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Milk Winter

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Milk Winter

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A thesis submitted to The Graduate School at the
University of Missouri - St. Louis in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts with an emphasis in Creative Writing.

May 2010

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Milk Winter

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Milk Winter

The smell is back, Kyle said, coming in from the car. *It's so fucking annoying, I can't believe it*, he said, walking heavily down the hallway and into the bedroom, where he shut the door, two or three times because it never sticks on the first. I had driven all day with the windows open, the sour smell in my lungs, heat blasting across my cold fingers. It was January, we had been married almost two years and our car smelled like spoiled milk. I felt world weary and, sitting alone on the couch, I felt blamed.

I knew Kyle would not handle the smell with anything like grace. In matters sensorial, Kyle is afflicted by a particularly good nose. And though he could only be described as an exceptionally patient person, almost beyond reason, he does not accept bad smells. It is a strange thing, this moderate person whose tolerance under other circumstances is so infinite. Kyle, tall and kind, good humored and long suffering, has limits. This smell, more than any before it, boldly crossed his every boundary.

It was sour and milky. A thick haze of a smell, settling wetly on every surface of the car, drifting like cigarette smoke into our hair and the fabric of our seats. The kind of smell that is every minute more powerful, so that each terrible breath is only a taste of what is already coming.

My sophomore year of college I drove for months with a similarly bad smell, this time in a different car. Kyle, with his pointer's nose, went after it and discovered, in the depths of my trunk, so deep it was almost to the back seat, a Tupperware full of old noodles. My roommate at the time was a great lover of

noodles, me not as much, but without an admission from her the guilt fell squarely on my stinking shoulders. Those noodles marked my first fall from pristine heights, a movement from the sweet first days of a relationship into later ones, greater knowledge, a movement with meaning and some small sadness. I was further implicated by my mother whose car had taken on an odor all its own, the smell catastrophic in scale. A mouse crawled into her car from some opening underneath the hood and died there, filling the cabin with such a rank smell that with the windows down, on a warm day, you could smell it from several parking spaces away. You could find the car by such a smell. There have been many more flattering comparisons drawn between my mother and me but this one was not welcome. Kyle did not tell me I was becoming my mother, but the reality of it hung in the air with a smell of its own—the seeping odor of inevitability.

I knew that day on the couch, as I listened to Kyle's footsteps recede heavily down the hall, that I was the only suspect in the milky offense. Not only because of the noodles but also because, for all of my neatness, my uncluttered drawers and well dusted shelves, I was, at the end of the day, the one who dripped coffee down the front of a white shirt, or left crumbs between couch cushions. I am clean by practice, but Kyle is clean by nature.

That milky winter I was not writing. I was working a job I didn't like and watching too much television when I came home in the late afternoon. I hadn't expected to feel the loss of college life so heavily, the careful structure of a full course load. I missed working for minimum wage in a coffee shop, talking to

regulars with names like Al and knowing the name of every dirty hipster who rode their bicycle past the store's front windows. For two years my clothes smelled like the oily, brown coffee beans sifting through the roaster, shaped like a locomotive at the back of the store. In a college town it is a thing of pride not to be a professional and there are more college graduates working in restaurants and bike shops than in office buildings. When I graduated and married, I moved away from Columbia, a college town with such pride, and there was suddenly the question of where did I work, where did my husband work, did we rent or own. I was sure to emphasize that we were in a transitional phase and stopped mentioning that Kyle still played in a rock band.

I was told by a writing professor never to write about college, because it will always be a cliché. That may be true, too, of that period just after, when we are all reeling from working full-time, from failed job interviews and the price of groceries. It is not a wise time, not a time that lends itself to great insights or reflection.

My best friend, Sarah, is working for a design firm, a stable, salaried position with presentations and clients. Her husband, too, does well, wears suits to work and talks about us all going away for a weekend, maybe taking a week off and flying to Toronto. For the first time in ten years we are in different places, separate cities and positions. She is already tired of staying late at the office and running on an indoor track because she doesn't get home before dark. I am already defensive when they talk about 401k's and it is an odd, gnawing feeling, the distance between us.

Sarah's father is the pastor who married us. He sat us down a week before the wedding and said, his heavy, Russian brows low over his eyes, *The only thing I can say to prepare you for marriage, is that nothing I can say will prepare you. You can have no idea now what you are getting yourselves into, and as you continue to be married you will continue to learn that you knew nothing before. It is a reality that will keep replacing itself for the rest of your lives together. God willing.*

Kyle looked unworried but I, next to him, was starting to sweat. *I think it's a good thing to be scared*, I said as we walked to the car. *I have been afraid of less important things.* Kyle was not afraid, but he is not a fearful person. I have spent all of my most defining moments feeling clammy and uncertain. And so we walked away from that meeting, soberly, nervously, boldly into the next week, down the aisle, through the church doors and into this present reality.

I did not know then how strongly Kyle would react against a bad smell in the car, that smell coming after two years of job disappointments, of his creative degree yielding only practical, entry level positions. I did not expect to drive along with him and the band he had played in since high school, to Bloomington, Cincinnati, Lincoln and New York. I did not know then the weight of marriage, the finality of it, that after an argument there was nowhere to go, after a lap around the block, but back inside to face him again.

Saturday afternoon, the day after the smell appeared in such force that it had to be addressed—and maybe it was building for a long time before that, and we were only thinking it had gone away for good, while it festered in the

carpeting between us—Kyle was ready for it. With a bottle of Resolve in one hand—his face, too, resolved—and a roll of paper towels in the other, he went out the door, calling behind him, *I'm going to get it this time, for good.* I was lying on the couch watching Wolf Blitzer deliver the news. I had affected a Blitzer-like position on the milky smell, skeptical and generally removed from the situation. I had stopped answering his questions about the smell. *So you can't think of anything you might have spilled in the last week?* I would blink my eyes and yawn, *I might need to go to bed*, I would say. *You didn't buy some milky drink*, his tone a little offensive, *some kind of coffee on your way to work this week?* I would mutter something senseless and walk away. I was prickly and distant, he was frustrated and relentless. It was a bad week and, as the smell persisted, as his intensive searches turned up nothing, it was getting worse.

Kyle was back an hour later, the paper towels gone, his face flushed. *I got twenty dollars worth of quarters,* he said*, and I took them to the car wash. I vacuumed the entire car, I detailed everything. I sprayed the seats and the floorboard and got rid of all the trash.* He let out a deep breath and smiled. *Did you find what was making it smell?* I asked and could see right away that my question was too direct. *It wasn't any one thing. It was a combination of things, and they're all gone.*

My brother's car smells like cigarettes and dried sweat, and it is a comfortable, masculine smell. My sister's car is a BMW and it smells the way you might imagine it would, like new leather and expensive perfume. My dad's car smells like a tube of wintergreen chap-stick with the slightest traces of Windex.

Growing up my family drove only Peugots, French imports that reminded my dad of growing up in Zimbabwe. Grey, white and navy blue, their insides always smelled like worn leather, musty and sweet. Later on, when my sister turned sixteen, she took over the grey Peugot, and it began to smell like hair spray, but when I, relegated to the back, would lie down across the seats, I could still breathe in that old, leather smell.

My first car was a blue Jeep Wrangler that was passed down to me when my brother left for college. I rode a lot of his hand-me-down bikes growing up, red and black with baseball cards still wound between their spokes, and the Jeep had the same boyish quality. I felt like I was driving a toy tank, sitting high with the top down, the dashboard flat and steering wheel small, the windows hanging from zippers. Inside it smelled like the dirt that came in on thick currents of wind, driving down the highway, and like rain from summer storms that came down suddenly, before I could pull the top back on. It was an adventurous, careless sort of smell and it didn't suit me at all, but I liked to sit for a minute and take a deep breath of it before I started the car.

Kyle and I started dating at the very end of high school, when we were all still driving our parents' cars, nicer then what we could later afford. His was a white, Ford Explorer. Inside, the seats were soft leather, the color of coffee with cream, and it smelled faintly like shampoo. Before Kyle, I did not know a car could stay so clean.

A few days after Kyle first went out to meet the smell, the day of eighty quarters, after an exceptionally warm weekend with highs in the seventies, the

smell was back and it had gained force. We drove to work that morning in silence, both distinctly aware of Kyle's crushing defeat. By his profile, nostrils flared, I could see he would not be taking it in stride. It was a long day, the ripe, milky smell trailing behind me. I was in the shower that night when I heard Kyle leave, slamming the door behind him. He was back an hour later, smiling widely and standing over me where I sat on the couch. *Old snow,* he said. *Wet shoes. When you get into the car tomorrow, you'll see what I've done.* His voice was a little breathless. *I've found a powder. It absorbs mildew. It gets to the real core of the problem. This is it, I think*, he said, pumping a fist in the air as he walked toward the kitchen.

In the morning, the smell was present but distant, the kind of smell you get driving past a soap factory with the air-conditioner on. The next morning it was faint, no more than a bad memory, already losing its sting. Two days later, we took our quarters back to the gas station and I leaned against the car while Kyle vacuumed the powder up off the floorboards. I was happy to be there for those last moments, to see him moving the long, plastic tube carefully along the seams of the car and standing, finally, to say, *We can go.* We had suffered enough. A week later the smell was gone but the powder remained, tracked through our apartment in faint, snowy footsteps that stayed another month before I mopped them up.

It is the end of February, almost March, the sun has disappeared but it must be lingering somewhere out of sight, the sky not quite black. We are driving back to Columbia for the weekend to visit Sarah and her husband. I am

staring out of the window at the flat Missouri landscape. The car feels light and airy, as if we had left the windows open all day. Kyle taps the steering wheel along with the music and the cleanness of the moment is in the beat. We travel well together, Kyle and I, with so many longer trips behind us. There is an old Ferris wheel halfway between St. Louis and Columbia, with a star in its cross-section that lights up at night. I see it up ahead and the outline of a giant plaster bull that sits a few yards away, a strange tribute. To what, I do not know. I have driven this road a hundred times and as the last St. Louis suburbs fall out behind us, that easy feeling of a Friday night settles in. The clouds are laid out in a thin, flat sheet, purple against the darkening sky. The weeks behind us and before us are thinning now, too, receding as we pass other familiar landmarks. We will be suspended here for awhile, unhurried, moving silently through evening and into the night.

He Won't Hurt You

When I first drove my mother past the apartment on Fifth Street there was a priest coming out of the house next door. "It must be the Catholic Campus House" she said, and we both felt comforted. A few weeks later we all moved in, the four of us girls with our parents in town to help. There were a dozen middle-aged men lining the fence in the backyard next door, smoking cigarettes and looking over at us. There were no priests in sight. "It's a men's rehab house" said a neighbor. "It's where they live when they're coming out of prison or off the streets but," he saw my parent's faces, "they're mostly just alcoholics." When the furniture and boxes were in, we all stood on the front porch and my dad prayed over the house. "Lord, put a hedge of thorns around this house" he said, "and let your presence live here." We said goodbye and they all drove away and we went back inside and closed our blinds so that the mostly alcoholics next door could not watch us unpack.

In the apartment on Fifth Street the walls were thin and the radiators clattered so loudly at night that I lay in bed wondering if some deranged student was banging against the basement pipes with a hammer. There were four of us living there and we argued about everything. We argued about the thermostat, the squash stuck to the frying pan in the kitchen, muddy footprints on the coffee table, and the electric bill. Spring came and I moved into a newer old apartment, this one from the seventies, where I lived with my best friend and, this time, a dishwasher. We sat out on the balcony eating lunch and watched cars drive

down old highway 63. Sarah said our friendship made her believe marriage could work, and the year off of 63 was a good precursor to my wedding. She made a pot of coffee every morning, and I picked up the clothes she left lying in trails behind her. We breakfasted together, enjoyed various film adaptations of Jane Austen novels, and liked all the same people. Calling back and forth from our twin beds at night, we were each other's perfect spouse. I was sad, in May, to see the rooms growing empty as I packed my things into boxes.

Kyle and I married a month after he graduated from college, and although I had a year left, I did not want to live like it. Kelly's Ridge was a new development a few miles outside of town, priced for recent graduates no longer bound to the shabby apartments close to campus. We were fed up with eccentric landlords, with old houses and the hippies that lived in them. We were casting off all pretenses of hardwood floors and buildings with character and moving to the suburbs. Everything at Kelly's Ridge was new: countertops, carpet, appliances and floors, all unused and in different shades of cream so that when it was empty the apartment, only two rooms and less than 600 square feet, stretched infinitely in every direction.

We did not see any neighbors when we brought Kyle's parents through on his graduation day. We did not see any neighbors the next day when we brought all of our things in a rented, mid-sized moving truck. A golf cart with a single figure in the driver's seat moved silently across the parking lot, away off in the distance. We did not see anyone as we jimmied our couch up the flight of

concrete stairs onto the landing outside our door. The next morning, though, a handwritten note taped neatly under the peephole.

> *Howdy neighbor! I just wanted to send a shout out to remind you to be considerate of the other people who live here. With all the bumping, banging and shouting coming from your apartment yesterday, it sounded like a professional dance team was practicing! I wanted to be sure I gave you notice before it happened again, in which case I'll have to go file a report at the front desk. We've all got to get along!*

The note was unsigned. We taped it to the refrigerator and read it aloud, filled with indignation and ready to confront its writer. The space was dead quiet below us, though, 'Howdy Neighbor' suddenly absent, so we ranted to one another. Did they not see the moving van? Could we have moved in quietly? And that note, with its false cheeriness, its undisguised threat, intimidation, condescension. We retreated suspiciously into our cream apartment, me peering through the peephole when I heard rare footsteps on the stairs. I caught sight of a middle-aged woman across the hall, a couple on the third floor carrying grocery bags, a thirty-something man next door. We looked for 'Howdy Neighbor" in the cars parked outside and thought, by the end of the year, his might be the oversized red truck, but could not confirm it.

Kelly's Ridge tried to be the kind of community its pleasant name and clubhouse suggested. The fictitious character of Kelly presented herself everywhere. There were plates of cookies laid out in the office for prospective residents. "Take one!" the sign said. It was just this touch that affected us

particularly when we visited— seduced readily by the promise of free cookies. There was a monthly newsletter, Kelly's Chronicle, that printed seasonal recipes and announcements like "Please be considerate and do not leave your trash by the pool!" or "Pot-luck in the great room this weekend—Please Stop By!"

By August attendance at these events must have been low, because Kelly advertised her end of the summer pool party in the Chronicle, in flyers scattered around the complex, and in a door to door campaign. We heard the knocks first on doors downstairs, then across the hall where someone answered and we heard the pitch: "Kelly just wanted to remind y'all of the pool party this weekend, Saturday evening at five o'clock. Come for hot dogs, hamburgers and a dessert buffet". Moments passed. We heard the door close, then a loud rapping on our own. We both jumped off the couch and ran silently across the carpet, barefoot, into the bedroom where we looked at each other in confusion. "Go answer it" I whispered as quietly as I could. "What?" Kyle mouthed, his eyes wide. "Answer the door!" I whispered again, so quietly I could barely hear the words. Kyle shook his head vehemently. We were both quiet, listening for the second series of knocks which came and went, then stood a few more minutes, for good measure. "Well that is really sad," I said. "Really weird that we couldn't even answer the door". "Did you want to go to the pool party?" Kyle asked. "Maybe we should." I paused. "But no, I do not want to go". I followed him back out to the couch where we muted the TV awhile longer, in case anyone was lingering on the stairwell.

One morning at the exit to the complex there was a metal card table with orange juice, muffins and an open box of donuts. On either side, standing, were two women from the office in business casual. They were too close to the road to ignore. "Keep driving" Kyle said in a low voice. "I think it's a nice idea" I said, "I think we should stop." We were of the same mind, I, too, afraid to stop, not wanting to make conversation, to say Good Morning to strangers as they handed me breakfast through the open car window. But I was afraid that we could become a strange couple, withdrawn, hermit-like, and that those things that had first drawn us to one another, a certain neurosis, would cause others to draw back. This breakfast which others would happily stop for, make small talk over, drive easily away from, was, in those minutes that we approached the exit, quickly becoming a statement about the way we as a couple would interact with the world for the rest of our lives. So, masking my own discomfort with a kind of casual bravado I said again, "I think it's a really nice idea, and I'm stopping". I pulled up to the table and rolled my window down. I could see Kyle leaning worriedly forward, then back again, not sure how much he needed to engage in the conversation. "Good Morning" said one of the secretaries, smoothing a hand over her thigh and leaning down to our level. "Orange juice?" She asked. "Oh yes, this is such a nice idea" I replied a little shakily. Kyle made a faint noise beside me. "Two?" She asked. I turned to him and raised my eyebrows. "Thank You" he said. "So two then?" She asked again. "Oh yes" I said, stupidly. "Muffin?" She asked. "Not for me" I replied. "And you?" She leaned forward to get a good look at Kyle who was leaning back against his headrest. "Sure, sure,

that sounds nice" he said. "Chocolate?" She asked. "Oh no, just a muffin" he said. "The muffins are chocolate, I meant do you want a chocolate muffin" she said. "Oh, a chocolate muffin then, yes" his voice was a little too loud. "Anything else?" She asked. I could see the box of donuts out of the corner of my eye, plain and glazed, my favorite kind. "No, thanks so much, this was so nice." I was nodding frenetically. "Have a wonderful day!" she said, still leaning down to see us through the window, waving her hand lightly as she said it. "You as well" I said and hit the gas, too hard, so that the tires screeched against the pavement, as though we were pulling away from a drug deal. "That wasn't bad" I said, my heart still racing. "Aren't you glad that we stopped?" Kyle nodded, his mouth full.

Kelly had an aggressive way about her, and that was not our only complaint. I muttered about the isolating architecture, the thick layers of drywall that kept our neighbors at bay, distant thumps coming occasionally from the apartments beside and above us. I did not want pool parties. I did not want to feel like I was living on some deserted planet, either. I did not think I was so difficult to please. Kyle muttered about the cheap construction, the countertops that stained easily and appliances that shut down periodically. When almost five feet of snow fell in late January, Kyle dug our car out with a frying pan. I stayed inside for three days and thought I had never seen anything blanker than the view from our windows, the deserted pathways with no footprints denting their flat, white surface.

Winter passed into spring and when I graduated in May we packed everything into boxes and carried them back down the flight of concrete stairs into another, larger moving van. We spent our last night on the living room floor, the apartment empty, and when we left in the morning the only sign that we had ever been there were the pockmarks in the carpet where our furniture had been. Kyle drove the moving van and I followed in our car, just an hour and a half to St. Louis.

We rented our apartment on Kingsbury from a woman named Phyllis who commented, on meeting us, that we looked like brother and sister, but that I, she patted my arm, was much cuter. Phyllis is five feet tall with a dark bob and deep lines around her eyes. Her father built the building and she lived there herself when she was first married, staying until she had two children and her mother told her it was time to move on.

The building is U-shaped, three buildings in one all connected through a series of narrow passages in the basement. It is faded brick, three stories high with six apartments on every floor. The only apartment building in a neighborhood of multi-million dollar houses, Craftsmen houses, enormous Victorians and shingled cottages built before property values skyrocketed, one of the city's historic districts, nicer than any we could afford if we were not renting. In May the oak trees were already full of crickets that sang when we walked out at night to the gelato place a few blocks away. I was wrapped up in the city lights we could see from our bedroom window, in the white iron radiators and big front windows. It was weeks before I noticed the neighbors.

By June I could hear nothing but the people all around us. I could hear the academic couple next door having sex in the afternoons. I could hear our upstairs neighbor singing loudly, pacing constantly back and forth across the length of our ceiling in clogged feet, always in a hurry. I could hear the college students from the third floor slapping up and down the stairs in rubber flip-flops. I heard rap music coming from a boom box in the basement as Phyllis's handyman repainted the staircase and a skateboard rasping against the concrete walkway out front as someone's kid practiced early on a Saturday morning.

There are conversations that can not be avoided. A beaten-down man with horn-rimmed glasses sits every evening on the front steps with his free-roaming yellow lab named Duncan. Maybe because he is worried someone might report him for breaking the city's leash law, he was quick to call out, the first dozen times we met, "He won't hurt you" as Duncan trotted up to smell us. I realized after the first few times that I could find no new ways to say, "I'm not afraid of dogs" and instead would stand to scratch its head a moment. We call the man 'He won't hurt you' and, with the front windows open at night, can hear him giving out the same greeting to others passing by. By the end of the summer we knew that he had a son and daughter who visited one weekend every month. His son, eleven or twelve, wears a straw fedora and takes Duncan for walks around the neighborhood. He can engage me in a ten-minute conversation as if it were nothing, about the farmer's market they've visited or a movie he has just seen. We call him 'mature eleven year old'.

On Saturday mornings that first summer and fall we woke to the sound of Dave, our neighbor upstairs, yelling at the dog whose backyard bordered our back alley. "Do you think its time to go inside?" he would yell or, sometimes less articulately, "The dog, do you think?" Once, maliciously, "Idiot dog alert! Idiot dog alert!" He must have picked up on the dog's name at some point, maybe overhearing the owner, and his complaints became more direct. "Josie, quiet!" It came to a head with him leaning out the window and barking himself, a high-pitched sound, not at all convincing. Some private agreement must have been struck between him and the owner because sometime after Dave barked back, the dog was taken inside and would be called in as soon as it started to bark from then on.

In passing, Dave is reserved but friendly, five foot six, prematurely grey and usually wearing a khaki driving cap. He brought us warm cans of Diet Coke when we painted our apartment just before we moved in and put a fluorescent menorah in his front window many months later at Hanukah. I wonder what he would say if when we passed at the row of metal mailboxes I said, casually, "You have a real temper, Dave. You are louder than that dog. While we're at it, could you take your shoes off when you're at home? Or could you sit still for a minute? It sounds like you're wearing wooden shoes." I am afraid of what grievances he too might air, so I keep my silence.

There is a woman with a German Shepherd that once got away from her and ran up and down the street several times before she caught the handle of its dragging leash. I was sitting in the park across the street, watching the scene

unfold. She looks severe always, more so as she ran after the dog, and I hoped that she could not see me where I sat, shielded at least partly by a sycamore tree. There is the academic couple who carries stacks of books and walk a Chihuahua several times a day up and down the street. They do not smile or return my hellos and it was awhile before I heard their thick, Russian accents and knew there was a language barrier.

The building has other dog owners, none of them friendly. 'He won't hurt you' is as charismatic as they come. When my brother moved into the building after his divorce and I started taking his English bulldog, Mordecai, for walks around the block my reception changed radically. "Is that Mordecai?" The woman with the German shepherd called from across the street. "Hello, hello" said the academic couple as we passed on the stairs. I had the vague feeling that I should be insulted but I was filled, instead, with a sense of belonging.

There are several divorced men in our building, parking their expensive cars along the street instead of in the garages of houses they did not get to keep in their settlements. There are people like us who have no houses yet and people who have retired and sold theirs. Sitting on my living room couch I can see them going out in the morning and coming home at night. Our windows all face out and I imagine they see me too.

It is strange to know the lives of these people, heard through footsteps across my bedroom ceiling and the stairwell outside my door. It is strange to watch their comings and goings, to see small pains in the way they slam their car doors at the end of the day. Late on a weeknight we heard men's voices getting

loud in the apartment above us. I muted the television, as they grew louder. Soon it was yelling that went on a long time, most of it muffled but some words coming in clearly through the cracked window. "I make 84,000 fucking dollars a year," we heard Dave scream. There was a crash and I wondered if this was our moment to call the police. We looked at each other, excited and a little panicked, feeling like we might be involved in something dramatic, a story to tell for the rest of our lives, and we paused there a moment before the voices became quieter and the need for some decision passed. A few weeks later they were making noise again, this time grunting above us, a distinctly sexual sound, sometime after midnight. I wondered if they were the same two, or if Dave was with someone new, unable to mend whatever damage was done by the terrible words too muffled for us to hear.

Kyle's band is recording a second album in Milwaukee and he is gone for the weekend. I have been watching *Law & Order* reruns all day, a marathon, and have become more convinced with every episode that I will be burglarized, raped and murdered. I take blankets and a pillow out to the couch where I can keep better watch over the front door and I fall asleep there, comforted by the sound of Dave pacing his apartment overhead. The windows are cracked, it is a warm weekend in early March, and I wake up to the sound of 'He won't hurt you' outside. "He won't hurt you" he reassures a jogger passing by. "He won't hurt you," he says to a middle-aged couple, walking back from the newspaper stand at the end of the block. His back is turned to me, he is sitting on the stairs out front, and I wonder what might happen if I got up and put on a pair of shoes, went

down the front walkway with the windows all around, and sat beside him for awhile.

#

Bright Lights, Strange City

Take Highway 44 south out of St. Louis, past city outskirts of flat-faced strip malls, scattered suburbs with identical houses, amusement park billboards and distant roller coasters. The road weaves through high hills, spread wide for the highway, between narrow walls of rock, cut back to make way. The hills roll south with the road, rising and falling without aspiration. In mid-July they are thick with green leaves, branches heavy at the height of summer.

It is a humid Saturday morning, temperatures in the nineties, and the air-conditioner blows lukewarm across my bare legs. My mother in-law, Kara, sits in the passenger seat next to me, text messaging the car ahead of us containing my husband, Kyle, his dad, Kent, and two little brothers, Kohl and Kade, ages 10 and 7. I am the only non-K initial on the trip, an oddity in this catalogue family. The click-click-click of Kara's acrylic nails against the tiny, plastic keypad grates on my nerves, the beginnings of a long weekend. My mother in-law is flawlessly blonde with well-toned arms and an even tan. I have a coffee stain from breakfast on my shorts. We are caravanning south to Branson, Missouri to celebrate her parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary. Nobody can believe that I've never been to Branson, the Midwest's wholesome answer to Las Vegas. I don't say that I made a commitment to myself never to go. My in-laws are kind, and I don't want them to know I am, privately, a snob. I shrug my shoulders and say, "First time!"

Branson, Missouri was incorporated in 1912. Silver Dollar City, now the city's own amusement park, was built in 1960 as a fake frontier front with five houses and a church, along with a log cabin where actors reenacted the famous feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys. In 1967, the Presleys—a family singing group unrelated to the King -- took their show to Highway 76 in the heart of Branson, followed a year later by the Baldknobbers—both families still play there today. By 1983 Branson began its rapid transformation into a commanding tourist attraction. Today, Highway 76 through the center of town is known as "the strip", and lined with over fifty massive theaters, each with a different theme. Standing proudly among the others: Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede, Baldknobbers Country Jubilee, Circle B Chuckwagon Theater, Dick Clark's American Bandstand, The God and Country Theater, and so on. Today Silver Dollar City is a full-fledged amusement park, adult tickets running around $93, children's tickets $76. Tickets to shows range from $30 to $60, and to take the Branson Dinner Chicken Train Scenic Tour puts a tourist back $60.

My friend Dave had an allergic reaction to Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede. It could have been partly philosophical, as his family was seated on the side of the South, but right after Dolly Parton came on the big screen and sang the national anthem, when they brought the animals in, Dave's throat closed up, he broke into hives, and was hastily helped out of the building. A few day's later, on a pontoon boat with the whole family out on Table Rock Lake, Dave's mom took out her Bible and started reading verses about the glory of God's creation. "Mom," said Dave, and pointed at the enormous concrete dam off in the distance,

"this is not God's creation. It's Branson". Dave left St. Louis for Boston when he went to college, and when he graduated he moved to New York. It can be difficult at twenty to separate your family's values from their value.

We do not enter Branson via the main strip, but by back roads to avoid traffic, which, Kara says, is constant along 76. We eat barbeque with her parents at a chain restaurant, and when they leave for Wal-Mart to stock up on groceries, we turn toward the strip, looking for go-carts.

The strip is like a tiny front yard filled with too many dwarves, bird-baths, deer, dressed-up geese and misplaced squares of Astroturf--all clutter and noise. On every side blazes the light of another ride, a miniature Ferris wheel, a bungee drop, bumper cars, bumper boats, put-put golf courses, Pizza World, open-air arcades blaring the rapid sirens of winning games. There are themed museums and theaters crushed between other attractions. The Titanic Museum, shaped like the ship, crashes into an enormous faux-iceberg in its parking lot. The Hollywood Wax Museum boasts a scaled-down Mount Rushmore, the faces of presidents past replaced with John Wayne, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley and an unidentified fourth celebrity in a black Bowler's hat, who could pass for one of the Marx brothers.

We get in line behind a group of skinny preteen boys in sleeveless t-shirts and a teenage girl with breasts twice the size of my head. They are appraising the different colored carts for speed, and I am starting to feel nervous about my maiden voyage around the track. The acne-scarred gatekeeper pushes a button to his left, red lights blaze on the course, drivers climb sweaty from their tiny

cars, the aluminum gate creaks open and the line pushes forward onto the track. I choose a dusty lavender car behind Kyle, hoping he'll shield me from the menacing preteens who will, no doubt, ignore the "No Bumping!" signs. I fasten the seatbelt tightly across my chest, my back pressed straight against the seat. A mechanical scream sounds from loudspeakers above us and suddenly we are off. The chesty teenage girl bashes into me right away. Kara passes with a bright smile and thumbs up, then my father in-law with Kyle's seven year-old brother riding shotgun. Within seconds I am comfortably behind the entire pack of little cars, their motors buzzing distantly ahead of me, the smell of gasoline hanging over the track. When we are all back on the cracked parking lot everyone laughs about it. "Beth was just out for groceries," Kara says, "She was Driving Miss Daisy!" I feel unsuited for Branson the way I used to feel unsuited for summer camp games with water balloons. The noise and the mess of it bothers me.

At the hotel that night, the din of distant motors and arcade games ringing against the quiet black of the night sky, Kara says, "You know, even though Branson is pretty redneck and cheesy, at least this is a place where I can feel safe." I glance at Kyle and know that, alone in our room, we will vent about that comment awhile, and the conversation will inevitably turn toward politics. We will hit all of our talking points with familiar rhythm: the GOP's seamless hijacking of conservative Christians, mindlessly branding liberals "unpatriotic", any new FOX news antics, and so on. Lying under the raspy, hotel sheets, with only the air-conditioning unit to oppose us, our rhetoric will be brilliant and

effective. Eventually we will wind down with a rant about Sarah Palin and, restlessly, fall asleep.

Kyle and I became hardened Democrats after marrying young at the end of the Bush Administration and beginning of a recession, unable to afford healthcare or find jobs once we graduated from college. Kyle's parents are solidly Republican, more so since moving South from St. Louis to the Florida panhandle. During the 2008 presidential election we talked politics endlessly on visits, staying up until two or three in the morning after the little boys went to bed. By early morning the debate took on a circular shape, our values the same but our conclusions radically different, neither side conceding on any point.

In the latest city census, taken in 2005, Branson was 94 percent White, 1 percent African American, 1 percent Native American, 1 percent Asian, and 3 percent Other/Mixed. The tourists reflect these demographics. During our weekend, I see one black family; everyone else is white. The average Branson household earned $31,997 in 2005. The population, tourists not included, was only 7,010, an insanely low number considering the noise. The go-cart per capita rate, I imagine, is high.

Kara was right to feel safe in Branson, it turns out, as the crime rate is relatively low. In 2006 there was 1 case of murder/man-slaughter, 9 cases of rape, 10 cases of robbery and 130 cases of aggravated assault. There is no dark underbelly to Branson, no back alleys to its bright storefronts. Branson delivers on its promise of wholesome, family fun, and perhaps that is why people love it so much.

There is an artifice to Branson, though, with its gargantuan theaters that look, from a distance, like painted stage sets, enormous monuments isolated in the wide, empty space of rural Missouri. Branson represents a strange fantasyland, one without bars, pornography, casinos or nightclubs. A city without poverty or diversity, an unreal place inhabited mainly by tourists who can, for a few hundred dollars, enjoy a weekend away. Branson exists in a time separate from the present, called "simpler" by its visitors, for which they will always be nostalgic.

Sunday morning we ride the Ducks, open-air buses that convert to boats—once used in World War II, now favorite tourist attractions. After a rapid tour of the city's outskirts, speeding along without seatbelts, our bus clattering loudly, the driver turns onto a steep dirt path the cuts down to the water. He shouts into the loudspeaker to "Get ready, get set and go!" and our Duck plunges downhill, gaining speed, hitting the lake with a fantastic splash that drenches the back row of passengers. Even with its propeller pumping hard below us, the Duck feels more bus than boat, lumbering loudly across the lake. A pair of grey-haired newlyweds sits on the bench in front of us in matching T-Shirts. Kara passes a bag of homemade taffy around, the candy warm and sticky from the heat. Speedboaters whiz by, their boats half out of the water, passengers waving as they pass us lumbering along. The driver cracks jokes about his wife, his smarts, and various outdated, pop-cultural happenings—a first-class ham. We cross the lake slowly, laboriously, a duck better off on land than water.

Then suddenly, the jokes stop and the duck makes a tight, left-turning circle. "Folks, looks like you'll need to take down those life vests above you. Just pull the strings hanging down and pass them around." We sit a minute wondering if this is shtick or if we should be getting down the life vests. "We've lost control of our rudder. That is, we can make a left-hand turn, but we can't go right. I've called for a rescue duck. Please get those life vests on and they should get out to us in a bit." Someone pulls the string and boxy life vests fall to the boat floor in a heap of dust and dirt. We put them on, laughing uproariously. Lame duck. The lake is filled with more fortunate boats. Motor boats fly by, passengers waving, their sunglasses flashing. Tiny speed boats towing jet-ski's whip past. "You would think a boatful of passengers in life vests might have a bigger effect" I say, suspicious. We are not the first duck to come to a stop out on the lake, it would seem.

Forty-five minutes later the taffy has melted. We have taken hilarious pictures of ourselves looking panicked and clinging to our mildewed life-vests that fit like box tops with holes for our heads. We have made one last, left-turning attempt for shore. The rescue duck appears with a part for our rudder. We sit and watch them work, a crew of neckless heads coming out of fluorescent rectangular box tops, smelling of mildew, our fingers sticky with taffy. The metaphors are endless; they weigh heavily on my mind, each one more overblown than the last. The rescue workers finish their repairs, pack up and climb back onto their duck. Our captain starts up the engine and we begin our long, lurching swim back to shore.

Across the water, the Queen Paddleboat wheels smoothly toward shore, an old-fashioned double-decker riverboat with grand, white wooden paddlewheels churning. I think about Mark Twain's epic, *Life on the Mississippi*, with its narrow shores and pilothouses. I remember my dad taking me early in the morning down to Sawyer Point when we lived in Cincinnati, buying me a Styrofoam cup of hot chocolate, the two of us sitting on the concrete steps of the levy to watch the Steamboats come around the river bend. I think of those steamboats out on Table Rock Lake with the Queen Paddleboat gliding quietly by. A breeze picks up across the water. The lake may begin with a concrete Dam, but it is lovely, cool and green in July.

In recession-wracked middle-America, there is a carefully manufactured distance between the GOP's specially termed "Real America" and the rest of us. Real Americans fear socialism, the deterioration of American values and the War on Christmas, among other things. Unreal Americans have fears of their own, albeit less streamlined. At the heart of it, though, we are all afraid of losing the same things. We are afraid of losing what is familiar, what we deem good. We fear that we are not getting better, that we will only become progressively worse. We fear being lost. We fear being forgotten, becoming irrelevant, our places taken.

Kyle's grandparents fill Ziploc bags with sandwiches, potato chips and brownies for our trip home. They tell us we must come back for a show sometime. We hug goodbye and leave; Kyle drives. I put in the Beatles' White Album, and we make our way north along 44 to the soft, sad sound of *Sexy Sadie.*

Sexy Sadie, what have you done? You made a fool of everyone…Sexy Sadie, how did you know? The world was waiting just for you. The world was waiting just for you.

We leave Branson where it stands, bright lights flashing against the darkening hills, loud motor sounds lost somewhere behind us, muted by summer leaves, the city announcing itself loudly to the deaf landscape.

#

Panophobia Does Not Mean Fear of Pans

I am afraid of sharks in the bathtub. I am afraid of sharks in the clear, chemically balanced waters of swimming pools, and the slippery, green waters of bottomless lakes. Forget mermaids calling from ocean depths; I walk with trousers rolled, like Prufrock, along the beach. I have a blurred memory from childhood of waking up after bedtime, creeping down two flights of wooden stairs from the third floor to stand in the wide framed doorway of the living room, where my brother and father sat on the couch, their backs turned to me, watching the first Jaws movie. I possess a lifelong love of fabrication, though, and this memory, like all those from my childhood, is foggy at best.

I am afraid of rapists and murderers hiding in small spaces. I squat down every night to check for them under the bed—barely 8 inches of space between dusty floor and metal frame. Whatever ax-murdering serial rapist could fit in such a space would not pose much of a threat, but I like to cover all my bases.

My favorite Law and Order series is Special Victims Unit (SVU), which focuses exclusively on horrible sex crimes. The entire Law and Order franchise is about fascination with crime, each series focusing on different kinds of criminals, with separate sets of detective for each. The opening lines, read over a black screen by a cryptic male narrator, identifies the series: In the criminal justice system, sexually based offenses are considered especially heinous. In New York City, the dedicated detectives who investigate these vicious felonies are members of an elite squad known as the Special Victims Unit. These are their stories." I've seen almost

every episode of the show's eight seasons, and can recite the opening lines in perfect time with the narration. My husband Kyle, who watches it with me, always botches the lines midway through, but he's bad with song lyrics, too. Every other SVU fan I've met has confessed their love of it with the same hushed shame I feel. Why do we love to find out the gruesome details of pedophilic sex crimes and violent rapes? "The characters are just so good," we say to one another. Really, we watch it because we are afraid of it.

I am perilously afraid of heights. At Portsmouth Harbor, on the southern coast of England, there is a tower built like Seattle's Space Needle, called Spinnaker Tower, standing 552 feet tall. An elevator runs to platforms at 325 feet, 341 feet, and 357 feet. From 357 feet you can see the Isle of Wight, and imagine Paul McCartney in his rented cottage there at sixty-four. In southern England for my brother's wedding, I took the train to Portsmouth with my sister, her husband, and Kyle, along with a few wedding guests who were similarly bored with the one-pub town we were staying in. We rode the elevator to the highest platform with glass walls all the way around and a glass floor in its center, about 6 feet long on all sides, through which you could see all the way down to the parking lot below. Kyle strode right over, stood on top of it, taking pictures, while one of the bride's cousins, a spunky fourteen-year-old, lay down, her back to the glass, and pretended to be in free fall. I inched over for a look from several feet away, then inched my way back, slowly, toward the elevator.

I am not necessarily afraid of speed, but I'm no fan, either. I dated a student from South Korea in high school named Chang-Soo Chun who drove a silver

Mitsubishi Gallant and watched too many Chinatown drag-racing movies. I did not like him much, but I was seventeen, and his persistence, after many months, persuaded me. He received a large monthly allowance from his wealthy parents in Korea and spent it on his car and bottles of Armani X cologne, which I found intoxicating. On our way back from a school dance he got into a race on the highway with a car full of friends. We broke 105 mph, me pinned to my seat, bobby pins stabbing into my scalp, before a cop caught up and pulled us over. It is a mystery, now, why Chang-Soo wasn't arrested on the spot. I broke up with him soon after.

Because I'm afraid of heights and speed, roller coasters are an obvious no. Kyle thought he could cure me of this by taking me on one the summer after we married. I swore I was not one of those cases, the person who says they hate something until they try it and discover they really love it after all. I agreed, finally, to prove my point that roller coasters are not in my nature. The first ride did not qualify as a true roller coaster, more an enormous Viking-shaped boat that rocked back and forth, tipping me first high into the air, and then dipping rapidly down again—it was a test run. I screamed like the female lead in a cheesy horror movie just before she is killed off in a sadistic way—by chain saw or sledge-hammer, for instance. The second was bonafide, a rickety old wooden-track roller coaster called the Mine Train. Hooked into tiny mining cars, we lurched up the narrow track, the pained squeaks of wheels and motors sounded worn-down and unsafe. After a series of hills the train took us into a dark tunnel where Kyle put his arm around me and whispered, "there's a bit of a drop here" before our little car went into free fall in the pitch black; the only sound in the tunnel my ear-wrenching scream. "That was an old

one" Kyle said, afterwards. "A bad choice. If you could only go on a real roller coaster, a smooth, new ride, like the Batman, I think you could really like it." Sweating and dehydrated, my arms and legs rubber after the tunnel ride, I agreed to the Batman. "I will hate it," I said, "You will see that there is no roller coaster for me." Our legs dangled down on the Batman, no seats, just a perch for our butts, smaller than a bicycle seat, and heavy plastic harnesses that clicked into place over our chests and shoulders. I did not open my eyes. I did not stop for breath. I screamed my head off from beginning to end and, when we pulled back onto the track, Kyle conceded that I was not a roller coaster person and, moreover, that he would never want to ride one with me again.

I am afraid of bats. I am afraid of wild animals, particularly bears. I read a *Readers Digest* article in a doctor's waiting room when I was ten about gruesome bear attacks, people being wrenched out of their tents in state parks in the middle of the night, clawed to death and half eaten while their friends or partners lay sick and paralyzed with fear inside the tent. Since then I have been afraid not just of bears, but also camping.

I'm religious, so I'm especially afraid of the supernatural. As a kid I was extremely devout and was equal-parts scared of being visited by angels and demons. Otherworldly creatures were always visiting biblical figures in fearsome, spontaneous ways. If the purest of the pure, Mary, was terrified when visited by Gabriel, I held no illusions that I would react differently. The New Testament is full of demon possessions, spirits being cast out of humans and into herds of pigs. I'm less worried about angels now, not as devout and therefore less likely to be visited, but I still

worry about demons when I let myself think about them long enough. I picture them as the most hideously deformed human faces imaginable, skin melting, eyes bulging from their sockets, mouths twisted in animal screams, their sharp, clawed fingers stretching blurrily towards me.

When Kyle was a teenager, he was excessively afraid of demons. Lying in bed one night, facing his desk, he saw a single object move across the dark surface. He kept staring, heart pounding, and watched the entire contents of the desk's surface—basketball trophies, pencil cup, notebooks, textbooks—whip suddenly off the desk and crash to the floor. Horrified, certain he was in the presence of a demonic power, he lunged for the light switch. Crouching on the floor beside the wreckage, he noticed tiny pieces of masking tape attached to the bottoms of each object, and clear lengths of fishing line running from tape, across the floor, into his little brother's room. An elaborate plot, masterminded by Kyle's parents, to teach some lesson that has not lasted as long as the joke.

I knew a guy in college who kept samurai swords hidden around his apartment in case of an intruder, so he was, in a way, a kindred spirit. When I told him that I hated horror movies, he insisted I watch the scariest horror movie of all time, "The Thing." I watched it in the middle of the afternoon over a cheese sandwich. The movie involves an alien life form buried beneath the arctic crust for millions of years, uncovered accidentally by a team of scientists who it inhabits and bursts out of at various intervals. I didn't find it frightening, and I told him so, saying maybe it was because I didn't believe in aliens. "You believe in demons, but you don't believe in

aliens," he said, and looked at me as if I was the idiot. I am not afraid of aliens, no, but I am afraid of everything else.

I saw the Sixth Sense at 16 and had to sleep on my parents' floor for a month. The ghosts terrified me, and with them the idea of seeing something nobody else can. By day I was a normal teenager, by night I was an overgrown child more afraid of facing the ghost of a murdered toddler than of tip-toe-ing in on my parents having sex. My dad thought my fears would be abated if I watched the movie a second time, because there would be no surprises. The second viewing put me on their floor for another month.

I was an easy child until bedtime, when I turned tyrannical. When I could, I would make my mom lie with me until I fell asleep. I had to be fully asleep, though, or I would wake up in a panic just after she'd gone. I devised a trick of putting my foot on her ankle so that if she got up to go and I was half-asleep, the movement would jolt me awake—a primitive sort of booby trap. I sleep now with a hand or foot on Kyle's arm or ankle.

I'm afraid of public speaking. Even now, two years into graduate school, talking in class can turn my face a shade of red more suited to vegetables than humans. In the fifth-grade my teacher, Mr. D—a red-faced man himself—forced me into the school spelling bee against my better judgment. I misspelled "corner" in the second round, on purpose, so I could get off the stage.

I am afraid of brain aneurisms, strokes, heart attacks and breast cancer. I thought I felt a lump a few years back but it turned out to be part of my rib. I am afraid of the gynecologist with her reassuring tones and carnal knowledge, her

artillery of tiny probes. I am afraid of small spaces, opossums, the date rape drug, and riots. I pause at the top of every escalator I ride, right foot out, timing my descent with caution. I dislike walking across those grates in city sidewalks where you can see down into the sewer. I am afraid of getting pregnant, childbirth, growing fat, and female pattern baldness.

Something deeply reassuring to me, though, is the reality of the human condition, that someone, somewhere will always be more neurotic than I am. For all of my fears, there are many more that I do not have. I am not afraid of handwriting (Graphophobia), or of progress (Presophobia). I am a democrat, after all. I am not afraid of eating (Sitophobia), although that fear might be useful, as one of my responses to fear is food. I am not afraid of the Dutch (Dutchphobia), or of sermons (Homilophobia). I am not afraid of chins (Geniophobia). I am not afraid of being tickled by feathers (Pternonophobia), or hearing good news (Euphobia). I did not think I was afraid of being beaten severely by a rod (Rhabdophobia), but now that I think of it, I am, and who wouldn't be?

Ronald Reagan, Johnny Cash and Ray Bradbury were all afraid of flying. Composer Frederic-Francois Chopin and Hans Christian Anderson were both afraid of being buried alive. Hitler was claustrophobic as was Houdini and, it could be said, both faced their fears in one way or another—Hitler in his bunker during the war's last days, and Houdini in a series of strange, small spaces and death-defying acts. Shakespeare, Mussolini, Napoleon, Caesar, Alexander the Great and Dwight D. Eisenhower were all, apparently, afraid of cats. Freud, who loved a good phobia, feared ferns. Howard Hughes possessed a long list of phobias, not the least of which

being a fear of germs—he burned his clothes frequently, afraid of contamination. Alfred Hitchcock, himself an odd duck, had a fear of eggs, of which he said, "Blood is jolly red, but egg yolk is yellow. Revolting."

Fortunately, I'm afraid of looking stupid, so I think I come across pretty effectively as a normal person. That is, in fact, what keeps my fears from morphing into phobias. To become a phobia, a fear must become irrational and debilitating. A phobia is fear strong enough to change the course of normal behavior. I have before splashed spontaneously out of a warm bath, imagining the sharp, silver fin of a shark making its way past my submerged feet. At my in-laws colossal Florida home, with guest room so far from living spaces that voices get lost somewhere between; I have been struck suddenly, in the bathroom, with the fear of a demonic face appearing in the mirror. I have streaked down the long, carpeted hallway, the imagined phantasm at my heels, to pause at the top of the stairs, catch my breath, and descend like a normal adult. In those moments, I am phobic.

Publicly, I keep my fears safely in balance. Look more closely at my bitten-down nails, or hazard to startle me, and you'll know. Kyle likes to scare people, so he hit the jackpot when he married me. In high school he and friends would drive around the city with a video camera, swapping turns in a life-like ape suit, all of them well over six feet tall so that their dimensions were ape-like and the effect was startling. The suited member of the group would scare bystanders in parking lots, outdoor restaurants, and parks. On school trips and at summer camps, they tied t-shirts over their heads, fashioned so the neckline made an eye-slot but the rest of their faces were covered, and wrapped themselves in black sheets, and then stood over

fellow campers' beds chanting. The kid would wake up to the towering figures in burkas and freak out. This was pre-911, and they were unaware of any Taliban connotations. Kyle and his roommate tried the trick one time in their freshmen dorm in college, were put on academic probation, and haven't done it since.

Kyle still scares me in newly creative ways from time to time, though. He had the idea recently to put pillows under the covers on his side of the bed while I was in the bathroom. I came back into the dark room, mistook the pillows for his long frame, and was climbing in next to him, I thought, when he popped up at the foot of the bed with a blanket over his head and said, in a voice that sounded something like a demonic grandmother, "Hello, little girl". I screamed for about as long as he laughed.

I scared Kyle once, effectively, and found it deeply satisfying. I was in my last semester of college, we had been married less than a year, and our apartment was small and very white, only two rooms. I came home from class late in the afternoon and said hello to Kyle where he sat, with his back to me, at the table. He didn't respond, and I noticed his huge, soundproof headphones were on, as he edited his band's recordings on the computer. I slipped out of my shoes, crept toward him, bent over, and when I was about five feet away, ran at him in full sprint with my arms above my head like talons, making a distinctly-raptor-like shrieking sound. He knocked over the chair jumping out of it and let out a stream of profanities so long I have never heard it matched.

I am afraid of death. It's strange, because I believe in an afterlife. I just don't believe that it will be as good as this one. I don't have faith that there will be an

afterlife equivalent of a run at five o'clock in the morning, when nobody else is up but dog-walkers and bakers, and the light is pure gray, and the air is sweet and wet. I had a friend when I was a kid who told me in heaven everybody would be naked. In every sermon I've ever heard on the subject, it's heavily implied that there will be no husbands or wives or fathers or mothers there, because everyone is one big family, and maybe it is good that I won't be bumping into earthly family members if we are, after all, naked. I wouldn't want another life without Kyle, though, my best friend since I was eighteen, or without my sister and brother, who know my fears well. I wouldn't want it without long walks by flashlight after dark. Even on moonless nights on city blocks with failing streetlights, if I can follow the long, yellow beam of a flashlight, I don't feel afraid.

I am afraid of getting old. I am afraid that with every decision I make, my life becomes more permanent. I remember the summer after high school as one long, transient moment. I spent every night with friends, sitting outside our parents' houses in the dark, moths tapping against the porch lights, talking about whom we would become, and casting movie stars to play us in future film-versions of our lives. Maybe it is true that you can reinvent yourself at any age, but it cannot compare to that limitless feeling the last summer before we all went away to college, slates clean. At eighteen some part of me believed I would be rich and famous, perhaps win an Oscar, or be a guest on the Oprah Winfrey Show. I did not know what for, but felt instinctively that one or all of those events were in my near future.

Of all my fears, this one is the greatest: that I am inauthentic in some essential way. That I am not particularly smart or interesting; that I am unexceptional, and that I will awake to it suddenly, without warning, eyes opened.

#

Cocktail Waitress

I wake up with a headache and go to the kitchen for water. Kyle is already up, brushing his teeth in the bathroom, and my mom is in the guest bedroom on the phone with my dad. "We've been working on it for three years, Mark," she says "It hasn't gotten any better that way. It isn't fear," she says. Another pause. "I think you should work on that, on that anger. Alright. I'm sorry. Ok. Goodbye." I breathe deep from the bag of coffee and spoon it into her French press; fill the kettle and set it on the stove. It's ten more minutes before I notice the snow. It must have been falling all morning because there is an inch on the ground already and it is still falling, thick and quiet, past our second-floor window. I'm a bit disoriented, time-wise, from a long winter break, four weeks off from teaching and graduate classes. My days are strung along, a series of empty weekday Saturdays. I am a lady of leisure. A childless stay-at-home mom. I think, though, that New Year's Eve is tomorrow.

The day before Christmas Eve, a cold afternoon without snow, I met my mom for lunch close to home. The place, a cafeteria-style sandwich shop and bakery in my neighborhood, was packed with suits on lunch breaks. We ordered a Fa-la-la sandwich to split and found a table 6-inches from two thirty-something guys with napkins folded neatly over their ties. My mom's eyes were wandering, her mouth flat and sad, distracted. I asked what was wrong and she said nothing. I asked again, and she said nothing. I told her I would worry all day, and she said she didn't want to ruin my Christmas. She said this was the wrong

place and time. I told her to spit it out. "Your dad had an affair" she said, and burst into tears. "Let's go" I said, standing. We filed out of the place, our Fa-la-la sitting on our plates, two neat bites taken out of each half.

Christmas, it turns out, cannot be avoided. For a fleeting moment in the car, after the abandoned lunch, processing the information as my mom gives it to me, I think I can skip it. I think Kyle and I can spend Christmas in our pajamas, watching CNN and ignoring the holiday altogether. I say this, and she tells me that it will be worse for her without us at my grandmother's house. I say we'll leave on the 24th, as planned, and calculate the hours we'll have to be there before going on to my sister's house in Cincinnati on Christmas day. If we get in just before dinner, go to the hotel around nine, and leave right after lunch the next day, we're still looking at a daunting eleven hours of feigning normalcy.

I wake up on Christmas Eve in St. Louis, the trip on my mind, my mother's face on my mind, the name of my dad's cocktail conquest on my mind. Mandy. I get up and find a pair of running pants in the dirty laundry. I get dressed in the cold hallway, drink a glass of water, turn on the TV and stretch for a minute. Outside the air is humid from rain. I work to convince myself that it is not Christmas Eve at all, but a weekend morning in early March, when all of this will be recent past and may have lost its bite. I cross Hanley Road and turn onto Lindell, up the steep street past houses built like multi-million dollar fortresses of painted brick and tasteful porch lights. At the top of the hill I pass a construction site where an older house was torn down a year ago and a new one is being built. The windows have gone in, I notice, and the stonework on the

front of the house finished. Our church is on the corner. The post office across the street is crowded, cars backing up in the parking lot and spilling out onto the road. I run past them waiting frustrated there. I run through downtown Clayton, past dark restaurants and winter themed displays in closed store windows. I cut across the sidewalk, past Companion Bakery where mom and I ordered lunch but did not finish it. The bakery is open, its windows steamed over and a line snaking along one wall. I pass dog-walkers, bundled too heavily for the mild day, turn onto Delmar Road, pass synagogues, an eight-foot menorah in one parking lot. Traffic is heavier on the road here. I pass Starbucks which is, naturally, open, its drive-through line clogged. I lean forward, push off the sidewalk, up the steep hill to the corner where Delmar meets Hanley. I get back to the apartment breathing heavily and hot. I can hear the shower running and Kyle dropping something, probably the shampoo bottle. I sit on the floor, untie my shoes, stand slowly, go to the bedroom to pack.

We stop forty miles outside of Campbellsville for gas and drinks. I eye the wine-coolers. "We are living out one of those bad holiday movies where someone goes home to spend time with their family and makes constant references to needing a drink," I say to Kyle. "Do you need a drink?" he asks me. "No. Let's do this bitch." I say, and head back to the car while he buys himself a soda.

My grandmother's house is the kind of place Stephen Foster would have written a song about, an old Kentucky estate with a wide, brick porch and columns, green shutters, a graceful slope to the dormer windows on its second

floor. There is a banister that curves from the second floor down to the first that my cousins and I slid down as kids. If we followed each other in too close succession we'd stack up at the end and need help getting disentangled. There is a map that runs from floor to ceiling, the length of the hallway, along one wall between the living room and kitchen. Pictures of my grandparents on trips all over the world are scattered with push-pins, covering every continent. My grandfather reading Louie L'Amour next to the Great Wall of China, and my grandmother riding an ostrich in Kenya. My grandmother has white electric candles in every window of the house as we pull warily into the driveway. We sit in the car. "I do not want to go inside." I say. "We don't have to," Kyle says hopefully. I reach for my purse and a bag full of wrapped presents. I bought the paper at a stationary store, bright gumdrops on creamy white, printed at a small press in Brooklyn. Probably there would have been more gifts to wrap if I hadn't spent so much on the wrapping paper, but they look lovely, tied up with red ribbon. My dad's gift, bought weeks before, is in a small brown shopping bag with crumpled red tissue paper pushed on top and a red ribbon tying its handles in a tightly knotted bow. Kyle hands it to me and I throw it on the wet driveway. "In case it isn't clear that this is not being given with a happy heart." I say, and reach for it. We pick our way between the other parked cars filling the circular driveway behind the house and go inside.

I do not look at my dad when we come into the house, or when he puts a hand on my back, coming into the kitchen with everyone else to greet us. I talk to my cousin Anna about her long hair, and to Savanna about her short hair. I

hug my Aunt Karen hard and tell her how good it is to see her, and am lifted an inch into the air by my Uncle Peter, who is a big man. I tell my grandmother how beautiful her house looks, and put my arm around my mom while we stand in the kitchen, waiting for the pot of tea to steep. I do not look at my dad or speak to him. He had my mom call us an hour outside of Campbellsville to let us know we could go on to Cincinnati if it would be too hard for me to see him. I knew it would be harder for him if we were in Campbellsville, so we pressed on.

At the Holiday Inn Express, hours later, I try to find a channel on the TV that isn't showing *It's a Wonderful Life* or *A Christmas Story*. I get the Gideon's Bible out of the bedside table drawer, find the Christmas story in Luke, then drop it back into the drawer. "No point," I say to Kyle, and go to the bathroom to brush my teeth. Lighting in hotel bathrooms is second only to dressing room lights in its unflattering neon brightness. My eyes, as I work the toothbrush around in my mouth, are puffy without makeup, dark-circled, pink. When I come back out into the room, Kyle has a red blanket over his head and body, only his face showing. "A child?" he says incredulously, staring wide-eyed at the empty space in front of him, "but I have never lain with Joseph!" More dialogue with the imagined angel messenger, then he throws off the blanket and is Joseph. "You've really done it this time, Mary!" he says, "I will divorce you quietly, then have a dream about you and marry you anyway." He's mixed up about the details. "No room in your inn?" he exclaims, panicked, gesturing furiously at one corner of the room, "but my wife! She is with child! Alright, thank you very much for you help!" he finishes, before rushing off to another corner of the room and another innkeeper.

The one-man Christmas pageant lasts until the birthing scene when I am hysterical and take pictures of his laboring Mary on my phone and he quickly shuts it down. He falls asleep before me and I lay a long time, listening to the heater blow hot air into the room, and Kyle breathing through a stuffy nose next to me. At five my alarm goes off and I slip out of the room, down to the hotel fitness center, run for forty minutes on the treadmill, watch CNN's coverage of a snowstorm sweeping the upper Midwest.

We leave late Christmas afternoon, drive three hours with my mom asleep in the backseat, to my sister's house in Cincinnati. She and her husband are waiting with stockings for us, presents under the tree, and, for the weekend, rightness is restored. I've known Andy since he and Kate started dating at sixteen, when I was a bony ten year-old who they took along to the mall or a movie. That night we make pizzas, drink a bottle of wine, ice cookies and start a fire. Kyle and I go to sleep in the four-poster guest room bed, wake up late, and have frittata.

Sunday afternoon we go over it all again. My mom's thinking is cyclical, first blaming herself, then convinced of my dad's culpability and then, later on, convinced she is mostly accountable. He, a psychiatrist, master-manipulator, has said she neglected him. He has said she worked too much, became withdrawn. He has said he can't believe it didn't happen sooner, and if she doesn't change things on her end, he probably will have another affair. He has only admitted what he has been caught with: an affair years earlier, a resort weekend a year ago, and financially supporting his mistress since. She is an alcoholic, a recovering meth-addict, a single-mother, a cocktail waitress. He is loyal, he says,

and cannot abandon her because she needs the financial support. "It isn't an affair to help someone who is needy" he will say to me, days later, over the phone. "If you're paying someone you've had sex with, it's not philanthropy." I will reply. I will be angry but I will stay calm. His temper has always been sudden, irrational, and counterproductive. I know how to keep it at bay. On Kate's couch in Cincinnati, we try to convince my mom that this isn't something she can fix alone, because she didn't cause it. My dad does not feel remorse. He is angry with my mom and wonders if they might take a six month break so that he can work through his anger, maybe with her in Florida, telling friends that she's there taking care of her mother. My mom, who worked to put him through medical school, quit working to stay home with us, went back to work as a Montessori preschool teacher once I was in high school and Kate and Aaron were out of the house. He has not apologized or ended the relationship. He does not want a divorce, but he doesn't want to change, either. This doesn't surprise me. He's always been an asshole.

We leave Sunday for St. Louis, stop in Indiana to meet my Uncle Peter and Aunt Karen at a Cracker Barrel. We tell them everything all over again, already sick of every detail. Two hours later, the snow is picking up and we say goodbye, get back out on the highway. Traffic has slowed in the storm; the road is unsalted, sparkling white in the fading sunlight. We count the cars that have gone off the road. There are brake lights just ahead, Kyle slows, and we are suddenly, smoothly, spinning to face back the way we came, spinning back around to face the car in front of us, which is spiraling, too, toward the grass on

the side of the road. We spin silently, gracefully, tracking a wide circle across both lanes. My mom lets out a calm cry from the backseat, "Ooooooooooooh." I am less expressive, repeating in a low voice, "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God" and Kyle, managing the wheel, soothingly, "We are OK. We are OK. We are OK." We slide sideways toward the grass poking through the snow, a narrow patch between the road and a bank of stone. I see a mile-marker coming toward me through the snow, it's reflector glinting off of our headlights, and then our tires hit the grass and we come to a stop, unharmed. There are two other cars off the road up ahead of us. Kyle starts our car to be sure it will start and, when it does, leaves it running with the heat on, while he gets out to check on the passengers up ahead. My mom and I take deep breaths in the car. "What has happened to life?" she asks. "We are OK." I say and we wait for Kyle to come back through the snow.

It's midnight before we're back in St. Louis, driving down my parents' dark street, leaving my mom inside the house with her suitcases. "I'll be over in the morning." I say. I sleep late while Kyle goes to work. By the time I get to my parents' house my mom has been to the bank to get statements of account activity from October, November and December. My dad has spent over 1,000 dollars in the last month on groceries and cash withdrawals. Unfamiliar restaurant charges in the last few weeks, a recent movie for two, two hundred dollars at Macy's. "I'm dizzy," my mom says. She's wearing a green T-shirt from St. James Park in London. "I can't stay here. I just don't think I can look at him right now." I tell her to pack up what she needs while I call Kate. We knew the

affair was not over and did not follow the neat narrative my dad had given. It took the bank statements for my mom to realize the same thing. Back upstairs she is packing. She wants my dad to know that she knows about the money, but she can't call him. I go back to the basement, say a prayer, put my head on my knees and dial his number. We talk. I stay calm, do not call him an asshole or worse, lay out the facts, tell him Mom will be staying with us until she decides what to do. His voice is quiet and unemotional. I don't cry until we are off the phone and I am alone. Then I go back upstairs to tell my mom it's taken care of, and wait on a stool at the kitchen counter while she packs. She fills the backseat of her car with favorite paintings, a framed pencil drawing her mother gave her, odd shoes in their boxes, clothes on hangers, drawing pencils, a sketchpad, stacks of books, the day's paper.

Snow is falling outside. I watch from the window and wait for Mom to come out of her room. I made the guest bed up with new pillows, heavy blankets, put a bowl of Clementines on the nightstand and cleared a closet for her. The idea, I think, being that if she could be comfortable, she wouldn't feel terrible. Kate's coming for the weekend, the thought of her approaching car on the highway the anchor that keeps me grounded all through the long, strange week. Kate and I talk every few hours on the phone. She's an exceptional researcher, and has learned that Mandy is 32—two years Kate's senior—has multiple DUI arrests—court dates corresponding with large payments to lawyers offices on my parents' bank statements—has bottle-orange hair and, in her MySpace photo, looks like a prostitute. Kate sets up a fake MySpace account under the pseudonym Jason C.

for more access. Jason C. owns a club in St. Louis, likes to party, and doesn't read. He listens to hip-hop and a little bit of country. We laugh uproariously over Jason C's profile. "I'm friending every skanky-looking thirty-something from St. Louis I can find," Kate says, "When Jason has enough friends to look legit I'll friend Mandy. Then we can see her full profile." Between phone calls, I bake with startling efficiency. Cinnamon rolls, soft pretzels, chocolate meringues and all sorts of cookies. I am going through flour, butter and eggs at an epic rate. My mom and I take a spinning class at six o'clock one morning. We drink our weight in tea. Kyle, Mom and I go out to dinner at night, watch movies at home. "Are you OK?" we ask one another.

On New Year's Eve the three of us watch old episodes of 30Rock on the couch, drink bad sparkling white wine and wear festive tiaras my mom picked up at Walgreens when she went out for the New York Times. We make stupid jokes about all the terrible things we could toast to, then toast to one another and finish our drinks. I take pictures of Kyle and Mom, then Kyle takes one of me and Mom, and Mom takes one of me and Kyle. A sedate trio, ringing in 2010.

It's fifteen degrees with a nasty wind-chill on New Year's Day, but I go for a run. Snow has been falling for a little while and has just started to stick. Earlier other runners were out, their legs in black spandex out of proportion with bulkier jackets and hats. They're all gone now. The sky is gray. The streets are empty with stores and restaurants closed for the holiday. I am alone in the quiet, white world. I can hear my feet slapping, muffled, against the concrete. There are patches of ice just below the thin layer of snow, black patches that I dodge,

running across the grassy borders of peoples' yards. Kate is at the apartment, showering after her drive. Mom is laying down. I've run two miles, about half of my route, when my right hand starts to burn with the freezing wind. My left hand, face, body, feet, are all humming and warm, but my right hand, in its glove, is starting to freeze. I clap my hands together as I go, clasp them in mock prayer, blow on my stiff fingers, slap my thighs. I get to Delmar, to the towering menorah, and the pain is making my head buzz. I worry about frostbite. Amputation. Paralysis of the thumb—my hand's most vital member. I run faster, downhill, scouring the ground for hidden patches of ice. I cut my last loop through Clayton short and run toward home. I turn onto our street, run a block, past the tiny, failing bistro on the corner, and hear a honk next to me. "You're almost there!" screams Kyle from the opened car window. "Pick me up!" I yell back, crossing the street toward him. In the car I peel back my glove, afraid of what I will find. A mangled piece of frozen bone and flesh. A blue bird claw covered in ice. Something disgusting and unrecognizable. But it looks normal. "I'm so glad it's red instead of blue," I say. Kyle puts his gloved hand on my bared one and presses down, but the warmth from his glove makes my fingers ache and I wrench it away, hold it against my chest like a wounded wing. We pull up in front of our building and park. "Go inside," I say, "I need a moment to groan alone." He protests, wants to help me defrost, but I prevail. Alone in the car, with Kyle a safe distance up the sidewalk, I start to scream. "Help me! Help me!" I scream to God. I become inarticulate, wail loudly to myself, cry incoherently, with energy, like a kid. As my hand starts to warm, it hurts more,

the blood slowly returning, the skin softening, the bones thawing out. I don't know the medical details, but it hurts worse heating up than it did cold. I kick my feet against the floorboard, hit the window, scream in anger, scream in pain. I overreact. I cry until the tears stop and I'm just making the noises, then I stop. I wiggle my fingers. The pain has passed. There are two men out on the patio in the building just past our car, smoking, their own hands bare. For a minute I care if they saw my hysterics, and then I do not. I put my glove back on and get out of the car, walk carefully across the icy sidewalk, through the snow, inside.

When we were kids my mom made us Cream of Wheat on snow days. Aaron liked his lumpy and I liked mine even, so she made separate batches. When I was in high school, she brought me toast with butter and jam and a cup of hot tea in bed on rare snow days. "I devoted myself to being a mother," she says now, "but not a wife." At sixty my mother is beautiful like Mary Tyler Moore. She is gentler than I am, smarter, more even-tempered. From my earliest memory, I can remember thinking she was the single-most wonderful person in the world. I can trace my own wholeness in crisis, my unshaken sense of identity, back to the kind of mother I had. I wonder now what her life would have been like if she had not married my dad, if she would gone on to graduate school, gotten her masters in sociology, kept painting, moved to Barcelona or Argentina. Years ago, when I was home from college, after my dad lost his temper with her over something trivial, and I made it worse by losing my temper with him, I told her I wished she had married someone nice. "I wouldn't have any of you" she said. I have thought about that moment many times, and think about it now. Thirty

years is a long time to be married to anyone. Probably she will go back to the house soon. The actual affair, my dad says, is long over, although the facts remain hazy. Maybe he will be changed, humbled, softened, broken by these weeks, by his children knowing this other life he's lived, his brothers driving from Indiana and Kentucky to confront him. He may hear from my mom that none of us were surprised, and that may change the way he sees himself. He may emerge a kinder, better man, and we will all be healed. Once we are done silently spinning toward cold, uncertain ends, we may simply stop, sit, and wonder what has happened, before we discover we can start, pull back onto the icy road and begin again.

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Sitting Sheba

The story of my brother goes a long way back, long before my trip through Pennsylvania, through the bright Appalachians and their tunnels. I do not know that there is any earliest memory of Jacob, only a series of moments from childhood, blurred the way all childhood memories are. I remember him standing on the branch of a pine tree, rocking back and forth with one hand on the trunk so that the pine needles fell down over my hair and onto my shoulders. I can remember sailing sticks tagged with ribbon down the gutters of our street during rainstorms, running alongside them until the water swelled and they fell one by one through the storm sewers and out of sight. I could not then feel the rapid movement of that time as it passed swiftly into the present. I was driving into the past as I drove through the mountains, back into the wide Midwest toward Chicago. Jacob's wife of two years had left him the night before and my sister Kate had called around dinnertime to tell me to come home.

We'll be like the Jews, sitting Sheba. I think that's what they call it, when somebody dies and everyone gathers to sit with them for a couple of days.

I don't think that's what they call it, I said.

Anyway, I can't go over there alone, she said.

Same called when I came through Blue Mountain, fifty miles outside of Ohio. He said that the dog was sick on the kitchen floor and to chew ice if I felt myself getting tired. He's read that monks who stayed awake praying and fasting for days at a time would hold sand in their mouths to keep from falling

asleep. Sam taught History at the public high school a few blocks from our house and used stories like this one in his lessons, sure his students would remember them for the rest of their lives. I'd left him sleeping before five o'clock that morning, putting my cheek on his shoulder for a minute, loving the warmth of his skin, the way it stretched smoothly across his back. I drove away from the house, our street quiet and black, and pulled onto the highway when it was still almost empty. I had not been back to Chicago since Jacob's wedding and it was a strange sensation, returning for the end of his marriage just as I had the beginning.

The land grew flat and wide as soon as I drove into Ohio. I stopped for coffee and, because I was alone, sat awhile inside, my eyes closed as I stretched my legs out onto the chair across from me. Sam would have been pressing ahead, counting each stop like a black mark on our final time, and I felt his absence like an old weight that had been lifted. There was a couple at the table next to me with newspapers spread out between them, in the middle of some slow conversation, their eyes on the papers as they talked.

I feel awful, she has so many good qualities, the woman said.

Well that's because you're a good person, you say it because you care, said the man.

I really do care, but ultimately, you know. Really, do you want to take her out?

No, he said quickly and they both laughed.

I love Willie Nelson, said the man, he always takes me to a different place.

Ohio receded into Indiana and then Illinois. I made the drive first at eighteen with my parents, our backseat packed tightly with all of my things. I drove back from college that Christmas, homesick, and again that first summer. I drove back when Katharine had her first baby and her second, Jacob and I going outside to smoke once it was all over and we could take deep breaths and laugh irreverently about the significance of the vent. At Christmas when Katharine's husband was putting the kids to bed and Sam had fallen asleep on the couch, the three of us, Katherine, Jacob and I, would take long walks around the neighborhood, looking through neighbor's lighted windows and casting our judgments.

They have the worst wallpaper. They change it every year and it just gets worse.

It's like they know how bad it is, but can't do any better, Katharine would say.

I think the window is open a crack. They're probably having sex on the living room floor and are now really pissed about what you said, Jacob would reply.

Believe me, Katherine wasn't worried, *they are not.*

Last year I had not gone back, but I knew that our lives, slowly spreading apart, began in the same place, and I could trace my way back as I did now, along I-90 as signs for Chicago began to appear.

I am trying to capture the feeling I had, driving home to Jacob, thinking of him and of what I could say when I pulled up to his house and looked into his face. There was an image in my head as I followed the narrow highway between my street and his that I could not leave behind. It was a picture of him at sixteen, standing on the curb outside school, wearing Katharine's old red backpack across his slumped shoulders. It was the first time I ever noticed how alone he was, the way you notice an old water mark on the ceiling that you have passed under everyday without seeing. At thirteen the sight brought me such pain that I could not go to him, and I waited behind a brick pillar until our mother pulled up.

Canadian Geese were threading their way across Missouri. I could hear their car horn voices when I pulled onto Jacob's street and I knew they were calling from the lake a few blocks from his house where they would be settled, floating evenly along the still water before starting south again. Katharine came to the door and closed it behind her, putting her arms around me and leaning her head against mine. We stood on the concrete stes outside the house, looking one another over, her hands still on my shoulders. I knew every line on her face.

How is he? I asked

I don't know, he's just been sitting in that chair she bought him for Christmas last year, not talking. Do you know what she said to him when she left?

I shook my head.

That she needed to go love herself before she could be loved by anyone else.

Can you really end a marriage because of some meaningless inspirational expressions? I asked and Katharine threw her hands up, agreeing.

Have an affair, that's substantial, I said.

Maybe she'll come back when she realizes she can't love a selfish bitch, Katharine said, and I laughed.

The street was cold and quiet. There was a woman clipping her hedges a few houses down and the sound of the metal blades was quick and clean.

Jacob looked up and smiled when I came in. He looked sad and tired, sitting alone in his chair as if it were keeping him from falling onto the floor.

Jacob, I'm sorry. It's good to see you, I said, and he nodded.

Katharine and I sat on the couch and were quiet for a moment before I aksed about her children and she asked about my classes, both careful not to discuss our husbands, as if we felt guilty for still having them. We sat in front of the TV and did not complain that Jacob was watching a tennis match. After awhile I stood and said I was going to say hi to Mom.

Dad's out of town, Katherine called out, as I shut the door behind me.

At my parents house, a short drive around the lake, to larger, older houses with broad lawns, I let myself in and followed the distant sound of my mother's voice, up the wide, front stairs, past closed doors to her bedroom, where she was already on the phone with Katharine. She hugged me, still nodding her head, the phone balanced between us, let me go and I wandered the

room, looking for changes. My eyes went first to the painting over the bed of a man walking down some back alley at that particular moment of sunset when everything goes rosy orange. I ran my fingers along her desktop, the neat stacks of books, patterned boxes of stationary and rows of watercolor pencils. The room smelled like the bars of lavender soap she tucked into her dresser drawers. As a little girl I had buried my face in the clothes I pulled from these drawers when my parents were overseas. I missed my mother so much that I would lie awake at night picturing her face for fear of forgetting its every detail. I heard the door swing open and turned to see her come in.

I'm sorry, it was Katharine. You look wonderful. Her hair was grey but her face was smooth.

How was the drive? I can't believe you did it alone. How is Sam?

I said that it was all fine and that Sam was well and then we stood for a minute, thinking about Jacob.

How is he? She asked. *He won't talk to me.*

He isn't really talking at all, I said.

Did you know she blamed me? Her voice was quiet.

Sophia? For what, for her leaving?

She said I made things too easy for him, that I did his laundry for too long and that he would always expect too much from women, that I damaged him.

The anger that came so heavily when Katharine called was suddenly overwhelming.

Incredible, I said.

Maybe I was too nurturing. I could have prepared him better for something like this, she said.

Why do we all feel so guilty? I asked. *I can't get over how guilty I feel.*

Guilt is a natural part of being in a family. She put her arm around my shoulders and we walked back out of the room, downstairs, to the front door.

I'll call in the morning, I said.

I walked out into the familiar scene of evening coming over my parent's street. The wide front lawns were soft and grey.

Jacob had fallen asleep on the couch with all the lights on and the TV flickering some late night talk show. I could hear Katharine on the phone upstairs as I tried to move quietly, turning off lamps. I stretched out under a blanket on the floor beside the couch and we slept side by side like we had when, as children, we took sleeping bags to the porch on summer nights.

Katharine woke us both in the morning, banging cabinet doors open and shut, looking for coffee mugs. I could smell waffles and for a minute I felt like I was fifteen again, waking up to any other Saturday.

I didn't know we had flour or eggs, Jacob said, and rolled over. I could just see a few brown curls over the top of his blanket, and his socked feet

coming out at the bottom. In a few minutes Katharine came in and stood over us until we got up slowly and stumbled to the table.

We should do something today, Katharine said, pouring syrup evenly across her plate.

I nodded uncertainly and looked at Jacob, whose mouth was full.

We can walk to the bookstore and get coffee. Katharine was firm, *We need to get out of this house.*

The last time I went up there I saw my third grade teacher, said Jacob.

Mrs. Schoner? I thought of the long vein that ran down her forehead.

No, Mrs. Kreimer, who always said Gesundheit instead of Bless You when someone sneezed. Even when I was ten that annoyed me. I was looking at a magazine a couple of weeks ago and I sneezed and three people said Bless You and one person said Gesundheit. I turned around and there she was.

I think her husband was from Australia, I said, as if it might redeem her.

I think she was an atheist, said Katharine*, and that is why she can't say Bless You.*

Jacob rolled his eyes, first clockwise and then counter clockwise, and I smiled.

He took his plate into the kitchen and walked slowly up the stairs. A minute later we heard the shower water running.

We walked the few blocks that wove through a neighborhood park and ended in a short row of local businesses. We did not see the large sign that read

'Book Signing Today' in the front window, and I pushed through the front door a little hard, so that the leather strap of bells hanging from the doorknob banged wildly against the glass. There was a card table a few feet away with a woman sitting behind it. She was middle-aged and smiling so widely that I could see the clear braces coating her teeth. A sign to her left read:

Susie Lee author of *J'adore Paris, French Kissing and Cuisine*

There was a stack of books in front of her and a pen in her hand. The store was almost empty and I locked eyes with Susie Lee before I could think of a reason to turn and leave. Katharine said something loudly about getting us all a cup of coffee next door while Jacob and I got our copies signed and I could hear him grunt unhappily behind me.

These things make me so nervous, said Susie Lee, finishing my inscription with a flourish and looking back at Jacob expectantly.

When we had paid reluctantly for our books and left the store I opened mine and read the inside cover.

Eat, love, travel!—Susie Lee

What does yours say? I asked

Go fuck yourself. –Susie Lee, read Jacob.

Katharine came out of the coffee shop with three cups balanced in her hands and we all sat on a bench facing the street.

I feel like I am a hundred years old, said Katharine

If you're a hundred then I'm ninety-seven. said Jacob, *and I always said I would kill myself before I turned forty*.

We sat for a long time, drinking our coffee, shoulder to shoulder, Katharine then Jacob then I. I hoped he felt safe sitting between us, as if losing Sophia did not mean losing himself, but I didn't know how he felt. After awhile he stood up and tossed his cup into the trashcan behind us. Katharine looked at me for help but I just shrugged and we all turned to walk back to the house.

Jacob settled into his chair and turned on the TV. Katharine walked toward the kitchen, calling out behind her,

I'm going to do a load of laundry.

We stripped the sheets off of Jacob's bed upstairs and threw them into the washing machine with a load of clothes we found scattered on the floor. Katharine cleaned the bathroom while I vacuumed in the bedroom, and I wondered what we would say if Sophia did come home. I felt suddenly uncomfortable in her house, dusting her bookshelves and wiping her mirrors clean. But I also knew that she would not be coming back. The house had the feeling of being left behind. I thought of Sophia on her wedding day, making her way silently down the aisle to Jacob who waited. Of course when we looked back there were warning signs, certain careless comments she'd made, how quickly they got engaged, how demanding she could be and how Jacob told me, when I asked how his summer had been just after they were married, that their marriage had been, from the first day, hard. But the truth was we all liked her

and felt cast off too when she left Jacob, felt the sudden loss in our own ways as we rearranged ourselves in her absence.

When the house was clean Katharine left for the grocery store. I went upstairs for a hot shower, found the bathroom stripped clean of anything but an old bar of soap and Jacob's razor. No hairdryers, straightening irons, hair products or old tubes of mascara. Not a single bobby pin, of which Sophie used hundreds, fastening her smooth, blonde hair into low buns that left her looking like a swan—unapproachably elegant. In the guest room, where Katharine had set my bags, I dropped my towel, slipped into jeans and a worn-out sweatshirt, shook out my wet hair. I went to the closet and opened the door hoping, I guess, for some sign that Sophie had ever been in the house, that it was not simply a four-bedroom, newly renovated bachelor pad on a quiet street in a family neighborhood. The hangers were bare but on the closet floor was a white, Prada shoebox. Inside, a pair of gold, leather sandals that laced up the ankles with thin straps. They were not my size, her feet longer and narrower than mine, but I took them out of their box and dropped them into my suitcase. Jacob didn't need the reminder that his wife had had impeccable taste, and I'd never gotten a goodbye.

I went downstairs and sat down next to Jacob, putting my head on his shoulder. After a few minutes, he said

I don't even feel angry with her, I just miss her. All I could think when she was packing was how much I would miss her, and couldn't I just hold onto

her to keep her from going. I like our life, our friends, the things we do. I wouldn't know how to start it all over again, what to go on.

I looked into his face with its old lines and dark stubble, and said I was sorry. He put his head on my head and I thought he knew what I meant to say. We could not be chlidren again. We could not be teenagers, coasting down Sherwood hill in Katharine's old green Jeep Cherokee, the sound of the car radio following us in the dark. We could not stop one another from making the mistakes that might define us, from living lives we'd hoped would be better. There were still the autumn leaves and the wet breeze coming in through the open window, the people who came a long way to try to make things right. And when we saw that we could not, we would sit together and pass a few days and hope that if life was not all we had imagined it to be, it could still, in the very end, be good. Katharine came in with grocery bags and we made chicken chili. We drank a bottle of wine and fell asleep still sitting on the couch, waking with cramped backs and necks in the middle of the night and crawling upstairs to sleep late the next morning.

When we were all awake we drank our coffee in silence, and when Sam called I stood up to go. I watched Katharine and Jacob in my rearview mirror until I reached the end of the street and saw them turn from the curb to go back inside. I hoped suddenly and painfully that we would all be alright. I drove through afternoon and evening. Rain fell hard against the windshield coming through Ohio and I pulled off under an overpass until it stopped, watching the blurred brake lights go by. When I got home it was past midnight. The kitchen light had been left on and Sam's papers covered the table, his neat handwriting

covering every line and margin. I made my way up the stairs, stepping over undershirts and running shorts, the remains of his solitary weekend. I would not think of Jacob in his empty house. I would wait until morning to think of him at all, but the ache that came over me when Katharine first called, that had followed all along the road to Chicago and the road back, would stay with me a long time. Sam put out a hand to touch me when I got quietly into bed and I held it a moment before falling asleep.

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Topless Beach

On the road between Miami beach and the big brick house in Cincinnati, Doris Spencer and her mother ran out of radio stations. It was gospel or country from Fort Lauderdale to Daytona and Doris had been singing along, affecting a twang. Next to her, Helen Spencer didn't know how long she could listen to the high, still childlike voice of her daughter or to the stations as they fuzzed and faded into one another every few miles. "Doris", said her mother "I think I might need a break". "From driving?" Doris had not let go of the fantasy she'd begun the trip with, that after a certain period her mother would get so sick of driving that she would say "oh, well" to Doris being thirteen and they would pull off onto the side of the road. They would scoot over each other, changing seats, and Doris would turn the key, check the rearview mirror, then pull carefully back onto the open road. "From this music" her mother answered, and punched the power button with her thumb. Doris put her feet up on the dashboard and made toe prints on the inside of the windshield. She wondered if anything had happened at the swimming pool while she was away.

They'd flown to Miami three days before to spend time with Caroline and, after a visit, to drive her old Chevy Corsica back to Cincinnati because she had a new car. The Corsica was long and pointy, its paint jewel-toned. Doris called it Ruby Red with derision. In Miami she shared Caroline's queen-sized bed, their mother on the fold-out in the living room. Caroline smelled like peppermint shampoo and clicked around the tiled apartment in high heels with quail

feathers on the toes. She called them her house shoes. Caroline pronounced all of her 'A's' short since she'd moved to Miami, now called Mi-ahhh-mi. She called the grocery store 'Pew-blix' instead of 'Puh-blix' just to be funny and the word, so like 'pubic', sent new waves of nausea through silent Doris. Caroline drove them past Madonna's club in South Beach and said she was at a party there over the summer that Puff Daddy came to. "Wow" Doris said, feeling lame. "Puff Daddy" their mother said in a voice that made it clear she didn't know who they were talking about.

In bed that night, Caroline said in a low voice "I've been to a topless beach here. Everybody should experience it once." Doris tried to imagine a beach without bikini tops or one-piece swimsuits. "What was it like?" she asked. "Everybody had fake boobs" Caroline said. Doris didn't know how Caroline could tell. She pictured topless Barbie dolls with their tan, useless breasts. "I don't know why anybody would do that to themselves" Doris said as if she knew, but Caroline was asleep. Caroline was seven years older and the gap felt wider then before now that she was living alone in an exotic city with canals and Cuban sandwich stands. Half of the television channels were in Spanish and everybody Doris saw seemed loose and golden, swinging their arms and flashing toothy smiles. Caroline had her hair highlighted blonde once a month now at the beauty parlor a few blocks from her apartment. "In the North, natural goes" she said earlier, over lunch. "But in Mi-ahh-mi, you work for it."

At a different beach a year earlier. The Spencers were on their last family vacation but they didn't know it at the time. The hotel was low and wide, white

stucco with windows that opened outward and a wide porch that wrapped all the way around. It was set right up against the South Carolinian coastline so that from the pool there was just a short flight of stairs down to the beach. At night a DJ played soft rock songs poolside and Doris's parents slow-danced to Jimmy Buffet with one hand on their drinks, the tiny paper umbrellas drifting back and forth inside their glasses.

Caroline and Doris slipped their shoes off and walked down to the water. From there the music was quieter and the hotel lights cast shadows across the flat beach. Doris was standing with her feet in the water, feeling it come up over her ankles then recede into the darkness, the sand sucking at her heels and toes. She was ten, what her mother called a 'young ten', all bony arms and legs and not yet fascinated by the mysteries of that next world. Caroline beside her began to sway, stretching her arms up above her head and humming along as she danced to the music muffled by the waves. It was a slow, sexy dance and Caroline's shadow was long and slinky behind her, the dance of a woman aware that she is being watched not by one man but by a world of men.

Doris brought one leg up and rested it on the other, bent, stork-like. She put her arms out on either side of her and wiggled them around trying to make the bones move like rubber. She put both feet on the ground and skipped to one side on pointed toes, spun in wide circles with her arms lifted and curved above her head. She tried to spin on one leg, lost her balance, tried again. She took flying leaps away from her sister, arms stretched wide, away down the beach until Caroline, now watching her, called out "Doris!" and she came running back,

breathing hard. Caroline had both hands on her hips, laughing. She put her arm around Doris's waist and squeezed. "You're a dope" she said and they walked back toward the stairs that led to the bright pool deck.

Caroline wore short shorts with high heels wherever they went in Miami, her legs long and tanned and curving where Doris's were straight as sticks. Caroline was a good dancer, it was in the way she walked and the easy way she sang along to the car radio. Doris felt humiliated just thinking about having to dance. Caroline taught her the electric slide when they still lived together at home, their rooms the only two on the third floor. It was hot in the summer, even with the central air going full blast and they brought box fans up from the basement. Caroline used to stand waving her hands in front of both fans while the polish on her fingernails dried, the color "red hot mama". Doris would say "oh yes, that's the one" to whatever Caroline pulled from her closet, leaning back into the pillows on the bed and watching her sister get ready to go out on Friday and Saturday nights. When Caroline was done they would sit side by side at the edge of the bed and watch through the window, down through the full, green Oak branches, down three stories to the driveway below, waiting for Caroline's ride to pull up in front of the house.

Floating on clear plastic rafts in the swimming pool outside of the apartment in Miami, Doris wondered if she should tell Caroline what happened on the last day of school. Their mother was doing laundry inside and it was

comfortable here, just the two of them skimming half-asleep across the lukewarm water. "Caroline" she began. "Mmm?" Caroline turned her head in Doris's direction, eyes closed. "Have you, well" she started again "At home, at the St. Bernard library. I went there sometimes after school when Mom was going to be late." Caroline nodded again and turned her face back toward the sun. "Have you ever seen, you know, a *man*?" Doris emphasized 'man' in a way that made Caroline's head came up off her raft, eyes open. "Doris!" she said. "Doris, have *you*?" Doris knew immediately she had misjudged things. Caroline was looking at her like she'd better say 'no'. "No!" she said. "Not like that, just, at the library one day after school…" she trailed off and wished she were back inside. "Doris, if you are looking up pictures in books that you shouldn't be looking at. There is plenty of time for that later. For God's sake, Doris, you don't even wear a bra yet!" Doris shifted her weight and turned over. Her back was stuck to the hot plastic so the skin burned when she pulled it free. When she was on her stomach she buried her face in her arms. Caroline laughed and kicked her foot across the water, splashing the top of Doris's head. "Jesus, Doris" she said, and went back to sleep.

It was 300 miles just to get out of Florida. Because they got off to a late start with Doris not packing the night before and Caroline wanting to have breakfast at the Bob Evans down the street with only two waitresses and a long line ahead of them, it was almost lunchtime before Ruby Red passed West Palm Beach. They stopped at a barbeque shack off of the highway. Doris ordered a pulled pork sandwich soaked through with sauce and her mother got a baked

potato. It was mid August, hot, the air outside throbbed against the thick line of blacktop. The Corsica's air conditioner was not cold. "It is the exact temperature" said Doris "of your breath after ice-cream. Cooler than usual, but not exactly cold". Outside of Palm Beach they discovered that the car couldn't get over 65 mph without the dashboard rattling like it might split apart along invisible seams. So they kept it right around 60.

Doris's mother loved maps. She loved to take long trips with big atlases, covering several states, turning the oversized pages, tracing her finger along the highways that criss-crossed the country like bright veins. Doris could not read maps at all and was too bored by the idea to learn. She suspected, though, that her mother might not be taking the most direct route—it all seemed a little scenic and with too many fruit stands, peach stands in particular. Her mother loved peaches and stopped every few hours to buy them by the half dozen, running back to the car with a brown paper bag in one hand, waving her keys and saying when she was back inside, "We're going! We're off!" Her mother threw her peach pits out the window and turned the tuning knob on the radio, listening for talk stations. The fact of all these roadside stands seemed, to Doris, a little convenient.

The highway curved along Florida's eastern coastline and from her window Doris could see the tall grass that hid the shore and the flat sheen of sand bars away out on the water. They were quiet inside the car, the dashboard rattling ever so slightly. If they could stay suspended there, Doris thought, with the late afternoon sun making the insides of her eyelids glow rosy pink when she

closed them, if they could draw out that single, soaring moment, she might feel light again.

They spent the night at a hotel in Jacksonville. Helen Spencer was up early the next morning. She bought a newspaper in the hotel lobby, had a Styrofoam cup of coffee with a cheese Danish and took breakfast up to sleeping Doris. Cold blueberry muffins, orange juice and a fruit cup. Doris wore her pajama pants to the car and slept the first hour on the road. There was a pileup coming into Atlanta and they sat in traffic for an hour. Everybody rolled their windows down and a woman up ahead turned her car off and got out to stretch. "Oh Lord" said Doris's mother and they both cranked the skinny knobbed handles at their knees. Doris sat on her feet and put her head out the open window, trying to catch a breeze in the hot, still air. It smelled like gasoline, the end of summer.

The highways were wide going up through the South. The trees were so thick on either side that Doris could barely see through to the southbound lane, and Spanish Moss hung from every branch. "Could anything be nicer than Spanish Moss?" Helen Spencer asked. "I can think of a lot of things" Doris said. "Swimming pools, boat rides, dogs". She liked the gray moss too, though, the way it draped carelessly from the trees but did not fall. The way it blurred every hard line it fell across.

In Tennessee Doris said "Did you know that Knoxville is the Underwear Capital of the World?" "Excuse me?" her mother said. Doris couldn't remember where she'd heard this fact but felt pretty confident it was true. They crossed

into Kentucky around dinner time and it started to rain. Doris suddenly missed Caroline and wished she had tried again to say what she needed to, not in the pool, the pool was not the right time, but in bed that night, in the dark, with the sound of cicadas heavy in their ears.

"Has it been a good summer?" her mother asked. Doris knew suddenly this might be the moment to tell. She could feel it in the blood roaring through her ears and the back of her neck getting damp with pieces of loose hair stuck to it. She felt a little sick and wondered if she would throw up. What it came down to, now that the moment was upon her, was what words she could actually use to tell the event. Could she say, for instance, "In the library, in the children's section, in the seats just behind the B shelves, there was a man in a pair of sweatpants with a slit cut down the front"? Could she, now that the time had come, be so direct? Would her mother say "Well, that's that". Would she be able to hear over the engine and the rattling dashboard, would Doris have to repeat herself? Or would she, and this seemed the most likely, reach a cool hand over and put it on Doris's hot cheek and say in her softest voice "Oh, Doris" and all of the horrible weight of it would be lifted.

"You know Caroline had Mrs. Mitchell for homeroom. You'll have to ask her what to expect" said Helen. They passed a sign for food at the next exit. "How do hamburgers sound?" Helen asked, and Doris knew she could not tell her now. "Fine" she said, and then, because her mother was being so nice, was really always nice, "I would always love a h-ahhh-mburger" and they both laughed.

"Would you rather a h-ahhh-m sandwich?" Doris asked and her mother shook her head, still laughing, and turned off the highway.

It was the last day of sixth grade and Doris was sitting in her favorite chair in the children's section of the library three blocks from her school. The chair had a high back and worn leather seat. Doris could smell the first days of summer even inside the library, the air-conditioning just switched on and the place close to empty even though it was three o'clock on a school day. She was reading a book called *Suddenly Super Rich* about a family who won the lottery. A man with tan arms and dark blue sweatpants on sat down in the chair next to Doris. He sat straight and silent and something about his silence made her think he had fallen asleep. She looked up from her book to see. His eyes were open and fixed on the shelves in front of him, he was very still, but his hand moved in his lap. She could not later say what made her look, only that she thought it was a cane at first held in one hand between his legs. And then it was not a cane at all and Doris was looking back down into the bright, white pages, the lines fuzzed gray and black, illegible. She felt him get up and walk away, watched from the corner of one eye his dark blue pants disappear behind a row of bookshelves. Then her mother was coming down the aisle between the shelves of children's books. "Darling" she said, "the traffic!" She had on sandals with thin leather straps across the toes and around the ankles. Her feet were tan and freckled, stepping lightly across the hard, gray carpet. She came up and put a hand on

Doris's hair, smoothing it between her fingers. Doris felt suddenly sick. "Ready? Do you have all your things?" her mother asked. There was a high, thin buzzing in Doris's ears. She leaned forward, stacked her books one on top of the other and stood. Her mother picked up the purple backpack still on the floor by Doris's chair and put an arm around her daughter's shoulders. "Summertime!" she said as they walked toward the doors.

Doris counted down the last hour of the trip by tens. Fifty-four miles, forty-four miles, thirty-four miles. When they drove under the sign that said *Ohio Welcomes You!* her mother let out a whoop and honked the horn. Doris felt that this was her moment to tell what had happened, that there would never be another moment like this one, that as soon as they pulled onto the long gravel driveway that led to their big brick house with its front windows lit up and her father there, leaning against the wooden doorframe with his arms crossed over his chest, the moment would have passed and would not come again. "Mom" she said. "Mmm?" her mother asked, putting on the blinker to change lanes. The only sound in the car was the click-click-click of the signal. "There was a man in the library with a hole in his pants."

She could remember riding her bike out at dusk that last summer before she turned thirteen, taking the long, narrow road that circled their neighborhood. It was light when she left but by the time she was halfway home again the sky was inky blue and then black so that she could not see past her

bike's front wheel. She was suddenly afraid of the dark but it was too far back to turn around and she did not know which dark she was most afraid of, the dark behind her or that in front of her. She had that sensation now. She thought about Caroline laughing and splashing her in the pool. She thought about the B books and topless beaches. She wanted to finish it now. "He sat down next to me" she said to the click-click-click of the forgotten signal "and showed it to me". She was not relieved the way she had thought she would be. She felt sick all over again and the words were there in the car, their terrible shape filling its cabin. "Doris" her mother said, reaching out to smooth the hair off her forehead with a cool hand. "Doris" she said again.

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