ABSTRACT

Leamy, Jennifer R. One Odd Box: A Collection of Stories. (Under the direction of Dr. John Kessel.)

The purpose of this thesis has been to write original narrative short stories, to allow plot to arise out of character, and to experiment with story structure. Each story is told by a distinct narrator, and each narrator has his or her own set of values and expectations arising from past experience. In some cases, untold experiences inform the central conflict of each story, and in many cases, the stories illustrate a situation in which a commonly held belief or assumption proves faulty, even though the characters themselves are behaving as they believe they should. In other cases, the story is part of a chain of events that began in which the long term consequences of past decisions and events become clear. Since originality of voice has been a focus, characters are of various social backgrounds, and narrators of both genders are used.
ONE ODD BOX: A COLLECTION OF STORIES

By
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Biography

Jennifer Leamy grew up in Summit, NJ and received a BA in English from St. Lawrence University in Canton, NY. She teaches English at Wake Technical Community College in Raleigh, NC.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One Odd Box</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girlfriend</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Albanian Wedding</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One Odd Box

Johari and I are about fifty miles outside of the city when the whole thing finally starts to sink in. I mean, what am I going to do? I’ve got fifty-two bucks in my wallet and about a quarter tank of gas in my ‘77 Chevy. Johari is curled up next to me with her arms around a tattered Snoopy doll. I’m pretty sure she hasn’t eaten since I got her a hot dog at seven yesterday morning. I have only the vaguest idea of where Hannah might be headed. The apartment was nearly empty, only a plastic fan and a few bags of trash, a phone number on a soggy matchbook. Her letter says, “We need to go south, Jack. Someplace warm, sweetheart, far away from this and warm.” Right to the end she was still called me shit like sweetheart, never one to miss an opportunity.

#

I was hung over and dead tired when I met Hannah. I had spent the day at my desk, trying to look like I was actually working. About the only benefit of being Mail Room Supervisor at McLendon Research is that sitting around like you’re about to chuck looks very much like what you’re supposed to be doing. I left as soon as the third shift arrived and walked to the train. Thunder roared over head, and I ran the last block to miss the rain. I had long since decided to skip class and was somewhere in between calling around to see who wanted to go out and going back to bed. When I got back to my building, it was about a quarter to six.

Her feet sounded small, like smack smack smack as she ran up the steps. She nearly ran into me. She didn’t stop to say anything, you know, like, “excuse me,” or I’m
She just kept right on going. I could see the soggy paper bag under her arm, so I asked her if she needed any help. It was raining hard by then, and she was soaked; the bag was tearing along the bottom. Beer bottles were about to slip through the brown paper and shatter on the concrete landing.

She looked over her shoulder on her way up the next flight of steps and said, “I got it. Thanks.” I looked up and down her long tanned legs as she popped up that last flight of stairs. She yanked the fire door open, pulled it away from the jamb and rushed through in a flash of arms and legs, yellow hair running over her shoulders. I got a look at her eyes as she glanced back at me. They were the color of soot -- real deep black, like sky on a night when there are no clouds, no stars, no nothing. I found myself thinking hard about her eyes, trying to figure out exactly what they meant, where I was supposed to focus. I mean, they were amazing.

When I got to my place I opened the door and threw my keys on the table. The lights were on and the phone was ringing, but I didn’t get it. I went to the fridge and opened a beer. Then I heard her feet again in the hall, so I went to the door. She was moving into 8C, in the corner. It’s a dump. When Capps lived there the bathroom didn’t have a door and the windows wouldn’t shut. Her feet slapped along the floor as I watched her. She smiled at me and said, “You’re Jackson. Landlord told me we would be neighbors.” She stuck out a thin hand and wrapped her fingers around mine. “Hannah Sweets,” she said. She had a nice little gap between her bottom teeth. It sounds ugly but it was oddly attractive, cute like a kid who is waiting for the tooth fairy.

She said I could help her carry some boxes. I followed her back down the steps, watching her shoulder blades flex back and forth under her white T-shirt. Hannah said,
“Just grab that stuff out of the trunk for me. I can get the rest,” and took off out into the street, her hands covering her head, like she wasn’t already soaked, like that was somehow going to help. She swung the driver’s side door open and leaned across the seat, pulling out a shopping bag and a huge potted plant. She balanced it against her waist. I walked across the street after her, dodging a taxi and a couple of teenagers wearing big shoes. They had no hair. They walked along the sidewalk, looking back over their shoulders, their eyes lingering on Hannah’s ass. As she passed me in the road, she threw a glance back at her car. “That’s the one,” she said.

I carried three loads of her junk upstairs, dumping the boxes just inside her door. I was ready to quit after that --- eight flights of steps pretty much sucks, even when all you’re lugging is your wallet, keys and a raging headache. I was crossing back to the car for the last load when thought I saw something move in the back seat of her car. I stood for a second and watched the rear window. A kid sat up and looked out at me. She had her hair pulled back in tiny yellow barrettes, pasted to the side of her head. I could see the tips of her fingers curled around the headrest through the rainy window. I looked at her, trying to think. Hannah came back out a minute later with a sweatshirt on, her hair in a stringy pony tail.

“Did you know there’s a little black kid in your car?”

She didn’t answer me for a second. The rain fell heavily, sending water down her face in little streams, which she brushed away with the back of her hand. She just looked at me with those eyes, every bit as black in the daylight, and hoisted the little girl out of the back seat, onto her hip. She carried her back across the street while I followed, feeling really stupid, like a total jerk. She glared at me from the sidewalk as I reached the
“This little black kid is Johari. She’s mine,” she said.

We spent that night sitting cross-legged on the floor, playing gin, drinking beer. Once inside her apartment I saw that there was still no door on the bathroom and the windows were still open just a crack. Capps and I spent a lot of time in here, eating take out before going down to Jaffa’s for the night. He’d had a pool table, which filled most of the apartment. There’s no bedroom. Hannah put her kid down on the counter and tweaked her nose. Then she turned and offered me a beer. I took it and said thanks, even though I had one nearly full sitting on the floor just inside my place. I felt good -- my headache was gone, and I felt up, for no good reason I could think of other than the obvious: I wasn’t working and I wasn’t in class.

She asked me what I did. “I’m a research physicist,” I said. “I work in the laser lab uptown. I’m in the physics Ph.D. program at NYU. Part time.” I was actually taking night classes in chemistry. I’d quit school four credits short of graduating so I could tour with my band. I’d be through with school forever after one more class.

“Well then, aren’t you a hot-shot,” she smirked, and lit another cigarette. Her eyes never left mine as she took a swallow of beer, letting the smoke escape through her nose. “I bet you’ll be raking in the bucks after you’re through. Tell me then, do you plan to teach?”

“Strictly research,” I said, looking into the floor. I opened that second beer and changed the subject. “What brings you to New York?” I asked.

“We just needed a change, to get out of Indiana. This seemed like a good place to
make a fresh start. Some day, I’d like to move where it’s warmer in the winters, somewhere at the beach,” she said. She gave me a coy, toothy smile. “Johari will be five in the spring, and I want to start her in school somewhere she’ll be for a while.” She smiled across the room at Johari and took a long drag on her cigarette. When the filter started to burn, she flicked the ashes on the floor and then put the cigarette out on the side of her beer bottle.

She had wrapped a towel around her head and put dry clothes on her kid. She hadn’t changed her own clothes though. Her shorts were loose and sopping wet, sticking to her thighs. Goose bumps sprang up along the tops of her feet, her ankles and shins. After a hand or two I felt really odd, like maybe I should leave so she could put her kid to bed, get warm. The thing is, she had no furniture. There were pillows scattered on the floor next to the windows and a couple of folding chairs resting against the wall. Her bags were all next to the door where I’d left them, in piles that spilled clothes and paper and all kinds of crap out onto the floor. Hannah just kept dealing the cards.

After four hands it was clear that she was the better player. She jumped up and got a legal pad and a pencil out of a box in the kitchen. She tucked them under her arm and got us two more beers. Johari sat in a pile of pillows and looked at a book. She turned her left palm upward and stuck her first two fingers into her mouth. The whole night, she never made a sound. Hannah unraveled her hair from the towel and arranged it with her fingers. She wrote our names across the top of the pad and lit another cigarette, which she balanced across the top of her beer bottle as she dealt another hand. She paused and looked me straight in the eye. “You married?”

We played until just after midnight. I left then because her bathroom had no door
and I had to go so bad I could have exploded. As I left, she pulled her hands through her hair and reached for the hem of her shirt, lifting it over her head. That’s how it started.

#

Johari and I are at a Brother’s Diner in Montclair, New Jersey. I’m drinking coffee, rereading Hannah’s letter, looking for any sign we could follow. There ain’t much. Johari is eating a ninety-nine cent mini waffle with a glass of juice that cost a buck twenty-five. She’s got syrup all over her hands and face, and her bright red T-shirt is covered with powdered sugar. She seems to be OK, but what the hell do I know about kids? I know nothing about kids. Hannah’s not much of a mother, but Johari is still hers, no matter what this letter says. It’s only one of a million reasons we have to find Hannah.

I swab the syrup off of Johari’s face and pay the check. I try the number again, but there is no answer. The matchbook says Claussen’s, Morehead City.

I keep my hand on top of Johari’s head, steering her through the door out to the parking lot. On the way to the gas station she looks back across the seat at me and says, “Nummy,” the first thing she has said all day. I pull into the service station, pump the gas, and twelve bucks later we are down to thirty-seven thin bills. It’s only ten o’clock. I’m trying to figure out if Johari really knows what we’re doing here, but already I know I’m asking too much of a four year old. I’m twenty-four, and I don’t know what we’re doing here. All I know to do is drive South, so I head back to the Parkway. It’s the best we can do.

#

The day after we played cards, the hall was quiet and dark. I was hung over -- no surprise there -- and had to listen to three frantic messages from Wendy before I left for
work. Wendy is my girlfriend, my lab partner, my chemistry tutor. I called her voice
mail at work so I wouldn’t have to talk to her that early in the morning. I didn’t much
care if she knew where I’d been the night before but I very definitely didn’t want to listen
to her bitch. I offered to take her to dinner. I told her to meet me at Jaffa’s at 7:30.

I got there a few minutes early, and ordered a drink. Wendy walked in, exactly on
time. I watched her cross the bar, her eyebrows furrowed into a little “v” that dipped
across the top of her nose. Her mouth was pressed into a tight, thin line.

“What the hell happened to you last night?” She dropped her purse on the floor
and sunk into the chair. She was exhausted, exactly what I had hoped for. She’d made it
all the way through pissed off and settled into worn out.

“Got stuck in the office, train stopped. Didn’t get home until nine,” I stared into
my drink.

“Why didn’t you call?” she asked. I told her I wasn’t feeling well, that I’d turned
off the phone and gone to bed. I had the distinct feeling I’d be doing a lot of lying in the
coming weeks, but I didn’t feel guilty about it. Not then. I think she felt it, too. The rest
of the night, she kept looking at me out of the corner of her eye. She’d look off at the
bar somewhere while I was taking a bite of spaghetti, and then her eyes would snap back
on me. Her head would stay still.

We ate our food and talked about her job. Work is something she loves to vent
about, since what she does is even more full of shit than what I do. She’s a production
assistant for Wright Night. The host is a bitch and a half, and Wendy runs around all day
doing whatever absurd crap she’s told to do. In the beginning, Wendy and I spent a lot of
time in bed signing 8x10s of Kirsten in a flight suit and a tattered bomber jacket. She’s
leaning out of one of those little four seater airplanes, like she’s such a big fucking deal. The year we met, my Christmas present was an autographed photo of Ms. W, one of the proofs they couldn’t use because her bra was showing. It said, “Jackson, honey, why won’t you return my calls?”

Half way through dinner Wendy broke it to me that we got a C on our last lab. “And you have a quiz to make up, if Dr. Worth will let you, Jackass.”

After that she got very quiet. On the way back to my place she started crying, her hair hanging down over her face. She kept her head down, her chin pressed into the lapel of her blazer. I asked her what was wrong a couple of times but she waved a hand at me. “Nothing, nothing,” she muttered. She kept wiping her the back of her hand across her face, looking into the sidewalk. It was a long three blocks. Once we got there she acted as if the steps were Everest. She locked herself in the bathroom -- mine has a door -- and didn’t come out until I’d given up on her and climbed into bed. A couple of minutes later she joined me.

“Jack?” she said.

“Uh huh?” I was waiting for something big, but she didn’t say another word. I turned over and watched her. She was naked under the sheet, pretending to be asleep. Her hair was spread out across the pillow like a black fan. I ran my fingers along her face, half under the sheet, but she wouldn’t respond. She waited until she thought I was asleep and then slipped out of bed, pulled on her clothes, and left. I lay in the dark and looked up the ceiling, knowing I’d been caught before I’d ever done anything. It made me feel like shit.

I didn’t see Hannah again for three days. When I did, it was in at the bottom of
the steps. She walked out as I walked in. She had black on from the ribbon in her hair to her tiny black sandals. Her dress covered her legs completely. I nodded to her as she passed me and she smiled. I looked back over my shoulder as she walked out into the street, but she kept going.

The next night I went to class and sat through a three hour lecture on the lab we had the next night -- Acetyl Salicylic Acid. How to make aspirin. Wendy sat next to me pretending she hadn’t snuck out of my apartment, also pretending she wasn’t getting my messages. After class we went back to my place and stretched out across the bed, our chemistry books spread out on the pillows. She rubbed the bottoms of her feet against my shins as she read the chapter to me. I asked a few dumb questions, which she was glad to answer. She doesn’t leave me much room to complain.

At the end of the chapter she closed her book with a gentle smack, and said, “We will be making only the crudest form of aspirin.” She talked for a few minutes about equipment and procedure. She explained precipitate to me. I tried to talk to her. I tried to kiss her, to get her to stay, but she left.

I woke up at four in the morning, to a sound I knew to be Johari screaming even though I’d never yet heard her make a sound. I jumped out of bed and pulled on a pair of shorts from the floor. I jogged down to Hannah’s and tried the door. It was unlocked. Johari was standing in the middle of the room in nothing but a yellow T-shirt. Her little fists were clenched in her hair and her face was swollen and red. Her barrettes had come loose and were hanging down near her ears. The whole room flickered blue and red from a police car passing in the street below the apartment. The blare of the siren filled the room.
Their place was in exactly the shape I’d left it in a week ago. The beer bottles still lay in the floor next to the cards, and the bags I brought up still sat in piles next to the door. The potted plant had made it next to the window, but that was it. Breeze from the never closed window had scattered ashes and cigarette butts across the floor. Hannah wasn’t there.

Johari looked up at me as I walked closer to her. The siren stopped, and the lights flickered off down the street and disappeared. I tried to pick Johari up but she screamed, wouldn’t let me touch her. She followed me as I walked back down the hall to my apartment. I didn’t know what to do with her, so I put her in a pair of boxers and an old shirt I had in the bottom of my closet. It’s one I haven’t been able to wear since high school, but she swam in it. She stuck her fingers in her mouth and plopped down on the couch in front of the TV. At about six I took a shower, got ready for work and watched the clock. I called in late at eight and decided to make another pot of coffee. I looked under the sink for more filters and saw this old looking blue wooden box next to the trash can. It had a couple of kitchen things in it, a nutmeg grinder, a teaspoon. I had never seen it before.

I got the filters, made the coffee, and waited. I wondered if Johari’d rather have something else to do, a toy or something. I went to my hall closet and fished out the only one I have. It’s an old Snoopy stuffed animal, grubby and falling apart, but better than nothing. I’ve had it since I was a kid, in the bottom of a bag of stuff my mom gave me when she remarried. Johari took it, laid it carefully across her lap. She stroked the nubby black ears as if the dog were real. She whispered, “good doggie, good doggie,” and then plugged her fingers back in her mouth, gazing at Snoopy.
At about nine, she grabbed a handful of my pants and said, “What your name?” I told her Jack. I pasted her hair back to the sides of her head with the barrettes and got her some cereal. When I called work again, I told them I really didn’t know if I’d be in at all. Then I sat down on the couch with Johari while she ate. At about nine fifteen, she walked back to the bathroom and got my toothbrush holder from the sink. She turned on the cold water in the tub, filled the glass and drank from it as I stood in the doorway, watching. She never asked me for a thing.

By the time Hannah got home I was so pissed I could have slapped her, but she beat me to it. I knew the sound of her footsteps coming up the hallway so I waited for her to get into her place before I opened my door. I thought maybe when she noticed her kid was missing she might think to look here. There was a long pause at the other end of the hall, some muffled footsteps and then the crying started. I went to the hallway and saw Hannah slumped down on the floor, against the wall in front of her door. As soon as she saw me she screamed and staggered to her feet. She lunged down the hall toward me. I glanced back into my place at Johari as Hannah charged at me. Johari sat on the couch with her eyes shut tight, her hands over her ears. Hannah slapped me across the face twice before she collapsed against my chest, pounding my ribs feebly with her palms. She was clearly hung over, smelling sweet and stale, like cigarettes and beer and perfume. She laid her cheek against my chest and looked through my door at Johari. She slid her arms around my waist and swayed against me. I let my arms rest along the tops of her shoulders, my chin brush the top of her head, feeling her tears soak through my shirt.

After a minute or so I took her elbow and walked her back down to her place. I
pushed her hands away from me just inside the door and led her to the pillows in the corner. Then I brought Johari to her. I looked around for a blanket but I couldn’t find one, so I went back to my place for mine. Hannah curled up in corner and pulled Johari next to her. When I checked on them that night, they were just as I had left them, in the pillows, asleep.

#

It’s dawning on me that I’m doing something incredibly stupid. Every once in a while, Johari says something about her mom-- and this a kid who never says anything. As we left New Jersey, she looked across the seat at me and said, “Get Nanna.” It’s not a question. The thing is, I don’t know what else to do. Hannah dumps Johari on me with nothing but the clothes on her back and letter folded up in a fifty dollar bill. I think: I can’t take Johari, I’ve got to go to work. I think: I can’t chase Hannah, I don’t know where she’s going. But then I’m back to: I can’t take Johari. She’s not mine.

At the moment she’s looking out the window. Her legs stick straight out in front of her, heels dangling over the edge of the seat. I pull over at a grocery store and buy us some Cokes for the road. Across the street is Stelzig’s Western Wear, the closest thing I’ve seen to a clothing store. I’m thinking I’ll get Johari some something, maybe a new shirt. Whatever I can find that fits. But Johari doesn’t care about that stuff. She wants a new hat. She uncurls her tiny brown fists, and points at the Stetsons, the turquoise string ties, the "DON’T MESS WITH TEXAS" belt buckles. I get her a hat with little cords that knot under her chin, a red bandanna, and a cap gun. Twenty bucks, and she’s the happiest kid east of the Mississippi.

When we get to the car, I put a pair of unisex tube socks on her, but her sneakers
don’t fit over them. Johari lays her gun on the seat next to Snoopy as if it were, deadly, real. I’ve decided we’ll drive straight til we hit North Carolina. Hannah told me about a few bars she likes along the coast, and the one on the matchbook has got to be open by the time we get there. Morehead City. It’s not much to go on, but it’s the best we can do.

#

Wendy came over the following Saturday while I was at work, making up the hours I missed waiting for Hannah. She straightened up the living room, cleaned my kitchen, bought me groceries. She left dinner ready on the stove with a note, “See you at eight? Call me if other plans... W” Wendy seemed to be back to her old self again. I opened a beer and sat down on the couch to wait for her. At about seven thirty, Hannah knocked on my door and handed me a glass of something that looked like ginger ale and smelled like gin. She didn’t even look at me, just handed over the drink, staring past me out the window. She wore a pale yellow dress, tied at the waist. She had glasses on, her hair in a white ribbon.

“Thanks for watching her,” she said, staring into her drink. “I didn’t mean to be so hard on you. I just sort of lost it when I came home and she wasn’t there.” Now she looked over my other shoulder, at the door. I didn’t say anything. “Thanks for watching her,” She gripped her forehead between her index finger and thumb, chin against her chest. I waited.

The thing is, I wasn’t mad at her. I’d been trying to figure that one out since it happened. Once she got back, once I saw her, it was like it all just went away. I actually felt bad for scaring her. She’d left her kid alone and come home drunk and I felt bad for
I offered her a seat on the couch, and she came and sat down next to me. She slid her arms around me, laid her head against my chest and whispered, “You really don’t need to do that, OK? Johari’s not a big kid or anything, but she really is used to being on her own,” The fabric of her dress settled across my lap as her shins nestled against my thigh. I let an arm fall around her shoulders.

We sat that way for a long time. She told me about Indiana, told me about the father Johari had never even seen. “My last boyfriend,” Hannah explained, “really doesn’t like kids.” She went on and on about him. His jazz band, his piano gigs, following him all over the country, broke, with a kid and no job. She sat back occasionally, and looked up at me, her head resting on the back of the couch. Then she looked down into her lap. “But that’s over now. This time I’m going to do things right.”

She took her hair down, letting it spill over the cushions and settle on her shoulders. I ran my fingers over the soft white hairs on her forearm as I listened to the sound of her voice. She talked about Johari like she was something incidental, like the stork brought her. It kind of pissed me off, but I didn’t say anything. By that time I was totally hooked.

When Wendy walked in, she dropped her purse on the floor as usual, and then froze in her tracks. She shook her head and walked into the kitchen, without a word. Hannah stood up and focused on me for just a second. Then she nodded and went for the door as Wendy walked back into the living room. I listened absently to the sound of Hannah retreating down the hallway, to the open and close of her door, and watched Wendy. She picked our glasses up off the table and poured our drinks down the kitchen
sink. She was moving in a kind of slow motion. By the time I reached the kitchen, she was loading her spice rack into the wooden box she’d pulled from under the sink. It was the bright blue one. The wood was mildewed, splintering.

“Where’d that box come from?” I asked. This was, of course, the wrong thing to say. Wendy wheeled around from the cabinet, glaring at me.

“This,” she said, “is the last box I have left to pack. You have been so preoccupied you haven’t noticed it, or anything else. There’s almost nothing of mine left.” I glanced around the living room for signs of her departure that I should have noticed. A pillow missing, a few picture frames she had given me, loaded with snapshots of us. I felt strangely calm as I watched her continue. Muffin tins, garlic press, egg separator. All this crap she thought I might someday use went into that box. Each time she blinked a tear landed on the counter next to it.

“Wendy....” she wouldn’t let me finish.

“Fuck you, Jackson. I haven’t known you forever for nothing. You must think I’m dumber than the dirt you’re made of. You must. I see through you, plain as glass.” I gave her my blankest, barest look, the look that says, “I have no idea what you are talking about. Do I know you?” I turned on the stove and asked her to stay. She turned it off, a finger flying up into my face.

“You lie -- look me straight in the eye -- and lie,” she stood back then, and made this wide eyed face. “I didn’t feel well,” she mimicked me. She anchored a hand on her waist, and leaned toward me, her eyes a furious electric blue.

“I have ears, Jackson. I haven’t been listening to you talk for three years for nothing. I came over here after class, and heard your voice. I know exactly where you
were. Exactly.”

“Wendy…” She held up a hand to stop me, flinging a carrot peeler into the box.

“This is not hard to figure out. I hope you have better fucking luck with the second half of the aspirin lab. Don’t you dare call me.” She tucked the box under her arm and walked out, slamming the door behind her.

I walked out into the hallway and watched as she made her way through the fire exit. Then I went back inside and opened the bottle of bourbon she bought me. This felt so final that I didn’t know what I should be thinking, what I should do. I went down to Hannah’s and asked through the door, “Can I come in?”

“Oh huh,” she said, and a second later the door swung open. She’d put her hair back up, lit a cigarette. “That was pretty bad, right?” She gave me this look, this look like she knew all about Wendy and me, everything. And really, I felt like she did. I nodded.

“You want to talk about it?”

“No.” I didn’t, not at all. There wasn’t a hell of a lot to say.

“What do you want to talk about? Want to play cards? Hmm? Sweetheart?”

Hannah tugged playfully at the hem of my shirt. I didn’t see Johari til she trotted out of the kitchen with a glass of water. When she saw me she reached up and put it down on the counter and went straight for the door. I listened to her walk down to my apartment, open the door and turn on the TV. Hannah went to the kitchen and rinsed her cigarette down the sink. I followed her and stood awkwardly against the stove. She gave me another, sweet, sad smile. “Do I need to say I’m sorry?” She took my hands in hers, wove her fingers through mine and looked at me. “I am, you know. I didn’t mean for
that to happen.” She rubbed the centers of my palms as my fingers closed around hers.

“No. I don’t know.” Hannah kissed me then, on the cheek. The smell of her hair surrounded my face, my neck. She dropped my hands, and I ran them up her back, into her hair, pulling her against me. She felt very small, like I could have crushed her with one little squeeze. She hugged me back. “No cards?” she whispered, sliding her hands over my chest, her fingers between the buttons on my shirt, flicking them open one by one.

“No.” I said.

#

Sometime in the middle of the night, I woke up to the whir of Hannah’s fan. She was standing in the kitchen in my shirt, the hem just grazing the middle of her thighs. I could see the tips of her fingers by the orange light of her cigarette, which she smoked, exhaling into the blades. Johari was asleep at the foot of the pillows, still in my boxers and shirt. I opened my mouth to ask Hannah to put her cigarette out, to come back, but nothing came out. She shifted back and forth, from one foot to the other, and clutched my shirt closed with one hand. I couldn’t keep my eyes off her.

The next afternoon, Johari appeared at my door with a big grin on her face. She handed me a wilting daisy, with a note around the stem. Hannah was standing at the other end of the hall, smiling, watching Johari. “Thank you” was all it said, in perfect, school teacher script. Johari ran back down the hall to Hannah, and I put the dying flower in a glass of water on the counter. By morning, the petals had fallen off, the stem brown and bending.

For a few weeks, I saw them almost every day. Sometimes I’d come home, and
Hannah’s door would be open, spilling daylight and jazz into the hallway. Johari would walk down to my place some mornings and watch TV while I got ready for work. Hannah would show up some time before I left, half dressed.

#

We get pulled over. Johari is screaming bloody murder, her face buried under a pillow in the back seat as I tap the brakes. The cop walks up to the window, as I roll it down. He peers through the window at Johari, and frowns at me.

“Would you step out of the car, please?”

I’m ready to put my fist through the windshield. I glance back over the seat, and see that she is in the floor now, between the box and the door.

“She’s afraid of the lights,” I say. I’m reaching here, I know. My heart beats so fast I can hear the blood roaring past my eardrums.

“Please locate your license, insurance identification card, and registration, and step out of the car, sir.” He looks me dead in the eye. His pupils are tiny, no bigger than a pin point. I’ve got an expired license, the minimum insurance, and an expired registration. I look back at Johari, and weigh the options. I decide to take her.

“Come up here,” I say, and reach over the seat, trying to touch the top of her head. I can’t. The cop peers down into the car.

“Now,” he says. Then Johari looks up. She scrambles over the seat, fast as lightning. She wraps her arms around my neck and digs her knees into my gut. I can hardly breathe. I’m thinking now that arrest is inevitable. I think of all the things they’ll charge me with before I get out of the car. Abduction. Endangering a minor. Poor judgment. Colossal stupidity.
Johari fastens herself to me, and I put an arm around her and pull her face away from my neck. I whisper, “You need to get quiet. You don’t have to look. If you stay in my and hide your face, he won’t even see you. Just be very quiet. Everything will be all right. I promise.” She whimpers, and looks me straight in the eye, blinking. Then she tightens her grip on my neck. “I promise,” I say.

The cop makes us sit in the police car while he writes the tickets. His siren is off, but his lights still whirl on top of the car, sending red and blue out across the highway. Johari is quiet with her eyes shut tight and her knees digging into my gut. The cop radios the station to check us out, but he can’t get a thing on us. No reports of a stolen Chevy Impala. No missing four year old black girl. As we sit in the back seat of the police car, the traffic whips by. The cop takes ten minutes to write out three hundred and sixty bucks worth of tickets.

We get back on the road. She sits next to me for a while, clutching her Snoopy with one fist in her mouth. I glance down at her while I drive. I notice for the first time how much she looks like Hannah. Her little finger-nails are shaped just like her mom’s. They both have this amazing skin, smooth and nearly hairless, though Johari is darker. Her eyes are the same too, a huge, determined black. I push her hat back down on her head and tie the string under her chin.

I buy her some fries at the McDonald’s in Springfield, Maryland just before dusk. She smashes them between her fingers and licks the salt off her palms, pursing her lips. She won’t touch a hamburger, no matter what I do. I try, “Here comes the car, open the garage.” No good. I try, here comes the train, open the tunnel.” I try to remember if I fell for that when I was a kid. I think the answer is no.
We are almost out of money, but I’m not really counting anymore. I have a checkbook and a credit card Wendy gave me in case of emergencies. I can only hope she hasn’t cancelled it. I eat my cheeseburger and start studying the map -- 95 south all the way to Rocky Mount, then 64 east to 17, then 70 all the way to Moorhead City. I bring Johari into the phone booth with me to try the number. No answer. When we get back to the car, she climbs across the seat and sits between my legs, her hands reaching for the wheel. I see a place up the road, so I put the seatbelt around us both, and we drive two blocks to the gas station. Johari grips the wheel and lifts her chin, to see out the window. As we drive, she laughs.

I’m hoping Hannah will be there in the bar, half expecting us. If not, I’ll get a baby-sitter and hope for the best. The worst part about this is that I miss Hannah. I can’t remember what it was like before her, this woman I met just a few weeks ago. She’s fucked up my whole life, really. I’m failing chemistry. Wendy’s dropped the class and won’t speak to me at all. I’m screwing up at work and my boss thinks I’ve gone crazy. And really, I have. I look down at the top of Johari’s head as we pull into a parking space. I’m crazy about this kid, crazy about her mother, even if she did run off with some guy who doesn’t want her daughter. What can I do? It’s true that I don’t know much about kids, but what I need to know Johari has taught me. She is giggling, sliding her Snoopy down the railing at the motel. We’re not making history, but we’re doing all right.

#

After that night, I saw her less and less. I went to work for the next few days, basically dead on my feet, waiting for something to happen. Hannah was never home, no
matter what time I knocked. I can only assume Johari was with her, but what do I know? Wendy wouldn’t return my calls. I left the most God-awful pathetic messages on her machine. I said things like, “Things can’t go on like this forever. I’m not picking up my stuff until we at least talk.” After a few of these, that same odd box showed up in front of my door with my baseball hat, a few pairs a boxers and a T-shirt folded neatly inside. No note, no nothing. I was getting very depressed.

Johari knocked on my door Friday morning and sat in front of the TV while I got ready for work. I didn’t have much in the house so I threw a hot dog in the microwave and gave it to her on a slice of Wonderbread. On my way out, we knocked on Hannah’s door, but she wouldn’t let me in. She just took Johari, without a word.

I came home from work at like four o’clock, hoping to see Hannah and Johari. I knocked on their door, tried it and listened for a minute. No luck. I sat on the couch with a beer feeling sorry for myself, watching the same CNN broadcast over and over. Then I heard her feet coming up the hall, Johari’s echoing hers. Then a third set, definitely male. I waited until I heard their door shut, and then opened mine, hoping to catch any piece of conversation. All I could hear was a low, muffled voice, and some clinking, like glasses. I turned off the TV, turned out the lights, and sat on the couch with my beer, looking out my window at the street. At about four in the morning I heard her door open. One set of feet receded down the hall. Not Hannah’s.

I listened at her door but didn’t hear a thing. I went to bed. In the morning I went knocked on the door, and Johari opened it. Hannah was sitting in a folding chair in a black T-shirt, and jeans worn through at the knees. Her feet were bare, her head buried in her hands. She didn’t look up. She didn’t move. Johari scrambled to her feet from the
corner and walked past me, down the hall to my place. I watched Hannah and listened to Johari turn on my TV.

“Hannah,” I said. I sat on the floor against the wall across from her, and waited for her to answer.

“Not ready,” she whispered. “Not ready.”

“For what? Hannah?” I couldn’t think of anything else to say. Hannah’s hands were knotted against her forehead, her hair hanging over them. Just occasionally her shoulders would move up and down as she took a breath. The floor was cold and bare, her feet rested thin and white on the wood. “Hannah?” I asked again.

“Hannah, you want anything?” I got up and reached for her hands, but she shook her head no. I went for the door.

When I got back to my place, Johari was watching a rerun of America’s Most Wanted, on some channel high in the nines. She was sucking her fingers. The closet door was open, my stuff scattered all over the floor. Johari had taken my old Snoopy stuffed animal from the box and folded it under her arm. I looked at the mess, and then at her. She held the stuffed dog close to her.

“She’s remarried to a UPS technician; they live in Jersey. I never knew my dad. Never cared to, frankly. I looked down at Johari, cradling the dog in her lap. I sat down next to her, and we watched TV for a few hours, Johari and me on the couch with the stuffed dog and an afghan that Wendy had failed to pack. I really missed her, sitting under her blanket with Hannah’s kid. After a while, I got myself a glass of
bourbon, Johari some apple juice, all stuff Wendy had brought over a few weeks before. We settled in.

At about ten I put an old red T-shirt on Johari and put her in my bed. I lay awake most of the night on the couch, with that bottle of bourbon and the stuffed animal under that blanket.

I looked out the window, at the building across the street. I waited for Hannah, for any sirens, in case Johari woke up. I drank a fourth glass of bourbon, and noticed that my bottom lip was numb. I could bite it as hard as I wanted to, but I couldn’t feel a thing. Things were spinning by the time I got up to get more ice. I threw back another drink, spilling a little on the coffee table as I set it down. I didn’t feel like sleeping. I got up to look for a cigarette, but I knew I wouldn’t find any. Wendy and I used to keep them around the house. That is, when we were together we did. We’d come home loaded and smoke in the kitchen, looking for something to put in the microwave. But then I realized that Wendy would not forget the cigarettes.

I had these fantasies wandering around the living room, like Hannah and I somewhere far away, somewhere pretty. The three of us in the mountains, the three of us at the beach, little sand tools in Johari’s hands. I pulled myself up and looked through the bedroom door at her. Her jaw had fallen open around her fingers, the sound of her breathing filled the room. I got the Snoopy, and tucked it between her arm and the pillow. I looked at the little pile of her clothes on the floor at the foot of the bed, wondering what Hannah would say if I got her a new pair of shoes. Her toes were wearing holes in the tops of the only ones she had.

I had one more drink. I hit the booze harder that night than I had in weeks. I
passed out on the couch, that last glass resting half full on my lap.

#

Johari is asleep in the passenger’s side of the car when we pull into the parking lot of Claussen’s. It’s past ten, but there are still some families out of the boardwalk overlooking the sound. Couples pushing strollers, kids with ice cream cones and taffy. I carry Johari across the parking lot. She still sleeps on my shoulder. I walk across a room with tables full of people eating, drinking, laughing. There is a stage in the far corner with a piano on it, but no one is playing. A jukebox next to the bar plays Bruce Springsteen. Rosalita.

At the bar, I shift Johari to my other shoulder as I peer through the smoke at the bartender, a young kid with spiky hair and shiny, brown skin. He leans on the heels of his hands, waiting for my order. “I’m looking for somebody, a girl,” I say. There is clattering from the kitchen, and the bar is lines with people smoking, drinking beer. “Her name is Hannah,” I say.

“We don’t have a Hannah here,” he said. I try again.

“About this tall,” I hold a hand up to show him. “Blonde hair, thin. Real dark eyes.”

“Don’t think so,” he said. He turns and pulls a couple of cocktail glasses out of a rubber rack and hangs them upside down in slats hanging from the ceiling. He continues, two at a time, until the rack is empty.

“Look, I think she might have been here,” I said. “She’s got a space here,” I pointed to my bottom teeth. “A gap between these teeth.”

The bartender cracks a smile. “Sounds gorgeous,” he said. “But I hadn’t seen
her."

Johari is awake now and rubbing her eyes with her knuckles. She looks at me and then lays her head down on my shoulder. “Her name is Sweets,” I say. “Hannah Sweets.” A couple of girls in tank tops and blue jeans walk over to the bar, money in hand. He gets them frozen margaritas and takes their money before he turns back to me.

“Look, man, we’ve got cute blonde girls in here every day, all day long. If you want, I can take your number and post it in the back, but I don’t think anyone would notice her.” I sit Johari down on the bar, looking around for Hannah. No sign of her. I’m thinking I need to get Johari out of here and find a decent place to spend the night. I try again.

“Look, do you have bands here, music? Does anyone come to play that piano?” I pointed to the other end of the room. The bar tender leaned over the bar as if he’d never seen it before. “Nah,” he said. “Plays itself on Sundays during brunch. We used to have a jazz trio that’d come in during dinner hours, but we couldn’t pay them much. They stopped booking us a couple of years ago,” he said. “You guys want something to eat?” he said. “Kitchen closes at 10:30.”

We sit in the corner, her drinking orange juice with a cherry in it, me drinking beer. After a few minutes, the bar tender brings us a bowl of peanuts, but I can’t eat. Johari pulls the skins off the peanuts and slides them over her fingernails “I has polish,” she says, holding her hands out in front of her like a princess. Each time the door opens, I crane my neck to see if it’s her, but it never is.

We stay about an hour before I pay the bill and walk Johari out into the parking lot. It’s cool out now, and the breeze from the ocean carries the sound of people talking,
laughing, packing their kids into cars and heading for home. I use Wendy’s plastic to check into the motel across the street. I hold my breath and wait for the charge slip to print out. It does, and we are safe. At least for now.

#

I woke up a while later, when I heard my door open and shut. The next thing I remember is Hannah was standing over me, with her shirt in one hand. Then her body, the feel of her sides under my hands as she stretched out next to me. She kissed my neck, my shoulders, my hands, stripping my shirt away as I struggled to focus on her. I seriously thought I was dreaming. She wrapped her arms around my neck and laid her head on my chest. She moved around some at first, trying to get her cheek to fit right at the base of my neck.

“I don’t know if it’s forever... so good to us…”

I ran my hands up and down her back, finding my way under the hook of her bra. I anchored a hand in her hair as she threw my shirt to the end of the couch. I remember her fingers tugging lightly on the snap of my jeans.

“You’re better at this, Jackson. Please let this happen, please. There’s no other way....”

She worked my jeans down to my knees. I kicked them off. The rain had stopped, making the room so still, so quiet I could hear the brush of Hannah’s body against mine, her skin as her hands skimmed over me, just grazing the hairs on my belly, my arms, my chest. I remember her looking desperately through the window, out into the street as she touched me. I remember her tears sliding over the backs of my hands as I touched her face.
“Can’t afford her, what love is Jackson. You’re better. Please let this happen, please.”

She pulled away and looked at me then, stroking my hair away from my forehead. She slipped her legs through mine, nestling herself in underneath me.

“Please tell me it will be all right. Please tell me that,” she whispered.

I don’t remember her getting up, her leaving, much at all after that. Just a second or two, of her hands in my hair, then her nails stinging my shoulders. In the morning, my head felt like it might have weighed a hundred pounds. I could feel, I mean actually feel the blood running down into my fingers, my pulse hitting the bottoms of my feet. I was sure I’d been dreaming, until I saw her bra, still scattered across the floor. I could still taste her skin in my mouth, feel her against me. The bourbon bottle lay on its side in the middle of the table, about one drink from empty. Johari appeared then, and put the Snoopy and the note in front of me. I pulled out a fifty and read:

Johari is a special kid, Jack. I love her more than I love myself, anything. I can’t afford her right now, and she can’t afford me. Being a good mom, honey, is knowing you’re not. This is the best I can do for her. We need to go south, Jack. Someplace warm, somewhere far away, and warm. Please let this happen for us, Jaskson, please. We may not get another chance to make it work. Tell her the good things about me, honey. Please. Only the good things.

I wrapped the afghan around me like a towel, and walked to the bathroom. I chucked a half a bottle of bourbon, and sat on the floor, letting the cold of the tiles seep
through the blanket. I don’t know for how long. At some point I heard Johari turn on the TV and flip through the channels. I puked again, and got in the shower. I tried to think of all the options. The most obvious one: call the police, was out. For one thing, Johari is terrified of cops. For another, all they were going to do is take her away from me, on top of taking her away from Hannah. Then what would happen? Johari would end up in some kind of home, with a bunch of other fucked up kids with ass hole parents and no one to give a damn about them. That just wasn’t on my list.

I didn’t see it then but what I really wanted was Hannah back. I wanted her with me, as much as I’ve ever wanted anything.

I got dressed and walked down to Hannah’s. I pushed the door open and saw what I should pretty much have expected. Nothing. A white trash bag full of beer bottles and cigarette butts. Some potting soil scattered over the floor. Her little plastic fan still perched on the counter in the kitchen. I dumped the trash out onto the floor and looked for something, anything. A few bills sent from Rhode Island, a receipt from a bar in Louisiana. The only thing I got that looked like any good was matchbook from Morehead City, NC. Hannah had circled the phone number. No answer.

An hour later we took the train out to Jersey. I didn’t say much to Johari, just put her jeans and shoes on her, and headed for the door with a pot of coffee in my thermos and fifty bucks in my back pocket. Johari carried the blue box, with the afghan and the Snoopy and a few T-shirts in it.

My car had been parked in my mom’s driveway since I left school, so all I had to do was bring my keys. Mom would be at work, and husband number two would be off somewhere, turning a wrench. As we rode the train, I cried, while Johari stared at me
like I was something toxic, nuclear. I haven’t cried since I was like eight. But then, I have never, ever been in a fix like this.

#

We spend the last of our cash at the motel diner. Johari likes ketchup with her eggs. I squeeze it from the foil packets into a little paper cup, but she just sticks her fingers in it and sucks them. She talks more lately, mostly telling me what she sees. In our room, she came out with the complimentary Camay and said, “New bar soap.” This morning she wouldn’t let me tie her shoes. She cried for Hannah, kicking her feet, screaming until I gave in and left them untied.

Last night we ordered a plain pizza and ate in front a TV bolted to the dresser. She fell asleep in my lap after half a slice, her hat still on. I eased her back down on the comforter and headed for our lame excuse for a balcony, to think. I looked at the sky, at the boats swaying in the water. I pulled my chair sideways, so I could prop my feet on the railing and still see Johari from there. She’s still in her clothes, her fingers hanging out of her mouth. I pictured us at the grocery store, the movies, the playground up the street. I tried to figure out how I was going to get her registered for school. I don’t know her date of birth, her social security number. I don’t even know her last name.

This morning, I called my boss and told him I’d be out a few days. “You are being placed on probation, Jack, and you’re also being reassigned. Your stuff is boxed in human resources, so you’ll report directly to them before work. I am understood?” I started to tell him about Johari and Hannah, but it sounded even less believable than my usual excuses. Chicken pox. Vertigo. Dementia. I think I said something like, “Big fucking deal, Norm,” before I hung up. Something like that.
I had a talk with her this morning, before breakfast. I told her that this looking for Hannah probably would not work. I told her that her mom had to go somewhere that is not good for kids. She sat on the edge of the bathtub, gripping her toy gun with both hands, blinking. “Nanna.” That’s all she had to say.

I put her back in the car, tucking Snoopy and the cap gun next to her, under the seat belt. We are going back, but not until Johari has built a sandcastle, spent a day with her feet in the sand at the beach. That’s the bigger fucking deal, in my opinion. I want her to see places Hannah would never have taken her, places I feel certain that social services won’t bother with. I don’t know what she’ll remember. I can only hope that she understands what we are doing here, but just lately I hope for a lot of things. Nice parents, glow in the dark stars on her ceiling. Kindergarten, ballet lessons, first kisses, love. I run my hand along the top of her light brown hair as she sucks her fingers, looking back at our hotel room as we pull out the space. It’s the best I can do.
Blue

There’s not much talk here in the daytime. A lot of mumbling from Delano, but most of us just keep to ourselves and watch the paint peel. The don’t let me read anymore, and writing is banned since I tend to abuse sharp things that come to a point.

Most days I wait for my appointments and look out the window, trying to remember. Sometimes when I think of all that was and would be, the light comes to me. Then I don’t mind so much about the quiet or flakiness or the dumb-as-dirt orderlies. I just shine inside. Everything shines, and it makes it hard to sit and look for all the world like I am so mentally ill when I have so much light inside me. I swear it must show, but I hide it so well that the orderlies let me be and keep on.

Orderlies. Makes one think of rightness straightening crookedness, but all they do is thread the disorder, drill us with pills, chess sets, little watery cups of Jell-O. They want me to show them how good I can be, these loser jobwads with crack-head eyes and Velcroed fanny packs. No light, no imagination, no ingenuity. Bores, all of them. I think some of them can see the light, but they pretend they don’t because they secretly like it. But that’s not ingenuity. Now Aaron, he had ingenuity.

My apartment’s management had hired him to do light maintenance, and I had thought little of the memo. I can’t say I wasn’t warned; the girls on my hall were all in a twist over him. They told me they thought he was scary, but I could tell they meant he was sexy. Lu Waterson had counted his face piercings and memorized his tattoos before I ever even seen him. Then one night I stepped off the elevator to find him on my hall, a few doors from mine, keys fanned out in his hands. I stood opposite him in front of my
door as he picked through his keys, his baseball hat on backwards, a cigarette behind his ear, the hint of a smile on his lips. I dug through my purse, groping for my own keys but unable to fish them out. I looked up to find him watching me, one key in his hand. He smiled and stepped to my door, slipped his key into the lock and pushed the door open without taking his eyes from me. He grinned at me like I was the sweetest thing he’s ever seen, like he knew what I looked like naked. I stepped inside, shut the door and stood there with my eyes shut, my heart banging in my chest, hands presses against the door. I listened to him walk back down the hallway.

Then I felt it, the change felt right even then. On the outside, all was as before. A car in the lot, a key in the lock, a cat in the kitchen, begging for food. But then I started see things, notice things like never before. The way the sunlight turned the bricks white, the cracked evenness of the parking spaces, the sly shapes in the rags threw in the corners on my hall. I started checking my mail once an hour. I’d take the stairs one time, and the elevator the next. I’d take my time turning the key in the lock, discovering the emptiness of the box.

When the neighbors complained about the rags he left in the hall, I picked them up and hoarded them in a kitchen drawer. Then I started feeling things, his presence in a room that looked quite empty, the tenor of his voice in my throat, his eyes on my body, his breath filling my lungs. And always I remembered his face, his smile that suggested things so wicked I couldn’t begin to guess. After a few weeks, my therapist put a red sleeve on my chart, started asking me a lot of bitch-krieg questions, free association “hypothetical” aggressor youth rupture psuedo-abandonment malarkey. I shut her out, shut all of them out, all of the insipid co-workers and looks-good, is-good idiots in my
life. I cleared the way, readied myself, never sure of what was coming. Communion? Release? I waited, feeling it, wanting it, knowing the dam had cracked, though no one could see it but me.

In the end, I only an instrument, a conduit of fate. Maybe it looked like I was begging, and begging I was, but our collision was as inevitable as rain, and the whole world was implicated, implicated in my fall.

#

On afternoon a few weeks after the hallway incident I was drunk, rationing the gin in my living room, reading the junk mail. I was studying a mailer of age progressed faces, children missing from bus stops and parking lots, those fate had noticed and selected for invisibility. I heard a knock at my door and put my drink down. I steadied myself as I walked to the door, but there was no denying the feeling; so strongly it came to me that it registered as fear instead of desire. I knew it was him before my hand touched the door. Before I turned the deadbolt I saw everything: pure light, pure color, pure feeling; I knew that he had come for me even as he leaned the ladder against the wall and looked into my eyes, steady and strong and straightfaced.

He asked if he could paint my ceiling. Dear God, I thought. How clever, how creative, how fraught with euphemistic intention. What ingenuity. It was exquisite, the loose-limbed, strong fisted way he swept the color across my ceiling, no affectation, no shyness. Twice he pulled the hem of his shirt up to wipe his face, then finally stripped it off and let it hang over the top of the ladder. I poured another drink and watched him click the stud in this tongue across his bottom teeth, which drove me perfectly giddy, crushed any chance I had of poise, dignity. But he never so much as glanced in my
direction. He just painted my ceiling with those languid, ink-scarred arms, a faint gloss of sweat on his chest. When he folded his ladder up and turned to leave, I gathered myself.

“Why did you paint my ceiling?”

“Didn’t you ask to have it painted?” He looked at me then, smiling but not quite, the question in his eyes not quite the question in his mouth.

Well. That struck me as cleverest of all. How could I answer? I smiled and bowed my head as he pulled the tool cart slowly through the doorway, watching me, now, blue eyes on me. I let the foot of his ladder brush my thighs, then watched him walk toward the elevator, marveling at the pure genius of it.

And now my ceiling is a lovely milky white instead of the dingy faded gray that it had been all those years, only I don’t get to see it anymore. Here I watch the flaking beige paint of the ward in a state of zonked out misery, unless it’s a day of light, of color. Those days come less often than I ask for them, though lately, I ask a lot.

#

Time for my appointment, they tell me. Dr. Stephen Whitaker, simpleton of belabored pseudo-education. I rise, follow orderly to the elevator, check hair in chrome doors. The orderly leaves me at Dr. Whitaker’s open door. I smile. Whitaker motions for me to sit. I do. He looks at me. I look back. Little game we play: whoever breaks eye contact first is the loser. So I look at him without blinking, my best glassy eyed sex-you-up stare. He pretends not to like it; he looks away and covers his chin with his hand, wiping at it like he has something sticky on his face. I win.

He asks me how I’ve been. I say that I have been a good girl, and he sighs,
glancing at my kneecaps.

“I have,” I say, and cross my legs which is a shame in a way because he can’t see them through the smock they make me wear. He clears his throat.

“What would you like to talk about today?”


“Whenver you’d like to begin,” he says.

“I love you,” I say. I uncross my legs and brace myself for the real fun.

“Nina,” he says, hands folded on his desk. He looks like the president, he looks like a minnow, he looks like my father. “Do you want to talk?”

“I wish my eyes were blue, the light that comes is new, the hand will turn the screw, you know how much I love you.” He scribbles on his legal pad, but he won’t let me see. Idiot. I try again.

“The light you see is blue, this color only grew, the sunlight shines askew, you know I’d --”

“Talk about blue,” he says.

“Blue,” I say.

“Tell me something about blue.” OK, blue.

#

“Well, Lu Waterson had called to complain about the mess in the hallway, and while they were at it could they repaint her ceiling. Water stains and peely spots, she said. Then she started complaining to me that he hadn’t done her ceiling, and I really took heart. When you call the management to have your ceiling painted you shouldn’t expect someone to come and paint it just so, you know. It’s a different way, a pattern of
behavior that doesn’t cause them to paint. If you want your ceiling painted, ask for your tile to be regrouted. That might get you some paint.

Aaron had painted a lot of ceilings; that was clear, so no mystery there. He did mine like you do anything that fate calls you to do. You just do it, without knowing the effect of having done it. It didn’t concern me at all. The paint job was just part of the totality, the big picture. Universe implicated --- if it happens, there it is. But Lu was clearly in mid anger-management crisis; she yanked the elastic out of her pony tail and let her stringy blond hair fall in her face. She sat at my table and laid her head in her hands. “Is it so much to ask? For paint?” She threw her hand up at my ceiling. “I mean, he painted yours, didn’t he?”

Poor thing. It was hard to find the heart of the matter, at least for her it was. “Do you think, you know, maybe he doesn’t like me?” It was hard to find the heart of the matter, at least for her it was. I could see it plain as day, the ingenuity, the pure rationality, but she just kept sniffling about the ceilings that wanted paint. Fool just couldn’t get her mind around it.”

#

I’ve given Whitaker more in ten minutes than he’s gotten in months. He’s been starved for it, poor thing. He scribbles on a legal pad but it’s a hardship for him to take his eyes off me. Rabid dog, bloated rat, wanton whore. I hate his sweater, his nicey nice finger nails, his pencil set slash his day timer, him. He’s trying to look clinical and officious, unconcerned, but it’s out there on the table for all to see. He’s soaking this in like a dry patch of land under a hard, hot rain.

“And did you tell Lu that he had, in fact, painted your ceiling?” He looks square
at my chest, hand poised on the legal pad. Minnow, coward, moron.

“What was to point out? It would have been like pointing out a nuclear accident,” I said. Whitaker shakes his head and writes, looks up. Time to get to blue.

“Later that day, I saw him in the parking lot and he nodded a little. Definitely not looking, but seeing me just the same, he saw me without seeing me, like he had always been seeing me, like he could see clear through my skin. I felt just what it was: a message, he was the messenger and the message was that sweet anticipated rush, a sweet surge that crashed into me, filling me, only me, hollow and desperate as I was to welcome it. I tested it force, learned its weight. I don’t know how I got to the car, unlocked the door climbed inside. I sat there, dizzy, reeling, breathless. I let my hands go limp on the wheel, and I and waited. Then blue came to me. Color deepened and danced before me, reached in through my eyes, and seeped between my ribs, ran down into my limbs, a secret blue, a dark ocean blue of spinning color, of light of purity, a gift of perfection, sense, dimension. How do you thank someone for something like that?

I told Lu Waterson that I needed my cabinet doors adjusted, but had gotten a ceiling job instead. I tried to get her to understand that fate doesn’t give you what you ask for. You get what you need.”

Dr. Whitaker gives it to me now, the glassy eyed desperate stare. The floodgates are open now, he wants more, more, more.

“What else?” He cocks his head like a bird listening for food.

“I blended blue shadows, I nurtured blue things, I bowed to all blueness, whatever
The orderly that comes is stunningly plain, a short and shapeless drone. She takes me to the day room and leads me to a table square in the middle of everything. She knows I hate that, knows it and does it out of small-minded aggression and misspent envy. I sit dumbly and take in the scene in my mind, the chair arcing through the air to meet the curve of her skull, the rightness of the thudding collapse of her body against the floor. It helps, it does. Sustains me sometimes.

There are times lately when I am unable to overcome the chemical intervention. No amount of focus can bring blue back to me. When I try to remember it, all that comes to me is the heat and smell of him, his fingers gripping the cart, knuckles dripping. Sometimes it even saddens me, though I still see the sweetness of his expression, the rightness of it in the resting blue of his eye. The benchmark they long for is shame, remorse, horror. For what? Idiots. I did what I was called to do. Some people are born for daisy fields and pinafores, some for blackened bedrooms and liquor bottles. Why blame me? I got the hard job, crushed elbows, stifled murmurs, dim schoolnights, dread. No rainbows and candy hearts for me. I wasn’t even complaining. How could they not see? How could they not know?

Mornings are hardest around here. The indignity of semi-privateness and flaky-paintedness and Lysol-nakedness is more a cruelty than a necessity, but Whitakers of the world stand in stoic disregard, as if people could get well in borrowed underwear and shapeless smocks on eighteen technicolor pills a day. Whitaker says they haven’t found that magic mix yet, that powder cocktail that will pull the trigger and make me wonderful. Imbecile. Mornings they wake us with murmurs and threats, rituals we must carry out. Brush teeth, scrub face, comb hair. Routine yields stability invites wellness.
We get extra TV time, carrot cake with after dinner. Grounds passes are for people who respond appropriately to privilege and the proximity of pointed objects. I do not get grounds passes.

This morning Delano cries. She chews her hands, tears holes in her face, bawls her eyes out on a handful of toilet paper soggy with blood and snot. When she gets loud, hey come for her, big men in white, fanny packs tight around their waists. One lifts her off the floor by her elbow while another swabs the running snot from her face. They carry her pliant body through the ward and dump her on a gurney. A shot to settle her down, *good girl*. I wish they’d pound her, the mumbling, stuttering, self indulgent ninny. I’m still wishing when the sound of her sniffling fades away. I close my eyes and lean back, feeling it, wanting it, knowing its promise has been felt, its message. Then light comes to me. Today it’s running red and tangerine orange, a rapturous reeling skein of liquid silky thread of light, of color. I move through it, with it, far away in the light, red and now sometimes yellow and sunshine white. I slide through its layers, soaking him in, all the sweet times we had, an embarrassment of riches, really, how blessed we were until the roaring end. The clatter of his fall, the drumming of the rain outside. And they say it was me, all me, all my fault. Asphyxiation. Universe implicated. You just had to be there.

Whitaker stands before me now in a houndstooth jacket and slacks that are just a size too tight. He says wants to see me though its clear that he is looking right at me. And I’m the one in the bin. He asks me to stand and the light leaves me. I make a scene in my mind. His belt buckle cool in my hands, his tie loose in my palms, the snap of his pants ringing in my ears. What a moron. He doesn’t even deserve it. I follow him down
the hall to the elevator. He asks me how I’m feeling as the doors slide shut over us.

When I move to him, he pushes me away. I make a new scene. My fist in his mouth, my
knee in his gut, my heel in his groin, the stifled moans from his throat. The elevator
moves down. He tells me he wants to record me today, to make a tape for us to listen to,
for later, when I am well. Could he play it for some interns, students? It’s up to me.
Bullshit, total bullshit. He likes to think of me while he bangs his wife. He likes to
imagine me naked and murmuring. He wants to remember me when I’m gone.

In the basement, he leads me to a windowless cinderblock room with nothing but
folding chairs in it, folding chairs balanced against the walls. He props a chair between
us and places the tape recorder in the middle of it.

#

“It’s, OK Nina.”

“Duh...” Dim-wit folder filer.

“Go ahead,” He smiles at me. His teeth are even and straight, and a little too
long. I fold my hands on lap. I’m feeling good.

“Fuck you,” I begin. It’s the right beginning. His smile collapses and I give him
the look he so loves, the look that says lay me, slake every desire pure and filthy with
absolute abandon. I’m yours. He pales, looks to the floor, then to the recorder. I win. I
stack my hands in my lap, watching him. He’s really earning his dollar today, smiling
stupidly at the ends of my eyelashes, teeth glimmering.

“What do you think?” He pats the recorder, his nails clicking against the dusty
plastic shell.

“Sailors to ashes, mermaids to dust. Curse you, burns me, your still born bloodied
lust.” He crosses his arms over his chest, frowns into the tape recorder. Then he reaches for it again, runs his fingers over the buttons, and presses down until the tape winds forward.

“Gimcrackery,” I say.

“Talk about ashes. Talk about dust.” Ok, dust.

#

“There was some rotten weather stripping on the door, then a broken shower head, a really questionable repair to the upstairs drain. Aaron was on his hands and knees frequently in the months that followed, and it was all of a piece, the way the notes I left and the calls I made brought him, pushing the tool cart through the hall to my door, his master keys at his hip. He never did paint Lu’s ceiling. Tell me that doesn’t mean anything.”

“Excellent. Go on.” He eyes the tape suggestively.

“In the end it wasn’t me after all. It was an aberration, a betrayal, a departure, if you will. It wasn’t me. I came home on afternoon with a note in my hands. Please check water line from fridge ice maker to wall. Leak. I slipped it under the super’s door and stood waiting for the elevator. That’s when it happened, really, the aberration. I looked outside through the lobby window. Aaron was leaning into the window of a car in the parking lot, a car I had seen many times before, only not with him. He tangled one hand in a wavy, blond pony tail and leaned into the car. There was a pain in my neck, my throat. I stood motionless, taking it in, seeing it without really seeing it, a slide of evil projected on a damp cinder block wall. He leaned in, rubbed his mouth against hers, stroked her face with his fingers. I choked and staggered against the wall, pressed the
paint with my palms. My mouth tasted like sugar, blood. He reached into car again to turn her face, to kiss her. Kiss her. Kiss *her*. He rubbed her chin with his fist. When he turned, he saw me, looked at me as if nothing, you know, nothing at all. He even smiled. Waved. Misfortune, a yellow haired scap of round faced misfortune. Well. I gathered myself, went upstairs and poured a drinks. A lot of drinks.”

Whitaker crosses his ankle over his knee. His socks don’t match. Two different navies. He eyes the tape, then looks back at me with a gentle, daddy loves you smile.

“Nina, all the way, this time.” Shattered grate, tethered weight, painted hate.

“You promise?” I say, and uncross my legs.

#

“That night it started to rain, a hot, hard rain, a frog strangler of a rain. It rained hard into the morning in sheets of pounding water that overfilled the drains and flooded the parking lot. It was a Saturday, a day when I go to the mall and replenish the liquor, usually. Only that day, I had a headache, and I hurt all over. I’d been crying all night, you know. Nothing to be done for it. I didn’t do it. His error, you know, that’s what it was. In the afternoon, I took the elevator down and exited in the basement. I slipped into the utility corner, taking him in. The exquisite arch of his spine, length of his legs, the pale blonde down along his forearms as he measured lengths of drain pipe above him. The rain was already boiling up through the grates, washing over the floor. There wasn’t much time.

He heard me when I touched the cart. I felt compassion, you know, because it was not the way, not the pattern of behavior. A violation, that’s what it was. It was a mistake. An error. I grieved for him. I loved him even as I swung the hammer down
through his neck. Aimed for his skull, but fate will not be denied. He turned, so neck it was.

He fell, clinging to the cart, and murmured. I don’t know what. He knees sagged against the floor until he left go of the cart and sank. The water had already pooled around my feet, was rising fast. I knelt laid his head in my lap, threaded my fingers through his hair. I turned his face to me. He gazed, eyes glassy blue, blinking. I watched the water dive through the vents into the rising lake of the basement as red ran over my hands into my lap. I stroked his temples, memorized his sweet face. He never looked away from me, never again. There was my boy, my angel. There.”

#

Whitaker’s eyes are wide and begging for it, starving for me. The recorder whines a little with each rotation. I smile at him. Time to be nice. Compassion, you know.

#

“I pulled the cigarette from behind his ear, rinsed the hammer, and laid his head against his hands in the bottom of the cart. I took the elevator up. It was water, they told me. Water, officially. Not hammer. So I didn’t do it, didn’t make it happen. Universe implicated. Aberration. Misfortune. Asphyxiation. Blue.”

#

Whitaker finishes scribbling and grips the edge of his chair, looking at me. He leans forward and clicks the recorder off. He flips the tape out of its dusty plastic shell and taps it against his finger nails, sighing. He tries to smile at me, and I see. I see blue on his notepad, blue in his shirtsleeves, blue in the lines of his tired eyes. I look down into the backs of my hands, listening to him gather himself to stand. I see blue in dark
Last summer, the cicadas came. The night I decided to talk to Alison, there were hundreds of them in the grass and on the sidewalk, and the tree trunks were pulsating with them, a winged migration creeping up into the leaves. I got off the bus and walked the two blocks to our apartment, swatting them away from my face and neck.

At first, I didn’t know what it was. I would never have figured it out if I hadn’t seen a TV commercial with a young couple staring puddle eyed into a plastic stick with little blue lines on it. I was just taking a leak, and I looked down, and there it was, in the trashcan next to a wad of dental floss. When I picked it up, I knew it was the real deal, two blue lines and a cap that said First Response. I’d waited a few days to say anything because I wanted to see if she’d tell me. By the time I reached our apartment, the soles of my shoes were slick with wings and guts, and the cicada racket was building in waves from the branches of the trees.

I walked in the find Alison, cross-legged on the kitchen table, painting her fingernails. Her face was red and her hair was wet, hanging in a dark rope down her back. She didn’t even look up when I dropped it in front of her. It bounced and settled face down, but she knew what it was. She looked at it, and then looked at me. She put the top back on the nail polish.

“So?” she said. She hopped down from the table and reached into her pocket. She lit a cigarette on the stove, holding her braid away from the burner.

“Whose is it?” I asked.
“Someone I used to know,” she said, and clamped her teeth down over her bottom
lip, glaring at me through the cigarette smoke.

“Doesn’t look like ‘used to’,” I said.

“What do you care?”

“Answer my question,” I said. She flicked the ashes into the kitchen sink with her
thumbnail, leaning against the back wall.

“I’ll take care of it, if that’s what you’re thinking.” She dropped her half smoked
cigarette into the sink and doused it.

“With whose money?” I said.

“Mine,” she said, “Now let me go.”

She walked past me into the hallway. I stood there and listened to her rattle her
keys, open the door and shut it.

It was the longest conversation we’d had in three months, and it hadn’t gone the
way I’d hoped. I thought she’d tell me how happy she was, when she was moving out.
The only reason we still lived together was the apartment. We lived on one of the best
neighborhoods in Brooklyn. Our place was rent stabilized and dirt-cheap, a studio we’d
scored when we first got together. It was small, just a living room and a galley kitchen,
but it had hardwood floors and cathedral ceilings, a fireplace that worked. When we
moved in together, we were so broke we didn’t have a stick of furniture. We went to a
flea market and bought a card table and a couple of twin beds. We’d pushed them
together under a single fitted sheet. When it was cold, she’d sleep on my side of the bed,
and I had to tuck her hair down between us to keep it away from my face. The place was
small, but we made the best of it.
Our plan was to work hard and get our careers started, her acting, my music. After a year or so, things had started to shake loose with my band, and the record labels had started coming to our shows. I was about ready to quit my bar job because of all the gigs we’d lined up. I was on the road more and more weekends, and she was alone a lot. She’d always cry when I left, even if it was just for a weekend, but I’d never let her come with us. She’d tuck little packets of notes into my pockets. Each time I’d open an envelope from her, I’d get covered in glitter or little hearts cut out of tin foil. I know I should have let her come to more of the shows. The thing is, my band had been signed by then, and we were getting some good reviews. I didn’t need her under foot while I was trying to play. I couldn’t keep an eye out for her in places like that, and she was basically a magnet. Everybody wanted her.

She was tall with long black hair and blue eyes and great legs. She wore skirts every day and left her hair tucked behind her ears. She was a friend of Mitch’s girlfriend, so she was around a lot at rehearsals and at shows. But I could never find my tongue to ask her out. I’d say hi to her, and she’d smile at me, and then I’d freeze. I probably would never have been with her at all if she hadn’t made the first move. One night after a show, everybody decided to walk up the street to get something to eat. About half way to the diner, she reached over and took my hand. I looked over at her, and she smiled, threaded her fingers through mine.

We were together after that, but I was always afraid of making an ass of myself. We didn’t have much money, so I’d save for weeks to take her someplace nice for dinner. Sometimes on our days off, we’d walk up and down 5th Avenue, and she’d point to all the things she’d buy, when we were rich enough to actually live in Manhattan. Sometimes
we’d spend fifteen minutes just looking into the window at Tiffany’s or Macy’s. Then we’d split a grilled cheese sandwich at a diner and catch the train back to Brownsville.

By the time we’d been together for a few months, I knew I wanted her to live with me, but I didn’t have the guts to ask. I waited for her birthday and spent three paychecks on a jewelry box she wanted at Tiffany’s. It was silver with glass in the lid and little roses engraved on the front. The inside was red crushed velvet and each time you opened or closed the lid, it gave a little snap. Before I gave it to her, I put a few change of address forms and a key to my apartment inside. When she opened it, she looked at the post office forms and the keys back and forth. By the time I reached over to take her hand, there were tears in her eyes.

When we moved in together, I was on my best behavior. I put the seat down, left notes telling her where I was, cleaned up the kitchen, made the bed. I even hid stuff that might make her suspicious, anything that could rock the boat. I put all that stuff, pictures of old girlfriends, phone numbers I’d gotten at shows, ten year old copies of Playboy --- anything that might piss her off --- into my top dresser drawer, which sticks so bad you practically had to get a crowbar to get it open.

Even after we’d lived together for a year, I was still crazy about her. All she’d have to do is smile at me, and I’d do anything for her. It worked every time. The problem was, it worked on everybody else, too. Every time I turned my back, a swarm of guys would boil up out of nowhere. They’d buy her drinks, ask for her number, lay a lot of cornball lines on her. The agent who signed us couldn’t even remember my name half the time, but he always took his cell phone away from his ear to ask me whether she’d be coming to any of the shows. When we walked to the newsstand, the this old guy in a
shiny black smock would sell me a stick of gum and give her ten dollar fashion magazines for free. He was always nodding to her, smiling, calling her “Miss Alison.” Alison was always sweet to him. She smiled back, and said, “Thank you, Mr. Oz.” And it’d make the guy’s day.

Even the guy who owned travel agency across the street had a thing for her. He started spending all day out on the sidewalk with his coat draped over his arm, smoking cigarettes, looking up into our windows. He was always leering up at her from behind his two hundred dollars sunglasses, smiling and nodding. A few weeks of that, and we’d started making fun of the guy, calling him Romeo and all. I’d long since gotten used to men just about breaking their necks to get a better look at her, but I didn’t like it.

The thing is, she spent a year waiting tables, trying to get acting jobs, but nothing ever really worked out. The jobs she did get never seemed to go well, and she still had to work double shifts to make rent. Then it seemed like she stopped going to auditions completely. She’d say she didn’t feel good, or that they’d already chosen someone, or that they wanted someone blonde. After a while, she didn’t even do her acting stuff in the apartment anymore. No more monologues, no more vocal exercises. She’d just sit on the bed and watch TV with the lights out. Then one night she sat me down, all serious, and told me she didn’t think she wanted to be an actress anymore, that she would try modeling. What did I think? I said sure, whatever you want to do. Whatever, you know? But when I said that, she started to cry and give me a lot of shit about why didn’t I ever tell her she was a bad actress. I don’t know what she wanted from me. I still don’t.

Then one she didn’t come home, so I asked her where she’d been. She told me
she’d spent the night at her girlfriend’s house playing cards, and I believed her. Then one morning, I noticed a business card on the table among the bills, a thick white card with gold leaf edges and some Italian name on it. It had a phone number written in ink on the back. I never asked her who that was; I just threw it in the trash and tried to forget about it. Even when people started calling and hanging up, I refused to make assumptions. I think I stopped believing her when she started coming home with strange clothes on, knee high calf skin boots and rhinestone belts. She would always have an excuse, always deny everything. I didn’t want to be a jerk, and I really wanted to believe her, so I left it alone.

I’d been gone about two weeks when I walked in and saw Alison pinned up against the kitchen counter with her ankles crossed around his back. I knew immediately who he was. His jacket was draped over the chair, and I could see the Euro trash buckles on his loafers. It was the grease ball loser from across the street. Apparently it was just a quickie, because aside from his jacket he hadn’t taken off a stitch. When he heard me come in, he pulled away from her without missing a beat. He grabbed his jacket, zipped his pants and walked out like his number had just been called from the pick up window. Alison sank down to the floor and started bawling, but I ignored her. I walked through the room, looking for shit to break. I smashed her desk chair to splinters and shattered the beer steins she’d given me for my birthday before I walked out.

When I came home the next day, her eyes were swollen and her hair was hanging in knots in front of her face. She begged me to sit and talk, but I ignored her. I made myself a sandwich and ate it leaning over the kitchen sink. Then I took a shower while she blubbered all this about please don’t leave and please talk to me. Whatever. I’d
spent the night in our rehearsal space trying to cool down, and by morning, I was already thinking that it was for the best. The band would be on the road a lot more, and things were only going to get worse. I thought about moving out, but she was the one who’d cheated, and it was my place, too. I’d be damned if I’d let her get the apartment.

That night I stripped the sheets off the bed and moved my half across the room in front of the fireplace. I figured it was only a matter of time before she got the picture and cleared out.

#

After I’d asked her about the test stick, she disappeared for a while. The neighbor downstairs had taken her in a few times, and Alison had gotten in the habit of running down there hysterical every time I looked sideways at her. I was pretty sure that’s where she was. I propped the windows open so I could listen to the cicadas beat their wings together and suck the sap out of the trees. The bugs had gotten louder each night. It was late May, and in a few weeks it would be so hot we wouldn’t be able to sleep without the windows open. I’d have to put screens in soon, by the looks of things. The cicadas had started shedding on their way up the trees, and the shells were stuck to the tree trunks, the sides of the buildings, everywhere. Each night, I’d watch the headlights scan across the room, thinking about how great it would be when the place was all mine. Our living room was so small that there was only about five feet of space between our beds, but for the time being, it was enough.

The whole time she was gone, I kept rehashing the conversation, looking for an angle I could play. She hadn’t told me much, but the fact was, something had to give. I knew she didn’t have any money; even if she did, I had no clear idea that she’d actually
do it. Since I knew it wasn’t mine, I didn’t much care whose it was. I just didn’t want it pinned on me. Every way I looked at it, this had to be the clincher, the thing that got her out of there. It just made sense. She couldn’t afford the place, so the guy who’d knocked her up had to take her in, was my thinking. Now that I had my advance, I could afford the place on my own. This had to be the way to get her out.

After four days, she came home. I found her asleep in the same clothes she’d left in almost a week before. The place smelled like a distillery, and there was a garbage bag on the floor next to her, splattered with half dried vomit. There was a little crusted spit on her chin, but she was breathing, so I left her alone.

I knew she was trying to make me feel sorry for her. The guy across the street had stopped hanging out on the sidewalk to look for her, and she kept telling me that she has stopped seeing him, that it was over. I couldn’t have cared less, either way. You let a guy throw you on the kitchen counter, you get what you deserve. For the first few weeks after I’d caught her, she’d kept the apartment spotless and filled the kitchen with beer and cigarettes; she even cooked for me and left me notes on how to reheat things when I got home from a gig. I’d throw whatever she made me away and order a pizza. I left the milk out, ran us out of beer and cigarettes and waited for her to buy us more. I started bringing people home to party after the shows, made sure there were plenty of girls. I never slept with anyone else, but I’d tell Alison to get the hell out so I could have some privacy. That’s when she started running down to the neighbor’s, crying. That’s also when she started drinking.

I should have said something to her sooner. She’d leave half empty beer glasses full of red wine next to her bed, bottles of flat champagne all over the apartment. At one
point, fruit flies had infested a stagnant screwdriver. But after that night in the kitchen, it seemed like a space had opened up between us that was getting wider every day. When the first of the month rolled around, I couldn’t even find my tongue to ask her about the rent. The day came and went, and I knew she hadn’t been working. I knew it was the perfect opportunity to tell her to leave, but I just couldn’t talk to her. Every time I opened my mouth to say something, nothing would come out. Living with her had become like living with a distant relative who speaks no English. Then on the fifth, I found a pile of cash on the table. Her three hundred dollars rent in crumpled fives and tens. I didn’t even want to think about where she’d gotten it. I wrote the check, but I never asked her about it.

#

On my way home from rehearsal, I bought some screens to put in the windows. The cicadas had started to migrate into the apartment, and since we had no A/C, there was no way we could shut the windows. By the time I got home with the screens under my arm, it was late, and I was no mood for a fight.

Alison had cleaned up the puke and showered. She was sitting in the window in her underwear, right up there for the world to see. I didn’t say anything to her, just undressed and got into bed. I wasn’t going to ask her to move just so I could put in the screens. Some time later, I heard her light a cigarette, smelled the smoke. I opened my eyes and saw her sitting just as she’d been when I walked in, staring out the window into the trees with the streetlight on her face. Her eyes were half shut, and her face was slick with tears. I watched her eyes dart back and forth across the street as she dragged on her cigarette. Then she let it drop out the window onto the sidewalk and lit another one.
She didn’t go the work the next day, or the day after, either. Every time I came home she’d be face down in bed, or propped up on the pillows, smoking. She’d started collecting the cicada shells, lining them up in rows on the windowsill. Her boss started calling to find out where she was, but she wouldn’t come to the phone. Then one day there was a message on the machine, asking her not to come back. The place must have been a madhouse, because I could here the waitresses shouting orders and dropping plates over his voice on the answering machine. When the credit card companies started calling, the messages came in droves, electronic and nasally. Her friends would call, but she wouldn’t talk to them either, never returned their calls. I don’t think she even listened to the messages, so I started erasing them.

Then one day I found her asleep in the bathtub, naked in a gray soapy muck of cold water. Her hair floated in clotted masses around her, and she had a tumbler full of cicada shells balanced on her belly. I stirred the water to wake her up. She let the tumbler slip out of her hand, and the shells spread out in the water like they were alive, moving. She told me to get the hell out. I did.

In June, the sound of the cicadas had died down in the mornings, but the air was thick with them, red eyed, shiny and big as your thumb. The sidewalks were spattered with carcasses, and the city has started to stink with the rot. That’s when the sickness started. The first time, I could hear her heaving over the toilet, choking and gasping. It happened every morning. After she’d emptied her stomach, she’d choke on her toothbrush and dry heave over the sink. I got into the habit of stepping over her into the shower so I could get to rehearsal. She looked like a battered dog, all elbows and kneecaps, with a towel over her face. It was hard to resist the urge to lean down and
touch her, to see if she wanted anything, but then I’d remind myself that I was not the reason we were in this place.

Sometimes things caught up with me, I admit. I’d put on a pair of jeans I hadn’t worn in a while, and my hands would get covered with glitter from my last show. I’d walk down the block to buy a newspaper, and Oz would ignore me, just take my money and drop the change in my hand without a word. Once I stayed for a minute and picked up a package of chewing gum, but he just turned his back to me and stared into the wall. Things like that were happening all the time now. The guys in the band knew not to ask about Al, but their girlfriends, Jesus. At one of the shows, Mitch’s girlfriend Sue got drunk and threw a glass of whiskey down my shirt. When our agent heard that I’d broken up with Alison, he whipped out his cell phone. He said, “You mean Alison, the girl with the legs and the hair? You broke up with her? Give me her number.” Then he laughed at me, like that was supposed to be funny. Sometimes I’d wake up and look across the room to Alison’s bed, and I’d see some strange girl there, a small, pale face, a dark span of hair spread out across the pillow. I’d close my eyes again, and then I’d remember: she used to be my girlfriend. The smile, the glitter, the business card, the kitchen counter. Alison.

#

After a few weeks, Alison turned over a new leaf, so to speak. She stopped smoking, and the fridge was filled with wheat bread and mineral water. She was in bed each night when I got home, but by morning she’d have her head in the toilet. She was still collecting the bug shells, though. She’d started sticking them to the curtains, stacking them up on the desk from the shortest to the longest, like a xylophone with
thousands of feet. Once I caught her holding a lighter to one of the shells, dropping it out the window just before the flame reached her fingers. She’d also stacked them on the grate in the fireplace, caramel colored shells in rows all the way up to the throat of the chimney. I never said anything to her about it. I also never said anything about the stuff she’d taken from my side of the room when I wasn’t home. I’d be looking for my favorite shirt to take it to the laundry, and there it would be, hidden under the covers at the foot of her bed, or shoved between her mattress and the wall.

She was also starting to lose weight. I’d grown accustomed to watching her feet hit the floor each morning. His shins had started to look like chisel blades, and I could see the tendons behind her knees as she lunged into the bathroom. At one point I thought I might ask her what she was going to do, but when I opened my mouth, nothing would come out. I just didn’t know what to say to her. I just kept hoping that I’d come home one day, and her stuff would be gone, and I could put the whole sorry mess behind me. I’d even eat a month’s rent if to have it over with.

Then one day, it happened. I came home from a gig and the place looked like it had been robbed. I turned the apartment upside down, looking for any evidence of her. There was none. My first reaction was panic, though I can’t explain why. Acting books, gone. Bras, undershirts, jeans, t-shirts, gone. Lipstick, nail polish, hand lotion, gone. She was gone. She’d even cleaned her hair out of the shower drain. The only thing she’d left was the inventory of cicada shells settling in the grate of the fireplace. I found an envelope with half a month’s rent on the kitchen table, in fives. No note. No nothing.

When I finally and opened a beer, I felt like someone had let the blood out of me. I walked back and forth across the apartment, thinking do something, do something do
something. But I didn’t know what, and there was nothing to do. I sat in front of the window watching the last of the cicadas bounce off the screen. I kept trying to picture her how she used to be, the way she was when we first met. I couldn’t. I tried to imagine where she might be right then. In the subway, on a bus, in a taxi somewhere. Nothing seemed to fit. Then I looked across the room and saw something, something I should have seen before.

My top dresser drawer was open. Just inside the drawer, I could see something shiny, something silver, nothing that I would ever put there. I went to the drawer and looked inside. Phone numbers, condoms, crumpled magazines, all this shit I meant for her never to see. And on top of all of it was her Tiffany jewelry box, the one with the glass top and the crushed velvet inside. Her keys were resting in the bottom.

I lifted it out and set it on the table next to my bed. Then I sat back in the chair, looking at it, drinking beer after beer. It took me a long time to get to sleep that night.

#

When I heard her voice, it was just a whisper. I opened my eyes, and there she was, sitting on the floor next to my bed. She had a handful of my blanket in one hand and one of her shells in the other. She glanced up at me and smiled.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi.” I didn’t know what else to say. It was strangely easy, like it was someone else I had not seen in a long time.

“You OK?” she said.

I couldn’t say anything. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. She looked peaceful, happy almost, sitting on the bare floor, staring out into the trees. A year before, I would
not have recognized her. She had gotten so thin that I could see her teeth through the flesh of her cheek. Her hair was fuzzy and matted, and her lips were cracked and split open in places.

She looked down and dropped the cicada shell into the skirt of her dress. She pushed the shell back and forth, looking glassy eyed out into the trees.

“I’m going,” she said. She tugged at the edge of my blanket and looked up me, smiling the way she used to, like she always did before.

“It’s done,” she said. “All over.” She tugged the legs off the cicada shell and let go of the blanket.

“I’m going,” she said.

“Where?” I said.

“I don’t know,” she said. I kept trying to say something, think of something so say. I looked into the smoky blackness of her hair and the hollowness of her cheeks and then the word just came to me. I tried to stop thinking it, but it wouldn’t stop. Stay. Nothing else. Just stay.

She reached over to touch the back of my hand, but as soon as her fingers grazed me, she pulled away.

“I’m sorry,” she said. She pushed the shell onto the floor and gathered her legs to stand. I put my hand out to stop her. I had barely moved, and I didn’t even touch her, but she stopped, settled back down and looked back out the window. She just looked out into the trees as if I wasn’t even there anymore.
A few minutes later, I got up. I got her a glass of water from the kitchen and pulled her into bed next to me. Then she fell asleep while I laid there, listening to her breathing. I tucked down between us and looked out the window, thinking, not thinking. I felt ok. I still felt ok when we got up the next morning and made coffee. We spent the day watching TV, dozing. We didn’t talk. When night came, she took a shower and crawled back into bed -- mine. A few at a time, her things started reappearing in the apartment. Her hair elastics, her clothes, her shampoo, her toothbrush. One night, she slid into bed and put her arms around me and before I knew what I was doing, I kissed her. I didn’t say anything, and I didn’t wonder what it meant. I didn’t wonder who’d get the apartment, either.
I tried to stop. I really did. But the lie had enveloped me and taken on a life of its own, and even though I realized that it was out of control, it seemed too late to erase it. By the time it started to matter, he had become a fact of life, like gravity or dusk. And there was nothing I could do about it.

It started one afternoon at the grocery store. I admit that it made me a little paranoid. I mean, what was I saying? And why was I saying it? Where had the words come from? “My husband is...” I said it right out loud in the parking lot of King’s Market, like there was someone standing there next me, someone to hear me say so and respond. One minute I was leaning into the car to grab my purse, and the next I knew, I was talking to no one about a husband that doesn’t exist.

I was able to brush it off that first time, but it didn’t stop there. After that, I talked about my husband all the time. In the car, into my dead cell phone, in the shower, in the hallways of my office even. I’d say the word “husband” or usually, “my husband” without regard to present or previous thought or mission of the moment or sense. The only prerequisite was that I would have to be out of the earshot of others. If anyone heard me even utter the word, I’d be vilified. One of the lessons that working in portfolio management teaches you is that the word alimony has a music truly unlike any other. Almost none of the women I work with have husbands, and those who do have pre-nups reams long. And the women who give us their money? Horror stories. Husbands who come home late and act like they haven’t been drinking. Husbands who buy boats to
house their twenty year old girlfriends. Husbands who throw their socks and underwear on the bathroom floor --- not just once, but every day for twenty years. You hear enough of this, and it really makes you grateful for your house and your car and your bank account and your own empty bed.

But the word husband, when I could sneak it in, was freakishly delicious, a forbidden sound spoken in some parallel universe of absurdity. I dared someone to remind me that I don’t have even have a boyfriend, that I am thirty-seven and single and have never so much as tried on another woman’s engagement ring, and not only because it’s bad luck. I’ve just never wanted to be married. Not once.

Picture this: you’re walking through the grocery store on an ordinary evening. You have your tomatoes, your bitter greens, your balsamic vinegar, maybe even a bottle of wine. As you stroll the aisle, you even get to glance admiringly down at the new charm bracelet you bought yourself last weekend, sparkly, playful, expensive, and yours. Then you turn the corner into the bread isle, and you see her. A woman about your age, a woman with her hair scraped back off her forehead by a cheap plastic comb. Her smock dress billows about her sagging abdomen; her hem is falling and she hasn’t got a lick of makeup on. And her bra is showing, for God’s sake. In spite of all this, you can see that she used to be at least marginally pretty. And now? Forget it. She’s got one slobbery little maggot in the front of the cart, and another one is dragging his feet along in back of her. The one that’s mobile can’t be more than three, but he’s wearing a Jiffy Lube shirt that says ‘Troy’ on the upper left pocket – and it damn near reaches the floor. Dear God, you think, and look away. Now, you’re reaching for a jar of alfredo sauce when you hear, “But momma, Daddy said. He aweddy said.” The kid is filling his lungs to scream,
his head thrown back and his mouth like the jaws of an attacking shark. He raises his
grubby little hand up to yank on a handful of her dress. He nearly pulls her into the
canned yams, and all she says is, “No candy, baby. Momma don’t have but twenty
dollars to last the rest of the week.” And then he’s wailing. On his back with his feet
thrashing, right there in the canned goods aisle, screaming. And you can still hear him as
you pick up your organic pasta, your cottage cheese, your carton of soy milk. You hear
him until you are clear out of the store with your bags fluttering in the heat.

I see this sort of scene, this snapshot of a wasted woman every damn time I go to
the store, even if it’s just to pick up a clove of garlic. Ditto the mall or the teller line at
the bank.

So since that destiny is just not what I had in mind, I couldn’t figure out quite why
the word was suddenly part of my vocabulary. For a while, I tried to curb the habit. I’d
be washing my hands at the office, and I’d look down at my nail polish and whisper, “he
hates this color.” Then I’d look around, paranoid that someone had heard. I’d check
under the stalls in the bathroom before I walked out, just to make sure I was alone. I re-
read The Single Girls’ Guide to a Good Time and ordered huge quantities of pricey
beauty products from catalogs and told myself that no one would ever see the bill but me.

But then I’d be back at it again. One morning while I was getting dressed, I put
on my favorite Gucci loafers. And out it came. “He gave these to me. My husband, for
my birthday,” I said. In the moment, the rush seemed to come from somewhere I never
knew existed; it was like sampling a designer drug, or buying your first bottle of two
hundred dollar champagne and drinking it by yourself. The word husband – I felt like I’d
swiped the icing off the cake -- only without the ankle biters and joint checking account.
Knocking around the house in my sweats on a Saturday night, the phone would sometimes ring. “My husband will get it,” I’d say.

#

The first time I said it to anyone else, I was at the garage. There’s this wiry grease flecked kid reading me a pitch about the importance of replacing the coolant in the car and adjusting the valves --- and this is October. He was just getting warmed up. “Regular maintenance of these systems” --- and then out it came.

“My husband takes care of all that,” I said. I didn’t even think, because at that exact moment, I believed it. It was out of my mouth and into the air before I knew what I was going to say, and the rush was exquisite. I felt so justified, validated. It was as much as saying, “Because I am married, you may no longer try to con me. I’ve got a husband.”

“Have your husband call if he has any questions,” he said.

Then he dropped the card on the linoleum and starting punching up the sale with his index fingers. He didn’t even look me in the eye. Saved me ten minutes and at least two hundred bucks.

I used the “husband” deflector for lots of other things after that. Late for eye doctor appointment? My husband didn’t get home in time with the car. Donation for fraternal order of police? My husband won’t let me give money over the phone. Once, I even pretended that I was married so I could avoid this knuckle dragger who kept trying to buy me a beer at The Bitter End. “My husband is running a tab,” I said. And he was out of there.

By far the best use of the husband shield evolved at the mall. I’d been through all my favorite stores, and I had some things I liked, but I couldn’t quite get rid of the feeling
that something was missing. I bought a chocolate covered pretzel and ate it as I walked
through the promenade. And then I saw them.

In the window of the outdoorsman store, there were these fabulous leather driving
gloves, gray and seamed and totally masculine. I went into the shop and asked to see
them. The girl looked at me like a little cross-eyed.

“They’re for my husband,” I explained. I slipped them on and smoothed the
leather over my hands.

“I’ll take them,” I said. I didn’t even ask what they cost because I knew, I just
knew, that he would love them. What they say about giving and receiving is true.

Buying something for myself was fun, but the excitement of buying something for my
husband was out of this world.

#

By the time I told my friend Suze, I’d been conjuring my husband for months;
instead of trying to quit, I’d practically supplied him with a wardrobe. Suze is one of the
only married women I know whose life didn’t end after her wedding. She’s got two little
girls, but she still looks great because she works next door to the gym we go to, at a
chiropractor’s office. When we first started working out together, I was shocked to see
that she had a ring on, because, well, she looked so damn good. Her hair was done, her
lipstick on, and she had the skin of a five year old, even though she’s almost forty. Once
after aerobics, she told me how she found him. Her psychic told her she would get
married to an Italian man who was five years older than she, and that when she met him
she would know because he would have on blue jeans. So when she met Marwan, who is
actually a dark skinned French Canadian, she just assumed that the psychic must have
thought that he looked like an Italian. He was also an evangelical Christian who did not believe in crystal swinging or past life regression, a fact that she got over without a wrinkle of doubt. Destiny, she said. I don’t think it hurts that he’s gorgeous.

Suze and I were side by side on the treadmills when she started in again about how she knew some tax auditor that’d like to take me out to lunch.

“I swear, he’s handsome. I wouldn’t say this to you if he weren’t. He’s got his own firm, some kind of franchise. Marwan plays handball with him.” We were running in lock step, and glanced at her with my best give me a break face. But I could see that she was serious this time.

“Will I get a free meal and no bull and no attitude? Will he get out of my face if I don’t like him? Can you guarantee me these things?” I date, yes, but only for sport and free steak. Some say it’s shallow, but that’s the extent of its usefulness.

“Janice, he’s seen your picture, and he doesn’t seem to think he’s too good for you, and I can verify that he is handsome.”

“As cute as Marwan? I bet not. What we’re talking about is some bald guy with crossed teeth and a lisp who breaks out in hives when people ask about his first wife.” These are the things people don’t tell you about blind dates.

“He has good teeth, and he’s never been married. He even has hair,” she said. You haven’t had a boyfriend in a long time,” she said.

“But ---”

“And don’t give me any of your tripe about how marriage is for the weak. If I were weak, I wouldn’t have had the guts to get married in the first place.” She punched the incline button up on her treadmill, and the belt started shifting up.
“Actually,” I said, “I don’t think dating would go over with my husband,” I said.

“He’s very possessive.” I smiled at her, gave her a little elbow shove.

But Suze didn’t say another word. She punched the pause button on her treadmill and planted her feet on either side of the belt. The she looked at me. “Come on,” she said, and cut the power off on my treadmill as well. As I waited for the machine to stop, I watched her walk around the equipment toward the door. She turned, “Juice bar,” she said. I followed her, and we climbed onto the stools. She ordered us a carb-arrest smoothie to split. Then she turned to me.

“What is this husband stuff, Janice?” She wrapped a towel around her shoulders and waited. Suddenly, I was highly uncomfortable. My thighs were sticking to the vinyl stool, and even though the music was loud, I felt like everybody was listening to us, watching. And I was certain that my make up was beginning to run. Suddenly, the fact that I had a whole closet of menswear and accessories seemed like a bad thing.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just say it sometimes when I want to get out of something.”

“Trying to get out of something? Are you hearing yourself?” she said, tapping her teeth on the edge of her glass. She pursed her lips and looked back at me.

“It’s just convenient,” I said. “I like it.”

“What’s his name?” she said.

“He doesn’t exist,” I said. “I told you. He’s just a figment. No big deal.”

“I see,” she said. And nothing else. We finished our shakes and went to open stretch. But we didn’t talk about it again.

The bitch of it is, after I told Suze, I couldn’t do it anymore. It was as if having it
out there took all the fun out of it. I couldn’t whisper husband into the hairdryer in the morning, and I definitely couldn’t tell the checkout girl at the grocery store that he just loved broiled salmon. But he didn’t go away.

Instead, I started to think about him, to fill in the blanks. What would he look like? Tall. With green eyes. And glasses. Would he like broiled salmon? No, he’s allergic to seafood. Makes his throat swell up. He has a scar on his left arm, from a boating accident he had when he was eight. He wasn’t even perfect. No. He had freckles on his back and he was a little slew footed. This went on and on and on until I could have picked him out of a police line up. I was even pretty sure that he would be some sort of salesman. Or maybe a banker. I can’t even say why.

A few weeks later, I picked up Suze to go to the gym. It was Saturday, and Marwan was home. He brought me into the kitchen and sat me down. I could hear Susan running around upstairs, packing her gym bag.

“You dating, Janice? Some nice man?” He smiled at me over his shoulder as he swirled a wooden spoon in a pan of milk.

“No,” I said. “Just a date here and there. Where are the girls?”

“Upstairs with Susan. So, you don’t want a husband?” He turned his back to the stove and crossed his arms across his chest. Tonight, he was making dinner for the girls so Suze and I could go work out together. He wore a crucifix around his neck that I always found disconcerting, but it was even more so when he was wearing an open collared shirt. Draws way too much attention to the chest. I looked away. He smiled at me.

“I just don’t have time for that,” I said, and then I was saved by the girls, who
came tumbling into the kitchen in front of Suze and jumped into my lap. Clean little hands and faces, hair done up in little barrettes. They even smell good, like a loaf of bread cooling on a window sill. Marwan called the girls over to have them “help” with dinner, and Suze leaned over and tugged my sleeve. “Let’s go while we can,” she said.

As I stood, Marwan turned again, and said, “Janice, if you want your husband, pray for him. If you pray for your husband, Janice, he will find you,” he said. “I know is true.” And then he smiled, turned back to the stove. As we were walking through the back door, he called back over his shoulder. “I pray for you, Janice. A nice man for you.”

#

Now, I have never been big on prayer. The only time I pray is when I am in immanent danger, as in, “God, don’t let me wreck my car,” or “God, please don’t let my hair look bad.” I believe in God, but we have an understanding. He helps me out occasionally, and I don’t kill the people who try to set me up with losers. He gets me a good account or two, and I don’t call out sick so I can go shopping. It was one thing to have Suze know, but the fact that she told Marwan was just too humiliating. I resolved to quit.

I have to admit, it was not easy. I didn’t shop for him, I didn’t talk to him, and I didn’t pretend he was waiting for me at home. Every time the word came to mind, I stopped myself by saying, “I am not married,” or “I am single,” or “I am unmarried,” or “I am totally alone.” It worked, but it made me feel like garbage. The one indulgence that I allowed myself was his clothes. I had hangers of them, shoes along the floor. I’d even taken the tags off some of them. But I missed, well -- him. I wanted him back.
And that’s when I made the mistake, the mother of all mistakes, the one that got me here. I started to have hope. I started looking for him. Don’t get me wrong --- dating was still just what it had always been --- free food and slack jawed admiration in exchange for a few hours of my company. Why mess with a good thing? But dear God, it seemed like he, the husband, was around every corner. I’d been walking through the gym to the locker room, and I’d see someone, or just something. The hem of a T-shirt sleeve, an elbow. Then I’d turn the corner, and he’d be gone. Or the elbow would be attached to some bruiser who was about to bust out of his tattoos. Once, when I walking through the lobby of my office, I saw what I thought was the guy. But then he turned around and I saw that he was just the delivery boy, a kid fresh out of college who didn’t even fill out his suit.

At night, I’d look through his things, the slippers with the rawhide laces, his Italian silk ties, his size thirty two jeans (extra long; he’s tall, you know), his jersey t shirts, XL. I’d look these things over and think: he’s out there. Here is the proof. Wherever he is, these are his things and someday he will be home and he will have them and he will love them. Then I’d close the closet door, disgusted with myself. The clothes definitely do not make the man.

I had just about given up hope when it happened. It was close to the end of the day, and I was packing up my briefcase when I heard his voice, out in the hall, way down the hall. I don’t even know what he said, but when I heard his voice, I knew. I dropped my files and stood still, waiting to hear it again. And there is was. This time I could hear him. He said something about chairs and tables, furniture. I smoothed my hair and
straightened my skirt before I stepped out into the hallway. And there he was. I mean, it was him.

He was leaning against the counter in the vestibule, talking to the receptionist; my boss was standing next to him, and they looked to be headed in my direction. My knees almost failed me. He was tall. He had light brown hair, wavy and curled a little at his collar. As he walked toward me, I saw that he had brown eyes, but still, they were the eyes, the right ones. And he didn’t have glasses, but whatever. It was him.

I must have looked like a drugged animal. My boss stood between us, introduced him.

“Jan, this is Chris LaChapelle. Dave works upstairs at central underwriting, but he’ll be coming down here with us to fill the SBA job. Starting next week.” He reached out to shake hands with me, and I looked at the floor while we shook hands. Because the hands were his, too.

“How are you?” he said.

“Hi,” I said. It was all I could manage. My boss looked worried.

“Chris, this is Janice Merrill. Special accounts.”

“Yes,” I said. “Special, ah,” His nose, his chin, his eyes, his smile, everything. He smiled again. “Accounts,” I finished. He nodded, and then they were on their way down the hall. The same conversation repeated at every office door all while I stood in the hallway like a potted plant.

I went home that night and looked in the closet, and I realized that he would hate, I mean hate, all of those things. Stupid looking sweater. Goofy movie star driving gloves. And really, what man actually wears slippers? Please. I filled a whole lawn and
leaf bag with hundreds of dollars worth of designer gear and took it to the thrift store. Then I wiped down the closet shelves and vowed to fill them with his things, the real things he would put there.

When Dave started working in the office at the end of my hall, I saw him all day long. I could barely keep my coffee down in the morning. Every time I heard someone open or close a door, my eyes would be riveted to the hallways, looking, looking. Dave? No Dave. I stood around the copier folding and unfolding useless documents; I faxed my own statements, and I wasted countless hours at the supply closet making paper clip chains, playing with the postage meter. Each time I saw him, each time he looked my way, I was more and more sure that he was it, the one, the husband. His hands, his watch, his eyes, his teeth his smile, all of it. Him. But what was as obvious as gravity to me was invisible to him. He didn’t even seem to know I was there when we bumped elbows at the coffee maker; it was as if I was just another woman in the office, just some accounts manager.

I tried making coffee several times a day so I’d get to overhear his conversations when he took breaks. “Then she said it was...” or “I missed the shot by about...” “I haven’t seen...” It drove me crazy. It took me a month just to figure out he was mostly talking about golf, and I only found that out because I was riding the elevator with him and Mark Brooks when they were talking about greens fees. I wished I hadn’t thrown out that golf shirt with the little alligator on it.

On days when I was really desperate, I did desperate, stupid things. Once when I hadn’t seen him all day, I took a pencil off his desk while everyone was at lunch and waited for him at the supply closet. He didn’t seem to think it was odd that I was there,
nor did he wonder why I just happened to be holding the box of pencils. He just said thank you and went back to his desk like it was nothing.

I started to wonder if I was making a fool of myself. My boss came by one afternoon and asked me if everything was OK. “You don’t seem like yourself, Jan. You are so restless. Something I should know?” I told her I was fine, that I’d been overwhelmed with the new account conversions, but she wasn’t happy when she left.

Some days, I’d just sit at my desk flipping through the mail, or surf the net looking for love advice. “Wear a short black skirt, sheer nylons and high heels.” Did it. “Smile. Walk like you are somebody.” All day long. “Be demure, a bit mysterious.” Duh.

Chris wasn’t paying any attention to me at all. After an afternoon spent scribbling the text of our wedding invitations in the margins of my accounts list, I felt I had to take action. What was the point of holding back? What I was doing obviously wasn’t working, so I decided that I was entitled to a little fun. So I whipped out the phone book and picked up the phone.

“Tea Rose Printing? Yes. I’d like an estimate on some invitations please. Wedding invitations,” I said proudly. I pulled one of my rings off my other hand and slipped it on my ring finger. “Just a range, just a range, yes.” I didn’t even check to see who was in the hallway.

“Embossed? No, no. Engraved. My husband insists on engraving. Yes. Well, he will be. My husband that is,” I scribbled the range down in my accounts book and put down the phone. I took out my compact and looked at myself in the mirror. I polished the ring on my jacket sleeve and held it out in front of me, admiring its sparkle. I felt like
a new woman, or at least I did until I looked up.

Chris was standing in the doorway with a stack of papers resting on his arm, but he clearly wasn’t reading them. He looked up when I jammed my compact back into my purse.

“Didn’t mean to interrupt,” he said. “Sounds like happy news.” My stomach lurched. I clasped my hands in my lap to stop them from shaking. I wriggled the ring off my finger and let it fall with a plunk to the floor. Then my knees began tremble under the desk. I tried to smile.

“Well, ah, actually, yes. For my friend. It’s my friend that’s getting married and she actually honestly wanted me to make some calls because she is fed up with all the printers in her area, which is Chicago where she lives, because they charge so much for engraving and her husband I mean her fiancé Richard, actually does insist on...” I stopped. Dave was standing there with his mouth half open, staring down at my desk like he was trying to read something that was upside down. “Engraving,” I said. He stepped back a little and looked at me like I hadn’t said a word.

“Uh huh. Well good. Um, Janice, I actually found this activity summary in my mailbox. They’re not my people. I think they’re yours,” He stepped forward and laid the report on my desk. He placed it right next to my client list, a list totally obscured by my huge, looping Ls and Cs and “The honor of” I leaned forward on my forearms to cover it up, but it was no use. “Yours?” he asked. He looked liked he’d just seen a ghost.

“Um, yes. How’d you get this?” I tried to look like it was a really important issue.

“Someone must have misfiled it,” he said. “Your mailbox is right below mine. L
is next to M,” he said.

“Right. Yes,” I said.

“Well, thanks,” he said. And with that he was out of there.

#

After he was gone, I got up and shut the door. Then I sat down at my desk and took a good look at my clients list, a thick greenbar report with LaChappelle scrawled all over it in livid black ink. I laid my head down on the desk and tried to think damage control. But there was nothing to be done. I was caught, absolutely caught. I kept the door shut until long after everyone had gone.

When I got home, there was a message on my machine. It was Suze. “Hey Jan, just wanted to let you know that double shot abs class is canceled this week, so I’m going to get a sitter and go to the movies with Marwan. Oh, and by the way, uh, he wants to talk to you. Give us a call.” I walked through the house, picking things up, putting them down. I stared hard into the blank walls, the bare shelves, the empty closet. A few times, I picked up the phone to call Suze, but then I’d start crying before I even dialed the number. It was almost eleven by the time managed it, and by that time, I was a third of the way through a bottle of cooking sherry. I didn’t even care that the girls would be in bed.

“Hello?” It was Marwan.

“Hi, it’s Jan,” I started to say something more, but I stopped.

“Janice, Janice girl. I love to talk to you. I wanted to tell you something my friend,” I could hear his smile, see his sweet face through the connection. I wiped my nose on my sleeve.
“Hi,” I breathed.

“So, I told you, yes? I told you I would pray for you, a nice man. Yes?”

“Yes, you did. Is Susan there?” I couldn’t bear to hear it.

“Yes, yes, but you must know that I have been praying for you and am having strong feelings now that you are ready. Yes, ready. That he will be with you soon. Is all right, Janice. But you must ask, Janice. Ask God to bring him to you. God will give what you ask for,” he said. I hung up the phone.

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After that, I came into the office each day, sat down at my desk, and worked. I didn’t look up for anyone, anything. I avoided the elevator, the supply closet, the fax machine, the copier. I got a caffeine withdrawal headache that hurt like a gunshot wound.

I didn’t see him. I’m sure he walked by my office some because I could hear his voice, but I never, ever looked away from my desk. When my clients called in, they asked me how things were, and I told them that things were really great, fantastic. Then I’d read them their balances and gush about next quarter and make cheap jokes about their ex-husbands.

A few weeks went by just like this. My boss stopped by to tell me that she was so glad I was back on track. She handed me twenty new accounts and a new bonus contract. I took the accounts and met every one of the women for a consultation, women with Gucci luggage, fifty thousand dollar cars and weapons grade lycra around their thighs. I listened to them tell me all about their husbands. “I caught him with a nineteen year old Jamaican call girl with a tongue ring. She has a lisp! She can’t even speak!” or
“He kept saying that I was still beautiful, even after the surgery, but then my hair fell out and…” or “He thought I had no idea about the roll over money. He thought he could cheat me out of my half because he thought I didn’t know the half of it. We’ll show him, Jan. Won’t we Jan? Husbands? Who needs them?”

I just smiled and said yes and took down the numbers, but oh, I wanted to say something, to tell them about mine, my husband. My husband. My husband. I make myself sick.

#

I still see them out there, disheveled women in grocery stores, women with dozens of kids and acne scars and tarnished rings on their fingers, only now I know how they got there, what it’s for. They get an end to the unfilled time, the bare shelves, the dark closets, the blank walls, and it wasn’t the designer boots and $200 eye cream that got them there. I have become such a schmuck that I actually pray. Please let him find me, me find him. Find each other. But I don't think God has time for that.

When I see Dave at the office, it is only in passing, in the elevator or the hallway. He sometimes nods, sometimes looks down, sometimes smiles if I am walking the other way. Sometimes when we meet at the copy machine, he turns around as if he has forgotten something. Once, I overheard him tell Mark that I was pretty nice looking for a total lunatic.

He never, ever speaks to me.

My husband? He is out there somewhere, at a desk, in the elevator, on a sidewalk, at a bus stop, in a stairwell, in the dark in an empty apartment. The word though, has lost its magic, its luster. It doesn’t even feel good to say it anymore. There is
The Albanian Wedding

The women were waiting for them when the plane landed. I walked through the gate first, toward a wall of plain old ladies, scarves knotted under their chins. When the bride appeared behind me, all these little dark haired women in black coats and flat shoes gazed around me at her, their quick, black eyes glittering. I stood aside and watched for a minute or so, watched the younger ones paw at her dress, avoiding the eyes of the men who followed her. The older women stood back a little, beaming, like they’d never seen anything so pretty. All except one, the one who walked out in front, linking arms with the bride. She wore a purple coat and black gloves, shoes busted out at the sides. I knew who she was. Her eyes were a deep green, little flecks of gold out toward the edges. She was looking at me like I was the filthiest thing she’d ever seen. Like if I got close enough, she’d spit.

#

We had just landed in L.A. I was there to see my girlfriend and interview for a sales job at her company. I didn’t want the job, but Emily had gone way out of her way to get me in there. She’d have a fit if I didn’t go, so I let her book the tickets for me and got up at three in the morning to call a cab to the airport. I wouldn’t have any time to get to Emily’s and change, so I was wearing my gray suit, the one I’d bought for my aunt’s funeral in ’95. I hadn’t worn it since. Every time I reached into a pocket I’d pull out a handful of faded prayer cards, or a cocktail napkin with a three year old ring.

At the airport it looked like I might get some sleep on the plane. There was no one
around, so I stepped up to the attendant to check in. She smiled at me, little wedges of lipstick splitting over her bottom lip. I looked over the counter as she stepped back to get a pen from the drawer and shuffle some papers around. She had long, narrow arms and legs, her hip bones jutting out against the fabric of her dress. I wondered if what they say about stewardesses if true – that they can’t weigh more than ninety pounds, or they get fired.

“Twenty-two C.” She stepped back up to the desk and smiled, handing me my tickets. Then she turned back to her paper work, like all of a sudden I wasn’t there anymore. The gate was still empty. I sat in a row of plastic chairs, under the flicker of a TV set that ran the same newsreel over and over again. The usual crap going on in the Balkans. Hillary Clinton’s change of hair-style, then a segment on the daily fat gram intake of the average American. I propped my feet up on my carry on, and closed my eyes.

The next thing I knew, the check in girl had about a hundred guys in beige suits waiting in line, stepping all over each other to compare seat assignments, jabbering in God knows what language. They looked Arabic or Indian or something, like a cab driver convention. I picked up my bags and walked over to the double paned glass to watch the plane taxi to the gate. The moon was faintly visible in the red glare over the Busch sign.

When I turned around, I saw the bride. The men hushed and stood aside as she appeared at the gate, a tiny woman, with a perfect crown of back hair peeking out above her veil. I could see the tips of her shoes poke out from under her dress as she walked. This old guy with a gray goatee walked her by the elbow up to the front of the line, and checked her in. Her veil hung down over her face. The attendants followed her, a flashy looking bunch of girls in lemon yellow dresses. They all wore too much make-up: blue
eye-shadow and black mascara, big orangy streaks of rouge. The woman herding them from the rear had to be the mother, a fat woman in a tight dress, little rolls of blubber around her ankles. They walked to the seats closest to the gate, and sat. The rest of the men gathered in rows behind the bride. I stayed near the window, and watched more and more of them appear – little guys wearing alligator shoes and pinky rings.

The stewardess announced that there would be a forty minute delay, to wait for a connecting flight that carried the remaining members of the wedding party. I looked at my watch, and calculated: landing now at around eight. Fifteen minutes waiting for a cab, then a twenty minute drive, in traffic. If things went awry I’d be late, and Emily would pitch a fit. I leaned back against the glass, picturing her in her tattered bathrobe, her hair in a towel. That’s how I’d find her tonight, after the interview. Just out of the shower in some state of unattractive undress. So many questions. Right then, I think I knew I was going to blow it.

When they called for us to board I pushed my way to the front of the line and walked onto the plane first. As I paused at the ticket taker, I caught a glimpse of the bride’s face. She was leaning over the seat to talk to the mother. The gauze was only one layer thick around the back of her veil, so I could see a smudge of rouge on her cheek, the black of her eyelashes. She was just like the rest of them, made up and trashy looking, even under that veil.

Mimi had put me in the last seat on the back of the plane, next to the drink cart and the bathroom. An aisle seat, thank God. I tossed my bags under the seat next to me and tipped mine back.

By then it was about five in the morning. If I looked up to the front of the plane I
could see the bridal party sitting up there in first class. The men sat in coach behind them, some jabbering like there was no tomorrow. The skinny stewardess stood at the front of the plane just behind the bride and did the usual “should we lose pressure, oxygen masks…” speech, but no one listened to her. Eventually she walked back my way, checked my seat belt, and strapped herself in between the drink cart and the emergency exit. I thought I saw her wink at me as she turned away.

As the plane accelerated up the runway, all the guys in front of me shut up. They crossed themselves and bowed their heads until we were at altitude. By this time I had been sitting there long enough to know they stank of booze and cigarettes – a bunch of drunk guys praying. I almost laughed.

As soon as the seat belt sign went off, the little old man stood up and gave some sort of speech I couldn’t understand. The other guys ate it up, though. They started clapping and hollering; a few pulled clear glass bottles of God knows what liquor out of their jackets and drank. When the drink cart came around, they all ordered shots, passing money back and forth into the aisle. By the time Mimi reached me, the pockets of her apron were stuffed with bills.

“You usually sell booze at this hour?” I just didn’t get that. I mean, we’d be landing at about eight in the morning.

“Sometimes,” she shrugged. “We knew there would be demand for it on this flight. This bunch connected from Albania to Newark. They’ve got a wedding in L.A.” She handed me a bagel wrapped in cellophane.

“All group reserved flights, and this is the last one.” She rolled her eyes. I looked around. Aside from the crew, it was just them and me. She began restocking her booze
cart for another round. What the hell, I thought. I got a Windsor and Ginger, and gave her five bucks. I was going to be late anyway.

One at a time, the men stood up and gave speeches in that dicey, thick language. Everybody took a drink after the guy before talked and passed the bottles around. As the cart made a second run, the drinks got more complicated. Gin and tonics, a lot of Bloody Marys. It was getting louder by the minute. I looked up to the front of the plane at the woman in the white dress. I could barely see her through the throng of guys leaning across the aisles with the bottles. She sat very still, surrounded by girls in yellow dresses.

I finished my drink and glanced back at the little occupied sign on the men’s room door. I waited. When I looked again, there were three guys standing in the aisle.

I walked up to first class. The men didn’t pay much attention to me. They just passed the bottles around me, their drinks sloshing over sides of their plastic glasses, pinky rings flashing. The stewardess up front was stocking another drink cart, her back to me. She had this amazing body, thin, but with a little more meat on it than Mimis’. She had an older face, definitely in her forties. She tried to shoo me back to my seat, looking at me like I was the biggest pain in the ass she had ever seen.

The bride and her attendants were up there, drinking bloody Marys, chattering and patting their hair into place. This one girl had a sweet little face, not a lick of make up on. Her eyes were a mossy greenish brown, little flecks of gold out toward the edges. She had on these big, fake pearl earrings that matched the ones the rest of them wore. She sat still, like the bride, while the rest of them hopped back and forth between the seats, every bit as loaded as the guys. The mother gripped her pack of PallMalls and her lighter in one tight fist. Her eyes were closed. I turned back to the stewardess.
“Look, “ I said, “I just want to use the men’s room. The one back there has been full since the seat belt sign went off. She eyed me for a minute, then said OK.

I looked back at the girl as I stepped into the men’s room and smiled. Her hands were clasped tightly in her lap, her knuckles white. She looked up at me with those pretty eyes, and blushed. She looked about sixteen years old.

I shut the door and pushed the lock. I took a leak and then washed my face, wondering what the bride looked like. There was just enough room for me to stand back from the mirror and see all the way down to my belt buckle. I straightened my tie, and shrugged. I looked like shit, but what did they expect? I’d just barely have time to get there, and wouldn’t have time to shave or anything. Circles were beginning to darken under my eyes.

I went back to my seat, and had another drink. This Albanian guy came back and offered me some of his cherry brandy, which I took. He was staggering over the aisle at me with the bottle, so drunk he couldn’t focus. I don’t even think he knew I wasn’t one of them. I got out some articles on Emily’s company that she’d sent me, and tried to read. It was boring as shit. I ordered another drink, and sat back to watch. Several of the men in front of me had settled into their seats to sleep it off. The women up front had settled down as well. I could see a limp, yellow sleeved arm hanging over an armrest, into the aisle.

By the time I got up to go to the bathroom again, I’d put the articles away, and spent my taxi cash on drinks. I’d even taken a few more pulls from their bottles after the drink cart made its last run. They couldn’t understand a word I said, but they seemed to think I was all right. I had to grip the backs of their seats on the way up to first class.
I wasn’t in there long when I heard a knock at the door. I pulled the lock back, and pushed the door open, into the bodice of a yellow dress. Her hand reached into the blue light of the men’s room, and tugged at the bottom of my shirt. Her nails were bright white, and cut to the quick. I stepped out next to her. I glanced down the aisle, and saw the curtain drawn. The women were all huddled deeply into their seats, asleep. I could hear the muffled laughter of the men as someone near the back gave another toast.

The girl never took her hand from my shirt, only hesitated a second before she stepped around me, pushing the door open with her other hand. I followed her. We stood there, crowded close between the sink and the wall. I stared at the top of her head, then reached behind me, and pushed the lock. She let her palm rest against my side. I could feel the coolness of her skin through my shirt. She reached for my hand, and I could see her fingers trembling. She would not move beyond that. I couldn’t get her to look at me. I backed up against the door.

“What?” I whispered. She stared down at the soap dispenser like she didn’t speak one word of English.

“What? What do you want?” I let my hand slide up, over her forehead. She backed up against the sink, and leaned forward a little, still looking away.

She has these tiny white teeth, set in a solid, square jaw. A small, straight nose.

“You speak English?” I whispered, sliding my arms around her waist. She looked at me then, unmoving. Then she leaned forward to brush her face against my neck, to kiss me just below my ear. I felt her breath skim over my hair. I felt her hands slide over my shoulders, pushing my jacket to the floor. I let her fingers slide up under my shirt, tugging at the buttons.
We stayed in there for about a half an hour, making out under the smoke detector. She leaned against me, her hands knotted behind my neck. I felt the bones of her ribcage rub solidly against mine, her dress crushed between us.

I fixed my clothes while she pulled her hair behind her ears and ran her hands up and down her dress. While she bobbed up and down to straighten her hem I caught glimpses of this jerk, this no good bastard in the mirror behind her. When I reached for the door, she grabbed my hand and gave me this sweet, desperate look. A sound came from her throat. Not a word really, but still, the only sound she made. She teared up, and put her hands over her face, her shoulders shaking. That’s when it hit me. There were over a hundred Albanian men outside that door. What if they knew? I wiped her nose and kissed her one more time. She laid her head against my chest for a second, her hands linked behind my back. I felt something catch at my chest as she turned to leave.

I stayed there a couple of minutes longer splashing water onto my face, looking in the mirror. As I looked down to tuck my shirt back in, I saw her earring resting in the eye of a button hole. I lifted it out, rolling it over my palm.

When I walked out, she was sitting just as before, her hands knotted in her lap, her ankles crossed. All the women were asleep but her and the bride. The bride sat perfectly still, but I could tell just by looking at her that she knew just where I was standing, where I was coming from. That she had seen, even with that thick, white veil down over her face. I walked back to my seat and waited for any sign that she might have told someone. The fat mother, maybe, or the little old man with the goatee.

I watched the guys wake up one by one, as we approached L.A. The old guy had spilled his bloody Mary down his goatee, all over his shirt. No one looked at me.
As we landed, all the guys crossed themselves, bowing their heads over their hands. I got up to the front of the plane fast, before any of them had a chance to stand up. I walked out ahead of the women, feeling the bride’s eyes burning into my back. My sweet little girl smiled at me when I looked back over my shoulder at her, in the mouth of the airplane.

The purple coated woman in the airport, the one who glared, took her arm and led her away with the rest of the women. I walked out to find a cab to my interview. I looked at my reflection in the glass of the cab stand. Tired eyes, no cash, wrinkled shirt. An earring resting against the seam of my pocket.