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Attention, Please

Abbey Marie Numedahl

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ATTENTION, PLEASE

by

Abbey Numedahl
Master of Arts, University of North Dakota, 2014

A Thesis

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of the

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for the degree of

Master of Arts

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This thesis, submitted by Abbey Numedahl in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This thesis is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.

Wayne Swisher
Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

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Abbey Numedahl

May 2014

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ABSTRACT

A thesis of short fiction that examines the lives of contemporary American women through five short stories.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The first thing you should know about *Attention, Please*, is that you will probably encounter more than one character who, in a moment of crisis or desperation, thinks that she can absolve herself by sitting you down and telling you her tale of woe, spilling her ever-living guts out.

Consider this your word of warning: my characters are going to be needy. These women (and one man) have made some bad choices, and yet lack the composure to deal with their problems in a healthy, *mator* way. These are characters whose situations and emotional needs dictate an insistence on telling their stories, and they are just desperate enough to tell all. But just because these women (and one man) may seem a little out of their depth, doesn't mean that they are stupid or silly. I work hard to craft characters who are emotionally and intellectually complicated, who are faced with problems large and small, real problems that would stress anyone out, but that especially stress out my protagonists, these people who are self-conscious and scared and sensitive (just so you know, these aren't traits of mine, at all, I just, you know, have friends like that).

How do I create my needy people? I have one word to say and that is "voice." I am more or less obsessed with exploring the effects my narrators' voices have on the filtering of events, memories, and details in a story. My favorite game while I'm working on a story is wandering the aisles of the grocery store or doing laps at the gym and posing questions to myself, like, what

kind of joke would Gina, from “Handspring,” make in this situation, or how would Alex, the narrator of “The Brother,” react to this line of dialogue by her mother? To me, these writing preoccupations are all tied up together, because the emotional fragility of my characters, the very type of people I write, make the biggest impression in their own words. In fact, the use of the character’s voice as a carefully developed element of the story is one of the reasons I feel I am able to communicate this emotional fragility. All of our little vocal stumblings and articulations and habits are what make us human, imperfect, interesting.

Some of my stories are more idiosyncratically “voicey” than others. With stories like “The Brother,” I focused specifically on creating a voice that had energy and life, a voice that would carry the character through the story. As I will discuss shortly, Alex cannot help but interject, constantly, and in her own style, making exclamations like “Well, holy Judas Priest, man” (23). Other stories, like “Swingin’ Party,” employ voice, but perhaps less heavily. The protagonist Quinn’s narration is particular to her but is tempered more because she is telling her story from a point in her adult future: “I haven’t seen Vinnie in what seems like a thousand years, but I heard he was managing a Subway franchise just a few miles from our old school, these days. Subway manager. Famous artist. Freelance canvas-stretcher. None of it mattered, or matters now, at all” (49). I wanted my thesis to include a range of stories with varying stylistic levels of voice. I was hoping to avoid becoming one-note, the “Voice Girl,” even as voice is fairly irresistible, since, for me, it’s the sugar that sweetens story-writing.

Fitting into this discussion of voice is another one of my stylistic interests, which is the workings of humor in fiction. The writer whose work I most try to emulate in terms of the use of humor is George Saunders, whose style instills a sense of vulnerability in characters, and therefore, on readers, too. The story, “A Feminist Reading of the Affair with My Former Best

Friend's Father," reflects this approach. Humor and voice are the places where a character's weaknesses creep in, and this is certainly true for my story's protagonist, Darby. Darby is a graduate student who is in love with (involved romantically and sexually with) the married father of her former best friend. Adding to this is the fact that Darby 1) is trying for feminist authenticity 2) is emotionally damaged and 3) regards herself as unrelentingly "tough." The instances when we laugh with her are those where her emotional maturity reaches its limits. She doesn't know how to relate to her married boyfriend in fundamental ways, so she says and does over-the-top things, like dressing up as a geisha and trying to assume that role for him. Still, I love Darby, and I tried very hard to make the humor in the story create empathy for this character.

I also worked deliberately with humor in "The Brother," which concerns Alex, who is trying to grapple with both the loss of her father from MS, and the fact that she has just learned she has a half-brother, the secret son her father never told her about. "The Brother" was mostly borne as a story because I was playing with voice—the voice of a young woman who was plucky, gloomy, sarcastic, dramatic. I wrote scenes through this voice and questioned this voice. What would scare Alex the most, and how would she react? It was almost as if through exploring *how* she said things, I could figure out *what* the story needed to say. I liked that her swagger guided me to her snap judgment of and patronizing sympathy for her brother, as in her comments here regarding her half-brother's suggestion to meet at the mall food court: "Before the end stages, at least, my dad had style. He loved silk ties and good cuts of meat and Hendrick's gin. Food court? Balls" (19).

But as I explored this humorous voice, with its particularities and idiosyncracies, I realized that Alex would also have to be sensitive and perceptive, and that sensitivity guided me

to her genuine need to create a connection, to be an agent of the good in others' lives. The following passage, where she is reflecting on her shortcomings in developing a relationship with her half-brother, as well as her need to make amends with him, is indicative of this dimension of the character: "But I felt that if I failed at this, I might as well move back to that disgusting co-op house. Let myself rot away there with the carpenter ants and the burnouts and the wannabes, like a tomato that sat on the windowsill for too long. Like I deserved to. Like my dad deserved to. Because it was about all of us now, I thought" (25). Because this girl—her voice—is smart and particular and cutting, she is also sensitive enough to realize her narcissism and to want to strive to be better.

I'm not just interested in humor; I'm interested in dark humor, and with this, I see Grace Paley in particular as another influence on my work. Just as Paley treats humor, I want my humor in my stories to be unsettled, uncomfortable and closely related to the social issues of women: the social constraints placed on women, their objectification and also their personal roles as mothers, wives, lovers, daughters. In her voice-driven stories, like "Goodbye and Good Luck," which explores the romantic life of a woman who had affairs but never married, Paley creates characters whose conflicts often pivot around these social issues. I admire Paley for her ability to develop her conflicts without being didactic; she does this through exploring her characters' everyday concerns, in their voices, and I look to her as a model for handling this subject matter.

When I was writing "A Feminist Reading," I saw Darby as a woman who was concerned with what it means, politically and socially, to be a woman, but who is presented with big-time difficulties in reconciling those concerns with choices that are influenced by her emotional desires and needs, things she can't always silence in the name of feminism.: the little animal

inside her that just wants to be loved, as a woman. This clash of interests is at the center of Darby's internal and external conflict, and it comes to a head towards the end of the story, in a confrontation between Darby and Norman, her married boyfriend: "So I'd say it, I decided. 'You mean to say that if I'm such a feminist, if I'm so rah rah women power rah, why would I be fucking my friend's married father? Good question, Norman. Good fucking question'" (76). This question is eventually answered by Darby herself, silently and reluctantly: "I loved Norman. I actually did. And I wasn't sure if that fact belonged in this feminist reading or not" (77).

Gender roles might be an important concern to my work, but I still don't want to write stories that are overly political or issue-focused. I am more caught up in what it means to be a woman, day-to-day: what are the expectations of being a woman? What about a girlfriend, daughter, wife, mother? How does being women change our options, how we are perceived, how we operate in the world? As women, do we inherently think differently than the "default," than men, or is that a socially constructed idea that we can't help but be forced to grapple with? And women's bodies, just what about women's bodies?

Along these lines, my recent fiction has focused on examining female relationships and how those can define how we treat other women and think of ourselves. I spent my adolescent years, not with a boyfriend, but with my two best girl friends. I still have a handful of best girl friends who I consider to be just as significant as a significant other. I was a member of a competitive women's gymnastics team for eight years and then I was a part of an honest-to-God women's bike gang, and even now, I belong to a women's community support and activism group. All of these relationships are important to me and I am interested in and mystified by female bonds. This interest plays itself out in my fiction, particularly in "Swingin' Party" and "Handspring." Both these stories involve the female protagonists reflecting on formative

relationships with other women; in “Swingin’ Party,” this relationship exists between two sixteen-year old rock-and-rollers, while “Handspring” explores the relationship between a college-aged gymnastics coach and her favorite gymnast.

Reading Mary Gaitskill’s *Bad Behavior* has been an important catalyst for me in contemplating these female relationships, how they can become foundational and exciting and heart-breaking and disappointing, almost blurring the lines of romance and friendship, even if those involved don’t understand those intricacies, exactly. I think especially of Gaitskill’s story “Connection,” which explores the relationship between two women, Susan and Leisha, who are intensely close friends for some time, before breaking apart. Using flashbacks, though always in vivid scenes, Gaitskill, through the narration of Susan, explores what her friendship with Leisha meant (she’s still unclear on that) and what went wrong (selfishness and clashing egos), and it becomes clear that these are the types of relationships with potential to shape and scar the heart. After years of being haunted by their friendship, Susan reunites with Leisha and achieves a small understanding: “She looked at this girl and realized, despite all the falseness and silliness between them, she had cared for her, and been cared for in return” (Gaitskill 103).

I wanted to emulate characters like Gaitskill’s in “Swingin’ Party.” Quinn is on the verge of sexual adulthood, a boundary that Steffi long passed, despite their being the same age, and Quinn is trying to use Steffi as a woman “model” for how to act and think about men and adulthood. They are devoted friends, but there is also a layer of ambiguity about their friendship. In the following passage, Quinn tries to physically emulate Steffi and the way she moves to music: “We practiced in my bedroom some days after school, and Steffi was always better at it. I’d stand beside her, trying to hang my arms like she hung hers, trying to tilt my head like she tilted hers. Practice her look” (46). Quinn wants to be as physically like Steffi as possible

because she sees that as some kind of benchmark of maturity. At the same time, Quinn wants Steffi's acceptance and love. In the following passage, Steffi compliments Quinn: "'They don't really understand me,' she'd said. 'No one really does. Except maybe you, a little bit, Quinnie. Quinn, the artist.' And then she smiled, and I smiled back, blushing. I'd be lying if I said I never cared if Steffi liked me" (51).

I see Quinn, like Gaitskill's characters, as desiring a special sort of respect and affection from her female friend, from Steffi. Like Gaitskill, I am interested in the mystery of these relationships and exploring what is at their core: is it attraction? Is it a search for identity? Or is it, as Gaitskill's character Susan says, a longing simply to be "cared for"?

By now, I've discussed most of the important elements of my fiction—voice, dark humor, women-centered stories—but I would be remiss if I were to leave out the concept of narrative framing. Many of my stories make use of a frame as a means of organizing the narrative and bringing out different elements of the character. I became especially interested in frame stories after studying Chekhov in a Reading-as-Writers graduate seminar where we read some of his "stories within a story," such as "Gooseberries" or "The Man in the Case." In these stories, a narrator in the present moment of the story (the frame) is telling or being told a story. Often the told story causes the narrator to reflect on the present moment of the story, and the two parts, frame and told story, resonate off of one another. Even though my thesis does not include a Chekhov-style narrative frame, *per se*, "A Feminist Reading" does make use of some framing and form-related techniques in the narration of the story, namely the protagonist's reciting of her academic background to make better sense of the events of her life. Early on in the story, Darby sets this up: "I am working on a feminist reading of my affair with Norman. It starts with this: we

both enjoy sex. Social taboos try to make us feel guilt about this, but we are evolved enough to put those aside and enjoy the sex. And that is empowerment” (64). Having this concept in place for Darby’s point of view was both fun and useful because it helped guide her voice and the content of the story, along with giving her an ideological framework to dance in and out of, to fulfill and defy.

Narrative frames are also interesting to me, as a writer, because they allow for character development in a character’s *misdirection*; Darby uses her “feminist reading” as a shield for her own pain and emotional struggles. Chekhov’s framing stories are constructed in a way so that their sense of meaning is based on the reflection the frame provides. This structure is one that I was working with in “A Feminist Reading.” The closest the reader gets to an understanding of Darby is after the main character interactions happen, during her moment of telling.

Another note on my form-related interests: “Swingin’ Party” is a story that, structurally, owes its bones to Alice Munro’s stories that I’ve studied, read, and loved. You never realize how incredible Alice Munro is until you try to write like her. The more that I sat down with a story of hers and tried to replicate it, even in structure, the more that I came to understand how much of a genius she is. In the fall of 2012, I attempted to write a story in response to her “The Progress of Love” as a part of an assignment for that graduate seminar in reading fiction as writers. That story crashed and burned, to put it lightly. By my estimation, Munro deserved that Nobel Prize, and probably a hundred more. The way that she can deftly handle the passage of time is commendable and so delicate. While “Swingin’ Party” doesn’t operate quite on the level of complication and layering of time that Munro achieved in “The Progress of Love”—the flitting through memories of both the story’s mother and daughter, arriving at some meaning for both—I was thinking about Munro’s handling of flashback in my story.

In “The Progress of Love,” the narrator, Phemie, is trying to come to grips with a series of events that reflect upon the shame, anger, and love in her family. The story is told in flashbacks both near, far, and in the middle, which is the narrator’s childhood, where a majority of the consequential action of the story happens. The way that Munro uses these narrative gaps in time to create a layering of meaning, which the character reflects upon in the last pages of the story, is a bit of a miracle.

Even though my character’s narrative arc is structured differently than Munro’s, after playing and working through a number of stories that attempt to use flashback and in-the-present narrative to create the meaning of the story, I feel like I finally managed to make some sense of Munro in “Swingin’ Party.”

In a Munro-esque reflection on her adolescence, Quinn discusses how she was torn between two “mothers” of sorts—her own, who is doting, loving and protective, and Steffi, who is the “mother” trying to usher her into her sexual adulthood. In the story space, Quinn wants to choose safety, childhood, innocence, but it becomes clear through her storytelling that Steffi’s influence has made an indelible mark. I wanted to do this through Quinn’s wishing for impossible reversals, as if a physical reversal would fix the emotional changes she’s experienced: “Back then, I thought that if I could just cover my tracks, if I could just speed backwards down 169, take a left onto the street that led to my street, carry myself into my house and into my bed and into the arms of my mother, then things could be right again” (61).

The ending of this story finds its meaning in the fact that Quinn’s wishes go unanswered. All she can do is numbly sing a song that she and Steffi loved together: “I rode home that night in the front seat of Roel’s boxy, 1980s Volvo, passing city streets lit in blue moonlight, singing to myself, in my head, the only thing I could think of, which was the lyrics to ‘Swingin’ Party.’

If being afraid is a crime, we hang side by side, I sang” (62). I love writing endings more than any other part of a story and as I wrote the stories included in my thesis, I began to discover how I could create more resonant endings, like, this one, where the return of the characters’ favorite song takes on a different shade of meaning.

Another story where the return of earlier story details offers the ending both a circular sense of closure and, I hope, an exciting final moment of character, is “A Feminist Reading.” Two pieces of information are necessary, here, to understand the ending’s resonance: Norman refers to Darby as “Crash” because of her name’s reference to a punk rock star. On the night the two are reunited for the first time since Darby’s childhood, they drunkenly talk philosophy together, and Norman explains the concept of “turtles all the way down” (69). By the story’s end, Darby is feverishly trying to make sense of her feminist reading, but instead of arriving at a conclusion, this is her vision:

“It is turtles, all the way down, Crash. Turtles all the way down. I picture them, the people in my life, like turtles, stacked, one on top of the other. Charlotte, my parents. Joanna. Deborah, for some reason. Norman. Lev. There is always someone else beneath the next person, and I’m there too. Endless.” (82)

While crafting this ending, I was trying to figure out a way to make the parts add up, and the convergence of the turtles motif with the characters who have shaped Darby was one of those thrilling writing moments where the pieces of a story align, where you feel like the story is writing itself.

The last line of the story offers Darby a command, and by this point, I felt I was being commanded, too: “Go, the turtles say. Go, Darby. Go” (82). The greatest joys of writing are the places in a story after you’ve established a character, after you’ve strategized form and managed your influences, after the studying and the plotting. If you’ve done all the rest right, you manage to enter a place where the energy takes you away and the stories achieve their own sort of life,

and you come to follow your characters not where you want them to lead, but where they need to go. If I was lucky, in a few moments in these stories, like my favorite published works, reached this point of liftoff. Perhaps now is the time to let them fly. To say to them, simply, Go. Go, stories, go.

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CHAPTER II
THE BROTHER

I was going to be having lunch with my brother. My brother. *Brother*. I did not have a brother, not that I knew of.

And, then, one day, just like that, I was informed that I did. He was thirty-seven, which made him seventeen whole years older than me.

I'm aware that booting was not really the well-adjusted, adult way to react to this kind of news. The well-adjusted adult way would probably involve some series of "hmms," a few thoughtful questions, and a load of quiet contemplation before revealing to the world any particular reaction at all. But as it is, I'm not known as a particularly well-adjusted girl, and besides, I think I get a sort of pass on this one, as I'm not sure I know anyone else in the world who lost her father and discovered her secret weirdo man-boy brother all in the course of a month. So, ladies and gentlemen of the court, forgive me, if you will.

Seriously, though. It was one week after my dad's funeral. One week of crying, of talking and not talking, thinking and not thinking, that I already would have preferred to spend having all of my facial piercings pulled out and repierced, pulled out and repierced.

My mom decided to unload the joyful news at a dinner we were having with my sister, who spent all day, every day, with her face in her computer, planning her getaway to Peru. She sat about one inch from the screen, like she could somehow force her way directly into the

jungles, and sacred temples, and Alpaca farms. She didn't talk except to explain something else about the trip.

“Oh!” Anna was standing up and carrying her computer blindly into the next room. “Just found a really great price into Cuzco!”

After Anna was gone, Mom started in with the gory details. A long time ago, Dad was different. Before Mom knew him. People make mistakes, Alex. Only human, la la la. Couldn't have the kid, put him up for adoption. On and on and on, even though all I wanted was for her to can it. To top it off, we were eating meatloaf. Meatloaf! It was all too much.

“His name is Dave, David,” she told me as I bit into a soggy cracker chunk. I looked down at the cat serpentining back and forth between my legs. The bird call clock went off. Eastern Meadowlark. Mom was double-mashing her potatoes. She was probably expecting some verbal reaction, but I honestly couldn't think of anything except the acid moving up from my stomach, into my throat, into my mouth.

The ensuing mess was like an act of God. By the power of greyskull! There were like, *babies* floating in baskets down the river of my puke. Discarded shoes and old records and rubber tires. If bad luck comes in threes, then between this disaster and my dad's MS, we only had one more thing coming, right? Sitting there, a tinge of bitter indifference came over me. Why bother? Why bother with any of this? I thought about just letting the mess soak in, about never leaving the table.

“Oh Alex!” My mom had always hated puke. When we were kids she would hover anxiously outside the bathroom door when we had the flu, caught between her concern about our dying or whatever, and being too disgusted to actually look. Now, even though it was clear from her face that she wanted to vom too, she was trying to help me, wipe my face and shirt off.

“I’ll clean it up, I’ll clean it up,” I said. I wonder at what point, with children, a person just decides to wash her hands of the whole thing. I mean, the puke was the least of it, of course. If I were my mom, I probably would have dropped the mic long ago, considering the minor and the new tattoo (“forearm means long sleeves *forever*, Alex”) and that stint I had living in the co-op house, which had been the reason I wasn’t in school anymore and which I had only slowly realized was a sad bung hole of an old Victorian house where kids (who couldn’t keep a job or go a day without smoking loads of dope) lived like they were still teenagers. I was a pain in the ass, for sure. But, I thought, at least I was becoming more self-aware about the fact. That was a step. I didn’t want to burden my mother with my own vomit anymore. That was a step.

“I think you should meet him, just you,” she said, back at the table after we cleaned up, after I brushed my teeth. “He’s been in town since the funeral, and he said he’d like to see you. But, let’s wait a little while to tell Anna.” She was so fumbly, trying to figure out her angle, I could tell.

And yet I knew what she meant about Anna. My sister could never deal with surprise or upset particularly well. If she wasn’t completely ignoring the thing that weirded her out (uh, hello alpaca farm princess!) she was basically bringing the wrath of a thousand suns on her little world. I remember when we threw a surprise Star Wars themed party for her ninth birthday. There were black and gold streamers everywhere, a Death Star piñata, a creepy blow up Jabba the Hut that was as big as one of those freaking yard Santas that light up and wave... the works. When she came into the Pizza Hut that day, we all jumped out at her dressed like ewoks and wookies and jedi and Princesses of Alderaan. She had a *freaking* fit. She screamed, so high and loud, and tore down the streamers, all of them, before proceeding to kick the blow up Jabba the Hut mercilessly, over and over again, tears streaming down her face. She did it long and hard

enough to puncture it, and Mom held her as the rest of us watched the big yellow blob deflating into a puddle of plastic on the floor.

Best to leave Anna out of this, for now. Better if I assessed things, eased her into it.

Mom was still talking.

“He’s very nice, Alex. And he looks just like him, your dad. It’s strange. Of course, David was from...another relationship, but he still looks just like your dad.” She was leaning over the table doing this nervous thing she has where she pulls at the bags under her eyes. Even just a few years ago, she had a really young-looking LL Bean parka model face. Boys in my class in high school, boys who never talked to me, would flirt with her shamelessly in the stands at my drum corps concerts. But lately she just looked like the type of person high school boys would never dare to address as anything but Mrs. Tambor.

I thought about how it must have been a big fat can of snakes for her, too, hearing about her husband’s secret child. Secret man-child. Unless...

“Did you know about him, before, Mom? When we were growing up, did you know about him?”

She stood and paused, her gaze boring through the wood of the table.

“Your dad and I had talked about him before we got married, yes. But David was adopted long before then, even. Your dad was so young. David’s only ten years younger than me! It didn’t seem like something worth telling you.” She had gotten out a new tablecloth, and she put it on like how you put a flat sheet on your bed, letting it billow up, and then fall. I still thought she was graceful. I still wanted to be like her. *Isn’t that weird?* I thought. Still, it didn’t change the fact that I felt lied to, and it definitely didn’t make me any less angry.

“That’s fucked, Mom,” I slumped down in the chair, dramatically, but not. “You guys should have told us.”

I had intended to freeze her out, which was something I was pretty awesome at, in terms of pain- and guilt-inducing tactics, but I had told myself that I was going to act more like an adult. And the more I tried to imagine what it might be like to be her, to be my dad, and maybe even, to be this brother, the more I felt like a scuzzball for beating her up about it all.

“I’ll think about meeting him,” I said, just before slamming my bedroom door behind me.

I wished there was a big stupid Jabba the Hut that I could kick and kick. I wanted to see something go down in a fat pile of plastic.

That night I put on an old Charles Mingus record that had been Dad’s, and I flopped down on my bed and closed my eyes. I was sick of thinking, but that didn’t really matter because my asshole brain decided to think and remember and wonder about things all the same.

At this moment, it decided we were going to think about how, when I was fourteen, Dad took me to see BB King. That dude, BB King, was *old*. He could barely get on and off stage. Honestly, he like, hobbled on like this scary ass mummy come to life, and some lady was carrying his water (he couldn’t even carry his own bottle of *water!*) and it looked like he’d have to stop for a breath halfway across the stage. And then you saw them bring him this blue momma of a Les Paul and he introduced her as Lucille and I wasn’t even sure he’d be able to hold her, much less play her. And I asked my dad, why are we watching this guy? Can he actually play that thing? Do you think he’s even going to be able to sit upright the entire time? I was bored.

And Dad just leaned over and said in my ear, wait. And then he smiled, and patted me on the leg, so calm. Wait and see.

I remember rolling my eyes like, get me out of here. I have rollerblading to do.

At that time, we lived about a mile away from the theater, so I probably could have left, and I really thought about it. I weighed the pros and cons of the effort it'd take to walk, how bored I was already.

But also, I thought about how my dad didn't usually lie. He usually knew exactly what was up, like the right formula to use in pre-Algebra, or whether I should actually be worried about a tornado warning or not.

So I settled down into the seat, folded my arms and tried to get comfortable.

Once BB King was sitting down and all settled with everything, he finally started playing. And at first, I was very doubtful. He seemed kind of weak, like he was playing all of these low notes. I was thinking, great. An hour of this guy playing a few random chords that are so soft they'd put a baby to sleep.

But then, this weird thing happened because he got this look on his face like someone was tickling him under his arms or something. And he started playing this crazy stuff. Deep trills, gorgeous ringing notes. Things that sounded like they came from a hole deep in the earth, blue and green things you never thought could come out of that big, fat guitar. And I remember thinking, no way that guy is eighty or however old they said he was. No way. And I also remember thinking, this might be the weirdest thing I've ever seen. Weird, but all right, I supposed. I looked over and saw my dad smiling like a freaking goon, his head nodding very slightly. And he just seemed like he loved being alive at that moment and it was beautiful, and I could tell about that even though I was a stupid little punk.

Sitting on my bed while "Better Git It in Your Soul" played, I thought about the day I saw BB King and I wondered how I could know which things to wait and see about and which

things I should just walk away from. I didn't imagine there were too many surprises like that, not like BB King. Life, in my experience, pretty much lived up to the predicted benchmark of shitdom. But then again, that was the thing; either way, better or worse, sometimes you just had to wait.

My new brother person wasn't what anyone would consider cool, that part was pretty abundantly clear from the first point of contact.

"Meet me at the Fox Run food court," his text had said the next day when I finally got up the nerve to initiate a meeting.

"No," I said out loud to myself. Huh? Food courts are a no-fly zone for me. And every other self-respecting adult, I had presumed.

I had been warming myself up to the idea of the meeting, to the idea of an older man who would be kind of like my dad in my life, this guy who I'd been told lived in Seattle and who wrote ads and who could probably educate me on good wine and making real-person money and stuff. I was planning to go because I wanted to know someone who lived on the West coast, because I hoped to bum some time on his couch, someday.

But this. It was worse than I'd imagined. Not only Sally-Jessy-situation-awkward, but mouth-breathing, adult-brother-who-eats-at-a-food-court awkward. How could Mom say this guy was like my dad at all? Before the end stages, at least, my dad had style. He loved silk ties and good cuts of meat and Hendrick's gin. Food court? Balls.

"Fine," I wrote David back. On the drive over, I focused on an image of myself living in Seattle, eating sushi with a guitarist who looked like Kurt Cobain, or a Seahawks player, or even just someone with nice eyes who could keep up a conversation about Patti Smith. I pictured

myself with long black gypsy hair flying in the wind, slurping up the mists of Puget Sound from some cafe. I imagined a time I'd finally feel new, the person I'm supposed to feel like, a time when this could all fade very dimly into a sob story I told my hip Seattle friends the moment that I finally decided to trust them, the moment we would all make the decision to do the holidays together, forever, instead of continuing to go home, out of obligation, to our shattered families.

The Fox Run mall. Nowhere in town did I hate more. This might be fitting considering that there were few social situations that I could remember dreading more. I supposed it was better this way, because it wouldn't be like I was tainting something I had always loved.

It kind of reminded me of the day I got the call, the call about my dad finally going. I was staying over at my ex-boyfriend Charlie's. After I hung up the call from my aunt, I guess I was hitting walls, screaming, throwing things. About what you might expect, if you have any expectations, if you ever give any prior consideration to such a thing. I think Charlie actually thought I would hurt myself, somehow, and he was trying to calm me down. He thought music would help, so he turned on the record player and selected a record. Hunky Dory by Bowie.

"Stop! No!" I yelled as the first chords of "Changes" came in. "Don't play anything I love."

I knew it was probably difficult because he didn't have a lot of records I didn't like, which was pretty much the sad pathetic reason we had started this pattern of making out in the first place. But he managed to dig up something, an album from a box he'd inherited from his dad.

So now, and for forever, I associate that clown Tom Jones with that day. "What's New Pussycat." Over and over, Charlie resetting the needle each time.

You're so thrilling
and I'm so willing
to care for you.

So go and make up your cute little pussycat eyes!

It sounded so stupid that even though I was crying so hard that I was completely dehydrated for days, I still laughed. Make up your pussycat eyes?

Naturally, it was holiday shopping time at the mall. Shoot me in the face. Generations of people, united under the mission to buy plastic junk. They had no idea how much they didn't need any of it.

As I stomped the snow off my shoes, I walked past the Laser Tag Arcade and pictured my weirdo old brother chasing after twelve-year-olds in a chest shield and a freaking super hero cape. I choked on a laugh. Sadness.

I found my weirdo old brother in the Taco Bell area of the food court. He wore a "Come to Butthead" shirt. He drank Mountain Dew from a clear plastic 7-11 cup. The only way I recognized him was because, admittedly, he did look just a little like my dad. Just in the eyes. They were green, and pinched, and maybe scared. Then again, maybe just twitchy. He half-waved, apparently incapable of any better social gesture. I put my head down until I reached him.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello, I said.

The water fountain in the center of the mall, a full corridor of storefronts away, thundered in my ears. David munched on those gross cinnamon Styrofoam things that Taco Bell once tried to pass off as dessert at one time, then gave up trying to define.

“Would you like one?”

I shook my head.

A little later, we’d managed to make it through the painful motions of small talk, as well as the clumsiness of finding a way to settle into the cafeteria chairs with food and winter coats and bags. Finally, David and I were staring at each other from across a plate of greasy mall Chinese. He had small, bad teeth. Gollum gollum, I thought. Still, he smiled.

I winced, then tried not to wince, then tried a smile.

“So,” I said, “you live in Seattle? That must be pretty rad, huh?”

“Yes, it’s nice,” he crunched a taco. He nodded thoughtfully, but then all he said next was, “I like it out there.” No follow-up information. I’ve always hated that kind of tease. Dad used to do that.

Once we ran into an old friend of Dad’s at the grocery store who brought up the time when they had gone bed-skiing, before laughing for an entire minute. I asked him later what bed-skiing was, and his only response was a little laugh and two words, “fun stuff”. Fun stuff? It was infuriating. David was infuriating.

But here we were.

“Right, so, what do you do? You see a lot of music? There must be some cool clubs, restaurants. Interesting people?” In my head I considered ways I might duck out of this. Vomit never happens when you need it. This is one of Murphy’s laws, I’m sure of it.

“Actually, what I like to do is more along the lines of sea-kayaking, hiking, riding my bike into the countryside. Walking my dogs around.” He had this awkward middle length of shaggy brown hair and he ran his hand through it over and over as he talked. “Sometimes I do outdoor yoga in the sand dunes at Discovery park! Really makes me feel alive. Any way that I can enjoy nature, that’s my motto.” He chuckled. His rubber shoes squeaked on the linoleum.

That’s not a motto, I thought. Makes you feel alive? I thought. He had a piece of shredded iceberg lettuce on his tooth.

There was a long silence between us, filled again with the sounds of the water fountain, then two children fighting over the toy in a Happy meal.

“Jerk!” The smaller one was whiny. And the “r” sounded like a “w”. Jewk.

We tried to do the getting-to-know-yous. What did he do? Advertising copy. Where did he live? Actually out in Tacoma, not Seattle. Actually with two roommates in an old house, not in a condo by himself, like before. Actually he wasn’t quite sure how much longer he’d be staying in Washington. It was getting expensive everywhere. *Perfect*, I thought. Bye bye, blackbird.

If only I could just get up and leave. But I was stuck in place. I didn’t think I believed in the afterlife but I couldn’t shake it sometimes, the thought that my dad might be watching. Just wait and see.

Nothing is happening, Dad.

I figured that the least I could do now was to make the survival of another few moments together as easy as possible for both of us, to try to make it interesting. So, I asked, was there someone romantic in his life?

“Nope, ha! Nope, not for me.” He shook his head. He made the ha! noise like he just sat on a porcupine. Preposterous. Like I’d just asked him if he’d create ad copy for a vodka enema. Well, holy Judas Priest, man! Excuse me for believing someone might actually love you.

Then, after enough awkward silence passed for me to almost forget the original question, he asked, “How about you?”

I had to think a minute.

“Naw, me neither, too much bullshit. Hah.” Which is what I usually did. Play it off like it wasn’t something I’d wanted, instead of something I was pretty much a big fat failure at doing. Not for lack of trying, of course. I wasn’t quite sure why, yet. Though Michael, and Charlie, and Sam, the three of them would probably have their psycho-babble explanations.

I sat there twirling noodles with my fork and thought about how funny it was. I mean, I almost laughed out loud. It didn’t seem to matter that I was the one who our dad fucking stuck around to raise. No one ever gets enough, do they?

Fifteen minutes later, it seemed we were parting ways. We walked together past the stores, a stupidly odd-looking couple. If I thought about it, we were both kind of freaks. Seriously, if you’d seen us, you’d be like, what is that tattooed punky dark girl doing with that elderly Dungeons and Dragon High Lord? Is he her ward of the state? Is she his?

But that, apparently, was not the perception, because some woman at the Pepperidge Farms stand smiled at us and asked me if my husband and I needed any help selecting gifts for the holidays. She had this scary huge smile, one of those smiles where you were just waiting for her to tilt her head sideways and cackle. Whoa.

“NOT my husband,” was all I could say.

David said, “No, thank you.”

“Well, anyway, I sure hope you two enjoy delicious holiday celebrations with friends and family!” She offered each of us a chunk of summer sausage. She winked and we walked on.

Young girls trolled through the Gap with arms full of clothing, their stressed-out, thin-haired mothers trailing behind. The sporting goods store was nearly bursting with boys and girls trying on hockey gear and jackets and boots, parents saying things like “So, we’re sure about that one? Fits comfy?” Up ahead, I could see the line to pose on Santa’s lap, parents holding little children’s hands and calming them during the long wait in line.

I looked at David walking a few feet in front of me. He must have felt me watching him, because he glanced back. He gave me an awkward, but kind smile.

I got to thinking. I have perfect teeth. Not to be an asshole or anything, but men love my teeth. “You have a beautiful smile, sweetheart,” say the creepy and the normal ones, the old and young ones. Old grandmas even say it in a benign way. “Lovely,” they say. And why? Because my parents worked out a payment plan with the best orthodontist in town. They took their fifteenth anniversary trip to Florida instead of Bali because of the cost of braces and oral surgery and cleanings. My mom was still getting bills. That’s why I didn’t have gnarly, crooked, roddy teeth. That’s why I didn’t have teeth like David’s.

Suddenly, I felt something heavy and horrible eating at my stomach. I had to make it up to him. The bad lunch meeting, the judgment? The things he’d been denied? I didn’t quite know. But I felt that if I failed at this, I might as well move back to that disgusting co-op house. Let myself rot away there with the carpenter ants and the burnouts and the wannabes, like a tomato sitting on the windowsill for too long. Like I deserved to. Like my dad deserved to. Because it was about all of us now, I thought.

We were almost at the mall exit, about to walk out into the freezing lot where we had both parked. David was beginning his good-byes.

“Good to meet you, Alex. Let’s stay in touch, right?” He pursed his mouth seriously and offered a hand to me. He had small hands. Delicate almost. It made me more sad for him, somehow.

People were packing up their babies to face the cold.

“Hold on just a minute, okay David?” I looked around. “Wait,” I told him. Teenagers were running around on cell phones, touring the Arcade like it was a casino. A cute girl laughed.

Then, before I knew what I was saying: “David, do you like Laser Tag?”

He seemed confused. “Sure, I like Laser Tag. *You*, you want to play Laser Tag?”

“Yeah! Why don’t we play a game? I tried to sound really excited, like it was just something I typically did. “Do you have time?”

He looked at his watch, then back at me. He said he had the time.

In the company of a couple of dozen middle school children, we were assigned to the purple team. “Purple power!” I said to David, who made a small, nervous smile.

He knew exactly how to fit the crazy robo-human vest on, showed me how to use the gun. It would be a few minutes until the party playing now finished the game. We sat cross-legged with our backs against the cheap padded walls. The sound of the crowd of children crescendoed and decrescendoed around us.

“Did you do a lot of stuff like this growing up?” I asked him.

He nodded that he did. “I liked running around, when I was a kid. Lots of steam to blow off.” His vest was sliding off and he caught it.

I tried not to think too much about what he might mean by that. The sound of kids talking and laughing and fighting around us got really super loud for a full fifteen seconds. Then everyone shut up. I mean, really shut up. I looked over and saw the television monitor of the game happening inside. Kids were cheering and running out. *Robots vacate*, I thought.

And then, we ran around the Laser Tag arena, because that's what you do. It wasn't really my thing, but that kind of situation gets the blood flowing, I will say that.

And holy shit! David was like a different person in there! Surprisingly, he could run and hide and aim and maneuver. He pulled me out of the path of some kids from the other team, told me to hang tight while he played lookout. I almost couldn't actually believe that it was him. He looked handsome, confident, although still in a kind of wack, honky way. Like Jean Claude Van Damme or something.

Before too long, though, it became clear that we were in his world and not mine, because I started to get pretty weirded out. I almost screamed a blood-curdling scream, like seven times. Someone was always waiting to jump out at you.

The kids on the other team were strategizing like this was a Navy Seals mission or something. Every time I turned around, he disappeared, but I was pretty sure one of them was after me. "You're on that weird-looking girl," I thought I heard someone say. *Get a life*, I thought. Even though another part of me really sincerely hoped they were having fun with this whole thing.

Kids should try to have fun while they can, I thought.

Still. Christ. My heart was beating in my ears like a helicopter. The techno music they played must have been composed to purposely stress people out. Nightmare zone. I froze in the

middle of it all and let the fakey gun hang from the wire attached to the vest. The gun kept banging on my leg as I wandered around. *I am a robot now*, I thought. Better get used to it.

I think David sensed something was wrong because he grabbed me and pulled me behind this barricade thing.

“Why don’t we just take a minute, okay?” He put his hands on my robo-shoulders. I breathed out, one long and loud exhale.

And then, this light hit me in the eye. It flashed me out of the moment. Where was I? I heard my dad in my ear.

Wait. Just wait and see, Alex, he was saying. I wanted him there, to hug me and hold me.

I wanted him there, to punch him and scream at him. He was responsible for all of this, wasn’t he?

I felt like saying something.

“Did you ever meet him when he was alive, David? Did you ever see him?” I saw at least five green lasers lining up in the center of my chest. The light over my heart turned off. *Robot recharging*. I didn’t really care, at this point, that I was killing our Laser Tag stats. I felt my lower lip tremble like a baby.

David looked down for a long time. Then he cleared his throat, and said, “Once.”

“Can I ask when?”

“About five years ago, before his MS got really bad, I’m assuming. He flew out to see me,” David was clicking his gun over and over again, shooting at the ground. At nothing. “He seemed like a good person. I was glad to have met him.” David looked up at me, his eyes shining in the dark. I couldn’t tell if he was crying or not. “I was grateful, Alex.”

When I was younger and I didn't want to cry, I tried to think of cute animals. My favorite animal ever was our fruity awesome dog, Russell. That guy could turn circles like a tango dancer. He'd just keep doing it! Sometimes we had to stop him because we thought he'd make himself freaking ill. But even Russell wasn't quite working for me. Not this time.

“Why aren't you more angry, David?”

He took off his Laser Tag vest and pulled me in. We slid down the wall, into a sitting position, and I just let it out, and he just let me, even though I snotted all over his “Come to Butthead” shirt.

I guess I never had a brother before. Until one day, in a Laser Tag arena, I did.

“I was. I was very angry for a long time, Alex.” But here, in this dumb, plastic place, chaotic with children running around us, he didn't sound angry at all. His voice was calm and sweet, and he wiped my face.

I started to ask him why he was only past-tense angry. What changed? How did he deal? Seriously. But all I could do was look at him and just try to focus on breathing, and by the time I got around to forming words, the moment to ask had passed.

And then, for a long second, for some reason, I had to remind myself that Dad was gone. That he was not here with me in this Laser Tag arena, that he was not waiting for me at home in his recliner, reading the newspaper, that he was not about to return from a fishing trip or even a doctor's appointment or anywhere. Never. And I had decided not to look at him inside the funeral home, which was my last chance, and I'd never be seeing him, ever again. Never.

The vest on the ground was reflecting on David's face, lighting him up all purple and red, all warm like the light of a different star, one where, on all the pretty planets that circled it, life was a dream. Where mothers didn't have to look suddenly old in two years. Where people didn't

have to fight to live with autoimmune disorders that brutalized them, made them angrier, stupider, more broken-bodied, all the time, until they were helpless as babies by age sixty.

But David and I, neither of us lived in that solar system. Not anywhere close. We just had the fucked up one we were born in, where sometimes, we were too scared for one last look. Where we had no choice but to eat Chinese food in a shopping mall and try to run away to Seattle or Peru and to stumble along, our unique griefs shackling us like leg irons.

No choice but to just wait and see. See if it got any better.

And yet, there were still small things. “Jesus, David,” I told him, “I can’t believe how much you look like our dad.”

CHAPTER III

HANDSPRING

Please come back to gymnastics, Annika.

I know it's been a long time. I've finally graduated college, but I haven't stopped coaching. Call it penance or bad luck or just life, but I'm still here, waiting for someone to coach with even half your talent. Please believe me when I say that I still think you could be really good. You are squandering your potential by staying away. It's been six years. You are probably almost fourteen now, and I've tried everything. I've called your parents, I've written friendly, 'we want you back' form letters addressed from the gym, and once, against my better judgment, I even tried to find you at school.

You never knew exactly what was happening with me, that Saturday morning. The thing is, I think you're old enough to understand now, so maybe if I could tell you, you would forgive me, and trust me again, and come back, while there's still time. You could send us both to the Olympics. We could even be friends.

It was a weird year for me, Annika. I was twenty years old, and I was already a head coach, waking up at seven AM on Saturdays to write lesson plans and lead day camps. I started to develop crushes on the fathers of my gymnasts because they were the only men I interacted with about anything but class work. It didn't feel normal, you know? I imagined that all my peers were on benders, smoking pot, having sex, with people their age. I wanted to be doing those things.

See, I wanted to quit, scale back my hours, but you kids wouldn't let me. I would show up two minutes late to start a class, and the little ones would be all over me like a litter of cats, wrapping their little arms around my legs, purring at me. I'd get a substitute so that I could watch my sister's piano recital, and when I came back, my kids would freeze me out for half the class before asking me why I left them with Jennifer. I'm not immune to these things. Children are very delicate, Annika. But so are adults. I've learned that.

You were my favorite, of course. We weren't supposed to have favorites, but as humans, we must judge. When we first met, I saw something in your eyes. A reflection. You were five, but God, were you a brain. I could barely out-logic you into learning tumbling passes, and when I did, I felt like a terrible person. Here I was, studying Philosophy, and you were outwitting me. On top of that, I was still trying to convince you to do things that you knew might hurt you. What sort of ethics was that? That whole idea is cracked.

You were seven when it happened, the last time I saw you, and I knew that you had to learn a back handspring to make it to competitive team. You would tell me every day that you wanted to be on team so badly, that you wanted to go to the big meets, and have your dad and mom and brother see you compete. I don't judge them, but it seemed like an honest enough need. I've seen your dad walk in, his face in his Blackberry. I've seen your mom hurrying you to get dressed while she juggled the baby's things. You would jump up and down as she held the door, as if you were trying to launch yourself into her line of vision. You only wanted them all to see how beautiful you were. I wanted them to see, too. So I was pushing.

It was a week before team tryouts, and I hadn't been able to get you to even try a back handspring. I just wanted you to make the cut, and I knew, *knew*, that you needed that back handspring. You had a flawless floor routine, you were even doing front tucks, front

handsprings, but the back! I think it was the throwing your whole self backwards, into the unknown aspect of things.

It's difficult, Annika, isn't it? You can never really know how it's going to go, taking such a horrible, thrilling leap of faith in yourself, in the things you cannot see or verify. It can be very rewarding or very painful. So sometimes, we opt not to try. I understand.

You and I had been at a stalemate for ten minutes, a long time out on that floor, with the big clock ticking and all the parents and other kids watching us. You would say that you were scared, and why you were scared, and I would tell you how to do it, and we would go back and forth, back and forth. I finally asked you, straight out, what was the worst that could happen?

You said that my arms could miss, that you could land on your head, you could hurt your neck—you didn't know if it would break it, but it would hurt—, you could land on your elbows and maybe dislocate something, you could step back on my ankle wrong, coming out of it. The words were weighted as if you were giving me a lecture, a list of things I'd do to you.

I told you that you had my word, that I'd be spotting you. My hand would be under your back. You might miss, but I'd catch you. I'd landed on my head with a spot. You get a little starry-eyed, but you recover in a second or two. Kid, I told you, you gotta try sometime.

I don't know if it was what I said, or if we just finally came to some nonverbal agreement, but I could sense your reluctant trust as you set up. You shifted your weight a few times, put your arms up, looked back twice. I nodded at you, and you actually pushed off.

You were only about forty-five pounds then, smaller than the others, but there was power in your legs. We'd done drills before, had gone through the checklist over and over. You knew what to do. Keep your arms strong, use your hips, believe in your legs.

There was something innately perfect about how you worked. Like you could calculate trajectory in your head or something, that your long hair flowing behind you in a loop was your plume, and you were some strange, lovely bird or moth-girl. I had this feeling that me spotting you was a complete illusion, only necessary for your brain to know there was something between you and the floor. I had this wild idea that there were tumbling passes latent in your arms and legs that would make us all cry, astound us, if you would only do them.

Time felt slow as I watched it happen. When most girls do back handsprings, they look choppy, harsh. But your hands connected with the floor at an exact right angle. Your back created a beautiful soft arch, which affected me so that I can still recall it in memory today. Your legs sailed over like an act of nature, like humans could really repurposing ourselves for flight.

When you landed safely, your small face was wide with shock. You stood for a moment as if you thought something bad might happen. You looked at me for an explanation.

I told you that you did it. I smiled, offered my hand for a five.

You were so logical and independent, that it surprised me when you threw your bony little arms around me. It was like someone hit me with a stun gun, and for one moment in that steel concrete warehouse, I didn't want to be anywhere else. The rest of the two-hour practice, you made me spot you. You did the handspring over and over again, each time with the same precision.

As you were pulling on your coat to go home, you grinned and looked up at me and told me you couldn't wait to do it again.

I said I was excited for you to come back so we could keep working. I think I said how proud I was of you. Then, I wrote, with motherly pride, 'Annika' on the list for team tryouts. I was going to write up a Star Gymnast card, but that is when the trouble started. I was distracted

because I could hear Jess and all the other college-aged girl coaches over on the tumbling floor, and they were all laughing.

They were being really loud, so I walked over. Their faces were craned up at the enormous industrial fans that circled forty feet off the floor. They were playing this game we'd thought up the Friday before, while we waited to start staff meeting, where we took turns throwing our slide-on sandals at the fans. We always wanted the sandal to hit the fan blade directly, to be propelled sideways, into the foam pit.

The party girls, basically everyone but Bernice and I, were telling their tall tales from the week before. You remember Bernice, right? Well, I had this aversion to Bernice. She was thirty-five, single and overweight, and even outside of teaching class, she said "bumper" instead of "butt." No one normal does that, when they aren't working with the kids, just so you know. She wore Sketchers, she had a roomful of dolls, and she had no issues with the fact that she was coaching gymnastics into middle age. When I looked at her, I thought I knew how Dorian Gray must have felt when he saw that portrait of himself, all gross and aged. I was horrified that she might be me, someday, Annika. I avoided her, but the thing of it is, she *was* me.

Back then, I was just trying to be friends with Jess. Jess was out every night at the DTD house. She was popular, although sometimes I wasn't sure why the directors let her keep her job. You might think the same thing of me, now, but I cared about you guys. I honestly don't believe that Jess cared about anyone. She came into work smelling like vodka. She always had a crier, in every class she taught, and she left the mats in messy piles. I didn't mind her shortcomings, then, though, because I was studying this thing called social capital. Basically, Annika, it means that you can get something from other people, just by being their friend. This might sound bad, but I

thought being Jess's friend would help me meet guys, find my way with people my age. Shitty, right?

No one was even close to hitting the fan in the game today, so I began trying. I drew my arm down to my waist, and let the sandal swing up, hard. I kept my eye on the blade, even after I released the sandal. It floated up into the air next to the fan, and fell back down to the floor. On the next throw, my sandal flew up, in a perfect, straight line. It hit the fan blade. It made a low thud, and dropped down, like a hunted bird, to the in-ground foam pit.

The other girls cheered as I jumped in and fished it out, playing the clown. I waved it around as I pulled myself up to ground-level. We were all impressed to see that the junky plastic strap was broken. I made some big joke about being able to afford another pair on the bullshit money we were paid, though truth be told, Annika, the money was fair. Everyone, except Bernice, laughed. Inside, I could feel the pride starting to bubble in my chest. I liked being laughed at. It was intoxicating.

You'll do a lot of things to get people to like you, Annika.

But then again, maybe you won't, actually. That would be quite cool, if you don't. You don't have to, you know.

The staff meeting started a few minutes later. We were walking through safety tips that day, and I almost couldn't control the zingers that were escaping my mouth. We watched a video called Gym Safety, from the Floor to the Door! Safety Officer Sam was the host. If there had been bushes around, he would have popped out of them. He was always teaching a lesson, and they were numbered like they came out of some biblical rulebook. Rule #5: Always make a child WALK off of the trampoline. Rule #10: Always follow through on a spot. Rule #13: Always make sure the mats line up. No cracks, no whacks!

For the rest of the meeting, as we walked around the gym, inspecting, I played the role of Safety Officer Sam. I pretended to chide Brittany for not screwing her water bottle closed, correctly. I blew a pretend whistle when Amy tripped on a floor beam. The double entendre involving “no cracks, no whacks” was pretty inane, but Jess laughed. I wasn’t thinking about my words, I was just saying things for the laughs.

I don’t think you’ve ever seen this side of me, Annika. Maybe you would tell me if I’m actually being funny or just mean, stupid.

Anyway, at the end of the night, when we were all putting on our jackets to go home, Jess approached me and asked what I was doing that night.

I said I had nothing planned and shrugged. I hadn’t expected this.

She looked around. She didn’t want Bernice to hear, and I knew it because she waited until the heavy glass door shut behind her as she left.

She said that she and a few others were going to a friends’ house. Rugby players. Was I interested? Did I want a ride?

I held back for a moment, composing myself.

Do you ever picture yourself at forty-five, alone and childless, Annika? It’s a terrifying image, but I thought these kinds of social opportunities would save me from that. That fear motivated me, in a serious way.

I told them they could count me in. The house where this party was held was huge and covered in trash. Eight men lived there, and it smelled like sex and cheap cologne.

Jess offered me some kind of Jungle Juice, as it was called, and I took it. One draw from the drink, sugary, and bright purple, and I could tell I was breathing fire. There were raunchy carvings in the wood beams of the ceiling. They really were horrible, Annika. I didn’t want to

think about what they meant, and I'd rather not repeat them here. I can only imagine what Safety Officer Sam would say. Rule #25: Always read the writing on the wall. Avoid jackass emotional idiots, like Rugby players.

Jess began introducing me around to people as "Gina, she's hilarious". At first I shook my head, but then I figured out that people laughed when I made some stupid face to be 'hilarious', so I did. I regret doing those kinds of things, now. Don't play to your social crowd, Annika. Be your sweet, real self, it'll always serve you better.

The night felt so short. I hadn't drunk much in the past, and I hadn't known about the time warp. I don't remember it all, but I know that I drifted from group to group. Inside, outside, upstairs, downstairs. I played the pong game. I saw no fewer than three bedrooms that were identical, with black lights and Jenna Jameson posters and bunk beds.

I watched some girl named Kacee lift her skirt to show her thong. I was sad for her. For some reason, at that moment, I thought of you, and how I hoped you would never do things like that. I hoped you'd always be excited about going to gymnastics meets, and seeing me. I really thought that. I did.

You might think this is a lot to digest already, Annika, but oh, the night went on. By the time it was two AM, the other coaches I had come with had all vanished. I felt so very out of place, so I poured a drink. I started to talk to a dull-looking tall guy named Jason. God, was I loose. I was drinking the bad stuff too fast. If you ever do start partying, stick to beer. Liquor makes you crazy. That's not an always or never rule, just something to think about.

This Jason asked me if I was a freshman.

I told him that I was a sophomore, but added that I had enough credits already to graduate ahead of time, a full semester early.

He mentioned that he was six foot eight. Not a typical height for a Rugby player but he managed. Coach was starting him in the next match.

I drank more. We went through the motions, mostly because I felt like I'd be a failure if I lost this one guy who had shown me interest. We talked majors, where we were both from, our out of school activities. It grossed me out, how interested he was that I was a gymnast, but I had smoked some pot, which I had never done before. It made me quiet and spacey, and I think I smiled, maybe coyly, on accident.

Rule #55: Always use your voice.

I'm not sure how we ended up in his room. All of a sudden, we were there, and he was touching me, rubbing his hand up and down my back, closer to my butt and then up my thigh, and I thought, this is just fine. This is normal and maybe you, Gina, are normal, and won't grow old, alone, with dolls. But his mouth was too big for me. It was like he was eating me whole, his jaw retracted, threatening to swallow me.

Oh, Annika. The rest is foggy.

The next morning, I could taste the weed in my teeth and the booze on my tongue, and I felt awful at Open Gym, holding the hands of little girls while they walked across the beam, watching kids slide down the yellow slide. The whole room spun like after you do an entire pass of cartwheels without focusing on one spot. I couldn't stop crying. My voice broke every time I had to say, Please, slow down.

And then you were there. Your big eyes set in determination, your plume all brushed.

Back handsprings? you asked me, and you made a little jump when you asked.

No, no. I didn't feel like I should spot you, no. I knew I shouldn't.

You were waiting. Every time that I started to do something else, you would hound me.

Now? You asked. Now? Now?

No. No, no.

I just couldn't refuse you all day, telling you no over and over. I should have, but after a battle that lasted twenty minutes, I agreed. Like an idiot, I just agreed. I thought I might be okay. I used to think, back then, that I could will myself to do anything I wanted. Mind over matter. Which isn't true, Annika. There are limits and human error and bad juju and so many little factors.

I don't know if you were tired that morning, too, or if you were just so excited to try and succeed again, so excited about team. I have no idea. But we weren't in our usual synch. You were off and I was off, but really, I was off. I saw flashes of Jason, of me trying to push him off, away. I felt the hollow drum of my stomach churning with hunger and sickness.

There was no setup. You threw yourself and your arms back, hard. I tried to grab you, but I was too late. The drinks and the pot and the jerks made me too late. I panicked when I saw the slow motion video of you, going back. I saw your arms bending, watched as your shoulders betrayed their strength and allowed your whole weight to sink fast, limply, to the floor. I saw your head whipping, your face making deep contact with the ground. The crumpling of your body as it fell through the air, the moment your head snapped back. I knew that you'd at least break your nose, but I told myself no, no, it will be all right. My heart thumped, hard, as if its musculature would save your neck.

You over-rotated bad, Annika, and it was my fault, because you were seven and we usually do a little checklist of things for you to think about before you go for a big, new move, but I was so, so tired and so, so sick and I wasn't inhabiting my head. You lay there, still for a second, like you were dead.

And then, I heard you. You cried out loud and from so far down. I knew we were supposed to let broken children lie there on the ground until a paramedic came, or until they moved on their own. That really is Sam's Rule #3. But I couldn't. I gathered you up in my arms. I think they all thought I was crazy; I didn't care. I kissed you on your long dark hair. I told you I was sorry. I cried like I was the one all mixed up and wounded. I hated myself, and I still hate myself, because you were blameless and hurt, your neck all jammed up and your nose bleeding and broken and your wrists sprained. I did it.

And I knew that you would never trust me again, which I had worked so hard for. And that I would lose you as soon as I let go of your little body that morning. So for just seven more minutes, until they came to check you out, I wasn't letting go.

CHAPTER IV

TWO PEOPLE

We are just two people who look the same. We are identical twins, but we are not, in fact, on the inside, the same. Not even close.

When we were six, our mother dressed us in matching sailor outfits in spring. Round white hats, like cakes, with a blue ribbon hanging down. I hated mine. I remember throwing it from my head onto the ground, grinding it into the cracked mud, tears streaming from my eyes. Grey just stared into space like it didn't matter if he were wearing a gorilla suit. The ribbon flying on the wind, the flap of the shirt placed just so, just like our mom put it on him. One of those kids you could practically pose like a doll. Unshakeable.

This difference became ever more clear when we arrived at high school, where we were first known as The Twins, until eventually, I was only referred to as Grey's Brother. He was a powerful runner. Took first in state when we were Juniors. I guess that was something people cared about. But then there was something else about him, a mysterious something else. And with all that smoke and intangibility came the girls.

Girls. In twelfth grade I went around with a guitar playing George Harrison songs and comparing their girl beauty to a summer's day and murmuring about patriarchy and liberation, always hoping they'd overhear. Things I didn't *not* care about, but things I actively cared about for one reason and one reason only, and that was them. The pert blondes who populated the cheerleading squad. The scary-sexy ones with black-dyed hair who would lie in the grass on the

quad, drawing each other in charcoal lines. Even the Lady Fishers basketball players, with their long legs, their square bodies, their spunky, dirty smiles. Everyone, practically.

If I were being honest with you, I would have given Michelle Richardson my spleen if she ever needed one. Such was my reverence.

But Grey ignored them. And naturally, he had three prom dates, and two of them just walked behind him during the Grand March because he forgot to tell them he was already going with someone, or something like that. He wore a powder blue suit that I heard his date later peeled off in the back of his fifteen-year-old Ford Tempo.

The worst was in college. He would send girls running home. I'd cross them in the hall on the way out, their beautiful pale or Chicano or black faces streaked in tears as they slammed the door of his dorm room. What happened? I would ask him. Just wasn't feeling it, he'd say, his marble gaze focused somewhere out in the middle distance of the window as he squeezed at one of those spring-loaded hand strengtheners. I wondered what he was looking at.

I never sent a girl crying from my dorm room. I don't think I've even sent a girl crying from my car, or my very well-decorated three-bedroom home.

In fact, at this point, at age twenty-nine, I am still begging and begging Desi to stay over every Saturday night, attempting to paw at her clothes, softly, desperately. I remind her, in a gentle voice, baby, you know you don't work early tomorrow?

Desi, the most beautiful woman I've ever met in real life. Her hair is like a bolt of black silk that I dream of draping across my chest. But her loveliness brings with it an opposite and equal amount of suffering, as if they were pairs that could only exist together, like the creatures of the Ark. One lioness, one lion. Splendor and fury. I feel the pain quake in a place somewhere

behind my eyes, which I cannot get at by rubbing or knocking with the butt of my hand or even with the usual prescription strength migraine medicine.

It isn't even about the sex, or at least, not only the sex, but I'd do anything as far as that goes. I would go down on her for hours, days. Happily. I would dress up like a dirty sailor, get a tattoo, sing My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean, every verse. I would wear a bit and beg for carrots and whinny when she spanked me. Whatever she asks.

And all I really want, in the end, doesn't seem like too much to ask for. All I really want is just to hold her head up by the neck. I want to rest it in my hand like a golden goblet, so that I might finally have the chance to stare into her sharp olive face and say, know me. Just try to know me. Please.

But it is the end of the night again, and she is gathering up her keys from her purse, and she is turning to kiss me goodbye, and there's no recourse now. The begging only makes her flee faster. She's standing before me but she is already gone. She is already back in her apartment, taking a bath in candlelight. Without me.

I think of those times in college, about what life as Grey, inside of that identical skin, would be like.

I try it, for a moment, his middle distant stare. I try to fix my eyes on something out past her car as it reverses from the driveway. A pair of rabbits hop across my field of vision. I think of Desi's legs striding to the car, one, then the other, as if her calves were two gorgeous and hardy animals, moving in coordination, in turn.

And then, the pavement is bare. Animals all gone.

I wonder if this is what Grey, inside of that identical skin, sees.

CHAPTER V
SWINGIN' PARTY

When it all happened, we were two high school juniors. 2004. If we weren't at school or at home, you could find us in our usual spot, hard red bleacher seats, numbers 24 and 25, in row G, overlooking the football field and track. We brought Steffi's battery operated CD player up there and listened to music as long as we could over our free hour and after school. Steffi had calculated down to the second how long it would take us to walk from the bleachers to our sixth hour classrooms: "Eight minutes and forty seconds," she'd said.

One day in September, in seats 24 and 25, on a day warm enough to still feel like summer but a day where you could sense the position of the sun changing, fall coming, Steffi made me give her a tattoo using a needle and pen ink.

"You're an artist," she said, as if that were the only real requirement for permanently scarring your best friend.

The tattoo was the words "side by side" snaked around Steffi's ankle, a tiny hangman's noose dangling above it.

"Pierce the skin one eighth of an inch," Steffi said, looking down at her ankle as I pondered how to start. "At least."

The needle was tied up with sewing thread and dipped in Sumi ink. I started with just a couple of pricks, bracing for a scream. Steffi didn't flinch. I thought I might throw up. I didn't

like blood or raw skin or making people hurt, all of which I suppose made me very unpunk. But Steffi had a way of making you do things you didn't want to.

Her new tattoo seemed kind of morbid, but really it was just a Replacements lyric, and honestly, now that I'm thinking about it, it wasn't such a tough lyric, after all: if being afraid is a crime, we'd hang side by side.

"It's about us, our friendship," she said.

The tattoo lasted for about a month, growing scabbier each day. I could see the area getting puffy and infected when we changed for gym. I don't remember now if Steffi ever went to the doctor or not, but I do remember that she blamed me when the tattoo didn't stay.

"Damnit, Quinn," she said, back in seat 25, her seat. "You have to dig the needle deeper."

I shuddered at the idea of a next time.

Back then, we both loved The Replacements, who were in a strange stage in their career, not young and fresh any longer, but not dinosaur-old, either. *Tim* was our favorite. We lived for that album, and spent evenings watching fan shot videos that one of Steffi's ex-boyfriends had collected on a VHS of the band swinging around, playing tunes, destroying their equipment. We wanted moves in case we ever got to a show of theirs, so we studied them like we were on the football team studying plays. The jumping, bouncing. A distance in the eyes. We practiced in my bedroom some days after school, and Steffi was always better at it. I'd stand beside her, trying to hang my arms like she hung hers, trying to tilt my head like she tilted hers. Practice her look. Not just the coordination, but the attitude. Not emotive, but not completely vacant, either.

Just when I thought I was getting it, my mom would knock on the door and offer us cheese puffs or peanut butter sandwiches. I would never admit it to Steffi, or anyone, hardly, but

I always felt a sense of relief at the sight of my mother at the door. I didn't like to be too out of touch with her—on days off from school, I'd even call her in her lab to ask about what I should make for lunch or how I should interpret something a teacher told me. Sometimes, adrift in Steffiland, talking about music and sex in the general sense and about how Steffi would move to Portland in a year, I would develop this weird anxiety, like I was late for a class or something, like I was supposed to be somewhere else, the white rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*. But when Mom popped in, I'd talk to her at my bedroom door, I could feel centered, like I was in the right place again.

I had this fantasy that Steffi would love my mom like I did, like somehow it would be possible for us to become a threesome of best friends who listened to the Replacements *and* played chess. Who watched horror films *and* made apple crisp on a Friday night.

Of course, this would never work. Even when Mom tried to create conversation with Steffi, the countless check-ins and inquiries about how Steffi was, what was new, Steffi just nodded. Looking over at Steffi, I could never quite decide whether I was angry with her for treating my mom this way, or embarrassed because my mom was *trying so hard* with her.

Steffi never picked up on any of this, or at least she didn't let on that she had. Her face never changed. She barely looked up. The pose of the indifferent.

I had never been to a show, at all, which was just one important thing that distinguished Steffi from me. After all, she had attended seventeen shows by the time we met in tenth grade.

If I'm being honest, there were a lot of other differences between us. Actually, there were a lot of differences between Steffi and everyone else. She had a rotating shade of dyed hair (blue around the time of her Replacements tattoo), a nose ring, an eyebrow ring (she had a friend with

piercing needles) and she wore silver space boots, always, even in the fall and spring. But the funniest thing about Steffi: she was actually very beautiful. She tried to hide this with all her modifications, the dying and scarring and piercing, but her beauty still managed to poke through, in small green glimpses. And even though I doubted her claim to having had a scholarship at the Joffrey Academy in Chicago when she was ten, the fact was, there was something graceful about her. The way she walked street dividers with her arms spread like a gliding bird. The even true tone her laugh took on when we were talking to our English teacher, Mr. Gefroh, about Mark Twain. That settled look in her eyes (indifference? boredom? sorrow?) that I noticed when we listened to *Tim* together.

If being wrong's a crime, I'm serving forever, sang Paul.

If being afraid is a crime, we hang side by side, sang Steffi, thousands of miles away from me, from everyone.

Steffi had always insisted that the boys at our school weren't for us. Country boys who fuck their dogs. Shit-for-brains losers. This was her refrain. And then she would spit on the ground, just a little, or maybe she was only pretending.

"But no fear, Quinnie," she'd go on to say, "because I know some who are just right, who are perfect for us." Then, she'd look up from whatever band name or fight-the-power phrase she was doodling on her notebook and pinch my cheek.

"I can't wait," I'd say. What I was not saying, but what Steffi may have suspected, was that there was a boy at school who I didn't think was quite so shit for brains, who I was almost positive did not fuck his dog, and that was Vinnie.

Vinnie had signs all over town proclaiming *V Will Stretch Your Canvas For (Almost) Free!* It was a side business, aside from school, that is, though I doubted he made much money

around St. Peter. I didn't know a single person who needed her canvas stretched, even for (almost) free.

Vinnie was a senior in my sixth-period art class, and I knew he liked me, too. He, the consummate artist, wandered around the studio barefoot, picking out paintbrushes and setting up drawing boards and mixing paints. On one of these days, he stepped up and onto the big utility table where I was sitting. He whistled to himself as if nothing were wrong, walking the length of it before taking one big stride over my drawing.

Another thing: I would catch him drawing me sometimes. Lingering sketches of my face or my back and shoulders. I never said anything when I noticed, I just smiled and turned away. Vinnie was part Iranian, and he had this olive skin and a sharp, big nose. I fantasized about kissing that nose right on its hook. Just a kiss.

I showed Mom a picture of him, and she called him gorgeous. I felt proud to hear that.

Vinnie was dating Gina Hunt, of course. Gina, the senior, the painter, the cool girl with legitimate artist cred and full-on C-cup breasts.

"But that's just a high-school relationship," my mom would say. I didn't really know what she meant by that. Didn't people who met in high school get married every day?

She was right, because I saw Gina and Mike Andersen's wedding announcement years ago in the paper. Clearly things with Vinnie hadn't panned out, and yet I still felt a tingle of jealousy as I looked at Gina's perfect artist face in black and white monoprint. I had this feeling that things just worked out for some people, that some people didn't struggle with things like I did.

I haven't seen Vinnie in what seems like a thousand years, but I heard he was managing a Subway franchise just a few miles from our old school, these days. Subway manager. Famous

artist. Freelance canvas-stretcher. None of it mattered, or matters now, at all. Because even now, I still fall a little bit in love with every hook-nosed man I meet.

A week after Steffi's Sumi ink tattoo, I finally got Steffi to admit that Vinnie was hot. We were back up in the old bleachers, row G, seats 24 and 25. It was fifth period, our mutual free hour, and the sky was a thick cloudy white-gray. It was a very dismissive admission, but still. "Not bad," she's said. "For high school. But that's not that important. No offense." She reached into her backpack, which was a stuffed monkey with a neck that zipped and unzipped.

She looked up, serious-faced while she dug for whatever it was. "We have tickets," she said.

She dropped them in my lap: Written And Directed By, October 6th. The Mallard, Minneapolis.

"I know these guys," she said, grabbing one of the tickets to inspect it again. "Two-piece art rock band. They're pretty decent." She went into how Graham, the guitarist, was *so* beautiful. He and Steffi had even been having semi-phone sex on and off for like, a year. And Roel, the drummer...well, Roel was really cool. And smart, really smart.

"Kind of like Vinnie," Steffi said. "You'll like him."

I'd expected nothing less of Steffi. I felt the excitement bristle through my body, up my arms and over the back of my neck. My first real show, the first one that wasn't just Steffi and me at the VFW or in a church basement, listening to boys who look like they probably get accidental boners in their gym shorts, who overstrummed I-IV-V chords and knocked over microphones that were constantly producing feedback.

“Wow,” I said, probably very high-pitched. “But Minneapolis, Stef? This weekend? How’ll we pull that one off?”

She just squeezed my leg and laughed an over-the-top laugh. “Quit worrying so much, Quinnie,” she said.

Then it was Thursday night, and we were plotting. Steffi lived with her uncle and aunt, for reasons she never really talked about, except to make claims about her wildness, that she and her parents had never really gotten along.

“They don’t really understand me,” she’d said. “No one really does. Except maybe you, a little bit, Quinnie. Quinn, the artist.” And then she smiled, and I smiled back, because I’d be lying if I said I never cared if Steffi liked me. Actually, if I were to be honest, now that I’m older, I lived to impress her.

We chose Steffi’s place because her aunt and uncle were usually gone, getting cocktails with this couple or that couple. I left my bike on the side of the house and let myself in the back, punching five numbers into the security system keypad, numbers I’d known for months.

I can still remember them: 11955.

Inside Steffi was scooping yogurt from a tub that said Supernatural. She was actually very concerned with eating natural, organic, no meat, no booze. I never pointed out to her that Sumi ink was made from vegetable oil soot, and most likely not organic.

Without asking, she placed a clear bowl of white, firm yogurt in front of me.

“Oh, no thanks, dude,” I told her. “I’m not so hungry.” I didn’t want to admit it, but I couldn’t eat the natural, unstrained stuff. My mom usually bought the kind that came in dessert flavors, the kind that made you wonder if it was really healthy or not. This difference probably

had something to do with the reason why I filled in a solid women's size six, and Steffi was more like a two.

"Come on, Quinnie, you should have some," she said. "It's so so good for digestion." She slid the bowl closer to me. "Just eat it!"

So, I ate it.

While I did, Steffi got down to the nitty gritty of our trip, which was two days away, Saturday. She would drive, her uncle didn't care, etc, etc. Everything seemed easy, except: "You'll have to lie to your mom, of course."

I'd known this was coming, but even so, I got an immediate stomach ache.

"Yeah," I said, swallowing. I dinged the bowl with my spoon a couple of times.

"You have to, Quinn," Steffi said, clearly aware of what it meant. "She won't want you in some club in the city with a bunch of weirdos—with me," she added, almost proudly, but I wondered if there wasn't some drop in the tone of her voice. She knew what my mom thought about her, though I'd never said.

I didn't know if I could lie. I had been taught by my mom, and the Catholicism classes she sent me to every Wednesday, that to lie was one of the very worst things a person could do. I had always been transparent with my mother, even when the truth was bad.

The first time I even tried to masturbate, I told her right away the next day, tears in my eyes.

But I thought about all the time I spent in my room, with Steffi or alone, listening to Pavement and Superchunk and Teenage Fanclub. I thought about how I felt when I listened to someone else sing about the same things I experienced: loneliness, disappointment, boredom,

emptiness. I thought about how I felt when I saw Vinnie walking around with his arm around Gina.

“Okay,” I said. “Okay, fine. I should just call now. Better to get it over with, right?”

Steffi nodded. “That’s my girl. You’re staying over at my house. I’m picking you up and dropping you off. Easy.”

I dialed my number on Steffi’s uncle’s phone and closed my eyes as I talked to my mom, as if keeping them open would let her on to a change in me, to the fact that now, her girl was the type to be untruthful to her.

The next day, we were in bleacher seats 24 and 25, row G, painting our nails black for the show.

“How do you know Graham?” I asked. I looked out on the track and saw a few boys in running shorts stretching.

“Friend of a friend, or something,” she said. “He was always around at shows in Chicago.” She blew on her nails for a second. “We slept together, once. You know how *that* goes,” she added, rolling her eyes.

I smeared the nail I was working on. “Damn!” I said. “Oh, okay. Yeah, I know how that goes. Or I assume.” Steffi knew that I hadn’t slept with anyone, but I had let her believe that I had done other things. The reality was that I kissed Joey Berg in ninth grade at a dance and hadn’t really gotten further than that since.

“You’re just picky,” Mom always said. “That’s good.”

I wondered how far I’d be willing to go with Vinnie, given the chance. Pretty far, I thought. If Steffi could do those things...

“Anyway, I think you and Roel would be really cute together,” she said, admiring her fingers. “I know you’re afraid of guys—God, except for Vinnie, apparently—but you shouldn’t be. You’ll like it. I promise.”

I looked out on the cross country boys, who were running now. Travis Abramson was out there, and I remembered the crush I’d had on him in tenth grade. We were in English together, and he had actually read *Julius Caesar*. I tried to picture myself peeling down Travis’s shorts, tried to imagine that I would be happy about what I’d see. But these fantasies were usually short, because I always got to a point where I froze, where I wasn’t sure exactly what to do next, even in my imagination.

By the next day at six PM, we were driving down 169 and listening to *Tim*. Then, an hour later, we were looking out on Seventh Street, at the line outside the venue. I had been to Chicago, Atlanta, Seattle before, but I had never seen people like these. I hadn’t been going to the right places, I realized. Because here, I saw purple-haired girls who wore dresses that looked like they once belonged to stewardesses from the Sixties. Boys had on in black pants tighter than Steffi’s. And other people, there were people who looked in-between in a way that I was shocked to find attractive. There was electricity in the air, everyone talking and smoking and singing and joking. They were all discussing music, all excited about music, and at that moment, I felt there was something to it all, something more than tattoos and piercings and old clothes. I would become one of them, I decided. As soon as I could.

And then we were in, inside the club, and I knew it would be the best night of my life, up until that point. And it was.

And it wasn’t.

The Mallard was all green, lit by a strange combination of fixtures from different eras and made of different materials. The walls were brick and the floor was wood worn down from seven million people stomping, jumping, dancing, and spinning. There was a bar area to the left of the entrance and a sleek red-headed woman was pulling beer from a tap. Huge, distressed mirrors lined the upper walls at ceiling height. Looking up, I tried to find myself in the crowd. There I was, next to Steffi, in a sea of men. There I was, looking like myself, but not—under the same curly hair I’ve had my whole life, there was a bigger body, one that clothes stretched around, pulled at in a way that felt unfamiliar.

Positioned on the edge of the wood standing area, an enormous painted wooden duck the size of a motorcycle was hollowed out and made to house the sound equipment in the round of its body.

“That’s Howard,” Steffi said, noticing me noticing the duck. “I know, he doesn’t look anything like the one from outer space. Someone’s idea of a joke.”

I liked that. It made me feel like I was in on a joke that other people, people who didn’t go to the Mallard and didn’t listen to the Replacements, wouldn’t get.

We posed and took pictures in front of Howard with the disposable camera Steffi had bought at a gas station along the way. I pretended to kiss him, and Steffi wrapped her arms around him, threw her head back. A guy with an enormous tattoo of a naked woman covering his forearm leaned over.

“You really like Howard,” he said, his eyes moving up and down, all over Steffi. He had a shaved head and a long, thick beard. He smelled like armpits and clove cigarettes.

“We sure do,” Steffi said, biting her lip, tilting her head. “Ha, who doesn’t love Howard?”

I didn't like the way she had changed, how her voice had become smaller and higher, talking to this gross stranger. It was like betrayal. Why did she even want to talk to this gross stranger, anyway? I wondered. But I was riding so high, being here, about to listen to a pretty decent art rock band, and then, about to hang out with said band, that I tried not to let the feeling take root. Steffi smiled at me. I smiled back.

The opening band played, and since they were some kind of "*boring* alt-country" as Steffi put it, she pretty much talked through the whole set, telling me about Roel and Graham and how much I would like both of them, how cool it would be if we could hang out with them after their show.

"Almost like hanging out with the Replacements, huh, Quinnie?" she smiled at me, adjusting her bra as she said it.

Then, from a door behind the stage came the band. Graham was tall and thin, and he had greasy dark hair, cut in a perfect chin length Kurt Cobain style. Steffi let out a wail.

"Oh, Jesus," she said, turning to me for a second. "Jesus, right, Quinn?"

"Uh, hey, guys," he said into the microphone, almost fussy. "We're Written and Directed By. We don't sing in this band, so I'm not sure why this fucking thing is up here, except so that I can say hello to you guys. So, hello. That'll be it." He didn't seem very nice to me. He was striking, though, and he wore his guitar high on his torso, a cerebral player, like pictures I'd seen of Paul McCartney.

Roel was, as Steffi had implied, not bowl-you-over attractive. But he was interesting. He wore thick glasses and a western snap-up shirt. His hair was thin, even though he was probably in his early twenties at most, and he seemed to defer to Graham in all ways. He counted down their first song as if hiding behind the drum kit.

I looked over at Steffi. All of the posturing, all of the practicing in my room and posing seemed like it had disappeared. I saw genuine happiness on her face, happiness at being here, doing this. It seemed like after all the time we'd known each other, Steffi was finally, actually, somewhere, instead of nowhere at all. Like she'd let go of something.

And yet there was something about her that was still so different from me. I found both of us in the mirror. Tall, gorgeous Steffi. She seemed to move in slow motion, side-to-side, sensually. As if her clothes would just peel off of her, as if she was made for something my body could never do. It seemed like everyone around her was staring at her, fixed, and I couldn't stop watching her, either. Don't stare, Mom would say. Except, then, I couldn't stop watching people watching her in the mirror. I found my own reflection and I realized that I had started moving with her, trying to move that way. But I couldn't catch the music right. I was always a half a beat behind.

And when Steffi ran to the bathroom, I stood alone, looking around, unsure about what to do with my hands as I stood among everyone else, a crayon-box selection of people in hues I wanted to be. Steffi came back, and her chest bumped up against my back, and I was surprised by how large her breasts felt.

"Hey, babe," she said. She wrapped her arms around me and squeezed one of my hands and we swayed for a minute in a lull in music. Something surged through me, a longing. Not sexual, not exactly, but more like I wanted our two bodies to become one body. That we might combine, and then Steffi could be satisfied and happy, and I could be adult, brave.

After a few minutes, Steffi's apparent favorite song came on, and she kissed me on the cheek before striking out into the crowd again.

The music was *loud* now, Graham's guitar tore through the hot air and the room was so pink and I found that if I threw my head back and just listened, I could find the music with my hips. I wanted to look over at Steffi, to see if she saw me, but I knew that as soon as I did, I would lose this tentative clarity. It was finally like I was in the right place. In the music, a part of the crowd, but separate. I felt arms and legs around me, bumping against me, but they couldn't hold me or move me. I was a woman, alone in a crowd.

I thought about how I'd almost not gone. And why? Because my mother thought it would be dangerous.

Before I even knew what was going on, Written and Directed By finished, played their last note and were putting their instruments away, and Steffi rushed the stage to wrap her arms around Graham. I just stood back in the rushing crowd like a freak, but she called me over to her and introduced us. "We're all old friends. Me and Quinn, and me and you guys." She smiled at Graham, intently. Graham smiled like a lizard, quick and shallow.

"So, what are you guys planning to do after this?" Steffi said. She was acting coy, like she needed to pull down her skirt, but it seemed more like she was just hiking it up, the hemline revealing even more of her long legs.

"Not sure," Graham said. "Packing up the equipment. We need to eat, I guess." He looked over at Roel for some cue.

"Yeah, I could eat. We'll finish later," Roel said, referring to the equipment. "We have until tomorrow."

And that was how I found myself hanging out on a green velvet couch back stage at the Mallard, talking to Roel Pierce, first and only drummer in my life. He fed me beers and I willed

myself not to get drunk. Steffi and Graham sat in opposite chairs, leaning into one another and speaking quiet, spare words, as if Roel and I didn't even exist.

“So, high school, huh?” Roel chuckled and shifted back into the couch. “I think that was two presidents ago for me.” The Steffi response would be to laugh but I just blushed and took a long drag of my beer.

A few awkward seconds passed and then he said, “It’s not a big deal. You don’t have to feel embarrassed. You seem cool, for your age. I was a big dork when I was in high school, ha.”

The Steffi response would be to assure him I was not embarrassed, to make it known that I never was. Instead I said, “Really?” perhaps too eagerly.

Still, he was trying to be nice, and he went into a discussion of his martial arts obsession and then his art classes, and we talked for a long time about drawing, because, as I would realize later, every broke musician is a two-semester art school dropout.

“I like working in charcoal,” he said. “I like smudging.”

I nodded, though I thought that smudging was a really lousy element of drawing to like. I saw it as a weakness, the effect of someone who couldn't actually get the lines right.

He laughed and moved in closer to me, using his free arm to grab a hold of my shoulder. That was nice, I supposed. Except we still felt like friends, even if I could feel the pull of him wanting more. I think I liked that he wanted more.

We talked about music. What had been my favorite show? I said this one, and he smiled because he thought I was placating him, trying to flirt. And then, the Replacements came up. He said that he'd hung out at Paul Westerberg's house once. His house? Or they'd drunk together at a bar? He'd had a conversation with him at least. That I remember.

“What?” I said. “Are you serious? Did you talk to him about his music? What was he like?”

“You don’t talk to someone like him about his own music.” Roel smiled in what felt to me like a fatherly way. “He’d hate that. You just play it cool. He’s a person, too.”

I shrank into the old couch as low as I could. My face got hot. I just wanted to disappear, for Roel to forget about me, rather than remember me as that stupid little girl who fawned over celebrities, who didn’t treat them like “people,” whatever that meant. Looking back on it now, I think Roel sensed this dynamic, because just then, he moved in for a kiss. He grasped my face like a vise, holding me in place. He leaned into me, on top of me, his leg, and I wondered where the guy who seemed to duck behind the drum kit had gone. He kissed hard and I felt the sensitive skin of my face burning already from the roughness of his five o’clock shadow. On my right leg, I felt the rigidity of his hard penis. It made me feel like I was being co-opted into something I hadn’t agreed to. That its presence demanded some outcome or action, on my part. I started to panic, like I almost wanted to scream for help.

I pushed him off me. “I need to use the bathroom,” I said. It came out as a stammer.

I needed to get my bearings, just to sit and breathe for a few seconds. There were people making out in the halls of the Mallard still. The same people who had looked like they held magic as we watched the show together now looked hollow, more shadowy.

I pushed open the swinging entrance marked “hens.”

There was Steffi, on her knees, pinned to a wall in front of Graham, whose pants were unzipped but still up around his waist because they were so tight. Graham had a hand on Steffi’s head, holding it in place, and he was thrusting himself into her face, down her throat, doing it so

hard that her head banged into the graffitied wall behind her, over and over again. Her blue eyes were open and watery. She looked pleading. Not to me, but to Graham. I couldn't tell if she was pleading for him to stop, pleading to him for more, or pleading for some answer I didn't have.

Graham and I met eyes, but he didn't slow down, just tore at Steffi harder, wearing the same imposing look in his eyes that he wore when he was strumming his Epiphone so hard I thought his hands would bleed.

Would Steffi bleed? I wondered.

She already had, I thought. She'd been bleeding ever since I met her.

I felt the tears rolling down my chin before I realized I was crying, and I turned and ran, straight in the other direction. I ran past Roel, out into the street, looking for some cab or bus or way to get out, to get home. I looked around me and Roel was there, asking what was wrong, where I was, what I saw. I was too scared, too embarrassed to tell him the truth.

So I just said, "I need to go home. I need to go home. I need to get back."

And I knew I'd do almost anything to get back. Back then, I thought that if I could just cover my tracks, if I could just speed backwards down 169, take a left onto the street that led to my street, carry myself into my house and into my bed and into the arms of my mother, then things could be right again. Then I could be the girl who always told the truth, again. The girl who didn't witness, or participate in, or even comprehend the pain of others.

I promised I would never think of Vinnie, never dream about Paul Westerberg, never look at a guy, again, ever.

I would even take back the show. The dazzling, bright pink, transcendent show. The best thing that had ever happened to me in my young, stupid life. I would forget about that, forget about music. Forget about love, forget about loving.

And so I rode towards home that night in the front seat of Roel's boxy, 1980s Volvo, pressing myself against the passenger window, feeling the cold of the glass as we passed city streets lit in blue moonlight. I sang to myself, in my head, the only thing I could think of, which was the lyrics to "Swingin' Party".

If being afraid is a crime, we hang side by side, I sang.

CHAPTER VI

A FEMINIST READING OF THE AFFAIR WITH MY FORMER BEST FRIEND'S FATHER

Each day, while reading for my Women's Studies grad seminar, in the blank spaces of some brainy piece of criticism, I begin a list of reasons why I should no longer be involved with Norman. Because I shouldn't. Duh, I shouldn't. But I'm not perfect.

In stacked rows, in the photocopy margins of Judith Butler: his knobby knuckles. The Russian fur hat, worn flaps up, in the cold. The word nuclear, spoken just like W.: noo-kyah-lur.

I don't start with the obvious because the obvious is so obvious I've breezed over it a thousand times, rendering it pointless. Plus that's all, like, you know, social constructions which force on us rigid gender, family and relationship roles through subliminal cultural values and the media. Right?

One really good reason to cut him out that I thought of a few weeks ago is that even though he is *allegedly* the sophisticated older man, Norman eats like a teenage boy. When we order in subs from Moe's, I get half a sub, vegetarian, very light oil. Norman gets two full subs, covered in salami. He drenches them in the spicy Italian oil from the bottle he keeps in his car, "for emergencies," and even though I ask him to wash himself before we make love, he never does. By the end of the night, my breasts are, through no action of my own, covered in red pepper flakes and grease. I should be firmer about that rule.

Another reason for leaving that I've considered, from time to time: he is a pervert. I mean, a true pervert. He is the dad with all kinds of sordid porno mags in a stash in the attic. And

even though you would shudder to picture him in a Victoria's Secret, just by looking at him (heavy graying beard, sometimes navy UNH cap), he has on occasion bought underwear for me and I've never been brave enough to ask him about how it gets all rumped before I've even opened the bag, but I can only surmise it's because he's rubbing the undies all over himself or doing some other freaky ass shit with it. Ew. I mean, kind of hot? For a second? But then again, ew.

And, yes, he *is* old. So old. The fact is that he's the father of my childhood friend Joanna, so, he is literally "old enough to be my father," to drop a phrase commonly used on the Lifetime Network. He has hair fountaining out of his nose and ears. Sometimes if he goes too crazy when we're doing it, he ends up limping out of my apartment.

"Old baseball injury," he'll say, referring to his knee. But I know better. He is old. That is all.

Sometimes, just for practice, or for fun, I do feminist readings of everyday stuff, like Salt 'N Pepa, or the things people say about Hilary Clinton's pant suits. A personal example is my feminist reading of my relationship with my mother. After some contemplation, this reading comes to the conclusion that even though I feel like she is self-involved and crazy, she has helped me grow into my own woman, and allowed me make my own choices, versus certain helicopter parents I know (hello, Deborah, Joanna's mom!).

I am working on a feminist reading of my affair with Norman. It starts with this: we both enjoy sex. Social taboos try to make us feel guilty about this, but we are evolved enough to put this aside for a certain amount of time and enjoy the sex. And that is empowerment.

And if I were to be real, the guilt, our roles, make the sex way hotter. He'd never say so, out loud, but I'm pretty sure he's just into me because I'm *the* sullen, "spank-me-daddy," alt-girl

of our town. Even if he doesn't get the reference, I'm still the only girl named after Darby Crash from the Germs (thanks for doing something right, bonehead parents) that he's ever met, and probably the only one he ever will, because he'll never move out of Dover, not at this point.

And I'd never admit it, because people like my Future Clinical Psychologist Horse's Ass friend, Charlotte, would say, "that's not a healthy reason to be in a relationship," but I like that he isn't always *so* available. I'm at a point in my life when I don't really appreciate a guy tugging on my sleeve constantly. I don't want to know what he had for breakfast or how he feels about this one song he heard today on the radio or the things he wonders when he's taking a dump. No, thank you.

Yes, he is still married to Deborah. Which, of course, feels...strange.

Sometimes, on my way to grad seminar, I see Joanna, his daughter, my old friend, on campus, and I just smile like she is another person, pleasantly on the periphery of my life. Once, when I was eating my lunch in the corner booth of the Student Union, the booth that is awkwardly positioned right behind a pillar, I saw her and Norman sitting down, full Italian subs from Moe's in their hands. There was no fucking way I could bring myself to go up and say hello, so I just sat, hair covering my face, watching. They both laughed the same way, mouths barely smiling, shoulders shaking. I tried to construct their conversation. What's that you're studying again, Joanna? Checked the oil lately, Joanna? Joanna, your mother wants to go out for dinner later in the week. The types of things my dad says to me when we talk, which is once a month, when I call him.

Or maybe he was asking, Joanna, met any nice boys, lately? Any feminist reading worth its salt would consider the possibly patriarchal undercurrents. Because, sometimes, Norman will pose this question to me.

“No,” I say, staring him down. “No nice ones.”

I hate it when he asks that.

But, back to the point. The point, which is that, while creeping on the two of them from afar, I am always forced to stop, because I become distracted by Norman’s smile as he listens to Joanna. Not his haughty and reticent smile, a response to one of my dirty jokes. This is a genuine, lit from within smile. I am always watching for this smile.

Norman and I met again, for the first time since I was eighteen, at Joanna’s college graduation. I had graduated a year before, and I’m pretty sure I got an invite as one of those “we used to be BFFs” gestures that you make when you get older, not really expecting that the other person will actually come. But I was short on money at the time, and I didn’t think I’d ever see Joanna again because she had said she was going to UVM for grad, not sticking around here, like she’d always acted way too good for, and so I thought, Hey, why not swoop in there for some cheese dip and weenies? Or cake? There is always cake at these things.

It is worth noting here, that a feminist reading of my life at this time would also involve Marxist undercurrents, and maybe some Post-Colonial insights sprinkled in, too. I am one-fourth Chippewa, on my mom’s side, after all.

I walked up to the familiar backyard, the same one I remember from when we would choreograph dance routines in middle school. The place was filled with Jo’s new, snobby, sorority bitch friends, along with aunts and uncles and cousins I’d met at previous family functions. I couldn’t believe all of these people were here for her *college* graduation. It seemed a little babyish, like still having a big birthday party once you’ve passed thirty or something.

My parents hadn't even come to the ceremony. "Traffic at that thing is going to be awful," they said.

I said hey to the people I knew, but that took all of three minutes, and Jo was like, all, working the room, as they say, for the cash and gift cards. I noticed Norman was in the background, grilling chicken breasts, so I made my way over to him. He had held up surprisingly well in the looks department. His dark hair and beard were giving way to gray, which I kind of have a "thing" for. Plus, he still had these excitingly blue eyes, and he wasn't entirely beer belly tubby, like my dad, and every other man in Dover, past forty-five, had become.

He wore a Kiss the Cook apron, which was hilarious because he had this look on his face like if you so much as looked in his direction, he would fucking ruin you. I liked that about him. Charlotte, Miss Future Clinical Psychologist Horse's Ass, thinks that I respond to people like Norman so positively because my mom is a cold bitch, and I like the task of trying to make them love me (here she'll say, "See, also: Lev, the Asperger's creature, and Caleb, the coked out jagoff"), but she's so wrong. I just like people who aren't fakey nice. I like people who aren't just easy and stupid. I looked at Norman that day, and I remember thinking, Look at how authentic that prickly bastard is. It's something I have always found cool about him.

Anyway, I started asking him questions about his Civil Engineering work, about Fantasy Football, which I know nothing about ("Does it involve half-naked women playing football? No?"), but I remember him doing every year of our childhood. There were margaritas nearby, which was nice because I felt nervous in a way I hadn't in a long while.

"So, what is it you do now?" his voice was a little deeper than I remembered it being. "You were always so smart, but I wondered, when you girls were going into college, what you planned to do with that."

I laughed a little, adjusted my skirt. “Well, I’m in graduate school. Women’s Studies?” I didn’t mean for it to come out so tentative. “Your next question will be, what can you do with that? To which I would answer, toil in poverty and obscurity for a lifetime.” Then I made a little gun with my hand, pretended to shoot him like pew, pew.

God, real cool, Darby. Luckily, he moved on.

“You’re going to do important things, I can tell.” His eyes seemed to soften for a second. “I love my daughter, but there’s something different about you.” He never said what this meant, and I haven’t gotten up the courage to ask him about it again, though I’ve wondered.

I didn’t know what to say, so I fumbled, stupidly blurted, “There’s something different about *you*,” back, and punched him on the shoulder.

He smiled and raised his glass to this, and we finished our drinks.

The night wore on and we talked and drank Tequila, eventually just taking pulls from the bottle. Jo’s mom was still entertaining a few other stragglers and cleaning up inside. Jo was going in and out, checking in with Norman and me every so often.

“How are you guys?” She had her hair up in the same way she used to do it for dance class. Low bun. “Want more food, Darby? We have a ton.” She held out a tray of some cream cheese roll-up thing.

“We’re good, girl,” I said. I could feel my contacts getting dry from being in too long. “You want to hang with us out here?”

She looked nervous, so I squeezed her free hand, one pulse, and maybe I was just drunk, but for a second I wondered if it felt the way I used to when we’d hold hands as kids, clasped together while we fell asleep at sleepovers. That intense girl energy. The power of woman. The feminist in me would like to think that’s what it was. The girl in me would like to think so, too.

But I couldn't be sure, because after that, she grabbed a rag and started wiping down the table, telling me, no, she should get back inside, but I could stay as long as I wanted, yadda yadda.

And then she went inside and the moon was high and bright and I remember hearing someone singing Fernando by ABBA, through the kitchen window. I remember their dog, Snickers, who had gotten *old*, poor guy, moving from place to place in the backyard, trying to get comfortable.

We had this funny philosophy conversation, the last deliberate words I could remember about the evening.

“So no Heidegger, for you?” Norman asked, smiling real sticky. “What about Joseph Campbell? Or what about turtles, all the way down?”

“No,” I said, “I don't know what that means. Turtles?”

“Turtles,” he said. “The idea comes from an origin story, from the Iroquois tribe. They believed that the earth was flat, and sat on the back of a turtle. That turtle stands on top of another, bigger turtle. And that one, on another turtle. As much as you look for the bottom of the pile, what all of the turtles are standing on, you'll just find more turtles on turtles. It's turtles all the way down. That's what you'll find, Crash Darby. Turtles all the way down. Existential despair.”

“Why do you spend your life timing stop lights?” I asked.

“Turtles, all the way down, Crash.”

And then, memory began to collapse in on itself, for me. I only have this very general sense of sitting at the abandoned glass patio table with Norman in the almost dark, laughing at

some stupid Lit nerd joke I heard as an undergrad. Something about Tequila Mockingbird? I laughed and laughed, and our knees touched under the table, and I can't be sure, but I'm almost sure, he told me I was pretty.

And after that, all I can recall is a montage of trying to walk to my car and my head spinning spinning hurting, already. Skinning my knee on the concrete of the Gevinson's sidewalk. Norman taking a hold of me and putting me in his Land Rover, something by Hall and Oates playing on the radio, and then, to my deep and utter shame, I was liberating all of that tequila all over the tan interior of the passenger side.

The funny thing is, I made peace with the embarrassment because I thought, The chance that I see Norman again is one to a kerbillion. But after that night, maybe by chance, but maybe it was because I was looking for him, I started running into him everywhere. At Starbucks downtown, at the Hannaford grocery. At Fit People gym. Each time we'd meet, I'd apologize to him about puking in his car, and he would laugh, and tell me he expected nothing less of a Crash dummy. We stood closer, and I smelled his spicy, expensive cologne.

And then, one Monday, in my running shoes, I told him to call me sometime. And to my surprise, he did.

Seeing him naked for the first time was not unlike the time that I accidentally walked in on my dad, shaving bottomless, in our downstairs basement. I couldn't tell if it was from arousal or from repulsion, but the sight of Norman, stripped, caused me to momentarily lose my breath.

"Whoa," I said. Fortunately, I think he thought it was because he was well-endowed. But then, after a while, he just became like any boyfriend. He had some moves, just like the movies have you believe about older dudes. The mastery of the angles. A delicate finger touch.

Strong, firm, palm slap. And he always wrapped me in his arms afterwards, and we had some kind of meaningful conversation, and it could be very fulfilling, being with Norman.

“What is the coolest thing you’ve ever seen?” I asked him once, lying on my back next to him. I put a foot in the air and circled it at the ankle, like I was warming up to exercise.

“Crash, what do you mean by, the ‘coolest thing’? I doubt I’ve seen as many cool things as you, Miss Worldly.” He pinched me in the ribs and I jerked. I knew he was just flirting, but the gesture always reminded me that I’d gained weight since he knew me as a kid. He said he didn’t think so, but I knew I had.

So unfeminist, I know.

“Gah!” I rolled over onto him. Hide the belly. “I don’t know. It’s not like, a trick question or anything. Just something cool. Like, for example, mine. Mine is that once, when I was on a trip to Denali.” I put my face right next to his and gave him an exaggerated smile, “that’s in Alaska, you old coot! I saw these dogs lined up in front of a dog sled. They were practicing for the Iditarod. They were so fucking pumped that they were about to run a bunch of miles in the snow that even just standing in a line, they wanted to jump. Like three feet in the air, one by one. All these dogs, jumping like fleas on a tether! Isn’t that cool? Tell me something like that. Something that filled you with wonder.”

He started rubbing my back, in these nice circles. The way my mom used to when I was really young. When she still touched me.

“Hm,” Norman said, making circles. “Well, this may be awkward for you to hear. But I suppose I was filled with wonder when I first held Joanna. She was our first, our only baby, and she had almost died; the umbilical cord was wrapped around her neck. She came out all blue. But the doctor saved her life, reached in and cut her free.” And there it was, the first time I’d seen

that smile, The Smile, in my presence. “I’ve never been so relieved, so shocked dead with joy, to see anything before. It was like holding happiness, personified.” He was stroking his chin hairs, shaking his head, but barely. Slowly. His blue eyes were bright, even in the low light, and he was beautiful. And I wanted to strangle him, or suck him off eighteen times, or maybe both. I didn’t know what to say.

And the fan whirred. Right, to left. Left, to right.

“Wow,” I said, my face burning. “I’ve heard, you know, from people, that having children is really life-changing. I can really only imagine what that’s like. Wow.” I nodded, like three times more than any sane person would need to nod in that situation. I nodded so that I wouldn’t speak the thoughts brewing in my head, thoughts like Congratulations, Joanna, on being such a fucking miracle. Thoughts like, If only Norman had just been present at my birth, maybe we’d have something here.

I started running a finger over his chest, which was surprisingly hard. I moved the finger up, over his clavicle, into the region of his shoulder, which was covered in hair.

“Such hairy man!” I said. “Want me to shave?” I twirled a hair in between my index finger and thumb, then, plucked.

“Ow,” he said. “No. Not unless you want to. Does it bother you?” He pulled me in a little closer with the hand wrapped around my waist.

“No, I don’t care. My opinion doesn’t matter anyway, remember?” I braced myself against him. “Does Deborah care?”

“Deborah? Do you think, after twenty eight years of marriage, Deborah gives a shit about my body hair?” He laughed, a low, incredulous laugh. “No, I could be growing a tail and

Deborah would just roll over and remind me to pay the mortgage.” He leaned in to kiss me, a soft one on the neck. “You’re the only one who notices my body.”

And I remember being surprised by that because I didn’t think men noticed if people noticed their bodies. Still, as a feminist, I saw his point. Everyone, men included, experiences body image pressure.

Look at your own body image issues, I thought. Too-thick hips, tree-trunk legs. Fat breasts, the tits of a girl than men liked to fuck, but not marry. I read that somewhere, a sociological study. Feminine features equal mistress, angular and masculine features equal wife. Remembering this, the feminist Darby and the emotional Darby and the bitchy Darby all chimed in, in unison: What?

Now, when we do see each other, which is usually once every week or so, Norman spends a few hours “late at work” and comes to my one bedroom on Daniel Street and we order disturbing amounts of Chinese takeout or Davanni’s Chicken Parm, and nosh it, camped out in my bed for a while. Occasionally we go out for food. One day, we planned to meet for sushi. My choice, obviously. I hadn’t gotten an e-mail from him in a few days, but the idea was that plans go on unless otherwise stated. I was going to surprise him. I found this bitching kimono, covered in cranes, at a thrift shop in Boston. I even had white kabuki makeup for my face. To transform.

The makeup was cool and thick and it felt at first as if I was coating myself in smooth white mud. I looked in the mirror and saw what looked like a negative photo image of myself. I was there, it was my face, but not. Instead, there was another Darby, and I imagined she had money and willpower and principles. As I collected my purse and keys, the makeup dried, and I worried that it would crack, leaving me halfway covered, halfway exposed.

At Shio, the sushi restaurant I chose because I had a feeling Deborah would never go anywhere near there, I sat up at the bar and ordered a Sapporo and waited. The sushi chefs were flirting with me, making the fish talk and telling me they liked my kimono. I smiled politely, said, Thank you, nodded. I checked my phone. No calls, plus Norman was seven minutes late.

I looked around the restaurant. There were tables filled with other people on dates, a couple with children feeding edamame to their messy baby. The baby chewed a pod for a second, before spitting it out.

I heard him coming before I saw him: the familiar sound of a million keys jangling in his jacket pocket. He looked around, then made eye contact. He had always had this slightly wounded way of walking, his left hip angled down, like a puppet with a broken string. When he reached me he stared, took my face in his hand and turned it to inspect. “What the hell?” he said, “What is that? What are you wearing?”

I laughed a little nervous laugh, leaned in. “I’m your Geisha, Norman.” And then I pushed my chair in, stood up and struck this pose where my arms created a diagonal and the kimono fell in a way so as to emphasize the flight of cranes. I’d seen the move online.

“Geisha, huh.” He smiled a little, trying to be nice. “Interesting.”

My face burned, so hot I worried the mask might run. I’m not an idiot. I know what it means when someone says “interesting,” like that.

However, I wanted to share the research I’d done on Geishas, so I kept going.

“Geishas are not, as it is commonly thought, prostitutes, per se,” I said. I went on to clarify that Geishas were more like artists who celebrate culture and entertain men. I told Norman about how Geishas have a matriarchal social structure, and some have *dannas*, who are their patrons, who they don’t have to be in love with. “But they are, sometimes.” I paused,

pleased with my feminist reading of Geishas. Then I added, “Geishas do what they want. Sound like anyone we know?” And then I winked and tried to do this faux flirty-college-coed face at him, even while I felt the dried paint of the mask cracking.

He laughed. More than a little amused laugh. He put his hand on his stomach, the laugh echoing deep in his chest. “My little feminist,” he said and rubbed my back in a few circles, trying to placate me. “I love that you try to fit your whole world into those terms. It’s admirable. It really is.”

I had wanted him to laugh, but the way he did it made me feel stupid. I wondered if he laughed at Deborah like that.

I doubted it.

“Ok,” I said, drumming a finger on the bartop, even though I could barely control the fine motors of my hand. “Well, I’m going to pick out some food for us.”

“Oh, don’t be sad,” he said. He looked around, then kissed me on my painted forehead. “I can be your *danna*, if you want. Geishas do sound impressive. I will admit.”

I pretended to be deeply immersed in the menu. I couldn’t look up. If I looked up, I was crying. I couldn’t cry. “I know you think it’s dumb, but this really is how I see things. In these terms. Life is about power dynamics. I’m a feminist, so I see those dynamics in terms of sex and gender.” I picked at a laminated menu corner.

“Hey, I think it’s great that you’re so ideologically committed,” he said, and took a drink of my beer. “At least in most parts of your life. Most people are much flightier, Crash. Just do whatever they feel like, no principles. But not you.” He cracked his chopsticks, razed them against one another. I watched bamboo flake off in little splinters.

What did he mean about most parts of my life? “What do you mean about most parts of my life?” I asked.

There was a quiet moment where the little girl nearby babbled “maw maw maw maw” over and over.

“Oh, I don’t know. I was just saying, no one is perfect with that stuff, though you’re pretty good. Don’t read so much into it.”

I couldn’t shake the feeling that he had meant something, that there was some little infectious microbe under the statement. “But you don’t understand. That’s what I do. Read things into it.” My face itched. I was very aware of the mask, of it invading my pores, while threatening to rub off on anything at anytime. “Do you mean Deborah? Do you mean Joanna?” I was staring fully into his eyes now.

He stared back, saying nothing. He was too kind to say the thing that floated between us, the thing that nipped at our heels everywhere we went.

So I’d say it, I decided. “You mean to say that if I’m such a feminist, if I’m so rah rah women power rah, why would I be fucking my friend’s married father? Good question, Norman. Good fucking question.”

I was really crying now, could really feel the mask coming off like a skin exposing a new, rawer layer of flesh. The sushi chef who had made the fish talk looked up from sharpening his knives for a long moment.

“Goddamnit, Crash! I didn’t want to go there tonight. I wanted a nice night. I didn’t mean to pull you back into that. But okay, we’re here now, so yeah, if you have so much goddamn feminist guilt about that, why do it? Why continue to do it?” He was motioning with his hands,

something he only does when he's very upset, something I'd seen him do when Joanna and I came home on our bikes after the sun had set.

I seethed at him, and it wasn't because of what he said, or at least not because of what he was implying about me, but more because of what the answer to his Socratic question really was.

I loved Norman. I actually did. And I wasn't sure if that fact belonged in this feminist reading or not.

Later, at home, when I came out of the bathroom, we were like different creatures. Not people, but something else. The line between arousal and fear was so close. I turned out the light, less scared in the dark for some reason.

"I know what you need," he said, pinning my hands to the wall and then pulling down my kimono.

And then he was moving into me. I threw back my head and he caught it with his right hand. His calloused fingers ran up and down my neck. Then, they stopped there, grasping my throat. Sometimes we'd play a game of trust. He applied pressure to my trachea, held it there. Him, breathing, me, breathless. I counted the seconds. I felt myself falling deeper. And then, after I counted ten, he let up. I gasped, felt myself tearing up.

But maybe he was right about what I needed. Because even with the pain, even with the fear, for a few minutes there, I didn't wonder what the fuck was wrong with me.

He could be tender in the moments after. He would smooth my hair with a hand, kiss me on the cheekbone, whisper trivia about World War II into my ear. He told me about how the man who invented the radio thought he was inventing a death ray to use on the Axis.

And then, it was that time, again. He stepped into his pleated khaki pants, expensive metal pens, and change, and devices for measuring angles all falling out of his pockets.

“When will you be back?” I asked, pulling on my underwear.

He sat next to me on the bed and dragged a finger across my thigh. “The next few weeks are gonna be tough. Family things. I’ll let you know.” He looked at me through the dark, for a second, and then he kissed me, one smack, on the lips.

I didn’t let him out, just listened to the door close behind him from my place on the bed, my back arching up, needing.

Not needing in terms of companionship or validation, I should clarify, in the interest of my feminist reading. Only needing more as a facet of my powerful, and equivalent, female sexual appetite. A healthy needing.

I felt my neck beginning to bruise. I pressed the spot, imagined the purple deepening.

Two weeks passed, and I didn’t hear from Norman.

I caught pneumonia in the meantime, from who the fuck knows where, and I felt like I was in the middle of a terrible transformation into the Toxic Avenger. Poor me. Poor mutilated Melvin. I felt ugly and strange.

I tried to keep moving. I went to class, I shopped for groceries. I did not see him, though I hoped to. I look everywhere—at Fit People, at Shio even. Nothing. No calls. No e-mails.

But I was okay. Because, as the feminist reading of this situation told me, I am capable. I am strong and independent and I do not require the constant presence of a man, of any other people, for my happiness, or even my comfort. I am an island, motherfucker.

On Monday, Charlotte Clinical Psychologist Horse’s Ass stopped by.

“You look like something is wrong,” she said, tearing open a package of cough drops. My lungs tripped into another coughing fit, and it took me a moment to catch a normal breath.

When I did, I said, “Well, I am sick.” I swallowed, trying to soothe my throat. “Duh. But I am not head sick, just lungs sick. Are you going to be a clinical lungologist?”

There was a moment where she stood looking at me.

“Poor Darby,” she said, and gave me tea. “Poor Darby,” she repeated, and smoothed my hair.

We’ve been friends for a long time and I guess she knows me better than anyone and I don’t even need to ask what she’s thinking. I know she just wants to mother me. And I let her. I’ll even admit that it’s nice, until she has to make it to a patient appointment across town, and I am left with not even a faux Psychologist Horse’s Ass mother, but instead, only a pile of cough drops.

Why is everyone always leaving me? asks a little voice down inside of me, a needy little animal that is easy to silence all the other days of the year. Today it is Charlotte who leaves. Weeks ago, Norman. Two years ago, Lev. Since forever, my dad. My mom, who might never have been there.

Why? The voice chirps. Why, why?

Things get worse by Wednesday, so I call my dad. A last ditch for a meds run. I’ll be by as soon as I can, he says. Five.

I do not have cable, so I only have time. I can’t comfortably do my reading, so I think. Time to think equals pneumonia’s gift, I reason. Except my head is so hot I feel like any second

it will go boom, combust, everywhere. My thoughts are weird. My hot head is manufacturing images, weird images that pass before me like a movie.

I picture myself in my sweaty, tangled bed. Just like now, except I am dead. I am so hot hot hot right now that I can't imagine turning blue, but in the dream, I am. I am stiff and still and alone. The sheets decay into me. Dust settles, the air is still. Days, weeks pass, and no one knows. I wear a sexy scary stunning death mask. And of all people, Norman, the one I want to notice, never knows, never sees my sexy mask.

I picture him with his family. Deborah. Joanna. They are in the backyard, drinking cocktails. Joanna makes a joke. Norman laughs. Hahaha. A phone rings. What? Darby? Dead? He hangs up. Joanna is funny, he says. Haha funny. And he puts an arm around Deborah, pulls her in for a kiss. Sun shines on them. He has never kissed me in the sunshine.

My head grows even hotter.

Finally, my dad arrives. Two hours later than he said. I get up, let him in, fall over onto the love seat, into a fetal pose.

He takes a look at me, my scowling, hot face sizzling on fringed pillow. "This isn't just about sick, is it, Dar?" He unwraps the meds, puts them on the end table near me. "I know that look, that slump. This is Lev, or something like that. Lev all over again." He shakes his head.

"I have fucking pneumonia, Dad. And I don't want to talk about it," I try to breathe shallow enough so that I don't start coughing. "We are not talking about it. We are hot."

The anger brings with it a respite of clarity, and then, anger. He didn't even fucking know Lev. Lev was just a different guy. He doesn't get it. He never gets it. How could he, anyway, with head, so far up ass? With head up ass, always?

“All right, fine,” he says. He removes a floppy golf cap from his head, kisses me on the cheek. Déjà vu. He adjusts my legs so he can sit next to me. “You never made it easy on yourself, Dar. Life isn’t always about being lucky.” He sucks at his teeth in the pauses. I hate that.

“Fuck that,” I say. I curl into sweaty fetal position, tighter, away from him. “It is too about being lucky. Besides, you can’t exactly lecture me about choices. You’re a felon.” I glare into space.

“That may be true. But I still know some things you don’t, by virtue of living longer. You may think I’m just some scarecrow, propped up your whole life, but I remember when you were eighteen. I know why you’re still in this town. I know you’re better than that.” The *I knows* are emphasized. So obnoxious.

And I roll my eyes because it’s a line I’ve heard over, so over and over. He’s about to get into how I put off my college applications. The idiot thinks I could have gone to Harvard. Because that’s so easy. People just *mosey* into Harvard. Even girls whose parents’ combined higher education totals one and a half years at Hippie Doofus State College. Even girls who had to drive themselves two hours, alone, to take the SAT.

Girls with nipple rings do not go to Harvard, dear Dad.

“Save it. ‘Propped up’ is not as accurate as ‘lit up.’ Thanks for the meds, thanks for the life lessons, bye.” I look at him, finally, because I want to look through him.

It is much less satisfying than I anticipate. His eyes look old, the dark blue dulled and iridescent, like the cow eyes we dissected in ninth grade Anatomy class. Sad.

“All right,” He stands. “Goodbye, Darby. You’re my daughter, and I love you. I’m sorry. I wish you’d be kinder to yourself.” He throws on his floppy hat, makes his way to, and then out the door. I drag myself up to lock it behind him. Then, without thinking, I open it again.

“I love you, too,” I say, quiet. I’m not sure if he hears or not, because he doesn’t turn around.

Surprise. Dad is gone. I am alone again. I am still hot, delirious. Now, I say to myself, is a great time to work on my feminist reading. Why not start today, those posters tell us. My grad advisor Sharon is always telling me that I am the type of writer who takes a few drafts to make an argument.

“I like it, Darby, but get that thesis!” she’ll say. I like the way she says *get* that. I will, Sharon, I think. So I work, in my head.

This feminist reading is to argue...blank. The meaning of this feminist reading is...blank. The oppressor here is blank. The oppressed here is blank. Blank acts on blank by blank.

I try out a million damn things, but nothing feels logical. Because of pneumonia brain, or because my life is wrong, wrong on all accounts, in all directions, the thesis of this feminist reading might be lost. Hopelessly. Maybe, forever.

It is turtles, all the way down, Crash. Turtles all the way down. I picture them, the people in my life, like turtles, stacked, one on top of the other. Charlotte, my parents. Joanna. Deborah, for some reason. Norman. Lev. There is always someone else beneath the next person, and I’m there too. Endless. My head pounds and I try to breathe, soft and shallow. My temples drip out sweat, and then, strangely, but unsurprisingly, to me, I hear the turtles chanting something. The chant is short and loud. It insists. It repeats.

Go, the turtles say. Go, Darby. Go.