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This thesis is a collection of short stories that explore isolation and uncomfortable relationships. These stories span from a young woman coping with how the world perceives her body and how that relates to her mother's expectations, to a man's senses being changed after visiting a sensory deprivation chamber, to a woman slowly losing herself to the department store she works in. Through these stories, I try to examine the lengths people will go to when they are cut off from others.

THEIR BODIES AND OTHER STORIES

by

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TEMPORARY PLACES

Sandra had known the old beige vacuum since she started at the motel five years ago. But it had been called that much longer, judging by the way the sharpie-written name went down several layers, all different shades of brown-black chipped and rubbed clean on the first half of the “M,” making it look like a backwards “N.” Sandra called the vacuum Nona for short, a little joke to herself on the days she was late and the Mona Lisa was all that was left. Nona was old, too well made to die and the managers too cheap to replace something that still technically worked, which they defined as turning on. Sandra would tell them that they needed to get rid of the damn thing, that she was tired of dragging it around, and then one of the Watsons would plug it in and turn the switch. As the vacuum screamed to life they would cross their arms and smile, and that would be the end of it. But Nona left a curry powder smell in the rooms and really just rolled lint into strips along the carpet that had to be gathered by hand.

It was just about spring when the hiring started for the tourist season. The owners always brought on a few local kids looking for summer work. Those kids never did too well, but there were enough guests that it didn't affect the booking. Sometimes they stayed on after the season was over, girls who had no better options. Two girls were brought on, Brita and Maya. They were both skinny little things out of the local high school, Brita heading off to Wilmington in the fall and Maya a year younger.

Sandra saw these summer girls twisting their hands together, swimming in their new uniforms as the manager went over the supplies in the back room. The uniform was black pants and a branded white polo. The logo, a small, dark blue sea gull, was printed on the left breast. Their shirts were too big, the owners didn't like to order more until they completely ran out. It was usually the summer girls who fit into the smalls.

After work Sandra drove home to Nag's Head Woods. It was a split-level house that she shared with an older man, Dave, who owned the property. The lower level was like her own little house, and he stayed on the upper level. He probably needed to go to assisted living, but he was stubborn and his only child lived up north. She had met him once, and every couple of weeks she could hear Dave arguing with him on the phone. Sometimes she felt like she was Dave's only leg to stand on against his son. She didn't feel comfortable with that. But, he gave her a good deal on rent and she ran errands for him so he didn't have to leave the house too much. She had lived with him for a few years now. It was nice to live with another person again, even though she almost never saw him. Sometimes on nice mornings, she could hear him go out to the deck to look at the sound and watch the birds.

She always knew he was okay by the list of what he needed from the store by the main entrance. Today's list: Lubriderm, Hungry Man frozen dinners, two prescriptions. The news was playing in his living room at full volume. Sandra had grown to feel as comforted by the TV as she had once been by the waves at night.

When Sandra first started at the Sea Spray, she asked about the vacuum, but either nobody cared or they just didn't know. The most she could get was from the night manager, Sam, one morning as he was leaving and she was coming in. "Hm? Oh yeah, that old thing. I don't know, I think one of the summer girls did it a few years ago."

She wondered what that girl would be like. Maybe she wanted to be an art history major, maybe she knew enough about the Mona Lisa to find something in common with a vacuum. Maybe she just liked to name things. Sometimes she liked to imagine that girl could have been her in another life.

Sandra was seven when her dad got a good job away from the textile mills in their town and they moved to Charlotte. By the time she learned to drive, barely any of those mills were still running, and her old friends whose parents hadn't managed to get out in time had no way to escape other than what those boys in the Ver-Len Mobile Park sold around town.

Even though she'd been gone all that time, they were just a short drive away, and she clung to China Grove against all reason. She married Tommy Dewalt two weeks before her 20th birthday, six weeks before she lost the baby, 17 months before Tommy failed a piss test and started spending more afternoons at the Billiards hall and the rooms above it than the unemployment office. There wasn't much point in it anyways, damn near half the town had some sort of government assistance and every year they seemed to give less and less. Sandra figured they were tired of people driving through the town and seeing the crumbling mills, groups of skinny shirtless white boys with sunken eyes and

sinewy arms hanging off the beds of pick-ups and in packs outside the Kangaroo at four in the afternoon.

Their marriage ended when she was 23, after the third miscarriage. So, she left Tommy and the town for good. She went back to the city and her parents, but soon enough she moved on again and again, until she made it to Nag's Head. She wasn't trained in anything, so she took the jobs she could get. This job at the Sea Spray Motel was the longest she'd kept, just because she'd gotten tired of moving around.

Sandra was paired with Brita the first day of training. Brita was mostly quiet, focused on her tasks. Sandra thought the girl would have a panic attack as she stared at the bed sheets, trying to get them perfectly smooth and straight, despite the lump forming in the mattress. "Now, come on, you'll only have about 30 minutes for each room, so you can't worry that sheet for half the time."

"I'm sorry Miss Sandi, I just want it to be right." This was better than the girls who didn't care at all, though in time she would probably become one of them. She would wipe down tables and counters without worry of streaks. She might even miss a full ashtray under a bed for a month. But hell, even Sandra had done that. There were only a few smoking rooms left now. Even this motel had faced that change.

They took their lunch break together at a metal picnic table near the front of the Sea Spray. Sandra got a diet coke out of the vending machine and lit a Camel as Brita bit into her turkey sandwich. Sandra looked at the girl, slumped over her food, as they sat in silence. Sandra put out her cigarette. "You have any plans for the fall?"

Brita looked up. "I'm going to Wilmington to study sea turtles. Last year I helped out with a hatching. We stayed up all night to watch the turtles come lay the eggs, and again when they hatched." She looked out towards the ocean.

"Well good for you. It's good that you're getting out of this place." Sandra thought about the handful of other local kids she'd heard say the same thing, or close enough to the same thing. It was like they thought since they knew the water so well it was like their birthright. Most of them couldn't handle the math and dropped out. Sandra looked at Brita. She was the kind of girl that was used to getting what she wanted. She was a pretty girl, with bleached hair straightened around her tanned face sprinkled with freckles.

When Sandra was younger, she was considered pretty enough in the country and not too bad in the city. It had been more than 20 years since she'd seen her husband. She doubted he'd recognize her anyways. She was a mess of dark blonde curls, brown eyes anchoring her pinky skin. But her time in that little town had taken its toll, as had her years of living alone in the sun.

The next day Sandra trained the other girl, Maya. Her family was from Wanchese, but they were thinking about moving further inland for different jobs. Her story was not unique. The islands were changing. When Sandra first moved to the coast it was a place that didn't worry about the damp carpet and sand on the tables all the while still charging as much as anybody, because people had to take what they could get. A place like the Sea Spray didn't make sense. But there were more and more tourists each year, and more

businesses marketed towards them. Those tacky giant beach stores started popping up on the highway and the smell of fast food filled the night air. Anything else would fall away. People can only rebuild so many times before they have to pack up.

Maya wasn't as slow and cautious as Brita, but she was about as quiet. She worked fast but missed things that were right in front of her. The first three rooms Sandra had to point out the sink knobs to her. When they got to the fourth room and she missed them again, Sandra looked at her, and the girl stared blankly back at her, not knowing what she was missing. Sandra walked out of the room, lit a cigarette, and started rearranging the cart. Maya came out and leaned her back against the railing. "So, what's with the vacuum in the back room? The one with the name?"

Sandra looked at her. Not many people noticed it. "Mona Lisa? I don't know, really. It was here when I started." Maya nodded slowly. "I like to call it Nona, cause part of the 'M' is rubbed off."

"Does it even work? It looks ancient." Maya laughed.

"Well you'll find out if you ever get here late." Sandra smiled at her, twisted the ember out of her cigarette, and pushed the cart forward.

That day when Sandra got home there was no list by the door. This wasn't too unusual, Dave didn't always need something, but she checked on him just to be safe. The TV was still loud as she walked through his living room, then his kitchen, until she found him in the hallway from his bedroom. She couldn't tell how long he'd been there, but he

was breathing just fine, and he knew she was there. He looked relieved. She called an ambulance.

It was lucky, in a way, that this was happening now. When she first got to the coast, the closest hospital was all the way up in Elizabeth City. A few years ago, they finally built one in Nags Head, so they didn't have to go very far. He was okay for the most part. No broken bones, but a hell of a lot of bruising that looked so much worse on his thinning skin. He was only able to go home because he didn't live alone.

The first weekend all three of them worked she had Brita and Maya work together to do the downstairs. Sandra liked to do the second floor, even if it seemed like more work, so she could see the beach in between rooms. Most of their guests were spontaneous weekend visitors who couldn't find or afford anything better, and the motel was glad to take them. By lunch time the two girls were laughing and whispering to each other. Sandra thought that was nice, and it saved her from having to talk about herself.

The summer crowd picked up fast and the summer girls did their job. Every day Sandra and whichever girl was working that day would wave hello as they got there and take their lunch break together. On the weekends when all three of them were working, whoever got there last had to pull out the old vacuum from the supply closet. They were good girls, Sandra liked them being around. So often the younger girls that worked here would keep to themselves, but these two, they made work feel less like work. Sandra started to feel a little dread as August loomed over them.

During the week when there weren't as many guests, the rooms weren't as overwhelming. After every couple of rooms, Sandra would lean against the railing smoking a Camel Menthol 99. Across the street on the beach, the late morning sun shone white and glittering off the ocean. She could see the little bodies lying on towels and under umbrellas or playing in the shallows, splashing water around and laughing.

It was an amazing thing, the Outer Banks. That thin strip of land was slowly disappearing every year. Eventually it would be gone. Here, the ocean was just a reminder of how nothing ever lasts. It had been and would continue to be long after Sandra, the Sea Spray, Nona. Maybe it would be all that's left when the sun eats the earth.

The people who lived here understood this, and so it felt like everyone was a tourist. This was a temporary place. There were reminders everywhere. The wind would brush sand from the dunes across the beach road until it fell into the sound on the other side. Walking along the beach, there'd be stilts from old houses out in the water. At Jockey's ridge, the giant sand dune sprawling across the horizon, the tops of trees poked out of the sand as the dune slowly took over a patch of woods. Then why would anyone stay? There's a peacefulness to this sort of living, and an emptiness that doesn't seem like a lack, just a truth.

One day when she got home from work she saw an unfamiliar car in the driveway. Dave almost never had visitors. Sandra opened the front door and heard a younger man's voice call to her from up the half-flight of stairs. She walked in to see

Dave pouting and his son sitting with his fingers laced together. He stood up when he saw her.

“Hi, Sandra, right?” He held out his hand. “I’m Dave’s son, Anthony. Have time to talk?”

She reached out her hand and tried to match his grip. “Is something wrong?” She looked over to Dave, but he avoided her eyes. Anthony shook his head and sat back down, motioning for her to take a seat as well.

“Well, as you know, my dad isn’t getting any younger and we think it’s time for him to move closer to me and my family. Unfortunately, that does mean we will be selling the house.”

Sandra could feel her heartbeat in her head. “How soon?”

“Well of course, it won’t be tomorrow.” Anthony laughed a little. “But we would like to get him settled in his new place in the next month.”

Dave broke his silence. “I don’t know how many time I have to tell you I don’t want to go to a home.”

“Dad, I’ve told you this, it’s a nice place. You’ll still have your freedom, but there will be people there to help you.” He looked back to Sandra. “I know this must be a lot for you and I’m sorry. But after everything that’s happened I can’t let him be here anymore.” He searched her face for some sort of response. “We’re willing to give you the

time you need to find a new place, but we just can't keep this up anymore." She nodded her head.

Sandra was late on Brita's last day, a Saturday. She rushed in, past Mr. Watson with the greeting he gave to those who were late, "Good morning, sunshine! Nice of you to join us." She walked into the back room to get her cart and stopped. The overhead light shone off the shiny plastic of a new vacuum. She backed out of the room and turned to Mr. Watson.

"Where is it?"

"What?"

"Mona Lisa. The vacuum. Where is it?"

"Oh, that old thing. Well, Sam was checking out all the equipment before the laundry got here, and it wouldn't turn on. About time if you ask me. We've been getting complaints about the smell, and you know me, I hate hearing the same thing more than once. But anyways, we threw that one away and got a new one. All you ladies can stop complaining about it now, too. You are all very welcome." Sandra felt her face get hot and she grabbed her cart and the new vacuum and went to work.

During her first summer at the motel she got stuck with the old vacuum. In one of her rooms it got clogged or something and it started making a terrible sound. She tried all the buttons and it started sputtering. Sandra didn't want to lose this job. She was still new in town and this place was a safe enough bet. She kicked the vacuum, harder than she

meant to and then it was silent. She sat down with her back against the wall and cried. Sandra was sure she had blown her chance, and she wiped her face dry. She looked over at the vacuum toppled over beside her and nudged it again with her foot. She thought about the life she'd left behind, the husband who never loved her, the baby she'd never had, her parents' nice suburban home. There wasn't anything to go back to. If it didn't work out here, there would always be somewhere else. She knew there was a kind of freedom in having nothing. She had to make peace with that. She thought of the next place she could go once she was fired from this job, the vacuum screamed to life and Sandra sat on the floor, her laughter drowned out by the vacuum.

At lunch, she sat quietly while the summer girls talked and laughed. The two had spent some time together outside of the motel.

Brita kept glancing at Sandra. She finally asked what was wrong. "It's stupid, it's nothing." The girls looked at her quietly. She sighed. "They got rid of Nona."

"Oh man, really? I thought it'd be here forever." Brita said.

Maya laughed a little. "Yeah are you sure? It might come back tonight." The girls laughed, until Sandra turned away from them, still laughing a little longer. Maya nodded at Brita.

"I've got an idea. Let's all meet back here at sunset." Brita said. Sandra turned back to face them and agreed.

They all came back a few hours after their shift, enough time to have changed out of their uniforms and rest up a bit. Sandra got there first and sat still in her car wondering if she had made a mistake. These girls were less than half her age, what was she doing? At work, they were all each other had, but she never kidded herself that any of these relationships extended outside of the motel. Before she could figure either way, the girls showed up together in Brita's car and they waved her over. She gave them a weak smile as she got out of her car. Sam was just getting in and they asked him to watch over their cars while they were gone. They walked across the road and onto the beach.

Sandra had brought a flask full of cheap whiskey to calm her nerves, and the girls each took a drink while Sandra told them about the summer girls who had come and gone. Sandra took a big gulp from the flask. She let herself sink down into the heat of the whiskey.

Brita grabbed Maya's hand and ran her out to the water's edge, Maya screaming and laughing. Brita ran them right into a wave and they both laughed and hugged each other. They walked back hand in hand, talking to each other.

"You have to come visit me, okay?"

"Of course! It's not like I won't be coming back for breaks and stuff anyways. And if you're ever around Wilmington, let me know and I can show you around. Once I learn everything, anyways."

They kept walking. Brita and Maya tried to hug Sandra to get her wet. Sandra's temples throbbed with each step through the loose sand.

Sandra noticed a flash of light and turned her eyes to the ocean. She gasped, “Look.” Out over the ocean was a storm, lightening striking down into the water. They all watched in silence. It kept going for a few minutes, but it was moving away from them, or falling apart.

As the strikes grew softer, Sandra lifted the flask towards the ocean sky, “To Nona.”

The girls looked at her. “To Nona,” She repeated to herself. Sandra tilted back her head and drank.

OUR BEST SELVES

It was Cora's idea to come to dinner. She thought it would make her feel normal again. This had been their Saturday routine for years. Their friends were always meeting new people and inviting them over. It was a constantly revolving cast. Most of them only saw each other enough to remember names and jobs. All of them got to be who they wanted to be.

She had to talk Manuel into going. He said he wasn't sure she was ready. She said he had agreed not to talk about it anymore. Now here they were, another party with the same people. They hadn't even been at dinner for an hour when she went outside. She was out there for ten minutes before he followed.

"I don't see the point in coming if you're going to sit out here the whole time." He leaned his weight against a pillar. "You should at least get your coat." After a minute he sat on the step beside her, but she wasn't looking at him.

"My dad taught me about constellations when I was a kid. That's Orion. Artemis loved him, but she was tricked into killing him. She wanted to put Orion into the sky, but she could only have him there for part of the year. So I always look up to find him." When she was little she kept track of him making his way across the sky while she was lying in the backseats of cars. Month after month, until he fell below the horizon.

He put his hand on her shoulder. “We can leave, you don’t have to go back in.” She leaned into him. The door opened behind them and Vince poked his head out, letting the music into the night.

“Everything okay out here?”

Cora turned and gave him her best smile. “Yeah, it’s just a lovely night.”

Vince looked at Manuel. “You might want to keep an eye on this one. I think somebody might have had a little too much merlot.” He laughed. “Well don’t enjoy the view too long, we miss you in here.” He shut the door and the air was still again.

Manuel started to get up, she grabbed his sleeve. “I’m sorry.” He pulled away and went inside. She leaned forward, forcing the air out of her lungs.

It had been four months since that girl’s mother showed up screaming at their front door. This woman was a stranger to her and what she was saying didn’t make any sense. Cora didn’t want to open the door, but she needed that woman to go away, to stop shouting.

She opened the door. “Look, you need to leave. It’s night, you’re disturbing people.”

“Did you know? What he did. The cops say there’s nothing they can do. My Kate may be a lot of things, but she’s not a liar.” Manuel appeared behind Cora. “Oh, and here he is now.”

“Ma’am, I don’t know what you think happened, but Kate is a very troubled young woman. I know she’s been having some problems at home, maybe that’s where you need to focus your attention.”

The woman looked at him for a minute before she turned her eyes to Cora. “You got anything to say about this? You just going to let this go?” Cora said nothing. “I guess that’s what I expected. Don’t be surprised when this happens again.” The woman walked back to her car and started the engine, staring back at them for a while before driving off.

Once the tail lights were out of sight, Cora sat slowly down onto the steps in front of their home and shook her head.

Finally, he broke down on the steps beside her. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know how this, how any of this, happened.” He was crying. “Do you still love me? Please say you still love me.” He over to her. Cora stared at her hands in front of her and just kept shaking her head.

Cora met him at her friends’ house. They were her friends first. They’d told her she just had to meet this guy. They called him Manny, and he was like their new pet. She didn’t like him at first. People always make it seem like you’re supposed to feel it right away, but sometimes it takes a while. He was too attentive, like he was tuned into what she was feeling and thinking. She felt invaded. But everyone else was just in love with him, so she played along.

A couple months later he was cooking for them. It was hot, and there were so many people coming in and out of the house that the door was kept open, with only the

screen door shut. It was a big old house near downtown, right by the train tracks and every time one went by the house shook and echoed. Everyone was very excited, one guy was home from his first year at film school, and there was a group playing music in the front of the house. Cora stayed in the kitchen on a stool, despite the heat, and watched him. The cats batted at the screen, waiting for a chance to escape into the yard.

“Why are you staring at me?” Manny said still facing the stove.

“I just like to watch people do the things they care about. Vince told me about culinary school.” Cora answered more honestly than she meant to, so she tried to change the subject. “Is your name short for anything?”

“It’s Manuel.” He turned to her.

“Manuel,” She repeated the name slowly. “It suits you.”

In a few months they were together, and in two years they were married. Cora landed an internship with a local publisher and eventually was hired on. Manuel finished culinary school and did pretty well for himself. Well enough that he could give back to the community in a way he always dreamed of, starting a program for young people to teach them how to cook.

She knew being married to a chef was a lonely life. She knew that before they were engaged. Even when he was still in school and working part time in a kitchen he kept odd hours. Cora was okay with it. Though she did not like to admit it, her solitude meant more to her than most things. After their first few months together, he didn’t cook

for her anymore and she ate most dinners alone before heading to bed early. When he came home she would pretend to be asleep when he kissed her on the forehead.

Because they rarely spent much time together they got along very well. There wasn't time to argue over little things. But they did fight when he told her he was starting the program.

“You knew I wanted to do this. You reacting like this makes it seem like you never thought I could actually do it.”

“It's not that it's just. Isn't this enough? Will it ever be?” Cora fought back tears. “You do stuff like this and it makes me wonder why I'm even here. If you don't want to be around me, why am I here?”

His face went red. “This is not about you.” Cora started crying. Manuel calmed down. “I invited you into my life because I want you to be a part of it. Nothing's going to change that.”

But things did change. After he started his program he started spending more and more time away. He'd give his number out to some of them in case they needed anything, most of them came from bad situations. It wasn't uncommon for him to get a call in the middle of the night and have to talk down some emotional teenager. He was more therapist than cook and they were becoming strangers living in the same house. Over time he stopped talking about his work. Cora couldn't help but resent those kids. She felt like they were taking Manuel away from her.

When they got to the party everyone told Cora how good she looked. She had done her best. She took extra time doing her makeup and curled her hair. She put on her expensive lingerie set and a dress that showed off her small waist and was a little see-through in the right lighting. She wore heels, so her legs looked longer. She wanted everyone to see her. She wanted to look Manuel in the eyes every time someone told him how lucky he was. But it wasn't working. Every time one of their acquaintances spun her around and told her how beautiful she was, Manuel would agree. She'd turn to him smiling, to show him how happy she was, and he'd look proud. Cora refilled her wine glass every chance she got. She knew no one meant anything they said, they were just being nice. She grew bored, so she focused on the stars.

It's not like she didn't know something was wrong. She could feel it, when she was alone. When he was home he was the same as he always had been. The short time that they shared was him doting on her like they'd just met. He always asked about what was going on with her. At first, she liked the attention, but after a while it felt more like he just didn't want to talk about himself.

Sitting on the steps, Cora didn't tell Manuel that there was a different version of the Orion myth. In that one, he kept chasing after the Seven Sisters, and they begged to be put into the stars so he could never have them. Zeus granted their wish, but being Zeus, he also put Orion in the stars. Orion moved across the sky after them, still chasing, year after year.

He never told her what happened, not really. But she knew enough. It came in bits and pieces over the month after the woman showed up at their house. He told her about how the girl, Kate, had tried to reach out to him. He told her about Kate's mother's new boyfriend. How he was just trying to help. He got too close, too involved. She never asked him to tell her. She wanted to pretend it never happened. Like it could be a weird anecdote of a woman who just randomly yelled at them for no reason at all. Like they could laugh about it someday. But he wanted to defend himself. He needed her to understand this incomprehensible thing. He just wanted to help. Maybe he was trying to explain it to himself, too.

The more time passed the less sure she was if she could pretend like it didn't happen. But she didn't know if she could separate her life from his. Sleeping alone was different than being alone.

While he went to get her coat and make excuses for her, Cora traced her view from Orion to find them. The Sisters. She knew that there were way more than seven stars in the cluster, the others were just too dim to see. She searched the spaces in between them for answers.

They took the interstate home. Cora leaned her head against the window and watched the white lines of headlights coming the opposite direction, stretching back over the hills. She thought about how they were just a pair of white lights too. She reached towards Manuel's hand on the gearshift, touching only his pinky before moving her hand back. He glanced towards her. She kept her eyes on the lines of lights until they burned

QUIET ROOM

Chuck called these field trips. He and Evan were the only single guys in the department so whenever there was a conference or meeting Chuck would find something for them to do while they were there. It had been rock climbing in Denver, deep sea fishing in Wilmington, dinner at a haunted brewery in Savannah. Chuck said he wanted to test himself, one step at a time. Evan was just glad it was something new.

But this time, on the way to Minneapolis, Chuck hadn't mentioned any plans other than meeting up with a new business partner.

Evan and Chuck worked for a small electronics company. Nothing very interesting, mostly office printers and things that went inside other things. Recently, they needed to test exactly how loud their products were. That's how they found themselves heading towards this research facility, because they had something no one else in the world had. They had a completely silent room.

So, there they were, on the road from the hotel in the city leading them out into the desolation of middle America. He rested his head against the window, thankful for the silence established on these car rides. The GPS told them to turn right, and Chuck led the car down a road that emptied out at the research facility.

“Here it is. You’re gonna flip.” Chuck pushed his door open with his foot and laughed. He stared at the building, arms crossed and waited for Evan to join him. Evan didn’t know what they were looking at, but Chuck seemed excited enough by it. “Just think of what the guys at work will say.”

The room worked like this: With no other sound, you become the sound. Our inner workings aren’t silent; the world is just too noisy. But with everything else blocked out like that, people would go crazy. You can’t stand up after a while because we use sounds to tell us how to move. Of course, this wasn’t the room’s purpose; it was designed to test sound in a perfectly controlled environment, but some people were curious. People like Chuck.

Evan went along with Chuck’s field trips because he had more to gain than lose, ultimately. Sure, if they hadn’t had a spotter in Denver he would’ve fallen to his death, or at least to a great deal of pain. And so what if the Dramamine hadn’t worked out on the ocean and in videos of Chuck reeling in a small shark there Evan was, in the corner, head hanging over the railing. But he was a part of something now. Evan had stories to tell, and he was part of other people’s stories.

In Evan’s two years with the company before Chuck’s transfer from factory management, his coworkers barely knew his name. Evan just wasn’t that kind of guy. He kept his head down, didn’t like to meet up outside of work. It didn’t bother him that his coworkers thought he was weird. But now, their boss would seek him out to talk about upcoming projects. Now, they would go out to the bar after work, their department head’s

idea, Chuck would tell their stories as well as his own, people would clap him on the back and late at night Chuck would look at Evan, eyes sober, they would put a hand on each other's shoulders and speak of their friendship in ways men rarely do outside of late night whiskey-saturated confessionals.

Evan knew there was more to Chuck than the excitement and adventure. He had the job and he had Evan. That was it. Their coworkers were too polite to bring it up at work, but Chuck was too old for this sort of thing. They thought he should have a family by now, a little collage of pictures of his wife on their wedding day, his daughter graduating kindergarten, his son playing little league. Instead he was still running around, Evan in tow. But Chuck was harmless and fun to have around the office, so they kept their thoughts to themselves and didn't invite either of them to dinner parties.

They walked into the building and asked for the director. While they waited, Evan looked around the lobby while Chuck chatted with the receptionist. The whole building was purpose-oriented, the seating no more than it needed be, pamphlets in black and white and no pictures other than the logo for the company, the desk the receptionist sat at just a rectangle of black. It was a specialized field, there was no need to impress anyone beyond the quality of their work and their resources.

The director came out and Chuck was very happy to see him. With everyone properly introduced, they set off on the tour.

There were big open rooms and labs that the director pointed to for test development, test runs, analyzing results, running those results against other results,

starting over again. Different chambers for different tests, employees staring out at them from meetings and computer screens. Evan wondered if this happened often, people coming to see the silent room.

The director led them to his office, where they talked about the actual reason for their visit. All the paperwork had already gone through, it wasn't about that, their company just liked to reach out to their new associates to "make them feel like they were part of a family," a policy marked by its southern roots and a need to guilt trip as many people as possible.

"I'm so glad you two could make it all the way out here. I hope you're ready for the chamber, many have tried but no one defeats it." Evan thought the director sounded more like a carny than a scientist, but he guessed that might happen when you have something no one else has.

They stopped in front of the room. The director explained how it worked, again, and said that at any time they felt uncomfortable they could get out, and if they didn't come out, after a certain amount of time he'd come get them.

"There's no need for pride, I can't last longer than ten minutes myself, and the longest anyone's been in is 45, and he suffered for it." The director looked down for a second. "Anyways, it's just about the experience, all you have to do is listen."

Chuck always went first. It was a sign of good faith on his part, as these were all his ideas. There was a door next to the quiet room that housed the observation and recording equipment. Evan followed the director into the observation room. Chuck didn't

shut up for the first minute, then he sat in silence for the rest of his time. Ten minutes. He came out confused by sudden chaos of sound, but still laughing. “Ev, you’re up!”

Evan walked into the room. It looked like randomly arranged corrugated foam was stuck to the wall. From their research into the facility, he knew it wasn’t random, this is what dampened the echoes. It looked surprisingly low tech for what it was. It didn’t seem that special.

“This is it, bud,” Chuck’s voice surprised him. “Don’t go crazy on me now!”

Evan laughed a little, then the door shut and took all the life out of the room. His own voice sounded unnatural and it was left with everything else on the other side of that door.

And for a moment that was it. He existed in the nothingness like how he imagined floating through space must be. There was no more oxygen in his lungs and he felt himself fading away. Then his blood rushed through his ears. He was back on earth. The dull thud of his heart almost took over everything, vibrating his fingertips. A hurricane at sea in his stomach, waves crashing into his esophagus. Every zap from his nerves to his muscles thundered.

When he was seven he spent the summer on his grandparents’ farm. There were just a few chickens in the backyard and the field beside the house was tilled and planted with corn, squash, tomatoes and sunflowers. The rest was woods and the road that ran past the house was nearly abandoned. Every day his grandmother, Lila, made meals out of the food they’d picked from the yard. He’d have to go out on the front porch and shuck

the corn or snap the beans. It was boring, but his mother insisted he experienced how she grew up.

One afternoon he was walking through the rows of sunflowers at the far end of the property when it started to get dark overhead. It was so subtle at first that he didn't notice until he realized he didn't have to squint his eyes against the sun anymore and he looked up and saw the black clouds forming a funnel in the distance. He had even mistaken the distant thunder for quarry blasts down the road. He saw a burst of lightening followed by a deep growl. He started to run back to the house.

The rain caught him about halfway back, near the shade trees. It came down so hard he stopped for a minute and looked back at the crops. The sunflowers were arching downwards and when the wind hit them they touched the ground dragging petals and pollen into a Morse code across the field. The tomatoes looked broken, hanging limp from their cages.

A bright flash spun him around and he saw the oak tree nearest smoldering from a deep gash curving up its trunk into the canopy. He knew his grandmother was right through that window, he could see it. She would be washing the dishes from lunch. Why wasn't she worried? He wanted to scream out for help, but the storm drowned out his voice. The thunder roared and he ran, branches and leaves whipping his face and arms all the way to the driveway. He laid down flat on his back on the gravel, arms and legs spread as the clouds started to move away.

He dug his palms into the rocks until he had deep red grooves to match the faint slashes from the trees. His wet t-shirt clung to each rib moving in and out, ragged at first and then still, he held his breath trying to slow it, then expanding like they might explode outwards in a circle on the rocks.

The door's hinges complained as it opened, and he grabbed his head and stared at the floor. The fluorescent lights screamed, and he could hear other bodies making sounds now.

"We have to whisper or it's too much." This must be the director. All Evan could hear was spit against lips and tongue slapping the roof of a mouth. He stared at the floor.

"Man, you didn't have to do this." Chuck put his hand on Evan's shoulder. The rough skin on his fingers caught on the fabric like Velcro ripping apart. "Come on, let's get outta here."

The director handed Evan ear plugs, which just muffled everything but didn't take it away, like putting a pillow between your head and a speaker. He stood up, his hips grinding and tendons snapping back into place. Chuck shook hands with the director, apologizing for Evan, then both shaking their heads as if to say, what a shame, what a shame. Chuck started talking again and slapped the director on the back, and they both laughed and so Evan knew everything was okay, this too would become part of their stories. He and Chuck walked outside.

It might have been lucky that there weren't any other cars on the road, but their feet hitting the ground, the birds, the wind, it was all still too much. Evan bit his knuckles

while Chuck turned on the engine and they went out to the main road. How long had he been in there? What had the director said about the time? He could hear a watch ticking but he couldn't see it and he couldn't articulate to Chuck what he wanted. They drove back in silence.

When they got back to their room, Chuck dropped him off and went to get them food. Evan could now at least type to him on his phone, but he didn't like to hold it because there was a whining noise coming through the speakers.

Chuck brought them steaks to make them, or maybe just Chuck feel better. He wanted them to eat together, but then there it was. The scraping of the knife on the plate, the connective tissue of the meat giving way under Chuck's teeth. The slurping of the water and the oozy gravy splashing against the force of the bread being slammed against the plate. The sound of Chuck swallowing, the food falling into the acid pit of his stomach. Evan ran.

He could hear Chuck yelling behind him. The stairs were less noisy than the elevator and took him past all the people, but he needed to get out before Chuck caught him. Evan had become used to his own noise, resigned to it. his own heartbeat was enough. Everything else was the problem. He dropped his phone from his pocket somewhere in the lobby. He didn't have the car keys. Would Chuck know where he was going?

Outside was worse. He thought about just running, but there were too many bodies here and it would take too long. He wanted to try to get a decent night's sleep. Evan caught a cab and scribbled the address onto a sheet of paper.

The facility was dark when he got there. It was night now, and Evan walked up to the front door. He took his coat off and wrapped it around his hand. His hand connected with the glass.

Evan was 11 when he begged his mom to take him with her to work. A building was going to be demolished near her office, it was on the news the night before. Around lunchtime they walked the two blocks over to the viewing sight. Evan made sure he got a good spot. When the charges went off he was terrified by the mass destruction. It didn't make any sense. He closed his eyes. His mother carried him back to her office.

The aftershock wore off and he went inside the building. He couldn't hear an alarm so he tried to find the room again. All the doors were shut, so it took a little while. Then he opened a door, the walls greeted him and he closed the door behind him. There was still a chair in the center of the room and he propped it against the handle to try to preserve his home as long as possible.

When they finally got to him the sun was starting to light up the sky. Chuck had called the director in the night and they called some professionals to help. There was an additional struggle to get the door open while making as little noise as possible. But at the end there he was, asleep in the floor. Later he would say he'd never had such a restful night's sleep. Later he would think of the ocean.

THROUGH THE DOOR

On Saturday Jeff called to me to tell me about the party that night. There were a lot of parties. I biked over to his house before it got dark, he only lived a few blocks away.

Jeff and his mom lived in an apartment two blocks from the train tracks and one block from the chicken place Jeff worked at after school and on the weekends. No one was home when I got to the house. I sat on the curb and picked at acorns.

“Neal!” Jeff leaned out the window of his car when he pulled into his driveway. “You ready for tonight?” Zach was with him. He was on the track team, a sprinter. He trained year-round and was one of the best in the county. Zach and Jeff grew up across the street from each other until Jeff’s dad left and he and his mom had to move to the poor side of town, a few blocks over. Zach enjoyed the perks of being a lesser jock, so Jeff got to tag along. The three of us pretended we were all best friends.

Zach laughed in the passenger seat while I got into the back, kicking plastic ringed six packs out of my way. “Sorry, man, we had to go by Zach’s house to get some beer. Can’t come empty-handed.”

“It’s fine, let’s just go already.” I leaned back into the seat and took a cigarette from Jeff.

“You heard the man, let’s get this show on the road.” Jeff said, and he backed out of the driveway, chirping his tires a little as he pulled away.

I only met Jeff when I moved to town in third grade. After we moved, I felt like an alien. My sister, Lucy, was too busy worrying her way through middle school to notice anything else. Jeff was the first kid to talk to me, who was nice to me. I’d stuck by him ever since. I think maybe he liked getting a fresh start. Everyone here had known each other since birth, they’d been pinned since kindergarten.

The guy throwing the party’s name was Owen. His parents travelled a lot up to Cherokee to go gambling, so he and his sister were alone most weekends. They lived in a one-story ranch surrounded by trees out in the county. About a dozen cars already parked in the front yard. We parked and unloaded the beer into the house.

The scene was typical that night. There was a bonfire in the backyard and people were smoking around it, drinking Natural Light and laughing. Inside it was more of the same. People came and went. I stayed outside, smoking Pall Malls and throwing the filters into the fire. Jeff stayed with me for a while. These weren’t really my people. No one at school was, except for Jeff, and I guess Zach.

People started to fall off few by few. There was this girl, Tara, everyone had a thing for her. She liked the attention, even though she didn’t ever really let it go anywhere. She was Owen’s sister, about a year younger. Owen treated her both like a prize horse and like a precious secret. Say things like, “just look at her, everyone wants a piece,” but also, “this is my sister, if you touch her I’ll kill you.”

I noticed her, like everyone else always noticed her, laughing and stumbling walking with Zach into the house. They'd been talking on and off for a few weeks; this was the natural progression. Her brother was already too drunk to notice, I wasn't even sure where he was. But if the night was going to end in a fight I wanted to be there to jump in, so I walked inside. People were crowding the place, but I saw them go into her room. Jeff was standing in the hall. He stared into his beer for a few minutes and then followed into the room.

The whole house started to go yellow as I walked over. I could feel my blood shaking my hand on the doorknob and there was a faint moaning. I did not want to open the door.

She was damn near passed out on the bed, her shirt half off and her jeans hanging around one bare foot. Jeff was on her. Zach was leaning on the wall, "Hey, what the hell man shut the fucking door." I didn't move. Jeff looked back at me. Zach pulled me into the room. "Dude, come the fuck on, what is your problem?"

I was five years old, there was a thunderstorm and I was scared. I walked across the hall to my big sister's room. She made me feel safe, she'd let me stay with her as long as I wanted. I cracked open her door and I saw our dad. He was lying in bed with her under the covers. Her eyes found mine in the dark. I said nothing, closed the door and went back to bed.

I pulled Jeff off Tara by the shirt and slugged him in the jaw. He fell to the floor and I was on top of him. I grabbed his hair and bashed his head into the wood floor. He

got his knee into my stomach, but I fought through it to get him again on the cheek. Zach pulled me up and I turned on him, but Jeff came from behind and nailed me in the kidney. I fell to my knees. Jeff kicked me to the ground. “Fucking psycho.” Zach said. I stayed down on my side.

Jeff ran his hand through his hair. “Now what?” He looked to Zach.

“We gotta get out of here now.” Zach grabbed Jeff’s arm and pulled towards the door. I tried to fix Tara’s clothes, but I didn’t want to touch her. She stirred a little and tried to pull away from me. If anyone saw me in here I’d be dead. I ran out after them.

Zach had the car started and Jeff was in the passenger seat. I could see Jeff fighting with Zach in the car as I ran up to them. I stopped short of the car and while Zach tried to book it and Jeff opened the door to get him to brake. Jeff said from his half open door, “Get in.” And I did.

We were silent on the drive back to Jeff’s house. I sat in the back with my forehead leaving a fog on the window. Jeff was in the passenger seat with the collar of his shirt pressed to his cheek, leaning back hard into the headrest.

Behind Jeff’s house was an empty lot with a fire pit where we’d have bonfires and drink. We walked back there almost automatically. Zach stared at both of us with his arms crossed, pacing a little. “What the fuck was that back there?” They were both looking at me now. “If someone saw something Owen’ll have us all killed.”

Jeff's face was dark. He finally said, "It's really not a big deal. It's not like they remember."

My face got hot. "What do you mean, they?" I looked up at them for the first time since I fell to the floor in that room. Jeff and Zach looked at each other. My voice went high. "Is this what you guys do?"

"Come on, you know Jeff has trouble getting girls." Zach shrugged and ran his hand across the back of his neck.

I started walking away. I could hear Jeff yell out, "You're not going to tell anyone, right?"

When I got back to Jeff's house I grabbed my bike and started off through the dim lit street towards town. Rockwell was a ghost town at this time of night. I pedaled through downtown, the empty street turned orange from streetlights. I kept going.

My sister moved out when she was 17, four years ago. There wasn't screaming, nobody threw anything. My parents just sat on the couch watching the news while she took her stuff out to her boyfriend's car, box after box. They never said goodbye. I'm not sure if she even told them she was leaving.

She was mad at me that day. I didn't want to help her leave me. I sat on the floor in my bedroom and I could hear her talking to her boyfriend across the hall, dragging boxes around and shoving clothes into trash bags. I heard the car engine start outside and she came into my room.

“Hey, Neal,” She sat down beside me on the floor. I wouldn’t look at her. “Listen, they’re probably not going to want us to talk anymore.” She took my chin in her hand and turned my eyes to hers. “I hope you understand one day.” She kissed me on the forehead and shut the door on her way out.

I stopped outside my house. I put my bike under the carport and sat in the damp grass. My sister was right. I hadn’t talked to her since the day she left. My parents told me she was a bad influence, she would only get me into trouble. I didn’t even know where she lived. I watched the gnats blanket the yard until the sky started to lighten, then collapsed onto my bed.

I woke up to late morning sun and my phone ringing from my back pocket. Jeff.

“Sorry things got so crazy last night.” He waited for me to accept, but I stayed quiet. “I don’t care if you’re still mad, you really need to come over here now.” There was something in his voice.

“Fine. Fire pit?” I hung up and wiped the sweat off my face.

When I got there, Zach was kneeling, trying to catch a pile of leaves on fire with a lighter. Jeff was pacing a little bit, like there was something in him he couldn’t control. Zach didn’t look up, and Jeff couldn’t keep his eyes on my face for too long.

“Owen knows.” Jeff finally blurted out.

“He does not.” Zach shot Jeff a look. “Well, he knows something happened. He called this morning, said he woke up and found his sister and figured the rest. He’s calling around to see what people know.” He went back to his fire.

“So, I’m here because, what, nothing is actually wrong?”

“Basically.”

“No, he’s going to figure it out. He knows we left early.” Jeff was almost crying.

“How can he know? He was passed out in his parents’ bathtub.” The fire caught and Zach picked up a stick to poke the embers. “He said she doesn’t remember anything.”

“Why are you freaking out about it this time? Why are you trying to drag me into it?”

“Because you caused a scene. Odds are if anyone figures it out, it’ll be because you hit Jeff.” Zach pointed the stick at me. “Look, we’re not trying to cause any more trouble, not with you, not Owen, not Tara. We just need to know that if it comes down to it, if anyone asks any questions, we need to know you have our backs.”

I stared at the ground. Jeff finally came to himself and put his hands on my shoulders.

“She doesn’t remember anything. No harm, no foul, right?” He searched my face for an answer.

“Right.” I said. He hugged me too hard. Behind him, Zach spit into the pile of ash.

The next week Tara wasn’t at school. Owen scowled his way through the halls, looking for someone to fight. I kept my head down. That Thursday, though, it didn’t matter. He caught me in the bathroom after lunch.

I was washing my hands when he came in. He leaned against the door. “Hey, Neal, right? You were at my house Saturday.”

“Yeah, I was.” I turned off the faucet and reached for a paper towel.

He walked over and put his hands on the sink beside me. “Did you hear what happened to my sister?” I looked over to him. “Somebody took her into her room and fucked her while she was passed out.” He looked back at me. “That something you know anything about?”

I kept his eye. “No.” I threw the paper towel away and walked out the door. I could hear him punch the tile from the hall.

One summer there was a big thunderstorm at night. The thunder got so loud it shook the glass in the windows. I ran to my sister’s room and we sat under the blanket facing each other. She held a little flashlight between us. I was crying. “Neal, you don’t ever have to be afraid at night. I will always be there for you.” She paused. “And you’ll always be there for me too, right? No matter what?”

I wiped my nose and nodded my head. “No matter what.” We stayed like that for what felt like hours, until my sister finally fell asleep holding onto the light between us.

THEIR BODIES DON'T MOVE LIKE OURS DO

It's a department store. It's nothing interesting. I've spent months here walking the aisles and folding pants. I've seen managers come and go, I've trained new people how to manage their time and how to check the fitting rooms to make sure they don't get clogged up with piles of tried-on clothes. I always smile at the janitor and try to stay out of his way. Two months ago I was employee of the month. I hold my smile when customers complain about prices. I am late sometimes. I do not take extra shifts.

Before I started working here, there was not much else. I mean, there were the normal things, the first day of school pictures in front of the maple tree, the first boyfriend who lied about kissing me at the movies, the early mornings spent in the attic in secret going through the clothes my great grandmother made for babies that would never be born, my artistic period where I thought I could be a great painter, realizing I couldn't get into any college with my grades except for the trade school the next town over. Trying to make it on my own, failing miserably. Moving back in with my parents. This job was supposed to be something small for me to do while I got back on my feet, as my mother called it. The house is paid off so they don't ask for much. My dad slips me some gas money as his form of compassion.

I was alone in the department one day. In the fitting room, there you were, one of you, changing with the door cracked open Your boyfriend or whatever he was to you, you didn't seem like you would be married to each other, was sitting on the bench beside the room. But the mirrors reflected your half-naked body to where I was, and I watched you change in and out of clearance bathing suits and jeans for ten minutes, just around the corner so neither of you could tell what I was doing. You talked to the man, your dark skin against the wooden door, small breasts dangling when you bent to pull on jeans. I folded sweaters on the floor and tried to forget.

It was the third time I'd heard the same song that day. Maybe. Sometimes they're hard to tell apart. I walked the pale tile floor marked with intersecting lines of black caulk running in and out between sections of carpet that always looked dirty, I'm sure that's what it's designed to do. Hide the dirt. It's why the tile is bright but not white, that would show too much. It's always dangerous moving out of our territories, into other departments. You all think we know every item in this place, like we're uploaded in real time to keep track of inventory. I don't know any more about the difference between the comfort plus mattress pad and the deluxe one than you do, I swear. Or where exactly the infant's bowties are, or why there aren't any coffee makers in blue. I turn to keep in my area.

The worst thing about this job is that I get to see who you really are. I get to be invisible until I am useful or bothersome. You don't see me, even though we went to school together for 6 years or used to work together down at the gas station, but I get to

see you leave the clothes you tried on in a pile on the floor or yell at a cashier for not taking your expired coupon. Or you watch me fold a table of jeans and come behind me and pick a pair up, unfold them, examine them against the light, the stitching on the back pockets, the way the denim would stretch around your hips, and then put them down, crumpled, a mark on the face of the store.

In the breakroom they leave out chips from the Mexican restaurant a couple stores down from us. When no one is around, I eat as many as I can, checking behind me and again and again for cameras along the ceiling. The crunching gets so loud, I have to cover my ears. I never bring lunches with me to work, I feel weird using the fridge, rotating other people's food around to fit mine wrapped in a plastic bag. For shorter shifts it's not a big deal, but it's taken some time to train my stomach for eight hours. The chips are small lapses.

I want to make my way through the store tearing apart everything I can. It's the same thing that makes me want to break the mirrors in the dressing rooms and leave the sink running in the bathroom or pull my hair out or cut the skin off my arm. I can hardly resist it here alone, the secret solitude of fabric and fluorescent lights. I crawled in between the racks and shoved shirtsleeves into my ears. Until one of you tapped me with your scuffed loafer and gave me a weird look.

The mannequin in active wear is undressed again. This is the best part. I swear they have different mannequins for each department, cause the ones in active are so much more defined than the rest. They have nipples, like there's any reason for a mannequin to

have nipples. They have muscle definition. But they're just white torsos, with enough arm for a shirt sleeve to fall over and enough thigh that only shorts don't look weird on them. I wish I could take them home. Just one. They're just so nice to look at, a perfect form. Where their heads should be a metal ring pops out, so they can hang on a rack. This makes them just tall enough to put my arm around their waists, like they're my date to prom. When a mannequin is undressed, we must dress it as soon as we see it. We don't want to be indecent, what with exposed plaster bits of people hanging around. This is a family store after all.

I take her hook-head off the rack and lay her down on the carpet. This makes it easier. You see, their bodies don't move like ours do, so it makes fitting clothes on them more difficult, even though they are quite small. It doesn't really matter what you put on them, so long as there's a good enough range of sizes for people. What's on the mannequin always sells out quicker than anything else. That's why the mannequins end up with their clothes stolen. Some of the others take joy in picking out the outfit. I like to run my fingers across their ribs, down the hip bone, grab onto a thigh. It's familiarity, but her hook-head can't judge me, and I don't have to be afraid. By next week she'll be naked again. The process repeats.

I've started to feel like I'm underwater. It's harder to move here. There must be something under the concrete, I feel pulled down. It was hard to tell at first, it happened so slowly, like there's someone under there turning a dial up notch by notch. I don't know how to prove it yet. I don't know how to get through the floor.

Did you know that rayon is made from wood? It's cellulose, that's it. I like rayon most of the time. The way it feels, not oppressive like polyester. They used to call it mother-in-law silk in its first iteration. Which is kinda messed up considering it tended to catch on fire.

I lost my watch today. Well, I know where it is, but I can't get it back. One of you had left some jeans on the floor and I bent down to pick them up. My wrist started shaking and pulling to the floor. My watch snapped down against the tile, I had to leave it behind. I watched it get lost in the industrial buffer when the cleaning man came. It was cheap anyway. The cleaning man probably fished it out after he was done and threw it in the trash compactor with all the boxes and plastic wrappings the clothes come in, the trash from the bathrooms and frozen dinner packages from the break room. It all gets crushed down together into its essence and gets picked up by a truck to get taken to the county dump where people can kill the vultures cause they attack people.

I think the active wear mannequin is getting sick. She's slumping at the shoulders; her bones are starting to poke through. I found some display fruit in the home department and brought it to her. I unscrewed her hook-head and tried to stuff rubber grapes into the hole. They just popped back out, I keep trying. Another one of you, an older woman, sees me on the floor with the mannequin and quickly looks away. You don't want to get involved in these things. I try ripping the grapes apart, no luck. Maybe she's given up.

I was pacing the department and the music stopped. A song ended and the pause before the next one never ended. I slowed my steps as I realized there was no next song. I

looked around and started laughing. I couldn't help it. After about a minute my laughing slowed and my jaw started to shake. I stood motionless. When the music started again I grabbed onto a folding table for support. I kept my face down until I was sure I could walk again.

Women keep asking me what I'm doing. "Have you lost weight?" they ask. "Is it on purpose?" they ask. I tell them how much I've lost and they congratulate me. My mother tells me how beautiful I look and wants to buy me pretty clothes that fit. A nice lady at the registers tells me every day that I'm wasting away. That seriously, I should stop now. But I'm not doing anything, how can I stop? I can't focus long enough to eat, it's not like all of this is for fun.

I guess it's a good thing though, that weight being gone. No one notices that I don't wear a bra. It's gotten stronger, what's under the floor. Last week I almost fell over when I walked into the building. I've learned to cover as much skin as possible so that if I have to crawl it doesn't hurt too much. No one's making me come back, but I do it anyways. Maybe I can feel the pull from outside the store. None of you really seem to notice its pull, but you did notice me crawling across the floor to the break room. But really there aren't many of you that are bad, you just don't understand what you're looking at.

Sometimes I like to lay here, with my face on the tile. I can see all the pairs of shoes walking by, making different clicks and taps. The reflection of the fluorescent tubes quiver off everything. If I concentrate hard enough, I can hear a pulsing, a creaking,

like the entire store is breathing. It's comforting, in a way. I know someday I won't be able to drag myself out of the store. After long enough I may hear whispers in the climate control or see messages smudged on the floor in shoe scuffs. Maybe I'll even sink beneath the concrete and find someone under it controlling a dial. Mostly I remain invisible, unless I am needed, which is less and less. Generally, you just step around me.

I'm clearing the fitting room. It takes most of my time now. Folding this brand with the front facing out and another with the back facing out. Everything's by feel, it's hard to get my head off the floor for too long. Is this shirt supposed to hang? I'll have to leave it on the floor, I can't reach the rack. There's a pair of running gloves in the corner of a fitting room. They're slippery-stretchy, but spandex is just an anagram for "expands." I take the gloves by the hand and lead them to their home.

FAT GIRLFRIEND

My momma always told me, “I never loved my body, but it’s okay cause it don’t love me neither.” I couldn’t ever figure out what she meant. I thought she was gorgeous. Thick rippling thighs stopped her legs from crossing at the knee. Her belly overflowed the top of her shorts when she sat down. I saw her in a bikini once when I was real little and her whole body looked like it was made of cottage cheese. I liked cottage cheese.

Of course she tried all sorts of diets. Different drinks and videotapes. I’d do aerobics with her in the living room before I would get tired and sit on the floor in front of the couch. As I got older she made me follow along all the way through. Said nobody would want a fat girlfriend. I got the feeling she was mostly talking to herself out loud but using my name. I didn’t get why anyone would want to look like the people on the tapes. You could see all the strands of thin muscle on the men and the women didn’t look like any woman I ever saw. I just shrugged and went along with the moves.

I grew up like my momma despite the aerobics tapes and meal replacement shakes: thick hipped and busting through every shirt I owned. In school, some of the kids gave me a hard time. They always do, especially if your name’s different enough. But I always felt sorry for the kids with names so boring no joke could be made. That’s the worst thing, isn’t it? Being forgettable?

But my name was a joke, sort of. Momma loved to tell me the story about the velvet Elvis painting. “Your daddy used to sing to me like Elvis when we met. Over and over again, when he’d show up at my doorstep or when we were in the back of his Impala, and I’d push him and tell him to go find himself another girl.” We had just gone through a drive-thru on our way to church. Momma got a ham biscuit and a Diet Coke, and I had a cheese biscuit and an orange juice. She was waving her biscuit in between bites as she talked. “And you know even then I was out at the yard sales every Saturday and that’s where I saw that god-awful thing. Two-foot wide velvet Elvis. So I brought it home and hung it on my wall. And when you were born your daddy wasn’t there so I named you Priscilla because he couldn’t stop me.”

That’s how I became Priscilla Songbird. My mother was just spiteful enough to make me the punch line of a joke that only she knows.

I met him when I was 19 working at the Dairy Queen for the summer. He was a little bit older, but I never asked for any numbers, and he had dark eyes that went on forever into his head. It was a hot night, even for Landis in July, and I was sweating through my uniform in that little building. He ordered a hot fudge sundae and smiled real wide when I bent over to get his change out of the drawer. It was a nice smile, the kind you wanted to keep around. He was still there an hour later when I got off, leaning against the hood of his Trans Am still smiling big at me as I walked to my car.

He was there again the next night, too. He ordered a banana split and when I got off, there he was again, this time leaning against the hood of my Pinto.

“If you dent the hood you’re gonna have to pay me for it.”

“I just had to introduce myself to you. Aren’t many girls like you around here. You’re something special. You can’t leave something like that sitting in the window.”

“Something, huh?” Well who are you then, seeing something so special about me?”

“Ray Clifton, sweetheart. You’re gonna remember that name.”

“It was nice meeting you, but I think I’ll be on my way home now.” I started the car and backed up, just a little, just to knock him off his feet. He stumbled, hands on his knees and laughed at the ground. I turned the car around to leave.

“Wait, you ain’t gonna return the favor, darling?” He ran to my window.

“I’m Priscilla Songbird, mister, you’re gonna remember my name.”

The next week I was naked on his couch, a thin blanket spread half over us. He touched me like other boys had, trying to hold everything in one hand despite nothing fitting in any hand. When he came he tried to call out my name, but the “cilla” just turned into a groan when he collapsed. After a minute, he started laughing so hard he was out of breath.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. I was right, is all. You’re not like most girls.”

“How so?”

“Most girls, well you know, bigger girls, they’re mostly the same.”

“You mean the cow girls?”

“I’m not talking about rodeo.”

“I’m not either. Those girls. Big, dumb eyes, move slow, talk slow, always chewing something over. They’ll follow you anywhere.”

“Yeah, I guess you could put it that way.” He laughed.

“They don’t know how to stand up for themselves. They just go around doing what you want them to.” I rolled onto my back. “I promised myself I wouldn’t be one of them.”

“Well, I think it’s safe to say you succeeded. You grow up on a farm or something?”

“No. It just seemed right.” I sat up and pulled my dress over my head.

My momma was a different type of big girl. The kind always apologizing for herself. She wouldn’t be seen eating anything fried in public, even though at home was a different story. She had her damn tapes. The workout clothes. The Thigh Masters. When she talked to her friends, the other receptionists from the doctor’s office, on the phone she was always talking about the new thing she was trying or how if my daddy hadn’t left it wouldn’t be so hard, raising a girl by herself.

I still lived with her, in my same bedroom I grew up in. We had an understanding that I would stay out of her way and she would stay out of mine. She worked and I took care of the house, I worked nights for spending money and we didn't ask each other questions.

It was late when I got back to momma's house. All the lights were off but I knew better than to believe she was asleep. Despite our rule, she still liked to ask questions in her own sort of way. I had to walk past her room to get to mine, and sure enough there she was, and she called out to me from her bed.

I leaned in the doorway. The room was dark except for the glow of the TV, that thing was almost never got turned off. She was watching a Lifetime movie, I think, she liked the ones about bad men so she could keep on blaming my dad. On her rocking chair was a pile of clothes from every morning when she tried on an outfit, didn't like it, tore it off and tried on another. She was laying in bed with the covers pulled up just below her chin and her fingers gripping the edge of the blanket on either side of her face like a little kid scared of something.

"I'm glad you're having fun, honey. It's so good to be young. You know when I was your age I wished I could go out with lots of boys, but that was never the plan for me."

"Momma,"

"What's his name? Does he treat you right?"

“Momma, please don’t start.”

“I just want you to be careful, now. I’d hate for something like what happened to me to happen to you. You’re so young.”

“I’m what happened to you.”

“Now you know you’re my whole life, baby, don’t try to start a fight over this. I’m just trying to help you and you’re telling me I don’t love my only child, my sweet girl.”

I walked over to the bed and laid down beside her. “I’m sorry momma, I know you’re just looking out for me.” She stroked my hair and leaned her forehead against mine.

“I love you, baby. Don’t you ever forget that.”

“I know. I love you too.”

When her hand stopped moving I knew she was asleep, and I just lay there watching the movie for a while. It was hard to tell what was going on, the volume was most of the way down and it was half over, but everyone looked very serious and it was always night. There were flashes of gunfire as I fell asleep.

I found Velvet Elvis when I was eight. Momma had gone out for a while and I was playing in her room. I opened her closet and there it was wedged behind some boxes.

I already knew the story by heart; I think she'd been telling me as soon as I was born. I pulled it out and ran my fingers around the edges of the King's head. He was traced in purple and fell away to black. He looked ugly and cheap. I wondered if this is what meeting my father would feel like.

That afternoon, momma came home from work to find me dancing to "Burning Love" on her bed, Velvet Elvis watching from the corner. She turned off the radio and grabbed me by the arm. She dragged me to my room and slammed the door. She never said a word. I spent the rest of the day in my room alone, until I heard her come by and leave dinner on a tray in front of my door. That was her way of saying sorry, just not enough to talk about it.

I started seeing Ray more often, even staying over. I cleaned his house while he was at work. He was doing construction on some new houses outside of town. Some nights he'd bring friends home to drink. They were always dirty and their shirts were too big and torn. I didn't much care for beer but I'd bring them out of the fridge and Ray'd slap me on the ass when I walked away.

One night after more drinks than usual he called me over. He tried to pull me closer to where he was sitting on the couch by my hips. He barely looked away from the two guys sitting across from him.

“Listen,” He said, looking serious. “Nobody’ll tell you this, but you got to find a girl like this one. Most fun you’ll ever have.” Those other guys turned to me and nodded their heads, looking me over, like they knew something.

I pulled away from him and went outside. I could hear him call after me and then they all laughed. I stayed out on the porch for a few minutes wishing he was dead. I kept wishing all the way back home to the TV in momma’s room lighting up the night. I knew the next night I worked, there’d he’d be, sitting on the hood of my car looking sorry and I’d follow him home.

But he didn’t show up. I was distracted at the front counter, missing orders or getting them wrong, trying to keep track of the cars in the parking lot. After we shut down I walked out, sure I’d see him, but there was only my car and the dumpster. I unlocked the door and sat down with my hands on the wheel. For a while I just stayed like that, half hoping he’d show, half just not knowing what else to do. I went home straight to my room and laid flat on bed with my arms crossed until I fell asleep.

The next night he wasn’t there either. I drove to his house after closing, not even really meaning to. His car was there, along with a couple more. I rolled down my window and I could hear a little laughter leaking out the thin walls. I thought about walking to the door, about seeing some other girl in there maybe, or just him and his drunk friends. Or that maybe me wishing him dead all those times worked. I couldn’t tell what I wanted to find. It didn’t matter. It all meant the same thing.

Back home, I walked as quiet as I could towards the TV light of mamma's room. Standing at the edge of the doorframe, I could see her there in bed, asleep on her stomach, her hands bunching up the pillow under her head. There was a movie playing, the same kind there always was, half over and the volume down. I laid in bed beside her for a minute staring at the screen before I picked up the remote and turned the TV off. In the dark for the first time in years, the moon glow crept in from the window.