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What Slides From the Pain Chamber

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WHAT SLIDES FROM THE PAIN CHAMBER

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

Megan Denise Henson

Director: Dr. Andrew Doolen

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

WHAT SLIDES FROM THE PAIN CHAMBER

A collection of short stories and one novella featuring women's issues, fairy tales, a coming-of-age story, and a pregnancy that turns out differently than expected upon delivery.

KEYWORDS: Coming-of-age, Fairy Tale, Women's Issues, Eating Disorders, Pain

WHAT SLIDES FROM THE PAIN CHAMBER

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For Michael

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Abalone

The Count had a wife, three daughters, and one son; but the tuberculosis swept through and death stole the Countess with its cold, strange hand. The Count hurriedly took a black slave woman from Trinidad to look after the children. The slave woman took great pleasure in scaring the children in the Count's absence with stories of the soucouyant—the vampiress of the French Caribbean.

“The soucouyant,” she said in her heavy accent while the children gathered around her by the fire, “lives on the outskirts of town as an old woman by day. At night she sheds her skin and preys upon the people of the town. The sunlight turns her into a ball of flame, thus she must return home and don her skin before dawn. This constant changing in and out of her skin causes her to become very wrinkled.” She pauses. “I bet it’s the soucouyant who killed your mother. You say she was vomiting blood?”

The children nodded, wide-eyed and tearful.

“Ah, maybe your mother had already become a soucouyant by the time she died.”

The children could not sleep at night and the eldest daughter went to the Count and told him what the slave woman said. The Count grew furious and raped the slave woman to punish her and, so, she became pregnant. The seasons passed and the slave woman went into labor they day of the winter solstice. The Count summoned the mid-wife.

The birth of the child was met by the mid-wife's screams, for the baby had skin as white as snow—the daughter of a black woman--thick, black hair, crimson

lips, and fangs dripping with blood. The Count tried to seize the child, but before he could grab it the baby turned into a crow and flew out the window.

The Count burned the slave woman at the stake and began hunting in the deep, black forest for the crow girl so that the forest floor became littered with the carcasses of the crows he shot with his bow and arrow. Yet, all of his daughters died of tuberculosis, and when his son grew old enough the Count taught him how to hunt. They hunted together in the forest for many years while the tuberculosis continued to massacre the town folk, and the Count went mad, convinced the blood-sucking crow girl was the soucouyant prophesied by the slave woman; and it was this monster that caused his daughters to drown in their own blood. He could not reconcile the fact that the crow girl was also his daughter, and that violence begets violence. The puncture of rape, the puncture of fangs.

So the Count executed every old woman in the town in the hopes that he would catch the soucouyant in her day skin, but the illness continued. It seemed the town was in a veritable hell and had been for years.

Unable to sleep one night, the Count's son, who was now quite grown, ventured out for a moonlit walk. He found himself by the stream in the forest and halted so that he nearly fell face down in the dirt and had to steady himself by grabbing a tree trunk. Before him, bathing in the stream, was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. She had long, thick, black hair—so black that the moonlight shone on it like an abalone shell or labradorite. It covered her buttocks. Her arms were thin and looked like white porcelain. But something was wrong. It took him a long time to come out of his erotic trance and realize what it was: it was freezing;

there was snow on the ground, but this fair maiden bathed in the stream without even flinching. In fact she seemed perfectly comfortable.

The young man tried to figure out what to do. He could take her very easily. She was all alone. Then, he decided, watching her step out of the stream with long, white legs, the build-up—the anticipation—was sometimes the best part, because it made the taking all the sweeter. He would come back tomorrow night. And the next if he had to. He would wait to take her until she turned toward him enough so that he could see her face, for though she seemed lovely, her face could be hideous, as he had seen many a fair maiden smile only to reveal rotten teeth.

Quietly, he retraced his steps, his virile member throbbing almost in agony.

The Count began to notice that his son was distracted. Their days of hunting together only brought strained conversation, and his son seemed tired. The Count decided to spy on him.

Sure enough, that very night, the Count watched from the window as his son left the palace. He rushed down to follow him into the forest. Soon, he stopped, finding his son watching a beautiful woman bathing in the ice-cold stream. The Count realized with glee that this was the crow girl, and his son's fatigue was probably the result of this soucouyant's bloodlust. Yes, yes, his son probably didn't remember her attacks, as women were known for their sneakiness, and this girl could make any young man forget everything but her beauty.

The Count quivered his arrow, took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and let go. The arrow struck the girl through the heart and she fell.

His son cried out and ran to her, pulling her out of the stream. He pushed her hair back from her face and found that her crimson lips were closed; her long, dark eyelashes sweetly caressed her cheeks. She was everything he'd ever dreamed of. He cried like a wounded animal, howling at the moon.

The Count, disappointed in his son, knew there was only one thing that could remove this pitiful sight before him. He quivered another arrow. It struck his son through the heart.

The young man's blood mixed in the ground with that of his half-sister, and from the ground sprung billions and billions of mosquitoes. They flew at the Count and ate him alive.

Heart of Eve

This is Time kissing her neck.

Imagine Adam when he first saw Eve post-apple. Imagine how he wondered—how he grew curious for her body without understanding why, and how this caused him to become curious about his own body.

And picture Eve and how frightened she must have been when that part of Adam grew—that part that had always dangled so flaccidly for nothing. Because now Eve panicked, realizing Adam must be very ill indeed.

Yet she, too, felt ill—something she couldn't quite consciously grasp, just below the surface.

Then God shoved them out of the garden, and Adam landed on top of Eve, and they figured out the mechanics, there, in the grass outside the gate. Eve became pregnant.

And killed herself.

But maybe she didn't kill herself. Maybe she was one of those motherly types.

Maybe, just maybe, she knew she'd created a new life, and she didn't need some stupid, boring god after all.

Reflection

“Melody, you’re a cold fish.”

These were the words my fiancé Brian used to break our engagement this evening.

And he’s right. I am a cold fish, but I’m not like that on purpose. It’s just that I can never seem to *feel* anything. My brain is numb. (Is *that* an emotion?)

Tonight I do what I always do when I think I should be able to feel something and can’t: I sit, naked, in front of my mirror and study my body as if there were a secret way to break through it and reveal my emotions. Maybe if I knock on my chest. Or open my eyes wide enough.

I used to do this mirror thing as a kid, always trying to get a sense of myself by studying one feature at a time: long, blonde hair, blue eyes. As a fitness instructor I have a long, thin physique.

I am fractured like a Picasso painting. My emotions, I’m sure, are floating around in my intestines somewhere or inside my veins. Maybe they’re not quite *inside* my brain, but in my cerebrospinal fluid, crashing *against* my brain like ocean waves against a beach.

I run my hands over my body, feeling every tendon. Maybe I became a fitness instructor because the physical burning of muscle is almost like an emotion. Anger, perhaps? Or anxiety?

I *think* I loved Brian, yet I can’t seem to relate to the feeling of love. I guess it doesn’t really matter now, anyway.

The phone rings and startles me. I get up, feeling foolish answering the phone naked.

“May I speak to Melody Flanders?” a female voice asks. It sounds vaguely familiar.

“This is Melody.”

“Melody, this is Cindy Paine from Iron Aerobics—“

I hold my breath. This woman was in my phone interview. I’ve been waiting for this call.

“—We really enjoyed interviewing you and we’d like to offer you the Master Instructor position. We’ve found a producer here in Hawaii that’s willing to do the first video. Pineapple Productions...I know, it’s kind of a lame name, but they’re highly reputable. What do you think?”

“I want the job,” I say, my heart beating like a hummingbird’s.

“Great! Do you think you can be here by August first?”

“Yes,” I say, looking doubtfully at all the junk in my apartment.

“Alright. I’ll call you again next week with updates and to check and see how you’re doing.”

“Okay.”

We say goodbye, and I go back to my mirror, lost in thought. Iron Aerobics is a new exercise program, and I was one of their hired guinea pigs last year. I flew to Oahu to audition for the video, and it paid off.

This program is going to knock Jane Fonda on her ass.

I have seen the frustration crease women's faces as they go to aerobics classes day after day and see no results. Iron Aerobics adds dumbbells to the aerobic workout, and when I did the choreography the founder mailed me, my rail-thinness turned into hard, lean muscle.

I imagine that there would be joy associated with that, but again, I'm numb.

I go to bed wondering how I'm going to get moved to Hawaii—almost 6,000 miles away—by August first.

#

I sell everything. My mother works at a high-end consignment shop, and she knows lots of places that buy used furniture, and the stuff they don't take can be donated, and I can write it off as a tax deduction. The thought of Hawaii keeps me motivated to keep getting rid of stuff that I don't truly want to get rid of, but can't take with me, one of those things being my mattress. It cost a lot of money, but I need a good mattress with the sore muscles I get from my job.

Cindy follows up with me a couple of weeks later. She asks what she can do to help.

"Find me an apartment," I tell her. I give her my monthly budget for rent based on my new salary.

"You trust me that much, huh?" she laughs.

"No," I tease, "but what choice do I have?"

The cost of living on the island of Oahu is very high, and I worry about ending up in a dump in some bad part of town like Hotel Street on *Hawaii Five-O*

where the pimps get girls hooked on heroin and they have to become prostitutes in order to get a fix.

Worry. Is *that* an emotion?

One day during an outing with Mom, we walk past a shop in Newport that claims it has a psychic.

“Wanna stop?” Mom asks.

“Sure.” I’m kidding, but she pulls me inside. It smells of incense and it is so small it’s hard not to knock stuff over with our purses.

“My daughter would like a reading,” Mom says to the woman at the counter. I balk and throw her a look. I didn’t volunteer for this.

“All right, but you get to pay for it,” I tell her through clenched teeth.

“If you ladies go up the stairs and turn right, you’ll find Sheila, our psychic,” the shopkeeper says.

The stairs are carpeted and steep, and I expect to find a cackling woman wearing a robe and pointed hat, but Sheila is middle-aged and very normal looking.

“Hi, I’m Melody,” I shake her hand.

She smiles. “Nice to meet you. Please, have a seat.”

Mom steps back awkwardly as though the woman needs some air or something.

“Now, what question would you like to ask?” she says.

“Question?” I am not prepared. I look over my shoulder at Mom. She shrugs.

“Yes. You won’t get any answers from your guides unless you ask a question,” Sheila says.

“Okay.” I bite my lip, and suddenly a question pops into my mind. “Why can’t I seem to *feel* anything? Why am I so emotionally numb?”

Sheila nods. There’s nothing in her face that makes me think she’s judging me. She leans over and starts digging through a bag until she pulls out a deck of cards.

“I think the Chakra cards are a good place to start,” she says. She opens the box and dumps the cards out. “We begin with a prayer.”

I was not expecting this.

“We ask for wisdom and guidance from our friend and teacher Jesus Christ. We ask that Melody’s angels join us and move us toward an answer to her question. We thank God and Goddess for your blessings. Amen.” She turns to me. “I will now ask the question and shuffle the deck. “

She proceeds to do this, then lays the deck in front of me and says, “You ask your question and shuffle the deck.”

I must look foolish asking the air why I can’t experience emotions, and I admire Mom for not laughing.

When I finish shuffling, Sheila tells me to pull the top card. It has a woman sitting cross-legged with a glowing red spiral in the vicinity of her intestines. It says, underneath the drawing, “EARLY TRAUMA/EMOTIONAL REPRESSION.”

“Hmm,” Sheila says, frowning. “Melody, did you have any kind of traumatic experience as a child that was not dealt with properly?”

“No,” I say, lying.

“Have you ever had any kind of unhealthy relationship with food or using food as a method of control?”

“No.”

I catch her glancing at my arms. I look down and notice their muscularity even with my hands relaxed in my lap.

“According to this card, you are stuffing your emotions deep in your core. Have you ever struggled with belly aches or constipation?”

My neck gets hot. “Yeah. I’ve struggled with constipation my whole life.”

“What you need to do is learn how to mediate with your hand on your lower abdomen. Feel the rumbling as your body works food through your digestive system. You may remember something that really upset you as a child. Maybe you were bullied or something. Eventually, through meditation, your emotions will begin to spill forth, probably in an inappropriate way. But as you get used to it, you will adjust and feel like a whole human being again.”

I stare at her.

“Okay?” she says.

I nod and thank her. When I turn around, Mom is standing in the doorway, pale.

“Are you okay?” I ask her. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

She smiles wanly. “I’m fine. Just hungry.”

She pays for the session downstairs. When we get in the car, I laugh. “What a load of rubbish.”

“Yeah,” Mom says.

I can't help noticing that she doesn't say much the rest of the afternoon, and her silence sticks to my ribcage like spoiled meat all through the evening, causing me to mess up and give late commands during my step aerobics class.

#

Hawaii. I am stiff and sore getting off the plane. I flew overnight from Northern Kentucky to Las Angeles and then from Las Angeles to Honolulu.

The door opens and I wiggle into line in the aisle. When it's my turn to exit I almost forget to walk down the steps because the view is so beautiful. Beyond the airport are lush, green rolling hills. There are high-rise apartments, palm trees, and a salty breeze. It's sunny, but there is fog around the hills I take a deep breath. The air is not so polluted here as it is back home.

I spy a short, plump woman on the pavement holding a cardboard sign with my name on it.

"Cindy?" I ask.

She smiles. "Oh, I could've picked you out of all these people and never had to bring this sign!"

"Why's that?"

"Because you're the tallest, blondest, leanest woman in this whole airport."

I laugh and think that surely I am feeling joy. Surely.

"Come on," she says. "Let's go get your luggage."

As we're waiting for my suitcases, Cindy excitedly talks my ear off. "You can get a rental car here at the airport, and then you can follow me to your apartment. I have plenty of maps for you and information about Waianae and the island of Oahu.

And then you can take a nap, and I can pick you up at about five for dinner, and then I'll show you the studio..."

"I'm hungry," I say. My intestines have been a wreck with all this traveling, and I was barely able to eat on either plane, but the fresh air seems to be doing me good. I could really use a laxative, too.

"Oh, well, we could go out for lunch, or you can eat what's in your refrigerator," she says.

"You filled my fridge for me?" I am amazed.

She nods. "It was a bit of a gamble because I don't know what you like, but..."

I don't let her finish. I grab her and pull her into a hug. "Thank you so much!"

Gratitude. Is *that* an emotion?

#

My apartment is...well, it's affordable, which is the important part. Cindy warns me that my neighborhood (I use that term loosely) is not the safest place on Oahu.

"I'm sorry," she says. "It was the best I could do with your salary. But, here's the good news. You are within walking distance of several beautiful beaches that the tourists don't know about. It's like you have the best pieces of Oahu right around the corner despite living in a dump." She sounds apologetic.

"It's okay," I say, cheerfully, wondering what I'm doing here. "No more winters. And I'll fix the place up. It'll be very pretty when I'm through. Let me just ask you. What's the crime rate around here?"

Cindy sighs. “As long as you’re not part of the mafia, a prostitute, or on dope, you should be fine. I wouldn’t draw attention to yourself, though. Don’t go showing off fancy jewelry and ball gowns.”

I give her a look. “Not draw attention to myself?”

She looks at me a long time and we burst into hysterics. I am 5’10” tall, 135 pounds with long blonde hair, big blue eyes, and the body of a gymnast. Draw attention to myself? I might as well have a stamp across my forehead that says, “Doll baby.”

“You’re the prettiest haole on Oahu, that’s for sure. I’d dress conservatively. That’s your best bet.”

I like the way this woman looks. She has big breasts and hips that remind me of my mother’s own soft body. Me, I have small breasts. I don’t even bother wearing a bra, which was fine in the seventies, anyway. I wonder if Brian broke up with me because of my small breasts. Do I look like a boy? Maybe I don’t look the way I think I do.

I ask Cindy for the time so I can re-set my watch, and then she leaves so I can take a nap. She put a twin bed in the corner; there’s a small bathroom, a tiny closet. It’s not really so much a closet as a little cut out in the wall with a curtain in front of it. The most important part of the room is a full-length mirror with a rug in front of it. She must have known that I would want to practice my choreography, but she doesn’t know about my obsession with looking at myself through my Picassoesque lens.

Right now I don't feel like dealing with my fractured reflection. I lock the door, shut the blinds on the two windows and lie down on the bed, doubting that I'll actually fall asleep.

I'm wrong.

#

Cindy takes me to dinner at a Japanese restaurant somewhere along Highway 99. We eat sushi and watch the koi swim in a fountain near our feet. They are so beautiful, ranging in oranges and grays.

"No two koi are alike," Cindy says.

"They look so sacred," I say.

She smiles. "They cost a pretty penny, too. There was a problem with people stealing koi from a place like this and selling them to private owners for a knockdown price." She slurps her pop. "But that hasn't been an issue for a few years now."

My stomach is still in fits because of the air travel, but I force myself to eat because I'm going to have to recover my strength quickly. I have to go to work in the morning.

Cindy drives me to the studio, which is located about ten minutes from my apartment. I'm surprised to see lights on inside.

"I told Tina that we'd be here around six-thirty. She's eager to meet you in person," Cindy says, reading the expression on my face.

She unlocks the door and we walk inside Pineapple Productions Studio.

The set is breath taking—nothing like I expected. It looks like an art museum. There are paintings on the wall and nude, muscular statues like Michelangelo carved.

The floor is carpeted and rather than mats, Iron Aerobics has laid down a small carpet for each person in the video. The instructor's carpet is obvious because it's right in front of the mirror and elevated by a platform.

"You like it?" an alto voice asks.

I look around and see Tina, the founder of Iron Aerobics, coming toward me.

"It's incredible!"

"We've also orchestrated groundbreaking music. It's a series of the usual 32-count blocks, but we've composed it so that it's much more exciting than your standard exercise music. Less synthesizer and more instrumentation. I think you're going to love it," she says.

"Wow! I just can't believe it!" I say.

She and Cindy smile, looking at each other with a kind of knowing.

"What's that about?" I point to a microphone hanging down by a long wire from the ceiling.

"Oh, we couldn't figure out a way to mic you with the jumping around you're going to be doing," Tina says.

I nod and yawn before I realize I'm doing it.

"Alright, time for bed," Cindy says, motherly. I laugh and apologize.

"Please, no apology necessary. You've come almost 6,000 miles in less than 48 hours. Of course you're exhausted. Go home, get a goodnight's sleep, and we'll see you at seven in the morning. Oh, and by the way, the Hawaiian sunrise is a beautiful thing. Make sure you leave a little extra time to see it," Tina says. She turns and walks away.

Cindy takes me back to my new apartment. As I get out of the car, she says, “Do you remember how to get here?”

“Yes,” I say, confident. It’s not very far and pretty straightforward.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes,” I smile. “And thank you for everything you’ve done for me. I’m so grateful.”

“Hey,” she says, “I’m just as excited about this thing as you are.” She pats her belly. “Maybe it’ll be a miracle for me.”

“You’re lovely the way you are,” I tell her.

I can tell she doesn’t believe me, but she drives away with a smile.

I walk upstairs and unlock the door, unpack my alarm clock and my clothes, making a note to myself to buy a bureau. Leotards are difficult to hang because of their slippery material.

Once I get everything relatively unpacked and take a shower, I feel a little more at home.

Still, Kentucky is a long way from this paradise.

#

After a fitful night, I get up a little before my alarm goes off and use the hotplate to fix a cup of coffee. I also make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and take all of it out to the fire escape to watch the sunrise.

Oh, it is beautiful! I think that I should feel some sort of contentment or thrill. As usual, my brain is numb except for my thoughts and observations, which are the only things that keep me human.

I dress in a light pink leotard, white leg warmers, sweats on over top, and brand new white sneakers—the wardrobe criteria was sent to me in a letter right after I accepted the job—and put my hair in a braid. The studio will put make-up on me, which is rather silly because I noticed the studio was not air conditioned, and I'll just sweat it all off anyway. I pack a lunch of deli meat, vegetables, and a couple of water bottles. Cindy was good to stock my fridge.

I get a block from the studio when my light turns green, and as I start to go, a car plows into me from out of nowhere.

#

WAENAE, OAHU—A woman identified as Melody Flanders was struck during a hit-and-run accident at about six forty-five this morning on Alimihi Street. Flanders suffered severe injuries including a concussion, a crushed disk in her neck, and deep cuts to her face and skull. She is at Hoomaluhia General Hospital. There has been no word as to when she will be released.

#

Three months later

My whole life is ruined, and Mom has to fly back to the mainland because her parents don't get around very well, and she has to be near them.

I am suffering from incredible migraines and pain all through my back and arms. The doctor said that all of this is because of the crushed disk in my neck.

I do not get to make the fitness video.

My grandparents are sending me money to pay my rent and buy my groceries until I'm healthy enough to fly home.

Cindy has made it her mission to be my friend, and she helps me with a lot of stuff. She felt so bad for me when Tina announced that, because of Pineapple Productions' timeline, she would have to bring in a replacement instructor.

Cindy says she is not nearly as pretty as me.

"I'm okay," I tell her. "I just don't know what to do. I don't know how to get better. The pain is killing me, even though I'm now on a million prescriptions."

She sits on my bed, drinking coffee, still breathing a little hard from bringing my groceries up the two flights of stairs to my apartment. She regards me with unease. "You know, it's eerie."

"What's eerie?" I lift my head from the pillow, briefly, and regret it.

"How calm you are about all of this. It's so eerie. I mean, you haven't cried or anything."

"If I were to cry, my migraines would get worse," I tell her, closing my eyes. "This is just the way it is."

I hear her sigh. "You know, you could go to a kahuna."

"A what?"

"A kahuna. A Hawaiian priest. They're known for being very powerful, and they've been known to help, and hurt, a lot of people."

"Like who?" I open my eyes.

"Well, my friend Leilani went to a kahuna when she was pregnant because her doctor told her that her baby was going to be born with Down Syndrome. She went

once a week until the baby was born. And you know what? Her baby was fine. And then she went every week for a month thereafter to thank the gods for the wonderful work they did,” she smiles.

“Do you know where this kahuna lives?” I ask.

“Oh, yes. He doesn’t have a phone, but I can drive you there. It’s not far. I think it will be worth it if you think you can make the trip.” She finishes putting away the groceries.

“Okay,” I say.

The kahuna lives outside of Waianae in a grass shack. He comes to the screen door in what looks to be a sheet. He has leaves tied around his head, thick white eyebrows, and a walking stick with a crystal ball on the top of it.

“How can I help you?” he asks in his thick Hawaiian accent.

“Kahuna, my friend here was in a terrible automobile accident, and she has gotten no relief for the pain from her doctors. We were wondering if there was anything you can do to help,” Cindy says.

“You brought another one of your friends here,” the kahuna says, “and the gods were good to her, were they not?”

Cindy smiles. “Yes, they were.”

“You believe in the power of the ancient rites, haole?”

“I do,” she says.

“Okay. You stay outside while I sit with your friend,” he tells her.

We step back so the kahuna can open the door. Cindy gives my arm an encouraging squeeze and goes out to walk among the beautiful trees and flower surrounding the shack.

“What is your name?” he asks, motioning me to sit down on a cushion. The shack has crude shelving on which herbs and salts sit in jars.

“Melody.”

“Melody. And do you, Melody, have any musical gifts?”

I (gently) shake my head. Ironically I was never interested in music as a kid.

The kahuna laughs and sits on a cushion across from me. “Tell me, have you sought spiritual counseling before?”

Again, I shake my head.

He frowns. “This tells me that you are not confident that such a thing could work.”

“I was never exposed to such things,” I say. It’s true. My parents never took me to church.

“So you are not a complete skeptic. Maybe I can help you, then,” he says. “Tell me about your accident.”

I give him the gory details and show him a scar on the side of my neck. I don’t think it will ever heal. Glass cut me when the windshield shattered. I’m lucky it didn’t get in my eyes.

“Lie down,” he says, gesturing toward a cushioned platform resembling a bed. “I will pray over you.”

I do as I'm told, and he begins chanting over me with a rattle in one hand and a palm leaf in the other. He waves both over me as he prays. I am uncomfortable, but I don't protest. Over the past three months I have tried massage therapy, chiropractors, and acupuncture along with the physical therapy and rehabilitation the doctor's been having me do, and everything just makes it worse. At least, it seems, the kahuna won't hurt me.

After what feels like forever, he stops chanting, rattling, and waving the palm leaf, and touches my belly.

I jump.

"Here is where the problem lies," he says.

"It's my neck, not my belly."

"No," he says, holding up a finger. "Your neck is your physical problem. Your belly is your spiritual problem. Your emotions are trapped down here in your lower self. It will take much prayer and practice on your part as well as mine to get to the point where we can begin to treat your physical problem. But the physical problem will not heal without the belly healing first."

I get goose bumps all over, remembering the day Mom and I went into the shop in Newport and the psychic said almost the same thing.

"Now," he rubs his hands together as though they're cold, "tell me if there was any trauma in your life before your car accident."

I decide to come clean. "We all have trauma, I suppose. Mine is not that big of a deal."

“It is not the trauma itself that is the big deal, but how it affected us and how we frame it. It is the way we tell our story.”

“I’ve never told my story,” I shrug, looking up at him.

“Ah, then you must tell it now.”

I swallow hard. “My father used to beat me when I was a child. Mom divorced him when I was six and I haven’t seen him since.”

“How do you feel when you speak of this?”

I feel nothing. Absolutely nothing. I tell him this.

“I think I know a way to crack you open,” he says.

I sit up, frightened. He goes to the screen door and starts yelling something in Hawaiian. Just when I start thinking that he’s yelling at nothing, an old, blond cocker spaniel hobbles into the shack.

“He got the arthritis bad,” the kahuna says. “Now, you watch this.”

He takes his big walking stick and starts beating the dog. The dog yipes and screams, collapsing onto the floor. His tail is between his legs.

“Stop it! Stop!” I yell, horrified.

He continues to hit the dog around the ribs and hips. The dog cries and shivers

“Stop! Stop!” I cry. I throw my body over the dog and look into his brown eyes as he continues to whine. There is such pain in his wet eyes. I recognize myself—my inner self, my reflection. I see that thing I’ve been searching for in my mirror my whole life.

I begin to weep. The dog licks my face, which makes me cry even more into his soft fur.

The kahuna sits down on the makeshift bed. “Now we can begin lomilomi.”

I can’t stop crying long enough to ask what that means, but it doesn’t matter because he tells me anyway in his thick accent. He sounds like an ancient wizard.

“You have, inside you, mana—a vital force inside your body that can be manipulated to provide healing. Your mana was caught inside your belly. Now, it is not. You will begin to experience emotions. At first, you may cry too much or laugh too much as memories arise to be processed. You will feel bad for a while. But with lomilomi, we start with thermal baths, hot baths, using the ti plant to drive away the spirits that caused your mana to get stuck in the first place. Then, we manipulate your body to circulate your blood and your spinal fluid. Last, we direct your mana to be normal. This last step is more complex. I cannot explain it. But I can tell you that we can use the vital force within your own body to heal all of this.”

I weep so hard I’m shaking. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to stop.

“For now, though, you cry,” he says, patting my shoulder.

The Savior

Dr. Sutton knew suffering. He had type 1 diabetes. His illness had been a similar experience to mine: it hit him suddenly and severely, like strep throat. One minute he was a regular 15-year-old boy eating Oreos; then he was in the hospital with an insulin pump sewn into his stomach.

It's funny, really. In this line of writing you try to be so careful to tell the whole truth the way the truth happened to you. Everybody carries a different truth.

With Dr. Sutton there's the way he was and then the way I remember him, and I'm honestly not sure how well my truth resembles the actual truth. He was a magic man. He still is even though I haven't seen him in years. The magician of my memory, so to speak. Anytime I need him there he is in my mind, as real as if he had his arms around me.

But I don't trust this kind of vividness anymore. I'm on too much medicine to believe that kind of clarity. Nothing else is that sharp and crisp. He's maybe become a character to me. I seem to know my characters more intimately than I know most people. He has transitioned into a creature of imagination, and imagination is much clearer than memory, and even more accurate at times.

For example, in my mind, whenever I saw Dr. Sutton, it was raining. A romantic, warm rain that sounded like typewriter keys clacking against his office window. And I daydreamed, while addressing my eating disorder, that the rain had found its way into his office. I could see it dripping down Dr. Sutton's hair, onto his face and neck. He removed his glasses to wipe his face with the back of his arm.

I, the rain, am like no other, I thought, and I dripped down the back of his neck. I was the sneaky drop running down his spine, giving him goose bumps. It was erotic, I guess, or a feeding from his energy.

“You’re going to have to accept your new limitations,” he said, looking me dead in the eye, his voice so gentle and soft, just above a whisper.

I don’t think I wanted him in a sexual way, exactly. It’s hard to tell. I was 19 and angry that my life had already been ripped apart at the seams. I was a virgin. My sexuality had not yet been piqued.

Dr. Sutton was an attractive man in his late thirties with a soft belly I adored for its innocence. And when I thought of the insulin pump, my affection grew even more. I wanted to kiss it the way that woman kissed Jesus’s feet and washed them with her own hair.

He always offered me a brown blanket and a cup of tea. We sat there in the dim light, listening to the rain. He took notes on a yellow legal pad.

He often hugged me after appointments. I always told him I loved him, and he knew what I meant and what I didn’t.

When I was sick, he came to the psychiatric hospital late one night to see me. I was already in my pajamas, and I got permission for him to see me in my private room. It was a bad idea. The room smelled like piss. My fluid input and output were monitored, so there was a hat on the toilet. That night the staff had been slack about emptying the hat, so it was full of urine that had been there several hours. It reeked.

I don't remember much about his visit, but I do remember the expression on his face when he regarded my 86-pound frame. He looked at me like I already died—like I was my ghost.

I felt sorry for him.

He said, "I always felt like you were hiding something from me."

I didn't know what to say.

One time I picked up a potted plant and there was a snake behind it, suddenly striking at me.

This is how I felt.

I often daydream of becoming a soft, furry, acceptable creature that could crawl into his breast pocket and fall asleep to the rhythm of his heart. I imagine the warmth of his body, the sound of his lungs filling with air. I imagine he cups me to his cheek. I hug his lips.

It is a child's daydream, I guess.

Hopefully, for my sake, nothing more.

Creation Story

The elevator at the pain management clinic stinks of stale cigarette smoke. The carpet is burned full of holes. A “No Smoking” sign hangs on the wall. The patients shuffle, hobble, and lope into the elevator and it groans up to the second floor where it spits out the rotting flesh of the walking dead.

This is the zombie apocalypse, right here in Kentucky.

There is the heavy handicap door—too heavy to push or pull open by hand. You have to push the button, and then side step the door as it swings.

The receptionists and nurses dart around, and the doctors—impatient and rude, one of them owning a horse that won the Kentucky Derby—appear out of nowhere to do quick procedures before disappearing again to some inner chamber. Everybody looks shell-shocked. The war on terrorism; the war on pain. It takes its toll on the bravest and strongest, eating people from the inside out.

My mother, a psychic, says that I’ll be able to let go of the pain when I no longer need it, but how will I do this when I can’t even identify its *present* purpose in my life?

The patients wait. Half of us look as though we haven’t bathed in a couple weeks. The other half couldn’t quite manage to change out of our pajamas. We cluster, in plush chairs, around a television that’s always playing *Horton Hears a Who*.

In other words: pure hell.

We wait out insurance claims, deductibles, prior authorizations, prescription refills with “do not fill until” orders, and disability checks. We wait out the bad days.

Every day is a bad day.

Anyone who says, “It can’t last forever” has not touched suffering.

We wait for muscle relaxers and opiates to kick in. Once a month we come here and wait. We wait at home the rest of the month.

I’m here for an epidural in my neck.

Apparently a disk is getting crushed by...something.

Apparently it’s really no big deal.

I’m impressed by this process despite my appall at my general situation. An x-ray shows the doctor where to stick the needle. He pumps a bunch of fluid in. I feel it soaking into every space of my chest cavity. I get angina.

Apparently this is normal.

I imagine this pressure is similar to what I felt in the womb. We all start out as female amphibians.

Some people are even born with webbed hands and feet.

They, like me, are unable to let go of the pain of change.

Screams

I turned eighteen that summer. Running the Rattlesnake roller coaster at Kings Island was my first “real” job after graduating high school.

The ride consisted of harnesses that came down over the person’s shoulders and chest, buckling him into the chair. It flipped upside down and created the sensation of the lower body falling.

I had become accustomed to the screams: The I’m-having-fun screams, I’m-gonna-piss-my-pants screams, the I’m-too-old-for-this-but-promised-my-kid screams. They reminded me of the way my mom, who owned a baby-sitting business, told me that you eventually learn the meanings of a baby’s different cries.

It was Friday around two forty-five in the afternoon. I stood there, leaning against the rail, yawning, glassy eyed. I had not had any lunch, thinking that I’d grab something on the way home. I was sick to death of amusement park food. It was too expensive.

I remember glancing at my watch.

I remember everything.

The ride stopped. A rather obese woman got off, shaking, and said, “There’s something wrong with this harness.” She walked me over to it. “It’s loose.”

“I’ll make sure we check it out,” I said, thinking that it was just that she was fat and stupid and imagining things.

I forgot all about it.

The scream I hear ringing through my skull when I lie down at night is different. It's the one of the woman who, two weeks later, fell until silenced by the cement.

It was one thirty-two. I hadn't had any lunch.

What Slides From the Pain Chamber

I'm watching the news, and it says that a poacher killed the last lion on Earth this morning. The lion had a black mane. The next generation will not see a lion in person. I sit in front of the TV and weep.

C.S. Lewis turned Jesus into a lion. I read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* about a million times as a kid, and so a lion is how I've come to picture Jesus.

Now the last lion is dead and Jesus is dead and my stone table's cracked.

Plus Dwayne's gone—left probably within hours of the last lion on Earth receiving a bullet in his heart. All I have are the scraps of shiny, black hair I kept when he graduated and went on the job market and made me cut his hair short. Destroying such beauty felt like pissing on a crucifix. Now he looks like any other 23-year old.

He's left me for another woman. She looks like a love goddess with her bottle red hair and hazel eyes that seem to burst with fireworks.

My favorite part is how I'm pregnant with his child—a child I didn't want at all, but his religious views wouldn't allow an abortion.

My other favorite part is how he met her at our church. His church, really. I just went to be supportive—to be what he wanted me to be. I'm pretty sure, now, that when he married me he did so thinking it would only be temporary. He wanted to save me from my pagan ways and wait for something more exciting to come along.

I think I need to go upstairs and lie down awhile. I'm sweating and feeling ill. Too much stress.

As soon as I lie down my lower abdomen starts to cramp. I practice deep breathing exercises.

I doubt that after he left this morning he noticed that Jesus is dead. He was always oblivious to my pain, too, no matter how many times we ended up in the emergency room for the pain caused by my endometriosis. I was happy when they said I'd never get pregnant. I should've stayed on the pill.

All the times I became bedridden the last couple of months, he said, "You can overcome your weakness if you just pray harder" and "What would Jesus do?"

Once, he said, "We never do anything fun. Let's go ride a roller coaster."

I should've known better. After all, *I* asked *him* to marry me. Begged him, actually. And then at the wedding I was so incredibly happy to have him as mine that I became a blithering idiot as I said my vows. I can't even watch the video because it makes me so ashamed.

My hair is now soaked with sweat and I'm shivering. I whimper and start making deals with God.

I look back and realize that Dwayne probably married me because he thought that we'd come into some serious money once my dad died, but it turns out I was cut from the will completely because of my pagan ways with my Greek gods and my tarot cards.

How is it that wherever I go I am always the different one? Still, this doesn't make me a complete outcast. A man named Gene owns a bird rescue about a mile down the road. I've been going there to unwind for about a year now, and not long ago Gene confessed that he's been in love with me since Dwayne and I moved here.

He forced me into a kiss. I eventually surrendered because nobody, including Dwayne, has ever kissed me like that. Maybe after these cramps disappear I'll go over to Gene's and let him bed me. It seems like he loves me more than Dwayne does. Or maybe all of this pain has me thinking out of my head. I am caught in the pain chamber of my uterus. Sometimes I seem to float above my body, an eerie glow casting a bluish light upon my face. There are the moments of relief. Other times I am so deep within my body that my soul detaches itself from its host; it is trapped and begs to be set free.

And then there are the moments when I am neither above my body or the soul inside, but the skin itself. Or the brain itself. Or the uterus. I am my organs, fragmented. As skin I am hot, then cooled by sweat—a fever has developed. I am anxiety crawling beneath my skin like an army of ants. I toss and turn in the wet, tangled sheets, trying to find some relief. There is nowhere to go, no way to hold my body comfortably. I panic sometimes, wondering if I will die, then hoping I will because my grief is such that I don't see the point in living.

Maybe I'm actually miscarrying. This excites me. I'm going to take the whole bloody mess and mail it to Dwayne and his redhead.

My own pillow feels like a limp, wet rag under me, so I switch it out for Dwayne's. It still has his scent—Old Spice—and for a moment I feel such an ache that my lip quivers. I almost cry, but I manage not to. Then I remember that Jesus is dead and I can't hold back the tears any longer.

If a person cries in the dark does it still count?

I can't see the items on his nightstand, but I have them memorized as though they are a haunting: the tie clip I gave him when he got his first job as an elementary school teacher. He got fired before he could wear it. It's all dusty—I'm not a very good housekeeper. The cubic zirconium looks like the sparkle's burned out. There's a water bottle and a sci-fi paperback, also untouched.

Here, in the pain chamber, time doesn't seem to pass. The red numbers on the alarm clock change so slowly that I think I might be in this dark pain cave the rest of my life.

I groan and feel something slide from my vagina. I struggle to remove my pajama bottoms and panties. I reach my hand down to my crotch. There is a soft head poking out among the blood.

Excited because this is almost over, and because I am about to be purified, I push and it slides out. I reach to turn on the lamp, then take the quiet fetus to my chest to examine it.

But it is not human. It is a lion cub.

Somehow I know exactly what to do. While the placenta slides from me, I lick the cub clean, making sure to clear its nose and mouth. It makes small kitten noises.

As I nurse the cub I begin to feel better—stronger. I sit up from the blood soaked bed and take the placenta downstairs. I carry the cub in my mouth by the back of its neck.

I descend the stairs and turn on the light in the kitchen. I place the sweet cub on the carpet and watch it try to lift its little sightless face. It is getting used to being outside of me, and I, too, am both the most outside and inside myself I've ever been.

I place the placenta in a pan with some olive oil and leftover garlic cloves from the fridge.

I eat it for dinner with the bottle of wine I was saving for our anniversary.

White Starlet

I was nervous waiting for people to arrive and see the exhibit, so I wandered around Harriet Beecher Stowe House, listening to my shoes on the squeaky wood floors. I admired the way my poems looked on the wall. They hung below pictures of me doing things that represented women's issues in society: me climbing a rock wall in heels (climbing the corporate ladder to the glass ceiling), me posed in front of a concave mirror staring down my reflection (eating disorders). I was eighteen, and it did not occur to me that I had not yet experienced most of the issues represented.

I was in love with the photographer—it was something I knew the way you vaguely know you've been bitten by a mosquito. Sometimes the itch lies just beyond consciousness.

But tonight I'd realize it. Oh yes, tonight my new truth would emerge.

All evening the photographer excitedly chattered. "I invited Kris Feldman," he said.

I looked at his profile. It was the profile of an old man and I loved him. It was not so much the thought as an indiscernible feeling. Not quite pleasant, maybe—a somersault of the stomach, a squeezing of the bowels.

"Who's Kris Feldman?" I asked, pretending to care.

"She wrote that play I wanted you to come see with me. Your parents said no, remember? The one about how her brother went nuts and killed himself."

I nodded.

"I thought you might want to meet a real writer," he said.

“Oh?” I felt stung. Was I not a “real” writer? When did one become a “real” writer? How?

“She works for channel 7. I think she’s mainly a writer for them, but I’ve also seen her doing interviews and giving the traffic report.” He paused. “She had an eating disorder when she was younger.”

“Did you date her?” I asked.

He glances at me. “No. I knew her from this place I used to hang out at and see music. She was constantly writing.”

I suddenly had the urge to get out my own notebook. This was a competition. I needed to scribble something brilliant in front of him.

All evening I watched people wander the two-story old house. There was a black jazz band and black volunteers. I enjoyed talking to them at the dining room table about how Harriet sheltered the slaves and about her novel.

People interrupted to say wonderful things about my work as a model and a poet.

But Kris Feldman never showed up. By 8:45 the jazz band was leaving. The show would only be open for 15 more minutes.

The photographer received a phone call. I could tell it was her by the way he turned his back to me.

He hung up and said to the volunteers, “My friend is coming, but she’s going to be late. Can we leave it open until 9:30?”

The volunteers glanced at each other, hesitating.

“I can’t stay,” the man said. “I’ve gotta go home and put my kid to bed. He’s got practice in the morning.”

The woman shrugged and said, “Okay. I’ll stay.”

“Why couldn’t she come earlier?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“She didn’t say,” he said.

“You do realize that woman isn’t getting paid for her time?” I said, but he had already taken off to talk to someone.

I went upstairs, fuming. He waited downstairs for her arrival.

About 9:20 I heard a female voice paired with your excited chattering. I stood at the top of the stairs, looking over the rail in the shadows the way Harriet must have done whenever authorities came to question her. Finally he came up, followed by a tall, skinny blonde in a short jean skirt. Her face was caked with thick make-up.

She did not say hello as she passed me.

Afterwards, I guess it was obvious I was upset with him because he said, “She read your poems so carefully, and she liked them!”

I was disappointed in him—a professor of Race, Gender, and the Mass Media. He fell for the sex of her.

Meanwhile the volunteer locked the doors on her way out behind us. It was 9:45. I was embarrassed that he had allowed just another privileged white woman to take up this black woman’s time.

I could feel Harriet Beecher Stowe’s hot breath on my neck in the wind.

I haven’t shown my face there since.

Opal

I.

Her name is Opal—an ironic name for a young woman who cannot keep the shadows from creeping inside, behind her eyelids. They leave their bruises beneath her eyes—her eyes already dark and fierce. Watch the way she cocks her head as she shelves the grimy romance paperbacks at the used bookstore. The look on her face says she cannot find meaning in her work; she cannot find meaning in anything.

II.

manic-depression: a condition which causes a person to function in two impossible planes simultaneously; lacking meaning (depression) then overzealous with the glory of living (mania); a condition leading to unemployment

III.

Her name is Opal—any light that hits her dives back outside itself into twenty colors, always a spectrum, always confused. She flirts with the farmhands down the road at her cousin's family farm; her vermilion cheeks tempt and tease. The men are ravenous—they are isolated out there in the country, and every woman for miles is a relative, married, or elderly. Opal is fresh flesh, a pretty face, an artistic disposition. They want to know her secrets, her desires. They want to gobble her up.

IV.

One man. One man carries Opal's heart in his pocket; he is a religious man, a moral man. He has no interest in gobbling her up. He is unattainable. Opal reaches for him over and over. He pays her no mind, but grants her his pity and his prayers when she shyly reports that she has lost her job. And this—this pity—is worse than any heartbreak she's ever known, which isn't much because she is young. She finds no meaning in anything. Her savings dwindle, and she loses hope.

V.

Her name is Opal. She comes in a hundred different species of herself—always shifting with the sunlight and the shadows of the clouds. The farmhands miss her smile, her teasing. Perhaps they're each in love with her. Love with its many meanings, some hidden, some simply unrecognized, misinterpreted. The men gather around her—they have an offer. They will pay her to be their personal whore if she extinguishes the flames that burn deep in their groins, over and over and over. They will keep her financially afloat. They make good money, and her eviction notice is expected to arrive any day now.

Opal considers this. She's desperate to save her independence, her pride. Besides, she finds nothing meaningful. Perhaps physical satisfaction and passion will heat her interior and quiet the uncomfortable, disconcerting shifts in mood. She lives for the mania. It keeps her alive and in motion. More mania would be good.

She agrees to be their mutual woman. They are fine sharing her with each other, but nobody else.

The men scramble to go first, but there is the issue of her virginity. She simply auctions it off, unblinking. It is nothing precious to her, though she thought maybe she could give it to the religious man one day, but that dream has blown up like a starburst. Only its dust remains. She wonders if she will be living the erotic life of those women in the novels she spent so much time shelving on her knees.

VI.

Her name was Opal. Now it is “honey,” “baby,” “sugar,” “gorgeous,” “sex kitten”. Every man holds a fragment of her. She has never been more genuine than she is when she’s fractured. She thrives, except for her sadness over the moral man who is unattainable and pities her more than ever. He disapproves. Once, on the front porch of her cousin’s family farm, he was almost seduced by the moonlight and her golden eyes. Opals make a spectrum—a spectacle out of light. He leaned to kiss her when one of the farmhands stepped between them, a storm in his eyes. She ducked like a puppy about to be smacked. He’s the one most in love with her, but he let the incident go. She, however, goes home with tears in her tiger eyes, the shadows moving across her face, which is just a shadow’s way.

VII.

Opal dreams that her diaries, her chronicles of her erotic escapades become a book. She awakes with Danny at her side—the one most in love with her, the one who ravishes her the thoroughest. She considers this dream a message. Women thirst

for the erotic. So many of them have faked their way through decades of a dull marriage bed. Their husbands are selfish.

Maybe this is why when Danny announces that he can't bear to share her anymore, and he pulls out an engagement ring, she says yes.

The rest of the hands do not take the news kindly, but they have to admit they do not quite love her. Not like Danny who swoons when she says hello. No, they just like gobbling her up. Eventually someone new will come here and they can gobble her up.

VIII.

Her name is Opal, and her book is at the grimy used bookstore. See the blue-eyed young woman shelving it down on her knees...

Let's Take the Long Way Around

Serial I

A membrane can simply rip off your life, like a skin of congealed paint torn off the top of a can. --*Bluets*

#

I'm in love with you. I've never been in love before. People have described it in metaphors and similes forever: *bee sting, flower petals opening for the sun, a new haircut...*

But me, I feel vaguely ill: nauseous and upset. It's humiliating even to myself.

The only other person who knows is Pappap. I had asked for one of your school pictures and told Pappap, "See, this is my new math teacher!"

"Are you in love with him?" he asked. Something in my eyes or my voice or my shaking hand gave me away.

I keep the little picture in a tiny frame under my pillow. At night I can barely make out your features in the light from the crack in the bathroom door: long, black hair and black eyes, vampirically pale skin.

You are a youth minister at some Baptist church in Ft. Ridge, and I want to make love to you in a way that will undo God's holy grasp.

And in the lovemaking I'd seek spiritual fruits—the secrets of heaven and hell, angels and demons.

After Mama went to bed last night I snuck into the living room to steal her Bible—she has the study version. I got distracted by the romance paperbacks on the bottom shelf.

I took them and read the dirty parts under the covers with a flashlight, wondering about the mechanics of the body—your body and my body—the mechanics of you sinking into me like teeth puncturing the skin of a ripe nectarine. One succulent moment of violence.

The next morning before school, I fan out the romances on my bunk bed in the early sunshine, creating a rainbow of bright colors and cleavage.

I choose to read the one with the man who looks like you. This, I stuff in my backpack. The rest go in my underwear drawer where Mama and Sissy won't find them.

Later, Mama, thinks she accidentally donated her books. (This means I get to keep them.)

When you stand in front of the class talking about the quadratic equation, nobody listens. Behind me Brian's pulling Lauren's hair, and Lauren's trying to ignore him because she wants to be your favorite, and Tessa snaps her (training) bra straps to try to get your attention. None of them realize that I win.

I win because I *am* listening, and you're looking at *me*.

#

The first day of school this year, I didn't want to come because I knew it'd be the same dumb kids that spent all of last year making fun of me.

I walked into the classroom to find a young man, fresh out of college, with white skin and long, black hair and black eyes.

You did not immediately strike me as beautiful.

But over time, you've become my god in this stale, white classroom.

One day I found out Grandma had a spot on her colon. This, after she's survived cancer and wears a colostomy bag. I came to school crying, and you bowed your head and prayed for me without asking me for anything.

That's the day I fell in love with you.

That's the day I should have killed myself.

#

We're all a little tired after what happened to the last math teacher. That dirty, oversexed McKenzie Joshua accused Mr. Mason of sexual harassment and got him fired.

We all know she was a filthy liar.

We all know he didn't do it.

#

Mint Independent School is comprised of preschool through eighth grade. There are 200 students. Total. Eighteen of these, including me, make up the eighth grade class.

Mint is a town like Mayberry on *The Andy Griffith Show*. The old, retired people sit on their porches and watch the young people do young things.

Like Mrs. Arnold, whose backyard connects to mine. She's a substitute teacher, and every time she subs for my class she tells me to stay out of her garden.

Now, I have spent many happy hours climbing the trees in her yard, but the only time I ever came close to the garden itself was when I fell out of a tree this one time and rolled down the hill. I landed at the edge of the garden. She came out with a broom and I had to blow that rattrap quickly.

I suspect she doesn't want anyone near her garden because she's got bodies decaying underneath the lettuce.

(That, and a dead bird my next-door neighbor's granddaughter threw into it last year.)

Anyway...

I'm pretty sure this little town has some grotesque secrets. Like the next-door neighbor (not the one with the granddaughter. The other side.), Ms. Junie. I was sitting on the broken porch step writing my romance novel when she called me over for a cup of tea.

I don't like tea, but I have to respect my elders, so I went over there to her porch. A wasp kept bumping the screen, trying to get in.

She told me about how she taught fifth grade for forty years and she used to pay the white kids to beat up the black ones.

The creepiest part was the look of nostalgia covering her face like a gaudy rouge.

Luckily Mama stepped out the door and, not seeing my anywhere, simply yelled, "Rain! Supper!"

And Ms. Junie, not wanting me to disrespect my mother, said, "It was good talking to you. Seems like young people don't take the time to talk to their elders anymore."

I told Mama and Daddy and they shrugged. (I found this creepy, too.)

Ms. Junie is Angel's mother. Angel is about thirty-five years old and has never been married as far as I know. She's a nurse at the Jewish Hospital in Ft. Ridge. She still lives with her mother.

Mama says, "Be careful about what you tell Ms. Junie. You know I don't want you telling her anything about our personal affairs, Rain." She hangs the dish towel on the

stove handle when she gets through drying. We don't have the money or the space for a dishwasher. The house is only 900 square feet.

Mama reminds me about Ms. Junie all the time because Ms. Junie runs a town gossip rag with some other bored old women who spend the days on their porches. They're like falcons, watching and waiting.

Once, when I was little and Sissy was a baby, Mama was gone too long at the Hollands' house visiting, and I locked the door before going to find her. She didn't have her key. We had to go to Ms. Junie's and use the phone to call Pappap who had a copy of our key.

That incident showed up in the *Lions Rag*. I thought Mama was gonna spank me til my legs fell off.

Another time it was Sissy who ran her mouth. Mama and Daddy were getting their concealed carry licenses, but the process got snagged when there was a different Eugene Ennis besides Daddy, and he happened to be a criminal. We had to go down to the state capital so Daddy could get fingerprinted and prove he wasn't the criminal.

Sissy told Ms. Junie about the fingerprinting, and Mama had to go next-door and make up some story, which found its way into the *Rag*, too.

I got spanked for that one, because I was supposed to be watching Sissy instead of writing in my journal.

#

This morning after gym, Tessa and her gang of brown-nosing bitches took turns standing on the toilet in the next stall over and watched me pee, chanting,

“Rain's thighs are so fat
hanging over the seat like that.”

I am devastated.

Looking at you is the only thing getting me through. Tessa and them have made it so I can't pee unless I leave class to do it, and I'm running out of hall passes. I can't even drink anything at lunch for fear it will go through me.

I thought about telling you what's been happening in the bathroom since you're my homeroom teacher, but then you'd know how fat I am.

Sometimes I love you so much I want to wrap my skin around you.

Sometimes I feel like I'm fading deeper and deeper into these pages.

#

Maybe you already think I'm fat.

#

My best friend Alicia has a new best friend. She's in seventh grade—the classroom next to ours. Her name's Jennifer, and I think she's a slut.

She's already seduced Jeff, the guy I've liked since last year, to the point that he sweats when he sees her.

For a long time I thought Jeff liked me. He's a gentle giant with feathery (an adjective they use in romance novels all the time to describe hair of all kinds: head hair, chest hair, pubic hair) blond hair and blue eyes.

Now he belongs to Jennifer.

And I hate them both despite the fact that my heart belongs to you now.

#

Lauren and I end up going to lunch late because we're both doing behind-the-scenes work for our eighth grade play the *Iliad*. I'm the script editor and she's the casting director. She wanted to be the script editor, but I'm a much better writer.

Neither one of us could memorize our lines, so Mrs. Hart had to do something else with us.

As we walk to the cafeteria, Lauren says, "You're in love with Mr. Kollins, Rain. It is so obvious everybody knows it, but you've got to be careful and not lust because lust can turn you into another Mackenzie Joshua."

"I'm not in love with him," I say. The sudden pain in my stomach causes me to grimace. I lose my appetite.

"Yes, you are, you idiot!"

"Don't call me names," I half shout. I feel exposed, stretch marks hanging out.

"And stop talking talking in clichés," I sniff. "It's unbecoming." (I read that in the romance novel with you on the cover.)

"Urgh!" Lauren growls. "Jesus can—"

“Jesus can go to hell,” I say.

Her hazel eyes well up with tears.

The silence between us is much louder than our shouting.

#

I’ve been dreaming about the romance novel I’m born to write. It involves a cowboy and a supermodel. This, too, keeps me going; it’s like clinging to a ledge of a cliff. The sheer weight of my body makes me tired: taking it to school, taking it home. I just want to stay in bed.

I became very jealous yesterday when you began talking to Lauren about church stuff. She’s a Bible thumper like you, and she’s always telling me I need to be saved. And maybe she’s right. Maybe I’m just waiting for the right Messiah to come along.

“From you, I’d suck and suck and suck some more fruits, which Heaven’s orchard bore, I’d suck until my lips grew sore.” – *Goblin Market*

I love you so much I could pop your pimples with my teeth.

#

Lauren, who claims she is one “born of the Spirit,” reminds me about what happened to Mr. Mason. She tells the class, “Rain’s in love with Mr. Kollins. She’s another McKenzie Joshua; don’t believe her!”

They hate me.
They hate you.

But they hate me more.

#

My sister joined the cheerleading squad and now I have to stay after school on Mondays so we can walk home together even though there hasn’t been a crime committed in this little, pathetic town in thirty years. In fact, in the eighties it was so safe that people quit locking their doors and the crooks realized this and started walking in people’s houses. Then, everybody started locking their doors again.

When I mention this to you in passing conversation, you tell me that you run a youth group that meets Mondays after school; and you wouldn’t mind taking me so I won’t have to be bored waiting for my sister.

I am ecstatic as we climb into your little, red Saturn. Maybe I'll get up the nerve to tell you I'm in love with you as well as the fact that I am seeking spiritual fruits—maybe you can mentor me on the secrets of heaven and hell, angels and demons.

The car ride up the hill to Ft. Ridge goes by, which saves me from being too much of a fool in trying to impress you by boasting about my tree-climbing abilities.

I follow you into the Youth House and you introduce me to the other kids who are mostly in high school.

I don't care about them. I spend the next fifteen minutes watching you play a wrestling video game with one of the boys.

I suddenly feel very ill. The place's furnace must be turned up too high. I rise from the couch, abandon my math homework, and take my journal and my favorite Gelly Roll pen out to the porch.

There's a little patch of porch that's dry. I sit down and stare at the parking lot—at your little red car (a false idol)—and then become engrossed in writing a poem about springtime.

I feel like I'm being watched.

I glance up to find you smiling at me through the window with kind eyes.

You pop your head out the door.

“What are you up to? Are you okay?” you ask.

I'm touched that you care.

“Fine. Just got too hot.”

“Well, let me know if you need anything,” you say.

“Thanks.”

Too quickly, you walk away and I'm stunned at how much I adore you—how I notice every detail of your being, including how your ass is rather full for a man.

You have a woman's ass and I love it.

Does that make me gay?

This thought excites me.

When youth group ends, and it's time to take me back to school, you say, "Let's take the long way around." We pass all the familiar places in silence.

There's the park.
And the woods.

"Let's take a walk."

My stomach flips; it is not an entirely good feeling.

My back is sweating under the weight of my red backpack. The Earth smells damp and lonely. It rained all night.

It occurs to me that you have not said much. Then,

"Come here."

I put down my backpack and walk closer to you, hoping you won't hug me because my back is gross.

You caress my face, kiss my eyelids, my forehead, my neck. I'm shaking.

You kiss my lips.
My first kiss. So soft...

My body surprises me. It grows demanding, animalistic. I am not myself. But when you slip off my red panties, I balk and say no. I don't want to get pregnant.

You ignore me.

It is over before I realize the pain. I think I see someone moving through the trees from the corner of my eye.

You zip up while I sit here, crying. You have somehow hurt my feelings. It occurs to me that some violence has been committed against my person—against my mind. It is the violence of being suddenly thrust into the realm of the unloved. I am an orphan now that I have a secret that's made me separate from my parents. Grief cuts a chasm through my belly.

You are the demon and I was the angel, and you hung my wings upon your horns.

I threaten to tell on you.

That's when you go through my stuff, finding the romance novels—the one I'm writing and the real one with the man on the cover that looks like you.

“Nobody will believe you. Not after what happened with Lauren in the hall yesterday. Yes, I heard that fight. And think about Mr. Mason. Think about how nobody believed that girl. He was only fired because the Board couldn’t handle the heat. If you threaten me again, I will expose these—“ you hold up the books “—to your shark tank of a class. Now, get dressed. “

I fumble with my jeans. They seem to have shrunk over the last fifteen minutes.

You smile, and I notice for the first time the yellowish discoloration of your teeth. Probably from braces. That smile lights up your brown eyes. You remind me of a wolf. Part of me still loves you, still wants you. Only you have the power to move me back into the realm of the loved boys and girls.

“I’m going to make my sister quit cheerleading,” I say when you get in the car.

“No you won’t. Because if you do, I’ll find a way to fail you in Math,” you say, backing the car out of the parking space.

I start to cry again, desperate, because I’m not a child anymore. Not with the blood and mucus soaking into my red panties.

“What if I get pregnant?” I ask.

You smile. “Fruit from Heaven.”

#

Vaguely, I wonder if you think I’m fat.

#

I spend the evening staring blankly at the yellow puppies on my Lisa Frank trapper keeper. Yesterday art was magic. Today it’s two-dimensional and crude.

#

The next morning my period starts. I am so thankful, I cry. I did not sleep last night and lay there pinching my belly off and on for hours, punishing myself for the gluttony of fear preventing me from punishing you.

In the romance novel with you on the cover, the man rapes the woman, but she likes it and midway through the rape she stops protesting. Her pain transforms into pleasure. He’s raped her “out of love” and “uncontrollable passion.” She enjoys the tearing because she realizes she’s loved him all along.

Tsk. Imagine!

And yet, I cannot let go of a certain optimism that maybe I, too, will go into denial over the tearing, the tearing like teeth sinking into a ripe nipple.

#

I don't want to go to school, but I say nothing. The anxiety crawling under my skin can only be eased by seeing you.

I don't know what it is on your face I'm looking for. Remorse? Guilt? Or maybe a truth—the truth that all of this is my nightmare and not my reality.

My sister is a chatty Cathy on the way to school. I can't bear to listen. Her voice makes me motion sick.

“Hey, what's *wrong* with you? I'm *telling* you a *story!*” she says.

I say, “Oh, I'm sorry. I'm a bundle of nerves over a—um—Math test I have this morning.”

“You didn't even *study* last night.”

I glance at her. “Didn't I?” Clearly I've been underestimating this kid.

“No, you goofy grape. You went right to bed after supper. Maybe you're sick?” She looks very matter-of-fact. “You shoulda stayed home today.”

“Maybe I'll stay home tomorrow,” I tell her.

Your little red Saturn comes into view in front of the red brick school and I stop, thinking I might heave.

“Ew, you look kinda green,” Sissy says.

I nod and force my legs to catch up with her.

When I walk into the classroom, I find the other students huddled in a circle, whispering something. As soon as I enter, you tell them, “That's enough. Here, Rain, I found this in the hall this morning. It has your name in it,” and stick the romance paperback under my nose.

I did NOT write my name in any of that stack I stole from my mother!

The other students laugh at me and I catch auditory glimpses of individual voices within their roar: “masturbate,” “pervert,” “mother's, no *grandmother's...*”

The blood drains from my brain and a veil seems to drop over my peripheral vision. I am overwhelmed by your power over me. Sweat springs around my hairline and over my lip as I reach to take the book from you.

But in my shaking, I miss it; it drops to the floor.

I follow it all the way down.

#

At the hospital, I don't remember much. And when I'm questioned about why I fainted, I don't know what to say. They do a CAT scan to check my brain, but they can't see the mind inside of it—the mind that remembers yesterday in the woods.

And they can't see how much I fear you now that I know you will keep your promise of humiliating me if I threaten you with exposure.

"It's a good thing Mr. Kollins was there to catch you," Mama says, stroking my head. "You would have hit that concrete floor and busted your face."

"Mr. Kollins caught me?"

She nods.

I shudder. The lights are so bright and there's too much noise and too much movement. All the bustling nurses make me nervous. I ask my mother to pull the curtain.

"Do you have a headache?" she asks.

I shake my head. "Not really." I don't know what I have. And then I think, *Oh, God, what if I have an STD?*

I start to cry.

"What's wrong?" Mama asks.

"I don't know. I don't know what's wrong. Maybe I'm having an anxiety attack. I didn't eat breakfast this morning either."

I decide to create a smoke screen by telling her about the girls in the bathroom at school.

"Oh my," she says.

Mama looks like *she's* about to faint.

The next time the nurse comes to check on us, my mother lays down the whole story. The nurse nods, knowingly. Apparently it is quite common for young people to come in with anxiety attacks, although fainting borders on full-blown panic.

It takes a long time for the doctor to come, which I expect at the ER. He diagnoses me with panic attacks and gives my mother some paperwork that contains information about how to prevent them and stop them, plus a referral to a psychiatrist at a mental hospital.

We have been here a long time and it's grating on me.

"We don't provide psychiatric medication in the emergency room, but I can prescribe a sedative that will help her sleep," he tells Mama. He is Chinese and soft-spoken. "Here is her discharge. I just need you to sign it." He hands this to my mother.

She signs it and the doctor gives her my prescription: a low dose of Valium. One tablet at night. "But she can have one as soon as you get her home," he adds.

Mama leaves me in the car while she goes into the pharmacy. I watch her full hips sway as she walks away from me. I feel like all my senses are aroused. The Bionic Woman.

I look around the car, wondering where my backpack's gone. When Mama comes back she says that Mr. Kollins has it and he will keep it in his classroom for me until I come back to school.

I take a Valium when we get home, but hours pass and I don't feel better. In fact, I feel worse. Like killing myself. Mama puts me to bed and reads me a story the way she used to do when I was little. She seems to enjoy caring for me. She also seems a little frightened.

When I wake up, it's late, and she tells me that she's managed to make an appointment for me with the psychiatrist in two weeks.

I lie in bed and fret about what to do.

#

Again, the woods.

I prove that I'm on my period.

My blood fascinates you, arouses you. You gently kiss my face as though I were slowly passing away from some fatal wound.

“On your knees,” you finally say, pushing your black hair behind an ear. The sun glints on it and makes it blue in places. A blue halo. You are so beautiful and I hate you love you hate you...

I want to spit out your seed, but you cover my mouth with a strong hand and command me to swallow.

“Spiritual fruits, wasn’t that what you wanted?” you whisper, laughing. Then you reach between my legs, startling me, and show me your red fingertips. “Spiritual fruits for your sins.”

“My blood is on your hands,” I say. You laugh, but I wonder if you would feel anything if I killed myself.

#

On Tuesday, I stay home from school, telling my mother that I can’t face the day.

The truth, though, is that after everybody found out I’m okay after fainting, they went back to making fun of me about the romance paperback. They noticed that the man on the cover looks like you.

All day, I am restless. I pace the house, and then try to settle down and watch a movie; but the movie star has dark brown eyes with long black lashes, and I can’t stand to watch any more of it.

Everything reminds me of you. I cannot reconcile my emotions. It is as though loving you became a habit I can’t break, and it bumps into the hate inside my heart.

Trauma has exhausted me. I do a terrible thing and, for reasons I can’t imagine, call the psychiatrist, pretend to be my mother, and cancel my upcoming appointment. There’s no doubt in my mind that, as scattered as Mama is, she’ll forget all about it.

I get too anxious sitting at home, so I throw on my jacket and go for a walk around the block.

Nobody’s out today. I guess it’s too damp for the elderly and the young are at work and school.

And this leads me to a train of thought about age being relative to everyone else’s age. Like, if someone’s eighty, then forty seems like a baby. But if someone’s thirteen, my age, forty seems like a century away.

Hopefully I won’t live long enough to see forty. I can’t imagine being part of this scary world for that long.

When I get to Bezold Street, I see someone I recognize.

Jennifer.

She starts walking toward me.

“Why are you not at school?” she asks, her face scrunching into an accusatory grimace under her glasses

“I’m sick,” I shrug. “What about you?”

“I’m sick,” she mimics me. Then she reconsiders. “Actually, Jeff and I decided to play hooky today. He’s been at my house all morning. My parents are at work.”

“You know you can get pregnant playing that kind of hooky,” I say, my stomach dropping into my feet. *Jeff. Oh, God. And what if I’m the one who’s pregnant?*

I don’t let my distress show as she laughs, flips me off, and walks up the street toward Belleview Avenue where she lives across the street from Alicia.

I enter my house feeling worse now than I did before my walk.

Mama has Sissy pick up my homework from school. “That Mr. Kollins is so nice, and I can tell he really likes you,” she reports, her hands on her hips like a grown up.

I laugh, the blood rushing to my face. My organs squirm inside their wet cavities.

I think I’m going crazy.

#

In sixth grade I went to the restroom after gym and saw brownish spots on my panties. I didn’t think anything of it. Never gave it another thought.

But Mama saw them later and said, “Rain, you’ve started your period.”

I began to cry.

She laughed cruelly and said, “What are you crying about?”

I couldn’t answer because there were too many things I grieved. And she obviously thought I was silly.

That evening, as though the fact that my body had been diagnosed with its new condition gave it permission to give in, I had severe back pain and cramps.

I made the mistake of telling Lauren who was the first one to menstruate in our class.

By the end of the day everybody knew.

And Lauren would not let me ask her questions about the whole thing. She stood on the playground at recess with her head held high, nose in the air. She was too much of a lady to talk about such filth.

I spent a lot of time in front of the mirror during that first period. Yes, my breasts had already taken root in fifth grade—my breasts were the largest in the class. My hips, too. I hid everything under baggy clothes.

I studied the contours of my face, the curls of my dishwater blonde hair, the arch of my eyebrows over my hazel eyes—hazel eyes, which were too golden to be green or blue or any other light and pleasing color.

I looked like a washed out young Brooke Shields; my skin has always had a yellow tint unlike Grandma's olive skin or Sissy's porcelain white complexion.

Nothing's changed.

#

I have a master.

You are a demon or a god. Apollo, in angry haste, turned the white raven black and the pure woman red. He was so bright—the god of the sun—that the woman died because she could not bear to behold him.

Every Monday, you reinforce your power over me, taking me.

My obsession becomes your seed inside my fertile womb.

#

What is the probability that I'm pregnant? This thought while I watch you teach the class about calculating odds: gambling odds, natural disaster odds, car crash odds.

Every night I worry that a baby grows inside me—a baby with my master's face. Every time I doze off I wake with shudders and cold sweats. There is no escape even during sleep. All my dreams have turned to nightmares.

When Monday rolls around again (there is no sense in even mentioning any other day of the week anymore), my sister skips happily over to her friends. They're in their uniforms. There's a pep rally tomorrow.

I hate this little red Saturn. You've ruined everything: the butterflies I used to get in my stomach, the idea of heaven, God. Yes, you've ruined God.

I want some pleasure in return for my pain.

Today, you pass the park and the woods. Alarm bells blare in my head—where are we going? Are you going to kill me?

We pass a beautiful fountain, businesses, apartment buildings...I try to keep track of all the turns you make, but I am too distressed.

We pull up to a small ranch house on a crowded street. The driveway's narrow. When I get out of the car I have to step in the wet grass. Rainwater spills into my shoes.

It makes me mad, these wet, cold feet. Why should I bear the pain of a body I no longer command?

The house is ugly.

"I'm fixing it up," you say, reading the expression on my face.

It is the musty bedroom that waits for me.

"It's getting too cool to lay you down on the ground. I don't want you to get sick," you tell me.

#

Early Tuesday morning, I'm in Language Arts with Mrs. Hart when the secretary calls over the intercom:

"Teachers, turn your televisions on to the news."

Mrs. Hart frowns, puzzled, but does as she's told. She flips channels until she runs across ABC.

We look up from our worksheets where we've been diagramming sentences into grammatical terms. The TV shows a commercial plane hitting a tall building apparently called the World Trade Center, which is located in New York City.

"Oh my God," Mrs. Hart gasps.

My brain can't seem to believe it. A plane being intentionally flown into a building?

During the next hour, we learn that our country is being attacked by terrorists.

Mrs. Hart goes to the board and writes: September 11, 2001; 9/11/01; 911

I get goosebumps.

She looks helplessly at the class. "I remember where I was when Kennedy was shot," she says. "Now it's your turn."

We don't understand.

Over the next couple hours, we learn that the other twin tower also collapsed from a commercial plane, another plane hit the Pentagon, and another was hijacked, but was unsuccessful in hitting the Capitol because passengers fought back. Unfortunately, it was crashed in Pennsylvania.

#

I don't eat dinner. There is only one way I can think to get rid of the child that I'm sure is growing inside of me. I must starve it to death. Fetuses need nutrition to survive, right? I must not give it energy or resources to grow.

"My stomach hurts," I tell Mama.

"Mine, too," she says.

"Mine, three," Daddy says.

Sissy looks curious.

"We're about to go to war," Daddy says, "but I don't think we know who to attack."

#

I eat breakfast only because I have a migraine. My gut feels bruised.

You're giving a Math test today. You don't even look at me when you hand me my copy. Yet, you always call me up to the board to solve a problem, and you always look proud after I solve it correctly, disappointed when I get it wrong.

I don't understand your feelings for me. It isn't love. It's paternal in a sick way: if Tessa or somebody picks on me in front of you, you jump to defend me and punish them with detention or whatever.

And sometimes, during free time, you speak at great lengths with Lauren about church and God.

This bothers me so much that the next week, I ask you, “What is all that crap about church and God? How can you act like such a devout Christian and be doing what you’re doing to me?”

You regard me from the side of the bed with a mix of amusement and defensiveness. I get dizzy because all of your features that I loved for so long are so painfully close to me.

“Tell me,” you say, “Where did you get the name *Rain*?”

I blink, taken aback. I am braless and shirtless and your mouth comes to me in one quick swoop. I have grown to hate this sensation and the way it makes me welcome you into me. My body is the ultimate traitor.

“Answer me,” you say, quietly.

I sigh. “Simple. I was born on a rainy day and my parents didn’t want me to be one of those people with a name that everybody in school would have.”

You smile wryly.

“Yeah, so?” I am puzzled. I don’t even understand how we can be having this conversation right now, sitting here, naked and ridiculous.

“Nothing,” you say. “Absolutely nothing.”

You kiss down my stomach, and then lower.

It doesn’t take long for me to come undone.

#

We find out that the terrorists came from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and United Arab Emirates. We learn this just before the leaves fall and it grows colder outside.

You take me to youth group for a little while, sometimes, before leaving your female co-minister with the group and taking me to your house.

“What kind of music do you like?” you ask one day when you’re in a surprisingly conversational mood.

I shrug.

“I hate it when you do that. It makes you seem like every other teenager,” you say. Your dark eyes look hateful.

“What do you mean? What’d I do?”

“You shrugged,” you say.

“I’m sorry.”

Pause.

“What did you mean? Am I not ‘any other teenager’?” I have to ask. (You’re going to say you love me.)

You smile in a way that suspiciously brings the image of the wolf and Little Red Riding Hood to mind, again.

“Other teenagers would have fought me the first time.” You shrug in an exaggerated motion to mock me.

I feel like a popped balloon. You’ve just called me a coward.

As usual you lead me straight into the bedroom as soon as you close the door behind me.

The blankets smell like a perfume I don’t recognize.

“Has someone...else been here?” I ask.

You push me down so that I’m on my stomach. Your hand grabs the back of my neck and presses me into the pillow.

I struggle for air, but my thrashing does no good.

Just when I’m panicking out of my mind, you release me.

As I gasp, you bend over and whisper in my ear: “Remember that. Always remember that I can suffocate you with one movement. I could snap your neck with my hands.”

I choke on my sobs. Your hand grabs my throat. You apply just enough pressure to terrify me.

“Now,” you say, “fight me.”

And with that, I am thrown into a battle to keep my clothes on as you peel them from me, pinching, biting, and hitting me in parts of my body that don’t show; inner thighs, breasts, butt, shoulders, hamstrings, and belly.

You pause only once to say, “Getting a little heavy my little piggy.” You pinch my belly so hard I scream.

You’ve drawn blood with your nails.

#

Getting a little heavy, my little piggy.

Getting a little heavy, my little piggy.

Getting a little heavy, my little piggy.

Sometimes your voice is so loud in my head that I can’t hear over it.

“What?” I constantly ask. “What did you say?”

I fall into a daze, which isn’t good because I have a project on Greek mythology due in Language Arts on Halloween. I’m supposed to write a one act play about the Greek muses, talk a little bit about it to the class, and turn it in.

(At least I don’t have to read it in class. I couldn’t bear it. Not after what happened with my journal and my own romance novel.)

I haven’t written anything in so long. You’re holding my notebooks hostage.

I’ve begun purging everyday. It’s gotten worse since the last time we were alone together. I’ve lied and told my sister that I have to get to school early because of a project, but it’s really because I need time to purge breakfast before class starts.

Sissy is angry. Her body’s rhythm even as a baby was to stay up late and sleep in. I remind her that I wait for her every Monday while she has cheerleading practice. She resigns herself with a sigh.

Purging breakfast isn’t easy because I don’t eat much anyway, and by the time I get to school it’s already entered my intestines, I guess, because all that surfaces is a bit of bile.

But it’s the *process* that makes me feel better. It’s the *process* that makes me calm enough to face the bullies.

#

There’s a fan that sits on the floor in Mrs. Hart’s classroom where we have Language Arts and Social Studies. Of course, we’re not using it this time of year.

Mrs. Hart cannot gain control of the class. Tessa is making the puppydogs go crazy with laughter by humping the fan.

I feel sick.

All my worries that I'm pregnant come flooding back to me. I feel the need to vomit harder and more often.

If the baby growing inside me doesn't get nutrition, it will die.

Die, I pray, squeezing my eyes shut against the laughter erupting around me. *Die, die!*

#

"Who are we inviting for Thanksgiving?" I ask Mama.

"Grandma, Pappap, Aunt Candi, your uncle Ron." She pauses. "You look really pale and skinny."

"Just sick of school," I say and turn on my heel to walk the three steps to my bedroom to try to do some homework.

But I'm distracted by the thought of Aunt Candi coming. She is the aunt that I've loved so much, who is so mysterious because she and Mama do not always get along, and there've been years at a time when I didn't see Candi because she and Mama weren't talking.

Where my mother has a soft, curvy body that's a bit overweight, Candi is tall and thin and blonde and a different kind of sexy. Sometimes, when Mama is trying to insult me, she says, "You're just like your aunt Candi." But what she doesn't know is that Aunt Candi has become a legend to me. Her mythology has turned her into a goddess in my imagination.

But now everything seems to be mocking me. Every word jars me so that I feel like I've stepped off a roller coaster.

I'm obsessed. Obsessed I'm fat. Obsessed I'm pregnant. Obsessed with you, with our secret routines.

Somehow I fall asleep on the floor, my body on top of my Math book like a protective shield.

#

Thanksgiving comes and goes, and I've been barely present. I am more confused than ever. You've become warmer to me, though I know better than to confuse it with love. You still have the romance novel I was writing.

But you don't need it to maintain your reign on me because I have somehow fallen deeper in love with you. I am one of those women in the books who enjoys the tearing.

I am loyal.

My loyalty breaks my heart.

I have stopped having my period. I am not pregnant with child, but pregnant with secrets. I am starving to death. It's the only method of birth control I have.

My grades have fallen into the C's. My parents won't know this until report cards are mailed during break.

If I *do* eat, I throw it up. Tessa and her gang have stopped picking on me in the bathroom because they can't stand the smell of vomit.

My freedom is glorious. I have discovered the spiritual fruits I've been seeking: my own religion, my own calling.

I win at thin.

#

I feel I might die. The restless yearning and anxiety in my stomach wraps around my ribs, squeezing.

I understand why Eve ate the fruit of the tree—the apprehension was too much.

Coming back from Thanksgiving break, you are not at school. A little, bald man stands at the front of the room.

“Mr. Kollins left to marry his long time girlfriend. He will not be back,” he says.

An inner earthquake re-arranges my organs. I am sure you left me because I'm fat.

#

I'm purging in the restroom at school one morning, thinking about your new wife—what does she look like? Is she thinner, prettier, sweeter than me? What does this mean for us?—and I come out of the stall to find Mrs. Hart staring at me.

“How long has that been going on, Rain?” she asks, her tone disappointed.

“I—I—I had a stomachache when I left the house this morning. I may have a fever,” I say.

I try to side step her and leave the bathroom, but she blocks my path.

“I’ve been around a long time. I know an eating disorder when I see one. You’ve been losing weight quickly the last few months, and just now I could tell you were forcing yourself to vomit.” She clamps the top of her nose with her fingers and closes her eyes like she has a headache. “Let’s go upstairs to the office. I need to call your mother.”

I panic because all my plans to use the eating disorder as a method of abortion are about to become nothing. All my hard work is about to be undone.

#

My mother arrives five minutes later and the three of us go down to the cafeteria where it’s quiet.

“I suggest you take her to the Mason Psychiatric Hospital. It’s about 45 minutes from here,” Ms. Hart tells Mama.

“Today?” Mama squeaks.

“Absolutely. There’s no telling how much body mass she’s lost or how bad her vitals are. If she’s been purging a long time—and she won’t tell me how long—her potassium levels could be so low that she’s at risk of having a heart attack.”

Mama regards me like I’m a stranger.

“God,” she says. “I don’t even know what questions to ask you.”

I bow my head. I think of you. *Maybe I should tell them.*

“I’m cold,” I say. “I’ll go home and pack a bag and we’ll go.”

“Fine,” Mama stands.

“How do you know so much about this stuff?” Mama asks Mrs. Hart.

My teacher looks very upset, then composes herself. “My daughter died.”

#

I pack as little as possible and Mama and I don't speak on the way there. She looked up the directions on the Internet, then called Daddy to come home.

"Well, kiddo," Daddy says, but he can't come up with anything to say after that.

I stare out the window, missing you and wondering where you've gone. Were you with her when you were with me? Of course you were. Do you love her?

Will I ever see you again?

I hope so because guess what.

You still have my fucking notebooks.

Serial II

There's a desk in my room, but I never get to use it because Staff's always getting after me for being antisocial. So I take my journal, folder, and Anorexia Nervosa binder (filled with worksheets to fill out as my "journey toward wellness" continues) out to the table at meals. I'm very protective of my journal after what happened with Mr. Kollins and I watch Ashley put her journal on her chair, then sit on it while she eats. I mimic the gesture, happy to have an answer to my conundrum of awkwardness.

#

The nurse that wakes us up for vitals and weight is named Matthew.

"Top o' the mornin' to ya," he says.

He asked me the name of my stuffed hyacinth macaw I got from the zoo. Sherman, I say. So then he says hi to Sherman. When I finish voiding (a fancy way of saying peeing), he hands me my paper gown to put on for the scale and says, "Your ball gown, milady. When he leaves, I'm smiling because he says good-bye to Sherman.

At seven, I'm awoken by a different nurse—a sterner nurse—who makes me drink liquid potassium because anorectics and bulimics have a tendency to be low on electrolytes, which is what causes so many of them to have heart attacks.

At eight, I'm fetched for blood work, and eight-fifteen is breakfast.

And then the days are filled with Group after Group, meal after meal, and then Boost. We have Emotion Regulation Group, Eating Disorders Group, Goals Group, Coping Strategies Group, Crisis Prevention Group, Recreational Therapy (which isn't very recreational considering we're not allowed to burn calories), Spirituality (church for those who have off-unit privileges), Nutrition Group, Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) Group, plus appointments with the doctor, minister, social worker, dietician, taking medications on time, and of course, calling our families or visiting with them whenever we can because we are all horribly homesick.

If I could only go outside for a minute I'd be happy, but it's cold and the cold burns calories. Some of the girls, like Ally, have very fine hair on their bodies called lanuga, which is the human body's version of fur. I stare out the floor-to-ceiling window at the barren landscape of the courtyard. Is it too much to ask for a breath of fresh air?

I guess it is. This will be the saddest place to spend Christmas in the history of time.

Even Jesus was born in a manger.

Every morning and evening the nurse gives me a bunch of pills. I don't know what they are, and I don't ask. Anyway, she's supposed to tell me what she's giving me, but she doesn't. The only thing I recognize are the Tums.

"Why're you giving me Tums all the time?" I ask.

"They're a good source of calcium," she replies, handing me my bottle of apple juice that has Miralax mixed in it.

#

It snows. The ward is unusually quiet, as though we've all taken too much Klonopin or something. Even Ashley gazes at her coloring pages through heavy eyelids. She keeps pausing to yawn. Finally she gives up and disappears down the hallway to take a nap. Most of the time Staff won't leave us alone if we try going to bed for a nap, but today they seem as lethargic as the patients.

My parents decide to stay for dinner. They don't bring Sissy to this lovely palace; she doesn't need to experience anything more than what she's already seen me do at home.

I feel guilty. What if Sissy decides she wants to be anorexic like me?

The meal is silent except for Mama's shrill and manic chatter about anything that comes into her mind. Daddy sits there and watches the anorectics' gazes dart across one another's plates. Twice Mama gets reprimanded for bringing up food. We don't talk about food or ED issues at meals. Staff corrects her twice. She's like a dog with an electric fence, new to the boundaries of its yard. I wince when she makes mistakes.

I don't invite them to stay for another meal. And they don't offer.

#

A new girl named Kayla arrives the fourth day I'm here. I mistake her for an ED patient, which flatters her because she is "recovered" from an eating disorder. I understand the logic behind this. This time, she's in here for her bipolar disorder. She's keeping her ED history secret because if she doesn't, they'll put her on ED protocol.

Nobody wants that.

Soon, though, my jealousy kicks in. She can eat with us, but she doesn't have to finish a meal. I pull the only power play I can: I complain to Staff that she's triggering me.

She gets kicked away from our table.

Now she has to eat with the psychopaths.

Nobody knows I am responsible for this shift. I think I'm learning how to use the system to my advantage.

#

Christmas Day. A male nurse I don't recognize awakes me for weight and vitals. But something is seriously wrong. I can't stay awake. And it's more than just staying awake...I can't stay conscious. Every time he tries to hoist me up from the bed, I black out. My stomach sinks to my toes, but he keeps trying to force me. I can hear him say, as though he's at the other end of a long, dark tunnel, "You've done this to yourself, you know. There's no point to having an eating disorder. Just eat, for god's sake!"

I wake long enough to feel myself being carried under the armpits by two nurses, down the hall for blood work. The tops of my feet drag the ground.

The next time I wake up, there's a beautiful woman with blue eyes and blonde hair sitting by my bed, studying me. She has a clipboard on her lap and a pen in her hand.

I think she is the goddess Aphrodite, but she turns out to be my doctor.

She tells me I had a "close call" this morning. My heart palpitates. She tells me to stay in bed this morning, but to attend all my meals and participate in afternoon Groups. I'm on intermittent bed rest, apparently.

I don't need to ask her what she means by "close call." I understand.

I cheated death.

Barely.

#

It takes me half the day to realize it's Christmas. When I attend the first Group of the afternoon Ashley interrupts everything in that way she has and says, "Lazarus, come forth!"

I sit down next to her, dizzy, and extremely gently bump her with my elbow. She giggles. "Merry Christmas, tough guy," she whispers.

That evening I'm no longer lucid. My parents bring Grandma and Pappap, and all I can remember is Grandma saying, "Are you itchy? Are you itchy?"

Later, I realize that the nurse must've given me something that didn't agree with me. My body is covered in marks from where I've dug into my skin with my nails.

Maybe I'm truly losing my mind.

They leave presents for me that are not wrapped, but hidden as much as possible in grocery bags, because Security has to go through everything.

The next day, I feel more normal. After breakfast, I wait out the half hour for my food to digest (so I don't purge) before I can return to my room and dig out the presents.

Mama and Daddy bought me Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* because I have wanted to read the book and the library doesn't have it. They also brought me some books I read and loved a few years ago: *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* and a few books by Jean Craighead George. Sissy got me an absolutely gorgeous journal. She must have spent all her money she's made doing chores. It's leather and engraved with three women on the cover. The women have large breasts, tummies, and butts. I know that this is Sissy's "get well" message. She is so precocious that she's showing me a different body image to accept and love.

I cry because I am so touched.

Grandma and Pappap left a note saying that their gift was not acceptable to Security, so it will be waiting for me on my bed when I get home.

Sigh...my own bed.

If we had a bigger house I would have a desk. This thought passes through my mind while I'm sitting in the main area, watching Ashley read the Bible.

I say, "I wish my sister and my's room were big enough so that I could have a desk."

"A desk is a staple item for anyone over the age of eleven," Ashley says.

"You think so?"

"Oh yeah. I use my desk for the clutter that would usually be on my floor. That way my mom doesn't yell at me to clean my room." She gives me a wry smile.

I laugh. "Good idea. But I think if I had a desk I'd actually use it for homework and stuff."

She nods, vaguely; she is apparently through with this conversation. There's a hangnail bugging her. She pulls at it with her teeth.

"Ash? Do you ever get teased at school?" I venture.

She glances at me. Her eyes are so dark underneath that they look bruised. “Once in awhile.”

“About what?”

She rips the hangnail away and drops it on the floor. “My faith and stuff. I get told I’m a goody two shoes.”

“Is that it?” I ask.

“Yep.”

I pause, fingering the pages of my journal. “Does it bother you much?”

“Nah.”

“Does anybody ever say mean things like ‘you’re fat’ or anything?” I am beginning to sweat as I remember the things Tessa’s said to me. My cheeks feel hot.

Ashley frowns at me. “Why? Do people say crap like that to you?”

“Constantly.”

She doesn’t know what to say. We sit there, looking at each other.

A nurse interrupts. “Girls, you need to go into the TV room. We have a psychologist presenting a special Group on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.”

Ashley glares at the nurse, unwilling to go. She just wants to read the Bible. That’s all she wants.

But what *we* want doesn’t matter here.

#

One snowy night, Ashley’s awake late, doing laundry. I can’t sleep, and I find her in the library alcove, awkwardly curled up with her legs tucked under her. She’s asleep. I sit down and, like some kind of stalker creep, watch her. The rise and fall of her chest calms me down—the rhythms of the body. My own body wants to adopt that rhythm. I go back to bed, passing the desk where Matthew sits.

“G’night, milady. Do you need me to turn on your water before you go to bed?” he asks.

I nod, feeling good that he knows how to say, “Do you need to use the toilet?” in polite code. I hate asking for my water to be turned on because it’s like announcing to the entire ward that you have just used the toilet.

I can’t help but smile. It gives me comfort to know that he’ll be the one to wake me in the middle of the night for weight and vitals.

Despite everything, the routine here has helped me settle into a life without Mr. Kollins. (Ashley’s made me promise to stop addressing you in my thoughts all the time. She says it’s not healthy.)

But at the slightest thought of him, I bury my face in my pillow and cry myself to sleep.

Most nights Ashley sleeps in Solitary. Apparently she finds it to be nostalgic from the days when they strapped her down because she yanked out her feeding tube every time they turned around.

Without Ashley’s presence, I run into difficulty falling asleep.

The doctor puts me on Ambien to help with this.

But all night the edges around the doorway of my room pulsate and glow with a purplish light. I believe aliens have invaded the ward and there’s no way out. I want to get Matthew, but I’m too scared to move or even shout.

I survive the night.

The doctor decides that perhaps Ambien isn’t our best option.

#

I don’t know what it is with the holidays, but there’s a whole herd of new patients that arrive between Christmas and New Year’s. Most of them are ED patients. One of them is an absolute skeleton. You can see her skull bones through her brown hair. I can’t look at her. Yet, she comes to the table and, surprisingly, eats everything on her plate immediately. After the standard 72 hour hold, she will have her privileges quicker than anyone I’ve ever seen.

Ashley disappears into her room, unable to deal with these new patients. She refuses to eat with us. Apparently she knows one of the new girls, Ella. I don’t understand what’s wrong until the days begin to miserably pass. Ella paces around the ward after every meal, sobbing hysterically. Staff cannot get control over her, much less calm her down. And she calls her parents all the time and screams into the phone about what “they’re” doing to her here and how she’s gaining weight.

It scares me.

I understand why Ashley's retreated, but I really miss her, and I'm beginning to backslide, too. One meal at a time, I eat less and less. I lose my privileges.

I'm not strong without Ashley, but I don't tell her this because, as I've learned in Mindfulness Group, she's not responsible for my success or failure.

One of the new girls is named Ashley also. We're all gathered for ED Group and this Other Ashley says, "So how much do you guys weigh now?" with a smirk.

Most of the girls, including my Ashley, get up and leave, but I've become a glutton for punishment, I guess—maybe it reminds me of the norm of school. Being bullied is something I'm used to, so I feel a sense of comfort.

"Well?" she says, her dark eyes narrowing at me. She has a large towel wrapped around her shoulders like a shawl.

"You're going to learn not to say things like that," I simply say.

Just then the nurse pops in.

"Ashley, Dr. D is in your room. She's going to put in your feeding tube," the nurse says.

She gets up, but shoots me a look.

I don't look away. For the first time in my life I don't look away.

#

The more I eat, the sicker I feel to my stomach until there seems to be no space left in my stomach, bowels, or esophagus.

"Your digestive tract hasn't woke up yet," my Ashley says.

"So what do I do? They're giving me Miralax everyday. I feel like I'm on the verge of puking all the time."

She quits coloring a boat. "Ask your doctor for nausea medicine. I take it. That's why there's always a line at the nurse's window after meals. Everyone's getting their Zofran."

"Thanks," I say. "Will we ever have bowel movements again?"

She shrugs, unperturbed by the whole thing. Then she gives me a wicked grin. “Just don’t poop in your hat.” The hat is the thing on the toilet that catches our pee and measures it.

We laugh like crazy, then she says, “I did that once,” and our laughter starts all over again.

#

Because I’ve lost my privileges, I can’t leave the ward to attend Spirituality, which is basically church. The chaplain conducts it.

I feel ill knowing that this whole hospital was founded on Christian principles even though nobody’s forcing anything down my throat.

It makes me think of y—him. How he tricked me with that youth group shit. How he taunted me that day he discussed church and Jesus with Lauren. How he taunted me, period.

Since I can’t leave the ward I put in a request to have the chaplain come to me.

He arrives later that afternoon, leads me to one of the little consultation rooms, and introduces himself as Brother Jim Parker.

“I know you,” I say. “I went to Spirituality during the very short time between gaining my privileges and losing them.”

“I remember your face, but not your name,” he says.

“Rain. Rain Ennis.”

“Why’d you lose your privileges, Rain?”

His face is the kind I trust: full, with blue eyes that sparkle. He has a big belly. I like this, too. It makes him seem harmless.

“I’ve been backsliding since a lot more girls arrived.” I study the veins in my hands and arms. I don’t remember noticing them before, and they embarrass me. I fold my arms.

“I see. They trigger you?” he says.

I nod.

We study each other for a moment.

“What can I do to help?”

I shrug, unsure of what I need.

“I don’t trust my faith anymore. Something...bad...happened to me,” I say. Now, I have used up all my courage. He’s going to have to take it from here.

“You know God has faith in you whether you have faith in Him or not. The truth of it is that God comes to each of us depending on how He thinks we’ll hear Him.” He lets my brain absorb this, then continues. “I bet that, if you pay more attention, you’ll hear God calling you into His arms.”

He reaches into his bag and pulls out a book. “This is a devotional book for those suffering with eating disorders.”

“Thanks,” I say. It has a handful of grapes on the cover.

The nurse knocks, then pops her head in and says, “Rain, it’s time for lunch. Your tray’s on the table.”

Jim and I say good-bye.

“If you need to talk some more or you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to ask for me or my co-chaplain Connie.” He shakes my hand and I watch him scan his badge and walk through the first set of double doors.

He will go home tonight to his wife (I saw the gold band) and kids, probably, too. They will eat dinner at their leisure and then he’ll go to sleep in his own bed and set the alarm. He will grumble before his coffee, put on his suit and tie, drive his car here, scan his badge...

Oh, freedom. How sweet.

#

The guy that runs Recreation Therapy Group brings bubbles for us.

“Now, these bubbles represent your thoughts. Imagine letting go of each thought as you blow the bubbles. Watch them float away from you and disappear in flight,” he says. He’s a young black man with an infectious smile and we’re all in love with him.

But the bubbles are, like, the cheapest bubbles in the world, and even though we blow our hearts out, no bubbles are produced. We’re just making a soapy mess on the floor and on our shirts.

We are quiet, disappointed and discouraged by this broken metaphor.

“That fucking sucked,” Other Ashley says.

We all have to agree with this.

That evening the nurse I hate tries to give me somebody’s birth control pill.

“You’re Shayleese, aren’t you?” he says.

“No,” I say and point across the room. “Do you see the black girl over there? That’s Shayleese.”

Shayleese doesn’t talk to anyone, and she writes more in her journal than any of us. She has a feeding tube dangling from its taped position on her cheek. At night they will connect it to a machine that pumps Boost into the stomach. Ashley has one at home and says they make an awful noise.

“Oh, well where are your birth control pills?” he asks.

“I’m a nice girl,” I say. “I don’t need birth control pills.”

“You don’t need to be rude about it.”

“Then don’t be such a prick,” I wave him away.

I get written up and lose the few privileges I had left.

I don’t care. No matter what, I’m a prisoner. As Janis Joplin once said, “It’s all the same fucking thing, man.”

#

There’s a fridge on the ward that only non-ED patients can use. It has apple juice and cheese inside. Those whose food intake is not strictly monitored down to how much water goes in and comes out have much more freedom. They can even flush their toilets on their own.

Suddenly, I have a day where no matter what I eat doesn’t satisfy me. I’m starving.

“I’m hungry,” I tell Staff after lunch.

“Congratulations,” someone says.

“Why?”

“It means your gut has woken up. Hunger pains are the first thing that comes back.”

“I’m hungry. Fix it.”

The nurse shakes her head, her blonde curls bouncing. “We can’t give you any more food than what the doctor prescribes. If we overload your body too quickly you could die. They learned that with emaciated POWs after World War 1.”

I get up and walk away from her, flustered.

That evening a girl named Melissa comes back from Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT). She has severe depression and also fought an eating disorder as a child.

She comes back in a wheelchair. Drool comes out of her mouth. The nurse pushes her over to the table where Ashley, Kayla, a bulimic named Brit, and I are being rambunctious.

Ashley has a curious look on her face. “Melissa. Melissa, do you know who I am?”

Melissa stares blankly at our faces.

“Melissa, do you know where you are?” I try.

We are finding this game to be absolutely hilarious.

“Melissa, do you know who you are?” Brit asks.

We crack up.

Then Melissa smiles and points at Ashley.

“Assssssee,” she says.

“She just called you an ass, Ashley,” Brit says.

We laugh.

The nurse comes over and says, “Okay, you guys, time for Melissa to go to bed.” She wheels her toward the hallway with all of those girls’ rooms. Only mine is in the other hallway with a bunch of people I don’t know.

Brit looks mischievous. She whispers, “Kayla, go distract the guy at the desk so I can grab some cheese sticks for Rain.”

Kayla nods importantly and sashays over to the guy.

And takes her shirt off.

We're about die.

He yells at her and Brit runs over to the fridge, grabs some cheese from it, and runs back.

Kayla puts her shirt back on and blows him a kiss, walking back to our table like a leopard. The guy is still yelling that she's lost her privileges, blah, blah, blah."

"Sorry about your privileges," I whisper, watching Ashley wipe away tears of laughter.

Kayla shakes her head. "It was well worth it. Besides, he's cute right?"

This sends us into another round of hysterics.

Brit passes the cheese packets around under the table. Ashley's the only one that doesn't take it.

The nurse comes back and sends us to bed.

"Time to break up the party," she says.

I hide the bite of cheese in my cheek and stuff the rest in the waistband of my pajamas. I go to bed happy.

For the first time in my life I've found a group where I belong.

#

Melissa is back to normal the next day. She doesn't remember anything about last night, which is simultaneously a bummer and a blessing.

Ashley, however, is sullen today. Ella is making a racket on the phone. Ashley cowers under her headphones. She's listening to her church's pastor's sermons on cassette. Her parents record them for her.

I find myself crying. The new anorectics have made Ashley unavailable to me, and she's the only one I can talk to about my secret.

I think about the things the chaplain said, and I remember how Mr. Kollins treated me, how I thought he loved me, how stupid I am, how I want my period.

"Hey, you," a gentle voice says. One of the mental health workers, Courtney, sits down across from me. "What's up?"

I shake my head. "Just...bad things happen."

She nods. “What bad things?”

I shake my head again.

“Well,” she says, “yes, bad things happen, but they make us stronger. Believe it or not, time always helps. Someday you’ll look back on this time and feel almost nothing. Almost.”

“Time takes forever.”

She pauses. “I think we’re about to do an activity that might help.”

She stands up and gathers the ED patients—all eleven of us—around my table.

“This is an activity of looking toward the future, because you all have one whether it seems possible right now or not.” She hands out some papers. “Take your time.”

1) Where will you live when you grow up? (You can live anywhere!)

I will live in Yellow Springs, Ohio near my aunt and uncle and have two cats and a dog.

2) What do you see yourself doing in 15 years?

I’ll be 28. I will be a famous romance novelist and the whole world will want to know how I do it. And I will never think about the past again.

3) Describe what your house/apartment will look like. Will it have a pool? Deck? Balcony?

My house will be a ranch because I hate stairs. The washer and dryer will be on the same floor as everything else. The library will have red walls and dark wood and a fireplace and ladders that move among the bookcases like in Beauty and the Beast. And a bay window. That will be the main room I use. The bedroom will be painted pale yellow, the kitchen pale blue, and the living room pale green or lilac. My desk will be in the library, but there will also be a simple couch and desk on the closed-in porch so that I can go out there and nap while it’s raining or look at the full moon.

4) What will your hobbies be?

Reading, and I’ll learn how to swim and have an in ground pool. I’ll be tan all the time. I will also climb the many trees on my property and ride my bike. Maybe I will be a beekeeper, too.

5) Will you be married?

I will be single so nobody will ever touch me again. My dog will be huge and s/he will sleep in my bed and will protect me. My cats will wind around my legs while I’m writing. I will be wealthy and will have to hire a pet sitter when I give talks around the country and do bookstore signings. Or maybe my dog will come with me.

6) What kinds of clothes will you wear?

I'll wear old lady eighties clothes like J.B. Fletcher from Murder, She Wrote.

“I want you to take these worksheets and tape them on the mirror or desk or in your notebooks,” Courtney says.

I leave the table feeling better and wanting to continue to make up questions to add to this activity.

It might actually be possible for me to move beyond this point.

Just as long as I'm not pregnant.

#

I dream of bombs in the desert. Daisy cutters. I dream of people with turbans, women completely cloaked in black, only their eyes peeking out.

George W. Bush's lips move: “Wake up!”

I wake up panting.

The mind is the ultimate terrorist.

#

There are some people who think an eating disorder is romantic. The thinness, the way clothes hang so well on the body, the chicness of having so much control over food cravings.

But these people don't know anything.

They don't know the way the body aches, the way it wakes up with cramped calves. They don't know how the mirror still tells her she's fat.

She will never have the privilege of feeling thin.

And they don't know how the women around her, who have their own body image issues, get cruelly triggered—how they hate themselves more when she passes by, how they scatter.

They don't know how she becomes stupid, the brain shutting down so that even following the plot in an episode of *I Dream of Jeannie* is difficult, not just because of this, but also because Jeannie is so thin, and this is a total distraction.

They don't know how she compares herself to every single woman that she sees. They don't know what's it's like to piss themselves when they purge, the migraines that follow, the fatigue mixed with a certain anxiety, the edema—fluid buildup in the legs.

But mostly they don't know about the pain of re-feeding, of constipation, of panicking before, during, after every meal.

Oh, how I'd give anything, *anything*, to think about something else.

Tell me, where is the freedom in obsession? Where is the romance in that?

#

My doctor decides that the other anorectics are having a negative impact on me, and I'd be better off recovering in my own home with the support of my family and weekly trips to this hospital for assessments.

I will be discharged tomorrow evening.

The dietician meets with Mama to go over meal plans. The social worker meets with everyone but Sissy to go over getting me back in school when it starts again next week.

I take my time saying good-bye to my new friends. We promise each other that we will stay strong on our journeys.

It's hardest to say bye to Ashley, but we exchange emails and promise to keep in touch and not trigger each other.

I panic in the car. How am I going to do this? How am I going to go back to school and tolerate the re-feeding process at the same time?

Mama calms me down. "One step at a time. And, hey, when you get home you can flush the toilet as many times as you want."

I laugh.

We stop at the pharmacy to pick up my new meds. I marvel at this freedom.

The transition from hospital to real world is extremely jarring. I spend the evening being pestered by Sissy. She's missed me.

"Good to have you home, kiddo," Daddy says, patting the top of my head.

It feels so good to be home.

Serial III

I enter the stale white classroom and expect to see Mr. Kollins standing there, in front of the whiteboard, with a yardstick in his hand even though I know he won't be there.

The whole class gets quiet when they see me. I can only imagine what they're thinking.

My friends don't have a saved seat for me even though they knew I'd return today.

I sit down in the back with the boys. Teddy smells like body odor all the time, and he used to poke me in the breasts in fifth grade, so I sit by Stuart—the shortest, nicest boy (of course, the standards for comparison are pretty low) in the class.

The new teacher comes in right behind me. He's a middle-aged man who looks like every other middle-aged man: bald on top with gray on the sides, and a potbelly. He wears glasses and has no distinguishing features.

I sigh, trying to understand my emotions. *I'm hungry already.* Is that an emotion? I want to go home. *What about that?*

Within my emotional tangle is the sensation of longing. Just about everything I see reminds me of Mr. Kollins. The computer, for instance, sits in the corner, and I remember him sitting there, absently twirling a piece of beautiful black hair around his index finger.

The image is branded in my mind's eye forever.

On the other hand, I'm more than relieved that he's not there.

I put my head on the cold surface of my desk and pretend I'm in a metal drawer in the morgue.

The idea is comforting.

I hear Tessa begin her antics that are similar to the ones she did when Mr. Kollins came in his first day. Flirtatious.

“Are you married?” she asks. Her puppydogs snicker. “You don't look middle-aged.”

“Then how did you know I'm middle-aged?” he asks, sternly.

I sit up.

“What?” Tessa asks. She's so dumb I could scream.

“If I don’t look middle-aged, then how did you know that I am?” He has cold blue eyes. I like him. I like anybody that tears down Tessa.

I can’t see her face from back here, but the tips of her ears turn red.

To Stuart, I whisper, “It’s gonna be a good day.”

He laughs.

#

Lunchtime is even more of a struggle now. My friends don’t want to sit with me. And I have to make a choice: to eat or not to eat? Do I eat and purge?

Or, God forbid, eat and keep it down, which is what I’m supposed to do.

I wonder what Ashley’s doing right now.

“Hey, barf breath,” Tessa says, walking behind me, carrying her tray. I’m in the lunch line to buy milk. It’s so stupid to have to wait in line for milk, but that’s the new rule. “How was the funny farm?”

I turn and pinch her, hard, on the side of her hip. There’s not much there, so I have to really dig in.

“Oww!” she cries, stepping back.

I get in her face. “Bother me again and I’ll do something worse.”

She looks stunned and walks toward the girls in the class. We used to all eat together, even though I hate them all.

I sit down with my milk and stare at my peanut butter and jelly sandwich—my favorite food.

But my stomach’s been in knots all day. I think of Ashley and take a bite.

Then another.

Then another.

Until it’s gone.

I pull the bag of Chips Ahoy Double Chocolate Chunk cookies out of my lunch box.

Mama included five of them—anything to bribe me to get calories down my throat.

When they're gone, I feel the panic set in. My face flushes. I can't believe I ate them.

"Pig!" Tessa and her puppydogs scream. "You're gonna get fat, pig!"

I turn my face away so they don't see how much it hurts.

Too late.

They've already seen.

#

The new teacher's name is Mr. Cary. He says things like, "Why don't they start drafting little people to play basketball? I mean, they could just run between the big guys' legs. A brand new strategy," and "When I worked for the juvenile detention center, there was this kid who drank human blood. A real, live vampire. It was creepy stuff."

I get bored fairly quickly, which the psychologist said would happen because my brain isn't fully functional yet. What feels like boredom is actually the sensation of being overwhelmed.

And I am overwhelmed.

On the way home from school (Mama's picking me up because I'm not supposed to use extra energy walking), I see a guy with long, black hair walking down the street. My whole being seems to wrinkle up then straighten out again.

"You okay? You look pale," Sissy asks me. I'm still unsure about how she's dealing with all of this.

"Fine. Tired." And half of that's true. I am tired.

When we get home I go straight to the couch, crawl under my favorite blanket (at least, it was my favorite when things still mattered enough for me to have a favorite anything), and fall into a deep sleep plagued with the nightmarish figures of Tessa and her posse.

#

The next day Mr. Cary informs me that I can't keep using my hall passes everyday for the restroom. If I have to go I've got to go at lunchtime.

My eyes well up with tears and he says, "Are you actually going to *cry* about this, you big baby?"

The class erupts with laughter.

I stare at my shoes. The right one has a hole in the top. I'll have to tell Mama I need new sneakers. She always says I'm hard on shoes—harder on shoes than my sister is.

“Well? Go sit down,” Mr. Cary says.

My classmates snicker.

I want to kill myself. I think of all the ways I could do it: hanging, cutting, shooting, jumping...starving.

It almost worked the first time. I might as well try it again.

In the restroom at lunchtime, Tessa and her posse attack full force:

“I don't think you were in the hospital because you're crazy,” Dora says. “I think you were in the hospital having a boob job.”

“I guess you'd notice, you fucking lesbian,” I reply.

“Oooo,” the girls laugh, cornering me with my back against the full-length mirror.

“You realize you just admitted to having a boob job?” Faith says.

They laugh.

The bell rings for recess to start. We're all supposed to head outside now.

They leave. I pee, staring down at my fat thighs. I notice tears splashing on them. I blow my nose on the toilet paper and try practicing a coping skill: closely draw your full attention to your surroundings.

I flush and leave the stall.

The walls are a puke yellow. The stall doors are green. There's a shower area that's been abandoned since, probably, the eighties. Nobody showers after gym anymore.

Tessa and them like to go back there and have their Spice Girls meetings. Before I went into the hospital they were Destiny's Child, except they had an extra girl who had to be somebody else. I don't remember whom.

“Rain!” The shrill sound of my name makes me jump so hard I have to stable myself by grabbing the sink.

“What?” It comes out as a squeak.

“The bell rang.” I turn and see Mrs. Wicke in the mirror. She’s so mean.

“Hurry up!”

“Okay, okay...”

When I exit, she’s waiting for me.

“Come on, young lady,” she says, her hand guiding me along by touching me between my shoulder blades. “You know the rules. No bath rooming after the bell.”

“The bell caught me while I was finishing up,” I mutter. I look around the gym with its red mats on each wall, the red and black lines of the basketball court.

We push the metal door to go outside, and the sudden sunshine makes me squint. In the winter we only get fifteen minutes of recess outside. Nobody thought of keeping me in from the cold, so I gladly go out for air everyday.

I want to take off my coat to burn calories, but Mrs. Wicke would make me put it back on.

I sit down on the bench and watch my two old friends talk to the gym teacher about eighth grade graduation in May.

“How do they pick the valedictorian?” Lauren asks. She pretends it’s an innocent curiosity, but it is so obvious that she wants to be number one in our stupid little class of eighteen people.

Whoopity doo.

“Grades,” Mrs. Roberts says.

I don’t like her because she told my sister that she was lazy last year.

“Extra-curriculars don’t have anything to do with it?” Lauren asks. She’s got her hands in her jean pockets and that superior look on her face. Alicia shivers, watching the boys play football. I don’t think her mom has the money for a good winter coat and I feel bad for her.

Mrs. Roberts shakes her head. She glances at me. I look away.

I swing my legs back and forth, trying to burn calories. I ate half my lunch, and my belly’s complaining that it’s still hungry. I ignore it.

I remember that day during warm weather, before Mr. Kollins raped me, when Alicia and I were pushing the merry-go-round, and Mr. Kollins came down the hill from his car, carrying a big cardboard box. His sleek black hair shone in the sun. It reflected white to blue. I had never seen anything so beautiful. I yelled, “Mr. Kollins! Do you need some help?” He shook his head, smiled slightly, embarrassed, maybe, and waved.

I wanted to impress him with how fast I could make the merry-go-round go.

Stupid stupid stupid.

I put my face in my gloved hands.

“Rain?” a male voice says my name just above a whisper.

Reluctantly I look up. Stuart stands in front of me.

“Yeah?” It comes out as a sigh. The sigh of a woman six times my age.

“I think you dropped this,” he hands me a mini-notebook I keep in my pocket to avoid another catastrophe.

He must see the fear in my eyes because he says, “Don’t worry. I didn’t read it or anything.”

When my shaking hand takes it, my fingers lightly brush his. Even through my gloves I can feel his electricity passed from his nervous system to mine. I shiver.

“Thanks,” I say, lamely. He nods and turns around to go play football.

I fear the things that run through my body—the things that warm me.

I realize I never really felt like that with Mr. Kollins. Not once...Or maybe it’s just a defense mechanism to convince myself I didn’t.

#

Nighttime. In my bed, I sniff the pillow, remembering how my hair sometimes carried the scent of you home with me.

There is no lingering scent on the pillow, but I remember it, and this remembering makes me long for you so much I start to weep.

Your touch was my god and my devil. I guess I convinced myself at some point that you were a fallen angel, that nothing was your fault.

(See me addressing him again. I promised Ashley I wouldn't do that anymore.)

My hand creeps down into my panties. I remember your mouth.

Afterward I am so ashamed and fall asleep crying, listening to the rapid beat of my heart as it tries to tear through my chest.

I wish it would.

#

I arrive at school to find the class in an uproar. Mr. Cary has not arrived yet.

“What’s going on?” I interrupt Stuart’s excited chatter with Phil.

“Tessa’s mom took off with the janitor!” he says, laughing.

Tessa has her face buried in her arms.

The *janitor*? That creepy guy with the tattoos all up and down his arms who always has an unlit cigarette in his mouth?

He’s the only janitor we have because the school is so small.

“I bet they fucked in the closet,” I yell. “I bet she sucked his dick so hard.”

The boys cheer. Lauren gasps and turns around. Alicia raises her eyebrows.

Mr. Cary walks in and we all shut up.

Tessa says nothing the whole day. But her posse protects her like an armored car.

In the bathroom, I say, “Cock breath. And to think she’s been kissing your cunt face goodnight.”

“Shut up! Stop it, Rain!” Lauren cries. “Don’t you know you’re supposed to be a Christian? Don’t you know how much that hurts her?”

I laugh. “Hurt? *Hurt*? She doesn’t know anything about pain except inflicting it upon others. Don’t be so naive, Lauren. You think you’re gonna wiggle your way into Heaven by pretending you’re a saint, but I know what you do to yourself at night.”

Lauren’s eyes well up with tears. She walks out, shocked. Alicia follows her, showing no emotion.

Tessa puts her head on Faith’s boney shoulder.

I am so happy to hurt people. I am so happy to fight back.

I don't eat my lunch.

It's not like Wonder Woman ever ate anything.

#

All of it wears off by the time I get home. My head hurts and my stomach aches and I feel dizzy.

"You haven't eaten," Sissy scolds me in the car. She is so freaking astute for a nine-year old.

"*Rain!*" Mama whine-yells.

I shake my head, trying to clear the fog.

When we get home Mama sits me down at the table and tempts me with PB&J and chocolate chip cookies.

I cave.

I am not powerful anymore. My grief is that of a conquered kingdom. My homework takes forever. I'm exhausted. I'm in bed by the time Daddy gets home at seven.

He knocks on the bedroom door.

"Come in," I say.

"Hey, kiddo," he says. He smells like work. He's dirty and his ears are red from the cold. He rubs them because he got frostbite on them when he was a kid and they still hurt.

"Hi," I say.

"Didya have a good day?"

"No. Did you?"

"No."

We laugh.

"Maybe tomorrow will be better," he says.

“Maybe.”

I can see his smile in the darkness. We are allies in our suffering.

“Night,” he says, patting me on the head.

“Good-night.”

He shuts the door behind him. Sissy will come in when it’s actually bedtime.

I lie here and cry for no reason.

#

I don’t have to go to school the next morning because I have an appointment at the hospital for family therapy. Daddy can’t come because of his job, and Sissy is in school and doesn’t need any more stress, so it’s just Mama and me.

I have to pee in a cup, put on a gown, do a blind weigh-in (meaning I stand on the scale with my back to the numbers), and have my vitals taken.

The social worker says, “You’ve lost weight since you got out.”

I gaze around his office. There’s a whiteboard where he’s drawn a triple Venn diagram with the words: *biology, environment, personality*.

“These are the three things that have to be in place for an eating disorder to occur,” Scott explains to Mama.

She sits across from me like we’re opponents at a chessboard.

“Oh,” she says.

“If you lose any more weight in the next week, I’m going to put you back in the hospital,” he says.

“That’s better than school,” I mumble.

“Why do you say that?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

“Please tell us,” Mama begs. The look on her face tells me that she thinks I’m about to reveal the big Secret—the key to all my problems. She doesn’t know the key to my problems is a grown man.

“The girls...they stand on top of the toilet seat in the next stall over and watch me pee. They torment me in the bathroom all the time.”

Mama goes pale and looks to the social worker. “I had no idea,” she says. “Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“What could you possibly do?” I sneer. My anger is exhausting. My parents can’t protect me from anything anymore, and the fact that they once promised to always protect me means they lied.

“I haven’t had my period,” I blurt.

“Why’s that bug you so much?” Scott asks.

I give him my you’re-an-idiot look and say, “Cuz I’m a girl and I’m supposed to have a period.”

“Have you had it before?” he says.

“Duh,” I mumble.

“She started at eleven,” Mama says.

“You’re too thin to have your period,” he says. “You’ve lost over twenty percent of your body mass. You’ll get it when you gain weight.”

Suddenly I want to gain weight more than anything in the world. I want to make sure I’m not pregnant.

After the appointment, Mama keeps me home from school. “I’m going to go up there and talk to that stupid principal and try to change some things,” she says. She calls and makes an appointment with him for one o’clock.

I’m nervous. I don’t know why. (Ashley is good at figuring out the root of things.)

We eat lunch and she bans me from the bathroom for the next hour. She leaves for the school at 12:45.

I decide to do some research.

It takes a long time for the old IBM to turn on, then longer for AOL to dial up. When the Internet finally pops up, I begin Googling Mr. Kollins’s name.

Nothing comes up.

After an hour, my eyes hurt, so I turn the computer off (which takes time) and head for the phone book.

Nothing there either.

My stomach flips. *Oh God, I might be pregnant and I have no way to reach him.*

I ponder suicide methods again.

But then Mama comes home with a broad smile on her face.

“So...?” I ask.

She hands me a small key. “This is a key to the faculty/staff restroom. You know where it is?”

“Upstairs by the auditorium.”

“You’re to use it from now on. But you have to do something for me now. You have to not purge. At all,” she says.

Her eyes reveal blatant fear. It pains me. She knows she can’t trust an ED patient, but she’s giving me a chance. She got me this key.

“Thank you. I promise. I truly promise.” I mean it. She must see this in my face because she hugs me.

I go to my room and find a chain for the key. I put it around my neck.

They’ll have to kill me to get it.

#

Tessa’s even meaner now that her mother ran off with the janitor, and she’s convinced Ray, the psycho, to beat up on me before school.

Angry tears run down my face because he doesn’t know how dangerous it is to hit an 85-pound girl. My bones could splinter, they’re so weak. Many anorectics break hips like old ladies do. It’s scary.

I’ve never broken a bone before. I don’t want to start now.

“Why are you crying?” Mr. Cary accuses me. I become unsure as to whether or not this man is actually a licensed teacher. Why should he be? Mr. Kollins wasn’t. He had a degree in math. He was hired as an emergency. The school couldn’t find anybody after the Mackenzie Joshua incident.

All these thoughts zoom through my mind, and I say, “I have an allergy. Ray stinks.”

Everyone laughs, but not with me. At me. Not because what I said is clever, but because I’m a proud coward.

Mr. Cary grunts and sits down at his desk. He re-arranged the room so that we face his desk now because he’s too lazy to stand in front of the whiteboard and teach.

I pat the key through my shirt to make sure it’s still there. It is and this gives me relief. I won’t have to face these rats in the bathroom at lunch.

The morning drags on. I’m sore from where Ray punched me on my back. Mr. Cary isn’t teaching us anything. He just sits there and makes stupid jokes and talks about basketball.

I miss having my journal. I leave it at home these days and only write the prompts and responses and dull stuff about the day. It used to be my only friend, but Mr. Kollins ruined everything. He still has my original journal. And my romance novel.

I want them back.

My anger knows no limits.

Last night I told Sissy that she’s a cutesy little brat and that I have no use for her.

I got yelled at because it made her cry, and I felt bad. That pale face turning pink and pinched. Those blue eyes springing bulbous tears.

I felt awful. She’s never done anything to deserve me talking to her that way.

But I didn’t apologize either.

I put my face in my hands, thinking about it. My guilt and my shame compete for airtime in my brain and even in my body.

I can’t stand it! I can’t stand it!

As Mr. Cary drones on and on about sports, I gaze aimlessly around the classroom, trying to calm myself with coping skills. There are two windows—one on each side of Mr. Cary’s desk. A computer sits against the wall next to the whiteboard and an image—a memory—passes through my mind’s eye. It’s the image of Mr. Kollins sitting at the computer while I worked on math problems. The room was quiet for once. Left-handed Tessa frowned at her paper.

And there was just the comfort of looking up and knowing he was there.

That's back when I was under the delusion he might love me. I thought people only did the things he did to me when they were in love.

I was in love.

And stupid. Very stupid.

This time, as I sigh, it's the shame that wins.

#

I throw everyone off at lunchtime by not turning the corner to go down the steps that lead to the bathroom. Nobody follows me either. There are many whispers of "where is *she* going?"

It feels so good!

At recess, I hear Lauren discussing valedictorian (which Daddy pronounces as "veledvictorian") with Mrs. Roberts again. It's virtually the exact same conversation they just had the other day.

Lame.

I roll my eyes.

"Hey," Stuart says. He surprises me by sitting next to me on the bench.

"Hey," I murmur, looking away from his stunning blue eyes.

We sit in silence for awhile because I'm not big on talking to the people in my class because of what happened with Faith in fifth grade. She acted like she was my friend, then betrayed my secrets to Tessa and them. I called her Benedict Arnold the rest of the year. Of course, she's too dumb to know who that is, so it was a waste.

"So..." Stuart says.

I study my shoes. The right one still has a hole in the top.

"So," he repeats, drawing a breath, "How are you?"

"What?"

"How are you?"

“I’m fine, of course.” It comes out extremely sarcastically and I wince at the sound of my rising voice.

“Is Ray giving you trouble?” he asks.

I nod. “He gives everybody trouble. His existence is trouble. This whole establishment gives me trouble.” I don’t know exactly what that means, but I heard it in a movie.

Anyway, he looks impressed. “I know what you mean. I can’t wait to graduate from this place.”

“Yeah. And don’t you think that an eighth grade graduation is lame?” I’m gathering steam now. I haven’t actually talked to anybody outside my family in a long time. I forgot what it was like, and it makes me nervous.

“I agree,” he says. “Who do you think will win?”

“Lauren. She seems to be the only one who actually cares.”

He looks around the playground. “Jay cares.”

I look directly at him this time, not quite believing that this is a real conversation that doesn’t consist of someone making fun of me. He reminds me a little of my dad. He has a very down-to-Earth face and he’s rather short and stocky.

Eventually he will grow into this world.

The bell rings and everybody starts running for the school.

I am so depressed that it takes everything in me to extract myself from the bench.

#

The days drag on. And on. And on. One runs into the next. The teasing continues. Ray eventually loses interest in hitting me because I begin showing no fear or pain or anything else. I have huge welts though. I looked at them in the mirror the other night.

I continue gaining weight.

Finally, it happens.

I wake up one morning to find dark red on my panties. They’re ruined. I almost shout for joy.

I am NOT pregnant!

With that off my chest, I feel so much better.

I get so sick of Lauren talking about the valedictorian thing that I decide to embark on a mission.

I am going to be the valedictorian.

It's not like I've got anything else to do anyway.

The day I decide to do this, I get home and Mama says, distractedly, "There's an e-mail for you."

I wait for what seems like hours for the computer to heat up. Finally, I read:

Dear friends,

I am so sorry and sad to report that, after fighting anorexia nervosa for years, Ashley passed away in her sleep.

Sincerely,

Lynn (Ashley's mom)

The air leaves my lungs with a whoosh. I start crying hysterically.

"Oh, sweetie," Mama says. She hugs me awkwardly because I'm still sitting in the chair, staring at the screen.

I go to bed.

"She probably had a heart attack," Daddy says, cautiously, at supper.

I feel like throwing up in my green beans.

I have to sneak in my crying before school, at lunch, and after school. I keep make-up with me for the first time ever to touch up my face. Mama gave it to me and showed me how to do it.

A week passes, and I decide I must do something that would make Ashley proud even though my first inclination is to go back to my eating disorder.

"Ashley, I'm gonna be the valedictorian in your honor," I whisper at the ceiling fan one night. I imagine her crooked smile and the way she sometimes winked at me.

At least I finally have something to live for.

#

I start doing every extra credit assignment I can. I concentrate on learning everything so I can get only A's on my papers.

This is my sacred secret. I'm gonna win.

"You seem to be working really hard on school stuff," Daddy mentions one evening as I sit on my knees at the coffee table.

"Yeah. My brain's trying to catch up now that I've gained weight." This is exactly what Scott told me would happen.

"Oh."

I guess he doesn't know what else to say.

My report card comes the next day:

Language Arts	B+
Pre-Algebra	B+
Social Studies	A
Science	B
Music	A
Gym	C
Practical Living	A
Art	A-

I'm disappointed, but those grades were in *before* I began my mission. I didn't expect gym to be good. I have to sit out a lot because I'm not allowed to intentionally burn calories. I will ask Mama to talk to Mrs. Roberts about this matter because she's not supposed to take points off since I have a doctor's note. But I expect nothing less from the woman who once told my sister that she was "chubby and lazy."

#

Family therapy. (Sigh.) I get weighed; they take my vitals; I pee in a cup so they make sure I'm not water loading.

"You're doing really well," Scott says.

"I don't feel well. I feel tired and depressed," I report.

"Well, we could put you on an antidepressant, but it's tricky since you're so young. It could backfire and your symptoms could get worse."

“I don’t want her to be on pills if possible,” Mama says. “What do you think, Rain?”

“I’m okay. If I can just get through this fucking shit year of school.”

“Rain!” Mama scolds.

I shrug. I don’t care anymore.

Scott studies me. “Those girls still pestering you?”

“I can mostly avoid them now that I have a key to the faculty bathroom.”

“Good,” he nods. “And don’t forget to use your coping skills you learned while you were in-patient.”

“I remember,” I say.

“Good,” Scott and Mama say together.

The appointment continues without me being completely present. I vaguely hear Mama tell Scott that Ashley died—that I almost relapsed, but stayed strong.

These comments are meant for me.

But I’m busy. My mind is on Mr. Kollins. I remember the invasive sensation of his mouth on my nipples.

I hope I never have to feel that again.

Then, I suddenly think of Stuart for some reason.

Boys are not worth my time. I could become a lesbian, I guess.

The only problem is I hate girls even more than I hate boys.

Whatever.

#

Spring and graduation is a month away. I can taste it.

The school does stupid, dramatic stuff with us, as though high school’s going to be some big deal. This town has no high school, so high schools from around the area come and try to recruit us. I know Lauren will go to Lendon High School because her mother’s the librarian there and her father is the football coach. Lendon is the worst school out of all of them, but she’ll be a big fish in a little pond.

Nobody talks to me. Even Stuart's moved on to greener pastures.

I have somehow become the most loathsome creature in school.

One day, Ms. Hart must realize I'm particularly upset because she asks to see me at lunch.

"I'm going to blow up this place," I say.

She shakes her head. "Rain, you don't know *how*. Just let stuff go. It'll be over soon."

I want to cry, but my classmates come in from recess.

Ms. Hart shows a movie called *Swing Kids* to complement our Hitler unit. It bugs me. There's a scene in a bathtub of a kid who's dead because he's slit his wrists.

I know he's just acting, but I have to close my eyes against it.

"Did you know kids like that at the funny farm?" Tessa asks. Her posse snickers. I always feel like I'm being watched.

I start because she's read my mind. Ms. Hart shuts them up, but the words can't be erased. They hang in the air.

I hold my breath against their pollution.

#

After school, I have a dentist appointment. The hospital suggested I get checked because of the damage an eating disorder can do to your teeth.

I HATE the dentist. He's cruel because he makes us swallow the toothpaste. Mama doesn't believe me because he's so nice and gregarious with the parents. (Gregarious was on my spelling test this week.)

After a rough examination, he lets me into a little room and calls Mama in.

"See this," he says, grabbing my face. "See how her bottom jaw doesn't line up with her top jaw and creates that serious overbite? She needs braces to pull that bottom jaw forward. It isn't growing as quickly as the top jaw."

"No," I say. "Absolutely not."

"Do you want your profile to be crooked forever?" he asks.

I do have crooked teeth, but they've come in handy from time to time, like in sixth grade when Ray thought I was a vampire and he kept away from me all year.

"We'll talk about it," Mama says, pinching her nose. She's exhausted.

I've exhausted her.

He hands her the paperwork of the options and the costs and ruffles my hair.

"Bye, kiddo," he says.

I frown because my dad calls me that. No one else is allowed.

#

Late at night, I can't sleep. I keep seeing the sneering faces of my classmates. So I get out of bed and pad softly to the hallway where I can overhear my parents talking over the TV.

"What are the options?" Daddy asks. "Have you talked to Rain about this?"

"No, I wanted to talk to you first," Mama says.

"Shit," Daddy says.

Mama clears her throat, obviously about to read the paperwork the dentist sent home with her.

"Option one is surgery. They'll break the jaw and reconstruct it before putting braces on."

My hand flies up to my mouth so I don't yipe aloud.

"Option two is braces plus headgear—"

"What's that?" Daddy asks.

"This pamphlet says that it's a kind of contraption she'd wear at night. I don't completely understand it."

"Only at night?" Daddy's asking all the questions I have.

"I'm not sure. Option three is braces plus rubber bands that stretch from the front top teeth to the bottom back teeth. It will apparently pull the bottom jaw forward to make it catch up faster...or something."

“Why have those other options at all if the last option’s the easiest?” he says.

“Because with the last option she can expect to wear braces for three years instead of a year and a half.”

There’s a pause. I picture Daddy sitting in his lay-z boy with the TV flipper in his hand, thumb paused above the channel buttons. He’s probably frowning, thinking.

I head back to bed before one of them surprises me by coming around the corner to go to the bathroom.

I toss and turn literally all night. When morning comes I’ve not slept a wink. My head hurts; my eyes feel like sandpaper; I’m sick to my stomach. But I can’t stay home because I’ve had more than the acceptable number of absences.

The school day begins with Mr. Cary beginning a debate about which one’s scarier, Michael Myers or Jason.

I don’t know what they’re talking about, so I sit there and daydream.

“Hey!”

I start. My face almost crashes to the desk. Mr. Cary’s poking my arm with a yardstick. My classmates are laughing.

“Wha--? What?” I ask Stuart. I’m dismayed to find him laughing, too.

“You fell asleep, sunshine. I don’t like snoring interrupting my lectures,” Mr. Cary says.

“Was I really snoring?” I ask Stuart.

He nods.

“Oh, goddammit,” I say.

Everybody laughs harder. Even Mr. Cary laughs. Right before he tells me to take my dirty mouth down to the principal’s office.

But I decide not to go to the principal’s office. I throw my hall pass in the garbage when I get to the empty auditorium. I check for the music teacher, but she’s not here. So I head up to the stage and hide behind it. There’s a passage that leads from one wing to the other. I sit there in the dark.

This time the bell wakes me up. It's the bell for Specials and today's Special is art. We'll be painting, so I don't need anything from Mr. Cary's room, and we go back to his room right after art.

"Mrs. Wyatt," I say, pretending to be discreet, "Mr. Hambly asked if you could call Mr. Cary and let him know I've been sent straight to art."

"Sure," she says. I knew she wouldn't question orders from the principal.

She makes the call and I hear Mr. Cary say, "Thanks for letting me know."

I smile, feeling better after a 45-minute nap.

It looks like I'm off the hook.

The rest of the day goes on to prove that nobody's the wiser.

#

The braces conversation doesn't come up again until April 24th at supper. I didn't bring it up before because I was hoping Mama and Daddy would forget all about it.

But Mama finally lists my options.

"You forgot one," I say with a mouth full of green beans.

"What?"

"Doing nothing at all."

Mama frowns and gives Daddy a meaningful look she thinks I can't read.

The conversation goes elsewhere.

But then the next week, when I go to Grandma and Pappap's after school one day, they bring it up.

"You really should have it done," Grandma says. She's so beautiful, too, with olive skin and high cheekbones. "You're such a pretty girl; it's a shame to have crooked teeth and that strange profile."

I look at Pappap. "It's true, Princess," he says, lighting his pipe before continuing. "And we've told your mom and dad that we'll pay for it."

"You remember the story about your Mama's ears?" Grandma asks.

I nod. When Mama was little she got made fun of because her ears stuck through her hair like a monkey's. Grandma and Pappap had her get surgery so they wouldn't do that anymore.

But they're forgetting one little detail: a week after returning to school, she got clobbered by a baseball at recess. She fainted.

#

I spend the evening thinking about my teeth, sometimes catching myself running my finger over them.

"I'm going to take the summer to consider it," I tell Mama.

"Are you sure you're not just putting it off?"

"I'm sure," I say, glaring at the French fries on the basket on the table.

I don't want to eat. I'm already so fat that even the girls at school know it.

Mama makes me eat three bites of everything on my plate, which adds up to about all of it anyway.

(Parents always think they've got you one way or another.)

I dream about Mr. Kollins. I don't remember the details in the morning, just that the whole night was filled with him.

I'd give anything to know where he is.

#

The next day Mr. Cary gathers us to the auditorium and we don't know why.

He constantly has to remind us to be quiet in the hall.

In the back of my mind I wonder if he's going to gun us down or something.

At least it would put me out of my misery.

We're instructed to grab a chair from the racks and sit down. Mr. Hambly is at the front of the room, waiting.

He makes a speech about how we're going to begin practicing the graduation ceremony soon, how we've made Mint Independent so proud, etc.

I sigh.

He glances at me.

“What I’ve really brought you here for is to announce the valedictorian, salutatorian, and third place winners.”

The kids smile excitedly and almost-silently congratulate Lauren. She beams, holding her head high. She’s so proud.

“The third place winner is Jay Williams,” Mr. Hambly says.

Jay gives a little nod, his lips terse. I think deep down he really wanted to make his dad proud and come in first.

“The salutatorian is Lauren Myles.”

Everyone gasps and looks around at each other. They are shocked.

So am I, and I know what’s coming. I cross my fingers and watch Lauren’s grin fade away. She looks pale.

“The valedictorian of the eighth grade class of 2002 is...Rain Ennis.”

I smile. Just a little, though.

“May I go to the restroom?” Lauren croaks.

Mr. Hambly nods sympathetically. Tess and Faith follow her without even asking permission. Mr. Hambly doesn’t mind. Lauren’s father is on the Board. It’s no wonder he looks so unhappy.

She was *supposed* to win. This fact falls into place before my eyes. This thing was rigged until I ruined it.

I can’t wait to go home and tell Daddy.

#

Daddy literally jumps up and down. He’s so proud of me.

I feel like I might faint, I am so hungry.

“Uh oh, let’s get her some food,” Mama says, reading my expression.

And with that, things are back to normal in this odd family dynamic I'm responsible for creating.

#

All night, I toss and turn. I ate a snack after school; I ate two helpings of supper, and I'm still hungry. It keeps me awake.

I also wonder if, maybe, well, if Mr. Kollins *knew* that I won, if he'd be proud of me. If he would do the things he used to do to me, but forever.

I almost laugh out loud at myself.

He wouldn't care.

Of course, he wouldn't care.

But, strangely, I find I *do* care. I do care.

And in the end, I won.

#

I am so nervous about making a speech that I miss the last day of school—graduation is tonight.

I am the only one that misses the last day. Mama finds this out when she calls to report my absence.

"If she misses school she can't attend graduation," the secretary says.

"Oh, she'll be there. Bet on it," Mama says, hanging up. She's so angry.

Mama never calls Daddy while he's working, but she pages him and when he calls, she tells him about this.

"Bull shit," he says. "They just want to give first place to their precious Lauren. We're not going to let that happen. Tell Rain she's going to that graduation if we have to carry her in on a stretcher.

I know he's right. And I know I have to go. I have to give my speech and accept my award.

I *have* to.

That evening the last thing I do before we walk out the door is vomit. Not from purging either. From sheer nerves.

I know from graduation practice that my classmates are meeting in Mr. Cary's room so we can march to the auditorium together.

When I walk in everybody looks quickly at me, then away. Lauren looks disappointed. Alicia's the only one who will meet my gaze, but she says nothing. The room is silent.

I'm not supposed to be here. Somebody told them I wasn't coming.

Before I can take my seat far away from everyone, my sister's second grade teacher Mrs. Weiss, curiously enough, pulls me into the hall.

She grabs my shoulders. "Honey, this is your night. Don't let anyone take that away from you. You've earned this. Now, you go onto that stage with your chin up!"

I'm dumbfounded. She's always been a little rough, threatening to "shake the feathers" out of people, and she's known for her skills at pulling baby teeth. Her fingers dig into my shoulders once more, then she spins me around and pushes me back into the classroom.

It occurs to me that the teachers of this school have chosen sides. Mine versus Lauren's (and her stupid father who's on the Board.)

How strange! Mrs. Weiss has never had me as her student. But she's had Lauren twice—for first grade, then second grade. Why would she be routing for me? She must have loved my sister more than she loved Lauren.

I won fair and square, even if it was by sixth-tenths of a point.

I barely manage to stay vertical as we march in the auditorium. I sit down on the stage while the salutatorian gives her speech. I gaze around the crowd.

Then I see him.

There's Mr. Kollins in the balcony, standing up, wearing a short-sleeved dress shirt and tie, his long, black hair shiny and perfect.

Luckily, I have at least 20 minutes (Her speech covers everybody that left Mint Independent in every grade since kindergarten.) to get a grip before it's my turn.

I'm shaking when I give mine, but my voice stays strong and confident. It's over in three minutes and everyone claps, relieved that my speech, which they probably all expected to be longer since I'm the valedictorian, is over and I notice that Mr. Cary

did not sit down during the whole thing. He stood up when Lauren finished and never sat down during mine. What a dumb cluck.

They've found a way to supplement Lauren's loss of first place: They give her \$125 for second and third place while I get \$100.

We march out and everybody gets up and fights each other to find their graduate. It's a small space. I'm trying to find Mr. Kollins when my parents find me. They are all grinning. Sissy's trying to hold onto to Daddy's jacket so she doesn't get separated. Everybody gives me a big hug.

I never do see Mr. Kollins, and I start to wonder if I imagined him.

That evening Aunt Candi calls and invites me to come up and stay with them this summer.

"I'll ask Mama."

"Oh, I've already cleared it with her," she says. "I can pick you up day after tomorrow."

"Okay," I say. It's about two hours from here to Yellow Springs, so I'm surprised that she wants to come pick me up. She probably wants to see Sissy because Sissy has gymnastics camp and can't come.

When the day finally ends, I sit on the porch step and close my eyes, feeling the balmy spring air on my face like a gentle caress. Like Mr. Kollins's caress on the days when he was being nice. Did I really see him at graduation?

I can take the whole summer to decide. The whole summer and the rest of my life.

Serial IV

The thing I love so much about Aunt Candi and Uncle Ron is that I can ask them any question and they don't narrow their eyes at me and say, "Why? Are you involved with _____?"

Like today as I help Candi shovel manure, I ask, "How do you recover from heartbreak?"

She stops shoveling and thought for a moment. "Well, I've had to do it a lot since this is my fourth marriage." She laughs. "I guess the way you do it is to make sure your life purpose isn't wrapped up in people. Establish your life purpose before you get involved with men, and hang onto it with everything you've got."

"What if you accidentally don't do that?"

"Take Valium." We laugh and get back to work.

I've grown to love the smells of the barn and horses, though I am still a little afraid of the male horse Ambriel. He's big—half Arabian and half thoroughbred. His mother was the latter. She died. Candi has a mare named Venus. She's pure white and wouldn't hurt a horsefly. I don't worry about her hurting me. But Ambriel once kicked Candi into the barn wall and she's had a bad back ever since. She wears a big brace to shovel manure.

Candi's taking a break right now to go inside and get some water.

I walk through the pasture looking for any of the ten cats.

"Pocket! Artemis!" I call because they are the most friendly and the most likely to show up. Onyx, the all-black kitten who is privileged with living inside, is extremely friendly, too, but she won't come because she's afraid I'll take her back in. She only gets to go out and play for a little while.

Some kitten, I laugh to myself. Yesterday she chased Mischief, the big orange tom, through the yard, whacking him on his backside with her paw.

Pocket comes to me immediately. Her sister Squeaky is much shyer and won't come. She only really comes to Ron. Pocket lies down on her back, purring in the clover. I scratch her belly and she rolls from side to side, ticklish. I have to be careful that she doesn't accidentally claw me in her enthusiasm.

"Artemis!"

I hear a noise behind me and turn to find Artemis looking up at me like, "What do you want?" She is an obsess cat, which is weird because she has no teeth and only

likes dry, hard cat food. Candi thinks it's a thyroid problem, but she hasn't had to the vet yet.

Artemis, like Pocket, has family on this little farm: Feather and Irena are sisters, but they never interact. Irena is wild and blind in one eye. She comes home bloody sometimes from fighting. I only ever see her in the evenings. Feather, too, is wild—so wild that she won't come to Ron. She only comes to Candi.

Candi has a soft spot for Feather and cuddles her like a baby. Onyx gets insanely jealous when she sees this and will mope the rest of the day and try to attack Feather the next chance she gets.

And these are only some of dynamics on this farm.

I walk to the driveway and sit down in a wooden chair next to the garage. The two cats follow me. They are hounds for attention.

He went to marry his long term girlfriend. Mr. Cary's words echo through my mind and cause my stomach to tighten. Like Onyx, I'm insanely jealous. I'm also relieved though, too.

Let someone else deal with him. I look at my shoes. Before I fall into too much despair (it's all too much) I practice the technique of making myself completely present to my surroundings. Out along the gravel drive are different kinds of trees: peach, hickory, crab apple, pine. Candi said the peach tree is sensitive and nearly dies every winter and fails to produce a crop. But when it does produce, the peaches are divine.

I try to picture what it would be like to be a peach tree rather than a hickory tree, find I cannot, and let the despair take me. My breath shudders. I love him so much. Look what he did to me.

Look at all the things he did to me.

#

That evening Candi and Ron drink Corona with lime at dinner. We watch the TV show *Beauty and the Beast*. I never saw it before, but fall in love with it immediately.

The beast lives under the city in a civilization of tunnels. He helps beauty heal after she's mistaken for a whore and her face is slashed and she is badly beaten.

I love seeing characters endure horrible things and then recover. They're the only kind of character I can relate to. Ron thinks I'm simply precocious.

He has no idea what I've been through.

#

In the morning I wake up because Candi has to go to work. She contracts with the Air Force at Wright-Patt as an expert in fitness and tobacco cessation.

Or something.

Ron and her workout to a Denise Austin tape. I wish I could join them, but I'm not allowed to burn calories unnecessarily.

I realize that I haven't had much trouble with my eating disorder since I've been here. I wonder if the intern doctor I saw first was correct in thinking that maybe my true issue is depression.

I don't believe this, actually.

"You can do it!" Denise Austin yells in her sandpapery voice. Candi finishes her sit ups. Ron has dozed off in the middle of his. Onyx puts her paw on his mouth. I laugh really loud and wake him up.

I've struggled with body image issues since puberty. And those girls making fun of me in the restroom all the time have ruined me completely.

Remembering this makes me put my face in my hands.

"What's wrong, honey?" Candi asks.

I shake my head. "Nothing."

I want to say, "Post-traumatic stress disorder."

I want to say, "Life sucks."

I want to say, "I'm happy to be here with you guys."

"Nothing," I say. "I'm fine."

We eat peanut butter toast and they have coffee. I choke down orange juice because I have to have a caloric beverage at every meal.

As soon as we eat, I try to forget about it as quickly as I can. Ron seems to catch onto this because he asks me to help Candi with the cat chores. While she feeds them, I do the litter.

Doing cat chores is like a ballet because Butternut, Buttersquash, Feather, and Pumpkin are on the front porch. When I come out they scatter. There are two boxes

out there, Onyx's box in Candi's room, and three boxes on the back porch for Mischief, Squeaky, Pocket, Artemis, and Irena.

Most of the cats are afraid of me since I'm the new kid on the block, so they scatter like a school of fish.

One thing I really like about being somewhere new is how few possessions I have here with me. Basically I have my clothes and a couple books. I didn't even bother bringing notebooks and pens because of all the trauma and drama of Mr. Kollins taking them.

It's as though I'm afraid he's going to sneak in through the window and take things from me.

Silly. I take the pooper scooper and bags down to the basement.

I'm no longer a virgin, I realize.

This thought crashes down on me.

The Baptist Church—my dad's family's church—says that you're supposed to save your virginity for your husband.

I don't know if that means I need to not get married or try to find a husband who will understand. (I prefer the first choice.)

My mom's family is Methodist. It's funny, I was christened by Pappap in the Methodist Church, but the Baptists don't see this as legitimate baptism. So I got dunked in fifth grade. It was not as fun as I thought it would be.

I go back upstairs.

"I'm going to make Sangria today. Do you want to chop up the fruit?" Ron says.

"What's that?"

"Sangria is a Spanish drink. Fruity alcohol."

"Yeah," I grab a knife from the knife thing.

Ron smiles. "First, that's steak knife. Second, we're not doing it now."

"Oh," I put the knife back.

He disappears in the mornings after Candi leaves to play video games on the computer for a little while. I'm not into that, so I go outside.

I like how he doesn't ask me where I'm going. His trust means a lot.

Sometimes my parents ask me where I'm going if I leave the room. And the house is only 900 square feet.

It's a beautiful morning. I hear a roar overhead and look up to find fighter planes doing early morning maneuvers. The National Guard Base is right up the street.

Excitement wells up in my throat. They are majestic. Absolutely majestic.

I sit in the green chair on the patio and look at the way the marigolds are lit in the morning light. They still have dew on their petals, but the bees don't mind. They're already at work. There's a subdivision across the street from the driveway. My view is partially blocked by the two pine trees in the front yard.

I sigh. Mornings are my favorite. By nighttime my thoughts have turned dark and have found their way to Mr. Kollins.

I have an idea.

I go back inside and pour myself a cup of coffee. I'm going to pretend to be a grown-up.

I go back outside to the marigolds and sit down. I close my eyes. *I am myself in fifteen years and Mr. Kollins and this summer are just a memory. My pain is in the past. I am 28, single, and this is my house and those are my marigolds and I'm having my morning coffee before I go to work writing my romance novel.* I take a sip.

My eyes fly open. How do adults drink this?

I sit there a moment, staring at the brown liquid. Then I shrug and drink some more.

That's one way to have one of those sensory experiences they mental hospital's always talking about.

#

Ron comes out and asks me if I want to help him pick vegetables in the garden. He sees my cup.

"I didn't know you drank coffee."

"Me neither. I was just pretending to be an adult."

"How was it?" he asks.

“Stressful.”

We laugh.

He wears a big hat and sunglasses because he’s very fair and gets burned easily even this early in the day. I think he’s a little over prepared, but hey, it’s not my skin.

I hold the grocery bag open while he plucks zucchini, squash, peppers, and tomatoes. Sometimes he has to whistle to get my attention because I’m fascinated by the planes.

“You have to help me pick beans,” he says.

“What kind is this?” I ask, holding up a purple bean.

“Green beans.”

“Why are they purple?”

“They turn green in the pot,” he says.

I must still look clueless because he adds. “You’ll see. I’m making beans, cottage ham, and potatoes for supper with cornbread on the side.”

“Cornbread! That’s one of my favorites. I forgot all about it.”

He smiles.

We pick in silence for a while. I see some interesting spiders and other bugs along the way. I watch out because Daddy said a garden spider went down into his collar and it was like being stung by three bees all at once. I don’t want to get bit.

I hear the hee-hawing of Onion, the donkey next door. This cracks me up. I laugh for a long time.

“He sounds retarded,” I say.

“I get the sentiment, but you really shouldn’t say that, Rain,” Ron says. But he doesn’t say it like other adults. There’s no disappointment or reprimand in his voice. He says it like he would say, “Looks like rain, Rain.”

“Sorry,” I say.

He shakes his head. “No biggie. Now you know.”

I believe this man is the best uncle I’ve ever had. He is so kind.

#

In the kitchen Ron brings his CD player in and sets it on the floor. I let Onyx out to play for a while.

Madonna comes out of the speakers. I smile to myself. My dad would never be caught dead listening to Madonna.

He puts the green beans in to boil and sure enough they turn green. Then he adds the potatoes. It simmers.

“I’m gonna start this process now so I can do the cornbread later. I’ve got some other cooking this afternoon, so this will go in the fridge for a little while,” he says.

“How come you didn’t do it the other way around and make dinner closer to dinner time?” I ask.

He pauses. “I’m not that organized, okay?” he play shouts.

I get a bang out of it.

We finish the kitchen work an hour later and he says, “Time to loaf for a while. Wanna watch a movie?”

“No, I wanna go outside.”

“Okay,” he says and heads to the computer for more video games.

It must be nice to be a professor and have summers off.

I walk out to the barn to talk to Venus. She’s eating oats from a bucket. Ambriel is walking circles near the fence, hoping for an apple, which I will give to him in a minute.

I turn around to find I’ve been followed by a kitty parade: Artemis, Pocket, and Onyx stare up at me.

I smile, feeling popular. I have more friends here than I’ve had my whole life.

“Hi, Venus,” I pet her on the nose. She smells my hand, then tries to eat my hair, which makes me giggle.

“Venus, I’ve been kicked around, girl. I’ve been raped, pinched, bit, strangled, and the weird thing—the sick thing—is that I’m in love with him.

I sit down on a hay bale because I have a feeling this will be a long discussion. Pocket joins me. Onyx loses interest and leaves. Artemis is too much of a roly poly to jump up here, and I love her for it.

“I just wish I could tell someone.” I wave a fly off. “But the girl I told is dead.”

My voice cracks and I feel tears coming on. It’s okay to cry out here. There’s even a water pump I can use to splash water on my face when I’m done. I just hope Ron doesn’t come out here while I get this off my chest.

Ambriel wanders in for oats. It’s really remarkable how much bigger he is than Venus.

I guess he can keep a secret too, though he has a rather untrustworthy face. Still...

“I’m really screwed up. Ashley’s dead and I’m screwed up. I’m not sure who got the better end of that bargain.”

There’s a place up in the corner of the barn where some black mud daubers fly in and out of a hole. I watch them warily. I hate anything but honeybees because honeybees are docile.

“I’m so tired of being afraid. So tired.” Tears run down my cheeks and drip from my chin onto poor Pocket’s face. She jumps down.

I cry in silence for a long time. Ambriel walks out again, but Venus seems genuinely interested, although it could just be that she’s interested in my hair.

I laugh when she grabs a bunch of it in her teeth and pulls. “Ow!” It doesn’t really hurt that much.

“I’m tired of being fat. I’m tired of being a burden to my family because of my illness. I’m worried about my little sister and what she’s learned from watching me shrink away.”

Artemis tries to jump up on the hay bale again, so I pick her up and put her on my lap. She squirms.

I sit there in silence for a while, crying about different things, but mostly over the fact that I’m still in love with Mr. Kollins and he’s in love with someone else and I’m such a fool anyway.

My life, I think, had a purpose when I was being abused. As strange as that sounds. My life had the purpose of satisfying you and your passions no matter how much they hurt me.

“Although there was one time when it felt good,” I wipe my nose with my hand.

Venus walks out of the barn. I guess my hour is up.

I go outside and pump water to wash my face.

#

When I go back inside I find Ron has already made the Sangria.

“I thought you wanted help,” I say.

He dries his hands on a towel. “I figured you were busy talking to Venus.”

I feel like I might faint.

He sighs and gives me a long stare. “Rain, do your parents know about any of that?”

“About what?” I have to be sure he’s talking about what I hope he’s not talking about.

“Your depression. I heard you crying. I heard you say that you weren’t sure which of you got the raw end of the deal—you or Ashley.”

Relief floods my veins.

“No. Maybe. I don’t know.”

Ron shakes his head. “Your grief is very normal, but there’s something happening beyond that that’s making you somewhat suicidal.”

I don’t know what to say. I want to say, “I’m fine. I’ll be okay,” but he’s too smart for that. He’d know I’m not telling the truth. I won’t be okay. Never again.

I sit down at the dining room table. He says nothing else because we hear the garage door opening. Candi’s home from work.

Ron walks over to me and gently pats me on the head. He gives me a look that says he’s not going to tell anyone unless I want him to.

I imagine he went through some hard times himself. I don’t honestly know that much about his family. I know he has a brother and his parents were divorced.

The basement door opens and Candi strides in.

“Hi!” she says, setting her cooler on the kitchen counter.

I hug her.

“Are you okay? Your eyes look red.”

“We think she’s allergic to hay,” Ron says as I clumsily open my mouth.

I look at him and smile. I have a friend.

#

Candi gives me permission to take my bike on the trail that runs through Yellow Springs. I’m not supposed to burn calories, but she thinks it might stimulate my appetite and cheer me up.

Ron has to take me though, because once you turn left off Sparrow Road the speed limit is 45 or 50, and that’s too dangerous. The trail is in town where there are apparently a lot of cool shops I’ve never been in before, but they want to take me there for my birthday next week.

Ron loads my bike in the trunk of the car. He’s going to do some shopping at the Natural Foods store while I ride.

“Promise you’ll wear your helmet?”

“Promise.”

We wave bye and I take off. The trail makes me feel like I’m in the woods. At one point I smell horses, but I don’t see them. I pass fields of corn and cross a road that has a sign with an arrow reading “Young’s 0.8 miles.” Young’s is the dairy restaurant and they have really good food.

Everyone I pass says hello. It’s not that many people. One woman rides very fast and a man behind her yells out the mph she’s going and how far she’s gone. Her tan arms are glossy with sweat, and I’m a little repulsed, actually.

Many of the people I pass are fairly elderly, but they must be in good shape because I’m breathing hard.

And then I see a man on a red bike with long, black hair and white skin. It’s Mr. Kollins. He’s on a bike moving toward me in the oncoming lane. He doesn’t look at me.

I turn my head, shocked, to watch him go by. My insides crawl around.

The next thing I know I’m on the ground with my bike on top of me. A hot pain goes through my shoulder and neck and head. I go blind with it for a moment.

“Are you okay?” an urgent female voice says.

I squint. “What?”

“Are you okay?” she repeats, bending over me and pushing the bike off.

“No, she’s not okay. Look at that shoulder!” a man says.

He is not Mr. Kollins.

“Oh!” I gasp.

“Can you walk?” the man asks.

I look at my legs. There’s a huge gash spilling blood onto the pavement.

I lie back down. The woman unstraps my helmet.

“She doesn’t seem lucid. Do you have a cell phone? Call 911.”

#

It’s a long and disorienting afternoon. I can’t keep it straight. Pain, then less pain, then more pain, then less pain...

At one point I think I must’ve been asleep because Ron says, “Rain? Are you awake?”

I see a halo of blonde hair and I know it’s Candi.

“Rain, you had an accident on your bike, sweetie,” Candi says. “The doctor gave you some drugs after he put your shoulder back in place. You dislocated it and tore some tissue. You woke up for a while, but the drugs kind of knocked you out again.”

I sigh. Then I remember Mr. Kollins on the trail and my eyes pop open. I try to sit up. I need to find the couple who saw the accident. I need to find out if they saw Mr. Kollins.

Sitting up is like fighting a body made of cotton and Candi shushes me like I’ve said something aloud.

“Rest now,” Ron pats my leg.

I fall back into a world void of dreams.

#

I don't know how long I've been asleep when Candi wakes me up and tells me I'm being discharged.

I have no idea if it's night or day, but I am lucid and able to sit up. I find my left arm's in a sling, stitches in my leg.

"What'd I break?" I ask.

"You dislocated your shoulder, your collarbone, and a rib, tore your posterior scalene and stretched tendons and ligaments all over the left side of your torso," a nurse says.

"Remember your accident?" Candi asks.

I nod.

"What caused it?"

I shake my head. "Must've run over something."

The doctor prescribes Vicodin for the next two weeks, then a follow-up appointment with an orthopedic doctor. He suggests a guy in Yellow Springs, Dr. Sangh. He then wants me to do physical therapy once it heals.

"Heat it and ice it off and on for the next couple days," he says, handing Candi all the paperwork.

"I called your mom when you were asleep," Ron says as we walk through the automatic doors. "She wants you to come home, but I told her we have better doctors up here."

"I don't want to go home," I say, easing into the car. Ron helps me with my seatbelt. When he shuts the door I close my eyes.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," Candi says. I hear her uncap her chapstick.

"Rain, while you were asleep, one of my old friends from school called me and he's going to also stay with us for a week or so. We went to college together. He got a double major in math and science and we met in a chemistry lab. Should I call him and cancel?" Ron asks.

"No," I say. "It's fine."

There's a spare bedroom in the house that I don't sleep in because it's so dark in there it feels like a coffin. I get claustrophobic. It's a really small room. There's no outlet available for a nightlight. Besides, I'm too old for nightlights anyway.

I keep my eyes closed all the way back; the drugs still floating around in my system give me a seasick feeling.

Did I really see him? Was he actually there? Or did I imagine him? Am I going crazy?

It's just like when I saw him at graduation.

My heart begins pounding hard at the thought of him possibly being here in Yellow Springs.

I remember his mouth all over me, the warmth of it, the wet of it.

I shiver.

"You cold?" Candi asks.

"No, just pain."

She nods. "We'll be home soon." She puts her hand on Ron's knee.

This intimacy makes me anxious. I think of Mr. Kollins and his girlfriend he left me to marry.

He left me because I'm fat.

I pinch the soft flesh around my belly. It never used to be there, this roll.

I look like I'm pregnant, I'm sure.

I notice the wet feeling of tears on my neck before I realize I'm crying. I wipe at them with my good hand. It's going to take some time to get used to working with only one arm.

Back at the house Candi gives me my Vicodin.

Half an hour later I run into the bathroom and throw it up.

"I'll call somebody in the morning and see if we can get you another pain med," Candi yawns, sitting on the edge of the tub.

Ron wets a rag for me to wipe my face and mouth.

The moon peers through the window and I see the dark presence of the barn.

We all go to bed and I sleep restlessly. The pain in my shoulder and upper back wake me up every little bit. When I dream, I dream of Mr. Kollins and the kids at Mint Independent School. I'll never see any of them again. This allows me to drift into a more peaceful sleep.

#

Mama definitely wants me to come home, but I convince her otherwise.

"It's just a flesh wound," I say, trying to sound bright and cheerful. "It'll be fine. Just give it some time. Yes, I'm eating fine. Yes, I'm enjoying playing with the cats."

She finally says, "Well...if you want to stay, I guess that's fine, but remember you have an appointment with Scott coming up and if you've lost any weight at all you're coming home."

"Okay. I love you."

We hang up and I relay the conversation to Candi. She nods and watches me curl up on the couch. The pain is so intense I want to scream.

"Here," Candi says, handing me four pills and a glass of water. I recognize two of them as ibuprofen.

"What are the other ones?"

"Tramadol," she says.

"What's that?"

She glances at Ron and shrugs. "They're an opiate like Vicodin. We had some left from when Ron had a couple of teeth pulled last winter."

I don't care that it's illegal, that they may make me sick, that there could be consequences. I swallow them.

Ron puts in *Beauty and the Beast*.

The Tramadol makes the bottom fall out of my stomach, but in a good way. It takes the edge off.

Sometime during the second episode I fall asleep.

I dream that Aunt Candi, Mama, and I have driven a long way to a church. I know Mr. Kollins will be there, but he doesn't come in until the middle of the sermon. I find him and ask if he wants to come downstairs to the church basement—I want to talk to him. He follows me and I want to seduce him, to win him over, but his girlfriend keeps hanging around. She's really skinny with golden hair. I can't get any privacy because then Candi and Mama come down there too. I tell him I'll see him again sometimes soon even though I know it won't be anytime soon. We get in the car and drive away. I wake up with a deep sense of loss, an ache so deep inside my bones that I want to kill myself.

The VHS player has quit. Ron's asleep in the other corner of the couch. Candi's asleep in the chair with Onyx on her lap.

I have never felt so lonely in my life. Part of me wants to go into town and hunt him down. I know he's there. I didn't just imagine him. My mind could never play a trick so vivid and real on me. It's not like when I was in the hospital and took Ambien and the doorway glowed. It's not like that.

He passed me on a red bike, his long hair pulled into a ponytail beneath his helmet. His dark eyes looked straight ahead. My mind wouldn't go so far as to invent a helmet and bike. I've never seen him in anything but a dress shirt and tie.

The thought of him being so near brings on an anxiety attack that makes me go crazy.

I have to find him! But how? It's not like Candi and Ron will let me be on my own now. It's not that I did anything wrong, but I'm vulnerable now and my mom will kill them if anything else happens to me.

I lie there for what feels like a century feeling bugs of anxiety crawling under my skin.

Finally Candi wakes up in the middle of the night, asks me if I need more pain medication. This wakes up Ron and they both stagger to bed, exhausted.

It won't be long before Candi has to get up for work.

I keep the TV on really low and catch a *Wonder Woman* re-run.

That stupid bitch knows nothing about life. Nothing.

#

By the time Candi has to go to work I have worn myself out entirely with worry. She fixes me a piece of peanut butter toast. I eat it and take the Vicodin and end up vomiting again.

“Ugh,” she says, “we will definitely have to find something else. I can’t keep giving you Tramadol. You’re so young and I don’t know if kids are allowed to even take that.”

She assigns Ron the job of calling my primary care doctor who, shockingly, is able to speak to him right away. I hear him prove that he’s whom he says he is by providing my personal information, which I wrote down for him.

“She was in a bicycle accident,” he says.

I tune out.

When he hangs up he says that first he has to go into town to Staples in order to fax the doctor my ER discharge forms. The doctor needs proof before he can prescribe anything.

“Do you want to come with me?”

“Nah,” I shake my head.

“Didn’t think so.”

He putters around a little bit, then leaves.

I sit, lost in my thoughts. Did Ron say that an old friend of his would be coming to stay for a week or so? Or was that a dream?

I must’ve fallen asleep because the garage door wakes me up. I look at the clock. It’s been two hours. What took him so long? His steps on the basement stairs.

“Hi,” he says. “Sorry it took me so long, I had to wait for the doctor to fax the script to me. He’s putting you on Percocet. I’ve got it in the bag.”

“Thanks for everything,” I say.

He smiles. “No problem.”

“I think I’ll go outside for a little while.”

“Don’t you want to take your medicine?”

“I’m going to wait until after dinner,” I say, standing.

“Okay.”

I go outside and carry the green, plastic chair with my good arm from the patio down to the big tree in the side yard. I miss writing. I miss Mr. Kollins.

I sigh. There's a shadow of a large bird hanging in the wind. I look up toward the sun.

Oh my God! It's a bald eagle! I can see it's pure white head! If I weren't injured I would stand up and yell for joy and jump up and down. I had heard there were nests in Ohio, but I have never seen a bald eagle in the wild. I can't believe it! It has to be a sign. It *has* to be.

#

"Did you say you have a friend coming?" I ask Ron later.

"Yep," he says. "He'll be here tomorrow, actually. I almost forgot all about it."

I don't know what else to say. I don't want anybody here but me. I'm hurt and hurting and I don't want any noise in my life. I just want to heal and enjoy this place the best I can even with my grief eating me up.

"I made an appointment for you to see my massage therapist tomorrow morning. Then I thought we could visit some of the little shops in Yellow Springs," Candi takes a bite of her soup. I'm not exactly sure what all is in this soup. It's one of Ron's weird, healthy creations.

"Okay," I say, unsure that I'm going to feel up to going into any shops tomorrow. "Won't she hurt me?"

Candi shakes her head. "Winnie is the best massage therapist in the world."

"Okay." I still don't know about this.

The episode we watch of *Beauty and the Beast* involves a killer and the beauty thinks it's Vincent, the beast, but it's not. It's just some dude dressed in a costume. Disappointing.

We go to sleep early. I take my new drug.

Wow. It's a ride.

#

We eat breakfast kind of early the next day. Candi is only working part time this week. She won't go leave for work until one o'clock. We head into town.

Winnie's house is next door to a house with big flower boxes of beautiful, full red roses. I have never seen a garden so beautiful. I want to touch them, but I am ushered along toward the back of Winnie's house to a small building.

Winnie meets us on the porch with a smile. She has really short black hair and high cheekbones. I wonder if she has some Native American in her. She's of average build.

The front room has a desk and a weight machine. Then there's a room in the back that's the massage room. She asks me a bunch of questions and writes down the answers on a clipboard. Then she takes me back to the massage room with its strange table.

"Let's get this off," she says, gently removing my sling. "I need to see where we're at."

So far so good.

"Lie down on the table face up," she says.

I do as I'm told. She sits on a stool behind my head and gently puts her hands under me. She assesses my neck and it's range of motion.

"Yep, I can feel the resistance of the posterior scalene tear. There's inflammation in there." She works her way down to my collarbone. "Swelling here, too." She puts her hands back underneath me and I can feel her dig into my shoulder.

"Oh, ow!" I yelp.

"I don't think I'll be able to work with you yet. I think you need time to heal. Have Candi make an appointment for next week, and I'll reassess you."

"Okay," I say.

"Oh, and take a pain pill about half an hour before you come. That will help," she adds.

She helps me get off the table, then puts the sling back on.

"That was fast," Candi says.

Winnie updates her and Candi makes an appointment for me for next week on a day other than my appointment with Scott.

We leave and go into Yellow Springs. We park at a place called House of Ravenwood.

“This store is really cool,” Candi says. “I think you’ll like it.”

Ron opens the door for me and I’m immediately blasted with the smell of incense. It’s heady. I like it. This combined with a Percocet would be something.

The shop is full of crystals—crystal balls, crystals for your pocket, pendulums, large chunks of crystals. There are also fairies all over the place and books about magic, belly dancing outfits, statues of dragons and bats and cats, mermaids, jewelry, incense, candles, candle holders, oils, oil diffusers, and then I come to something that makes my heart jump.

There is a wall of leather journals, and one of them is the mother of all journals. It’s huge—maybe 9” by 13”. It has intricate loops and spirals in the leather, three crystals sewn into the cover, and pages like linen.

“Whooooaaaaa!” I say. I can’t reach it; it’s on the top, so Ron gets it for me.

A woman in witch’s clothing greets us. “You like it?”

“Whoa,” I say again.

“Do you know much about crystals, young lady?” she asks.

“No.”

She points to the top stone. It’s kind of brown and gold. “This is tiger eye. It’s a very strong stone. It can be used to harmonize all types of polarities, and it helps you maintain hormonal balance as well as strength of the intellect. It’s a very willful solar stone.”

She slides her finger down to the middle stone, which is kind of forest green. “This is rainforest jasper. It keeps you in touch with nature. It can aid in overcoming grief or depression. It puts you in touch with devic beings.”

“What are those?” I ask.

“They’re nature spirits. Spirits of trees, of grass, of creeks, and flowers.”

“What’s the last one?” It is a light purplish blue.

“That’s blue lace agate,” she says. “It helps one communicate his/her deepest truths. It helps you relieve yourself of emotional burdens through talking about them. It is a very gentle stone. Not like tiger eye. Blue lace agate helps you ‘find your words’ so to speak.”

“Wow,” I say. “How much is this thing?”

She finds the price, which I didn’t see. “Seventy-five dollars.”

My heart sinks. “Never mind,” I mumble. “You can put it back, Ron.” He takes it from me and I move on to look at other things.

I look at a display case of tarot cards, but when I turn around, Ron is handing the journal to the woman at the cash register and taking his credit card out of his wallet.

“Wait, what are you doing?” I say.

“I’m getting this for you. You deserve it.”

Tears fill my eyes. I make a fist and wipe them away. He walks over and gives me a hug. “I love you,” he says.

“I love you, too,” I choke.

The lady wraps it in tissue paper and puts it in a purple bag. Ron carries it outside.

“What are you doing out here?” I ask Candi. She’s just standing outside the store, her blonde hair lifted by a breeze.

“Hot flash,” she says. “That incense does it every damn time.”

I can’t help but laugh, and she smiles. Ron is much, much younger than Candi. Candi is in her fifties and Ron is thirty-two. It’s hardly ever noticeable. Candi takes such good care of her skin. She looks youthful.

“What’d you get?” she asks.

I get choked up again, which Ron sees. “We’ll show you when we get home.”

Candi looks at her watch. “We better grab some lunch before I have to leave. What time is Tyler supposed to get here?”

“He just said he’d be here this afternoon.”

“Well, it’s getting on afternoon. Want to eat at Young’s?”

“Yeah,” Ron says.

I remember that Young’s is the dairy farm restaurant we passed coming into town. And there was that sign on the bike trail for it.

At Young's we get milkshakes and burgers. The food is absolutely delicious. I pop a fried mushroom in my mouth and immediately regret it.

"Uggghh, hot, hot!" I say. I grab my milkshake and suck some into my mouth. The cold strawberry flavor cools me.

"Be careful," Ron says. "They're hot."

We all laugh. Despite the incredible pain, I'm in a good mood. I love my family so much. I love this town. I love their farm. Maybe things are looking up.

And it looks like I might be a writer again. Thank God it's my left side I hurt.

#

Shortly after Candi leaves for work, we hear the porch screen door open. I'm sitting on the couch holding my new journal. I can't stop staring at it. I open it and write down the stones and what the lady said they meant. I am so in love with this thing. I wonder what I'm going to write.

Ron opens the front door and I hear a familiar voice exchange greetings with him.

In walks Mr. Kollins.

My mouth drops open.

"Rain! I had no idea..." he says.

"You two know each other?" Ron looks amazed.

When I can't answer, Mr. Kollins says, "I was her math teacher for a little while. Then I left to get married, but Sidney and I never actually ended up married. Some stuff...happened. Oh well. What's going on with your arm, Rain?"

I still can't say anything.

"Bike accident," Ron says. "Come on in, Tyler."

"That's right. Rain, you can call me Tyler now."

I nod and clutch my new journal to my chest. Tyler, which is going to be so hard for me to get used to, sits down on the opposite corner of the couch. I can't believe my eyes. I can't believe this is happening.

Ron sits down in the lay-z boy. The two of them start chatting about old times in college.

“I’m going outside,” I say.

“Okay,” Ron says.

I take my new journal with me. I go to my spot under the tree.

What the holy *hell* am I going to do?

Arieh

It rained the day Arieh died giving birth to our son. I remember how the river looked, its surface disturbed as the rain pierced it like the surface of a pincushion. Arieh pulled me to her, her promise clear despite the noise of our crying baby.

“I can’t let go.”

And then she died.

Such a strange feeling, the joy of holding our son and the grief of losing my beautiful blonde wife. The midwife, her sister, covered her face with the sheet, and the doctor came and took her body. We buried her on All Hallow’s Eve.

#

I married Arieh’s sister, Julie, the following year—almost one year to the day of my wife’s departure from our world. There weren’t many maidens in the village, and I desperately need help raising Moses. He had become more difficult to watch, crawling and getting into things—a very normal, curious child.

A week after our wedding I awoke one night with an unsettling feeling. Julie lay peacefully next to me, her hair cascading over her features the way Arieh’s used to do.

I crept into the other room of the cabin to check on Moses. But he wasn’t in his crib.

I woke Julie. It did not take long for us to panic. Then I heard the crying of an infant. We dashed outside toward the river. I was reminded of how, when I built the cabin here, by the river’s bend, people wouldn’t come calling at first because the

crone in the woods said the bend in the river was the gateway to the dead. Crazy as a loon, that one, and everybody knew it. Still, people get spooked.

Anyway, Moses lay in the grass, still wrapped in his blanket near the cattails by the water.

The next day I went on a tirade around town, looking for whoever pulled such a violating prank. I made random threats and came home sweating.

That night it happened again.

We moved Moses into our room. It didn't matter. He kept waking among the cattails.

And then as suddenly as it began, it stopped.

#

This is hard for me to explain. A little embarrassing, but I might as well tell it like it was.

I started having dreams—or memories; I'm not really sure which. Julie and I lay down to go to sleep and I dreamed of Arienh. Not just any kind of dream. Sexual ones. Very detailed in nature. Many times I woke up Julie having spilled my seed all over her back. She knew something was going on with me, but she trusted me and didn't ask. I think she knew I wasn't dreaming of her, but I doubt she realized I was dreaming of Arienh. These dreams caused me to miss her deeply.

Moses was getting a little older and I could see her in his face. The turned up nose. The bright blue, mischievous eyes. He had his mother's aura about him. Julie was just the opposite of Arienh, though similar in physical features. Julie was quiet and calculated, predictable and steady. She was the rock in my life. Arienh was

always making waves. She lived through her passions. I never found her untrustworthy, yet trusting her always felt like a risk.

And then Julie got pregnant. We were very excited despite fearing that what happened to Arienh would happen to her, as if something like that were genetic. Julie joked that if she died I could always marry their mother who was a widow.

My dreams went away. I decided they must have been caused by a slight breakdown. I had been working too hard. I'm was a carpenter and lately there'd been so many orders for new piece of furniture that I'd not been taking very good care of myself. I probably wasn't drinking enough water.

I shrugged it off. Whatever it happened, it was over. Julie and I were ecstatic, wondering if Moses would have a brother or a sister. Life was good.

#

The accidents began once Julie announced she was pregnant, which was a few months after conception. Women never announced it before the second trimester. It was bad luck. In those days the miscarriage rate was extremely high.

The accidents seemed very innocent at first. As Julie gathered wood from the pile out back, part of the pile collapsed and landed on her foot, which made her lose her balance and fall. She caught herself with her hands, but sprained her wrist.

Another day she stepped in a hole and went down on her backside, which jarred her terribly. Her hips hurt for days afterward. Doc said she bruised her tailbone.

Two days before All Hallow's Eve Moses and I were outside. He was walking back and forth between me and our neighbor Bob when Julie, in the bedroom with

clean linens, let out a scream I'll forever hear in my nightmares. Bob and I tore into the house.

"I saw her! I saw her, Jack!" she clung to me.

"Who?" I asked, but I knew who it was.

"Arieh! I saw her! Right there in the doorway! She looked...she looked like a terrible monster!" She buried her face in my shirt.

I believed her. For some reason I believed her. Julie was not the type to get hysterical. Arieh, yes. But not Julie.

"Where's Moses?" she suddenly asked.

I looked at Bob. He looked helpless.

When we ran back outside Moses was running with all his might for the cattails. We caught him just before his little feet hit the water.

Julie went into labor right after that. The doctor came, but there wasn't anything he could do. She miscarried.

#

The only religious man we could find was a priest in town. He came in and exorcised our cabin. We became the number one gossip. Even our friends stayed away. It was just like it was when I built the place. Except Julie and I were scared.

"Her face...it had a terrible white pallor," Julie kept saying. "Not at all the rosy cheeks she had when she was—"

"I know," I snapped.

Julie nodded, tears welling up in her eyes. It had taken her a long time to be able to talk about it, and now she couldn't stop.

“Her eyes looked puffy as though she’d been crying a long time. Her lips were white, and her eyes were sunk into her head. She was rail thin. Oh, Jack,” she cried. Since the miscarriage she’d become very emotional. More like her sister.

The next time Arienh appeared was in front of the well. To me.

“You saw her,” Julie said when I entered the cabin. I could only nod. Despite her ghastly appearance she was still Arienh—the woman I’d loved so and lost. All of my grief welled back up inside of me.

Never had I felt so confused about where my heart’s allegiance lay. There was only one thing left to do.

#

As I mentioned, people said the crone in the woods was bonkers—a real live witch. Everybody avoided her because there had been news of a witch-hunt up north. Nobody wanted to be associated with a witch just in case the hunt spread down to these parts.

We didn’t have a choice; the priest had done what he could, but it didn’t work. Arienh was a ghost of dark schemes. Perhaps it would take dark magic to make her leave our little family alone.

Miss Hodner opened the door of her small cabin with a suspicious gaze, but when she saw Moses in Julie’s arms she smiled. Her teeth were yellow and crooked, but she had a meek demeanor. She looked about like I remembered.

“You’re the family that occupies the cabin in the bend of the river,” she said. Then she squinted at Julie. “Except you’re not the same one.”

Julie blushed and I told her the story of Arienh’s death.

“We’re being haunted,” I said, my voice as high and strained as a young boy’s.

“Come in,” she frowned.

When we were seated with cups of coffee I told the crone—I mean Miss Hodner—the whole story. Julie piped in whenever I missed something. The only part I left out was the dreams.

At the end I was tired and miserable, wondering why we’d come. The whole thing sounded ridiculous, as though I’d mixed up a child’s nightmares with reality.

Miss Hodner said there quietly, contemplating things for a long time. Then Julie grew impatient.

“What are we to do?” she asked.

Miss Hodner looked surprised. “Well it’s quite simple, dear. I have said a million times, and I’ll say it just once more, the bend in the river is the gateway to the dead. But did you listen when you built that cabin? No siree!”

“Yes, yes, we get it. My mistake,” I said, crossing my arms. “Now what?”

“What do we do?” Julie asked again.

The witch nodded vigorously. “Find an animal that was born the same time as Moses. Bring it to the bend in the river tomorrow at sunset. I’ll be there.”

We left not knowing what to think. Still, we had to try.

#

Bob and I rode all over looking for someone with an animal that had been born the night Arienh died. We finally found a young pig, and I paid the farmer a handsome sum. By the time we finished, we had questioned almost everyone. Most of

them had no specific records for their animals besides the time of year they were born.

Miss Hodner appeared that evening with some kind of incense.

“It will lure Arienh to us,” she said.

“Then what?” I asked.

She looked at me like I was stupid. “Do you not know of bush souls?”

I shook my head. Julie, who held Moses, shrugged.

“Oh my,” said the old woman. “Let me explain. When a human is born its soul is divided between the human body and that of an animal born at the same time. This is the person’s bush soul. What I’m going to do is lead Arienh to take Moses’s bush soul with her to the Underworld. Then she will be satisfied.”

“What will happen to Moses?” Julie asked. She looked suspicious.

“There is a price, but I don’t have time to tell you.”

“No! Tell us now!” Julie became hysterical. Moses began to cry, too.

Just then Arienh appeared, reaching for the child. It cut me deeply to see her that way. So thin. So pale. Like a terrible she-monster.

Julie gasped.

“Arienh!” Miss Hodner yelled.

My deceased wife turned to her. Miss Hodner pointed at the pig.

“Take half,” she said.

Arienh gazed at the animal, her eyes sunk back in their sockets. She seemed to then recognize something about it. She leaned toward the pig, and when she touched

it with a ghostly hand, the witch raised her hands and mumbled something in what must be the Devil's tongue.

Then, Arienh disappeared. The pig and Moses keeled over at the same time.

"No!" Julie screamed, laying the child in the grass.

"He'll be fine. That pig, however, is now soulless meaning he will leave our world for good when he dies," said the witch.

"What about the price?" I asked. I was overwhelmed with anxiety and fatigue.

"You'll find that he will always be searching for some unknown connection. But it will ease his discomfort if you tell him the story of his soul and his mother when he's old enough."

The next day a band of witch hunters rode past our cabin.

"Do you all know anyone who's been practicing magic?" one of them gruffly asked.

"No," we said. "Not around here." And they rode away and didn't look back.

Girl, Sick With Stories

Oklahoma, 1838

“She doesn’t speak,” I hear the guard say. He’s not talking about me. He speaks of Galilahi. At one time, when we were a proud people, we laughed. We talked. We sang. We told stories around a fire, around a circle. Now, there is no one who listens and we have been starved silent anyway. The stories are forever lost in the steam of our summer memories. A medicine man once told me that there will be a girl who, many years from now, will be very sick with stories. He said that her body will seize up and turn in on itself. He said that she will be blessed with long black hair and eyes the color of onyx, but it won’t matter because her misery will surpass her beauty. Her tears will fall.

“She will be Ani-Yun’wiya,” he said.

I look through the bars at Galilahi who is across the hall. She sits still and stares at me. She is not in the world anymore. She lives in her own mind until I make eye contact. Then she is brought into my mind as well. We have shared this gift since we were children. She’d sing about it, but now, she doesn’t even open her mouth to eat. She may starve before the white men are allowed to kill us.

I sit and wait and talk to the walls in my language. I mumble it over and over again, “Ani-Yun’wiya.” We were the Principle People.

“Look at that crazy Cherokee over there,” the guard says.

“Which one?” asks the officer and they laugh.

I look into Galilahi's eyes. Do you remember the summer we got stung by the bumblebees? She stares, her face expressionless, but she remembers. I hear her laugh and she says, Yes, I remember. She hums the song about the girl who fell out of the tree and we're thirteen again and giggling about her old friend going on his vision quest. I can't remember his name now, but she reminds me that she was supposed to marry him and continues singing. The story lives on.

"It's time to get ready," the guard yells at Galilahi. She doesn't move until he opens the cage door and kicks her in the face. She never makes a sound. She just turns her black eyes on me, staring. A bruise forms another eye on her cheek from the guard's brown boot. She reminds me of a spider as she stares at me with her new eye. The guard drags her down the hall. I stare back and hum the song about the girl who fell out of the tree. Galilahi disappears around the corner, but it doesn't matter where I am or she is. She is still staring, still seeing—from the corner of the ceiling, from a raindrop on the window, from inside a coffin. She's thin as a twig, but still beautiful. Her skin glistens. She's the dew on the grass in the morning as I walk through it. She's watching from her web. She can't speak, but it doesn't matter. The sun reflects the sparkling dew in my eyes and blinds me. She knows how to get my attention.

I lie back on the cot and picture her as a girl. She had long, flowing black hair. We all did. When the rain fell, our hair stayed wet for hours. When we ran through the wet cornfields at dawn, our hair turned the sky black. It grew in thick sheets, each strand holding a piece of our story. It was alive. For me, it still is. I bit the woman who held the scissors. She was supposed to cut my hair, but she thought I was rabid and refused to come near me. I was locked in one of these cages, away from everyone

for three days. When they were sure I wasn't foaming at the mouth, they took me to a school where a Christian missionary beat me with a stick until I said my new name.

"Nancy," the woman said. I didn't understand. She hit me, and pointed to me.

"You—Nancy," she said, smacking my hand. It stung.

"You—Nanyi'hi," I said, pointing at myself. She smacked my hand again and it started bleeding.

"Me—Nancy," she said, grabbing my other hand and making me point at myself. I couldn't say it, so she hit my bleeding hand once more.

"Me—Nanyi'hi," I said. The name left a bruise on my tongue. The woman sighed, using the stick to make a cross on me. She crossed herself and left.

"Hey. Here's a letter for you," the guard says. He is a tall, pale man. His eyes are bloodshot with drink. They are my father's eyes in the camp. He was once a chief. The guard was once an officer. I overheard talk about him. They don't know I speak English.

"Le-tters," the guard spits. I look at the hand and he turns into a ghost. I don't want the letters. My mother died, my father is killing himself. My brother married a white girl. There is no more pride and no room for shame. I don't know the person who writes. He is some white boy at the school training to be a guard. He's been trying to convince the courts to sell me to him.

The guard still stands in front of me and I blink.

"Ani-Yun'wiya," I say.

He laughs and I kick the letters under my cot. The other guard comes back with Galilahi.

“It’s time,” he says. I reach behind my back and yank out a piece of my hair. It floats to the floor. I pick it up, kiss it full of stories, and gently place it on a shelf in a corner of the cage. The guard laughs and shakes his head. He does not understand.

The door opens and the guard grips my arm with one hand, Galilahi with the other. I know where we’re going. Galilahi does too. She stares at me, makes a small whimpering noise, trips over her and the guard’s feet. We walk forever, down hallway after hallway. We don’t cry. We’re brave like our ancestors. It becomes colder as we step outside. It is a beautiful morning. The dew glimmers on the grass and the sky is like autumn leaves.

Death comes easily. There are two horses. Two trees. Two ropes. Silence. They cut my hair and throw it away. Galilahi goes first. There’s a snap, but she just keeps staring. I gaze into the sun for the first time in my life, unafraid of blindness. It burns. I choke and gag for a while. I kick a few times, struggling, and then it’s over.

There is a new Cherokee girl in my cage. She finds the letter and reads it. I listen to her from the corner. A spider beside me stares at her.

The letter is from the white boy, claiming that if I can stall the guards, he will break us out tonight. No matter. We will wait.

The spider turns her shiny black eyes to me, smiles, and says, “Asasga, we are Ani-Yun’wiya.” We sing about the girl who fell out of the tree, waiting to be resurrected like Jesus, waiting for a woman who is sick with story.

The Sybil

She's transformed into a kind of Buddha, her breasts sagging like sandbags over the rotundity of her abdomen. She's not used to being fat, and the doctor tells her she must learn to love her body "like a wise temple." She works to remember these words every time she looks in the mirror, which is often. Remembering proves difficult, though, because it's *his* fault she's turned to fat: the medication he prescribes for her depression has caused her to nearly double her size even though the doctor swears Cymbalta can't cause weight gain.

At the university she teaches young poets about "bodies of work," how Michelangelo said, "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free," and how one can carve letters from a white page.

The students don't believe this, and neither does she. Her journals are shoved unceremoniously in cardboard boxes in the damp basement. They date back to sixth grade.

"I think I'm perverse," she tells her friend while sitting on the floor in his office. She does this because she's in love with him, and even though he's gay she doesn't want him to notice how fat she is even though this is all she talks about.

"Why?" he checks his e-mail, frowning.

"Sometimes I daydream about getting cancer and needing a double mastectomy, and then running my fingers over the knotted scars." Her voice takes on a wistful tone as she picks a thread in the thin, commercial carpet.

“Who am I to say whether or not that’s perverse?...although daydreaming you have cancer *does* go a little far.” He glances at her. She blushes beneath the gaze of his blue eyes and shrugs, rendered speechless by how much she loves him. She decides that she must get up and leave, but she’s unsure how to get up now that she’s fat, so she pictures herself doing it gracefully: one hand here, the other there.

When she executes the motions she winds up embarrassing herself. Her right leg is numb and her knees crack. She heaves herself up and out the door, wincing at the pins-and-needles sensation in her foot. A mild sweat breaks out over her upper lip from humiliation. Luckily her office is only two doors down. *Really*, she thinks, *I need to get a grip*. She shuts the door, sits down at her desk, and stares at her lesson plan for the afternoon. And this makes her wonder if her students think she’s fat.

She had a friend in college who, when cursed with a pimple, became so obsessed with it that she’d start every conversation with, “I’m sorry; I’m breaking out like a twelve year old boy.”

It’s like that. She wants to apologize to the world for having to look at her. *No, it’s just a skin suit*, she consoles herself.

Then she puts her face in her hands and weeps.

#

A week later she listens to the rain on the roof, lying under paper sheets at the gynecologist, her heels in stirrups, still wearing her modest light pink socks.

She knows he will say how much weight she’s gained. When the nurse weighed her there was a glint of amusement in the young woman’s eyes.

A knock on the door throws her heart into her throat, and the doctor breezes in followed by the nurse.

“Hello, hello,” he says, glancing at her chart. He’s middle-aged and plays trombone with the clipboard, clearly in need of bifocals.

He asks a few routine questions: is her cycle regular? Does she experience clotting? Any odd discharge?

The questions bore her. Nothing’s abnormal. She waits for the clincher: he’s going to say, “Do you know you’ve gained ninety pounds since last year?”

But he doesn’t say it. He moves beside her and tells her to put her arms over her head. The breast exam. Concern passes over his face as he palpates the left one.

“You have a large lump here? Did you know? Do you ever do self-exams?”

“No,” she says, raising her eyebrows. “I don’t know how.”

“I’ll give you a pamphlet.”

This must be the nurse’s cue to fetch one because she leaves the room.

“You’ll need a mammogram.” He pulls the paper sheet back over her chest.

She does her best to ignore the rest of the exam. She knows she has cancer, which is exactly what she wanted, right? He will have to remove her breasts. *Finally*.

In the car on the way home she smiles to herself, listening to the rhythm of the windshield wipers. It’s as though she predicted her own future, or maybe manifested it. She thinks of the sibyls at Delphi, of Apollo, god of Poetry. *Her* poetry. She stops at a red light, bringing a hand up to cup her breast.

By the time she gets home she’s frantic. Something’s changed her mind.

I have no future. I have no future. I have no...” Her mind has a new mantra. Tears drip from her chin. She wanders the house, and then remembers the journals in the basement. She must get them! She must take them to the university library’s archives. The world has to know who she was—who she truly was (before she got fat and sick). The world must *know* her.

She misses the last basement step and twists her ankle, falling to the concrete floor with a hard *thump*. Never mind. Never mind the pain. Never mind that she falls because she’s so fat. She must get to the journals.

The rain leaks through the old stone foundation, but she doesn’t notice the moldy smell or the puddle beneath the boxes. Her hands plunge through a spider web, but she doesn’t care.

This *thing* is essential: she must save the story.

She pulls out a journal—the one she wrote during eighth grade. It has her name on the cover above Tennyson’s “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.” *This* is what she used to believe.

She opens it.

All of the ink runs down the page like the journal itself is crying.

A bolt of grief makes the floor fall out of her stomach.

Let’s try another.

One journal after the next is ruined--the ink wet, the pages warped. She cries out and throws the empty boxes across the basement. This is not, exactly, an erasure, but something much worse.

There is a puddle at her knees, thick with black ink like an oil slick. Like blood. The rain has turned to hail. It clicks against the window like a fountain pen's nib tapping a desk. Like Michelangelo's chisel against pure, white marble.

She dips her fingers into the ink and smears it down her cheeks, across her forehead. She reaches into her bra and rouges her nipples. She removes her clothes and paints her entire body. She fills each pock of cellulite with black ink until the puddle dwindles. Then she climbs the stairs and moves about the house as a shadow.

Vita

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