

SO MUCH UNFINISHED BUSINESS

by

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A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of short stories written by Kate Lorenz, between 2006 and 2010. The stories embody themes of displacement, identity construction, and posturing through their female protagonists of various ages.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Justin, to my family, and to those I borrowed from.

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OPERA HOUSE

Either Fitzcarraldo does not know that Lydia is on the verge of madness, or she does not care. Lydia wonders, what is the responsibility of a landlord to her tenant's physical and mental well-being? Probably none, she decides. Lydia spreads the dust-grey blinds open with her index finger and thumb and peers outside. Fitzcarraldo is sitting on the stone bench she recently installed, smoking a cigarette, and watching her henchman hack at the ground with a shovel.

The landlord's real name is Cheryl. Lydia calls her Fitzcarraldo. It was Andrew's idea, the nickname, after a Werner Herzog film. It originated when the woman started showing up at their apartment every day to beat the lush Alabama backyard into something orderly and respectable: a place with faux marble sculptures and plastic fountains, with the wild, hungry bamboo banished at the root; a place where a young tenant and her lover could sit and wait for the coolness of evening, the trees forming an opera house's canopy, the oversized insects its performers.

Although Lydia had never seen the movie, she was content to invoke it on a nearly daily basis while pretending a deep understanding about the title character that would sometimes cause Andrew to put a hand on her shoulder and squeeze. Lydia counts that Andrew has been gone for twenty-two days. It is a nice, symmetrical number, and also her age. *Fitzcarraldo*, she whispers through the blinds. The landlord turns to the window, looking but not looking, like a cat waiting for a creature's small movement before pouncing.

Lydia sits on the couch and puts a hand to her chest, feeling, scientifically. Cataloguing. Today there is a tenderness in the center, over her sternum. Lydia loves the names of bones, and finds these names useful in fortifying herself against the universe's fatal afflictions. Sternum: a shield. She runs her fingers across her collarbone. Clavicle: a delicate, reedy whistle. In the wrist,

the carpals, two clusters of stars, then the phalanges, ten small soldiers. Lydia moves her hand to her breast. The skin is smooth, unwanted, she notes.

There is a rasp from the backyard. As Fitzcarraldo admits, sometimes she can't catch a breath. She said it to Lydia once, three months after another henchman had stripped the kitchen cabinets of their butter colored paint. It was supposed to be a quick job, a couple of days, but the painter's wife had gotten sick. And so, Fitzcarraldo offered to pay Lydia to finish the job.

"I'd do it myself, Sweet Pea," she had said, "but I just can't catch a breath."

Then Fitzcarraldo had bent at the waist and buttressed herself against her knees. Lydia's heart swelled to bursting. She had always been able to muster great amounts of compassion for those who brought misfortune upon themselves. Lydia had wanted to take the woman in her arms and rewind a lifetime of substance abuse and familial outrages that had without a doubt colored Fitzcarraldo's days. Still, she did not want to paint any cabinets.

"I'll ask Andrew when he comes home," Lydia had said, closing the door and locking it slowly so Fitzcarraldo would not hear the bolt turning.

"Get a job," is what Lydia's mother advises. "You're stuck there, and you'll have to pay rent at some point." Really, the problem is the type of available occupation. For a while Lydia had worked at a grocery store perched at the fork of two streets, which gave it a strange, triangular shape that Lydia despised. The store, called Winship's, printed a Bible verse near the bottom of each receipt. They also sold spoiled milk, which was probably why they had gone out of business.

"What kind of job do you want?"

Lydia has an aunt who works at a flower distribution warehouse, taking pictures of the overstocked flowers and designing tags that specify where the plants should be placed, how much direct light they need, and what temperatures will keep the leaves perky and the blossoms full. This sounds good to Lydia. She has never been able to grow a plant, but thinks she would be soothed in the presence of so many successful blooms. Instead of looking for this job, she stays

in the apartment and eats mostly canned ravioli and waits for the moment when Fitzcarraldo will have something new to discuss.

Lydia remembers a spring vacation. A romantic weekend, Andrew had said, was what they needed. He had been so busy with school, of course, and she had done such a nice job hanging pictures in the house, and organizing the dishware. Lydia wanted to go to the beach, and wear the large straw sunhat that her mother hadn't wanted and read a book while propping herself on her elbow at a flattering angle.

There was a long, pleasant car ride on an overcast day. They had listened to the music that Lydia chose, and Andrew spent part of the drive with his hand on Lydia's knee. It was a pale and well-formed hand, and could have been her own. She had dragged one finger along his knuckles, counting the bumps and ridges. Then Andrew missed an exit, and he swore and returned his hand to rest on the automatic gear shift.

Lydia did end up reading a book on the beach. Andrew swam and ran along the shore, and purchased her a t-shirt with her name spray painted next to a hermit crab. But then he got drunk on scotch at dinner, and took, in Lydia's opinion, an excessively long bath, and sliced his hand on the ceiling fan while putting on an undershirt. They wrapped the wound in a towel, which they left on the bed the next day, in a moment of collective malice, for the housekeeper to dispose of.

When they finally got home, their apartment was in disarray. All their furniture had been pushed into the middle of the rooms. The kitchen tile was missing, and the unfinished trough of the counter extended two feet further than it previously had. On the bedroom floor was a pot rack and a plastic zen fountain still in its cardboard box. Next to the couch in the living room stood a dishwasher, and a beech-hued kitchen cabinet that almost touched the ceiling

Everything had been painted cream: the walls, the ceilings, the cabinet. The windows were painted shut. Small dots of paint bread-crumbed their way across the hardwood floors. Lydia checked her messages. There was one from Fitzcarraldo.

"Sweet Pea," she said, "have I got a surprise in store for you."

Lydia wonders if Fitzcarraldo is a supernatural omen of disaster. Then, she decides to take a nap.

The tiles on the extended kitchen counter were never grouted, and by now Lydia has unintentionally filled the cracks with small and irritating crumbs of food. The cabinets must be pried open at the sides—the handles were never installed—and the pot rack rests steadily on the floor in one corner. There, as well, the ornate curtain rods Fitzcarraldo installed on a whim hang above the windows, curtainless. When Lydia wakes up, she surveys her apartment and is enraged at so much unfinished business.

She looks through her bedroom blinds. Fitzcarraldo and John Edge, her main henchman, are sitting in the back drinking beers. Fitzcarraldo has a clipboard in one hand. Lydia puts on a bra, switches her sweatpants for actual shorts, and approaches them.

“Hey Sweet Pea,” Fitzcarraldo says. She waves Lydia over with her beer-holding hand. John Edge spits on the ground.

“Look at these flowers,” Fitzcarraldo continues. “My nephew just put them in. They’re going to perk the yard right up.”

The flowers run along the base of Fitzcarraldo’s new fence, which is waist-high and black, with little points on every fifth bar. French style, Fitzcarraldo calls it. The rest of the yard looks like the grounds of a funeral home, with thick stone benches, and thick stone planters filled with stringy, formerly leafy ferns. The yard’s focal point has always been a birdbath with a cherub in the middle, which used to terrify Lydia when she went out at night. The cherub only seems angelic in the daylight; otherwise, its eyes sink in and its mouth pools away, and it is poised to attack.

“The flowers look pretty,” Lydia says.

“They ought to. Those flowers were not cheap.”

Fitzcarraldo coughs into the crook of her arm. Lydia feels the bones in her own: radius, ulna.

“I wanted to talk to you about my apartment,” Lydia says. “That kitchen cabinet still hasn’t been painted.”

“Hasn’t it?” Fitzcarraldo asks, looking stunned. “I had my son-in-law in there last month, and told him to take care of it when he put up the pot rack. He never got to it?”

A trap, Lydia thinks.

“No, he never got to it. In fact, he didn’t get to the pot rack, either.”

Fitzcarraldo looks at John Edge, who shrugs. He is a man who knows how to get things done, Lydia thinks. John Edge is the only person she has seen do any work. Fitzcarraldo should have told John Edge to put up the pot rack.

“I’m sorry, Sweet Pea,” Fitzcarraldo says. She explains that her daughter and her son-in-law are getting a divorce, and so he didn’t finish some of the work. These are tough times for her daughter. There are puppies involved in the marriage, and her son-in-law keeps trying to take them out of town. It’s a whole situation.

“I understand,” Lydia says, “but I’m paying rent and I have no handles on my cabinets.”

“That’s because I was trying to find some pretty ones to put you on.”

Fitzcarraldo looks blankly at her clipboard, then at the ground. She appears to be done with the conversation, which makes Lydia feel both unproductive and a little guilty.

“She loves to make things pretty,” John Edge offers. “Want a beer?”

He holds out a can. Lydia sees her hand reach for it. John Edge opens it for her, and Lydia lowers herself onto a terra cotta tile that has been loosely planted into the dirt. A Siamese cat sneaks out of a bush and runs across the yard.

“There goes that cat again!” Fitzcarraldo says, reanimating. “I rescued two of her kittens. One was orange, like that old tom that lives under your apartment, and one was Siamese. I took the orange one into my accountant’s and said ‘somebody better take this kitten.’ And the receptionist did.”

John Edge confirms the truth of this story with a spit and a nod.

“And I kept the little Siamese one. He’s at my house right now. I named him Edge, for

that one, because he's adorable *and* a pain in the ass."

John Edge laughs. Lydia wonders if Fitzcarraldo is in love with John Edge. He wears a wedding ring; she does not.

"I could put up the pot rack," Lydia says.

"Sweet Pea?"

"If you give me the tools, I could put on the cabinet handles. And the pot rack."

Fitzcarraldo assesses her tenant. She has offered Lydia work before, which the young woman declined. Lydia thinks on this now with regret. Fitzcarraldo looks at her list, and checks something off. She holds her pen and her beer in the same hand.

"If you want to do that work, that's fifty dollars in your pocket, honey."

John Edge nods. So does Lydia.

Lydia will work for Fitzcarraldo. She will paint her own cabinets, and put up the kitchen hardware, and drape the gauzy curtains over the fake brass rods in the living room. Then she will offer to do this work in the other apartments, in her area and elsewhere. She will water the perennials in Fitzcarraldo's funereal gardens all across town, and drink beers on the benches in the afternoon. It will be money in her pocket, and it will take her mind off things.

And always, if she does not get the work done, Fitzcarraldo will explain to the tenants that her girl was sick, or having family troubles, or just couldn't make it around. She will say that the work will surely get done once her girl is having a good day again.

A DIORAMA WORLD

I sometimes think about all the people in the world who are better than I am. Some people volunteer at hospitals, some work at soup kitchens, some take up collections for single-parent families. I do beauty pageants. I have long, thin legs and arms, broad shoulders, a small waist, and enough of an ass that my grandmother bills me as the All-American Girl. Heather, she says, you are going to make us all proud, but I know she really means rich.

The other girls know who I am. They also know that I can't play piano or dance or twirl a baton, but I still beat them. That's why they dislike me. It's because I can talk to the judges, give them the eyes. I learned the eyes from my mother, and then from my father's girlfriends after he left. You're the prettiest girl in Boston, my grandmother says. When she says this, I laugh.

My mother and father met at a teaching conference. He asked her to dinner, and never showed up. When he caught her the next day, he said that he meant to come, but had been at a meeting that turned into an orgy. My mother accepted this explanation and went to dinner. They look happy in all the pictures I have, the ones I keep. My grandmother liked him. Two months after I was born, he fell in love with a Russian woman and moved to Moscow. Then he came back, but fell in love with another woman, and then another and another. These were not serious women; these were women who gave him the eyes, and I came to understand that I would have to learn some things if I wanted anything from anyone.

As soon as I get home from school my grandmother starts, like she's been waiting all day for someone to criticize, or just talk to.

“Are you wearing a bra? You better pray to Mary that your boobs stay up.”

“Why should I pray to Mary?” I ask. “Don’t the other saints care about boobs?”

“Mary understands what it means to be a woman.”

I don’t see my mother, and my grandmother says she has been upstairs all day. She stayed upstairs all yesterday, so this makes two in a row.

When we sold the house in Carver and moved in with my grandmother, my mother stayed upstairs most of the time. I read to her sometimes, and she would look at me and touch my cheek and say, I made a pretty girl at least. My grandmother said we’d prove it. She signed me up for a beauty pageant the next day. After I won, my mother got out of bed for a week or two.

I saw Lee at the bus stop, a month after we moved into the city. He wore a long coat and carried binoculars, and I couldn’t tell how old he was. He looked at my legs, and I wished I had been wearing a skirt instead of pants. I felt okay about talking to him. He was staying with his mother for a while, because she was sick. I told him my mother was crazy, which was probably true. He said he liked to bird watch. He would take the number five bus to Forrest Hills Cemetery or to the park by the art museum, but he didn’t go to the harbor as often; it was difficult for him to distinguish gulls from terns. His jeans were cuffed and I could see a sliver of ankle above his white socks. I thought he might be cold, which made me sad in a way that I liked.

I skipped school and went with him to the harbor, to practice gulls. He showed me his bird book and let me use his binoculars, and said I had an eye for recognition. It was nice to look at the birds, the water from one focused point with a border, a lens. There was an order to this diorama world. Then I went to Lee’s house, and he made me a sandwich and I sketched him on the back of a brown paper bag. His mother was asleep, like mine usually is. I wasn’t worried when he took me to his room. He walked me over to the mirror, stood behind me, and stretched out my arms. Look at these bird bones, he said. I felt heavy then, but he lifted me the air. And his mouth tasted like metal.

I'm in a pageant tomorrow. It's a big one, held in the Hyatt, and the winner gets to be a live mannequin in the window of Liza F. Boutique in Cambridge. My grandmother has a good feeling about this one. She says I look healthy, that the judges like pink cheeks. I tell her I feel the flu coming on, and she shakes her hand by her face like that's not even something to joke about. My mother spent most of the week upstairs, but today she is in the kitchen making coffee. She's humming. Do it for your mother, my grandmother says, but I don't want to anymore. I don't like people looking at me, like I owe them something, like women looked at my father when they wanted him.

Lee tells me I should stop doing them. It's not my responsibility. I didn't even like them before, but at least it was a challenge. Lee used to work at a joke shop, so he came up with this great idea: I'll play the whole thing like usual, smiling and answering all the questions. Then, at the end, I'll put on my formal gown and slink down the runway like I know I've got the win. Only right before they announce it, Lee's going to set off a smoke bomb and grab me off the stage. He says it's retro-heist, and will be awesome. They won't know if I've been kidnapped, if I'm in on it. It might even be on the news. We'll run right out of there together. We'll ride the bus to the end of the line, using each other's fingers to count the birds we see.

My mother usually stays at home, but today she is coming to the pageant. She's put on her red dress with brown velvet at the cuffs and collar, and her lipstick almost matches.

"You look fancy," I tell her.

"Thank you, gal. Today is a special day."

"Are you going to enter instead?"

She looks at me and brings her hands to her mouth, and I say it was only a joke. Then she smiles and grabs my waist with her hands, dancing me side to side. She does this for a long time.

"Your father is coming into town," she says, when she stops moving. "He wants to see you compete."

I spot the look on my mother's face, and I almost refuse to go. I feel hollow, like I could

swallow a rock and hear it clang when it hit the bottom of one of my feet.

The Hyatt lobby is crowded, but my father is tall. The moment I see him I know he's trying. He holds up a rectangular box—a gift that was obviously wrapped for him at the store. The usual. He's given me a sketch pad every Christmas and at all the birthdays he remembers. It's warm in the hotel, and the other girls push around me. The air reeks. I am in a hurry to check in, so I walk past and wave. He holds up the box like a trophy. You're gorgeous, he mouths to me. You're old, I mouth back, but he doesn't understand. He shakes his head and laughs, and probably feels like a father again.

They do the interviews first at this pageant. They take me into a closed room with the judges. I recognize most of the girls in line, but there are also some new ones, pretty ones, probably Girl Scouts. I joined the Brownies when I was little, because in the pamphlet they showed a girl on a horse. But there were no horses, actually, so I quit after not too long.

“Who is your hero?” a middle-aged blonde asks me.

“My father was my biggest role model. It was he who taught me to draw. But he has since passed on.”

The judges nod collectively.

“If you could describe yourself in one word, what would it be?” This question comes from an overweight, well-dressed bald man.

“If I could describe myself in one word, it would be self-motivated.”

After the interview, I go to change, and I listen to the other girls talking; they are nervous, it is their first pageant, they messed up their make-up, their hair is wrong, they feel fat today. My dress is light green, with a little shine to it. My grandmother made it, and I like the way it swishes when I walk. It makes me feel cared for. I take my place in line for the final walk, to meet Lee for the grand finale, and it is only now that I feel nervous.

The girl in front of me is wearing pink. I stare at the loose curls at the nape of her neck. She walks, struts, makes the turn and comes back. Maybe she will win. And then it is my turn,

and I'm out, smiling, crossing each foot slightly across the other as I walk. I see my grandmother standing. I look for Lee but I can't see him, and then I'm almost to the end of the stage, I'm there, I'm turning, I can't see him. I don't have more time. People are clapping. Lee isn't here. I just stand at the end of the runway, like I don't know what to do, smiling and waving and imagining a smoke screen curling up in front of me, making me invisible, nonexistent.

Lee's apartment looks empty. There isn't any light under the door, and I worry that he's not home. Then there are footsteps, large feet. At least I know his mother is asleep. He opens the door just a crack.

"Hey," I say. "Where were you? It was today, you know. The plan."

"Hey. I just couldn't make it."

"Can I come in? My dad came to town. Where were you?"

He raises his eyebrow and opens the door wider, but doesn't ask me in.

"Hey, before you tell me more of this stuff, I need to tell you that I'm taking off tomorrow. My mom has this home care nurse, really awesome. I got her all settled today."

He looks at me, but I don't say anything. I don't even move.

"You knew I was going to go," he says, like that was the real plan and there was never any other. Which is okay, really, and I don't feel like giving him the eyes anymore or being around him and I don't even tell him that I won.

I've never stood this still. Don't even move your eyes, they told me. I didn't for the first hour, but now I look at the people walking by. Some stare at me, but some don't even notice that I am there. A little girl waves; kids know more than anyone thinks. I stick out my tongue, but I don't shift my posture or scratch my left ankle which has been itching for forty-five minutes to an hour.

My grandmother and my mother come by to see me. They carry coffee and giant shopping bags. My father is still in town, but he has meetings. My grandmother takes a picture of me in the window, then takes a picture of my mother in front of the window, then has a man take

a picture of both of them with the window. I stare over their heads and clench and unclench my jaw.

Then there is Lee, or maybe not. Squinting past the reflections in the storefront, I can just make out his silhouette. He is standing at the bus stop. Finally he sees me looking and waves. Maybe he's going to stay, and he will stand there watching me, standing as still as I am, waiting until I have done my time. He puts his hand on his chest, and stretches out his other arm, palm up, like that means something. I don't understand. I want to shake my head. The clouds shift and the reflections on the window change. I shake my head, I do not stop, and I shake it so hard that my mother and grandmother jump, drop their bags, that they run into the store to get me out. I close my eyes.

I can hear my heart beating. It sounds small, but then I feel the blood pulsing through my veins. It flows heavier in my feet and hands, since I have been standing so long. It races down through my arms and pools in my fingertips. I feel my muscles, my tendons, the fibers pulling and releasing, keeping me upright, working to keep me still. Then I feel my bones, porous and light, floating up, straining against my body. I can see them on the backs of my eyelids. They are smooth and straight, and do not give when the pairs of hands, gently, lift me away.

MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

As a child, Crystal loved the museum. She went each year for her birthday, eschewing the requisite party at the bowling alley or skating rink. She liked the Great Plains display, complete with a sky filled with birds and a tall-grass habitat at eye level. There were holes in the fake dirt, and if a child waited long enough, so patiently, a mechanized prairie dog would pop its head up. Crystal memorized their patterns and, after a while, she always knew where to look.

Years later, Crystal was applying for a job in the museum gift shop. She was broke. A student, yes, but still. She went on a reconnaissance mission before the interview. The shop was just as she remembered: filled with rubber snakes, wildlife puzzles, bins of rocks and geodes. There were t-shirts with pictures of the museum exhibits. Crystal wondered if the enormous ant farm was still there on the fourth floor, and, if so, how many generations of ants had lived there since she last saw it. She guessed hundreds. Next to the cash register was a carousel of postcards, mostly rolling fields and sunflowers. The carousel squeaked when Crystal turned it, and a woman appeared from the office behind the counter.

“Can I help you?” she asked, but Crystal did not want to get into a conversation. She would save it for the interview.

“I’m just looking, thanks.”

Crystal moved again to the bins of knick-knacks, taking occasional glances back behind the counter. The woman had long, dark hair. She was maybe Hispanic. She was occupying herself with some business, maybe with the receipts that Crystal would soon be responsible for. The woman looked up and smiled. Crystal picked up a piece of quartz, then let it fall back against the rest.

It was a tall man named David, and not the woman, who interviewed Crystal the following afternoon. He asked mostly questions she had anticipated, about previous work experience, which mostly consisted of babysitting. He had one child, a son, a toddler. David and Crystal made pleasant conversation about children for a few minutes, and then he asked what about the museum interested her.

“Well,” Crystal said, “I would come a lot when I was a kid. I liked the prairie dogs the best.”

She thought the prairie dogs would make her seem more earnest and trustworthy. But by the way David looked at her, with a slightly furrowed brow, she couldn’t tell whether or not it had worked.

“Thank you for coming in,” David said. “You’ll be hearing from me or from my wife, Elena.”

A few days later, Crystal did hear from Elena, who instructed to report for work the next week. Crystal imagined herself behind the gift shop counter, tossing her imaginary long hair, penciling tally marks on the merchandise sheet every time a child convinced his parents to buy him something he didn’t need and shortly wouldn’t want.

On her first day, Crystal manned the gift shop counter while Elena worked on a fundraising drive. It wouldn’t be too busy on a Monday in the winter. Elena explained that they needed extra help because she and David also ran the Friends of the Museum group, and were trying to drum up more patrons.

“We can’t survive otherwise,” Elena said. “We’ll have to close some of the exhibits.”

“Don’t people pay to visit?” Crystal asked.

“Donation.”

The day went by slowly, so Crystal tried to find things to do that would pass the time but would also make her appear to be helpful and self-motivated. She cleaned the glass display cases. She dusted. She made new price tags for the various rocks for sale, and drew a new sign advertising the t-shirts, which Elena admired.

“You’ve got a good eye,” she said. “Do you like to draw?”

“I do,” Crystal said.

“Our son Oliver loves to draw, but David and I are both terrible. I try to draw a lion and it looks like a dog.” Both of them laughed about this.

Later, Crystal went to explore the museum. She found most things the same, only the whole building seemed smaller. She passed the permanent exhibits and the children’s activity centers, then stumbled across the taxidermy horse. It had once belonged to an Indian chief. He looked alive still, even in his glass case. He was wearing some sort of war blanket, and to Crystal he looked sturdy enough to support her weight if she could find some way to break in. But she couldn’t, and left him behind to look at the fossils of giant monster fish who lived in Kansas back when Kansas was a salty ocean.

Crystal returned to the gift shop two days later. She had drawn a picture for Elena to give Oliver—a lion, perched on top of a craggy red rock.

“I like this,” Elena said. “A nice strong lion. It’s for my son?”

I nodded. She looked at Crystal for several seconds, her expression changing into something that Crystal didn’t understand. This was a look that David and Elena had in common.

“Do you babysit?” Elena asked.

Crystal realized that David and Elena had a home. A house, filled with things that she could look through. The idea of this home tantalized her. She accepted the invitation immediately, and was invited to come over the next day for a trial session. It was if they had been waiting for her to come along for all this time, Crystal thought.

The house was nothing special, as it turned out. It was a small two-story structure, nothing like the kind of gypsy bungalow Crystal had imagined. No cabinets of curiosity to display small items of wonder, no soft scent of incense or herb gardens. The decoration was minimal, with nothing interesting to speak of except for a large purple sofa with cracker crumbs in its creases. The job paid well, though, as David and Elena turned out to be surprisingly

generous with their hourly rate, and Crystal agreed to sit every other afternoon during the summer.

The baby was nothing unusual, either. He was a good napper, which allowed Crystal to read several of David and Elena's books over the summer—their bookshelves being perhaps the only interesting part of the house. It contained novels in English and Spanish, glossy photography collections, and several volumes on animal life, reptiles in particular.

“Look at the iguana,” she would say to Oliver, holding a picture up for the baby to see. And he would laugh and reach out his hand, as if nothing were unsafe to touch.

Mealtimes were the only drawback. Crystal hated to feed Oliver banana, which was his favorite food. He got it everywhere, even underneath his fingernails, and he hated the coarse rubbing of the post-lunch washcloth. But, as always, Elena would come home, write her a check, and then Crystal would slink back into her regular habitat.

One afternoon it was David who came home unexpectedly, when Crystal had taken Oliver on a walk. She saw a light on in the kitchen window, and her heart race at the thought of an intruder until she saw David's car in the driveway. She pushed the stroller quickly to the porch, glad for the early relief. When Crystal carried Oliver into the kitchen, she saw David at the table, tipping the contents of an entire bag of Goldfish into his mouth. There were some in between his neck and his shirt collar. He was drunk. Crystal would have to stay until Elena made it home. She left in a hurry, understandably, without receiving payment.

At the museum the next day, David came into the gift shop specifically to assure Crystal that nothing like that would ever happen again. He said he was on the wagon, and had a slip up now and then. And that Crystal was free to leave, if she wanted to, and could keep her job in the giftshop.

“It's alright,” Crystal said. “Things happen. I need the money anyway.”

David seemed relieved, and also a little disappointed.

Crystal avoided David, which was not difficult since they worked different shifts at the museum and Elena always handled babysitting matters. She saw him sometimes, on her post-work strolls through the museum, but they didn't speak. Crystal would often sit in front of exhibit cases, watching children on field trips sketch landscapes or rock samples or their own hands. She would catch David standing on the other side of an exhibit, standing close to the glass. Occasionally he would wave, as if they were sharing a normal, friendly ritual, a wave that Crystal only sometimes returned.

When the first check bounced, Elena explained that a direct deposit had not gone through. It was their mistake. She wrote Crystal a new check, from a different bank, based in another state. This one did go through, although the bank teller gave Crystal a suspicious look, as if she herself were a part of some racket. She hoped Elena would pay her in cash the next time, which she occasionally did.

Then David was arrested for drunk driving, and he and Elena moved to the next city over. Crystal thought that they had probably done it all before, and would do it all again, which was the only real betrayal that she felt as she left their house with one last check in her pocket.

Crystal entirely forgot David and Elena, until four years later around New Year's. There was an article on the front page of the newspaper, about the first baby born in the regional hospital in the year 2000. "The Millenium Baby," they were calling it. And there in the picture was Elena, looking beautiful, without even a fat face, holding her tiny daughter slightly away from her own body. They would like this, the Millenium Baby. Crystal knew it. She tore out the article and stashed it away, maybe as proof of a different kind of existence; though it yellowed in her desk drawer without ever being looked at again.

BEEKEEPING

It is a terrifying thought, that all the bees are dying. Quickly, too. When I think about death I usually think about myself, or my family, or about small neglected kittens drowning in burlap sacks or left mewling in the gutters of the world. But now the bees are dying hive by hive, and no one can explain it. The British call it Vanishing Bee Syndrome. Previous experts called it spring dwindle, or autumn collapse, but these terms were inaccurate because it actually has nothing to do with a particular season. These scientists think they have it all figured out, but they turn out to be completely wrong. Then they have to rename all their phenomena, syndromes, and diseases. This brings me some joy. But as long as the bees are dying I'm having trouble sleeping. I like their colors, the gold and the brown that looks black except for close up, and I've never been stung, not even as a child.

I want to call and warn you. Watch for them, and if you can spot one, follow it for as long as you can, wherever it goes, even if you have to run a little. Also, watch the flowers as they stretch into the light, turn it into food and greenness with their small mechanical processes. Although plants have always seemed to me somewhat distant and annoying, I know that they're important to global ecosystems, and that you have three or four nice ones in your bedroom. When the bees go, the plants go, too. Also, honey. Eat as much as you can.

Albert Einstein said: if the bee disappeared off the face of the earth, then man would only have four years of life left.

I could write you a letter and tell you that, and other things.

We had a joke about beekeepers. Actually, they were their own joke. All that mesh, and those safari hats, and those big tan gloves. What costumes, what a show! And they walked around pouring smoke out of tea kettles onto their wooden boxes, and then there was the man on television who wore bees on his face like a beard. They shuddered on his cheeks and chin, and he smiled at the camera. Know how many times I've been stung, he asked the reporter. We thought it would be zero. That was the build-up. Then he said three hundred and fifty. Even if it was true it was the wrong answer, not particularly amazing and certainly not funny. So we laughed at what we could, which were their outfits, and now I wonder if they are sad to lose all their little bees, or if they are relieved to move on to other things.

Still, it was fun to laugh together.

Experts are particularly worried about apples. Bees pollinate almost all of them. But I worry about all the other insects, whether or not their populations are healthy even if they contribute nothing to the survival of all species. My grandmother used to tell me: every bug is special, every wing is magic, every flower needs a bug to make it grow. Then she told me not to kill them, not even the fireflies which the neighbor boy killed to smear their glowing insides underneath his eyes. I wouldn't have killed them anyway, because I wasn't fast enough to catch them. But he kissed me once, and left a gleaming smear on one of my cheeks.

Einstein said: no more bees, no more pollination, no more plants, no more animals, no more man.

You live two thousand, three hundred and twenty-eight miles away from me. I used to try to count that high while I was falling asleep, to verbalize the impossible farness of it, and to keep from calling too late or at all. Now it makes me hopeful, because maybe things aren't so dire

where you are, bee-speaking. But my father's colleague knows a beekeeper who lives in South Africa, and things aren't looking good. I forget that there are places farther from me than where you are.

Possible reasons include: malnutrition, pesticides, pathogens, poisonous plants, genetically modified crops, and the interruption of secret bee signals by cellular telephone technology. The experts say there are no possible reasons. I wonder how both can be true, and I'd wager that someone has probably lied somewhere down the line.

And there were the other reasons: age, seriousness, time, work, caffeine. So I left bravely, although I felt very sorry for myself while doing so. I thought, maybe if I write an album's worth of songs, or make a witty and detailed comic book, or anything else that might impress you. Maybe if I could be sure we'd only have four years left, though even then there is a high probability that either the bees will not completely disappear, or that Einstein was inaccurate in his ratio of bees to the extinction of mankind.

Bees just can't catch a break, said a scholar from Ohio, while speculating about the effects of the cold weather on the already shrinking bee population of his state. It's a lackluster phrase, catching a break, especially in regards to an apocalyptic global phenomenon, but I would like to hear you say it in your fake Irish accent.

God almighty, said another beekeeper, I had 30,000 dead bees.

His loss makes me feel a little better about mine.

They've turned into nomads, the beekeepers. They take their bees and equipment to geographical locations that seem forgiving, and pray that their personal bees will take to the cherry, or the pear, or the almond. Some bankrupt beekeepers do not have enough money to get

themselves home, said one article, let alone their equipment. I imagine a hoard of sorrowful beekeepers showing up at my door, parched and dejected, and I think of what I would offer them for solace: pillows, lemonade, popcorn, but nothing sweet.

I would have to hide my honey in the back of the cabinet, in case one of them got snoopy. And there are the flower magnets on my refrigerator, which would surely have to go. And my black pants and my yellow shirts which, if accidentally worn together, would conjure up painful memories for the fragile beekeepers. I should probably do this anyway, cleanse my household of these reminders. Anything that helps a little, you'd have to agree.

And the box of things you gave me, and the wondering what to do with it, and if sending it back to you would make you feel just guilty enough, or if I would find it more fulfilling to crash it down a ravine or drop it off a rowboat in the middle of a lake. But there are better things to think about and say.

Then I think about just one beekeeper, having walked two thousand miles on his way back from failure and despair. I think of him leaving his gloves, his kettles, his veils on the road, one by one, as they become too heavy. He would be heading back to where his people are, people much more aggressive and crass than this lone, gentle beekeeper, who has managed to live a slightly finer life for so long. Until his colonies collapsed and his bees started dying, and collected in dead inches in the bottoms of all of his hives.

This is someone who would need someone else, and be willing to tuck himself wherever, fit into any circumstance. And my house would already be combed, cleaned, and rid of anything offensive or provoking of sadness. And I would be careful not to mention the death of the bee, although I would be thinking about it one-hundred percent of the time.

WEIMARANER

The door was locked, so Kathleen had to knock. Jack barely opened it.

“You’re going to hate me for this,” he said.

He was always saying that. Stop doing things that will make me hate you, Kathleen would say. She was already annoyed for having to knock. He knew she was coming and could have easily left it unlocked, and now she was left standing on the porch with a bowl full of biscuits.

He opened the door all the way. With the living room exposed, he gestured with one hand to a dog lying in the middle of the carpet. It was greyish-brown, with a long ghost face. It saw Kathleen, and leapt to its feet and toward the door in one arching motion. She stepped quickly back onto the porch and closed the door behind her. She balanced the red plastic bowl on the porch rail, carefully.

Think, Kathleen said to herself. It’s a dog. What can be done about a dog? She began to wring her hands, a behavior she had adopted because it felt soothing and because she liked its melodramatic and historical implications. Jack opened the door again, and shut the dog inside. He sat beside Kathleen, putting a flat, heavy arm over her shoulders.

“I’m allergic,” she said.

“I know,” Jack said, “but I couldn’t let my aunt put him down. His name is Cooper.”

“Cooper,” she said.

“He’s a Weimaraner.”

Kathleen thought about that. He was the same kind of dog she had seen in calendar pictures, often standing on its hind legs and wearing a detective suit. Also, standing on square

blocks in interesting poses. That either gave him a sad dignity or made him a marketing pawn. She looked toward the living room window. Under the curtain, a dog nose moved.

Jack wanted to leave her, because she behaved in a needy fashion. She knew that she did. One day she said to him, I'm thinking about chopping all of my hair off. He said, sounds like you need some new things to think about. Then it was clear to Kathleen and, despite his numerous shortcomings, she disagreed with his decision not to love her anymore.

You're going to hate me for this, he had once said. Then he told her he was going on a cruise through the Arctic with his ex-fiancée. It's been planned for months, was his excuse. Besides, they were still friends, which Kathleen was encouraged to accept without ill will toward either of them. She had spent the week going to work and cleaning her apartment, as it was impossible to mop and cry at the same time. Then Jack had returned bearing a snow globe with an Eskimo in it. He was very kind to her for several days. It occurred to her that maybe the cruise was originally intended to be his honeymoon.

Jack got Kathleen a glass of water, and tenderly dropped a Benadryl tablet into her palm.

"Try this out," he said. "It might work."

She wondered if she could kill the dog and get away with it. She was smart, and had succeeded both in school and in her employment as an archivist at the Mossberg History Museum. As a young girl she had fantasized about heists: rappelling down a wall to lift a painting, using glass cutters and tactile sensitivity to pluck a diamond out of a case. Kathleen was sure she could map out a decent murder. Even though she detested the dog's presence, she was unhappy at the thought of killing Cooper; but the dander would make her nose itch and her eyes water. And Jack didn't like coming to her place.

Kathleen dropped the glass into the bushes behind her and swallowed the pill without water.

Jack was having a dinner party. That is why Kathleen had made the biscuits. She liked to bake because she found it interesting the way everything worked together: the flour, the water, the heat. How anyone thought to do that in the first place was beyond Kathleen. Sometimes she tried to do a thing for the very first time—invent something, combine two elements that no one else would have thought to put together. A new compound that would make the world cleaner or less difficult, and they could put her name in its name, if only informally. She never could, so she baked instead, and pleased herself with flakiness and roundness and soft white insides.

Jack's friends had liked Kathleen at first. Jack was happy, so they were happy. Brian, his former roommate, even flirted with her. Give me a hug, he'd say, circling his arms around her lower back. Inappropriate, is what Kathleen thought about that, but she did not stop him. Jack's other friends were Bonny and Julia, both bartenders, both kind and slightly hostile when faced with Kathleen's permanence in their social circle. She tried to avoid conversation with them, because she could tell they thought Jack's happiness was an illusion, and that they had seen many girlfriends come and go, some much prettier than Kathleen and more knowledgeable about music and film.

Jack was proud of his house, which he purchased with money he earned by teaching other people business strategies that enabled them to make up to one-hundred thousand dollars a month. It was a one-story Craftsman with a bedroom loft, containing solid walls and large doorframes and thick windows that would be difficult to shatter. Kathleen had noted this the first time she came over, as she scanned for fire exits and places to break out if there were another kind of emergency. Jack had a medieval-sized oak table in the dining room. He showed it off to everyone; that's why he liked to host parties, Kathleen hypothesized.

"The dog's going to chew up your table," Kathleen said, upon reentry.

"Dogs chew bones."

Jack took the bowl of biscuits into the kitchen. Kathleen sat on the living room couch, willing the dog to stay away from her. He stood at the door, quivering. She noticed the severe

curve from his ribs up to his hind legs, and wondered how all his internal organs could fit inside that lean container.

“Then he’s going to scratch up the table trying for food.” Kathleen shouted. “Look at him.”

Cooper had risen onto his hind legs and pressed his paws to the door. He was trying to look out. Maybe he understood that she was not the only invited guest that evening, or maybe he just hoped she wouldn’t be. Jack returned to the living room and perched on an ottoman. Then he slapped his thigh, and Cooper bounded over and rested his strange grey head in Jack’s lap.

“See? Dogs don’t scratch. Cats scratch.”

“You could cover the legs,” Kathleen offered. “My sister’s friend got a cat that climbed up table legs. She had to tie big t-shirts around them so the cat didn’t destroy everything.”

“Dogs don’t have destructive personalities,” Jack said. “Not naturally, anyway.”

Kathleen wondered whether or not her personality was naturally destructive, and hoped to someday establish it as one thing or the other.

They met because a teenage girl had almost been sexually assaulted by an older male, possibly a family member. Both Jack and Kathleen had been called for jury duty. Jack was wearing a suit with no tie, and had round blue eyes that didn’t quite focus on anything. He looked like the pictures of World War I soldiers Kathleen had archived: the Lost Sons of Mossberg, unprepared for trenches and gasses and death. She had slept through her alarm that morning, and wore a black skirt, a striped t-shirt, and mascara that she could feel melting into rings underneath her eyes. It was summer, after all.

Due to the nature of the case, it was necessary for the attorneys to ask the potential jurors about their experience with sexual abuse: whether or not they had any, whether or not their friends, family, or loved ones did. Hands shot up immediately. To Kathleen’s disgust, many of the potentials were eager to share stories of cousins that had been drugged and fondled at college parties, men who had exposed themselves to childhood friends, the stranger down the block

whose house they were forbidden to go inside, even to just play video games. Sensationalists, Kathleen thought. Even if she did have something to say, she wouldn't have told those sensationalists. Jack didn't raise his hand either. He caught her eye and smiled, the corners of his mouth creeping slowly upward.

A criminal action had brought them together. Kathleen thought about this on nights when Jack would not let her come over.

It was Brian and Bonny at the party, as usual. Julia couldn't get off work. Kathleen wished Jack would make some new friends, and then thought that maybe she should make some instead. Still, dinner was good. The foods—roasted chicken, broccoli and cheese casserole, fruit salad—coordinated much more smoothly than at a usual potluck. Everyone complimented Kathleen's biscuits, and she thanked them and drank several glasses of wine and listened to Jack talk to other people. Cooper wove in and out of their legs under the table like a great grey fish just under the surface of the water. Every so often Jack would feed him a shred of chicken. He rubbed against Kathleen's leg. She shuddered.

"Shall we to the living room," Jack suggested after dinner. Kathleen hated when he used his host voice. He pretended it was ironic, but it wasn't. Shall we to the bedroom, he'd say. Then Kathleen would poke him in the gut with her index finger.

Jack sat on the couch next to Bonny, and Kathleen sat in an armchair. Brian sat on the ottoman, and scooted it closer to her. The ceiling fan spun. Kathleen liked to pick one blade and trace its circular path until her eyes were too slow to follow. The five blades looked like fingers, and Kathleen imagined the fan turning into a giant hand and lifting her out the ceiling.

"What do you think of the new house guest?" Brian asked, motioning to Cooper. The dog sat in front of Jack, his grey mouth nearly dripping, expecting more chicken. Kathleen remembered the phrase "put down." He couldn't have Cooper put down.

"I don't understand it at all," Kathleen said.

"Come on. He's just a little doggie."

Brian scooted the ottoman again, in front of her, so he was sitting almost between her legs. Kathleen wondered if Jack had observed his behavior. She looked at Jack, his torso turned toward Bonny so as to better hear what she was saying. From the nouns Kathleen could over hear, they were talking about either a film industry scandal or a blues album, she couldn't tell. Kathleen thought she might be able to unite the conversation if she said something witty.

“How much is that doggie in the window,” she sang.

Jack looked at her. Brian guffawed, and went to get the bottle of wine. The night continued in all the ways Kathleen didn't want.

Jack took Kathleen into the hallway.

“Why don't you go to bed.”

She couldn't focus on him. She closed one eye, and tried to say she wasn't tired.

“Hey, Stinkeye,” he said. “It's fine if you have a crush on Brian. You and I both know this isn't working out.”

He extended a finger and pointed it back and forth. She waved a hand in the air, and then put it to his face.

“Here,” he said. “Go upstairs, and we'll talk about this tomorrow.”

She started up the stairs to the bedroom, then turned to shut off the light. She fell, bouncing and hurting. She got up and fell again. Then she heard running and scratching, and a dog ran past her. She crawled the rest of the way to the bed. The dog had beaten her there.

Kathleen woke in the night. She couldn't breathe through her nose. She felt a weight on her ribs. Jack, she thought. Then she realized it was a paw, and went back to sleep.

Mornings were bright in the loft. Kathleen rolled over. Cooper was there, arched away from her. She reached for a tissue, but there were none. The dog sniffed and moved.

“Dog,” she said.

He raised his head. She pet him between the eyes, then stopped. He slammed a paw on

the pillow in protest. She pet him again, thought about the previous night, and was filled with rage.

She stepped down the stairs slowly, putting pressure on the rail; she was still off-balance, and her hip ached in a deep, slow way. Cooper followed, overtaking her in his rush to the door. Jack, who had fallen asleep on the couch, was now on the floor rolled into a cocoon of blanket. Kathleen squatted down to inspect him. The back of his hair swirled upwards, and he had been drooling on his wrist.

She went to the kitchen door and let Cooper out back. He circumnavigated the yard quickly, his body swaying, stopping randomly to sniff at the fence in spots where other animals had probably marked at one time. Kathleen found the scene grotesque. She went to the knife block and examined the assortment. There were knives for cutting small bites of meat, knives for neatly slicing bread. Kathleen liked classifications, but in truth the same silver knife could carve through a turkey or chop garlic into a fine paste. Finally she chose a thin, serrated blade that was slightly shorter than her forearm.

Jack had not moved. She squatted again, feeling the bruise in her hip stretch and pulse. Then she took the knife and poked him in the shoulder, softly. It bounced back, failing to pierce the skin. She poked him again, slowly, but with more force. The knife's point made a round dent in his skin.

There was a bang. Cooper, having finished his natural dog behavior, had hurled himself against the kitchen door to get back in.

You're going to hate me for this, Jack had once said. I already hate you, Kathleen had replied. She thought about the snow globe, with the chemical flakes swirling around the Eskimo's plastic body, and how all it really meant was that he had gone someplace she couldn't go.

Kathleen let Cooper in. He ran to Jack, sniffed him briefly, then sat at Kathleen's feet. She reached down, finding a soft ear with her fingers. A leash hung on the doorknob. Kathleen checked the dog's collar and found a small brass loop. She picked up the leash and Cooper

responded with a series of small hops.

“Walk,” Kathleen whispered.

Cooper stamped his paws. Kathleen attached the leash, and the dog pulled her forward, toward the door then out it, no time to lock it behind.

It was a lovely morning. The sun shone, and if it hadn't been the dead of winter, birds would have chirped. The ground was hard, and Cooper's paws crunched the grass. An old man raked leaves into a pile. A woman hung wind chimes at the corner of her porch. A cat in a window watched Cooper pass, and Cooper watched a squirrel claw its way up a bare tree. There were many people out walking dogs. They smiled and greeted Kathleen, politely and with great understanding, as the dog pulled the leash and her fingers strained to shaking.

VERSAILLES

I was happy to go with Rayna to her grandparents' lake house. I always wondered what it would be like to have a lake house, and also several other girls from the soccer team had already gotten to go. Her grandparents lived at the lake house part-time; they planted flowers around the porch and kept two boats in the dock. They would let us do anything we wanted, Rayna said. They didn't care at all.

I thought my parents might not let me go, since it was in the Ozarks, six hours away, and Rayna would be driving. We were only sixteen. Rayna's Honda was already ten years old, with questionable reliability. The vacations my family took were usually by airplane, to Epcot Center, or Sea World. I never went to camp. My parents didn't like me to go places alone. But I got good grades and earned their trust, and they had run out of excuses to tell me no.

Rayna was a good driver. She could change a tire if she got a flat. I convinced my parents of this. I had witnessed her jacking up the Honda, removing the screws by kicking the tire iron and then twisting. She put the spare on quickly. No one had taught her how to do this, but she knew. I paid close attention, remembering everything, in case I had to change a tire at some point in the future. I thought that's how Rayna must have learned.

So we were on our way, with the windows down—Rayna's car had no A/C. I had ordered a new bikini from a magazine, which I thought about once the ride turned unbearably hot. The suit was red, with blue piping, and it really fit.

We arrived in the Ozarks feeling faint, because the engine had almost overheated, so

Rayna had to blast the heat from Kansas City all the way down. I kept my eye on the engine gauge, watching it drift toward the point of most redness.

“Don’t worry,” she had said to me. “This is just something it does.”

I imagined us broken down on the side of the road in an unfamiliar and threatening place. Even then, Rayna would have gotten us a ride. She drove with her left foot pressed against the dash, her knee sharply bent.

The lake was in the middle of the woods; I hadn’t pictured it like that. I thought we would see it—vast, mirror-like—stretching along the horizon, promising bountiful summer fun possibilities. No. We drove up, around, through trees and grass that looked and smelled wet, past the areas where three-story mansions lined flat areas of shore. The signs displayed French-sounding towns hiding down the road: Versailles, Lafayette, Fontainebleau. Rayna explained the local way to pronounce these names. I tried them out silently, shifting my tongue without opening my mouth. We turned off at Ver-sayles.

Then Rayna veered down a dirt road before stopping the car. The house was small, but recognizing the objects I had seen in our other friends’ pictures thrilled me a little. The driveway was capped by two stone lions. The roof of the house hung dark and low. And Rayna’s grandmother sat on the porch, smoking a cigarette.

“Grandma, this is Jesse,” Rayna said. “She’s my smartest friend. You’ll like her.”

She bounded up the steps and gave the woman a kiss on the presented cheek. Rayna’s grandmother stubbed out her cigarette and extended a short, thin arm. It was true. I was Rayna’s smartest friend.

She looked exactly like Rayna’s mother, who I had met only a few times despite having spent several weekends at Rayna’s house. Except the grandmother was smaller and more tan. I shook her tiny hand, and she asked me to call her Helen. Then she put that hand on the small of my back, and the other on Rayna’s, and pushed us through the lake house door. I was happy.

“Let’s get right into the water,” Rayna said.

We put our bags in the guest room. I didn’t know how getting right into the water was

supposed to work. I hadn't seen how far it was from the house to the dock. I was unsure if I should go barefoot or wear my sandals, or if other people would be able to see us. I watched Rayna, trying to mimic what she put on: black bikini, cut-off jeans, and flip flops. I realized I had forgotten a towel, and found a thin white one in the guest bathroom. It smelled like smoke.

Rayna looked at me.

"Want to trade swimsuits?" she asked.

And so we did.

It felt good in the water. I always thought I was scared of lakes, with the lurking fish and clinging algae clumps, but this water was cool and didn't smell like chemicals. We swam to the point of exhaustion, backstroking or treading water in a thirty-foot radius from the dock. Any farther out and we could have been hit by a jet-ski. The local kids drove them fast, Rayna told me. She pointed to the house next to her grandparents, also mossy, which shared the driveway.

"Their grandson hangs out a lot in the summer," she said. "He's not like the guys we like, but he's hot."

She told me they had kissed one night. Rayna always seemed to be kissing some outsider, who was usually older, and none of us would likely ever see him. I looked at her floating. She was beautiful, especially in the summer when her compact body became perfectly tanned without her even trying. In the summer her eyes looked even more green, and her hair went wavy from the humidity, and she didn't try to straighten it. I had just gotten my braces off, but was not receiving the attention that I had been hoping for. I ran my tongue over my newly smooth teeth.

"His name is Chris. Maybe he'll come out tonight, and we can do something when my grandparents go to bed. We can probably drink some beer with him."

I had heard stories about kids who got drunk out on the lake and exploded their boats or drowned. But the other girls got drunk, sometimes at Rayna's house and when they came down to the lake, and nothing like any of it usually happened to me.

"Let's go inside," Rayna said.

My arms felt weak. I scraped my shin while pulling myself back onto the dock. We went inside, starving from being in the water so long, and ate mango slices right out of the jar, not caring that they dripped sugar on the kitchen floor.

“Rayna!” her grandfather yelled. “Where’s my sweet Rayna?”

He had come into town with a trunk full of groceries. He was not Rayna’s actual grandfather, and had been married to her grandmother for only five years. It seemed like a small amount of time for people their age.

“He’s kind of sexist,” Rayna had told me, “but he’ll like you anyway.”

He set the grocery bags on the counter. He wore suspenders, and had a round stomach and a large nose. He was pretty much the opposite of Rayna’s grandmother. I wondered which one of them had purchased the mango slices.

“This is Jesse,” Rayna said.

He tilted down his glasses and looked at me from over the top.

“Well, look at Elvira,” he shouted.

I still had my swimsuit on and, being with Rayna, I had forgotten about my paleness. My long hair had gone dark from the wetness.

“I’m not a vampire,” I said, and he laughed.

“Well, you girls leave on them little swimsuits and run down to Mrs. Bonifeld’s. I have a coffee cake in the kitchen for her.”

Rayna’s grandmother entered the room.

“Don’t make them go in their swimsuits,” she said.

He hooted. Rayna grabbed my elbow. We went to the guestroom to shower and change.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “He can’t make us do anything we don’t want to do.”

We took showers and looked at magazines until dinner. Rayna’s grandparents were taking us out. My parents sent me with forty dollars and told me to offer to pay for myself, but Rayna’s grandmother was rich. I hadn’t told them that. Rayna said: my grandmother is rich, but my

grandfather won't let her spend any of her money on the things she wants to.

"What does she want?" I asked.

"A new boat. Did you see those old ones at the dock?"

One was a speedboat with a turquoise bottom. I didn't know what to call the other, except that it looked like a cartoon tugboat. I pictured Rayna's grandfather standing at the front, wearing his suspenders and an old captain's hat. These were not the boats I had anticipated.

"The speedboat is OK," Rayna said. "If Chris is home tomorrow he can drive us while we waterski."

The magazines we read were old, left by other girls on previous visits. The actresses' haircuts were out of style, and the perfume samples smelled like old letters.

I wore a skirt to dinner, and so did Rayna. The restaurant was trying to be fancy, she told me, since it was the only steakhouse in town. Rayna's grandparents did not dress up. Her grandfather drove us in his conversion van. We sat in the very back and he seemed far away, wrenching the van around the twists and turns of the lake's small roads. Rayna's grandmother sat in the front seat, buckled in.

"Maybe we can get something to drink with dinner," Rayna whispered.

I nodded. She pointed out the window.

"My mother use to date the guy whose family lives there," she said. "Then they went to college and she dumped him."

I did not know things like that about my parents. I liked when Rayna told me about her life, and was jealous of the things she knew. My shin still stung where I had scraped it on the dock. I scratched it.

The restaurant looked like a log cabin, perched on the lake, which was beautiful. I liked the lights of the boats on the water: red, blue, and gold. We didn't get a table outside, but Rayna and I sat so we could see out the window. Her grandmother ordered some rolls.

"Rayna's going to a good college," her grandfather said. "Did you know that?"

I told him we were all going to good colleges.

“Yes, she’s sure going to college. And we’re probably going to have to pay for it.”

Rayna’s grandmother put her hand on his forearm and shook her head. He put his enormous hand on hers. I picked at a thread on my skirt, and the waitress returned with the rolls. Rayna’s grandmother ordered a Miller Light.

Rayna and I went to the bathroom, weaving our way between other people’s tables. Some of the men watched Rayna, I think, even though my skirt was shorter. There was only a bathroom for one, so we went in together, and looked closely at our faces in the mirror.

“My nose got pink,” I said.

Rayna confirmed this.

“I have some new freckles,” she said. “Look.”

She pointed to the bridge of her nose. Then she opened a purse and took out a square of aluminum foil, with pills wrapped inside.

“Take one of these,” she offered. “They’re my mother’s. Muscle relaxers. Did you see that waitress? We won’t be able to drink tonight.”

She put one in my palm. I was not expecting this kind of decision. At least a doctor had originally prescribed it to someone. I swallowed it, and then washed my hands for a long time.

When we got back to the table, Rayna’s grandmother was smoking. Rayna’s grandfather was finishing the Miller Light. I felt like I was in a different country. The conversations at tables around me rose, fell, and ran together. I drank my water quickly, and reached for a roll; but instead of eating it, I tore off a small piece and rolled it between my fingers, under the table.

“Grandma, I want you to get a new boat,” Rayna said.

Her grandfather raised his eyebrows.

“Sell that old one you have. I’m sure someone would want it, like a collector, to fix it up. Then get us a new speedboat. That other boat is OK, but too slow for water skiing.”

“If I get a boat, will you come visit more?” her grandmother asked.

We laughed, and I tilted a little in my chair.

“She comes all the time,” Rayna’s grandfather said. “With her pretty friends.”

At first I did not like this. Then I thought he probably meant me, too. I set the balled-up roll on the edge of my plate, and unrolled my silverware from the napkin.

“Don’t say things like that,” Rayna said.

The waitress came to take our orders. Rayna’s grandparents got steaks, and Rayna wanted a salad. I asked for a grilled cheese, and felt like a child. Rayna’s grandmother ordered another beer. Rayna hit my leg.

“See if she even gets to drink it,” she whispered.

We ate and talked, or I listened to Rayna’s grandparents talk. They talked about money. My parents never talked about money. I didn’t know anyone who did. Rayna’s grandfather said he’d get her a jet-ski, but Rayna thought they were stupid. The lights went blurry along the surface of the lake, and my sandwich tasted good. Rayna’s grandmother was telling someone not to get angry. I finished half my sandwich, and all the mashed potatoes, then closed my eyes. When I opened them, Rayna’s grandmother was crying.

“Grandma,” Rayna said, and took her to the bathroom.

I didn’t want to be alone with Rayna’s grandfather. I stared at my sandwich, thinking maybe I could finish it and he would just leave me alone.

“So you’re going to college,” he said.

“Yes.”

I hoped that would be the end of it. He looked at me, squinting, and finished the second Miller Light. Then he put it down and sawed at what was left of his steak. I was a little relieved. But then I thought he might not have stopped if I were one of Rayna’s prettier friends. I put my hand up to my warm forehead. I thought about going home, and felt a little better. When Rayna’s grandfather drove us all home, careening down the tiny roads, I was exhausted but not scared.

Chris, the neighbor, did come out the next day. He was hot like Rayna had said. We went water skiing, since Rayna had promised to teach me. She strapped me into the life jacket, and

tightened the rubber skis around my feet. She told me what to do: wait until I felt the rope pull, then push my legs out, keeping them tight. She said I wouldn't get up the first few times, but once I did, I wouldn't have trouble doing it again. Chris nodded, and said he'd drive the boat fast to make it easier.

The first time I fell forward, smashing my face into the water. One ski fell off. I swam to it, then put it back on my foot. It took too long. I tried to smile at Rayna, who gave me a thumbs-up sign from the back of the boat.

The second time I pressed as hard as I could with my legs. The rope jerked my arms. The water rushed against my feet, but I still fell forward. And the third time and the fourth and the fifth. My face stung, and both skis had fallen off again. Rayna pulled me back into the boat, and I sat next to Chris, holding my breath so I wouldn't cry.

Then Rayna skied. She shot right up, riding in the wake for thirty seconds, a minute. I thought she would fall, but she didn't.

"This boat is pretty slow," Chris said. "You have to be really good."

Rayna was smiling. I moved to the back of the boat to watch, kneeling on the rear seat. The mist felt good on my arms and hands. Rayna skied the surface of the lake for exactly as long as she wanted before letting go and sliding into the water.

We ate a last "family lunch" before heading home. Rayna's grandmother fixed us all ham sandwiches, and Rayna's grandfather complimented her on the preparation, the choice of bread, the yellow mustard. I wasn't hungry. I was nervous about eating together, in case there was going to be another scene—though everyone seemed happier than they had the day before, except for me. Rayna's grandmother even got to finish all of her Miller Light.

"Jesse tried really hard on the skis," Rayna said, eventually. "She almost got up."

"I wasn't even close," I said.

Rayna's grandfather guffawed.

"Our little gal is a wiz out there," he said, patting Rayna's arm.

“The boat was pretty slow, though,” Rayna said.

“Nonsense.”

“It’s true,” Rayna said, looking at me for verification. “Tell them how much harder it was for you with that old boat.”

I confirmed this, happy to blame my failure on something other than myself.

“Grandma wants one anyway,” Rayna said.

I put my sandwich down, waiting for a commotion. But there was none. Rayna’s grandparents nodded at each other, as if something had been decided.

“We’ll get you girls a new boat soon,” Rayna’s grandfather said. He put his plate in the sink, and went for a beer. “Just bring your little friend back,” he shouted, leaving the room.

I looked at Rayna, expecting her to shake her head or whisper something sarcastic. Instead, she was smiling. She lifted her eyebrows at me, asking me if I would come back, I could tell. And I answered yes with my own eyebrows, without meaning to and knowing it wasn’t true.

THE CARPENTER'S SHOP

In my town, one evening last summer, a man killed his wife. Their children, a boy and a girl, heard a struggle. First the children lied about it, and then they testified to the judge. They were sent to live with relatives they might or might not have loved, I guessed, since I had relatives of both kinds in my own family. The trial involved another woman. The trial involved pornography, which had to be explained to some of the younger children in the neighborhood. He had been a church-going man and a carpenter, and I wondered if he could still consider himself to be both, but all we knew was what the newspapers said from the trial reports and the interviews with witnesses and members of the community.

I walked past their house on the way to school. Before, I liked to look at it—Richard Reynolds, the man, had built a boat in the yard, with a smooth, shallow hull and a cross where the mast should have been. There was no sail. The grass grew long against the sides of the boat, where the lawnmower couldn't reach. I had seen commercials for electric yard tools that would help you mow in the places that the lawnmower couldn't reach, but I thought maybe they didn't have a television since there were other things about them that were different.

My friend lived next door to the house with the boat in the front yard. That summer, she called to tell me what had happened. He poisoned her, is what she said. Everyone in the neighborhood knows. Then she had cautioned me not to tell a soul, because it wasn't really our business and could interfere with the investigation. But this was misinformation and, although I did not blame her specifically for the circulation of this rumor, I still distrusted her for the next few days.

Richard Reynolds' workshop was on the side of the house. I imagined the way it might

smell: like sawdust, varnish, the making of boats. I imagined these things while walking past, slowly, and I tried to peek into the windows of the house. The furniture had been removed. On the side door he had painted *The Carpenter's Shop* in thin, slanted letters. And then there was the boat, and then the lighthouse he had built to go with it.

I worked at my father's shoe repair. He could fix anything, from a broken heel to a cracked sole. That's what the ads said. I liked the ads that mentioned all the things he could fix, and was proud when I saw them in the newspaper. My father's shop smelled like varnish too, but like leather, not wood. Sometimes I tried to imagine my father doing something terrible; he was nice to people and could build and fix things, but you never really know about anyone. That's what people were saying at the time. Then I would feel bad for thinking these things, and would go to hug him, or tidy up an area in the house or shop.

One day a man came in to drop off a pair of loafers. "Richard Reynolds," he said. I looked up his account in our record book. Usually I had the customers memorized, but he seemed new. I recognized his name but not his face. "On Delaware Street?" I said. "No," he said, "that's the other Richard Reynolds. The one who killed his wife."

I stopped looking. Of course that was the name. Things were different when I was at work than when I was walking around outside, and he had caught me not on my toes. I was embarrassed, but he was still standing at the counter. I tried to think of something to do.

"It's OK," the second Richard Reynolds said, and he shrugged a few times. "Incidentally, I'm running for City Commission. Having to go door to door, but it's not going so well. People aren't always so nice."

It wasn't working, and so the second Richard Reynolds was going to drop out of the race, he told me. People still thought he lived in the house with the front yard boat, mistook him for the other Richard Reynolds. For instance, me.

"Maybe if my wife went with me," he said. "But she won't."

"Do you have any children?" I asked.

He didn't have any. That wouldn't help. People only liked to vote for other people with children. He put the loafers on the counter and reached for his wallet.

"You can pay when you pick them up," I told him. "It's okay."

The nightly news that my parents watched ran controversial sketches of witnesses. The newspapers talked about secret desires, hidden from the wife, from the children, from the church. About extramarital affairs, and about the medical details of asphyxiation. It was not really appropriate information for the younger children to read, but no one took the newspapers away or hid them. People felt free to comment, to give their explanations and opinions. I didn't like it, how everyone was so interested, but because I walked down Delaware Street on the way to school, and tried to peek into the windows of The Carpetnter's Shop, I was one of them.

I thought of the second Richard Reynolds. He seemed like he would be a good city commissioner. He might even compliment my father's shoe shop on the news. Then I had a pretty good idea that there was something I could do to help everyone.

Thankfully, I was working when Richard Reynolds came to pick up his loafers. He smiled right away, before I even said anything. I went to get his shoes.

"We did our best," I told him.

"That's all a person can do," he said. He paid for the shoes and turned to go.

"Mr. Reynolds," I said, stopping him. "I think I could help with your campaign. I mean, I would like to help."

"Would you like to make some phone calls?" he asked. "I can always use some community volunteers."

"I think it's best if I go door to door."

What I meant was, they might think I was his kid, and if they could see I wasn't afraid of him, or in state custody, they would know he was a different Richard Reynolds who deserved to be on the City Commission. I think the second Richard Reynolds knew this. He accepted my

offer to help, and asked me to meet him at his house on Tuesday, after school, if my parents said it was fine. But I was too excited to even ask.

The second Richard Reynolds' wife poured me an orange pop in a green-tinted cup. It looked pretty ugly, but was still nice of her, and she didn't seem like a naturally nice person. She brought it to me in the living room, and then did a head motion to say that Richard should follow her back into the kitchen. I looked around their house. It smelled like cinnamon, and they had a pilgrim statue and some Indian corn on top of the TV even though it wasn't November yet.

Mrs. Reynolds sounded mad, which I could tell because she was talking to him in a loud whisper that I could hear in the next room. She wanted to know why I was helping, I think. He whispered back, but his was soft so I could tell he was calm and I shouldn't worry. He came back into the living room alone.

"Ready to hit the road?" he said.

I wasn't done with my pop, but I said I was ready. I set the glass back down on a cream-colored doily. I didn't know what else to do with it.

"What do you think of these?" Richard asked, holding out a stack of leaflets. They were printed on violet paper, which wouldn't have been my choice, but his name looked good and there was a nice picture of him standing by a tree. The leaflet stated that, if elected, Richard Reynolds would focus on responsible growth and opening government up to the civilians, like with newsletters. These sounded like good ideas to me.

"I think they're great," I said. "Let's hit the road."

What I realized when I started knocking on doors was that most people aren't home at four-thirty in the afternoon, and the people who are home are mostly old and look out the corner of the window and don't come to the door. And the people who do come to the door want to talk for so long that you're basically wasting fifteen minutes, which is not a very time-effective strategy. But we passed out the leaflets anyway, sticking them between screen doors and doorframes. The violet color looked nice like that.

We talked to one old man who asked if we were father and daughter. I looked at Richard Reynolds.

“No sir,” he said, “this is just a young lady in high school who wants to get more involved in her community.”

“That’s right,” I said, sounding jolly.

“And this is you?” the old man said, pointing to the leaflet. “Richard Reynolds?”

“That’s right,” Richard Reynolds said.

The old man put his hand to his head, then excused himself. We heard the bolt turning as he shut the door. It wasn’t going well.

“Maybe we should split up,” I suggested. Richard Reynolds didn’t look convinced, but he agreed.

The people were nice to me when I was alone. A younger woman offered me some cookies, but I told her I was on the job. She took a leaflet, and then asked for some more to give her friends. But one of them would see the name and get confused, I had a feeling. And then this woman would think about the young girl on the stoop and be sad. I looked across the street. The second Richard Reynolds was much further down, which meant that no one had even opened the door to him. Then I looked down the block, and to the end of the street, and saw how many houses there were and that we couldn’t get to them all. And at the end of the block, a lighthouse that I wanted to knock down all of a sudden.

When I went home, my parents were watching the news as usual. They didn’t even ask me where I had been. Apparently, the first Richard Reynolds had fallen in love with a woman from church. She had visited him in jail. She was able to comfort him, because she knew him and his wife, and also the woman he was having an affair with, so she was really very knowledgeable about the whole situation. The newscaster said that they would be getting married in a few days. I didn’t think such horrible people should be allowed to get married again, but I guessed it wouldn’t be like a real marriage because, mainly, he was still in prison and she couldn’t exactly

move into his cell.

I asked the second Richard Reynolds about this when I went to his house the next day.

“I mostly take pity on the woman,” he said. “But you can’t control the insanity of other people.”

This made sense to me. I took pity on the second Richard Reynolds. We had agreed that it wasn’t doing much good, the going door to door. He was probably going to lose the election. There was nothing I could do about it. I asked him if he was going to drop out after all.

“I think we should just let the people decide,” he said. “I think that’s all we can give them.”

“You’re right,” I said, but I wasn’t sure.

“I think you’re going to be a really good citizen. You’re showing a great deal of pride in your civic duty.”

I wondered why he was talking like a teacher all of a sudden, but you can’t really understand all people all of the time. I swung around my backpack and gave him the leaflets I was still carrying around. I had handed most of them out, which I hope he realized. He said I should keep them as a souvenir, but I didn’t want to, so I threw them away after I had walked so far that I was sure he couldn’t see me.

The house is for sale. I see the plastic flags around the door, and the sign in the front yard. I walk past, slowly, and try to peek into the windows. I am sorry for this, that I still want to look after everything. But it will be good if the house sells. The children will get some money in a special bank account, for one thing. New people in the neighborhood would be something to talk about. The long-time residents would have barbecues and invite them over, especially if the new people had children. And maybe the new people would tear down the lighthouse, and sell the boat. The house would look so different that no one would even notice it. Or maybe they would keep the boat, and the lighthouse, and everyone would finally forget who had built them in the first place.

STRANGE AND LOVELY OBJECTS

My father was married twice: once to a Bosnian belly dancer named Vedrana, and once to my mother, because Vedrana died. I was supposed to be named Vedrana but my mother wouldn't go for it. Instead they named me Sara, because everyone would think it was normal and American, like Karen, my mother's name; only my father would know it was pronounced the Croatian way, with a swiftly rolled tongue in the middle, although even he was several generations removed. I preferred it the Croatian way. In that way, in many ways, I was no child of my mother's; I devoted my entire imagination to the beautiful woman who had driven herself off a bridge three years before I was born.

When I was young, I wanted to be a spy. The other girls wanted to be princesses, or mermaids, or sometimes mommies. Not me. I snuck around the house, seeing how close I could get to my parents without detection. My mother, hunched over the phone book at the kitchen table, would startle when she felt my sudden breath on her elbow. It made me laugh. Sometimes she would laugh, too, taking a large sip of her scotch and pretending to rip the phonebook in half. But not usually. My father never heard me, but because he had plunged himself deeply in the world of foreign texts, translating Eastern European folk tales into English. Sometimes I stood behind his desk chair and twirled one finger, softly, in his hair, until he reached up and scratched obliviously, very close to my face.

I was more than a spy; I was invisible. That's how I found the trunks in the attic, full of costumes and pictures of the woman who was prettier than my mother and had made my father happier, I could tell.

They always fought when I was asleep, but how could I sleep? I would creep to the

landing, slowly, digging my heels into the back edge of the wooden stairs. I had read in a book that they wouldn't creak if I walked like that, and I was light enough anyway. I held the banister with both hands, pushing up, looking down. My mother was usually on the floor, legs tucked underneath her body, shrieking at my father. One time, though, he was the one yelling, and she reached under her floor pillow and pulled out a Polaroid camera. Then she took his picture, flash after flash, and arranged the developing squares on the floor in front of her. He stood behind her, and watched himself emerge from the void.

It must have been difficult for them to get divorced; my mother loved my father, and my father hated to be alone. Still.

Our house is a beautiful house—heavy but with a well-divided allotment of spaces—except that my mother collects. She has filled the living room with antique couches, the dark wood and velvet piled with pillows and old travel books and seashells that leave their disintegrations in the cracks between cushions. Armoires loom in the corners and, inside, their contents spill over and press against each other. Pages stick. Photographs attach themselves to others at the corners. I pretend they are flipbooks with irregular images and unorthodox storytelling patterns.

I am of the belief that, since my father moved out, my mother has doubled her possessions. When I was a child I liked to look at all these things, but I am not young enough for that anymore.

My mother appreciates that I do well in school, and attributes this to the high volume of books she has kept in the house, at my disposal. It is true that she read to me. She would hold me on her lap, and let me turn the pages, and sometimes she would cry if the story made her emotional. It's okay, she told me. It's better to feel these things than to keep them in. What part makes you the saddest, she would ask, and I would point to a lost dog, or a fish that had jumped out of its bowl, or a girl who had skinned her knee. Good, my mother would say, I can tell you're really *feeling*.

Last week I changed rooms. I excavated one of the four bedrooms on the second floor, and injured myself several times in the process. There are now small, hard bumps under the surface of my knee where I drove it into the corner of a claw-footed coffee table, and I don't think they are going away.

My father's house is under construction and, him being the architect, contractor, and primary labor man, no one ventures to guess when the project will see its completion. He plans to tile all the first story counters and floors, which are currently made of wood. He wants to erect a wrap-around porch, and rebuild the upstairs completely. He has drawings of these projects in a graph paper notebook. He has measurements, crossed out and written over again. Essentially those are the steps I'm going to take, he says. Essentially, he says.

His house has a wood-burning stove in the middle. The large black pipe snakes into the wall. It makes me feel like I am a poor, wanting girl, who lives in a country where the people burn money in their stoves because their currency no longer has any value. These people would have black teeth, and would keep meager quantities of grain and seed in tin cans. My father nailed wooden boards around the chimney opening, to keep the hot air in and the smoke out. He chops the wood in sloppy chunks. It is not beautiful.

Because my mother's bedroom is the first floor breakfast nook, I have to be quiet in the kitchen. But I can have a friend or two over, and stick to the upstairs, and she'll never know. This is what I do on the weekends. We usually steal some Crown Royal or Franzia that my mother has forgotten underneath a coat or an afghan. I use nice glasses. We drink and look at pictures of family vacations I used to take. There was a time when I got drunk and kissed one of the girls in the bathroom, but it was not a big deal.

My friends are all skinny, and play soccer, and have tan lines in the summer. Their parents drive them to my house reluctantly, although they recognize that I am a nice, good kid. The daughters want to be edgy, though. They like the fact that, when they come over, they get to

hide a little, and they don't complain that the house smells like cat urine because at one point my mother had seventeen kittens tucked into cardboard boxes to keep them warm.

But the best part—in the attic, Vedrana's trunks. My father can't take them because his closets are filled with his own normal things and he has not finished building himself the ideal upstairs. He might secretly know that I like the trunks, and so he leaves them, which I think about sometimes when I want to love him more.

Her costumes are both beautiful and slutty. Most of them involve skirts with long slits up the legs, with metallic threads woven in swirling patterns into the panels of fabric. Then there are the metal pieces: bras made of gold medallions fused together, and chain link skirts. I think about how spectacular my father must have thought she was, an intelligent woman dressed like that.

I used to try on the skirts, ashamed when they pooled at my feet because there were no hips for them to cling to. I used to feel how cold the metal was against my chest, and wonder how anyone could dance when it felt like that.

My mother never mentioned the trunks. I don't think she even knew they were there, nestled among my father's belongings from the life he lived before us.

The problem is this: my father has gone to Japan to find a new wife, because the women there appreciate his academic conquests and his general disposition more than do the women in America. This makes my mother drink, more. He calls to talk to me, and she listens in on an extension. Of course, I have tried to unplug all the phones but one, except that she has hidden several in closets and under piles and piles and piles of other things.

They view me as important here, he tells me. I am a scholar. They call me professor, like doctor, because that is what they care about here.

I'm happy for you, I say.

I hear my mother breathing over the extension. I can tell it is her because her nose whistles.

My father tells me that he has three prospects. But the one he likes the best is not sure. He has agreed to fly her to the USA for a visit, and has given her a two month trial period so she can see if she meets someone she might like more.

My mother storms out of her nook. Hang it up, she says, and I say a polite goodbye and put down the receiver.

You approve of this, she says, not quite asking.

No, I say, but maybe if he has someone in his life he'll finish the house. Then he can get all his stuff out of here, and we can use the attic again. We can clean up.

Stuff, my mother says.

She eyeballs me, like I know something. I try to appear supportive, and skeptical of my father's romantic prospects. Her glasses are thick, and her hair billows out behind her ears. She smokes too many cigarettes. Her whole head has a yellowish sheen. I think of Vedrana, and I smile at my mother, but I am not really feeling.

My mother whirls, then disappears.

They took me to Croatia for my eighth birthday. I hadn't expected the beaches. Our hotel looked like a cereal box, but it was close to the water, and on the street one day there was a parade in which lines of nude men marched with signs covering their crotches. My father was proud to expose me to such a rich culture, and my mother hadn't yet developed her reservations.

At the shore, I pulled out the weeds that grew up from the sand. I put lovely stones in a bucket. When I got in the water I could see my feet clear down on the bottom, because the sea was clear and my mother had painted my toenails orange.

She wore a swimsuit with one of my father's shirts buttoned over it as a cover up. My father wore a short swimming suit, and still appeared golden and mildly athletic. We have pictures.

I move Vedrana's trunks to my father's porch by myself. Even though his house is not

far, the trunks are heavy and the work takes all day. One is missing. I could ask my mother, but I don't. I cover the trunks with a tarp so they will not be damaged by rain or dew or outdoor animals. The porch only wraps halfway around my father's house. I sit on the floor even though the boards splinter and gap. It is not the first cool night we've seen, but it is one of the first.

I think about my father in Japan, about whether or not I want him to find an appropriate mate. Someone should. And I would be lying if I said I didn't think about a beautiful new woman with a spicy yet established occupation, with trunks full of strange and lovely objects to hide in my attic once she dies or leaves—objects for me to fit against my skin or turn over in my hands, and objects for my mother to destroy.

RESERVOIR

I see her at a bar, with a girl I know but who isn't my friend. It is spring, at the very beginning when most people are still wearing versions of winter clothes. Like a grey sweater but without a coat, and only maybe a scarf. But this girl, with the girl I kind of know, is optimistically dressed for summer. She has on some light tan pants, and a brown shirt with short, ruffled sleeves. Her hair is in a braid that starts at the back of her head and hangs across one shoulder. It is long and thick, unlike my hair, of course. And this becomes a time in my life when I decide to become someone else.

Like the first time, in junior high, when April and I traded clothes to prove that since we so were the same size of person, we were also great friends. She came to my school from another one, because her boyfriend got her pregnant, according to everyone. I had met her before, just a little. She sat next to me in a class. She wanted to talk to me. She selected me out of all the girls in the class, which was surprising.

"I was hoping we would be friends when I came to your school," she told me.

"Why?" I said.

"Because I always thought we could end up being alike," she said.

So we traded clothes, and even though several pairs of her jeans were too tight on me, I liked the tank tops a lot. Some people noticed, and gave us strange looks, which made us laugh quietly and exclusively. April would roll her eyes, and then, later, I would roll my eyes. She lived across town from me, of course, since she had originally gone to the other school, but my mother didn't mind driving me over to April's house on the weekends. She was glad that I had a nice

friend. And gas wasn't as expensive then.

April would sometimes need to take a shower all of a sudden. She wasn't modest. She was the opposite. She would sometimes complain that her boobs, which were bigger than mine, were sore.

"Sometimes I just have to hold them up, like this," she would say, "after a long day."

I would try not to look, until I realized I was actually supposed to.

It's fair to say that April and I were best friends for a while. We got a summer babysitting job together—an older girl and two twin babies. And when the girl was away and the babies were asleep, April and I were allowed to try a little wine. April told me that she and the mother had an understanding, as long as it wasn't too much. I liked drinking wine in the afternoon wearing someone else's outfits. I did like that.

My fiancé is named Jeff. He is my first fiancé, but I am his third, which I don't love but it doesn't make me nervous either. Like it does with my mother. My mother has come to believe I might not be the best judge of character, so she says. When I met Jeff I had blue hair, but only for a week, and then I decided to be another person. Then he asked me to go on a date.

But now, when I tell him I am growing out my hair, he scowls at me.

"What for?" he says.

"Just a different look," I say.

"I like the way you look now," he says.

When he realizes that this does not really matter to me, he stands up. He picks up whatever is nearest to throw, which unfortunately for him is a small beach ball I got for free at a career fair. It has the name of a law firm on it. It goes a short distance, catches the air from the vent, and ends up closer to him than before, actually. He is still furious. I look away from him, at my reflection in the window, at the place where my long braid will be.

Jeff makes breakfast the next day: bagels that he bought fresh, not out of the quarter bin.

This is to show he is not mad and is sorry for throwing the beach ball. Mine is an everything bagel, which is my favorite even though they give me onion breath and the poppy seeds stick between my teeth. I just have the kind of teeth things seem to stick between. And then Jeff says he will take me shopping, if I want.

“At the sports store?” I say. Jeff likes to take me there. He likes when I wear athletic clothes because I am athletically built and he is sports-oriented. He didn’t like when I wore black dresses and had blue hair.

“No, anywhere,” he says.

I tell Jeff what store I want to go to. I think it’s the same store where the girl in the bar probably got her outfit since, though I haven’t seen her there, I have seen the girl she was with carrying a big teal shopping bag. Those are the bags they have at this store, and I tell him the name.

When we get there I see that I am probably right, since they have a whole display of tan pants very close to the front of the store.

“They’re popular for this season,” a saleswoman says. She looks like the type who wears only skirts, but she probably still knows better than I do.

“Do you have any without this waist string?” I say.

“The drawstring? Let me see.”

She does not have any without the drawstring, which is a hitch in my plan. I decide to try on the closest approximation. A close approximation is sometimes the best anyone can do. And when I try them on, they fit pretty well, so I decide to buy them. The brown shirt with the ruffled sleeves is in stock, so I buy it, too. And then I wait.

The weather is almost hot. My new outfit is folded neatly on a special shelf in my closet. My hair is thicker and longer now, partially due to the prenatal vitamins I bought at the health food store where Jeff gets his smoothie powders. I snuck the vitamins into the basket, and then tore off the label when we got home. “Must have come off in the bag,” I said, and he agreed. I

tugged on my new hair, just softly.

“I’m going to meet a friend tonight,” I tell Jeff.

He is making a smoothie. I accidentally say it when he presses the blender button, and he can’t hear me over the noise of liquefying fruit. I don’t have the energy to say it again, which would mean shouting. So I vacuum the house in order to make my own noise, and tell him again over dinner.

“I’m meeting a friend tonight,” I say.

“What friend?” he says.

This is something I haven’t thought out.

“A girl from my pottery class.”

Unfortunately for me, I had the pottery class six months ago and never mentioned a friend. I worry this might come up.

“That’s cool,” Jeff says, after only a few seconds of thinking. “I’m going to trivia tonight anyway. At least you’ll have something to do.”

Then it is happening: I am putting on the new outfit, and going to the mirror to braid my hair. The three strands cross each other easily. The pants fit well. I am better than a close approximation. I am my own idea of something else.

The thing was, April invited me over one day and then locked herself in the bathroom and ate a bottle of aspirin.

And then her father was calling me. He talked for a minute about how April was going to be fine, and was getting stronger, and that they were bringing her vegetarian food in the hospital, because that was important to her. I had seen her eat a turkey sandwich the week before, but I didn’t tell him. Finally he got to the point.

“You can tell me if you know why she did this,” he said. “Even if it’s that I’m the worst dad in the world.”

I didn’t say anything. He tried again.

“If you know, you have to tell me.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

Because it was probably a lot of reasons. He was probably one of them, but the others had happened a long time ago, in a time when I didn’t even know her at all. When there weren’t even rumors to hear. I gave her clothes back the next day, surprised at how easily my own clothes fit again, how they didn’t even look different or smell like her, how she had discarded that version of herself so easily and with so much success.

I am ready to be seen. I sit down at the bar and order a drink. A gin and tonic. That sounds like the right thing, like summer, which has arrived. The bar is slow. It is actually empty, except for me and the bartender, at the moment. But the setting sun is shining through the window, and the door is open a crack to let in the fresh air, and more people will surely arrive as time moves forward. And tonight I look really nice.