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# Empty's Always Empty

Short Stories based on Ovid's  
*Metamorphoses*

by Alex Sladky

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### Metamorphoseized

Imagine it is a cool summer morning in Iowa City - unusually cool, and it is raining. Ten young writers sit around a table in a classroom that still has blackboards and thin blue-gray carpeting unraveling along the bottom of the doorway. Most of us have already figured out that there are only a few stories to tell – a man comes into town and changes things, a man decides to go on a journey, a man overcomes some obstacle – internal or external, and there aren't too many more. But we're eager to tell our stories. The teacher is Aaron McCullough, a poet, but the aspiring writers are interested in all genres – short stories, creative nonfiction, novels.

I'm feeling a little discouraged – and struggling to figure out where I fit in the world of writing – how am possibly going to tell a new story? In this hazy-morning confusion, Aaron gives us all permission to steal. He does not mean to plagiarize; he does not mean to copy. He means that we can take any idea and make it our own. In this moment, the world of writing felt overwhelmingly huge and quite small all at once.

Not long after this, I finally begin to understand the phrase that my high school Latin teacher always repeated when we read the poems of Ovid, Virgil and Catullus, "There's nothing new under the sun." There really isn't. My job as a writer, then, is not to create completely new stories or plot lines but to bring my own insights to a particular situation. How I see the world is so different from how others see their worlds, and that is what I have set out to share through my writing.

This small collection of stories is in large part proof of the most basic thing I have learned as a writer: “There is nothing new under the sun.” It is a combination of my interest in Latin literature and my passion and need for writing. It is the beginning of a larger collection of short stories that hopefully will one day be worthy of publication. Each story here is loosely based on, influenced by, or inspired by a story in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

I say “loosely” because I am not re-writing Ovid’s stories but rather translating some aspect of the ancient myths and putting them in contemporary settings. Not very much has changed from Antiquity in the realm of human feeling and emotion. The *Metamorphoses* is poetry rather than prose but contains a narrative structure and is considered an epic. While I found inspiration in the *Metamorphoses*, I also studied closely a few contemporary women writers to understand what makes a successful story. Some of the most influential books I’ve read this year are *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout, *Mrs. Somebody Somebody* by Tracy Winn, and *Moral Disorder* by Margaret Atwood. As a Southern woman writer, I also found particular inspiration in and a strong regional connection to Flannery O’Connor, from her stories as well as from her letters.

In my work with the *Metamorphoses*, I have chosen stories that are rich in emotion, and I have worked to translate the psychological problems and emotional responses of Ovid’s characters. I am particularly interested in the ways in which women frequently turn to stone or to trees, and I have worked to make the physical changes into a psychological ones for my

characters. What is particularly interesting in Ovid's text is how he deals with strong emotions. He designates only a few lines for the real feeling of the story, the madness, sadness, hatred or anger. In my own stories, I am taking these emotions and expanding upon them, really trying to unpack what the character has to deal with and relating it to a situation that is familiar.

While one of the most obvious connections with myth is history, I have not set out to place my stories in any particular historical context related to Antiquity. In a short essay by Nicolas Berdyaev, "Myth as Memory," he writes, "Historical myths have a profound significance for the act of remembrance. A myth contains a story that is preserved in popular memory and that helps to bring to life some deep stratum buried in the depths of the human spirit"<sup>1</sup>. As myths change over time and across different cultures, the stories have to be shaped to fit a particular group of people – in a sense, myths, as they go through metamorphoses themselves, help to interpret the world to contemporary audiences. I hope to show through my stories that the emotions of Ovid's characters aren't as unfamiliar as we might think. By translating these emotions, I believe I can get at the core feelings and themes from Ovid that have become embedded in our "popular memory." Ovid himself wrote that he wanted the *Metamorphoses* to be read forever; he wanted immortality through his work. Through the metamorphosis of each of

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr., ed. The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965) 671.

the characters in my stories, I try to bring to life a feeling that may have been pushed away or hidden somewhere deep inside of the character.

One of the most provocative and inspiring stories for me is Ovid's story of Daphne and Apollo. I am particularly interested in the idea of the effects of unwanted love. Daphne's character seems whimsical, fairy-like, almost like she might disappear right before your eyes. In "Empty's Always Empty," I try to capture the feeling of what it might mean for Daphne to run away from the boy who wants to marry her, and in a sense, give her roots that she doesn't want. Daphne is a whimsical girl who seems to appear on her Aunt Margaret's doorstep, and at the end of the story seems to, just as easily, disappear. There is the sense that both Margaret and the Daphne of my story have attempted to do something about their situations and are no longer chased by unwanted love, only the after-effects. After Daphne has left at the end of the story, Margaret watches a tree outside the window that calls to mind Daphne's transformation into something that seems to free her in a way from having to marry when she doesn't want to: "Outside, the tree branches, long and slender, danced around the opening, like they were trying to get in. I looked down at my hand and found that my ring was still here... I took it off... it felt weightless, just the opposite of what it really was all my life" (29-30).

In Ovid's story, Daphne prays that she will become a tree so that she does not have to marry Apollo, and "hardly having finished with her prayer, a heavy numbness grips her limbs: bark covers over her soft heart, her hair



becomes leaves, her arms turn into branches; her feet, once so fast, are held with sluggish roots, her face has become a treetop: her beauty is all that remains” (*vix prece finita torpor gravis occupat artus/... remanet nitor unus in illa*, 1.548-552). In my own story, I try to evoke the sense of heaviness that both women feel and yet also show that once the weight of their problems is lifted, they are still beautiful.

“Jesus Fans” is a story of a woman’s relationship with her mother and her mother’s God. The transformation here is from unbelieving to the hope of believing. Rather than tearing Penny to pieces, as Pentheus’ mother does in the myth, Penny’s mother reaches out to touch her, crazed with the notion that she has to be the one to bring her to see the light of God. Penny seems to make an effort to understand what her mother believes in, and then, like in Ovid’s story, after all the chaos where Pentheus’ mother pulls him to pieces, there is an eerie quiet. “There was no breeze to rustle the limbs of the pine trees or send pine cones down on their heads, and after a while all the voices seemed to blend into the air, and Penny sat dazed listening to what sounded like a mellow buzzing in her ears” (72-73). In Ovid’s story, he also ends with the image of the wind in the trees: “The wind is not more swift as it tears leaves from the high trees when touched by the chill of autumn than were those wicked hands tearing at the limbs of the man” (*non citius fronds autumni frigore tactas... minibus direpta nefandis*, 3.729-731). I try to translate this sense of eeriness and quiet, the feeling that everything stands still for a moment.

“A Long Way Down” is the story of a wife who has just found out that her husband is having an affair and realizes that she will never be able to leave him, even though he has done a horrible thing that has deeply hurt her “She knew that there was nothing she could do. Unable to move, she sat there, knowing that she would always be there, rooted to him, like the trees on the mountainside. Once your heart is with someone, it stays there, shackled, parasitic” (92). Like the character Clytie in Ovid’s story, who loves the sun so much, all she seems to be able to do is stay rooted and stare at him until she begins to waste away because she cannot do anything else:

she begins to waste away foolish with love, impatient for use, and under Jove by day and by night she sat naked on the naked ground, her hair disheveled, and through the new light, she wanted no part in food or water, and fasting on pure dew and tears, she is terrified. She did not want to move from the land: she watched the face of the god and his face was turning to her

*(tabuit ex illo dementer amoribus usa/ nympharum inpatiens et sub Iove nocte dieque/ sedit humo nuda nudis incompta capilis/ perque novem luces expers undaeque cibique/ rore mero lacrimisque suis ieiunia pavit/ nec movit humo: tantum spectabat euntis/ ora dei vultusque suos flectabat ad illum, 4.259-265).*

“What You Never Dream Will Happen” is the second story in a set of linked stories about Daphne and her flight from her marriage and her home. Here, I explore the character of Daphne’s mother in relation to Niobe, and what it means to lose your children. Jane wants to be in control, and she transforms when she realizes she can’t:

The hair on her head is getting grayer and her face looks pale, and she imagines herself as a statue, stuck right there, or stuck in a place that doesn’t exist anymore, a time that’s past. She’ll be stuck there forever and there’s nothing she can do about it. She starts to cry tears that

look like shiny pebbles coming out of her eyes, glaring off her cheeks in the light (111).

In Ovid's story, Niobe makes the transformation to a stone statue after she realizes that there is nothing she can do to save her children from dying and is overcome with grief: "The air moves not even her hair, the color in her face is without blood, above sad cheeks her eyes stand motionless; nothing is living in her image" (*...nullos movet aura capillos/... nihil est in imagine vivum*, 6.303-305). As Niobe realizes the true weight of her loss, she realizes that it is out of her reach, and that sense of loss devastates her. Just as in Ovid's story, Jane realizes too late so that there's no way for her to go back and change things.

In Ovid's story of Jupiter and Europa, Jupiter disguises himself as a harmless, white cow who then carries off Europa and rapes her. Jupiter, as a cow, gains Europa's trust but then snatches her away from the shore: "She is terrified and she looks back, having been carried away, at the shore and with her right hand grasps the (bull's) horn placed on the high ridge; her clothes billowing, they flutter in the breeze" (*...pavet haec litusque ablata relictum/ respicit et dextra cornum tenet,/ altera dorso/ inposita est; tremulae sinuantur flamine vestes*, 2.873-875). Rather than staying close to Jupiter's perspective, as Ovid does, I wanted to explore Europa's feelings. Eliza, in the story "Jake and Eliza," is a young girl looking for a thrill. She is afraid of being the last one of her friends to be kissed and also of being alone, of not being able to find a boyfriend. Jake disguises himself as someone who might be interested in her. What Jake takes away from her is not her virginity but her desire for a

thrill, and he also completely changes the way that she sees herself: “Whore? She thought again. She was better than that, she thought, but maybe not; maybe she was just what he said she was... she didn’t like how his words seemed to be true” (53).

The story of Pyramus and Thisbe is a story of forbidden love. Pyramus and Thisbe try to overcome the rules set by their parents so that they can be together. In “Waiting,” Blake murders his family so that he can stay with Alma. However, this murder essentially ends their relationship since Blake is put in jail. This makes it hard for her to believe that their love is really as strong as she thought it was. Alma struggles with the idea that Blake is not the person she thought he was; she does not know him anymore. Alma’s change in the story is subtle. She decides that she will wait for him and essentially sever any opportunities she might have to find love with someone else: “I’m still here, for now. I’ll wait for you... If I was going to get married to you, I would say that I promise to follow you wherever you go. And I’d promise to be patient” (137-138).

This echoes Ovid’s story where the character agrees to suffer because her beloved is suffering also. In the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, Thisbe decides to kill herself because Pyramus killed himself: “Oh unhappy boy, you died at your own hand, she said, and love killed you! And the hand perhaps is this for me, it is love: it gives me strength to wound myself” (... *”tua te manus” inquit “amorque... dabit his in vulnera vires*, 4. 148-150). As Thisbe

sacrifices her life, Alma sacrifices her own life by deadening her senses to other possibilities.

Through transformation in the *Metamorphoses*, characters often change to become something that embodies the essence of their characters while still maintaining aspects of their human form. When Daphne becomes a tree, her beauty remains; Niobe turns to stone but still weeps, which embodies her devastation. Throughout my years at Mount Holyoke, my perception of home has changed into one that feeds my writing. My view of the places I know is different from someone else's. As I explored these changes, I found that they provided for me a lens through which I can now more clearly see and write about what I know: the South. Flannery O'Connor, in a letter, wrote about being a Southerner and the relationship between her identity as a Southerner and as a writer.

If you're a writer and the South is what you know, then it's what you'll write about and how you judge it will depend on how you judge yourself. It's perhaps good and necessary to get away from it physically for a while, but this is by no means to escape it. I stayed away from the time I was twenty until I was twenty-five with the notion that the life of my writing depended on staying away. I would certainly have persisted in that delusion had I not got very ill and had to come home. The very best of my writing has been done here<sup>2</sup>.

I, too, tried to escape the South, believing that in order to become a writer, I had to go out into the world and leave my roots behind, only to discover that my experience provided a new clarity concerning the South. From Ovid's

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<sup>2</sup> Flannery O'Connor. *The Habit of Being*. Sally Fitzgerald, ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979) 230.

stories I found many ways to draw parallels to Southern culture – the perception of church with Pentheus, debutante balls with Niobe, and class with Pyramus and Thisbe, to name a few. The contrast between the ways of life and the people who inhabit the areas where I grew up provided me with characters and themes. I began to consider the different kinds of people and the changes they made to become more human aspects of themselves.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* provided the foundation for these stories, but I also turned to Flannery O'Connor's stories because I could relate to her writing style and voice. She is a master at characterization, and as she develops a character, that character seems to go through an Ovidian-like change at the end. Her characters, like Ovid's, come to embody the very essence of themselves. They keep unfolding until, at the end, the characters often have a humbling experience, and the reader sees that they are not who they seemed to be at first but are, in fact, more human. Her stories were helpful as I tried to think of ways to embody change that is believable but still miraculous. Of course, my characters do not change in form – into a tree or a rock, for instance – but they change in their own understanding of themselves.

All the myths in Ovid's poem are linked by change. In each story, a character does something or is the victim of what someone else does, and the character changes form as a result. This is a simple structure and the basic one that I began with as I wrote each of these stories. Writing with this structure provided a clear focus for each story. Yet, it was also challenging since I had to find some way to make the changes unique. With this structure

in mind, I read collections of linked short stories, which shed light on ways to develop the complexities of characters through multiple story structures. I looked closely at *Mrs. Somebody Somebody* by Tracy Winn, *Moral Disorder* by Margaret Atwood, and *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout. Similar to the way a novel is structured, these collections follow characters through their lives. However, because they are separate, distinct stories, they also show the unique complexities in a character since the interactions aren't on a scene-by-scene basis. Through interactions with different characters across stories, as well as when a story is told from a different point of view or at a different time in a character's life, it is possible to create other windows through which readers see who the characters are. This also allows for detours where the author may indirectly bring in even more aspects of the characters. These stories may not involve the main characters of a previous story, but they call to mind certain moments that the main characters can relate to or feelings that the reader might associate with events in previous stories.

In an essay by T.S. Eliot, "Myth and Literary Classicism," he writes, "It is much easier to be a classicist in literary criticism than in creative art – because in criticism you are responsible only for what you want, and in creation you are responsible for what you can do with material which you simply accept" (680)<sup>3</sup>. While working towards an ending is a prescription of sorts, and while it gave me a structure to work with, I could not "simply accept" the structure and storylines, but I had to challenge them. Were the

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<sup>3</sup> Ellmann and Feidelson, 680.

events that I translated from Ovid's stories too predictable? How could I show the same or a similar change but still have an air of mystery to my stories? Like Ovid, the changes that my characters make bring out their most human aspects. Yet, what sets these stories apart from the stories that have been told many times over is my vision, insight, and voice. This is a satisfying process and one that will continue for a long time after these stories are bound in this document.



Empty's Always Empty

*Hanc quoque Phoebus amat positaque in stipite dextra  
Sentit adhuc trepidare novo sub cortice pectus...  
Oscula dat lingo: refugit tamen oscula lignum.  
Cui dues 'at quoniam coniunx mea non potes esse,  
Arbor eris certe' dixit 'mea...'  
(Metamorphoses I. 553-558)*

*Still Apollo loves her and placing his right hand  
On the trunk he feels still her heart beat under new bark...  
He gives kisses to the wood: however the wood refuses his kisses.  
The god says to her 'but since you cannot be my wife,  
At any rate, you shall be my tree.'*

It was an afternoon in July, so hot and still that the door stuck, swelled from humidity, and I had to lean into it and push with my hip until I got it open. I hung my apron on the nail that stuck out from the wall at eye level beside the door. When the doorbell rang, the sound seemed to hang in the stagnant air. I finished taking off my shoes before I opened the door. She stood on the welcome mat with a backpack strapped onto her shoulders, and a suitcase beside her feet; her arms and legs as thin as twigs. “Daphne.” Her name escaped my mouth before I could think. She was my niece, my sister’s daughter. There was no sign of any car; no taxi had brought her. I was sure that as I walked down the dirt road back from the diner where I worked, I would have seen her. Maybe I had walked up the stairs and opened the door and she had been there the whole time and I didn’t notice. She stood there like she was dropped from somewhere – dazed, like she expected to wake up from the dream and be at home in her mother’s house.

“Well,” I said. “Well, look at you.”

I opened the screen door, and she accepted my embrace by holding on to my upper arms as though for stability.

We stood there in the doorway. I held the door open with my arm extended, and she smiled at me. She looked into my eyes, then she looked away. Her stare was glazed, nervous, and I had a feeling her mother didn't know she was here. It had been a year since I'd seen them both, and I knew my sister would have a thing or two to say. None of it would be good. I had wondered for months if they'd even gotten the card I'd sent with my new address on it. They'd never called, and I hardly dared to.

Daphne's eyes peered past me, and I backed up to let her in. "I haven't seen you in a whole year, and here I am making you stand out in this heat."

She smiled and I took in the rest of her – the graceful way she bent her knees, her fingers wrapping around the handle of a suitcase.

"Where are you heading?"

She laughed nervously. "I was wondering if I could stay a night or two? It's been a long time. I wanted to catch up." She paused. "A year is a long time."

"Does your mother know you're here?"

She shook her head no. "I had to tell you the news." She held up her left hand. The diamond was bigger than most diamonds in the whole county.

Taking her hand in mine, I looked at the ring, maybe a size too big on her bony finger. "Oh my Lord." I looked at her face, her lips were set, her

eyes blank. “I can’t believe you’re old enough to be getting married. I just can’t believe it.” I tried a smile.

She set the suitcase down just inside the door.

“I wanted to take a little time before the wedding.” She sounded like she was reciting something practiced. I could almost see her standing in front of the bathroom mirror at home, making up what she was going to say. “I wanted to get back in touch with some people.”

I wondered who else had disappeared from her life all at once and suddenly. I had disappeared a year ago, when her mother had said I was no longer welcome in her house since I was planning on getting a divorce.

Daphne followed me to the kitchen where I offered her a chair at the kitchen table. I said, “What does your mother have to say about you coming here?” She looked around the room as though she was trying to remember it. I wondered if she could see any sign of similarities between her mother and myself. I couldn’t imagine she would, but for a moment I wished that there was a picture, or something.

“It’s nice here.”

I waited patiently for her to answer my question. “Well, Daphne, make yourself at home.” I turned the water on in the sink to rinse my hands off. “You can put your suitcase in the guest room upstairs whenever you’re ready.”

She walked out of the room softly so that it seemed like no one was there at all. I listened to her climb the steps, heard her drop the suitcase on the

floor, followed by the backpack, and I asked myself without thinking, *if she's getting married, and soon, what is she doing here?* It wasn't a hard question or the wrong question. In fact, it was the question I had asked myself a year ago. When I had packed the car and gone to stay with my sister and Daphne for Easter. Why did I choose there when I knew how her mother felt about the idea of divorce? It seemed so easy: she was my sister and had certain duties to fulfill.

I could remember it well, no matter how little I wanted to. I could hear her mother's voice asking me the same thing when I dragged my suitcases into the foyer of the house. The plum colored entrance way suggested seriousness. They did not have time for my frivolous self-doubts or the late night calls from the man who was my husband when he realized I had no intention of coming home. He had been drunk and screaming, calling me back, calling me home, Jane had said.

My sister, Jane, had just come from church. I had sat at the large oak table in the dining room, putting my signature on the papers for a divorce. She had come in, her heels clicking faintly on the wood floors.

"Well, that was a nice service. It's too bad you missed it." She had taken a step closer. "What have you been doing there with all those papers all weekend?"

"I'm getting a divorce."

It seemed like she had stopped breathing.

I had told her that my marriage was failing. “I can’t go on living this way.”

“You don’t have a choice,” she had said. “We all have things we don’t want to do.” She might have been jealous of me. But her husband Robert hadn’t gained forty pounds and wasn’t hitting her when he was drunk. She had said quietly, “I just let Robert do what he pleases, and we’re just fine.” I knew she had been talking about the other women, and I knew she would never question her place. A moment later she had said that she couldn’t deal with me getting a divorce, and she had left.

I had sat at the table for hours it seemed after that. Daphne had come in and sat down beside me; her church clothes looked too big for her. We didn’t talk for some time. Then she had asked me to braid her hair. “What are all those papers for?”

“I’m getting a divorce.” I continued to braid the long, blonde plait down her back.

She didn’t move much, and she said, “I’m sorry.”

Her mother had walked back in then. I had finished the braid and touched her shoulder. Her mother had said, “Daphne, say goodnight to your aunt.”

Daphne had obediently said, “Goodnight.”

When the door shut, Jane crossed her arms. “I can’t have you in this house if you’re going to be getting a divorce. How long are you planning on staying?”

“I wasn’t sure. Just until I could find somewhere else to stay.”

“I can’t support this.”

“I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“You can go home to your husband.”

I thought of that table and foyer and lace doilies. Everything must look so small, so plain to her. The kitchen cabinets were white, the walls were white, the counter tops were white. The stainless steel sink stood out, shining. It looked spotless, untouched. There were no pictures on the walls. It did not seem lived in. After a moment, I stood in the doorway of the kitchen and called up the stairs that lunch would be ready for her whenever she got settled.

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That night after Daphne unpacked and walked around the grounds – past the old barn with twisting ivy vines creeping up the sides, sizing up the place – we sat out on the porch until dark. Summer nights have heat as heavy as bricks weighing down on us. She stared off the porch, past the dirt road.

“How’s your mother?” My nerves felt tied in knots just asking. I thought of how long it had been since I’d actually said her name, or even thought about her at a time other than that Easter a year ago.

“She’s the same.” Daphne moved her limbs quickly, flighty, like a fairy. “You know how she is. She started going to a Bible study with a few of the women at church.”

I thought about how very little her mother ever surprised me.

“She’s planning the wedding.” Daphne turned the ring on her finger. “She’s already booked the church, Lighthouse Baptist, you remember the one mama goes to. And it’s only been a month since Chad proposed.”

“Time sure does fly,” I offered.

She shrugged, attempted carelessness. “How long have you been here now?” She wouldn’t look at me.

“About a year.” A year off the lonely highway where the closest town was Milledgeville, two full hours from where she lived with her mother. I had left the house when her mother had told me I was no longer welcome there, and it was two hours away and there was the sign for a house for rent. It was the easiest thing I’d ever done, and I had this feeling in my stomach that everything was alright. I wondered where she had found the address. Her mother couldn’t have just given it to her. She probably had kept it hidden in her underwear drawer.

No matter how long it had been, the feeling still smarted like when you pick at a scab. She watched the weight of the diamond turn the ring upside down on her finger. I twirled the fragile band on my own finger with my thumb. It was a wonder to me suddenly that she was her mother’s daughter. Maybe she should have been mine. When we looked at each other, it was like we were looking in the mirror. We looked enough alike to know that we were related – same shaped face, same sloping shoulders. I had gained weight since I moved into my own house, and I started thinking that maybe she would too, once she got away from her mother, once she was on her own,

doing what she wanted to do, or needed to do. It dawned on me that maybe she was there for the same reason I was.

“Were you excited when he asked you to marry him?” Daphne asked.

The weight of the diamond seemed to make her hand wilt. “I mean, so excited that you couldn’t do anything else, or think of anything else?”

“Maybe I was once.” I waited.

“I mean, before you came here. Before you left your husband.”

“I was very young,” I said. “I didn’t know what else there was.”

I watched the ice melt and become perspiration on the sides of my glass. It was hard not to say everything. Say anything about how I realized that the jittery-nervous feeling, almost like I couldn’t breathe, was the opposite of liberating, or romantic. I didn’t even want to think about what her mother would do if I told her the whole story. The part where I found that I wanted more to life than folding laundry and opening his beer bottles. I wondered if Daphne ever asked her mother what happened to me after I left and never called or visited, as her mother had instructed me. Women aren’t supposed to leave their husbands; they’re not supposed to think for themselves, or live for themselves.

When Jane married Robert she felt the spark, maybe of love or maybe of necessity, and kept going with it. She filled her days with meetings and church activities and errands; she designed the costumes for Daphne’s school plays and was the head of the committee for the debutante balls. She did everything, and when it came to thinking, there wasn’t any time for it. It was



scary to think about changing everything in your life. If you don't feel like you have to think about it, you don't. I wondered if she ever had that gnawing feeling in her chest, like something wasn't right, something was missing. Of course she didn't. I thought, some people don't know when they're being abused or used. Some people choose not to see it.

That afternoon, when I sat her down to lunch at the kitchen table, I felt like I had all those years when I would come to visit, when she was still very young, sitting her down to her after school snack at the dining room table that overwhelmed her with its proud, solid oak and cloth doilies.

I gave her an egg salad sandwich, and she excused herself halfway through to go to the bathroom. Standing still beside the table, I listened to her barely audible footsteps. She stood beside the phone where she picked up the receiver, dialed half of a number and hung up. She did that twice more. I never heard the toilet flush or the bathroom door creak, like all the doors in the house did.

When she came back, Daphne said, "I never remember seeing you with Uncle Chris. He never came to Thanksgiving or Christmas or Easter."

"He never wanted to."

"Chad always wants to come to those things." She wouldn't look at me but kept her head facing straight forward, eyes fixed on some dark corner of the land. "He always wants to be with me and always wants to do everything right. Sometimes I can't stand it."

I opened my mouth and closed it again. Sometimes Cupid's arrow pierces all the way to the bone and marrow. Sometimes, he hits you with the wrong arrow, and you're left with a chill you can't shake, no matter how much you might want to. It shouldn't be a feeling you want to shake. Nobody should go hoping for that.

It had been years since I thought of all this. "When Chris and I got married, I didn't know that there was anything else in the world. I just didn't know I had other choices. I could have gone to college or gotten a job. I could have moved out here years ago."

We were still sitting on the porch, where I was half asleep. I roused myself enough to watch her chew at the ice left in her cup. There were fireflies dancing in the distance, like string lights on a Christmas tree, and zombie moths overhead, flying at the porch light by the front door.

"Daphne, it's getting late." I yawned.

"I know." Daphne smiled but didn't look at me. "I'm old enough to know that now."

I thought, she doesn't know how much she has to learn. "Daphne, tell me, before I go to bed tonight, what you are doing here?" It sounded like maybe I was trying to whisper, as though I didn't really want her to hear me. I was afraid of her answer. "Here you are after a year, with a ring. And your mother doesn't know you're even here. I want to know what it is that you're looking for."

She kept staring off into the distance twisting a silver ankle bracelet between her fingers. I thought at first that maybe I didn't say it really. But then she said it quietly. "My mother doesn't have to know everything." The ankle bracelet caught the light that was leaking out of the kitchen window and twinkled. She looked at me, pleading a little, like I was supposed to know, or at least tell her what she wanted to hear. It was as if she were trying on the words, trying on the idea of being disobedient, thinking for herself.

"I'm not your mother."

"I don't think I'm ready for marriage." Daphne glanced at me. "He works construction with his dad, and we've known each other forever and both our families have money. It would be good." She paused. "He just kept on talking about it, so I said yes. I couldn't think of anything else or anything better. I didn't think that there was anything better."

"There's more to life than what you see there," I said.

A breeze lifted the hair off her shoulders for a second. She didn't say anything more. Just stared. I ran a hand across my eyes. She reminded me so much of myself.

"Are you done with this?" She nodded. I added her empty glass to the tray with my own and the pitcher and carried everything to the kitchen.

Standing before the sink, running water to wash the dishes, I stared out the window and watched Daphne. I could see no physical scars, no bruises. I knew Chad. He was a kind and squirrely-looking kid, who had the face of a fifteen-year-old, hardly old enough to be getting married. I couldn't imagine

he would do anything out of the ordinary. But then Chris was the same, there was nothing, until one night he had been drunk and tanked, and I asked him one thing, and that was all it took. I had a black eye for a week. What worried me more were the bruises I couldn't see. I wondered how many times Chad had asked her, what he had said, and how he had convinced her.

Daphne took the ring off and stared at it. I glanced down at my own hand. The diamond on my wedding ring was small, but it was still there, still on my finger, and I couldn't quite bring myself to take it off. Sometimes we don't know why we hold onto things, except that if we let go of them we let go of a whole life that we had once known. I knew leaving, for real, was different from figuring things out. I could see the feeling in her, the uncertainty mixed with a sense of curiosity. It would take longer for her to put a finger on the something she was running away from. I hoped she was thinking, *what if there is something better?*

"Aunt Margaret, is there anything you need before I go up to bed?" Daphne came to the open window in front of the sink, found me standing there with my hands dripping wet. I still hadn't washed any dishes.

"No, Daphne. Go on to bed."

I stood beside the window, my hands floating in the gray dishwater appearing ghost-like rather than like parts of my own body. She walked across the porch, came inside through the door, but didn't stop for a moment to say goodnight. She was paler in the dark and so thin. I hardly turned away, and she had climbed the stairs and disappeared. With water still in it, I left the

sink, the open window and returned to my room. I listened for her noises in the room above me: footsteps or blankets rustling, maybe humming. I strained my ears, but I heard nothing.

The phone rang with a clattering echo into my silence. Before I answered, I knew it was someone looking for her.

Her mother's voice was thin and rattling, familiar. "Have you seen Daphne? We're worried."

I imagined her, as I knew she was, sitting at her dining room table, one hand on the phone, the other hand cinching the collar of her robe up at her neck.

"I mean, Chad's worried. He hasn't heard from her all day, or all last night he said. He said he thought there might be a problem." She sounded calm. "She doesn't realize what she's fooling with here. This wedding is the best thing that could happen to her."

"I haven't seen her." I knew that my claim was unconvincing.

Jane sighed. "The postcard you sent is gone. I don't know where else she would have gone."

"Why don't you let your daughter have some time to think this through?" I tried to sound neutral.

"She doesn't need to think anything through. This is solid. It's certain. Chad knows it is; that's why he asked. She doesn't need any time. They've been together forever." Jane spoke quickly. "I want her to be happy.

I want to see some grandkids. She'll be happy with him. She knows she will."

"Maybe she won't." I switched the phone from my right ear to my left ear. It was a lost cause I knew. "I'll let you know if she comes by." I hung up without waiting for more, knowing that she knew I had no intention of calling her. Standing at the bottom step, I contemplated going up, finding her thin, nymph-like ankle and shaking her awake. I would tell her to call her mother. Tell her exactly what she was thinking. Maybe it would make her see.

The stairs creaked under my weight, and I was afraid of what I might see, a girl so young and afraid of her own life. I thought of her standing by the phone, when she had excused herself from lunch, unable to find the nerve. I didn't feel guilty anymore.

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In the morning, the dream woke me slowly. I saw the clear images pan across my mind like in a movie. It was so vivid that I'm not sure it didn't really happen. It was day. I stood just inside the door, showing her out with her suitcase. There wasn't a car waiting for her, and she didn't say that there was someone waiting for her back in town either. She stood in a patch of sunlight. It seemed like the light went all the way through Daphne's body, and it made her glow a little like maybe she did when she was a little girl, running free. She took a step towards the porch, and I touched her arm, lightly. She turned back and opened her hand. She was expecting it, and I

was ready to give it. I tugged my wedding ring over my knuckle and pressed it into her palm. Her fingers closed over mine, and that was it. For a moment, the pictures in my mind seemed just an extension of thoughts, a memory. But I knew quickly that they were not.

I heard the radio playing in the kitchen and stretched in my small twin bed, which I kept because after I left Chris, I didn't allow myself to entertain ideas of love. The sun produced lazy heat that matched the soft orchestra on the radio. From where I lay in my bed, I could see the still wind chimes that hung from the awning all the way around the house. It was hot and still again.

The noise was sudden, something clattering down the set of stairs. I sat up and called, "Daphne?"

When I heard nothing, I stood up and walked into the kitchen and then to the bottom of the stairs. Daphne stood on the last step looking down at her suitcase.

"Is everything alright?" I looked down at the suitcase, which had come open like a set of broken stitches, and her clothes burst out in a pile. In the clothes lay an old, gold picture frame. I bent and picked it up.

"Everything's fine," Daphne whispered. The frame held my own wedding picture, where I stood beside Chris, holding his bent elbow. Chris looked like he had been laughing. I looked frozen, frightened, like I was growing attached to him. "Where did you get this?"

"Mom had it hanging in the hallway."

I said, "What do you think you're doing? It doesn't seem right that you're leaving now, and I haven't seen you in a year, and I don't even know that everything is okay with you." I stared at her and she seemed so fragile to me.

She was quiet and kept her head bent. "I just wanted to see you. I wanted to know what happened after so many years of being married and then you're not anymore."

I nodded.

"You look as young as I am." She stepped down from the stair and stood beside me to look over my shoulder. It seemed for a moment that Chris was looking out of the picture at me.

"I was eighteen." I sat down on the stair.

"Did you know you would end up leaving him ahead of time? You couldn't have known that when you were so young," Daphne asked.

"No. You don't plan for these things." I lay the picture flat on the floor.

"Why do you still wear that ring? If you're divorced, and you don't love him anymore, why do you still have it on?"

I closed my hand in a fist. "To remember why I'm here." I wasn't sure if I really believed that. It seemed like I'd spoken too quickly. "It makes it easier. No one asks anything, I have a ring to show for it, for some lost love that no one needs to know about."



I wanted to believe that if I thought hard enough, I would be able to somehow tell her without saying that everything she wanted to know. She had to learn on her own.

“I’m supposed to get married. It’s the right thing to do.” She looked down at her hand. The diamond seemed to glitter even when the light didn’t hit the stone. “I just don’t know if that’s what I want.”

I shook my head. “You’re not supposed to do it if it’s not right for you. Go on far away from here and find what you want.”

“What else am I supposed to do?”

“You can do anything you want.” I touched her hand.

She paused and then began to push her clothes back in her suitcase.

I said, “I can’t tell you what that is – the right thing for you.”

She nodded, “I just don’t even know where else to go.”

“You don’t have to know anything.”

She looked at me for a moment, and it felt like she could see inside me. She took off the ring and left it sitting on the counter top. She kissed my cheek and she was gone.

I didn’t hear her come back. I heard the faint sounds of her suitcase bouncing against the wooden stairs. I heard the door open and close. When the house was quiet, I climbed the stairs stepping lightly in order to keep them from creaking. The attic door was ajar, and in the dim morning light that came in the west facing window, I could see that no one was there. The bed was made up, no trunk, no clothes in piles on the floor. The window was open,

and the curtains waved in the breeze, lifting and falling like a sigh. Outside, the tree branches, long and slender, danced around the opening, like they were trying to get in. I looked down at my hand and found that my ring was still there, like a callus on my finger, a part of me that had grown tough and unwavering. I took it off and held it in my hand for a moment. It felt weightless, just the opposite of what it really was all of my life. I closed my eyes and let it slip from my fingers, and it was gone between floorboards of the attic. The curtains sighed again, and I slammed the window closed and returned to bed.

*Vix prece finita torpor gravis occupat artus:  
Mollia cinguntur tenui praecordia libro,  
In frondem crines, in ramos brachia crescunt;  
Pes modo tam velox pigris radicibus haeret,  
Ora cacumen habet: remanet nitor unus in illa.  
(Metamorphoses I.548-552)*

*Scarcely had she finished her prayer  
When a heavy numbness overcomes her limbs:  
Her heart is enclosed by a thin bark, her hair becomes leaves,  
Her arms become branches;  
Her feet once so swift are made sluggish with roots,  
Her head becomes a treetop:  
Only her beauty remains.*

Jake and Eliza

... *ausa est quoque regia virgo  
nescia, quem premet, tergo considerare tauri:  
cum deus a terra siccoque a litore sensim  
falsa pedem primo vestiga ponit in undis,  
inde abit ulterius mediique per aequora ponti  
fert praedam...*  
(*Metamorphoses II.868-873*)

*Then also the virgin Europa dares to sit on the back of the bull  
She does not know whom she feels:  
Gradually then the god moves from dry land with false hooves  
Into the waves  
From there he moves further and  
Through the waters of the middle of the sea he carries his prey.*

The school year ended in a blur, as usual. Eliza, Sara and Rebecca checked ninth grade off the list as something belonging to the past. They were sophomores now and had only to acknowledge that they had been through the experience of freshman year, which they did not care to relive if they could help it. They felt like they knew how life was supposed to be: they did whatever they wanted all day – swim in Eliza’s pool, listen to music in Harry’s, Sara’s boyfriend’s, dark basement, wander around down town free of any adult supervision. For hours, the three of them sat at the only table outside the drugstore, reserved usually for the old alcoholics who sat there in the morning – waiting for the liquor store to open up. The summer stretched out before them like the empty, unpaved road into town. They sat relaxed, slouched in collapsible lawn chairs on the sidewalk. They looked older than they were, fifteen, and their bras were nicely padded. All three had board-straight hair that shimmered a little with chemicals from the hair products they used.

The three of them bought sodas and sometimes a bag of chips. Sipping Coke through straws, they watched people going in and out of the deli next door and the homeless man that sat on the sidewalk asking, “Could you spare some change?” When he got no response, he shook his head and said, “God bless you.”

The sun came down straight and hard. It was noon. Eliza watched Rebecca keeping an eye on the movements inside the store. Business men walked by in suits, ties loosened slightly for lunch hour. Eliza sized them up and followed them with her eyes into the deli or the drugstore. In the streets, the asphalt seemed to tremble, looking like there was a pool of water a ways down the road.

Eliza tossed her brown hair from one shoulder to the other, scrutinizing one end of the sidewalk and then the other with her light brown eyes. The heat made Eliza ornery. More than the heat, what did it was that she couldn't think of anything to do. It was the third Monday after school had let out, and they'd gone through all the luxurious summer excitement: spending every night at each others' houses, sleeping 'til one in the afternoon, and sneaking over to Harry's house late at night with Sara where they mixed a few drinks from his parents' liquor cabinet. Once they had taken out Rebecca's mom's car on the back roads where rocks kicked up and left tiny nicks in the paint on the side of the car. No one had ever mentioned it since her mother was too busy anyway. She was a nurse and could buy a new car whenever she wanted. It seemed like they had done everything they could possibly think to

do in town. Eliza tapped the ash off her cigarette, and crossed then uncrossed her legs. A sticky layer of sweat and suntan lotion coated the front of her thighs.

Every night, Eliza's mother would come home just before six, and she'd find the three girls sitting out beside the pool, baking in the evening sun, their skin shimmery with sweat and their small, slender bodies practically sizzling. There wasn't anything they would be keen on doing. Eliza's mother only reminded Eliza to clean her room and sometimes to do the laundry, even more rarely, to wash the dishes after dinner.

She had asked her husband, "Should we be worried? Leaving them alone all day?"

He had taken a long look out the window at the poolside and shook his head. "Doesn't hurt to sit a while by the pool."

The door of the drug store creaked, and the bell attached to the handle jingled wildly each time someone opened it. And each time, Rebecca turned to see who was coming or going. Sara shook a cigarette out of Eliza's pack. "We could go to Harry's. His parents are still gone." She pushed strands of her blonde hair out of her face. Her eyes were a watery blue and her skin pasty in the sun. She sun-burned easily.

Harry had asked Sara out at the beginning of the summer. They'd had their first kiss in front of the TV and hadn't spent much time away from it. Eliza and Rebecca had tried to decide whether or not Sara would be pregnant

by the end of the summer. Sara wouldn't tell Eliza or Rebecca if she had *done it* yet. Harry was eighteen and wasn't going to college.

Rebecca said, "Why don't we just stay here?"

"You're sitting in the shade. Plus, you just want to be here when James gets off," Eliza said, and she inspected the ends of her long, brown hair, which she flipped up between her fingers and looked at almost cross-eyed. James was the delivery boy for the drug store. He delivered prescriptions and small grocery items to the elderly people who lived in the ancient high-rise apartment complex that used to be considered stylish. Eliza wondered sometimes why Rebecca liked him; he was a junior but he looked so much younger sometimes. Eliza had come to think that maybe they all had to find someone while they could, or else they'd be alone forever. In a small town like this, she knew that people married their high school sweethearts all the time. She was comforted by the fact that James had not officially asked Rebecca out yet but was on the verge of it, any day now.

"Do you have any better ideas?" Sara asked as she pulled her hair back off her neck and let it fall back onto her shoulders again. The way the sun shone on her face, they could see her eyes clearly behind her dark sunglasses. She looked bored and hot.

During the school year, they all had taken the three o'clock bus from school to downtown. Their knees had been bare between knee-highs and short skirts. Someone had always had a hand mirror and a brush. They had shared lip-gloss and mascara and eye shadow. When they'd made friends

with the upper-classmen they'd paid their new friends to buy them packs of cigarettes.

Eliza couldn't think of anything else to say. She went through all the same spots in her mind. They'd been told to stay away from the train tracks over the river by the police, on account of it wasn't a safe place for them. Minnie Dalton had told them they couldn't sit in her shop all day and only buy soda. A waitress at the diner had said that it wasn't possible for anyone to live on Coke the whole summer. She had said, "Don't you girls want to get anything else?" They all had shaken their heads and had paid for the Coke by the can, three for each in one sitting. It wasn't any of her business anyway what they consumed and what they didn't. So they sat outside the drugstore where no one bothered them about sitting for hours.

After a while, Eliza still hadn't come up with anything to do, and she thought she might not be able to stand staying home alone for the whole rest of the day. Since they had exhausted everything that they could do together, Sara had begun wanting to spend more time with Harry, and Rebecca thought it was better to spend time at home, where she could wait for James to call her. Which left Eliza alone, and today she felt determined: she had to find some way so that she would not end up alone. Sitting outside, right in the middle of town, she thought the boys would have to come through town at one time or another. But they never came, and Eliza didn't know what else to do.

At close to one, James pushed the door open with his back. In his hands, he held a box with folded and stapled paper bags sticking up like pages

of a book. He turned in their direction. He had a sweet, pink face that would probably stay young forever and still retained a large amount of baby fat. The kind of life he was going to have would be the kind where every day was the same as the one before.

James started toward his car. He looked at Eliza, Rebecca and Sara and said, "Hello, ladies." Everyone said that if he stayed with the job, he would be the town's next pharmacist, and he'd make lots of money. Rebecca would be very lucky if she managed to pin him down, and she would.

They all murmured hello, and Rebecca might have blushed, but it was hard to tell in the heat. Everyone looked flushed.

"We could see if Harry'd want to drive us to Atlanta." Sara and Rebecca looked skeptically at each other. "We wouldn't be bored in Atlanta," Eliza said. "We've gone to my house and to the pool every day last week."

She wanted there to be some way to keep them interested; she even had the idea to invite Harry along. The look they exchanged made Eliza think that they wouldn't want to go all the way to Atlanta. Eliza had begun to think that maybe they had to go elsewhere, or that she did, to find any boys who might be interested in her.

Eliza sighed and turned to watch the sidewalk. A younger looking man was approaching them, not dressed in suits like the businessmen, but in a pastel-colored polo and khakis. Eliza squinted behind her sunglasses and saw that it was Jake Thomson. Jake was on the golf team and practically owned the school since his parents donated so much money. He was popular, not that



Eliza and her friends weren't, there was just the age difference since Jake was a year older. He stood about halfway down the block. Squinting, Eliza could see the golf glove sticking out of his back pocket. He had a cigarette in his left hand which he lifted to his mouth every few seconds. It looked like he was sucking something through a straw with lots of force. Eliza didn't smoke her cigarettes like that but took only mild puffs, not what anyone would call a deep inhalation. Eliza stared but tried to make it appear like she was looking at something else.

Jake had been in Eliza's biology class. Since she was smart enough, she had taken biology as a freshman. He sat at a lab table in the back, and she sat up front, right beside the teacher's desk. He had always laughed at inappropriate times, and there were always sharp noises, then laughter, usually once every period, that came from his corner. Eliza thought he was annoying. The teacher always stopped mid-sentence and stared over his reading glasses. Jake always said, "What?" with a completely straight face. Mr. Martin had to repeat himself in order to remember where he left off. There were quiet chuckles from that corner. He was cute and sixteen, with a brand new car from his parents.

"Who are you looking at?" Sara squinted at Jake over her sunglasses.

"Who is *that*?"

Eliza shook her head. "Oh. That's Jake Thomson."

"Don't stare at him," Rebecca said. "He'll come over here."

“So what?” Eliza shrugged. “This might be the most exciting thing that’s happened all summer.”

Jake started walking towards them. He flicked his cigarette to the side. Eliza told herself that he would walk right past them, like the men going back to the office after a lunch break. If he didn’t notice them, Eliza thought, she would give up, and they would all go back to her house to swim. Jake had no reason to notice them. He didn’t associate with them at school. In fact, Eliza never really saw him outside of class. Sometimes she watched him get into his car from the window of the bus, and she longed for the day she would drive to and from school or have a boyfriend to ride with.

“Why don’t we just go swimming at your house?” Rebecca asked.

“Because we’ve done that every other day this summer,” said Eliza.

Rebecca glanced back at Jake. “We don’t even know him. How do you know he’ll even talk to us?”

Sara put her hand on the gritty table top as though she had some kind of authority. “Why don’t we go for a swim and decide what we’ll do tomorrow.”

“That’s what we always say.” Eliza felt a small spark of something, like she wanted him to notice her, she wanted him to think she was pretty, and she wanted him to want her. Even if he didn’t do anything other than look at her, at least she’d know that she was desirable. She secretly hoped he would do more, but she thought it best not to wish for too much too soon.

Jake stopped right beside the table, and Eliza felt her heart beating somewhere in her stomach. He paused and shook a new cigarette out of his pack. “Can I get a light?”

Eliza looked up at him, squinting even though she wore sunglasses. His hair was a dark blonde, and the sweat dried on his tan skin made him look dirty. She looked skeptical and raised one eyebrow.

He laughed at her serious face. “I got that light from someone else. Could you just...?” He stuck the cigarette in his mouth and bent down to Eliza. She flicked the lighter to life, and he puffed smoke in her face when he exhaled.

“What do you girls do all day now that we don’t have school anymore?” Jake looked around for a chair but there wasn’t an extra one outside.

Eliza glanced at Sara and Rebecca.

“We just sit around. There’s nothing fun to do around here.” She felt relief knowing that he knew who they were, or at least that they all went to the same school.

“This town gets real small, real fast, especially when there’s nothing to do.”

“You don’t have to remind us.” Eliza rolled her eyes.

Jake raised his eyebrows and looked at the pack of cigarettes lying on their table, which was nearly empty by now. Eliza followed his glance and ran a hand through her hair, rearranging it while his eyes weren’t on her.

“There’s a few of us going down to the lake today. If you can’t think of anything else to do, why don’t you join us?”

Eliza looked at Rebecca and Sara. Sara was still inspecting her nails. Rebecca leaned her elbow on the arm of the chair and glared at Eliza. Eliza said, “Oh, I don’t know. We were just talking about going back to my house. But we go there every day.”

“We should hang out. We never got to talk much at school.” Jake looked like he was being serious. Eliza couldn’t tell though. She didn’t know what he looked like when he was really being serious and when he wasn’t. He said, “We only had that one class together.”

“Biology. I sat on the other side of the room. Rebecca was in that class too. Remember, Rebecca?”

“We’ll have fun. I’ll drive you and bring you back. It’ll be a good time.”

Eliza couldn’t imagine what else he might have to say to her, or to any one of them. It was something that would keep them away from home for the afternoon. They would just be able to relax by the lake and maybe even talk with Jake, so long as he wasn’t busy with his other friends. She was sure his other friends would be there, and they’d all see her there with Jake and maybe think that she was someone they should be friends with too.

“We don’t have bathing suits,” Rebecca said.

“Oh, that doesn’t matter any.” Jake smiled at her. Then, “I’m just kidding. If you want to get your suits, we’ll stop to get them.”

“I think we’ll be alright.” Eliza glared at Rebecca and stood up. “Are you two coming or not?”

Sara and Rebecca stood up, and they all followed Jake to his car. Eliza got in front, and Rebecca and Sara slid into the back seat through the same door. It was a nice car, clean and new looking. Of course his parents had gotten it for him when he turned sixteen. Eliza watched Jake out of the corner of her eye. He was concentrating hard on the road.

The lake was maybe thirty minutes from town, and they rode most of the way in a quiet car, except for Rebecca and Sara whispering in the back seat. Eliza wanted to know what they were saying, but it probably wasn’t the kind of thing that they should talk about out loud in Jake’s car. Jake cleared his throat a few times. He smiled at Eliza. The car smelled new and like air freshener. It was smooth, and the air conditioning whirred louder than the motor.

“I’m glad we’re finally doing this.”

Eliza nodded. It felt good to have someone interested in her.

“We never really saw each other after that class.” Jake looked awkward. Eliza tried to ignore it. She tried to remember if he was still with Laura Heart. If he was, maybe she was on vacation, and maybe Jake would like her so much that he would break up with Laura Hart to be with her. Love seemed to come in seasons.

“Biology.” Jake said. He smiled.

“With Mr. Martin.” Eliza glanced out the window. The trees seemed to be going past unusually fast. The thin trunks of the pines seemed more full, their edges blurry. The scrawny branches blew by in blended patches. It didn’t seem like the car was speeding. Eliza couldn’t tell what the speed limit sign said, but she felt like she had a giant gust of wind in her face, like when she lost her breath. They were going faster than the sign advised; she was sure.

“I’m pretty sure I wasn’t paying attention in class.”

Eliza tried to relax in the seat; she pushed her shoulders farther into the cushions.

Jake glanced at her for an instant, then back at the road. “You were pretty good though. You made A’s right?”

Eliza nodded. “It wasn’t hard. I mean, I don’t spend all my time studying.”

“Naturally smart?” Jake laughed and Eliza laughed too.

Eliza couldn’t think of anything else to say right away. She wished that there was something she could say, that she could tell him that would make him want to pay attention to her, be interested in her. They drove quietly. Even Sara and Rebecca stopped talking. The air conditioning felt good, although Eliza’s body felt sticky and clammy from the dried, salty sweat.

Jake made a sharp left-hand turn into the gravelly shoulder right off the road. They sat facing a bunch of pine trees so thickly planted that they

could hardly see through them. The sun shone brightly on the water though, that they could see the glare, bright as a camera flash.

They got out, and Jake led them through the trees, holding back thorny vines to let Eliza, Sara and Rebecca pass unscratched.

On the beach, the sand was speckled with pebbles. Piney brush grew without pattern and looked shriveled by the heat.

Three boys and two girls sat out on the sand. It looked like they'd been wet and then dried already. The girls' hair was wavy and thick; they wore bikinis while the boys wore shorts with no shirts.

“Look who I found.” Jake sounded excited.

There was a look of blank faces. No one seemed to recognize Eliza, Rebecca or Sara. They stood awkwardly with gritty sand already in their sandals. Jake introduced the three of them and then introduced his friends. He touched Eliza's shoulder blade when he said her name.

They all sat down and took off as much clothing as they could without being indecent. It felt like a first date. Eliza felt certain that they would all have already stripped down to their underwear if they were with people they knew well. Jake took off his shirt and shoes. Eliza removed her shirt to reveal her tank-top and Sara did the same. She moved her hair over her shoulder so it wouldn't get too sandy. Rebecca put up her hair instead of taking anything off.

They didn't say much. The girls put on suntan lotion and offered it to Eliza, Rebecca and Sara. They declined.

Jake got up and waded into the water with his pants rolled up. He seemed to stand there, up to his knees for quite some time. Eliza watched him. She wanted him to come back out of the water, she wanted him to pay attention to her. The shore of the lake stretched far to her left and right. The patch of beach where they sat seemed to be a miniature peninsula, and in both directions, the shore curved around so Eliza couldn't see all the way to the end. They could go for a walk, Eliza thought, but she didn't think he would ask her. As he walked back out of the water, Eliza saw how the fabric stuck to his knees. When he came back to where the others were sitting, he said, "Want to go for a walk?" He held out his hand to Eliza.

Rebecca glared at her and shook her head back and forth once. Sara lay in the sand with her eyes closed; her blonde hair spread out and mingled with the sand. She looked asleep. Eliza smiled at Rebecca and stood up. She didn't know why Rebecca wanted to ruin her fun.

They walked along the edge of the lake. The murky waters lapped against the sands. It sounded like someone's hand slapping the water, only quieter. The incessant sound of cicadas drowned out other sounds. Eliza was glad there was some sound other than the sound of sand beneath her feet, a hollow crunch.

After a period of silence, Eliza asked, "Where's Laura Heart? Aren't you still together?" They walked slowly. Jake looked out over the water like he was contemplating something large and beautiful rather than just the view



of the receding shoreline, the murky, gray waters, and the road they drove in on.

“Who?”

“Your girlfriend?”

“We broke up.” Jake paused. “She’s going away for the summer. Family vacation. We don’t have to talk about that.”

Eliza was quiet. She didn’t know what they should talk about and she felt shy. “I’m glad you asked me to come on a walk.”

He cleared his throat. “What do you really do all day?”

“We sit by the pool.” Eliza sighed. “Or take the car out. Or drink.”

“That’s not boring.” Jake stepped closer to her.

“It’s just the same thing over and over. I don’t want to just keep doing it.” Eliza was walking so slowly she practically wasn’t walking. “What do you do?”

“Oh, I’m the boring one. I play golf,” Jake said. “I come here. He touched Eliza’s silky hair.

He got closer to her. They stopped. He held her hair still, rubbing it between his thumb and forefinger like he was testing the texture of fabric.

“You have beautiful hair.”

Eliza blushed. “Thank you.” She opened her mouth to say something but nothing came out.

“What do you want right now? Right this second?”

Eliza shrugged. “I don’t know.” She looked at him and then looked away. Without thinking too hard, she touched his shoulder and kissed him. His lips were soft and shaky.

“I want some excitement this summer.”

Jake took her hand. She didn’t seem to notice at first. “That felt good.”

“We could do more of it.”

Jake caught her eyes. His were dark brown and boring, like everyone else’s eyes. He kissed her again. He pushed his tongue past her teeth. That felt even better. When he stopped after a moment, he said, “This isn’t boring.”

“No.” She practically whispered.

They kept on walking. He held her hand loosely, his fingers limp and intertwined with hers. She liked the look of it and started to feel a little nervous – giddy, excited. She was afraid her hands would start to feel clammy when his felt dry and smooth.

After a little while, they stopped again and he kissed her again. Her hands felt clumsy, and she thought that if she did the wrong thing that maybe he wouldn’t want to be with her anymore. After a moment, she told herself that there was no point in feeling that way. She wasn’t supposed to be nervous. This was the kind of excitement that she wanted.

Jake lifted her tank top over her head, slowly peeling the fabric away from the sweat on her skin. She had never been in just a bra in front of a boy

before. It was almost the same as wearing a bathing suit top she told herself. His hands felt hot as he touched her stomach and hips and traced his fingers up her sides, which tickled, and she couldn't help when a kind of choked laughter escaped her mouth. He seemed amused.

“Let's lie down.” Jake was already pushing her to the sand. It felt sharp against her skin, and when Jake lay down on top of her, she couldn't breathe very well. She tried shifting beneath him, but the sand didn't offer any bounce, and he was too heavy.

“Why are you pushing on me?” Jake pulled back to look at her. His eyes looked watery and out of focus. He seemed annoyed.

“You're just heavy. I couldn't breathe.” Eliza smiled and started to kiss him again. Maybe if she kept kissing him, he wouldn't look annoyed anymore.

The belt buckle on his pants was hard, and the corners pressed unpleasantly into her stomach, leaving a pink impression. She had wondered about sex ever since they'd talked about it in health class, where they separated the boys and girls into different groups. Many of the girls asked questions and took detailed notes. Eliza had been too shy to ask questions, never having talked about anything but kissing boys. Many of the girls had already asked things she might have anyway. What if she were to have sex now? She wondered. She'd imagined it would happen in a bed, maybe while her parents were at work. It would be soft, and whoever she would be with would know what he was doing. It would happen naturally.

All Jake had to do was unbutton his pants. She wondered if she was supposed to be scared; she felt a little scared but mostly nervous. Jake touched her right hip.

“Do you like this?” Jake pulled back to look at her. She looked into his eyes and then became distracted by some strands of hair that were stuck to his forehead with sweat.

“Yes,” said Eliza. He ducked down to kiss her again.

She felt his hand tracing her side over her skirt and then felt him push the jean fabric up to her hips. His hand was on the edge of her underwear and felt as hot as an iron on her skin. She wondered if maybe she was just exaggerating to herself because of the situation, and she tried to calm down.

It was a slow process, the way he pulled her underwear down by one corner, over her thighs and knees and calves. He levered himself off of her so that he could get the underwear, plain pink cotton, over her feet. There was a cool breeze that rolled over her body like a wave of water. She listened to the lapping of the water on the shore, and she kept her eyes closed for when Jake lay his body back over hers.

After a moment, when she didn't hear his movement in the sand, the gentle crunching as he shifted his weight, she began to realize that he wasn't moving. He wasn't coming back on top of her. Eliza kept her eyes closed for she was afraid that if she opened them, he wouldn't be there. And yet, it seemed more frightening that he would be there. What was he doing? She

wondered. Maybe he ran off with her pink panties. Or maybe she had something wrong with her *down there*.

Slowly, she opened her eyes and saw Jake sitting in the sand, his arms resting easily on his knees. He held her underwear in a tight wad in his left hand.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He didn’t respond. She thought maybe he’d gotten scared.

“Don’t you want to... ?” Eliza sat up, shifting her skirt down so she wasn’t sitting directly in the sand. The sand that stuck to her back ticked as her skin dried and the sand started to trickle off of her.

Jake turned back to look at her. “Don’t I want to... what?”

Eliza looked away from him. “I thought you wanted to have sex with me.”

Jake began to laugh. He looked at her again and laughed even harder. She couldn’t see how this was funny, but Eliza thought that maybe she was missing something. So she tried to smile, then to force a few fake giggles.

“Me and you? Why would I want to have sex with you?” Jake looked at her steadily, suddenly not smiling. She had the urge to turn her eyes away and look down.

“I thought we were having fun.”

“You’re gross and you’re a sloppy kisser.” Jake looked her up and down. She could feel his eyes, and they moved slowly, so slowly. “I don’t sleep with girls who want to sleep with whoever comes along.”

“But this was just fun.” Eliza couldn’t quite understand. He didn’t want to have sex with her because she was throwing herself at him?

“You’re a whore if you sleep with just anybody.”

She wanted to tell him that she didn’t sleep with anybody; she hadn’t slept with anyone at all. And, what was more, she thought he liked her. But she couldn’t seem to make the words come out.

“You’re a whore.”

Eliza thought about the girls at school to whom that word applied. She wasn’t like them. They came to school high on marijuana, one even got pregnant, and there were rumors that another one had at the very end of the school year. They chewed gum loudly in class and doodled hearts and stars in their notebooks instead of notes. Eliza was not like them. But because of this, maybe people would start to call her a whore behind her back.

“You don’t even know me. How can you call me a whore if you don’t know me?”

“I know enough,” Jake said tauntingly.

He stood up then.

“Can I have my underwear back?”

Jake watched as she scrambled to her feet. He stuffed the wad of pink cotton into his pants pocket.

“What are you doing with those?” Eliza followed him as he started walking back in the direction they’d come from.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” She could see a small bulge in his pocket.

“Jake, this isn’t funny anymore. Please give me my underwear.”

Eliza ran her fingers through her hair; they caught on knots and sand.

“No.” He stopped and waited for her to catch up. “I’m not giving these back.”

“What are you going to do with them?”

“You’ll see.” Jake started walking again.

She wondered if he really had something in mind or if he was just saying it. He was probably just saying it, but she could see what he would do in her mind. When she wasn’t around, he would show all his friends, and they would laugh. Then they might really think she was a whore. Eliza had heard those girls at school slept with whomever called them up. He probably wouldn’t even wash her underwear. And, if he did, maybe his mom would find them in the clean clothes. Maybe that’s what he would want to happen. Then his mom would call her mom. Then her mom would have to have a talk with her about sex. And, it would seem like it was all her fault. Like she had seduced him. When really, it wasn’t that way at all.

And then there was Sara and Rebecca. They would immediately notice that she didn’t have an underwear line. They’d ask but she wouldn’t tell them. She couldn’t. She’d never hear the end of it. They would just say, “We told you so.”

She looked at Jake. He looked relaxed and unruffled by the whole thing. What would he do with her underwear? She imagined something about the internet. Maybe he'd take pictures of them and post some horrible story about how she took advantage of him and tried to make him have sex. Maybe he would even post her phone number with them. Then anyone could call her up and ask her to have sex with them.

They were almost back to where everyone else was.

Eliza whispered, "Can I have my underwear back *now*?"

Jake looked at her. "No." He took her hand as they approached the rest of them. She let him. She couldn't let anyone think that something bad had happened. When they got close enough, he dropped her hand. Sara and Rebecca stood by the trees. Sara stared at her for a moment, like she had something coming out of the top of her head. Eliza brushed her hand through her hair and looked away. She certainly didn't want to talk about it.

"I called Harry," Sara said when Eliza was close enough. "He's almost here."

Eliza nodded.

Jake said, "I could have taken you home."

Sara said, "We didn't want to be any trouble."

Jake nodded and leaned his face to Eliza's hair. He had his hand in his pocket to cover up the bulge of her underwear.

Rebecca said, "We should go." She twirled the end of her hair and looked impatient.



That was it, Eliza thought to herself. Jake walked back over to his friends, and the three of them, she and Sara and Rebecca, walked off into the trees. She would go back home and wait until she heard something from someone. Something about the girl Jake almost had sex with – the whore. That would ruin her completely. And it would ruin her friends if they continued to hang out with her. Whatever she would hear, she thought, didn't matter because she was going to sit at home for the rest of the summer. Whore? She thought again. She was better than that, she thought; but maybe not, maybe she was just what he said she was. She didn't like the sound of his voice when he'd said it; she didn't like how his words seemed to be true. Maybe that's why he was popular. When he spoke, people believed him. She didn't want to believe him, but she didn't feel like she had a choice.

Rebecca held the thorny vines back, and Eliza walked through without a scratch. She wouldn't have noticed anyway. Her whole body felt like it was trembling. Sara and Rebecca didn't seem to notice. Harry pulled the car up fast onto the gravel, and the wheels spun as he turned. Sara climbed up front, and Eliza scooted into the back seat after Rebecca.

“What were you doing down here?” Harry asked. He turned down the volume knob so the music wasn't so loud.

“We ran into this kid from school.” Sara put her feet up on the dashboard. Harry looked at her, like he was probing for more. “We really need to find real things to do. Is your mom's friend still looking for a babysitter?”

Harry shrugged.

Eliza watched the trees flash past. She wondered if this was what happened to those other girls at school, the *whores*. She wondered if they also felt like it wasn't real. And maybe that's what made them into whores, that they kept thinking that moments like those contained real feelings, that the other person, whatever boy it was this time, might really like her. That was it, she thought. She felt like she was no longer real.

"After today, I'll take anything," Rebecca said.

Jesus Fans

*Contemptor superum Pentheus*  
(*Metamorphoses III.514*)

*Pentheus despiser of the gods above*

At nearly quarter after eleven Penny and her mother hurried up the walk to the church. They were late. It was eleven-fifteen, and they were late. Penny walked quickly, the click-clack of her high-heels kept pace, and she glimpsed her mother's shadow a few paces behind her out of the corner of her eye. The brick walkway was uneven, and as they hurried, Penny felt like the thin high heels on her shoes might just snap. It was nothing like the city, where the sidewalks were evenly paved, and anyway, she knew where all the uneven spots were so she could avoid them.

Penny only visited her mother during the holidays, when all the children who had gone away to college, and stayed away, came back. She was surprised sometimes that she wasn't friends with more of them, but no one wanted to make connections at the place they'd been trying to get away from for so long. Penny had stopped coming back after she graduated from Emory four years earlier. She had gotten a job and a life away in Atlanta, and that hadn't been as hard as her mother made it out to be.

The Annual Fourth of July picnic was, by far, her mother's favorite service. The church was decorated in red, white and blue streamers, and American flags were hung up all over the brick building outside and inside. It was gaudy and overdone, Penny thought. It was more like they were trying to throw a party than feel closer to God. It was hard for her to forget the dinner

that her father always insisted on having afterwards. Her mother would cook for hours with Missy Howard, and Penny's father would sit with Missy's husband out in the kitchen. They'd remember the army days before the weddings, before college. They'd start with the whiskey, and by dessert they'd all be ready to sing Happy Birthday to America. It wasn't easy for her mother to be alone on days that held memories like that. Penny thought that even though she would rather be in Atlanta, she knew it was best that she had come home for the holiday.

Penny was moving too quickly to watch out for each brick, with pointed corners sticking up and free of mortar. Penny thought that the church should really repair that; there were too many old people that came to church on Sunday. She was sure it would be a liability or something.

"Mom, if you don't walk a little faster we won't get a seat." Penny paused impatiently, thinking of the packed church where they all sat sandwiched in elbow-to-elbow so that when they breathed, they breathed each other.

Penny's mother caught up until Penny started walking again.

"It's just the perfect day for this service." Her mother inhaled deeply, as though she were trying to catch her breath.

"You can enjoy it after the service," Penny said, although Penny couldn't think of a whole lot to enjoy. They would be outside, with flies and mosquitoes, and in a wide open field beside the church where the puny pine trees hardly passed for shade.

“Don’t worry so much.” Her mother patted Penny’s arm and proceeded.

Sometimes, when Penny visited her mother, she felt like their roles were reversed. Just the day before, her first day home, they were in the supermarket, and Penny had to practically push her mother through every aisle, asking her questions about what she was planning on making, what she needed to get. In Atlanta, Penny didn’t cook for herself, but usually picked things up on the way home, sandwiches wrapped in white paper or pre-made salads in plastic containers from the deli on the corner. She never made it home before eight, when the sun was close to going down, and there was no point in cooking for herself or for her boyfriend, Rodney, who never made it home for dinner either. At the supermarket with her mother, they had run into her mother’s friends on every aisle, and there was always something to talk about.

In the checkout line, the clerk had smiled at her mother. “You must be happy to have your little girl back home.”

“She isn’t so little any more, is she, Judy?” Penny’s mother had laughed, and they both looked at Penny with their heads cocked to one side, considering how she had changed, and Penny thought, probably mourning the loss of her great potential as someone’s wife and then mother. Penny had thought sometimes that maybe she’d want kids one day. Women on the career track hardly had time to think of those things.

The clerk had looked at Penny. “Be good to your mother, Miss Penny.”

Penny had nodded and smiled. She had felt like she was being scolded, and like most times when people spoke to her like she was five years old again, she felt like she deserved it for some reason. It was like they had undermined her intelligence.

When they finally stood before the gigantic mahogany doors, which, Penny knew, were saved from the original building that was built some time before the Civil War and then burned down sometime before World War Two. Penny leaned close to the door.

“Shouldn’t we wait until a hymn or something? We can’t just walk right in.”

Her mother shook her head. “Oh, it’s alright. Latecomers are always welcome.”

Penny’s mother’s hand was already pulling the door open. The hinges creaked like tired muscles, and her mother hadn’t stopped talking yet.

Of course, everyone turned around. Everyone in the whole church turned around and glanced, trying not to look like they were looking: Mrs. Anderson, Penny’s piano teacher in middle school, with glasses that might as well have been magnifying glasses, and the Dawson twins, peering over the crowd with beady and inquisitive eyes. Penny even noticed the Reverend’s wife, leaning around the arm rest of the front pew with a scowl on her face. Penny and her mother stood there at the end of the aisle and waited for the

doors to shut, almost embarrassed. Even the preacher stopped preaching. He said, “Welcome, welcome. Please take a seat anywhere. Join us.”

Penny slid into the pew closest to her, which did not have a back to it but sat close enough to the wall that they leaned their backs against the solid white. She took a deep breath and thought better late than never.

The first thing that hit her was the heat. The second thing was that the service had only just started. The last strands of the processional hymn had just dissolved into the stagnant air. People shifted and fanned themselves with their orders of service. The Reverend Franklin Pierce ascended the two steps to the pulpit, unfolded the papers with the sermon written out in his own short hand, and then stared dramatically out into the congregation.

Penny wasn't sure what he was waiting for. She fanned her face violently with the order of service and thought that he might be trying to conjure up some presence of God before them. Penny was getting impatient. She wondered how it was that every year she found herself in church for the Fourth of July service. Her mother never missed one. Never got sick on Sundays, and made up for Penny's own lack of attendance and her father's, who had been dead for nearly ten years. Penny always thought it would be nice to get her mother out of town, take her to Atlanta and let her enjoy herself. Her mother would never stand for it.

Penny did not believe in God. She believed in eating out every night after she left work four hours later than everyone else and her eyes were blurry from reading case after case, her mind like jello so that she sometimes

had a hard time ordering at the deli. She'd forget to say "to-go" or to ask for no tomatoes but extra Swiss. She believed in getting her nails manicured on those Sundays when she woke up early enough to possibly make it to church. Simple things gave her lots of pleasure. And, so did holding a pen in her hand, making notes on a legal brief about some sad person who would be sent to his judgement day before he was really ready.

"Our reading today is from the Book of John, chapter eight, thirty-one through thirty-eight." The Reverend cleared his throat and proceeded with his dramatic reading. His voice got loud near the middle, like thunder shaking the window panes and then trailed off towards the end so that the last part, "you should do what you have heard from the Father," sounded like a menacing whisper.

There was a pause after which he said, "Now then," in his normal voice, and paused again. Reverend Pierce squinted seriously at some spot on the back wall, trying to impart the grave importance of his words, whatever they would be when he finally said them, to the whole congregation. Most everyone stopped fanning their faces and held their breaths.

"I know y'all just want to get to eating that pig." There was a chorus of "mmhmms" and a few "A-mens." The smell of the twenty-six hour roasted pig began to seep through the cracks in the walls of the church as though it was an answer to his prayer.

"But we have got to remember the things that bring us here today. The Fourth of July is this Tuesday. We are celebrating how our country became



what it is today, through Jesus Christ. God created our great country and watches over it every moment of every day and every night.”

The crowd sat and listened as though they had never heard or thought anything like it before. Penny yawned. Reverend Pierce stepped down from the pulpit. He walked back and forth slowly from the choir loft to the side door, before the two columns of pews. He went on and on. “God is great. God set us free from the bondage of slavery.” Penny wondered if any Fourth of July services were ever different.

A couple kids toward the front squealed, and their parent shushed them loudly. Penny thought, that’s what Sunday school is for.

“Think of the “Star-Spangled Banner” today. Think of the words. They’re about freedom! Jesus said, ‘so if the son makes you free, you will be free indeed.’ Rockets and fire crackers all the way up in the heavens mark the celebration of freedom. God wants us to remember this freedom he gave us. Jesus said, ‘you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ God gave us the freedom to be His followers. Follow God and love God and you will all be set free. If you don’t fear God, if you don’t put all your trust in God above, your whole world, your whole life, as you know it will be struck meaningless.”

Penny wondered why they always had to scare her into thinking that she was bound for Hell. She didn’t even believe in Hell.

She watched the Reverend closely. He looked worse than she’d ever seen him. Sweat glistened all over his fat face, which was pink from shouting

his praises, and his neck bulged over the buttoned collar of his shirt. He looked like he was panting. And then he nodded abruptly, as if it served as a kind of punctuation, and the pianist, Mrs. Carson, who had been at Lighthouse Baptist even before the new church had been built, began to play the hymn. They all stood and sang in loud, scratchy voices, out of tune. A few old choir members sang loudly over the congregation, but it sounded too high-pitched and screechy.

After the hymn, they all bowed their heads in prayer. “Let’s all take a moment of silence and meditation.” The Reverend folded his hands over his pot-belly. Penny watched everyone else around her with their chins practically resting on their chests. The Reverend led everyone in the Lord’s Prayer and their voices raised up together, loud and clear. Penny kept her mouth shut.

After the benediction, the Reverend said, “Everyone join me outside for the Annual Fourth of July Picnic.” He walked down the aisle in between the pews and stopped to shake hands and offer welcomes to those unfamiliar faces that seemed to have some resemblance to the bouncy, impatient children that once sprinkled the congregation. When he got to Penny, he took her hand and said, “We are glad to see you here this morning. Welcome home.”

She felt like this should make her feel accepted, or at peace, or something. As the Reverend squeezed her hand, Penny squeezed back, and she thought he looked surprised.

The doors creaked open, and the hymn came to an end. For the moment, everyone sat there, in silence, and let the hot air from outside blow in, which then seemed almost cool in comparison to the stifling air inside the sanctuary. There was an eerie quiet. They heard the Reverend's dress shoes clicking away down the brick walkway. Penny held her breath until someone stood up slowly, and then everyone was up, crowding the entrance way and talking loudly. They laughed and shouted and Penny thought about how she was always confused by this part of church. Everyone jumped up with the fear of God in them and seemed to feel like they ruled the world, when wasn't the opposite supposed to happen? Weren't you supposed to be humbled?

Penny's mother took Penny's elbow, and they filed down the concrete stairs one step at a time until finally they were back on the walkway. Penny's blouse was sticking to her spine, and her mother's face was flushed with sweat beading around her hat rim and underneath her eyes where a little blob of mascara was smeared.

A table stood outside to the right of the walkway piled with plates and cups and baskets of forks, spoons and knives, ketchup and mustard and bar-b-que sauce. People milled around. As they talked, they inched closer to the plates.

Penny stood slightly to the right of her mother, slightly behind her. That was how young people stood in the presence of their elders. If Penny's father were alive, her mother would have stood slightly behind him on one side with Penny on the other. They would have flanked him as if they were

ready to defend their family name. Or maybe like body guards. Penny's mother carried on conversations with a few church ladies. They leaned very close to one another and whispered. Sometimes they used dramatic hand motions, like a hand to their throats or fingers over their mouths. Penny looked bored, staring at the pile of plates. No one wanted to be the first in line.

After a while, her mother's friend looked at Penny, and she smiled as if they hadn't been discussing anything so serious. Her mother was speaking with an old high-school friend of hers, Margaret Chambers. They had grown up together and gotten married in the same year, and even started families at the same time. Margaret's daughter, who was Penny's age, was away visiting her husband's family over in Charleston for the Fourth.

Margaret didn't sound any different from any of her mother's friends, and Penny stood there like she was in grade school again, with her hands clasped together in front of her.

"Well, Penny, what are you doing with yourself these days? All the way up in Atlanta?"

"I'm working at a law firm."

"Oh, mmhmmm. Like Barryman and Barryman?" Which was a firm advertised on TV a lot. The kind that will help you declare bankruptcy, or get you money for car accident injuries for which you are at fault, and things like that. "You must make a lovely secretary!" She touched Penny's arm.

“Actually, I’m interning to become a lawyer.” Penny crossed her arms over her chest.

“Oh, Jeannie!” She said. “You’ve got yourself one smart girl!”

Penny inspected Margaret’s blue eyes and peroxide-blond hair and tried hard not to tell her that she could see her dark brown roots growing back in.

Margaret continued, “You must be so proud. If only I could get Louisa to do anything half so smart.” Penny’s mother gave Margaret a pat on the shoulder, which made Penny think that this was probably what they were talking about earlier with all the dramatic hand movements to the throat and hoarse whispers which Penny had given up trying to decipher.

Laurie Jane, another of her mother’s friends, came over then and it started all over again. Penny waited patiently, picking at her manicured fingernails. Margaret used the same hand motions when she told the story over again to Laurie Jane, and Penny’s mother nodded vehemently. When the story was done and Laurie Jane had offered her advice and sympathy, they all turned to Penny once again.

Her mother said, “You remember Laurie Jane, Penny. She’s in our new women’s group here.”

Penny smiled and nodded. Her mother always seemed to think Penny wouldn’t remember who people were back home.

“You’ve gotten all grown up,” Laurie Jane kissed her cheek.

“She sure has!” Her mother laughed in a high-pitched nervous burst.

“Do you have a ladies group at the church you attend up there in Atlanta?” Laurie Jane folded her hands over her middle and looked inquisitive and serious.

Penny never knew anything to say other than the truth. “I don’t go to church.”

“Don’t go? They’ve got them up there – right?” Laurie Jane glanced at Penny’s mother and tried to laugh. “It’s been a while since I’ve been to Atlanta, but last time I checked, they had some churches.”

Penny’s mother smiled. “She goes to the one right at the end of the block.”

There was a simple white church that stood at the end of the block where she lived. It seemed unimposing and out of place amongst the tall buildings and honking cars. Sometimes, she thought, if she had to go, that one wouldn’t be so bad. It was quiet.

Penny sighed. “There just aren’t enough days in a week.”

Laurie Jane looked more baffled than anything else. “There are always enough days in the week. You do believe in God? I know your mother has raised you right.”

They stood for a moment without speaking. Penny’s mother took her arm, as though she was willing Penny to speak.

Laurie Jane looked up into the tree branches, squinting. She stood thoughtfully like that for some time.

Penny's mother opened her mouth and looked from Laurie Jane to Penny. It was customary, Penny knew, for parents to scold their children, even if they were twenty-five and living on their own with jobs of their own. Penny knew that her mother was no exception to the rule. She closed her mouth and opened it again. Penny shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She waited, exasperated.

So this was it, she thought to herself. Everything she had worked for, everything that wasn't this town. The only sounds that Penny could focus on were the birds fluttering and squawking in the oak tree overhead. Sunlight came down through the heavy branches, and Penny felt sweat around her middle where her skirt pinched tight at her waist.

The whole group of people quieted down. Penny looked around, certain that they were all aware of the blasphemous thing she had said. They were all going to turn and look at her, stare her down until she took it back or denied that she had ever said it. After a moment, the Reverend cleared his throat. Penny was sure he was going to get ready to curse her to Hell. She would fall over dead right then, and her soul would be cast to the deepest, darkest cave of Hell.

“Friends. God's children. I would like to offer up a prayer to the Good Lord before we take of this pig and eat.”

Penny felt like she could breathe again and wondered, embarrassed, why she would even think things like that.

Everyone who was milling around the grassy field stopped and bowed their heads. Penny looked around and watched parents grab their children by the arms, holding them still, silencing them with a finger to their lips. The kids squirmed. Penny never understood what parents thought they were accomplishing by bringing little kids to an hour-long church service through which they had to sit silently. They were always embarrassed when their kids squirmed and whined anyway.

The Reverend continued. “Dear Lord. We just want to thank you for this pig which we are about to take into our bodies, provided directly by you for us. Please, Lord, bless this food which we are about to receive, and bless us so that we can go into this week with your power in our hearts and minds.” The Reverend paused dramatically, and the whole group held their breath. And then, he said, “A-men. Let’s eat.”

Everyone applauded.

Penny didn’t move because her mother didn’t move, and Laurie Jane didn’t move and Margaret didn’t move. They stood there with their heads bowed. All that was missing, Penny thought, was hand holding and some swaying with raised hands.

Finally, Penny’s mother spoke quietly. “Dear Lord.” She paused and they waited, looking down at the ground, the usual stance for prayers. “Dear Lord,” her mother said again.

Penny shook her head. “Let’s eat, shall we?”



They didn't move, and when they did, it was all at once. They reached out their hands and touched her. They might as well have started chanting over her head. Penny started a little when all the hands touched her shoulders at the same time.

“You have to feel the Lord, Penny. Feel the Lord.” Laurie Jane closed her eyes and moved her head from side to side like she had the powers of the Lord pulsing through her body right then.

“I don't believe in God.” Penny said it as though she had to remind herself.

Penny's mother pinched her arm.

Penny took a deep breath and waited.

When they finally lifted their hands from Penny's body, they took in deep breaths and said, as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened at all, “We better get some before it's all gone.”

Laurie Jane and Margaret looked at each other. Penny's mother led the group towards the stand with the plates and forks and knives. She grabbed utensils and squirted ketchup, mustard and bar-b-que sauce on her empty plate. Penny filed in behind them, followed by the rest of the congregation. They all stood too close together, and they smelled like sweat and roasted pork and gardenias. What was it about Southerners and their food? She wondered to herself. What an odd ritual. She grabbed her own plate and utensils and fanned herself with her red plastic plate. The napkins were white,

the utensils were all blue and the plates were red plastic. Original, she thought.

Penny listened to Laurie Jane. “You didn’t say your daughter was an atheist, Jeannie. You never mentioned that.”

Penny’s mother glanced back at Penny. “Well, now, I don’t think she’s quite atheist.”

Penny raised an eyebrow. She wondered if she ever really did believe in all this. She remembered holding on to her mother’s hand, walking up the gravel path before it was paved with brick. She would drag her feet, and the gravel would kick up against the skin on her calves and feel like a nip. Her mother’s steps had always been small, but Penny guessed that once, when she was small, it seemed like her mother moved very fast. In fact, maybe her mother had dragged her to church before instead of the other way around.

The line moved slowly, people turning around to talk to one another. Behind her, Mrs. Johnson talked to Mrs. Fulton about the new youth leader in the Sunday school.

“Do you know if she’s married?”

“I don’t know if she’s married or not.” Mrs. Johnson was saying. Mrs. Fulton’s glasses were so heavy and her nose so coated in sweat, that the frames slid down a little and she squinted in the light.

Penny shook her head. She looked at her watch. She was staying another night, but she tried to think of ways that she could sneak out tonight.

She couldn't bear the thought of having all her mother's friends come over to the house for dessert later that evening.

Penny looked ahead at her mother and her mother's friends. The three of them had finally reached the pig. Penny watched their hands work efficiently on the pig's skin, pulling bits of meat right off the bone, and Penny felt disgusted. She could see their mouths still moving. But the crowd became too loud to hear them. Penny's turn came to pull meat and she fell in line behind her mother and her mother's friends. They walked slowly to a spot beneath a pine tree right beside the church. There was little shade, even beneath the tree, for the pine was so tall and thin and the branches so lanky and scattered, that it hardly did any good.

The group of them sat in silence until Laurie Jane raised up her hand. They all looked at her and waited in silence, in dramatic anticipation. "I want to pray to the Lord for this lost soul among us."

The other two immediately bowed their heads. Penny thought, what is she doing praying in the middle of the meal. She took another bite of pork. Her mother batted at Penny's hand as she stuck the meat in her mouth.

"Lord, just keep this child in your thoughts, and tell Jesus not to let her wander far. God put yourself inside of her and let her feel your power and goodness. Don't let her despair in your absence. A-men."

Penny's mother had her hand on Penny's wrist still, and Penny was still holding the piece of meat that her mother wouldn't let her eat moments before. Penny's mother whispered, "Lord. Help us." She couldn't stand the

thought of them praying for her like that, like she was some nut-case, some lost soul going down to the devil any day now. Maybe that was what they meant by having the fear of God in you. You feared going to the Devil, so you believed in God, even if you didn't. Penny was speechless, and they all stared at her like she was a foreign object, like they were waiting for the word of God Himself to come out of her mouth. She thought, no man's words were going to come out of her mouth, and besides, her mouth was full anyway.

“I raised you up good.” Penny's mother looked worried. “Even without your daddy. I raised you good.”

Penny took another bite of pork. She chewed hard until her jaw hurt and until she had to take a sip of her sweet tea.

Penny's mother spoke just a little too loud, and it took Penny a moment to realize that the families that sat within earshot could hear every word. They were quiet. Penny chewed more slowly and swallowed with a gulp. The Reverend came over and placed his heavy hand on her hair. Penny waited, waited until she thought she might be able to feel the Good Lord pulsing through her or maybe hear Him say something, just so she could say it. Then she wouldn't have to say anything more, and they would all leave her alone.

Penny listened around her. There was chatter. Everyone was talking, and she couldn't make out one thing from the next. It was just normal. It all sounded like chatter in a movie, background noise. It took her some time to realize what she did hear in her mind was “Dear Lord,” over and over again.

She wondered if it was a prayer. After some more time, there was nothing else. She listened to birds chirping in the trees. There was no breeze to rustle the limbs of the pine trees or send pinecones down on their heads. And after a while, all the voices seemed to blend into the air, and Penny sat dazed, listening to what sounded like a mellow buzzing in her ears.

*Iam se damnantem, iam se peccasse fatentem*  
(*Metamorphoses III.718*)

*now he blames himself, now he confesses his mistake*

A Long Way Down

*At Clytie, quamvis amor excusare dolorem  
Indiciumque dolor poterat, non amplius auctor  
Lucis adit Venerisque modum sibi fecit in illa.  
(Metamorphoses IV 256-258)*

*But Clytie, although love might justify her jealousy  
And jealousy for her informing provide some excuse,  
Is no longer sought by the Sun, and  
For him marked the end of Passion over her.*

She felt like she was getting too old for this. She wasn't old, she knew, and she wasn't really out of shape, but it sure felt like it. Amelia wasn't fat, but she was soft in the places where she should have muscle. As they climbed higher, the air seemed slight and she breathed heavily. She tried to remind herself that whatever doesn't kill you, makes you stronger. Amelia didn't feel strong. She felt like stopping in the middle of the trail and sitting down. They could have the picnic there for all she cared. It would be more enjoyable, she imagined, satisfying even, to not let him have what he wanted. She did not look at the scenery or the trail before her, the beautiful rolling mountains that were in the distance green-blue so that they looked like waves on an ocean. Instead, Amelia watched the path, uneven rocks, slippery leaves, tangled branches, poison ivy. So far up, the air was cool, but Amelia had sweat crawling down her spine and her temple and in between her small breasts. The other woman, Louisa Phillips, probably had larger breasts, maybe implants, Amelia thought. Maybe they sat like two, round grapefruits in her bra. Amelia hadn't been able to stop thinking about them since she'd heard Louisa's own voice on the phone a week ago. Her voice was soft, quiet,

and languid and sounded the way Amelia imagined those women who men called on the sex hot-lines sounded. Maybe that's how Anderson had found her in the first place. She was beginning to lose sleep over it and how he'd found Louisa Phillips. Did he see her every time he went to Atlanta? Did he have sex with her every night when he was with her? More than once?

Anderson walked a few yards in front of her. She wondered how he had gotten in such good shape. All those trips to Atlanta, the gym membership there, instead of a family plan back at home. For her, it was all the same. Day in and day out, her schedule felt no different, and somehow there was never any extra room for the gym. She wouldn't like it anyway. All the extra sweating, and feeling out of breath made her feel old, which made her feel panic-y. There was not reason for that. She drove their children, Lizzy and Holton, to and from school and various practices, she baked pies, and she visited the new members of the church. She had a prayer group with women every morning. Sometimes she didn't understand what they prayed for, all the dying people in Israel, underprivileged people in India, the starving in Africa. Sometimes while everyone else prayed for all those people who only God could help, she prayed for practical things: for God to give Lizzy swift feet in the next track meet; that she find the strength in herself to resist eating whenever she felt bored. Sometimes she didn't even pray. She would sit in the metal folding chair under the fluorescent lights of the sanctuary and listen to each woman offer up some tearful prayer. She never got teary eyed. Sometimes, she wondered what she was doing there.

She could never come up with reasons not to go, and so she went. It was something.

“It’s not much further!” Anderson stopped and turned to look at her. She was practically heaving. What made him think that she would enjoy this? A bramble scraped against her skin.

“Just a little longer.” Anderson panted in encouragement. He waited for her and took her hand, but they walked unevenly. The trail wasn’t quite wide enough for the two of them at once. She couldn’t match his pace, and she almost tripped on a root. He tried to catch her and then almost tripped himself. She batted his arm away. She felt bulky compared to Anderson. Round, uncoordinated. She didn’t like feeling as though he was aware of that.

“I thought we were going to relax this weekend.” Her lungs felt tight after almost falling, and she could hear her heart thumping. “The pool wasn’t that busy. We should have just stayed there.”

“This is relaxing; it’s just you and me up here. You can sit in the sun at the top.”

She had found out in the worst way. Amelia had walked in from the garden one morning with the paper under her arm and a bouquet of flowers in her hand. She had let the paper flap open on the counter, freed from its rubber-band constriction, and she had started to push the flowers into a vase, their stems still wet with dew, when the phone rang.

Amelia had answered like she normally did. She had asked, “Hello?”



The person had taken a breath, as though she might hang up. Amelia hadn't been sure how it was she had known it was a woman before she spoke, but she had sensed it. Her voice was young, uncertain, and at the same time soft, like syrup. "Is this Amelia?"

"Yes." Amelia thought she had heard what sounded like a porcelain cup being placed on a ceramic counter.

"My name is Louisa Phillips." Her voice had become languid, suddenly more confident. "I'm having an affair with your husband." She had seemed to hesitate for a moment after she spoke, and then she hung up. Just like that. Like she was punctuating a sentence.

Amelia had taken the phone away from her ear and stared at the receiver, as though it might tell her something, give her a sign of some kind. There was nothing. Her daughter, Lizzy, at sleepovers, talked to her friends about using \* 69 to dial back the number that had just called, usually pranksters, and they would call back and forth like that. Like a high-schooler, Amelia had thought of trying it. Who would play such a nasty prank? It was just plain rude.

With the faint sound of the busy signal pulsing out of beat with the birds chirping, Amelia had hung up and then dialed her sister Rose's number. She had said, "Rosie. I just got the strangest call." She had told her sister what happened. "Do you think he's really having an affair?" Even as she had said it, there was a slight churning feeling in her stomach that had made her realize it was the truth.

Rose had slurped her coffee into the phone. “Has he been acting any different lately?”

“He’s been in Atlanta more often since we started refinishing the floors. That was almost four months ago now.”

They had the floor company coming in every day for two weeks to refinish the floors, and all the furniture had been out of place. Everything had gotten moved from one room to another until all the rooms were done, and the strong men in overalls, with tobacco stuck between their bottom lips and teeth, had moved the chairs and couches back to their original rooms.

Anderson had gone away for all that. He spent most of the week in Atlanta at his law office where he helped very rich Atlanta women with their divorces and made sure that they got even richer. He had a small apartment there. It had never occurred to Amelia that he would have an affair. But she supposed that’s what happens when you forget to think about your marriage – when you don’t suppose you have any reason to think about it.

It was also around the time that Amelia had gotten that call from Lizzy’s guidance counselor concerned about Lizzy’s eating habits, mostly that she wasn’t. Amelia hadn’t been able to imagine where that had come from. But then, neither Lizzy nor Holton usually came home for dinner anyway.

“What should I do, Rose? I can’t just ask him that.”

She had heard Rose rustle the paper open. “Mix yourself a drink and take a long bath.”

The house had been quiet. She had been able to hear the almost silent buzz of electricity and some cars going by on the street in front of the house. At least when the kids were home, she could hear their movements in their rooms, their voices on the telephone. Breakfast had still been sitting in the sink. Cheerios were thick and bloated, still floating in milk.

Amelia had wished she could think of something better to do. She had taken the vase of flowers and the newspaper into the bedroom. She had set the flowers on the dresser and dropped the paper onto the bed, and then she had sat down on the mattress and waited, holding the phone in her lap. Anderson had meetings all day at the office. From early in the morning until late in the evening, he smiled and told all those women that everything would be alright. They'd have it all. He was never available to talk to her during work hours. When Amelia finally convinced the receptionist to page him, he would pick up politely enough. And then, she could just hear his voice, "We'll have to talk about this later. I'm very busy right now." And then, in the evenings, he'd go back to his apartment where, Amelia imagined, Louisa Phillips had made spaghetti for them both.

The sun filtered through the branches in patches. Amelia pulled her blonde hair back off her neck and stopped just before another rock on the trail to catch her breath. Of course, it was all supposed to be okay now. They had talked about it, and he had planned the weekend get-away for the two of them: dinner reservations, tickets to a show, a cabin in the mountains, hiking. The only thing Amelia wondered was, why hiking? She waited until she fully

caught her breath to admire the path before her. Anderson hadn't stopped this time. He was heavy footed, and Amelia listened to his feet crunching leaves and twigs. She would much prefer sunshine to the shady, cool woods. He knew this and had told her, "There will be sun at the top," like he was comforting an impatient child.

He called down to her, "Are you making it?"

She looked up at him and smiled, attempting to look carefree. And anyway, how was she supposed to make it? It felt like it would take her hours longer than Anderson. He wasn't really too far in front of her, but it seemed that if he wanted to go faster, he would. She would have enjoyed sitting in the sun by the pool. She wouldn't have to think about anything extra. He should have just let her do that. The pool was so close to the cabin.

"Are we any closer?"

"If you don't keep stopping, we'll be there soon." He started up again.

"I haven't stopped that much."

"You're stopped now."

She picked up her feet one at a time over the rock in the middle of the path. Her thighs were beginning to burn. She glanced up long enough to see that he was hardly in her line of vision anymore. His feet seemed to be moving impossibly fast.

"Why did you decide we should hike?" She had her hands on her hips.

"I was fine staying at the cabin."

“It’s a beautiful day. It would be a shame to stay inside.” His voice sounded strained.

“We could have sat by the pool. That would have been a nice picnic. We haven’t hiked in ages. I don’t even want to count how many years it’s been since college. What made you pick hiking?”

“I was trying to spend some time with you. Jesus.” He took a breath. “I wanted to find things for us to do together.”

It felt as if this was supposed to be something symbolic of their marriage: if they could just make it to the top of the mountain, then their marriage would be successful. She couldn’t breathe. Were they going to be okay? She just wanted to know. Maybe this was his attempt at starting over, although she knew she hadn’t fully decided whether she wanted to start over or not. She probably wouldn’t believe him if he suggested it. She tried to catch her breath.

Maybe if they had kept hiking, stayed interested in getting out every once in a while, getting lost in a quiet place all by themselves. Maybe if that could have given them a sense of purpose or togetherness, everything would be better. She felt like it was too late to think of all this. If he hadn’t been sleeping with Louisa Phillips, maybe she would say better late than never.

A few days a week, Amelia helped the welcome committee at the church. She baked pies and took them, warm, to the new members of the church, many of whom were grown-up children back to take care of aging parents. It was more like welcoming home.

After she had read the paper and talked to Rose, she had made a pie and taken it that afternoon to Mary Sue Wallace's house. Mary Sue had directed the choir for nearly thirty-four years and had to stop because of her arthritis. She couldn't play the organ anymore. Her daughter, Helen, had come home to help her out, in the beginning, with some doctor appointments.

Amelia had stood on the front stoop holding the pie.

Helen had opened the door and laughed when Amelia handed her the pie. "I came home so often, I practically lived here even when I didn't anymore."

"Well, the church does this for everyone. You were at the top of the list."

Helen had invited her in. Mary Sue had been sitting in a recliner doing crossword puzzles. Helen had insisted that Amelia sit on one end of the couch and that she sit down on the other. Mary Sue had reluctantly folded the paper, she had looked annoyed at having another unannounced visitor.

"We're all so glad to have you back," Amelia had launched into her speech. "Here's a small token that explains the importance of the church. It has the Reverend's name and number on it." She had handed Helen a book mark with a light-blue tassel hanging from it. "There's a ladies' prayer group that meets in the sanctuary at nine o'clock every morning."

Helen had thanked her and glanced at the bookmark, the same one that she had probably seen around many times before. Bookmarks were always handed out at most church events. "What have you been doing with yourself

these days? I saw Holton the other day playing football. He's grown up! I don't even know how I recognized him!"

Amelia had laughed and started to respond.

"And your husband..." Helen had shaken her head. "How is he? I've heard he's been mostly in Atlanta."

Amelia's words had seemed to get caught in her throat.

"Oh, divorces are in season!" Amelia had tried to make a cough sound like a laugh.

"I always said he was gone too much." Mary Sue's voice was clear and sing-songy.

It was worse than she had thought. If they had made up this much without knowing the truth, as she did, that her husband had been sleeping with another woman, she couldn't imagine what they would do with what had actually happened. And then she had thought, with a dry taste in her mouth, that maybe they had already known. And that they had pitied her right then, wasn't it terrible that she'd only just found out.

Amelia had nodded. "That's what I always said." It had felt like she was whispering and like her voice was shaking. "I hope you enjoy the pie, and welcome back." Amelia had stood up and left the house.

Amelia could hardly catch her breath, but she knew that if she kept going, like Anderson said, the hike would be over sooner. When she finally got to where Anderson stopped to wait for her, he handed her his walking stick and began again.

“Maybe you should have considered who you were spending the weekend with. I’m not Louisa Phillips.” Amelia leaned on the walking stick.

“Haven’t you missed this? Just you and me, alone.” Anderson took a deep breath, taking it all in.

She stared at him but couldn’t quite figure it out. They’d hiked a little in college. Nothing regular. He had enjoyed it and she probably had too, but Amelia couldn’t think of that right then. When did Anderson find the time to keep that up all these nearly twenty years? She had figured he was too busy for anything but his office work, which he did diligently. That’s what he was always doing. The sky above his head was clear and looked like water in a pool.

She thought that if things had been different, maybe she would want him then. He looked good then, with the blue sky behind him.

The last time they had had sex was two months ago. Anderson had reached over and flipped on the lamp on the bedside table. He had already been on top of her, and had said, “Take off your clothes.”

She had obeyed, too tired to think of what it meant then. She had taken her shirt off still lying down and then had slid her underwear off and had laid naked under him. She had tried to turn the light back off, but he wouldn’t let her.

Then he had said, “You get on top.”

She was tired and had said, “Not tonight. Let’s just do this like we normally do.”



“No. I want you on top.” His voice had been thick and soft. It had been a while since he had sounded like that. It had been a while since he’d said he wanted her.

She had done it, and the next morning Anderson had stayed home and told her that he loved her. It had been a while since he’d said that too. She remembered she thought he had been vulgar – the way he had touched her hips and breasts with his hands, holding onto them, squeezing. They hadn’t had sex very much since then. And, she wondered then if that was how he’d done it with Louisa Phillips. What if she could get used to doing it that way? Spice it up a little. She thought her life might need a little something to wake her up.

Amelia could finally see a grassy clearing. There were small boulders covered with moss and patches of grass interspersed with mud and clay. Everything was damp.

Anderson looked around. He set the cooler down and Amelia sat on a rock.

Maybe Louisa would know what to do if they wanted to picnic and the ground was wet and he hadn’t thought to bring a blanket. Of course she would.

“We’ve been married almost twenty years.” Anderson got out a bottle of wine and was unscrewing the cork. It popped.

He handed her the bottle and felt around in the cooler for plastic wine glasses. It seemed like he was planning to propose; it seemed like they were

twenty-two again. This would have been a nice place to propose all that time ago. She didn't feel like waiting for him to fill a glass. She took a gulp. The bottle made a sound like a fish, glug-glug, as she turned it upside down.

“What is that supposed to mean anymore? Now that you've been sleeping with Louisa Phillips. Does it mean anything?”

“Why are you being difficult?” He laid his sweatshirt on the ground.

“What is there for me to be difficult about? What does it matter if we've been married for twenty years or not since you had an affair with someone else?”

There was a breeze. “Look, I brought you your favorite, chicken salad.”

She ignored the box that he handed to her and sat down on his sweatshirt.

“Amelia. Please.”

The dewy damp of the grass soaked through the thin fabric, and she felt the wetness soaking through her shorts. “It's all wet here.”

“The sun doesn't hit this spot until later in the afternoon.” He looked quite pleased with himself, and if only she wasn't so difficult, Amelia thought, it would be the perfect day. He had thought through all of this; he had probably been there before, but not with Amelia.

“I guess this is something *she* would enjoy.” It seemed to be a hard fact in her mind. She could see the difference between herself and Louisa

Phillips now, plain as day in her mind. “Are you thinking about her right now?”

“I don’t want to talk about Louisa anymore.” He took the bottle of wine from her and poured some into the plastic glass. The plastic stem connected to a flimsy bottom that kept falling off when he moved the glass to his lips. After a few sips, he gave up and left the bottom part off.

“You haven’t told me anything.” Her ribs felt tight and her voice was shaking like she might cry. She hated the sound of it; it sounded whiney. “You haven’t even told me for sure one way or the other if you’ve done it or not. You haven’t told me why. You haven’t told me how long it’s been going on. You haven’t told me that it’s not going to happen again.”

He looked away from her, squinting into the distant trees. “I don’t want to let that one thing ruin this.” It sounded like he was talking to a client rather than to his own wife, his own wife whom he rarely shared a bed with anymore. It was formal. Controlled. “Now, I said I won’t do it again.”

Amelia took the bottle of wine. “Look at me and say that.”

He didn’t look at her. Her fingers began to tingle. When she looked down, her hand was white. She didn’t realize how tightly she was holding the neck of the wine bottle. It sounded to her like he thought everything would be ok again if he just apologized and said what she wanted to hear. Part of her wished that was how it worked.

“Why don’t we just try to enjoy this? Huh?” When he did look at her, he was smiling. Amelia wanted to believe him, wanted to feel something in

that smile, something good. It had been a long time since he had smiled at her like that. Or, maybe he always had and she never noticed it anymore. He only slept at home for half the week. The other half he was away in Atlanta, and she was lucky if he called twice. Sometimes she felt like she didn't really see things even when she looked right at them.

“I just don't see how anyone can enjoy sitting here knowing that their marriage is going to end any minute. Do you wish you were with her right now? Do you wish it was her sitting here with a picnic blanket instead of me?”

“Do you know how expensive it is to get a divorce?” He sighed. His glass was empty and he lay it on its side, the base sat somewhere in the grass. From the basket, he pulled out two boxes with sandwiches. He handed one to her and kept one in his lap. There was a bottle of olives, potato chips, and a box from the bakery with small, square petit fours for dessert.

Amelia unwrapped the sandwich. She didn't feel like eating though. “Forget about me for a little while then. There's Lizzy and Holton. That's who you're really betraying.”

Anderson took a bite of his sandwich. A dollop of chicken salad, heavy with mayonnaise, plopped onto the napkin he had spread onto his lap. “Amelia. Those kids are so wrapped up in what they do. Lizzy spends so much time out with her friends; Holton has practice every day. Do you think, when they get home that they think about their parents' marriage? They're going to think it works until you tell them it doesn't.”

“Are you saying they won’t notice?” Amelia nearly dropped her sandwich. She wanted to throw it in his face – watch the clumpy salad slide slowly down his chin.

“I’m not saying that at all. I’m saying they’re not going to ask questions if we don’t give them any reason to wonder.” He said, “I’m not leaving you.”

He looked tired, more tired than she’d ever seen him. She thought for a moment that she was being too hard on him. She was supposed to be forgiving and understanding. That’s what they said in church anyway, and that’s where people would be most interested in the state of her marriage. One too many Sundays she had gone alone to the service and had to explain where her husband was. Always at meetings in Atlanta. Who ever heard of a meeting on Sunday? She thought maybe it wouldn’t be too hard to act like nothing happened. Almost too easy. He would still be gone to Atlanta most of the time. In the same instant she knew she would not, could not, forgive him. Who stayed because it was too much of a hassle to leave? Lots of people, Amelia thought.

He said, “Just tell them everything is fine. You don’t have to explain everything to them right now.”

“What else am I supposed to do, Anderson?” She wanted to shake him. If he was home enough, he might see. Nobody wanted to deal with teenagers though. Especially girls who starved themselves and boys who

played football and drove around with cheerleaders, doing God-knows-what. Amelia didn't even want to think about it.

She would be stuck answering all their questions. She would have to calm them down. She would be up every night waiting to see when they would come home, to deal with whatever damage they did, to themselves or to others. She'd say little prayers when they'd leave the house from now on. "Dear Lord. Keep them safe. Amen."

"They'll be the only kids in town who have parents that are divorced. Will you ever realize how much damage you've done?" Her voice was getting shaky. "I didn't even hear it from you. I told you, she had to call me, Anderson."

"What am I supposed to do about that? I told her not to do it. She insisted. It's over and done with now." He set aside the sandwich and opened the bottle of olives.

He should have brought martinis she thought. "If she hadn't called me, you would still be having an affair with her?"

He was quiet for a moment. "No." He said. Then, "I don't know what I was thinking."

When she looked at him, the words came out before she'd rightly thought them through. "You were in love." It was an easy diagnosis. Although, that made her want to think about the whole thing less.

He didn't nod or shake his head, but she knew she was right. What an awful thing to realize. She reached into the cooler and took out the box of

petit fours. She ate one little cube whole. Anderson refilled his cup with wine. She ate another.

She really felt like she hated him then, really hated him. He looked exhausted, ready to give into whatever she wanted, whether he really meant it or not. She looked out over the mountainside. She saw trees that looked like green cloud puffs. She had the urge to run and push him. Tackle him with all her might. He would tumble in continuous somersaults, cartoon-style, down the side of the mountain. And at the end, his body would splatter on the pavement of the road below. She could brush her hands off and walk away. She wouldn't have to think about it ever again, even though she knew she would. She would always remember this.

Anderson looked into the box of petit fours. All but two were gone. Amelia made no gesture to offer him one, but he stuck his hand under hers and took one anyway.

“Shall we?” He stood up and began to put the empty containers back into the cooler.

She didn't get up from the blanket. “Is this it? Do we just hike back down now?”

Anderson looked baffled, like his mind was somewhere else. She knew it was with *her*, Louisa Phillips.

“Nothing else is going to happen.” He looked at her again, and his eyes were empty, vacant. She knew he was just filling in the silence, taking up space. She wondered if this was the first time he had been unfaithful and

knew it wouldn't be the last. She wondered how he could seem confused by her anger and so calm. She knew that there was nothing she could do. Unable to move, she sat there knowing that she would always be there, rooted to him, like the trees to the mountainside. Once your heart is with someone, it stays there, shackled, parasitic. Anderson held his hand out to Amelia and she took it, getting up from the sweatshirt so he could tie it around his waist.

“You can trust me.”

She imagined him in his suit and tie. Saw him in meetings all day assuring his clients that they could trust him. They could count on him. They would win it together. Mostly money in divorce disputes. There were many rich women in Atlanta.

She wasn't the kind of person coming to him in the office.

“You're always going to be thinking of her. What am I supposed to do with that?”

“I'm not going to be thinking about her.”

“You're only through with her because I found out.” She stood stiffly, nervously anticipating. After twenty years it seemed, she should know what he was about to say. How many old couples did she know that could finish each others' sentences? Too many to count. It took less than twenty years for most people. Yet, she was standing there like she hardly knew him at all.

He stared at the trail before them. He said, “Are you ready to head back?”



Anderson led the way. She followed, holding on to tree after tree to keep her balance. Their roots were twisted and brown, and they had survived rain and snow and people walking all over them. Amelia stopped and looked at one. The sun came through the branches in kaleidoscope patches, and it was warm on her forehead. She would stay, like the roots of those trees. And it would be forever. They would leave it there. Maybe they'd come back to it; maybe they wouldn't.

Amelia started walking again and saw Anderson waiting for her a ways ahead.

“Keep up and it won't take nearly as long to get back down.”

Amelia followed, dragging her feet, watching out for raised roots, the sun on her back all the way down.

What You Never Dream Will Happen

*sum felix: quis enim negat hoc?  
Felix manebo: (how quoque quis dubitet?)  
(Metamorphoses VI. 193-194)*

*I am happy: who can deny this? And I  
Will remain happy: also who can doubt this?*

By the time the children under her instruction turn thirteen, they will know the correct way to shake hands, where to place forks and knives and spoons on a dinner table, and how to look one another in the eye and smile, no matter what might be eating away at their consciences. Then, through the fox trot, the waltz, and the jitterbug, Jane teaches them how to interact politely, especially the boys – lead gracefully, don't rely too much on your partner, and don't let your right hand travel too far south. The children come with no confidence, no idea how to dance, still staring distractedly at their feet whenever they have to speak to members of the opposite sex, and it is Jane, at Social Augusta, who teaches them all how to be presentable and independent, and it is she who trains them, diligently, for their debutante balls.

In the dance studio, the wood floor is so shiny that the light reflects right off it and produces an impressive sheen that looks something like sunbursts. When the children dance, the floor no longer looks perfect as the small horde of them mill across it. For two hours Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday nights, Jane teaches dance and etiquette classes. When the kids mess up, when they trip over their own feet and can't remember the fox trot or the waltz, she stops the music and claps her hands and makes them stop. She shows them the right way so that they waltz around the floor in a perfect

circle, exactly to the beat. And the ones who can't do it at first, can do it by the end.

Out of the fourteen couples in the beginning dance class, there is one in particular, Cynthia Lewis and Matthew Fulton, who can't seem to remember any of it. The music plays, everything goes smoothly, and then these two trip over their own feet and the whole circle is off. It is like a ten-car pile up. One couple stops and then all the rest crash into them. It is hard to recover from, especially when they have trouble counting out the beat. Jane tries to be particularly careful with these kinds of children, since they are often already frustrated. A bad experience would surely push them away from dance, and Jane doesn't want that.

When this happens, as it often does, Jane claps and signals everyone to stop. "Let's not make this harder than it is." Jane's voice sounds chirpy, and she is overly encouraging. "It's as easy as counting to three."

Now she walks over to Cynthia Lewis and Matthew Fulton and guides them over to a clear spot on the dance floor, away from the circle.

"Let's try this one more time." She starts the music and counts, "One, two three. One, two three."

Cynthia is a pretty enough girl. Her blonde hair is curly but unreasonable, and she covers her thin lips with lip gloss that shimmers in the overhead lighting. Jane has known Cynthia for some time since her mother, Lydia, is on the debutante ball planning committee, and her sister, Sara Beth, is going on twenty, Jane's own daughter's age. Jane is sure that Matthew

must be pleased to be paired with such a pretty girl. He looks like he hasn't yet grown into his skin. Like a puppy, his hands and feet and head seem too big for his stick-like body.

The dancers were paired by their parents, and while the children beg to be paired with one of the popular children in their class, a few end up with someone they would not choose themselves. Jane suspects that this is the case with Cynthia and Matthew. Their parents, Jane knows, are friends, and so Cynthia probably did not end up with the boy of her first choice and now has to suffer alongside someone she does not like very much while her friends dance gracefully with boys they are at least friendly with. Lydia is doing a good deed, making sure that Matthew has a nice girl to dance with, at the cost of her own daughter's enjoyment.

"We'll slow it down. Take it in double time." Jane counts out loud for them. "See? You look fabulous."

They do not look fabulous. Matthew is counting silently with his lips, and his steps are choppy, which make Cynthia's steps choppy. Jane does not want to have to tell her friend that her daughter still has a long way to go before dancing well in the Formal.

When they all finally make it around the circle without any disasters, Jane stops the music and everyone lines up to shake Jane's hand before leaving. Jane makes sure to tell Cynthia and Matthew that they did a nice job, that they are beginning to improve. They will look spectacular in the Formal.

Jane follows the kids out to the patio where they wait for rides, for it is her job to make sure everyone has rides. Many couples carpool, and Jane often sees women with whom she is on the committee for organizing the debutante balls. Some nights, she waves to Lydia or Sue Ellen or Kathy. When she is sure all the kids are gone, she switches off the lights in the dance studio and locks the door.

On these nights, she doesn't usually get home until nine o'clock, just when Robert arrives home from the office, either the one in town or the one two towns over. In the kitchen, Jane heats up leftovers from the night before, and they eat quietly in the dining room. Most of the long, oak table is overrun with Robert's papers and her calendars and Formal plans. The dining room has high ceilings and walls that seem to echo. Dinner is quiet now, both of them too tired to talk about whatever happened during the day and with no one else there to make fresh conversation. The dining room table seems too formal, but Jane does not have a kitchen table. They always eat in the dining room. But sometimes the silence is unbearable, yet so is the way that their voices sound, light and empty, when they attempt conversation.

When dinner is over, Jane goes up to bed while Robert sits on the couch to read. To get to their bedroom, Jane walks past her nineteen-year-old daughter's bedroom, the door ajar, everything neatly in its place. It looks the same as it did six months ago when Daphne suddenly disappeared one night last July right before the wedding. She holds her breath. It's like a little prayer that wishes Daphne back home. A silent one only between God and

her. Even when she is in bed, she hardly dares to think about it because Robert, when he's sleeping beside her, might be able to read her thoughts. She does not want to appear like she misses her daughter too much – yet what mother doesn't miss her daughter when she disappears from home?

Jane can't quite get used to the quiet. When Daphne was there, she never seemed to be such a presence, for she was quiet, and Jane often felt like she had to pry her open by asking simple questions about her day at school. But other times, Daphne went on chattering throughout a meal about some new flower she found blooming on the way home from school or the garden that she started in the back yard, and ended up with a mostly full plate when Robert and Jane had finished their meals.

When Daphne was much younger, she and Robert had Daphne's birthday party at home. It was the first one that all the girls in her class at school came to. Daphne sat at the head of the table, wearing a plastic tiara and sang Happy Birthday to herself along with everyone else. Jane doesn't think they've ever had a party quite as lively since; she can't even remember the last time they had guests over in the last six months. While they were making wedding plans, the house was never quiet. Someone always seemed to be at the dining room table looking at dresses, then sending out invitations, and then composing seating charts. Daphne's pale-blue party dress still hangs in the front closet along with other dresses Jane had had made for Daphne for special occasions, including the wedding dress that she was supposed to wear last August.

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In the morning, Jane wakes early, early enough to take children to school, although she no longer has any children young enough for school. She showers, then makes coffee and eggs. Robert doesn't wake up until breakfast is ready and never sets an alarm. It is an unspoken rule that this is how the household works.

As he leaves for work she says goodbye, and as he shuts the door, "Don't work too hard." Sometimes Jane notices how slumped his shoulders look, like he's been defeated by the quietness of middle age, and how off it sounds to hear his voice when they haven't spoken since the night before. Then she prepares dinner and leaves it to heat up that night.

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That night, Jane marks, with a black star in permanent marker, the date of the Formal on a calendar. The calendar hangs on the wall of the dance studio. She warns the children that there are only five weeks left until the first week in May. "It might seem like a long time, but we only have a few more meetings before the Formal."

There are so many things the children still have to do – get white gloves and navy blue ties and order corsages and boutonnières; the boys need white pants as well. Jane goes through the list in her head. The children sit side-by-side with their partners on the wooden bench that lines the edges of the room. They don't look excited, but she knows that they will be later, when the Formal comes closer. They'll get nervous too, they all do

eventually. In all the fifteen years that Jane has taught, she has never had a child who was not nervous when it came time for the Formal. Even Daphne was nervous. In the car on the way to the formal, Daphne made the movements for each dance with her feet on the floor of the car as they drove to the Club. She wasn't one who had to worry about forgetting the steps.

She decides that they'll review the waltz, and the children make their circle around the room while Jane starts the music. It isn't long before she has to pull Matthew and Cynthia off to the side again, and she finds that her patience is wearing thin. Matthew is a toe walker, which is not a desirable trait for a young man; in fact, Jane has heard that his parents tried paying him to put his weight on his heels and walk like a man. Cynthia doesn't have the right attitude – she won't even to pretend to smile when Jane looks at her. Sometimes, Jane thinks, a girl has to make the best out of a situation, even if she doesn't get to dance with the boy of her choice.

She has them try the steps separately, then together. When there aren't any turns, they do just fine. Jane knows they're good at math. All the kids are these days – and it isn't difficult to count. The tape deck plays the same song on repeat, and it will until these two get it right. She counts out loud and claps. These children *will* dance in May, Jane thinks, even if she has to make them practice more than the other children. She could keep them an hour later, or could open up the studio for lessons on Mondays and Fridays.

“Now, Matthew,” Jane clears her throat. “I know you want to step with your right foot first, but you simply can't.”



She feels relieved after she says this, but it's not five minutes later, and they are tripping over their own feet again. Matthew has robot legs and almost marches through the steps. He steps on Cynthia's foot. Cynthia jumps and winces, since the fabric of her shoes is very thin. She says, "Watch it." Matthew looks embarrassed. They stop and Jane makes them try again while the song plays over and over. The other students dance more smoothly, not perfectly, but that will come in a few years, when they're at the cotillion level and preparing for their own debutante balls.

"The waltz is a traveling dance: it moves across the floor. You have to keep moving forward as long as the music is playing."

At the end of the night, when she crouches down to look in the faces of Cynthia and Matthew, she is solemn. "This is serious. You are going to have to be better and you're going to have to practice harder. May isn't as far off as you think. The Formal is a very important event."

At the end of the lesson, Jane watches them sternly as they walk past her and shake her hand. They look like they don't care. They don't understand how important these classes really are. This is what will get them to the debutante ball when they turn nineteen. She's teaching them valuable lessons about how to live their lives. If it weren't for her, for these dance and etiquette lessons, they wouldn't know how to function in society. But kids aren't like they used to be. The list of the girls who are having debutante balls this summer is smaller than Jane can remember it being any other year. Not as many parents registered their children for the dance classes this year. It is

important, Jane thinks, that girls know which fork goes where, that they're good mannered, and know how to carry a conversation, they want to get married to good people.

Suburbans line the parking lot, and Jane waits out on the patio while the children climb into their parents' cars. Lydia pulls her car up to the curb. She rolls down the window and waves Jane over to her. Jane can see Cynthia sitting beside Matthew in the back seat. Lydia's older daughter had her debutante ball the year before, along with Daphne. Lydia leans out of the window a little, "I know we have our meeting tomorrow, but I just couldn't wait to tell you."

Jane waits. She waves goodbye to a few more parents and turns back to Lydia.

"I think we should order the gazebo again for the Ballroom at the Club this year like we did last year."

Jane wonders why this couldn't wait until tomorrow. Then Lydia reaches out for Jane's hand. "And, I wanted you to be the first one to hear, Sara Beth and Thomas are engaged."

Jane smiles a forced smile. All the women in her group have tip-toed around Daphne's disappearance. They have never spoken of it, but sometimes, while they are talking about their daughters during meetings, their eyes wander to Jane with a sympathetic look. Jane doesn't think that they can understand how she feels, and it makes her angry that they look at her that way.

“That’s wonderful, Lydia. Congratulations. They’ll make a lovely couple. Have you set a date?” She hopes she sounds more thrilled than she feels.

“It will be in August at Lighthouse Baptist. That’s just the perfect wedding month, don’t you think? I’m going to tell everyone else tomorrow, but I wanted you to be the first to know,” Lydia smiles and reaches out to touch Jane’s arms which are crossed over her stomach. “You are happy, aren’t you?”

“Of course, there’s nothing better than a wedding.” Jane keeps smiling.

“You should see the dress Sara Beth picked out.” Lydia is nothing less than giddy. “I should have brought a picture.”

Jane listens while Lydia describes the dress – strapless, champagne colored ribbons, a train. Lydia always liked to talk, she thinks, but she wishes it were about something else. All Jane can think about is Cynthia and Matthew stumbling across the floor. Lydia would be disappointed to hear, but then Jane wonders if maybe Cynthia has already told Lydia, has already complained to her, about the dancing.

“How is the Formal coming along?” Lydia asks when she is through with the wedding dress.

“Oh, yes, it’s going to be wonderful.” It’s not lying completely, Jane thinks, since they still have time to improve.

“I always love coming to the Formal. Ever since Sara Beth danced in it. It’s always my favorite event of the spring, besides the debutante ball.”

Lydia adds, “Everyone just loves it.”

“Yes, well, I have a few things to talk to you about tomorrow too,”

Jane will think of the right thing to say later.

After she locks the studio, Jane gets in the car and lights a cigarette.

She rolls down all the windows and turns on the air conditioning. She believes that the more air a space has, the less it will smell like cigarette smoke. The smoking soothes her nerves and calms her. And, half a cigarette every once in a while can’t hurt. She smokes half and then chews on hard breath mints the rest of the way. It feels like she’s breaking small bricks with her teeth.

The dress that Lydia described can’t be as beautiful as Daphne’s, Jane thinks. It is not right that Daphne never wore that dress, and it hangs, still with the plastic covering around the hanger and the price tag, in the closet where Jane has pushed it all the way to the back, as far as it could go. She told all the women in the committee when they asked, that she has gotten rid of it. She can’t tell them that she still has it. They would look at her with a look that says how sorry they feel for her. It is a beautiful dress and it should have been worn – of course, Jane doesn’t care about the money she spent on it – and it cost quite a bit – but she does care that Daphne never got a chance to wear it, will never get a chance to wear it.

Jane tries to think back to when she told the committee about Daphne's wedding. She was just as excited as Lydia is, maybe more. She couldn't help it, since it was everything she dreamed of for her daughter, and she was the first of her friends to have a daughter get engaged. It was going to be at the end of August at Lighthouse Baptist, when things would start to cool down, in the evening. The reception was to be at their home, in the garden out back. There is nothing wrong with Lydia's enthusiasm. And Jane is happy for her, really happy.

Chad, Daphne's boyfriend, proposed right before they graduated from high school. He told Jane beforehand what he planned to do, take her out in the boat while they were all at the lake house and ask her there. The ring had three diamonds on it, one large one in the middle, with two smaller ones on either side. When they came back in the boat, Daphne had the ring on her finger, and Jane brought down the champagne from the house. They drank the whole bottle.

She never dreamed that she would have a daughter who wanted to throw it all away. It wasn't like Daphne was going to have children right away. Chad had plans; he was going to college after a year. Now, she can't imagine Daphne taking buses from place to place until she gets somewhere that she wants to go to, staying nights in hotels whenever she feels like sleeping. It doesn't seem right, and she has trouble imagining Daphne, poised and dreamy, staring out of the large, tinted bus windows.

When she gets home, it's late and Robert should be home soon. She looks at her list of things to do in one of her leather-bound planners on the dining room table. In the solid white box for tomorrow, she has penciled in an appointment at the nail salon and one to get her hair colored, to cover up the gray. She loads laundry – all whites – into the washer. There's a low thumping that comes from the washer when it's running which has been going on for the past three weeks. Robert says he can fix it himself, so she hasn't called a repairman, but she's still waiting for him to do it.

Jane does the dishes and changes the sheets on the bed and then waits while the dinner she made in the morning heats up. She sets the two places at the table, then the dishes and then the food. After a while, she even sits in her place and waits. She checks the clock on the oven and knows he won't be much longer.

Robert arrives just before ten and sits down. He shovels food into his mouth, and Jane watches and eats more slowly. She wonders if maybe he wants to shorten the time that they have to spend sitting together at the table. "All my children had such trouble tonight with the waltz." Her voice sounds hollow in the large room. "At this rate, they'll never be ready to dance in May, and they'll be humiliated."

Robert chews slowly, like a cow, his eyebrows raised.

"Then I'll be humiliated." Jane moves a few green beans with her fork so that they make a line on her plate.

"No one is going to notice one couple."

Jane stares at him. “You know how many people come to the Formal. How can you say no one will notice?” She wonders if their conversations were always like this and she didn’t notice until after Daphne was gone. “Everyone is watching them. Everyone can see them mess up.” She wonders if she should tell him it’s Lydia’s daughter.

“If they make a mistake, they make a mistake. Everyone makes mistakes.” Robert wipes his mouth with the white linen napkin.

Jane puts her fork down. Why doesn’t he understand? “If they make mistakes, it reflects on me, and then no one will want to enroll their children in the program.”

She wishes he’d think about all the people who would be there: all of their families, their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins, family friends. Even the teachers from school come. Jane hasn’t heard of someone disliking it once they saw it.

The studio is all she has. Now that Daphne is gone. Before the wedding, in early July, Daphne and Chad looked at houses to rent just down the road and apartments just across town. They were planning on staying close; Chad wanted to, he told her. Jane wasn’t going to lose her daughter the way that some mothers did when their daughters got married and moved across the country with no intention of ever coming back. Chad was going to work for his father’s landscaping company, then go to college. He wanted to be a doctor. She even told Daphne that once they had children, she wasn’t opposed to babysitting them once in a while if Daphne and Chad wanted to do

something on their own. That was a nice thing to do; they would have beautiful babies.

Robert takes his last bite, and as soon as he swallows, he is up out of his chair. He places the plate in the sink and goes to the living room. By now, Jane feels tired enough to go to sleep without lying awake thinking unwelcome thoughts.

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The next night, Thursday, she decides to review all the dances they've already learned. She chooses music, and when they arrive, she feels calmer, lighter. The children greet her when they walk in and sit on the wooden ledge that goes all the way around the walls of the studio.

“Excuse me?”

Jane turns and looks down at Cynthia, and right there in the middle of the dance floor, she says, “Matthew and I don't want to be in the formal.”

Jane raises her eyebrows. “Why not, Cynthia?”

Cynthia shrugs.

Jane thinks that they just don't want to work a little bit extra to be better. She says, “I think I should be the one to decide who dances in the Formal.” Jane reaches down and pats Cynthia's shoulder. “What would your mother say to that idea? There's still time to improve.”

Jane has never had someone refuse to participate simply because they do not want to, and Jane knows that is the case. Cynthia doesn't want to dance, and she's ruining Matthew's opportunity. There were plenty of



sprained ankles and broken legs that kept people from dancing in the past but never *this*. It would be even more humiliating than having them make mistakes. And what *would* Lydia say? She would accuse Jane of not being able to teach her daughter how to dance. Jane wonders if Cynthia is a problem for her mother, although Lydia has never mentioned it before.

After a moment, Jane pulls herself together and smooths her hair.

“The Formal is a very important event. I don’t want you to feel unprepared.”

Jane smiles to reassure them. “Now, we’ll start with the foxtrot and then the waltz and then the jitterbug.”

When she claps her hands, they all get into rows and the music starts. Jane tells herself that everything is just fine; these children will be just lovely when it comes time for the Formal. She can relax now, because it’s all up to them, and she’s never had any class fail her. Even when Daphne took the class, she danced perfectly, like she was born to do it. She is her mother’s daughter, Jane always used to think. She did everything else right too. She had the debutante ball, she accepted the ring, sent out announcements, and posed for a picture that appeared in the local newspaper. It was just that she abandoned them all after that. After Daphne left, Jane held Chad’s hand while he cried and told him everything would be alright. She would come to her senses; she would return. Well, it is them who had to come to their senses when she didn’t. They said that Daphne was making a mistake, but there is no way to tell her since she is not there. And if she were there, Jane has decided, she would.

As Jane makes her way to the back of the rows, she finds Matthew and Cynthia sitting on the back bench hidden behind everyone else. They look straight ahead, as though they can't be seen if they don't look right at Jane.

"You won't get any better at it if you don't practice like everyone else." Jane sounds overly enthusiastic.

They don't even look at her. She wonders how many students are watching them.

"Come on, give it one more try." She encourages them.

Cynthia glances at her face. Her lips are frozen in a pathetic smile, and she looks away again. "You can't make us," she says.

Jane looks down at them. Matthew looks nervous, but Cynthia looks like she knows what she's doing. Jane can't imagine having a daughter who speaks this way. "You may not want to do this, but it's very important. I'm trying to help brighten your future. Your parents will be so disappointed."

"We don't have to dance now if we don't want to."

This is how children talk now, Jane reminds herself. How horrible. "I'm sure you don't want your parents to hear how you're behaving. You're disappointing us all."

Cynthia looks right at Jane then. In a barely audible voice she says, "Is that what you told Daphne? Because my mom says you ruined her life."

Jane doesn't know what to say next. She stands there frozen in her spot, unable to move even her hands or eyes. The music ends. Everyone stands, waiting for her to give them directions, to tell them what they need to

practice, because they do need to practice. Jane doesn't say anything though. She looks around the room at all the pairs of eyes staring at her. What could she have done differently? She wonders. Was there anything? Was it really all her fault?

She tells the children to call their parents and sits down where Cynthia and Matthew had been. The bench is warm. The children file out the door to wait; a few lag behind. She begins to think that Sara Beth's wedding is a little rushed. August isn't very far away at all, and there are rumors, rumors. Yes, she will have to talk to the minister and see if he will still allow them to marry in the church. She stares across the long, rectangular room to the mirror on the other end. She looks small to herself, like a slouched over lump. She never slouches. When she forces herself to sit up straight, she looks too rigid, controlled. The hair on her head is getting grayer, and her face looks pale. She imagines herself as a statue, stuck right there or stuck in a place that doesn't exist anymore, a time that's past. She's stuck there forever and there's nothing she can do about it. She starts to cry tears like shiny pebbles glaring off her cheeks in the light.

*Heu quantum haec Niobe Niobe distabat ab illa  
(Metamorphoses VI. 273)*

*This Niobe was different from that Queen Niobe.*

Waiting

*... "tua te manus" inquit "amorque  
perdidit, infelix! Est et mihi fortis in unum  
hoc manus, est et amor: dabit hic in nulnera vires"  
(Metamorphoses IV. 148-150)*

*"Oh unhappy boy, you died at your own hand,"  
She said, "and love killed you! And this hand of strength  
Perhaps is for me, it is love: it gives me strength  
To wound myself."*

Before.

It started their senior year in high school, in the springtime when everything begins to get hot and slow. Alma worked at the diner, waitressing, and Blake came in with his friends and all their girlfriends after school, before school, and on the weekends. They always sat in her section where they pushed two tables together. Alma was patient while they ordered because it usually took them a long time, in between all the jokes and laughter and not being able to decide between pancakes and waffles and grits and bacon and so on. While she stood at the edge of the table, sometimes she thought that Blake was leaning closer to her. Sometimes it made her feel uncomfortable. Sometimes it felt good because she felt pretty, and all his friends were watching, even his girlfriend, Suzanne.

Once, when she walked over to the table, she thought she heard Blake say something about her being pretty, that she smelled like smarties, which was true. It was her perfume. Blake's girlfriend leaned closer to him and said, "You shouldn't look for something else when you have me." The rest of the group laughed and so did Blake.

It was June before he talked to her. Graduation was over, and the parties that went along with it had quieted down. They were all getting bored, getting restless and ready for some different part of their lives to start, the next part. Everyone who was going somewhere, that is. June was hot and humid, and while she was running plates back and forth from the counter to the tables, she watched Blake. He sat at a table by the window sometimes; sometimes he sat at the bar. His group had dwindled to just three of the guys; the girls usually went on vacations with their families. The diner got lots of interstate drivers during the summer, lots of people passing through on their way to somewhere else.

She didn't feel at all pretty. The air conditioning wasn't blowing nearly enough, and the fans seemed to move in slow motion. Alma was sweaty, and her face was turning pink with all the running back and forth. When she got to his table, she was nearly out of breath.

Blake looked up at her, "My name's Blake. I always see you around here. I wanted to introduce myself."

Alma held her notepad with both hands and said, "You can read my nametag. It's nice to know your name though."

"This is John," Blake pointed. "This is Franklin."

Alma nodded. She had the pen ready to write.

"Want to go for a drive when you get off?" Blake looked nervous and self-conscious, and his friends were trying to keep from laughing, but they just

looked like they would explode with it. She thought they were good friends though, for trying.

Alma's lips turned up slowly, her teeth were yellowed, from smoking, and she knew that Blake's real girlfriend had perfectly white teeth, along with lots of other perfect things. "I'm off at nine."

"So yes?"

"That's what I mean." Alma took their order then, and her hand felt a little shaky while she wrote.

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*Dear Blake,*

*I came down to the police station. They won't let me see you. I'm leaving a note instead. They said they let you have one phone call. But they aren't letting us talk. They say it's part of the investigation. Why did you do it? I need to hear it from you. Love, Alma*

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The silence hangs in the air like wool – heavy and hot. It has been like this for days. Alma floats between the different spaces in their trailer. The kitchen is separated from the living room by a counter with cabinets hanging over it from the ceiling. In the living room, hardly a room itself, just a space in between the bedroom and the kitchen, there is the television and the recliner. Between the living room and the bedroom is only a large doorway without a door. Alma can still see the tv from the bed. She can't tell which one has her more hypnotized, the heat or the tv. It's probably a tie.

On the screen, flames go up in an orange blur and it's blinding as sunshine. The glare on the tv screen keeps it from being so bright. Alma can see herself in the reflection from the sun on the screen; it seems like she's looking in a crystal ball and can tell the future. She'll sit in front of the tv for the rest of today and most of tomorrow and probably the day after too. She'll find out as much as she can. The flames are the only thing visible on the screen. The corners around the fire are dark as the night sky. It reminds Alma of the bonfires they had in high school and in her own trailer park, where she grew up on the other side of town and where her mother still lives. Every time they show the footage, her heart seems to be pounding somewhere deep in her stomach. It's uncomfortable, and she has to remind herself not to hold her breath. The flames are full in the clip they show, reaching up into the dark night like long arms. The beams crack, and she can see through the walls like thin paper.

The news anchor says that the fire must have started hours before this footage. Alma tries to remember what she was doing then, what she had been doing all day. She was probably at work, then walking home, then heating up the leftovers. Then she was watching tv, not the news though. And all the while, a fire was starting in the basement or the laundry room or the kitchen of Blake's family's home. Alma thinks that she has never watched the news this much in her life.

The news anchor says, "This is a terrible loss for the city, the loss of one of the greatest families. The Folley house burned down last night,

authorities say, at the hand of Clay Folley's own son, Blake Folley." At this point the television flashes the large headshot of Blake. Alma thinks it hardly looks like him.

All that night, when the police had first taken him, she slept with the portable phone beside the bed on the pillow right next to her, the one Blake would have slept on. There was nothing. She holds the phone in her lap now, checking it occasionally, pushing the talk button, listening to the hum, then turning it off. For a while, after eleven-thirty, Alma tries to tell herself that he'll still call to tell her that they're taking an extra load of concrete blocks one town over so he'll be home late. She swallows and tries to quiet the feeling of panic in her stomach flipping around and around.

\*\*\*

*Dear Blake,*

*I only know where you are because the news says you're in the county jail. The picture they keep showing on the news isn't very good – you've got bags under your eyes like wells, and your jaw is clenched so you look mean. I don't know if you get to watch the news in jail, but I guess if you got to watch anything that would be it. I don't know what to believe. Tell me what to believe. Love, Alma*

\*\*\*

Before.

Alma hardly recognized Blake in pictures from high school, and the time she first met him, he was clean cut and had sunglasses on a lanyard that



said UGA for the University of Georgia, where he would have gone had she and Blake not made the decision to live in the trailer. She imagined him in wife-beaters, which he started wearing after they came to the trailer and he began working construction. His shoulders got tanned and strong from lifting concrete blocks all day.

After work at the diner, the first time she spoke to him, Blake drove her home. He had on a pastel green dress shirt and khaki pants. Her jean skirt was frayed at the pockets and her tank top was too tight. They were quiet in the car; the leather on the seats was hot and stuck to her shoulders and the backs of her thighs. The car drove so smoothly that when she shifted positions, she thought he would be able to hear the gentle tearing sounds of her damp skin moving away from the leather.

They didn't know what to say after she told him to turn left down the main street. He asked, "Where do you live?"

"Down at the end of town. Right on the county line." They both knew she was talking about Edgefield Park – the trailer park. The drive took twenty minutes.

"Have you always lived there?" He cleared his throat.

"All my life." Alma said. "It easier. You can just pick up and move if you want."

If she said it that way, it sounded romantic. It wasn't all about the red clay that stained the bottom half of the trailers and kept things like grass and azaleas from growing in a space that could be considered the front yard, which

was nothing like what Blake was used to. He had a large yard, green and leafy, divided from everyone else's yards by a fence.

“Weren't we in a class together once?” Blake shifted his leg.

Alma nodded, but she couldn't really remember. She knew him mostly from the diner. She hardly saw him at school. “I think it was science.”

They got to her mother's trailer, the one with the cacti on the front steps and a fake palm tree by the door. Water stains had turned the metal on the screen door to rust and the curtains had turned gray from the original white. The shape of the whole thing was rectangular, like a cracker box, but she had her own room.

“Those are some nice plants there.” Blake nodded toward the front door.

Alma smiled. “Mom likes palm trees.”

“They make you think of the beach.” Blake turned to look at her. His face was soft and sweet, and Alma knew that he meant well. “I could take you out for lunch maybe tomorrow.”

“I have to work.”

“Well, I could have lunch with you at your work.”

Alma nodded. She stood outside the car and was bent over with one hand on the roof of the car and the other on the open door, looking inside at Blake who had on his sunglasses, so she couldn't see his eyes.

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Alma thinks that maybe she is going crazy. She sits in front of the tv, watching the same thing over and over again, and her legs start to feel restless, tingly. She gets up and takes her empty glass into the kitchen. The pile of dirty dishes overflows out of the sink – bowls and cups and plates. The silverware has sunk to the bottom. When she tries to get a cup out of the cabinet for sweet tea, there are none left. She inspects the glass nearest to her and figures that there was probably tea in it. Then she pours herself a glass and takes it back to the recliner.

After the news, the diner let her have a few days off to get things in order. When she protested, they said they had it covered. A few days off wouldn't be so bad, she thought. But it is bad enough. A few days off has turned quickly into a week, and now she isn't sure that she still has a job. At first, no one knew quite how to take it – so they treated it like someone had died.

When she has to shower or walk into the kitchen and has to leave the phone for even a moment, she makes sure that the ringer is on high so she won't miss it if he calls, when he calls. She reminds herself that he will call. He has to. It's important that she remembers this. He can't just forget her. But sometimes she isn't so sure. They'll let him contact her eventually. He'll want to. He'll miss her. Even if he's not missing her now, he will when it's been a little longer. She just has to be patient a little longer. She can feel it eating away at her insides. It's like when she forgets to eat breakfast and lunch on some days. This is what it means to miss someone. This is what her

whole life would be like if they weren't together. She can't stand the thought of that.

Alma stares past the tv and out the window by the door. She misses him so much that she can't think right. It all just baffles her. Her mind is muddled. Alma wonders how couldn't he have known that he would get caught? Nobody gets away with something like this. They have ways to find clues, evidence. And that's all it takes, something as small as a fingerprint. How could he get himself thrown in jail? How could he do that to her? To them? Over and over, she thinks, they live in a trailer. How hard could it have been to leave? If only he'd told her he wanted to.

\*\*\*

Before.

Somehow, Alma wasn't sure how, but somehow, one thing led to another and Blake began waiting for her after work to take her home. This went on for a month, maybe less. Alma didn't find herself in the habit of counting the days. She noticed only when things started running together. He said nice things like, "You smell good," and "We're lucky." He leaned over the armrest in between their seats and kissed her hard. His lips were wet and soft. He said, "I love you."

She knew about Suzanne, and she didn't want to get in any trouble. But when Blake kissed her, she knew she didn't have to worry about Suzanne anymore. Blake kept going out with Suzanne at first, but that was before he realized, he'd told Alma, that there was more to life than just marrying your

highschool sweetheart. He wanted to live with her, be with her because he loved her, not because it was convenient. Alma liked the idea. She liked the idea of jumping into love rather than waiting, waiting for something to happen. She knew because of the way he kissed her and loosely played with her fingertips over the center armrest in the car while he drove her home.

“What are you telling your friends? And your girlfriend?” Alma sat in the car. It was night. The lights in her mother’s trailer were off, and her mother was either asleep or gone. Blake turned off the car. He drove Alma home most nights and began to kiss her after maybe a week. Some feelings come in and take over like unexpected guests.

“I’ll tell them.” Blake looked at her. “I don’t love Suzanne.”

Alma waited. “I don’t want to be on the side.”

“You’re not going to be. I’ll break up with Suzanne.” Blake held her hand.

They sat in the car, the windows open and the air not moving outside or inside. He kissed her again and again, and somehow he ended up kneeling on the floor of the front seat. He had his pants unbuckled and her skirt pushed up around her rib cage. They had sex like that, and when it was over, Blake laid his head on her chest and was quiet for a long time. His breathing sounded like an echo in her ears. Alma felt calm.

Blake got back into the driver’s seat and buckled his pants. “Would you marry me?”

“Don’t say things you don’t mean.” She was joking, because she knew, or she thought she knew, that he was joking.

“But would you?”

“You can’t ask me to marry you when you’re still with someone else.”

Alma opened the front door.

“But if I wasn’t with someone else?”

Alma sighed. “I would.”

Alma got out onto the dirt driveway where her mother’s car used to be before it got taken away because she stopped making payments on it. The front door was sticky and made a sound like paper tearing when Alma opened it. She stood just inside, her eyes already adjusted to the dark, and found the house empty, her mother still at work or out on a date.

\*\*\*

Alma sits on the stoop outside their trailer. The sun comes down right on her. The neighbors don’t know what to say. Some ask, “How are you holding out?” Others bring her food. It isn’t that he’s dead, Alma thinks. But she doesn’t know what else to call it – lost, put away for a while, she can’t decide. After the arraignment, Blake was moved to a jail near Atlanta. They are going to have the hearing in a week. Then she’d know.

The sun makes her feel light headed. She is hot, but she feels cool for a short second, then hot again. She thinks about the night Blake told her he loved her. She had felt like this, hot, then cold, then hot again. She liked that

feeling. She thinks about how she really does love him. Will she ever forget the first time he said he loved her?

The car drives slowly up the strip of black pavement on the two lane road going past the trailer park. It's a Ford just like the police cars except without the lights and police decorations. The sunlight catches the granite in the street, and it shimmers. The tenants of the trailers are surely hiding their loot, their drugs, as they do when anything that resembles a police car drives down the road. On this side of town, there are drugs and shootings and all kinds of things that aren't on the other side of town, where her mother's trailer is. They don't bust people for using drugs in the trailers very often but wait for when the deals are going down. The car stops when the driver spots her. He pulls half of the car onto the shoulder and a cloud of red dirt kicks up. The detective levels himself out of the car and squints at Alma. "Are you Miss Alma Johns?"

Alma nods. She doesn't get up.

"Ma'am, I'm here to ask you a few questions about Blake Folley."

Alma nods again. She feels old when he calls her ma'am and wonders if she'll have grey hairs when this is all over. She tries to stay calm, like she knows what she's doing, but she doesn't know how anyone can get used to having the police come to their house.

"What is your relationship to Mr. Folley?"

Alma hardly thinks of him as a mister. "He's my boyfriend."

He asks her to tell him about what she was doing the night he was arrested. Alma tells him she stayed home and made dinner. She was upset that he was going out so late and leaving her home alone.

“In the time you’ve been together, how was his relationship with his family?” The detective lets his eyes wander over the trailer.

“They argued a lot.” Alma stops there, then says, “After we moved in together.”

He wants to know if Alma ever argued with the family, but she says she hardly spoke to them.

The detective shifts his weight, his sagging stomach and thick arms. The blonde hairs on his arms catch the sunlight. “Did he say anything to you beforehand that made you suspect he was up to anything out of the ordinary?”

Alma is quiet and wonders if they are going to find a way to blame her for the whole thing. She wants to say that she didn’t have anything to do with his decision to be with her. He could have left her and done what his parents wanted him to do.

The detective nods like he understands the way she feels.

“Do you know what will happen at the hearing?” She feels tired.

The detective repositions his feet as if he is uncomfortable. “He’ll plead guilty or not guilty. Then there’s the trial”

“Do you know which one he is?”

The detective looks tired. “I don’t know how he’ll make it out of this one.”



When he doesn't have anything more to say, the detective shakes her hand. Alma still sits on the front step to the trailer. She wonders if he has any other stops to make in the neighborhood. She should have told him that they are good people. They're not like everyone else who lives here, not on the same level as them anyway. This is just one thing, one mistake.

\*\*\*

*Dear Blake,*

*They gave the date for your arraignment in the paper. It was open to the public, so that's how I knew to go. You looked so sad – hardly looked up from the ground. You only saw me for a second when they walked you out. You went right past me, but you must not have expected to see me there; you must not have recognized me in that short second. If I were you, I'd try to tell whoever I loved the whole story. We've never gone this long without talking. I think about that night and how I smelled the lighter fluid and smoke in your clothes. Call me as soon as you can. If I never get a chance to talk to you, all I'll ever think is that you did it. -Alma*

\*\*\*

Before.

When Blake finally told everyone, he kissed Alma on the cheek and said, "It's official."

Alma sat still while Blake clasped a necklace with a silver heart on it around her neck. It was, no doubt, a gift that his parents had purchased, and

they expected Blake to give it to Suzanne after graduation. But Alma liked it because no one had ever given her anything special before.

The night Blake made plans for her to come to dinner, he smoked two of her cigarettes in the car. She should have sensed how nervous he was, she thought. He rarely ever smoked.

Blake's mother led them through the hall. Her heels clicked and nearly echoed. At the doorway to the dining room, she stopped and considered the table. In an airy voice, she told them where to sit. "We'll have you over here, dear, and Blake, over here."

Everyone sat down and served themselves. Alma sat between one of Blake's sisters and his mother. Blake sat diagonally from her. He looked over at her encouragingly.

Alma was not addressed at first. They discussed the family vacation they were taking in August. Virginia, his older sister, had just gotten engaged. She talked about some business with the dresses. The wedding preparations had everyone on edge.

They talked to Blake about college, going over the checklist for the hundredth time. His mother turned to Alma and said, "Did he tell you he was going away to UGA?"

Alma nodded, "Yes, ma'am."

"Tell us your plans, dear." She chewed slowly on a bite of steak.

"I'd like to go to a trade school some day." Alma took a sip of tea and accidentally slurped. Blake seemed amused.

“Do you know what you’d like to do?” Blake’s father asked.

Alma felt flustered. “I don’t know just now. I guess it’s good I’m not going right away.”

“Mom, I told you, I’m not sure if I’m going right now either.”

“Blake, don’t talk like that.” His mother looked away from Alma.

Blake’s father spoke with his mouth full. “That’s fine, Anne. He should wait until he knows what he wants to do. I don’t want him wasting our money on school if that’s not what he wants to do right now.”

“Oh, Frank.” His mother sighed.

“No, really, Anne. We’ll save in the long run.”

“Well, I don’t like the idea at all,” Anne lowered her voice to something like a stage whisper. “It’s alright if she doesn’t want to go, but that doesn’t mean you should stay home too.”

“Mom,” Blake spoke sternly.

Anne looked embarrassed. “Alright, nevermind.”

They ate and at the end of it, Anne looked over at Alma, “I’m sorry dear, but would you mind waiting for Blake in the front room. We’d like to speak with him a minute in private.”

Alma waited, sitting on the couch, staring out the window, thinking that her new dress hardly seemed to impress them like she thought it would. And, what was the big deal about college anyway?

Blake slammed the dining room door and hardly stopped walking to tell Alma they were leaving.

In the car, he was quiet. He said, "We're not going back there again."

Alma looked at him. He couldn't be serious. For some reason though, she knew he was. That's why her heart was beating so fast.

"What did they say?" Alma asked.

"You don't want to know." He held his hand out for a cigarette.

Alma pushed him, and he finally said that they thought she was white trash and a bad influence.

She said, "That's silly." Although she wasn't entirely sure she thought that herself. "You'll do what you want to do."

He looked at her. "I don't want to be around anyone who doesn't accept you. We won't go back there again."

He dropped her off at home and she sensed that she was to be prepared, be ready to move in with him at any moment. She gathered some things together and waited.

\*\*\*

*Dear Blake,*

*I took a walk today. Just up the road. Haven't been into town since I went to the arraignment. I'm scared of what people will say. Mrs. Meadows from two doors down saw me walking and said she was sorry for me but that she didn't think you were worth it. That I should start to look for a nice rich boy to start up with. I laughed a little because you used to be rich. She just shook her head. I didn't tell her that you're not allowed to talk to me. But I guess she probably already knows that, and I don't even want to think about*

*what she'd say. I can't stop thinking about you. I wonder what it's like where you are and what you're doing. All this missing you is making me tired. Love,*  
*Alma*

-

Before.

It was hardly a week after Alma went over to Blake's for dinner that he called her and told her to get ready. He'd found a place for them – a trailer. It wasn't as exciting as it sounded, since it was on the other side of town, which they could afford better. Blake honked the horn, and Alma walked right out the front door. Her mother was at work.

When they moved into the trailer, she insisted that Blake put up a picture of his family. He said no. He didn't want any part of them in their new trailer. But she put one up anyway – Blake with his mother and father and two sisters. They all looked happy. It made Alma wonder for a while after that if they'd done the right thing. If they were happy like that before, she started to wonder, was it her fault that they weren't happy anymore? She came to the conclusion that they had done the right thing. They loved each other, and that was the only way they could be together.

\*\*\*

Sometimes, when she remembers when they first came to their trailer, Alma thinks, people do things that they think are the right things to do, but maybe not for the right reasons. She knows that she loved Blake when they moved in together, but she isn't quite sure about Blake. Maybe he was in too

far to pull himself out again. That happens. It happened with her own father when he realized that her mother was pregnant and that there would be a baby. He just walked away. That's how her mother put it.

Alma finally gets the keys to the car. But that's as far as she gets. She sits in the driver's seat with the windows rolled up and can't bring herself to turn the car on. It's hot. The leather seat quickens her sweat until it trickles down her back in a thin, slow line. She never drives, and Blake doesn't sit in the passenger's seat. Finally, she pushes open the car door. The outside air feels cooler in comparison to the stagnant air in the car.

\*\*\*

*Dear Blake,*

*I got up and am writing this in the dark. The trailer is the same since you left. Your side of the bed is empty. Do you wonder about all these things? I hope so. Have you ever thought that I could take the trailer and go somewhere else to live? If I hadn't let you fall in love with me, all your family would be alive, and you would be off at college. Maybe that's true. I'm not going to wait around anymore and try to figure this out. I don't know if you love me anymore, or if you don't. I can't drive to Atlanta all the time to see you behind some glass wall with just a hole to talk through. I can't afford all that gas. If you didn't want to be with me anymore, all you had to do was say so. – Alma*

\*\*\*

Before.

Blake's sister started calling around the time of the wedding. She whined that it would break their mother's heart if he wasn't there. Then, they said Alma couldn't come. It was bad enough that they had to decide where Blake was going to go in the seating chart after it had already been arranged. They'd never find room for Alma. She heard Blake say, "I'm not going if she's not going." Then, "No. You're the one being silly. I told you I didn't want anything to do with you if you're not even going to try to like the person I love." He hung up and Alma sat still in the recliner, pretending like she hadn't heard.

The wedding came and went. Blake didn't bring it up. It seemed to her that he didn't even miss not being there.

Alma only remembered it was Sunday because when she flipped through the channels, local stations broadcasted church services in the morning and evening.

She said to Blake, "Have you already missed your sister's wedding?"

Blake nodded. "I don't want to talk about it."

"You should have gone."

Blake kissed her forehead with force. It was supposed to mean that it was the end of the conversation. "I've got some things to do. I'll be home late."

She gave him a real kiss and stayed sitting in the recliner with the television on.

When Blake came back, he smelled like smoke and lighter fluid, a stale, foresty scent. Alma perched on her knees in the recliner, leaning against the back. Blake walked straight to the kitchen, where he did a shot of Jack right out of the bottle. She could almost see him shaking.

“What’s going on?” Alma sounded to herself like a disoriented child, woken up in the middle of the night.

Blake didn’t answer. He stood with his hands on the counter top, staring into an empty cabinet.

“Blake?” Alma stood then and then stepped into the kitchen.

“Just wait.” His voice was quiet, harsh.

Alma placed her palm on the smooth, hard muscle of his shoulder. He was hot, sweating. He hugged her then, so tightly it hurt her.

“What happened?” She asked.

“Nothing.”

“You wouldn’t be like this if it was nothing.” She looked at his shaking shoulders, and she couldn’t understand how he was shaking when it was so hot.

“Let’s not talk about it right now.”

Alma leaned her hip on the counter. She felt like all she could do was sit back and wait for the explosion, whatever that was going to be. “Please tell me what’s going on.”

“I’m sorry.”



The knock on the door made Alma jump. Through the window she saw the police officer standing with his arms crossed, posing calmly as if this was something you could get used to – hauling off people from their houses.

Blake stared at her. Alma wondered how fast he had driven to beat the cop there.

“Blake, what is this about?” Alma could feel her voice getting high and shrill.

“Just take a second, Alma. I didn’t mean it.” Blake’s voice was calm, quiet, monotone.

The cop knocked again.

“Stay here with me.”

Alma shut her eyes. When she opened her eyes, she could see the police staring through the window in the door. Right before she had opened the door, Blake had looked her in the face and said, “Don’t. Not just yet.”

There was nothing else to do. She opened the door, and everything went in slow motion. There were handcuffs, and then the cop led him out of the house. Alma watched their mouths move but couldn’t seem to hear anything they were saying. She thought that this was what it must be like to be hypnotized. Her mother told her later that she would have gotten in lots of trouble had she not opened the door then.

\*\*\*

Alma goes to bed early now. She goes to bed when it’s still light outside because she can’t think of anything else to do. The phone rings while

sitting there on Blake's pillow. She answers it because there is the possibility that it might be Blake. Of course she feels like that possibility is dwindling as the days go by, and sometimes she wonders what they do to people without letting others know. If they'll make some decision and find him guilty and not report it on the news. She keeps up with the news every day.

Her mother is on the other end saying she thought she would wait until things quieted down to call.

"Things have never been quieter." Alma sits up in bed, and the alarm clock lying on the floor reads ten fifty-four. That's something else she hasn't gotten used since Blake left. Her mother asks how she is holding up. Alma shrugs, as though her mother can somehow see that motion through the phone.

"Why in heaven's name would he kill his whole family?" her mother asks.

"I don't know, Mama." Alma stares up at the ceiling. It was appealing when they first bought it because there was a skylight in the roof where they put the bed. The idea was that they could see the stars, and feel the sun. She likes this. Even though she can't see any stars she can still feel the sun in the morning.

"I don't think it sounds like true love, Allison May. I think that sounds like crazy." Her mother slurps on her iced tea.

Alma is quiet.

"Allison May, I don't think it's very smart for you to stick around with someone who is so crazy."

“Mama,” Alma whines. “I’m going to wait for him.” She doesn’t feel certain about anything, but it feels good to tell her mother that way.

“He’ll always be a criminal.” Her mother takes another noisy sip. “You can’t change that.”

Alma closes her eyes.

“What I mean to say is, you shouldn’t get mixed up with someone who’s got himself thrown in jail for murder.”

Alma sighs. “I know, mama.”

“I think you ought to come home,” says her mother. “But that’s just what I think.”

Alma hangs up and turns onto her left side. The empty side next to her seems to take up too much space; she could get lost in it. The sleep she’s had was like a nap. She’ll never fall asleep now.

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Alma thinks maybe she’ll go for a walk. Then she thinks that if she’s going to go for a walk, she should just drive into town and run errands. She can wait until late when there won’t be as many people at the drug store.

When she finally goes, she drives like an old woman, very slowly, jerking stops at stop signs. She gets out of the car and stares down one side of the street and then the other. She doesn’t have the nerve just yet to walk into the diner. She’s been away so long without even calling. The bell on the door sounds loud to her, and she imagines that everyone in the diner will hear it and turn around. But people have their own lives and conversations, and she

walks practically unnoticed to the counter where she orders and waits for the manager to come out and talk to her. Every now and then, it feels like people are staring at her, watching her, but they probably aren't. And if they are, it's only for a second. When they whisper to each other, Alma can't hear them, and she's thankful for that at least.

When the manager, Elenor, comes out from the kitchen through the swinging door, she smiles at Alma and gives her a hug. "You ready to come on back?"

Alma nods, "I am."

And that's that. She gives Alma a schedule right there, and Alma writes it down on a napkin with the pen Elenor has behind her ear.

When she is done with dinner and it is dusk outside, Alma crosses the street to the bar, a square, brick building with a neon green sign that reads BAR. Blake met his friends there after he got off work in the evenings.

The inside of the bar is dark and hazy and smells like smoke. There are televisions on mute in the corners and above the bar, and country music plays quietly. Alma sits herself down and squints at the row of beer taps. A young woman comes over, her eyes tired and sad looking, almost too big for her face, her shoulders slanted. Her nametag says Daphne, and Alma says, "You have a pretty name."

Daphne nods her thanks, "What'll you have?"

"Bud Light." Alma glances at the choices, embarrassed.

Daphne brings back the glass and Alma stares at her hollow cheeks, darkened circles in her face. Alma tries to hand her money, but Daphne shakes her head. "I'm sorry to hear about your loss."

Alma says, "Nobody's dead yet." She takes a sip of beer.

"Nobody has to be dead for you to miss them just as much."

Alma thinks that this is true. She sips on the beer, staring at the television overhead. Baseball. Two men sit a few seats away from her. They look young, and she wonders if Blake knew them. When she finishes, she leaves a tip under the glass and walks back to the car.

\*\*\*

*Dear Blake,*

*They're giving me my job back at the diner. A job is important, but I think I'll pick up and go somewhere – haven't decided where yet. Maybe Charleston. I've got to make money before I go. I don't know how to feel now that they hardly say anything about you on the news anymore. They're not posting bail for you. My mother says it would be too high to pay anyway. And, you won't have visitors until after the trial. It will get easier to think about other things, especially if I'm working. And, I hope that you have to think about me all the time since you don't have anything to do. What is jail good for except to think about what you've done? I'm still here, for now. I'll wait for you. Besides, no matter what, we can see each other after the trial. If I was going to get married to you, I would say that I promise to follow you*

*wherever you go. And I'd promise to be patient. You don't even have to get  
me a ring. Love, Alma*