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Woman by the Water and Other Stories

Anne Barngrover



THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

WOMAN BY THE WATER AND OTHER STORIES

By

ANNE BARNGROVER

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The members of the Committee approve the Thesis of Anne Barngrover defended on February 25, 2011.

Elizabeth Stuckey-French
Professor Directing Thesis

Julianna Baggott
Committee Member

David Kirby
Committee Member

The Graduate School has verified and approved the above named committee members.

DEDICATION

For my Southern and Midwestern families, for all that you do.

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ABSTRACT

Woman by the Water and Other Stories is a collection of four short stories that range in setting from a touristy beach town in the Florida Gulf to a party school in northern Appalachia, and from old-fashioned Midwestern suburbia to a farming homestead in pre-Depression era Iowa. The common thread among them is that each story is narrated by a young woman who is embroiled in a dilemma that usually ends up being largely by her own making. Furthermore, the style of each story relies heavily on its narrative voice and point of view. I believe that my work fits in to the larger dialogue of contemporary women's literature that places value on story-telling, familial and relationship issues, self-identity and, ultimately, raw narrative honesty, even if it traditionally may seem "unbecoming" for female characters.

Woman by the Water and Other Stories

By
Anne Barngrover

This next song is for people who are too bad to be good, and too good to be bad.

~Dolly Parton

Woman by the Water

The morning before Hurricane Charley roughed up the Florida gulf like the meanest, most whiskey-drunk sonofabitch in any smoke-stained Dirty South bar, I cheated on my husband for the third time.

I guess it'd been a mistake for us to move here. "But Rosie, baby, you always said you loved the ocean," my husband Jackson spluttered this one night at dinner a few weeks ago when I first started shredding my napkin and acting all fidgety like my back was plugged with baby chiggers. Actually I never really did used to say that about the ocean, but I figure it was implied because I'd always buy us these little corked shower gels with names like "Sea Island Cotton" and "Sandalwood Fig," and because, for our honeymoon five years ago, the only real vacation we've ever been on, I picked Orange Beach over Vegas no question. Jackson got sun poisoning so bad he grew cankles, and our bay-side condo smelled like a bucket of dead fish mixed with Lysol.

That was when I cheated on Jackson for the first time. We met this guy "Giddyup Dave" at the Flora-Bama, and he kept buying me Jell-O shots whenever Jackson had his back turned. I had a purple "Youngin'" stamped on my hand because back then I wasn't even twenty-one. The way the night went I ended up going at it with Giddyup Dave in a bathroom stall. It was the annual Orange Beach Mullet Toss Festival, and he had certainly grown himself one proud mullet for the occasion. The bastard also gave me crabs, and looking back I'm lucky as hell I didn't catch anything worse from him, like a fetus. I had to fake a migraine for a week so that I wouldn't pass them on to my new husband.

You'd think, from all that, I would've learned.

Over the past summer, Jackson moved us from Tallahassee to this trashy snowbird town off the south Florida gulf where he got a job as a music teacher for the one high school that could actually afford music classes because it was for all the little jits whose parents transferred them down from Michigan after every summer. "We really lucked out," Jackson kept saying, his eyes lit up behind those big rimmed glasses that used to get your head slammed into a locker but are now supposed to look cool, like showing that you survived. "With no competition from the other schools, I'm just really

gonna utilize their resources and revamp the program from the ground up.” He always used those two words, “revamp” and “utilize,” when he talked about his new job, and then he’d see that look on my face and start sweet-talking, “Now, baby, don’t think there aren’t any Ruby Tuesdays on the gulf shore that need you as the sexiest waitress around. Hell, I bet they have a million pirate-themed crab shacks missin’ this hot little *mamacita* serving up some shrimp scampi and margaritas right about now.” He’d roll his r’s and I’d lean forward and purr in his ear, “Believe me baby, nobody’s missing that.”

Now I’m not one of those typical beach-crazed girls; that’s not my problem. I’m not a city girl or a country girl or a desert girl or a mountain girl either. And I didn’t cheat on my husband with three different men because I’m a barfly or a black heart or a lifelong fling. All I know is that the three times it’s happened—first with Giddyup Dave; second with Jackson’s married cousin, Matty “The Meat” Hall, two years ago at a family reunion in Panama City; and third, here—I’ve been by the water. The water does something to me. It hustles underneath my skin, settles into my bones and fills me up with a restlessness I can’t even begin to explain.

That, and there was Chase the assistant marine biologist, who worked at the local resort’s sea life exhibition and had a body that hit me harder than a great white shark in a tidal wave.

I first met Chase when we moved down here in late August, back when the sand crusted over and burned the skin of your bare toes. I was bartending five nights a week at this shithole where they kept flabby, googly-eyed fish in dirty tanks and fueled the local crazies with ten cent pool and cocktails like “Dead Bastard” and “Unprotected Sex on the Beach.” Jackson, on the faker side of town, was busy “revamping” and “utilizing” during the day like a pro. We pretty much only saw each other in the single digit hours when we were usually too bushed for sex anyway, which made him get all cranky and me kind of sluggish with random times of annoyance and nausea.

For those first few weeks, after all the unpacking got done, I spent most of my days laying out at the beach, trying to avoid getting sand kicked in my face by the day-drunk vacationers pitching Frisbee nearby, and reading whatever half-priced shit Jackson brought home—you know, those books of “contemporary” short stories always written by some dick-wagger named Richard or Raymond or Donald. Sometimes I’d go in the

water as far up as my eyebrows, but then I'd get freaked out and come paddling back, limbs flailing like a drowning dog, and nearly hyperventilating with saltwater gushing out my nose. I guess you could say I'm an "all or nothing" kind of girl. As evening'd set in I'd pack up my stuff and sneak into the local resort's swanky spa locker room that had pearly marble sinks and little bags of lavender potpourri I'd steal to put in my underwear drawer. I'd quick shower and change there before catching the bus to work all night in deep-fried humidity where some crackhead was always slurring that my eyes are a real unnatural shade of blue.

A week into this routine I had a later shift and some time to kill, so on my way into the locker room one night I started kind of wandering around this little touristy marine life exhibit they'd set up next to the beachside Tiki bar that was bedazzled with tons of fake-ass conch shells. At the help desk stood a peroxide blonde woman with a fat neck and acrylic nails. I didn't look her in the eye and tried to seem all laid-back like I owned the place—you know, nonchalant as hell. She spoke with a baby voice so I didn't trust her. I was always afraid she was going to rat me out for using the locker room and not actually belonging to the resort. Lucky for me, though, at the time she was busy thumbing brochures for a family that reminded me of those people who take Christmas card photos in the sand while dressed all in khaki and holding matching Bibles.

My flip-flops smacking against the concrete floor, I walked over to the topless saltwater tank that seemed to be a watery cross-cut of everything both nasty and beautiful in the entire Florida gulf. I leaned over on my tip-toes. This tank was nothing like the ones at the bar where I'm sure those glum fish will be swallowing an eight ball one day. But here there were fat starfish suctioned to the tank's sides; hermit crabs scuttling underneath rocks; long, dark blobs pulsating like slugs on steroids; clam shells that were clamped shut at the bottom, others that zoomed backwards, and others still that looked like they were chattering away. There were purple spike-balls; chunks of coral like old, wrinkled brains; and even this tiny octopus clinging to the glass side of the tank, its eight squiggly little legs splayed out as though it alone should be the sea star.

"You can touch them if you want, you know." I glanced up to see this young guy in an intense turquoise Polo and bright white visor. He grinned at me from across the tank. It was a kind of slanted smirk, almost as if he knew something I didn't.

“Huh?”

He scooted around to my side of the tank. “You can touch the stuff in there,” he repeated. “Nothing’ll hurt you.” His skin was sun-cooked like a lifeguard’s, and the hair on his arms was light blonde, almost gold.

“I’m not worried about anything in there hurting *me*,” I said. It came out with more of a bite than I meant it to, and for a second I felt kind of bad. “I just don’t want to hurt *them*.”

“Gotcha.” His eyes were green—not gray-green or hazel but actually green for real—and his teeth looked like he slept with those white strips on every night for a year. Goddamnit, he even had dimples. “Want to see a trick?”

I didn’t mean to I swear, but I noticed myself twisting a wet-tangled lock of hair around one finger and doing that little pop thing with my shoulder that I’ve learned to perfect since high school when around a hot guy. Jackson’s cousin “The Meat” had practically drooled over it. “Girl, that thing you do with your shoulder is breaking my heart,” he’d told me while unhooking my zebra-print bra. “*Breaking* my heart.”

“Sure, what the hell.”

“Alright then.” He dipped his hand into the tank and pulled up one of the clamped shut clam shells. “Look at this.” He held it towards me flat in his palm, and when I leaned forward it squirted a stream of cold water directly into my face.

“Jesus Christ!” I yelped, and swatted my face with my hands. But I was laughing, and he was laughing, and in that moment there it was, and I knew in the way you just *know* something deep down, there was no use turning back now.

He set the clam back into the tank, wiped his hand on his pant leg and held it out for me to shake. “Chase. Figured I should introduce myself after ruining your mascara or whatever.”

I shook it. “Rosita.” Little shoulder pop. “And it’s waterproof, for those us who can’t predict what happens all the time.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Rosita, huh? That’s a pretty name...sounds Spanish.”

I nodded. “Well, I usually go by Rosie. But yeah, my mom was Mexican.” He raised his eyebrows even higher until they disappeared under the rim of the visor. I get that a lot: my hair, *red*, my eyes, *blue*, my skin, freckled even after all this sun when it

should turn the color of Coca-Cola. Not a trace of a Hispanic trill in my voice. I don't even like tacos. But that's what happens when you grow up as the only daughter of an Irish Catholic Confederate with the last name of McDaniels and a fire-and-brimstone belief that English is the only language that should be spoken in the entire world, much less in north Florida. You're Rosita Maria McDaniels for the first two decades years of your life, and then you're dropping out of two-year community college to marry Jackson Hall, the bass player in an "indie alternative rock" band called Resist String Cheese—who introduces you to hummus, bandana scarves and menus without decimal places, who washes your hair in the shower and croons to your vulnerable heart while kissing your navel—and who you somehow convince yourself is the only thing in this whole world that will save you.

My mother, the Mexican: Dosinda Maria Garcia McDaniels. I should explain.

All my memories of her are from when I was a little kid, before she went and got herself so fucked up that she walked right out of a bar and into the street without even looking. One coked-out, pancake-ass bitch, I would think on the days I hated her, started calling myself Rosie instead of Rosita and wished I could claw out my middle name that belonged to her as well.

What I do remember the most about her, though, was when she would spend hours waxing and tweezing her eyebrows into these perfect high black arches like parentheses. The light from her cosmetic mirror would cast an orange glow on her face, and it almost scared me how beautiful she was with her hair and eyebrows and eyes black-black with the black swoops across her eyelids and her cheekbones cut sharp like Cleopatra's. "What do you think, *Rosita*?" she'd ask, peering at me through the mirror, where I'd be sitting on the bathroom tile, suckling on a Jet Puff marshmallow. "Do I look like *La llorona*, baby girl? Good enough to kill a man?"

She'd say this like it was just something to say, but it wasn't till years later that I learned the real story of this Mexican ghost whose name meant "the crying one." She was some Indian peasant who slept with a noble and drowned her two kids when he left her for a rich broad. Classic pissed-off gold digger. Of course, then, she was doomed to roam the rivers and beaches of Mexico forever, shrouded in black, bawling her head off

for what she'd done. That is, except when she seduced any man who was dumb or drunk enough to try. Sometimes she'd have her way with them first. Other times, I guess, they would just plain drop dead the moment they saw her face. Even dead, ghostly and wailing, they say she was still the most beautiful woman in the world.

Now that takes chops.

But as beautiful-to-kill as she was, whenever Dad came home at night my mom would shrink into her own black shroud, and would cower at his feet, right there on the dirty tile floor while he hollered "chonga!" and "wetback!" and "whore!" I didn't know those words, but I did know they were barbed with enough meanness and hate to rock somebody to their core. I'd barricade myself in my room and plug my fingers into my ears, curl myself so that I was small. I could never understand how she and my dad ever got together in the first place, even for those twelve minutes or however long it took to make me, and even more so that he'd been guilted into staying with us afterwards. But I guess stranger things do happen; I mean, I myself ended up with Jackson by my own free will, after all.

When I was thirteen, though, the year that she died, I have my last real memory of my mom. It was when she let me wax my own eyebrows for the first time. She heated up all this sticky yellow beeswax in the microwave and pinched my arm if I squirmed because otherwise I might end up with half an eyebrow or something and have to wear a paper bag for a month. But I remember also, after she jerked away the strip of wax, she pressed her fingertip down over the spot that hurt, and while I could still feel it throbbing, right then in that moment I couldn't tell exactly if it was a part of me, or a part of her.

The second time I saw Chase was a week later on a day so muggy it felt like I was trying to breathe through a wet rag. I was walking along the shore, picking through shells, kelp and bottles of Coors Light when I came across the most freakish, dried-up little *thing* I had ever seen. It was the same color and feel as a sand dollar and could almost be a starfish except that, sticking out from its tiny circular center, were five spindly limbs twisted into the cramp of a pinwheel. I gently picked up the thing by its center between my thumb and forefinger, placed it flat on my palm and just kind of

squinted at it like a fool for about a minute. It almost looked like five worms got smashed together by their ends, like an alien washed up on shore.

“Brittle star.” Chase bounced it lightly in his hand. Today he was wearing a sherbet orange Polo and the same goony white visor. But underneath it, his eyes were green like the time I took three shots of absinthe straight from the bottle. “You’re right to think it’s some kind of starfish, though,” he said. “Brittle stars are very rare. It’s the second class of starfish, called Ophiuridea. The first is Asteroidea, which includes your basic sea stars, you know, the Beaded, the Netted, the Spiny Beaded, the Sugar...” He grinned in a kind of embarrassed way and handed it back to me. “Sorry, that’s probably a little more information than you needed to know. Promise I’m not showboating—I just get excited when I get a real chance to bust out the obscure Advanced Zoology knowledge, ya know? And with that hurricane coming in soon, you can bet that a bunch more crazy stuff is gonna get washed up on shore. It’s like Biketoberfest for us marine life bros.”

I took back the brittle star. “That’s ok; I actually think it’s cool.” I immediately felt awkward after saying that and shifted in my flip-flops, which then made an even more awkward squelching sound. “It was just so strange I had to ask you.”

“Well, I do tend to come across a lot of strange things.” He winked and could actually pull it off. “I like strange.” He was grinning again in that way that made me want to booty-dance on the Tiki bar like a bitch fizzed sorority girl and shock the hell out of all the khaki-wearing Evangelists in this whole damn town, even though I could tell it was a lame pick-up line just the same.

After my mom died, but when I was still a kid and getting ready to go out on a date, Dad—the Joe McDaniels Jr. of Joe McDaniels and Sons Auto Repair that never actually repaired itself after a rogue tornado took the roof off and scattered tires across town like a kid flinging Oreos—would always start telling the guy about this one spring night like thirteen years ago, right after I was born, when he shot down a UFO with a single round of buckshot. “Flying saucer, just like in them movies,” he would say, waving his arms like a heron shot in the liver. He’d usually then take a glug from his PBR and eyeball the guy-of-the-night—let’s call him B.J. (Before Jackson)—who’d have

this real hangdog look to him, mouth pouched open a little and eyes half-glazed. I'd be wearing that one jean skirt that Dad said made me look like a cowgirl rode hard then hung out to dry, and I'd twist a piece of my hair around my finger and look at the split ends up close or start chewing on a hangnail. Dad would clunk down his bottle on the coffee table, which was always a mess of spilled ashtrays and Popeyes chicken bones and the mail still unopened from two weeks ago, and then he'd just continue rattling away about shooting down that damn UFO.

“Sonofabitch was riding low over the woods, ‘bout near enough to skim the tops of the trees.” He swept his arm into a straight line ahead of us, a metallic glint in his eyes. “I was out on the back porch at the time, and when I saw it I thought to myself, I got me a wife and a new baby in this household, and there’s no way in hell those bastards are coming anywhere near my home.” He’d take another swig of beer for emphasis, and I would roll my eyes and crack my bubble gum.

“So, anyway, I ran inside, grabbed my single barrel and, wouldn’t ya know it, I shot ‘em down. Took three shots but I finally hit ‘em dead center and, I ain’t shittin’ ya, I swear, the fucker went up in flames and came crashing down into the woods. Right over the shed I used to have out there but now don’t have anymore because, ya know, of the crashed UFO. Made a real big explosion like no fireworks you ever heard, and that smell, Good Sweet Lord Jesus.” He’d start shaking his head over and over again like a dog that just got skunk-sprayed. “It wasn’t from this world. You know the shit you’re used to smelling around here, horse piss and road kill and shit, but this wasn’t like that stuff. Can’t explain it, just can’t. So!” And this is when he’d start to get real serious, lean forward, suck in his breath so hard that the whole room would suck it in with him, and B.J. would quick-glance look at me and I could tell he had turned just a shade green. Dad’s voice lowered into a deep guttural sound.

“So don’t nobody, nobody, ever tell me that I don’t do nothing to protect my baby girl here, because who else in this whole goddamn town—or hell, in all of Florida—could say they shot down a UFO with just one single round of buckshot?” He pointed with his beer. “Not you, son, that’s for damn sure.”

The UFO story was always meant to threaten B.J., or any of the other guys who would drive over to my place to pick me up for an easy lay and had to meet my dad

before they could get to me, but it never really worked, not in the end. Dad never even brought out that shotgun. He would finish that story, which of course was a whole crock of shit anyway, drop the tough guy attitude, and ask without asking what our plans were for the night. I'd stay silent on the couch except for rubbing one smooth shaved leg against the other while B.J. would spew out some bullshit to my dad about us going to Red Lobster and the new Jackie Chan movie. Whatever shit he felt like he'd need to say. Both of us knew that we couldn't even afford the cheese biscuits at Red Lobster, and that the only reason for us to go see a movie would be so we could sit in a dark place and he could put his hand up my skirt in public without anybody noticing. Who knows what the hell ever happened to any of those guys; they were all interchangeable to me. Jackson says that it's a wonder they all didn't turn my heart into one big old stone.

The third time I saw Chase was a few days after I discovered my strange little brittle star, the morning before Hurricane Charley was supposed to hit the gulf and everything. I woke up that day to a spitting wind outside the window and some obnoxious jangling sound. When I stomped into the kitchen I found Jackson crouched on his hands and knees, rummaging around deep in the drawers.

“Shouldn't you be at work already? What are you even doing?” I rubbed the heel of my hand against my forehead where I felt a sharp sudden pain stab behind my right eye. “You woke me up.”

He stood upright and flashed a grin at me, a wide-bottomed candle in one hand and this industrial-strength flashlight in the other. “Sorry babe. I just got up early to stock up on some stuff, you know, for tomorrow.” Since we lived a bus-ride away from the shore we weren't really supposed to be in a lot of danger from the hurricane, but according to the robot guy on the weather channel we were supposed to keep a flashlight on hand just in case the power went out, God forbid. Jackson just looked so excited about it though, as if it was going to be this huge adventure. He put the things away, grabbed his man-satchel from the counter and kissed my forehead goodbye. As I watched him open the front door, the pain behind my eye spasmed and I saw lots of tiny stars.

“Life ain’t the Boy Scouts, you know,” I said. The words tumbled out of my mouth without me even planning them. “I don’t need saving or protection from anyone anymore.” Saying that felt mean, but in a good way, a way that I somehow needed, so I kept going. “And tonight I don’t want to wait out the hurricane by playing *Settlers of Catan* by flashlight, or whatever dumb-ass board game you had in mind, and I especially don’t want to listen to you strum a goddamn Beatles song about peace or some bullshit on your busted ukulele for the billionth time in a row.”

I just stood there for a minute in our kitchen in my old Hanes t-shirt and exploding red hair, breathing hard like a winded filly. Jackson just stood there, too, frozen at the half-open door, his hand still on the knob. He looked like he’d been slapped. Seemed to me that a hurricane had already hit the gulf shore.

“Maybe you should go back to bed and think about what the hell you really do need, then,” he said, stepped outside and slammed the door behind him.

But I didn’t go back to bed that morning, or at least not back to my own. Instead I took the Metro to the beach, ignored the judging kook of a driver muttering, “Now you betta watch yourself,” ignored the boarded-up windows from the mermaid-themed shops all around, the clouded sky and the hustling wind, the entirely deserted shore. Inside the marine life exhibit the tank and all of its little sea creatures had been taken away, the walls stripped of all the ocean life charts and posters, the display coral gone. But, in his lime green Polo and typical white visor, Chase was there. I was wearing my shortest skirt and my highest heels, and I wasn’t wearing my ring.

“Ok,” he said. “But I have to be back here by noon.”

I went with him to his place that morning. Just this once, I told myself. Jackson would never need to know. And Chase, Chase at least had a real name and looked like a goddamn movie star, bronzed all over and choreographed to a T, even tore off my nice little skirt because unzipping just would’ve taken too much time. But I didn’t allow myself to worry about how I would get home with a ripped-up skirt or how much a new one would cost or even how I would begin to hide it or fake-apologize to Jackson for my fit that morning that was only a sand grain as bad as what I was doing now. I just swam in over my head and let myself drown.

Afterwards, Chase and I lay quiet for a while, tangled up in his bed sheets, listening to the sound of the wind talking to us outside. The walls of his cheap apartment creaked and the branches tapped against the windowpane, showering bright petals of crape myrtle every time. He rolled over.

“Did you know,” he said, tracing the curve behind my ear and down my neckline to the points on my collarbone, “that starfish are actually violent predators?”

I shivered with a whole flock of goose bumps. “Mmm...I thought they just kind of floated around, actually, or sucked in algae or something.”

“Nope.” He leaned down and nibbled on my earlobe, pulling the skin almost enough for it to hurt. “They eat mollusks and all kinds of other stuff. Vicious and beautiful.” He lifted my chin and kissed the skin there. “Like you.”

I sat up on my elbows, my stomach twisting sharp. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged and starting kissing slow down my neck. “I mean, you’re a beautiful woman, but, damn...you’re married.”

My heart began to jack-hammer against my ribs, and I suddenly felt like I was going to pass out. My fingertips were starting to prickle and go numb, and that pain jolted again behind my right eye. Of course I hadn’t told Chase that I was married. The other two before him had known, obviously, and I guess it just hadn’t mattered to them because they’d known Jackson, which made it alright with them in a really fucked-up kind of way. In a moment of sheer panic, I decided to play innocent.

“Excuse me?”

He stopped kissing me and sat back on his side, his mouth close to my ear. “Brienne, you know, that woman who works the help desk at the resort? She knows your husband. Her kid is in his class or something and I guess they met at a parents’ conference. Told her all about his gorgeous little red-head wife and that she goes to the beach every day. Said she should look out for her.” His lips twitched into a whole new kind of grin, one I hadn’t seen before. “She’s not an easy one to miss.”

It suddenly felt like a knife got thrust into my lungs. I couldn’t think of what to say. Instead I just sat there on my elbows, in someone else’s bed, wearing nothing but a sheet, my mouth gaping like a stupid, hooked fish on a line. I thought of Jackson that

morning rummaging around our kitchen with plastic-wrapped candles and flashlights, the look on his face when I yelled at him on his way out the door, and of him rambling on and on to this random woman about me, his wife who he loved no matter what awful thing she did. I then thought, too, of how last night when I came home from work, Jackson and I lay in bed before we fell asleep, his breath rising and falling against the nape of my neck, his hand curled on my belly as if he could trace one of those spiral wishing well to my navel. And I thought of how he would never, and could never, be able to save me from my own damn natural disaster.

Chase and I didn't speak, the silence rising between us like a monsoon. I found that I couldn't meet his eye. Finally, I swallowed hard.

"I should go."

"Yeah," he said. He got out of bed and pulled on a pair of boxers, then started zipping up his khakis. "This was great and all, but I don't exactly have the time to get all involved in your marriage problems." He reached down to the floor and tossed me my bra without looking at me. One of the straps hit me across the nose. "Also, just so you know, you really aren't supposed to use the locker room if you don't belong to the resort."

I caught the bus on his street corner; he didn't offer to drive me home. He did lend me some duck tape, though, for my skirt. I patched it up best I could but still tottered down the street in my slut heels with one hand at my side, gripping a fistful at the waist. Jackson wouldn't be back for a while yet, but instead of getting off at our stop I waited until the bus drove past the ocean. The wind was a lot stronger now, and the clouds were bunched like blanket rumples. I kicked off my heels at the end of the dock and started walking, sinking deep into the sand with each step. The water was frothy and dark gray, and above me tons of seagulls shrieked and dove in and out of the waves.

My foot clamped down in the wet sand on something hard but soft, something still alive. I quickly stepped back and looked down: a sea star. I bent down to my haunches and scooped it up in my palm. I could feel its tiny feelers twitching away. It didn't look so vicious to me. In fact, it was probably dying, out of water, far from its little home.

I knew, then, that there was something I had to confess. I had to admit it first to myself before I told anybody else. But I'd known; I'd known for a while now. In all my foolish ways, I'd gone and caught myself a fetus. And it wasn't from any of my stupid flings by the water: from Giddyup Dave, Matty "The Meat" Hall, or even from Chase, Hurricane Chase, Hurricane Charley. It was from my husband.

Wading into the dark, tumbling water up past my knees, I dunked my arm into the waves and let the starfish go. I knew that what I had just done was worthless and that it'd probably just wash up to shore again in about two minutes' time. Actually, by the time the hurricane had blown through, this beach would probably be trashed with tons of starfish, mollusks, crabs and gaping fish, all either scale-slimy or bone-dry and long dead.

I hoisted up my torn skirt, and my fingertips grazed across my belly. It hadn't started to pooch out just yet, but I knew that soon it would. I wondered if I would love it. I wondered if I would drown it like *La llorona* then spend my life wailing and haunting no one harder than myself. Or, if it came down to it—if it really came down—I wondered if I would shoot down a UFO and holler at any old stranger who second-guessed what I was doing and who I was.

I did know, at least, that I couldn't waste my time saving every sea star in the whole damn gulf shore. A hurricane was coming, and soon I'd have to make my way back home. But still, I couldn't bear not to try and save this little one I'd found, held and felt twitching against my palm. It was strange, but it was real. For whatever reason that happened to make sense to me at the time, I just couldn't let it be alone.

Thrummin'

This was never my idea. First, I'm exactly six months past the point where this ship has sailed. Second, as bartender and hostess at The Beachcomber, I've served up enough drama and whiskey-based drinks to inspire a country pop song. ("Oh," said my dad when I first got the job, "that sounds exotic." "No," I responded, "actually it's the furthest from exotic as possible. Think of it more as a ponytailed Vietnam vet searching the beach with a metal detector for nonexistent buried treasure"). And yet, here I am: dressed like Mother Earth in an ash-white terrycloth robe, Birkenstocks, and a wreath of \$4.99 Food Lion pink carnations intertwined around my head. I am crashing an OU house party with my underage step-brother Dylan on a drizzly, soup-foggy Halloween.

While this gangly fool brings on a barrage of drunken whoops and pumped fists with his fanatic *Guitar Hero* abilities, I stand alone against the banister, crowded by the damp, Spandex-ed bodies of a trio of 80s aerobics instructors, and clutching a Solo cup of spiked Kool-Aid to my chest. "Oh my Gawd!" One of them shrieks across me at her friends, blasting into my eardrum. I can practically taste her hot Appletini breath. "You guys, I feel like J.Lo dipped in bleach."

Before everyone else got here, this house, which belongs to five sophomore guys, supposedly Dylan's friends, smelled like equal parts cat piss and Natty Lite. Now it just stinks of sweaty people. It is the year of Sarah Palins and Joe the Plumbers; fresh for rehab Amy Winehouses with Bump-its, cat eyes and fake tattoos; leering *Dark Knight* Jokers slathered in sour-smelling face paint that oozes down cheekbones and jaws. In my peripheral, all four members of KISS take up the gray-tiled kitchen, playing beer-pong. From the slouching, barf-colored couch against the wall, some skinny kid with flat-ironed bangs keeps yelling about how long he has been stoned.

Dylan is wearing jeans, Nikes and a rumpled white t-shirt printed with the Wonderbread logo. Whenever someone asks him what he's supposed to be he simply cocks his head, points to his mop of carrot-orange hair and goes, "Gingerbread, get it?" I want to tell as many people as possible that the two of us aren't actually related. The grim reaper behind him waiting in line to play *Guitar Hero* is, I'm assuming, one of the five owners of this house based on the very heated conversation he is having with George W. Bush and a Ninja Turtle.

"Dude, this house seriously is haunted, like legit." Dubya and Raphael are losing it, but the grim reaper's voice remains completely dead-panned. "Her name is Nell. I swear to God. I hear shit at night. And sometimes...I feel real cold."

"Yeah, yeah," hoots the prez. He's wearing one of those goofy, stretched-out masks and a homemade cardboard button that reads "I Heart Mavericks" written in black Sharpie. He knocks back a Rolling Rock. "Fuck Nell."

The grim reaper shakes his head, solemn as a graveyard. "That's really disrespectful. Dude, seriously, show some respect."

I heave a sigh and chug some Kool-Aid. Dylan has his eyes glued to the television screen, ripping the chords of "Message in a Bottle" so that veins pop out on his twiggy arms. When I first arrived at his dorm earlier in the day, a duffle bag slung over my shoulder and a coiled sleeping bag tucked underneath my arm, panting from the eight story climb, he barely glanced up from his Xbox. I was almost positive that I detected a sickly-sweet whiff even though the window fan was on full blast. "You can sleep on the futon," he mumbled as he detonated a Russian tank. One sideways glance at the cushions' splattered stains, and I know I'm gonna be sleeping on the floor. Or, now that a slutty mouse with goopy pink lip gloss sidles up next to him and starts tugging on the neck of the plastic guitar, I may be spending the night in the back seat of my Jetta. Besides, it's probably been an hour at this point since Dylan has even looked my way.

My dad was the one who talked me into coming here. "So, Claire, when's the last time you talked to your little brother?" he asked me last Tuesday over dinner, couscous with asparagus and almonds, halved acorn squash. My step-mom, Gena, glanced up over her drugstore reading glasses, her lips pursed, and diced her asparagus stalk into

miniscule pieces. My dad has taken to talking like that, using phrases like “your little brother” ever since he married Gena this past March, especially whenever she’s around. It had just been him and me for forever, so I think it gives him kind of a rush every time, a little accomplished reminder of how our family has so swiftly doubled.

“Uh, no, I haven’t really talked to Dylan since like, I don’t know, mid-September.” I forked some squash-pulp. “We send each other messages on Facebook sometimes, though,” I added hastily. I didn’t mention that these “messages” usually just consisted of me writing “WTF?” on photo albums of kids playing flip-cup with such illuminating titles as “We Hot Cuz We Fly, You Ain’t Cuz You Not.”

Last year, Dylan was living at home, still a senior in high school, and I was studying Printmaking and Art History at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh. Now, he’s a freshman at OU and I’m back in my childhood bedroom (rainforest-themed, swinging ceramic cockatiels and all), skirting around street corners to avoid fish-faced Eli Fosselman just as I did in high school (except that now he’s even paler, supposedly an acid dealer, and has somehow earned the nickname “Big Whitey”) and bartending at The Beachcomber because—oh, of course it was!— the only place that was hiring.

Gena nibbled on her asparagus. “Well, he won’t call his mother, Dylan won’t.” I involuntarily bristled. She has this irritating habit of talking about herself in third person, most often when she’s on the phone (“Hold on honey, Gena’s eating an apple,” and I’m all like, *Wait...then who the hell is this?*). She sipped her water, ice cubes clanking. “But he’ll talk to you.”

I snorted into my couscous. “Not really. To be honest the last I heard from the kid was something along the lines of ‘Yeah...college is great, too much fun. Oh, and I love the learning part, too.’ So, who knows.” At that I was content to let it go, clear my place and start loading the dishwasher when my dad swallowed some squash and spoke up.

“Maybe you could go visit him this weekend, you know, for Halloween.”

I looked up from the glass I was rinsing. “What? And get killed by inhaling the fumes from a burning couch? Get trampled in the street by some guy in a hotdog costume?” (Or worse, I thought, have someone puke Keystone into my hair like what happened last year?) “No. Besides, I have to work a double on Friday.”

He shrugged and got up from his seat, carrying his plate over to the sink. “Yeah, but you work there almost every day. Can’t you get someone to cover?”

“No way.” I yanked open the top dishwasher rack and started loading it with dirty glasses, knocking them together a little rougher than was necessary. I could practically *hear* Gena cringe. “I see enough dumb stuff go on at the bar nowadays to want to spend Halloween weekend up at OU. That place is notorious for being insane. I’m so done with college...I’m so, *God*, I’m just so *done*.” Before I knew it I could feel a little knife-prick starting to lodge itself in my throat and a slight burn beginning to tickle behind my eyes. It’s all just so fucking *fake*. All of them...they way they think, the way they live, everything. I wanted to say that, but didn’t. My dad and Gena stopped moving like they were suddenly in freeze-frame.

“Fine, fine.” My dad wiped his palms on his pants and walked over to the fridge, pulled out a carton of non-fat frozen yogurt. “Forget I mentioned it then. Just thought it might be nice.”

I lightly kicked the dishwasher door closed and pressed it with my foot till it latched. “I have to work this weekend. Doesn’t matter anyway.”

Some guy in a navy fleece North Face jacket is putting the moves on me. “So what are *you* supposed to be?” I asked him after his dazzling opening line of “Only Jesus and lesbians wear that kind of sandals, so which one are you?” He bumped into me as he was attempting to muscle his way through the crowd to the vat of Jungle Juice. Literally: he actually stomped down on the naked toes of my left foot and elbowed me in the ribcage. I’m pretty sure that I am going to develop a bruise. And, obviously, tonight, for Halloween, the one night of the year when you can dress up as ludicrous as your imagination and costume resources will allow, he is a skier who forgot his skis.

“An art student, huh?” he yell-grunts from about a foot away. He’s got a pretty bland though not unattractive face: square features, glazy brown eyes, scruffy brown hair. I have been telling people all night that I’m still a senior at Carnegie Mellon. It saves all the trouble of shrieking over the music that I’ve already graduated and am saving up for moving to a new city or something, bartending and living at home blah blah blah.

Nearby in the center of the living room a werewolf, the slutty mouse, Dylan, two of the

Jonas Brothers, a Playboy bunny and a guy in a huge-ass chicken costume are dancing the Soulja Boy, and I inch towards the wall in fear of another jutting elbow (or wing) to the side. Dylan's skinny limbs flail. "So, what's your major in then, finger painting?"

The stuff in my Solo cup hasn't ever really kicked in so I know it's not that, but something about him makes me about twice as bold, twice as mad. "No, dumbass," I say, sneering. "It's not. And what's your major, douchebaggery?"

He barks out a laugh, spraying Natty Lite-tinted saliva onto my cheek and smearing the rouge. "Nice roast, little hippie lesbo." He slings an arm around my shoulders and pulls me against his fleece jacket, practically choking me in the process. "Let's get you another drink." He pushes us by a girl dressed like a bunch of grapes. A purple balloon shimmies against my hair and makes it go all electric.

That was Tuesday, when they brought up visiting Dylan for Halloween. On Thursday, my dad had an appointment with the cardiologist after a referral from the family doctor for some difficulty breathing.

"It's shortened to A-Fib," my dad told me. We were both seated at the kitchen table, my hands curled around a steaming mug of coffee. It was late in the afternoon and I looked like Johnny Cash in all black because I was getting ready to leave for work in a few. Nearby Gena leaned against the kitchen counter, arms folded. The rain and wind whipped against the window panes and made wet brown clumps of leaves outside. I kept sipping on my coffee before realizing it hadn't yet cooled, burning my tongue and then sipping on it again.

"What does that mean?" I have this thing where I'll just start interrupting everyone the second I get nervous and agitated. Gena clucked her tongue. I took another sip, winced.

He took a deep sigh. "It's short for Atrial Fibrillation. It means that the top of my heart is beating faster than the rest of it. The doctor said if he could open up and see inside my chest it would look like the top part was shaking like Jell-O." He scratched his cheek at the graying stubble I had never really noticed before. "Basically it means that my heart is beating out of rhythm."

“Ok...” I started tapping my fingernails against the ceramic edges of the mug. “What happens now?”

“Well, it’s not immediately dangerous. The biggest risks from it are that it could potentially cause a heart attack or a stroke, which, yeah, is a pretty big deal.” He wasn’t looking me in the eye and started speaking in a slow, calculated way. “Since the heart isn’t pumping blood the right way it can pool, which can cause a clot to form.” He spread his hands out on the table before him. Dark blue veins, knuckles sprouted with graying hair.

“But how did this happen?” I blurted out. “I mean, what causes it?” My dad isn’t exactly a health nut, but still he has never been a smoker or a heavy drinker or even overweight in any sense, at least in all the years I’ve been around. He even works out—we both do—nearly every day on our basement elliptical and stationary bike, lift free weights, take long, arm-swinging neighborhood walks. And ever since Gena has entered our lives for the past few years they’ve been together she’s convinced us (then, really, we had no choice once she moved in and started cooking) to cut all red meats, dinner rolls, two percent milk, the Saturday morning breakfast lards—powdered donuts, blueberry muffins, cream cheese and raspberry strudels (“Hell,” my dad would always say about this routine, “your second word *was* ‘coffeecake,’ after ‘dada,’ after all”).

Instead, we now pour skim onto our Kashi granola and eat whole wheat angel hair, organic spinach and sweet potatoes, lean turkey breast and grilled salmon fillet, blueberries by the handful when in season. We’ve even tried some of Gena’s weird bagged lentil shit that looks and feels like birdseed.

And truthfully, on my part, for someone coming from art school, I was way behind the times with this sustainable health craze. Most of my friends first went vegetarian, then vegan, then boycotted supermarkets in general, (I used to love to get drunk and waggle a Taco Bell Chimichanga in their faces just to earn those sour faces and piss them off), and now are apparently on a solely raw food diet where basically all you can eat is nuts and berries like some kind of varmint. I’ll tell my dad about it to make him laugh and feel somewhat better. “It’s kinda sad, though,” he’d say from time to time, eyeing a “guiltless” South Beach Diet cookie box or a snack pack of 100 Calorie chocolate chip cookie wafers. “Your kid’s first word will probably be ‘tofu.’ Gone are

the days when we used to sprinkle sugar on our Frosted Flakes in a bowl of whole milk.” And at this I laugh, roll my eyes and reply with, “Dad, you know we never used to do that.”

“Dr. Brownstein thinks it’s from my sleep apnea.” He ran a hand through his scalp. “You know how bad I snore. Even after all those meds it’s never really gotten better.” He turned towards Gena and gave a quick wink. “She’ll tell ya that.”

I cut them off, not even wanting to briefly imagine their nightly cohabitation. “Uh yeah, I know Dad; I can hear you sawing logs from all the way down the wall with both our doors closed.”

He smirked. “Yeah, that’s what’s doing it, they think. So I’m going back on Monday for another checkup, and they said then they’ll probably prescribe me with some kind of a blood thinner. And from there we’ll figure out where to go.” He glanced up and looked at me, though I kept my view distinctly focused into the liquid swirls, breathing in the steam. “So that’s what’s going on now. Ok?”

I nodded and bit my lip. “Ok.”

The corner of his mouth twitched into a kind of warped grin. My stomach was starting to feel a little queasy, my pulse thudding dully in my ears. From across the kitchen Gena shot me a wet-eyed glance. My dad twisted his wedding band.

“Alright, alright” I said. My heart was beating *thrum, thrum, thrum*. “I’ll go visit Dylan this weekend.”

“You said you’re visiting your brother?”

The Forgetful Skier’s question in my ear jolts me for a second. He passes me a half-filled shot glass and a lime wedge. Looks like this dude isn’t messing around—homeboy has scored some Patron.

“Step!” I shout over *I make it rain I make it rain on dem hoes*. “Step-brother. He’s the ginger over there...good lord!” The slutty mouse is now grinding her little bubble butt against Dylan’s crotch with enough vigor to grate a block of cheese. “Whoo, yeah!” she laughs shrilly, alternating texting on her Blackberry and gulping from her Solo cup. Dylan’s hands are clamped to her hips, and he sways back and forth behind her, occasionally high-fiving some Ninja Turtle walking by. He looks terrified.

“Damn, your bro is gettin’ it on!”

“Ugh.” I shoot the tequila and slurp the lime wedge, forgetting how much that sour combination aches in your jaw. The first time I’d ever done that was in the freshman parking lot my first weekend at Carnegie Mellon with my roommate Becky and a bunch of junior art guys. We thought we were so hot and rebellious. Now it seems like a bazillion years ago. “A blow-up doll has more personality than that little skank.” I hand him back the shot glass and toss the rind into the trash.

“Aw, come on now, Miss Georgia O’Keefe.” I roll my eyes. Wow, so he knows like, a real artist’s name. Impressive. “Even skanks need love, too!”

“Not ones who are rubbin’ up on my eighteen year-old step-brother like they’re auditioning for a Daddy Yankee video.”

He snorts. “Hey, your little bro might become a man tonight. Now wouldn’t you feel bad about trash-talking the girl he’s porking?”

This kid is such an idiot, but it’s kind of fun messing with him. I raise my eyebrows and wrinkle my mouth into what I hope is a judgmental sneer. “Not as bad as your crotch is going to feel if you ever use the word ‘porking’ in front of me again.”

“*Sassafrass!*” He’s suddenly pulling me towards him. His hands are on my waist. His lips are on my neck. He’s breathing in my hair. “You’re hot,” he says, his nose nuzzling me. “Even though you are a lesbian...or something.”

And then, we’re kissing.

I am thinking of another party last year at Carnegie Mellon and of the boy who found me there two months before Gena and my dad got married, before I had a step-brother. He had a laugh that was wide-mouthed and liquored, brown hair that flipped up a little in the back like it had been underneath a baseball cap all day, like it was the most natural thing in the world. He drew tick-marks on the wall for beer-pong scores, one-night stands, showed off some Michael Jackson moves. We’d had Native American Art History together sophomore year, him the half-asleep Business major in the back row needing a fine arts credit, me the over-zealous nerd who wrote a longer-than-necessary term paper about visual representations of time as a spiral in Navajo culture then going

through a phase where all I read were Leslie Marmon Silko novels and Joy Harjo prose poems.

He remembered me at the party and so we danced, his hands traveling me. I wanted to ask him what he was doing next year, after graduation, but before I could we were kissing, and then we were in the hallway, outside in a whirl of frost-bright Midwestern cold, scrabbling in my purse for keys against my apartment door, in my bed, textbooks and decorative pillows flung to the floor. *This isn't me this isn't me this isn't me*, I kept thinking, panicked, and at one point I even said it out loud.

I'd never had a real boyfriend, one that lasted before finding some reason to flee. In high school, a guy I'd dated for six months my senior year dumped me because, although he was certainly in no place to judge, my love for art seemed to surpass my love for Jesus Christ. Faith just wasn't my top priority. If it weren't for that, he attested, he wouldn't move to Kentucky, and I wouldn't be getting ready for art school. He would have married me.

And yet, once I'd gotten to college, I'd never truly had a legitimate one-night stand that moved beyond sloppy necking in a dark corner of some frat party or shitty bar where the music blares so loud you have to scream to ask the other's name. "It's ok," the boy muttered that night in bed, against my collarbone. "You're beautiful. You shouldn't be so unsure of yourself." But even then he was positioning me the way he wanted, pulling down my jeans. And throughout the whole thing I felt this tremor within me knowing without knowing that after this I would be forgotten, even down to the moment when we were curled together half-asleep, when he smoothed his knuckles down my arm, turned to me and kissed my forehead, an act more taboo than the taboo we had already done. An intimacy I wanted but couldn't understand.

He was different from the hipster guys all my friends dated—or, rather slept with, because no ever used the "d" word in art school. He wasn't crazy enough for them. He didn't wear trucker hats and skinny jeans or grow an ironic mustache for No-Shave November. But, then again, maybe I was more mainstream than I thought. What was wrong with sleeping with the popular Business major frat boy anyway? Maybe that's the way to do it all along. Be so out that you're in. Becky was the only one who agreed

whole-heartedly with this. “He can be your training wheels,” she said over fair trade coffee the next day. “Nothing wrong with having a little strange on the side.”

That was until the next weekend, when I saw him at another party, up against the wall, kissing another girl, his thumbs notched into the loops of her jeans. The room tipped around me, my heartbeat clamoring like claws.

In the paper I wrote for my Native American Art History class, I’d learned that the Navajo people viewed time not as a line, like we do in modern Western society, but as a spiral: always returning, always reliving. And despite my hardest efforts to forget and get past the incident like every other college student who has ever had such an obvious and common one night stand, that was the way it was for me—that one weekend lived on and on in my mind. I couldn’t just “get over it” as if it were a button I could press, a hurdle to pole-vault over. My art school friends, except for Becky, mostly just laughed about it. To them, that was my slummin’-it night, my senior checklist night, and besides, they had way more drama going on with them anyway. But for me, I couldn’t move on. I found out soon enough that he had told his entire fraternity. I was just one more tick mark drawn on that wall.

Everywhere I went that last semester, there were eyelids and eyeballs. Becky reassured me, then called me paranoid, but it was something I couldn’t shake. In the musty stacks of the library, boys knew the shape of my ass and the curve of my thighs. Walking across a snow-beaten quad, they glimpsed the black lace of my bra. Behind me in line at the dining hall, they snorted into their fists at how I gasped and moaned. And when they saw me through the grainy darkness of the town bar, they laughed and jeered—I know they did—at how he told me I was beautiful and that he never did this and that I was different and special and how I believed him even as he was unzipping my jeans and pinning me down all at the same time. *How could you how could you how could you.* I was so angry I could spit out my own teeth. These things were mine to know and keep. Ours. I found there’s not a speck of a thing in this world that is private. And still, he didn’t understand.

We’re in someone’s bedroom, on someone’s unmade twin bed, and his lips are a lot bigger than mine.

“I’m gonna lock the door,” he says, and shifts like he’s going to get up off of me. I guess that one shot of tequila affected me more than I thought, because we were kissing in the main room of the party, then kissing and dancing, then kissing and walking, and now kissing lying down in this room that we found. Should’ve known that any guy with Patron knows what he’s doing.

“Don’t.”

“Ok.” We keep making out, or, rather, he’s making out with me, his lips sucking me in. “I’m gonna turn off the light.”

“Don’t.”

“Ok.” Now he’s frog-kissing my neck and down to the open collar of my bathrobe costume. My hands are at my sides, and I don’t really want to even be touching him. I’m starting to sober up and am feeling sicker by the minute, and now that I look at him, at the top of his head pushing into my face as he’s biting and slurping on my neck like some awful kind of vampire, I wonder what the hell am I doing here and who the hell is he and how wholly and utterly tired I am and how I just want to leave and go home. But now he’s kissing my lips again and he’s unwrapped the rope of my bathrobe and his hands are reaching underneath the waist of my little elastic band shorts underneath, trying hard to pull them down. I push away. “Don’t,” I say firmly.

“Is that your fucking word of the day or something?” He sits up on his elbows and glares at me. I suddenly feel like I’m about to hurl, and it’s not from the Patron.

“I’m sorry,” I say. I tug my bathrobe back together. “I shouldn’t have...I can’t...” My mouth is so dry and sticky it takes effort to swallow. What am I even doing here? I should never have left home. I should never have come here. My father could be dying. “Can you just leave?”

He shoves himself off me and stands up off the bed. “So, basically you just came in here to give me blue balls?” I bite my lip and stammer out another half-hearted apology.

“Cunt.” He turns his back on me, stomps out of the room, and slams the door behind him.

The last week of spring, I finally confronted him, the boy from Carnegie Melon. I knew I couldn't live with myself if I never did. And so he sat beside me on a stone table underneath a flowering dogwood and fumbled for my hand. I tried to swallow that bitter taste in my mouth. "I'm sorry," he said to me, "but that's just the way the world is." That was six days before graduation. I told my friends I couldn't go with them to New York anymore. All along, I had been planning to go. I'd been excited about it; I'd already lined up a *paid* internship in a prominent gallery, the only one out of the group, besides Becky, who'd actually figured out something worthwhile. But I couldn't do it anymore. It was the thought of moving to that big city with all that concrete, all that gray, all those dead eyes moving past in the streets and subways. If that was the world out there—if that was *just the way it was*—then I didn't want to be a part of it.

That was how I ended college.

Someone has called the cops. I'm back in the main room, fixing the carnations on my head, adjusting my robe. "Fuck yo' couch!" howls the grim reaper, the guy who owns the house. In one swift motion he vaults himself towards the back door, shoving aside the bunch of grapes girl and sprinting out into the open lawn. The music has screeched to a halt right in the middle of "Ridin' Dirty," and we can hear the shrieking sirens and see the blue and cherry lights refracting off the walls. Everyone is freaking out. I wonder what that house ghost Nell thinks of all this, and if she's pissed off or just laughing. I'm sure the Forgetful Skier is long time, cussing me out to his friends. And then I wonder: where the hell is Dylan?

I shove through the crowd and start to call out his name. Come to think of it, I don't even know if he's still here. Maybe he and the slutty mouse took off. Shit, I'll be so pissed if I get held up by the cops at this joint and I don't even go to this school. A-Fib or not, I'll kill my dad. Or rather, I'll spare him and just go straight for Gena. I'm about to give up and just get myself out of there when suddenly I hear, "Claire! Claire! Claire!" and there he is, Jimmy Stewart-gangly and carrot-topped, a wide-eyed, scared, gingerbread kid.

"C'mon!" I grab his freckled arm and pull him through the crowd of sweaty bodies wearing polyester or plastic and jostle our way to the back door. Outside the

scene is mad chaos. The guy in the chicken costume has lost his head. A Scotsman bowls into the slutty mouse and knocks her to the ground. Her slutty kitten and slutty flamingo friends shriek and quiver around her fallen form. Over on the front yard it appears as though the entire band of KISS is getting arrested.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say.

Dylan nods. He glances swiftly at the fallen slutty mouse now being pulled to her feet by her friends, then turns back to me. “Good call. Let’s go.” We start sprinting away from the house, then fast-walking, then just walking. That’s when it strikes me.

“Hey.” I stop dead in my tracks.

“Yeah?”

My pulse is jammin’. “So, like all of the cop cars in Athens are at your friend’s haunted house or whatever. You wanna...let’s...let’s do something crazy!”

Dylan looks at me like I have gone absolutely psychotic. “What, like rob a bank or something?”

I bust out laughing. “No, ya goon. Let’s...I don’t know...let’s...” My voice trails off. I want to go faster than I can run. I want to drive just to drive like the way I used to going from college to home, past the city bridges and tunnels down mountain country roads with bad static radio, yellow wildflowers and mudslides and nobody else nearby. I want to whip myself around and spin and spin just because I can. “Let’s do some donuts!”

He cocks his head like a dumb puppy. “Wait...”

“Drive donuts!” The sleeves of my bathrobe are flapping around and pink carnation petals flutter down to the damp ground. “We can walk back to your dorm and get my car...I’m not drunk at all...let’s just drive up to that mall parking lot and drive in circles for no reason than just to do it.”

Dylan stands there, arms limp, brows creased. “Is that a hickey on your neck?”

“Dylan! Focus, man!”

His face cracks into a jack-o-lantern grin. “Yeah!” He pumps a fist into the air. “Let’s do it!”

It takes us about forty-five minutes to get back to his dorm. In Athens for Halloween, they shut down all the bars and just have people swarm the streets like New

Year's Eve in Times Square, only with more vomit and polyester, though about equal amounts of sucking face. Finally, though, we reach the outside of his dorm (pausing only briefly to avoid Bill Nye hurling his guts onto the sidewalk and watch a slutty nun pole-dancing on a stop sign), and then we're peeling out of the dorm parking lot in my '95 Jetta, blasting Prince and hollerin'.

"Tell me something." Dylan crams a smushed Reese's Cup into his mouth, wipes his chocolate-slick fingers on his shirt. "Tell me a secret, something deep."

"Seriously?" I look over at him, kind of weirded out. I'm not about to go into what all happened back there at the party. "What makes you say that?"

He shrugs, unwraps another. "I dunno. It just seems like something we should do right now. Come on! Tell me one and I'll tell one to you." He hands the Reese's Cup to me like a peace offering, and I stare at him like I've never really seen him before. Maybe this kid is more legit than I expected. "I mean," he continues, licking some chocolate off his lips. "I feel like I should be stoned right now...or some shit."

I sigh, take the Reese's and pop it in my mouth. "Fine, I'll tell you something deep." I think for a minute, swallow. "The one real memory I have of my mom, before she died in the crash. I was like, four." The chocolate and peanut butter residue suddenly feels dry on my tongue. I keep my eyes on the road, not looking at Dylan, who's not really looking at me. Prince wails on from the stereo.

"She's at the stove making this German meat dish we used to eat, called Rouladen." I give a little chuckle and glance sideways at him. "Your mom would freak, especially now with all that...shit. It's so good but probably terrible for you: like, oil-fried bacon and onions wrapped in thin slices of beef, then cooked. I remember the smell of it and the way it sounded sizzling in the pan. And I remember her singing this song, more like a joke, actually, that went 'Rouladen, whoa whoa.' Dad tells me now that she was playing off of some famous car commercial, but I don't know what it is. But Dad and I always sing it when we make it. Or, I guess, when we used to make it. I don't think we've had it in years." I pause for a second, swallow. Dylan doesn't say anything. On an impulse, I rush out, "Oh, and also, I still haven't gotten over this one-night stand I had last year." My stomach curdles slightly.

“Huh.” He shreds the Reese’s wrapper into tiny pieces. “I’ve never had a one-night stand.”

“Don’t,” I respond immediately. “Well...I mean...this guy was a total asshole.”

“That sucks. I’m sorry.”

I give a little snort of laughter. “It’s cool.” New Prince song. I feel slightly flushed, and yet I find that I don’t want to linger, not even a little, just to vent or grumble. “Now it’s your turn.” Moving on.

“Ok...” He thinks for about a half of minute, then I see the corners of his mouth tug into a grin. “I’ve never had a one-night stand.”

“Uhh...you just said that.”

“I know, but that’s just the beginning.” He dumps the shredded Reese’s wrapper bits on his lap. “I’ve never had a one-night stand, I’ve never gotten stoned, and, you know what, I’ve never even gotten really that drunk.”

The tips of my ears singe. “What? Shut the fuck up. Why are you being this way?” I can’t help but be pissed off. Here he gets me to tell all this emotional baggage I’ve been dragging around like a goddamn hobo in an earthquake, and now he’s being a little jit about it all like it’s some huge prank.

“No, I’m serious! Like, dead serious.” His voice cracks a tiny bit and he squirms sideways in his seatbelt to face me. “That’s my biggest secret, Claire. I walk around with Solo cups filled with Sprite. I pretend to inhale and then pass when no one is looking. I point to girls at parties and say I’ve banged them, like a total asshole. It’s exhausting! I feel like I’m having an affair or some shit for all the sneaking around and pretending I have to do. And you...you had this guy treat you like dirt. You lost your mom when you were a little kid. I’m just living one big, fat-ass lie. Is this how college really is?”

We listen to Prince croon out the rest of his song. I don’t really know what to say. Finally, I let out a puff of breath. “Well...sorta. I mean, it is sort of how college is like. But Dylan...” I take my eyes off the road for a second and look at him. “They know. Believe me, they know. They just don’t say anything because most of them are pretending, too.”

We drive along in silence for a little while. I can feel every bump and jolt in the road under my butt, jostling up into my veins. “There it is!” Dylan finally shouts. Athens Mall in the distance, like it’s the freakin’ Sphinx or something. He grins. “Let’s do this shit.”

“Hell yeah!” I switch into third gear and pull a 90 degree angle into the parking lot entrance, already cracking myself up at how random we have to be right now. This is seriously the most bizarre thing I have ever done. Then it suddenly occurs to me that I’ve never actually driven donuts before and I have no idea how to actually do it.

And then, before I can process my anxiety, I seriously cannot believe my eyes. In what was supposed to be a completely deserted parking lot at 1:00 AM there is instead a line of cars—one, two, three, four, *five* in a row—all waiting to take their turns to do donuts.

“Is this for real?” Dylan throws himself backwards in the seat, clutching his sides, practically shrieking with laughter. “How...who...what...?”

I’m shaking my head in sheer disbelief. “Your guess is as good as mine. Un-freaking-believable.”

Dylan wipes his eyes and sits upright again. “Well, what are you waiting for? Get in line!”

Not only are there five cars in front of me waiting to do donuts, but also they’re all surprisingly *really good*. As each one revs its engine in front of me and speeds into a beautifully crested turn, I actually find myself getting kind of nervous. My hands tremble a little on the steering wheel. Seriously, what if I suck? And what’s more is that these cars aren’t driving away afterwards; they’re parking and watching the next one in line. But then, as the fourth car goes, and then the fifth one, and then it’s my turn I realize that everyone’s windows are down and they’re not just cheering, they’re *screaming*.

I take a deep breath and rev the engine. “Alright bro,” I say, shifting into second gear. “Let’s do the damn thing.”

I fly forwards. We’re not as fast as the others and certainly not as smooth, but Dylan and I are laughing and whooping and blasting music. “Don’t cry, don’t cry,” Prince wails to us as we turn. Everyone else is cheering and my heart is thrumming like crazy in my eardrums. Everything is happening. Everything is happening at once.

Maybe Dad's A-Fib will get better. Maybe I'll learn to love Gena. Maybe Dylan will grow into his own. Maybe I won't move to New York but somewhere else altogether, start brand new, find art and love and all of that other stuff you're supposed to, that's promised to you from the beginning. And maybe this has all already happened, and we're just waiting for the world to rewind. Dylan and I spin into a circle in my car, then again, me as Mother Earth and him a skinny gingerbread boy, a spiral, again and again, around and around and around.

We Can Say

The summer Abby turned eleven, the McCrea family moved in two houses over, and, while helping her mother bake them a welcome-to-town pineapple upside down cake, she unearthed a porn magazine that had been crammed into the very bottom of the kitchen trashcan. For a moment, as she clutched it in her hand, everything froze then wobbled around her—the daisy-patterned wallpaper and the lemon wood cabinets of the kitchen, the bleeping sounds from her brother Jeremy's video game in the living room, the yeasty smell of the cake still baking in the oven, and, from somewhere in the near distance, the chintzy tinkle of an ice cream truck, the rumble of lawn mowers and the hiss of sprinklers, the shrieks and squeals of neighborhood kids running through. It was a late August afternoon in Sheriden, Ohio, a week before Abby was going to begin middle school.

She just stared. Abby had been rooting through the trash because she'd accidentally, carelessly, she knew, tossed the milk cap along with the eggshells, and so the magazine's glossy cover was smeared with wet coffee grinds and gummy with yolk

leftover from baking. Still, she could make out its title: *Blow Stars*, in jagged scarlet lettering. It matched the straps on the model's thong.

"Mom," Abby said, half-turning. Her mother, Deirdre, was awash in the orange glow of the open oven, poking the cake through with a toothpick as cautiously as if she were inserting a needle into an exposed vein. She had been a hospice nurse for nearly a decade before she'd married and had children, and so sometimes she took to still wearing her old scrubs around the house, but always changed a half an hour before Abby's father came home. Today she was wearing loose lavender ones, her dull blond hair, the color of a grandma's, tied back in an old camping bandana. Sweaty curls poked out, gathering on her neck and forehead. When Abby spoke her own voice sounded distant to her ears, and so she wasn't surprised that her mother didn't respond. Again she looked down at the magazine, her mouth gone dry. The tan, black-haired girl on the front cover had skinny red panties, a sharp, makeup-globbed face, and enormous naked breasts. A thin, coy smile teased across her face, and the tip of her tongue poked out, to Abby, it seemed, like their cat's when she was fed and purring in a patch of afternoon sunlight on the living room rug. The girl's elbows were bent inwards behind her shoulder blades, pushing her chest forwards.

It was a kind of nakedness Abby could hardly even imagine to be real: stripped, skinned, plucked like a featherless bird. She squirmed involuntarily, feeling her cotton training bra against her chest as if it were the only sensation her body could perceive, feeling her flatness, her scrawniness, her entire self as something frail. Her mother, Abby knew from the times she'd walked in on her changing into a bathing suit or emerging from the shower, had breasts that were small and slightly drooping, like doughy muffins only half-risen in the baking tin.

"Mom," she said again, slightly louder this time. Her mother turned, and it seemed to Abby like all the air had suddenly whooshed out from the room.

Abby didn't know what she'd expected her mother's reaction to be until this moment, but it wasn't this. She could understand a sob or a banshee-like scream then followed by those soft purple scrubs enveloping her, smelling like cake, safe and warm, shielding her eyes, protecting her from the image that had already been emblazoned into her mind. Instead, her mother just stood there. Her mouth was pulled as tight as a string.

Her eyes glinted like nickels. “Put it back,” she said, softly, slowly, as if she were rolling marbles around in her mouth. Abby stood rooted, her pulse throbbing dully in her ears. Her mother had never seemed so very frightening to her before. “Didn’t you hear me?” she said again. Quiet, calculated, dangerous. “I said. Put. It. Back.”

At once, then, Abby dropped the magazine back into the trash as if it were a spider. Her mother, without even skipping a beat, slid on a pair of checkered oven mitts and removed the cake from the oven. One mere glance at it—that glistening, golden mound, its topping layered with broad, fleshy rings of caramelized pineapple slices that encircled pert, sugared maraschino cherries—flooded Abby with shame. She felt both cooked and raw. She felt like she was going to be ill.

“I’m going upstairs to change,” said her mother. Abby didn’t look her in the eye. “Finish doing the dishes and tell Jeremy we’re going to head over in ten minutes. Ten minutes, ok?” She always repeated herself like that, as if no one had heard her the first time, which, as Abby hadn’t yet realized, was nearly always true.

As her mother left the room and Abby turned up the sink water as hot as it would run, a new thought slunk into her mind, and she simply couldn’t let it go: to whom did the magazine belong, her brother or her father? Without knowing much else, she knew from a place deep down that it was something made for a male’s eyes, for whatever reason there could be. Abby had never much considered her family divided into halves, two against two, until now. Jeremy was thirteen, about to begin junior high, and was reaching that point in boyhood where he was becoming all Adam’s apple and weedy limbs, his feet clownish and his voice squeaking so much that, for the most part, he seemed content to remain completely silent and shoot hoops in the driveway with a few buddies or play his video games alone. To Abby, he had entered another realm, like in *Super Mario*, where you can jump through stained glass windows to travel instantly to a jungle beach island, a desert, outer space, a snowy mountain with waddling penguins and an icy slide where, if you’re not careful, you could whirl off into the oblivion. Maybe the magazine was his.

Or, maybe, it was her father’s. She shuddered and wrung blue detergent from a wet rag. Abby loved him, certainly, but if Jeremy lived in a distant realm, then her father was off in that blackness you could spin into and just keep falling, a space utterly unknown. He worked a sales job in Columbus, which was about a half an hour away

from Sheridan, if the traffic wasn't bad, and he made a lot of money doing it, enough so that her mother hadn't had to work since before Jeremy was born. All of this Abby had just assumed; in reality, she had no idea what he did at his job or how he even earned all that money. She'd gone to Take Your Daughter to Work Day three years ago, when she was eight, and while he was in a meeting she drew a picture of him sitting at a brown desk with a computer and a mug of coffee. Her father tacked up the drawing on the bulletin board in his office and told her that he especially loved the little curlicues of steam she had drawn rising upwards from the mug. He said that in the same way he said that he loved her mother when ending a phone conversation or leaving for work in the morning—just, it seemed, as something to say.

Her parents didn't hold hands. They didn't hug or kiss on the lips, just on the cheek, on the spot near the mouth, like they were going to but had decided against it at the last second. Her father drove to Columbus in bad traffic, drank coffee at work, typed on a computer and made money, and her mother stayed at home in her old scrubs and took care of everyone. When her father got home from Columbus, after driving through more bad traffic from rush hour, they all sat down to dinner together every night of the week. Her father rubbed his temples with his fingertips as they said grace. Her mother always cooked for at least a half an hour beforehand, changed out of her scrubs and put on some makeup, and then cleaned up afterwards. Whenever she was sick they ordered take-out, and Abby couldn't remember the last time she had seen her father making anything more elaborate than a peanut butter sandwich or even loading the dishwasher. Her mother liked to joke that he couldn't even boil a pot of water if he needed to. Abby just figured all that was normal.

But, as she would think during years later, once she was older and started to feel romantic feelings in her own life as well: weren't parents also supposed to be romantic together? Wasn't that also normal? And, whenever she would really consider it, the idea of her parents out on an actual *date* together—her mother spritzing on perfume and fixing her slip, her father opening the car door for her and paying for Merlot, chicken parmesan and tiramisu (one plate, two forks), them snuggling and accidentally-on-purpose grazing buttery fingers at the movies—the kind of dates you see on TV between adult people, a man and woman, seemed practically unimaginable in her mind.

Her mother reemerged back downstairs in Bermuda shorts and a simple white v-neck, her hair down and face washed. She wore teardrop pearls gleaming at her earlobes, the ones Abby knew from stories that her father had given her their first Christmas together, the ones she had worn on her wedding and when she had given birth to her children. Abby started to feel nauseous again.

“Where’s Jeremy? Didn’t you tell him to get ready?” her mother snapped, fiddling in her purse for the house keys. “Jeremy!” she called into the living room, which vibrated with zips and beeps from his video game. “We’re leaving *now*.” Her mother took the cake and had Abby get the door.

Outside the late afternoon crinkled with heat. White clouds boiled the sky. Their neighbors’ gardens were a riot of color around them, and the trees lining East Elm were so summer lustful and green that Abby always expected there to be parrots or monkeys, not mockingbirds and squirrels. Plodding ahead of them and grumbling, Jeremy pushed back hair that was a shock of bleached strawberry blond, a color that dulled in three seasons and nearly blinded in this one.

If Abby hadn’t cared about meeting the new neighbors before she found the dirty magazine in the trashcan, then she cared even less about it now. And even beyond this recent discovery, she had other things on her mind. In one week she would start fifth grade. Middle school. Although she couldn’t deny a rather geeky excitement for actual *assigned* chapter books—the thick ones that smelled like dusty yellow, not the sissy kind that still had glossy pages and color pictures—and a *real* art class that you could take as a Specials instead of study hall if you were good enough to get in, all summer long she’d still felt as if she were just barely swallowing down that hot, mustardy taste of fear.

Everything about middle school still seemed unknown; everything was a potential cause for punishment or humiliation. Over and over, against the safe, languid backdrop of cicadas, after-dinner Creamsicles and chlorine, Abby imagined her fingers fumbling against the cold metal of her locker combination, its numbers woefully forgotten; her gym clothes left behind in a Kroger bag on the kitchen table and her slumped on the bleachers in jeans and a snowflake sweater, watching everyone run laps or play volleyball, a lunch detention in her near future. And worst of all, her nightmare beyond all nightmares, she imagined a queasy and damp feeling in math class, then glancing

down to see bloodstains—and not just stains, but *gushing*—all over her khakis and the seat and dripping down to the carpeted floor, right there in the middle of percentages.

To make matters even worse, Sarah, Michelle and Nicole, the three girls in the neighborhood who she'd been in the same class with since preschool, and who she used to play with on occasion, had recently become distant since mid-way through the summer. They had the kind of parents who allowed them to be dropped off at the Sugar Ridge Mall unsupervised, as Abby imagined, to troll the candy-colored clothing and fake jewelry displays in Limited Too, Forever 21, Claire's. They all got their ears pierced, Michelle for the second time. They bought Diet Pepsi's and Panda Express at the food court, cinnamon-covered Auntie Anne pretzels and Blue Chip cookies. She pictured them standing by the fountain like a triad of flamingos, legs twisted into plies, chewing on their Pepsi straws and giggling as junior high boys passed smirking and slump-shouldered.

For one brief, iridescent moment a few weeks prior, Abby had allowed herself to become hopeful that, with arrival of the new neighbors, she might finally meet a Best Friend, a kindred girl-spirit she'd never really had before. But that illusion quickly shattered when her next door neighbor, Mrs. Schultz, noted offhandedly to Abby's mother, "Well, so their daughter should be in high school, a sophomore or junior, I think, and their son, oh I guess the son will be in Abby's grade." As if Sheriden didn't already have enough obnoxious pre-teen boys who "accidentally" kicked sand in her face or hit her in the ear with a foam football when she was reading on a beach towel at the town lake. She'd confiscated the football under her towel and wouldn't give it back no matter how much they hollered and called her names. That was the kind of girl she was—to the boys, a frigid-bitch-in-the-making.

And now, the image of that magazine still smoldering in her mind's eye, Abby felt a new sick swoop of panic in the pit of her stomach. This would all get out. In less than a week, everyone in Sheriden would know. Her imagination zoomed into overdrive, and at once she envisioned the bus ride home on her first day of school. She would be sitting alone in the front, in the seat directly behind the bus driver's, no less, the place reserved for only the biggest losers. Since Jeremy was starting seventh grade, he would be riding the junior high bus when he wasn't staying after for basketball, and since Abby

wasn't allowed to go to the mall without her mother and her list of errands and returns at Penney's, she also highly doubted that Sarah, Michelle and Nicole would want to be her bus buddies when summer had ended if they had already stopped calling her by now.

Instead, she pictured her backpack, crammed full with so many books and binders that the zipper snagged, occupying the empty space next to her in the plastic seat. She would just be trying to read her *Redwall* novel when the sixth graders would start taunting nearby. And, because she was already considering the worse possible situation, what if the magazine truly did belong to her father? She could almost hear them now: "Did you hear about Mr. Harrell? His wife totally found out that he was looking at those nasty magazines!" "Wait, you mean, like, the ones with *boobs* in 'em?" "Yeah! He had tons of 'em, right there in the house." "Ew! What a perv...isn't that Abby's dad? Oh, shh, she's right there." They would quick cover their mouths with their hands, stifling laughter. She would pretend to keep reading even as the pages started to get blotchy, even when she knew they would get stiff and crinkled later. *Don't cry don't cry don't cry*. She would pretend that she couldn't even hear.

No brother, no girl best friend, no regular girl friends, nobody. And here she was just about to meet one more idiotic boy. If only meeting these neighbors wasn't so ridiculously important to her mother. After all, the father of the new family, Tom McCrea, was going to be *Father* McCrea with a capital F, the new minister at St. Mark's Episcopal. Her mother had loved Father Chuck, who'd just recently left the parish, and was devastated by his early, rather unexpected retirement. Abby never really understood why, since she was pretty much indifferent to anything church-related and just went most Sundays, along with the rest of the family, because her mother insisted. All she knew was that it was *imperative* (that was the word her mother used, repeated more than twice, over and over) that they make a good impression when meeting the new minister.

The house two doors over was a two story, old brick with bright blue shutters on all the windows, even in the garage. There was a minivan and an old blue station wagon now in the driveway. Besides the massive oaks and tumbling front garden that defined most of the homes in East Elm, this house also had an enormous weeping willow out front, perhaps the only one in all of Sheriden, which partially swept itself onto the front

walk. Abby had called it “the spaghetti tree” when she was little and still liked to call the entire place “The Peacock House” with all of its vibrant blues and greens.

It had always seemed odd, then, that the elderly woman, Mrs. Griebing, who used to live there, was drab and even kind of grouchy to passersby, complaining of a December snowfall that frosted the Peacock House like Narnia, and that she had to go buy presents for her fourteen grandchildren and then actually celebrate the holiday with them. This was the kind of house that should belong to a semi-crazy person, someone *eccentric* (one of Abby’s mother’s words that was trying to be nice but still wasn’t), like a fortune teller or an old guy who makes a lot of pottery. Mrs. Griebing’s only redeeming factor was that she owned three fat basset hounds—Mandy, Molly and Maggie—that tripped over their own ears when they ran. Apparently she’d left to move in with her son’s family in Savannah, and Abby both felt bad for them and wondered what happened to the dogs.

A small face appeared in the window behind the spaghetti tree, and before they could reach the front steps, the door swung open. “Hi!” The boy standing in the doorway was skinny and small, no taller than Abby, with crazy brown hair, bugged-out brown eyes and big ears. He smiled with his whole face, revealing dimples and gapped buck teeth. “I’m Colin. Is that cake for us?”

Abby’s mother laughed her nurse’s laugh. “Sure is. This is Abby and Jeremy. We live in the yellow house two doors over.” She pointed to each of them and then at their house. She didn’t introduce herself. “Are your parents home?”

“Dad walked to church for something, but Mom and Mer are here. Come in!” He motioned for them to enter in a way that Abby had only seen adults do, except that he hopped a little on his tip-toes. His feet were dirty and bare, his toes like little bony fingers. “We got a green bean casserole with bacon in it yesterday and sunflower seeds from somebody’s backyard today and Mer—Meredith—that’s what we call her, went to the lake and came back and I was going to go but I’ve been busy taking care of the birds.” He said this all in one breath as they followed him inside.

It was different from Abby’s house; the walls and floor were dark wood, but the sunlight pouring in from the windows made it look like the inside of an old church. There was a grandfather clock by the door that reached the ceiling, and in the front living

room, a moss-colored, velvety looking couch, an old writing desk with an actual typewriter, and stacks upon stacks—towers, really—of books. Cardboard boxes, some already folded, some still brimming with lamps and photo frames, cluttered the floor. Above the typewriter hung the one decoration on the wall, a cross that looked like it was made from sticks and made Abby think of Africa. She felt herself lighting up.

“What birds?” she found herself asking. Colin turned to her and grinned.

“In the garage. Come see!” At that moment they had reached the kitchen and a dark-haired woman with Colin’s smile came to greet them and marvel at the cake (“Oh, but it looks almost too beautiful to eat!”), her arms outstretched to place it on the counter and shake their hands. She offered them something to drink (“Sweet tea? Lemonade—with rum in yours?”). She winked at Abby’s mother. A teenage girl in a damp cover-up t-shirt, who was pouting in a pretty sort of way, followed behind, chewing on the end of her wet braid. Jeremy turned pink, stared at the floor and shuffled his feet. Abby glanced at her mother and she nodded that she could go.

“Ok.” She gave Colin a shy smile and he bounced a little and grabbed her wrist, pulling her through the kitchen to the garage.

“We brought our birdhouse with us from our old backyard in Akron cuz it was my grandma’s and we didn’t think there were any birds living in it but really we just hadn’t been paying attention to it I guess because there were trees in the way and we were packing up and everything and it wasn’t till we got here and took it out of the car last night that we heard all the chirping and found the nest of baby birds!” He rambled on happily and showed Abby the birdhouse, open at the roof, placed on a ragged towel in the corner of the garage. Abby could see why they wanted to take the birdhouse; it was fancier than any dollhouse she’d ever owned, blue with little white shutters, lacy white trim, and even two tiny holly bushes painted by the front door. She peered inside.

There were five baby birds in the nest, and as soon as they heard Colin’s voice they all came to life from sleeping gray knots to squeaking *eeee eeee eeee*, and if you were looking down on them, all you could see were there five opened beaks demanding a worm. Or, as Colin showed Abby, watered-down oatmeal. He had it in a plastic bowl on the towel and squirted it up into a tiny pipette then into their opened mouths, one half pipette each.

Abby was instantly fascinated. It reminded her of when she'd found a burrow of newborn bunnies living in the begonias this past spring. She'd called up Sarah, Michelle and Nicole, because even they in their growing snobbery couldn't resist the appeal of newborn baby bunnies, but when they fed them pieces of radishes and celery Abby'd swiped from the fridge one of them bit Michelle's finger, and she'd screamed and ran off crying. Abby had made the joke that it probably thought the finger was a carrot since Michelle had recently doused herself in self-tanner now that it was starting to get warm. No one thought that was funny, and for weeks afterwards Michelle gave Abby the silent treatment as payback for, as she claimed, Abby plotting to give her rabies before her spring break to Cancun.

Now, she watched Colin feed the birds as though hypnotized. They were curled up like sushi rolls, slimy and naked, their eyes still sealed over with a weird purple skin. They were so cute that they were almost ugly, or maybe so ugly that they were almost cute; Abby couldn't decide. She realized that they must have been very recently hatched because crushed, yellow-y eggshells littered the nest around them. One bright blue egg, the bright blue of the Peacock House shutters, still remained unhatched. Abby suddenly thought of the eggshells from baking earlier, of rooting through them in the kitchen trashcan, and what she'd found there. Her stomach gave a sick sort of squirm.

"Dad thinks they're robins," Colin said, squirting up more oatmeal from the bowl. "Cuz of the blue egg, see it there? We think it was just a bum egg and didn't hatch, but that's ok, it happens. I've named them Curly, Larry and Mo—you know The Three Stooges?—and that really itty-bitty one is Tiny Tim." He gave Tiny Tim a little too much, and some oatmeal dribbled out of its wide little mouth, which was the exact shape and size of a dime. "Oops! Hey, you want to name the last one? We can say it's a girl."

Abby felt like a light turned on. Those were words straight from the younger days of her childhood—"we can say..."—from the days when she used to play imaginary games in the backyard with Michelle, Sarah and Nicole or even, on rare occasions, with Jeremy. "We can say we're in the rainforest, and we're golden tamarin monkeys, and we're endangered." "We can say we're on the Oregon Trail, and we all have babies; our husbands just sit up front and whip the oxen." "We can say we're changelings from the Moore, and our eyes turn colors with our emotions." These were all things Abby had

read from some book or another, and the others would usually go along with it, but not as far as Abby wished it to go. Recently she had given up with the others, now that she'd found the atlas, her secret, the one she taken to keeping tucked under her arm like a doll.

She'd discovered it once while sneaking around in Jeremy's room, and although he chased her around the house and pressed his sweaty basketball socks to her face as punishment, he later conceded that she could keep it if she wanted it that badly; he had just used it for some grade school class project. From then on she carried it nearly everywhere she went, dragging it through mosquito thickets to her place by the creek across East Elm, clutching it between her teeth as she climbed the sugar maple in the backyard, plunking it down on the front steps in the midmorning sun. The thing had browned with summertime and was splotted with mud and creek water, became dog-eared and creased with use and love.

First Abby memorized all the capital cities of the United States. "Springfield, Topeka, Phoenix, Boston, Columbus, Hartford, Montgomery, Austin, Little Rock, Nashville, Trenton, Annapolis, Baton Rouge," she would rattle off at random, sometimes to her mother, who said "Good, good" in that nurse's way, but usually to herself in a rapid whisper. Abby would swat the mosquitoes from her ears and curl her toes into the mud of the creek bank. She loved Sheriden, but still, sometimes wished so badly that she could just leave.

Even more she wished that she could go to all of these dog-eared corners of the world, places with names like spices or flower petals or smooth like marbles. That summer she turned those pages so many times that the shapes of Europe and Central America and Southeast Asia became as familiar to her as the map of skin on the back of her hands. So often Abby would look up from her creek bank and long with all her heart that she could trade places with the mockingbird, the red-tailed hawk, that sole gray heron, the only one in Sheriden, that she very rarely saw. *We can say that we have wings*, she thought. *And when we really, really want something, we can fly.*

"So how about it? Do you want to name her?" Colin was staring at her and biting down on his bottom lip in anticipation. His brown eyes were like a puppy dog's waiting for a Milk Bone after sitting when it was supposed to. For some reason that Abby couldn't quite explain, she felt like she could trust him.

“Colin,” she said, softly, her voice slightly shaking. She hardly ever called anyone by their name. “I found a bad magazine in the kitchen trashcan before I came over here.” She looked him in the eyes, then quickly back down to the baby birds, their open mouths still begging. “It had a naked girl on the cover. I showed it to my mom.”

He rested the pipette in the bowl. “Was she mad?”

“Yeah. I don’t know. I think...” *Oh no, oh no, oh no.* She started to feel tears forming in her eyes, a hot jab at her throat. “I think she’s mad at me.”

“Why? Was it yours?”

“No. I don’t know whose it was. It’s just, I dunno, it’s just the way I feel.” She began blinking very rapidly, feeling overwhelmingly stupid. Why did she even have to bring that up? The last thing she wanted was to cry in front of this kid who was actually being kind to her. And now he was going to think both she and her family were a bunch of freaks. What if he told his dad, the new minister?

Colin shifted on the towel. “That doesn’t make sense. Your mom seems nice. I mean, she did make us a cake. The green bean casserole Mrs. Schultz made us gave me the runs.” With that, Abby burst out laughing, and because of the relief of tension, she couldn’t stop. Colin started laughing with her. “Sorry, I know that’s TMI, but it really did! Here, you want to feed Tiny Tim?” Abby did and was laughing so hard that she got oatmeal all over its little face and had to wipe it off gently with a paper towel.

Shortly afterwards her mother knocked on the garage door and said it was time to leave. Abby felt like a rock landed in her stomach until Colin said, “You should come back tomorrow morning. We gotta watch these guys round the clock. Oh yeah, and think of a good name for the girl.” He grinned so big that he had to squint his eyes.

“I will,” she said, getting to her feet and dusting off her shorts from the dingy towel. A thought popped into her head. “You know what, you should put them under the spa- I mean, the weeping willow tree out front. To give them some fresh air. It might remind them more of their old home.”

Colin looked at her like she had just explained Christmas. “Oh sweet! Good idea. I’ll have my dad help me tonight.”

Abby smiled. Everything was going to be OK. Colin wasn't a girl, but she had made a new friend, and no matter what now happened with the magazine, at least she wouldn't be alone on the bus when everyone started talking about it. "See ya."

"See ya later," he said, and, strangely, but strange in a way that she felt shouldn't be, he reached over and patted her on the knee.

Dinner that night was corn on the cob from the Sheridan farmers' market, a large bowl of bowtie pasta, a tossed salad with grape tomatoes Abby's mother grew in a little plot by the screened-in porch, and fresh strawberries with whipped cream for dessert. Jeremy was playing video games in the living room, again, and Abby was setting the table, feeling pleased. She was afloat in her own little world, daydreaming about a ceramic bowl she would make in art class that would look like a bird's nest, complete with a perfect oval blue egg. She didn't even notice the familiar evening sounds of the garage door going up, the car entering the garage, and the door opening, her father coming home.

"Hey there girly-girl." Abby looked up and saw her father closing the door to the garage behind him. He looked weary in a falsely bright red polo and khakis, his hair graying at the temples, and even his voice sounded worn. He set down his briefcase on the floor against the wall. "How was your day, sweet pea?"

Before Abby could even open her mouth to respond, let alone process the question, an "Oh no you don't!" erupted from the hallway. Her mother came storming into the kitchen, her pointer finger raised like a switchblade, her face a fire hazard. In an instant Abby felt again like she had when she'd first seen that magazine in the trashcan: everything frozen then wobbling around her.

"You even *think* you have the right to *speak* to your daughter after the shit you've pulled?" her mother screamed. She was now about a foot away from him, jabbing her finger in his face. She threw her hands above her head as if she were wringing the world. "Jesus, Keith, the websites, the magazines under the mattress, but now this...*this*? It was in the kitchen trashcan, Keith!" She motioned with both arms, hands splayed, her voice shrill and nearly breaking. "Abby found it!"

Abby heard a faint ringing in her ears. She was still grasping a spoon, fork and knife in one fist. Her other hand gripped the smooth edge of the kitchen table. Her

father's mouth opened and closed like one of those baby birds', yet he made no sound. Abby was vaguely aware that Jeremy was now standing in the kitchen as well. He clutched a Playstation controller in his hand, its wire dragging behind him like a tail. His paused game bleeped continuously from the living room.

Her mother let out a dry sob and, without warning, reared her arm back and slammed the pantry door so hard it leapt back open. The wooden spice rack attached to it nearly exploded. Its little wooden shelves gave way, and a cascade of bottles and jars ricocheted off the walls and floor into tiny fireworks of cumin and paprika and thyme. Abby involuntarily shielded her face, Jeremy yelped and dropped the controller, and even the cat meowed loudly and streaked out from its hiding place underneath the kitchen table. Her mother was wailing and shaking her head over and over again.

Abby's father stepped towards her and put his palms against her shoulders. "Deirdre...Deirdre," he kept murmuring, as if he were trying to calm a frightened mare. For the first time Abby had ever seen, he looked like he was about to cry.

She raised her eyes but didn't push off his hands. "Maybe you should go take one of your prayer walks now." Her voice was dry and cold.

Abby and Jeremy ate dinner that night without their father. Their mother told them he was off taking a long walk to think about some things, but Abby knew that his car was gone. She wasn't stupid. That ate in silence, the only spoken words the grace they recited every night to begin the evening meal: *For these gifts we are about to receive, make us truly grateful and keep us ever mindful of the needs of others, Amen.* Abby picked at her pasta and salad, nibbled a row of kernels of her corn, and excused herself before dessert. A stone had reappeared in the pit of her belly, and it wasn't going to dissolve.

Abby couldn't sleep that night. She stayed up with a flashlight rereading chapters of her favorite book, the one about the changeling from the Moore, and then, when it was becoming so late that it was almost early, she pulled out that old atlas once again. She traced the lines between the cities whose names she had memorized, over the Rocky Mountain ridges, rivers and plains of wheat and corn, canyons the color of burnt ochre and deserts that must be like gold. Perhaps it was due to the fading and creases of the pages and the darkness in the room around her, but to her, the borders of states seemed to

merely blend together, to barely matter at all. Instead Abby skittered her fingertips along the routes of highways and interstates, the pulsating veins within the landscape of this country. *Just like the sky the road never ends*, her favorite country song always said.

That morning Abby did something she had never done before: she ran away. Well, not exactly—she left a note (*At the McCreas'*) on her bedside table, and she planned on coming back. But still, she'd never slipped out before, never had any reason to in the first place. It was simpler than she expected; at the six o'clock hour, when it was clear that sleep was never going to come, when the light outside her bedroom curtains was gray and the birds were beginning to stir, she pulled on shorts and a t-shirt and slid into her flip-flops. She had almost left the room before she realized that she'd forgotten her training bra. Removing her t-shirt to put it on, she again felt doused in shame. She was glad it wasn't a real bra yet. In fact, she hoped that she would never need to wear one at all.

She padded downstairs softly as the cat, through the kitchen, which was now swept clean of the broken spice jars and wooden shelves, and out the back door, slowly clicking it shut. The world outside was shadowed and foggy, the grass damp with dew like a cold sweat. Abby shivered a little as she walked through the Schultzs' front yard, rubbing her arms, and wished that she had brought a sweatshirt. But there was no way she was going back into that bedroom where she had stayed awake grinding her teeth the whole night long. In the muted light of early morning the Peacock House, the McCreas', Colin's home, was darkened and somber, and, without the bright blue, seemed to be something that belonged to the trees in the deepest part of the woods.

Abby had hoped that Colin had moved the birdhouse underneath the weeping willow the night before, but she hadn't even considered that he would already be there when she arrived. "I heard you coming," he said as she started to apologize, pushing aside the green veil to where he was crouched on a jutting root. The fancy birdhouse was there on the towel, beside it the pipette and bowl. He was wearing a baggy Cleveland Browns sweatshirt and, beneath his orange mesh shorts, his legs spindly with knees knobby as crabapples. "Tiny Tim didn't make it," he said. "And the rest don't look too good."

She looked down. A few of the birds still opened their beaks but made no sound. It reminded Abby of when they'd rescued their cat, Cece. It was four years ago, and she was a tiny gray kitten they'd seen dashing across the street. At first they thought it was a mouse. The cat had squirmed up into Mr. Schultz's car engine, and Abby got underneath and pulled her out, yowling, by the tail. For the first few weeks they had her, she opened her mouth to meow but was still too small to make a sound. They eventually realized that, whenever she opened her mouth like that, all she wanted was to be held.

Abby wasn't the kind of girl to poke fun or make light of this. It was clear from the purple shadows under his eyes and his pale, drawn face that, like her, Colin hadn't slept last night. The contrast between him now and the previous day was palpable. In this Colin, Abby wondered if he missed his old home, his old neighborhood, and what he thought of Sheriden. And she wondered for the first time if he was scared of middle school, just like her. It was now less than a week away now.

It was then she realized that, one by one that morning, the baby birds were all going to die. Little slimy gray knots, their head and feet tucked in. The skin still sealed over their eyes; they had never seen the world. They were plucked, never got their chance to fly.

She put a hand on his knee. "I'm sorry," she said.

He looked up at her. "We shouldn't have brought them outside." He had a different look in his eyes now, not just tired and sad. "It was your idea," he said. His words snapped like breaking icicles off a window pane. "It was too cold."

Abby drew back her hand as if bitten. It wasn't her fault! How could he say that? Those birds would have died anyway, and besides, weren't they supposed to be friends. "I'm...I'm sorry," she tried to say again.

"You should go home," he said. "I probably won't be allowed to play with you anyway if your dad keeps bad magazines in the house."

She wouldn't cry. She couldn't. Instead, she ran, ran out of the weeping willow, past his yard, past her own, back inside to where no one had even woken up yet. No one had even noticed that she was gone.

Sometimes, in the weeks to come—when she and Colin began middle school, worked on the same percentage math sheets, read the same chapter books, crafted art

projects in the same Specials, played gym volleyball on the same team and never sat together on the bus coming home, when her parents never spoke of the magazine and the spice rack fight again—she would see a robin flying overhead, and wonder if it was the babies' mother, who'd flown all the way from Akron to Sheriden, still searching. And whenever she saw one, Abby would ask silently for its forgiveness. She never thought to wonder if Colin did it, too. It was her own private thing, always would be. She knew she hadn't done anything wrong, but still she asked to be forgiven, just the same.

Hold on to What is Yours

My boy wasn't found he was taken. Six decades later and I don't care; I'll say it still. School lets out for the summer like it always does, and when they all carry out whooping and tumbling over their own shoelaces like a barn full of newborn fawns, my boy gets taken from me once more. All year, chalk dusts my fingertips like baby powder. Checkered sun falls on the wooden desks like morning time against a cradle. I try not to favor the tow-headed ones. They're only yours for a season as it stands.

My boy's father J.M. had left for me a letter, scrawled at the top *July 16, 1929*, and promised me, *Dear Ella, we will work him on the homestead, put him through school, raise him well down God's chosen path in every way you won't be able.* J.M. always was shamed that he was inferior to me in the epistolary form, and so I can't help but wonder still how long he must have spent crouched over himself, chewing his tongue and scratching down words like they were stilt-walking across the page. My grade threes can write better to their pen-pals. They always begin, *Thank you for my letter*, and end with, *Please write me more.* They know to ask for unnecessary love.

During our short marriage and even shorter courting, J.M. never wrote me much, but when he did reading it was like trying to wade through a mud-slung stream. Of course I thought it was pretty as a sonnet at the time, but it's unfortunate for me now that if I'd ever have to memorize something, it had to be written so poor. And these days, I

don't need to read over his last letter to remind me. All it takes is the children leaving, that bumbling rush after the summer bell and the following calm—a stillness pulled tight as a string, like an eerie quiet in the trees after a funnel storm. The thought alone of his letter puts a numbness in my mouth and a ringing in my ears, then pricks and nips like stinging nettle across my skin and last a warm, living pain that settles down my ribs steady as a drum roll. Does still.

I always knew I'd have a blister-aching love. It wasn't easy growing up in the middle of three girls, Iowa sisters knowing nothing but corn stubble winters and the cow-hog musk on the wind's every turn. But I always took comfort in that I was the prettiest of us three. People told me so. Every farm boy in Jefferson carried a desire to marry a Thayer girl like he was dragging around a burr on his pant cuff from the eastern to the western side of the field.

Catherine was the oldest and fell on the first proposal flung her way. Johnny O'Dell, who had broad shoulders but a weak jaw and balding patches in his beard, was the first of the town men to buck up the courage, and so he gave her his grandmother's ring set with a tarnished ruby. In those days this was enough for a girl like Catherine. The day she married Johnny O'Dell hearts were gutted all up and down Raccoon River, and I always thought that was the story for why Jack Thompson set brushfire to his own field, walked a ways and stood straight-back to watch it burn as if it was the grief inside of him that he hadn't asked her first. But not six months later he had gone to courting Ruthie, the youngest of us three. Ruthie kept her hair in tight ringlets and had hand-bones so white and fine that many speculated they somehow must've been whittled.

As for me, I drew out long the pleasure in my cruelty. From girlhood onward I knew that I wouldn't be lingering around these parts for long. I was the sharpest girl in our school—really I was the sharpest person they had—but they always placed Raymond Bruesser, who bit his nails to stubs and had a head shaped like a turnip, ahead by one so that the board wouldn't be shamed. Back in those times the only thing a sharp girl could do with herself was become a nurse or a schoolteacher, and since I squirmed at hog blood stains and gobs of tobacco spit, I was determined to read everything I could find, take the exams, apply for that loan and earn my teaching degree.

And so, because I felt I was biding my time in those cow fields, and because I soon tired of playing with my sisters and our dolls, I started a game of playing with farm boys. At first I would just watch Catherine at the schoolyard or fencepost or Nelson's General Store, watch her tilted white neck and slim bent forearms, her hips cocked like a Bartlett pear and her tiny licked smile. I watched her and then, because I knew I was prettier besides, tried my own ways, twirling a lock of hair round my forefinger, shrugging my shoulder slightly forward, and leaning back against the fence or wall and dragging my toe through the line of dirt before me, real slow. I saw these boys and their hand-twisting, their pocket-shuffling, their swallowing hard and knew it was because of me and the way I made myself look to them. And I desired to be so lovely and so cruel.

When I was thirteen I let Davey Nelson kiss me behind his daddy's store, a sack of cornmeal in my hands and the taste of butterscotch on my tongue from the little candy his mama gave me on the way out. And then in the years following before I left for my degree, I kissed Benjamin Hess, Jonas Miller, Tommy Smithson, Albert Hamell, Pat O'Dell (Catherine's husband's brother, who brought me prairie roses), Davey again, Raymond Bruesser on a dare, Sam Wilson, Teddy Booker, and then Dodge DePeter, the night before I left, my carpetbags packed and my blouses starched and laid clean on my dresser ready to go. Catherine once told me that I could kiss every farm boy in Jefferson up and down the prairie roads, but if I ever let one of them stick his thing in me I would be in a world of trouble; then people would begin their talking. That was all I ever heard of the act, and so during my life among the trodden fields and hog farms I never let that happen to me.

I was still hard waiting for my blister-aching love.

I met J.M. my first semester at Illinois Wesleyan at my friend Diane's social party in early November. Diane was a rich girl from Chicago with hair like black satin and who wore pearl earrings the size of pebbles. She held socials once a month at her richer aunt's nearby Victorian-style home. When I arrived at the party that night Diane was already floating around on the arm of a finely-dressed man. She glanced up to see me enter and began to wave all frantic with her lace-gloved hand, slipped her arm from the rich man's elbow and fluttered over my way. In a flurry of perfume she quick-whispered against my ear, "Dearest, you must meet this man." She pulled back from me with a

pinch-pretty smile, and then her voice rose like a bell: “Joey, come over, you must meet my friend.” At that, a man stepped closer our way, and she winked at me. “Joey, my dear friend, Ella Thayer. Ella, this is Joey Stenson. His mother knows my Aunt Mabel.”

He was handsome, real tall, and almost pretty, his face slightly flushed, his slicked hair fair to the color of milkweed. I extended my hand. He took it and shook not too gentle and not too hard. “Call me J.M.,” he said. “I’m only Joey to those who’ve known me from being a boy.” Spoke to me as if I were a man. His palm was rough, so I knew he couldn’t be as city as he seemed. I went ahead and looked him full in the face like when you’re breaking a foal and you mean nothing but business. He stared back at me, though, with eyes like chips of ice-blue. That instance I got the urge bubbling up inside me to call him Joey, to spat it out like something nasty, but instead I pursed my lips into a smile like I knew how, the shyest dimple on one side, and blinked ever so slow.

“It’s nice to meet you, J.M.” I took back my hand and crooked it to my hip, gave my shoulder the barest shrug.

He didn’t grin, a German kind of stern, and what he said next put a jolt in me that snapped my breath like a corn stalk in the wind. “I can’t stay tonight,” he said, “but I made reservations at Waterson’s tomorrow evening. I’ll meet you at your dormitory at seven sharp, Ms. Ella.” He then nodded to Diane and myself and strode away, cool as a Bible salesman pleased in his work to money and the Lord. My face felt frozen into a gape. It was then I knew for certain he wouldn’t be broken and wouldn’t break easy like all the others had done before. I flushed warm then cold. Somehow, he already knew my little kind of play.

Joseph Mortimer Stenson III, was the only son of an only son and the one boy of seven tow-headed sisters, five older, two younger than him. He had grown up on a farm, like I had suspected, in northern Illinois, but it was a much bigger farm than ours in Iowa, and so his family had a lot more money to their name. His father had been dead for five years now, however, gone early from bad heart and bad lungs.

I want to say that our courtship was like a windstorm from the beginning, that I tumbled down a stone well for him that night we dined at Waterson’s—at the time the fanciest restaurant in town—that his kiss and his touch were different than the others’ and

that I always knew he would be my blister-aching one. But it didn't begin in that way. It took me three dinners with him to not want to spit out "Joey" in his pretty-cheeked face, and it wasn't even till he bought me braised duck that I found myself possibly liking him. He wasn't a bad kisser either, but I wouldn't say he was the best. And the path from liking to loving him was slow-going as well as if I was thrashing my way through a heavy-weeded field.

But when I did love him it was like he decked me swift with it over my head. It was like a scab ripping open that hurt so bad in a way that was still so aching good. We had been steady courting for only two months chock-full of duck and dinners and white roses when we were sitting on a campus bench in the middle of the day on a brisk Wednesday with our books and schoolbags. Before I knew it he had his knees in the dirt and was sweet-talking away—*Ella Bella, My Bella, Little Miss Belle*, names for a child that I gobbled up like toffee. I bent over him and grasped both his hands between mine as if he were dying, my breathing and heart causing a racket all over the campus commons. How could one man prove so vulnerable and so strong? His lips were open so that a cherry could perfectly nestle. His eyes were liquid blue; actually, in that moment, everything about him was liquid, and that's how you know you've really fallen hard for somebody: he isn't solid, there's no geometry, he's wind and water, and you're the whistling flame.

J.M. didn't promise me anything when he proposed. To confess, I don't remember a damn word out of his mouth besides those love-dove names. But he'd brought a box, a manmade velvet square, and what was inside was rare in those days. It was a bright ring set with an actual diamond stone. Tiny rosebuds and curlicues of gold blossomed around the jewel, holding it aloft like a troupe of servants bearing a Nile queen. I had never seen a true diamond before, the closest being Catherine's rusty garnet stone (was it an actual ruby? I wondered now, possibly not so) from Johnny O'Dell. When my J.M. presented me with that ring, I said yes. Wasn't an answer to a question. Wasn't acknowledgment of a guarantee. I said yes because, with that diamond and gold slid onto my finger, I'd already gotten that teaching degree. I was the smartest and the prettiest no matter what anybody said to me. I had earned my own way.

It did still pain me slightly to drop out of school a year early, but in those days no married girl ever went to college, as rare as girls went back then anyway. J.M. dropped out too, a semester before me, but though he wouldn't ever admit it I always knew it was because of his reading troubles and how he couldn't write worth a nickel. "I don't need it," he took to saying about his schooling whenever somebody inquired. Truly, he had only begun to attend in the first place to please his widowed mother, who, the first time we met, gave me one curdled look with her ice pick eyes and a full-bodied shudder. But that was before I wore J.M.'s diamond. Now, he would squeeze an arm around my shoulders and press me to him, lift my chin and say to all the doubters, "I have my lady here. Don't need anything more." And I would feel a blush heat rise to my cheekbones and to the tips of my ears, and I would giggle, scoot closer and tuck my hand into his back pocket like a secret shared.

He liked me that way. He liked me in my dark curls pinned, wide-brimmed hats he bought for me and slung-belted city cardigans, skirts that swished just above the knee. He liked me on his arm walking and beside him with my ankles crossed sitting and that soon I would be his own and be wearing his name at the dip of my collarbone like yet another fine jewel. And the diamond on my finger was like the front porch to me, my lamppost. It spoke all the words and sounds I'd ever need to utter. To his mother and sisters and doubting colleagues, it demanded I belong.

I married J.M. Stenson March 22, 1926 in the Presbyterian church near his family's homestead. I was raised Episcopalian so there was a bristle of that division running through my side of the crowd like a snake in the grass, but it wasn't as big a bristle as the one on the other side, the Stenson side, for the nerve of me marrying their J.M. But I didn't care. It was a cold day spitting gray snowflakes, then freezing rain, and by the vows we could all hear the hail drumming away on the arched roof above. I married him in white pumps, satin tight to my body and a lace veil that fell around me like I was a child playing among the draperies in the parlor. I knew I looked like a blazing light walking down that aisle, my daddy on my arm in the very suit he got married in years and years ago, but not one of J.M.'s seven sisters would look my way. Instead, they fidgeted with the hems and cuffs and folds of their bridesmaid dresses, the color of a drying rose, a color that looked better on my own dark-haired sisters besides.

And J.M. was still liquid in love with me, despite his sternness that I had gradually grown to adore because it meant he was strong. He was all the colors and glow pouring in from the stained glass, which themselves were winter-dull, muttering stories that nobody wished to know. Ours was the only tale that mattered in this town.

Before we left for our honeymoon, my mama and daddy, Ruthie and Catherine all kissed me good-bye. Catherine embraced me extra long, her fingernails digging a little into my arms. “Remember,” she said to me, “hold on to what’s yours.” I didn’t know what she was saying to me, and for the briefest moment, I felt a flicker of something sick and foreign in the crook of my belly. My fingertips prickled like when you’re up somewhere high. Before I could respond, she pulled back and looked me right in the eye, her eyes dark as pitch, just like my own, then released her hold from my arms and let me go.

The first time I wanted to kill J.M., and I mean truly wanted to kill him like by hitting him square in the back of the head with the iron or wringing his neck like he was some fowl bird, was the day we got back from our honeymoon in New Orleans. J.M. had inherited the Stenson family house, which stood as solid and foreboding as some castle over their homestead. His mother had moved out and was now living close by with the two youngest sisters. We clunked through the door that day, heavy-laden with suitcases from our trip and thick in coats from a late spring blizzard, stretched our arms and rolled our necks, and looked around to find a house that wasn’t our own.

“What the hell?” I had taken to swearing over the honeymoon, just as I had taken to smoking cigarettes. J.M. disapproved of both, but I’d found that I made a point of keeping them up just to see that crinkle-sneer appear in his left nostril. It made me tremble with an old cruelty that was I was surprised to feel still rumbling in my bones. I shrugged my muskrat coat to the ground and stomped down the foyer into the drawing room. *She*, his mother, had been here while we were gone, and *she* had filled our house, its rooms, ceilings and walls with her things. Polished vases on curved-legged end tables, gold-framed paintings hung of cloying summer gardens, claw-foot sofas and tall-backed chairs, brittle-armed candelabras, portraits of high-browed, thin-lipped relatives, *hers*.

J.M.'s. And, I realized as its light-sparklers boogied on down the ceiling and walls, just like my diamond ring.

He, my husband, followed me woodenly down the foyer and stood beside me, nodding. He placed a hand flat on my shoulder like he was steadying a wild mare. "It looks nice." I couldn't say anything back; I was too busy trying to swallow back down a taste like hot mustard that was rising into my mouth. J.M. pointed to one of the portraits of a woman who had beady eyes, tight cheeks and looked like she had just been sucking on a lemon rind. "Tanta Ana, I remember her." I glanced up at him and saw that he was smiling a sickly, boyish smile, the stupidest smile I had ever seen. In that moment, his eyes were different, too. No longer liquid, but glass eyes like a doll's. Dead eyes. "She was from the German side."

Well, I wanted to tell that German side a thing or two. Nothing in this house belonged to me. Not even the clothes I was wearing. For the first time since kissing Dodge DePeter the night I was packing my bags, I wanted to go back home.

But by the time the Black-Eyed Susans were blooming, the goldfinches chittering in the field and the corn grown taller than me, I knew that I had another thing coming my way. I was going to have a baby.

I was sure without a doubt that I was sicker than any other woman had ever been before or was ever going to be. J.M. was starting his new job as a car salesman that summer, and since Catherine and Ruthie lived so far away, J.M.'s two youngest sisters, Margaret and Lucy, took to coming over every morning and pretending to care for me. Rather, they would lounge around in the humid parlor and dip cool wet cloths at their own temples while I clawed back my hair, crumpled on the bedroom floor. My fingers puffed out like pig sausages, and so early on I had to twist off my ring with lard and hot water and place it glittering on my dresser. Margaret and Lucy sneered at it there. It happened to be the current family brooding that their older sister, Adele, and her husband, Richard Brunner, who was the only person I have ever met whose mouth lay always in one straight line, had been trying for years to have a baby and had never been able. So now I was heaving it all in their faces and deserved every scrap of misery I got because of my fate.

It dragged on, the sickness and the swelling, the loneliness and unknowing and fear. J.M. and I barely spoke or saw each other during that time. I suppose that for one boy growing up with seven sisters it would either make you fully at ease with women or terrified and spiteful of them and their secret ways. I'd have to say that J.M. turned out to be the second of the two. Alone, then, I watched myself balloon.

And then, after the bleakest days of dark and snow, in the middle gray slush between the late winter months and early spring, I had my boy, Robert Mortimer Stenson. Mortimer because J.M. insisted, even though I always hated that name and felt it brought to mind the sound of gravel-grinding under heavy wheels. But his first name was Robert because I insisted, after my daddy.

So we called him Bobby.

At first I was more scared of this squalling, scrubbed-red bit of a thing than I had been scared of anything my entire life long. The nurses set the baby on me, and once I woke up from the glaze they'd put me under, I could feel its little fists beating on my skin and its tiny fingers scrabbling at my breast, and really I felt like I was looking down at a barnyard kitten than anything else, something that couldn't have come from inside me, that truly I couldn't have ever made. I had spent so many months hating it and crying over it, after all. But I put my hand on it, one palm of my hand, that's all it took to span the length of its nubbly little spine, and I fell to missing my sisters so bad I thought I would howl along with it in hunger and lonesomeness and misery. And I remembered then what Catherine had said to me when she embraced me on my wedding day before I left for my honeymoon. She had said to me, no matter what happens, hold on to what is yours.

My boy, Bobby, was different from how babies are, or how I was told that babies are supposed to be. J.M.'s sisters called him *serious*, called him *difficult*, called him *strange*, but I knew that they were wrong. From a newborn on Bobby was watchful and curious, sparing with his affections. He was sharp, just like me. But he was the spitting image of J.M. with blonde hair like tufts of cotton and eyes winter-bright blue once their color began to settle. J.M. would take him on his knee and coo to him, "Who looks like his Papa?" and bounce him up and down like he was riding a pony. The only son of an only son of an only son.

The day it all turned, though, was the day we visited his mother's place so she could see Bobby, the day all our silence and sputtering finally boiled over. I was nursing Bobby in a bedroom with the door ajar when I heard his mother whispering to J.M.'s sister Lucy in words that snapped and barbed. It didn't take long to realize they were talking about me.

"It was like I always said," I heard his mother snarl. "He only married a pretty face." Lucy huffed in agreement, and they continued on down the hall.

"She's a bitch!" I screamed at J.M. that evening once we were home. My pinned curls had come ragged and undone and my fists were balled at my sides. I was too angered to cry. J.M. just stood there for a moment, his jaw clenched and his eyes flat as stone, and then, almost without warning, without words, he reeled back and struck me hard with the brunt of his white-knuckled hand. I didn't fall to the floor but staggered, arms pinwheeling, and caught myself against an end table. My inner ear whirred and my head spun in pain.

That night, I dragged down Bobby's crib from our bedroom and set it in the parlor where I slept, or not slept, curled on the sofa, my knees tucked to my chin. I watched Bobby lie on his blankets in a puddle of moonlight, his careless breathing, his simple rise and fall.

The next morning I rose when the sky was still gray, before J.M. left for work, and carried Bobby still sleeping into the steeped morning cold. I moved as if still sleeping, as if under water, but in all my life I had never been so sure. I was wearing a wide-brimmed hat, one J.M. had bought me during the early part of our courting, and bent the brim low to cover the bruise like an ink splatter all down the left side of my face. I took J.M.'s car, drove to the town courthouse and asked to file for divorce. On the way home I pulled the diamond ring from my finger, and in a single swift movement like a hawk taking flight, I flung it into the cornfields. Let some hapless farmer find it and grow rich, his wife and children plump with fineries, I thought dry-eyed and bitterly. Or, rather, let a mouse choke on it. Let a night crawler wriggle through. Let it be beaten into the earth by the rain and wind and storms so that it deepens and dulls and never shines like some lost star for anyone else ever again.

In those days a girl didn't have much to her name if she divorced her husband, especially if she divorced a husband with money. But I had my Bobby, my boy. And so without a letter or a note or even a final word I packed my bags and left the Stenson homestead filled with lovely things that could never be mine, the seven sisters and the widowed mother, and my husband, who I once thought I'd loved.

I took a train home to Jefferson, and when she saw me Catherine flung her arms around me and clung both Bobby and me tight to her, said I was welcome to could stay with her and Johnny for the time. I told her and Johnny I was grateful, but Johnny said it didn't matter to him as long as it wasn't for long. So before Christmas we had settled in, Bobby and me, and I began to learn how to live in my own ways again.

Besides finding that he had signed his divorce papers as well, we went more than two years before hearing from J.M. Later I learned that after I left with Bobby he had fallen into a fit of despondence, lost his car salesman job, refused to talk to his mother and sisters, let the house fall to dust and termites, quit farming the homestead.

And for us, it wasn't the easiest time either. I so desperately wanted to go back and finish my degree, to get a teaching job somewhere, to support Bobby without crutching on Catherine and Johnny and the good hearts of my mama and daddy all the time. I felt I was wasting all my sharpness on nothing, on pinning diapers and folding linen, coring apples and peeling potatoes, warming milk day in and day out in a little pan on the stove. But after my divorce, I didn't have the money. And, even with Catherine's help, with caring for Bobby, I just didn't have the time. It wrung me dry to be of so little use; I couldn't stand to be so idle. The home I had so longed for here in Iowa now seemed to be as suffocating as a cage, and all I wanted was to leave. I told Catherine and Johnny that I would pay them back, every penny, for what they were doing for me. I told them that every day.

And what of my boy; what would he think of me? Sometimes I wondered if he ever missed his aunties and his nanny, his daddy who looked like him and bounced him on his knee. Or, I wondered if he even remembered them at all. I took to feeling the comfort of his weight, soft like a pound of dough and settled at my hip, the constant of his downy head leaning against me and his dimpled hand grasping my dress folds. I

loved most the times when I would set him on my lap and read him stories, my head bent low to rest against his own and the spiral of his ear pressed warm against my jaw.

At night I would take to smoking a cigarette on the front step and gazing out across the familiar land spread before me, the fields of corn and soybeans, the cow barns surrounded by their muddied earth, the hay bales like slumbering bears in the distance, the prairie sighing deep and long. Most nights the sky was thick with clouds pulled loose like gray wool, but during others the view above would be clear with a wedged moon and the pinpricks of planets and stars. On one such clear night in late winter, right before Bobby turned a year, I felt his tug on my dress front and saw his little arm raised and his finger pointing upwards towards the nearly circle moon. “Unh!” he grunted, and turned to look at me, his finger still pointing, blue eyes wet and wide, mouth shaped in a tiny “O.” “Unh!”

“Yes,” I said. I took the last drag of my cigarette, craning my neck to blow the smoke away from his upturned face. “Moon.”

He stared at me again for awhile, searching my face in a way that briefly reminded me of an old man. And then he turned back to the night sky, arm still outstretched and finger pointing, showing me he knew.

This was the way we lived for nearly two years, idly and restless, extending my stay by the month and each time feeling the shame bubble through me hot and sickly like first of thunder rain. I still had not heard from J.M., and to be honest it was not so often that he ever crossed my mind.

That was until we received a visit from him, without notice or calling, one oven-roasting afternoon the summer that Bobby was two.

I was alone that day with Bobby, I remember; Johnny was out farming as usual, working the soybean fields bare-chested and perspiring under summer’s sweaty palm. Catherine was out visiting Ruthie, or my parents, or her friends. I was feeling gut-torn awful, as usual, about still hanging around for so long, and so I had decided to spend the day on my hands and knees, scrubbing down the kitchen floor. My hair was lank and pulled into a handkerchief, my tucked blouse smeared with stain and my arms sudsy to the elbows. Bobby was sitting nearby, playing by himself with a tiny tower of wooden blocks on the floor. When I heard someone rapping at the door I thought nothing of it,

simply pushed myself to my feet with a grunt and wiped my hands on my thighs. I figured it was probably one of Johnny's friends, sweating and smelling like dog from the day's work, hoping for a slice of Catherine's canned peach pie. If I had known it was J.M. there I would have already whisked Bobby and me on the fastest train to the furthest coast of California.

But I flung open the door and there he was, standing before me. Time stood still for one humid moment, my arms slack at my sides, my mouth fish-gaping, the soapy drips from my sleeves plopping to the wooden floor as if from very far away.

"Ella," he said. No *Ms.* any longer. No *Little Belle*. He extended his hand.

He didn't look the same. His usually flushed skin was pale, and his cheeks were hollowed, his back slightly stooped and his pants and jacket fitting slack around his frame. Even his tweed brimmed hat seemed weary, and the ice-blue eyes that once had pierced were now dull. He's looking for the diamond, I thought wildly. I'd never told him that I'd lost it, and I'm sure it had been worth a good deal. Because I didn't know what else to do, and because I knew I couldn't just stand there gulping, I somehow uncorked my tongue and shook his hand. His palm felt clammy against my own.

"J.M. Won't you come in?"

He jerked his head into something of a nod and followed me inside. My mouth felt suddenly wadded with cotton, and my pulse started fluttering in my throat. When Bobby saw me coming closer he looked up from his blocks and reached both arms up to me; "Ma." I bent halfway and scooped him up into my arms, pressed his warm little body against mine and turned to face J.M. For another moment the two of them just watched each other, neither speaking one damn word.

I couldn't bear it. "Would you like to sit down?" I asked, more of a demand than anything. Without waiting for his answer, I carried Bobby down the hall into the sitting room. J.M. followed.

I sat slowly on the loveseat against the wall, holding Bobby on my lap, his legs swinging lightly against my knees. J.M. sat facing us in the armchair. The silence between us bent and rippled. Finally, he broke it.

"He's grown so big," he said. His voice was thick and rough. "Bobby. He looks just like me."

I swallowed hard. There was nothing to say to this. Across from me in the harsh afternoon light he looked so drawn. At once I felt a twitch of guilt in the pit of my stomach, not for leaving, but for carrying Bobby away. As much as I detested J.M., I knew somehow that he still must love his son. But as soon as I felt this twitch it went right away, and I then became overcome once more with a boiling hatred for this man, for his mother and sisters and for that night-slap across my face that had left me so ruined.

I had to do something with my hands. “Do you want some lemonade?” I slid Bobby off my lap and sprung to my feet, practically out of the room before he could even respond. I knew Catherine had made up a pitcher the evening before that was now cooling in the kitchen icebox. Besides, I needed something to drink, bad, since my voice was now crackling and my tongue had turned to wood.

I remember walking down the hallway to the kitchen. I remember getting out two glasses from the far cabinet, the kitchen floor sticky-wet against my feet, retrieving the lemonade, the blast of cool air from the icebox, the curve of the pitcher’s handle against my palm, the weight of the pitcher as I lifted it to pour. There was the gurgling stream of liquid from pitcher to glass, the light and tangy smell, the cool air once more as I put the pitcher away. I remember picking up the two half-filled glasses, their surfaces already perspiring in my hands, and then walking back down the hall.

By the time I had returned to the sitting room, J.M. and Bobby were gone.

This became my windstorm. What I have remembered so clearly from the moments before has now, in my memory, suddenly become a reeling blur of flesh-gripping panic and fear pushed tight against my chest and hands and the sockets of my eyes. The two glasses came crashing down, lemonade drenching the floorboards and cushions and walls, and I flew throughout the house like a caught bat, flinging open the door to each room. I didn’t even bother to put on shoes as I ran out the front yard barefoot, down the gravel drive and along the prairie dirt road, legs pumping, arms flailing, my heart pounding in my ears and hot bile rising in my throat, crying “Bobby, Bobby!” over and over in a kind of scream that I had never uttered before, a scream that tore itself from my lungs.

It wasn’t until I had returned home, I don’t even know how many minutes or hours later, that I found the envelope on the front step that must have been there all along,

that I must have simply rushed over. Nearly stumbling over my own feet, I bent down and snatched it up, practically ripping apart the paper as I slit it open.

J.M. had dated it. And then he had written, *Dear Ella...*

There were promises, stacked clumsily like blocks of wood, about how he and his family would care for Bobby and raise him to be a fine boy, an even finer man. They would pay for his schooling; they would pay for everything. He knew that Bobby would need a mother in his life without me there, so he had already agreed to let him live with his sister Adele and her husband Richard, who had always wanted a child of their own. I could see Bobby twice a year, on Christmas and his birthday. Otherwise I had no rights and had no means of pursuing them. He had included legal documents to tell me so.

And then, as I let the pain settle fluid and warm within me, I noticed something else tucked between the letter and the legal warnings: money. My heart, already worn ragged like a songbird on its last wing, somersaulted into my mouth. I fanned them out before me, the bills, bronze-green, starched as collars, crisp as autumn leaves. Twelve hundred dollars.

For my trouble.

It was like that diamond ring all over again. But this time, I saw my life suddenly in bright flashes, of what my life could be with money of my own. With this I could return to school, finish my degree and find a teaching job. I could move out of my sister's place after my time long overdue, no longer have to avoid Johnny's hard gaze or to be fated to become the burden who lingers while Catherine bears her own children, makes her own family. With this I could move out of my girlhood prairie town, east to cities sleek and dazzling or west from Colorado to California, following the mountains coastward like the constellations of stars. Out there, I could find another love.

I would not know my boy's stories until many years had passed, but if I could have imagined them that day this is what I would have seen: Bobby with his father in the sitting room waiting for me to return with glasses of lemonade, his father coolly rising from the armchair and bending down to gather the small boy in his arms, Bobby being carried out of the room, down the hall and out the front door to the dirt road where there is a cab there waiting that will take them to his father's car, which was parked several miles away, in town, so that I will never be able to find them. There is Bobby sitting in

the front seat in his shorts with the windows open and the heat pressing in, the backs of his legs sticking to the upholstery and a bee buzzing frantically, his whimpering fear that he will be stung. His father rolls up a newspaper and swats it over and over, finally out the open window. The car rumbles down the dirt road to the highway and Bobby falls asleep, head drooping forward and gently lolling all the way to Illinois. It is his earliest memory.

And then there is Bobby as a young boy, his aunt Adele becoming the one he calls *Ma* and his uncle Richard becoming *Father*, in time the formal adoption papers that change his name from Robert Mortimer Stenson to Robert Mortimer Brunner. Bobby sees his real father for Sunday dinner and his real mother for the Christmases and birthdays of his childhood, and then just the birthdays, and then hardly ever at all. To him she is only beautiful and strange.

As a boy Bobby remains watchful and curious. He is sharp like his mother, reading whatever he can find, skipping grades in school, pointing at everything new. He cannot stop asking questions, questions about anything he does not know. And because his new father Richard Brunner is a strict man, a German, he tapes the boy's mouth shut when he asks too many questions and raps him on the knuckles with the blunt edge of a knife when he speaks out during dinner. Children should be seen and not heard, at dinner mostly but preferably all the time. Bobby never has any brothers or sisters but many cousins, and they all play together in the haylofts and tool sheds of their farm.

And so Bobby grows into a young man, studies engineering at the University of Illinois at the age of sixteen, trains with the Navy but is too young to ever fight in a war. He lands a job in New York and earns a steady pay, meets his wife, a pretty, blonde receptionist from Long Island. Her family thinks that Illinois is as far and foreign as Nebraska. They marry and move to Ohio. They have three daughters, each one with hair like milkweed and eyes like winter blue.

And as Bobby grows from baby to boy to man he will remember being brought by his father to the family he now knows, and he will believe that he had been found, as he has always been told. Yet, he will still remember that earliest memory, and he will ask questions about that summer day where he is sure, that somehow he knows, that he had been taken. And he will remember this with a taped mouth and with an engineering job

and with a wife and three daughters of his own, and he will remember this when his eldest daughter puts his first grandchild in his arms, a squalling newborn girl with hair black like matted feathers on a crow. He will hold her and laugh, “Can this be our baby?” This little dark thing so unlike his own.

That day, July 16, 1929, I put the envelope with the letter and legal documents and folded bills in my pocket, and then I went inside and washed my face, changed into something fresh and walked down the dirt prairie road to the town bank before it closed for the evening. I handed the teller the money and had them put it in my account, which until that day held next to nothing at all. Soon I would return to Illinois Wesleyan and finish my teaching degree. And soon I would leave this place for good.

I’ve never told anyone this, Bobby, but on that day as I made my way back home, the sun setting deep and alighting the green corn in a passing gold, I wished deep within me that I could have a field of my own. I wished that I could become the makings of a story long told. And if I could have a field of my own, I would set brushfire to it, turn and walk a ways. And then I would turn back around and face it all, stand straight-back and chin-high like I know how, and I would watch it burn.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Anne Barngrover grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio. She graduated from Denison University in 2008 with a BA in English-Creative Writing and is now a third-year MFA candidate at Florida State University, where she teaches writing composition. During the summers she teaches at the Reynolds Young Writers Program at Denison University. Anne's poetry and prose have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Houston Literary Review*, *Big Lucks*, *FreightTrain*, and *Magazine Americana*, among others. Her poem "Canopy Road Blues" won the *Caper Literary Journal's* 2011 Borges Poetry Contest. After graduating from FSU, Anne plans to pursue a PhD in Poetry.