To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Alexandra Staunton Zinke entitled "Love and Privacy: Three Stories." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English.

Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Michael Knight

Allen Wier

Robert Stillman

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges,
Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

Love and Privacy: Three Stories

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Alexandra Staunton Zinke

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I thank Otis for the chance to know him. I thank Otis for joy. I thank Otis for our new life and love in all respects.

Abstract

This thesis is compiled of stories written and revised while the author was a Master's candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Accompanying these stories is a brief introduction in which the author considers elements of craft in fiction.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....1

STORIES:
Before All the Men Have Landed.....8
Love and Privacy.....32
Teaching Men.....66

Vita.....101

Alexandra Staunton Zinke
UT Thesis
July 2008

Introduction

When I think about communicating anything public about my writing, as I am required to do here, I can't help but feel pressed to answer the question, What do I care about? My heart rate increases at the prospect of answering this question. I would like very much to be able to meaningfully articulate the essences of what I care about in life and relate these cares to art. I would like to relay in a personally integrated way what I think fiction has to offer and what I would hope my fiction in particular might have to offer. In doing this, I'd love to manage not sounding generic.

What strikes me at this point, as I read over the stories I've included here, is how very much of a developing writer I am. Being a "developing writer" is of course just a handy phrase to use, one meant to say "I'm still going to improve," "I have yet to realize my potential,"—something self-soothing like that. And maybe it's a ridiculous notion to think that I might ever feel more like a Writer (no qualifier necessary) and not so clearly held in a stage of development. Perhaps I should hope to always feel that I am developing. I imagine it's only a fleeting sensation to ever feel one has arrived at a final point in regards to any life project. Regardless, I hold strongly and clearly onto a sense of myself as "developing" and not just for the sake of self-soothing or as some form of self-degradation. And not just because I think all writers are, in some positive sense, invariably developing. I see myself as a developing writer just now specifically in relation to the stories in this manuscript. What is developing in me, I realize, is

not just a matter of writer's craft (this is coming along too), but the self-discovery of how I might covertly and with nuance answer those larger questions: What is it that I care about? What is it that my art might offer?

Maybe I am wrong in this, but I would argue that all art, all writing, speaks to the needs of the author. Then, as a corollary, the degree to which a work of art has universal value depends in large part on the degree to which the author's needs resonate with others' needs. I argue this perhaps because it seems that this is what I am always discovering after I draft and re-draft a story: my own needs. I can make this less abstract by talking about my story, "Love and Privacy," in particular. While the bares bones plot of the story follows a general trajectory that I had conceived prior to writing—by bare bones, I mean simply this: husband secretly uses pornography and gets caught—the way in which each of the characters developed was entirely a surprise to me. I thought Joan, the wife, would be upset and maddened, but she isn't; these emotions are manifest in the less mature and highly-insecure Cass. I didn't know how conflicted Jeff would feel and that a sense of loving his daughter would be regularly present in him. I didn't know that Maribel could have a resilience in her innocence. I had conceived a much colder story, one in which the characters were less complex and more susceptible to long-standing alienation. But in writing, I discovered that I needed something else, another sense of the world at least for now. That "Love and Privacy" resolves with indication that Joan and Jeff may be able to communicate with each other more openly than they have been could perhaps relate to a vision of things as I'd like them to be, just now in my life, as I've drafted this story while pregnant, expecting to grow a family of my own.

I might think that mentioning my own pregnancy or entertaining too much speculation on an author's needs indulgent, except for that I do think what a work offers the author is likely to

correspond to what it may offer others. And, I think regarding oneself as a fully authentic, feelingful person with needs and longings and phases of life, is inherently part of what it means to engage in the creation of art. This does not mean that an author necessarily feels like a worthwhile human being at all moments, but that the act of creating is itself a claim of worthiness.

Part of what I am saying here is inspired by the way in which Rob Stillman, a professor at the University of Tennesseee and someone I asked to serve on my thesis committee, chooses to explore Shakespeare with his students. When comparing earlier works and later works, comedies and tragedies and tragicomedies, let's *say Much Ado about Nothing* and *King Lear* and *The Tempest,* Dr. Stillman speculates on where Shakespeare might have been in his life and what Shakespeare's psychological and emotional needs might have been during the writing of each play. Such speculations are one way to account for the range of spirit and tone in Shakespeare's work. With my own work, I hope to discover some personal sense behind the patterns and range of spirit and tone and subject matter. In this way, I might be assured that I've manifested something authentic and thus worthy.

When an editor read, "Before All the Men Have Landed," she praised a few of the scenes and some of the language, but said, "There's no heart to this story. You've written-in so much ugliness." What one editor says is not the be all, end all of criticism on a story, but I mention this comment here because it's one that reflects how I can feel too. I am surprised in this way by my own work and I can't help but question myself, wondering how things go awry. Certainly a great many stories deal with subject matter that is ugly—Dorothy Allison's work comes immediately to mind—and yet they have heart.

I suspect what's playing out is a fair amount of unprocessed psychology, which is appropriate to a degree, perhaps good fuel for a first draft, but what I'm interested in looking at here is how, as ridiculous as it might sound, craft might play a part in whether or not a story is read as having heart. I'm resistant to doing this in part because I'd like to think any manifestation of heart—and I don't know that anything is more important—no matter what the medium, is strictly a matter of genuine organics. And before I move on to discussing this construct of craft, I'll say, yes, having heart manifest on the page may all be a matter of heart clarity (whatever that is) on the author's part. In which case, (as it should be regardless), I will try to do the personal work I need to do. But if I were to assume that I inherently have heart (not capable of measurement) and simply want to learn how to better translate heart onto the page, I might approach this, like any other aspect of fiction, as a matter of craft. I look for example at a work by Tobias Wolff; he is often called a moral writer. I don't know what better qualifies him as such than that his work is full of heart. In what follows, I excerpt the first and last paragraphs of one of my favorite stories, "Firelight":

> My mother swore we'd never live in a boardinghouse again, but circumstances did not allow her to keep this promise. She decided to change cities; we had to sleep somewhere. This boardinghouse was worse than the last, unfriendly, funereal, heavy with the smells that disheartened people allow themselves to cultivate. On the floor below ours a retired merchant seaman was coughing his lungs out. He was a friendly old guy, always ready with a compliment for my mother as we climbed past the dim room where he sat smoking on the edge of his bed. During the day we felt sorry for him, but at night, as we lay in wait for the next racking seizure, feeling the silence swell with it, we hated him. I did anyway.

The narrator here is not too obviously likable. After all, he does not love his neighbor, he hates his neighbor. And we have a dreary world, full of disheartened, noisome people. The outlook is not good. Yet, right off we feel the story has heart. Why? I probably can't do justice

to all that Wolff manages in any single paragraph, but one thing I can clearly learn from is the range of complexity he gives to all his characters, to any human being, even those only mentioned for a moment. On the one hand, Wolff makes a spectacle of the awful hygiene poor people in a boardinghouse may have, but he requalifies the attribution of smelliness to poverty with the more emotionally meaningful classifier, "disheartened." Then, the retired seaman—in no way essential to the plot of the story—gets to be friendly and goodhearted along with being sick and hated. We learn that he smokes; thus, while we are inclined to see him as a victim of poverty and ill health, we must also accept that he contributes to his own illness, to that cough that keeps our protagonist awake at night. Finally, we can consider the emotional range of our protagonist, a boy who can feel for someone by day and hate them at night.

We see Wolff working with emotional complexity again in the final paragraph:

> My wife comes in and praises the fire, knowing the pride it gives me. She lies on the couch with her book but doesn't read it. I don't read mine, either. I watch the fire, watch the changing light on the faces of my family. I try to feel at home, and I do, almost entirely. This is the moment I dream of when I am far away; this is my dream home. But in the very heart of it I catch myself bracing a little, as if in fear of being tricked. As if to really believe in it will somehow make it vanish, like a voice waking me from sleep.

In this paragraph, we deal with only a single character's emotions and yet the complexity runs deep. On the one hand, the protagonist, now an adult, feels such secure pride that even his wife might attest to this emotion in him. And yet, we learn that what he feels pride over is also something he has trouble believing in, or accepting as real. Thus the pride is at once surely manifest and jeopardized. The same complexity exists around his other emotion, feeling "at home," or safe. He holds both safety and fear at once. The concrete reality of family and place is threatened by his anxious psychology such that he imagines these concretes might vanish.

What I am arguing, to myself really, through these examples is that heart, what makes me feel and feel richly in reading Wolff, has at least in part to do with his craft expertise. The workshop rhetoric that applies here is simple: create complex characters. Wolff takes this on to a degree beyond what I may have thought possible. And, of course, an ability to see and experience people complexly, ourselves included, does have to do with heart. Nice the way what's good in art and life generally correspond. Finally, I think it is this correspondence that makes artistic creation a fulfilling engagement.

Perhaps most relevant to note is that my care for a story can change. Usually, if I love a story, novel, poem, art piece, my feelings of appreciation are constant. But if I don't connect with a story, say, one day or year, I might very well at another point in my life.

Along with this, I'll say that these stories as I've submitted them will change. I am very much a developing writer, still figuring out how to work with myself. My mentors at the University of Tennessee have been relentlessly dedicated, kind and encouraging. I owe them true thanks. Thank you.

Alexandra Staunton Zinke
UT Thesis Submission

Before All the Men Have Landed

It's midsummer and I'm lying alone in my father's bed. I can't sleep because coming at me through the bedroom door is the sound of my father in the other room. He's having sex on the sofa with a prostitute named Suki.

The bed is a modern monstrosity: a black, straight-beamed version of the federalist four-poster upon which I was conceived. My father designed it himself. There are red bulbed spotlights set in the plank above me: mechanical eyes aimed at my toes. The sex noise isn't loud, just soft, amorphous sounds from time to time—a deflating breath, swipe of sticky flesh, the thump of a knee or elbow against the floor.

This bed: this father. He was a banker. That's gone. Embezzlement.

The bed is black. The blinds are black. The carpet is black. The walls are white.

Mom's off in a land of breakdown and diagnosis. I remember the night it happened. She wore a turquoise dress, brushed her hair as big as a pharaoh's. I smelled Aquanet in the elevator and in the cab ride to Geiger's, a German restaurant uptown. All was hush when they seated us

and hush through ordering. The waiter left and my father said, “Please, Miriam, everything’s going to be fine.” But everything was not fine. Forks scraped against knives, sauerbraten tasted sour, and suddenly: “Bastard! Bastard! You son of a bitch, bastard!” pushing back from the table. “Do you want to see?” She turned on her heels, ran hands down her backside, turned again. She cackled and popped buttons, flipped out a nipple, laughed as she looked at it. She laughed again at the other one. My father rose and my mother sank, her legs splaying crookedly on the parquet of the restaurant floor. A waiter, in shiny-toed shoes, knelt down. More waiters, more shoes. She said, “Bastard, you forever bastard.” Snakes in the head. Done. Gone. An alien.

Not him. He's a full-on re-creation, in the other room working late. *Fifth Ave Escorts*—he owns it.

She: Suki: an import, prostituted. No tongue for America, hummed over from Japan. Hmmm-hmmmmers are the women who've replaced my mom. For the most part they don’t speak English and my father knows nothing of their native tongue. Listening to his phone calls, I’ve heard dozens of names. Most sound Asian, and I can’t be more specific.

The bed is big. Painted High-Gloss Super-Black. I open the sideboard on my right and find a four-bottle wine rack that rotates on a swivel. Hanging in the center, a corkscrew clinks the wine.

Compartments, cubbyholes, knobs and dials. With the push of a button, my father can re-angle the mattress. He can answer the cordless with a woman's knees at his shoulders. He can switch the cable. He can watch football and fuck. He can blast Beethoven from speakers in every corner and know he's the master of orgasmic symphonies. Or, he can make the whole

thing vibrate, so that when he glances at the sliding mirror doors on the left, in the dim light, he sees the dun flesh of her buttocks jiggling.

I'm in his bed for the night because I won the last game of Hearts. Games are the way we negotiate each other and it's supposed to be a big prize for me to be in his big bed, but no fun as I lie here wondering who he is and who I must be now that he is not who he was. He is proud of his stereo. It has woofers and sub-woofers.

The squeak of a spring: they're unfolding the sofa, staging for more. The air conditioner beside me is broken: what comes out is the temperature of breath and a sound like metallic rain. A bead of sweat trickles across my left temple. The bed has eyes and power. This is when I begin to imagine being fucked by a robot.

I am a sixteen-year-old girl: slight, new to myself; if I have hopes they are hopes of love and grace. The robot fits over me like a clamp. Its body is cold, jabby. The corkscrew twists, entering in. Mechanical cups—sockets from the canopy—extend, scoop, pin my arms. What I am most thankful for is its coldness. This is what I concentrate on. The robot has four eyes; two are winking. My breasts are wine glasses with broken off stems.

I work and work, feel myself about to verge, arch my back. My head twists up on the pillow all the way. It's like when I was a girl tipping back on swings to see the sky inverted, the buildings upside down, the person pushing me with big legs, a pea head, chin and eyebrows joggled. Back then, playground sand close below my forehead brought the rasp of my hair streaking through it. Here, now: the plank of the bed like a cut-out piece of sky, flat and teetering, hung by a crane.

My own sensation readies, but instead of myself, I hear the climax of them: her feigned piquing, a universal murmur; his sure thing, a smothered yell, something held between clenched teeth. Three times, I hear pothole-scraping cars on 3rd Avenue.

The terrace doors slides. The motion detector lights click on. I part the blinds, see my father looking up at the sky, a drink melting in his hand. His terrace is laid out on the roof of the lobby which stretches between the building's towers. My Dad is the only tenant with a terrace. He's fenced off an area, glued down astroturf, stationed a grill. He's hung gargoyles, installed a constant-stream water fountain, built an arbor of oak. He's filled planters and positioned lawn chairs, trained vines to lattice with garbage ties. Wrought iron stakes are cemented at the posts of the arbor, ornamental spears pointing at the sky. They're meant to be medieval, in a new-agey sort of way. My father stares upwards, perhaps hoping for the city's heat to find a hole in the sky, like a kettle going off. At the top of one tower, there is a swimming pool and a weight room. The other has offices for private practice: accounting, acupuncture, couples counseling. In New York, people take elevators to the sky to count money, heal themselves, repair marriages.

He comes back inside; the terrace lights go out. I hear the bathroom door across the hall. In a moment, his flush. The bathroom door twinges back. He's turning the knob to this room. I shut my eyes, stop my breath. As it opens, the reedy sound of the door pressing its arc over the carpet. My father stands looking at me, an old habit of checking on his daughter. Under the covers, I feel myself praying for love. He draws the door closed, shuffles away and I wait to hear the creaking wires of the foldout. My father's face, I believe, is sad when he thinks no one sees.

Tomorrow an anonymous man will commit suicide. He'll come crashing onto my father's terrace, beheading himself. I do not know this now, though. It is not time for me to know that men everywhere do not make sense; men everywhere come crashing down.

~

Hot morning, Suki sits on the Black Box of the Bed. Her shirt is cheap satin green, cropped. It hangs loosely above the waist of her red jean shorts. Squinting, I see the wrinkles of her belly, folds of burlap. She lays her palm on my cheek and I can't help but see further under her shirt: coconut breasts, sweat pearling. She moves her hand to my forehead, strokes my hair. Waking me this way is something my mother used to do.

Suki's ring snags my hair. When she stands, a beam of low morning sunlight angles through her thighs. Dust swirls in its light. Household dust is 90% dead skin according to my science teacher—the build-up of everyday human debris. Suki pulls the strand of my hair from her ring, lets it fall from the pinch of her long-nailed fingertips. I watch as it rides upward currents through dandruff, dancing against gravity.

A treble chorus of household phones buzz and ring. Suki opens the cabinet of the bed and withdraws a cordless. "Hello who is it?" she says, almost perfectly, only her rhythm is jammed: *hellowhoisit?* Inexplicably, she says, "Thank you help me," and holds out the phone. She signals me with her other hand. It's not the typical spread of thumb and pinky to mean I have a phone call, but one finger pointed at her ear turning in circles.

This is the first time I've been alone with Suki. Our eyes meet, lock, engage a contract of war. Her eyes are thick-lidded and close together; her eyebrows flare like stretching worms. There are craters of acne under her make-up, rising like brail around her plump cheekbones. Her

hair is pulled tight: red, silver and blue doodads orbit a bun. She leans over me with the phone and her puffy body seems inflated, potentially pop-able.

It's Frank, my boss. First, he wants to know who answered the phone. "That," I say, "was my father's maid."

"Maid?" he says. He wants me in to cover a shift.

I hand the phone back to Suki. Suddenly it feels uncomfortably like she's at my service. I should have put the phone away myself. She clunks the phone back in its cradle, closes the lid of the cubby and sits. She's waiting again.

I roll my head back into the pillow. She puffs when she breathes. The flying hair is a worm. My Dad chose black on black on black. I don't know why the air conditioner hums without working. I don't know why New York City buses outside my window have begun to snort and wheeze and kneel, like dying metal dragons, traveling in gluts, collapsing, coming alive with token-gulps. They transport meaningless people to meaningless places, over the grid, North or South, across on 42nd. I don't know why the people keep getting picked up. I don't know why this woman put her hand on my head. I don't know why she's here. And why she can't speak. I want Suki to speak. I want Suki to tell me what traveling across an ocean ever promised.

You'd think she could hmm-hmmmm me the information; hmmm-hmmmm me the secrets of international escorting. Hmmm-hmmmm me the story of herself or of my father.

~

He pads in over the carpet, yanks the belt of a gold paisley smoking jacket. He's not fat, but wide. He slips his hands in the pockets, silk on corduroy. "Goldilocks up?" He pecks my

forehead, wet puckered lips. I feel the prickles of his red goatee. He trolleys Suki to the door with a hand on her back. "Time to rise and shine," he says and claps. "Let's go, up and out."

He twists the blinds. The sun slices in, stripes the black bed like a grill. My white body flames. I roll off the far side and prance my knees to help my shorts slip down my thighs.

"You like Suki?" he asks.

I'm wearing a loose, white T-shirt and I cross my arms. "What happened to Lovella?"

"You liked her? I didn't like her." His hands shrug the air. It like he's puzzled that a woman—a remarkable-looking woman—managed not to pan out in all the ways he'd wanted. "But you see—Japanese women have the best features."

I flounce the sheet. I've never made a black-sheeted bed before. It's like draping a coffin for two. "I liked Lovella," I say, though this surprises me. I met her only twice but I remember her for a reason. The second night, after grilled fish on the terrace, she took me aside. She told me my father was evil. She said it quietly and left out the verb. "Your father evil."

When I puff the sheet again, my father grabs it, flips the fabric over my face, spools it around my body. It's the ambush and mummify thing he did when I was a kid. "Got you, kiddo," he says.

"Dad, I'm not in the mood." The sheet puckers against my nose as I speak. I smell my own odor. It's a black sheet and I worry he can see white stains.

"Oh, you didn't like that?" Dad says, unspooling me. "Now something must be wrong. What's wrong?"

I tell him it's Frank. "I have a feeling he's had it with me."

Now he does the thing I haven't seen him do for awhile—chews his cheek before speaking. "Why would Frank have had it with you?"

I stuff the sheet into a ball. "I have too much fun."

His voice lightens: "But fun is good."

"Not everyone thinks so, Dad."

"Frank's not up for fun, huh?"

"Frank just wants the store to make enough money to send his nephew to college."

"Sounds like a good man You, *young lady,* ought to take employment seriously."

I can't help but feel it's a bit much coming from him. "Right," I say. I sit on the bed and cross my legs. Between them, I feel last night's robot leaking oil.

~

After my shower, wrapped in a towel, I open the bathroom door. I want to nip across the hall to my clothes, but can't. Suki is waiting, cosmetic bags at her feet and my father behind her. She strokes a loch of my hair, twists and squeezes it. Water dribbles to the floor. I jerk my head back. My father reaches a hand to my shoulder, "Kiddo, let her do your hair," he says. "That'll make her happy."

He fetches a bar stool from the living room while Suki herds me back into the bathroom. She empties a bag into the sink: mascara and rouge spin circles around hairbrushes and bobby pins. She sets the stool in front of the mirror and plops me onto it—I've lost resistance. She wipes bird wings through fog on the glass. I can feel my father standing bolt straight in the doorway. He's a fetishist for posture and I don't like sitting where he sees me in profile. "I can hardly imagine what's in store for my daughter," he says. Like she understands, Suki trills and slaps his chest. My father raises his hands, says, "I get it, you girls want to be alone."

I see myself between cursive streaks in the mirror. "No I don't," I say, but my father's already slipped out.

Suki lays a towel across my shoulders. Behind me, above the toilet, is Marlene Dietrich in a shadowy headshot. Her long eyebrows dip like my collarbones. My father must look at her when he pees.

Suki swivels from one side of me to the other, swiping with a large-toothed comb. Her heels squeak against the tiles. She zooms out an enormous hairdryer, its nozzle shaped like a loudspeaker. My head feels dangerously center stage. For nearly ten minutes, electric wind blasts my ears. When the dryer shuts off, the squeaking resumes. Suki pulls spikes from the sink, heats a straightening iron.

In the end, she's made my hair just like hers: pulled so tightly it stitches the skin at my temples and my eyes thin out. On top of my head is a dense bun porcupined with glittery sticks. The only difference is my hair is blond and hers is black. She's mimicked the peacock coloring of her eye shadow on my eyelids, rubbed clown disks of rouge on both of us. Suki brings us cheek to cheek in front of the mirror. Over our heads, the decorated buns look like mini-firecrackers. Behind us Marlene is black and white, sultry and sedate: she sang to raise the spirits of men. I feel obligated to smile. My smile comes out more like a wince. Suki doesn't smile. With a placid face and darting eyes, she inspects: her, me, her, me.

Suki pulls me by the elbow, drags me down the short hall to the living room. My bare feet slap behind her heels. My father's slung like an ancient Greek on the couch, one knee up, one leg straight; he pours nutmix into his mouth. My towel has slipped from my backside and dangles narrowly between the pin of my underarms. I flip it around my right hip; this causes my left hip to come exposed.

My father looks across his game of Solitaire. "Ahh! Twin beauties!" he says. "The transformation has begun!"

~

The glass of the storefront glows green and orange from the neon sign. Frank's behind the counter. I'm late and he's had to frontline it. Frank hates when his workers are late, hates being an owner doing the menial work. His monobrow is a strict line. The door jingles reindeer bells. It's cool inside. I smell Sysco cleaner and butterscotch. I move through the line velcroing my visor around my bun. Dinah starts laughing. She's goggling my hair. "Who *are* you?" she says.

I flip the counter to let myself in. "Sorry I'm late, Frank."

"I'm ignoring the joke of your appearance," he says.

I squirt my hands with a foamy green antisceptic. Hygienic protocol of the Yummy-Licks! franchise mandates a double-squirt of antisceptic twice per shift; Frank prefers we do it every thirty minutes.

Most of our customers come from the hospital across the street. We get lab-coats, marine scrubs, sometimes patients themselves wheeled out pre-dialysis. One yogurt, large with two toppings, costs the amount of my hourly wage, while vagina doctors, heart doctors, colon doctors, cosmetic surgeons—all the doctors get 10% off with a Yummy-Licks! punch card.

Sometimes I wish for equanimity, but I'd settle for beauty. Yummy-Licks falls short here again. Dominating our plate-glass view is the massive ugliness of the hospital: architecturally nothing more than a chunky conglomerate of real-sized Lego blocks, white shiny brick with staggered dashes of orange and black. Alarms blare out from the ambulance garage as often as I reach for the foamy green. Still, I'm glad the hospital is there. I believe in a healthport for earthlings.

In come our most dreaded customers: an anorexic threesome of soon-to-be-wives, at the end of their speedwalk. Flawlessly made-up, these women exude clonability: flesh for one divvied by three. They make a spectacle of extreme psychology, self-control gone out of control. When dropping change into my hand, they do it without touching skin.

A squad of jumpsuited EMTs hollers goodbye to Dinah and me. Frank's gone to the back. Here's our chance.

The woman in a red bodysuit wants cookie crumb topping on a Saccharin Super Cone. Her nose is long like an exclamation point. Under the quivering fluorescent light, I see she has tattoo-ed eyebrows, jagged lines like whips of lightening or the computerized-graph of a convulsive heart. The standard method is to dip and roll. Not what I do. I lick my palm, dig my hand in the crumbs, scoop a fistful and smash it on the side of her cone. Dinah takes a crumpled-up napkin off the counter, unfolds it—there's gum inside—wraps the base of the other woman's cone. We hold out the cones and I say, "One hundred percent sugarless!" Under my breath I add, "like you."

Our hatred for them, Dinah and mine, is unreasonable, callous, shameful even, but necessary as a vent. Besides, robots hate pretty clones.

The women are not pleased. They take the cones with French-tipped fingernails and dump them on the swing-top garbage lid. Dinah and I look at each other, make the face—Oh no! A mess on the garbage lid is the mess we hate the most. The third woman—the hinges of her jaw like broken matches under skin—demands the manager.

We double over laughing and lean against one another. What we've just done is nothing compared to what we've trained ourselves to do. Snorting white lines: coconut shavings up the nostrils through a straw. Spigot guzzling: lips around nozzles, whoever holds longest without

leaking wins. We check our tongues, feed the nozzle in deep, open our throats to let the cream flow. If our lips are wet, they freeze to the machine. It takes letting a layer of skin rip off to get them back. I usually lose. A leaker.

Dinah lifts a flap-board over one of the machines, hoots for Frank. He schleps out wiping his hands on a steamy rag. Worry lines criss-cross his forehead in the pattern of the waffle press.

The women corner him. Long nose exclaims, "They need to be fired!"

For two years, despite keeping our wages to a minimum, Frank's been half-concerned with treating Dinah and me right. He once said we're like the children he never had. Now customers are telling him I'm perversely anti-social, perhaps a sociopath.

Frank points me to the back. I follow him into his closet-sized office where he leans against the wall and astonishes me with grief. Impossible as it is, he hugs a broom. He puts his palms against his eyes.

"Sorry, Frank," I say. Really I wonder what's wrong with him. He has tears in his eyes.

"This store is everything to me, you know."

I tell him, I know.

"I tried to take care of you," he says.

"I don't need to be taken care of—"

"That's just it, you're wrong. You don't know it, but you're wrong," Frank says. I'm not sure what he's talking about. He was a boss. He let me have Fridays off. "Why in the world would you act like that?"

I feel the tautness of my eyes. "I guess something came over me."

Suddenly Frank appears less forgiving. "That's right, Julia. Something's coming over you."

I try to say something, but Frank interrupts. He tells me to wait. Frank leaves and I eye the pictures on his desk: a bright color photo of his nephew on a tire swing; a sepia-toned picture of a family in formal, out-of-date clothing, luggage at their feet.

Frank comes back. He lifts my hands into his—moist like the hot towel and hairy on the backsides—and when he lets go there's a twenty-dollar bill in my hands. As kindly as he can, with affection and indirection, Frank fires me by saying "Life is about how you treat yourself and others."

~

Styrofoam noodles escape from a shipping truck, pour out on all the people. Garbage collectors, butchers, baby carriages, construction men—4:30 p.m. everyone's out. Cabbies swerve for passengers. I walk invisibly. Invisibility is achieved by walking fast, passing everyone and never making eye contact. At these temperatures, the wet dirty air helps everyone keep their distance. A jackhammer explodes pavement on Lexington making tar-trembling breakthroughs. I pretend I'm maneuvering a battlefield, a man at war. I avoid orange-marked detour ramps. Pedestrian tunnels are a trap. I walk off the curb, into the street. Cars, mostly yellow, try not to hit me. I assume they won't. The next block is full of scaffolding. Dangerous men walk on planks overhead. Three more blocks and the Styrofoam hasn't stopped. It's as if I'm the only one noticing we're being rained on by packing material.

Ben's place stinks of additives: bong hits, Chianti, and something else—cherry scented candles. They're everywhere: the grate-glassed windows, the arm of the couch, in serpentine patterns across the floor. They don't smell like real cherries, because real cherries barely smell, but like artificial color No. 5. Dale, Ben's friend—flat-headed, pimply—is reading Nietzsche on

the couch, an electric guitar between his knees. His fingers pluck. The amp begins to reverb. Ben shoves it with his heel.

"What's with alien girl?" Ben asks, nodding at my face and hair. He drops into a purple velvet chair. He grunts in Neanderthal, swings a glass to indicate he's on his way to getting drunk. "You're always beautiful, of course."

"Thank you, Ben." I tell them about Yummy-Licks.

"Is your Dad gonna be pissed?" Dale says. He lays down his book and his guitar, starts blowing into a balloon. He stretches it and starts blowing again.

"No, my father never gets angry."

"Maybe he'll want you to work for him," Ben says, angling his voice like what he's said might just sneak under the radar. He laughs again, this time cracking himself up pretty hard, bringing his knees to his chest. "You know—put you out."

I almost have to say something.

"Oh, I'm sorry, doll. Come here." He waves me over to his chair, then stands up and pulls me onto his lap. "You know I didn't mean that," he says. "What your father does is crazy." He laughs again. "Hot, but crazy."

"You think everything's funny," Dale says. The thing he's blown up isn't a balloon; it's a condom, a pink one. He ties it off and taps it in the air toward us. "Not everything's funny," he says. It floats to me. I tap it. Smelling nonoxynol-9 brings a sour taste to my mouth. Ben knocks it with his foot, back to Dale. When I lean forward, Ben runs his hand under my Yummy-Licks shirt and under my bra. "I'm too sweaty," I whisper. He rubs my nipple. "Whatever, sweat is sweat," he says. Ben taps a second round with his foot, slides his hand to

my other breast. Playing keep-it-up while I get turned on feels uncannily right, a triangle of repetition and deflection: Dale taps to me, I tap to Ben, Ben kicks to Dale.

The condom pops on a candle and Ben asks Dale if he'll take off.

"Whatever, uber-asshole," Dale says. But gets up and goes.

We move to the couch. I stand close, toe my sneakers off, slip down my shorts.

There used to be a sweetness in Ben, in us. When I lost my virginity, almost a year ago, we'd taken a camping trip and found a place called Sunset Rock. We cleared away rocks, made a pad of leaves and rolled out Ben's sleeping bag. The first to be naked, I felt nervous and shivery, but when Ben lay over me and pulled off his sweatshirt, the heat of his body made the cold autumn air curl away. There were honey-colored freckles on his shoulders, some the size of cereal flakes. It was late afternoon, in October, in the Catskills: the sun was low and strong and orange and as I encouraged Ben in entering me protean rays of sun shone around his head, stretched webs of gold through his hair making a coronation. I adored making love then. It's not like that now.

"Ben, do you think you'll ever evolve?" I ask. He rubs his thighs and gathers himself. I take off my shirt, toss it carefully between candles, remove the bra he's already undone. Climbing on top of him, I say, "Extinction may be imminent."

~

Once, I was loved by a robot for real. Life was true and beautiful. I was eight. It was Christmastime at the Tavern on the Green. The branches of the trees were ribbed with ice; my shoes were small in the snow of the park. Little lights, a thousand to a length, were wrapped in the shape of animals all around. My father held my mittened hand and snow was snow in a way

it's never been since. Three steps of mine for every one of his, we made our way into the restaurant. My mother floated in her red dress before us. She was beautiful to look at, narrow and velvety. I knew this even then. They sat across from each other with me in the middle. There were candles on the table. I fingered wax. My mother dazzled. And then, during dessert, my father tapped my shoulder. "Look behind you." I turned and there was a short, blue-headed robot shining into my eyes. His name was Simon. He was real and I forgot my profiterole. He asked my name with robotic charm and I believed him in the next moment when his recorded voice said, "I love you, Julia." His voice said "I love you," and my voice—because he'd recorded me—said, "Julia." But it all came from him and his red plastic cheeks swirled with light like the red whirl of a police car, whizzing blush. "Can I have a kiss, Julia?" I pressed my timid lips against his battery-warm cheeks. The lights came again and it was for sure my first crush and the first time I was beautiful. The first time I'd fallen in love with a mechanical heart.

~

In my father's lobby, people glimmer. Some women wear earrings, some carry silver walkmans. The doorman is dressed in a green suit, cap and cape. On his lapel is a cursive gold pin, the building's name is stamped in black. *Twin Towers.* It is not a tower for children.

The mirrors on the walls of the elevator are patterned with lacy green frosting; my face appears covered in Tahitian jungle moss. The long corridor walls are green: light green above the chair rail; dark green below it. The carpet is designed with wavy diamonds that alternate between the greens. My father's front door is painted dark, the same green as the doorman's suit downstairs.

I tap the knocker, hear Suki's shoes. She must be looking at me through the peephole. I don't know how I look through a peephole. Perhaps she sees me with my nose enlarged and

misshapen, looking like India on a map. "It's my Dad's daughter," I say. No answer and I repeat myself with the cadence of a question on the end: "It's my Dad's daughter?" Still, she doesn't open the door, slippers away.

I pound until my father slowly wedges the door open.

"She wouldn't let me in."

"No need to be angry. She's just careful who she lets in," he says.

"She saw me through the peephole."

"She can't reach the peephole."

Get a girlfriend who can reach the peephole, runs in my head. I squeeze past my father standing in the entryway, arms crossed. Behind him, on the wall, is a Man Ray poster of a woman in a bikini. She's emaciated, tall, bending in profile. Beads on strings hang from the nipple-centers of her bikini. They're like solid drops of milk. The knobs of her spine jut like the tabs of a cogwheel. She has the torquing power of a machine. That some women are made of such parts makes me feel as if I'm not a woman. Looking at her, I feel like I don't exist.

Suki's sitting unnaturally upright on the sofa—the L-shaped leather one. I slump myself on the far end. Suki scoots toward me. She rests one hand on my knee and her other under the small of my back. She presses me to sit forward. She guides me silently until my chest rises. "N-I-C-E girl" she says. "Nice girl." My father taps the deck of cards.

~

To shoot the moon, my father must win every heart and not forgo the Queen. If he loses one heart all the rest will count against him. Only desperate men choose to fill their lives with emblematic bullshit: fast cars, convertible beds, gambler games and valentines.

This is what my Dad says: "It's all in the hearts you win, kiddo."

You're right, Dad. You're enormously fucking right.

Suki dips out of her shoes, folds her legs fawnlike on the sofa. I move to the floor. Dad's high on a barstool. The coffee table is a red Formica triangle, glossy, modern. Two Lichtenstein imitations hang above the couch. They're pop culture American, Dad's attempt to be cool. He found a junk artist who knew the deal with Benday dots. One is a close-up of a woman in a diner. Her hair is orange; the booth she sits against is blue. Out the diner window a red cityscape horizon echoes the red of the woman's hot dotted cheeks. Yellow tears pop out of her eyes. The thought bubble reads: "Oh my God! I left my baby on the bus!"

If Dad wants to play Hearts, let him play Hearts. I ask why there are holes in the cards.

"Finished casino decks," he says.

I ask, "Are you a gambler now too, Dad?"

He throws the two, taps the table. "Lay down." A potted jungle fern stands behind him, its whorls creeping out. "Games are a pastime," he says. "When Pops came back from the war—growing up—we played every night."

Suki wins the first trick. She plays admirably, if meekly, like me. That she can play at all seems like an advanced miracle of international prostitution. I assume my Dad taught her—additional entertainment. Her trick is meaningless because no hearts come out. She gets the extra card, checks it, hums, leads diamonds. I follow.

Dad thumbs his choices. He throws a low-heart, lucky to be void in diamonds, wins the trick. Collecting the play, he says, "During the war, it was chess." He leads hearts now that hearts have been broken. Out comes his ace, taking my heart, Suki's heart. I bear the metaphor of the game while my father tells this story:

"Pops was stationed in Germany and his cousin was in the Philippines. They played chess by sending their moves in letters, one move at a time. It took months just to stagger the front pieces. Can you imagine? It had to have been the longest chess game in history. Pops spent days planning moves. Sometimes, he'd regret a move. He said he wished he could renege his castle, but the letter had already been sent. That's the way it was played—no talk or anything about what was going on, just their moves—until the army ended it. They thought it was secret code. That's government for you. Any mail with letters and numbers must be conspiracy. Pop's mail was confiscated. That was it. In the end, Lenny never came home. He died of fever in the Philippines. So the last game of chess Pops ever played was a game that was never finished. Mom encouraged him to play with me, but Pops never wanted to play again. He hated the war for that—ruining chess." My father re-fans his cards, then raises them and says, "So—the family game is cards."

In the meantime, he's played heart after heart. With the strength of his hand, he can play mindlessly—otherwise he wouldn't allow the distraction. He unfolds his legs, crosses them the other way. "Your grandfather fought the Bulge, you know." I nod; I don't want to admit I had no idea. I like him talking; it feels good his fatherhood has a history. "Pops was one of the lucky ones—made it home with nothing more than a funny-looking lip."

With the memories, my Dad looks sweet, perched on the high chair, peering at his cards, talking into them. He throws another heart.

"Shrapnel." He eats my last heart; Suki's throws off again. "I was four when he came home. I looked at the man standing in our kitchen—he looked totally unfamiliar and had a kooky bandage across his upper lip. For years I'd been kissing a photograph of him that hung in

the kitchen. Before bed, Mom would say, 'Give your Pop a kiss,' and I'd run to the photograph. So when he came home, she said, 'Give Pop a kiss,' and I ran to the photograph."

My Dad smiles. I look at my cards. "At first they laughed. Then Mom started to cry and Pops and I ran to hold her. I ran here to the photograph, then there." He points his finger from one corner of the room to another, as if following the sight of himself as a boy. "Of course, Pops ended up holding both of us and that was that—all of us hugging and crying because he'd come home."

My father excuses himself and steps off the barstool.

I've never seen my father cry. I imagine it now: behind closed doors, hunkered down by the toilet, wiping his eyes on a towel. The towels in the bathroom are black, monogrammed with the initials of his alias: VSL III.

Suki shows me the kitty card. It's the two of hearts. I don't know if she's understood any of my father's story, but with the card she will foil his plan to Shoot the Moon. It's a game of cards, after all; as my father says, there will be winners and losers.

When he comes back, my father drops something into my lap. "If Pops knew he had a grandkid, he'd want me to pass this on," he says. It's an army cap: greenish brown, made of smooth dry wool. Even held at a distance in my hands I can smell its age: mothballs, dust, maybe mould. My father stands over me which compels me to inspect it more. The inside of the cap is lined with satin, once white but now yellowish and stained, dirty-seeming; there's also a leather sweatband and tucked behind the leather on one side is a piece of army cotton sewn square. I pull this out and unfold it: at the center of the cloth is an embroidered emblem of an ax cutting into a rail on a red background and underneath, it reads, RAILSPLITTERS. "Mom cut that from the shoulder of his uniform," my Dad says.

I run my fingers over the tight weave of the insignia, across the letters. The fabric that holds them is worn soft.

"Let's have a look," my father says, his voice no longer caught. I prop the hat over the skewers in my bun and raise my chin. He smiles, shakes his head. "Looks pretty silly. Maybe I should take that back."

Then, with sudden gaiety, my Dad claps his hands and rubs them together. He reseats himself on the bar stool, announces there's been enough small talk. Tt's time to finish the game. "See, Suki knows not to talk," he says, winking. He doesn't know Suki can ruin his plan. He's over-confident. "Yes. Yes. I need to concentrate so I can impress my daughter by Shooting the Mooooooon." His voice crescendos. He knows better than to have gone for the Moon without the kitty. It's not like him. He's leads again, believing I have another heart.

~

We don't think of a body liquefied. It sounds—like an enormous water balloon thrown off the upper pool deck by rascal teenaged boys. We rush to the terrace door. The cards are in our hands.

The motion detector light is on. We press against the glass. The body lies on the ground over snapped trellis, red seeping out its neck into the astroturf. The head is above, pierced by a stake. Blood funnels down, wetness gleaming in the light. The spouting fountain sprinkles pink.

Suki is next to me, gripping my arm, and begins to scream. For this moment, I understand that people must turn to each other in desperation and there is no way to hate someone completely.

Within minutes, the place evolves into a state of emergency. Firemen. Police. Sirens. Red and blue swirl the street below. Someone at their window screams. Someone in the hall, in

the elevator, is screaming. Uniformed people move in and out. They wheel two gurneys. One for the body. One for the head. White canvases blooming red.

Eventually I'll learn the man jumped from a window at the top of the tower. I'll hear he was in marriage counseling and his wife wanted out.

And so he fell. Perhaps, he thought the heat of the summer could catch him, thick as it's been. Perhaps, he was swept by an illusion of birdliness as he stood at an open window contemplating his wife's words: "I. Am. Gone." Words like rain drops from the gutter. Or, it could have been a fierce crash through glass, bold as a Kamikaze. Surely, it was the act of a man marking himself *Unlovable.*

Eventually, the responsible therapist will descend from his office perch on the 34th floor, offer free counseling to me and my father. He'll acknowledge it can be disturbing to see a man decapitated. My father will say, "Your last client beheaded himself—now you offer to counsel me?"

~

A roll of white gauze lays unraveled, crisscrossing the floor. One of the paintings, the one of the mother who's left her baby on the bus, has fallen off the wall and onto the couch. My father picks it up. He laughs uneasily, speaks to the painted woman, "No chance of finding your babe tonight, my dear."

"How do you think the ambulance people knew where he landed?" I ask.

My father shakes his head, steps on the sofa. "I don't know. I guess they just figured."

"How about when they took Mom?"

My father slides the painting up and down, trying to catch the wire on a nail. "That was a different situation, Julia." He steps down, sits, tells me to sit. I tell him I don't want to sit. "Your mother didn't believe me, Julia," he says. "She believed the creditors."

Suki crosses the room. She paces back and forth, barefoot now—for some reason or for no reason.

"Your mother said she believed I was criminal—worse. She said I wasn't human."

Suki begins to talk. She talks a lot in fast, cranky Japanese. It's a squawk, and I feel guilty to be judging her and like it's my right. And, I don't know what to say to my father. I want to tell him he *is* a criminal, but he might think I'm talking about the law. I want to tell him I don't think my mother's entirely wrong. I hold my grandfather's cap over my face and breathe. It smells more clearly now: minty scalp; salty sweat; closeted time. Hiding my face in the cap, I say, "You made Mom lose her mind."

I lower the cap from my eyes, keeping it on my nose and cheeks and mouth. A spider web tugging the corner of his eye, the side of his lips—these twitches are the physical response my father has before he says, "Take that back." My father swipes the cap from my face. "You take that back now."

I don't respond, but Suki does. She sweeps across the room in a blur. She kneels at my feet. She wraps her arms around my legs and begins to moan. A barefooted Japanese woman is holding me and making sounds like an animal. I don't know what she wants. "Get up. Stand up," I say, pulling her arms. "Dad, do something." I kick my feet. I'm starting to scream.

My father pulls Suki off me, locks her in his arms. She wriggles and lifts her feet, manages to slide down. He pulls her back up. In a forced hug, he hold her still. "It's okay," he says with one hand clamped on her neck. She stops fighting. Her body shudders and she begins

cry. The ornaments in her hair quiver and shimmer as they catch the light. Over her shoulder, my father looks at me, says, "Everything's okay."

~

I run up the fire stairs. The walls and beams, stairs and banister are washed in red. 34 stories rise and turn, an upwards hell. At the top, the bar-alarm on the exit door fails to sound though it reads EMERGENCY.

And so it is silent; nothing heard. My thighs burn as I walk out on the roof. I bend to catch my breath, waiting to feel my heart slow. I hoist myself on the edge, a low brick wall ridged with ironwork. I crouch, then stand. The humid air feels supportive. Below me, the city unfolds an artificial galaxy: streetlights align in constellation, apartment lights turn out like dying stars. I look up and the real sky is starless.

I think of the dead man again, ready like a bird. I think of my mother in Bellevue looking out a window close to the river, wire meshed into glass caging her sight. I think of my grandfather. I don't know for sure if my paternal grandfather's dead or alive—I suppose he's dead. A war survivor, hero even, but I don't really know what that means. He played chess intercontinentally, blasted his lip, saw other men die. I want to send him love now, for no good reason. I want to say thank you for your life now, for no good reason. To commemorate I close my eyes and raise my arms, balance with my feet and knees together, feel some holiness in the spectacle of my hair.

I wish to be Airborne. To jump and release, have fabric spread above me for the catch. A true parachuter. I fall delicately to earth and land with angel's feet in a valley shaped by age. I lie still between all the war noises, the silence and the booming, between the knowledge of where I've come from and where I'd like to be. There would be patriots and foreigners fighting in the

cleavages of earth all around, but this would mean nothing to me. Nose to the ground, I smell dew on grass. I turn on my back and see the others making their way across the vault. Instead of stars, snow, sunbeams, rain, Styrofoam, trash or metal towers, I see people. People falling. There they are—the soul-clasped men of the U.S. 17th Airborne Division in 1945—falling with grace from metal bellies. Cold Colt side-arms, metal-toed clods, skeins of ammunition, the weight of their faraway children and schizophrenic wives—all this is gone. For a long and beautiful moment, less heavy. Clouds are circus cotton and the hanging bodies floating down from under them surely seem more like wind-up toys than harness-slung bachelors and fathers about to die. The chaos halted, the war discontinued—a tableau of unsung men—for this momentary span of time before all the men have landed.

My compatriots are coming down. It is beautiful. A dream. I am forgetting down to where they fall.

Alexandra Staunton Zinke
UT Thesis Submission

Love and Privacy

He'd built the house. Functional, but with a certain revealing thinness. Lying in bed, he could hear his daughter and her cousin talking in the room below, their conversation carrying up through the seams of the rough-cut pine floorboards. It was a dark enough night—slim moon—such that if Mirabel's light had still been on he would have been able to see it shining through cracks in the floor and through the one sizeable knothole, just to the side of his bed. The knothole wasn't surely visible, but he had a sense for where it was; if he stretched his arm, its course wood would be at his fingertips. In some tedious way, the one pesky knothole was as familiar to him, as regular a nightly presence, as his wife, Joan, who lay beside him now, facing away, the gentle wheeze of her breath reminding him of her age, the grayness of her hair.

Whereas Mirabel was a coy, inward girl, her voice murmurous and velvety, Cass' personality, voice and all, maintained itself as a loud, persistent honk. Hard not to think of taxicabs: she was a city girl, Jeff's brother's daughter. Though Cass' parents were still in the process of a divorce, her father was already living with another woman. And as Cass' mother,

Nell, had apparently announced to the world, this woman was barely a woman, only six years older than Cass.

Jeff hadn't caught what was making his daughter laugh. Cass implored, "Have you? Have you?" He waited to hear what the subject was. It must be boys, a boy, or sex. He pictured the two of them facing each other, each girl with one hand tucked under her ear, the other between bent knees; their bodies together formed something like heart. "Tell me," Cass insisted. "There's no point if you won't talk."

"Okay," Mirabel said. But whatever she said next came out smothered with laughter.

"Mirabel, this is serious."

"Okay." She paused and giggled. She stopped, giggled again, then cleared her throat. "Not a blowjob, fingering."

"Alright." Cass adopted her most tempered, bureaucratic tone. "Were you wet?"

Jeff's Mirabel was quiet again.

"Mirabel, were you wet?"

Mirabel let out a long "Noooo!" which was another way of saying "God no!" Somehow she'd arrived at claiming dryness as the desirable answer. Prescribed as this sort of young, desperate prudery was, Jeff felt proud of his daughter.

Cass proceeded: "So it did *nothing* for you?"

Mirabel defended: "It was totally weird and he only did it for, like, two seconds."

"Tell me what you mean by weird?"

"This is weird."

"Was he inside or outside?"

Jeff smiled at himself. It had occurred to him plenty that he could be turned on by Cass, partly for what she wore and how she wore it, small skirts and shorts over her bubbly body, but more so for her indelicate personality, the refreshing obnoxiousness of it. She brought life to this quiet, repressed household of his, of Joan's. Maybe once or twice he'd used something of Cass for a minute, played a snippet of her in his mind while touching himself, but he'd always moved on—he made sure of it. For one, he didn't want to be anything like his brother, that executive of wealth management schmuck.

Jeff smiled too because he loved his daughter. Sometimes this tenderness articulated itself to Jeff in ridiculously broad and good-natured wishes: *I want the world to be good to her; I want her to feel loved, deeply and fully; I want her to always be well.* Jeff himself couldn't help but shudder at the near meaninglessness of these sentiments as they came to him now.

"What do you mean 'inside or outside'?"

Jeff knew the fact that he was listening to them now would only add to Mirabel's perception of weird—but she would never know and it seemed oddly like his right as a father to be privy to her budding sexuality. Jeff liked the sense of seeing his daughter behind a screen, his daughter on the other side of knowledge.

"If you don't know what I'm talking about it's *hope*less," Cass said. "Do you want to end up like your mother."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Do you ever even touch yourself?"

Mirabel and Cass were both sixteen. Jeff couldn't help but imagine that Cass had perhaps done everything, that maybe she was the kind of girl who gave blowjobs to virginal boys in the bathroom, and that, in sure contrast, his daughter hadn't done anything, just suffered this

one inadequate feely. It seemed right that the two girls would occupy extremes. And still, Jeff wanted something for his daughter to fight back with; he wanted her to make a covetable badge of inexperience. Strangely, up in the bed beside his wife, whom he had not had sex with but a handful of times in the last year, we might as well say years, Jeff found himself rooting for his daughter to be a romantic, someone who might hold out for love in the most intimate sense. Jeff had this investment in Mirabel's purity and somehow it didn't strike him as incongruent with any way in which he lived, his own lusts and emotional incompetency.

"I don't masturbate with my fingers," Mirabel said

"What are you talking about?" Cass said.

"I grind."

Cass burst out with a laugh. "Oh my god! That is so—"

"Whatever," Mirabel said. Jeff could see his daughter now: turning into the mattress, hugging her pillow, dark hair falling around her face. If she could disappear she would. As he saw it, Mirabel could transport herself out the other side of moonlight. That sort of thing was the secret beauty of her quiet personality. Some man would really like to go with her there.

"No, seriously. I'm not trying to freak you out, but if you go that route, you really will end up screwed. Everyone should be wary of being like their parents. Your Dad's a leery horndog and your Mom has shut down."

"My dad's not a horndog and how would you know anything about what my Mom's like?"

"Mar, he *looks* at me. Believe me."

Jeff waited for Mirabel. What could Cass mean? He *looks* at her? Did she think he would do something to her, actually? It perplexed Jeff that Cass could be overblown and

childish and perceptive by small degree at the same time. He wasn't really a transgressor—that was Cass projecting her own father. In fact, the idea repulsed him. He didn't really want Cass or any young girl. Even his brother doing it half-legitimately—living with some twenty-two year old—disgusted him. That's one point of pride Jeff had. He knew he didn't really want any of that fantasy stuff.

But Cass was right about Joan. Joan never wanted sex. Sex to Joan was a chore. She'd once said, "Maybe Tantra, Jeff, if you have any idea what that is."

Jeff stared at the knothole's shadow, still waiting for Mirabel to saying something. She didn't. "Mir?" Cass said, "Do you believe me about your Dad?"

Jeff realized Mirabel wasn't going to answer. What could Mirabel think? And if she drew a curtain somewhere inside herself, where did that information go? Jeff visualized the curtain, a shroud of gauze, and a woman behind it walking away. He became startled by his own emptiness. Extraneous sounds seemed to amplify as Jeff swallowed against a sharpness in his throat. He could hear Molly as he had left her, head and paws hung from the wingback, huffing breezily through a canine nightmare. Wind in the tips of the maple branches tinkered at the window. Crickets screeched their electric surround sound, a sound which seemed to begin exactly ten paces in every direction from Jeff's ears. Hearing beyond possibility, the cows in the open field at the shallow of the valley stretched their necks to grass, munched, while Dolores and Daisy May, their two pet donkeys on the far side of the shed nuzzled each other, brayed, one scratching its bulky mandible across the other's backside. Jeff saw it all and his wife beside him, but he couldn't take part. What if there was something wrong with him, as Cass had so meanly asserted?

He searched through the dozen or so standard thoughts of personal insight that had somehow come to accompany him in life, looking for one to anchor him against this half-tender assault of emptiness. He arrived finally at an anchoring thought that felt pathetically familiar to him and it was this: he wanted to be better than his brother, to live more deeply, profoundly, meaningfully than Kirk.

Jeff's mind reeled through the history of their antagonism. Kirk was someone who'd gotten by since grade school flaunting himself as a soulless prick. It was still astounding to Jeff that anyone could be so cartoonishly unkind. Kirk had fucked girls and laughed about it. He'd beaten Jeff for not being cool. He'd stolen presents for their mother and told her she inspired him to be kind. He'd called their grandmother's rear-end atrocious, and this when she was treating them to ice cream at Jones Beach. The day he graduated college, Kirk said being richer than other people is what gives you power. This was offered as a gift of brotherly wisdom, whispered into Jeff's ear. It was the mentality behind this wisdom that guaranteed success for Kirk as he embarked on his career of pelf.

Well into his twenties, Jeff had wanted to beat his brother up, like his brother used to beat him, but he'd finally let this go—he was smaller, weaker and generally less vehement anyway—after falling in love with Joan. Instead, with her help, he decided he'd beat his brother by living a profoundly better life, one rich in depth and connection, loyalty to his new family and to different, meaningful, soul-enhancing ways of survival. Sure, Jeff had lost sight of his aspirations, just gotten by, his daily tolerance for disengagement and failed fulfillment rising steadily without much notice until one day—there's no knowing exactly when—all that wasn't there, between himself and Joan and otherwise was simply too much to note.

But lying here in the dark now, this thought of wanting to be better than his brother helped Jeff allay the disturbance of what Cass had suggested. He could relax his self-doubt now as he felt his ambitions focusing again to something good. And as he became calmly tired, there arrived the ridiculous sentiment that tomorrow was a new day. He fell asleep feeling that he had a good and strong love for Joan and Mirabel.

When Jeff came down the next morning, Joan and the girls were already up. Joan sat in the window box lotus-legged and namaste-armed on her meditation pillows. Mirabel strained almonds for nutmilk, part of the nothing-processed eating gig she and her mother had sustained for the last year. Cass sat on the couch with the phone. Jeff could tell it was her mother. Cass' voice, as she responded intermittently, sounded anomalously timorous: "I am happy—yes, you seem happy—I thought you looked really good, Mom—that's what I mean—I think it's better—I think it's for the best too—I feel totally fine—I am happy—he's the same—it doesn't bother me—he said he'd call—I don't know—I'm not sure—I don't know—fine—happy—very happy—I love you too—I will."

Every word Cass spoke was scripted and empty and yet Jeff could see the emotional investment on Cass' face. Her eyes lacked the alertness they usually had, pertness gone from her eyebrows. Gone too was that upwards and backwards inclination of Cass' posture, that alluring suspension of her shoulders and spine and tailbone which was both curved and erect like the backline of a seahorse. She was normally regal and buoyant, and then flouncy in spirit and never obsequious. Now instead she'd hunched and held her knees and in some high, caught voice clucked transparent assurances.

Cass lay down the phone and rose from the couch and Jeff smiled at her, trying to make it a kindly knowing, I'm-with-you-kiddo smile. She barely looked at him, but when she did, she bristled her eyebrows. She crossed the room with a melancholic sashay. She leaned and lay an arm across Joan's shoulder.

"Excuse me, Dad," Mirabel said, ushering him away from the sink, a cheesecloth dripping almond guts dribbled across his toes. Jeff looked down. Mirabel had sounded accusatory.

He remembered last night (somehow he'd managed to forget it) and wondered if Mirabel thought she'd caught him in a moment of leering. Absurd. Absurd. He felt sad for Cass; his staring was a matter of being impacted by her emotional readability. Inadequately hidden emotion is a draw, no matter who the person. Jeff thought this in the moment of his forced defense and it occurred to him that maybe that's why he'd not been more drawn to Joan these past few years. Joan had become a spiritually practiced master of emotional nonresonance.

"You're dripping, sweetheart," he said laying his arm on Mirabel's shoulder much like Cass lay her arm on Joan's. He was trying their approach.

"I know." She slid from under him back toward her brewing pot, dripping again.

Joan bowed to the windows before rising. She picked up the phone and resumed her lotus on the couch. Cass fell in beside her, slinking down with a *CosmoGirl* until her head was on Joan's thigh. She lifted her legs onto the back of the couch and then against the wall. She squirmed her bottom and crawled her bare feet around until they found a comfortable spot between the phone mount and a poster of a bindi-dotted mountain woman with her arms around a lamb. She tucked an arm between her thighs to keep her skirt from falling.

Jeff took his coffee mug, shooed Molly from the wingback across from Joan and Cass and sat. He paused over his cup, letting the swirl of steam between his hands entertain him as much as it might.

Joan didn't speak for awhile. He heard Cass turn a page and Mirabel give a mousy squeeze her manmade udder. It was a Saturday and there'd be no need for anyone to leave the house. Maybe he'd go fishing.

Finally embracing a need to respond, to interject her acquired wisdom, Joan spoke in placid clips. There was none of the young dependent fear that riddled Cass' responses to her mother. Jeff listened with somewhat of a gripe, as he did to NPR's *Marketplace* when it came on; that the sense of being involuntarily subjected to hatched up schlock. Nevermind Joan's wasn't money talk:

"Desire is painful—we imagine there's something to fear—it's all in place of feeling pain—we tend to imagine we're replaceable not realizing we leave ourselves—we look for distraction—it's hard to stay present—we have the drive to absent—remaining is hard—action becomes temptation leading away from presence—just sitting is a challenge—relaxing at the core is a challenge—relaxing the sides of the tongue—releasing the fantasy—unhitching language which controls the mind."

Cass' mother hadn't called a pre-recorded 1-900 wellness line; it was impossible for Jeff to conceive how Joan's rhetoric could be any part of an integrated conversation. He slurped his coffee and gagged a little. It was still too hot.

Hanging up the phone, Joan stroked the bangs across Cass' forehead. "Your mother's going to be fine and she loves you very much." Cass took her legs off the wall and fetus-curled herself into Joan. "It's very hard to stay well when we're hurting. Your mother isn't sure how to

feel loved right now. She's working to understand herself." Relatively speaking, this sounded revitalizingly normal to Jeff. When it came to her daughter and her niece and young people generally, Joan could adjust back to straight-talk. He couldn't stand that other stuff.

Mirabel brought two bowls over to the couch. "Scoot over," she said, causing Cass to sit up and her mother to shift over. Mirabel handed a bowl to Cass and shared a bowl with her mother. They began to eat, Mirabel taking big slurpy spoonfuls, Joan clearing her mouth mindfully before each bite. No one looked at Jeff. No one tried to tease him into tasting their homemade ultra-digestible, alive-enzyme gruel. He inflicted himself again with the acidic burn of burnt black coffee. It was an imported cash-crop product and he was unevolved in this house for drinking it

The three of them were quiet even after they'd finished eating.

"How was it?" Jeff said.

Mirabel gave a mischievous, knowing glance to her mother. "Detoxifyingly delicious," she said and wiped her chin. She leaned against Joan; Cass had already squirmed supine returning her head to Joan's lap. It seemed the three of them could sit there happily all day, Cass and Mirabel leeching nourishment from Joan. They didn't even need to talk. They seemed to communicate just by the warm entanglement of their bodies. And then as it continued, this intergenerational vibration of women touching for the sake of touching, leaning close for the sake of leaning close—ankles tucked, necks tilted, stomachs full—Jeff felt the affront. It appeared to him as some kind of a demonstration, this connected silence. He thought again about the accusation Cass had made. But he didn't want to construe things with paranoia. Certainly Mirabel wouldn't knowingly collude. She had a steadiness to her, a complexity in how

she understood people, as young as she was, which would keep her from seeing things in the stark ways that Cass did.

"You all look very sweet together," Jeff said. Mirabel snuggled in more tightly against her mother and closed her eyes.

"I know. Why don't we make carrot-noodle lasagna?" This was Joan trying to distract Cass out of her lull. "Cass, honey, you loved it last year. I can do it for supper."

Mirabel sprung from the couch, nearly dancing as she collected Cass' bowl and her own, bringing them to the counter. She swung the garden basket from a nail in the kitchen rafter, discovering in it a handful of shriveled lilies. "What are these doing in here?" she said. "Come on, Cass. What do you need, Mom?"

Joan stroked Cass' head again. "Go on. Go with Mirabel and get whatever you think will taste good. If you pull me some fennel I can pickle it."

Mirabel had to pull Cass from the couch. She kept hold of her wrist while Cass fidgeted her flipflops into place; Cass was quite demonstratively saturnine. Molly followed the girls out the dog flap.

"So, was Cass' mom going on again?" Jeff's coffee had cooled some finally and he took a gulp.

Joan rose, collected the dishes from the counter and lay them in the sink. "I don't know what you mean by 'going on.'"

"Well, babe, I guess I just mean was she talking all out of sorts again, *going on* about what Kirk's up to."

At times, like now doing the dishes, Joan stood almost too erect, as if there was something about which she wanted to appear irreproachable. She swiped the sponge around the

bowls, soaping them, and then rinsed each, front and back. She took up the spoons and washed those and placed them in the drying rack. She shut the water off and dried her hands on a dish towel. She turned to Jeff without expression as if she weren't actually seeing him. She looped the dish towel back on its hook, pressed her hands on the sink and gazed out the window. Jeff, sitting low in the chair, couldn't see what Joan saw. He imagined the girls' heads would be dropping out of sight as they made their way down the hill. Then there'd be just the chicken coop, empty and doorless and half-painted, a job he needed to finish. Maybe a bird would swoop across, disappear once landed on a branch. Then the ever-subtle sway of the branch would hold Joan's gaze because, like it is impossible not to look at a bird, Jeff thought, it is also impossible not to look at the movement of the branch which indicates where the bird has gone.

Thoughts like this on the nature of human behavior sometimes came to Jeff. They helped him feel like he possessed a special quality of character, inclined toward universal insight. Being profound, even privately so, helped Jeff feel worthwhile. Caught in himself, he forgot he'd asked Joan a question.

She moved to the door, arranging her gardening gloves in her hands. She pressed the screen door open slightly, then paused and looked not at Jeff, but forward through the screen. "Nell's obsessed with whether or not Kirk's girlfriend has hair on her pussy."

Stupidly, Jeff gagged. "What?"

"She's afraid he likes everything as pre-pubescent as possible."

Jeff felt amazed and so laughed again. Joan moved through the door. Jeff stood up quickly, as the screen knocked shut. He called after Joan. "That's what she's got stuck in her head?"

It was fully dark and the stars were up as Jeff smoked his last cigarette. Mirabel and Cass had left for the Falls in the afternoon and hadn't come back. He'd driven out on the old logging road at half past seven knowing they couldn't still be there, hoping he'd run into them on their way home. Joan had made the lasagna and the girls wouldn't have just blown that off, though Joan said she wasn't worried. Joan figured they'd met up with other kids, probably some boys. "That place is full of teens in the summer and Cass probably isn't too shy at meeting people. They're having fun, Jeff. It's good for them." But Jeff didn't trust Cass. Her judgment was screwed up and premature and she pressured Mirabel.

He was right; the Falls were deserted. There was a crushed beer can and an orange bikini top on the crest of the rocks. The bikini lay inside out, its one pale circular foam padding popping upwards like a large mushroom cap. Padding for the other breast lay three feet away with burn holes and cigarette butts in it. Jeff crossed his attention into the trees on the other side of the water and there was another bikini top, bright yellow, hanging from a branch. That one could have been Mirabel's or Cass'—it was small enough, unlike this large cupped orange one—but for some reason he didn't think so. He looked over the edge of the rock, training his eyes on the bolted ladder which extended down into the water. When they'd first moved here there was no ladder and you had to jump. Joan and Mirabel always used to jump and they'd scream not because of the height, but in anticipation of the cold.

Jeff watched as night fell, the sky shading even first with the hills in the distance, and then with the treeline just across. The white of the water churning off the upper slide began to glow. It ran harder and whiter.

When he arrived back and the girls still weren't home, he felt like driving around to all the neighbors houses, the many newer people he didn't know and hadn't called, and then if that

didn't turn up anything, he wanted to alert Search and Rescue and the Volunteer Fire Squad. Joan said she thought that'd be ridiculous. She'd taken to her meditation pillows.

When there was just a little more than the butt left, Jeff walked around the house to the window in front of Joan. He took a long drag right in front of her, his ash glowing in the dark. He put his cigarette out by turning it on the window glass, then moved forward and pressed his palms and forehead and nose against the glass. He stood a minute feeling like a bogey man, waiting for his wife to open her eyes.

Joan gave him an agonized glance and reclosed her eyes. Her chest rose as she inhaled and flattened as she exhaled. She held rings in each hand between her middle fingers and thumbs and kept her palms upwards on her knees. Her legs were crossed so that her shins in the foreground, sticking out from red leggings, replicated the length and angle of her collarbones. She was balanced and wholesome, but unerotic. Jeff felt himself needing something. If it could be roaring around in search of his daughter, that would suffice.

He stomped into the house. "I'm not going anywhere right now, but what time would you think it reasonable for me to head out?"

Joan's braid ran down her spine. "I'm not there yet, Jeff. It's only right now."

This riled him. "Well maybe if they're not home in a week, we'll think to do something." She didn't respond and he could feel himself about to lose it. If he did, it would be because she was so damn passive.

Sliding it from the top shelf of the shed wall, Jeff took down his box of porn magazines. He'd gotten some new ones lately. He never bought them, but if he visited Hank who lived down the road, Hank would usually offer the ones he was done with. It didn't seem to take Hank long to get done with any of them. Jeff felt pretty aroused as he always did once having decided

to look. It was almost as if latching the door and climbing on the step ladder is what gave the biggest rush. It had been what, thirty years of doing this and he was still fearful every time. He had a tremendous juvenile fear of getting caught, of having his deep-seeded badness exposed and confirmed, such that then the question of whether he was lovable or not, loved or not, would have to stand and be answered. It was only later, separate from the event, that Jeff, on occasion, would come to some conclusion that that's what his fixation with porn was all about. He had to come to some understanding like this for himself, but also because there was the specter of Joan, how appalled she'd be. Raising that fear, challenging goodness as what makes him lovable—yes, Jeff found this invariably compelling, though he also regularly felt a smallness in it all. Compulsion and smallness were there at once, vying, each time he followed the routine of it: the latch, the step-ladder, the box, a rag, setting his flannel across the cold of the metal chair, lowering his pants, sitting, taking in the cover, flipping through, seeking further, almost and again, stroking and stroking, ignoring the tedium, seeking further, stroking and seeing and seeing and feeling further, until, finally, with his face in a grimace, a vein popping in his neck, throbbing in his shaft, he'd arrive at that masterful yet fleeting achievement, the whole purpose being to have the immediate tension behind the overwhelming question of his own power, worthiness and potential for love pleasurably released.

Jeff could not do it this time. His care for Mirabel, the invasiveness of his worrying about her, given that she'd never not come home before, given the culture of beer cans and bikini tops in trees, given Cass and her prematurity, collided with the rebellion against care that his masturbation fantasies demanded. The images impressed him blandly. And the more he tried, stroking and turning and trying to access some will of his own with which to dominate each woman's wide-spread willingness, the more this blandness turned toward something else. The

images appeared only flatly, the way they would after he'd come. And worse, he felt their complete inadequacy and saw them as embarrassingly contrived—this woman with frills and a whip and her anus hole as small and tight and hairless as a belly button. And from the falsity of the image he felt by extrapolation some fierce detestation of his own life. The flimsy charade. What more had he hoped to have? There was only a single day, even only a moment in that day, it seemed now, in which he could clearly remember feeling sure that he'd been saved from trepidation at last; Joan had reached for his hand in the grass and he'd turned to see the side of her face and though her hair was light and long unlike his mother's, their smile was the same. So very much the same as the warmest smile his mother might ever have had, perhaps never did, and his love for Joan conduited out of his soul while simultaneously her love conduited back. And it was a blessing, a splash, which somehow in life ever after required too much faith for him to try to feel again. The general message of daily life seemed to suggest that splash was a tease, a delusion of neediness, and it's best to learn that one's own self is all one has got.

Jeff covered himself with the rag, though there was nothing to wipe off. He tossed the magazine in the box at his feet. The room smelled of wood and oil and dust in lamplight and Jeff, slouched and disconsolate, noticed a spider testing footholds or web placements around the corner of the box, elevating the same feeler leg over and over like a dancer practicing lifts. The best Jeff could do was to find some implicate assurance in the view of this spider going about its selfsame habit with utter diligence and little doubt.

Jeff had not yet pulled up his pants when he heard a car with its radio spilling bolt up the driveway. It came to a stop outside the shed door and voices and laughter rose above the music. Jeff clicked his belt buckle, unclicked the door latch and stepped outside. The donkeys brayed.

Cass fell into Jeff's arms. She'd tripped climbing out of the car, apparently climbing out the driver's side over some boy's lap. "Oh my god. Thank you!" she said.

Mirabel scrambled out of the rear passenger's seat on the far side of the car. Molly ran up to her with a bark. Joan walked casually across the grass.

The car was full of boys, five or six of them—Jeff couldn't distinguish in the dark. He leaned in closer, toward the boy in the driver's seat. The boy held out his hand and, following some sort of stylized belch, said, "Hi, I'm Chris."

Jeff scanned the car, two in front, four in back—Mirabel must have been shoveled in across their laps.

"What the fuck!" Jeff announced.

"That's enough, Jeff. They're home and we're going inside." Joan had her arm around Mirabel and was reaching an arm out for Cass. Cass stumbled toward Joan. Joan poked her head in the window on the far side of the car. "Thank you, boys."

Inside, Mirabel didn't appear half as drunk as Cass. Cass fell to her knees and crawled across the carpet calling for Molly. Molly trotted to her. Cass pressed her to lie down, then lay her own head across Molly's back. She didn't have a shirt on, just her long hippie skirt and a bikini top. Mirabel sat very properly on the couch with her knees together and her hands in her lap. She wore shorts and a T-shirt; her T-shirt was all wet, as was her hair. She began shivering.

Joan brought a plate of lasagna for Mirabel and a glass of water to Cass. Jeff was waiting to find out the story, hanging back to let Joan handle it.

Joan brought a blanket and lay it over Mirabel. "You should take a hot shower, honey."

Jeff went into the pantry and cracked a beer. He guzzled about half of it, then left it on the pantry shelf.

He paced back into the room, stepping around Cass. "You lost your shirt, girl," he said.

"Alright, Jeff. Why don't you go to bed?" Joan lifted the lasagna away from Mirabel who was now looking sick. She escorted Mirabel to the bathroom, keeping the blanket around her shoulders. They slid the bathroom door closed and Jeff heard the bath water turn on. He looked down at Cass, who was now lying on her stomach with her head twisted over Molly. He went to the pantry and took another guzzle and then returned to Cass.

He bent down. Cass' eyes were closed and her mouth was parted; she was drooling on the dog. The tie of her bikini was loose and drooping off of where it had been; Jeff could tell because there was a bare white line across Cass' otherwise completely sunburned back. Without thinking, Jeff placed a hand on Cass' lower back and felt the heat of her burn radiate into his palm.

Cass slapped an arm backwards toward his hand. She shrugged and in a whiney voice, said, "Get off me!"

Jeff took his hand away. In just more than a whisper, with an astringent tone, Jeff asked, "Now did you get my daughter something better than a fingering?"

Cass opened her eyes, gave Jeff a condemnatory look. "What is *your* problem?" she said. "You're totally gross." She flipped her hair, turning her head and body the other way, raising and lowering her hips to snuggle more fully against the dog.

Jeff slept late the next morning. He could hear the girls were up and Joan too, of course. And their moods were high: Joan's voice chimed as she said, "At least I've already made your dinner for tonight, sweethearts."

Cass intoned: "I don't deserve it."

Mirabel said, “Girl, you need its detox value,” and laughed.

Jeff trudged down the stairs, nodded at everyone and went into the bathroom. He felt he had to go and waited, but couldn’t. He flushed anyway and came back out. Joan and Mirabel had begun making another batch of raw nutmilk and Cass was at the table just beyond the area of the kitchen, flipping through a magazine. Jeff started his coffee, then poked a fork around an English muffin.

“You’re up late,” Joan said.

“Felt good,” Jeff said groggily.

Joan brought Cass a short glass of green juice. It was from happening to notice Joan’s face, peering over Cass’ shoulder, that Jeff knew something was up. And suddenly he knew what, though he tried to convince himself that it couldn’t be—Cass would have no reason to go out to the shed. Why would she ever go first thing in the morning? Still he knew, he knew, he knew. Joan’s face had elongated in a ghastly way and she’d froze with her arm reaching down and the glass not yet at the table. But then, as if warping into an alternate reality, she regained that ultra-placid expression of hers. Every single muscle of her face became loose and soft. Jeff could almost perceive her ears lowering and, delicately, she placed the glass on the table. She squeezed Cass’ shoulder and kissed the side of her head.

Jeff closed his eyes and prayed it wasn’t so. Or, if it had to be, then let Joan have assumed the magazine belonged to Cass. Cass was going through a bizarre and difficult time, everyone knew. Things were very hard on the girl.

Joan didn’t look at Jeff as she passed back into the kitchen, though Jeff didn’t give her much opportunity as he turned to toast his muffin. It felt to Jeff then like every noise related to him was too much—the metallic slide of the toaster’s lever, the coffee maker’s gurgle. Joan had

an uncanny sense for when someone around her was emanating tense energy and she began to hum.

But then Joan stopped and looked at Cass, who abruptly shouted: "Oh, my GOD!"

Jeff's muffin popped.

"It's her!" Cass dropped her jaw and pointed to the magazine. Mirabel and Joan shuffled over to the table and Jeff followed. They all looked down. It was a picture of two girls, one in just a bra and knee socks, with her legs spread, the other in just g-string underwear with her ass up in the air. They were on a beige couch and impossibly bound together by a long string of pearls. Pink and purple sex toys were scattered on the couch and floor. Cass pointed to the girl without underwear and her legs spread. "This is totally her!" There was a clear view of the girl's crotch—hairless—and for a moment Jeff lost sight of how he might be implicated; instead he felt a great rush of revelation on two accounts: first, he felt it confirmed that Kirk was a sleaze; second, he thought how pitiful it was that the answer to Cass' mother's obsessively-pondered, pathetic question was right here on full display. The girl had no pussy hair; it was not an answer that would help heal.

But then Cass had a revelation too. Her eyes goggled at Jeff: "Oh my god, you've masturbated to my father's girlfriend!"

Joan said she didn't want to discuss it while Cass was still visiting. This was okay. Jeff didn't really want to either. For the next several days, Jeff took to his room and Cass took to Mirabel's. Joan and Mirabel made raw juices and milks and broths and vegetable pate on dehydrated seed crackers and brought trays of food to Cass and told her that if she wanted

something else, even ice cream or a hamburger, they'd drive to town and get it for her. But Cass was too dejected to eat. She had bouts of loud crying, as many as four times a day.

No one brought food to Jeff, though Joan did eventually come sit on the edge of the bed to tell him he didn't have to hide. "It's not finally that big of a deal, you know," she said. Jeff agreed with her, but something made it so that he couldn't get out of bed—except at night when he'd go down and get his own food: peanut-butter and banana on toasted muffin. He didn't have any cigarettes and hadn't smoked in three days, so he said, "I'm focusing on quitting smoking. We'll see if it lasts when I go back to that cabinet job." Joan said, "Maybe you should give up that cabinet job. My July yoga classes are full, so that'll be fine until you pick up another job." When Joan left the room, Jeff reflected that it was pretty nice of her, the way she was easy on him about work. It's true that cabinet job had been driving him crazy; he hated working on city people's second homes.

Lying in bed throughout the week in this weird state of sudden-onset depression, Jeff occupied himself very little. Mostly he lay wide-eyed hearing mizzle in the attic where there wasn't any. He didn't read, though he'd been previously engrossed in a book about people with low pain perception, people who could be surgically cut or have a tooth pulled and feel only minor discomfort. It had something to do with a difference in the receptivity of their A-delta and C brain nerves. Unlike people who were born with the chemical difference of low receptivity, fakirs and yogis had been studied for their ability to alter experiences of physical pain through self-hypnosis and pain-meditation. Before he'd stopped reading, Jeff was in the middle of a chapter providing scientific explanation of how yogic practices alter brain chemistry. He'd been riveted, feeling like he was about to expose the ruse of mystic profundity behind Joan's midlife

passion. But now he'd become too conscious of himself and couldn't muster up that same will to deflate Joan.

He listened to everything that went on with Cass through the floor: her wailing and sniveling and refusal to eat. Occasionally, Mirabel could make her laugh. She'd say: "Well, if we make friends with her, I bet we could learn everything we could ever want." Or, "Maybe you should appreciate me as a prude while I still am one. Maybe I'll become a porn star in college too."

On the third day, Jeff looked out the window and saw Joan loading his box of porn into the truck they used for dump runs. She did something strange. She shoved the box toward the back of the bed, near the paint cans and other junk, then dragged it back to the edge. She rooted through the pile examining the magazine covers, opened one and flipped through its pages, pausing occasionally. Then, she returned to the one on the top. She flipped through it until she found—Jeff could just make this out from the second story window—the picture Cass had pointed to. She ripped this page out and each of the pages before and after it. She folded the pages several times until they fit in her back pocket. She tossed the magazine back on the pile and shoved the box toward the middle of the truck bed. She went into the shed. She came out with a tarp and a broken rake and the head of a shovel. She threw the tarp over the pile of paint cans and debris and over the box of magazines and then lay the rake and shovel head on top of the tarp. She wiped her hands on the butt of her shorts, then lifted her braid to cool her neck.

In a minute, Jeff heard Joan's footsteps crossing the center room. He heard her say to Mirabel, "I've got more to do with those blueberry shrubs if you want to help."

In the evening of the next day, Jeff overheard Cass and Mirabel talking again. Cass had tapered her crying and was beginning to be garrulous again.

"I wish those boys would have called," she said.

"Yeah, but they were probably jerks, really," Mirabel replied.

"All guys are jerks, but that doesn't mean we don't want them to call."

"I don't think *all* guys are jerks. I just think you could tell that those guys were. Maybe not that guy, Stephen. The one with curly bangs—he seemed nice."

"You would pick the loser. That one had zero personality."

"He was probably just shy and didn't want to come off like one of the others."

"What about that half-Asian guy. Did you see his tan?"

"Macho, though."

"But the thing is, you never know. When he's alone with you he could be totally sweet."

"That's like two personalities."

"Not if the one he shows you is the real one."

Mirabel didn't respond. She wasn't one for arguing, whereas Cass would pursue confrontation just for the sake of it. Their conversation made Jeff feel pretty sure nothing had happened that night with the boys, that Mirabel was still a virgin. It felt silly, in retrospect, to have gotten so worked up over the chance that she wasn't or that she'd given out blowjobs or something like that. Jeff realized he had no idea when the right time for Mirabel to be sexual and lose her virginity was and since he didn't know, it felt silly to care.

Cass started up again: "So, I knew I was right?"

"About what?"

"Your father."

"What does that mean?"

"I told you he was a creep."

Mirabel paused for a second. "I don't think he's necessarily a creep."

"Dude! He's been jacking off to his brother's girlfriend who's apparently a whore."

"Well, it's not like he knew it was the girl your father's with."

"But that's totally the karma of it. Obviously if he wasn't jacking off to porn in the first place, he wouldn't have ended up jacking off to her."

"I think that's logic, not karma."

"Fine. But you have to admit it's pathetic."

"I'm not even trying to think about it, so I'm not thinking about whether it's pathetic or not."

"Yeah, but if you did think about it, you'd agree it was pathetic."

"I don't know, Cass. At least it's just a bunch of pictures. It's not like he's doing it like your Dad."

"But that's the thing. It's basically the same. It's not like your Dad is any better than my Dad."

"I'm not saying my Dad is necessarily better. Their lives are just totally different."

"But it's really the same. It's like men need to feel all powerful, right? And how easy is that? Pretty easy when you have all these girls shoving their totally groomed up little pussies in your face."

"Gross."

"I know. That's what I've been saying. What your Dad does *is* gross."

"I don't mean that, I mean the way you talk about it."

"Why? Because I say *pussy*, you think *I'm* gross. You need to look at those pictures and also you need to accept that your Dad has a problem very similar to my Dad's problem. Look, think of it this way. Women are all one species or sub-species or whatever and then men use the lot of us at will for their own need to feel powerful. That's so different from say your Mom, who's like putting in her own resources everyday to create some positive perspective on her life. Breathing and bowing and all that. Your Mom's practice is all about seeing people as whole human beings, all connected and part of the world together. Porn is like the opposite of that. Women and girls just become these totally one-dimensional sex objects with no other personalities or will or anything. And, I bet you if your dad didn't use porn, he'd be way closer to your mom. He'd have to be, because he'd need her and be all vulnerable and everything. But instead he disappears into some shame-protected little hole and gets whatever good-feeling he needs from a totally, weirdly controlled pretend reality. It's like with my dad. There's not a single second of any day that you'll see him being vulnerable. You should see my Dad in restaurants--if they don't have what he wants, he just immediately acts like he really wanted something else. My mother sounds crazy and it's totally embarrassing the way she talks about how my father has a potency complex, but it's also so obvious and your father does too. And Mirabel, you should know from your Mom that you can't feel true love and intimacy without being vulnerable. It's that stuff she says about surrendering control in to have a receiving heart. Or however it goes."

"Cass." Mirabel moved into a calm, slow voice. "I'm sorry about your Dad. It must be really weird to have that girl around. And I'm sorry that my Dad even had that magazine. I think he's really embarrassed. He hasn't comes downstairs for days. But I don't think there's

anything we can do so maybe we should just try to figure out what we're gonna do. Like if our Dad's are so pathetic, how are we going to find boyfriends who aren't like them."

Cass—or maybe Mirabel, but it seemed like Cass—did something that sounded like she was kicking her legs up and down on the bed. Jeff heard the comforter tufting and the bed squeak. Then Cass said, "I have no idea, Mirabel. Maybe there are no such boys. But I'm starving. I'm starving for *real* food. I don't know how you can live forty-five minutes from a store, eating your mother's weird, wholesome shit."

Jeff pressed his hands to his temples and was surprised to realize he hadn't already had them there. He even tried one of Joan's visualization techniques, imagining the flow of a waterfall from the top of his head, trickling soothingly all down his face and around his skull. This worked for a minute, meaning he could feel the coolness, and then he felt the hot rage of knowing in the form of a clear angry visualization that he would sometime soon—not if, but when—end up using masturbating to Cass. He may make her look different, hide her face, vary her hair or her clothes—perhaps just keep that ugly purple hippie skirt as a marker and nothing else. He'd allow some interchange, interlace some more-knowable hipsize, alter the context of place and relationship in his senses so that she wasn't too clearly his young niece. It might start in Mirabel's bedroom, Cass' face wet with all those tears from this week and him coming upon her, but he wouldn't be able to sustain that and so he'd shift into greater obscurity, thrusting himself finally not so much into her body for sure, but her essence.

This realization felt dark to Jeff, but also necessary and right. If it weren't for the evidence of Joan's presence downstairs—her putzing around—he'd go into the bathroom, perhaps into the shed, and take care of it right now.

In a few more days, by the Friday evening that would begin the weekend, Joan had somehow, without using words directly, coaxed both Jeff and Cass to come out and sit at the table for a raw meal. Her magic was to make the two withdrawn and angry spirits feel coated in an elixir of universal immunity—this was a household of peace and calm and love in which every person is automatically forgiven on account of having nothing to be forgiven for, because we are all simply as we are and in every moment worthy, deserving and loved. This was the sort of blanket approach to well-being and relationship that generally didn't jive with Jeff's individualist psychology, but he appreciated it now.

They started with a shot of kombucha. "The mushroom's had a baby," Joan said, to which they toasted and swallowed. The table was full: bowls of cucumber gazpacho, a platter of flaxmeal sprout patties and deviled eggs made from nasturtium-dyed white beans set in tofu rounds and sprinkled with hot cinnamon and blue chive flower. For dessert, Mirabel had made a cowless-cream layered cacoa and nut cake using whipped avocado and tofu sweetened with agave. Jeff savored the non-eggs and the cake and ate all there was of each. Throughout, Joan and Mirabel tag-teamed to bridge tense silences. They offered nutritional value tidbits related to every ingredient of every item on the table. Just by way of absentminded listening, Jeff felt himself newly, though rather extraneously, edified. He was ever-so-mildly the better for it. When the meal had clearly ended, he said, "You two created such a delicious and nutritious spread, maybe Cass and I should be responsible for clean-up."

"Cass should do what she feels like," Joan said.

Cass didn't look at Jeff, but muttered, "I'll wash if you dry."

Saturday was reasonably normal around the house with everyone out of their rooms. Mirabel, Cass and Joan did yoga on the lawn between daffodil clumps while Jeff painted the window frames of the old chicken-coop. As a gift to Joan two years ago, he'd promised to renovate it into a prayer studio. By the afternoon it was overcast and humid and Joan proposed they all take a trip to the quarry. Mirabel and Cass ran inside to change. Cass returned and said, "I can't find the bottom to my suit." Joan said, "Fuck clothes! Skinny dipping is good for the soul." Jeff did something he hadn't done in years, which is that he charged Mirabel like a monster, scooped her up and carried her wriggling and screaming and giggling into the car.

They marched on a sparse path through the woods, It ended that opened up over the highest wall of the quarry. The wall across the water was half cement and half rouge-red limestone, richly veined. They stood and stared for a minute, marvelling at the great excavation cube, a project some company had abandoned. And now nature seemed to have taken over: the water level was high; neon lichen splotched the concrete; pine trees had toppled in, the cement was eroded. The sun, as it began to hand low, beamed through the overcast, vibrant against the limestone wall.

Joan stripped first and conveyed herself to the edge of the cliff in that steadily proceeding way that a person daring nudity must. She glanced back only slightly at her family before jumping off. It was a quick glance as if to assure herself of her own existence, You see me right? Jeff and the girls heard her yelp and then a splash. Mirabel pulled her shirt off next. She'd already put a suit on, but took that off too in the spirit of things. She walked to the edge. Jeff was surprised by how small and undeveloped her body still was. Mirabel tried to go right off, but then jerked herself back and collapsed her shoulders. "Do it, silly," Jeff said. Mirabel laughed crazily, then straightened shoulders and took a big gulp of air. She screamed too. Cass

and Jeff stood a few feet from each other, Joan and Mirabel's clothes between them. They heard Mirabel call to her mother, "Oh, it's so freakin' cold!"

Jeff slapped a mosquito on his shoulder, turned and looked at Cass. With her one leg bent, her hip cocked, and her shoulders swung back, Cass' posture communicated formulaic toughness; Jeff could see she was nervous. "Go on," he said, "I won't look." He turned around and walked toward the trees. He stood in front of one, facing its trunk. "I promise. I'm going to stand right here like this until I hear you hit the water."

"You swear?"

Jeff held his hands up as blinders on either side of his face. "Hello, tree," he said.

Cass whimpered. "Ack, it's going to be freakin' cold." She began taking her clothes off. Her voice became muffled as she lifted her shirt over her head. "Okay, I'm doing it," she said. Jeff heard a twig snap. "Oh my god, this is so high, but now I'm naked so I have no choice, right?" Jeff kept his face to the tree. After a long pause, he heard a scream.

He turned around and eyed the three piles of clothes over pine needles in front of him. He lifted up Joan's shirt and smelled it. She'd always smelled like juniper.

He walked to the edge and looked down. Their three heads bobbed in the dark water, concentric ripples glimmering with sunlight emanated out from each, changing pattern as they crossed. "Come on! We're freezing our asses off!" Cass yelled.

It was late afternoon on Sunday when Cass' Dad came to pick her up. Her mother had dropped her off and Kirk said he'd gotten lost finding the place. It was an excuse for why he hadn't come in the morning as they'd planned. Jeff knew he hadn't gotten lost. Kirk had made

it there without getting lost for the last twenty years. He was supposed to come early so they could all spend the day together. Kirk's girlfriend was with him, which nobody had expected.

He drove up in a Porsche. It looked ridiculous on the dirt and gravel driveway, next to Jeff's weatherworn shed. Dolores and Daisy May came around to their side fence to look at the car and bray at Kirk. Molly barked and jumped on the passenger door. Jeff leapt to grab her off. As Kirk stepped out, Jeff said, "Sorry, sorry man. She doesn't like Porsches. I don't think she scratched it. The slip and slide of the dust kept her nails from going in."

"Look at this thing," Kirk said. "No wonder you guys drive beaters." He waved his girlfriend out of the car. "How ya doin', Joan?" He opened his arms for a hug. "Look at you, Mirabel," he said, eying her over Joan's shoulder.

Kirk's girlfriend snuck from the car. For some reason she opened the door as little as possible as she got out. She immediately closed it behind her, but not hard enough for it to latch. Jeff crossed behind her and stuck his knee against the door.

"Hi, Cass," she said with a wave.

"Hold on, hold on," Kirk said, making his way beside her. "Everyone, as I'm sure Cass has told you, this is Alicia." Alicia smiled and waved. Joan leaned forward and put a palm on her shoulder. "Welcome, sweetheart," she said.

Mirabel waved. Jeff reached a hand, "Hey, pleasure to meet you."

"She is a sweetheart, Joan. A total sweetheart," Kirk said, squeezing Alicia up against his shoulder. He looked at Cass. "And how's my other, number one sweetheart?"

Cass shrugged and then smiled. "I'm full of raw food."

"What do you mean raw food?"

"Raw vegan," Cass said. "It's Joan's diet."

Kirk brushed a hand through his hair and nodded at Joan. "Joan's diet, huh? Well, it must be a good one because just look. She's the epitome of health and beauty and always pretty good-natured too, huh?" Kirk tucked his chin in towards Alicia's ear, but then spoke loudly while pointing to Joan. "Wait til you get to know this woman. She's a maximal health nut and smart and good from my brother and it goes on and on." Alicia bobbed and waved again at Joan.

Alicia was as thin as Joan's dehydrated seed crackers. Jeff could barely imagine it was the same girl. In the photo she was petite, but round and fleshy, and though she was the one in a bra, there were some fair-sized breasts lifting out of it. This girl had nothing, no hips, no breasts, not even the same full, puckerable, wanting lips—if Jeff remembered right—and yet it was definitely her. She had a turned-up nose and cute freckles.

"Thank you, Kirk. We try to be healthy. Mirabel's my inspiration and Cass too." Joan put an arm around each of the girls. "Kirk? Alicia? What works best for you? Do you want to come in? You want to get on the road?"

Kirk pounced at the opportunity to say they had to take off. "I'm sure, well, I think Cass is supposed to head over to her mother's in the morning which means we don't want to get back too late. And Alicia here has school papers hanging over her head. I don't know if Cass told you, Alicia's finishing up at Columbia. Smart cookie. Smart like Cass. We all know Mirabel's a genius. He paused with his hand on the back of Alicia's neck. Kirk looked not at Alicia, but right at his own hand, which seemed to Jeff like a weird thing to do. "And of course I've got the office. God, it seems like blowing out is the thing to do. Every time I'm up here, I think why didn't I take the week, just be in the country, hang with my bro, my niece. I love seeing Cass and Mirabel together, they're like sisters, you know."

Jeff felt relieved by how plain he found Alicia to be. He couldn't stand hearing Kirk's rambling bullshit. Jeff moseyed over to the Porsche. He bent over the hood, used a finger to clean dust from the insignia.

"Sounds like you better get going," Joan said. "We enjoy Cass so much, you know. She's welcome here anytime. Hold on a minute, though. I just want to run and get the camera. We didn't take any pictures."

Jeff looked up, watched Joan disappear into the house through the woodshed. She never took pictures. In fact, pictures had become against her philosophy. Pictures are past. We are here and now. If anyone used the camera, it was Jeff.

Alicia bounced on her knees again. "How are you, Cass? You look like you had a fun time."

Her tone was all off. She was condescending. Jeff watched to see how Cass would take it. Cass kicked her flip-flop into the dirt, then lifted it off her foot and examined its sole. "I knew these felt sticky." She turned to Jeff, squinting. "I think it's sap from where we went yesterday. Would there be sap on that trail?"

Jeff sidled up beside Cass. "Looks like," he said.

"That was such a blast. It felt all weird and silky and mermaidish." Now she was looking at Mirabel and they laughed.

Joan came back out and called for everyone to stand for a photo.

Kirk moved around to the other side of Alicia, so it was only natural for Jeff to stand beside her too. Kirk pulled Cass in front of him and Mirabel stood in front of Jeff. Joan held the camera up and said, "Okay?" Alicia turned her head up at Jeff. He looked down at her and felt himself blush. Her eyebrows were lifted like she had some question. He smiled and looked

away. He felt her hand squirm up over his shoulder. Standing close with her touching him, she became the girl in the photos again. He recalled looking at her pictures, at the two girls with pearls and sex toys. He remembered there was a picture of the other girl putting a dildo in Alicia's ass. He'd stayed on that one. Came to it.

Joan snapped the picture. She took a second one. Then another, kneeling to get Molly in the picture.

"I love you, bro," Kirk said as he gave Jeff a smack on the back.

Jeff held his hand out to Cass, suggesting that she slap him five. She slapped him five and asked for five back.

Jeff didn't look at Alicia again, not even as they backed up and turned around and he could feel her waving from the front seat, probably trying to make even eye contact with each of the three of them. He only looked at Cass and as he waved to her, Joan and Mirabel came up close next to him. He imagined they looked like a close-knit family.

Later that night, Jeff went up to their bedroom shortly after Joan. She was already in bed, in her nightgown, with her hair out. He felt nervous. He hadn't approached her awake in bed in a long time. He sat on the edge of the bed beside her, like she had done when he was on furlough through the past week. "Joan," he said. She blinked her eyes. "Why did you take those pictures today?"

She kept her voice sleepy-sounding, in a nice way, like she didn't mind the question. "Well, Cass' mom is fixated on knowing what the girl looks like."

Jeff felt confused. Feeding such a fixation so obviously went against Joan's wisdom. "Are you going to show her the photos and the magazine stuff?"

Joan gave a sly, sideways smile. Jeff figured she was probably a little uncomfortable with him knowing she'd taken clippings from the magazine; he could feel her wondering if he did know. "No, I don't think so," she said. "I'm not sure why I took the photos. I don't really imagine I'll ever show her. It'd be too jarring. I think I'll probably just put them in a private box and store them away."

This made sense to Jeff and he nodded.

Joan tucked a hand under her chin on the pillow. With moonlight in her eyes, she said, "Now tell me about you."

Alexandra Staunton Zinke
UT Thesis submission

Teaching Men

It is a small school of seventy-one students, twelve pedantic maestros, the gray-haired director, Mr. Stork, and a handful of roaming animals. The teachers, mentors really, are, for the most part, forty and fifty year old men. We, the students know, in a hodgepodge sort of way, the personal histories of all our teachers. Most of them were at one time married and at one time divorced. Though many of the men—Mr. Dennis, with spittle on his lips; Mr. Leedborne, rumored to be impotent—have remarried and manage to present us with a puritanical model of stability and commitment (it is only in the context of a stable home that scholarship can thrive), it is commonly believed that each of these men is longing for someone, something he has lost: a woman he once knew who was more intriguing and offered a bigger reflection of himself than anyone since; a love that seemed ideal, whether workable or not. For each, we know, it has to be, that there was at least a short while, when the dream of love and the living of it bore no discrepancy.

But it seems the longing has been given up, exchanged for something less, something livable: a daily accompaniment with wives—surrogates—bright and beautiful in their own right, just not quite as startling as what once was.

We look at Mr. Gentry, his pent up energy so eager to outline the infallibility of a geometric proof, Mr. Dernishcom with his keyboard recitation of 440 vibrations pleading out as if heartstrings were literally pluckable, and we know, in contrast to obvious passions, that each of these teaching men has defeatedly decided to stop holding his breath. Like poetry erased from the blackboard and chalk dust clapped from one's hands, the dream has disappeared. There has been a great exhale as each no longer waits to be courted by a museful embodiment of memory or imagination. Love has become practical.

As students, we don't like to see resignation in the men (as it were) who lead us. We want to imagine that life fulfills its promises. And so we have no choice but to resent the wives, Mrs. Thornburg, Mrs. Lubushkin, etc. when they swarm onto campus for such tedious events as the all-school play, possessively clutching the elbows of our precious masters. With a slight wince of the face and stiffening of the body when receiving a wifely kiss, it can be seen among our teachers that each has made a resolution against loneliness in the face of absolute love.

Still, as students, we are not entirely unforgiving of this. After all, we imagine for the teachers it is especially treacherous to be alone. Through the long hours of one's professional day, time is spent proselytizing impressionable minds with love-affirming lines, such as of Shakespeare and Donne. At recess when class lets out and there is nothing but a deskful of papers to grade, our teachers have no choice but to glance, between paragraphs, out the classroom window and take in the spectacle of us.

There we are—just a window width's distance beyond the silence in which Mr. Cole sits with his red pen poised—clusters of students, ultimately unconcerned with whatever belongs in books and over-intensely obsessed with ourselves, all energy, splayed on the lawn and laughing. Our bodies draped across one another, beside a smattering of open textbooks, book bags substituting for pillows, we are an undeniable view of what it means to be sensually driven toward connectedness. Sally's knees arch over the waist of Miguel on the right, Peter on the left. Her head in Anemone's lap, she is innocently having it all. The rest of us too. Dandelions between our toes, we flirt with each other in a way so exuberant idealized love seems nothing but true.

But in this small boarding school, crouched containedly in a bowl-shaped land where hills rise like half-curtains against the sky, there is one young teacher—he likes to jump for unripe pears off high-branched trees and swim in the boggy leaf-covered pond where student lovers often go—one young teacher, new to us. Here only a week and girls have already begun to observe an alacritous spirit and seemingly faithful heart. Like some spontaneous breeze, collective whisper begins: *He's true. He believes. We've found our Romeo.* We are all romantics.

Yet among the goggling girls, there is one student who takes herself more seriously than the rest. She says (to herself, under her sheets in the dorm room at night), that she will love this teacher in a way that can't be denied. She vows to hold his teachings (or at least an idyllic rendering of them) in her heart interminably, hoping one day to deliver them back to him with the proposal of a perfect love. She determines to draw him in and, despite being only sixteen, knows she must start right away.

Thankfully, cloistered by the insularity of campus life, this young buck of a teacher, Mr. Seb Dasche, exists with no plausible prospect of love or companionship other than the pitiful devotion of a limping shadow, Pirandello, his three-legged dog.

Along these lines—love, companionship—anything between student and teacher is, of course, unthinkable. But among the many girls who want him—surrounded by scholarly men, surrogate wives, a swarm of horny teenage boys—in this half-heavenly place, I am the only one making a promise.

The school was founded by a widow who donated her husband's estate. The girls are housed is the old-half-mansion. Our rooms have floridly papered walls, some hand-painted and retouched each year by student artists. Senior girls are in the Gatehouse, with their own kitchen for brewing tea. The boys live two to a room in the red horse barn. Their rooms have Dutch-cut stall doors with lever-latch metal handles and wood troughs in the corners where hay used to be thrown; they hang their coats on iron pegs originally for halters and water buckets. Classes are all held in converted buildings: art in the hen house, languages in the turnery. School plays are performed on a makeshift stage in the once-was chicken coop. It was a large coop until, years back, they scraped cement over bird turd and underfeathers.

Coexisting with the grace of my heart during these teenage years—the general grace of us youth as a hopeful, aspiring collective—is the crude reality of what it means to belong to our age group. First of all, the boys aren't just obsessed with us girls, but perhaps even more so with themselves. They are particularly obsessed with *doing* for themselves. This means masturbation. Nothing keeps the boys more secretly separate and invested in privacy than masturbation and still nothing unites them more. Allegedly, the pornography circulating their

dorm isn't much, just whatever gets passed down from former students, boys who grew to men on graduation day and desired, as much as anything else, to be remembered well. There is apparently a well used, overly creased and splotched, catalogue of Pamela Anderson advertising happiness on the California shoreline. Less used, but still coveted and trickled-on is a utility-brazier catalog, nothing too lacy, nothing too lithe, bustiness a clear back-breaking burden needing too much cover up. The square-shoulder shots frame those prime parts as unsuggestively as can be, but the boys' ready and afraid imaginations, their coltish hand pulls, are enough to suffice. The collective of us girls remains a great landscape to them: for the brave we are a place in which potent claims of the self can be made; for the rest we are a paralyzing minefield of potential rejection. Masturbation is enough to have each boy know that he is in fact a maturing boy, with all the requisite urges, and most importantly, with ways to master these urges self-sufficiently. Pamela Anderson is a practical way to detour around the inaccessibility of love and access its great pleasures all the same.

Us girls like to talk about It. It is everything, but more so than anything else, It is what boys and men want. What they want is the contortion of what we want. Along these lines, it feels immensely important to know as much as we can possibly know, to sort shapes and sizes, what's real verses what's desired, sociology and biology. What we do is put on our nightgowns, our sleeping boxers and tee-shirts, light candles and sit cross-legged in small talking circles after bedcheck, after one of the wives doing dorm-rounds has praised us each as individuals for making it into bed by lights out.

We meet in Marchy's room. Marcy is tall and buxom, eager to abandon herself, the leader of talking about It. She and I share a best friend, Natalia, who wears braids and does backbends in the dining hall, and is now sitting beside me with the candlelight making her

straight nose waver. I am shy and smart and inward, but cool too, maybe because the other girls feel the balance of my earnestness. A girl on my left, Roxanne—she's one of the few non-white students: her father's a caucasian Jewish producer and her mother a model from Zaire—strokes my hair before the official talking begins. She whispers, "You should let me do your hair." Roxanne is well-read, articulate and elegant, a body like her mothers and sprawling hair to her waist like rays of the sun.

The group of us girls, myself included, like how Roxanne sophisticates what we're all about. She is the most interesting and beautiful, we'd all agree. Agreement comes easily because we're all up for giving her this privilege. As a group we'll sometimes say, *Roxanne, you are the most beautiful girl in the school* (the only one who stays silent on this is Marcy) but then without articulating as much, we hold tight to the assumption that Roxanne's beauty is negligible; we assume none of the white boys or men for whom we vie would desire her.

Marcy begins: "Does everyone know girls can ejaculate?" She barely waits for our expressions to form. "Well, it's very possible and it's what every boy would die for a girl to do. The thing is, most girls will never do it. It's very rare and mostly genetic. I will probably be able to do it because my sister just told me she can do it."

Roxanne says, "I've heard of that. It has to do with how young you get your period and how young you are when you lose your virginity."

Marcy and Barbara are the only girls everyone knows are not virgins. Marcy, as she's told us all several times before, got her period and breasts by the time she was ten. Marcy leans across the circle to high-five Barbara. "Girl, we've got it made."

I can't stand Marcy. Though I'd registered him privately, Marcy is the one who first brought everyone's attention to Dasche. Marcy thinks that because she's tall, has sex and wears make-up and jewelry, that she can get whoever she wants.

A thought comes to my mind. I can tell the group of girls something I've never told anyone, something to trump Marcy. It's an old memory wrapped in gauze. It's never been of use to me, but it might be now. I tell them: "I'm not a virgin. I had sex younger than anyone here."

The circle caves in around me. There's a long collective, *With who?* And there's Marcy who says, "Nuh-uh. I did it last year."

"No. I was younger. I lost it when I was eight."

The girls become excited with disbelief. *That's not even possible. What do you mean? Who was it?*

I tell them it was my brother. Responses vary. One girl says, "Oh my god, that's incest."

Another girl says in a quieter voice, not to me, "Have you seen her brother? He is like totally so cute."

The girls turn to each other. The ones who seem inclined to think I've experienced something awesome become targets of the girls who've picked up on the word, incest. *She's an incest victim. Incest isn't really sex. It doesn't count if it's with her brother.*

It's not going as I had planned. When I have the chance I interject. "It wasn't incest. Incest is if I were going to marry my brother. We had sex as practice which is different. You can do it for practice and then it counts. I'm not going to marry my brother. We don't even have sex anymore. What our sex means is that I'm not a virgin. I've known for a long time what sex

is about which is why I feel lucky. Now I don't have to be in some rush with the dorky boys here."

This seems to convince a number of them. The questions changed: *Was it awesome? Did it hurt? Was your brother as cute then as he is now?*

Someone mumbles, "It's still totally incest. He's older, so it also means she's been raped."

Someone else: "That's really sad."

Marcy says, "Is it the brother you showed us a picture of? The guy at Dartmouth?"

I say it was and they all make me run to my room and get his picture. We pass the picture and the candle around the circle so everyone can get a close look at this college-boy version of the person with whom I've done it. Caitlin, who had said, "That's really sad," doesn't seem to think so anymore. Like all the girls, she thinks he's gorgeous. They're captivated.

Natalia turns to me, "I can't believe you never told me. You know I've had a crush on your brother forever." She turns to the group, "You should see how sweet he is with her. He's like the older brother to die for."

The next day I have my first real encounter with Dasche. He comes upon me by chance sitting with my back against a Linden tree in an improbably-crossed location at the furthest edge of campus. The spot overlooks a hillside of tarnished brown pasture, cows pausing in the distance. Though a book is open on my lap and I'm ostensibly reading the assignment for Dasche's class (D. H. Lawrence's *The Horse Dealer's Daughter)* I am not so much reading as trying to. I read what I can. This desperate Mabel is asking the doctor who has saved her from drowning to confirm that his saving her is the equivalent of love, that he loves her. *Do you love*

me, then? She asks and she asks and my eyes circle up on the page because I have missed the point by which her asking such a question makes sense.

"What have you wandered out here for?" he says, sneaking up from behind the tree. He hasn't noticed me crying. Piro brings his nose to mine, hops around the buckled roots of the tree.

"Reading Lawrence," I say.

"Oh. And how do you like it?"

"The characters I kind of weird."

"Yeah, that's right," he says. "It's a story about relational psychology."

I can't really grasp what relational psychology means just as he says it. I feel like I'm supposed to know something that I don't. I look out toward the cows. The late afternoon sunlight is turning bronze.

"Hey," he says, "Are you down about something?" He tucks down on his knees, so he's at my level. "I'm sorry. Do you want me to leave you alone?"

I shake my head.

"Is it something you want to talk about?"

I can't get myself to speak.

"I can leave you alone or I can just sit here," he says. "I didn't know anyone else ever came up here. I've sat at this very tree too sometimes. It's a good place to be alone. Do you want me to leave you alone?"

Dasche nestles into the grass, props on an elbow and stretches out his legs. Piro settles in a circle behind Dasche's knees. "I'm in a bit of a downer mood too," he says. "That's why I didn't even bring a book. Just came to stare at those cows."

I look up at him and smile. "I love to look at those cows," I say.

"I've never seen them head this way, but I know they do. They must. I tried walking in that field and there's cow shit everywhere."

I laugh at his cursing. He puts a blade of grass on his lips, between his teeth, glances at me, then back to the cows. "Shit everywhere," he says, making me laugh again.

"I really like you, Mr. Dasche."

"Well that's good because I generally can't tell if students do."

"We all like you."

"It's good to be liked, particularly when you're up here all alone like I am. I don't think there's anyone my age in this whole town. Don't get me wrong—I'm glad I took the job and I like the country, but for a guy my age it's pretty isolating, you know."

He's saying he's lonely. He wants someone to be close to.

"I have lots of people my own age here," I say, "but they can rub me the wrong way."

"Yeah," he says. "That may be the way it works. I thought I'd like being alone, away from the city, but then I get restless."

"I don't want you to be alone, Mr. Dasche."

His eyes shoot from the cows to me. He looks surprised and smiles. "Oh, that's okay." He spits out the grass, puts a hand on Pirandello's back. "Being alone isn't too bad."

It's winter before I'm alone with Dasche again. Frost on the window glass is crystallized in the shape of fern leaves. I see him outside trudging his way through the snow. Books are pressed between his arm and waist, into the thickness of his jacket. Pirandello is forced into an arrhythmic hopping dance alongside him. Dasche holds a cigarette, just out of view behind his

leg. I can't see it, but I know it's there. He didn't smoke when he came in the fall, but always smokes now.

He stomps up the three porch steps of our makeshift classroom building. The tip of his cigarette brightens as he takes his last drag. He jabs it out on the porch rail and enters the room with his hand in his pocket.

He nods at the table of us. "Who wants to start with what you make of the reading?"

The room we're in is an old forge. Pirandello has moved from Dasche's side and is curled by the wood stove; he shivers and intermittently licks snow from his one front paw.

Natalia beside me wraps her arms around the back of her chair, loosening her shoulder joints. "I enjoyed the reading, Mr. Dasche. I mean, it's dark and horrible, but fulfilling."

"Okay, someone elaborate. Why would we read literature that's dark and horrible? Why do we find it fulfilling?"

Judd calls out, "Because you assigned it."

Dasche looks around the classroom. "Someone? What do we find fulfilling?"

I have barely raised my hand all semester; I'm running out of time to make my mark. I decide to be bold. "We're fulfilled by love, but sometimes we think that all we can have is the opposite."

"Well, I'm not sure. Is this a love story? How can we tie it to the reading? What do the characters want? What do we think this particular family of characters would be fulfilled by?"

I haven't finished the reading. I don't know what the characters want.

Natalia chimes in again. "The family seems to care about being proper and maintaining their reputation."

"Great, great. How do we know this?"

I sink low in my chair, lean my head against the window. Outside, a pile of snow slides from the roof, thumps softly. I scan my eyes over to Piro. He's twitching with his eyes closed. I close my eyes. At first I listen, but then begin to doze. The voices of the class stay with me as I sleep, not the content of what is being said, but the rhythm. When I was in elementary school, my brother fondled me in the bushes of the schoolyard and it was like this: I could hear other kids voices, but not what they were saying.

When I wake, my classmates are clambering out the door, released. Sheldon tries to pinch Claudia's snowpanted bottom in the doorway. She pretends to want to get away and they fall on top of each other onto the porch. Other students pile over them. Their laughing carries back into the classroom. A snowball hits the window.

Dasche and I are left in the room. The unfinished walls slant in, cabin-like. Dasche makes a stack of his books and notebook, slides a pen into his jacket pocket. "I'm curious what's going on with you, Miranda," he says. "You seem like you could have a lot to contribute, but you doze off."

I straighten. "You didn't want to hear what I had to say."

"I want to hear what you have to say, but how's that possible if you're sleeping?"

"I was trying to say that people suffer from resigning themselves to love that's not real or to no love at all."

Dasche gets up, walks to the corner of the table where I am and leans on it's edge over me. "Miranda, where do you get this stuff?"

I shrug. "It's obvious."

He takes his glasses off and lays them on the table, pinches the bridge of his nose again. It seems like I'm giving him a headache. I decide to continue.

"There's a difference between *feigned love* and *unfeigned love*." This is something I wrote in my notebook. "To feign" is one of the words on our last vocab quiz, along with "requite," "counterfeit" and "actualize." Dasche marked me off for misspelling *fiegn* and *counterfiet.* Like spelling matters. "If you look around you'll see feigned love everywhere. Look at the other teachers. They only pretend to love their wives and the wives only pretend to love them back."

"Miranda, I don't think their lives and marriages are any of your business."

"Why not? I'm not prying. I'm just taking what I see everywhere. It's totally obvious. That's why I'm glad my parents are divorced. At least they won't be feigning anything."

"I'm sorry about your parents, Miranda. Is that what this is about?"

"No, it doesn't have anything to do with me."

"I think you'll find most things have to do with ourselves."

Miniature images of Dasche are reflected in his glasses, one in each lens. "Aren't you afraid?" I say.

His voice is abrupt. "Afraid of what?"

"Faking love."

He rises from the table, fixes the leg of his pants over his boots. "Miranda, I don't know what to say. You're taking a strange tack. No, I'm not afraid. How could I be afraid of faking? I don't even have a girlfriend."

He paces to the stove, pokes around with a stick. "Then how come you're not happy like you were when you first came?" I ask.

He keeps his engagement on the fire. "Who says I'm not happy."

"I can tell. You're becoming depressed."

"You're a curious girl, Miranda."

"I want you to be happy." I feel vulnerable after saying this and turn my chair to the wall. There's graffiti carved into the wood. People's names and dates and symbols. In small block letters, someone's written: "…like ginger after sushi." "I care about you," I say.

Dasche clangs the stove shut, scrapes its handle into position. He speaks firmly from across the room. "Miranda, I am your teacher."

"So? That doesn't mean I can't care about you."

"Miranda, you are a girl. A young girl."

I keep my back turned to him. "I think I can care about you and that's worth something, Mr. Dasche."

Dasche slides his books from the table and kicks the wall for Piro to get up. I hear him at the door, feel his hand on the door handle. "Miranda, I want you to stop and think. You are a very young girl."

"I want to be with you, Mr. Dasche."

"That's it. We're done talking. Don't sleep in my class."

I watch Dasche out the window. Pirandello follows, falls to his chest in snow and rises back up. Dasche stops for a cigarette, struggles to get it lit, walks on.

At the Christmas party, I sit next to Josh because he has become my boyfriend. We hold hands, I'm aware that this is noticeable to other people. The girls will talk. I want it to be noticeable to Mr. Dasche that I am the girlfriend of his prodigy.

The trajectory by which Josh got to be my boyfriend is not entirely clear. I guess he's mastered a boyish form of insinuation. He's looked at me like I'm pretty, like he enjoys

something in my face, even when I smirk. He covers for me when I haven't done the reading for class. And he doesn't just recount plot, he makes it deeper. Like when we read James Baldwin, he said, "the characters manage identity crises through sex and abandonment."

Dasche has been neglecting me in a serious way ever since I was open with him that day in November.

Josh's hand is bulky, disproportionate to his chest, and my hand is small; our hands together is uncomfortable. With his free hand, Josh rubs back and forth up my arm to where I'm self-conscious about my skin being bumpy. It's bumpy above my elbow. I can bear Josh feeling such a thing, but I wouldn't want Dasche to.

It's hard for me to concentrate on anything beyond how noticeable I think Josh and I are. We're planning to have sex. We're going to sneak out. I've agreed to it—because I believe going all the way with Josh will somehow bring me all the way with Mr. Dasche. I've come to understand doing it with someone my own age as a necessary part of the sequence. Okay. Fine, then. I'll do it.

Most students do it in the old tool shed. Its two small rooms have been carpeted and soundproofed to make it the "practice hall" for students of Bartok and Beethoven. It's a covetable space for our purposes: Marcy says the soundproofing means we're free to fake high-pitched orgasms. I went there by myself one night. If you lie with your feet to the window, the view is of full hills parted by a valley. In the absent space between, there's a bucketful of stars.

The tree at the center of the room smells of burning plastic and pine. Mr. Stork is Santa Claus dressed in the same suit that's outfitted him for decades. The beard, hair and chest ruffles have become soot grey, not as pure and white as snow. Mr. Stork's black, half Chilean eyes twinkle, secure with tradition. He begins: "'Twas the night before Christmas…" He holds

himself still for a long pause, raising his finger in the air. I feel sweat drop from Josh's palm to mine. Mr. Stork leans forward to continue, "…and not a creature was stirring…" Josh squeezes. "Not even a mouse." We slide off our chairs and tiptoe to the back of the room. At the doorway I look over to find Dasche's face. To my surprise, his is the only one not turned toward Santa: he is looking, with glazed-over eyes, directly at me.

There's snowfall outside. Beside the windows, parallelograms of light illuminate the snow-covered path. Inside the rest of the school is huddled. Josh carries two overcoats, grabbed of pegs in the mudroom.

"I hope you're okay with this," he says.

I stick my tongue out in the darkness, trying for snowflakes.

"I really want it to be nice for you," he says.

I think of the love we've read in books. I've never read a love scene, never actual lovemaking. All I've read is yearning and disappointment, ecstasy feigned. What about the love?

We cut off the path. Our boots break shin-deep in the snow. Small balls of ice cling to the wool of my socks. At the steep of the hill, I have to step hard to keep from slipping back. I fall twice on my knees, but scuffle up quickly so Josh doesn't notice. I don't want him to think I'm in anyway incompetent. Not now. It's a hard slope. I want to look up at the stars, at the rising moon, but when I do, it's like the world's a teacup tipping over me backwards.

Josh stands with the tool shed door open.

"Let's stay outside," I say. "We can do it just behind."

Josh walks around. "Okay," he says, stopping at an arbitrary spot. "We'll do it right here. We need to stamp the snow."

There we are—already like a memory seen from the bow of a nearby tree: two figures marching erratically in the snow, unfamiliar to each other, separated from seventy students and Santa in the big house with its warm lights below. They're about to have sex and though one is very eager, both are afraid.

This stomping in the snow will forever be my memory of foreplay before doing it. The act itself is barely memorable.

Josh evaluates our palette, shoves his boot over a few remaining lumps. He flings an open an overcoat and waits for me to arrange it. He flings the second one half overlapping the first. I arrange this one too. The snow is very slow coming down, thinly dispersed, floating up at whim. I feel conscious of how the world might be perceived in terms of substance rather than absence, filler rather than empty air.

"We should get naked," he says.

"It's too cold," I say. "We can just take off what we have to."

"No, don't worry. You'll be under me."

I can't tell if he's looking out for us, over-prescribing how it will be to save us the awkwardness of fumbling through. Maybe this is nice of him.

With swollen fingers, I pick at the frosted laces of my boot. Right foot bare, I hop across the purloined coats. I trip on an underarm, fall hard on our frozen bed.

"Careful," he says.

Josh pulls my boot off, stands me up. He lifts my sweater and rakes his cold hands around my back, fingering my bra.

"It's in the front," I say.

He unhooks it, ferrets the straps down my arms, out the sleeves. The symbolic trophy hangs wiltingly from his fingertips, poly-satin glimmering in cold moonlight. I grab for it back, embarrassed by its smallness. Josh holds on and tries to drag me to him. The scrap of my lingerie stretches between us. I pull my hardest and together we end up butt-thumping onto our make-believe bed, ice clods from Josh's boots showering over us.

"Okay, get naked," he says.

"You."

Naked, he tells me I look beautiful. We're both covered in goose bumps. I slither onto the scratchy coats and flip an arm over my waist and pull as much of the coat as I can up against my backside. "I wish you could be my teacher," I say.

"I'm happy to be," he says, kneeling on all fours, taking his lips to my neck, my chest, my nipple.

Most of the time he is in me, in me and out of me and in me again, I am wondering if condoms are made to withstand this kind of temperature change, from below 42 to above 98, in, out, in, out. There is a bit of stinging pain, but for the most part just a numb, overstuffed sensation.

As he begins to move faster, like a spastic jackass, we hear the Christmas party streaming out: kids screaming "Vacation!" into the night. He comes to the rhythm of them, a chaotic diffusion. I hadn't expected much, but I guess I wanted something. I remind myself that this is just a prelude to the love I will have one day with someone I want.

He pulls out of me, says, "That was awesome!" I feel nothing but sunk. Mr. Stork's two greyhounds come flashing by. Circle us. Their fast-plowing paws upturn the snow.

When we return to campus after holiday, I feel sure the distance between Dasche and me will at last be surmountable. I spent nearly all vacation working on the assignment for his class: *In an essay (no more than five pages, please), discuss the conclusion of Conrad's* Heart of Darkness. *What do you think Conrad is trying to say? What is the purpose of Marlowe's journey? What does he discover? In other words, what is your understanding of "the heart of darkness?" Use passages from the work to support your argument (don't forget page numbers!) Due Monday after break, Enjoy.*

Writing fourteen and a half pages, I thought for sure I'd outdone myself. A masterpiece. I addressed a question I believe much more relevant: What is the meaning of life in the absence of love? I hadn't read the whole of Conrad's work so I couldn't very well do more than interpret the title which seemed straightforward to me, the heart of darkness being the absence of love. I extracted parts of the text that we'd read aloud in class. I inserted them here and there into my own composition, ending with a line of hope and recommendation: "The greatest thing one can do in a circumstance of unrequited love is persist."

Needless to say, I'm more than disappointed when, after giving big cheers to Natalia and Josh, Mr. Dasche slides my paper silently across the table, the last paper to be returned other than Jeremy's notoriously inadequate one-page drivel. I turn immediately to the last page of my manuscript. Perhaps Dasche has written praise in a secret note, so astounded, smitten really, he has to disguise his awe in front of the others. But his words are hard to make out, a quick shot in ugly handwriting. When he's impressed he writes in big curling letters; I know because Natalia always shows me. What litters my page is chicken scratch: *Too bad you've indulged yourself in length when there's nothing of substance on the page. It's all very convoluted. I'm not sure*

you've looked outside of yourself. You haven't dealt with Conrad. Next time, I'd prefer you stick to the page limit and try for what's assigned. –S.D.

Tears press in my eyes, but I don't cry. I have my own conviction of love for reassurance. I can feel Pirandello pressing his body over my foot. Jeremy crumples his paper and tosses it to the corner.

Dasche calls for a break. He says we'll read excerpts from the papers in ten minutes. Dasche leaves to smoke. I have to stay because I haven't seen Josh since we've returned to campus. As his girlfriend, I should have returned his phone calls and I should have waited in the student lounge until he arrived. Instead, I ran upstairs as soon as I saw his parents' station wagon pull up the drive. For a week, I've played sick, skipped classes, taken meals upstairs.

"What's your deal?" he says.

"What kind of greeting is that?"

"What kind of greeting is not seeing me?"

"Where?"

"Wherever."

"What do you want me to do? I assumed I'd see you."

"You're full of shit," he says. "And I'm not trying to be an asshole. I just want you to be straight with me." He looks sad. Truly sad. He's still wearing dumb overalls, which he thinks are cool. He wears one shoulder strap hanging.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I *am* happy to see you."

"I want to hold you." He moves hesitantly toward me.

Pirandello has his nose up my pant leg and is slaking the rim of my sock. I giggle. Josh takes this as a welcome and holds the back of my head. Bending my neck, he munches down my larynx like an angry animal.

The door swings open. "Not in here," Dasche says. "You two need to control yourselves." He winks at Josh. "There's a time and a place for that."

I refuse to acknowledge Dasche's interruption. For six weeks, he's refused to acknowledge me. "Don't let Mr. Dasche ruin our fun, Josh."

"I have to listen to Dasche. He's my main man." Josh salutes his mentor.

"Then you're a jerk," I say. Josh smiles confidently, amused, not as sensitive as a minute before. Sheldon stomps his feet in the doorway, his arm around Claudia. The rest of the class filters in, carrying snowmelt across the floor. Marcy is beaming. The cold shows in her face. Roxanne wears a white shetlandt coat. They both got A papers, I can tell.

"Read us your stuff, smart girl," Dasche nods at Marcy.

Marcy deflects, says she'd rather not. How demure.

"You're missing out on the glory," Dasche admonishes her. She tucks her chin at him.

"I'd like to read something," I say.

"Oh, yeah?" he says.

"Yeah."

"Well I hope it's not your whole paper, no offense." He's becoming mean.

"I want to read something from the book," I say, "because I didn't refer to the text enough in my paper."

"Alright, sounds good."

The room quiets as much as it ever does. Judd, an aspiring drummer, thumps his boot. I walk to the blackboard. Dasche angles his chair for me to get by. I open *Heart of Darkness.* Dasche leans back, removes his glasses. I imagine he enjoys looking at me, despite how he's dissembled what's between us. Now he doesn't have to pretend not to notice. I read, as if only to him: *I believed in him more than anyone on earth—more than his own mother, more than—himself. He needed me! Me! I would have treasured every sigh, every word, every sign, every glance.*

No one says anything. "Is that all?" Dasche asks. The heat of the stove is gathered around my head. I don't answer. "Do you want to tell us why you chose this part?"

"Because this part is true," I say.

"True how?" He's getting colder.

"It's just true. It's how the woman who loved Kurtz really felt."

Dasche shakes his head. He crosses his arms. "You're missing the point, Miranda." It seems like forever since I've heard Dasche say my name when he doesn't actually have to. "The crux of the story is the lie. The lie that Marlowe tells her defeats the love—that's why Marlow's last words 'The horror! The horror!' continue to resonate as true, even in the end." He leans back in his chair. "The Intended is blind. That's the great twist. Delusion is the best we can hope for, and that is what makes Conrad a master." Dasche rocks to and fro over the back legs of his chair, gripping the table with one hand.

"You'll never feel love, Mr. Dasche," I say. Natalia's jaw falls open. Josh's face screws up.

Dasche gives me a firm, expressionless stare. "I hope that's not what you wish for me."

I run out of the room, into the snow.

It snowed yesterday, has been falling heavily for days. Outside looks like a frozen ocean. Mounds of snow crest at the base of the trees, pothole around them.

Word got to Mr. Stork that I'd run crying from the forge. The school is protective of its students. We're supposed to be coddled—appropriately of course. Mr. Stork asked Mr. Dasche to check in with me and now we are.

Before he says a word I feel shy and ashamed, knowing I've loved him too much. I press my mittens against my cheeks.

"Miranda, you can't continue this," he says.

I lower my head. "You want me to stop caring for you?"

"I want you to act your age. You have a boyfriend—probably your first. Josh told me how much he likes you. He's a good kid. I imagine you like him too."

"No. I like you, Mr. Dasche."

Dasche looks away, out the window at his dog. I step beside him. The snow has deepened and is almost too much for Pirandello. His leaps are big and efforted. He is trying to find us, unsure of where we are. *In the forge, Pirandello, in the forge.*

"Miranda, we don't really have a choice in these things," he says.

"We see choices where we want to see them."

"That's what you think."

"Yes, it is."

Pirandello sinks in on the far side of a snow bank. His tail rises up and for a moment this is all we can see of him. Three tail flares and he comes crawling up through the bank, his front

paws battling a wash of snow. In the distance, Mr. Stork's dogs are playing. They swing fast, elegant circles: dark flashes on white. Piro pulls himself up and falls again.

"Help your poor dog, Mr. Dasche."

Dasche laughs a sardonic laugh. "I find it fascinating to watch the management of instability. He's a more interesting dog without that limb."

"That's sick."

He turns to me. His face is blue, weary-looking. The skin is cracking on his lips. "Miranda, maybe you're right. Maybe I am sick."

I am quiet. I meant something easy. Something you say. Now I feel myself shrinking away from his literalness.

"I think you're beautiful and that is sick."

"Oh—that's—"

"Sick and wrong."

I want to say something but I can't. I need a prompt, a better idea to go on. I say, "Say something else."

"You've got me thinking about you—you and all your talk. It's wrong that I think of you."

I can't look at his face. I'm the height of his chest and his body seems enormous. Maybe it's the layers of his clothes. His jacket stuffed with underclothes, too stuffed to be able to close: a thick plaid flannel, hung open; a white thermal with rows of indentations; a turtleneck sticking up; but of course I'm crazy. It's him standing there with his stupid words.

"Can I smoke in here?" he says. "You won't tell?"

I nod. He lights up and points out the window with his cigarette. The snow is coming down smoothly, at an angle.

"Miranda, you're going to be fine." I don't say anything. He finishes his cigarette, smoke fogging the glass. He turns to me, steps forward. He pushes hair from my face with the palm of his hand. He looks down at me, takes my head in against his chest.

That he says he's thought about me—I'm filled with a sad, sort of tricked feeling. "I'm kind of worried," I say.

"Sure you are," he says. He rubs my back, kindly.

Then, not really wanting to, but because I feel an obligation, an obligation perhaps only to my own promise, I lean my mouth up to kiss him. He lets us touch. His lips are dry. Our heads stay still. It is brief and then he pulls my face away. He shakes his head. "You are young and sweet, Miranda. You need to try to understand that love can not be a matter of will."

I feel myself able to be more moderate after this. I feel myself endowed with the graciousness of a new quiet faith. He's thought about me and that's enough. I don't even want to be with Dasche just yet.

In the spring, Irises break ground, and Daffodils. The pond ice melts and where students played broom hockey, we now dare each to jump in. Josh is more tolerable to me. I've even told him I love him. And it's true in a way, because I'm okay with things being a bit less absolute, more temporary. I don't feel I'm resigning myself because I still have the swell of my private thoughts. At night, I recall what Dasche said.

Then one day, Dasche isn't with us. And Roxanne is gone too. The night before, we could hear her in every room of the dorm and none of us knew what she cried about. We thought

it must be something with her family, that's where pain like that comes from. She didn't even pack her own things. Her roommate is asked to pack them and the school will send them on.

Mr. Stork interrupts us at dinner. He announces that Mr. Dasche has been asked to leave the school. He says it's come to the administration's attention that he'd pursued inappropriate relations with a student. That student—he didn't name names, but of course we knew from her absence—has chosen to leave the school too. Mr. Stork says he is sorry for any disruption this causes in the community. He expects to be able to cover Mr. Dasche's classes himself for the rest of the year. He encourages any student who feels disturbed by this news to come and talk to him individually.

It's too confusing for me to make sense of. It can't be. And then I wonder if what Dasche said to me was true. I wonder if I ever did have him thinking about me. I am just plain and young. Roxanne is beautiful, womanly. I forced myself on him. How humiliating. Maybe the words he said to me were just words, sentiments he was familiar with and could speak easily because he felt them all in relation to her. How could he have been with her? And when? And at whose will? What did she promise?

I can't bear anymore to be with Josh. I break up with him immediately. He says he's terribly confused and that I'm breaking his heart. Other girls console him. They ask why I'm being so harsh. Someone tells him my secret: *incest.* They tell him that maybe that's why losing it to him didn't mean much to me. He tells me this and asks if that explains it. "Does this have to do with what your brother did to you?" he says. We are outside by the swing on the Oak tree. The air is warm and the day is pleasant and I am trying very much to heal, to forget how this news of Mr. Dasche pains me. I don't care about what my brother did, but when Josh says this I

slap him. I become the only girl at school who has slapped a boy. It's my new identity. I forget ever having vowed to love.

After slapping Josh, I become inward and distant. No one tries to know me anymore. I don't go to talk circle. I lose friends. I begin to wear dark clothes, long skirts and drape-sleeved shirts. I wear black make-up, like one of those misfit angry girls you see at every school. But I am not one of them, in my mind I am not. Somewhere there's a girl who's tattooed "Life is pain," on her wrist, using her own needle. I don't ascribe. I know I am shut down, biding time until something brings the good feeling back. I feel vehemently that teachers shouldn't date students. That's the one thing I'm sure of. I could start a campaign. I do better in school because now I read and write papers about dark and horrible things under a cold, numb light.

There are two years like this.

At college, my need for isolation wears off. No one knows anything about me and there's safety in that. I am able to change my clothes, adopt a lighter persona, wear pastels from time to time. I don't pursue relationships, but a young man pursues me. It doesn't turn out well—he's studies biology as a way to entertain animal fetishes I don't understand; in short order I believe he's a deeply maladapted individual and I tell him as much—but he's broken the ice. I begin to enjoy boyfriends to a degree. Each time I discover its not the young man in particular I enjoy. What's enjoyable in every case, while it lasts, is the pretense of love. It's possible in a single evening to ride pretty high, proclaim a great deal, feel the sensational squirmy endorphins that come with naming a thing great even if that thing—the enthusiastic talk, soon-repeated sex, single smoky dinner—is not felt to be great in the least. Sometimes they act shocked when it's over and I feel a bit cruel in stepping so quickly around the corner. They're often confused that I

have no need to revisit all that went wrong and all that was—as they insist—so, so right. What confuses me is that any of them could think the act of it was real. I was foolish once and I'm not foolish now. I think for sure this is the case. I don't want to be mean, but if they haven't learned to see even the acting in themselves then it's time they must.

One man too many cried too hard. Two in a row recommended I see a counselor for emotional disconnect. It's not possible to make the promises I've made and suddenly turn off like I do, they say. I don't know which you to believe, they say. More than three in a row begin to speak about more than one me. I don't see a counselor, but I also don't see men. Not anymore.

I am alone. Very alone starting my second year out of college. I return to reading. Being alone and reading, I begin to have memories. I read a story by Chekhov. The story called "A Joke." It is a simple story and most of it saccharin, but it brings back the chance of longing. A girl and a man go sledding in winter and the girl hears the words "I love you," paired with her name. She doesn't know if it is the wind or the man articulating what she hears and she hopes and hopes for it to be the man, not the illusion of wind. It is difficult for her to know and terrifying for her not to know. I do not feel exactly this because I am numb, am accustomed to feeling numb, disengaged from hope. What's more, I have no one whispering in my ear. But reading the story, I am reminded.

The memories become vivid. I walk down the street and as long as there's no need for me to know just where I am or what I am doing in the moment, I slip back in time, inhabit a past which feels no longer to belong to me. I am at the school again with Natalia and Marcy and even Roxanne—Roxanne with her sunray long hair and glowing dark skin, whose recalled image for years has made me unable to feel—and with the other girls too, in a circle at night in candlelight.

We're huddled close, all knees and dangling hair, elbows knocking, around a linty square hole in the floor from which we've carefully and quietly removed the heating grate. Below us, in the basement rec-room, through the hole in our floor, we hear a drunken Mr. Taft relieve his grief over an old lost love to an all-ears, also drunken Mr. Dennis. We are well attuned to loves forsaken, but deprived of details. We hope for some word on the quality of a prior love. In competition to have her ear the lowest, Natalia singes her hair in the candle flame. It's the smell of death and we muffle our coughs. The balls knock, two clunk as they sink. Mr. Taft says, "Loving her, I never had a thought that wasn't a feeling."

It is a strange journey, one I can't entirely own. I am skeptical. Remembering is less than living because I don't believe every word. My allegiance to the wives has grown. They husbands may never have loved.

More memories come. Memories that aren't just happenings, but feelings. I see myself walking on a hill, and I feel what I felt then. Not a single emotion, but an entire source of vitality. That absolute readiness to love. A girl consumed with love. Separating herself from the rest. Alone on the hill, ready to love. A girl consumed with love. Why does she want so much to love. What might love give her? What does it save her from? I can't see clearly into her world. She is alone on the hill, ready to love and it feels like bliss. Bliss to her, she's sure. She is safe and sure, encapsulated in memory with no connection to me now.

The memory of a girl consumed by love—what love? what in actuality?—presses on me. I cross at crosswalks when the walk signal indicates. The symbol of a man with legs astride flashes: I walk. She is there with me, walking. I am young still. I am in my twenties. I am twenty-six. That seems too young to be haunted. I am haunted by a former self. I am too young to be haunted by a former self. I am haunted by *what was* and *what has been.* I am haunted by

the green of the grass, the slope of the hill, the weather of the day. Young people draped over grass. Unopened books. Someone, anyone, leaping to pull high pears. Cows at a distance, pausing. The inspiration behind a vow. And somewhere, buried, history growls deeply.

Today I am standing in the narrow, crowded, Used Literature aisle of Green Apple Books on Clement Avenue in the Richmond neighborhood of San Francisco. I've pulled a copy of *Breakfast at Tiffany's,* knowing I won't buy it because I already own it, but having suddenly wanted to get a fix of clarity around the aimlessness of my own life by way of dipping into Miss Golightly's.

The bookshop suffers used-book moldiness. I seem to have a sixth-sense for seeing psocids burrowed into bindings, traipsing between pages. I stoop myself on a stack of books on the floor, letting my knees and feet wedge out. Every so often another customer mumbles "Excuse me" before taking a demonstratively high step over my toes. Like Miss Golightly, I feel entitled to be just as I am precisely because I can not know who I am or to what better place I belong. I do not know even how very much I'd like to regain the hope of a saving love, that good charge of faith which provided me emotional buoyancy through early high school. If I could know, I would deny it.

I have just settled into a middle-of-the-book passage—Miss Golightly's slanted explanation of true-loving the rich Brazilian, her *I'd rather have cancer than a dishonest heart*—when the voice of the "Excuse me" over my feet is not one like all the rest. Hearing it, I'm struck with all range of emotions.

There they are: bulky-toed, ratty leather boots, always his style. I am too astonished to feel I have a voice or that I can raise my head, but somehow I both raise my head and say, "Mr. Dasche."

He is there before me, but only his backside. His shoulders have grown, his worn-pocket blue jeans fit the same. He has a stack of books, of course, shoved under one arm. With his other hand he traces a finger along the shelf in front of him. Bookish as he is, he has trouble with the alphabet. I repeat myself, "Mr. Dasche?"

His glasses catch the light, make a wash of his eyes, but I can feel the steadiness of them. His eyes were always this way, making translations into his brain with unflinching, unrevealing, half-soldierly, half-scholarly regimentation. Sitting low, eyebrows up, forehead trembly, I wonder if he's able to recognize me. Waiting, I feel like an unowned dog. With his voice come all the old assurances. "That wouldn't be who I think it is," he says.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"Buying books. And now I guess I'm running into you."

"Do you even know who I am?"

"Well, I think you're that young girl all grown up."

"*Which* young girl?"

"Clearly the one with the feisty personality," he says. "I think you used to claim all sorts of things. You gave me a pretty hard time back then. Apparently you liked me and I kind of liked you."

I decide to match his front with equal brazenness: "First of all, I didn't just claim things. And do you think *that girl all grown up* would give you any less of a hard time now?"

"I guess not," he says and holds a hand out. Alive again, my mind whirls through all histories of romance. I leave time and space, the mustiness of the bookshop, the psocid infestation invisibly about. The green hills rise. And as suddenly I come back again, ready to make something of contemporary life. Determined even.

I rise close to him. A stranger—her hip dropping impatiently—waits for us to rearrange. We shrug against the books. I feel us as a *we*, surprised and stimulated. A great thing becomes apparent. In both our lives, something has been absent. A wanting of love is where it's at. There's no telling how I can know that we share this. We're ready to break with caution.

Dasche pays for his bundle: along a novel, he's selected a book on the history of happiness (Kilmt women with their curlicue hair lending erotic vibes to the cover), another on the evolution of consciousness (white blankness). We walk at first without asking one another if we have any place to go, if walking in one direction or another makes better sense. We avoid practical questions. We make dead end comments. Dasche says, "You've grown taller." I say, "You still wear ratty boots." We walk five blocks or six and Dasche says, "I have to eat. Are you going to eat with me?"

On Geary, we press into Brothers Korean Barbeque. It is crowded, but we are the only two-top and so slip by crowds of four and six into a firebox table still messy with banchan bowls, rib bones, beer rings, charred fat on the grill. The place smells of sweet and spicy death and by contrast it is alive with the noise of multiple languages.

When Dasche and I speak, we sound flat. He runs his hand against the linoleum wall, faux wood paneling. "Classy place, huh? Are you all classy now?" It seems the classiest, but least snotty thing to do is ignore the question. I cast my eyes on a soft-focus poster of a small, unspecial bridge above his hand. "Must be in Korea."

The waiter comes. Dasche points to the menu and mispronounces everything. The waiter points back and says: "You want to order pork and boiled eggplant and stir-fried fern shoots. Everything comes with bachan condiments. You'll like mul kimchi and maybe small bowls of soondobu. Also, I can bring you bellflower root dish and everything served with lettuce wraps. And to drink?"

When the waiter leaves, Dasche brings his hand to his glasses. He says, "So it seems like you're not married and maybe like you don't have a boyfriend."

"It can seem I always have a boyfriend."

"Right. I imagine you would," Dasche says.

"And are *you* married?" I ask.

The way he says no, I know Dasche doesn't want to be judged for failures at intimacy.

Dasche pokes the raw pork when it comes. He lifts a top piece, discovers it is ribboned to the next and the next. He raises his hands high over his head until, about five chunks down, the fat tether breaks. The sections he has pierced with a stick spring toward my nose. We spread the pile and grill it until the fat turns tar-colored and clings to the rungs. The grill smoke wafts through my hair and films my skin.

Dasche offers me first dibs at a condiment bowl of dried fish, smaller than minnows. There are maybe two or three hundred of them. I dig my fingers in to extract a pinch. They still have eyeballs. Each of these fish had a small, stark existence with wide open eyes. In the bowl together, there are countless eyes. I would refrain from the fish sprinkle, I think, except it seems sensuous to swallow ten, twenty or thirty little fish in one bite, amid charcoal smoke, across from my love object, the handsome teacher Mr. Seb Dasche. And that's exactly what he is—an object, a thing, a wonderful dashing thing that me and my friends used to talk about, talk about what he

might be like, what he might do, and dirty as we were, graphic as we might be, he was still some version of "handsome," some version of his own syllabic punctuation: the "handsome Mr. Seb Dasche." Not quite dashing, no, and not quite Daschle, or—what did he think now, me the little flirt, after gorging on little fish, guzzling a dozen strange condiments, chim-chic and bok kow, and ranmadan, and goopa—whatever those thick cubes of white gelatine are called—he would of course expect I might swallow the strangest condiment of all, down at the Ocean Beach parking lot, looking at the retaining wall, because that's all you can see there, in his car, while I saw far less, bumping my head against his steering wheel, him thinking I might think of Father Zosima's uncondional love, or Marlow's lie, that I would think something other that what it means that he no longer drives a stick-shift. And I would give him one, because then I could report to my friends that love was true, that it was possible, and that of course, Mr. Dasche had always been sick.

Tonight, after walking home to my studio, we make love. I think I will call it making love. We take each other's clothes off still standing. We lie across my bed. He turns us and slides us. I am neither passive nor active, but like an ocean swimmer. He doesn't seem to have a goal. He has skill. I should love just this, exactly as it is now, but an old fear comes up. I ask him to come inside me. He rolls us again. His shoulders bridge his weight as he rises and I turn under. His hands grasp and release. He is the machine of the ocean; he is the machine of the shore. I say again, *please, I want you inside me.* He pulls out and get off me, sits at the edge of the bed. I lie on the flat mattress. "I can't do that," he says. "I have a girlfriend who wants me to marry her. We've been together two years and I've always broken up after two years. I have to try to make it work. If I can't sustain a relationship, who am I?"

I think, “Jesus Christ, haven’t we gotten beyond that,” but I don’t say anything. I lie there for a moment thinking of my next move, looking over my naked body, down all of me.

Vita

I was born in New York City in 1974 and moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1997. I spent close to a decade in community service, working as a child advocate, a homeless shelter case manager, a domestic violence counselor and a progressive services support provider for people with mental disabilities. I began writing in 2001 and am grateful for support from *The Writing Seminars* program at Johns Hopkins University, The University of Tennessee, The Millay Colony, The New York Mills Cultural Retreat Center and The Jerome Foundation. "Before all the Men Have Landed" won second-prize in the 2007 John C. Hodges short-story contesy. In the fall of 2008, I will begin the PhD program in Creative Writing at the University of Tennessee. I live in Knoxville, TN with my partner, Otis Haschemeyer, our dog, Zuka, some koi fish and, at present, a little bundle in gestation we hope will be born.