

In Judy's Room

by

Benjamin Goldstein

A Dissertation submitted to the

Graduate School-Newark

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Rutgers University – Newark MFA Program

Written under the direction of

Akhil Sharma

And approved by

Jayne Anne Phillips

Newark, New Jersey

May 2014

Table of Contents

In Judy's Room.....	1
In La Agüita.....	12
If You Have Tears, Prepare to Shed Them Now.....	29
San Fran Studio.....	44
The Saint.....	46
Excuse Me While I Disappear.....	59
Release of Everything.....	70
The Taunting Voice.....	80

In Judy's Room

The hospital looked like a ritzy hotel, covered in snow up in the Berkshires. Our blue Volvo station wagon wound its way up to the main building, a bright white structure that was set off from the road and which nearly blended in with the snow, a trick of the eye that allowed the tourists of the tiny town to stroll by and pretend the hospital wasn't really there. In truth, the town was famous for it.

“Out,” my father said, and jerked a thumb to the door.

“Take care, David,” my mother said, and patted me on the hand.

Then, the car was gone.

They put me in the room where Judy Garland had stayed more than fifty years ago, when her addiction to alcohol and barbiturates resulted in a nervous breakdown. The nurse assigned to do my intake told me the legend: when Garland was a patient, she dressed up in a gleaming ball gown and heels that were right out of *The Wizard of Oz*, minus the sparkles, and painted the room a deep, stunning purple.

“I want to paint the room purple again,” I said. “In her honor.”

“Of course,” the nurse said, handing me a binder filled with information. “You’ll find Pleasant Valley is an open place. You can leave the hospital whenever you like, as long as you attend individual and group therapy. You’ll find you have a lot of time here.”

“Time?” I said, as if pronouncing a word in an ancient, forgotten language.

She gave me a look that was meant to be comforting. “You’ll see what I mean.”

The first days passed, and her meaning became clear. Everything slowed. It was an illusion, of course, but it was powerful and hard to shake. I sat in the front hallway and flipped through magazines while a grandfather clock ticked away. A few times, I wondered aloud what I was doing here. A female patient overheard and gave me a sidelong smile, flashing her eyes dramatically. Meanwhile, the staff wandered about with drowsy expressions on their faces.

One night, over a dinner of flavorless baked chicken and colorless mashed potatoes, a boy with red dreadlocks and a ruddy beard took a seat next to me. He smelled of week-old body odor and filterless cigarettes, and his baggy hemp sweat suit didn’t quite hide his lean physique.

“And what brings you here?” he asked with sarcastic interest.

The terrible oneness of the world, I wanted to say.

Instead, I kept my head down, and shrugged.

The boy seemed not to notice. He introduced himself as Connor, explained matter-of-factly that he was admitted to the hospital after he was found running naked on the Interstate, trying to go as fast as traffic. “I wanted to fly,” he said. As he told his story, I couldn’t help but imagine the pale white flesh of his ass churning in the headlights of every passing car.

Then, as if beamed in from a distance, I realized what it was. I was attracted to him.

That night, we decided to take a walk through the tiny town. There was a Main Street with a diner and a hardware store, a couple of side streets which turned into two highways, and nothing to do. But Connor knew about a path that led across a small bridge to the base of the hill that rose above the town. We reached the bridge and stood for a while staring up into the darkness of the woods, water running smoothly beneath us. Even in the dark, I could see him twirling a dreadlock between his fingers.

“I’m not crazy,” he said, without looking in my direction.

“Nope,” I said. “Me neither.”

Beyond the murmur of the stream and the soft hooting of an owl, silence.

The moon appeared from behind a cloud, bright and clear, and Connor’s eyes mirrored it, his inky pupils deepening.

“Well, sometimes, I’m a little crazy,” he said.

“Yep,” I replied.

We started back. When we reached the path that led back into town, two foxes emerged into the open, breathing rapidly, their eyes refracting in the dark, immense golden discs of color.

“Mountain lions,” Connor said.

“They’re foxes,” I said.

“Foxes.” Connor nodded his head and bit his lower lip. “You know what,” he said, “we’re like those two foxes.” And as soon as he said it, I knew he was right. That is to say, I wanted it to be true.

Later, after we had returned to our rooms for the night, I lay in bed thinking about the only boy I had ever kissed. Three years prior, I was a senior at a liberal arts college that leaned so far to the left politically, even the jocks came to question the hetero-normative mores of society. I was a five foot seven philosophy major with moppish hair and glasses with frames too big for my face. Everett wasn't much bigger than me, but he was popular, and an athlete. He was small and skinny for a baseball player, with long wispy blond hair. His hair hid a Harry Potter scar that jutted across his left temple, which he fingered when he was anxious. I think it was his anxiety, and his scar, that drew me to him.

One night, after a frat party, he invited me to his dorm room. I can't remember who made the move, but we ended up kissing, a drunken squirming of lips on lips. I pulled away for a moment and gave him a gap-toothed grin. When he saw my face, he pushed me away. I was a little surprised, but at the same time, I wasn't surprised at all.

"You're a fucking queer," he said, eyeing me nervously, an uncertain undulating effect in his voice.

"I don't ascribe to labels," I said, so he punched me in the mouth. I staggered backwards and put a hand to my cheek. A hot pain seared through my jaw and a run of warm blood trickled around my gums.

"I'm not *gay*, I'm just fooling around," Everett reasoned. "I have a girlfriend."

"Don't worry," I managed to say. "I don't feel threatened."

Everett swung his fists again, knocking over empty beer bottles, and I fled his room.

At graduation, we made eye contact, from a distance, but only for a moment.

After college, I moved across the country to San Francisco, and swore off men and women. I had little interest in sex, refused even to masturbate. But then I began to have trouble doing other things, small things, like mailing a letter or picking up spinach for a salad. The bright lights and the soothing music of the supermarket terrified me.

Around Christmas one afternoon, Connor and I decided to take the walk along Main Street. The town where Pleasant Valley stood had a yearly tradition of recreating a famous Norman Rockwell painting, one that the painter held especially dear. He had lived just outside of town for most of his adult life.

When we reached the main strip, a baby-blue Ford wagon that looked like it had been one of the first ever constructed idled in the street in front of a confectionary, which sat between the diner and the hardware store. It was exactly how we might imagine small-town New England in the '50s. It was the memory of a memory. It was a neon sign of nostalgia. I wondered if Judy Garland had walked these streets, and if things had looked then precisely as they did now. About fifty people gathered in the street, huge numbers for the tiny town, taking photos and buying their kids candy canes while snow swirled down from a sky blotted with grey.

“Wow,” said Connor, pulling his parka tight around his shoulders. “Americana in its purest form.”

“Don’t make any sudden movements,” I said. “You might scare off the townsfolk.”

Connor chuckled. We stood at a distance from the children and their families, as if we were criminal or dangerous. They took little notice of us, but I couldn't help but feel that a sign reading MENTAL PATIENTS hung over our heads.

"Come on," I said. "Let's keep walking."

We wandered across the street, along one of the side roads, and toward the path that led to the hill. As we walked, we told our stories. Connor told me about his time before his stay at the hospital. He had been living out of his van in West Virginia, one with the rolling hills, smoking pot everyday and believing he was Jesus. I told Connor how I had stayed at my parents' house in the suburbs for years after college, how some days I couldn't manage to sleep or eat, how I couldn't hold down a job or cook myself meals.

When we reached the bridge, we decided to walk through the woods. Connor stomped ahead of me. The trees enveloped us, the ground before us speckled with sunlight through branches slowly collecting snow.

After we had gone a ways up the hill, Connor slowed and then stopped altogether. Turning, he pointed a finger at me.

"You know, plenty of people our age can't hold down a job for very long, and some end up at their parents' house." He looked at me, as though searching for something. "I mean, you seem normal enough. So what're you doing here, anyway?"

A branch fell from a nearby tree, sending up a flurry of powder.

I decided to tell him the truth. "I killed somebody."

Connor stared at me dead in the eye. Then he whooped with laughter, yanked on a dreadlock, an unbelieving expression crossing his face. "You *killed* somebody."

“I mean, I killed somebody. With my mind, you know?” It wasn’t something I had ever mentioned before. I felt the heat rise across my face: shame, confusion, dislocation, panic.

Connor took a step back. “Maybe you are a little crazy, David.” A sadness crept into his voice. “I can see it now.”

I didn’t know what to say. We walked home in silence.

A few months before he punched me in the face, I met Everett, the man with the Harry Potter scar, in philosophy class. One day, while reading the *Phaedrus*, our professor asked if anybody could explain Plato’s theory of the madness of love. I raised my hand and explained that Plato divined human nature as a chariot led by two horses, one spurred by sexual instinct and erotic desire, the other by truth and beauty. The horses warred with one another at the sight of young, beautiful boys, one horse wanting nothing but sexual satisfaction, the other pulling back for a glimpse of Heaven. It was the balance between the two, the light and the dark, that yielded a perfect blend of madness and love.

The professor was impressed.

After class, Everett approached me. I had never spoken to him before.

“You’re really into this stuff, huh,” he said.

“It’s a beautiful text,” I returned.

“*Beautiful*,” he scoffed. He ran a finger over the scar on his forehead. “Listen to yourself. Plato is a total perv.” But even as he said it, he looked up at me with a kind of longing. There was something soft and tender on his face, a vulnerability he couldn’t quite hide, and it was in that moment that I knew.

Then the party, the kissing, the punches, the rest.

Afterwards, Everett stopped showing up to class. We didn't see each other again until graduation. When I saw his face beaming out from beneath the peak of his graduation cap, our eyes met briefly. In that moment, I loathed him. I couldn't help it: I felt the hate coming out, stronger than anything I had ever felt before. It was only later that I realized even that was a kind of attraction, a darker brand of love.

That summer, after I moved to San Francisco, I didn't hear from Everett. I didn't expect to, really. I often wondered how he was doing, if he was still dating his girlfriend, how he was managing in the world.

A few weeks after I moved, I heard the news. Word got around that Everett had drowned himself in the lake behind his parents' house. I showed the proper amount of sympathy, told my friends from college I had been in a class with him, but that I didn't know him well. Meanwhile, a strange realization struck me: I was responsible. There was the beginning of a storm forming in my mind, the faint murmur of voices which pronounced me guilty of murder.

It was the look I had given him at graduation. In that moment, when all the hate came out of me, he saw himself mirrored in me, a side of himself he had never come to terms with before, and the only thing he could do was to end it all.

For the next ten days, wracked with guilt, I went without sleep. I tried everything to get some rest—pot, exercise, herbal tea, liquor—but nothing worked. Nights flipped into days. The world turned on its head. Somehow, I managed to board a plane across the country. When I came to, I was back in Boston, in my parent's house, my mother hovering above me.

“Honey,” she said. “You’re awake.”

It was true. But nothing was the same.

I was in a new place, a changed place, a place where one breathes differently. Shadows slinked around me in broad daylight, voices called my name in foreign accents. Sometimes, I smelled smoke where there was no smoke, like my insides were burning up. Demons appeared by my side and casually discussed the bleakness of my future. I was living in two worlds simultaneously: the real one, and one that seemed even more real.

The friction between worlds was often too much to manage. It seemed my skull would burst. The weight of what had happened to Everett slowly vanished in a sea of nonsense-rhymes, a fluttering of bizarre thoughts that, like birds, alighted for a moment and then took to the wind.

I met with psychiatrists. They prescribed meds, which I dumped in a trash can near the park by my parents’ house.

In spite of everything, the truth is, you begin to depend on madness. Like the dark horse, you love it.

I told Connor what I did, and something shifted. We still occasionally ate together in the dining room, and he would nod to me in group therapy. But we didn’t go on walks anymore. It was as if he had seen a side of me that he couldn’t forget, as if what I said had revealed something too difficult to digest.

And yet, something had shifted within me, too. When I told Connor what I did, when I said it out loud, I wondered if it could possibly be true.

I didn't know what to do with myself. I took long walks. Sometimes, I ended up at the town's tiny public library. I looked for books on madness. There wasn't much there, only some books by Freud and Jung, which I couldn't comprehend.

Then, one day, on the table with new books, was a biography of Judy Garland. I took it to the small reading room and absorbed the entire thing. I read about her family. Garland's father, Frank Gumm, when he wasn't on stage with his vaudeville act, was a demure, unhappy man. He had a long, black moustache that he waxed when he felt unwell. After his vaudeville shows, he would hit on the ushers, men from the various towns where they stayed, and invite them back to his room. He desperately tried to keep his secret from his family, but because of his actions, they were forced to relocate to different towns many times over.

I put the book on my lap. I thought of Frank Gumm's black moustache, of Everett's jutting scar, of Connor's long dreadlocks. I thought about myself, and about Plato. I thought and thought and it seemed it was all I had been doing for ages.

Group therapy ended one day, and I stood with a cigarette in hand outside the main building of Pleasant Valley. Connor came outside, and nodded to me. I offered one to him. He smoked in short, quick puffs, while I blew long plumes of blue smoke out of my lungs.

It was the camaraderie of smoking that broke the spell.

"So, what have you been up to?" Connor asked.

"I've been reading a biography of Judy Garland," I said. "You know, she used to be a patient here. I'm staying in her room."

“Dorothy? Really?”

“Really,” I said. I wanted to tell Connor everything then, about attraction and love and hate, about secrets kept too long. But I couldn’t find a way to say it. Instead, I told him everything I knew about Judy Garland, about her beauty and skill as an entertainer, about her struggle and eventual decline. I ended with the legend the nurse had told me.

“Purple,” Connor mused, running a hand through his beard. “An odd choice. But probably beautiful, in its way.”

Some time passed. One evening, I took the bus to the town over in order to pick up supplies. Night fell, and all the nurses and doctors had gone to sleep. I brought in the cans of paint. I pushed all the furniture to the middle of the room. I began to coat the room in broad, wide swaths the color of eggplant. When I finished, I placed candles in little glass holders on the bed and the end table, and lit them one by one.

Then I said a prayer for Judy Garland, which really, was a prayer for me.

In La Agüita

“What are you doing here in the asshole of the world?” It was the first thing Luis said to me, the first day of class. We were standing in the bright sun of the courtyard outside one of the main lecture halls at the Universidad of Concepción in Chile, where I was studying for a semester. Some of the other students had begun to gather around us and took notice of the North American in their midst. I was tall and broad-shouldered and stood out in my new Nike sneakers and blue-and-grey golfer shorts. Despite the sun, nobody here wore shorts.

Luis looked intently at me and pointed at the brown skin of his arm. Then he took a step towards me, his square jaw clenched, and touched the beige-pink skin of my hand. His brown eyes burrowed into mine, his voice accusatory yet tender: “What are you doing here?”

I couldn't think of what to say, so I said, “Estudiando.” *Studying.*

“He's here to study the natives,” somebody called out.

“He's one of those antropólogos,” said somebody else.

Everybody laughed. The courtyard broke out into noisy confusion, and I felt as if I had entered a wind-tunnel. My mind struggled to make sense of the words being shouted and came up with nothing, just a slew of slang. For a moment, I was at the center of attention. The men sized me up with their looks while the women glanced at me

furtively, giggling in twos or threes from a distance. Not knowing what to do, I flashed the Vulcan salute from Star Trek. Then, I entered the classroom.

Luis entered behind me and tapped me on the shoulder. “My name’s Luis, but you can call me Lucho,” he said politely. “And if I can’t help but point out your horrible gringo accent, I apologize most sincerely in advance.”

That was how we met.

The next day, I arrived late for class and seated myself in the back-row, just behind Luis and two other boys. They both turned around in their seats and the shorter of the two pointed at his wrist as if he was wearing a watch.

“Ah. Half-an-hour late,” he said.

“Like a good Chilean,” the other said.

I leaned forward in my chair and asked for their names.

“Esteban,” said the short, thin man with sinewy muscles. “But please, call me el Negro.” He was clearly given his name for being the darkest of the group, and the beginnings of a dark moustache peppered his upper lip.

“Eduardo,” said the taller of the two, a skinny man with long black hair in a ponytail. “But please, call me Edu.”

Luis, having already introduced himself, bowed deeply in front of me in mock reverence. I could see he was balding, the curve of his hair forming a sharp widow’s peak. Edu and el Negro laughed, though I accepted the gesture a little timidly. I introduced myself as Benjamín, and they decided to call me Benja.

That afternoon, we strolled down Calle Los Olmos for beers after class. We arrived at El Bar O'Higgins, a small beer shack near campus. From where we sat outside, we could see the Arco de Medicina, the archway that marked the entrance to the university, and its engraving of Hippocrates, and the three palm trees along either side of it. In the distance, through the archway, we could almost see the wall portraying students who had been disappeared by the government in the seventies, their faces featured in long rows of black and white photos.

"Let me get this right," el Negro said. "In America, when you go to college, you leave your parents' house, you move in to a dorm with a bunch of teens, and you have wild parties, orgies and assorted debauchery until all hours of the night. Is that true?"

I laughed and shook my head. "Not exactly. Not for me, anyway."

"I bet it's just like the movies," Edu said.

"Of course it's like the movies," Luis said. "They all act like movie stars because they've all got tons of plata."

"Plata?" I asked.

"Money," he said.

After chatting some more, we discovered that all of us lived in La Agüita de la Perdiz, a poor neighborhood occupied by students and activists. The barrio crept up the hill just behind the university and buried itself in the forests of Concepción.

"It was founded in a land-grab move in the late fifties. Before there was nothing, era puro barro," explained Edu. *It was pure mud.* "Now there are houses and soccer fields and a community center."

"These days, some of the residents even have cable TV," said el Negro.

As we headed up the hill behind the university that led to La Agüita that evening, el Negro invited me to the hostel where he and Edu lived. It was a small boarding house made of wood and concrete with eight rooms and one bathroom. Inside, el Negro introduced me to Amalia and Hermann, Germans who had finished up their degrees and were travelling and helping out at the daycare center in the neighborhood. They seemed pleasant and were happy to meet another foreigner, and they even spoke a little English.

As Edu and el Negro were conversing with the others, Hermann pulled me aside. “Watch out for those two,” he told me in English.

“How come?” I said.

“If you don’t know by now,” he said, and looked over at them.

“Then what?”

“Listen. They’re maricones.” *Faggots*. Before I could respond, he gave me a short, fatherly tap on the shoulder and rejoined his friends.

That weekend, we all went out drinking all night: Edu, el Negro, Lucho, a friend of el Negro’s named Lorena, and the Germans. The party started at eleven at La Nacional, a warehouse on the other side of Concepción where cultural events were held.

I had been keeping my eye on el Negro and Edu in spite of myself. They were disarmingly friendly, boisterous, fun to be around. Luis, on the other hand, held me at a distance. Sometimes in conversation, he would launch an assault of slang, words he knew meant nothing to me, words that simply bounced around in my head.

When we finally reached La Nacional, the place was packed. There was a pause in the music when we entered, one band leaving the stage and another band setting up.

All of us went to the bar to get pisco sours and beers. With drinks in hand, we hung out against the far wall, away from the stage, and waited for the music to start. While we waited, Edu pulled el Negro close to him and stepped up to Hermann.

“I just want to know why it bothers you so much,” Edu said, and smiled broadly. He had let his hair down and now shook it out vigorously.

“It doesn’t bother me, it just shouldn’t be seen in public,” Hermann said.

Edu combed back his long hair with one hand, reached over to el Negro, and planted a sincere kiss on his lips. They both looked over at Hermann for a reaction.

“Ya basta.” *That’s enough.*

But they kissed again. And then again.

“I said—” Hermann started, but before he could say another word Edu grabbed Hermann’s nipple through his shirt and twisted it hard.

“You fucking queer,” Hermann choked, tearing himself away.

El Negro sidled up to me. “We’re just fucking around with him,” he said casually, clearly pleased with himself. “We’re not really gay. We just like to fool around.”

“Sure,” I said, but I didn’t know exactly what he meant. I noticed then, as if it had been hiding just beneath the surface, that el Negro was an attractive young man—about my age, nineteen—with soft features and large eyes.

“Wait,” I asked. “What do you mean, fool around?”

“You know,” el Negro said. “We just like to have a good time.”

“You mean—”

“You know that song.” He began to sing in a choppy imitation of English: “*Girls who like boys who like boys who like girls—*”

“Sure,” I said. “Like a European thing.”

“Maybe,” el Negro said. “I only know Chile.” And, as if to prove his point, he performed a perfect jig to a traditional folk song that suddenly burst from the horns of the band that had finished setting up. He swayed back and forth around Lorena, who laughed and followed his lead. At the right moment, el Negro would sink low and then shoot up into the air, twirling a bandanna in one hand. He whisked the bandanna around Lorena’s neck, and then stood upright just as the music finished. He bowed deeply in every direction. The crowd around him clapped enthusiastically.

“Bueno, bueno!” cried an older man, who by his reaction looked as though he hadn’t seen such a dance performed in years.

I leaned against the far wall, watching el Negro silently. He approached me, doing an imitation of the robot. “Muévete, gringuito!” he cried. *Get dancing, gringo!*

I started to dance a little, shaking my fists up and down and wiggling my torso.

“Not like that!” el Negro shouted over the music. “Shake your ass!”

At his request, something snapped. I let loose. I backed up close to him, thrusting my butt up in the air. “Like that?” I called, looking back, and I saw a slow smile cross el Negro’s lips.

Amalia and Edu passed by us, dancing seriously to a Cuban love song which started to play. They were both singing loudly and embracing. Off to one side, Luis was dancing with Lorena, yet staring right at me.

We danced until close to six in the morning. Even Hermann and Edu seemed to be getting along again, all of us dancing in a circle and laughing at one another.

“Are you there yet, Benja?” el Negro said to me.

“What are you talking about?” I said.

“En el lugar más allá de las palabras,” he said. *The place beyond words.*

As we headed back to our student hostels in La Agüita, drunk and tired, stumbling through the streets of Concepción, I found myself next to Luis.

“What do you think of Chile?” he said.

“I’ve never experienced anything like it,” I replied.

It was then that Luis pulled me close. The look on his face startled me. His bushy eyebrows were furrowed in steady concentration, his cheeks flushed a deep red beneath his skin, and his eyes looked searchingly into mine, waiting for—yet fearing—judgment.

“Listen, Benjamín,” he said. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“I’m a homosexual,” he said, and a pain flitted across his face.

“That’s okay with me,” I said, but I could tell right away I hadn’t said the right thing. His pain scared me, confirmed things I was only beginning to understand.

“You don’t get it,” he said impatiently. “Do you know what it’s like to be a homosexual man in Chile? Do you have any idea?”

I wanted to mention that I had only just arrived in his country, but instead I shook my head.

The hurt lifted from his features and he appeared calm again. “Of course you don’t, gringo,” he said. “It’s so easy in los Estados Unidos.”

“It’s not easy,” I said. “It’s just different.”

“Te matan aquí,” Luis said, drawing a long finger across his neck. He saw me shudder. “That’s right,” he said.

We had almost stopped in the street, the group now far ahead of us, only el Negro hanging back to see what cause there was for delay. He caught up with us. “What’s the hold up?” he asked.

“I’m explaining to our friend that you can be killed in our country for being a gay man,” Luis said.

“Don’t listen to him,” el Negro said. “The pungas don’t kill you for being gay, they kill you for your wallet.”

For a time, that put an end to it.

The next week, all of us—the Germans, Luis, el Negro, Edu, Lorena and myself—decided to take a trip to the beach. It was nearing sunset. We had a campfire going and one of the Germans sang American pop songs and played along on guitar. Everyone was drinking and laughing. Only Luis seemed despondent, slinking around the outside of the group and occasionally staring out beyond the water.

Ever since his admission to me the previous week, I held my breath around him, not wanting to say the wrong thing. Yet there was something else that made me hold my breath, something worming its way through me.

“What is it?” I asked Luis when the time seemed right.

“It’s nothing, amigo,” he said. “I don’t think you’d understand.”

“Try me.”

“I don’t like coming to this beach,” he said, and refused to say anything more.

The fiesta continued. Edu began chasing Amalia around the campfire. She was giggling and screaming when he got close. The guitar had been passed around to Lorena, who only knew one song but played it beautifully. It was El Cigarrito by Victor Jara, a folk singer that had been assassinated by the Pinochet regime. The legend goes that first they cut off his hands so that he would never play guitar again, and then they shot him.

I sidled up to el Negro. “Tell me,” I said. “Why doesn’t Luis like coming here?”

El Negro made a face. “You see that island out there?” He pointed away into the distance to an island just visible on the horizon, between the ocean and the blazing sky.

“I see it.”

“That was where they used to dump the bodies of political prisoners, before I was alive. But Luis, he’s older, he remembers. When he was a kid playing on this beach, the bodies would wash up on the shore. And that’s not all,” el Negro said. “His father was in the military. Era milico.”

“And now?”

“He’s retired.”

The party continued and Edu tackled Amalia in the sand and I just stood there, feeling the churning of my stomach.

The weeks passed and the rainy season began. Sheets of rain pelted the tin roofs of our homes in La Agüita. We were on holiday from school and I was spending more time with Edu and el Negro. The Germans had already returned home after a few months abroad, and though Edu had tried to get Amalia to stay, eventually, she declined.

“Alone again,” Edu sighed.

We were hiding out in his room, away from the water-clogged streets and the mud that suddenly seemed to be everywhere in La Agüita.

“It’s just the rain getting you down,” el Negro said.

“Easy for you to say,” said Edu. He was referring to el Negro’s new girlfriend, Ruby, Lorena’s sister. “You can pound it out all night.”

“I prefer the mornings,” el Negro yawned.

Later that night, Luis, Lorena, and Ruby came to join us at the hostel. We drank until we couldn’t see, until the stars became blurs, until the rain had stopped and the mud had dried. We drank until La Agüita felt like a little paradise. We sang songs I didn’t know the words to, but it didn’t matter. We made plans to remain friends even after I left. We talked about owning a house together as a group, starting a business, a hostel.

We turned in around three in the morning. I slept on the floor for what must have been a couple of hours when something woke me. I had been dreaming in English, about American things, American food and American malls.

“Pssst,” said el Negro. “Get up!”

“What is it?”

“Come to my room.”

“Now?”

I slipped out of bed, pulled on a pair of pants, and saw that el Negro was wearing only his underwear.

“I’m inviting you into my bed,” he said playfully.

We softly padded over to his room and closed the door behind us. Ruby was wide awake, her dark brown arms hugging her knees to her chest. She looked tiny, even in their room, which itself, was tiny.

“La Ruby and I were wondering what you look like naked.”

I blushed. “I look like anybody else does,” I said.

“Get in the bed,” el Negro demanded.

At his request, I approached the bed and flopped down between el Negro and Ruby.

“Hi,” I said to Ruby, and I even waved a little.

“Hola,” she said.

“Do you know how to touch a woman?” el Negro asked me. “This is how you touch a woman.” And he stroked his hand up and down Ruby’s bare arm.

“Like this?” I did an impression of el Negro, stroking my hand quickly along Ruby’s arm. She laughed.

“Not at all,” el Negro said. “Are you going to take off your pants or what? We’re in bed. Nobody wears pants in bed.”

I took off my pants.

“Have you ever seen the pubes of a Latin American?” he asked me.

I admitted that I hadn’t.

“Here,” he said, and pulled down his underwear enough to show me his pubes.

“It’s different than yours, I’m sure of it. My hair is brittle and crunchy, see? I bet your pubes are lush. Shampooed and conditioned. Unless you shave them off altogether. Am I right?” Ruby was laughing like mad.

For a moment, it was unclear where the night would go, whether or not we would sleep together, but in the end, we didn't. We just messed around. We kissed and tickled each other, until the moment came when the three of us were embracing and laughing together at once.

We watched the dawn become day. El Negro finally bounced up out of bed and put his clothes on, ready to start the day without sleep. I kissed Ruby goodbye in bed and then stood up and embraced el Negro playfully. "Ciao," I said, and strode over to their door.

When I went out to the street, Luis followed me outside. Apparently, he had slept in the common room, too.

"Did you sleep in el Negro's room last night?" he asked me, shielding his eyes from the sun.

"No," I called, walking away from him. "Only for a little."

He looked as if he was about to respond, but instead he turned around and said nothing more.

I had a girlfriend (although we didn't use that word) named Robyn back home, who I had been writing to every week. I told her about everything, including the nights I spent in el Negro's room, though perhaps I didn't tell her when the visits became more and more frequent. When Ruby was with us in el Negro's room, we messed around like good friends, but sometimes, when Ruby was taking care of her little boy in the neighboring town of Talcahuano, el Negro and I would be all alone.

One night, when we were sharing his room, el Negro woke me up with his hand grazing against my cheek. Suddenly he stood up and locked the door. He stripped naked, the moonlight kissing his chest and nipples as his pants and shirt dropped to the floor. “Take off your clothes,” he said quietly, in a voice I had never heard before. He took two steps to the edge of the bed, and kissed me. I pulled off my shirt and unbuckled my belt. We had kissed before, but not like this. He kissed my neck and chest, and put a hand down my pants. “Esteban,” I whispered, and realized I was moaning.

In that small room, we fumbled around as if discovering another body for the first time. And we were, a male body, which suddenly seemed so new, with all of its angles and curves, its muscles and bristling hairs. We were lithe and young and never before had I felt so good.

When Ruby returned from her visits to Talcahuano, she smiled at us like a scolding mother. She didn’t seem to mind what was passing between us, what it meant. The three of us were somehow like a little family in that room, or children playing a game of pretend.

Robyn wrote to me one day and said she wished she could visit, but she didn’t have the money. I told her it was alright, I would be home soon. And it was true. The end of the semester approached. My departure loomed in front of me, and I could do nothing but accept it. Alone with Esteban, I let the minutes and hours stretch into days.

After taking our last final exam, Esteban and I went to his tiny room and made love, groping each other with a renewed sense of passion and urgency, because he was

leaving the very next day. His family lived two hours away by a bus bound south in a town called Llanquihue.

When each of us had come onto the sheets, we lay there taking deep breaths, listening to the rain.

“Esteban,” I said. “What if I joined you in Llanquihue? Just for the week. You’ll introduce me as a friend,” I explained hopefully.

“I’m going back to my house alone,” said Esteban, running a hand along my back. “You understand.”

“Of course,” I said, but something inside me collapsed.

“I want what we have to stay here. In La Agüita.”

“In La Agüita,” I repeated.

The next day, I woke up in bed, and he was gone.

On my last day in Concepción, Luis, Edu, Lorena, Ruby and I celebrated. We met at my flat, where I had spent hardly any time at all. We drank cheap wine called El Gato straight out of plastic containers and passed them around the room. We made candela, a kind of fruity, hot wine, and sang songs.

Around four a.m., everybody turned in, a little early, because some were travelling back to their parents’ homes in neighboring provinces the following day. I was about to get up from the couch and turn in when Luis sat down next to me. He looked me squarely in the face.

“Listen,” he said. “I know about you and el Negro.”

“Everybody knows,” I said. “Even Ruby knows.”

“So, you had your Latin American adventure. How do you feel?”

I pushed him away from me a little. “Quit talking like that,” I said. “I feel fine.”

Luis pulled himself toward me, and leaned in close. I could smell his breath, hot and sour.

“There’s something about being gay,” he said slowly. “It’s in your blood.”

“I don’t follow,” I said.

“It’s like how the Mapuche people are in my blood, how being a gringo is in your blood. It’s a heritage, something to be honored, but it’s also a burden.” Something like anger edged into his voice, vague and undefined, yet electric. “I’m trying to tell you something.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m trying to tell you something and you don’t want to listen.”

He reached his arms around me and hugged me tight, too tight, as if he wanted to crush me. I wanted to comfort him, to say the right thing, but instead I pushed him away. Before I knew it he had jumped on top of me and pulled at my hair. I pushed him off of me and caught the fierce expression on his face in that fleeting moment, his features twisted in rage. I had hit his nose by accident, and blood poured from his nostrils and all over the couch where I was laying.

He laughed out loud. “What does it feel like,” he sneered, “to have the blood of a homosexual all over you?”

“Luis,” I said. “You’re drunk.”

He grunted and muttered something in his slangy Spanish almost too quick to catch: “Este conchasuma’re,” he said. *This motherfucker.*

“Besides,” I went on, “I’m gay, too.”

“Maybe,” he said slowly. He considered me. He suddenly seemed sober. “You’re going through it, anyway. But you’re just starting. You’re so young.” He pressed his white T-shirt to his nose, sopping up blood. “Soon you’ll be alone with your little girlfriend in los Estados Unidos, with no one to love.”

The words struck me with the force of a brick. I wanted to go home, to be finished with Latin America. And yet, I was terrified of returning to the United States.

“I have a way to repay you,” Luis said, and he smiled a strange smile, his mouth coated in dried crimson blood. “Here.” He poured two more tequilas, the clear liquid sloshing into two little glasses. Luis capped the bottle and smiled. “This will help.”

“I don’t need it. I’ve had enough.”

“Suit yourself,” he replied, and finished them both in two quick swigs.

Somewhere, a rooster crowed. Dawn approached. We headed down the dirt road that served as the main street of La Agüita. The trees around us seemed to breath, waiting for us to speak. Yet, when we reached the bus stop, we waited, saying nothing.

A colectivo arrived, a car that followed a fixed route and was cheaper than a taxi. But who cares anymore about these quaint little differences.

“Good bye, gringo,” Luis said to me, and pulled me close to him. He hugged me again, with all his might. I was about to push him away when he lunged at me first, swinging at me with a curled fist. The impact of his right hand thundered against my face, sprawling me out on the ground. I could feel the pain in the bones of my jaw, which suddenly burned. The colectivo driver saw what was happening and the car quickly drove away.

“Pucha, que estoy feliz en La Agüita de la Perdiz,” Luis sang. *Shit, am I happy in La Agüita.* He was quoting Victor Jara.

Not knowing what to do, I began to cry.

If You Have Tears, Prepare to Shed Them Now

Monday

Freezing rain is pounding the pavement outside, and for weeks there's been nothing to do but watch Maury re-runs on the huge fifty-two inch plasma screen TV in the dayroom. We exist between therapy sessions, between meals, between lives.

The fact is, we're bored. And not just a little bored, or a little restless; we are radically, explosively bored. We = me and the rest of the mentals here at Pleasant Valley. I use the term fondly, though I suppose there's also a hint of derision. How else do you expect me to feel? Pleasant Valley's staff-to-patient ratio is 1:1. Where else can you get so much personal attention (resulting in self-esteem) for something so universally stigmatized (resulting in self-derision)?

Mom says I should be proud to be here, the Harvard of mental hospitals. What a joke! Sometimes I imagine I must be on a reality television show, and that the doctors are really just actors or producers for the show, and that one day they'll all break the fourth wall. They'll tap me on the shoulder and say, "Hey, Tristan! You got *punked!*" or something equally inane, but then at least I'd be certain of the knowledge that I didn't lose my marbles and end up in the bin.

A little about Bachelor #2: hailing from the suburbs of Boston, I'm a recent college grad with a diagnosed neurochemical imbalance. My nose crooks a little to the

left as a result of being punched by a boy I loved once (but who didn't love me). I'm a budding novelist, or at least that's what I thought when I was in college, just before all this trouble started. I wear glasses with sleek black modern-looking frames. At the moment, my dark brown hair is cropped short and neatly parted, but I like to let it grow out for months before I cut it again. I'm not particularly photogenic, and I always look different from one photograph to the next.

I was floridly psychotic (lovely phrase!) until a few weeks ago, when the pills they gave me finally kicked in. For a time, I encountered myself as a torpid mass, a horror-movie blob in a confused, altered state. The meds squelched my mind and dulled my sense of self. Even my muscles had given in! One morning I discovered I was drooling down my shirt as I walked along Main Street to get a decent cup of coffee. (Note: Pleasant Valley is a progressive hospital without locked wards; we can wander around this two-horse town as much as we like.)

They switched me to a newer medication after a lot of complaining, but this one just seems to amp me up and makes my skin feel like its slithering off my body. The medical term for it is *akathisia*, which is derived from the Ancient Greek, "inability to sit still." It's a kind of internal restlessness that makes the generalized restlessness of Pleasant Valley that much more unbearable.

Dr. Horner says the feeling should go away any day now, and that I should be happy to have my own mind back in relatively good shape. He suggested I write down my feelings in the journal I keep by my bed (so here we are). But he doesn't seem to grasp how complicated my life really is right now.

You might think I would be overjoyed to have my mind back, deranged as it was

for the better part of three years. Instead, I feel like I've been robbed. Three years is long enough that whatever you're going through begins to feel like your own kind of normal. So now, returned to what is generally considered "reality", I feel, perhaps paradoxically, somewhat psychotic.

None of the previous entries in this journal make any sense to me. I have destroyed them in a fit of rage.

Tuesday

Dr. Horner actually cried in our session today when I told him I was feeling better and needed to get out of here.

"Why out?" he had the nerve to ask, not yet crying, craning his head to the side, his vomit-green turtleneck cinched too tightly at the neck.

"Gee, I dunno," I said. "The constant sense of psychic pain permeating the walls? The fact that someone is actually writing messages with their own fecal matter on the first floor bathroom mirror?" (That's a stock mental hospital image, I know, but it really is happening.)

"But you've been making so much progress."

"Progress," I said calmly, "is a Western narrative for conquest and colonial domination."

"But," he tried again, "you have peers, a community here. Doesn't that count for something?"

"The community is in a state of perpetual crisis. It's no way to live."

"But," he said, in a tone that was more somber, "you're not stable yet. You only

just started speaking to me last week.”

This threw me off course. The winds changed direction, the sail went slack.

“I wasn’t speaking?” Now I sounded nervous. Worse: sad. A smidge confused. I don’t know why, but for some reason I felt for an instant like my great-grandmother, a woman who left her homeland of Poland for America when she was a teenager and never returned. Some invisible threshold had been crossed from which there was no turning back.

This is when Dr. Horner began to cry.

“For fuck’s sake,” I said. “You’re crying?”

“You’re doing well,” he explained. “Not everybody bounces back as quickly as you have. Look, you’ll be out of here in six months to a year,” he said definitively, wiping his eyes.

Six months to a year!

Wednesday

My life, I have decided, is a disaster. I have only this journal as the record of my suffering. I’ve taken up smoking, and am constantly walking to the corner store for more cigarettes. My days are determined by the pack I smoke: Newports when the weather, which is fickle in the mountains, turns nice; Camels when I have a pain in my head; Marlboro’s when I’m feeling sporty; Virginia Slims when I feel like something more deviant; USA Gold’s when I have practically no money left in my pocket.

The rest of the time I spend watching Maury in the dayroom, or wandering the hallways aimlessly. Sometimes, you can hear the sound of crying like a dying cat.

Thursday

The other patients have taken more of an interest in me now that I'm talking again. For a whole month, they tell me, I simply walked around and glared at them, smiling inwardly and saying nothing. Embarrassing. But now that everybody wants to hear my story, I don't quite know what to tell them. I feel like Frankenstein's monster, or Rip Van Winkle.

After lunch, two patients about my age approached me in the game room and asked if I wanted to play ping-pong. They told me they sympathized with me, and introduced themselves as Simon and Constantina. Then, with a candor inappropriate for the outside world, they told me their life stories.

Constantina, a woman from Toronto who stands at 5'3", is a diagnosed manic-depressive, a term she prefers to "bi-polar" (which feels too cushy, in her opinion). She dresses fashionably, even wears cashmere scarves indoors, and she's quick to speak her mind, when she's not stuck in a book on Freud or Jung.

She had been a third-year student of Shakespeare at NYU when she was struck by her first manic-depressive attack. She painted her body purple and yellow and paraded naked down the streets around Times Square. When the police confronted her, she said it was all a performance for a modern art exhibit, and they let her go with a ticket as long as she put on some clothes right away. She went home and dressed, but decided right then she didn't like any of her clothes. She went out again and maxed out her parents' credit cards at several fancy clothing boutiques. The next day, they found her weeping in her dormitory among a pile of new washed-out jeans with studs like diamonds.

Simon is another fellow who suffers from paranoid psychosis, Yale drop-out (though he has every intention of going back, he says), and expert violinist. His dark hair greases across his face in dramatic bangs, and his face is pocked with red and yellow pimples. I don't think he showers much. I don't blame him. He told me he was feeling angry because he couldn't come up with anything to say in therapy: "What's the point of talking about our *feelings*?" The fingers of his hands twitched a little as he spoke, as if he were eager to draw a bow across the strings of his violin.

He came to Pleasant Valley because he had a nervous breakdown after a performance of a Brahms concerto. In the middle of the performance, he realized he could read the minds of the people in the audience. He was scared, of course, because this had never happened before. They were all whispering nasty things, telling him he was a failure and urging him to quit his playing right there on the stage. Instead, he continued to play with more and more fervor, fortissimo when the part called for pianissimo, and soon everybody else had stopped playing and just stood there gawking at him. He ended in a wild flourish. There was a terrible silence, and then he slammed his violin to the ground as if it were an electric guitar and he was Jimmy Hendrix.

Constantina and Simon wanted to know about me, and I didn't know what to say. I mentioned that I lived with my parents for three years before coming here, but my memory of that time is fuzzy (even though it just happened). I told them how cable news had made me so angry I once broke the windows of our kitchen with my bare fists, how listening to music on my iPod made me so sad I would forget to eat or sleep for days. I said that something inside my gut gave way and erupted through my mind.

"I don't want to sound like some hipster-Buddhist," I explained, "but you could

say my chakras became overwhelmed.”

They nodded as if they understood, but I wondered. Whatever I came up with sounded like only half of the truth. To become floridly psychotic is to descend into an abyss and live there. How can you describe that? And the most terrifying thing, the thing that really keeps me up at night, isn't that the abyss can't be described: it's that you can sit deep within it, and continue to exist.

The clock struck two PM and we realized it was time for CM, our daily community meeting. We made our way to the large circular room with lots of comfy couches and chairs. The whole community was there, about a hundred people, all told. The director ran through the announcements, and then opened the floor to the patients.

I should mention here that Pleasant Valley has a rule against relations, which forbids sexual liaisons between hospital residents. The staff here won't go into any real detail as to why the rule exists—something about sex getting in the way of the therapeutic process, the fragility of our egos, etc.—but I can't help but feel that it's all a tad Puritanical. Constantina called it a fascist means of social control.

At this moment, an older female patient stood up, smoothed out her long grey hair in a practiced gesture, and then became a little hysterical. In a squeaky voice that seemed to belong to someone else, she accused Mark of being in a relationship with Joanna. (Mark and Joanna = the prettiest wards in the hospital, the most popular of the twenty-something set, and a natural couple who almost make being in an asylum look good.) Everybody knew this to be the truth, but nobody had brought it up before. The older woman said their relationship was bringing up feelings in her she couldn't deal with, intense anger and sorrow and jealousy.

Mark and Joanna looked shocked and denied everything, of course. They received only a warning, as there wasn't enough evidence to take further action.

The older patient must be in her sixties, so what business is it of hers if Mark and Joanna are sneaking into each other's rooms after dark? I guess their fancy for one another reminds her of how long she's been out of the game, a common refrain for the long-timers, and even for some of the short-term patients who can't afford to stay for longer than the six-week intake period.

If you're caught having sex, you could get kicked out of the hospital. Which doesn't sound so bad, really, except if you're kicked out you can't come back.

As much as I hate this place, what would I do if I became psychotic again? Move back in with my parents for the rest of my life?

Friday

I was in the dayroom watching Maury when Simon bounded into the room with an announcement.

"The nurses told me we're going to put on a play," he said. "Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*."

We gathered in the dining room prior to the first rehearsal to go over the scripts, most of us trying to make sense of the dialogue. Constantina, the Shakespeare scholar, explained the first few scenes: Caesar's quest for power, the soothsayer's prediction, and Brutus, who made the last stab.

"If life is a tale told by an idiot, all sound and fury, signifying nada," she said, "there's no better place to prove your point than Pleasant Valley."

“Amen,” I chanted.

“But that’s *Macbeth*,” Simon said.

“Anyway, it’ll give us something to do besides jerk off.”

The little playhouse was just three blocks from the hospital and was used mostly for Christmas plays and the occasional crafts exhibition. They had called in a director from a local theater company, someone who had experience working with all kinds of people, the nurses explained.

“Enough of this euphemistic crap,” Constantina said. “We know who we are.”

We trudged to the playhouse through the cold in time for the first rehearsal, when I was struck by sudden inspiration.

“Listen,” I said. “I’ll play Caesar, ruler of the known world, and you all will conspire against me. My death, as my life, will be glorious and fated.”

We read monologues from the play in the small upstairs room that served as the theater, and the director cast us then and there. As it turned out, I wasn’t cast as Caesar. Instead, I was given the small role of Cinna the Poet, who the murderous hordes of townfolk mistake for Cinna the Conspirator after Caesar’s death, and in their rage tear limb from limb. My job was to say, “Hey, you’ve got it wrong, I’m Cinna the Poet! Cinna *the Poet!*” and then to scream as the townfolk dismembered me.

That moment of confused identity clicked and made a terrible kind of sense, for as I wandered the hospital hallways, watched Maury in the dayroom, played ping-pong in the game room, ate dinner in the poorly lit dining room, walked to the corner store for more cigarettes, I felt like somebody else, like somebody who had never really existed

and never would, like somebody who was the figment of somebody else's imagination, like somebody who, at the least, was the brunt of a particularly cruel joke.

Saturday

I woke and went directly to the tiny reading room on the first floor of the hospital. Simon was sitting next to Constantina, both of them poring over their scripts. I am a little bitter, as Simon, whose powers of theatrical expression apparently overpower my own, has been cast as Caesar. Constantina plays Brutus.

“What, Cinna, ho!” Constantina said upon seeing me. “I cannot, by the progress of the stars, give guess how near to day. Slept you soundly?”

“Ay,” I croaked.

They both cracked up. They seemed to be in good spirits, which irritated me a little.

Soon we gave up on practicing our lines and the three of us walked along Main Street toward the town's only café (which has excellent coffee). It's a quaint little restaurant where somebody who used to be famous once wrote an anti-war protest song. It sits just past the playhouse, next to a tiny library and the post office. Around the corner is a Christmas-themed candy shop and a dime store that sells postcards and souvenirs.

You might be wondering how the townsfolk feel about the mentals wandering their streets, drinking their coffee, borrowing books from their library? Well, the truth is, everybody here is quite friendly. Always a smile on their face, even if it is a little bit knowing and/or smug.

We sat and ordered coffees. Constantina and Simon were on one side of the

booth, I was on the other. We ordered, we waited. It seemed we were always waiting for something: food to arrive; plates to be cleared; meetings to begin; thoughts to emerge from the sludge of our fellow patients' subconscious and then to be organized into meaningful verbalization.

Our coffees arrived. I slowly poured in two creamers and watched the white swirls make curling designs on the coffee's surface. The patterns were exactly like what Dr. Horner says about delusions: the more you scrutinize them, the more intricate they become. Each thought spirals out to ten new ones, and then each of those thoughts spirals out, eventually returning to the original thought. It's hard to be stuck in your own mind's infinitely repeating pattern for so long, and then harder still to return to the outside world and face the fact that you were stuck for all that time.

I stirred my coffee until it became a uniform caramel color, and cleared my throat.

"Let's say, Constantina, that you never had a manic-depressive attack. And Simon, let's say you never had a psychotic break. Where would you be now?"

"Me? I'd be playing Carnegie Hall," Simon mused.

Constantina arched her eyebrows, then shook her head.

"You're both stuck in hypotheticals. This is where we are. There is no going back."

"But doesn't that thought terrify you?" I said.

"You just need to trust the process," Simon said. He was parroting the director's constant refrain.

"The process whereby we sit around and watch Maury all day?"

Constantina sipped her coffee and seemed to think about this. "The process is

admittedly a slow one,” she conceded.

“The process,” I said, “is killing me.”

“It’s your attitude that’s the problem,” Simon said. “Give in. Let go. Relax.”

I felt like cursing them both. They didn’t understand at all. How could they act like everything was fine?

“You know what,” I said, “if you all are happy here, great. Then stay. But I’m on the first boat out.” I drank the rest of my coffee and got up from the booth. “I’m going to practice my lines.”

“But you only have the one,” said Simon.

I saw Constantina nudge him in the side as I exited the booth and headed out the door.

I went straight to the bus stop, catty-corner to the café, and decided to get on the first bus that stopped. A Greyhound bus pulled around the corner ten minutes later. It stopped and waited for me to get on. I imagined myself traveling to some unknown destination with only the clothes on my back, ten dollars in my wallet, and a pack of USA Gold’s in my pocket.

I hesitated too long. The driver flashed a smile, as if he knew my whole story, beginning to end. The door made a whooshing sound, the exhaust coughed up a cloud of black smoke, and the bus chugged away. I walked the few short blocks back to the hospital, and turned on Maury on the plasma TV.

Monday

I discovered why Simon and Constantina don’t mind being here at Pleasant

Valley: they're having sex! I heard them making coitus noises from across the hallway last night. (Okay, to be perfectly honest, I had my ear to the door.) I don't know how to feel about this, exactly, because I am attracted to Constantina. I am also, though slightly more nebulously, attracted to Simon.

I briefly considered knocking and making my presence known, hoping for the best, but at the last minute I decided against it. I heard them both reach what sounded like a brilliant simultaneous orgasm, and then I stole across the hallway to my room, and with the door propped open just a crack, I saw Constantina rush away from Simon's quarters.

I was in such a state of excitement (and not simply sexual excitement, but a feeling achieved when someone successfully rebels against an arbitrary rule, something close to a feeling of, for lack of a better word, freedom) that I stole back across the hallway and knocked on Simon's door. I didn't even know what I was doing. He opened the door, and obviously thought it was Constantina.

"Well hello again," he said before he saw my face.

I made my voice low and sultry: "Well hello."

He swept his greasy bangs out of his eyes and looked up, startled. "What're you doing here?"

"I can't sleep," I lied.

"Come in."

His room was in complete disarray, books and magazines and small plastic Dungeons & Dragons figurines scattered across the floor. The sheets were pulled up from the mattress and lay in a clump at the foot of the bed.

"Excuse the mess," he said.

I merely nodded.

“Listen,” he said, “I’m sorry you’re having a rough time here. Constantina and I, we’ve been here a little longer than you, and maybe we’re just used to it.”

I nodded again. Then I blurted: “I just saw her leave your room.”

Simon turned red in the face. The fingers of his hand twitched a little.

“We were just playing D&D,” he mumbled.

I decided not to press the issue. We sat and played cards for a while, and then took turns writing lines of poetry on his typewriter until we had written a love poem to nobody in particular. We slipped it onto the desk at the nurse’s station, and then went to sleep.

Tuesday

Individual therapy, group therapy, CM, meeting with a social worker, a Rorschach test, and then, at last, rehearsal. I had been waiting all week for this day, because we were scheduled to run through the second half of the play. I was determined to stun the director with the brilliance of my performance.

We acted out Caesar’s murder and listened to Antony’s speech. (Antony is played by Mark, who looks good but doesn’t have much of a flair for the role, in my humble opinion.) I steeled myself for the end of his speech, knowing what came next.

When it came time for my performance as Cinna the Poet, the townsfolk circled me, brandishing plastic knives and wooden clubs, and as I was thrown to the ground, my face contorted and I curdled the air with a scream. The Romans, their lifeblood and energy newly freed with the murder of their emperor, paused for a moment, for they had

forgotten to drag me from the stage. Everything went still, everybody took in the scream, which went on and on, which could have been real, which was real, I could have been dying, it could have been my last breath.

When they finally dragged me off stage, Simon pulled me close. “That was *good*, damn it,” he said.

“It felt good,” I stammered.

San Fran Studio

The four of us moved across the country straight out of college, into a San Fran studio apartment. It was the only thing we could find on such short notice. We slept two to the pull out sofa, two to the queen bed. The landlord, Robert, lived down the hall. He was tall, long blond hair, arms and legs stacked with muscle. He repelled down bridges and investigated water pumps for work. He seemed shy about having such a beautiful, hulking body. He was so nice, so non-assuming, I figured he was gay. We didn't know about Californians yet, the flirtatious but flaky friendliness. Anyway, Jessica soon proved the hypothesis wrong. We could hear them fucking in the afternoon with the windows open while Robert's daughter was at school. None of us had jobs or anything to do. Connor, the twenty-something tenant who lived in the basement, showed us the machine he'd built. The elaborate series of peddles connected to his guitar and took up most of the floor. He played us a twenty-minute solo arrangement, smashing on the peddles. This way, he explained, I don't have to change the chords with my fingers. It took him three years to build. I didn't see the point. Another time, the man who lived upstairs came downstairs. He appeared disheveled and wore one pair of glasses on top of another. He handed us a card: PSYCHOTHERAPIST. Did we mind if he sat in the veranda to read the paper? It seemed an odd request. The veranda was open to all. We told him he could do what he liked. We watched through the window as he stepped out into the sun and

stretched his arms. He proceeded to take off his clothes. His naked, flabby body was nearly translucent. Hey there, Robert called out through his bedroom window. I thought he was going to scold the man. But no, he was only waving hello.

At some point it occurred to us we weren't meant to be here, us four in one room with a little kitchenette, surrounded by strange, too-friendly people. We ate burritos and looked for a real apartment, but the Mission was filling up with more hipsters each day. One day, an anti-gentrification rally marched past the front of our building. We were sympathetic. We hated the hipsters, too. To be sure, we were the hipsters. The contradiction didn't bother us, not right away. Evenings, we walked to the top of Bernal Hill. We watched the city blinking down below. Our post-graduate lives pulsed with possibility. Then we returned to the cramped studio. Reality set in. Tensions rose up. Once, Jessica slapped me across the face for taking her place in the queen bed. We couldn't eat a bowl of cereal without scowling at one another. The bathroom smelled of rotten toothpaste. By chance, we saw a man putting out a FOR RENT sign down the street for a three bedroom. I called the number immediately from across the street. We watched the man get out his cell phone. We'll take it, I told him. I crossed the street and introduced myself. We'd pool our money together, live there for a year, and go our separate ways. California, Jessica sang, doing her best Joni Mitchell. California, I'm coming home.

The Saint

The church ladies of Timmy's town were believers, God-fearing people. The morning Timmy died, after I had cared for her through the night, the ladies called the house one by one and told me I was a saint and a hero. I thanked them one by one, and then slammed down the receiver and burst into hysterics, tears and laughter and emotions I couldn't name. A saint!

At the funeral, I met them, aging women with pale, loose skin and too much crimson lipstick. Black hats with black sequin flowers adorned their heads, and they smelled of dried jasmine and honeysuckle. They looked at me as if I was one of their own, this boy who had rushed to South Carolina to help his dying grandmother cross over, this young man who had performed God's work, this hero, this saint.

I wanted to tell them I didn't believe in saints, that I even think it might be dangerous to believe in them. To deny them the full range and complexity of our human reality. To believe that, somehow, they managed to transcend it all and reach some kind of lofty perfection. Be careful, I wanted to say. The idealized conception of the pure of heart and mind leads to the cursed conception of the damned. You can't have one without the other. All of it, dangerous Christian thinking.

Instead, I smiled back at them out of politeness, went through the motions of shaking their hands and engaging in tepid conversation. Their faces were wide open, full

of tenderness and kindness, as if I was a representative of some bygone era of chivalry and duty and respect. It made me cringe inside, their sanctimony, their religion. I was guilt-ridden and ashamed. Maybe I just hated them for loving me without knowing the first thing about me.

I moved to San Francisco right after college in an attempt to outrun my problems. It's a typical strategy of those who are still young, to immerse yourself in a new environment where nobody knows your name. I had been cheating on Richard, my college boyfriend, and when he found out, he cursed me. I lashed out and told him he wasn't half the lover of these other men. He said he never wanted to see me again, and that was that. I felt horrible. I thought if I ran away to the Bay, where everyone was supposedly interesting and friendly and queer, I could reinvent myself, and forget about it.

It worked, for a little while. I got a job as a server at an upscale taqueria near Dolores Park, where the gays would gather on the hill to sunbathe or flaunt new outfits. I made friends with the servers and even went on a couple of dates and immersed myself in the city some called the Gay Mecca. An exaggeration, of course, although there was something of a religious fervor to the place, only with more glitter and drugs and skin.

A few months passed, glazed over like a dream. I don't know what started it, the drugs, or maybe my hectic pace of life in the midst of the otherwise calm oasis that was San Francisco. In any event, I started thinking too much too rapidly. I started worrying that my neighbors were watching me through the window across the street. Strangers on

the street looked at me, and I thought I could read their minds: they were trying to communicate nasty, hateful things to me.

My mind was like a thousand birds taking flight at once. One door closed and fifteen would open. I would go to the post office to mail a letter, and forget why I had come. New thoughts fluttered through my mind as quickly as I could think them. I had the feeling I was forgetting something long remembered, something that would save me and end my torment. At other times, I felt like an automaton, like I was simply going through the motions of life without purpose or meaning, as if everything were preordained, a constant and sinister *déjà vu*.

It was my mother who called me in early September and told me Timmy was sick with bone cancer. I admit it, I saw an opportunity. The truth is I wasn't thinking of her when I offered right away to go and take care of her.

"Oh, Lee, you're wonderful," my mother said, and I could feel her gratitude radiate through the phone. For an instant, I was the good son again, the person I used to be before running to the Bay to start a new life, away from friends and family and everything that was familiar.

Within a few days, I quit my job at the taqueria. Family emergency, I explained. Buoyant with the knowledge that I was doing the right thing, I packed my bags and said goodbye to my friends. Really, I was thrilled with the anticipation of being on the move again and starting a new adventure. I barely thought about the days ahead of me. I thought only of jumping ship and moving out and being in a different place, exploring uncharted territory.

The terrible feeling that had struck my inner self, the horrible radiance that had so fully infused the world, seemed to evaporate like the mist that settled for an hour each afternoon over the neighborhood where I lived.

We touched down in Columbia, South Carolina, and I caught a cab to the outskirts of the city. It was night. We passed a post office and a single corner market and several churches. I let the window down and tasted the air, dusty and sweet. Nothing like the rarefied air of the Bay. Palm trees lined the entrance to the tiny public library. We drove past the main street of the town on a road which threaded its way alongside a river, until we reached a long red dirt road. We turned down the road and in the beams of the headlights I could make out a yellow sign with white lettering: Devil's Backbone Lane.

We arrived. I hadn't brought much with me, just a few changes of clothes in a duffel bag and a backpack full of philosophy books. The house was short and squat, a two-bedroom with only one floor. Beyond the house was a pond that winked in the moonlight.

Two clean raps, and the door opened, as if Timmy had been waiting by the door the whole time. She stood just behind the screen, a shocked expression on her face, her greasy white and grey hair sticking up in places.

"Lee," she said, as though she were surprised to see me, though she must have known I was arriving that night. "Come inside, no use waiting on the doorstep." She turned and ushered me in with brusque waves of her hand.

The house smelled of the geriatric center where I had volunteered ages ago, an odor of must and microwave-dinners. The center of the house was one large room that

served as a kitchen and a parlor. An ornate oak desk sat to one side of the room next to a wall of books, histories of the Civil War and biographies of past Presidents, that sort of thing. On the desk was an extensive coin collection.

“Where’d you get these?” I asked, turning a coin over in my hand.

“I’m a collector,” she said.

“How much are they worth?”

“You’ve only just arrived and already you’re trying to rob me?” Her voice was serious, but then her mouth cracked into a grin. “It’s good to see you, Lee,” she said, and gave me a pat on the back.

“You too, grandma.” Yet as I said it, I realized I knew so little about this woman, we might as well be meeting for the first time.

Her real name was Timelia. I hadn’t seen her since the family reunion in Barnegat, New Jersey five years earlier. At first, when I thought about it, I wasn’t even sure how we were related. Then, with a little effort, I remembered: by marriage, not by blood. No children of her own. My great-grandfather had met her after his first wife passed away. When they married, she was very young and he was older. Then he got sick, and she took care of him for over a decade. When he died, she moved to Columbia. She didn’t know anybody here, just felt a kind of kinship with the South. The people, the pace of life. She fell in love with her Church, and never re-married. There was nobody to look after her as she had looked after my great-grandpa.

Lying in bed that night, I heard the creaking of the old house, unfamiliar to me in every way. I felt alone. I thought suddenly of Richard, and then of those other men. For

the first time since college, I missed him. I began to cry, so quickly I didn't feel it coming. Even though she was on the other side of the house, I muffled my sobs with a pillow, until it was soaked in snot and phlegm.

The following afternoon, Timmy beat at the door with a fist.

"Get up!" she cried from the other side. "I've been trying to wake you up for hours!"

"I'm up, I'm up," I moaned, rolling over. "Jesus."

"Don't you use that language in this house. Get up and make us some breakfast," she said, her shrill voice receding into the kitchen.

I fried us three eggs, splattered them in ketchup.

"My appointment is in half an hour." She looked at me with a stern expression I remembered from when I was a kid, the look that said, *eat your vegetables*. All these years later, and nothing had changed. From an angle, her eyes were distorted behind her thick glasses, but when you looked at her straight-on, her eyes were magnified, large and commandeering. "You'll drive me to the hospital, then."

We drove to the health center where they did her treatments. It was a long walk from the parking lot, so I helped Timmy into the wheelchair she kept in the trunk of the car and careened her over to the entrance. Inside the waiting room, she seemed to know everybody there—the nurses, the other patients—but she didn't introduce me.

I read magazines while Timmy was in back. It occurred to me that I didn't even know how radiation works, if it's a sharp or dull pain, quick or long-lasting. I felt

somebody's eyes on me, and I looked up to see an older lady with white hair sitting across the waiting room.

“Are you her grandson?” she whispered playfully.

I nodded my head.

“What a good boy,” she said. “You're a saint.”

A nurse wheeled Timmy back into the waiting room. She had a severe look on her face as if to hide the exhaustion she felt. She signaled without speaking that it was time to go. I guided her chair outside the center and across the parking lot, where a younger woman in scrubs passed us.

“You're lucky to have such a nice young man helping you out!” she called to my grandma. I waved to her and Timmy bobbed her head with a self-satisfied smile.

We went to the clinic three times a week, the major event of the day. I spent the rest of the time reading my philosophy books and thinking about my friends in San Francisco, feeling disconnected and alone.

The problem returned one evening while I was trying to make spaghetti with broccoli. I couldn't seem to remember how to do it. I knew I had to boil the water, crack the dry spaghetti in half and put it in the pot, but each time I started, I kept forgetting what I was doing.

Timmy was waiting for the food on the porch. Finally, she came inside.

“What's wrong?” she demanded.

“I just—I forget how to make spaghetti.” I laughed as if it were all a joke. It was a hollow laugh, and rang out strangely.

“You *forgot*? But Lee, it’s simple.”

“I know grandma, I think I’m just tired, that’s all.”

We made the meal together, and I brought it out on a tray to the porch.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” She rapped the table with her hand.

“What am I forgetting?”

“What are you forgetting?” Timmy said shrilly, as if nothing could be more obvious. She turned her head sideways and gave me her stern expression. “Napkins!” she declared.

“Of course, of course,” I said, and grabbed a roll of paper towels from the kitchen.

We ate in silence. The sun dipped beneath the trees, and the loons cooed softly.

“Grandma,” I started to say. “Why did you move to South Carolina?”

“I like it here,” she said, moving a little in her seat.

“Yes, but how did you know you were going to like it?”

“Sometimes you just know these things,” she said brusquely, halting any further conversation.

I wanted to ask her what her early life was like, what my great-grandfather was like, but Timmy seemed distant and uninterested in talking about it. I wanted to know who I was and what I was doing here, but it seemed like too much to ask at the moment, too much to dredge up.

“The ice cream,” I said finally, and got up from my seat.

I read in bed with the door open after dinner, when the phone rang. I heard Timmy walking slowly over to the portable, making a little gasping sound with each step.

I should have gone to help her, but she told me expressly I was there only to do the things she absolutely couldn't do on her own.

After a few seconds of talk, I could tell it was my mother.

“Oh, he's been a great help,” Timmy said, and then her voice hushed, and I heard her shuffle away as quickly as she could from my room and toward her own. She shut the door. Without thinking, I got up and crossed through the kitchen to the other end of the one-floor house, and pressed my ear to her door.

“—funny,” she was saying. “I can't explain it, really. He takes a long time to respond to me, and he has trouble doing basic chores, and there's something strange about the way he looks at me. I don't know what it is. Well, no, I don't—”

I took my ear away from the door and tip-toed back to my room. I lay down in bed and knew that something was wrong with me. My thoughts suddenly raced again. The urge to cry came on quickly, a pressured sensation from behind my eyes. I let the tears fall, but it didn't feel good. I didn't even know why I was crying, or what I was doing here.

Two weeks passed, and I was getting more and more distracted by my thoughts, more prone to stop in the middle of doing something I should have known how to do. I was more upset by the thought of being alone out here with an old woman I didn't know and taking care of her for an indeterminate amount of time.

On a Wednesday, Timmy didn't have treatment, so I gave her a lift to work. She did the accounting for a used car and parts shop in town. She shouldn't have been

working, she should have been resting, but she insisted. While she got settled in her office, the owner pulled me aside and asked for my cell number. Just in case, he said.

I drove to a coffee shop down the road to read my book. About an hour later, I got a call from the boss.

“You need to come immediately,” he said. “Timmy passed out in her office.”

My stomach sank. I jumped into the car and drove back to the lot. Inside the office, Timmy is propped up on the floor against a couch. She was wheezing a little and her eyes moved in two different directions.

“I think we should call for an ambulance,” I said. The boss called 911 and an ambulance arrived in less than ten minutes.

I followed the ambulance to the hospital, and waited for them to take care of Timmy. They paged me from the waiting room about an hour later. The doctor, a woman with grey streaks in her hair, asked how we're related. I explained that she's my grandmother.

“We don't know why she passed out,” the doctor said. “Everything appears to be normal. Her vitals are okay.”

Timmy seemed a little confused about what was going on. I reached over and squeezed her hand. She looked up.

“What should we do, grandma?”

“Let's go home.”

On the ride back to the house, Timmy said quietly, “I don't want to die in the hospital.”

I didn't know how to respond, exactly. "Why not, grandma?"

She spoke so quietly I had to lean over to listen to her. "It's too sterile. I want to die in my bed, at home."

When we got to the house, I parked outside. I went around to the passenger seat and helped Timmy out. I turned around for a moment to get the walker out of the back seat. There's a *thump*, and I turned to see Timmy lying on the ground.

"I don't feel too good," she murmured.

I tried to help her up, but she didn't want to move. I quickly dialed my mother on my cell. No answer. Sweat dripped down my neck to the small of my back. I started to feel dizzy, and I took a few deep breaths to center myself.

"Ok, grandma," I said. "Let's go into the house."

I went to the trunk to get the extra wheelchair.

"Ready, Timmy?"

I started to lift her up into the chair, when I saw a spot of brown running down her leg. The acrid smell of feces wafted into the air.

"It was an accident," Timmy managed to say. "Don't take me to the hospital."

I saw what happened and felt the urge to cry, but I held back the tears.

"It's ok, grandma, let's just get into the house."

I lifted her with both arms into the wheelchair, and wheeled her into the house. I prepared her bed with towels, then lifted her onto the bed. She gasped a little bit as I lay her down, and I cooed to her like the loons outside: everything is going to be okay, just relax.

My mother called on my cell.

“It’s not looking good,” I said. I explained what happened over the course of the day. Part of me felt guilty in recounting it, somehow, as if I were the one to blame for what happened.

My mother told me to take off her clothes, clean her off, make her feel comfortable, and stay with her through the night. She would come and meet me in the morning.

“Listen,” she said before we got off the phone. “This could be it. Be kind to her.”

I stripped Timmy down to her underwear. I got the roll of paper towels, soaked them in water, and cleaned off her body. It was warm in the house, but I covered her in blankets anyway, in case she felt embarrassed, but she was barely paying any attention to me. Her eyes were focusing on a distant point somewhere far away, and her breathing was troubled. She was shivering, and I wrapped the blankets tighter around her.

We had never been this close before. A strange and delicate kind of intimacy was building between us. A memory flitted through my mind: I’m in college, learning about psychopomps in Greek antiquity, who lead the newly dead to the afterlife. Maybe I’m a psychopomp, I thought to myself, here to guide the dead home.

Another thought surfaced briefly and vanishes just as quickly: *Maybe I’m beginning to lose my mind.*

I took a deep breath, and tried to slow everything down. My mind was racing ahead of itself. I needed to think about the task at hand, about Timmy.

Timmy suddenly sat halfway up, her face contorted with pain. “Oh, it hurts, Lee!” she said, her voice gurgling out of her mouth, spittle forming at the corners of her lips. “It hurts!” Then she lay back down again, her breathing slow and troubled.

I started to cry. I couldn't help it.

Timmy believed in Heaven, I know. Maybe that's where she's headed. But what did *I* believe? What did *I* think happens next?

"Focus on your breathing," I said, gathering my strength and halting the tears. "Everything will be ok."

Timmy seemed not to hear me. Her eyes were closed now, and she was breathing heavily.

The minutes passed, slow and terrible.

"Grandma," I said suddenly, "I love you." I don't know why I said it, exactly. I hadn't said those words in a long time. It couldn't possibly be true, I thought. I barely knew Timmy, and yet, it felt like the right thing to say. It felt like saying goodbye.

"I love you, too," she said with effort, her eyes open.

Then her eyes closed again, and she counted to ten, over and over again. I held her hand. At some point, she stopped counting, her breathing rattling all the way down to her ribcage, shaking itself in and out of her. I got the chills watching her.

At some point, hours later, I fell asleep on the floor. When I woke up, sunlight filtered through the air, and the dust particles in the room seemed to swim and swirl through the air around Timmy. She didn't move, didn't breathe, and until that moment in my life, I have never experienced anything so quiet.

Excuse Me While I Disappear

When Jacky told her father she was in a relationship with a woman, he looked at her and cocked his head to the side a little, as if she was offering him a piece of rare fruit he didn't know how to eat. His eyes blinked once behind his thick lenses, his slender shoulders slouched, and he seemed to recede into himself. In that moment, he looked small and meek.

He shuffled over to the stove, cracked a stack of dry spaghetti in half, and put it in a pot of boiling water. Outside, the snow fell over Hyannis, Cape Cod, a few flakes sticking to the kitchen window.

Did you hear what I said?

But he was busy cooking.

Later, at her mother's place, Jacky announced over the tinny jazz music of the radio that she had something to say. Her mother put down the book she was reading and pricked up her nose like a wolf.

I'm in a relationship, Jacky said.

And who is this young man?

Actually, Jacky hesitated, she's a woman. Her name is Sam.

A woman! her mother cackled. But you're barely fifteen! What do *you* know about *women*?

Jacky stiffened. I'm not just some dumb kid.

Her mother gave her a pitying look. Oh honey, she said. You'll grow out of it.

She picked up her book, and continued to read.

Upstairs, in the bathroom mirror, Jacky saw her own pale face with its thin lips, the curly dark mess of hair that nearly covered her eyes, which were bloodshot and panicked. She said out loud, I'm gay. It was like reaching out to a world she could just barely touch with the tips of her fingers. She thought of the rounded curve of Sam's hip, the brittle hairs of her crotch. I'm gay, she said again, and felt an old ache that now had a name.

She reached into the shower, slipped one of the thin blades out of her mother's razor, and tested it against a finger. The metal was cold and sharp. She pressed it lightly to her arm, waited a beat. Then she winced and held back a cry as she ran it lengthwise across her skin. There was a wash of panic, a pain behind her eyes. Her heart beat rapidly as blood flowed smoothly down her arm.

I'm alive, she thought. I'm a living thing.

The air seemed to pulsate around her.

A wave of calm.

She washed the wound with an antiseptic. A Band-Aid went over the cut, and the razor went back in the shower.

It was easy to call her father and say that she would be at her mother's place for a few days, easier still to tell her mother that she would be at her father's. It was after Christmas, just before New Year's, and she was still on break from school. Her mother simply nodded at the news, as if listening to the weather forecast, and shut the door to her room.

Without hurrying, Jacky packed her clothes and books in a duffel bag, grabbed sixty dollars from her mother's wallet on the kitchen table, and put the bills in the inner pocket of her winter coat. Then she slipped out of the house and crossed the street toward the center of town.

The thin layer of snow crunched beneath her feet. She stuck out her tongue to catch the flakes coming down, like a child might, though she wasn't a child anymore. Whatever her mother said about her not knowing what it's like to be a woman, she knew she felt pain like a woman, like any adult. Pain was the same for everyone.

The streetlamps cast a pallid glow over the road. The boutique shops and little book stores along Main Street were closed for the night, and the square in the town center was empty of people. The Greyhound bus station was a grey building with one streetlamp lighting the entranceway. It was a Saturday, and the last bus to New York City left Hyannis at ten o'clock PM.

Jacky bought her ticket, and when it came time, boarded the bus and took a seat by the window. A man with a flannel coat and a grey wool cap took the seat next to her. When he turned to look at her, she could see his scraggly tuft of a beard, the deep lines beneath his eyes. The light at the crosswalk across the street changed color, and his face took on a greenish sheen.

You look scared, he said. Looks like you don't know where you're coming from or where you're going. Might be a long while before you figure it out.

Then he chuckled to himself, took a swig from a container buried in a paper sack, exuded a beery stench.

Jacky flashed him a smile and shifted nervously in her seat. She wanted to say she was leaving Hyannis for New York City, just like him, but at that moment, the bus rattled and thrummed to life, pushed off from its granite station.

Once they reached the outskirts, liquor stores burning with orange neon lights and one-story cabins dusted with snow rumbled by the window. Then they turned onto the Interstate, past telephone poles strung with wire, and beyond them, the dense, impenetrable woods.

When her parents were still together over a decade ago, her family used to take road trips from Cape Cod to Boston, where her grandparents lived. She remembered it as she did when she was six: the sun sinking behind the trees, the pungent rot of her mother's perfume wafting through the airless car, her father's straight-ahead stare at the road, and his occasional glance at her through the rearview mirror.

Her mother liked to point out the woods. Look, Jacky. Don't they look mysterious?

Jacky would stare out at the trees whizzing by and try to find a through-line, to penetrate into the forest, but as soon as she did, the view shifted and changed, disappearing.

Nana always said that Jesus is in the trees, her mother would say. He's in the trees, the sky, the stars. He's watching us drive by right now. He even knows what we're thinking.

He does? Jacky might say.

Now, as the bus rumbled along the Interstate, Jacky stared out at the woods as they flitted by. They did seem mysterious, dark and deep.

She prepared herself for a moment. The man next to her was snoring, his hands cupped around his paper sack. Then she faced toward the trees and put her hands together.

Jesus, I'm in love.

She quickly separated her hands, feeling embarrassed, but then she looked back at the trees going by. She put her hands together again.

Jesus, I fell in love with a woman last summer, and I don't know what you think about that. I'm going to see her now, but she doesn't know I'm coming. Just please let her be happy to see me. If she's happy to see me, I won't ever cut myself again, I won't run away anymore, I'll just be happy. Please.

The trees winked by, unceasing, uncaring.

She was dreaming that she was lost and running through the forest. She tripped and fell against the roots of an enormous tree, when the blast of a horn woke her from her sleep. The shock of the sound merged with a pain in her arm, and she realized she had fallen asleep against the arm rest. Startled, Jacky rubbed at the gash on her arm, and gritted her teeth in pain.

She checked her watch. Two-thirty AM. They were in the city now, tall buildings rising all around them in the night, lighted signs offering things to eat and see and buy. On the streets, shafts of steam from the subway vents enveloped passersby. They turned into the Port Authority Bus Terminal, a long line of buses taxiing before them like giant insects.

The man with the scraggly beard stood and retrieved his bag from the overhead compartment. He turned back to look at Jacky, raised his eyebrows once, and walked off the bus.

Jacky headed quickly down the street, toward the bright lights of Times Square. At the awning of restaurant offering one dollar slices of pizza, she found a phone booth. After two rings, there was the sound of someone picking up, voices and laughing in the background.

Sam?

This is she, came the response, affecting the tone of their parents, their teachers, all the people they despised.

It's me, Jacky squeaked.

Who's *me*? Then there was a little gasp, and the phone line went dead.

Jacky dialed again. Sam's voice was hushed this time. Jacky! Where are you?

I'm in New York, Jacky said, and the reality of it hit her all at once.

Like, *Manhattan*, New York? What're you doing *here*?

I'll explain. I'm hungry. Will you meet me?

There was a long pause.

I think this is a mistake, Jacky.

All at once, Jacky remembered the tone Sam had used when they broke up at the end of the summer, the tone that said, you're still a kid.

Fine, Jacky said. I'll just wander the streets until I freeze to death.

Oh, Christ. Where are you exactly?

Jacky looked up at the lights, the advertisements which scaled the sides of buildings. Times Square, she said.

Meet me at the Tick Tock Diner, Eighth and Thirty-fourth. I'll be there in half an hour.

Jacky hung up, and felt a thrill run through her.

Manhattan was like a living thing compared to Hyannis, where everything seemed slow and dull and dead. Jacky had been to New York before, but only with her parents, and now the feeling of being swept off her feet at the rush of cars and taxis and the great variety of people was even more pronounced, because she was alone.

She asked a man in a bodega for directions, and he pointed a finger without saying a word. She walked to Eighth Avenue and headed south. In the doorway to a shabby looking apartment building, a man removed his oval glasses and kissed a woman passionately, his tongue thrusting into her mouth in the light of the vestibule. On the next street, two men in tight jeans and fashionable coats walked by her, arm in arm. By the corner, two homeless women sat on the ground begging for change. They smoked cigarettes and laughed heartily, bundled in blankets in the cold.

Hey, girl! one of them called. Spare a quarter? Jacky reached into her pocket and put a quarter in the cup.

Happy New Year, the woman said, and winked.

When Jacky opened the door to the Tick Tock Diner, a wave of warm air hit her in the face. The place was made to look like an old-fashioned diner from another era, with signs offering ten cent Coca-Colas and burgers, booths with faux red leather. A waiter motioned to the first booth, which was empty, and Jacky took a seat.

A song played on the jukebox, one that sounded vaguely familiar:

Try to think that love's not around

Still it's uncomfortably near...

My poor old heart ain't gaining any ground

Because my angel eyes ain't here

Sinatra, Jacky realized. Her mother's favorite. She felt a pang of guilt and brushed her hand absently against her arm. She listened to the rest of the song, until it reached the final, fading line:

'Scuse me while I disappear

Can I get you something to drink?

Jacky snapped to attention. The waiter hovered above her.

A Coke and a burger, please.

The waiter left, and Jacky pulled out her wallet and the bills from her coat pocket. Sixty-one dollars, seventy-five cents. Jacky took the quarters and chose another Sinatra song on the jukebox. She wanted something brighter, happier. She sat back down, and with the first notes of the song, her heart began to pound. *Start spreading the news*, Frank sang. Something in the music made Jacky's head whirl. She felt like getting up on the table and dancing like mad, telling the world she was in love, that she had come to this city to meet her lover. *New York, New York*.

Instead, she waited facing the door, looking up at every face that entered the diner, but none of them belonged to Sam. The burger and fries came in fifteen minutes. Jacky ate quickly, and when the waiter came around again, she ordered a coffee to stall for time.

The bell tinkled above the door again, and Jacky expected it to be another unfamiliar face. Yet, suddenly, living and breathing, there she was, wearing a puffy purple jacket with a fur-lined hood. Sam peered out from behind the hood for a moment, and then removed it. Her face was red with cold, her short spiky blond hair jutted out in every direction, and the ring through her nose gleamed in the fluorescent light of the diner. She looked older than Jacky remembered. She had just turned nineteen, a sophomore in college.

Sam looked down at the first booth, and their eyes met.

Jacky, you old bum, Sam said, taking the seat across from Jacky. What're you doing here?

Jacky stiffened. No 'Hello, how are you'?

Hello, Jacky. How *are* you?

I'm fine.

You can't just hop on a bus to come and see me. What about your parents?

No 'I love you, I missed you'?

Sam's face darkened. Listen, Jacky. Why are you here?

Jacky began to tremble. My parents kicked me out, she said.

Sam's eyes widened. Both of them?

Jacky nodded. I can't stay in Hyannis, Sam.

Oh, God. Sam reached out and held Jacky's hands in her own. I'm sorry to hear that Jacky, I'm really very sorry, but I live in a *dorm*. We're not even allowed to have guests.

So?

So?

Jacky looked out the window, half expecting to see the trees whooshing by. She wished for a moment she was still in transit, just travelling, and never arriving.

Did they really kick you out? Sam pleaded.

Jacky nodded. Then she reached for the place where she had cut herself, and felt a dull pain in her arm. She looked back at Sam, and shook her head. No.

So you were lying.

Look, Sam. I love you.

You thought just because I'm the first girl you ever liked, the first girl you ever fucked, the one who opened your eyes to all *this*—she waved a hand in the air, as if

indicating the whole world—you thought you could just plop down in front of me and ask me to take care of you?

I prayed you would be happy to see me, Jacky blurted out.

Come on, Sam said, and offered Jacky her hand.

The refrain from the Sinatra song rang out in Jacky's mind as they stepped out to the cold, wet streets.

The first bus back to Cape Cod left at six AM.

After Sam hugged her goodbye, after she stepped on the bus and took her seat, after they had finally left the city behind, Jacky began to sob.

You OK? asked an older woman with graying hair seated next to her. We all go through these things in life, she said, and patted Jacky on the shoulder.

When they reached the Interstate near Cape Cod, Jacky looked out the window. In the morning light, the trees went by.

Jacky stared at the woods. She thought, Jesus is not in the trees. Jesus is not watching. It was just a story, a story like any other, a fiction she had believed most of her life. Sam would think it was stupid, and her parents didn't even go to church anymore.

It was like a light switch she could flip on and off in her mind: seeing and not seeing, believing and not believing. There, and then gone.

Release of Everything

Toby and Jude sit at the kitchen table covered with a red-and-white checkered cloth eating hot dogs for their Saturday lunch. Their mother lumbers from sink to stove, cleans dishes in suds and then takes slices of eggplant covered in bits of breadcrumbs out of the frying pan, her belly ballooning out in front of her. Toby takes an extra-large bite of hot dog, gets a bit of ketchup on his Spiderman t-shirt. He got it for his birthday two years ago, and now that he's eight, it barely fits. Jude—a year younger, two inches shorter, and much plumper than Toby—squirms in his seat while he waits for his brother to hand him the bag of Wonder Bread buns. Toby reaches for the buns, can't help but notice his mother's pregnant stomach as she walks around the room, knows that somewhere inside, his baby sister is swimming in goo.

“Ma,” says Toby, “where was I before I was here?”

“Watching cartoons, dummy,” their mother says.

“No, Ma. I mean, was I in your stomach, too?”

“You sure were.”

“Well how did I get in there?”

“Yeah,” says Jude. “How did we get in there?”

Their mother takes a seat, pulls her red sundress speckled with yellow flowers taut around her mound of a stomach. “Maybe it's time for *the talk*,” she says.

Jude grinds away at the food with his mouth open, swallows a huge piece of hot dog before he says, “What talk?”

“You should know where your baby sister comes from,” their mother explains. “Where everybody comes from. Some people call it the birds and the bees, but I’m just going to call it what it is: *sex*.”

“Sex,” says Jude, picking up on his mother’s tone of voice and extending it to its natural conclusion, “is a good thing.”

“That’s right,” their mother says. “It is a good thing.” She takes a breath, looks soberly from Toby to Jude. “Listen: when two people like each other, they sometimes get happy to see one another. I mean *really happy*. So happy they go to a private place where they can kiss and play with each other.” She pauses. “To make a baby, you need a man and a woman. When the man gets happy to see a woman, his penis grows, and he puts it inside the woman’s vagina.”

“Inside?” Toby says.

“Uh-huh,” their mother continues. “Then, when the man has an orgasm, semen comes out of his penis, and the sperm swim to the egg deep in the woman’s body. Then, when the egg is fertilized, a baby starts to grow.”

“That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard,” says Jude.

Their mother laughs and hugs her belly with both arms. “But it’s true, Jude-baby.”

“What’s an orgasm?” says Toby.

A smile crosses their mother’s face. “An orgasm is this great big feeling from deep inside of you, something that makes you feel really, really good.” She thinks for a moment. “It’s a release of everything.”

The way she says it, Toby can't think of what to say right away. Then something occurs to him.

"You mean like when you have to go to the bathroom really bad, and then you go, and it's like, *aaaahhhh*," he says.

Their mother laughs. "Yes," she says, "I suppose it is something like that."

"I want to orgasm, too!" Jude says loudly.

"Listen, boys," their mother says. "You'll grow up soon enough."

She gets up to check on the eggplant drying on strips of paper towel, washes her hands and wipes them on a dish rag emblazoned with a picture of Rosie the Riveter. Toby and Jude say excuse me, and run outside to the backyard to play.

Later that afternoon, while his mother and Jude are taking a nap upstairs, and his father is busy in the office, Toby pads downstairs from his room and goes into the kitchen. He walks to the cabinet, selects the biggest glass he can find, the one from the ballpark with the Red Sox logo. He goes to the sink, and fills the cup to the brim. He brings it to the kitchen table, sets it down, and looks at it carefully. Then, with two hands, he lifts the cup and slurps down the water in several long gulps, some of it splashing onto his Spiderman t-shirt. When the last of the water has drained into his mouth, he returns to the tap, fills it once again.

Three times over, carefully and methodically, Toby drinks water from the large plastic cup. Then he sits and waits, reads a Spiderman comic book. He becomes so engrossed in the story, he practically forgets what he came here to do. But when

Spiderman has trapped the villain in a net of webs at the story's finale, Toby begins to feel a sharp sensation in his groin and a churning in his stomach.

Toby doesn't move, however. He focuses on the feeling. He stands up, lets the sensation spread down his legs and up his arms until his hands are clammy. He sits back down, winces and knits his hands together. He folds his left leg over his right, then right over left. He tries to read from the beginning of the comic book, one he has read many times, but he can't focus. His concentration is dwindling, the pressure in his crotch growing more and more urgent. He begins to sweat. He gets up and waddles over to the sink, fills up his cup yet again, swallows the water in a series of pitiful glugs, then tosses the cup into the sink.

One step is all it takes. A burning feeling spreads from his groin through his legs, he runs out to the backyard, through the bramble thicket and into the clearing in the middle, jerks his penis out of his pants and lets out a long blissful piss. His legs tremble and shake and churn with feeling while a warm jet of urine spurts out of him, pools in the dirt below.

"Orgasm," Toby says to himself, shuddering, his stream now a thin trickle that drips and finally stops.

Before they go to sleep in the room they share, Toby shows Jude his new trick, and Jude—who formed his first word, took his first step observing his older brother—listens in awe. For days afterwards, the boys hold in their piss together to the very last awful second, bladders aching with urine, sweaty palms clasped together, until they let go in steady streams that spill down the side of porcelain or into the weeds outside.

When their father opens the door to the bathroom and sees Toby and Jude holding hands and criss-crossing their piss, he frowns.

“What’re you boys up to?”

“We’re *peeing*,” Jude says, and squeals in delight.

Seeing his father’s disapproval, Toby stutters, repeats the magic word he learned from the other day. “It’s like an orgasm, Dad.”

“It’s like *what*?”

Their father brings them into the kitchen and puts on his doctor face, the one he uses when he’s talking about patients. He explains the damage they could be doing to their internal organs, the possibility of the loss of control over their bladders altogether.

Then their mother appears in the doorway. “What’s going on?” she says.

“Did you tell Toby that peeing is like an orgasm?”

“Oh god,” their mother says. “Boys, what have you been doing?”

Jude points a finger at Toby. “It was all his idea,” he grumbles.

“It’ll be okay,” their father reasons. “I’ve explained to them that what they’ve been doing could be dangerous. Right, boys? I think they know better now.”

We do? Toby thinks to himself, but he doesn’t speak up.

Toby is extra good over the next few days. He bathes and cleans his room without complaint. Then one morning, a week later, they’re woken by their Nana.

“What’re you doing here, Nana?” Jude asks sleepily.

“Your mother gave birth to your new baby sister this morning,” Nana says. “Your parents will be home soon.” She smiles and adjusts her glasses with both hands because of her tremor. “Aren’t you excited?”

Toby and Jude get up in bed, jump up and down and shout at each other:

“What’s her name?”

“What does she look like?”

“Is she cute?”

“Her name is Alice,” Nana says. “And if she’s anything like you two, she’ll be very cute.”

Nana makes Toby and Jude scrambled eggs with ketchup in the kitchen. There’s an electricity in the air, an excitement, and Toby and Jude can barely contain themselves. Toby drinks three glasses of milk from the Red Sox cup.

“That’s a good boy,” Nana says. “You’ll grow up with strong bones.”

Jude gives Toby wide eyes, but Toby puts a finger to his lips when Nana isn’t looking, makes eyes with Jude to let him know it’s their little secret. Silently, Toby decides to tell no one about his game from now on.

When their mother returns from the hospital, something is wrong. Her face is puffy and tired, and she goes right upstairs to bed, almost without saying hello. Their father tells them the baby will be in the hospital for a few more days, and then they’ll get to bring her home.

When he does bring Alice home two days later, their mother doesn’t even get up from bed. She’s alone upstairs in her room. Toby and Jude sit in the kitchen while Nana

stirs macaroni and cheese in a pot. The baby curls up in her crib, chortling or snoring, Toby can't tell.

“Dad,” says Toby. “Why is Ma still sleeping?”

“She’s just feeling a little sick,” his father says. “But don’t worry. She’ll be feeling better soon.”

“Why is she sick?” says Jude.

Their father looks over at them, opens his mouth as if to speak. Finally Nana says, “She’s just feeling a little sad.”

“But why is she sad?” Toby asks.

Their father and Nana look at each other, and then their father looks over to the baby in its crib, which gurgles and curls its hands around empty air.

“I don’t know, exactly,” their father says.

After eating, Toby steals away upstairs, and enters his parents’ room. Kleenex litter the floor, and a bottle of Aspirin lies open on the night stand. His mother’s head is smashed between two pillows to drown out all sound, but she stirs and hears the door open. She rouses herself and finally sits up.

“Toby?” she says. “Is that you?”

Toby walks on tip-toes to the edge of the bed, peers down into his mother’s soft eyes, blood-shot from crying. Her face has deep red lines from the pillows. It’s as if she’s waking from a deep slumber, from hibernating in a cave.

“Ma,” says Toby. “Why are you sleeping so much?”

“Mommy is tired, honey,” his mother says. “That’s all.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong, honey.” But he doesn’t believe her. Something in her voice trembles, her cheeks are pale, and her eyes communicate a pain she doesn’t want to acknowledge.

“Why aren’t you downstairs with the baby?”

“Toby, baby, I just need to sleep some more,” his mother groans. “Just let me sleep.”

She crams her head between the two pillows again, and with one hand shoos Toby from the room. Toby concedes. He walks downstairs, drinks a glass of tap water, but realizes he has no desire to hold his urine.

A month passes. Toby’s mother sees the baby only to feed her from her breast, and at those moments, it’s as if nothing bad is happening at all. She smiles at baby Alice, kisses her bald head, acts as if nothing is wrong. But when she puts the baby back in its crib, something passes over her face, she excuses herself and goes upstairs to sleep.

Then there comes a time when she doesn’t go to sleep at all. She wanders around the house at night, turns on the TV and laughs dismally. From upstairs, Toby hears the front door open and imagines his mother looking out into darkness.

One night, she comes up to his room and tucks Toby into sleep, something she hasn’t done in months. As she tucks the covers under his chin, she whispers in his ear, “I would kill myself if it wasn’t for you, my little baby boy.”

Toby panics, wants to scream that he is no longer a child, no longer a little boy, but instead he rolls over, pretends to be asleep.

The whispered confession is like a visitation from an alternate universe, a black hole in the world seething with a reality Toby can't quite comprehend. And yet, almost as quickly as it happens, it's forgotten. The next morning, a Saturday, Toby goes downstairs to watch cartoons with Jude at six am, like any other day.

One morning, just as Toby and Jude are sitting down to eat cereal, their mother appears in the doorway. "Good morning," she says, and she even smiles. She takes a seat next to them, and pours herself a bowl of cereal.

Toby and Jude are momentarily stunned. But then they go on as if it were the most natural thing that could happen, as if she hadn't been sleeping for weeks.

"Hi, Ma," says Jude. "Are you done sleeping?"

"Mommy feels well rested, thank you," she replies.

After that, Dad sings in the shower while he scrubs himself down, and Nana returns home a few miles away, and everything seems to go back to normal.

School starts that week. Toby begins his first day of second grade, notices a girl named Amy who sits next to him right away. He's shy, but he introduces himself politely, as he would with company visiting his parents. She gives him a puzzled look, but then smiles. When they reach out to shake hands, like adults might, Toby feels a tingling sensation and his hands get clammy.

That afternoon, when Toby returns home, he goes out to play tag with a few friends from the neighborhood. When they call it quits around five, Toby gets down his favorite cup, fills it up and drinks down the water sloppily. Suddenly, he remembers his private sport like a friend returned from a far off place. He brings the cup up to his room.

He starts drinking more water than ever, more than he ever thought possible, holding his urine as long as he can.

Once, he decides to collect his urine in a mason jar. He likes the way it looks, like apple juice, a little lighter than the stuff Dad sometimes drinks when he gets home from work. In his room, Toby looks quietly at the jar. He brings it to his lips, takes a tiny sip. It's bitter, he thinks, but not bad.

The Taunting Voice

Sometimes I hear a voice, a nasty, taunting voice, that says the most unpleasant things to me as I walk down the street. You stupid shit, it might say when I'm doing my laundry, or, You worthless fuck, when I'm picking out a cantaloupe at the bodega. I freeze when I hear it, shocked, embarrassed, no matter how many times it makes itself known. It isn't clever or original, this voice, it's just vicious and mean. It likes to mock me in the most vile terms you can imagine. Just mentioning it to you now is making me nervous. I feel nervous. But I will go on.

The voice seems to come from outside of me, though apparently only I can hear it. It's not a voice you would hear echoing down a hallway; it's a kind of isolated, weaselly, high-pitched whining, like the buzzing of a fly in a vacuum. You can't hear anything in a vacuum, you might reasonably counter. But that's what this voice is like, the voice that only I can hear. Which begs the question, how am I hearing it at all? Where does it come from? Just talking about it is making me feel disoriented!

Worse still, behind that nasally voice, there seems to be other whispering voices, all of them judging and conspiring against me. It is as if through a democratic process, they determine what the voice should say. When they've come to a vote, they let me know: I am decidedly an ugly, miserable, useless sack of human excrement.

Go ahead and laugh with them; I certainly can't. The saddest thing is, I agree with

what the voice says, especially in the very moment that it speaks. It has a power over me I can't quite describe. It's not just that I hear a voice, it's that what it says reverberates deep inside as being the ultimate, bottom-line truth.

Occasionally the voice turns itself away from me and towards other people. A child will pass me on the street, a boy in blue overalls, say, and the voice will utter the nastiest words you can imagine speaking to a child. But I know that, in truth, it's still targeting me, that the voice wishes to frighten and anger me by saying viciously mean things to a child. When this happens, I half expect the child to turn around and stare at me in fury or in tears, but it doesn't happen. Only I hear the voice; it is my own.

The voice which only I can hear may actually be a vestige of myself projected outwards. The problem, then, would be to integrate the taunting voice into my sense of self. Perhaps my feelings of self-loathing are so intense that I've invented a voice to capture those feelings and put them outside of myself. Now they're fighting their way back in.

But it's also possible that the voice is the representative of an evil spirit, that my soul is afflicted, that I'm living with one ear firmly planted in a type of hell, another world beyond this world, or perhaps within it, a fly buzzing in a vacuum, an invisible realm connected to yet separate from our own.

There is finally the possibility that it is both of these, since either is merely one interpretation of an irreducible thing.