BLIND SPOTS

By Andrew Pryor

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Jayne Anne Phillips
And approved by
Jayne Anne Phillips

______________
Thesis Advisor Signature

______________
Director Signature
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David had said a few times to his wife Nadia that he didn’t see the point of having a picture window on Sherwood Road—there was no picture to look at except one you’d see in a waiting room, one you saw every day when you went to work. Same neighbors out front mowing their lawns, same elm trees planted in open spaces like unconvincing hair plugs, same ornate houses with stonework and shrubbery and dusty wicker furniture. The house across the street was a simple one-story home.
with square windows, bland and unassuming in appearance, save for the
fact that it was now painted neon green.

The sun reflected off the green paint job and almost made the
house glow, like a spot in someone’s vision after they’d stared at the sun
too long. David almost couldn’t look at it. The paint job wasn’t an even or
professional one, either—he could see the long trails of spray-paint
looping around the front and sides of the house, creeping over the rain
gutters and window frames. The whole house looked like it was wrapped
in thick, writhing caterpillars, or those crinkly plastic leis the Fosters gave
out at their beginning and end-of-summer barbecues when they lived in
the house.

Nadia lay asleep on the couch behind David, her leg propped up
on a stack of fringed throw pillows, her plaster cast yellowing and
unblemished. She had refused to let anyone—even David—write on it, for
the same reason she’d never gotten a tattoo in her youth. She didn’t
want anything staring back at her for the next few months or years, no
cutesy faces or empty sentiments or puns-in- traction. All she wanted to do
during the day was sit and read and occasionally stick an unsharpened
pencil down the side of her cast to address any agonizing itch. She had
broken her leg in a freak accident, had fallen off a chair while she was
dusting the ceiling fan and landed wrong. Her crutches were propped up
against the wall next to the couch, just within arms reach.

David walked into the bathroom and opened the mirrored
medicine cabinet over the sink. He took out one of the bottles and twisted
off the childproof cap, shaking a tiny green pill into his palm. **ABILIFY**, the label read, followed by the scientific name in parentheses, *(aripiprazole)*. David liked the scientific name better—there was something interesting about a mood stabilizer having a name that sounded like a cross between a Tolkien character and a ventriloquist’s dummy. *Make way for Aripiprazole*, he thought to himself. It’s a-ri-pip-ra-azole/it’s a-ri-pip-ra-azole/come stuff your fil-thy hole/with a-ri-pip-ra-azole—

David popped the pill into his mouth and swallowed it dry, feeling it settle in his throat. He closed the medicine cabinet door, stopped and stared at his reflection, resting his palms on the edge of the sink. He was looking at a man in his early thirties, who worked all day at a strip-mall H&R Block, who had a Starbucks card in his wallet, an Obama bumper sticker on his Honda Civic, and a mortgage on his house. He felt like he’d been molded, shaped into a default form over the years.

He walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge, took out a bottle of O’Doul’s. He took a long pull from the bottle, felt the carbonation blast away the lump in his throat, then set the bottle down. There were exactly sixty-three tiles on the kitchen floor, off-white squares like unchecked boxes on a form. David started counting them. One, two, three, four. When he reached sixty-three he took another drink. Last night, he had repeatedly counted all thirty-two bottles in the spice rack. Yesterday morning, the knobs on the kitchen cabinets and drawers, all twenty-six of them.
As soon as David set the bottle down on the table, he heard a low sigh from the living room. David tossed the almost-empty bottle into the recycling bin and walked through the kitchen doorway. He walked in and saw Nadia awake, sitting on the sofa, her eyes boring a hole straight ahead.

She was staring at the house again.

David sat down next to her, rested a hand on her shoulder. “Leave it alone for a sec. It’s not going anywhere.”

“Easy for you to say. You don’t have to stay here and look at it.”

“Look, go call Mrs. Welling or Mrs. Robinson and talk to them about how you hate the color green. I’m sure they’re just as bothered as you.”

He gave Nadia a peck on the cheek. “Hell, just go up to the front door and ask the poor guy why he tried to save money on a paint job.”

“Carrie tried that, remember? The doorbell doesn’t work, and even if it did, nobody answers the door.” Nadia rubbed her temples, then turned away from the window. “And it’s not just that. Ever since he moved in—”

“Maybe it’s a she. You never know.”

“He, she, it, whoever, ever since they moved in—” Nadia took a breath. “I don’t know. You’re right. You’re absolutely right. I don’t know, and no one else believes me when I say I don’t know. The whole thing just gives me the creeps. Everyone in the neighborhood keeps asking me if I can see through the front curtains, if I’ve heard any strange noises, and I keep telling them I don’t know.”
David stepped forward and embraced her, held her close. “You’re just tired, is all,” he said softly. “We can cancel the party if you want.”

“No, that’s fine,” Nadia said quickly, looking up at him. “It’s something fun for me to do. It’ll get my mind off things.”

Yet in the middle of Saturday’s party, in between the clinking wineglasses and whispered communications between the residents of Sherwood Road, David thought that the one thing Nadia wasn’t doing was getting her mind off things. All everyone wanted to talk about was the house across the way, and how things had gotten worse—the green spray-paint had advanced to other parts of the house like a creeping mold. The front door was now covered in neon green streaks, including the brass doorknocker. It had even spread to the front porch, covering the welcome mat that had been there since the eighties.

“I just can’t understand it,” said Val Sunderland to David and Nadia, standing in the far corner of the living room. She held a glass of Zinfandel in her right hand and toyed with her necklace with her left one. “I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“It has to come from wanting attention,” Nadia said, leaning on her crutches. “What kind of person lives in a bright green house and doesn’t want to draw attention to themselves?”

“I’m not sure that’s it,” said Val. She leaned forward, and her voice dropped to a half-whisper. “Did I tell you that I saw him when he first got here?”
David turned away for a second to roll his eyes. He knew the story she was about to tell, and so did Nadia, and so did nine-tenths of the people standing and sitting in their living room. Val had been so excited to be part of the neighborhood gossip for a change that she’d let everybody know within the first couple of days. Now everyone listened just to be polite.

“It may not have been a man,” she said, “but whoever it was had short hair. I couldn’t see their face, it was dark, it was the morning. The way it happened was—” she cleared her throat—“I always leave a gift-basket for new neighbors, so a couple of days after he got here, I woke up early and walked to his house to drop it off. But when I rang his doorbell, nobody answered. I thought, alright, maybe he’s out on an errand, maybe he works early hours—so I just left the basket in front of the door. I turn around, and what do I see but a person in a black hooded sweatshirt and jeans walking up the front path!”

Val’s voice started to rise, like she was approaching the climax of an important speech.

“I was frightened, but I had to walk past him anyway, so I said to him, ‘Hello, my name is Valerie Sunderland, but most people call me—’", and he didn’t even turn his head to look at me. I could have been a lawn ornament for all he knew or cared. And I know he knew I was there, because he bumped into me as he passed. He stepped over the gift basket I had just left in front of the door, walked inside, and slammed the
door behind him. I’m still completely shocked. Rude isn’t even the correct word—you have to go out of your way to be rude.”

David smirked. He’d remembered walking by the house the morning after that day and seeing the basket still on the doorstep. Two raccoons were tearing apart the boxes of cheese straws and Scottish shortbread, flinging tiny wine charms like Frisbees.

“I wish somebody would help him,” said Nadia.

David looked at her. “He doesn’t seem like the type of person that wants help,” David said. “He seems like he knows what he’s doing.”

“How do you know for sure?” said Nadia. “Maybe he’s mentally ill.”

“If he was crazy, nobody would sell him a house, or a car, or a sweatshirt for that matter. Crazy people don’t just—"

“Hey, Nadia!” yelled someone from the far side of the room.

They all turned and stared at Ray Parcival, Carrie’s husband, standing next to the fully stocked liquor cabinet. Ray was waving his arm frantically, holding a half-empty glass of scotch and ice, his pinky extended. David didn’t know Ray well enough to judge him, but recognized the looseness of his gestures. He was leaning on the wall as if it were the only solid thing left on Earth. The party had started to move in Ray’s direction.

As they all walked over, Ray stopped waving and jabbed his finger at the liquor cabinet, leaving a fingerprint on the glass. “What’s that?” asked Ray. The fingerprint hovered in front of a bottle of green liquid.
“Chartreuse,” Nadia answered, the word lilting out of her mouth. “It’s French.”

Ray started to say something, then stopped, swallowed. “That.” Ray said, jabbing his finger at the glass again. “That is—that is what that is.” He took a sip of his drink, flinging his hand in the direction of the front door. “What’s that, Ray?” Carrie said. She was staring at her husband like he was stumbling through a minefield.

Ray bent down to the floor and set his drink at his feet. He stayed bent over with his hands on his knees, and started to speak again. “It’s, you know, it’s—it’s crazy.”

“Well said,” said David. “Because, you know, it’s not normal.” Other people were turning to look at Ray. “We’re fucking normal.”

Carrie moved forward and took Ray’s hand in hers. “Ray, please…”

Ray looked up at her. Something in his face softened. He stood up and peered over her shoulder at everyone. They all stared back at him, the room silent. “It’s fine,” he said. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll—I’ll pick up the pieces for you.” He abruptly turned and half-sprinted, half-stumbled towards the front door, Carrie following behind. Ray flung the door open. David winced as it hit the wall and moved to follow them, but Nadia grabbed his arm. “He’s fine. I don’t want you to—” Nadia cleared her throat. “I don’t think you should be out there.” Nadia met David’s gaze for a second, then looked down at the floor.
He placed his hands on her shoulders. "I know. He'll be okay." He forced a smile.

“He better be,” said Nadia, motioning toward the doorknob-sized dent in the wall. “Someone’s going to pay for that.”

“I know,” said David, more forcefully than he’d intended. He looked back around the room, at the gracious guests, who had all turned away from the front door. He could hear a quiet laughter, a chuckling, making its way around the room like an airborne virus. Nadia started up another conversation with Val, who was gesturing wildly with her hands while Nadia nodded.

David walked over to the side of the room, to the table with the drinks and hors-d’oeuvres. He took a long, slow sip of his sparkling water, and counted. One, two, three, four, twenty-four. Including Nadia and himself, twenty-six. Twenty-six living and animated bodies in their living room, the same number as the knobs in their kitchen.

What’s twenty-six times zero? David thought. He took another sip.

Later that night, David fished the key to the liquor cabinet out from the bottom of Nadia’s sock drawer. There was no reason for her to hide it after her parties anymore, but David guessed that she still did it out of habit, just to make sure there was one more thing in its proper place.

He stood in front of the liquor cabinet and took out the bottle of Chartreuse. It was unopened, the top sealed with thick white wax. Nadia had gone to the actual Chartreuse monastery in France to bring the
bottle back home. His eyes immediately shot to the two numbers on the bottle, the date (1605) and the proof (110). The monks had been making the stuff since before the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock.

He brought the bottle over to the window, where the moonlight was shining down. He held the bottle up and watched the light filter through the green liquid. As he stared, he thought of Nadia, of how she must have buried that bottle in the front yard two years ago when he’d started scavenging the house, when he’d stopped paying attention to the voices in other rooms because he knew they were talking about him. His eavesdropping habit that had started again after he’d gained respect for himself, enough to deny respect for certain people.

When he married Nadia, she was upper class and he was lower-middle class, and they decided to average out to an upper-middle class neighborhood. He remembered how nervous Nadia was moving in five years ago. She was used to the exclusivity and judgment of her old circle, and she was worried Sherwood Road would be the same. “Don’t worry about them,” David had said. “Worry about us.” That was his mistake, turning the whole thing into us versus them. Us was fallible and tangible, them was indefinite and indestructible. He was fighting a losing battle before he even knew it.

What had broken him down, what had finally convinced him to seek help, wouldn’t have been a drastic and life-changing event for most people. He didn’t send Nadia to the hospital or hit a kid on his bicycle. It was the night when Nadia was holding a mixer at their house, inviting all
of the single neighbors to mingle and flirt with each other, and David had staggered in, home from the pub. They’d all turned to look at him at once, like he was barging in on his own surprise party too early. Nadia glanced over at him, shook her head, then turned back to Carrie Parcival and continued with her conversation. And David had felt something like ice water rush up the center of his spine.

But that wasn’t even the worst of it. The worst of it was flopping onto the bed, too drunk to move and yet unable to fall asleep He lay there, able to hear every word casually tossed out in the wake of his arrival.

“Sad, really…”

“It’s not a one-time thing…”

“Poor thing, I hope she’s not embarrassed…”

“I say that if you can’t handle your liquor…”

“You know there are programs for that sort of…”

“…I just wish…”

The last was Nadia’s voice, and David lay there, surrounded by the voices of people he swore would never enter their lives, wondered what Nadia wished for and why, hoping that it was something he could still give her.

He loved Nadia, he still did, loved her long dark hair, the crispness of her voice, the way she walked like she was trying not to bruise the ground, the toothy smile she refused to show anyone but him. He loved
everything about her except for the fact that she might have stopped loving him back.

David lowered the bottle from his eyes, and as he did he saw a little glint of light leap through. He looked outside and saw light coming from behind one of the curtains in the front of the window of the green house, like the white of an almost-shut eye.

He put the bottle of Chartreuse back, locked the cabinet, and walked back into the bedroom. Silently slipping the key back inside the drawer, he slid into bed.

It was three-thirty in the morning when David’s internal clock woke him up. He laid in bed for the next twenty or so minutes in defiance, until his brain couldn’t stand the stasis any longer. As he rolled gingerly out of bed, he thought he might go for a run. There was nothing else to do, the moon was still out, and who knew if this might be the last time the weather was warm enough.

Clad in orange gym-shorts and a pine green T-shirt, David planted his left foot on the kitchen counter and stretched out his quads, then switched to his right. Then David jogged out the front door, catching it behind him before it slammed. He felt the brisk air rush against his face as he began a familiar stride. His muscles flexed and moved as he ran down the hill, the rest of the neighborhood spread out in front of him.

He ran like he knew where he was going. With each stride, he felt like he was tamping down his problems, stomping them into the ground
only to have them pop back up again. He passed by the silent houses as he ran, the darkened windows and shut doors like features on sleeping faces. Other towns had history; their neighborhood had architecture.

David turned left on Castle Road at the bottom of the hill and made it all the way to Evergreen Lane before slowing to a stop, his hands on his knees as he breathed in and out, exhausted. Spots started to swim in front of his eyes as he bent over, the wind blowing through the trees at the side of the road. He remembered exactly how long it had been since he’d exercised, and it was too long ago to be proud of. So many thoughts were swimming through his head at once; all the thoughts and obsessions he’d been pushing out of his head suddenly caught up to him now that he’d paused for air. He counted them like an insomniac counting sheep:

one-wine-charms-two-spray-paint-three-wishes-four-soul-searching-five-admit-it-all-six-let-go-and-let-God—

He slowly stood back up, blinking his eyes and shaking his head from side to side as his eyes readjusted to the darkness and shapes began to form. As he looked around, he almost missed the dark figure standing across the road. He froze.

Whoever it was had their back turned, facing the small copse of pine trees in between houses like they were looking for someone lost in the woods. The figure moved, stepped out into the moonlight and silently waved, a friendly gesture shrouded in shadow. He wore a dark zip-up hoodie and tight spandex shorts, his muscular legs ending in blocky high-top sneakers. “Yo,” a gruff voice called out from under the hood. David
didn’t move, kept staring at the man like he had been caught in some embarrassing act.

“Yo,” the man said again. “You sleepwalking?” The man walked across the street towards David. David saw him reach into his pocket for something, all of a sudden aware of how alone they were. He didn’t know if he had the energy to run, or which house he could run to—

He heard a click, and watched as the man cupped the lighter in front of his face, illuminating a bearded mouth with a cigarette jutting out from the lower lip. He inhaled deeply, then held the lighter out to David. “Need one?” he said. “Menthol.”

“No—No, thanks,” he stammered. “In the middle of a run.”

“Me too,” the man said. “This is what I call ‘running on fumes.’” He laughed, a dry, hacking cough like gunfire. “You from around here?”

David looked at him sideways. “Are you?”

“Yeah,” he said. He tapped the ash off the end of his cigarette. It fluttered to the ground like an early snowflake. “Just moved here. It’s quiet.”

“No kidding,” said David. He stuck out his hand. “David Richmond.”

The man paused, then shook his hand. “David Richmond,” he said.

“Pardon?”

“No, you just look like a Richmond.” He coughed again. “People that live ‘round here have the exact names they should have.”

David squinted at the man under his hood, tried to look into his eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”
The man smiled. “Nothing.” He exhaled a tufting plume of smoke.

“So, where do you live?”

“Up on Sherwood Road,” said David. He shoved his hands in his pockets. “I haven’t seen you around much.”

“Yeah, I don’t go for the whole ‘welcome wagon’ thing. Where I come from, my neighbors specialize in minding their own business and nobody else’s.” The man dropped his cigarette, ground it out with the heel of his sneaker, and turned, walking back uphill. Then he turned back around, motioning to David to come with him. “C’mon. Let’s walk and talk. Doctor says I need to keep my heart rate up.” He cackled.

“Why do you think I want to talk?”

“Because you’re here. Let’s go.”

David looked up at the full moon, the only witness to the two of them. “Richmond?”

“Sure,” David said. He jogged over to where the man was waiting for him. They started walking.

What David would remember later, out of all the things that could have possibly jutted out in his mind, was how in-shape the guy was. He was pumping his arms and moving his legs like engine pistons, while David was hyperventilating as he tried to keep up and converse at the same time. After a while, David couldn’t remember how many turns they’d taken around the neighborhood, just content to follow the man wherever he decided to go, assuming he was headed back to his house.
The man kept talking, without a hiccup or a misplaced breath, and David tried to listen, tried to listen to his stories about his service during the Gulf War, how he’d lost more enemies than friends over there and was eternally thankful for it, how he’d stayed overseas after his time was up, worked for a while as a photojournalist’s assistant, helped him take pictures of kids missing limbs from landmines, and then the conversation had moved on to his dead ex-wife while David had no idea how it’d gotten there, his words like sand slipping through David’s fingers as his heart pounded in his ears and his breath funneled out through his lungs, throwing in a “yeah” or an “uh-huh” out of obligation.

“...just a jungle of pachysandra and rhododendron ‘round here. Squirrels. Raccoons. Crickets. Make a man turn crazy, hearing the crickets at night. You know what the problem with this place is? It’s too safe. Too friendly. Ought to set a few rattlesnakes loose in the neighborhood, just to keep the kids on their toes. Kidding, kidding. Wish I had one, though. No stars out here. You know about light pollution? Just learned what it was when I moved here. Didn’t know there was such a thing. All the streetlights and office buildings that blast away the night sky? It’s never a good thing. Go down to the plains, the prairie, lay flat on your back and take the world in. It’s like nothing you’ve ever seen before. I love it. But I’ve been a lot of places and there’s always been stars out. Back where I’m from, you know? Where I’ve been from? How can you tell which way home is without the stars? I mean, I guess no one here has to worry about that, they know where they live. Bet you’ve lived here your whole life, have
you? Mister Richmond, Es-kwire? They call Middle America the middle of nowhere, but this right here, this has to be the middle of nowhere…”

Without thinking, David blurted out, “Where are we going?”

The man stopped walking, and David bent over, taking big heaving breaths. He stood there with his hands on his knees for what felt like ages, and when he stood up again, the man had another lit cigarette in his mouth.

“Any particular place you were thinking of?” the man murmured.

“I’m just taking the scenic route. Sure you don’t want a smoke?”

David stared at him. “I’m sorry, I need to go,” he said, unsure of why he was apologizing.

“I’ll walk with you. Sherwood Road, right?”

“No, no, it’s okay—“

“I insist,” the man said. “I live up there anyway.”

David paused. “What?”

“Sherwood Road. I live up there.” He took another drag.

“But—“ David stopped, looked at the man as if to try and recognize him.

“I told you, I don’t get out much.” He flicked his cigarette butt off to the side, then rubbed his hands together. “Tonight’s an exception.”

This time, the man lagged behind and let David set the pace in front. He’d stopped talking, but David still knew he was following behind from the smell of cigarette smoke in the air and the heavy footfalls that
accompanied his light ones. The silence was almost more exhausting than the conversation—David kept waiting for him to say something, to acknowledge the gap between them. He wanted to look back just to know for sure he was still there, that he hadn’t drifted off like an interrupted thought, but he kept walking forward until they passed through the mouth of Sherwood Road, walked up the hill to where his house sat, dormant, at rest, and then he finally turned around.

He was still there, his hands at his sides, his face turned away. Neither of them said anything for a moment.

“I guess this is your house,” the man finally spoke. He motioned across the street to where the green house loomed in the moonlight like a signal.

David stammered, “No, that’s not where I—"

“I’m kidding you,” the man said. He didn’t laugh, just put his hands in his pockets, rocked back and forth on his heels as he turned away.

“Who do you think lives there?”

David exhaled. “Probably some insane person. Who cares, right?” He leaned forward. “Did I catch your name?”

The man stared off at the house across the street as if he didn’t hear, just nodded into the distance.

“Sir?” The word fell out of David’s mouth, impotent, an answer to his own question. The man stood there.
David backed away, walked up his front steps and shut the door behind him quickly, unaware that he was running again until he had stopped, safe inside the front hall.

He leaned his back against the wall next to the door and bit his lip, stared blankly into the darkness, stayed there for who knows how long just thinking about everything at once. There were questions, questions that would shrivel into dust like Dracula once the daylight came, but part of him wanted them left unanswered, even knowing that he might never get a chance to ask them again. Not even sure who he was supposed to ask. After some time, he walked over to the picture window and stared out into the street. The man was no longer standing there. The moon had disappeared, and the world was caught in the moment before the first traces of dawn, when there was no light around at all. He couldn’t tell the house was green anymore, just saw the thick shades of paint creeping off of it, like a disease that couldn’t be contained.
Mise en place

Half an hour into her first culinary session, Mia stared into a burbling double boiler, steam and aromas rising past her face, thinking about nothing for the first time in a long time. It was a simple pleasure that felt like a luxury to her. Everything was reduced to time and temperature.
It was one of the first things their cooking instructor said when they were still going over the kitchen ground rules, somewhere between “Always cut away from yourself” and “Wash your filthy hands”. The instructor, a large woman named Sharon, her graying hair pulled back in a bun, said that the thing any aspiring chef needed to master before anything else was something called mise en place. “Mise en place,” Sharon said, “is a French expression that means ‘everything in its place’. You’d be surprised at how many world class chefs don’t figure this out.” She handing them each a tray stacked with measuring cups, measuring spoons, and a long list of ingredients.

Mia’s tray was right next to her on the counter. She had done a great job being precise, measuring the salt and spices to the exact quarter-teaspoon and dumping them into individual ramekins, chopping the carrots and celery into one-inch chunks piled high next to the stew beef. It was therapeutic, calming, knowing that you could just reach over and take whatever you needed without having to worry about fucking up.

They were all standing in a room filled with reflective surfaces: silvery ovens and sinks, refrigerators as wide as wardrobes. Sharon walked around, checking on the bored housewives, her stained apron swishing against her thighs. Mia had tied her own apron as tight as it would go and it still hung off her thin frame, the shoulder straps falling over her shoulders. She looked around the room, sweat dripping off her forehead, eyes bouncing off the stainless steel.
She heard a sizzling behind her. Mia turned and saw her beef stew bubbling over the sides of the boiler. She grabbed at the stove knob to turn down the heat, looking around to make sure no one had noticed. Later, she and the other students sat down at a long wooden table the same color and shape as a tongue depressor. They shared the stew they’d made with each other. Mia took small spoonfuls, enjoying the savory broth and the way it coated her tongue. She finished her bowl of stew, and then quietly asked for another helping. It was the first full meal she’d eaten in three weeks. When she finished, she felt just as hungry as she did before.

Between the first and second alimony check, Mia’s mother ground up all her Parliament 100’s in the garbage disposal and went on the patch. Between the second and third alimony check, she started wearing flowery print tops, pleated denim skirts, armbands and bangles and other wrist jewelry that made her look like she’d been places. And as soon as the fourth check arrived, she cashed all of them in and spent her compensation for the last two years in one daylong frenzy. Paid for her next five years with exact change, in the literal sense of the word—change exacted, by her, upon their lives.

Of course, the ground zero of all that change was the kitchen, now a Martha Stewart Shangri-La that smelled like chicory and coriander and baking, oh dear God, the wafting smells of yeast rising and butter bubbling and bread browning that made her taste metal in her throat, all
from a woman who used to cook food with a phone and the Yellow Pages. An Ikea bookcase near the backyard door was filled with premade mixes—no flour, baking soda, baking powder, brown or white or powdered sugar—just mixes for blueberry muffins and Madeleine cookies and lemon tea scones and cinnamon brioches and adobe mud cake, mixes mixes mixes. The plain white fridge with the old-fashioned rounded corners held eggs, butter, milk, maybe orange juice, Pepsi Max or Pepsi Next or Pepsi One, depending on the day, and that was it. Formica countertops, linoleum tiles, floral print wallpaper plastered on top of their past like so much revisionist history. What really told the story were the shelves on the right side of the kitchen, and what they held.

Mia’s mother had someone come in and install them when Mia wasn’t around—five asymmetrical wooden shelves that hung above the dining room table like a threat, heavy and thick. They held meticulously placed dead-end cooking tools, good for one thing and one thing only: a special knife used to crinkle-cut fries, a set of ceramic cheese knives with fat, ugly cherub bodies as handles, a cast iron tortilla press that looked like a medieval torture device, even though the closest Mia’s mother had ever come to Mexican food was Ben & Jerry’s dulce de leche ice cream. Rice washing bowls sat among olive oil drizzlers and dumpling makers and brown sugar fresheners and butter warmers and lobster forks and crepe spreaders and everything else that could have possibly fallen off the Sur le Table truck. Meant to be used, made to be admired, and bought to be neglected, to collect dust.
Mia’s mother brought people over to look at the entire array, hovering and beaming the entire time, like she’d throw them into the oven with Hansel and Gretel if they weren’t careful. Neighbors, co-workers from her new interior decorating job, her sister Davina. Every time Davina came to their house, Mia either holed up in her room or hung out in the kitchen out of boredom, never saying more than one-word answers. Davina and her mother filled up the pauses themselves when they had to. Davina mostly complimented Mia’s mother—Oh Sarah, look what you’ve done with this old place. Sarah, you look absolutely marvelous and radiant and full of life. Sarah, these brownies you made are absolutely scrumptious.

Then Aunt Davina would look over at Mia—a girl, eighteen going on death, bone skinny, teeth yellowing from the smoking habit her mother had abandoned, black denim and silk clinging to her skin like settled tar. Davina’d ask Mia about school or friends or a summer job, all the while crinkling her nose like she smelled something rank, like Mia was the trashcan containing the old life her mother had thrown away.

Mia stepped off the bus onto the corner of her street. The sky was a bruised-looking dark color, like it was about to burst under pressure. “Drum-roll weather”, her father used to call it.

She walked up the front steps of the split-level house she and her mother shared, slid the key into the doorknob and turned it. As she opened the door a crack, she could hear classical music coming from the kitchen radio like some Disney movie denouement. A happily ever after.
Her mother spotted her before she'd taken two steps. “Hi, honey!” she called from the kitchen.

Mia stepped inside without responding. She looked around, took inventory. Everything was where it was supposed to be: kitchen table in the corner, four places set with woven placemats and plain blue plates. Garage-sale 70’s refrigerator against the left wall, humming along with the classical music. Rows of kitchen gizmos, arranged on the wall like a homestead restaurant. Her mother was the only moving part, flouncing around the tiled floor, jerking like a conductor’s baton. The baking smell seeped into Mia’s nostrils, along with something sweet and floral—perfume? Was her mother wearing perfume now?

“Hey, Mom,” Mia replied. “I have a favor to ask you. Can I—”

“Wait, wait, hold on a second,” her mother said, bending over to open the oven door. She pulled out a thin pan full of grainy-looking rolls and set it on the stovetop. “Okay. Now give me a hug. I haven’t seen you all day.”

I haven’t seen you in two years, Mia thought, but stepped forward and embraced her mother. They pulled apart and sat across from each other at the kitchen table.

“Okay. Now what were you going to say?”

“I—” Mia stopped, then started again. “Have you talked to Dad in a while?”

Her mother frowned. “No, I haven’t. Why would I?”

The answer hit Mia hard, even though she was expecting it. “I don’t know, because he’s your ex-husband, maybe?”
Her mother looked down at the floor. "You have his number," she said.

"Yeah, and every time I call him he asks me how you’re doing. You should talk to him." Mia tried to seem less invested than she was.

"Can we talk about something else?" her mother said.

"Like what?"

"Like your first cooking class. How did it go?"

"Great. We made beef stew. It was delicious. The end. Why won’t you—"

"Are you still hungry? I made whole wheat rolls."

Mia stared at her, a million thoughts racing through her head at once.

The only one that made any sort of sense was that someone had shoved the Looking Glass from Alice in Wonderland into her path and she had walked right through it, into this topsy-turvy life where she was the cynical one with a nicotine habit and her mother was the one with rolls in the oven and rolls on her hips.

"He wants to talk to you."

"We’ve established that," Mia’s mother said. "I don’t want to talk to him. And he knows that. That’s why he hasn’t shown up here looking for me. I have a great life now."

You had a life before, thought Mia while her mother continued to talk. You were a person, not this phony Barefoot Contessa personality.

"—so are we okay? Is everything okay between us? You can tell me if it isn’t."

"Great. Fine." Mia stood up. "Never mind. I’ll be up in my room."

"Take a roll with you."
"I’m not hungry," said Mia.

"Save it for later, then. You’re still growing." Her mother pointed at the stovetop.

Mia grabbed a napkin and gingerly picked up a hot roll from the pan, then raced up the stairs as quickly as she could, her fingertips and face burning.

The kitchen had belonged to Mia’s father long before it belonged to her mother.

He had a full-time job as a chef at the country club across town. His specialty was molecular gastronomy, and he used Mia and her mother as his lab rats every lunch. Molecular gastronomy, he explained, was about playing with expectations, fooling the tastebuds through science. And for a while, they became his resident fools. He cooked them sous-vide chicken, wrapping it in plastic and bathing it in warm water for hours. He used spherification to turn drinks into little piles of shiny pearls that burst in their mouths, margaritas for Mom and Shirley Temples for her. He’d take starch and soybean paper, write on it with fruit-flavored ink, and pass edible love-notes to them when they’d cleaned their plates, sweet sentiments that crumbled on the tongue. Mia called them “magic tricks.”

She used to try to sneak into the kitchen before dinner, just to see how the tricks were done, but her father always caught her. He’d send her running, squealing, back up the carpeted stairs to her room before she’d
inevitably try to tiptoe down again. Finally she’d grow tired and get into bed, pulling the covers up over her face.

The drum-roll had ended, phasing into timpani thunder and staccato rain that spattered down her windowpane while she was trying to sleep. Mia sighed, threw off the covers and stood up, walked over to the full-length mirror on her door. It was her favorite thing to do when she couldn’t sleep, to look at her reflection when it couldn’t look back. She didn’t know how to look at herself properly—she just listened to what other people saw. Like when her mother told her, in her newfound sweet voice, that she looked “like a peppermint stick with all the red sucked off.” She stood still in her underwear, and she shivered for a moment, feeling the October chill in the air.

Lightning flashed outside her window, lighting up the room for a split-second, burning the image of herself into her brain. She had the impulse to scream at first, just out of shock. Her jutting collarbone stuck out like the bent tines of a fork, her arms bent out at the elbows, thin and round as skewers. Her hips were like paring knives, slicing through her flesh, her ribs encircled her heart and lungs like sharp wires. Her legs tapered off, slid into the floor by their points.

A skeleton like a scattered silverware drawer. She was full with hunger, and she couldn’t go back to sleep.
The night before her dad officially broke the news, Mia was in bed, coughing up a storm. Someone in her gym class had given everyone a virus that day. She could barely move, so she just rested under the covers, trying to fall asleep. She heard her mother shout her name.

Mia groaned and clenched the pillow over her face. Then the door to her room swung open. Someone’s fingernails dug into her forearm.

"Mia," her mother said, this time in a tone that jarred Mia awake. She sat up and looked her mother in the face.

"Come downstairs. Now."

Mia started to apologize, to try to remember something that she had done that her mother would be mad about. Before she could say anything she was dragged out of bed and onto her feet.

"Ow, Mom, stop it—"

Her mother let go of her arm and walked down the stairs. Mia followed her, unsure of what was about to happen, walking silently behind like a horror-movie heroine going down to the basement.

Her father was sitting at the kitchen table, staring at her mother. “Sarah, please don’t do this.”

"Mia, sit down. Jake, tell her."

“You’re fucking this up for all of us.” Mia’s father said. Mia put her hand to her mouth—she’d never heard her father swear before, and certainly not at her mother. She coughed and said, “I’m tired, I want to go back to bed.”
“In a second,” her mother said. “Your father has something to tell you.”

The way she leaned on those last two words, tell you, like they were being tortured—it scared Mia to death. Now she felt like the audience member screaming at the movie screen: DON’T GO IN THERE, RUN, RUN THE OTHER WAY, IT’LL SAVE YOUR LIFE.

“Dad?” she said, the word tumbling out. Her mother’s thin hands were shaking, the lit cigarette twitching between her index and middle finger.

“Mia,” he said. “You know I’ll always love you.” It was the “I’ll”, the future tense, which let her know, three stick-thin letters like blades slicing toward her in the dark.

She didn’t hear much of what he said next, or what he said when he came into her room later that night and placed a hand on her shuddering back, or what he said three days later when she came home from school and met him as he was picking up all his things. When she walked up to her room after he left, there was a note made out of edible paper perched on her pillow, folded in half, face-down like the roof of a tent.

Looking back on it now, she could have read it. Even if there was another “I’ll” waiting for her, another nod to a future without him in it. Even if there wasn’t anything on it that would have been an acceptable abbreviation for an entire person, a full family. Instead, she ate the note, wedged the corners in her mouth and closed her lips, feeling his words disintegrate. This would keep his last thought with her somehow; she could keep it safe from everyone, especially herself. But when the last trace of flavor left her, she
felt like a child again, trying to find out the secret to a trick her parents had played on her.

“Today, we’re going to bake a loaf of bread from scratch. Normally this kind of stuff is reserved for the pastry chefs, but it’s always important to be versatile, and there are a lot of techniques you can adopt from today’s lesson.”

Sharon went on to describe how bakers needed to be much more precise, how everything had to be measured to a tee, because there was no course correcting in baking, no doting over a pot as it boiled. You mixed everything together, threw it in the oven, and it either rose or fell flat. Mia’s tray was beside her, the flour and salt and baking soda measured out perfectly, the eggs uncracked, the butter solid and fresh. Everything was in its proper place. She tried to focus, to turn her attention back to what Sharon was saying. Her stomach growled at her. She closed her eyes. “…and before we start, just remember: it’s just the application of heat to food. It’s not the end of the world. Now, get to it!”
If you’re ever caught in a storm, just learn to fly. Birds aren’t scared of lightning.
Yesterday, I was walking through a neighborhood that shall remain nameless when it started raining. I was far enough away from where I lived that it would’ve taken just as much time to go forward as back, so I kept walking. The rain got worse as I walked through it, coming down in bursts and forming small rivers that I had to hop over whenever I turned a corner. Even as I heard the muted thunder in the distance, I kept thinking to myself, *Relax. It’ll clear up any second.*

Then I heard one gigantic crack of thunder, one that sounded like it was sharing the street with me, and my walk turned into a run.

Your mind latches on to random shit when it’s trying to grasp at straws, and as I was frantically running down all the practical thunderstorm advice I’d ever gotten while trying to not die, I remembered the advice my best friend Kail gave me a long time ago, the sentence at the top of this blog post. *Birds aren’t scared of lightning.* And I recalled being back in New York City, where pigeons strolled across twenty-third floor ledges, flying between buildings that regularly caught any spare lightning bolts.

But now, I was running through wide-open streets like veins beneath paper-thin skin, past squat, stony mansions and flammable trees under which I couldn’t take shelter. Any birds in those trees were even more fucked than I was. I was a fast-moving lightning rod, drenched and helpless.

Anyway, I’m still alive, and I decided to start this blog post with Kail’s advice because I’m still not sure what it means, or if it’s even true. It’s probably true. It has to be true. Have any of you ever seen a bird get
struck by lightning?

Nobody? I rest my case.

Of course, when I type “any of you” I mean “any random person who has stumbled upon me yelling into the void.” “You” means “the people reading right now that I’m sure I could count on one hand.” “You” could very well just mean “me.”

I could have just kept a journal, like people did in the past. The Internet can be a very cold and isolated place if you’re not saying anything people want to hear. But I’m in that weird place between wanting to tell everyone everything and wanting to say nothing and talk to nobody. So a blog sounded perfect.

To the nobody that’s reading, I live in a cushy neighborhood on the East Coast, in a carriage house behind a large mansion with stone columns and marble lions flanking the front steps, which I hardly ever see. I had never heard the words “carriage house” before I came to this neighborhood. The family explained to me that a carriage house was where people kept their horses, but today people used them as garages with an upstairs room, big enough for a chest of drawers and a bathroom and a kitchen and a smallish bed.

I’m lying down on that bed right now. It’s comfortable. The mattress doesn’t have any lumps. It’s perfectly fine.

Two cars are parked below me in the garage. There’s an old pickup
truck with a gaping rust-hole in the side of the bed, filled in with patches of cobwebs and dust. The front tires sag, the headlights are cracked and broken. There’s also an almost-brand-new Infiniti sedan, smooth and silver. The hood curves like the arc of something escaping Earth’s gravity.

Neither car has been touched since I showed up.

On certain nights, I’ll slip down the side-stairs into the garage and try the door of the Infiniti, and then press my face up against the ice-cold back window, fog the safety glass with my breath. I’ll stare at the three empty backseats and wish I could throw myself down on them, feel the “seat” parts of the seat belts digging into my thighs and shoulders like familiar aches, push my long hair out of the way to feel the fuzz of the stubbly grey fabric against my cheek, better than any smooth cotton pillow. I was raised on the backseats of other people’s cars, raised on that feeling of floating, of not just drifting while driving but being carried through space. The letting-go of everything to the steady hands of the person in the front seat, and the trust and love in that simple gesture, that abandon—even when you have nothing left to lose. Swooping, cradle-rocking right and left turns, in the knowledge that you’re just comfortable enough to sleep without caring where you’ll wake up.

When I finally walk back up the side-stairs to my room, and lay down on my bed, head back, shoulders back, spine straight—it takes me forever to fall asleep. No matter how many windows I open to squeeze sound and light out of the night, the crickets and cicadas aren’t car horns, and the stars do not exhale neon. I’m still as death, still as folded hands, and
the roof closes over me like a wooden lid I can’t pry open.

I know the family from the few times we’ve occupied the house together, whenever my early cleaning duties intersect with their late mornings and cancelled school-days. There’s a mother and a father who kiss each other in front of their children, two teenage sons, and a lanky nine-year old daughter. She sits sideways in a kitchen chair like a pile of tangled coat hangers, all jutting elbows and knees, just supremely comfortable. I don’t think I’ve ever been as comfortable in my life as she is on a daily basis.

More often than not, though, they’re all gone before I show up to clean. I take out the cleaning supplies, my scrubbers and bleachers and scourers and dusters. I take all the family pictures off the walls and shelves, and then I can pretend it’s my house, that I’m the stay-at-home matriarch keeping her house tidy for the rest of her wonderful family. I dust, vacuum, and mop with a purpose, thinking that I should take pride in my wood floors, my lampshades, my picture windows. My house, my home. I dream and pretend and look at my reflection in the polished wood and glass and metal as I scrub. Then, if I look in the right direction, I can pretend that the house is a penthouse, that if I look out the window, I’ll see birds flying past, I’ll hear traffic rumbling and honking from the streets below, I’ll look off into the distance and see a skyline, a sunset, something settling over a vast and complicated city.

Then I look, and I put all the pictures back where they were. Then it all
dissipates, evaporates like water sucked out of sand.

I have one of their pictures on my bedside table. I didn’t take it on purpose, I swear I didn’t. I put it in my pocket while I was cleaning because it was small enough to fit, and it made its way back to the carriage house without me noticing. I don’t think they miss it. They’ve never asked me about it.

It’s a picture of the mother with her daughter. The daughter is about four or five, the mother in her thirties. They are both outside during the time when summer turns into fall, wearing sweaters and jeans, and I see a few stray brown leaves in the foreground. The daughter is sitting on a swing in the middle of the swing set, her legs kicked out, her elbows bent, fists gripping the chains of the swing. Her mother is standing over her, bending down to plant a kiss on the top of her blonde head, lips puckered, eyes closed. The daughter’s eyes are open, squinty and sparkling, lips turned up in a giggle that I can almost hear.

I know their names. You don’t get to know them, but I know them. I try as hard as I can to forget they have names, because whenever I remember them, the picture sinks back into its frame, shrinks to the size of a contact lens in the space under my eyelids.

But I’m getting away from the subject of this post.

I wanted to write something that someone would see, even if that someone is me and only me. It’s kind of a fable, but I like to think of it as a bedtime story. I told it to myself when I was growing up, during nights
when I refused to sleep. Hopefully I can tell it to someone else someday, but if I’m just throwing it into a hole in the ground, that’s okay too. Here goes.

A Story

There was once a creature whose parents named her Scale.

Scale was born when the Earth was still growing, when massive lizards walked across deserts and trampled over forests. She was born into a family of two-foot-tall raptors, raptors that hunted and attacked each other as they scurried around the stomping feet of the much larger reptiles.

As she grew, Scale realized very quickly that she was different from her older brothers and sisters. She still had the normal qualities that made a raptor a raptor, namely the sharp teeth and deadly curved claws. But the rest of her resembled something entirely different. All over her body, where there should have been a tough and scaly hide, there were only dark feathers, small and stubbly. Her forelimbs were much thinner and flimsier than her siblings’, and her tail stuck straight out instead of curving downward.

Scale was just as good as her brothers and sisters at being a raptor—at tearing into flesh and gnawing at bone, at running fast and cutting off potential prey—but there were plenty of times she didn’t feel like one. She would look at her forelimbs, her strange tail, the growing feathers that covered her, and she’d think that someone before her, someone in
control, had made a mistake when creating her. She was really good at doing all the things a raptor loved to do, but she didn’t love doing them. Whenever she tried talking about it with her siblings, they treated her as if she made no sense. You were born a raptor, you’re good at being a raptor, you’re a raptor. Stop thinking about it.

And then she’d look up at the clear blue sky, where the pterodactyls glided and flapped their big leathery wings, casting grand shadows across the ground, and she couldn’t think about anything else. Everything seemed to make sense for a moment. Her heart was up there, among the clouds, but her body was stuck down on Earth, and she went on day after day, feeling the pain of what was missing. Somehow, she knew that she was made to fly and never touch the dust and the dirt again. Her neck hurt from looking up, looking towards the part of the world she could never reach.

One day she looked up and saw her.

She was some sort of creature, but she had the same reptilian claws that Scale and her family had. She was covered in thick black feathers, feathers that were glossier and fuller than Scale’s, and they fanned out under her forelimbs and crested off the back of her tail. And she was flying. Her limbs were flapping, pushing the air downwards as she looped and dipped and twirled around and around… Scale had never seen anything so beautiful.

It was as though the sky had become a giant pool of water, and
Scale was seeing her true reflection for the first time.

“Hey!” Scale yelled up at the flying creature, who didn’t seem to hear. Scale ran after her, trying not to trip or step in a hole as she craned her neck upward. “Hey!” Scale yelled, her chest about to burst. “Who are you?”

The creature dove gracefully down through the open air, coming to a rest in front of Scale. Scale caught her breath—she was even more beautiful up close.

“My name is Archaeopteryx,” the creature said, “but you can call me Arc for short. What’s yours?”

“Scale,” said Scale. “Wha—who are you?” she asked again.

Arc said nothing. She edged closer to Scale, looking her up and down, prodding Scale’s misshapen feathers with her beak. Scale froze in place, afraid to smile and show her teeth or to make any sudden movements, to do anything that would scare Arc away.

Finally Arc stepped back, looking at her in a way Scale couldn’t interpret.

“You want to fly,” Arc said. “I can help you.”

Scale stared back, afraid to speak. At that moment, Scale already felt lighter, as though her body was rising towards her heart.

Every day after that, Scale would disappear in the middle of family hunts and run off to the forest where Arc lived.

It was hard work, learning to fly. There were countless exercises, meant
to strengthen different parts of the body. Scale had to eat different foul-tasting berries and herbs to make her feathers grow larger, to curve her claws, to toughen up her hind limbs. She forced herself to choke them down—they tasted a lot worse than lizard blood. And of course, there were the constant and endless running starts and leaps, running starts and leaps, over and over, until Scale wanted to claw trenches in the tree trunks.

She had never been more frustrated, but each time she lost her temper or stormed off, Arc stood in front of her, reassuring her in a calm voice, telling her that it would all be worth it. And if that didn’t work, Arc flew a couple of loop-de-loops, and Scale suddenly remembered why she was there.

Scale’s parents kept asking her where she was running off to, and she kept telling them the truth: “I’m learning to fly.” They always laughed it off. But as her feathers started growing and she spent less time on the ground, taking longer and longer hops from place to place, they laughed less and less. They began see her less as a family member and more as a stranger.

One day, one normal day, the family was taking down a much larger reptile, and Scale was at the back of the pack. Without even thinking, she took a running start and began to glide forward, her forming wings helping her sail low over the heads of her surging brothers and sisters. She could see to the front where the giant reptile lumbered forward, the first members of the pack already attacking its hind legs. She ground her teeth together, pointed everything in her body towards her prey—and all
at once she felt a deep, stabbing pain slash down the center of her body, shocking her out of the air as she tumbled to the ground, rolling away from the trampling claws. Blood dripped on the ground in front of her as she tried to make sense.

She looked back.

Her father was standing a ways behind her, hunched over in front of a group of other raptors. He began to creep towards her. She could see the mark his left front claw left as he moved, see where it stained the earth with her blood. She could see the look on his face as well. She wished he would look at her with disgust, derision, anything but the predatory grin that he and the others wore now. Her father wasn’t supposed to look at her like that. She didn’t believe it, until he lunged for her again.

She felt another deep pain inside of her as she ran away, crying and stumbling and running back to where Arc lived. Arc comforted Scale as she sobbed. She told her that everything would be okay, that she was where she needed to be.

“How do you know?” Scale screeched at Arc. “How do you know I’m not just one giant mistake?”

Arc smiled at her, held her close, quieted her. She whispered into her ear: “The heart doesn’t make mistakes. It’s keeping you alive right now.”

The first time she and Arc flew together, Scale was nervous. She couldn’t stop thinking of falling, of plummeting back to Earth, of some judgmental and ancient claw reaching up from the dirt and yanking her
back down.

Right before they pushed off, Arc said to her, “It’ll be fine. I promise.”

Another running start, push off, catch the air, pump, pump, pump—and they both flew, side-by-side.

It was like nothing Scale had ever experienced before—she could see the giant lumbering lizards, the tall trees with their splayed branches, the tiny skittering shadows of the raptors—all of it hundreds of feet below her.

She felt free, felt right for the first time in her life, and she never wanted to touch the ground again.

But eventually, their wings got tired, and they both settled to a stop in the middle of a clearing. She looked at Arc with love in the heart that was finally back inside her, and Arc looked back at her with pride.

Then she heard a voice off to her left. “What is that?”

Scale turned.

A raptor, one she didn’t recognize, walked towards them. He had a look of disgust on his face. There were two others behind him. “What is that ugly thing?” the first one said.

His tone was like a blast of cold water. It washed over Scale, hardening something within her. Scale swung around to face them.

“Scale, don’t,” Arc said, her legs poised to take off again. “Let’s just get out of here.”

Scale didn’t respond, her eyes meeting the green, slitted pools of the raptor’s gaze. Even as she stared, she could see him start to weaken. He was shorter than her, a complete runt. Her claws dug into the ground. She
grinned. She could take him, easy.

Then, out of the corner of her right eye, Scale saw one of the raptors behind him circling, creeping towards Arc. Scale moved in Arc’s direction just as the raptor pounced. Arc flapped her wings and fluttered up into the air as his jaws closed on empty air. Scale began to move towards her when she was tackled to the ground, the runt planting his claws into her right wing. He grinned down at her as she struggled, beating her wings against the bare ground.

“I wonder how a freak like you tastes,” he said. He opened his mouth, baring his fine, pointed teeth. His jaws descended towards her neck as Arc dove forward, her claws aimed at the raptor’s throat, knocking him away. Scale ran forward to attack the other two, then looked further back.

A pack of about twenty, approaching fast. Raptors hunted in packs. Scale knew that from experience.

“Arc, no!” Scale shrieked. She bit into Arc’s left wing to try and drag her away. But the other three had a good grip on her, scrabbling at her wings with their claws, carving gashes into her chest. They all pulled as the rest of the raptors advanced through the trees. Scale could hear the dead branches crunching under them, all bladed edges and joints. They were ready to tear through anything in their path.

Arc’s head whipped back and forth in panic. Then she looked back at Scale, and steeled herself, gestured with her head. Go.

Scale screeched in frustration, wrenching her neck, trying to tear Arc
away. Then Scale fell back. A long black feather caught in her mouth as the raptors broke into the clearing, and she flew off into the distance, screaming through her gritted teeth. She couldn’t tell her screams apart from Arc’s.

She kept flying, even when she had no strength left, even when she was just coasting on currents of air that carried her forward on the wings she’d just learned to use.

The storms were the worst. She’d seen thunderstorms before, she’d taken shelter from rain. But up here there was nowhere for her to hide. Driving rain surrounded her until it became her world, weighing her down and sapping her strength, making her blind in all directions until she couldn’t even tell where the ground was. She wanted to nosedive back into the earth, back through the earth, let it swallow her up.

Still, she kept flying.

She flew and flew until the sun finally came out and then she crashed to the ground, the black feather still in her mouth. Everything she’d run away from caught up with her, rushed over her like the water that had weighed her down had turned to ice, keeping her still, motionless. She could have laid there forever, and she wanted to. But somewhere, deep down, she knew it was not in her blood to stay still forever. She had to keep moving.

Scale spit out the black feather and watched it flutter to the ground. She would take on her friend’s name. She would start all over again.
That’s the story, more or less. Kail told it to me a while ago, way back before I ended up at this neighborhood, way back before I lost her. I don’t know if I should add the cliché “she finds another Archaeopteryx and they live happily ever after” part just yet. Maybe I’ll add it when tell it to someone younger than me, but for now you can hold onto it.

I’ll probably post at least a few more times, but I really just needed to get that out. Now I can hear the door gently shutting behind me, and I can move forward, out of the storm. I haven’t been back to New York, but I dream of finding a place where there’ll be enough skyscrapers and dirt and screaming cabbies to remind me.

One last little detail for whoever wants it—this story inspired the tattoos I got on my shoulder blades. No, they’re not wings, and no, I’m not posting pics. The one on the left says ARC, the one on my right says YX, with enough space left in between. The one on my left is a short way to describe who I was during the years I spent on earth. The one on my right is a short way to describe who I am now, and how I started flying.
Sterling Sliver

Sterling reached down and speared a garlic-poached shrimp on the metal spike that extended from the tip of her right index finger. She
stuck the shrimp whole into her mouth and chewed mechanically as the spike slid back into her fingertip.

Mrs. Carrick stared at Sterling from across the room, mouth agape, her permed blonde hair perfectly still. Sterling looked up at her, and she clacked her mouth shut. “Is good, no?” said Sterling.

“Yes, yes, very good,” said Mrs. Carrick. “Getting hot in here, isn’t it? Unseasonable. I’ll go get myself a drink.” She turned and walked towards the front hall, barely avoiding tripping over a lampstand. Sterling stared after her, then turned away. She could feel the eyes of the other party-goers dart towards her.

The room was decorated with dozens of dried sea-creatures, as well as bottles filled with sparkling sand, miniature clipper ships, and ersatz bound messages.

Sterling had been the first to approach the table full of finger foods, and now the housewives were grouped against the walls, whispering in sharp tones to each other. They were all dressed in light pastels, cotton blouses and cashmere sweaters paired with inoffensive khaki pants. They looked like marshmallow stars, circled around the black hole that was Sterling, who wore snug black leather pants and a long-sleeved black military-style jacket. Polished silver buttons ran all the way up to her neck, and a thick-brimmed colonel’s cap perched on her short dark hair.

She returned to the platter of shrimp and skewered another one, scraping the platter as she did so. A toneless voice sizzled through her
head: Silver-plated steel alloy: 97% Iron, 1.3% Nickel, 0.7% Chromium, 0.67% Manganese, 0.33% Carbon.

Mrs. Polk appeared at Sterling’s side, smiling. “You should take your hat off,” Mrs. Polk chirped.

Sterling swiveled her neck to look at her. She noticed Mrs. Polk straight white teeth, framed by coral lipstick. Her mouth pursed outward like a suckerfish.

“Why?” Sterling said through a mouthful of shrimp.

“You really should,” said Mrs. Polk again. “It’s not polite.” She gestured to the coat rack in the corner. “You can put it over there.”

The other women looked at each other, fear on their faces.

“Is fine,” Sterling said.

“Here,” said Mrs. Polk, reaching up towards Sterling’s cap. “Let me just—“

Sterling moved at the speed of sun glinting off glass. Before Mrs. Polk finished her sentence, Sterling’s left hand surged upwards and caught Mrs. Polk’s wrist, gripped it until Sterling’s knuckles turned white.

Mrs. Polk’s breath caught in her throat.

The half-eaten shrimp fell to the table.

The room fell silent.

Sterling blinked and let go of Mrs. Polk’s wrist. With her right hand, she took the cap off of her head. She touched the insignia on the front.

A six-inch metal spike shot out from the top of the cap. Mrs. Polk yelped and jumped back, cradling her wrist.
Sterling walked over to the coat rack in the corner. She turned the cap sideways, then stuck the spike into the drywall with a shuck. It stayed put. She turned back around. “There,” she said.

No one moved.

Sterling walked back over to the table, speared three more shrimp and a smoked salmon roll, and then walked through the kitchen doorway, ducking her head underneath the fake cargo netting as she went.

The gift basket sat at the gate of her compound for two days before she noticed it. Nothing was delivered directly to her door anymore, not since the incident with the Jehovah’s Witness and the cluster of diamond-edged spinning blades next to her doorstep, disguised as a patch of pachysandra. The community’s response had been mixed.

By the time one of her arachnoid automatons had brought the basket back to her in its wiry fangs (after testing it for contaminants and explosives), nothing was left but a torn open bag of cardamom shortbread, some sour-smelling tissue paper, and a gnawed-at envelope. Raccoons and squirrels had probably scavenged the rest. They had become her biggest arch-nemeses ever since she’d moved to the sterile suburbs.

Her plan all along, choosing a fortress location, was to find somewhere split between a place everybody would want to visit, and a place nobody would want to live. Neither the tropics nor the tundra appealed to her. Of course, there had been some issues with people
complaining that her ten-story tall compound violated a few building
codes, not to mention the protestations about property value being
affected by gun turrets and front lawn landmines. She’d dealt with those
people one way or another.

She took a filed fingernail and sliced the letter open to reveal a gilded
invitation (Bleached Paper, Artificial Gold Leaf, Carbon Ink).

Hello,
Mrs. Claire Polk would like to invite you,
Ms. Finsterling Nachtstahl Oberfrau,
to her monthly Glasgow Park Ladies Luncheon.
Theme: "Seafood and Eat It"
Address: 32 Sherwood Avenue
Date: Saturday, June 9, 2014
Time: 11:30 AM
Dress: Summer Casual
Please RSVP at: (973)-412-0629

Sterling stared at the invitation for a good minute and a half, trying to
make sense of it. Was this a ruse of Green Witch? What did RSVP stand
for? Eat what?

A loud, strangled moan came from the next room. Sterling stuffed the
invitation into her jacket pocket and went into what she called the
"doctor’s office." There, one of the members of Green Witch’s band of
eco-terrorists was strapped to a polished metal table, bound tight by
leather restraints. He was a shaggy-haired and middle-aged man, and
Sterling wondered if it was the tightness or the dead-cow-ness of the
leather that bothered him. She undid the gag from his mouth.

He immediately started yelling, "Get me out of here, I don’t know
anything, you’ve got the wrong man, man—"
"Tell me where Green Witch is," said Sterling. "That is how we say Hello now. Tell me where Green Witch is."

"I've told you for three days, I don't know who you're talking about—"

As the man kept shouting, Sterling wheeled over a metal stand that ended in a flexible metal arm. At the end of the arm, instead of a hand, was a pot full of bubbling silvery liquid. A thin metal spigot protruded from the side of the pot. Sterling extended a spike from her pinky finger and dipped it into the liquid.


"Tell me where Green Witch is," said Sterling again. "I can be patient."

"Bullshit!" the shaggy-haired man said. "You don't know anything about patience! You waste and waste and build and tear down just like all the rest—"

Sterling put a hand over the man’s mouth, muffling his shouts. She chuckled. "Oh, I know a thing or two of patience." She removed her hand.

"I am indestructible. And you, my dear," she said, flipping a switch on the side of the metal arm, "are very, very biodegradable."

She walked back into her bedroom, towards the phone. Wouldn’t hurt to taunt Green Witch over a defused ruse. She dialed the RSVP number, expecting to hear a familiar voice on the other end.

Instead, a woman’s voice answered. "Hello?"

Sterling was caught off guard. "Yes?" she stammered.

"Who is this?"

She twisted the phone cord in her hand. "This is Sterling."
“Sterling? Sterling...” The woman on the other end paused. “Ah, Miss Oberfrau. I take it you received my invitation?”

There was a bubbling, simmering sound from the other room, followed immediately by a strangled “OH GODS HELP ME! MAKE IT STOP!”

“What in the world was that?” asked the woman.

“Nothing, nothing.” Sterling tried to cover the phone mouthpiece and talk into it at the same time. “Man Channel. Husband watch Liam Neeson movie. He is big fan.”

The shaggy-haired man was still screaming. Sterling raised her voice and talked faster. “Listen. Can I go? Is party a go? Miss Polk?”

“Sure, I just—“

“Okay bye.” Sterling set the phone back on the hook and stormed back into the doctor’s office, where she found the shaggy-haired man sobbing. Tears dripped down his cheek, next to the bloody trail made by the boiling mercury as it dripped from the metal arm.

“Verdammt,” Sterling cursed, “my aim seems off.” She flipped the switch on the metal arm, then nudged it forward an inch. “Now,” said Sterling, her finger on the switch, “you tell me where Green Witch is or I hit the bullseye.”

Three minutes later, she had all the information she needed. She figured she’d keep the man hostage for a few more days until her international liaisons could get confirmation. She had plenty of free time before then.
Sterling sat out on the patio, eating the shrimp and salmon off of the skewer that extended from her finger, half-listening to the muffled party noises filtering through the kitchen screen door.

Being alone didn’t bother her as much as she’d thought it would. She was made to be alone, had had it drilled into her brain ever since Heinrich Stahl had created her. Took her when she was twenty and filled in the half of her that she never knew was missing, made her from polymers and alloys and chemicals, built her up over time to withstand beatings, bombings, destruction and death, her machinery gradually overtaking her humanity until one day she had to use finer and finer instruments to look for it. “You are meant to stand tall,” Stahl had lectured her, “proud, firm, inflammable and unflappable: a monolith in tribute to humanity’s progress.”

Now Stahl was dead, his liver broken down by too many glasses of Alsatian wine and too many cigars and the falling of too many regimes, and here was Sterling, eighty years later, smooth as silk and strong as steel, sitting in a random backyard looking at the birch trees and wishing she could cut them all down, douse the grass in gasoline, burn it all and pave it over with cement—

“Want a cigarette?” a voice said.

A woman in her late twenties stood by the kitchen door. She was dressed in a dark blue top and jeans, and walked with more grace than the other women—because, Sterling realized, she wasn’t wearing heels. She’d
wedged a lit cigarette between her caramel-colored index and middle fingers, and she held out a half-full pack of cigarettes.

Sterling shook her head. "I don’t smoke."

The woman blinked, tilted her head slightly. "Really? You look—" She shook her head. "Nevermind."

"I look like I smoke?"

"You looked like you needed a smoke," the woman said, "back in there when you almost broke Claire’s arm." She stood next to Sterling’s chair. "Either that, or you just don’t like being touched."

Sterling stared at her. "I can’t afford to be touched," she said.

The woman took a drag of her cigarette, blew a stream of smoke. "Well, either way," she said. "Don’t let those old birds get to you." The woman stuck out her hand. "I’m Carina."

Sterling looked at her hand, and then looked back up at Carina, who smiled at her. Sterling’s eyes widened. She took the hand, grasped it, didn’t shake it. "Sterling. Pleasure."

They sat still for a few seconds, then Carina wriggled her hand free. "Did you just move here?" said Carina.

"Yes," said Sterling. "I am originally from Europe. Germany."

Carina shook her head, whistling. "No kidding, huh? That’s more culture than they deserve."

Sterling turned away. "I am not too big a fan of culture," she said softly.
“Then you should be getting along better than you are,” Carina tapped the ash from her cigarette onto the crisscrossing patio bricks. “Listen to me,” she said.

Sterling looked in her direction.

“I know the feeling,” Carina said. “I came here two years ago with a white guy who slept around on me every chance he got, and I had to hear them”—she jerked her thumb back towards the house—“whispering behind my back every time I turned to look at their tacky paintings. You know what I did when I turned back around? I put a big dumb smile on my face, because it made everything easier. It made—”

“Why are you telling me this?” spoke Sterling. Her hands gripped the armrests of her patio chair.

Carina turned her head, looked down. Flicked the cigarette butt in front of her and ground it with her heel. “I like seeing them scared.” Carina stared down at the ash mark. “You know how much it takes to make them scared? I’ve been here five years and I couldn’t do it once.” She swallowed. “But they always win, because they know where you live. And you know where you live. So let it rest for a bit.”

They were both silent for a minute.

“I better head back inside,” said Carina. Sterling heard Carina’s retreating footsteps on the patio. “You can come back in whenever you want. Let me know if you need anything.” The screen door swung shut.

Sterling sat and thought. She heard Carina’s voice in her head like she had sunk a spike into her: toneless, no trace of an accent.
When Sterling re-entered the living room, the women all stopped talking. They all looked at her, waiting to see what she would do next.

Sterling looked at Carina, who gave her a thumbs-up.

"I just want to say, to say thank you all for inviting me here." Sterling cleared her throat, tried to smile. "Is just hard, coming to a new neighborhood, and reaching out to people, is difficult." She stopped smiling. It felt unnatural. What to say next?

Sterling picked up a glass candleholder with a lit votive candle inside. She raised it in front of her. "I want to make—make toast. To all the lovely wives in my new neighborhood—"

There was a knock at the front door.

"Who want to see me and others happy—"

The knocking grew louder. Still no one moved.

"And who love all their fellow man—"

The front door flew off its hinges in a blaze and clattered to the floor. A man with well-defined cheekbones and frosted tips walked into the room, carrying a flamethrower.

Sterling saw him and shook her head, laughing at herself. She set the candle back down on the table. "I knew you would find me, Green Witch," she said. "What, Shaggy Man sent up smoke-signal?"

"The name," said the man as he adjusted his bulletproof argyle sweater-vest, "is Greenwich. Rod Greenwich. How many times do I have to say it, steel-skull?"
Sterling curled her lip up in a snarl, her hands forming fists. "The name," she said, "is Sterling." She tensed her muscles, ready to spring. "But you call me Death."

He pointed the flamethrower at her. "We'll see about that."

She ducked under the burst of fire and lunged towards him. Greenwich caught her by the shoulders, flinging her into the mail-table. He drew back a fist, just missing her as she rolled out of the way. She quickly upended the table of finger foods and ducked behind it as he unleashed another stream of flames.

"Every conversation we have is the same, Stahl," said Greenwich. He smashed the picture window with the barrel of his flamethrower. "You think you know how to live. But you only know how to die. And you want to let the world die with you. But I'm not going to let that hap—"

He stopped, tilted his head just before the silver platter caught him square in the face.

As he staggered back, Sterling lunged forward and swiped at his face, all five spikes extended. He screamed, high-pitched and bloodcurdling, "NOT MY FACE, NOT MY FACE—". Blood trailed down his bare cheeks. He fled out the front door, covering his face with his hands.

The voice rang out in Sterling's head: Red blood cells. White blood cells. Plasma. Platelets. Dogfish Head IPA.

Sterling heard a scream, and whipped around towards the kitchen doorway, where Mrs. Polk stood, shaking and screeching with anger.

"Look at this place!"
Sterling looked around at the burning drapes, the stained carpet, the smashed mirror above the mantel, the splintered tables, the broken picture window. She lifted her index finger in the air, then carefully made her way back to the corner, extracted her hat from the wall, and stuck it on the coat rack.

"Better, right?"

**If Your Boyfriend Were An Animal**

_Hola, Tranzition-istas! We know you love us because we give you the best relationship advice, but this week’s Perfect 10 Quiz is about relationships that aren’t so perfect. Yeah, you and your man are inseparable, destined for each other—or are you? Maybe he doesn’t call you as much as he used to, or maybe things just feel a little... weird._
Maybe you’re wondering if he’s bored with the relationship, or has a big question on his mind, or he’s even, heaven forbid, leaving you. Well, you’re in luck! No need to worry anymore. Just take this quiz and find out the true future of your relationship—no.

No, no, no. That’s enough of that.

I’ve spent six years working in this god damned gingerbread house called the Tranzitions Writer’s Room, choking on the syrup I have to slather over every single article. But I mean, why should I feel upset? This is supposed to be a fun working environment, and I know this because it’s written on the Writer’s Room door in 72-point magenta Jokerman font, FUN WORKING ENVIRONMENT, full stop. My boss Viv reminds me every week through the six pounds of Chapstick caked on her wrinkly wobbling fortysomething lips: “Tranzitions is a fun, young, hip publication and the way we work and write needs to reflect that, Cara honey, so would you just smile a little bit more (it only takes two muscles!) and maybe wear something with a little more color to it, you know...” on and on until I want to shake her so hard she dislocates her perky, old, hip. I can’t remember the last time I’ve written something more than a page that had no exclamation points in it.

Everyday, I hear the honking L.A. rush-hour traffic outside, and I think about all of the people that have an excuse to go nowhere. I’m sitting at my desk, staring at the blinking cursor on my computer screen, my left hand on my heart and my right hand on my mouse, and the cursor is blinking faster than my heart is beating. I swear my computer’s going to outlive me.
If you’re reading this, then congratulations to me for pulling a fast one on the editing department. A small congratulations, at least—the editors here are so lax, we could paste the front and back covers of Tranzitions over an issue of Playgirl, send it down the line, and I doubt they would notice until most of America had an eyeful of “Sexy Singles in Sweaty Singlets.”

Anyway, whoever’s reading, be it the 16-28 female demographic or my botulism-fishtank-faced boss, enjoy. By Caralyn Costas

**Question 1: If your boyfriend were an animal, what kind of animal would he be?**

A. A giraffe called Alvin. Tall, skinny, keeps bumping his head on tree branches and clouds and rarely makes any noise. Half the time he’s on the lookout for threats, switching back and forth between agitated and apathetic. Intimidating and harmless at the same time.

B. A goldfish called Blake. Needs attention, fidgety as hell, always trying to grow in different ways, just to test the limits of his environment. He’s the one who defines his limits, though, so he’s a goldfish who picked out his tank at the pet store.

C. He’d be a scruffy dude called Cliff who plays in a punk cover band and has never really asked himself that question.

**Question 2: How did you meet each other?**

A. Halfway through your Intro to Film class, you looked back and saw Alvin sitting two rows behind you, rolling a pencil between his fingertip and the desktop. Vivien Leigh’s voice was grating on your nerves, so you got
up and sat down next to him. Alvin talked about his Communications major, about how his grandpa wrote for the Times during the Great Depression, and how he wanted a better appreciation of “how things were before Google and Facebook.” You remember noticing his smile before anything else, even though he never showed his teeth, not once.

B. You were excited about how your first week at your new job was going, so you walked a few blocks to a hole-in-the-wall bistro with a name that sounded like the French phrase for “caffeine addiction.” Blake worked there as a barista. You stood in front of the counter and took in the shock of spiky hair poking out the back of his faded bandanna, noticed the “Shakespeare hates your emo poetry” t-shirt poking out over his white apron. When you asked about it, he told you he was a hypocrite, that he wrote plenty of angsty poetry in high school. You told him that it was fine, that now he was a warning sign for others.

C. At SFX, the bar across the street from your apartment. You were working on your second vodka-and-cranberry, wondering if a black eye and a bloody nose would color-coordinate with the floral-print top and khaki capris your boss wore to work that day, when Cliff sat down next to you. “Well, if it isn’t the lovely Sharon,” he said. You told him he had the wrong person, and he said, “Nope, I just suck at names. It’s Sarah, right? You look like a Sarah.” It had been a long day, and you wanted another long night with someone. You told him “Close enough,” and scootched over.
Question 3: What was your first date like?

A. You saw The Ring at a movie theater uptown, splitting the cost of tickets and popcorn. Alvin didn’t talk much once the movie started, but you could feel his arm across your neck, his hand grasping your shoulder. When the girl crawled out of the TV, he jumped and dug his fingernails into your collarbone. He drove you back to your dorm on the other end of campus and asked if you were free sometime next week. You said yes. When he walked you to the door, the overhead lights shone down on his face and lit up his green eyes as he whispered “Goodnight”.

B. You took a walk down Hollywood Boulevard with Blake after his shift ended, overpriced coffee in hand. A few minutes into your conversation, you found out you’d both studied Shakespeare in your freshman year. Another couple of minutes and you were both quoting The Taming of the Shrew, darting and gesturing with your empty coffee cups like fencing mimes all the way down the block. After both of you stopped laughing, you told Blake that since you’d moved near the Boulevard, you hadn’t seen one celebrity. He said “Well, we’ll just have to become famous, so people can say they saw us.” You groaned.

C. You went back to the bar after a long and hellish Tuesday. Cliff and his band were performing, and he recognized you. You remembered him by his long black hair, and how it brushed against your face as you’d looked up at him, your bare shoulders pressed against the cushions of his shitty overstuffed couch.
The two of you got a booth. You vented to him about your boss over Michelob Lites, thinking that you could hide your troubles with the last person anybody would ask. He talked about his band, the Barren Stain Bears, and he showed you the logo tattooed on his shoulder—the shape of a bear claw dripping trails of black ink. You glanced at it again as he walked to the stage. As you returned your eyes to your folded hands, you heard him shout, “This one’s for Cara, the girl whose name I’ll never forget—again!”

Question 4: How do you act around each other’s friends?

A. When Alvin’s around your friends, he disappears into the wallpaper and listens to the sound of everyone else’s voice. You have to ask him questions now and again just to rein him back in from whatever he’s thinking about. You’ve only met his friends a couple of times, and they’re other Communications majors, which is odd, because they’re not very talkative either.

B. Except for a couple of close girlfriends you call sometimes, you left most of your college friends behind, and Blake’s artist friends have become the people you hang out with. You laugh and get stoned and spill paint over everything you can find, like “a ritual to invoke the creative energy of the masters,” as one of them put it, just before his girlfriend emptied a tube of black acrylic on the nape of his neck.

C. Most of the time you spend together is just between the two of you. Sure, you’ve met Cliff’s bandmates after a few sets, tossed back a couple. They look at you the way your parents used to look at the girlfriends your
older brother brought home for dinner. You hear one of them tell him that you look bitter, like a history teacher he used to have.

**Question 5: When you’re together, what do you do for fun?**

A.  Sit and talk, mostly. You drive to some abandoned place together and sit and bury your thoughts. It’s the only time Alvin really seems comfortable with someone else. You feel flattered, and want him to trust you in return, so you spill half-secrets about yourself, giggling under-cover sleepover secrets about toys you stole from your brother as a small child and family fairy-tales of Greek heroes your mother whispered into your ear at night. This trust bonds you closer in that same innocent and mushy way.

B.  Weed, and occasionally LSD. You act out more plays with Blake, whether you know them by heart or you borrow them from one of Blake’s friends. One day you’re Ruth Younger, telling him he needs to eat his eggs before he wants to fly; the next day he’s Bottom the Weaver and you’re the fairy queen, tricked into seducing him under a spell of romance. The drugs take everything to another dimension—the world is your audience. You can feel the floor raise and descend under your feet with every shift of power, hear the walls shudder and groan with the force of your words, see the stars burn through his apartment’s low ceiling and light up your flawless passion for each other. The orchestra music swells and fades in your head as you embrace, the lights dimming.

C.  You do damn near everything for fun, honestly. Cliff lives in the now, and you feel better than you ever have—even your job seems easier now that you’ve started caring less about the dinky little columns you have to
write. Yet there are days when you look at him and think, *If we’re still together in six months, will we still be here?* Still feeling like the girl who grew up listening to myths from her grandfather about valiant war-heroes in Elysian Fields, who sat in between the library shelves and read about the Parthenon, battered but standing after generations of parents and grandparents lived and killed and destroyed all traces of things that weren’t theirs. Who carried the book under her arm as she walked through the park on her way home, staring at the hearts carved in the elm trees, the simple declarations: *At this fleeting moment in time, EC and JH were in love.* Wondering if they ever got that house in the suburbs they were dreaming of.

**Question 6: What does he care about more than anything else (besides you?)?**

A. **Himself.** Alvin goes through these phases—one day he’s talking about his job as an editor for the *Times* or the *Post* and his penthouse apartment with a view of the Brooklyn Bridge as if it’s all something he could just scoop up like an orange at the supermarket. And then the next day nothing makes sense, and he doesn’t know what’s going to happen ten minutes from now. Nothing exists but himself and his cluttered dorm room. You have visions of yourself as the Miracle Worker and him as Helen Keller, thinking of yourself as the only person that can “save” him. It makes you feel important.

B. **His image and reputation as an “artist,”** which he works constantly to define. When Blake’s alone, he’s either sleeping or working on
whatever medium he’s discovered that week. One day you go to his
place and he’s sitting on the floor, mixing paint. Not even painting, just
mixing different colors together, occasionally making a brushstroke on a
piece of notebook paper before moving on to his next mix. Another day
he’d filleted through a stack of newspapers and magazines and made
about twenty different collages. When you saw them, you said “These
don’t look like anything,” and he replied, “That’s what I’m going for.”
Giving you a look like you had just asked him why the sky wasn’t purple.
“Art is always changing,” he would say, “and if you can’t stay one step
ahead, there’s no point.” You nod your head and pretend to understand,
content with leaning against the wall and watching.

C. Music, not just his, but all music. Cliff tells you after a set one night
that he’s glad that he happened to be really good at the one thing he
always loved. You ask him if he’ll work you into one of his songs, and he
moaned, “Oh, I don’t know if we’re at that point yet. You’re mooooving
too faaaaast…” He bats your hands away as you try to smack him.

**Question 7: When was the time you felt most romanced by him?**

A. When Alvin showed up at your door on the six-month anniversary of
the day you met with a bouquet of roses. “Blue roses”, he said, “like the
girl from that play you read, right?” You rushed over to him and gave him
a long, slow kiss, surprised and proud of him. You led him over to your bed,
and he kept talking about how he’d found a special florist downtown
who injected dye into the stems and how he almost drove past it but he
just knew that you would remember that play about the glass animals,
speaking of which, the vase... You had to put your hand over his mouth and pinch his lips shut.

B. During a Friday night party at one of his friends’ apartments on the West Side, the one with the B-movie posters on the walls. There was music playing, and you were easing into the acid as you bounced to the steady synth beat. Everything just started to turn and warp into something terrible like the acid was poisoning the place. The music raked from flat to sharp like a loose violin. You saw shadows swarming over your feet with the screams from the women caught in the grasp of the snarling monsters, and you hunched down, covered your ears, shut your eyes, and wailed a word unknown. A voice called your name, and when you looked up, Blake was elbowing through the crowd with a look of wild-eyed concern. You’d never seen that reaction in the depths of his eyes before that night, not as Antony, not as John Proctor—as himself, and you clutched and sobbed into his shoulder, glad to finally see a face you didn’t recognize.

C. The time you both stood on Sunset Boulevard in the late afternoon and sang to the people walking by. Cliff played every song he knew on the guitar as you fumbled along with the lyrics, blushing, dah-dah-dah-ing forward nevertheless. Even when he ran out of songs, you both kept singing, making up songs for people when they threw change into his guitar case. He sent you around the block to get him a coffee, and when you walked by he asked what your name was, pretended he’d never seen you before. “Ca-ra-lyn,” he sang, “you’re star-uh-in’, waitin’ for my
“luh-uve to bar-rel in…” You pelted him with a quarter and played guitar tug-of-war.

**Question 8: What’s his deepest fantasy?**

A. Alvin’s deepest fantasy is to be the pope. Or Maya Angelou, or Nelson Mandela, someone who’s adored and respected by everyone, in spite all he’s said about the stable life with a 401K and a view of the river. He started going to parties on the weekends just to look for others that would respect him, while you stayed home, studying and thinking the thoughts you left naked and unburied.

B. Blake wants to be remembered for something. Not just anything, but something meaningful that reminds future societies who he was and what he did. There are times, watching him jump from project to project like stones in a pond, when you believe that he would sell his unborn child for a speck of dirt that looked like his face, stuck on the side of an ancient brick at the foot of an Egyptian pyramid. Sometimes you think it’s why you were so attracted to him.

C. Cliff’s told you he doesn’t believe in fantasies. He knows that there are things that he wants to do with his band and his life, but “things happen the way they happen.” You ask him if he’s ever thought of starting a family, settling down in a house somewhere, and he said, “I never thought settling down was something you planned for. I always just wanted to settle down with a family and all that when I ran out of steam, when I’d done everything I could on my own.”

**Question 9: What are your arguments like?**
A. You do most of the arguing, if you could call it that. Alvin leans against the doorjamb of your dorm room with his shirt hanging untucked and sweat collecting on his forehead, his eyes glazed over and bile-green. He takes every bitch you pitch at him, hardly bothering to pitch one back. You’d say it was like arguing with a brick wall, but brick walls actually absorb some things. He’s more like a screen door, swinging in the wind.

B. They’re like the plays you perform for each other. You shout, yell, stomp and gesture until one of you gives in—end scene. Most of the time you’re the one who gives in, as you feel like you’re doing nothing but entertaining him. You prefer hallucinating with Blake to seeing him sober.

C. The only arguments the two of you have had are recent ones about his band deciding to spend a year living on the road, driving through Las Vegas and Chicago and Philadelphia and New York. You have heated discussions, not fights. You wish for fights. You want the chance to yell, accuse, empty all of your issues on his dirty carpet, go to bed, and sort through the pile in the morning. Instead, you have lunch. Cliff tells you that it’s something he and his band have always wanted to do, that he doesn’t want to break things off and he doesn’t see why you have to make a “thing” out of it. You say, through clenched teeth, that long-distance relationships are slow torture, that they never end well, that you should know because you write about it every week and that you want him here, that you don’t know if—. You stop before you let him know you don’t trust him.

Question 10: What made you feel like you needed to take this quiz?
A. The Sunday after one of his party nights, Alvin knocked on your door and asked if you could go for a drive with him. You asked him why, and he said he’d talk when you got there. You drove, trying to spark a conversation, but he didn’t say anything. Even as your car coasted to a stop next to the playground a few miles off-campus, he was silent, staring straight ahead. You asked him if there was anything wrong, and he inhaled like he wanted to say something. Then he closed his mouth and looked down at his hands, gripping the armrests. You noticed a couple of kids tangling themselves on the jungle gym while their mother sat on a bench, an open book perched on top of her knees. He told you he wanted to go back, and you sat there for a few seconds, watching the kids, before shifting into reverse. He leaned back and closed his eyes as the engine hummed.

B. One night you and Blake tripped together, your dramatic whims landing on A Streetcar Named Desire. Blake was sitting on the bed next to you, puffing out that Marlon Brando chest he didn’t have, talking about how he took you down from those columns and showed you those colored lights, and you stared at him. You saw his eyes rolling, his face contorting, heard his voice warp and falter as he finished his line: “...wasn’t it all okay ‘till she showed here?” And you saw him. Saw him stoned, saw him frantic and covered in paint, saw him weak and desperate to mean something. You stared, and then you began to laugh. He stopped, repeated the line, and you kept laughing, short bursts you couldn’t control, thinking: This is where I’m supposed to go into labor, for
crying out loud. You didn’t notice his arms move until you were sprawled on the floor, the side of your face burning. He stood over you, hands clenched at his sides, shouting “Wasn’t it all okay?” And then you stared at yourself in his bathroom mirror with no recollection of how you got there, hearing thumping and crashing and muffled yells from behind the locked door. You wanted to ask your reflection where you were.

C. It had been decided for about three days. Cliff was going on the road, and he gave you the whole spiel about how he’d call you and how the two of you were still part of a relationship and how he promised to think of you every day. You listened to him as he gave his little sendoff, and then he asked you if you wanted to ride to SFX with him. You said "Sure." He went into his bedroom to get his guitar, and your legs carried you out of his apartment, down the crumbling cement stairs, and out onto the street. A river of disgust was bubbling under your breath, poxes upon girls with New York and Chicago accents, but you shut your lips tight, running home to escape. You ran back to your old life for three days, up until the night before the morning he was scheduled to leave. You poured yourself a glass of red wine and stared at it for fifteen minutes. The world looked terrifying through the warped red lens until you grabbed it and poured it into the sink.

The lights were out when you opened his apartment door, and you could see his hair draped over the back of the couch. You settled on the couch next to him, the hard wooden frame pressing against your back. You told him you didn’t want him to leave, your words sounding weak and
pointless against the far-off sounds of a restless Los Angeles. He turned to you and said, “I’m only going somewhere else. I’m not leaving.” You both sat and looked for flaws in the darkness, holding each other beside the open window as the wind whipped the plastic bags and coffee cups and orange peels around the front sidewalk, rustling and scraping against each other. To your ears, they almost sounded like fallen leaves.

If you answered mostly A’s:

Tonight you will get a message from one of your Facebook friends, sending you a picture of Alvin, your boyfriend. His eyes will be closed and his face will be pressed against the lips of a blonde chick you’ve never seen. You will look at her profile: she has a name that rhymes with “spacy,” she plays Ultimate Frisbee and lacrosse, her favorite bands are Metro Station and 3OH!3. You will call Alvin up and tell him that he needs professional help, exhausting the synonyms for “cocksucker” in the process. You will only run into him once more, in the fall of your senior year, when he shows up outside your apartment, calling your name, slurring and stumbling over a declaration of love. You won’t open the door, and you will only respond to him to tell him to go away, get the hell away before the police show up. You won’t want to see his face. You know it will replace the image you have of him after your first date, darken and eclipse it for eternity.
If you answered mostly B's:

Blake will knock on your apartment door in a day and a half, stopping by in the early hours of the morning with some important news. He will explain to you that after he left, still tripping, he saw a hallucination of you standing in front of him, your arms locked around his waist, keeping him from reaching a far-off light. He will say—his face sincere—that he now realizes that he can’t have someone tying him down, keeping him from finding himself and “realizing his vision,” and that it was great being with you and all, but he has to move on now. And then he will leave. You will stare at the door he gently closes behind him, and look over at the first rays of sunlight trickling through your window and across the floor. Then you will head to work, and stare at your computer screen. You’ll make a run at an opening paragraph—“To all the lovely ladies out there”—delete a few words, maybe. Then the full force of the last fourteen months will rush through your head, relentless and generous in every detail, every sensation and sweet nothing he took with him. You will slump over your desk with your arms folded over your head, shuddering as the sobs force their way out. A gust of wind could send you flying. Thinking: How could he, how could I. Thinking: that motherfucker, that motherfucker edited me out of his fucking life, he went back through every moment we had and drew a bright red X on my forehead, fuck him, fuck him—

In five minutes, your boss will walk past your desk, notice your tearstained face, and ask: “What’s the matter, honey? Did you get dumped?”
If you answered mostly C’s:

Cliff will leave in the morning as planned. No last-minute epiphanies, no pleas on bent knees—he’ll get in a van and ride off before the sun clears the horizon. The next couple of months, you’ll get phone calls, conversations about pizza and broken drums and public jam sessions in front of Wrigley Field. The calls will become less frequent, and then they’ll stop for two months, his last goodbye fuzzed over by the wind. And you will be left—left wondering, left conflicted, left as in the opposite of right. You’ll be left staring up at the ceiling at night, searching for an answer in his garbled words until you fall asleep. But you will wake up again, as you always have, and you will walk out the front door of your apartment on Saturday morning. The tops of the few L.A. skyscrapers will point upward like swords raised against the stark white shield of the sky. A beefy man wearing a Ramones T-Shirt will be dragged over a fire hydrant by the leash of his Irish Setter. You’ll walk past a grungy-looking Chinese restaurant, red and purple paper lanterns hanging faded in the window like Christmas ornaments in January. A radio a block away will be playing a song by a hair metal band you used to hate in high school. You’ll feel a raindrop on your eyelid, and when you blink, everything and everybody will change in a way that you could never predict or describe. And some small, newborn part of you will be relieved.
Blind Spots

1.
At almost 1 PM on the Sunday of April 6, David Harper looked out of the back window of his house at his son Crane, sitting in the backyard, before pouring himself a drink and walking into the living room.

When David Harper returned to the back window, Crane was missing.

II.

The Harpers were a nice family—everyone in their neighborhood said so. David, Claudia, and their 8-year-old son Crane lived at 207 Spruce Lane in Glasgow Park, in an old Victorian home, in the middle of a wooded area where most of the trees blossomed in the spring and lost their leaves during the fall.

The father worked as a risk assessment expert for a large insurance company in Manhattan; the mother was a nursery-school teacher-turned-stay-at-home-mom. They lived a relatively quiet life at the end of a private road and tried to avoid any more Decembers.

That spring, Claudia was six months pregnant, so David negotiated a way to telecommute and work from home while looking after Claudia and Crane. Crane loved to play outside after he ate lunch.

At around 1 PM on the Sunday of April 6, David Harper looked out of the back window of his house at his son Crane, sitting in the backyard, before pouring himself a drink and walking into the living room.
When David Harper returned to the back window, Crane was missing.

The Harpers went out into the backyard to search for him. They walked into the woods, looked behind trees and rocks, called out his name. Then they called the police. The police did more looking, sent out search parties and patrols and snuffling dogs. They asked everyone in Glasgow Park if they’d seen or heard anything, if they knew anything about where Crane was. No one did. No one had noticed anybody entering or leaving the private road that led to the Harpers’ house.

David and Claudia were inconsolable. But people tried anyway. Some of the neighborhood felt sorry for them, described it as “a shame” and “a tragedy” and “an awful, awful situation, especially after what had happened seven years ago.” Others in the neighborhood had their questions, as people would. The Harper’s house took on a sinister leer whenever they passed by it, the attic windows glassy and darkened, ivy clinging to the roof. Some of the neighborhood children swore they saw missing children poking their heads out from the shadowy frames. Their parents chastised them for telling stories, and told them to stay away from the Harper’s part of the neighborhood.

David and Claudia did not hear any of them, even if they did. Claudia locked the front and back doors, kept retreating further and further into the old house, locking every door behind her. David took few calls.
The police kept searching for another few months, and then they called off the search. They put Crane’s picture on a stack of flyers, a shelf full of milk cartons. Have You Seen This Child. David saw the picture they used, nine months later, in the dairy aisle at Foodtown. Crane was smiling, and there was a gap off to the side where a tooth was missing. One side of his shirt collar was flipped up.

III.

The Harpers were a nice family—everyone in their neighborhood said so. The father worked as a risk assessment expert for a large insurance company in Manhattan. He was used to keeping his eyes open, used to using foresight, to playing chess with checks and balances. Forecasting life before it happened. He believed in life’s predictability. A client who smoked, a client who owned a speedboat, a client with a past DUI, a client who never took wood shop class in high school, a client who had waited until his wedding night—they all had their own special arcs and trajectories. Derek’s job was to determine if his company could provide a soft place to land. The trick was to look at them from all sides. All angles.

He raised his son, Crane, in much the same way—an overprotective parent if there ever was one. Walk on the left side of the road. Don’t chew more than two pieces of gum at once. If a piece of bread crust gets stuck in the toaster, leave it there. Three years ago, the Yancy’s three-year-old daughter had been run over as Mr. and Mrs.
Yancy backed their Navigator out of their driveway. By the time he was seven, Crane had heard the story from his father eight times over.

It was harder as Crane grew older, grew more independent and mischievous. He constantly went back-and-forth from always wanting to be around him and Claudia to hiding away from them, burrowing away into the old house. They never told him what hide-and-seek was—for all he knew it was his own invention, and whenever the house was too quiet, David would know that the game had started without him.

David almost always found him without incident, sometimes as he darted out from a doorway, giggling into his arms, other times curled up in his toy box or under a sofa, springing out with a shout.

In the October before Crane disappeared, David tiptoed into Crane’s room, sighted his bare feet sticking out from under the end of his bed. Grinning, he knelt down by the side of the bed, Crane’s blanket draped down over the side. He pulled the blanket away, waiting for the inevitable yelling celebration.

Instead, Crane flinched back from him, a surprised look on his face.

“Hey Dad,” he said, “who’s Sara?”

David froze. “Who told you—who’s Sara?” he said.

Crane wouldn’t say.

His father didn’t press him, just kept him closer, looked a little harder each time he disappeared.
Sometimes Crane would get frustrated with his father’s constant pressuring admonitions and run to his mother, who would stroke his blonde curly hair and tell him that Daddy loved him very much, more than Daddy could stand.

Claudia was a nursery-school teacher-turned-stay-at-home-mom. She was used to the hushed tone of voice because of both her professions, used sound to comfort. She wasn’t a loud person to begin with, and time and experience had lowered her voice to a whisper. Even when she tried to yell, it was like the wind trying to speak.

They lived a relatively quiet life at the end of a private road and tried to avoid any more Decembers. Any more gaps in their life. Any more pauses.

That spring, David negotiated a way to telecommute and work from home while looking after Claudia and Crane. That particular day, David was stressed. Last night, he and Claudia had had a disagreement, and the tension had spilled over into the daytime. Claudia was holed up in the back room of the house on a chaise lounge, the one she always returned to when she just wanted to lie down and talk to the baby that hadn’t been born yet. David stayed in the kitchen with Crane. They said a few words to each other as Crane ate his grilled-ham-and-cheese sandwich, then Crane hurtled through the swinging screen door and ran outside. Crane loved to play outside after he ate lunch. Before he left, David said, “Promise you won’t go off into the woods. Swear to me.” Crane curled his pinky finger around David’s and swore.
At around 1 PM on the Sunday of April 6, David Harper looked out of the back window of his house at his son Crane, sitting in the backyard, before pouring himself a drink and walking into the living room.

When David Harper returned to the back window, Crane was missing.

David looked out into the yard, at the spot under the cherry tree where Crane used to be. He immediately told himself that Crane was probably by the side of the house, playing around with the garden hose, making mud puddles. All the while, a low, guttural chord played in his head, a low note in the back of his mind that blotted out all melody. The sound of something being erased.

His glass of brandy shattered against the floor as the door swung shut behind him. The sound woke Claudia from her nap, and she found him outside, next to the windchimes that were ringing softly, looking out at the endless tangles of branches and shrubs and weeds. She put his hand on his shoulder, and they both flinched back from each other.

David and Claudia were inconsolable. But people tried anyway. Most of the neighborhood felt sorry for them, described it as "a shame" and "a tragedy" and "an awful, awful situation, especially after what had happened two years ago." That was the worst. David heard it and thought of another screen door swinging in anger, another terrible, months-long pregnant pause, another missing child. He had walked away, turned his back on Sara that night, and when he looked back, she was gone.
You turned around once, and the future you thought you had was taken away by the time you took another look, and all your nightmares snuck up behind you.

Claudia locked the front and back doors, kept retreating further and further into the old house, locking every door behind her. David took few calls.

The police kept searching for another month, and then they called off the search. Put Crane’s picture on a stack of flyers, a shelf full of milk cartons. Paper tigers, David thought, flat, two-dimensional justice. Two-dimensional closure.

David saw the picture they used, nine months later, in the dairy aisle at Foodtown. Crane was smiling, a gap in the front where a tooth was missing. One side of his shirt collar was flipped up. He looked like he was pressing his face up to the flat white window on the milk carton, peering out from a parallel universe.

David stared at his son. He felt all the energy drain out of him, from his legs, up through his chest, all the way to the top of his head. He sank to the floor, rested the back of his head against the metal trough where they kept the salted and unsalted butter, the imported cheeses and heavy cream. He stared at a spot in the distance, unwilling to look away, afraid it would change or vanish if he did.

IV.
The Harpers were a nice family—everyone in their neighborhood said so. They lived in an old house. Crane, his mother, and his father.

His father worked for a large insurance company in New York, and his mother taught babies not to cry all the time.

Crane’s mother Claudia sometimes said that the worst day of Crane’s life happened when he could walk on his own, without needing her to carry him. It was why he gave such great hugs, wrapped his arms and legs around his father or his mother, pointed his toes and clenched his fists.

As he grew older, there were still times when he wanted to hold onto them for as long as he could, but more often Crane found joy in hiding from them. He loved the game of hide-and-seek, loved drawing tight breaths in the lightless cavern of his toy box, his pants drawer, the dusty underside of his twin bed. Waiting for the inevitable squealing reveal, but also curling up in a quiet sanctuary where no one could disturb him.

Sometimes he stayed hidden for hours, found nooks and bare spaces within their old Victorian house even his parents didn’t know about, would dart between them as his parents frantically searched, until he could see the worry in their faces and it stopped being fun.

Right after his seventh birthday, as Crane was hiding in his toybox again, he cracked open the lid and heard an unfamiliar voice. A voice that didn’t belong to his mother or father, but to a young girl.

Whenever he was able to block out the outside world enough, he could hear the voice of the young girl, sometimes in conversation with his parents. The first few times, he sprang out of his hiding place, hoping to
catch the girl by surprise, but he only found himself alone. From then on, he just sat there and listened.

As time went on, the girl’s voice sounded less melodic, less bright, as her conversations with his father became more heated. As he hid under his bed, he heard the girl open the door and walk in, crying softly to herself. Crane wanted to reach out from his hiding place and hold her, put a hand on her shoulder, only knowing that it would send her back to wherever she was from. He could only listen to her as her sobs grew louder, as the mattress above him curved down with her weight, the springs straining. He wanted to cry as well, but instead he swiped the blanket back and shimmied out from under the bed, made sure she was gone so he wouldn’t have to hear her anymore.

That spring, his mother was pregnant, and Crane was obsessed with the future baby. He kept asking his mother questions.

“When’s the baby coming out?”

“In three months, sweetie.”

“What is it going to look like?”

“You’ve seen babies before. You know what they look like.”

“What does the baby eat?”

“Whatever I eat.”

“What does it drink?”

“Whatever I drink.”
“Where does it sleep?”

His mother thought for a moment. “In like—a kind of swimming pool. One you can live in.”

Later that night, Crane took a bath. He kept perfectly still in the warm water, clenched his hands into fists until the water felt like air, stuck his nose and mouth out through the surface, his eyes submerged. He breathed steadily, in and out.

He wondered what it would be like to be pregnant. Wondered about male sea horses giving birth, about mother marsupials carrying their babies around in pouch as they hopped around. He hopped around the ancient house in the kangaroo onesie that he had received for his birthday, fierce-looking action figures tumbling out of the polyester pouch. Crane wondered if his mother could talk with the baby already. If he had told her anything while he was waiting to be born. It was more fun to think of it that way.

The second-to-last time he peered through the gap in his toy box lid, he could only see a thin green light shining down on...something. He tried to focus his eyes, but he wasn’t in his parents’ house anymore. It felt cold outside of where he was hidden. His breath steamed in front of his face.

As his eyes adjusted, he saw something, something floating in the middle of the green light, something that looked like...

He heard a cough. The sound of rippling water. A quivering mouth.
Crane slammed the lid shut, shoved his fingers in his ears, wishing he could reach into his own head and pull out the sight of the ghastly green face, one eye rolling in its head, dipping below the waterline. A vast and terrible rustling sound hung in the background of his thoughts, like the wind blowing against his face.

He stayed there, curled into a tight ball, until his parents found him.

He had realized how other things could hold things within them, be pregnant in their own ways. Especially the things people said.

When his parents told him “no,” or comforted him, or asked him a question, their words were pregnant with meaning. When his father kept telling him the story of the Yancy’s daughter, run over by their own SUV, he could feel the meaning soaking through his father’s words, even though he couldn’t express it, couldn’t express the fear and love held within. When they looked down at him in his toybox, their faces writ with some sort of knowledge he didn’t have.

And sometimes the silences between the words meant more than the words themselves.

Midway through the night of April 5, Crane woke up to the sound of his mother yelling. He walked down the dark hallway and paused before the kitchen doorway.

His mother stood over the kitchen table, her swollen belly resting on the polished wooden lip. Her voice was high and wild, her arms motioning
and jerking like lightning bolts. His father was sitting at the other end of the table, his head tilted down, his mouth closed as his mother kept on going. A half-empty glass of liquid the color of maple syrup rested next to his right hand, splayed flat.

As Crane kept staring, he noticed his father’s hand was shaking. Then Crane noticed his whole body was shaking as well, vibrating as he picked up his drink, drained it, then pitched it against the refrigerator, where it shattered, glass shards scattering down between brightly-colored magnets, sending Crane back to his room in a panic.

That morning, as Crane ate his sandwich and prepared to play out in the backyard, he didn’t remember much of what his father said, but he could feel the pauses between each word. They felt like something settling in his chest. The pause after his father asked him to swear, to swear that he wouldn’t go play in the woods—he felt every bit of it, felt what both of them couldn’t say.

At almost 1 PM on the Sunday of April 6, David Harper looked out of the back window of his house at his son Crane, sitting in the backyard, before pouring himself a drink and walking into the living room.

When David Harper returned to the back window, Crane was missing.

The Harpers went out into the backyard to search for him. They walked into the woods, looked behind trees and rocks, called out his name. Then they called the police, and the police did more looking, sent out search
parties and patrols and snuffling dogs. They asked everyone in Glasgow Park if they knew anything about where Crane was. No one had seen anything. No one had noticed anybody entering or leaving the private road that led to the Harpers’ house.

David and Claudia were inconsolable. But people tried anyway. The rest of the neighborhood felt sorry for them, described it as “a shame” and “a tragedy” and “an awful, awful situation, especially after what had happened seven years ago.”

Seven years ago, Crane had an older sister named Sara, a teenager.

Crane’s parents obsessed for years over the best way to tell him, saw child specialists, consulted friends who were parents, rolled soothing words up to the tips of their tongues before sucking them back into their throats, and then one night in March Crane told them about the dead girl in the pool down the road.

How she took a bunch of pills and stumbled in their backyard. How she unhooked one of the edges of the green canvas tarp of the undrained pool and shimmied under it, eased herself into the icy December water, her skin shivering until she lost all feeling in her bones, her breath turning from steam into winter air. How they found her in the spring once the ice had melted, her skin the pale green of pharmacy shampoo, long blonde hair trailing to the bottom like gnarled, moldy
ropes trailing off the side of a ship. How they didn’t find the three-month-old baby growing in her belly until—

They erupted together, rushed him with sharp voices, propelled him to his bedroom and locked him in.

Lying down in his bed, he strained to hear anything from the other side of the house. Heard a lot of weighted silence. Soft syllables. An intermittent squeak that could have been his mother crying.

Claudia locked the front and back doors, kept retreating further and further into the old house, locking every door behind her. David took few calls.

The police kept searching for another few months, and then they called off the search. Put Crane’s picture on a stack of flyers, a shelf full of milk cartons. David saw the picture they used, six months later, in the dairy aisle at Foodtown. Crane was smiling, and there was a gap off to the side where a tooth was missing. One side of his shirt collar was flipped up. He looked like he was pressing his face up to the flat white window on the milk carton, peering out from a parallel universe.

Like he was aware of some detail everyone else wasn’t, some happy little thought he could come back to.

V.
The air is still in the Harpers’ backyard on the afternoon of April 6th. The sky is grey, overcast. Someone standing outside might have said that they heard the rumble of approaching rainclouds, confusing something they felt deep within them, rising up from the ground through the sensitive pads of their feet, with something they heard.

In this world, there are very many spaces that the eyes cannot reach. Will probably never reach.

No time of year makes this more apparent than spring. All around, stems and stalks are shooting up from the quiet earth. Insects and animals take tentative steps out of secret knotholes and burrows. Then the air, the spring air filled with pollen and dandelion seeds and invisible dampness, pours down into the world. Fills every corner and cranny and crevice, the underpasses of bridges made from tree roots, crawlspaces under flat rocks like fallen gravestones, the gaps in between fenceposts and gatespires and windchimes.

These are the places that are unknowable on first glance, or second, or third, the places that open and close like hungry mouths, blinking in and out of existence every time human eyes fall away. So many hiding places. So many empty niches waiting to harbor things that are lost, carried off by the wind.

On the Sunday of April 6, David Harper looked out of the back window of his house at his son Crane, for the final time, sitting in the backyard, before pouring himself a drink and walking into the living room.
What did Crane Harper do during those lost few minutes?
Slept, mostly. Slept and dreamed.
What did he dream of?
Something. Something almost indescribable. Some massive presence made of dust and fireflies and white petals and blossoming light, something that couldn’t take shape anywhere else but in the subconscious mind. It swirled and shaped itself in front of him, just as the wind was billowing and whirling around his sleeping body, back in the backyard.

He stood in front of the something, thought his deepest thoughts, his desires to carry, to shelter, to be sheltered, to immerse, to breathe water, to hide, to give birth, to be born, to be a mother, a father, to hold and be held and never stop.

And the something in front of him responded, grew solid, grew a sharper and thinner point towards him, something that looked like—possibly—a finger.

Without thinking, Crane reached out in his dream, extended an index finger towards the point, to touch it, to feel it. Moved closer—

The something surged forward, wrapped around his finger. Tightened.

Swear.

Petals rained down.
The windchimes crashed and clattered.
Crane opened his eyes.
When David Harper returned to the back window, Crane was missing.

Where did Crane go?

Well, if you think of a human being as the world does, as a bright and smooth piece of string, one with a birth at one end and a death at the other, string looped and kinked and knotted and clumped over time into the shape of a man or a woman—

String that could unravel with the right touch, the right pressure, could unknot and unclump and undo itself into one long strand, loop and re-tangle and run through all the secret places in the world, through all the spaces eyes can’t reach and only air can touch, the crannies and crevices and knotholes, and then tighten itself at both ends, hold everything in the world that much closer together in its tight embrace—

That’s one way to explain it, sure.

At the sound of glass shattering, Claudia opened her eyes. Some part of her knew, knew even before she went outside, found her husband and touched him on the shoulder. Some part of her that peered out of the old ornate doorframe within her. A door that had been pried open a few inches over the past two years now slammed shut again.

VI.
On the afternoon of December 6, Claudia Harper looked out of the back window of her house at the bare branches, covered in hanging trails of ice. The ground was pale and smooth with packed white snow. The air was still and silent.

The baby lay asleep in a crib on the far side of the house. She didn’t cry very often. Sometimes, Claudia made herself sick as she stayed awake at night, waiting for her daughter to cry, wanting to shake her until she made a noise, until she proved she was there, the wooden slats of the crib rising not-high-enough around her. David held her tightly.

Sometimes, Claudia thought she could see Crane out there, sitting under the tree like an afterimage, burned into her retinas. A trick of the light that she forced herself to believe. Or maybe she would open a door one day, any door, and Crane would be standing behind it, smiling his gap-toothed smile, along with Sara, and David, and the baby in her own arms.

She closed her eyes.

Outside, the windchimes brushed against each other. She felt them more than she heard them.