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Talk Me Down: A Selection of Short Stories

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Katie Elyce Freeman entitled "Talk Me Down: A Selection of Short Stories." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Margaret Lazarus Dean, Allen Wier

Accepted for the Council:
Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Talk Me Down: A Selection of Short Stories

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Katie Elyce Freeman
May 2012

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DEDICATION

To my parents
for the love and means

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Michael Knight, Margaret Lazarus Dean and Allen Wier, three esteemed authors who have been kind enough to discuss my stories eagerly and honestly. Without their guidance and the advice of my brilliant peers, this collection of stories would still be a notebook of scattered ideas. Thanks to Jessica Weintraub and Mark Littmann for encouraging me to continue my higher education and helping me when I could not help myself. I would also like to thank the University of Tennessee, Department of English for welcoming an outsider into their rich and complex world.

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ABSTRACT

In *Talk Me Down*, Katie Freeman offers a selection of short stories that follows young characters in their pursuit for self-satisfaction. At times her characters are uncertain of their talents, at times wracked with guilt over immature mistakes; but their highly detailed, sensory worlds often deliver a needed coincidence, a sliver of light to lead their way.

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I. Introduction

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We finally stored all of my childhood belongings in the attic. My parents dutifully kept my room as I left it for six years, but no one can exist in two places for very long. Along with my old posters and bedroom decorations, we had to go through all the books. Tossing the books I've read in the last twenty-four years into boxes was like Tom Sawyer witnessing his own funeral from the rafters. There were the dark mysteries, including Alice Hoffman's *The River King* and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* and *The Little Friend*. When I was fifteen, Tartt's recreation of a classical Greek tragedy at a small, northeastern college made me decide to take Latin in high school. The Latin class was not a practical choice, but my classics teacher's obsession with Waterford crystal would later resurface in one of my own undergraduate short stories. My older brother's set of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy was still stashed in the back of my closet, where I smuggled away the beautiful, fresh books not long after he brought them into the house. My primary literary critique in high school was "I don't want to spend two pages getting from one tree in the forest to another tree in the forest *like Tolkien*." I may have inherited this attention to detail from him, despite my efforts.

A copy of Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone* was concealed in a scrapbooking kit. I was appalled by the language and sexual content in high school but couldn't yet part with his young, female narrator who delivered details with a dry wit that I so envied. There were all the history and theology books I ferreted away from my brother and the books on architecture and outer space I bought myself. Cards of song lyrics and Bible verses fell out of several of these books. With a pang of embarrassment, I found the hardbound *Poetry.com* book that includes two amateur poems of mine; both of them fumble with a desperate desire to simply write things

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people will like. They explain my current aversion to words like “entrance” and “elation” and using surface reflections as a narrative device — oh wait, I did that in this collection, too.

In short, I excavated my creative impulses and discovered, with relief, they are not difficult to deconstruct. I typically feel awkward discussing my identity as a writer because I have always assumed it started with the first jacket cover, but regardless of the type of fiction or creative nonfiction I write in the future, it will probably always draw from that formative eclectic sensibility.

For English students now in their twenties, a warm association with J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series is not unusual, even cliché; but it was the experience surrounding my introduction to the series that was different. My mother had horrible migraines and muscle pains during my pre-teen years, and she wanted to read the books but couldn’t focus on the pages long enough to get through them. So, after reading each book myself, I read the book aloud to my mother, usually in a nearly dark room. My narration of the fantasy was sometimes punctuated with reading medicine bottle labels or grocery store titles on herbal remedies for new, American diseases that set out to explain a fatigue, a bodily disconnect that I have grown up anticipating. I recorded myself reading those books and other books. I listened to my voice saying the same words over and over again (I guess you could say this is where I fell in love with the sound of my own voice).

I felt, up until a certain age when I became exposed to other young writers, that writing had a resonance to me that other people did not understand. I started writing stories based on *Harry Potter* and other books, but then I became precociously offended by the idea of plagiarizing someone else’s work, so I wrote stories about my own life and my friends. I think

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this collection shows that I am still, essentially, writing about the same people. I am attached by the heart strings to the people who have invited me to witness their flaws and worries, many of whom are young people who have not yet figured out how to live up to their childhood expectations, who are discovering that they may never do so; and not unlike the books I read to my mother, their stories are often told in a dark room with no clear escape.

About halfway through my time in the master's program, I realized almost all of my stories pursued characters in their twenties, including story drafts that did not find their way into this collection. I began to worry that I was writing what I know too literally. A mild crisis of creative spirit followed. I obsessed over how impressively young Zadie Smith was when she wrote *White Teeth,* a story of two middle-aged men who struggle with the complex issues of immigration and the subsequent friction of conflicting moral codes. Needless to say, the book represented a new level of creativity to me. Eventually, I had to accept that not everyone sits down in the coffee shop next door and begins writing *White Teeth*, especially when one is torturing one's self with the thought "I must write a book just like *White Teeth,* only with different characters and different conflicts." So I began asking myself what about young characters approaching quarter-life interests me other than the fact that this is the stage of life I myself am living?

As I was finishing this thesis collection and struggling to articulate what has defined the American experience for people born during the 1980s and early 90s, a 22-year-old college student sat next to a friend of mine on a plane. He explained to my friend, "I've lived through two centuries, two millennia and three doomsdays" — and in only two decades. This young man,

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like many people in their twenties today, associates his generation with an ironic sense of gravity. Rapid scientific advancement has presented people in the twenty-first century with amazing tools for looking ahead, but also looking to the past, a catch-22 that makes us feel both invincible and insignificant. Just as Don DeLillo critiques in *White Noise*, an oversaturation of information, of methods for improved lifestyles, leave people at a loss for what they should learn and how they should live (DeLillo).

One of the first prose pieces I remember writing was an indulgent description of a futuristic waste management crew dumping bodies into the ocean because humans had run out of cemetery space. I think I was about twelve-years-old. My mother was horrified: Why was I so *dark*? I also wrote children's stories about a squirrel detective, which was more acceptable. Cut to my eighth-grade short story contest, for which I wrote yet another futuristic story. In this story, a supercomputer with artificial intelligence software goes rogue, shutting down planes and space shuttles, directing cars to crash in the streets. My mother actually forced me to remove a paragraph about a baby trapped in a burning car; in retrospect, I thank her, but at the time I was irate at the unjust censorship.

Obviously, the world has not disintegrated into the fiery chaos I first imagined. However, the gloom of apocalypse, of final despair, has followed my generation from a coy distance. The movies of my childhood are *Armageddon*, *Independence Day*, *Jurassic Park*, *Outbreak*, and *The Matrix*, among others that question scientific responsibility, the lifespan of the Earth, and the future of a morally corrupt society.

None of the stories in this thesis collection so directly address these tropes; however, all of my twenty-something characters — Eli in "Blind Creatures," Janie in "Touring the Biltmore,

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Age 24, 2011," Feller in "The Brotherhood of Distinguished Motorists" and Owen in "6,000-Mile Talk" grapple with a pervasive anxiety, a certainty that they are not functioning in their worlds as they should. If someone asked me and my friends how we would describe our age group, we might refer to ourselves as unemployable, as children of the suburbs, as "plugged-in" and existing largely as digital doppelgangers. Although this would be an overdramatic assessment of how we move about in our day to day lives, I see that many contemporary narratives, not unlike my own, explore this exhausting life perceived to be on the fraying edge of human history.

Joshua Ferris's *The Unnamed*, the male protagonist suffers from an impulse to walk, a state of existence he cannot stop. He tries psychological therapy and physical restraints, yet his problem has no definitive diagnosis. He keeps a bag of survivalist gear next to his door in case his condition suddenly overwhelms him and he must begin a walk that lasts days (Ferris). In *My Sister, My Love*, Joyce Carol Oates recreates the JonBenet Ramsey murder case from the point of view of the character Skyler, who represents JonBenet's brother. Skyler, the narrator, eviscerates wealthy, suburban America: children abuse prescription pills, parents have no genuine love for their children but only interest in capitalizing on their talents, and an average boy from a good family ends up a homeless addict with no one to correspond with but his lawyer (Oates).

Ferris and Oates are among recent influences who have led me to identify with an individual's unrest, a liminal state of existence that serves a purpose of questionable merit. All of my protagonists are striving to fix themselves in some way before they can fully engage in the world around them; however, they are typically met with an external indifference to their internal

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crisis. I am lucky to be surrounded by smart, creative friends, but I never expected when I was younger that we would be so hampered in our twenties, so unwilling to be satisfied.

In planning a direction for my career, I believe I will explore topics of contemporary crises further. I look at the research and the argumentation that Margaret Atwood has married with fiction in books like *Oryx and Crake*, and I desire to be that kind of author.

I have never planted many social critiques in my fiction for fear of ideological boxes, but Atwood navigates her speculative fiction with such finesse that her worlds, though largely constructed for the purpose of social commentary, could exist in their own right —even if bioethics had never seen the light of day.

The third story in this collection, "Touring the Biltmore, Age 24, 2011" is my attempt to allow fact to highlight fiction. I tried to write so that, at times, fact influenced the fiction and vice versa. The narrator is a hypochondriac, so when the characters enter the room with Napoleon's chess table, on which the emperor's heart was set during his autopsy, I tried to let Janie reflect on that artifact so it could speak to her own conflicts.

When I consider the state of my craft, my desire is that I will learn how to incorporate the quirky details I love with a larger narrative that fully engages the reader.

I think of craft in two ways: the act of crafting a story through revision and a writer's creative process, or craft. The act of crafting a story is the process of waking up every day with a freshly sharpened pencil or a ritual cup of coffee, sitting down at the notebook or Word

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processor, and writing, then shaving away at those words, then enriching those words, et cetera, until the story is crafted to the writer's expectations. This is the part of craft on which I'm still working. Although I am improving, adopting a rhythm and routine has been challenging. Myself as an editor who is so keen to critique other people's stories is still learning to be humble enough to be a decent self-editor. Only recently has the process of revision become enjoyable to me. Like a child whose mind operates faster than her motor skills, my ideas do not always deliver on the page. I've learned that an important part of crafting a story is making it accessible and relevant to others. This may be on the micro-level where clean sentences and a narrative consistency help the reader follow and trust what they're reading; or this may be on the macro-level where the author must accept that what they love about a story — a hidden detail, an underlying theme, a social or political comment — is still something intimate between themselves and the story and will not be easily understood or appreciated by the reader.

What draws me to writing a story is almost never discussed in workshop. For instance, in "6,000-Mile Talk" my first page of notes is on perspective. It is a description of this man in his apartment from an aerial perspective. I took it as far as I could before it became absurd (and frankly, dull) to describe his movements around the room by the top of his head, his shoes, his cigarette smoke. However, this exercise did grant this faceless character with the problem of surveillance, being watched from an inhuman perspective. Finally, he became a character (in his twenties, of course) who was not only surveying the Iraq war through the Internet, television and radio but who is himself surveyed like a rat in a cage via the confines of the narrative, which extends over only a few hours during which he is alone in his apartment.

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Before I wrote “Blind Creatures,” I had a Word document on my computer for about three weeks. All it said was “Look at my brother — there, on the train.” The story outline was originally a girl telling the reader about her brother’s death. I was working as a science writing intern at the time, and I wanted to tell a story that depended on a technical topic, leading me to research magnetic levitation train crashes for a few days; but when all the real crashes didn’t end in fiery demise (it’s the safest way to travel, really), I abandoned the story. Then, I read about genetic therapy for Leber congenital amaurosis, and the narrator took on the identity she has in the final draft. Initially, the word “train” was the most important word in that first sentence. However, the train as grown less and less important in revisions, overshadowed by the character of Eli.

It is all too evident to me that my creative process is like building a house — starting with the chandelier. My craft sinks or swims in the slant. If my stories were geometric planes, all the components would be leaning just a little toward one corner. I fall in love with a character’s voice, a certain room, a string of dialogue, and allow the whole story to conform to its whims. Maybe this is indicative of a relatively novice writer. At times, I think this attention to a small detail harms the story; important characters or plot points don’t get developed as well as they should. At other times, I think that detail augments the story with an interesting texture.

Even after I participated in creative writing workshops during undergraduate course work, I was never able to vocalize how I was learning to become a better writer. This ability to self-assess and self-edit is what I desired from a graduate program and is what I received during my two years at the University of Tennessee. I don’t believe someone has to have academic

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training to be a good writer, but I would not be a good writer without mine. I say this as a conclusion to my critical introduction because I feel that I still have a lot of knowledge to apply to my fiction. I have not skimmed the surface of the influences to which I've been introduced, or the voices I want to mimic. I consider this thesis a study in human nature, rife with faults and temptations, but also an exercise in precision — an imperfect exercise, but a much loved one.

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I. Blind Creatures

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I cannot see the dragons breathing fire, their tongues curled like birthday party poppers, or the gargoyles, perched on their clawed feet, their wings crossed like shields in front of their squat bodies. I don't know if Eli's drawings are any good. Mom says there's something wrong with an eighteen-year-old boy who still draws gargoyles, that I should be glad I don't have to witness it. ("In a manner of speaking, dear," she always adds.) Dad says let him have his art therapy. If he's going to be at home like this, he might as well do something harmless to keep busy.

Eli passes me the frayed, spiral notebook across the coffee table. We are sitting Indian-style on the floor where I have been stitching my initials in a pillow. Mom stuck pins along the surface of the pillow so I know where to tie the thread. I take the notebook from Eli's hand. The pages are soft with use and the ink lines are heavy. Some pages are more textured with detail than others. One must be in charcoal because Eli takes the notebook from me.

"You smudged it, but that's ok. I'll just tell you about it instead."

Gargoyles are blind, too, some of them, he says. They breathe fire like dragons, and sometimes the fire burns their eyes. Eli says he draws some of these blind eyes wrinkly and closed and some he leaves a pale white.

"Your eyes aren't white though." he says. "That's just for mythical creatures."

What is there to worry about? White is not a bad color. Brides wear white. Smart people like Einstein have white hair. People always say they hope for a white Christmas. A boy in my sixth grade class said he shot a fox in his yard. He said he was close enough to see the whites of its eyes. I am obviously not going to get shot, even if I do have white eyes, I want to tell Eli.

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But he has moved on to what is happening on TV. I have to explain the first part of a news story to him. He looked away, drew part of his gargoyle, and forgot about the TV. But I hear the voices all the time. I cannot turn away.

***

I have been legally blind for nine years. I am only twelve-years-old now, and it's difficult to remember being three, to remember the exact day I stopped seeing figures. I have Leber congenital amaurosis, a genetic disorder that leads to blurry vision or blindness in children, a definition I have heard my mother offer a hundred times with the finesse of passing along a business card. In my case, I am almost totally blind; except, I can perceive light. I can tell the time, even in the house, based on light.

I remember two silhouettes: my mother bent over as she helped me take a bath, her forearm slender and strong as she reached across me for the soap bar, and a raccoon that scuttled across my feet while I played in the yard. Eli says raccoons are timid and that it's impossible a raccoon got so close to me, a loud child who called out strings of funny syllables like horn blasts, but animals always come close to me because it's staring they don't like, not people. It was definitely a raccoon.

We knew something was wrong when I was a year old. Eli was in the second grade wanted to learn spelunking, something difficult to accomplish in a Baltimore suburb. To make up for not having a cave handy, he carried a rope and miner's headlamp around these old warehouses at the corner of our street. His older friends crawled into the warehouse through broken windows. He says they would scratch in hurried, short strokes on the other side of the loading dock door like a colony of vicious bats. Eli would push open the door from the outside,

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jarring it along its rolling track as the sunlight sliced through the dark interior and illuminated its columns of dust for the first time in months. His headlamp would cut a swath across abandoned tools and rusting parts of old industrial equipment, and the bats would squawk and scurry away, their teeth barred and their wings flapping furiously against their cotton polo shirts.

He was reenacting his discovery of a bag of washers for my parents — he says he could flip a washer in the air and balance it with the bridge of his nose — when his headlamp flew off and landed upright on my highchair table. The bright light, capable of illuminating a miner's path tens of feet ahead, did not seem to bother me.

"Eli! That thing's going to blind your sister!"

My mother dropped a skillet of sautéed peppers and onions in the sink and swooped down on the headlamp. As she reached for its rubbery strap, my father softly blocked her arm and stooped to watch as my eyes lolled serenely from side to side, hardly aware of the hot spotlight cast in front of me.

"She's not…scrunching her eyelids. You know, not closing her eyes," my father said, hesitantly lifting the strap with his forefinger and rotating the bulb in front of my face.

Eli says they peered into my eyes for a long time, as if plotting a course in a strange world.

***

Eli has been carrying pamphlets since he left the hospital. After his accident, or as our parents like to call it — that night, that time, that trouble — Eli always has a pamphlet folded into quarters in the front pocket of his button-downs; or, on bad days, in the narrow side pockets of his polyester gym shorts. I've asked him what they say.

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"Just stuff for me," he's answered.

Eli's pamphlets are glossy keys that cannot be deciphered, like the backsides of playing cards.

Mom keeps pamphlets, too. But hers have always been for me: "Adapting play: toys for visually-impaired or blind children," "The end of Braille: preparing your child for a computer generation," and "Puberty and visually-impaired daughters." She prints them from the Internet or files through them at the ophthalmologist's office. Eli reads them aloud to me when she's not home. He created a pompous voice he calls Dr. Smart Ass.

"Dr. Smart Ass tells you that an exciting future awaits in assistive technology."

Eli does not want me to want help.

He emphasizes numbers to me. He has been responsible for my "survival strategy." Everything in our house is a certain number of steps, a certain reach of my arm or rotation along my line of "special sight."

No, I don't count things anymore. The doctors and my mother attribute this to living a routine every day, but I don't think that is why. I break my pattern all the time. Sometimes I crawl out of bed at the foot instead of the right side. I move my desk or chest of drawers to the left three inches. My gait is weird because sometimes I take quick, tiny steps, pretending I'm bound in a kimono, and other times I take long strides like I'm stepping over a bed of needles or a dying campfire. Even without counting, I always stop just short of a table, reach my hand out at the exact point where it meets the door knob, address a silent person who has approached me. My brain doesn't really need eyes, even in uncertain places.

***

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"Some cave fish are blind," Eli told me when I was six. "They don't even have eyes."

The cave fish were the first in a long line of blind creatures: moles, some salamanders, now gargoyles, always me.

"I have eyes," I said, raising my little fist to one.

I used to rub my fist against my eye a lot. The doctor said I was instinctively trying to stimulate my retinas.

"Yes, you do. But you can't see everything, can you?"

"No. I can see the light on your bike."

"The reflector, right. Well, these fish have antennae," — Eli wiggled two of his fingers against my cheek — "like that and so they can find where they're going by feeling around."

When she came home from work that afternoon, my mother caught me walking with my arms out, zigzagging them back and forth. She cried at the kitchen table and told Eli not to tell me I was a fish ever again.

***

People move in predictable ways, Eli says.

"When a swift shadow comes across your vision, that is someone moving like this," he said, as we lay on the patio one summer.

He grabbed the fresh, rubber soles of my shoes and pedaled my feet at fifty rotations per minute.

"Their steps scuttle!" I said, having learned the word from Dad at the beach.

"And when you hear one step — nothing — then another, they're moving like this…."

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He swung me onto his back, and I rested my elbows against his bony shoulder blades as he slowly lifted one knee and his shoulder blades moved up. And up and down sixteen times a minute.

***

When Eli first came home, he didn't want to leave his room for days. I don't blame him. The disruption to our routine upset Mom. She had been working on sewing with me every day, but when Eli's at home, he tires her out. He comes down for breakfast with what Dad calls his big scheme for the day. His first day back home, he announced he was going to get a summer job as part of the maintenance team for the country club golf course, or maybe as caddy if that's all they had.

"Should be a good opportunity to make some contacts for college, don't you think?" he said to my parents, as if presenting a boardroom.

"Oh, I don't think you'll have time for that with summer school," Mom said, pouring out the cereal bowls. "You know you won't graduate this month because of what you did."

What you did. Eli calls it *what happened*, but Mom insists it is *what you did*.

Now Eli has trouble staying in his room. He doesn't sleep much at night and is usually on the couch in the morning, a book creased back to the first couple of pages on the floor, a nature show blaring on TV, only one of his socks still on his feet. His glossy pamphlets, tucked into the couch cushions like money stored away.

Mom turns off the TV and lets him sleep there. Hushing me at every turn, she creeps behind as only she is able to do, dispensing orange juice boxes, hair brushes, Pop Tarts over my shoulder.

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"Don't wake your brother."

He is her prickly dragon, destructive with his energetic flair.

During the day, he mostly walks around the neighborhood, but today, he says he will take a train into Baltimore.

On Dad's way out the door for work, he stops, and I can hear him kicking around the doormat in front of the back door, the door hanging half open, squeaky on its hinges.

"Ok, if that's what you want to do, I think it's a good idea," he says to Eli. "Call if you need something."

The door groans shut. The car starts in the driveway.

"Do you really think you need it?" Mom asks him quietly.

"I just want to go."

***

While Eli is gone, I work on my sewing. I have guided the thread from pin to pin, tracing the outline of the letters — my initials — in their curly script.

"Whoops," Mom says, walking by the couch. Her hands smell like dish soap from scrubbing the kitchen all morning. She plucks the thread from my hand. "Almost took it over to the wrong pin. Looking good now."

"Where did Eli have to go?" I ask as she slaps stray magazines and newspapers together and drops them in a basket by the TV.

"He had to go back to the hospital for follow-up counseling. You know, they just want to check and make sure he's feeling better after what he did last month."

***

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He comes back with a black eye. They try to hide it from me, whispering from the foyer, non-descript accusations: *What is that? How did you get that? Did you start it? Oh, hell, I'll get some ice.*

Later that night, when he is spread out on the couch, his legs hanging over the back, crunching on potato chips to a nature channel documentary, I go sit beside him.

"How bad is it?"

"Eh," he takes my hand and cups it into a fist-sized circle, "About like that."

The crunch of a potato chip.

"It was some kid from school," he tells me. "Apparently, I got the aquatic center shut down before some big meet. Apparently, I'm no big shit."

This sounds like a peculiarly male problem me, so I avoid asking him about it.

"What's the train like?"

An owl is hooting on the nature channel. Eli describes the Amtrak to me, as if we are settlers reclining at our camp under the night sky, predicting the future. Subway tunnels are dark and the windows reveal the lighted train car and all its occupants easily, until the train erupts into open air and the images disappear.

Eli likes the seat by the door, he says, because then people aren't crowding you and you get to feel, for a split second, a little pendulum swing in your stomach when the train stops and the sensation that has been zipping along the body of aluminum behind your back and under your feet stops too.

He has always tried to understand the physics of things, to quantify what is fast and slow, hot and cold, rough and smooth. The Amtrak he is riding moves at seventy-nine miles per hour,

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which is like riding a car on the interstate, only closer to the ground. If I lay in the floor board of our van, it feels more like an Amtrak than if I am belted in my seat.

He adds, "And if you sense a red-head, swim team puss approaching you, turn away and walk to the other end of the train."

Eli tried to drown himself in his prep school's pool. Or so our parents say.

***

The spring before Eli's ninth grade year, he was teaching me to ride his old bicycle around the drive way. We calculated that if I yelled "Urchin!" really fast, it equaled one wheel rotation, and if I let the wheels turn seventy-four times, I could reach the end of the driveway without falling into the yard.

I rolled along the concrete — "UrchinUrchinUrchinUrchinUrchin…" when my mother called from behind the screen door for Eli to get me off the bike.

"She has thirty-eight more to go!" Eli protested.

"UrchinUrchinUrchinUrchinUrchin…"

But I lost count during their conversation, and while Eli's voice was directed away from the drive toward Mom, I pitched forward into the yard, throwing my leg out for support and breaking my toe on a ceramic planter.

"Oh my God! Honey, what were you thinking!"

Mom let me soak in the bubble bath for an hour that night. I could hear her garbled, sobbing voice on the other side of the wall in my parents' bedroom.

The next day Dad smoked two cigarettes on the porch, their ashes settling in the cushion of his wicker chair. Then he told Eli my mother was anxious and getting sick, and since they had

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considered sending him to a good in-state boarding school anyway, would he like to go to Hayley Preparatory in the fall?

***

I don't go to prep school. I do go to school though. There was a lot of arguing about that. Mom homeschooled me until middle school, but I wanted to find new ways to change my pattern and I had already circulated all the furniture in my bedroom. I thought I would have a sense for school. Eli told me when classes change it would be very crowded in the hallways, like a sea of people, and would I be scared? But I like crowded places, all the conversations rolling by you — one second an energetic conversation about weekend plans, then a description of a new movie, then sobbing and the story of a break-up.

Mom drops me off at school. She turns the car engine completely off each time.

"Do you have everything? Let me check your backpack."

"I have everything."

"Your reading list?"

"In the folder."

"Make sure you give it to the librarian so she can find you the audios. I know I put your lunch bag in there."

"Are we parked right over the pedestrian cross?"

"Yes, so you can just go straight into the building."

"Aren't people, like, trying to cross, Mom?"

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I get out of the car, the sunlight warm on my face, girls in flip flops slapping around me. I walk one yard, two yards, three yards, foot on the first step leading up to the building: the car engine clicks to life.

***

Leber congenital amaurosis is very rare. If you lined up all the people in the United States shoulder to shoulder, you might come across someone like me every nine or ten miles. I did most of that calculation roughly in my head, although Eli gave me the exact numbers from his calculator.

That means that I've only met a couple of children and teenagers with LCA in my whole life and only through my specialist, and I didn't realize until after Eli was at Hayley that he was very lucky not to have it himself.

Mom bought me my first training bra with its tight, elastic band that squished my fat on either side. I was circling my palm over my chest at the dinner table, memorizing the change in my profile when my mother clasped my fingers and lowered my hand to my lap.

"Don't do that, baby. Your shirts look better, I promise. You'll get used to it."

Dad's fork scraped the plate as he scooped more potatoes or more roast.

"You know the doctor said once that it was pretty likely Eli would have gotten the genes, too," he said.

Mom didn't say anything. She usually prayed for Eli's safety before dinner each night, but otherwise she preferred not to talk about him. He was eighteen now and still at boarding school. He sent handwritten letters each week, usually detailing his physics and math studies or gossip about anyone our parents might know. Mom read these letters aloud but very carefully.

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She said sometimes he would use language that I was too young for, although I knew Eli wouldn't curse in a letter to our parents.

A few weeks before his graduation, the dean called our house in the middle of the night, and my parents carried me to the car because they couldn't leave me and we drove to Bethesda.

"I'm afraid Eli took some sleeping pills before swimming in the pool," the emergency room doctor said.

"Why would he do that?" Mom asked.

"He's actually lucky his leg got wrapped around the ladder, or his head might not have stayed above water," the doctor said, the stark sound of one piece of paper sliding under another as he looked through Eli's admittance forms. "We've pumped his stomach, put him on some fluids so he doesn't dehydrate, and I suspect he'll wake up pretty soon. You may want to speak with him yourselves, but we can also refer a staff psychiatrist."

"Wait."

Dad gently guided me out of the room, his hand on my shoulder. I stayed in the hall as Eli woke up and a woman smelling of lotion and hairspray passed by in clacking heels on her way to his room. She left half an hour later, and they let me go to my brother.

"I swam two-hundred and sixty-one arm strokes before falling asleep," he said to me in our own way of measuring things.

"That's not a very long way."

"It is for someone who is tired," Eli said as ice chips crunched in the water cup he had tilted to his mouth.

***

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Mom hates Eli's pamphlets. I can hear him plotting them out for her in the kitchen: *See, this is how they do it, and look at the results they've gotten back so far. We could definitely do this.*

Whatever his scheme for the day is, Mom thinks it's a pipe dream. *That would cost a fortune, a fortune, and after your tuition, and see, it's* experimental. *Who knows what could happen. You focus on yourself when you go up to that hospital. Get yourself right.*

I pull one of the pamphlets from his stash in the couch cushions while no one is looking. The information is totally lost on me, but the weight of the paper, the smooth gloss, cold to the touch. It doesn't feel like whatever it wants is real.

***

One morning, I step on Eli's glasses misplaced on the floor by the couch. The nose bridge snaps in two perfectly, crisply, like a twig in the backyard.

He wears contacts and glasses for near-sightedness, which means as long as he has the contacts in he can see things far away. Mom resisted fitting him for glasses and contacts because she thought he was exaggerating his condition for attention.

"Our genes can't be that bad," she said, holding a card with a six-inch letter E printed in bold two inches from his face and declaring him visually agile.

But our genes are that bad. My condition is autosomal recessive, meaning that both my mother and father carry a gene for LCA. Eli called it inbreeding once when he was mad, but that's not the case, and my mother threw a teacup at the living room wall to prove her point.

Mom tells her friends she feels terrible that she carries that gene around, that she fell in love with someone who couldn't help her hide it. Eli isn't blind because my parents, unwittingly,

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passed him the normal, healthy genes. Or maybe, he carries one of the bad genes but not both. He says sometimes when he's sleeping, he senses things he cannot see, little phantoms. Maybe it's the one bad gene, he says. But he is just trying to be like me.

He laughs when he sees the two lenses, separated like the pieces of a cheap locket.

"I guess I can't get mad at you," he says.

I reach out and feel his face, a gesture my family is used to, the same as passing the TV remote or plucking a hair off the back of someone's shirt. Eli is looking at me through one-half of the glasses, holding the lens to his face like a monocle.

"Have you been going through my pamphlets?" he asks.

I don't know how he can tell. Maybe I shuffled them.

"I just felt them in the couch."

"It's ok. They're for you," he says. "I'm trying to convince Mom to get you this new treatment."

His voice becomes hushed and excited.

I think of those glossy pamphlets in my hands, so slick, so featureless.

"It's called gene therapy. They're going to give you a shot and insert the good, normal gene, and all the tiny pieces of DNA that got confused are going to take up the good gene and you're going to see," Eli says.

"Just like that?"

"Well, with glasses probably, but yes. As long as you don't break them, you should be fine."

I can hear him smile.

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A man narrates the birthing of a baby lion on the nature channel.

Eli is still smiling.

"I could take the waiting list papers with me next time I got to Baltimore. You can have Mom sign them. You'll be able to see the television, to read letters, draw pictures, and in a few days," Eli says, his voice eager, his posture tense.

I feign interest because Eli doesn't understand these things have no meaning to me. I understand television is flat, like a paper doll, and learning letters would just be another way of listening.

"Everything will be new," he insists.

I hug the pillow I have been stitching, the pins prickly against my stomach.

***

Take the percent change that my parents would meet each other in 1975 at an outdoor symphony concert and want to sit under the exact same 200-year-old oak tree, now multiply that by the 25 percent chance I would receive both mutant genes, and you have me.

***

It's another two weeks before Eli wants to go back to Baltimore. I try to sleep late that day, so he won't ask me about the treatment papers. From my bed, I can hear the morning shuffling; Dad leaves for work; Mom heats something up in the microwaves; the coffee maker chirps; Eli turns the shower off. I am about to drift off, the perfumed smell of cologne following him down the hall.

Then I hear the microwave door slam shut. Mom's sharp voice starts off strong then settles into finality. Eli calls to me, as if summoning a witness: *Sis, hey, come here. I need you!*

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By the time I slink into the kitchen in my pajamas, I can hear Mom has already tried to begin the rest of her day, struggling to get the vacuum cleaner out of the pantry.

"I'm about to leave. Tell Mom to stop worrying and that she should put you on this waiting list."

"This is just not the right time, dear," Mom says casually, her voice boxed in the pantry where she is still grappling with the pieces of the vacuum cleaner.

"I don't want the shot," I say.

"It won't hurt, I promise," Eli says.

"I mean, I don't want those genes. They're not mine. They're…weird."

It's quiet for a minute.

"Maybe when she's older, Eli," Mom says.

"You just want her to stay this way so she'll be good. Blind kids can't get in trouble. And, Sis, you, you don't realize what's wrong with you. I know you don't know, but it's messed up. People should be able to *see*."

"Ok, that's enough," Mom says.

I try to touch Eli's face as he walks out, but I only graze a lock of hair, a swift shudder of texture, a thousand little strands.

***

Eli gets off the Amtrak at University City Train Station. The wind slaps the cloth of his trousers against his legs as he walks the block. He jaywalks across a one-way street, passes by a smoking pavilion and canteen, and takes a seat on a bench outside an outpatient drop-off. Different kinds of patients come in and out. One man exits, the spokes of his wheelchair

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whirring. A little girl comes out, her knee wrapped in a bandage under pin-striped softball pants rolled up to her thigh; the bandage is the elastic kind, whiskery into the touch. Nurses leave for the day, smelling of antiseptic that is still slick on their shoes.

Whenever a young child comes out, apparently healthy with no bandages or casts, Eli watches them closely. Are they looking at the ambulance that just drove by? Is the mother holding their hand whispering when they come upon a stair? Do they turn their head toward the balloons bouncing from a new mother's wheelchair? Finally, one boy comes out, an eye patch over each eye. He could be number seven or number fourteen.

Or maybe Eli gets off the train and goes straight to the counseling center.

Maybe he stays on the train, rolling through the dark tunnel, the soft notebook of ink drawings in his lap. All the gargoyles look sinister. All the dragons look childish. They flicker in the reflection of the windows, and when the train bursts from the tunnel, they disappear into the sunlight.

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II. 6,000-Mile Talk

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My brother emails me videos from war, from the desert. In one, Isaac is in all of his gear, and he has that stance that combat boots give them. He's holding his M16 at his side, like a snake he has charmed into a trance, and he's pacing in front of a civilian who has been injured in a car wreck. It is a relief in dust brown: the ground, the sky, the civilian's clothes, my brother. From what I can gather, this happens a lot — pacing in front of civilians — and he says a word in Arabic and waits (nothing but the crunching of a Humvee off camera), then he calls over his shoulder for a medic. He hitches up the rifle. The strap slides down his shoulder, and he shifts the rifle behind him to kneel next to the man. The video cuts over to someone else.

In others, he is in the barracks. In one, he is eating a twelve-inch sub sandwich. "Check out the rub on this" he says, peeling back the top loaf. He bites into the sandwich and gives the camera a thumbs-up. In another, he is competing in a push-up competition. He looks up periodically and strikes a thin, square grin before the camera returns to the bald spot at the center of his buzz cut. Whoever is holding the camera during the competition laughs so hard the pictures drops to the floor, just like the men themselves. In two, he is binge drinking: one by himself, pouring whisky into cups under the narrow, yellow light of a desk lamp, and one with a group of soldiers, flashes of men barreling into each other, fighting, cussing, breathing hard and drunk. He sends them all with the message: *Wish you were here. It's sunny all the time.*

***

I could definitely throw a loafer onto Mac's balcony. Peach pits and apple cores are easy. I've chucked those before. It's not like I'll need them or he would know who threw them. There are four more balconies within that trajectory. Now, a match, a match is proving difficult. The first lit match hardly made it over my own rail, went smoking in its exhaust down to the street.

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But I've dipped this match here in my gin and tonic, and now, now, we're going to calibrate this bastard.

M-*mmm*! A gin match clears three feet.

I stand up to check where it landed, then sit and wrap my heavy coat around my shoulders again. Mac hasn't been outside in almost two hours. Must be asleep even though the sun just went down because on the hour he's dragging whatever's in his lap — cereal bowl, magazine splayed at the spine, cell phone — outside to light one up. He leans into the corner of the railing, puffs, inspects, watches the roll whither down to fine silt in his fingers. Lately, he's been arguing with a hairdresser.

That's how I learned his name.

He said, "No, no, *this* is what you say — you say, *Mac*, I'm sorry. I was flighty, and I'm sorry."

I tilt my drink at him now and then, and he tilts his head, his lips puffing and shucking.

I fold my newspaper, all ugly angles, a smart in my mouth as I drain the last of my gin and head inside. I take a last look at my feet. A girl lives below me, and sometimes I can see her hazy figure through the Lucite balcony floor. I hear her on the phone, too, if she's stretched out in her balcony chair, her white toes poking over her railing; but she speaks some Eastern European language. Her voice is like vegetables simmering in a skillet. She's not there right now.

The suck of air through the sliding glass door alerts me that my apartment is still messy and cold. It looks the way you might think my apartment would look. The way a tall man in dark wash jeans, bright plaid shirts, and A-frames might decorate his apartment. There's a ceiling-

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high bookshelf, most of the books paperbacks stacked horizontally near the top. They were once ordered alphabetically by a bored woman.

I should pick up the inside-out socks, the Thank You carry out bags, the sticky ball glasses and the empty cereal boxes before Isaac gets here. Isaac was messy too, probably not anymore; it's not that. But if you think about it, what kind of person has a bunch of empty cereal boxes scattered around his apartment? Someone who is in his apartment all day. Someone who never eats lunch because there is no lunch. There is waking, a couple of hours of self-evaluation (maybe the computer cracks open, maybe there is a phone call or two, something to be mailed), and then the smell of fried food rolls up from the street and Mac comes out at the five o'clock hour onto his balcony.

I don't clean because this war is occupying all my time. I rotate from room to room through the twenty-four hour news cycle. The panoramic shots of desert and the clips of tanks and dark doorways suddenly ignited from behind are best viewed in the living room. But the bedroom has an old tube television good enough for watching round tables and talking faces; the picture crinkles down their foreheads, but the discussion is heard clear into the bathroom. My showers are narrated by British-born news anchors and commercials for products elderly people buy.

The kitchen has a radio. Sometimes they use archived audio; I've heard the exact same crumbles and blows before. When it gets real hard to hear and the voices are distinguishable only by a familiar spike above the background — a long vowel yelled, suddenly cuffed by more background noise — then it's probably real. Just sounds far away.

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I spent my time on the balcony debating whether I should hide all my notes on the war, all my work for the website. I debated whether I should change all the channels on the TVs, close up my laptop, and unplug the radio. What if my war zone does not compare to Isaac's?

Sometimes I get a message from Isaac. He could call, but he calls Mom, the shrieking conduit. She tells me everything he has said. Mom gave the first car bomb he saw go off all the sulfur and brimstone description of the Lake of Fire in Revelation — which, she says, probably won't occur too far from where Isaac has been, when the time is come.

Eventually, he stopped giving her so much to work with, and she thinks despite what has happened an hour outside Baghdad in the last four days, that things are dying down over there.

The last footage I got from Isaac was a viral video of a scrawny, middle-school kid in a Guinness t-shirt flipping his skateboard over a railing and wiping out on his head. What to say. The kid is an idiot. But he really injured himself. Actually, had he been successful, no one would call him an idiot; it would have been rather impressive. We can assume that since his friend, with the online moniker *superjacked*, loaded it online, that the kid is not dead or suffering. I respond amused, and concerned but, overall, in wonderment. There is an Isaac gradient in my mind, and I can only guess as to whether he is more or less desensitized these days.

But football scores, talk of women both here and there, this is 6,000-mile talk.

More gin. I turn the bottle so that as I pour it I can see the art deco lettering on the label. I put the room temperature gin on the wine rack from my grandmother's condo. Remarried at sixty-five, without any sentimental attachment to her post-midlife, post-divorce purchases, she shipped me everything in her condo but her clothes and furniture two weeks before she left for a

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Bahamas honeymoon. The wine rack curls into florets of green leaves at the base. It's, admittedly, feminine.

Apart from her being rather sassy in the first place, my grandmother doesn't feel much like a grandmother now that I have repurposed her coffee cups as ash trays; her rooster and chicken kitchen towels as toilet wipes; her ornate, little vanity as a display case for my greasy computer and stacks of CD cases. I think of her as Kaye. And all the stuff she packaged between carefully folded Christmas wrapping paper as Kaye's shit. She probably thought of it that way too, and that's why she sent it to me.

I turn the kitchen radio up. It's on a music station. I've decided to go on media blackout before Isaac gets here. Bob Dylan's voice is wheezing high and prophetic at me: *you'd better pawn it, babe.*

I have procrastinated long enough. I told myself I was going to work tonight, get something down. I hunch onto Kaye's vanity stool and lift the lid of my laptop. There's a blog that if you go to a national, online news website, then click on one of their smaller syndicates, then browse that homepage for an opinions tab, and then find a caricature of a youngish man with slick, black hair banging his head on either side with a glass of red wine and a rolled up newspaper, you can read my thoughts — valued, by the way, at three-hundred and fifty dollars biweekly and a comped chef's salad on the first Monday of the month.

This caricature man looks intelligent and groomed but frustrated. He is allowed to talk about anything from wine to movies to politics, but this month he has specifically been asked to talk about the war.

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On my Word browser, I type, in bold font, *Following Fallujah*. It's a working title. That I erase.

***

"I'm thinking of buying a house," Isaac said, holding the dart behind his shoulder and squinting in aim.

I slammed down the base of my beer bottle when the dart hit its mark.

"Nice one," I grunted.

Isaac whistled as he swished an X on the cricket board.

"You make an okay salary, but why spend all that extra money on a house?"

"What if I had a cat and it died? Where would I bury it?" he said, ripping one of my rogue darts from the wall plaster. "I walk into the apartment, my cat is dead. I get a garbage bag, and then what? I would drive a dead cat to the vet's office because I don't have anywhere to bury her."

"You don't even have a cat."

"I think I'd like some green space. I never know what to do when I need a water hose. And I can hear the neighbors all the time. It sounds like they're just banging things on the wall. Hammers? Coffee mugs? Baseballs?"

Two games later, he was planning to buy a vacuum, wanted satellite instead of cable, was completely preoccupied with how to make his life slightly different by spreading it out a little. And then this pair of guys came over to the pool table near the dart boards. It was spring 2003. I had been solely a wine-movie-tech gadgets guy for three years.

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A lean guy, with the look of a swimmer and a new, scalped, buzz cut was playing his buddy for "One thousand five hundred, and if I win you can pay that up in small bills for the belly dancers I'm gonna visit when I get over there, brother."

Isaac elbowed me, tipping his head at the guy. He wanted to mess with him.

He clapped the swimmer's fat friend on the back, said "Do you mind, brother," took his pool cue and snapped a striped ball into a pocket by the swimmer. The swimmer looked so pissed his mouth curled into a pursed paunch like a catfish.

At the end of the game, Isaac told the guy real quiet that he was a sergeant in some bullshit division, and he would have him transferred over there, seeing as he was so interested in belly dancing, and seeing how his men had a vacancy for a belly dancer.

I don't know if the guy believed Isaac. But Isaac must have liked some part of what he'd contrived because a week later he had a date for basic training. And six months later my editor, who obviously couldn't afford to hire anyone else said, "What do you know about the war?"

"Not much. . .I have a brother in the Marine Corps."

"Ok, good. We need to show more opinion about the war."

***

I search for images of the operation in Fallujah. After only four days, there are thousands. As I scroll down, my buzz fails me. I retrieve a pen from the pile of trash crowding half the vanity. I scribble one of those charts that looks like an L on the left with a diagonal line shooting out of the right angle, you know? I designate a point in the middle of the diagonal line, then I go through the pictures and tick off some below the point and some beyond the point. There are a

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lot beyond the point, beyond the point that I feel that I can relate to or speak about what I see in the pictures. This is the 6,000-mile point.

In photography classes — which I've dabbled in of course, being the yuppie with the red wine glass and the newspaper kaleidoscope — they tell you that depending on what you want out of a picture that subjects either have to be very still or they should be in the midst of action, caught in a moment of energy.

These are damn still. And stilled — in different ways. Stilled and then still.

***

I've taken to the couch these days. With the lights out and the blue light of the news channels crackling against my body, illuminating in patches my wristwatch, my forearm, my Adam's apple, I feel I am undergoing a clandestine, scientific procedure while I sleep. I could wake up suddenly able to speak Arabic or Mandarin, or I could find the numbers to a subway terminal stamped on my wrist.

But I usually wake up frozen in a state of distress that I cannot trace. No matter what, the fleece throw that covers me about as well as an X-ray apron has been tossed over the back of the couch and a candy bowl of Kaye's where I keep loose change has been knocked a powerful distance from the coffee table.

***

Howard, my editor, ripped apart chunks of sourdough roll to submerge in his tomato soup before he addressed me.

"And Owen, what are you thinking for this week? Gotten a chance to talk to Isaac, right, about, what was it, the reception of journalists on the bases?"

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That was almost three weeks ago on a Monday afternoon.

Another staff member down the table, an Asian American girl with thick dark lipstick, said she had a network friend who landed in the Green Zone two weeks ago.

"I can give you his email address. Maybe he could give you a journalist quote or some photos. He might even write up a little description for you if he's not too busy."

"Yeah, I'll take his number down. I've heard they've been getting flak for posting videos and writing about the war online, so I might have trouble communicating with any of the guys."

I wrote the email down on a take-out receipt from my jacket.

Sghamilt never emailed me back. The day after I sent the email request, the *New York Times* said *But it is the insurgents who have seized the offensive in recent weeks, and the number of attacks per day has risen by 30 percent or more since mid-October.*

This is a statistic I've written on a shiny, white square of Kaye's Christmas wrapping paper. I survey the apartment and flip any squares of notes over to show only yuletide logs and reindeer sleighs.

Isaac doesn't seem to know I'm writing about the war. I always tell my editor I'm consulting him, but instead I scourge the Internet for interviews, videos and soldiers' blogs. At first, I thought Isaac would realize I was writing about Iraq when he read my blog, but two months went by and Isaac never said anything about my blog. And so, I have come to the conclusion that we are living the war apart.

***

It's rounding on ten or eleven. Cabs taking people home after dinner are lining up below my balcony. There's a sushi bar on the first level of my building. When I moved in here, I

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thought I could look down at people at their best — women in cocktail dresses and heels, men in their loose ties and slacks, a little wine drunk, excited to start the night, eager to end it on a good note.

When I look up, Mac is back from his close-of-business-day nap, lighting up his roll, balancing the phone on his shoulder. He blows his smoke up then looks down to the street, his head lolling back and forth this way for a while.

" — couldn't bother to stop by, could you?"

His conversation with the hairdresser carries.

The girl is beneath my feet. Her hazy figure is twirling. She twirls a lot, chasing a rodent dog around her cramped balcony, softly clucking at it in her language. I tuck my head between my knees like, God, I can't go on anymore, but really I'm watching the twirling girl, my drink glass slack in my hand, leading me on in my heavily censored voyeurism.

It would be nice, having a girl around when Isaac shows up. I could brush off any questions she might ask him about being gone, like I don't need to know. She could be drinking red wine out of Kaye's brandy glass, looking pouty and moving around my apartment all lithe and dark. Like there's gravity here. The beautiful, exotic woman here to distract from whatever illicit compromises I could be making in this apartment.

She moves to the edge of her balcony, her shape, the gray orb, slides from between my feet away to the edge. Who wouldn't come upstairs to help a struggling writer greet his brother come home from war?

I'm out of gin. All that is left in Kaye's wine rack is the bottle of red wine. I run a dirty coffee cup under the faucet, shaking out cigarette butts into the garbage disposal, scooping out

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the mushy, black tar at the bottom with my finger. Red wine in a coffee cup is a casual, last resort, not unlike the girl.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I forget I have the thing sometimes. It's a number I don't recognize: Isaac has touched down. *Should be midnight.* I have to hurry. I swipe the leftover food containers in an empty trash bag and stick it between the wall and the fridge.

Outside 712 is very different than outside my place, 812. It smells like carpet and baby drool down here. The child cries, in rounds, like it is being lifted in the air and pulled down, only able to stop crying in mid-motion. I take a swig of my ashy wine and retreat. Maybe it's a child she's twirling on that balcony.

It certainly won't complete the picture in my mind. I should feel pathetic for trying to stage the thing in the first place, but instead I feel resentful that the hazy girl so misrepresented herself. I think of playing out this disappointment by knocking on the door and speaking to her for a moment, only to leave without extending an invitation. But I don't. I go upstairs and scribble down the title *Forecast: Fallujah*.

***

The bullet did just what the .22 did to Ronald Reagan.

And my thoughts on this along with the parceled footage on my living room television (because I've broken down and turned on the news), place my brother in another dust color relief, pacing in front of a store, half busted, half barred. The rifle strap coiled around his shoulder. Rounds are going off somewhere, but that's not what hits him. A small, pistol bullet is fired from ground level of the abandoned store. Isaac spirals down in the shape of a boomerang. A machine gun out of the frame sputters over to where the little bullet came from.

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Another marine runs over to Isaac. Five more run up to the storefront, but there is no one to drag out. The bullet has clipped unencumbered through his rib cage, and the left lung falls like an unpitched tent.

***

The shrieking conduit called thirty-six hours after Isaac's shooting.

"He's in Italy! My son shot in the chest!"

"Italy?"

"In Italy, in Italy. He's recovering there."

He did well in Italy. I talked to him from my balcony, pacing with the hot phone to my ear for almost an hour.

He glazed over the story of his shooting, instead describing this American nurse in excruciating detail. *She's got one of those short haircuts…slender…perfect tan…father is a lawyer…grew up in Minnesota…this weird silent laugh…got her to sit on my bed for a minute today…*

"Huh, you only had to sign up for war and travel six thousand miles to meet a tan girl from Minnesota," I said, looking down the foreign girl twirling below my feet.

"Isn't it something?" he said.

"What about what the news is talking about…about the city of Fallujah?"

I was gripping a legal pad that was damp with sweat and a chewed up pen in my hand.

"Oh, I don't know. Just be glad you're in the states and not in that hell hole. I wouldn't know how to explain it to you."

His nurse must have walked in.

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"See you in a few days, brother."

***

I'm taking a shower. It's 11:30, and the audience is laughing on cue with the late night host from the bedroom tube TV, their voices clouding thickly around me with the shower steam and the smell of shampoo.

The night before Isaac left for basic training, he stayed in the shower for an hour-and-a half while a handful of his friends and I played cards on his bare apartment floor. When he finally came out, his hands were wrinkled like a crumpled plastic bag, his eyelids flushed with heat. He looked harsh and older, but carried himself like he was brand new.

"Whew. Sorry, fellas. Thought it might be my last good shower for a while," he said.

My phone is vibrating while I comb my hair, wipe my glasses, and button up my shirt. The message from Isaac says he'll be here in a few minutes.

I survey the apartment one more time. I turn off the televisions and unplug the radio. The reporter's voice cuts off with a spark from the wall outlet. I sit down at Kaye's vanity. The homepage to my blog is open, but I close it. I pull up my file of videos from Isaac. I feel him approaching my apartment as I click through them: Isaac eating a sandwich, the skateboarding kid who never really hurt himself, the soldiers fighting and binge drinking.

I post the video of the men binge drinking in the barracks on the Internet. I give myself the moniker *Mac712*. I turn off the laptop, going so far as to hide it in a kitchen drawer, terrified Isaac will know what has been done as soon as he walks into the apartment. But I am nervously thrilled. I will be the first blogger to respond to the video tomorrow morning; and when everyone

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is talking about the conduct of soldiers, the responsibilities of war and occupation, I will be the first person to come to my brother's defense.

There's a confident knock on the door. I can see Isaac's face though the peephole, distorted through the rounded glass.

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III. Touring the Biltmore, Age 24, 2011

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The Biltmore Estate

The morning we went to the Biltmore, Miranda knocked on my apartment door, the same pair of sunglasses I'm used to seeing perched on her head. When people disappear for a while, I always expect them to return more glamorous, like they've been hiding in the perfumed pages of a magazine all that time. Miranda and I have not lived in the same city for a while. She is close, an hour and a half drive from my apartment in Knoxville, a three hour drive from our destination; but it doesn't seem close to us after going to the same high school and rooming together in college.

"Hi, Janie. Should I whisper? Is Rodney asleep?"

"You don't have to whisper."

I opened the door wide for her to come inside. From across the studio apartment, the bed comforter rose and fell like a marshmallow in the microwave. There was no flash of square ankle or mussed hair; Rodney was completely hidden.

"I'll just grab my purse," I said.

At the kitchen counter, I checked again: bottle of sunscreen, hand sanitizer, a tube of antiseptic. Miranda came up behind me.

"We're going to the nicest house in America, you know."

Rodney's voice called from under the comforter, "Might as well be Ghana to her. Aspirin before you leave."

Miranda went to pay her parking meter while I poured Rodney a glass of water and shook two aspirin into his hand.

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I tried to kiss him, but he rolled the comforter over his body.

We don't have real jobs. Miranda works in a restaurant part-time, where someone's best quality is to never question anything. I work part-time as a teacher's aide. I slide pieces of pulpy construction paper under wire stencils and use a levered press to clip the paper into the shape of acorns, hearts, pumpkins, leaves, birds and houses. I rarely see the children who are using the cutouts to make calendars or booklets. I work next to a microwave and smell cups of soup or plastic cartons of limp pasta all day.

Sometimes I try to stand away from the microwave because I can feel it's perfectly timed churning echoing in my head. I have grown nervous lately, in my box.

I was nervous, too, about the concrete barrier between the eastbound and westbound lanes. The interstate hugs the edge of a mountain so that to one side a craggy rock face tilts over the cars and to the other side, a guardrail separates them from a three hundred foot drop. I concentrated on correcting my impulse to glide from lane to lane.

"Look at that," one of us would say. It was a creek or a weathered barn, or a cluster of black cows.

"Do you think they design interstates so you see only the scenic stuff?" Miranda asked.

"I think there's more undeveloped land out there than we realize."

"Who built the house?" Miranda asked.

"George Vanderbilt."

"George," Miranda repeated, leaning back comfortably in the passenger seat like she was lowering into a beach chair.

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The Banquet Hall

We became attached to an older couple who began the tour at the same time. The man hunched slightly in a khaki windbreaker and plaid button-down. His wife, a petite Asian woman with one thick streak of white hair, smiled at each piece of notable furniture discussed on the audio, as if the house was diligently living up to expectations.

The room was designed after grand, English dining halls, with a fireplace that staggers up several stories and a table that seats sixty-four. Deer heads on either side of the hall gaze across the table at each other, their mouths screwed serenely shut, their eyes as polished as the empty wine glasses displayed on the table. Flemish tapestries hang on the walls. Worn from the years, they now resemble printed throw blankets of horses or forests peddled at gas stations by the interstate. Finally, the audio drew my attention to the flags of the thirteen colonies that George hung on the recesses above the tapestries.

The Asian lady pointed to each flag. She looked at Miranda and me and smiled graciously at one yellow flag with block letters "LIBERTY OR DEATH." The flag was simple, the block letters sewn roughly on top of the yellow fabric.

"It looks like a high school campaign poster," I whispered to Miranda.

Her audio was still on the detailed Flemish tapestries so she answered me with a strange look.

"Did they have looms in the fourteenth century?" she asked against my headset.

Neither of us knew.

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"Those chairs," Miranda said, sweeping a hand at the one hundred ornate chairs in the room, "That is the same fabric we had on a loveseat in my parents' house."

"I doubt it's the *same*," I said.

The rich, dark wood chairs with perfectly straight backs have seats of maroon damask silk imprinted with a flower pattern.

"It's hideous," she said. "I always thought it was."

"Well, it was probably a more regal color at the turn of the century. I expected the wine glasses to be different."

"They're pretty plain. You would have thought maybe they would have crystal goblets."

I agreed, even though I couldn't remember where either one of us might have seen or read about crystal goblets. It sounded like a fantasy prop.

I gazed back at the deer heads until the Asian lady tapped me on the shoulder and indicated that we could go on to the next room if we wanted. People were starting to crowd behind us, the velvet rope dividers swelling closer to the extravagant table.

The Breakfast Room

As the audio says, the breakfast room is smaller and more intimate than the adjacent banquet hall. I felt like a stiff observer of an oil painting, watching myself watch the room. The breakfast room is the first room that looks out on a view of many thousand acres of manicured forest; however, the room itself is dark and closed in with tiny portraits and delicate candlesticks.

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I would not have been surprised if a giant hand had reached through the veranda doors to straighten the furniture, as in a dollhouse.

The audio was glorifying the original Renoir in the room, *Young Algerian Girl*, but I was savoring a sick feeling I got from looking at the wallpaper. The whole room was wallpapered in pressed Spanish leather, and it was beginning to sag and billow in places. A hundred years of southeastern summers had caused it to sweat loose from the wall.

I was almost dizzy; my eyes were beginning to water. Why was I staring at it so hard? It was almost moving.

"That's a lot of dead cows," Miranda said.

"That's kind of sad," I said.

Miranda thought I meant about the cows.

"I like their philosophy about what paintings to hang in the dining room," Miranda said.

"You mean more dining rooms should have Renoirs?"

"No, I mean, they could have hung still lifes of food or animals instead of portraits."

A big woman in purple sweatpants and a jeweled sweatshirt asked us if we'd mind moving over just a pinch. Her chest hung low over her stomach, the rhinestones on her sweatshirt tilted up, gleaming like the hood of a car parked in the sun.

"Look at the little figurines," she told her friend, leaning against a glass curio case, "They're so darling."

The little figurines were porcelain children walking with baskets or puppies. They reminded me of a dentist's office, and I began to obsess over a popping in my left jaw. I've heard that dislocating your jaw is incredibly painful and some patients wear a head brace for months. I

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raised the volume on the audio guide so I couldn't hear the popping behind my ear. The audio was guiding me into the salon, *where they would have rested for afternoon tea.*

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I examined my hairline in the bathroom mirror, my terrycloth robe tied snug against my body. I had dried off after my shower as quickly as possible and put on the robe. If I stand naked even for a minute, I will notice something unusual: a purple bruise I don't remember, a sensitive spot on my breast that is suspicious. But I can't cover up my face, so I found a tiny white spot on my scalp, the size of a fish's eye and cloudy like a fish's eye. The throbbing in my chest began, and I shook my hands to distract myself from the numbing sensation.

When Rodney walked in, I had pulled a few hairs out, enough to draw blood.

"Why are you bleeding?"

He raised the toilet seat. It rang against the porcelain tank.

"Do you see this?"

I stood on tip toe, almost falling into him while he tried to piss.

"What? Do I see what?"

"This *spot*. This white spot."

"Did you pull out *hair*?"

"No, I, it was an accident. Could this be a sunspot?"

"What's a sunspot? Like what my grandmother has?"

"You know."

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I didn't want to suggest it.

"No, know what?"

"Could it be *pre*-cancerous?"

I say the word cancerous with the precise nonchalance of a museum guide pointing to a dinosaur bone and announcing, *from the* Psittacosaurus *species*.

"God, Janie."

He pushed me softly aside and slammed the toilet seat back down.

"You need to see someone."

I followed him out of the bathroom, my throat starting to thicken, my eyes beginning to steam. I popped a knuckle in a pocket of the robe to distract myself.

"I just need you to tell me it isn't *that*."

"How am I supposed to tell you what it is? How the hell do I know?"

He was shoving his keys in his pockets, snapping his watch onto his wrist.

"Just help talk me down."

***

The Salon

"Isn't that that rhinoceros picture?" Miranda asked me at the end of the salon.

Just out of reach of the rope barrier was Albrecht Dürer's *Rhinoceros.* Turns out, it's not that spectacular because the original woodcut is in the British Museum, and this was only a print.

"That *is* the Dürer."

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I was looking at the gilt-framed Dürer, but I had the sensation of the crinkled plastic cover of my high school history binder. I had read about the *Rhinoceros* in some encyclopedia: how Dürer was only given a verbal description of the creature and had never actually seen one when he designed his woodcarving. The representation is incredibly inaccurate. The rhino has scaly armor and an extra horn on its head.

"That was the dorkiest binder," Miranda said.

But I felt a little flattered that George and my fifteen-year-old self had something like the Dürer in common.

The Library

George's library was the most crowded room. People were packed on the one carpet that wasn't roped off. There are two stories of books, rows and rows of perfectly upright, perfectly placed books. The audio tour suggests looking above your head at the paneled artwork that comprises the entire ceiling. The painted ceiling was once located in a palace in Venice. *The library looks up into the heavens. If you look closely enough, you can see the lines where the panels meet.*

The closest books were still far enough behind the ropes that it was hard for us to make out titles.

"Florentine drawings. . ."

"Swift, I think that one says Swift."

"How many do you think George actually read?"

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Mr. Vanderbilt was an avid reader, spending long hours among his book collection. He would often share titles with the guests in his house.

Napoleon's chess set is on display in the room. It sits on a little gaming table that also held Napoleon's heart briefly during his autopsy. The rooks are not geometrical pieces like the chess set my brother and I balanced on my living room sofa, but little men, one foot set in front of the other, going somewhere.

"The board's painted on the table," Miranda said, squinting across the cautious distance it is positioned from the crowds.

"They must have taken the pieces off to set down the heart."

"See, they need some ghost stories on this tour. All we've learned is how cultured they were."

"There's a slanted book," I said, pointing up to the top row on the second story.

"What?"

"All ten thousand books are perfectly packed. Except that one."

"Like someone strolled in and borrowed a book."

"And is reading it in an empty room somewhere."

On the way out, Miranda bumped her purse against a blue and white ceramic bowl on the floor near the rope. The tour guide standing next to us involuntarily stuck out her arm, but the urn was too heavy to tip over, the size and weight comparable to the base of a marble, courthouse column.

"Sorry, what is that?" Miranda asked the guide who was inching the rope barrier forward.

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"A ceramic fish bowl from the Ming dynasty. In the winter they kept fish inside the palace in these bowls to keep them warm."

"And *that's* not on the audio tour?"

Miranda squeezed her purse like it was a towel pulled warm from the dryer.

The Grand Staircase

Coming out of the library, we were back in the atrium filled with tourists checking in, wiping down the headphones for their audio tours, shifting diaper bags and jackets. Two more school tours were filing in. The kids looked restless and itchy, already clutching at the velvet rope dividers, dipping their heads under until a woman's finger snapped or another little hand pulled their jacket hood back to the other side. The Asian lady busily calculated how many rooms were left in her guide.

"How do you think the Vanderbilts would have felt about all these people coming to see their house?" Miranda asked as we ascended the cantilevered grand staircase, our silhouettes passing in front of a view of the manicured lawn and the shallow reflection pools.

"I think George Vanderbilt is rolling over in his grave."

"*Ha*." Miranda pulled her headphones down. "Why?"

"Because this place was magnificent and opulent because it was made for a *few* people. An entire forest was landscaped for one family to look at from its balcony. Now, a million people see it every year. It's like Graceland."

"Only, people bring flowers to Graceland."

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We sat down on a bench for tourists at the top of the stairs before going on into the second floor rooms. Miranda pulled a handful of M&Ms from her purse.

"Don't let them see you eat them."

I was careful to let the M&M melt in my mouth before I swallowed it so I didn't have a choking reflex. I had been too afraid to eat anything alone but soup and smoothies lately. Rodney had already slapped me on the back while I coughed up bits of food twice. After one of the incidences I cried for twenty minutes, clawing my way through the refrigerator, dumping slivers of chicken, stems of raw broccoli and chunks of sourdough bread down the garbage disposal.

***

The fighting is the only thing that is worse.

I ran after him, the muscles in my legs rolling perfectly, my heart expanding with a full certainty, the damp, night air spinning in and out of my lungs with the efficiency of a turbine. I was flushed, almost happy, when I reached him, pawing at the back of his rain jacket. He jerked his arm away from me.

"I'm not doing this tonight. I'm tired," he said.

The taillights on his car blinked and the door locks snapped up.

"I'm sorry. I won't talk like that anymore. I can get over it."

"If you could, you would have."

His car was parked on a viaduct over railroad tracks. I've never been able to tell if you can see the headlight or hear the engine bellow first as a train approaches.

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But the bellow drained out the sound of Rodney clicking on the ignition from the front seat. I wedged myself between the door and Rodney and leaned into his chest, the rain jacket draped across it like a plastic tarp protecting something in repair.

"I'll do whatever."

"I know," he laid a hand on the top of my head. "You've got to know that it scares other people. It's stressful. No one wants to think about that stuff."

"I know."

"And it's unhealthy enough on its own."

"I know."

He agreed to come back inside. We walked the length of the viaduct as the last two train cars rattled underneath. My hamstring shuddered like the string accidently grazed at the end of a chord.

***

Mrs. Vanderbilt's Bedroom

The school group caught up with us in Mrs. Vanderbilt's overly lush purple and gold bedroom. We tried not to look put out by the fifth graders, who by their slumped shoulders and cautiously wide eyes, obviously wanted to gather for ice cream sandwiches on the front lawn rather than listen to the tour guide talk about how many times a day Edith Vanderbilt changed outfits. Eight, by the way.

I had not been around so many young kids in months. I visited Asheville often, always had, and saw the Biltmore when I was nine or ten. But I didn't remember any of the details from

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the audio. I remembered the indoor swimming pool, a room of pristine, white tiles fanning from the deepest part of the pool to the highest seam in the ceiling. Standing in that room was like standing in the belly of the whale, a cluster of fake palm trees around the diving board the sprig of parsley caught in the pile of fish bones. I remembered the billiard room, as textured as the inside of a box marbles, dark creases left in the leather couches and glints of light sparking off the whisky decanters and bronze-lipped pool tables. At nine or ten, the Biltmore housed every grand feeling I would experience one day.

"EdithVanderbilt was our age and hung out in her room all day changing clothes. That's not too different."

"Only because we don't have jobs. My parents are going to be paying half my rent until I'm forty and finally old enough to work the Revlon counter," Miranda said.

Later over ice cream in the renovated horse stable, Miranda talked more about not having jobs.

"And you grow up learning about world landmarks like they're preparing you to be a tourist when you get older, and how many people we know have actually gone? Going to Rome is supposed to be so easy. It's supposed to be my right," Miranda slurped the last of the chocolate ice cream from the bottom of the cone.

She looked through a set of stable doors at the Biltmore house, which stood as the only interruption to garden hedges and thousands of acres of sparsely forested hillside.

"Old drive-through cups make me nervous. I've started avoiding walking by them in parking lots. I get this, this sensation," I clawed at the bottom of my lip. "Like someone is forcing me to chew on that nasty, sticky Styrofoam."

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Miranda looked down at my Styrofoam cup of ice cream. I had let most of it melt in the sun. I had no appetite for it.

The Louis XV Room

"I will not deliver my children on purple velvet. That will not even be an option open to me," I said.

The room was the crowning element of the house. It had the only front balcony, which looked out onto the lawn that stretched flat and green before a series of ornate stairs raised the lawn to a pavilion, like the polished curves of a violin. The Louis XV room was also the birthing room for both of Edith Vanderbilt's children. The bedspread, like Edith Vanderbilt's own bedroom colors, was rich purple velvet with gold tassels.

"I'm sure they had different bedding for the births."

Miranda and I agreed we felt profoundly unspecial. It was if we had been led, late in the beginning of our lives, to the one and only birthing room. That something damning about ourselves had been revealed, here, in a room in a city not entirely unfamiliar to us, only fifteen miles from the first concert hall we ever went to, where we sucked down syrupy vodka drinks, felt the weight of our presence in high heels, and called passionately for the first time over crashing music so loud that pressure pushed out and pressed in on our almost bare chests, never knowing we would return to the city to feel so small.

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If I sat down on the floor of this room, someone would come and put a forceful hand under my arm. If I reached for a porcelain doll on the fireplace mantle, someone would come and take it away, rub off my fingerprints and push me out the door.

It was the first place where there could be no record of my existence or tolerance of my past.

My jaw was not popping, my throat constricted and expanded when I swallowed, as effortlessly as a bird landing on a tree branch. I was in a birthing room, and not even my birthing room but Cornelia Vanderbilt's birthing room, and no stranger had been allowed to collapse here.

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IV. The Brotherhood of Distinguished Motorists

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Feller woke with a dry throat. Patting his chest, he felt the polyester of his high school baseball jersey. His radius of reality expanded around him, pieces clunking into place. He was still wearing cargo shorts, the keys to the trophy shop hitched to the belt loop. A flip flop was on his left foot, but he had kicked the right one to the floor. His bull mastiff rustled at the side of the bed, the chain collar clinking in the dog's restless sleep. When he threw aside his left arm, hoping to crack his back, he almost elbowed Abigail in the collar bone.

Petite with a little baby fat on her forearms, Abigail worked at the trophy shop. She lay on top of the comforter, curled into the fetal position, her arms pressed between her legs, which were still covered in buttoned jeans. Feller looked over her shape, small and soft, unassuming, polite; even in her sleep she tried to make herself as unobtrusive as possible. He felt guilty that she was here.

Certain he hadn't woken Abigail, Feller rolled onto his back, blocking the sunlight out with the crook of his arm. Down the street from his apartment was Gully's, a bar. Next door to Gully's was a consignment shop where Feller bought a walking cane for a Halloween costume last year. One more mail slot down was the Southern Region Brotherhood of Distinguished Motorists. The lettering on the door read "Taxonomy," leftover from its history as a deer and small game stuffing salon.

A haphazard gentlemen's club of sorts, the Motorists were a group of seventy-year-old men who had street raced in the late 60s, and as they grew older and rounder and accrued more money, they came to rent a space downtown where they could reminisce about street racing and park their GTO Sport Coupes in the adjacent alley on muggy summer evenings. The alley was, incidentally, licensed for four water taps by the mayor, a Motorist himself, and this is where the

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mayor's fellow motorist Gene Campbell was rinsing and waxing down his baby when Feller sulked out of Gully's the night before.

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Feller's tab had been larger than he expected, and this one girl — a curly blond with thick lines of eye makeup — had once again hovered coyly by his bar stool, talking loudly to her bartender friend about her impending break-up with the tax attorney boyfriend.

Three evenings of watching the girl's rump angled above her bar stool as she reached for cocktail napkins and straws, and Feller left Gully's alone at half past nine that Thursday after she'd taken off to make a television drama deadline with Rob the tax attorney.

"Hey champ," Mr. Campbell said, flagging down Feller with a rag he had been swirling in a can of car wax.

Feller had seen the Motorists out before, at their Fourth of July picnics and their Saturday night rumbles. (Both hot dogs and lawn chairs and coolers of Red Stripe bottles tucked into the pristine trunk interiors.)

"Howdy, Mr. Campbell," Feller called, assuming the swag of the young and bright-eyed. "How's she faring?"

"Damn radio dial fell off. Just popped off turning on the I-40 ramp, like a fat man's button." Mr. Campbell patted his own generous belly. "But that's women for you."

Feller shifted his weight, gauging how long he should talk to the retired software salesman known to be friendly but long-winded.

"Say, have you ever been to Kentucky?" Mr. Campbell barreled on, hitching up his pleated khakis and laying the waxing rag across the fender before propping up his right foot.

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"Sure, I guess. Went a couple of times in college for away games," Feller said, instinctively groping for his pitching shoulder and giving it a routine rub.

"Well, I've got a mighty complicated situation about Kentucky."

Feller imagined a classic automotive show, a conference center lobby full of 60's hubcaps and 60's pistons and 60's steering wheels and Gene stuffing his khaki pockets full of radio dials before dashing from the building, and speeding away across state boundaries.

"Gambling's my problem," Mr. Campbell said with a weak laugh. "I never bet too much, no sir. But a couple hundred, 'bout equal to whatever the wife spent at the department store that month, and I usually come out on top."

"I should be so lucky," Feller said.

"Oh, and I was. Lady Luck did one over on me. Won 8,000 dollars last week. One to a thousand odds or something."

Mr. Campbell grappled with the back of his shirt collar and took in another breath, his story both exhilarating and exhausting for him.

"But I can't keep it, son. Just can't keep it."

"The money? Of course you can. It's yours. You won it."

"The wife, she doesn't know I gamble, for one. Besides, she's gotten her heart set on moving to Florida. We've got a daughter down there about your age, and Emmy she's gone and researched on this retirement community. Now, I want her to be happy, but if she knew we had even a little nest egg. . . ."

Mr. Campbell gazed over the alley, which was glistening from the leaky water hoses. There were two mechanics benches shoved against the side of the old taxonomy office, a bottle

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of antifreeze hung on a hook by the backdoor so stray animals wouldn't get to it, and Gene's car was encircled by a halo of street light reflecting off the chrome details.

"I was thinking a neighborhood man like yourself could use it," Mr. Campbell said, "I'm sure it had to be a little tough, opening that trophy shop, what one, two years out of school?"

Feller only had to count three months of pitching minor league ball, a now strange and unfamiliar collection of dry Arizona afternoons and chilled nights spent in an extended-residence hotel, drinking watered-down scotch and Gatorade with roommate and second baseman Nick Abby, a Nebraska boy with wide front teeth, freckles like war paint across his cheekbones and a penchant for chubby, bow-legged girls. Three months and then he was back to his hometown, a sling around his shoulder and no plan except to somehow remove the black tarp covering 406 Third Street, a slit of forgotten commercial space that was backwards, the front of the narrow store facing the alley below his apartment.

"Less than a year," Feller said. "I broke her in quick."

"Well, surely the rent on that place is a hassle. I mean, it ain't pretty down here, but that's a fine old building —."

"Mr. Campbell, that's nice, but uh, I can't just take that money. Send some to your daughter or something."

"Well, alright."

Mr. Campbell dropped his foot to the ground and dug in his khaki pockets.

"But I'm at least going to give you a bit for a night out. You seem like a good young man."

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And as when anyone shared this sentiment with him, the same slideshow reeled across Feller's mind.

The black Volvo, side door curled in on itself; the car smoking, plunged into a shallow embankment; a little gold chip — A watch clasp? A filling? — sliding down the driver's window. Sliding, sliding slowly, the only movement from behind the gray glass.

His flannel shirt cuff getting stuck in the smashed door handle.

Feller swaying, crouched down on his feet, one eye focusing on the fibers. Just trying to pluck those green fibers from the heart of the mess.

Casting the blue cell phone light on the packed dirt; rubbing with the tree limb, rubbing any shoe prints away.

The dashboard of the Jeep, glowing, alert and watchful.

The drunken words repeated against the steering wheel, *This is the helm of my life. I am in control. Helm, control. Control.*

"Thanks, Mr. Campbell. I shouldn't, but thanks."

Mr. Campbell folded two one-hundred dollar bills into Feller's hand and returned to the classic car, massaging wax onto the hood.

***

Feller went back inside Gully's. It was now 10 o'clock and the specials were over, but he handed a hundred to Roger behind the counter.

He wanted whiskey and coke. But he ordered vodka soda.

"And can you put it in a plastic cup, man?"

"You walking out on me?" Roger asked.

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"No. I just…plastic, please. Just for tonight."

He had meant to stop drinking, but instead, he changed colors, hid behind clear liquors. A different man, a less brutal man doesn't drink whiskey.

A football game played on the TV. There was snow falling in front of the camera, and the players seemed to move behind a film of two-dimensional static, their figures flickering from corner to corner of the screen.

"White wine, I guess."

It was Abigail. She gave him a hesitant half-wave from two stools down.

"Did you just leave the shop?" Feller mumbled into his drink.

Feller always made Abigail stay late because he didn't want to and she couldn't say no.

"Yeah, you just get here?" she said.

"Y-yup."

A drawl and clip framed the word. If Nick Abby ever asked Feller if he could have the room for the night: y-yup.

"Sorry about that then. Making you stay late," Feller said.

***

The trophy shop looked impeccable when Feller opened the doors. He built the display shelves, the register counter and a wall of racks for baseball bats. He only sold children's bats for the pee wee league. Older brothers and sisters would come in to pick up their trophy ordered by a coach, and the little sibling would beg and beg for their own bat.

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Feller spent three weeks sanding and painting, completely invisible from the street behind black trash bags taped to the windows. He listened to an old boom box he found in his parent's basement and wore his flannel shirts from high school. Only a couple of the buttons were able to snap at the bottom where his shoulders were still muscular from the minor league.

Several high school boys applied to work at the shop, but Feller hired a retired friend of his father's, a single mother who he never saw without a Diet Coke in hand, and two college girls, including Abigail. She admitted in the interview that she had never played sports.

"You don't really need any awards to sell trophies," Feller said.

He hired her. She didn't talk much, and when she did it was about things she heard on the news. Listening to her was like listening to the radio.

Earlier that night, before the blonde and Mr. Campbell, Feller was pulling down a box of bowling trophies in the storeroom. The miniature bowlers were shaped from a brittle, hollow plastic spray painted metallic gold. A sharp seam ran down the side of their heads to their right feet, poised behind them, mid-roll.

A phantom pain in his pitching shoulder — a reminder that had nothing to do with a baseball injury — shivered. Feller dropped the box.

One bowler broke. Feller stared at the gold figure, its side cracked open to reveal a brown inside, smothered in glue resin. Its head, with a thick ripple of hair, remained intact, staring ahead at the pins; but the figure's back had splintered into several pieces along the decorative creases in the shirt, into little gold chips.

"Oh, no. At least it's just the one."

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Abigail had walked up behind him. She hurriedly began stacking the bowlers back into the box. Then she raked the little plastic splinters in her palm.

"Good thing we always order an extra, huh?"

She tossed the plastic chips into a wastebasket.

"Did you store that box?" Feller asked. "There should have been a strip of mailing tape across the top. There's a note on the door reminding everyone."

"I — don't remember," she said.

"Doesn't matter now," he said. "You should be out front in case someone walks in. I'll take care of this."

He waited until he was ready to leave the store before he asked Abigail to put extra tape on all the boxes in the storeroom.

***

"It's ok," Abigail said, "Making me stay late, I mean. You stress me out sometimes, you know."

"Are you saying you like *my* store better when I'm not in it?"

"I think it just seems like you don't like working around other people."

He could tell it was hard for her to criticize him because she didn't know how to hurt another person, even in fun.

Abigail started collecting her things, slowly assembling her sweater, her purse, her cell phone.

"Hey, wait," Feller said. "Don't you want to stick around and learn something?"

"What am I going to learn?"

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"How to make a hundred dollars disappear."

He placed Mr. Campbell's Kentucky one-hundred dollar bill on the table.

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The morning after the hit-and-run, Feller woke with the flannel shirt laid carefully across his pillow. He had choked dry sobs into the fabric, he remembered, as he tried to go to sleep. He threw the shirt in the trash bin beside Nick Abby's bed, where his teammate was still snoring. After chugging a glass of water and searching for aspirin in his gym bag, he braced himself for the news. He never saw anything about it on the Phoenix news. The thirteen hours he slept had bumped the story out of rotation, if it had ever been there.

He pitched a ball at 92 mph that afternoon, a team record.

"Not doing so good, coach. Gonna quit."

And he was on a plane a day later. He put the sling on his pitching arm before he met his parents and sister in the airport. Nick Abby's Jeep was still in Phoenix for all he knew.

***

"Why a trophy shop?" Abigail asked, gently rotating the base of her third wine glass. Swish, swish, like windshield wipers.

"I don't know. I played sports. I wanted to give kids trophies."

"And you hurt your arm, right, so you couldn't play anymore?"

"Y-yup. But I pitched 92 miles per hour before I went out. That's impressive, in case you didn't know. . ."

"Oh, okay."

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Abigail rested her hand on Feller's right arm. He thought about pulling away but could imagine the staggered scrape of his chair against the floor as he jerked away and could feel the chilly air clap him as he opened the door. Mr. Campbell wouldn't be outside. He'd be alone, feeling like a jerk.

He tugged on a piece of her hair and leaned forward.

"You're impressed aren't you?"

***

"Oh, man. A deer did that?"

Nick Abby had paced circles around his Jeep, not unlike Gene Campbell with his waxing rag.

"I probably could have stopped if I hadn't been hammered. I'm so sorry. I'll send you some money to help with it."

It felt only marginally better to take some responsibility for what had happened.

"The damn thing must have skidded across the hood. I didn't even know they had deer here."

"I think so. It's fuzzy, man."

Opening and closing the front door to check the interior, Nick Abby called from in the cab. "Hey don't worry about it. Don't worry about the money either. I'm just glad that you're untouched. Can you imagine if your arm had gotten jacked? You'd be out of Phoenix tomorrow."

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On the flight over, Feller told himself over and over *It was a deer. A deer. A stag.* And he rested his head against the back of the seat, recreating the scene with an oily black stag, dark as night, flinging itself into the windshield, undetected until the prongs cracked against the glass and the Jeep shook.

He repeated this exercise night after night. The night before he opened the trophy shop, the stag flew in the windshield and then he saw the chip of debris sliding, sliding from where its antlers impelled the glass.

***

Abigail tripped on the stairs up to his apartment, and her elbow started bleeding. He poured two glasses of water while she washed up in the bathroom.

"I can't stand blood, I'm sorry," Feller said.

He handed her a towel and shut the door behind him.

She complained about the elbow in a drunk way as they watched television, a premise to move closer on the couch. If he rubbed against it, she drew a loud breath of air.

"Everyone at work is going to think you cracked it with one of those kiddie bats."

"That's stupid."

"No, it's not. You're a jerk at work. I could have messed up an order and *bam*!"

She pretended to swing a bat into Feller's side.

"You're doing it wrong," he said, grasping the back of her arms.

As he touched her wrists together, he thought how horrible, how disruptive, it would be if he squeezed the bruised elbow.

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It wasn't until well after he heard her sharp breath that he realized he was squeezing the bruised elbow.

***

Feller called Nick Abby for the first time since he left Phoenix the day he bought the trophy store. He thought as long as he was in this new place, maybe he could hear whatever Nick had to say.

"Hullo."

Nick sounded beat from practice, a familiar exhaustion.

Feller asked about the team, hardly listening to Nick's locker room anecdotes, before he asked about the Jeep.

"Oh, she's fine. A hailstorm a couple of weeks ago made the auto shop a pain in my ass, so I took the opportunity to drive up to Las Vegas for a weekend while my cousin worked on it. I don't think I can handle that city for another decade."

"Oh, yeah?"

Feller began looking at the naked dry wall, planning his display shelves.

***

"I'm sorry," Feller said to Abigail, letting go of her elbow.

She should walk out, Feller thought.

"It's ok. You're not so bad," she said. "You seem like a good guy. Just a little rough."

He would have respected her if she had left. He was giving her all the clues that she was walking around a crime scene, but she just smiled politely.

Volvo, green fibers, Jeep dashboard.

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"Can I tell you something?" Feller asked, gently cupping the injured elbow.

Overcompensating, Abigail opened her eyes wide and looked deeply at Feller.

"Hmm?"

Feller shook his head, unsure whether he should tell her.

"I didn't hurt my arm playing baseball and that's why I have trophy store for kids."

"Then why do you have a trophy store?"

"No, no. I lied about my arm."

He waited for the sharp disapproval of a smart girl.

"Ok, so? You didn't want to play baseball?"

"I had to get out of Phoenix."

She moved her elbow away.

"Were you in trouble?"

"Yes. . ."

Feller looked down at the water glass and could see his fingerprints at the base.

"For gambling. I was in trouble for gambling."

"Oh, well, everyone has faults," she said.

She reached to grasp his pitching arm and leaned in to kiss him. He took her elbow; she pressed a palm against his chest. He moved his right hand behind her neck; she took the water from his left, enclosing him in skin and hair and fabric as she reached to set the glass on the table behind him.

***

Feller carefully rose from the bed and slowly opened the door to his apartment. He

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walked down to the alley, but Mr. Campbell wasn't there, of course. In the morning, the Motorist alley held a couple of trash bins waiting to be picked up. Feller thought about leaving what was left of the two hundred dollars somewhere, but he figured someone else would find it before Mr. Campbell.

He rinsed down the alley with one of the water hoses so that it glistened the way it had the night before. Without the chrome edges of the car to spray, the exercise lost its meaning. Feller wanted to move on before Abigail came down. If they were lucky, she wouldn't really remember what happened.

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VITA

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