Where You Belong: Stories

by

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FOR THE LIVING

You know it from the doctor’s face before she says a single word. The word for her expression is “exhilaration.” Your sudden resilience has startled her from exhaustion, and this, you know, should make you happy. In the time it takes you to arrange your face, the doctor leaves the room to let you dress. She closes the door firmly, but you hear her whoop of triumph echo through the oncology wing.

Instead of calling your employer and rescinding your resignation, or the real estate agent, or your mother, you rummage in a desk drawer and realize the extent to which you were prepared to leave things unfinished. You’d handled your life—home, work, community—sent them off to go on without you. Some breaks were cleaner than others. The small details, this drawer, for instance, betray your unwillingness to move on.

You find a pink plastic gift certificate, still good, call the number listed there, and schedule an afternoon massage. You listen for signs of distress in your voice and notice nothing remarkable beyond the tendency to uptick your words so that everything sounds like a question, a quality that makes your actual questions sound optional to those in a position to answer them with conclusive medical authority.

When you enter the spa, your scalp is a secret you hide in a scarf. You see the girl at the desk do a double take, then smile. She doesn’t mention it, but you know she thinks she knows. What they don’t know won’t kill you. This is a joke you make to yourself. Remission has revoked your license for gallows humor.
You wait, reminded of other rooms in which you’ve waited. To distract yourself, you fixate on the thinness of the robe, the way it presses against your skin and will leave a crisscrossed pattern against what used to be your ass. The room smells like eucalyptus and you wait for the nausea to rise like an old friend waving hello. Your stomach is calm, sits down, plays dead. Or stops playing dead. Your stomach is flat as the clipboard in your hands. *Do you have chronic pain? Do you take any medications? Do you have any persistent ailments that have been diagnosed by a medical professional?* You check “NO” on all of the boxes.

You do as you are told and press your body to the warm table beneath you. You remember the only other time you received a massage, ten years ago when a girl in your apartment building was in school and needed volunteers. Your hair was long then and she’d arranged it for you in a knot that pulled toward the floor, stretching the skin at the nape of your neck with a good, biting hurt that made you think of pulling taffy.

You close your eyes and breathe. You try to feel quiet and long between the soft sheets. Your breath sticks in your chest. You feel you’re being judged for how well you handle the task of being alive.

The therapist’s hands descend and slide. You gasp and she presses again, whispers once: “Good.” Her small hands articulate the places where the flesh disappeared from your ribcage so quickly you made jokes about your new beauty secret. Your friends didn’t know whether to laugh. You’d laughed enough for everyone, laughed until you coughed. That was when you’d started ignoring messages or calling too late at night,
rambling the things you’d never said out loud until your friends hung up the phone, their sympathies exhausted. You made yourself easy to mourn.

You breathe into the masseuse’s touch, into the strength of her fingers and palms and the weight of her forearms. Your lungs fill and her hands make arcs against your freckles and moles, against the stubborn seal of your skin. Her fingers grasp your shoulders, graze the bandaged, stitched hole where the port was removed. You wait for the question and instead receive another: “Is that pressure okay?”

You arch into her touch and let your body do what it does best. Respond. Surprise you. Submit.

You move beneath her like the live animal you are. She presses both elbows to the slack cords of muscle along your spine and the room closes down around you. You see flashes of color float behind your closed eyes and wonder if this is what it feels like to die.

You realize you don’t know her name, this woman pressing her flesh against your own. It seems right this way. You passed from the living towards the dead with strangers. With a stranger, you’ll come back the way you went.

A cellphone rings. You say “sorry” when she curses, as if it’s your fault. The ring pinballs off the walls and your still body. You admire the noise, the way it persists and reminds you of the smallness of this room. Echolocation, you think. What dolphins do. Last summer on the day the doctor told you, you drove home and listened to a news story
about the hundreds of dolphins found dead on the coast. You’d cried in the car, picturing the dividing cells in your body spreading like black oil.

The masseuse stumbles in the dark, curses again, and then it is silent. You think about clearing your throat. What you do instead is hunch your elbows beneath your body and curl your chin into your chest. You wait balled beneath the sheet and think how strange to be suddenly struck like this: your eyes brined; your flesh oil slick from a stranger’s hands. Your heart is a sinewy muscle in an ocean of blood; your heart is a chamber of empty rooms. You lay stuck, stilled. Flooded by a surge of feeling for those dolphins who didn’t wash up on shore, for the living creatures left to carry on.
Jenny won the Edenfest tickets from a radio show, but Troy, Darla’s ex, said Jenny couldn’t go. Jenny was 14 now, but she still acted like a baby sometimes, howled and hit the wall with her balled up fists. Troy was better at cooling her off, even now that Darla was sober. Especially now. Darla was afraid of Jenny’s grown up body and her baby emotions. She didn’t like thinking about what Jenny might drive her to if she was the one tasked with getting Jenny to chill the fuck out and stop all the noise. Darla just wanted to give Jenny good things in life, without all the tantrum and hassle.

Darla sat at the kitchen table making chitchat with Troy’s new girlfriend while Troy talked Jenny down in the living room. Darla drained the coffee in her cup and poured another. Troy’s new girl was pretty, but Darla could see that the way she pinched her eyebrows together was going to catch up with her in a few years. She was from Cleveland and she and Troy were headed that way to visit with her family for the weekend while Darla stayed at Troy’s place and watched Jenny. Troy was probably going to marry this Cleveland girl, and soon; Darla had very little to say about the matter. She had made peace with it, as long as she still got to see Jenny. She deserved time with their daughter, too. She’d quit the bar job over a year ago, and was ready to show them all that she was serious about the changes she’d made. And was still making.

Jenny howled from the other room and Troy’s girl covered her ears with her manicured fingers. Darla went towards the sound.
“Hey, guys.” She stood in the doorway and kept her voice soft, too soft. She cleared her throat and tried again, but Jenny went right on howling. Darla reached out and swatted Troy on the arm.

“Jesus!” Troy spun around. He often gave her this look, like he was surprised to see her, even now, after 17 straight weekends in a row, drinking coffee and listening to Jenny play mixtapes while Troy got himself a little date night. “You see we’re in the middle of something?”

Darla was grateful to Troy for letting her back into their lives, but she couldn’t abide being treated like another child. Darla straightened her shoulders and looked at her daughter. “I think a music festival sounds fun. You really want to go?”

Jenny looked at Darla for the first time that morning. Her brown eyes were puffy and red, her hair long and wild. She looked like a mermaid someone had dragged up from the sea. “YES I WANT TO GO!”

Darla held Troy’s wrist and spoke to him beneath the sound of Jenny’s fresh howl. “You hear me now, I can take her.”

“Oh no—”

“YES!” Jenny screamed.


Troy opened his mouth to say no, just as his girl walked into the room.

She rolled her little suitcase behind her. “We about ready, babe?”

“BABE IS A PIG’S NAME!” Jenny shouted. “I TOLD YOU! I SAID DON’T CALL HIM THAT!” She threw herself onto the couch and sobbed into the cushions.
Troy’s girlfriend blinked like she’d been squirted with water.

“It’s off the table,” Tory said. “Just look,” he said. “Just look at her when she gets going.”

“Third person talk is RUDE, Daddy!” Jenny moaned into the cushions.

Darla shifted to face Troy’s girl. “You two could use a weekend alone,” she said. “I know you could.”

“You are the sweetest thing. Troy, isn’t she? Isn’t Darla the best?” She moved towards Troy and curled herself around him.

Darla crossed the room to where Jenny lay and picked up her daughter’s Walkman from the coffee table. She placed it beside Jenny and resisted the urge to touch her daughter’s head, to settle the headphones against her flushed ears. Jenny kept her face in the cushion, but sent an exploratory hand towards the Walkman, picking it up blindly and clicking it on. Tinny rock music buzzed in the silent room. Jenny’s breathing slowed, her sobs bottoming out into little hiccups.

Darla stood and held Troy’s gaze. His big plumber’s body was draped in his girl’s long limbs. Troy was ready to trust her to stay the weekend with Jenny, and Darla could see it on his face that he wanted to trust her with this, too. Darla liked that version of Troy best, had embraced it every night the summer they both turned 19.

Troy’s girl whispered something Darla couldn’t hear, then rolled out of the room.

“So?” Darla heard the front door open.

Troy crossed his arms. “It’s not Jenny I’m worried about.”

Darla’s cheeks burned. She wanted to call him on that, remind him of how easy it had been for him to not worry about her for so many years, only to spend too much time
worrying about her now. She was finally doing alright. Darla stepped closer to Troy and lowered her voice. “I can get in more trouble here in town than I can following Jenny around. This will be good for us.”

“You don’t “follow” a child around, D.”

“You know what I mean,” Darla said. “But you’re right. You’re the one in charge.” She smiled, trying to look casual, confident. “It’s simple. You either trust me, or you don’t.”

From Troy’s place to the festival grounds was 150 miles, which Jenny told Darla was 241.4 kilometers. Jenny spelled Scajaquada five times fast without stopping for breath and Darla looked over to notice, not for the first time that day, that her daughter was becoming no less strange but somehow even prettier.

Darla’s palms sweated on the steering wheel. “Tell me what you know about the Skyway,” Darla said.

Jenny shrugged. “First opened to vehicular traffic in 1958. Spans the Burlington Bay. A twin bridge was added in 1988 to handle increased volume. The new bridge is shorter than the old bridge, but only by 1300 feet.” Jenny unzipped her fanny pack and recounted the pairs of yellow foam earplugs they’d picked up at the hardware store. Jenny told Darla for the third time that the richest men in the gold rush were the ones who sold the sieves.

At a red light, Darla worked a fingertip into the coin pocket in her jeans and touched the klonnie she’d placed there, just in case. Her normal dose in the morning with her OJ and toast was usually enough to flatten everything out for the rest of the day, but
she could feel the rising tide in her chest, the tightening, every time she thought of
driving her Oldsmobile over the Skyway.

Jenny put a mix tape in the player and started humming along.

Darla started running through her own mental list. She’d gotten her 11 month chip
last week. The klonnies didn’t count. She had never been a pill girl, but these were
helping ease the transition. She got them from an old boyfriend, paid for them in cash in
his office. She kept all her clothes on and he even gave her the little pamphlet with the
instructions. Nothing funny about it, everything above board. Just one a day. One day at a
time. Eight months at the same job was good. Don’t fuck up, don’t fuck up. She tapped
out the words on the steering wheel.

“This song is for feeling the feeling like your heart is broken open,” Jenny said.

The Skyway loomed ahead, suddenly visible. Darla’s heart thrummed along to the
rising string section. She wiped one palm on her jeans. “What’s the next song for?”

“For feeling the feeling like it’s summer and you’re going to the beach on a
Saturday.”

Darla swallowed. She wished she’d thought to buy a couple bottles of water at the
gas station. “Play that one.”

Jenny leaned forward and held the button down. She was a good girl and Darla told
her so. Darla took a shuddery breath and wiped her other palm against her thigh. There
were trucks in front of her, trucks behind her, trucks beside her, too. The tape player sang
that happy Cranberries song, the one about life changing every day in every possible way.
Darla wanted to turn it up but she couldn’t take her hands off the wheel. Jenny sang along
in a strong clear voice, you’re a dream to me, dream to me. Darla put one foot above the
brake and let the Olds glide into the crush of cars snaking up and over the bridge that stretched high above the harbor.

The song wound down to the part where the singer seemed to gargle sunshine.

Darla and Jenny were still alive and inching closer to the midpoint of the Skyway. Darla risked a look towards the guardrail. A fresh pulse of adrenaline flooded her chest.

“Again,” said Darla.

Jenny shook her head. “The feeling isn’t the same if you do it again right away.”

“Play it again.”

Jenny shrugged and pressed rewind.

“I love you, kiddo,” Darla said.

“Oh,” said Jenny. “Do you want to hear the one with the feeling like a mother seeing her baby for the very first time?”

“No,” Darla said. “I know that one already.”

They parked the car in the massive, dusty lot. There were no cars allowed on the Edenfest grounds. No outside alcohol, no drugs. She called the number Troy’s girl had given her and left a short message on the machine. *We made it!* Darla was excited to sleep in a tent with her daughter, to ride a shuttle bus back and forth between the campground and the stage, like they were classmates or campers, people who had chosen to be together. The view of the campground from the bus looked like a child’s toy box emptied onto the grass. Brightly colored tents were arranged in loose rows in the dust. Spangly banners rose into the air.
Jenny sat in the aisle seat, running her fingers against the tough green leather of the seat in front of her. “The seats on this one are nubblier than the ones we have on the school bus.”

Darla laughed as if Jenny had made a joke. She’d tried to insist Jenny sit near the window so she could act as a barrier between Jenny and the group of sweaty stoners sitting across the aisle, but Jenny had given a short warning grunt of displeasure. Darla had given up.

“Who you here to see, little mama?” A tawny young guy in neon green sunglasses grinned at them both.

Darla stiffened. She thought he looked like a Brett, or a Josh, one of those quick, forgettable names.

Jenny removed her hands from the seat and pulled a folded schedule from one of their plastic bags. “There are 60 bands playing over three days on two stages so obviously I’ll be making some tough decisions.”

Brett/Josh chuckled and Darla shot him a look. He lowered his sunglasses and gave her a good onceover. She had at least a dozen years on him, but he looked at her a little longer than he needed to and kept his mouth shut.

Darla glanced behind him. A spaced out girl leaned her head against the window, drawing shapes in the light with her slender fingers. Darla imagined that these two were probably together, and definitely carrying some good supplies. A case of beer, a handle of cheap whiskey. At least an eighth of good weed, even a little coke. She imagined finding him at night after his girl was good and passed out, and seeing what he had to share. Darla swallowed hard. There would be thousands of Bretts at this festival. She
folded her hands in her lap, then cracked her knuckles instead so she didn’t look like too much of a priss.

Jenny turned the schedule around and around in her hands. “Did you know that routine exposure to high decibels can result in hearing loss?”

Brett raised his eyebrows and smiled a big fake smile. “Now, is that so?”

Darla opened her mouth to tell the kid to leave them alone, but Jenny was already unzipping her fanny pack.

“I got earplugs if you want some.” She handed him a pair, snug tight in a tiny plastic baggie.

“Aw, for me?”

“Five a pair, two for seven, three for ten.”

Brett blinked and Jenny stared at him with that uncanny Jenny smile. When Jenny was a baby, Darla thought she looked like a little doll. Darla told this to Troy and her mother and anyone else who would listen. She sometimes wondered if that was what turned her sweet baby girl into the weirdo little kid who wouldn’t let anyone hug her or hold her or brush her pretty hair. Like she became more doll than girl, a doll girl who memorized all the N words in her kiddie encyclopedia because she’d said she liked the way the buzz of the sound felt on her teeth.

“Hey, gimme three.”

Jenny turned in her seat and took a crumpled ten from a girl with dyed pink hair.

“Zip it up good,” Darla whispered.

“Would you like to purchase those, sir?”

Brett held up the baggie and shook it, smirking. “What happens if I swallow ‘em?”
“They’re soft enough to pass in a normal stool, I’d imagine.” Jenny blinked, her brown eyes alert.

His face broke open in a grin. “Whaaaat?! You’re a trip, smalls.” He pulled a five from his shorts pocket. “I’ll take two. Get you and your sister something sweet.”

“She’s my mother. The profits are for my college fund.”

Brett caught Darla’s eye again. “You got a real smart kid, lady, but I can’t believe she’s really yours.”

Darla held his eye. She couldn’t tell if he was trying to say that she was too stupid, or too young, to be Jenny’s mom. Maybe both. Again, she felt the urge to touch him, whisper something in his ear, get close enough to find out what he had. It was an instinct she didn’t know how to forget. The bus lurched to a stop and Jenny fell back in the seat, bumping against Darla. The sudden, slight weight of her daughter’s body startled Darla into wrapping her arms around the girl in a squeeze. She smelled like lemon shampoo and sunscreen and Darla held her tight. Jenny squirmed, a high whine rising from between her teeth.

“Shh,” Darla whispered, stroking Jenny’s hair.

Jenny growled and gave Darla a sharp elbow in the ribs. “No,” Jenny hissed.

Darla doubled over, trying to pretend that she was looking for something in her bag. The pain radiated through her side, and she let it ride her out of wanting the old pleasures she couldn’t ever have again.
The walk from the bus to a spot that met both Darla and Jenny’s requirements was long and hot. Trickles of sweat ran down Darla’s neck, but Jenny walked on ahead, the handles of their plastic grocery bags looped in the crook of each arm.

Jenny stopped at a patch of dusty grass with barely enough clearance to pitch the tent between their neighbors. She didn’t seem to mind how close everyone was; she liked that the spot was close to the tree line.

Darla liked that she could see both the restroom and a makeshift concession stand from their site. She gave Jenny two dollar bills and told her to go get them each a water, then crouched to unpack the tent so she could keep an eye on her.

Darla wasn’t religious, and she didn’t go in for any of the self-help New Age shit in the meetings either, but there was something cruelly perfect about exactly who Jenny had become. It was almost like she hadn’t noticed those years that Darla wasn’t around, the missed birthdays and holidays. Jenny was like a planet with a different kind of gravity. Normal rules about forgiveness and love didn’t apply when Darla was in her orbit. Jenny had her quirks, but Darla was amazed by how quickly the girl had let her back in. Darla should have been happy, and she was; she had a second chance to do it right with Jenny, but Darla had begun to wonder if there was such a thing as “in” or “out” with Jenny at all. Darla’s sponsor had a boy who wouldn’t forgive him, even though he’d been sober 8 years. Sometimes Darla envied him the drama of a grudge.

The tent sprang up easily and Darla bent to press each little metal stake into the dust. Their site looked small and humble in comparison to some of the other spreads of chairs and coolers and blankets and canopies, but Darla thought it would be fine for two nights. Home base. Where, she hoped, they would talk each night about the bands or
whatever else Jenny wanted to talk about, side-by-side in sleeping bags, safe in their sky blue dome.

“Darla?” Jenny’s voice rang out high and questioning.

Darla fumbled to get out of the tent, thrilled to hear her name in her daughter’s mouth.

“I’m all red! I’m all red and I want it off!” Jenny flapped her hands around her sides, the bills flying free of her grip. Light red streaks crisscrossed Jenny’s wrists and forearms.

“What in the…” Darla could make out the imprint of what looked like letters, flipped backwards in a mirror image.

“Get it off!” Jenny’s voice was shrill above the muted pulse of tinny boombox reggae.

“It’s okay,” Darla said. “Look. Look, it’s just from the bags. Shhh. It’s like a temporary tattoo!” She could hear her voice getting higher. “It’s just the ink from the plastic bags!”

“Off! Off!” Jenny shrieked.

A few tents over, another young man, this one shirtless with long black dreadlocks, turned his head in concern.

“Shh,” Darla repeated. “Stop it.”

“You stop it!” Jenny began to scratch where the ink had marked her.

Darla wanted to clap her hand over Jenny’s mouth, but that wasn’t right. Don’t fuck up. Darla bent to find the backpack in their pile of things and fumbled for the zipper with shaking hands. She flashed on the klonnie in her pocket and wondered if she and Jenny
shouldn’t just each take one to take the edge off? No, no. Darla’s fingers roamed through
their belongings and she pulled out a small tub of cold cream.

“Here,” she said. “Here, here, here.” She held it out to Jenny, but her daughter just
looked at her wild-eyed, her face streaked with tears.

Darla scooped out a small glob and rubbed it onto her own wrist. It felt cool on her
hot skin. “See?” She held the tub out again.

Jenny extended one arm and held the other tight to her chest. “Off.”

Darla scooped up another dollop of cold cream and hesitated a moment above
Jenny’s skin.

Jenny shrieked and Darla jerked upright, the cream falling from her finger to the
ground.

The dreadlocked man was standing now, calling to them. “Uh, ma’am?”

“We’re fine!” Darla took Jenny’s wrist between two fingers. “Shh,” she whispered,
and patted the cream onto her skin.

Jenny closed her eyes and began to hum. Darla stroked Jenny’s skin until the ink
was barely noticeable. The man stood a few yards away and caught Darla’s eye. She saw
his surprise; surely he’d been picturing a much smaller child. I’m sorry, Darla mouthed.
She noticed the smooth muscles of his chest, the way they reflected the light as he
shrugged his shoulders and turned back the way he came. She could see herself the way
he’d seen her: a sweaty, ragged mother panting over her uncontrollable child. Darla
looked back at Jenny.

She’d opened her eyes and was breathing normally again. “Do you think he wants
earplugs?”
Darla laughed out loud. “Maybe a free pair.”

Jenny cocked her head. “Oh, like a sample. For word of mouth. That’s good, Darla.” She pushed her hair out of her face and rubbed her tears dry, as if they had appeared on her face from some unknown source.

Darla watched Jenny approach the shirtless man, her saleswoman smile plastered on her beautiful, blotchy face, as if she hadn’t just been screaming bloody murder, as if her mood was a summer storm that had passed, nothing more.

The earplugs were a hit. Jenny sold three pairs on the shuttle bus back to the main stage, then another dozen during the first three sets. Darla hovered within sight of the punked out girls and barefoot boys Jenny approached, but Jenny handled every transaction like a pro.

Darla remembered herself at Jenny’s age. She’d started wearing her hair in a ponytail when she was eight or nine because her mother told her she looked cheap when she let it down, long and curtained around her face. She was painfully shy, but by 8th grade she’d gotten good at concealing it with navy blue eyeliner and cutoff shorts. She mastered a way of looking at boys and then looking away that didn’t require a single spoken word. She never allowed herself the kind of enthusiasm that came to Jenny so naturally, the eagerness that blurred her pretty features and made her look like she was still a child.

By the time the headliner took the stage, Jenny’s fanny pack was empty except for a bundle of bills, zipped tight in an inside pocket. She swayed back and forth beside Darla, singing along and waving her arms as if the air was filled with jello. Darla felt like her
heart was going to burst. She almost couldn’t believe that this bright, alive person was her daughter. The band came on for an encore and Darla hung back to let Jenny press ahead and scream her lungs out as the shirtless lead singer climbed the scaffolding of the stage and howled above them all. Darla bummed a cigarette from a guy in facepaint and a sequined sarong and felt herself relax for the first time all day.

They rode the shuttle bus back to their tent site and washed their faces in the dingy, crowded restroom. Jenny lined up their sleeping bags just so before they both lay down on piles of folded clothes for pillows.

Darla could smell cigarette smoke and incense wafting from a neighbor’s tent. She propped herself up on one elbow. “Who was your favorite?” she asked.

Jenny stretched her hands above her and played the air like a conductor.

Darla watched her hands and wondered if she was going to respond. “The Cure,” she said finally.

“Robert Smith over Gavin Rossdale?”

“'Glycerine’ will always come second to ‘Just Like Heaven,’ no matter how many crunches Gavin does.”

Darla fanned her face. “Gavin gets my vote.”

“That’s silly. Bush is a decent alternative rock band, but will their music endure? They’re like Tracy Bonham. I appreciate her energy, but I’ll be surprised if she’s still putting out albums in 10 years.”

“In ten years you’ll be younger than you sound now, old lady.”

“Take ‘Mother, Mother,’ for example.” Jenny mirrored Darla’s position so the two of them faced each other. “The first time you hear it feels like the feeling when someone
is yelling at you for something you didn’t do and you’re like, oh my god, what *is* this?

But when you listen to it even one more time, the chord progression becomes so obvious and expected.”

Darla disagreed. The song was from a girl to her mother and the chorus wailed over and over that Bonham was freezing and starving and everything was fine. The song was like a nightmare engineered to activate all of Darla’s worst fears about the kind of daughter and mother she and Jenny would become. Darla sat up. She thought of calling Troy, of giving him a full report of their safe, successful day.

“Hey,” Darla said. “I need to call your Dad. You okay if I take a walk?”

Jenny nodded her head. She made little grasping movements with her hands and Darla handed her the Walkman from the other end of the tent. Darla felt a small, shameful thrill at Jenny’s lack of interest in talking to Troy. “Morrissey?”

Jenny smiled. “‘Asleep’ is by The Smiths, actually.”

“Right. Okay, I’ll be right by the concession stand where I can see you.” Darla reached down and patted Jenny’s foot through the thick layer of the sleeping bag, then zipped herself out into the night.

It didn’t go away, the wanting.

Darla stood in line for a payphone, her eyes on the tent. An empty beer can lay at her feet and Darla resisted the urge to pick it up just to have something familiar to hold. She could still call up the softness of that first stage of drunkenness, how good it felt to let every little thought just slide away. Darla had loved the expansiveness. Everyone and anyone had seemed good at heart and interesting, worthy of a free shot or two, or hey, a
quick sneak down the alley for a smoke and maybe something else, after her bartending shift. She could sometimes stay in that softness, but she knew now that it was only a matter of time before the hunger would kick up. She would want more and more until she was slurring and falling and cursing someone out, waking up with vague regret for something half-remembered.

Darla let her gaze slide across the pairs of people strolling in the dark. She felt invisible in her sweatpants and her big t-shirt, sexless. Everything was lonelier when she was sober. She was timid now when it came to sex. She’d slept with a few men from meetings. Each time she’d felt strangely alone, like there should have been more than two people in the room to diffuse some of the feeling. She thought it was easier for men to satisfy their cravings. They’d consume her while she lay back and wished for a better song on the radio, a joint, a shot of vodka, or five shots, anything to blur the obviousness of what was happening, their two sweaty, human bodies moving in the dark. She envied Troy and his girl, not because she wanted Troy back, but because she wanted that familiarity, that comfort. Darla wished it could be enough to touch and to be touched. She wanted to crave touch, not feel the other, gnawing desire she feared she’d carry with her to the grave.

Darla checked her watch. It was after ten. She didn’t know Troy’s girl, not really, or what kind of people she came from. She imagined their Ohio phone ringing late on a Friday night and Troy having to explain who it was on the line. She was tired of being some sad detail in Troy’s life. She would call tomorrow, instead.
Darla woke with a headache the next morning. She’d smoked a few cigarettes at the concession stand and drank coffee until her gums had started to ache. When she slipped back into the tent, Darla removed Jenny’s headphones and let herself stroke the girl’s sleeping head.

They ate dry cereal and drank juice boxes for breakfast. Jenny wanted an early start, so they made peanut butter sandwiches and packed them with the last of the earplugs before most of their neighbors had stirred from their hungover sleep. On the shuttle bus, Darla leaned against the window and felt the klonnie do its work. The sun sat low and generous and Darla felt a surge of gratitude for the clear skies and quiet of the bus.

The grounds in the morning were dusty and calm, the vendors still setting up their jewelry booths and food trucks, the sound system pumping canned music into the hazy air. Jenny surveyed the grounds. She wore jean shorts and a tiny white t-shirt with a droopy yellow smiley face printed across her chest.

Darla pointed to one of the booths. “Isn’t that the shirt you wanted?”

Jenny squinted and shook her head. “No. There’s a guy selling homemade shirts. That’s the one I want. The blue one with the green design.”

Darla sucked her teeth. She’d seen the guy Jenny meant, a dirty looking dude in his forties with straw colored hair. He was selling the shirts and crystal necklaces from a canvas sack. Darla had distracted Jenny with funnel cake the first time she’d try to go up to him. She steered Jenny towards the main stage where the first band was setting up.

The day passed smoothly. At sunset, Darla sprung for pizza and hot dogs and some kind of space ice cream that looked like tiny pellets of styrofoam. She and Jenny ate in the dry grass where Jenny could still see the big screens to make sure they didn’t miss the
next act. She’d sold out of earplugs by midafternoon and bought toe rings for Darla and herself, a rare act of generosity that nearly brought Darla to tears. Darla admired the rings as they ate. Hers was silver with a pink daisy; Jenny wore gold with a thorny rose.

Darla pointed and flexed her feet. Her $7 velcro sandals looked just like the kind all the hippie babes wore with their long, flowing skirts, but her feet kept going one way while the stiff rubber went the other. But she was feeling good about their day, about the whole weekend. The last act of the night was a Canadian band Darla had only heard once or twice, but Jenny was beside herself with excitement.

“—their best song is the one about about Bill Barilko. Do you know who that is?”

Darla leaned back and let her elbows rest in the grass. She shook her head.

“He was a Maple Leaf. The hockey team, the one Dad likes. But back before you and Dad were even born.”

“Jeez. Did they even play hockey back then?”

“Yes,” Jenny said, serious as a funeral. “The National Hockey League was founded in 1917.”

“Kidding, kiddo. I didn’t know you liked sports.”

“I didn’t get to the good part yet.” Jenny paused to finish her space ice cream.

“Okay. So he won the game and it was a big deal and everyone was so happy, right? And so Barilko goes on this fishing trip—”

“—to celebrate?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. It was four months and five days later that he left so probably he was done celebrating by then.”

“What did he catch?”
“Nothing! No, that’s the story. Stop talking and let me tell you.”

Darla clapped her hands over her mouth and raised her eyebrows.

“Okay, so on the fishing trip, Bill Barilko disappeared. He and his friend just totally disappeared and no one saw them or found their bodies for eleven whole years.”

“Their bodies?”

“Yeah, they died. In a plane crash. And the year they found the remains was the first year the Maple Leafs won the Cup, since the time Barilko scored the winning goal in ’51. And that’s it. That’s what the whole song is about.”

“That is good. What’s the feeling?”

Jenny flung her hands in the air and the ice cream cup went flying. “That’s the best part! It feels like the feeling of watching a hockey game with Dad and the guy scores the big goal. And when you hear it, you know that everyone listening to it is feeling the exact same thing, not just you.”

“How.”

“It’s a very popular song.”

“I see.”

“On the bootleg I have, you can hear how wild the crowd goes when they play it.”

Darla sat up and brushed the dust from her hands. It would be a good time to call Troy, she thought, but she didn’t feel like hearing his voice, not so soon after Jenny mentioning him, their closeness. “Do you have a song for what it feels like to do something with me?”

Jenny’s eyes searched the air, as if she was reading an invisible page.

“I mean, since you have one for Dad and watching hockey and stuff.”
“Yes. Sarah McLachlan.” Jenny stretched her arm out to grab the cup and made a pile with her trash. “Come on. They’re starting soon and I still need to find the t-shirt man.”

Darla crumpled her napkin into a ball. “Which song? The angel one?”

But Jenny was already up and moving away from Darla through the fading, crowded light.

The Canadian band was good, but their fans were terrible. Broad shouldered boys with shaggy haircuts and red, boorish faces, they threw bottles and cans to bully the preceding act offstage before their time was through. Jenny was oblivious, her face rapt as the band played through a full set before the opening chords of the Bill Barilko song rang out during the encore. The giant boys around them shouted out every lyric and jumped on top of one another like puppies wrestling in a box, and when one of them bumped into Darla, he snarled as if she’d been the one to strike him. Darla placed her fingertips on Jenny’s shoulders, but Jenny shook her off and shouted along with the rest of the crowd.

Darla pressed the light up button on her watch. The show was already running 15 minutes over and she was ready to get Jenny back to home base. At that moment, Jenny turned to face Darla, mid-jump, her hair bouncing, a wide, free smile stretched across her flushed face. Darla decided they would stay as late as Jenny wanted and then they would call Troy in the morning, on the way home. And she dug down in the pocket of her jeans and touched the extra klonnie and the Xanax she’d been saving. Things were going so much better than expected. Darla closed her eyes and let the pills slip into her mouth, like
someone else had placed them there, like she was receiving communion. She felt them come down like a heavy blanket. She opened her eyes and took in the scene with a fresh feeling of calm. Boys would be boys. She bounced on her toes and cheered along with Jenny as the Canadians took a bow. Jenny turned suddenly and wrapped her arms around Darla in a tight embrace.

Jenny pulled back, her eyes wet. “I am never ever going to forget this happened, ever.”

Darla felt a heavy movement in her heart, as if old pains were shifting to make room for some other, more beautiful kind of hurt. “I love you, Jenny.”

Jenny wiped her eyes. “Okay,” she said. “I’m tired now.”

Darla held out her hand and Jenny hesitated a moment before slapping her palm. Darla took a moment to let it all wash over her. She had given Jenny this, the memory of life lived in the world instead of inside songs and books and her own head. She had given her something she’d never ever forget.

“Darla,” Jenny said.

Darla felt bodies pushing at her back, her sides. The crowd was starting to do its crowd thing, the milling and seething at the end of the night. Darla dreamily imagined how it would all look from outer space, like little ants burrowing in their separate tunnels: one tunnel to the buses, another to go get beer, another tunnel to find a stranger to lean up against in the dark.

“Darla!” Jenny said. No, shrieked.

Darla opened her eyes; she couldn’t remember closing them. She felt an arm holding her waist and looked up to see the t-shirt man beside her, propping her up.
“Oh look, it’s the t-shirt man,” Darla said.

The man grinned and Darla could see a few flecks of food caught between his teeth. The sweet stink of a freshly smoked joint was on his clothes, in his hair. It didn’t feel half bad, the solid pressure of her body against his. She felt his finger snaking around the back of her waistband and she thought of saying something but couldn’t find the words.

Jenny shook her head. “I don’t want one anymore.”

“Want what, honey?”

“Mom!” Jenny screamed. “I’m TIRED!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” said the t-shirt man. He stood now between Darla and Jenny. “You two look like sisters! Mother and daughter? That’s a trip. Who wants a free shirt?”

Darla felt a cool rush at her side where the t-shirt man’s body had been. “No,” she said. The word felt like it took a long time to get from her brain to her lips. “No free shirts.”

“I SAID I’M TIRED! I’M TIRED! I WANT TO LISTEN TO THE SMITHS. I WANT TO LISTEN TO “ASLEEP” IN THE TENT!”

“Come party with me,” cooed the t-shirt man. “We can all sleep in my tent.”

Jenny made a wordless noise somewhere between a growl and a scream. A cluster of pretty girls nearby sent up an explosion of laughter, like a flock of little birds let out of a bag. Jenny turned around and ran into the crowd.

“No!” Darla said. She felt hot and cold. The t-shirt man opened his eyes wide and shrugged, and Darla gave him a firm push with both hands. She moved into the crowd, calling Jenny’s name.
Darla felt a shifting in the energy of the other people in the crowd. She glanced around and felt several pairs of eyes. A short girl with glasses wore a pair of Jenny’s bright yellow earplugs. “Hey!” Darla called. “Did you see my daughter go by? She’s 14 and she’s by her fucking self!”

The eyes cackled and someone made a low hoot.

Darla grabbed the girl’s shoulder with both hands.

She jerked away and Darla grabbed for her again, her fingers clutching at nothing. Darla pushed through the crowd towards the line of buses, her hands outstretched, pressing her palms against sweaty bodies and calling Jenny’s name again and again.

Darla ran straight into a couple holding hands. She backed up and saw the yellow foam plugs still stuck in their ears.

“Watch it,” the man said.

“My daughter,” Darla panted. “She sold you the earplugs. I can’t… have you seen her?”

The woman shook her head and pulled the man’s arm closer to her.

Darla ran on, scanning the crowd for Jenny, for anyone wearing Jenny’s plugs.

Ahead, she saw the bright red of the emergency tent. Darla stopped, her feet stuttering in the dust. She looked back and forth, as if Jenny would suddenly appear and grab her hand, as if she hadn’t run away at all. Darla walked towards the tent, her heart pounding. She felt the Xanax doing its quick work in her blood, the klonie easing down behind it. She thought about the emergency staff giving her one look and calling Troy in Ohio. She turned around and ran back into the crowd.
Jenny knew about Stranger Danger; Jenny knew to stay put in a shopping mall if she was lost. Troy had taught her all that safety shit, but it didn’t matter because what had Darla let her do for two days straight? Walk up to strangers and talk to them, take their money. Darla bent over and gulped dusty air through her mouth, dry heaving until her legs started to shake.

She lurched towards the front of the bus line, elbowing people out of her way. Jenny would do the right thing, would go right for the buses. Darla thought of what she would have done alone in a crowd like this at 14, how much trouble she would already be in, how far away her own girl orbit was, even then, from Planet Jenny.

Darla scanned the faces in line, searching for her daughter. She could see one young, pretty girl after another, none of them her Jenny. She thought of Bill Barilko out there in the woods for eleven years. She thought of Jenny sitting safe and sound in the tent. She would have her headphones on, and she would be listening to something sweet and quiet in the dark.

Darla tightened the straps of her backpack and braced herself to jump onto the bus the second it stopped. All at once, the song that Jenny meant for her snapped into her head. It was the one where Sarah McLachlan sang about the wind blowing through the great divide. How she would be the one to hold you down. To take your breath away.

The bus stopped and the doors wheezed open. Darla took too small a step and crashed down into the dust. She heard the crowd cackle.

The bus door shut abruptly.

“Fuck you,” Darla howled. She didn’t need the bus. She didn’t need the emergency tent or a call to Troy. She had her two good legs and she hadn’t had a drink in 11 months.
She ran, stumbling over tent stakes and empty beer cans, towards their safe, blue tent.

She would give every last breath if it meant Jenny was safe inside. She would let the great world hold her down, if it meant that Jenny could spin up and away, somewhere safe, free, floating high above them all.
EXPECTING

The first parts came through the faucet: fingers, then the ear. Our baby came to us in pieces.

It was nice having time to prepare ourselves. We were much older by the time we’d collected enough baby parts to buy a bassinet. You learned to crochet and made an afghan in stripes of pink and blue. I drank less and moved my free weights and one of the bookshelves out of our spare room. The bassinet fit nicely and you swept around it every day to make sure it didn’t become another ignored thing gathering dust. The bassinet got the late afternoon sun and it comforted me to see the pieces of our baby, all golden, laid out: the firm mollusk of the knee; the twin whorls of each delicate ear, the tiny, starfish hands.

We got sloppy. When your belly started to swell you said it would be nice that our baby would have a brother or a sister, but I knew right away which you preferred. From then on, I did it on my own. Searched the cracks near the casement window, the dark spaces beneath the claw tub. I found the perfect dome of the head and marveled at the way each eyelash seemed to hold the delicate eyelids closed. I brought our baby’s head to you, cupped in both of my hands. You waved me away and asked for water.

I’ve assembled the pieces just so. I know we’re getting closer every day. I leave you to stand near the window and place my hand on the afghan in the bassinet. On moonless nights, I worry that I will miss it, the sight of that first, perfect breath. Our baby knows what to do and all we have to do is what it is we’ve always done: wait, and love each other, and believe. I think I would give anything, everything, just to hear that howl.
It wasn’t a city meant for walking, but she walked. Typed the address of the clinic into the hotel computer. Swiped a credit card and printed two pages of directions. Seventy-eight cents. Everything broken down into increments. Point two miles down the service road. Stay straight for another point three. The concrete gave up the night’s hoarded heat.

The straight line went straight to the shoulder of an on-ramp, swirling with empty cups and plastic bags. Cars so close, the trash jumped into the air. She thought of the Disney cartoon teapot, the cups and clock, the sexy feather duster and her candlestick man. The trash fluttered down, switched position, showed off. At your service! A driver laid on his horn: one long sound that startled the directions out of her hand. She went back the way she came.

He was pacing the lobby. They got cell phones that afternoon and waited in a FEMA line and rescheduled the appointment for the following week. He rented a car and drove and held her hand in the waiting room.

When she was better they went to a shrimp boil in the courtyard of someone’s cousin’s apartment complex. Folding tables buttressed by foam coolers. She stood with strangers and reached into the pile of things to eat. Damp newspaper, boil mix and garlic tingling her cuticles, a warm lemon wedged in her palm. Potatoes, half ears of corn, fat shrimp in thin skins. She wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. It was dark back
there. They ate without looking or talking. They sucked the heads dry. The pile of food got low and it was too dark to tell who said it first—*Houston, we have a problem*. They all said it; then put the phrase on repeat, a murmur that never stopped being true, not even when the next pot was drained and they were called again: *eat*.

**BIG BOX**

She got tired of waiting and found work. She wore a blue apron, spent $14 for a pair of khaki pants. Stood in the greenhouse as long as she could to breathe the sweet stink of soil and wet rubber and leaves. Celery green, sage green, celedon. Ceylon. Iced tea, sweet tea. Cubed, coned, shaved. Syrup. Sno-cone. Home. Stood in the greenhouse until she got sent back to her assigned aisle.

In the break room she opened her wallet to pull a dollar for the machine. Shirley from Kitchen Cabinets stood beside her, glugging water into a paper cone cup. Shirley gasped and stabbed a fingertip at her driver’s license. *New Orleans?* Shirley said it like a question and a prayer. Shirley said she’d had no idea that she was working with one of them, one of the *displaced*.

She punched the machine. Tore a packet of chocolate peanuts with her teeth. Well you do now.

**MACHINES**

The candy machine at work. The swipe of the card at the register. She got used to the hum of the hotel elevator. Sixth floor. The room was paid up ‘til the end of September.
The room had a dishwasher. The night after the appointment they smoked Winstons into the fan over the sink and ashed in the coffee mugs. The next day they walked to buy more cigarettes and beer and ripe avocados. When they came back the bed was made and the dishwasher was running. She’d never had one before, and never since.

They found a group on the Internet to do it for them. Clear everything out at home. Get rid of the whole mess. She thought it would be easier that way. They went back and everything was gone. The refrigerator, the window unit, her tools, his shelves, their photographs, winter sweatshirts, summer tanktops, the washing machine. The thought of a stranger opening the rotten lid of the machine and seeing their moldy underwear made her sick to her stomach. She hoped they were kind, that they’d took pity on her. She hated any chore with two parts. Switching wash, drying the dishes. It was a hard time to realize that she was lazy, but there it was. She liked to bring a plastic bag to the hotel desk and pick it all up the next day: clean, dry, folded.

THE OLD HOUSE

It was empty when they got there, and empty when they sold it off. She liked to think of it as always empty.

In the smallest room, a single picture of a sailboat used to hang opposite the window. The water line ran around the room at the height of her waist. She liked to imagine that this is where the baby had gone. Had taken the boat and ridden the flood waters somewhere far, far away.
Mold bloomed in the bathroom, teal and gray. She liked to think of that living lace eating the house from the inside, swallowing the empty walls and windows and floorboards, licking the place clean.

COLORADO

Where his family lived. Where they went after Houston. Where she nodded when he told her what he would tell his mother.

Lost.

Like the baby was a handbag she’d left in a taxi.

A LONG TIME AGO

He was a bookseller and she was a landscaper.

She rode her bike to his shop one summer afternoon when she was done spraying plants with her long hose and selling potted flowers and petting the big yellow labs that lay in the shade of the nursery. In the back of the shop, he repaired old books. She closed the door behind her and waited until he looked up. He wore goggles and a paper mask, his fine hands in powdered latex. She unbuttoned her shirt to keep him from speaking. Her arms and neck and face and calves were honey-brown. Rosy freckles like baby’s breath across her sternum. Pale breasts and belly. She covered her navel with her hands. She imagined his breath echoing warm inside its paper shield.
THE KENEQUISASCOT APPEAL

From: LaPointe, Roland
To: ALLFACULTY@kenequisascot.k12.me.edu,
ALLSTUDENTS@kenequisascot.k12.me.edu,
ADMIN@kenequisascot.k12.me.edu
Sent: Monday, November 3, 2008 12:32 PM
Subject: Official Statement re: Ruling at Saturday’s Track Meet

Dear Kenequisascot Community:

As you may have heard, our Girls Cross Country Team placed 4th in this past weekend’s Maine State Championship Meet. As you may have ALSO heard, our Team actually scored enough points to place 1st, but two of our hardest working seniors, Ashley LeMieux and Jennifer Donnelly, were unfairly disqualified.

Myself and many of the other state level coaches stand firm in our belief that this was a ridiculous interpretation of the rules. While Ashley and Jenny did touch hands when they crossed the finish line, these two girls did so in the spirit of joy and triumph, knowing they had just placed high enough to get us the points needed to win the championship! The ruling that Ashley was “aiding and abetting” Jennifer is false and wrong and we will fight it and take our rightful place as state champs soon!

Please show your support to our team, especially our seniors. They trained hard and ran like the champions they are. We will get through this!

Go Eagles!
-Coach LaPointe

From: LaPointe, Roland
To: Haverview, Jane
CC: ashley.michele.lemieux@gmail.com
Sent: Wednesday, November 5, 2008 2:38 PM
Subject: FW: Ashley LeMieux Official Statement
Dear Mrs. Haverview,

My name is Ashley LeMieux. I am a senior at Kenequisascot High School, home of the mighty Flying Eagles! I have ran cross-country under the direction of Coach LaPointe for all four years of high school and I am proud to serve as the Team Captain. I also serve as Student Body President and was recently inducted into the National Honor Society and I am in the process of submitting early applications to seven different colleges. I am hard-working in the classroom and on the field and I think it is incredibly important to play by the rules to get ahead in our society, but I believe it is also important to follow rules that are just and fair.

I don’t know if you are familiar with Dr. Martin Luther King, but this is the “gist” of his argument in his famous and historical work, “Letter From a Birmingham Jail,” which I had the good fortune to read in my AP English class recently. I believe that my team and I are suffering from injustice, and I humbly ask that you, Mrs. Haverview, please consider our appeal and do what is right.

This is an incredibly important time in my life, which is why I am asking you to consider our appeal and reverse our unfair disqualification. But more than that, it is also important to our entire team. This is not a personal thing, but I am personally very invested in the outcome. This is not about me, but I am the one who is in the harsh light of judgment. This is not just about cross-country, but it is about having the good conscience to apply your strong moral values everywhere, including the cross-country field.

Let me state plainly what happened. I was called to that meet to run, and I ran. I was called to be a team player, and you know what, Mrs. Haverview? I played with my team.
I cheered and I clapped all through the bus ride even though to be honest I prefer getting in my own head space. In addition to this psychological sacrifice, I also experienced arduous physical conditions. It was raining and muddy and sloppy and cold, was it not? Far more adverse and severe than even an expert source like weather.com could have predicted, wouldn’t you agree? But when it came time for our event, Jennifer Donnelly and I ran hard and strong through our course and I just knew when we finished that we had done it. As a team, all together, we had done what we needed to do to be the very best in the great state of Maine.

I touched my teammate’s hand, but I did not pull her. Maybe you are not familiar with this because you yourself are not a runner, but let me say that it is customary to high five or to grab hands or even hug after a race. We are not animals or robots or running machines. We are girls, human girls who get excited and proud and for that we should not be punished and called cheaters in the newspapers. We should not have to say we came in 4th in our college essays when we know in our hearts we came in 1st. We should not have to wonder how this will affect our future and our scholarships and the many many hundreds and thousands of girl runners out there in the world who are looking up to Jennifer Donnelly and I as the heroes that we are.

It cannot be a coincidence that I am writing to you about Dr. King on the day that we elect our very first African-American President. It is an historic time. Please remember Dr. King. Stand up for justice, and let my people go. To Nationals!

Humbly yours,
Ashley Michele LeMieux, Class of 2009

P.S. I know that last sentence is a fragment but I was making a biblical allusion, just like King. Sorry I love America and Social Studies as much as I love running!!!
Hi my name is Jennifer Donnelly and I am one of the senior runners who you probably remember from the meet on Saturday. You ripped off my bib at the finish line and I think I may have cursed at you, for which I am sorry.* I understand what it means to be a hard worker.

You said that me and Ashley broke the rules, but this is not true. Ashley LeMieux is my friend and a hard worker and a runner. We are like two halves of the same cookie. It is true that Ashley helps me with school sometimes.** But it is important that you know that I am a strong runner and an athlete.*** I also pride myself on my good sportsmanship. I would never cheat. I would never need help getting across the finish line. I know you have to do your job. But we did not cheat and we do not deserve to be called cheaters.

Please look at our appeal and thank you and I am sorry again about the cursing.

Respectfully,
Jennifer Donnelly

*I remind you of this not to bring up bad feelings but to remind you of which one of the two girls I was. You probably disqualify people all the time and so maybe you forget. It’s probably a big part of your job and everyone has a job to do, that’s what my mother tells me all the time. She works at the paper mill and sometimes I complain about the way her clothes smell and she tells me that it’s the smell of the roof over my head and the food on our table. Everyone has a job to do and that’s hers.

**And my writing. Like telling me the parts that are not as related, like these. But I’m going to leave them in and leave it up to you to decide because I think this is important to know things like about my mom and how it was Ashley’s idea not to tell you that part.
***A stronger athlete than Ashley. Like I would literally never need her to pull me and I’m not saying that she would need me or that I was pulling her but the case that you accused me about like is an impossible thing.

From: LaPointe, Roland
To: Haverview, Jane
Sent: Friday, November 7, 2008 9:29 PM
Subject: RE: appeal attached

Just checking in. Did you receive everything OK? We sent it certified mail so it shouldn’t have been a problem. Did you get started already? On the statements? The ones I emailed?

Let’s get this all settled on Monday.

Thanks,
Coach LaPointe

From: LaPointe, Roland
To: Haverview, Jane
Sent: Monday, November 10, 2008 12:31 PM
Subject: RE: RE: appeal attached

The silent treatment? Oh, that’s really professional. Mrs. Haverview, I’m sort of begging you here. Please confirm receipt of our materials and let us know where the appeal stands. I have kids and families and an entire school community waiting on pins and needles over this.

-RLP
Coach LaPointe,

I am writing to you from my personal address even though I made clear (or attempted to) that I do not wish to conduct official business with you outside of the appropriate channels. However there are a number of inappropriate behaviors happening in regards to Kenequisascot’s appeal process that are forcing my hand:

- Flowers? I’m assuming these are your doing. No. No gifts, no bribes of any sort. I attempted to return them with the delivery man but he refused and it made for a very awkward scene in my office. You realize that officiating high school cross country is not my full time job, don’t you? You must, since the flowers were delivered to my actual place of official employment. Now I have a bunch of colleagues bugging me about it, and right in the middle of grant application season. It’s distracting, totally unprofessional, and certainly won’t help your case.

- News articles? Unnecessary and distracting. Apparently Colorado does things differently than Maine, but the National Federation rule book is clear. Even if a runner gets injured, by her own fault or by the impact of a wild animal running through the forest, contact should result in immediate disqualification. I don’t agree with the Colorado ruling, and the news coverage is particularly irresponsible. It was kind of the girl’s teammates to help her, and yes, I imagine running into a rabid deer (?) on a course would be quite a shock, but those girls
cannot be both heroes and winners. Winners carry on, no matter what the circumstance.

- Ashley LeMieux. She visited me this evening at my home, or tried to. Coach, she’s clearly an intelligent girl, but perhaps a bit off? I didn’t let her in, but she was quite insistent and, frankly, unwell. Please handle your team and let me handle processing your appeal.

Regards,
Ms. Jane Haverview

From: LaPointe, Roland
To: Haverview, Jane
Sent: Friday, November 14, 2008 10:13 PM
Subject: RE: this has to stop

Thanks for your reply!!! How is the process going? Great to hear from you! Sure, I’ll talk to Ashley. I agree, totally inappropriate for her to come by your place. The other stuff though? The flowers and the clippings? Haven’t the foggiest. I’m pretty busy getting my seniors in line for their college apps and not sure if you got a chance to see her at the meet, but I am a happily married man, Mrs. (Miss?) Haverview so the flowers thing? Sorry if you got the wrong idea. I have a professional interest in what happens here, nothing more. OK. Your decision whipped a lot of people up here in Kenequisascot. My guess is that some of the community are trying to speed things along. Again, I don’t agree with their methods and I will talk to Ashley on Monday, but I also would like a speedy resolution so we can all get back to our normal lives.

Keep me posted!!!
-RLP
From: LaPointe, Roland
To: Haverview, Jane
Sent: Wednesday, November 19, 2008 6:24 PM
Subject: Ashley???

Jane—

I’m sorry it’s taken me a minute to get back to you but I’ve got something of a situation on my hands here. I’ve just come from speaking with Ashley’s parents and they’d like to have a word with you soon—we all would, actually.

What exactly happened with you and Ashley last week? Your last message made it sound like you two barely spoke at all, but it seems like you had quite an impression on the girl. She told me she made it clear to you that she was the one who sent the relevant articles as well as the bouquet (her mother runs the flower shop in town), so I don’t understand that part of your note either, the part where you seemed to imply that it was me, and not an over-excited student who sent you these items. What exactly is going on, Mrs. Haverview? What is the status of our appeal and what did you say in your conversation with Ashley LeMieux that you’re not letting on?

She’s issued a statement to the local news about a hunger strike. Have you put this particular bug in her ear? You realize how foolish this makes the appeal look. I wouldn’t put it past you to put her up to this, I really wouldn’t.

This is a girl’s health we’re talking about. Today, she passed out in my 6th period honors class. Right to the floor—pale as a ghost!

Forget the protocol. Call me at the number below at your earliest convenience.

Urgently,
RLP
From: Haverview, Jane  
To: LaPointe, Roland  
Sent: Wednesday, November 19, 2008 8:39 PM  
Subject: Ashley???

Coach LaPointe,

The student in question was here very briefly, and though I am no doctor, it seemed clear that she is suffering from some sort of anorexia. I say this because she appeared to be in some sort of manic state, and was speaking very rapidly about not eating. She mentioned nothing of the flowers or articles, hence my confusion. I don’t know what else to tell you. Oh, and she gave me a (handwritten) addendum to her statement, but as the appeal review has officially begun it will not be considered. She now says that she did indeed help the Donnelly girl.

I won’t respond to your accusations about my supposed collusion. I just won’t.

I wish you and her family luck in this matter. The Federation will be in touch within the allotted 8 week window regarding your appeal.

Regards,  
Ms. Jane Haverview

From: LaPointe, Roland  
To: ALLFACULTY@kenequisascot.k12.me.edu, ALLSTUDENTS@kenequisascot.k12.me.edu, ADMIN@kenequisascot.k12.me.edu  
CC: Haverview, Jane  
Sent: Tuesday, November 26, 2008 12:28 PM  
Subject: Update on Ashley LeMieux

Greetings Faculty, Students, and Administration:

I’m writing to you today, via our official mailing lists and on the eve of our Thanksgiving holiday, with information that is certainly pertinent to the entire school
community. I am writing to share an update with you on one of our beloved students, your Student Body President and our Team Captain, Ashley LeMieux.

As many of you know, Ashley has been suffering from symptoms related to her fast and was hospitalized yesterday afternoon. But Ashley is in good spirits! She welcomes visitors and cards so please ask myself or any member of the Team for information on visiting hours. The Team will be organizing an anonymous collection following the holiday to assist Ashley’s family with her medical bills. We ask that you join us in showing your support for this young woman of great courage and conviction and continue to show your support for our entire Team as we anxiously await notification of our appeal request.

Enjoy your holidays, and please keep Ashley and the LeMieux Family in your hearts.

Keep the faith, Eagles!
Coach LaPointe

P.S. At Ashley’s request, I’ve included several hyperlinks below on the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi for those who would like to learn more about the bold and selfless act Ashley has taken to draw attention to our appeal!!

From: Donnelly, Jennifer
To: LaPointe, Roland
Sent: Tuesday, November 26, 2008 3:16 PM
Subject: RE: Update on Ashley LeMieux

Coach all due respect but i do not think its right what Ash is doing and i do not see how its helping the team. I visited her last week and something is not right like beyond and more than the race. she doesn’t even seem to care anymore about what really happened
and she was trying to get me to lie and say she DID help me because she thinks if we apologize then they are gonna feel bad for us? or something? either way i will not lie for her or you or the team. so i am writing to say i will not be at the holiday party tmrw because i disagree that we should be holding it in a hospital for someone who is making her own self sick! we have the team party at alex’s pizza every single year and it is not right to change it bc Ash is…doing whatever she is doing. honestly i almost wish we just got 4th from points and not from all of this bc honestly 4th in the whole state is not so bad and i know and you know that me and Ash really did place 1st and 2nd with no cheating and isnt that all that matters? that we know we did our best and did the right thing?

-jenny

Sent from my B-Berry

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From: Haverview, Jane
To: LaPointe, Roland
Sent: Wednesday, November 26, 2008 11:42 PM
Subject: RE: Update on Ashley LeMieux

Roland,

Forget the formalities indeed. I am writing you this note from my laptop in the guest bathroom; it is the only place I have to myself because there are no fewer than nine people lodging in my home tonight in preparation for tomorrow’s holiday. Apparently my sister’s imminent divorce renders her incapable of hosting duties and so the responsibility falls to my seemingly free and easy shoulders. Forgive me, Roland. I’m
writing this into my 2nd glass of wine and I’ve started over already three times so I think it best if I just let it all out.

I was visited tonight again by one of your runners. I’m beginning to feel a bit like Scrooge here, the insistent ghosts of cross-country meets past! But it seems from your last note that LeMieux is set on playing both wraith as well as Tiny Tim? I do not envy you, LaPointe. A hunger strike? I have never in my life—and I am a Smith alum, I’m familiar with all manner of demonstrative acts of supposed justice and valor!—but even this, for me, is a new experience.

But back to the Donnelly girl. She rang my bell just as I’d successfully sedated my sister with a pint of gelato and moved the rest of the clan on to a rousing game of Scattegories. She’s a bit of stray cat, that one. Very apologetic and seemingly aware of the social boundary she was transgressing by coming to my doorstep, which is more than I can say for the other. Anyway, the upshot is that she seems pretty disgusted with the whole affair, a sentiment to which I can raise my glass in solidarity. She says she wants to withdraw her statement and forfeit her own part of the appeal and accept her disqualification. A true sportswoman, through and through.

I assume you and the LeMieux crusader will not go as gently into this good night. The formal mechanisms are still at work, but for the girl’s health and the good face of your team and your school, you may want to consider it, especially now that their stories no longer align and yet my own eye-witness testimony remains unwavering. Rule 5, Section 4, Article 9-b. No contact. None. It was a clear call and this is a good lesson that they’ll need to learn if they plan to run Division 1 some day.
You have a talented team, Roland. 4th place isn’t bad. This will give them the fire they need for next year and if they you all work as hard on training as you have on this campaign of foolishness, they’ll take 1st in states, fair and square.

I’ll leave it off here. I have a turkey to roast in 5 hours. Let me know if you’d like to proceed with an official withdrawal of the appeal and we’ll remit the $35 fee (hell, you can even donate it to the LeMieux Family Fasting Fund).

Happy Holidays,
JH

From: LeMieux, Ashley
To: Donnelly, Jennifer
Sent: Thursday, November 27, 2008 9:23 PM
Subject: gratitude

There comes a time in one’s life and one’s relationships where they get to take stock of what is around them and what poison they have allowed to enter their system without even noticing. Now is such a time. Last night, I looked around my bed and who did I see? Coach, Lauria, Jessica K., Jessica H., Christine, Michelle, Nicole…but not you. My “supposed” best friend.

The sad truth is you must be cracking under the pressure without me there to hold your hand. Coach told me you want to just give up and accept defeat. WHICH IS SO LIKE YOU. You’re not supporting me as a teammate or as a friend at a time when friendship is LITERALLY the only thing sustaining me through each minute of each day.

I’m blocking you and I’m deleting your number. Good luck with your life.

Sent from my SpacePhone
From: Donnelly, Jennifer  
To: LeMieux, Ashley  
Sent: Wednesday, December 24, 2008 11:23 PM  
Subject: merry xmas

I guess i want to wish you a merry xmas bc to be honest i dont know when im gonna talk 2 u next. yr mom said shes getting you a tutor for next semester so you can get better. and i want to remind you i guess of what it seems like you forgot about bc maybe if you read this and think about it you can remind yourself of why this all started in the first place and maybe start getting better again and stop with the whole…hunger strike thing. so i guess this is my xmas gift to you.

it was rainy and cold and there was mud and roots everywhere on the course and you fell in the first few minutes and bashed up your knee and were bleeding but you kept going like you always do. I felt good even with the rain and you did too. it was states! STATES! I kept thinking it while we ran even though i didnt say it and we didnt talk how it was like the end of something running there next to you the way we did for all 4 years.

and you felt that way too. thats why you did it. you werent helping me across the line. you were doing the same thing i was doing. you were happy crying bc you knew the rain would cover up your tears and the mud was already covering up yr bloody knee and if you reached out and you held my hand you would cover up the fact that this was our last run and who knows what after that. and what i never got to tell you is that i held yr hand because i was happy but also because when we were running the last 2 tenths i looked up at the pine trees and it smelled good and clean and cold like winter was starting to come down and i thought about how the next time it would be like this we would be gone. outta school and on to the next thing. and at that moment i knew that for me and
you what ever that next thing is it is not the same and it never will be no matter how much we pretend. did i ever tell you my mom used to play basketball? she showed me the pictures and her stupid 80s hair and the little cheesy uniforms but she looked so happy and strong and smiling then and not like how she is now.

when we came out of the trees and into the last stretch and i wasn't thinking anything, my heart was pounding and my breath was coming big and clean and i pushed off on my big toes and my body felt like this was the only thing it was supposed to do, maybe ever, until you held out your hand and my body was like ok, that too.

and then when she came and ripped off the bib i was thinking gatorade and ice and trophies and then i saw her face and said “F@CK!” before i even knew what it was we did bc i knew somewhere deep down it was too good to be true. for me at least.

and that's what you forgot. that what we did we did because it felt good and sad at the same time and winning states was like the cherry on top and you acted like they took away the whole sundae.

and for that you will always be wrong.

Get Well Soon,
Jenny
Dear <COACH LAPOINTE>:

Thank you for your patience while we processed your request. Your request to appeal ruling <#AA374G-267> has been <DENIED>.

Thank you for your interest in The National Federation of High School Track and Field.
WE ARE ALL OF US WINNING NOW

We were mainly known for the rain before our team won the big game. The game didn’t stop the rain, but the main thing became something a little harder to name.

The main thing was this: we couldn’t stop watching. The game. Our champions. A few of us had recorded it, and a few more of us made copies, and copies of copies, and we played the game on our TV screens in our dark living rooms and it got so nobody asked anyone anymore if they wanted to see it again because they were already seeing it again and again and again.

The actors in the commercials between the plays became the people our family and friends used to be. She always laughs for exactly four seconds, we said. He always spills the spaghetti sauce because he is too sloppy with that spoon.

The food trucks circled our houses and we walked back and forth until the food truck workers came inside to watch with us, until the animals grew bold and took our food from the trucks and into the woods, until the trucks were near empty and foul smelling. The rain came in and browned the avocado slices and the slices of wheat bread, sprouted the sunflower seeds moldy in their plastic tubs.

We were surprised. It was just a game, we said. It wasn’t like we all started hibernating or eating our own young. It’s not like a big snake slithered up from the sea or a giant man fell down from the sky. We said these things but we could no longer tell if we made noise when we said them, so hoarse was our breath in our throats, so deafening were the sounds we made when we watched ourselves winning over and over and over again.
Eleanor stops me before I get to my cubicle. She sends me to Mr. Li’s office on the 39th floor of the compound.

He’s standing at the picture window with his back to me. “Take a seat, Natalie. I’m not going to keep you very long.” He turns and keys a code into his workscreen and projects the display onto the surface of his white desk. “You recognize this?”

It’s the last shoot I styled before my transfer, a GreatOutdoors theme with multiple tie-ins for the SouthwestSierra and Coleman accounts. I watch the video play across his desk. The camera pans wide to show the red rubber SafeTee Kayaks beached on the lake shore, the real smoke curling up from the BROasterRoasterOutdoorGrill.

Mr. Li taps at his workscreen. “There.” He taps again and zooms in. I see a square of blue water and my own arm raised above the surface of the lake, poised to splash down.

“It was a Level 3 infraction and it was documented—obviously—and processed by my immediate supervisor.” Eleanor would fire me outright if she knew I was up here talking back to Mr. Li., but he doesn’t seem bothered. It’s like he hasn’t even heard me. “I was transferred to in-house manipulation months ago.”

He taps his screen again and displays another shot: my forearm deep in a pile of ripe tomatoes at the EarthLuvversGreenMarket shoot. I’d fit a dozen in my bag that day, and my mother used our entire quota of gas for the week to boil and preserve them in a leftover AquaNeutra bottle.

I say nothing.
“It’s curious,” says Mr. Li. “Why steal unprocessed nutrients?” He looks up from the projected image and catches my eye for the first time. He holds my gaze while he taps the projected image away.

Up this close, Mr. Li’s eyes are speckled hazel, yellow on green on brown. I stare into his eyes and feel my breath pulse in my chest.

Mr. Li looks away and taps again at his screen. “I called you here about an opportunity, a way to make use of some of those untapped and previously undisclosed skill modules.” He passes his gaze over my face and turns his mouth into a little smile. “I’m not interested in pursuing punitive measures, but we do have a few things to address.”

“Eleanor, Ms. Stiles, I mean—”

“—recommended you directly for this potential placement, yes. Please review and check the options below.” Mr. Li taps his screen and projects columns of skill modules onto the desk.

My eyes snag on the first category: Kinetic Ability. Before my father died, he taught me to operate the ancient stick-shift sedan. My mother covered bicycle lessons, and the three of us all practiced swimming in the University pool before my parents lost their faculty jobs. We kept at it in the pond on our property nearly every day until Dad got too sick to go outside.

“Here,” Mr. Li says, swiveling his workscreen so I can see the display. It’s my log-in screen: the small, unsmiling photo, the list of available LivingSolutions orders in my queue, the summary of my skills and assets in small type at the bottom of the page. “Just select one of the skills listed and see what happens to your interface.”
I press my fingertip onto a checkbox. *Nektonic Competence (Swimming)*. My log-in screen recalculates and the background turns from the pale yellow given to all Unassigneds to a deeper shade of gold.

“Hm,” Mr. Li says. “Another.”

I hesitate my hand over the projection, then quickly check off the rest of the boxes in Kinetics and more than half of the Unassisted Self-Care column. *Nutrient Processing (Cooking). (Hunting). (Gardening)*. I check off all the skills under Archaic Technologies and sneak a look at Mr. Li’s face when the box for *Firearms (Rifle)* lights up. My cheeks flush and I realize that I’m showing off. I watch my log-in screen refresh and compute, the screen changing from yellow to green, then black, then the deep purple shade I’ve only seen on the screen in Eleanor’s office. I place my hands in my lap and look at Mr. Li.

He looks from the completed inventory to his workscreen. “The results appear to be what I’d predicted.” Mr. Li holds out his hand. “You’ve qualified for a Provisional Assignment as a TotSol Pretender.”

“Provisional?”

His grip is firm and he squeezes my fingers before letting go. “Pending verifiable competence in the field. If all goes well, you’ll receive the commensurate salary and housing adjustments this evening. Ms. Stiles will accompany you to document your work.”

“Today? Now?”

“Natalie.” Mr. Li swipes his hand across his screen, cutting off the projection on the desk. He leans in, cocking his head to the side. “As I see it, you’ve wasted months of
earning potential already. Why waste your skills as an Unassigned? Especially with a dependent elder in your care. Why not disclose?”

I remember the look on Mom’s face when I told her I’d taken the TotSol job. I told her it didn’t matter, that I’d only be doing the basic stuff, like setting up shoots and pasting together images of Products and Users, the kind of thing anyone could do. It would get us a safe place to live and steady access to clean water and NutriSupplements. She shook her head and said that she’d overestimated me.

I shrug. “When do we leave?”

Mr. Li sighs. “Reticence is actually a good skill for a Pretender.” He consults his handheld. “Report to your housing unit and prepare basic supplies for two days. Ms. Stiles will brief you on the details in transport.”

I stand to go, eyeing the fruit displayed near the door.

Mr. Li walks me to the door, then plucks a large green pear from the marble bowl. He draws the fruit to his nose and inhales.

My mouth tingles. “This is an honor,” I say. “A real opportunity, sir.”

He clucks his tongue and drops the fruit into my hands. “Not bad,” he says. “You almost sounded sincere.”

I shake out a two-day portion of NutriSupplements and twist them into a handkerchief. “I’m leaving for a couple of days.”

My mother watches me pack from her bunk.

I roll two TotSol jumpsuits into a tight bundle. I grab the pocketknife from beneath my mattress and stuff it deep into a small canvas bag, then reach further under
the mattress for my father’s notebook. It’s small enough to fit; he wrote in cramped code to keep his ideas portable if we had to move quickly. I realize again how much he knew about how things would change.

I slide down and reach for my mother beneath the gloom of blankets. I take her slender arms in my hands and pull her towards me. She refuses to take the NutriSupplements, says that we can’t be sure what kind of drugs TotSol is blending with the minerals and proteins. I steal small; little bits of real food from the shelves in Eleanor’s office, Products from the photoshoots. My mother planted a window garden of bean sprouts when we first moved to the compound, but got too paranoid that we’d be caught and flushed everything down the SaniTube.

She struggles, but I manage to slip a NutriSupplement into her mouth and clamp her jaw shut until I feel the muscles in her throat contract. “I’m sorry,” I whisper. “Here.” I hand her the pear. “When I come back we’ll get to move to a bigger room,” I say. “And food. No more pills, I promise.”

She glares at the fruit, turning it over in her hands. “What did you tell them?”

“We can’t keep living like this. It’s fine. It’s going to be better this way.”

“What did you tell them you would do?”

I pull myself out of the bunk and grab my bag. “I’ll be back soon.” Our intercom buzzes with the sound of Eleanor’s voice telling me to report to the transport hub. I slide open the door, then lock my mother inside.

We travel in a black van. Eleanor sits beside me in a pair of glasses tinted even darker than the windows, tapping at something on her handheld. I’ve never seen the
driver before, but I recognize Xavi, one of the upper level set dressers from the Product
shoots. He ignores me and rummages through a bag of fabric samples. I’m not sure what
I should be doing, so I squint out the windows, trying to see.

“Don’t bother,” Eleanor says. It’s the first time she’s spoken since I got into the
van. “There’s nothing out there worth looking at. We’ll be in the mountains soon
enough.” She reaches into a leather case and pulls out a slender folder full of papers. “Li
said your inventory was in the uppermost percentile, so this shouldn’t be a problem for
you, right?”

I take the papers. “I was expecting a digital file, but yeah, analog is fine.”

Eleanor smirks and traces a fingertip beneath the full curve of her glossy,
blackberry lips. “From Unassigned to Pretender. That’s quite a jump. You’re what, 20?”

“22.”

“Hm.” Eleanor removes her glasses. “Let me guess. Paranoid conspiracy type?”

She smirks again. “I knew something was off about you from the beginning, even before
that swimming stunt at the shoot.”

“It was hot out. I didn’t think anyone would see.”

“That set was shot from more than 1,000 angles. That GreatOutdoors stuff is
trending hard, and you knew it. You wanted to get caught.”

“Then why did you recommend me?”

She shrugs. “If your assignment gets confirmed, Li says I’ll get a bonus from
regional.”

I look down at the papers. “So what exactly do I have to do?”
Xavi raises his eyebrows, shifting in his seat. Eleanor replaces her glasses and launches into what sounds like a recitation. “One of TotSol’s more visible missions is to pair Products and Users in manipulated images that are easily shared across social networking platforms, thus increasing the perceived value of both Products and Users in a mutually beneficial exchange—”

“I know all that, I’m asking—”

“But TotSol’s diversified services also include pairings of highly skilled individuals with Premium clients in real-world scenarios formerly unavailable due to environmental and social restraints.” She taps the folder on my lap. “In other words, you’ll be employing those doomsday survival skills by acting in some rich person’s fantasy land. It can get weird.”

“But what’s the tie-in? What’s the Product link?”

“There usually isn’t one. We set up the scene using industry professionals, like Xavier here, and then we shoot it or don’t shoot it, depending on whether they want to document the experience or not. Usually not.”

I look over at Xavi but he keeps his eyes down, folding and twisting a small swatch of thick blue material that looks both rubberized and metallic. I open the folder on my lap and see a black and white photograph of a bland looking white guy in his mid-fifties. He stares straight at the camera and doesn’t smile, like he’s posing for an employee badge. There’s no name on the papers, just an ID number: #33748Z1.

53 years old, 192 pounds, just shy of six feet tall. #33748Z1 has estimated that the job will take anywhere from two hours to three days. From what I can gather, we’re supposed to be supplying some sort of big game fish. I imagine that Eleanor’s got the
tank in the back, or maybe there’s a separate vehicle meeting us there. Marlins, probably.

I wonder if I’ll have to clean the thing for him, or just show him how to hold it up, set the scene to make it look like he’s actually caught it. Like gardening and hunting, the licensing fees for fishing weren’t something a regular person could purchase anymore. That, and the ban on bodies of water not treated by AquaNeutraSol, made folks stop swimming, fishing, or even wading more than ten years ago. We knew the risk of swimming in the pond on our property. I wonder sometimes if that was what did it, what made Dad sick.

We arrive hours later at the wall outside of #33748Z1’s property. I only assume there’s a wall; I can’t see anything but darkness when I look out the window. Our driver speaks into an intercom and I hear him use the full name of the company, TotalSolutions. No one calls it that, not Eleanor, not Mr. Li, and not the Users who send their family portraits and bank account information over our SoSecure interface. I rarely write a note when I send back the finished image of the family reclining cozy on the latest midlevel SlothFam or DenDenizenz furniture set. When I do, I sign it, “Natalie, TotSol Imaging Technician.”

Somewhere ahead, a pair of heavy gates slide open and the van inches forward. Eleanor stirs beside me, gathering her briefcase into her arms. We drive in silence for another slow mile.

After a few minutes, I see light beginning to filter through the dark of the tinted window. I press my forehead to the glass and the light grows brighter. “Is it morning already?” I turn to Eleanor.
She’s backlit by the light coming through her window; a white halo glows around her dark brown skin and black blazer. Her ghostly silhouette shakes its head. “No, but Premium clients don’t always follow the time zones of their localities. If this guy wants it to be morning, then morning it shall be.”

I reach for my bag and the van stops suddenly.

“Is this…?”

Eleanor nods. “Good luck.” Behind her, the van door slides open. “Just remember, it gets easier after the first time.”

The house looms above us, three stories of brick and tall glass windows, the circular room at the top rising to a pointed roof. It looks like something out of a picture book from when I was a kid, even down to the low, white fence and the spiky field of freshly cut grass. A man in crisp khakis stands in front of the large front door. He walks towards us across the floodlit lawn, and I can make out the bulge of a small handgun holster strapped to his right side. Xavi and Eleanor trail back, flanking me.

The man approaches and introduces himself as Smith. He holds out his hand.

“Welcome,” says Smith. His palm is soft and warm, despite the coolness of the night.

“I’ll show you to your lodgings and then we’ll get started right away.”

He leads us to a small outbuilding behind the main house.

“You’ll find some basic supplies here. Coffee, eggs from our coop, some fruit and a loaf of bread. Our kitchen staff will prepare a meal for you while I take you down to the site.”
I nod and work to keep my face neutral. There’s a wooden bowl of apples and bananas beside a loaf of brown bread wrapped in a linen towel. My mouth begins to water and I realize that I skipped my evening NutriSupplement during transport.

Eleanor raises her eyebrows slightly, inclines her head towards our host. I feel like I should say something. “The site,” I repeat. “Yes, let’s go ahead and start setting up. Will we be using a natural or artificial body of water?”

Smith turns and appraises me. “Natural, as usual. It was treated within the month. We’ll forward the documentation to your employer.”

Eleanor runs a hand over her short, tight curls. “That won’t be necessary. We’re pleased to do business here once again and we trust that all the appropriate safety protocols are being observed.”

Again? Meaning she’s been here before?

Smith tells us to stow our things in the closets. I hesitate before settling my bag on one of the broad cedar shelves. I feel inside for my pocketknife, but then Eleanor comes up behind me and I pull out the folder instead.

“Just leave it,” she says.

“Why didn’t you tell me you’d been here before?” I whisper.

“Calm down.” She prods me into the main room of the small house. “It’s easier the first time if you go in without a lot of premeditation. But yeah, he’s a repeat client. It should be easy enough if you stay cool. Come on.”

I follow Smith along an artificially lit path through the pines. Xavi follows me and Eleanor brings up the rear. My parents had pines on our property, and oaks and elms and a small citrus grove, too. When I was little, they taught me how to irrigate the field
and the orchard with rainwater we’d collected in the tarps out back. I thought then that this was how everyone lived, working outdoors and smelling sap and eating small, hardy vegetables from the earth. I wonder about #33748Z1, if he’ll be someone like my father, a former University guy. Instead of hiding like they did, maybe he turned corporate and earned enough to keep his land.

Smith stops and I see that we’ve reached a small, sandy beach overlooking a sheltered cove of flat, shallow looking water. A dozen or so yards from shore, a man stands up to his waist in water. He’s turned away from us, the water around his thick body calm as a plane of glass, his pale back lit up by hidden light.

#33748Z1.

The man’s arms fan out at his sides and his palms pat the water lightly, as if to soothe some unseen agitation. Even from this distance, I recognize the slack curves of his bulky shoulders. This is a man fed on meat and milk, on fresh fruit and the yellow yolks of eggs. His skin seems to grow whiter as I take him in: pale, spoiled thing. He starts to move, turning around in a slow revolution to face our group at the shore.

His eyes seek out mine, dark and deep set in his sallow, smiling face. He looks like no one, like anyone. I meet his eye.

The first time I went fishing with my father, I was struck by the muscled thrash of our catch, the way the violence of their scaly bodies contrasted with their cold, wet eyes.

#33748Z1 stays still, calm. The thrashing is all in his eyes, flicking across my body and face like he is measuring every part of me.

My tongue prickles, remembering the salty give of fish between my teeth.

“Well,” says Smith. “I’ll let you get started. Breakfast will be ready in an hour.”
I feel Xavi come up behind me and gather my hair away from my neck. He pulls it taut and twists it into a knot, then stretches a silicone cap over my skull. “That AquaNeutra stuff can be a bitch on long hair,” he murmurs.

My skull feels tight, my ears dulled to the gentle sounds of the water on the sand. “Eleanor?” My voice sounds far off and small beside the motionless spread of water and trees. “Where’s the fish? Weren’t we supposed to bring fish?”

In the water, #33748Z1 extends his pale arms. He cups his hands and raises them, letting the water dribble down and splash the surface. His face is immobile, smiling. He curves his arms like he’s waiting for my embrace, like two fleshy hooks pointed straight at my heart.

Behind me, I hear the sound of something rustling, and then the two of them are pulling the zippers on either side of my jumpsuit, skinning me to my underthings. Xavi’s hands pin my elbows behind my back, and Eleanor darts around my middle, snipping the fabric away with a short, sharp blade. I cry out, but my mouth is suddenly filled: a heavy rubber tube spreads my lips wide. I shudder, naked in the cool air, but then I am suddenly clothed again, my arms bound down, my ankles pressed tight against one another beneath a sheath of shimmery blue, supple rubber: scales.

Eleanor pushes at my back, her fingers insistent. I take tiny, bound steps, my bare feet sinking into the slurry of sand. Eleanor is close enough that I feel her breath on my earlobe. Xavi murmurs, runs an appraising hand over the curve of my spine before I stumble, then flop into the water.

My cheek hits the shallow surface and I gasp. I feel the sensation of air entering the unseen channels beneath my scales, buoying me up. I remember what my father
taught me. I turn my face to the side and try to breathe through my tube. I struggle in my scales and feel rage pulse through my body. I push with my hands and the thick, floating material pushes back. I gnash my teeth and water drips down my throat, brackish with tears.

I flip onto my back and catch sight of my tail shimmering beneath the lights.

Somewhere close by, a camera clicks on and off.

I turn my face back and forth, gasping as the shore falls away beneath me. The water rises up and I writhe against it, swimming further and further away from shore, swimming towards the only relief I can see: those pale, waiting arms.
The husband came back from the war and did the usual thing of drinking and hitting the wife. The wife was ashamed of how thrilling it was to have the husband so close, his fingers on her wrists, his eyes all over her face. He had seen a number of very terrible, very bloody and bad things, and yet she, the wife, in her mild blue apron and shirtdress, could provoke in the husband the kind of rage she knew he’d needed in those soupy swamps, those hot, jungle lands.

It went on like this and then one day the wife decided, enough, and she kissed the baby’s head and she drank a good bit of the kitchen bleach and she waited for whatever it was that was going to come next.

What came next was a kind of roaring. A gurgling started in her belly and grew. The wife felt she was being boiled or born, turned from water to steam. She didn’t die and she wasn’t any longer alive.

In the bathroom mirror, the wife made some croaking noises at what used to be her face. In the living room, the wife slid the plastic cover from the velveteen divan. In the nursery, the wife sliced the baby’s head nearly off in a single gesture. Red red red red red. The nursery walls the carpet the wife’s hands the baby head the baby’s bassinet.

The husband came home like he always did and it was like all the other times he came home were rehearsals for this time, the only time that counted. The wife felt the roaring and everything in the home was all at once black and white and red all over.

Do you remember that joke, the wife asked. The one about the newspaper?
The husband made bitter bowel churning sounds that the wife had only previously heard coming from her own mouth. The sounds made the red wife laugh out loud, sharp and clattering, like a drawer full of knives falling all at once, falling all around.
1.

On the day we call the cops on him at school, L. tells me he’s always been a fighter.

_No guns, though._ He looks up at me, the teacher holding him here in this little room. He’s a skinny kid sitting on a rickety chair. _Not before what happened._

What happened was L. was riding his bike and some bad boys shot him in the spine. He wasn’t supposed to walk again. He walks fine now. He swaggers. His khaki pants are too big and he cinches his belt up higher than the other boys.

L.’s uncle tells me he has nerve damage and I’ve seen his legs shake when he has to stand too long. He covers it well. He’s a fighter.

2.

E. gets arrested in a big group of boys weeks before the 10th grade spring assessments. In the courtroom, I sit next to his mother and sister and we wait for the attorney, who is late. When the judge reads the arresting officer’s statement, I realize I know all the boys who were there that night. The boys E. was allegedly with when he allegedly put a gun in a white man’s face and allegedly forced him out of his car. The man described a gunman the cops have determined is E. Medium height, medium build teenage male with medium-length dreadlocks. The description matches half the boys in the group.
The judge allows me to read a short statement. I praise E. for regularly completing homework, for coming to school every day on time, for staying out of trouble. I say that I know the boys. I say that I believe they made some bad choices. I say that I can’t picture E. with a gun in his hand.

*So you know these kids?* The prosecutor drones a list of names.

D. was expelled, I say. M. stopped coming. I haven’t seen T. since I taught him in the 8th grade.

The prosecutor shakes his head. E. is a bad boy, a boy who hangs out with boys who get expelled.

This last part is true. These boys are E.’s friends.

Across the room, E. sits quietly in an orange jumpsuit. He looks bigger than his age, blurs into the other men in their jumpsuits, all of them together waiting to discussed by those of us on the other side of the room. I look at him, but we’re too far away to make contact.

Much later, I will imagine the carjacked man’s fear, the dark of the night, the flip book of mug shots at the station. I think about how easy it must have been to point to someone, anyone. To look at E.’s hard face in his booking shot and think: yes. He looks like the one.

E. is held for nearly two years, until the case is dropped. I never really understand what happened, or how, and neither does his mother. His court appointed lawyer rarely answers calls. They release E. just after New Year’s Day. When he calls to tell me the news, I am 1200 miles away. He asks me about school, tells me he can’t wait to go back. He tells me he’s thinking about an alternative school for older students with built-in
vocational training. I wish him luck, but when I think about checking in a few weeks later, I realize I never saved his number in my phone.

3.

The gun doesn’t belong to anyone, it’s just there. It’s in a backpack. The backpack is on the floor of a classroom in which teenage boys and girls reluctantly recite Shakespeare. How it comes to light I never find out. Who finds it, who has the instinct to pull one of the boys and the backpack out of class, who pulls the zipper open: these things I don’t know. There are only all the moments before the gun and then the moment of the gun, which is a moment that goes on and on.

4.

The money from the dance will go to the family of the dead boy, but no one wants to think about a dead boy when there’s a dance, so there’s a fundamental problem before we even move the tables in the cafeteria.

When A. leaves the dance, I know he is leaving to go cry. He cries angry, like a boy, his face puffed out, snorting, his breath like a horse. A. is a 9th grader, and so was the dead boy. I taught them both, but at a different school, a different time. I learned then how A. got his nickname. Turtle. He liked to hide under desks and then throw them. He had his hard shell, and then he didn’t.

The dead boy had transferred to our school just weeks before the day he was shot. It’s become a cautionary tale; the teachers walk a little more upright after the news comes
in, armed with the story of his death. The dead boy was skipping school that day. He was shot breaking into a house. *If only he had come to school*, we think, and sometimes say.

A. walks away from me when I follow him out of the dance, but he doesn’t walk very far. Nobody knew the dead boy but A. Nobody really knew him like A. did. They only care about the DJ, the new clothes, the chance to touch each other in the dimly lit space, the ghost smell of the day’s lunch forgotten in the mix of cologne and perfume and snapping bubble gum.

A. knew him. A. knows.

No one wants to talk about how the dead boy’s mother sounded when she spoke at the dance, the way she blurred her words together. Instead, they talk about A.

*Did you hear? Boy was crying like a bitch!*

After the dance, he is a changed boy. His anger is the only thing that reminds him of his friend. He holds it close and holds it in. He walks around flashing angry dead boy eyes to remind them all of what happened. To tell them they didn’t know the dead boy, not really. To prove how they lie.

A. walks around until even he forgets why his angry eyes look different than all the other angry eyes. To remind him of his clever, crinkled turtle eyes would fill him with sadness that toes the line of terror. Dead boys never go down scared. They go down fighting.

5.

*You gotta be crazy not to have a gun out there.*

I hear this, in various forms and phrasings, from nearly every boy who trusts me. These are good boys, boys who say they want to go to college. Boys who raise their
hands in class, who tuck in their shirts when I raise my eyebrows, boys who run towards me in big loping strides to show me a good grade on their report card.

_Snitches gets stitches._

Also, I think, reduced sentences.

Another teacher and I find B. and K. skipping detention beneath the raised pillars of our school’s portable classrooms. I’m struck by how childlike they look. Long spider limbs folded up, guilty faces shining in the dark. I lecture them about safety, about responsibility, about maturity. When they are safely in the office and their parents called, my colleague and I finally look at each other and laugh. How absurd! How very sixteen! To hide _under_ the school? Who does that? We laugh until tears stream down our faces, until we are snorting and hiccuping.

And then we go back under the building with flashlights and we search the soft ground for a gun.

6.

In a dream, L. comes to the door and I am in a pink ball gown, half drunk. The table inside is full of friends in carnival masks. We are laughing, drinking bottles of wine.

He’s been running. He asks me to give him the gun in my hand.

There is no gun in my hand, and then there is. There are no other boys out there in the street, and then there are.

L. takes the gun and he is gone.

In my hand I have a folder full of pages that float off into the stairwell. I’ve documented. I’ve ensured compliance. The word I want to write is: _complicit._ I chase the
pages and read all the things that L. has done and all the things he has yet to do. I chase pages of smashed windows, threatened girls, punched boys, tackled bus drivers, robbed houses, emptied guns. I grab for the pages, the litany of L.

The dream is silent as sirens that sing all day until you’ve stopped hearing. L. is an alarm that sounds over and over until he becomes a heartbeat I cannot hear. *Silence is Violence*. The city throbs with an invisible pulse that pumps blood into every corner. We breathe in and in and in.
My stalker is getting cold feet. I don’t know what happened, only that one day he was my stalker, and the next he stopped calling. It’s been three days, and now he’s just acting like a regular guy.

“Hey you,” I say to the beep, “where’d you run off to?” I’m no detective, but I got his number from an Internet service. It used to say “blocked” when he first called, and now it displays his number. He’s calling from El Paso, Texas. “You’re being foolish,” I tell him. “Call me and we’ll work it out.”

My stalker called me on a Saturday morning. I woke up to three missed calls that weren’t my mother. On the fourth call, I answered.

Hello? I said.

He answered, Hello?

We did that for a while, made a loop of hellos like we were each the one who had called the other, like it was all some big misunderstanding. Then my stalker started speaking fast and in some kind of language I didn’t understand. Mama, he said. Hermana. Verde. Oh, Spanish, I thought. I figured someone was in trouble and he was calling me to get help. I seemed like a person who could help someone like that.

I don’t understand you, I said. I’m sorry.

That first time I hung up on him. He called again and it was more of the same, and then I made a pot of coffee and let the phone ring and ring and ring, vibrating across the kitchen counter until it fell to the floor and scared the cat away from her water dish. Oh come on, I said, but she’d already run out of the room.
Around the fifteenth time he called, he left a message.

Hennie, he said. Come on, Hennie. Pick up the phone. Hennie, Hennie, come on and pick up the phone.

I listened to it a few times before I realized the message was in English. Now we were getting somewhere. Hennie? I thought. I put the voicemail on speaker and pulled a carton of eggs out of the fridge. When he called again I was on the couch with the plate on my knees but I muted the TV and listened to what he had to say. I still didn’t get most of it.

I don’t know you, I said.

But I know you, Hennie. I know you.

Oh, I said. You’re trying to say Jenny!

I remembered the time I was eight and waiting for the bus on the corner by my house. My little sister was sick and staying home from daycare with my mom, and so I walked out there alone with my little backpack. I wanted to be helpful to the man that pulled up in the car and asked where he could find Blowjob Street. I knew the names of six streets. I could walk to the store and the park. I wanted to help, but I had never heard of the street. Was I hearing him wrong? I pulled my hood from my ears. And then he pointed down. Because I need to find someone to suck on this, he said.

You have the wrong number, I told my stalker.

You gave it to me.

No, I said. You just heard my name on my voicemail.

He laughed then. Okay, okay, he said. You smart, Hennie. I know you, okay?
He said a few more things and I repeated them back to him and he laughed and I wrote them down with a pencil on a takeout menu from the couch.

*Pelotas michinados.* I said it like a question.

*Apretada,* he said, like it was something I didn’t want to be.

I went to my laptop and typed the words into an online translator. Oh, I said.

Yeah, he laughed. Oh.

I was quiet then and he was too. I could hear the cat eating my eggs in the next room. She made a lot of noise for a creature so small and pampered. I remembered how the first time I talked to a boy on the phone I was thirteen, and in the kitchen because we didn’t have a cordless. I concentrated really hard on whispering, and then just said nothing, and then I noticed that he was saying nothing, too. It was all very familiar.

Another time I fell asleep with the phone pressed to my ear and the man on the other line was a man I loved who was somewhere far away. His sun was already coming up. Look, Jenny, he said, the sunrise is fucking spectacular. Outside my window wasn’t even a moon, just the neon glow of the bodega across the street. Yeah, I said. Fucking totally.

When we finally stopped being quiet it was me who hung up. I had a pile of laundry to wash. My stalker called me all through the day and it got so I liked it, the insistent buzz against my thigh as I watched my underwear turn in the dryer.

On the subway I wore headphones, but my phone was dead and I couldn’t play music. I looked at the face of every man I could see, really looked. *Are you my mother?* Isn’t that a book or something? From when we were kids? *Are you* my stalker?

It’s been three days now since I told him where I lived. He didn’t say anything,
but I could hear his breath. He didn’t ask, but I told him. That and other things. He was a good listener at first, but I worry that he’s gotten bored.

Come find me, I said. And then I told him my street. Just get to the city, then drive around and ask. You’ll find it.

El Paso is the sixth most populated city in Texas. It sits across the border from Ciudad Juárez. I like to think my stalker was named for that city on the other side. Juárez, I want to call him.

I wonder into his head, into what it’s like to be Juárez. I sit at the dirty kitchen table. My wife is gone with the truck to wash clothes at the big cattle ranch, and the kids have been gone much longer than that. I keep the phone plugged into the wall and punch in numbers until it rings. I hear the dry claws of the dogs in the dirt and the beep of a smoke alarm. The phone rings and the alarm beeps and it’s too late for any of this, phone or alarm. They weren’t there when I woke that night, the walls all ash, all smoke and that hungry crunch like insects chewing. The phone we got new and the alarm, too, and we live in a different place and all I do is sit and push buttons and listen to the small beeps and the ring and the way they layer with the dog’s curled claws in the dirt outside.

Then he hears a voice. Or I do, if I’m still being Juárez. On the other line is a girl, a gringa. Outside the windows, the mountains are everywhere and there is no curtain. We are together and we are not alone anymore and I think this time I want to be the one that goes quiet into the flames. I watch for the sun out there rising, yellow warm as butter.
GOOD OLD-FASHIONED PEOPLE

1.

Snow fell from a gray sky onto the Grand Hotel Niagara. Chet slowed his truck around the traffic circle and parked on an empty side street. He’d never heard of anyone from town staying at the Grand. He didn’t think it would look right to leave the delivery truck overnight in the lot. Lena had chosen the place and she’d made a point of telling him about Marilyn Monroe and DiMaggio staying there in ’52, back when she was a girl and her mother ran the hotel switchboard. He’d said it sounded great, sure. Downtown, right next to the Falls.

Chet shut the lobby door hard and entered with his head bowed, the carpet thick and warm beneath his thin loafers.

Lena walked towards him from the fireplace, her narrow hips squeezing between a pair of leather wingback chairs. Chet swallowed once and couldn’t think of a thing to say. She kept her hair long, braided and coiled like silver cable. The soft fuzz by her ears, backlit by the fire, shone white as his own. Her dress was buttoned down the front like a man’s shirt, and over it she wore a coarse cable-knit sweater that opened in the front. It was the kind of thing a fisherman would wear, and he smiled like a fool, pleased at how sensible she was, how warm.

The last time he’d seen her was the night of Audrey’s funeral. They’d met at an all-night diner in Buffalo. She hadn’t attended the service. He’d come to her dry-eyed, seeking comfort. Lena had ordered tea and kept herself apart from him, not even an elbow within reach as he walked her to her car. It seemed almost an afterthought when
she turned to him before unlocking her sedan. The name of the hotel and a suggestion to meet in three weeks’ time.

Now, she pushed a folded newspaper at him with both hands.

“Chet, here. The key’s inside,” she said. “Seventh floor.”

The elevator ride up was slow and the mirrored walls trembled. He ran a hand over his face and wondered what Lena would think of him when they were finally alone. When he was a younger man and newly married, Audrey had been crazy for his face; she’d stroked it like a pet. His skin was coarser now from decades of cold and work and alcohol, but his chin and nose were still strong. Overall, he thought he’d held up.

The room key was a metal skeleton key, long and slender and tarnished, and he was glad. A card, a little rectangle of plastic, wouldn’t look right in a place this old. He had a key like this at home for the door to the crawlspace by the kitchen, still full with Audrey’s photo albums and knitting projects. His daughter Maggie had called him last summer from her honeymoon in Ireland sounding like a little girl again: all the B&Bs have skelly keys, like the one for Mommy’s room. She’d sent a postcard every day. He’d lined them up on the dining room table, pleased that the months of trailing Maggie to the bridal shop had resulted in a beautiful party, and then ten picture postcards of sheep and rocks and sea. He’d felt so embarrassed in the bridal shop, he and Maggie wandering the racks of frothy lace and satin, the smell of Audrey’s antiseptic hospital room clinging to them both. But Lena had welcomed them to the shop warmly, and did what Audrey could not: guided Maggie toward a dress that made Chet’s breath catch in his throat.

Chet didn’t want to think of Audrey and Maggie; he didn’t want to be alone in the elevator at all. But Lena was careful, she always was. It had taken him months to
convince her to join him for coffee. The second afternoon in the bridal shop, he’d lingered with Lena near the register while Maggie and her friends snapped pictures of trains and trims. Lena stood apart from him, her careful gaze on the girls.

It wasn’t as if she didn’t know who he was. Lena and Audrey had finished at LaSalle in the same class—’65—and Lena’s husband was just a year younger than Chet. Everyone said it was a shame when he’d passed so young. Chet had always wondered why Lena hadn’t remarried. She’d been beautiful then; she was handsome now and seemed to know a thing about endurance.

By the fourth visit to the bridal shop with Maggie, Chet could distinguish the scent of Lena’s perfume beneath the layers of too-sweet potpourri. He’d brought a business card from the liquor store, underlined his name next to the word “owner,” and added his home number to the back. He still wore his wedding band, he’d worn it until the day after Audrey’s funeral, but he thought his visits to the shop alone with the girls made his situation obvious. Lena eventually agreed to coffee, an occasional movie, and once, a touring musical matinee downtown, but she’d never been to his home, not once, and he’d never been permitted inside the upper half of the bridal shop that housed her apartment. Chet knew that his interest in Lena had begun as curiosity; he wondered how she’d learned, so successfully, to be alone. She was always meticulously groomed and dressed; she dictated their meetings with the same level of exactitude and an almost professional detachment. And now, this. A hotel and the line about DiMaggio. Like they were slummers doing something wrong, instead of two good old-fashioned people.
In the room, Chet hung his coat in the closet, lumped his gloves over a hanger to dry, and wished for a mini-bar. The water from the tap was cold and tasted of bleach. He dried the glass and put it back, lining it up with the others and replacing the paper seal.

Her knock was light, but he opened it before she was through, her fist still up at chest level.

Lena’s lips parted in surprise, but no sound came out.

“Are you going to hit me?” he teased, then took her clenched hand to his lips.

She glanced right and left, her mouth frozen in a silent shh. A door opened down the hall and she pressed inside the room, freeing her hand to shut the door.

It was over in fifteen minutes, and afterwards Chet was quiet, his breathing still labored and his body flushed.

Lena had been quiet, her sounds more like surprise than pleasure, a little questioning, “Oh?” in his ear. He couldn’t even remember it feeling good; he felt numb still, and embarrassed. It had been a kind of release, like a day’s piss held in too long. She deserved something different from him after all this time, after all those long looks and chaste coffeshop conversations. He closed his eyes to gather his thoughts, and then it was dark and the blanket was on, his eyes gummy with sleep and Lena awake beside him.

“I’m sorry, I must have dozed off.” Chet’s voice was thick and he moved to roll towards her.

Lena pulled the blanket higher. “Chet—”

“Easy,” he whispered. His eyes sought hers in the darkness.

“Chet, I’d like to be alone.”
Chet opened his mouth, but nothing came. During his good years with Audrey, he could never keep quiet. They would lay in their narrow bed and Chet would talk to the creases of her neck, her knees, his words alive in the wet cleft of her. He shook his head, gradients of gray and white and black bringing the room into dim focus. Now he sat up, the carpet soft beneath his socks. “I must have fallen right asleep.” Chet bent to pull off one sock, then the other, ignoring Lena’s high sigh behind him.

“Chet? Listen, I mean I want you to leave. I’ll take a taxi home in the morning. I’m sorry.”

Chet navigated the space between the bed and the wall and felt his way to the bathroom. He returned with two glasses of water and placed them on the small table that sat between the two queen beds. Chet pulled back the covers on the second bed as Lena moved to switch on the light.

Lena pressed at her neck. “If you don’t mind, Chet. I could use some time alone.” Her mouth dropped open in a yawn, strands of saliva stretching at the corners.

He blushed at the sudden candor of her body and nodded. “I get it. I’ll stay right over here, out of your hair. You get some rest now.” He lay down without waiting for her to respond. He felt more awake, having gone against her wishes. It was foolish, just as foolish as her insistence to go to the movies in Buffalo or Lewiston, where they wouldn’t see anyone they knew, so afraid was Lena of shaming a dead woman she hadn’t spoken to in thirty years. He would no more walk the three snowy blocks to his car now than Audrey would appear in the room, full of life and giving Lena whatever it was she seemed to think that she deserved. “Take a drive tomorrow,” Chet murmured, acting
sleepier than he felt. He rolled over, his back to her. “Niagara-on-the-Lake. Real nice lunches.”

If Audrey had ever, he thought, but that wasn’t a thought worth thinking. Audrey hadn’t needed to kick him out of bed. Chet slept in Maggie’s old room willingly those last few years before Audrey got sick. He’d lay there in the dark some nights listening for her. She wouldn’t have had to say a thing, just come and stand by the bed. That would have been enough. But they’d turned away from one another; there was no going back.

Lena clicked off the light without another word. Chet rolled his head on the pillow, eyes closed. He wasn’t a brute and he wasn’t a bad man. He and Audrey never let other people know about their troubles, especially not Maggie, although having her so late might have been what changed things. He could see that now. Chet could never rightly tell who started it, though he’d tried to place the blame over and over in his mind. It didn’t much matter either way; his silence and her distance became two bears sharing the same dark hole. These were old thoughts, tired thoughts, and it felt strange to wonder them with Lena there in the dark, just beyond his reach. It wasn’t that he wanted to tell Lena these things. He’d said all he needed to in those last months in Audrey’s hospital room. Only when she was sick and silent and locked away inside herself could Chet begin to speak to her again. He sat and talked about everything: where they’d gone wrong, the ticking sound the thermostat kept making, even Lena. Lena in her bridal shop helping Maggie into the gown. Lena and the copied pages of poetry she carried in her purse. The nurses patted Chet’s arm when he left Audrey’s room, praising his patience, his devotion. It was shameful. All that praise for something he should have been doing all along.
Lena woke when the first stripe of morning appeared beneath the heavy cream valance. She lay a while longer, willing the drapes to part on their own, to flood the room with golden light. She allowed herself a moment to imagine how it could be: their skin soft and honeyed in the sun, a tray of fruit and toast between them, strong coffee in china cups. Look out the window at the noiseless snow. Chet’s willfulness was a surprise, as was her reaction to his decision to stay. It was what she’d needed: a show of force, a glimpse of a different sort of man beneath the kind, grieving father. It disturbed her that she was excited by his refusal, by his casual disregard of her wishes. It was better, wasn’t it, to stay to one’s self, not to have to parse through the emotions in one’s own heart? She’d built much of her life around this belief, wrapped it in the guise of hard work and faith. Surely her prudence would lead to a kind of dignity.

She reached for the leather bound menu on the nightstand, being careful to move without waking Chet or disturbing the full tumblers he’d placed there in the night. She would order for them. Something rich. Eggs Benedict, French toast, Croque-Madame. Forget the fruit for once. Lena stretched beneath the blankets, skimming her legs with the flat of her palm. She’d taken her time with her toilette, shaving her legs slowly and applying a cream one of the boys had given her for Christmas. She could smell it still on the sheets. Sweet almond. Made, Pat and Rob told her, by fellow businesswomen in a small, war-torn part of the world. She felt like a good mother, a good citizen, just by virtue of using the cream and thinking about those women. They knew, as she did, how to go on after tragedy and provide something beautiful to the world.
Chet rolled once, didn’t wake. Lena eased out of the bed and over to the small case she’d left in the room before meeting Chet in the lobby. Her satin robe was dark with wrinkles, but she felt like she belonged in a room with a sleeping man when she tied it beneath her breasts. She placed the phone on the edge of the bed, then moved into the bathroom, stretching the long cord as far as it would go and closing the door behind her. The girl on the line had a high, sweet voice, and Lena was reminded again of her mother, the way she would set her hair and dress each evening after dinner for her shift on the switchboard. Lena was the oldest. She knew to bathe her brother and sister and put them to bed, to check on her father and give him the pills her mother left each night in a paper cup. At ten, she’d imagined herself a young Florence Nightingale. She liked the feeling of moving through the house and checking the locks and windows, turning off the lights the way her mother taught her. Her mother was more like Lucille Ball, painted and pretty, her voice sugary when Lena called each night with her bedtime report. It wasn’t until Lena was in her teens that she questioned her mother’s decision to make a child responsible for an ailing adult and two small children. She realized then that most mothers didn’t put on makeup and go out to work in the evenings, or stay in their wrappers and drink coffee in the mornings while their children ate cold cereal and walked to the bus stop alone.

Lena ordered more than they could possibly eat. Afterward she stood for a moment in the bathroom, listening to the crackle and silence on the line. Chet would be startled to wake at the sound of the knock on the door; she knew she should wake him now, but was unprepared for such an intimate, domestic act. She didn’t want to see his face flicker into awareness. She didn’t want to talk. She wanted only to skip to the quiet
of breakfast, the morning light, the promise of companionable hours behind a closed door on a Sunday.

Instead, she moved quietly through the room. She applied lipstick, threw the crumpled receipts and used tissues from her purse into the bin beside the window. The phone the boys had bought for her still seemed out of place, too large and efficient in the soft nest of mints and newspaper clippings she kept for times she needed to wait. They were good boys, men now, far away but diligent about sending pictures of their children and short, cheery notes; it seemed harder for them somehow to use the phone to hold a conversation, however brief. Lena was surprised then, to see a new voice message. It was Sunday; the shop was closed as it had been every Sunday for the past 30 years. Lena felt a quick pulse of guilt, imagining the explanations she would make next Sunday at mass. She’d gone to the 4:00 service at St. Mike’s the previous afternoon before coming to the Grand, but Saturday never seemed to count.

Lena thumbed the screen. Her boys were preoccupied with their own families and besides, the number was unfamiliar. Lena settled on the ottoman by the window and pressed the phone to her ear. She played the recording twice and then a third time.

It was a policeman, young enough to mumble his name when he should have slowed down and stated it plain. An explosion on the street. Gas leak. The policeman left a number to call but Lena was already buttoning up the front of her dress. *Your property has suffered significant damage.*

Her hands shook against her chest like a pair of small animals she was trying to hold. Pat had taken home the class gerbil once when he was seven. Rob was only five, and Lena was still keeping the shop closed until noon and staying in bed with the blinds
drawn most mornings. The sound of the thing scratching at the cage had driven her crazy until she released it in the yard and placed the cage upside down on the floor with the door flung ajar. Staged a crime scene and blamed the boys when they came in from play, their negligence. Rob had wailed but Patrick said nothing, and Lena had felt judgment in his silence.

*Your* property. No one remembered that it had been his too, theirs. Lena clasped her fingers to her mouth and bit down to still herself. She put on her sweater and scarf and reached for the coat on the rack before she realized she was still barefoot.

“Lena?” Chet sat up in a series of small, grunting movements.

She’d entirely forgotten he was there. It carved her up, this willingness to forget about others in the presence of her own, more compelling emotions. “I have to go.” She hated that she had to sit and stoop to pull on her socks and boots.

“No,” Chet said. “No, pet.”

She looked up at the name. She’d warned him. They weren’t children. “The shop,” she said.

“It’s Sunday.”

“No,” she said. “There’s been an accident.”

Chet did not tell her to wait, did not ask questions. She watched him without wanting to, the way he stood from the bed and moved to and then past her, reaching for his coat and gloves and sliding into his own shoes without socks, despite the cold. She was the one to pause, to call after him.

He turned just before he reached the door, his eyes still hooded with sleep. “You can tell me on the way. We’ll take the truck.”
“Let me,” Lena said.

“Drive?”

“Let me take the truck. You stay.”

“Here?” Chet unzipped his coat and came towards her again. “What’s going on? Is this some kind of fib to get me out of here?” He reached for her.

Lena let him take her in his arms. His coat smelled like smoke and the cold old smell of the liquor store’s walk-in cooler, where he kept cases of beer and champagne. Taking a taxi to the Grand was foolish. She wanted to push past Chet to her own car, but it was at home, parked in front of the shop. And what? Destroyed now? She couldn’t very well pull up alone in his delivery truck, but it would be worse still if Chet drove her there. She couldn’t trust herself not to do what she was doing now, crumpling into him and crying in front of the police and who knows who else. Her neighbors. What if someone was hurt? She imagined blood on the snow and stood up straight again and wiped her eyes. “We never should have come here.”

Chet held her elbows. “Lena, for God’s sake. What is it, a fire? Busted water pipe? Come on. I’ll drive and you call your insurance.”

“This was a mistake,” Lena said. “I should have been there.”

Chet pulled her to the door and she let him, scuffing her boots on the carpet as if she was a child. He didn’t let her go when he reached for the security bolt, and this is how the boy with the weighted cart of silver trays saw them; the door opened before he had a chance to knock. Lena patted her fingers beneath her eyes and smiled like nothing was wrong. The boy looked away. He seemed to make himself a little smaller and pulled the cart to the side to allow them to pass.
“We decided to dine out after all,” Lena called. The elevator made its sour creaking sounds. She fluffed her hair and smiled again at the boy, who was gazing stupidly towards them. “Charge the meal to the room and be sure to take care of your tip, dear.” Lena watched the boy looking at them, then followed his gaze to the sight of the Chet’s ankles, bony and bare beneath the salt-stained hem of his slacks.

The police determined that the blast originated in the kitchen of the house directly behind Lena’s, one street over. Something to do with fumes and harmful chemicals, powerful enough to send the bathroom through the double block windows of the bridal shop.

Bolts of fine lace frothed over the shelves, pockmarked with fragments of mildewed tile. A lone claw foot lay atop a crushed hatbox. Ribbon tangled in the wheels of Lena’s upended office chair. A bar of soap wedged in the ceiling tile. Silvery dust from a shattered mirror haloed a gash in the wall like fireplace ash. The wind blew through the broken windows and needled tears from Lena’s eyes. She gripped the collar of her coat tighter.

What had Chet said? Some sort of drug lab? She’d tried to send him away once they arrived, but again he’d refused. He stood talking to the officers on the sidewalk, but she couldn’t listen and had walked towards the shop, alone. She pictured young girls snorting powders with their legs spread on the filthy bathroom counter that lay upended in her store. She guessed at the form the drugs would take. Powder seemed explosive enough. Her thoughts buzzed like horseflies as she picked her way across the room. It must have been a fine, tiled counter once in a fine house, the kind you would rest a baby
on before bathing it in the sink, cradling its head with a sturdy hand. Her brain was a loose net, trapping images. What was the next step? She placed a hand on her chest to feel the solid retort of her heart. And then she saw the bed.

It lay broken and twisted in the yard, the lovely cherry oak frame disappearing under the snow blowing in from the river. Lena could make out the shape of her pillow beneath the mess. A refrigerator door leaned against the remains of the headboard, the edges charred and crumbling. There were no magnets on it, no pictures. She opened her mouth and took in a long shuddery breath for what felt like the first time in many years.

A handful of emergency workers in padded coats throbbed through the shop, snapping photographs and marking areas with yellow tape. She’d found the bottle of pills on her husband’s nightstand that morning, too late. His mouth was still warm when she wiped the foam from his lips. She’d pressed her hands against his chest, like a woman in a play, knowing it wouldn’t help with what came next. She’d hid the bottle and called an ambulance. In those first years following his death, Lena had paced each night, making a circuit between Pat and Rob’s room and her own, then down to the shop to stare at silent rows of merchandise. She was waiting to find something amiss, something she could notice and prevent.

She wondered sometimes how it would be different if it happened today. People were kinder then, and trusting. No one questioned that a healthy man just over forty would die suddenly of a heart attack in the night. They took her statement with solemn faces and patted her hand. No one pushed her to request an autopsy. No one asked her much of anything at all.
She didn’t regret the lies, to their families, to the boys. Nor did she forget them. It was all to preserve what they thought they’d known about a good, sweet man. And she’d lied, happily, easily. She’d let him go with dignity, even though he’d refused her the same courtesy.

Lena heard Chet’s footsteps crunch in the snow. The wind gusted, raising a corner of eyelet trim from her bedspread. Chet stood behind her and held her in his arms. They stood in silence, ignoring the officers and the snow, the neighbors standing on the street in mittens and hats, or peering from their windows.

Chet spoke quietly, his mouth at her ear. “That could have been us in there.”

Lena huffed something close to a laugh. “Well, me. It should have been me.”

Chet released her and turned her body to face his. “How can you say that? Don’t say that.”

“We all have our time. This was supposed to be mine.”

“This?” Chet swept his hand at the wreckage of her bed. “No.” He leaned in and held her again. He didn’t care who was watching. “You saved your life last night and you better believe you saved mine, too.” Chet took Lena’s chin in his hand, like he was someone who could get away with that sort of thing. His gloves were rough against her skin but she didn’t move. His eyes moved across her face. She felt scrutinized, scanned. It was not an entirely unwelcome feeling. She fluttered her eyelids against a gust of wind and willed him to ask her something, anything. She would tell him everything he wanted to know.
Marielle let six months pass without seeing her mother, Rose, and then the calls came daily, hourly, until Marielle agreed to take a bus from Philly and meet Rose for dinner.

She reached Manhattan later than expected and took the local subway instead of the express. It was hours past rush hour and there were less than twenty passengers on the car. Wrinkled brows, glassy eyes, dumb, parted lips. The collective goal seemed to be a look of calculated distaste. The look was one of disgust, of deep, damning disappointment. It implied that the world was a rotten place while excusing the bearer from any part in the affair. The look said: I am appalled. And also: I had nothing to do with any of this.

The train slowed and blasted its horn. Marielle stood and moved to the door of the subway car, swaying as the train shuddered to its designated stop. Three sharp buzzes sounded and the door stayed shut.

In the station, a naked man balanced on his hands, his upturned body leaning against the scuffed wall. He was streaked with dirt, his feet bloodied. Marielle could see the power in his muscled trunk as he folded down from the wall and leapt towards the door.

She jumped back, startled.

The naked man pressed his fingers to the scuffed glass of the subway car’s window. They stood less than a foot apart. She could see her own reflection, a dark oval
of shining skin and cropped hair, superimposed over the man’s pale, wild face. He ran the slug of his tongue over a row of gray, gutted gums.

Marielle looked to either side. The other departing passengers had herded themselves to doors at either end of the car, away from the naked man. The loudspeaker mumbled nonsense and the doors stayed close. In the distance, Marielle could hear the crackle of a walkie talkie.

On the other side of the door, the naked man rushed forward again, jumping and slamming his body against the layers of metal and glass.

The doors buzzed again, then slid open. Marielle could smell the man immediately, the humid air carrying his rank, woolen scent. She stepped over the gap and the subway roared away.

They stood inches apart beneath a rotting ceiling. Without the glass and steel between them, he looked softer, his eyes a translucent, mottled blue. He raised his hands in the air and Marielle fluttered her eyelids, waiting for the blow. But he just raised his palms to touch one another, lengthening the hard cords of muscle in his arms before lowering his square palms until they hovered above her shoulders.

Marielle suddenly remembered the recess staring contests of her childhood. The boys had always been so assured, but they were no match for the heady feeling she got, the way she would tell them with her little girl eyes: *look at me. Look at me until you can’t look anymore.*

“I’m not giving you anything,” she said.

The man blinked, then touched her shoulders lightly. He ran his fingertips down the outsides of her bare arms and over the tops of her hands, then leaned in, the matted
nest of his crotch inches from her hip. “I wouldn’t want anything you have,” he whispered. “You’re fucked.”

“Let me pass.” Marielle felt her throat clench. “You don’t know a thing about me.”

“You’re going up there,” the man said, “and you belong down here.”

“Fuck you,” Marielle hissed, but she hesitated a moment longer to watch the way he fell gracefully into a back bend, extending one leg towards the ceiling, toe pointed, a stream of urine spurting from his penis in a sour, steaming arc.

Aboveground, Marielle walked towards Central Park. The night was growing cool, the sky darkened to a crisp September violet. The heat from the station rolled off of her skin, but Marielle could still feel the lingering touch of the man’s calloused fingertips on her arms. It was as if the man had marked her, had called her out as one of his own. Marielle half feared, half wanted it to be true.

Rose had chosen a small, expensive bistro on the Upper East Side, the kind of place where she had worked nights for years while spending her days going to auditions. Rose had earned a few small parts, nothing major, and nearly all of them one episode stints as a nanny or friend in otherwise all white sitcoms. Marielle thought her mother’s acting aspirations were impractical and childish, especially since she’d been at it since Marielle’s first year of boarding school, nearly 10 years ago. A small clump of people waited outside the restaurant in smart, lightweight coats, their faces lit up by the glowing screens of their handhelds. Marielle pushed through them, her jutting elbows jostling each person from their private, digital reverie.
Inside, Rose hovered near the maître d’ station, the open anxiety on her face clashing with her sleek black attire. Marielle felt a small surge of relief upon seeing her mother, at the familiarity of her boundless, overwhelming capacity for worry that nearly replicated love.

“Oh my goodness!” Her mother pressed her palm to her heart. “You’re so late! I thought, oh my goodness, I thought for sure…” She trailed off and cast her raised eyebrows around the room, searching for an audience.

“Well, I’m here. So, it’s fine. Come on, he’s waiting.” Marielle gestured to the maître d’, who made a slight bow that reminded Marielle of the man underground. She hadn’t planned to share the episode with her mother, but now she felt the wild need to tell her everything, to give her mother the satisfaction of being right about the constant peril that surrounded them.

They sat at a small table near the bar on a pair of high backed stools and Marielle’s mother ordered a bottle of wine before excusing herself to the restroom. Marielle ignored the hollowness in her stomach and accepted her glass from the server. She drank deeply, nearly finishing the wine in one go. The volume of the room seemed to increase, a pleasant rising din of clinking cutlery and low conversation.

Alone at the table, Marielle resisted the urge to scroll through her handheld. She thought again of the naked man in the subway, but the experience had already begun to take on the contours of a dream. The dim restaurant was brighter now than the street. The reflected paper lanterns hanging above the bar played a kind of trick with the dark glass of the window; the lantern’s reflections made it seem as though they were strung all the way across the narrow street, connecting the dark brick buildings with their cheery light.
The ghost reflections of the people in the bar were out there, too: girls in sleeveless blouses floated above the chilly sidewalks; a taxicab drove effortlessly through the reflection of crowded tables dotting the street. Marielle stared at the superimposed images, aware that she was a reflection in that ghost world as well. She wished that someone in the street might look up and see her there, two-dimensional, hovering above the real world.