian's comments, so I avoided my disgruntled look and tried to listen.

"I know this whole thing is going to be hell for you, Camille..."

It was about all I could pay attention to. People had been spouting inspirational monologues at me ever since I'd filed for divorce – my mother, my brother, my chiropractor, to name a few, and now Brian. I gazed out the window while he spoke. I half listened, hearing patches of what he was saying and injecting nods and sighs into what I deemed appropriate pauses in his speech. Brian's focus on new opportunities and self-discovery kept directing my thoughts toward Rebecca. I'd imagined so much about her while lounging on my sofa at night, unable to bear the racket of the television. I'd pictured her undertaking her morning routine, climbing out of her oak-framed bed, her blankets and sheets askew from a night of unrestful sleep. I'd seen her stumble into her bathroom, flick on the light, and turn on the shower. I'd seen her strip out of her

boxer shorts and tank top pajamas, her eyes still squinting from the light, and stand under the water, letting it wash over her face and wet her hair.

I'd imagined her apartment dozens of times, slowly building a cohesive image – the hardwood polished floors with Santa Fe style throw rugs accenting various areas of the apartment. My vision included a cream colored sofa littered with chintz pillows and fringed throws. She usually has a few dishes in her sink, but the counters are spotless. She has a kitchen table in her dinette, but she never uses it for eating. It's a disaster, covered with casually fingered mail and newspapers. I'd spent so much time hovering in some undefined space above her, as she balanced her checkbook at that table – as she sat cross-legged on her sofa eating a bowl of cereal and watching CSI on her nineteen-inch Zenith. I'd seen it all. I'd been there with her. But now, in the polite and muffled din of Café 23 under the weight of Brian's heartfelt monologue on self discovery and liberation, the scene I'd built and occupied with Rebecca Orne collapsed. The fantasy no longer sufficed. I needed the real thing.

"I have to get into her apartment."

Brian trailed off at the interruption. "Camille?" Then louder, "Camille?" He took his napkin off his lap and lay it on the table.

I shook my head and took a sip of wine. "I'm sorry. I was..."

"Somewhere else."

"Yes. I'm still a bit out of sorts, I guess."

“Understandable.” He replaced his napkin in his lap and picked up his fork, eyeing me.

I grasped for something, anything to draw his attention from my previous statement. “Anyway. You’re right. It will be a refreshing change to go about the business of being Camille. I’m just a little off balance right now.”

“I know.” He paused, taking my hand in both of his. “I’ll go with you to get tested if you like,” he said, looking into my eyes, sincere.

“That’s sweet, really. But I’ll be fine.” I tried to smile, put my brave face on. I really didn’t want to go alone, but I didn’t want to go with Brian either. Part of me, some horrible little part, wanted Tony to take me.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. He paused, leaning back in his chair, regarding me. “So, Camille. Whose apartment do you need to get into?”

I’d definitely thrown Brian for a loop. I invented a post-divorce obsession with decorating and insisted that I was referring to an apartment I’d seen showcased on a cable show. I don’t think he bought it, but he let it drop. I was supposed to go in for my blood test after lunch that day, but my mind was awhirl with possibilities. I called and rescheduled.

Since then, I’ve turned my attention to my decision to enter Rebecca’s apartment. It is clear that I will need a key. And I think I have figured out how to get one. As Douglas Kelley told me during our first lunch meeting, “Investigation is about patience;

it's about waiting for and exploiting opportunities, nothing more than that." So that's where I am now, waiting for an opportunity.

3

At first my waiting was passive. I continued my normal routine of riding the bus with her, which yielded exactly zero opportunities. But in watching for opportunities I have become both less conspicuous and more observant. The first thing I did in an effort to seek out an opportunity was to purchase a pair of mirrored sunglasses. Normally, I wouldn't wear such outrageous eyewear, but I can stare directly at whomever I choose without the slightest fear of being observed. On the bus, I simply turn my head slightly toward her, as if I'm gazing out the opposite window, and I can watch her every move for the entire bus ride.

Just from the purchase of these dark sunglasses, I've surmised a few things. Namely, Rebecca Orne does not get enough sleep. She's formed some rather ugly circles under her eyes. A little cream in the evenings and some skillfully applied concealer in the morning would go miles toward improving her look. That's assuming, of course, that she can't find some way to get the required sleep. My other observation is that she enjoys music. Her lips move just a little, and her head bobs back and forth almost imperceptibly. She's singing in her head, God knows what, but it's clear. And when she needs to be passionate in her silent singing, her eyes slide shut and her head bobs from

side to side instead of back and forth. I haven't decided what this constant silent singing means.

Also, Rebecca needs a manicure.

Boundaries. Limits. Restrictions. They're everywhere. Little ones and big ones. It's deemed inappropriate to touch a stranger outside the normal protocols of introduction. Introductions warrant a handshake. To stand up on the bus, cross to a stranger, and touch her face, would be a serious breach in what is deemed socially acceptable. It's a small boundary to cross, while breaking into a person's apartment is a much larger one. It's illegal for one thing. And it's penetrative—forcing one's way into another's private, guarded space. But as much as I would like to touch Rebecca's face on the bus sometimes, it is a boundary that is much harder to breach. It's public. It's confrontational. It's not possible to do unobserved. And while forcing myself into her living space may represent a larger crossing of boundaries, it can be completely concealed from her.

But there is something else about boundaries. They are sometimes difficult to cross. I have been following Rebecca for thirty-four days now in an attempt to find some way of getting into her apartment. But somehow, I am unable to muster enough courage to follow her outside the safe confines of the bus. I keep waiting for the moment she'll trip getting off the bus and her purse will spill everywhere. I'll bend

down to help her, secretly pocketing her keys in the process. Or maybe she'll get up one day and they'll just be sitting there on the seat after she's gone.

But so far that hasn't happened, and I know in the back of my mind it likely never will. I know what I need to do. I need to observe her after work and on the weekends. I need to explore her apartment building—find all the entrances and stairwells. I need to follow her all the way to work and spend the day there. I don't even know what company she works for or what she does for them. I need to find out what she does for lunch. Does she bring her food, order in, go out? With whom does she eat? What does her boss look like? I need to see the restroom she uses during the day—the mirror she looks in to inspect those awful dark circles. I need I need I need. It's a long list. But what I really need is to do one thing, and one thing only. The rest will follow. I need to stop being wishy washy and commit.

I am following Rebecca Orne.

I bought a car. It's an adorable black Mini with contrasting white mirrors, wheels and roof, complete with 6 disc CD changer and electric cooler. The car, besides being the most patently adorable vehicle ever created, has changed everything. The day after I bought it, I drove to the bus stop where Rebecca gets off for work. I sat in my car and watched as she emerged from the rear doors of the bus and went one block north to a squat gray building on the corner of Limestone Avenue and Brady Boulevard. After she

went inside I sat in the car for a moment deliberating over what to do next. The ridiculousness of it all struck for a moment. What in Heaven's name was I doing there? This woman, Rebecca Orne, was moving through her life completely unaware of my invasion. How had I even gone this far? I was sitting in a brand new car, purchased for the sole purpose of following this woman around. And why? So I could get into her apartment, touch her things, run my fingers through her life. Her overall importance in the universe seemed minimal suddenly, as did mine. And Tony's. Right then, I was on the edge of knowing something. I turned the car on, ready to drive away, leave her behind, never pursue her again. I gripped the wheel, but my hands and arms wouldn't participate – something in me railed against discovery. The knowing slipped away before I could grasp exactly what it was I had figured out.

I glanced in the rearview and then at the clock in the dash. The doctor's appointment I'd rescheduled for later in the morning fluttered into my mind. I wondered who Rebecca's doctor was. If she needed blood tests done, who would she see? Was it a man or a woman? What kind of insurance did she have? She'd probably had the same doctor for a long time. Maybe when she started working in the gray building, her longtime primary care physician wasn't covered by her new insurance policy. He (I decided it was a man of medium height with dark hair and gray highlights) was out of network, so she had to pay a little more to see him. But it was worth it. He was a good doctor. In fact, he'd been seeing her since she was very small. If

she needed to get something personal done, like a blood test to detect the possible presence of venereal disease, she would go to this man that she knew and trusted.

I turned the car off, called my doctor, and cancelled my appointment. The earliest appointment they had was five days away, but it could wait that long. I sat in the car for a few moments watching the building. It had double doors in the front and a small parking lot that wrapped around the side and rear of the building. Sculpted rows of robust azaleas flanked the front door, and a narrow bed of red volcanic rock ran along the side. A few gangly trees supported by rough wooden stakes dotted the grassy areas. I scanned the tinted windows, wondering if she was looking out of one of them. Did her position warrant a window, or was she stuck in some cubicle far away from light? The time had come not to retreat, but to leave the car and finally penetrate her world.

The slate sky pressed on me as I crossed the street. Everything seemed closer, compressed. The inside of the building was the same way – a low lobby served as portal for the building. Elevators lined the back wall, and corridors branched off the back to the first floor offices. A young man with a pierced lip sat behind the front desk reading the *Post*, and a few twitchy people stood by the elevator sipping from paper coffee cups and pretending to chat. On the gray wall near the desk, a directory displayed the contents of the office building. I scanned the names and was vaguely surprised to see she actually had her own office. Rebecca Orne, LCSW. 208. I wondered what her analysis of my behavior would be. I was tempted to laugh. It seemed unlikely I'd be

able to observe her in her natural work environment without making an appointment, which, considering the circumstances, probably wasn't the worst idea I'd ever had. I made my way to the stairs, noting that the young man at the front desk never once even glanced up at me.

I went quickly up to the second floor. I wasn't really interested in seeing her at that point, but I did have an interest in the layout of her building, and maybe even her office if I could risk it. My only experience with therapists had been when Tony and I got married. The minister required two joint sessions before he would conduct the wedding. It seemed like a good policy to us, and we did it happily. Unfortunately, as evidenced by Tony's absence, it was a total waste of time. The therapist we saw had a small waiting area, a bathroom, and his office. That was it. If Rebecca Orne's office was at all similar, I could slip into her waiting room, take a look around, and then vanish without her ever knowing I was there. The door meant to insulate her clients from the world outside would insulate her from me, and me from her. My fingertips tingled in anticipation of touching her doorknob. Once I made it to the top of the stairs the corridor reached toward the other end of the building and turned the corner. I walked slowly, noting the details of the hall. On one side the wall indented, leaving room for a battery of vending machines. I paused at the snack machine, trying to imagine what sort of snack Rebecca would purchase in the late afternoon to tide her over until dinner. Pepperidge Farm Goldfish certainly. Or perhaps Sunchips. Doritos would affect her breath negatively, which is a definite hazard in a business in which one has to spend a

lot of time in a small room talking. A little further along, I came to a row of water fountains. After taking a small sip out of each one, I took a deep breath. The cheap pictures on the wall, the chipped paint, the worn carpet were inconsequential.

I stood in front of her office door. She had a square gold plaque by the door frame with the room number, and a plate on her door announced:: REBBECA ORNE, LSCW. Just a half an hour earlier, parking near her bus stop had seemed like such an invasion. But this, this was something else. Something big. I was inside her life, on the carpet she walked every day, in front of the door she went in and out of without any thought. This space was distinctly hers. And the spaces that were distinctly mine lay vacant as I reached for the doorknob.

Before my fingers touched the metal, voices floated out from within. I recoiled and backed away, turning, heading back down the hall. I stopped at the vending machine when the door opened and pretended to search for money. Sweat rose on my neck, and my stomach lurched. I glanced toward her office, expecting to see her client. But she came out too. My nipples hardened. I became frantic. I needed a dollar in my hand, and although I had at least four hundred dollars in my wallet, I couldn't find a single. And then it hit me. Change. Change could be used in a vending machine. To my astonishment, Rebecca and her client were coming toward me. I stopped plunging through my bag and looked at the machine. The garish oranges and reds of the snack packaging blurred as they went by.

"You're feeling okay?" Her voice was soft, reassuring.

Her client, a teenager, nodded.

“This is a big step for you.” They continued past me, Rebecca’s hand resting lightly on the girl’s shoulder. “Whatever the outcome today, I’m proud of you.”

“Do you think they’re here yet?” The girl’s voice cracked, and Rebecca lightly tapped her shoulder.

Was there a way? A way for me to be that girl, walking down the hall with someone who knew all my secrets, someone who knew all about Tony. Someone who wasn’t a lawyer or a detective or even Brian. I couldn’t tell Brian that I missed Tony, that I loved Tony. Brian would find it intolerable that I felt the way I did. I found it intolerable myself. But with someone like Rebecca, I could tell her everything. And she had to sit there and take it. A therapist couldn’t recoil, couldn’t limit what I would say. Couldn’t belittle me or turn me away. It was an attractive thought. And then I had another attractive thought.

As Rebecca and her client disappeared down the stairs, I went back to her office. I pushed the door open slowly. Her waiting room was rather remarkable, considering the dingy hallway. The carpeting was a deep plush blue, and she had an overstuffed vermilion loveseat along one wall and an adjacent matching comfy chair. A small table held magazines and a black vase filled with live daisies. A table stood in the corner holding an aroma burner, which gave off a sweet citrus scent. The room, warm and almost womb-like, relaxed me. Directly opposite the door to Rebecca’s office was the door to her inner sanctum. It stood wide open.

“Hello?” I called out. I didn’t want to find out that Rebecca had left someone behind. No answer. I took a deep breath and stabbed my way into the back room. It’s a blur now. My intellect shut off – it couldn’t allow this incursion into Rebecca’s space, into her life.

My eyes roved back and forth, searching for that behemoth purse of hers. I found it crumpled behind her leather chair. My hands were not a part of me. They acted of their own accord, unzipping, prodding, fingertips like the feelers of a blind mollusk. The jangle of keys. My eyes closed as I slipped them in my jacket pocket. All I needed to do was run across the street to the hardware store to get copies made and then turn her keys in at the front desk – say I found them on the floor near her office. I had to hope she’d get them back – if not she might have her locks changed. As I backed out of her office I picked up something in my peripheral vision that didn’t quite register until right now – a bag of Sunchips on the table.

So, what next? I’m here, in my home, in this place I no longer understand. My connections to this place have been severed. How does one convert from “ours” to “mine?” This sofa can never be “mine.” And it can never be “his.” The echo of “us” is everywhere. And here in my palm is a copy of something of hers. It is nothing more than a simple ring holding a set of six shiny keys. I can almost feel the tumblers in her lock yielding to the insistent pressure of the key. And then I enter a space where mine and his and ours is nothing. Everything is hers. I sense these keys are something more than the metal they are made of – they can open more than doors. Tomorrow.

I had successfully avoided the possibility that Tony might have contracted and then infected me with a venereal disease for three months. But the morning I awoke ready to visit Rebecca Orne's apartment, I was forced to accept the actual danger in my situation. Up until the moment I saw the foamy mess on the toilet paper, HIV had really been the only possibility I'd considered. I had been a bit sore for a day or two, but I'd been preoccupied and hadn't really given it much thought. Of course I called the doctor immediately, and he fit me in that afternoon. My special gift from Tony and his prostitute playmates turned out to be Trichomoniasis. It sounds like a worm, but it isn't. I'd never heard of it, but Dr. Blackmore took one look at my vagina and said, "Camille, I think you have Trichomoniasis. I'll just do up a wet mount here and have a looksee under the scope."

He swabbed me and left the room, his jolly demeanor never faltering in the face of such hideous pollution. He prescribed Flagyl, and I left, keeping myself together through the trip to the pharmacy and the drive home. I exercised patience, waiting for the right moment to break down. It happened in the bathroom. I sat on the edge of the tub, filling it with hot water and lilac bath beads. The beads slowly dissolved, the shells disappearing as the oil spread out in little discs on the surface of the water.

Normally I'd find that sort of thing relaxing, but as the pearly tendrils of oil permeated the clear water, leaving it cloudy and gray, I was reminded of how this disease had come to me. I kicked the faucet with my foot, stopping the flow of water,

and plunged my hand into the tub to pull the plug. A thin slick of oil coated my forearm, and I yanked a towel off the bar to rub it off. I bolted out of the bedroom and down the hall to the guest bathroom where I stripped, my hands shaking as I tried to work the buttons on my blouse. In frustration, I ripped the last one open. I tossed my panties into the hallway, not wanting to look at them. I tore the shower curtain open and turned the water on hot and scrubbed every inch of me, not wanting a single dead skin cell left behind. My skin was as sore as the flesh of my vagina, which I scrubbed until I was in tears. But the foamy green filth coming out of me didn't stop. All I could do was take my pills and wait for the disease to go away.

It took a few days for the symptoms to disappear. I didn't leave the house during that time. I didn't want anyone to look at me. By the fourth day I needed to get out. I needed to go to Rebecca's. But it was Sunday – I couldn't. Too much risk that she'd be home. I did venture out to get some food. I considered calling Brian to tell him about the Trichomoniasis and that Dr. Blackmore had given me the blood test, but decided it would be better to wait until I was disease-free, assuming that was a possibility. Dr. Blackmore was supposed to call me the next day with the results of the HIV test. I already had one disease. Why not another? Why not two or three more? Why not all of them? Tony's indiscretions took on a new meaning for me – they were no longer childish, pitiful escapes.

As Dr. Blackmore drew my blood, telling me how sorry he was about my situation, about the Trichomoniasis, about the divorce, Tony's acts became tiny bullets

lodged in my body, poisoning me. Tony became a killer. I wanted to call him and tell him what he'd done. I wanted to tell him about the green foam that had come out of me. It would disgust him and shame him. It would make him drink. And I wanted him to. To drink and drink and drink until he was poisoned.

I didn't call. I'm not even sure if I could have spoken to him if I had. Shady Pines is a strict facility. They protect the people on the inside from the ones on the outside they have hurt. Looking back at our wedding day, I should have seen it coming. We'd agreed not to shove cake in each other's faces. And then he did – in front of all the guests, he went back on his word and ground cake into my face. His groomsmen laughed at me. My reaction was to retaliate and shove cake into his face – laugh it off, make it look planned. And the day continued, happy, bright, full of possibilities. That's what people saw. But inside I was completely humiliated. His jagged laughter as he watched me wipe the cake from my face came back to me over and over, even as we sat at the head table sipping champagne. Even as he looked into my eyes and told me how happy he was that we would be together forever. I never spoke to him about it. I should have known.

I stood in front of her door, shaking. I wasn't even certain my keys would work. What if she hadn't gotten her keys back? She might not think to ask the young man at the front desk of her office building if anyone had found them. I fingered the keys, trying to sense which one would open the door. I chose one with a hexagonal head, still

silver, shiny, unused. The key slid into the lock with no resistance. I turned the key, opened the door, and stepped inside easily. The invasion into Rebecca's life that had once been so difficult had suddenly become easy. Boundaries, once crossed, disappear. Tony is intimately aware of this – it is an awareness we now share even though we are currently separated by 3000 miles of geography.

I expected crossing her threshold to reverberate somehow. My other incursions into her sphere of existence had elicited strong physical responses. I should have collapsed in rapture. Instead I just stood there, holding my breath, waiting for something to happen. Rebecca's apartment was completely silent except for the ticking of a wall clock shaped like a sunflower. I stepped into the apartment and kicked the door closed with my heel, hoping the sound of it clicking shut would jumpstart the experience I was expecting. Nothing.

Her apartment resembled my fantasy in only one way. Her floors were indeed polished hardwood, and she did have a selection of drab throw rugs – one under the coffee table, and one between the living room and kitchen, which appeared disorganized and dirty. My need for breath quickened, and I began to understand why her apartment had no effect on me. I was expecting something clean and pure. I wanted to plunge myself into her and clean away the toxic fallout of my divorce.

It wasn't too late. I exhaled and sucked in a deep lungful of stale air. The sunflower clock read 9:10. I didn't have much time.

At first I had intended to only clean the kitchen counter and the dishes, maybe straighten a few pillows on the cheap sofa, maybe dust a bit. But in the kitchen I quickly lost control. Her spice rack was completely disorganized, and all the little glass bottles had a coating of kitchen grime. I scrubbed each bottle, dusted and cleaned the spice rack and returned the bottles in alphabetical order. I removed all of her dishes, cleaned them by hand, dusted and cleaned the interior of the cabinets, and rearranged her cabinets to maximize space. When I was through with that project, I'd freed up two whole cabinet shelves. Pleased, I turned my attention to the floor, which I scrubbed using the last of her Murphy's Oil Soap. On my hands and knees, I removed every mote of dried up food and grime. By noon the kitchen was spotless, organized, streamlined, pure.

I hadn't eaten at all, and by the time I started in on the living room, my hands shook. She had a cheap entertainment center crammed with CDs and DVDs, which I organized by genre and alphabetized within their categories. She seemed to have a great love of foreign films, a detail I might have been fascinated with when I first began following around. But that afternoon I passed over it as insignificant. What mattered to me was that she be pristine. As I pushed her couch back across the floor and reached for the broom to sweep up the dust underneath, it struck me as completely ludicrous that a woman who left the house with a dryer sheet dangling from her sleeve might be clean, orderly. Then I stopped.

I fell backward onto the floor, and I think I may have actually lost consciousness for a minute. My limbs went completely cold, and I was hovering above myself looking down. What was that bag of skin on the floor of someone else's apartment? Why did her knuckles bleed? I don't know how long I floated there, but during that strange dream of myself, I knew it was over. I had a vision of myself at some future time, wrapped in a blanket, in some other place, alone, sobbing, away from Rebecca Orne, away from the home that Tony and I had shared. Then my cell phone rang.

I sat up, tingling. My head hurt. I groped for my purse and stood up. My phone identified the caller as Dr. Blackmore. My finger hovered over the button. I could send him directly into voicemail or I could answer. Sweat slicked my palms. I answered.

It wasn't Dr. Blackmore himself – it was one of his nurses.

"I have the results of your blood work, Mrs. Donaldson." Her use of my married name threw me to the point that I didn't hear the door opening. Not that I could have done anything if I had heard.

I looked up to see Rebecca framed in the dull light of the hallway. The nurse continued in my ear. Rebecca opened her mouth to speak. I held my hand up, motioning her to wait. She complied, taking a step into her apartment and pushing the door wide open. Her eyes flitted from the kitchen to the living room, noticing the changes I'd made. She dropped her purse and groped for the doorjamb. I thanked the nurse for her call and closed my phone. I stared at the CDs for a moment, considering

how the information I'd just received changed everything. The clock ticked. I finally turned to face Rebecca Orne.

She stood there in the doorway, her mouth open, brow tight, dumbfounded, terrified. The realization of what I'd done to her struck me in waves. First I knew the mechanics of it—it was a rape. Then my agitation increased as I became aware of the severity. All at once she was moving, shouting. She had a phone in her hand and was dialing. I wanted to explain or apologize. I wanted to fall to my knees and beg for understanding. I wanted her to know my brand of rape wasn't about hurting her. It was about hurting myself. And in an instant I knew it didn't matter. I'd taken something from her—used her, without any regard for her as a human being. I stole from her, entered, touched, changed her into what I wanted her to be. I grabbed my purse and made for the door. She grabbed my wrist and yanked me backward, puncturing me with her hard glazed eyes. I tried to pull away, but she was surprisingly strong, and I simply went limp.

The clock ticked. My heart pumped blood to my vital organs. Her fingers relaxed. With my free hand, I pulled her keys from my purse and handed them to her. She let go of me.

“Get out. Before the police come.”

I began to speak, but she shook her head, and I went silent. Shame coated me. I wanted, needed to see Tony. But I knew it wouldn't happen. I walked past her, not looking back. The door shut behind me, a bit louder than I expected. I got in my car and

drove to a hotel where I took a shower, careful not to hurt myself again. I closed the curtains, shut off the lights and flicked the TV on. The starched sheets and stiff pillows were nothing at all like the bedding in my home, and they comforted me. Images on the television flickered by. A chemical in my body waged a war against a toxic pollutant. I hurt.

Right now that's all there is.

MORE COLORS

Eliza skipped a rock across the surface of the water where her husband Nick had disappeared. His boat was on the shore now, flipped over, the single oar leaning on the boat's side. She bent to find another rock, replaying in her mind, as she did every morning, the day of his disappearance. It was a simple thing. She'd walked out on the balcony to wave to him. He was out on the lake, not too far, sitting with his back to her. She sipped her coffee and watched him as he waited for the morning fish to start biting. Finally she turned to go inside, walking across the deck to the open glass door. She heard the splash behind her, and as she turned and saw the empty boat, her coffee cup slipped from her fingers, landing squarely on her toes, hot coffee spilling onto the wood planks. Her eyes darted across the water, returning to the empty boat and circling it again, waiting for him to surface. His fishing rod dangled in the water. In the glare, she thought saw him floating.

That had been a month ago – July. Today Detective Hadley would be visiting again – drinking coffee, asking questions with an eye of accusation. Hadley'd wanted to arrest her. She'd been the only person within miles of the incident, so she was the obvious suspect. In his mind she certainly had motive. Nick was a successful gastroenterologist with a booming practice. She was a car mechanic. Nick's insurance policy could set her up for life, and what a better way to collect than to fake a drowning. But with no body, it was impossible to get an arrest warrant. Still, Detective Hadley

visited about once a week to ask questions. He didn't believe her story. Eliza hardly believed it herself. If Nick had actually drowned in the lake, his body would have turned up. But she had seen it, or most of it. On the bank of Lake Anna, she was almost certain she had seen Nick's floating body. She had waded in, her t-shirt soaking up the water, clinging to her skin. Mud filled the spaces between her toes, and she said his name over and over, louder each time. She thrashed about twenty feet out, and as the water became deeper she burst into freestyle, propelling herself forward.

She arrived at the small boat out of breath, shivering. Clearing the water from her eyes with her fist, she treaded water. As she moved slowly around the boat, she kept expecting to come upon Nick's floating body, but it wasn't there. She dove, feeling for him under the boat. Again and again, she thrust herself underwater, trying to reach the bottom. She almost inhaled water at the sharp jab in the meat of her upper arm as she became snagged on Nick's fishing hook. She found the line and tore at it, her blood clouding the water.

The house was so quiet without Nick, causing her to whisper and tiptoe, even though there was no one to disturb. Nick whistled and hummed and click-clacked as he moved through the house, but no longer. His sounds had been displaced immediately by doting relatives and loud detectives and then by the creaking and settling of the cabin, and by silence.

His smells dispersed more slowly. When Eliza went into the bathroom in the morning, the steamy scent of shaving gel that had lingered for a while was absent, and the aroma of coffee no longer greeted her at the top of the stairs. No more fried striper and walleye, no more striped bass. No more fish guts and scales in the sink. And his breath, the clean smell and taste of his mouth even when the rest of him was humid and rank, his hand on the small of her back, his tongue in her mouth—his taste, his smell—gone.

Eliza's mother called every day. How are you? Any word? You should really come home. What are you doing to keep yourself busy?

Reading, she always answered.

She sat on the balcony for hours at a time reading in fits and starts, spending more time gazing out over the lake than at her book. Walking was the other answer. During June and the first half of July, she had walked with Nick every evening after dinner, he with a toothpick in his mouth and one arm draped across her shoulders. Now, in the heat of August, she walked alone wearing jeans and one of his white v-neck t-shirts. Sometimes, after the sun set and the frogs began to chirp, she'd stand in the middle of the trail and say his name, hoping one night he'd answer. If I close my eyes, she thought, he'll be here when I open them. And when he comes, I'll take his face in my hands and kiss him and taste his breath again. She'd close her eyes on the trail, alone, and whisper, "Nick." Everything would seem to go silent, the frogs and insects

respectful of her grief, and on the trail in the dark, she'd open her wet eyes and, alone, return to the cabin.

When Detective Hadley arrived, the coffee was ready. Eliza had changed out of her well worn-pajamas and robe into her jeans and t-shirt.

"If he had drowned, we would have found a body, Mrs. Morrison." Detective Hadley leaned over the island in the kitchen, looking down into his coffee cup. He said the same things every time, trying to wear her down – trying to get her to admit to something. But she always had the same answer, as irrational as it sounded.

"I saw him, detective. I saw him, and when I got out there he was gone." She replayed it again and again. Nick in the water, floating gently. It was him. It was his yellow t-shirt with the blue letters on the back, "Kentlands 5K " And then nothing. No body. No t-shirt. No Nick. She turned her back on Detective Hadley and gazed out the small window over the kitchen sink. A robin pecked at something in a patch of dry pine needles outside on the path.

"You know you couldn't really have seen him." Detective Hadley sighed. " If his body was there, we'd have found it by now."

"I know, I know."

"Look, Mrs. Morrison. I'm not saying you killed him. Not anymore."

Eliza turned to face the detective. Dark circles ringed his eyes, and his tie needed to be ironed. His skin wore a thin coat of oil, making him appear waxy. He hadn't looked like that the first time she'd seen him.

"This case is getting to you, isn't it, Detective? Why the change of heart?"

Hadley took a sip of his coffee, licked his lips, and looked down into the cup again. "Nothing adds up to murder. I was certain at first that you had done it. You know, for his money maybe. Let's face it, you can't make all that much working in a garage."

"Hey!" Eliza took a step forward.

Hadley chuckled. "No offense. Look, all I'm saying is, you had motive, means, and opportunity. You called 911, reporting him drowned. The paramedics show up, and nothing. He's just gone. A little fishy, don't you think?"

"It's fishy if I'm a moron. What idiot would call in a drowning and then move the body?"

Hadley cleared his throat. "Well..."

"It's because I'm a woman, isn't it?"

"No, it isn't that," he said quickly. "It's just that nothing made sense. And when nothing makes sense, there's usually a stupid criminal behind it. Everything pointed to you."

Eliza glared at him, her arms crossed.

“Again, no offense. You’re clearly not a stupid criminal. If you’re a criminal at all, which I doubt, you’re a heck of a lot smarter than me.”

Eliza relaxed a little. “Detective, you really know how to make a woman feel good.”

“That’s the first time I’ve heard that.”

Eliza refilled Hadley’s coffee cup and pushed the sugar bowl toward him. “So I’m innocent. Why are you here then?”

The detective sighed again and stirred two spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee. “Well, if we assume you didn’t kill him, there’s a good chance he isn’t dead at all. After all, we haven’t found a body, or even a trace of one. We also found no sign of a struggle. You follow?”

“Yes.”

“So I think you need to start considering...” He paused, eyeing her. “Other possibilities.”

“Like what?”

Detective Hadley took a sip of coffee and put his cup down. He gazed past her, out the window.

“So you’re saying he left.” It came out fast, and louder than she’d intended. The detective didn’t say anything. It wasn’t the first time the thought had entered her head, but it was the first time she’d uttered it aloud, the first time she’d actually entertained it as a possibility.

“Is there anything, Mrs. Morrison, anything at all, that might have caused him to leave? Did you have a fight?”

“No,” she said in a hoarse whisper. “Nothing I can think of. Nick and I almost never fought.” She made to lean on the counter, but it was further from her than she expected, and she stumbled backward, falling awkwardly. Hadley jumped out of his seat and darted around the counter to help her up.

“Are you all right?” he asked, hefting her to her feet and leading her past the counter toward the sofa.

She shook his hand off her arm. “Let go. I’m fine. I think you should go.” She turned her back on him.

“Okay, Mrs. Morrison. Just call if you think of anything. Okay?”

“Go.”

The detective let himself out. She stood in the same place until she heard his dark blue Malibu back out of the gravel driveway onto the single-lane, paved road that led to the cabin.

The thought of him alive but choosing to leave her was almost as bad as the thought of him dead. The thought that he’d left her had flitted into her mind a few times since his disappearance, but she’d laughed it off as ridiculous. But maybe he had left. Could she be that blind? Was it possible that their relationship had gone so wrong and she hadn’t even noticed? “Nick, where are you?” she said to the empty room, fighting back a fresh deluge of tears. Silence.

She decided to bake him a pie. Peach was his favorite. First she made the crust. Two cups of flour and some salt. Then the shortening and water. She wrapped the dough in waxed paper and put it in the fridge to cool. Taking a stainless steel bowl of peaches, she sat at the wooden trestle table and peeled. She loved how the fuzzy skin concealed the firm, yellow flesh of the fruit. Slicing each peach in half, she removed the pits and dropped them in a paper bag. She cut the peach halves into slivers and added sugar, cinnamon, and lemon peel, finishing the mixture up with the juice of half the lemon.

Nick usually helped with the pies – he was better at rolling the dough. Eliza remembered the first time they'd made a pie together. It was back in college, about three weeks after they'd started dating. She could almost hear him:

"Hey, Eliza?"

"Yeah?"

"What's that over there?" He pointed over her shoulder at an imaginary something behind her.

She turned, playing along, "What? I don't see anything." And she'd turn back to see him licking his fingers, chewing on a sugared peach.

Blinking back a fresh round of tears, she pulled open the fridge and retrieved the dough. It was firm and cold now. It would be hard to roll at first, but she knew that after a short time it would warm up, and she'd be able to work with it.

She couldn't eat the pie. The odor of it made her sick – it was a Nick smell. It was too much. But she couldn't throw it away, either. Making a pie for him and then throwing it away would demonstrate bad faith. Instead she put it out on the deck railing to let it cool. Who knew? Maybe if he was alive, it would entice him to come home.

Sticky from baking, she drew a bath, sprinkling in a handful of spearmint eucalyptus bath salt, which according to the jar, warded off evil thoughts and calmed the mind. "Let's put this to the test," she said aloud.

The steam filled her lungs as she stepped into the water. Flecks of eucalyptus floated around her calves. She sat, the water hot enough to burn, hugging her knees. "He used to sing 'Brown-Eyed Girl' to me," she said to the wall. Her voice shook. Steam rose from the surface of the water, leaving beads of moisture on her face. She closed her eyes, slid under the water and let all the air out of her lungs.

One of Eliza's favorite things to remember, even before Nick disappeared, was the time they'd had sex in the bathroom at her parent's house during dinner. Her mom had put out the good china, and her dad had grilled New York Strips.

It was the usual hell of bringing a date home. Nick and her father fenced about politics, her father becoming more adversarial with each glass of wine. Eliza's mother pulled her usual smile and nod act, which would, as it always did, culminate in an hour-long bitch fest after dinner when Dad, drunk and cranky, had gone upstairs to lie

down. But Nick had handled it. Even after the conversation turned to how disappointed her father was at Eliza for being a car mechanic.

“We pay for four years of college and she’s doing hourly work in a garage.” He said it like a joke, laughing at the punch line, but only his mouth smiled. His eyes remained hard. At the end he tacked on, “What do you guys even have to talk about? You’re a doctor, for God’s sake.” He chuckled again and refilled his Merlot, having already abandoned sipping in favor of swilling.

“It’s easier to talk shop than you might think. She overhauls engines and I overhaul digestive tracts. It’s not that different. Colonic cysts, worn-out seals. We go in and fix things. It’s what we do. I’d say we were a match made in heaven.” Nick was all smiles, but his eyes were locked on Eliza’s father, refusing to balk.

Taking another gulp of wine he said, “Well, that’s wonderful for you two. Just wonderful.”

Nick raised his glass. “I’m glad you think so.”

Eliza squeezed his knee under the table.

“Excuse me.” Nick placed his napkin on the table and left for the bathroom.

“Eliza, he’s certainly large,” her father said, as if it was Nick’s only redeeming quality.

“That’s nice, Dad. Drink more wine.” She excused herself and followed Nick, meaning only to give him a hug and a kiss. She caught him coming out of the bathroom

and pushed him back in. On tiptoe, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, kicking the door shut with her foot. "That didn't suck," she murmured between kisses.

Nick smiled. "Your dad's kind of a punk."

Eliza couldn't help herself. She slid her hands up his shirt and ran her fingers through the fuzz on his chest, pinching one of his nipples.

He winced. "Hey. Perv."

"That's me," she said, unbuttoning his pants.

"Okay by me." Lifting her skirt, he propped her up on the sink. It was a definite quickie, and she didn't come, but it didn't matter. She wanted to be defiant. And instead of being a prude, he understood and was more than happy to oblige. On the way back to the table, he leaned down and whispered, "We'll finish later."

The salty water burned her eyes when she opened them. She tracked blurry eucalyptus leaves as they floated across her vision. Her chest started to tighten, her lungs aching for breath. It was easier to cry underwater, nothing burning a hot track down her cheek. The tears just dispersed, the single drop into the whole in an instant, like being born straight into heaven. Maybe her father had been right. Maybe a mechanic and a gastroenterologist couldn't possibly have a life together. She opened her mouth, letting it fill with water, and inhaled.

* * *

The coughing had worn her out. Buried under two blankets and a quilt, she slept. With the AC set at 65, the cabin was cold. But she preferred cold to hot. Floating somewhere near sleep, it occurred to her how difficult it was to drown. The body rebelled against it. Her body certainly had. There was no escaping it. Hadley was right. Nick had left her.

The pie plate was empty in the morning, which wasn't really all that strange. Raccoons were abundant in the woods surrounding Lake Anna. No. What really made Eliza ask the pie plate, "What the fuck?" was the fact that it was still perched on the deck railing. She'd never known raccoons, or any wild animal for that matter, to be particularly cautious of knocking the dishes down.

Out on the lake, a speed boat purred by, pulling a bronzed water skier. Shrugging, she lifted the pie plate and sniffed it. The scent of peach was gone. She glanced down at the railing, and her face went cold as the blood drained out of her head. Words had been scratched into the wood: "Thank you." Black dots peppered her vision, and the pie plate slipped out of her grasp, falling almost forever, and finally hitting the boards with a clunk. Her knees buckled and she went down.

She woke inside on the sofa under a blanket. Eyes burning, head pounding, she sat up. It was later, around noon. She closed her eyes, trying to recapture the last moments of some dream. Nick. She'd smelled him. But he was different. Cold. Silent. Opening her eyes, she looked out the sliding glass door at the deck. The pie plate was

still out there, upside down on the floor. For a split second she went woozy again, but fought it back. Rising, she shrugged the blanket off and went to the door, pulling it open. The August heat rushed inward, and she shivered. She stood in the doorway looking out into the woods. They were on the quiet end of the lake where most of the fishing was done. They did get the occasional speedboat or party boat, but at that moment, nothing. Nick's rowboat was still upside down on the shore. She picked up the pie plate and went to the railing, her fingertips tracing the words scratched into the wood. The edges of the letters were smooth, and the curves of the grooves almost graceful. What sort of tool had done it? She lifted her gaze and scanned the woods again. "Nick?" she whispered. She knew he wouldn't answer. But she knew for sure he was alive and that he was near.

She ran full-tilt into the house and burst through the door of his office, almost expecting to find him sitting there. The office faced the woods at the back of the house, and light streamed in from the single window. Nick's leather chair sat facing the door. Eliza pushed it aside and opened the bottom drawer of his file cabinet where he kept his medical bag. It was gone.

An hour later, she sat in his leather chair, spinning slowly, her eye catching the open file drawer every time it passed her line of sight. He had been in the house. She'd only been in the office twice since he'd disappeared. The first time was right after he'd drowned. She'd come in and sat in his chair, flipping through his medical journals. The

second time was just a few days ago when she'd cut herself while chopping up some celery for tuna salad. The first aid kit had been out of alcohol swabs, so she'd gone to check his medical bag for some. There had been plenty.

She kicked the drawer shut and turned his laptop on. It took a few minutes to boot up, and while everything was loading she fingered some of the papers on his desk. Most of it was as he'd left it—notes on articles he'd read, stuff he was putting together for a class he was teaching at Johns Hopkins in the fall. None of it seemed tampered with at all. So had he just come for his bag? And why? Why would he leave without it and then come back for it? Something had gone wrong with him. Buy why hadn't he told her? Could it be something between them that had driven him away? She opened one of the cabinets above his computer desk. She expected it to be empty—he didn't bring much with him to the cabin. But inside were three legal pads.

The first pad was filled with notes for an article he was putting together on the possible long-term dangers of treating acid reflux disease with acid-inhibiting medications. The second legal pad was empty. The third one started out with a list of things in the cabin that were broken or missing. They rented the cabin out when they weren't staying in it, and Nick always kept careful track of what needed to be replaced or fixed for the fall tenants. Then, to her surprise, his careful inventory of the cabin became something of a journal. He'd scribbled a few sentences down on the condition of the boat and his first day's catch.

Eliza ran her fingers over his blocky lettering. The last sentence on the page read, “Will fry the walleye up for Eliza when she gets back from the store.” He’d scrawled a small smiley face at the bottom of the page. She flew through the pages, reading a chronicle of their month together. None of it seemed at all strange. It was mostly things like, “We went for a walk tonight and saw a doe on the path,” or “I think I’ll paint the boat this week.” She cried as she read. Not jagged sobbing, but steady streaming tears dotting each page as she read and turned to the next one. She could almost hear his voice, almost feel his breath on her neck, almost smell him. About three-quarters of the way through, she came to a few longer entries. One in particular caught her eye.

The longer we spend here, the less I want to leave. I don’t know if it’s because I’m subconsciously nervous about teaching or what, but I feel a strong pull to just give up everything and move in here permanently. Eliza would flip if I suggested it. We’d be too far from the city. It’d kill her. But I could do it. We’d open up a gas station – maybe buy out Tom Wilson. That guy’s older than dirt. Eliza could work on the cars, and I could run the station, do the books and stuff. And on the weekends, I could be out on the water. It’s the water really. I’m in love with the lake. When I’m out on the boat or swimming, I feel complete. Like I was made to be here.

“God,” she whispered to herself. “I had no idea.” She glanced up at his computer which had been on long enough for the screen saver to come on. Images of fish,

amphibians and reptiles appeared on the screen, one fading slowly into the other. The room had darkened some since she'd entered, and bright blues and greens filled the room. She stared at the images through one full cycle, and then another. Salmon swam upstream, tiny frogs sat perched on leaves and twigs, toads plucked insects out of the air, trout and catfish lurked underwater, their eyes almost glowing. Geckos clung to rocks, snakes sunned themselves, and lizards basked in the sun.

She left the office, taking the legal pad with her. He was right. She would have flipped. She would have never agreed to live in the country. He knew her enough to know that. And she didn't know him at all, it seemed. She went to the sliding glass door and gazed out at the lake. In the dusky light, the surface was a deep red. Had he been right there with her, having never disappeared, asking her to stay, she would have laughed in his face. But now that he was gone, she knew she'd rather have him with her in the Virginia country than live without him.

She baked him another pie and wrote him a short note. It said: *Nick, I know you're alive. Please come home. Love, Eliza.*

It was a long day. She put the pie outside and watched from the sofa, but deep inside knew he wouldn't come until night. The phone rang three times, but she didn't answer. At four she made a can of chili to pick at. She tried her hand at reading, but Tom Clancy, once again, failed to hold her attention. She paced. She doodled. She cut fringes into the edges of her newspaper with sewing shears. She did pushups and jumping jacks. She chewed her nails. She stood in the mirror, fingering the scar on her

arm left by Nick's fish hook. She cracked ice and filled the trays. She stripped the bed and put new sheets on. She showered. The sun was setting. She went downstairs to wait. She turned off all the lights in the house and sat on the couch, staring out at the pie. She blinked. She yawned. She watched. She fell asleep.

When she opened her eyes, it was dark. The clock on the end table read 2:17 AM. Eliza blinked and rubbed her eyes, yawning. Her neck ached from sleeping with her head flopped to the side. As she stood, she rubbed the sore spot with her fingers. She stared at the sliding glass door, slowly moving toward it. Still foggy from sleep, she struggled to separate her dream world from her reality. Had she really found a message scratched into the rail of her deck? Was Nick really alive, out there somewhere maybe, living off the land? Maybe he was hurt – he'd come back for his medical bag, after all.

When she reached the door she flicked the outside light on. Crouched over the plate, which was no longer on the rail but on the floorboards, two raccoons looked up at the light, seemingly paralyzed. Eliza yanked the door open and hollered, "Vamoose." The coons took off, loping down the steps as fast as their fat raccoon haunches could carry them. Eliza stepped onto the deck, the August heat blanketing her skin. Frog song filled the air, as it did night after night, the incessant chirping that could sometimes get so loud it sounded like Armageddon had begun.

She moved to the railing and looked up at the sky. A small patch of stars was visible right over the house where no trees blocked the view. Out on the lake, the view was much better. Moving toward the stairs, she considered going back into the house

for a flashlight, but when she went back inside, she emerged with a half-empty bottle of Bacardi 151 instead.

Picking her way down the path to the lake, she took four large swallows of the rum, so that by the time she had the boat in the water, she was already woozy. She pushed back from the shore with the paddle, looking up, the stars becoming more visible as she moved away from the trees. A few strokes from the shore, she noticed a hush had fallen over the woods. She could still hear frogs crying in the distance, from the other side of the lake, but from the direction of her house, all was silent. She took another mouthful of rum, replaced the cap, and rowed toward the center of the lake. The boat glided silently over the water, the oar gently breaking the surface and propelling, first on one side of the boat, and then the other.

Her arms tiring, Eliza stopped, well short of the lake's center, and took another few swigs of rum. The alcohol burned her throat and her head was already clouded, her lips and teeth tingly. She lay back in the boat and looked at the sky. There were so many more stars out here in the backwoods of Virginia than in Baltimore, where they lived. The Big Dipper was already too low in the sky to see, but Orion was overhead. She propped herself up, downing another four healthy swallows of the rum. It burned her empty stomach, and as she lay back down in the boat, it burned her esophagus too.

Her eyes clouded. He hadn't come. Or if he had come, if he had gotten her note, he'd rejected her. What if he never came back? What if she'd lost him forever? Boxes. She'd need boxes to put his stuff in, his clothes, his books. She'd need to pack up the

cabin too. Could he really be gone? She sat up and chugged the rum as fast as she could get it down, and cast the empty bottle into the lake. She watched it float away, mildly surprised to see the oar floating alongside it, no longer attached to the boat. She belched, a bit of rum shooting back into her mouth. The boat seemed to spin under her as she lay back again, blinking her eyes, watching the stars appear and disappear behind her eyelids.

When the rising sun woke her, she sat up and vomited between her legs. It was hot, acidic, rushing past her teeth and splattering her legs. She leaned over the side of the boat and retched again, the smell of alcohol clenching her stomach. A mouthful of bile came up, and Eliza was puzzled when it landed on dirt rather than water. She puked herself into dry heaves, slung over the side of the boat, her head pounding, her mouth aching for some cold water.

Once her stomach settled, she stepped out of the boat. It had been dragged up onto the shore. The oar was on the shore too, next to the boat, as was her empty bottle of rum.

“Fuck you,” she snapped at the bottle, kicking it back into the water. The bottle bobbed, and watching it move up and down made her stomach well up again.

“Nick!” she yelled, her voice breaking the quiet. She clenched her teeth through a dry heave. Her head pounded. She turned toward the house and made her way back up the path. About halfway to the house she noticed how quiet it actually was. Normally at sunrise birds would be chirping up a storm, waking up anyone with open windows.

But it was dead silent, nothing but the sound of her footsteps. She paused and peered into the woods around her, seeing nothing.

When she began to walk again, she heard something large rustling in the brush to her left. Her head snapped toward the sound, and it went silent. She took a step toward the trees, her eyes aching as she searched for the source of the noise. As she moved closer to the tree line, she stepped in something wet and cold.

“Yech!” She jumped back and began dragging the sole of her foot across the ground, disgusted. Peering toward the spot she saw a pile of orangish slime at the edge of the tree line. Bending over to get a closer look, she could pick out peaches and chunks of crust. It was the pie, but it gave off a smell something like ammonia. She picked up a stick and poked it, noticing a clutch of maggots writhing in the goo. Her stomach lurched and another mouthful of bile came up next to the pie. She looked at her bile, and then at the pie. “It’s puke,” she said aloud.

Another rustling sound came from the woods, this time a little farther off, and when she glanced up, almost certain she’d see Nick watching her from the woods, she thought she saw something large and green pressing through the bushes about twenty yards in. Chills racked her, and she hugged herself, quickly looking behind her to make sure no one was there. The silence coated her. She squinted hard into the woods, watching for any sign of movement. Her heart raced; rum-scented sweat beaded up on her skin, and after standing, muscles tense, studying the woods for a full three minutes,

she said, "Screw this," her voice shaking. She swallowed hard, looked behind her again, looked down at the lake, and then turned and jogged inside.

Eliza grabbed the phone the moment she got inside, snatching Detective Hadley's card off the refrigerator. She dialed the first few numbers and then hung up. She leaned over the sink and retched again. The room spun, and she realized she couldn't call the detective yet. She was still drunk. Instead she went upstairs and took a long shower, rinsing off the scum sleeping on the lake had left on her skin. She downed four Advils and dozed on the couch for a while.

Around noon, still raw from her hangover, she ate two slices of buttered toast and sipped chamomile tea. She was tempted to take a swig out of the vodka bottle, thinking that might make her feel a little better, but decided against it. Instead she went out to the deck to pick up the empty pie plate. Under it was another message scratched into the wood. It read, *Go Home*.

She glanced toward the woods quickly and then went inside as if she hadn't seen the message at all.

She wasn't much of a coffee drinker. The only time the pot had been used since Nick had left was for Detective Hadley. She filled the filter with twelve scoops and flicked the maker on. She sat on the sofa all afternoon, with a book in her lap, staring out the window, drinking cup after cup of strong, sour coffee. After the first pot, her stomach began tingling, and her left eyelid developed a tic. She decided to drink the second pot more slowly.

Around nine that night, she turned all the inside and outside lights off and sat on the sofa, staring into the night, sipping her fourteenth cup of coffee. She sat Indian style, her left hand tapping her knee in a constant quick rhythm. Her eyes burned, and her heart thumped, heavy in her chest. Sweat rolled down her back. The house was so quiet she could hear the frogs outside croaking their chorus. And then around 10:15, the frogs went silent.

Eliza's back tensed, and she put her mug on the coffee table. Her fingers fidgeted with the hem on her shorts, pinching it, kneading it. A clicking sound came from the deck, faint, but clear. Out of the darkness a silhouette emerged and stood at the glass. Eliza drew a deep breath, and her heart pounded in her chest, staring at the Nick-sized figure on the other side of the glass. She flashed back to the morning, seeing something green and low to the ground arching through the bushes, and seeing, but not registering until now, eyes in the undergrowth.

Eliza sat, unsure of whether to run to the front of the house, get in the truck, drive away, and never come back, or to simply take a few steps forward and unlock the door.

"Nicky?" she said and rose from the couch.

At her movement, the figure darted toward the stairs, disappearing into the darkness. She bolted for the door and burst into the night, yelling his name.

Rustling sounded to her left. Tearing down the steps in her bare feet, she stumbled at the bottom and fell, twisting her ankle. Forcing herself up, she limped around the house.

“Wait,” she called, startling herself – her voice rang out louder than she’d expected. Silence. No frogs, no rustling, just the still air and quiet. She stood still, listening to her breath, scanning the trees, listening, looking. In the darkness, she saw him suddenly, a silhouette, about twenty feet in front of her, emerging from the surrounding brush and branches. She hobbled forward a step.

The figure backed up a few steps, then stopped.

“Nick. Is that you?” Silence. “I know it is. Say something.” Her voice cracked. Eliza took a few more steps toward him, tears streaming down her face, her hands shaking. “Baby?”

The figure reached its hand out toward her and then drew it back quickly as she continued to approach.

“Are you okay? What’s wrong? Say something.” Eliza’s spine tightened, and her stomach lurched. She squinted, attempting to see his face. Maybe it wasn’t him. Maybe it was some deranged serial killer that murdered him and now wanted to murder her. Whoever it was definitely had his shape, his height. Moonlight reflected off the figure’s smooth skin, and she realized he was naked. Suddenly unsure of herself, she took a step backward. The figure stood still and continued watching her.

Her ankle throbbed, her eyes burned, her knees were caked with mud, her head ached. Suddenly she was angry.

“Fuck you. You fucking bastard. What the fuck are you doing out here? Why did you leave?” Her voice rang out, and for a moment she was worried the neighbors would hear, but she laughed out loud at the thought. They were too far away.

The figure hadn't moved. She bent, rummaging in the dirt, and came up with a rock. “Asshole,” she said, her voice evening out. She hurled the rock at him, and he ducked as the rock sailed over his head.

In a fury, she bolted for him, sprinting, ignoring the pain in her ankle, ignoring the pain of the rough ground on her bare feet. Startled, the man jumped backward, and turning to run, lost his footing and went to his knees. Eliza tackled him, rolling him on his back, and in the dark, she smelled his breath as he exhaled, and she knew it was Nick.

Something was wrong with his face, his skin. He bucked, throwing her off him, and scrambled to his feet backing away from her. She landed hard, her elbow slamming into a tree root jutting out of the ground. Wincing, she touched the wound and then covered it with her hand. Blood oozed from the cut in her palm.

“What's your problem?” She looked up at him and gasped. He backed further away and ducked behind a tree.

“Nick?” Her voice was low, hoarse. She stood slowly. “Don’t run. Please don’t run.” She bit her lower lip, blinking back new tears. Letting go of her elbow, she held out her bloody hand to him. “Is it really you?”

He emerged from behind the tree, nodded, and then looked away from her.

Reaching for his arm, she sniffled, a smile forming on her face. He jerked his arm away from her, but she was too quick for him. She held his hand, running her fingers over the cool, smooth scales, green in the moonlight. His face was transformed, his brow lower and more pronounced, his nose reduced to a nub with two holes. His head was completely smooth, and every inch of him was pale green. Dropping his hand, she backed away. They stood looking at each other for a moment. Eliza suddenly burst out laughing, holding her stomach.

“Oh my God. This is too much.” Her knees buckled and she fell to the ground, her chest heaving as she cackled. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she gasped to catch her breath. “This is un-fucking-believable.” Her laughs began jagged and crackled into sobs. “All this time... I thought you were dead... and then I just thought you’d left me.” Her diaphragm ached. “But no. You’re just a great big lizard.”

She fell back in the brush and rolled onto her side. Her sobs hiccupped into laughs again. Her eyes burned and her dry throat crackled. She coughed, and rolled to her knees hacking for a few seconds, trying to erase the itch at the very back of her throat.

The coughing silenced, she wiped her cheeks. She forced herself up so she could look at his face again, see if what she had seen was more than a dream, but he was gone.

Back at the house she showered and crawled into bed, shivering and shaking. She lay staring at the wall, the coffee not allowing her eyes to even shut. She ran her fingers along her legs, trying to find a part of her that felt like him. Breathing deeply, she tried to pick up the scent of his breath again – the familiar scent that had completely disarmed her earlier in the woods.

Deep into the night she finally slept, her eyes twitching, her legs kicking under the covers. In her sleep, she saw her husband emerge from the lake at sunrise, rising from the depths of the earth, his green skin glistening. He glowed in the morning light, and the vacuum inside her that had been pining for him, the hole that he left in her pulled her toward him. She ran to him and clutched him tight, nestling her head in the crook of his arm. After a moment he closed his arms around her. Her cheek pressed against scales, where once skin and hair had been, she sobbed, squeezing him as tight as she could, unwilling to let him go again.

Eliza opened her eyes at 9:00 and shuffled into the bathroom for more Advil. She stared at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were red and puffy and her lips pale.

“My husband is a lizard,” she said to the mirror. She splashed some cold water on her face and patted it dry. “My husband is a lizard,” she said again. “He’s just the

way he used to be. Tall, trim. But now he's pretty much green." She began to giggle. "Nick's a lizard!" she hollered. "Oh my fucking God. Wait until Detective Hadley hears this. Yeah, right. That'll go over well. 'Hi, Detective. Nick's come home. He's fine – he just turned into a lizard, that's all.'"

After brushing her teeth, she went downstairs and walked out onto the deck. Lizard or not, he'd left her, and he owed her an explanation. She yelled into the morning air, "Nicky! I'm sorry about last night. Please come home."

He came at night. The first thing he did was flick the AC off, leaving the door open to let the heat in. Holding his arms across his chest, he shivered, and she understood – he needed to be warm. He hadn't wanted her to turn the lights on in the house, so she lit candles, and they sat together in front of his laptop, her speaking, him punching the keyboard with one spindly finger from each hand.

"How did this happen?" She kept touching his face. All his hair was gone, and small slits replaced his ears.

"Don't know. It was weird. Heard something. From the lake. It pulled me. I had to go to it. I sank, deep. Sinking like forever."

Eliza leaned over him, reading as he typed, anxious. "And then there was the silt, reaching fingers up and pulling me in, and I sank into the mud. It covered me. And I was sinking again, deep, covered, and still something was calling me. Couldn't even fight it, even though I was scared. It seemed right. And then it burned and I felt my skin

melt away. It hurt – but it didn't bother me. I knew I was dissolving. Then, just me. No body. Nothing. Thought I was dead, but the earth put me back together. I came up. Like this."

Eliza leaned back in her chair, staring at his face as he looked at her. "What does it feel like?"

She watched him squint alternatively at the computer screen and the keyboard, carefully punching the keys with the long thin claws at the ends of what were once his index fingers. His irises shrunk to slits in the light of the LCD.

"Feels fine. Like I was meant to be this way all along. Fishing easier. More colors."

Eliza laughed. "Fishing. Figures. More colors?"

"Colors. I guess reptiles have more receptors. Not just red blue green."

"What's it like?"

"Whole world different. Bright."

"That's neat." She touched his cheek.

He shrugged. "Miss you."

"Well you shouldn't have left me then," she snapped.

He hung his head. "I thought it would be best if you never saw me again."

"Best for who?"

"Eliza. This isn't normal."

“No shit,” she said softly, ashamed of how little she’d known about what he really wanted for them. She stroked his shoulder and had a vision of them eating dinner at her parents’ house again. She heard her dad say, “So, Nick, Eliza tells us you’re a giant lizard,” and burst into laughter.

Nick typed fast. “What’s funny??”

She told him and he slumped in his chair.

“I’m sorry, Nick. I’m just... well... what are we going to do? We can’t go home.”

He shrugged. “I know. And you can’t stay here.”

“Why not?”

“Do you want to?”

She eyed him, wondering if she should tell him she’d read his journal. “Nick, I’m just so happy you’re alive. I don’t want to think too far past that.” She touched his face, running her fingers over his lips. He was so smooth and cool.

“I didn’t think you’d be able to handle this. It’s why I left.”

“Nick, you came into the house. You scratched notes to me on the deck. That’s not leaving. That’s fucking with my head.”

“I didn’t mean to. I just missed you so much. And I couldn’t stand to see you so sad.”

“I want to kiss you.”

He shook his head and leaned back.

She leaned forward, grasping both sides of his head, and kissed his cool cheek. Withdrawing, Eliza studied him. "Why can't you talk?"

He opened his mouth and a loud grating croak filled the room. "Ever met a talking lizard?" he typed, his reptilian lips curling into a smile. "My voice box isn't as agile as yours it would seem." His eyes gleamed. The kiss had pleased him.

"Open your mouth." She leaned in as he obeyed and peered inside at the tiny sharp teeth lining his jaw. His tongue was flat, almost triangular and slick. Putting her hand on his jaw she closed his mouth and kissed his leathery lips. "You don't taste like a lizard."

"Neither do you."

She read the screen and looked into his eyes, almost the same hazel as his human self. "Nick, let me look at you."

Shaking his head he looked down at the floor.

"Please Nick. We'll go upstairs. No one will see."

His nails clacked on the keys. "You'll see. You'll laugh again."

Her eyes welled up at his shame. She rose and held out her hand to him. "I wasn't laughing at you. I was just a little insane. You can understand that, can't you?"

He looked up at her and nodded. She took his hand and led him up the stairs.

In the bedroom, she pulled him to the bed. "Lie down." She flicked the bedside light on and sat next to him. Starting at his hand, she lifted it and ran her fingers over his knuckles. The fingers were much longer, his middle finger almost seven inches long,

and thin, with a hard black claw at the end. It was also jointed in five places. Each finger was smaller than the middle one, and his thumb wasn't much more than a nub poking out of his wrist. His arms and chest were still muscular, but not bulky. Running her fingers over his soft dry scales, she looked to his crotch. Nothing there but a bulge and a vertical slit of some kind. She wanted to ask him how lizards mated, but didn't want to embarrass him.

Moving farther down his body, she rolled him on his side and touched the base of his tail. It was a few inches thick at his spine and then narrowed rapidly to a point ending at his knees. Dragging her fingers across his hip and down his thigh, she lay next to him, her head at his feet. They were much like his hands, toes long and spindly, his fifth toe jutting out where his heel used to be. Taking his foot in her hand she nuzzled his instep. She had a sudden desire to be naked with him, to feel his cool dry scales all over her body.

Sitting up, she pulled her shirt over her head and unhooked her bra. Nick propped himself up on his elbows, watching her. She wondered what she looked like the way he saw her, with more, new colors. Could it be anything like seeing him this way, completely transformed? Wriggling out of her shorts and underwear, she slid up next to him and pressed her body against his, but it wasn't enough. Climbing on top of him, she lay her head on his chest and listened to his heartbeat. It was slow, a full three or four seconds between beats. She lifted her head and looked at his face. His eyes were closed. "Nick?"

He raised his head and looked at her.

“Do you still find me attractive?”

His jaw was set, his eyes hard. He nodded.

“Kiss me.”

He wrapped his arms around her and moved her onto her back. His lips pressed against hers, and then moved to her cheek, her neck, her chest. His tiny teeth abraded her nipple, his tongue flicking it. Groping his head, she lamented the lack of hair. Nothing to hold onto. She felt pressure on her thigh, something poking. Moving her hands down his legs, she slid her hand between them and found his phallus, much larger than before, fully emerged from the slit she'd seen earlier. It was smooth, like the rest of him. Nick shuddered. He pulled her arms away from him and pinned them on the bed. Looking into his eyes, she nodded.

He kissed her mouth again and then, moving down a little lower, bit into her shoulder, holding her firm. She angled her hips up, and bit her lip as he penetrated her. It struck her at first how cold his penis felt inside her, but it quickly warmed, matching her temperature. He held her firm for the first few thrusts, his mouth clamping harder on her shoulder at first, and then relaxing, and finally letting go.

He let go of her arms and she draped them over his shoulders, pulling his face close to hers. She licked her blood off his lips. Closing her eyes, she clamped her arms around his neck. His hands wandered up and down her body, leaving tiny scratches in

her skin. All she cared about was the smell of his breath, coming in steady even bursts, filling her again.

Sitting by the table, having turned the computer off, Eliza blew out the only candle that still burned. It was early, just after sunrise. She hobbled to the door, still naked, and sore from Nick's increased size and stamina. A ring of red colored her shoulder where he'd bitten her, and her arms and chest were covered with scabbed over cuts and purple bruises where he'd clutched her too hard. Seeing her own reflection in the glass startled her. Nick was in his office typing away on his computer with two pointy claws. She poked her head into the office.

"Hey, hon. I'm going out for a few hours. You'll be okay for awhile?"

He nodded and smiled. She crossed the room and kissed him, wishing she wasn't so sore. He was still handsome, slick, soft, smooth. His eyes caught light in a way they never had, glints of yellow and purple sparkling at her. Closing the door behind her, the sound of the keys clacking as if he'd never left, she mounted the stairs. Quickly she dressed and went down to the basement to get her supplies. She took a trowel and bucket and Nick's fishing pole, and after stopping to dig some worms, made her way down to the boat. It was a little late to get the morning biters, but as she pushed the boat out onto the lake, she was hopeful she could catch a few for his breakfast, as a surprise.

He ate the two walleyes she'd caught raw, bones and all, biting stiff chunks off with his sharp teeth. She spooned cereal into her mouth, the sound of her teeth crunching the flakes drowning out the tearing and wet gnawing of Nick's meal.

After breakfast they did the dishes side by side. He pulled her to the laptop.

"I love you," he typed, and then kissed her on the forehead.

"Maybe you can come up with a distinct screech that means, 'I love you.' You know. So you don't need a computer to say it every time." She smiled at him and pinched a fish scale off his chest.

He opened his mouth and emitted three short, low-pitched grunts.

"Perfect." She paused. "I love you too." She put her hand on his shoulder. "Can I ask you something?"

He nodded.

"Are we going to do anything about this? See a doctor?"

He shrugged. Then, "I'm afraid."

"That they'll hurt you?"

He shook his head. "That they'll cure me."

Eliza sat silent and then rose and crossed to the glass doors. "I want to stay here with you."

Nick came and stood behind her. In the glass, she watched him wrap his arms around her, his muscles contracting under the tight scales where skin had once been. She'd expected his appearance to shock her for a while, but it didn't. She'd seen him last night,

maybe for the first time. He was a lizard. And that was that. They watched the lake together, Eliza catching the scent of his breath as he inhaled and exhaled over her shoulder.