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The purpose of this thesis is to portray the lives of different people, at different points in time, but to show that despite the differences amongst the characters, like in life, the lives in the stories intersect somehow. For instance, in one story, a particular character may play only a minor role (or may play no role at all, but is only mentioned as someone from the past); but, in another story, the same character finally has the opportunity to play the protagonist.

The reason behind this is to depict a microcosm of reality. In truth, one encounters many people in a single day, but each of these people has his/her own life he leads, in addition to a past already lead; and thus, each person has a story to tell. This thesis takes a handful of people, and tells the person's story.

HOW WE ARE RELATED

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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EARLY PICKINGS

I stand in the driveway the driveway, a dirt road, about a quarter-mile back, and I look at the house with its new siding while Ron takes a picture of me from the porch; and from here, I think how the house and Ron almost look right. The house is now pretty on the outside—it's blue, and there's white trim that Ron put around the door that reminds me of cake icing. However, from the outside, no one can tell the house still has a basement that floods when it rains, and an attic that harbors bats in the summertime. This was my father's house that he had bought when he'd retired; but when he died a few years back, I learned he'd left it to me in the will.

I was living in north Jersey at the time, with a suit, in a small, dumpy apartment in Edison. A man with a heavy foot lived upstairs. He snored so badly I could hear him through the walls like a hibernating bear each night. And really, up until the past couple of years, Edison was somewhat dangerous (this was before people started buying property there, and commuting into the city). So, at the meeting two weeks after my father's funeral, where some man read my father's will and said I had a free house to live in—that I didn't have to pay rent anymore—well, I took it; and, I didn't care where the house was. I didn't even think about it. I didn't think how far south in Jersey I would be, that I would be borderline Delaware, living on two acres, in cranberry bogs, and on farmland that I didn't know how to tend. My father did, I didn't, but the cancer ate away at him so quickly, he never got to show me what to do. I'd already signed the papers,

though, I'd realized my mistake, and so it was too late to go back.

Ron tells me now to smile as he sets the dial of the camera with fingers so long and thin they look like an ill woman. I have always thought this about his fingers, and about his hands, but it never bothered me until recently. Ron lives at the house with me, and has since about the time I inherited the place. I'd left the man I was seeing in Edison for Ron because Ron was kind, and gentle, and fun. He would pick the cranberries from the yard when I was in town so that when I came home, there they were—washed and in a bowl, ready for me to eat. Now, all I seem to notice are the khaki pants he wears each day. Even in the summertime, he wears khaki shorts. In fact, in three years, I have never seen him in anything else but khaki colors, except when we are in bed together, and then the lights are off. Ron's shirts are plain and neutral, too, like the carpeting in the front room, or the straw in the distance on someone else's farm. Sometimes, when I come inside, it takes me a minute before I even notice him sitting on the couch.

"Tess," he calls now. And he waves at me. "Hey, did it flash?" he asks, holding up the Canon. The wind blows, and the air is finally getting cooler in this late September.

I don't know if it flashed or not, though, and I shrug. But I am too far for Ron to see me. So I say yes, it did flash, and he says, "Perfect." I walk back to the front porch, my arms folded across my chest because I know Ron does not like this—he says it always makes me look as though I'm trying to hide. I laugh now, and I look in his direction so that even if he can't see my face, he can at least see where my arms are. Since the beginning has now faded into routine, I've learned what Ron is really like; he tells me what I do wrong, and what I can do better, and most days I think how he should

find instead someone he can be proud of, rather than trying to mold me into the perfect woman for him, the perfect man.

Ron waves at me again, and I stop walking to check my shoes. The soles are red—I cannot escape the damn cranberry bogs in front of my house. The wind blows the cranberries everywhere. The bogs have not been flooded yet, and the wind blows the ones too loose on the vines into the yellow, dirt driveway that splits the bogs in half. The canvas, though, and the laces of my shoes have remained in tact and white. Ron now limps his way towards me.

“My knee’s acting up again,” he says, bending to hold his leg. He winces. “Boy, my knee’s *really* acting up.”

“I see that. Do you want some ice?”

“No, I think I’m okay.”

“You don’t look okay,” I say, and I go inside. Like an old dog, Ron follows.

“Hey, Tess, you think it’s going to storm? Should I go close the windows upstairs?” he asks.

“I don’t know.” I pause. “Oh, just leave them. Your knee.”

“No, I’ll shut them. I don’t want the rain to come inside.”

“But it’s not even raining yet,” I say.

“Well, just in case.”

I think I see Ron smirk before he turns his back to me, as if I’m stupid, as if he is so much better than me.

“You don’t want the inside of the house to get wet, now do you?” he asks.

Gripping the rail with both hands, Ron hobbles up the stairwell, and I eventually hear the row of windows in my bedroom shut with a loud thud, and now it's me winces. I wait to hear the glass inside each window's panel break.

"Jesus, be careful," I say, but I know Ron can't hear me. And it wouldn't matter one bit if he could. I don't know how many times I've told him to watch how he treats the windows. I don't know how many times I've told him the windows are old. But he is careless and does not listen.

"It looks like we're really going to get it, Tess. Storm clouds are *definitely* moving in. Dark ones. I see them moving up from the south," Ron calls.

I realize, listening to him, that the walls suffocate me when Ron is in them. "I'm going to the store," I say, and I grab the car keys off the table.

I'm out the door before I finish hearing what Ron has said, though I'm sure it's something to the extent of being careful with the car. For the past month, I've backed into the mailbox at least twice a week and I've dented the car in three spots. I've scratched it in seven spots total. Ron does his best to wipe the scratches out with an old shirt, but to each dent I've made, he says, "There's nothing I can do. But don't worry, it's not so big. You can't even notice it." And he smiles, as if this is expected of me because he believes I am less than. Sometimes, though, I see the aggravation on his face—the lines, like car dents themselves, in his forehead and around his eyes, and I keep waiting for him to ask me why I am so bad at driving all of a sudden. I wait to see Ron angry.

But I pull up now in front of Charlie's house and not the parking lot of the

grocery store in town. It is a green, one-story, paint-peeled rancher with one window opened, and one boarded up. The grass in front of the house is dead, and yellow, and when I walk on it, it sounds like maracas shuffling beneath my feet. Charlie is the man Ron found in the paper, and introduced me to years ago. See, Ron was good at knowing how things worked out here. How was I supposed to make money, not knowing how to farm? Well, Ron saw Charlie's ad, and told me to lease the cranberries to him. I did; and now, Charlie pays me a piece of what he makes on the fruit—which is more than the looks of his house ever lets on, I think—in addition to the money it costs him to rent my land.

I get out of my car, and I walk around back. Like always, I see the firewood from last season still sitting in a messy pile by the door, and Charlie's nephew's toys are spread upon the grass, like booby traps, so that I must watch where I step. I see the water reels still farther back in the yard, out of the way, that Charlie uses to get the berries off their vines, and next to them, the yellow floating tubes to collect the berries once they've surfaced. I remember last season—Charlie will use these tools in about a month, or so, when the cranberries are ready to harvest and pick.

“Good afternoon, gorgeous” he says when I come inside, squeezing through the sliding glass door. His kitchen is still the same. Nothing is put away—opened bags of chips are on the table, as well as newspapers from the week. Charlie makes coffee—I smell the grinds, hazelnut-flavored, in the steam—and he asks if I'd like a cup.

“Sure,” I say, and I come from behind to hug him. Unlike Ron, he is tall. And his hands are masculine, like the bark of thick trees, and in two years, he has never told me

what to do. I see Charlie at least once a day, usually in the mornings when Ron is gone. Although sometimes, just to feel the blood pulse through my veins, and to hear my heart beat in my ears, I go to Charlie when Ron is home waiting for me, like Ron waits today.

“How are you?” he asks.

“I’m tired.”

“Well, you look beautiful.”

“It’s really getting chilly out there,” I say between smiles. My face feels flushed.

Charlie turns his head to the side so that behind him, I can still reach to kiss him. His breath smells of chocolate.

“Yep. It’s almost harvest time,” he says. “How are my cranberries looking?”

“About ready to be picked,” I say.

Charlie winks at me, like an actor in a movie as I move to clear the table. I push the condiments and chips aside, though I don’t know where to put them—there is no room anywhere—while Charlie stirs milk and sugar into my coffee. I notice he doesn’t ask anymore how I take it. But instead of sitting, he carries our cups to the back of the house, towards the bedroom.

“Come on,” he says. “Let’s drink these in here.”

I follow, and I see that, as usual, his bed is not made, and his dark clothes are thrown and crumpled on the floor. Charlie puts the cups on the nightstand beside us, and though he doesn’t use coasters—old cup rings are crusted on the wood—he’s careful when he puts them down, as if he places a small animal on the floor. I have never met a man like Charlie, a man both tender and rugged, and when he kisses me, I think how his

lips feel like no other I've known. His calloused hands feel like no other hands I've felt, and the way he removes my dress, removing each sleeve and pulling from the top, well, this is unique to only him, too.

When we are done, I look around the bedroom. Pictures of my front yard during harvest season are framed on the wall, like a gallery. Charlie stands in his knee-high boots and suspenders in some of the shots, his Wilmington Blue Rocks baseball cap turned around, and pails of cranberries in his hands. He smiles widely. I see how by his bed, he also keeps a picture of me. The picture is after he and I had had a cranberry fight last October. My dress is stained red, as if I'd spilled juice on myself. My teeth are pink.

I sip my coffee, which is cold now.

"You staying for dinner?" Charlie asks. "I've got some steaks in the 'fridge."

"I actually should be getting back," I say. I stand and look at my watch.

But Charlie reaches for my hand. "Come on, Tess, it's early. You don't have to leave."

"No, baby, I do. I want to beat that storm, or Ron will come looking for me. He has to know where I am all the time, you know that."

Charlie nods, and then shrugs. "Well, that's what you tell me. At least let me walk you to the door."

He kisses my cheek as he leads me out, his hand on the small of my back.

"I love you," I say.

And like he always does when we part, Charlie blows a kiss.

In the car, a Bette Midler song desperately plays through the static that the in-

coming storm makes, intercepting the Wilmington airwaves. Storm clouds more black than grey are above my car, and they chase me home. I don't like Bette Midler, but I let the song play anyway, and I think to myself Charlie is such a good man. He doesn't fight me when I say I have to leave, and he doesn't ask me questions, like why I'm still with Ron. He accepts me for me; he accepts my situation, and I am thankful. But when will I have the courage to leave Ron for good? This is what I wait for. Except, how do you hurt someone you once loved?

I turn Bette Midler off just before the house—I can only take so many love songs. I park my car between the cranberry bogs where I know it will be tinted pink by morning, after the storm. In front of me is Ron's Chevy, though I imagine Charlie's car in its place. If Charlie moved in, it would be an improvement for him, I realize, now that my father's house is fixed up. If it wasn't for Ron, and the guilt I feel for him, Charlie would be here already.

“Hurry up, Tess, get in, get in,” Ron says, opening the front door and waving me in. “I heard your car. Hurry up. The clouds are going to open up any second.”

The wind picks up, and Ron fights to shut the door.

“Where were you?” he asks.

“I went for a drive.”

I think I see Ron smirk again, like earlier. I know he thinks I must be stupid to go out in this weather.

“You went driving during a storm?” he asks. “Why would you do that? You were gone for nearly an hour. You know I was worried.”

“Ron,” I say. “I need to talk to you.”

But I watch as he turns his back. He still wears the khaki from earlier, though he’s changed his shirt. His chest is bare. It’s soft—just like it was yesterday, and the day before—and the coarse hairs on it are graying.

“I made us tea,” he says, and limps to the kitchen, his knee still paining him, an injury from a previous job, he’d once explained.

“Ron.”

“Hold on, hold on.”

“Ron, sit down, *please*.”

“One second,” he says, and I know his pig head is still thinking about the tea. He probably pictures it in his mind. It is the same routine we’ve been suffering for three years, and God forbid I change it. God forbid routine is ever broken.

“Oh, I don’t want your damn tea,” I finally say, thinking of the coffee Charlie made me. Poor Charlie, I imagine, alone in the storm.

Ron smiles nervously. “What’s the matter, Tess?”

“Ron, I don’t love you anymore. That’s what’s the matter.”

“What are you talking about?”

Ron moves towards me, and I anticipate a yell, or a tirade of some kind. But still, he only smiles uncomfortably.

“I don’t love you anymore,” I repeat. “And I think it’s best if you left, Ron.”

“What are you saying?” he asks. “Where is this coming from?”

“If you knew me at all, you wouldn’t ask me this,” I say.

Ron laughs. He says, “You know, I helped you make this house what it is. *I* fixed this house for you. And what, now you’re making me leave it? Were you just using me to fix it up for you?”

“You know that’s not true,” I say.

“Do I? Is this why you haven’t married me, Tess? You waited until I got your house and land fixed up before you told me how you *really* felt?”

“Ron, I’m in love with Charlie,” I say. I wait once more to see what happens, to see what he does. Ron’s face is a picture of confusion, and he takes a minute to stare at me as I brace myself. His cheeks redden, and his jaw line tightens until he pouts like a doll, while clenching his fists. He mumbles something under his breath.

“Excuse me?” I ask.

But he only laughs some more. “Of course you are. Of course you’re in love with Charlie, now that you’re *both* profiting from the cranberries. Christ, I can’t believe how much money means to you.”

Again, Ron shakes his head.

“But Ron, it’s not like that,” I say. “I was never using you. I really did love you once. But now I’ve stopped.”

Ron snickers. “You make it sound so simple.”

“It’s never simple,” I say.

“You should have told me sooner,” he says.

He moves upstairs. I hear the two snaps of his suitcase open, and hangers flinging

from the closet onto the floor like a ding, ding, ding.

“Ron,” I call.

“Don’t worry, Tess. I’m leaving. Is that it? Is Charlie moving in? Does he get to leave his shit-hole house and come live here with you now?”

“Yes,” I whisper. “He does.”

Of course, Ron does not hear me, and I say nothing more to him as he continues talking. I go outside. It’s raining now, though I don’t recall when it’d started. It comes down hard, and in the car, behind the wheel, I drive the four miles to Charlie’s. I don’t see anything in front of me except rain and darkness, and the occasional flash of lightening that lights the sky purple.

“Charlie,” I finally yell, standing on his front porch. I don’t know how I got here—it feels like I’ve been driving for forever, and I don’t know when I got out of the car. Thunder clangs in the distance, and I bang on Charlie’s door until I hear his footsteps get closer.

“Tess,” he says when he sees me. He holds a Coors in his hand that I want to sip. “Come in,” he says. “What are you doing here? Why didn’t you go around back instead of standing in the cold?”

I smooth my hair with rain collected between the strands. “Charlie. I did it. I ended it with Ron. I told him the truth.”

“You did what?” he asks.

“It’s over.”

“Tess,” Charlie says. “Why would you do that? What did he say? Is he alright?”

“What do you mean, ‘Why would I do that?’ And what do you think he said? He’s mad as hell.”

“Damn, Tess.”

“Charlie, why are you acting like this? We love each other. And now we can be together.”

Charlie shakes me off him, and laughs uncomfortably. I am reminded of Ron, only some minutes ago. A few drops of Charlie’s beer spill on my dress and on the floor. He asks, “When did I ever say I love you?”

I pause, and I think back. I think back on every day of the last year we have been together—he has *never* said he loves me.

“Tess, I think you’re a great lady. But I like my life simple like this.”

“I don’t understand,” I say. I look around his house, at the clutter and the trash. It is like a yard sale, I think. Or a flea market.

“I like it here,” he says, knowing what I’m thinking before I say it.

“But, Charlie, you could come live with me.”

“Tess, I don’t want to come live with you. You’re great, but I’m just not that type of guy.” He scratches his head. “Look, I’m sorry if I’ve led you to believe something else.”

I lean against the door, and I shake my head and stare at the red on the tip of my shoes.

“Tess?”

“I can’t go home,” I say.

“It’s good Ron knows the truth. You didn’t even want him there.”

I begin to cry, and Charlie asks if I’d like another cup of coffee. He puts a hand on my shoulder.

“I don’t want your damn coffee,” I say.

When I leave, it is still raining, though not as hard, and the thunder and lightening have moved north of here, towards Edison. I get back in my car once again, and I drive home from Charlie’s for the third time today. The gas tank is less than half full, and I think, Ron is the one who normally fills it for me as soon as the notch gets down to half—it makes him nervous if it gets too low. Ron has his faults, but *he* is a good man, too.

I turn the radio on, and I listen for another singer like Bette Midler, but there’s only static now, like TV fuzz. If I apologize, maybe Ron will understand. Maybe he will listen, and appreciate what it feels like to be in a rut. Maybe he will change, and then maybe he will stay.

I pull around the dirt bend, and in my headlights, I see the edge of the cranberry bogs and the small puddles, like oil leaks, from the rain glistening in the shine. I see the long, green grass, like dunes, protecting the perimeter. I continue turning the corner. Where is Ron’s car? But then I see it. I see everything. The closer I get to the house, the more I see how Ron has flooded half of the bogs with the hose from the back. He wades in the water up to his knees. I pull into the drive, behind his golden sedan, and I get out.

“What the hell are you doing?” I say.

But I know what Ron’s doing. My father’s rusted water reels have been pulled

from around back, just like the hose. I see them in front of Ron's car, near the front tire, two metal boxes that look like giant fishing rods. Like egg beaters, they've churned the cranberries too early from the vines at the bottom of the marsh. Ron collects the cranberries now with my father's dusty floating tube, like a lasso.

"You've picked them too early," I yell. "You've ruined the harvest. You've ruined Charlie's work. They're not ripe yet, Ron. They'll never bounce. Charlie won't sell these."

"I've ruined *his* harvest?" Ron says, and pulls the cranberries to him and plays with them in his hands. He says, "You're still thinking about the money, Tess, but do you ever stop to think about me? He's not the only one who knows what to do with these tools."

Ron gets out of the bog, his khaki pants wet and dark now from the water stains, and red near the bottom where the cranberries have broken, their color leaked. Ron shivers in the cold, and his hands are full of fruit. But he drops them now, and just as I thought, the cranberries don't bounce, but splatter on the dirt by his feet. They've been picked too early. They are dead before their time.

"Are you crazy?" I ask. "Look what you did."

Ron stares at me, and I at him. There is three feet between us. But as my headlights fade, Ron slowly becomes a silhouette.

"Ron," I say.

Ron says nothing, though. My headlights have gone out entirely now, and my eyes have yet to adjust. For a moment, I hold my breath. And then I hear Ron move. I

hear the dirt kick and scrape. When my eyes finally adjust to the darkness, I see Ron holding the green hose in his hand, pointing it in the other marsh, on the other side of the driveway.

“*You* fix this,” he says. This time, on your own, without me. Or go get Charlie to come fix it.”

By the time Charlie gets here, though, it will be too late. It *is* too late, for him.

“Ron,” I call. “Please come out of there. Please, let’s just talk.”

“What do you want to talk about, Tess?”

“I want to talk about this.”

“Tess, I don’t think I want to talk to you anymore tonight.”

“Fine. Okay, that’s fine. But just don’t leave tonight, Ron, okay? Stay here. Let’s just talk about this tomorrow.”

Ron doesn’t answer me. But, still, I know that we’ll speak tomorrow morning. We will talk about all of this. I know we’ll work it out, and that he’ll stay here, that he won’t leave because where else does he have to go?

I look up at the sky. There is still no moon, and the shapes of lingering clouds hover as they slowly move their way north. I look back down; I look for Ron. At last, my eyes trace his figure which looks bigger in the dark than he really is, and I study his stillness. I listen. There is no noise, though, except the sound of running water, flushing from the hose.

THE BARS OF GEORGIA SUNSHINE

You see the fat woman. She's standing with her trash bag in her hands. "Keep pickin'," you say to her. The fat woman glares at you, and you try not to look away. She finally backs down. You've matched her once again—the fat woman in charge of them—and this makes you feel good. You've got control, and she knows it. She listens to you; she picks. Her orange jersey shines, like a ripe peach, in the Georgia sunshine, as she collects the garbage along Interstate 75, right outside Macon. You watch, baton in hand, gun in holster.

You call the fat woman Maude Aiken, like the rest of them, but this is not her real name. You don't know her real name. She's from Aiken, South Carolina. There she had a lot of money, and still does. Her mama, *a crazy doped up ol' bitch*, sends cash once a month. From a real, southern, blue-blooded lineage, Maude Aiken is. You know she's not fooling, neither, because you get a piece of it—a nice chunk—once a month, an additional under-the-table surplus to your paycheck. You call it unofficial gain-sharing. And in return, you turn a blind eye to whatever crack-cocaine she deals to the other girls. No real harm done ad Maude Aiken even thanks you for it. It's a good thing you and Maude Aiken have going—she gives you no trouble on your time, and you don't give her any either. But still, it's important for them to know who's in charge of whom here, who carries the weapon. You can't ever let yourself be intimidated, even if you and Maude

Aiken do have an agreement, and even if the other girls know about it. You can't let yourself be known as the pussy-guard, the guard out of the three they label on each block, the one they know they can scare.

You go about your walking—up and down the median—keeping the ladies in line. But you don't have to do much today. It's August and the Georgia heat keeps these women from chatting too much or slowing their pace. They want to keep busy to pass the time, it seems. You look out at the road, at the cars heading north towards Atlanta. You begin to think about the Georgia heat, and how it turns you every year; you feel your neck and face change blood-red, and you think how the infirmary nurse will scold you for not wearing sunscreen, like she's been doing since early May. "I already told you, Deanna, you got to wear your sun protection." Each time you visit her, a new burn has formed over peeling skin. The nurse always looks annoyed, her lips tight and slightly puckered. But she never yells. "Sorry," you say. But you don't mean it. Once cooled, the heat and burn feel good against your body; they tell you that you're alive.

"Deanna," says Maude Aiken, sharp like an army command. You turn to face her. A blue Nissan speeds past, honking. Someone yells from it, "Bitches!"

"Maude Aiken."

"It's hot as hell out here. What we do to deserve this?"

"Just a little longer," you say.

"This is cruel and unusual punishment," says a mousy voice from the crowd. The sun's glare prevents you from seeing who's talking, but you think it's Cindy. You and everyone else know that Cindy was falsely accused, and found guilty only because she's

Puerto Rican. She's tried to take her own life three times. *A shitty life*, you think. And so you can't help but feel bad for the mousy woman, with her big buck teeth. And you don't order her as much as you do the other women, though you'd love to tell her to shut her mouth sometimes—Lord, she butts in so much. But you can't. You even hope Maude Aiken doesn't charge her for her score of illegal substances, which you're pretty sure Maude Aiken doesn't. You've heard that Maude Aiken's father was allegedly one-quarter Cuban, and so the other women say Cindy gets off for nothing. "Nada," they imitate, and shake their heads, but that's all they do.

"There's still time to go," you say.

"Ain't you hot, Dee?" Maude Aiken asks.

"Yes, I's hot. I'm very hot."

"Then why're we still here?"

"Cause. Now come on, get this trash."

"I think it's too hot to be doin' this shit," Cindy says, fanning herself.

Maude Aiken looks at you, unmoving. "Oh, hell, come on, ya'll," finally she instructs. She picks up a cigarette butt, and grunting and cursing, everyone follows. You watch. In the sun, Maude Aiken looks like one large, sagging, burnt wrinkle, but you've heard she's only fifty-two. You start to wonder how long she's been in prison again like you've wondered before. She was already here when you started working. Maybe since her late thirties, even. She has a loud and raspy voice, and she likes to pick fights with those who might possibly be stronger than her. There aren't many. She's beaten them with metal pipes from her bed and once slit a new prisoner's forearm with a pen. She just

up and dug it in, a ballpoint pen. The prisoner screamed as you drew your baton and acted like you'd dare clunk Maude Aiken on the head. "Back the fuck off, Maude Aiken," you'd said, all tough and convincing.

But your heart was racing the whole time, and you just hoped Maude Aiken would listen. She did. She dropped the pen, spit on the prisoner who moaned on the ground, and walked back inside her lonesome cell. You were scared of Maude Aiken when you first started working. You had every right to be—she doesn't like authority much, and there you were, in charge. But you feel she's alright now; she seems to like you enough.

"Maude Aiken, how many years you got left?" you ask.

"Seven. Why?"

"Just askin'."

"How many year we know each other now, Dee?"

"Eight. You goin' home after you get out?"

"Yes, I's going home."

"Back to Carolina?"

"Back to Carolina. Find me another man to kill." She laughs. "My ma and brother are waitin' for me."

"You got a brother?"

"Yep. He's a retard."

"That's too bad."

"No, he's got a real good life. Where do *you* go home to every night?"

You don't know why, but you tell her, and she doesn't say anything. There isn't much to say. You look out towards the road again, this time at the way heading south, all the cars heading towards Orlando, you assume. It's only the beginning of August; families are still taking vacations. You imagine yourself in one of the cars, driving towards Disney. You imagine your son is still four years old, and that your husband once loved you before he left. The humidity causes you to perspire heavily, and you feel dizzy—the day's so bright that everything looks black. Maybe you should pack it in and head back early. *It wouldn't be all that early*, you think.

“Deana, you're so red, don't you want to go?” Maude Aiken asks. You look at your watch. There's still half-an-hour of roadwork left. You tell her this. “But it's hot. Why can't we just go back a lil' early? Who gives a flyin' fuck if we're here 'prisoned or in a cell 'prisoned?”

Maude Aiken's hair is dark brown, and curly, but she doesn't keep it. Her face is covered in freckles. She reminds you of your mama sometimes, when the Georgia sun hits her just right. Your mama's hair was dark brown, too, and curly. Only your mama, unlike Maude Aiken, was beautiful. “Just keep workin', Maude Aiken. Just a bit more.”

You walk down the median, and watch the ladies continue to pick the trash, their denim armpits beneath their jerseys turning a dark blue, like the Georgia coast. You smell the honeysuckle lining the road, and it makes you slightly nauseated, it's so strong. It smells almost medicinal, and makes you feel a numbing sting inside your nose, as if a small bug had gone up and gotten stuck. You want to sneeze, but can't. You see the cherry blossom trees bordering the outskirts of Macon proper, with its shopping plazas on

juxtaposed to Victorian homes. The trees look like they've got those poisonous berries them, only these berries have mutated and amplified.

You look down at your hands, bright red now like tomatoes you buy every week at the road-stands in Crawford County. You live in Roberta alone now, in the same house you once grew up in, in the same house your mama died in. You think how everyone you once knew is now, in some way, gone. You remember how your mama looked on her deathbed. Her long brown hair had fallen out, and she was painted with these reddish-brown moles, like spoiled strawberries, across her body. She'd lost all her middle-aged fat, too—her body was as thin as your own—and her lips were blue. You were only twelve. Twenty-two years and counting now, you been missing your mama.

“Maude Aiken, you got kids?” you yell.

“You know I don't.”

“You ever wanted ‘em?”

“Nope. Not the right woman to play mama. I's into too much shit. You got kids?”

“I got a boy. Diego.”

“Diego.”

“I used to be married to a Mexican man.”

“Who's got the kid?”

“The Mexican man. Apparantly, I shouldn't play mama, neither.”

Diego's sixteen now, but you haven't seen nor heard from him in nine years.

Your ex-husband took him away from you to save him. “You cry too much and drink too

much,” he’d said, so it wasn’t good for your boy to be around you. Now, years later, you still don’t know where they are. But you know Diego’s better off. You were no example for him like your ex-husband said, and Jesus, sometimes you still feel like a kid yourself.

Maude Aiken’s brown eyes soften. *She* softens, and she seems to understand all of this; you don’t say anything else to her, and you don’t feel you need to. You look at Maude Aiken, and she at you, and you wonder how it would be to have her hold you tight. Then you look up at the Georgia sun, trying to erase the thought. You let it burn from your mind. You feel the humidity, and you notice your thirst, like cotton in your mouth. *I ought to take them back*, you think, but there’s still twenty-minutes left to kill.

“Ain’t it time yet *now*?” asks Cindy.

“No.” You turn to look at the road, then up at the sun again, squinting. The blood rushes from the tip of your head, down, like a waterfall. You hold your hand out as if to steady yourself. Maude Aiken grabs your arm.

“Dee,” you hear her say. You can feel her touching you. Her hand is bumpy, like one large callus, and wet. It slides to your wrist, leaving a heavy trail of her sweat on your forearm.

“I’m fine,” you say, and your vision clears. “I just looked down too fast.”

“No, you’s getting’ tired out in the sun so long, just like us,” Cindy says. “I ain’t stayin’ out in this no longer. I ain’t passin’ out in traffic, no sir.”

“We still got twenty minutes left a this,” you say.

“You sure?” Maude Aiken asks. She’s still holding your arm.

“*Sure’s* crazy,” someone mumbles. They laugh, all except Maude Aiken. You

think of her, your mama and how she used to bring you and your sister fresh lemonade in the summertime, when school was out and all there was around you was time. The swing-set you used to play on, still there in your backyard to this day—all steel and rust—and you, swinging high on it, your sister pushing you. Your mama would then come out that back door, wearing long pastel-colored dresses with flower prints, glasses of sugary lemonade in her hands.

She loved her flowers, her vegetable garden, and her picnic table. All but one, the picnic table, is gone. Instead, you've got weeds now, patches of dandelions floating in knee-high grass. The dandelions cover her garden, and the grass grows against the side of your home. And though the table's still there, it's lost all its beauty, all its charm; its wood is rotting and it's covered in bird shit. You've let it all go to hell, and you don't give a damn. But you can remember your mama, what seems like a lifetime ago, sitting out there with your daddy, sipping gin and bitter lemons. She didn't believe in umbrellas for the table or personal parasols; she'd sit in the sun for hours. She tanned so easily, her excuse for never having to wear sun lotion. She loved that heat on her bare skin, with no protection at all. But you and Linda burned, and so she made you wear it. It smelled like coconut cream pie. You were too much like your daddy not to wear, she said.

“How come we got to wear this, Mama?” you used to ask. You hated that grease on your skin, the oil that suffocated your pores.

“Honey, please don't fuss,” your mama would say, rubbing the lotion on your shoulders. Her hands were soft, her touch always soothing, like chamomile. “You got to take care of this smooth skin of yours, sweet pea. You don't wanna look old before your

time, now do ya?” Then she’d hug you, and kiss your cheek—leaving behind a pale print of her lips—and brush your deep yellow hair into a ponytail. You used to close your eyes, and feel her gentleness.

When you were eleven, your mama was diagnosed with cancer. It was too late for her by the time they diagnosed it. You even overheard them say that she was *done*. You were eleven. And you were watching your mama turn into an old woman, though in the beginning—the beginning of her last year on earth—she sure as hell made it seem like she was okay. And so you believed she would be. She still kept at it with her garden, and she still drank her gin. But, eventually she had to stop all of it, all the *masquerading*, as your daddy said. It wasn’t helping anyone, he’d said. Your mama listened. You don’t think now that she had much choice in it. She began to sleep more and more from the *chemo*—you never did get used to saying that word—and you all learned early on that the gin and bitter lemons didn’t mix too well with her Compazine.

Your mama was scared of dying, though not a bit for her own soul. She always seemed pretty sure she was going to see God one day. She prayed a lot—every night, by the book—and was even baptized two years prior to dying. She was saved in the summertime. You and Linda watched with your grandma and grandpa that day when your mama was invited into heaven, as your daddy took pictures with a Sony he’d bought just for the occasion.

“Do you accept the Lord, Jesus Christ as your Savior?” the preacher asked. He wore a black short-sleeved shirt with a white collar. You remember it. You remember thinking he looked like a penguin. And then you bit your tongue, and hoped your

thoughts wouldn't ruin your mama's chances at being with God. Your mama shook her head *yes*, that she had indeed accepted Jesus as her Savior. And then the preacher poured holy lake water on her head, erasing all your mama's sins. Now your mama was saved, and she never worried much about it after. She was saved in the sunshine outside the church. The only thing she ever feared after that was you and Linda wouldn't get saved, too. Like when she was dying—she feared it most when she was dying—that she'd die and never see you again. *And as of now*, you think, *she won't be seeing you*. Because you don't know how much you believe in God or that your mama's even in a place called heaven anyway.

“Ya know, Dee, I'm real sorry 'bout your man,” Maude Aiken says, picking up newspaper from the grass. “Men are such lousy dickheads, ain't they? If only we didn't need them dicks.” She laughs. Maude Aiken's missing three teeth on the side of her mouth. She wipes the sweat from her forehead with the front of her shirt.

“Thanks.”

“You ain't ever see your boy now?”

“Nah, never.”

“That man just up and took him from ya?”

“Kinda.”

“You're a policeman sorta, ain't ya? Can't you go 'rest that man?”

“I don't want to, Maude Aiken. I thought I did, one time. But the way I see it is my boy's better off without me.”

Maude Aiken looks at you sadly, then at a passing car. It's blue. She follows it

with her eyes. Then she says, “A baby always needs his mama.” You look at her, and you wish she’d say it again.

What you miss the most is being held. You miss your mama’s hugs, the way you’d cling to her, the way she’d make everything okay when she pat you on the back. She’d hold the top of your head and kiss it, and then tell you that *it’d be alright*, no matter what it was, and even if it wouldn’t be alright. Like when she was dying. She’d mostly do this—lie about her being okay—when she was dying because you cried so much then. And you guess now that she had to lie to make you stop. And so you’d believe her for a day or so that she’d be okay, that *I’ll live to see you marry off and make babies of your own, honey* until you saw her dying again. Your mama was so pale those last months, and she wore a big black wig. She looked like a witch. And she threw up so much, all her insides, until she’d lost so much weight that there was nothing left to vomit.

You missed her when you started bleeding—you were fourteen—and you missed her at your senior prom. You missed her on your wedding day, too. It was performed by a judge at Roberta’s City Hall. You wish your mama had been there to give you her blessing, and to tell you that a city hall was no place for you to marry. You wish your mama had been there to hold you. But she wasn’t. And she wasn’t there to hold you, neither, when your marriage came to its end. You had to catch your tears on your own sleeve, and call your sister a thousand times in Roanoke. “It’s your sister again,” you used to hear her husband say, passing the phone to her. You can only imagine his face.

“Is it fair that Maude Aiken can bullshit with the guard while we’re here pickin’ up the crap? We’re the ones doin’ all the work. That ain’t fair,” says Cindy. She seems

to know that Maude Aiken won't ever try to hurt her, or worse. The other women agree. One even throws her trash bag down. All the garbage she's picked up leaks out, and a smaller, white plastic Kmart bag flies across the road. A brown Chevy honks its horn.

"Don't pull that shit on me," you say. "Now we're gonna be here even longer, how do ya like that? You did it to yourselves. Now pick this up!"

An empty can of Campbell's chicken noodle soup has fallen out of the bag near you, and you kick it with the toe of your boot. You kick it dead on, not under it, so that it doesn't fly into the air. You kick it like you hit a cue ball playing pool, right in the center, and the can rolls just a few feet, onto the shoulder of 75. You stare at it, then at the interstate. You can see the humidity rising from the tar like gasoline on a stovetop, the cars penetrating the thick, wavy film as they speed past. An airplane flies overhead, its motor gurgling loud in the sky like a speedboat on water. The line of cars move on average at eighty miles per hour, so fast you can barely see them individually, but only as one long, poly-colored train. It creates a line of motor noises, too, an intensity one level softer than that of the plane—a beat that quickly hums then disappears, only to immediately sound again as the cars pass one by one.

You're about to call and round them up—it's too hot, and you were only trying to scare them before. You walk towards them again, farther away from your correctional facilities van like a modern day paddy wagon.

"Ladies," you say. "Let's wrap it up, come on."

"We're leavin' now?" Cindy asks.

"Yes, we're leavin'." You move in place behind the head of the bunch, leaving

only several women in back of you to follow, the stragglers, and shuffle them into a moving line. A chain-gang. You feel like a sheep dog, a German shepherd maybe, hurrying the flock of killers and thieves and misfits along towards the van. You march with them. You look behind you, making sure the stragglers are still there. They are slumped over, their black bags loose in their hands. They are sweating, their hair matted to their heads like hat hair. They are red, too, and their orange jerseys soaked.

You look to the side, at the road heading south. You want to look those drivers in the eye as they pass you—you want them to know your truth—and you know they’re looking, too. Across the interstate, though, past the cars and trucks, you see a woman standing beneath the arms of a cherry blossom. You notice her right away, she’s out of place. She stands next to a white car, parked next to the shoulder nearest her. She’s the only one you see watching you. The woman wears a light yellow dress with a collage of daisies painted on it, and she’s smiling as curls outline her face. She looks like your mama. Her skin is just as dark, the way you like to remember her, before she went and got sick. She’s three lanes away from you, but you think you can even smell her from under the cherry blossom. You smell Jean Natet perfume, sweet like, like tangerines.

“Mama?” you whisper. It sure as hell looks like her. You walk out of line, a step closer once again to the shoulder. From the corner of your eyes, you see the misfit women still walking towards the van. You wonder if they see the cherry blossom woman, too.

“Mama,” you call.

“What that, Dee?” you hear Maude Aiken ask. Maude Aiken’s leading the

pack. You ignore her, and instead focus on the woman under the tree. The beautiful woman is waving to you. Her lips move as well—she’s calling to you, it seems—but the cars and trucks are so loud, you can’t hear what she’s saying.

“I can’t hear you!”

“Who she talkin’ to?” you hear someone ask.

“Who’s that she’s lookin’ at?”

“Say again!” you call.

“Dee, who you talkin’ to?” Maude Aiken asks.

“*Her*,” you say, pointing. You move to the edge of the median, and cup your hands around your mouth. You’re careful not to step on the broken glass, like puzzle pieces, shattered around the white line.

“Say ‘gain,” you cry.

“Damn. This girl is hallucinatin’,” an inmate from behind says, and the rest laugh. You pay them no mind because they can’t see from where they stand. They’re blocked by the cars, and can’t see past the vehicles, like you can. Because you’re standing at the edge of the road and this makes all the difference.

The cherry blossom woman who looks like your mama waves to you again, frantic now, but she smiles. Her dress is sleeveless, and the healthy flab from under her arm jiggles as she waves. “Come here,” her lips seem to read. Her dress is blowing, real subtle like, like the humidity from above the road. You step onto the shoulder. The car passing you beeps its horn, and you feel wind as it passes, a quick gust. You close your eyes and bite your lip, as if it prevents you from flying away.

“What’s your problem, asshole?” you yell after it. Then you take another step forward and think how sorry you are for cussing in front of your mama. You look at her. You see shades of black.

“Stay, Dee,” says Maude Aiken, from nowhere. Her voice is calming as she interrupts your thoughts.

“Get back to work, Maude Aiken.”

“Dee, come on, where you goin’ now, honey?”

Your neck snaps at the word *honey*, and you turn to Maude Aiken. You’ve wanted to be called *honey* for twenty-two years now, to *be* somebody’s honey. Maude Aiken puts out her arms toward you, as if to stop you. You wish she’d come hug you.

“Aw, let ‘er go, Maude Aiken, let ‘er go! Let’s see how far she gets.”

“Ya’ll hush up!” But Maude Aiken never takes her eyes off you. She says, “Deanna, don’t you want some water now, sweetie? Come on. You’re just overheated honey.”

Maude Aiken walks, but is still some distance from you. Now you wish she’d stop and leave you be. You’ve got time. You look back at your mama—you’re almost positive it’s her—loving her and missing her the way you have since she gone and passed. Did she ever really leave? It’s your mama’s ghost, maybe. Whoever, she’s got something you need to hear. You thought Maude Aiken understood this. “A baby always needs its mama,” she’d said. And yet, here Maude Aiken is, trying to stop you from being with yours. And so you start to cross the road because you’ve never wanted anything more than to be your mama’s little girl again.

You step on the glass on the shoulder, letting it crack beneath your steel-tipped Timberlands. A row of cars in the far left lane honk their horns one long note, and so you step back and wait. *Goddamn them, hurry up*, you think. You don't want her to disappear again. You wait only seconds, and then you see an opening in that left lane. You look back. Maude Aiken screams something, and the girls are laughing. They're cheering. *They can go to hell*, you think. Then you face her, your mama, or your mama's ghost, or whoever it is that's standing beneath the tree. Your view is hazy. You see fuzz in front of her. But you run to her anyway because you know she's there, letting twenty-two years of missing melt away behind you in the unbearable Georgia sunshine.

PIGS IN THE CLOSET

I.

I live in a halfway house that they keep telling me used to be a slaughterhouse in the early 1900s. “Fucking great,” I say. “Who gives a fuck? Why keep telling me the same shit?” My bedroom’s on the first floor, in the back of the building, away from all the others; and, my p.o., Ron, says it’s because this room used to be the freezer where they stored the headless pigs. Ron says this room’s probably where they cut the heads, too, as if I get off on this, as if this makes me feel welcome. Shit, he’s exactly like the guys who live here—he repeats himself all the time—and I get headaches now from how much I roll my eyes in this place. “Okay, okay, I get it,” I say. “Frozen pigs.” But the floor in my room is hardwood, and Ron likes to play detective and point at the damn spots where the wood is darker than the rest. On one knee, hunched over, he’s always telling me, “This here, Jimmy, is definitely a pig’s bloodstain. This place might be haunted, what do you think?” What do I think? Christ, enough already.

My bedroom, like the rest of the house, smells like those old houses kids go to on school fieldtrips, like the Betsy Ross house across the river, or that poet fag’s house in Camden, but sometimes I think I smell death, too, like the smell on old people. But I know it’s because these guys fucking talk too much—all that talk about those mother-fucking pigs. It gets in my head.

When I walk, the floors creak. The walls are brick, and I can see where past

inmates have colored the cement with their pencils. A quarter of the back wall is a fucking coloring book. They give me some furniture, but it's like I live in a convent—I've got the bare minimum here—and each piece looks like it might break if I shut it too hard. My feet extend past the bed, a twin, when I'm on my back, and I've got a pillow with no fucking fluff. I don't think I'm allowed ladies here, and that's okay—I wouldn't take them here anyway. Sure, the bed's soft, at least; but, aside from its size, I only have one blanket, and it gets damn cold at night. I keep telling Ron I need another layer, and he reassures me he'll get it. But I haven't seen anything in a month.

Someone knocks on my door.

“Yeah? What is it?” I ask. I already know I'm late. Breakfast was twenty minutes ago.

Ron smiles when I open it. “What's going on, Jimmy?” he asks.

“Look, man, I know I missed breakfast. I just can't tie this fucking tie.”

“Here, you want me to help you?”

“No,” I say, and turn away from him. “I got it. I'll *get* it.”

Ron is a small man, five inches shorter than me—and I'm not that tall—and he's wiry. But he's been doing this shit, paroling, for his whole life. He told me once, “I swear to God, Jimmy. All my old girlfriends are in this business, too, because I never meet anyone outside of it. This is all I know. Even in the Army, I dated a girl down in Georgia? And you know what she was? A prison guard. A coincidence, huh?”

Ron stares at me still, and I throw my tie on the floor.

“What do you want?” I ask.

“I’m just seeing if you’re ready.”

“Do I look ready to you?”

“I meant, are you ready for this interview, Jimmy?”

“I don’t know,” I say. How the hell am I *supposed* to know? I want to ask. I can’t even tie my tie. I’m supposed to go downtown to PizzaHut this afternoon, and give them my application. I don’t want the retail part of it, though, and I checked that on the paper. Ron said that that was a bad idea, that it’d reduce my chances of getting hired. But I did plenty of retail shit before State prison, and it’s fucking terrible. Every holiday, I worked. And every week, the schedule’s different. I could never plan ahead. So now I just want to be the guy who delivers the pizza, and pockets the tips, and I don’t fucking care when they put me on.

“Well, when you’re ready, I’ll drive you,” Ron says.

“Thanks.”

“If you need any help with that tie, Jimmy.”

“Yeah, sure. You’ll be the first guy I call.”

Ron leaves and goes upstairs, and I follow him out, but I go to the kitchen instead. I wish I could lock my door, but I can’t. It doesn’t have a lock. Some of the others who don’t have jobs yet either, sit around the kitchen table, a butch bridge club, and they read the fucking newspaper like they give a damn. I don’t know who they are, and I don’t know where they came from—as far as I’m aware, we weren’t at the State Pen together, and if we were, well I never knew it. Trenton’s full of shit-heads I never met. That’s all that’s there.

I pour myself coffee, but it tastes like ass, and so I pour it out and toss the mug in the sink.

“Watch how you handle that cup,” Harry, the bald man who lives upstairs, says. He’s middle-aged, and has the gut to prove it, and I think how sometimes, in the right light, he looks almost pregnant. He says, “You’re going to break it.”

“Well, who made this shit?” I ask, pointing to the coffee.

“If you don’t like it, then don’t drink it.”

I walk up to Harry, who’s in a chair, and I’m close enough so that if I spit, he’ll feel it. “What the hell am I supposed to drink then?” I ask.

“Take it, easy,” he says. “You’re overreacting.” But he’s not scared, I can tell, and I’m glad because maybe that means he’s angry.

“I’m still half asleep, and I’ve got to go to a fucking interview,” I say.

“So? Get your p.o. to take you to Dunkin’ Donuts, or something. You’ll live, I promise.”

“Hey, fuck you.”

But Harry only laughs. “You want to?” he asks.

Outside, Ron smokes a cigarette on the stoop of the building, his green windbreaker riding up his back as he sits, hunched forward. He turns when he hears the door open. “There he is,” Ron says.

“I didn’t hear you come out,” I say.

“You were starting up with that guy in the kitchen. And, I thought I’d let you

work it out.” He exhales, but speaks in the middle of the drag so that he sounds like he’s lost his breath. “Hey, you better be careful, Jimmy.”

“We need to go get coffee,” I say, and I look at the sun.

“Go get some inside.”

“It tastes like shit today. I’m not drinking it.”

“Don’t be a dick, man.”

“I’m not drinking it.”

“You could always make some yourself.”

I watch him, and Ron stares up at me with a sore expression on his face, like he’s disappointed and angry and confused, all at once. “Come on, then,” Ron says, and he throws the butt on the step. But neither of us moves as we watch the smoke still struggle off the cigarette. The wind blows, and the tip of the cigarette suddenly crackles. But it dies as soon as the wind moves down the block. Ron extends his leg to step on what’s left of the butt. “Well, come on,” he repeats.

“What?”

“We’re leaving now.”

“The interview’s not for forty-five minutes.”

“You’re not going to be late, Jimmy,” he says. “So if you want that coffee, we’re going now.”

I move past him, and I cut across the lawn, which I know pisses him off, and I reach to open his old-man Skylark with its rusted rims.

“Do you have your application?” Ron asks.

“Oh. No, I don’t.”

Ron turns his hands palms up. “Well, what the hell are you doing?” he asks. “Go get it.”

The PizzaHut in downtown Trenton sits between a lawyer’s office, and a nail salon. I sit in the waiting booth for the manager to come and shake my hand. Ron is somewhere outside, parked along the curb of the street. I hold my coffee, but I don’t want it anymore—I think I’ve got to take a shit—and I look for a trashcan to dump it.

“James Keegan?” a man asks, coming from the back. His voice is loud, and unexpected, and I spill some coffee in my pants; but, I ignore it, even though it burns like hell and looks like I’ve pissed myself. I nod to greet the man.

“Hello, I’m Gordon,” he says, and we shake, and he pulls his hair into a ponytail. I see that Gordon is probably in his late-twenties. He is thin, and wears glasses, and his teeth are crooked. This *is my boss?* I think.

But, I say, “It’s nice to meet you. And then I remember what Ron told me, and so I add, “Thank you for this opportunity.”

Gordon smiles and we move to a table where he gives me a glass of water. He doesn’t ask me any questions, but says it’s good that I’m punctual, that that’s a good sign. And then we are quiet as he examines the piece of paper that’s supposed to tell him who I am. I wait for the questions to come, especially after he reads Number 13—“Have you ever been convicted of a crime?” I tap my foot against the floor, quietly, so that no one can hear, and Gordon blows bubbles with his chewing gum. Minutes have gone by, I

think, and still, nothing but silence. Finally, I move my arm into my lap, and look at my watch beneath the table.

“Do you have a valid driver’s license?” at last, Gordon asks me. I wonder if he’s overlooked the question.

“Yes, sir,” I say. “I just got it renewed.”

“Well, we could only start you at minimum wage, but the tips would be yours.” He pauses and looks up. I smile. But Gordon cocks his head. “So what were you in jail for anyway, if you don’t mind me asking?”

II.

Jimmy held Kelly as she giggled into his chest, and she tried to push him off. “I’m going to miss my train, Jimmy, let me go.”

“Ah, I don’t want you to leave,” he said.

“I’ve got an appointment,” she laughed. “Listen, you’re going to find a job today, right?”

Jimmy loved the way Kelly felt in his arms, but he absolutely hated the way she looked at him, like he’d take care of her forever. “Go take care of yourself, and quit needing me,” he wanted to say to her sometimes; but, he could never bring himself to do so. Kelly was small, and very fragile, Jimmy thought, like an Easter egg. Her old man used to beat on her; and, even years later she still flinched if Jimmy moved too quickly, as if she thought he moved to hit her. And, the thing was, Jimmy wanted to take care of the girl. He just hadn’t been able to do it very well, up until now.

Jimmy let her go. “Yes, I’m going to look for a job. Don’t worry,” he said.

Kelly kissed him on his nose, and walked to the doors of the station, leaving him to watch as the clouds opened and the rain fell hard on his head. She turned to tell him to go away, or he’d get sick. Jimmy just waved, and Kelly blew a kiss. “Go back to your car, jackass,” she said, and smiled.

Jimmy nodded. But he needed money, that’s what he was thinking. The rent was overdue, and Jimmy was sure that any day now, the electricity would be cut because he hadn’t paid that either. If only he hadn’t been fired from Wegmans, he thought, still standing in the rain, his clothes stuck to his body like film. The managers had caught him on camera stealing boxes of store-brand instant macaroni and jars of tomato sauce, and they’d threatened to call the police if he didn’t cooperate and leave peacefully. But Jimmy had complied—the last thing he’d needed was another petty crime added to his rap sheet. And anyway, he’d believed he’d find another job. It was retail—people were always hiring. Except, three weeks went by, and still no one had called in response to his application.

Jimmy returned to his car once Kelly was out of sight.

“Fuck,” he said, and hit the steering wheel with a fist. He turned around. The camera that his mother had given him as a birthday present three years ago still sat on the floor in the backseat. It was used—his mother had found it on the internet—but its lens was just long enough for Jimmy to feel like a professional when he used it, which is why he’d wanted it in the first place. The night of his twenty-seventh birthday, and the two months following, Jimmy took pictures of whatever was in the park—flowers, birds,

people playing chess. He'd had the pictures developed and hung them in his apartment. But, as the winter moved in, the novelty wore off, and he'd put the camera in his car, under a sweatshirt, and forgot about it.

Now, as Jimmy removed the sweatshirt, and brought the camera to him, he saw the potential behind the Nikon logo. But he wasn't going to sell it, he decided. No way. Instead, he thought of what he'd recently seen on television, a report—hundreds of lawyers made money chasing ambulances. They'd found accident victims with the guidance of sirens and glowing lights, and then they would fight for them. Jimmy was no lawyer, he knew this, but he didn't see why he couldn't do the same taking pictures. After all, people bought photographs of tragedy all the time. Weren't magazines full of disaster and heartbreak? And, anyway, news broadcasts were half an hour of just that. In fact, that's *all* they were, and people made a living from it. If they could, then he could, too, he thought.

Jimmy drove around downtown Trenton for half an hour, looking for an accident that he could get a shot of; he circled the same blocks again and again, and at the lights, when he stopped, he wondered just how much one picture might sell for. The more Jimmy thought about the money, the more he pet his camera beside him. He would go to the *Inquirer* or the local papers this afternoon, after he'd gotten what he needed, and had it developed. He would take his pictures to the reporters, even.

But in the rain, Jimmy's brakes continued to squeak a warning every time he slowed to meet the red light, and he was losing gas, and all of this, he suddenly realized, was for nothing—the streets of downtown were too short, and because so, people could

not build enough speed to cause anything more than a fender-bender. He looked around—minor dents in doors, and one side mirror dangling off a car. Jimmy shook his head. “Shit,” he said, and thought how he’d wasted so much time doing nothing, getting nothing accomplished. He drove towards to highway then, and it was there, just as he got on the on-ramp, like fate, that Jimmy heard the siren, and then multiple ones, he distinguished. They wailed in the distance, like cats in heat.

“Holy, shit,” he said, and gripped the wheel like a racecar driver. The sound was getting closer. Jimmy checked his rearview mirror; no one was behind him, and so he waited at the yield sign for the red and blue lights to come spinning by. Drivers in passing cars, fearful Jimmy was going to cut them off, honked. Jimmy laughed. “Relax, I’m not going to touch you, assholes,” he said, and turned the radio down so that he could hear better; UB40’s “Red, Red Wine” went from reggae to a whisper.

The ambulance went by so quickly that for one moment, Jimmy saw it in his side mirror, approaching, but in the next second it was in front of him. The shock, though, was the second emergency vehicle—a police car—that Jimmy had forgotten he’d heard; it surprised him as it came from nowhere, and sped ahead in the far right lane. Jimmy laughed like a cowboy—this was a big deal, he realized—and sped up, too, until he was on Route 1, with all the angry commuters, tailgating, and trying to get to New York, and the ambulance and police car not too far ahead of him, though moving farther still, out of reach. It felt like a puzzle, or a video game, that Jimmy had to work; but, he was ready to play. Strip malls lined his route with giant department stores uncomfortably out-of-place along the busy highway. Drivers both beside, and in front of Jimmy flipped him off and

honked as he swerved in and out of lanes, braking and then gaining speed, braking and then gaining speed, like an obnoxious teenager. Whatever this accident was, though, he was going to get a picture of it, even if it killed him.

Maybe he wasn't thinking clearly, he was aware that this could be a factor; but, what else could he do? Kelly made next to nothing. His parents said he could not come to live with them anymore, as sorry as they were. And his brother's wife hated him—Shana claimed Jimmy owed her and Mark too much money that they would never see again. But if he chased ambulances all day, Jimmy thought, he would take so many pictures that one or two would have to be bought—reporters would find them too catastrophic not to exploit. Jimmy felt the odds were in his favor, just like for those lawyers he'd watched the television.

At last, the traffic slowed, and Jimmy realized he'd finally caught up, his car now inching along the highway; and then, moving around his seat, straining for something new to see, Jimmy saw the ambulance and the police car turn a corner nearly a mile ahead, both vehicles moving at a crawl. They'd arrived. Jimmy turned his car where they had when it was his turn, and saw that he'd turned into the parking lot of three, privately owned stores, Linens and Things, and Bed, Bath, and Beyond. But, Jimmy saw nothing out of the ordinary. He scanned the scene—fancy cars parked too closely to each other; and, shopping carts loomed and misplaced in the middle of empty parking spaces and white lines. But, Jimmy finally realized, there were no people. He looked behind him, and then again in front of him, and that's when he saw the cluster of onlookers in the corner of the parking lot, a quarter of a mile ahead, where a black Ford Focus had crashed

head-on into the side of the Bed, Bath, and Beyond, the corner store in the strip mall.

Jimmy could barely see the car except for the smoking hood, and the wrinkled front half.

It had smashed into the store coming from behind the building, Jimmy concluded.

He understood it now. The emergency cars had pulled around back—they were right behind the wall, he was sure, where they could better assist the driver—and that’s why he couldn’t see them.

“Nosy, mother-fuckers,” Jimmy said, watching the desperate onlookers.

“Fucking assholes, standing in the rain, and for what? Well, fine then. You want it? I’ll fucking give it to you.”

But Jimmy didn’t park his car—why get wet so soon, he figured, and risk ruining his camera when he could get a little closer before he got out. He looked both ways. It was a big parking lot—the mass of people actually looked like bugs from the entrance where his car braked and idled—and so Jimmy drove hard around the rim, where it was empty of anyone and anything, heading towards the mess, one hand on the wheel, and one hand caressing his camera. But in the grey of day, and the rain that blurred his vision, Jimmy didn’t see the man who wore black outside, beside his car, who’d crossed the highway into the parking lot just as he’d pulled into it. He didn’t see the man jogging towards the accident while he drove thirty-eight miles per hour on the slippery asphalt. And there had been trees on the median between the highway and the lot, he explained later to the judge. The trees had made everything darker, harder to see.

Jimmy suddenly remembered in the one second before he hit the man that his camera needed batteries; that, at that moment, his Nikon didn’t even work. “Shit,” he

said, and looked at the passenger seat, at his camera; and, as he tried to remember what kind of batteries it took, he felt a thud and braked without thinking. His car squeaked like in the movies, and spun a forty-five degree angle.

“Holy fuck,” Jimmy said. His knuckles were white and his breath was heavy. And for a moment, he remembered this was how he felt right before the first time he had sex. “Oh, shit,” he said, looking through his windshield, through the single crack that ripped through the center like a fault line. “Oh, my fucking God.”

Jimmy jumped from the car, but stood beside it. “Yo, come on, man, get up,” he said, the rain matting his head. But the man he’d hit was on his back, his neck twisted so his eyes were parallel to the ground, and his legs were crossed at the groin but opened like scissors. The man wore a knit hat and a leather jacket, and his mouth was slightly ajar, and the raindrops bounced from his teeth like fleas. Jimmy stood still behind the car door, and gripped it like a shield, too afraid to move closer and view the details. But he continued calling for the man to move and he waited for the rain to stop; except, neither man nor rain obeyed. Jimmy looked around for shoppers, but everyone still focused on the driver who’d crashed his car into the department store up front.

He crossed himself. “I’m really sorry,” he whispered. “Oh, God, I’m really sorry.”

Jimmy jumped back in the car and reversed it out of the plaza. “I’m sorry,” he repeated. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” until, finally, he’d reversed himself so far he was miles down Route 1, in the direction from which he’d come; but, as Jimmy shook, and glanced every two seconds in his rearview mirror for the show he was afraid to imagine, he

realized that no matter how much he reversed, no matter how hard he tried to start the day again, the day itself was not stopping. Jimmy remembered waking up, dressing, dropping Kelly at the station. He could not erase, and time still moved forward.

III.

Gordon didn't seem to care too much about my history or record, and I start my job tomorrow as the new PizzaHut delivery man. They're giving me a red, Chevy Cavalier to drive around town in, and they're giving me money to fill it up when the tank's low. And this isn't even the best part. The best part is that I don't have to deal with people except when I walk up their driveways, give them their pizzas, and collect their money. Yeah, sure, I'll get the occasional asshole who wants to stiff me or prank-call me, but I can handle this. I'm just glad I don't have to bus tables and have people rag on me; I don't have talk to anyone at all.

I take off my clothes now and put on the sweats and T-shirt the State gave me to wear in this house. I don't know if it's a fucking joke or not, but my shirt reads *Property of New Jersey State Prison*. Now I don't think it's funny, and yet, I don't mind wearing it, either, even though it's fucking big on me. It's dark outside even though we've set the clocks ahead; it should be lighter, longer. It's only seven o'clock, for Christ's sake; we're still three hours from lights out. The guys are in the front room watching pre-season baseball—I hear the announcers give the play by play through the wall, and I feel like I'm listening to the radio like my grandpop back in the day—and I bet those fellas are talking about me. I bet they're saying I'm weird as fuck for staying to myself. But I don't care, I'm damn tired. All I have to do is save my money—this is what I keep

telling myself—and when my probation’s up, I’m out of here. I’m not sure where I’m going, but I’m leaving, and I’m sure as hell not going anywhere where there’s people.

Someone knocks on my door, a low rap that he repeats in a pattern.

“Get the fuck away from here,” I say. “I’m trying to sleep.”

“Watch out for them pigs, son.” I recognize the voice—it’s Harry’s, from this morning. And then I hear laughter on the other side of the wall.

“Fuck off,” I say.

I wonder what would happen if I left right now. Shit, I probably should. The worst that happens is they find me and throw me back in jail, big deal. I’m not afraid. Let them throw me in. Let them give me the chair, for all I care. I dare them to do that. I shouldn’t even be here. I didn’t mean to kill anyone—it was an accident. Not like these assholes. How can they leave me here, with murderers and addicts, and all-around pricks?

I sit in my bed, and I turn the light out next to me, and I wait for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. It takes a second, but I make out shapes now—the bureau, the desk, the nightstand beside me. They are all grey against the black of the room. I was better off in prison, really, I think to myself; my room is so small it’s like a fucking cell anyway, and I can’t move anywhere. I put five years inside that can, and now I have to put up with this shit, too; and I didn’t do anything really all that bad. I swear to Christ I didn’t mean to kill anybody. I swear to Christ. How is this still considered justice?

But now something’s caught my eye and I quit scratching my feet and look up. Something moved. What the fuck was it? I think. My closet door’s open—it doesn’t

shut all the way—and I hear something walking around inside it, underneath my clothes. It sounds heavy—my floors are creaking like it was me who was walking around in there—and so I know it’s no mouse or rat. If someone left my window open, I suppose a squirrel could have gotten in this afternoon. Those assholes—I bet Harry did this. I ought to beat his ass right now. I look around, at the bureau and on the desk, but all I’ve got for protection is a lousy *Playboy* that I can only roll up and swat. I hear the guys still talking in the next room, and the announcers on TV debating whether the guy at second was safe or out, and I stand on my bed and bang on the wall with my fist. Someone asks, “What the hell is his problem?” and they all laugh. But I only bang louder, and the house fills with a shitty, hollow, empty sound.

But the creature doesn’t stop moving—I can still hear it—and I know I’m not going to be able to sleep with it there. When I get up, the hardwood floor is cold against my skin, and it’s like I’m standing on a sheet of thin ice. When is this weather ever going to warm up? I wonder. And when is Ron ever going to give me my damn blanket that he promised?

I turn the light back on, and I grab my *Playboy* because it really is the only thing I’ve got, and I roll it, and hold it like a baseball bat. Maybe the broad’s big-ass tits will scare that mother-fucker to death. I walk to the closet and I’m prepared for a giant squirrel, I swear I am, with a tail the size of some lady’s bush. I really can’t believe the kinds of assholes I’m stuck living with.

“Come here, I’m not going to hurt you,” I say, and I walk real slowly until I hold the closet doorknob and wait.

What am I going to do with it? I think. Once I catch it. And then I know what I'm going to do with it—I'm going to let it out into that front room and hear those assholes scream like little girls. *That's* what I'm going to do.

After a count of three, I hold my breath and open the door. But I don't see anything but the clothes I never hang, but just toss, scattered on the floor. And whatever animal that's there beneath it all doesn't move anymore—like a snake, it's fucking paralyzed. I just stare at the pile for a minute. Shit—maybe it *is* a snake. I wouldn't put it past Harry.

But the thing is, when I move my clothes out of the way, I don't see a fucking snake or rat or mouse. Two fucking headless pigs are on my closet floor instead, bleeding, their blood, like thick, red paint, spilling out of their necks slowly, taking its time, and seeping into my clothes and floor. I look at the shirt in my hand, and it's saturated in pig's blood in select spots, like tie-die, and my hand jerks and I throw the shirt across the room. I look at my palms; they're bloody, and they smell like old pennies. *Shit.* I look down. The pigs' legs still move, like chickens that run without heads, and they kick back and forth on their side, as if they are underwater, and trying to swim away. I look around the room, and I bet that mother-fucking, cunt Harry hid the heads somewhere. Are these fucking ghosts? I have to ask myself. But these pigs are no ghosts.

I close my eyes and slam the door on the headless porkers. And then I open and slam the door again. And again, and again, and again, and then I look back at them. The bleeding's stopped, and I throw my clothes over their bodies.

“Goddamnit,” I say.

I walk to the front room. The guys sit in front of the television set, and when I’m close enough, I grab Harry by the collar of his shirt and lift him to his feet.

“You fucking asshole,” I say.

But he laughs. *“You again. What’re you doing inside your room there, princess?”*

“Where’d you find them, huh?” I ask.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Quit fucking with me. I’m not sleeping in that room until you clean that shit up.”

Mitch, the house father, comes running at me from behind and pushes me off. He’s a big man, the size of a linebacker, and I throw my arms to keep myself balanced.

“Knock it off, Jimmy,” Mitch says. *“What the hell’s going on here?”*

“The man’s crazy,” Harry says.

“You piece of shit,” I say. *“Go clean my closet.”*

Harry laughs. *“What? Is that some way of saying you’re gay? What are you saying, man? What the hell’s in your closet?”*

Mitch grabs my shoulder, but I shrug him off. *“Just leave me alone. I’m going for a walk.”*

“Wait,” Mitch says. *“Did he do something to your stuff?”*

But I ignore him. I’ll clean my own shit later.

“Don’t walk out that door, Jimmy. You know the rules. Don’t make me call the

cops.”

“Fuck it, Mitch. Go ahead. In fact, *please*—call them. See if I give a shit.”

I walk out the door, but the thing is, I’m not going anywhere. Where would I go? I don’t have a car to drive. I sit on the front stoop instead, and I see Ron’s cigarette butt from earlier still flattened against the step. It’s so dark outside, like the prison at night, even in the light of the streetlamp in front of the house; and, when I look at my hands again, it’s hard to see what’s there anymore. But they still look bloody to me. They still smell. Mitch is probably on the phone right now, I think. They’re going to take me at any second. I look down the street, and wait for the red and blue lights to come, and I prepare what I am going to say.

IV.

Jimmy pulled into the space directly in front of his apartment, and checked the front of his car for any dents other than the one in his windshield. The rain still came down upon his head, and his sweater, and jeans, and a chill went straight down his body, until he felt the tiny bones in his feet—stiff and bitter. He rubbed the rain from his eyes, but nothing about his car looked abnormal, he decided, except for that one crack; and, he wished to God he could cover it somehow, or fill it with sealant.

But he didn’t know how to do any of this—he didn’t have any sealant, anyway—and he went inside, and locked the door; he pulled the blinds, and prayed that no one in the neighborhood would notice his damaged vehicle, and thus, realize what he’d done. Did his car tell the story? How much could anyone really understand just by looking at one broken windshield? Jimmy sat on the couch, and smoked a cigarette, and then

another, and didn't realize until he'd smoked three, and had sneezed a handful of times, that he was still soaking wet, and that rainwater seeped into the orange cushions.

"Shit," he said, and stood. He felt where he'd been sitting, and pushed his hand into the seat like he would a cloth or paper-towel. Water came up from the pores in the fabric. "Shit," Jimmy repeated, and smelled his fingers and palm. "What the hell? I fucking pissed myself," he whispered, and scraped his hand across the stomach of his shirt. He bent and looked at his pants for proof, but his jeans were drenched entirely.

Jimmy changed his clothes, but he still shivered, sitting at the kitchen table. What the hell was that jackass even doing? he wondered, lighting up again, and thinking of the man in black leather who'd come from nowhere and an instant, ruined Jimmy's life. "He fucking deserved it," Jimmy said. "No one that dumb deserves to live." He shook his head, and thought how he'd even heard of some people running into traffic on purpose, just so they could sue and win big money, in big-time lawsuits. "Fucking prick," Jimmy said.

What would he tell Kelly? She would see the car, and she would ask questions. He could lie to her easily, he knew, and say a stone flew up from some truck's tire, and hit his windshield and cracked it. And then Kelly would leave him alone about it. And anyway, Jimmy would be the one to pay, and get the car fixed; not Kelly. What would she care what happened?

But he could tell her the truth, too, he thought. She'd probably try to convince him to turn himself in, and he'd put up a fight. "Please, Jimmy, just do it. You fucking hit someone with your car, and you probably killed him," she would say. "You have to

do this—you have to turn yourself in.” And so he would.

Jimmy put out his cigarette and hurriedly dried the couch with Kelly’s mother’s quilt—the first blanket he saw, thrown under the coffee-table—although when he finished, the cushions were still damp. Jimmy flipped them upside down and sat, and turned the television on, and waited for coverage on what he’d done. But a soap opera played, and he watched it without really watching it. Would his crime be Breaking News? Or, he wondered, was he wasting his time watching *The Young and the Restless*? Should he be expecting a phone call, or would they just come to his house and arrest him? Jimmy held his chest, and felt his own heart beat inside him; and, he stared at the cordless telephone as if it was a baby, ready to take its first step. He thought then how two hours ago, he’d wanted a baby with Kelly, but now he wasn’t sure. Everything had changed.

And then, against his will, Jimmy wondered if the man he’d killed had a baby of his own. Was he somebody’s father? Or, maybe he was somebody’s grandfather? Jimmy didn’t get a good look at his face, after all. He’d left before he knew anything.

He cracked a beer and pulled the last cigarette from the only pack left in the apartment, and when he went to light it, he indulged himself and thought what it might be like to set the place on fire, with him still inside. They were going to catch him, Jimmy just had that feeling. Wouldn’t this be saving him, and everyone else, the time? What about the family of the man? They’d want Jimmy dead. They’d want him to die in the worst possible way. *Christ*, he thought. He hit someone with his car, he actually hit and killed someone, and then he left as if he’d meant to kill the man all along. How had this

happened? Jimmy would be doing them all favor if he just burned, he thought, burned until he was ash, and then the family could collect him, and then burn him again.

But Jimmy didn't light himself on fire, though he did put the cigarette out on his forearm—it felt like tattoo needles sticking him until the hair on his arm singed and curled like a pig's tail, and that small circle of skin bubbled into a pale mass. But he got back in his car, got back on Route 1, and headed north again in silence. Maybe no one had found the man yet, he thought. It'd only been an hour since it happened. And he'd hit him close to the highway, under the trees, where hardly anyone parked unless it was the holidays.

The traffic moved at its normal pace, and Jimmy told himself that this was a good sign; ambulances weren't blocking the roads, slowing people down. He told himself that, most likely, no ambulance had even been called yet. Jimmy would find the man and take him to the hospital himself, and there admit what he'd done—that he'd hit the guy with the front of his car—but that it'd all been an accident because, really, it had been. But he wouldn't mention, because he wouldn't have to mention, that he'd ever left the scene in the first place at all. He'd admit his crime, but he would omit his fear because that's all it'd been, Jimmy told himself; that's why he left—it was fear.

Jimmy finally turned into the parking lot. And, just as he figured, there were no policemen or ambulances in the back, though the crowd of people up front had dispersed and the accident had been cleared. Jimmy held his breath as he made the right and inched along the rim, looking for the man. Surely, Jimmy thought, the man was still there. But where was he? If anyone had taken him, there'd be signs, like yellow-tape, maybe, or a

policeman still investigating the scene, or *something*.

Jimmy drove up and down, up and down, and finally stopped the car and got out. But the man was gone. But how could he be gone? Jimmy asked himself. Jimmy jogged twenty-five more yards, in case he'd hit the man farther down, closer to the Bed, Bath, and Beyond. Jimmy ran through puddles, and the water leapt into the air in response, and came down against his leg and in his sneakers. He kept his eyes low, and looked for a bloodstain because the man had to have been bleeding; but whatever blood had come out of him, Jimmy realized, had been washed with the rain.

So someone knew what had happened. "I swear to God I didn't mean to leave," Jimmy said, in case anyone was watching, listening. "I swear to God."

He walked in circles, still wanting some sort of proof that the accident had even happened. Had he imagined it? Maybe that's what this was—some sort of hallucination. Jimmy was suddenly hungry, and he walked back to his car. There was a stick of gum in the glove compartment, he remembered. Jimmy crawled inside, but he shut the door on himself, his mind deciding he would not go back out. Instead he drove for nearly two hours, non-stop, up and down the highway until the warning light for low gas came on and clicked, like a pen, three times.

But Jimmy ignored it, and after fifteen more miles, he felt his car struggle like it was going uphill, except the highway was flat. Jimmy pushed the petal with his foot until it wouldn't go any farther, and then pulled over to the side of the road. An Exxon station was a quarter mile up ahead—he could see it through the rain—and knew he could walk to it and get more gas. Hell, he could even push the car that far, if he wanted to. But he

sat inside, and waited, his heart still racing, his toes fidgeting inside his shoes. There was nowhere left to go.

V.

Mitch lied. He didn't call the damn cops like he said. I waited outside on that stoop for nearly an hour, but I finally got too cold and had to go back in.

"There's the princess," Harry said when he saw me. Only he and two other guys from upstairs were left still watching the game; everyone else had gone to their bedrooms.

Mitch came out of the kitchen when he heard me, walking like he had something to say, and I braced myself for a beat-down. But he stopped in front of me and crossed his arms.

"Why didn't you call the police?" I asked.

"You sound disappointed, Jimmy."

"No. Of course I'm not."

"I saw you out there, just sitting. I thought I'd cut you this break."

"Yeah, thanks," I said.

"Don't be *too* enthusiastic."

"No, I mean it. Thanks."

"Just don't do that again, alright? Look, I'm not out to get you. I'm here to get you back on your feet."

"Right. Thanks again, Mitch," I'd said, and we shook.

I know Ron knows what happened. Mitch may not have called the police, but I

bet anything he told Ron about the blow-up last night. I bet anything. Ron sits beside me now; he drives me to PizzaHut so I can start my job, and he stares straight ahead with two hands on the wheel, perfectly at ten and two. He's so fucking law-abiding sometimes that it makes me sick. He's even got his shirt buttoned to the very top. I wonder if he can even breathe.

He's been quiet the whole drive over, and I wait for him to chew me the fuck out. I look out my window at the group of kids that walk in the direction we're heading, and the leader bounces one of those blue racquetballs against the sidewalk as he moves; he bounces it around the broken glass and chipped gravel pieces that's scattered all over. The kid practically dribbles the ball, and it makes a sound against the concrete, like in tennis. My guess is that the kids are probably thirteen, or so; and, as we move farther away, I see them shrink in my side mirror, becoming younger, and I imagine what their lives must have been five years ago.

"I know you know," I finally say, and turn to Ron.

"I know what?"

"I know Mitch told you."

"Mitch told me what?" Ron keeps his eyes on the road, but he cocks his head in my direction, and his fucking eyebrows narrow to a focus. "What is it, Jimmy?" he asks again. "Nothing," I say.

The two of us stay silent the rest of the ride over. But when we finally pull up, Ron says he'll be back at five to get me, but not to worry if he's running late.

"Traffic's no good at that time," he says. "It might take me a little longer than

normal to get over here.”

“That’s fine,” I say.

“You’re going to do real good, Jimmy.”

“I know.”

“Alright, then,” Ron says, and he extends a hand. But I pretend I don’t see it, and I get out of the car and shut the door.

It doesn’t take very long for Gordon to see me when I get in—I don’t even make it to the back room where the cooks and waiters go before he stops me—and he gives me a cell phone and a set of keys. The restaurant’s fucking loud with lunch crowd voices, and mothers with screaming kids too young to be in school.

“I’ll call you,” he says. “Or if not me, someone else will. We’ll give you directions if you get lost, okay?”

I nod.

“Listen, don’t use this phone for anything else. Don’t take any other phone calls, Jimmy. And anyway, we can see at the restaurant who you talk to.” Gordon pauses. “Not that I don’t trust you.” He smiles, and he pats my arm like we’re friends, like I’m supposed to forgive him and understand his suspicions.

I reach to shake his hand. “Sure,” I say. And he leads me outside to the car.

This is the first time I’m inside a vehicle, behind the wheel, since that fucking day they took me in, and I adjust the seat, and the damn mirrors, and I figure out which buttons do what. I learn how to turn the high beams on—I pull the fucking control stalk on the left-hand side towards me—and to set cruise control, there’s a button I press on the

steering wheel, all the way to the right. I look for the windshield wipers now, but, goddamnit, I don't have to look too hard—all windshield wipers are the fucking same, it seems. But, it's not even raining today—it's bright outside, actually—and so I don't give a shit about any of this.

Gordon's given me the first place I've got to go to. I look at the address on the sheet of ripped paper, and I squint—Gordon's handwriting is sloppy, and loopy, like a kid's. I'm supposed to go to a bank, it says, about ten minutes from here. The car drives real smooth, and it's in good condition when I brake and turn, as if it's new. The outside looks like shit, though.

If I wanted to, I could take this car, and drive some place far away right now. I know I'd be caught in a day or two, but fuck it—what a day or two I would have myself. And anyway, after they caught me, it wouldn't be so bad. Truth is I didn't really mind prison all that much. It's not exactly what they show on television, though I'll say TV's pretty damn close to accurate. Guys jerk around and fuck with anyone they can in all kinds of ways, yeah, sure, that's true; and, I was always looking over my shoulder in case someone tried to jump me. But, I didn't mind this; see, and this is the part where TV distorts things. Guys on the inside don't suffer as much as people on the outside think they do. I didn't anyway.

I see the bank four blocks away; its Eagle symbol is just a small bird from where I am, but I fucking see it nonetheless. I'm at a light, and a group of business people cross in front of me, holding their McDonald's bags and sodas. Some big-ass woman clutches hers, and I think how a strong wind wouldn't even be able to pry her finger-link sausage

fingers from that paper. I look down. My foot's falling asleep holding the damn brake down, and I push the tongue of my sneaker to make sure I can still feel my toes. I don't feel shit, though. I can't even tell anymore if I've got the brake, and I look up to make sure the car's not moving. Now there's another fucking herd grazing in front of me, crossing the damn street, and I try my best to keep the brake steady. I honk.

"Hey, it's still red, asshole," a suit says to me. "What's your rush?" He wears dark sunglasses, but they slip down his nose.

But then the light turns green, and I still can't feel my foot, and the people just keep coming.

"Hurry the fuck up," I say, pressing the horn.

Some people flip me off, some laugh. When they've all crossed, I go. But I press too hard on the gas because I can't judge, and I take off faster than I should on a city street. My face tightens as my head and neck snap back. It could have happened again, I think. I could have hit those people. It could fucking happen every fucking day I work.

I see the bank on my left, but there aren't any places for me to stop and park on the right. I've got to turn around. I keep going straight, and then turn right, and when no one's coming, I make an illegal u-turn. I'm back on Newman Rd. again and I see the bank. It's blue and green, and big like the ocean, and the Eagle on the sign is proud. There are people outside it, by the ATM, in a huddle, and they smile like they think they'll live forever. Goddamn, there are people everywhere. What if it was raining? I wouldn't be able to see shit, I think. How many more people will I end up killing right working this damn job? I grip the wheel, and I think how I could drive into something

now; I could drive into this bank, if I wanted.

But, now I've fucking passed it. It's behind me. But the road is too long ahead of me. And, anyway, how many times am I going to have to drive Newman Rd.? And how many times during this damn job *total* will I drive it? I keep driving until I'm on the on-ramp to the highway. They're doing construction, these guys in orange hardhats and jeans around the bend. I'm careful as I go around. This is the first time I'm on Route 1 in five years, and I don't know where to fucking go. But, I'll keep driving until I can't drive this car anymore.

HOW WE ARE RELATED

Elizabeth's husband Noah says for the second time this week he'll divorce her if she doesn't start talking to him, that she holds everything inside her except the things that don't matter, and he's tired of it. Noah says, "Lizzie, you've always been detached, but now that your mother's gone, well, you're just a wall." He tells her how he doesn't want to hear anymore the things she thinks she *has* to say, but that he badly wants to know the things she thinks she *can't* say.

"What do I care who got voted off *American Hero*?" he asks. "What do I care which pop star had a mental breakdown and shaved her head? Don't tell me anymore about these people I don't know."

"It's *American Idol*," Elizabeth corrects. But Noah's face tells her he has no idea what she's referring to. "You said American Hero? The show's *American Idol*."

Noah throws his hands. "Did you not hear what I asked you?"

But Elizabeth hears fine.

Noah walks upstairs, pouting, and mumbles that goddamnit, this is not a marriage. "I get you're upset, Lizzie, but don't shut me out. You can break in front of me, it's okay—it's really not so scary. It's not your fault your mother died. I know you think it is, but it's not, and I wish you'd talk to me about it."

"But I know it's not my fault," she whispers when he is out of sight, and she makes a cup of coffee despite the time the microwave reads—eight o'clock pm. *Noah is*

probably going to bed, Elizabeth thinks, *because he's tired and tired of me*; and, she adjusts the lighting in the kitchen to make it brighter—why not pay some bills while she has the time? She hasn't missed any work despite her mother's passing six months ago, so it's not as if she can catch up on these things—the shopping, the running of errands, and the paying of bills—during the day. She even works weekends for the extra money, though she and Noah don't need it.

But when Elizabeth sits at the table, ready to work, checkbook in one hand, and a black pen in the other, she thinks how her mother did not simply pass away like the elderly do, like the way Noah makes it sound sometimes—her mother did not die old for one, and she did not die in her sleep. “Ruth Hoover was only fifty-two years old.” This is what the obituary in Elizabeth's wallet reads. But Ruth Hoover did not die. She was killed. “She intentionally drove her car into a tree going sixty-seven miles per hour.” Each time Elizabeth reads this, though, she questions if sixty-seven miles per hour is really the exact speed her mother was driving. After all, how can they know for sure once the car has crashed and flipped? What's dead is dead, she thinks; and really, would her mother's face have been any less bloody, or less cut up, her nose not *as* broken had she, say, moved at sixty-*four* miles per hour? Would a three mile per hour difference have enabled an open casket?

Elizabeth sips her coffee, and smokes a joint that Noah doesn't know she has—she keeps a bag full of dope behind the auburn bottles in the liquor cabinet that he never touches, like a secret pot of gold. She shuts her eyes, and she thinks how in New Jersey, where her sister Shana lives, it's ten o'clock. Elizabeth could call right now and talk to

her, if she wanted to. But Shana, she is sure, is still playing the role of upset and hysterical, just as she did months ago; or, maybe, finally, she has transcended stages and is depressed and half-dead now. Either way, Elizabeth doesn't doubt Shana is still overly grieving for their mother's suicide. She remembers how Noah once compared her to her sister. It was a month after the funeral. Shana had come back out to Springfield to visit their mother's grave.

“Why can't you just show some emotion, huh?” Noah had asked. “Look at your sister. Why can't you lean on me like she leans on your brother-in-law?”

“Oh, please. She's only putting on a show. And anyway, she's being selfish— Mom's probably happier in the ground. You know, at peace,” Elizabeth had said, and she'd folded her arms across her chest.

But Noah only shook his head in disgust; he'd said she was disassociating, and apparently, Elizabeth thought, he'd already grown tired of it. “I'll be in the car,” he said.

Elizabeth scribbles circles with a heavy hand now on the front check in the book. She draws trees and the acronym RIP, and then picks up the telephone and dials her sister's number from memory.

“Hello?”

Elizabeth recognizes Shana's voice, though it's scratchy.

“Mom was no picnic,” she blurts.

“Lizzie? Is that you? What are you doing? We're sleeping.”

“You don't know. You moved to a different state. You didn't get to talk to her every day, telling her yes, over and over, reassuring the shit out of her, that people still

cared about her; and that no, we weren't too busy for her anymore. You didn't drink yourself to sleep after she made you feel like shit, like you weren't good enough. She let you Shana, have a life outside of her, just because you didn't stay. But someone had to stay."

Elizabeth draws stick people on the line beside "Pay to the Order Of."

Shana sighs, dramatically, Elizabeth thinks, and she clears her throat. "Lizzie," Shana says slowly. "Are you drinking now?"

"No. Do you think Mom was driving as fast as they said?"

"Yes."

"Why do you think that?"

"I don't know why. Because why not? Where's Noah?"

Elizabeth laughs, and she shrugs her shoulders as if her sister was in front of her. "He's probably packing," she says.

"Why would he be doing that, Lizzie?"

"Where's *your* husband?"

"Trying to sleep. Lizzie, what's wrong? Where's Noah?"

"Of all places, Shana, why would you go to New Jersey? I mean, who goes to New Jersey?"

"Lizzie, my husband's from here, and you know this."

"Yeah, but you didn't know him when you left. If you wanted something urban, why didn't you just go to Chicago?"

"Honey, are you in therapy? Or, are you on any medications? Why would your

husband be packing?”

Elizabeth pauses, but knows exactly what she will say.

“Lizzie? Why would Noah be packing?”

“Because of you, I guess,” Elizabeth says. “Because you’re emotional, and I’m not. And, given our differing locales, he doesn’t think that makes any sense.”

Elizabeth laughs and hangs up the telephone before Shana has the chance to respond, but then disconnects it entirely so her sister cannot call back. It is easier to blame Shana for Noah’s pending separation than to acknowledge it as her own fault.

Elizabeth sits back and remembers her twenties; she recounts her formative years. Her mother had started threatening to take her own life as she’d gotten older, particularly when her daughters were all grown up, and Shana had moved away. And at first, Elizabeth had stayed up all night with her. She’d cried and begged and said how much she needed her mother. But she’d learned quickly enough that her mother wasn’t serious, after all—Ruth Hoover only threatened in private, in front of Elizabeth, it seemed; it was all a show, a ploy, just to make Elizabeth worry and fawn over her existence. And so Elizabeth had stopped. Her mother didn’t have the guts to do what she wanted people to believe she would.

Elizabeth remembers, and she wonders if Shana remembers, too, remembers what it was like when they were teenagers—the more time they’d spent out of the house, the more their mother screamed and found fault with them, as if to bring the attention, the focus, back to her. That was the problem, Elizabeth thinks—it was always about her. Elizabeth could never speak from fear it would upset her mom. And, even at the end, it

was her mother's damn threats that Elizabeth had ignored—it was Elizabeth's desire to have her own life a part from her mother—that had made Ruth Hoover angry enough to kill herself, and to try and instill a sense of guilt in her eldest daughter.

Elizabeth relights the joint that'd burned out while she was on the phone, and finishes the coffee. Without thinking, she writes on the back of the very check she's destroyed the real words she can't say to anyone, not even to herself—*I wished for you to do this someday. And I don't know if I'm sorry, but I don't think I am.* She writes quickly, as if she only has seconds to say it, to write it; and then she puts the check in a white envelope containing a security seal that protects against fraud, or people wanting to pry into thoughts, like her husband. Elizabeth pushes backwards too hard in her chair, still sitting. The chair's legs slide against the floor, causing a loud scrape; and then, not knowing her watch is also caught on a piece of string frayed from the red, table cloth, Elizabeth stands. Her coffee mug falls against the linoleum, as well as the bills, which float to the ground like leaves from a tree; the ceramic breaks, and the black coffee spills and stains the paper in odd shapes.

Like the footsteps of a ghost, Elizabeth hears Noah above her; he runs from the bedroom to the hallway, and then down the stairwell into the kitchen.

“Are you okay? What are you doing? What broke?” he asks. Then Noah fans the front of his face and cringes in disgust, and knowingly. But he asks anyway, “What the hell is that smell?”

“I have to go,” Elizabeth says. “Where are your keys?”

“You have to go? You have to go where? You're fucking high, Lizzie. You're

not going anywhere. And since when did you start smoking that shit anyway?" Noah scratches his chest as he watches her, angry, his eyebrows narrowed and his mouth an O. He reaches into the refrigerator. Elizabeth hears him move bottles and containers around, and she knows he's digging for the pudding in the back.

"I'm going out," she repeats, and grabs his keychain on the table across from where she'd been sitting. "I only had a few hits, I'm fine."

Noah sticks his head up, and looks at her from the other side of the refrigerator door. "Oh no, you're not going to go drive my car into a goddamn tree."

"That's not funny, Noah."

"Oh, hey, look who's responding to me? *Finally*. Is that it? Sick humor is what gets you?"

"Noah, I'm serious. I'll be right back."

But Noah walks until he stands in front of her, and he grabs her shoulders. "Is that a metaphor, or something? You'll be back? Don't you fucking make threats like that to me. I won't stand for it."

Elizabeth shakes her head.

"Look at me," he says.

"Noah, I just...I have to get out of here."

Noah shakes her again, one single jolt. "Why can't you just talk to me? Your mother killed herself, Lizzie, and it's not your fault. She made threats constantly. What were you supposed to do? She was unhappy woman. But you did everything you could to change that."

But Elizabeth only stares at him. She doesn't want to hear what he has to say, and she chooses instead to watch his lips move. They are chapped, and cut from the cold. But his eyes are so kind, she thinks. They are brown, like chocolate, or coffee—all things warm. “What would you say?” she asks. But her voice trails into silence.

“What would I say to what?”

Elizabeth feels her chance—she breaks free as her husband releases his grip, and she runs to the front door. “I'll be back, Noah. I promise. I have to mail something.”

“Jesus Christ, Lizzie, come back here. Get back here.”

Noah chases her, but she's out the door and in his navy pickup truck before he can catch her. Elizabeth drives through their neighborhood, where one house looks like the next—each house is small, and they alternate between brick, siding, and brick. The cars emulate one another, too. They are all middle class cars, Elizabeth thinks. Ford station wagons, and Honda civics. And everyone does what they can to get through the day; here, everyone just wants to make it and survive. So what does this make me? Elizabeth wonders, driving around the bend and onto the highway where there is no one on the road. Is she low-class? Or, would the phrase be second class? Elizabeth laughs. What do you call someone who wishes for death? What do you call someone who wishes for death on someone else?

The black iron gates of the cemetery are still opened, though it is past dusk; and Elizabeth feels as though she's looking into, and past the gates of hell. She slows the car and stops. Should she go in? she wonders. Or, what if someone comes along and locks up while she's still inside? It doesn't matter, she thinks. Here is her chance to talk to her

mother as Elizabeth. Elizabeth starts the truck again, and directs it around the grounds; and as she winds along the dirt road, and up and down the cemetery's hills, she looks at the tombstones in the various shapes and sizes. Does the bigger the stone mean the deceased was more loved than a dead man with nothing? Elizabeth and Shana had given her mother a solid piece of stone, 2x2 feet, though at first, Elizabeth had wanted something smaller. "It's too much money for someone who can't even see it," she'd said. And, it wasn't until the priest denied Shana's request to conduct her mother's service did Elizabeth agree to something bigger.

Elizabeth stops the car. She is lost in the maze, but has found her mother. There is only one person beside Ruth Hoover, Elizabeth sees, and it is a man. Elizabeth looks at his dates—he was seventy-one when he'd died; and, she wonders if that was mother's problem all along—maybe her mother's soul-mate was an older man, rather than the man her own age that she'd married and subsequently divorced.

"Hi, Mom," Elizabeth says, and lowers to pet the grass she stands on, above her mother's casket; she smoothes it with her palm and she feels the cold of the grass, so cool it almost feels wet. "I'll be right back."

Elizabeth walks the thirty yards back to Noah's truck, and from the back, beneath the plywood, and bucket, and the dirty rags, she takes his rusty shovel and carries it, back again to her mother.

Elizabeth ploughs in the black night, though the ground is cold and hard, like cement, and when she hits it with her dig, it clangs as if she's struck a pirate's chest of buried treasure. She hears crickets chirp in the distance, like it was still summer; and she

sweats in the cold, and wipes her face with her shirt. Little patches of grass and clumps of dirt come up and Elizabeth tosses them behind her, where someone's plot waits for him to die. Where am I going? she asks herself. She cannot dig all night.

But after she digs less than a foot, Elizabeth all at once drops the shovel, and in the same movement, takes the check in her pants and tosses it, still secure in its envelope, into the little hole that she's made that resembles a dog's. She exhales deeply, and dramatically, and she hugs her hips with her hands. And then she sits beside her note, and plays with the clumps of dirt that she's made, letting the dark, gravel pieces squish beneath her fingernails, and into both her fingerprints, and the grooves of her hands where her fingers bend and her skin folds.

For the first time since her mother died, Elizabeth feels the ball of anxiety in her chest move up, and into her throat, and her cry comes out as a choke, or a small shout. She surprises even herself. Her lips quiver, and her eyes well, but she holds her breath to stifle the emotion quickly. Elizabeth stands and dusts herself off. Like a child, she wipes her eyes and nose with the back of her hand, and then buries her confession.

Finally, when Elizabeth pulls up again in front of her house, it is ten o'clock. The house is dark, though. She wanders up the drive, and to the porch. The door is unlocked.

"Noah?" she calls.

The lights go on, and Elizabeth sees her husband sitting at the far end of the sofa, his hand beneath the dress of the lamp. He wears a coat, and sneakers, and beside him, his Samsonite and backpack.

"What are you doing?" Elizabeth asks. She flips her hair, and wipes the dirt from

her face with her fingertips.

“I’m waiting for you. What do you think I’m doing?”

“Oh. Well, I’m here. I’m back, just like I said.”

“Where’d you go?”

“Nowhere. I just went for a drive.”

Noah scoffs. “See, that’s what I mean. The smallest things, you can’t even tell me anymore. You did *not* just go for a drive, don’t lie to me. You wouldn’t have taken my truck, if you were just driving. You wouldn’t look like hell, if you were just driving.”

Elizabeth smiles in her discomfort, and removes her shoes by the door. She shrugs her shoulders when she sees Noah watching.

“Is that all you can do?” Noah asks.

Elizabeth unzips her coat.

“I went looking for you. I drove around, couldn’t find you, came back. And then I just sat here, waiting for someone to fucking call me and tell you’d gone and killed yourself.”

“I told you when she died I’d never do anything like that.”

“Right.”

“Well, I’m here, I didn’t hurt myself.”

“Lizzie, I told you, I can’t do this. You know what the past six months have been like for me?”

“What?”

“They’ve been all about you. And you know what? I swear to God that that

would have been fine because I get it. Your mom died. But it's not about that. It's about me fucking worrying all the time that you're crazy, or that you don't love me, or that you're seeing someone else."

"How could you even think that, Noah?" Elizabeth asks.

"I don't know. Maybe it's because I fucking sleep with a stone?"

"That's not funny," she says, though she laughs.

"It's not supposed to be funny." Noah stands and grabs his things, and lobs them in the air across the room. They fall down loud and hard on the floor in the small foyer. "I'm sorry, Lizzie. But I can't be here right now. You of all people should know what it's like to worry about someone. But you don't even think about me, about how I sat here all night, wondering where you'd gone, or what you'd done." He pauses. "I'm sorry, Lizzie."

Elizabeth remains seated, though. "Where are you going?" she asks as he walks to the door.

"I'll be at the Super 8. I left the number on the counter. I won't do what you did for your mom. I won't stay here and cater to you while you run off and make threats. I can't do what you did. Maybe you're just a better person than me, Lizzie, I don't know."

Noah shrugs, and grabs his things, and he shuts the door behind him. Elizabeth hears him stick his key inside the lock and turn it.

"But that's just it," Elizabeth wishes she could say when she hears his truck pull out. "I am not the better person."

Elizabeth goes into the kitchen and pours a glass of water, and she drinks it in

three gulps; and, she thinks about how, and why, she is not as sad as she thought she would be if Noah was to ever leave her. It is not a matter of sadness, though, she thinks, nor a matter of endurance. She will endure it fine because this is the bed's she's made, and she doesn't want to share. Noah doesn't deserve that from her. Elizabeth walks upstairs and collects some of the rest of Noah's things, and she puts them in a pile and carries them to the door. And then, when she's done, Elizabeth goes back up; and, in the darkness of her bedroom, while the rest of the world sleeps, she sits at her desk, and hugs her knees; and, in her mind, replays the first real conversation she'd ever had with her mother.

HEALS ALL WOUNDS NOTHING

Ted is Maura's ex-husband of five years; and, though she hasn't seen him since they'd signed the papers, she believes she still knows him well. She knows that when Ted called four days ago, announcing his visit this upcoming weekend, and his desire to stay with her in the home they once shared, he wants something from her, something important, and that she will probably give it, whatever it is. But Maura doesn't want to. She doesn't even want him to come, really; Ted is just a reminder of the part of her past she'd like to forget—the way she used to be, and the abortion they'd had because of it. The abortion *she* had, rather. He'd wanted her to get it, the abortion—the pregnancy had been an accident—and she'd listened because he said he'd changed his mind and didn't want children; and, it was easier to say “yes” to him rather than fight. It was easier to be agreeable rather than say what was going on. Maura looks at the time, and shakes the “What ifs” from her head.

And yet, what if she'd been a mother? Maura folds her clothes inside the bedroom she hasn't shared with anyone in two months, and alphabetizes CDs in the cluttered nook overlooking the lower West side. What if she was picking up her baby's toys instead? What would that be like?

“Shit, he'll be here in less than an hour,” Maura says to herself, running back and forth across the house. Has she lost weight since Ted saw her? she wonders, and she pinches the extra skin around her stomach, though she is still slender. On second

thought, she doesn't think she has. What will *he* look like?

She dusts the furniture in the front room, and gets on her knees to wipe the kitchen floor with disinfectant, disposable cloths, and she allows herself to make the comparison to baby wipes. There was a time when she couldn't do this—couldn't make these kinds of comparisons—without getting upset. Maura shakes her head; she can't remember the last time she cleaned, *really* cleaned, and she hopes the place looks okay.

"It looks exactly the same, Maura," she's afraid Ted will say, looking around the house condemningly. "You're still not much on the domestic, huh, baby?"

Her lack of skills had always been a joke between them. She'd never been able to perfect that pot roast his mother used to make before she died—somehow burning the outside and leaving the inside bleeding in spots, like sores—even though Ted swore it was just a matter of following a recipe; and, she'd shrunk many a blue jean and leaked so many colors that his shirts often looked like the sixties. Together, they'd once snickered over her inability to clean up, but now, as Maura changes her outfit, which, she proudly notes, is the same color she'd bought it as, and dabs perfume behind her ears, she only dreads the sound of his deep-rooted laughter at her expense.

"Hello, Maura. Are you home?"

It's Ted's voice calling from the front room. Time has not totally altered recognition—his voice is the same, just a tad deeper, the kind of depth that comes as men age. Maura runs from the bedroom, and she wonders how she could have left the door unlocked, especially in this city.

"Ted, how did you get in here?"

He holds a key, and dangles it like bait. He says, “You didn’t change the locks.”

“I didn’t think I had to,” Maura says, and grabs it from him, stuffing it in her pocket. She smiles reluctantly.

Ted laughs. “Damn, Maura. Five years. You glad to see me, or what? Give me a hug.”

They stand in the small foyer that’s like a box, and Ted reaches for her, still holding his orange Nike duffel bag in one hand. “Five years,” he repeats, and he is abrupt, like a child, as he brings her to him and wraps his arms around her back. His bag taps Maura behind her head in their embrace. But Ted holds her longer than she thinks is appropriate—he is still tall and handsome, despite what she believed and hoped he would be, and her body still reacts despite her will—and so she gently pushes him off.

“Jesus, Maura. How the hell are you?” He sniffs the air. “Hey, does it smell like Pinesol in here?”

“Yes, it does,” she says, and turns her back before he can speak, or make a joke. “Why don’t we go in the other room, huh?”

Maura leads him into the living room, and just as she feared, it’s as though he never left. His face, despite a few new lines, is the same; it’s still obnoxious-looking, Maura thinks. Even his clothes are the same; she recognizes the Skidmore t-shirt he wears, though it’s faded now, like his jeans. Looking at this man, Maura is reminded of her once silly fantasies of being an actual family with him.

She asks if he would like something to drink and motions for him to sit.

But Ted declines the water, and grunts as he plants himself in the chair, his legs

automatically opening, and his hands on the armrests. He pets them, as if he tries to detect what fabric the chair is made of. “So how are you?” he asks.

“I’m fine, Teddy.”

“Yeah, you know, I was surprised to hear you still lived here, Maura. I thought maybe you would have moved back to Jersey, or something.”

She laughs. “Just because you did doesn’t mean I had to.”

“I’m just surprised you could still afford it here, that’s all.”

Maura nods. “I’m doing alright with that.” And she nods again, restraining herself from saying anything more; she knows she has more money than Ted knows or would like her to have.

Ten years ago, Maura had starred in the Broadway musical *How to Age Gracefully*, and played the younger version of the piece’s protagonist. She sang the hit solo of the first act, “Gravity Wants My Ass, and I’m Only Twenty-Five,” and the caricature of her face lined the marquee in lights. The show ran for years in a packed house, and she’d run with it for four of those eight seasons. It was the only show she’d starred in; it was the only professional show she’d ever been in—she’d never landed another role despite three years of auditions and agent changes, not even off-Broadway. But after three years, and a hesitant retirement from the business that Ted had pushed, Maura counted her money from the one stint, and combined it with his, that of a successful financial planner, so that they could purchase the quiet brownstone he wanted. She’d agreed, thinking it would be a good place to raise a child.

But Ted continues despite Maura’s terseness on the subject; he says, “Do you

mind if I ask what this place is costing you?”

“My great-aunt died,” she says, though she knows she shouldn’t speak. After all, it is none of his business. But she adds, against her own objections, “After we split. My great-aunt died after we split. And she left me a lot of money.”

“I see,” Ted nods.

“But I also work as a dance instructor now.”

“Oh?” he asks.

“It’s a private, semi-novice troupe.”

He smirks. “What? Like, little rich kids whose parents live vicariously through them?”

“No. Like early twenty-something’s with talent, trying to make it.” But, Maura feels her face warm in embarrassment despite her defense. Or maybe because of her defense. Why is she so defensive anyway? she wonders. She is very proud of what she does; her girls are talented. But, still she cannot help but feel he’s judging her. Ted looks at Maura, his eyes studying her every movement, and she does her best to keep one, solid expression on her face, a poker-face. But she chews her tongue, as if it is a wad of orange tobacco. She says, despite the regret she knows will follow, “And, you know, I still get paid each time a soundtrack sells.”

“That must be nice. It’s really great how everything came together for you, Maura. What luck, right?”

But Ted smirks.

“I know I’m no financial planner like you, Teddy.”

“I didn’t say a word.” Ted smiles, just big enough, Maura thinks, to say he knows something she doesn’t. There’s a pause between them, and Maura exhales, relaxing her shoulders, not realizing she’d even tensed them. She looks at the clock above him on the wall—it is only ten o’clock in the morning. *He actually thinks I have everything I want,* Maura thinks to herself. *And that it’s all been handed to me. You damn fool.*

Maura laughs to keep from crying.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Ted asks.

“Why are you here, Teddy?”

“What do you mean? I came to visit you. I’m not allowed to come visit you?”

“Why now? Why, after no contact in five years?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t understand. We ended peacefully, Maura, didn’t we?”

“We did?”

“For the most part, yeah. Why did you say I could come if you didn’t want me to come?”

Ted takes his wallet from his pants and checks the inside. He runs his fingers over his credit cards.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“I’m checking for my train ticket.”

Maura wants to laugh again. Was he always this immature? “I didn’t say I wanted you to leave.”

“And you didn’t say you wanted me to stay, either.”

“Jesus, Teddy, I was only asking why, now, after five years, you wanted to come see me. That’s all. Why are you being so defensive?”

What was she saying, though? Maura wonders. Let him leave. She doesn’t want him here, and what difference does it make if he knows it or not?

But then she watches his reaction, and she says it again. “Boy, Teddy, you’ve really gotten so sensitive over the years.” She watches the way he shrugs his shoulders—so nonchalantly, like whatever he’d just been huffy over actually didn’t bother him at all—and the way he tucks his wallet back into his pocket, like a magic trick he wants to make disappear in a hurry; and, she hears the way he says, “Fine. Well, maybe, yes, you know what? I think I will have that water. Actually, do you have coffee?”

“Sure thing,” Maura says, and she gets up with ease. She’s scored a point in this match-up called a reunion. “So can I ask it again, or will it make you go hail a cab?” she asks.

Ted smiles. “Why, after five years?” he calls. “I don’t know. I was just thinking about you lately, Maura, that’s all. I just wanted to get together and catch up, like I said on the phone. Maybe grab some drinks, or something to eat, but, you know, nothing too big. Don’t want to put you out.”

Maura lets the coffee brew, and stands beside the pot in the kitchen, on the other side of the wall. He cannot see her.

“Oh, *drinks*?” she says. “You know, I don’t think that’s such a good idea, Teddy.”

“Why’s that?”

“I’m pregnant,” she says, she lies, and brings the coffee to the other room. Ted takes a cup from her hands.

“What? No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am. My boyfriend and I, we’re pregnant. We’re having a baby. I’m due in December, kind of like a little Christmas baby, right?”

Ted searches her hands for a ring.

“We’re not engaged, or anything,” she says. “*Yet.*”

“Oh, my God, Maura, that’s, that’s wonderful.”

Ted tries to smile, but Maura sees the attempt is not genuine—he actually looks as though he winces more than anything—but he hugs her, and Maura holds her stomach the same way she did when she actually was with child, all those years ago, except now her hands only protect flesh and skin. But she disregards the truth, and allows herself to imagine a baby, a little fetus, inside her, and she grins widely.

“We’re not sure yet if it’s a boy or girl.”

“Oh. I guess it’s too soon for them to tell.”

“It is. But, we’re not going to find out, even when they are able to detect the gender. We’re going to let it be a surprise.”

“Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“I didn’t want to tell you over the telephone.”

“No. But I’ve been in our house for almost twenty five minutes. Jesus, this is huge. Congratulations? So who’s the lucky guy?”

Maura takes the photograph of her ex-boyfriend from the mantle, and she silently

thanks God, for one, having taken the picture of him even though they'd only been together for a month and a half; and two, having left the frame where it was, out in the open.

"This is Jimmy," she says.

"Jimmy."

"He's a wonderful guy."

"And what does this Jimmy do?"

"Well, he's about to be father, for one, so he's very excited. But he's also a mechanical engineer." Maura bites her lip. She is actually not sure what Jimmy did for a living—he would never give her a straight answer—but it certainly wasn't mechanical engineering.

"Oh. That's fantastic." Ted winks. "So that's how you're able to still afford this place, huh?"

Maura stands and returns the photograph to the mantle, but before she puts it down, she wipes the dust with her sleeve, and she remembers the names now she'd picked out, and mulled over, for the baby she'd aborted. She'd never forgotten them. "We're trying to decide on what to call the baby. I've got my personal favorites, but they don't necessarily jive with Jimmy yet."

"Oh, yeah? What are they?"

"Patrick for a boy, and Amanda for a girl."

"They're nice. You think you'll head back to Jersey to raise the kid?"

"Why would I do that?"

“I don’t know. You’re in the city. And, the schools are better back there, aren’t they? C’mon, you know the commercials—*New Jersey public schools work.*”

“I think this brownstone, and this neighborhood, are both excellent to raise a child. So does Jimmy. That’s what *we* were going to do, Teddy, remember?”

But Ted doesn’t seem phased. “I guess so. But just be careful. New York’s rough.”

“Where are you living in Jersey? Are you back in Madison? Be sure to tell your Mom I said ‘hi,’ by the way.”

“I will. She loved you, you know. But, nah, I’m in Westfield now.”

“Oh. How’s that working out for you? Traffic’s a bitch in Union County.”

Ted shrugs. “I don’t really notice it,” he says. “It’s not that bad. Hey, listen, you want to go grab some lunch? I’m hungry. And anyway, you’re eating for two now.”

“It’s kind of early, don’t you think?”

“Let’s walk. We’ll eat at Chipotle on St. Mark’s, like we always used to. By the time we get there, it’ll be open, and we’ll *both* be hungry.”

“Alright,” Maura says and stands. She holds her stomach with one hand and hoists herself up with the other, as if the extra body that she’s made up inside her causes her stress and imbalance. “That’s fine. Let me get my coat.”

Ted claps his hands. “Perfect.”

Maura is in the den when she hears him say, “The place looks great, by the way.” She ducks behind the door where she has thrown her coat, and various jackets, and a couple of pairs of shoes. She didn’t have time to hang them, or put them in their proper

place. But, she didn't want Ted to see her mess, and so she hid them. From the buffet of coats and accessories in front of her, Maura picks the jacket she will wear and pushes everything else farther inwards. "Okay. I'm ready," she says, emerging from the room. But she turns again to make sure nothing is in sight.

Outside, they walk beside each other, Ted on the left, closet to the street, just as he used to walk. It is sunny, the first day it hasn't rained in a week; and it doesn't take long for Maura, who wears boots, to feel sweat on her calves in the heat of late springtime, like a tickle she can't reach. They pass a variety of couples who stroll on the cobblestone, in the silence of Saturday mornings in lower Manhattan, the one section of the island that seems removed from the rest. Maura tucks her hands inside her pockets, and plays with the candy wrapper she feels inside—she hears its crinkle; it is the only noise that sounds—and she stares at her feet. Their footsteps are in sync, she notices. It is as if they are marching in one, common army, though for every step Ted takes, Maura takes two.

But then Ted stops. "Oh, hey, are we moving too fast?" he asks.

Shit, Maura thinks. "Well, maybe a little," she says. "I'm starting to really feel the baby these days. Would you mind slowing down?"

"Maura, no, not at all, of course not. You should have said something. I'm sorry. It's just that you look so great, you're not showing at all, and so I forgot."

"So, what else is going on with you, Ted? I feel like I'm talking about my baby too much."

"Well, it's a big deal, I understand. Not all that much is going on, really. Just

sort of same old, same old stuff.”

“No ladies of which to speak?”

“Eh. Hey, you remember that time in college, Maura that you threw up all over yourself?”

Maura rolls her eyes. “Vaguely,” she says, but then she laughs. “But as I recall, weren’t you the one who threw up first, all over the floor of the bar?”

“Hell, yes, I remember that,” Ted says, and he claps his hands. “You remember the time that cabbie misunderstood us, and took us all the way into Yonkers?”

“Sure. You know that happened to one of my dance students, too?”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, she missed the first class, and I said I was sorry, but that I’d have to charge her anyway. But then she explained how she was new to the city—hell, she was new to the country—and that she and the cab driver, also new to the country, completely misunderstood each other. She was saying Bronx, but he heard *Yonkers*, and so that’s where she ended up—in Yonkers.”

“Did you still charge her?”

“Not after that story she gave me. It’s not like she just missed class, you know?”

Ted snickers, and Maura asks what’s wrong.

“Nothing’s wrong. It just must be nice to have that kind of money is all that I’m saying. Hey, you remember that time in college we stayed up for twenty-six hours straight?”

“Not really,” Maura lies. But of course she remembers it, she thinks. She

sighs.

When they arrive at Chipotle—all the way on the other side of the island, Maura notes—there is still five minutes before the restaurant opens. They stand and wait, and a group of hipsters in plaid pants walk past them, carrying coffee cups from Starbucks and wrinkled newspapers. Maura hears various protest phrases from their mouths. *Hell no, we won't go.* “We have to march,” the leader of the group says. He wears yellow shoelaces as bracelets. “He’s not Trumping shit in SoHo.” Ted pulls a pack of cigarettes—Marlboro’s—from his pocket and lights one with a black and white Marilyn Monroe lighter.

“When did you start smoking?” Maura asks, and steps backwards and visibly holds her breath—she inhales and her cheeks puff out—so that the smoke does not hurt the non-fetus in her stomach; and, she makes sure that Ted sees it.

“Eh. I don’t remember. A little while ago,” Ted says, and then inhales. He carefully blows three rings before finally exhaling a cloud away from Maura. “You can’t smoke inside Manhattan restaurants anymore, did you know that?”

“I heard something about that,” Maura says. She’d like to remind him that she still lives in the city, though—of course she’s heard it. But she says, “That stuff will kill you,” and she waves her hand. She adds, “And me and the baby.”

“If it’s not this, it’ll be something else. It’s always something.”

“That’s cynical of you, Teddy.”

Ted smiles playfully, and winks, and Maura blushes until someone knocks

hard on the opposite side of the restaurant. Maura turns. A tall man with curly hair and an indie-rocker physique flips the knob, unlocking the establishment. He wipes his hands on his shirt and pushes the door.

“Jesus, John, you scared me,” Maura says.

“Hey, beautiful.”

They hug, and Maura introduces John to Ted, who crushes his cigarette with the sole of his shoe.

“Hey, nice to meet, bud,” Ted says.

“Man, you must be a real prick to let this one go,” John kids and he shakes Ted’s hand. “Just kidding, guy. Come on in. It’s good to meet you, too.”

The lights are dim inside the restaurant, and it takes a second for Maura’s eyes to adjust. She sees only white as she moves further in, but she feels Ted’s hand on the small of her back, directing her like it used to. The music is loud—it sounds as though an operatic piece plays from the speakers.

“Yo, man, too loud, too loud,” John says, and the music lowers; Maura recognizes it now as the same foreign pop Chipotle always used to play when she and Ted came to eat.

“You two enjoy,” John says. “Let me know what you need.” He kisses Maura’s cheek.

“Thanks, babe,” Maura says, but feels the weight of her ex-husband’s eyes.

Maura and Ted order at the counter, and then move to sit, and though Maura can see just fine now, she still feels Ted’s hand guide her to the booths. It feels big and

clunky on her skin, and she'd like to tell him to kindly remove it because she is seeing someone.

"Do you come here a lot?" he asks before she has a chance.

"Not that often."

"That guy John acts like he really knows you."

"Well, I come here *some*, when I'm in the area," Maura says. "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know. I guess I just figured you wouldn't after we ended." Ted pauses.

"He's what, maybe ten years younger than you?"

"Not quite *that* many years. He's twenty-eight, I think."

"That's pretty close to ten."

They continue to talk while they eat, but the more they do, Maura notices that Ted steers the conversation into the past. He asks if she can recall certain memories, and when she does because she can, they repeat it—the memory—and what Ted calls its intricate details, though Maura doesn't find them very intricate. Animated, he laughs with his mouth full of guacamole and enchiladas.

"How about that time you thought you lost your mother's credit card in the cab?"

"Yes, I remember," Maura says, sipping her water. She clears her throat, and she wishes could bring herself to ask why the memories he recalls are ones where she'd looked stupid, or where she'd messed up. But instead, she tries to get even and talks about the baby. How could he not be jealous? Maura thinks.

"You know that back room in the house? You remember, the one that we always said would be the guest room?"

“Sure.”

“Well, I think that’s what Jimmy and I have decided to use as the nursery.”

“Where is Jimmy?”

“What do you mean?”

“Am I going to meet him? He’s okay letting you spend the entire weekend with your ex-husband?”

“Sure. He trusts me.” Maura pauses. “I’m going to be the mother of his child.”

Ted smiles and chugs what’s left of his beer, and they finish up in silence. It is not until they’re outside again that Ted speaks.

“You know, I was thinking,” he says.

“About what?”

“That I couldn’t do it, I just couldn’t have a baby. You know how some people are just made to be parents? Well, I’m definitely not that someone.”

They start to stroll through the East Side, though Maura doesn’t pay attention to where they go. Instead, she stares again at their feet.

“You okay?” Ted asks. “Do you get sick? You know, because of the kid?”

Maura shakes her head. “No.”

Ted walks beside her, and everything about him is exactly the same. The way he shoves his hands in his pockets, and the way his right leg drags, just a touch, when he walks, and the way he belches so freely after a meal, as if it doesn’t bother her. He has not changed at all. The way he walks, yes, but the way he talks, too, well, it is the same way he did it five years ago. Maura continues to think, holding her stomach again, and

caressing it like a crystal ball.

“Can we slow down?” she asks. “My baby.”

And she thinks how, Christ, if it wasn't for her pregnancy this weekend, nothing would have changed *between* them, either.