Old Girls

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Old Girls,
or The Ordinary Adventure

I

Babcia called them the old girls, a nickname she debuted when Viv and Tess were in elementary school. Neither of them had fathers; who needed fathers? Tess’ mother, a nurse, often worked evening shifts in the ER, leaving Tess with Babcia, who’d retired from her desk job at the post office and had cared for Viv since her mother passed. Viv and Tess would ride the bus along Bloomfield Avenue with Babcia for her weekly errands. Babcia often found the old girls perched on the red metal bench outside Shop Rite, sharing peppermint patties with residents from the local senior citizen complex. At night, Babcia would pull back the woolly throw obscuring the entrance to their blanket fort, where the old girls lied on their bellies, chins resting on velvet pillow shams, cutting and pasting images from beauty and travel magazines to create their own reality in purple composition notebooks. The old girls liked to discuss their futures of living alone in foreign cities, marrying out of love, not obligation. They idolized artists over pop stars, preferred foreign films to teen movies. Tess, they always said, had the good sense; Viv had the gift.
The old girls spent the first three weeks of their summer before college in short shorts and crop tops at the diner counter on Bloomfield Avenue, eyeing Irish fries and Rocky Road milkshakes while the men eyed them. They didn’t mind; really, the old girls liked it. It’d become their new game, timing how long it took the men to slither over and make small talk about the milkshakes, the heat, the ’80s movies playing on the little TV in the corner. It beat laying out on the Bloomfield Green and seeing how much Sun In and lemon juice Viv needed to pour onto Tess’ black hair before it rusted. Sometimes, they got free chicken fingers and fries out of these men or, if they waited long enough, a six pack of Yuengling.

Consider the man today: His dark brown hair, swept coolly over the growing lines of his forehead, still held its youthful wave. His biceps, on full display in his black tank top, were strong and freckled. Tess’ good sense pegged him as thirty, at least. Viv asked the man his name (Matt, short for Matthew Joseph, reluctantly Catholic); she giggled when he flexed his left arm, stretching the ink of his block-lettered USMC tattoo; she pressed the side of her bare thigh against his green cargo shorts. When he flashed his driver’s license, Viv saw he was twenty-nine, born in 1974, September, a Virgo. Tess whispered, “I told you so,” from behind her sheet of silky straight black hair. Once he excused himself to the bathroom, the waitress behind the counter fluttered her blue eyelashes and said what she always said when someone else paid their check: You girls, don’t enjoy yourselves too much.

They rolled up to the local bodega for loosies, which they smoked in the parking lot below Bloomfield station. Matt was outspoken and energetic and somewhat charming
in his unapologetic curiosity. He asked Viv about her grandmother, and wondered how Tess could possess a Spanish last name if she was Filipina. He teased Tess about her Stanford ambitions but wanted to know more about her upcoming California makeover. (“Viv’s gonna bleach it blonde before I go,” Tess told him. “I’m good at that,” Viv added.) When Matt said he'd always wanted to write a book, Tess began lecturing him on the gender politics of 19th century literature and Viv groaned. No one wants to hear that shit. In Watsessing Park, they sipped PBRs masked by paper bags and Viv performed a childhood tap routine on a picnic table. Matt hurdled onto the table and spun her around by the waist. They slipped into an endearing offbeat two-step, Viv’s blonde hair, even paler now in the summer, rippling to her waist. Tess clapped along and finished his PBR.

Later, when curfew neared, Tess waited outside his gold Jeep Cherokee as Matt enclosed Viv in a soft side hug. Tess shook her black hair over her face and pretended not to see him kiss Viv on her forehead, her eyelids, her lips. Viv kissed back; she always did.

Viv lived with Babcia in a three-family home on a narrow Bloomfield street that dead-ended into train tracks. The old girls prowled these tracks after the last train powered by at midnight. When they were ten, they placed pennies on the metal rails and scrunched their bodies among the weeds. Now they stowed their loosies and lipsticks in a shallow dirt basin, sheltered by stubborn dandelions, at the base of the crossing lights.

They slipped on their hoodies—a black Rowan University one for Viv, deep Stanford cardinal for Tess—kicked off their plastic flip flops, and crisscrossed barefoot
between the tracks. “Why you always gotta flirt like that?” Tess asked. “You never let me talk.”

“We don’t wanna hear your Stanford shit,” Viv said.

“It’s literary history,” Tess said.

“It’s boring.” Viv lit a cigarette and handed it to Tess, who waved it off.

“You just want him,” Tess said, “I know.”

Viv vaulted onto the metal rail and used it as a balance beam, pointed toes and curved arms. “I don’t really like him,” she said, performing a series of wobbly arabesques.

“Then why’d you kiss him?”

“I don’t mean to flirt.” Viv simultaneously shrugged and arbesqued. “If that’s what you mean.”

“Wislawa, please.” Tess grabbed the hood of Viv’s sweatshirt, ruining her impromptu ballet.

Viv knew it was serious when Tess used her birth name. She placed closed fists on her hips. “Don’t call me a slut, Maria Teresa.” Tess’ birth name was equally as serious.


Viv hopped down from the metal ledge and hugged Tess, an overprotective around-the-neck type of hug. She said, “You’re so pretty, Maria Teresa. Fuck them. You’re so pretty, you can fuck them all.”

“So are you,” Tess said. “We are pretty.”
Babcia’s house stood farther back than the other aging peak-roofed homes, separated only by asphalt strips clustered with city-issued garbage cans. Mrs. Li, the widow in the attic apartment, outlined the covered porch with strings of oversized white lightbulbs as large as baseballs. Mr. Woźniak, the owner and landlord who resided on the second floor, had clicked his teeth and called the light display tacky; Babcia said it was charming. On summer evenings, once the humidity dropped, Babcia and Mrs. Li, their hair already in plastic curlers, would set their rockers on the porch, trade cigarettes, and sip hot green tea. Twenty years together on this porch and still, they found their way back to their deceased husbands almost every night. Mrs. Li would try to tell the old girls that she didn’t miss him, that men aren’t for keeping. Babcia would shush her; Babcia did not miss her husband either, but she preferred decorum over reality. Tess called this respectability; Viv said, that’s Babcia.

Only the miniature porch lantern was lit when the old girls arrived at Babcia’s house. Still, they removed their flip flops before hurrying down the walkway. They entered through the back door, certain that Babcia would be waiting in her rocker beside the front bay window in the living room. Instead, they found her playing Solitaire at the kitchen table, an opened pack of Parliaments at her side. She always smoked indoors, even in the summertime.

“Get lost, old girls?” Babcia crushed a dying Parliament in the ceramic Atlantic City ashtray, a birthday gift from Viv.

“It’s summer.” Viv kissed her on the cheek and smoothed the gray curls peeking out from her plastic powder blue rollers. “We were at a movie.”
“Dobry wieczór, Babcia.” Tess kissed her on the other cheek. She knew Babcia loved her scrappy Polish.

“Magandang gabi, Tess.” Babcia liked practicing the few Tagalog words she had learned with Tess. “That right?”

“Not bad,” Tess teased. “You’ll get it in another ten years.”

“Jesuz Maria.” Babcia raised palms up to the ceiling. “If only.”

Viv smacked her palm into Babcia’s and shook her head. “Never.” She kissed Babcia again on the cheek.

Babcia nodded to Tess. “There’s some babka for your mother on the counter.”

“Tess is sleeping over, okay, Babcia?” Viv said.


Viv and Tess cobbled a fort out of blankets and throw pillows in the middle of the living room floor. Babcia paused in the doorway, her melon-yellow linen housedress clinging to her hunched back, and mused, these old girls of mine, what will happen to them?

Here’s what Tess’ good sense, female sense, always told the old girls: never leave your real address or phone number with an older man. The old girls knew the stories. A teenage girl, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, gone missing for weeks. A body resting beneath cement. A body burned and mutilated. Even worse: a rape and a baby, which the priest at Sacred Heart had said was the best gift from a “bad situation.” (“Fucking Christ,” Viv would whisper to Tess in the pews. “Give me death.”) But the old girls also craved the ordinary adventure.
Matt drove Viv to the shore, to Point Pleasant. They held hands as they carved their way through the boardwalk crowds. He won her a hermit crab after knocking over a pyramid of metal milk bottles. Viv named the crab “Knuckles,” inspired by the way he crawled around the hard metal of his cage. They drank tallboys on the beach, sliding lower on the plaid blanket to glide their feet beneath the sand. She let him squeeze her breast under her kerchief-printed halter top. She stopped his fingers at the top of her denim shorts, the buttons indenting the skin two inches below her belly button.

Viv had lied not only to Babcia but also to Tess, who’d planned to lie out on the Bloomfield Green that afternoon with a book and fresh lemons for her hair. Babcia expected her home before midnight, and Viv had promised Tess they’d meet at the train crossing at 11:30. Matt took a detour near Watsessing Park, cutting the engine beneath that one tree whose leaves turned indigo in the fall. He told Viv that girls like her were sweet. Sweet and free. Viv would take free, but she did not want to be sweet. She wanted to be complex—free and complex, like all the girls in those foreign films. Like her first boyfriend Pawel’s older college girlfriend, who went down on him inside the gazebo near the Glen Ridge train station. Viv and Pawel had broken up months earlier because Viv, age fifteen at the time, would only let him cup her breasts as they watched Dr. Who reruns in his living room while his parents slept down the hall. Pawel said he wanted to feel, to feel something more. The next year, when she was sixteen, Giovanni from Sacred Heart youth group lifted her skirt behind the gymnasium. She dropped down and unzipped his jeans, afraid of his touch on her pink cotton briefs. She told all the girls before Giovanni could tell all the boys, and her nonchalance seemed to make her bolder than the act itself—to everyone except Tess, who was forever curious about the size and
the taste but balked when Viv bragged about her encounters at the gymnasium, the movie theater, even their beloved train tracks. “It’s fun,” Viv countered. “Let’s just have fucking fun.” Tess could never have fun without Viv, without knowing what Viv felt, having her within reach. But now Tess was alone at her mother’s house, waiting for Viv to call, and the fun was in the backseat of a gold Jeep Cherokee. Viv grew tired of the fun—tired of going down, plunging, her pleasure undone. She wanted to return, to discover that ordinary adventure. She shimmied her denim shorts down her thighs and calves. Matt was a man with an honest job and a salary, but this, Babcia would never approve; Babcia would cross herself and bow her head. Flushed and hurried, Matt ripped the seams of her pink cotton briefs, but Viv didn’t care for them, anyway.

Long after midnight, Viv and Tess stretched their legs across the train tracks. Tess asked how it felt but Viv could only say it was weird, just as she’d described dissecting a frog in the 7th grade.

Tess asked if Viv would do it again.

“I don’t know.” Viv plucked the dandelions springing between the wooden planks until the soil crumpled. “If he wants to.”

“It must be weird,” Tess said, “if only the guy wants to.”

The halls of Tess’ apartment building used to remind her of a ship’s passages, comically narrow, under-lit, silver pipes running along the ceiling from one end to the other. For a time in the sixth grade, she could never sleep, waking every night at 2 a.m. from ordinary nightmares—running from dogs, then bears and lions, soaring into tornados and hurricanes, ducking from invisible bullets. Her mother said Tess needed to walk away
these omens, so they devised an escape route. Down the hall, left into the stairwell. Take the stairs two at a time, hop over the landing. Repeat until Tess could feel her good sense settling in.

Tess went through the escape route twice tonight; she made it to the first floor each time. On her third elevator ride to the 18th floor, she stripped off her Stanford sweatshirt and examined her body in the shaft’s mirrors, elongated and foggy like a thrifty funhouse. She and Viv were different, really, physically, but Tess never liked to admit it; Viv was lithe and thin, while Tess was broad and petite, her hips as wide as her shoulders. They could never share powder or blush, nor boot cut jeans or baby doll dresses. Only their breasts—small and triangular, still waiting for their fullness, a little too unfeminine—seemed to match.

The overworked AC left the apartment chilly and sterile. Tess slipped on her Stanford sweatshirt in her mother’s bedroom. A sanctuary of saints, one dozen ceramic statues, covered the tops of the dresser and chest and even the television. Some glittered, some glowed, some faded away. Tess ran her finger along St. Anthony, St. Francis, St. Lorenzo, St. Bernadette, St. Elizabeth, the Virgin Mary—a duplicate of the one her mother had gifted to Babcia long ago. Tess’ mother lifted her head, rested her body against the bed’s curved cherry-wood headboard. No more nightmares, she told Tess before falling back asleep. Walk away, my Maria Teresa.

After walking Tess home, Viv returned to the train tracks. She wandered there alone, slinking on the balls of her feet from Bloomfield to Watsessing and back. Her inner thighs were sore, but a small part of her, the restless part, enjoyed this roughened feeling.
Crossing lights flared yellow and red: the 5:30 a.m. train. The newspaper delivery man trailed her back to the house, which only had one lit window: Mr. Woźniak, waking before the sunrise. Viv entered through the kitchen, cast in a murky morning blue. She never made it to her bedroom. She yanked throw blankets to the living room floor and collapsed there, shaking.

She could hear Babcia’s footsteps; the slight whistle of her breathing, the one she worried more often now was a death rattle. Would she know when it was—when that would be? Viv could not open her eyes to look.

Babcia lowered herself onto the couch and, calmly, began to braid Viv’s ashy blonde hair. The ends were brittle from sea salt, the roots still damp with sweat and humidity. Once Babcia reached the last strands, she let the braid fall; it swung like the flimsy string of a stray balloon until half of it came undone and Viv opened her eyes.

You and Tess, you were always so sad, Babcia said. That’s why I called you the old girls.

***

The old girls became new girls on their own.
The old girls said, fuck the old, we want in.
The old girls knew the stories, but they did not know better.
Old girls crave the ordinary, but old girls have new souls.
Viv placed Nina Simone’s “Lonesome Cities” on the record player, which sat on two stacked apple crates lazily hidden under a fringed blanket, and lit a Parliament. The man in Viv’s bed had needed a condom, one of those larger-than-average types that men believe they need. Viv let them believe it, and so she’d sent the man to the twenty-four-hour drugstore down the block, unsure if he would return. At age twenty-eight, Viv had finally learned to say, “Okay, but only with a condom” (or, “No, you really need a condom”) after countless Plan Bs and one miscarriage. She did not mind so much, now, if the men never came back from the drugstore.

Viv examined her right breast beneath the silk of her bathrobe, a muted yellow with pink orchids. Smoking made her nervous; she had planned to quit at twenty-five. Viv had planned on quitting a lot of things then, including sex with people she knew only by first name. Tonight, his name was Jack. Short for nothing. Just Jack. This Jack, though, whom she had met at her friend’s housewarming on the back porch steps, sharing a beer and a mutual appreciation for that French arthouse film playing in Montclair, she liked. She would mind if Jack left her with a sobbing Nina Simone and stray thoughts of breast cancer.

When Jack returned, posing in the doorway of her pre-war studio with a tiny cardboard box that he offered like an engagement ring, Viv said, goddamn. Goddamn, I’m glad I saw that pretentious French flick.
She was undoing the buttons of his jeans when her cellphone buzzed on the nightstand. And as Viv pulled down his jeans, buzzed again.

Text messages from Tess lit up the screen: *need you*

*i can’t deal right now*

*need youuuuu*

Jack sighed as Viv reached over to the nightstand. She stuck her fingers in his mouth and texted Tess back with her free hand: *soon. i’m getting it girl*

Tess texted: *get it girrrrlll get it*

Tess tossed her cellphone into her boxy Kate Spade purse. Viv was always getting it, and where these men came from, Tess never knew. They were older, younger, police officers, sales agents, grad students. Viv had her way of leaning back and getting everything. Tess knew that Viv did not want everything but took it anyway. Tess had stopped blaming her for it.

It was Friday night, and only 8 p.m. in Los Angeles, but Tess was already exhausted. Tess, who now went by Maria Teresa, worked a client-facing job in branded content marketing and lived with her boyfriend Davey, a commercial producer, in an overpriced Spanish hacienda-style duplex “overlooking” what was left of the Silver Lake reservoir. On evenings like this one, when everyone was playing air hockey at the local barcade, Tess navigated, on foot, the knotty streets from Hyperion to Silver Lake Boulevard. The drought had sucked up the last bit of green, transforming the hipster hamlet into a village of concrete tunnels. Tess would slip by house parties and backyard comedy shows, sidestepping the laughter and bad jokes and electronica and drunken
shouts, and wonder how everyone else could have so much more fun, in the very same place. Was she, Ms. Maria Teresa Santos, missing something?

No, Ms. Maria Teresa Santos had a secret. Her life was better than Viv’s, but she hated it.

Tess paused outside a faded craftsman bungalow and followed desert-red stones like lily pads to the backyard, where twenty-somethings in ripped jeans, miniskirts, and crocheted halter tops mingled in shapeless groups. Lawn chairs, beach chairs, and garden benches formed an uneven semi-circle around the makeshift stage: a wooden platform affixed to four cinderblocks. Someone handed Tess a tallboy of PBR. Someone else gave her a lit cigarette. Another asked if she wanted to share a spliff. She passed along two joints and snuck off to a lumpy pink beach chair in the corner of the yard, beside a dry grotto replenished with rubber stones, and laughed at all the right times during Davey’s stand-up set. Tess knew she should record his jokes about dating the “Filipina woman” and send the video to Viv, but instead, she texted Viv a stealth photo of two women with poorly done hair extensions.

Tess captioned the picture: *seriously?*

Viv stood in her crowded corner kitchen, pouring a glass of water for Jack, who stretched out on her bed, a new condom wrapper in his hands.

She texted back: *ugh janky!*

Viv worked at a mid-level hair salon. She waxed eyebrows and upper lips and bikini lines; swept discarded clumps and curls; and washed the dirty hair of people she did not like. They wanted to tell her about their babies and their dogs; the names they chose and how big they’d grown; the parties they would throw (for baby or dog) and the
people they, too, did not like but had to invite. Viv never had anything new to tell these clients. She was still single; her babcia was still dead; her landlord was still an asshole; and her life was still here, in Bloomfield, where it had started.

Tess had the money, the scenery, the man. Viv had a view of the Parkway and some used condoms in her wastebasket.

Still, Viv slept well beside Jack, who curled around her spine. In the morning, he lingered for a mug of coffee on the fire escape, wrapped in one of Viv’s fuzzy throw blankets. He stroked her ankle as she smoked her Parliaments and pointed out the street’s main attractions: the neighbors who fought; the neighbors who had kinky sex; the neighbor who was likely dead but everyone was too afraid to check. After Jack left, Viv saved his number in her cellphone and played “Il N’y A Pas D’Amour Heureux” on the record player. She reclined on her velvet indigo arm chair, sifted through her dead neighbor’s magazine subscriptions, propped her bare feet on the thin windowsill, and called Tess, even though it was barely 7 a.m. in Los Angeles.

Tess was awake, even on a Saturday, because Tess liked to go to sleep long before Davey came home from his fledgling comedy gigs. Davey would need to drink at least five more beers to fall asleep. Tess told Viv that he needed it to treat his insomnia; Viv said, sounds like some Dr. Oz bullshit.

What Tess did not tell Viv is that she had caught Davey one night, sitting in the corner of the bedroom, the laptop on the ottoman, jerking off to porn. Actually, it had been more than one night; really, more than a few nights. When she finally confronted Davey, he told her he just needed more, but Tess did not know what more she could give.
On the redwood balcony, flanked between two wispy birch trees, Tess viewed her sliver of the reservoir, a vacant pit once flushed with blue. Joggers still trotted in elongated circles, past construction zones and dying bushes. She loosely tied her taupe sweater duster at the waist, folded herself into a plastic hunter-green Adirondack chair, and pressed her cellphone harder against her ear, straining to hear what was happening in Viv’s four-hundred-square-foot of Bloomfield.

“Are you listening to Nina again?” Tess asked.

Viv ripped out a coupon for laser hair removal from Women’s Day. “Maybe.”

“That’s so fucking depressing.”


“Sadness isn’t beautiful, Viv.”

“There is no happy love, Tess.”

Tess walked to the edge of the balcony and hoisted herself onto the railing. “You don’t need to tell me that.”

Tess knew Davey could be better; she knew they had to try. Six weeks ago, she’d booked a trip up the Central Coast, hoping to quell the part of his mind that spun madly. They went for an extended weekend, four days out of cellphone range and Internet access. Davey drove, three hundred miles north on the PCH, stopping along the way at Santa Barbara, the Los Padres forest, Pismo Beach. She read him essays from Harper’s and The New Yorker; they argued over food politics, cruelty as art, and confessional poetry. He did not enjoy any of the poems she’d chosen, finding Adrienne Rich too political and Louise Gluck, too thin. But he liked how Tess read, a calm wave that somehow pierced the wind escaping the highway. Tess tried not to chastise Davey for
getting lost. U-turning on rugged canyon roads until he swerved to the side, steadying the
car beside a valley of trees. Calm down, he said. We’ll make it.

They were in a mossy bungalow just east of Big Sur, one of the last places in
California, it seemed, which still possessed some green. The host had left them a bottle of
wine (from a winery in the valley down, down the road) and some packaged chocolates.
The bed was larger and softer than the one at home in Silver Lake. Two French doors
opened onto a raised patio, surrounded by fir trees that created a natural blue-tinged
canopy. Davey had said it was perfect.

He made a fire in the white-brick fireplace and Tess prepared siomai (her
mother’s recipe) and pierogi (Babcia’s recipe). They ate on the patio, nestled together on
the cushioned love seat, and toasted the wine, drinking two full glasses. Tess changed
into a new lingerie set, which the salesgirl at Victoria’s Secret said would make her look
like a “sexy angel” with her long black hair shadowing the pale pink lace. Davey fingered
the garter belt, undid her bra, twisted her hair back when she straddled him against the
headboard. Tess felt sexy, but not like an angel, and she slid down to the sheets,
overwhelmed by the wine and adrenaline. Her mind, now, spun madly like his. She
pulled the sheet to her waist. Davey snapped her wrist back and pressed her arm against
the mattress. The bed wasn’t softer than the one at home; it was firm; it had hardened. He
said, I can’t be in a relationship with someone who can’t be my sexual equal. She said,
can you let me go? He said, I can’t. She said, then go, but please let me go.

“It’s the 21st century — why am I still Googling, is it spotting or am I pregnant?”
Tess asked Viv over the phone, that Saturday morning, two days before she peed on three
little white sticks. “You’d think we’d have this shit figured out.”
“Why are we still getting pregnant?” Viv said. “Where are those bionic uteruses?”

“Uteri,” Tess corrected.

“That’s what they’re called?” Viv said. “Sounds very Silicon Valley.”

“Forget it.” Tess could not put up with Viv this week, but Viv was the only woman, really, she could put up with. Although Viv was saying, you’ll be fine, Tess, you’ll be fine, Tess knew what Viv was really thinking: this sucks, Tess, this really fucking sucks.

“Be real, for a sec.” Tess paced in quick strides. “Be real, Viv.”


“You also a comedian now?”

“I didn’t tell you?” Viv lit a cigarette. “Comedy Central called last week.”

Tess paused, tightening the sweater duster around her waist. “You think I’m a joke?”

Viv sighed. “I think your boyfriend is traumatizing you.”

“Thank you,” Tess said.

“I think you’re stressed and pissed.” Viv said. “But I think it’ll come, I do.”

Viv had a lot of habits, including smoking, double espressos, Saturday afternoon HGTV marathons, and kissing Babcia’s ceramic Virgin Mary statue before leaving the apartment each evening. She could live with all that caffeine and rustic shiplap and questionable idolatry and even dying a premature death—maybe, if the timing was right—but she could only live with it all if she Windex-ed her prefrontal cortex during that soundless
ride through the sprawling marshy majesty of the Meadowlands on the last train back to New Jersey.

Jack did not call her; not after a week, not after two. Viv did not like to think of herself as a mourner, someone who pines for an entirely believable but ultimately fantastical encounter until the longing fossilizes into resentment. Viv was a Jersey girl; she did not play nicely with patience. She had always insisted that she could fuck whoever whenever. That’s what boys do, she would say. That’s what Viv did.

The next week, after spraying and scrubbing all the mirrors in the salon, she traveled into the city with her coworkers, who wanted to dance at this new club on the Lower East Side. They pooled their tip earnings and got a cab, passed around a flask in the Tunnel, stuck their arms and heads out all along Second Avenue. Viv danced until her body clashed with a man in expensive blue jeans and a silky striped button down. Her coworkers, having witnessed this before, knew Viv would disappear, and they would not look for her.

The process of erasing went something like this: Viv would hug her body underneath her bulky thrift-store leather jacket and drift back through alleyways and artist lofts and college dorm rooms, filing them away one-by-one in her mental filing cabinet until she reached Matt, the leather seats, his sweat, the hum of the low-flying jet planes, his elbows resting on either side of her head, his knees spreading hers. She still cannot see his face, ten years later, because she kept her face turned to the right, her nose grazing the leather seat.

Viv was trying, desperately, to keep a man, any man, which may have been part of the problem. You can get a man, any man, to go out with you, sleep with you, live with
you, marry you, but it’s these very men that will wear you down until you’re all bone and cartilage.

Yet they had warned her, hadn’t they? They had given her signals, written out demands along her body. There were never any lies in the fucking, only lies in Viv’s retelling of it. And Babcia, poor Babcia. She had done everything the right way. She had used her Social Security checks to buy Viv a mother-of-pearl rosary; a new bedroom set for her dorm room; a blazer from Easy Pickins’ for her work-study position at the business school. When Viv dropped out of Rowan and returned to Bloomfield to wheel Babcia into the nursing home, she took a job at a local pub, pouring Jameson and Bacardi into open mouths, some of which she kissed, later, in the kitchen, the basement, the alley. Viv hid her exhaustion behind sunglasses and sarcasm, and Babcia would sigh, When will you wise up, Wisława.

And when Babcia drifted into unconsciousness for the final time, Viv stroked her veins, already sinking between the folds of her forearm, until the priest led her away from the bed and down the hall to the multipurpose “faith room.” Having cast aside her Catholicism long ago, Viv begged for this multipurpose faith, envisioning a goddess, a gentle goddess, enwrapping Bloomfield in her elongated arms. She said to the goddess, beneath that sickly yellow light, please don’t leave me lonely.

As Train 2203 jerked past the Kearny shipyards, Viv bit into a Boston cream doughnut and paused the routine Windexing. Perhaps this is what Babcia meant, all those hours she curled Viv’s thin hair and ironed her skirts; the nights they practiced their vocabulary together at the kitchen table; the Sundays she took Viv to Mass for a little bit of grace and the library for some peace. Babcia, who rode the trains and buses alone
nearly every decade of her life. She had taught Viv to always keep her pocketbook zippered, and to hold it firmly on her lap (never place it on the floor or, Lord, on the seat beside you); to keep her ankles crossed and knees together (never cross your legs at the knee on public transit, this isn’t the bar); to stare straight ahead to avoid attention, but if a man did sit beside her, to talk politely and sweetly but not actively or attentively (never ask him a question, which invites further conversation, a conversation you never wanted to have). Babcia believed in the rules. Viv, having seen Babcia solemn and steadfast and so, so exhausted as she rolled her little metal cart up and down Bloomfield Avenue, never did.

Earlier that night, Viv had let the man from the dance club fuck her against a brick wall. She felt the skin break, everywhere, her skirt up and thong down. He shimmied her around, her skirt still lifted, and pressed his body over hers. She turned her face to the right. She sucked the blood from her knuckles on the walk to Penn Station. She walked twenty blocks, at least. Outside Madison Square Garden, a man without a jacket said she was beautiful. She said thank you. He asked her name, and she said, Wsislaw. He said, is that Russian? and she said yes, even though it wasn’t. In the bathroom, she rinsed her ass with damp paper towels that streaked pink and black. She plucked specks of brick and stone from her upper thighs. Her damaged skin flailed like shredded fish fins. She tossed her thong into the trash can.

The long bathroom mirror reflected a woman who still, somehow, beneath the cracked makeup and streaky black eyes, looked younger than what she knew. The fluorescent lights howled, don’t go back to Jersey. Don’t go back to anywhere.
Viv did not want to leave the train at Bloomfield, but the last stop was only another five miles down the tracks. Where’s the adventure in a last stop if it’s so familiar; if it’s home? She limped down Bloomfield Avenue. The storefronts were black but cars still streamed by. She slid onto the red leather stool at the diner counter, the one she and Tess had once occupied all summer. She sat with her ankles crossed, knees together. She kept her purse, zippered, on her lap. She said hello to the sixty-something-year-old man who sat beside her; replied thank you when he said she had stunning eyes. He wore a short-sleeved Hawaiian shirt even though it was October. She ordered a cheeseburger and French onion soup for breakfast. He placed his hand on her knee and she left it there. He offered to drive her home and she said thank you, thank you, but no, thank you. He followed her outside.

Davey had said couples needed to fight as much as they fucked. It was healthy, expected. When do you learn more about a person than when they’re engaged in argument, two inches from your nose and spitting red? Davey’s neck colored first; eventually, the flush reached his temples, outlining his square Ray Ban frames. Tess’ eyes shimmered black. She climbed onto the middle rung of the balcony. The reservoir emptied; the joggers slowed to a walk. She questioned if he was ready. Davey grabbed her wrist, the second time. The redwood balcony splintered beneath her bare feet. He said he would be committed to his child. Tess asked if he would be committed to her.

Tess drove west on the 10, into rolls of the late-day mist. This was the grayest Los Angeles; this Los Angeles was the closest to home. She tried to listen to her female sense, her good sense, what it told her about his face, how he smiled, close-lipped, when he

Tess circled back east. She called Viv from a strip mall parking lot just south of Hollywood and Highland; only the laundromat was open. Live music floated down from Highland: a drum circle in front of the Chinese Theater. Tess had longed to experience things first, but she never wanted to be the one who would call Viv with some wild story or unexamined feeling.

Viv reclined on her bed in her bathrobe and drank coffee past midnight, like how Babcia would do on days when she drained the rosary. “Son of a Preacher Man,” Dusty Springfield, played from the turntable. She tried to imagine a lover here, refilling her coffee, choosing a new record—something familiar. Something they both liked. Viv had solitude, but she had long craved Tess’ quiet comfort.
But Tess had neither. Comfort eluded her; the quiet, it beat in her stomach as loud as the drum circle a mile away. She phoned Viv and told her, “You never think you won’t be a mother.”

“It’s like, it’ll always be there.” Viv dipped her toe on the fire escape, testing the metal floor like a cat tests a still pool of water. “Waiting for you.”

“Babcia always told us there would be a man and a baby.” Tess stepped out of her sedan and paced in small circles. The Roosevelt Hotel sign kept vigil over Hollywood’s darkened crevices.

Viv sat on the fire escape, pinching her bathrobe closed. Bloomfield was dim and tired, except for her neighbors, the kinky sex ones, whose silhouettes danced from one position to the next against their white curtains. She slid down to her knees and sucked on her raw knuckles.

“What if there’s no man,” Viv said.

“What,” Tess said, “if there’s no baby.”

And so Tess became one of those women who sit in the last pew at weddings, stays for the vows but leaves well before the husband and wife rush down the aisle, bouquets and bubbles overhead. It had started with the wedding of her college boyfriend, Chad, an Evangelist Christian from Waco, Texas. (“You can’t marry a Chad,” Viv had said during their summer break between freshman and sophomore year, after Tess flashed her
promise ring: sterling silver twisted into a rhinestone-studded cross.) Then there was Leo, the tattoo artist she’d dated after Davey, when she felt a little tipsy with rebellion. Shaun, a lawyer, was the only man other than Davey with whom she’d shared an apartment. And there Tess sat, before she left Los Angeles, at age thirty-four, with a one-way ticket to Newark, in the last row at the Korean Cultural Center on Wilshire Boulevard, watching Davey marry a woman nearly ten years his junior. His neck tightened when his eyes passed over hers. They hadn’t spoken since Tess moved out six years ago. Davey never blamed her for the abortion. He blamed her, still, for leaving.

Six months later, Tess and Viv sat in the last row of Sacred Heart, clinging to the leather clutches on their laps. Viv wore an iridescent pink shift; Tess, a floral halter sundress. They didn’t know this bride and groom, a 20-something Filipino couple: the Mendozas, the lovely Mendozas.

“This is pathetic, Tess,” Viv said.

“That could’ve been me,” Tess whispered back.

“Fuck off.” Viv rolled her eyes. “You never liked Filipino guys.”

“If I had a dollar for every ex who said, ‘they loved me so much,’ then got engaged—” Tess began.

“You would have about five dollars,” Viv finished.

“I’ll take that five dollars,” Tess said.

Tess got a job working in public relations at a start-up in the city and rented a brand-new “luxury” apartment in the heart of downtown Montclair. Viv, promoted to manager at the hair salon two years ago, had upgraded to a polished one-bedroom overlooking the Bloomfield Green, which she shared with Ramon, her boyfriend of two
years. The old girls were women now, neither young nor old. They returned to their high school haunts, the diner, the pizzeria, the pub. Tess, still donning her cardinal Stanford sweater, thrived on running into high school classmates, regaling them with tales about Los Angeles, congratulating them on their marriages and babies. She’d turn to Viv once they left and snort, “Everyone is so basic.”

Viv had already been through this, the pitiful basic-ness, the humiliating familiarity. Before Ramon, she’d suffered the invites and blind dates set up by her clients. She couldn’t close down the pub with Tess without brushing the forearm of a former alleyway fuck. All of them were married but would still grip Viv’s waist when they approached her bar stool from behind.

Ramon was a perfectly normal man—a nice guy, even—from Elizabeth, New Jersey: a middle-school math teacher, a soccer fan, a dog lover, a coffee drinker, a secret video gamer. The type of man who sits in the corner of the bar, keeps his thoughts to himself, reads the news and listens to all opinions before making a judgment. Viv was afraid to tell Tess about Ramon; she felt guilty now for having him and she knew it should. When Ramon first met Tess, she’d bought a round of Jameson for everyone at the bar, then tried to persuade Viv to attend an after-party with some off-duty firefighters.

“We’re tired,” Viv told Tess. “Right, babe?” She said, looking at Ramon, who curled his chin to his chest in mock exhaustion.

Tess drunkenly slung her arm around Ramon’s shoulder and pulled him a little too close. “You ruined her,” she told him. “Absolutely ruined.”

Ramon flinched. “The fuck?”

“She used to be so Viv,” Tess said. “She fucked every guy in here.”
“Tess—” Viv pulled her by the waist. Viv always had a very public life in Bloomfield, whether she wanted one or not. Once you become the girl who has a revolving love life, you are left on that rotating pedestal like a plastic ballerina frozen, in motion, as an adolescent girl in satin pink.

Tess kept going, swinging her double shot of Jameson. “Didn’t you, Viv? All these guys. Even the trucker over there.”

“Maria Teresa.” Viv again grabbed her by the shoulders this time. She ducked Tess’ arm, which cut through the air like a pitcher’s wind up, Jameson spilling onto the tiled floor.

“She can’t remember,” Tess, still staggering, told Ramon. “She never remembers anything.”

Viv and Ramon left Tess at the bar that night with the firefighters. They did not talk on the way home, nor once they were there, in bed, with the lights on.

“Ramon thinks I’m different,” Viv explained to a very hungover Tess over omelets and bloody Marys the next day.

“You are different,” Tess said. She removed her oversized sunglasses to read a text message from a firefighter, with whom she’d spent the night. “You were right about those guys. Damn, Viv.” Tess waved her cellphone in front of Viv’s face. “Daaa—mn, girl. He was fine.”

“Told you you needed some—”

“If you say, ‘some D,’ I’m gonna puke all over your eggs.”

Viv stuck a fork in her omelet and pulled out a chunk of eggs and avocado.

“Some stress relieving.” She swallowed it theatrically.
Tess slid her bloody Mary toothpick full of green olives into her mouth. Eyes closed, she slowly sucked each olive. “Mmm, Viv.”

Viv rolled her eyes and threw a home fry at Tess. “Feel better?”

Tess placed the mostly empty toothpick back into her bloody Mary and took a thoughtful sip. “I’d feel better if you did, too.”

Viv looked beyond Tess, beyond her black hair gathered into an off-centered topknot, to a group of moms clad in luxury activewear, strappy laced-back crop tops and cutout leggings dyed various earth tones. They pushed strollers, green smoothies resting in the cup holders, their children shielded by black mesh.

Tess, too impatient to wait for an answer, turned too. The mothers had stopped to soothe a crying child, the black mesh zipped back. They smiled and hushed. The old girls wanted to hate it. The old girls knew better than to appear wistful for such things.

Viv lit a cigarette. “I just wish men would stop using me as a pit stop for their betterment.”

Tess sucked down the last of her bloody Mary. “That’s not a word.”

“It means advancement,” Viv said. “Some people don’t need to go to college, Tess.”

The old girls, still in their summery wedding outfits, danced barefoot across the train tracks past midnight, their discarded heels poking out of the weeds. They tossed a bottle of Jim Beam and a pack of Parliaments back and forth.

“Ramon’s gonna be pissed,” Viv said.

“He doesn’t let you have any fun,” Tess said.
“Maybe Mrs. Li was right,” Viv said. “We would be better off.”

“So we can play mahjong for QVC handbags?” Tess marched to the center of the tracks. “Let’s just end it now.” She stood with her feet shoulder-length apart, spread her arms, and titled her head back.

“Girl, you’ll have to wait another five hours for the 5:38,” Viv said. She snatched the Jim Beam from Tess and patted her shoulder.

Tess stumbled back, already past her threshold. She did a sloppy twirl then paused, face up to the inky blue sky.

“What is it?” Viv asked.

“How old would your kid be?” Tess asked.

Viv coughed, having just made a quick, full circle and swallowing a little too much Jim Beam. She rarely discussed her miscarriage, even with Tess. She often envied that Tess had a choice, and she knew that Tess, too, envied her for escaping a decision.

“Twelve, I think,” Viv said, finally, lighting a cigarette. “I don’t know.”

But Viv did know. She had told Tess, twelve years ago, that she didn’t know the father. That he had been a friend of a friend of a patron at the pub. She was too embarrassed to say that it was Mike, the thirty-something musician she’d met at a folksy coffee house show in Jersey City. They dated for almost a year—something else she, too, had kept from Tess. Back then, Viv preferred—no, resorted—to call it “whatever, a fling, I guess.” It’s what she had called everything. The miscarriage, too, was considered a reprieve. Don’t we all like a fake-out sometimes, a true streak of fate? Viv didn’t know she was pregnant until the morning she drove herself to Mountainside Hospital, soaking several pads with purple-grey tissue and blood clots larger than quarters. The doctor said
she was sorry. The nurses said they were sorry. Viv said, don’t be, it’s nothing. But she could imagine it then, cross-legged and pants-less on the rubbery green gurney, imagine it because the fantasy had, briefly, been acknowledged. She could imagine peeing on the little white stick and not feeling anger, quitting smoking and her job at the pub, visiting Babcia’s grave with a good, happy message, so that when she came to this hospital in the very same circumstance the doctor and nurses would have a reason to be sorry. She could imagine it until Mike entered her partitioned-off corner of the ER fidgeting with his hoodie and said, Weird, right?

Tess took the bottle of Jim Beam from Viv and sat down in the center of the tracks. With the moon sloped behind the trees, Viv could barely see Tess there, the heavy shadows concealing her face like the long, long sheet of black hair she had as a teenager.

“My due date just passed,” Tess said.

“You remember?”

“I remember everything.” Tess had wanted Viv to join her in Los Angeles six years ago for the procedure, having told Davey it wouldn’t be right if he came. She’d bought Viv a one-way ticket and texted her: don’t worry about the money, no paying me back.

Viv texted: i don’t think I can get out of work

And Tess spent an unpaid sick day throwing up into a wastebasket beside her Adirondack chair on the balcony, counting the days left until the procedure, and texted back: i’ll spot you money, just quit

And Viv swept some peroxided curls into the dustpan, and texted: quit?? ??
And Tess smoked her first cigarette in years, her hands softly circling her stomach, and texted: *i need need need you here viv*

And Viv swiveled herself around in her coworker’s chair, and texted: *i’ll try old girl*

But Viv kept her job at the hair salon and never boarded the plane.

Tess drove herself to the clinic, opting out of anesthesia. She sipped plain Lipton tea and answered work emails in the waiting room until they took all her belongings, her phone and purse and jewelry, and placed them in a Ziplock bag inside a school-sized locker. She stopped at a Ralph’s on the way home to buy pomegranate juice and rice cakes. She almost wished she had the anesthesia so she could vomit into the paper bag of “goodies” they gave her, birth control pills and spermicide and a pamphlet on warnings, from possible infections to avoiding tampons and sex. She read the pamphlet three times in the parking lot, lying on her side with the seat down. Davey had called but didn’t leave a message, not even a text. She instead called and left a voicemail for the landlord of her future East Hollywood apartment.

“We could’ve had joint birthday parties,” Viv said, hopping onto the metal ledge of the track. She performed a crooked arabesque, her black ankle boot flexed down toward the weeds.

“Let’s just have our own babies,” Tess said, skipping in a small sloppy circle beside Viv. “Why not?”

“Why not, why not,” Viv sang. She swung her leg forward, leaving her boot dangling off her metatarsals. “Two babies. One for each.”
Tess lit a cigarette and blew the smoke toward the moon. “We should get married, too.”

“Benefits?” Viv asked.

“Financial,” Tess said.

“Spiritual.” Viv lit another cigarette, rocking slightly on the metal ledge. She remembered the nights in the blanket fort, when Tess would run her hand over Viv’s breast, gliding it down until their fingers entwined, and they would fall asleep like that, side by side.

“I always loved you, Wisława” Tess said, walking forward until the top of her head aligned with Viv’s neck. “I loved you first.”

Viv brushed back Tess’ black hair and kissed her on the forehead. “I know, Maria Teresa.”

Babcia had always said knowing when to leave was a skill one acquires with age. She would know—she often joked how she’d never left. But you moved from Jersey City to Bloomfield, Viv would say as Babcia braided her hair on the front porch steps. That’s something. Babcia would twist the ends of Viv’s blond strands and lean back, watch the moths complete their slow spiral into the hanging porch lights, and say, yes, isn’t that something.

Viv lugged a drunken, heavy-eyed, still-barefoot Tess across Bloomfield Green. They paused at a bench directly across from the statue of Christopher Columbus. Tess murmured something that vaguely sounded like, fuck that guy, and rested her head on
Viv’s lap. Viv stroked her fine black hair and said, I know, baby, I know. She stared at Christopher Columbus until she was sure Tess had fallen asleep.

Last winter, Ramon had driven Viv to the shore, to Asbury Park, which was always better during the off-season. They drank spicy hot chocolate and strolled the boardwalk in fingerless gloves, winter turning their noses red. Moody clouds swathed the little big-hearted city from the Stone Pony to the historic Casino. There, they took cover in an alcove of aging wood and new scaffolding. Viv leaned against a slanted beam and Ramon tugged his navy blue beanie over her ears. He told Viv she was a good woman; the type of woman you keep. Viv asked if he wanted to be an honest man. He said she could make him one. Ramon never needed much, and Viv supposed she did not, either. They slipped between unzipped parkas.

“I think I’m leaving him,” Viv said, quietly, still stroking Tess’ hair.

“Ramon is a nice guy,” Tess said, awake but unmoving.

“I know.”

“We’ve never liked nice guys.”

“I know.”

Tess collected herself into a sitting position. The old girls perched with straightened backs, hands clasped in their laps like schoolgirls in church pews, dresses hiked above their knees like women in distress. Bare feet pressed flat on the grass, their heels scattered around the bench. Two very unserious ladies, posing for a portrait no one would dare to take.

“I support your decision to like nice men, Wisława,” Tess said, finally. She laid back down, knees and feet up on the bench, her head in Viv’s lap.
Viv watched the remaining fireflies, the last wild ones, weave across the green. When they were young, the old girls would catch fireflies in the front yard and drop a select few into an old pickle jar fashioned into an insect lair. Holes punched into the lid, grass precisely positioned at the bottom. Tess loved watching the fireflies scuttle in the jar, a natural nightlight. Viv, never knowing what to do with the captured fireflies, preferred the chase. She had tried to figure out their patterns, count the seconds between their flashes, but they never had any patterns or codes. They flickered when they wanted to.

Tess fell asleep before Viv could tell her: She wished the old girls knew what to do with them.
Former Marys

My mother has lived in a four-family on Avenue A with her mother, father, and brother; a six-family on Avenue C with her mother, brother, and sometimes, father; a two-family on Broadway with her mother, brother, and a pregnant sister-in-law; an eight-family on Avenue A with just her mother; a two-family on 25th Street with her mother and husband; and a three-bedroom Tudor house on a bulldozed-over strawberry farm in suburbia with her husband and daughter. My mother has never lived alone.

My mother doesn’t like that I live alone, but what she doesn’t know is that I don’t always sleep alone. I slept with Luke and LeRoy at my studio on Franklin; John and Giancarlo at my one-bedroom with two dormer windows off Hoover; just Luke at my studio-sans-kitchen on Wilshire; Mike and Dantel and Luke again at my studio-plus-den at Vermont and Beverly; and no one yet at my air-conditioned one-bedroom with a balcony in the Valley. When my mother moved in last month, I’d slept alone for almost a year.

I would like to sleep with Luke here. We would pretend my stucco balcony, levitating just three feet off the ground, was one of those Parisian Juliet balconies—one
hardly large enough for Luke and me to stand on. We would lean our elbows between my
ashtrays and planters and imagine the Latin Quarter in place of Laurel Canyon
Boulevard, buildings painted the hues of the insides of conch shells instead of the thirsty
Southern California desert, translucent pearl-white veils for curtains instead of landlord-
approved venetian blinds. I always wanted to pry those blinds from their metal clenches
in each apartment, swing them around, and swap them out for floor-length curtains
reminiscent of fairy-tale ball gowns, but I never stopped moving.

I would like to sleep with Luke everywhere, really, if he’d let me. I liked to lie on
my side at midnight and watch him prick his fingers with a miniature lancet, squeezing
drops of blood onto a pocket-sized remote control that knew his body better than I did.
Some nights, I would doze off before he got his blood sugar results, waking in the
morning with my head lolling in that space between his clavicle and his shoulder. I had a
bad habit of falling asleep right after sex. Like a straight dude, I would say. My favorite
place to sleep with Luke was always on the boat ride back from Catalina, anchored to
each other in those high-backed plastic chairs. College kids buzzed out on Corona Lights
probably laughed at us as we fell asleep, just like how they laughed at my mother her first
morning in town as she asked them to translate L-G-B-T-Q at the queer
coffeehouse/bar/bookseller/vegan joint.

My mother transcribed the acronym in her mini spiral notebook. “So ‘queer’ is
okay now?”

“It’s a thing,” I told her. “Like, we’re here, we’re queer, fuck off.”

“That language,” she sighed. “Did I really raise you?”
The mother told her daughter: Wash your sheets at least once every two weeks. Save your plastic bags in a larger plastic bag beneath the sink. Always wear pantyhose—even in the summer time. Wait until you’re eighteen before using Tampons. Don’t say everything like a question, but question everything. A married man may not always wear a wedding ring. Keep a rosary in your bedside table. Listen to your father.

The men had said to the daughter: We can fuck that shit right out of you.

My mother didn’t expect to sleep alone that night in January. After watching two episodes of *Maverick*, she retired upstairs around 11 p.m. while my father made another pot of coffee, sat down at the kitchen table-turned-office, and rebooted his TurboTax software. (It was January 2nd; this was my father.) At 6 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, my mother awoke to the smell of burnt coffee.

At 1 p.m. Pacific Standard Time, Luke came over to my Vermont and Beverly studio with only his car keys and a half-drunk bottle of Bacardi. We drove to Griffith Park, but that place is too popular now to share any quiet moments of catharsis, even on a rare overcast Tuesday, so we went to the taco truck at Alvarado and Temple, where we dipped our foreheads together over paper plates soiled with al pastor and hot sauce. Having lost his mother at age three to an aneurism, Luke could imagine the trajectory of my father’s blood clot. How fast had it traveled through his chest, his neck, his nasal cavity to his temple? For Luke’s mother, it took at least three days; for my father, maybe three hours. My father had never liked Luke, and Luke had never liked my father, but they found kinship in death.
We tossed away the paper plate, which had nearly disintegrated between our fingertips, and lingered there in the mist rolling in from the adjacent car wash. I gathered the hem of his navy T-shirt, soaked a little from this sudsy rain, and told Luke I loved him.

The night before, Luke munched on sour jelly candies peppered with extra sugar to raise his glucose level from fifty-seven to eighty and I slipped into that unnamed space his body saved for me. Luke had decided humans were meant for physical contact—always, always wanting contact. I told him I enjoyed being alone and he said, “That’s where we differ.” Why do we differ?

My mother knew, because like all mothers, she thought she knew everything about her daughter. “You can’t let go,” she said. “He can.”

So now my mother and I both sleep alone, but live together. She took my bed and banished me to the rusted orange mid-century-style couch that had looked better online. My mother told me when I first moved to Los Angeles five years ago that I needed a grown-up sofa that didn’t reek of millennial defiance. “Too bad you got rid of that futon,” my mother would say now, every other morning. as I half-assed some Pilates stretches in the hallway between the kitchen and the bathroom. I let her claim this one. See, I can let go.

I didn’t know what to do with my mother, who, at sixty-two, was not only newly widowed but newly retired, having left her back-room accounting job at a small religious nonprofit after my father’s passing because life’s too short. (Addendum: Life’s too short and your husband might drop dead.) While I navigated the 405-10-110-101 to my data entry job to my executive assistant job to my substitute teaching gig, my mother would
wait at that queer coffeehouse/bar/bookseller/vegan joint. She would bring her plastic index-card holder, order a gluten-free croissant, and delve into a stack of rainbow newsprint. She clipped coupons for hand soap and mouthwash, scented candles and cat food (for my neighbor and her two Siamese kittens). When she had enough coupons for Dasani water to replenish the Hollywood Reservoir, my mother perused those free real estate pamphlets displayed at the local Ralph’s. I found one stuck in her pile of grocery-store weeklies. She had made notes all over it in blue pen, circled every two-bedroom, two-bath condo within a thirty-mile radius. Glendale, Northridge, Studio City. Even San Gabriel and Montebello, the forgotten east valley. She marked a three-bedroom condo in Pasadena with a star: *Dream! 0.05% Downpayment? 10? Use life insurance $$?*

I ripped out the page and stuck the pamphlet back between the weeklies.

We started going to beach bingo—or bingo on the beach, but never beach blanket bingo—on Saturday mornings. We lounged in rubbery chairs, balanced plastic dinner trays over our laps, and rolled our toes in the sand. Most of the bingo players were locals, residents of the active-adult community a half-mile down the boardwalk. They rode to the beach on golf carts, their foldable card tables affixed to the back. The women liked to wear bedazzled floral kimonos and straw fedoras.

“Maybe you could get an apartment at their place,” I told my mother. We were spending our second Saturday at the beach.

“You think these are my people?” My mother poised her electric blue marker mid-air and glanced at the so-called active adults. They were busy color-coding their bingo cards with their markers.
“Well,” I said, “am I your people?”

“Don’t tease,” my mother said. “You’ll be having this conversation with your daughter one day.”

I thought about the three-bedroom townhouse in Pasadena. The one my mother marked $$$. The one marked dream.

I didn’t know whose dream it was.

The mother told the daughter: Don’t be a floozy. It’s not Halloween candy—don’t give it out to everyone who comes to the door. Lock your doors with the chain. Complete your college degree. Why not graduate school? An MBA? Have your own bank account; accounts, if you’re lucky. A family may not always live in the open. You always know who the father is.

The daughter said to the men: I’ll be over by midnight. I can’t tell you when I’ll leave.

It only took six Saturdays at the beach before my mother won bingo—twice. First, she won in the diagonal pattern: B5, I21, Free Space, G58, O69. She received a cobalt blue fanny pack embroidered with the Rocco’s Tacos dancing burrito logo—“Why not a taco?” “It’s ironic, I think.”—and a gift certificate for Trader Vic’s at the Beverly Hilton.

“This money goes to a church, right?” My mother brushed excess sand from her calves and thighs before clasping her new prize around her waist.

“I think it goes to a Kabbalah center,” I told her.

“Is that Jewish?”
“It’s like, Madonna. She’s kinda Catholic.”

My mother shifted the fanny pack so it obscured the plum-red scar that split her abdomen like a fault line: a remnant from her massive emergency surgery five years ago. The doctors explained that scar tissue thin as a piano string, a long lost complication from her C-section decades earlier, had twined itself around her intestines. It took me these last six weeks to persuade my mother to wear this bikini-skirt combo, and still she crossed her arms at her belly button when she walked by those active-adult men sipping Coronas in their pastel Bermuda shorts.

“You’re a better Mary than Madonna,” my mother finally said.

My mother liked to tell people I was a former Mary. She was one, too. We’d worn the same headscarf when we played the Blessed Mother in the same staged Living Stations production at the same Catholic Church, thirty-four years apart. The headscarf was a color that lived somewhere between aquamarine and sapphire—a color without a birthstone. A bastard blue. My mother said that was blasphemous, so I renamed it Virgin Mary Blue.

A good color, my mother would say.

It was, in fact, our favorite.

It was always a burden to be the Mary. All my high school classmates knew me as “the church girl.” I went to Mass every Sunday, and pro-life rallies every election season. It wasn’t until I rid myself of that virgin modifier that the boys became interested. It was perversion: boning the church girl. They thought I would be kinky in bed—kinky in that sweet way of a Catholic girl who’s shy but willing, who knows she’s sinning and,
somewhere between the whiplashing hair twists and sex in public places, burrows her
shame as these boys unhook her bra with one hand and wrench her wrist with the other.

But I wasn’t kinky-sweet, and I’m still not. I’m still a Mary, former or not.

Luke didn’t have that perversion; he liked that I was a Mary. He was the only one.

“Maybe I’ll date a woman next,” I said to my mother as we began a new round of
bingo.

“I don’t think that’s you,” my mother said.

Mothers are cute, thinking they know everything there is to know about their
daughters. “Are condos in Pasadena me?” I asked.

My mother furiously blotted I-22 on her bingo card—already two numbers away
from winning bingo in an X pattern. “You have this one,” she said, leaning over to blot I-
22 on my bingo card.

“Why don’t you just talk to them?” I pointed to the active adults. The men waved
back, all smiles and Coronas.

“We need something,” my mother said, just as the bingo caller announced O-64.

My mother’s arm snapped toward the sky.

After carefully marking my mother’s card with a pencil, the bingo caller yelled
that it was “a good bingo!” The other women tugged at their crocheted cover-ups and
tossed their crumpled bingo cards into their canvas tote bags. Their fedoras couldn’t mask
their side-eyes as my mother returned to our beach chairs with yet another gift certificate
for Trader Vic’s.

“Fifty bucks!” My mother waved the gift certificate over her head like her
winning bingo card. “Now we really need to go to this place.”
“I don’t need a condo in Pasadena, Ma,” I said. “And you haven’t even sold the house yet.” I removed the plastic dinner tray from my lap and sunk my toes deeper into the sand, creating a ripple that settled around our ankles. “So what do we need?”

My mother slipped off her sunglasses and studied me with her light blue eyes.

“You need to stop thinking about Luke,” she finally said.

“And you need to start talking about him,” I said.

My mother prayed the rosary in full each night; I’d grown accustomed to falling asleep to her muddled incantations from behind the closed bedroom door. Earlier in the week, I’d caught her on the balcony at 2 a.m., hunched over the wide stucco ledge with her head and shoulders pressed between the planters. I waited on the couch, half-awake, for almost an hour, the quilt pulled to my chin. I woke to her tucking the quilt around my body, pink morning light already filtering through the blinds.

My mother continued to go to the grocery store, the drug store, the mall, each day with her plastic coupon holder. Two days ago, she bought a toaster and coffee maker because “it was a good deal.” And yesterday, on my drive home from my substitute teaching gig, I found her strolling along Laurel Canyon Boulevard humming the Maverick theme song. When I pulled over, she slid into my car, careful not to wrinkle her linen slacks, and said she was just passing her time.

We towed our beach chairs along the concrete boardwalk, the Trader Vic’s gift certificates secured in my shirt pocket. My mother hummed along as we passed a twenty-something nouveau hippie in fur boots and pasties playing a tinny version of “Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow” on her portable synth. My mother dropped a five-dollar-bill into the tip bucket, and the nouveau hippie blew her a kiss. The synth lines soon rolled
out with the boardwalk planks. We were steps from my car when my mother let her beach chair collapse onto the concrete.

She turned to me and said, “I loved your father. But he was just one person.”

The father said to the mother: You’re my favorite thing.

The mother’s mother said to the mother: Without him, you’re finished.

The mother said to the father, to her mother: Don’t I know it.

During the year I’ve slept alone, I relearned this city. I’ve gotten quite good at eating alone, drinking alone, sight-seeing alone. Still, I would find myself side-eying men in bookstores and movie theater lobbies. But star-crossed meet cutes only happened onscreen; Los Angeles is not a particularly chatty town unless it involves your IMDB credits. That, or being alone is a hard habit to break.

But I wasn’t alone-alone. I would talk to Pete at the queer coffeehouse/bar/bookseller/vegan joint every Monday night. He was middle-aged, unemployed, and the only customer there never working on a graphic novel or web series or a comedy-action screenplay, though he did like to talk about movies. He knew more about inciting incidents and deus ex machina than the producers and film school kids who lived in this town. One night, as I fired off resumes to more temp agencies, Pete told me what he hates most about Los Angeles: “You know what I never see in movies? I never see two lovers who come back together after many years apart.”

I called Luke that same night and told him what I hated most about Los Angeles.
Now, what I hated most was how my mother watched me flipping through sports and news channels on a Saturday night, drinking warm beer in my yoga pants.

My mother marched in front of the television to block my view of KTLA and its bronze-tinted anchors. She pressed her heels firmly into the carpet, glanced at my legs haphazardly draped over the arm of the blood-orange couch, and sighed, “You’re just like your father.”

“Bored?” I asked, attempting to switch channels around my mother’s stubborn body.

“Sad,” my mother said.

“Dad died happy,” I said.

“He died doing his taxes.”

“But he loved doing his taxes.”

My mother rearranged my legs so she could lower herself onto the couch. We watched raw footage of a car bomb in a foreign city with the newscasters muted, then switched to the Dodgers-Angels game. “Is this how we live?” my mother sighed again.

I knew what she was asking: Is this how we’d always lived?

She went onto the balcony, left the sliding door open. Laurel Canyon Boulevard floated into the living room with that strange inland breeze. I thought about all the things I would do if my mother wasn’t here. Stop shaving my legs. Quit my temp gigs. Get an IUD. Call myself alone and childless. Make that big move to Paris, not Pasadena.

“OK,” I said, joining my mother on the balcony. “The game is called, Fuck Laurel Canyon Boulevard. Where do you wanna go?”
My mother rested her elbows on the stucco ledge. “Someplace else,” she said.

“This place your father would never take me.”

We nibbled on cashews and sipped Mai Tais poolside at the Beverly Hilton. The Trader’s Vic patio glowed red and orange, illuminated by four-foot-high tiki posts and scattered fire pits that struggled to warm even a mild Los Angeles night. My mother wore a silk Virgin Mary Blue dress that highlighted her eyes and concealed her curves. She lazily traced the shape of the pool in the air with her pointer finger. I shoveled the ice from my Mai Thai with a chintzy paper umbrella and scanned the patio for people my age. There were none.

“Oh my Lord.” My mother checked me with her shoulder.

I followed her gaze to the palm-tree-canopied veranda at the opposite end of the pool, unsure of what I was supposed to be Oh-my-Lording.


“Your contacts are old, Ma,” I said. “That guy’s not British enough.”

My mother stretched her sandaled feet toward the mini fire pit, which cast long, spiky shadows across her misshapen big toes. “You need a Mr. Darcy,” she said.

“Maybe a Mr. Wickham.”

She shook her head. “You always liked those bad boys.”

I went through my mental archive, indexing all my real-life bad boys. “There’s only three, I think,” I told her.

“Three is too many for a former Mary,” she answered.
Another round of Mai Tais. We kicked off our sandals, wrapped our shoulders in cotton cardigans. We put on Cockney accents and tried fooling the middle-age couple relaxing nearby. I invited the Hawaiian-shirted waiter to an after-party in Hollywood. Both the couple and the waiter said we were cute. “Mother and daughter?” they asked. “No,” we replied, but we didn’t tell them what we were exactly.

The man my mother had believed was Colin Firth appeared before our fire pit. He gazed at us like men do in the last remaining moments of calm before a night’s uninvited disruption. Up close, this man was not Colin Firth at all, but he did bear a passable resemblance to Jimmy Stewart, his silver-streaked hair slicked back. One small curl glanced the three fine, parallel wrinkles defining his forehead.

“Not bad,” my mother whispered to me from behind her paper umbrella.

The Jimmy Stewart look alike eased into the charcoal lounge chair next to my mother and held out his freckled hand; a gold Rolex flashed at his wrist. My mother raised her eyebrows at me, immediately charmed; It’s a Wonderful Life was her favorite movie.

“I’m Mary,” my mother told the Jimmy Stewart look alike. She winked at me.

“And I’m Mary, too,” I said.

“Mary and Mary.” He casually crossed his legs, relaxed in his light gray trousers.

“For Christ’s sakes, did I end up with the only Catholic girls here?”

“Women—” I started to correct him.

“We’re just a couple of girls,” my mother spoke over me, tapping the tip of her sandal against my ankle. She assured him that we were single—very single—girls.
The Jimmy Stewart look alike—whose name, we learned two minutes later, was George—ordered shrimp scampi and steak frites and two more Mai Thai’s, even though my mother’s nose already radiated that drunken pink sheen. George was from Northern California originally, Boston educated, and now a bonafide Angeleno for nearly three decades. He worked as an executive producer at a satellite radio station.

“But not for one of those conservative nutjobs.” George winked at my mother.

“Oh, thank God,” my mother cooed.

“You hated the Clintons,” I whispered to my mother.

“No right now,” she whispered back.

My mother was not my mother tonight but a divorcée trying to get back on her feet after leaving her cheap bastard of a husband. I’d never seen her act this way, so unbound and luminous and playfully deceitful. Her short blonde bob swiveled as she giggled at his jokes and exclaimed, “That’s right, George!” She even smoked a cigarette—“I haven’t done this in 30 years!”—exhaling as though transported to the Beverly Hilton circa 1960. I’ve never seen my mother lie, either, but a former Mary is a former Mary for a reason.

George was all in, relaxing his hand on my mother’s leg. His splayed fingers covered the entirety of her knee.

“What’d your husband do?” George asked.

My mother leaned further into George, the tips of her blonde bob grazing his shoulder. “He sold insurance,” she said, “and became regional manager, too.”

“No, no,” George said. “What’d he do to you.”

“Oh, oh.” She tossed back the rest of her Mai Thai.
I wondered what lie my mother would come up with this time. She got creative
when it came to my father, having spent years devising excuses for why he couldn’t make
weddings or birthday dinners or Christmas Eve mass.

My mother looked past the veranda, past the boozy, willowy partygoers spilling
out from the poolside suite, past the hazy Beverly Hilton sign.

“Well,” she said, finally, “he wouldn’t let me go to law school.”

“Let?” George said.

“He thought it would be a waste of time,” my mother said, “paying for night
school and all that. And then I had her.” She pointed her paper umbrella at me, her blonde
bangs quivering above her finely arched eyebrows.

“Not a waste of time.” George patted my mother’s knee and winked at me.

I jammed the umbrella into my chin until it snapped. The paper crinkled like the
hem of my mother’s Virgin Mary Blue dress between George’s fingertips.

The daughter said to the mother: This isn’t what you wanted.

The mother said to the daughter: You never asked what I wanted.

I followed my mother into the restroom, where she adjusted her dress and powdered her
cheeks. Her youthful pink flush seemed to linger with George’s rustic cologne and her
new bravado. “I asked George to come back to my—our—apartment,” she said.

“What for?”

“You know what for.”

“You know we’re already at a hotel, Ma.”
“It’s more fun this way.”

She switched out her powder for her dark red lipstick. I pushed myself onto the bathroom counter, like how I used to when I was a little girl watching her get ready for work.

“I always thought hotels were sexy,” I said, crossing my legs.

My mother swatted my knee. “Stop that.” The flush faded from her cheeks, her shoulders tensed. For a moment, she was my mother: back slightly hunched, head tilted down, courage drained.

“George must be a weird guy,” I said. “You think he really works at that radio station?”

“Stop it.” She straightened up, the rosy glow returning to her cheeks. “You always see the worst.”

“Why would he want come to my shitty place in the Valley?”

“It’s not shitty.” She delicately blotted her lipstick with a paper towel. “I live there, too.”

I slid off the counter and stood beside my mother. Wisps of pale hair levitated above the crown of her head. “Was that true about Dad?” I smoothed her hair.

My mother didn’t respond, didn’t look at me. She ran her fingertips up and down her stomach, one gentle straight line from her underwire to just below her belly button.

“Do you think George will mind my scar?” she asked.

“Dad never minded,” I said.

Her reflection lifted her eyes. A vision in Virgin Mary Blue.
Sexiled by my own mother, I called Luke. I told him, my mother is here and fucking a man who resembles Jimmy Stewart. Luke asked, in which movie?

We drove to Griffith Park, which was too bustling, even at midnight, to have a calming presence. We needed the company now; the city was our chaperone. We flashed our cellphones at the USC kids making out in their Audis and Beamers. Along the dusty path to the L.A. Zoo, we thought we heard that mountain lion on the lam for mauling a koala bear, but it was only a twitchy jogger who assumed we were the koala-face-eating mountain lion. He told us to watch out and jog backwards if we confronted it. Luke thought we had to run sideways. I told them they were both wrong.

We abandoned the zoo and instead found a canopied overlook of Los Angeles. The city was a basin of orange and purple lights. Nighttime Los Angeles possessed a sense of normalcy that the city lacked in the daytime. I counted the skyscrapers staggering downtown. Luke wrapped his arm around my shoulders and I found that space. I could always find that space.

“Do you think about me?” I asked.


He wore a new sweater—a striped beige-and-navy cardigan. I’ve never seen him in a cardigan, and I didn’t want to find out who he wanted to impress. Luke insisted on telling me anyway. He’d started sleeping with a college senior he’d met online, then at the local dive, then at her off-campus apartment with the purple shaggy bathroom mats and Breakfast at Tiffany’s posters. The sex was okay; she was okay; it was all okay. He’d
answered my phone call because tonight was one of those nights when he sometimes thought of me.

I pulled away from his shoulder. “Do you think about what I said?”

“About the mountain lions?” Luke asked.

I nudged his bicep with my shoulder, barely moving him; Luke was scrawny, but resilient. He removed his diabetes lancet from his back pocket and pricked his middle finger. Two droplets of blood plopped onto his little machine.

“It really meant a lot to me,” Luke said.

“That’s it?”

Luke put his little device back in his pocket. His blood sugar read perfect: ninety.

“Look,” he said, “just let me get my life sorted out.”

I cat-walked to the edge of the trail, past dry, spiky thickets of brush and shrubs. I tried counting the skyscrapers from downtown to the Fox lot, but got lost in the maze of craftsman houses and motels and car washes lining the mid-city corridor. “L.A.’s not that old,” I said.

Luke sidestepped down the trail, his clumsy gait crunching the brush. “I have no idea,” he said when he came to a rest beside me. “What are you saying?”

“It doesn’t feel new, but it never feels old,” I said. “It never feels settled.”

Los Angeles seemed to shrink in this moment, the lights of the city shutting off one neighborhood at a time. Mar Vista, Hancock Park, Boyle Heights. I shuffled the dirt with my ballet flats, shuffled it right onto his sneakers. He shuffled it back.

“Let’s not fight tonight,” he said.
I slept beside Luke that night, but I did not sleep like how I always slept beside him. In the morning, I woke with the sun floating over Mount Washington and saw that he was just one person.

Northeast of downtown, the palm trees swayed like piñatas. I paced along Figueroa with a $4 iced coffee, past Owl Drugs and the half-mile corridor of fast food restaurants. A line of grade-school girls in swingy Virgin Mary Blue cotton jumpers crossed single file at an intersection, arms linked like they were playing Red Rover. I thought Luke would have liked this scene; he would have said, “What a movie moment.”

My mother was waiting on the balcony, elbows pressed against the stucco ledge, when I returned to the apartment. A light jersey bathrobe draped loosely over her hips and shoulders; the ends of her bob spiked up and out. George was gone, but my unmade bed still held his presence.

I closed the bedroom door, made a fresh pot of coffee, and joined my mother on the balcony. The easy morning breeze rippled the bathrobe at her waist, revealing her nearly sheer camisole. I could see the dark purple line, rough and raised, dragging along her abdomen, from her upper intestine to her pelvic bone. I used to give my mother suggestions, dangerous scenarios to recount when people asked her about the scar: a shark attack, a home invasion, a natural disaster, a motorcycle accident. She used to tell people it was her last souvenir of motherhood.

“You just had a one-night stand.” I offered her a mug of coffee. “How does it feel?”

“Conflicting,” my mother said.
I leaned my elbows onto the stucco ledge and together we watched the cars swerve under phone lines and billboards. The heat out here did not flush, did not burn, but blanch its surroundings until our skin became overexposed.

“‘The game is called, Fuck Laurel Canyon Boulevard,’” I said. “Where would you like to be?”
Instinct

See how she can’t function in society as a woman of rules. How she doesn’t care about conducting all her grocery-store transactions with an upper lip bristled like a broom, or her auburn hair clumped with enough grease to start a kitchen fire. She doesn’t even shrug. She stands there willowing, staring blankly as if she’s waiting for a bus on a route that’s been trampled by budget cuts. Hear her break down outside the movie theater—over nothing!—while contemplating a little boy chasing after a pigeon chasing after a French fry. Or watch her shiver in the grocery store, not in the frozen foods aisle, where it would be appropriate to shiver, but in front of the oatmeal boxes; trembling, a full-bodied tremble, as she decides between “plain” and “cinnamon.” She argues with the stoplight between midnight and 1 a.m., yelling for it to turn green, then red. Over nothing! A fractured relationship and an empty apartment, his things long gone, shipped to Riverside, California, where he’s living with his brother and working on his second career in landscaping—poor timing, considering the drought and all. She has no belief that he will turn himself around. She cannot even turn herself around outside the movie theater, to walk inside and purchase a ticket with her own money, watch a movie of her own choosing, only crying when it is the right time to cry, as any woman would.
Women of a Certain Kind

They had told Anna over the phone not to bring anything that would remind her of Leonard; her father; her brother; her first boyfriend; her first fuck; her last fuck that wasn’t Leonard; the last man she thought about fucking when she was with Leonard; the man who gave her her first orgasm; the man—men, really—who never gave her an orgasm, God bless them; the man who changes her oil; the man who taught her about Proust and lost time; the man who wasted that time she never recovered; that surrealist painter in art school who said she was too striking for the canvas then painted her as a llama; that musician who slept in his station wagon and only used blue condoms; the man in this elevator and the man in that elevator and the man in the elevator at Winthrop Square who said she would be his type if he were thirty years younger and forty pounds lighter; her corporate boss who wore blazers with tweed elbow patches like a Russian history professor; her coworker who slapped her ass at the Christmas party and the HR head who lost the report he never filed; her first love and his pregnant wife; her other first love and his pregnant wife; the man she had wanted to love and his second pregnant wife; every man she has met under dim lights and the spell of Jameson.

They did not tell her what they would do for her, exactly.
The women at *St. Elizabeth Joan’s Home for Women of a Certain Kind* lived on the second and third floors of an Easter egg yellow triple-decker house in Newburyport, Massachusetts, where cobblestones outnumber cellphones. Their rooms were small and practical, painted pale blue with white trim, and furnished with only a bed, a dresser, and some mismatched nightstands. Lacy balloon curtains covered the wide windows. None of their doors had locks.

“A formality,” said Lillian, a plaid-shirted forty-something woman who helped Anna lug her suitcase up the wooden helix staircase. She jiggled the bronze antique handle. “I’m sure you understand why.”

Anna was already used to it. It had only been a week since two Boston police officers snapped her front-door lock with a crowbar, discovering Anna half-naked on a bed of Doritos and liquor-store receipts, her flannel shirt streaked with spit and vodka. Anna knew, even though the cops wouldn’t say, that Leonard had phoned the police. It was something Leonard would do. He always considered himself an expert in crises. I’m a disaster fixer, he would say.

Really, Leonard was the catastrophe. That’s what Anna repeated to herself as she drove north on Route 1 in that muted New England light. Leonard, who left her, at age thirty-four, pancaking scars in other women’s bathrooms before other women’s baby showers. Leonard was living with his brother in Riverside, California, chain-smoking Pall Malls by the community pool and going to AA meetings in flip-flops. She hadn’t seen him in six months.
Anna opened and closed the dresser drawers, swiped its top with her index finger, and blew away the dust. “Who’s in charge here?” she asked Lillian.

“Quentin,” Lillian said. “She’s already doing her nightly meditation. You’ll meet her tomorrow.”

“So that’s what this is?” Anna said. “A halfway house.”

Lillian paused in the doorway. The stairwell’s octangular stained-glass window cast her in a ceremonial glow. “Well,” she said carefully, “what does, ‘women of a certain kind’ sound like, do you think?”

Anna surveyed the bed, its curved white metal frame and the gold floral quilt that sought to make it less sterile. She had agreed to spend two months at the home to heal what could not be powdered and concealed with pricey Sephora products.

She glanced at Lillian and shook her head. “Like we’re not that certain.”

They’d lived in Brighton, on that one-lane serpentine road linking Commonwealth to Sutherland. Their only views were of parking lots and back porches. The summer Leonard lost his job, they built a shantytown on their roof. Leonard hauled the sea-foam green love seat he salvaged in Allston up there, placing it beneath a tarp composed of transparent plastic umbrellas strung together with fishing line, so they could count the stars even during those balmy summer showers. Anna would find Leonard lounging with a thirty-rack between his feet, listening to the radio broadcast of the Red Sox game four miles over in Kenmore. He never wanted to go to Fenway, because who pays eight
dollars for a Budweiser? Leonard planned everything around how many beers he could
drink, and for how much.

Longer days somehow meant longer nights on the roof, with Leonard taking
refuge there once the brownstones became flushed under the sinking sun. Anna began
timing Leonard’s beers by the B train scraping along the Green Line tracks. A clank and
a snap, metal grating metal from two blocks away. It was almost Pavlovian, the way both
the B line and Leonard announced themselves, every twenty minutes until 1 a.m.—
thankfully, the T gave up on late-night service—when Leonard would limp to the edge of
the roof and spit tobacco bits onto the Boston College kids lighting up four stories below.
Anna cannot remember him not drinking. But everyone drinks in Boston, Leonard would
say, it’s how the Revolution started. A bunch of drunk Boston rascals swinging empty
mugs at the Red Coats and pissing into the harbor. They could do that, then, without
getting fired. Leonard had an excuse for everything.

The women here were the kind who wrapped themselves in wool shawls and discussed
that sixty-seven-year-old actor who’d just had a baby with his twenty-nine-year-old wife.
There was Lillian, a single mom from Albany separated from her sex-addicted husband
(“Everyone at my son’s school found out,” Lillian told Anna, “it was the worst.”) Patti, a
widow in her sixties, seemed completely incapable of making any decisions without her
late husband Al. Shannon was a talker who described herself to Anna as a “self-
medicated chronic depressive.” And Eve, the twenty-something cipher. She’s been “hurt
real bad,” Patti whispered to Anna as the four women brushed their teeth in the
communal bathroom that morning. “We’ve all been,” Lillian said, spitting into the sink.

“Anna too.”

In the mornings, the women drank coffee out of little metal carafes in the living room, huddled around thrift-store end tables and chintzy throw pillows embroidered with sailboats and seagulls.

“I always thought men should stop having kids at the same age that women can’t have them anymore,” Lillian said. “Like a mandate, or something.”

“Al would have never done that to me,” Patti said.

“He would’ve if you hadn’t killed him,” said Eve, who stretched sideways on a Victorian love seat. She purposely ashed her Marlboro Red on the Persian carpet.

“Jesus Christ, Eve,” Lillian said. “Leave her alone.”

Eve didn’t shrug, didn’t blink, didn’t smile. Just reclined there staring beyond the coffee carafes. She was dressed in black jeans and a black sweater and black motorcycle boots, all of which matched her black eyeliner and black hair, which hung in two uneven braids draped across her shoulders.

Lillian leaned closer to Anna: “Patti’s husband committed suicide.”

“It was the diabetes,” Patti said, making waves in her coffee cup. “He couldn’t handle it. Who could handle it?”

“Sure, Patti,” Eve blew a careless stream of smoke toward the chandelier. “That’s what he couldn’t handle.”

Lillian pointed her stirring spoon at Eve’s cigarette. “We asked you to do that outside.”
The women waited as Eve’s black motorcycle boots clomped-clomped through the foyer; the door rattled the walls so much that Anna had to anchor her coffee carafe with two hands.

“Girl is a time bomb,” said Shannon, who earlier had grumbled about how much she missed Irish coffee—a complaint that was, apparently, a daily occurrence. Shannon pushed her oval turquoise frames up the bridge of her nose and examined Anna’s auburn hair and hazel eyes from across the table. “You said your boyfriend was Irish?”

“How long you’ve been here?” Anna replied, not wanting to talk about whom she had to forget.

“Too long,” Shannon hiccuped.

“Me, only four months,” Lillian said. “Patti’s been here for six. Eve’s been here longer. Nearly two years. But it’s not her fault, really—Quentin doesn’t push her enough.”

“Quentin lets her do anything,” Patti said.

“Girl is a time bomb,” Shannon repeated.

The women adjusted their wool shawls, which now hung low around their waists, and switched to discussing breastfeeding in public. Through the lace curtains, Anna watched Eve, her left hip pressed against the white porch column, another cigarette at her lips. Anna gazed at Eve’s slender fingers, twirling the cigarette between drags, until she felt a tug at her cable-knit sweater.

“Anna,” Lillian whispered, “Quentin’s here.”
Quentin looked like one of those blue herons that stalked the beach in Southie, all legs and neck, the ones the Dorchester kids used to pelt with half-empty beer cans. Even Leonard didn’t do that. She was dark-haired and dark-eyed, dressed only in shades of white: cream, snow, eggshell, ivory. When she talked, she would finger a silver amulet that rested on her breastbone; it looked like a vial, but what was inside, Anna didn’t know.

Quentin never pontificated, never gave them those accusatory lady blog sermons that encouraged women to focus on self-love by first breaking them down, blemish by blemish, fuck by fuck, forcing them at an emotional gunpoint to admit they were wandering the dating clearance rack with no self-anything for years. You are what you attract; don’t be surprised you end up with these losers; they are only a reflection of yourself; you see, you are terrible; you never had any self-worth to begin with; why do you do this to yourself?

“You didn’t do anything to yourself,” Quentin would say.

Instead, she delivered blameless screeds: You are only responsible for how you act; your self-worth does not fluctuate from man to man; you don’t teach men how to behave. Should you teach men how to behave? Of course not, that’s how you ended up here, for Christ’s sakes. You broke the rules, and you paid for them.

“Whatever,” Eve would respond. “They’ll just fuck you, anyway.”

The women were sitting on the sweeping back porch among a menagerie of wicker furniture and tasseled throw pillows and rustic knickknacks. Eve balanced on the railing, her back to Lillian, who’d just said that she was tired—tired of submitting to
men’s moods; tired of trying to placate men’s moods; tired of how men are the only ones allowed to have those moods, despite women being known as the “moody ones.”

“Eve’s right, you know,” Lillian said. “Fucking is just part of their moods.”

“I don’t like that word,” Patti said. “What happened to making love?”

Lillian laughed. “It never happened.”

This is how the days would go: coffee in the mornings; a powwow on the back porch; dinner followed by a depressive meditation that only made Anna more restless. To transfer her nerves into something a little more “productive,” Quentin assigned Lillian to give Anna ballet lessons on the back porch in the New England twilight, the sky coordinating with their leather slippers. Lillian hadn’t picked up dance until age forty-two, having chosen ballet over Zumba, which she called, “clubbing for white women.”

Anna was grateful that Quentin didn’t make her practice “art therapy” or any of that new-age stuff. One week at the Home, though, and Anna already felt she was wasting away in a psychiatric ward moonlighting as a self-help retreat masquerading as a bed and breakfast. Trip Adviser users would rate it “quirky, three stars.”

“This is bullshit.” Anna spoke from the lone mattress at the far end of the porch beneath a canopy of cheap silk and fairy lights. “Nothing can fix us.”

“Anna, honey, haven’t you been listening,” Lillian said. “You don’t need to be fixed.”

“Just reshaped a bit,” Shannon added.

“I’m over it,” Anna said.

Quentin uncrossed her legs and pressed forward in her wicker rocker. “What did you do to Leonard?” she asked.
“You mean, what did he do to me?” Anna did not want to think about Leonard. She was not here to think about Leonard. But she’d hoped, secretly, over these last eight months, that Leonard was off somewhere in the California desert thinking of her.

“You’re ashamed,” Quentin said.

“I think it goes both ways,” Anna said.

“Did you love him?”

The women turned, regarding Anna with a sadness that was all too familiar. Eve, too, glanced over her shoulder, studying Anna from under her thick-lined eyelids.

“I think that’s also supposed to go both ways,” Anna said.

“What if,” Quentin relaxed in her rocker, “he didn’t love you?”

Anna pushed herself up from the mattress, her brown suede boots igniting tremors through the floorboards. “This is bullshit.”

“You can go,” Quentin said, re-crossing her legs. “Anytime.”

The summer of the shantytown, Anna worked as a corporate copywriter during the day and at nights, fastened bracelets on museum guests at the MFA. She’d liked the museum gig for her coworkers, especially the assistant curator with a PhD in art history and a vintage motorbike. He would dim the lights and whisper about Monet while stroking her neck once all the tourists were gone. Anna pretended she didn’t know about impressionism to make an impression, leaning back on her heels so their shoulders brushed like watercolors.
Leonard didn’t know about any of this. But one late-night, Anna skipped up the stairs to the shantytown to find the tarp split open. Joe Castiglione’s broadcast sounded from the portable radio, the Red Sox down three in the eighth. Leonard stood at the roof edge, wiggling his bare toes in the humid night.

And she said, What’re you doing, Len—
And he said, Tell me more about Monet—
And she said, Step back, Len—
And he said, Tell me more—

At the Newburyport Public Library, Anna signed into her Facebook account and pulled up Leonard’s profile. This morning, Leonard had posted an article written by a Riverside woman with a pixie cut and a Roman nose. It was something about the ghosts of ex-lovers interfering during sex with her current man: Larry*, name changed. Something about how she wanted to know only Larry, to need only Larry, to feel only Larry:

*I love that the head of my current lover’s penis is bigger than anyone else’s before.*

Leonard commented: *great job, babe.*

Anna vomited into a nearby wastebasket, and the librarian kicked her and the wastebasket outside. She stumbled along State Street, dragging the plastic thing for two blocks before dumping it behind a soap shop. The cobblestone path unfurled onto the town square, a whitewashed refuge guarded by 18th-century brick fortresses; blacksmiths and apothecaries converted into banks and Starbucks. A man in a hunter-green fisher’s
hat sold hot cider from behind a metal cart; another man, this one in a pageboy cap, sold chestnuts from a handmade wooden stand. Moms in puffer vests and knee-high boots held babies in cloth slings. Two preteen girls braided each other’s hair on the wide stone steps leading to the street.

She bought a Styrofoam cup of cider with some pocket change, watched the two girls, and thought: Would it be better to go back to that age, when you only had to worry about the good parts of boys and not the worst parts of men?

Anna followed her senses to The Grog, a tavern that united townies and tourists over lobster rolls and craft beer under its green-striped awning. There, she heard Shannon cackling at the bar, tossing back her gray curls like the glass of whiskey in her hand. Her plum loafers pummeled the air.

Shannon patted the bar stool beside her.

“Aren’t you sober?” Anna said.

“Semantics,” she drawled, waving her glass like a wand.

Several rounds of beer and whiskey shots and Shannon telling off drunken men later, Quentin found them on a quiet side street, pelting acorns at a scarecrow that Shannon insisted was Rod Stewart. Shannon climbed into Quentin’s silver SUV without much prompting, but Anna jogged ahead.

Quentin rolled her SUV forward, trailing Anna with the windows down.

“I’m walking home,” Anna shouted. When Quentin didn’t respond, she slowed her pace and raised her voice. “Home. I said I’m walking home.”
“Boston?” Quentin laughed. “Forty miles?”

The November air had found its chill and Anna had forgotten her jacket. Her fingers swelled at the joints. She was only a block away before she realized that Quentin had pulled a U-turn, the SUV’s brake lights teasing her all the way from State Street.

Quentin drove to Plum Island, Shannon slurring Celtic ditties in the backseat. Quentin hummed along to Shannon’s boozy hymns as she navigated the residential streets, arranged in a slipshod grid that only locals could understand. Quentin said she wanted to show Anna something.

The island was hushed and desolate. Wealthy vacationers had packed up months ago, leaving behind flamingo-pink lawn chairs and foam body boards on the wispy front lawns. Quentin parked the SUV outside a colonial cottage with yellow trim—one of the only houses on the street with an uncluttered yard.

She said her husband had once shared this house with his newly pregnant wife.

“It was his third affair.” Quentin twirled the silver amulet around its silver chain. “I was too cold. Not committed enough. But, that was years ago.”

“They still live here?” Anna asked. “Your ex-husband and—”

“Oh, no.” Quentin dropped the amulet to her breast bone and laughed. “Three years ago, I drove my Jeep through their living room window.”

Shannon pounded Quentin’s headrest. “It was a good shot,” she hiccupsed.

“Thanks, Shan,” Quentin said.

Anna didn’t know the woman in the driver’s seat, didn’t know the woman slobbering in the backseat, but she knew this feeling of being strapped in when you wanted to catapult.
“I am ashamed,” Anna said, finally. “But is this your way of telling me I’m wrong?”

Quentin started the engine and let it idle. “No,” she said as Shannon’s snores filled the air. “No, we’re just here.”

Quentin said Anna needed to restore her connection with her own self, her being, out of isolation. She constantly talked of estrangement and disconnection, of social action and reaction. “We are individual souls, but we can’t be alone,” Quentin said each afternoon on the back porch. “We don’t trust ourselves when we’re alone.”

Some would say that certain women don’t trust at all. “And why should we?” Lillian asked. Eve wouldn’t talk unless it was to express her various “fuck offs,” most of which were directed at Patti whenever she sighed that they were all so sad.

“And you, Patti?” Eve said between threads of cigarette smoke. “What the fuck do you think you are?”

Patti was a good woman, the kind considered nice and sweet and, maybe, dim and meek. She had an indentation at the top of her left ear, a hole from a piercing that never fully closed. Perhaps Patti once had a wild side where getting cartilage piercings was as rebellious as sleeping with a salt-and-pepper-haired man while she and her husband Al were on a “trial separation.” Al had, anyway.

“Yes, a man.” Patti shared a lemon-yellow umbrella with Anna as they slid down Green Street in the rain one Sunday morning. “But I couldn’t divorce him. Catholic, you know.”
Tuesdays and Thursdays, Anna was assigned to accompany Patti to the grocery store. On Sundays, she took her to Immaculate Conception, the only Catholic Church in town.

“Isn’t that a trip?” Patti continued. “You gotta put up with one sin to avoid the other.”

“That’s the Church for you,” Anna said.

“No, no, no.” Patti paused. The umbrella slipped through her white leather Sunday gloves and nearly spiked Anna’s temple. “We’re just trying to do what’s right.”

“How’d Al like it?” Anna asked.

Patti jerked the umbrella, her face tense. “The bad things probably started happening to you once you stopped going to church,” she said, and continued down Green Street, her arms as stiff as her neck.

Anna let the rain glide down the sides of her nose as she followed Patti, whose gait had transformed into a march. Patti really wasn’t so different from Anna’s mother, who would leave blessed angel pins and protective saint medals in Anna’s purses. Her mother liked to remind Anna how happy she was when Anna kept a rosary by her bedside table. That maybe Anna should think about finding men who weren’t so lapsed in both faith and judgement.

Patti liked to dole out the Catholic stuff, even at the grocery store, where they had a harder time with what Quentin had called agency. Quentin never gave them directions or even a list of food allergies or special diets—it was anything, all the time. Patti and Anna weren’t good with anything. They lingered for thirty minutes in the chips and crackers aisle: there were too many children around, triggers for both Anna and Patti.
Patti, especially, could not hear wailing babies or bumbling toddlers; unable to conceive naturally, she was firmly against the alternatives. (“In vitro is for heathens and jezebels,” she told Anna.) At the deli counter, Anna and Patti stuttered through cold-cut orders, but when it came to the cheeses, they were unable to choose between provolone, Swiss, and mozzarella. Why are there so many cheeses? Patti shrieked, her face scrunching and brightening. Anna had to guide her by the elbow as the mustached store manager escorted them outside.

They never told Quentin about the grocery-store incident, even though Patti was always looking for reasons to stay at the Home; she had, really, no other place to go. But Patti knew how much Anna yearned to return to Boston, Brighton, somewhere. In exchange for keeping their secret, Anna let Patti style her outfits for church even though Quentin had forbidden outside decision making. The following Sunday, the first Sunday of advent, Anna spied Eve watching her from the stairwell as she buttoned a brown-and-navy plaid blazer over a shapeless knee-length skirt.

“How do I look?” Anna asked, fanning the blazer lapels.

Eve raised an eyebrow, her black fingernails twirling the tips of her braids. “If you’re going for catechism-chic, I think you nailed it.”

There were days when Eve remained curled on her bed, in sweaters, knee socks and underwear, chain-smoking with the door open. The other women passed by silently, avoiding that loose sixth step between the second and third floors. Lillian would offer her chicken broth, which Eve would turn away with an unlit cigarette. Shannon would try to jack some Jack from the liquor store, but the clerks were onto her now. Quentin would sit
on Eve’s bed for an hour at a time and rub her calf, but Eve only slipped further into her oversized black turtleneck, the wool pills creating a low-hanging halo.

Eve fled the polluted cities of northern New Jersey to attend Dartmouth on scholarship—Dean’s list, a cappella club, newspaper editor. She dropped out twelve credits short of graduating. Quentin found her, age twenty-five, handcuffed to a bench in the Portsmouth police station, having wrestled an ex-college friend in the feminine care aisle at Walmart. Eve didn’t have much of a reason for the incident other than, “Fuck her,” which intrigued Quentin, who possessed a streak like that herself. She paid Eve’s bail and drove her across state lines to Salisbury Beach, where Eve said she wanted to die. Quentin waited cross-legged in the sand and watched Eve tiptoe her black motorcycle boots along the shoreline, pull the boots off, march knee-deep into the waves, tread the Atlantic blue crests, then swim back around to stomp barefoot back up the beach and bark, “Fuck off.” But Quentin didn’t move, and Eve didn’t return to the ocean.

Men had always liked Eve more than she liked them, but she’d liked them enough to sleep on their Ikea beds or, admittedly, on a bare mattress or two. They had ranged in age from twenty-one to forty-one; from journalist to construction worker; from unpredictably polite to predictably juvenile. She could name their pets and mothers, their birthplaces and workplaces. She could talk about which men bought her dinner or just coffee, which called her beautiful and which didn’t, which always forgot to buy more condoms and which refused to come outside of her. She could name them in alphabetical and chronological order, yet there was one she never talked about.

Anna learned later that when Eve was twenty-two, she fell for a bike mechanic with anchor tattoos on his calves, moving in with him too soon as money ran out too
quickly. The house was shotgun style, a strange architecture for New England. Eve had called it their “spite house,” a slate-gray middle finger at the Victorian mansions preening next door. They snorted Xanax in the afternoons, had sex in the evenings, crushed and sorted and rolled and snorted some more blue pills at night, and danced barefoot and breakneck until morning. In those last soggy minutes of the come down, he would kiss his love into her bare, brown shoulders. He would often do it when her mind was long gone, the corners of her lips wilting in that sleepy way.

There were, it turns out, two men Eve would never talk about. How she got to that spite house was, after all, out of spite for another who’d already turned her cruel.

It was Anna’s thirtieth day at the Home. No one really remembered except Lillian, who gifted Anna a pair of shimmery rainbow leg warmers she’d knitted out of sweater scraps. Anna thought at least Quentin would sit her down on the back porch, take her hand, and present her one of those small circular charms they handed out in AA—do something, anything. But Quentin seemed distant during morning coffee, fingering the silver amulet resting on her breastbone as she sat in the corner, her full carafe cooling. She rose to say today’s meeting would be canceled, and returned to her top-floor room.

In lieu of their meeting, Lillian and Anna rehearsed a Nutcracker suite on the back porch. They tried to ignore Eve, who reclined upside down on the mattress, her boots flat against the wall.

“Are you supposed to be the nutcrackers?” Eve asked.

“Flowers,” Lillian corrected.

“Poisonous?”
“Christ, Eve.”

Eve pointed her cigarette at Lillian and smiled at Anna. “That one has thorns.”

Quentin stuck her body half-out the back door and waved Shannon’s turquoise glasses overhead like a flag. Shannon had missed morning coffee, which wasn’t so unusual; she often slept until noon. “But she never leaves these,” Quentin continued waving the glasses. “Never.”

The women waited in the living room until evening. Lillian made phone calls, Patti paced, Anna scoured nearby yards, Quentin drove her SUV up and down the block, but Shannon never returned.

“We need the police,” Lillian said.

“No cops,” Quentin hissed back.

Quentin sent Anna and Eve to search downtown. They wielded battery-operated flashlights through Newburyport’s twined streets and alleys and didn’t speak. This winter carried with it a frostbitten chill, and the two women tightened their furry parka hoods and layered wool scarves around their necks, chins, lips.

The wordless pair searched the public parks, then headed to the empty dock. Sailboats clanked against the wood as the waves slapped their sides.

Eve climbed on top a replica buoy, lowered her parka hood, and panned her flashlight from left to right. The dock was still. “What’s your deal?” she asked.

“What’s yours?”

Eve tip-toed in a slow circle on the buoy. “You were fucking this dude who wasn’t your boyfriend.”

“I never fucked him.”
Eve stopped and swiveled her flashlight toward Anna. “So you wanted to fuck this dude,” she said, “and you’re mad your boyfriend goes off--”

“It happens.” Anna’s flashlight shook, casting splotchy shadows across the dock.

Eve hopped down from the buoy, her flashlight still pointed at Anna. “What does?”

Anna took a step forward and raised her flashlight, fully illuminating Eve’s face. “Wanting someone else.”

“Where’s your agency, Anna?” Eve mimicked Quentin. “It doesn’t just happen.”

They faced off with their flashlights. The waves slapped and the boats thumped. A bell sounded further down.

“Whatever.” Eve collapsed onto the dock, swinging her legs over the side. She kicked the dock with her heels. “Why didn’t you just fuck him, then?”

Anna dropped the flashlight, letting it bounce pitifully along the wooden planks. She crouched down, crawled toward Eve, and, when they were only inches apart, pointed to the scar above her own right eyebrow, visible even in this scanty light.

Eve flicked her cigarette and cupped Anna’s face in her small hands. With the tip of her middle finger, she traced the long, winding scar, studying the grooves and wrinkles that seemed to have shape-shifted over the last year.

The shantytown was closed in the winter, so Leonard smoked at the open kitchen window, spitting and ashing into coffee cans. He’d tried to quit drinking, for Anna, but his buzz had begun to pulsate at all hours. His brother wouldn’t come, because no one
could afford transcontinental flights these days. His mother, she drank too; she’d told Anna that maybe she wasn’t trying hard enough to understand her son, who was trying—very much trying—to understand her. Anna’s friends had said, watch out, but Anna didn’t know for what or for how long. No one knew about the scars on her biceps.

Anna would smoke with him when she returned from her corporate finance job, still in her blazer and striped Oxford shirts. She’d quit, too—quit her night job at the MFA. She would ask Leonard, what’s going on, babe? Sometimes they talked; sometimes they yelled. Sometimes, there were only pieces of Anna and Leonard left by midnight. One time, Anna swung at Leonard, her right knuckle striking the side of his nose. Leonard swiped a ceramic vase that Anna had made; it fell through his elbows, the stray pieces vaulting, slicing through Anna’s skin, engraving Leonard in her forehead from the top of her right eyebrow to the edge of her temple. The triage nurse had whispered, are you in trouble? Anna couldn’t nod her head. Leonard paced in the waiting room, his bloody fingers clenched inside his hoodie pockets. The ER doctor had said, we know, you know. We know.

Eve traced the scar along Anna’s eyebrow until her curious fingers gave way to soft strokes. The nylon of their parkas touched like new lovers, exposed in a pale spotlight created by the forgotten flashlights.

Quentin found Shannon at a hospital in Gloucester, wrapped in a foil blanket that made her glow like the winter moon. She’d hitchhiked there after The Grog had turned her away for breaking a glass in response to a man who called her something vulgar;
something she would not repeat to Quentin. Two Gloucester officers found her hours later, hugging the bushes outside a townie pub.

The other women were already there when Anna and Eve arrived, keeping vigil in the ER cubicle partitioned off with linen curtains. “Don’t I look like an astronaut?” Shannon’s voice cracked. Her lips were a lost blue struggling to find their color. “I always wanted to be one.”

“You’re something,” Eve said.

“Is that where we are?” Shannon asked.

“Where?” All the women answered at once.

“Up up up there.” Shannon’s head lolled back, her pupils widening at the fluorescent lights overhead. The women followed her glassy gaze and Shannon began to hum. “Who set me free?”

“You’re drunk, Shannon,” Lillian said.

“Who set me free?” Her words lingered between these linen curtains. “Who set you free?”

The state social workers, a man and a woman in matching muted-blue suits, arrived at the house three days later. The women at St. Elizabeth Joan’s Home put on their best dresses and brightest smiles—all except Eve, who had neither. The social workers surveyed the house, each room, the back porch, and left with a heavy docket.

The next week, the social workers returned to move Shannon to Commonwealth-sponsored rehab.
“They’ll kill her.” Quentin shook her head as the social workers ushered Shannon down the front walkway. “Absolutely kill her.”

And this loss consumed Quentin. She stopped eating, preferring to drink black tea on the back porch. She meditated there for hours, dressed only in thin sweaters, compelling Lillian to run outside and throw a blanket or parka around her shoulders until, one day, Quentin packed an overnight bag and left, too.

The women flocked around the living room window as Quentin disappeared into a Pink Tuna taxi; Eve remained on the front porch, cross-legged and parka-less. She would’ve camped out there all night if Lillian and Patti hadn’t, quite literally, pulled her in. The tips of Eve’s boots streaked black across the hardwood porch floor.

That first night without Quentin, they ordered in spaghetti and clams and ate around the fire. Lillian donated some of her journal entries to keep the embers going, and Patti made hot chocolate with cocoa powder left over from last Christmas. They talked about where they would go for a weekend, if they had that kind of money and conviction. Lillian said she’d drive back to Upstate New York to visit her twelve-year-old son. Patti wanted to travel to Key West, where she and Al had spent their honeymoon. Eve said she would visit the volcanoes and beaches of New Zealand, so she could stand at the edge of the earth. (“Don’t you know the earth’s not flat?” Lillian said. “The edge of fucking something,” Eve said.) Anna shrugged and said California, because she’d never been to the West Coast and it always looked more promising in photographs than Boston.

The wind chill plummeted into the negatives the second day without Quentin, so the women replenished the fire. Lillian taught Anna a Swan Lake variation in the living room. Patti sat on the ottoman and pretended to be their pianist, stomping the floor with
her boot whenever Anna fell off-tempo. Eve was their lone audience member, and she only joined in on the condition that she plays a critic from *The Boston Globe*. Dressed in a slim-fitted black turtleneck, she perched in the plush armchair, and cocked her head as Anna pirouetted and pas de chat-ed. Eve, unsmiling, marked down notes on the back of the take-out receipts, but when asked for her final scathing critique, “Lovely,” was all she said.

The third day, a light snow began to fall, and a man in an orange fleece hunter’s hat arrived at the front door. The women crowded around the peephole, taking turns watching him; he mouthed the wording on the brass plaque three times before lifting the silver lever of the vintage doorbell. The women dispersed before Lillian even opened the door.

Patti crouched behind the arm chair, afraid the man may have a rifle strapped to his back. Anna crawled beside her and whispered, “You know this is Massachusetts.”

“Isn’t that where the militia started?” Patti whispered back.

“Anna!” Lillian called. “You got a phone call at The Grog.”

Anna looked out from behind the arm chair. The man in the hunter’s hat did not hold a rifle but a restaurant receipt marked with scrawls of blue ink. “He says his name is Leonard Hennessy.”

Anna sighed. “Of course he would call the bar.”

Eve scanned Anna with her dark eyes. Anna’s auburn hair was gathered into a topknot, her grey boot socks stained with bleach. Eve fell back down onto the sailboat throw pillow, lit a fresh cigarette, and exhaled. “That motherfucker.”

“You can’t talk to him, Anna,” Lillian said. “He’s no good for you.”
“Maybe he’s changed,” Patti offered.

“Fuck off, Patti,” Eve said.

Anna snatched her parka from the bannister railing and shooed Lillian aside. “I got to,” was all she said as she slipped on her boots and joined the man on the front porch, Lillian tsk-tsking, “he’s no good, he’s no good,” in righteous defeat.

The man in the orange fleece hunter’s hat led Anna to the dusty phone booth in the corner of The Grog. She balanced on the electric-red leather stool and folded her mittens in her lap. Someone had written on the wood panels above the pay phone: “USA cool, but Americans are assholes!” Someone else had written underneath: “Massholes are awesome!” It’s something Leonard would have done; he liked identifying as a “Masshole.”

The phone shrilled three times before Anna answered. “Len?”

Leonard’s voice hadn’t changed; it was as if he grunted through his nostrils. “I release you, Anna.”

“Is this a joke?” Anna said.

“No joke,” Leonard said. “I’m purging.”

“I thought you were sober,” Anna said.

“Not like that. Jesus!” Anna could sense Leonard’s nerves through the phone wires. He was spitting, his lips smacking. He would be stomping soon. “This place was supposed to chill you out.”

“What do you want, Len?”

There was a pause; Leonard was steadying himself. “I release you.”
He released her. Wasn’t it supposed to be the other way around? She was the one who’d released him, who’d used her savings to not only move to another apartment further down the Green Line tracks, but to continue paying his rent until he shipped out to Riverside. She was the one who left, a move that Quentin had said, on that drive back from Plum Island, was Anna’s most defiant act—a show of self-worth that would crash the servers of those you-are-what-you-attract-you-loser-selfish-woman websites.

Anna could hear Leonard sucking his lips, letting out a low hiss.

She thought of baseball, how it used to be her favorite sport. She thought about how she couldn’t watch the Red Sox anymore without seeing the shantytown, or smelling Leonard’s cigarettes, the unfiltered Lucky Strikes before he switched to Pall Malls. Anna thought about pulling a Big Papi and taking a baseball bat to the phone, the receiver, all of it, but The Grog wasn’t the type of bar that displayed sports memorabilia. If Eve were here, she would snap the telephone cord in half.

Anna steadied the phone between her ear and chin, and pulled the silver wire taut.


Leonard punted an empty beer can off the roof. Save for the Red Sox broadcast, the shantytown was quiet. Without a breeze, the tarp hung limply.

And he said, You know, I could jump from here.

And she said, You’ve been drinking, Len, you’ve just been drinking.

Leonard dangled his other foot over the edge and said, I’m fine, I’m fine, I was fine until you went back to being a slut.
She stepped closer to the edge of the roof and said, Well, you got involved with this slut.

And he said, This is what you want, huh, and before she could say I’m tired, I’m going to bed, he wrapped his calloused fingers around her forearms, dug his cigarette into her left bicep, and said, You are a nasty person sometimes—

She tried to twist away. What are you doing, Len, what are you doing, it hurts, that hurts—

He held her tighter. You think I’m a little fucking bitch—

And she said, Stop, fuck, you’re not, stop—

And he said, You make me like this, you make me—

Until he crumpled, dragging both of them down to the love seat. He kissed her arm, her hot skin, burrowed his Irish-red beard into her stomach and said, sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, as Joe Castiglione called a three-run home run and the Red Sox took the lead in the eighth and the shantytown somersaulted above their heads.

Eve found Anna hugging her knees inside the town gazebo, the late-afternoon sun etching black scrolls over her cheeks. Anna said she was released with nowhere to go. Eve said let’s go, then, let’s go. She slowly peeled Anna’s fingers from her knees and warmed them in her parka pockets until Anna said, anywhere. Let’s go anywhere.

They drove north along Route 1 across the Merrimack to Salisbury Beach, where every shop on the boardwalk was closed except for Joe’s Playland. There, they played Skee Ball and ate saltwater taffy. They ducked into one of the six photo booths lining the
back wall and, with Anna sitting on Eve’s lap, took three photos with the same expression; on the fourth, Eve leaned into Anna’s shoulder, which surprised Anna, causing her to half-turn and half-giggle.

The machine spit out the thin strip of film. “Disgusting,” Eve said. She pocketed it anyway.

They sat on the blue wooden stairs flanked by competing dunes; long stems of winter grass matched the color of the sand. Eve smoked two Marlboro Reds and Anna said they reminded her of being twenty-two, when she was drunk and in love with a long-haul trucker. Eve rolled the Red between her pointer and middle fingers and said it must have been nice. The scenes come swiftly and heavily, like a high tide, but it didn’t take them out to sea. They are the debris exposed in the morning. They are not damaged, but the damage.

They tried not to think about being twenty-two, until Eve could no longer look at the waves.

Beach towns during winter on the North Shore are fishermen towns. If a Main Street shop isn’t named after the Atlantic, then it’s a shack: a crab shack, a lobster shack, a bait shack, a surf shack. The car of choice is a pickup truck with shredded Coexist bumper stickers. Women are scarce and hidden. So when the trio of young fishermen hanging off their seaweed-latticed ship whistled, “Hey, ladies,” Anna knew they shouldn’t climb aboard and kick back some beers with men who haven’t been in close quarters with women since Labor Day.

In the ship’s narrow galley, Eve went from riot grrrl to sorority girl. She sidled up to the youngest fisherman, who’d kept his summer tan and sunny hair; only his beard showed any hint of winter. He snaked his arm around Eve’s waist, skimming his hand down to the top of her thigh. His T-shirt rose slightly. Anna noticed a black anchor tattoo, the size of her palm, above his right hip bone. She watched the young fisherman rub Eve’s black denim jeans in wide circles, his eyes contemplating her eyelids, eyelashes, slender nose, flushed lips. Through a man’s gaze, Anna realized just how attractive Eve was.

The youngest fisherman led Eve behind an accordion door. She turned back to Anna and stuck out her tongue, licked her front teeth, and smiled. The door latched into place and Anna perched on a step stool, resigned. She felt like she was back in college, the odd girl out at the party, forced to make petty small-talk with her girlfriends' hook-ups' roommates or—worse—watch them play video games.

The second fisherman handed Anna a Narragansett. “Fucker,” he said to the third fisherman. “It’s always him.”

The third fisherman pressed his elbows onto the table, flashing a gold front tooth at Anna. “You girls lesbians?”

Anna performed a girly hair flip and smiled. “Only when there’s men around.”

The second fisherman laughed, punching his friend in the shoulder. “She’s fun, huh.”

“How come you guys don’t have accents?” Anna said, still watching the door.

“We’re not all townies,” the second fisherman said. “We go where it’s good.”

“We follow the fish,” the third fisherman said. “That’s all you gotta do.”
“I like that,” Anna said. “Maybe I’ll start following the fish.”

“Fucking bitch!” The bark came from behind the accordion door, which Eve punched open. She flung her parka over her black bra, her sweater somewhere on the floor behind her. The youngest fisherman struggled to stand up in a haze of shattered glass, his left hand pressed to his bare right pec. Blood pooled around his spread fingers. “I didn’t touch her,” he yelled, swiping Eve’s sweater from the floor and using it to staunch the blood.

Eve tucked the broken, bloodstained beer bottle inside her parka pocket and wrapped her arm around Anna, lifting her from the step stool. The second fisherman hooked Anna’s leg, just above her knee. Eve tugged back, breathless. Anna jerked her leg, her boot punting the second fisherman’s jaw. The bleeding fisherman kept yelling that he didn’t touch her. He pawed at Anna and Eve as they side-galloped through the galley, the ship pitching sharply to the left. The third fisherman just leaned back and watched and laughed. Fuck those cunts, he laughed, those fucking cunts.

They could hear the bleeding fisherman yelping from all the way down the dock, where Anna and Eve paused, hunched and heaving. Anna zipped Eve’s parka to her chin and they ran on.

The weatherman did the talking for them as they drove south on Route 1. He went on and on about some impending winter storm named after a Greek god. When they neared the Merrimack, Anna slowed to a stop at the base of the steel bridge and the weatherman morphed into static.
What would the other women at the Home do if they were here now, in Quentin’s car? And where would Quentin drive Eve now? Anna glanced at Eve. Did Quentin already drive Eve out to Plum Island and tell her that this is the furthest she can go without diving in? But Anna knew Eve enough by now to know there was no line for her—no line that wasn’t meant to be crossed.


“But it was a reaction,” Eve said, looking out the passenger side window.

Anna twisted the radio knob—dead air. “I’m not sure,” she said.

The bridge lights flickered nervously. “He didn’t touch me,” Eve said. She unlatched her seat belt and hopped out the SUV; the open passenger door quivered in the bitter wind.

Anna turned off the engine. The wind swept stray snowflakes into the car. Was her allegiance to Quentin? She turned the engine back on. Or was it to this puffy figure drifting further across the bridge? She turned off the engine.

Halfway across the bridge, Eve brandished a small bottle of Jim Beam from the lining of her parka. “Lifted it from that bastard,” Eve said with her wide, coy smile. She took two gulps and looked out across the railing, not east toward the Atlantic but west, where there was nothing but rolling darkness.

In this uncertain pause, Anna snuck her arms around Eve’s waist, underneath her parka, where her hipbones spiked. She could feel Eve trembling; she knew Eve could feel it, too.

“Let’s go to Riverside,” Eve said, her voice rising.
“Why?” Anna unhooked herself from Eve. “So Leonard could release me in person?”

“So we can fuck him the fuck up, that’s what.”

“Like that guy back there?”

“You’re sweet.” Eve swished the whiskey between her gums. “You’re too sweet.”

She balanced one black boot on the concrete ledge then hoisted her body over the metal railing, framing herself between two of the dozens of steel cables that crisscrossed up and down the span of the Merrimack.

She asked, her back to Anna: “Do you trust me?”

Eve looked like Leonard then, stalking the edge of sanity. “Not at all,” Anna said.

“Good,” Eve said, lighting a cigarette. “You’re not supposed to.” She rose on the balls of her feet and lifted her arms. “I’m like the Black Swan.” Eyes closed, she flicked her wrists like a bird about to take flight.

“Why’d you do that to him, Eve?”

Eve’s arms went limp; a flightless swan. “Quentin says there’s something wrong with me.” She gripped the steel cable and pirouetted around to face Anna. “There’s something wrong with me.”

“You’ve been drinking,” Anna said. “You’ve just been--”

“Don’t.” Eve finished the last of the Jim Beam, and then lobbed the bottle into the river. “Don’t bullshit.” She slipped the broken beer bottle out from her parka pocket, flipping it over in her hands once, twice. Her eyes never left Anna. “Push me.”

Anna watched Eve again rise onto the balls of her feet, the extra few inches thrusting her into a flood of harsh white light radiating from the bridge lamps.
“Come on.” Eve smashed what was left of the beer bottle against the railing.

“Show me how sweet you are.”

The glass disintegrated like a meteor, a hundred specks shooting as one through an invisible tunnel. Anna shielded her face with her forearms.

“I know you can’t do it.” Eve was laughing, her body swaying. “You can’t do it, you can’t do it.”

The tiny amber shards sprinkled onto the pavement. Anna shook the last glass remnants from her parka like dirty snowflakes. They glittered on the pavement like the stars watching over the Merrimack, reflecting whatever Eve and Anna saw in that midnight sky.

Up on the roof, in the shantytown, Anna used to watch the misguided seagulls searching the rooftops, their feathers soiled with the city. They would wait on the brownstone ledge until something caught their attention four stories below—a tossed apple core, a chewed-up pizza crust—and launch themselves off the side of the roof, beaks first, determined as Olympic divers. Anna would wonder how they moved easier through air than water—so easy that, somehow, falling, diving into something that cannot hold your being, seemed less scary than plunging beneath the surface of the Charles, the Atlantic, the Merrimack. She would long for this thrill until she saw Leonard about to go feet first. This was no thrill. It was arousal, it was electric, but it was no release.

Anna looked at Eve. “I hate you,” she said.

Eve stopped laughing. Her red fingers wrapped around one of the steel cables, mooring herself to the bridge.

“That’s better,” Eve said. “That’s a lot better.”
Salute

The girls heard from the boys that the boys were looking for the girls. Outside English, History, Spanish class. Inside the gyms, stables, dormitories. For one week only, they were in demand.

The boys heard from the girls that the girls were getting ready for the boys. Cherry, berry, wildberry lipgloss. A pluck pluck pluck from the eyebrows to the ankles.

The girls heard from the boys that the boys had a plan for the girls. A semester’s worth of hijinks, eight weeks in the making. The last hurrah from uniform khakis to Harvard Square.

The boys heard from the girls that the girls had begun practicing their salutes in front of mirrors. Sometimes naked, sometimes not. Always with the hope of a second or third time.

The girls heard from the boys that that one boy from Wellesley had sent that one girl from Revere a series of text messages. She responded with a <3, like the girls do when
they want to say what they cannot say. The Wellesley boy had flashed that <3 around like a medallion.

The Revere girl met the Wellesley boy under the statue of St. Paul. She dressed in a tank top and floral skirt, as if they were going to the movies, then the diner—or the diner, then the movies. That’s what the Wellesley boy had told her the day before, when he walked the Revere girl to her biology lab, elbows brushing and hands tightening.

But the Wellesley boy said, there’s no good movies. He saluted St. Paul, who leaned on his sword and lowered his eyes.

The Wellesley boy took the Revere girl into a janitorial closet, though some girls said it was the boiler room and some boys said it was the chem lab. She held the Wellesley boy’s hand, feeling his lacrosse callouses for the first time. He slipped the Revere girl’s hand beneath his uniform khakis.

The boys had heard from the girls that the Revere girl didn’t want the Wellesley boy to mess up her wildberry lip gloss, but the girls had heard from the boys that the Wellesley boy liked the taste of it. Wild, berry, smeared.

The girls heard from the boys that the Wellesley boy saluted the bathroom mirror before knotting his tie the next morning. What did he say? the girls asked the boys. We’re cool, the boys told the girls. Are we cool?
[The Revere girl curled below the wooden fence at the edge of the pasture, where even the horses do not tread, until the faraway laughter fell with the moon. She would text the Wellesley boy the next afternoon. She would text him a <3, because boys do not want to see that / in the middle. They do not want to see that line at all.]

What the boys did not hear from the girls, and what the girls did not hear from the boys, was the shattering, shattering, shattering. Only the Revere girl could hear it. Only the Wellesley boy could make her lips unkissable, but not sealed. And she said, you can’t leave here the way you are. And he said, I thought, I thought you knew. Didn’t you?
The Girls Go to Van Nuys

You may not have heard the one about Van Nuys. You could live in Los Angeles for years without hearing it. When you do, perhaps it will be in passing, over drinks at Wilshire and Rodeo with the girls who don headsets at their desks despite their six-figure bachelor’s degrees. They’ll mention, while nursing their classic cocktails, an hour-long trip into the steaming sprawling grid. They’ll brush it off as a nuisance, the lost wages and long waits and wasted gas. You’ll never hear about the absent men. These girls won’t clarify what you’re surely thinking, for these are not girls who would speak of such things. Instead, they retreat to their sweetly painted citadels between Fairfax and La Brea.

The girls who go to Van Nuys are weary. They go without blush or mascara, in padded slippers and sweats too unrefined even for the gym. They go as the passenger and...
the driver, the civilian and the escort. They aren’t without purpose, but what led them there? To the girls who go to Van Nuys, it’s still uncertain.

The one about Van Nuys doesn’t start in Van Nuys, but that’s where it will end.

The woman in Van Nuys has a red bucket full of roses, enough for each girl who visits the crook of this strip mall. Approximately 5,200 girls go to Van Nuys each year, give or take emergencies and second opinions and holidays; Van Nuys is not open on most holidays. There are always the most girls on Thursdays and the fewest on Mondays. Sunday is Van Nuys’ day off, when the girls stay home and the woman goes to church.

Parts of Van Nuys didn’t want to be Van Nuys, and so they left under the pretense of fleeing a paralyzed industry. The exodus began in the ’90s with the collapse of the General Motors plant—where her husband had found his first American job—and they have been leaving since. One community traded zip codes to join Sherman Oaks. As the population depleted, the cars for sale on Auto Row went from luxury to used.

The woman in Van Nuys did not join the exodus—someone needed to greet the girls. She isn’t needed in Sherman Oaks or Encino, or across the mountains in Beverly Hills, where her skills would tuck her away in gleaming stainless steel kitchens. Fifteen years in this city and the woman in Van Nuys has never so much as seen inside the triangular town of Swarovski palm trees and overheated patio dining. She has seen the Hollywood sign, in glimpses—an H here, a double-L, double-O—through breaks in that gauzy veil of gray air that drapes from the tallest building at the private university
downtown to the tallest building on the backlots. She wasn’t impressed with the glimpses she’d seen, but the woman in Van Nuys has never made it out to the basin on a clear day.

The woman in Van Nuys knows she and her husband would be better off if she rode the bus every morning to Encino or Sherman Oaks or even Beverly Hills—that’s where the highest paying but not necessarily the best employers were—to push white babies in canopied carriages. We could move away, her husband would say, from the freeways to the sea, if you took care of them white babies. Alejandro’s wife goes on trips sometimes, her husband tells her, trips with the white family and their babies. To the islands, Jamaica, the Bahamas. They let her relax, her husband would insist as the woman in Van Nuys rinsed her roses in the back room of his gas station, they do. When they go, she relaxes.

We make do, the woman in Van Nuys would say, we make do.

They had a modest apartment off the boulevard, a one-bedroom with a separate entrance leading to an alleyway advertised as a patio, where in the morning she watered her miniature planters. At night, she mistook the planes for stars. Fifteen years in this city and she hasn’t seen many stars here. You could say the woman in Van Nuys hasn’t seen much at all, but she’ll assure you that she has seen enough.

This isn’t like the stories they stack on the newsstands, the ones Mama used to show her of women hemorrhaging blood until their bodies became vacant. Maria wants to make that clear. This isn’t for anyone to know. He had called it a “non-issue,” anyway, and that’s what she would believe.
And he would call until she turned off her phone, bang her front door until it sends her behind the couch. He succeeded only once, his force snapping the brass chain from the doorframe, which he later repaired himself. He wanted to know what she’d decided. She didn’t want to let him in. He said he was the only one who could help. She believed him even though she didn’t want to.

But tonight, he doesn’t come around. Maria waits on the front porch, now afraid that he wouldn’t come again. This isn’t like those stories Mama had warned her about, the ones with lost women, sad women, whichever women. Maria knows it’s not that.

She had liked certain parts of him when they met last spring, bumming cigarettes outside the local Cal State library. He was taking night classes in accounting. She tutored him in calculus. They shared a printing card. And they were both addicts, once, though they didn’t know each other in their addictions.

Lost women, poor women, whichever women. This isn’t that story--Maria wants to make that clear. But Mama could’ve seen the signs; she knew them well enough.

This isn’t that story, but Maria knows it well, too.

Her grandmother was born Władysława in a farming village north of Białystok, not far from the Soviet border. When Władysława was fifteen and wore dresses with slips, she fainted on the stone church steps weeks after a man, at least ten years her senior, flattened her in the hayloft of her family’s barn. The women in the village sliced the seam down the center of her slip and sent her to a one-room cabin on the Baltic shore, a night’s journey to the line of German occupation. Władysława waited there for three days with a fresh bar of soap, a change of undergarments, and her journal, bound with horse hair.
The women in the village said the man would come at the harshest hours of the night. They warned her not to open the door fully until he flashed the equipment, a glint of soiled metal. (There are soldiers in the area, you see, they’ll know why you’re there.) The man would know her name, but he wouldn’t nod and say Dobry wieczór or even Cześć. She mustn’t talk to him. She mustn’t fight him. She mustn’t return until the bleeding stopped.

Those three days played out like a death sentence. On the first day, Władysława wrote a letter to Matka Boska Częstochowska, the Black Madonna, asking for forgiveness—her trip south, to the shrine, had been delayed—then tore the paper, ashamed to ask the Madonna for anything here. The next afternoon, she slithered on her elbows, searching for remnants of the others. The only light came through a rip in the uneven curtains, once mint green, now dusted gray. When she couldn’t find any scratchings or codes or hieroglyphs left in the hardwood floor, she lay still in that pitiful beam of sunlight. You must stay low, the women in the village had said, just one disturbance of the curtains could cause a cry. If she pressed her palms into the floor and arched her back in a crescent, she could see the glazed jetty and the sapphire waves and a small girl, much smaller than she, with crisscross braids and a tattered jumper. The girl ran in haphazard figure eights, treading close to her window. Władysława wanted to call out but she could not speak, two days of silence having wrung out her vocal cords. It was a test, she knew on that third day, when those harshest hours arrived and the man appeared at the cabin door with a black leather case pressed against his side. He did not give her a nod or a Cześć, but swiftly unlocked his case, exposing a long cylinder of metal. He tied her ankles to the linen cot in the corner, cut her undergarments on either
side, lifted her skirt above her waist, and told her to count until he finished. Once the equipment was in her, Władysława could only mouth the numbers resounding in her head.

Władysława would tell this story chain-smoking in her rocker as the Home Shopping Network quipped in the corner. A story Władysława would forget for years after she landed in America, opened a bank account with a paltry interest rate, and fell in love with Władysław—but by that time, she had already changed her name to Laura.

The woman in Van Nuys has a red bucket full of roses. The red bucket is held together with duct tape now, cracked in half during an argument with an angry young man who threatened her with fists and keys and 911 calls. Officers arrived, and the woman in Van Nuys was taken away, the red bucket marked as evidence. There were the girls you grabbed in Van Nuys, and the girls you didn’t.

The woman in Van Nuys is quite good at counting the roses. She has a system each morning: count five by the bud, tie together at the stem, place stem-first into the bucket. On the rare occasion that she counts too many, she brings the roses to the church at dusk, lays them before Our Lady of Guadalupe, and murmurs a Glory Be to the Father, and to the Son—Gabriel. When had she last seen him? His birthday had passed, but the bus ride seems longer now that her husband won’t follow her there, to the Other Valley, the one east of Los Angeles, and she has abandoned praying for his strength.

Gabriel, born twisted and blue, did not make a sound at his birth. The doctor said his heart had stopped days earlier, but the woman in Van Nuys didn’t trust the doctor or the nurses who clamped her in restraints and said there was nothing to be done. The walls
painted yellow by fluorescents, her husband feeding her a hamburger in pieces, the woman in Van Nuys wondered if they ever bothered to wake Gabriel up, get a good look at his eyes, or lay an ear to his chest and catch a pulse and count the spaces between:

one, two, three

one, two, three

one, two.

She left the hospital the next day with a poorly stuffed teddy bear and a death certificate.

The bus ride seems longer, too, in this heatwave. The one rose she salvaged curls from bud to stem. It’s more than a mile walk from the bus stop to the wrought-iron gates, and the woman in Van Nuys is no longer; she is the woman in the Other Valley, the one to the east, and she has lost her way. The hills cast in half-light, she forgets which row of graves she needs to follow, then turn, follow, then turn, staggering through neglected paths until she comes across the tombstone with a single date. She straightens the rose before laying it on the ground, as dead and yellow as those hospital walls. She could say the rosary in full without her husband here. Chant its glorious mysteries, for Gabriel. For the girls. But today, no, today she will rest, not kneel, and wonder about the stone cherub hovering overhead, how the roundness of his cheeks will never give way to middle age.

When Władysława was Laura in America, she lived on a peninsula between Newark and Staten Island—prime real estate for those who could not afford east of Lady Liberty. No beach there, only a stocky charcoal coastline that grew fainter as the hours passed in the
shadows of the bridge that wanted to be in Sydney, Australia, but was, in fact, in Bayonne, New Jersey.

The women in her village had said Laura would be sent here for a new start, a pardon of the past. Yet everything in America was a copy, either of something or someone: a steeple stolen from Britain, a fashion recycled from France. Laura perched outside the downtown corner store and ate a pastry derived from Sicily on her break from wiping away other people’s waste, the only job they said she could do with such a thick accent and calloused hands. She thought about what the women in the village had whispered before she exchanged wooden shanties and unblemished air for railroad apartments and fluoride-laced water.

After three seasons in America, Laura went to see a priest, a portly red-faced fellow at St. Anthony’s who told her she had bartered with Satan. He splayed his hands over her ivory veil, muttered sad, incoherent incantations, and concluded she couldn’t receive the Eucharist at Sunday Mass. Still, Laura waited in the pew week after week, her tongue out, fingers laced, patent-leather loafers twitching beneath the wooden bench as the priest skipped over her without a gracious Body of Christ. The other women, those coiffed aspiring immigrant types, had their suspicions, circulating myths behind their missals and knotted scarves. Laura would have cast off her patent-leather loafers and practiced her balancing act in her house stockings on those Sydney-in-Bayonne railings, yet she couldn’t die without the Eucharist; that would be a worse sin. She would never make it up to that bridge.

They wanted to name her granddaughter Laura, the laurel, an image of beauty and chastity, but Laura defied them. She didn’t want a namesake, there’s nothing here to pass
on. So they named her Maria, an image of blessed strength and perseverance, and Laura was very pleased to see that her granddaughter was not a version of the past. Maria was always so steadfast and sharp, excelling in school and clubs and sixth-grade concert band and everything she tried and even those things she didn’t. Her granddaughter would not be on her knees scrubbing and waxing, pleading and weeping, calling hotlines to schedule anonymous appointments on the north side of freeways, and so Maria ends the call mid-breath.

But her cellphone rings. It rings and rings. She turns off the phone and crawls behind the couch, finding the cat already there. Soon, there are footsteps on the front porch. The doorknob twitches. This isn’t the story for anyone to know.

Gabriel was going to be a doctor. That was the plan, the plan that the woman in Van Nuys made when she traveled to the Good Van Nuys, the one located between a dry cleaners and a pawn shop on the far side of Auto Row. This Van Nuys had less space but not fewer visitors, girls squatting against glass and cinderblock with checkered backpacks at their ankles. These girls bounced babies on their swollen stomachs. The woman in Van Nuys had nothing to bounce so she sketched slanted lines on the back of her medical surveys dotted with disembodied question marks. Her family had few medical records. Even her mother’s death certificate was blank.

In the exam room, a doorless broom closet lined with stenciled Easter chicks, the woman in Van Nuys saw Gabriel move. It was more of a flutter, really, than a jab or a kick, Gabriel flexing in the grain of the imaging. This will be you here, the woman in Van Nuys said to Gabriel, pointing to the broom closet but not to the Easter chicks.
Gabriel received his first medical record, which the woman in Van Nuys placed in a crisp yellow folder from the ninety-nine-cent store. Everything was in order.

The woman in Van Nuys went to the pawn shop, for she had no laundry to clean but a bank account to open. Cash for gold, cash for gold. She slid her crucifix across the counter for seventy dollars. Gabriel was going to be a doctor—Her earrings? Bought by Papa, sí, they are so beautiful, such fine Mexican gold—that was the plan.

She would say it, one letter at a time, to Gabriel in her belly: U-C-L-A. Over and over, a rhymeless lullaby with no broke cradles or mockingbirds. Sometimes, when the air was heavy and the basin-folk stayed put, the woman in Van Nuys would ride the bus through the Sepulveda Pass to Westwood Village. She would cross in front of the preening storefronts and turn up her nose at their sidewalk sales. Years from now, these streets would be Gabriel’s to keep. He would live not far away, up the hill on a street with permit-only parking—not that he would need it, with his three-car garage. Gabriel, doctor. In a long long coat with rolled-up sleeves, clinging to multiple degrees. That was the plan.

On the weekends, her husband would want to take her to the well-lit, well-kept section of Lankershim Boulevard so they could browse those stores that sell ten variations of one household good, but the woman in Van Nuys would refuse. Instead, she donated her husband’s spare bills to the church collection box. He’d begun sleeping in on Sunday mornings, having come to believe she was what the other women whispered. Oh, the Padre tried to absolve it. A Catholic can have a rich life without children, but we know it is not a very Catholic life, and we know it is not a very rich one either, and she will have no one tell her these things that she knew and knew that they knew. The woman
in Van Nuys was not that kind of woman—the kind who feigned pride while other women took pity. She would continue to sit in the front pew each Sunday out of blind ritual, shielded from the other women by maroon lace. Black would have been too much; the woman in Van Nuys is not a proper widow, not with a perfectly healthy husband whose sole suffering is a complacent understanding of life's shortcomings. She was a woman whom God disrespected. The plan does not change, not for God nor by God. He was not there on the back of her medical surveys in the Good Van Nuys, guiding her pencil as she scrawled Gabriel

  in a long long coat
  with rolled-up sleeves

  And she would chant this in place of the Our Father, but you can mourn a plan schemed without the tools as much as you can mourn a dream; this she learned in America.

Maria puts on her most expensive dress and pours some cranberry juice without the vodka. She’s going to toast herself and only herself tonight. A toast not for the non-issue, but for no non-issue. Here’s to you, girl, and to you and you and you. To the girls alone tonight, in two-thousand-dollar studios and wallpapered prisons. Alone and unkept.

  She stretches on the floor like the cat, back arched against the baseboards, and basks in the orange glaze of pollution. The men in the courtyard three stories below fight over beers and cigarettes. They have invited Maria down only once, handing her more beers than niceties. When the stars became undetectable from the dirt she crept back
upstairs to call her mother, to tell her she was having a good time with men who were not interesting but interested, only to wake with an operator talking into her hand.

So many men have admired her intellect (or so they said), her ambition (or so they claimed), her thoughts (or so they vowed). You are not like the other girls, they would say, giving no point of reference. They never did, for men never give a woman the tools for comparison. You are not like the other girls tonight, that’s what they would say now, refilling her cranberry juice with something a little less juvenile. They would stand over her, jaws unhinged, the orange glaze highlighting their silhouettes, until they swallowed her intellect and ambition and she had nothing left to say.

Maria had dreamed the night before as if she knew how things would be different; if they’d kept their plans; if they’d have reached that point where they had all the pretty things people like; if all men didn’t possess that mercurial rage when a woman breaks them open. She dreamed as if all “ifs” were settled in this limbo.

The men in the courtyard talk and fight and scream and laugh and burp and talk of summer. Maria refreshes her cranberry juice and washes away her if if ifs. The men are having fun talking about some sluts. There are no ifs left, she reminds herself. The men are laughing about that one woman, that one their friend did against the garage wall. A familiar metal rattling that sends the cat tumbling. She’s in deep shit now, the men howl. Here’s to the girls alone tonight: Maria toasts herself and only herself. The men don’t know what they have done.

When Władysława lived as Laura in an America that pretended to be something else, somewhere else, she cleaned houses for nickels and office buildings for dimes. She
partook in Thursday night rosary sessions at St. Anthony’s, hunched over in the back pew with Agata, a fellow cleaner with a slighter accent but harder hands. Laura would bake sweet rolls nestled with apple peels for Agata, who had six children and one drunk husband. Laura never wanted children, yet somehow ended up with two. They were friends with Agata’s six children, but not such as good friends as Laura and Agata. Laura and Agata were such good friends that when Agata visited Laura with the plea to not have a seventh child, Laura took her to the bridge that stood not in Sydney but in Bayonne. There, they held hands beneath the mouth of the bridge, counted the headlights gliding overhead, and waited for a man—it was always a man—this time in a plaid jacket and a flouncy ski cap.

The two women crawled into the car, a compact Volkswagen the man had bought before the war and could not sell. Laura imagined it had a different purpose then, when it was a livelier shade of black that shimmered like those limos that shuttled women draped in plush furs from Manhattan to Newark. Those women would hold Nat Shermans but never smoke them, because women like that never smoked, their burgundy lips intact until closing time. Laura and Agata wanted to hold each other in the backseat like those women held their Nat Shermans, but the man whisked Laura up front as the Volkswagen turned onto Hudson Boulevard. Stopped at a red light, he pulled Agata toward him by the collar and knotted a blindfold around her head. Laura, he left free. He was not the chauffeur this evening. He was the celebrity.

When the Volkswagen crossed Newark Bay, the man began asking questions. Was this the first time, and would it be the last? Did anyone know they were here, and would anyone care to remember? Agata remained silent, leaning and leaning so that she
was nearly horizontal, everything but her head lying on the scuffed leather seat. Laura answered for her: yes, yes, no, no. But Laura also had some questions for the man as the steel trusses of the Pulaski Skyway loomed nearer. They don’t have the money, you see, there were things that needed attending to. Piotr—Agata’s husband—owed the bookie. A few games’ worth, to be honest. And their boss! He was not a good man, not when it came to bills. There was no “payday” with him, just a string of “maybe”s and “next week”s. The man did not stop smiling, even as the Volkswagen slowed on the Skyway. The angular rooftops of New Jersey’s immigrant cities turned to outlines. Here, there were no shoulders. The valley of marsh was below, but you’d never know it. Here, metal overpowered nature. Laura had heard things about these marshes, whispers about what simmered beneath the lanky golden grass that wilted away at sundown. Headlines for stories that wandered off with a direction but no map, sensationalized for those who lived on the other side of Newark, where the ground was higher and the buildings were squatter. What did those people think when they consumed the newsprint? The dead children and lost women and broke husbands and bad bad people who guarded them all. A story would catch their eye and linger for a week or two, or however long the media chose to stay, pressing their cameras into drugstores and interviewing everybody but quoting no one. When they’re gone, the carriage-house owners will think they know the row-house dwellers well enough to bring them up at Wednesday lunch. Were they all as misguidedly curious as the banker’s wife, who cocked her head as Laura dusted her porcelain and sighed, *It must be so strange there, what, with all the people living on top of people?* The man tugged his ski cap to his eyebrows and placed a hand on Laura’s knee. The Volkswagen teetered closer to the steel ledge. Here, there were no shoulders,
but there was metal. He slid his hand under her skirt hem, up her leg, across her thigh. Agata, pawing at her blindfold, heaved in the backseat. He wouldn’t stop smiling.

Laura sent the children, her two and Agata’s six, to the widow next door. She fixed Agata a cup of tea, one so bitter the windows needed to be opened in the comatose air of February. Snow spiraled in, dizzying the family cat who pounced in circles of failed captures.

Agata lay curled in the center of the bathroom like the cat on a quiet day, her strawberry blond hair folded around her shawled shoulders. She batted the mug away, but she had to drink now. After opening Agata up with metal prongs, the man had injected an amber liquid. A blindfolded Agata stammered through the Zdrowas Maryjo, laski pelna, as he bypassed every hospital from Newark to Bayonne. Laura spent the night scrubbing the waxy amber from Agata’s thighs and calves, sprinkling holy water along her stomach. The man had given them a twelve-hour window, but Laura had already lost track of the hours.

Laura forced Agata’s mouth open with her blistered fingers. When there wasn’t a drop left, Agata pleaded to go home. Her hands clawed at her stomach, her ribs and shoulders jerking in the opposite direction of her hips. Laura tucked rags between Agata’s legs, told her to phone, and sent her down the block, watching from behind the living room curtain.

Laura phoned the widow to ask for a few more hours of calm. The children cackled in the background; the widow had the only television on the block, set to I Love Lucy reruns. Laura could hear her daughter emulating Lucy’s laugh, Oh Ricky, oh oh oh. Her daughter never stopped laughing.
Laura did the dishes, swept the carpets—one carpet and a straw doormat, really.
She waited for Agata to phone.
Laura fastened her hair in plastic rollers. Four on the right, four on the left, three on top.
She waited for Agata to phone.
The Sydney-in-Bayonne bridge mocked her above the rooftops. A rocky coastline, sapphire bartered for charcoal. She would run in haphazard figure eights.
She waited for Agata to phone.
A woman of thirty-six, fixing her hair into crisscross braids.
She waited for Agata to phone.
A woman of thirty-six, she would run run run.
The call was not from Agata but her husband, slobbering, but not out of drunkenness. The sight of Agata’s limp body had repulsed the whiskey out of him.

***

The woman in Van Nuys does not carry signs. This sets her apart from The Others. They came to Van Nuys on Wednesdays and Saturdays, usually in a white van coated with rust from fender to trunk. The Others would congregate just a few steps away, trading handfuls of trail mix and kettle corn for her bite-sized chunks of watermelon. The woman in Van Nuys always made it clear that she has carved out her own space on the pavement. She would never use their signs, glossy and graphic, nor give them a rose, not even when Van Nuys has locked its doors and polished its metal. The woman in Van Nuys saw their
signs as showboating. You may persuade people to open their pockets with a well-placed billboard, but even a priest cannot persuade them to open their souls. The woman in Van Nuys believed in truth, but it was not the kind that could be blown up and printed.

The Others were mostly men—all men, really, except during Lent, when the schools shipped busloads of uniformed children and teens. The elder Others have skin as anemic as their feathery hair; the younger ones are strong and tan with pale, unkind eyes. The older ones did the yelling; the younger ones, their bidding. Sometimes, it required cameras; other times, iron fire pokers. The woman in Van Nuys often wondered what they would do to her if she weren’t on their side of the blacktop.

Today, it’s the fire pokers. They have never been used—at least, not as intended—for no one has a real fireplace here. The Others stab pamphlets onto their pokers and poke poke poke into open car windows while the girls cover their faces, moaning as they peek through spread fingers. The girls hated The Others, and The Others weren’t here for the girls.

This comforts the woman in Van Nuys, who rushes to the girls as The Others poke poke poke, shouting Take Take Take, Save Save Save, until the next car comes along, a blue Honda Civic stamped with a peace sign sticker. The Others won’t like this, but they don’t like much outside their world. When Van Nuys is preoccupied, they will chip away at the sticker with their house keys and replace it with one of their own.

The woman in Van Nuys rarely greets the girls with a smile, but the girls, the girls, they come just for her. There were the girls you grabbed in Van Nuys, and the girls you didn’t, and the girls you did would claw their fingers into her pillowy pink cardigan as the woman in Van Nuys steered them across the parking lot. If the woman in Van
Nuys is successful, the girls will take a rose and return to brunch next week with no stories to tell.

“It’s fucked.” He eyes the fast-food chains along the flattest stretch of the 405. He wants to stop but Maria can’t eat, not twelve hours before nor twelve hours after.

“You don’t know that,” Maria says. On her lap are the notes for the exam scheduled for today; astronomy, a class she frequented so often she had to take it again.

*If the sun were to explode, we would not know until eight minutes after the fact.*

“It’s fucked,” he says. “It’s all fucked.”

They had told her to keep an empty stomach for at least twelve hours. Maria broke the fast last night when she let him in, because it was time. He gave her a beer so he didn’t have to drink alone, even though he had done so the night before, and the night before that, and the week before, and the week before that, and so on. Maria drank with him because it’s never a good idea to have a “non-issue” drinking alone in your apartment. So, she had only waited eleven hours, not twelve, and this may or may not be a problem once she reaches Van Nuys, and if she finds out this is a problem in Van Nuys, she doesn’t know if she will stay in Van Nuys. This seems like a rule of Van Nuys, one that can’t be broken as easily as her fast. No drinking in Van Nuys. No eating in Van Nuys. Not much of anything in Van Nuys.

“It’s so fucked,” he says.

It’s less than twelve hours now. It’s only three.

“It’s you,” Maria says. “That’s why it’s fucked.”
It may be time to point out that this non-issue is Erik, a bearded man with a soft yet insistent voice and cloudy gray eyes and a much-too-early beer gut. Raised in Oregon, previously worked as a bike mechanic. He liked soccer, and sometimes coached the kids who played on his block. He thought he would always have sons.

She knows now she shouldn’t have let him in.

“You know, I can maybe hold your hand,” Erik says.

*If the sun were to explode, we would not know until eight minutes after the fact.*

Yet Newton theorized that we (him, her cat, his coworkers, her astronomy professor, the inhabitants of Earth) would know right away.

“I don’t know if you can,” Maria says.

She begins to count the minutes by seconds, starting with four-hundred-and-eighty.

“I did the last time,” he says.

Four-hundred-and-seventy-eight--

“It worked?”

Four-hundred-and-seventy-six--

*If the sun were to explode, we would not know until eight minutes after the fact.*

“Well, I really loved her,” he says.

*If he did not love her, she would not know until after the fact.*

Four-hundred-and-seventy--

This section of the 405 always bothered her.

*She would not know.*
Hawthorne, Artesia. The forgotten cities save for Sunday brunch, when the Westside dwellers wanted something “exotic” to pair with their mimosas.

Four-hundred-and-one--
Four hundred--

“It’s fucked,” Erik says now, has said for the last three weeks, whenever Maria was with him and even when she wasn’t. Maria shouldn’t have let him in, she knows now, but she turns instead to Inglewood, Westchester, Ladera Heights. The Westside that the Westside dwellers still consider the Southside.

“It doesn’t mean much to you that I’m here,” he says.

*If the sun were to explode*

“Does it?”

*we would not know until eight minutes after the fact.*

Erik bangs his fist against the dashboard. It doesn’t rattle like her front door.

It doesn’t mean much.

*If he did not love her, she would not know.*

“Does it mean much to you?” Maria says.

*Not until after, not until after.*

The highway shifts to an incline past the 10 as the numbers become easier to track.

Seventy--

*Not until after.*

Sixty-eight--

They were nearing the mountain crest, where Los Angeles looks less like it should. Here, there is shade but no exits. Here, the sun shines too little but the rain never comes.
Sixty--
Erik takes his foot off the pedal. If he reaches over, she will run.

If the sun were to explode we would know we would know

Fifty-six--
There are no exits, but there is shade.

Fifty-two--
He removes his seatbelt.

Fifty--
She will run.
She had told this to the cat.

we would we would
She would.

In Van Nuys, rain comes as a flood, surging through the concrete washes and leaving the worst on the streets. The woman in Van Nuys can’t rest beneath the awning—she must be fifty feet away, always—so she ties plastic bags to her white sneakers and balances a paisley-printed umbrella on her hip. In the days of one-hour photos, the attendant would let her share his booth, but it’s gone now, except for several crumbling cinderblocks outlined in scarlet paint, and so are those days.

From her post under her umbrella, the woman in Van Nuys watches the girl, in yoga pants and a sweatshirt, her soaked eggplant-purple curls sticking to her neck. The woman in Van Nuys knows she could be a very pretty girl with a better outlook. A very pretty girl away from Van Nuys, a place so consumed with ugly appearances. The woman
in Van Nuys grabs the girl by her arm—a very pretty girl, or she could be—hands her a rose—she will be pretty, God wills it, in another, the Good, Van Nuys—and steers her across the parking lot. But it’s the wrong girl. There were the girls you grabbed in Van Nuys, and the girls you didn’t, because the girls you didn’t had men parking the cars. These men were protective in a perverse sort of way, keeping one eye in the mirror as they straightened the wheels. You did not talk to their girls.

But the woman in Van Nuys did more than just talk, and the girl’s man knew, and before she strikes the pavement the woman in Van Nuys thinks about Alejandro’s wife, how she once told her while feeling for bruised fruit at the farmer’s market that the girls were willing, sometimes confessing in broken Español, American-like, in that half-minute before the men came, keys out and heads down. She knew these girls were like roses before they open themselves up to insects and nostrils and gas station attendants. Alejandro’s wife had said, firmly, squeezing a peach until it oozed, that roses must be picked.

Blood seeps from her left nostril, filling the cracks in her lips. The girl’s man slings the umbrella handle onto the drenched asphalt, where it joins the paisley-printed top, its metal spokes all akimbo. The girl’s man is bearded and waxy, the color of skim milk left on the clearance rack, but the woman in Van Nuys, on the pavement in Van Nuys, sees only scarlet, her roses, perfectly counted roses, strewn about like street-fair confetti.

“Erik,” she hears the girl whisper softly. He does not say her name. Do these girls ever have names? “Erik, stop it,” the girl whispers again. The woman in Van Nuys
watches the girl pull his arm, just as the woman in Van Nuys had pulled the girl’s arm moments before.

The employees come to the door, in suits and scrubs, but they don’t leave the bulletproof glass. Phones pressed to their cheeks—whispers, snickers and sighs. Her, they whisper, she’s moving, I think, snickers, again, yeah, sighs. They’re calling the officers. Today isn’t the day for the officers. It’s never the day for the officers. The woman in Van Nuys must leave the roses on the asphalt. You can’t take it with you, isn’t that what they say here in America?

At the edge of the parking lot, the woman in Van Nuys throws her red bucket into the Dumpster. The bearded man and the girl disappear behind the suits and scrubs, who watch the woman in Van Nuys from behind metal detectors and armed security guards.

They won’t be the ones who first turn their backs.

He said it wouldn’t hurt just like he said he didn’t come that night on the front porch couch, the mustard one he bought at Salvation Army that used to sit in his living room until he bought that new couch from Goodwill, the rose-hued Victorian with indigo buttons where the cushions cinched. Maria preferred that it happen on that couch, the rose-hued Victorian. Not outside, but he said it wouldn’t be fun unless they got caught, just like he said it wouldn’t hurt. There are more people crammed into this room than there were at her last birthday dinner. He was there, they did a shot of Jack together—not one, two, like the two people in sea-green scrubs strapping her two legs to the two stirrups. The others, in powder blue, stack metal on metal. The man, the only man here, in
powder blue, places an oxygen mask over her mouth. Her breath reverberates against her eardrums. How rapid yet how weak, to go that quickly.

When Maria made her First Communion, and her only understanding of eternity was falling into forever unconsciousness in a darkened bedroom, she would stutter passages to the Virgin Mary, who stood guard at the edge of her quilt. Now she can’t remember the prayer, can’t remember—Why are you here? the woman at the front desk had given her a bundle of clipboards—can’t remember. Only the couch, soggy and slouchy with lint seeping out from the cushions. Not the rose-hued Victorian that she liked, but the mustard one damp with early-morning dew. The couches here were newer, if a bit too firm. But that doesn’t matter here. The girls sit and wait, but not long enough to remember. Eyes lose their color as a woman in lavender calls a name over the vocal fry of reality stars slumming around on the plasma television. The girls shred the hems of their white paper gowns. Their only sense of status is the shoes on their feet. Maria finds a twisted solace in this. The other girls are not her, but they will be her minutes later, their Ray-Ban wayfarers and Prada purses and Marc Jacobs dresses and Mercedes down payments and industry boyfriends Chad and Chase and Addison and Blake and Taylor and Owen stripped away. Put your Ray-Bans and Prada and Marc Jacobs and Mercedes in this locker, pin this key to your gown, wrap this blanket with zero thread-count around your thighs. The girls: all lined up in a row like cans on logs, waiting for the shot, unable to escape the crosshairs. And those industry boyfriends Chad and Chase and Addison and Blake and Taylor and Owen? They’re not waiting. They’ll call your desk and reach the mailroom floater, who has straighter teeth and a bachelor’s from a better school. They won’t leave a message but take the mailroom floater to that gastropub in Culver City,
where they’ll slip their fingers under the table. They’ll call your desk on Monday when the scent is long gone. They’ll never know.

The man replaces her IV, inserting a fresh tube into Maria’s forearm. This will hit you in thirty seconds, it shouldn’t hurt, and he was always right, except when he slapped her behind as she pulled up her jeans on that ugly slouchy soggy dirty dewy couch. The doctor lifts her gown and powder blue flashes to sapphire. The fluorescents reflect Władysława—who was still Władysława then—grim but not disapproving, knowing what she did not want to know. The IV nearly flattens, the drips slowing, slowing. Maria doesn’t count the seconds but numbers her breaths—how rapid yet how weak, quick, no force, no force behind them at all.

It’s too muddy for the cemetery, and the woman in Van Nuys is not dressed for church, so she retraces her steps along the boulevard, stopping only to give a long-haired man, his jeans perforated along the inseam, her last dollar bill. The salesmen on Auto Row huddle in their cars and flick Hawaiian air fresheners hanging from the rearview mirrors. They would never unlock the doors for her. The woman in Van Nuys has worked furiously to avoid being the worst on the streets, but she cannot trick a salesman.

By the time the woman in Van Nuys reaches her apartment, the plastic bags tied around her ankles flail like streamers; her sneakers are no longer white. The rain had washed away the scarlet, leaving crusted blood at the edges of her lips. She flicks at it like the salesmen flick their Hawaiian air fresheners, brown flecks burrowing beneath her too-long fingernails.
Bangs and stomps and the overtures of children’s cartoons pour out from under her neighbors’ doors. The woman in Van Nuys doesn’t know when she last walked these stucco halls during the daytime, or saw her neighbors with a tan. 1A is unemployed. 1C has two small children and no husband. 2A, who speaks in a funny twangy way, is new to Van Nuys and, it seems, the world. 2B emerges only to walk his dog, a snouty snippy terrier. None of them have ever called her by her real name, though 2B once came close.

On the alleyway “patio,” the woman in Van Nuys removes the plastic streamers from her sneakers. Her plants are suffocating, the overflow water splashing the cigarette butts left by 1A onto the cement. The woman in Van Nuys once wrote 1A a note with no punctuation, and 1A tossed that into the planter, too.

Her Los Angeles was not the one she saw in the pictures at the internet cafe in Chilpancingo, a month after they paid their debts and received the bid to go up north. Her friend had told her to search, “Bey-ver-lee Heels,” a town within a city where women walked the sidewalks in furs in seventy-degree weather. The first search result was a slyly smiling couple cheering white wine on a glass balcony, scroll to the right, and there they were again, slyly smiling on a blanket on a grassy knoll on a mountain on a beach. A mountain on a beach! She scrolled the slyly smiling couple from a lagoon-shaped pool to a lounge with teacup candles to an outdoor mall, back back back to the pool, crisp orange lanterns reflecting in the almost-turquoise water. She used her lunch money on that picture, printed it out in color, folded it in squares, and placed it within the zippered pocket of her zippered pouch, only removing it when the train left Guerrero and entered the northern desert of cacti and bullets. A treasure from home that was not home, nor was it familiar, and that’s what she had liked, and liked too much.
The woman in Van Nuys circles the kitchen island. She lights the Our Lady of Guadalupe candle keeping vigil on the windowsill above the sink, but she can’t think of any prayers that fit today. As she brews coffee she will not drink, she irons out today’s paper with her palms and spends time on each headline to test her English. Three dead in this landslide. A string of suicide bombs, a riot ending in tear gas. She removes the atlas from the cabinet to look up the whereabouts of Turkey. And when she has gone from foreign affairs to obituaries, the woman in sopping sweatpants in a stucco apartment building on a street with no outlet swept under the 101 in Van Nuys folds the newspaper in half, moves to the couch, and watches an empty space meant for a television set as bangs and stomps and the drifting overtures of children’s cartoons overtake the room.

Maria waits until evening to leave. She slips on rubber boots and a sweatshirt, tucks her dirty curls into the hood. He had wanted to see her—it was urgent, though he didn’t call until the evening, interrupting her nap on the floor behind the couch, the cat stamping imprints on her stomach. There was no need for the floor now, but her memory, like the cat’s, had become instinctual.

The storm had rolled out and left a trail of drowned debris in the street. Palm trees that once stood at attention now slouched over the concrete blocks; some may never regain their posture. The phone call plays in her ears like a 2 a.m. infomercial on a restricted channel. He wanted her to come over. He had been drinking.

He wasn’t sorry.

He had been drinking.
The wrinkled woman shakes at the corner. She squawks about God and the Devil and the President—who, by the way, are all working together—squawk squawk squawking to the man who leans against the bus-stop rails every evening and never squawks back, to the skateboarders ollieing on sticky wheels, to Maria, stretching a sweatshirt over her starving stomach. You’re gonna have a beautiful baby girl, the wrinkled woman squawks as she gallops alongside Maria on the chipped-cracked curb. Her sun-bleached hair dangles like soiled mop strings, crispy tentacles lashing into her eyes with each haphazard stride.

You’re gonna—lash—
Have a—lash—
Beautiful—lash—
Baby—lash—
Girl—lash—lash—lash—

Maria says nothing. She moves nothing, except her feet, trying for a straight line, ending in a patch of burnt weeds. The wrinkled woman does not follow her past the Christian bookstore with its murky windows—a front for a prostitution ring, everyone on the block and the police who patrol it know. For the residents of these streets it was like an electric fence. The wrinkled woman won’t let that tame her, shrieking now, her voice slicing every other syllable. Later, when curfew comes, firefighters in Bixby Park will strap the wrinkled woman to a gurney for an overnight stay.

Maria turns down Pacific, past the Press-Telegram building with graffiti murals supplanting newsprint. She wishes for rain, to be left inside. She tosses her rubber boots into a Dumpster. She’s all out of socks, bare feet will have to do. Mama bought those
boots for her with a bonus from a surprisingly good month, but Mama doesn’t have to know.

At the corner, Broadway and Pacific, port cranes jut out between the rooftops like ostriches clipped of their feathers. She has gone too far now.

A beautiful baby girl.

She wishes for rain.

She says nothing.

Agata’s funeral was not held in the church. It was held in a church, but not The Church, the portly red-faced priest at St. Anthony’s having turned her soul away at the wood-and-brass doors. The priest had heard, from the lace-veiled women through the confessional grates, of Agata’s condition, though the cause of death on the certificate read, simply, “Hemorrhage.” No one bleeds out like Agata did when their bodies are already empty.

A Lutheran reverend took Agata’s remains, consoled her children, and stiffened her husband. He opened the doors—not wood-and-brass but industrial metal—to both churchgoing communities. But the hall remained empty the day of Agata’s funeral, the lace-veiled women having stayed home to bake babka for their children.

Agata’s family had lasted only a year before moving to a folksy community nestled between the Pine Barrens and Atlantic City, but Agata never left the peninsula. Laura would keep her there for decades, tucked away in either her handbag or the pockets of her housecleaning dress—company for the midnight bus rides across Newark Bay. She would tell Agata about their boss, how he was giving her fewer clients but was at least paying her on time. That the strip mall by the port was getting a makeover, with a
ShopRite and a chain pizzeria and a salon advertising these new things called blowouts. That her fifth-born child and third-born son was now a tax attorney practicing in Jersey City. He had sent Laura a card last Christmas, one of those professionally laminated types of a family dressed in white, thanking her for the batches of apple rolls she had baked for him and his siblings years ago.

But Laura couldn’t tell Agata about the man. That she saw his dusty black Volkswagen on Avenue A, then again on Avenue C, then on Broadway, and finally, on Hudson—decades after it was renamed JFK Boulevard—as she pulled Maria along in the red pea coat with missing buttons. The man wore a flouncy cap but a thinner, tired smile. His back remained stiff, his shoulders scrunched to his cap; his hands, stubby and gloved, curled around the steering wheel. He watched Laura like an owl.

Maria tugged at her grandmother’s pocketbook, reeling like a puppy tied to a parking meter. “You know him, Babcia?”

Laura had waited for this day. She had told Agata, on one of those soundless nights riding back into Bayonne, that it would come. That she still had faith, however misguided or misplaced, in seeing him again. A faith driven by an anger that never dissolved into the mist that rolled over the Kill Van Cull. Before Laura could start to his car, swing open the door, and confront that smile, the man lifted a gloved finger. He brought it to his lips, his smile gone.

A police car turned onto JFK, its lights flashing. The dusty black Volkswagen rumbled. Laura had waited for this day, and now she wanted to follow it. Follow the Volkswagen to the Sydney-in-Bayonne bridge. She would chase it to the top deck, where she would discard her coat and hat and scarf and balance on the railing—not in her house.
stockings, which she had finally outgrown, but in her fine wool-blend tights. But the mission had changed, the route gone off-course, and Laura had Maria now, who was only five or six and still unable to ride the bus alone. Laura had waited but never planned for this day, and would have no news at all to give Agata.

Laura straightened her pocketbook. “No, dziecko,” she said. “Don’t know him at all.”

When Władysława hung her head as Laura and moved into an apartment building where she traded Social Security checks for rent, police found the dusty black Volkswagen submerged in the leaden waters of the marsh, one hundred feet from the Pulaski Skyway. Its leather seats were slashed open. No one was inside.

Two hundred feet from the Pulaski Skyway, they found the owner.

And the people living in the square, squat houses on the other side of Newark sighed, oh dear, oh how terrible, imagine, imagine living that way before turning to the Home & Lifestyle section.

It’s recital season in the Valley and the woman in Van Nuys has run out of roses. She has a JCPenney shopping bag full of white carnations—enough, she made sure, for each girl who visits the crook of this strip mall. A blonde woman filling up her SUV at the gas station had said sunflowers were the flowers brides want now; carnations have gone the way of the orchid.

The woman in Van Nuys shuffles along the boulevard in chunky sandals with a low heel. Van Nuys in the morning is always the best time. The steam rises from the streets and swivels around her ankles well before Van Nuys opens its doors. In
Chilpancingo, there was no steam, just sweat and heat and heat and sweat. But this isn’t just the average Van Nuys steam on an average Van Nuys Tuesday when the average number of girls would go to the very average Van Nuys. The Others are here, even though it’s neither Wednesday nor Saturday. They’re flattened against their white rust-dusted van by the officers, the officers struggling to handcuff their hands at the small of their backs, backs sooted with a diabolical gray.

Red and orange ricochet off broken windows. A misshapen Van Nuys, collapsing, its innards glazed in violent flames as hoses cascade foam. The woman in Van Nuys cannot walk any closer. Today, she must stand much more than fifty feet away. The officers assure her it’s too early for the girls: Van Nuys was empty, is empty. It’s not the day for the officers, never the day for the officers, but the woman in Van Nuys will listen to the officers, because today is also not the day for The Others. They have gone amok like she knew, truly, they would. The Others never came for the girls.

The Others thrash and thrust, wanting a glimpse of their work, their skill, before they’re carted downtown and then, to Victorville. They chant Save Save Save in lighter tones, Save Save Save we did. The woman in Van Nuys doesn’t hear The Others. There is no Van Nuys. This isn’t what she wanted. This is what sets her apart from The Others. This is what, perhaps, makes her The Other.

At the bus stop, the woman in Van Nuys sets down her shopping bag and rests her elbows on her swollen knees. Maybe she’ll join Alejandro’s wife and go to Sherman Oaks or Encino or even Beverly Hills. The pay would be good, more than enough for what she and her husband had now. They would move to a two-bedroom apartment with a porch and a yard, or at worst, a stucco balcony in direct sunlight. She would replace her
miniature planters with full-sized pots crafted out of mosaic glass, grow lettuce and red peppers and, when the Valley cools off, an eggplant or two. And she would travel. Take her first plane ride and flash a boarding pass to Jamaica or the Bahamas. Saunter through those X-ray scanners shoeless, but with pride. Walk along the white-white sands with someone else's baby on her hip. Maybe they would say she had a knack for this. Maybe they would say it was a calling.
We Cannot Live Without the Birds and Animals

Their first night out in the city, Lisa and Jenny meet a Portuguese woman in the upstairs alcove of an overpriced cocktail bar on the Lower East Side. After several rounds of Old Fashioneds, the Portuguese woman wants to know their “story.” She’s convinced that all thirty-one-year-old single women have stories. Lisa and Jenny take turns explaining: man, abusive, depressive, emotional, asshole. He beat you? The woman asks. Oh no, they reply. Jinx! They spoke in unison for the first time—as if they were one person.

Jenny likes to carry around a book by the psychologist Judith Herman. Lisa flips through it on the train ride to New York while Jenny takes in New Jersey’s finest steel structures and marshlands.

*Recovery unfolds in three stages. The central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. The central task of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life.*
Lisa and Jenny walk north to Penn Station later that night and count Christmas trees shining through apartment windows. Lisa had done this sightseeing alone last year; couples do not bother her anymore. Jenny still tears up whenever a couple passes, yelps whenever she sees a pregnant woman. Lisa thinks Jenny has disrupted her relationship with ordinary life. But as Judith Herman reminds them, these stages are a convenient fiction, not to be taken too literally.

***

Jenny writes in that first email to Lisa: What did you mean when you said that about him? What did you mean?

Lisa reads the email at her nonprofit communications job in Newark. Why do you want to talk to me? she writes. What can I do for you?

***

Lisa meets Jenny a day after Christmas in the Burger King parking lot off Broadway. Jenny wears a slouchy orange knit cap and a black-and-gray checkered scarf with braided fringe. Lisa recognizes the scarf instantly: She’d bought it five years ago from a former B-list actress hocking novelty items at a flea market in Los Angeles (Pasadena, technically).

Jenny doesn’t know this scarf had once belonged to Lisa. Jenny doesn’t know much about Lisa, the person. Only Lisa, the ex-girlfriend. (Or Lisa, the slut.)
Lisa doesn’t need an introduction to Jenny, the new girlfriend. Jenny, the fiancée. Lisa never put a ring on it, but she doesn’t judge Jenny for saying yes. There was a night, back in Boston (Allston, really), where outside The Silhouette, in-between flicking popcorn kernels from their teeth, he rose on the balls of his boots, pressed his hips into Lisa’s, and promised he would follow her wherever she went, even if it meant moving to Auckland or St. Petersburg or worse, still, New Jersey.

Jenny had planned to have a baby with him. She wanted to give the baby some archaic Celtic name to honor his ancestry, but the baby never happened. Instead, Jenny followed Lisa to New Jersey with a hunter-green duffel bag, an electronic typewriter, and an elderly calico cat named Pickles.

***

Note: Names have been changed to trick the innocent into believing a semblance of comfort and normalcy. Lisa and Jenny are generic enough. Think of them as your white girl neighbors in the ‘90s with the acid wash overalls and chunky blonde streaks. Two Jennifer Anistons buying ceramic-potted plants and Ikea poster prints. They constantly ask for paper towels and pot. They sit cross-legged on your couch with their Doc Martens on. They rename all the fish in your aquarium. They let you grope their inner thighs between bong hits. When they’re baked, they let you blow smoke into their open mouths but quickly smack their lips then move to the armchair beside your aquarium. They love
Madonna and sex-positive feminism. They hate their fathers and neoliberal policies. You know a Lisa and Jenny.

***

Lisa and Jenny won’t talk about him for a while. They’ve been told, by various psychologists and concerned friends, that they shouldn’t talk about him until they are ready. Both women have used that as an excuse to isolate themselves, sidestep emotional landmines. Jenny has more of an excuse for this silence; Lisa left him two years ago. Jenny thinks Lisa might be about to detonate, but Jenny isn’t sure because she, too, might implode.

Was there a timeline, or an equation?

They can tell you his name is [redacted]. That he is from [redacted]. That he works for [definitely redacted]. They will redact everything to protect the guilty.

***

For to wish to forget how much you loved someone--and then, to actually forget--can feel, at times, like the slaughter of a beautiful bird who chose, by nothing short of grace, to make a habitat of your heart. (Maggie Nelson)

The habitat is Newark in January. A ghost town on a faraway planet.
Revised: The habitat is a hornet’s nest. Once shaken, it’s destroyed by its makers, not its invaders.

Question for Nelson: Is a “slaughter” a slow death?

Cliche: The habitat never existed.

Better: The habitat is a mimesis of one’s own projection.

The habitat: Lisa lives in the attic apartment of a three-family house on Clifton Street. It’s only a one-bedroom, with beige wall-to-wall carpeting and deep green walls. Double dormer windows flank either side of the apartment. Brass chandeliers and a claw-foot bathtub give the apartment its only sense of vintage charm.

The mimesis: Over email, Lisa and Jenny had joked about living in the East Hamptons like the Bouvier women. They said they would wear fake furs, adopt twelve more cats, and dance. Instead, Jenny settles for an air mattress in the center of the living room.

We can still dance, Jenny says. Let’s still dance.

The projection: Her first night in Newark, Jenny stands at the living room window and contemplates the German shepherds patrolling the nearby used car dealership. The dogs stalk the perimeter of the high metal fence, their teeth sometimes rattling the bars.

Lisa blows up the air mattress. Pickles pounces on Jenny’s duffel bag.

Jenny lights a Newport and blows the smoke out the open window.

It’s a shame, Jenny says of the dogs. It’s a shame to be locked up that way.
Those dogs are crazy, Lisa says.

They’re doing what they’re taught to do, Jenny tells Lisa. What do you expect?

***

Lisa likes her nonprofit job, in which she crafts grant letters and proposals and newsletters. Pay is low, but she makes enough to make it work—for herself. Lisa doesn’t know how to make it work for Jenny.

What habitat did Lisa and Jenny expect? One of simplicity and order. Not turbulent and complex.

***

Still hungover from their late night in the city, Lisa and Jenny sit at the kitchen table and scoop marshmallows into their cereal. Lisa thinks of the Portuguese woman, who had no qualms asking strangers about something so private, so intimate. Maybe it was primal; maybe she’d felt a bond. Maybe it’s just what you have to ask.

What if we were all like that Portuguese woman? Lisa asks.

What do you mean? Jenny asks.

Forthright, Lisa says.

But what do we tell people? Jenny asks.

Jenny means: Do they say the word?

It’s like when women are raped but not, like, raped. It was this, but it wasn’t this.

A necessary speech act.
When Lisa first read Jenny’s email, she didn’t know what to say, either. She wanted to say no, she did not mean what she meant. She wanted to say, I don’t know what you mean. She wanted to say, I don’t know, what is abuse anyway?

The rhetorical is always safer.

How did he abuse you, anyway?

We tell people we know what it was, Lisa says. It was this, but it wasn’t this.

[Redacted] used to ask: What happened to you?

Last year, in the book stacks at the nearby public library, Lisa found a text by an academic named Andrew Slade on trauma, the sublime, and her favorite foreign film. A coincidence? No—Lisa doesn’t believe in coincidences.

There was validation for Lisa in the first paragraph. That she had been *certain something happened*, even if it *resisted comprehension and understanding*. 
She checked out the book and returned home to watch her favorite foreign film. She was happy. Amnesia could be a form of resistance, consciously or not. But we’re not concerned here with private forms of traumatic experience like rape, incest, or other forms of primarily domestic terror.

Oh.

Who is?

***

Lisa curls on the mismatched Ikea throw pillows cushioning the square window seat. She watches Jenny sort her pill cocktail: one pill for PTSD, one for bipolar II, one for ADHD. Jenny wears that scarf; that black-and-gray checkered one that used to belong to Lisa. This time, it’s twisted around Jenny’s head. An impromptu turban.

I thought we could still be like the Bouviers, Jenny says. But it’s too cold today to wear a bathing suit, even inside.

I like that scarf, Lisa says.

[Redacted] gave it to me, Jenny says.

Lisa doesn’t correct her.

Pickles meows and bats a toy mouse around the kitchen table.

Lisa drives Jenny to the Social Security office so Jenny can pick up her supplemental income checks. Snowflakes sprinkle onto the windshield like confetti. Etta James plays from the radio. A Sunday Kind of Love on a Monday.
She sings like she’s in mourning, Jenny says.

Maybe she is, Lisa says.

Turn it off, Jenny says. I don’t want to cry again.

Jenny is always crying. Jenny, broad and braless, buzzed hair and septum piercing, is constantly fighting the feminine. But Jenny is fearful. She expresses her fear. Her nearly bald head radiates it. (Gendered? Maybe.) She yells at Lisa in the middle of the night, accuses her of making [redacted] mean. A man is his collection of scars, and Jenny holds Lisa responsible for all of his.

Jenny had imagined Lisa differently. [Redacted] had said Lisa was a little “crazy.” Jenny didn’t expect her to be so reserved. Or maybe Jenny did. [Redacted] also said Lisa had a problem with expression.

***

Before [redacted], Lisa had a boyfriend who was blonder and smarter and meaner and sober. They lived together in his townhouse apartment—white-walled, stucco exterior, linoleum everything—on the UC Irvine campus while he completed his English PhD. Concentration: British Romanticism. He would quote Edmund Burke as they drove over the lush hills toward the smooth, white, cliff-lined beach (romantic). They would sip dark coffee in their scratched Ray-Bans and thrift shop clothing beside overheated Newport moms in their cashmere pashminas. He would read Lisa’s writing and say she had a
“feminine partiality” (Burke). He was obsessed with beauty, with small expensive objects and postcard landscapes and her soft female body. He admired, but did not love.

On their second anniversary, they drove down Highway 73 toward Laguna Beach. The British Romanticist quoted Burke.

*Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror which is the most genuine effect and truest test of the sublime.*

But which is the true test—the infinity or the horror?

***

*I am worn out with desire.* (Marguerite Duras)

*I am fucked over by desire.* (Lisa)

***

Lisa now fucks a 22-year-old who cannot quote Burke. They drink at pubs and beer gardens along Market Street, rub their noses together on the walkway over the Passaic. Orange lights illuminate the ripples of the black river. Shadows from jutting steel structures blanket their cheeks and foreheads (romantic). They sleep until 8 a.m. and fuck, careful and slow, until noon. She makes the pancakes; he makes the eggs.
Their second night together, the twenty-two-year-old tells Lisa to let him know whenever she becomes uncomfortable during sex.

Is there anything I can do? the twenty-two-year-old asked her at the time. Don’t be afraid to tell me.

[Redacted] used to ask: What happened to you?

***

Lisa waits for Jenny in a hard gray chair in the front room of the Social Security office. She opens the latest issue of a New York glossy and reads an article about quote-unquote hysterical women. The article begins with Rachel Carson, the scientist, the activist.

We can live without birds and animals, writes one anonymous letter writer following publication of Carson’s Silent Spring. Letter writer’s gender unknown. Likely a man, Lisa thinks.

As for insects, isn’t it just like a woman to be scared to death of a few little bugs! the letter writer continues. (Just like a man would!)

Lisa’s first serious boyfriend once called her hysterical, then opened the passenger door of his Nissan and told her to get out. He never liked cats or dogs, never took Lisa to the aquarium, not even when she begged.
Two years later, she watched one of her roommates, the one from Arkansas, punt a tiny kitten across the kitchen. Don’t tell [the other roommate], he said. She’ll get hysterical.

But [redacted] liked cats and dogs. [Redacted] took her to the aquarium. [Redacted] enjoyed all animals. The British Romanticist did, too.

Lisa cannot figure out this pattern. She tucks the magazine in her purse when no one is looking.

***

Hysteria is knowing that we cannot live without the birds and animals.

Hysteria is knowing what we cannot live without.

***

Jenny’s favorite letter to the editor is actually a letter addressed to Shirley Jackson following the publication of “The Lottery.” *Our brothers feel that Miss Jackson is a True Prophet and Disciple of the True Gospel of the Redeeming Light*, the letter reads. *When will the next revelation be published?*

    Jenny tells Lisa later that evening: I once spent a week in the Boston Public Library researching the Exalted Rollers. Found absolutely shit.

    Did you think they were real? Lisa asks.

    I wanted them to be, Jenny says.
Are you a prophet? Lisa wants to ask Jenny. What do you know?

***

Jenny holds Pickles on her lap and watches Lisa dance, shyly, in the center of the living room. A Lesley Gore album plays from the vintage turntable. It’s Judy’s turn to cry. Judy’s turn to cry.

[Redacted] said you were a good dancer, Jenny tells Lisa.

[Redacted] told them many things.

What else did he say? Lisa asks, still dancing. That I’m a liar?

Maybe, Jenny says.

Don’t lie, Lisa says. Don’t be like me.

You know I’m still sorry about that, Jenny says.

Lisa pushes the air mattress into the doorway, and then holds out her hand. When he treats me rough and he acts as though he doesn’t really care.

Jenny takes Lisa’s hand. Plus, he loves me and I know it.

But he’s just afraid to show it

They dance together beneath the brass chandelier.

Pickles lays his head on his paws and yawns.

***
When Lisa left the British Romanticist, she gave him this note she thought romantic:

*Astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror.* (Burke)

Once Lisa purchased her plane ticket to Newark, packed all her bags, [Redacted] wanted a hug. [Redacted] squeezed her as she kept her arms to her side. Buried, not suspended.

***

The twenty-two-year-old comes by late, once the bars have closed, and long after Jenny passed out on the air mattress. He steps over the sleeping Jenny and follows Lisa into the bedroom.

Why do you put up with her? the twenty-two-year-old asks.

You know why, Lisa says.

The twenty-two-year-old takes off his shirt, lies back on Lisa’s bed. The twenty-two-year-old is only twenty-two, but he likes to think he knows some things.

Guilt isn’t a very good reason, he says.

***

Jenny wants to express everything. Lisa needs her reconnection with ordinary life.

***
The German shepherds wake Lisa and the twenty-two-year-old early, around six, when light breaks over the Passaic. This morning, Lisa cannot fall back to sleep. She dreamt of being handcuffed to a hospital bed, but she could not remember her disease.

Lisa lies on her side so she can see the Passaic. It is gray this morning; there is never any blue in this city. Even the Atlantic is more green than blue. [Redacted]’s eyes were more green than blue.

[Redacted] used to ask: What happened to you?

Lisa tells the twenty-two-year-old about one of the sexual assaults she suffered, the one that happened in her early twenties, before she met the British Romanticist. The twenty-two-year-old turns on his back and begins to moan. He can’t look at her or the ceiling. He asks her to move the wastebasket beside the bed. He cried more than she did. She does not cry at all. She is no longer shocked by the crimes against her body.

She is no longer horrified.

She is suspended.

This may be horror.
Lisa and Jenny agree they do not like the word survivor. A survivor is someone who is dead or should have died but is still living. A survivor, then, is a witness.

But what did Lisa witness if she was a witness no one believed?

***

There’s an alternative narrative in which Lisa and Jenny know of each other, but have never met. Lisa does not like that narrative too much.

***

When Jenny left [redacted], she threw the cubic zirconia engagement ring into a sewer along Commonwealth Avenue and rented a cheap sublet in an East Boston triple decker. After exchanging emails with Lisa for two weeks, she bought a bus ticket to New Jersey. [Redacted] showed up on her rickety back porch while she packed her duffel bag. He presented her with a gold-plated necklace (for her) and some catnip (for Pickles).

Our passion is too strong, Jenny wrote to Lisa in an email. I’m okay, but you wouldn’t understand.

Lisa reads Jenny’s email while riding the Path Train to Journal Square. She wonders if [redacted] now knows where she lives; if he knows where she works. How many people have heard him shout; how many people have heard her scream. All the things he broke with his fist. All the things they broke together.
***

A man reads this story and wonders: Maybe you should give “redacted” a name toward the end. As he develops.

Memories develop the opposite of film.

Is there a name for that process?

It’s not fade. That implies there was a clear and complete picture in the first place.

But sometimes, you get a blank roll of film back from the drugstore. No grain, no red or blue bars, no orange stripes.

After eight long emails, Jenny wrote: *I’m sorry for not believing you in the first place, Lisa. I’m truly sorry.*

Lately, Lisa’s mind turns up blank.

***

Lisa first met [redacted] at her workplace in downtown Boston. They served in the same department at their copywriting company. She still shared a bed with the British Romanticist the first time she shared a bed with [redacted]. She has edited this out for you [her].
She has edited this out to hide the fact that she may be complicit in her undoing.

An accessory, not a witness.

Is it possible to be both?

[Redacted] stopped asking: What happened to you?

***

Jenny is in Allston. She wraps a fleece blanket around her torso and sits cross-legged in a wicker chair on the back porch she shares with [redacted]. She thinks about Lisa, wonders how one can leave while the other stays. Jenny considers it survival.

But Lisa wants to scream at Jenny that she hates that word. Jenny wants to correct Lisa’s memory.

No! Jenny wants to scream back from Allston. We are not survivors, but we have survived.

Can that duality exist?

[Redacted] would say to Lisa, to Jenny: *I will follow you forever, be yours forever.*

Sounding like the diary of a twelve-year-old girl.
***

Lisa never responds to Jenny’s email. She doesn’t want to understand, but she does.

(The search for a feminist utopian anything leads to disappointment.)

***

Jenny finally receives her SSI checks in February, just after Valentine’s Day. Snowed in on a frigid Friday night, Lisa, Jenny and Pickles huddle around the portable space heater and throw a belated party complete with chocolate truffles and red wine.

Tell me more about those Exalted Rollers, Lisa says.

I told you, Jenny says. I found shit.

But what did you want to find? Lisa asks.

Communion, I think, Jenny says. They seemed so certain in their letter.

Lisa runs a warm bath with vegan bubbles and lights a vanilla-scented candle. Little bubble islands form under the faucet and converge, seamlessly, in the center of the tub. She eases an exhausted Jenny into the water. The bubbles consume her.

The British Romanticist once took Lisa to his professor’s million-dollar home in Santa Monica for an unofficial lecture on soap bubbles and Romantic art and 19th-century politics. She cannot remember the thesis now. She can only remember thinking, sometimes you are obsessed with the connections that aren’t there. Beside the koi pond in
the professor’s Japanese garden, The British Romanticist said that Lisa wasn’t trying hard enough.

Jenny crinkles the bubbles with her fingertips before she lays her head against the tiled bathroom wall. She closes her eyes and tells Lisa to come in.

Water seeps over Lisa’s nipples; Jenny watches them become more apparent through her pink cotton nightgown. The water gradually turns the nightgown purple. Pickles stalks the base of the bathtub. Across the street, the barks of the German shepherds echo throughout the still corridor.

Jenny lifts her head. The bubbles float away from her neck and chest. Her hands grip either side of the tub, but she does not leave.

Maybe the dogs are scared, Jenny says. They’re not tough, they’re scared.