

5-2007

Sky Mines

Erin Mccoy

Clemson University, emccoy@clemson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses



Part of the [Modern Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mccoy, Erin, "Sky Mines" (2007). *All Theses*. 115.

https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/115

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

SKY MINES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Erin Ruth McCoy
May 2007

Accepted by:
Keith Morris, Committee Chair
Dr. Alma Bennett
Dr. Wayne Chapman

ABSTRACT

This creative thesis explores variety within the single genre of the short story. There are eight stories in this thesis, consisting of four longer pieces and four shorter pieces. Each piece is a reflection of the author's command of narrator, plot, characterization, and many other important elements within the art of fiction. The purpose of this creative thesis is to show examples of the author's ability to demonstrate proficiency within the boundaries of a collection of short stories.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my family – for their support and influence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my advisor, Keith Morris, for his assistance with this project. His unflinching commentary and willingness to take on this project with me is much appreciated, and his humor and encouragement have been invaluable. I would also like to extend a hearty thanks to Dr. Bennett and Dr. Chapman, who took the time to be on my committee and provided ample advice. Both Drs. Bennett and Chapman have given me many challenging opportunities throughout my graduate studies, and I thank them for their mentorship. All three of these people have helped me to become a better writer, and for that I am forever grateful.

I would like to extend gratitude to Liz Newall and Tristan Hendrix, who aided in the early editing process of this project, and whose support helped my writing grow.

Finally, I would like to thank the students in Fall 2005 and Spring 2007 fiction workshop for their feedback on some of the stories contained in this work, as well as all the miscellaneous editors (Dr. Beverly Christopher, Dr. Robert Doak, Dr. Brooke McLaughlin, Dr. Taura Napier, Dr. John Sykes, Dr. Pamela Thomas, Joseph Schumacher, and Geoffrey Way) who kept me writing.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT	iii
DEDICATION	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTERS	
1. OUTSIDE OF HIMSELF	11
2. THE WAKE.....	13
3. MARIANNE DALLOWAY	23
4. THE SUM OF COLLEEN.....	25
5. GENTLE IMPULSION	37
6. SKY MINES	39
7. LET ME CLIP DIRTY WINGS	57
8. PINS AND NEEDLES RUST AND BEND.....	59

INTRODUCTION

A primary goal for this creative thesis is for it to explore variety within a single genre. The short story is my favorite writing medium because of the flexibility it has — one can leap back and forth between voices, narratives, and time. I enjoy playing with different styles of writing, and I have taken this opportunity to write a creative thesis partly to be able to *see* how much I have grown in my ability to play with words.

Wordplay has always fascinated me, and from a young reading age I began to notice how different writers wrote *differently*. *The Secret Garden* and *The Little Princess*, for example, had similar themes (orphaned girls dropped into a dismal English setting after living lavish lives in British India) and yet the writing was not the same, the characters were not the same, and the tone of both stories varied widely. As I have grown in my literary knowledge, I began to notice what types of literature toward which I gravitated. Those works, the ones that I seemed to re-read over and over, remain my strongest writing influences; even if they don't stand out in my writing *per se*, they are there, buried somewhere in my subconscious prose.

My first introduction to Thomas Hardy was through his novel *Tess of the d'Urburvilles*, and its spiraling, fatalist plot hooked me for some reason. Here, for the first time that I could recall, were characters who were tragic, dark, and damaged; moreover, they were common people. Everyone was doomed and messed up, to say it mildly, and for some reason that resonated with my

developing ideas about society as a whole. Also, I have always felt that a good writer is also a good observer of her surroundings and of people in general, and I felt a kinship with Hardy in the sense that he wasn't interested in looking at elite or flashy people. Hardy, instead, chose to look at the "lower" classes and their struggles, which to me was and is far more interesting than the stories of the great heroes, colossal battles, handsome gentlemen and winsome ladies.

Many of the stories in this thesis reflect the notion of looking at characters who are not significant members of modern society. The opening story, "Outside of Himself," was chosen to begin my thesis for the specific purpose of introducing the most common people I write about: those who catch my attention. This is a man that I saw on the side of the road and I imagined an inner dialogue for him and, like many characters in this thesis, the unnamed man in "Outside of Himself" is not important or extraordinary. He is damaged, like all of my characters, but not dramatically so. The women in "Gentle Impulsion" and "Marianne Dalloway" are similar in that they are also slightly broken, while the young boy in "Let Me Clip Dirty Wings" is extremely damaged but not, by today's standards, remarkable. These one-page stories were excellent platforms for taking still shots of people who do not get much attention.

When tackling my own writing for this thesis, I decided to take my major literary influences and utilize some of their techniques to better experiment with what I am capable of. A challenge that I set for myself for this thesis was to juxtapose "regular" length stories against one-page stories. I first read "Two

Cents” by Suzanne Jacobs (translated by Susanna Finnell) in the class English 800: Introduction to Research and was fascinated by the idea. I had never considered writing a one-page story before, and I wanted to try. The story also opened doors for me in terms of other types of short stories, including the “one-sentence” short story, the one-paragraph, etc.

But for the purpose of my thesis, I decided to wiggle around a little more in the one-page genre. With a one-page story, a writer is only allowed a certain amount of room to tell a story that simultaneously keeps the reader’s attention and also assures every word a bit of the spotlight. One-page stories also give an author a limited amount of space to establish tone, and what struck me most about Jacobs’s “Two Cents” was that the story left the reader with an eerie, unsettled feeling. The story was so vague that I felt unsure about what I just read. The tone of the story, along with its different format, made for a very interesting take on fiction, especially the short story genre. For my thesis, I am attempting to play with the ideas of tone and wordplay. I want to use one-page stories as though they are snapshots of a moment, where the climax is all that the story is. I also hope to use one-page stories as places where character experiences are the focal point of the story, and what these people have to say is interesting enough to pop out of such a small piece.

Most of my characters and plots are not extraordinary. One piece of advice that writers are often given is to “write what you know.” What I know, and what I study, are the situations and people around me. I hope to grow to a

point where I can write about something that I don't know well, and I attempted that in my thesis. The inspiration for "The Sum of Colleen" was taken from a short news piece I heard on National Public Radio. I wanted to write an epistolary story in the form of emails, and I had been trying out different ideas with the format. The story about a transgender man struggling through becoming a woman while living in a tiny town in Alaska lent itself well to the email system. I found that taking the root idea of a married man running a dogsled business in Alaska while trying to become a woman was great material, but I had a great deal of liberty with specifics. What had begun as a last-minute submission for a fiction workshop class became an interesting story, and while I initially was concerned with my authority on the subject and voice, "The Sum of Colleen" developed into an atypical but poignant story.

My prose seems to be going in the direction of "southern writer," but I have just been following the advice of "writing what [I] know." I do admire many Southern writers sense of setting, and I like my stories to have a strong sense of place, even if a specific town or city name is not mentioned. One of the greatest lines in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* is when, to paraphrase, Mr. O'Hara tells Scarlett that owning land is the most important triumph an Irish person can have, and I'd like to think that attitude is one shared by people raised in the South. I think my home region is rife with colorful people and fantastic stories that aren't found in other parts of America. And while my stories don't involve Confederate jubilees or a Yoknapatawpha county, they still have hints of

the Southern literature I have ferreted away into my writing voice. Faulkner's sensibilities with storytelling are far beyond anything I am capable of, but he has introduced me to certain elements to utilize with in terms of writing, most notably the narrative voice of Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*. The stuttered plot, told in various voices, wasn't an idea I had thought of before, never mind having one of those voices be mentally handicapped and written with a strict attention to details of Benjy's free-association style of thinking. I admire the achievement that Faulkner realized with Benjy.

There are many attempts to mirror William Faulkner in my thesis. The troubled Southern families and friends in "The Wake" only bolster the fragile central character in the story, Belle. She has aphasia, a condition that enables her to recognize the world around her yet she is rendered unable to comprehend it. Belle does not narrate "The Wake," but her struggle and confusion are rendered through her memories. Eunice and Mabel are well-intentioned characters, whose proclivity to gossip allows the reader to attain a somewhat biased view on everything that Belle has forgotten. The setting in "The Wake" is lifted from my hometown, but Belle's memories are borrowed from other people whom I know, which I think gives the story a little less of a narrow feel. If Belle had grown up in the town her entire life, Mabel and Eunice's ideas about her would have been more or less vicious, but, since Belle is not native, her fragmented experience is underscored.

I am always leery when naming William Faulkner as a personal writing influence, but naming Helen Fielding as an influence is more comfortable, due to the lack of an “overly ambitious” stigma. Along with Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* takes form with a first person narration delivered entirely in the snappy wit of her narrator’s candid diary entries. While I do not write much comedy, I consider *Bridget Jones’ Diary* to be my go-to book when I’m trying to remember how to get a laugh out of an audience. While Fielding may not be trying to make major political or social statement with her book and it is not, in the sense of Faulkner, life-changing, the writing is so expertly done that I feel Fielding is a worthy colleague of these literary giants. Without Fielding (and living in and traveling to England) the character of Omar in “Pins and Needles Rust and Bend” would not be as realistic and funny as he appears.

Contemporary writer Nick Hornby, known for his best-sellers like *High Fidelity* and *About a Boy*, is another of my writing influences. Also British, Hornby’s strengths that I admire are his abilities to find humor and sadness in the lives of the unexceptional. Hornby’s book-to-film success does not mean the “hype” surrounding him is just a pejorative word for “praise.” Hornby once wrote that the most difficult topic to tackle in fiction is real people, because “nothing happens.” But his characters, settings, and plots are always treated with a developmental respect that is reminiscent of that of earlier greats. Hornby’s dry wit, good turn of a phrase, and intelligence make his books likeable, and the attention that he gives his characters make his books touching. Hornby was my

greatest influence in “Pins and Needles Rust and Bend,” as I wanted to make the relationship between Laura and Omar vibrant, important, and relatable.

One of my most recently discovered writing muses is Katherine Anne Porter. She is definitely the current exemplar, in my literary trophy case, of the writer who pays most attention to craft, and whose every word seems to mean something. “Flowering Judas” and “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” were my first exposures to Porter’s prowess, and every time I pick her stories apart I am amazed at her attention to structure, detail, and commentary. Her observing-writer lens rarely misses anything important, and yet she is so skilled that even the hidden meanings of her work are always floating around the surface. Porter’s work is a challenge for me, and I think reading and studying her works have allowed me to pay more attention to my own writing. At the same time, her influence has helped me to think critically about my work.

The story “Sky Mines” shows a great deal of Porter’s influence. The story began in early June of 2006 and has gone through many revisions before I brought it to fiction workshop during the spring semester of 2007. The premise of the story is that there are instances in life where people are close to death yet are inexplicably brought back. The “cancer girl” in the story is someone I saw while swimming that June, and I wanted to write a story about what it’s like to live after you almost died, and a previous story about a recovering methamphetamine addict seemed like a good vehicle for that idea, as both experiences can take life to its limit, yet one is more pitiable than the other. Every word in “Sky Mines” has

been considered and weighed, and I still consider the story to be in flux; Porter's influence helped me to indulge in almost excessive attention to that particular story.

So my thesis stands as a hodgepodge of influences, some deemed "important" and some just too contemporary for long-term judgment. I have many influences, because I have devoured so many great books, but the ones whom I most admire I believe are those who have been most prominent in my own development as a writer. I write every day, yet usually, if at three pages a day, maybe one really solid one will come out of the week. That is one thing that I learned while working on this thesis, and it is a sentiment echoed from many a "how to be a writer" type book: *Want to be a writer? Write.* I usually have flashes of ideas, and, like Roald Dahl, have to write them down immediately. Some of my ideas, like an idea I have for a potential novel, will not come to fruition until they have matured. Others pop out and become something fascinating, and I generally have my characters talking to me in my head for awhile before they actually get on the page. I like to know what they would think, wear, how they would react, drive – miniscule details that make the characters real.

My immense hope for my thesis is that it maintains a strong, unique voice, even when I play around with structures and themes, settings and plots. I have intentionally attempted to make all of my stories somewhat different and distinctive, even if they are by the same author, who is young and limited in life experience. But the experiences that I do know, and the people whose stories I

have heard, are neither limited nor unimportant due to their somewhat mundane nature. My characters are my people and my plots are my thoughts. Thus, because my short stories are alive to me, my primary goal for this thesis collection has been to create stories that come alive for their readers.

CHAPTER ONE OUTSIDE OF HIMSELF

Not many people notice how many power lines there are around here. They drive past this restaurant without stopping to look at the signs and wires. I stand out here every Sunday afternoon and watch them. The diner's on the highway, so most people, I guess, are in a big hurry to get between the two towns this road runs through.

I notice everything. The rainbow eyes of oil that spread on the asphalt, the birds resting on the wires, the battered signs — I see all of this. I rest my hands on my belly and tell June about it. She used to be here, but now she's not. I still run the diner — it's open Mondays through Saturdays, and we have fish on Fridays. June used to spell it "Fish FRY-day" on the chalk board by the door. I can't write it like that; I can't draw the little fish under the words. Doesn't seem to make much difference. The same people who've been coming forever don't say anything. As long as they keep coming, I can't complain.

Somebody drove by a minute ago and looked at me, probably wondering why a fat man like me would stand outside of a highway dump named "Me-Maw's Country Kitchen" in the rain on a Sunday. I know what I look like — giant stomach spilling over old stained pants, dirty hat sitting on top of my balding head. I got dressed today, that should be enough.

The girl was in a newer car and she flicked her cigarette out the window as she paused at the light and looked at me. I don't know what she was thinking, but I bet she was thinking something like June used to say. Something like *what kind of fool would stand out in the rain and stare at nothing?* But I'm looking at the sky, the birds, the pavement. I'm looking at the things that I used to see everyday with June, who's not here anymore to tell me to get out of the rain.

CHAPTER TWO THE WAKE

Belle creaked back and forth on a white porch in an ancient rocking chair. She strained her old eyes to watch the people milling around in somber colors, their faces melting into despair, spilling over their collars and blending with their dark-colored suits and dresses.

With a sigh, a woman fell into a propped position against the porch rail. “I just can’t believe it,” she said in an exaggerated hush. “I really *cannot* believe it.” *Ah reel-lee cahn nawt bull-eve eyat.*

“Oh, Eunice, I know,” said another woman, standing slightly to the left of the first woman, who was still half-collapsed against the porch railing. She had a dowdy dress, a lint-specked navy blue that had a matching, sewn-to-the-dress jacket. Her necklace was what looked like a string of Christmas tree ornaments, painted to look like black pearls. Her hair was the color of butter, thinning but ample enough to be swooped into an origami-esque helmet, and her shoes, kitten-heeled suede, were the same color. Moist with a lace of sweat, her face was jowly and open, similar to both the cute and ugly aspects of a bulldog pup. The perspiration muddied her carefully powdered cheeks, where blue veins could be seen swimming under her pale skin.

The second woman was frail and thin, except for her legs, which were like doughy tree trunks, dimpled and sturdy. Her feet seemed to be squashed into her

sturdy loafers, uncomfortable and spilling over the sides. Black with black velvet flowers, her dress was fancier than her companion's, and her silvery hair was cut in a blunt bob that only created more shadows in her hollowed cheeks. She had various glittering objects on her ears, wrists, and fingers, but her neck, a shaking wattle of dappled skin, was unadorned. She held a deep purple, almost black purse with gold clasps.

"I hear he just dropped," Eunice said behind her clutch.

"Yes... And at the front door as he was, you know..." The other woman's mouth waned into her face as she pulled her lips under her teeth.

"Who found him?" The purse had sparkles on the bottom.

"Well, I *heard* from Rosa and John Gaddy that the UPS man found him when he was delivering a package. Just *found* him there, laid out over the steps."

"And... and *she* never noticed?" The pearls moved slightly from the fan.

"Is the sky blue? He was there for an hour."

"Do you suppose that he could have been revived if she had..?" Eunice's voice dropped to a buzz.

"I never raise my voice against God's," exclaimed the second woman with a sepulchral gaze at the ceiling.

Belle tucked herself further in the rocker, momentarily quickening its rusty pace. The women gazed out at the other people on the porch, oblivious to the creaky-hinge sound in the corner. They watched the other mourners murmur to each other, all grim and self-consciously hushed.

“Just as he was getting to the front door, probably to ask her to help him. I declare, Mabel, I think something should be done about *some* things,” Eunice said ominously, her head tilting knowingly towards Mabel, the second woman. She scanned the porch. “Where is Max?”

“I believe they are still talking to Wayne. Such a horrible way to celebrate an engagement.”

“Is he still going to marry that little girl he’s been with since high school?”

“Gina? Oh, of course. And you know Thomas was planning to give them the farm as a wedding present? Wayne just found out this morning when the lawyer came sniffing around with the will.” Mabel’s face relaxed into a frown, and she opened her purse, the gold snaps winking in the sun as they jumped open. She pulled out a tissue, but instead of dabbing at her eyes, she patted her forehead, where sweat was beginning to bead.

Eunice gasped and put her hand to her throat, captivated, and her eyes filled with sympathy.

“Yes,” Mabel said, delicately depositing the soggy tissue into a nearby concrete planter that doubled as an ashtray. The two women looked around again, occasionally glancing at each other meaningfully, glances that reminded each other of the plight of the newly-engaged Wayne, son of his deceased but farm-giving father, Thomas.

Belle fiddled with the hem of her dress, which was a soft, kitten gray. Over her dress she wore a black linen shawl, and she had passed much of the day

idly looking down at its tasseled fringe. A box hat perched on her white-haired head, its dotted black veil making her face difficult to read. She wore no necklace, but she had simple diamond studs in her drooping ear lobes that peeked out from behind the veil at certain moments, teasing the light. A single ring, a diamond set on a slim golden band, seemed to hang from her bony finger. Belle liked the ring; she always wore it. She'd recently had it polished by some nice girl who came and helped her clean a week ago, and she'd even let the girl wear it for a while.

“What about the daughter? I barely spoke to her in the line. She was just *stiff*. I mean, nary a tear from that child's eye and she was her Daddy's angel,” Eunice harrumphed quietly, and Mabel nodded.

“I think Anna's just in shock, but more might be going on. You know she's off at school now, and I bet she's still dipping into the pharmacy,” Mabel said, her voice dropping into a knowing whisper.

“I thought she'd been saved!”

“Oh, she was saved *publicly*, but that don't mean her *private* soul was saved!” Mabel whinnied, her voice loud enough for a few of the mourners to turn slightly.

“Well, her eyes *were* red,” Eunice conceded. She shot a look at her husband, Max, who was shaking hands with some of the men. He didn't catch her gaze, and she began to wave her clutch more rapidly.

“I suppose she's still planning on going to veterinary school...”

“Oh, I heard she couldn’t get in because of the... *charge*,” Eunice said with a nod, proud to have some information to contribute to the conversation.

“Well, I don’t rightly know, but as smart as that girl is, you would think she’d know not to disgrace her family like that... And she was off at summer school when she heard the news, so...” Mabel smiled tightly at her husband, who was beginning a conversation with a couple of retired bankers.

“She must not be doing so well in school, then, if she’s taking summer courses. Pity and such a waste. At least she’s not seeing that one boy...”

“Oh, he’s long gone, up and moved to Gaffney.”

“Were Thomas and Anna getting on well, do you think?”

“Oh, I think *they* were fine. He was proud of her going back to school at such a... adult age. But he was, well, *preoccupied*.”

Watching the two women bend their heads closer together, Belle realized that she had no idea who these people were talking about, and a sudden surge of warmth made her realize that she should. She shook her head, a quick, slight motion like that of a horse’s skin when it shudders away a fly.

Looking over the porch railing and onto the main street, Belle remembered the bougainvilleas taking over the garden in May. The street was fairly devoid of cars or shoppers. The porch gave its occupants a perfect view of the local gravestone sales business, or “burial monuments emporium” as its sign boasted. Belle didn’t think too much about the burial monuments, preferring to let her eyes rest on some wily hydrangeas that were spilling over the wall beside the building.

They reminded her of her childhood in Davie, Florida, where she would lie in her bed, watching the bougainvilleas shift from the canal breezes, their sweet fragrance mingling with the musky scent of her mother's eucalyptus plants. As a child, she liked to pretend that faerie people lived in the blossoms. They had conversations with the bees about the faeries in the neighboring bush, and they wore dresses of honeysuckle. Belle dipped her head as if to closer inspect the fringe of her shawl, but she was really hiding her smile. Her thin lips spread at the memory of those bright magenta flowers, and she smiled even wider remembering how she used to imagine them to be harboring small glittery creatures under the petals. They were dipped in pollen, so their skin was always bright gold, and their hair was bright orange.

Staccato laughter interrupted Belle's thoughts, and she raised her eyes to locate the source. A few teenage boys were riding bicycles down the street, glass bottles of Coca-cola gripped in their hands. Their bicycles were too small for them, but they didn't seem to mind. They hooted at each other, running into each other and looping into the street as they rode away from the funeral home. Belle focused on the Coke bottles, remembering how she used to go to football games with a man who stuffed peanuts down the necks of their "game bottles" of Coke, giving the sodas a salty edge.

What was his name? Belle frowned. She could remember that she always wore her special purple corduroy suit to the games, pinning an orange pom-pom to the lapel. She remembered that the two of them would split a thermos of

Purple Jesus during halftime. Panic rose in Belle's throat as her brain clawed for the man's name.

"Have you seen Mother?" a woman asked Mabel and Eunice, a faint smell of smoke accompanying her. Belle's anxiety rose. She knew this girl, but she didn't know why. She didn't know the girl's name, but she remembered the voice.

"Anna... How are you doing, dear?" Mabel asked, touching Anna's shoulder and almost pulling her closer, but she resisted.

"I'm doing okay," she said, distractedly looking down the street.

"You seem to be holding up well."

"I... As well as can be expected?" Anna mumbled. She turned to the left, tapping her fingertips against her mouth. Tall and lanky, she had braided her hair into a swoop around the crown of her head, emphasizing her height. Stray strands stuck to her cheeks, which were ruddy from the heat. She was in her late thirties, but she looked older. She turned, pensive, back to the women. "Wayne is a mess, though, but we knew that Daddy wasn't doing...well."

"Oh honey, we are *so* sorry. Is there anything we can do for you?" Mabel interrupted, rubbing Anna's hand, which was clasped between Mabel's bony, sweaty palms.

"No, but thank you." Anna's voice was impatient. "Have you seen my Mother?"

“Ah... No, honey we haven’t,” Eunice said, waving her purse like a Japanese fan.

Anna nodded distractedly, then walked away from the two women, who began to whisper. Belle sat up straight in the rocker, clutching the arms.

Who was that girl? Her hair was the same color as... the man with the Coke bottles? No, that’s not it. Faerie people... She liked the faerie stories... Anna? Anna, *who* was Anna? Belle started to push herself out of the rocking chair, her entire body wobbling for a moment before she became upright. She looked around for a moment, then spotted Anna, who was talking into a cell phone. Belle stared at the girl’s pinched face, trying to place those green eyes, squinty eyes. The girl looked up.

“Mama,” She cried, relief flooding through her body. “Come here! Please?”

Mabel and Eunice whipped around at Anna’s voice. Belle had been to their right, tucked behind a large potted plant.

She struggled to stand, keeping her eyes on her feet. Eunice and Mabel stared, noting the way her shawl fell against her shoulders, which were so bony and frail. Her spindly legs didn’t quiver as she pushed herself further out of the chair, and her delicate arms bent with the ferocity of someone determined to do something that her body struggled against. Her hair and black dress moved slightly as she steadied herself, and she began to walk towards them, her movements unsure and slow. As she got closer to them, they noticed that her

eyes, which used to be lively and laughing, were blank. She was looking at them, but her eyes had the shallow focus of a blind person. She had green eyes; they used to sparkle. As she walked to them, they tried to arrange their faces in a semblance of sympathy, but only succeeded with barely concealed curiosity and pain. The other mourners, seeing Belle shuffle across the porch, became quiet, watching her step as if she was treading through water. She raised her head to the women, her empty eyes overlooking a fixed, muted smile.

“Belle, honey...” Mabel began, clearing her throat. Eunice reached down and took Mabel’s hand, and the two women exchanged a look.

“Hello.” Belle stopped, staring at the women blankly.

“*Mama*, please come here!” Anna called, covering the mouthpiece of the phone with one hand, beckoning with the other. She wiggled her eyebrows and nodded encouragement.

I guess she’s... Belle’s eyes filled with frustrated moisture. *My daughter?* That girl who cleans... I don’t understand, and I’m... Her heart beat in her throat, pushing angry blood into her brain. *Why don’t I know these things?* The girl beckoned again, and Belle began to walk to Anna. Mabel and Eunice were still speaking.

“...And if you ever need anything, please don’t hesitate to...”

“Yes,” Belle said loudly, her back to the women. Their voices stopped. Faintly, Belle heard the laughter of the bicycle boys, and she smiled slightly,

sadly. Turning, she noticed the women, Eunice and Mabel, had watery eyes.

Eunice ducked her head and sniffled softly.

Belle touched Eunice's shoulder, smiled blankly at Mabel. "I just wanted to tell you that I heard you talking, and I'm sorry about your loss. You must've been very close to Thomas."

Tears ran freely down Eunice's cheeks, and Mabel clenched her jaw, trying to stop herself from sobbing. Belle patted Eunice's shoulder and walked towards Anna, her clear green eyes fixed on the woman. Anna slapped her phone shut and hurried over to Belle, taking her arm.

"You okay, Mama? Are you okay to ride in the car a bit?" Anna asked. She put her face close to her mother's and spoke loudly.

Nodding absently, Belle glanced back at the hydrangeas. "Where are we going?"

"We're going to the cemetery, Mama. We have to go bury Daddy."

Belle looked at the girl's pained face, her red-rimmed, puffy eyes.

"Thomas?"

Hearing this, Eunice and Mabel looked away from Belle and Anna, and each other. They stared at the quietly swaying rocking chair where Belle had been sitting, and they didn't speak. They were too busy grieving the loss of their dear friend; they had been very close.

CHAPTER THREE

MARIANNE DALLOWAY

Marianne had never lived in the city before she moved to New York. It was Mitch's idea to go. He found a job there after they were married for a year. He worked in sales. Marianne never knew what he sold, but it allowed her about anything she wanted, so she never asked. He liked her mute. She did what she was told.

He started taking her to those parties. She wore what she thought was appropriate; she was a lady and she knew what kind of wife she was supposed to be. But they never ended up the way she thought they would. Mitch gave her a capsule one time. It was white with brown flecks. She sat for an hour, kneading the couch and clenching her jaw. She knew Mitch was somewhere else in the apartment, talking to another person, probably a woman. But she couldn't hold on to a thought long enough to worry about it.

A woman named Paige ran her fingers in Marianne's hair. It felt so good that she began to loosen up, feel better. Later, things happened with Paige that Marianne thought weren't supposed to for ladies with successful husbands in an uptown city. Marianne liked going to parties when she knew Paige would be there; she soothed and excited her. But she went to all the parties Mitch asked her to, because she knew that ladies did what they were told and didn't argue. He was the man and he knew what was right.

So they kept going to parties. Mitch bought her a present before every party. Once it was Chanel No. 5 perfume, and she danced, momentarily, in front of the mirror, naked. She thought of Mitch, of his friends, and of Paige. She liked the way she looked, flushed and demure, when she thought of Paige. But that night Mitch lit a cigarette and asked her not to do something with him and another woman at the next party. She agreed; a good wife does what she's told.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE SUM OF COLLEEN

To: help@glbtg.org

From: sledman@gmail.com

4 February 2002 16:48

Hello-

I was wondering if I could get some help - something has happened and I think you are the only people who I can talk to.

F.

To: louise@glbtg.org

From: sledman@gmail.com

10 February 2002 18:12

Louise-

Thanks for the quick reply. To introduce myself properly, I am a 43-year-old man. I live in Bettles, Alaska. It's a small village or hamlet or whatever you'd like to call it, but it's my spiritual home. It's beautiful. I own a dog-sled courier business. Most of the year the lake is frozen, and that's our only route out of town – over the frozen lake. So I'm pretty busy most of the time. My wife and I also own an espresso bar and coffee/sandwich shop. We've been here ten years, and I love it. It's so quiet and peaceful – anytime anyone asks you a good place to “get away from it all,” you should send them our way!

I sent the original message because I went to Anchorage last week and went out as my “other self,” who I have named Colleen. Now I’m confused... I don’t know where else to go from there.

F.

To: louise@glbtg.org

From: sledman@gmail.com

16 February 2002 3:22

Louise-

You’re right, I shouldn’t be so surprised. But I’m not gay, and I’m not into women as women; I feel like a woman and I’m open to the idea of being with a man. There have been signs all my life that I have thought of myself *as a woman*, but, and again, you’re right – I’ve been suppressing myself.

I don’t know if being “Colleen” is being true to me, however. I have always bought women’s clothes, but after I wore them once I threw them away. I used to go into stores and ask ladies if sweaters or skirts would fit a woman with my build. I’m 6’4” and slender, so I always told the clerks or the other shoppers that I got my height from my mom. They’d always laugh and say they hope my mom got my metabolism... It was not a rush, though. I felt like at any minute a woman would stop me and say “You’re really buying this for yourself, aren’t you?” and I would be done. I felt like the cashiers were always secretly watching me, doubting my “mom’s birthday cardigan” or whatever. And shoes? Forget it. I’ve found some internet sites that cater to transvestites and similar, but I’m afraid to order a package from somewhere called “crossdresser.com” and have our small town whispering, because our post office would definitely notice.

Do you know what it feels like to feel like everything you've been all your life, for over forty years, has been a lie? My time as "Colleen" was liberating, yes, but if I pursue a life as her, as I really might believe myself meant to be, then I will lose everything.

F.

To: louise@glbtg.org

From: sledman@gmail.com

20 February 2002 14:21

Louise (Luis☺)-

Thank you for all of your helpful words. Knowing that you've been through a similar situation helps me feel less alone. And I am enjoying writing you in an almost unhinged way – I feel like I am not being judged for not sounding masculine – I have often been picked on for that, especially by my wife.

My wife's name is Kendra, and we've been married for five years and together for six. We moved to Bettles shortly after college and had grand plans of conquering the wild Yukon together. She's from Arizona, and she always had romantic visions of the ice and snow. I came here mostly because of her – She's my best friend in many ways, even if our marriage isn't what it used to be. She's become a successful entrepreneur in many ways since we came here, and I've pretty much been the hunk of meat she drags behind her. Or at least that's how I hope to appear; I am rugged and quiet. I have a beard.

The dogsled job is all my doing. I learned from my uncles in Montana and knew that, when we moved to Bettles, I'd at least have some bankable trade to help us start out. We live in a little two-room cabin, so no, not much room for secrets.

That's why I'm getting so anxious, because every moment we are together I can feel my skin burning with the heat of the lies underneath it. I know that sounds dramatic, but she has noticed something in the past week. She keeps asking me where my mind is. Our sex life? I try to be with her at least once a week, because I am attracted to her, but as a woman, which makes it more difficult for me to get into the act without thinking she'll figure me out.

But yes, to answer your other question, I have been to Anchorage several times (I'm obligated about one trip every two months) and have, while on business, tried on women's clothes in the privacy of a hotel room and have admired what I looked like. I love the feel of the dresses the most – they make me feel instantly like my feminine self, instantly like Colleen. I bought a padded bra at a store that sold Halloween costumes, and I think it looks great on me – I have often fantasized about having breasts. I looked online once for articles on gender-change surgery and I could see myself happier with a woman's body. It would feel like my skin is where it's supposed to be, and that all the parts looked right. Right, correct, something like that.

Thank you for letting me ramble on to you about these things, it helps so much to *tell* someone who truly understands and doesn't judge.

F.

To: louise@glbtg.org

From: sledman@gmail.com

25 February 2002 1:39

Louise, I'm having a breakdown.

I know I haven't written you in weeks because I had a moment after reading my last email... of shame. I felt so ugly, dirty, and disgusting. I read my words and they repulsed me. I took a hot shower and scrubbed at my skin, trying to make it realize that I am a *man* and don't need to be thinking these thoughts. I started jacking off in the shower, halfway through, and couldn't finish because I was so consumed with thoughts of self-hatred.

I cannot be a transgender person. I just cannot be. I tried – like your last email said – to talk to Kendra. I asked her if she ever saw me as different, and she said sometimes she thought that I was the “epitome of the strong silent type” and that she often wondered if I was hiding something. She said she wasn't happy with our marriage, and I started to tell her that I'd been keeping a secret from her, but then she admitted to a brief affair a year ago and I went crazy. I threw a lamp at her and that scared her so much that she stayed with the neighbors. The whole town, of course, is talking about this. We are barely speaking unless it's related to our shared business ventures.

I have to make another trip to Anchorage in the next couple of weeks, and I'm anxious to hear what you have to say before I make another mistake like Colleen again. Maybe it was a giant mistake to contact you people in the first place.

F.

To: louise@glbtg.org

From: sledman@gmail.com

28 February 2002 4:03

Louise, you didn't reply to my last email, and I'm really upset and confused. Please send me some words or thoughts on what you're thinking. I know I was upset, but now I need your help. I don't know what to do. You're the only person who knows about my situation. I'm at a point where... Just please reply.

– F.

To: louise@glbtg.org
From: sledman@gmail.com
28 February 2002 5:13

Please

To: louise@glbtg.org
From: sledman@gmail.com
3 March 2002 8:53

Louise-

I still haven't heard from you, so maybe I'm just typing into the void, but perhaps this email will soften the words of one of my previous emails, where I referred to contacting you and your organization as a "mistake." I don't really think that way, truly, but I sort of wish that I did because that would make things so much easier.

After I emailed you last, it was around five in the morning and I was feeling lost. I went out to the dog building, which is basically a huge barn with a small heating

system and lots of dog beds lying around. My dog sled team functions as a pack, so thus they sleep that way; no individual kennels. And the barn isn't too warm because Alaskan Malamutes can even sleep in the snow. They make little divots in the drifts and settle in. It's really neat to watch when we're traveling overnight. Anyway, I took two of my older dogs, Tracer and Arrow, out and took a walk. It's strange how you forget things about where you live. Bettles is somewhat of a tourist town in that it advertises itself as one of the best places to see the aurora borealis, or northern lights. The best times to see the northern lights are during the peak equinox changes, and we're entering into that time period now.

So it was me and Tracer and Arrow, roaming around in the cold, and I looked up to see those swooshing green lights above me, more fantastic than you can imagine. It's something about living up here that I never get tired of. Sure, I don't enjoy not having everything at my fingertips. I sometimes feel stir crazy and just want to go somewhere else, kind of pack it all in and move to a big city, one where I could blend in and be part of a crowd, but I'd never forgive myself. Under those rushes of swimming colored lights, I could still hear myself think. I could feel my body being cold, I could feel the warmth of my dogs even through my heavy gloves, and I remembered what sold me on the idea of living here – freedom. Under those lights, with my dogs, I felt free and untouchable. But now, back at the computer, I realize that I am sitting in a business that I opened with my wife, a woman I love and consider my best friend. A woman who I feel I will always be connected to, but a woman who has taken to sleeping on the couch or crying softly to herself. The lamp that I threw at her has been smashed and buried under some snow a few miles outside of town; I did that the next day, I just couldn't look at it anymore. I have apologized to Kendra many times and we had dinner the other night, but her guilt about her affair and my guilt about (still) not telling her about Colleen make our moments alone painful. I'm

going to have to tell her soon; maybe it will make her feel better in some strange way. One can hope.

Please write back soon, if you can-
F.

P.S.: I'm attaching a photograph of the lights from our #1 tourist spot, Bettles Lodge. Maybe it will entice you to visit, but I'm not forgetting your disdain for all things cold☺).

To: louise@glbtg.org
From: sledman@gmail.com
5 March 2002 9:44

Thank you.

That's the least of what I can say in response to your latest reply. I am getting ready to leave for Anchorage in a week, and Kendra and I think this time apart will allow us to do some thinking about our marriage. Of course, I will need to tell her about Colleen.

But how? I'm swinging between getting her drunk and just blurting it out (the best choice), or having her come home to me in a dress (the least likely to succeed). I can't take her hand and simply explain it, as I can see her grabbing her hand away, and it hurts to the point of tears to think of her recoiling at my touch. I need someone to touch me, you know? Like you said, it'd be nice if the news was met with a hug, because it's a time when you could use one the most. You're right, that's exactly where the monster stigma comes in – the people you tell...

Will they look at you like a freak? Will they reject you? Will they think that you're wrong?

At the coffee house this morning, I put on a CD that Kendra and I have called "our album," *Clouds* by Joni Mitchell. We used to just cruise around Boulder (that's where we met and went to school, Colorado, UC-Boulder) and talk, sometimes smoke pot (we were fun☺), but we experienced our best silences to that album. Just holding hands across the seats and looking around. Sometimes I drove, sometimes she drove. She had this old Husky-mix she'd adopted from the shelter, and he'd hang his head out the window and we'd laugh at him. It took her four songs before she looked over and smiled at me; normally she grins at the first notes of track one.

So I think I'll take your advice and go to Anchorage first before I tell her, let Colleen make another appearance if she really is real. If she really is me.

Thank you again, and talk to you soon. Oh, and glad to know you thought the picture of the lights was something to get excited about... wink.

F.

To: louise@glbtg.org

From: sledman@gmail.com

14 March 2002 17:23

I'm going home in two days, and I'm going to tell Kendra the truth.

You advised me to be totally honest with myself. Tonight I shaved my beard off, and I took the shaved hair and arranged it in letters on the bathroom sink. I

spelled out “Colleen.” Then I spelled out my given name. Pieces of me, dead pieces of me, arranged in my name looked right, but “Colleen” looked right written in cursive on the mirror in lipstick. I went out and bought some, a cheap red called “Rosy Ice” from a convenience store, a frosted ugly color. But it looked beautiful on the mirror as “Colleen.”

I may lose my best friend, but I am her, I am Colleen. I cried and cried, I’ve tried to convince myself otherwise, but I am Colleen.

Wish me luck –

F.

To: louise@glbtg.org

From: sledman@gmail.com

18 March 2002 3:21

She’s gone. She’s gone back to Arizona to stay with her family. After over a day of non-stop talking and crying and screaming and... She went home. She couldn’t look at me. She called me a liar and a traitor and a circus freak and everything short of the devil. She thinks our entire marriage has been a lie. She asked me if I thought she was ugly, if I wasn’t attracted to her, and when I said I was she couldn’t understand.

I half wish... I can’t lie anymore, but if I could... I can’t, and it feels better to tell Kendra, but I wish it was different. I wish I was someone else.

F.

To: louise@glbtg.org

From: sledman@gmail.com

27 March 2002 12:04

Louise-

You've been such a great friend, and I thank you for that. I did call Kendra, and she finally called me back, saying she heard a Joni Mitchell song at a gas station and felt like she "couldn't escape" me, further evidence that she still thinks I am the plague. We think a divorce is a good idea, as she feels like she hasn't been in love with me for a while now, but she still loves me and cares about me deeply. But she doesn't understand and is still angry at me. She still believes that everything in our marriage was a lie.

Our town knows something is going on, and Kendra doesn't want to come back, so I'm getting stared at a great deal lately, even though I explained Kendra's absence to be "a family emergency." In a town this small, people feel that such a vague answer is just covering something up, never mind that most people recall Kendra staying with the neighbors recently.

I want to get out of here myself. I'll figure something out, sell the businesses, and get the paperwork ready for my dogs if I want to get out of Alaska through Canada... I took Tracer out for a walk last night and ran into one of my neighbors, and he kept backing away from me while we spoke, which was no more than a minute. Maybe I'm imagining things, maybe he had to go to the bathroom or was really cold or something, but I already feel alienated.

Thank you for the list of contacts. I may call some of the Colorado people; I have ample savings (not much to spend money on in Bettles) and, once our businesses get sold, I plan on taking 20% of the sale, with the rest and the house going to Kendra.

I don't want to change, in many ways. I want to walk around as myself, as Colleen, right *here*. This is my home, the one I've chosen. But I don't think I can stay any longer. I'll let you know how it goes.

Thank you.

F.

To: louise@glbtg.org

From: rosyice@hotmail.com

February 2 2003 15:39

Louise-

Happy Groundhog ('s?) Day to you, too! Looks like we've got another six weeks of winter! Not that it really matters here in Denver – It's still snowy and chilly, but the sun's out every day so I'm not complaining.

Yes, I am happily on my way to becoming Colleen. I have a job as the office assistant for the doctor who will be doing my surgery. I come to work looking like a woman, I sign my name as a woman, I conduct myself as a woman, yet I still get strange looks when I use the women's room. Eventually my "transformation" will be complete. I'm positive about the whole thing, and I thank you for being my rock to lean on.

The only thing I regret is the relationship with Kendra, who's doing well in Oregon right now. We keep in touch, but I miss her constant presence. I think my relationship with her will be something I deal with for the rest of my life. We kept the cabin in Bettles, however, and we're going to go for a vacation together in March, just to see the lights and some people.

I may cover up Colleen a little for the trip, but I'm growing my hair out and that may be a little questionable. But then again, people might think I'm just another groovy divorcée ... or something.

Take care and I'll talk to you again soon –

Colleen

CHAPTER FIVE GENTLE IMPULSION

She walked slowly through the hallway, the one at the top of the stairs with all the pictures on the walls. She stopped at the top of the stairs and stared back down the hallway. Her breath was labored. The hall ended at the master bedroom, a place where she'd spent the last eighteen years of her life, with Adam. Now all that was over, as evidenced by the small bag she was carrying with her.

Looking down the staircase unto the shiny hardwood below, she contemplated just leaning forward and falling — bruises, maybe a broken bone if she was lucky. The neighborhood street lamps bounced distorted blue lights across the lacquered floor, interrupted only by the occasional rug or side table. She had chosen all these things so carefully for their home, and now she had to leave. She took in a deep breath.

At the foot of the stairs, she paused to notice the door, which was a heavy dark wood one with a stained glass inlay. Adam bought her that inlay at an antiques fair they went to before they got married, and he had it put into the door for their fifth anniversary. She moved past it, walking into the dark sitting room.

She sat at the end of the couch that he had long since claimed as his own, the side with the phone where he took all of his all-hours “business calls.” Adam would suddenly have to leave but would make sure to freshen up before he ran

out of that door. She had always sat at the other end of the couch, watching him or the television.

She tapped a cigarette out of a long-neglected pack in the drawer under the telephone. They'd confiscated them from their son, now a freshman at college. She flicked a lighter, lit the cigarette, and picked up the phone all at once. She dialed three digits. Staying in this house by herself after the fact wouldn't do her any good.

CHAPTER SIX SKY MINES

“The Unicorn.” Mandy turns the box around in her hand, the lavender packaging trying to subvert attention from the explosives contained therein.

“It shoots out different colors.”

“Hmm.” She scrunches her eyebrows while she reads the description of the numerous color combinations of sparks that the firework offers. Her eyebrows are slashes of red-blond, and in the sunlight you can’t even see them. She darkens them with pencil; she draws light brown marks around her green eyes and adds some faint purple eye shadow and dark brown mascara. She does this because she thinks she looks ugly without a full face on. She looks like the wrong version of herself; she looks against herself.

“Is that your mask?” I don’t say it out loud. She puts down the fireworks and immediately moves towards the bulk packs on the wall.

“For \$43 you can get a lot of variety,” she comments, poking a shiny fake fingernail into the plastic wrapping around the box. “I think I’m just going to get this one. It has rockets.”

I nod as I follow her to the cash register, where American flag car magnets are four for a dollar. I feel itchy, ready to leave. Tons of people are milling around, most of them vacationers, and I feel like I’m trapped in their enthusiasm. Some country song about being American is playing overhead and irritating me

even more, but I can't leave until Mandy's finished. I abandon the cash register in favor of browsing the racks beside it. Champagne Poppers. Friendship Pagodas. Wolf Snaps. The names entice you to think *wow, fireworks!* in fleeting, happy ways that will make you love their rarity forever.

Last time I was in a fireworks store, it was with my uncle, and he wouldn't let me and my cousins touch anything. Now I offer to hold the bag, and Mandy concedes so to better dig in her purse for her keys and her Marlboro Menthols. I feel dangerous for a minute, like a criminal, carrying a whole bunch of legal explosives wrapped in festive 4th of July paper. She makes me put them in the trunk.

"You ever write your name with sparklers?" I ask once we are on the road.

"Yeah yeah... We used to send bottle rockets into the pond by our house. They make a really deep thud and bubbles come up. We also used to throw bottle rockets."

"Dangerous," I say, and we both laugh.

She bought fireworks for the beach party she's going to with her husband. I just came along for the ride, and the high. Mandy's blunts come from her dad's home-grown crop.

We are neighbors, so when she scurries into her apartment to show Dave the fireworks, I unlock the door next to hers and greet a cat that may or may not be waiting for me. Hank is either terrorizing the apartment or sleeping on the couch. He is, as my psychiatrist says, a "necessary responsibility" that will help

me “achieve full rehabilitation.” Hank is actually my justification to have a *kitten*, but I use the therapist’s excuse when prompted.

I lolled on the couch, listening to Jimi Hendrix’s rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Eddie the maintenance man was packing a bowl for me and Mandy. He had come by to fix an emergency kitchen leak and figured he’d stop by to hang out with his “favorite tenants.” His Xanax hook-up, along with his myriad prescription painkillers, made us fast friends. Mandy perched on the edge of the couch, listening for sounds of her husband’s arrival.

Drugs. What do people do without them? How do they feel good? Everything is a drug, to me. According to women’s health magazines, I think of food incorrectly. I am supposed to think of it as “fuel,” selecting and savoring my meals with the utmost respect as to what I am putting in my body. But I instead see it as statements; at 3:30, I will have a glass of chocolate milk because I need the milk and I want the chocolate. And that’s what drugs are; you need to feel good, they satisfy that need. Some you can quit. Some you cannot.

Eddie passed me the bowl, and the radio switched over to John “Cougar” Mellencamp’s (I insist on the “Cougar”) “Pink Houses.”

“Isn’t this song supposed to be ironic?” I coughed, handing the bowl to Mandy.

“I think you’re thinking of Bruce Springsteen – Hey baby!” Her thought is cut off by a phone call from her husband, and her voice is clogged with inhaled smoke. I stared at Eddie and Mandy for a second, she anxious on the couch and he lying to his wife through furtive lies. Both of them hide their drug use from their spouses by hanging out with me. Mandy needs “more girlfriends,” so her husband doesn’t care, and Eddie’s wife only knows me as “the fat girl with the fucked up sink.” I am not fat, I am skinny and icky, but being “fat” makes me less threatening. His wife thinks her husband feels sorry for me.

I feel sorry for her.

Mandy confirms that she and her husband have plans for tomorrow, the Fourth of July. She invited me to the party, but I declined. We instead decide to get fireworks tomorrow.

My therapist said that exercise could be a drug, something that I would be healthier “taking a hit of.” So I swim, every other day, at the local pool. When I first started going, I would just go into the gym and sit in the locker room, taking a long shower in their never-ending supply of hot water. Every time I have attempted a long shower anywhere, the hot water has run out. But not at the gym. So I decided I liked the place because of the shower, decided that I was safe. Pool, shower, sauna, hot tub, water park. It had everything.

The indoor pool was open on one side by a wall of windows, and the sunlight could pour into the natatorium and dance on the water, sending up

sparkles of light and reflections on the ceiling. The amount of chlorine they used had turned the water a lagoon blue, so it was a happy environment.

People also were free there, shy but determined. Elderly people would pace in the shallow end of the pool, and handicapped people would be lowered in on a mechanical chair. People who were severely out of shape swam in their initial stages of their new exercise programs, not wanting to feel fat, stupid, and sweaty in front of other people yet. But everyone got out feeling good and more confident. Drugs make you feel good, sometimes instantly. Swimming and drugs aren't interchangeable, but they are similar.

Every week this summer, there has been a group of teenagers using three of the lap lanes in the pool. They have a coach; they are probably from a neighboring high school swim team. The coach paces the length of the pool and yells encouraging things at the swimmers, slapping his palm on a clipboard that looks like a flower-covered surf board. I think it's waterproof, but the paper he clips onto it isn't. He is a short, tan person, with dark features and a slender build that, compared with his penchant for wearing white sneakers, long shorts, and bright t-shirts, makes him appear like an overgrown boy. Just add a ball cap – boy. The swim team loves him and laughs at all his jokes. They write funny messages about the team on the dry erase board and dissolve into giggles when he references them. But they, him, the team, don't really interest me.

What I stare at more is his daughter. She's perhaps twelve, but no older than thirteen. One look at her and I know she is an ex-cancer patient. She has her

father's dark features, which look darker on her because she is so painfully pale. Her hair is about half an inch long. Her limbs are thin, but her middle has the bloated look that juvenile cancer patients seem to take, and she's probably going through puberty as well. Her paleness is what I linger on the most when I stare: the look of someone who has spent too much time inside.

You wouldn't know she is a girl if you just glanced at her in a crowded room, as her body is almost genderless; it's still struggling with itself and the cancer. But she wears decidedly girly pink flip flips under her long shorts and bulky shirts. A few of the shirts have charity walk slogans on them, and I know that her family participates in them fiercely the way people develop when their child is still not totally well. Or, maybe they aren't totally well because they are still coming to terms with the horror that their child has cancer — cancer that might never go away and might always be an undercurrent of their day. They will never move on. I don't think they can with the same respect for life they had before. Even if your child doesn't die, she almost did, and you were there.

I wonder if that's how my mom feels. I wonder if that's how I should feel. I did walk right up to it, stood on the border, and almost jumped. And everyone was there, watching. And just like with cancer, there really wasn't much they could do.

And the daughter knows that she almost lost. In addition to her strange body, pasty skin, and average pre-teen angst, she is no longer young. Sure, she will develop crushes on boys, get upset about her looks, and gossip on the phone

all night. But she will never be very young inside, because nothing can break you more thoroughly than looking over the edge and knowing that there's something behind you, ready to push.

I look around and am immediately bored. The restaurant has closed for the evening, so there's no shift to cover, and Eli, the owner, knows everyone in town will be at the restaurants that border the inter-coastal waterway. People in boats turn on their little twinkling light decorations that they've hung on the tops of their boats and watch from their floating docks, adding to the effect of picturesque summer.

I won't be going. I've been before.

I am instead now at my apartment complex, a weed-choked sand pit about 40 minutes from the beach, and I have nothing to do. Well, I can think of a few things that, if I could find them, would dull this ache of inner anxiety. I could read a book, I could watch television. I could read ahead for my summer course in sociology of marriages and families. I might even clean up a little, as Hank has re-arranged the rugs in my absence today. I work in a restaurant, so I rarely feel like cooking. I decide to look for things to do.

I pull a pen, a paintbrush, and a leaking miniature snow globe out of a mug on my bookshelf. I've had the gold and black dust-collector since I graduated high school, almost six years ago, according to the date. For a minute I worry about my ten year reunion, wonder what everyone will say about me. But it

doesn't last, because I have located yesterday's Fourth of July gift from the maintenance man. A beautiful totem pole of Xanax, a delectable blue cylinder of Vicodin, and a deceptively small Flexaril. I marvel at the shapes in my palm, the deceptive mathematical pureness of them. Pills.

It's been five months since the last time I did *anything*, and they're more concerned that I stay off of stuff like meth or coke than little pills. Hell, these are technically legal anyway; you can get them at a pharmacy. I know they aren't for *me per se*.

One exercise they taught us in rehab was, if we were going to try something again, we should do it in front of a mirror, telling ourselves: "This is not what I really want to do. I can do better than this drug. I do not want this." Then you're supposed to call "someone you've selected as a life line" or write down what you're feeling or some bullshit.

One of these pills, and maybe a little bit of weed or a beer, will make me feel better. I won't be sad or worried or anxious anymore. I won't fidget or pace; I might fall asleep. I won't have to care and I won't feel bad for not caring.

I have friends now, fun ones, but not as fun as the relaxation any one of these little shapes might entail. I could even try out the Vicodin, and, if I felt okay, I could take the bus downtown and meet people and feel really good. No one can scare you or make you feel bad on Vicodin, and, in a social setting, it goes well with beer. But then again a Felxaril will make my legs calm down, get

the knots out of my calves. My neck and back hurt a lot too from swinging those damn trays around at work.

I go upstairs and look in the mirror.

“I do not want these pills. They are an escape route from myself. I shouldn’t run from myself, but rather embrace me.” I think about giving myself a hug, but I get stopped by my reflection. My methamphetamine eyes are gone, no longer sunken, dead, wild holes. My nose doesn’t have a crust of blood around it or small sores. My skin has color, and my arms don’t have raw spots where I used to scratch them.

I hear a thud and laughter through the wall next door, Mandy’s apartment. I snap the Xanax into four pieces and shake them around in my palm. A dog barks outside, and I can smell someone’s charcoal grill starting up.

I put three of the Xanax pieces in a bottle of aspirin. I leave one on the bathroom sink. I put the Flexaril in a tampon box. I put the Vicodin next to the small square of Xanax. Cupping my hand to hold some water from the tap, I swallow them.

“I wanted to take all of them at once,” I tell my reflection. “But I chose two. See?”

Mandy and I tend to reminisce about the past. She played a song the other day, one written by an artist from her hometown, and got misty-eyed about how the song reminded her of high school and parties and friends. Now she’s stuck

here, working two jobs while her husband is finishing school. He was in Iraq, and now he's a freshman. He is twenty-four, and he has seen things his eighteen-year-old peers have never seen, so the term *freshman* never sits well when I hear it in regards to him. Mandy once told me that, when she was coming in early one morning, he pulled a gun on her. She'd scared him, and he thought he was still in the desert. Their dog had whined and peed on the floor, and her husband cried. It's startling to see us all, in our mid-twenties, crying over the past. Most of my past has been cut away from me, bled out and never to return.

My past is a myth, and it is only suitable that he was a mythical creature; Jay was a centaur. Broad and muscular on top, scrawny on the bottom. White chicken legs. He was even two-toned; the constant sun exposure from his roofing job tanned him from the belt up. His nose was large and proud. Italian or Indian or something, but beautiful.

He was moving on top of me and I wrapped my legs around him, never able to touch enough of him at once. He pushed up on one elbow and looked down at me, still moving. "I'm so in love with you right now."

I stared up at him, and all I could say was "centaur."

He wasn't listening anyway. Or maybe I didn't say it. I don't remember.

Like any fairy-tale villain, Jay was mostly smoke and mirrors, guesses and rumors, and he has since developed into foggy snapshots. He was a drug socialite, a sort of hostess for the illegal. He'd introduce you to something then move on. He installed me in conversations with heroin, ecstasy, LSD,

mushrooms, methamphetamines, methadone, morphine, cocaine, ketamine, pills...

So many new friends to play with.

Anything he found, we'd eat. We were hunter-gatherers for high. He dealt for awhile, when he broke his foot. They gave him liquid morphine for it, and we took swigs off of it like it was a flask. I threw up in the bushes outside the house. We dropped sweet tarts once and stayed in his room, and I watched his eyes move around his face, watched the waves of heat surround his body. But his body grew larger, more horse-like. He loomed over me, his mouth on mine, and I could taste his magic poison powers. In the dark, my giant dilated pupils gave his kisses the appearance of bruises. I was his shadow, but not his dark side. He never made me that, I did that to myself.

I lost him. He moved away and I wouldn't go. I didn't want to leave my friends, the ones he'd introduced me to. He didn't want to be friends with them anymore, except for pot, which is the most loyal of the bunch. He was so sad, so sick. He cried and slammed a door in my face. His roommate had just had his wisdom teeth removed, and I ducked into the bathroom. I could hear Jay yelling, but I tipped a few of the roommate's painkillers out of the bottle before I yelled back. If we were going to break up, and it was my doing, then I didn't want to feel it. I didn't want to love him anymore, watch him glow with an energy that I would never have. It was a hard thing to do, but he would be better off living away from the network of chemicals he'd created.

Go away, I love you.

I'm laughing. I fell off the wagon, hit my funny bone. You're supposed to laugh when you hit your funny bone, but it hurts. Not so much right this second. Nothing hurts. Water is falling on me and I am blowing my lips together and laughing at the sound of it. My eyes are shut and I imagine what my eyelashes look like against my cheeks and I imagine that I look healthy, happy, and beautiful. Like a girl in a mascara ad, my thick eyelashes are only one beautiful part of me, but it's the first thing people will see. They are lush and full and I am lush and full and blooming and rupturing from my lushness. I am laughing. I am in a hot shower. I am clean on the outside. I have fallen off the wagon, so I am not clean on the inside. But I'm laughing. Please somebody look at me and notice that I'm just like you, laughing. All of you are always laughing, and now that I get the chance there's no one here to see it. I start to feel tears under the drops of water. I stop laughing as I hear the swim team enter the locker room. My body seizes up. I'm crying. I have to get out of the pool and go home and be alone. I'm laughing, but this is the third time since rehab that I've slipped. It's easy to slip in the shower, especially when it's not your own.

One of my favorite conversation starters is "what would you have for your death-row, last meal *ever*?" I want to know what I would want before going through death's door; I wish I could ask the girl at the pool what she would want.

It might've been something simple, apple butter on toast, but then again it might've been the scent of leaves burning in the fall air outside her bedroom window. She was close enough to it. She must have thought about it, her last memory, meal, hug.

I should feel excited about life, that I still have one and that the phone calls that I ignore are old friends who still think I'm interesting enough to hang around. But they're just vultures, hovering over my now cemented images as a loser, a druggie, a failure, a mistake, a bum, a bitch. Whenever I clean out the litter box or make change at the restaurant in my head, I want to call those people and tell them about it. But I realize those things are not that monumental to them.

Who was a friend to the young girl at the swimming pool, a person she could talk to about *all* of it, the person she could talk about her parents to? I have a multitude of people to call. I think of some right now who, if I had the money, would come here and give me something to take so I could gobble; I want to ingest.

Everything that Jay turned us onto got turned off when Deason died in his sleep of complications between his heart and the meth, coke, and pills he'd ingested the night before. His stepmother, my aunt, found him the next morning. Cold and blue. I'd been with him at some point the night before, and my mom finally figured out why I had become such a scarce and scared person. She's a cardiac technician at a branch of a giant hospital; she looks at hearts all night, third shift, so I don't see her very often.

“Hey mom, you ever see a still heart?”

There’s space before her answer. She’s called to remind me to see my therapist, on the holiday, the Fourth of July, of all days. She’s at work. Her voice is tight as she answers: “You normally only look at ones that are still beating.”

She does not want to love me fully again. If she does, I might slip away and scare her again. She was the one who stormed into my room, hysterical over news of Deason. She was throwing my stuff around, knocking things over, finding things. She woke me up from an ecstasy crash, and I was confused.

“What’s your fuckin’ problem?”

“Don’t you *dare* talk to me like that. You’re going to end up just like him; you’re going to have to go somewhere.”

“What’re you throwing my stuff around for?”

“You need help and I’m going to make you get it. No more Jay, no more fun. No more of this endless... No more.”

“Help for what? What’re you – ”

“Deason died. Becky found him this morning. You know why he died?”

I know how he died. I don’t know why.

She took me to rehab. I stayed for nine months, giving birth to this new me at the end. My mother enrolled me in a community college about thirty minutes away and installed me in my one-room apartment. She found me a job waiting tables. I do every lunch shift, seven days a week. I pay for my rent and my gas; she handles everything else, including the doctor. Waitressing, two night

classes, therapy, and swimming. That's all I do anymore. I look out the window and see one of my neighbors firing up a grill. Across the courtyard, another group of neighbors are setting bottle rockets off into the laundry unit. I can't celebrate when I'm on the phone with my mother, so I decide to be nice and concede. She tries one more time.

“You need to schedule an appointment.”

“I will.”

He will tell me that I need to satisfy my id, rediscover my inner needs and wants. He thinks my anxiety comes from that, from not being able to do what I want.

“Do you ever treat yourself, like get your hair done or take a bubble bath?”

His office has a Celtic-looking wall hanging and a giant poster of a mandala. They are supposed to be soothing, like the honeysuckle-scented candles he burns, but it all reminds me of the rooms where I have done drugs. There exists a similar sparse and strange décor in therapist offices and the bedrooms of the drug users. And that is what I want to do to satisfy my id. Use drugs. I will tell him about my holiday relapse, my Independence Day fall. He will not be happy, but he won't be mean. It was only a pill, not meth, so he won't be as angry as he could be.

“Do aromatic candles help you satisfy your id? Maybe I should try feng shui. Or would excess order disrupt my super ego’s need for control?” This will make him laugh. I like to make him laugh; it means that he won’t think I’m totally nuts or without a sense of humor. I think he laughs because he’s paid to.

“I take it you’re not a fan of honeysuckle?”

“I prefer cinnamon. Or apple.”

“You should do something nice for yourself,” he will say again, glancing above my head to check the time. “You should do something that gives you a high that isn’t chemical.”

“Isn’t everything chemical? Serotonin is a chemical. Adrenaline is a chemical.”

He will sigh. “I mean a high that doesn’t involve *ingesting* chemicals.”

I will agree with a nod. I will be crying again, and I don’t talk through tears.

He will look concerned.

Time’s up.

My patriotic presents are kicking in, and I celebrate by taking out the garbage. I’m feeling good. Good. I notice my shadow swaying as I walk to the Dumpster, and I realize how fucked up I really am. I talk to one of my neighbors, but I don’t remember what I’m saying, and I don’t give a shit anyway, because I’m so high that it doesn’t matter. I worry what she might think, but I reason that

it *is* a holiday and that alcohol is an acceptable drug for anyone to get messed up on. So I'm drunk. I exaggerate my stumbling walk as I go to swing my bag of garbage in, just so anyone watching will know how much I've had to drink today.

My phone has rung and friends are trying to get me to come downtown and watch the fireworks. One friend can get us on someone's boat, so we can drift in the water while staring at the sparkle display. I tell them I'll call back because I'm too fucked up to go anywhere yet, and I'm too fucked up to know enough to just tell them I'm not coming. I walk back to my apartment but stop when I see a ladder propped against one side of the building. Looking around to see if anyone's watching, I climb.

It's difficult, because my formerly exaggerated sway has now become my body's reality, and I slip on two different rungs. But I get on the roof. It's a mess, and there are soggy cigarette packets and whippet canisters left all over the sinking and tar-sticky surface. In the fading light, I can see the tops of some scrub trees, the roofs of big beach homes, and the lights from the draw bridge to the beach.

The wind is colder than I thought it would be, and I debate going back down the ladder to get a sweatshirt. I'm interrupted by a flicker of light in the distance, a shimmering waterfall of gold fire. Its faint crackle is further diminished in the wind, and then a red fan of glittering palm fronds takes its place. My hair ruffles against my ears. I sit and hug my knees to my chest, which is still too bony and beaten to provide me with much warmth.

The lights are exploding and thudding into the sky from a distance but I can still see and hear them. I see them and wait, shivering, for the accompanying noise. Each one is like a surprise; I don't know what they'll look like and I forget they make noise, so each one is a little jolt. I lay back on the rooftop, and suddenly I am falling into the glowing colors. I am running across the sky, full speed full throttle, diving into these sky mines, I am going to let their fiery bursts detonate me, and I am going to glimmer and be beautiful. Can you see me, Mom? Mandy? Doc? I am singing and leaping across the sky and onto one of those sparkling, glittering blasts, those portals of moments. And on my back, looking into the sky, I imagine that cancer girl is beside me, laughing with me. We laugh with tears running down our faces, because it's so stupid to get worked up over fireworks, but we didn't know if we'd ever see them again. I want to resurface from the sky into the pool, looking up at her, the daughter, the cancer survivor. The water isn't blue, it's black, and the sun-glints are the stars, and I am in a colorful explosion in the middle. I can look up from under the sky, and she's at the edge, blurry. She will try to help me out of the water, but I will pull her in with me. She won't be scared because she knows that both of us have almost drowned before. I will hold her head under the water until she's almost out of

breath, and then I will pull her up. She will gasp, not only at the explosions above us and around us, but how many times we can die, and how many times we can live.

CHAPTER SEVEN LET ME CLIP DIRTY WINGS

I remember that he kept everything in a cigar box. It was black with swirly gold edges. That's one thing I can definitely remember. I never saw him smoke anything, but he was always washing his hands.

He kept me in the closet at first. He let me out to go to the bathroom, but while I went, he stood behind me. He listened to everything I did, not just watched. When I got done, he would help me pull up my pants. In the bathroom was where it happened most often.

The razor blades were in the cigar box. He only used those a few times.

It was so hard for me to stop crying when he first put me in the car. I called for my Mom, but she was inside, and I was out by the sidewalk. I had just gotten my new bike, and she let me ride it on the walk between our house and the Crawfords'. He leaned out the window to ask me directions, then got out of the car and started pointing. "Turn right *then* left?" He asked me that. Then he grabbed me. I tried to yell but he put his fist in my mouth. I bit him. I kicked. I cried. Nobody heard me.

I was allowed into the kitchen by the time the cops came. He would bathe me in the sink, even though I was only six, I was still too big for the sink. He would put the soap straight to my skin; he never used a washcloth. The water was always warm.

He kept a little picture of Jesus with some lambs in the cigar box. I saw it once.

They took me to a hospital, then put me in another part of the hospital where I had my own room and television and people would come and talk to me. The bruises are gone, but the scars are still there. If I quit picking at them, like Mom told me to, I wouldn't have any scars.

CHAPTER EIGHT

PINS AND NEEDLES RUST AND BEND

I get off the Gatwick Express at Victoria Station, and it's early. I took the red-eye, so to me it feels like three a.m., but it's a bustling 9:08 here in London. The energy of London in the morning is something that I've always been fascinated by, and usually I would park myself on some random stool and people-watch. Victoria Station is open to the street, so even as I pick up a coffee from the mini Burger King inside the station, pigeons swoop and coo all around me. Omar calls pigeons "bat rats," but I've always liked them. I throw a piece of my croissant to the ground, and a pigeon with a misshapen foot attacks it, its beak exploding the crumb into millions of butter bread shrapnel. I stare at the train schedule for a moment, think that perhaps I should just take the 9:15 to London-Luton and hop to Scotland, or maybe Amsterdam. I'd rather be anywhere than here, because I don't want to deal with Omar. For once it's not him but me who's been the pain in the ass, and he's a bitch to apologize to.

"Would you get in the damn car already? I can't sit here forever or that cunt with the *Star Wars* baton will come over here and harass me again."

"Again? Omar, you know you're supposed to circle around and around. You can't park until your arrival person comes out." Omasr rolls his eyes and

flutters his tongue at me, not bothering to get out and help me wrestle my duffel bag into the back seat.

“The rules don’t apply to the beautiful, babe.”

“Apparently they do, or that woman wouldn’t have yelled at you.”

“She didn’t so much *yell* as she *kvetched*.” Omar plants a kiss on my cheek as I slide into the passenger seat. “How was the geriatric theme park?”

“*Miami* was hot, crowded, and dirty. I don’t think I’ll get into U.M.; I fucked up Turner when I was talking to the head of the art department. Why is he a classics guy, dammit? I needed a Harlem Renaissance buff so I could look smart.”

Omar shifts the car into gear and glides into traffic. “You don’t really *want* to go there, you know. You only want to live there to be next to what’s-his-face.”

“I did until he started flaking out over the Orca.” I lean over Omar and grab his cigarettes and lighter from the driver’s side pocket.

“He’s still chasing that female hippopotamus? You’re so much better, honey. Rude, but better.”

“He’s intimidated because I’m smart,” I announce as I flick the lighter. It doesn’t spark. “Do you have another lighter?”

“Rosie missed you. She said Laura couldn’t go to Coral Gables because it sounds like a Jimmy Buffet song, and you know how she hates Jimmy.” After digging in his pocket, he hands me a small orange lighter.

“That’s my lighter, thief. Did Rosie really miss me?” We merge onto the freeway, and Omar places a hand on my knee and gives it a squeeze.

“Yeah, she really missed you.” This freaks me out, because I can’t stand it when Omar gets all emotional. He might start crying, and I never know what to do when people cry.

“Did you get a new manicure? Your cuticles look good,” I say, my voice scratchy around the edges. As Omar goes into his diatribe on how *this* manicure was so much worse since Taeja left the Glamour Nails he frequents, I stare out the window. In Miami, it was easily in the mid-eighties, but it’s a wonderful 62 degrees here in Charlotte. I relax when it’s cold, and I missed Omar. Hell, I even missed Rosie, the little dapple dachshund who Omar refers to as our “love child.” It had only been seven days, but I realized, while trying to impress admissions people and chase my joke of an ex around Miami-Dade, that I hated Florida. I hated the heat, the noise, the bugs, the highways, the turnpike... I hated everything about it. And I hated not having Omar there.

I met Omar my sophomore year of undergrad. We were in a group of 20 students doing a semester in London, and I’d never met him prior to the excursion. Omar was born and raised in Britain, his parents both human-rights lawyers with lots of cash. The first eight years of Omar’s life were spent in London’s Council Estates, which is pretty much a public housing ghetto. His parents had been championing various causes of the impoverished, but they gave up one particularly nasty winter and moved to St. John’s Wood. At the age of 17,

Omar's parents got a divorce, and his father, an American-born expatriate, split to the United States. Omar's mom announced that she wanted to go back to Council Estates to help the needy. Omar followed his Dad, because he doesn't like poverty, he doesn't like the disadvantaged, and he doesn't like getting dirty.

We had our first conversation on the moors of Cornwall. Everyone else was tromping about in rubber boots, looking at Kist vanes, but Omar stood by the coach, holding a fancy umbrella and delicately rubbing the tops of his shoes with a napkin. His shirt was pink and pressed, and I laughed at him. "You look so dapper, out here in the moors."

"You'd do well to lose that scarf, it's hideous." He had shot back.

"Ugly. Nasty. Repulsive. Outré."

"Cumquat. Vermillion. Haggard. Fey."

He glared at me for a moment and then laughed.

I later learned that his boyfriend had emailed him the day before and asked for "time off", and this incident was underscored by a terrible hangover that wasn't getting cured in the hills and dales of the rainy English countryside.

Omar had taken the semester abroad because he missed London but he didn't want his father to know. He saw his mother often while we were there, and he took me with him to visit twice. They cooked awesome curry and sang Aretha Franklin songs. She was a small woman with dark hair and dark eyes, and a wonderful Australian/British accent, as she was an aboriginal Maori. Omar had inherited his mother's features, and as a bonus, he also got perfect teeth and a flat

stomach, a naughty sense of humor and a wonderful laugh, which he measures out in sparse doses throughout the day so that you learn to treasure moments when he finds something funny. He's the type of guy that women take one look at and immediately wish they still had virginity to lose, because Omar's perfect for later bragging rights. Of course, he plays for the other team, but once you get to know him, the perfect-ness wears off. Slightly.

"So do you want to go or what, you don't have jet-lag from a two-hour and forty-five minute flight." Omar was asking. I saw a Bojangles.

"Can we stop for tea? Please? And I don't have any money."

"You never do. Yes, we can get you your tea, which is just hummingbird syrup. I could do for a muffin." Omar tapped his fingers on the dash impatiently.

"You mean biscuit."

"Cookie. Biscuit. Biscotti. Parfait."

"Sundae. Jujubees. Wax. Paraffin."

"Touché, pussycat. Now, do you want to come with me to the little coffee shop thing? I think Allison is going, and I haven't seen Justin since London."

"You saw him at graduation. Get in the turning lane!"

"I am *indicating* that my intention is to get in said lane. Bojangles won't explode if you aren't making great haste. No, I didn't see him, I avoided him because he'd been particularly pissed at the Gopher Hole and he kept calling me Princess."

"I really don't like Justin."

“Nor do I, but that’s the trouble — we’ve been invited by him *personally*.”

Omar dramatically pulled up the parking brake, and I grimaced.

“Can we not go through the drive-thru?”

“I have to go to the loo. You drive yourself round and I’ll hop in when I finish.”

“Why’d you park then?”

“Do you want me to sit in the middle of the drive-thru while we have a Chinese fire drill? Think about the coffee shop concert thing, because I need to call him within the next hour to confirm or deny.”

“I will go if you don’t make me go through the drive-thru. I hate talking to people through those little speakers, and I don’t have any money.”

“Done.” Omar slammed the door and loped through the bright orange doors of Bojangles, flipping me off as he walked inside. I leaned back in the seat, running my fingers on the top of the car. A bunch of paper tucked under the driver’s side visor caught my eye, so I grabbed it. It is our custom to go through each other’s things, so I didn’t worry about snooping. It was a bunch of computer printouts, some stapled and some paper-clipped. Every document was about breast cancer: studies of breast cancer, causes, diagnoses, and diagrams of different placements of tumors. I was still going through them when Omar got back in the car.

“Most foul smells in the – What are you looking at? Why are you looking at that?” He snatched the papers from my hand angrily.

“I didn’t think you’d mind. Have you found a lump?” I was mocking him, but I stopped. Omar had his jaw clenched, and he wasn’t looking at me. “What’s wrong, Omar? What’s going on?”

“I don’t feel like talking about it, Laura. Just a tea, then?”

“Omar, I wish you would... Why do you have breast cancer information?”

“No discussion. Tea?” He turned and looked at me hard.

“Yes, please. But Omar –”

“You wouldn’t understand right now. End.”

“Right, full stop.” I replied, purposefully throwing in Brit-speak in hopes to make him smile. It usually does, or at least takes some of the punchiness out of him. But he always smiles.

But then he didn’t.

“The next station is Green Park. Alight here for the Piccadilly and Jubilee Lines.”

I hate Green Park; it’s my least favorite tube station. It’s all hot tunnels with no moving sidewalks (Westminster) or multiple elevators (Baker Street). But I love the calm, posh voice of the trains. Sometimes the recordings are broken (usually on the Circle Line) and a surly-sounding conductor will bleat something out for the passengers. As the doors did their three-beep prelude to opening, the posh voice told me to “mind the gap between the train and the platform.” I wished the posh voice could be with me everywhere, reminding me

of little things that I might forget, like stepping over potential hazards instead of walking right into them.

The exit I use leads me right under the jumbotron, which has a McDonald's advertisement flashing brightly in the overcast gloom. I head past Eros, almost to Trafalgar Square. But I stop at the Texas Embassy, Omar's favorite "tourist" restaurant. They have just opened, and I ask the hostess if Joe is working today. He's not. Joe the Bartender, my biggest crush ever. When I finally got up the courage to profess my love, he told me he was married. Then I noticed the ring. I am the president of the Last to Know Club. Pulling my coat tighter, I trundle to Trafalgar Square, drag my suitcase to a bench, and sit and stare at the four lions, at St. Martin's on the Field. I'm trying to figure out what I am going to say when I see Omar.

"Pick your poison hurry hurry step right up!" A palm full of pills whizzed under my nose.

"Oh no, you're going because Tom is going to be there, aren't you?" I suddenly realized, staring at Omar sternly in the mirror. His face flickered truth, then burned full wattage with innocence.

"No, I just thought it might be a better evening if we raided the pharmacy." His ears turned pink. Tom was this art gallery worker who Omar was obsessed with. In fact, he was so infatuated with him that he never could bring himself to speak to Tom, leaving Tom to think that Omar didn't like him at all.

“What do you have?”

“Less mascara, you look freakish. Hydrocodone, Xanax, and a wee Adderol.”

“What color eye shadow would look best with the shirt I have on? I want Hydrocodone.”

“Words fail me about the shirt.” He handed me the white oval, and I balanced it on top of a bottle of moisturizer.

“Try.”

“I cut down trees. I wear high heels, suspendies, and a bra! I wish I'd been a girlie, just like my dear Papa!” Omar bellowed, smirking. I turned and scribbled on his face with eyeliner.

“I look like a dyke?” I smoothed out the fitted plaid shirt. “I guess I do.”

“Wear something *pink*.”

“Can I borrow something of yours?”

“Oh clever.” He sauntered out of the bathroom, whistling the “Lumberjack Song.”

I fiddled with my hair for a moment, then followed Omar to his room. Rosie lounged beside him, her long ears hanging over the bed. Omar was packing the bong. “You are getting awfully loaded with chemicals for something you don't even want to go to... You're gonna be so fucked up that if you *do* get the balls to talk to Tom, you'll be incoherent.”

“No, I just wanted a bit of a puff, you know... I just don't want to seem desperate when I talk to him, just cool, aloof, distant and mysterious.”

“But you will be sloppy, clumsy, drooling, and unattractive.”

“Maybe he likes that. He doesn't talk to me otherwise.”

“That's because you always stuff something in your mouth or pretend you have something else that you suddenly must do. How would 'I'm too busy to talk to you' indicate to him your seething lust?” Omar didn't answer me, but instead passed me the bong and pulled Rosie into his lap. She yawned. Omar stared blankly ahead.

“Will you tell me what those papers in your car were for?” I coughed.

Omar's glare would have burned steel. “No.”

“Please. You know I won't forget.”

“Take that pill and drink a few beers with this herb and you'll forget.”

“Omar.”

“My mother thinks she found a lump.” He looked down at Rosie, who lazily licked his nose then stretched further out into his lap. “That's all. No questions from you. Get something remotely feminine on your shoulders and let's go see that bastard make an arse of himself.”

“This is Baker Street. Change here for the Circle, Hammersmith and City, Jubilee, and Metropolitan lines.”

I'm glad my suitcase has wheels, because it was a long drag through Green Park to get to the Bakerloo Line. Baker Street's one of the oldest tube stations, with King's Cross/St. Pancras close behind. I'm going up to Swiss Cottage on the Jubilee to get an early lunch from Nando's chicken. There's a bookstore beside it, and then my old flat's the next stop up, Finchley Road. I'm hoping something as deliciously greasy as Nando's will soothe my nervous stomach. I have no idea what I'm going to say to Omar, if he's going to even want to hear what I say. But I have decided that "I'm sorry" is only the beginning of the monologue I need to prepare.

We stood in a corner, hiding our laughter behind our drinks. Omar was sipping a Grey Goose and Tonic, and I had a beer. Justin was on stage with an acoustic guitar, and a large pool of girls were jostling each other at the front of the stage, trying to be the one who stood closest to Justin. He crooned at them, smiling and nodding.

"Oh using false impressions/ So here's my apology/ I was wrong/ Forget inconsiderate me!" He sang, and Omar stifled a laugh.

"What?" I had to yell in his ear.

"He looks like he's giving head to that poor microphone."

I hadn't forgotten about the lump possibility, but Omar was getting more and more fucked up as his pill kicked in, and I guess he was just determined to have a good time. The last time I had been to Amos' Southend was to see

Fishbone, and I got the D'Angelo Moore's autograph. That had been a rad show, with lots of rowdy people pushing each other and falling on the slick concrete floors. Justin's show was more like a wake; people were swaying and smiling and no one was banging into each other, except for the girls up front.

Justin had greeted us when we came in, and I was glad that both Omar and I were high, or Omar would have probably slapped Justin and I wouldn't have been able to stop him. He had hugged us.

"Hi, Princess — Hello lovely Laura!" He had smiled. He was wearing the Mt. Mullet t-shirt that I remember telling him about. "I am so glad you guys could make it, it looks like a really good show."

"Wouldn't have missed it..." Omar had said, rubbing his palms together feverishly, which he does when he's stoned. "Have you seen Tom? Thomas? Thomas the Tank Engine? I wondered if he'd take me for a ride!" He then had giggled and wandered off to the bar.

"Sorry. Good crowd." Omar gets chatty, I get quiet.

"I know, it's so awesome. I'm so happy you're here, Laura. I think about you all the time."

"Really, Justin? Why?"

"You're just an anchor for me, Laura. Creatively, I just think of you as someone who really looks out for me, who really gives it to me straight."

“That’s because I broke a vase over your head at that graduation party. You called me a bitch because I had taken the last bed and you wanted to fuck that girl you’d just met.”

“I know! Right!” He squeezed my hand with a car-salesman laugh and kissed my cheek. “I’m going to say hi to a few more people, but I know I’ll feel great knowing *you’re* in the audience. Call me tomorrow; I need your help with something... The art on my website, I know you’re the perfect person for the job. You know, I’m going to dedicate a song to you, Laura. Just because you’re here.”

I had watched Omar then, staring at Tom from across the room. Justin winked and blew me a kiss, and I went fluttery inside, which surprised me.

I joined Omar, but I never took my eyes away from Justin for the rest of the evening.

“This is Finchley Road. Change here for the Metropolitan Line.”

When I think about it now, I can see how slimy Justin is. But at the time, Charlie had left me for a stupid girl he’d met in Ft. Lauderdale. She was giggly and wore clothes that swaddled her giant 2x4 bottom in a very unattractive way, she said “fo-shesie” without any irony, and her teeth were like great tombstones jutting out of her mouth, but Charlie said she was beautiful. He said she really liked me and thought Charlie and I were unbreakable... And she liked me so much that she decided to steal him. He said the distance was too much for him anyway, there was no guarantee that I’d get in to U.M., blah blah blah.

So I like to think that I was vulnerable, and that my momentary lapse of reason was due to a period of high emotional duress. I'd always been aware that the majority of females he encounters consider Justin a good-looking guy, but it usually takes more than that. And his taste in music is shitty; he doesn't even listen to anything I really enjoy. And he only plays a Martin acoustic guitar because Kurt Cobain did, but he claims he plays the Martin to honor some obscure country blues guitarist. Poseur. Jerk. I look around to see if anyone else can tell that I screwed myself.

I see umbrellas, bright orange ones, through the window of the £ Saver store. Maybe I should buy one, because it's cloudy out, and because it's a long walk from the Lambeth North station to Omar's mom's.

“You broke your rule.”

Omar was lying on the couch, listening to Dolly Parton with a rare-Earth mud mask on his face, cucumbers placed over his eyes, and Rosie absently chewing a pig ear on his chest. I had just come in that Saturday morning, but I had brought milkshakes in hopes that Omar would still be in bed. The milkshakes would have been an easy cover for why I was up so early on a weekend.

“What rule?” I sulked, thinking he had waited up on me.

“You fed Rosie canned food.”

“What?” I put the milkshakes on the table.

“You slept with him after two weeks. Your rule is six months.”

“I did not sleep with him; I was just hanging out with him.”

“You’re lying.”

“I slept with him.”

Omar snorted.

Rosie hopped off the couch, dragging her pig ear. I picked her up and cuddled her, cooing: “Are you enjoying that pig ear?”

“Probably as much as Justin’s enjoying shagging yet another groupie.”

Omar had been picking on me relentlessly about the amount of time I’d begun spending with Justin.

“Omar!” I put Rosie down and yanked the cucumbers off his eyes. “Fuck you!”

“It’s true, innit?” He sneered, scooping Rosie up and standing. “You’re just another one of those little spangly-topped things that amuse him for a bit until he decides you don’t boost his ego enough, so he goes and finds another bubble-head to shag.”

“That’s not true! We talk a lot, we have a lot in common!”

“Your mutual love of Dashboard Confessional, perhaps? Because last I knew you have cultivated a hilarious interpretive dance to ‘Vindicated’ referring to Chris Carabba’s tune as ‘the most ridiculous song ever to be written.’”

“We don’t *have* to have the same music tastes, Omar. He’s sweet, and you’ve been on my back about this since that show that *you* forced me to go to. What’s your problem? Can you not be happy for me? Are you jealous?” I felt my cheeks burn as my voice rose. Omar put Rosie on the couch angrily.

“The prat used to preach he was saving himself for marriage, and then proceeded to screw 28 women five months after his Christian fiancée dumped him. He calls me Princess and used to tell me that I was going to hell for being gay! We both didn’t care for him until he sings a naff little song for you and suddenly you fancy him and his pitiful excuse for music. You’ve turned into a stupid twat because Charlie chucked you and Justin pays attention to you!”

“Shut the fuck up, Omar!” I yelled.

“Ooh, when you snog does he write songs about how special it is, fuck number 122?”

I saw my hand connect with his cheek before I knew that I had slapped him. I didn’t feel the goopy mud mask on my palm, but I saw it. It took me several seconds to realize what I’d done, and my arm fell limp to my side. I felt like doing it again; I felt like crying.

We stood there for a moment, neither one of us speaking. Rosie whined softly, and Omar stared at me, his face indecipherable. The phone rang just as I opened my mouth to apologize.

“Get it,” he said.

It rang again.

“GET it,” he screamed.

I answered the phone. “It’s your father.”

Omar took the phone from me and marched upstairs to the bathroom, slamming the door. I heard the pipes from downstairs, our neighbors stumbling around in their apartments, but it was all a hum. Omar and I had never fought like that, and I had never slapped *anyone*. We’d been like this since the show. But I was so angry. For two weeks, all I heard about from Omar was that I was a groupie slut. “Oh, Justin! Do you need another soda? Sing baby! Wooo!” he’d twitter, and he made little snide comments like “How nice that you thought of someone else long enough to get Rosie some dog food!” whenever I’d do something chore-related. No, I had not spent more than three evenings with Omar since the show, but I had really been enjoying my time with Justin, and Justin didn’t *care* about those other girls, couldn’t Omar see that?

I glared at the ceiling, then grabbed my bag. I decided to get some lunch and catch a movie. I didn’t want to have anything to do with Omar for a while.

I tuck in Pizza Hut for lunch because Nando’s isn’t open yet. I do the conversion in my head, realizing I am about to spend ten bucks for a pizza that would normally cost four dollars. But that’s pounds, currency conversion, and crappy fast food chains. The pizza is warm and gooey, and I stare out the

windows of the Pizza Hut and into the rain. There's a Waitrose on the corner, and people are standing outside of it opening umbrellas. I try to follow specific people as they walk by, but they blend into the rain, the crowds. I picked up a copy of the ULU-P (University of London Union Paper) and read the movie reviews. I'm happy to see that the paper still has columnists who feel it necessary to devote 600 words to Quentin Tarantino once a week. I read a nasty letter to the editor, where a student rails against the Muslim racism from the week prior. The number six bus rides by, and it would take me to Oxford Street. I think for a moment about H & M, about the Christmas decorations hanging above the road. It just makes me sad, however, because I am not thinking about this with Omar. It is almost twelve-thirty. It will be after one before I can get to Lambeth North.

“So here's to you, these feelings/ Here's my airport /Here's my breath/
The last thing I can think of when I wake up/ This turbulence is twisted! I really
need some help! / Defrost my love baby, microwave me in yourself.”

“That's... good. Turbulence is a good word.”

“I think that's what I want to call it, *turbulence*. It's what defines my soul.
The album is going to be called “Drive-By-Versailles.” You know, about putting
the big gaudy stuff away and, like, living simple. Living like an artist instead of a
puffed-out, bloated rock star. Just drive on by.”

“If you keep drinking like you do, you're going to be a puffed-out, bloated
rock star.”

“Still, I’d be a good rock star. I have a message, I have something to say.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, to live honestly, to embrace the many different people, cultures... things in the world. That’s why I got this tattoo of multi-colored stars around my wrist last week, remember? It’s my message. Diversity.”

“That’s a good message.” There was a silence between us, and I hoped it was comfortable.

“So... about last night.”

“What about it?” I felt myself turning red, which I hated because it made me less womanly and more girly. I wanted to appear sexy, not silly.

“I had a fantastic time. These past two months have been fantastic,” Justin said, taking my hands.

“It really has.” I leaned against him.

“You know, the label wants me to do a reality show.”

I sat back up. “You’re joking, right? That sucks.”

“No! I think it will be great exposure for me, you know... I think if people watch they will get to see the real me, get to see my creative process and how I think.”

“That’s so stupid, having cameras following you around.”

“Why must you be so negative? You know, lately you’ve been really confining me, putting me into boxes where I don’t belong. You know, Laura, labels only belong on canned foods.”

I snorted. “Omar says that all the time.” Justin rolled his eyes and got up from the couch. “What?”

“Omar says this, Omar does that. That’s half of the problem, you just go on with what Omar says. What Omar does. You will never have a completely open mind about things if all you ever concentrate on is Omar.”

“You sound jealous.” I get up, wrap my arms around him.

“How can I be jealous of a faggot?”

I pulled my arms away from him and recoiled to the corner of the room. I have never stood for that word, but Justin, he was, he was...

“You’re joking, right Justin?”

“Of course...” He walked over to me. “I know how to respect diversity. It’s just a word.”

“A shitty one.”

“Listen, baby, get over it. I’m sure he gets called that all the time.”

“Not in my presence.”

He hugged me for a minute, and then jumped back. “Diversity and challenge/ Space shuttles that soar! / I am the champion/ Tolerance is worth fighting for!”

“Huh?”

“That’s great! Those are great lyrics for that melody I played for you last week!”

“Which one?”

“The one that went ‘da-da-da-da-da-da-*da*, da dee da da da *dee*.”

“Oh, right.” I couldn’t remember.

“Honey, fix me a sandwich would you? I gotta work on this!”

I dutifully went to the kitchen and began to get out the bread, the exotic jelly I bought him last week, and the crunchy peanut butter. But I hesitated. I wanted to ask Justin about the lyrics I wrote, about the melody I came up with, but I couldn’t. I don’t want to lose him, I thought.

I made it as far as Embankment. I had to get out of the stuffy tube. I’d had to change lines at Baker Street, and while I was waiting on my train, I took the time to really *listen* to the whoosh of the trains, to remember the rumble beneath my feet. I love the hurricane effect that happens in the bowels of the Baker Street station, better in that station than anywhere else. But now I am here, at Embankment, staring over the river. Omar and I have a private joke where we call it the *Thames* river, pronouncing the “th” sound. I stare over the water, to the other side of the river, where Omar’s mom lives, where the Tate Modern sits. Omar showed me that the Tate is the same building on the cover of Pink Floyd’s *Animals*. I had told Justin that, later. I told him everything, and now it’s not mine and Omar’s anymore. Justin knows all the private things. I stare at the river, huddled around my suitcase in the frigid wind, and feel ashamed.

The dog was sitting in front of Omar's closed door, chewing a sock that had "Enjoint Amsterdam" stitched around pot leaves. It used to be mine, and Rosie wasn't supposed to be left alone around socks. I banged on Omar's door, trying to be heard over Madonna's "Die Another Day" song, but I had no luck, so I just walked in.

"Do you like the hat?" Omar said without looking around. He saw my reflection in the mirror that he had been dancing in front of. The hat was a jaunty military thing.

"Very disciplinary. What's the occasion?" I turned the music lower.

"I'm er, ah... I'm thinking of going to London for the New Year."

"What? Why haven't you told me?"

"You haven't been around." Omar sniffed. He turned the music off and plopped down on his bed. He lit a cigarette, then saw the sock in my hand. "Oh cheers, Rosie."

"You can't leave her out like that, she destroys my things. And you can't go to London! I thought you would be here and I planned around you!"

"Where is your little minstrel this New Year? And why would you think I would plan around you?"

"I just thought..." I sighed. "He's in Chicago."

"Go be with him, then."

"He doesn't want me to, he wanted to talk to some people and he thought I would feel ignored."

“Chuh.”

“How’s Tom?”

“We’ve only gone out on two dates. It’s friendly right now. I just don’t hop into bed with people.”

I ignored it. Since I slapped Omar, I’d been trying to keep my temper even when Omar makes his little zingers. It was difficult. “When did you speak to him last?”

“Yesterday.” Omar took off the cap, spun it around. I watched him for a moment, noticing how thin he had gotten, how his usually glowing skin was patchy. I noticed his overflowing ashtray and the way his pants sagged on his frame.

“Omar, tell me more about your mom. You won’t let me talk about it, and yeah, I have been with Justin a lot since October, but I have asked.”

“Three times. There’s nothing to discuss.”

“But I don’t even know if it’s cancerous, or if she needs help, all I know is that it’s a lump and that you’ve been to *your* doctor about it a couple of times. And I know that your dad has been calling more.”

“Fuckwittage. Like he cares about anything.”

“Omar, why won’t you talk to me?”

“I would have!” He exploded, standing up and throwing the hat at the door. “I would have but you just haven’t given a god damn about anyone but

yourself since... Since ages ago, forever ago. So don't try now, just because you've not got your little whingey singer to keep you. It's a bit late."

"I have tried!" I yelled, standing up so that we were almost nose-to-nose. "You just won't listen to me; you won't be nice to me when I am here. And used to I could talk to you about anything, but I don't even feel comfortable *being* around you, because if I do try to talk about Justin, you just shoot off at the mouth with some witty little jab! It's fucked up."

Instead of pushing back, Omar just stared at me. He turned away after what had seemed like an hour, and walked over to his thrown hat.

"You just don't know anything about what's fucked up. Please leave, I must practice my dance moves so to wow all the beautiful and fabulous people I will soon see in London."

Emerging from Lambeth North, I pause and stare back into the station. Not many people get out here, and at this time of day, it's pretty quiet. Everyone's at work. I snap the handle up on my suitcase, and I am walking towards Omar's mother's house. My stomach churns with pizza, croissant, and the Yorkie bar I just inhaled. I walk anyway.

"You can't come."

"But I want to see you! Who am I going to kiss on New Year's?"

"I don't know. But you can't come. I'm really busy."

“Justin, I have miles on my credit card, I can use them. Please, I really want to see you.”

“Wait until I get home.”

“But Justin...”

“NO. Look, if you can’t handle this type of schedule, then we don’t need to see each other anymore. I can’t see you if you want me to be in one spot, to be there for your every need. I must have space to explore myself.”

“I just want to see you on a really important holiday. I thought it would be fun.” I hear a voice in the background, then laughter. “Who is that?”

“This lady from the record label. We’re talking over arrangements for my new song.”

“What new song?”

“American Blood, British Heart.”

“I wrote that one!” I squeak.

“Well, I hope you don’t mind, but Samantha thinks I should at least take a co-author.”

“But, I wrote it.”

“No, we both did. See, this is what I mean; you won’t let me be me. I don’t want to do this anymore Laura, this is the second time you’ve called and I told you I was busy.”

“The second time in five days! I haven’t tried to bother –”

“Well, you have. I think we should take a break. I’ll talk to you when I get back.”

I sat, stunned. Clapping the phone shut, I walked out of my bedroom and knocked on Omar’s door. It hadn’t opened since I’d gotten home at 12 from the restaurant, though it had been cracked all evening. Omar liked to be in bed by 10:30, so I didn’t think anything of it. When I got no answer, I walked in and turned on the light.

Rosie yawned atop a perfectly made-up bed. “He’s out with Tom tonight, huh Rosie?” I asked, scratching her ears. Then I noticed the piece of paper she was lounging on. I sat down next to her and wiggled it out from under her bowling ball butt. Thinking it would be a funny read, I waited for a minute to pack the bowl that Omar had left on his bedside table. When I finally read it, my buzz crashed.

It said: “Oy love, gone back to London town. Meant to mention it to you, but my mum pretty much about to go. Didn’t want to bring you down, figure you’re high enough (look in the bathroom cabinet for my New Year’s present to you, by the way). Please don’t worry, I just didn’t think talking to you about it would help.”

Rosie nudged my elbow, and I let her waddle onto my lap. “You’re right, Rosie. I need to get a dog sitter and a plane ticket. He can’t be by himself right now.” The dog blinked at me, and I reached for the phone.

So here I am. Omar is my best friend, even though I haven't honored that title very much lately. I don't care if he wanted to do it alone, if he didn't feel like talking about it. I could have ridden the Bakerloo all the way to Elephant & Castle, gotten on a rail and headed for somewhere else in England, since I'm flinging expensive ass plane tickets on my credit card, might as well keep the debt high. I'm sure he was fucking terrified, but saying "I need you" is not the worst thing you could admit to your friend, really. My heart is pounding with every *thwap* of my suitcase. I wasn't that bad over Justin, and I was around. I didn't know what to do except come. I tried to call his mother, but I never could get an answer. Omar's dad was also not answering. The first flight I could get (and by that I mean afford) was three days later, New Year's Day. I cashed in all the flier miles I had, plus some major bread. The restaurant where I work wanted to fire me, but I convinced them it was an emergency.

Walking up to the ramshackle towers of Council Estates, I feel colder. I chant "326 B" in my head, thinking that simply making Omar's mother's address a mantra will keep me from freezing. I pause at the front of the building, hope it's the right one, and walk up to the doors.

An Asian woman and little boy trot out, and the little boy smiles at me. The woman stops, glances at my suitcase.

"Hi." I cleared my throat. "Does Emma Nagra still live in 326 B?"

"I thought you were her." The woman had a thick accent. "Omar he tell me look for you, and tell you she die."

“Who died? Omar spoke to you? About me?”

“He say tell you he knew you come, he say she have the red hair and ugly suitcase.” The woman smiled. “He say they put Emma’s ash bones in the sea, but you go make yourself at home, he come back.”

“He come back?” I asked, suddenly feeling warmer.

“Yes, he tell me look for you. He say tell you ‘Wait. Guilty. Curry.’”