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In accordance with long held tradition, it is customary within the Italian culture to name the first and second born sons after the paternal and maternal grandfathers, respectively; following this, sons can be named at will. Daughters are often named after their grandmothers, but not exclusively. Often children will be named after the saints that affected their mothers during pregnancy, or else saints they felt helped them through difficulties in their lives.

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Pietro Spanelli was a silent man.

He was born in Acquappesa, Calabria, a small town right off the water, placed just where the toe would begin, right at the joint. Often he would run down to the shore, place his own toes in the surf and inhale the salt, feel it burn his nose. He never splashed or swam but was always looking for sea life: mussels, clams, sardines and whatever fish he could find. Convinced he would one day be able to catch anything with his hands he stood still in the water for hours, studying the flitting pattern of the metallic sardines or the anatomy of the ocean floor and the difference between the bumps and crooks, a mussel and a sand pocket. He fished often, casing the tidal pools and shallow parts for shellfish, seining when the tide allowed. His young feet would grow tough each summer,
his skin thickening against the rocky shores. His skin would flash in the sun, transforming like boiled crabs until the burns peeled and he was nut brown

When he had to, he would return home, his eyelashes sticky with salt and his cheeks wind burned. His mother, Antonella, was a strong woman with a stiff, curved back and thick shapely brows; his father had died years earlier. They lived together with his younger brother, Maurizio, in a small house less than a mile from the shore. Antonella mended clothes and took care of her neighbors’ children in order to support her own. Though a young man, his mother counted on Pietro as head of the house. Pietro, determined not to let her down, contributed his fish to every meal: fried mackerel in the mornings, oiled sardines for lunch, boiled crab or steamed mussels for dinner.

Pietro stopped school at a young age, learning to read and nothing more. Yet his skill was enough to make his mother proud. In the evenings she would often ask him to spell out her name for her, watched as he used the cooled, charred wood from the fire to write the lettes on their worn wooden table, A-N-T-O-N-E-L-L-A. Afterwards, he’d walk outside and check his seining net or tinker with his rods. Often he would peer into the window, watch as his mother sounded out the letters to her name, repeating the sounds over and over until she finally wiped the charcoal away with a damp cloth.

When Maurizio was old enough Pietro told their mother it was time he learned to fish. Pietro took him to the shoreline and made him stand in the calm waves for the entire day.

“Guardare,” Pietro told his brother. Watch.
The next day Pietro allowed Maurizio to dig around the tide pools and was not surprised to see that almost immediately he filled a bucket with mussels. Pietro was satisfied that if he were to ever leave, his brother could take care of his mother.

On his thirteenth birthday Antonella told Pietro that it was time for him to begin to work. He relinquished most of his tools—his buckets, seining net and poles—to his brother, keeping only one pole for himself. From then on his early mornings were spent delivering his mother’s mending and the rest of his day working under a carpenter. He made very little but the money went to his mother, the hard woman softening as her own burdens lessened. Antonella was determined that Maurizio would go further in school than Pietro had; she explained to the boy that as long as Pietro was working Maurizio need not spend so much time fishing. The boys agreed with their mother but neither could stay away from the sea for long. Pietro soon spent his lunches by the ocean, searching for oysters that he would crack and eat, never content with the thick bread and hard cheese his mother packed for him. Maurizio, at eight, continued with school through the colder months when the seas were unforgiving. As soon as the weather changed, however, he abandoned his studies entirely and spent days by the sea and the port, talking with the fisherman and often joining them on day trips.

At twelve Maurizio kissed his mother goodbye and shook his brother’s hand. He walked to the port and climbed aboard a large fishing vessel with no plan to return. The next day Pietro left the house prepared to go the wood shop but instead found himself, hours later, in a port-side bar. Talking to the sailors he told them about his brother’s life as if it were his own. He adopted the name Maurizio and described a young boy who
never met his father and forever followed his brother, a kind boy who taught him how to fish. Not realizing he was speaking to the same fisherman who had spend hours recounting stories to Maurizio he continued to lie until one of the fishermen, a grizzly man with a stark white beard and skin the color of mahogany, picked him up by the collar and threw him out, shouting “Impostore!”

Sitting on the street Pietro thought of his childhood dream to catch a fish using only his hands. Looking down at his splinter-ridden fingers, the nails filthy with wood stain and sawdust, he picked himself up and walked purposefully out towards the docks. It was past noon and the town had shut down, the men either tucked into bars or their homes, and Pietro knew that he was alone. Looking out past the sea line he slowly removed his shoes and pants, folded his wine stained shirt and said a silent prayer to Saint Peter, his own Saint and the patron saint of fishermen. Before he could jump he was stopped by the polizia and taken home.

The next morning Pietro woke early to his mother’s voice and that of a man he did not know. Joining them in the small kitchen he recognized the man, the polizia from the day before. His mother was sharp with him, told him to ready himself for work and make sure he was there on time with deepest apologies for the day before.

The polizia smiled at Pietro and told him his mother was a good woman and he should listen to her. He grasped Pietro’s hand firmly and looked him steadily in the eye as he told him that that two boys from the same family could not share the same desiderio, the same wish.
Leaving the house with the intention to return groveling to the wood smith, Pietro again found himself elsewhere—this time at the police station, determined to take up the work that had saved him. He vowed never to go to the sea again.

Years later Pietro, a polizia with his own small family, was called to join Mussolini’s war. His pregnant wife was left alone with their small son, hopeful until she received word that her husband, a brave man, had died and was buried in honor in a tomb in Sicily, the island surrounded by the sea.

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Alfonso Tramutta was a smart boy who grew into a smart man.

Born in Cuccaro Vetere, a small mountainous village in Salermo, he often explored the medieval castle and decaying churches that were scattered throughout the mountainside. As a small boy he would climb the hill just a quarter of a mile south from his home and follow the well worn path to the church that rested there, trapped behind weeds and saplings, its front steps offering a perfect view of the red roofed houses below. The dark tower was fragile with worn bricks and a caved dome. From the doorway he would say two prayers: one to St. Teresa, his mother’s preferred saint, and one for his father, to whoever was listening.

He was a lonesome child, his father having died soon after his birth and his mother never remarrying. The pair lived with Carmelina’s aunts in their loud and jovial convent of a home. His days were spent exclusively with women—as an infant he learned
to walk by moving from skirt to skirt, as a boy he learned his numbers and letters at the table amongst tomatoes and pasta, dried figs and jars of olive oil. He was a stern boy, used to and sick of the constant feminine teasing he endured from his aunts. His mother had been a teacher before she married and was determined that her son grow to be an educated man. She encouraged him to spend his evenings reading Bible passages and filling out times tables. He soon grew bored with the simple tasks his mother suggested and moved on to more complex studies, reading Dante and Shakespeare, preferring the company of books to that of his boisterous family.

When Alfonso was fifteen he began work in his uncle’s dry goods store, helping him with his accounts and the small ledger that was filled with each customer’s rolling bill. His mother instructed him to treat his uncle well in the hopes he would choose him as his heir. For the first time he was content among people, making friends with the fishmonger who would sometimes pay in sardines and the man who brought them fabric and news from Rome. Not long after Alfonso was settled, his mother left for Lombardino, a town to the north, in order to teach again. Alfonso moved from his great aunts’ home and took a room in Dona Marguerite's house right off the piazza, minutes from the store.

Only months into his nineteenth year Alfonso’s uncle died and left him the store. He gave up his small room and moved into the apartment over the store, cleaning out what few possessions his uncle had and replacing them with his own meager collection of books and papers. In the years that followed Alfonso made few changes to the store and his routine. Each morning he had coffee with the baker and lunch each afternoon with Dona Marguerite, enjoying her conversation and the laughter from the young
granddaughter who lived with her. His evenings were spent in solitude, his only company books.

By thirty Alfonso no longer found solace in his silent evenings and so he bought from Dona Marguerite her house and married her granddaughter. Their lives were full and by thirty three Alfonso was expecting his second child and planned on expanding his store, hoping to one day include vegetables and meats, everything a person could need. He dreamt each night of his sons inheriting his business, building it up in ways he could not even imagine. He would often tell his wife about his childhood and the lonesome manner in which he grew up. He planned on having many, many children.

His wife soon gave him a second son but died during labor, leaving him alone with two young boys to take care of. Certain he would kill the children if left alone with them he asked his wife’s niece, a beautiful young girl his wife had been fond of, to take care of them. His plans for expansion were postponed and he again took to a rigid routine, waking in the morning to have coffee with the baker and silently eating the lunch that Dona Marguerite's great grandniece prepared. Each evening he would lock himself in his room and read, ignoring his sons and their caretaker.

Celeste, the young woman with chestnut colored eyes and shining black hair, soon began taking her own lunch when Alfonso did, eating with him, chatting and telling him stories about his sons. He was unable to ignore her beauty and kindness for long and by the end of his thirty-fifth year he married her. She gave him nine more children, filling the house with the beginnings of doctors and lawyers and teachers and businessmen. They lost their youngest son to pneumonia when he was no more than a baby. During the
war his eldest sons left to join Mussolini's army and then returned home. Alfonso, all the while, tended his store and his family, dreamt of all the things his children would grow to do.

At the end of his fifty sixth year Alfonso developed a powerful toothache. For days he tried to ignore the pain but it finally became too much and so he had the tooth removed. That afternoon he had lunch with his family and then asked his son, Vittorio, to watch the store so he could rest. An hour later, when Celeste went to check on him, he would not wake. When she touched his shoulder, she realized he was dead and screamed and screamed.

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The feast of Saint Dominic, the patron saint of astronomers and stargazers, is August eighth.

Francesca Spanelli, while pregnant with her third child, could not sleep. She lay awake each night uncomfortable and large, her stomach a great bolder in the bed. She had not wanted this pregnancy, but it had come in full force.

It was during this time that she began the practice of stargazing, of looking out her bedroom window at the city sky, the weak stars shining through the thick summer nights. She missed the clear mountain air of her home and the vibrant night sky.

In her final month she passed night after night restless, wandering from room to room, window to window. Her husband, joking, often called her astronomo, asking what
she saw in the sky. Finally she began to pray, begged the saints to let her sleep. She called on Saint Dominic, her stargazing patron, and asked that he let her rest.

Finally, she slept. And that August eighth she gave birth to her daughter.

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Francesca Tramutta and Rocco Spanelli were married just days before they boarded the ship that would take them to America.

Francesca was older than Rocco by five years and had lived in America, with her sister and brother-in-law, for two years before she was called back to her home of Cuccaro, Vetere, and told she must marry. She had been engaged twice before but her first suitor lost his leg when a mine, left over from the war, exploded, and her second boyfriend had a mark against his name that made it impossible for him to leave the country. She chose Rocco because he was a handsome police officer with a good record and little family; when she told him she wanted to live in America he agreed they could emigrate as soon as they were married. And they did.

The newlyweds docked on Ellis Island and were collected immediately by Francesca’s brother-in-law who drove them to his home on Montgomery Street in Elizabeth, New Jersey. When Francesca crossed the threshold she began to cry.

“Home,” she said in careful English.

Rocco began working with his brother-in-law at Bristol Meyers in Bridgewater and Francesca took up line work in a clothing factory in Elizabeth.
The couple adjusted to their new lives. Neither spoke much English but picked up the language through their jobs and in stunted conversations at the stores they shopped in and at the bank where they carefully saved money.

After a few years Francesca’s sister and brother-in-law decided that life in America was too difficult and bought tickets for a ship ride back to Italy. Their young daughter went with them. Rocco anf Francesca bought their house and, once alone, had their first child.

Pietro was a small, sickly baby. The doctors warned Francesca that he might not survive past childhood and so three years later, another son was born. Alfonso was strong and so Francesca was satisfied.

“Non piu,” Francesca told her husband. No more. Sons were enough, and though Rocco wanted a daughter he did not argue.

Not six months after Alfonso’s birth, however, Francesca became pregnant again. She ate bottle after bottle of laxatives to terminate the pregnancy and when that did not work she began to douche with vinegar and—once—bleach. A daughter was born, however, and Francesca named her Domenica.

The Spanelli children lived in a different world than their parents.

Francesca had spent her childhood roaming medieval streets and playing in the piazza outside of her father’s store. Rocco had lived most of his life by the ocean, splashing and fishing in the same waves that had swallowed his father’s dreams.

Elizabeth—even Peterstown, the Italian section where the Spanelli’s lived—was nothing like fifties era Italy. The streets were packed tightly with houses and the yards,
when they existed, were small. Francesca, whose family owned land filled with fig trees
and olive groves, had worked tirelessly with Rocco to turn they clay soil of their yards
into something that would grow tomatoes and eggplants and figs. The children would
walk from their kitchen to the pavement of their driveway and drop eggshells and coffee
grounds into the compost heap in their yard.

Each morning, with Francesca in the lead, the children would walk the city blocks
to St. Anthony’s school. They would pass bodegas and corner stores, huge multi colored
groups of students on their way to the high school, and many, many cars. Francesca
warned her children each day of the dangers they faced. The America of Francesca’s
dreams was not the one in which she lived; there were opportunities here, yes, but she
was not not Signor Tramutta’s bella figlia on Pearl Street—or anywhere else.

When the children were old enough they attended Italian school with the other
paisano children in the neighborhood. Here, they became good Italian children,
learning—and forgetting—proper Italian; all they carried with them into adulthood was
their parents’ dialetto.

Pietro and Alfonso spent most of their adolescence mowing lawns with their
father. Here they better learned the streets of Elizabeth, the neighborhoods where they
belonged and those where they were not welcome. Pietro was studious and he would
often try and sneak away from his father and brother to read, or else complete practice
equations and homework. He had friends in school, good Italian boys like himself who
lived in Elizabeth and attended mass at St. Anthony’s on Sundays. He sometimes took a
walk at night to clear his mind, down Pearl St. until he reached the high school and then
knew to turn around. Alfonso was more rebellious, though his grades were good. He
never studied as hard, or cared as much as Pietro. He too would sneak away from his father or brother but he did so to play soccer or baseball with his friends. These children were not all good Italian boys, but Francesca allowed for the odd Polish or Irish companion so long as they ate, and enjoyed, the food she offered.

Domenica spent her days with her mother. She was la figlia, and not allowed to roam as her brothers did. She cleaned the house, did the laundry, chatted with her older cousin next door. The girls her mother picked as friends for her were tolerable, but often they were at different schools and shared few interests. She involved herself in activities in school, aware that they would be her only chance out of the house. She spent a lot of time with her parents, grocery shopping and completing errands. Though the boys were older, Domenica was more accessible and so it was she who helped her parents translate and understand bank statements and jury duty notices.

Rocco moved up at Bristol Meyers and won an award for efficiency. He carefully cut out the newspaper article that was written about him and tucked it away in a photo album. Francesca demanded she be moved from line work to piecework and increased her salary by working faster, completing more garments.

When the children were in high school—they had moved from St. Anthony’s to St. Mary’s, neither school more than blocks from their home—Francesca and Alfonso decided it wise that they buy another home. The purchased a property across the street from where they lived and packed the family and moved from 623 Montgomery St to 626. The old home—the place where they first came to, where their children grew up—they divided and rented out. Rocco still tended the garden at 623, but he and Francesca also began a new, larger one, at 626.
Pietro and Alfonso, though living at home, began their college degrees at NJIT, the New Jersey Institute of Technology. Here, for the first time, they were out of Elizabeth. They soon learned, however, how close to home they still were. Domenica, when it was her turn, started her degree at Rutgers, Newark. For her this trek felt longer, the distance greater. She had never, it seemed, been that far from home.
Magie Ave is a strange place. The small, unassuming “business district” in Elmora Hills, sometimes “the Hills,” that merges three very different locations. Union on one side of the road, Elizabeth on the other, both funneling into Roselle Park, the square mile town that’s more an afterthought than anything else. Running the length of the north side of the road are two gas stations less than a minute apart, a bank, a CVS, an auto repair, liquor store, corner store, pub, YMCA, hair salon, the Magie Mart, the Garden—an overpriced restaurant, the barber shop, Chinese restaurant, tanning salon, dry cleaners, and pizzeria.

People live on Magie Ave, houses lining the south side and in the pockets before, between, and after the businesses. Some live above the establishments in apartments that have invisible entryways and windows. Many live in the Village, a small community of half homes that shoot off from the road into unnamed culs-de-sac and dead ends. Between the pub and YMCA is a semi-wood where mulberry trees grow. Here, also, is Dinosaur Park where children never play but teenagers sit and kiss and smoke weed at night. Between the hair salon and second gas station is a dead end street that leads to a field and a second playground, and a footpath that goes through more woods and opens onto the Kean University Campus. Magie Ave begins at a four way stop between two sides of Westfield Ave and Cherry St and continues down, looping—dramatically—twice until it ends at Gallopinghill Road and becomes something entirely strange and different, Lincoln Ave.
When at first I knew I was pregnant—the morning after Zack and I came home from a weekend in the Poconos—I cried. We had been married a little over a year and I was only just getting used to the little freedoms—eating out whenever I wanted, sleeping late on Saturdays, letting the laundry go just a bit longer—that came with a life on our own.

“Honey, you need to calm down.” That evening he sat me on the bed and rubbed my back, comforted me with his lowered voice, the smooth circular motion of his hand.

“But you don’t understand.” I wailed. I had been crying since early that evening, salting our dinner with my tears and snot, finally abandoning a scorched pile of hardened garlic potatoes, dry chicken, and greying brussel sprouts just moments before he was due home. Sitting on our bed I sobbed until he followed the trail of socks and oven mitts—detritus from my sudden fit—to our bedroom.

“Don’t understand what? This is what we wanted!”

“I know!”

“Then why are you crying?” His voice echoed concern—he was worried about me—but also anger, something I knew he wouldn’t admit to; how could he understand why I was discouraged? He’d lived years on his own before we were married, before we
moved in together; I had entered our home straight from my parents and it was too soon for me to let go of my new weightlessness.

“Because…” I paused, unsure what to tell him but needing him to understand.

“Well, Zack—I wanted us to have more fun! I wanted us to live more.” I looked down at the dandelion and ivory patchwork of our quilt, ashamed. “I wanted to be selfish.”

I hated the words as they came from my mouth, hated the whining pitch my voice had reached. I wanted this baby, but I wanted her later, when I was ready.

“I understand that. But…”

“Oh, hush! You know I would never—”

“I was just—”

I sighed, interrupting him. “I just need to take the test and then—”

“Wait!” Zack shouted, the anger leaving his voice. “You haven’t even checked yet? You haven’t taken a test? Then how could you know you’re pregnant?”

I looked up at him, wishing for a way to make him understand. I knew because suddenly I was full, knew because my belly felt warm and expansive, because things felt a little quieter, the world padded. I knew because that morning, upon waking, the world felt settled: a completed puzzle, an oil painting, those few hazy moments upon waking when sound has yet to catch up with consciousness. I hadn’t wanted to feel this settled, this solid—not yet.

“I know, Zack. Trust me—I know.”

“Well, let’s get a test. We’ll try it. If it’s positive—” here he paused and smiled large, happy “we’ll make a doctors appointment.”

Breathing deeply I reached for his hand and tugged at his fingers.
“If it isn’t—” Zack continued, “and it very well may not be positive—then we should plan a trip for the spring. We can go anywhere you want. We’ll be free. And then, when we get home...maybe we could start trying?” He asked the question gently, honestly; I knew this was what he wanted, was ultimately what I wanted. I nodded at him, my answer irrelevant. I was already pregnant.

“Either way. I don’t think it’s a good idea if we tell anyone…”

“Not until we’re sure. Especially not my parents,” I replied.

For the moment, at least, I was free from that conversation.

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Zack agreed that as this was the first baby (“But not the last!” he would joke, constantly) we should take our time and let things settle—be certain that everything was alright—before we allowed the wave to crash and our families to rush ashore, storming the beach.

After two months without any complications, Zack began his prodding, gently at first. He would arrive home from work tired, insist I leave dinner and sit with him on the sofa. Rubbing my belly (the baby indistinguishable) he would hum, talking to our daughter about the world she was missing but would soon experience. He would talk to her about all of the things he was going to teach her, show her. Tell her each day how excited everyone would be to finally meet her. Would sneak in over and over how much he couldn’t wait to share the news with everyone he knew.
I would sit there—my daughter growing inside me—and listen to Zack’s words. Slowly, but without faltering, I began to imagine this new world with our daughter, the world Zack detailed so clearly. I would lie back, relaxed and at ease, and picture birthdays and Christmases, the first day of school and nightly baths. I listened as Zack’s voice rose and fell, as he murmured the coming events of our lives together, our own tiny family. I slowly fell in love with the little world we were creating, the world I began to dream about each night.

One evening he walked in from the kitchen, sidled up to me on the sofa and smiled nervously. “Come on now, Nic. We’ve got to tell them! You know how upset they’ll be when they realize we’ve waited this long. Any longer and—”

“Zack, please.” I looked up from my book—*A Tree Grows In Brooklyn*—immediately frustrated that my weeks of ignoring Zack’s own frustrations had caught up to me. “I’m just worried, all right? I need everything to be perfect, and comfortable, and... well, you know what they’re like!”

“I do. And that’s why we have to tell them. We have to.”

“Alright,” I sighed, “okay. But not tonight. Give me at least another week. Another week and then we’ll tell them together and everyone will know everything!” I threw my hands up, overwhelmed by the whole thing. Zack kissed me, gently and on the cheek, grabbed my arms and smiled warmly down at me. He began to hum as he walked away, happy at everything.

I didn’t want to tell my parents—or Zack’s parents—about the baby in a week. I didn’t want to tell them in a month. I didn’t plan on telling them at all, actually, until after she was born and we’d gotten her past her first birthday, or maybe her fifth—at one point
I considered waiting until after she was in high school, a teenager with the worst of those angst ridden years behind her. I didn’t want anyone to know anything about the wonder that was happening in my life—in my stomach and between my two hands. My first fears about the pregnancy were behind me, but new ones followed in close suit. I didn’t want to share my family with anyone, wanted this warm happiness to exist completely between us. Since we were first married I had spoken to my family almost every day, fielding calls from my mother and father, making dates with my brother’s girlfriends (neither brother ever called himself), but in the two months since I first told Zack I had managed, somehow, to avoid them. My parents’ lengthy calls we cut short, my brother’s girlfriends were put off and put off again. Zack and I spent night after night looking through naming books (he insisted we at least consider the possibility of our child being a boy, but I knew—as surely as I knew I had been pregnant—that she was a girl). We spent our weekends window-shopping baby clothes, toys; ignoring the more important items, the expensive cribs and changing tables, elaborate bassinets. I was happy, and I refused to allow the storm of our families to intrude, to break the perfect calm I was feeling.

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When we finally told our families—mine first, over a Sunday dinner; Zack’s later, a coffee stopover the same night—we were greeted with joy and anger.

My mother, her eyes filling with tears and her voice cracking, screamed at me for having waited as long as I did (Zack had grown stalwart at four months, refused to speak
to me until I agreed to tell our families) but then did nothing more than coo at my stomach for the rest of the evening.

“Why you didn’t tell us, Domenica?” She asked after having set the table in a violent haze of shrieks in between resting her hand on my stomach.

The baby was still mostly indistinguishable, but she swore she had felt her kick. At her words I had felt my face glow red, felt the heat rushing to my cheeks and down my neck—these were the moments that I knew she would claim for herself, take from me and twist, make her own. I searched the room for Zack, found him looking at me from the doorway, his glass topped off with wine, his eyes shining and mischievous. Silently I cursed him and he smiled, shook his head at me as he saw my eyes brim with tears. Later on he told me that it had been months since I had reacted rationally to anything; he had decided he wouldn’t take my free falling tears seriously. Instead, he quietly walked up to me and placed his arm around my waist, as if to steady me.

“She’s a tough one, isn’t she? Last night she woke Nic up with her kicking.” I smiled, relieved that he had managed to recapture the moment as our own, even though it had yet to happen.

My mother thought it was a boy because I hadn’t put on much weight yet, and ordered my brothers’ girlfriends (both of whom looked calculatingly at my stomach, jealousy filtering through to the surface) to do the chores she usually reserved for me. My brothers didn’t say much of anything save for a simple congratulations and a few snide glances, snickering that seemed to put a bitter taste in their girlfriends’ mouths—both of whom were older than me and anxiously awaiting rings. But Alfonso, in a quiet moment, placed his hand on my shoulder to give me a congratulatory tap.
“Mama,” I sighed, locking eyes with Zack who quickly looked down, nervously fiddling with his plateful of antipasto, rolling olives around the plate and gnawing absently on the waxy rind of provolone (later telling me that it was this moment he dreaded most about the visit, certain it would come). “I don’t think it’s a boy—she’s a girl. I can tell. I can feel it.”

“Ha!” Her eyes hardened and her voice grew deeper, smiling she shook her head at me. “Domenica, cosa stai pensando? I’m your mother, I know every time. Every one of my children, I know—Giuseppe, too, I know. You,” she pointed to my stomach, touched it gently, “have a boy.”

My father was silent throughout the evening, avoiding even his usual conversation with Zack and the inevitable outburst at either one or both of my brothers. I remember looking at him, worried at whatever it was he wasn’t saying. At the end of the evening (Zack pressing us forward, onto his parent’s house) my father simply kissed my cheek, pausing to smile at me. As Zack wished him well, my father merely said “Good job.” He walked us to the door as my mother, bent over, doled out espresso and cookies to my brothers and their girlfriends; I heard her mumbling about our early departure. As we descended the stairs I turned to see my father smiling, the porch light illuminating his dark sapphire eyes and the glittering dampness that had gathered in each well.

The trip to Zack’s parents wasn’t nearly as intrusive, but transformative; travelling to the other end of Elizabeth, we left the tight bustle of Peterstown and moved towards the quieter Elmora, preparing for the relative silence of his parents’ home and the next round of questions, of thoughtful prodding and belly patting. Zack’s parents were
both gentle people, quiet in nature and far less prone to the petulant questions we expected from mine. They lived on a small rented property half hidden by large, full bushes, doors and windows festively framed with icicle lights year round. It was not the house Zack grew up in, but he had lived there in the years before we were married. It was in this house that I had nervously met his parents, so determined to make a good impression that I broke three dishes and a cup and was finally convinced to relax by his mother’s warm smile. We arrived as a heavy rain began to fall and Zack, concerned that the roads would become slippery, vowed we would only stay a short time—already he was worried about our daughter's safety—but I knew we would again be held hostage by the excitement. His mother was a lady in ways that mine was not (her face done up, lips and eyebrows always perfectly filled, her clothes always pristine and matching) and though she would ask more politely than my mother, I knew she would wonder why we had not told them sooner.

“Will your sister be there?” I asked him, hopeful that we could finish the telling all at once.

“No, I don’t think so. Mom said she had a date or something. I wanted to tell her she should cancel, but—”

“Then they would have realized something was going on. I know.” I looked at him, worn out and wanting nothing more than to go home and sort through the name books we had bought. “I just don’t understand why this has to be such a show.”

“Hello, dears!” his mother greeted us, a smile on her round, kind face. In the living room as she kissed my cheek she rested her hand on my belly, a momentary slip from decorum, and I knew she had her suspicions (we didn’t spend as much time with his
family as we did mine—a Sunday night pop in, she later told me, roused a household suspicion that ended in his sister Winona guessing at my condition).

We sat down for weak coffee and a crumbling pound cake, his grandmother’s recipe and his mother’s favorite to put out for guests, always proud of its impressive shelf life. The small talk quickly turned into our announcement and his mother crooned with happiness while his father, a burly man much like his son, clapped him on the back and pantomimed searching for a cigar, claiming he’d owe him one the day the baby was born.

“Any idea what it might be, Nic—a boy, perhaps?” His father asked searchingly.

Smiling at me, Zack answered instead. “Actually, dad, Nic’s convinced it’s a girl. Won’t even consider otherwise.”

“Don’t tease me, honey.” I looked him straight in the eye, warned him not to push me tonight. “I have a sense about it—I was positive before the test was, wasn’t I?”

His parents laughed, a jovial mood overtaking everyone.

“Oh,” his mother giggled, “think of all the wonderful times you’ll have! Birthdays and holidays and first days of school!”

I smiled at her, pleased that she wasn’t yet claiming them as her own memories, inserting herself as my own mother had done (Zack warned me that I should expect the same grandmotherly voyeurism from his own mother, though at the time I didn’t believe him).

“There’s just so much to account for, dear,” she continued. “I was a certain mess! If you can believe it, and I’m sure you can, I completely forgot about Winona’s first birthday until the day before. Poor girl doesn’t remember, but her cake was rushed and
the icing was runny. It was terrible—I burnt the bottom of it and didn’t have time to make another. You can imagine the looks I got from John’s mother.”

Smiling I nodded, a fragrant new fear spreading from the warm center of my stomach—the tiny heart I felt beating throughout the night, when all the rest was quiet. This was a life I was responsible for, a home I was in charge of creating. This wasn’t just a tiny family, a simple build-your-own module with an instruction packet, it was a whole new life—separate though completely dependent, entwined, in mine and Zack’s. The thought—the sparks of which I had felt since the morning I woke up knowing, since Zack’s evening murmurs—grew and bloomed into years and decades, conversations and reprimands, meals and laughter. It was a life I would shape and memories that I would work to create. My daughter would grow up and experience the world; I would be there to flavor it.

****

When I was young my mother would make soup almost once a week. It was not considered a winter tradition, nor was it specially prepared for sick family members. In my mother’s eyes, soup was just another meal, another tune in her repertoire. My mother, a bold and creative woman, would make the same simmered concoctions week after week. Pasta e fagioli (always hastily pronounced pasta-fazzool) served with thick bread and grated cheese, would be doled out by the bowl full, the leftover scraps—like any other meal—tossed in the garden for the compost and the birds. When my brothers or I grew bored of it we would whine to our mother that it was too hot outside, the soup too
plain, the dish served too frequently, small complaints that we never dared put through to our father.

Later, as we grew older, she made the soup less and less; it was still apart of our mealtime tradition, but it no longer appeared on the table once a week.

Soon pasta e fagioli was a requested meal, something that my brothers would ask for during exam time, or that I needed when I felt under the weather. Sometimes, during the summer, Alfonso or Pietro would beg me to bring them down a pot from home, the rented shore houses they would stay in lacking in homey amenities and our mother’s cooking. The more time went by, the more interested I became in my mother’s recipe (it was one of the many dishes that she would make herself, never sharing her process), determined to make it on my own one day.

“Mama,” I asked one night as she sat at the table and shuffled her deck of cards, carefully counting them as she went. “Mama, could you teach me how to make pasta e fagioli?”

“Not now, Domenica. Zia Serena and Giacomina are coming.” She held out the cards in her hands, obviously. “We play Briscola.”

“I didn’t mean now, mama. Tomorrow, or next time you make it.”

“Tomorrow is Sunday. I make pasta.”

“Alright.” I knew it was not something she would easily give away. “Whenever you make it, then.” I refused to be defeated.

I thought about it again during the fifth month of my pregnancy, when I was nauseous at the thought of most meat and determined to make the soup myself. I had already requested it many times from my mother, and while she would dutifully appear
hours later with a steaming pot, she would wander around the house while I ate, reprimanding me for the dusty stairs and our general lack of preparedness.

Finally, after another visit of snide comments and kind gestures (she had brought me Brioschi, a chalky, lemony antacid that seemed to be the only thing—aside from her soup—that calmed my stomach) I asked her about the soup.

“If you want pasta fagioli, I bring it to you,” she responded, avoiding my direct question and getting up from the table, tittering to herself as she slung a dishcloth over her shoulder and moved towards the sink, reaching for small pile of dishes.

“No, mama, stop. Stop with the dishes, please. I want to know how you make it. What you put in it.”

She turns to face me, refusing to relinquish the dishcloth. “I put in beans. I put in water. Pasta. You know, Domenica. It’s easy.”

“I know that, mama. But I want to know how you make it—I want to make it for my baby, when she’s old enough. So when she’s older she’ll make it for her children.”

She looked at me and shook her head, disappointed. “You baby is a boy. If he wants it, I make it for him, too.” Her eyes lit up and her mouth curled into a slow smile. “When you have a girl, then I teach you.”

“Mama,” I growled, trying to keep as even a temper as I could. “Can I please watch you the next time you make it? Per favore?”

She sighed, finally dropping the dishcloth and shaking her head at the dishes. Picking up her purse, she looked at me. “Okay, Domenica. On Saturday you come over. I show you.”
That weekend I called my mother, making sure she would wait for me to make the soup. Irritated that I had remembered, she told me to come over at noon. When I got there, she was already roasting garlic, the beans plumped and soft from having been boiled most of the morning.

“Mama!” I shouted, knowing she had had no intention of waiting for me.

“What, Domenica? I’m sorry. I have things to do.” She looked up at me, saw the tears that were swelling in my eyes. “Oh, you no miss anything. You know how to boil water, yes? I save you time. Here,” and she motioned to the stove, the garlic popping in the hot oil, “watch.”

That day I learned how to make the pasta e fagioli.

She would simmer dried red beans all day, letting them soften and plump up until she felt they were perfect. Then she would season the broth and add minced onions, tomato paste and diced tomatoes. Whatever pasta was on handy got thrown in—usually something small and easy, never spaghetti—along with the garlic and now flavored oil. This she would boil until the pasta was almost done and then remove from the heat, letting it cook itself for the final step.

“You don’t cook this all the way,” she said, finally. “My mother always say—it taste better when it sit. So, you let it sit.”

****

Once I had begun I knew there were other things I must learn to make. My daughter would spend evenings stirring boiled beans and tender pasta in a huge soup pot,
tasting the sweetness of the garlic and the saltiness of the tomato base. But there was more that she needed to know: the mechanics of a meatball and the careful way to grease your hands before rolling the meat, bread, garlic, onions, spices into a delicate ball—not so large that it cooked unevenly, and not so small that it shrunk, dry. She must come home from school in the afternoon and smell the trays of roasting meat; reach into the freezer on a summer afternoon, searching for a popsicle, and meet sealed bags of cooked meatballs, ready for an evening of late soccer practice and a quick meal.

My daughter would wake on Sunday morning, scratch the sand from her eyes, and come downstairs—greeted, not by frying bacon or sweet cinnamon buns, but the simmering perfume of savory, buttery tomato sauce and slow cooking braciole.

In the sixth month of my pregnancy all I wanted were fat slices of soft bread dipped in slow simmered gravy flecked with garlic and hunks of tomato. Zack tried every jarred sauce in the store as I couldn’t take any more of my mother’s harried calls and stop ins. The food she brought was always what I wanted—vinegary, tender eggplant, home-jarred mushrooms, crisp and salty roasted potatoes—but the rest of her visits were spent nitpicking every aspect of the home I was creating. Often she would bring Alfonso’s fiancée (just a month after our announcement, he and Bianca were engaged); she would chatter endlessly about the wedding and her intricate plans as my mother rearranged the baby’s room.

Eventually, I couldn’t take the flat, flavorless sauce any longer and asked my mother to teach me to make her own. I’d spent evenings of my childhood squashing together waterlogged bread and fresh ground beef with my fingers, watching as my mother added the seasoning and diced vegetables, waiting for them to finish cooking so
that I could eat them straight from the oven—I knew how to make the meatballs, but her sauce eluded me.

“Mama,” I asked one Sunday night as I sat in the kitchen and plated cookies while she prepared the espresso; the rest of the family was gathered round the dining room table, laughing loudly at Renee—Pietro’s girlfriend—while she imitated my brother’s panic over a weekend trip our parents had planned (both of my brother’s still lived at home and Pietro, especially, depended on our mother for even the simplest of things). “Mama, could you please tell me how you make your sauce?”

Pausing, she shook her head. “Domenica, you know the sauce. You grind the sauce when you were small!” She was impatient with me, upset with the laughter in the other room.

“I know how to grind the tomatoes, but what do you put into it? How do you make it taste so good?”

“Don’t put those there, cousin Maritza made them!” She slapped a cookie out of my hand, sneakily looked to make sure no one was looking and then tucked it back into the tupperware with the rest, determined not to be outshone at dessert—those cookies could be left for the boys. “Domenica—what do you want to know? What I put in the sauce?” She shook her head at me. “What you think? Tomatoes!”

“Mama, I know that’s not all. I want to make the sauce at home—I want to make it for Zack. For the baby, when she comes. I want to teach her the meatballs, like you taught me.”

“Here,” putting down the espresso pot and moving from the stove she began to rifle through the cabinets, pulling out an old coffee tin. From this she removed a worn
piece of paper. “This is how *my* mother teach me. This is what you need to make the sauce. This, and youself.”

On the paper was a simple recipe, not all of which I understood. It outlined beginning steps of the sauce—the tomato grinding and boiling that I knew well—and then listed a few spices and a small amount of butter as the other ingredients.

“But mama—this doesn’t tell you *how* much to put in. And I’m sure you put more than this in.”

“I do. Domenica, I cannot tell you how to make you sauce. I make my sauce. My mother make her sauce. You make your own sauce. You start with this,” she gestured towards the paper, “and you add you own.”

****

In the midst of my frenzied collecting and dietary demands Zack began his own quest and started encouraging me to spend more time with his mother, pressing me into more frequent weekend visits, telling me how much it would mean to her to have me and our baby around. Other times his approach was subtler, requesting company while he helped his father in the basement, trimmed their bushes, or tinkered at some other odd job. It was such that soon our entire weekends were filled with familial visits and obligations and the peaceful isolation of the first months of my pregnancy were nothing more than memory.

“Honey,” he would say, searching the kitchen for fresh mozzarella, Rice Krispies, or chocolate--whatever I had requested from my weekend perch on the sofa. “My mom’s
home today and I know she’d love it if you stopped by. How about I drop you off while I go to the store and pick up the baby’s crib? They called and said the shipment had come in.”

I always fought his requests, telling him how tired I was or how much I had still to do (we were still completely unsure what to name our daughter, Zack wasting far too much time with boy names) but usually gave in. On the car ride over he would talk to me about his childhood, chronicle stories I had heard time and time again.

“Nic,” he said to me one day, later in my pregnancy, on a trip to the hardware store for his father. “You know what? I think I’d be great to have dinner with my parents tonight. What time is it, two? We’ll get the lawn bags and I’ll help dad cut the lawn. When I was talking to my mom earlier she said she might be making a dessert. What do you say?”

I looked at him and smiled, his face was bright and young, excited. “Zack, we were just at my parents last night, and—”

“Nic!” he shouted, his eyes clouding. He wouldn’t look at me but instead kept his eyes on the road. “Please. I want to eat dinner at my parents’ house. I want to eat my mother’s dry meatloaf and her potatoes. She’s going to make Lamingtons. I know she’d want your help, unlike—just please. All right? We’ll have dinner there tonight. Next week we’ll ignore them all, but tonight I want my mother’s meatloaf.”

I looked at him, unsettled, and nodded. I remember at that moment feeling as if I had been missing something for months, had ignored something vital. “Of course, honey. Of course we can go.”
That evening as Zack and his father cut the lawn and weeded the garden, tended the young sprouts and the small seedlings, I sat in his mother’s kitchen and watched as she added the oatmeal, ketchup, shredded vegetables and egg to ground beef. I was very pregnant and she wouldn’t let me do much work; instead she handed me a notepad and pencil, told me to take as many notes as I’d like.

“I’d just be careful,” she smiled down at me. “Zack does love this meatloaf, but he’s very particular. He only likes this recipe—it was my aunt’s—but don’t worry, sweetheart. You’ll be able to do it quick as a lick.”

I took careful notes, ignoring my better instincts and all the things my mother taught me (both begrudging and willingly)—the meatloaf would be dry because of the ground beef’s low fat ratio, the potatoes sticky with starch. It was only until we had settled with the dinner preparations and moved onto dessert—his grandmother’s Lamingtons—that I truly felt myself grow hungry.

“These,” she said, dropping a pan of moist, crusty vanilla cake in front of me, “will be delicious. My mother would always make them for us on birthdays.”

“What are they?” I was curious; the cake wasn’t fluffy like my mother’s or anything I had seen in stores.

“I guess you’d say they’re cake bars. We make the cake with a special recipe—more sugar than flour really—so it stays dense when we cut it up and it soaks up all the chocolate sauce. Each bar then gets coated in coconut.” She lowered her voice. “That’s my favorite part.”

She removed the dense, thin cake from the pan, breaking off a small portion to give to me, proving its moistness. As she cut the cake into bars she dictated the
ingredients, careful to get the measurements correct, stopping once to pull from the cabinet a thin sheet of paper covered in small, elegant handwriting. After cutting the cake she showed my how to mix cocoa powder and cups and cups of powdered sugar with milk, whisking it to make a shiny, chocolate glaze. We dipped the bars in the sauce and then the covered bars into shredded coconut, licking our fingers after each dunk.

Once we had filled the cooling rack with the sweet, heavy squares his mother sat me down and made us each a cup of herbal tea, smiling as she pat my hand.

“Hi-ho!” Called a deep voice from the back porch, Zack’s father’s. “Something smells great!”

****

By the beginning of my eighth month of pregnancy I had grown so large that doing simple tasks—even walking up the stairs—became difficult. Zack, forever supportive, begged me to stay home and let him drive me wherever I needed to go. At first, relieved that I could take leave at work and sleep through most of the day, I agreed. I would wake long after Zack and roll myself into the living room, moving only once a craving took hold. What I wanted more than anything was a frothy cup of my mother’s espresso but refused to ingest any sort of caffeine. I would wake in the morning angry and groggy and spend evenings tapping my fingers and dunking cookies in milk. Zack, in a heroic effort to comfort me, gave up the treat himself but I knew that he was drinking it while at work. What he didn’t realize was that the absence of the smell made my moods even worse, and try as I could to convince him of this, he was stalwart in his refusal to
drink it. When we had first moved into the house—a small place not very far from either of our parents, neat and tidy in one of the more idyllic sections of Elizabeth—I immediately missed the loud home of my childhood. The only thing that had seemed familiar, silly as it was, was the smell of espresso every morning and the lingering rinds in the trash at night.

I finally broke down and drove myself to the store, bought a small espresso maker—the perfect size for just two small cups—and some wonderfully rich ground beans. Just as my mother had taught me I packed the canister tight with coffee, overfilling it as she had instructed. I then filled the basin with ice-cold water and topped of the coffee with just a sprinkle of salt. Zack came home that night and walked into the kitchen with a look of expectant anger on his face. I sat at the table, a large mug in front of me, cold espresso at the bottom.

“Nic, what are you doing?”

“Nothing, darling. I missed it so much but don’t worry, I didn’t drink any. Can I make you some? This is cold, and doesn’t have much of a smell anymore.”

In my final month of pregnancy I was inconsolably round and immobile, entirely confined to the ground level of our home. Zack, too worried to leave me alone all day, secretly arranged for our mothers to maintain a rotating schedule. I discovered his plan quickly, but put up no fight; my own secret worries had emerged, and I was feeling lonesome. Besides, what I sorely wanted was the sweet taste of my mother’s fried honey balls. Struffoli were a staple at any function and were something that my mother made for
every holiday—but she never made them for anything short of an event, and try as I might she would not make them for me.

“No, Domenica. For what should I make them? You wait, it will be time soon.”

“But mama, I want to be able to make them for when people come over to see the new baby.”

The date was quickly approaching and on most days I wanted nothing more than to fill my house with guests, feeding them and showing off my new baby. On other days, however, I could only imagine the three of us and no one else, a quiet scene. In either case, I wanted the recipe—wanted to make the small balls of fried dough, coat them in honey and eat them sticky and warm. Wanted my daughter to help me fry them a few days before Christmas, give them out to family and friends. Show my mother what I could do—bring them to her house.

“You’re too big, now. You cannot make anything. Wait, and then I show you.”

“Mama, it’s important to me. I want to be able to do this. I can make them for when people come to see the baby.”

“No!” She shouted, her fist slamming the table. She was seated in my kitchen, inspecting the new espresso pot. Upon hearing that I was not drinking coffee—something that she could not understand—she brought in her purse a handful of coffee flavored hard candies, half of which I had already gone through.

“Mama—”

“Domenica, ascoltami. I make the struffoli. When I get too old, then you make. They will be yours. Now, they are mine. I make the struffoli. When you daughter is born, I bring them.
I looked at my mother, at her strong hands and purse full of candies—at her hard water eyes. My daughter—she understood what that meant; she knew that soon I would, too.
Two strange houses sit where Westfield Ave bleeds out into Magie Ave and Cherry St.

The doll house isn’t noticeable until you are stuck at the light on Magie, waiting to make a left hand turn. The house sits directly across from the intersection. It is older—no fancy new façade—but in good shape. They stand in the glassed in porch, elegantly dressed. At first, they look human. There are three, all standing, with outstretched hands, facing the street. But they never turn, never move. The dolls are life-sized, their faces painted with delicate, blank stares. They never have company—no lonesome person sitting with them, or moving them—but their outfits change, from time to time. No one ever leaves or enters the house. Perhaps no one lives there, just the dolls; but even at night, when the buzzing streets have dulled, they do not move.

Across the street and just a little to the left is the satellite house. This, you can spot immediately. Much like the doll house it is older but cosmetically and structurally sound; it would have to be—the roof and sides are covered in varying sizes of satellite dishes. The largest dish sits in the front yard, next to a freestanding porch swing. The yard and entire property is fenced in, the dishes carefully secured. No one comes in and out of this house, either. No decorations go up during the holidays. Snow collects in the dish basins in winter, leaves in the fall, rain in the spring. No one ever sits on the swing.
The Labyrinth

The students were herded into a large, cold gym. Olive looked around, trying to take everything in. The lights were jaundice yellow and extremely bright, the air heavy and sweet. Olive felt a tickle in her throat, wondered if it was because of the dust or the excitement.

For two years she had waited for this chance to leave, to be entirely her own person. The drive to New York—upstate, where there was more grass than pavement—was long but the bus ride had been jovial. She’d sung songs with her classmates and played MASH until they had run out of paper and ideas. As the bus pulled into the long, unpaved driveway her excitement seemed to reach its pinnacle. Finally, she’d escaped.

In the gym, Olive waited in the tight semicircle composed of her close friends.

“What do you think they have planned?” she asked.

“There’s a ton of stuff,” Gloria replied. She had come the year before as support staff for the class ahead of them. “Everyone had an amazing time. And just wait until the Labyrinth. Its amazing.”

Anna, Kady, Morgan, and Olive listened intently as Gloria outlined some of the group activities that she had witnessed the year before. As juniors, they felt mature beyond their years. Olive knew that whatever was to come would change them all forever.
Their sleeping bags and backpacks rested in a high pile in the center of the room and as the girls talked, teachers and the senior counselors began calling out names in groups of six, segregating the student by gender. Each group moved forward when called, grabbed their bags, and marched off after their group leaders. Anna went off with a group of girls from their History class. Gloria and Kady were called soon after, laughing at their luck. When a counselor finally called Olive’s name, bookended by girls she barely knew and Morgan, she felt nervous for the first time.

“I had sort of hoped we’d all be together,” she whispered to Morgan as they walked off. “It would have been awesome, all of us together.”

“They do it on purpose, I think,” Morgan replied. “They want us to build new friendships and stuff. But don’t worry,” she pointed to the girls ahead of them, “I have a class with almost all of them. We’ll have fun.”

Olive decided to believe her. Morgan was her oldest friend, though they had grown apart during high school. Given the choice, she would have preferred to be with Anna.

The dorm room was large with wood paneling and steel colored carpeting. The center was empty, except for an old card table, and bunks lined three of the four walls.

“I call the bottom,” Morgan shouted as soon as they entered.

Olive wandered over to the bunk Morgan had claimed for the two of them. The beds were small, much smaller than Olive’s bed at home. She climbed the ladder and lay down on the thin mattress.

“I think I might fall off,” she said and waited for Morgan to answer.
No answer came, and when Olive peered over the side she saw Morgan had moved to the center of the room and was talking to two girls she recognized, but didn’t know.

“What do you think we’re going to do the rest of the night?” Olive asked after wandering over to the rest of the girls. She checked her phone. “It’s almost nine thirty. I hope they don’t send us to bed.”

One of the girls laughed. “You’re so cute,” she said, patting Olive on the shoulder. “We won’t be going to bed for hours. And I wouldn’t let the teachers see you with your phone. They like to think this is a technology free space or whatever. Just don’t pull it out, especially in front of O’Rourke.”

“Alright, girls!”

Olive turned to the doorway where their senior counselor stood.

“Let’s head to the chapel, okay? You,” she pointed to the girl who had warned Olive about her phone, “know where it is, right? Can you lead them? I have to make a call.”

The chapel was large and carpeted in rough, green fabric. The apse was bare except for a simple alter, and the aisles empty of the neat rows of benches Olive had come to expect. Instead, circular tables furnished the nave, cluttered with mismatched chairs.

The students were handed slips of paper as they walked in.

“What does your say?” Morgan asked her.
“Four. Yours?”

Before Morgan could answer, the head of the guidance department—Mr. O’Rourke—began clapping his hands.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced, and then waited for silence. “You each have a slip of paper. Look at the tables,” he paused for effect, “each table has a number. Find the one with your number and take a seat.”

Olive turned to Morgan and shrugged and then walked to table number four. Already sitting was a hulking basketball player, a quirky boy she’d known since grammar school, a girl from her dorm, and the class enigma, Eloise. When it seemed like everyone had found his or her seat, Mr. O’Rourke clapped again.

“Alright everyone. In front of you is a stack of papers and a pile of markers. Take the next fifteen minutes to create an image—whatever you think would be suitable—describing yourself. Things we don’t already know, things you’re afraid of.” Again, Mr. O’Rourke paused for effect. “Go!”

Olive sat for a few moments before beginning. Of everyone at the table, she knew Eloise the best. Once, earlier in the year, Eloise had walked up to her after class and said “You’re beautiful.” Olive had cringed and made a joke out of the comment. “I mean it. Sometimes I can’t stop staring at you,” Eloise had insisted. They’d been friends on and off, depending on the seating arrangement in whichever classes they shared. Olive liked her. Eloise was brave where other girls were timid, bright instead of ordinary. Olive often wished she was those things, too, but didn’t think she knew how. She comforted herself with the knowledge that the girl who seemed to have all the confidence she desired admired her.
Olive grabbed a marker and began sketching an old camera. The rest of her table was chatting amiably, the boys mostly looking for opportunities to flirt with Eloise. Olive had a hard time inserting herself in conversations, and though she knew she was meant to talk, she found herself unable to come up with anything to say. She had always been shy—another reason she had been so excited about this group outing—and had hoped that simply being here, away from home, would force a more sociable version of herself to appear.

“You’re in my dorm, right?”

Olive looked up at one of the girls Morgan had been talking to earlier. “Yeah,” she replied.

“This is pretty lame, huh?” she asked. It was clear from her expression that she meant the boys doing all in their power to get Eloise’s attention and not the assignment.

Olive chuckled. “Yeah. But at least it’s entertaining.”

“Alright everyone!” Mr. O’Rourke shouted. “I want to see some amazing illustrations, people. They’ll be plenty of time to talk afterwards, when you’re explaining your pictures.”

The chatter in the room dropped significantly and Olive, and her group, began drawing with more purpose. Olive added a few doodles of books, and a pizza to represent the job she had taken a year ago. None of what she drew was particularly secret, but no one at her table knew much about her, so anything she shared would be a reveal.

“Is that a camera?” Eloise asked just as their time was running out.

“Uh—this? Yeah,” Olive replied.

“I like it,” Eloise responded. “I take pictures, too.”
Olive smiled, about to respond, when Mr. O’Rourke burst out again.

“Alright everyone! Time to share!”

And Olive thought, happily, that she knew exactly what she wanted to say.

Counselors woke the girls at quarter to seven the next morning. They hadn’t returned to their dorms until almost two. Olive checked her phone and realized she hadn’t slept more than three hours. She couldn’t imagine a more uncomfortable bed and, because she had been terrified that she would snore and disturb the other girls, had kept herself awake until she was sure everyone else had fallen asleep.

She followed the other girl’s in a quiet procession to the woman’s restroom. Everyone seemed tired and Olive felt a true sense of camaraderie with her sleepy group. She found Gloria and Kady in the cavernous washroom giggling, waiting in line for an empty shower. She waved at them, but continued on to a bathroom stall—each cubicle had a sink and all Olive wanted to do was wash her face. She was far too shy to shower in front of her classmates.

It wasn’t until after she’d left the bathroom that the weekend began to feel unconquerable. She knew she had checked the dates before handing in her permission slip—she never would have come if she knew she’d have her period to deal with—and so she hadn’t brought supplies and was completely unprepared. She found Gloria and Kady in one of the changing rooms and started to cry as she told them. Gloria held out a tampon. Olive shook her head, but her friend misunderstood.

“No, no. It’s okay. When I tried out for swimming my mother asked the doctor,” she dropped her voice, “don’t worry. You’ll still be a virgin.”
Olive started coughing, Gloria’s comment completely unexpected. She was upset, and she didn’t want to use a tampon, but she didn’t know how to tell her friend that it wasn’t her virginity she was guarding. She had been so hopeful about this weekend but suddenly all she wanted to do was go home.

At breakfast, the girls sat together. Olive had managed to find Anna, who was always prepared, and after a brief detour to Anna’s dorm and a close encounter with an inquiring counselor, Olive entered the cafeteria feeling significantly better.

“How are you,” Morgan asked, her voice sounding deeply concerned.

Olive laughed, “better now,” she replied. She had spent more time with Morgan since arriving than she had for weeks. She had realized—last night as the girls were preparing for bed—why that was; Morgan tended towards the disingenuous, Olive preferred a more straightforward attitude.

“Did you guys eat already?” Anna asked.

“No,” Kady answered. “We’re waiting for them to call our tables, I think? Nobody’s gone up yet.”

Just then Mr. O’Rourke materialized. “Ladies and lads,” he called out, clapping enthusiastically.

Olive couldn’t help but wonder if he attended concerts often, or live theater.

“Ladies and lads,” he repeated. “Before we eat, let’s pray.”

The dinning hall was large, with the same rounded tables that filled the chapel. To the left and right of the entranceway were two large cutouts where empty trays and dishes could be dropped off. The serving buffet ran the entire length of the room, though Olive noted that only about a quarter of it seemed to be set up for their group. Here was a place
that had once had a heyday, though she couldn’t imagine when it might have been. Perhaps, during the sixties, or seventies: she could see the monks having set up a commune of sort. They weren’t Jesuits—she imagined these monks knew how to have fun.

After grace Mr. O’Rourke began calling up tables one by one. Serving the meal were seniors and sophomores who belonged to the Youth Ministry. They laughed and joked; Olive wondered if perhaps she wouldn’t have had more fun on the sidelines of the weekend, facilitating instead of participating.

The girls lined up neatly as soon as their table was called. The servers piled their plates with ham omelets and toast. When it was Olive’s turn she quietly asked the girl, a popular senior, if she might get eggs without any meat in them.

“Why?” the girl retorted, snapping stale smelling bubble gum in Olive’s face.

“I’m a vegetarian,” Olive replied.

“What’s your name?”

“Olive Whitcombe.”

“You’re not on the list,” the girl replied, looking at a sheet of paper taped to the counter. “If you have…dietary demands you need to fill out a form before you come. Sorry.”

The girl walked away before Olive could answer. Normally, she would have grabbed a few pieces of toast and been on her way, hungry for the rest of the day. She felt bold, however, and approached one of the teachers. Olive explained that she hadn’t known about the form, and that she would appreciate it if she could have some eggs without the ham.
“I can make it myself,” she said.

“No need, there’s probably some plain eggs left,” the teacher replied. “Just hold on a minute.”

Soon, the teacher came back with a plate full of regular eggs. “I put your name on the list with the others.”

Olive walked back to the table, feeling emboldened, and sat down to eat her breakfast.

After breakfast, Olive found herself again in the chapel, the stale air of last night expanding in the morning sunlight. This time, instead of numbered slips of paper, the counselor manning the door simply looked at each clique as they entered and instructed them to “split up, completely.” By the time the entire group had assembled, there were oddly numbered masses of people sitting sporadically throughout the nave.

For the rest of the morning they ran through group exercise after group exercise. The seniors who had served them breakfast each joined a group and lead in an hour of “peer counseling.” The girl who headed Olive’s group, in an effort to steer the conversation in the direction of the day’s theme—Relationships—began with a personal account of a jealous ex-boyfriend who had tried to run her down with his car. She held up her wrist, showing off the thin scar that ran the entire length of her ulna as proof. Olive, who had decided at breakfast to participate in any discussion, was stunned into silence. Then each group was joined by a faculty member who used a tennis ball to play the “get to know you” game, asking questions and then tossing the ball at random. Seniors ran through skits, choosing members of the audience to participate. Finally, they were
brought back into groups in order to complete brainteaser exercises. Olive, who had managed to lay low in her inattentive group, was exhausted when it was over.

Before lunch they rearranged the chapel. Girls folded and stacked the round tables and chairs while boys dragged from storage long wooden benches. One of the brothers, a full time resident of the facility, led the group in mass.

Olive looked around to find her classmates bright eyed and euphoric, their faces plastered with near-crazed grins. Even Morgan seemed changed, somehow. She laughed with Gloria, singing a hymn from the service. Olive resisted the urge to whisper “fuck,” or “crap,” into their ears; she wanted to break a mood she didn’t understand.

The rest of the day passed by quickly. Once the group seminars were finished, the students were allowed time to go off on their own. Here, outside, the world seemed much different than at home. From the chapel to the woods was only a three-minute walk and Olive reveled in the beauty that was around her, the patches of dark moss on the trees and the sound of anything—rushing water, snapping leaves, bugs and birds and laughter—other than traffic. Here it smelled sweetly of rotting plants and burning wood; at home, in Elizabeth, the air was dank and crushed like a forgotten cigarette butt. Her classmates seemed the same—were the same—as at home. Morgan still whimpered over things she didn’t want to do, Anna preached about things she claimed expert to, Gloria and Kady giggled at things no one else thought funny. Here, though, *Olive* was different. There was no roof above her head, there were no tall buildings or hovering electrical wires; here, above her, only trees.
Olive and her friends joined a group who walked out towards the banks of the Hudson and peered into the grey water. The wind making her brave, Olive walked out on a jagged rock and hung her legs over the side. She closed her eyes, feeling wild, and imagined her classmates gazing at her in awe. She turned around, her hair whipping in the wind, and saw that no one, in fact, was even looking at her. On their way back, the girls linked arms and skipped, laughing until Gloria fell and then they all tumbled down.

Afterwards, they all split up. Morgan and Gloria and Kady decided to join a group of girls who were making friendship bracelets while Olive and Anna wandered into the game room.

Much like the rest of the retreat house the room was oversized and cavernous. There was a television in the corner that was huge, though bulky and out of date, and two equally large couches placed side by side in front of it. Four tables, two pool and two ping pong, composed the center of the room and small chairs and tables—Anna suggested they were intended for cards—created a loose perimeter. Olive noticed a pinball table off to the corner; widely unnoticed, it still rang out from time to time, announcing itself in *bings* and *clacks*, audio that taunted those ignoring it: “Hey, buck-o!”

Most of their peers had gathered here. Girls draped themselves over chairs, surreptitiously preening into their phones and giggling as their male counterparts strutted by. A few kids were watching the television, which flashed images of dark haired boys in ripped jeans, scowls worn like badges on their face. Most people were either playing or watching the tabletop games, the participants slinging insults as easily as they did balls. A group of boys who had been talking loudly in a corner all sprinted at once towards the exit, shouting they were going to be playing a game of basketball in the gym.
“Dammit,” Anna whispered. “I was hoping...” she trailed off, looking around.

“What?” Olive wheedled. She and Anna had only become friends this year, and while they were still in the inaugural stages of their relationship, Olive felt closer to her than she did Morgan, who she had known for ten years.

Anna’s eyes again darted back and forth. “I wanted to talk to Bradyn. I sort of—”

“You like him?” Olive was surprised. Bradyn was the tall basketball player from her group the night before. He was well liked, but Olive thought him very dull. He never seemed to smile. She preferred his closest friend, a tall curly haired boy with large teeth and a booming voice.

“He seems so,” Anna paused, seemingly weighing her words, “deep. Like something very important is always on his mind.”

“I guess; I never thought of it like that before. I always thought he had nothing on his mind, and that’s why he looked like that.”

“Well, I dunno.” Anna sounded suddenly unsure. “That’s why I wanted to talk to him. To get to know him.”

Olive, on the verge of suggesting they move to the gym and watch the boys play ball, was interrupted by the return of the rest of their group. There hadn’t been enough material for them all to weave the bracelets, and they hadn’t been able to decide who would stay or go.

“How about we play ping pong?” Kady offered, gesturing towards a recently abandoned table.

The girls agreed, but Olive begged off once she realized the teams would be uneven. She had enjoyed the afternoon with her friends, but she welcomed the prospect
of a break. She moved to the pinball table, still abandoned, and pressed the start button. She played a few quiet games until her friends came to collect her, telling her she had to play, uneven teams be damned. They giggled together, orchestrating an elaborate version of the game in which teams rotated around the table.

“This is so fun,” Kady squealed. “I wish someone would take our picture!” She held out a camera, but none of their classmates seemed willing to take up the charge.

“I’ll do it,” Olive replied.

“But then you can’t be in it,” Anna said, disappointed.

“Just add me later,” Olive laughed, content with the role of photographer.

“Booo,” Gloria called. But no one else objected, and so Olive took the picture.

That night, at eleven, the entire group moved once again to the gym.

She knew what was coming. The Labyrinth. She’d heard stories and had seen pictures of students deep in prayer walking the maze. The school’s faith minister, Mrs. Belshkin, had explained it during trips to their Religion classes. Gloria claimed to have been changed by the short journey. Olive thought she was prepared, but hadn’t expected the gym to be so deeply changed. It was as if it was another place entirely, miles away from the bright, dusty room that had held their sleeping bags only one night before.

The lights had been dimmed almost completely; the bleachers pulled back, the basketball nets raised. Large pillar candles lined the walls and smaller ones were spread periodically around the court. A velvet rope hung from matching stanchions at the three-point line, dividing the court unevenly, and it was there that the students congregated. Stretched out wide on the other end of the court was a large, round piece of white canvas.
It covered the floor entirely and gave the cavernous gym and eerie, cozy appearance. There were four looping paths painted on the canvas, each leading into the empty center that was framed by a six-petal flower. This section of the Labyrinth was reserved for the quiet meditation at the end of the “journey.” Olive had seen smaller iterations of the Labyrinth before, in their classes and on pamphlets made by the school, but here she was taken aback. It was so daunting.

Mr. O’Rourke had prepped the group in the chapel: once they entered the gym, they were expected to remain silent. It would take about two hours for everyone to walk the Labyrinth. Quiet meditation was expected before, after, and during.

Mrs. Belshkin stood at the end of the stanchioned rope, her arms folded in front of her. She motioned silently for the students the form a line, and then gestured towards one of the senior boys standing off to the side, awaiting instruction. He moved towards her and she silently motioned for him to take her place. He mimicked her stance exactly. Mrs. Belshkin moved towards the Labyrinth, stopping at the entrance, and then nodded towards the boy. He held up four fingers and allowed the corresponding students to move past the rope. They walked towards Mrs. Belshkin, who touched the leader’s shoulder and allowed her into the maze. After a minute she repeated the motion with the next student, and then after another minute, the next.

Olive stood roughly in the center of the line, the last in her group of friends. She watched quietly as student after student entered and then exited the Labyrinth. A few students entered with a churlish grin on their faces. Everyone exited solemnly.

After about half an hour, Olive noted that some of the students walking the Labyrinth had begun to cry. One girl sat sobbing in the center. A boy in the middle of his
walk was quietly wiping away tears from his eyes. Those students who had finished chose to sit against the wall. Most had their eyes closed; many looked stern or upset.

Gloria, then Anna entered the Labyrinth. Not four minutes later Gloria was sobbing. Anna bit her lip. Olive watched each of her friends enter the and then proceed with tears in their eyes. Suddenly, it seemed as if everyone were crying; shoulders shook and heads were bowed. The room was dim and smoky. Olive entered the Labyrinth expecting a sudden wave of emotion to wash over her. She wanted to feel the pure ache she was certain her peers were experiencing. This was a growing experience; surely some great spiritual force was at work.

Instead, she found herself focusing only on her feet, on following the intricate pattern beneath her socks. Halfway to the center, she encountered a classmate returning from his journey. She stepped aside, allowing him to pass, and then couldn’t locate the path she had been on. She’d almost exited the Labyrinth before she realized that she had chosen the wrong path and gone in the wrong direction. She had no idea how to find her way back. She looked around and saw that no one was watching so she took five long, quick strides to the center. She sat down, relieved, and waited expectantly, her mind as blank as she could make it, for the emotion to wash over her. She felt nothing.

After five minutes of hopeful expectancy, she stood again and made her way out. She still hadn’t cried. Boys too stoic to show emotion had their heads lowered, eyes closed. Girls sobbed or whimpered openly.

She walked the circumference of the gym, trying to locate her friends. Kady, Gloria, Anna, and Morgan all sat huddled together, their arms wrapped in an embrace. Only Morgan raised her head and spotted Olive. She moved her arm as if to make room
for her, to allow her in. The two girls’ eyes met and for a moment they simply looked at each other. They were all crying deeply, and Olive’s eyes and throat were parchment. She lowered her eyes, turned away from her friends, and walked quickly to an empty corner.

   Here, finally, she cried. Her tears flowed freely, her shoulders racked with the effort to breathe. She began to hiccup, to sob. She felt nothing, and it was the nothing that had moved her to tears. Mrs. Belshkin walked the room, observing the students. As Olive struggled to breathe, Mrs. Belshkin looked towards her and nodded her head in silent approval.

   More students entered and exited the Labyrinth. Olive continued to cry; she felt robbed, tricked. She had been lied to. What was special about it? Moving? Were her classmates, like her, crying because their souls remained untouched? Olive didn’t think so. She heard herself sobbing, heard the emptiness behind her quiet wailing.

   Later, before they graduated, these girls would tell Olive that she had changed. A pow-wow around the lunch table, shaking their heads about the previous Saturday night: Olive, smiling and near wasted, had revealed an exceptionally high tolerance for dark rum. And, it would seem, a deep thirst for it. As her friends sat on couches, sick from the alcohol, she spun in giddy circles around Gloria’s living room, laughing to herself. They shook their heads, telling Olive she wasn’t welcome at their houses. You see, they would say, it’s just that we never want to be the sort of people who have to drink to have fun, you know? Morgan wouldn’t say a word.

   The trip home felt much shorter. Olive positioned herself by the window, next to Morgan whom she knew would get carsick and then drift off to sleep. She pressed her ear
buds deep into her ears and leaned her face hard against the window. Trees whipped by beyond the window, their branches spindly and fragile in the early-winter air. Olive wanted to reach out and touch them. She wished she had a camera. She wanted so much to capture it.
I was tired by the time we arrived—I’d more than likely worked that night, though I can’t remember—and the condo we were going to was still dark when the Shaggin’ Wagon—my friend McArthur’s car—pulled into the parking lot. Another group—Chanty and Jose (both friends from school) and some other guy—showed up just moments after us. We talked in the parking lot as we waited for the host and whoever else was coming to arrive. By the time we got into the condo there was a group waiting and it took me a few moments to notice that I was being stared at by a guy named Francis, who was there with his best friend Kris. They were a grade ahead of me, but we’d gone to the same small, Catholic grammar school—St. Gen’s— and high school. Kris and my younger sister had been best friends, so he was somewhat familiar to me. Francis was someone with whom I’d never spoken. I knew of him—I live less than a block from St. Gen’s and he would always park in front of my house while he was waiting to pick his younger sister up—but nothing more.

A few months prior to this party, however, when I was waiting outside St. Gen’s to pick up my sister, I noticed him staring at me. That same night I got a Facebook friend request and then message, a casual “hey i dont think you know me im francis,” to which I responded. After a barrage of questions about what sort of music I liked and how I felt about both zombies and pizza, he asked for my number. We texted back and forth but I politely declined any invitation to hang out; I’d never had a boyfriend and despite the fact that he seemed nice, I wasn’t eager for anything. He never used any sort of
punctuation, except when he was asking a question, and he always prefaced a question mark with a space, ie “hey whats up ?” which I found extremely frustrating. He also spoke a lot about his ex-girlfriend, which was more than off-putting, and after a while we stopped talking.

He was at this party, however, and decided to use the opportunity to get to know me better. McArthur, to his credit, stuck with me the entire night—this is partially, I think, because he thought Francis was super cute—but so did Francis. Up to this point, I’d never been the obvious object of so much attention and the effects were somewhat paralyzing. Except for a brief foray outside, I never left the table at which I originally sat. Because McArthur was driving, I had brought a nice bottle of tequila for myself and drank quiet a bit of it. I don’t remember a whole bunch. Kris hung around the table for most of the night and so did Anna, the girl in their “group” who I knew from Spanish class. Chanty, who was a good friend of mine, was also around and so was Rob, who got a lot of shit for bringing a bottle of Amaretto, but who was really cool, a fellow writer, and in love with Chanty.

Other people came and went—though I can’t remember who they were—and Jose and the guy who had driven down with him and Chanty hung around for a while. I don’t think I was officially introduced to him until Francis started “eating my brains”—which wasn’t anything sexual, but this thing he would do when drunk which involved him touching and pretending to gnaw on unsuspecting females’ heads—and he came to my rescue. This was Carm. He was hulking and in a parka which he never took off. His hair was wild, he had the stupidest soul patch in the world on his face, and he was double fistimg beer the entire night. I didn’t speak to him much, but it was Carm who managed to get me to leave the table and sneak outside to smoke with him and Jose.

When it was time for McArthur and me to leave I had about half a bottle of tequila left, and every intention of taking it home with me. Francis tried to get me leave
it, but I wasn’t 21 and wasn’t stupid. He disappeared, then, and Carm came up and easy as pie asked me if he could have a bit. He hadn’t tried to eat my brains and was charming despite the goatee and when he offered up and empty beer can as receptacle I ceded to a very, very generous pour. Francis came back with money, to buy the bottle from me, and it was nearly three thirty in the morning so I succumbed. I slept nearly the entire ride home.

Francis and I started texting again. This time, when he asked me to go out—to hang at Carm’s—I agreed. We smoked and I watched as they played Marvel vs Capcom and then we all sat around watching Sanford and Son. Carm was on a La-Z-Boy and I was next to Francis on the sofa and so I supposed I was Francis’ date—though, during the year that followed, we never dated—but when his ex-girlfriend called he wandered outside to explain which Meghan he was with and Carm got up and said “Well, if he’s going to be an idiot I’m going to take his seat.”

And nearly a year later, after Carm had spent a season in Seaside calling out games on the boardwalk, he decided to move home, to his grandparents, in Elizabeth. We had become good friends. We’d talked a bit, first over Facebook and then through text. He confided in me about some shitty things and told me that he wanted his grandmother to meet me, because he was sure she would love me. That summer, when things became too much, I decided to take a weekend and rented a shitty hotel room in Seaside. People came through all weekend—my friends Michelle and Brianna, Francis and Kris—but I had picked Seaside because it was where Carm lived. The first night, when both beds were full and he appeared at the door past midnight, he camped on the floor while we silently watched Frasier. The next night, he shared a bed with Kris.

The first time we hung out after his move back north I had to get directions from my dad to his house on Country Club Lane. My father swore that if I just took North Ave down to Kilsyth and made a left I would be at his door in no time. He called it a shortcut
and said he’d done it countless times as a kid. Nearly half an hour later I was still circling Kilsyth looking for a road that seemed to have, quite literally, disappeared. When Carm finally called me, wondering where I was, he laughed when I told him, and said the road had been gone for almost twenty years. Later—though not that night—he showed me the real shortcut to his house, down Wilder, where I could avoid every light on North Ave.

The next day, when I was explaining to my father his mistake, my mother walked into the room. She asked me what I was talking about, and when I explained she asked me what Carm’s last name was. When I told her she laughed, and went on to explain that I should have asked her, because she knew exactly where the house was. You seem, you can’t be a first or second generation Italian in Elizabeth without knowing all other first or second generation Italians in Elizabeth. My nonna—grandmother, in Italian—had worked in the same factory as Carm’s nonna and our families had been friends for decades. His nonna was at my mother’s wedding and his father and my uncle shared the same Godmother. I called Carm immediately to tell him, and I could hear his nonna squeaking in the background as he relayed the message. The next time I saw him, he handed me a picture of our nonnas sitting around a table with their coworkers and laughing. And when I finally meet his nonna she did, in fact, like me.
When I was sixteen I walked into Reggio Pizzeria and asked for a job. The owner, Tony, jokes that I was so shy my eyes never left my feet. I walked with dropping shoulders and wore nothing but oversized jeans, an old pair of Converse high-tops, and too big t-shirts. I did not speak unless spoken to and then only in unsure whispers. I was so frightened of the world that the first few months of my employment exist only as a smudge, a blurred spot in the canvas of my experiences. Once things began to clear—the first few moments of a budding confidence brought on by a night swamped with customers and complaints and compliments—my job became easier.

Over the five years that I worked at Reggios—an average of thirty hours a week, though sometimes forty, or fifty—everything I knew changed. My hair grew longer, my clothes smaller, my back straighter. My voice changed to become stronger, changed again and was soft, changed a third time when I spoke the Spanish I learned from the cooks and dishwashers in the kitchen. My eyes widened and also narrowed, a cosmic soup of emerging wonder and suspicion, a newfound respect for the lives I encountered each day.

There was an ever-fluctuating cast of Reggios employees. Some people stayed for years; others came and went in months, weeks, and even days. Walter had worked at Reggios for years when I started and came and went a few times during my time there. He was Tony’s favorite employee and best friend. When things were good, he was one of the most reliable people Tony had. When things were bad, he had an endless supply of
dying grandmothers whose funerals he had to attend. Not long after I quit he was picked up by the cops for possession of heroin with intent to sell and firearms. He was in jail for a while, and then came back to the pizzeria to work. His final round of employment didn’t last, however, and not even Tony talks about him anymore.

Cindy worked there when I first started and we slowly became good friends. Best friends, even, until she claimed I was trying to steal Canales—with whom she was cheating on her boyfriend—from her. This was not true, but Cindy quickly became my worst enemy. She spread rumors about me and spoke such ill that George—the nine fingered pizza man who worked for maybe a year—in a fit of overworked rage held up a wooden pizza pallet and threatened to beat me. Soon after this George was gone, and not long after so was Cindy. She claimed to want a job that matched the degree she was getting, but she was married—to a completely different person—and pregnant just a year later. Her wedding was filmed for an MTV show that only aired out of the country and from what I’ve heard, a good portion of her marriage has been spent with other men.

Canales was hired around the same time as I was, and though he is one of the laziest people I have ever met he is also a decent human being. He’s quit and been fired from Reggios countless times, now, but he always comes back and whenever Tony needs a new delivery boy, he calls Canales and asks him if he has any friends who need a job.

Michelle was a friend from high school who texted me the summer after we graduated and asked if I still worked “at that pizzeria” and if we were hiring. This was around the time that things became shaky with Cindy and so Tony hired her. We quickly became best friends and the best team Reggios has ever seen. She’s still my best friend.

Dany worked at the pizzeria when I started and not long after he got his brother, Mario, a job as well. They were young—Dany maybe twenty and Mario no more than 18—and rented a room in the top floor of a two family house. I became particularly close with Mario, who asked me to teach him English and helped me with my Spanish. He told me
how terrifying it was to cross the border and how they were caught and sent back once before finally making over. They returned to Mexico a few years before I left and while Dany was happy to go home, Mario desperately wanted to stay.

There were other employees whose careers ended quickly. Tony is hot tempered and when things went wrong he had the habit of mass firing everyone under his employ, most commonly the delivery boys. Canales and Walter would always return, but others did not. There was Wolverine, whose given name I can’t remember, but who was called Wolverine because of the thick mutton chop sideburns he sported. He was slow, and got on Tony’s nerves, and did not last long. Jerry Lewis—whose real name was Jerry Louis Garcia—was a heavy partier who would often get drunk and then park his car outside the pizzeria, camping out to ensure he would not be late to work. He sometimes asked me to call him in the morning to make sure he was on time and would drive me home from work at night. He once told me I was the first girl to be in his car more than once and not sleep with him, and I laughed. He was a casualty of a mass firing; I saw him once at a 7/11 late at night getting into his car. He had a girl in his passenger seat, but he said hello. There was Anthony, who in an effort to make a delivery on time, drove onto a schoolyard. He was fired because of this and about a year later was involved in a drunk driving accident that resulted in a pedestrian death. I’m not sure if he went to jail. Dante, who started out as a customer, became a “counter girl” for a while; he was a sweet kid who had a rough stepfather and not long after he left the pizzeria he ran away from home. I’m friends with him on Facebook and from what I can tell he’s happy; he’s openly gay and living in Florida. I’m not sure if he finished school. Dave was another customer turned employee. He was a middle-aged divorcee whose daughter, before moving to North Carolina with her mother, was in the same class as Tony’s son. His family owned a Carvel, which closed off-season, and one winter Tony hired him as a driver. After a few months he took a week off to go to Costa Rica with his girlfriend. He never returned. His
brother, who had crazy eyes, would come in from time to time and ask us if we’d seen him. I have no idea what happened to him.

Besides the employees, Reggios was populated with an array of eccentric customers. I was warned about Mary the first time she walked in. Tony, my boss, told me never to cash her checks—he had, and they all bounced—and not to give her credit. He always called her a crack head, and I’m fairly certain he was right. One of her children was in jail and the other was a young boy who seemed to have joined his parents down the same strange, rabbit hole they had fallen into. He couldn’t be more than fourteen but he would stand guard outside, smoking cigarettes while his mother placed her orders: sometimes small cheesesteaks and French fries, but more frequently small cups of hot sauce or parmesan cheese and nothing else. He quit school early and joined his parents when they worked; they didn’t have a car and so would take the bus, which stopped midway down Magie, and walk the rest of the way to the apartment they lived in above one of the nearby businesses. Still, sometimes, I see them walking.

There was the other Tony, the trucker, who came in each Friday night with his son, Junior, and ordered a pizza and dinner. Tony was a rough looking man, forever in a baseball cap, who always left a tip and called the girls sweetheart, asking Cindy or Michelle or me if we would consider going out with his son. It was his wife who called each week, her voice high and squeaking, to place the order. I never saw her, though she always recognized my voice. My boss gave them a free two-liter soda each week and attended the funeral when Tony’s wife called—for the last time—to let us know that he’d succumbed to the cancer. Junior still stops at the pizzeria for lunch; I saw him once, years later, and asked about his mother. He said she was fine, that he was taking care of her now that his father was gone.

Labe lived across the street with his parents and would only come in at night, when it was quieter and most of the other customers had gone. He was a huge man who
grew larger each year I worked. He had a job as tech support for a major cable company and always complained about the customers he had to deal with and bureaucracy he worked under. Often, he would threaten to burn it all down. He teased me for having an iPhone—technology made for the mindless masses—and didn’t frequently shower. His mother, who came in often, was a sweet woman who pleaded with Tony to encourage her son to eat healthier. Instead Labe would order cheesesteaks, wraps and was one of the only customers to order the somewhat pungent spaghetti and baby clams. He would eat the salads that came with his meal but only with thick, creamy dressings. His father made appearances infrequently: popping in already screaming that whichever customer had blocked his driveway would be towed in just a few minutes. Labe lost his job about a year before I left and had to start a tab that he paid every few months. Tony allowed this—tabs still existed in Reggios, as did the bartering of service for food—because he felt responsible for Labe. He often told me that before he took over the business Labe was smaller, “normal sized,” as Tony put it. After a few months of unemployment Labe began taking classes online and talked about finally moving out of his parent’s home. Now, I’ve heard, he lives in Phoenix and has a job he likes. He’s also lost a lot of weight.

The Witch Family came in nearly every Wednesday afternoon. It was a large group—from what I gather a mother, aunt, and three or four daughters and their children—composed only of females. The daughters, who were all in their early twenties, were always with infants or pregnant. These children were usually girls, though there was one male toddler. Michelle and I joked that we were fearful of his safety, as these women were clearly witches who absorbed men’s souls in order to procreate. They were a very nice family and always ordered the Family Meal Deal, a family style combo that included pizza, a dinner, a sub and desert. While driving by the old Reggios location I’ve seen the group hanging out, waiting on food. At least two of the daughters were pregnant.
Bob reminded me of my grandfather. He was quiet and would come in each Sunday to place his order in person—an ever changing variation on our usual dinners of lasagna, eggplant rolatini, or pasta—and eat a slice while he waited, sometimes for an hour, without complaint. I never met his wife, but I knew he loved her; he complained about her often in the typical, joking “ball and chain” manner. When she took trips to Atlantic City he would stay behind, claiming he was on his own “vacation” and order a personal “grandma pie”—a Reggios take on a Marguerita pizza. I only spoke to her when she called, about halfway through my career, to let us know he had died.

Mark was—and probably still is—a little shit. Younger than me by a few years he would attach himself to the groups of young kids who would come in, bumming food and drinks off of them and harassing me and whichever other girl was working. Once, Dante gave him my phone number and he began texting me all sorts of nonsense, calling me his girlfriend. I had to steal his phone to delete it and only gave it back with a careful threat. He often came in with iPhones and televisions he had either “found” or “bought off people” and would wander the dining room, trying to sell them to customers. I only ever saw Matilde, Tony’s wife, buy anything from him, even after I told her she was stupid, and that they were stolen. He rarely ordered but when he did it was simple slices or else fries; he used the pizzeria more as an office than a restaurant. I stopped entertaining any nonsense from him when I found out he was selling weed to the grammar school kids in the neighborhood. After that I would warn any kid I saw him with that he was a piece of shit, often in front of him. He would laugh and say I didn’t know what I was talking about. I told him that I’d call the cops on him if I ever got any proof, which I didn’t. The last time I saw him was in a 7/11 late at night; he called me out for buying a Dutch and tried to follow me to my car until I told him to fuck off.

Betsy was an older lady—though not as old as she looked—whose husband died right before I started working at Reggios. She worked at a Home Depot in the area until
she was fired. She never got another job and began selling off things in her home. She, too, had a running tab. She would come in midday and stay until we closed at eleven or midnight, sitting at the counter and slowly eating whatever she had ordered: a wrap or salad or tiramisu. She didn’t talk much, though I grew to know her very well, but simply absorbed the energy in the room. Periodically she would not be able to pay her tab and would disappear for a few months. Tony never tried to track her down—he knew where she lived—but would simply wait until the day she appeared again, money in hand. Eventually Tony stopped having her pay altogether and would let her eat and hang out without the guilt. He even gave her a job for a while, but that didn’t last. I see her sometimes walking—she gave up her car—along major roads and in other towns. I’ll stop, pick her up, and drive her wherever she’s going. Most of the time, it’s to Reggios.

Chris—or, as we called him, Chrissy—had been coming to the pizzeria long before I started working there. He was a strange, lonely man who reused the same trite responses time and again. Whenever I asked him what I could get him, he would respond: “a hot blonde?” or “a trip to the Bahamas?” or else “a blonde, a redhead, and a brunette?” and I would laugh until he placed his real order, usually three slices—to which he always added salt—or a whole pie and mozzarella sticks. He worked in one of the local school cafeterias and hated it; he came in more frequently, and stayed longer, when school was out. He would always flirt with Michelle, Cindy, or me. He had a strange case of what we all assumed was gout; in the summer, when he wore shorts and a cut off t-shirt, you could see the swelling in his legs. Sometimes, when it was particularly hot, he would raise his arms to air out his armpits, which were always red and puffy. While I knew he was lonely, and felt badly for him, his strange flirting made me and the other girls uncomfortable and when we could avoid it, we did. I see him driving, or at CVS, but I don’t think he recognizes me out of context and so I haven’t said hello.
Al was my favorite. He wasn’t so much a customer as mascot. Tony joked he inherited Al from the previous owner—he worked on and off in the kitchen—but I know the true love affair didn’t start until he met Tony and Matilde. He’s a big guy with a lazy eye and a tendency for seizures, which is why he can’t drive or work as an architect, his dream job for which he has a degree; instead he works at Newark airport. On my first day working he called the pizzeria and when I answered said: “Hello, city morgue.” He, too, would come midday and stay until close, snacking nearly the whole time. He would order dinners or wings or sandwiches. When everyone from the pizzeria went down the shore for a weekend Al came, and despite mercilessly being teased, refused to remove his shorts or shoes the entire time, only changing his tee shirt. His mother was a sweet woman who would make Tony rice pudding and bring me broccoli rabe when it was on sale. When she died, I cried. I once saw Al have a seizure, saw his eyes dull and his speech slow. Tony and Al’s parents often told him he should get married and have kids but he always claimed that he didn’t want someone who was going to steal his money, though I know his lack of prospects was the real reason. When Tony left Matilde for a few weeks it was Al he turned to, Al’s couch he slept on. It was Al, too, who made all the menus and fliers for the business and Al who we teased when things were spelled incorrectly. When I see him now he still asks me to go to the movies with him—“catch a flick”—and I always promise him that one-day I will.

Super Hero Bob only started coming in once I’d been at the pizzeria for a few years but he quickly became a regular. He was a large, beefy man who always ordered multiple Sicilian pizzas—one of which always had to have sausage—for his family. He was quiet at first but was a jovial man who wound up teasing Tony or I often. After a while, another man named Arty would come in and ask if “that fat Bob” had been in. He wouldn’t tell me how they knew each other, but soon after Bob began coming in and asking if “Arty with the huge nose” had been around. One night, a mysterious man came
in and asked, seriously, if Bob or his arch nemesis Arty had been seen. I replied yes, and tried to question him further but all he would say was that the two of them would never get along. I never saw the mystery man again and soon Arty stopped coming in. Michelle and I spent a good amount of time debating over who was good and who was evil in this feuding pair and we came to the ultimate conclusion that because we liked Bob more, he was the Super Hero. I can only imagine that Super Hero Bob was the victor in their final battle, because he still orders pizza.

Every Saturday night Nick and his family would come in and bring some sunshine to an otherwise bleak string of impatient and rude customers. They had a standing “reservation” for 6pm, right after church, which they kept every week save the two weeks a year they would vacation at the Jersey Shore or Disney. Their group consisted of Nick and his wife Mary Ann, Mary Ann’s brother Carmen and his wife Audrey, Danny—who lived in the same assisted living/special needs care facility as Carmen and Audrey, Ronnie—an older woman and friend, Debbie—who happened on the group and stayed, and a few other revolving companions. They were patient, but particular. It was always Nick who would approach the counter with a list of their orders: cheesesteaks, dinners, salads and two small thin crust pies which we would have waiting upon their arrival. Tony gave them a discount and often Nick would call once we closed to talk with Tony. Nick would make suggestive comments towards Tony, some of which I overheard, and despite the fact that he was married we came to the conclusion that he was gay, and closeted. The whole group gave me a card, with money, when I graduated and would bring me back souvenirs from their vacations. On occasion I return to the pizzeria on Saturday nights so I can say hello.

And there were others: Walking Al, who retired and couldn’t stand his wife. He would spend the entire day walking around the neighborhood and would only stop in if he saw Tony. He always ordered a slice. There was Crazy Maria who was a mother and
businesswoman but always seemed stoned and confused. She had a barbed wire arm tattoo, an obvious blonde wig, cakey foundation and false eyelashes that were always on the verge of falling off. Once, when she was picking up her two pies—one cheese, the other pepperoni—they did fall off, right in front of Michelle and onto the counter. Michelle and I never saw Crazy Cheese Lady because she always ordered for delivery but we knew her well. She had a rude, nasally voice and demanded that anything she ordered have extra cheese. Pizzas, dinners—even our lasagna, which was mostly cheese to begin with—and salads all had to be covered. Sometimes she would send things back with her husband Al, who was quiet and patient, and complain that even with the extra, there was not enough cheese. She was a mean woman, with a quick temper, and Michelle and I would often joke that if her behavior—and eating habits—didn’t change she’d most certainly have a heart attack. Mr. Caspar was always a pain in the ass. He would come in and order raviolis and demand that his complimentary side salad be composed precisely: ice burg lettuce, sliced tomatoes, and French dressing. Each time he would tell me that the salad—the size of which was consistent for my entire career—was smaller than the last and that I was being cheap. He constantly asked Tony the same questions—“how’s the soccer team you’re coaching?” or “how’s your other location?”—despite the fact that Tony told him, each time, that he neither coached nor had another restaurant. Eventually, Tony began making up answers that changed every time. Mr. Caspar never noticed. The Gipper was fun, and got a kick out of the fact that Michelle or I recognized most people’s voices or orders over the phone before they ever said their name. He would come in Fridays with his wife or son and request garlic on whatever they ordered. Gipper often teased his young son by trying to set him up with us counter girls, but it was he who did the most flirting, though never in front of his wife.

I quit before the lease was up on Magie and Tony and the entire business moved further into Union, on Morris Avenue. At that point, my sister Kaitlyn began working
there. I visited from time to time, filled in once when she was busy, and stayed in touch with Tony and Matilde, who had become like second parents to me. Now, Kaitlyn is gone—off, temporarily, to live across the world—but Robyn, the last of us girls, is the new counter girl.

I’ve told my sisters all these stories. I’ve told them that my experience at Reggios has colored the rest of my life. I’ve tried, as best I can, to share with them what I’ve learned: that there are people whom you can and can’t trust; that sometimes your choices don’t define you, but that sometimes they should; that where you come from—be it Elizabeth, Italy, or Mexico—doesn’t matter; that in certain situations it’s better to seem crazy and that when guys fuck with you, sometimes the best thing to do is to grab a butchers knife and look them dead in the eye while you stab the wooden counter on which they work; to kill people with kindness and also to be kind to the people who deserve it.

But I’m certain that they’ll learn these things on their own, once they get to know the people.
Each night I drive home down the same streets in some cloudy haze of “was asleep” and “soon will be asleep again.” Some nights—most—the drive home doesn’t even exist. It’s the punctuation between two dreams, the comma between two clauses. It’s my car in reverse—a gentle swoop around the cul-de-sac—a left onto North Broad and then an immediate—you’d miss it if you weren’t careful—right onto Wilder. I drive straight for a while then, navigating the pockmarked streets and staying in the exact middle of a two-way road—residential, so there are no glaring yellow lines—to avoid the craters that would wreck my tires. Here, on my right, will be a carved wooden eagle emerging from the trunk of a dead tree; an ageless sentinel guarding the street. The houses here are huge, the road wild. In the fall, leaves cover the asphalt and branches sway and splinter in the wind, litter the road. The winter is a dull waste where packed snow bleeds into slush under the tires of my car. Spring and summer are lush seasons, dappled with the shade of so many trees married in an overhead canopy. There are stop signs at the end of each street, flashing red traffic lights when those are not enough. I never have to wait for passing cars at this time of night; the stops are unnecessary but I complete them nonetheless. Often, I will yawn or reach down for the cigarettes I no longer smoke, turn on the radio; subconscious efforts to mark time and place and distance. A nightly reminder that this is not a dream. Finally, when the road ends straight into the college parking lot, I take a left and then shortly a right. Here, I meet cars. It may be midnight, often later, sometimes two or three in the morning, but still there are cars. Still, along the
side of the road, are dark ghosts walking towards home or the bar or nowhere. This is North Ave, a major street in Elizabeth, the ouroboros of a road that begins and ends at Route 1&9. I take this, following the too bright lights and too cramped lanes. After a moment I will cross Morris Ave, pass the campus and its gaudy building, the reflective surfaces and absent trees. Along my right will be a small cramped group of buildings: a Chinese restaurant, pizza parlor, convenience store, gas station, and a few storefronts with no discernable purpose. Once these buildings bleed away homes appear, quiet places that must capture each rush and honk of the road. I'll pass two lights, one always green and the other always changing. The sign will come quickly, then, not the street sign but the one I always notice first: “Rabbi Teitz Plaza” proclaiming the synagogue that will be on my left as I turn down my road. This is the street I road my bike up and fell down on. Here, at this first stop sign, is where we gathered as kids for baseball games and manhunt games. There, on the right, is the church we would attend each Sunday. Attached, the little school I spent my childhood in, the fenced in asphalt on which I learned to ride a bike, played four squares, and lined up each morning. The next block is my own, my house on the right and hidden by the giant pine trees my father planted 25 years ago. Here they stand guard, my older brothers and sisters, the only ones still awake.
Semester break of her sophomore year, Myri decided she’d like to return to school early. Christmas and New Years had passed and she felt she couldn’t bear to be home any longer. Her father asked her often about her progress—he was interested in the effects of her antidepressant medication—and she suspected her mother counted her pills. Stacy, her roommate and closest friend, would not be returning until after the semester began. Myri had received a postcard from the Poconos. The purple gel ink, slightly smudged, read: “Myri! Lovely time with George and my family! Soon off to the Dominican Republic with his family! XOXO, Stacy!” There was a postscript, scrawled in different ink, which read “HE PROPOSED!” Myri was anxious to return to her dorm.

In truth, she wanted to do some redecorating. She’d received some art prints for Christmas, as well as some new books, and thought that the bright watercolors and pensive oils might offer newfound inspiration. She’d spent a lot of time researching holistic cures for her official diagnosis. The most promising had been simple: it will pass. She was grateful that her parents seemed unconcerned about her school performance. Her grades had dropped and she’d received one incomplete—a term paper she hadn’t been able to turn in. She couldn’t muster the energy to be disappointed. She knew that if she were able to break through the hazy cloud that seemed to hang over her she would do much better. But her head wouldn’t clear. Her aunt had given her some ideas about the chi of her room and how to better arrange it. She was hopeful it would help.
She told her parents that a host of people waited for her on campus, and she felt heartened when they believed her. Perhaps, she thought briefly, some of her dinnertime acquaintances *would* be there, and just as lonesome.

She insisted on taking the train back, choosing a day and time she knew her parents would be at work, and spent the hour and a half trip engrossed in the alternating suburban and urban landscape. The journey north was quiet, the commuters going to New York or Newark already at their destinations, and Myri found herself drifting in and out of consciousness. One moment and she was on the train, the other wandering the streets of the passing towns.

She was dizzy and tired by the time she reached the Union Station, just blocks outside of Elizabeth. She began the short walk to campus and was halfway to her dorm before she realized how hungry she was. She turned quickly, not even stopping to drop off her bags, and headed down North Avenue to Happy Family Chinese Restaurant. The sidewalks were quiet, the normal flow of pedestrians more than halved with the cold, but the streets were busy and Myri had to be careful to stick to the innermost portion of the walkway as cars frequently sprayed gray sludge from the roads.

She was the only customer in Happy Family and the owner, a man she recognized, smiled widely at her as she waited. She looked away, uncomfortable with his friendly gaze, and wandered out the front door to wait. Her bags were heavy. She set them down on the pavement and leaned against the wall. It was cold, but she didn’t care. Her fingers rested at her side, uncovered and red. The dizziness from the train ride had worn off a little, but her weariness had only seemed to worsen. Closing her eyes, she
smiled weakly. She was glad she’d returned early. At the very least, with no one else around, she would finally be able to rest.

“Do you have a light?”

Myri opened her eyes to see a young man standing in front of her, cigarette between his lips.

“I’m sorry,” Myri responded. “What did you say?”

He seemed huge in his heavy blue coat, but his face was thin and bearded. He shook his head, seemingly annoyed, and pointed to the cigarette in his mouth.

“Cigarette,” he paused, and then gestured with his fingers. “Lighter. Do you have a lighter?”

Myri looked at him quizzically.

“Fire,” he said. “Come on. Do you have a light or not?”

She shook her head, finally understanding. “No, I’m sorry. I don’t smoke.” But he’d already walked away, and she was left talking to no one.

She’d almost reached her dorm when she decided that she could wait no longer, and needed to rest. She was exhausted. Sitting on one of the benches that lined the walk, oblivious to the snow that had begun to fall, she opened her meal and began to eat hungrily.

“What is your deal, man?”

She looked up to see the same boy as before. His cigarette was lit and his beard flecked with snow.

“It’s snowing,” she responded, noticing for the first time.
“Good job, genius.” He moved the paper bag from the bench and sat down next to her. “What the hell are you doing?”

She looked at him, unsure how to answer. “Eating,” she said, finally.

“I can see that.” He shook his head and glanced at her meal with disinterest. “But why are you eating here, now, outside?” He opened his hands wide, turning as if to demonstrate. “As you said, it’s snowing.”

“I was hungry. It hasn’t been snowing long.” In truth, she wasn’t sure.

“Nope. It was snowing when you sat down.” He pointed towards Hawkins Hall, a neighboring dorm, “I saw you from my window.”

“Are you new here?” she asked, surprised. One of Stacy’s former boyfriends had lived in Hawkins and Myri had followed Stacy there many times. She’d never seen this boy.

“No.” He paused, swallowing hard and then clearing his throat. “Are you?”

“Oh, no. Second year.”

“Well, I’m O’Dallum,” he said and then paused, waiting for her to introduce herself. She said nothing. “And your name?” He looked at her suspiciously, but with a half smile.

“Myri,” she answered.

They sat for a few minutes, Myri eating steadily, aware of his staring but not uncomfortable in his presence.

“I haven’t really been going to class,” he said, finally. “Hit a rough patch. Made some stupid choices, fucked up my final year. Got into some stuff…” His speech trailed off, but his eyes stayed on her.
She looked up at him. “Like what?”

He squinted. “Bad stuff,” he answered.

“Oh,” she replied, unsure of what to say, and looked around as if for the first time noticing the snow.

Myri seemed to swim through the winter. Stacy returned from break and then left again, throwing clothes into suitcases and kisses at Myri.

“You should stay,” Myri told her friend. “What about classes?”

“I’m still enrolled,” Stacy replied, “but I don’t think I can keep up with all my classes and plan a wedding.” Stacy rolled her eyes at Myri to show her how immature she was being. “I’ll be back, I promise. Hell, I paid for the housing. I’m gonna use it!”

Myri understood what Stacy didn’t say: she knew how Myri was and so would not abandon her. Myri made a final attempt to bargain with her, to get Stacy to commit to her own future. She gave up when Stacy gazed purposefully at the bottle full of pills on Myri’s desk.

Stacy hugged Myri tightly before leaving. “Nothing will change,” she promised.

Myri understood that Stacy was sad to leave her. Myri was sad too. But she didn’t tell Stacy that her worry was unnecessary, that Myri had met someone.

On the days that Stacy stayed at school, she and Myri spent most of their time together. Stacy had people to see and gossip to spread, and as always Myri was her closest companion.
“What do you do without me around?” She asked Myri when one friend commented she hadn’t seen either of them in a long while. “I hope you haven’t become a complete cloister without me.”

Myri shrugged. “I’ve been busy.”

“I hope you’ve started taking your medication,” Stacy replied. “Or at least talked to your mom or the doctor or someone.”

“I have talked to someone,” Myri replied, though he wasn’t anyone Stacy had in mind.

Myri always joined Stacy for dinner when she was on campus. When she was on her own, Myri would find O’Dallum and the two would walk to the Happy Family Chinese restaurant. Sometimes they wandered the campus walkways. Once or twice one of Stacy friends saw them. It wasn’t long before Myri received an early morning phone call.

“You have a boyfriend!?” Stacy shrieked into the phone

“What?” Myri was half asleep and confused.

“Someone saw you walking around with some bearded giant. They said you looked very cozy.”

“It’s early, Stace.”

“I know. So answer me and you can go back to bed.”

“I mean…I guess,” she replied. Myri didn’t consider O’Dallum her boyfriend, but she thought it easier to let Stacy believe so. While Myri enjoyed spending time with him, anything more than that was too much to consider. She was happy when she was with him, but the world still seemed shrouded in mist.
For a while Stacy insisted on meeting O’Dallum, but Myri felt it wasn’t a wise idea. She knew the two wouldn’t get along.

“It’s still new, you know?” She would beg Stacy, “I don’t wanna complicate it.”

“All right,” Stacy replied, “but soon!”

Soon didn’t come, however. February came and Stacy packed herself away again, this time for an extended trip. “I miss him too much,” she told Myri simply. George had begun his semester abroad in London and Stacy would be joining him. “Of course I’ll miss you, too,” she said.

In a short while Myri and O’Dallum had become quite cozy, though not in the way that Stacy had imagined. With Stacy gone, Myri and O’Dallum became inseparable. At first, they spent a lot of time in O’Dallum’s room. He had a record player and carefully chose albums to play for her. Sometimes he played one of his violins—he had two, and explained to her that he’d been accepted into the school on a music scholarship. Myri sometimes read aloud to him from her favorite book, *A Hundred Years of Solitude*.

They got along well like this for a while, but O’Dallum had a roommate that he didn’t like. At Myri’s suggestion he began to sleep in her room, on Stacy’s bed. He was polite about the purple shag rug and the Hello Kitty nightlight, but Myri knew he disapproved. She admitted only to herself that the room had begun to feel like home when O’Dallum’s blue coat hung on the door, and his record player sat in a corner. It wasn’t Stacy’s absence but the combination of both Stacy’s and O’Dallum’s possessions that made Myri want to smile.

O’Dallum never seemed to study and his disappearances to class were few. For a time he helped Myri with her work and respected the absolute silence she needed to
complete any schoolwork. He recommended the library many times, telling her that in years past it had been a refuge for him.

“You have to go to the really abandoned corners, though,” he told her. “Anywhere else is filled with brown-nosers or dummies. By the bathroom is where it’s at. Nice and quiet.”

“Maybe,” she replied. “But honestly, I feel more comfortable here with you.” She shrugged, hoping to diminish the feeling in her words. “Anyway, it may not seem like it, but I’ve been getting a lot of work done.” This was, in part, true. Though she was still behind in her assignments, the quality of the work she managed to finish had improved. O’Dallum always encouraged her to go to class and often offered to walk to Happy Family to get her food. Sometimes, while she studied, he played for her on the violin he kept in her room.

“Thank you,” she told him one day. “I don’t think I’d be doing so well without you.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” he responded, smiling.

“I’m worried that maybe it’s my eyesight that’s the problem. Doctors could be wrong, you know. What if I’m really going blind? That could explain why it’s so difficult for me to read and to concentrate.”

“I don’t think you’re going blind, Myri,” he replied, “but maybe you should go back to the doctor.”

“Maybe it’s a brain tumor. If I have a brain tumor, I don’t want to know.”

“You don’t have a brain tumor, Myri,” he told her calmly.
She knew she sounded ridiculous. She knew her self-diagnoses’ were unlikely. Most days it was an effort just to open the thick textbooks stacked neatly on her desk. Most days, words scrambled in front of her eyes; when they unscrambled, she found the material dry and unbearable.

“Thank you,” she repeated.

Myri and O’Dallum were together for all of March. Sometimes they spent days without leaving the room, schoolbooks completely cast aside. Myri hung her Christmas watercolors on the ceiling and often the two would lie together, chaste but with arms slightly touching, and look up at them. Most of the time they fell asleep like this, but sometimes Myri was able to concentrate long enough to feel a stirring. It never lasted, though.

People came by the dorm. O’Dallum would shuffle his friends into the bathroom and then out again, but Myri never asked who they were or what they did. He never introduced them. She wrote furiously in a journal, certain that something like pebbles had become lodged in her brain and that she had to pry them loose. Each morning, when O’Dallum woke, she presented the book to him and asked him what he thought. He would read carefully, nodding.

“But do you think this is it?” She would plead. “That this is the epiphany I needed to get better?”

“I don’t know Myri,” he would tell her honestly. His bruised looking eyes full of caring. “I can’t tell you that.”

“But!”
“Hey, if it were the right thing, do you really think you’d have to ask me?”

She wouldn’t reply, though she knew he was right, and each morning she would present the book to him again.

She picked up his cigarette pack on a day in early March and began smoking.

“Whoah!” He stopped her. “You gotta go outside. This room end up smelling like smoke and they’ll triple charge you for cleaning.”

Myri looked out the window at the fire escape. “It’s cold, though.”

“Here,” he said, handing her his blue coat. “Wear this.”

Afterwards, she would sit outside for hours writing and smoking and wearing his blue coat. She watched him, sometimes, from the window. Other times, from the corner of her eye, she saw him watching her.

Once, in mid-March, she ran out of cigarettes and came inside to tell O’Dallum. He wasn’t in the main room, so she knocked quickly on the bathroom door and stepped inside. He sat on the toilet with a rubber tie around his arm, holding the ends tightly with his teeth. A needle shook gently between his fingers.

“Oh!” She gasped quietly.

He looked up at her, eyes wide with fear.

“Hey,” she said, “uh, we need cigarettes.” She turned from the room and closed the door behind her.

“Listen, Myri,” he said as they walked to the convenience store later. “I—I mean, I told you—when we first met, remember?—that I had gotten into some shit, and…”
“Don’t worry, O’Dallum,” she told him. “I’ve been thinking for a while now that you were working to dislodge something from your brain, too.” She stopped walking and looked up at him. “It’s okay. Just be careful, please. I’ve got faith in us. Rough patch, right?”

By the end of March, Myri had filled three journals and O’Dallum had lost what little weight he had. Myri tried endlessly to get him to eat, but food didn’t interest him. He suggested she return to the doctor, but she refused.

In the final days of the month O’Dallum’s roommate called him and told him he was no longer welcome in the room.

“He said I’ve been gone too long,” he told Myri. “He...found some of my stuff. Said if I try and come, back he’ll contact the administration.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Myri told him. “This is your home now.” She had stopped worrying that the things she said sounded sappy. Often, they made him smile.

That night, while his roommate was out, they snuck back to his room to rescue his violin and a few other items. As they walked across the courtyard and back to her dorm, he held her hand for the first time.

“I’m happy,” he told her.

Later that night, as they sat watching television, Myri turned towards him.

“I know I’m not really going blind. I know I don’t have a brain tumor. I know I’m sad. But I’m happy with you. What if...” she paused, fighting tears for the first time in almost nine months, “what if one day your face is clouded, too?”
O’Dallum looked at her. “You’re going to be okay, Myri. I’m going to stop. I’m going to get better.”

He paused, and Myri thought he might kiss her.

“Being with you,” he began again, “you’ve helped me. The pebbles have started moving. I’ll be better soon. I hope you will too.” He paused again. “Anyway, I’ll take care of you.”

She closed her eyes and cried. He kissed her, for the first time, on both eyelids. They were quiet for a while. Myri hadn’t noticed, but her fingers were laced tightly in his.

“Hey,” he said. “I think we’re out of smokes. How about I go out and get some, and then get you food. Happy Family?”

During April of Myri’s sophomore year she spent most of her time in the library. Her dorm room felt too crowded.

Stacy had returned from London early, engagement broken but relationship intact. “When George found out I was leaving school he un-proposed,” she told Myri. “He said once I graduate he’ll ask me again.”

Myri was glad Stacy was back. She knew, as well, that it wasn’t just because George wanted her to graduate.

Myri was bogged down by schoolwork. She’d had to drop three classes, but managed to convince two of her professors to let her finish. She spoke to the dean, who called her doctor, who confirmed that she had gone through a period of severe depression but had since recommitted to taking her medication. She was on academic probation, but
all things considered, had gotten off easy. Stacy, after hugging her and crying for her and then glancing uncomfortably at her own bed, had told her so. Myri still had her hospital bracelet on; Stacy’s suitcases were still adorned with their baggage checks.

“Myri, I’m so, so sorry.” She paused as if searching for words. “That’s all I can say,” she said finally.

“I know,” Myri replied simply.

“It’s nearly the end of the year,” Stacy said. “We’ve both lost most of the semester. I failed nearly every class, even those I was taking online.” She looked around the dorm. “Why’d we come back? Why don’t we just go home, start fresh next year?”

“I think it’s important that I finish,” Myri answered. “My doctor says so, but I think so too. It feels right.”

Stacy looked at her and nodded. “Then I guess we’re staying.”

Myri always sat in the same place in the library, in a far off corner, right near the bathroom, as O’Dallum had suggested. It was the perfect spot, the only place she could go to get any work done. She tried hard to avoid distraction, had her earbuds pressed firmly to her ears, but whenever someone walked by, she couldn’t help but look up.

She knew it was impossible. She knew that he was dead. They had told her so in the ambulance and then later, at the hospital. They told her again a few days later when she woke up and found herself in a plain white room. Her doctor told her. Her parents told her. They all told her he was gone, but she never saw him go and so still she was unsure.

When Stacy asked why Myri spent so much time in the library, she told her she was studying. Myri was, in fact, studying. But she was also waiting.
It was late April, and late evening, when he finally came. Myri recognized his blue coat. It had disappeared from the room when he did.

She followed him into the bathroom and called out to him before he settled on a urinal. He turned, confused, and for a moment she knew that it had happened. Even though she’d been taking her medicine, the fog had changed him. His face was not O’Dallum, but his coat was. She walked towards him.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

Myri grabbed hold of him, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist, and began to cry. He struggled away but she just cried louder and grabbed him tighter, so tight she felt her fingers go numb.

“I’m sorry,” she cried. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. I thought you were getting cigarettes, Happy Family. I didn’t know, I fell asleep. I should have stayed awake. I should have known when you didn’t come home.”

The man shouted for help and she sobbed as she held him.

“Please come back,” she said through tears. “I want us to get better, I want our pebbles to crack and dissolve. I went to the doctor. I listened. Please, listen to me now. Please come back. I want to finish reading you the book, the one about the man who believes that ice is magic. I miss you.”

She knew it wasn’t O’Dallum. The man she held was rounder and squirmed in her arms. He seemed afraid, but she couldn’t let go. He cried for help, wrenched his arm free and pounded on the bathroom stall. Another man came running in and then backed out, horrified. A series of staccato shouts rang out from the other side of the wall and still Myri clung to him.
“I’m sorry,” she said over and over again, “I’m sorry,” but there was more.

The door opened again, slowly, and Stacy stuck her head in. Seeing Myri, Stacy ran towards her and tried to pry her off the man. Myri clung tightly so Stacy put her arms around Myri whose arms were around the strange, terrified man.

“It isn’t him,” Stacy cooed into Myri’s ear. “It’s not O’Dallum.”

Myri nodded her head slowly. She knew it wasn’t O’Dallum, but still there was something she needed to say. She couldn’t say it to him but would say it to his coat because it was his coat. Her head was buried right where she’d burned it with a cigarette and still it smelled faintly of him. She didn’t know how this stranger had come across it; she didn’t care.

“Myri,” Stacy repeated, her voice now firm. “It isn’t him. You have to let go.”

The man shook beneath them. Myri heard shouts from the other side of the wall. This would be her only chance. Her face was still pressed to the coat. She breathed deeply, smelled the saltiness that used to be O’Dallum, and whispered so that only the coat could hear.

“I know,” she said aloud. “I know,” she shifted, loosened her grip just a little. “This isn’t yours.” She tugged at the coat. “It’s mine. You have to give it back.”

The man nodded and Myri felt it slide from his body, felt it lose the foreign shape and become, again, what it used to be. As O’Dallum had, she knew his coat would carry her through. And so she put it on.
The Union Train Station isn’t in Elizabeth, though it may as well be. The Elizabeth (and North Elizabeth) Station—removed from the suburbs of Elmora Hills and deeper into the city—is much older and busier. Trains come in and out at all hours of the day and night. Union is small and quiet, newly rebuilt after years and years of languishing closed. At midnight you can park five feet from the tracks and sit in your car with the windows down and a cigarette between your fingers. The police don’t come, and when they do you can say you’re just waiting to pick someone up. You can sit for hours. Often, a freight train will zoom by and you won’t be able to hear anything but the clicking of the tracks and rocking of the load. You can look out past the tracks and imagine you’re looking at something other than a chain-link fence and electrical tower. You can drive past and bet money your sister will be sitting there, her windows down and a cigarette between her fingers. You can park your car next to hers and get out, get into her car. You can roll her windows down and the two of you can sit with cigarettes between your fingers, waiting until a freight train comes and you can’t hear anything but the load rocking and the clicking of the tracks. You can sit for hours.
As usual, he was late for his doctor’s appointment. He’d gone out on Saturday night to celebrate his fiftieth birthday and still, on Monday, he was groggy. He shuffled into his childhood friend’s office at quarter past the hour. The receptionist, Margaret, was on the phone so he smiled at her widely and made his way to the slippery vinyl seats.

He sat down and pulled from his breast pocket the dented old flip phone that he was determined to see through to the end. He dialed his voicemail and listened to the single message from his sister:

“Fred. It’s Joanne. Listen—think about it. Anthony agrees. She’s an interesting woman…former ballerina. A nurse. It’ll do you good. Let me know.” There is a pause, some mumbles. “Oh—and let me know how it goes with Scalera.”

He sighed as he deleted the message and opened up his MMS in order to text her back the most appreciative refusal he could muster.

“Mr. Buchanan, the doctor will see you now.”

He rose from his chair with a wink at Margaret and walked down the narrow connecting hallways into the first exam room. The doctor was waiting there, his cell phone pressed to his ear. Fred hoisted himself up onto the examination table and waited.

He half listened to his friend’s conversation, more absorbed in his sister’s message than anything else. Since his divorce fifteen years ago she had tried to set him up with countless friends and coworkers—even a department store saleswoman or two.
He had confidently held her off for the first ten years, then staunchly and stubbornly for the last five. He had a steady job in a reasonable field. He golfed whenever he wanted, drank a scotch and soda each night, ate any time he pleased. He was self-sufficient. He was happy. He told Joanne this time and again, but she was determined. While he had been successful with women over the years, he’d had no relationship that lasted for more than a few months. He had given himself over to his ex-wife years ago, but still she had left. He wasn’t looking for commitment, he always made clear; he’d had plenty of that already. What he relished now was his freedom.

“How’s it hanging, Freddy?” The doctor said, hanging up his phone and extending his hand.

“Uh-oh,” Fred replied, looking down at his lap. “I didn’t realize we were doing that sort of exam. Thought I had one of those not too long ago.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jerry laughed, “wise guy, eh?”

“I hope so—for a little longer, at least. I’m not sure why you had to call me in just to go over some results…”

“Now, now Freddy, relax. It’s just a formality, really. How was the birthday?”

“Alright,” he replied, “nothing special. I went out to dinner with Joanne and Anthony and then for drinks with one of the new accountants at the office. Cute little thing.” He smiled devilishly. “Nothing to write home about.”

Jerry laughed and shook his head. “Who is, anyway?”

As he said this, there was a knock on the door and Margaret peeked her head in.

“Perfect timing,” Jerry said, and the two men laughed.
“Doctor, would you be able to step out for a moment?” Margaret asked, smiling at the two men. “I need you to look at something—if Mr. Buchanan doesn’t mind, of course.”

“How’s that, Fred—do you mind?”

Fred laughed and shook his head. “Of course not.”

Fred waited a few moments in the office and, when Jerry didn’t immediately return, pulled out his phone. There was a text message from his sister and he silently cursed the technology that allowed her protective fluttering to be waiting for him; ‘THINK ABOUT IT,’ the message read.

Annoyed, Fred closed his phone and looked around the room. His file sat on the counter, opened, and Fred thought how strange it was that he’d never read it. He walked over to it and began skimming his general stats when he noticed the lab paperwork, and the very clear results.

The door opened and Jerry walked in. “Three guesses about what she wanted me to look at,” he said, smiling. “What are you doing there—”

“Christ!” Fred said, turning to face his doctor. “Diabetes, Jerry, really?” He motioned from his toes to his neck as if to say, *Not me—not this body.* “How!? There’s got to be a mistake.”

“No, Fred.” Jerry sat down, “I’m sorry. It’s a pretty solid diagnosis. But not life threatening, by any means, and with a slight change in your lifestyle and daily doses of insulin—”

“Which in this case they would be—”

“Am I supposed to drive over here every day so you can stick me—”

“Now listen, Fred.” Jerry paused, waiting for his friend to calm down. “Be reasonable. I know you’re upset but you know it doesn’t work like that. You can do it yourself, or you can get a spou—a friend to do it for you. You’ll get used to it in no time.”

Fred shook his head, but Scalera went on to explain the seemingly impossible daily procedures that Fred would soon have to endure. It wasn’t fair. He had made such a point to take care of himself, to make sure his body never inconvenienced him. Over the years he’d made sure to keep healthy, had exercised regularly enough, didn’t smoke more than the occasional cigar… hell, he’d even managed to keep all his hair! And here it had all been in vain. He was repulsed at the thought of needles and vials and daily encounters with blood.

“Listen, Jer,” he cut the doctor off mid-sentence. “Thank you. Can I just, I don’t know, call the office later and get the information?” He pantomimed looking at his watch. “I’ve got another appointment. You can set me up with prescriptions, equipment, whatever. Just…right now I’ve got to go.”

Jerry looked skeptical. “Alright Fred, but listen…don’t put this off, okay? If you don’t call here by two I’ll be calling you.”
“Yeah,” he stood up and moved towards the door. “Yeah, of course. Wouldn’t dream of it. Like I said…appointment and all. Really important stuff. I’ll be sure to call Margaret.” He walked out of the room, down the long narrow hallway and into the waiting area. Seated in the far corner was an older couple in their early seventies; the husband was in a wheel chair, the wife seated next to him, reading a magazine. He glanced halfheartedly at Margaret and then burst through the front door, stubbornly noting that he felt more vigorous, more alive, then ever.

Once in his car he pulled from his breast pocket his flip phone and fired off a quick message to his sister. He’d love to meet this woman. Would Joanne mind setting up a date? And had she mentioned, by some chance, that this woman was a nurse?

A week later Fred was sorting through the sugar-free candy at the drugstore on Magie Avenue, trying to decide which brand of mints would taste less like aspartame, saccharine and rotten and wrong. He was already five minutes late for his date with Alexa, but he couldn’t bring himself to hurry. His sister had assured him that she was exactly the sort of woman he needed. When he’d asked her what she’d meant she’d told him Alexa was warm and compassionate; she had what Joanne classified as a “personality like a hug.” Fred thought that sounded terrible, and told her so.

“What else should I say, Fred?” Joanne was offended. “She’s petite, attractive and good-natured. She has a nice smile.”

Still, Fred wasn’t satisfied. What had he been thinking? He was not a man to whom commitment—or even the thought of it—came easily. His sister, her husband, and his doctor were his most consistent and oldest companions.
Finally deciding on a bag that claimed to taste like the real (he had cringed at the word) thing, he made his way into the line. In front of him stood a woman, short and dark haired, whose small disinterested eyes immediately captured his attention. Again he checked his watch. Ten minutes late. He thought about abandoning the mints. He thought that this woman had noticed him. He wondered if she would try and strike up a conversation.

“It’s a cold one, isn’t it?” He asked her after a few moments.

She looked up at him and smiled. “Oh yes. I walked out of the house and almost immediately turned around.”

With a smirk he nodded towards the shampoo, tissues, nail polish remover, and gum haphazardly thrown in a basket. “Important errand changed your mind?”

“Oh,” she laughed warmly. “I actually have a date soon. I hope this line starts to move.” They both gazed downward to check their watches. Ridiculously, he felt neglected.

“Me too,” he answered, dropping the conversation.

Fifteen minutes later and he was parked in front of the little coffee shop where this woman—Alexa—was surely waiting for him, upset. He checked his phone, expecting an angry voicemail from his sister, or else a plaintive text from an unknown number, but found nothing. Popping a mint into his mouth he got out of the car and made his way to the door. Inside, he scanned the room for his date but found only a college student with books piled high in front of her and an elderly couple with steaming cups of tea between them. For a moment he wondered if she hadn’t come and gone, and was intrigued by this woman who had so quickly abandoned him. He sat down, however, at
an empty table beside the door. He would stay, for a few moments at least; perhaps the woman was even more inconsiderate than he was. He imagined Joanne laughing. The woman from the drugstore walked in in not five minutes later.

“Oh!” She said upon spotting him. “Fancy seeing you here.” She paused for a moment and then sat down. “You wouldn’t happen to be Mr. Fred Buchanan, would you?” She was more playful now out of the austere aisles of the drug store. Her voice was almost melodic. Had Joanne said she was a singer, he wondered, or was it a dancer?

“Yes, I am. And that must make you Alexa.”

She smiled at him, pleased. “I am. I’m sorry I’m late.” She giggled, “I was talking to a very nice man at the drugstore—”

“I suppose I can’t be one to talk, but I would say half an hour is a little more than a ‘few minutes’.” He couldn’t keep himself from being rude. She hadn’t seemed interested in him when they had met in the drugstore. Was she only acting so, now, because they were on a “date?” He wondered if she had seen him coming—he wouldn’t put it past Joanne to give her a snapshot of him—and followed him into the drugstore.

She was more beautiful in the soft yellow light of the coffee shop, much more so than he would have ever expected. If not for their chance encounter earlier her beauty might nearly have stunned him. He couldn’t help remembering her, though, under the unforgiving fluorescents.

“Oh!” Alexa looked down at her watch. “Seven, right? Its only ten past now…”

“Seven? I thought…. Ah, well. Miscommunication.” But he knew his sister had tricked him, anticipating his usual tardiness. “So, Alexa. What can I get you?”
The pair talked easily for the next hour, Fred telling her about his job selling insurance and the big-time area clients he serviced. He bragged about his golf game and Alexa discussed her experience as a ballet dancer in a small in-state company and her current position as a nurse in one of the area hospitals. She told him she enjoyed kayaking and he shared with her his brief experience rowing crew in college. He wondered aloud how such a woman could still be unattached and she blushed, admitting to a brief romance in the past. She’d been too committed to dancing to date much, though, and then she’d gone to school and then she’d become a nurse. When she returned the question, he mentioned his divorce but didn’t get into the details. He never did—they had been high school sweethearts, he swore he’d never love anyone else; she became disenchanted with the relationship in her thirties and then filed for divorce on her thirty-fifth birthday. Alexa didn’t pry. By the time the dregs of their coffees had become ice cold he stood up and asked her if she’d like him to walk her to her car.

“Oh!” She seemed surprised that the date was ending, and so suddenly. “Well, actually, I walked. My apartment isn’t too far from here—”

“Then I’ll take you home,” he announced without asking. But she seemed taken with the idea, and agreed.

“So,” she said once they had situated themselves in the car, “you and your sister are fairly close, aren’t you?” Her voice was melodic, but not in the chirping way he’d first thought. Everything about her—her bird bones, simple hair, those carefully disenchanted eyes—were gentle. He hadn’t come to any conclusions either way, but she certainly wasn’t offensive.
“Oh yes,” he replied, shifting into gear and pulling out of the parking lot. “We’ve been good pals since we were kids. Now, with our parents gone, she’s my only family. I have dinner there almost every Sunday.” He paused, wondering if this would endear him to her.

“She’s lovely, your sister. Did she tell you how we met?” She waited for a moment and when he didn’t respond, continued. “It was at a co-worker’s party. Lisa—she knows Joanne from school…? No? Well, anyway. She was throwing a party and invited me; I didn’t know another soul there and your sister came right up to me and started a conversation. She invited me to lunch the week after and we’ve been friends ever since. She, Lisa and I often go to lunch.” She smiled at him pensively. “Joanne always has lovely things to say about you.”

He nodded. “That’s Joanne. Never has a bad word to say about anyone. So don’t go thinking too highly of me.” And he winked at her, to show that she should, actually, think very highly of him. “What about your family?”

“Oh, no,” she seemed to blush in the moonlight. “I’m an only child. My mother was all I had until she passed.”

He smiled, secretly, at this. The woman wanted companionship; she was pleasant and smart, certainly beautiful. And she was easygoing; he didn’t think that she would require much from him, in a long-term relationship. But he did think she was the sort of woman who would be willing to take care of him, when things got down to it. He had such a difficult time managing his insulin and the soreness in his fingers was wearing him down. He needed someone—one qualified, as Alexa surely was—to be there.
“Well,” he said as he pulled up to the apartment complex she had pointed out, “here we are.” He hoped that she would invite him in; he could do with a nightcap, and a quick blood-sugar test.

“Thank you so much for the ride,” she smiled at him and leaned in. He tilted his head towards her, but she merely pecked him on the cheek. “Maybe dinner next time?”

“Of course. I have your number. I’ll be giving you a call soon.” And he winked at her before pulling away, watching as she waved him goodbye.

That Sunday evening Fred pulled up to his sister’s house with a coffee cake and a bouquet of pink carnations.

“Hiya, Ant,” he said as his brother-in-law answered the door. “How’s the game going?”

“Eh,” Anthony replied, closing the door behind him. “You know. Who’re the flowers for?”

“These?” He asked, making his way into the kitchen where Joanne was busy mashing potatoes. “These are for my wonderful sister.”

“Oh, lord.” Joanne looked up at him. “He must have liked her, Anthony. Who’d have thought? His older sister—his best friend—was capable of setting him up with a wonderful, sweet, interesting woman.”

Fred smiled. “You were right, and I was wrong.” He bowed to her, full of theatrics.

“So you agree, then? You should have listened to me from the start?”
“I didn’t say that.” He stood over her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Taking his finger he swooped a dollop of the mash onto it and into his mouth. “She’s great, don’t get me wrong. And you were right about her. But it just happens to be timing. I think—” he paused for emphasis, “that it is time I settle down. At least a little.”

“Anthony!” Joanne shouted. “Alert the media! Frederick Buchanan is thinking about—nay, admitting—that he needs to settle down. Praise the heavens!”

“Calm down, you two,” Anthony called out from the sofa, eyes never leaving the game. “Its about time, Fred. I’ve heard enough from your sister about this. Alexa’s a nice woman. Pretty.”

“She is pretty, my dear husband. And, more importantly, kind and intelligent.”

“And she’s a professional.” Fred replied. “Can’t get much better than that.” He had put down the coffee cake and was arranging the flowers in a vase on the table. “And I’ll have you know—I wasn’t even late.”

Two weeks later Fred and Alexa sat in an intimate dining room sipping cold beer. They had seen each other one other time since their date—another coffee room foray, despite Alexa’s charge for dinner—and Fred still hadn’t balked. This restaurant had been Alexa’s choice, a small Japanese place that Fred would never have even noticed. She assured him that he would be able to eat his fill without threatening his blood sugar, so long as he enjoyed fish.

“Have you had many girlfriends?” Alexa asked, causally picking at a piece of pickled ginger.
Fred was taken aback by the question—he had hoped she wouldn’t do any digging in regards to his past romantic entanglements. “Well, you could say that.” He paused, searching for a way to explain. He wasn’t as much a Casanova as Joanne claimed; he wasn’t, however, a choirboy either.

“Are you seeing anyone else, now?”

He looked at her; her face was neutral, though her eyes shone brightly. He thought it must be from the candle flickering between them. “No,” he replied.

“Good,” she placed a piece of sushi in her mouth, her eyes fixed on him. “I don’t mind a past. I would just prefer that if we’re seeing each other, it’s only each other we’re seeing.”

He was taken aback by her bluntness. The women he usually dated were far more insecure; they had blank expressions and demanding eyes. He wondered what Joanne had told her on one of those lunch dates.

After, as they walked towards his car, she paused under the restaurant’s burlap awning. She dug through her purse until she removed a silver lighter and cigarette case. Inside was only one cigarette, which she placed between her lips.

“I hope you don’t mind,” she said. “I only smoke one a day. Its an old habit.” He looked at her curiously. While he indulged in a cigar from time to time he had never smoked cigarettes. His ex-wife had, however. The taste had never bothered him. “These were my mother’s—” she held out the silver pieces, “—she smoked much more than me.”

“I don’t mind,” he said.
She smiled at him, the cigarette between her lips. “Good. I thought you should know.”

“Fred,” the voicemail started, “listen.” He stood in the outer hallway of the business suite, nervous with the amount of times his sister had called him. He had nine missed calls and one voicemail—the makings of a minor disaster. “I didn’t want to leave this as a message, but I have a meeting in five minutes. I just found out today, and I think we should go—well, listen. I’m sorry, but Alexa died.” He released a gasp at the same moment his sister’s recording paused for breath. “Apparently she had some sort of brain aneurism a few days ago. She was gone before they could even call the ambulance. I know you didn’t get the chance to go on more than a handful of dates, and—look, I’m not sure how serious you really were—but I know she did like you. And she doesn’t have much of a family. Lisa—you remember Lisa—is actually the one doing most of the organizing for the wake. Anyway—shit, they’re starting—anyway; you’ve got to come. Today from five to nine. Just…just come to my house after work. Right after. I’ll see you then.” Again she paused, thinking for a moment. “I’m sorry, Freddy. I love you.”

Parked in front of Joanne’s house, Fred sat waiting for her tan SUV to pull down the block. He had left work early—half an hour after listening to her message—and had spent the rest of the day sitting in the coffee shop where he and Alexa first had a date. While he was standing in line to order he was struck by how sentimental and nostalgic he was being. By the time he reached the barista he had no idea what he wanted and so ordered the first thing on the menu without thinking. After, in his car, he struggled with a
needle—he’d gulped the sugary drink down quickly; it was as if he had forgotten he was ill. As his car idled quietly outside his sister’s house he pulled from his breast pocket the beaten-up cellphone he was so attached to and called his doctor.

“Hey Jerry,” he said into the mouthpiece. “Yeah, everything’s alright. No, no—no complications. I’m being a good boy.” He forced a laugh. “Yeah, yeah—I’m getting the hang of pricking myself.” He half listened to Jerry as he tried to make golf plans. “Yeah, yeah—that sounds good. But listen, Jer, I actually had a question. Uh—well, I know someone who…who died—no, no, everything’s all right…just ah, just an acquaintance. Yeah. Well, the thing is—they had a brain aneurism? And I’m just wondering what you might know about…Well, I know they’re hard to find…So she could have had it for years?…And it bursts…No, I didn’t realize they weren’t always fatal. Bad luck that no one was around to take her to the hospital.” He coughed, impatient now to finish the conversation. “Yeah, well—oh, oh! Jer, listen, I was waiting on Joanne and here she comes down the block. I’ll call you later, okay? Yup, Saturday, sounds…sounds good. Alright, see ya buddy.”

Quietly he sat in his car, determined not to think, until his sister’s car truly did appear fifteen minutes later.

She pulled right into her driveway, ran quickly up to the Belgium windows and tapped three times. She waited a moment and then waved to Anthony, who appeared solemnly on the other side. Quickly then she ran back and slid into Fred’s car.

“Hey honey,” she said, and kissed his cheek. “You alright?”

“Sure. How about you?”
They pulled away from the house, Fred intent on the road. “Oh, I cried when I heard. I’m glad Lisa thought to call me. I wish we could have gotten flowers, or something…”

But Fred had stopped listening. His sister meant well, but something about this death—it couldn’t be Alexa, specifically, though he thought he could have loved her—had truly shaken him. Perhaps it had something to do with how she had died—so suddenly and with no warning. At work he had tried to research aneurisms, but couldn’t come up with anything conclusive. It was unfair, he thought, that something so deadly could so quietly exist. What if a violent little clot lived in his sister’s brain? Or his own?

He had just become accustomed to the idea of Alexa. After their last date he’d decided he would be prepared to give her a key to his home in a few months. They were having coffee that first night when he told her about his diagnosis and she had smiled as he stuttered through the medical jargon. After, on their third or fourth date, she’d invited him back into her apartment and graciously offered to check his sugar levels. He was feeling uncharacteristically euphoric—not even Jerry, or his sister, had managed it with quite such finesse.

“You’re so gentle,” he had told her, and smiled.

And she didn’t shy away, or refuse his compliment, but instead replied, “I know,” and then went to wash her hands.

He hadn’t yet told Joanne about the key, and now he didn’t think he would. He knew she would obsess over it, imagine him heartbroken, and he simply didn’t want that. He was sad about Alexa, but he was not wretched.
He knew, now, what he was looking for in a woman. And secretly, he was looking forward to meeting Lisa. He had heard so much about her—this nurse who had so thoughtfully planned a friend’s wake—but nothing of a husband.
My father’s home is my own, but different: the same streets are filled with different buildings or the same buildings housing different things. He’s sprung his roots in the same garden he’d sprouted from, picked a richer patch of soil. The streets we’ve walked together—my grubby hands in his larger, dirt stained ones, my childhood—are benign pavement and cicada shells. What was once his home, the mid-level of a three family giant, is now a discount clothes warehouse, his church the home of a different denomination, his grocery store, the one he watched, from his mother’s window, as the militant police held up shields and weapons and vowed to open fire on anyone who approached, a Pizza Hut. The hospital we were both born in is now abandoned, lichen-kissed and crumbling, the hallways filled with junkies’ needles, heavy mattresses. The façade ivy covered. My walk to school—to the church—was short, down the block across the street, Catholic school skirt blowing in the wind, cherry blossoms and ginkgoes in the spring and fall, slick in either season. I played four-squares in a schoolyard—a parking lot, really—framed by oak trees on a court my father volunteered to pain. As a young boy, my father would walk from school armed. Once a schoolboy’s scuffle, face pounding violence but clean, soap washed mouths, reached their front yard and my grandfather stood out the window and shouted at him, told him not to come home if he couldn’t fight back. My father learned to fight. I spent my summers walking under bridges—face to face with graffiti, dank crushed cigarettes and choked dandelions, greeted by the men who sell newspapers at intersections—to the library, the welcomed air conditioning, the
books. Walked home under those same bridges, saw those same men, waited until I reached home—my shared bedroom—to look; experienced the world through words. Once my father watched as a silent young man ran down a quiet street and was swarmed by others, angry hornet men, buzzing and screaming, broken silence; watched as the men dispersed; watched as the single man, a knife in his back, fell. My father ran to the nearest house, pounded doors, shouted for police. As a child I played manhunt, hid under pines and ran crisscrossed through backyards, screamed—joy and childhood terror—when someone turned the corner, found me. Or I searched for minutes that felt like hours—under cars, in trees, the wilderness behind garages—knocked on doors, cheated, asked: is she here? When my father was a boy he would spend his pocket money on the tiny crackers, sidewalk snappers. Collect the gunpowder from a multitude; drop monster bombs from his window on summer nights. Dug up the shared backyard, staking claim from all other residents, and built a well; waited as it slowly filled with groundwater and rain, used it to water the garden he had planted; nourish the vegetables, the flowers: bountiful harvest in his shared backyard. Shallow soil, deep roots.