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These stories explore the vulnerabilities of three distinct characters; each of them young and struggling with the isolation and loneliness that besets us when we feel like we don't "fit in." Like most of us, they want an easy answer, a simple solution to patch up wounds and move on. Life is rarely so simple. In these stories, they begin to open their eyes to the complexity of the world as well as its wonder.

ALL THIS SPLENDOR:
THREE STORIES

by

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For my husband, Kent

APPROVAL PAGE

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LOOK AT ME

Darla had come to dread Wednesday evenings at The Actors' Lab, a drab studio in a two-story building off of Hollywood Boulevard that looked more like an abandoned office space, with its beige stucco exterior and opaque windows, than a theater. Tentacles extended from a cavity of shattered glass at the bottom right of the front door, above which hung a weathered wooden sign with "The Actor's Lab" written on it in sun-bleached black paint.

She couldn't understand the seriousness of the students. Every time the instructor, Mrs. Avery, stood on stage in her floor length black skirts and tops as shapeless as curtains, the students' eyes narrowed and they nodded eagerly as she spoke of emotional truth, of how they needed to risk their egos for the sake of the character and use all their will to reveal what the playwright, through his words, demanded they reveal. This was acting class. *Acting*—a profession based on pretend and glamour. It was the world of the unreal, not the real. But here in this theater with its black walls and dusty air, where most of the time Darla sat with twelve other students on stage doing exercises that were supposed to get them to zero—a neutral state where their own behavior no longer interfered with the behavior of the characters they were supposed to become—Darla was overwhelmed by the

students' sense of purpose. She just wanted to act, to get up on stage under those lights and be seen.

Tonight was scene study and it was Darla and Lewis's turn to take the stage. Mrs. Avery had assigned Darla to play Laura and Lewis to play her brother, Tom, from *The Glass Menagerie*. Darla paced back and forth between the tape marks where the furniture was supposed to be, where she had to imagine it while Mrs. Avery stood off stage and directed her. "You've got to get the first moment," said Mrs. Avery. Her voice was the rich and coarse voice of an old movie star—a Katherine Hepburn voice. Darla listened to it and ignored the shaking in her hands. "Now remember," Mrs. Avery continued, "Tom's coming home from a late night and you're relieved because you sense it's only a matter of time before he takes off for good. Look at the room. Where's the Vitrola?" Darla pointed downstage right. "Where's the picture of her father?" she pointed down center. "And Amanda, her mother, remember she's asleep so you must be quiet. Stay with your senses." All Darla noticed was that the room smelled stale like an old cupboard, the students sitting in the audience didn't make a sound, and the dust beneath the stage lights drizzled around her.

Mrs. Avery wouldn't stop talking. "And where's the Glass Menagerie? Is she playing with it before she hears Tom fumbling at the door? Go find the glass, let it catch your eye." Darla walked to that part of the stage where she imagined the shelf with the tiny sparkling animals. She could hear Lewis at the door trying to get in, so she walked across the stage and opened it. "Look at him, Darla," Mrs. Avery said.

“Really look at him and let him affect you. He’s the only connection Laura has to the outside world, the only real thing.” Lewis smiled at her, sad and resigned; he stumbled towards her, his round eyes searched for something from her. He was supposed to be drunk and he looked it, but she couldn’t respond. Her insides turned to concrete. His wanting and sincerity, the genuine desire to engage up there in front of the small audience of their class and the lack of fear in him, made her all the more fearful. The air left her body and she couldn’t get it back.

She heard the turn in Mrs. Avery’s voice: an exasperated sigh, a clearing of the throat, and when Mrs. Avery spoke next the sound was small and tight. She looked at Darla, but spoke to Lewis. “Get off the stage, Lewis.” And then—“Darla, you stay.” Oh God. Darla knew what was coming. For two months she’d been able to avoid it. The patience Mrs. Avery allotted her for being new had been exhausted. She’d seen this change before with the veteran students.

“You’ve got to get into your goddamn body, Darla,” said Mrs. Avery, the restraint in her voice thinning. “Now I want you to punch out at the air. Don’t just stand there. You know the exercise. Punch!” Darla resisted rolling her eyes and raised her fists. She couldn’t understand how this petite woman could become such a force, so intimidating. It came from a pure conviction and those regal features: rectangular jaw, ruler straight nose, plum, heart-shaped lips, and eyebrows that arched like two black rainbows above her deep-set hazel eyes. Mrs. Avery yelled, “Punch!” again and Darla punched. She punched so hard she could feel the sockets in her shoulders give. Mrs. Avery wouldn’t stop, “ I know you hate this exercise, Darla. I

know you hate it. Put that hate into it!" Then Mrs. Avery turned towards the students sitting in the house. "Class, get up on stage and create a circle around Darla. Darla, don't stop punching." Darla was certain she was going to be sick. She could hear them all moving, whispering, and then they surrounded her.

She punched the air, choosing specific points in the distance, out in the dark of the theater, where the seats were empty, where she could avoid the other acting students, until Mrs. Avery yelled, "Be here! Look at your classmates! Punch at them! Choose any one of them, one you can love or hate." Darla tried. She lifted her eyes and then lowered them immediately. Lifted and then lowered. The other students never hesitated to expose themselves when they worked. Willingly they ripped at their insides and toyed with their psyches in the pursuit of emotional truth. Like acrobats they contorted themselves into whatever shape their imaginations and a script demanded. When they took center stage they presented all that muck on a gold platter while they asked the most humiliating question: Love me? And Darla, there in the center of the circle, couldn't give them anything in return. It was too close, too intimate, too much.

Lewis was the only student who still expected something from her. But he was her roommate—he didn't count. She searched the actors' faces for reassurance, for the secret understanding that this was all bullshit. A smirk would help, a look to confirm that Mrs. Avery was out of her mind and that it wasn't because Darla just *didn't get it*. It was supposed to be *acting*. But their faces were a combination of petulance and pity. She knew they were sick of her wasting their time.

She settled her gaze on Lewis and punched in his direction. His eyes were so dark she could never tell what he was taking in. He seemed to tremble with hope. He sucked in his lips like he was bearing pain. She flushed with embarrassment at the thought that he hoped she'd have a breakthrough. Briefly the question—could I love or hate you, Lewis? —presented itself in Darla's mind as if on a marquee. No answer followed.

She just wanted it to stop—the churning inside of her, the humiliation. And if she kept punching, would it go away? Would Mrs. Avery stop talking? Her voice was a drum. “You can't be a civilian on stage! How do you expect to surrender to something greater than yourself if you don't allow yourself to feel?”

Darla wasn't as vulnerable as Laura Wingfield. So what? So what if she couldn't bring Tennessee Williams's sister to life—that hidden and debilitated soul like glass that shattered upon encountering the world? Who would willingly put themselves through such pain for a character? Darla was a pretty girl. People liked to look at her. Didn't that count for something? Just a week ago when she was working at Koo Koo Roo in that absurd faux chef's uniform with the winking chicken on the breast pocket that man had come in and couldn't stop staring at her. He was an older man, a modeling agent, with gossamer hair and delicate bones. Tippit was his name. From behind the counter she handed him his plate of chicken and a medley of salads, and with his long, spindly fingers he placed his card in her hand. “I do hope you'll call,” he'd said. “You have a beautiful face and I've been looking for someone with copper hair.” The man's fingers brushed her hand and she twitched.

Modeling would be simpler. In this studio with Mrs. Avery, beauty didn't count for anything. Right now, as Darla stood center stage in a circle of students who looked at her indifferently while she punched and lost her balance, and with the lights so hot and bright she could feel her make-up run into her eyes, she realized that she was as talentless an actor as when she started, and it took all the restraint she had not to scream, "I hate you, Mrs. Avery! I hate you!"

Darla sat in the passenger's seat of Big Blue, Lewis's pick-up truck that wasn't very big, and was partly blue—he'd been in an accident last year, a white car had sideswiped him, lifting most of the paint from the left side of the bed and replacing it with a sizeable dent and a long white tail. The other driver was at fault, but Lewis refused to get the car fixed. It wasn't broken; it was just aesthetic. They drove down Hollywood Boulevard. Darla rolled down the window and stuck her head out. The air was dirty and dry and hot. It was just after ten o'clock in the evening. The sky was brown, grainy with pollution and heat. It could have been day or night. The lights on the Boulevard shined, and the fluorescent signs glittered for attention. The people on the street looked like misplaced extras on a movie set.

Lewis was playing with the knobs of the radio. Big Blue didn't have a CD player or air conditioning. Keep it simple was Lewis's motto. He kept catching static. Darla waved his hand away.

"Concentrate on the road," she said.

"My, my. Aren't we in a bad mood," said Lewis.

She scanned through the channels and settled on Jamiroquai's "Virtual Insanity."

"I'm fine," she said and leaned her head back into the seat. The music bounced in the cab. She closed her eyes and watched colors twirl and dance, the quick sounds of jazz making sense of chaos. The rhythm slipped into the tension that gripped her neck and stomach during class.

"You're not fine, you're all pent up," said Lewis.

"Two more classes and I'm done. So there's nothing to worry about," said Darla, keeping her eyes closed, trying to escape into the music.

"Who's worried? I'm not worried."

It was true, Lewis rarely worried, but in class his face wrinkled with concern and she saw him biting the inside of his cheek.

"You give up way too easy," said Lewis.

Why wouldn't he just let her be? "Fine, I give up too easily. But, acting is obviously not my vocation."

"Why did you even try it?" he asked.

"I don't know. Marisol suggested it."

"Oh, that's big of you, blaming Marisol."

Darla fought the impulse to grab the plume of dreadlocks that sprouted from Lewis's head. "I'm not blaming her. Can you just let me listen to this song?"

Marisol was their other roommate and of course it was easier to blame her. She had an amusing yet intriguing L.A. quality that Darla, coming from an arid no-

man's land in the central valley with a vague identity of not quite city and not quite country, had found hypnotic. Marisol spoke with a Latina accent that made her words linger in the air like a floral perfume, her hair was as long as a horse's tail, and she had fierce reptilian eyes. She was convinced everything she said mattered and after graduation was planning on returning to Mexico, where her family was from, to become a curandera. Darla tried to get her to explain what exactly a curandera was and when Marisol told her a soothsayer, a healer, Darla still couldn't grasp what she meant. "Do you mean like those psychics who give readings for \$10 on Westwood Boulevard? "

Marisol blew air from her oversized lips. "No estúpida," she said. "Curanderas help heal the soul."

Marisol would say things like, "You need to buy some gold earrings, it'll help heal your wounded image, put you in touch with your inner Aphrodite." Or when Darla had severe cramps, Marisol made tea out of dried raspberry leaves, chamomile, and passion flower, placed it in front of Darla, and said, "Drink this." Voilà, the pain disappeared. So when Darla was listless last semester, moping around the apartment because she'd decided she didn't want to be an International Relations major anymore and didn't know why she'd chosen it in the first place—it sounded smart?—Marisol recommended she try acting. It was Los Angeles after all. Who didn't consider acting? Living out drama without consequence, saying things you would never dare say in actual life, the freedom not to be you, but someone else. Such expression appealed to Darla, and when Marisol encouraged her it was as if

Darla had been given permission to seek a forbidden dream. Yet every time Darla got on stage, she closed instead of opened. Mrs. Avery would say “Speak” and Darla would go mute.

The song ended and she started flipping through the channels again. It was all crap. Lewis hummed, calm and focused on the road; he didn’t even seem to notice when she turned the radio off.

“Why did you sign up with me, anyway?” Darla asked Lewis.

He shook his head, and exhaustion pulled on his face, “Because you pinned those big blue eyes on me and begged me to go with you.” A sly smile broke on his lips. “We both know you just needed a ride.”

“I would have taken the bus.”

“Yeah, right,” he said.

“I would have,” she insisted. She would have hated it and complained incessantly—an hour and a half to get to Hollywood from Westwood was ridiculous—but she would have done it. Although without Lewis she probably would have quit within the first few weeks. His mere presence was a support she couldn’t do without. He had a confidence that was foreign to her, a warmth and honesty that seemed too generous considering his past: a drug addict at 14, dealing at 17. He didn’t like to talk about it except to say that he made it out by the grace and love of his family. It was a past she might have thought he fabricated because she could only see him in the world as he was now, so present and full she couldn’t

imagine him ever fleeing from it, but there were the raised tracks on the inside of his arms, scars like tiny, dull hard blisters, an anomaly in the smoothness of his skin.

“Look, I was happy to do it. It was something different. Besides, like you said, it’s over in two weeks and then we’re back to school.” He kept his eyes on the road. The gleaming multicolored lights of the storefronts reflected off the windshield.

She turned away from him and tried to count the pink Hollywood stars that covered the sidewalk like footprints. The wind lifted her hair in a tangle above her head, and she forced her fingers through it, smoothing it down around her face. On the corner of Hollywood and La Brea, where Lewis stopped at a red light, she stared at a Marilyn Monroe who was striking her Seven-Year-Itch pose, blowing kisses with such desperation Darla couldn’t bear to look at her. She leaned back into her seat and rolled up the window. The cars and the lights and the people sped past too quickly and blurred together.

“Uck,” she said.

“What?” asked Lewis. He made a left onto Fairfax.

“I just want to get home.”

Marisol was sitting on the living room floor watching *E TV*—some red carpet event—when they walked in the door. She was skillfully eating Kung Pao chicken with chopsticks. “There’s more Kung Pao in the kitchen if you want any. How was class?” she asked.

“Fantastic,” said Lewis.

“Shitty,” said Darla.

Darla examined the squishy, orange chunks of chicken, inhaled its vinegary smell, and decided she'd have Top Ramen instead. Lewis rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "You can have it all," Darla said. At which point Lewis broke into a happy food dance, alternately lifting his right and left shoulders to some inaudible beat, circling his hips like he was swinging a hoola hoop, and then pounding his stomach with fervor. He was trying so hard to make her smile and she wanted to be a good sport, but she couldn't will the sulk out of her eyes. He let out a long, deliberate sigh, picked up the box of Kung Pao, and headed into the living room.

Lewis and Marisol sat on the carpet watching Joan Rivers quack about the sublime and grotesque fashion choices of the stars while Darla eased herself onto the couch behind them. After two minutes of trying to maintain her balance while eating ramen on a couch that might as well have been a waterbed, she moved to the floor. Lewis stretched out like a cat, sat up and began to roll his neck. Marisol walked over to him on her knees and started massaging him. He began oohing and ahhing as she pushed her fingers into the tender divots between shoulder and neck. From the corner of her eye, Darla watched Marisol squeeze the base of his head; her fingers slid down his spine, she pounded the muscular wings of his back, and Darla's stomach began to turn as if someone were kneading her insides.

Marisol dug into his shoulders and told him he was too tight, he needed to stop lifting weights, do yoga instead, and start taking Epsom salt baths. The uneasiness in Darla's stomach became sharper, angrier. She shifted her focus back to Joan Rivers, who was telling Catherine Zeta Jones that she was divine and did

Catherine know that she and Joan shared the same housekeeper? Then Lewis oohed again. "I'm trying to watch this, Lewis. Could you keep the ooohs down?"

"Saar--ry," he said.

The way Marisol flipped her hair, the way she spoke, the sensual and languid movement of her body, the ease with which she seemed to go through life and prescribe ridiculous remedies for the soul—menstrual cramps and tight shoulders were not soul diseases!—made Darla furious. It's what she loved about Marisol and, as she watched her with Lewis, she realized it was also what she absolutely despised. Darla felt her forehead for a fever. She went to the kitchen, filled a glass with ice and Sprite and took it down in a few quick gulps. The sugary soda dripped from the sides of her mouth. She wiped it away, felt her cheeks for heat, counted to ten and returned to the living room. She stood watching them. Marisol laughed as she massaged Lewis's ears—his ears! Something tight inside held Darla; she could see wire coiled around her ribs; it constricted her breath and poked into her sides. She heard herself saying, "What are you two doing?"

They turned towards her at the same time and their animated faces dropped flat with surprise.

"What do you mean?" said Marisol. "I'm giving Lewis a massage."

"Whatever you two are doing, please stop," said Darla. "Didn't we agree to this before we moved in together? No hooking-up. No complicated love affairs. Let's not shit in our own backyard. Isn't that what you said, Lewis?"

“Man, I don’t know what has gotten into you.” He put his face in his hands, took the tips of his fingers and pressed them hard against his forehead. He looked up at Darla. “This is not hooking up. This *is* a massage.”

“Darla,” said Marisol. “ You take it all too seriously. All of it.”

“And you don’t take anything seriously,” said Darla.

“You are out of line, chica. Why are you picking a fight with me?” said Marisol.

Lewis intervened before Darla could speak, “It was a tough class tonight. That’s all. That’s all this is.” He said it to Marisol as well as Darla.

The lights in the living room were a bright sun. Marisol and Lewis sat on the floor looking at her with gentle and careful eyes, and she knew they were seeing something she didn’t see. A quiver spread across her face. Stop, stop, stop. She pressed her nails hard into her palms and said, “I’m tired, I’m going to bed.” She walked into her bedroom and closed the door.

Marisol could just go up and touch him, put her hands on him. It was so easy for her. Darla thought of when she met Lewis for the first time at the Santa Monica Art Institute when she wanted to be an artist and signed up for a beginner’s drawing class. Lewis stood in a sunlit room like Michelangelo’s David while she and ten other students diligently sketched his firm flesh. Having never sketched a naked man before she didn’t know what to do; she was fascinated by the size of his penis and his ability to stay flaccid in a room full of mostly attractive women. She avoided looking at him, but ultimately looking was all part of the exercise. On more than one

occasion she had to stifle her girlish laugh. One day she looked up from her sketchpad and caught his eyes on her. She blushed and looked away.

Later that year, after she'd determined she wasn't an artist, she stood in line at Kirby's on campus deciding between a mocha or a latte when he tapped her on the shoulder and asked, "Do you remember me?" She recognized him, but no she didn't remember him. He said, "Art Institute." Oh! Yes, yes, of course. He told her she had an unforgettable face, cheekbones as full as apples. He wanted to buy her coffee. She said she'd buy her own, but he could join her if he'd like. He was direct and good-natured. And then she introduced him to Marisol.

Darla changed into her pajamas, slumped onto her bed, and bit at the inside of her cheeks. Sleep was far away. Her entire body was itching; she scratched the inside of her hands and her ankles. She walked over to the mirror just above the dresser. Her skin was blotchy and red with irritation. What the hell was wrong with her? She grabbed her purse, opened it and dug inside the pockets. Her fingers found the card crinkled up like a piece of trash under crumbs and an empty pack of gum. She smoothed it between her fingers and read the print: Tippit's Modeling Agency: 213-501-11202.

The building was located on the edge of Sunset Strip. It was four stories, gray, and unimpressive. Darla thought an address on Sunset Boulevard lent it some credibility. Tippit's Modeling Agency was one among many offices along a narrow corridor that was filled with the electric hum of fluorescent lights.

In the waiting room she crossed her legs, felt the vinyl cling to her thighs and regretted wearing such short shorts. She tried to ignore everything that made her feel uncomfortable: the smallness of the room (it had no windows), the crimson carpet and the baby blue of the chairs, dust as thick as laundry lint that hung from the vent above the door, and row upon row of pictures of Tippit with his arm slung around various movie stars. He looked more like a tourist posing with them than a colleague or friend.

She was the only one in the room besides the receptionist, a girl who looked about fifteen with hair the color and consistency of powdered sugar. The girl thumbed apathetically through an US magazine.

Darla rubbed her hands over her thighs, across her collarbone; she pinched her chin, took in a deep breath and exhaled so loudly the receptionist looked up and her pencil thin eyebrows almost flew from her forehead.

“Does he see a lot of models?” asked Darla.

“He sees a lot of girls,” said the receptionist and flipped to the next page of her magazine.

“Today’s just a slow day?” asked Darla.

The receptionist’s face might as well have been numb, there was nothing in it but a vacant disdain. The phone’s ringing cut the silence like an emergency siren. Darla flinched.

“Mr. Tippit will see you now,” said the receptionist and pointed to the door just to the right of her desk.

“Through there?” asked Darla, looking at her for reassurance or warning.

Without looking up she said, “That’s where I’m pointing.”

“*Thanks,*” said Darla.

Mr. Tippit’s personal office had one dull tinted window where light filtered through and colored everything it touched jaundice. He sat in a large black swivel chair. In Koo Koo Roo, where she’d met him, she recalled a refined older gentleman. Maybe it was the light in the office, but he was more emaciated, even skeletal, than she remembered. His eyes were slick with a whitish film like the belly of a fish. Her whole body stiffened—she couldn’t sit down, though he didn’t ask her to.

“Do you remember me?” she asked. Something happened to her voice, it constricted and sounded small and sweet like a child’s. Breathe, she told herself.

“Of course, I never forget a beautiful face.”

She didn’t believe him, there was no recognition in his milky eyes. But what did it matter? Beautiful faces were everywhere in L.A., they were easy to forget.

She remained standing, waiting for instruction. Pleasure spread across his face as he looked her up and down. He asked her for her measurements. 34-27-36. Had she ever modeled before? No. Why not? She didn’t think she was tall enough. Would she be interested in modeling lingerie? Maybe. She hadn’t thought about it. He asked her to lift up her shirt so he could see the shape of her waist, then he asked her to lift it higher so he could look at her breasts.

“Remove the bra,” he said.

She was floating, weightless. The thrum of traffic filtered through the window from the street. He wasn't real, nor was she. He said, "Remove the bra," again and she removed it.

She heard him say, "A 1940's pin-up girl look." There was a camera in his hands. Flashes brightened up the room. She stared at the white wall above his head until he said, "I think I can find something for you." His lips were two pieces of red licorice, his eyes tiny black buttons that sunk into his skull. He took down her details, said he'd call soon.

Outside, standing on the corner of Sunset and Larabee, the sun blinded her and for a moment everything was white and shapeless. Slowly the landscape appeared. Down the block, the red Hustler sign glared, the 900 building glimmered silver, fine cars passed in what seemed like slow motion, and people lunched in the shade of café awnings--cool water misted their faces and reflected rainbows--while lanky hostesses stood with animated faces and hands drawing in passerbys. All of it was slippery, and pretty, and new, and money. Is this what she'd wanted? The dry air scratched at her skin and made her shake: What the hell was she doing? He had her tits on camera; the sleazy douche-bag had her tits on camera.

The next day Darla called in sick to work and didn't get out of her pajamas. In the morning she went into the kitchen to pour herself a bowl of Kashi cereal and noticed the French press on the counter that was a third full of coffee. Lewis had already had breakfast and left for the day. She poured herself a cup. It was luke

warm, but the rich smell and full taste of it comforted her. As she alternately took sips of coffee and bites of cereal, Marisol walked in, all breezy and beautiful. The bracelets on her wrists rang like chimes; her skin against her turquoise cotton dress appeared gilded. Their eyes met, but they didn't say anything. Marisol couldn't be caught by the tangle of emotions Darla cast in every direction. If only Darla could inhale some of that free spirit; if only the compact point within her that she felt sharpen and crystallize into a thousand glittering shards of confusion could be dispelled with the intake of a breath.

Marisol went about packing a lunch: slices of avocado, Swiss cheese, tomato, purple onion, and lemon. She packed small plastic containers filled with salt, pepper, and olive oil and then she added a packet of water crackers. In the cupboard, Marisol kept a box of bite size squares of Ghirardelli's chocolate. She took two. She was working the desk at the Santa Monica Youth Hostel that summer and watching her pack a lunch in the mornings was like observing a religious ritual. Darla knew she should say something about the other day, apologize for her moodiness. But her mood still seemed to have the upper hand and she couldn't be bothered to pretend otherwise. Luckily, she didn't have to because just then Marisol whipped her head around, her face cool and composed as if to let Darla know there was no need for drama, and she asked, "You still mad at me, chica?"

She wished she could stay mad at Marisol; it would be easier than dealing with the tumult inside of her, easier than dealing with herself. At least it would be easier for a little while. "No. I was never really mad at you. I'm sorry."

“Ay. No te preocupes. I didn’t really think you were mad at me. You know what they say—water under the bridge.” Marisol folded the top of her paper lunch sack, placed it in the gaping mouth of her black leather purse, and gave Darla a double kiss, on the right cheek and then on the left. “You know, there’s nothing going on between Lewis and me. You’re blind if you can’t see he’s loco for you.” Darla turned away from Marisol at the mention of Lewis. The jealousy that had possessed her that night and the fact that they had both witnessed her flail under its power left her too exposed. “Ay chica, when are you going to relax?” said Marisol. She winked at Darla and then flitted out of the kitchen, a bird indifferent to gravity. How had Darla ever expected anything more from her?

The day passed slowly. Darla watched television, flipping through channels but never settling on a program. When she got hungry again, she ate more cereal. She clipped her toenails and her fingernails. On the internet, she made an effort to read the news but instead found herself being lured to sites like Wonderwall, People, and TMZ—celebrity pictures and gossip. When she looked at the time and realized two hours had passed she slammed her laptop shut, went to her room, and lay on her bed. The ceiling above her became a billboard. On it she saw her pale full pointy breasts and her stupefied face with those doleful eyes, lost and begging for attention. She turned away, rolled onto her stomach and buried her face in the pillow.

In the early evening she awoke to the sound of tapping on her bedroom door and Lewis’s low, gentle voice: “Darla? Darla?” The room had filled up with amber

sunlight. It was warm and brilliant and she felt like she was swimming in liquid gold. There was his voice again, "Darla? You okay?" coming through the small crack in the door. She didn't want to wake up. Her body, heavy and soft, moved sluggishly. It took her a moment to recall that she was even in her bed, that she had taken the day off work and done nothing. Then she remembered yesterday: Tippit's skeletal face and tiny black eyes. The softness in her body turned hard. She sat up, put her feet on the floor, leaned over her legs and rubbed her face. She told herself not to think about yesterday, about Tippit. "Yeah, I'm here," she said to Lewis. His long dark arm pressed against the door. He stood there beneath its frame, his head tilted, his face inquisitive, as if he was trying to figure out why she was there.

"I didn't go to work," she said.

"I can see that," he said. "Everything okay?" She wanted to tell him what had happened. Maybe it would make her feel better, admitting it, but then there was the humiliation, and the risk of making it more real. If she didn't say anything, if she just tucked the incident away, it would disappear. She needed to be lively, forge ahead; the past was the past. She stood up, raised her arms above her head and stretched. The sun coming through her window was a warm hand against her cheek.

"You hungry?" she asked. "I'm starving. We could order pizza or some Chin Chin. Chinese chicken salad sounds good." Her voice sounded unnaturally upbeat and she hoped Lewis didn't notice.

"Sure," he said. "You sure everything's okay?"

Her eyes were shifty; she couldn't calm herself enough to look straight at him. "Yeah. I just didn't feel very good today." She hadn't noticed him holding his right arm behind his back until he brought it forward and handed her a package wrapped in white paper and a yellow ribbon tied in a neat bow.

"Here," he said. "I thought you could use some encouragement."

She was taken aback by his genuine sweetness. She didn't know why, but she felt ashamed. Her fingers traced the edge of the small note card under the ribbon and the pen that was taped beside it. The card read: Darla, Why not give you and Laura Wingfield a chance to get to know each other? Love, Lewis.

His eyes were expectant and happy, "Open it, " he said.

She untied the bow and tore at the paper. A red, leather bound journal, taut and smooth; she rubbed her hands over it and squeezed the pointed ends that were stitched with a tan thread.

"I thought you could use it for the acting exercises Mrs. Avery's always preaching to us. You know, a character biography, writing out the context of the scene, linking your life to Laura's...you know, just all that stuff she talks about."

Laura. Fragile, Laura. Shy, crippled, Laura. Brilliant and hidden; forgotten and abandoned, Laura. How could Darla ever do her justice? And why did Lewis have this faith in her? Couldn't he see how weak Darla was? How much she lacked? A tremor moved through her. Her hands wouldn't keep steady and her lip—the harder she tried to keep it from quivering the more uncontrollable the quiver became until

it spread across her face. She wanted to stop the rippling feeling inside of her, grab it, and choke it.

“What’s wrong,” he said. “Something is wrong. I didn’t mean to upset you. Darla?”

The feeling was wide and vast and it came too quick, an enormous wave, it broke. She doubled over, dropped the journal, and gripped her knees. Lewis had a hand on her back, heavy and warm. She could feel it move up and down with the rhythm of her sobs.

“What is going on? Talk to me.”

But she couldn’t speak.

“Alright,” said Lewis. “It’s time to take a walk.” His tall frame hovered behind her; his arms slipped snugly beneath her armpits and he lifted her up. “Come on,” he said.

They walked out the door, down the steps and out into the late afternoon. A radiant palette of colors, too luminous and too dazzling to be natural lit up the sky—it was the one upside of pollution. Yellow, fuchsia, violet, and azure all spilled like ink across the horizon and into a thin mist of clouds. He kept his hand on the middle of her back and told her to breathe, to relax. The air was dry and it sucked away her tears. No matter how hard L.A. tried to sell itself as an oasis with palm trees and beaches, Darla just had to breathe in the air and feel the relentless sun on her skin to remember that it was a desert. When the sobs stopped, he asked her what was wrong.

Her breath was caught in her chest. “I’m not...a good...person,” she said.

“A good person? Oh come on, even good people aren’t all that good.”

“I don’t have...character.” She wiped at her eyes and nose. The apartment buildings on the block all seemed to shrug at her—they were dilapidated and needed paint, neglected in a way that only college students were tolerant of.

“What are you going on about? You’re twenty-years-old. You don’t have to have character at twenty. You’re meant to fuck-up and then you develop character.”

“But, Lewis I have fucked up.”

He stopped, stepped in front of her and faced her. “Are you trying to tell me something, because if you are you might as well just say it.” He didn’t know how to be indirect and she didn’t know how to face anything. If she told him, that would be it, it would be out there in the world. She gazed at the old, crooked trees that lined the block; their craggy branches reached towards her. From below, their roots struggled to break through the concrete.

“I—uh...” she began. His eyes were so intense and focused on her she had to look down at the sidewalk.

“You—uh, what?” his head inched towards her like a turtle’s.

The words came out of her in a gush: “I went to this shady modeling agency yesterday, showed a guy my tits and he took pictures.”

He drew his head back. Peered at her. Minutes seemed to pass. She kicked at a crack in the sidewalk and tried to hold herself back from yelling *Speak!*

Finally, he said, “Really?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know why. That’s the thing, I don’t know why. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“I never thought you were that—“

“*What?*” Her insides twisted at his tone. Her spine stiffened. She didn’t want to hear what he had to say because she could tell he wasn’t going to say it was okay, it was just a mistake and to forget about it. “You never thought I was that *what?* You going to judge me now?” A red-hot fury exploded inside of her. “You out of all people Lewis. Or don’t you recall being but-ass naked in a room, your dick hanging out—”

“What the fuck is wrong with you! You’re going to make this about me? You’re suddenly going to get all pissed-off at *me?* I haven’t even said anything.” He put his hand over his mouth, his head swiveled around—his eyes darted towards the sky, the ground, the apartment buildings. He took a step closer to her, pointed at her chest and spoke with utter control. “It’s not the same thing. It was a job. I wasn’t being exploited. It was a conscious fucking choice, and it wasn’t some seedy, desperate attempt at attention. You want to blame me because you don’t know how to deal with your own fuck-up.” He shook out his hands. “Man, you are a piece of work.”

He’d never been so angry with her. There was a quaver in his voice he couldn’t hide. It rattled her, him seeing her like this, acknowledging what she couldn’t acknowledge. To defend herself would be pointless. Her entire body was a

cavern, hollow and empty, subject to the tides of her emotions that flooded and then retreated on a whim; her center, a shifting point she could not touch or feel. She wrapped her arms around her waist and rocked back and forth from her heels to the balls of her feet. “You’re right,” she said. “I’m sorry. I just wanted to be comforted.”

“Yeah, well, you didn’t even give me a chance.”

From a block over she could hear the traffic on Veteran Avenue urgently rushing by. Everyone in L.A. drove like they had an emergency to attend to. A car horn honked and she squeezed her arms tighter around her waist.

“What do you want from me, Lewis? I always feel like you want me to be somebody I’m not.”

“That’s funny. I always think you’re trying to be somebody you’re not.” He gripped the dreadlocks on the top of his head. “I just want you to be real, Darla. To be yourself. But that seems to be the last thing you want. Honestly, you confuse the hell out of me.”

The wind brushed by them, rustling the speckled leaves of the trees. “Do you think less of me?” she said.

He shook his head and she could sense disappointment, but he said, “No.”

She wished he would grab her, hold her, whisper to her, put his hands on her face. The distance between them was her fault. She’d created this space, filled it up with all of her fear and now she didn’t know how to bring him closer. “Thank you for the journal,” she said.

“You’re welcome.” He bit at his thumb. His large eyes were sorrowful. All the traces of anger in his face were gone. “You’re coming to class tomorrow, right?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Oh, come on. Two more classes, it’ll get your mind off things. It’ll be fun.”

“It’s never fun.” She couldn’t understand why he was always trying to convince her that it was fun. She had seen him on the stage floor during the sense memory exercise when Mrs. Avery told them all to close their eyes and go back to a moment in their lives that was vivid. A moment filled with pain, fear, or elation. What do you see? What do you smell? Taste? Feel? Take your time. Darla could never get through the exercise. Her memories were vague images. Her mother standing in front of the bathroom mirror, admiring her reflection—stiff blond curls, heavily mascaraed lashes, ruby tinted lips—and Darla standing next to her, wishing she was as pretty as her mom. Her mother’s eyes never strayed from the mirror while Darla stood there gazing at her intensely, trying to will her mom to look at her. *Look at me, look at me*—but her mom never did. Her father didn’t appear, but she could hear him: his heavy footsteps on the carpet, the door opening and closing. That’s what stuck, the door always opening and closing—but she never saw him. It was as far as she could ever go with the exercise; her parents feeling so close and yet completely inaccessible made her breath flutter and a heat rise inside of her that she couldn’t bear. So she pretended to do the exercise and kept her eyes lowered and with her back turned towards Mrs. Avery, she snuck glances at the other students. Their faces always turned rubbery with emotion. Once she saw Lewis in the corner,

sobbing. Grief stricken. He reached for something and then pulled back. She was struck by how helpless he appeared. This was the closest she had ever come to seeing his addiction—the need and grief on his face didn’t match any part of the Lewis she knew. It was not fun.

The sky was turning dark—blue and purple swallowed the red and orange hues. “I give up,” said Lewis. “I can’t help you. I don’t know why I ever thought I could. You don’t know how to show up for yourself.”

Her stomach jumped. She wanted to shake him and tell him not to give up on her. The class was ridiculous, it was too much effort, he couldn’t expect her to go after last time, but that wasn’t a reason to give up on her. She almost blurted all of this out, but stopped herself. As much as she hated him seeing her this way and wished she could change his perception of her and everything that led up to this moment, she knew now that it would only be an attempt to manipulate him.

The air felt a little cooler. The thin crescent of the moon appeared above them, delicate and sharp. “Let’s go inside,” she said. She’d think about the class tomorrow, figure out what to do then.

This is how she convinced herself to go: It was the right thing to do. If she couldn’t show up for herself she could at least show up for Lewis, who had only taken the class because she’d coaxed him into it. Lewis, at this point, didn’t seem to care either way. They barely spoke in Big Blue on the way there. He kept his eyes on the road. There was nothing to say and although she felt the need to fill up the

silence with chatter she knew it wouldn't help. So she looked out at the Boulevard that was even more unglamorous in daylight, just a long strip of random shops—wigs, souvenirs, posters, and costumes. Tourists teemed about and snapped photos with cardboard cutouts of movie stars, oblivious that there was nothing genuinely Hollywood about Hollywood Boulevard.

As they pulled in front of The Actor's Lab, Darla could already feel the nerves tingling in her hands.

Mrs. Avery wore her normal black. Today it was black leggings and a long sleeve black cotton shirt that hit her mid-thigh. It didn't matter that it was summer, black was her color, always. What was different was the pink chiffon sash she had tied around her neck. This little bit of color made her seem almost approachable.

The class all stood on stage and went through the relaxation exercises. You had to move every part of your body, working down deep to the connective tissue. If they felt any sensation, physical or emotional, they were supposed to make a long *aaah* sound or a short, sharp *ugh* sound. The sound was crucial and had to match the intensity of what you were feeling. It was a release and Mrs. Avery had explained from the first class that if they didn't release they would repress and repression was death to the actor. Lewis moved his limbs and moaned without reservation. Don't get self-conscious, she told herself. Don't repress. It became her mantra as the class wore on and into scene study.

She found some consolation in watching the two scenes that went up before she and Lewis were expected on stage. Mrs. Avery reamed one of the students, Paul,

who was playing George from *Middle of The Night*. Did he have any idea what it was like to be a musician? Because Mrs. Avery was unconvinced by his whole *cool* act. Did he even know what instrument George played? What kind of music? As far as Mrs. Avery was concerned Paul was being an imbecile, thinking he was blessing them all with his presence and not giving a shit about memorizing the lines or creating one original gesture. His *cool* was laziness; a one-size fits all generic suite of behaviors that any Joe Shmo could play. Just who did he think he was wasting her and everyone else's time? He looked at his toes, shrugged and then Mrs. Avery told him to get off the stage.

When Mrs. Avery called her and Lewis onstage Darla's stomach began to fire off like a volcano. She just had to concentrate on Lewis. For the next fifteen minutes he was her brother, Tom, and there was nothing to be afraid of. Until there *was* something to be afraid of, until Mrs. Avery said, "Start the scene," and every part of Darla stopped. It was the same as last week. It didn't matter what she told herself, her body, her feelings, none of it was in her control. How was it possible that this was happening again, that once again she heard Mrs. Avery's saying to Lewis, Get off the stage. She'd been singled out enough. Enough. Mrs. Avery told the class to line the fold-up chairs in a single row on the edge of the stage and to take a seat. "Darla," said Mrs. Avery, "you're going to do the Happy Birthday exercise."

She could run. Run right down the aisle and out of the building and never come back. Forget acting, forget being somebody, and forget being noticed. It was too excruciating trying to be seen by others. It only ever backfired on her; she only

ever ended up feeling more invisible. Then Mrs. Avery did the most bizarre thing: she walked up to Darla and grabbed her hand, spoke gently to her. "I know you're petrified," she said. "You don't stand a chance if you don't get past it. Try to be here." And then Mrs. Avery walked away and sat in a seat along with the students. All of them faced Darla; they were impossible to avoid.

The exercise consisted of Darla standing in front of them and singing "Happy Birthday." But she couldn't rush through the song, she had to look at each student individually, hold each syllable for as long as her breath would allow, and when her breath gave out she had to inhale again, move to the next syllable and the next student. "You ready?" asked Mrs. Avery.

"No," said Darla.

"You don't have to do it," said Mrs. Avery. "I'm not going to force you." Had she given up on Darla too?

Darla tried to find her breath, her will. The house was dark, musty. The theater wasn't much, about fifty seats; it was old, and smelled worn like it carried all the unspoken dreams and heartache of people who had been coming there forever. Did they all come in search of fame or was this space meant for something more than that? It felt too intimate for the ambitions of fame. Mrs. Avery, Lewis, and all the students sat under the lights on stage. Darla took her place in front of them and began.

She started with the first student, a girl named Shelby, who had hair reminiscent of Farrah Fawcett's. Her cheeks were a sunburned pink and dusted with

tiny dark freckles. Darla remembered her saying hello the first day of class, a chipper, optimistic person. There was nothing threatening about her, but Darla still trembled as she looked into her eyes and began to sing, “Haaaaaaa--” Her arm hair stood on end as if her body anticipated lightning striking. Shelby’s eyebrows lifted and knitted together. This wasn’t just difficult for Darla; it was difficult for Shelby too. She took the next breath. Tom sat next to Shelby. “PYYYYYYYYY—” Tom with the bony shoulders and a neck as long as a stork’s. His face was all stitched up like he was trying to retreat from the sound coming out of Darla.

“Class you’ve got to return what she’s giving you. You’ve got to have the strength to look back. Darla, slow down and breathe.” Mrs. Avery’s voice seemed to descend from the heavens, disembodied and definitive. As Darla took the next breath her body weakened; she didn’t have the energy to resist the exercise, and she didn’t have the energy to push it either. All she could do was breathe and sing, “Birrrrrrrrth—” And there was Mrs. Avery, her eyes animated and alive with excitement, she kept talking to Darla, guiding her. “See Darla, you’re not going to break, you’re not going to melt. Keep going.”

“Toooooo—” She went down the row, recalling their names, and seeing their faces it seemed like for the first time. A hot embarrassment broke open inside of her; it pooled inside of her, until it overflowed and permeated every inch of her being. “Meeeeee—” Her voice was raw and throaty, off-key, out of synch. What a mess she was, what a fucking mess and they could all see it and even when she had thought she was fooling them, when she had convinced herself she was in control

and they had no idea who she was, they had seen her then. There was Lewis, right at the end, “Haaaaaaa—“ glowing with what must have been a renewed hope. His eyes squinted with happiness and the space between them danced with invisible forces—expectations, dreams, needs, wants, so many things unspoken, but felt. There was Mrs. Avery’s voice again, “Take a step closer to him. That’s right. Now say a line from the scene, any line that comes to mind. Speak to him.”

Her heart and her chest swelled. “Where have you been all this time?” she said.

NEVER THE SAME AS BEFORE

Corinne and Charlie. This is how Laura now thought of her parents. No longer Mommy and Daddy or, Mom and Dad. The only thing that stopped her from referring to them aloud by their actual names was that she wouldn't be able to bear their pained faces if she called out *Corinne. Charlie*. Her parents were more foreign to her now, less parental, though she didn't love them any less.

The accident had changed something. Being in the hospital and watching their helpless eyes, their faces wrinkled up in despair as they fumbled for a way to tell her what had happened, wringing their hands, biting their lips, itching their heads as if they'd been plagued by some madness, when really what burdened them was their duty to tell her the truth, had made her wary of them. She wanted to seek solace in her parents, but her instinct told her to move away from rather than toward them. Leaning over the hospital bed with a halo of blinding light behind them, what had Corinne said?

Your father dropped you. He held you too high. He tried to lift you above his head.

Laura remembered being in the park and his hands gripping her ribs; she'd felt the awkwardness of her body as he'd tried to balance her, the fear at sensing she was too big and then, hesitant to tell him to put her down, she tried to imagine they

we're ice-skating Olympians. Only they weren't Olympians. He tripped on the root of the Jacaranda tree. The hard ground was a shock and when she looked up, he was falling toward her. She couldn't move fast enough. There was a crack, a sound like glass, or lightning followed by a hailstorm—an explosion of noise and then a million pieces scattering across a hard surface with the tinny sound and pitch of metal.

What had that been, that crack?

Her bone, Corinne told her.

Laura didn't recall turning twelve in the hospital and even though she knew she was twelve, the only difference was that now her leg was all bandaged up, swollen and tender, in a thick scratchy Velcro casing. It was an elephant's leg, fat and ugly, but everyone—the doctors and her parents—told her it would get better and in a few more months it would look like new. This wasn't her real leg; it was a leg from another planet that was visiting and needed a place to rest until it was healthy enough to leave. Her real leg, her pretty dancer's leg, had been kind enough to take a trip to give this ugly leg some room. She tried not to hate the leg, tried to be kind to it, but the only way to do that was not to look at it and to make sure other people, especially her friends, didn't get a chance to see it either.

They said it would be like new and she believed them. Why then was Charlie so different? He'd been unplugged; his head always down, his body moving slower than normal and Laura trying to get his attention, asking if he wanted to play card games like Go-fish, or trying to get him to go to the park so she could swing. Because

she could still swing and later she'd be able to do other things, the same things as before. But he just smiled, rubbed her head and told her he didn't have time. Corinne told her he was tired, working too hard, and to let him be. The work excuse was a lie. He was a salesman and covered the same territory as he had for the past three years. It was because of the accident. But it was her leg, not his, and why didn't he just talk to her. Why did he have to be so sad? She was going to get better.

A few months after the accident, after the rods, pins, and screws had been removed, her parents held a small party in their backyard—a belated birthday party. Laura hid her leg under a long chartreuse skirt. Her toes, painted a shimmery purple, poked out of the corrective shoe and she hoped people would notice the purple more than the bulky shoe.

From inside the house she leaned against the glass door. With her breath she misted the pane, and with her finger she drew faces in the warm wet cloud and then wiped it clean, made another cloud and drew flowers. Outside, behind the blurred glass was Corinne. All day she had been fiddling in the yard trying to make things pretty. She moved nervously about, pinning and taping decorations; she stretched from the tips of her toes as she taped pink and yellow crepe paper in small low hanging arcs to the top of the fence and waved away the bees that buzzed around her head as they tried to find a spot in the bougainvillea.

It was summertime. The dry heat scoured Laura's lungs. The loud hum of the cicadas filled the backyard. The sun overhead was white and hot, but it was starting its late afternoon descent and it would cool soon. Corinne had lathered her in

sunscreen, but Laura noticed her skin already shone pink and thought she might be burning. What would she and her friends do? She couldn't run. They showed up with their parents, which Laura found odd since this was her party—a party for girls, not grown-ups.

Abigail Donning, her best friend, arrived with her mother, Mrs. Donning, who startled Laura when she took long, purposeful strides across the lawn toward her and stuck her face up to Laura's, told her how lovely she looked, and asked if she was comfortable. This made Laura terribly uncomfortable; although she smiled politely and told Mrs. Donning she was quite comfortable, thank you.

The smell of cigarette smoke lingered on Mrs. Donning's mouth. But the smoke didn't bother Laura; rather it was Mrs. Donning's face, flat as if a steamroller had smashed it. Laura had seen her face many times, but it always shocked her and she had to try not to flinch because she didn't want to make her feel bad. It was a wonder that she was Abigail's mom. Abigail whose face was plump and pretty and glowed like a peach, whose wide eyes were a vibrant swatch of blue and green, and who, at twelve, had breasts while all of the other girls still had washboard chests. Abby was popular and always would be. Her looks were soft, but in her was a shiny, hard and indestructible thing. She was a peacock who wouldn't be moved from her perch and, if she liked you then you were popular, too.

The parents gathered in a corner of the lawn, sipped punch and looked sympathetically at Laura who wished they'd stop staring.

Propped up by her crutches with all of her friends circling around her, Laura felt the frightening beat of panic rise in her. She asked Corinne where Charlie was and Corinne said he should be there any minute. He had gone out to pick up some things for the party. Abby asked if she could try Laura's crutches. Laura could never say no to Abby and at least this was something for them to do. "Lucy, let me lean on you," said Laura to her friend standing beside her as she handed the crutches to Abby. But before Abby could secure them under her armpits, Mrs. Donning yelled from across the yard, "Abby! Give those back to Laura, now," her caring, smashed up face suddenly turned more ugly and cruel. Everyone was quiet, even the cicadas seemed to stop their chatter. Abby rolled her eyes and handed the crutches back to Laura. "You can try them later," whispered Laura.

"She's such a nag," Abby mumbled.

Lucy, her frizzy dark hair sticking out like pipe cleaners, asked Laura to lift her skirt so they could see the boot around her entire leg and foot. It was just a blue hospital boot. Her purple toes were much prettier. Laura noticed the warm stickiness of her palms as she gripped the handles of the crutches and tried to figure out a nice way to say No. But then she didn't have to because there was Charlie, bounding through the back door with a bag of oranges.

He tripped in the grass and Corinne scowled at him, whispered something in his ear. "Gather round, gather round kids!" he yelled, though he could have just said it normal and they would have heard him. He looked happy, even dopey. This is how

Laura liked to see him. His face was all done up in smiles, and so maybe he was back to how he was before.

The game was the orange pass. Charlie put an orange in between the nape of his neck, all folded up like an accordion, and held it in place with his chin. Absolutely no hands were allowed; the orange had to be passed from neck to neck.

“Laura’s the birthday girl, she goes first,” said Charlie. He lowered himself slowly with his knees like he was about to dance under a limbo stick. “Come on, Laura.” His voice was garbled. With the crutches it was hard to maneuver her body; she needed to twist it just so to get her neck in line with Charlie’s, and she couldn’t bend her leg. Everyone was watching her and holding their breath, counting to ten, hoping. Why was she scared? Tiny hot tears pooled in the rims of her eyes. She blinked hard and fast to push them back down. Charlie stepped closer, contorted himself so she wouldn’t have to move too much. She could smell the mixture of faint cologne and beer as she stuck her neck out for the orange. The bristles of hair on his face scratched her skin. She pecked at the orange with her chin, tried to get it to roll into her neck and cinch it tight, but she couldn’t bend enough, couldn’t react quickly enough and the orange dropped.

Everyone in the yard seemed to let go of their breath and when the orange rolled on the ground they averted their eyes as if they hadn’t been watching. “Nice game, Charlie.” The voice came from the grown-up corner of the yard—low, but loud enough for everyone to hear. Instantly, the yard seemed smaller and the air hotter than before. There wasn’t enough space to move or make oneself comfortable.

Luckily, the day ended better than it had begun. Corrine had rented a Karaoke machine and by the end of the evening Laura and the girls were gathered in the living room screaming, singing like Broadway stars, giggling and falling over when they couldn't keep up with the lyrics and when their voices cracked. They sang songs from *Annie*, "It's a Hard Knock Life," "Maybe." And then they sang the songs Laura loved: "Believe it or not" from the TV show *The Greatest American Hero*, "What a Feeling" from *Flashdance*, and Cindy Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun." She didn't think about her leg or Charlie. She didn't care what anyone thought because all she could feel was the music and the laughter of her friends, and nothing else mattered.

The summer was spent swimming in the club pool, sleeping over at Abby's or Lucy's and waiting. Waiting for her good leg to return from that other planet. Waiting to be the same again, able to dance, to run, and to swim for real. She already walked without the crutches because this helped to build the muscle in her leg. Her walk, though, was more of a hobble. She couldn't swim like Abby or Lucy. Instead, she sat on the edge of the pool with her bandaged leg wrapped in plastic bags. At first, she refused to go to the pool when they invited her. She cried and told Corinne, No, everyone would be looking at her. Corinne gave her pep talks. It was everyone else's problem if they stared, not Laura's. Why ruin what could be a perfectly good time because other people couldn't mind their own business? Corinne's eyes,

wrought with worry, were pink and raw, and Laura, tired of her encouragement and anxiety, eventually gave in.

She splashed her leg in the water, watched Abby and Lucy as they did handstands in the shallow end, as they raced from one end of the pool to the other, and as they practiced water ballet. It wasn't a perfectly good time, being on the sidelines, but it was better than being at home and watching Corinne fret and hoping Charlie would rise from his stupor in the evenings and be a dad again.

After swimming they would walk down Oak Park Avenue and stop off at Cora-Mart to buy candy: Gobstoppers, Pixy Stix, candy cigarettes, Jolly Ranchers, and Bubble Yum. Abby and Lucy would forget to walk slowly. They'd talk about boys, and it was like a hot air balloon lifted them into the atmosphere while Laura remained on the ground and watched them float away. She'd suck on the cigarettes, blow the powdered sugar into the air, and pretend she was eighteen and dressed up in some shimmering gown with a slit up the leg; she was at a fancy dance party where men eyed her and her long beautiful leg, and she felt sexy. Abby and Lucy eventually would realize they'd been walking too fast or Laura would call out *Hey!* and they'd turn around and skip back toward her.

Abby wanted to know when Laura was going to get rid of that boot. Soon, Laura told her. When? Lucy asked. Laura didn't know. The doctors wouldn't say exactly.

One afternoon as they walked back from the pool, sipping on Capri-Sun, the smell of chlorine in their hair, and the sun warm on their shoulders, Abby asked,

“Will it be the same as before? Will you be able to roller skate, and bike, and walk normal?”

“Oh, yeah. Definitely,” said Laura.

Before the end of the summer Laura was issued a new shoe, a smaller shoe for her foot. Her leg was free, but it didn't look the same. Scrawny, pale as paste, and covered in tiny pink pimples, she couldn't stand looking at it and she couldn't stand the new shoe. There shouldn't have been a corrective shoe anymore. With a slab sole three inches thick, it resembled a nurse's shoe or, even worse, one of those heavy sandals with the form fitted putty toes. A shoe made for a sixty-five year old, not a twelve-year-old. Three heavy straps buckled in front with an oversized heel and an ankle strap in the back. All of it tightened to brace her foot for security.

She became impatient. When? She asked Corinne and Charlie. When will I be able to wear a pair of matching shoes? School would start in three weeks. Would it be better then? Corinne said they were going to have a family meeting to talk about it. A pit, wide and deep, opened in Laura's stomach.

Laura sat on the couch. Corinne sat in a chair facing her. Charlie paced behind Corinne. He was as jittery and agitated as a squirrel.

“Daddy, please sit down,” said Laura. He about faced and pulled a chair next to Corinne, but then his legs started to bounce. The bright light filtered through the slits in the blinds and created shadows, long and thin like fingers, that moved across the pale gray of Laura's skirt. Corinne wrung a piece of tissue through her anxious

fingers. “Dr. Messud said your leg has healed beautifully. And look at it, it’s so pretty.” Her voice, coated with sweetness and insincerity, sent a chill up Laura’s spine.

“Just tell me,” said Laura. She couldn’t address Charlie, he was so excitable she thought he might wiggle out of his chair and start convulsing.

Drop foot. Corinne said it first. Drop foot. Charlie said it right after her, but under his breath as if he didn’t mean to say it, like it was a thought he had forgotten and was struggling to remember. Corinne’s face shook as she spit out the words: Partial loss, nerve damage, temporary or permanent, it could be either. It’s why Laura couldn’t feel her foot. It’s why when the doctor asked her to walk down the long glossy corridor of the hospital, after he removed the full brace and the bandages, that her foot was loose, numb, and she had to cast it out in front of her like a ball left tied and hanging to her ankle.

The room spun around her; it had become unhinged and her parents teetered in front of her. She gripped the couch seat cushion, steadied herself and looked at Charlie. His face was long and shamed and it made her want to scream.

“It’s going to be okay, Laura,” said Charlie.

“It’s not going to be okay!” She didn’t believe him anymore. He wasn’t even around to try and make it okay. He came home late and when he did, he sat in front of the TV like a zombie. She hated how he felt so bad and how he tried to make her feels so bad for him. Why didn’t he comfort her? Why didn’t he put his arms around her? Why did *he* need so much comfort? It was like a huge vacuum had come into

the house and sucked out all the love and the joy and she hated her parents for letting that happen, hated them because they made everything more awful and more confusing, constantly telling her everything was alright when she asked if they were okay or when she inquired about her leg and they kept reassuring her it wasn't going to be much longer before everything was back to normal. She felt more alone being with them and wished they would just go away because they lied. They lied!

"You're not okay! I'm not okay! Stop saying it's okay. It's your fault. It's your fault!" Her voice was shrill and filled the room.

Charlie's face was dumb and blank. Corinne slumped in the chair, buried her face in her hands. Her cries were tiny squeals, the sound of a small creature being smothered.

"You're right, Laura. It's my fault," said Charlie. "It is my fault." Finally, he had looked at her; finally, he had said something true. "I'm sorry."

That week she didn't go to the pool. She stayed at home in her room and listened to records. Music she and her friends used to choreograph dances to: Tears for Fears, Madonna, Depeche Mode, and Michael Jackson. She lay on her bed and watched the ceiling fan spin.

Temporary. The word circled in her mind. The letters compressed together and then separated. T-E-M-P-O-R-A-R-Y. She had to be patient, to keep going to physical therapy, and she had to pray. She had to believe in miracles because if she didn't believe in them, she'd never get one. She'd take tap again and ballet. She would be a dancer like she had planned.

On Saturday, Abby invited her to sleep over. Laura sat on the edge of the Jacuzzi tub in Abby's parents bathroom and kept extremely still while Abby, after digging through her mother's make-up drawer began to paint Laura's face with colored powders, cream-rouges, eye and lip liner. When she finished, she grabbed a mirror from the tile counter and held it in front of Laura, "Tada!"

"Interesting," said Laura.

"It's beautiful."

Laura took a closer look. Her far-set eyes were like a cat's with the black eyeliner extending out and up toward the tips of her eyebrows. The eye-shadow was a sunset on the top half of her face, her fleshy lips, which always reminded her of a fish, were a ripe cherry, and when she removed the tie from her black hair she was startled by the paleness of her skin against it.

After the beautifying session and eating mint chip milk shakes, they sat on Abby's four-poster canopy bed and listened to the radio. The Eurythmics, "Sweet Dreams" was playing. Laura sang quietly under her breath, *Hold your head up, moving on, keep your head up, moving on...* Abby pushed the cuticles on her fingers back with the long tips of her nails. She talked about Andy Molta, a freshman, who worked at Baskin-Robbins on Oak Park Avenue. Abby thought he was hot and knew for a fact that he thought the same of her. She had plans of kissing him and then some.

"Yeah, he's cute." And he's a FRESHMAN, Laura wanted to say.

“He’s *hot*,” Abby said because hot was sexier than cute. Mrs. Donning knocked on the door and poked her broad face into the room, ““Lights out girls, it’s late. Laura, I put a jar of cold cream in the bathroom, it’s to clean off your make-up.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Donning.” Mrs. Donning smiled then looked sharply at Abby.

“Just two more minutes, Mom.” Mrs. Donning held up two fingers and mouthed two. Laura was about to get out of bed and head to the bathroom when Abby grabbed her arm.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Abby said, twisting her pretty face and squeezing her eyes together. She huffed out a breath. “I want to touch it.”

“What?” Laura was horrified. “You want to touch what?”

Abby pointed to Laura’s foot, securely fastened and hidden within its corrective shoe. She wasn’t planning on taking the shoe off until the lights were out, until she was safe under the covers.

“No.”

“Oh, come on. I’m not gonna do anything. I just want to see what it’s like.”

“It’s like a piece of dough.” She had avoided looking at her foot for months. In the mornings when she put on her corrective shoe and in the evenings when she took it off, she closed her eyes. It was a thing, a thing that had shown up like a lost puppy and claimed her. But it wasn’t fuzzy or adorable. It didn’t have big droopy eyes and ears. It just followed her around, relentlessly, wherever she went.

“Laura, I’m your best friend. What? Are you afraid of me?” She wasn’t afraid of her; she just didn’t believe her. Laura thought of Abby as her best friend, but for

Abby *best friend* was just something she said to make you believe she cared about you. Laura could already feel herself wavering under Abby's gaze, under her attempted earnestness. She wanted to trust her; she wanted to feel close to her.

"Please," begged Abby.

Laura bit her lip and looked at Abby sternly, "Don't make fun."

"Cross my heart, hope to die." She quickly took her pinky finger, crossed her heart and then kissed it.

Laura pushed herself back on the bed and bent her knee so she could reach her foot. She unfastened the buckles and the Velcro and slid the foot out of the thick sock that was sewn into the stiff frame of the shoe. It was dead weight, though resting on the bed it looked like a normal foot. Abby's fingers fidgeted as she approached.

"It doesn't bite," said Laura.

"Can I lift your leg?" She wanted to see the foot drop, she wanted to see its lifelessness. Laura could feel the humiliation already, but she was also curious. She nodded. Abby put her hands under Laura's calf and lifted. The foot hung heavy without a hinge. She took one hand and poked at the foot while Laura watched her hesitation turn into fascination. She squeezed Laura's toes.

"Do you feel this?"

"No."

"This?"

"No."

“Is that where they operated?” Abby slid her finger across a long purplish-white line of skin that ran from Laura’s Achilles heel to halfway down her foot. Laura felt soothed by Abby’s fascination, but when she started to giggle Laura pushed her away.

“That’s one of the places.”

“It’s so strange!” said Abby, handing Laura her shoe.

“So when will it get better? It’s been months.”

“I don’t know.” Laura nuzzled the shoe back over her foot.

“It’s not going to get better. You lied about that.” Abby’s face was smug; satisfied that she’d just revealed a dark secret.

“I didn’t lie.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m not lying.” Laura could hear the strain in her own voice.

“It’s just strange that it’s taken so long,” said Abby.

“How would you know how long it’s supposed to take?” Laura got up, went into the bathroom and smeared the cold cream all over her face. It made her look like a ghost. The cool against her skin soothed her.

Lying in bed, Laura listened to Abby’s deep breaths. She inhaled the clean smell of the sheets. The scent was like the faint scent of flowers drying under the sun. The curtain over Abby’s bedroom window was as thick as tapestry and didn’t allow for even a sliver of light. Laura squeezed her eyes shut then opened them and watched shapes appear in faded fluorescent, morphing into other shapes until they

disappeared and she squeezed her eyes again. She thought about how she could feel the weight of her foot at the end of her leg, but no other sensation.

When school started in September, Charlie drove her. The school was only seven blocks away, but Charlie and Corinne didn't want her to walk there because it would put too much pressure on her foot. Charlie still wasn't the same Charlie as before the accident. At least he'd stopped making excuses that he was tired and too busy to play with Laura. She supposed giving her a ride was part of his effort to act like her dad again. He promised that he would play games with her and so far they'd played Connect Four, checkers, and UNO. He did everything more carefully now—he kept his eyes on her when she spoke to him. When she attempted to tickle him, he didn't tickle back, when she asked him to lift her up on his shoulders, he told her, No. No playing rough, he'd said. She was too big for all that.

The car idled in front of the school. Laura wrapped her hands around her seat belt and let her weight pull on it as she gazed out the window.

"Are you okay?" asked Charlie.

"Uh-huh," said Laura. Kids spilled out of the hallways and onto the grass; their voices were a high-pitched hum, everyone talking at once. Their hair was sun bleached and their skin bronzed or severely freckled after the long summer.

"You're going to do great," he said. But she could tell he was nervous, too. He reached his hand out and placed it against her face. "It's going to be okay." She

wasn't so sure and opened the door and stepped onto the sidewalk with her good foot.

She found Abby and Lucy in homeroom and they compared first day of school outfits. Abby made sure everyone knew that her Guess? jean skirt was real Guess?, not the fake kind that people bought for cheap in Mexico. Laura's leg was still extra skinny, still ugly and so she wore parachute pants. They had zippered pockets and made swishing noises when she walked. Abby and Lucy ran their hands over the nylon cloth. Her outfit passed their approval. So the first day was okay, and the second, and days after that, too.

Laura's foot, however, stubbornly resisted her desire to be fixed. She couldn't keep up.

Her friends moved with the quickening pace of the world. Underneath their efforts to consider her, she began to sense restlessness. Come on! Hurry up! They would say. She couldn't hurry, even when she tried, she couldn't hurry. And then there were the boys who were so cool and cruel. Cripple, someone had called to her from across the quad. She had always been a lovely, graceful girl. In ballet class, before the accident, she admired her kicks and plies. But they were right, she was crippled now and until they had said it aloud she hadn't really known.

The restlessness and impatience of her friends turned into aloofness. They moved outward from a concentric circle, out toward the boys, toward crowds and cliques, toward the noise of the world, while Laura didn't seem to move, but rather watched as the life she knew pulled away from her. Slowly, she faded into the

background, not realizing what was happening, but getting the distinct sense she was becoming invisible.

In homeroom, she sat at her desk at the front of the class. While Mr. Ussery wrote on the board, she looked back at Abby who sat a few desks behind her. Abby sat sideways in her desk as she whispered to Phillip Comstock, a popular dark haired twelve-year-old. Laura caught her eye and smiled. Abigail rolled her eyes, said something to Phillip, and then scratched her cheek slowly with her middle finger, very slowly; as if she wanted to make sure Laura would see it clearly. She saw it and thought it couldn't really be her middle finger. And then, when they snickered, she knew that it was and quickly turned away. She gulped again and again to stop the tears from reaching her eyes. So this is what it's like, she thought. This is what it's like.

ALL THIS SPLENDOR

The studio was above Xiao's Acupuncture and Herb shop. In the window was the Apartment for Rent sign and right next to it was a Help Wanted sign. Lawrence and his dad walked through the door and saw a small, firm woman with dark, kinky hair, large flat lips, and a chipped front tooth standing behind the cash register. She introduced herself as Mrs. Xiao, handed Lawrence's dad the keys, and directed them to the apartment entryway just left of the shop. "Top," she said. "F1. You want, you take as is."

They walked through the studio door into a stale chemical smell, a smell that covered some other smell.

"Rat poison," said his dad. "Hopefully they're all dead and you won't have anything to worry about." Then he made a half-hearted attempt to laugh. He never could pull off a joke because, like right now, his jokes weren't funny. Most likely there were dead rats in the walls decomposing, and what was funny about that? This was cheapest place they had found and cheap was livable as far as Lawrence was concerned.

His parents had made it clear that if he planned on spending the summer in the city before school actually started in September then it was going to be on his dime. Two years working in the bakery section of Hal's Market—shaping dough,

putting it on pans, sliding it into the oven and then slicing and bagging bread—he'd saved enough money to support himself for a month, maybe a bit longer, until he found a job.

There was enough room for a bed and maybe a small table. The kitchen was a strip of linoleum flooring that bordered a square of counter with a single hot plate and a mini-fridge. The humidity in the room was so thick the walls were sweating and the paint was peeling off. Lawrence walked over to the air conditioner lodged in the back window with a limited view of a courtyard that looked like one of any cement prison yards he'd seen in the movies. He flipped the switch and the unit made an explosive sound and then pattered and coughed until it settled into a jarring rhythm. He watched his dad kneel down on the wood floor and brush his stubby fingers against the baseboards. The finish had been completely lifted, leaving nothing but a worn wood that could put splinters in your feet. The shower had a layer of scum and was big enough to hold a body, and the toilet was just close enough to the bathroom door that, when Lawrence sat on it for a test run, the door hit his knees.

"It's a shit hole," said his dad. And then, as if he immediately regretted not saying something supportive, "But I think it's great. It'll do for three months before you get to the dorms. You'll do just fine." His dad's large, loving brown eyes stared at him from under heavy, drooping lids. His dad didn't understand any more than his mom why he would want to go to Hunter College over Syracuse, why he would want to be farther away from home instead of closer. But unlike his mom, whose

round face turned all damp and pink from tears when she pleaded with Lawrence to stay, offering up scenarios of how much easier it would be to live in Syracuse--how he'd have more means and he could visit on the weekends and do his laundry and eat free food, and wouldn't that be nice--Lawrence's dad never imposed his personal wishes on him. "It's your life," he'd told him. "You're the one who's gotta live it."

What could he tell his parents? He didn't want to end up like them, satisfied with living a life of routine, where grilling in the backyard was the highlight of each summer and the prospect of retirement in the next ten to fifteen years was the most exciting topic of any conversation they had with their friends. Sometimes he wanted to scream at them: *What about now? You have a life now.* He wanted more and he had no doubt he could have more; believing was in his nature. He didn't know what *more* was exactly—more life, more money, more passion, more experience, more fun—it didn't matter. He just knew staying home wasn't enough for him. He wanted options, and if you lived upstate you went to the city for options.

His dad unloaded the blow-up bed and two large duffel bags from the truck that now sat idling in front of Xiao's shop. He wiped his face with the back of his hand. It was five o'clock and the heat was as sweltering as it was at noon.

"It's a heavy load. Let me help you take it upstairs," said his dad.

"Nah. I got it," said Lawrence. "You sure you don't want to stay the night and head off in the morning?"

"Nah. Your mother's expecting me home. I'll get a cup of coffee. I'll be fine."

They were quiet for a minute. "Alright," said his dad. He stepped forward, put

his large arms around Lawrence and squeezed him tightly. His dad's t-shirt was soaked through with sweat and Lawrence could smell the unmistakable salty body odor that always made him think of his dad as a man's man. His Dad was massive, short but burly with big arms and a chest that looked and felt heavily armored. Physically they were nothing alike. Lawrence took after his mother. His scent was unrecognizable. He was pale, long and willowy, skinny as a reed, and every time his dad put his arms around him, he felt like he might snap.

As he watched the truck pull away from the curb and his dad's arm reach out the window to wave good-bye, he was mindful to keep his legs steady and still on the sidewalk for fear the impulse to run after his father and yell at him to stop and please take him home would overpower him.

His enthusiasm and baby face were holding him back. What else could it be? His mother always told him he had cherubic cheeks, which really just meant fat baby cheeks. The combination of fat cheeks and his boundless and eternally optimistic energy meant no one would take him seriously.

He filled out applications at a bunch of restaurants and refused to be discouraged each time they noted he didn't have any experience waiting tables and they were sorry, but they weren't willing to give him any. He had applications in at Gristedes for a bagger, Diesel, Macy's, Rizzoli's, and Barnes & Noble for a sales clerk, and at Clear View Cinemas for a cashier.

He heard you could make twenty to twenty-five bucks an hour at the temp agencies and registered with four of them. Every morning he went to the Empire Temping agency in the Graybar building near Grand Central to take the word processing, database, and spreadsheet tutorials. His scores improved, but they still hadn't called him with an assignment.

He amused people, as if he were a puppy or a lop-eared rabbit. After multiple rejections on the job hunt, he adjusted his approach and tried to replace the beaming excitement that lit up his face with the expressions of an older more seasoned person: knowing, stern, cynical. It didn't work.

Three weeks, no job, and he was living off of peanut butter and tuna fish sandwiches. When his mom and dad called to check-in to see how the job search was going and if he was enjoying city life, he told them he was making progress, any day now he was expecting to hear about various positions. He was unreasonably cheerful on the phone, which was his way of letting his parents know to stop asking him how things were for a while. As far as city life, he hadn't had a chance to partake since he had to make every penny last, but he didn't tell them this either.

It was Monday, and when he thought of the whole week ahead of him he felt empty. His button down shirt and khakis, an attempt to look respectable for his morning tutorials at the temp agency, were glued to his body with sweat. Walking from Grand Central to Chinatown in the middle of summer to save on subway fare was, he realized now, not the wisest choice. He just needed to make it home so he could peel off his clothes.

Chinatown, as always, was overcrowded, and the coordination it required to weave through the people and overstuffed trash bags without tripping was an athletic skill he had never known he possessed. He passed a fish market; the sour smell and bulging black eyes of the coral-colored carp that floated in melting ice didn't bother him like it did when he'd first arrived, nor did the leathery Peking ducks hanging from their long necks in the window of another storefront. He just couldn't get used to the heat.

The whole city existed inside a hot, humid balloon, the atmosphere growing heavier by the hour while everyone waited for it to pop. What he wouldn't give for that violent summer rain to temporarily release him from his misery, for the lightning to hit the sky and torrents of water to wash all the smells and filth away until the steam rose again and filled the air with the inevitable oppression of summer in the city.

He stopped in front of Xiao's Acupuncture and Herbs and noticed the Help Wanted sign was still in the window. Asking your landlord for a job was not ideal, but his earnestness was turning into desperation. If he didn't find something in the next few days, he'd have to call his dad to come pick him up and spend the last two months of summer at home, a failure. He decided to go upstairs and make out a check to Mrs. Xiao first. July rent was due at the end of the week, and she'd be more susceptible to hiring him if she didn't suspect how desperate he actually was.

The shop had a green awning and the large storefront window was framed in red. The bell that alerted Mrs. Xiao she had a customer jingled when he walked

through the door. Behind him he heard the sky crack and the summer rain come down, pelting the street. The bowl he'd placed in his kitchen a few days ago to catch the water that leaked through his ceiling would overflow soon. Still, rain was better than no rain.

Mrs. Xiao walked through a worn curtain from the back of the shop blowing into her hands and rubbing them together.

"How I help you?" she said.

"I'm the tenant upstairs," said Lawrence and pointed towards the ceiling.

"Didn't recognize you."

He handed her the check.

"Very good. Thank you," she said and nodded.

He didn't move. He glanced around the shop and tried to appear pleasant. On the ceiling, six small round porcelain plant holders with red tassels swayed above their heads. A tall plywood shelf took up the length of the far wall where mason jars were stacked one on top of the other, filled with mossy green herbs; their white labels marked in strange characters looked like scribble to Lawrence. He listened to the rain and watched Mrs. Xiao chew at her lips; the tip of her broken tooth was sharp enough to draw blood.

"You want something else? Herb? Acupuncture?" she said.

"Uh. No. No." His hands were balled into fists. He took a slow breath and said, "I was wondering about the help wanted sign in the window. If you're still looking for someone I'm interested in some extra work."

She drew her head back and eyed him carefully. "You need work?"

"Some extra work. I-I could use a little more spending cash."

"Mmmhmmm." She rubbed her hand over her chin like she was stroking a beard. "Well, I be your landlord and your boss. Not good idea. You give me too much power."

It was too much power, but if she didn't give him the job he wasn't sure he'd able to eat and she'd never see next month's rent. Sweat dripped down the back of his ears. "Can I fill out an application?" he said.

"I have your rent application. That enough. It's for a delivery boy."

"That's fine," he said.

"Sit down," she said and placed a green pleather stool in front of him.

"What—"

"Don't talk. Breathe."

He did as he was told and watched her hand tap against his arm.

"Lift arm," she said, continuing to tap him. "Lift arm." She placed two fingers on the inside of his wrist. "Now, stick out tongue." Her face was so close to his that he could smell her scent: a faint burnt scent, musty and comforting like smoke from a wood fire. Her narrows eyes scanned him. This was the oddest interview he'd been on and was rather personal and involved for a delivery job. It didn't surprise him, though; Mrs. Xiao didn't seem like a woman who was concerned with normal protocol.

“Your red hair is good omen. You have a little too much heat and dry, but you have clear mind. You not from here, right?” she said.

He didn’t understand what she was talking about and decided it best not to ask. “No. I’m from upstate.”

“That’s right, I remember. Makes sense.” She slapped her thick hands together. “I pay twelve dollar a hour. You want more, you go somewhere else. I have bike with a basket. If you take subway then at your cost. I pay you weekly. You can start tomorrow.” Her brusqueness bordered on rude, but her face was open, absent of malice, and the round moons of delicate, worn skin around her eyes convinced him she was a soft, kind woman.

The work wasn’t complicated: put the containers into brown paper bags with the names and addresses of the customers written on the outside, put said containers in bike basket, get on bike, ride to customers’ homes and make the delivery. Easy.

He was exhausted. She had him going all over the city. There was no discernible pattern to her customer base except that they all had to be willing to shell out \$75 for one container of herbs. He thought most of them would live in Chinatown, the Village, all within a half-mile of each other. But no, he was biking to the Upper East Side then across town to the Upper West Side, and back downtown to Tribeca, Alphabet City, and the Bowery. He liked the work. He got to peek into people’s homes, which ranged from majestic Upper East Side penthouses to bohemian dwellings in the East Village.

After a week of biking five to six hours a day his calves began to cramp. He didn't mind, though, since for the first time in his life they were developing tone and muscle. He asked Mrs. Xiao if she had something for muscle cramps. She told him to eat lots of bananas and buy some Tiger Balm.

At the end of the week, Mrs. Xiao took cash from the register, counted out \$280 dollars, and handed it to Lawrence. He couldn't stop the ear-to-ear smile that spread across his face.

"Thanks, Mrs. Xiao," he said and shoved the cash into his pocket.

"No need to thank. You do work, you get paid."

The customer bell jingled behind him, but he didn't turn around. He stood wondering if Mrs. Xiao paid such a high wage for a delivery boy out of ignorance or generosity. He knew most delivery boys got minimum wage plus tips, and here he was getting twelve and tips. She looked past Lawrence at the customer. He heard a young woman's voice. *Baba*. The air stirred behind him and from the corner of his eye he saw a thick, dark river of hair swish past him. He watched the girl kiss Mrs. Xiao on the cheek. They spoke quickly and in what sounded like gibberish, but must have been Chinese. Lawrence stared: her hair flowed to her mid back, her arms moved fluidly in front of her, her fingernails were painted white, and her skin was tawny and smooth against the sleeveless electric green top she wore. Lawrence heard Mrs. Xiao say his name and the girl turned to look at him. She was still speaking Chinese, talking to Mrs. Xiao, only now her head was cocked and her wide

hazel eyes were on Lawrence. They were talking about him. He stood as still as a mannequin, waiting, unsure if it would upset Mrs. Xiao if he just walked out.

Then Mrs. Xiao said, "Speak English."

The girl rolled her eyes. "Hi," she said, without a trace of an accent. She lifted her hand in a lame wave. "I'm Wendy. Mrs. Xiao's daughter."

She was beautiful, intimidatingly beautiful. For a second he couldn't find his voice. Her face was perfectly oval, her lips pink and full, and her almond shaped eyes studded with lashes thick and full as feathers. "Lawrence," he said.

"You're my mom's new delivery boy."

Mrs. Xiao said something quickly to Wendy—her words came out rough like a violent cough.

"What?" said Wendy, turning towards her mother and throwing up her hands. "I didn't mean anything by it, I was your delivery girl for years, remember? Mom was generous enough to fire me once I got into college." Wendy walked over to the cash register, opened the till, and counted out some cash. Mrs. Xiao snatched it out of her hand. "Baba!" said Wendy. "I need money."

"That fine, but you don't take, you ask."

"Fine. Mother, may I please have some money?" she said, holding out her hand.

Maybe he shouldn't have been watching this mother-daughter exchange. Wendy didn't seem to mind, though. She obviously relished attention. It was like she

was putting on a show. But Mrs. Xiao, counting cash into her daughter's hand, looked up at Lawrence and he could have sworn she blushed.

"I should go," he said, but he didn't want to go. He was mesmerized and wondered how often she came by the shop, what his chances were of seeing her again.

"Don't go," said Wendy. She kissed her mother on the cheek again, picked up her purse, and moved towards Lawrence with a self-possession that unnerved him. His legs quivered. "Mom says you're new to the city."

"I'm not that new," he said.

"Really?"

He was being an idiot; he could see her seeing right through him.

"Well then I guess you wouldn't be interested in going out with me and some friends tonight," she said.

"I didn't mean it that way." His face was hot; he must have been turning red. "I'd be interested."

"Oh you would, huh?"

He stared at her, dumbstruck. It's like she wanted to see him beg.

She started laughing, "I'm just kidding, Lawrence."

"Oh," he said and his chest sank.

"No. No. That's not what I meant. You're still invited. We're meeting at The Living Room at eight."

He nodded.

“It’s in the Lower East Side on Ludlow,” she said.

“I’ll try and make it.”

“Yes, *try*,” she said. Then she looked at Mrs. Xiao and winked. “See how hospitable I am Baba?”

She walked out the door and he watched her lithe silhouette as she glided past the window.

He was startled by Mrs. Xiao’s voice, “Be careful, Lawrence.” He hadn’t heard her creep up behind him. “You don’t have strong heart-protector. You need strong one with my daughter.”

He hesitated to ask her what she meant when she made statements like this since he thought of her as a witch doctor and not knowing what she meant made him feel less threatened. No explanation was required of “heart-protector,” though. He understood.

Young people huddled together on the corners. They whispered, laughed, and smoked. Lawrence scanned the awning signs looking for The Living Room. He fingered the fake ID in his pocket. His friend, Danny, told him he wouldn’t let him go to the city without an ID. “The city without an ID is like asking to have a bad time,” he’d said. Danny had a contact in Rochester, a guy who made good ones. So one Saturday they drove the two hours into Rochester to a gray part of town where the houses slumped in yards of knobby brown shrubs and dirt. It cost two hundred dollars. Danny paid for half of it as a going away gift.

She stood outside with a few other people—three guys and another girl—and took a drag from her cigarette. She blew smoke into the air. They all stood with ease and confidence, their faces layered in expressions he couldn't read. These were city kids. The way they dressed, spoke, and moved hinted at a code, a secret that became more complex over years and which they might not have known they possessed. Even though he couldn't name the quality, he knew they possessed it because he could see he didn't have what they had.

Wendy was wearing a short white skirt and lifted one long, brown gorgeous leg out in front of her as if she were a Rockette about to kick the air. Maybe she was showing off her shoes, but everyone's eyes were on her leg. As soon as she saw Lawrence she raised her hand high and screeched, "Lawrence!" like they were old friends who hadn't seen each other for years. He walked towards her, hands in his pockets, face tense and smiling. She introduced him to the group. They blinked at him and were neither friendly nor unfriendly. He was just some guy to them.

There was a small stage in a back room with a red curtain as a backdrop. The air was musty, filled with the warm breath of the crowd. A band was playing music so blaringly loud Lawrence's ears rang. They stood since there were no tabletops left. People moved in stunted motion to the music. Lawrence tried to tap into the rhythm, but his body wouldn't listen to him. He asked Wendy if she'd like something to drink.

"How old are you?" she yelled over the music.

"Twenty."

“No way. You look twelve. Let me see your ID.”

He took the ID from his pocket.

“Albert Ross from Texas. That’s a great name. It suits you perfectly. But I want to see your real ID.”

“Can you not say that so loud? Are you some sort of nark?” he said.

She leaned into him; her eyelids glittered and her skin smelled of citrus. “No one can hear anything in here,” she said.

“I don’t have my real ID on me. How old are *you*?” he said.

“Twenty-one next month.” She flipped her hair from one side to the other, rubbed her tongue along her bottom lip. Everything she did was sexy. He was still in shock that she’d invited him out. “I’ll have a vodka tonic,” she said.

By the time the band finished he could feel the beer floating inside his head. Wendy was talking so fast he could barely make out what she was saying. There was a game lounge upstairs. She wanted to play Pac-Man and she wanted more drinks. A new band would come on in a half hour. He bought more drinks and managed to make it up the stairs despite his legs’ resistance to submit to his direction. He could barely feel his body; it was as if he had no shape. Everything was dark blue—the light, the couches, the rug—he could hardly see. She was sitting on a couch with one of the guys he’d met outside. Tito was his name. He had his hand on her knee and was whispering in her ear. He looked like a Tito, stout with overdeveloped biceps.

Lawrence set the drink down on the table in front of her. She didn’t even look up at him. The window had closed and now he wasn’t sure if it had ever been open.

Whatever he imagined could happen between them was a dream. How could he have thought otherwise? All the people in the room were dark shadows. He found Pac-Man and put in fifty-cents. The joystick would not yield to his lead. Pac-Man's yellow head kept moving and chomping in the wrong direction, one head imploded after the other until GAME OVER appeared on the screen. He played again, and again. GAME OVER. GAME OVER.

He stood in front of Tito and Wendy, staring. They were all over each other, tongues in mouths, hands slithering up and down each other's body.

"I'm going now," said Lawrence. Then once again, louder, "I'm going!"

Wendy pulled her face back. She looked from Tito to Lawrence as if she was trying to place where she knew them from.

"Oh!" she said, and like a Jack-In-The-Box, she popped up from the couch. "I'll go with you." She grabbed Lawrence's hand, and they teetered down the stairs and out into the humid night.

The cab stopped in front of Xiao's Acupuncture and Herbs.

"Lawrence, you got any money?" asked Wendy.

Did *she* have any money? He must have gone through half of his week's pay buying drinks and now the cab ride. He felt for the wad of cash in his pocket. It wasn't there. He jammed his hand frantically into the seams—nothing. He was going to be sick. He was going to cry. He was going to puke all over this pretty girl and then he was going to clean her off with his tears. He'd lost it, how had he lost almost

three hundred dollars? Why the hell had he brought the whole wad? He was an idiot.

He was naïve. Fuck.

“Lawrence?” she sounded annoyed.

“I don’t have any money left,” he said.

“Oh. I think I have some,” she said.

Yeah, she had some. He saw her swipe it from the till.

They stood on the sidewalk. What normally was an overcrowded and littered street looked surprisingly serene under the silver moonlight. The air shook with the clattering of the subway crossing the Manhattan Bridge a few blocks away. He had tip money left, about forty bucks. It would have to last him the week. Another week of peanut butter and tuna. He almost gagged at the thought. He kicked at the ground.

“Why you so quiet?” said Wendy. She’d lowered her head just under his and gazed up at him—wide, lazy eyes. Who was this chick who had just macked on Tito frito, who acted like everyone was her best friend and enemy, and whom he’d been fantasizing about since she walked into the shop that afternoon? He knew nothing about her except that she was gorgeous, twenty, and Mrs. Xiao’s daughter. She was drunk. He was drunk. Wasn’t he supposed to think of this as an opportunity? This was a once in a lifetime chance, but the excitement had left him. He wondered if Mrs. Xiao would give him an advance. No, no. She paid weekly. Stop thinking about the money and look at this beautiful girl by your side. Think of her, you want her.

Aw, hell. Focus. Be a man. He grabbed her face in his hands, drew her into him. It was anything but graceful. All he could taste was lime. To his surprise she didn't recoil. Their tongues sparred sloppily. If either one of them had any skill as a kisser it had been lost, completely submerged in the alcohol.

He kept prolonging the kiss because he didn't know what else to do. His mouth was going dry. He couldn't make it with her in the street, he wouldn't even know how. So he stopped and asked, "Are you coming up?"

"Are you inviting me?"

"Of course. But I think you should know I live in a rat hole."

"I know what your place looks like. My mom owns the building."

They stood at the bottom of the stairwell. Looking up into its dark tunnel, they leaned into each other for support.

"Your place would be a lot better," he said.

"I live with Mrs. Xiao, your boss."

They walked side by side, up and up, squeezing between the railing and the wall. He opened the door but didn't turn on the light. A cockroach crunched and went flat under his foot.

"What was that?" asked Wendy.

"It's just some Cheerios. I think we're standing in my kitchen."

"Light would be good," she said.

"No. It's better without the light."

She tripped. "Ow!" she screamed. The end table.

“Here,” he said and led her to the bed. They fell onto it with a sigh of relief like they’d just crossed the desert and found water. He didn’t know what to do. Touch her. But, how? How did one give oneself the authority? The closest he had ever come to getting laid was with Marissa Lewis in the woodshop work shed--pants on the floor, all signs pointing to go until she chickened out, said no and ended up giving him a blow job. He had to hold his breath to stop from choking on sawdust. After, when he’d tried to talk to her at school, she ignored him, walking away without a word. He’d never understood what he’d done wrong, but she made sure he felt ashamed.

Wendy was on top of him. She didn’t feel real. He could smell the alcohol between them and underneath that, the lingering scent of sweet citrus on her skin. Her skirt was up around her waist. This was actually happening. He stared up at the darkness, blinking in disbelief as she moved all over him like some crazed animal. He didn’t have condoms. It was a superstition of his that buying condoms would guarantee he never have sex. As if the gods would punish him, squash any chance at losing his virginity if he was ever so bold to be prepared for sex. But here it was, opportunity. How did he ever think he’d get laid without a stash?

Maybe she had condoms on her. He could ask. Maybe it didn’t matter, maybe he was being paranoid. She’d had her tongue in Tito’s mouth an hour ago. Who knows where this girl had been or how many guys she had made it with? He imagined hundreds. And how the hell did he expect to measure up? She’d know he was a virgin. She’d know in two seconds. He had to calm down. But it was too late. A

panic was taking hold of him—quick and cold it shot from his groin to his head.

Concentrate. Engage. Engage. Don't let me down now. This is what you want: sex, sex, sex.

His body wouldn't respond. It was as if he existed outside of it and was trying to get in, to wake the damn thing up. Wake-up! Normally he could get hard from just looking at a pair of cantaloupes. Her hands were under his shirt, unbuttoning his jeans. In the dark her white fingernails glowed. He grabbed her hands, kissed them, and pushed them towards her chest. He prayed she wouldn't ask what was wrong. He stroked her face, her hair, and her arms. He kissed her lips. The inside of his mouth was sticky, craving moisture. He needed to distract her. He rubbed her back and she began to purr. "You're sweet," she said. He massaged her neck and kept massaging her until her quick, shallow breath, slowed and evened. She began to coo like a baby under the spell of a lullaby. Finally, her body went limp at his side and her breathing became a light snore.

In the morning he awoke to a throbbing pain behind his eyes. He sat up slowly, pushed himself against the wall. The sunlight was just making it's way through the front window. He half expected to see her beside him, but wasn't surprised to discover she had gone. Beneath the sink on the floor roaches lay dead on their backs; their stiff, brittle legs hugged the air. Over near the door he could see the smashed up body of the roach he'd stepped on the night before.

He didn't have her number and was afraid asking Mrs. Xiao for it would further complicate their already sticky landlord/tenant /boss/employee relationship. Two days passed and Wendy hadn't come into the shop. He began to think she'd been a dream, an apparition, a lure his imagination had conjured up to bring him closer to the excitement and promise the city held. She was something he'd hoped for. The longer he waited for her to appear again, the more distant and inaccessible she became. He finally gave in and asked Mrs. Xiao for the number. Mrs. Xiao tsk, tsked him and he wasn't sure if it was because he had delayed in asking for the number and should have asked sooner or if she was disappointed that he was pursuing her daughter in the first place. And was she disappointed because he wasn't a decent prospect or because she didn't have a high opinion of her own daughter? Whatever her reasons, she kept them to herself, and gave him the number.

The first three times he called, she didn't pick-up and he didn't leave a message. The fourth time, she did pick-up.

"Hello?" she said. He could hear voices in the background, the clinking of dishes. Laughter. "Hello?"

"Wendy. Hi, it's, Lawrence."

"Lawrence?—" and just as his gut began to wrench at hearing her draw a blank: "Oh. Yeah. Lawrence. Hi. How are you?"

"I'm great. Thanks. I wanted to call sooner, you know. I just, well, I had to get your number from your mom."

“Uh-huh.”

He paced back and forth between about five feet of space in his studio.

“Anyway, I had a great time the other night and was wondering if you’d like to go out sometime. I’d like to take you to dinner and—”

“Hold on one sec, I can barely hear you.” The voices got louder, then softer, and then they became muffled and distant. A car horn sounded. “Go ahead,” she said.

“I was just saying I’d like to take you to dinner and a movie. Maybe next week or something.”

“A date. That’s so sweet.”

His face suddenly went hot. He felt like he was ten years old and talking to a babysitter he had a crush on.

“The other night. You know I don’t recall everything, did we...you know did we?” she said.

He waited. He was nothing to her. If only he could make her feel even remotely as uncomfortable and as small as he felt. He decided to walk downstairs and talk to her on the street. There was no space in his apartment for this conversation, for the angst firing off inside of him.

“Lawrence?”

The stairwell was dark. All the light bulbs needed to be replaced. “No,” he said. “We didn’t do it.”

A sigh came out of her that sounded like pure relief. "Well, it's really nice of you to call. But, I'm just so busy these days. Maybe we can get together another time. I'm sure I'll see you in the shop."

"Yeah," he said. "Sure." And just as he walked out the door into the sticky evening heat, the phone clicked. He looked up at the sky where tangerine and red hues were slowly turning to violet. People walked at an almost leisurely pace, ready to retire for the day. The idea of going back up to his room was intolerable, so he walked too. He headed west, zig zagging through the streets until he got to the Hudson River. He sat on a bench and watched a roller blader speed by. The water glistened and moved in front of him; the wind kicked up white caps and felt cool against his skin. A tugboat passed and he wished he could be on it, going somewhere up river. He thought he could hear thunder not far off and as the sky turned a darker and darker blue, he waited for the rain.

Mrs. Xiao started treating him. He insisted he didn't need to be needled or to take herbs that smelled and tasted of potting soil, but she insisted harder that he did need such things. She was the one who had said she already had too much power over him and wouldn't this added arrangement just tip the scale way too far? "Too late," she said.

She pointed to his skin, told him he had too much heat and dampness in the body. Wouldn't he like to get rid of those volcanic mounds erupting on his face? It was true the past few days his face had become one big infected rash. She told him

he was too skinny; look at how his shorts barely stayed on his waist. He couldn't deny he wasn't in top form. After deliveries he'd just go up to the hot box that was his studio, watch movies, and when he got hungry, because he was sick of any food that came off of his hot plate, he'd go get take out. His parents had called him twice that week and when he told them that he'd been working as a delivery boy they were so enthusiastic he felt like an ass. Did he seem so helpless?

If Mrs. Xiao wanted to get rid of the heat in his body she should have bought him a new air conditioner. He built up enough nerve to ask her for one and wasn't surprised by her response: Apartment as is; air conditioner is tenant responsibility. An air conditioner was nearly a week's pay, and although he felt she owed him as much—if the department of housing ever inspected for health and safety hazards this building surely would be condemned—she did say the treatments would be free and even though this wasn't the compensation he was looking for, it was something.

He sensed that she carried a guilty conscience about Wendy, as if she had to make up for Wendy's lack of conscience. He never asked her about this directly, but the first time he lay on the acupuncture table face-up with his flat bare chest tense at the thought of being stuck with needles, he did ask if she was going to realign his heart-protector.

"Smart boy," she said. "But no realign, you need complete overhaul." He was surprised when she shook all over with a hearty laugh. She was always so serious, matter-of-fact. When she stopped laughing she leaned over him, placed a hand on his forehead and said, "You let too much in too fast."

There was no miracle. No sudden drastic change. His skin did calm down, and he actually found the motivation to paint the walls in his apartment, though he was hesitant to attribute any of these subtle changes to Mrs. Xiao's sorcery. Wendy showed up at the shop one afternoon and as he looked in from outside he witnessed the same scene as the first day he met her—Mrs. Xiao counting cash into her hand. He couldn't see the relation. Sure, they were both Chinese, but Wendy must have been a head taller than Mrs. Xiao, lanky and poised like a dancer while Mrs. Xiao was squat, lacking in the graceful movements her daughter had been gifted with. Perhaps it was just the years between them that emphasized their differences more than their similarities.

"Hi, Wendy," said Lawrence. She hadn't turned her head at the bell when he walked through the door.

"Oh, hi, Lawrence." A quick glance and nothing else.

"Bye, Baba." She closed her hand around the cash and walked past him like she didn't know him. He followed her out onto the street.

"Wendy," he said, grabbing at her arm.

"Hey!" she said. Her eyes flared up as she pulled away from him.

"Sorry. You're just in such a rush. I mean you act like you don't even know me."

She laughed quietly, not at him exactly, but to herself. "I *don't* know you, Lawrence."

He looked down the street at people moving quickly and haphazardly. He watched a guy trip and fall into a row of bloated trash bags that sat on the curb, awaiting pick-up. He felt sweat collect under his eyes and drip down his cheeks. How did someone like her, who only seemed interested in taking, come from a woman like Mrs. Xiao? He couldn't fit his mind around it. She didn't deserve her beauty. The supple skin, the nimble body was a sheath, only a sheath, and even that was wasted on her.

"Okay, then. I don't know you," he said and turned around and walked back in the shop. His heart pattered close to the skin. Mrs. Xiao dusted and rearranged herbs on a shelf. When she looked at him her face was dense and sad.

"I can't control my daughter, Lawrence. It her life. You see?"

No, he didn't see, he just hurt.

She continued, "You make her more important than she is. She so big to you, like you see her through magnifying glass, not real eyes."

He nodded, wanting to understand but feeling lost. She pulled a magnifying glass from beneath the register and brought it close to her eye so that it became huge and distorted. "*See*," she said and for the second time he watched her face break into full, hearty laughter and he felt better. "Come," she said and motioned to him to follow her to one of the acupuncture rooms in the back of the shop.

"No, Mrs. Xiao. Please, no acupuncture today."

"No needle, no take off clothes. Don't worry. Come."

He took off his shoes and lay face-up on the table. She removed containers from the corner cabinet, scooped out various spoonfuls of what could have been dust into a metal bowl and mixed them together. She struck a match and lit the dust, put a top on the bowl and grabbed the chains at its sides. "Lay all the way back," she said. She started from the top of his head, swinging the bowl back and forth all the way down to the tips of his toes and back up to his head and then back down again. He watched the thick smoke coil above him. "Breathe slow," she said. "Rest." She walked out of the room and he closed his eyes. The smell was sweet and full—a combination of flowers and pine leaves, the holy smell of a church or a temple at prayer.

In the shop, he and Mrs. Xiao bagged and labeled the afternoon orders. She placed one in his backpack and said, "This one go to Brooklyn. Ms. Lowell. Sad. Depressed." She shook her head as if to acknowledge sadness was all too common. She had a habit of announcing the ailment of the persons who requested deliveries. At first it perplexed Lawrence and his cheeks would flush when customers opened their doors; he was privy to information he shouldn't have been. Mr. Rory on McDougal Street suffered from impotence. Mrs. Lapis on 8th Street: bladder infection. Mrs. Zimmer on 72nd and Park: panic attacks. And Mr. White on 84th and Columbus: constipation.

There were customers who had more serious problems: pancreatic cancer, lupus, and infertility, among others. Lawrence knew it was inappropriate that such

information be shared with him, yet he felt oddly grateful knowing these people suffered. He didn't take pleasure in their pain, but it made him feel less isolated. No one in New York really knew him, not yet. There was Mrs. Xiao, of course. But mostly he felt alone, and seeing these people who anxiously awaited their deliveries—who, if Mrs. Xiao had been more discreet, would have remained nothing more than a name and an address to him—he suddenly felt an invisible thread of connection. Perhaps only an imagined connection, but what did that matter? They were lonely too.

After he completed his deliveries, he showered and took the subway uptown. At the end of July, after growing increasingly claustrophobic in his studio, he had made a decision to venture out each evening instead of spending every evening watching movies. He'd strolled around Central Park, where summer concerts were held almost every night of the week. He lingered on the periphery of the open-air theaters, lay in the grass, inhaled its ripe green smell, and listened to the music. He managed to get a ticket to Shakespeare in The Park, and despite his limited understanding of what was actually being said, he was fascinated by the drama that played out in front of him in the warm open air, and comforted by the audience that he was a part of. He bought hot dogs and then ate them, relishing their saltiness as he walked around the reservoir and admired the number of New Yorkers who ran past him with a palpable determination. He spent hours at the MET staring in awe at the Greek and Roman statues and feeling incredibly small beneath their towering physiques.

Tonight, he went to the Time Warner Center and took the escalator to the top floor. He looked out through the massive east-facing window where he could see all of 59th Street; it was the most orderly view of the city; all the cars flowed east and west towards and away from Columbus Circle where they spiraled around and around. The city didn't look or feel as intimidating from way up high.

He walked through midtown down Madison Avenue where the storefronts were populated with chicly dressed mannequins and people strode with their shopping bags, colorful and cumbersome, swinging at their sides. The yellow cabs like globes of light brightened the sea of dark cars all heading downtown. An invisible layer pervaded the city like a gossamer light, or waves of heat that distorted the air and made everything look malleable. All this splendor was what he had imagined and hoped for, but couldn't see before now. He could sense something coming into being, if he could just be patient, if he could just hang on and let it come.