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Grazed: A shy expatriate woman in Paris desires connection, but finds that when she reaches out for it, it's not what she expected.

Ailments: A recent college grad takes up work with an aging man who is trying to sell off his comic books, the last treasure of his life, but as their relationship progresses, she is forced to ask herself some questions about what it means to care for someone.

Misbegotten: A young woman in an unsuccessful relationship struggles through multiple pregnancies and complications, forcing herself to question her place in life, and the situation she's found herself in.

Model Day: A man with a very particular way of seeing the world loses his sister and caretaker to a bicycle accident, and he has to navigate a photo shoot with a model who was scheduled to arrive at his home that day.

PAST POSSIBLE PATHS

by

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Approved by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I

### GRAZED

Sarah would never be a real Parisian, but she could pass, keep the stern look on her face and her eyes on her shoes. She spoke well enough now that, while her accent still gave her away as American, no one switched to English anymore as they had when she'd first seen the city as a girl.

Sarah lived alone with her labrador, Bean, in an apartment too small for either, much less both of them. After coming here for study abroad, then staying when she found a job at a travel agency of all places—who would want to leave Paris?—she was still at the same travel agency six years later, the Eiffel tower outside her window gaudily reminding her of how outsiders saw the city. She resented having to take the metro down from her cocoon in Montmartre, across the Seine, and into the flocks of English speakers who reminded her of herself, and of what she could never be.

Paris and all the people in it had been the same sickly shade of grey for months. A fog disappeared into low banks of snow, black with the soot of the city's unending motion. Somehow Sarah still found herself fantasizing about Paris, though she'd been here so long now, and this was maybe why she stayed; she still believed in the city she'd first envisioned: the white lights in the trees, the perpetual possibility of love, the cigarette smoke coming in clouds from sidewalk cafés. The smoke was here, and yes, the

lights, but it didn't feel the way she'd thought it would. And still, she waited for Paris to appear.

Marion should have texted already, and while always late, she was getting steadily worse. When she had come up to Sarah in a café and asked what book she was reading so many years ago, Marion had been the first Parisian to take notice of her. She listened patiently when Sarah spoke slowly or made mistakes. She corrected her without mocking. It didn't take energy to be near her, and they had spent the last several years binge-watching Netflix in Marion's apartment and people-watching on the canal, but those nights came to an end the moment Marion met a woman who could give her what Sarah could not.

"How come you never let me introduce you to people?" Marion had asked one day when they were out at their favorite bar.

"I go out plenty."

"Yes, if sitting at cafés and pretending to read while you stare at people is 'going out.'"

"I read some," Sarah said, folding her napkin into fourths.

"What if there were a place you could go and not even have to talk to people unless you wanted to, and you can just...feel them out." She laughed and Sarah raised an eyebrow.

“Cause it’s a contact class, see. Contact dance.”

“Marion, that’s approximately the last thing I want to do.”

“But we’ll do it together. You can dance with me. And get to know the other people as we go. Not scary.”

Sarah knew Marion was trying to help her make new friends so that she could feel less guilty about pulling away to spend time with Sophia, and while Sarah hated it, she knew she might as well accept Marion’s time and attention while it lasted.

Sarah had already finished a first cigarette and started a second when she finally got a text saying, “So sorry, can’t make it today, kisses!”

She’d actually been looking forward to class this week, as much as it still scared her. These couple hours were often all the time she got with Marion anymore. Her first thought was not to go, but she knew she would just sit in her room smoking and staring out the window. Bean picked his head up off his paws and looked at her. “I know, I know, I’m an idiot,” she said. The dog cocked his head. “Ok, I’ll go. I’ll go, I’ll go.”

Though she’d been dancing with Marion at the class for over a month, Sarah had not yet been able to bring herself to interact with anyone else, as was expected. On the first day the coordinator had explained how they would learn to be aware of when to lift and when to lower, when to give and when to push, if only they were respectful of the movements and energies of their fellow dancers. She said the first stage of the dance was

grazing, stepping slowly to assess the motions in the room, sampling interactions as a calf grazes in a field, picking at the greenest shoots and moving on. Sarah had been stuck in this stage, studying the other dancers, wishing to watch without being watched, but also to throw away her fear and trust someone else with her weight.

Sarah was small-featured and plain except for her crimson hair, which she pulled back from her face to hide its striking effect. She had no desire for the nameless desire of strangers. She wanted someone to know her and carry her along, as Marion had done, but had no idea how to seek that out, to learn someone while allowing them to learn her. She'd dated a few boys in college back in the States, but never realized then how hard it would be to meet people outside the classroom; now the only people she saw regularly were her middle-aged coworkers, Marion, and the dancers who came to class.

She passed through Place des Abbesses, where the wooden stalls of the winter market overflowed with jewelry and scarves, crêpes and cups of hot chocolate. Families milled among them, the parents smoking cigarettes as the children touched curious fingers to bright fabrics and toys. Sarah could still summon the taste of the salted caramel crêpe she had ordered here three years ago, walking arm-in-arm with a boy who had afterwards never called her back. The wall of "I love you's" loomed to her left, covering the side of a tan Haussmann building: ceramic squares, each with the words written in a different language.

Among the market stalls, as usual, stood the Arab bracelet seller with green eyes you could make out from across the square, who would win over women with a smile and a compliment, taking up their wrists in his hands, tying on a thin string bracelet, and then, once the women had been, they thought, gifted, demand the few coins he'd been angling for all along. She loved to watch the women's confused, then disappointed, then resigned faces. Most of them would leave the bracelet on and begrudgingly hand him the coins. Some would try to tear it off and return it, but he tied a tight knot, and once on your arm, the bracelet was yours. She'd always been surprised that they would let a stranger touch them like that.

But how was she supposed to let a stranger touch her today? She had only been able to let Marion come close. In class, other dancers had tried to join them, or to dance with her when Marion had gone across the room to intertwine herself elsewhere, and Sarah always pulled away. But she couldn't hide inside herself forever, not if she ever wanted to spend an evening, much less a night, with anyone other than Bean. These days even a handshake felt clammy and foreign. She'd seen the way the dancers touched each other—what if it was too much, and she would freeze right there and then, alone in the class without Marion to snap her out of it?

No, she couldn't think like that. She had to try. Now that she'd gotten more comfortable, and recognized some of the regular dancers, it was time. She said into her scarf, "Sarah, you're gonna do great."

She squeezed through the crowded sidewalks of Boulevard Clichy, towards Pigalle and the red-light district, with its multi-story sex shops, their windows stuffed with leather- and lace-clad plastic women and signs for the private booths in the back. The people inside those places let others touch them so easily, but it meant nothing but money.

Arriving at the converted church where the class was held, Sarah pulled open the heavy oak door and nodded to the leader, who nodded back. A woman waved and she thought it might be to her, but couldn't be sure, and raised her fingers in what could have been either a hair twirl or a wave in return. She hung up her coat and found a place to stand on the bare wooden floor, along with the dozen or so other dancers. A few she recognized: the exuberant man with the long grey ponytail, the girl about her age who wore full-body leotards and always looked as if she were being held up by a string, the gentle-featured blonde man she'd heard speaking Dutch with his friend while he stretched. Several others were new, or else she hadn't noticed them before, but they all looked as if they belonged, all full of that same strange energy that had brought them here, seeking out this kind of interaction.

Everyone stood spaced out in the large open room where rose light filtered in through the stained glass windows. All facing the same direction, they began to silently send their praise or pleas to whomever or whatever they believed was receiving them. No one asked about yours, nor offered theirs; this part of the class you were meant to

keep for yourself. Sarah joined in the silent invocation, asking no one but herself, and nothing but to not be afraid. There was never any music, and no particular cue, but slowly, almost imperceptibly, people started to move.

The man to her left pointed and unpointed a toe; a woman in forest green raised and lowered her arm, the rest of her body still. Some motions were circular, repetitive, others discrete. People felt their inner impulses, moved as their bodies compelled them, and then, when their bodies told them to interact, they would do that too, beginning to strain towards one another, one leaning in, back arched, to give a little of his weight to his partner, then rolling off to separate, graze, step through the space alone again, unconnected, until the next connection presented itself.

Sarah lifted a foot, set it down gently, toes first, the sound disappearing into the floor's slats. Each step deliberate, she passed close to dancers, moving towards the center of the room, as she had never before dared. One mirrored wall reflected her and the other dancers back, their bodies morphing into kaleidoscopic shapes. Surely someone would cross her path here, amongst them all. She tried not to focus her eyes on the dancers, but only watched in her periphery as circles formed, changed, and dissipated, limbs intertwining, disengaging, then disappearing from her field of view. She would wait for them.

She stopped dancing and stood motionless in the middle of the room, feet barely angled out, palms turned upward, open. Sweat wicked off her skin and she shivered

once. She closed her eyes and the floor creaked heavily with the weight of all the people in the room. If she waited in one place, willing, someone would come. Against the red of her eyelids the room was limitless, full of the breaths that people took as they pushed their bodies around. No one tried to touch her. No one came near. And she waited. No one. Maybe she had been too cold. Maybe they could see her fear, and didn't want to let it into their bodies. They'd given up on her. She was like the buildings in a city that no one ever looks up at anymore. And no one came and no one came and they were brushing past her, so close to her, but never touching her, not even for a second, not her, but each other, and everyone else, and her breath came shorter, tighter in her chest, and she couldn't fill her lungs, and tried to force the air down, but there was nowhere for it to go, muscles clenching tight. She opened her eyes and the room was throbbing around her, all the energies in it catching on one another, colliding, grating. She had to get out.

And before she knew it she was running. Out the door and into the cold and the rain, and she couldn't stop, just kept running until she saw a sign and went down underground and followed a path she knew, lined with posters and lights and leading towards home. The blue line would cut her right across the top of Paris, back to Bean and her bed, where she didn't have to dodge the looks and the handshakes and all the other social chatter that felt so foreign that sometimes she wondered how it was that everyone knew how to do it but her. She was inside the train now, with all the people and their thoughts pulsing and spinning around her. They started to slow as she became

aware of her breathing inside the quiet car, and stuffed her thumbs into her balled fists to steady herself. The car came into focus as packs of teenagers leaning in and whispering to each other, an old couple poring together over the same magazine. The sharp odor of unwashed skin.

The doors gassed open after a few stops, and she fell out, flustered, past the crush of people who jostled her to get on. She turned left, towards the exit, but stopped when confronted with a wall where there should have been a hallway. She checked the blue and white tiles of the tunnel: Abbesses. One stop too early. Abbesses lay buried a hundred feet beneath the layer of living city, and to escape, rather than get into another box full of people, she opted for the seemingly never-ending series of spiral staircases that led back out to the world. The corridors smelled of earth and body fluids and alcohol.

When she emerged from the underworld the square was quiet, all the stands closed up for the night, though jazz notes still strained, blue, from somewhere up the cobbled hill. A steady stream of walkers followed the storefronts toward cafés and music halls, their faces turned down against the persistent drizzle. Sarah headed through the center of the square, between the closed wooden stalls. On a low stone wall surrounding one of the cafés a man sat smoking a cigarette. He stood and flicked it away as she approached, green eyes catching the light. Recognizing him, she thought to turn away, but instead her

steps carried her straight towards him, and then they were face to face, clouded breaths mixing above their heads.

“Out by yourself?” the man said, stepping in closer, picking up her hand. His touch was like a drag of a cigarette after a dull day of work. He smelled of earthworms and clean grass and he wanted her money and she knew it, but she let him stand close anyway.

“Why would a lady like you walk alone on a night like this?” He opened a palm to the sky and let a few raindrops fall there before dropping it to his side.

The night air cooled her face pleasantly. She held rabbit-still, her heart a drum in her chest; she was sure he could feel every beat loud and hard against their joined skin, that he knew how much this was feeding her.

And then the thin strand was around her wrist, his fingertips brushing her palm as he tied his practiced knot.

Switching to English, he asked “A beautiful bracelet for a beautiful lady?”

She hadn’t said a word. He still didn’t know.

“C’est très gentil,” she answered, watching for his face to change, but his cool smile remained in place.

“Deux euros, Mademoiselle?”

She turned the bracelet on her wrist, then dug in her pocket and pulled out a handful of coins, picked through and found the right two. He plucked them from between her

fingers, and their eyes met a final time as they turned from each other, both of them mouthing “merci.”

His skin had touched this bit of string with its bands of blue and red, and now its cotton rub against her wrist as she fell away from him, into the still streets of her city, would have to be enough.

## CHAPTER II

### AILMENTS

Sheila pulled out of her parents' driveway in her sky-blue Cavalier with the hail-pocks on every panel. She hadn't had a job in a week, so it was anything she could get at this point. Last week this guy paid her to punch through his car window. Who knows what the hell for. Gave her 100 bucks. People would pay good money for weird shit. And in Backwatersville PA, there wasn't a big market, so you couldn't be too picky. Since graduating high school she had half-heartedly applied for a few retail jobs, but Craigslist was easier, nobody to answer to, show up if you want to, don't if you don't.

Sheila turned from one tree-lined street onto another, and saw the unlit Budweiser sign hanging from the porch of a bar, just like the man had described on the phone. He was looking for somebody to help him sort and sell his old comic books. Big payoff for easy work, it said. She'd been into *Archie* and *Betty & Veronica*, and even dabbled in a little *Wonder Woman*, so she figured it could be a fun way to make a buck. She parked her car and pulled open the creaky screen door to the apartment across from the bar. Knocked at the wooden door behind it, and there was no answer for a long time. A pile of mail sat gathering dirt at the doorstep. Finally she could see him at the top of the stairs waving. Come in, come in, she could see his mouth saying, and she opened the door.

"Just come on in and shout next time," he said.

A gallon jug of water sat on each carpeted step leading up to the single bedroom.

“You must be Jeffrey.”

“I’m the only one here. Hah.” His voice was gravelly, and she couldn’t tell if his laugh was sarcastic or just difficult for him to get out. He walked ahead of her, one hand holding a flap of his back brace against his stomach, the other tightening the velcroed opposite side. His full-body long underwear, waffled and post-white, was the kind with the flap for easy access. He velcroed and unvelcroed the thing several times before he got it to where he was satisfied.

“This damn osteoporosis,” he said. “Makes you into a whole different person than you used to be, you know.”

“I don’t know,” she said, but then thought that sounded insensitive. “Is it bad?”

“Well, I hardly got any sleep last night. A sinus infection on top of everything else. The new nasal spray I got seems to be helping with that, but it makes my nose run, so I have to keep getting out of bed to blow it. And I was hoping to get a new TV chair, but this guy who said he would help is yanking me around again, so all I have is this one, and my back aches every time I sit down in it, but it’s better than the couch, or my bed, which is sagging down in the middle, so...”

He kept talking as Sheila took in the apartment, and she said “uh huh” or “oh” at appropriate times. Rachel Maddow was talking fast on the TV, and Sheila realized that it was set at 1.5 speed. Sheila would wonder later why, with a life so empty of activities, he

still seemed to want to get them over with as fast as possible. A set of weights sat in the corner, stretched across with spiderwebs, along with countless stacks of DVDs, VHSs, and records. Two home-made looking box speakers held a Freddy Krueger mask and a VHS rewriter shaped like a race car, its hood open, awaiting a tape. The objects which had been in use most recently were evident, a finger-streak of clear running through the layer of dust. Sheila tentatively made herself a spot on the orange 1970's lounge chair across from where Jeffrey was settling himself into his brown leather armchair. Sheila's pants leg stuck to the fabric a little and she pulled away. Resigned herself to it and set the leg down to restick itself again.

“So glad you could come, so glad you could come. Well then. Comic books!” he said. When he talked, it was as if he was pulling the cheerfulness out of some dark, unused place, like it hurt him to smile.

“You really think they're worth something? How many are we talking here?”

“Oh, I shouldn't have sat down.” He pushed himself up out of the chair, wincing, and walked through the kitchen to a small storage room in the back, where Sheila saw stacks and stacks of boxes, all, presumably, filled with comic books.

“They're too dusty for me to go through anymore. With my allergies and everything. Thought young hands and eyes would do a better job.”

Sheila pulled off the lid of one of the boxes and coughed.

“You weren’t kidding.” She flipped through and saw the *Silver Surfer*, *Captain America*, even some old R. Crumbs. She’d never seen such a great collection, and this was only one box out of maybe 50.

“Can I read them while I sell them?”

“Yeah, just don’t dog-ear the pages. Hah. I’ve had these since I was a kid. Six, seven years old. There’s original *Spidermans* and *Fantastic Four* and everything, anything you could want in there. Those number ones and number twos, those’ll be worth thousands. Make us both a buck.”

“So how are we gonna work this?”

“OK, OK, let’s go sit down. I have a proposition for you.” She picked up the box that she’d opened (holding the dusty lid far away from her face) and he led her back into the room with the TV and resettled in his arm chair, waving for her to sit down. She tried the couch this time, and while not sticky, it sagged so heavily in the middle that she felt like a child, encompassed by the thing.

Jeffrey picked up the Kraftwerk album that had been leaning against his chair and set it across his lap, grabbed the Ball jar from the table beside him, unscrewed the lid, and pulled out a bud. Sheila could see, even from where she was sitting, that this was not your name-brand weed, no purple hairs growing on this stuff. It was brownish and dry-looking, and even with the whole jar of it open, she couldn’t smell anything.

“You smoke?” He held up the record and looked at her.

“Sure,” she said. “Yeah, who doesn’t?”

“Listen, I’m really glad you responded to the ad. These comics are the last shot I have at a big ticket. I can’t work anymore—look at me. I get checks from the state every month, but that barely covers the meds I need just to sleep through the night. What I mean is, I don’t have a lot of money. Cash flow. Income. Right now. So, I wondered if you would help me out in the form of a trade. Until the books start cashing in.”

“Hold up, so you put up an ad asking for help, but you don’t have anything to give me in return?”

“I didn’t think it would be a good idea to post this kind of offer on Craigslist. If you know what I mean.”

“Right. Right.” She watched him as he sat there breaking up the weed and stuffing it into the bowl of his vaporizer. His hands moved slowly, as if set at half-speed, but he talked fast, like his mind and body were disconnected, on different rhythms. She could use the dough now, but it seemed like this really was all he had. Bags of inhaled brown weed and Rachel Maddow at 1.5 and these boxes of comics.

“But you think the books are going to be worth something?” she asked, dubious.

“Think so? I know so! There’s gems in there, just you wait and see.”

Sheila pulled the comics out of the box one by one, laying them in front of her, putting the *Green Lantern* with the *Green Lantern* and the *Amazing Spider-man* with the *Amazing Spider-man*. Some of the covers said “Number 1!” and she thought she might

see a way out of her parents' house, maybe into some shitty apartment, maybe even into some other shitty town than this one.

“So, how do we do this?”

“You're in! Hah! That's wonderful. That's great, you just keep doing what you're doing. There's a guide you can use to figure out the value of each one, and then you take pictures, and post them up on Ebay. Easy peasy. And I can do a”—he lowered his voice—“an eight of this stuff for your time. When you come over. If that would be good for you. Then you can have 15% of the profit from the comics.”

Sheila's eyes flicked from the jar of ditch weed to the *Green Lantern* she was still holding to Jeffrey's shaking hands over the Kraftwerk album.

“That sounds good, Jeffrey. That's generous of you, thanks.” She couldn't look him in the eye when she said it. She was embarrassed to be taking anything from him, and annoyed that she couldn't take more.

A new bag was filling on the vaporizer, and he plucked it off, covered the tip with a square of paper towel, and handed it to her. “Smoke?” he offered, holding his last lungful in with puffed cheeks.

His skin was so grey; she wondered about the last time that someone had touched it. She wanted to take his hand, but didn't know how to. She just accepted the bag that he held out, and for now that was enough.

He walked her down the steps and saw her out; it would be the only time he did. When they reached the bottom, he kept his hand on the doorknob and stood looking at her.

“Sheila, just one more thing. I was wondering if you might be willing to help me with something.”

“What’s that, Jeffrey?” she said, her keys already in her hand, the weed in her pocket.

“I was wondering if you could help me with my laundry. The washer and dryer are in the basement and I can’t carry the baskets down the stairs anymore. I would ask someone else, but I don’t really have anyone else to ask. I haven’t been able to do it in weeks, and I need to change my sheets, and I thought you might be able to—”

“I’m happy to help, Jeffrey. It’s really no problem.” The words reverberated in her head: “Happy to help. Really no problem,” and she hated herself for saying them, but didn’t know how to say anything else.

The smile on Jeffrey’s face was enormous and full of genuine relief. “Next time, next time. Don’t worry about it now. It’s winter anyway, so it’s not like I’m sweating through the sheets or anything. Hah.”

“Ok, Jeffrey,” Sheila said, and felt herself imitating his dry laugh.

Jeffrey was still looking at her like he was going to say something, but then he stepped closer to Sheila and raised his arms. Sheila at first didn’t recognize the gesture,

but then it dawned on her, and she slotted her own arms under his, reaching around to his slender back, to the spot above the unwieldy brace that covered most of his torso. She could feel his muscles straining, pulling her in with all his strength, but the force was no more than that of a young child's embrace. She pressed her palms into his back, but not her fingertips, the way she opened doorknobs when her nails were drying. It was the only time they hugged.

Sheila pulled her Cavalier back into the the extra spot in the driveway, next to the wump of snow her dad had shoveled that weekend, which still hadn't melted. Let the dog out in the front yard and watched her shit, went inside. Neither of her parents were home—they both worked long hours and she didn't see them a lot. This didn't bother her too much, since every time she did it was "Did you find a job yet, honey?" "Have you been looking?" She didn't tell them about her Craigslist gigs, and they didn't ask where she got money to go to the Promenade and "bum around," but they didn't give her any either. With nothing better to do, she rolled a joint out of her new income and sat on the back porch to smoke it and stared at the black tarp stretched over the pool, weighed down with rain water. Her mom came home with take-out bags and turned on the TV. Sheila sat at the kitchen table and looked at it with her while they put fried chicken in their mouths, then she went for a walk around the block, got bored with that, came inside, and fell asleep in front of a movie.

After that first time, it was always the same. Sheila would walk up the carpeted steps with their jugs of water, greet Jeffrey, who'd still be sitting in his chair in front of the TV. She'd strip the bed and add the sheets to the basket of laundry he'd left for her in the bedroom, then set to work on the comics. When she would arrive, Jeffrey would force that painful smile and ask, "How are you?" While the smile seemed forced, she knew he was terribly happy to see her. So happy it hurt, and hurt her to see it. She'd answer, "I'm well, thanks. Good to see you," rather than asking him the same "How are you?" back. If she asked how he was, he would tell her, and the answer was always the same.

Sheila would bring over the Chinese food he'd ask her to pick up, and they'd eat it out of the containers, with the plastic cutlery that Jeffrey kept on hand. He'd floss in his chair afterwards, and Sheila would try not to look. He didn't have dishes or silverware, because it hurt his back to stand and wash them, he said. Every day when she left, Sheila would bundle up Jeffrey's trash bag full of Chinese food containers and plastic cutlery, and haul it over to the dumpster across the street. Jeffrey said he couldn't afford trash service, and had asked Sheila to take it out one day, and afterwards that became one of her jobs too, another thing she didn't know how to say "no" to.

Once in a while Jeffrey would ask her to pick up something from the grocery store, usually a new supply of gallon jugs of water, which she'd place on the stairs, just as she'd found them the first day. Sometimes it would be a frozen dinner and he'd ask her, when

she arrived with it, whether she'd looked through all of the packages and found the one with the latest expiration date. If the date were too close to today's, he would send her back to the store to get a different one. While she resented her growing responsibilities to him, she knew he needed the help, and if she didn't do it, no one would.

Laundry took about three hours, all told, so she'd settle in, they'd each smoke a baggie from the vaporizer, and watch old sci-fi movies, or the news, while she inventoried the comic books. She'd lay out the comics on the floor—that's where she chose to sit from then on, it being the least grody surface, given her choices. She couldn't put her finger on it, but there was something unnerving about Jeffrey. Maybe it was how intensely lonely he was, without ever saying a word about it. Maybe it was how close he looked to death, so thin and sheet-pale. She knew he wasn't sick, not in any contagious way, but she always pulled her sleeves over her hands when she closed the bathroom doorknob and kept her bare skin away from the furniture.

People would stop by occasionally to buy bags of weed from him, and he'd weigh them out on his scale, on top of the Kraftwerk album. She never heard him listen to it, but it was serving a purpose, she figured. The people would sometimes sit on the sticky furniture, but they would never stay long. It seemed that people didn't stay around Jeffrey very long.

Sheila came to understand that she was the only person who regularly visited Jeffrey, other than the "Nebula prize-winning science-fiction writer" who came over

every Friday to eat Chinese and watch sci-fi movies. Sheila had crossed paths with him once, and Jeffrey introduced him as “Tom Nelson, the Nebula prize-winning science-fiction writer,” as if their friendship were not the man’s most valuable trait. Jeffrey’s parents were dead, and hadn’t left him anything, never having much themselves. He had siblings, but two of them were dead, and he wasn’t on speaking terms with his living brother. He didn’t seem to have any friends, or go any places, or have any hobbies, even, other than watching movies. She wondered what kind of a life a person must have led to be not even sixty years old, and live in total isolation and purposelessness, not meaning anything to anybody, and nobody meaning anything to him.

“Lois Lane. There’s a perfect woman,” Jeffrey said one time, as Sheila pulled a *Superman* rerelease out of one of the boxes.

“Did you ever have a wife?” Sheila blurted out, afraid she knew the answer before she asked it.

“Hah. A wife. I did once, long time ago. Married just a couple months, back in the good old days. When I was an editor at the arts magazine. Went to work every day, went out with my girl. Didn’t think much of it. Now I’m here. Guess I’ve got time to think about it.”

“So, what happened with her? Why didn’t it last?”

“I’ve never been good at understanding why people do the things they do.”

“She left?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I wasn’t industrious enough. Smoked too much pot. Didn’t want to hang out with her friends. Yeah, she left. Didn’t get another chance.”

Sheila entered every comic into a spreadsheet on her computer, and as she went, she checked the titles against the Overstreet Price Guide, which told her how much a given comic was worth based on its condition. She took pictures of each comic (she brought over a white towel to lay down, rather than shoot them on the filthy carpet) and recorded its condition in her spreadsheet.

“Listen, wait on the big-ticket stuff. We don’t want to blow our load early, excuse my French. Why don’t you see what you can get for some of those later-series *Xmen* or something?” Jeffrey said, when she mentioned actually starting to sell the books on Ebay.

“Jeffrey, I think we need to put our best foot forward. Especially if we want to make a good name for ourselves as a seller. Give ‘em the big stuff first. I found the first five *Conan The Barbarians*. I’m gonna put ‘em up and see if they bite.”

“The first five! That should be worth a good couple hundred, if not a thou!”

“Hold your horses, Jeffrey. That’s if they’re in mint condition. These ones are a little yellow. A couple of the spines are cracked. I can get away with calling them Fine, but I’d be lying if I called them Very Fine or Near Mint.”

“Sounds like you know your stuff already.”

“Yeah well it’s not that hard to pick up. What’s going to be hard is convincing people to buy these comics.”

Jeffrey picked up one of the *Conans* and started flipping through it. “These look great! Look at them! God, I read these so many times as a kid.”

“That’s the point, Jeffrey. Collectors don’t read them.”

Sheila put the *Conans* up on Ebay and told Jeffrey she’d start the bidding at \$50.

“\$50!” Jeffrey said. “Just one of those is worth five times that!”

“You can’t start the bid at \$500. No one will go for it. Let’s just wait.”

So they waited, and after a week there were only two bids, and the price had gone up to \$71.50. Sheila sat on her bed at her parents’ house and watched the auction count down its final minutes. With one minute left a third bidder came in and brought the final price to \$82. So this was it. The most valuable item she’d found so far. Not just one comic, but five. The first five. If this was all they could get for that, the rest of the stuff was going to be worth pennies. And she didn’t know how long she could keep hanging out at Jeffrey’s house every week just for a bag of that shitty weed.

Jeffrey was chomping at the bit when she arrived that week.

“So? The auction ended, didn’t it? How’d it go?” he asked before she was even up the stairs.

“Not so good, Jeffrey,” she said, hesitating in the doorway to the living room.

“Only 82 bucks.”

“82!” he said, incredulous. “How am I supposed to pay the rent with that? Or my medical bills? 82? For the Conans?” He pushed out of his chair and paced the room, came back to where she stood in the doorway. “82,” he said, and Sheila could see tears filling up his old man’s eyes.

“Jeffrey, don’t—” She held her hand out towards him, but didn’t touch him. “Don’t cry, I’ll—I’ll find some more. There’s gotta be some more that are worth something in there.”

And so she kept coming over, kept inventorying, entering the books into the spreadsheet, hoping against hope, but knowing that she never would stumble upon another number one, magically in Near Mint condition at the bottom of one of the boxes.

Sheila arrived on a snowy evening and pulled off her coat as she came up the stairs. Jeffrey was waiting on the landing, and without a hello, he said, “You gotta see my toe,” and stuck out a blackened and ripped toenail for her to inspect.

“I was just walking through the bedroom—” here he guided her through the incident, indicating the metal frame sticking hazardously out from his bed “—and usually I’m really careful going around this corner, but I just banged the shit out of it, and now it’s all black and swollen, like you saw, and there’s a gash right through it that’s still seeping blood.”

“Sorry to hear that, Jeffrey,” Sheila said, and picked up the laundry basket, went to the basement to put it in. She came back upstairs, grabbed a box of comics, and came back into the living room where Jeffrey had put his sock back on. She was settling in to go through the box of comics when there was a knock at the door. Jeffrey went to the top of the stairs to see who it was, then waved in the woman standing in the cold.

“Phew!” she said, and clomped up the stairs, kicking the snow off her boots. She looked to be about Jeffrey’s age, but still had a sense of youthfulness about her, as opposed to Jeffrey, who looked 20 years older than he was. Her hair was just beginning to grey around the edges of her curls and she wore a baggy button-down shirt with a stain on the breast pocket. She smiled as she entered the room, training this expression first on Jeffrey, then on Sheila. She had a kind of purposeful benevolence about her which Sheila found distasteful, like the sort of person one might encounter on the bus reading “The Power of Now” with the cover held unnecessarily erect, so the other passengers would know she was well on her way to enlightenment.

“An old friend,” Jeffrey said. “Maureen.”

“Real pleased to make your acquaintance,” the woman said, but her eyes wandered back to Jeffrey who was already settled again in his chair.

“Just thought I’d come to pick up a little painkiller!” she said, and laughed uncomfortably.

Jeffrey told the woman she could take a seat; the couch was cluttered, as usual, with DVDs, movie guide books, and a package of stale cookies. Sheila knew about the cookies because Jeffrey had offered her one and she'd politely eaten it, crunching, summoning saliva, swallowing laboriously.

“That’s alright, I don’t want to intrude; I see you have another friend here,” the woman said. Sheila wondered if maybe they could use a moment alone, so she said it was time to check the laundry. She walked down the carpeted steps, out the screen door, around the house, and down into the dank basement where the washing machine was still running. She waited, not wanting to return and interrupt Jeffrey and his guest, not sure what kind of relationship theirs was.

When she came back up carrying the warm sheets and clothes, Sheila heard the woman saying, “—got back the tests, and the doc says the arteries going to my brain are blocked.” Sheila continued straight back to the bedroom so as not to disturb their conversation, but as she walked past the room Jeffrey caught her glance and held it until she disappeared into the bedroom. The woman was mid-sentence, “I had my second stroke last week, and I just got out of the hospital—” when Jeffrey abruptly walked out of the living room and followed Sheila into the bedroom, where she stood separating the sheets from the rest of the laundry and piling them on the bed. He faced his back to the bedroom door, through which the woman might have seen him, had she been looking, and mumbled, “Here, I’ll help you with the sheets.” The woman didn’t finish her

sentence, or even look around the corner, but waited silently for him to return, as if paused.

Jeffrey had never once helped Sheila with the sheets. Now he stood struggling with his Tempurpedic pillow and green pillow case, making no progress, since he could barely support the weight of the pillow, much less wrangle it into the case. Sheila said, barely able to conceal her shock, “Jeffrey, it’s OK, you can go talk to your friend.” How could he, when she was telling him about something so important, ignore her and walk into the other room? He made no sign of having heard Sheila, which was inconceivable, as they were within touching distance.

She raised her voice slightly. “It’s OK Jeffrey, I’ve got it under control.” He at least acknowledged her this time, looking up and saying, “I’ll just help you get this done.” Sheila glanced toward the living room where Jeffrey’s guest remained on pause, then back at him holding the pillow case out with the hand that wasn’t steadying his brace. She felt revolted at the idea that he was running away from this woman’s story, that he couldn’t bear to hear a little of someone else’s pain. She pitched her voice higher, ensuring that now the woman would hear her as well, and said decisively, “Jeffrey, why don’t you go in and talk to your friend?” At that he expelled breath in exasperation, threw the pillow case down, and turned his back to her. His swaddled lungs laboriously lifted and fell. He fumbled with some things on his dresser before padding in his white socks into the living room.

Sheila, having finished putting the sheets on, followed him in to monitor him, to make sure he didn't try to escape the woman again. She turned to the woman still standing frozen in the corner.

"What were you saying, Maureen? Just now?"

"Oh, it's nothing, I was just—"

"It didn't sound like nothing to me. Wouldn't you say, Jeffrey?" She pinned him with her eyes, and he couldn't escape, even to sit down in his chair.

"Pretty important," he mumbled, like a chastised child.

"What were you telling him, Maureen? I don't think either of us got a chance to hear everything you were saying." She was amazed at herself for being so bold, but was suddenly furious at him, for his hypocrisy, for his selfishness.

"I was telling him about my strokes. And the hospital."

"And were you listening, Jeffrey? Did you care about her problem? You didn't! You walked out of the room!"

"I was trying to help you with the sheets."

"Bull. Shit. You were running away. Just like you run away from everything, like you run away from all your problems, and from everybody else's. You're too afraid to deal with anything, to get engaged with it, to deal with the hard stuff, the real stuff, so you just watch your sci-fi and read your comic books and play in your pretend worlds. But people in the real world have problems! They get sick, and you have to take care of

them! They aren't always pretty! Sometimes they ask you to do their laundry for weeks on end and keep them company when there's nobody else to do it, and you listen while they tell you about all the stuff that's wrong with them, and you never complain and just listen. And what happens when somebody tries to tell *you* something that's wrong with them? Something that's not easy to hear? You walk away."

The woman was speechless, there in the corner next to the Freddy Krueger mask. She seemed ready to run at any second.

Jeffrey looked as if Sheila had slapped him.

"What do you think the world owes you, Jeffrey?" Sheila continued. "What do you expect? That people will come over and help you, and listen to everything that's wrong with you, and look at your goddamn bloody toe, and you don't have to do anything back?"

"Listen, I didn't mean to start something," the woman broke in, her hand already on the door frame, "but I have to run." And she did. Not a full run, but she certainly didn't take her time. Sheila wondered if Jeffrey would see her again.

After they heard the screen door slam, and then her engine start, Sheila turned back to Jeffrey and waited for an answer. He had sat back down in his chair and was busying himself with breaking up a new bud. She kept her eyes on him until he looked up.

“What do you want me to tell you, Sheila? I’m a sad man living a pathetic life.”

He gestured to the cobwebs in the corners of his room, to the whole room, to his whole life.

“So wouldn’t that make you more sympathetic to someone else’s pain? To someone else’s sad life?”

“I just didn’t know what to say, Sheila. As simple as that.”

“Well.” She bent down and started picking up the stacks of comic books she’d laid out on the floor and putting them back in their box. “I guess I just don’t know what to say to you either, anymore.” She picked up the box and carried it back into the storage room with the others.

“The laundry is in your room, Jeffrey.”

“See you next week?” he said, looking very small in his big leather chair.

“I just don’t know, Jeffrey. I just don’t know,” she said, and started down the stairs, noting that Jeffrey was down to two jugs of water.

She let the screen door slam behind her, and ran to her car through the rain. The sun had gone down while she was there, and it was one of those shitty, freezing nights when no one wants to be outside, or even look at what’s happening out there. When she got to her car she realized she was shaking, and calmed herself by rolling up a joint to smoke on the ride home, breaking the buds up with her jittery fingers.

Sheila drove the few miles home in a kind of haze. The streetlights expanded in halos and revolved around their centers, and she was surprised when her own driveway appeared, like she didn't remember how she got there. The house was empty, and she walked upstairs with no real purpose. Stood in the dark kitchen watching the rain beat on the windows until she realized she wasn't hungry. Walked into her bedroom on autopilot and sat down on her bed with no idea what to do next. She imagined Jeffrey, in his long underwear and back brace, still sitting in his chair, not having moved since she left. She wondered if he knew what had happened. She wasn't even sure she knew, except that she could never go back there, and that, as far as she could see, he would be forever sitting in that chair, waiting for someone to come take care of him, wondering if a Number One might've hit, and why it mattered so much that he walked out of that room in the middle of a story that didn't seem important.

CHAPTER III  
MISBEGOTTEN

Melody was five days late, past the point where she could keep pretending it was just a fluke. She was also late to work, as usual, but stopped at the CVS on the corner, the one that all the bums hang out in front of, and bought a pregnancy test. The bar was pretty empty—mid-day with just the few regular day drinkers—but she couldn't get away until halfway through her shift, when the other bartender showed up. She grabbed her purse from its hook in the back, then ran to the bathroom. The walls and floor looked grimier than she remembered them, even though it was her job to clean this bathroom most days of the week, so she knew it inside and out. She latched the door behind her, sat on the seat with her pants still on, and pulled the test out of the package. She read the instructions four times. One line. She was looking for one line. That would mean she wasn't pregnant, that her world wasn't collapsing, that she didn't have to figure every single thing out right this second.

She pulled her pants down and peed on the stick, with her hand shaking between her legs. What would Tyler think? Would he be excited? Mad? Oh Christ, this couldn't be real. And what about her parents? Would they be supportive? Where would she find the money to raise a child, working for tips at a dive bar? She shook the stick and held it,

steadying her hand between her knees. There was one line. And then, the ink seeping more slowly into the paper, a second line appeared. Both of them pink.

“Ho,” she said, and dropped the stick, buckled over, her whole body convulsing in panic. She let it wash over her for a minute.

“Holy shit fuck christ fuck,” she said suddenly, and pulled up her pants, stood up, nearly fell, caught herself against the door. The night it happened came rushing at her: it was late; he’d come home from a show, she from the closing shift. They’d pulled each other’s clothing off almost without thinking, without deciding anything, without seeing each other. No one thought to put on the rubber. It crossed her mind at one point, but she figured she wasn’t at that point in her cycle, and then he came, and it was too late.

She worked the rest of her shift in a haze, filling up glasses and putting them in people’s hands. Taking their money and putting it into the register. One of her coworkers asked if she was OK, and she nodded, said, “uh huh.” With all the alcohol around her it was nearly impossible not to drink herself silly to avoid thinking about it, but she knew she had to.

Melody was not ready to bring a person into the world. She barely made enough at Porter’s to cover her half of the rent, didn’t have her Master’s or a real job yet, and Tyler found odd construction jobs to pay his half, since all the tips he made at his DJ gigs typically went to beers afterwards. This was not enough to raise a child on, she knew that much.

This was not the time, and she was not even sure it was the man. But this was the man who had gotten her pregnant. The one she had chosen. She had chosen him, that was for sure. On the night when she'd caught sight of Tyler in the back corner of the Fun House, one hand holding the headphone just off his ear—it was the first time she'd seen him since high school—she had been dating someone else. An endearingly clumsy, less than traditionally attractive, bespectacled geek, he'd laugh at her *Firefly* references and admire her tattoo of a heart with a banner through it that read “Science” where one would expect the word “Mom.” He was timid but appreciative in bed.

She'd chosen Tyler over the bespectacled geek because there was something inside her that wanted him. He had a boyish glee about him, in the way he played his music, and in the way he looked at her. Like they were school kids again. When, in reality, the last time they saw each other, they were. They'd never dated in high school, not even really been friends, but they'd kissed once. It hadn't stuck out in her memory—at the time he was just a skinny, already-beginning-to-bald-in-high-school music obsessionist. But now, though he maybe didn't like all the same movies as she did, or read as many books, or have as much to talk about as her geek, there was a masculinity about him, something in the sourness of his skin after a night of spinning amidst all the smoke and bodies, that compelled her, that was stronger than her taste in literature.

Melody and Tyler had decided to move in together after a little over a year, and they'd found a two-bedroom farmhouse overlooking a knotty creek, about half an hour

from the closest bar or gas station. Melody had had her doubts about shutting herself off like that, but they couldn't afford to live any closer to the city and have enough space for both of them. Melody could only receive phone calls and texts in one corner of the house, and she'd stuff herself in there next to the fireplace so she could text her friends to make plans to go out on the town. Not her town, but Bethlehem or Easton or, God forbid, Allentown. Towns that were now most of an hour's drive from her. They'd drink beer after beer, accompanied by cigarette after cigarette, while bands played and TVs glittered, and then she'd drive home sheepishly, at exactly the speed limit, fingers crossed the whole way, then, the next morning, pick herself up and make it through classes and work again.

Sometimes, if she got out of work especially late, or knew she was in no state to get all the way home, she would drive the 20 minutes to her parents' house in Bethlehem, rather than the hour to her little farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. She'd creep in to her parents' cavernous, carpeted house while they were asleep, slip her shoes off by the door, pad up to the bedroom that had been hers in childhood, and which she'd come ricocheting back to after college, with no place else to go, and where she knew she might end up again, if things didn't work out with Tyler.

The night she found out she was pregnant, Melody went to see Tyler spin at the Lafayette for Jazz & Funk night, her favorite show that he played. She ordered herself a

ginger ale at the bar and lit a cigarette. This was her last pack, and she was finishing it while she decided what to do. She figured that couldn't do too much harm. Tyler went on break between sets and sat beside her on one of the cracked stools that ringed the low bar. He'd just said something about a new gig, another new gig, and she was trying to think what the hell to say back. Melody pulled her cigarette out of her mouth, exhaled from a slit at the side, ashed, and fitted it into a half-circle slot in the ashtray. She let her forehead fall into the V of her hand and thumb, resting her eyes for a moment in the almost-black she had created for herself. She heard him breathing beside her and pulled her face out of her hand. She had to tell him, but how do you just say it?

“Do what you want, Tyler. What's a gig at a shitty bar in Boston versus a gig at a shitty bar in Easton? Except that it's like 500 miles away, so I won't get to come visit you at said shitty bar, and you'll go home to a hotel and the smell of the light show guy in the morning instead of me.”

“Might be an improvement,” he said, reaching out to tickle her ribs.

“Off topic,” she said, and let her lips turn up at the side, where the smoke had escaped.

It's not that Melody disapproved of Tyler's work. It's just that there were other factors to consider now. She'd been attracted to the late-night, smoke-enshrouded DJ persona, after all. It's what had drawn her in. But as she watched him pumping out a dance mix of old Bill's “Use Me,” she wondered if she could have done better. It was

time to make a decision, sooner or later, but it had to be sooner, as to whether this was the kind of man—no, the man—she wanted to be with, whether they wanted to really do this.

As far as settling, which was the word she'd come to use in her head about Tyler, just about everybody in Easton knew about that. They knew their lot in life, went to their jobs, complained the right amount, then let it go, because they knew it wasn't meant to get much better than this. Easton was home to many homeless, and they would wander in and out of the bars and coffee shops, paying for a refill or a croissant with a pile of coins they'd collected from empties. These people made Melody and, she assumed, the rest of the people in Easton feel better about themselves. They provided a welcome reminder that it could be worse.

“You know I love you because you're not like other women. Not controlling. Believes in me. Lets me do my thing,” Tyler said, putting his hand on hers.

“I didn't know that was why. Tell me more about that.”

“Melody, why do you have to turn everything into a Big Deal?” Tyler said, letting go of her, arms going limp in defeat.

She looked at his blue eyes, the baseball cap to hide his prematurely balding head, tilted to the side like the cool kids wore them. “Because nothing is a big deal to you, Tyler. It's just spinning every night, drinks with the guys, and the occasional obligatory conversation with the girlfriend to keep her appeased. What if a Big Deal happened?”

What if there was a real Big Deal?" She was starting to feel herself getting hysterical; she needed to calm down. She couldn't tell him yet. Not ready. Didn't even know what she wanted herself.

"What are you talking about? Our folks are all happy and healthy. We got enough to pay the rent every month. What's the Big Deal?"

She let all her breath out, picked up her cigarette, which had gone out, and said, getting up, "Nothing, Tyler. There's no Big Deal." And then, kissing him on the cheek, "Great set tonight, baby."

Melody spent the whole week swinging back and forth between decisions, each of which felt perfectly firm in the moment she made it. She had not yet told Tyler anything—she needed to decide for herself whether she wanted to have this baby. She'd always imagined having children. Knew she wanted them. She'd also, of course, wanted children with the man of her dreams, with her degree behind her, a steady job. But, she'd learned, shit didn't tend to go as planned. In fact, if it did, at this point, she was downright shocked.

She didn't so much mind the idea of growing up—she was 31 after all, and nearly finished with her Master's in Public Health. If there were ever a time to grow up, this was it. It was Tyler she was worried about. He didn't seem likely to change his ways anytime soon. She didn't want him to change really—just to start being more responsible

about time, and especially about money. She wanted him to come home before four in the morning, and for him to sometimes not be stoned. She wanted him to have conversations with her about how they would raise their child, who would fulfill what roles, where all the money—which was far from a lot—would go. But when he came home from spinning he was always some combination of intoxicated and exhausted, and she was smart enough to know that wasn't the time to have a productive conversation. So she waited, and they didn't talk about it, and the next day it was the same.

It wasn't the right time now, with the two of them living paycheck to paycheck, she with a year of school still ahead, and he with no prospects other than some gig in Boston, which would cost more than it brought in. But there wasn't much time left, right or not. She'd be 32 soon, and the numbers only went up from there. She pulled a last drag from her final cigarette of the pack—she'd been carefully meting them out—got a taste of filter and gagged, stubbed it out, and decided to tell Tyler. She'd tell him they were going to have a baby.

As Melody lay in the deep lounge chair in their den, her body started to pulse with the knowledge of what was inside it, what she had to say. Tyler would be home late as usual. She didn't expect him to take it well—hell, she hadn't taken it well—but she thought he'd see reason and come around to her side. She had texted him a few hours ago asking him to come home early tonight, if he could, which would mean midnight

instead of four. He'd texted back, "Ok honeypie, I'll see what I can do." This meant he'd stay out for a few beers after the show, and see where it went from there. She'd have to take care of her own needs tonight, as usual.

She flipped to her favorite women-friendly porn hub, where she could find something other than gang bangs and blow jobs. Even before she knew, she'd already been, not desperate for, but craving some intimacy with Tyler. She needed physical touch, and she needed orgasm. Tyler wasn't creative in bed—he pretty much wanted to do missionary, and then once he was finished she was left to fend for herself. This remained a problem, but trying to talk about it was as much of one. She'd had much more exciting lovers, but the kind of passion that makes for great lovemaking, and fucking too, was the same passion that overflows into the rest of your life and becomes untamable. Maybe the calm, water-off-a-duck's-back, maybe a little chained to missionary kind of guy was just what she needed.

Still, she watched the men going down on their ladies, watched them play with their breasts and look in their eyes, and wished Tyler would do any of that. What would their sex life look like after they had a child? What would their life look like at all? She felt her own touch, fingers to body, body to fingers, and tried to feel inside her the minutest piece of person, with the heartbeat of a tadpole, pulsing. There was an ache in her back, almost in her kidneys, and it felt like the coming-into-being of her thoughts, the making-real of what she knew. Her body began to thrill at the continuity of it, all the parts of her

touching, and touching the new thing that was inside her, and was not her, and was not not her. And all that, it was Tyler too, and he was inside her, part of him, buried down in the folds of her whose violets and magentas she could not even imagine, they were so deep.

The kitchen door creaked open; Tyler's boots kicked leaves onto the mat.

She shut the laptop, pulled her underwear up her leg, and cleared her throat.

In the kitchen he sang to himself, "Oh honeypie, you are makin' me crazy..."

"Ty-ty! You came home early!"

"Just lemme get a bite to eat, I'm starvin'."

"Come here, just for a second. I got a secret to tell you."

"You didn't make that apple pie again, did you? Ooh, you didn't did you?" He was drunk and gleeful. He came running, apeline, ready to pounce, from the kitchen into the den, where she lay in shirt and underwear.

He stopped abruptly, then moved towards her again. "What, were you expectin' company, lookin' all sexy like that?" He wrapped his arm around her waist and kissed her on the mouth, quickly but sincerely.

"Just waiting on you, lover."

"You didn't start without me did ya?" he said, recoiling. "You know how I don't wanna know about that." Melody had gathered that Tyler didn't like to think of her as a

sexual being outside the confines of their relationship. Masturbation was seen as “outside.”

“How could I, when you’re the only thing that gets me hot?” As she said it she hoped it didn’t sound forced, laughable. But he seemed to buy it, and crawled on top of her in his typical missionary-style-sexual-encounter position.

He kissed her once more, then unbuckled his pants, balanced on one arm to pull his pants legs down. Fishing himself out of his boxers, he pulled a few times until he was hard, then pushed inside her.

“Wow you’re so excited. Guess you’re happy I’m home.” He looked up at her for the first time since he’d kissed her. From where her mind was, miles away in her belly, she realized he’d spoken, refocused her eyes, and cupped the back of his neck with her hand.

“I am,” she said. “I really am.”

When Tyler was inside her, she again felt the pull of the giant circular enormity, the everything-in-nothing, the big bang, the universe that she held inside of her, that was completed by her, and by the man who was the other half of the every-nothing. She ran through ways to say it in her head. You couldn’t just up and say “I’m pregnant,” not while the guy who got you pregnant was inside you. Every version felt impossible to say, and she knew whatever she said would ruin the moment, and turn into a conversation, if not an argument. For now, she would just be with him, knowing it, letting it settle.

When they were done—well, when he was done—Melody got up to pee. The ceramic tiles were cool on her feet, and she kicked an errant toilet paper roll as she sat down on the toilet. She'd tell him now; she just had to figure out how to say it. But as she wiped herself, she noticed spots of blood on the toilet paper. She stared at the bloody paper for a few seconds, at first not understanding, then she frantically wiped herself again, and again there was blood. She stood with the paper still in her hand, her womb suddenly gnawing at her, doubled-over in horror. And then, in a second, in a rush, the horror changed to desperate relief. That she was no longer responsible for this whole new life, this continuation of her and another's beings. Like waking from a horrific dream, she realized it was over. She didn't have to make any of those choices anymore. Didn't have to look at Tyler and wonder whether he would ever be capable of acting as the kind of father she hoped he would be. And she didn't have to look at herself and wonder whether she would be prepared, whether she would do terrible things to her child, knowingly and unknowingly. She didn't have to worry about how far into her pregnancy she had still been drinking and smoking, before she had known. None of it was real. None of it mattered. But that feeling inside her, that something else, that life within life, it was gone. She got up and ran back into the bedroom, the toilet paper in her hand. She could feel herself breaking apart.

“What is it, babe?” he said, turning over to look.

She held the bloody paper out to him. Sat down on the bed, and the tears came. She knew Tyler was there next to her, but he said nothing, and didn't move. The tears were gentle, but constant. No big wracking sobs, just a steady flow that dripped into her hands and onto the paper she still held. Finally she pulled her face out of her hands and turned to him. He was still sitting there, baffled.

“I was going to tell you—I meant to tell you—” She remembered she was holding the toilet paper, and balled it up, threw it away from her. “I promise I was going to tell you,” she sobbed.

“Were—were you going to keep it?” he asked, finally understanding.

“I don't know. I think so. I wanted to. I don't know.”

“And now it's gone?”

She turned her face from him.

“Well now you don't have to make those decisions,” he said, taking in a breath and letting it out. He kissed her on the top of her head. “It's all for the best, all of it.” He got up and put Etta James on the turntable, then came back to bed and was quickly asleep, but Melody heard the vinyl turn itself over, play the whole second side, then click off, as Tyler snored beside her empty body.

She knew what had happened—she was sure of it, but still she went to the doctor to check. The doctor confirmed that she had been pregnant, and now was no longer. When

she said it it was suddenly real. More real than when she saw the lines on the stick, and more real than when she knew saw the blood on the paper. The doctor stood there in her white coat and Melody cried again into her hands. Her body was empty of everything.

Nothing had happened, really. She was not pregnant, and then she was not pregnant. Everything was the same as it had been two weeks before.

At the doctor's office, she'd also got a prescription for the Nuva Ring, and filled it the next day. She'd never liked feeling like some other hormones were controlling her body, but she didn't want to have to go through a scare like that again. If that's what you even call it when it goes that far. For a few weeks after the "event," as they referred to it, when they had to, they didn't have sex at all. It seemed like Tyler was afraid of her body, like it was the bearer of bad news. But after she'd been on the ring for a month or so, when they were both sure it would work, they started to fall together more often, even a few times a week. Her being on birth control had become kind of a turn on, that they knew they didn't have to be careful anymore, that sex could be about sex again, not about babies. Melody was overjoyed, and it seemed that everything was back to how it had been at the beginning.

She'd get in her battered Jeep and drive the same highways, smoking cigarettes again, as she made the daily ride to school in Stroudsburg, then another hour to Easton afterwards to work the dinner or bar shift at Porter's, then home. Alone at the house, with Tyler out at one gig or another, she would remember the sensation of carrying something

other, more than herself. Wonder what life would be like now if the baby had stayed with her, how her skin would've stretched, whether she'd be able to feel it inside her. Then remember the relief, that nothing had to change, that everything didn't have to get turned upside down. But then again, somewhere inside her she wished that everything would get turned on its head, for her and everyone else to get rattled out of their everyday, out of their same-same, out of their nothing-doing.

She was at work again when it happened this time. The same greying tiles in the bathroom with its wooden stalls. The same test from the same CVS with the bums outside. This time she'd waited six days. The two lines were there again, pink and screaming at her. Again, she remembered that exact moment when she'd fallen into bed with him, knowing she'd put her ring in two days late that month, but figuring it would be ok, thinking what are the chances that lightning strikes twice.

Her naked body so fragile against the ceramic seat, full again of something she didn't want, something she'd always wanted, something she had no idea how to handle. And then she knew, in a second, what she would do. Even with the same man she didn't know if she could make it with, and the same job that paid jack. Like it was her last chance. Like it would be a sin to kill a second baby inside her, if she ever wanted to grow another one there again.

As before, she pulled herself together, washed her hands at the sink, wiped her face down with the wet towel, and continued the shift. She had to shoo the last drunks out the door at closing and lock it behind them. She was too exhausted to get home, so decided to do the short drive to Bethlehem. She couldn't just keep it to herself this time. She had to tell Tyler, but first she needed a night's sleep. She would stay at her parents' house and tell them in the morning, then go home and tell Tyler, once she'd gotten her head straight.

She pulled down Rosemont drive, the same street her parents had lived on for her whole life, and slid her beat-up old Jeep along the curb in front of the house. The sky was the color of the bottom of the ocean. It was past two; the lights should have been long off, but she could see through the front window that the kitchen light was still on, and thought she could make out slight movements of the shadow on the walls. She shut the car off, walked through the grass, cutting off the path, turned the knob, and slid her shoes off, as always. Her mother and father were there at the kitchen table.

She dropped her purse and ran into the room. Sank into the booth next to her father, across from her mother.

“What’s going on guys?” she asked, looking from one to the other.

“Oh, it’s just your father’s sciatica again. Can’t sleep, so we’re sitting up till it passes. Late night?”

“It was,” she said, and picked up the sugar dispenser, set it down again.

Her father tapped his foot under the table. He was a lawyer and only used words when he thought they served a purpose.

“I’m pregnant,” she said. Blinking, hearing herself say it.

They looked at her in unison, then both looked away.

Her mother twirled a pen on the table and her father sat stone still.

After some silence, her father asked, “Are you going to keep it?”

“I think so,” she said, as she filled up her lungs, checked their eyes, then looked back through the table to her shoes. “I am.”

“Do you really think you’re ready for that with Tyler?” her mother said. She and her mother looked so much alike it was upsetting to Melody—the black hair greying, the already-too-round face expanding. It was like an uglier, whinier version of herself was saying everything that was coming out of her mother’s mouth.

“Ready or not, mom, this is what’s happening now. I could make a different choice, but I haven’t, I’m not going to. I want to keep this baby.” She had put more emphasis on the word “this” than she had meant to, was briefly afraid one of them would hear what she’d said, what she’d really said. I want to keep *this* baby.

“Well don’t expect us to be your free babysitters. We’ve got lives of our own, you know.”

“Thanks a lot for the support, mom. That makes this whole thing a lot easier.”

Her mother said, “There’s no need to be sarcastic with me when it’s the middle of the night, and I haven’t done anything wrong.”

Her father spoke again finally. “We helped you through college. Now it’s time for you to support yourself. You can’t expect us to bankroll this child, either.”

“Helped me through college! Tell that to my 50 grand in loans!”

“Well where would you have gone afterwards without us? Without a job?” her mother said, always stepping to bat for him.

Melody pushed herself up from the table, pressing the palm of her hand into her stomach. “Goodnight, folks.”

As she ran one hand up the banister, the other still pressed to herself, she imagined she could feel the rapid heartbeat, separate but connected to hers. She would do anything to protect it, no matter who helped her or not.

Melody slept like a blankness, woke after three hours feeling like she’d not even fallen asleep. She dragged herself out of bed and back to her car, down the same dark roads, to her little home. It was around six in the morning when she arrived, the sky one continuous confusion of grey. She kicked the snow off her boots, removed them and stepped inside, into a puddle left from when Tyler had come home, probably not too many hours earlier. She could hear the phantom stillness of the dark around her, wondered if later, years from now, she would remember this particular moment of

crossing the threshold into her house, ready to tell the other half of her family that there was about to be a third.

The bedside lamp was still on, Tyler lying on his side facing away, tucked into himself. He stirred when she sat on the bed, said, “Mmph,” reached out one arm, and with eyes still closed, pulled at her t-shirt. She had her back to him, peeling off the wet socks.

“Ty?”

“Mmph.”

“I gotta talk to you, Tyler.”

Lying there, for all the world asleep.

“It’s important.”

“Ok, honeypie, what is it?” he mumbled, dragging himself into consciousness.

She pulled her knees in and hugged them, looked at him, at the wall. Stretched her legs back out, then settled on Indian-style.

“I’ve thought about this for a long time, both before and now, and I know what I want.”

“What do you want, babe? What can I do for you?” His eyes were open now. He’d pushed up onto one elbow, was rubbing his eyes with the palm of the other hand.

“I wanna do this again, I wanna do it right this time. I don’t want it to get fucked up like before, whatever it was that didn’t work out, and I didn’t want it to in the first

place, but how can you even say that—I was scared shitless, just like you were—well, you didn't know—like you would've been, I mean, but then I realized—“ She stared ahead of her, hands flat on the bed. “Oh God,” she said. She couldn't stop now. “Oh God, I don't know Tyler, I just realized that if I'm ever going to do this it's now or never. And I love you, and we can work the other stuff out.”

She looked at him.

Tyler straightened his back, then in slow motion, without focusing his eyes, like his brain was working on only the most basic functions, he reached for his cigarettes, looked around for his lighter, pulled out a smoke. He lit it, dragged, let his hand fall, dragged again, exhaled, then said, finally, “So that's it, you're just going to tell me? Just like that? That's how I find out?”

“What other way is there to tell you, Tyler, but to tell you? Should I beam it to you? Play it over the loud-speakers at your next gig?”

“No I mean that you're just telling me. Instead of asking. Instead of. You didn't even—“

“Asking? It's not a question. I had a decision to make, and I made it. It wasn't an easy one. And I had to do it on my own. And now I'm telling you about it. Now that I know.”

“When did you find out?”

“Today. Last night—yesterday. I barely slept.”

“How could you know already? You haven’t even slept on it a night.”

“I just know this time. I already did all the thinking I need to do.”

“And what if I haven’t done all my thinking? What if maybe I don’t want a baby right now, a baby that I didn’t even know about, that doesn’t fit into my life?”

“Your life? What does fit into your life? Weed and vinyls and tracks and whatever. But I have a life too, and I want a baby to be a part of it. This baby. Ours.”

She reached out to encircle his chest with her arms, and he turned away, back to the position he’d been sleeping in when she walked into the room, cigarette still burning.

Months passed and the snow at first picked up, then let off again, and Melody became increasingly uncomfortable. Although they fought more than in previous months, she found herself more attracted to Tyler; he smelled like warm bread and smoke, and she was always excited to kiss him again when he’d come back from a show. The gig in Boston had come through, amazingly, so that meant Tyler was gone for days at a time, usually every week, driving the hundreds of miles each time in the light show guy’s beat-ass Festiva.

Sometimes it was a relief not to have Tyler around, since she was so overwhelmed with schoolwork, a new internship, doctor’s visits, and preparing her thesis. Her days were lonely and long. She went to classes and came home, went to work and came home, but she had no one to talk to in the hours in between. All her friends had been drinking

friends, and she couldn't go out with them anymore. They all congratulated her and cooed over her belly, but she could tell they were relieved when she left, like they could go back to their lives without being reminded of the other side of life, with bellies and bills and bedtimes.

With each passing month shifts at Porter's got more difficult. The hot weather came and she felt heavy with it, felt the something inside her sucking her energy, making her weaker. It seemed like the more tired she was, the less helpful Tyler was. Or available. She'd talk to him and he'd cross his arms, look into the corners of the room.

Melody would sleep on the couch most nights, because it was too uncomfortable to have anyone else move or bump her. She didn't mind—that way Tyler didn't wake her up when he came in, and if they went to bed around the same time, she didn't have to wonder whether he would put an arm around her, whether he would say anything nice to her, and be disappointed when he didn't. This way she just got some sleep, which was what she needed anyway.

Even though he was more distant, and more often at a distance, she found herself wanting Tyler more than ever. She could smell him every time he came in, and in the sheets that she rarely slept on with him. One night he came home two or three beers in, and put Cymande on the turntable. Melody had been waiting in the kitchen for water to heat for tea, and she joined him in the den, pressed her belly into the back of him as his

hands moved over the knobs. He turned, put his hands on her shoulders so she had to back up a foot or so.

“Hey baby, how ya holdin’ up?” He kissed her quickly on the mouth.

“Mm, I’m ok papa. But I could be better.” She linked her hands around the small of his back.

“Papa, huh? That’s a new one.”

“Play along ok, geez.” She squeezed him a few times. “C’mon, you wanna play house?” She let go of his back and took him by the hand, made to lead him to the bedroom.

He let her pull his arm out straight, but didn’t let her pull him any further. His arm dropped back to his side.

“Listen, I got this song in my head I’m trying to work out. Lemme just do this, ok?”

“Tyler, it’s two in the morning. I haven’t seen you all day. You think I could get a minute?”

“Listen babe, you can’t control the muse. I gotta do it when I gotta do it.”

She stepped another foot back and crossed her arms. “That’s right. You gotta do *your* shit when you gotta do it. But when I need something, it can always wait, right?”

“Don’t start this again. That’s not how it is.”

“Tyler, it is, and you know it, and I’m sick of talking about it. If you can’t even come home at a reasonable time, how are you ever going to take care of a child? And if you have no interest in making love to that child’s mother, why even stick around?”

Tyler shook his head and fiddled with the knobs on his deck.

“Do you even hear anything I’m saying? Listen yourself—we’re gonna go see someone once and for all, and talk about this. I can’t handle it anymore.”

So that was that. They went to see someone, and while Tyler was not pleased, he conceded because, she figured, it was easier than putting up a fight. Anything to avoid a fight. She wanted to have a sober, and sobering conversation, so that she could say for him, he really did his best. So that, if she ever did leave him, she’d know they had really tried.

When the counselor asked him a series of questions, and gave him for options of answers: “Yes, because I want to,” “No,” or “Yes, because I’m obligated,” he had almost uniformly chosen the latter:

“Will you, when the baby is born, stay home more often and spend less money on beer?” “Yes, because I’m obligated.”

“Will you help Melody with household chores when she is tired or unable to do them herself?”

“Yes, because I’m obligated.”

He could've said "No," after all. He wasn't the perfect man, but at least he was learning to be an adult. An adult is a person who does things they don't necessarily want to do, because they are obligated. It didn't sound very romantic, but she could work with it. She knew he loved the bejesus out of her, she was sure of that, so even if it was partly out of obligation, to his love for her, it was a place to start. He was a decent person; she knew that much. You couldn't ask for much more than that.

She was too afraid to talk to the counselor about her desires, about how even when he pushed her away, she wanted him more, and spent more and more time in front of her computer, hiding what she wanted from him from him.

One day they found out they'd be having a son. Tyler said, "I'll probably like him once I meet him." She thought that was not the ideal way for him to feel, but not terrible. That was how a lot of new fathers felt. Maybe their son would win him over, and something would be able to change. Then he turned to her, in celebration of the news, and said, "When you're done being pregnant I'm going to take you out and get you drunk. We'll go to the bar, and you can drink as much as you want, and I'll drive your drunk, not-pregnant-anymore ass home. You can even have a cigarette if you want." When Melody heard him say that, all she really heard was "when you're done being pregnant." As if being pregnant were the hard part, and it would all be smooth sailing after that. As if she'd be all "done," and they could return to their old lifestyle. Not to mention, who exactly would be watching the baby while they were out getting wasted,

and then what milk would the baby drink, once all of hers was contaminated with beer and nicotine? He just didn't get it.

Every now and then Melody would wonder if she hadn't made the wrong choice, not staying with her movie geek, all that time ago—the gentle man who might have stayed home with her, had conversations with her, taken care of her. She still saw him around town, and they'd wave politely. She wondered if they'd ever be able to rekindle things, if it didn't work out with Tyler.

Sometimes Melody longed for it to not be true, for this not to be her real life. She would wake up with dreams of a flat stomach again, in which she was out with friends and this, her real life, had all been a dream; relief that flooded her whole body like a deep breath, then, before the first sensation had even finished overwhelming her, the next would come: the deep guilt, the shame, the nasty, gnawing feeling that did not let her out of its grasp for the whole day on which she'd woken with the dream. It never really left her. There was her stomach, here her house, and her not-husband. But the shame would reappear, because she had had that wish, that desire to be free of this burden, the life that she had always hoped to create, which now seemed to be strangling her.

Just when she was starting to feel enormous and perpetually exhausted, when she still had three weeks left to go before her due date, and she was thinking that Tyler might have been right after all about how being “done with being pregnant” might be nice, she woke to a disconcerting dampness, saw that it was thin, milky white—realized what it

was. She yelled for Tyler, and he came running in, pulled on a t-shirt inside out, and drove them to the hospital.

She pulled herself out of the car, still feeling like she was dripping, embarrassed, knowing she shouldn't be thinking about that. When they got into the lobby and Tyler signed them in, someone rushed up with a wheelchair and rolled Melody off, without a word, to a pink room lined with photographs of newborn babies. After a few minutes Tyler sloped in, followed by a striking nurse with round cheekbones and her hair pulled back in pretty rows.

“Hi honey—your water break just now?”

“Just now, we just drove here. It took a while though.”

“Uhuh. Can you tell me, was it all at once, or little trickles?”

“It was like, whammo, all at once, I think. I was asleep. But it all came out.”

“You feel anything changing in there? Cramps? Pain?”

“No nothing really. I guess I feel a little lighter.”

“No contractions yet? Ok, we’ll check. Alright, lemme take a look in there.

Stirrups, please. I’m Sariya, by the way.”

“Melody.”

Melody slid her feet into the horrid stirrups and the nurse ducked between her legs. Melody felt the nurse push several fingers inside her, feeling whether she was ready to push this person out. In a flash everything felt still, and Melody became aware of her

breathing, the intimate but impersonal touch of the nurse, of being in this moment, this being a moment of her life that she was living right now, that was inextricably tied to every other moment that had come before it and would come after. This was one of those changing-tide moments, when the waters of your life rushed in and turned everything upside down, for better and worse. This was about to be one of those. Would she remember this moment later? Would it matter once her son had grown up and become a boy, then a man?

“My dear, you are not dilated at all,” said the nurse, emerging from her legs. “We’ll just check the heartbeat, see if we can’t afford to wait this guy out a few hours till he’s ready.”

She pulled out a fetal stethoscope, pushed it into Melody’s belly, held it there, listened, moved it, held it, listened. She kept moving it and she kept not saying anything, and the quiet had gotten louder in the room when the nurse said, “There he is.” She pushed the little cup in more firmly. “Wait.” She moved it an inch, looked at her watch. “I hear him, he’s just dancing a little slow. Let me get your doctor and I’ll be right back.” She brushed past Tyler and pulled the door closed behind her.

Melody was alone again, except Tyler was here. As she looked at him, standing in the middle of the room, like he didn’t know where to put himself, his face kept morphing into different versions of him. He was his boyhood self, the one she had met in high school, and shyly kissed; then the DJ she’d seen from across the room, tilted baseball cap

and tilted smile; then the Tyler who said “I’m listening” but crossed his arms; the Tyler who said, “Anything for you, honeypie.” He never stayed one version of himself long enough for her to finish a thought, just kept flipping, flipping.

The doctor pushed the door open, came right up to Melody’s bed and put his face close to hers. She felt like Sariya had said something to the doctor while she was out of the room, something Melody didn’t know about. He smelled like sulfur and breath mints. He didn’t ask her name.

“Your baby’s heartbeat is slower than we’d like it to be—this could mean the cord is caught around his neck, we’re not sure—but we’re doing an Emergency C-section.

Siraya, prep our young mother—I’ll meet you in the OR.”

The doctor turned away, and Sariya said, “Ok my dear. Because we have to move fast here, I’m going to give you a general anesthetic. You’ll fall asleep, and when you wake up, there’ll be a baby in your arms.” The nurse looked like she was trying very hard to smile. Melody turned to her, glassy eyed, and presented her arm for the needle.

A C-Section? General Anesthesia? This was the opposite of what she’d wanted. After going through this whole pregnancy, she wanted to at least have the experience that all mothers go through, knowing what it’s like to push a person out of you, to be the force behind that new life. She felt she was being robbed of some essential part of her motherhood. What if this was a sign? That something wasn’t right, that she wasn’t ready. That she wouldn’t be a responsible mother. That this had all been a mistake.

“No,” she said, aloud. No, she couldn’t think of that now. She would care for him no matter what. To hell with Tyler or her parents or anybody—she would take care of this baby on her own if she had to. Just the two of them. They were rolling down the hallway. The walls blurred like street lights in the rain.

“No what?” Tyler said, from somewhere very far away, beside her. They were in the new room now. This one was white, with masked people everywhere.

“No, Ty. Nothing, don’t worry. He’s going to be great, when we meet him.” She smiled and felt for his hand, but he was getting a mask on too, and looked like one of them.

## CHAPTER IV

### MODEL DAY

Walter got out of bed and pulled his pants on, right leg then left, and ate his frosted flakes at the kitchen table and walked the half mile, across ugly open parking lots and streets, to the Wawa where he worked, like every other day. He ran his card to check in and rang up sandwiches and gum and Coca-Colas, then ran his card to check out. When he got home it was 5:12. Joanie would be there in three minutes, like always, and they would get ready for their Thursday photo shoot. Joanie came over every day for a different afternoon activity, but Thursday was model day, the best day.

Walter made himself his snack of crackers and cheese squares and sat at the table to wait for her, but at 5:17 she was still not there. Joanie came over every day at 5:15 and they would have their activity: Mondays origami day, Tuesdays TV day, Wednesdays ping pong day, and Thursday was model day. It was 5:25 and Walter was still sitting at the table eating crackers and watching the clock when the door opened and his mother ran in. Her grey hair was everywhere and she had tears running down her face.

“Walter!” she shouted. “Walter, it’s your sister!” She fell towards him with her arms around him, and he stood quickly and folded his arms and she righted herself on the chair.

“It’s Joanie, Walter. She’s been hit by a car.” She put her hands over her face. “On her bicycle. She’s dead.”

Walter looked at his mother sobbing at the table, then looked at the clock. It was 5:35.

“The model will be here soon. I have to get ready,” he said.

His mother looked up from her hands. Her face curled into a mask of disgust.

“The model?” she said, like she was spitting the word out. “How could you think of that at a time like this?”

“It’s Thursday.”

“Even now, he doesn’t understand. He never blessed understands,” she said, like there was someone else in the room she was talking to. She pushed herself away from the table and kept it between them, as if he might attack her at any moment.

“I’ll be seeing you, Walter,” she said, and ran out of the house as quickly as she had come.

Walter finished the last of his crackers and cheese and put the dish in the sink. The model would be here soon; he had to get the lights and costumes ready.

The light in Walter and Joanie’s apartment was never very good, and when they started taking pictures together, they shut up the windows with cardboard and duct tape to keep out the light that came in from outside, and set up their own bright lights in the

corners of Walter's bedroom, which doubled as their studio. Since Walter didn't bother to take down the cardboard between shoots, the house was always dark.

Walter shuffled into his bedroom: its four white walls, his bed in the corner. Even though it never changed, it always looked different to him on shooting days: filled with possibilities, instead of the same plain room he'd slept in by himself since he moved out of his parents' house. He'd stayed in that apartment and kept learning about his cameras and lights, with Joanie teaching him everything she knew. He'd never needed anybody else's help anyway.

Walter opened his closet with its neat piles of clothing: two pairs of blue jeans, one pair of sweatpants (he was wearing the other), four plain white Hanes t-shirts, six pairs of white Hanes boxer briefs, and seven little white balls of socks. He adjusted the sweatpants an inch to the left so they didn't touch the jeans pile. Behind the piles of clothing hung a jumbled array of dresses, pants suits, vests, all manner of costume and outfit that his sister had designed. He imagined them filled with Joanie's body, the closet filled up with a hundred different Joanies, all saying to him what a lovely fabric this is, and here, wouldn't he like to feel it, and wouldn't the model look nice in it.

At first they just took pictures with simple cameras and no lights. Joanie needed help taking pictures of the dresses she was making, so she would put on the dresses, and he would take pictures, and then he got better, and she helped him pick out better

cameras, and it started to be what they did all the time. They would push the furniture to the side of the room and she would pose in her outfits against the white walls. Then they'd look at the pictures and pick the best ones, and slide them into the see-through pages of a black book that Joanie could carry around and show to people to show off her dresses, and when she did, she always made sure to say who took the pictures.

He remembered the day when Joanie first said they would invite a model over to take pictures with them. Joanie would put on the outfits she'd been sewing for her work, and Walter would practice taking pictures of her. But one day Joanie said, "I know you don't like lots of new things, Walt, but what if we tried something new? What if we had a girl come over to help us with our shoot?"

"A girl?"

"Yeah, what if we invited a girl over, and she could try on my outfits, and you could take pictures of her, instead of of me?"

Walter liked the idea of having a girl come over to the house. He'd never taken pictures of anyone other than Joanie.

"I don't know, Jo. I don't know if they'll like me."

"Well I love you. And other girls just haven't gotten a chance to know you."

The first shoot with a girl was scary, but Joanie told her everything and all Walter had to do was hold the camera and look for his picture. At first Joanie had the model

wear her dresses, bright red and blue silky fabrics that Joanie had designed. Then she told the model to wait a moment and came over to whisper in Walter's ear. She said, "Get ready, brother. Now don't worry, and just look for your shot." Then she made a sign to the model and she turned her back to them and her hand came around her back and she unzipped the dress and it fell down around her feet in a puddle of blue. It was the first time Walter had seen a naked woman in person. He looked at Joanie and she nodded, and he tucked his face behind the camera and took picture after picture as the girl twisted and opened and showed her body. He was out of breath when Joanie caught his attention, paid the model and showed her out; he couldn't believe an hour had gone by.

When Joanie took him over to their parents' house for Friday dinner after that first shoot, Walter told this parents about it. He took a bite of mashed potatoes and said, "Joanie invited a girl over to the house and she took her clothes off."

"What?" his father said, and smashed his fork down. "You got him a prostitute?"

"Not a prostitute, dad. A model," Joanie said calmly.

"What in Christ is the difference, if they're taking their clothes off?"

"He's a good photographer, dad. He's expanding his repertoire, and getting a chance to interact with some ladies, besides." Joanie always stuck up for him.

"A chance to fill his brain full of things he doesn't understand, more like. Why the hell would you parade girls over to your house for him to look at, just to confuse the boy?" his father screamed, still not eating. His mother was silent next to him.

Joanie held her fork up when she talked. “He’s not confused, dad. He likes girls, just like anybody else. But it’s not easy for him, so I’m just helping out a little.”

“You just baby him all the time. He’ll never learn to be normal if you do that.”

“Normal! Dad, he’s never going to be normal. He’s different. We don’t want him to be normal.”

“Speak for yourself.”

Walter sat silent and ate while they yelled at each other. They talked in front of him like he couldn’t hear them, or couldn’t understand. But he understood enough.

Walter returned his mind to the closet, and the sea of talking Joanies. He knew them all by heart. He reached out to a purple velvet costume dress she had sewn for *Anything Goes*, back when she was still in high school. The soft fabric crushed between his fingers. She sang in the chorus, and he saw her in every performance, stood up and clapped when it was time, even brought her flowers on the last night like he’d seen people do at plays before. Maybe that one would be good. He ran his hand down the line of costumes, touching each one. He stopped at a kind of woman’s tuxedo suit: satiny black, with a fitted vest, and its own bow-tie draped over the wire hanger. He tried to remember what Joanie had worn that for. Was it from last year, when—

A knock at the door, and then it was quiet. She was here. He pulled his robe around him and ran, barefoot, across the apartment. When he arrived at the door, he

stopped in front of it and took three full breaths, then unlocked it and opened up to the outside.

The light hurt his eyes and he stood blinking for a second, trying to focus on her. He knew she could see him already; he was afraid she was staring at him. He was wearing his old pink terry robe, one of his white Hanes t-shirts, and grey sweatpants, frayed at the bottoms. He wasn't wearing shoes, and his toes looked like the fingertips of a long-time smoker: yellowing and slightly curled in on themselves. He was lanky, but ashamed of his height, and stooped his shoulders so he always appeared to be looking down at something.

He could see again, and the model was there, with the bright light around her, staring at him and holding the strap of her purse with both hands.

"Hi there, Walter." She was a little rounder than Joanie, so sometimes it was hard for her to fit into the dresses, but Walter liked this model. She didn't look at him like his mother and father looked at him.

"Hello, Audrey." Even though it was so bright outside, it was sharp and cold. Walter pulled his robe tighter against his body.

He stepped out of the way so she could come in, then closed the door behind her, and they were in the dark together. She followed him through the carpeted living room, back to the bright white studio. The heat wasn't on yet, and a chill had followed them in from outside.

The model looked around the doorway, into the bedroom.

“Where’s your sister, Walter?”

“She’s not here.”

“That’s funny, I just talked to her this morning. She’ll be back soon, right?”

Walter hesitated. He didn’t like to lie, but he knew what he had to say to make her stay.

“She’ll be back soon. We can get started.”

“I don’t know Walter.” She was shaking her head.

“Here, try this one on,” he said, and handed her the same floor-length blue gown the model had been wearing on his and Joanie’s first shoot.

She accepted the dress from him and looked at it for a second, then back at him.

“Ok, Walter. We’ll get started. We can do dresses, but nothing’s coming off in front of the camera until she gets here. Clear?”

She looked him right in the eye, and he was stunned for a second. It was model day. They were going to take pictures. Everything would be ok.

“Clear,” he said, and then she turned from him and closed the bathroom door behind her.

They would do everything in the same order, like always. Dresses, then nudes. He adjusted the tripod’s feet, checked each of the three tightening knobs. The roll of paper

was ready on its frame against the wall, the white paper stretched out across the grey floor.

The model came out of the bathroom and stepped onto the paper. She put her hands in her hair and looked into the camera and did all the poses like she was supposed to, but Walter could feel her watching him through the lens, like she was trying to see something inside him. He tried to ignore it and focus on what he was doing.

Seeing the model through the lens, the rest of the world blocked out, Walter felt at ease, like everything was normal, and Joanie was standing there just to his left, telling the model: Chin down, Stick that elbow out a little more, Nice expression. He took a deep breath and tried to settle in and look for his picture. From behind the camera, he could see Joanie walking up to the girl, touching her arm, guiding her. But when he looked away from the camera, Joanie was gone and it was just him and the model in the cold room.

“Is she going to be here soon, Walter?” the model said, stepping off the paper. “It’s almost 6:30.”

“We do nudes at 6:30,” he agreed.

“That’s right, Walter. But we can’t do them without Joanie.”

“It’s almost 6:30.”

“That’s right. When is Joanie going to be here?”

“She’s...she’s not coming.”

“Walter, where is she? What’s going on here?” She was stepping away from him.

“We have to finish taking pictures.” He slammed his hand against the wall, then pulled it back and cradled it against his chest.

“Not like this, we don’t. You better pay me for my time and let me go. I’m gonna call Joanie and let her know about this.” She picked up her purse off the bed and backed up, towards the bathroom, where the rest of her things were.

“No, you can’t leave.” He moved towards her, the paper crinkling under his feet. “We have to take pictures!” He was repeating it now, over and over. “We have to take pictures!” She was in the corner of the room, with the bathroom door behind her. She opened it and tried to close it behind her, but he slid in after her and closed the door. Her skin was sharp in the bathroom light, against the white of the tub. She was screaming now, but he had to get her clothes off so he could take the pictures.

“Get off of me, you’re out of your fucking mind!”

He was trying to hold her down but she was stronger than she looked. She got her foot under him and kicked, and he fell backwards and hit his head on the toilet. He grabbed for her as he fell and got hold of the strap of the dress, and she landed on top of him, the dress spread out over both their legs. He knew where the zipper was, and he could just reach it. She was clawing at him and trying to stand up, but he had the zipper halfway down her back and he could see the tops of her breasts coming out of the dress. Her face changed, and she pulled back and then her fist hit him between the eyes and

everything was white and searing. He could feel her pick herself up off of him, pull the money out of his bathrobe pocket.

“She’ll be back soon,” he said, exhausted, still reaching for her. “We have to take pictures.”

The dress swept over his legs as she walked past him, and he heard her bare feet on the tile, then on the carpet, and then he heard the door slammed. His body was still against the cold floor, the camera heavy on his chest.