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Likelihood Unlikely: Stories

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Likelihood Unlikely: Stories

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Amanda Ruud

June 2015

Thesis Committee:  
Professor Susan Straight, Chairperson  
Professor Michael Jayme  
Professor Charmaine Craig

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The Thesis of Amanda Ruud is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

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## **Vernix Caseosa**

April 15th

My Famous Daughter,

Your father and I had this game. One person would try to show the other their rear end by surprise. For example, I would be reading at the kitchen table and your father (who was not your father yet, nor my husband) would say, “Some weather we’re having today.”

And I would say, still reading the paper, “Sure, uh huh.”

And he would say, “Look at those thunderheads!”

And foolishly, in a distraction, I would look up from my paper to the window inset in the backdoor. Outside, there would be no thunderheads, only endless blue. Inside, your father would have dropped the elastic of his running shorts to his mid-thigh, exposing his bottom. A fit bottom, it was, and hairy.

We are human beings, your parents. The Bible, Walmart, canned applause, these influences want you to think of us as eunuchs, save the times when allusions are made to “our” honeymoon and you break the fourth wall with a “yuck face” or else, just say flat out, shaking your head, “Oh brother!”

After all of these years, it is still strange for me to watch you on television. I can tell that a heated instrument has been used to pull something sacred from your hair. “Sacred” I will define as the inconsistency of expressed genes – kink, frizz, bangs that curve upward, instead of down. Your hair, lying flat, looks like a humiliated animal, like

an animal just returned from the groomers, purged of the scent with which it identifies itself.

I know. I digress. I'm writing like one of my students. In an essay, I would circle the paragraph above with a red pen and write in the margin, "How does this relate to your thesis?!"

Yes, "?!" I've caught punctuative and linguistic ties from high schoolers. If, during one of the warm, hazy, after-lunch classes, my lesson becomes especially soporific, I will literalize one of their acronyms.

"Laugh out loud!"

And they do, at yours truly. Mockery, I've found, is like a shot of adrenaline to the heart, but I don't care about the red glitter in their eyes, so long as they are sitting up and listening.

Most of my students do not watch your show, or, at least, will not admit to it. The consensus is that it is too babyish. In the past, I conducted casual surveys. "Has anyone seen - - - ?" There were never more than a few, reluctant hands.

"Well, I don't like it, but I have to watch my baby sister when my mom is working."

"That show is so dumb. My uncle told me there used to be a show like that one, but the puppet was from Jupiter instead of Italy."

It would be a lie to say that their panning didn't please me. Of the show only, I don't solicit unkind words spoken against you. I shudder when I see your name in print for fear that the article will contain anything cruel. This does not stop me from reading



every word I can find printed about you. A month ago, I saw you in a magazine. A candid photo showed you browsing a supermarket in small denim shorts and wooly boots to your knees (I made out Greek yogurt and Pringles in your cart); beside this there was an aerial shot of your home in Laurel Canyon.

And yes, I saw the photos of you stepping from a Town Car, your face overcast with prescriptions and alcohol, your black skirt ridden to your hips. I don't know if you wore underwear. Regardless, whatever was showing had been pasted over with a kitten's face, a blue-eyed kitten with gray stripes. It peeked from between your thighs, blinking. That set me off on a long, pained walk.

I've been taking more of these walks through the desert around my home. Scraping up little pebbles with my hiking boots, sending lizards scurrying, I do not take a path, only mark wide circles. I collect prickly pear fruits. Fuchsia, carmine, violet, they are attractive, but barbed, studded with tough areoles, spiked with glochids and long needles. You're supposed to handle them with gloves, to skin them, despine them, and boil them down into jelly. I use my nails to tear them in two. Red and exposed, the flesh at their centers is sour; it holds a delicate, puerile flavor something like bubblegum. The fruit makes my lips raw and my hands ache. Walking, I eat and eat, yet never feel sated. All the while, I think of you, what I might say in a letter that will make you a human being again.

Your address at the studio, your email, even your residence – this information is not impossible to ascertain. But, as an asset, a commodity, you must be flanked. You are like skin – many dead layers protect the living part. Assistants. Assistants' Assistants.

Housekeepers. Managers. Agents. Lawyers, “Security.” They edit, delete, recycle. Some are incompetent, others act on orders. Such as things are, there is no way for my words to get directly to your eyes.

Believe me, I have tried.

And so, with this letter in my glove box – between a worn AAA road atlas and an obsolete tampon (the brand having gone under since my days of reproductive viability) – I leave for Los Angeles.

\*

April 17<sup>th</sup>

My Famous Daughter,

You were a supernaturally pretty baby: big bright eyes, smooth cheeks, a mouth like a red button. I have always been a fine-looking person. Cute. Round-faced. A nose of inoffensive proportions. Strong, log-like legs. A milky and plump décolletage. At thirteen, I was spudly – oddly shaped and mostly brown (my hair, my eyes, a dingy tan earned by hours spent on my parents’ lawn reading Archie comics and eating slushy yellow popsicles). My aunt and mother, anticipating anxiety and self-hatred on my part, sat me down one afternoon and explained that they too had been duds at my age, but in their eighteenth year both had bloomed rich and ripe.

I waited. In the mirror, I stared at my face the way one would focus on an object she wished to move with her mind. Nineteen, twenty-one, twenty-three, I waited for my cheekbones to announce themselves, for my neck to grow. At twenty-six, the line in my forehead, which had once lingered after certain expressions, now never went away. The

skin around my eyes assumed the fissured texture of a poorly-set panna cotta. I came to realize that there would be no spontaneous beauty, no late-hour transfiguration. I was handsome. I would be handsome.

But you, you arrived dazzling. Coated with vernix and pink blood.

Vernix is the ricotta-like white paste on infants' skin. It sounds like a pesticide, Vernix, or a spermicidal dust, like the powdered soap found in bureaucratic outposts of the city government (the least popular DMV; the office which issues dog licenses).

I found the word on the Internet, after searching, "What are babies covered in after birth?" I'd expected the substance to have a soft, curdled sound: perjorum, qualgmire, offall. I suppose the second word satisfies that: caseosa. Vernix caseosa.

It means: cheesy varnish. It was there to protect your delicate skin during the month's you spent steeping in my fluids. Even in utero, a barrier between us.

When the RN wiped the gunk from you with a wet hand towel, I could tell instantly that I'd made a pearl. My aunt's, my mother's beauty wasn't lost, only recessive. For twenty-eight years it had been germinating deep within me. You came lacquered in *je ne sais quoi*, an opalescent aura, the intangible quality that to this day makes strangers want to eat you.

A burbling infant, gassy smiler, still crossed-eyed with myopathy, you ruled the world from your pram. Women sailed to us across supermarkets as if you'd tied clear filament to their sternums. Children who were typically wild grew calm and meditative looking upon your sleeping face. Once, stopping short to admire you, a bicyclist twisted her ankle.

Of course I was proud, but not surprised, when a pageant director hailed me at the mall and said, “Truly, that’s the roundest head I’ve ever seen on a baby. C-section?”

When I told her “no,” she took a falling step backward and clutched her chest.

“Here is my card,” she told me. “We need to get that baby under the lights.”

Your father, if you can believe it, was the one opposed to the idea. He got into one of his moods where he dressed all in tweed, made a pot of opaque Turkish coffee, and beat himself at chess.

At the time, he was a mere lecturer and was still operating under a deluded, superstitious understanding of academia. He thought if he threw salt over his left shoulder, scowled pensively through car windows, and quoted Barthes in casual conversation his book would be published and he’d be thought a real scholar and man.

When I suggested we enter you in the Coppertone Beautiful Baby Smile-Off, he consulted the canon and frowned. Sartre, Heidegger, Benjamin would not have allowed their girl children to be buffed, crimped, rouged, swaddled in chiffon, or dressed in a two-piece and then publicly coaxed by their mothers into giggling. He feared his colleagues would hear about it. He doubted my intellect, my intentions. Child pageantry, he had assumed, was a kind of barbarism, like animal neglect, that we both held an unspoken disgust for.

The morning of the pageant, unshaven and fretting his rumpled collar, he glared at me, watching as I dusted your face with shimmering talc.

He followed me down the walkway to the car and glowered as I buckled up your seat. “I do,” he said, “consider this a mild form of kidnapping.”

I kissed his turned cheek and pulled on my big, black Jackie Onassis sunglasses. I'd bought them with this day in mind. I made sure to wear them when I walked into the green room in a floral caftan with you on my hip. I felt like Joan Didion, like, for a moment, life was a cocktail party in Malibu in 1972. It all seemed like an exhilarating joke, an essay in the making.

You weren't half as made up as the other babies with their kewpie cosmetics and handsewn bathing suits (I told the mother of one of your competitors that I bought yours off the rack at Mervyn's and she about drooled on her own chin), but when I carried you out on the lit stage, you smiled and smiled, and won.

After, we stopped at Dairy Queen with you still in your sash. I fed you from my soft serve with a plastic spoon. The boy working the counter watched us with his chin on his fist. You acted as a tiny sun, making me, a simple rock, glow like the moon. Sharp people caught on, but the sweet and simple ones, young men, thought the light you lent me was something innate that I'd excreted.

Your father's mood brightened when he saw the check for your first commercial. We lost the VHS in our move to Los Angeles, so I'll paraphrase. In the ad, for a local optometrist, you were fitted with a pair of baby-sized eyeglasses and filmed gurgling before a series of tomes (Shakespeare, Hugo, Swift). After the address and phone number were given, the voiceover said something cute along the lines of, "Smart babies choose Dr. Click." Shooting took three hours. You made six hundred dollars. Your father put a sixth of that away for your college and used the rest to buy an above ground swimming pool; we would share collectively in the spoils of your preciousness.

After the print work in the *Sacramento Bee*, you landed your first speaking role in a TV spot for a car dealership where you toddled up to the poor man's Shelly Long and tugged her skirt, saying, "Mama gimme dem keys." Initially, when told what to say, you'd pronounced the words correctly and had to be coached to frown imperiously and talk in Childese.

Due to your widening ring of exposure, you father too caught some of your moon glow. The faculty requested an appearance at their biannual where you were stood on a conference table and asked to recreate the commercial. After that bit was exhausted, they fed you lines from *Dirty Harry* and *Scarface*. You scowled and shot from the hip. They laughed their faces wet. After a half hour, your eyes, stunned by a kind of exulted delirium, stopped blinking. I stepped forward from the wall and pled naptime. The lot of them, adjunct to endowed, groaned. You cried when I lifted and carried you from the room. Reaching back over my shoulders, you clasped after their expressions.

That night, your father returned drunk from The Rogue's Flagon. The department chair had gotten him loaded and raved about you. Red faced and bristly, sweating the brown tang of mid-shelf whiskey, he ignored me and crept into your darkened room to wake you. Petting the back of your head, bouncing you, prickling your white cheeks with his stubble, he got you giggling and brought you into the kitchen. "What treats do we have?" He pulled open cabinets and thrashed through the refrigerator. "Let's give her something."

All we had was applesauce, which you loved anyhow. He dipped a finger in the jar and decided it was too cold. He microwaved a cup of it and fed it to you from a

teaspoon. I told him that you could feed yourself. He explained that was not the point.

Amenable, you perked right up and ate, allowing him to do the work.

“Tenure,” he said. “I got a feeling.”

His feeling, of course, was wrong.

\*

Did you know that I met your father at my cousin’s wedding? My mother had died five years before, and in the interim, my connection to the family had attenuated such that I was seated at table of miscellaneous singles.

When your father walked into the reception in a natty suit, I turned to the woman beside me and asked, “Who’s that man?” To which she replied, “My ex-husband.”

The divorce was quite fresh, so he came by to say a cordial word. The ex, who was enormously drunk and quite territorial, noticed the lingering way he shook my hand. After dinner, she sought me out in the restroom and, in a tone both confidential and domineering, told me that she and your father were drawn together, and torn apart, by their emotional and physical deformities (a piece of information I found both humorous and intriguing) before showing me that her breasts were two different cup sizes: one like an overripe grapefruit, the other a modest honeydew. Her nipples, a whole other story.

When the DJ started, she prowled the disco-lit parquet. Your father and I had to dance around her. One of the groomsman twirled me and rocked my hips. I rested my chin on his shoulder. Your father had a concessional blind date, a friend of a friend of the bride’s, a woman I remember as being more beautiful than I, but not as forbidden. We

moved with our partners, but kept eye contact, treating the people in our arms as surrogates for the other.

We left together during the pandemonium of the garter's removal. In the cab, I showed your father the welts where my pumps had pinched me. He called the heels, pointy and lilac, "medieval" and threw them from the car's window. I had the driver stop. Your father got out and retrieved them.

Room service closed, we loaded our arms with Bugles, Mars Bars, and cans of Dr. Pepper. We sat on the queen bed with the curtains drawn to the blue-black of predawn.

I will be honest. He wasn't the most skilled man I've been with, but he was the most thorough. Only after we'd made love did he remove his dress shirt and tell me about the surgery he'd had for his scoliosis. A decade later, the scars still looked tender. They roped into canyons where flesh was missing. When I lightly touched them, he shivered.

\*

Today, I wanted to drive through the night, but exhaustion overtook me in Arizona. I stopped in Flagstaff.

I need the white noise of television to help me sleep in unfamiliar places; do you remember? Eyes closed, body drifting, your inimitable giggle roused me. It was an ad for facial cleanser which had you standing in an all-white room before a clear basin – something like a baptismal bowl. Again and again you splashed your face with water while the camera traveled 360 degrees around you. My ears ringing, I sat at the foot of the bed with the volume up, through two, dull syndicated sitcoms, waiting for the ad to replay. It didn't.



Unable to sleep, I spent the night writing this letter to you. The sun will soon rise over the desert. The world looks so similar to my first morning with your father. A quarter century has passed and the universe seems not to have noticed.

The morning news has begun. I have no option but to pack my bag, buy coffee at a gas station, and continue toward you.

\*

April 18<sup>th</sup>

My Famous Daughter,

I am parked atop Mulholland, not too far now from your home, looking out on a view that you are surely inured to. The mossy feet of the canyon below dissolve into the gray, eczematous surface of the city. A few skyscrapers huddle together near what might be the horizon; delimitations between earth, sky, and sea are indistinct here, softened by the ozone of heavy metal and dust.

This is where we all lost our minds.

Denied tenure, your father made you, still a toddler, the significant project of his mind. He paced the house in socks, pulling on the beard he'd grown as a mark of mourning for his career. Conveniently, this beard also concealed the soft grade from his chin to neck – a little ramp of flesh composed of butterscotch pudding and whole bags of Lays potato chips soused with Tabasco. The weight, the stress, worsened his back. Now he led with his stomach, his chest concave, his shoulders hunched, giving the simultaneous impression of arrival and departure.

He made plans for you, subscribed to a children's hairdressing magazine and bought a pallet of Aquanet to hold the styles he attempted in place. He convinced a sympathetic faculty member in the photography department to take your headshots. One day, returning from the high school, I stopped to retrieve you from daycare and found you were not there. An attendant told me that your father had been picking you up in the late mornings, returning you at naptime. He was taking you to auditions. This was the beginning, so far as I know, of the duplicity. I'd told him that I didn't want your talent to interfere with your socialization; he'd told me that he still had a job.

Events colluded in his favor. My anger at his deception was overshadowed by the news that you'd been invited to a callback for a sitcom that he'd *flown* you to under the guise of visiting his parents in San Diego.

"N. B. C." was all he would say when I confronted him about his lying. We'd gone into the backyard to argue (you were asleep). The sun hadn't quite set. The nostalgic light of an early-summer dusk leant a quaint, heartbreaking quality to our yellowed lawn and chain-link fence.

The skin around his beard was bright pink. He padded the grass in his wool socks. "N.B.C." he said. "N.B.C. N.B.C. N.B.C."

He was wildly joyful, nearly floating, pinching his lips, eyes dilated. Pacing, he came near me and moved away.

"What about your book?" I asked. "What about Wittgenstein?"

If you ever marry one of the muscled men I see you with in magazines, walking to-and-from ponderous SUVs, there will come a moment when you look into a face that

you have observed for thousands of hours, at a person you've told your heart to, you've thrown up on, cried on, laid back for countless times, and you will think, the thought arriving like a nocturnal cramp, "I don't know this man."

You will be filled with terror, or a trill of anticipation.

"N.B.C." your father replied, his eyes flashing an unnamed color. A silver flush of unreality passed under my skin. My blood turned to mercury. Hollywood.

\*

Cleanses, juice diets, therapeutic enemas – when we arrived in Los Angeles, everyone was obsessed with their bowels. In our hotel room, we found a fruit basket waiting on the coffee table. Planted in a hillock of kiwis, tender passion fruits, and lychees (a fruit we'd never seen before), there were coupons for a spa package that included Thai hot oil massage and a choice of either caffeinated or salinized colonics. We laughed. Your father ate a lychee whole and gagged. Guileless people we were; our tastes soon changed.

Watching reruns of your first sitcom, I imagine that you and I feel similarly alienated by the lisping girl on screen with blonde hair erupting from pink bands above her ears. Her features are undeniably precious, but made generic by makeup and artificial light. She is a figure who never reaches kindergarten, never sleeps, or urinates. That girl was not born of me; she had her own mother (a lovely redhead who never grew impatient with her children, never cursed, or sullied the white turtlenecks she wore. A few years ago, when I heard that an ovarian cyst of hers had burst and she had died while skiing, I wondered if you had mourned her, if her death had made you think of your other missing

mother). Likewise, it must be strange to see a version of yourself you cannot recall, saying words written by a team of grown men.

Moving here, your father and I had a short renaissance. We were energized and united by our hunger for your success. Yet, in becoming the sole premise and purpose of our existence, you changed. Thinking of that time, I cannot remember holding you, just holding you, to no end, as I once had done. The three of us were slaves to the shooting schedule, which was quite rigid due to your age. “Maximization of viable time,” I was told again and again by men wearing exquisite loafers. They wanted you perky, rested, and pliant when it came time to shoot. And so, your father and I always needed you to do something: sleep, smile, repeat the words we fed you. I bought enormous bags of M&M’s to use as bribes. Your tolerance for the candies increased, task by task, until it took jeweled handfuls to keep you still during makeup.

Discipline became circumstantial. If you hit, with your small, frustrated fist, the bone beneath my eye, I might have scolded you, if I could afford the redness and swelling, the change of mood that would accompany your tears. But on set, on a schedule, I’d only say sweetly, my words soft puffs of air, “Now, now, honey, no, no,” to which, you, with a toddler’s morbid humor, would laugh and, more often than not, hit me again.

I believe that the pathology of this place entered you systemically; you sucked it from the soil and thrived on it, but for your father and me it worked more like creeping ivy – from the outside in.

We did not change overnight, but by slow gradation. Uncanniness accumulated.

Around the time you were cast in the soap opera, I noticed that your father was an odd color. He seemed always flushed. His teeth glowed. We had, by this time, stopped sleeping together (both literally and figuratively). No decision was met. There was no overt disagreement. We were busy. Things simply fell into disrepair. By chance, I caught him entering the shower one afternoon. A bleached pair of briefs glowed against his tan. This was the pale skin of his buttocks, protected during his high-wattage activities, waxed hairless. I asked from the doorway how long this had been going on.

Caught, a shrunken incarnation of the academic crawled up his spine to pull at the strings behind his face. “Oh,” he said, “a few months.”

We stood together before the mirror and held our arms out in comparison. I had to admit that my skin, relative to his bronze glow, looked a bit green.

“Don’t worry,” he told me. “I’ll make you an appointment.”

Ivy is, perhaps, the perfect metaphor, promising as it does that, with time and tenacity, flawed architecture can be disguised or elevated. And this discovery, of course, came right when the money really started. We began to build our own franchise: lawyers, housekeeper, au pair, tutor. Meanwhile, your father and I were: peeling, sloughing, dying. In the buttery, sun-bright mornings, my heels rang off the ceiling of the foyer, and my chest felt explosive with the certainty, each time I surfaced at the mirror, that my aunt’s and mother’s prophecy would soon prove true.

Outside, there were billboards of your face thirty feet across. The rights to your image had been sold to foreign investors. You appeared, reproduced in odd dyes, on patent leather backpacks and school folders sold at gas stations.

The deep green leaves folded over themselves, spread.

\*

April 18<sup>th</sup>

My Famous Daughter,

Our final act. I now wait outside your home. Pages and pages, hundreds of miles, and I fear that I am no closer to an explanation, to clarity. Still, I could not keep away; your lure, the hooks you cast into the hearts of strangers, work all the more powerfully on me.

It is surprising that there is no iron gate here, no winding drive. Only a strip of sidewalk separates the street from your shaded lawn. The lawn separates me from the craftsman bungalow painted a modest white. I wonder if you take to that porch swing when you are hung over, if you let it rock and comfort you.

I pray that the burnished Porsche in the driveway is not your father's. Yes, I've seen him in the tabloids too, defending your privacy at LAX (you thin and frail-looking, a twenty-year-old octogenarian wrapped head-to-toe in some kind of designer muslin, stumbling in lacquered shoes like Meiji bricks, the skin on your face tight and glowing with some perseverant health, flourishing despite malnutrition). He looks bloated from sucking on the exhaust of your success, exhausted from the yelling he does on soft-news programs denying, bargaining, shouting over dietary pundits.

I've always been able to pick them. Or, I suppose, I was too willing to love the ones who picked me.

I will not lie. Our separation, yours and mine, the mess of it, began because a man left me. He was younger than I was, and knew exactly how to exploit my fragile narcissism. He supported himself with small-potato lawsuits (slipping on a puddle in the soda aisle; bruising his groin on a locked turnstile), but his passion was martial arts. Post-coitus, he'd pitch me the dojo he planned on opening atop a dormant volcano in Hawaii. "Exclusive clientele," he'd say. The martial artists would need to be helicoptered in. Overlooking the verdant canopy, there would be a juice bar.

God, was I a fool.

This affair, this illusion of *really, finally* living (he'd spend hours gazing at my face; he once tore up to the curb where I stood, threw his car into park and, leaving the engine running, leaped from his door to embrace me), was a chimera which moved with me. This phosphorescent atmosphere of delusion set about my head like a fishbowl, compromised my mothering, my connection to you.

I made the mistake that all parents, all people, make: I thought that I had more time. I believed that I could capture what my heart had been straining toward – some impalpable, ideal iteration of myself – and that you would still be a girl, my girl, when I returned.

My boyfriend eventually found someone his own age (the same ubiquitous type your father went for; think: rollerblades, spandex, amenorrhea). After an explosive argument, I was disinvited permanently from the hypothetical dojo. Crushed, I slithered home on surface streets with all of my car windows down to take in the yellow air.

The entry mirror found me bagged, damp, and violet with emotion.

Miraculously, you were home, sitting cross-legged in the den with your chess coach Katerina. Frowning, toes clenched, you supported your chin with both fists. As usual, you were losing. I sat on the loveseat behind you and watched your tight shoulders. You did not look up when I said hello, only twitched your hand and took Katerina's rook. She clapped quietly and wound her white braid around her head, let it fall. A scent rose from your parted hair: waxy, warm, unwashed, but sweet, like grain, like kitten's fur. My child. I looked up at the high ceilings, the wide windows half filled with sky. Around me, there sat cream leather settees, the Eames daybed. On the walls, a curation of safe modern art: a Prussian-blue canvas the size of a mattress punctuated with a single red thumbprint just right of center; a lithograph of a prone woman in a field being loaded into an ambulance by two medics (I could not remember the name of the original work it mimicked). I felt out of place, small, perilously vestigial sitting in that lovely room.

I leaned forward and slid onto my knees. I reached out, tried to hold onto to you, to take in a rough breath of your hair, your smell.

It was too late. You shirked and pushed me away with the back of your head. Katerina's bland eyes dilated. She crept to her feet and bolted to the kitchen for an "Orange-ina"

"Off," you said, like one speaking to a Spaniel, and I, twice rejected that day, obeyed.

I found your father in his bedroom. He was reading (an act I had not seen him do in months) and this heartened me. Only later would I learn that he was conducting



research for a dismal miniseries based loosely on *Pretty Baby*, perfect for the delicate transition of your brand to adolescence.

I was wounded and his chest looked accommodating, so I crawled onto the bed and found that your father's anatomy held an old comfort. Setting aside his book, he brought one arm around me. It was so easy, I noticed, to reclaim a forgotten posture. For a moment, I believed that we were still essentially ourselves and we could find our way back.

"I think that we should all take a break for a while." My cheek was pressed to the warm thrum of his ribs.

"What do you mean?" his voice was soft.

"A break. We should all take a long, long trip together."

"Yes." Slow. "We could do that." Careful.

"I've been thinking we might even move somewhere quiet. The desert. Let her go to a traditional high school and decide what she wants once she's graduated."

Bucked off when he stood, I curled on my side, looking up at his looming, ochreous presence.

"What?" He said this as if I'd suggested we inject hot ore into your eyes.

"I would like to work again," I said, "to teach again, wouldn't you?"

"No."

"Well, I don't know if I'm comfortable with how much she's working."

We both recognized that this test was not entirely sincere, still felt that the other person was failing it.

His head tipped. He scratched the wiry stipple on his neck, grown out because he liked to have it waxed, and watched me. With one hand, he adjusted the belt of the monogrammed dressing gown he had begun to affect at home.

“Well, if that’s how you feel,” I said. “She and I could always just go together.”

“Good fucking luck.”

The stereo buzzed on in the den. The opening cords to “Here Comes the Sun” echoed up to us. This meant that you’d become bored with your lesson and had insisted instead that Katerina dance with you.

I followed your father’s eyes to the cordless phone on the bedside table. Closer, I gripped it first. Your father’s hand landed over mine.

“Give,” he said, and brought his face, green veins shivering at the temples, breath of lox and stale coffee, closer to my own. He tugged. I tugged. Trying to slow my own breathing, I spoke his name in a rational, self-effacing way, as if to say, “Are we really doing this?”

Planting his feet, he snapped his arm back. I shot forward from the bed and fell. My knees crunched on the hardwood floor.

We were, most certainly, doing this.

His grip tightened. As if working a bow saw, he forced the phone forward and back with me still attached.

A blue pain throbbed in my hand and elbow. My fingertips bulged.

“Give me the fucking,” he hissed, leaning over me, hunched, his mouth wet.

I knew then that he would stop at nothing to protect his fruit-bearing tree. I knew too that I'd pay and pay for the Coppertone Beautiful Baby Smile-off, for seeing something of myself in your incandescence.

Locking his ankles for the coup de grace, he yanked viciously, wrenched his left shoulder, yelled, and pitched forward onto me. The phone dropped from our grip and clattered under the bed. He moaned. I felt his leg flutter in a spasm. He took small, panicked sips of air and whimpered, onto my neck, into my ear.

His long suffering back, always trying to twist, to bend more deeply into itself, had gone out.

Music carried up the stairs. I imagined you, eyes closed serenely, dancing beneath us.

Straddling him around the waist, I tested the limitations of my own back (the first fluttering twinges of middle-aged pain danced above my buttocks) and rolled him over, so his shoulders could rest on the bed's frame. Long-dormant expressions of adolescent shame and rage contorted his face. And, for a moment, attending to mutual panic, we forgot the narrative that had been playing out between us.

"Oh. Oh. Oh. Thank you," he said, taking a gingerly squat onto the pillow I'd wedged underneath him. A liquid softness at the bottom of his eyes, he gently touched my abused wrist and said, "Flexeril."

While I retrieved this from the doppel kit he kept in the car, he called our lawyer. This fact, of course, elevates the entire scene to high comedy; we'd both been trying to

call the same man, as if his loyalty would rest with the person who contacted him first, and not with the most solvent perspective.

Your father smiled abashedly when I returned with the orange bottle. He took three and lay flat on the floor. He slept there, making small, subvocal complaints, until after dusk.

The next morning, not one, but three lawyers arrived and explained to me what was going to happen. Your father, like a withered Egyptian king, sat in a high-backed chair with his chin dipped. He did not look at me.

I do not know who pulled you aside and told you what I was trying to take from you. But, just like that, conditions and opposing stances had been set. I looked down and saw that I held one end of a taut rope.

In court, you acted beautifully, ventriloquizing their accusations against me. When the time came, you pointed to your father and said without hesitation, "Him."

\*

Just now, as I was writing, your front door cracked open and you came out onto your lawn. You're a young woman with ankles like wrists. By happenstance, you've dyed your hair just the shade of my mother's own copper-brown.

You carried an aged corgi to the grass and set him down so you could smoke. With the cigarette between your teeth, you darted after him.

I did not think you would recognize me. I'm not so far away, but parked in the shade. You've no reason to know this car. And I have changed. The sun and solitude have leathered me. My hair, undisturbed, has grown long and white.

Arms crossed, you took your last puffs. The dog wove around your ankles, snuffling, eating dandelions. Strange how, now so near, you seem no more real to me, making me feel that there are thin screens of impermeable glass between us human beings onto which we project the particular teleplays we have written and are enacting.

I fear that I have elucidated nothing. Shame, intimidation, resentment, even the most shadowed abstractions seem insufficient to explain a mother abandoning her child to the thousands of hands which have massaged, teased, kneaded her into their contradictory images.

Yet, what's done is done. The same goes for that which awaits us.

If, when I knock on your front door, by some grace, you open it, before you or one of your protectors decides I must leave, I will not tell you that I was an idiot not to see the dormant kink in your father, the rub or rent, turning us both, inevitability toward our own darkness.

No, forcing these letters into your hands, speaking quickly, I will tell you about a moment I think of often:

Long ago, in an unglamorous place, on a sweet, sepia-toned afternoon, I knocked at the door of your father's study and let the hinges creak slowly. I stood nude with my dimpled, imperfect backside to the door. I heard your father laugh quietly at this, our joke. He set the heavy book he was reading down on his desk, crossed the room, and knelt to kiss my bottom.

How small we were then, privately and unimportantly strange. Ahistorical people, weaving the little stories of our lives.

This was the tender moment before your conception, before you were a person,  
when you could have been any person.

## Epidural

Marie wasn't worried about her numb backside.

She told her husband over dinner, "You need to stop worrying about the eye pain (he was massaging his left eye). "And the funky joint in your thumb. We have to accept the accretion of minor irritations as part of our physical development."

"Development?" he said, "Development? No." He moved his bread plate and used a golf pencil to draw an arc across his placemat. He bisected this arc with a rough gray line. On the line's left, he wrote: DEVELOPMENT. To its right: DECAY.

"Here," he said and drew the first tally at the foot of the upward slope. "Conception." He travelled the line for half of an inch, dug the lead in for another tally. "Birth." He traced over the line, making more tallies: "Solid foods, bicycle riding, sleepaway camp, shoplifting, over-the-shirt, geometry, under-the-shirt, *The Great Gatsby*, your father," – meaning her father's death – "high school graduation..."

"Hey," he looked up. "Here you meet me." He drew a tally there and went on, "Anatomy and Physiology, physics lab, Lake Winnepesaukee, graduation, *AmeriCorps*."

He'd arrived at the bisecting line where the graphite was worked shiny into the paper and pointed to the other word: DECAY.

"Guess what happens here?" He rode the pencil down the rightward slope with a descending whistle. "You're either growing or decomposing."

Marie lifted the paper and balanced it atop her empty soup bowl.

"The diagram, of course, is wildly inaccurate."

“How’s that?” she asked.

“Well, you spend a lot more than half of your life decomposing.”

The waitress, a girl wearing a black leotard beneath her chinos and green apron, approached. She leaned over Scott’s shoulder to fill their empty glasses from a pitcher of melting ice.

“Thank you,” Scott’s voice assumed the televangelical hush he used when speaking to attractive women.

The girl lifted the napkin-lined wicker basket from the table. “Would you like more breadsticks?”

The restaurant’s recessed lighting pulled a peachy iridescent shine from the skin on her shoulders. All the girls working there glowed. Marie imagined them all sleeping in a communal pouch – warm as mother’s milk and lined with placenta and stem cells – in the stockroom. Meanwhile, Marie tracked the progress each morning of a primary wrinkle and its thready tributaries which lay in the fold where her left breast rested on the right while she slept

“Hmm.” Scott said. “I don’t know.” He actually had his chin in his hands.

“They’re free,” the girl said. “As many as you want.”

“No thanks,” Marie smiled and directed a curt wave at the wicker basket.

“As many as you want,” Scott marveled at this. “You must make a lot of breadsticks back there.” He pitched his thumb at the stainless-steel doors leading to the place where Marie suspected the limitless breadsticks were defrosted and microwaved.

“Yes,” the girl said and walked away.



Marie studied the placemat. It spawned in her a ticklish anger. She'd never learned to ride a bicycle, and it was Scott who'd taken physics, not her.

She looked at her husband – he had the last breadstick stuck between his molars like a cigar – and tried to distinguish whether what was wrong with him was voluntary or involuntary, willful or congenital.

\*

At GreatStart, Marie sat at a desk all day, aggregating survey data and smiling into her webcam.

Her officemate, Cara, laughed the first time Marie stood and complained that she had no feeling in her ass.

Marie walked around HR that afternoon kneading at her numb flesh.

A week later, Marie rose from her chair to help Cara unjam their shared printer. She took a step, found her foot asleep, and flopped forward onto the floor. After a relay of laughter volleyed between the officemates, Cara, sputtering, complained of a, “laughter-induced squirt-of-pee” and went home early.

Two days later, it happened again. Getting up from her seat, Marie tried to stand but dropped like a stone. She sat splay-legged on the floor laughing. Dabbing her eyes, massaging a cramp from her stomach, she'd looked up and met Cara's gaze.

This time Cara looked far from wetting herself. “Marie,” she said. “I think you need to go to the doctor.”

\*

When the doctor said, “A tumor on your spine,” Marie felt as if he were casting a spell or schoolyard hex.

“No,” she wanted to say. “A tumor on *your* spine.”

But before she could speak, he looked up at the ceiling through his woolen eyebrows and said, “Well, actually, a tumor *in* your spine.”

“Is that worse?” she asked.

“Oh, yes,” he said gently.

\*

While the doctor drew the biopsy, Marie lay on her side in a paper gown with her knees to her chest. The nurse, meanwhile, petted Marie’s neck with a dry, soft touch.

Marie almost laughed; cancerous, curled foetally, she was unable to summon any regret for rich meals uneaten along the Seine or sunrises slept through. Instead, she was worried about the condition of her underpants. She’d dressed in the dark that morning and had held two pairs in her hands. Both were white and imprinted with delicate, china-blue flowers. One of the pairs, she knew, had a rusty continent of a menstrual stain on the crotch, more stubborn than scalding water and bleach. The other did not, and she did not know which pair she was wearing.

It was the thought of her underpants, not the pain – like an injection of red ore – that made her cry. The thought that this moment of vulnerability, of preliminary sanctification, should be tainted with indignity. The thought that on one of the few and finite days she would be given to live within, she did not know what her own undergarments looked like, a thought which led to the realization that most days of her

life she could not have guessed at the color or cut of the panties she was wearing. Her underwear was but one small thing, a twig in the detrital pile, the comprehensive mass, of small things which she had overlooked or taken for granted.

The intentionality of nice underpants: the selection, the maintenance, the self-regard. Nice underpants, it seemed, tucked into herself, with the nurse's fingertips stroking the skin behind her ear, were one of the carrots of life, one of the diaphanous, bobbing spores of hope she followed forward into time.

The sentence already delivered within her body, the outside world only waiting to open the envelope, two warm, loose tears, fell with the soft sound of lips parting on the tissue paper her face was pressed to, because she'd always thought that by some kind of spontaneous betterment, at an unspecified moment in her endless future, she would be the kind of person who wore nice underthings.

Three days later, a phone call. Intramedullary Ependymoma.

\*

Two weeks before her doctor's visit and the biopsy, Marie had attended a reading in the Upper Haight.

Instead of going home after work, she braved waiting for a bus on Market in the white, wet wind, a meteorological phenomenon unique to San Francisco that she and Scott referred to as "power mist," or "patient rain," for the way it caught and condensed on skin and in clothing, soaking the subject more slowly, but somehow more holistically, than a downpour.

The bus was full, and after a day of inhaling and exhaling damp people, held a tangy, brutal smell. Marie could not find a seat, and so stood between the knees of a white-haired man in the section reserved for the handicapped. The numbness originating on her ass had migrated south, leaving a fuzz of nonfeeling on the back of her thighs.

Although she avoided the bus when she could, and hated the Haight (where the most persistent panhandlers were healthy men in their twenties who often looked like models), she was making a point to go there to attend an author's reading, something she had not done since a lit class her sophomore year – a fieldtrip to a bar in Santa Cruz where an arguably senile beat poet, well into a period of late alcoholism, had read incoherently from a book an audience member had brought, then walked around, sipping the dregs from empties left on the bar – because she'd been transfixed with this author's latest novel after purchasing it in an airport on the way to an ed convention in Nashville.

The book, named after a Velvet Underground song and blurbed by *The New York Times* as, “an intellectual treatment of cataclysm with a molten heart and significant aftertaste,” had held Marie to her hotel bed, where she read straight through a panel on survey calibration, and then, again, the following weekend, to her couch, when she read it a second time. It made her feel a sensation that could only be described as the inverse of nostalgia – missing what is yet to come.

She remembered vaguely the song with the same title; its dirgeful melody and aortic percussion thrummed in her mind while she gorged on the beautiful scenes – “white/silver tides slid over the bank, sweeping pink stucco homes, wet calves, pick-up

trucks flipped end-to-end, back into the surging water as neatly as a mother's hand". She bought the MP3 and listened to it as she'd scanned the author's website.

Vivified as she was by his work, she was surprised that she didn't find him more attractive. But the photo inset on the book flap: inky, broody, much hair, very dark, and features somehow both bulbous and pinched, had done nothing for her.

Still, her fascination with the book itself impelled her through the drab weather.

At the bus stop outside of the McDonald's abutting Golden Gate Park, three men and a girl, ethereally pretty with her hair cut, teased and knotted into a faded pink nest, were seated on the restaurant's steps with damp cardboard signs in their laps. They passed a joint and a communal Quarter Pounder in opposite directions.

One of the boys was a blonde with a nearly transparent goatee. He caught Marie's eye as the door to the bus opened, making her foot stutter between the last step and the curb. She fell forward, but caught herself by clutching at the air.

"Lady!" the blonde boy said. "Pretty lady, watch out."

Marie smiled at him and ducked her eyes. Walking away, she felt his gaze on her and so shook her head and sighed, chuckling at herself.

A sandwich board outside of the bookstore read "*All Tomorrow's Parties starts Today at 7!*" Inside, the shop's proprietor – dressed in a knit cap, sweater, and scarf – sat tugging a length of receipt paper from the register. Six chairs arranged into a semicircle faced a white wall at the back of the shop. No one else was there.

Marie wandered over to the Philosophy section. She had a long-term and somewhat nebulous goal to familiarize herself with the subject.

A bell chimed with the opening of the shop's door. The owner stopped scratching at the paper for a moment, and Marie quickly pulled a thick volume of Foucault from the shelf. She opened the book to its introduction, which felt somehow less like faking, and began to read.

Three women in slacks and the kind of professional shoes which ride the compromise of moderate comfort and moderate attractiveness, passed the aisle chatting and pulling off their coats. Three seats squeaked. Marie returned the book to the shelf and righted the underwire of her bra. She considered a title from the shelf to her right, *1,001 Medical Questions Explained*, but instead took a seat between the shop owner and the three professional women.

An old Asian man came in and placed himself cross-legged on the floor. While they waited, he picked at the eczematous crust on his bald head, dislodging flakes of dead skin the size of guitar picks. He placed these, one-by-one, into the zippered pocket at the front of his backpack.

Hearing the door chime again, Marie looked down at her knees intellectually, and so saw only a sweated blur of the author as he passed his audience. He emitted a kind of frantic grunt of greeting to the shop's owner and disappeared behind a purple curtain fitted over a doorway.

The assembled fans sat in silence. A toilet flushed. Through the velvet curtain, the author reappeared. He edged, back to the wall, like a cat burglar, until he stood before the group.

“Hello,” he said. There followed a squeaky batch of throat clearing. He pulled a copy of his novel from his armpit and began to read.

His eyes surprised Marie. Brown when he looked ahead, there was a lightness to them, a hazel cap, when he looked upward. It was the kind of feature that could not be articulated by a photograph, but existed only in animation. His face too – stodgy and immobile on the jacket – now looked almost gaunt. The words he read drew shadows into his face. His lips and eyebrows moved purposefully, intelligently.

He happened to read the particular scene from the book’s four hundred pages that returned almost daily to Marie’s mind. In this scene, two teenage brothers and their neighbor, are trapped atop a slippery tin silo. Together they watch as a biblical flood blots out their families’ farmland. The neighbor boy, seeing the water, “in a patient silty brown wave nudge the second story from his home,” having left his infant sister in a bassinet in the attic when he went for help – sure that the flood waters wouldn’t climb that high – tries to throw himself into the foamy current shaking the silo’s girders, but the brothers catch up the collar of his shirt and won’t let him go.

Marie, transfixed as she’d been by the scene at home, heard little of what the author read. She was distracted by his eyes – the flash of olive transparency when he looked to the ceiling, as if punctuating internally the end of each sentence. Distracted too by the way they fell on her in the audience, only once on the first page, but then with increasing frequency, toward the final page of the excerpt, when the wind picks up and the neighbor boy’s buttons begin to pop underneath his chin.

When the author finished, there was a silence which could have been interpreted as awe, but which, as the seconds wore on, distinguished itself as only uncomfortable.

The author squinted at the audience.

The man seated on the floor broke the silence with a whispered, “Well, *fuck you*,” and smiled.

“A few questions then?” the shop owner asked.

The author stuck his thumb nail between his teeth and nodded.

No one raised their hand.

One of the three professional women stood and made her way toward the bathroom. Ducking when she passed the author, the way a person might creep below the screen during a movie, she stepped on the strap of the older man’s backpack. He yelled at her, “Hey!”

Without looking back, she launched herself through the curtain.

The way old friends might, Marie and the author shared a reflexive glance at that moment.

A woman whose moderate shoes looked moderately more comfortable than attractive raised her hand beside her face.

“Oh, what was I going to say?” The woman scratched her jaw and pinched her eyes, conjuring her question.

The toilet flushed.

“Okay. Did you write this book because you experienced a flood?”



The author opened his mouth and waited while the paper towel dispenser pounded and squealed in the bathroom.

Once all was quiet again, he pressed his palms together before his chest and said, “No.” He looked at Marie again. This time there was a beat of responsibility imbued in the look, a request for her to help somehow.

The throb in her throat quickened. The elegant questions, the nuanced ones she’d formed on her way there, delicate and laced like the rivulets of tangled condensation on the bus’s windows, were all gone.

Without raising her hand, her voice arriving on a croak, Marie said, “Could you speak to the process of imagining the book?”

The question had bobbed up from somewhere in her subconscious, sourced from a book club she’d attended in her twenties, or perhaps something she’d seen on PBS. Unsure of whether what she had said really made sense, she straightened in her seat. Her breath was warm on her lips.

“Yes,” the author said with a relieved smile.

She shifted in her seat again, satisfied in their complicity.

While the author spoke, Marie noticed a soft, adenoidal grunt he made in the silence between thoughts. Delivered through his nose, it sounded as if he were incrementally relieving tiny bits of pressure. Personal, unconscious, vulnerable, it was the noise Marie imagined a child would make, his tongue taut with concentration, as he tried to form his first cursive letters.

She noticed, too, a whirling white static pulsing and flexing below her navel. When she breathed in, this feeling tightened to the diameter of a pin. When she exhaled, the light of it scattered like a dandelion, warm motes of it swirling out to the tips of her extremities. This light, this feeling, seemed to be fed by the little “unh” he was making, by the cartilaginous click in the dark of his sinuses as his eyes fell across her again and again.

Marie had married the first man she had ever slept with. This was a decision that, after years of whittling at it with her mind, she’d convinced herself was inevitable, the right one, and perhaps did not matter so much at all. Still, she had a habit, which she’d also convinced herself all women – all people had – no matter the number they’d bedded in college, of spinning stories and sniffing down unknown alleyways. The author, she thought, must have a loft with plenty of exposed brick on the top floor of what was once a cannery. There a wall of wavy, leaded windows would look out on the fog settled atop the blue-gray bay; canted stacks of first editions framed the fireplace; fleshy olives were eaten from jam jars; conversations about eternal recurrence took place beneath an Indian blanket; a calico named Borges slept always.

In a gesture consolidating humility and flight, the author bowed to the piebald applause as he fled the stage. Stepping forward, half bent, he caught his foot in the strap of the old man’s backpack, which he flipped and dragged, scattering on the carpet chunks of skin resembling primeval confetti.

To the whine of the shop owner’s DustBuster, he signed the books the women had brought with them. Marie smiled as she approached him. He took her worn book and

asked her name. While his pen scratched, she wanted to share an insight, but all of the comments she had prepared about the book, once again, curdled and clumped.

He snapped the book closed and handed it back. Eyes downcast, he smiled slightly.

Marie stepped into the wet street. Darkness had subsumed the edges of buildings and the park had gone black. Her butt numb, she mounted the gum-studded steps into the McDonald's and ordered herself a conciliatory chocolate milkshake.

She sat in an orange plastic booth and smiled sadly into the reflective night glass. Taking a pull from the shake, she cracked the cover of the book. Just the sight of his handwriting, the paucity of words, made her feel embarrassed with herself. She looked away from his blue scribble and out of the glass doors. The bus that she needed to catch home, wet and squeaking, lit yellow from within, was passing. She took another sip, let the ice cream melt in her mouth, and forced herself to read.

“Marie, thanks.”

She fit the heels of her hands into her eyes and considered throwing the book, a memento of private delusion, into the swinging mouth of the trashcan beside her table.

Salt in the wound, she decided to look once more before tossing it. She took a breath and read again.

This time she saw the addendum at the bottom of the page: small, cramped timidly, purposefully illegible.

She thought, at first, it was an arcane form of dating, or a curlicue meant to tease the ink from the pen, but no, small and undeniable (striking in her a spark, a sparkle), there was written an email address.

\*

The emails began. They were short missives: flirtatious, obliquely factual, peppered with personal trivia. He was a visiting lecturer at Stanford, but was travelling for a month on his book tour. He lived in St. Louis, though he'd be in California until December.

Marie did not disclose the diagnosis.

The messages, which she saved for the private hours alone in the living room away from colleagues and Scott, were analgesic, a buoyant island of fiction in the center of her life, which itself, felt more fictitious all the time.

When the numbness infected the entirety of her left leg and the limb stopped listening, she made an appointment to see one of her doctors.

This doctor watched as she walked, foot hooked inward and dragging, down the hallway of his office.

“That is not good,” the doctor said.

He advised crutches.

The X-ray showed not what she had expected (a rot-softened potato studded with carious teeth; a skeletal fetus sucking at its own lips and staring always sideways with a single, red eye). No, the tumor was a thin, gray strip. A discontinuity in the white bone. A long, narrow erasure.

Seven to ten years it had been growing.

“Have you experienced any back pain in the past decade?” the radiologist asked.

“Yes, some. Off and on.”

“Numbness?”

“On occasion.”

“Where?”

“My shins. Parts of my leg.”

“Well...” He shrugged and smiled; it was a gesture communicating the kind of humored fatalism common among mechanics who specialize in European cars.

Marie, who had once owned a used Karmann Ghia, recognized this look.

She left his office unsteady.

She board the N and noticed a schoolgirl in a tartan skirt. Through the window, Marie watched the green succession of passing trees and calculated.

“My god,” she thought. “It’s old as a fifth grader.”

Due to the tumor’s “maturity,” they would need to employ the oncological trinity: surgery, radiation, and chemo.

The surgeon informed her that he would need to work gingerly. Inside the spine was every possible movement a body could make like a million electric threads bound and braided inextricably together. Each fiber had to be treated as a tripwire. He told her, “I can paralyze you. Yeah, I could. I could very well paralyze you.”

They would begin radiation after the surgery: burns as if someone had ironed her; the skin pink and red and raw and peeling; exhaustion indifferent to sleep; diarrhea; the lining of her mouth replaced with fiberglass; more cancer (possibly), but later.

She had learned that a sick body had its own economy, an unstable one. Checks were paid off with credit cards, those credit cards with other credit cards. A new tumor, tomorrow, was better than this tumor, today.

She confirmed too that seconds, hours, days were negotiable increments. They bent like light and shortened like shadows. The length of every moment of one's life, she saw now, was proportional to the number left to expend.

Marie opened a new email. The author would be back in San Francisco in a week. She'd be flying to Cleveland for surgery in ten days.

The outcome to only one of those events could be, more or less, guaranteed.

There was no Make-a-Wish foundation for adults. She'd checked and wondered why. Perhaps, she had thought at first, that adults were supposed to already be gratified, to have made their own dreams come true, to have made their own peace.

No, that was not it.

More like: no one wanted to know what adults would wish for.

\*

"You look very nice," Scott said.

She was going to drinks and dinner with Cara, a "goodbye."

They hugged. An edema of sadness swelled in her chest. She felt guilt, not for what she was about to do as for the time – the short, quick time she now lived in – that it would take to do it.

The author had picked the bar. Marie found the address in Chinatown, entered a lobby with brown Spanish tile and a wood-paneled elevator. There was a bank of plastic ficus and a lit case displaying dead moths and yellowed photos: Jayne Mansfield in a pink dress, signing a menu; Sammy Davis, midsentence, raising an eggroll to his mouth; Jean Claude Van Dame, his calves taut, dressed in a bulky sweatshirt.

She took the elevator up to the seventh floor. The doors opened on an empty Chinese restaurant upholstered floor-to-ceiling in red velveteen. Partitions of dark, carved wood divided the room. The tables were set with linen and spotty wineglasses. Light winked from squat, jade-crusted chandeliers and gilded statuettes of snarling foo dogs. The north wall, cut into black windows streaked with reflection, gave onto a panorama of city night. The lit arm of Coit Tower stood above narrow orange avenues, the silver on the bay, and the pulsations of little white lights.

A couple sat in a booth beside the window. Their table was littered with fanny packs and photographic equipment, plates smeared with fluorescent pink sauces and stacked with brown and white bones. They were engaged in a drawn-out kiss. The man's hand was lost in the woman's frosted hair. Their doubles grappled in the glass.

Marie felt like a James Bond villainess in her black panty hose and stilettos, until she started walking. The heels were a problem. Entering the dim bar room to the left of the elevator, her left leg resisted the cant of her hips. It tugged a half-step behind her and

caught on the thin carpet. The tumor, which Marie imagined as a black worm, crawling inexorably up the column of her spine feeding on nerves, growing longer, shitting violet pain, wriggled in her mind. “No, no,” she thought, tightening her left buttock, stiffening the whole leg and leaning on it like a cane.

The author sat at a table by the window, caulked into its center was a green fish tank holding only a handful of gravel.

“Marie.” He stood.

They hovered a foot apart; neither of them seemed well-versed in the etiquette and procedure of affairs. If that was even what was happening, Marie felt unsure. He’d signed his last email to her, “*so* looking forward to seeing you,” but now he shook her hand.

His hands were smaller than the ones she’d imagined manipulating her body, and somehow less hairy. Soft too, very soft. That made sense. He sat all day, thinking things up, typing them down.

They sat.

“Some vista.” Marie noticed, saying this, that there were black lines crosshatching the view, little grids like those on the Plexiglas in hospital and prison waiting rooms.

“Yeah, it’s cool here.”

Marie, unsure whether he was being intentionally inarticulate, gave him an unsteady smile.

The bartender was a tall, woeful-looking man, dressed in a white tuxedo and bowtie. He approached their table and stood above them silently.



Marie lifted the triangular cocktail menu from the table and pointed.

The author ordered a Tanqueray and Tonic.

“No Tanqueray.”

“Well’s fine, then.”

Making no sign, the bartender stepped back from their table, pivoted slowly and lurched back behind the bar.

They looked to one another, neither settled on a categorical expression.

“How was your trip?” Marie tried.

In emails, the author had told her of hilarious incidentals, readings worse than the one she had attended, terrible regional meals he was made to consume by local hosts: meaty gruels served in sourdough bread bowls, curled bricks of fried clams, spaghetti noodles served in a ketchup gravy flecked with hardboiled eggs.

“Oh, good,” he said. His hair was wet, or heavily gelled. Squinting out at the black view, he brought just the tips of his fingers to different parts of his head as if softly checking the tenderness of new burns. He nodded, though Marie had not spoken, and palpitated his eyebrows with his thumbs.

A man, just that. Maybe nervous. Ankles crossed, one small loafer jangling.

She leaned back into her chair, regarded the little streets below, the small cars moving to destinations unknown; fuzzed lights red, white and yellow; unmoving lights and the ones that turned corners. The bagged intimation of her face in the aquarium glass.

She felt the black worm move.

The waiter seemed to have undergone a subtle change in internal climate. He smiled with a private look of pleasure as he placed their drinks half on their paper napkins, dampening them with spilled alcohol. He lit the votive on their table with a trembling match. Marie worried that the author might ignite the wrist of his sport coat when he leaned forward with the toast, “L’Chaim.”

They drank. Marie’s lips dodged the paper parasol, a lime wedge and two cherries to sip at the pink alcoholic foam.

The author drew on his drink until the twin cocktail straws crackled.

“I suppose that I should just tell you.” He dropped the glass onto the table and slumped back into his seat. “You are.” He looked up at her and the candle caught, for a second, the bright ozone over his brown eyes.

A shiver straightened her neck.

“I find you, paralyzingly.” He interwove his fingers and pressed his palms against his scalp, the force of which summoned a complaint in his sinuses, “Attractive.”

Marie swallowed against a “thumpthump.” A warm draft rose along her legs. She removed the parasol from her drink, placed the cherry between her molars. Full of a tart, plum flavor, its flesh gave between her teeth. She pulled the brown stone from her mouth, set it on the table, and drank up.

\*

Leaving the elevator, they walked together to the case of faded celebrities and stood arm-in-arm before the photo of Jayne Mansfield. Marie noticed this new contact,

but was unsure when it had been made (Standing from the table? Entering the elevator?); the membrane keeping one person, one life, from another now seemed porous.

Their hips, too, touched, and were warm, resting against one another.

“I’m working on something about her.”

Mansfield’s dress was slit to her hip. The loose fabric of the conical halter, unfilled by her breasts, was puckered and dented. Color photography paid her no compliments. Her hair, in color and texture, resembled used cotton.

The author looked Jayne up and down. He tilted his head as if that would offer a better vantage into the darkness between her dress and thigh. Sniffing, he made the soft nasal cluck. “The ersatz Marilyn, it’s a sad story.”

“Wasn’t she decapitated?” Marie shifted left, bringing her calf against his. She liked how he tipped his chin up and blinked considerately at the photo, liked the gentle excavation he was making of a dead woman’s heart.

“No, that’s a bit of a tale.” His hand found the small of Marie’s back. He turned and led her through the lobby and out into the night.

It was good with him on her left with his hand like a warm poultice over the tainted spot. Trying to mask the crick and slide of the bad foot, she leaned into his support. They walked north, away from the glass towers on Market, where the bars were filled with anemic girls whose shoes were shaped like crab claws and bartenders were groomed like Civil War soldiers.

Chinatown buzzed during daylight. The sidewalks glutted with wizened produce vendors and postcard collectors, pedestrians were forced into the gutters where the

rumbling buses and honking cars passed them in a slow procession. Now the street was still. Mustard-colored fog wreathed the brick buildings and unlit shops. No sound save their footsteps.

“There’s a photo of the crash scene. With magnification, you can see tufts of blonde hair, ostensibly hers, embedded in the windshield glass. The hood is twisted. There’s a lot of black liquid, streaks of it.” He dropped his fingers through the air as if making the sign for rain. “But with a black and white photo, that could be anything. Oil. Antifreeze. Transmission fluid.”

He stopped and looked down at the lame foot whose dragging heel had been making the sound of a perpetually striking match. “Are you all right?”

“Sorry, it’s a running injury. It gets worse when I drink.” She’d rehearsed this lie on coworkers, and now delivered it naturally.

“No, I’m sorry. I’m dragging you. I had designs for Tosca, but let’s go somewhere closer.” He nodded at a smudge of neon up the street and tightened his forearm to take on more of her weight.

“Anyway, it was probably one of her wigs tangled with the glass. The one she was wearing or something that got loose from her bag. She packed whole suitcases with blonde wigs.”

His hand had slipped into the indefinable region between tailbone and backside, the prespine where a woman’s soft split originated. He looked at Marie with a wry side expression inquisitive of consent. She smiled and pressed into his hip, feeling strangely

envious of Mansfield's name in his mouth, but victorious too; here she was walking, the skin of her throat hot, breathing in greedy lungfuls of cold air.

“Who knows, though? The coroner's documents read ‘avulsion of cranium from the brain.’” He mimed lifting his scalp from his head.

They stopped below a buzzing sign which read, “Li-Po Cocktail.”

“What will you write?” Marie turned to face him. Their breath formed a white atmosphere between their bodies.

“I'm not sure.” He looked up and out into the darkness above the buildings.

“She's the subject, but it's hard to say what I'll do with her yet.”

\*

Sandwiched at the bar between games of Mahjong – the players growing drunk and morose – he told her the stories that she wanted to hear: of a mentor at Princeton who'd been nominated for the Nobel, of a trip to India to research his first novel. He'd been twenty-five then, paying his own way, sleeping on rumbling trains. His ragged linen clothes had stunk so terribly he'd been removed from his seat on a plane and forced to shower before his return trip.

Marie, supple with the thought of foreign sunlight, red and low as the paper lanterns strung above the bar, was pulled without resistance to his mouth. She closed her eyes and sank into the soft place above the stubbled chin.

His kiss rang a gong of hope in her. That was a sad thing about her human heart, its reflexive hope. Softly, drunkly kissing, her mind muted by rum, she pictured her heart not as a red organ, so much as a face, her own, whose expressions she felt moving

beneath the skin of her chest. This face was always turning towards the light, tipping to the right and left seeking an explanation or exit. In a sinking submarine, the narrow walls flashing red, the floor churning with icy seawater, this face peered out through the porthole, wet eyes wide open to the permanent-night of the sea floor, blinking into the navy-blackness, waiting, waiting for an approaching light. Hope was madness, an alchemic logic, cooking existential books, and prodding wet leaves into meaningful piles.

Her femur bones vibrated with the bass rising from the basement below the bar. She touched the back of his unknown head, felt the grain of unknown hair and wondered (they were breathing into each other's faces, a miasma of companionable drunkenness thick between them): could it be that all of this was supposed to happen (her first life and illness), and in this order, so that her real life might begin?

\*

In the days before the date, she had worried that her inexperience would show; with the same partner since the mid-nineties, maybe her kissing would seem dated or juvenile. Her handjobs, outmoded.

Nevermind. The nonthinking of sex, its ambulatory fog, descended when they came stumbling into the hotel room. Edges were smudged; time droned somewhere else, a television in an accompanying room.

His penis was disheartening – bowed and slightly inattentive. They looked one to the other on its revelation and he said in a loose, gravelly way she liked, “Give me a minute here,” and laid her back to uncover her breasts. When his hand pushed into her

underwear, he made a little exalted yelp, a sound surprised and joyfully pained, as if her pubic hair were a small fire.

During, she closed her eyes and drifted backward into blackness.

She was small and light: a cork caught in the night tide.

She was a drupe-fruit, all softness around a black pit.

She was drunk. She fell asleep.

After, she lay atop his chest with one leg bent at the knee and the other lolled flat, anesthetized. His palm drew wide circles on the skin of her back. With her forehead bent into the pillow, her nose in the patch of hair on the side of his neck, she breathed in citron and shoe leather, summer in the Hamptons, the melancholy and possibility of a swimming pool at dawn.

“You’re beautiful,” he said. An after image of white static lingered on the skin he’d touched. Her weight pushed his voice down an octave. “Very beautiful.”

“Really? I feel so old.”

“How old?”

“Thirty-eight”

“Old,” he said.

She felt his laughter in her chest.

He fell asleep in his boxers and buttoned Oxford, curled on his side. She crept into the bathroom, sent Scott a text message complaining about the stiffness of Cara’s couch and turned off her phone. There was no precedent for suspicion.

She woke him at ten. He couldn't speak for grogginess, winced at the ceiling, swallowing again and again. She brought him a glass of water. His eyes flared open and closed while he drank. His sinuses made their faint click, click.

He found her stepping from the shower, and hugged her damp body.

In her black dress and heels, her pantyhose striped with thick runs, a faint ache between her legs, Marie queued for the hotel's continental buffet. Rewearing clothes, standing in public with wet hair and gray vestiges of makeup ringing her eyes, felt like things that a cancer patient should not do, felt illicit, like a pregnant woman posing for a photo with a cigarette. But cancer was a private pregnancy. None of the mothers in the dining room, licking their thumbs and rubbing at their children, ladling portions of scrambled eggs that were promptly spilled from plates and ground into the carpet, took a second look at her.

The author did not eat; he drank only black coffee. He held her hand beneath the table and shuffled through mixed sections of the *Wall Street Journal*.

He chewed on his lip as he read. "This is from Friday." The pillow had backcombed the side of his head, fluffing his curls into brown wool.

Marie used her free hand to eat a piece of bacon. She held it before the author's mouth. He snapped off the end of it with his front teeth.

"Are you married?" she said

He looked up from the paper and sniffed attentively. "No," his voice dipped. "Are you?"

"Yes."



A brief dimple appeared deep in his cheek as if he'd bitten into something sour.

"Well, life is complicated." He said this as if life were quite simple and went back to his paper.

Marie lifted the bacon to his mouth again. This time he shook his head. "I'm fine, thank you."

She set the cold bacon on her plate and watched him read.

"I told you that I was going to Cleveland this week."

"Yes," he said slowly, finishing a line of text. He dropped the paper on the table.

"Well," she continued, looking into his face, already so familiar. "I'm going for an operation."

One eyebrow ticked. "All right."

She painted broad strokes, replaced some drab olives and browns, many stiff black lines, with pastels, used water colors where oils might have been more appropriate. Still, the shape of the subject was communicated: the worm and its coming extraction, a recovery that would take some months.

"My god," he said. "Did you have enough for breakfast?"

He took her plate and returned from the buffet with a mound of fruit salad and a large portion of hash browns.

"Something hearty here," he said and cut the hash browns with the edge of his fork. He asked if she wanted ketchup and interrupted the French family a table over to borrow their bottle.

Holding his fingertips to his jaw, he watched her eat.

“Last night,” he whispered. “Was I too rough? Did I hurt you? I wish you’d said something so I could have...” He pushed this line of thought away with his palm. “I’m sorry. Eat. The pineapple is full of antioxidants, the oranges too.” He pointed to the respective fruits with the fork and speared a grape. Handing the fork to her, he asked, “What kind of cancer is it, specifically?”

He wanted Latin terms, symptoms, and the prognosis. All the while he explored her knuckles with the pad of his thumb and shuttled back and forth to the buffet for glasses of orange juice. His kindness concerned Marie; it felt transactional.

“How rare is this particular variety?” He reached into his coat, shook his head, and removed nothing.

“And will there be chemo?” He leaned forward. His whole hand wrapped around her wrist. He was so attentive, winching his thick eyebrows at her answers, teething his lips bright pink. The more he looked, the more distant he seemed to her, like the surgeon who’d see her only as a spine.

“No more juice.” She laid her palm over the crystal mouth. The sugar fed a headache behind her eyes.

“Sorry,” he smiled and pulled at the hair above his ears.

Later, walking through the dining room, arm-in-arm, he looked down, “The leg?”

“Yes,” she said.

\*

They squinted against the sunlight. The backlit mist drifting bayward glowed white as bleached cotton. The skin on her legs stung with cold. Marie lifted the collar of

her coat and huddled into him, breathing into the woody closeness of the crook of his neck. The wind lifted her hair and tossed it on her shoulders.

Only the extremities of his hands touched her, the fingertips and the plane of each wrist. She could feel them arched behind her, poised like a second ribcage.

“I’ll be back in a couple of weeks. I will call you.”

“Oh, yes,” he said. “Please.”

Over his shoulder, the rose window of Grace Cathedral was a dull, concrete-gray.

He kissed her a last time, lunging forward with some late-hour zest. It was a dribbling kiss, two small motions with his bottom lip.

They parted. He gave a quick wave and a sheepish bow of his head before he turned and walked away.

This was “goodbye,” something that other people did all the time, bouncing off of one another like billiards balls, then onto separate trajectories.

“In another life,” she thought and felt her own sad smile. There was no other life and no other body to live inside.

She watched his back as he dropped down Taylor Street: shoulders square, hands in front pockets, arms stiff. Canting his feet, he pressed into his toes to keep from sliding downhill.

The dead leg was awake; it tingled as if filled with tonic water. She wanted to make love again, thought of him behind her, wanted to walk with him home, to guess what was printed on the spines of his books from across the room, to open cabinets,

closets, small rectangular drawers and examine their contents, to marvel at imported jellies and trade stories about childhood dentists, injuries.

The clean black shine of his hair caught flirtatious dips of sunlight. Opaque windshields mounted the road. He was walking against a one-way.

Her back ached.

With his neck straight, he lifted his chin skyward, opened his mouth, and fell below her line of sight.

She had to get home. Scott, her unintelligible twin, her living half, would already be packing their bags for the trip, folding her wrinkled cotton panties into neat squares.

Still, the cold wind on her skin, she stood and waited.

She imagined a small red desk pressed to a wide window. In its center sat a typewriter next to clean stack of white paper.

Marie could feel the future: he feeds a piece of paper into the guides and cracks his knuckles.

He imagines her face and begins to type: "Once, twice, three times, the cells inside her divided, burst like popcorn, percolated darkly. Death appreciated. The dime in her back would soon be a quarter."

## **The Best of all Possible Worlds**

### **I: Waiting**

A room full of bodies. Little children mostly. They outnumber the adults (teachers, lunch servers, janitors, and outdoor monitors) twenty to one.

One of them, Emily, sits on the floor near the stage with her class of first graders.

Some of them cross their legs. Others squat.

One squatter, Karl, squatting next to Emily, has a blonde fade, a chin that projects from his flat face, and pink circles of ringworm on his arms and up his neck.

Digging at the toe of his tennis shoe with the bobby pin he found on the reading rug of Mrs. Osbourne's first-grade classroom, he farts covertly.

Various "ews" and "achs" rise from the vicinity. Children flap their hands. One Nick Bettini clutches at his throat, rasps, "poison," and flops sideways onto the cafeteria's linoleum.

"Get up, Nick," Mrs. Osbourne calls to him through a cupped hand. Far into her second trimester, she is in no mood. Her breasts ache. Her ankles have started to swell. Last night, her sister called from Cleveland and rhapsodized about hemorrhoids and episiotomy. "Oh god," she said. "Don't be so squeamish. Would you rather the membrane just rip in half all on its own?"

Nick opens one eye and peeks at his teacher. His view of her face is half obscured by the protrusion of her belly.

Emily makes a gesture. Karl hands her the bobby pin. Thoughtfully, she begins to dig out the little pebbles stuck in the tread of her sandals.

\*

At one end of the cafeteria sits the stainless steel lunch counter and a barricade of tables rolled out of the way to make floor space. At the opposite end of the room, there is an elevated stage framed on either side by black felt curtains. The stage is made of varnished wood. A bright-blue gymnastics mat is spread in its center. The school's principal, Ms. Camillo, stands beside this mat. She is heavy, stocky, sturdy, what the children would refer to as fat. Her hair is cut bristly short and is the same shade of brown as her pantsuit. She wears sunglasses indoors.

Mr. John, the gym teacher, is late, and the children are growing restless. Little twitches and tics and spasmodic motions of boredom move over the audience. Through the sepia tincture of her glasses, Ms. Camillo can see one group of fourth-grade boys sitting up on their knees, shouting at some boys in the other fourth-grade class. Mrs. Kaplan is managing both classes since Ms. Byre left to chaperone a nosebleed to the nurse.

Camillo looks up at the distinct *thwap* of a sparrow flying into one of the cafeteria's high horizontal windows. Faces turn. Arms raise and point. There is a momentary hush before the chatter returns with added energy, like water that's been dammed. She catches scraps of what they're saying, (a bird, a dead bird, a stupid bird) and reminds herself to scuttle out at the bell and throw the body away before the children can see it.

She checks her watch. Twenty five minutes to that bell. She could just send them back to their homerooms. No, it would be bedlam getting them out in rows and down the hall in lines.

Her eyes drift over the crowd.

Mrs. Osbourne stands near the stage looking exhausted. Her belly is projectile. It strains her knit shirt. She is addressing Nick Bettini who is splayed on the floor as if he'd been dropped from the ceiling.

“Up,” she mouths.

His face twists.

“Up,” she repeats. He stands and she directs him – snorting, shuffling his feet – into the hall.

A week before Christmas vacation, Nick fell from the metal jungle gym at lunch. He'd been hanging upside down above the playground and his knees had lost their grip. Camillo's stomach curls remembering him sitting in shock in the office, a shard of pink bone poking out of his forearm.

Camillo watches Miss McDonald, the vice principal, as solid and impassive as a piece of construction equipment, enter through the cafeteria's back door and plow up the aisle between the children. Little elbows dart out of her way, little butts scoot for cover.

Camillo walks to the front of the stage.

“John was tied up with a bathroom situation, but he's on his way,” McDonald pants.

“A Bathroom situation?”

McDonald waves her in like a capo, forcing Camillo to take to one creaking knee.  
“Adam Morales pooped his pants while running the mile.”

Morales. Fourth grade. A sweet boy bussed in from the South side. Poor thing, thinks Camillo.

“Okay. What is John’s ETA?”

McDonald tugs at a couple of the black hairs growing from her chin. “We found some baby wipes and a change of pants in the office. I’d say less than five minutes.”

“And there’s no way the puppet people will make it?”

“No, their schedule is FUBAR. They double-booked us with Mansfield Middle. Tina, Tiny, whatever her name was, told me that they’d call on Monday to find a spot for us next week.”

Camillo sighs. Her back hurts.

A putative voice rises in the audience. “Stop. Stop it now.” Ms. Byre is back and making fourth-grade boys from the two classes get up and move. Camillo understands now that they must be gossiping about Adam.

“Thank you.” Camillo heaves herself to her feet and scans the crowd. She senses the room’s inertia moving from squirrely to unruly. There is that late-Friday tang of anarchy on the air. Mrs. Kaplan, leaning against the informational bulletin-board display on dairy products, must feel it too; tugging at the throat of her turtleneck, she shoots Camillo a look from across the sea of wiggling bodies, that asks, “Carmen, what’s the deal?”



Camillo checks her watch. Twenty minutes. She considers for a second Time sending them back to their classrooms, but she has a pedagogical opposition to wasted Time. There should be some point to their gathering here.

She cracks her neck and turns on the mic in her hand.

“Hello, George Howard Elementary. I need eyes up here.” Somehow it always works. They look at her and go quiet, save a “shh,” here and there. Never without a plan, she pulls a pink flyer from her suit pocket. “The fabulous gymnastic stylings of Mr. John are about to begin any minute.”

Pause for shouts of joy.

“In the meantime, I want to give you all a heads up on next week’s lunch menu. Who here likes cheeseburgers?”

Pause for shouts of joy.

She unfolds the piece of paper.

The PA whines.

A voice in her head reminds her not to forget about the bird.

\*

## **II: Mr. John**

John cracks the door to the boys’ bathroom and calls in, “Everything all right, buddy?”

“Yeah,” Adam says quietly. “One second.”

He checks his watch. Twenty to the bell. Camillo’s voice echoes down the hallway. She is talking up Spaghetti Wednesdays.

John sucks in a breath, bends forward, and tucks his fingertips beneath the toes of his Reeboks. Letting the air out, he pushes his face in toward his knees. It feels good and it hurts. He still jogs most mornings, does his ab work, free weights, runs around with his classes all day, maybe gets some basketball in on the weekends, but he is a different species than the eighteen-year-old who was on the gymnastics team at Florida State.

There is a little tremble in his stomach at the thought of ten years gone, just like that; it is a little freefalling feeling of emptiness, like a door swung open on a long drop.

He stands up straight, lifts his hands until they nearly touch the paneled ceiling of the dim hallway, then arches into a slow backbend. He holds this a second, stiffens his core, lifts one leg back and up into a split handstand, then draws his legs together vertically.

For a moment, he is a single length of tense muscle, toes pointed up. He looks at the waxed linoleum ceiling, and tries to read the inverted gibberish on the colorful bulletin boards.

Releasing his breath, he drops back into the bridge, then pushes up to his feet.

His specialty was rings. His arms and shoulders were built to shit, absolutely beautiful.

Still, he learned all of the floor work – handsprings, flips, aerials – when he was in preschool. He knows he isn't as strong as he once was, nor as tight, but the movements wait coiled in a part of him as fundamental as DNA.

Fifteen minutes ago, Camillo sent a fifth grader with a note asking whether he couldn't help her, "fill some time." This won't be the first opportunity he's had to

entertain a crowd since his retirement from a sport better suited to the green bones and virgin cartilage of the very young; he was inspired to do a few handsprings at his wedding – barefoot, across the grass of his in-laws’ backyard, ripping a hole, to everyone’s’ great enjoyment, in the seat of his rented suit.

Just this past autumn, he showed a group of kids a front flip at the fall carnival. Camillo must have heard about it and stored the knowledge away until she needed him to be her jester.

The woman always has a plan.

John smiles. He likes being a jester. He likes Camillo.

Adam comes out of the bathroom in the pair of rustling parachute pants Miss McDonald fished out of the lost and found.

“Looking good, man.”

Adam does not look very good; his face is damp. He has wet down his hair. Pieces of it hang limp around his ears. His little hands are pink from scrubbing.

A bolt of guilt shoots through John’s gut. “Can I tell you something, Adam?”

Adam nods. He is a gentle and serious child. His sable eyebrows regularly express subtle emotions many of his peers have not, nor may ever, experience. Right now, they are working in conjunction with his eyes – dark and heavily lashed as a giraffe’s – to communicate irreparable despair.

“The same thing happened to me on a camping trip in *high school*.”

This is not true.

“Really?” Adam’s brows hitch hopefully.

“Oh yeah, it wasn’t pretty man, but I lived. Here I am. Stuff happens, right?” John lowers his voice. “Can you do me a big favor and watch this door while I run in here quick?”

“Okay.”

Knowing that he is committing a big no-no, John ducks into the boys’ room; staff is expected to use the locking restroom in the office, but that would take longer.

“Hello?” he calls. No answer.

Bad smell in here. One leg of Adam’s jeans peeks from the mouth of the trashcan.

John passes the little urinals. He chooses the last stall, drops the bands of his sweats and briefs, stands there a minute holding himself – soft, a little humid – before he shivers and the stream starts.

His shoulders relax. He closes his eyes. He loves Friday afternoons.

He’ll be at Young Explorers Preschool within the hour, lifting a squawking toddler onto either shoulder. Tonight, he and Jenny will grill the steaks he threw into the refrigerator this morning to defrost, then crack the Malbec he got at Trader Joe’s for five bucks, put the kids to bed, and watch a movie. For a second, he feels the ghostly impression of Jenny’s lower back in his palm, the downy hairs of her beloved butt on his fingertips, and is inspired to sing.

“Oh, what a beautiful mornin’!” He flushes the toilet.

He breathes through his mouth as he washes his hands. “Oh, what a beautiful day!”

“I’ve got a beautiful feeling!” Like a surgeon, he holds his wet hands curled to his chest as he pushes the door open with his back.

He takes a deep breath of the clean hallway air and lets his voice boom. “That everything’s going my way.”

He puts his damp palm on the back of Adam’s damp head. “Ready?”

The boy leans into this contact as they walk toward the noise of the assembly. Their soles squeak on the floor.

The whole of Adam’s skull fits in the heel of John’s hand. Inside it, his brain is coiled, growing, wiring, watching. John reminds himself of this often; they are, all of them, watching him, watching what he says, how he says it, what he does.

When they get to the cafeteria, Adam keeps walking.

“Hey,” John calls, “where you going?”

The boy stops and turns around. “The office to wait for my mom.”

“Do you still feel sick?”

Adam looks at his shoes. He surely senses the trap John is laying. Still, he is unable to lie. “No.”

John squats down and raises his voice over the collective rumble coming from the doorway. “I think you should join your class now.”

Adam’s eyebrows grip each other – a look of consternation not unlike the one he gave John when they were all out jogging around the yellowed grass of the baseball diamond. The boy had lifted two fingers twisted together – the school’s symbol for

“bathroom” – and John, in all his wisdom, had lifted five fingers, indicating the number of minutes Adam needed to wait until the end of class.

“I know it’s scary, but it will be worse if you have to wait for it all weekend. Trust me. Your mom’s not going to enroll you in another school. This is it, so just get it over with.”

How many times, John wonders, has he heard this same speech after falling on his ass, bashing his groin, hitting his head? His coaches taught him that being an animal means running from pain; being an athlete, or, for that matter, an adult, means running toward it.

Adam swallows. His face and body are deceptively still, like a doe preparing to dart.

Meanwhile, over Adam’s shoulder, a shoeless child, in what appears to be a timeout situation, is jumping around by the cafeteria’s front entrance. John squints. “Is that Nick Bettini?” he calls. “My executive helper and basketball wrangler? In the hall? Because he’s in trouble?”

Bettini barks in response.

No time to deal with him now. John stands. “What do you say, Adam?”

The boy looks suicidal. There are divots in his hair where he combed it back with his fingers. “Okay,” he says.

John gently grips the back of Adam’s neck, and calls back over his shoulder, “Pull it together, Nicolas.”

The cafeteria smells of Pine-Sol, onion rings, and the alkaline sweat of the prepubescent. Camillo is using the toe of her boot to futz with a corner of the gym mat as she explains the importance of literacy over summer break. “Now, the Tucson Public Library has a program whereby you can earn personal pan pizzas by reading books.”

The kids are seated on the floor, arranged by age. Little at the front. Big at the back.

Seeing him, a few of the fifth graders wave. One whispers, “Hey, Mr. John.”

Ms. Byre’s class is on the right side of the room. She stands in the aisle with her feet planted, staring ahead at the stage with arms crossed. Bands of light from the high windows make her blonde perm glow. As always, he wonders, “What if?”

As if sensing his attention, she looks back over her shoulder. Now the light is fallings softly on her weary face. Her eyes move from Adam to John. She gives John a stiff smile of irritated incomprehension.

One student, then another, then the entirety of her class turns to John and Adam.

John halts, puffs up, and gives them all a long look that says, “This is your chance to be good. If you laugh or say a word, I will melt your faces off with my eyes.”

No one laughs. No one says anything. No one moves.

John stands there, beaming out all of the tall, tan gym-teaching cachet that he can muster. For a queasy moment, he worries that he’s made the wrong decision. The class will reject Adam and the boy will be traumatized for life. But then Sabrina Wagner and her protégé, Taryn, scooch over in the back row, making room.

Sabrina, the Princess Di of the fourth grade, at once saintly and glamorous in her sunflower-print capris pants, grins at Adam and pats the floor.

John gives a little push, and with a *swish-swish* Adam crouches down next to her.

John's hands are now empty. He slides them into the front pockets of his sweats, and moves toward the stage, tightening his glutes as he passes Ms. Byre.

\*

### **III: Emily**

I'm driving down Fifth near my old elementary school when I notice the motorized wheelchair cruising up the sidewalk. I recognize his sculpted blonde hair and sunburned neck. In the side mirror, I see sunlight flash on his glasses. It's late July. The temperature, according to the thermometer in my rental, is 104.

It's been ten years since I left college, so I haven't seen him in almost twenty. Still, he has on one of the baggy Cosby sweaters I remember him wearing; it's like he's steered right out of the past.

"Mr. John," I say to myself. "Holy shit."

I used to walk home on Fifth when I was a kid. Thus, everything I pass is imbued with undue significance and is smaller than I remember: the stone house that looks a little castle, the park with the drooping pepper trees, the weird midcentury church with the roof staggered like a staircase. As a girl, I imagined climbing up it and sitting on the spine of the A-frame. Now I see the pitch is such that would be impossible.

I glance back in my rearview mirror and it's like that Jimmy Webb record my dad used to listen to, "If You See Me Getting Smaller." In the matter of few seconds, he's



become this small dark point behind me. My heart does its weird little half skip, its stagger.

At the next light, I make a U-turn and pull into the Quick Gas Mart. I get the gas pumping, then walk around the car and lean on the hood. I can see him moving steadily up the street. His face is pink and indiscernible at this distance. Sunlight glints white on his forehead. It's hot even in the shade of the station's awning.

I moved away for college. I've lived in Chicago since graduating from Michigan State. While the Midwestern climate has its own extremities, there is nothing quite like the post-apocalyptic heat of Arizona in the summer. When I've come home in the past, I've always made sure it was during the winter. But then my father called this spring. He rambled for an hour. His tomato plants were flourishing. One of the neighbor's feral children had tagged his truck with spray paint then, when confronted, claimed she'd seen "gang members" doing it.

I wandered around my apartment saying, "uh huh, uh huh," figuring he was just lonely and bored. Then, getting off the phone, he mentioned offhand that one of the doctors at the VA had "upgraded" his emphysema to terminal.

A wooziness went through me. I asked, and it felt like someone else was my throwing my voice, "Are you sure that 'upgrade' is the right word?"

He made a wheezing sound in response, and I thought he was maybe crying. Then the sound cracked and deepened; I realized that he was actually laughing; he never took shit like this seriously.

I said, "Are you smoking right now?"

He said, “What do you think?”

For a few days, I stalked around thinking, “Fine. Okay. If he wants to die, that’s on him.” Then, one night, I woke up at three and my first thought was that if he died, nothing would be on him; he would be nothingness, insomniac dust. I would be the person that it would be on, the woman who let her enfeebled father smoke himself to death in his squalid little duplex. I imagined a neighbor finding him lying on the leather couch, MSNBC still blaring on the television.

I called him and said I was coming; he’d better clean that duplex to within an inch of its life.

“Heil, mein führer. I’ve got the Swiffer at the ready.”

I said, “You never stop.”

He said, “Stop what?”

I work as a project manager at a nonprofit tutoring agency in Bucktown. My supervisor is as much of a bleeding-heart liberal as I am. She said if I needed to take a month off, I could take a month off, so I’ve been here for the past three weeks, imposing financial and domestic order on my father’s life, driving him to medical appointments to get his medication straightened out, and generally acting as the responsible parent that he was not.

The pump clicks. I walk around, pull out the nozzle, and screw on the gas cap.

Mr. John is almost directly across the street. He is passing the church with the staggered roof. Looking straight ahead, he still has that stiff way of sitting in the chair. I wait and see if he will pass this way.

\*

#### **IV: That Night**

John jogs up the aisle toward the stage. Little faces turn as he approaches. Someone has initiated a rhythm. Hundreds of hands clap in time. Hundreds of feet stomp.

Though his feet are propelling him forward, his mind flits backward for a second to the night last spring when he and Ms. Byre lingered at happy hour and ended up in the backseat of her Corolla in the parking lot of TGI Fridays. They only kissed – a sweet, soft kiss that tasted, not unpleasantly, of Kahlua and curly fries.

The illicitness of the moment (he had not done this to Jenny before, nor since), a mysterious quality to Ms. Byre (she made him think of a beautiful European nun riding her bicycle on a misty street), made him feel like an electrified tin can: hollow, light, dangerous.

After their embrace ended, there was no great need for conversation. He had Jenny. Ms. Byre had that boyfriend with a goatee who had come to open house. Still, he might have suggested they meet again. He did not. He was already thinking of the experience as a weird, if enjoyable, aberration, a hiccup in his understanding of himself and his life.

He drove home with the windows down. The warm wind smelled of creosote. The cab of his Silverado smelled bready, of his body after a day at work.

He drove east, past the Skate Country and the momentary Doppler of the laughing teenagers in its parking lot, past the street lights, into the desert and night.

There was still effervescence on the skin around his mouth and groin. He felt adrenalized, shaky, the way he did after missing a step. For a moment, in Lauren's car, it seemed that he had seen the typically occluded edge of the irremediable, the invisible cliff we spend our lives walking along.

He pushed into the gas, opening the throttle like a throat, surging along. He felt oddly deific, enlightened even, distancing himself from his mistake.

Now he takes the four steps up to the stage in one stride. A false note plays in a muscle of his back. He takes a deep breath and it goes quiet.

Camillo's glasses reflect him darkly. She covers the mic with her palm and asks if he would like to say a few words first.

\*

**V: Emily**

Mr. John stops at the intersection, backs up, and reorients the chair so that it is facing the crosswalk. I'm still standing beside my car door.

My father and I had a conversation about Mr. John a week or two ago. We've been going through my father's closets, deciding what can be donated now, tossing out weathered cowboy boots, looking at old photos. When I was a kid, my father still had the futon business. He was busy with that and heavy drinking, so many of the stories from my childhood are novel to him – new entirely or full of details that escaped him before.

One night, we were sitting in the living room. He was on the couch in front of the corkboard to which he's pinned a poster of the Buddha, a postcard of Jesus Christ, photos of various female country-western singers he admires, political activists, and me.

I sat in the wood banker's chair with my feet up on his desk.

We had come across a photo of me from the fifth grade standing with the George Howard girls' basketball team – I am the thin child in the front row with an irregular haircut and angular gray eyes. I ended up telling my father about the afternoon, near the beginning of third grade, when Mr. John motored into our classroom.

I recalled being surprised. None of us had seen him in over a year, a long time for children; my little mind had trouble reconciling the teacher who had stridden around the school chewing gum and this new Mr. John. His voice had changed. It sounded as if something were pressing on his windpipe. In this new voice, he explained to us that “quad” was Latin for the word four. A few weeks later, he returned full-time as our gym teacher.

My father nodded. His eyes were gray and sharp. “And how'd you kids respond to him?”

I watched as he reached for the packet of GPCs sitting on the coffee table. He shook one out and dug around under a dismembered newspaper looking for his lighter. I stood and retrieved a cigarette for myself; this was a tack I'd been taking, smoking when he smoked. He hated it.

“Oh goddamnit, Emily. Fine.” He tossed the unlit cigarette on the table.

Pleased, I slid mine back into the pack and sat back down.

“We just thought of him as a normal teacher, I guess. I remember sensing some kind of frustration from him. He delivered sarcastic commentary under his breath during

kickball games and drove his wheelchair like Steve McQueen, flying down the school's hallways, children leaping out of the way, and so on."

This image produced a wet, crackling laugh deep in my father's chest.

"But really, like most adults to me then," – the subtext of this "most" being, "not you, you were a lunatic during this period of my life," – "he was emotionally opaque, just another source of authority, telling me what to do, telling me when I could or couldn't go to the bathroom. I don't think I even understood that having a paralyzed gym teacher was odd until I told the story to friends in college."

"Well," my father leaned back and picked at his cuticles, a sure sign that he wanted to smoke. "The only kind of sight is hind."

"Yes, thank you, Confucius."

My father looked up. "Didn't he have something to say about respecting your elders?"

"You tell me. Didn't you go to high school with him?"

"Clever girl."

We both watched his overfed cat, Norma, rise from her empty shelf in the book case and stretch. She gave us a disgusted look, then slinked down the hall.

"Do you remember it happening?"

I supposed he meant the accident. "Not really. I was so little. I don't think I really knew what was going on."

"We so rarely do."

“I don’t know.” I was picking at my own cuticles now. “It’s weird for me to think about the arbitrariness of it. If one little thing had been different.”

My dad waved this away with a platitude of his own creation. “Things don’t happen for a reason. They happen for a thousand reasons.”

I figured this was an easy thing to say if both of your wives have left you (my mother was the first), you’ve tanked a business, and lost twenty years drinking before you dried up.

“Yeah,” I looked around his duplex slowly, “maybe this *is* the best of all possible worlds.”

“Oh,” he shivered. “God, I hope not.”

A few nights after that conversation, I woke up at four. My room smelled of smoke. I could hear a Busby Berkeley orchestration swelling in the living room. He’d started stayed up all night watching old black and white movies. Alone, he could smoke and cough in peace. This coughing was low and gargled, the chocking sound someone makes after they’ve had the wind knocked out of them.

In the case of my father’s illness, it was not a thousand reasons, but three-hundred thousand— at least according to my conservative estimate of a pack a day for forty-five years. Three-hundred thousand decisions accreting in his lungs even while they turned to ash.

At this thought, the familiar prickle of panic. I felt my own lungs clench as if some invisible force were kneeling on my chest. The way some people cling to the repetition of a rosary, my mind cycled through the treatment options we’d been talking to

doctors about: the short-acting and long-acting inhalers, the oral corticosteroids, oxygen therapy, a promising-sounding surgery where they would cut out pieces of the diseased tissue and stitch what was left back together.

His color was a little better already, I told myself. It seemed like he could walk a little further without needing to sit down. He might be getting better, in a way.

I thought of these same things cyclically, until the dawn turned my vanity mirror pink and, with a sigh, the TV went quiet.

\*

Mr. John starts across the street.

He has some trouble navigating the dip in the curb. His wheel sticks, then, with a buck, the chair crawls up onto the sidewalk. He's maybe thirty feet from my car.

About a year ago, the guy I was mistakenly in love with convinced me to get a Brazilian wax – I always go in for a certain type: the skulking waiter, the solipsistic bar-back, the belligerent sous chef. After the charming, and diligent, Ukrainian esthetician had ripped free the last strip of muslin and coated the razed area with baby powder, she held up a mirror so I could see myself – puffy and bare.

“How do you look?” she asked.

“Lovely,” I said, and thought, like a seven-year-old.

When I got home and examined myself, I found that I looked like both a woman and a child at once, as if both of those states, the past self and the present, were being superimposed onto one body.



That is similar to how I feel now as I walk to edge of the awning and stand there hesitating.

Part of me, the child seeking adult approval and astonishment, wants to wave and call out his name, to come forward and say, “Look it’s me, Emily Geoff, of the dirty T-shirt and disordered family, grown, college educated, carrying a nice purse, capable of operating a motor vehicle.”

He is close now – twenty feet, then fifteen feet away. His face is tan and gleams as if it has been rubbed with an emollient. The same broad forehead, square chin, and narrow nose. He has few wrinkles, save the lines on either side of his mouth. I expect anyone who was an adult when I was a child to be old, but now I realize that he was young then, not much older than I am now.

His eyes flicker in my direction. Of course, he does not recognize me. I am just another adult.

I let him pass.

I buy a packet of peanuts from the gas station and eat them in the car, AC on full blast, my eyes prickling. I know that there is my rosary and then there is the truth. He will likely die soon, and forever. He, my father, will enter the kingdom of nothingness and I will enter a country where there are no daddies, only my pulse and the incomprehensible future.

I drive home and manage to carry groceries inside in one trip.

I’m putting them away when he shuffles in from the backyard with his arms full of tomatoes.

“I’ve been wondering,” he says, “whether Norma shouldn’t be given the opportunity to deliver a eulogy.”

I am hunched over the crisper. I watch a tear plop onto an eggplant and roll. “Oh,” I say, my voice thick and clotted. “Fuck you.”

I squat there, unmoving, the cool breath of the refrigerator on my face. The motor clicks on.

I hear him take a bowl down from the shelf, hear him stacking what he sowed.

There is another sound, too, that wheezing I heard on the phone.

\*

### **IX: A Leap**

John smiles and bows for the crowd. Leaning forward, he says into Camillo’s mic, “Don’t try this at home,” turns his back on them, then leaps into the air.