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Author

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Publication Date

2020

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

In This Body: A Novel

By

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THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

Creative Writing

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

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2020

Abstract:

In This Body is a novel that follows Laura, a young woman living in rural Southern Oregon, as she navigates a failing marriage, grief, ideals of love, and undiagnosed chronic pain. When pain begins impacting her relationship with her husband and her sense of self, Laura discovers online health forums and meets a queer woman who unintentionally opens up Laura's understanding of her sexuality. In her relationship with this woman and, eventually, within a local queer community, Laura is forced to confront her own becoming at the risk of collapsing the expectations that have held up her life. The novel intimately chronicles the dramas that take place within Laura's body, on the surface of her skin and in her sensual relationship to the natural world. It hopes to complicate linear narratives around cure and queerness.

My husband Jared is no stranger to hospitals either. He calls and says in one breath that he cut his thumb at work, saved the piece and had it sewn back on already. I'm out of bed today, nestled on the yellow couch with a bowl of dripping ice in my lap to cool me, so it isn't hard to put on a bra and slip into my sandals. Leaving the house, though, I move more slowly. I haven't been outside in over a week. The air is swirling with smoke from the Path fire and another on a reservation in Eastern Oregon. They say neither will go out until it rains. Some blame global warming. Others blame the Forest Service. Jared thinks the earth just has cycles like this, that we're in the middle of a bad one. I pull on my face mask. Though it helps me breathe, the smoke still sneaks in, making my head pound. No one else wears masks. Maybe senior citizens or babies with asthma. I tried to make Jared wear one this summer, when six other fires were raging and ash fell like snow. He thought the idea was hilarious, as if I were telling him to wear a bow in his hair.

The driveway gravel bakes in the harsh sun of early October. Should be almost fall, but it's not. My car's coated in ash and grass shards from Jared weed-eating the yard last weekend on a rare windless morning before burn restrictions kicked in. From the backseat of the car, I grab the glossy coupon section of an old newspaper. Big5's Stars and Stripes Sale ad from the Fourth. One hundred tiny shoes half off. Discount innertubes and guns. Keeping my elbows in as best I can (*dinosaur arms*, said the chiropractor I saw the five times my insurance allowed), I use the paper to smudge a clear spot on the windshield.

At the first stop sign, I turn my head side to side. My neck doesn't lock up all the way down my spine. No muscles seize. I've been laying especially low lately and I guess it's worked. The alt-rock station plays the same Pearl Jam they played ten years ago. I dip down from the south end of town into the bowl of the valley. Smoke is thicker here, stuck. It turns the

surrounding mountains blue-gray.

In front of the ER lobby, I honk for Jared. I can't go in. I've spent way too much nightmarish time in there. With mom, two years ago, and in the spring, on my own - first for pain spasms that almost blacked me out and fatigue so intense I felt like a walking dead, then a gnarly staph infection that I think I got from the hospital. These days, it's mostly just the spasms and some blurred-out sick days, but still. Through the glass, I see Jared chatting casually with the intake nurse who seemed to doubt my pain was really a ten. I glare at him and honk again.

He comes out, holding his bandaged hand in the air like he just won a game, and I can't help but smile at his goofy face, the sparks of crow's feet at the edges of his eyes.

In the car he tells me that of course he was kidding, the chunk of thumb caught in his saw didn't actually fall off. It was a deep cut, though.

"I think I saw tendons," he says, in the way a young boy might say he saw boobs, or god.

"Cool," I say. I keep my eyes on the road, but now that he's with me, driving feels easier. Town is dead. My AC is broken, the car windows down. The intense oven heat of the day relaxes me like a sauna might, until I flinch going over a speedbump.

"You're okay," Jared says, such a short murmur I wonder if he said it at all. It leaves a tight sweetness in my chest that I could confuse with sadness. He puts his bandaged hand on my thigh and stares ahead.

A few blocks later, he moves his hand up, so his fingers rest just below the edge of my cloth pajama shorts. He nudges the fatty blue gauze of his thumb against my underwear.

"Cure me, baby," he says.

"Gross." I pick up his hand and plop it back on his lap. He keeps it limp like it doesn't

belong to him. These days, I don't find his horny jokes that funny.

It's a forever wait for his prescription at Rite Aid. The cold air is pumping. I borrow a fluffy plush blanket from the home aisle and hug it on my lap to keep from freezing. Jared gets a triple scoop of mint chip. He's happy it's a fresh batch. Thrifty's often gets that rubbery freezer taste he hates. He kisses me, passing waxy chocolate bits into my mouth. I suck on them until they're gone.

"Mine," he says to the crinkly white bag of pain meds.

Our living room is red with light from the bloody fire sunset. I tell Jared to relax on the couch. Usually, he makes me dinner or I eat a bit of what he makes himself. Tonight, I pretend to enjoy caring for him like he does for me. I get out the floppy flour tortillas he likes and cut thin pieces of pepper jack, ignoring the twinge in my back when I press on the knife. I slosh oil into the hot pan. A speck spits onto my forearm, making a little red dot between my pale arm hairs. The spot throbs as I slide his quesadilla onto a plate. I almost like the feeling of pain from something so obvious. I rip off a bit of the tortilla before setting the plate on Jared's lap.

He looks at the plate and back at me. I swallow.

"Oh, did a little mousey take a bite?" he says. If my body could fold right up, I might smile and snuggle myself into the arm of the couch, tucking my toes between the cushions and his legs, bashful like a kid getting away with something. He'd like that. I shrug, unamused.

"I can make you one," he says. He thinks if I just ate more, I'd feel better.

"I'm not hungry."

I sit next to him on the couch, not touching him. He likes his space to eat.

“What about this?” He holds out a pill from his new bottle. I close his hand over it. “So you’re feeling better?” His voice is syrupy from the pills and his face loose, like it could drop right into a grin or a frown. “It’s like we switched places.”

I smile, but don’t agree. He’s right that every day is not a struggle anymore. Pain doesn’t flatten me, and the muscle relaxers, when I need them, actually work. It doesn’t feel over, though. Out the front window, the sky is split into ribbons of day pink and night purple.

“You should stay home tomorrow,” I say.

“Eh, I can do stuff on-site without using my right hand. We need the money.”

As if one day of work could cut into our buttload of medical debt, racked up from one ambulance ride, a handful of scans and some blood tests. Jared can’t say the number out loud. It’s so absurd it makes me giggle, which makes him mad. I’ve told him that my old coworkers, and probably many people, have more debt in credit cards alone, but it doesn’t help.

I kiss his cheek and turn on the TV. Jared slouches into the couch, his head slack on his neck like a big flower on a bendy stem.

I’m trying to stretch more these days. This morning my muscles feel like thin, knotted rubber bands. I reach gently towards my toes, careful with every strain. After ten minutes, I sink onto my belly on the carpet over a People magazine that Jared stole for me from his mechanic’s waiting room. I can’t smell smoke in the house or see it between the trees, but the sun is still clouded. And seems oddly cool outside, the eerie chill on a sunny day that only a fire can bring.

I read the magazine cover to cover. It's better than TV. When I hear voices outside, I move to the kitchen window. I'm entertained by the idea of me as a creepy old lady, always home, always spying. My neighbor Landon walks towards the field at the end of our street, alongside a girl with jet black hair, baggy jeans and a striped tank top. I've always liked Landon, though I don't really know him. Today, his blonde hair is gelled into even spikes. Black and red plastic bracelets line his wrists. Jared says Landon has 'gay voice.' Maybe true. He didn't get to West Valley until five years or so after J and I graduated. I could see him getting bullied there by dipshit kids, but he always seems in a pretty good mood. Quiet. Works at the video store now, an odd shop that smells of warm cassette plastic and incense. Last time I went there, they'd added a whole section of frisbees, glass pipes, and off-brand snacks that seemed invented by stoners. Landon wasn't there that day. I looked.

If I was more of an extrovert, I'd be tempted to invite him and the girl into the house to smoke a bowl. It's been too long. In May, Jared started a corporate construction job that drug tests, so we both stopped cold. I didn't have to. Just didn't want him to see me as a sick and stoned stay-at-home wife, a character that, besides the sick, is kind of fitting. I look at the microwave clock. It's 12:21. The right time.

While she was dying of cancer in this house, the house I grew up in, my mom and I started smoking together everyday around noon. Before she got sick, I'd never seen her smoke weed. I was shocked she could roll a perfect joint. She'd grind and roll as I poured myself cereal. It was nice waking up like this, both of us softer than usual. Sometimes we'd share the joint, then watch TV. Often we'd just look out the windows. Stoned, we loved any inch of light that cut through the Oregon gray and into the house. We asked Jared to chop off the front porch roof so

more light could get in. He did it. Of course he did. And she loved him for it.

Watching the light or the dull fog-dark of winter, mom and I would laugh at something stupid like how freaked out I used to be by blood. She'd crack up at the story of the time I peed my pants at the school blood drive and she accidentally brought me a clean pair with a hole in the butt. Occasionally, she'd get on a roll and really ramble. Always easy topics - my big sister Sheridan's young kids that mom called her babies, the deer that hung out in our front yard, Jared and I falling in love at sixteen, how she knew right away that he was a good man. It was his idea that we move into her house, my childhood home, when she got sick, and she could never get over his *sacrifice*.

But you know how stoned connection is. I'd wash and feed her, and brush my hair for my Riverside Inn night reception shift, and by the time Jared came home and I said bye, mom and I were tired strangers again, our relationship loving enough, but tight and practical. Like it was before we smoked. Or, she'd be asleep and I'd be organizing her meds for Jared, while downing a giant cup of hazelnut coffee or a Monster, then driving to work without the radio because music plus that much caffeine made me shake. Joyfully, but also a swerve away from an accident.

Mom thought it was funny that our weed guy stored stuff in orange prescription bottles like the doctor ordered it. There's probably still one or two in the sticky kitchen cabinet above the stove. Maybe just the catatonic shit that she smoked at the very end. Sheridan didn't approve of it, but she wasn't the one who saw mom's pain everyday. I almost looked for the bottle when my back was really bad, but I was too scared it'd send me into some kind of time warp.

I step outside. Landon and his friend haven't moved far, kicking a pine cone back and forth in the street just past my house. I slam the door behind me, but they don't look back.

Strange how the simple churn of air can feel like noise, sometimes. A barrier. We don't have many plants in the yard. Pine trees and some bushes that have grown on their own for years with little pruning. Last February, I found some bulbs busting with roots in the garage. Said on the bag that they should've been planted in the fall. I put them in the ground anyways. The digging and bending and clearing of weeds was what popped my ribs out of place for the first time. Thought I was having a heart attack. Despite the late planting, irises came with the summer.

I turn on the hose and let the water run down my legs. My thumb in the stream, I spray a wave over the rosemary and stemmy lavender. Colors shimmer in the water. Then, I twitch the hose over my head, sending an undulation of drops like rain onto my body. I accidentally shriek at the heavenly cold. The girl in the street turns. I wave and mouth *oh hey*, like I just noticed her and Landon there. Water drips from my eyebrows into my eyes.

She waves back and nudges Landon and he looks and waves too. Then she picks up a big pine cone and dropkicks it down the street. She runs after, dribbling the cone like a soccer ball. As she runs, the sheet of her thick, dark hair shuffles. Even from here, I can see the glint of her chunky bracelets. They're all up her arms like Landon's, but made of rainbow plastic beads.

I go back inside. The girl's flailing stomp-run loops in my brain for the rest of the afternoon, along with images from People Magazine of Maggie Gyllenhal smoking on the balcony of her New York City apartment, with its high ceilings and cascades of plants in every corner. There's something about her small, raspberry lips and sleepy-looking eyes that turn into half moons when she laughs. The article says she's happily married, but her husband isn't in any of the pictures. She says her guiltiest pleasure is smoking and that she cries more and more as she ages. She doesn't say a word about why she cries.

After twenty-four hours, we're supposed to start cleaning Jared's wound. He sits on the toilet with his arm up on the counter. I find antibiotic cream and a roll of gauze under the sink, and stare at the line of grout below the mirror as I wait for him to sit still. The grout is yellowing, squishy white in the very center, brown on the edges. I know this feeling. Me patiently waiting, brain empty, tools ready. Robot nurse mode. My whole body beats hot and cold. I haven't felt this specific feeling since I was caring for my mom. I sink into it again so quickly. Too quickly.

Jared is sitting still, now. It's time for me to take the bandage off. I tell him the air might hurt his wound and cue up my distraction: *remember when you went hunting for the first and only time and failed miserably? Haha, you were so pissed.* I'd joked before he left that he was too cocky and wouldn't get a thing. After, he blamed the failure on me. I'm not a witch, I'd said.

"Actually, can you take the bandage off?" I say.

"Aw can't you? I miss Nurse Laura." He pouts, then sees my face, which must look serious, and unwinds the bandage himself. The dip between his thumb and pointer finger is sliced a half inch into his palm. Puffy red lines the black thread of the stitches.

"Oh wow, that is very gross," I say.

"Isn't it," he says, proudly. He stands and turns on the faucet. "Just soap and water?"

"Wait." I put my hand under the water until it gets lukewarm but not hotter. I was stiff with thoughts of my mom and an old version of me who always knew exactly what to do, until she didn't, but now the emotions are gone and it's just me and Jared in the small bathroom with his nasty hand throbbing and warm water running over my fingers. Why wouldn't I help him do something I know how to do? I take his hand in mine. He winces when the water hits. Gently, I

rub bar soap on the cut. We sit there and let it air dry before I wrap it again.

“Thanks, Doc.” He winks. His healthy hand brushes up the back of my thigh.

“Can you stop with the doctor stuff? It’s weird for me.”

“And what if I don’t?” He flashes me daring eyes, eyes asking for sex.

I glare, trying to play stern and stubborn like I felt five minutes ago. Now, I’m just tired. I could easily get out of it. We could go to bed, curled spine to spine. Every time, though, I wonder: Is this the time that will not hurt? Will I finally fall asleep feeling turned inside out by sex and reattached to my husband? I take his bandaged hand and lead him down the hall.

It’s been two months of stabbing pain with penetration. I don’t know much about it. Neither does my doctor. I do know that J and I can’t have straight up, regular sex. Always fails. We need something different, distracting. I tell him to get on the bed and put his hands at his sides. My voice comes out controlling, confident. The mean sound of it flushes me head to toe.

“You did something stupid and hurt yourself,” I say. “So no touching, okay?”

He nods, smiles. Good. He’s going with the flow today. Sometimes he makes fun of my attempts, which is obviously a buzz kill. I think playing embarasses him, too, at first.

“And if I have to re-bandage that hand, I’m going to be fucking pissed,” I say.

I pull my sweatshirt over my head, blinding myself to his reaction. Whatever he thinks of my bad acting, he stays flat on the bed. I peel off my leggings and shirt. I’m not wearing a bra or underwear, so I’m naked, suddenly. I like to keep myself cute down there. With my back the way it is, I absolutely can’t shave my legs, even if I sit on the toilet with a bowl of soapy water, but I can shave my bikini line into a small triangle and trim it. I think he might prefer it all gone. I just can’t do the red bumps. They get infected so fast.

Crawling onto the bed, I pull off his jeans and kiss the growing lump in his boxers. My mouth wets the fabric. I planned to trace the parts of his body that might need surgery if he doesn't get his act together, blah, blah, but now I can't say a word. I always get shy like this, even if I'm having fun. I have to amp myself up. Leaving his boxers on, I sit on the mound of his cock and rub against it. I turn around so I'm looking at his big feet. My ass faces him. He's told me he likes that view. I jiggle around and swing my hair from side to side. He loves my back, too. It can feel like death, but look totally normal from the outside, sexy smooth all the way from my shoulders to the dimples above my butt. Jared hums with pleasure. I grind down. When he grazes my ass with his hand and reaches for his boxers, I push his hand away.

"Okay, okay," he says. "You can't just tease me, though."

I'm getting into a groove, but this could make me get up and leave the room. He's been saying lately that sometimes he doesn't even want to kiss me, because it turns him on too much and then we can't have sex, and then he feels bad and weird. His body feels *confused*, he says, by my mixed signals. I resent this.

"I can tease you if I want to," I want to say. Instead, I turn around and snap the band of his underwear, hard enough to redden the skin, then pull them down, so they squeeze his thighs that I know other girls would think were so muscly and hot, but to me are just hairy legs with many moles. I spread myself and sit so his cock is pressed between my body and his. This feels fucking good. We are trying to communicate better, so I told him last month that this slippery position, almost-but-not-yet-sex, is great for me. I make myself look at his face, my eyes liquid and stoney at the same time. I touch my breasts and squeeze my nipples. Then he starts pushing lightly up so that when I slide around, his tip presses into me. I freeze.

Okay. I have a couple of strategies to make actual sex work despite my issues: while maintaining my sexy face, eyes either locked with Jared's or shut tight, I take deep breaths. I try to relax the muscles that the doctor says get too tight and cause me pain. I turn my breaths into porny whine-moans. The sounds of pleasure turn me on and obviously turn Jared on, so I really go for it. I spit onto his stomach and smear my spit between us or use lube, a desperate, messy amount of lube. Then I lift up and put him inside of me just a few inches.

It sears. I keep going. I rub my hands hard against my body, then drop them in fists onto him. He's gasping. He wants all the way in. Grabs for my hips.

"Slow," I say.

"I know," he says, breathy, a touch away from irritated.

I need to get out of my head. I need him all the way in, and closer. I sit down hard, folding and dropping my chest onto his. I grab his wrists, shoving his hands onto my hips.

"Now hold me." He looks confused but frantic, and grabs at me. "Tighter."

His arms wrap across my back. He groans and begins thrusting harder. Sweat washes over me. One quarter of me feels pleasure. One half feels pain like a ripping scab. The other quarter feels growing panic. I think I can stick with it until he comes, but my chest tightens and an ocean of tears shoves up my throat, as I continue to force out cute, non-crazy moans.

My eyes are watering. I could collapse. Sliding off him, I try to keep my composure. My hand goes to his cheek, my face smiling the purest sex-nurse smile.

"You stay right here while I get your meds. Don't you dare come while I'm gone."

"Yes, doctor," he says. He exhales a deep sigh. A part of him probably thinks this is over, isn't fooled by my acting, but he doesn't seem to search my face for signs of sadness.

In the bathroom, I'm shaking. Balled up on the bathmat that smells like OxiClean, my face wet. In my belly, a depth of sadness that I can't name. It doesn't feel like mine. It's intense as hell, but not attached to anything. Like when I get nauseous from taking B vitamins on an empty stomach, immediately barfing into the trash: a harsh bodily reaction probably not caused by anything deeper, but for a struck moment makes my body feel like a mystery. I used to let my thrashing fits of tears out in bed. I stupidly thought that this, too, might connect us. It just freaked J out. He'd hold me and ask what I needed and I had zero ideas.

When I'm calmed, I go right back in the room and put him deep into my mouth. Once I excite him, I pull away and lay on my stomach.

"Rub on my ass. Doctor's orders."

He grinds against me. I raise my butt in the air just a little. I try not to arch my back, like ever, but I want to make him come in a different way than last time (a blow job, so many blow jobs). He moans and soon the small of my back is wet. He collapses on top of me, rubbing for a few more slimy soft seconds. He kisses the slope of my neck. I shift and he rolls over.

He reaches off the bed to grab his shirt from the floor. Still on my belly, I turn my head and watch his chest bend, as he almost falls off the bed, but doesn't, snapping back with shirt in hand. His body is elastic. He wipes his chest with one side of the shirt and my back with the other. He turns the bedside lamp off and curls around me. His breathing deepens and his arm over my hip gets heavier. He always falls asleep so quickly.

I go to the bathroom and brush my teeth, toothpaste turning my tongue and gums sparkling cold. Doesn't make sense after brushing, but I put on pale pink gloss. I smack my lips together in the mirror. The sex wasn't terrible.

Back in the bedroom, I sit in the puffy green recliner that Jared moved from the living room to this corner by the window when I had trouble leaving the room but didn't want to always be in bed. The chair is velvet soft, textured like a holiday dress. I'm not tired. I open the curtain a foot or so. It's dark enough inside and out that I don't see my reflection in the glass.

I could wonder why I got so fucked up from it, why I broke down like I did. I've spend days wondering, stayed up all night.

The dark used to terrify me. As kids, Sheridan and I shared a bed with cloud sheets and a tropical comforter in the small room down the hall from this one. When I'd sense her drift off, I'd freeze and listen so hard that soon, the air itself seemed to screech. I'd break my locked pose to knock my leg into hers. I wanted her to wake up, but also didn't know what I'd say if she did. She didn't believe in ghosts and saw no point in considering the many ways a stealth murderer might get into the house without making a peep. She slept on, a rock.

I'd work myself up until I was stiff as a board, my heart pounding through my chest, and then run into my mom's bed. Unlike some of my friends' parents, she always allowed us in her room. Even when she had boyfriends staying the night, which was rare, she'd leave her door unlocked and if I crept in, I'd always find her in pajamas on her own side of the bed. I'd pretend to fall asleep in her bed, but hoped to wake her, too. When I did, she'd take me outside. Pines shot up tall around the driveway. Their hulking shadows made panic swirl in my dry throat.

"Look," she'd say. "Same yard as you see during the day, just no light on."

She didn't believe in the supernatural or fear murder either.

When my eyes adjusted, I'd recognize my surroundings. The same world, just calmer, quieter than day. I'd even wonder if the trees and the bugs were soothed without the bright light

of the sun thumping down on them. I'd fall asleep in my own bed minutes later.

My fear would come back the next night, though, and the next, until I wore my mom out and she banned me from waking her unless it was an emergency. She said I had to at least try to talk myself out of my paranoia. Sometimes fears were just fears, she said, not a warning that something is wrong. I stayed scared of the dark into adulthood, until I started working nights while mom was sick and they began to feel like day, but simpler. I no longer mind the shadows. They could swallow me whole.

A bare window used to taunt me, my imagination conjuring a face on the other side of the dark glass, beady yellow eyes, but tonight, I gaze into the blank. The neighbors left their porch light on. From it stretches a long oval of lightened grass and trees that makes the dark seem even darker. I wonder if anyone's awake over there, or yet to come home.

Jared is whining: his hand throbs and aches when he jogs, but he can't stand not exercising. It makes him want to kick his legs and scream. I've got nothing to say about this. I never exercise. Eventually, he goes for a Sunday morning run and I lie in the bath and touch myself.

I should ask for a detachable shower head for Christmas. It'd also come in handy if I get back to the point where I can't wash my own hair. To finish before he gets home, I think of the redheaded Bond girl from Goldeneye. I have a theory that everyone fantasizes about boobs and butts because we see them all the time. In movies and TV. On billboards, too.

I think of the Bond girl's white bra and wrap skirt, and imagine licking from her tan

cleavage up her neck to her mouth. She's touching me back, pressing her body into mine. I push lightly into myself, avoiding the places that hurt. I pinch my nipples with my other hand and hum-moan to myself. My heart beats harder between my legs. I wonder if sex with a woman would be so different it wouldn't hurt. The thought freaks me out. I sink my head under the water. Holding my breath clears my head and makes me come hard.

Around ten on a Wednesday morning, Sheridan comes over to work on her eBay business. *Our* eBay business, I should say. For years she's worked at an antique shop downtown, but when the fires wiped out tourist season, her boss Carl left in an RV for Arizona and told her to sell what she could online. It's been a month and we're selling more on eBay than they were at the store. She's so thrilled about it as a "sisterly enterprise" that I haven't asked if it'll pay her rent. I also can't tell if she's actually excited, or just thinks that she's helping *me* out, keeping me busy.

She sprawls out on the brown carpet of the living room. I sit on a stiff kitchen chair for my back. eBay and pictures of antiques layer on her computer screen. She uploads a photo of a metal cow hanging on a wall, then hands the laptop up to me. My job is the words.

"Beautiful black and white metal cow," I type in the description box.

"No lazyass. Carl estimates \$58. Let's do \$73 and make it seem worth it."

"One of a kind, first-edition pressed metal. This vintage beauty hung in the Oregon Governor's mansion and was much loved." I giggle. The cow is dented and old.

"Perfect!" Sheridan says. I press Publish and she claps her hands. "Break time."

She gets up and shuffles around the living room like she does after almost every post. She would hate to work full-time in an office like I used to. After mom died, I quit the motel for a six-day-a-week receptionist and more job at State Farm. It was nonstop work, but all our clients loved me. It was there that I started getting sick all the time. If anyone had a cold or flu, I'd get it. If I stayed up too late worrying about paperwork I got wrong, I'd get a cold from the lack of sleep. Used all my sick time, so when my back went out, I took a few months off. Even filing fucks it up. I was going to start again in July, but the owner's daughter up and decided she wanted to work there. Jared said he'd really prefer I wait until I'm back to 100 percent, anyways. Whatever that means. His doctor once said stress decreases a woman's odds for fertility.

Sheridan walks to the kitchen to eat a single Oreo from the box she keeps in our cabinet. Even though she didn't want the house, she still acts like she lives here. If she finds anything that reminds her of our mom, she takes it back to her house. I never argue. They were always closer. Had more in common. Their cackle-laugh, their chestnut brown hair, their love of gossip. Sher takes tiny bites of the cookie, looking out the front window.

"Do you ever put new sugar water in the hummingbird feeder?" she asks.

"Not in a while. You can, if you want."

"Eh, not today. But you should."

She begins picking dead flowers off the Christmas cactus in front of the window and puts them in the base of the pot. While she's distracted, I consider telling her about my sex pain. I haven't told anyone yet besides Jared.

"How's Jared's finger?" Sher says, half-reading my mind. She moves around the plant and keeps plucking. Even though they're withered like old crepe paper and faded from dark to

light pink, I'd prefer she leave the blooms on the plant. I like the color.

"Healing okay," I say. I upload the next item, a set of circus animal Pez dispensers.

"Well you just sound thrilled about that."

I didn't notice my voice sounding any kind of way.

"Are you mad at him?" She stands in front of me, scanning for signs of drama.

"It's not him. Lately sex has been really hurting me." I try not to sound emotional about it, don't mention that, now, the pain sends me into writhing tears like I'm possessed by demons.

"That's happened to me before. You probably have a yeast infection."

The edges of my mouth tug downwards.

"My doctor thought so too. Gave me back-to-back rounds of antifungals. When they didn't work, he said to take two a day." This feels exhausting even to say. I'm afraid she'll get mad that it's been so long and I haven't told her, but she doesn't seem to care.

"Well, that'll probably do it."

"No. It's been over a month since then. Nothing."

"Ugh, I'm sorry. Are you trying to do it before getting turned on enough?"

"I mean now it's kind of hard to get into it, but I try. I don't think it's that."

We don't usually talk about sex. She looks excited.

"Oh! You should get this little vibrator Leslie sold me at one of her sex toy parties like years ago. Remember when she had those? So fun. It fits onto your finger. Seriously, I can come multiple times during sex with it."

My fingers are resting on my keyboard, shaking.

"I have a vibrator. Helps a little."

“Aww, Lo.” She crouches next to me and tucks my hair behind my ear. “It’s not the end of the world if you guys have lost your spark. You’ve been together forever.” I stiffen. I want to shove her. She’s always had a thing about me and Jared. She loves this. “Look, me and Robbie have to work at keeping it sexy. It’s tough. Kids for sure, but also, like, time. Be patient.”

I’m surprised that Sheridan, who led my mom and Jared in the Get Laura Pregnant crusade, is admitting to kids having any negative effects at all. In 2005, when we spent our puny savings on mom’s funeral, Sher and Jared dropped it. I think she likes being the sister with the kids and J’s worst nightmare is raising a family broke.

“I’m here for you,” she says. She tilts her head onto my shoulder and looks at the Pez picture. “Ohmygod, wouldn’t it be cute to have a thingy like this for your pills?”

Sheridan leaves after lunch to have alone time before the boys get out of school. I’m happy she’s gone. I lay on my back in front of the big living room window, my knees up in A’s. Between 2 and 4 pm, the carpet there gets hot and sunny like a square of beach. I take deep breaths. It doesn’t take long for the ball of pissy feelings I have towards Sheridan to dissolve. Who cares. She’s so stupid sometimes.

I don’t know what Sher does alone and I don’t ask. I guess everyone enjoys some empty space in their heads if they can get it. I wouldn’t have said this six months ago. Then, my empty space was dark and anxious like the out-of-control insides of a tornado. It swirled constantly, especially when I was home alone during the day, flashes of shoulds banging around: should go to work, should get pregnant, should try to vacuum. Should feel better. On the worst days, it felt like my ribs tapped my spine with any movement. Dizzying spasms shot through my back and

stomach. I'd step slowly, wincing around the house. The only comfortable position was sitting. Even sitting, though, I was so aware of my body and blurry to everything else, that I felt like a psycho on my own planet. Eventually I got kind of used to it. I don't know if that's a good or bad thing. *Radical acceptance*, mom's hospice nurses would say, but it's not like I was dying.

Things in my head are a bit slower these days. I know I can get obsessive, so I try to block out the sex stuff when Jared's not around. When it first started, I got all wrapped up in what the pain said about us, as a couple. I don't go down that road now, but it's still easy to get stuck on questions like what am I doing wrong or will bad sex make Jared fall out of love? The doctor said it would probably work itself out.

I take my mom's Hot Wheels off the china cabinet shelves and set them in rows on the sunny carpet. I dust them off with a Kleenex. I won't leave them to get sun bleached, but I like them there for now, a little museum. She loved collecting the cars. Kept them in the packaging. Last week, Sher suggested we sell them on eBay. My first reaction was to slap her.

"I'm joking," she said. "But hey, I got a rise out of you."

After dinner, Jared and I play a memory game with the cars. He stares at two rows until he's ready to close his eyes. Then, I move them around, take one away and make him guess which one - color, make and model. He's better at it than me. My memory sucks these days. We play way longer than I thought we could. For the first year she was dead, Jared tried to bring up my mom in moments like this, when we were sitting around happy-faced. Maybe he hoped my brain was soft, so he could stir up some hidden emotions. I've told him most everything though: I never felt all that complicated about losing her. I miss her to the moon and back. It seems unfair

as fucking hell, until I remember this universe doesn't give two shits about fairness. When I was emo as a kid, my mom would push me outside and tell me to run laps around the house until I felt better. Why should I feel a lot if there's nothing I can do about it? Also, she's still around, to me. Not that I see ghosts or anything, but you know.

I'm glad we're not talking about her now. I like the way Jared's face looks when he's trying to recall the hidden car. His eyebrows inch together and he shakes his head around, as if trying to stir up the edges of his brain to make that thing he knows but can't quite grasp pop out.

"Red Camaro!" he shouts and I toss the box into his lap.

In the narrow hall on the way to bed, he stops to pick up a ball of my hair that's caught the light. All kinds of stuff gets stuck in the dead air of the hallway. I come up behind him and expect him to chide me for shedding like a dog, but he doesn't even acknowledge the little nest of hair, just holds it in one hand and takes my hand with his other. I let him lead me down the hallway. I love the creases in his worn hand. I never crave it to be soft. He means to be romantic, but it feels like we're two kids in a fantasy movie, tip-toeing somewhere we've never been, some Narnia, where snow glitters with sun but never melts.

In bed, I lay my head on his chest, my hair nestled in his pit. Sometimes, this is too much twisting for my back. Sometimes, he gets annoyed if my hair tickles his chin. Tonight, he falls asleep with my arm across his body, my fingers touching his warm bicep. It's not that his muscles turn me on. I just like the way they swell like hills under his skin. I can feel his heartbeat in the veins that wrap over them. I think of his arm holding a hammer on the scaffolding of that new hotel that was supposed to be done two months ago. I trace the crisscrosses of the building's wood planks and hear the metal crack of hammers, the twisty whirl of drills. I blur my closed

eyes at the clouds of saw dust puffing in the open air around him. Without these imaginings, I can get hyper-focused on time and caught in the fog of insomnia, which reminds me too much of the thin space between living and dying. Sometimes it can make me feel like I live in another dimension. I worry I won't find my way back.

Jared goes over to Levi's to watch Sunday football with other friends we've had since high school. I said I was too tired to go, which is kind of true. Going would exhaust me.

Coming from the kitchen with my giant plastic water cup, I stop in front of the Christmas cactus. It's our only house plant, supernaturally large, overflowing. Carlos, an ex-boyfriend of my mom's, brought it here from California. They broke up when I was in eighth grade, but I swear I still see his pill-shaped Geo Metro around town sometimes. Mom said she broke up with Carlos, but Sher thought it was more complicated than that. I hadn't been paying enough attention to have an opinion. He was just around and then I missed him and then I got over it. Carlos said the cactus was a clipping from his great-great-grandma's, making it over one hundred and fifty years old. We believed him. The giant thing thrives with barely any care.

When Jared and I decided to keep living here, Sheridan insisted we rearrange all the living room furniture so the house would feel different than the one mom died in. The revamp worked, but not so much that Sher wanted to live here herself. Robbie begged, but Sher insisted it would be like living in the past. I don't feel that way at all. The cactus was the only thing that Sher let stay put on its folding card table in the section of the window that gets the most sun.

I miss the flowers that Sher yanked off. The plant covers the clump of pink she stuffed in the pot. Tendrils with jagged edges spill out, reaching in all directions. Late afternoon sun lights up the few dried flowers left on the table and the dust surrounding them.

A thin layer of dust coats the plant, too. I rub a leaf between my thumb and forefinger, wiping it smooth. Deeper in the plant, where the stalks are browned and thick with age, it's dustier. I wonder what the world was like when these spiny segments were young and green. Nearer to the window, closer to the sun, there are so many new shoots, juicy and thin at the end of each chain. Gently, I touch a tiny one. It's yellow-green, soft as satin and edged with a stroke of red. Then I'm tempted to bend it, to break it off, but the young thread of stem connecting it to the plant is more flexible, harder to snap, than the older stems. I walk quickly away, almost ashamed, like someone was watching me violate the plant.

I sit back on the couch. Clouds cover the sun and the room goes dark. My phone lights up with a text from Jared. The cactus distracted me from my lingering wife-guilt. It returns.

"Hey baby, how's your afternoon," he writes.

"Good!! How's the game?" "

He doesn't write back, but I don't mind. I imagine he texted because someone asked about me. The TV is still on from before he left. Muted football. I ignore it, except when they zoom in on the audience or the dancers. The only thing that interests me is what people look like, the expressions on their faces. I love when the stadium video hovers on two people until they realize they're being watched. Sometimes they kiss. Jared and I probably would.

I'm also flipping through a Cosmo that Sheridan brought me after our sex convo. Awkward, but I thanked her. The faces of the models on the first page of the sex-tips article are

dewy and bright. The woman's hair is messy-cute, the guys' eyes starry, more mid-laugh than mid-fuck. The sex positions on the next page are kind of boring. Not that I can now, but in ten years of having sex with the same man, I've contorted my body in most possible ways.

Before my newest pains started, we had good sex. Nothing super wild, but I've always liked who I am when we're fucking, when I sit on top of him and take my clothes off slowly, teasing, enchanting him. I feel powerful and hot. When we moved out of our K Street apartment to care for mom, we started having sex that we needed. Hard, quiet sex. He'd spoon me, entering from behind and holding me so tight. I'd turn out the lights or put his big hand over my face, palm across my eyes, so I'd forget where I was. I'd beg him to rally before bed or before work. He'd fake a sigh, like I was some crazed sex addict, but then get hard. Of course.

We stopped completely when I got sick, but after the constant back spasms were gone and I had a bit more energy, we found positions that didn't hurt. Mostly me on my back, him doing all the work. It was still hot. Felt like a victory. Nothing like the last two months, where we try new things, but I always end up crying. I'm not even a crier.

Sher would say that sex isn't everything. I'd argue it's also not nothing.

Actually, it feels like a lot, but maybe that's because I think about it too much. If it were easy, it'd feel like nothing. One day in August, I was walking to the kitchen when I realized that I hadn't thought about my back all day. I remember this moment very clearly.

I want to make Jared feel good, so he doesn't overthink this sex thing. It's hard, especially when he responds to things so differently than me. After the first month of my pains, we took a trip to the Castle Super Store next to the freeway in Medford. I flirted with Jared on the car ride there, rolling my body to the radio and grazing his jeans with my fingertips. In the

store, he was blankly serious, like we were buying a washing machine or a printer.

“Babe, people come here because they have great sex, not bad sex,” I whispered in his ear. “Don’t be weird.”

“I never said we have bad sex,” he said. He stood in front of the vibrator display for under a minute before picking out a purple oval, the one that least resembled a penis.

“It’s cute,” I said, which seemed to disturb him.

He handed it to me. Then he took a small butt plug from a big plastic bowl display, though we’d never tried anal.

“Who’s that for?” I joked. He didn’t laugh.

Before we reached the checkout, he stopped by a rack of lingerie.

“Maybe you could get something?” he said.

Up until that point, I was having a good time, making fun of his awkwardness. This suggestion made my heart sink into my stomach. I love lingerie, but hated that he’d think of it then. Like I just needed to look sexier. Tears pressed at my throat. I flipped through the rack and handed him a magenta lace bodysuit that dipped low in the back and the front. He paid.

That afternoon I put it on and looked at myself in the mirror for a long time, before having mediocre, painful sex while rubbing the vibrator on my clit til it was numb.

It was like trying made sex even harder.

I’m thinking about the bodysuit now. It does look good on me. Given the grand tally of what I owe as a wife, I really should put it on and lay on the bed with my legs spread, waiting for Jared to come home from the party I should have gone to.

Jared has a smile on his face when he walks in the door, just grinning at the wall as he takes his shoes off. I'm still on the couch in my baggy sleep shorts and soft tank top. He makes his face more normal when he sees me, but I can tell he's high with that out-of-the-house energy, hyped by friends and a few beers. His team must have won. He's still jolly, like our living room is full of people. I stand up. He looks pleased about that. He kisses me, sneaking his tongue into my mouth. He has one hand on my butt. The other hangs at his side. Loose gauze loops around it. I stop kissing him and hold up his hand.

"Oh yeah," he says. "I showed it to everybody. Didn't wrap it back up because I wanted you to look. It's been feeling a little weird and see, it's red. Leslie says it looks infected."

"Yeah, it does. Why didn't you say anything?" He's been cleaning it himself lately.

"I don't know. I thought it was fine."

I put Neosporin on it and tell him to take the antibiotics the doctor gave him just in case.

"Will do," he says. He blows on his cut. "Leslie and Cassandra missed you."

"Aw. Me too."

"They both brought their babies. They're huge! Well, Leslie's girl is. Looks like over a year before even six months." He shows me a picture on his phone of him holding a baby in each arm. Leslie probably took it. She's always hitting on him. When she's drunk she slurs about how he asked her to middle school Winter Formal and she said no. *Isn't it just SO crazy that it could have been them?* She always says that of course they'd never work, not like we do, but I doubt she actually thinks this. Jared likes that I get jealous, but I wouldn't say it's jealousy. I just get pissy imagining what Leslie would do if I threw myself all over her husband.

"Cute," I say to the pictures.

“I told them they should text you, that you’d love to have them over for margaritas or something sometime soon. I can get out of your hair for a girl’s night. Whenever.”

“Thanks,” I say. “But you know I don’t really click with them, right?”

He shrugs and winds a new bandage around the stitches.

“I’ll think about it,” I say.

He looks too long at me, and I wonder if he’s frustrated that I don’t have any friends, then I feel bad again for not going to the party, so later, when we’re in bed, I kiss down his chin and chest, until I’m on my knees with him in my mouth. He moans and presses on my head, then immediately softens his grip. He doesn’t want to hurt me, to be a bad guy. I put my hand over his and push down. He pushes harder, pulling my hair a little. I like it. My gag reflex is weak and I have to distract myself because if I focus, I’ll try to give him the world’s best blow job to make up for something and then my neck gets all fucked.

“Shit,” he says when he comes. He groans with pleasure and looks at me in this congratulatory way. I swallow. He kisses me. We get under the sheets without brushing our teeth.

“You’re so fucking sexy,” he says. “Love you.”

He turns over. I’m not surprised that sucking him off made me wet. I press between my legs with my whole hand. I could wait until he falls asleep and really touch myself, but I’m exhausted all of a sudden. I look at the patch of curly black hairs sprouting from one spot on each shoulder blade. Tufts of wing feathers, I used to say, his angel wings.

Monday night, I catch Jared starting a sink full of dishes. His gauze is already soggy.

“Can’t just pretend the cuts not there,” I say. “Probably why it got infected.”

“I’ll put a plastic baggie over it.”

“No, let me do them.” I push him to the side of the sink.

“No,” he says. “You need to be careful.”

“*You* need to be careful.”

I take the sponge. He hugs me from behind and goes to watch TV. I wipe the slope of a bowl stuck with dried pasta. I keep my stomach flexed to support me. Plates and cups. Soap, rinse, stack in the drying rack. None of this particularly hurts, but as I go, my back does begin to twinge on the left, along my spine, just below my shoulder blade. The twinge makes me sweat. I reach around to rub it with my fingers and keep washing. The dishes are almost all done. When I finish, I mop up the wet countertop with a cloth and hang it over the bend in the faucet.

In the night, I half-wake up and roll over to hold Jared’s body, when a shock of pain wraps around my ribcage. I gasp. Turning onto my back again, I lay dead still. I need to get up to get a muscle relaxer, but each time I try to push off the covers, my back spasms from my spine deep into my stomach, making the space beneath my eyelids white pink. If I woke Jared, he’d get all worried and feel like he has to stay up with me. He has work in three hours. He’d also scold me for doing the dishes. *He could have done them.* I hold my breath, humming quietly, at the back of my throat, and heave myself up. Walking, my back spasms with every other step. Gravity pulls heavy on my ribcage. I could cry, but don’t want to shake.

I swallow a Flexeril with just a little water, so I won’t have to get up and pee later.

I lay on my back with my knees open. My pain fades, so long as I don't move an inch.

When I wake, Jared's been at work for hours. I shift in bed, readying myself for splintering pain. Dull spasms come, much weaker than before. It's a level I can wince through. I try to fall back asleep, my head still groggy from the pill. When I can't, I babystep to the couch and sit against my electric heating pad and text Sher that I can't work today.

She comes over anyways, bringing tube socks full of dry rice that she sewed shut. She heats them in my microwave and puts two on my shoulders and one on my sternum, where my ribs also ache. She knows that my whole body gets stiff as rusty metal.

"I know you have a heating pad," she says. "But I thought these would bring more TLC."

I thank her.

"I got the idea online," she says. "Where's your laptop?"

She sits next to me on the bed and unfolds page after page of people talking about life with fibromyalgia, about doctor's appointments and vitamin recommendations, which tests to take and how to get the right diagnosis to qualify for Disability (it's nearly impossible).

"I don't have fibro," I say. "Didn't test positive for anything. I'm just hyper-mobile and fucked up, I think."

"Doesn't matter. People seem to use a bunch of forums anyway."

I watch her type my symptoms one at a time into Google plus "patient forum": chronic pain, arthritis?, get sick all the time, intense fatigue. She seemed to forget our sex conversation as soon as it was over. I don't remind her.

I've already read every WebMD article out there, but Sher's search gets different results.

Clusters of threads, big groups of real people under cryptic usernames. I'm curious, but remind her I'm feeling okay most days. She shrugs and shuts the computer without closing the tabs.

This morning, I lay still and quiet, as Jared gets ready for work. After my fourth night of Flexeril, my back feels mostly better. Out the bedroom window, mist hangs low between the trees. Jared can't see my eyes, but must sense that I'm awake. He says he's putting the kettle on before he leaves. A strategy to get me out of bed, cloaked as a gift.

I close my eyes until the wheezy foghorn whistles. My feet carry me quickly through the house. There's a single step between our living room and kitchen, faded brown carpet steps onto creamy old linoleum like square pats of butter. My mom always wanted to blow out the wall between them so heat from the black woodstove, with its red brick that collects dust, could reach farther. I step wrong between the rooms. In the single step, my hips shift oddly, my spine shuffle-cramps. I grip the countertop. I breathe. I am fine. I pour water over my Lipton's and let it steam my cheeks. My bones and muscles eventually relax where they sometimes get stuck.

Though my back doesn't really hurt, now, my body stays flush with adrenaline or something, hot and nervous. I sit with my tea and open my computer to Sheridan's search tabs. I browse, like Sher and I do instead of actually shopping for clothes. Some of the forums are attached to healthcare places like Mayo Clinic or organizations that raise money for research. One is called the American Pain Association. This seems extreme, makes me think of a country full of pain. Others are just random GeoCities sites. You can't tell who made them, but people

are talking. Some posts don't have many responses. Others are layers and layers of conversation.

The place with the most active users is called WellHealth. It's a simple site with no pictures and a teal border the color of nurse scrubs. They have posts about every single type of body issue, from kid stuff to elderly UTI's to heart disease. People report the crazy things doctors have said to them and others suggest how they should respond, or how to report symptoms differently so doctors will listen. I search my symptoms and get lost in long threads. I'm more interested in the people than answers, though most of them seem in more pain than me. Their personalities come through so clearly in their posts. There are many typos. Everyone must write out their stories as fast as they can.

At some point it starts raining and then pouring, a steady pound, hollow on the gutters, windy on the chimney. The rain feels bigger than the house, like it could flood right through the roof and soak everything. It was a long, dry summer, but soon, it'll seem like it's always rained and will always rain. Maybe the wet winter they say we need is coming.

The rain makes me want to nap, but I promised Sheridan I'd get shit done today. She says eBay is like Walmart. A week after the aisles of Halloween stuff go up, the next few aisles become Thanksgiving, and a week later, Christmas, so that by late October, all the stuff for all the holidays is in one place. The holidays crush Sher. Everything reminds her of our mom, from gravy to crunchy leaves. We're not talking about that yet, but she is obsessed with getting our act together for *the hottest eBay times of the year*. She sent me a document of pictures and prices and told me to write under the pictures and send it back to her by Friday. Okay, Mrs. Manager.

I shouldn't mock her. Last week she gave me a check for \$351, my portion of what she'd made since August. Not bad for hanging out with my sister and putting together words.

I'm on the couch with a blanket over my knees, still lost in WellHealth pain forums. I make a list on the back of an old electric bill envelope of vitamins people say you should take. Magnesium, fish oil, capsaicin, turmeric. Maybe I'll ask Jared to pick them up. But not the fish oil. Mom took it and said it made you have seafood burps.

I make myself close those pages and open the document to do descriptions. I need to stop thinking of it like "describe," or else I just tell what's in the picture instead of telling a story. It's a set of six frosty mugs. Frosty as if coated with a thin film of milk. Frosty like the glasses my mom would keep in the freezer for soda in the summer. The cups are printed with wide, droopy red lips hanging their tongues out. The lips have teeth that glitter with the * mark that means shiny and wet. I search for frosty mug online. They are called "Mid Century Frosted Glasses."

Sher said it's good for the text to have a voice, letting people know we're a mom and pop place: "Wish I could keep these for my own family! I'd happily serve my sons tall glasses of cold milk in these mid-century gems. Their lippy designs have a lot of character and will make you smile while you sip your gin and tonic after work. - Sheridan Rose, Blue Suede Vintage."

Jared's in the shower when I wake up. My body feels glued down. I should get up and pee. Instead, I open my computer on my belly and go to the catch-all WellHealth board for undiagnosed chronic illness. Someone posted a series of pictures of wet cats mid-bath. I start giggling. The drenched kitties are truly freaking out, eyes bulging, pathetic and precious. Each cat has a line under it: *The pills you gave me for the side effects of the other pills aren't working.*

When you tell me to hurry. When you ask if I slept well.

Jared comes out of the bathroom in a wave of steam, towel around his waist.

“You’re cheerful,” he says. I look back at my screen and consider explaining. Seems impossible. When I look up, he’s naked beside the bed. Damp skin, curling hair, squeaky-clean junk. He puts his hand through my hair, then along my chin, tipping my face up to look at his, like he wants to gaze into my eyes instead of get a blow job.

“I have to pee,” I say. I stand up next to him. Sciatica rushes down my legs. I wince and kiss his chest, but keep my pajama’d body at a distance. He follows me to the bathroom and crouches in front of the toilet. He kisses my knees.

“You’re cute,” he says, pushing my hair behind my ears. I can tell he wants to ask how I’m feeling, but he’s trying for a mood. He stands and stretches to touch his toes. Sometimes he seems like an altogether different species than me. His brain and his body just exist as one, operating so smoothly, that he doesn’t have to think about it unless he gets food poisoning from the chicken nugget samples at Costco or has acid reflux on Thanksgiving. When I walk out of the bathroom, he ropes his arms around my middle and pulls me into him.

“I can’t,” I say quietly.

“Sorry,” he says. “You seemed energized.”

“Sorry,” I say.

I want to get back online, but feel guilty about the computer. I can’t explain to him how good it feels to be virtually surrounded by people without leaving my bed, surrounded by people who are also in bed.

It's a Monday afternoon. I'm home alone and bouncing off the walls. Hyper as hell. I just hit a jackpot: a WellHealth sex issues thread. People here have been treated for yeast infections, bacterial vaginosis, yeast gland issues (some doctors suggest surgically removing them; others say they don't exist), trauma from abuse, trauma from repeated infections, etc. Seems no one's doctor knows what to say.

I choose LoloLala80 for a username and type my post fast.

LoloLala80> SEX

So damn happy to find this thread. Whenever I have sex, I get intense, burning pain. My husband is the sweetest, but when it happens, I panic, like really freak out. He's worn out (not in a good way). Don't you just wish you were a lesbian so this wouldn't totally ruin your marriage??

The responses come in fast because we are all online most of the time:

Desi23utah > LoloLala80

f*&k sex but also I'm so desperate : ((how can I be horny when sex is really not fun???

taylormoon12 > LoloLala80

Yeah and maybe I'd be taken better care of. My pain is so bad, everytime.

BHappi45>LoloLala80

Yes yes yes my husband resents me bc he has to survive on handjobs

Periwinkle77 > LoloLala80

Just FYI, not everyone on here is straight.

And pretty sure being a lesbian wouldn't solve all your problems.

Signed, annoyed gay woman with pain during sex TOO

When I read the last one, I flush, head to toe. I click her handle. She has the default heart profile pic: 34, Portland, OR. Fibromyalgia, CFS, RA. "Clinical" depression and anxiety. *Queer.*

I don't know what to say.

When Jared's been asleep for at least an hour, I pull myself onto the big leather chair in the living room that we call my Throne. Yes, I have two recliners dedicated to me. I click the little blue envelope by Periwinkle77's comment to open the box for a personal message.

LoloLala80 > Periwinkle77

Hey! I'm sorry for my comment earlier. It was really dumb. I guess I'm sheltered out here. My town is pretty conservative. I actually live in Oregon too. Funny coincidence. So, have you always known you were gay?

I delete and rewrite the last line. People get personal really fast on these sites, so I don't think this question is too much. Plus, I want to show her I'm open-minded. Once I hit send, I feel obsessive. I make myself leave the forum and click around on recipe blogs and holiday craft how-to's for a while. Then I refresh the page.

Periwinkle77>LoloLala80

The internet is weird, but thanks for apologizing, I guess. I grew up in Portland and knew I was gay in high school because I fell madly in love with my best friend and she loved me back! A teen gay miracle lol. Are you on here bc you have other health issues too?

LoloLala80 > Periwinkle77

Yeah, just have a bunch of random symptoms -- fatigue, chronic back pain, weird rashes and flus too often. I fell in love with my best friend in high school too! He's my husband:) But everything about me seems up in the air right now. I'd probably know if I was even a little gay, right?

Periwinkle77>LoloLala80

Totally depends. I've never had a crush on a guy but most of my friends have dated men. Even been married to them. Heteronormative culture is so powerful (all the love stories you ever see or hear!!) that it often seems like the only option. Woah, sorry if I sound pedantic. Are you not in love with your husband?

When I read her last line my mouth opens on its own. I look up heteronormative. It is my life. I look up pedantic, too, and want to tell her she isn't being that, but I can't form sentences anymore. In bed next to Jared, my brain makes movies of me and her. We're having coffee at the Dutch Bros cafe downtown, talking about this stuff. She looks like the hot girl in The Fast and the Furious. She puts her hand on my leg, then we go into the alley behind the coffeehouse and she pushes me against the brick. Now, we're in the hot tub at a hotel where Jared, Sher and I

stayed when we went to see Shania Twain in Portland like ten years ago. The surface of the water is bubbly so you can't see her hand in my swimsuit bottoms.

There are commercial breaks, too: dread pounding rock hard in my chest.

In the morning, before Sheridan comes over to eBay, I get back online. I ask Periwinkle77 if it's possible to know whether or not you're in love with someone when they literally make your life possible. She doesn't know either. All of her relationships passed their expiration dates. We agree it's hard to even know what love is. She says that for her, it's often mutual care. I say *me too*, but it seems like I have a lot of care and am still missing something. I admit to her that I'm not even that sick right now, that I took some time off when I was and then lost my job, and now am just sick when I do too much, which is why I stay home and chill. She says I don't have to justify anything to her, she doesn't care. I feel bad for thinking sexual thoughts about her last night. I don't even know her. I call her Peri and she says her real name is Sammy.

"I'm Laura," I write, mouthing my name as I type. It sounds different directed at her.

My inbox icon has a flag by it again tonight. I feel a rush when I see it. This message isn't from her, though. My first thought is that it's another girl like her.

Desi23utah > LoloLala80

Hey, thanks for posting that thing about painful sex. It's driving me nuts! Made my day to hear so many other people are struggling. Hugs from Utah. Have a great day!!

We start chatting. Desiree is forty-two, living outside of Salt Lake City. Turns out we got married at the same time. August, 2001. I start talking to her all about my wedding like it's something I think about daily. She sends me a link to her Facebook so I can see her wedding dress. She recently sold it. It didn't fit her anymore anyways. They are pictures of pictures, the flash of a camera reflected in the glossy photos. Her poofy dress has a train that her friends carried for her, like ladies in waiting. In both the old pictures and her more recent ones, where she explains her illness to family and friends in the comments, she wears bright red lipstick.

"So beautiful!" I write. I try to muster the sadness she says she felt at letting the dress go, but to me it seems more depressing for a giant thing like that to take up half her closet for the next fifty years. I smile. My mom would totally say something like that.

I tell Desiree that her husband Jesus is cute, that they look adorable together.

Desi23utah > LoloLala80

God do I know it. I'm honestly too turned on by him, it's a crime. He's a real life firefighter hunk!!! Haha. Maybe being home alone all the time makes me more crazy for him than I normally would be, but seriously, if I wasn't sick as a dog six months out of the year and could just stay home as his sex concubine, I would do it! And your hubby - a cutie too!!!

I've always felt awkward about girl talk because I rarely had big crushes on boys and found sharing them embarrassing. Too easy to say the wrong thing, or something. But I got a guy people love to look at, so I have something to offer.

LoloLala80 > Desi23utah

Thanks :D he totally is and has always been. People are always asking me if he has brothers haha. A firefighter?! Steammmy. You should make a calendar ;). Sex concubine calendar 2008!! How did you love birds meet?

"We met when I was 28. Online!!!" Desi writes. "Can you believe that?"

For some reason this makes my heart beat hard.

When Desi met Jesus, she'd already been married and divorced to a douchebag extraordinaire who never even went down on her. She asks about me and J, and is really into the high school sweetheart story.

"With that history," she says, "you guys can make it through everything."

"Without a doubt :). You guys too."

When I say I have to go make dinner, she sends me a link to a "frickin easy" crockpot stew she likes and xoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxo.

Jared keeps a pile of wood on the porch for him and another pile for me. The logs in my pile are one-fifth the size of the logs in his pile. It's my job to keep the fire going all day. Wood smoke is probably not great for my lungs, but it's starting to get colder and our ceiling heat is expensive.

After Jared goes to sleep, I add a few splintered logs at a time and watch the orange flames rage. I spit on the stove to make it sizzle, pleased at how quickly the drops disappear. In the night, the fire makes the house creak. I like it, as if someone else is up when I am.

This is how the internet feels, too. The living room is dark except for the glow of my computer screen and the crackling fire. Sammy and I have been talking about basic stuff like our health and what we do each day. I don't want her to know how desperate I am to have someone to talk to, so I let her ask the bigger questions, and she does. Tonight we're talking about Oregon. She asks where exactly I'm from.

"Oh, I know Grants Pass," she says.

She tells me this wild story about a lesbian commune outside of Wolf Creek, which is only like twenty-five minutes from my house. I tell her I find that hard to believe.

Periwinkle77>LoloLala80

Actually, there's a huge history of gays living off the land in southern Oregon, especially woman-only communities that don't allow men, under any circumstance. I was kinda negative before I went, expecting them to be old-fashioned or terfy, but it wasn't like that. Some places maybe are, but not where I visited. Planned to spend the night on my way to the Bay Area and ended up staying a week! We came into Grants Pass actually. To go to an herb shop and a grocery store to get stuff for the old ladies. They didn't have a car.

I am surprised to hear that the lesbians are old.

LoloLala80 > Periwinkle77

Crazy, we could have passed each other on the sidewalk! I've even been to that herb shop! Just once in high school to buy salvia hahaha. We smoked it and at first I just giggled and giggled, but then I started to feel like a cloth doll ripping at the seams

I touch my arms. I remember that feeling so clearly. Like a dream, but under my skin.

Periwinkle77>LoloLala80

Fuck, I feel like that sometimes now, ripping at the seams. You know, the womyn's land sometimes has parties! You should go. Well, in the summer I guess.

LoloLala80 > Periwinkle77

Maybe. But my dad lives in Wolf Creek so that could be kind of awkward. I know its so spread out over there, but fuck, with my luck I'd run into him on my way to the party.

Periwinkle77>LoloLala80

You think he'd not be down? With the gays?

LoloLala80 > Periwinkle77

Um, no. I mean, maybe? I really don't know. Him and my mom divorced when I was three, so I think of him like a distant uncle or something. Sounds weird, but my mom wasn't fucked up by it, said they just didn't see eye to eye, so neither was I. Ehh.

Tho actually, his wife is a big hippy...i can almost see her at one of those parties :D

Periwinkle77>LoloLala80

That doesn't sound weird, abt your dad. you can feel chill about things that other people think are like, life-changing or whatever. Speaking of hippies, the other place I've been to down there is Ashland. Do u ever go? Like to the Shakespeare festival or whatever?

LoloLala80 > Periwinkle77

Yeah! Ashland is sooo cute. I love the creek and all the shops. Never went to shakespeare - my sister Sheridan went with her drama class in high school but i did NOT take drama lol . Omg, you're reminding me of this memory I totally forgot about.

Periwinkle77>LoloLala80

TELL ME!!! Wow, sorry, I think I drank too much green tea lol

LoloLala80 > Periwinkle77

Shush you're making me giggle. Ok so listen. When I was a freshman, I had this friend, Mindy. she gave me her number after we got kicked out of math class for talking too much. after her first week at our school, we went to ashland and climbed a dumpster onto a flat roof and talked foreverrrrr and ate salt and vinegar chips. god, they give me cankersores. Anyways, we could see the stars. It was so beautiful. Just a week later, she had to move back to her grandma's house in corvallis or something.

: (: (So weird, our friendship was so short, seems like it didn't even happen.

Periwinkle77>LoloLala80

But it did. Sounds special. Did you guys stay in touch? dude you could probably find her on the internet!

LoloLala80 > Periwinkle77

we messaged on myspace for like a month or two but then fell off. makes me pretty sad, actually... We called each other best friends after a week and, now that I'm telling you, I have to say - I meant it. And i did search for her on fb, but couldn't find anything. Must of gotten married & changed her name?

Periwinkle77>LoloLala80

Wow, yeah. Bummer. Those formative hs friendships are like nothing else. People that just *poof* get you. When you don't even get yourself. Kind of magic.

"Really did feel like magic," I write.

I don't tell Sammy that Mindy was the only high school friend that felt like that, that I just clicked with. I can't even picture her face. I'm sure neither Sher or Jared even remembers her. Jared and I started dating right after Mindy moved, when he invited me to homecoming. I remember wondering if she would like him, if she'd think he was good for me. I also wanted to send her a picture of my first formal dress, black lace with hot pink satin underneath, strapless. I craved to talk to her so badly that I stopped reaching out. Felt too eager.

It's been two weeks since Sammy and I started chatting. We say good morning and good night every day. We ask how the other slept and dreamt. She doesn't dream much unless she eats before bed. Then she dreams vivid, video game dreams. She wishes we could collide our dreams

and hang out there.

A few nights ago, I gave her a quick rundown of everything that happened with my mom. She said she was so sorry and asked me my mom's name. The question surprised me.

"Elizabeth," I said, "Liz." I realized I hadn't said her name in months.

Tonight, when I ask for a photo, Sammy says surveillance culture is intense, so she keeps pictures of her off the internet if she can help it. Instead, she paints a self-portrait in words. She's a thirty-five-year-old white woman with dark hair and dark eyes. The edges of her two front teeth overlap a bit, which her friends say is fitting for how she can be sharp sometimes. Her eyes are big and sunken, like mysterious black holes. She has short hair that her friend comes to her house to cut once a month.

I tell her that I'm twenty-eight, that my dishwater blonde hair is stick straight like hay and my skin's so pale in the winter that it looks blue. In the summer, I get a million freckles, like my mom did. My eyes are gray or green, depending on what I'm wearing. I don't notice the shifts. Jared does. Sammy probably would, too. She seems like someone who would notice things like that.

"I'm bored," Sammy writes this afternoon. "Can we pretend to hang out?"

She wants me to go first, describing a place as good as I can, to "bring us there." She says she can tell I have a good imagination.

LoloLala80 > Periwinkle77

OK, so we are driving down a bumpy road. You're driving! I kind of hate driving. You put on the music you like and open all the windows. Way down below the road is a blue river, cleaner and clearer than the other rivers around here. The hill going down to it is so steep it makes you dizzy. After like 30 mins of bouncing along, there's a wooden bridge over the river. We park. No one's there but us. The gray rocks are soaked with sun, hot on our bare feet. You're braver than me. You walk straight in not even stopping when the water hits your hips and belly. I walk in slowly. The water is perfect, cool but not too cold. We swim around and float on our backs. Our bodies feel perfect, no aches and pains. The water is like anti-gravity. Also like a mellow ice bath. We swim to a little rapid and sit above it against a rock. The pull and swirl of the water feels so good. And... hmmm. We decide that we will live here at the river. Actually, in the river! There's not much of a forest to live in because I forgot, it burned down in the Biscuit fire. Every hill you can see is covered in burnt trees. So we're mermaids and swim all day without getting tired, lay on the hot rocks and collect algae from the bottom. That's all we need to survive.

Sammy says this all sounds great, but she's not much of a mermaid type. More of an under-water-dyke.

LoloLala80 > Periwinkle77

OK then, water dyke. There's one really deep part of the river below the bridge. If we get

bored of swimming and talking, we grow our legs back and run up to the bridge and jump in and it is a long enough drop that you can think for a second as you're falling. You like to make a big splash. I pencil dive and make absolutely zero splash.

I blush typing the word "dyke." We go back and forth for a while about how we spend our days by the river. I learned to type through a game on an elementary school computer, and thought I was fast, but now I'm getting much faster, my brain flowing right through my fingertips. I actually feel transported somewhere. When I tell Sammy it's her turn, she says she has a splintering headache and has to stop looking at the computer.

"Sorry to keep you online," I write. "I'm a blabber mouth, could talk forever."

Her green light stays on for another two hours. I wonder if she knows it looks like she's online when she's not.

This morning, Sammy sends me a message:

Periwinkle77 > LoloLala80

Hey sorry if I made you feel like the one keeping ME online. Pretty sure I coaxed you into telling that beautiful story. I appreciate your mind in my blurry days, and it's not like you're distracting me from anything too exciting. Just hard on my eyes, because I also work on my computer - I'm a freelance graphic designer. Blah, blah, who's not a

freelance graphic designer. Trying to do irl things more this week. Paul is coming over this afternoon to buzz my hair. There's a dance party tomorrow, so might go and sit on a barstool and bop my head, haha. It's at an old club that I actually like, with a balcony where you can see the river. But so many stairs YAWN and so much cigarette smoke. Whiny old lady. My friends are coming over with food before the party. They're getting so good at making stuff that meets my dietary restrictions. But yeah, the potluck is definitely them trying to get me to go out. Look at me, saying I want to spend more time offline and then telling you every detail of my life. Have a good day, mermaid.

No one's ever told me they "appreciate my mind." Sounds romantic. Probably just the way she talks to her friends. I don't tell her she's the only freelance graphic designer I know. I say that her message was like the swimming hole game, took me right into her world. I want more of it, but also don't. Her words make me yearn for something and I hate that feeling.

I don't hear Sheridan come in, but there she is, standing in the doorway as I re-read Sammy's messages. I slam the computer shut and pray I hadn't been smiling all gooey.

"It's like the internet is your boyfriend," Sher says. "Cute couple. Both in your heads."

My whole body blushes, heat spreading down my arms. She doesn't seem to notice. She opens her own computer, groans and then shuts it. She's grumpy. Her kids have been little terrors this week. She tells me to start the eBay stuff and grabs a rag to dust. Cleaning relaxes her. She wipes every nook of the coffee table and the TV cabinet.

"Remember this day?" she asks.

She holds out a framed photo she took from the bushes on the day Jared proposed to me. We were nineteen. He kneels in a grassy stretch by the river. It's spring, the picture full of a million greens. We'd run nine miles to the park. Our faces are red, shining. I loved running beside him, not talking, in our special rhythm. Like we carried each other. I thought my heart was going to explode out of my chest when he opened that tiny box.

"We were so in love," I say. The words tumble out, sounding much heavier than I meant.

"Woah," Sher says, setting down the frame. "What's up?"

"Oh, nothing," I say. "Did I say that weird?"

My heart is deep in my belly. She moves on to the windowsills. It hits me that I'm keeping a big secret from her. I feel guilty, but then, when she doesn't press me, validated. If she wanted to know, she should ask. I had a maybe plan to mention this girl Megan from high school who is gay now, and ask Sher what she thinks about sexuality, in general, but I'm glad I didn't. She should know something is up without me saying. She should see it written on my face.

After she leaves, I think about how funny it is that we pretend to know each other and ourselves, when life is so long and we haven't even lived much of it yet. We change. It makes sense, hypothetically, that I could love Jared then, and not now, or less now. Like once, I was a runner. I felt free as a bird when I ran. Now, I can't run at all anymore, but it doesn't feel tragic.

Jared has plans to play poker after work with his friends Matt and Lodie, but he comes in the door around seven. I'm on the couch watching What Not to Wear reruns. He plants his lips on my head and snuggles his face into my neck. His tongue feels nice on my skin. I wouldn't mind if he kept going, but he stands up and holds out a plastic bag.

“You hungry?”

“I thought you had plans tonight,” I say.

“I do, just wanted to drop these off. So you’re not hungry?”

“I guess I am.”

He puts one of the tamales he buys from a coworker on a plate and microwaves it before spooning salsa on top. The house fills with the smell of sweet corn and seasoned pork. Jared goes into the bathroom to wash up. When he comes back, he smells like the new almond body wash he got after I read online that I should try more natural fragrances. I get up to kiss him, but he’s already leaving.

“Love you,” he says through the screen door.

Three hours ago, I felt sure of myself. Connected to Sammy and on a distant planet from Jared and Sheridan. But now I wonder if I just need to try harder. I brainstorm ways to heat up my intimacy with Jared and write them into a post. Partly, I write them to see if I can turn myself on. I try to channel sex concubine Desiree. Thinking of Sammy, I edit out the word “husband”:

LoloLala80 > Love Life

Some ideas for the achy (breaky heart):

Have your lover hold themselves up over you, like a push up pose. Close your eyes and make out, feeling all the sensations in your lips and love feelings in your chest. Put lingerie on and turn up the heater so you don’t get cold and sit on the bed while they touch themselves. Make your eyes as sexy as you possibly can without bending your

back all crazy like a sex kitten. Watch porn together? Take a bath and let your lover massage your feet. Kiss and kiss and kiss.

Typing this fills me with the vibes of late night sleepover girl talk more than it turns me on. Of course Desi responds immediately with a bunch of exclamation points. We talk for a minute about our nights. I tell her about Jared going out of his way to drop off the food.

“What a sweetie,” she says.

I reread what I posted and feel delusional. For some reason, I imagine my mom reading my post, and then looking at me in real life, barely touching my husband. Sometimes it felt like she loved him more than she loved me. I think of them watching Judge Judy together, shouting their opinions about the messy defendants. My mom would call them nasty names and Jared would act like their brother or lawyer, listing all the reasons they were the way they were. When she felt the worst, Jared making dumb jokes or saying nice things about me perked her up more than anything.

Actually, it was more like she loved me more knowing that he loved me.

I fall asleep in bed, with my computer beside me. When Jared comes in, he puts the laptop on the bedside table. His movements wake me up, but I don’t open my eyes. I can’t fall back asleep. Silently, I take the computer and go sit on the couch.

My post has forty “hearts” and twenty-three comments. It’s only been five hours.

LaceyizCute>LoloLala80

He says that making out is just a tease for him if we can’t do it

frappucinogrl>LoloLala80

Gahhhh this sounds fun and cute. THank u! *Inspiration*

GodisGood123456>LoloLala80

i love lingerie but shopping for new stuff at my steroid weight sounds like hell.

Desi23utah>LoloLala80

Online shopping, kids. Try it on, wear it or return it, repeat.

Periwinkle77>LoloLala80

Damn. You sound like a heartbreaker.

I grin ear to ear and tell Sammy that maybe I am. Dot dot dot.

I've gotten into a bad routine. Whenever I can't sleep for even a few minutes, I get out of bed and open my computer. Sometimes, I do it sitting in bed with Jared sleeping like a rock. Tonight, I'm in the living room and even the internet seems asleep. The radio playing quietly makes a nice companion in the night. The night DJ's are less obnoxious than the daytime ones. KLDR's Kimmy at Night doesn't talk much at all, not about celebrities' lives or her own. She just reads the ads and introduces songs in her sultry voice. I imagine her in a dark recording booth drinking a silvery can of Redbull, lit up only by the lights of the radio mixing machines. She must know how sensual she sounds. Probably how she got the job.

I'm zoning out. Then, Kimmy plays Madonna's Like a Prayer. The song courses through

me, lifts me up like a church sermon. *In the midnight hour, I can feel your power.* I'm moving my shoulders, singing along. It's a song you'd sing to a lover with your whole body and soul. Not a sweet serenade, but an explosion of energy and movement. Makes me want to jump up and down. I turn my head and kiss the skin of my dancing shoulder. I'm so crazy.

My computer is extra hot on my lap and whirring loudly. I put a pillow under it. Then I take a deep breath and do something I've been dreaming of doing for a week or so now: I spill to Sammy that I think about her all the time.

"It's weird, I know, but I think I have a crush on you even though we've never met."

After hitting send, I smile ear to ear, looking around the living room as if a friend were there gasping at my risky wildness. The song is over. A commercial about a watch repair shop plays. Without Madonna's room-filling beat, the house feels dead empty.

I click on Sammy's icon. Last online six hours ago. If she's sleeping, she'll probably wake up soon. She did say she was trying to be better about not getting online when she couldn't sleep. Said it was bad for her mental health, getting all wrapped up in life outside of her life. Better boundaries, she said. I shut the computer and slide to the other end of the couch.

On the coffee table is my makeup bag of nail stuff. I remove the chipping coat of shimmery blue from my toes. Underneath, my nails are yellow and rigid with fungus. Sammy's probably are too. I try to cut the flippy edges and file down the thick parts, careful not to cut off the whole of my big toenails, which appear completely dead. Picking out the fungus from underneath is the grossest, most obsessive part. When they're clean (if you can call weird half-dead nail bumps clean), I imagine Sammy holding my feet in her lap. My heart pounds.

After two coats of pink, I fall asleep with my feet propped on the table.

I wake at three a.m. My feet are freezing. My eyes barely open, I crack my computer and refresh and refresh and refresh, but there's still no reply.

I leave the computer in the living room and lay in bed half-awake until morning.

Jared is outside when I wake up. I hear him chopping wood. There's a message.

Periwinkle77 > LoloLala80

Sorry I didn't respond. I was at my friend's holiday party and ended up spending the night. I respect your feelings, but don't really have the energy to deal with them. Maybe tell your husband instead. Don't worry, you'll probably get over your crush soon.

Sorry to be so blunt. Having a bad day.

I write many messages and apologies. I don't send them. I feel like I know nothing, like I was talking in another language and ran out of words I know.

I stay in bed all Sunday. Talking to Jared feels like torture. We were going to go to his mom's for dinner, but I say I need to stay home. He turns off all the lights on his way out.

When I see Sammy post her immune system broth recipe on a Winter Tips thread, I get mad. Her voice is cheery and supportive, like she's some kind of internet fairy godmother, stirring soup all day. I have no idea who she is. Might hate her in person.

Anger exhausts me.

Still, I open our messages. I scroll and scroll to the very beginning. Now, some parts of our conversations seem thinner, simpler than they did at first. Other times, though, our messages flow like streams of personality into our keyboards. It feels like a romance, but different than any

romance I've felt. I told her things about my life, little, but important things, that I've never told anyone. I think she did too. I like my tone in the messages. So open. I miss her.

In the night, my whole head becomes packed with the painful gunk of a sinus infection. The polyp inside my left nostril is so inflamed that air can't get past. I can only breathe through my dry throat. By morning, the space above my eyebrows and under my eyes hurts to the touch. I spit a wad of green phlegm into the sink and decide to take the rounds of Z-Pak I didn't use on my last sinus infection. After taking the first dose, my face clears, but my body fogs even thicker. On antibiotics, I am underwater.

It's Tuesday, now, and finally, there's another message from Sammy. I am pissed and still sick. I shut my computer despite the swell in my heart and pretend for a moment that I will not read it. I enjoy the sound of the laptop clicking closed, before I rip it open again:

Periwinkle77 > LoloLala80

Hey. I'm really sorry. I didn't have a good night. TMI, but: I went over to my friend Renee's and everyone was there. I had a lot of energy. I talked and laughed until my throat was sore. Renee and I used to have a thing. We ended up in her bed. I used to dominate her, tie her up and hit her and stuff. I told her I had to top her with words now. I hadn't hooked up with anyone in so long, but felt great bossing her around. Telling her exactly what she could and couldn't do to herself. My arthritis wasn't that bad, so I

touched her a little, but she kept saying, harder, harder. I don't know why she was being so demanding. It's like she forgot all about our dynamic, saw me as a different person she didn't respect in the same way. I said I couldn't and she said forget it. I know she was very drunk, but it made me feel like shit. When I came home and read your message, I felt happy, but then enraged, like you were fucking with me too. Sorry.

Hearing her voice, sure and telling, apologizing, relaxes me from head to toe. Then I'm stiff again. She's never told me this much about her life before. Jealousy flips in my belly when I read about Renee, but then I feel special, more connected to Sammy than ever. My skin prickles when Renee says *harder*. I picture a curvy brunette begging Sammy. Drunk and naked on a bed with Sammy, begging. I've never imagined myself tied up. This makes me the most jealous. My right pinky nail has grown strangely long and strong recently. I drag it across the top of my hand. I grip my wrist as hard as I can.

When I read that Sammy felt enraged at me, any hardness towards her washes away. She doesn't admit she has a crush on me too, but clearly she thought that I could hurt her.

I keep my reaction to myself. I'm afraid to say the wrong thing, to come off as a prude or plain obsessed. I tell her I'm glad she wrote, but that I need to lay low for a couple of days because I made the mistake of going on antibiotics and now have a bad yeast infection.

I don't tell her how bad of a place her rejection put me in.

Periwinkle77 > LoloLala80

I'm so sorry you have a yeast infection. I've hesitated to give you health advice - don't want to seem like a know-it-all, but take a sitz bath if you're hurting – fill your tub w/ 2 or 3 inches of really cold water. The cold will bring blood to your pelvic area and calm the pain. You should also stop eating all sugar and starches – bread, pasta, etc. Would you ever consider coming to Portland to see my naturopath? We could share a meal, too :)

Her invitation makes me high. I try to be realistic. I tell her I can't afford another doctor right now. She says she can pay for my appointment. She's not actively sick these days and has a lot of steady design clients. Also, she decided not to worry about her debt a long time ago.

"The bank can eat it when I die," she writes. "Plus, the world hates sick people. We have to take care of each other. I wouldn't offer if I couldn't swing it."

Today, I wake up feeling okay. Sammy looms in my head like a warm fire. My yeast infection and the fog that came with it has lifted. I'm on my back, my knees butterflyed to the sides, my body stiff in the unshocking way. With my thumbs, I rub the hinge band of my hip flexors, that smooth dip. I like to be able to feel a muscle - that one, and the tight bands running up the slopes of my neck. They feel like strength, though I know they're just holding me together. They're not even supposed to be that tight. I'd feel better if they weren't.

Rain fell for five straight days and now it has stopped. Sun glows through the curtain. I reach to open it with the tips of my fingers. Outside the door is a small back porch, which sounds

nicer than it is. We never go out there. When I was ten, we got new neighbors on that side, a Filipino family who owned the donut shop off Redwood Highway. They cut down every large tree on their property, so you could see straight from our back porch to their front porch. With trees in between, the space seemed big, but without them, it wasn't far at all. The family said that a huge dead tree fell straight through their old house, barely missing their beds. That's why they cut them all down. My mom said she'd do the same. Doug, mom's friend who I think thought he was her boyfriend, said the family didn't appreciate the forest. Mom said there were obviously forests in the Philippines. At some point, Doug called the cops on them for growing weed, which I think they did do because our yard smelled like concentrate of skunk every fall, but Doug's own brother grew mountains of greenhouse weed. *In the middle of town for god fucking sakes*, mom said. I never heard sirens over there, but the family eventually moved. No one else moved in. Little trees have grown back.

The bedroom porch is old and gray. The ends of some planks pop up, their nails loose. It's like a raft, just two feet above the red dirt ground. The wood gets furry wet in the winter and bleached dry as bone in the summer. This morning, the wood steams in the sun. The earth beyond it steams too. I realize there are no big old trees in our backyard either. Just bumpy, mossy oaks, naked ceanothus shrubs covered in fallen leaves, and a stunted madrone, three smooth red trunks stretching out from a stump with a deep hole in it that fills with buggy water. Someone must have cleared our backyard once, too.

I take off my socks and jostle the plastic door frame open. The wet wood is cold on my feet and the sun warm on my hair. The air is clear. It's hard to believe that just a month ago the sky was thick and brown with burn. I stand there feeling gravity, a force I usually hate, anchor

me. The surface of my skin likes this air, with its currents of cool and warm, so unlike the still, predictable air of the house. Everything is quiet, drying.

My toes squish in the red clay dirt beside the porch. Then the ground is soft with needles and leaves, a carpet. I step and step, letting my body run into thin branches and weeds, careful only that they are not the straight, rooty sticks of off-season poison oak. I gasp when my foot lands on a hard spike. Nail, I think first, and flush, though I know I got a tetanus shot because I was sore for two weeks after. Stuck to my foot is a pine cone scale, nail sharp and curved like a talon. I pull it out and rub the indent it left. I squeeze it in my closed fist.

Inside, I tiptoe to the bathtub and I run hot water over my feet. The water swirls brownish red from the mud. I walk back and forth in the filling bath, pushing the water around like I'm wading in the ocean. In my hand is the pine cone talon. I press it into the middle of my palm, almost puncturing the lines there. My breath seems to reach a bit deeper. I press and move the spike, making lines up my wrist that glow white and then red. My insides feel cleaner when I breathe, less cluttered. I decide that I want to go to Portland. I must.

Tonight I tell Jared he can try to enter me. I whisper it in his ear, maybe because I am bored and enjoy the heat of his body next to me in bed, his heart thumping.

"Slowly," I say, "and it might not work."

Our bedroom is dark. Rain fills my ears. He holds himself up above me, his head in the crook of my neck, breathing into my hair. He's hard immediately which surprises me because he said last month that if we keep almost having sex, but not, he'll stop getting erections because they lead to disappointment. I feel him first on the inside of my leg. I breath in, deep, and forget

to breathe out. He wets his hand and touches me for a second. I know I need foreplay, but foreplay is anticipation, and what really gets me wet is penetration, penetration that doesn't hurt, that slip in past the dangerous spots, the seconds between the cave-in of pleasure and the pain of thrusting. I'm fine with the pain, almost. These days, though, I can't even get there, because its collapse at entry. Not to be like a Christian teenager, but now I see a difference between half an inch and all the way. I push into his hand and tell him to go.

He's slow like I need, but my legs are tense and my back, too. The shallow, fleshy thrusts feel good, but that fire in my chest and behind my eyes has started burning. I reach onto the nightstand. I grasp the cone talon in my fist and with my other hand, squeeze my nipple so hard. It's a good distraction, fills me with a cold current that soothes the fire. Too soon, I'm numb in my palm and my nipple. I let go, wait a few beats, and then squeeze again, palm and nipple, and they hurt again. Right when they stop hurting, though, is when Jared pushes a bit further and his dick turns from flesh to poker. Pain sears. A trapdoor in my chest opens. I push him away, tears welling, face crumbling.

I turn and cry into the sheets. In my belly, a depth of sadness that I can't even name beats cold. It doesn't feel mine, this sadness. It's intense as hell, but not attached to anything. Like when you get nauseous from taking B vitamins without enough food, automatically barfing into a bush: a harsh body reaction not connected to something deeper, but that feels so real you doubt you know yourself. I ask, what else is in me that I don't know?

Jared puts his arm around me. I don't speak. I am shaking still. He is silent. I calm down.

"What the," Jared says, his fingers touching the pine claw on the sheets.

I don't answer, but take it from his reach and drop it off the bed onto the floor. I hope I'll

step on it in the morning.

Jared's been home for a few days because he's between projects and the weather's been bad.

When I tell Sammy that I will come to Portland, I'm in the bedroom and he's in the living room.

I feel sneaky, but not quite guilty. My body needs this.

"Yay," Sammy writes. "Does Thursday, November 5th work? Maybe in the afternoon?"

I tell her yes and she says I can spend the night if I need to. Says she has a comfy couch.

Then she sends me a bunch of appointment forms and tells me there is a 24-hour cancellation policy. I tell her I wouldn't dare cancel and want to say I like beds better than couches, especially hers, but I've decided to take it slow. She's trying to focus on the appointment, I think, not on us.

I shut my computer and take a long shower. Sitting on the floor, I let the water pound me. My wet hair flows in rivers down my chest, parting at my nipples. Will she see this?

I smack my fingers hard along the insides of my thighs before I touch between them. I don't think of her touching me, but of me touching her. When I draw circles on my clit, I think of her sitting between my legs, her back against my chest, me kissing or biting her neck, my fingers on her, dipping inside of her. I also think of just holding her like that. Of washing her hair.

Losing my virginity scared the shit out of me, but I wasn't worried I'd do it wrong. Jared liked that I hadn't done it before and didn't know what to expect. He was sweet, almost too sweet, and so soft, except for the moment he pushed through and let out an animal grunt. The thought of that guttural sound still makes me wet. I don't think Sammy would be as turned on by

newbie fumbling. It's not fair of me - she apologized - but I can still hear her say, *Tell your husband*. I imagine her saying, "So you want me to teach you and then you'll go back to him?"

I try to remember what I already know. Pleasure, I think.

Last year Sher was very drunk at our friend's bachelorette party in Medford and blurted that she didn't masturbate until she was sixteen and got fingered for the first time. She collapsed in giggles. I was a little disturbed because I'd been touching myself with objects and my hands since I rubbed against the strap of my car seat as a kid. I remember the new heat of that pleasure. My mom didn't shame me. "We don't do that when people can see," she said.

I bang my head against the shower wall a little too hard to get my head out of that gutter. Weird child horniness isn't at all what I want to be thinking about right now. The impact shakes up my brain a bit. Jared yells, "Are you okay?" and I shout "yes," praying he won't come in.

It'll be fine. I can pretend to be at ease, can give her what she wants. I'm very good at reading people.

"A password, eh?" Jared says from the living room. "Little Miss Paranoid."

I finish filling my cup at the sink and walk slowly back into the room.

My computer is open on his lap.

"What do you need to look up?" I take a sip of water, so casual.

"Football scores. The weather. What do you have to hide?"

"Nothing. It's a virus protection thing."

“Mhm sure,” he says, taunting me. “You’ve been playing chat roulette too much, huh?”

He’s waiting for me to type in the password. That’s the next logical step.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” I say. I slam the computer shut, stick my tongue out at him, and dash into the bathroom, trying to be cute. When I sit down on the toilet, my laptop clutched to my chest, my heart is beating. My back feels twisted from running. Tears are close to my eyes.

I clear my search history and walk calmly back in.

“I thought you were going to chase me,” I say.

“Too easy,” he says.

I sit next to him and put in the password. My fingers fly. I’ve gotten so fast at typing.

“Wait, do it again,” he says.

“Missed your chance.”

He groans and takes the unlocked computer back.

It’s Periwinkle77. He’ll never guess it and I’ll never forget.

Sheridan, Robbie, and their boys are over for dinner when I tell Jared about my trip. I think that doing it in front of them will make it less suspicious.

“My doctor wants me to see a naturopath,” I lie. “In Portland.”

“Interesting,” Jared says. “Is it covered by insurance?”

“No, but they have this program for low-income people.”

“What if they tell you to only eat vegetables for a year or something?” Robbie says.

“Shut up,” Sheridan says. “I think that’s great. Absolutely worth a try. I can take you. We could stay with Ashley Duncan. She lives outside of Portland.”

“I can take her,” Jared says.

I swallow too big of a bite of noodles and cough.

Sheridan corners me in the kitchen after dinner.

“So exciting,” she says. “How long have you been sitting on this little secret?”

“Just found out,” I say. I hope she doesn’t ask too many questions. I haven’t thought much about the appointment as an actual opportunity to change my health. “And we’ll see. I don’t want to get my hopes up.”

“Well, I’ve been reading about natural cures online lately. Sounds promising.”

She bumps me away from the dinner dishes and fills the sink with hot water.

When they’re gone, I tell Jared I want to go alone. He spits out his toothpaste and looks at me in the bathroom mirror.

“Wait, why? No. You’ve barely driven for months.”

“It’s only four hours. I need to prove to myself that I can do it.”

We were both athletes. I watch him thinking, maybe about pride and challenge.

“I’ll stay with Desiree, a woman I met on a medical forum. She’s seen this doctor, too.”

“Oh, makes me feel just great to think of you staying with someone you met online.”

“You would love her! She’s really sweet. Lives in a safe neighborhood. Our friendship means a lot to me. And you know, I don’t connect with people that often. Sorry I haven’t told you about her. Thought you would think it was weird.”

“I do,” he says, but I can tell he’s softening to the idea.

I open my laptop and show him Desi's Facebook pictures, mostly the ones of her and Jesus. I linger on the one of her hugging him in his firefighter gear next to a firetruck.

"It would mean a lot to me if you let me go alone," I say.

He looks into my eyes for a long time and then his mouth splits into a smile.

I'm going to Portland on Thursday. It's Monday afternoon and I'm watching lesbian porn on my computer. To learn, not masturbate. Jared and I have watched it before, together. He didn't seem to think that was weird. Everyone knows guys are into girl-on-girl. Now I remember my worry at the time that he'd think I was too into it. I remember pushing his hands away from me and getting on my knees on the couch to give him a blow job. Images from those few minutes of video - shiny bodies roped together - would sneak into my head even when I was in bed with Jared. After that, I told him I preferred girl-guy porn, or at least threesome.

Watching it now turns me on, but I get scared that I'll seem too porny to Sammy, too forced and unnatural. What if I accidentally imitate the little moans, flicky fingers and spitty, puckered kisses? She would see right through it.

Before closing the internet window, an ad appears in the sidebar for "Angelina Jolie Bi 69." The ad is just a picture of Angelina's face. She's not even naked. Just one strap of her satin dress falls off her shoulder. I know the promise of a celebrity sex tape is probably fake, but I click it anyways. My screen fills with pop-ups: sales ads, weird medical stuff, cartoon characters shaking their gigantic boobs. Every time I try to close the pop-ups, more appear, layering and

layering until it says “1 of 122 windows” and the laptop starts its hot whirl. I press the power button. When it finally shuts down, I restart it immediately. I patiently wait for the internet to load and search “angelina jolie sexuality.”

Turns out, she’s openly bisexual, or at least says she’s had relationships with both men and women. One article features images of her with Brad and their many kids, plus a cropped photo of two manicured hands laced together. It quotes Angelina saying, “I think if you love and want to pleasure a woman, particularly if you are a woman yourself, then certainly you know how to do things a certain way.”

I have no idea what this means, but it soothes me. *Certainly.*

I end up watching a video of a 60 Minutes interview she did. It’s kind of boring, too many fake smiles from everyone involved, but then Angelina starts talking about her mom. She says through tears that her mother was her best friend, that she told her everything. My eyes water. I listen on, hoping that the interviewer, Anderson Cooper, who people think is gay, will ask if she talked to her mom about her sexuality. He doesn’t.

A car pulls into the driveway. I think it’s Jared coming home early from work, but Sheridan is behind the wheel. Katy Perry blasts from her car. The flat expression on her face does not match the song’s beach party vibe. She sees me at the window and gestures for me to come out. Shaking my head, I put my hands up like *what?* She leaves the car on and stays put, so eventually I go out, running through the rain.

“I wanted to see you before your trip,” she says. Her voice is mooney-sweet, quieter than usual. “Do you want to get coffee? We don’t even have to get out of the car.”

As we drive, she keeps the music so loud that if I was going to talk, I’d have to yell. The rain races by the passenger window in beady stripes. When we’re in line at the Dutch Bros coffee drive through, she finally turns the music down.

“I really would have preferred to come with you to Portland,” she says. “As your sister.”

I tell her I’m sorry. She orders two Kahlua Kickers, iced. The barista says something about drinking iced coffee in the cold.

“Well, that’s the way we like it,” Sher says, all cute, like we’re two peas in a pod.

She pays. I take a sip of my drink. The cool, creamy coffee lights up all my tastebuds. She tells me to put the change back in her wallet and drives towards the north side of town, where winding streets go up a hill with a view. We used to hang out up here as teens, walking around in huge half-built houses. Some of them still look empty. She parks at the top, where a chain blocks off a stretch of unpaved road that they cut out of the mountain years ago, but never built on. She turns up the car heater. Warm air blows on my hands and my cold drink.

“Look, I don’t want you to feel guilty,” she says. “But I feel my seasonal depression, or whatever, coming back. I could really use a trip out of town.”

“I love you,” I say, touching her arm. I take a long sip of my drink. I promise myself that I will not tell her about the plan she is trying to wreck. I cannot. “It’s just...I have to go alone.”

“Why do you sound all spiritual and weird?”

“I don’t know. I never do anything on my own. It gets frustrating.”

“You stay home everyday by yourself.”

“Hey,” I say. She gets like this when she’s sad.

“Seriously, though. I just don’t get it.”

“We should do something else together soon. Maybe go to brunch in Ashland? They’ll probably have the Christmas lights up in a few weeks.”

“You’re so fucking stubborn.” Her phone buzzes in the cupholder. She doesn’t pick up, just lets it ring, plastic banging against plastic. “It’s Robbie picking the boys up from school. He calls me about every little thing. Like, figure it out.”

Eventually the phone stops vibrating.

“Listen,” she says. “I get that you don’t want Jared to come, with all the issues your health stuff is making for you guys. You wanna keep him out of the nitty gritty.” I stop myself from interjecting. “But don’t you need someone there?”

“Sher,” I say. “Please try to understand. It’s like, I don’t know, how you didn’t want the house. Sometimes we have to follow our guts.”

“Wow, that is a completely different situation. Why would you bring that up?”

I can’t win. She starts the engine again. We glide down the hill. She’s quiet all the way home, but at my house, she turns off the car and grabs her purse, like she’s coming in.

“Well, if I can’t go on your stupid trip, can I at least trim your bangs for you? I have my scissors in my purse like a crazy person. I get paranoid sometimes about parking lot creeps.”

Her voice is friendly again, but I put my hands up over my hair and shake my head.

“Aw but bangs are so cute on you,” she says. Her hand is on the door handle. “Please?”

I sit on the toilet. Her eyes level with my forehead, she tries to breathe softly through her nose so she’s not blowing in my face. She holds the comb straight against my head and readies

her scissors. I try to calm my nerves. If she fucks up and makes me look like an awkward kid who cut her own hair I am going to scream, and then I'll have to tell her everything, to show her how high the stakes of her fuck up are. So. High.

She snips. I hold my breath.

"Perfect," she says. "Now you're ready to go."

I keep my eyes closed.

"Ahem," she says.

Oh thank god. My bangs are even, and exactly how I like them, with tapered sides so they blend into my hair. I brush the stray hairs from my cheeks and smile at myself in the mirror before straightening my mouth in case I look too excited.

The night before my trip, Jared suggests we go into town to fill my gas tank. I drive. I've been tired this week, but otherwise okay. The birthday cake air freshener hanging from my rearview smells sickly sweet. My eyes flick between the mirrors and the road.

We get gas at Fred Meyers. With the club card, it's always the cheapest in town. And always packed. The usual skinny attendant dashes from car to car, smiling. He starts one tank filling, sprints to the next car, starts theirs, then the next and back again, running the cards and taking the cash quick and smooth like a poker dealer. His gray hair is trimmed tight to his head. He wears a stretchy knee brace over his jeans. Must be older than fifty. Once, Jared tried to tip

him, but he said he couldn't take the money and that he likes running around because it makes the time fly.

"Wanna eat here?" Jared asks.

We walk to the Carl's Jr tucked into the entrance of Fred's. I order fries and fill my cup with sparkling water from the soda machine, which I've never noticed they have, and an inch of lemonade. We slide into a booth. Jared tries my drink and makes a face.

"Less sugar than soda," I say.

"Yeah, tastes like it. Are you trying to lose weight? You're already a skeleton. I mean, a hot skeleton."

"No, just trying to eat better. Sugar messes with my body, I think."

He devours his two Super Stars, leaving me the last bite of each. My mom always took us here when we were little. She could feed Sher and I, one Famous Star each, for \$1.98. Their fries are my favorite fries in the world, crisscut, battered and crunchy, thick like a meal.

We pass Fred's clothes section on our way out. I touch the sleeve of a fluffy blue sweater.

"You wanna look around?" Jared asks. "I just got paid."

I went through my closet this morning, pulling out all of the black things I owned. Everything with patterns or even stripes seemed dumb. My black jeggings and long gray t-shirt dress are folded in my overnight bag, along with my silky purple pajama pants and an old sleep shirt that is so soft and thin with age, it drapes perfectly over my shoulders and boobs. It feels a little fucked up to have him buy me clothes for my trip, but I'd really like something new.

He sits on the tiny bench inside the dressing room stall. When I take off my shirt, he puts his hands on my hips, pulling me between his knees. He kisses my belly button.

“You actually do have little more weight on your curves, now,” he says. “I like it.”

He squeezes my butt. I like looking at myself in the tall dressing room mirror. I sit on his lap and move my ass in his hands. We make out. I know I’m a tease, but watching myself, enjoying the way I look, makes me grind down on the hardening lump in his pants. I can give him this. He has to bite his lip not to groan. I pretend to breathe so hard I have to cover my mouth. He reaches into my underwear and puts a finger into me. Shit. My body feels electrocuted and I stand up as fast as I can. I look away from the scared expression on my face in the mirror and pull on a long-sleeve. It has a deep enough V-neck that my sternum looks like cleavage. My heart is rattling.

“I thought I heard someone come in,” I say.

He leans back against the wall, staring into space.

I pick a navy blue chunky knit sweater with a hood. Next to the checkout is a display of sale shoes. As we wait, I try on a pair of low, black fake leather boots with silver buckles. I wiggle my toes. I don’t want to take them off.

“I don’t know if they’re really you,” Jared says.

“I like them,” I say.

He picks up the box, looks at the price and puts it on the belt.

It is Thursday. The fog is low and cold, but it’s not raining yet. Jared sets my overnight bag and my good pillow in the backseat. He sits in the front as we idle the car and wait for the thin layer

of ice to clear from the windshield. He's ready to leave, too, in his work clothes, worn pants and a cozy orange Carhartt sweatshirt, sipping coffee from his thermos. I'm wearing my new sweater and a lacy light blue bralette and panties set that Sheridan got for me years ago. I put it on while Jared was brushing his teeth. .

"You got this, you know? I'm proud of you." His tone reminds me of when I tried out physical therapy in August. The PT was a friend of a friend and the high school volleyball coach. Jared was excited by it all. The guy made getting better seem simple, like rallying to a finish line, winning over your body through hard work and dedication. It was cute to see Jared rolling out the yoga mats he bought for us at Ross and doing the exercises with me every morning and night. After three weeks of pain from even the lowest-impact exercises, though, I refused to go back.

"Thanks, baby," I say. I give him a full smile, shiny and well, and slide one of the mixes I made myself for the drive. Pink's Get the Party Started bangs out of the tinny speakers.

"Hell yeah," he says. "Okay, I'm out of here."

His truck disappears down the driveway. I have to pee, but don't want to go inside. I fear I'll lose the momentum I've barely got. I turn my music up and text Sammy, "On my way :)." We've never texted before. Last night I entered her number from our online conversation into my phone and saved it as Desiree. If she sees it, I hope she thinks I meant "desire."

The first hour flies by. The road chops right through the mountains and I'm shocked by all the shades of deep green. Bare brown swaths of recent clear-cuts patchwork the hills beside older ones with their perfectly spaced new trees. White ice lines the road over the passes. Then it begins to rain and warms up. Every time I feel my energy plummet, I'm patient with myself. It'll come back. My purse is on the passenger seat. I reach into it to make sure I have all my old test

results and the appointment forms. Sammy reminded me again and again. For the last week, she's been fixated on the appointment, like that's the only reason I'm coming. Our conversations loop in my head. I'm glad she never shared a picture. I love imagining how it will feel to see her.

My body begins to ache against my seat. I stop at a rest area and try to stretch, but sciatica burns down the backs of my legs. I tighten my stomach (one thing I learned from PT) and walk slowly. A Lions Club lady is giving away coffee and cookies at a fold-up table next to the bathroom. I dump two creamers into a cup.

Back on the road, I dig my nails softly into the styrofoam. The coffee makes my pulse race and my arms sweat, but it also makes my heart swell. I smile to myself. I feel like I'm barreling towards something huge, like I imagine people feel on the first day of college or whatever. All alone, in a good way. Finally.

The Portland freeways are clearer than I expect, but with the walls of rain, I'm craning my neck all over the place to see where I'm going. The wide Willamette is far below the freeway, crisscrossed in the distance with bridges. I try to keep my eyes on the signs and the print-out of directions that I've looked at a million times. I drive towards the tall buildings downtown. My exit takes me along the gray, grassy waterfront. Then I turn onto a smaller road lined with wet brick buildings. I'm almost there. Sammy said the neighborhood is called The Pearl, but it's dull in the rain, not shiny. Homeless people tuck under awnings with their stuff. That's what people at home say about Portland - all the freeways and all the homeless. I scoop the change from my ashtray and empty it into a young man's hand at the light. Sheridan always does that, reminding her kids it's way too easy to lose your home.

I drive around Sammy's block twice to find a spot I don't have to parallel park into. At

her building, I hit the buzzer like she told me to. When she comes out of the elevator, my heart is pounding like crazy. She's shorter than I expected. Her hair is spiky black, dotted with silver. From the back, she might look like a little boy. She wears navy cargo pants with loops and pockets. They're ripped at the knees. Her band t-shirt is worn thin. It looks soft but is ripped around the collar. I worry for a moment about her spending money on me instead of things she needs, but then she opens the door, ushers me in out of the rain and wraps her arms around me. She smells of lavender, like fancy spa candles.

Her face pauses inches from mine, not asking for a kiss but just smiling at me like I am a long lost friend. Close-up, she looks more how I imagined. Her face is lined and so pretty. Her smile is sharp like she said. So are her deep eyes. I feel electrified and exhausted.

"Hi," I breathe, smiling, and I realize what I'm doing. I haven't flirted with anyone besides Jared in years. The old metal elevator is small. We stand quietly, inches from each other. I look into her eyes. She grins at me, then looks at the wall behind my head.

"Do you need to lie down for a second?" she asks when we get to her place. "I thought we could go to lunch, but I can just grab it. I love this vegan place across the street."

I nod and she points to a light blue suede couch.

"Great, thanks."

I want to say more to make her like me, but I'm a little overwhelmed. She covers me with a feather comforter. Then I remember she said, once, that she's very comfortable with silence. She puts a pillow under my knees.

My eyes float open and closed while she's gone. Her apartment is heated to a temperature I love. I feel like a child, waiting here all cozy. Makes me tear up, being with someone who

knows exactly what I need. But Jared would have asked about pillows, heated the house and gone for food, too. Maybe it's that whenever he asks what I need, a part of him hopes that for once, I need nothing. That for once, I am whole. Sammy knows that the idea of a *whole person* is a sham. She's said that sick people know things about life, like this, that other people ignore.

She returns with brown containers full of salad and grains.

I pick up a slimy thing with my fork.

"Sea vegetables," she says.

"Mermaid food," I say.

I put it back in my bowl. She scoots closer and reaches her fork across my lap to stab it. Chewing, she smiles too, her eyes charged with that dancing feeling I felt in the elevator. I touch my hand to her face. She shakes her head to knock my hand off, playfully.

"We can touch," I say. I hear my voice coming out of my mouth like someone else is speaking. "If you want. It's okay."

"How are you feeling, though?" she says.

"Fine," I say. It's a meaningless *fine*, the kind I would give to a random person who had no idea what my *not fine* looks like. I think we both know this.

She pauses. I watch her think. Then she picks my hand up and presses it against her cheek. She puts her bowl on the coffee table and then mine. She scoots closer. It's me who leans to meet her lips. They're softer than Jared's and I feel our kisses everywhere. Only the first or second kiss of my life has taken over my body like this. I'm a good kind of dizzy. We lay down, fitting together on the couch. We kiss with all our clothes on, fingers running along hems but no skin, until the electric beep of an alarm goes off on her phone.

“We have to go,” she says. “I set alarms because I always lose track of time.”

I must ache from my drive but all I can feel is my lips pulsing as we leave the house.

Her Volvo is on the street right below. People are parked so tight behind and in front that she can barely walk through the gap.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she says.

I am silent getting in the car. The dash starts beeping.

“Seatbelt,” she says to me, looking straight ahead.

On the way, she curses at a stopped car hovering too long and at a cute young couple strolling too slowly in a crosswalk. She hasn’t touched me since we left the house.

“Are we late?” I say.

“No. Sorry. This neighborhood has gotten so busy. Are you nervous about the appointment? You seem tense.”

I am nervous because she is tense, but say, “Yeah, I am. It just hit me.”

“Rebecca is nothing like other doctors. Try not to be scared.”

I clutch the folder of papers in my bag. I remember the pressure of an appointment: I must surrender to the doctor, to learn from her. At the same time, I must present myself bravely, *the leading authority of my body*, as they say online. I want to lean across the center console and hold Sammy’s waist, but she is focused on the road.

She drops me at the curb and tells me she’ll come up before I’m done. My heart drops. I don’t know why I expected her to come into the room with me.

The doctor shakes my hand like this is a business meeting. She has thick brown hair and her face glows, smooth with nice smile lines. We sit across each other in cream-colored leather

chairs. She asks how my drive was and I say good and then she begins asking questions: has my house been checked for mold, when was it built, what kind of trees grow around it, do I drink coffee, do I have fillings or crowns, what year did I get them, does anyone in my family also have toenail fungus or yeast infections, does my water come from a well and has it been tested?

I try to answer honestly, without first trying to guess which answer is right or wrong. I admit that there are creeping spots of brown mold in our bathroom, because the fan is weak and there's no window.

"It's not black, though," I say. My voice in doctor's offices always comes out so small.

"Well, any mold overgrowth can be toxic if you have a weak immune system. You should hire someone to remove it. Don't do it yourself."

I nod. She looks at my intake forms and asks how often I take my pain medications.

"Just Flexeril with flare-ups. Maybe every few weeks for four nights or so. Is that bad?"

"No, not terrible, but also not fixing any root problem. Have you tried marijuana? I don't push it on people, of course, but it has fewer side effects, and is good for pain and for stress."

I stumble over my words a bit, telling her that I do smoke, but haven't in a while for my back because the Flexeril works so well. Then I hear what I'm saying and get anxious - if I do hurt so badly sometimes, why wouldn't I try everything that could possibly work, again and again. Feeling awkward about that, I ramble on that my mom used medical marijuana for her cancer symptoms. I hate saying "cancer" out loud. It sounds sharp, like a cuss word, and demands that I say if my mom lived or died.

"She didn't make it in the end," I say. "But the marijuana did help."

"I'm so sorry," the doctor says. "Did your symptoms start when she passed?"

“Not really.” I think of the time following her death. I kept working nights and soon got the insurance company day job. My health didn’t shift until I totally quit the motel and started trying to relax more, to sleep the same hours as Jared, to see more of Sher. “A year or so later?”

“Sometimes our responses to trauma don’t start until we get a break.”

“It didn’t feel too traumatic,” I say. “We were all okay. She was ready, in a lot of pain.”

She nods sympathetically and says the body can read grief and caregiving as trauma.

“Sometimes,” she says. “And you’re married? Have a good support system at home?”

“Yes.” I wonder if she knows I’m a friend of Sammy’s and thinks I’m gay, too. I don’t want to deceive her. “I am married to a man.”

Her face doesn’t change.

“What do you use for birth control? Hormones can upset people’s systems.”

“I’m on the pill. Generic Levora.” I keep taking it, even though I know Jared would prefer I went off, *to see what happens*. I realize that since Sammy and I started talking, I’ve made absolutely sure to take it. For the first time, I feel a pang of guilt for kissing her. I want to get out of this appointment and back to her apartment, so I can stop thinking about my life.

“Would you consider going off it? There are other options with lower hormonal doses. Or, I do support the basal temperature method. Do you want kids?”

My face gets hot. I’m sure my eyes look red and watery. I want to say yes to her question, to put it simply: I love babies and think I would be a fun mom.

“I’m not sure,” I say. My voice cracks. The doctor gives a gentle smile, but doesn’t try to soothe me. She probably sees people cry all the time.

“No need to decide now. I’d like you to collect air and water samples from your home,

and do a gut biome stool test before your next appointment. Now, I'm going to muscle test you for imbalances. Put these two fingers together. Try to resist when I pull."

I lay down and look up at the high concrete ceiling. Bare pipes pass through the room. She puts various colored glasses over my eyes. She doesn't explain what she's doing. It seems she decides, by testing my finger strength, that the purple ones are best. She puts her hand over parts of my body and pushes at my fingers, jotting things down in my file. I try to stay still but wiggle my nose and the thin plastic glasses fall to the floor.

"Sorry," I say.

She picks up the glasses, wipes them with a Kleenex and puts them back on my face. After testing my fingers again, she gets out dozens of thin boxes of vials with liquid or just air inside. She sees me watching her.

"So," she says. "These tubes contain the energy patterns of various bacteria, viruses and body biochemicals. When they enter your energy field, your muscles weaken or stay the same."

"Oh," I say. In another person's mouth, these words might sound like new age gibberish, but I trust her. She sounds like a highly trained scientist.

She sets one whole box of vials on my chest, then the next box. If my fingers open, she takes out one vial at a time and sets that on my chest. When she has a cluster of vials on her desk, she opens another series of boxes with vials containing pills and powders. She tests different combinations of them. Eventually, when she touches my belly and my throat and tries to pry my fingers open, they stay closed. She is satisfied.

She asks me to sit up and explains that she is giving me supplements for mold toxicity and liver detox, as well as boric acid for my pH, and natural antivirals. She notes my Epstein

Barr test, which my other doctor said just showed an old virus that most people have. She says that for some people, the virus comes back often with stress and may be causing many of my symptoms. She touches my back and says that the all over systemic tightness could be from that too. She says that I shouldn't eat nightshades or dairy or gluten. I want to ask what I can eat. She says I should stop using the woodstove. I sense her start to close my file. My heart pounds.

"I wrote it on my form, but..." My voice shakes. "About the pain with sex."

"Ah yes, sorry I didn't mention it directly. The boric acid suppositories - they're for bacterial vaginosis. Also stay away from sugar completely, even most fruit, and any non-natural cleansers - no soaps or even scented laundry detergent."

"Bacterial vaginosis? Like a yeast infection?"

"No, the opposite of a yeast infection, though you have issues with candida, too."

"BV?" I've seen this on a forum. She nods. "Also, someone mentioned physical therapy for the vaginal pain?" I try to ground myself in my online knowledge, to slow things down.

"Some people like it. You can do it yourself through meditation or breathwork when you touch yourself or have sex. Never force sex if it hurts. It'll only build traumatic muscle memory."

She turns to the cabinets lining the room. The word "force" rings between us. She takes bottles out and writes instructions.

"Keep the homeopathic ones out of heat. Wrap them in foil when you go on a plane."

I don't tell her that I've never been on a plane. She goes over the stool kit instructions and outlines the fee chart. Even with insurance it's \$259.

"Is there any way I can do this test at my regular doctor's? I'm on OHP."

"Unfortunately not. This is an advanced test. I haven't been able to get such illuminating

results with any other lab. It's worth it."

I try to smile, as I put the box and all of the bottles into my bag. She opens the door to let me out into the lobby where Sammy sits next to a leafy fern, reading a magazine. The doctor gives her a light, professional hug.

"Keep me posted," the doctor tells me. She asks me to schedule a follow-up in six weeks, hands the receptionist my file and disappears back into her room. I'm so overwhelmed by all of this info and by seeing Sammy's face, that I can't pretend to protest as Sammy pays. When the receptionist asks, I say that December 19th works for the follow-up. The date feels eons away.

"Do you want to do the stool test now?" Sammy says.

"No." I don't want to do it now because I feel nauseous and my brain is starting to take flight, and because I haven't decided yet if I'm ever going to do it. Seems like if I do that test, I have to do everything the doctor said. I say that I'm constipated. This isn't a total lie.

"So, do you feel seen and heard?" Sammy says in the car. "Hopeful?"

I realize then that the doctor did seem to trust every word I said. She didn't doubt that there was something deeper going on, told me how all my symptoms related.

"Yes, she's amazing," I say. "Incredible. I'm still taking it in."

Her hands are on the steering wheel. I wish she would touch me.

"It's a lot. But if you want to stabilize, I do recommend following her instructions."

"Not sure if I can afford it all, but we'll see."

She doesn't respond. The idea that I wouldn't follow her doctor's orders seems to disappoint her. She did spend a lot of money on me.

When we get back to her apartment, she puts on sweatpants and a loose long-sleeve tee

without a bra. Her small breasts and nipples poke through.

“You must be worn out,” she says. “I’ll make tea.”

While she boils water, I look at myself in the bathroom mirror. Am I happy to be here? Do I want to be home? I search my reflection for answers, but just see two gray eyes, hair with a thin layer of fuzz from the rain. I touch my lips. What I really want is to kiss her again.

“It’s good you’re staying the night,” she says when I come out. “You’ll be rested for the drive home.”

Her voice is motherly. Where is the part of our relationship that has nothing to do with sickness? She pours water over the tea. A foresty mint smell fills the kitchen. I come up behind her and press my body into hers, wrapping my arms around her waist. I kiss her neck. She takes a sharp breath and lets it out slow. I feel her body relax. She turns around. Our faces are close.

“Don’t you want to sit down?” she says. “Drink tea and talk? Get to know each other.”

“We do know each other. And we can talk online. We can’t touch online.” I know my voice comes out desperate. In the bathroom I felt conflicted, tired. Now, I feel the fact that in less than twelve hours, I will have to leave.

“You’re thirsty,” she says. She’s making fun of me. I kind of like it.

“Yeah, maybe. But when’s the last time you’ve been touched like this?” She scowls at me. I panic. That was mean. “Hey. I didn’t mean it like that. I know you’re not lonely. Duh. You’re perfect on your own.”

“Yeah. Duh. And when’s the last time you’ve been touched like this?” She puts her hands on my waist. When she squeezes me, she seems to really feel my body between her hands, really hold me. “Oh wait... maybe never?”

I roll my eyes and step away. She mimics my eye roll and pulls me back. She touches her lips to mine, steady, still, and then begins to kiss hard. We grab at each other, magnetic. Her hand slips up my sweater. We kiss across the room and onto her bed. I take my sweater and leggings off. She takes off her shirt but leaves her pants on. When her hand touches the inside of my thigh, I tense. The same whole body freeze when Jared enters me, before the pain. I want her just to go for it, to pound me like she once did to her friend. I can handle it. Her head on my belly, kissing it, she rubs circles on my clit. My breathing is short. Then she puts her finger just in the opening of me and pain shoots. I'm sweating and closing my legs.

She inches away. "Are we going too fast? We can stop."

"No. Please keep going." I rest my head on the sheets and try to calm myself down. This time, turning my body into as soft a landscape as I can, really relaxing like that stupid old doctor told me to with Jared, works. Her finger slips in again and it's sharp, but then not. I feel wetter than I usually am. She presses deeper, while kissing my hip bones, and my body gets lighter and lighter, pulsing away from me, lifting off this bed to someplace else. She gets on top of me, with her fingers still inside of me, and she seems bigger than before, much bigger than me. She kisses my neck, tonguing my ear. She's so good at this. Of course she is.

When I close my eyes, I fall in so deep, feeling only my skin and my insides and hers. It's good, but like having the spins. I have to open my eyes. I look at the tops of her cheeks as she kisses me and around the room behind her. She has paintings on her wall, three in a row. They are abstract, but look to me like rivers, the colors of the rivers and mountains between our two lives. The blue, tan and green pulls me out too far, too fast. I shut my eyes again, but I can't fall like I was before. My brain is split, now. I sit down hard on her fingers. I put my hands on her

hips and pull her closer. I want to forget about home. I slide my fingers under her waistband, but she takes my hands and puts them on the bed. She holds the space between us, intimate and tense, but not smashing, not breaking like I need it to be. I try one more time, putting my hands around her head and kissing her harder. Our teeth touch, clash, and I feel a hot rush, but she's back to small kisses along my jaw. She's afraid to hurt me. I let go and roll onto my side.

"Are you okay?" She is starting to look exhausted by me, almost annoyed.

"Yeah." I know I'm doing what that stupid girl Renee did to Sammy, wanting her to be harder than she can be. But I don't think it's the same situation. I think Sammy thinks I need it soft, thinks I can't handle the real thing.

"Are you thinking about your husband? You didn't call him after the appointment did you? He's probably worried about you." She is lying on her back now, looking up.

Her question about Jared makes me angry. Why is she being like this?

"Yeah, I should call Jared," I say. I don't know why I say his name. She raises her eyebrows. I walk naked into the kitchen with my phone, running my free hand over the tile of the countertop. My heart is pounding. I absolutely do not want to hear his voice, but I want her to see me hear it. I want her to hate it a little, to get mad at me. The window shades are open, but the room is dark. No one can see in. A light glows in the alleyway below. Rain falls in its beam.

"Babe," Jared says. He sounds distracted. "How was your appointment?"

"Good." I open the cabinets. Plates, cups, spices, dried grains and beans in jars. The top shelves, too high, are empty. She sets things up exactly how she needs them. "I'll tell you all about it tomorrow."

"What are you guys doing? Did you get out in the city at all?"

“We’re home now, relaxing. We went to Pioneer Place earlier. Got some food with her family.” When Jared, Sheridan and I came to Portland years ago for Shania Twain, we went to that mall and spent hours in Wet Seal, Jared groaning, holding our stacks of hangers.

“Cool,” he says.

I say I’ll text him when I leave. He says I love you and hangs up in the middle of me saying it back. He didn’t seem worried about me at all or suspicious. I go back into the bedroom feeling frustrated with both Sammy and Jared, but somehow lighter. I drop my head into a pillow, interlacing my fingers with Sammy’s. Her hand is limp when I squeeze.

“Why did you say that?” she says.

“What?”

“The mall thing? And that we’re with my family?”

“I don’t know.”

She waits, not looking at me.

“You’re kind of a mess,” she says.

“And you’re surprised by that?”

Her face relaxes at this. She smiles and then makes her face stern.

“Well, you can stop doing that if you want to. Stop performing for him.”

Her fingers are still looped loosely with mine. Acne scars pock her cheeks, a shallow, rocky texture that makes her look hard and soft at the same time. Her phone buzzes on the dresser. She doesn’t move to get it. She wants to stay right here. I realize then that she’s pouting.

“You’re right,” I say. She doesn’t respond. I sit on top of her. “Look at me.”

She looks up, her grainy eyes serious and unblinking. We’re having a staring contest,

until I bend to kiss her. We kiss slowly, breathing deeper, shared air catching in our throats. The slight moans of her exhales ripple through me. I flatten my chest to hers and her arms rope over my back. She holds me tight to her and presses the mound of her pelvic bone between my legs. I suck in air. My head is in the crook of her neck, my lips reaching to kiss whatever skin I can find, drooling. Being held so tight like that makes the space behind my eyelids go white. I hold my breath. I'm awash with feelings, electric numb spreading through me. She moves her hips, her bone grinding against mine. It's as if she has a cock and it's moving into me, filling me. How can it feel like that? She rolls me off of her in a smooth motion so like pulling out. She gets on top.

Lying on my back, I try to keep my legs together. I want them pried apart. She doesn't open them, though, just kisses my upper thighs and my hair, and then sits up and sticks her finger into the slit. It almost feels like a tongue. She keeps her good posture as she plunges in and out, touching all of my folds. She's still wearing her black underwear, but her pants are off. She isn't afraid to make eye contact. But when she does for a long time, her eyes become soft, movie-romantic. Different, I imagine, from how they looked when she held me locked to her. She kisses my stomach and nipples, touches her lips to mine, humming as she presses. Compared to before, this sweetness seems like an act. I'm the one to look away. I think of her word for me and Jared: performing. A siren passes on the street. I try to buck my hips, pushing to make her push back again. But she doesn't. Instead, she lays down next to me, her head on my shoulder, and puts her finger to my clit. It feels fucking good. She knows just where to touch. But I'm distracted by questions: is she even having fun?

I shut out these thoughts. I think she would like it if I came hard, letting loose. To focus, I think of the porn I last watched. My brain goes to one girl's wet red lips around a dildo, then

around a penis, which was not in the porn. This freaks me out, so I zero in on the girl's round boobs. I could look at Sammy's body, but opening my eyes makes me think too much. She glides her fingers in and out, now sitting on my thighs, holding my legs together with hers. Her crotch is hot on my skin, her fingers wet. I squirm around and moan and twist my nipples and think about nipples and come slow and long, shaking all over the bed. Sammy collapses on top of me and, now that my legs are loose, shoves three fingers, which feels like a whole hand, inside me. I'm shocked at how easy they go in. I pulse again and again. I open my eyes. Seeing her, one last pulse rides through my whole body. She kisses all over my face and neck. I'm smiling so wide.

"That was very hot," she says.

She rolls off me, laying beside me. We're quiet. I see her smiling at my smile.

"Can I touch you," I ask eventually, my hand on her hip bone.

"No, I got off on getting you off."

"You can tell me what to do to you. You could hit me. I'd like it."

"Oh honey," she says. Her tone embarrasses me.

"What? Nothing that will hurt you. Just the dynamic. Or whatever."

"I'm sorry. I'm not comfortable domming people who've never done it before."

"Oh."

"It just, like, requires a language, experience. Or else I'll feel like shit tomorrow."

"I don't want that. It just sounds so good to be out of control like that, pleasing you."

"I know," she says. "It would be. Look, if you lay on some pillows, I'll eat you. Make you come again." She makes her voice sexy when she says this, but her face is tired.

"You look sleepy."

“Yeah,” she says. “Aren’t you?”

I nod, though I think I could stay up all night with her. But I don’t want to be a burden, some child she has to enchant. She yawns and I try not to yawn in response, but my mouth stretches open. Sleep waters my eyes. I hold her. She is so warm. It wasn’t perfect, our sex, but I want to stay right here for a long time. I feel a lump swell in my throat. I’m not thinking much, just feeling. I could cry.

She gets up for a glass of water. When she comes back, she kisses my cheek then rolls over and pulls the covers up to her neck. I like looking at her spikey shaved head tucked into her pillow. I curl my body around hers. She shuffles and pushes me away with her butt.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “Am I hurting you? Cuddling hurts my back sometimes too.”

“It’s not that. I just need space to sleep.”

I move away, still looking at her head, at the large white wall beside the bed with the river paintings and a cluster of loose photographs of her friends. I drift off without realizing it and wake up when she, half-awake, throws my sleeping arm off of her.

“Please,” she grumbles.

I freeze. Her breathing deepens and her body stills, then I notice my aching joints, my neck and back so stiff, like I’m flexing all my limbs. My ribs aren’t shooting pain, but feel so tight and oddly aligned that if I twisted wrong, I’d feel shocks for days. I try to fall back asleep. The knots all over me throb.

I rise slowly, careful not to wake her. The living room is bright with light from the alley outside and maybe the moon. The night sky of Portland has a gray pink glow that is new to me and seems like it should belong in a fairytale or movie set, though I think it may be pollution. My

phone is on the counter. No texts from Jared. When I pass the windows, cool air sneaks in, but the rest of the room is warm. Next to the blue couch are two heating pads covered in a fabric of pastel geometric shapes. Someone must have made the covers for Sammy. She seems to be the recipient of many thoughtful gifts. I plug them in and lie on top, one under my lower back and one under my upper. There is a whole plate of half-burned candles on the coffee table, mounds of multi-colored melted wax. I don't light them, but they smell like many perfumes together. At first, I don't like all of these smells. Some are too sugar cookie sweet and others too earthy, but as I calm down, they get less intense. I cover my body with Sammy's fleece. I usually have to try hard not to fall asleep on a heating pad, but hers have timers. I set them both for twenty minutes.

I hear Sammy get up and go to the bathroom. It's off of the bedroom, so she doesn't have to step into the living room. I know she knows I'm here, but she doesn't come in. I want to go back to bed with her, but she seems to prefer to sleep alone.

She wakes up before me and makes oatmeal. Porridge, she calls it, with coconut milk and buckwheat instead of oats. She slides me a bowl across the kitchen counter. Sitting down next to me, she rubs a circle on my back, then begins to eat. A piano plays in the apartment above us, so loudly my brain can't think of anything to say. It's a beautiful, flowing song. I would prefer the grainy porridge with brown sugar on top, but eat it all anyways and we start talking about music and instruments. We both played clarinet in middle school. She continued to jazz band in high school. When I ask if she listens to jazz, she says she loves it and that she'll message me her favorite albums online when I leave. I tell her that in my dream world, musicians come to my house each morning and play for me.

“It’d give me more energy than coffee, feeling loud, beautiful sounds in my body.”

“You’re so cute,” she says, and looks at me just for a second before pulling her eyes towards the kitchen window. I get shivers. Then she takes the bowls and rinses them to load in her small dishwasher, which she told me her friends went in on together to make her life easier.

“Do you want to get on the road soon?”

“I should,” I say. I don’t want to put my stuff back in my bag. I like my shirt on her floor, my balled up socks in her covers. I make moves towards my bag, but then sit on the couch and roll the cords of her heating pads into organized knots. I set them in the basket below the coffee table. Then I stare ahead at the open space of her living room, my elbows on my knees, my chin in my hands. What can I say? I really don’t want to leave. It’s raining out, but the sky is a sun-backed gray, fluorescent, light pressing through the clouds. I sense Sammy watching me.

“You okay?” she asks.

My throat tightens. I put my face in my hands, squeezing my thumbs into my jawline.

“Can I tell you something?” I say. She nods, but doesn’t come sit on the couch. “Your doctor said my sickness and pain might have started after my mom died. Adrenal stress, fatigue, from the whole experience of her death.”

“Makes sense,” Sammy says.

I nod. She sits down on the edge of the couch and rubs my back.

“I think of when you asked me if I was in love with my husband,” I say. “I still don’t exactly know. He is the only one who really knows what I went through.”

I wish that I was the kind of person who could cry easily, like Sher. Really pour tears.

“I asked you that?” Sammy says. “Yikes.”

“Yeah, right when we started talking. It’s kind of why we bonded. You made me think about my life in a new way.”

“Oh wow,” she says. “That’s funny because I’m not sure I even believe in love.”

“You do too,” I say. She shrugs. “Maybe you’re just cynical about it. Like my whole goddamn family. Well, I think real love exists.”

“Good for you,” she says.

I play-punch her in the stomach. I like how different we are. Gives us this spark. My heart flips, sad again.

“I just wish you could meet her. My mom. She’s kind of closed off, like me, but I think she’d really open up to you.” My voice sounds tearful, but my eyes are dry. I don’t know where all of this is coming from. “And my dad, too.”

“I thought you don’t even really know him, don’t care to?”

“Still.”

She seems suspicious of my emotions.

“And I don’t think of you like that,” she says. “Closed off. Listen to you.”

“Because you get me,” I say. “You make me feel comfortable with myself.”

I kiss her. She hesitates, but then kisses back. Then I crawl onto her lap and rest my head in the bend above her shoulder. I love the smell of her body, her house.

“Want to lie in bed for a bit before I go?” I say into her neck.

“You should really get on the road.” She’s pulling away from me, getting up from the couch, folding up the blanket that I slept under. “It’s a long drive. You’ll get tired.”

She’s right. The day feels long already, the drive home even longer. I gather my things.

It feels terrifying to leave, like everything that we have may be either over or just beginning. Sammy's distant as we walk the two blocks to my car, but then, after we put my stuff in, she pulls me into her, tucks my hair behind my ears and kisses me. Right there on the sidewalk, with people passing us, she kisses me hard and long. When she lets go, I look at her and then kiss her again. She laughs and reaches behind me to open my car door.

I soon realize I shouldn't be driving. The shivers from Sammy's fingers are fading and the fog between me and the world is getting thicker, like there's drugs in the air. Rain begins to fall in sheets. Walls of water shoot up around the giant semis that own this road. I guess if they can swerve with the curves of the 5, parting water, so can I. Sometimes, when my brain fogs, I try to hold on to concrete reality. I try to keep making thoughts from the blur, but it's like trying to make words with a paintbrush in water. Impossible, just makes me crazy. Today, I let the fog rule instead. It doesn't make driving easier, but does stop some inner war, puts me at peace. I sink into the nothingness of my blurred brain and drive faster. I speed around corners. Not that I feel depressed, but I wouldn't mind if my car flew off the road, light and easy as a toy.

I fumble with my phone charger. Its red charging light is on and then not, lit and then dark. It fails to charge and dies when I try to text Jared and tell him I'm on my way.

I order a hot coffee at Dutch Bros off the 5 in Springfield.

"What are you up to?" asks an over-caffeinated barista with white blond hair.

My face feels like it could fall off as I tell her that I'm going from Portland to Grants Pass, was visiting a friend. She asks if I had fun in the city. I say yes and think of how useless the word "fun" is. She asks if I like sweet things. I say I do, but can't have sugar. She makes me a

sugar-free vanilla latte and when I say I shouldn't have whipped cream, she says, "okay, just a tiny bit," and sprays a dollop on the end of my neon straw like they do for kids.

"Gotta have a treat sometimes," she says. I laugh with her, but feel a little crazy, like I could keep laughing and then cry or scream or fall asleep or faint.

I wait too long to pee, so pull off at an exit without even a gas station. The freeway here slices through the mountains in deep, quick cuts. A rocky bank rises from the gravel pullout where I park. Water drizzles down it, gathering into tiny falls. Small ferns and bright green weeds grow straight out of the rocks. Their roots sneak into cracks or sprout translucent root fingers into the wet air. I crouch between my two open passenger side doors. I hold onto the tops of my thighs as I balance. I think of Sammy's legs and stomach. I want to do it all again.

Driving back onto the freeway, I see that the hills above the exit, the land above the rock wall trickling with water, were thinned by fire, maybe last year. I remember now that the fire jumped the freeway. They usually rely on this not to happen. The new underbrush and the leftover trunks, some capped short and some still tall with new branches, are wet. It's hard to imagine that next summer, they'll be brittle. That they'll grow a little, then burn again.

Landon's house is the next thing my eyes really land on. I wish I could park at his place and go sit on his couch. He's younger than me, but seems like the only one I know who could hear this story and know what to say. If I even knew how to tell it.

Jared looks surprised to see me home. He hugs and kisses me. My lips feel numb. The stubble on his face is scratchy. It seems like a long time since I've really looked at him. His blue eyes pop. His black pupils are huge. I let him plop a can of minestrone into a pot. I don't say the

doctor said I shouldn't eat noodles or beans.

On the couch, I take a couple bites of soup. As the heat of food makes its way through my body, I start feeling my bones. I shiver, cold, then hot. I want to get online and post in forums that Sammy wouldn't see about how impossible it feels to have one full life and want another, sometimes, neither quite right. My post would get deleted by moderators who make sure people don't ramble about random stuff, but to me, it all seems related: how do I live in this body?

Jared turns on the TV. His pipe is on the table next to a small jar of weed and a black lighter. The pipe's glass bowl is gray on the inside with residue. He probably told me he started a new job and could smoke again, but I don't remember. I look at his face. Seems like more than weed. I ask him if he took something else. He reaches next to the couch for the orange vicodin bottle. He hands it to me. I squeeze the lid and turn.

My eyes are slow to open, gummy. My body doesn't hurt like I expect it to and I remember the pain meds from last night. I remember, too, the unexpected warm feeling I had towards Jared as the pill sunk in. The twisting fatigue and anxiety of the road lifted. I remember wondering what I was smiling about. Maybe Jared asked, *what are you smiling about?* Silent, I slipped my hand into his. He tried carrying me to bed, but sunk me against a wall and it didn't even hurt.

He's at work, now, and my mouth is dry, the heater pumping, my skin hot to the touch. I open the window by the bed. Falling rain sends in a breeze. Still, my body beats with sweat, my parched throat tight. Ten seconds longer and I'd mistake discomfort for panic closing in. I push

my legs over the edge of the bed. My butt aches from the car ride.

Yesterday. I both want to think of it, to go over every moment, and do not at all.

I sink into the deep couch and feel something hard between the cushions. Jared's pill bottle. His name spelled out on the label reminds me of hearing it during roll call so many times. The letters make a kid of him again. I shake the bottle. Pills on plastic. I've always liked the sound. Without it, the house buzzes.

My dead phone is on the coffee table. I plug it in and look out the front window. From the couch, I can't see much. A day gray with rain, and dark. A steady slosh runs off the gutters.

My phone wakes with beeping vibrations: three texts and a voicemail.

"Did you make it home?" she writes.

"Laura? Let me know plz I'm worried."

Maybe as a cruel self-punishment or to pretend she's here with me, I click speaker phone and start the voicemail: "Laura, it's Sammy. Please just text me yes or no about getting home. If you feel weird about anything that happened we can talk about it later, or not at all if you don't want to, but Laura, I want to know if you are safe."

She repeats my name. Laura. Laura, I want to know if you are safe.

My stomach drops at the idea of causing her fear, then crests at the idea of causing her fear. I pick up my phone.

"Hi." My voice comes out quiet. I remember her eyes on me for the first time. My fingers touching the soft spikes of her hair. "I got home last night."

"Why didn't you text? I was so worried."

I tell her I know it's a stupid excuse but my phone died and then I fell asleep.

“And I don’t use my phone as much as you,” I say. “Didn’t think you’d worry.”

She doesn’t answer but doesn’t hang up.

“Thank you for having me,” I say.

“You don’t have to keep thanking me. It’s weird.”

“Sorry.” My words tiptoe. “How was your day?”

“Bad. I told you. I was worried sick about you. You were so tired already when you left.”

Her *you’s* feel soft as kisses.

“I pictured your car in a ditch,” she says. “Anyways. How do you feel? Happy to be home?” Her tone is sincere, but her question seems to mock me. *Happy to be home.*

“I’m okay,” I say. “Obviously I miss you.”

“Shut up,” she says. I can see her smiling. “I have to go. I miss you too.”

She lingers on the line for a second before hanging up. I toss my phone onto the couch and look up at the room, as if someone was there to sigh with me and say *oh god*. I’m grinning, pressing my cheek into the couch so hard that when I pull away, my skin is marked with the crosshatch of the cushion.

In the kitchen, I look for something that fits what the doctor said. The worst food demons, in her opinion, are sugar and gluten and dairy. White rice instead of cereal should work. The rice is too watery so I cook it more and the bottom burns, but I like the crispy bits. I put butter and salt and pepper on it, then remember that butter is dairy. Next time.

I unload the supplements from my purse and line them up on the counter. I open each one, puncturing the foils with a knife. Plastic seals and wispy cotton balls pile up.

I thought it might feel good to put these Portland things in my house. It doesn’t.

The sheet the doctor gave me with the supplement instructions looks like chicken scratch, now. I decode her handwriting and swallow the pills it says to take with breakfast. Half-doses for the first three days. I have to be careful not to overwhelm my system, she said.

I think of leaving the doctor's office. Sammy held the door and touched her hand lightly to my lower back. I was disoriented from the appointment. I let my fingers drag behind me as we rounded a hallway, and they tangled with hers for a minute. She squeezed and let go. I didn't look back, just turned my head so she could see the line of my nose and the tiny hairs by my ear.

After a few minutes, my stomach begins to twist. The doctor said it might take a few days to get used to the supplements. For distraction, I copy my doses onto the lids with a Sharpie. My mind keeps getting lost in the second between when I look at the paper and when I go to write. Something about Sammy was always in motion. Her eyes dancing to the side to meet mine and then slicing away. It felt scary. Hard to read. A game that she chose me for. The layer of sweat on my skin turns cold. I blink and write *I w B L D* on a glass bottle with a dark blue label that says Biocidin. I slide my diet sheet under the edge of a Fire Department fridge magnet, careful not to dislodge the other scraps of paper balanced there.

Most of the day, I lay on the couch, considering when I should write to her again online. Or if we're past that. Where we are. I don't open my computer.

At three, I decide to call her. I want to say that I'm sorry again for making her worry, and sorry if I sounded insincere earlier, I was really out of it.

She doesn't pick up. Punishing me for scaring her, maybe.

My whole body and brain are so tired. I shut my eyes for minutes at a time, then open them. Sleep never comes. I'm thinking. Well, not quite. The pill hangover puts a wall between

my brain and actual thoughts. I'm happy to be alone, I guess, though of course I'd rather be with her. I take a hit from Jared's pipe so I'll stop fighting my mushy brain. I imagine my body is a car being hotboxed by my brain, whirls of confusing feelings swirling in me like smoke. It's cold outside, though, and there's the threat of a window opening and the smoke curling right out.

I lay in bed, warm after a long hot shower. I take another long pull from the pipe. The coal twinge of the bud slowly disappears. It's been a while. I missed this.

I'm sleeping when Jared puts his hand on my shoulder, heavy enough to wake me.

"Babe," he says, "are you okay?"

Just seconds after waking from deep slumber, my brain works ahead of me: I know it's not late, so he'll leave if I seem like I want to sleep.

"I'm fine," I say. "Just recovering. Come to bed?"

"No, it's early still. Let me know if you need anything."

He leaves without kissing me.

The next morning, I wait until I hear the gravel crunching under Jared's tires before getting out of bed. Sheridan has texted and called. Her voice is snappy when I call back.

"If it isn't my long lost sister," she says. I don't reply. "Well, how are you?"

I say I'm okay and maybe we can hang out tomorrow.

"I learned a lot from the appointment," I add. "Excited to tell you in person."

"And I'm excited to hear." She does not sound excited.

“Okay,” I say.

“Okay,” she says.

“Bye,” I say.

She hums, unsatisfied, and hangs up.

This time I swirl peanut butter into rice for breakfast with cinnamon sprinkled on top. I feel like a sorcerer. There’s a browning banana on the countertop begging me to mash it in too, for sweetness, but bananas are on the list of sugary fruits the doctor mentioned. It’s not very good, my concoction. At all. I need to go to the store.

My eyelids are heavy, my shoulders slouched. I take small bites of my experiment-mush. Computer still closed, phone plugged in by the couch, I have nothing to look at on the kitchen table besides a pile of old receipts and nonsense mail. I stare at the room. The paint is worn along the edge of the kitchen doorway, just at shoulder height. I’ve never noticed this trace left by me and Jared, my mom, Sheridan, all brushing that corner on our way to the living room. Thousands of trips back and forth. When we first moved in, Jared made a list of house repairs. We’d only ever rented, so he was excited. He did a few things right away. Painted our bedroom light blue and replaced a cheap bedroom door that Sheridan punched a hole in when she went through this period of teenage puberty rage, mom called it. The idea of him doing home improvements now, of painting away these dull scrapes on the door jamb, makes me feel claustrophobic.

I swallow my supplements, and soon, my stomach clenches. I don’t mind these cramps. The sign of something new happening in my body. I trust Sammy’s doctor.

I can’t stay in the house today. Not some BS like I saw what it was like out in the world or I realized my true capacity or something. I’m just restless. Don’t know what to think.

Soaked leaves layer the ground outside, composting. Dark splashes from the morning rain spot the jigsaw pine tree bark. Pitch perfumes the air. Wet grass dampens the toes of my sneakers as I walk through the field behind our house. Eventually, the field meets a long gravel stretch called Wagon Road. Sher and I used to walk this path to our bus stop everyday. At the end of the road, the shelter that mom's ex, Carlos, built with oak trees for posts and a square of plywood for the roof, is still there, blending right into the landscape.

Across from the bus stop, a driveway leads to nowhere. Our neighbors with the horses own the land, but never built on the circle they flattened at the base of the mountain. I cross the road, step over the chain, and look for the trail we used to hike. It's overgrown. Some areas of brush have been cleared by the repeated passing of deer, but none lead to a path.

I stand on the packed dirt atop the giant pipe that runs under the driveway. As a kid, I thought they made a hole in the driveway for the creek that passes through it, but now I see that the creek was there first, built over. Below me, the creek falls from the pipe into pools of black water. The rocks are covered in layers of leaves, decomposing brown on the bottom, wet yellow on the top. Leaves also clump in the water. Islands of them, a fake layer of ground, float beside the rocks. I make my way down to the water, careful not to slip. At the edge, I touch the huge leaf of a lush plant that I've only ever seen here. In the spring, it grows a cluster of white berries in its center. My palms drip.

The last time I remember being here was in middle school. Sheridan and I sat on top of a big, flat, moss-covered rock with the two mormon girls that rode our bus. A full crack ran through the middle of the rock, like it fell through the sky and split upon hitting the earth. The gap was two feet wide or so, and that time in middle school, Sheridan kept leaping over it and

cackling with the girls who I knew were laughing at the possibility Sher could fall right through. I wasn't laughing. I looked away from them at my hand resting on the carpet of moss that sprouted tiny shoots with tiny heart-shaped leaves. I wished I was a bug.

I also wished to fall in love. And to lay on this bed-like rock across from my lover, marveling at the sprouts, like a miniature field of green flowers. Or, I wondered what was there in the forest that I couldn't yet see. I believed in magic longer than most people. By this creek, I feel like a kid version of me. Maybe I've always moved slowly, touching and looking.

My sneakers squish into the sandy wet mud by the creek. I set my hand on a different rock, slick-wet from the rain. I take a picture of my hand in the rock moss with the black water behind it. The picture is eerie, too dark, my hand pixelated and pale. The effect is nice, though. Artsy. I am thinking of Sammy. No text seems right after our time together. I send the picture anyways, an awkward stumble into talking regularly again.

Then I get nervous that the picture is too confusing. Or too depressing.

"Feeling furry moss next to the creek," I write. I blush. Now, my words sound too playful. Childish? I don't want to feel like a child with her.

The creek water swirls. It moves more slowly than it appeared to from above. It isn't just one current falling from the pipe, but many, twisting.

"So pretty," she texts back.

The water of the creek is stuck in places, so still that algae grows at its edges.

"Sammy, I hope you know how great it was to be with you," I text. "Like intimately."

The gray sunlight is dimming into dusk, but I don't move to leave.

"I'm happy to hear that."

I put my phone away. My heart sinks when her texts are less than gushing. I must remember that she's always tight with her words around romance. It's easier for me. I've been in a sort of healthy relationship for years. I say *I love you*, whether or not I feel it with my whole body, almost everyday. It's getting dark. I need to go home. My phone vibrates again.

"So you feel okay about everything?" she says. "Was going to ask you but didn't want to pry. Now that you're back with your husband and all."

Why does she always have to say that?

"I feel great about it. Wished I could have stayed a week."

"Good. Not that I was super worried. I trust you."

"Thanks. I trust you too. Also, you're very sexy," I say.

"~)," is all she says.

It's true that I felt so lonely in the night, laying on her hot pads as she slept alone. It wasn't what I'd imagined at all. Now, though, it seems more intimate than sleeping intertwined. Me moving freely in her home, caring for myself in the half-dark with the things she uses to care for herself. I'm embarrassed at how picky I was in sex, if I can call it sex. It's funny that I thought I knew what I wanted.

I try not to be regretful. It's not like it's over.

I emerge from under the cover of trees onto the road. The dusk is thick here too. I try to light my path with my open phone. It is too dim. I feel strangely scared. I need to trust my feet. My head is throbbing, now. It might just be the cold, but my body shivers with aches. It seems a long way up Wagon Road. I pray that Jared won't come home just as I'm walking across the field to the house, his headlights hitting me, a ghost.

He's not home yet. I drink two back-to-back cups of water, warm. The internet says this is better because your body doesn't have to warm it up. I have a serious headache. I take Advil, then close my eyes. When I wake up twenty-five minutes later, I feel a little better.

I'm on the couch looking at the pictures I took of the creek when Jared comes home.

He crouches to kiss me. His beard scratches my face. I nudge him away and then rub my neck, my body's automatic excuse, though it didn't hurt to tilt my head to kiss him.

He stands, looking away, touching his face.

"Got Dominos. Pepperoni, sausage and olives."

"I can't eat pizza," I say. "My new diet from the doctor."

"Oh," he says. "I wouldn't have known, because, you know, you didn't tell me."

"I'm sorry, I've been -"

"I know. Resting."

I'm so glad I put my muddy shoes in the hall closet. He's leaning against the wall, still wearing his work boots. I wish he would take them off and sit down and eat the whole goddamn pizza like I know he could even though he looks so hurt, like it was a huge waste of money.

"Well, what can you eat?" he asks.

"Anything except for milk, butter, sugar, and gluten, like flour, noodles, wheat."

He listens, then raises his eyebrows and goes back out the door.

While he's gone, I just sit there, feeling my head pound and my skin ache slightly. I'm curious about his pissy mood. Did I hurt him by going away without him? Do I care if I did?

Half an hour later, he comes back with a takeout bag.

"Can you eat this? It's curry from Thai BBQ. Chicken."

“Yeah.” My voice comes out quiet. “Thank you.”

He scoops rice into a bowl and spoons curry on top.

“Do you want me to heat up the pizza?” I ask. “It’s probably cold.”

“No.” He sets the pizza box on the table and opens it, the square lid standing between us.

I hear the crunch when he bites into the pepperoncini. I eat. We don’t talk. My brain is foggy, stuck between Jared’s mood and Sammy, Sammy’s apartment and the house, some limbo nowhere. I get my supplements.

“Let me see?” he says. I hand him each bottle after I take the pills.

He reads each label, says nothing. He seems less thorny now. Food, maybe.

We go into the living room and sit side-by-side on the couch. We smoke a bowl. I get up to use the bathroom. I look at myself in the mirror, at my unpierced ears that Sammy noted were so small and cute. I pinch my lobes. I feel tired, but not really sick anymore, maybe just on the verge of a cold. When I walk back into the room, I sense my secrets on my skin like glitter, only visible in certain light.

“Come here,” Jared says, his voice soft and deep, scratchy in this way that used to drive me crazy. The air in front of the lamp is threaded with smoke. He holds his pipe out to me. I sit and take a long hit. He puts his hand on my leg. I look at it, at the hairs on his knuckles, the chewed skin around his nails. I feel I know him too well, like I made him.

I get on his lap. It always feels good to stretch my legs in a crouch like this, especially after being in the car for so long. He puts his hands around me, touching the soft of my lower back. This feels nice. I lean into his mouth and don’t realize how high I am until my lips become like liquid and I want my mouth to open wider, my tongue flowing with his. We kiss and kiss.

Though I'm resting on the crotch of his jeans, he doesn't press up into me. When I kiss along his hair and ear, he sighs instead of groaning. He's not looking for sex. It feels like we're the only two bodies in the world for a moment, mashing together.

Then a shadow itches at the back of my mind, that weed shadow that is so hard to make go away. You think everything is just fine, but then a tiny section of your brain decides it's not and you can't put your finger on why. But I can. I know we're not the only people left. Even my high brain knows we're not. My brain is like a map. I'm in one state, feeling high and calm, then in another state looking at myself. I criss-cross the border. I try to put the other state out of mind, but it's there on the horizon. Another me saying, hey, what's that ache in your heart? Hey, what are you missing right now? My mouth closes. Jared kisses my shut lips, little kisses, expecting my mouth to open back up and resume this dance. My lips stay closed. He puts his hands on my hips and sits me down so I'm not crouched over him. My thoughts are putty. I'm ready for him to say, *where did you go, just now*, and I'm ready to get up and leave.

"I'm sorry I got mad earlier," he says. "I just thought you'd like the pizza, but you seemed weirdly offended by it. Like why would I think you wanted pizza, of all things."

"I didn't mean it like that. I'm sorry. There's a lot on my mind."

"Like what?" His voice is sharper.

"Nothing specific." My head is swirly and emotional. "Shit, babe. Sorry, I'm super high."

"Let's go to bed," he says.

High, I should want his body wrapped around mine like it is, his lips touching my shoulder, hoping I'll turn to kiss him, but my brain keeps going into a wormhole of Sammy in bed. He sees my bare shoulder, I see hers. I move his arm off of me.

“Sorry, I’m hot,” I say.

A minute later, I straighten my leg back to touch his and feel only the sheets. He slid all the way to the far edge of the bed. I take my phone from the night stand and tuck it close against my chest, so the glow won’t reach the room.

“Good night,” I write. Then, I turn the phone all the way off, just in case.

Sheridan texts that she’s picking me up and we’re going grocery shopping. Twenty minutes later she’s here. She said she’d wait in the car until I get ready, but she comes right in and starts picking up every little piece of mail and my supplement bottles, reading them one at a time.

“Bovine glandular thyroid? Ew,” she says, glaring at the label.

When we go over the hill into town, a little break of sun pushes through the fog, lighting up a thin layer of dust on the dash. I rub it with my finger. She swats at me.

“Stop, you’re making it look dirtier.”

I hold my hands in my lap. We dip down from the hill and are surrounded by fog again. She does get depressed in the winter. Used to have a UV light, but the bulb went out and she never got a new one. Said she didn’t want to sit under it like a stupid lizard anyways.

My ears feel cold. I put my sweater hood up.

“You’re being so quiet,” she says.

“I’m tired from my trip.”

“Told you that you shouldn’t do it alone. That’s like, a lot, Laura.”

“I guess I’m not more tired than normal.”

“Can you take your hood off for a second? I want to hear about everything, but I can’t even see your face.”

She reaches towards me and yanks at the edge of my hood, her fingers snagging my hair. My hands fly to my head, throwing her off me.

“Jesus, Sher.” Hot rage rushes into my veins. “Leave me alone. You’re not my mom.”

She looks straight ahead, both hands on the wheel in driver’s ed style perfect form.

“Well listen. I need you right now. I told you my seasonal shit is coming back and I still feel sort of dead inside. I’m thinking about her all the time. I know you’ve been going through it, but please. Can you be there for me?”

“Yeah, of course, Sher, why wouldn’t I be?”

She turns on the radio. The jingly end of a Mariah Carey Christmas song plays. Two weeks before Thanksgiving. I think of Sammy and the holidays, a fresh, stupid, sentimental ache in my chest. From the backseat, Sher drops two cooking magazines in my lap.

“I bookmarked things I want to make for Thanksgiving. We’re getting ingredients so I can try out new recipes ahead of time. Tell Jared to invite his family. I want it to be a big one.”

“You really don’t have to do all that.”

“I know, okay. I know I don’t have to do it.”

Her body is tense behind the wheel. She won’t look at me.

Winco is not my favorite place. It’s always cold inside, one big warehouse freezer. It’s not even a fun store to hang out in like Fred Meyers, so I don’t know why everyone is always

here. The prices, I guess. The worst part is that I can't avoid seeing people I know. When it's been a while, people like to ramble on about it: "Wow, it's been so long." Like, I know. I don't leave my house. But if you ask them what's up, what's happened in *all that time*, they just say, *same old, you know*, like all our "same olds" are exactly the same. They also love to compliment how skinny I am, even if I look like a zombie. Or they'll just say, "Laura, something about you looks different, what is it? Your hair?" Yeah, my hair, I want to say. It's all falling out. So cute, right? I could pull a clump for you right now if you want to see! I leave my hood on.

"You are so annoying," Sher says, rolling her eyes at my sweated skull.

She hasn't been like this to me since I got sick. Bitchy. Sisterly. It probably is the weather, but a part of me wonders if she senses something in me is different.

She has a list in hand, written down the back of an electrical bill envelope. I was supposed to carry it and push the cart, but she yanked it from my hand after I accidentally skipped tomatoes. Though we're in no time crunch, she moves fast around the store, her actions sharp like an angry teacher. I can't keep up. I was feeling fine, but being asked to hurry makes me more tired. When a wall of exhaustion hits me in the produce section, I start to notice the base of my head and the back of my throat throbbing. I press the lymph nodes below my jawline. Sore to the touch. Normal, but not good at all.

I walk the produce section's perimeter. It's easier to hide from randoms on the edges of the store. Piles of herbs and lettuces glisten under misters. Sher chooses two pale lettuces wrapped in plastic like playground balls. I reach my hand under the mist. Sammy had herbs like bouquets of flowers sitting in a cup of water next to her sink. I move out of the way for a hippy-looking woman with a braid down her back and chunky wool socks sticking out of her boots. She

puts wet parsley in a used bag from her cart. I hear Jared's voice in my head, "so that's gonna save the earth?" But he wouldn't say that. He wouldn't even notice her.

I pass the woman to look at the bins of mushrooms, all colors of gray and brown, some wormy and others fanned like sea shells.

"If you were going to cook for me, what would you make?" I text Sammy, underneath her goodnight text to me that came in while I was asleep.

The mushrooms look nasty, too meaty. Sammy told me once that her friends went mushroom hunting in the woods and brought some back for her. I imagine they looked like these weird ones. She said they were still in her freezer because fungi are moldy and she has to eat them sparingly. "I'm already a fungus farm," she wrote. I wrote *me too* and took off my socks in my living room, wishing I could show her the athlete's foot that laced dry around my feet, stretching up the backs of my ankles in scaly pink ribbons. Candida, the doctor said.

I grab a plastic box of mixed greens. It's five whole dollars, but it looks like there are a lot of leaves stuffed in there. From the little shelf of dressings above the veggies, I pick a bottle of ranch, but then remember the no milk rule. Italian instead.

I catch up to Sheridan in the bread aisle. It's a chamber of sweet yeasty goodness. I realize I'm craving cakey sugar today like water in a drought. The want is throwing a tantrum in my mouth and stomach. Sher tosses a sack of potatoes into the cart and gathers three loaves of sandwich bread that's Buy 2 Get 1 Free. Then, to the bakery. Torture.

"For stuffing," she says, squeezing two warm loaves to see if they're soft. In high school, we lived on that 99 cent hot bakery bread. I'd tear open the crusty outside, grab wads of the fluffy, steaming center and ball it in my fist. Then I'd bite the carbo ball like it was a chocolate

truffle, my front teeth leaving clean square prints.

“Maybe roasted sweet potatoes with pesto,” Sammy texts. “Something easy & delicious.”

Words from her, even simple ones like these, bump my mood, make me forget my body.

The high doesn’t last, though. I need more. Especially when out and about in a place that seems so otherworldly far away from her. I need phrases like “cook for you” or “you would love.” *I*s and *you*’s that I can sink my heart into.

“Who are you texting?” Sher says.

“My friend Desi I stayed with in Portland. She says stuffing is the thing she misses most since she stopped eating gluten.”

“You’re texting about stuffing?”

“She eats roasted sweet potatoes instead now.”

“Well, I’m making sweet potatoes *and* stuffing,” Sher says.

I also grab a box of lemon ginger tea bags. Sheridan looks like she’s going to say something positive about it - I know she loves a steaming cup of tea - but stops herself.

“Hey girls,” the checkout lady says. She’s the mother of KW, a kid I went to elementary and middle with. I don’t know where he went after that. KW’s mom’s hair is the same as it was when we were young, reddish curls, cut short and fuzzy around her forehead and long in the back, face framed like a country music star’s. She’s worked here forever, but today I notice that she’s pretty. My mom often commented on people’s beauty. Even wrinkly old ladies. *What a beautiful face. I bet she used to be a knock-out.*

My eyes fill with water. I want my mom to see Sammy. Sammy would hate it, but I want my mom to study the angles of Sammy’s face and say, *Such a pretty girl. Too bad she cuts her*

hair like that. I pretend to cough into my elbow, wiping my eyes. Sheridan moves a step away, looking at me like I'm a leper. She squirts hand sanitizer onto her palm from a glittery plastic bottle hooked to her purse strap and rubs her hands together dramatically.

"Mmmmm," I text Sammy as we leave the store. I pray that she thinks of my lips pressed together, of that humming sound buzzing from inside my warm mouth.

Sheridan doesn't ask before driving me and the groceries to the boys' school for pick up and then to her house where she tells me to wash carrots and potatoes. My eyes beg to shut. I take my time, breathing as I lean over the countertop.

Sheridan puts on an apron I've never seen. It's old, red and white checkerboard. Was probably mom's, but she didn't cook much. Sher narrates like we're on a cooking show. It seems to make her mood immediately better. I remember that to support her in rough times mostly all I have to do is be her agreeable audience.

"Let's put all the ingredients on the counter so we know what we've got," she says. "Now, the turkey goes into the crockpot with broth, french onion soup mix and butter. Why have dry oven turkey when you could have moist turkey made like pulled pork?"

"Wait, can you not use butter?" I ask as she is peeling open a yellow stick of it.

"We'll use oil instead." Her voice stays show-level cheery.

I cube the carrots and five huge potatoes. My back twinges as I raise the knife and press it through the thickest parts. Then I go sit on the couch. The boys ask if I'll play Sorry with them.

"Not today."

"Dude, just play with them," Sher yells from the kitchen.

I let them deal me in. We pass our cards around. Arlo throws up his hands like a small

angry man when I give Sean a wild card that helps him win. After I lose twice, they both get mad that I'm not trying hard enough. I want to go home. Arlo pinches my toe to get me to pass a card.

Sammy doesn't text again. I ask Jared to pick me up on his way home.

When he comes in, he sits next to me on the couch and the boys tell him I'm being lazy. J takes my cards. The boys are sitting on the floor. Arlo pokes at Jared's feet absentmindedly, and then settles on his belly with his head leaning against Jared's calf. Of course Sheridan walks in at that moment.

"Well isn't this adorable," she says, her voice sickly sweet. "You two should take them for a while." Like my mom, Sher's mood is often 100% lifted by the image of Jared as a dad.

I check my phone again. Nothing.

Sher sets a bag of tortilla chips and a bowl of salsa on the coffee table.

"They're not always like this though, are they?" Jared says.

"If only!" Sher says. She leaves and comes back with a big glass of pink wine. As she passes Jared, she squeezes his shoulder with her free hand.

"You need to teach the boys to give your infamous massages, Jare." Her voice twinkles. Jared used to give my mom shoulder rubs she'd ooh and ahh about for days. Now that I think about it, Jared was one of the only men I ever saw intimately touch her.

Sheridan sits on the floor in front of me, cozying her back between my knees.

"Lo, you probably get so many neck rubs you're an expert yourself." She wiggles her shoulders up and down, then reaches back and takes my hand and puts it on the slope of her neck. I squeeze a little.

"Oh c'mon," she says. "At least try."

Her tone is grating. I feel the boys watching me. Can they tell their mom is tipsy and maybe about to get annoying? I sit up straighter and squeeze her shoulders harder, but feel it in my own back, so instead of squeezing, I karate chop her knots with the edges of my hands. Sometimes Jared does this and it feels good.

“Ow. Nevermind. Shouldn’t have expected much.” She scootches away from me to sit in front of Jared’s knees. “I wasn’t gonna ask because you’ve been at work all day, but can you give this tired mama some relief?”

Jared starts rubbing Sheridan’s shoulders. She hums with pleasure. I curl into the couch and flip through my old texts. I re-read Sammy’s demanding texts from the day I drove home and flush hot and cold. Right now, in an alternate universe, I could be eating sweet potatoes and pesto with her in Portland, her apartment so much calmer than this chaotic living room. We could be eating on the couch, kissing in between bites. My stomach does a roller coaster flop. No one’s watching me, so I let a little smile glow on my face. Sheridan hums and the boys shuffle a half deck of Sorry cards each, bending the edges terribly.

Over my phone screen, I watch the boys realize that everyone’s attention is elsewhere. Their mother’s eyes are closed. Jared’s looking out at nothing, kneading her muscles. Suddenly, Arlo grabs Sean’s deck and says, “52 pick up!” throwing them everywhere, but nobody says anything for a couple slow beats of time, so Arlo looks up at me maniacally and pounces, grabbing my phone and running onto the empty recliner.

The fluffy chair rocks like a boat under him. He sways, holding my phone to his face.

“Mmmmm,” he says, reading my last text.

“Sweet potatoes. Mmmm, sweet potatoes,” I say. It comes out so awkward I want to cry. I

grab the phone and swat him. He yelps. Sheridan looks at me and then shuts her eyes firmly like I am a child too and she won't have any of this. I can't look at Jared.

We all hear the car roll into the driveway. The boys collapse onto the ground. I feel Jared's eyes on me, but when I glance towards him, he's looking past me to the door. I am still standing, panting, trying to not hold my phone like it's my baby, when Robbie comes in.

"Hi honey," Sheridan says. "Watch and learn."

Because Robbie looks at Jared, I look. He's still kneading away. I breathe out.

"Mom getting too relaxed?" Robbie says to the boys, raising his eyebrows at her huge wine glass that's painted with a palm tree and a pink polkadot bikini. Sean wraps his body around Robbie's foot and writhes like a dying bug. He tries to hang on when Robbie walks away, but Robbie lifts his foot up and Sean falls to the carpet with a thud. It couldn't have hurt, but Sean looks so sad he could cry. Arlo watched it happen and shares his brother's teary look for just a moment, before they both jump up and bound after their dad.

Sher and I used to feel things for each other like that too. She'd pick fights and make me cry and then she'd cry because I was crying. Little mirrors.

She makes us stay for dinner. I eat a pile of saucy turkey over waxy boiled potatoes that she took out of the bowl before she whipped the others with milk and butter. Robbie says the crockpot turkey is good, but that he would miss regular turkey if we didn't have it on Thanksgiving. Sheridan says if he cares that much he can make it himself. Robbie asks how my appointment was, and I realize Sheridan hasn't even asked.

"Good," is all I manage to say.

There's a pause and then Jared asks Sean if his touch football team still practices in the

rain. Sean nods and Jared asks if he loves getting all muddy. Sean nods again. He's the shy one.

"Adults should play in the mud more," Sheridan says.

She looks at me. I give her a blank stare and she looks down, disappointed, like at one point I would have agreed. I try to remember if we have a special memory of playing in mud. I can't recall one, but do remember high school running in the winter, splotchy stripes of mud up my legs. She's right, it felt so good. Running alone on the wooded trails behind the high school, I'd step right into puddles I knew would splash me. In the dark months, dusk falling right after school, we'd do faster, shorter runs. Because of this, we'd get separated more easily, everyone speeding along. I'd smash a puddle or step on a crunchy brown oak apple, and realize that I was totally alone. I loved it. I'd listen to my breath, to my lungs doing their thing, and feel my arms moving easily with my strides, brushing against reaching pine needles. Jared was faster. Once he finished, he'd often loop back to me. I'd always smile at him sailing down the trail towards me, but would also know my total peace for the day was over. I'd hose the mud off my sneakers with the locker room hose. All winter, they'd smell moldy, never really dry.

Jared snaps his finger in my face.

"Yeah we should," I say. "Play in the mud."

"Uh huh," he says. "Okay."

After we eat, I empty the plastic baggie of supplements I brought in my jacket pocket in case I ate out into my palm. There's a pile of pills - the whole dinner dose of each. Sheridan touches my hand before I knock them back into my mouth.

"They're pretty," she says, picking up a little yellow oval and holding it to the light.

Jared is quiet as he turns on the car. The radio is a long line of commercials, people with clownish voices boasting bullshit. I want to change it, but Jared hates it when I click and click all the way home, never landing on anything.

“Their house is lively,” he says. A song finally comes on.

“Ha, yeah. Very lively.”

“I like it.” He looks at me when he says this, like he wants me to do something about it. I look back at the road. “Is it weird that ours felt more lively when your mom lived there? Dying.”

The word shocks me.

“Well,” I say, slowly. “I guess there was more activity.”

“Hm,” he says. “Maybe I get why Sher and Rob didn’t want the house.”

“It’s not, like, cursed.” I am defensive.

“I don’t mean ghosts. Just something.”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugs and we drive the rest of the way in silence. He walks into the house as soon as I shut the car off. When I go in, I don’t see him anywhere. TV sounds come from the garage. When we were in high school, my mom would sit out there in her old recliner smoking until we got home at night. Well, she’d wait up for Sheridan, holding a tight curfew. Not so much for me. Especially after I started dating Jared. Mom let me do anything because she trusted him. Sher thought this was the most unfair thing in the world, more rules just because she came first.

I look at my phone for another text from Sammy. Nothing. My laptop is on the coffee table. I wait minutes for it to load. No messages there either. I poke my head into the garage.

“Hey,” I say. He keeps watching the little TV that has been out there as long as I can

remember. A pretty, but stern middle-aged detective is interviewing a young guy who looks genuinely sorry about something. “Aren’t you freezing?”

“Not really.” He glances away from me at his phone that lights up on his knee.

I tell him I’m going to bed and he says okay, smiling with pursed lips until I leave.

A pounding headache wakes me up. Jared is asleep and doesn’t move as I pull myself out of bed. I stand, dizzy. I keep one hand pressed to the bed and then the wall as I move. In the bathroom, steady rain beats on the fan. I am viciously thirsty. I scoop cold water from the faucet into my mouth. Straightening up, my eyes fall on Jared’s vicodin bottle. It sits on the counter next to the gunked up dish holding a sliver of old soap. Thoughts like movie scenes flash through my head: My obvious neglect has sunken him into a deep depression that I didn’t even notice. Or he knows everything, but is so hurt he can’t talk about it. Then, he starts taking pills. I see it happening, but I ignore it, and then one night... Fuck.

I pour all but three of his pills into an almost-empty Advil bottle and put it inside a flowery cloth bag. In a bin under the sink are my prescriptions. I take out the Flexeril, Tramadol, the ten-pill Percocet they gave me only once. And wisdom teeth Vicodin so old that the label is yellow and peeling. I put these bottles into the bag, too, and zip it shut.

Right after my mom died, Jared asked me if he could sell her leftover cancer-level painkillers to someone at work. We needed funeral money, bill money. He was nervous asking and made me promise not to tell Sheridan, in case she told Robbie. Robbie’s best friend Chase died of an oxy overdose the night of their senior prom. I remember crying to My Chemical Romance, Chase’s favorite band, in Robbie’s backseat on the way home from the memorial at

the big church where Chase played acoustic guitar in the worship band. We weren't friends, but he was the first young person any of us knew who died. My face flushed when mom's nurse told me she could dispose of the big tupperware of pill bottles. I told her I could and she didn't press. Jared made out pretty well, not that the money lasted long. The guy swore he didn't sell to kids.

Stashing pills away from my own husband isn't that weird of a thing to do. Precautions. I put the makeup bag in the back of the bedroom closet behind long dresses I haven't worn in years, including my coral red prom dress, a halter with a jeweled bodice, still zipped in David's Bridal plastic. When I slide the closet door shut, Jared rolls over in bed. I jump. I would hate for him to see this. My heart rattles until my head hits the pillow. His mouth is open, his breathing heavy. I wrap my fingers lightly around his wrist to feel his pulse. I want to hold it all night, to make sure it keeps going. His thick veins beat steadily without pause.

In the morning, I'm itchy and achy. My head is stuffed with sinus pressure. It's 10 am, but I could fall right back asleep. My body feels worse than before the appointment, worse than it did after driving all day. I don't call her because I've called too many times when she hasn't picked up. I don't text either. My heart is closed in a fist. I don't really think Jared is an addict, but I do think he's being strange. Watching me. Sammy is ignoring me and he's watching me, always. I should delete all my texts, but I don't.

I get online and open our chat. It makes me emotional to see our back and forth, getting to know each other, going deep so often. We could lose all our momentum in the next six weeks.

Things could be so awkward when I go back up there. I stop scrolling before it makes me cry.

LoloLala80 > Periwinkle77

Sry to bug u but i think i'm feeling really bad from the supplements. It's like all my symptoms are worse. I'm also quite anxious. I mean, I'm fine, these things were normal before, but shld I stop or...

Five minutes later, she texts me: "Got your message. Ugh, sounds like die-off. The supplements are killing whatever's in you too fast. Take half your dosages and drink a LOT of water. Would call but I'm out with a friend."

I lie in bed looking at the ceiling. Its bumpy white texture is like tiny snowy mountains. When I was little, I would look at the ceiling and imagine little people climbing the tiny ridges, hanging on with all their might, daring to swing from peak to peak. Some brightness, not quite sun, comes in the window, making sharp shadows from the ridges.

Die off. I've heard the term online. I open my computer.

Blogs try to simplify the scientific stuff - fungus and bacteria cells bursting with toxins when they're killed by supplements or diet, starved of sugar. Anxiety pings around in my chest. People list it as a die-off symptom.

Would call, but, Sammy said. This should soothe me. Instead, I wonder who she's with.

Desiree is online. We haven't been talking lately. Her brother had a baby that she's been helping with. Seeing her name makes guilt thrash in my belly. I need to tell her the truth.

“Hey beautiful, I’ve been meaning to tell you something,” I write. “I told my husband and sister that I was going to visit you in Portland and I actually went to visit a lover I met online. Fuck. That sounds so crazy. I thought you’d maybe understand and forgive me for using you like that. I didn’t mean to. It is so hard to tell people the truth when your body makes you think you live on a different planet from your loved ones. You know how it is.”

No no no. I delete it and make myself smile while typing a new message, hoping I sound chipper and not deranged.

LoloLala80>Desi23utah

Hi sweetie! How are you doing? I’ve been seeing your essential oil posts! Are there any you’d suggest for me? Went to a new doctor and got some supplements but am having DIE OFF ITS AWFUL. Please send help. And how is the baby? Sounds like a fun addition to the family, especially with the holidays getting close. God, when my sister had her first, my mom and I went crazy with presents, as if the kiddos would even remember!

Desi23utah>LoloLala80

It’s you! So sorry abt die off. Should be gone in a day or two I hope. You’d love the lavender and the stress relief blend. Ugh they smell so good and calm me right down. Here’s a link if you want to buy. I’d so appreciate it. Hoping I’ll get enough sales to make it worth it. The baby is the cutest damn thing I die again and again when he makes new little noises and just wanna eat his toes!!!! He’s got these persistent ear infections, which suck, but I think they should be a bit more careful with so many antibiotics. Not to be like

anti-dr but YOU KNOW. I'm not his mommy soooooo shut up Desi! What's going on with you??? Hubby good?? sex still a problemo? Xxxxxxx

LoloLala80>Desi23utah

Wah sounds adorable. Thanks for the link, I'll buy them for christmas presents too. Go you! Jared is good. Weird mood lately. Winter is strange around here, cozy, but everyone's so moody. We haven't really been having sex. Honestly, I'm kind of worried about him. He's been distanced, dazed. I'm concerned he might be taking pills. But also I've been so anxious, maybe it's just paranoia? I feel like I can't rly trust myself.

Desi23utah>LoloLala80

Oh sweetie, I'm so sorry. You should probably trust yourself? But also, have you tried talking to him? Even if he doesn't tell the whole truth, maybe you could get something?

LoloLala80>Desi23utah

No, I haven't talked to him yet. I really should. I will tonight, thank you. It's also such mixed signals because I've been sleeping a lot and having these wild dreams where he's powerful, almost violent to me, and it's really hot... Like who are you, husband??

I type the three dots before realizing I totally made the last part up. Sex has been the last thing on my mind, even in my dreams. And I knew when I typed it that I won't ask him about taking pills. I can see him turning the question back on me.

Desi23utah>LoloLala80

Good luck with your conversation. And...mood shift!!! That sounds super hot. You guys should try it out (maybe after your hard convo lol). I love rough sex. With romantic shit I just can't relax. Not that I don't like ~love making~ but you knowww.

She writes back again before I can gather my thoughts.

Desi23utah>LoloLala80

U should check this out actually. A friend sent it to me a while ago. It seems like a lot of work but rly cool. Maybe your hubs would be more down than mine to work on it...

<https://www.britbiprincess.com/bondage4chronpain/> I bought a little whip the other year to slap myself with when I had rly bad neuropathy and pain in my legs and couldn't sleep. My husband thought i was a psycho but i think he liked it. It helped tho rlllly!!! Still use it whenever i need a distraction from pain.;;;)

Desi's rambling distracted me. My heart is no longer racing with anxiety. Flu chills wrap around me, but I take an ibuprofen 800, put my heating pad on my lap and open the link. The page has a baby pink backdrop with black bows in the corner, the kind of cutesy punk rock vibe of a Hot Topic corset. Ads for other blogs, house-cleaning supplies, and hotels, plus pictures of feet and hands roped together with intricate ties, break up the text. Excitement churns in my belly. The ties look hot but a lot of work. They also make me miss Sammy.

In the About Me section, the blogger, Britney, is smiling, her head on a puffy white pillow. Her curled hair is blond with dark brown stripes and a pink ribbon choker crosses her

neck. In another picture, Britney lays horizontal in the arms of a man and woman, like they're a cheer team. They are on a porch and a bunch of smiling people sit on the steps below them, holding hands. "Our poly commune!" the caption says. "JK, just a nice family dinner."

Britney the Bisexual Princess describes herself as a polyamorous intimacy-lover and community builder from Akron, Ohio. Her favorite things are cupcakes, her name twin Britney Spears and *perfect little kisses*. She loves when friends and lovers paint her nails for her and actually likes hard conversations that help her grow.

"As a horny bisexual with many interests and health issues that make me need a lot of TLC sometimes, alternative relationship shapes are my JAM. Bread, butter and jam!"

Wait, is Desi a horny bisexual? I thought she was Utah mormon. Who does she think I am? I ask if Desi has read other parts of the blog, if there are other helpful articles Brit has shared. She says she's only really looked at the link. People are always sending her links.

"The blog seems cute, tho," Desi says.

"Yeah, so cute!" I say.

I try to imagine my relationship growing and stretching like Britney and her boyfriend Luke's did, to include other guys and girls. I can't. Jared and Sammy and me hanging out, him blessing our relationship like a nice dad at a wedding, isn't at all my fantasy.

Sleep takes over my afternoon. The house is dark when I wake. I walk into the living room for water and the front door is open, cold blowing in. Then Jared comes through with a stack of boxes. He looks tired. Without acknowledging me, he goes back out and brings back another stack. By the time he shuts the door, the living room is a cold maze of boxes.

"Sheridan wanted me to bring these here from the store. I guess Carl cut the heat so she

doesn't want to take pictures at the shop? Said the kids would fuck with them at her house."

I bet *fuck* was her word, but coming out of his mouth it sounds too intense, bitter.

"Thanks, Jare."

He goes out again to get a bag of Taco Bell from the car. His overlapping burrito wrappers make a placemat on the coffee table. Burrito in one hand, a packet of Diablo in the other, he leans over the table, squeezing sauce onto each bite.

"I didn't get you anything because I didn't know what to get."

"Yeah, I've been just eating salad and lunch meat."

He makes a face. "Do you feel it helping?"

"Eh, today I feel bad. There's this thing called die-off. When the nasty stuff in me gets starved and makes me feel like shit."

"Yeah, you look pretty worn out. Your face is all red." He puts his hand to my forehead. "Maybe you should stop taking the pills."

When I don't say anything he asks what they are for, what the doctor said.

"You want to hear?"

"Yes, Laura. Of course I want to hear. I've been wanting to hear."

I tell him about the supplements and what she thought I had. I tell him she wonders if all of this started from systemic stress and exhaustion following my mom's death. I don't tell him what she said about changing birth controls. I tell him she said to hire someone to remove the mold in the bathroom and to get a better fan or leave the window open.

"I can do the bathroom," he says, his voice gruff. "No need to hire someone."

He finishes eating and folds up his wrappers into a tight ball.

“By the way, Sheridan thinks that,” he says.

“What?”

“That you’re having a harder time dealing with your mom than you let on. *It’s all connected.*” He quotes the air with his fingers. “She was whining about how you never talk to her about it. She asked if you talk to me. I said you could, obviously, but that you don’t really.”

“Sheridan has a lot of opinions. She doesn’t get when someone is just different than her. And I think about mom all the time. Not like I just moved on.”

“Talk, I said. Not think.”

He walks into the bathroom and gets in the shower. I try to open the door a few minutes later. His big pile of work clothes get caught under the door with the bathmat. I push harder.

“Can you just wait?” he says. “You’re letting in cold air.”

I walk back into the living room. All the boxes surprise me. It looks like we’re moving.

My fingers graze a stretch of raised bumps on my legs and butt. They itch a little. Not badly. Standing in my underwear in front of the bathroom mirror, I twist to get a better look. Thick white stripes cross the backs of my thighs with red around the edges, like the indent of a lounge chair’s thick plastic bands. My skin is already pale, but the stripes are bleached of any pink. The strange rash looks like a trick of lighting and shadow, but when I shift, it stays striped.

I spend fifteen minutes trying to take a picture of the backs of my legs, where the rash is visible and the curves of my butt look good. I’ve never sent Sammy a photo of myself before. I

angle my phone over my head to capture the mirror's view of my backside. Then, I try laying on the bed with my flipped-open phone over my shoulder. In these, my butt looks blobby and you can barely see the rash. If I fuck up my back doing this... I send the best one

"Look at this wild rash," I write. "Doesn't really itch but weird, right?!"

I think of her at home, opening the picture. A surge of desire in her chest, I hope. If anything, I hope she wishes to smooth antifungal cream on my thighs. Okay, maybe I'm delusional and the picture is gross, but in my opinion the black fabric of my underwear denting my butt does look hot and the rash is more interesting than nasty.

"The pic is kind of hard to see," she writes. "But the rashes are probably die-off too."

I regret not making my message more flirtatious. Facing the bathroom mirror, my phone by my cheek, I take a picture of my face. I'm smiling slightly and biting the edge of my lip.

"I guess I'll be okay ;)," I send with the picture.

"Looks like it," she says.

Before I can respond, my phone starts buzzing. I almost drop it. Sheridan's name is on the tiny screen. Fuck. Did I send her the pictures too?

"Oh hey sister," I say, trying to sound as casual as possible, maybe even silly, in case she did get pictures of my butt. Her voice is stressed and in a rush. She says she has errands to run before coming over, but there's only thirteen days until Cyber Monday and we have to get all of our stuff online, stat!

I turn on the stereo, expecting radio. It's switched to the CD player instead. The first chords of Dolly Parton's Jolene come out, soon followed by her voice. I don't know why the album is in there. We never use the stereo. My mom loved Dolly. Shivers skate over my skin.

There's nothing quite as sad as one-sided love, Dolly sings on the next song. It brings tears to my eyes, even though one-sided love doesn't really describe my life. The short song ends and Dolly's singing about love again, a garden of it. *Somewhere there's a garden where only love grows*. Sounds like a dream. For me, there's always been more than love to think about. It's funny that my mom loved Dolly, but thought that love was sentimental b.s.

The first box I open holds many small, fragile things wrapped tight in bubblewrap and white paper. I unpack a ceramic angel with a white gown and gold trim, then animals and more angels. Then dolls in lacy dresses that could be angels, too, but without halos in their hair. At the bottom of the box there's a layer of ceramic hearts painted with love notes and bible verses.

Sheridan comes in as I'm taking pictures of the hearts against the backdrop of the coffee table. It's hard to find an angle without the shadow of my head or the camera in the picture, so I'm standing on the couch. Sher's wearing jeans and her winter jacket, not the sweats she's been wearing over here lately. Even has a purple scarf around her neck. I wonder if Arlo got in trouble at school and she had to deal with it. She throws off the scarf and takes the camera from me.

"Are you trying to hurt yourself? Just write descriptions."

I get down and open the computer. I type *Whoever lives in love, lives in God, and God in them* from a shiny heart to the document. Sher is taking pictures, then stops. She goes to her purse to plunk a box of granola bars down on the table.

"Gluten free," she says. When I thank her, she smiles a thin, cold smile like she does when the boys finally say an insincere sorry after doing something dumb.

"These hearts are funny," I say. "Has Robbie ever bought you a gift like this?"

"Fuck no. These are cheesy as hell."

“They’re kind of cute though,” I say. “In a silly, sentimental way.”

“You would say that.”

Every time Sher picks up an object, she sets it down harder than she needs to. The table gets packed. I start wrapping the hearts and angels back up, quietly, so as not to bug her.

“Are you thinking about mom?” I ask, thinking of what Jared said.

Sher turns a ceramic deer to get a picture of its other side. “When am I not?”

“What are you thinking about?” I try to sound casual, but my heart is pounding.

“Nothing specific. How I wish she was here.”

“She’d make fun of these, huh?”

“Yeah, she’d hate them.”

“I know she dated,” I say, “But do you think she was ever in love?”

“How would I know?”

“I don’t know. Don’t you wonder about these things?”

“No, I don’t. Just because you’re obsessed with ooey gooey perfect love doesn’t mean everyone is. And you don’t have to pull apart her life to talk about her.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I can tell you thought you and Jared had the greatest most romantic love in the world. Now it’s fading like normal people’s, so you think your whole life is fucked. Poor you.”

My face tingles with anger. I walk straight out the door and into the field. I’m not crying, but the cold makes my eyes water. She doesn’t follow me. Of course she doesn’t. It’s a dry day, which makes it colder. Gray smoke and fog mists the hills. I stop by the scrubby circle in the dirt where Jared made a giant bonfire last New Year’s. We torched all the Christmas boxes, our tree

and random papers. Jared got pumped and kept finding new stuff to keep the orange flames high. We burned a falling-apart picnic table we'd had forever and pallets he was saving for something. Sheridan got drunk on Cherry Coke and vodka, which could have gone downhill, but she actually seemed pretty happy. Robbie had to carry her to the car.

The ground here is still brownish black, with wispy grass over it. The prickly ceanothus bushes that Sheridan and I used to make forts in as kids are the same gray-green as the fog and woodsmoke covering the hills. Before I hit the road, I come up behind Landon's house. His family recently built a little deck with a wood wall blocking it from the field between us. Steam comes up from behind the wall. Maybe a new hot tub. I turn back.

My mom had boyfriends she acted like she just had to put up with. When they stopped coming around she never seemed that bummed. I think she only actually liked one, Carlos, but they never kissed or held hands. Sheridan and I were sadder about their breakup than she was. Eventually, she stopped dating all together because she said all men have too much baggage.

Actually, I'm not thinking about love at all. Mostly, I wonder if my mom had anyone to talk to, anyone who really understood her.

Sher's comment about me and Jared stings because it's so wrong. It's never been me who gasses up my relationship with Jared. People do it for me. Sher does it, for fuck's sake! I hate seeing myself through her eyes, obsessed with Jared like our high school friends are obsessed with their babies. But also, what the hell is wrong with being a romantic?

I look through the front window before going back inside. Sheridan is laying on the couch, her face pressed into it. Our computers are open on the coffee table, black-screened asleep. I hear her shaking sobs. I want to go sit in the garage and smoke, alone.

When I go inside, she hushes to a snuffle. I rub her back as I pass. I kneel on the floor and start typing the description of a set of watery blue glass candle holders. I write that they would be the perfect artsy addition to any family's holiday table, beautiful with plain white tapered candles. *Blue and white like snow against a clear sky.* My photo uploads.

"Sorry," Sher says quietly.

"It's fine." I hand her the candles to wrap back up. She takes my hand, instead. She holds tight. I look at her face, her eyes staring straight at me, her face crinkling. She looks like she could explode into tears again. I pray that she doesn't.

"It's ok," I say.

"Is it?" she says, and I have no idea. I don't even know what *it* is.

She takes the candle holders, though, and wraps them individually. Then she ropes them together with a long strip of tape, better than they were packed before, each on their own. At first I didn't even know they were a set. I had to unpack the whole box before finding all six.

The seven o'clock news team is reporting from a small town in California. Two days ago, it was evacuated because a roaring fire raged through. A firestorm, they call it. In the middle of November. They interview a couple who didn't wake up to the alert call and had to hide in their swimming pool as the fire passed, coming up just for short, smoky breaths. The news guy's voice is deep and grave, but also low-key hyped, like a reporter on a disaster movie. He wants the story. The couple tells it like a disaster movie, too. *And then, and then.* They sound surprised that

they survived, and shook up by their telling, like they are reliving it all.

The reporter asks what they're going to do now, and the mood changes. Their house is gone, leveled to the ground. Now they appear so tired and without words. The woman takes a deep breath and says, "stay with friends." The reporter looks so tired, too. Things are quiet on the screen for too long. I can't take my eyes off their faces. I'm not breathing. My ears are glued to their silence. Then, the news cuts to a website people can use to track down loved ones in area hospitals or community centers. The graphic stays up for a long time without music or sound, and I hear Jared banging around in the bathroom. He brought a new fan home from work, as well as cleaner and a steel brush to get the mold out of the bathroom. I asked him if the cleaning chemicals would be bad for me and he asked if I had a better idea.

The news switches to a story about the West Valley football team going to state. The fire story made me lose my appetite. I put my plate, with its stupid leafy greens, brown rice and strips of lunchmeat, onto the table. I've been pretty good with my diet lately, though it often leaves me hungry. I drink a lot of water and herbal tea. I think I have more energy and my head is clearer.

There's more noise and scraping in the bathroom, then Jared showers.

He comes out a half-hour later, all dressed and clean shaven.

"I'm going to meet CJ at the bar," he says. He doesn't look at me.

"It's kinda late," I say.

"I'm not going to stay out all night."

He gives me this awkward wave from the doorway and leaves.

"Have fun," I say into the empty living room.

The house feels extra quiet. I log into WellHealth out of habit. Sammy sent me an article

about how rural queer people lack access to “affirming health care.”

“Thought of you,” she writes. Her first online message since the trip.

I like that she’s thinking about me, but I only read the article’s headline. I feel weird about her calling me that. A “rural queer person.” The picture in the article is of a pride parade in Ashland. I’m not sure what the parade has to do with healthcare.

I shut my computer and want to take a shower, but there’s dust all over the bathroom, some of it still clumpy with moisture from Jared’s shower. He took the old fan out, but didn’t put a new one in. Dusty wires hang from the hole in the ceiling. Both square plastic fan covers, old and new, sit on the countertop with his tools. I wash the ceiling particles off my toothbrush.

Sammy hasn’t said it directly, but I think she’s afraid of relationships, of commitment. The more open and affectionate I am, the more closed off she is. Jared wasn’t like this. He liked me long before I liked him and courted me rom-com style. With Sammy, I have to learn the little dance. It’s been two days since she sent the health care article. Just long enough. If I waited longer, she might feel spurned and talk herself into getting over me.

“Crazy and sad,” I write. “Thanks for sharing.”

“It’s fucked,” she writes back quickly.

“Yeah. Seems like all health stuff is. Ugh.” I really don’t want her to ask about me and my queer healthcare. I do want to talk, though. Sheridan’s been here everyday to work on eBay and I’ve been thinking about Sammy through all of it. In my head, we’ve been antique shopping

together. I've imagined what she would say about each object, if it would look good in her house, if it reminds her of any memory. "How are you?"

She says she's fine and asks how I am. I've also noticed she seems more excited to talk when I mention big ideas or my deepest feelings. Besides the ones for her, of course.

LoloLala80 > Periwinkle77

Pretty good. Been busy working with Sheridan on the online antiques biz. Thinking about how obsessed people are with the past. People spend hundreds of dollars collecting little angels or salt and pepper shakers! Also I've been thinking about my mom. Missing her.

Periwinkle77> LoloLala80

Fuck that. White nostalgia for the good old days *barffff* I'm sorry that you're missing your mom. But also seems important to let the missing in? The holidays suck for this kind of thing. It's like people (corporations?) want you to be aware of every single lack

LoloLala80 > Periwinkle77

Yeah, totally. Was just feeling sad abt the idea that my mom didn't have a companion. Seems weird to think this about an adult but what if she was rly lonely? I can't think of anyone she could have told her deepest darkest secrets to. You know?

Sammy says that sounds really hard to think about, but that it's good to remember people have all kinds of feelings inside them before they pass. It honors my mom to think of her as a full, complicated person. Not just happy or sad.

I do want to think about her like that, but I worry I didn't really know her like that.

Then Sammy asks if I am lonely. If *my* secrets are actually what I'm worried about.

LoloLala80 > Periwinkle77

I don't know. Sher said she never felt as lonely as she did after my mom died, even though there were people around us all the time, coming and going. Makes me think.

Periwinkle77> LoloLala80

Omg you are so avoidant. I asked about YOU not Sheridan. when you don't want to talk, you always talk about other people. Your sister sounds great, but...

She's right. I look down and smile, blinking my lashes sheepishly, as if she's watching.

LoloLala80 > Periwinkle77

Maybe I am lonely. I hate it because that's what people said when I started staying home a lot. You must be so lonely, so bored. Like, no actually, I'm fine. When I am lonely, it's not because I'm sick or at home. It feels different than that. Like the other day I was with Sheridan and she started crying and it made me feel so fucking alone.

Periwinkle77> LoloLala80

I know what you mean. A deeper loneliness when you're around people but not really connecting with them.

LoloLala80 > Periwinkle77

Yes! That. Ugh god. You understand everything.

She tells me she gets lonely like that sometimes too. She thinks everyone does. Then I ask her if she felt lonely when I was there.

“Not really,” she says. “But it felt pretty temporary.”

This hurts, but it’s true. I want to feel close to her again. Closer. I ask her if her friends make her less lonely, her *community*, Britney the Bisexual’s favorite word.

“Yeah, I love my friends,” she says, “but they don’t do it for me all the time.”

I ask if she’s ever tried polyamory, if she thinks polyamorous people are less lonely.

Periwinkle77>LoloLala80

Nah, multiple lovers is no cure for loneliness. But yeah, I’ve been polyam on and off. In my twenties I had three solid partners and it was picture perfect for like nine months. I lived alone how I like it. Was pretty domestic with Suzanna, had a long distance thing with Rocío (we’d meet in cities where she was working and have a pretty damn romantic time), and I’d hook up with Rachel, back when I thought I could like being topped if the person was intense enough lol. Takes a shitton of work, so much conversation. Don’t rly have it in me. I don’t know, tho. My desires seem to change with time. Right now, I kinda want that one special person. Friends, plus that person. Wait, are you poly? Sorry I never asked. I didn’t think you wanted to talk about it.

My heart races when I hear that she wants to find someone to love. Just one person.

“Kinda poly,” I lie. “So I can meet my sexual needs, you know? But I prefer one love too.

My desires also seem to change with time.”

I tap the plastic of my laptop with my fingernails. They seem to be getting stronger with the vitamins, though they still have weird ridges running across them.

“Yeah, I guess because life changes,” she says, “we change.”

I wait for more. I don’t really know what she means. The chat box says she’s typing, but then it goes blank. I can’t think of anything to get the conversation started again. What were we even talking about? Minutes later, Jared comes in and I’m staring off into space, wondering if she wasn’t talking about me at all.

He says *hey* and I can’t say a thing. He takes off his boots, goes into the kitchen and comes back to stand in front of the window, looking out into the dark, spooning peanut butter into his mouth from a jar of Jiffy. A teenage burst of anger burns in my chest. His lips smack around the spoon. There’s that stupid denim slouch in the butt of his work pants.

“Are you going to finish the bathroom tonight?” I ask. “It’s so dusty in there.”

“Maybe?”

He plunks the jar onto the coffee table in front of me and stomps away. Just as he turns the corner into the hallway, he takes his phone out of his back pocket and I swear he smiles at it. The metal spoon is too tall for the almost-empty peanut butter container. The whole thing tips over and the spoon falls out, trailing sticky peanut butter.

I’m pulling a tea bag in and out of my cup. Turmeric ginger. Sheridan bought it for me because she heard it’s good for inflammation. Sammy would love this tea. The spices leave wispy clouds

of orange in the water until it's all one color. Tangerine. I imagine Sammy drinking tea. I think she likes to say only half of something she's unsure about (that she wants love), instead of admitting what she doesn't know (that maybe, maybe, that love is me). She doesn't challenge my questions (my love for my husband), just lets them float in the air between us. I see what she's doing. She's shown herself to me: one tightly packed box, slow to open, begging to be unpacked.

I play it safe and tell her that the pills seem to be working. She says she's happy to hear it and tells me about her weekend watching all her favorite movies with friends and the food she ate. She says to let me know if I need her to pick up any more supplements from the doctor and mail them. None of my bottles are close to empty, but I like the idea of telling her where I live, of her writing my address on a package and it arriving here. Her handwriting in my living room.

I want to be able to tell her something else that I'm doing right. I'll start washing my underwear by hand. The doctor said regular detergent may trigger my BV and that washers are often coated in years of detergent. I've been tossing my underwear into a shoe box by the closet when they're dirty. I dump the box into the bath and turn on the warm water. The sample packet of natural detergent from the doctor smells like nothing and doesn't bubble.

I sit in the tub. In an hour or so, I have to go to the store with Sheridan to get last-minute Thanksgiving stuff, but for now, I let myself zone out in the hot water. Underwear float around me. I scrub each pair before pushing it to the other side of the bath. When I'm finished, the water is cool. I stand with the pile and turn the shower on. After I rinse them, I drape them over my shoulder. A light green cotton pair slips down, resting on my belly, almost translucent.

When I get out, I hang the underwear on the backs of chairs and then sit in the chairs, my robe hanging open. Wet hair drips over my shoulders onto my breasts. I hold my phone at arm's

length, first in front of me and then above. I send one to Sammy.

“Good girl :),” she responds minutes later.

In bed, I masturbate really quickly, thinking of Sammy whispering in my ear, good girl.

Jared’s parents come to Thanksgiving and bring their teacup chihuahua, Miracle, in her turkey sweater. It has a crown-like tail that’s supposed to stand up like a turkey’s, but falls over her butt and drags on the ground. Everyone lingers in the kitchen. This usually gets on Sher’s nerves, but today she doesn’t seem to mind. Jared’s dad is quiet as always. His mom tells me I look good, then goes off about their druggy neighbor Cody always attracting addict weirdos and creeps that scare her. She said she called the cops the other day because some guy from Cody’s was sitting in his car all night and she thought he was waiting until her husband left for work to get her. The dispatcher said no one was on duty until the morning, but that an officer could come then.

“Isn’t that terrifying!” she says. “They were gonna leave me to die.”

Jared’s dad says she’s overreacting, but mentions a Facebook group where you can get armed people to come and protect you without calling the cops, like vets or something.

“And they’ll actually take care of the problem,” Jared’s dad says.

“My friend Mike’s into that,” Jared says. “But he’s kinda crazy. Dunno if he’d make things safer.”

“It’s all scary,” his mom says. “Just wish Cody would get some help.”

“Can you please talk about more pleasant things,” Sher says. She tells Robbie to take the

boys outside, even though they're being chill, so they go slingshot rocks against a tree. Jared's mom sits on the couch with Miracle nestled into her armpit and watches the football on mute. Sheridan gets everything on the table in a way she's happy with and even thanks me for helping.

Before dessert, I say I need to stretch. I shut myself in Sher's bedroom and call Sammy. In the middle of all of this family stuff, I want to hear her voice. She said she was going to a Friendsgiving. When she answers, people are talking around her.

"Happy Thanksgiving," I say.

"You too."

"Thankful for you."

She hums in response. My stomach flops.

"How is your Thanksgiving? Have you eaten?" I ask.

"It's fine. So joyful, this celebration of genocide. I ate a bit. My body doesn't feel great, but you know, just happily giving thanks to my colonialist ancestors for fucking up the planet and making us all sick like this." She coughs a harsh laugh. *Damn*, someone next to her says, *but true*. "JK, I'll take any excuse to hang out with my hot friends around food I mostly can't eat."

"I never really thought about it like that," I say quietly.

"Anywho, babe, what are you up to? Enjoying the family gathering?"

She sounds distracted, like she's talking to a sibling who calls her too much. Maybe she hasn't told her friends about me yet and doesn't want to show them her feelings so obviously. It would be tacky, too sweet. Not her style at all. But did her friends hear her say *babe* to me?

"Yeah, it's pretty good. Sheridan made me some desserts with fake sugar."

"Hope stevia, not powdered chemicals." I hear things clanking around. Sammy laughs a

real laugh. “God, Margaret, you goof. Just give me one bite of each pie, not a slice of each!”

Her voice is sweet to this Margaret, fun and warm. A lump shoves itself into my throat.

“I’ll let you go,” I say. I want her to say no, to move to a different room and talk to me about what’s really on her mind. Socializing makes her anxious, sometimes. I could be her rock.

“K, talk to you later,” she says and hangs up.

I sit on the bed. Some time passes in my cloudy, sad brain, and then there’s a knock.

“Were you talking to someone?” Sher says. She paces in front of the bed.

“No. I’m so crazy. Was probably talking to myself.” I try to giggle, but the sound catches in my throat. “I was just stretching.”

“Yeah, you said that earlier,” she says.

She sits on the bed next to me.

“Ready for pie?” I say.

“No,” she says, and her voice breaks. She wraps her arms around me and starts to shake. She’s crying too loud to cry with the door open. Sean’s face appears in the hall, worried. I give him a look to get the hell out of here. Again, her crying shuts me right down. I look at the bedroom carpet and her quaking back, the pilly orange knit of her fall sweater.

My mom passed on a day hospice hadn’t expected. She hadn’t had that end-of-life up turn. Her feet were going pale, but not stony blue yet like the nurse said they would get. She was still ingesting water from the sponges I dabbed on her tongue. That week, the nurse did tell me to spend more time out of the house, to give Mom space and permission to inch closer to death.

Instead, I spent time in different rooms. I cleaned the bathroom, bleaching every crevice of the tub. I pulled boxes from garage shelves and went through them. I made a stack of childhood pictures and essays, cute cards and valentines. She could still make noises in response to things, so I wanted to show her stuff. I threw stupid stuff like math worksheets and random fliers in a pile to burn. When I went in with my stack, my hands dirty with sticky glue and paper dust, something seemed different. I put my hand in front of her mouth. I wasn't sure what was breath and what was the air of the house, suddenly full of small currents. I ducked my head close to her chest and put my fingers against her neck. Her pulse was still, but for at least five minutes, I didn't trust my body, what I felt or didn't feel. Maybe her pulse, everything in her, had just gotten quieter. She didn't have to be beating loudly or breathing a wind to be alive.

Eventually I called Sheridan. *She's gone*, I said. I felt like a girl in a movie. There was a pause, as if Sheridan, too, would never speak again, but then she erupted into howling. Her shrieks hit all over my body like fiery stinging nettles. I waited in silence. She didn't hang up, just kept wailing. I waited and waited. There was nothing to say. Eventually Robbie took the phone and said they were coming over.

When she walked in the door, Sheridan started again. She squeezed me and her tears burbled around in her chest, her body shaking against me, then when she let go, they rattled back into a hiccupping howl. She hugged Jared and same thing. I didn't know what to do with my face when she made that noise. Instead of making me sad, it made me feel nothing. She sobbed across the living room to the edge of the bed. Seeing our mother, if you can call a lifeless body that, sunk Sheridan's sobs back into her chest. She shook quietly, her face streaming. I brought her a

chair. I told her she could hold mom's hand. She looked at me surprised, maybe grossed out, but then curious, like a little kid allowed something she thought was off limits. She held her hand.

"It's so cold," she said.

"I know, right?" I said.

"I know you know," she said.

I left her alone.

That afternoon two men came to get mom's body. They wrapped her sheets around her and put a blanket they brought on top of her. It wasn't clinical, like in *Law and Order*. More like how you wrap a kid up in blankets, burrito style. The men weren't dressed like nurses, either, but in black clothes and practical black shoes. They drove a regular minivan with no back seats. When they took the body, our mother's body, out on a stretcher, Sheridan followed. She stood there in her socks, in the January cold, her shoulders shaking. I stood at the door. Smoke puffed out of the neighbor's chimney. I went back inside as soon as the van turned on.

Jared held me in bed that night. We were both silent, but awake.

"Why am I not feeling it like Sher?" I asked. "I can't even cry."

"It's okay." He touched my hair. "And if you're a little relieved, that's okay, too."

"Maybe," I said, and I felt so tired in that moment, like pounds and pounds of flour hit my body. An exhaustion I know well, now. I slept fourteen hours that night. When I woke up, I was still tired.

In Sher's bedroom, I hold her tightly. She shakes in my arms, not holding me back. I think of being held or secured in another way, with ropes or someone's unbreaking grip. I think

of myself cracking open. I think of all the space in my heart and belly that does hurt. I squeeze Sher so tight that it's like she's holding me up without meaning to.

I hear my own wail break through hers. It surprises me. No words or thoughts. Just the sound ringing in my throat, so big. I feel Jared take me from Sheridan. I push against his arms. He holds tight and then lets go too easily. There is too much loose and flailing space around me. He seems afraid to touch me. I walk straight through the house to our truck. The door pops with ice when I pull it open. Jared doesn't come out right away. I put my feet on the dash and hug my knees. I crisscross my ankles with my sharp fingernails. I'm thinking now, of my mom being alone and me being alone, of Sher feeling alone, too, sometimes, but not getting it at all. Jared not getting it. My life, a desolate tundra, looming. Me, too scared to really leap into change.

I cry and cry until I feel the frozen outside air entering my nose and throat, sharp. Then I stop. I feel tired from crying, and empty. I rest my head against the cold glass and close my eyes.

When Jared comes in, the cab of the truck lights up. I cover my face.

"Baby. I love you," Jared says, starting the car. "I told Sher to maybe wait until tomorrow to talk to you. I know she can get on your nerves more than help, sometimes."

He drives home with one hand and his knees, holding onto my hand the whole way.

It's the day after Thanksgiving and I'm not sad anymore. More, I'm mad, or something. Me crying last night put me on my own planet. I didn't say a word for the rest of the night and Jared seemed scared of me. My eyes are raw and red. Maybe I'm a little scared of myself.

Sheridan is Black Friday shopping for 50% off socks at Fred Meyer. Jared is working. Sher texted me when she woke up this morning at 4:30 am that she hopes I am okay. She said that the holidays really are the hardest, but that I should try to spend the day photographing the antiques. Things are already selling fast and work is a good distraction.

“Everything not online is money lost,” she said, followed by a stupid heart.

I was surprised that she didn’t come out to the truck to comfort me last night. I thought she’d been waiting eagerly for me to break like that. But I’m glad she didn’t follow me. She’d dig into my tears like a fucking detective.

A few days ago, she arranged the cardboard boxes in a row like a train so I’d know what to do next. She treats me like a child. I cut open the front box, the exacto knife barely touching the tape so it doesn’t slice any of the contents. Inside, underneath a layer of paper, are stacks of beautiful glossy boxes. Each thin box has a painted image on the cover, flowers in the edges, a colorful design like a stained glass church window in the center. I open one. It’s full of paper. Clean, creamy sheets with a flower in each corner, and behind the paper, a stack of creamy square envelopes. They make me smile. I choose the prettiest piece of stationery and find a good pen that won’t look blotchy like high school homework.

Of course Sheridan would diss me for being a romantic. She thinks I’m some alien for having a complicated soul. Fuck her and her wishy-washy tears, like all she has to do to connect with our mom, to connect with me, is sob and sob. The pen in my hand makes my heart pound.

S - You were the best thing to happen to me this year. Meeting you, talking to you. I don’t think I knew who I was before I met you. It’s scary to say this but more and more I am

imagining my life differently. I am imagining you in it. I have a fantasy that I don't think is too unreasonable. I could move to Portland and we could be together, in any way you want. I want to fuck more, talk more, get to know each other better. I want to care for you and I want you to care for me. You've shown me that my life here isn't even really mine. I want a life that's mine. You've made me feel brave.

I think that I love you. In a way I've never loved anyone before. Thank you for being there for me. I don't know what I'd do without you. Hope to love you more in 2008.

At the beginning of the letter, my hand was graceful, fluid, my true feelings in the same small, loopy handwriting I've had forever. Near the end, though, my hand starts to shake. I let go of the pen and wipe both sweaty palms on my sweatpants. A surge of energy fills my chest. It could be relief, or even happiness. Proud to say what I've wanted to say for so long? Proud to be romantic as fuck. Even if there's no place for it in this world, I want to try to be honest.

I can't re-read it, though. My teen diary handwriting makes me cringe.

I take a shallow breath and sign my name.

After stuffing the letter into an envelope, I begin a letter to Desiree. I have her address from when she sent me a pamphlet on heavy metals in tooth fillings and the essential oils that help with gingivitis, with two sugar-free butterscotch hard candies stuffed into the package. I never did use the oils. It's a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year letter, even though I know I'm early, I say. Of course I want to send love to Desi, but I also want to see when her letter gets to her, so I know if Sammy has gotten hers. I tell Desi how happy I am to have met her and say what I hope for both of us in 2010: health, happiness, newness, and all of our wacko desires met.

My writing voice in the letter to Desi, is the same as online.

Writing to Sammy, my voice felt different. Like wedding vows, or something. Sammy has never been married. I imagine her opening the letter, seeing my handwriting, thinking of holding my hands in hers. I think of her heart opening up at the possibilities of a life like the one I imagined in the letter. The possibility of us. She can read these words again and again, keep them by her bed. The best gift.

I crave to feel the cold outside. I step outside without a jacket.

I walk to the mailbox and pull the little red flag up. My arms poking out of my t-shirt get marbled red like meat. Back inside, my skin gets hotter, tingling.

With every passing car, I come to the window. Finally, the USPS truck chugs by. I've felt like this before with Sammy, like something very real could happen or I could float right away.

I spend the weekend with Sheridan, fulfilling orders and putting more stuff online. She's touching me more, looking into my eyes. She says that it's nice to know we're in this together. Online, Sammy messages short and sweet, "Sorry if I was rude Thursday. Many people around."

I say it's totally fine, I was just happy to talk for a sec. Thanksgiving feels like eons ago. I'm being a little fake, too nice, but I have to be. I don't mention the letter or anything about my feelings. It feels kind of pointless to chat online with my letter in the air. Not intimate at all.

I swear I'm not obsessing, but I today I do look at her Facebook page. It's still pretty much blank, but last week, she posted about a fundraiser for a shelter that houses homeless queer

youth. Sammy's status asks everyone to buy their holiday gifts through specific Portland shops on or before Giving Tuesday, so some proceeds will go to the shelter. I click around and end up on the page of a florist. The bouquets are beautiful, not simple roses and lilies, but wild flowers and mosses and leaves, too. One even has a branch of a raspberry bush with red, hard winter berries. I pick a simple bouquet of lavender and purple daisy-like flowers. I can see it on Sammy's kitchen table. I write "With love, Laura," in the text box.

I'm afraid it will overdraw my debit card that I haven't used in months, so I try my credit card. It doesn't work. I have one other credit card from Old Navy when Sher and I went shopping a long time ago. It doesn't work either. In the kitchen, I find a silvery VISA gift card that Jared's company gave him for his June birthday. He said he was surprised to get it, because the foreman switches between generous and stingy like a moody teenage girl. Jared probably forgot it existed. \$50. It just covers the flowers. I walk the glossy cardboard out to the trashcan and bury it under a bag of bathroom trash, mostly Kleenex and Q-tips.

An email comes to say the flowers I ordered yesterday were delivered. Nothing from Sammy.

Desiree sends a message on Thursday, thanking me for the kind letter. She says she loves the idea of newness. Babies get her thinking about it, but she should think about her own newness - the

fact that maybe she'll discover things about herself she didn't know before. I could say so much to this, but I just say, "Totally!! Exciting stuff."

Our eBay orders are way up. After a long day of boxing, just before Jared gets home, I call Sammy really quick. I could text, but I want to be able to hear how she's feeling in her voice and want to tell her with my voice that she doesn't have to respond to my letter yet. It goes to voicemail. I hate that her message is only her name recorded. I want to listen to those two syllables again and again, but I resist calling back.

Today, I try her again. I imagine she saw my call the other day, but got busy and then forgot about it. If she forgot at first, maybe she imagines that now, I'm busy with Jared or eBay. She doesn't answer. I continue boxing items to mail out. At four, I drive the packages to the Post Office. I need fresh air. The nice old clerk uses a dolly to bring them in. He wears a bulky back support brace over his starched uniform shirt. It reminds me that my back has been feeling pretty okay lately, or I'm so distracted, I'm not thinking about it. I feel bad making him haul the packages, but I guess it's his job. I follow him up the ramp.

"Business or pleasure," he says, over the wooden counter that's gouged with pen marks and grooves from so many signatures and addresses over the years.

"Business," I say after a pause. The word *pleasure* sounds so sing-song in his mouth, but almost makes me sick to my stomach. I think of Sammy's silence and feel scared.

He pokes at the computer keyboard with just his pointer finger.

Waiting for him to print out my long receipt, I look at all the tiny metal boxes around the cold post office. I wonder if all letters feel like risks.

When I get back in the empty car, I sit there for a long time. I don't know where my brain is. Rare afternoon sun comes through the windshield, soaking into my dark sweatshirt. A car honks. I jump. I think it's someone telling me to move out of this loading zone, but there's no one behind me. Then I worry that someone that I know saw my idling car, my closed eyes. I probably look as crazy as I feel. I turn on the ignition and cruise down Sixth Street.

I take a long hot shower and go into the kitchen. Jared's home, now, drinking a Miller High Life. I feel warm and clean, my skin smooth with honeysuckle lotion. All I can think of is crawling into Sammy's lap like this, her fingers in my wet hair. I slam any fearful thoughts right out of my brain. I get a beer from the fridge. Jared raises his eyebrows. I haven't had much to drink since I got sick. Doesn't make me feel great in the morning. It's all sugar, like Sammy said.

"Can you open, please?" I say.

"It's a twist-off."

"Oh, silly me," I say. I am desperate for distraction. "Wanna play a game?"

"What kind of game?" he asks.

"Mmm, a card game?"

"Sure. What?"

"Go Fish? We used to have a cute kid deck. Must be around here somewhere." I get up and open the cabinet below the TV. It's full of junk. "Damn I wish I could find it. Such cute drawings. Weird, I even remember the fishies! *Do you have a Debbie Dolphin?*"

I laugh. I don't know why I'm laughing. I suck down the beer too fast and burp.

“We can play Go Fish with regular cards,” he says.

He walks past me and comes back with a pack of playing cards. Shuffles them. I sit back down at the table and pick at my bottle’s gold foil with my fingernails.

“God, my nails are chipping so bad. Poo. I’m just not in the mood to re-do them.”

“How many cards do I deal?” he says.

“Seven.” My lime green polish is on the kitchen table. I open it and swipe a stripe across my chipping pink for no reason at all. It looks disgusting.

“That smells,” Jared says, as he deals us. He cracks the window. Cold air rushes in.

“Shush, it’s not that bad.” I close the window. “Oh my god, can I do your nails?”

Sammy has a Facebook picture of her smiling next to a cute guy with purple nails.

“Hell no,” he says.

“Why not? You’re a manly man. Even with green nails.”

“Are you drunk already?”

“Come on, why can’t I paint them? What are you afraid of?”

“Are you serious? Calm down.”

He rearranges his cards in his hand.

“Three of diamonds?” he says.

“Go fish,” I say. He draws a card. I realize I don’t remember what the goal of the game even is. “Fuck, I actually totally forget how to play this game.”

He groans and puts his hand face down on the table.

“I need to change the wash anyways,” he says.

After Jared goes to bed, I open my computer. A message notification from her, finally. I am sad that she didn't call, but I'm excited to see her name all the same. Periwinkle, that word that reminds me of a star.

Periwinkle77 > LoloLala80

Laura, I appreciate your thoughtfulness, expressing your feelings and all that, but this has gotten to a bad place. I hate to do this, but please don't contact me again. This isn't like that other time. I'm not just mad about something else, taking it out on you. This is about boundaries, Laura. You think I'm the answer to all your problems. I can't be that for you. You can't have these expectations of people, Laura. I took a risk on you, but never told you this was love. Don't blame that on me. We don't even really know each other. The flowers are pretty, but way too much. I feel manipulated by them, like I owe you something. I'm really sorry Laura. I had to block your number. I thought I communicated that I can only handle so much.

Her punctuation and spelling is perfect. She spent time on the note. Or, she was so deeply upset with me that every word came out crisp and perfect, enunciated and loud. She typed this at 6:32 pm, maybe from bed, maybe from the couch, where we kissed, where I dozed in and out of sleep. When she hit send, did she stand up? Did she open a window above the alley and let fresh air hit her face, like she does when she needs a refresh, but doesn't want to go outside? Or did she press send, then enter a new address into her search bar, moving on?

Spiteful tears gather in my throat. I think of some friend telling her that I am no one, that I have a husband and am using her. *Manipulating* her. The word makes me sick. I think of her trying to defend me and failing, because maybe those things are true. I am more mad at this imagined friend than I am at Sammy. But I know that it's not her friend. It's her. My name comes again and again from her stern mouth. Her discomfort with me stings. Her disappointment in me. I can't sit here and reread this or I will puke.

I look down the hallway. It is dark. No triangle of light pokes out from our room. Jared falls asleep the second after he turns out the light. I put on sneakers, my thick socks bunched around my ankles. I pull Jared's turquoise Miami Dolphins beanie from the pile of warm stuff next to the door. It almost covers my eyes. I put on my winter coat, but take it off and put on Jared's instead. It is warmer, with a quilted inside, and weighs heavy on my shoulders. I swim in it. As I open the front door, the nausea in my stomach, the churning guilt, gives way to tears.

We barely know each other.

There is no one that knows me as well as she knows me.

I feel sorry for myself. Like really, really sorry. It is the stupidest, blubbering, most pointless emotion, but it fills me up, more than it ever did when I was sicker, more than it did when my mom was dying in my own damn house. I take fast little steps, gasping tears. The dry night freeze makes the grass webby with ice that crunches under my feet. I want my tears to freeze on my face. I want to lay down and see how cold I can get.

"Hey," a voice says. Landon pulls a plastic bag from his car. I see the bulby shapes of soda bottles. I didn't even realize that I'd walked almost to the street. I'm in the dark still, but I

see him see my face and look away. He reaches with his toe to crunch the clumps of ice grass around him. He waits. I can tell he wants me to keep on walking. I can't.

"You can come in if you want," he says. "My friends and I are going in the hot tub."

The light of the house lifts me out of my quiet tears. I wipe my eyes on the way in. Four of his friends are in the kitchen, stripping out of their clothes. I don't know them, but recognize the girl with thick dark hair. They look in their mid-20's, older than Landon, though Landon looks younger than his twenty years. He introduces me as his neighbor. They say hey. I'm quiet, blinking. The girl I have seen with Landon is Dana. Their friend Michelle has dyed purple hair and a face full of smooth, vibrant make-up that she doesn't take off before running out to the hot tub. Tyler, a guy with long hair and one long feather earring grabs the bag from Landon and pours soda into five glasses from the cabinet. He glugs rum on top. They all run stiffly across the ice cold deck in their underwear. I feel so strange taking off my clothes here. Good, maybe. I fold up the bottom of my cami so it looks more like a bra. I gulp the drink before walking outside.

The hot tub steams on the deck like a giant pot of soup. Everyone is sighing as they inch in. I sit on the edge with my feet in first, then sink deeper. The heat alone makes my heart lighter.

"What's up with you," Tyler says to me. "I see those red eyes."

"Leave her alone," Landon says. His voice is looser now that he's with his friends, rum in his belly. I take another big sip. It burns sweetly.

"It's okay," I say. "But it's kind of a long story."

Suddenly I want to launch into the whole thing so badly I could cry.

"We have all night," says Michelle. Angel. She rises to set her glass on the ground and I see her dark pubes through her wet white underwear. I look away.

“So I was seeing this girl I met online,” I say. Landon raises his eyebrows, entertained, I think, not judgemental. I am whispering, but my whisper is loud, performing drama, Sammy would say. “I went up to Portland to see her. We have so much in common. I thought we were in love. Great sex, blah blah. I was figuring out how to make it work with my marriage. But she broke up with me. Tonight. Because apparently my love was too much for her?”

My face reddens with pressing tears. I look at the surface of the water, not crying, just setting my hands down on the surface and pulling up, feeling the water stretch as it suction.

“Fuck,” Michelle says.

“She said we didn’t even know each other. That’s the biggest betrayal. She’s lying to herself, I think, but she’s impossibly stubborn. Won’t even talk to me about it.”

I let my face crumble at this, but can’t admit to them that she blocked my number.

“That’s awful, baby,” Tyler says. He reaches his fingers towards me lovingly, but doesn’t touch me because we’re almost naked in a hot tub.

“Are you a codependent person and she’s not?” Dana asks. She’s perched on the edge, her body steaming. Backlit by the porchlight, her face is dark. “That can be a lot for people.”

“Maybe?” I keep my eyes on the water. It glows blue from a light at the bottom.

“Wow, shutttt up,” Tyler says. “Way too soon. Another conversation for another time.” He raises his glass to mine. “You’ll find a greater love.”

I clink his glass. Michelle clears her throat so I clink hers too. They both make exaggerated eye contact with me. I try to smile and finish my drink.

“We can distract you?” Tyler says.

I nod. The steam of the hot tub seems thicker, now.

They launch into conversation. I half-listen. Michelle talks about her newish boyfriend JP, this tall guy I think I know from high school metal shop, where Jared hung out sometimes. Dana says her girlfriend Alysha has been annoying and petty lately, picking fights all the time.

“I thought you wanted to be needed!” Tyler says.

“Not like this,” Dana says.

They ramble on. I can’t really follow. I get too hot, sit my butt on the ledge of the tub, until I get too cold and sink back in. We all dip in and out for what feels like hours. I’m trying not to think about whether or not I should go home. My house seems a universe away.

It must be after midnight when a girl wearing a blue Dominos polo and no coat walks out of the house. She comes up behind Dana and wraps her arms around her body even though it gets her shirt soaking wet. Alysha. As much as Dana complained about this girl, she looks so happy to see her. Dana’s smile is wide and pure like no one’s watching. Alysha kisses up her neck. I can’t look away. Then she rolls her black stretchy pants up and steps in. Ankle-deep, she’s towering above us. I must be drunk because I know if I stood that high, I’d fall right in.

“Who are you?” Alysha says to me.

I say I’m Landon’s neighbor.

“Cute,” she says. She is close to me and smells like pizza. “Hey, no holes? Me neither!”

I squeeze my lobes and she squeezes hers and my laugh bubbles out.

Later, in the kitchen, I’m pouring myself another drink and Alysha’s grabbing paper towels for the pizzas she brought, when she says, “Babe, you seem sad.”

“Kinda,” I say. I pause for a while so I seem sad, instead of just numb. “Breakup.”

The word feels so good in my mouth. So solid and easy to understand.

She puts the roll of paper towels on the counter and hugs me. Her shirt is still damp from hugging Dana earlier. I'm wearing my sweatshirt with nothing underneath. I'm always so stiff in a hug, worried that the other person is going to squeeze too tight and fuck up my back. Alysha just lightly holds and pets me between my shoulder blades like I'm a cat. I stand quietly, empty of emotion but glad to be held. In her arms, I look at the kitchen cabinets, glad that no one is around to watch my blank face. When she releases me, I step back too fast and get dizzy. I clutch the countertop and blink my eyes, waiting for the world to stop spinning.

"You alright?"

"Yeah," I say. "Sorry. I have to go to the bathroom."

"Don't be sorry," she says. "I'm bringing you a big water into the living room, okay?"

This makes me so grateful, my eyes stream as I walk down the hall, and in the bathroom, I know I shouldn't look in the mirror, but I do, and seeing my contorted face makes me cry harder. I have to look away. The toilet seat is that puffy soft plastic kind that always feels weirdly warm. I sit, my face in my hands, and cry so much, my thighs get wet. There is a window beside the toilet, covered in dusty blinds. If I opened it, I could see the row of trees Jared recently trimmed because they were growing over our driveway and touching our cars.

My tears dry up. I wash my face and put on someone's rose face cream, but then wash it off, fearing I will smell like I stole it. My face feels numb.

When I come back, everyone sits smashed together on the L-shaped couch, except for Alysha, who is on the ground between Dana's feet. I balance my butt on the armrest.

"Sit," Alysha says. She slaps the ground next to her.

I sit in the middle of the room instead. I'm too far from the couch, in an ocean of carpet, so I scoot forward. Then I feel too close to Alysha but I don't want to move again. I look at the people on the couch instead of her. They are passing around a blobby purple pipe. Weed swirls in the air. I think of Landon's mom. Someone said she was sleeping. I think she's a teacher. Must have her own thing going on. Dana is scratching Landon's head with her nails. They seem close, a friendship I don't really get. I watch them until Dana meets my eyes.

"What?" she says.

"You two are just cute," I say. My words come out unshaking. I like being drunk.

"My oldest friend," Dana says. "This faggot knows all my secrets."

My eyes jutt over to Landon's face. I expect him to look uncomfortable at this word, but he just looks high, Dana's hand rubbing his neck, his eyes on the muted TV.

"Yeah they're so adorable it's gross," Alysha says. "Laura, eat the cheese plate I made."

Between Alysha's outstretched knees is a cutting board with a bunch of crackers spread on it, some pepperoni and two sticks of white string cheese. She nudges it towards me.

"Wait," she says. Then she carefully peels a strip of cheese off and winds it into a spiral on top of a Ritz. I don't say I can't eat these things. My teeth grind the cheese into the cracker. They both taste like waxy salt, probably not worth breaking my diet, but impossible to resist. Alysha makes me another combo, this time with a pepperoni, which is spicy, and also waxy.

It gets quiet then for a long time. I feel my cold hair dripping on my boobs. I want to make a joke about it, but am scared I will sound stupid or creepy. I curl up on the carpet, with my head on a soft stuffed seashell. Dana throws a blanket on me from the couch. It lands covering my face. Alysha glares at Dana and folds it down around my shoulders. I close my eyes.

Then I feel that body-shock start before sleep, and sit up. I can't be the sad, random girl that comes uninvited and overstays her welcome. Graceless. I slap my own face. Michelle, the only one still clearly awake, texting, laughs at me from behind her phone.

"I think I have to go," I say.

Everyone else is almost asleep, too, but they shake awake, eyes blinking with forced energy, trying to pretend they were never sleeping.

"We will deliver you back to your land," Alysha says.

"She's not a prisoner," Dana says. Her eyes are still closed.

"Come now, princess," Tyler says, rising and yawning loudly.

"I'm so sorry," Landon says. "My friends are nerds."

"I would love the company on my treacherous walk," I say.

Under my silly tone is dread, obviously, but they giggle, so I giggle. We walk, shivering.

"Wait." I slow by Jared's truck. I feel for his keys in the jacket pocket. "I'm just going to stay here until I sober up." I push the key button and the unclicking pop sounds through the night like a horn. The lights flash on, brighter than day.

"Oh fuck," I say. I click it again and it beeps. "Fuck."

Alysha dances away from us, out in front of the lights, spinning around, moving her arms like a tree in the breeze. Her long winter coat sways.

"Your honor," Tyler says to me. "You will freeze."

"I don't care," I say.

"I care!" He clutches my face in his hand. "Don't you dare talk like that. You're not gonna die in your own damn yard."

He looks genuinely scared for me. His fear surprises me.

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that,” I say. I’m embarrassed I made him think I was that sad.

“Oh, me neither, then,” he says.

Alysha returns, stopping solemnly in front of me. Her hair is still wet in her messy bun, but the hairs around her head are dry and curling into tight ringlets by her ears. My heart races. In one steady motion, she kisses me on the forehead, the right cheek, the left cheek. I am stone still. She pulls away and curtsies in front of me. An old yellow cigarette butt turns in the gravel under her toe as she dips. Then she is backing up into the darkness. Tyler kisses me, head-cheek-cheek, too, and they turn to run back.

“See you around,” Alysha yells.

“Take care of yourself, bitch,” Tyler says, running after her. They disappear in the dark.

They are right. It is too cold for the truck. It’s too cold for the garage, too. My teeth are chattering. The house feels too small. Landon’s felt warm and expansive, like an endless clubhouse. I hold my breath as the front door creaks open. I feel sick. I don’t want to sit on the couch, in the same room with my computer, my Sammy memories. And not the bedroom, either.

I sleepily run a bath, plunking in drops of Desi’s eucalyptus essential oil and then lavender. The oil beads on the surface of the hot water. It’s mesmerizing. I add way too much. The intense scent catches in my throat. My eyes water. Ignoring the sharp smell, I get in the stinging hot bath. I wait to sink in until my submerged feet are red. My back against the smooth ceramic, I press my toes on the hard edges of the faucet. I really need to close my eyes.

In the morning, the shower curtain is open and the bath is still full, dotted with oil sheen. I wonder if Jared noticed the still, cold water. I touch the bristles of my toothbrush. Dry. Did he smell the vodka on my breath? Whatever. If he even noticed I was gone, he couldn't imagine where I went. I unplug the tub and watch the water spiral in the drain.

Advil. Cold water. Jared's cold burrito straight from the fridge, and a stray fleck of foil, picked off my tongue. Kettle steam coating the kitchen window. Black tea steeped too long, bitter. My hands, shaking. My chest shaking, or my heart. The deep couch. Computer on the coffee table, shut. Staying shut. A small wave could take me under.

No. If she's not thinking about me, I will not cry about her. I won't reread old messages and talk myself into the fact that she must still love me. She probably is thinking about me, but I won't beg. I won't fall into some sickness like the last time she hurt me like this. I can move on.

My sorrow is so deep, uncomfortable, angry, but under it is a rosy flush, like the slight high I get from dreams where I cuddled or kissed a random person. Leftover butterflies. There were no kisses last night, at least not like that, but the butterflies are there.

I am so dramatic, I imagine saying to Alysha over coffee, as we share our life stories.

Sheridan will be here soon. I absolutely can't. I call her and say I want to get out of the house, so I am going to a cafe to work on eBay. I pretend there is nothing abnormal about this.

"A cafe?" she says. I say nothing. "Um okay. Where are you going?"

There are only three or four coffee shops in town, but I tell her I'll let her know when I get to one. If she calls later, I'll tell her I'm tired and going home to nap.

I wash my face with old apricot scrub that I find under the sink. It's rough on my cheeks, making them pink, but after I wash it off with warm water, I look more awake. I put my hair in a low ponytail at the back of my neck so it doesn't hang all thin. I don't have blush, but I pinch the tops of my cheeks to make split-blood-vessel red. Sheridan taught me that in high school.

I put my laptop in an old backpack. Walking it from the bedroom to the kitchen gives me an ache between my shoulder blades and in my neck. I slide it out and into a shopping bag. Something about taking the computer out of the house seems like a fuck you to Sammy.

The whole cafe smells like coffee. I order a sugar-free vanilla latte with soy milk. My drink, now. As I wait, a short, casually pretty girl pops out from behind the giant espresso machine and asks me how my day is, what I'm up to. My head throbs.

"Just working," I say. I don't put pep in my voice to meet hers. I sigh sadly.

She says *nice*, nodding her head. Gives me an empathetic smile that fills me with satisfied self-pity. She looks young, but maybe she's been heartbroken before. Not like this, of course. Does she recognize it on my face? I wish I was wearing eyeliner, smudged. As she puts a plastic lid on my drink, I feel her looking at me, probably searching for something to compliment, an offering to lift my mood. I used to do this when I worked at the insurance office.

"Cute sweater," she says.

"Thanks! Sale at Freddies." An upbeat tone. Apparently, I am a social butterfly now.

"Their clothes get better every year, right?" She takes my money. She's smiling more comfortably than before, not so pretend. I find a punch card in my wallet. The paper is worn thin.

"Washing machine?" she says, rubbing the cottony paper with her fingers.

"No, just haven't been out in a while."

“Good for you,” she says. “I wish I could hibernate all winter long.”

“Yeah, it’s nice,” I say. If only she knew how much time I spend indoors. She’d probably be like Jared, *god I just have to get out of the house and move my body!*

In the far corner, there’s a brick nook with two tables tucked inside, a renovation trying to look city-like and cool. On the wall inside the nook is a mural of a field with green mountains and blue sky. Little puffs of white clouds make shadows on the rows of coffee plants. In the middle is a drawing of two men with sun-wrinkled faces. It says below in cursive writing, “El Salvador: for Jose and Andres, coffee is love, coffee is pride.” Really? I bet the company just picked those names, added a generic picture, and threw them on the wall. I realize that I’m still mad at Sammy. I wish I had someone sitting across from me to rant to. Maybe Alysha, or Tyler.

My coffee is too hot. I take off the lid and open my laptop. Each person that comes through the door or passes by the huge glass windows distracts me. I read reviews on our eBay shop. People agree that we pack fragile things well and everything is as expected, aside from a couple of things that have arrived way bigger or smaller than expected. Sheridan wants me to respond kindly to each of the comments.

“Glad you’re enjoying the miniature jukebox,” I write. “We so appreciate your business!”

The coffee makes me jittery. My heart and hangover lift, but my body feels dangerous, in a way. Most of the people who come into the cafe are in casual athletic clothes, leggings and sweaters and sweatshirts. The only people who sit down are teenagers who should be in school, bible study groups, and three old men who share a newspaper, passing around each section.

Waiting in line is a small guy with a shaved head and a tight beanie, all his clothes black. He carries a black tote bag with a cool bright blue line drawing on it. I can see him hanging out

with Landon's friends. I strain to hear him order a black coffee. Actually, maybe he's too serious. The group last night was so silly. Even Dana, who seemed kind of bitchy. I think of her catching my staring eyes and raising her eyebrows: a threat. Alysha didn't notice, of course. She was in her own little world, bent over her cheese plate, wetting her finger to pick up cracker crumbs so it was restaurant clean. This makes me smile. What a goof. Maybe I like that Dana seemed threatened by me. I wish I'd been drunk enough to hold her eye contact for a few seconds longer. She knows nothing about me. I could absolutely be someone to worry about. The guy in black stirs a packet of that fancy brown sugar into his cup and leaves.

After a few hours, I decide that Landon and company do not hang out here.

"Have a good day, sweetie," the young barista says as I leave, like she's a grandma.

On the way to my car, I detour to walk a few blocks downtown. Big painted bears line the sidewalks. There is a kayaking bear, a jazz musician bear, a ballerina bear. They're not very cute at all, in my opinion. I can see these bears coming to life in a horror movie, killing whatever rude artist decided to paint them with a football sealed under their arm, a fake-jewelled crown, embarrassing long eyelashes. An older woman takes a picture of a blonde little girl in front of a bear dressed as a bunny rabbit, pink fluffy ears on a headband atop its brown furry head. Sheridan thinks the bears are gaudy and dumb, but will also probably take her boys to the tree lighting ceremony next weekend and make them pose by the Santa bear.

At home, coffee worms around under my skin. I notice that the linoleum of the doorway is stuck with tracked-in leaves and mud smudges. I pick up the leaves and throw them outside. They don't go far, catching the wind and blowing back towards the house. I slam the door.

I'm collecting the coats from the backs of chairs, hanging them on hooks when I realize, with total glee, that Jared's Miami Dolphins beanie is nowhere to be seen. I recall the cold of the night touching my wet head on my walk home: I left the old hat at Landon's. Jared wouldn't care, probably wouldn't even notice. I think he got it at the Champion outlet like a decade ago.

I wait until I see Landon's car return from work to go over. He looks surprised to see me.

"Hey! I, uh, left a beanie here. It's my fave, so I had to come get it. Sorry to bug you."

He goes to look. I follow him inside.

"Maybe it's in the couch?" I say. I tell him I can't really lift up the cushions because of my back. He does it, uncovering crumbs, bobby pins and a pen that leaks a big, black stain.

"Don't see it," he says.

"It was really nice to hang out last night," I say. He's looking in places he's already looked. I don't mention that the hat is bright turquoise and easy to spot. "I like your friends."

"Yeah, they like to party," he says, almost apologetically.

"I like it." I know it sounds desperate, but I go there anyway. I can't stop myself. "Maybe I could hang out with you guys again?"

"Uh, sure."

He's so awkward with me. Doesn't want to get in the middle of anything, I guess.

"I get lonely." I look at his eyes when I say this. I am trying for his sympathy, but I do feel the weight of this fact in my body. Heavy. "This town's a hard place to live sometimes."

I think of what Sammy said about places like Grants Pass. Hard for queer people.

"Yeah, it is," he says.

“Ugh your minions are so cute,” I say. There is a display of yellow figurines above the TV. He has construction worker minions and classic ones. Next to the minions is a D&D miniature I recognize because my cousin used to work at a game shop. It is dressed in robes, sword raised, and has a gray cat at its feet. I want to ask Landon about his character. Next time.

“Oh thanks.” He looks at the minions as if saying hi to them. “My guilty pleasure.”

This makes him smile, so I ask for his number and he gives it to me. I put it in my phone. Because I only have a few numbers, his saved contact is on the same screen as Desiree aka Sammy. I click edit contact and press delete. Then my phone double checks, as if trying to protect my heart: Delete contact? I can get her number back through our chat, but clicking yes still makes my heart ache. I consider telling Landon that I just deleted my ex’s number from my phone. I imagine the words on my tongue. An audience makes the terrible weight of it lighter. He’s busy searching the coat rack by the door, taking the quest for the hat very seriously.

“It’s not a big deal,” I say. “I’m sure it will turn up.”

The walk back to the house is quiet and gray. I look down at the wet gravel, at the little river of rainwater running in the gutter along the driveway that Jared cleared last weekend. The leaves are almost gray, too. The only real color is the hunks of moss on the oak trees. I look closely at a patch. It is as squishy as a sample carpet square. If I was a miniature, I’d live there.

After Jared goes to bed, I get on my computer. I open our WellHealth chat. Even the colors of the site shake me up inside. I rest my mouse cursor on the sidebar. I cannot read it. I have to read it. The soul-strong desire to open the car door while flying down the highway.

I imagine Alysha is here with me. Tyler, too. I'm reading to them from our messages. Bitching about Sammy. Tearing up like a girl on the Real World. Sighing and wringing my hands and running to the fridge to pop champagne. Guzzling straight from the bottle, cold glass on my lips. Bubbles in my throat, then a blur in my head. My mouth opens and I read a line from way back when we were first getting close. *Can you fucking believe she said that?*

I shuffle my socked feet into the kitchen. There's beer in the fridge but I do need to be more picky about sugars. I really don't want to get pitifully sick. Even if just to spite Sammy. But my computer will continue to beckon and I can't do it sober. Above the microwave there's a sticky cabinet full of really old alcohol. Mom wasn't much of a drinker. There's just random stuff like peach schnapps for this punch concoction she made a few times, tequila for margs and Baileys that Sher used to put in her thermos with hot chocolate in high school. She wouldn't tell me, just loved to cackle at the look on my face when I tasted it: surprise, pleasure.

The plastic ice trays are empty besides two slivers sitting in the squares with cracks in them. I pour schnapps and tequila over the ice shards. I pour too much, listening for the glug that alcohol makes when sad housewives pour it on TV. It never comes. The ice slivers float to the top, dissolving before I can add 7Up to the top, just an inch, all that will fit.

The drink immediately soothes me. My heart feels surrounded by hospital gauze. The familiar font is easier on my eyes. I go and go. Our history, laid out like a book. Sometimes I smile at myself or her, then I hate myself or her. As I read, my stomach sloshes with terrible waves and crashes, excitement of love or lust and then deep despair.

Then shame: I was so open with her. And anger. She led me right into everything. I finish the drink. My voice and Sammy's. Our hearts on the screen. Or just mine? I have to lay down. Sugar congeals in my throat, a hint of vomit. Alcohol buzzes behind my eyes. I fall asleep fast.

I can't think of any reason to text Landon besides *what are you doing*, and that doesn't seem appropriate until Friday or Saturday night, the days when Jared is obviously home and up later than usual. They must all go out for coffee or breakfast or at least occasionally have weekday movie nights. I don't want to ask this, so today I just write, "Hey, this is your neighbor Laura. Forgot to give u my number. Here it is :).".

Landon doesn't text me back. Whatever. I glance into his driveway whenever I go out, which is more often this week. Sheridan and I have a new rhythm. When she leaves to pick the boys up, I do the post office runs. Sher packs the car and everyday, the same nice clerk unpacks it onto the dolly. I will bring him chocolates at Christmas.

"Do you have back pain?" I say today, following him up the switchbacks of the ramp.

"Oh yes. Not so bad today. Try not to take too many pills, but it's hard."

"I know," I say. "You gotta do what you gotta do, I guess."

"Enjoy being young while it lasts," he says.

“Ha,” I laugh, and he looks at me weird, so I clutch my own back even though I’m not hurting right now. It’s funny people think pain is reserved for old people.

When I turn the car back on, I feel that the world is my oyster. Though there’s nothing to actually do, something happens in my brain when I drive different streets, get different vibes from them. Today, I go slowly up Washington, the street of huge old-fashioned houses with porches where we always trick-or-treated. The fancy houses end at a park the size of a yard. Jared and I used to hang out there sometimes. It’s overly shaded by thick trees. There is a little concrete bridge in the park that just goes over the ground, no water.

After the park is the old hospital. My pediatrician was in that hospital. I thought he was nice, but later my mom said he was too touchy with the nurses, creepy. The hospital closed years ago and they opened a brand new one across town. I’ve never been inside, but in high school, kids liked to sneak into the old hospital. Apparently a lot of the equipment was left behind and it feels like a horror movie set. Landon and his friends have probably hung out there, drinking and shrieking. It sounds fun. These days, I don’t feel afraid of anything.

At the top of Washington, I coast back down Sixth Street, watching the green light in the distance, trying to time it so I stop by the Dominos on the corner. I hold my breath until, 3, 2, 1, yes. I come to a stop as yellow turns to red. I don’t see Alysha inside, but do feel my heart flip.

I stand at the counter in front of a big guy with so much facial hair they make him wear a chin-covering mask like a surgeon. He has giant gauges in his ears. Behind him, his comic book opposite, a pink-cheeked boy with a blonde swoop of hair, folds pizza boxes. I hear movement in the back kitchen, so I take my time, slowly looking over the menu. I ask what the specials are even though the menu shows them. I order a three-topping with sausage, spinach, and olives.

The bearded guy says it will be ten minutes. I sit in the single Dominos-blue plastic chair. The window glass radiates cold behind me. The shop is so quiet, no music. I imagine Alysha is listening to music in headphones as she kneads the dough for my pizza, arranges the sliced olives, fans the pepperoni slices like on her cheese plate. I'm the first thing she'll see when she walks out of the back room, if she ever does. She said she works almost everyday.

Her hair is in a high ponytail and she has black-painted wings above her eyelids. Blue eyeshadow to match her blue shirt. Graying white sneakers with spots of flour on them. Her smile widens when she sees me and she adds a flourish to her walk, holding the pizza box on her palm like a catering tray.

"Oh hey, I forgot you worked here," I say, standing up.

"Liar," she says. "You came here to see me."

I don't say anything. I hope I'm not blushing terribly.

"Well I'm happy to see you," she says.

"And I'm happy to see you."

"How's your heart?"

"Oh, it's okay. Up and down all day long." I'm relieved there's something for us to talk about. I look around. No, no one in here knows Jared. "I just miss her."

"You'll have to tell me all about it sometime. If you want. Or I could distract you with my own stories of lost love. Ugh."

"You're sweet."

"Do you want parmesan or red pepper? I've started asking so we don't waste so much. Everyone has like five billion packets in their junk drawer."

“That’s a really good idea,” I say. Jared hates using old stuff, but I still tell her that we have enough at home. My “we” feels so bad between us. I wish I could suck it back in.

“Poor girl, you look pretty miserable,” she says. “Want to get coffee tomorrow?”

“Oh, I’m not too bad,” I say. “But I’d really love that.” I give her my number.

I want her to stand at the counter watching me get in my car and drive away, but she disappears into the kitchen as soon as I turn to go. I open the box on the passenger seat. The pizza is still so hot the cheese threatens to slide right off the crust, taking all the toppings. I blow on my piece and take tiny bites. The cheese burns my tongue, leaving a numb white pulse.

Jared is home when I get there.

“Got a pizza,” I say cheerfully. The slice churns in my stomach. “Sorry I started already.”

“You’re eating pizza now?”

“Today I am.”

“You’re a confusing woman.”

He is looking at his phone. I peek. Texting his mom that his day was good.

“I needed a break from my diet.”

“Ok, so you need a break when you get pizza, but won’t have a bite when I do?”

“My diet was new then,” I say. “Jare, don’t get mad over pizza.”

“I’m not mad about pizza,” he says. He puts four pieces on a plate, cheese stringing and mounding on the edge of the plate. “Leave me some for lunch tomorrow?”

He takes his plate and phone. I watch his broad back go out the door, into the garage. On the table, another plate sits, a white one rimmed with a coffee-brown strip. Of course he got two

plates out. And in the box are all the smaller pieces, the ones he knows I like because they don't waggle around like messy rogue tongues.

It takes less than five seconds of slow waking, before my eyes even open, for the sneak-up wave of loss to hit. It's like someone yanked the covers right off me. I'm naked, freezing, the absence of Sammy weighing dull on my body. It feels like her message came just yesterday. I'm filled with ripe embarrassment. So similar to that dread of waking up after a drunken night: what did I do? What did I do to her that I didn't realize I was doing? I stay right here, cemented to the bed, for an hour or two. Then my phone rings. I didn't think Alysha would call.

I make my voice sound wide-awake and happy, until she says, "Want to girl talk over strawberry crepes? Promise they'll make you feel better."

"Yes," I say. "I was trying to sound good but I feel pretty bad."

"I suspected that," Alysha says, and I feel mad at Sammy again, no longer sickly sad.

We plan to meet at Elmer's, an old diner by the freeway that's right across the street from a Denny's. Alysha says her dad is a cook there. I wonder why she wants to hang out with me around her dad, but then remember this isn't a date.

I wait for her inside on a wooden bench next to a claw machine full of stuffed animals. It's so warm in here. Pretty empty, except for the tables around the fireplace on the back wall.

Alysha hugs me loosely with caresses on my back, like before. My skin beats with her touch. She greets the hostess, a pretty middle-aged woman with curly hair, and hugs her in the

same way. Alysha points to an empty part of the restaurant, opposite of the fire. The hostess nods and Alysha takes the big plastic menus from her. We slide into a big corner booth.

“I’m a zombie before three,” Alysha says. “But I love b-fast with friends. A sacrifice.”

She looks at her menu briefly before shutting it and looking up for the waitress. I feel like a zombie, too, though I’m buzzing with nerves. Why am I being so awkward? I want to say something interesting, but not forced. She’s quiet. Maybe so immediately comfortable with me she can be? She orders the crepes. I want to do the same, but I can’t take the sugar. I get the Basic Breakfast with eggs, sausage, hashbrowns and an English muffin. We both order coffee that comes right away. Alysha dumps a small waterfall of sugar and three creamers into hers. She stacks the creamers and puts them in the middle of the table away from us, then sips and sighs. After she’s downed almost the whole cup and looks right at me.

“So,” she says. “Tell me about your life, love.”

“Well, I’ve lived here all my life. Went to West Valley. Stuff’s been a little hard the past few years, but it will get better.” She nods, like my life’s hardness could be interesting, but I can’t turn that into anything. Talking to her feels harder than I thought it would, each sentence like pushing a boulder up a hill. I feel high or something. I wish we could flirt instead, hold hands under the table. Be quiet and warm together, connected. “Sorry, I think I’m tired.”

“No worries,” she says, but doesn’t fill the silence.

I try to bring it back to Sammy and me, but stumble on that, too. My eyes tear up unexpectedly when I tell Alysha how we started talking online and were immediately best friends, despite being so different.

“We were lovers, of course,” I say. “But also friends, I think.” I hadn’t thought of it like this before. I play with a blackberry jelly packet, squeezing it so the plastic ripples.

“Some people are just like keys to ourselves or something,” she says. She takes out the other jellies from the holder, looking through them for another flavor. There’s only blackberry or marmalade. “Like even if they suck, they help us figure shit out.”

“That’s exactly it,” I say. This wakes me up a bit. She’s right. “Is Dana that for you?”

“Hmm, maybe in ways. Other people more. People that, I don’t know, made me a less fucked up person so I could be better to Dana.”

I hate that I hate that she seems to like Dana a lot, in an uncomplicated way.

“Maybe Sammy is just preparing you for someone else?” she says, stacking the jellies back into the plastic holder. “Or, like, making you better off in your current life or something?”

“Doesn’t feel like that right now, but maybe.”

“I’m sorry, baby.”

“It’s really okay.”

“It’s not okay,” she says. “I’m a fucking mope about breakups, just really roll around in despair. Cancer sun and moon. Thank god for my Leo rising. Even when my life’s falling apart, at least I know I’m hot.”

This makes me smile. “Worst breakup?”

“Lucas. Hands down. Dated him when I was eighteen through twenty-one and fuck, we made each other crazy. Honestly like so crazy. We’re not bad in other relationships, but together we were a fucking shitshow. I’d get deadly jealous, he’d get distant, I’d get even more needy, blah blah blah, always in crisis. We’re both probably still fucked up by it. I feel bad for Dana.”

“You date men too?”

“Yeah, it depends on the person. Wait no, I totally like girls better. What’s not to like?”

She looks at me across the table and I just smile back at her and keep my lips zipped.

Waves of quiet bounce across the gummy table. I don’t answer her question, afraid of sounding girl-obsessed. But I easily could: nothing, there’s nothing not to like.

Our food comes and Alysha says *fuck*, gazing at her plate like it’s a dream gift.

I eat and begin to feel more comfortable with our casual quiet. The salty food tastes perfect. Alysha asks for a bite and I pile eggs, potatoes and a slice of sausage on my fork. She takes my fork and eats it. She talks about needing to go Christmas shopping. She says maybe we could go together. She tells me about this woodshop in town that makes expensive rings. She wants to get a dark wood and metal one for Dana.

“Not like a ring ring, though,” she says.

“No?” I act surprised, but had definitely not thought she meant a wedding ring.

“Hell no, not yet. I want to be with her forever but I’m kinda nuts. If we put a ring on it, I’ll be freaking out and looking for a way out.”

I laugh, then realize I didn’t even know if gay marriage was legal in Oregon.

Alysha looks at her phone.

“Hey, do you mind if Dana joins us? She just got off work. I think she’d really like you.”

“I don’t know about that,” I say. “Didn’t seem to.” I blush the second this negative reaction comes out. Fuck. Why am I pushing this love-triangle thing? I had literally no drama in my life for years and now I’m tied to it like a bad habit. I drink a huge sip of coffee and beat my fingers on the table, hoping she thinks I’m being awkward because I’m too caffeinated.

“What?” She smiles. Thank god, I think she liked my weird honesty. “She’s just a little cold with new people.”

“I believe you,” I say. “But I should really be getting home.”

“I thought you didn’t want to go home.”

“I didn’t say that!”

“Mhm,” she says. She gets up to show me that I can leave. I didn’t mean ready like right now, but I’m up and she’s hugging me and so I have to grab my wallet and phone and go.

“You’re gonna stay?”

She says yeah, that her dad gets off soon and he’ll make Dana something to eat. “I could stay here like all the time,” she says. “My own private place to entertain guests.”

“I was entertained,” I say. She smiles and I worry I’m still flirting with her by default or that maybe she’s actually flirting with me and I should react more, but then I decide that no, we’re just friends. When I look back from the doorway, she’s looking down, adding creamer to a newly filled cup of coffee. How did she know I needed a friend?

Sheridan calls to ask if I’m going to CJ’s Dirty Thirty at the Alibi. She sounds too excited. I remember that she kissed CJ once during spin-the-bottle in high school. Robbie wrestled him outside after, and Sher clapped and screamed with glee.

“Didn’t hear about it,” I say.

“It’s tomorrow.”

We realize at the same time that Jared would have invited me if he wanted to invite me.

“He must have just thought you wouldn’t want to come,” she says. “Hate to be rude, but so did I. You’re a homebody.”

“Well, yeah I’d prefer to stay home.”

“But you will come?”

I can tell she’s trying not to beg. “I guess.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Can I wear that red tank top of yours? I hate all my clothes.”

I tell her she can, but she has to come over and get it.

When she hangs up, I put on the red tank top. Not sure why she thought of this one. It’s so simple. It does fit just right, though. The thin straps are just a little shiny, the neckline a perfect scoop, the fabric, a soft cotton like it’s been worn a million times. Sewn in the bottom left is a little yellow shooting star. American Eagle sale rack, I think. Driving to Portland, I wished I’d packed it to wear around Sammy’s house, under a blanket hugged around my shoulders.

I tug my ponytail high like Alysha wears hers. I think of something I could say to her: high ponies never go out of style. After three cups of coffee, we could laugh at the phrase *high ponies*, at the image of stoned horses running through a field, wind in their hair. She’s more fun than Sammy, but I don’t know yet if she gets me like that. I put on mascara, my eyelashes curling so long that the tips touch my lids. I wet a Q-tip with spit and wipe the black smear clean.

I’ve stopped myself so many times from messaging Sammy, but I want to send her a picture of me so badly. In our WellHealth chat. It’s not like she’d have to respond. She could

even hate me for it, I don't care. No. Even if I look hot, I would seem far too desperate. Or worse, manipulative: me, smiling in a cute shirt, telling her that however much she says I wasn't allowed to need her like that, she knew the whole time that I did. And she loved it.

"You look pretty," Jared says when I'm walking through the living room to grab a magazine to read in bed.

"Oh. Thanks."

"Why did you just flinch? When I said that you flinched."

"No I didn't."

He makes a noise and I try not to walk too quickly out of the room. My heart is beating. I didn't notice flinching, but I probably did flinch because his words seemed to punch me, unexpectedly. I shut the bedroom door and cover myself completely with the comforter. For the first time I want to fall into his lap and drench his shirt with tears. I want to tell him everything. It is just so much to hold.

Without getting out of bed, I take off the tanktop. I set it on the nightstand for Sheridan.

"You sure you really wanna go?" Jared says on Friday night. He's eating two toasted peanut butter and jelly sandwiches off a folded paper towel. I hate the way that paper towels get moist under toast, that bread-paper taste. I'm already dressed to go out, in a tight black shirt and jeans.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I want to come?"

"I could name a few reasons."

“Go ahead.”

“Eh, nevermind,” he says.

“Do you not want me to come?”

“No, I don’t care. Want to take a shot before we go?”

I planned to drink tonight, not a small amount, and expected him to chastise my drinking, to tell me not to. To remind me of my fragile health or something. I shrug and he gets out two shot glasses. One is red polka dotted Minnie Mouse and the other is from the Grand Canyon. He pours tequila in both without looking at me. It feels like a challenge. Especially when he clinks his shot to mine. Alcohol spills onto my fingers, burning cold. Then into my throat, burning hot.

He parks in the gravel behind the bar, away from other cars so his truck doesn’t get banged up. I open the mirror and put on light pink lip gloss, smacking my lips together. Jared sighs, gets out, and goes in. For five minutes, I just sit there, looking at myself in the lit mirror. I hate that I feel nervous to go in and see people. It’s not like I even care what they think of me. I remember what Alysha said about knowing she’s hot. *At least* knowing that.

The bar is bright and alive. People are already scream-talking at each other. People I’ve never seen before cluster beside people I haven’t seen in a long time. Jared is at the bar with Bret and Lodie and their wives. I think he saw me come in. Sheridan is down the bar from him with her old friend Kelsey, the only one of these girls I like. Kelsey’s quiet, but really looks at you when you talk to her and seems to love Sheridan from the bottom of her heart. I don’t think they hang out that much, but often Kels will call Sher when I’m around and she’ll pick up and they’ll talk about nothing for a few minutes and then say, ‘Love you, bye.’

“Holy shit, you’re really here,” Sheridan says.

This makes me want to smack her, but then Kelsey gives me a long hug and says, “Nice to see you,” and I’m chill.

Sher orders tequila shots and for some reason we thread our arms together like a couple getting married. When the liquor hits our throats we both step back, yanking on each other’s linked elbows and spilling tequila down our shirts. Sher cackles and demands we do another.

The bar gets louder and fuller. There are so many plaques and pictures on the walls that you don’t have to look at people if you don’t want to. And behind the bar, rows of bottles, plus a big cork board tacked with fun-sized bags of chips, their plastic bleached with age, and a giant jar of pickles, because Oregon law says that bars must serve food. The bartenders move fast, pointing at people, then looking down while they listen, nodding, pouring.

Kelsey and I follow Sher to the bathroom. The small room has one stall with a wooden half-door that’s thick with layers of white paint. The room smells chalky sweet like that pink powdered soap, but there’s just a bottle of liquid Dial by the sink. I’m standing outside the stall with Kelsey, trying to think of something to say to her, when a group of girls throw open the door and pile in. I squish towards the stall, then feel arms snake around my middle.

A mess of highlighted blond hair presses into my chest. Natalia West and Jessie Brinkley stand by the door. It’s Leslie hugging me.

“Honeyyy,” she says. “You’re out and about! Oh boy, how I’ve missed you.”

“Missed you too,” I say. I try to smile, feeling more sober than I am, compared to her. She faces me, still holding my waist. Her eyes are unfocused.

“No, I missed you,” she says. The toilet flushes. “I’ve been wanting to tell you how much I love being friends with J. He’s like a brother to me.”

Sher comes out of the stall, ropes her arm around me and whispers in my ear, "BILF."

When I look at her, confused, she whispers, a little too loud, "Brother she'd love to fuck."

"Oh my god, it's not like that." Leslie giggles very hard. She clutches her reddening face.

"A girl needs a best guy friend, someone to talk to. About girl-guy relations. You know."

"No, I don't really know," I say.

She looks for her friends. Jessie's in the stall. Nat's putting on lipstick in the mirror.

"He loves you so, so much," Leslie says, getting closer to me. "Right Sheridan, isn't it just sick how much he loves her? The most."

"Yes, the most most," Sher says. She squeezes next to Natalie to wash her hands.

Leslie is relentless. She pushes a chunk of my hair back from my face and twirls it around her finger, her face lined up with mine.

"It's obvious why," she says. "You're, like, so pretty."

"Thanks." I want to say something mean to her, but she's acting like she's going to kiss me. I'm frozen. Why are girls so fucking weird? My heart is beating through my chest.

"God, you two would make the sexiest kids," she says. "Holy shit, I mean cute. Cute cute cute. Cute little babies. Not sexy babies. Ew, that was embarrassing."

She wheeze-laughes, tipping her head into my shoulder, one arm still around my waist. With her other hand she gropes for Jessie, who just came out of the stall. I stand up straighter.

"Yeah, I don't think I want to have kids," I say.

"Oh, you don't know that," she says. "Just wait."

"No, I do know. There's just too much life to live. I don't have time for babies."

This isn't very true. Some people would say I have all the time in the world and that I'm not even really living my life. But it feels good to say. Leslie just hums, like she's thinking. She's clutched so close to me that I can smell the powdery scent of her foundation and see the line where it hits her neck. She still looks pretty. Pretty and drunk. I kind of hate her.

"Well, I think you'd like being a mom," she says, looking into my eyes and smiling slightly, almost flirting, and I kiss her right on the lips, one hard smack. She breathes in through her nose and presses back. Then I pull away, give her a shock of eye contact, and march out into the bar, stomping to right my stumbling.

Sher follows me to a booth. She spits on a cocktail napkin and wipes my bottom lip.

"Wait, did Leslie kiss you?" Sher says. "She's so crazy. Always does that."

This makes my heart sink.

"I kissed her," I say. "She wouldn't shut up."

Sher laughs and then her face gets serious.

"You don't really not want kids, do you?"

"I don't know. Wanted to get her off my ass."

"Okay, well no decisions now for fuck's sake. I'm texting Rob to get us whiskey sours."

We sit in the red leather booth for a long time. Robbie brings us drinks, rolling his eyes at our drunk asses. Sher yanks him into the booth for a second and they kiss before he goes back to throwing darts with Cole. I don't see Jared and consider getting up to look for him, but then one of our old elementary school teachers comes in and sits at the bar.

"Is that?" Sher asks, pointing.

"Yeah," I say. "Wow, it's like her name completely left my brain. Fuck."

“Oh god, we’re old,” Sher says. “Wait wait, Mrs. Eliot?”

I nod and we watch. Mrs. Eliot doesn’t look drunk. She’s just sipping a clear drink with more than one lime slice in it. Her grown son is the bartender. They aren’t really talking, but he comes over every now and then and refills her glass and they exchange a few words.

“Wish we could get smashed with Mom,” Sher says. “Why didn’t we ever do that?”

I shrug, praying she doesn’t go too far down this road.

“Wait, no, that’s just sad,” she says. “We didn’t need to get fucking drunk to bond.”

This makes my head swirl. Sher seems dead drunk, seconds away from sobbing, but then she hops up, wobbles to the bar and returns with a cracked Connect Four game. I’m thrilled to play instead of talk. When Sher’s winning circle taps into place, she stands on the puffy booth and gyrates her hips. Then she slips down, emptying the game for another round. Sometimes she reminds me so much of her boys. She can have fun so easily.

I feel drunker and drunker as I plunk in my red circles. Her words about not needing to get drunk with our mom whirl in my brain. My face tingles.

“Sher, you know I smoked weed with mom, that we did bond that way.”

“Oh, babe, I didn’t mean it like that. Look, you and me are drunk bonding right now.”

My eyes are blurry. I try to put together my thoughts and then speak, but they keep getting lost, so I just open my mouth.

“You always thought our bond wasn’t as close as you and hers, huh?” I say.

My heart pounds violently. It feels so dangerous to say things I’ve never said before.

“No,” she says. “Just different. What are you thinking about? Are you mad at me?”

She moves the game to the side and holds my hand across the table. I want to pull away.

“You were mad, though, right?” I say. “Because even though you two were closer, I was the one with her through everything, while you were busy being a mom and stuff?”

A hot liquid ache like heartburn spreads in my chest.

“Maybe I was. Jealous.” She says it like it’s not that big of a deal. “I was so scared, Lo. I missed her even before she died and sometimes it seemed like you didn’t.”

“Fuck, Sher. How could you say that? I missed her every day. And you were jealous of me for seeing the toughest shit I’ve ever seen? For working my ass off and then losing her?”

“I don’t know, Laura. Feelings don’t always make sense.” She slides towards me. “You’re really mad at me for not being there, huh? I didn’t know. I always asked you what you needed.”

“No, I’m not mad. I mean, you couldn’t be there. Your boys so young and everything.”

“You can still be mad,” she says. Now, she barely seems drunk, aside from how close she’s tucked to me, holding my waist, whispering into my hair. My face is wet and sticky, more sweaty than full of tears, I think. I am looking at the table and realize people can probably see my contorted face, but I don’t care.

“I hate that we make it all complicated, though,” I say. “Can’t we just miss her? It feels terrible to her to be jealous or angry. Disrespectful, or something.”

“Shit, Laura. We’re human.” She’s smiling at me like I’m her kid. I kind of hate it. “We can feel more than one thing at a goddamn time.”

She takes a sip of her drink, but it’s empty, so the ice slips to her lips and water dribbles onto her chin. She pulls up the front of her tank top to wipe it.

“You’re right,” I say. “I’m sorry if talking about it hurt you. I really didn’t want that.”

“You’re my sister, you’ll always hurt me a little,” she says. “Here and there.”

“What the fuck?”

“Get up, get up.” She slides out of the booth and stands.

I get up and she wraps her arms around me. Our bodies feel too hot from being drunk and emotional, but it is still nice. I feel forgiven for something. My ears and eyes were buzzing during our conversation, but the bar comes back into focus. The music is clearer in my ears, louder. Over Sher’s shoulder, I see that Jared is back, standing in a circle with Natalia, Leslie, Frankie Robles and Matt Carl. Four friends, married to other people. I love Sheridan, but I wish my friends were here. Alysha and Tyler, Landon and Dana, too. Everyone cracks up at something Jared says. He smiles with his whole face. Sher lets go of me, but I can’t take my eyes off him.

“He never looks like that in the house,” I accidentally say to Sheridan.

“He’s drunk, dummy,” Sher says.

“I’m drunk,” I say. “Want to go home?”

“No.” She gets up, orders another whiskey sour and starts screaming along to Dancing Queen. I’m surprised she can stand. All the girls in the bar start dancing with her. Screaming.

I stay in the booth and take tiny sips of the whiskey sour Sher brought me. I definitely don’t need it. Across the room, I see Jared see me. I am about to wave, to gesture him over. I could make out with him on this shiny leather seat, for everyone to see. I could touch him over his jeans under the table. Okay, I could also get up and go to him. I do like leaning my body into him, how he wraps me up and kisses my head. I’m curious, too, what Leslie would say to me. I’ll go in a minute. I push the drink away and rest my head on the table to sober up a bit.

When Jared wakes me up, my forehead is flattened and probably red from the table top. I hang my arms around his neck. The lights in the bar go on. I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Carry me, please?” I say. I would love to make an exit like that. He shakes his head and I walk myself, tugging hard on his hand.

The radio pounds out of the speakers when he turns the truck on. He mutes it immediately and takes a deep breath before driving out of the parking lot. He’s serious about not drunk driving, keeps his eyes glued to the road.

“Oh Jare bear,” I say.

“I’m still tipsy,” he says. “Need to focus.”

“Sorry.” I try to be quiet and still, but thoughts keep bubbling up. If I shut my eyes, I get the spins, so I stare at my hands. “Baby, I’ve been thinking about something. Sher and I had a good, but hard convo and it made me want to talk to you.”

I put my hand on his leg and he bumps it off.

“Just a minute,” he says.

Then he turns the wheel sharply and pulls into the parking lot for river access by the bridge. I accidentally gasp. He’s not driving recklessly, but goes a little too fast through the lot, just keeps going towards the boat ramp, and continues all the way down it until his headlights hit the water. His front tires splash. I am nauseous, considering jumping out of the truck like a crazy person, but then he stops, inches into the water.

“Okay, now we can talk,” he says, like nothing just happened.

I can't read him. He doesn't seem drunk. He turns off the car but leaves the fog lights on. I look at the black water beyond them. Now it's too quiet in the car. I wish it weren't cold out. We could sit on the bumpy, algae-smelling ramp like we did in high school.

"So?" he says.

"So," I say. "I want to be real with you. I see how happy you are with your friends. Like really happy." He sighs like my drunken rambling is the same old shit, girl jealousy. My eyes are on the neon green lights of the silent stereo. I should look at him, touch him. I can't. "I've been thinking about it lately and, for one, I still don't want to have kids."

"Ha, Leslie told me you said that." Saying this seems to relax his body behind the wheel. "Told me you kissed her, too. Wild night. You haven't been drunk in a long time, huh?"

"What? She told you that?"

He nods. It's like a punch in the stomach. She told him I kissed her and, like Sher, he didn't think anything of it. I can't feel my skin. I crunch the toes of my boots into the plastic edge of the dashboard below me and feel a pinch. I want him to say something. He doesn't.

"I'm serious, though, Jared. I want to be more honest with you." I must be really shoving my feet into the car, because he puts his hand lightly on my leg to still me. I relax my legs and bite my inner lip. "It seems like what you really want, kids."

"I mean, I guess," he says. "I've always wanted kids, but--"

"I know. And all your friends have families. You're so happy with them, in their world. Like, don't you feel weird without kids, sad?" He shrugs. "It's okay. If our dreams don't match up anymore, we can, like..." I take a deep breath. "Go our separate ways."

"What the fuck?" His voice is razor sharp.

“Sorry. I’m so drunk. That was the wrong way to phrase it.” I try to giggle. Fail. “It’s just like, our vows were all about choosing each other every single day. No one is forcing you to choose me, if our goals for the future are different. I’m okay with whatever. I’ll be okay.”

“Goals? Lo, I don’t give a fuck about having kids right now.” His voice is steady, suddenly very sober. He rubs smooth the knee wrinkle in my jeans.

“No, I mean, I don’t want to have them ever. Like if we have kids I’m kinda terrified I would have to just, like, disappear. Like my dad, or whatever.”

“Stop. You would not. You know you fucking wouldn’t.”

“I don’t know, though,” I say. “Jare, we just can’t be the family you want to have.”

“Laura, I love you. I don’t care about that shit. I know things aren’t the easiest right now, but they’ll get easier. I’ll be better, too. Promise.”

He reaches into my hair to squeeze my neck, his hand warm and strong.

“You’re too good already,” I say, so quietly, I’m not sure he hears.

“Unless this is an excuse and you’re just not happy with me anymore.” He sits up straighter and looks at me. “I’d appreciate if you fucking told me, straight up.”

My heart sinks. I can’t even make a thought.

“No, it’s not that,” I whisper. I feel like I could puke. He waits, expecting more.

“Ok, then.” He’s calm again. Too calm. “Let’s go home.”

Jared backs up the ramp and drives out of the park.

I think I tried to break something and failed, badly.

It's called a tree-lighting event, but everything seems already lit up when we arrive. Glaring fog lights surround a plywood stage that minutes ago featured kids dancing off-beat with nutcrackers. Bright masses of colored bulbs are strung between lampposts and around the bases of the bears, whose cartoon faces look creepier in the direct lighting, Santa hats drooping on their heads. And hundreds of feet of classy white lights ring the crown jewel of the celebration, a truly huge tree with a winged angel on top. The tree is so tall, it's branches so perfectly spaced. It's like a drawing of a tree, not a tree in the wild. I immediately wonder how much it cost. Of course this town that Sheridan told me keeps voting down funding for libraries and the county schools where we went, would happily buy a giant farmed tree. We let Sher fill out our ballots every year. Jared kind of hates this, but when I ask, he has no real reason for his differing opinions.

As Jared scans the crowd for Sher and her family, he holds my hand, rubbing circles on it with his thumb. Anxiously. Or trying to be sweet. I don't care to figure out which. He's been strangely kind to me since our talk. Kind like I'm a baby he doesn't want to upset. It feels forced and I can't say that I love it. He must think I am trying, too, being at this stupid event and all. I came because I guess I'm getting more curious about what can happen in a night. But here I am, exhausted and chilled to the bone and overwhelmed, weaving through groups of people with fake, animated faces, bundled in their holiday best and pretending not to mind the freezing cold.

We spot Sher and Robbie standing near the end of the terribly long line that stretches the length of the Chamber of Commerce. The building is topped with light-up reindeers posed mid-prance and a boxy fake chimney. There is no sleigh. The big plastic creatures pull nothing and look tippy on the roof. They could fall off and kill someone. Sher reaches her hand high to wave.

The boys are obscured by everyone waiting for free holiday pictures. Jared waves. I don't lift my hand. My back is tight. Not desperately so, but I should keep my limbs in close.

On our way to join them, we run into Leslie, Cole and their kids, further up in the line. Of course. The sad coincidence of this almost makes me laugh. Jared's face lights up in that way. It doesn't surprise me anymore. Leslie probably doesn't remember the other night. If she does, it must seem like any other good time. She's wearing a jingle bell necklace, gold, silver and rhinestone, so tacky, but on her, somehow not, and faux fur earmuffs that press gently into her wavy hair. She takes my hand between her soft fleece mittens. Her eyes are charged, mischievous. Maybe she does remember. I try to curve my mouth into a smile, but probably look pained. Coming close to my ear, Leslie whispers, "Just get in line with us."

Sheridan's watching me for exactly this cue. When I beckon, she quickly folds her boys into line next to Leslie's three-year-old Miles. We avoid eye contact with the people behind us. Leslie crouches beside the kids and holds her big baby girl so her feet in their tiny winter boots touch the ground. Like this, she introduces Miranda to Sher's boys. Leslie lets them hold Miranda's gloved hands. The boys' faces get soft. Miranda coo's and giggles.

"Such a happy baby," Sher says.

"Yeah, she's going to be a heartbreaker, huh?" Leslie says.

I look at the little girl's pink dot of a nose and her light brown lashes, so delicate.

"You're imagining your baby dating?" I say. "That seems a little weird."

Leslie giggles awkwardly and looks to Sher for help.

"I guess it is," she says.

I look down at my black boots. Crisscross cuts scuff the toes from me pushing them into the car cracks. The boots are too plastic to buff the cracks out. I feel Sher watching me.

“They’re so gentle with her,” Leslie says to Sher.

“Of course,” I say. “They’re great little boys.”

Sher grins and shrugs, pretending to be bashful. The line is not moving. People are probably asking the photographer to shoot their families again and again. Babies cry. Parents hush, some nicer than others. Kids chase each other around the parking lot. I’m leaning into Jared, as he talks to Cole and Leslie, Sher and Robbie commenting from time to time. They talk about cloth diapers and if it’s worth buying holiday clothes for growing kids. I try to remember being at an event like this a few years back. Was it always this horrible?

My eyes skate around the crowd, not landing on anyone in case I happen to know them. My lazy scan is broken by a wave. I blink. Tyler. With him, Dana, Landon, and of course, Alysha. The group looks cute, walking aimlessly around the gathering that is for kids and families, but I know why they’re here. Because everyone is here. Even I am here. I flush with excitement. My salvation! My hand raises to wave. Then I remember who I’m with, that Jared isn’t a parent I can leave behind in line. No, he is the someone I’m supposed to be with, who I chose to be with. I’m panicking, but it’s too late to pretend I don’t see them, to pretend I don’t know them.

They come up, all smiles. I hold my breath. Tyler comes right in and squeezes me a little too tight, making me aware, again, of my back.

“Hey Laura, I thought that was you,” he says.

I try to slap a happy, simple smile on my face. I unhook from Jared, but he keeps his hand on my lower back. I am slammed with anxiety, can't say a word. I want to run away and let this interaction boil and spit on its own.

"Hey man," Jared says to Landon, and Landon introduces his friends.

Everyone seems to think this is totally normal. None of them say anything to me, maybe protecting me. I hate that it makes me wonder if we're even really friends. Just yesterday, Alysha sent me a picture of Dana's little brother's ferret. Tonight, she's wearing a cute sweater with an illustration of smiling peas holding hands atop a blue and green planet. *Peas on Earth*, it says. Landon and Jared are talking about the cougar they think has been around our neighborhood.

"My cat's been so spooked," Landon says.

"I've heard they've been coming down into town more because there's less food in the mountains or something," Dana says. She holds Alysha's hand as she talks. I catch myself staring at their interlaced fingers, at the cuffs of their jacket sleeves bumping. I sweat, expecting Sher or Jared to look, too. They don't.

"Cute sweater," I say to Alysha across the circle.

"Thanks." She touches the raised fabric bumps of the peas.

"What are you drinking?" I ask.

"Eggnog latte. Fucking delicious. Try." She thrusts her drink towards me.

I take a sip. It is delicious. The tang of alcohol mixed in pleases me. Our little secret. Sheridan's watching me. When I look at her she says to Alysha, "Can I try?"

"Of course. Warning, has a little rum in it."

"I didn't even notice," I say.

“Good idea,” Jared says, and Alysha says they can have some from her flask if they want, so he and Cole go to get eggnog lattes of their own from the coffee stand at the edge of the lot. Landon and friends continue to hang around and talk about random things I can’t pay attention to because my brain is in some foggy other place. I should enjoy it, this damn melting pot, but I’m stiff as a board. I shift from foot to foot. I watch the space between Leslie and Alysha. They stand side-by side, but don’t talk, which I’m grossly happy about.

When Jared and Cole return, Alysha hands over her flask. Their drinks steam.

Finally, we are at the front of the line. The kids pep up when they see Santa.

“Happy picture time,” Alysha says to the kids. She hugs Sheridan. “So nice to meet you.”

This pointed gesture makes me both nervous and warm inside. She wants to know my sister because I matter to both of them. After they leave, Jared and I step to the side of the Santa set-up to wait. Next to us is a manger, the plastic painted animals glowing, loose hay scattered over the asphalt. Looking past Jared, I track the white puff of Tyler’s beanie. The group weaves out of the festivities to sit on the concrete planter boxes lining the path from this parking lot to the back one where Jared and I parked. Sometimes I do feel loneliest when surrounded by people. Sammy said that first, but it feels like my thought. I cuddle close to Jared, squeezing his hand in mine till my fingers are white. I tip my head hard into his arm. He rubs my back harder, seeing my sharp movements as rough affection. I have to dig my heels in and lean into his hand to keep from stumbling forward.

“How do you know them?” Jared asks.

“Oh, just from Landon. I’ve run into them a couple times around town.” These days, I can so easily gulp down the shivers in my voice, refuse the reddening of my cheeks.

“Like at the store?”

“Yeah. Outside Landon’s house sometimes, too. When I go for walks.”

“You go for walks?”

“Aw, look,” I say, pointing. Sher and Robbie stand at Santa’s sides, with Sean and Arlo on his red velvet knees, peeling their lips back to show all their tiny teeth to the camera.

“Cute,” Jared says. He’s unamused. If he’s pissed, he’s pissed for reasons way below the surface, things he wouldn’t even know how to talk about.

“Baby, I’m exhausted,” I say.

“We can go if you want to.”

His frustration smacks at my frustration.

“No, stay. Don’t you want to hang some more? Sher said they’re going to La Burrita.”

He agrees that he’d prefer to stay and eat with them. They’ll drive him home. I stretch onto my toes to kiss his cheek. He holds his head stiff, accepting my kiss but not returning it.

I cross the parking lot. Now that the stage is dark, most of the lot is in shadows. Groups of ambling, hyper teens gather there, outside of the reach of the glaring Christmas lights. I don’t look at anyone closely. I step over the railroad tracks.

“Hey guys,” I say.

It takes too many seconds for anyone sitting on the planter to acknowledge me.

“Oh, hey,” Alysha says, when I get a few steps closer. “Couldn’t see who it was.”

I swing my keys on their long lanyard, offering proof that I am going to my car. I don’t want them to think I left my family to hang out with them, uninvited.

“You know, Jared’s a nice guy,” Landon says. “I’ve always been a little scared of him.”

“Yeah, he’s a softie,” I make myself say with a grin. “What are you guys up to?”

“Michelle’s little sister’s having a party,” Tyler says. “Her eighteenth!”

“Cool.” I linger. Am I really trying to get invited to a stranger’s eighteenth birthday party? “Sometimes I hate parties,” I say. “But sometimes they’re so fun.”

I can’t think of the last party I went to.

“And something is kind of romantic about holiday parties,” Tyler says. “Dude, you should come.”

“Thanks. But fuck, I’m feeling pretty sad. If I got drunk I’d probably just cry.”

Spiky plants line the path in hedges. Juniper? One summer Sheridan and I laid on top of a thick of it in our babysitter’s front yard. The plants were poofy like a princess’s bed, but made me itch all over. I pick off the tip of a branch, knead it in my fingers and drop it on the ground.

“Break-up sad?” Tyler asks.

“Yeah, same shit.” My tone is harsh. Sounds like someone else, but no, it is me.

“No, you’re coming,” Alysha says. “It’s my house, so basically my party. I insist.”

“Fine,” I say, and just like that, I feel cut loose, floating like a happy helium balloon.

Alysha says she needs to drive her own car. I think of my car sitting in the parking lot. Jared could walk right past it. I agree to go with Alysha anyways. I don’t want the time or space alone to think. Before we part ways, she eats Dana’s face for a minute or two, really macks on her, maybe to remind her there’s nothing between us to worry about, while Tyler and Landon debate what they should get at the liquor store. They agree that tequila gives you the best drunk.

The blue house on B street has a porch and two trees in the front yard. The porch holds a long sagging couch full of young kids in tight jeans and layers. I imagine sitting there with

Alysha and friends, drinking tea in the morning light. A lump of glee and something much heavier builds in my throat. I don't think I've ever been on this exact block of this exact street, though it looks like most other streets in this part of town. I want to be drunk.

I follow Alysha inside. The living room is lit by two bedside lamps with scarves over them. Three girls are dancing, hands in the air, hips dipping. Dancing alone, but together.

"These kids make me feel ancient," Alysha says.

"Shut up," I say. "You're so young."

"Twenty-four. Just my baby face. But I feel old and dead inside, wah."

I try to laugh casually. She takes a frosty bottle of rum from the freezer and pours it with diet coke into two coffee cups. I should tell her how old I am, but it feels hard and awkward. Forced. Instead, we cheers. The ceramic cup is cool and smooth on my bottom lip.

On the back steps, Michelle and her boyfriend PJ lean into each other. Me and Alysha stand in front of them. The patchy grass is muddy under our feet. The backyard is as wide as the house, but not deep, squished shut by the back wall of the two tall houses behind it. The tight, walled space makes me look up. The cloud-clear sky glows with cold and a sliver of moon.

"Does my sister seemed fucked up?" Michelle asks.

"No," Alysha says. "Just dancing all cute with her friends."

"Good," Michelle says. "Hate to be a sappy mom, but I'm proud of her for growing into herself. So fucking brooding sometimes, though."

"Can't blame a girl for having a lot of feelings," Alysha says. "The best of us do."

My drink empties quickly and when Alysha takes her last sip, I go to refill. The house beats with darkly weird and rhythmic music. I wouldn't tell anyone this, but I like being in the

loud kitchen with these drunk kids I don't know. Their faces are soft and bright, even if tired or scarred or parched dry from drinking. Still seniors in high school, maybe. Parties I went to in high school were messy, but not free-feeling like this. I went to the county school district, so our parties were mostly outside of town, down long, winding roads, like the one high above Hell's Gate Canyon that my mom was sure would kill us. I'd wobble around with Jared in fields. Drunk, I always wanted, expected, something surprising to happen. It rarely did.

I look at the white paint of the cabinets. Dirty nail marks dot the doors next to the handles, but otherwise they look bleach-scrubbed. In the fridge is a half-eaten rotisserie chicken, a plastic container of Reser's potato salad and two dozen eggs. I take out the coke. I don't know why I thought this house would be messy like teenagers lived here or something.

I'm pouring rum into our cups when a girl with dark hair chopped straight by her ears bumps her cup into mine. She is a miniature version of Michelle, with a sweep of side bangs. I pour for her, too, and we take our first sips together, making cheery eye contact over our cups, and I wonder if I'm acting young and *fucking brooding* like her. Alysha appears. She doesn't look at the birthday girl, just takes her cup from me and drinks.

"Have you seen Dana?" she says. Her eyes flick around the room.

"No," I say. I look around the room, too.

"God Laura. I can feel the crazy coming on." Her hands are in her hair, working it into one thick braid scattered with split ends. "I get caught in such a tizzy sometimes."

"I'm sure she's on her way," I say.

"So they went to the liquor store and now they're getting some Taco Bell probably." She drops the braid on her shoulder. "Ah, I can't text her. Hide my phone!"

She throws it at me. It bounces off my clumsy fingers and hits the ground, but she isn't concerned. I pick it up and put it in my back pocket.

"And you take mine!" As I hand it over, I press the side button that illuminates the screen. One text message. Would have to open the phone to see from whom. My heart pounds.

"Victory," she says, putting my phone in her back pocket. "Unplugged."

We both still look very freaked out. I drink more and move my shoulders to the music.

"Ugh, being in here is like watching a pot boil. I don't want to be the first thing she sees when she walks in. Des. Per. Ate. Can we go to my room for a sec? I need to calm down."

"Of course," I say, and she touches my cheek. She smiles a real smile to my face, but I watch it become sad as she turns to grab the handle of booze from the freezer.

"Sorry kids," she says. She hides the frosted bottle under her baggy jean jacket, maybe Dana's jacket, and leads me down a set of stairs into the basement.

The walls of the big, carpeted room are purple. She hits a switch and strings of tiny white lights twinkle on across the room. She opens a door to what I think is a closet but is actually a small bathroom with bare plastic piping. She goes in, leaving the light off and the door open a crack. I can see her head resting in her hands as she pees and talks to me.

"I can't stop thinking that Dana and the boys are driving around so she can get some space from me, so she can talk about me. Vent. I really don't want to know what she's saying, but if I don't know, I just imagine. Like how she must hate my neediness."

She flops, belly down, on her unmade bed. A corner of the sheet pops off the mattress.

"Ugh," she says into her pillow. "I hate myself."

“No you don’t.” I want to tell her that while she thinks Dana is too good for her, maybe she in fact is too good for Dana. She removes her face from the pillow. Her cheeks are red. A raised vein I’d never noticed crosses her forehead. Must be the lighting.

“You’re supposed to be at home, huh?” she says. “With your husband?”

“Yeah.”

“But you came out because you’re thinking of your ex and your husband doesn’t get it?”

“Maybe,” I say, though oddly, I haven’t thought about Sammy for hours. “I don’t know if I’ll get over her, like ever.”

“Shut up, you absolutely will. Does he know you’re here?”

“No.”

She sucks in a breath and shakes her head, a slight smile on her face. I think she likes that we’re both kind of crazy.

“Wait. Does he know anything?”

“I mean, he knows some things.”

“Well,” she says. “Better make it a good night.”

I take a long sip from the bottle and lay flat on the bed beside her. I’m very aware of the space between us, careful not to dent the mattress so she doesn’t roll into me. After a moment, she springs up to rifle through a rack hanging by rope from the ceiling.

“Want to wear something?” she asks. She holds up a sheer dress covered in tiny sunflowers. It’s short, the thin fabric flowy around my thighs, but long sleeved. A springtime dress. I try it on and like how I look. “And this, to make it not too sweet.”

She hands me a leather jacket that seems stiff, but is big enough to be comfy, with a satiny lining. On the floor in front of the mirror is a bag overflowing with makeup. I think she's going to do my face, but she pulls out a forest green velvet box. A wedding ring box. On the poofy silk inside sits two whitish pills marked with a tiny symbol I can't read.

"I've been saving these for me and Dana, but she never ever wants to do them. Too responsible, that girl. I don't think she'll ever be down. Wanna take them? You and me?"

I ask her what it is and she says ecstasy and when I say I've never tried it, she gets very excited. She says it's her favorite, that all the complications of the world just float away.

"Sounds like a dream," I say.

I confess, though, that I'm feeling tired and my back is grinding weirdly on itself.

"It will make your body like jelly," she says. "I've heard that MDMA's used like that sometimes. Medicinally. For pain and depression, like in tests. Obviously the government doesn't want anyone to know that the things they call *drugs* can actually help people."

When I don't say anything, she just stuffs the box in her jacket pocket. We march back up the stairs, faces both shifting from tipsy to drunk. At the top, we immediately see Dana, Landon and Tyler with some other friends.

"Finally!" Alysha says and rushes to pin herself under Dana's arm.

We go into the backyard. People are smoking. Alysha takes drags from Dana, who always rolls her eyes but I don't think is actually annoyed. Alcohol has loosened my bones. The beat from the living room makes it outside. I sway around in the wet grass. In the dark corner of the yard, I see an old metal thing. I walk over to it and push it with my foot. It's a compass thingy like they have atop old houses in movies. It's rusting, in a good way. People on eBay would pay

something for it, especially if we cleaned it up and praised it as rustic and old-fashioned. Country chic. I lift the “E” side and the “W” cuts into the mud. It’s heavy, too heavy for me.

“Oh, hold it up,” Alysha says. I get my hands under it, lifting from my knees. Alysha runs over to me to get her phone from my back pocket. She looks at me and the compass on her screen, then shakes her head and grabs a silver digital camera from Dana’s cloth bag. Dana doesn’t look thrilled.

“So dramatic,” Alysha says. The others go inside, but she keeps clicking.

With the weight in my arms, I look at the camera, half-smiling, then make my face serious, mouth parted. I stare at the metal below me. The letter *W* is green with mold or moss. I pose, half-hoping this makes her forget about the ecstasy.

Alysha eventually says okay and I drop the compass. It dents the earth and stays like that, half submerged, half sticking up into the patchy grass. We study the little screen, our heads touching. I look pretty. My hair falls towards the compass. I’m in the shadows, dark and mysterious. The metal snaps and zipper of my jacket glint in the light from the house.

“My legs are so pale,” I say.

“Duh,” she says. “You’re a white girl in the dead of winter.”

She says she’ll send the pictures to me tomorrow.

I forgot about tomorrow. Despite being quite drunk, fear slams me. I try to say thanks for the pictures, but nothing comes out. I must go home now.

We’re alone in the yard except for two girls who sit on the steps, holding each other tight, though they seem to be fighting about something sad. One girl says again and again, ‘No, that’s not how I meant it.’ Their raw emotion embarrasses me. I feel like an ancient mess of a woman.

“Doesn’t Dana seem weird?” Alysha asks. She pushes the camera into her pocket. It’s too big and threatens to fall out as she walks towards the house.

“I didn’t notice,” I say. She says nothing, but gives me the feverish, scared look she had earlier. Friendship demands I find something to say. “More talkative than I’ve seen her?”

“Not talkative with me, though.”

No, it’s already too late to go home. I’m already a lost, drunk wife. A liar.

“She looks happy and proud when you stand with her,” I say, and she smiles.

Back inside the party, Dana is walking around, talking to everyone. I was right about that. Her hair is pulled back in a simple ponytail with a bump on the side that she should have brushed out. Her jeans don’t even fit her right, bunching at the crotch, but she’s very attractive. She leaves her arm around a girl’s waist as they talk in a group. Then I see her do it to a guy, too. When Landon offers to get her another beer, she hugs him and squishes her lips into his forehead. They leave a wet mark and Landon pretends to be grossed out, wiping off her spit. Alysha begins to stand closer and closer to me. When I see her looking too long at Dana, I bump her. She holds my hand and Tyler tells us about Mercury in Retrograde. They agree that it explains why everything’s felt so fucked up and impossible lately.

“Oh is that it?” I say, trying to laugh at my life.

A long time goes by, us standing in a big circle in the kitchen. Dana says nothing to Alysha, doesn’t even touch her. It’s true that Alysha’s hands are at her sides, her fingers intertwined with mine, but still. Then, without warning, Alysha pulls me into the bathroom. She takes out the ring box and puts it on the counter. The bathroom isn’t dirty, but there is a mess of little hairs stuck to the side of the sink, like someone just tweezed their thick eyebrows.

“Wanna do this?” she says. “We don’t have to tell anyone. It will be funny.”

This sounds like a strange, probably very bad idea, but now, I want to take the ecstasy. My stomach has been twisting terribly with the thought that I can never go home. I can’t leave the party like this, drunk in the middle of the goddamn night. There’s no one sober to even drive me. I think, too, of the milky soothe of a pill between my shoulders and down my spine. I need this, especially if I’m going to sleep on a floor or couch.

I’m walking from the kitchen to the front porch, through the loud living room, when my right leg raises so smoothly, like a swell of air or water is billowing beneath it, buoying my limbs, filling them with something buzzy like freedom. I let my leg down softly and the hardwood under it pulsates like a heart, like a mouth opening in the earth and kissing the bottom of my foot. I know the glittering grin on my face is becoming stupid-wide, but my happy mouth keeps stretching, my cheeks beating with the warm air of the living room filled with its ripples of pure sound. I hear only the song’s deepest beats, hear them like the musician’s instruments are connected to an amp in my brain, in my body. Then my other foot raises to take a step and like before, there’s a swell under it, my leg riding a wave, the ground kissing my foot. I want to run, so I can feel this bliss in my bones again and again, but I don’t want to leave the warmest room, so I walk in place and my walk turns to dancing and my hands find the air and I’m laughing. I see people see what is happening and laugh back, and though I know they are partially laughing *at me*, not feeling what I’m feeling, I don’t mind at all. In fact, I love them.

Then there’s Alysha standing in the front doorway, her eyes glittering, too. She takes a long, deep breath and I do it, too, the air caressing my throat, my skin caressing my clothes. She

comes to me and there is no one else in the room. She's moving, dancing, and I feel eyes on me, people looking. I consider, for a split second, if we look stupid, dancing like this, our bodies the happiest wet noodles, but then I forget about my brain, and my bones do feel like jelly. It seems impossible to feel pain. We dance and dance, my eyes on the lights of the stereo or on people's phones if they take them out. When Alysha spins around, I think I see a light in her back pocket, my phone getting a call, but then she spins again and it's gone.

Alysha disappears and comes back with a CD flashing in her hand and then a perfect song plays and then another, maybe more perfect one. Then, I swear, the same two play again. One is deep, spiritual feeling, all electric guitar and pounding drums and a voice in the background like a wailing ghost that courses through my body. The other is twitchy techno with a girl rapping in an English accent and when the beat drops I could die of happiness. Both songs spin around my head, seem to hover right above my skin. Both repeat the same phrase *where is my mind*.

Your head'll collapse, but there's nothing in it

And you'll ask yourself

where is my mind

"Not this fucking song again," I hear Dana say and then she comes close to me and instead of panicking, I hold her waist and she lets me. "You know this CD is only these two songs, back to back, forever."

"Oh," I say, and the word *forever* rings in my ears like an echoing church bell. She goes outside and the word is gone and I keep dancing. These two songs are the most perfect songs.

I'm moving alone and could forever, but Alysha takes my hand. She's pulling me towards the door. I don't want to go. Then, what at first felt like loss of the living room, feels like the biggest gain, her warm, soft hand, holding tight, her eyes looking back at me, and the porch, full of people that I like. They talk and laugh, so easily. Their cigarette coals pass through the air. A car goes by and I feel its rumble like music in my chest.

"You feel good, huh," Alysha says. She sits on my lap, sinking me deeper into the couch. My phone digs into my leg. It is still, not vibrating, maybe dead, carrying no bad news at all. She leans back like I'm a chair and I feel smashed and good. My back feels off for a second, but then I try to notice exactly where it feels off and the pain is gone, like an elusive fairy, flitting away.

When she gets up, I feel her absence and my jaw starts to hurt because I am munching too hard on the piece of gum Tyler gave me earlier that is now tough and flavorless. My jaw hurts into my neck and my brain can't catch a thought.

"Are you okay?" Landon asks. I didn't know anyone was watching me.

"I don't know," I say. I'm happy to get a sound out. "I feel a little uncomfortable."

"Are you cold?"

"Oh yes!" I say. That's it. So simple. "I am cold."

He goes inside, then returns to throw a thick blanket on me. Feels like a bed comforter. I am suddenly all better. I smoke a cigarette. The color of the sky is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. It catches the blur of the city lights, purplish like the sky in Portland, unlike the clear black expanse above my house, only miles away from here, but up the hill. I live under a slightly different sky. I listen to the whirl of people talking and rock lightly to the beat of the music inside.

I don't notice I'm fidgeting until Landon, who is still sitting by my curled up feet, squeezes my bent knees. He asks if I'm achy and I realize I am. I still feel the pulse of joy in my chest, but it's duller, now. He says that I'm probably coming down, so he brings me out a fizzy beer and a big jar of cold water. Despite the cold outside, they both feel divine on my throat. I'm surprised that my hands are sweaty around them.

"Guess who I'm texting?" he says. I think he's trying to distract me. I shrug. "Carlos."

"Carlos who?"

"Carlos Álvarez. He said he knows you."

"Oh my god. I haven't thought about him in forever. Carlos used to date my mom."

"Ugh, I know he did because we were first hooking up, I had to keep seeing his fucking Geo next door at your house, as I was sadboy waiting for him to text me back. Wah."

"Carlos's car at my house? When?"

"I dunno, maybe like three or four years ago. We hooked up when I was a baby. Now we're mostly just friends."

"I haven't see him in years," I say.

"Let's send him a pic of us," he says.

I say okay and try to smile for Landon's phone, but we can't get a good one because my eyes look weird and my smile is all twisted and worried-looking. Did my mom hang out with Carlos while I was at work? Did she know her exboyfriend was gay?

"You didn't know he was gay, huh?"

"Yeah, no, I mean, he dated my mom for, like, a while."

"Yep, that happens. Chill. Not like I'm gonna invite him here."

“Oh, I’m not freaking out,” I say. “You could invite him. I’d be happy to see him.”

“Okay,” he says, doubting me. “Well, don’t let homophobia-light wreck your high.”

“What?” I say, but he says nothing, just texting and smoking.

Fuzzy emotions besides happiness are able to make it inside my body again and I don’t like it at all. I finish my beer and let the whole glass of water fall down my throat in one smooth avalanche. Then Alysha is in front of us, pulling us off the couch. On the way in the door, she stops, putting her hands on my shoulders.

“Babe, are you good?”

“Yeah,” I say. I don’t know what I feel or how I would tell what Landon said as a story.

Someone says we’re letting out the heat and Alysha gives me a quick hug, pushes me inside, then fake-faints onto a thick blanket on the floor of the living room. She pats the blanket and I lay down, too. The others sit on the couches. The kids are gone. In the backyard, maybe. Now, I think I’m really coming down. The buzz is totally gone. No more silky feeling of being in my own skin. But then, suddenly, it comes back through, a wave of sensation and soothing. I am not able to really think. Alysha and I have our heads on hard textured couch pillows. My skin beats warm under the blanket, too hot, sticky, but then I take a deep breath and it feels cozy again. I’m trying to drink water. The repeat CD still spins in the player, but quietly now.

The friends talk over me and Alysha, couch to couch. I feel like a kid waking up in a house full of people, no one really noticing me, just doing their adult thing around me. Loving me. My eyes are closed, then I open them and see Alysha’s face closer to me than I thought it was. I thought my hair was touching my face and neck, but it is her hair. We are sharing one pillow. She is cuddling with me, her legs moving just slightly against mine. I wonder if she’s

mostly asleep, but then her eyes open. Our noses are almost touching. We don't move an inch closer. We stay just right here. I can't even see her face, she's so close, so I shut my eyes, but I know her lips are right there at my lips. I feel the warmth from inside her on my face. Then we touch. We don't kiss, we just touch the surface of our lips together. Hers are not soft, but like paper. She wets her lips and then they are soft. We aren't kissing, just gliding our lips together. I feel only my lips and her lips and the pulse of the low music inside of me. I remember that Dana is on the other side of Alysha. I reach past Alysha for Dana's ankle. I wish she would come down here, too. To cuddle with us and feel our warmth. Our togetherness. It's really not sexual. I think of Britney the Bisexual Princess. How happy she always looks holding the hands of her lovers. I do feel that buzz between my legs, but it's underneath all these other feelings. Or not underneath, but just existing with. It's not the strongest feeling here, which is connection, I think.

I touch the skin above Dana's sock. It is spikey. I want to keep rubbing her ankle against the grain of her leg hair. Instead of sinking down onto the floor, though, she kicks at my hand like I'm a dog. Her bare foot feels hard and punishing on my wrist.

"What in the world," Dana says. She stands up.

Our lips are still touching like held hands. I open my eyes and can't see much. Dana kicks at the pillow under our head. She pulls away from me so fast and stands.

"Hey," Alysha says, trying to grab Dana's hand. "Don't be mean, we're hardly sober."

"Mean?" Dana says. "You blame me for being the difficult one, then you act like this?"

"It's just the molly," Alysha says.

"Mhm," Dana says. She backs up to the edge of the room and her body is puffed up mad.

“You’re jealous we took it without you?” Alysha says. Dana shakes her head, grinning like that’s the stupidest thing she’s ever heard. “You hate that I have a close friend that’s just my friend, not yours.” Alysha’s voice is hard at the beginning of her sentence, but then soft by the end, like her voice flowing through her mouth feels good. She smiles, then straightens her mouth so quickly. She’s standing so close to my head, I can feel the heat from her leg.

“Haha, oh man,” Dana says. “This is one thousand percent not about you having friends.”

She makes air quotes around the word *friends* and I feel incredibly sad in the base of my stomach. Dana walks out of the room and Alysha follows her and I scoop all the blankets over me, tuck them in around my body and over my head. I feel judgement pulsing around the room, and shame. I don’t want to see anyone’s face. I don’t want anyone to see me.

When I open my eyes, the house is dark. Landon is sleeping on one end of the couch, with Michelle’s sister on the other end, their legs folded together. My body aches. I go to the bathroom to splash my face and drink from my cupped hands. I know I’ve fucked up badly, in so many ways. My emotions feel out of reach. Across from the bathroom is an open door. A string of lights stuffed into a vase sits lit-up on the dresser. I’m not feeling high anymore, but the pile of lights holds my eyes. I peek in and see Michelle and PJ in bed. They are wearing clothes. I imagine if they weren’t so drunk, they’d be naked with the door shut.

Michelle’s eyes open. “Need a place to sleep?” she says, sleepily. “You can come in.”

She pats the bed between them. I don’t know how she means it, but I crawl into the bed and under the covers. Michelle turns her back to me and pushes her butt into me, so I’m spooning her. My legs ache, my hips sinking uncomfortably into the too-soft mattress. I want to kick my legs to relieve the ache, but then I become very aware of PJ’s heavy breathing behind

me. When I sense Michelle is asleep, I roll over and touch his open palm. It's cool to the touch, like water. He doesn't move. I want to put my head on his shoulder, curl up in his pit. What do I know about my sexuality? I like his thick arms. I feel tension ringing between our bodies. But PJ is asleep. Completely asleep. I guess bodies can lie. The fucking lesson of the night. I fall asleep.

"There you are." Landon yanks my foot. It is morning, the room light. "Want a ride?"

I roll over in bed. PJ and Michelle's sleeping mouths hang open, smelling sour.

I can't look at Landon and he doesn't look at me. His gesture is kind, but his voice is not.

"Or, you can just stay here," Landon says. He walks out of the room.

I jump up and hurry behind him. He seems pissed. I feel ashamed about last night. And ashamed at how desperately grateful I feel that he thought of me this morning. He walks straight out of the house. I have no time to gather myself. I'm still wearing the sunflower dress, but magically, see my long winter coat draped over the porch couch. I zip it as I walk towards Landon's car. It covers the dress completely. My bare legs stick out below the thick hem.

On the floor of the car by my feet there is an ice cold plastic water bottle. I want to ask to drink some, but don't want to make a sound. His face is firm. He doesn't look at me as he drives without music. Maybe he's just hungover. He stops at McDonald's and orders two sausage McMuffins and an orange juice. I think one of the egg sandwiches is for me, but when they come, he keeps the bag of food in his lap and hands me only the cold cup of orange juice. It feels good on my throat, but then I want water even more. I click in all the plastic bumps on the lid.

Landon pulls into his driveway, not mine. I pull myself out of the car. My eyes are spinning in my head. My body is uncomfortable, wormy and dry, but not acutely painful. I see the wood wall surrounding Landon's hot tub. I fear I'll never be able to hang out there again.

"Thanks for the ride," I say, my voice quiet and shy, and turn towards home.

"Wait," he says. He pulls my phone out of his pocket. "Dana gave it to me for you."

"Oh." I put it in my jacket pocket. He doesn't leave right away. "Hey, is Dana gonna hate me forever?" My voice comes out more like a whisper than I meant. I cough to clear my throat.

"God, your lost, spurned puppy bit might get old," he says. I look at the ground. "Well, I guess it depends. Have you and Alysha been hooking up?"

"Oh my god, no. Wait, does Dana think that?"

"I mean, kinda looked exactly like that."

"No. No, we're just friends. It was an ecstasy mix up," I say. "The kiss."

"The kiss," Landon says, like it's a slogan. "You promise?"

I nod and make myself look him in the eyes.

"Not that you deserve it. You made her look stupid. But Dana will get over it. She's too nice."

I'm relieved to hear this, but then a chainsaw sounds in the distance and my throat seizes. Jared could be anywhere on our property, so near to here.

"Hey," Landon says. He touches my arm. I realize my face looks scared. "Do you need anything?"

His concern makes me want to weep. I shake my head.

He goes inside and I step slowly. I realize the chainsaw sound is coming from another neighbor. It continues to grate through the misty morning. My stomach twists. My chest aches. I get dizzy and stop, holding the trunk of a tree. The puzzle piece bark is damp and soft, almost like cardboard. Sap sticks to the base of my hand as I pull away. I make the mistake of wiping it on the sunflower dress. I know better. With my luck, I'll smear it into my hair, too. I lick my palm, tonguing the already-tough sap. It tastes bitter, piney.

Walking on, I kick a pile of red-orange wood shavings from a madrone Jared trimmed last month. It looks like shredded carrot. When Sher and I were little, we would make taco from big leaves and dirt, the curly wood chips on top as cheese. I feel a wave of numb, thoughtless joy, leftover from last night. I consider not going inside. Calling Sheridan instead. But I don't know what I would say. The brief joy doesn't even have words attached. Then, it's gone.

Jared is on the couch when I walk in the front door. He doesn't get up. I take my shoes off. I feel the nakedness of my legs under my jacket and of my bare feet. I didn't even notice I wasn't wearing socks. There is a black and blue spot on the outside of both feet from my boots bleeding ink onto my skin.

"Hey," I say, from the doorway

"Hey," Jared says.

He's looking straight ahead at the TV. I think it's muted. Then I see that it is off, a square of gray black blank, reflecting the living room lamp and Jared. My head beats like an empty orb.

"Where were you?" he says. Now he dares to look at me. I look back at him, but can't make myself focus. His face is a blur. Before I can answer, he continues. "I could have called the

cops, Laura. Had everyone in town searching all night. Maybe I should have. You could have been in an accident, attacked. I knew it was something else, though, I don't know why."

There is a single wooden chair sitting in the middle of the living room from Sher and I working here on Thursday. I sit in it awkwardly and press my back against the rungs.

"You're going to sit all the way over there?"

I shrug. I don't notice I'm biting the inside of my cheek until I taste blood. I look at the carpet. The square where the leg of the coffee table used to stand, before Sher rearranged the whole house, is orange by my feet, bright and unfaded in the sea of beige. I should be thinking about Jared, trying to find something to say. Instead, I'm remembering Dana's face last night, her raised eyebrows, her look of disgust. Landon was right. I made her feel like a fool.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" Jared says.

He gets up. Walks towards me. He's not touching me, but anger radiates off him.

I begin to feel nauseous, my body hot inside, ice cold on the skin. I press my hands against my thighs. I want to take my jacket off, but don't want him to see me wearing Alysha's sunflower dress. My breathing got quicker at some point and now I'm out of breath.

"Please," I whisper.

"Please what, Laura? Don't act like I'm the monster, here. You're giving me nothing."

"Can you sit down?"

He sighs loudly, paces a loop around the living room and sinks back onto the couch. It's a big couch, but it looks small under his long body.

"I was at a party," I say. Fuck. This sounds flippant, like I'm a teen in trouble.

"Yeah? What fun," he says.

“Jared, I think I might be gay. Or bisexual. Or something.”

I feel my lips move. My heart flips and then sinks, like a leaping doe, smashed by a semi.

I know that I released these words into the room, but I didn’t even hear them.

“Okay. So you accidentally fell asleep in someone else’s bed last night? A girl’s?”

“No, not really.”

“Not really?”

“I wasn’t sleeping with anyone, Jared. I was with friends. The ones you met downtown.”

“I thought you were with them.”

“And you didn’t wonder, like, about my sexuality?”

“Because of them? No, Laura. Why would I think that?”

I get up and sit on the couch. He scoots away from me. I hear his back molars grinding together. The muscle above his jaw moves. I wish I could scoop the last three months out of my head and set it, bloody and pulsing, in his lap.

“I did think you were having an affair, though,” he says. “For a while, now.”

The situation with Sammy feels so far away that this idea sounds wrong, unfair.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I say.

“Every time I’ve asked what’s up, you’ve avoided me. You’re a fucking stranger, Laura.”

“You haven’t asked.”

“Ha. Okay. Well, either way, I guess I didn’t press you, because I thought you’d be able to figure it out your goddamn self.”

He spits this out, disgusted, but it feels oddly respectful. Trusting. Reminds me why I once loved him and this is not helpful at all. His phone vibrates on the coffee table. *Leslie* blinks on the lit screen. My heart, which I thought was dead numb, starts beating like a bass drum.

“Leslie?” I say. “Oh I get it. *You’re* having an affair. That’s why you didn’t say anything.”

“Nope. That’s not it at all, actually.” He lets the phone ring. “We’re friends. I need someone to talk to, Laura. When you’re off doing who the fuck knows what.”

Then he tells me that Leslie’s dad’s been sick with heart disease and her mom is being a super bitch and her brother just moved to Idaho and Cole is going back to school to be a CPA. That Leslie has no one. I want to interrupt him and scream *I don’t care*. I feel punched in the gut by the idea of him talking to Leslie about sickness and death, about her loneliness. I hate her.

“Did you tell her I was gone last night? That you thought I was having an affair?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Fuck, Jared.”

“What? I’m just supposed to sit here quietly while you’re totally ignoring me, and have no fucking feelings about it?”

He’s looking straight ahead, hunched over, his elbows on his knees. Purple red dots cluster the skin around his eyes. I wonder if he’s been crying.

“I was trying to figure my shit out, Jared. I really was.” My voice breaks. My eyes are wet. “It feels like the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my whole life.”

He touches my back, his hand hot. It is brave of him to touch me.

Neither of us say anything for a long time.

“I think you should go,” Jared says. He pulls his hand to his side. Tucks it under his leg.

“You need to figure your shit out somewhere else. At Sheridan’s, or with your new friends.”

Even though this was my house first, my home, this makes sense.

In our bedroom, I put some clothes into a bag, the same bag I brought with me to Portland. I put my computer in, too, and my toothbrush. I dig through the closet for the flowered bag of pills I hid. I’m already hurting. Seems likely that I’ll need them. When I’m packed, I have to go into the kitchen to get my supplements. Jared’s standing in front of the cabinets, eating golden tater tots off a hot sheet pan. I didn’t even smell them before I saw them. I don’t want to ask him to move. He sees me looking and offers me the fork. This small kindness feels terrible.

“I just need into the cabinet,” I say.

He moves. I put the bottles into a plastic bag. The bag in one hand, I grab a tater tot on the way out. Bad choice. Hot grease burns my palm. I want to drop it. I don’t. It’s cool by the time I get to the bedroom, but its salty taste is too intense for my mouth. I swallow it quickly and drink a whole cup of water. I text Sheridan to ask if she can come pick me up, if I can come over for a girl’s night. She asks what’s wrong with my car. Says she’s home alone and Sean was up all night and just finally fell asleep. Make Jared drive you, she says.

Before I ask him, I do something my body tells me not to do. I step into my childhood bedroom. I expect it to slam me with memories, maybe to remind me of who I am, or who I was before all of this, before my whole adult life, which it feels like I got wrong from the very beginning. The room is dark and musty. The bed is made. Puffy plastic still wraps the sharp corners of the metal frame. Mom taped it there after Sher and I bloodied our shins in the night too many times. The walls are bare. Jared painted when we first moved in. Guest room, he said,

though I think he meant nursery. Papery tape still lines the edges of the ceiling. My old plastic toy chest, purple and dotted with overlapping princess stickers, sits in the closet, full of school stuff and art supplies. I don't feel much. I wish I had journals I could look through to try to trace how this happened: me, twenty-eight, knowing nothing about myself. I didn't keep a diary, though. Was always too scared someone would find it.

From the doorway of the kitchen. I ask Jared if he can take me to my car.

"So I can get to Sheridan's," I say.

He looks at my bags. Then he looks at me, his wife, and a mountain of grief and guilt and loss hits and I open my mouth to beg to stay, to promise I want to stay, to promise it is him I want, but then he nods and grabs his keys off the table. We walk in silence to the truck.

Buckling my seat belt, hearing the steady click of his blinker at the bottom of the hill, I get chills. This specific quiet reminds me of the time right after mom died. We walked, drove, ate, worked, without words. Just put one foot in front of the other. Nothing to say, or too much.

After minutes of stillness, Jared begins to beat his fingers against the steering wheel to the pop song on radio. He turns it up. He usually hates this music. His energy keeps shifting. I feel I can say something else, just one more untragic thing. Before we part.

"Hey, question," I say, trying to be casual. "You know Carlos, my mom's best ex? I know you haven't met, but remember me mentioning him?"

He nods.

"Was he ever, like, at our house? When mom was sick?"

"Oh yeah," he says. "Nice guy. Came by a few times while you were at work."

"I didn't know they hung out. I didn't even call him to tell him she was sick."

“Well, they seemed pretty close. Not, like, romantically. I think he’s gay, now,” he says, easily. This word doesn’t seem to make him think of me at all. “He was at the memorial.”

“I didn’t notice,” I say.

“Well you were pretty out of it. Understandably.”

He would know. Held my hand, led me around, made sure I drank water and ate.

“Jared,” I say, my voice cracking. “I’m really sorry I didn’t talk to you about all this shit. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“Well,” he says, his tone back to cutting. “That didn’t really work.”

He pulls up next to my car and leaves the truck on. It’s throttling engine idles loudly.

“Talk to you soon?” I make myself say.

“Sure,” he says, his eyes straight ahead.

The diesel smell is sharp in my nose and mouth as I put my bags in my backseat. Jared waits until I start my car and then drives away.

Sheridan comes to the door. She sees my bags and hugs me so tight it makes me cry. She takes my stuff from me and sets it on the ground, then guides me through the house to her room. Holding my shoulders, she plops me on the bed. I curl up on it, my face down. She pats my back and says *you’re okay* again and again. I’m rocking under her hand. Then my stomach starts sloshing, so I sit up straight. She gets me a glass of water.

“I texted Jared asking what’s up and he said I should ask you,” she says.

I roll over in bed and cover my head with a pillow.

She lays on the bed next to me. “You can tell me anything. Get it off your chest.”

I am crying again. I don't want to be crying.

"Did you cheat on him?" she whispers. She sounds shocked, hurt, at her own idea.

I shake my head.

"I think I want to date women," I say into the pillow.

"Babe, I can't hear you."

"I think I'm gay or something," I say, louder, still muffled.

She is stroking my back, but at this she pulls away and sits up. I turn my head to glance at her. She's staring at the wall. She is quiet and still for so long, my tears dry up in my throat.

"Wait, are you mad? You're not allowed to be mad about this."

"I'm not allowed to be mad?" she says. "Look, I'm not fucking mad that you might be gay. I'm not homophobic, or whatever you're thinking. It's just. Why didn't you tell me?"

"You love Jared," I say.

"What? I love you more. You're my fucking sister."

I tell her I'm sorry and she says she needs to think and walks out of the room. My throat is parched. I fill my cup again in the attached bathroom, which is messy but smells of Sher's lotion and hair products. The scent makes my heart flip. I lay back down for a minute, trying to decide if I can handle sitting around a dinner table with her family.

I fall asleep and wake when Sher comes back in. The room is dark, now, except for the bedside lamp. I expect her to shake me and ask me to sleep on the couch. Instead, she turns out the lamp, exchanges her sweats for a long sleep shirt and gets into bed. She snuggles her body behind me, her top arm looped over me. She kisses my shoulder and soon, we're both asleep.

It's been almost a week since I came to Sheridan's. The boys and Robbie still step carefully around me when they remember to. If Sean and Arlo are playing quietly in the room where I'm sitting, they pick up their toys completely when they're done, glancing at me as they put them back on a shelf or in a bin, like their care is helpful to me, so they want me to see it. I don't know what Sher told them. Jared and I haven't talked except for one text he sent me after two days apart. He asked me if I was still in love with him. I felt I should call him, to explain how complicated it is to answer that question. He didn't pick up. Just texted me: *text please I can't talk to you*. I told him that I didn't know. He didn't write back.

Sher got some eBay stuff from my house and we've been working a lot, probably more than we need to. To fill time. She's not pushing to talk, which I guess I'm glad about. We had one conversation where she asked how long I'd been wondering about my sexuality. I told her that I'm realizing I've been attracted to women for a long time. Then she said that of course women are attractive and asked if I was maybe thinking too much about sex. Her tone was careful, to show me she was trying to understand, but the question shut me right down. I said no. The word came out so cold I was embarrassed. I didn't say sorry. We kept boxing antiques to ship out and I realized that, before, I had been thinking so much about sex, but when it came down to it, this is not about that at all.

When Sheridan walks the boys to the bus stop each morning, I sit alone with tea on the couch where I've been sleeping and try to make myself think about Jared and me as married or divorced or something in between. I try to force my blurry brain into a box called Decision. It

just floats there. I feel more numb than heartbroken. Also angry. At something. At Jared, and Sher too, letting me figure everything out on my own. Sometimes at my mom, for not knowing me better, for having her own secrets. Sometimes at Sammy, for not giving me an easier way out. And at myself. For going along with my life for so long, for being too scared to trust myself.

Today, we're working in the living room when Sher asks if I want to have friends over.

"What?"

"This weekend," she says. "Maybe your friends from the tree thing? Stop being so awkward. It's not like someone died. I'll make Robbie make a fire."

I call Alysha. She's called a few times and texted that I was crazy if I thought accidentally kissing while on drugs would fuck up our relationship, or hers and Dana's.

When she answers, her voice is muffled. She says *just a sec* and I hear her moving. I'm imagining her with Dana, hiding her phone, going into the bathroom to talk. Guilty.

"Sorry," she says, her voice loud and clear, now. "I'm at work. It's really slow, though."

I tell her it's fine and she asks if I'm okay. I say I am. She rambles for a while about how the party was actually good for her and Dana, how they talked for hours after and realized that they have opposite attachment styles, that when Alysha thinks Dana is pushing her away, Alysha becomes insufferably needy or does something to hurt Dana, then Dana really pulls away.

"A toxic cycle," she says. "Crazy, huh?"

"Yeah," I say.

"Not that that's all the ecstasy was, or our kisses," she says. "I wanted to bond with you."

"I know." I believe her.

"Life's so complicated," she says.

Then she asks how I am doing. Says that she's actually been pretty worried about me, but that she's probably just being paranoid. I tell her that I'm staying with my sister for a week or two, maybe longer. Trying to figure stuff out with Jared.

"Fuck. Not because of the party? Oh my god. Shit, Laura."

"No, no. It's okay. It's for a lot of reasons. A long time coming."

"Proud of you for leaving," she says, though I never even told her I wanted to.

Sher told the boys and Robbie to leave us alone, so it's just us and Alysha and Dana sitting around the backyard fire pit. We're sipping drinks Sher made with apple cider mix and American honey whiskey in her crockpot. We're tipsy and the three of them are talking a lot, maybe to take the pressure off of me. It works. I actually feel relaxed.

Alysha sits closer to the hot flames than any of us. She says she likes to be almost too hot. She unbuttons her thick flannel. Underneath is a long-sleeve shirt with tiny pineapples on it.

"Love your shirt," Sher says.

"I love everything pineapple," Alysha says. "It's my thing."

"Oh my god," Sher says. "I have to show you this whole box of vintage pineapple stuff I have from work. You'd go crazy. You can pick something! For Christmas?"

Sher gets generous like this when she's drunk. Our mom was the same way, giving away things she actually loved. Makes me smile. They go inside, taking our cups with them for a refill.

Then, it's just me and Dana, sitting silently. I hold my breath. I should apologize to her, but I'm scared it would ruin the mood. The fire crackles. Dana picks up a stick and nudges the logs. I wish I'd kept my cup so I could pretend to keep sipping from it.

"I'm really sorry I was a bitch to you," Dana says. "I was too drunk, overreacted."

She rests the stick on the edge of the fire pit. She doesn't need a distraction while talking about something hard. I'm shocked. Relieved. Embarrassed that she had to bring it up.

"You weren't overreacting," I say. "I was kissing your girlfriend."

"She said I kicked you."

"Barely," I say. "And I'm the one who should say sorry. I'm a fucking mess. In some weird part of my brain, I thought you'd like to cuddle with us or something. God."

She laughs. "You and Lysha do have a lot in common."

I'm not sure how to read this. She looks at me, and I make myself look back.

"Thing is," she says. "You're allowed to be a mess."

"Not like that. Hurting you."

"I don't know. You didn't know it would hurt me. I know how those drugs feel."

"Yeah," I say. My heart is exploding for Dana. She is quiet, stoking the fire again. She pushes a log over and the coals below it glitter.

"Anyways," she says. "Alysha told me you see a naturopath in Portland? I get really intense migraines. Go to this Chinese medicine doctor in Medford for acupuncture. It helps."

I tell her about Sammy's doctor and my health stuff, that Sheridan and I are driving up for my second appointment next week. I don't mention the sex stuff. I'm kind of relieved that I

might not have to deal with it for a while. Can maybe have some time to heal. I tell Dana that since coming to Sheridan's, my back has been pretty bad, but it's okay today.

"I've been taking a lot of muscle relaxers," I say. "My worrying, I think, just locks up my whole body. I try to sit with my feelings till I figure them out or whatever, but I literally can't."

"Oh I know that feeling. I take meds too. No shame. Your shit sounds fucking hard."

"It is kinda hard."

"Don't wanna act like I know everything," she says. "I'm not even out to my family. They're super religious. But like, your queerness doesn't have to be a disaster. You have friends and family who care for you. A home. Stability."

I nod, looking at the fire through tears.

"Just sounds like your body can't really handle a giant coming out crisis or whatever. Maybe it's already been going through it. Sometimes we have to take the path of least resistance. That's why I don't talk to my family right now. Fucks my whole body up."

"You're right," I say. "Though my husband might hate me forever. That crushes me."

"You're pretty cool," she says. "He's probably just heartbroken."

This takes the wind out of my chest.

"All to say, you're allowed to feel joy about this, too," she says. "I have to pee."

She goes inside. The coals at the base of the fire flash and glint red, orange, black, like a separate heat is beating in each of them. On the underside of the log Dana shifted, a layer of coals, still holding on, glow. The last flames go out. I should add kindling or blow as hard as I can to make the coals turn back into ribbons of fire, but it seems unnecessary. Plus, I don't want it to cloud me in smoke. I'll let the coals be. They're still so hot, maybe hotter, like that.

Beyond the fire, Sher's yard ends in a barbed wire fence with two silvery rungs. To cut off the property, I guess. Wouldn't keep anyone out. Without the flames, the yard is dark. The twists of the fence and a few tufts of grass catch the scarce light from the house. A coyote screeches in the distance like a screaming child. I decide that the world of night is very different from the world of day. Not just a light switched off. Different animals are awake. Different flowers are open or closed. The colors of leaves are lit in different ways. A whole new set of things to see, and my same heart, the one I've always had, beating at their beauty.

The porch light also catches the smooth, thick trunk of a red madrone near the kitchen window. Stretches of its bark still peel in curlicues, but the new skin underneath is no longer lime green, because it is winter. There are two dim lights on either side of the back door, so the single tree makes multiple shadows, like fingers crossing on the ground.