

5-2014

## **We Were Just Like Them A Collection of Short Fiction**

Jacqueline DeRobertis

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/honors\\_etd](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/honors_etd)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

We Were Just Like Them  
A Collection of Short Fiction

by

Jacqueline DeRobertis

Undergraduate Honors Thesis under the direction of

Mr. Randolph Thomas

Department of English

Submitted to the LSU Honors College in partial fulfillment of the Upper Division  
Honors Program

May, 2014

Louisiana State University  
& Agricultural and Mechanical College  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

## Contents

Introduction 2

Blue 3

Petty Offenses 10

Her Face in the Dark 16

Meditations 24

Here We Had it Good 31

Ashes 37

Close Body 45

One of Those Moods 58

We Were Just Like Them 64

Four Weeks 78

Afterword 84

Bibliography 98

## Introduction

While I officially began this project in August 2013, I approached minimalist writing for the first time a year earlier, in the fall of 2012. The summer before my junior year I had read Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, which sparked my interest in the famous Iceberg Theory. I had only read a few stories by Hemingway at that point, and so this novel was an appropriate beginning to my fascination with minimalism—how it works, and why one should pursue it. In my advanced fiction class the August after I read the novel, I wrote a short story titled “Petty Offenses,” which appears in this collection. It was my first foray into minimalist writing myself, and I must admit it was a rough attempt. However, writing in a restrained and calculated style challenged me; I wanted to learn how to manipulate concise prose with ease. That semester I decided I wanted to write a thesis that incorporated minimalism into my own writing. I hoped to study the masters—Hemingway, Carver, Hempel—and learn how to capture their sparse sentences with my own twist. For me, it was a challenge I was eager to face.

In the past eight months, I have structured my thesis around minimalist writing. Nevertheless, I could not have anticipated the theme that arose from the stories as I wrote them. Around October 2013 I began to realize that my collection had developed into stories about miscommunication, or missed connections. I write relationships, and the ones in these pieces are isolated and, in many cases, devastating. Perhaps what became one of my biggest struggles was to depict the almost overwhelming sadness and frustration of these characters in an understated way. It is my hope that this collection evokes the simplicity of action that masks the complexity of deep emotional loss. These are broken people.

## Blue

Everett's driving is terrible. We pull up to our house and we all tell him that it's a miracle we're alive. Jared even falls to his knees outside, miming kissing the ground. Everett smiles, and then he looks at me, and his smile changes. I pretend I don't notice and help with the balloons. Everett turns away from me and lifts my suitcase out of the trunk, propping it on the gravel drive.

Our place is the same, and the Rothko rip-offs on the walls are still pretentious, just like our housemate. David teaches art at a private school, and he never lets any of us forget it. There's a blue, green, and brown print in the hallway by Everett's room. I stop to stare at it.

It's new. I wonder if Everett asked David to put it here, by his door. I wonder if blue is his favorite color too. The browns and greens mesh perfectly, but blue overpowers. It transcends.

I feel like I should know Everett's favorite color, but all of our conversations have somehow ended colorless.

We haven't spoken about anything that matters in so long. I wonder if our conversations will end in colors now. I would tell him about how blue means life. I would tell him why I needed to remember the water and the sky when I was gone, across an ocean of fog and ice.

In some ways, the painting makes me feel young, which I am. It makes me feel the thing I am vividly and painfully. Everett bumps into me as he rolls my suitcase past me along the gravel.

He apologizes, and goes on.

Missing home, I had started reading up on what made it so special here, so pure. Across the miles and miles of tumultuous water and nostalgia, I needed the warmth. It was the only memory that I could really pin down.

I knew too much about cypress trees and Spanish moss already, so I started reading about coastal birds. Just facts here and there. Birds migrated, and I knew that I was like that now. Somehow I was avian—having left and thinking things would stay like they were.

They never do.

Later that night, at the party they threw without warning me, I imagine blue things, blue water and blue horizons. The color is inside me, and I have carried it to and from my wanderings. I recall the coastal birds. Now that I am home, they feel more distant, rather than closer. When the information is not needed, it begins to fade. I cling to my knowledge, to the blueness of my home.

Of all the birds I read about while I was away, I identified the most with the Little Blue Heron. Small, like me, the youngest birds are born white and clean, and darken into steely blues with age. The whiteness helps her mesh with the Snowy Egrets, hunting with them, disguised as one of their own. But the marks of maturity wax as the Little Blue Heron grows, and soon she must return to her colony, to a new belonging.

After all this time, I don't want to be here.

The Little Blue Heron, the *Egretta caerulea*, dwells, among other places, in the coastal Gulf region of the United States. She makes her home inland, in a temperate, freshwater environment.

She craves heat.

I sit next to Everett, his warm, thick body brushing mine as he laughs and moves. I am small beside him, and he makes me feel even smaller with his large hands, his broad shoulders.

I've just come from so much cold, and I am almost reptilian in my need for warmth. He has a glow of heat that burns through the aftershave and cotton, through the fine hairs on his arms and into the stretch of air between thighs or elbows. He doesn't feel it, but I do. His warmth is incidental.

David ignores me. I'm half a foot away, and he won't look at me. Everett told me David thinks I'm trouble. I told Everett I think David should be a back-up singer for Taylor Swift.

David was happy when I left. He used my room as storage for his sweaters. It still smells like mothballs when I fall asleep.

I won't look at Everett as I feel his stare against my cheek, and now he leaves me cold. Whatever exists between us widens. I excuse myself from the room.

The Gulf provides warmth, but the Little Blue Heron often flies further southwards in the winter to hotter climates. She comes back in the spring to begin again.

I flew north and found nothing.

I was wrong to return now, like this. Leaving didn't fix anything. If I left to learn new things, to change, I was wrong. I haven't changed enough. My colony still rejects me.

It's a crowded house. As I wind through the droves of laughing people, I avoid the greetings. They sting my eyes. Things have changed. We haven't spoken for six months, because Everett refuses to find ways to communicate. His phone is ancient, and even though he checks his online accounts, he never speaks to me, through text or otherwise. He is stubborn and old-fashioned and I hate him for being selfish and letting me exist far away without him. I hate him for cutting me out when I needed him most.

I am on the back porch now and I fan away the smoke from my neighbor, a tatted loner lounging idly against the railing. He gets the idea and walks away. I don't know him, and I doubt Everett does. The knowing and not-knowing of everyone around me leaves me breathless. There are connections I missed, things that broke that I heard about but never witnessed. Alex and Sarah are back together. Michael has lost his job. Derick moved to California months ago. I lean against the railing, tense my arms, and imagine I'm driving along a road back, back, back.

I find shelter in a neglected corner of the house, somewhere near David's room. I am silent and angry. I know he's followed me into the dark, and I feel his hand snake around my waist and brush my hip, turning me into him. Even though I'm angry, I don't resist, because I know I need this kind of man. I need his inevitable distance, and his sudden, stifling proximity that comes in flashes.

I try, though. I'm valiant. I tell him that we can't. I tell him that I was nursing a broken heart and that I had one too many beers. I tell him that I'm vulnerable, but he cuts me off with a scratchy kiss.

It was never how things were supposed to be. Even though things come together, things break. Growing closer means learning more about the things that will eventually divide us. It was a running joke, the fact that no one knew what any one of us knew about the other. There were so many secrets, and even more lies. We all have fallen in and out of love so many times that the edges are fraying and the foundations have sunk into the marshy land, the water that defines us as insane and primitive and living where people never should have settled.



Like the swamps, estuaries, rivers, ponds, and lakes where the Little Blue Heron makes her home, my existence is transitory. The land will sink one day, and the water will continue to flow over the places we used to walk.

The water will lead me away, and it will make everything smooth and new.

While he's kissing me, I just keep telling him that I can't do this to him, not like this anyway. And he just looks at me and I say that he's so goddamn delicate, that his heart is this fleeting, sincere thing that cares too much and breaks too quickly. I will move on as I have a thousand times, but he will shrivel up, quiet and still, too proud to profess his loss.

Everett looks at me and says he's fine, that he's not delicate, and then he kisses me again.

I had left for reasons. I wanted my master's degree somewhere away from here. Far, because it was easier to explore places I had always wanted to go. I wanted to leave whatever tension had grown between us, all the moments that I hated because they made us run. I was built for running, and so I ran. Everett always hated that I left, but he never said it to me. I never told him my reasons. I didn't think he'd care for them much.

We're sitting on a window seat, wedged in this forgotten alcove by David's room. We've always called it a window seat, but there is no window, only a blank, gray wall. There isn't even a faux Rothko to glare down on us, to judge our indiscretion. Though we never talk about it, this neglected anomaly—window seat without a window—is my fault. When we first moved in, I said I wanted a window seat, because it reminded me of home. As a little girl I had a cushioned window seat in my room, with white lace bordering the sides. It overlooked a sweeping bay

window. On rainy days I would curl up in the corner to read *Anne of Green Gables* and watch the rain. I pretended I was in Nova Scotia, though I didn't know where that was.

When we finally bought a window seat and realized there was no window for it, I demanded that we keep it. It became a lost relic of the times before I left, almost forced into the rectangle between two unyielding walls. Even so, it was always Everett's and my favorite place in the house. The windowless window seat was holy to us, now more than ever.

Everett's large hand is knotted in my hair, and our noses are touching. He lifts me into his lap, facing him, and we kiss, and we keep kissing, and I know I'm shaking but I can't stop. My back is pressed to the wall, and Everett leans in, hands braced on either side of my head, smiling a little. It's the first smile I've seen since I've been home.

"Oh, sorry, man."

Everett's neck snaps up at the voice. My face is hot as I peer under his arm to see the tatted loner from earlier, standing a few feet away and grinning at us. His arm is looped around a girl's waist, and she giggles drunkenly as the stranger steals a kiss. I don't recognize the girl either.

"We're kind of busy," Everett says.

"No worries," the stranger says, and turns away, back to the party. "It's just usually this place is empty."

Earlier, when my flight landed, Everett was waiting there at the gate. He stood with the rest of them, holding the sign, because he's tallest. It read, "'Welcome Back to Freedom.'" It was painted in red, white, and blue. Jared held a bottle of wine, and Mari had picked up balloons.

We loaded my suitcase into the back of Everett's SUV. We were all laughing, relieved somehow. Relieved things hadn't changed.

In the car, I ignored Everett's stare in the rearview mirror. I looked out of the window. I reminded myself I have returned in the spring to begin again.

I tried to articulate the cold I had just left, 40 degrees cooler, but they couldn't grasp it, not today, not with a heat index of 102. I reminded myself *Fahrenheit*, not *Celsius*. We drove away, through the airport gates, and back into the city.

## Petty Offenses

It was a formality.

The mesh screen drawn between priest and confessor could not shield voices from the Almighty.

Today the air conditioning was broken, and the stolid, muggy heat of mid-April in Louisiana transcended even the patience of a man of God. The confessional was lined with soundproof padding which kept the sound out and the heat in. Father Arnold had been hearing confessions since 4:00 P.M., and the sliver of sky he could see through the crack in the door from his cushioned seat was already darkening.

“Bless me Father, for I have sinned.”

He recognized the thin, reedy voice of Margaret Thibodeaux. She was the type who would stare at her hands during a sex scene in a movie, the type who would cross herself if she heard profanity.

The church was an octagon of floor to ceiling glass. On Sunday mornings light filtered through the streaky panes, landing dappled and fresh across the pews. Sunday evenings as the sky burned in pinks and golds and the shadows grew long the people would sit in the dark places between the cement columns at intervals around the church. Secret and cool, they could hide from the words and the sun and the impending Monday morning.

He had been forgiving for a long time. Most of them confessed what he had privately labeled as “petty offenses”. They were typical and usually insincere. Most of those that came to see him were digging for a good sin, as if they didn’t see themselves capable of doing any kind of bad. He hated them, the sheep without compasses. He forgave himself for that.

Father Arnold repositioned his vestments, swinging a swath of fabric over one leg so that his thighs could breathe.

“When did you last say confession?”

“Four months ago, Father. Advent.”

It was now Lent. Father Arnold liked to keep a tally of how many parishioners showed up for confession during Lent versus Advent. Lent easily took the crown each year. Guilty sinners flocked to church, in search of a shepherd to save them.

Christ died. So could they.

“And what is it you would like to confess?”

He paused to check his watch before dabbing at his forehead with the tassel of the purple sash. Margaret was picking at the wooden cabinet beneath the screen, tracing the cypress knobs. Through the mesh he saw that she had filed her nails into perfect crescent moons, the silky cadence of a smooth white sliver against the soft peach of her skin.

“My dad. I hit him.”

Mr. Thibodeaux was an attorney. He wore khaki pants, a pastel polo, and a brown leather belt to mass every Sunday. He wasn’t tall, but he held himself ramrod straight. His broad shoulders and glare commanded respect. His family dressed to the nines for God and sat on the front row, always with shined shoes and crosses around their necks. Mr. Thibodeaux never spoke too loudly, though his voice carried with it the occasional telltale crescendo of a totalitarian dictator in another life. People listened to him.

“And why is that?”

The screen shuddered as Margaret crossed and uncrossed her legs. Her foot, suspended inches from the carpeted floor, traveled in a continual circle.

“He deserved it.”

Shadows from her foot leapt against the padded walls. He watched as she painted anxiety into the fabric, a telling biology of a known and primitive fear.

“Violence is never the answer,” Father Arnold said.

“I know.”

Margaret’s foot had ceased its rotations, and the shadows were flat and still.

Father Arnold traced a hand through his hair. He decided he would quote Scripture. That usually convinced them.

“The Bible says, ‘Honor thy father and thy mother’,” he said.

He always lingered during the “thy,” enjoying the sensation of tongue against his teeth creating the almighty law.

“I know. I understand. I do.”

He bowed his head, his hands clasped against his chin.

“That’s good,” he said. “Then you know it was wrong,” he said.

He saw her fingers twitch in their steeple. The holes in the mesh split her hands into a thousand tiny particles, and they rippled as she moved. Father Arnold wondered what his face must look like in pieces.

“I guess.” She paused. “I don’t think I was wrong, though.”

The particles stilled.

“We often don’t find our sins despicable. It’s the paradox of the moral being.”

“It’s not that.”

A thin tail of sweat trailed down his cheek.

“You felt entitled,” he said.

“For my sisters. My mom. He gets angry. Says things.”

His fingers knit together as he watched the ceiling. The light bulb pulsed heat and power just beyond his vision. The dark filter on the rims of his eyes glowed with white lining.

“You acted in self-defense?”

She repeated, rigid, “He gets angry.”

He felt the moisture collecting in his armpits.

“This, to you, justifies hitting him?”

The particles rolled in an almighty wave as Margaret pulled her hands away from the screen. Her thin lips were puckered, pale and tight.

“Yes, Father.”

Father Arnold watched her lips. He noticed a mole, just below her left nostril.

“Do you doubt he loves you?”

Margaret’s lips relaxed into a line.

“Of course not.”

Father Arnold leaned forward. His collar clung to his neck. The blackness of the confessional grew.

He was translucent. He was her salvation.

“Do you want forgiveness?”

When he was small, he would run through his backyard, trapping butterflies in his bare hands. His mother warned him to be careful. If you touch a butterfly’s wings, she said, their scales would fall off. Without their scales, they might never fly again. He listened and nodded, his mouth split into a bleeding grin. Once she was inside behind the rusty screen door, he would

pluck each butterfly one by one, pinning them thrashing to a board and slowly tracing his finger over their stained-glass wings.

“I do, Father.” She was white behind the screen.

He used her name. He wanted her to know he knew.

“Margaret. Are you truly sorry?”

She didn’t move. She was silent.

“God cannot grant you absolution for your sins unless you’re truly sorry.”

The confessional grew stifling. He waited. She would not refuse his help.

“No.”

She whispered it. Her voice was weak, a skinny, thrashing thing. She moved to sit on the chair beside the kneeler. In her periwinkle blue dress, she dwarfed the black screen.

“No. I’m not sorry.”

He sat, watching her through the screen.

“You must be,” he said.

Tiny fireworks of white exploded before his eyes, hasty stars in a sea of black.

“Thank you for your time, Father.”

Margaret rose, her dress a blue tidal wave. He felt his pulse quicken. He tried to stand, but sank back to his seat.

“You can’t just leave.”

Margaret stood at the exit to the confessional, staring.

“You came for forgiveness,” he said.

His breath burst from him, frenzied. He reached wildly to wipe at the sweat drenching his forehead and chin. Unsteady, his arm collided with the screen. It tipped, balancing on the blunt



edge of the cabinet before crashing to the floor of the confessional. The plated oak didn't break but held in its solid, latticed black square, resting at Margaret's feet.

Her hand was covering her mouth comically—an image of righteous shock.

“Get out,” he said.

She was flushed and uncertain.

“Father...?”

He was helping her. He helped people. He helped them get clean. He showed them the right path. They wanted him. They needed him.

“Get out of this house.”

She fled.

The giant, metal doors to the atrium crashed behind her.

Father Arnold released his breath. He did not move until he heard the motor rev and the crunch of tires on gravel. Finally he stood, tearing off his vestments and throwing them in a heap to the floor. He loosened the clerical collar around his neck, stepping over the robes and out into the church.

The church was empty, only the candles lit. Dusk crept through the hollow spaces of the tabernacle sanctuary, along the vacant pews. Beyond the sweeping glass windows the sky darkened, tinged with the suggestion of stars and the clouds rolling in.

Father Arnold walked to the altar. It stood on a stage of carved stone steps, a beacon of holiness. He lay down before the altar, spread-eagle on his back against the stone. The cold bit his sweating skin, and he was thankful for the darkness, and the emptiness.

## Her Face in the Dark

Outside, the wind whistled sharp and clear across the plains. Jim leaned back in his seat, squinting through the fogged-up windshield into the dark. He drove with one hand, keeping two fingers on the wheel. In his left hand he held a cigarette, and every now and then he would take a drag, blowing a trail of smoke out of the cracked window. I got to thinking it was too cold to keep the window open, but I didn't say anything.

In those days it seemed I was always going home. When my car veered off the road and into the snowbank, I called Jim. I called him a lot that year, because he knew not to ask. That night I stood waiting for him along the shoulder of the road, clutching my purse and heels in my hands, barefoot and shivering in my dress. It was maybe in the low teens, with a wind chill of negative something, but it didn't stop me from crouching on the pavement, balancing my compact mirror on my knee and holding my phone up so I could see while I fixed my eye makeup. It's one of those lucky things about being a woman—given the right to hide our pain with powder and paint. You can't spot a woman hurting if she can fix her face in the dark.

I had tried to cut home a back way, through the Fond du Lac Indian Reservation, so I was waiting a good long while for Jim to show. The reservation was a far piece from his apartment, and I knew this was a trip he'd only make once. When he turned up thirty minutes after I called, all he did was open the door of his pickup and throw me a blanket.

"You should dress warmer, girl," he said.

I tossed my shoes on the floor with my clutch, pulling the flannel comforter around my shoulders. I reached over and closed the door. Now the only light that could be seen was from the headlights and the small, glowing ember at the end of Jim's cigarette. All I could see of Jim's face was the harsh outline—the slant of his nose, the mild jut of his lips.

“Left my coat at the bar,” I said.

Jim let the engine idle for a minute as I buckled my seatbelt.

“Bet that’s a story.”

“Hush.”

Jim snorted under his breath and pulled off the shoulder onto the road. I turned to look out the window, bundling my feet in the blanket as I watched the dense, white ocean streak by. The surrounding blackness only illuminated the soft light that lingered on the surface of the snow, and I felt pleasantly alone, and warm.

“I take it I didn’t interrupt your busy schedule at four in the morning?” I said.

“It’s Saturday,” he said. “A man likes to get his sleep sometimes.”

“A man needs to live a little, too,” I said.

Jim reached up to scratch his beard. He leaned forward and peered through the glass.

“Damn window’s foggin’ up too much.”

“So defrost it.”

“Defroster’s not workin’. Grab that towel.”

Keeping his eyes on the road, Jim jerked his head to the backseat. I leaned over the armrest and felt around in the back.

“Christ’s sake, Jim, what do you even keep back here?”

“Shut your trap and give me the damn towel.”

Holding up my phone as a light, I felt along the floor, my fingers running over what seemed like a tire iron, a pack of styrofoam cups, a water bottle, and a bag of chips. I finally located the towel, stuffed under the seat. Sitting up, I dangled the towel in front of him.

“Found it.”

Jim swerved.

“Goddammit, you tryin’ to kill us?”

“We’re the only car on the road,” I said.

“Just wipe the windshield.”

I got up on my knees, gripping the dashboard and leaning forward. The glass was cold, and my forehead touched the pane as I reached as far as I could over to Jim’s side of the car, wiping the windshield down. Streaks of clear glass appeared between the foggy places, revealing the salt-caked road and the whiteness that extended only a few feet before vanishing into the blackness.

“Better?” I said.

“Fair enough.”

I slumped back into my seat, tossing the towel on the floor by my shoes.

“You’re welcome.”

“Wouldn’t be foggin’ up if I didn’t have to haul your ass back to civilization in the middle of the night.”

I was quiet. He was right, about it not being civilization. It was too clean and clear, and I wished, in some ways, that it could go on like that. People tend to think lights are holy somehow, with that whole light-and-dark dynamic that makes for good TV, when really, it’s the dark that’s sacred. Things are honest in the dark, because they’re safe.

“You didn’t have to come, you know,” I said. “I could’ve called Amy, or Sid—”

“And they would’ve flaked. Don’t bitch and moan about how I’m replaceable. I’m not.”

I folded my hands in my lap and glanced at him sideways. He was all fire and fury, glaring into the night like it owed him money, sucking the life out of that cigarette with his thin, wispy lips.

“Jim,” I said, “remember when we were kids, and you used to come over when it finally got warm, just around March or so?”

Jim grunted and rested the cigarette on the window edge, tapping the ashes onto the concrete. I shifted so that my feet were pressing the armrest, my head leaning against the window. We had grown up down the street from each other, best friends from the moment I threw a rock at his bike for making fun of my little brother. He told me later he decided I was okay then, because I was the type of girl to defend a kid’s honor.

“And one day you stopped by, it was the spring equinox or something,” I said. “and we were trying to get that trick right, where you can balance an egg on its tip—something about the pull of the sun that makes it work just on that day.”

Jim nodded, adjusting his baseball cap. He took another drag on his cigarette.

“You were about twelve or so and you got all upset because you kept breakin’ the eggs when you tried to stand ‘em up,” he said. “I remember.”

I breathed against the window, waiting for my heat to paint it cloudy and vacant.

“I was so mad at you because you had no trouble with yours. It took you maybe six tries, and you never broke a single one.”

Jim rolled his window down a little farther, and flicked his cigarette into the wind.

“You always were too damn competitive.”

I drew a face in the muggy spot of my window, then breathed again to make it disappear.

“And you’re too good at everything,” I said. “You know that was why I went outside, crying probably. I never wanted to let you see me cry. It was stupid, me caring so much.”

“Been tellin’ you that for years.”

“Been telling you to mind your own business just as long.”

Jim cleared his throat.

“Thought you were talkin’ about somethin’ important.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah. I was on the porch, sitting on the swing, waiting for someone to notice I was gone.”

Jim’s teeth flashed white as he smiled in the dark.

“Attention whore.”

“I was twelve,” I said. “You weren’t exactly a peach to be around either.”

“Yeah, well, I’m a boy. We have the right to be little shits.”

I nudged him in the arm with my foot. He made a show of pretending that I caused him to swerve, shooting me this look. Without the cigarette between his teeth his face looked empty.

“So I’m sitting there on the swing,” I said. “And then no one’s coming, and I decide to go walk around the house and hide, scare people into thinking something’s happened.”

“God, Cam.”

“And I’m barefoot and walking fast along the concrete of the porch, and I come to the end and almost step off, and there’s this rabbit in the grass, its insides ripped out, ants crawling all over its face and stomach, or where the stomach was.”

“It was the Montanas’ pet or somethin’, right,” Jim said. “I remember they lived about a block down and the thing kept gettin’ out its cage.”

I nodded. Up ahead, I could see the lights of the chemical plants in the distance, and white smoke billowing into the air.

“Mr. Fuzzy, I think.”

“Cam,” Jim said. “Why you tellin’ me all this.”

I shrugged, picking up the towel from the floor mat.

“I didn’t even scream,” I said. “I just looked at it. I was more upset that I almost stepped on the thing than that I was staring at this awful, dead rabbit. It was the cat next door that ripped out its throat.”

“I hate cats,” Jim said.

I found a frayed edge of the towel and started to work my finger through a threadbare section.

“I know you do. But Jim, don’t you get it.”

“There’s nothing to get.”

I frowned, concentrating on the towel. It was old, almost crusted, and I used my fingernail to dig at the cloth, to get the threads loose.

“It’s stupid,” I said. “But after dad left it was like I couldn’t feel the things I needed to.”

We were both quiet. Jim’s pickup passed out of the reservation, and we were surrounded by lights now, overhead and behind and besides. The roads were still mostly deserted, but there was a car or two that went past, driving in the opposite direction. I imagined they were wayward and singular, like us, only maybe not as alive. I liked to believe that I was alive in a way other people weren’t. I saw a bumper sticker once with this old quote, “Know thyself.” I get the idea that’s what I want to do.

Jim shook his head and glanced over at me.

“You feel things normal, Cam. You just think too much.”

I shrugged again. Now Jim’s face wasn’t just an outline. The lights danced across his forehead and down his chin—the orange, artificial kind of light native to highways after dark. It seemed his face was moving faster, not the lights. He was in perpetual motion, and I couldn’t tell the difference between glare and cheekbone, the flash of his eyes or the glow of headlights. I looked away.

“Doesn’t seem right,” I said. “I was more upset over an egg not staying put than a dead rabbit.”

“You can’t force somethin’ that isn’t there,” he said.

I gave up on trying to wear a hole in the towel and threw it to the floor.

“That’s the thing,” I said. “It should’ve been there, and it wasn’t.”

I looked back at him, waiting.

“Jim,” I said. “What if something’s wrong with me.”

Jim just laughed. I shot him a glare.

“It’s not funny.”

He kept laughing, and I leaned over to shove his arm. Jim switched hands on the wheel and reached over, grabbing my wrist. He pinned it to the armrest.

“Cool it, girl,” he said.

I struggled, more out of spite than anything, but Jim’s hands were large and coarse. He worked construction for a living; he could sure as hell pin down my flimsy wrist. I stopped fighting after a while, but he didn’t move his hand, though his fingers loosened a bit. He looked at me sideways.



“Course somethin’s wrong with you,” he said. “But you be careful about givin’ your daddy too much credit.”

I stared at him, trying to see what was in his face, but the lights that suffused his cheeks in an orange glow bathed his eyes in impenetrable color. I wanted to say something, but then we crossed into a tunnel, and the lights went down. You might not think it, but it’s hard to speak when you aren’t sure of where you are, or what you’re seeing. I stopped what I wanted to say and waited for my eyes to adjust, blinking. In the temporary blindness, I tried to pull my wrist away, but Jim caught it, and held on.

## Meditations

Andrew catches a cab home from the airport, and asks me to foot the bill. He insists he didn't want me to have to pick him up. I say it's fine, and I pay the driver and help him with his suitcases. He's grown thinner. His shoulders jut straight and narrow and when he walks he does so on the balls of his feet. His chin sticks out and I know it's from holding back his anger as the Marine drill sergeants yelled and he believed he was right anyway.

Andrew's home from boot camp.

Andrew is my brother and he's tall and strong, and his face is thin but his eyes and the lines that made his eyes unkind are heavy and full. He's older than me, but only by two years.

Three years out of college, I have a job working as a high school philosophy teacher, a class the students find taxing and dull. I drive to work and speak to adolescents about duty and moral imperatives. No one cares for Kant. I hope they like existentialism. Existentialists were the edgy rock stars of the philosophical world.

I'm giving him a place to stay before deployment. He and mom stopped talking years ago, but I know she still prays for him. I see her novena sitting next to her rosary beads—a prayer for those in combat. He's not been in combat yet, but I guess she figures he will be soon. It's only a matter of time.

He looks at me after I let him in. I don't know what to say. I can't put more than two words together to bless him.

"I don't think we should talk while I'm here," he says.

"I'm your sister," I say. "I think that's going to be difficult."

"People do it all the time," he says.

"Fine," I say.

He wakes at 5:00 A.M., music blaring. By the time I wake up enough to brew some coffee and get the paper, he has run five miles, lifted, and downed a protein shake. He hellos. I nod.

I want Andrew to speak about boot camp. He aggressively silences, like he told me he would. I had stopped knowing him before he left, because we stopped speaking when I was seventeen. But now his strangeness and insistence on being aloof threatens my recognition of his brotherhood, of his blood. I don't know if he doubts his decision to join up or if his insides are painted red, white, and blue. Boot camp was a test of endurance, and clearly he has passed. What it did to him, and what it prepared him for, I don't want to think about. I know he can't turn back. I know he's not the kind to talk about something once it's certain, because the certainty makes it a point of no return. Dotted lines are iron gates like that.

When he left for boot camp, Andrew had to take a plane, even though it was only two states over. It was required. I got to the airport, and they said military families were allowed in the back past security to the waiting area, to say goodbye. The way people looked at Andrew, it was like he was a hero already, and I kind of guess he was. He has this way of holding himself so he looks like he's just stepped out of a Michael Bay movie, carrying some unconscious damsel in distress.

When he was called to board we shook hands, like neighbors or business partners.

"Don't write," he said.

"Wouldn't dream of it," I said. I said, "Stay sane."

He said, "Too late."

He hoisted his duffel over his shoulder and boarded his 8:05 to Birmingham.

I wanted to say things to him, all of them gentle and cowardly. While he was gone, my heart was so full of things I wanted for him. His peace, his strength. His patience. I couldn't write to him about these things because I believed he needed to be alone in this. And I said I wouldn't write. It was how it always would be between us.

When we were kids, I watched his powerful blooming. I ached with things I did not know because he was so much of what I was not. He spoke in sentences clipped and calm, with confidence and superiority. He excelled in all things technical, and his love of science eclipsed all but his love of sports. He challenged teachers and later professors with his take on everything from politics to grammatical syntax. He was born with an unflappable will and a tongue of iron.

I sometimes wondered what it would have been like if I were a brother and not a sister. Would I have grown all limbs and sharp abs like Andrew? I knew, likely, I would still exist, nose to the grindstone in a sweater vest or khakis, reading Rousseau because it was in my bones. I would not have the same thoughts and actions because so much a part of my motion was reactionary, a response to being in the world with too many words and too many thoughts. I wasn't built for battle, but a different kind of striving.

Small, I wanted to be like Andrew, but sisters did not have the same set of actions to choose from. I was born whispering. I felt the things I wanted to say burning and stemming from what I loved and what I meant, but could not make them break into speech. I reasoned and read history and political science and bundles of philosophers to solve the problem that was my flawed burgeoning self.

Andrew's self was not flawed. It was bold and square-jawed and relentless. Sometimes it killed me, watching him push so hard against a world that was all but indifferent. He could not handle the apathy of the world. If he kept going, then maybe, he would make it matter. The force of a thousand sighs would bring a wolfish grin to his face, and he would be happy, for once.

One evening when I was seventeen and he was eighteen, we were on the way back from the local high school. Turning into the country road at the front of our neighborhood, we spotted a car that had flipped over the guardrail around a sharp curve, and had fallen into a ditch. I was driving. Andrew yelled at me to pull over, and I did. I called 9-1-1 as he threw open the passenger seat door and clambered down the embankment.

We were the first on the scene, but a few more cars pulled up behind our battered Camry. Three people rushed past me as I told the operator where the wreck was. I didn't pay attention to the noise in the direction of the ditch. Later I remembered I heard the movie scene sound of breaking glass as Andrew smashed the window to pull out the two occupants of the crash.

I hung up after confirming the details with the operator, and turned to the steep incline. It was a grassy slant, caked with mud and lined with hasty shoe indentations. I struggled down, reaching the bottom as Andrew and the other man were laying the two bodies on the bank. It was a young woman and her son. The son had died on impact, so they would later say. The young woman still had a fighting chance when they lifted her from the vehicle.

Andrew was in his element. He had helped lift the car to free the young woman's trapped leg. He had bloodied his own elbow smashing the windows. The young woman was not breathing at this point. Andrew nodded to a man who had helped him carry the body, saying rapidly that he was about to administer CPR, and that they should give him some space.

It was then that the man who had helped him carry the body grabbed his arm, telling him firmly that he was a doctor, a surgeon. He could handle it from here.

The man was very nice. He was in his late 50s. He had bright, honest eyes. He knew what he was doing. He was just trying to help.

Andrew punched the doctor in the face. I saw it coming and had already bounded halfway across the ditch. The surgeon faltered, blinking. Before Andrew could lay another punch I tackled him from behind. I grabbed his arm, pulling him to face me. He tried to break free, struggling to dig his nails into my hand.

“Andrew, what the hell?”

The other two members of the parked cars wrested Andrew from my grip, leading him a safe distance away so the doctor could do his work. I did not look at Andrew after that, but I knew how he looked.

He was a kind doctor. He didn't press charges. He didn't even report the assault when the police and ambulance arrived. After answering questions from the police as first arrivals on the scene, Andrew and I walked back to the car, driving the rest of the way home in silence.

We never spoke of it. We never spoke of anything much after.

Two months later he graduated from high school. He tried to do college for two years, but he was too distracted. He dropped out, and enlisted the summer before his junior year. He left for boot camp in July.

In the spaces of summers and winter breaks, he'd avoided me. I knew he did not think of me as his sister anymore. I had broken a pact, taken their side, and he would never forgive me.

We haven't spoken in a week. It's his last night before he returns to training. We pass handwritten notes back and forth to determine the menu for takeout. Chinese food is our thing, one of those small traditions that lingers, even after years of silence. Sitting two feet apart on the sofa, we watch a reality show about people who were born without legs, and their struggles to overcome and conquer their disability. When it's over, I click off the TV. I clear away the dishes.

I lean against the island separating the living room and the kitchen and look at my brother. He's got his back to me, folding up a blanket that's fallen off the sofa.

"Andrew," I say.

"You said you wouldn't," he says, standing. "Mel. You said."

He walks to my room and closes the door. I wait for a minute, just on principle, before I make my way to the sofa. Laying out the sheets, I curl up under the checkered blanket Andrew had folded and turn off the lights.

In the morning, Andrew will leave without saying goodbye, like he prefers. He'll strip the sheets in my bedroom, though, and probably do a load of laundry for me. He might even reset the alarm system before leaving, while I'm still asleep. He'll leave, and come back in six months to a year, according to his orders. Out of nowhere I'll get a call, and then he'll be here, standing on my doorstep, bags in hand. Maybe he'll have the cab fare by then.

Stoicism is one of my favorite sections to cover in my *Introduction to Philosophy* course, because the students find it so difficult to grasp how anyone could ever think in such a way. Stoicism is about mastering your passions and glorifying rationality—in a lot of ways meaning separating yourself from worldly attachments. You have to look at your family or your dog, your best friend even, and consciously tell yourself that this thing I love is mortal, it will die or

disappoint me some day, and I can't feel torn up about that because it's inevitable. Eventually you'll stop caring. Eventually you'll realize you're happier that way.

You aren't special, and you can't stop it.

"Can anyone tell me about *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius," I say.

The class stares at me. I feel their eyes on my skin. It burns.

"Marcus Aurelius?"

The class remains still. Someone coughs. I try again.

"Can anyone tell me something about Marcus Aurelius?"

No one raises a hand. Convincing one of them to speak is a daily struggle. I call on Alex, who is texting beneath his desk. Alex almost drops his phone when he hears his name. He looks up at me with dull eyes.

"Yes?" I say.

"Some guy," he says.

The class laughs. I lick my lips.

"Eloquent," I say. "Does anyone else have a more precise answer to offer?"

They watch me, a wall of faces.



### Here We Had it Good

It was senior year. I planned to graduate in May with a double major in History and Political Science, and then to apply to PhD programs if I didn't take a year off first. Everett beat me to it a semester early, and only had two months left until December graduation. He had his heart set on engineering jobs at the local chemical plants. And Jared, he prayed his Philosophy and Political Science degrees would get him a spot at a decent law school. Things were about to begin, so it felt like. We were all young and we had this overwhelming possibility, but most of it depended on getting past some kind of application, some kind of test that said you met the qualifications or not.

We were on our way home from this party in late October. As the designated driver, I had finally reached the point where drunk people seemed more funny than annoying. It was cold, and we had the windows down. I could see my breath hanging in the air after I laughed. A country song played on the radio because Everett had shotgun, and shotgun picks the music.

We decided to stop in at Ray's, a 24-hour diner right before you hit the interstate. Ray's had the best pancakes in the city, even if they were cooked by homeless looking guys with greasy, tangled beards. I pulled into a parking space right by the door. It took a few slaps to the face to get Everett moving, and Jared came quietly enough. He's always quiet when he's drunk, real contemplative.

After Jared ordered his pancakes, and me and Everett poured some coffee, we slid into a booth by a window. The booth was half-lit by the fluorescent lights high overhead, the rest illuminated spottily by the flickering, red neon glow from a gas station the next door down. It was even colder in the diner, and I gulped down my coffee in a last ditch attempt to warm up. Ray's smelled like grease and coffee, day and night: a good smell.

Everett glanced at me through cracked eyelids as he took a sip of his coffee. He didn't even like coffee, but I forced it into his hands because he had work in the morning. He looked awful, his eyes bloodshot, his head resting on the heel of his hand. He and I were good, we were okay and all, but we weren't close. Even tonight we were the age old binary: stone cold sober and wasted. Instead of talking to each other, we watched Jared scarf down his banana chocolate pancakes. I stuck to my coffee.

Jared polished off his pancakes with a glass of water, belching and leaning back on the cracked pleather of the booth seat.

"Hot damn," he said.

Everett made a noncommittal noise in the back of his throat.

"Shut up, Everett," Jared said.

Jared studied the table, tracing the places where the plastic had cracked.

"I started applying to law schools," Jared said.

He was quiet, and I knew he wasn't happy. I ignored the dejection in his voice.

"What kind of law do you want to practice again?" I said.

"Whatever makes the most money, I guess." Jared said.

I smirked.

"What I heard is 'When you're living on the streets of New York as a starving, wannabe academic, you can come live in my mansion for an indefinite period of time.' Right?"

Jared swirled the dregs of his coffee, staring into his mug, smiling a bit.

"And what can a fucking academic give me that I don't already have?"

I raised an eyebrow.

"A soul."

Jared snorted.

“I can pay someone to be my fucking soul.”

“I think you’ve got this whole lawyer thing in the bag,” Everett said from under his baseball cap. “I wouldn’t worry. You got this.”

Jared rolled his eyes.

“You don’t get it. It’s like, I don’t want the sum of my whole fucking life to go into being a prick.”

“So choose a different career, dumbass,” I said. “Easy.”

“Mike, you’re such a fucking idiot,” Jared said, leaning back in his chair. “It’s not that simple. God, if it were, this whole life plan thing would be so much easier.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Don’t give me the sob story about your parents expecting it from you. You’re a free man, stop bitching.”

“Fuck you,” Jared said. “You don’t know shit about my parents.”

Everett took off his baseball cap, ruffling his hair and fixing Jared with a hazy stare.

“Look, man. I get that you’re feeling all purposeless and whatever, but this is not the time. Some of us have work in the morning. Some of...oh fuck.”

Everett stood up quickly, his face white. Stumbling out of the booth he set off in lumbering strides to the restroom with the general grace of a dying bull.

“Yeah, I don’t think he’s going to be showing up to work tomorrow,” I said.

Jared was staring moodily at his mug, not looking at me. I threw a crumpled napkin at his head.

“Man, c’mon,” I said. “You’re drunk and tired and everything seems shitty right now. I know.”

“I just want to fucking do something that means something, you know?” Jared said, quiet. “I mean, all of this school, all these papers I’ve written, all these books, what do they add up to?”

“Student loans,” I said.

“I’m fucking serious,” Jared said. “If I can’t use some of what I learned to really *do* something...man, I just dunno.”

I sighed, shaking my head.

“I’m not a psych major or anything, but I feel like that’s a normal response to being in your early twenties and graduating with liberal arts degrees,” I said. “Just a guess.”

Jared shook his head, resting his elbows on the table and pressing his forehead to his hands.

“I’ve got a little sister, Sarah, right?” he said. “And she’s only fifteen but she looks up to me. And if I go away to law school, what if I’m letting her down?”

“She’ll live,” I said.

Jared reached up, running a hand through his hair.

“Nah, you don’t fucking get it. She’s dating that loser, Todd. He’s what, six years older than her?”

“So she has shit taste in men,” I said. “Nothing new there.”

Jared lowered his hands to the table.

“What if she goes off and gets into drugs or gets pregnant or something? I mean, fuck. I need to be there.”

I was quiet a minute. The waitress brought more coffee, and I took mine and drank to avoid talking, even though it scalded my tongue.

“Sarah’ll be fine,” I said finally.

“But what if she’s not?” Jared sounded desperate.

At that moment Everett blundered back over to the table. He looked slightly better.

“You good?” I said.

Everett slumped into the booth, slapping his cheeks a few times.

“Fair enough,” Everett said. “What’d I miss?”

Jared explained about Sarah. I watched as Everett replaced his baseball cap, which had fallen off in his dash for the toilet. He frowned at Jared.

“Okay,” he said as Jared finished. “I think Milo would kill you if she heard you saying Sarah can’t take care of yourself without you. That’s horseshit.”

Jared rolled his eyes, shooting Everett a dark look. Milo was our friend getting her M.A. in gender studies overseas. She’d been gone a year, and Everett was going nuts.

“Forget Milo for five seconds, you stalker,” Jared said. “I don’t give a damn what Milo thinks. She’s not going to change a fucking thing. Sarah’s my responsibility.”

“What, are you gonna sell Sarah into marriage for five goats and a lamb or something,” Everett said, snickering. “Because that’s sure as hell how you sound, talking about protecting her and keeping her from what, getting pregnant? This isn’t the fifties, she’ll be *fine*.”

“Don’t talk about my sister like that,” Jared said. “Just...just shut the fuck up. This is such bullshit.”

Jared stood up, swaying a bit, balancing himself by gripping the table.

“You fucking take that back,” he said.

He leaned across the table, shoving Everett in the chest. Everett, seated but already unsteady, toppled over onto the cushion of the booth on his side. He clumsily rolled off the seat, onto his feet, where he pulled himself upright with the table to face Jared. I jumped up, trying to grab Jared's arms from behind, but Jared's a big guy, almost 6'4", and he pushed me back. Jared took another swing at Everett, and Everett didn't have enough time or clear enough motor skills to dodge it. He tripped backwards onto the floor, hitting his head against the tile.

So it came as no surprise when they kicked us out, even though as far as fights go, ours was pretty lame. Jared was subdued somewhat, and Everett had a swollen lump on the back of his head where he hit the tile. Everett hadn't passed out, so I figured it was okay to just rest a bit on the tables outside. Jared sunk into a chair, resting his head on the table, closing his eyes. Everett propped his chin on his elbow, blinking blearily. I sat back as the chill October wind picked up, watching through the grimy windows as Ray's closed down and the red neon light from the gas station flickered around us.

There, sitting outside Ray's as it closed, watching the busboys stack chairs and tables, I realized here we had it good. The bearded fry cook on the other side of the counter asking you about *Breaking Bad*, the dog tired wait staff who didn't notice you arrive or leave. Existential conversations at 4:00 in the morning because that's the kind of thing you do when everything starts ending. Diner fights trumped bar fights, especially between friends. I watched the drifters that lingered along the periphery tables, draining and refilling and draining again their coffee cups, tomorrow's paper already in their hands, sitting and waiting for the sun to rise.

## Ashes

Fulwar Jefferson lived in a small brick building in the Garden District. It stood, rather like one's matronly, inappropriately affectionate aunt—a bit too stout and clean in all the right places—on Baron's Yew Rd. number 328. Ben saw it wedged between the towering, flowered branches of two crepe myrtles on that unaccountably mild autumn's day as his mother pulled their '87 Mitsubishi minivan to the curb.

His mother turned from the driver's seat to face him, her sallow cheeks pinching as she examined his folded hands and crossed ankles. She was never a beautiful woman, but she had always been lovely, the still-life-painting-of-a-bowl-of-fruit sort of lovely that made her seem too kind to reprimand and too plain to seduce.

"Don't be rude," she said.

"I won't be," he said. "But this is some kind of stupid joke."

"Manners," she said.

He took the fifty dollar check she handed him. Climbing out of the car, he straightened his school uniform and smoothed back his hair. He stepped along the gravel walkway, trying not to get rocks in his brand new sneakers.

Ben reached the door and knocked. The door opened and a man stepped onto the porch. He stared. It wasn't that Mr. Jefferson was too much to look at but rather that he was too little. He had a lot of mouth and not enough hair. Mr. Jefferson was the man you expected to disappear into the wallpaper. He wore a sagging oatmeal cardigan over an ivory button down too starched to look comfortable, and his jeans were faded and obviously stretched around the waistband, as though he had lost a lot of weight too quickly and was attempting to hide this fact.

"You must be Benedict," Mr. Jefferson said.

Mr. Jefferson's teeth were yellow as he smiled, tea and cigarette stains bleeding through the natural white.

"I prefer Ben, actually" Ben said.

They stood for a moment, staring at each other.

"I believe you have something for me," Mr. Jefferson said.

Ben hesitated before handing over the sealed envelope with a polite "Sorry" written in his mother's stunted cursive across the front.

Mr. Jefferson took the envelope, forcing his index finger through the small crack between sticky underside and paper, pulling up sharply. It ripped cleanly, and he reached in, pulling out the check, examining it from every angle for a good minute before replacing it in the envelope and tucking it into the pocket of his cardigan. Ben waited.

"Tell your mother this will cover the damages," Mr. Jefferson said.

Mr. Jefferson's voice had a predictable, nasally quality about it that reeked of many years of practiced condescension. Ben didn't answer. Instead he looked pointedly back to the minivan.

"Can I go now?"

"Not yet," Mr. Jefferson said. "I'd like to have a few words with you, young man."

"I'm fourteen," Ben informed him.

"Yes, *young*," Mr. Jefferson said.

Ben glared as Mr. Jefferson held open the door, leading him into a sparsely furnished sitting room. Unlike the outside of the house, it was not so bright.

A loveseat the color of whole wheat bread was pushed against the far right wall, where a feral-looking cat rested, its fur sticking in all directions, barring its teeth in a hiss. To the left was an ancient armchair, the wooden arms pocked with dents, splinters jutting lethally from



inconvenient angles. The sofa was draped in a sterile plastic cover. Everything else was plastered in a shade of spoilt milk, from the shag carpet to the tablecloth draped across the low-set coffee table. A faint smell of musty linens and artificial citrus hung in a dense, sickly cloud over everything, almost tangible in the motes of dust hovering lazily every few inches.

Ben stood just inside the door, staring at the room.

There was something awful and unholy about the dim, oddly stuffy area. It was a something that existed solely in math classrooms the day of a particularly grueling exam, or in the dressing rooms of overcrowded department stores. Meanwhile, Mr. Jefferson had already folded his gangly frame into the armchair. He looked expectant.

Ben did not move. Mr. Jefferson peeled his puffy lips away from his teeth.

“Have a seat, Benedict.”

Ben remained standing.

“I’m all right.”

Mr. Jefferson raised an eyebrow.

“I can press charges, you know.”

Ben sighed before moving to the sofa, sitting carefully on the plastic-covered cushion. It sunk a few inches under his weight, and he tried to look as if nothing had happened. Beside him, the cat meowed, shifting its weight upon its side of the sofa, marking its territory.

“I don’t like threats,” Ben said.

Mr. Jefferson’s smile was wooden. Ben frowned.

“It was an accident.”

“Your baseball smashed the urn containing my wife’s ashes.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have kept her stupid ashes right by the window.”

Mr. Jefferson's eyes narrowed.

"It is customary to place a relative's ashes on the mantelpiece. I do not believe I can be blamed for the positioning of my wife's ashes in my own home on my own property."

"Well," Ben said, "Customs change, right?"

Mr. Jefferson lifted his chin, his lips drawn into a thin, severe line.

"Your mother and I agreed that if she would pay for the emotional and physical damages, and if you apologized, this matter would be settled."

Ben's hand slid into his pocket, crumpled against the tight cotton.

"I don't want to apologize," Ben said. "It was an accident."

Mr. Jefferson cleared his throat.

"I'm not so certain that you're telling the truth."

Mr. Jefferson turned to his side table, retrieving a file. Opening it, he flipped delicately through the pages before pulling one of them out, shaking it, adjusting his glasses, and looking down his nose at Ben.

"Your school disciplinarian has informed me that you're a compulsive liar. Would you care to elaborate, or shall I?"

Ben's nostrils flared as he crossed his legs at the ankles, gripping the arm of the sofa.

"That's private," he said.

"Very well." Mr. Jefferson said. "According to the records of St. Martin's Preparatory School, you consistently lie about your unfinished homework, you have plagiarized a number of papers, you have forged parental signatures for field trips—is that enough?"

Ben's knuckles turned white.

"You think you're so smart."

Mr. Jefferson replaced the file, setting it carefully on his side table. He steepled his fingers and pressed the tips to his chin as he thoughtfully regarded the boy.

“I think you’re a liar.”

“I’m not.”

“Prove it.”

Ben stared at the old man. He hated Mr. Jefferson’s house, and the way Mr. Jefferson talked down to him. He hated the way it smelled, and how Mr. Jefferson played the role of disciplinarian rather than kind, elderly neighbor. He figured all neighbors over the age of sixty had a duty to be kind and offer cookies or something, in lieu of scolding.

After a moment, Ben uncrossed his legs, and sat up straighter. He forced a pleasant smile, clearing his throat.

“We weren’t aiming for your window,” Ben said. He paused, and then added, “Sir.”

Mr. Jefferson was looking down his glasses at him.

“Go on.”

Ben rolled his eyes, gesturing vaguely.

“The Homeowner’s Association shut down our baseball field,” he said. “The one right behind your house, at the back of the neighborhood, sir.”

“So?”

“So there was a noise complaint,” Ben said. “About our games making too much noise or something stupid like that. Sir.”

Ben sucked in his breath.

“So they told my mom that number 326 on Baron’s Yew Road complained,” he said.

“We were aiming for your neighbor’s window. I missed, sir.”

There was a pause.

“To be fair,” Ben said, “The ball ricocheted off your neighbor’s wall. I’m a good shot. It was just a bad angle. Sir.”

Mr. Jefferson leaned back in his chair.

“326, you say?”

Ben cracked his knuckles.

“That’s what the lady on the phone said. The one with the red shutters, and the magnolia tree out back.”

Mr. Jefferson raised an eyebrow.

“Really? Are you sure?”

Ben frowned.

Mr. Jefferson folded his hands in his lap.

“They moved.”

Ben shrugged.

“Well then, I guess my mom misheard or something. That’s what she told me.”

“And is your mother hard of hearing?”

Ben glared, putting his hands on his knees, leaning forward to shoot a glare at Mr. Jefferson.

“Look, I don’t know what you want me to say. Maybe the lady on the phone messed it up, I don’t know. Maybe the person who told the address slurred it, or wanted to cover their ass in case something like this happened. Anyways, I told you what happened. You happy?”

“Well, Benedict,” Mr. Jefferson said, “Thank you for telling me that.”

“It’s Ben,” Ben said, “And yeah. Sure. Anytime.”

Ben stood up, cracking his knuckles again.

“So can I go now? I did what you asked.”

“Not until you apologize.”

Ben sighed, gritting his teeth and flopping back down on the sofa.

“I told you, it was an accident. I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“My wife’s *ashes*, son,” Mr. Jefferson reminded him. “I need you to understand the severity of your actions.”

“C’mon, I told you the truth, I admitted that *my aim was off*,” Ben said. “Isn’t that enough?”

Mr. Jefferson leaned forward, smiling thinly.

“Not quite.”

Mr. Jefferson rested his hands on the arms of his chair, contemplating Ben.

“Benedict, if you do not apologize, I’m afraid I will have to contact the juvenile detention center and inform them of your actions.”

Ben sighed, looking away.

“God, you’re clearly not a baseball fan,” he said.

“Loathsome sport,” Mr. Jefferson agreed.

Ben straightened, presenting Mr. Jefferson with a look of forced calm.

“Sorry,” he said.

“For?” Mr. Jefferson asked.

Ben clenched his teeth.

“For destroying your property and spilling your wife’s ashes.”

“And breaking her urn,” Mr. Jefferson added.

“And breaking her urn,” Ben amended.

“That’s better.”

Mr. Jefferson held out his hand. Ben hesitated, standing and reluctantly holding out his hand to shake the older man’s.

“Fine,” Ben said.

“Tell your mother thanks,” Mr. Jefferson said.

Ben turned and walked to the door, opening it and stepping onto the gravel path. As Ben walked to his mother waiting in the driveway he turned and glanced back at the whitewashed house.

He didn’t believe in accidents. His aim was never off.

### Close Body

I didn't answer the door when I heard someone knock at 2:00 in the morning. I remained in bed and stared at the ceiling. It began as a polite tap, but progressed rapidly into a persistent banging. I blinked and waited for the sound to fade. It didn't. My phone began to buzz. I didn't answer. It vibrated on my bedside table, an impatient, living thing. It fell off the bedside table onto the floor.

Through the door I heard Amy's voice.

"I can't find your spare key. Goddammit, Nina. Let me in."

I closed my eyes. A distant *click* echoed through my apartment. I opened my eyes and turned onto my side. The door opened and light spilled across the faux-wood floor in the front hall. I could see it from my bed, and I watched as the light filled with shadow, and then the door closed.

The steady clip of Amy's heels filled the hall, and in a moment she appeared in the door.

"That was really great of you."

I reached over to turn on the lamp by my bed but Amy flicked the overhead light. I squinted and threw my hands over my face.

"It's two in the morning," I said.

I felt a weight at the foot of my bed, and my mattress sank a little as Amy sat. I lowered my hands.

Amy smelled like smoke and beer, and her cheeks were streaked with the remnants of leaked mascara. Her whole body heaved in quiet sobs, and she gripped her ankles to steady herself, her legs curled beneath her dress. She turned and slipped off her heels, throwing them across the floor.

“There’s no need for that,” I said.

I sat up, rubbing at my eyes with the palm of my hand. I folded down the comforter and gathered my knees to my chest. I waited.

“Don’t, don’t be rational right now,” Amy said.

“Being rational helps. It forces you to think clearly.”

Amy shook her head. She reached for a pillow and buried her face in it. She wrapped her arms around the pillow and hugged it to her chest. Her voice came out distant and muffled.

“Just let me be sad. I just need to be sad right now.”

I sighed and crawled across the blankets to where she was hunched.

“Amy,” I said. “It’s going to be fine. You’re fine.”

I wrapped her in a hug, pillow and all, and held her as she shook. Eventually her sobs lessened, and she finally pulled her face away from the pillow. She sniffled.

“I don’t want to be here anymore,” she said.

I released her.

“You want to go back to your apartment?” I said.

“No,” she said. “I wish I weren’t alive anymore. I don’t want to be alive anymore.”

She closed her eyes.

“Hey,” I said.

“I’m just so tired. I’m so tired. I can’t do this anymore.”

“Who was it this time?” I asked.

“Ryan,” she whispered.

I shook my head.

“Amy, this is the fifth time this month. You’ve can’t let these guys treat you like this.”



“I can’t help it,” she said “I’m such a mess.”

I frowned and patted her on the arm.

“Let me make you some tea,” I said.

“I don’t want any.”

“You’ll feel better,” I said.

Reaching over I draped a blanket around her shoulders before climbing out of bed and walking to the kitchen.

In the morning Amy stayed, curled in a nest of sheets in my bed. Before I left for work I carefully tugged the pillow Amy had cried into the night before out of her arms. I pulled off the lipstick-and-eyeliner-smeared pillowcase and left it in the laundry room, draped on the edge of the washing machine and drenched in Spray-and-Wash.

At lunch I took my sandwich and walked across the street to the park. The day was mild with the hint of a breeze, and I sat on a bench closest to a cluster of trees. I listened to the afternoon sounds. The wind moved between the trees, and the sun reached through the leaves, and I felt warm.

I’ve known Amy since I was a freshman in high school. She sat next to me in Geometry class and I let her borrow my book on the first day. From that moment on we became friends because Amy decided we would be. Amy is loud and always has too many plans. I can never keep up with the guys she dates, as they change at least once a week. I think she keeps me around because I’m her foil, though she would never tell me that. I don’t like crowds, and I’m picky about the people I do hang out with. I never have plans. Amy is my best and only friend.

I don’t need much.

My phone rang as I walked in the door from work that afternoon. I answered, shutting the door with my hip, briefcase in hand.

“Hey,” I said.

“I’m so sorry about last night,” Amy said.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I understand.”

There was silence. I set my briefcase on the counter and walked to the refrigerator, opening it and scanning the shelves.

“I just don’t get why you didn’t open the door.”

I closed the refrigerator and walked over to the bar stools at my counter.

“I was asleep. It was late.”

“I called you,” she said.

“Amy, I was asleep.”

I hoisted myself onto the stool, resting my feet on the seat opposite.

“You’re lying,” Amy said. “I know you don’t like dealing with me when I’m upset, but I really needed you last night.”

“And I was there for you. I was.”

“You didn’t want to be.”

I sighed, setting the phone on the counter and turning on speaker. I stretched, resting my elbows on the countertop, cupping my chin in my hand.

“Stop putting words into my mouth.”

“I’m not,” she said. “You don’t have to say it, I know you.”

“I’m going to go now,” I said.

“Fine.”

“Alright.”

I checked on the pillowcase. The black and red stains had dissolved. Now there were only damp places where the stains had bled and vanished. I dropped the pillowcase in the wash. While the water ran, I walked to my room and stripped the bed. I bundled the sheets in my arms and returned to the laundry room. The room grew louder in a powerful throbbing as I fed the sheets into the wash. As the sheets began to twist I poured the detergent in, a thin blue stream that moved across the surface in elegant script before sinking. The water enveloped the sheets, churning slowly, drowning the whiteness in suds and wet greyness.

We didn't speak for three days. She called at the end of the third day.

“Good to hear from you.”

“Nina,” she said. “Nina, I'm sorry.”

“It's fine,” I said.

“No, I mean, I really hate not talking. You're my best friend. You know.”

“I know. It's okay.”

I heard her hesitate. I waited.

“Please come dancing with me this weekend.”

I laughed. Amy had lots of hobbies. She did yoga three times a week, and took up one of those classes where you paint while drinking a bottle of wine. Her latest obsession was salsa dancing. She had been trying to convince me to come to a lesson with her. It sounded like hell.

“Is that why you called? Amy, no.”

“It could be an early birthday present. Come on, we haven’t done anything fun lately.”

“I already got you a birthday present. It’s a book.”

“Return it. And come dance.”

I sighed.

“Amy, I don’t dance. You know that.”

She was quiet on the other end. I waited.

“Ryan was supposed to come with me this week. Don’t make me go alone.”

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Do I have to?”

“Yes,” she said. “You do.”

The studio was run by one William Elizo. He was in his mid-forties, had a thick Spanish accent, and wore cowboy boots with decorative flourishes in teals and reds. Amy led me to the side of the room where there was a line of benches. I set down my purse and slid my hands into my pockets as Amy half-dragged me by the arm to the edge of the dance floor, where Elizo stood, leaning over a laptop and adjusting the music.

“Elizo,” Amy said.

Looking up from the laptop, he cracked a white smile, strutting over to Amy. He lifted her into his arms and spun her around.

“Amy, my love, you came,” he said.

Amy laughed and hugged him back as he placed her back on her feet. I hung back, watching.

“Good to see you,” she said.

Elizo glanced at Amy, then back to me, taking my hand in his leathery one. I twitched.

“And who is this?”

“Elizo, this is Nina,” Amy said. “She’s my friend and she wants to learn how to dance salsa.”

Elizo raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t dance,” I explained.

“Nonsense,” Elizo said. “Come, let me show you the basic step.”

Elizo stepped forward and took my hand abruptly. Amy just shook her head, smiling.

“I really don’t think—”

“Come, come, it is simple,” he said.

I walked out onto the dance floor with him, standing very straight. I kept looking back at Amy. Elizo reached out and took my hands, holding them loosely.

“In salsa it is very easy to learn the basics,” Elizo said. “You just take your right foot and move back when I move forward, yes, you see?”

When I danced with him I rolled back my shoulders and held my head up straight and tall. I was afraid to breathe. I followed his movements jerkily: step backward right foot, step in place left foot, right foot back in position, pause, step forward left foot, step in place right foot, left foot back in position. He said the pause was a silent *four*, so you went “one, two, three, *pause*, five, six, seven.” I was having trouble moving in my sandals, and so I took them off and moved barefoot across the floor. After a few minutes of practice, I had the steps down for the most part.

“Now we try close body,” said Elizo. “We just switch places by stepping chest to chest, like this.”

He moved so that when I paused in the basic step, I stepped with my right foot across him, and he followed on my other side, so we switched places.

“Your friend is a fast learner,” Elizo said. “You didn’t tell me this.”

“I’m not,” I said.

My glasses fell down my nose, and my face was hot. I pulled away.

“Thank you,” I said. “I need to go.”

Outside, in the gray afternoon sunlight, Amy told me she expected it, so I shouldn’t worry. We walked to the car, and she reminded me that people like me don’t like to be touched. It was normal. She wasn’t offended. She was thankful that I tried. On the way to my apartment, I told her that I don’t like to be analyzed. She said she just wanted to understand why I didn’t like dancing. Who couldn’t like dancing, she said. It’s like flying, in a lot of ways. Who couldn’t like dancing.

She said she just wanted to understand me.

The pillowcase emerged from the wash, white and clean. I loaded the sheets into the dryer and returned to the kitchen where I was cooking a red sauce for dinner. I consulted my laptop on the counter, checking the recipe for the pasta. Behind me, the sauce simmered, popping in slow, thick bubbles. I added a pinch of oregano and returned to the laptop. In the background I had an online radio station playing soft rock. It echoed through the kitchen, and felt almost tuneless and dry in the silence of my white tiles and bleached cabinets. Clicking between my email and the radio station, I paused and typed *salsa* into the search bar. The music changed. I

leaned back against the cabinets and closed my eyes. I listened as the drumbeats throbbed in my small kitchen, fast and insistent.

The music continued, and at last I opened my eyes and returned to the stovetop. Later that night I practiced the basic step in front of my mirror.

I went back on a Friday, when I knew Amy was on a date. I got there early. Elizo was standing at the table with the laptop, messing with the music. I scuffed my foot against the floor and waited for him to notice me. I finally coughed.

He looked up, and his face split into the same, dazzling grin as last time. He crossed over, took my hand and kissed it. I nodded, pulling it back.

“Mamacita,” he said. “It is so good to be seeing you. You come back.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t know what to do.”

He smiled, holding out his hand.

“I teach you the basic step again, yes.”

“Yes,” I said. “Please.”

Kicking off my shoes, I rolled back my shoulders and took his hands. The music throbbed around me, and I held eye contact with him as he led me forwards and back, across and around.

After a few rotations he adjusted his grip, gesturing for me to follow his movements.

“Now I teach you how to spin.”

I nodded, watching his feet.

“When you go into the basic step, one, two, three, then you stop, and step forward, and—yes, like that.”

I held onto his left hand with my right, twirling quickly. He laughed.

“You go too fast, that is not the way,” he said. “Again.”

I moved into the spin, and as I did, he caught my waist, and slowed me down.

“The key is elegance,” he said. “Slow and beautiful. Again.”

I moved on the tips of my toes in and out of the spins, counting and turning.

“Why didn’t you tell me you’ve been going to lessons?”

Amy traced the rim of her coffee cup and frowned. The creases at the corner of her eyes wrinkled as she squinted at me. I shrugged, taking a sip of my coffee.

“I just thought you’d make fun of me.”

Amy shook her head and set her cup down.

“You could have said something. Besides, I thought you didn’t like dancing.”

I didn’t look at her as I drained my cup.

“It’s fine,” I said. “It’s just fine.”

“You know he’s gay,” Amy said.

She leaned forward.

“I guessed,” I said. “Why does it matter?”

“Just, in case you were trying to get with him or something.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Ames,” I said. “He’s at least fifteen years older than I am.”

“Well, you never get out. I can’t even remember the last guy you dated. If you’re that desperate I can just set you up with someone.”

I stared at her, watching her shift in her chair.



“Just say what’s wrong,” I said.

She was quiet for a moment.

“I’m your best friend,” she said. “We barely hang out as it is because you’re always making excuses not to be social. And now I find out you’re going dancing every evening without even telling me? That’s so selfish, Nina.”

“I didn’t think it mattered,” I said. “And I don’t make excuses. I like to be alone sometimes.”

“Exactly,” she said. “This is so unlike you.”

I pushed my cup and saucer away and stood.

“I think I’m going to go,” I said. “I have new steps to practice.”

During my weekly lessons Elizo began to teach me more complex moves. Most of the time he would just push me into twirls or plunge me into dips, and I would have to go with it.

“This one is difficult,” he said. “Just follow my lead.”

I nodded and took his hand. He spun me out, and then I twirled back into his arms, my back to him, nestled against his chest. He tapped my shoulder, and I stepped away. He gripped my waist and twisted me under his arm, cupping my neck in his hand as I fell back, inches from the floor, before he propelled me up into a double spin.

I almost fell over coming out of the spin, but caught myself at the last minute.

“Not bad,” Elizo said. “Again. Slower, mamacita.”

I sighed and rubbed my temples. The phone was on speaker. I had a headache.

“I don’t understand,” Amy said finally.

“What?”

“This isn’t like you. How are you able to do this? It’s not like you.”

“Amy,” I said. I stretched in front of my TV. The upbeat music from the salsa workout DVD murmured in the background. I reached for the remote and paused it.

“It’s like I don’t know you anymore. You never want to go out and go dancing with me, or go for drinks, or go anywhere in crowds. Hell, you don’t even like people all that much.”

“Right, those are things I don’t like,” I said.

“But you like salsa? It’s like you’re a whole different person.”

I leaned forward, hands on the floor, arching my back. I spit the hair from my ponytail out of my mouth.

“Why are you so upset?”

“I feel like I’m losing my best friend.”

I sighed.

“You’re overreacting,” I said. “Don’t be so sensitive.”

“I’m not sensitive,” she said.

“You are though. You forget that I don’t need you around to have fun.”

Amy paused.

“You’re such a bitch,” she said. “You’re such a selfish bitch.”

I blinked.

“I’m going to go now,” I said.

Amy’s voice grew frantic.

“No, no, no, please don’t hang up, let’s talk about this. Please, Nina—”

I ended the call. I stood upright and grabbed the remote, unpauseing the TV. On the sofa, my phone started to buzz. I closed my eyes and began to dance. My movements were clean and crisp, and my body bent and swayed the way I told it to.

### One of Those Moods

The kids had just passed out. She and Rand always gave them NyQuil on Christmas Eve to calm them down. Without it they were too excited to fall asleep. It was a hell of a time putting out the presents when you were constantly on edge, waiting for the pitter patter of footy pajamas down the hall.

Kate was sitting at the kitchen table surrounded by wrapping paper and bows. Curled up catlike in her flannel pajamas, she reached across the freshly wrapped presents to retrieve a bottle of bright red nail polish, seasonal for Christmas mass in the morning. Unscrewing the top she carefully applied a coat, blowing the tips as she wrote names on the present labels with her free hand.

“You know,” Kate said, “When I was tucking the kids in I could still hear that obnoxious music from the next door neighbors. Didn’t you tell them to shut it off after eleven?”

“I told them twice,” Rand said. “They didn’t listen, just accused me of being a scrooge.”

Rand was doing the midnight dishes. He never wore gloves, and his fingers had become accustomed to the boiling, faintly sulphuric water, the suds grainy against his knuckles and the brillo pad as he scrubbed the pan.

“Maybe we should cut the wires,” Kate suggested. “Sabotage for the sake of our kids getting some sleep.”

Rand didn’t answer. Glancing up, Kate watched him over the island separating the kitchen from their homely dining room table. He was so quiet tonight.

Sensing her prolonged stare, Rand raised his eyes from the sink. Kate returned her gaze to the print. Alexandra’s name was always the most obnoxious to squeeze onto a label, and it was proving particularly difficult this evening with her wet nails. She waved her hand

methodically to dry her fingers, the sparkles embedded in the polish gleaming against the harsh florescent light of the kitchen.

Finally, she looked up at him, meeting his eyes. Rand looked tired, and she smiled a little.

“You okay?”

He shrugged.

“I’m just in one of those moods,” he said.

Her smile faded, and she gripped the table as she turned to face him, the flannel of her pajama bottoms pivoting easily on the hardback chair. She propped her feet on the seat of the chair opposite.

“Rand,” she said. “Rand, it’s Christmas.”

She frowned as he abandoned the pan. Toweling his hands dry, he walked over to the counter, leaning his elbows against it. She watched as he examined the dead skin on his fingertips, still damp from the dishwater. His hands were dry and cracking.

“Rand,” she said again.

“Goddammit, I know it’s Christmas,” he said.

She stared at him.

“We’re not breaking the bank with presents,” she said. “Relax.”

“It’s not that,” he said.

Kate waited. She knew what was coming, and she started to breathe more quickly. Rand studied his fingers, rubbing his thumb and index together slowly.

“There’s a difference, you know,” he said.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Tell me.”

Her pajama pants were too long. They bagged around her ankles. She tugged them up to her knees, and drew her legs in, roping her arms around her calves. She was watching him.

She was finishing up her Ph.D. in marketing. When Rand lost his job, she went back to school. She worked a second job at a PR firm on the days that she didn't have class. Rand had been out of work for a year. Her friends jokingly called him her "house husband," though never in earshot of Rand.

He was good at what he did, and the kids loved being with him. The laundry was always fresh and folded, the dishes clean and put away, and the floors impeccable. She couldn't fault him for that. Rand was growing sullen, though. He picked up smoking again, a habit he had kicked when she got pregnant the first time. They quit together, but now he was smoking half a pack a day. In retaliation, she bought family packs of spearmint flavored gum and chewed it pointedly around him whenever she got home from school. He ignored her.

Rand had taken to wearing flannels, and his sweats were ratty and growing uncomfortably tight around the waist. He looked up at her.

"I can't do this," he said. "I can't."

"Can't do what," she said.

She thought, the kids are asleep. She thought, now isn't the time to fight.

Rand turned away, walking back to the sink and plunging his hands into the soapy water again.

"Can't do what, Rand?" she said.

She stood up. She knew he heard her stand up, but he didn't turn around.

"Rand, please."

He didn't respond. He just shook his head.

“I told you ‘Alexandra’ was too stuffy a name for one of my kids,” he said.

“You—what?”

“I told you that if I was gonna have a girl, I wanted something normal, like Mary or Jane. But no, she had to have some pretentious-ass name that you picked out on some stupid website.”

He was acting like a hurt teenager, and she wondered if he had been drinking. She made a mental note to check the recycle bin for empty bottles.

“But I wanted to make you happy,” he said. “That’s what it was all about.”

Kate ran a hand over her face, her own forced laugh hitching in her throat.

“You could have argued with me,” she said. “I’m a big girl, I can take disagreement.”

Rand leaned forward over the sink, speaking to the window.

“See, no. That’s not true.” Rand said. He shook his head. “I’m tired of this.”

She hated that he had his back to her.

“Please,” she said.

He didn’t reply.

She released the chair, walking over to where he was standing at the sink. He stared at the bubbles and water as he continued to scrub methodically at the pan. She reached up to touch his shoulder, willing him to look at her. Twitching, his hand slipped against the pan as he applied more force than necessary to the metal.

He could not have known that another pot was propping up a steak knife, the sharpened point facing up in the cloudy water. He could not have known that when his hand slipped at precisely the right angle, instead of his palm plunging into lukewarm water filled with bits of leftovers, it sliced along the serrated edge of the stainless steel steak knife.

Kate felt his arm spasm wildly as he yanked his hand out of the water.

“Fuck!”

She stumbled back as he pressed his left hand over the cut, applying force. There was a lot of blood.

“Rand,” she said, “What do I do, just tell me.”

“Shit,” he said. “Get me a paper towel.”

Kate lunged across the counter for the roll of paper towels, starting to pull the sheets off individually.

“The whole roll, just give me the whole damn roll,” he said.

She threw it to him. He caught it in his left hand. He turned the faucet to cold and held his right hand under the stream. The cut was deep, and it smarted in the water.

“Here,” Kate said, reaching under the faucet to take his hand, but Rand pulled away.

“Just let it alone.”

Kate dithered back and forth. She didn’t know what to do with her hands, first folding them across her chest, then moving them to her hips, finally linking them latticed around the back of her neck. In the uproar she had forgotten that her nails were still wet, and flecks of sticky, already-drying red paint dotted her white shirt and the edges of the paper towel roll.

“Maybe we should take you to the ER,” she said.

“Goddammit,” he said. “I don’t need to be babied.”

He pulled his hand out from under the faucet and wrapped it bandage-like in at least twenty of the paper towels. Backing against the counter, he pressed his hand to his chest, applying more pressure to stem the bleeding. Kate approached him, biting her lip, and reaching for his arm.

“Please, Rand,” she said. “Let me help you.”



Rand would not let her come with him. She stood on the screened-in back porch in her slippers as he strode past her, still holding his bandaged hand to his chest. She saw that blood was seeping rapidly through the paper towels as Rand reached into his pocket. He pulled out his car keys. Walking to Kate's Camry, he opened the door, climbing awkwardly into the leather seat.

Rand turned on the ignition and pulled out of their gravel drive. Kate waited a moment before opening the screen door and stepping outside. Walking to the edge of the driveway, she stood and stared down the street, but the car was already out of sight. Next door, the neighbors' Christmas music loop blared "Jingle Bells" merrily into the night, while the timed lights display peppered the pavement and the adjoining houses with a multicolored LED hailstorm. As she turned to walk back to the house, she remembered her car was almost on empty. She tugged her bathrobe closer and did not think any more of it.

### We Were Just Like Them

When she finally reaches Linetti's it's well past eight. I watch her wander between the empty wine bottles suspended from the rafters, her purse strap clenched in her fist. Tilting my head into the candlelight, I raise my hand. I think, I should make this count. She pauses and squints through the dim lighting. The few lamps in the place are draped in scarves, leaving only candles to illuminate the table and our faces.

I wave again. Her lips part in a grin, and she mouths, *sorry*. She dodges the two waiters in white aprons and crewcuts circling the bar and reaches the table in a half-sprint. I stand to meet her. She leans across the table and kisses me on each cheek, balancing herself with her hand on my shoulder, the other clutching her phone.

"Ciao."

She's slow about sitting. I reach over and move her purse into the empty chair between us. She shrugs off her coat and brushes her windswept hair out of her eyes.

"Well," I say.

She shows her teeth.

"I'm ready to drink," she says.

"Good," I say. "I ordered a bottle already."

I watch her lips twist into a pout.

"You know I don't do champagne."

I spread my hands across the red-and-white checkered tablecloth. I see her staring at my wedding ring, and then she rolls her eyes. She doesn't even hide it.

"That's why I got a pinot. It's like you think I don't know you."

She's always moving—her finger scrolling through the newsfeed on her phone, her other hand digging in her purse for her lipstick.

“Which one,” she asks. She applies a deep red to her lips.

“Casa Marín Lo Abarca Hills.”

“Year?”

“2004.”

She smacks her lips and replaces the cap of the lipstick.

“Not bad. You know your wines. Chilean pinots are my favorite.”

I smile.

“Again, you act surprised.”

The waiter arrives right on cue. She tells him to leave the bottle. Calamari to start for the both of us, she says.

She turns to me and then back to the room. It isn't crowded but the cramped space might convince you otherwise. The tables are spaced three feet apart in two parallel diagonals. This positioning creates a straight path to the back of the restaurant, where the walkway turns into an L-shape. Our table is nestled in a corner, closest to the kitchen doors. There are no windows, and the darkness, the smothered lights, and the thick air give the feel of a fire where there is no fireplace.

She clears her throat and reaches for her phone. I watch as she pretends to read something. She puts a lot of work into it, squints and everything.

“It was a bit out of the blue, you know,” she says.

I adjust my watch. It's a Rolex. Sheryl got it for me on our one year anniversary. I watch Cam's face over the open bottle. I want her to see the silver glint in the candlelight as I tug and twist at the metal.

"I just miss you," I say.

She looks up from her phone.

"It's been almost a year, Mark."

I don't answer. I pretend that I am fascinated with the menu. I pick at the plastic binding with my thumbnail. She waits another minute and then props her elbow on the table. She leans forward.

"How are you and Sheryl doing?" she asks. "Be honest."

I take my time with my napkin, ironing out the creases with my fist before I drape it across my lap.

"We're good," I say.

"Mark," she says. "Come on. Best friends. I know when you're lying."

Studying my butter knife, I rub my thumb across a smudge on the metal.

"She loves her job. We're happy."

She raises an eyebrow, producing a compact from the depths of her purse and checking her eye makeup. I try again.

"We're thinking of starting a family," I lie.

She looks up from her mirror.

"What?"

"Having a kid," I say. "We're trying."

She closes her compact and sets it on the table instead of replacing it in her purse. For a moment she remains still, and then she reaches over and picks up her wine glass.

“Christ,” she says. “That’s sudden.” As she sips her wine, her lipstick leaves a half-moon imprint on the glass.

I shake my head. “Not so much. We’ve wanted kids for a long time.”

“That’s not what you said in college.”

The waiter comes out with the calamari and two plates. He refills Cam’s already-empty glass. He is very close to her face, and I wonder if he can smell her perfume. I tap his shoulder before he leaves.

“Two waters,” I say.

Cam gives me a look.

“I see you over there being sneaky, trying to monitor my drinking. You’re not my goddamn mother, Mark.”

“What?” I say. “I just thought you might want some water.”

“I intend to get drunk tonight, and you can’t stop me, Marcus.”

I laugh.

“Just because we’re eating Italian tonight doesn’t mean you get to call me out like I’m a Roman.”

“Marcus is so much nobler than Mark,” she says. “Aurelius, or something.”

She swirls the dregs of her wine and watches me. I fold my arms across my chest.

“It fits. I’m not a noble guy.”

I watch her try not to smile. She hides her lips behind the glass so the outline of red to skin is blurred.

“So. Kids,” she says.

“Just a couple, maybe.” I say.

She sets down her glass and serves herself some calamari, stabbing at it with her fork. She glances at me and then fills up my plate as well. One of the breaded bits crumbles between the tines of the fork and rolls across the cheap tablecloth.

“Nice plating technique.”

Her cheeks redden, and I say “sorry.” I don’t mean it. She sits back and hands me my plate. I’m not a fan of calamari, but I eat it anyway. I would like to tell her that I know her better than she knows me. I make a note never to let her order for me again.

“You were saying,” she says.

I lean back in my chair.

“Let’s talk about you,” I say.

She sips her wine again.

“Same old,” she says. “Selling overpriced shoes to debutantes.”

“That design degree gets you far,” I say.

“Shut up.”

She eats her calamari. The waiter brings the waters and a basket of bread. He asks if we’re ready to order, and Cam says no. I nudge her foot under the table after the waiter leaves.

“I didn’t mean it,” I say.

She kicks me back, hard.

“I’m trying to make rent,” she says. “Forgive me if my humor is thin tonight.”

I reach across the table for her wrist. She twitches, but doesn’t pull away.

“I’m treating you tonight,” I say. “You deserve it.”

“I deserve a lot of things,” she says. “Let go.”

I release her wrist. She rubs her it for a moment before she pushes aside her plate and consults the menu. Her painted nails tap an uneven rhythm against the plastic tablecloth.

“Enough about me,” she says. “How’s your job?”

I counter, turning to my own menu.

“Do you know what you want?”

“Stop evading. I’m thinking ravioli with red sauce. You?”

I close my menu and take a sip of my water.

“Not evading,” I say. “And what I always get.”

She frowns.

“Which is?”

I laugh, taking the menu from her and stacking it neatly on the edge of the table.

“I thought we were best friends.”

She looks away and turns to her purse. I watch as she digs through it.

“That doesn’t mean I need to memorize your restaurant order.”

I take out my wallet.

“I bet you fifty bucks you can’t get it in three guesses.”

“Don’t be a teenager, Mark. That’s stupid.”

“Too late,” I say.

The waiter comes back. This time I order for her. Could I get the ravioli with red sauce for the lady, I tell him, and the spaghetti with clam sauce for me.

\*\*\*

I sit at the table, my feet propped on Cam's chair opposite. I check my watch. She's been in the restroom for ten minutes. I adjust my watch again. I remember when Sheryl bought it. I manage my own law firm, she said. I can afford to buy my husband nice things. She tells me to wear it to work and remember her. I wear it to work and I watch the minute hand tick. I take it off at night.

We were so in love when we got married, just a small ceremony right after college graduation. Smart, successful, filled with potential—we knew who we were, what to expect. Now, things are growing tired. We should have known better. Her work hours spin longer and longer into the night, and I sit at home, but I don't wait for her. I just live without her. If I'm a coward, Sheryl doesn't know how to quit.

I'm reading a page of Ionesco's *The Lesson* and waiting for Cam to get back. I work as a security guard for the natural history museum downtown and I have to keep my hands folded behind my back the whole time, staring straight ahead and all. It's boring as hell. The thing is I've started hitting up used bookstores and buying old paperback copies of plays. I rip out the spine and tear off the cover, leaving only the raw insides of the book. I'll take fifteen or so pages and fold them in my pocket before I leave for work. At the museum, after the tour groups pass and my supervisor has made his round, I pull out a page, read it, and throw it away.

"So, how's work?"

I look up, and Cam's there. She's changed out of her slacks and buttondown and into a little black dress. I fold up my page and tuck it into my back pocket. Her purse is slung over her shoulder like a rucksack, and she carries her sensible shoes in one hand.

"Don't you look nice. I thought you didn't have plans."

She replaces her purse on the empty chair and sets her shoes on top.



“I always have plans. Stop ignoring me.”

“I’m not. Work’s fine. I got through *Waiting for Godot* this week, and *Dutchman* the week before.”

She pushes my feet off her chair and sits.

“And now?”

“I’m reading *The Lesson*. It’s Ionesco, he’s really good.”

“So much free time,” she says.

She sips her wine. I smile.

“My job’s not so glamorous, you know,” I say.

“Yes, but you don’t need it.”

I don’t say anything for a minute. I watch her watch me.

“It’s a nice atmosphere at the museum,” I say. “I don’t mind. Theatre majors who can’t act, write, or teach shouldn’t expect much out of life.”

“You could stay at home,” she says. “Be a wealthy patron or something.”

“I’ve never cared to be a trophy husband.”

“Just a security guard with a Rolex,” she counters.

I raise an eyebrow and avoid her gaze.

“Ouch,” I say. “That was harsh.”

She smiles, but doesn’t apologize. Instead she reaches forward and touches my hand. Her fingers are warm.

“If it’s any consolation, I think you’re the most cultured friend I have.”

“I’ll try not to let it go to my head.”

She laughs, a light, fake laugh, and pulls her hand away. We're quiet. The bottle is empty now. The tables around us are mostly empty, too, and it's long past eleven. Behind us, the crewcut waiters lean against the bar swapping stories and wiping glasses dry. I removed my blazer a long time ago, the heat creeping under my skin, like the fire that isn't there has blazed higher than ever.

Cam's eyes are smoky, and I imagine them to be caked with colored soot. She blinks at me. I feel slow and tired.

"Mark," she says. "What's going on with you and Sheryl?"

I stare at the table. I trace the checkered red-and-white squares. My fingers are too large, and they cover the empty spaces instead of following the lines. I watch my wedding ring glint in the candlelight.

"I don't know," I say. "She's just. She's not there."

"What about the kids," she says.

"We're not thinking about having kids," I say. "I lied."

She's quiet. Her movements are gentle, empty. She reaches for me again, her warmth brushing my arm.

"You've been married what, five years?" she says. "It's normal for things to slow down."

"You're the expert," I say.

I wait for her to flinch. She does.

"I just want you to be fine." She pulls her hand away again.

"I'm fine," I say. "I just need to find a way to make her want me again."

She drains her glass but does not put it down. I watch as she traces the rim in slow, patient circles.

“I could talk to her,” she says.

I shake my head.

“She doesn’t like you.”

“Tell me how you really feel,” she says.

“She suspects you,” I say. “She thinks there’s something there that isn’t.”

She won’t look at me.

“You’re like my brother. Doesn’t she know that by now?”

I shake my head. I give up on tracing the tablecloth and clench my hand into a fist.

“It’s not so easy. You don’t know Sheryl.”

She sets her glass on the table and leans forward. She stares into my eyes.

“I know you love her, and that’s important. Keep that.” Her eye shadow sparkles in the light of the candle.

“I know. I know.”

She grabs her phone as it buzzes.

“You don’t want to end up like me, right?”

Cam answers her phone and stands. She walks over to the entrance and paces in her heels. The rest of the customers have drifted out of the restaurant, and I’m left watching Cam navigate the tables and chairs, talking and talking. Her balance is exceptional on such high heels with so much alcohol in her system, and I wait for her to fall. She doesn’t. I wonder how much of the swaggering and giggling is real. I wave one of the crewcuts over and ask for the check. He returns, and I glance at the bill and give him my credit card. I leave a generous tip.

She walks back to the table and sinks into her chair, her cheeks flushed. She smiles, and I know she has already forgotten what we were talking about.

“Who was it?” I say.

“Don’t be nosey. Just a friend.”

I stand, holding the back of my chair. I face her.

“I think I’m going to head out. It’s getting late.”

She frowns and grips her chair, knuckles white. I know she’s drunk.

“It’s still early. Stop acting like an old man.”

“Cam, Sheryl’s waiting for me.”

“Does she know we’re meeting tonight?”

I shrug.

“Sure,” I say.

Cam stares me down. I know she knows. I don’t care. I examine my watch, rubbing my thumb over the glass face.

“She’ll be watching the clock like a hawk,” I say.

Cam shakes her head.

“Doesn’t it bother you that she doesn’t trust you? God, it’s so awful.”

I help her into her coat.

“It’s not. She trusts me. It’s fine.”

She bats my hand away and scoops her hair out from beneath the collar.

“Stop saying that. Stop it.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re lying to me, and I hate it.”

I hand her the strap of her purse. She grabs it from me and turns away, straightening her coat and smoothing the front of her dress.

“Are you heading home?” I say.

“There’s a bar across the way. I was going to meet some people there.”

“Let me drive you.”

“I can walk.”

I roll my eyes as we wend our way through the tables, Cam in the lead as usual. She walks past the bar without comment. One of the crewcuts catches Cam’s eye and smiles at her, real cocky. I want her to keep walking but she pauses and doubles back. I stand by the door. She walks up to the crewcut, and I watch as her figure loosens, draping against the bar. She leans forward against his chest, her whole body soft and still, only air between her movements and his cotton shirt. She whispers something in his ear, her lips touching his skin. I look away.

I open the door for Cam when she walks back. Her shoulders are rigid again. As I close the door she pauses and looks through the murky glass, into Linetti’s.

“He seemed nice,” I say.

I wait for her to laugh, but she won’t. Beside me, her eyes are blank. She shakes her head and turns away.

“If we were just like them things would be easier,” she says.

“What, in a dead end job,” I say.

“No,” she says. “The way they are. They’re ready.”

A gust of cold air stirs the tails of her coat, and she pulls it closer. I put my collar up against the wind.

“It’s just across the street,” she says.

I can barely hear her in the rush of air, but I nod.

“I’ll still drive you. You can walk to your car after.”

I lead her to my parked car and she climbs in. I run around to the driver's side and close the door. Cam shivers as I pull out of the parking lot and across the street.

I glance over at her, turning up the heat in the car as she continues to shiver.

"Here," I say.

"I know."

She holds her hands in front of the air vent and rubs them together.

"Look, Cam."

"Don't," she says. "Just say good night. She's watching the clock, remember."

I stare at her.

"Yeah," I say. "She is."

I pry off my Rolex with frozen fingers and hand it to her. It sits in her open palm.

"Mark," she says. She stares at the watch. "Mark, I can't."

"Take it," I say.

She's sitting there staring at the thing, and the silver glints in the street lamps outside the window. I watch her and wait and watch her, and then I reach over and cup her jaw in my hand. She is still and silent, not looking at the watch now. Her skin is so warm, but she is trembling. I lean forward, my face close to hers.

She slaps me and shoves me away.

"Goddammit, Mark," she says.

My cheek stings and I reach up to feel the tingling. My own fingers are like ice. Cam is breathing fast. She stares down at the watch and then holds it in front of my face. She shakes it.

"Am I supposed to whore myself out for your fucking Rolex," she says. "Is that what this is?"

“No, Cam, I didn’t mean it,” I say. I rub my jaw.

She tries to force the Rolex back into my hand. I fight her.

“Keep it,” I say. “Just fucking keep it.”

She stares at me, her black-rimmed eyes wide. After a moment she clutches the watch in her fist.

“Unlock the door,” she says.

I do. I watch as she yanks the door open and grabs her purse. She slips the watch into her coat pocket and ducks her head against the wind as she runs to the door. She vanishes inside.

I sit in the car, staring at the place where she disappeared. Across the street, the crewcuts are outside, leaning against the wall. One of them lights up. The other crosses his arms against the cold, laughing at a joke I can’t hear. Their black uniforms blend into the darkness of the wall, and their white aprons seem to hover disembodied in the night. I can see the tip of the cigarette as it burns harsh and warm in the silence.

## Four Weeks

The house is empty now.

I keep the lights on in the front room and the staircase because I'm afraid of ghosts. It's your chair that worries me, closest to the stairs. I can't avoid it when I go up to my room.

I've taken to wearing heels lately to feel braver. When I'm tall, the cold corners can't reach me.

I never liked housesitting, but I can't really refuse. Atlanta is far. Frannie stays there, with her daughter, and I'm alone in this empty house where you died. I check the answering machine, but she never calls or leaves a message. There are messages, though. Condolences. Their voices don't break, and I am left hating them for what I am sure is insincerity.

At work, my boss asks me how I'm doing. She gives me some bullshit about a high stress job and how to deal with loss. She says, seriously, if I need a break, she understands. I think I told you how much I hate her. To spite her, I'll finish out the internship. I glare her down when she lies so convincingly.

Part of me would like to say that this is something I've gone through before, but the thing is I haven't, and I'm not sure how to react. If I had known you longer, it might have been different. If I had known, I never would have agreed to board at your two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old-house. For the price of chores and walking a dog, it seemed like a dream deal. My own room upstairs, an AC unit under the window, and a back entrance to come and go as I please.



I should have known, with your hips so bony and your ribs bulging. It's not my fault. I haven't been around death very much.

It was only four weeks, in the end.

When I get the mail, I see your name, and I cover it with my thumb. I hide the bills and the personal letters in the cupboard by the refrigerator. Today, I lean against the sink and the bone-white cabinets are dappled with the slanting afternoon light filtering through the leaves of the oak tree right outside the window, and I wonder if it's here where you decided to become a painter.

I decide it is, but then I remember the John Constable portrait outside of your bedroom and the story behind it, and I realize it happened long before you came here.

I don't want to imagine you before.

I try to ignore the other interns in the cubicle. It's a cramped space. Our computers are from the 90s, and they're so slow that I spend my days doodling in the margins of my notebook to pass the time for the pages to load. I draw faces, but most of them are angry. Emily, one of the interns, saw the doodles over my shoulder, and she's been avoiding me. I like it that way.

When I'm scared of the emptiness, I don't whistle, I sing. It's funny, because I am a terrible singer. Like walking around naked in an empty house, singing badly in an empty house is fulfilling. It's not even good songs, mostly show tunes and top 40 hits.

I sing while I do the dishes, while I sweep. I hope that the neighbors can't hear me through the walls. Whatever, the kitchen has great acoustics.

When I saw you the day you fell, I wasn't ready. Work had been hell, and I had stayed late to finish writing copy for the new catalog. There were cars in your driveway, and I remember I was annoyed because I had to parallel park and carry paperwork in from half a block away. The ambulance wasn't even in my line of sight. So when I opened the door and saw you being helped off the floor by the paramedics I felt ready to run, but I stayed, and I think I even smiled. I joked with you as they helped you into the wheelchair, and you smiled back and said the pain wasn't so bad.

I was so scared I wouldn't see you again. I stood on the front porch and watched as the ambulance drove away. I waved so you wouldn't see me shaking.

I get afraid at night because it's a big house, and I'm not convinced the locks on the door will hold. The AC unit blocks out any noise that could convince me someone is coming to murder me, so giving up becomes my only option. Somehow I feel like if I can hear movement or creaking, I'll be able to live longer, to win. I decide a cool room outweighs death, because it's over 100 degrees in New Orleans in August, and if I turn off the AC I'll die from suffocation anyway.

I move furniture in front of the door, and I pray before I fall asleep.

Terrance is obsessed with James Joyce, and always tells me a fact about him as I walk by his office. He's in sales, and is always on the phone with overseas clients. When he's not on the phone, he's working on spreadsheets. For holding a boring job, he's not too boring of a guy. Today he tells me to look up this story called "The Dead" in Joyce's *Dubliners*. He says I should

read it. I say, try again. He says the dirty love letters from Joyce to his wife, Nora, will probably be more entertaining right now.

He was right.

The night they took you away I started crying. Horrible, panicky sobs that wrecked me, and I would sit on the edge of my bed and hold my stomach and try so hard to catch the breath that wouldn't come. I called my mom and said I was driving home for the weekend. My parents only lived two hours away. Frannie understood. Her daughter was flying in from Atlanta. I hugged her tightly and I said to call me if they had news about you.

Later, on Sunday, I got the call that said you were going on hospice. They said you'd be home by Monday. When I got back from work on Monday afternoon and you weren't there, I got back in the car and drove to the hospital.

I hate hospitals. It's not the sickness or the death or the doctors. It's the space, and the people there who are weak and fading. It makes me anxious, to be around so much pain. But I was going there for you, because I didn't know your feelings on hospitals and if they were as strong as mine, and I knew that if I were in the hospital, I'd want you to visit me.

Today, someone left balloons on the front porch, with flowers, and a "Sorry to Hear about Your Loss" card. I guess they didn't realize how many weeks it has been since you died. I place the flowers on the dining room table with the balloons. I'm so tempted to pop the balloons, but I resist. Instead, I go for a run, and almost pass out from heat exhaustion. Sometimes I think passing out from heat exhaustion and staying out would be nice.

For two hours, I sat at your bedside, and you told me about playing rugby as a teenager, and falling in love with Frannie, and moving to New Orleans. You told me about your sister-in-law, and how your youngest brother ran away from home when he was seventeen, never to be heard from again.

You told the nurses I was your great-granddaughter. You were lisping because of the medication, and I pretended not to notice. When you grew tired, I left.

You came home on Tuesday, and you couldn't speak anymore. I went home again.

I found out while I was eating a snowball. Limeade still tastes stale to me.

Really, I don't want to admit that I'm scared because this was the last place you were. I keep thinking I'll walk in one day, and you'll be sitting there in your chair reading, and you'll take up your cane and wave.

I don't know anymore if I'd care that seeing you would make me crazy.

I stop listening to the condolence voicemails. I delete them instead.

At work, I cry in the bathroom, and then I overdo my eye makeup after so no one notices. I water the plants and collect the mail.

I think I'm resentful, but I try not to dwell on it. Really, though, this, all of it, could have been avoided if I'd picked the shitty apartment off of Lowerline. I expected thin walls and leaky faucets, maybe even cockroaches. Instead, I got you.

It's easy to pretend no one has experienced what I'm going through. I find myself yelling at the TV, and I've stopped reading books because they know my heart too much. I stay late at work so I don't have to be alone with myself.

I get frustrated easily, and the furniture is looking less haunted and more like potential firewood. It kills me, that they're lonely, and that they belong to you. You're not here, and they still smell like you, and it makes me want to take an ax to the chair, to dismantle the sofa, to smash all the glass figurines along the windowsill.

Did you know that researching "The Five Stages of Grief" makes you feel like a tool?

There's only two weeks left of the internship. Terrance isn't running out of Joyce facts yet. He's lending me his copy of *Ulysses*. He says it helps everything.

I've started drawing landscapes, because they're not so human. Not so tortured and tragic. The new intern sharing my cubicle approves.

To wake up each morning, I brew a pot of coffee and watch the sun come up over the sweeping oaks out of my window.

I flood the house with light the moment I get home. I throw open the curtains and the doors. I flush out the death. I succumb, and I pop the balloons. They were trite, anyway.

## Afterword

### Constructing Skeletons: Exploring the Fundamentals of Minimalism

Minimalism utilizes the bones of a story; in fact, minimalism is, in many ways, the bare bones of storytelling itself. Once a writer strips away the superfluous language and description, the adjectives and adverbs, she is left with striking verbs that create the action of the story. It is the action that propels the story forward and gives it momentum. Characters speak in brisk, clipped dialogue; we do not dwell on the narrator analyzing his or her thoughts; sentences are active and strong. These are the marks of a minimalist story. Every word counts, because without it, the skeleton will crumble.

If actions push the story forward, the driving action needs to be at the forefront of a story. It needs to be the reason the characters act as they do—what causes them to make the decisions that keep the plot moving. However, in many cases the fundamental actions that create the story must be withheld. In other words, the action might move past the beginning of the story, outside of the words on the page to a hazy *before* about which the reader can only speculate; the reader does not get to see the action that creates the momentum. After exploring such writers as Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, and Amy Hempel, I have realized that minimalist stories do not rely on the *spectacle* of an event, but rather the actions *surrounding* the spectacle. I have incorporated this school of thought into my own writing, as I believe it strengthens both the plot and the characters. For example, in Carver's "Why Don't You Dance?" the action of the main character's wife leaving him is left out; the reader gets his aftereffect, sitting in the yard with all of his furniture as the boy and girl arrive to interrupt his reverie. Hempel's "Beg, Sl, Tog, Inc,

Cont, Rep” tells the story of a narrator who has just had an abortion, and her self-healing as she knits her way through the trauma, yet the reader does not see the abortion, or even the moments before or after. Similarly, in my own “Ashes,” we follow Benedict and Mr. Jefferson after the driving action of Benedict hitting a baseball through Mr. Jefferson’s window. In “Her Face in the Dark,” we do not learn about how Cam left her coat at the bar; we do not even see her crash her car. In each of these stories the unseen events are causes, and the stories themselves the effects. While this “leaving out the primary action” is not singular to minimalist stories, the act of evading actions and pulling focus by excluding important narrative elements is a hallmark of minimalism.

In this way it seems that the minimalist short story is a reactive mechanism. In other words, a minimalist short story reacts to the world rather than affects change. The characters are not there to create the action but to act around a moment that has dictated their choices. Ironically, minimalist stories tend to use active language, which seems to conflict with this notion of reactive writing. This tension between moving forward actively while casting focus back in many ways creates the strong emotion and subtle character relationships in this type of short story. Nevertheless, before I go into the character developments and the short story as a reactive device, I would like to examine the concept of defamiliarization and how it pertains to minimalistic storytelling.

### Invisible Editing

One of the processes that I have utilized that has aided me in minimalistic approaches to my work is the concept of defamiliarization. In his essay “Art as Technique,” Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky emphasizes art as a sensitizer. According to the general laws of perception, Shklovsky argues that oftentimes “perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic” through

repetitive, mundane tasks (Shklovsky 15). This tedious process of living through basic actions makes them desperately ordinary and uninteresting; they do not, at first, seem to be anything worthy of painting or mentioning in a novel. However, to contrast this familiarity of perception in the day-to-day life of an individual, “art removes objects from the automatism of perception” through innovative use of language and perspective (16). Art, for Shklovsky, exists as a mechanism to make strange and new what has become stale and typical for the reader. Writing about normal things in a new way defamiliarizes the reader with what she thought she knew and understood, making different and exotic what seemed typical and dull. Minimalism, in theory, uses language and perspective, in this Shklovskian vein, to explore ways to make the simplest of tasks fresh and striking.

In many ways, the role of the minimalist writer is to bestow meaning and significance on objects that, prior to this reading experience, contain no such partiality. Defamiliarization aids in this careful process. Raymond Carver points out this function of the writer as endower of meaning in his essay “On Writing: “It’s possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things—a chair, a window, a curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman’s earring, with immense, even startling power” (Carver 24). In Carver’s own “The Bath,” where a couple’s son ends up in a debilitating coma after a car accident, the son’s lingering cake at a bakery for his birthday symbolizes the future the boy can no longer have. As the baker calls the family over and over again, the repetition winds their nerves tighter and tighter, trying to remind them of the now-forgotten emblem of their child’s possibility. It becomes macabre, even darkly comical. Similarly, the gate in “I Could See the Smallest Things” represents Nancy’s quietly unhappy marriage, something that she consistently worries about, something that keeps her up late at



night. At the end of the piece, she tries to forget about the gate as her husband reminds her of the slugs her neighbor was pouring salt on. She shuts out her discontent.

I have tried my hand at giving meaning to objects in my own work. In the short story “We Were Just Like Them,” Mark’s Rolex gains significance throughout the piece; as a gaudy symbol of his failing marriage, as the vessel of time that he cannot control, and as a sign of intimacy he can only share with his oldest friend. Before we read this story, the Rolex is just an expensive watch. It might contain connotations of wealth and power, but it does not hold any special significance for Mark until the reader sees how the author has constructed the world *around* the Rolex. I have taken something utterly ordinary and given it complex meaning, effectively creating a setting of defamiliarization for my reader. The Rolex is no longer a familiar signifier, but a strange and new device used to analyze and explore Mark as a character.

This understanding of defamiliarization extends to procedural actions. Minimalism tends to lean toward the genre of realism in many ways, and so often includes details of what some might consider the most commonplace of processes. From opening a car door, to making coffee, to doing the dishes, the minimalist author will describe these movements in infinitesimal detail, in a largely active voice. This description of general commonplace action, while it may seem random at best, fundamentally serves to establish characters and the set of actions associated with them. It is not, in fact, random, but careful characterization through movement, the very basis of the “show don’t tell” rule. For instance, in Hemingway’s “Indian Camp,” Hemingway employs short, simple sentences that describe the action, and only rarely does he give us, as the reader, any insight into Nick’s thoughts. One of the most telling sentences is an action, and a brief explanation of the action without going into detail: after Nick’s father lifts the newborn up for Nick to see, Nick “was looking away so as not to see what his father was doing”(Hemingway

17). The action of looking away is informed by the reason of not wanting to see what his father was doing, which seems simple enough at first. But there is no justification as to *why* he doesn't want to see, which is so much more powerful than telling the reader. It is the most basic action of looking versus not looking, and Hemingway loads this action to inform Nick's character.

Similarly, you cannot understand Nina from "Close Body" until you see how she does laundry, or how she sits alone in a park to eat lunch. The way Cam in "Her Face in the Dark" wipes down the windshield for Jim as he drives through the snowy night speaks volumes about their comfort zone and emotional reactions to each other. The advice to "show, not tell" is prevalent in this process—to explain characters through their verbs, through their daily tasks. The art of minimalism defamiliarizes readers by describing the small moments of life and assigning meaning to them in ways the reader has not seen previously.

In this manner, the action in a short story can appear much like the "invisible editing" of contemporary film; the cuts are made so that we are barely cognizant of the fact that we are reading a short story. The writer has established spatial or temporal continuity to convince the reader this is a normal experience; we are so accustomed to our daily rituals that it is easy to get lost in the descriptive writing. The realist writer of this particular strain of minimalist writing knows this; it lulls the reader into a false sense of security by writing about common occurrences, only to bury meaning within these occurrences that it might take several readings to fully grasp. The tension between the loaded meaning and symbolism of particular objects and seemingly typical, everyday descriptions creates the subtlety of short story writing, particularly minimalistic short story writing. We are introduced to things we already know, but with a very subtle twist. In many ways, Shklovsky's method of making things new defies this invisible editing style, and yet minimalism utilizes both to produce a unique result that often creates an

unsettling experience for the reader; the uncomfortable conclusions of many short stories often do not provide closure, as many times closure does not exist in reality.

### Slice of Life

While I have discussed withholding central action in short stories, I have yet to discuss the simple withholding of information on a basic level. A short story, particularly a minimalistic short story, need only tell what needs to be told to make the story real for the reader. You do not need to know the date the main character was born, where she went to school, what she studied, and so on—unless that information is crucial to understanding the story. Similarly, you do not have to provide a real setting for each and every story. Sometimes it is necessary to use real destinations in your work, but only if it is a functional aspect of the story. In Hempel’s “In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried” there is a very specific use of place that adds to the Best Friend’s story, of the hospital beside the beach in Hollywood, and the obvious burying of the friend in the cemetery where Al Jolson is buried. Other writers such as James Joyce use setting to their advantage in a different but explicit way, like Joyce does with Dublin in “An Encounter”—demonstrating his knowledge of Dublin as the boys play hooky. Dublin is the basis for Joyce’s stories, and that makes his collection unique. Nevertheless, it does not detract from a story to give only the information about a location necessary to propel the story forward. If you need a place that is cold so a car can hit a snowbank, as in “Her Face in the Dark,” then it does not much matter where that snowbank is in the world, as long as it serves its purpose. Even evoking a general geographical location, such as the Gulf region in “Blue,” works in its lack of specificity (are you in Louisiana or Mississippi, and if so where in these states?) if and only if it serves to help build the story and action. Essentially, give a story a setting, but do not bother with what

does not help the story achieve its fullest potential. Of course, this decision depends on the story, and the writer, but it is a rule of thumb I have followed in my own work.

Some short stories are not novel-length works, and this should be kept in mind when encountering a piece that refuses to give all of the information a reader desires. I like to view my own stories as a slice of life. As I was discussing earlier, I find minimalistic short stories in particular to be reactive, and this holds true for this point. Short stories operate under the premise that there is a conflict that must be confronted, or avoided, or passive-aggressively left as a sticky note. The fact is that there is a conflict, and that is why there is a story. Carver's "So Much Water So Close to Home" tells the story of Claire, who tries to come to terms with her husband's not reporting a dead body immediately while on a fishing trip. We do not see the relationship between Claire and her husband at any other stage in their life—this specific moment in time centered on this specific occurrence (textbook reactionary) is the story. I write about Father Arnold in "Petty Offenses" because, for the first time, someone is contesting his authority as a priest; I do not write about the thousand and one other times when everyone agreed with him and granted him the power he felt he deserved. That would not be a story.

The purpose of some short stories, as I have seen in various works, is to give a small window into a character's life. It is not to give extravagant background information, or to set up an entire complex world that must be spelled out in every line—no. It is to look at what is happening within the moment and to describe it for what it is in the best, clearest way possible. It is likely the writer chooses to focus on this character at this moment in the character's life because the character is *reacting* in some way to an event or an action that is unlike anything previously. This decisive movement from the mundane experience of everyday existence to a very specific reaction to a very specific event creates the story that the reader needs to read. It

does not have to be a catastrophic event, though that is very possible. It can be as simple as a father taking his children on a road trip, as in Hempel's "Today Will Be a Quiet Day," or as normal as two friends meeting for dinner after a long period of time, as in my own "We Were Just Like Them." However, it is important to recognize why these actions—as minor or major as they may be—are important to the characters. Why, for them, is it different from how it is for everyone else? Why does it affect them negatively or positively, and why does the situation deserve to be given a voice? These are important questions to ask in constructing not only the plot of the story but how you choose to characterize the individuals who populate the story—what to show and what to hide. This is a careful process because it is not always clear what the reader needs to know to understand the story. Many times something is clear within the writer's head, but not clear on the paper, which is where the real conflict begins.

### The Art of Inference

A hallmark of minimalist short stories is the subtlety of the story itself. Another criticism I have received in workshop courses after submitting a minimalist short story for critique is that the action is "too subtle." Many people want things to be clear and easy to interpret and read, but in the case of minimalism a linguistically simple story is not always an easy one. Often there is explicit surface action, but also carefully concealed interior action. In Carver's "Viewfinder" we know the surface action is that a hook-handed salesman comes to the door of the narrator and tries to sell him pictures of his house. But what is the real, internal conflict? It could be something about loneliness, and the camaraderie of loneliness; it could be about voyeurism and physical disability which creates otherness. It could be about expressing violence over loss—or even simply the inability to express pain in an open, healthy way. The beauty of this story is that you cannot sit down and explain what the "lesson" or "moral" is. You cannot even say that the

conflict is solved, because it is clearly left open-ended. Carver is a master at presenting layers of complexity in his stories, conflict that cannot be so easily articulated.

This omission, obviously, does not make the story “bad” but merely complex. Mastering the subtlety of omission requires painstaking editing. The way to find your way out of the difficulty of deciding what to say and when and how is to use details. Details tell so much without the writer having to explain them. Carver explains that the way to carve out the subtle movements and explanations of the story is “through the use of clear and specific language, language used so as to bring to life the details that will light up the story for the reader” (Carver 27). In my own experience, I do not like to use many details, but finding the ones that count and placing them in the perfect place in your story makes all the difference. Furthermore, the details must give the reader clues to who the characters are, and their relationships to each other in the context of the story. Carver’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” gives exquisite detail in the form of dialogue. This story, which follows two couples having dinner together, possesses a distinctly sarcastic tone, melancholia hiding behind brass and boasting. The people in this story never stop telling everyone—their respective others, their friends, their friends’ spouses—they love each other, but in the end, it is the truest story of what they view as “love” which silences them. Their lives are intertwined with vindictive hatred of the people they used to love, and steadily growing frustration (at least with Mel and Terri) with the people they currently do love. The unbalanced nature of their relationship can be seen when Mel snaps at Terri to “just shut up for once in [her] life” (146). There is tension, whether sexual or merely anger-fueled. Terri “seemed anxious,” more than any of the others, which leads the reader to wonder how Mel treats her, this former victim of a certain kind of abuse, and if he is getting away with more than he should because of her situation (146).

These two subtle details signal abuse in Mel and Terri's relationship. Sandwiched between pages of meandering dialogue about love and what love means are these two incriminating passages that almost slip by amid the rapid exchanges. Carver utilizes these very specific details in very specific places to show us how this relationship grows in tension throughout not only the story but in the external world of the story. It also demonstrates how not every detail in a story must be described, and how many can be placed into dialogue between two characters to further develop their relationship.

In my own work, the dialogue-heavy "We Were Just Like Them" also illustrates these details in the exchange between Mark and Cam. Discussing Mark's failing marriage, Cam notes that Mark has "been married what, five years...it's normal for things to slow down," to which Mark retaliates with, "you're the expert" (DeRobertis 72). Mark then "wait[s] for her to flinch. She does" (DeRobertis 72). While the romantic tension between the two is palpable throughout the piece, in this moment the reader realizes the vindictive nature of Mark much more clearly; he is manipulative and bitter, and he exercises what little control he has in his life over the woman he knows must love him desperately on some level. He takes a dig at her love life because he knows the hardships she has had in finding the right people, because it makes him feel superior. In this brief exchange a new layer of their friendship and relationship in general is revealed.

Deliberately placed details are crucial to writing a story. The motivation is there, but should be discerned through action rather than through spelling out thought processes for a reader. It is important that the reader is able to infer certain connections between the characters without the author spelling them out for them, and in minimalism this art is refined in the brief details added in dialogue and moments between the dialogue.

### Considering Closure

While the writing of a solid ending to a short story is an important skill, I have found that in minimalistic writing there is less pressure to create closure where there should be none. Realist stories do not always contain closure because life itself does not always contain closure—and realist minimalist stories are the same. An open-ended ending that has a sense of finality while still expressing the possibility of future actions tends to provide one of the most poignant and indeed impactful endings. Take for example Hemingway's powerful close to "Indian Camp," the first story in his collection *In Our Time*. Nick, a character that we see again in the collection, is a young boy witnessing his father help an Indian woman give birth. He has crossed the lake at the beginning of the story, symbolizing his passing into adolescence or manhood. After accidentally seeing the woman's husband kill himself out of terror that his wife would die, Nick asks a question as they take their canoe back across the lake: "Is dying hard?" (Hemingway 19). The last sentence of the piece is peaceful and full of the arrogance of youth: "In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing; he felt quite sure that he would never die" (Hemingway 19). Nick has witnessed death but is also apart from it; he is privileged and not intrinsically *other*, like the Indian family. He asks childlike questions about dying because he is a child, and even after witnessing death and symbolically crossing into adulthood, Nick feels "quite sure that he would never die." The death Nick witnessed made him secure in his own life. His inability to understand the complexity of the situation allows for Hemingway to write a poignant and simple view of death, and of a child's view of death.

This story offers a sense of closure, but it is still open-ended. We know that Nick will one day die, as we all must, and that this is the pride of the boy at the end of the story. We know that Nick has yet to grow up and experience true loss, and that witnessing death on such an



impersonal level could not shake him the way death on a closer, more personal level leaves scars. I use this piece as an example because it is one of the most fitting illustrations of how to end a short story.

In my own work, I have struggled over the course of the past few months with how to master this subtle, tense, poignant ending. One of the stories I had the most difficulty mastering the ending with is “Here We Had It Good.” I end the drunken escapades between the three friends with this line: “I watched the drifters that lingered along the periphery tables, draining and refilling and draining again their coffee cups, tomorrow’s paper already in their hands, sitting and waiting for the sun to rise” (DeRobertis 36). When I first ended this piece, my ending was the exact same except “sitting and waiting for the sun to rise” was replaced with “and I knew we were just like them.” I eventually cut this line, obviously, and I decided I preferred it as the title for another short story, and later for my collection as a whole. What was wrong with this line is it was too obvious, and it told too much. My characters were too self-aware in the moment, and it did not fit their characterization or the tone of the piece. My second edit for the ending I spent a long time sitting and staring at the ending. I tried five different phrases at the end of the sentence, and none of them felt like they fit. They were all some variation of the narrator knowing they were just like them, but with something added. I went with the best of the five, and so my second copy replaced “sitting and waiting for the sun to rise” with “and I knew we were just like them, sitting and waiting for the sun to rise.” I was desperate to keep that line, but when I consulted Mr. Randolph Thomas, he drew one line through the “and I knew we were just like them,” leaving the ending as it is now. I realized after I reread the sentence several times that this was the ending I needed. It gave the feeling of companionship and sadness, of hope and possibility in the predawn—without my having the characters tell what they are feeling. This

ending gives closure, to an extent, but also is open-ended and allows for future actions to exist outside of the reader's consent.

### Learning Anatomy

The fundamentals of short story writing are complex and nuanced, and certainly comprise of more than what has been mentioned here. However, in the past two semesters, these are the most important aspects of learning how to develop a minimalistic short story that have stayed with me—both from my thesis director's guidance and from the short story collections I have read. I have revised the stories in this collection countless times trying to capture the subtlety of Carver; the striking endings of Hemingway; the understated beauty of Hempel's sentences. In some cases, the stories have emerged more complete than I would have anticipated, while in others, a story I wrote in September has been revised up through March. All of my stories have been edited to the point where I believe the bones of the story remain. There are no extraneous words. Each verb moves the story to its conclusion. The narrative articulates a succinct and clear flow of events that create the world of each piece of short fiction.

Minimalism has challenged me to be brief, one of the most difficult orders one could give a writer. One's instinct is always to write as much as possible to give a sense of clarity to one's audience. It is often too stressful to consider the implications of inference about motives and past occurrences. Realizing that the bedrock of minimalistic short story writing is reaction to outside actions has given me the understanding and confidence to construct my stories around unspoken events. If details and history make up a character, I have striven to demonstrate that the bare minimum of these minute descriptors can be gleaned from an interaction that represents a reaction to all they have experienced. I have attempted to write just enough, which I believe is sufficient for interpreting and experiencing a story as a reader.

Learning the anatomy of a minimalist short story has been a difficult task, one which has stretched the limits of what is comfortable and easy in writing. In many ways minimalism contradicts all of what writers have learned from a young age: to provide background information, to be descriptive, to give closure. Minimalism says yes to all of these tropes, but with amendments: provide background information, but only what is necessary; be descriptive, only when it moves the action forward or provides indispensable details; give closure, but also keep the ending open and ready.

## Bibliography

- Carver, Raymond. *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories*. Reissue edition. Vintage, 1989. Print.
- Carver, Raymond. *Short Cuts*. 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. Vintage, 1993. Print.
- Carver, Raymond. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. Reissue edition. Vintage, 1989. Print.
- Chekhov, Anton. *Stories*. Bantam Books, 2000. Print.
- Greaney, Phil. "An Introduction to literary minimalism in the American short story." *What We've Got*. Web. 17 Feb. 2014. <<http://philgreaney.wordpress.com/>>.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *In Our Time*. 1st Scribner Paperback Fiction edition. Scribner, 1996. Print.
- Hempel, Amy. *Reasons to Live*. Reprint edition. Harper Perennial, 1995. Print.
- Joyce, James. *Dubliners*. Penguin, 2012. Print.
- Mansfield, Katherine. *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*. Penguin, 2007. Print.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. *The Assassination*. 1st Ecco Paperback. edition. Ecco, 1996. Print.
- Ryan, Michael. *Literary Theory: A Practical Introduction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. Print.
- Trussler, Michael. *The narrowed voice: Minimalism and Raymond Carver*. Newberry College, 1994. Print.