A SPECIAL RELATIVITY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

INTRODUCTION TO *A SPECIAL RELATIVITY*

Influences, Aesthetics, & Models

As a freshman in college, transplanted to Boston and freshly disillusioned with California, I read *Less Than Zero* by Brett Easton Ellis and fell in love with an entirely different breed of novel from any other I had previously read. Ellis's opening line—"People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles"[1]—spoke to me. As an eighteen-year-old who felt a confusing disconnect with her birthplace, I understood this line. In all my time in California, I sometimes felt as though I had not merged with anyone or anything there. In the dysfunctional lack of connection between *Less Than Zero's* main characters, Ellis captured my feelings toward California. His clean, sweeping prose meant that the pay-off of his novels was quick. I subsequently read Ellis' *The Rules of Attraction* and his collection of linked short stories, *The Informers*—and thoroughly enjoyed both. I have immense respect for these novels. I believe they speak to the MTV generation—a generation exposed to excessive stimulation almost from birth—in a way that few contemporary novels do.

Sam Lipsyte's novel, *Home Land*, has been called "the kind of book you give to the guy who doesn't like books." At a time when the pool of readers is dwindling, I consider that high praise. Keeping the attention of contemporary readers is a special struggle. These are readers who have grown up multi-tasking: updating their Facebook profiles, tweeting on Twitter, watching sitcoms on Hulu.com, playing music from iTunes on their laptops, texting their friends, checking e-mail, and responding to Blackberry

[1] Ellis, Brett Easton. *Less Than Zero.* (9).

BBMS—all at the same time. These are readers who have been popping Ritalin and Adderall since elementary school for their ADD and ADHD diagnoses. These are readers whose attention is demanded by a plethora of tasks that did not exist a century ago and who are choosier than ever with the their free time. Still, some authors manage to reach them with cult-like success.

Even so, literary-minded elders dismiss Brett Easton Ellis as smut for the anti-intellectual. It is true that Ellis' audience is not limited to logophile English majors. His readership is composed of many who might not ordinarily pick up a book. This, I think, is what makes Ellis and his novels—and authors like him—so interesting. I have heard the counterpoint to this argument: that reading a Brett Easton Ellis novel is like eating candy devoid of nutrition. As the argument goes, although candy tastes good and fills you up, it leaves you hungry and candy cannot cure world hunger. Personally, I would argue that a Brett Easton Ellis is not in fact empty, but quite deep and rich with irony. In any case, writers like him are winning the war against a dying readership and gaining fans.

Perhaps writers like Sam Lipsyte and Brett Easton Ellis enjoy a sort of cult following because they corner 'taboo' subjects, attack them head-on, and do so with a nonchalance fitting of today's contemporary readers, many of whom, thanks to the Internet—and the ever-present opportunity to Google anything with which they're not already familiar, not to mention sites like ChatRoulette.com and YouPorn.com—are familiar with taboo subject matter before they graduate from elementary school. When I read Sam Lipsyte's short story collection *Venus Drive*, I was fascinated by his cold, honest portrayal of a nonchalant drug culture that doesn't bat an eyelash at disaster:

"There were white dunes and straws on the marble, pills and cash on the floor."[2] In the story, Lipsyte repeats the line, "I'm running to keep up."

My taste for edgy and taboo subject matter is tempered by my appreciation for Michael Cunningham-esque lyricism: clean, quick, and poignant. One of my first deep connections with literature took place during high school, when I read Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*. I vividly remember the scene where Laura Brown, the housewife planning a birthday party for her WWII veteran husband, pushes the cake she has just finished baking into the trash. Cunningham's prose struck me as simultaneously crisp and rich. I was enamored with both the language and the action. Since then, I have fallen in love with Michael Cunningham over and over again. Cunningham's *A Home At The End Of The World* is one of my all-time favorite novels, and the self-contained, often-anthologized short story "White Angel"—a chapter from the novel—is perhaps my favorite short story.

With the same awe, I devoured Philip Roth's novella *Goodbye, Columbus*—the classism and elitism that is sorted out between Neil Klugman and Brenda Patimkin—and Michael Chabon's *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*. I discovered something quiet and lovely—and urgent, and painful, and moving—about Meg Wollitzer's *The Wife*, a book that again incited in me that feeling of love for literature that is something like apprehension: as though I risked suffocation if I were interrupted or unable to finish the book; as if the book itself were oxygen.

Old reading habits die hard, however, and I still have a taste for the taboo—Mary Gaitskill, most recently. The underbelly of society will always fascinate me. I like

[2] Lipsyte, Sam. *Venus Drive.* "I'm Slavering." (43).

stories that unearth the cold, stony secrets of the rich and famous. I like stories that explore the dangerous seductions of cost and privilege. I like art that makes people uncomfortable and challenges their happy conceptions of life. I read Junot Diaz' *Drown*, and agreed with the *New York Times* when it described the collection as "sexy, diamond-sharp stories."[3] Most recently, I have found in Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* an artistic balance that is beautiful and pleasing but still manages to incite a delicious panic in its audience. Yates' smooth prose is like a glass jar full of bees: I can feel the humming of the bees beneath every line, the danger of their stings just beneath his polished sentences.

For me, the boundaries between art genres and mediums feel fluid. My artistic aesthetics have been influenced by more than literature. Despite my lack of formal exposure to other art forms—including poetry, music, film, and visual art—they have greatly and powerfully influenced my writing. I have seen paintings with the same aesthetic I hope to have in my stories and novels. I remember a black-and-white painting of a swimming pool in a backyard overlooking Hollywood that captured, visually, the discomfort and stark cleanliness I am to convey through my writing. A number musicians—The Shins, Decemberists, Talking Heads, Wild Light, Phoenix, Spoon, Passion Pit, M.I.A., and MGMT—manage to capture in their lyrics and their music what I hope to sum up in prose.

I find myself influenced by movies as well—Quentin Tarantino's "Pulp Fiction," Burr Steer's "Igby Goes Down," Woody Allen's "Match Point," and Tim Burton's "Big Fish" —together have all the elements I hope to include in my writing: captivating plots,

[3] Scott, A.O. "Dreaming in Spanglish." New York Times. 30 September 2007.

interesting characters, clever dialogue, dry wit, irony, humor, passion, and a wide-eyed, unblinking portraits of specific slices of life. As a writer particularly interested in dialogue, I am intrigued by the connection between screenwriting and writing prose. Interestingly, Burr Steers originally intended for his movie Igby Goes Down to be a novel. Not surprisingly, critics have compared it to J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*.[4]

I hope one day my writing shows the influence of all the artists whom have most affected me: Richard Yates, Brett Easton Ellis, Michael Cunningham, Phillip Roth, Michael Chabon, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Joan Didion, Mary Gaitskill; of others whom I haven't mentioned here—Virginia Wolff, Kim Echlin, Erica Jong, and countless instructors and professors; of musicians and painters; of Quentin Tarantino and Burr Steers and Woody Allen and Tim Burton. But most of all, I hope my writing is something new altogether.

Aims

I have several poems pinned up in my room in Nashville. One of those is Larry Levis' "For Zbigniew Herbert, Summer, 1971, Los Angeles." I have it there because of the line, "If terror is a state of complete understanding." For me, that line captures the panic I began to feel when, as a highschooler, I began to understand California—the California, at least, that I knew, in all it's frightening imperfection. To understand my aim in capturing California, one must have an understanding of my relationship to California.

[4] Ebert, Roger. *Chicago Sun Times*. "Igby Goes Down."

My own relationship to California is deeply conflicted. When people ask me where I'm from, I answer in a complete sentence: "I grew up in California." What is not spoken but implied is this: I am not *from* California. I am not *of* California. But I grew up there.

Growing up, Southern California deeply frustrated me. My high school, Laguna Hills High School, was like the set of a reality television show. I bounced between cheerleading practices and Honors Chemistry study sessions, never fully satisfied by either circle. I think that having to constantly ask myself, "Why don't I feel at home here?"—having to build this great puzzle out of jagged puzzle pieces—is perhaps the reason I became a writer. If not why I *became* a writer, then it is why I *remained* a writer: that is, why I continued to write. (I began writing at the age of 6—my earliest memories are of a deep love for words.) Writing became my tool for digging through all the strange information I was receiving during such formative years.

As soon as I could, I left California. I applied to colleges across the country, with an eye toward states that were furthest away—in particular, New York and Massachusetts. After an especially heated argument with my parents, I added colleges in Maine just to upset them. When I landed in Boston, Massachusetts for my freshman year at Tufts University, I was—for the first time in my life—exactly where I wanted to be.

At first, I tried not to think of California. I was in Boston now, and wanted nothing to do with California. Somehow though, it crept back into my mind. I couldn't help but think of my peers in California—those who had never left. I finally had the distance to examine California with perspective. When I became a wide-eyed observer of drug culture on the East Coast, I realized that while both coasts had their share of

skeletons in the closet, there remained something distinctly Californian about the victims of drug culture I knew from high school: students from my high school who had quietly overdosed on Xanax and Vicodin in huge mansions overlooking the shores of Laguna Beach; others who had, while I was away at college, disappeared from their lives of English or American History at the local community college for methamphetamine and heroin addictions. What most surprised me, though, was that these were not students from families with socioeconomic struggles. In fact, quite the opposite: these tragedies had all taken place while the victims' mothers attended yoga and Bible Study, and while the victims' fathers—self-made CEOs who spent their days golfing and philandering—smoked cigars, shook their heads, and *tsk-tsk-tsk*ed. Sure, similar scenarios exist on the East Coast. Still, there is something unique different about the way things like this happened in California—is it the way people react? Or the way they don't react? *What is it that makes California so different?* I wondered. Because California is such a unique mystery to me, I have, at times, found myself drawn to California literature, including Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Day of the Locust*, and Hunter S. Thompson.

The more I wrote about California, the more I realized that I loved it, too. Today, I have a more complicated relationship with California. California has shaped who I am. Has California damaged me? I certainly thought so in high school, but if it has, that damage has created the artist I am today. Furthermore, at some point during college, I realized that California was not the black sheep in a nation of perfect states. The world of a private East Coast liberal arts college (which I had formerly designated my perfect world, as compared to California) had its own hypocrisies and hidden advantages.

My goal with this novella is to write a commentary on life and families in Southern California through the eyes of a character who is immersed in that culture. My goal is to explore the relativity of morality and the self in the face of temptation.

In its ideal form, I think this novella will take shape as a form of transgressive art. By creating an unsympathetic narrator, I hope that I have disconnected my views as an author from those of the narrator. This novella should be read as a commentary against many of the things that the narrator is for. Readers would be so bothered out outraged by what is on the page that they would question and rethink themselves and their daily lives: How much materialism is acceptable and how much materialism is too much? Does Vanden West say and do things that, in small ways, we all do? Do we all appreciate the level of fortune that we've had in our lives or do we sometimes take it all for granted the way she does?

In Vanden West, I have a character who is positioned to tell the most authentic story about the underbelly of excess in Southern California. In Dutch, *van* means 'of,' and *den* means 'the.' So Vanden West, then, is 'of the West.' An important thing to consider when reading this novella is that the audience to whom I am writing would include a character like Vanden more so than a character like Elizabeth. In Southern California, characters like Vanden and Marshall are the norm; whereas a character like Elizabeth, when she first arrives is, at least in my opinion, much more real. As I wrote this novella, I asked myself: What type of novel would a character like Vanden be willing to read and what type of novel might change her?

Earlier drafts were narrated by Elizabeth Moore. The narration was intended to draw in readers who needed a sympathetic narrator. However, while writing Elizabeth's

narration, I lost sight of my true goals for a moment, which are to comment on a culture from within that culture—to allow the culture to comment on itself, rather than comden it from the outside. In an earlier draft, when Elizabeth was the narrator, her viewpoint presented a contrast to the world of the West family. However, the contrast to that chaotic world, as I see it, is the reader's own life and experience.

The current draft is written in the first person point of view and present tense. First person is both a literary and symbolic choice. It captures the self-absorption of the narrator and her friends, and also highlights the blind spots in the narrator's limited perception. Present tense accurately represents a world of instant gratification and the characters' lack of foresight regarding future consequences.

As it stands, the book is currently in a bit of a Limbo—in many ways, I have played down Vanden's unsympathetic views (I had taken the feedback of readers who could not tolerate a narrator with these views). If anything, the solution is to make Vanden even less sympathetic—so unsympathetic that the reading experience becomes a glimpse into the life of someone whom the reader might not otherwise know. The challenge this presents is how to keep the reader engaged with such an unlikable character. In future revisions, I am considering beginning the novella with a more sympathetic portrait (albeit falsely so) of Vanden which the reader ultimately learns is untrue. A respectful interaction with her mother and stepfather, for example, could help the reader engage with her as a character while simultaneously setting up Vanden's mother's and stepfather's obliviousness to her life and foreshadowing how close she is to the edge of disaster. I hesitate to use touchstones – like nannying, or bonding with the puppy, as has been suggested to me – to make Vanden more loveable, because I think,

ultimately, her character is most authentic and successful when there is no respite from her harshness.

Though the story is currently told in present tense, I could also envision telling this story from a point in the future when Vanden is numbly looking back on the events of this summer after the trauma surrounding Aster—perhaps recounting them to a therapist. I have also considered introducing the current economic recession into the plot and exploring how this might affect Vanden's mother and stepfather. If their financial world crumbles around them, would this humble Vanden?

This draft of *A Special Relativity* is by no means perfect. Currently, *A Special Relativity* is about 35,000 words. Going forward, I must decide whether to continue to think of *A Special Relativity* as a novella (and whether to choose only the strongest of these scenes in order to provide space for new material) or to expand it outward into a novel. I have also considered the possibility of breaking down these vignette-like chapters and using them as material for a collection of linked short stories, each with a smaller, more precise arch and climax.

I believe that fiction—at least, good fiction—asks questions. Good fiction holds up its characters, its circumstances, its situations, to a bright light and examines them. I have always connected to the idea that good fiction asks questions. I write to find out, and once I know the answer to the questions I'm exploring in my fiction, the writing becomes stale. Though so many authors give young writers the advice to "write what you know"—and though we probably all believe we *are* writing what we know—I have always felt, just as Grace Paley and so many other writers have felt, that I must write about the things I *don't* know. I write what I know enough about to question.

I don't claim to know everything about California. I have spent eighteen years in California, but there are many Californias, many versions of California. What I can say is this: I have questions about California. And so I write about California. As artists, our subjects are the things in our world which we have questions about. Our worlds mold us, shape us, and then, as artists, we turn around to look at the world that has shaped us, and we challenge it with our art—with our questions.

HOME

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

I haven't been home in six months and the first thing my mother wants to do is introduce me to someone.

I don't ask her about her recent wedding—the ceremony that took place six months ago in St. Thomas, or whom she's married to these days. There's always someone new. She doesn't ask me about my time on the East Coast or why I haven't called her back in a few months or why I've come home *now*. I don't ask her why she allowed the voice mails she left me to go unanswered, why she hasn't hunted me down earlier, why she hasn't insisted I return. I don't remind her that my college graduation was two weeks ago. She wasn't there. I don't explain that the trees in Boston were in full bloom—green explosions that screamed *life*!—and how I felt a little burst in my own heart, like a bud that had unfurled suddenly only to whither, when I looked out over that audience of beaming faces on that grassy quad, and realized my mother wasn't there. Despite everything, I had thought she might be.

Maybe I don't ask her these things because I already know the answers. Her fourth husband, Howard Moore, has been in all the newspapers. He comes on the heels of the pianist, who followed the film actor-turned-politician, who followed my father. One marriage and three remarriages; one father and three stepfathers; one truncated childhood and three other lives—the newest just beginning.

My mother stands nervously in the entryway, frozen in the shadow of the house's two enormous arched mahogany doors.

"Vanden," she says, expelling breath, as though my name has knocked the wind out of her.

Even the driver who picked me up from Long Beach airport—that small blue-and-white-trimmed building like something out of a 1950s movie set—had been more inviting than this house, this woman. Perhaps the driver senses this too, because he deposits my red suitcase on the cool white concrete and pulls out of the driveway almost as soon as I have stepped out of the car. I watched the town car disappear down the street, all of it smooth and black: the lapels of the driver's suit coat through the dark-tinted windows, the limousine itself, the asphalt street.

I blink at my mother from the driveway, by the birds-of-paradise and the purple agapanthus, as if I have been dropped here from the sky. My mother does not hug me, though she looks as if she might want to. Instead, she invites me inside with a wave of her hand. As if I am a guest. And I suppose I am. As if I need inviting. Maybe I do.

"There's someone you should meet," she says, and then tells me I have a stepsister. "Two, actually, but the little girl is never home." She reaches out to touch my shoulder (her touch feels foreign) and adds, softly, "Welcome home."

Home, I think.

I follow the *tap tap tap* of my mother's heels into the new house.

MIRRORS

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

These are the first things I notice: how many mirrors there are, and that the house is all but made of glass. An oblong mirror runs the length of the living room. Floor-to-ceiling mirror doors open to walk-in closets. The hallways, too, are lined with mirrors, as if the house is trying to appear larger than it is.

Everything, it seems, is made of glass: a curio with windows that frame rows of gold-rimmed champagne flutes and wine glasses, light wood cabinets in the kitchen whose transparent faces are frosted crystal, and white French doors that are a grid of panes. That anyone would find this amount of fragility acceptable—desirable, even—astounds me. What about an earthquake? Aren't there still earthquakes in California? Or has California herself changed, too?

So much to *break*, I think. Not that I would break anything—I would never dream of breaking these things. After all, they are not mine. (At least, not anymore.) As I follow my mother through the house's tiled hallways I see myself again and again and again.

Before we reach the kitchen, my mother turns to me and mouths, "She's your *same age*." As if my new stepsister and I are just *sure* to be friends.

In the kitchen, the new maid is making enchiladas.

"Where did she go?" my mother asks her. The maid waits for my mother to explain her question. "Howard's daughter," my mother says. The maid shrugs and my mother sighs, exasperated. "Oh, she's probably *reading* or something—she seems sort of shy. I'll go find her."

"Do you want me to wait here?" I ask.

My mother seems frustrated at my nonchalance. "I don't know, Vanden," she says. "Why don't you go upstairs and put on a swimsuit? You look a little pale from all that East Coast gloom."

"I'm not a *cookie*, Mother," I tell her. "You can't just put me in the oven and watch me turn golden brown."

"Ah, but we *can*," she says, and now she is smiling. "We can in California." I'm unsure whether she is serious. Then she says, "Let's not be jealous of the weather you've missed while you were away from California. Alright, honey?"

FAMILY

Boston, Massachusetts. Spring 2008.

It hadn't been hard, at a college three thousand miles away, to find friends to take me in for holidays—Thanksgivings in New York, Christmases in Connecticut, Easters in suburban Massachusetts. I hadn't minded these glimpses into the lives of other families: how normal families functioned; how familiar their lives seemed even to me, a stranger who hadn't grown up with their traditions. During the summers, I worked, picking up odd jobs around Boston—as a barista, a hostess, a bartender.

Then, two weeks before graduation, my stepfather's name was suddenly everywhere: all over the newspapers, on the news, and as his new wife, so was my mother's. Soon everyone—the friends, the parents of friends, all the people who had warmly taken me in for the past four years—was asking the same thing: Is it true? Are you related?

When I answered them, I could read the distaste in their eyes: How could your mother have married him? Did she know? Did *you* know? On top of it all, there were the unspoken questions: Your father has $80 million dollars now. Why are you asking us to feed you?

I wished they had said these things out loud so I could have corrected them: My *step*father, I wanted to say.

After graduation, there were no offers of shelter for the summer, and since the collapse of the economy was the thing that had put his name into the papers to begin with, there were certainly no jobs available to a liberal arts major.

Maybe because I had spent four years carefully separating myself from my

home— "I'm *from* California, but I'm not *of* California," I insisted to the crew of artists and misfits I had lately been passing the days with (though I don't think they ever fully believed this)—I had forgotten what it was I was pushing against. After all that time away, I let my guard down. Or maybe, there was something more that lured me home, something intangible.

Although I hadn't spent much time at home in four years, I was privy to my mother's ever-transforming life. I had watched her life evolve in the Christmas cards she still sent, which someone always managed to forward to me. In the most recent card, I had seen Howard Moore's two daughters: the one my age, and the other much younger, maybe eight or nine years old. The little one had been beautiful—a lovely, almost ethereal, bleached-out sort of beauty, as if the photograph had been overexposed and ruined by the light.

The cards were never inscribed with more than a holiday greeting. They were simply proof that my family—the remains of it, at least—still existed, somewhere in California.

PLAYING DEAD IN THE POOL

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

I am floating face down in the pool, drifting with the gentle current of the water. I allow the water to dictate my movements, and my body rocks slowly from side to side.

I close my eyes and hold my breath. A cool gust of summer afternoon air breathes against the exposed skin of my back. I feel the tickle of a drowning brown leaf on the back of my thigh, and I brush it away.

After three thousand miles of public transportation—still feeling sticky from the plane, the middle seat, the snotty crying child, the layover in some Middle American airport—I remember for a moment the allure of this lifestyle: why someone might like to spend all summer like this: playing dead in the pool.

"Vanden?"

I don't move.

"Vanden!"

Beneath the water, I open my eyes. The sound of my mother's voice is muffled, but I can hear its franticness. My hair fans out around my head. I study a single strand of chlorine green-tinged blonde.

I feel the *thud thud thud* of my mother's weight on the hot cement as she runs to the edge of the pool and then screams. "Vanden! Oh my God. Vanden." Her voice is shrill. "Marta! Someone call—"

I stand up in the shallow water, sending ripples to the marble walls of the pool.

"What?" I ask.

The screen door to the house slams. The maid emerges, holding a dishtowel.

"Sweetheart," my mother says, "you almost gave me a heart attack." My mother

places her hand over her chest, touches her collarbone. "This is Elizabeth," she says, and puts a tentative arm around the shoulder of a rather boring-looking girl standing next to her.

"That's nice," I say, studying the girl.

"Say *hello*," my mother says.

"*Hello*," I say, mimicking my mother's tone exactly.

"It's nice to meet you," says the girl, smiling brightly, brown eyes bulging nervously in her plain-but-attractive face.

"Did you just graduate from college, too?" she asks.

"Sort of," I say.

"Don't be silly," my mother says to me. She turns to Elizabeth: "Yes, she just graduated from Lords University—in Boston." She turns to me: "And Elizabeth just graduated from Azusa Pacific—the Christian college. But she's been living with her mother in Tennessee."

"*Congratulations*!" I say, using the same tone of voice I used for 'hello.'

My mother sighs. "Vanden, should Elizabeth put on a swimsuit? Do you think you two can spend some time together?"

"I'm busy," I say.

"Busy doing *what*?" she says. "Drowning? I don't think so."

"I'm not twelve, Mother. I think I can handle myself, okay?" I paddle to the edge of the pool and climb out. The maid hurries toward me with a plush beach towel.

"Gracias," I say, taking the towel, and draping it around my shoulders as I walk across the hot cement towards my mother and the new girl.

"Now that's nice," my mother says. "Why don't you two talk for a bit. I'm going to get some sun before dinner." She walks to the other side of the pool, and stops at a lounge chair. Her silk skirt drops swiftly to her ankles, revealing a navy-and-white one-piece swimsuit. She lies on her back in the sherbet-striped lounge chair and positions a white towel beneath her head.

A brownish poodle puppy is running the perimeter of the pool, lifting the pads of its paws like a pony.

"That's a cute puppy," Elizabeth says. "The cement must be hot. Does it ever swim?"

"That poor dog," I say, shaking my head. "I found him in the laundry room last night. I was throwing one of my parties, and I found him in the laundry room choking on smoke. Can you believe that? No one tells me anything around here."

"Smoke?" she asks.

"Now?" I look quickly at my mother, who lifts her eyes from the magazine she is reading and waves at us.

Elizabeth shakes her head. "No, no," she says. "Why was there smoke? The dog, you said, was choking on smoke."

"*Pot* smoke," I say. "Did you think we were smoking *opium* or something?"

She stares at me, alarmed. "I thought maybe the house was on fire," she says.

"Nope, still spring," I tell her. "*Summer* is fire season. I thought—" I look her up and down, taking her in for the first time: pale pink polo shirt, khaki capri pants, her hair the same shade of brown as the poodle. "I thought my mother said you went to college in California?" I say.

"I *did*," she says, indignant that she has to explain this to me. "Apparently not *your* California."

The poodle comes up to us and licks me wet toes. "I'm not sure why they chose an ugly color like brown," I say. "Mother," I call over my shoulder, "why did you choose brown?"

My mother looks up again from her magazine. "Not *brown*, Vanden. *Apricot*. Everyone gets apricot."

"Aren't poodles supposed to be white?" I say.

"White? Who can keep anything white these days?" my mother says, almost to herself, and goes back to her reading.

When I look back at Elizabeth, I find her eyes on me.

"You look quite a bit like your mother," she says.

"Is that meant to be a compliment or an insult?" I ask, but it seems clear—with the sunlight falling across my mother's long legs—that it's meant to flatter both of us.

"I was just noticing," she says.

"And what about your mother?" I prod. "Are you just like your mother?" She stares at me, as if I haven't said anything.

"No," she says. "Which is why I've come to live with my father."

I pick up a brown bottle from the patio table and mist my legs with a fine spray of tanning oil. I rub the greasy liquid onto my stomach and arms.

"Sunscreen?" she asks. I wonder if the sun is burning her arms, which are paler than mine and already pinkening in the sun.

"Tanning oil," I say.

"Tanning oil?" she says. "But don't you worry about—"

I look up at her. "*Cancer*? Are you really talking about *cancer* right now?" I stare at her. "And I suppose next you'll want to lecture me about *church*? And then you'll tell me that premarital sex is a *sin*, porn is the handywork of the *devil*, and I'm a *murderer* if I terminate a pregnancy?"

Her mouth drops open. I watch her throat pulse as she swallows. She gestures feebly at the bottle of tanning oil. "I just didn't know anyone still—"

"Still what? Likes to be beautiful despite the warnings of a bunch of quack doctors?" I continue to rub the grease onto my legs. "Sun has Vitamin D, you know."

"Right, but—"

"Anyway, I'd rather live a short life *pretty* than a long life *ugly*."

"Oh," she says, and swallows again. The expression on her face darkens. Vulnerability washes over her posture, which collapses subtly.

I have lost my cool with the new girl. I'm upset at my mother, bitter that I'm home, a number of things—and I haven't meant to take it out on this prissy new stepsister of mine. I take a deep breath. "Only kidding," I say, with the same false tone of voice I used to congratulate her earlier. I force a smile.

"So that's really sunscreen, then?" she asks.

"No, it's tanning oil," I say quickly, tiring of this conversation. I give each of my legs one last rub-down. My fingers are still shiny from the oil, so I throw back my head to whip the hair out of my face. I watch white-blonde wisps flies through the hot air. "Please stop asking questions, okay?" I say.

ICECUBES

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

I am sitting at the kitchen table, drinking water from a tall glass. My mother, dressed now, hugs me very suddenly, very quickly.

"I've missed you," she says, and takes a seat across the table.

"Well, now I'm here," I say. I have nothing more than myself to offer, no apology for the last four years.

"Yes," my mother says. "Now you're here. Would you like some more water?" Though my glass is more than half full, I nod. My mother pretends not to notice the glass is full. She goes to fill it from a dispenser in the freezer door, first opening the refrigerator in a frenzy of confusion. The refrigerator is bare except for a green head of lettuce and two yellow lemons from a tree in the backyard, but the freezer is full of ice in a variety of shapes: cylindrical, cubed, ball-shaped.

"Why do you have ice in different shapes?" I ask.

"Because Howard prefers cylinders and the rest of the family likes cubes best," she says. As if she is talking about white or wheat bread, and not something as idiotically extravagant as different-shaped ice. She scoops up a handful of ice from one of the trays as if to show how dispensable it all is. A cube slips from between her fingers and explodes into shards when it hits the floor. The shards ricochet across the white tiles. My mother smiles sheepishly and discards the remainder of the handful down the kitchen sink. Her eyes dart from the floor to the ceiling to me—gauging how clumsy I find the mishap—and land finally on the kitchen window. I try to smile at my mother, to tell her with my eyes that I don't think her clumsy from the ice, but she is still looking out the window.

"Where's Howard?" I ask.

"Playing golf," she says. "A car took him straight to the course from the airport."

"Does he still have anyone to play golf with?" I ask. "After everything—"

"Yes," my mother says quickly. "Yes, he does. A businessman never stops being a businessman." She opens the kitchen window, which looks out to the backyard, where Elizabeth is reading a book, still dressed. "Elizabeth," she says. "Your father will be home any minute. Are you dressed for dinner? We're going to dinner when he gets home." I can't make out Elizabeth's response.

"So Howard Moore has children," I say. "I didn't know that."

"Howard has *everything*," my mother says wistfully, and then she laughs at herself, at her wistfulness. My mother places the glass of ice water, slightly fuller than before, on the table. I feel her eyes zip from my crossed legs to my posture to the damp ropes of my long blonde hair.

"Please stop staring at me," I say.

"I wasn't staring," she protests, "but you really should use some of that swimmer's shampoo. You've only been in the pool once and your hair is already a bit brassy from chlorine."

Elizabeth enters the kitchen and takes a seat at the kitchen table. She tries unsuccessfully to fluff her limp brown bangs, which are pasted to her forehead with sweat.

"My mother tells me you'll be working," I say to her. "When do you start work?"

"A week from Monday," she answers politely.

My mother folds her arms over her chest. "Maybe you should think about finding

a job, Vanden. Perhaps the Christianson family needs *two* nannies. You know, they're a very nice family. Everyone thinks Misha Christianson is just some Hollywood starlet, but there's really more to her than that. She and Nolan, they do their part. And hey treat their help very well." She pauses, frowns, seems to cringe at something she has just said. "What I mean is, they don't treat them like help at all, really. I'm glad Howard and I could find you the job, Elizabeth."

"Thank you," Elizabeth says. "What will you be doing this summer, Vanden?" she asks me.

"Doing," I repeat, "What will I be doing?" I take a sip of the water. "Hopefully not much of anything. I'm taking the summer off," I explain.

"Off?" she says.

"Yeah, actually a whole year off."

"From what?" she asks.

"What else?" I say. "Life?"

"Which means Vanden will have lots of time to show you a good time this summer, Elizabeth." my mother says. "Won't you, Van?"

I slide a finger up my glass of ice water, creating a trail through the condensation. "Of course," I say. "If you like, you and I can have an amazing time this summer."

"Really," she says, her voice teetering between fascination and challenge.

"Absolutely," I tell her. "I always do." Despite my bitterness at being home again, at having to live with my mother again, despite the fact that all these changes are leaving me a bit unsettled, this is the truth: I *always* have a good time.

CHANGE

El Cajon, California. 1995.

When I was eight or nine, before my father died, I asked him if he believed in aliens.

"Van," he said, "This Earth is one tiny grain of sand on the longest stretch of beach you've ever seen."

It was the summer of 1994 or 1995, and we were in the backyard of the house in El Cajon. My father was grilling steaks, which he overcooked that night, as well as all the other nights that summer, despite my mother's minute-by-minute reminders to check them.

"I'm not a wild animal, and I don't eat my food raw," my father said to her. "If you want bloody steaks, Lori, you can cook them yourself."

"Not raw, Jack. *Rare*," my mother told him, the hint of a smile curling the edges of her lips. She shook her head, amused, still in love with him after all these years of burned steaks, and left the grilling to my father.

When my mother was not in the backyard with us, my father liked to explain to me that he was not a rabbit: Therefore, he did not eat rabbit food, like salad or carrots.

"I am not a rabbit," I repeated at the dinner table. "I do not eat salad or carrots."

"Jack! Will you stop telling her these things? How do you expect her to get any of the vitamins she needs?"

"Aw, relax, Lori," my father said, batting a hand at the conversation like he was swatting a fly. My father's logic against anything green was one of the main reasons he was my hero that summer.

The August evening I asked him about aliens, my father ignored the grill and led

me to the crabgrass-dotted lawn that lined the perimeter of our backyard. There wasn't much of it, just one dry strip behind the patio furniture. He squatted next to me so we could look up at the stars.

"We barely know what's happening on our own grain of sand, Van, let alone what's happening on the other side of the beach," he said, and wrapped one of his huge arms around my shoulders. Under the blackening sky, I imagined an infinite sea of planets; I felt tiny and lost, like a firefly. The steaks, like the sky, were also blackening, and my father said we should bring them inside before my mother noticed.

It was just two sentences and I was only nine years old but I have always remembered the image of that sandy beach. I have always remembered that my whole world is just one speck that someone might not even notice in an aerial shot of the universe, and that my life—my *whole* life—is basically invisible in the scheme of things.

There's more to it, of course. What really got me about my father's explanation of extraterrestrial life was the infinite possibility out there, how much we don't know, how much is unknowable, how you can't be sure anything is out there, but you also can't be sure anything *isn't* out there, how much extraordinary mystery there is to all of this.

In some ways, I've never stopped searching for that mystery.

∞

When he was alive, my father was obsessed with astronomy. Albert Einstein's claim to IQ-infamy, my father always said, had little to do with math. According to my father, Einstein was a genius because he summed up the world in metaphors that paraded around as if they were literal.

"All depends on your frame of reference," my father liked to say. He was quoting

Einstein then, though I didn't know it at the time. As a nine-year-old, I was more interested in the sound of my father's voice than what he was saying. His voice was deep, soft, contemplative.

"What does?" I asked.

"Everything," he said. He nodded slowly up and down, as if to confirm for himself what he had said, and closed his eyes. "Absolutely everything." His head snapped up: "Of course, there are no absolutes, Van. You remember that."

From another room in the house came the voice of my mother, who was usually lying in wait nearby, with ears that could hear thoughts through walls. "You're going to confuse her!" she called to my father. She popped into my father's office, appearing through the doorway suddenly. She was holding a dish towel. Her short blonde hair fell into her eyes. "She's in third grade, Jack. *Math* doesn't depend."

"According to Einstein, math *does* depend," my father said.

"Not in elementary school," my mother said. She tucked a piece of blonde hair behind her ears; it immediately sprung into her eyes again.

"Well. It does depend," he said.

"On what?" she asked, putting a hand on her hip.

"On your frame of reference," he said. "Like everything else. It's all relative." He nodded again, slowly, turning over the pieces in his mind like dice in a gambler's palm. "Every last piece of it."

My mother sighed. "Vanden," she said to me, her eyes skirting anxiously over my face. She smoothed down her blue jeans, as if I might have already inherited the critical eye she often cast upon me—upon everyone, even then. "Vanden, *math* is not

relative," she said. "Don't go telling your teachers that Daddy says math is relative. In math, there is one right answer. Daddy makes life so complicated."

My father leaned back in his desk chair and shook his head. "Van, you listen to me. There are a thousand ways to succeed and only one way to fail."

"What's that?" I asked, perking up at my name.

My father winked. "Listening to your mother."

"Jack!"

"I'm kidding!" he said, throwing up his arms as if to shield himself from a punch, though we both knew my mother never hit anyone. "Oh honey," he said. "You know I'm kidding."

"Tell her whatever it was you were going to say, Jack. Just stop confusing her." She dipped her toe into the carpeting.

"The way to fail," my father said, "is never to try one of the thousand ways to succeed." I watched his face, but he did not smile. "It's that simple."

"It's time for dinner," my mother said. She turned and left. It was always time for something when my mother grew tired of a conversation.

Dinner smells wafted through the house to our little nook. My father's office was my favorite room in that old house.

"The most incomprehensible thing about the world, Sweetie, is that it is in fact comprehensible," he said, shuffling papers on his desk.

That was just like my father—to throw cryptic sayings at a nine-year-old. It was always about the Big Picture with my father. "I don't care if you understand the details," he used to say. "It's the idea that counts. A nine-year-old can understand ideas, can't

she?"

Back then, I thought my father was just talking in circles. He was my favorite person in the world, of course, but I was sure he was just talking in circles.

As we left his office, he stopped, and turned back to me. "One more thing," he said. "Change is the only constant. You got that, Girl?"

∞

Whenever I hear a quote that I remember—a quote or phrase that creates a little flutter somewhere deep in my mind—I look it up now, to find the author. Many of the quotes are attributed to Einstein, but others are not.

When I was just learning to read—I think I was about five-year-old—my father bought me *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* for Christmas. I don't remember receiving the book, but my father inscribed it to me, dated it, signed it, and it still sits on a shelf in my bedroom—a different bedroom in a different house, a bedroom that feels worlds away from the one that we lived in when my father was batting quotations around like it was a competitive sport. My father loved quotes, and I love them now because he loved them.

For example: "Change is the only constant." Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher. I like Heraclitus. He believed in the Logos. He said, "Listening not to me but to the Logos it is wise to agree that all things are one." I don't know what the Logos is, and I'm not sure that my father did either, but I agree with Heraclitus that all things are one.

I think it's true, too, what he said about change. Once, my father tried to explain the quote to me: "If you can't see it now, you'll see it later, Van. You'll change and then you'll see it. Or else, everything around you will." Then he added: "I hope you do, Van—that you keep on changing forever. When you've finished changing, you die. Or

maybe even sooner, which is why it's important to keep changing while you can."

Maybe my father *was* just talking in circles. It's hard to be sure now.

Every time I discover the author of a quote my father once said, I feel closer to him. Suddenly, all the changes fall away. For a moment, Heraclitus is wrong. For one brief glittering instant—like the quivering second before a raindrop *drops* from a spider's web—I never went so far away for college, my mother never remarried, and my father is still here.

EGGSHELL WALLS AND EGGSHELL FLOORS

Irvine, California. Summer 2008.

Outside the car window: the color beige—how much there is, and how unexpectedly suffocating. In the car on the way to dinner, Howard rattles off obscure facts: The city of Irvine is the safest in America, and known colloquially as the Irvine Bubble! The downside to safety is overregulation!

"Too many city ordinances around here," Howard says. "But choose your battles. Isn't that right, girls? Don't you find that in life?" He runs a hand through his white hair, and catches sight of me in the rearview mirror. He smiles and the lines of his face crease into a series of triple folds. My heart jumps at how plainly his eyes seek acceptance.

Outside the window, the street signs are uniformly green with tidy block lettering. City ordinances, it seems, prohibit signs that are ugly or unique. In fact, the entire city is sleek, clean lines and beige stucco.

Nothing outside the window is familiar. Our old house was in El Cajon, a tiny city in San Diego, sixty miles south and twenty miles inland from here. My mother and I left El Cajon when she married Robert Ransom, a couple years after my father died.

"The Spectrum," my mother explains to Elizabeth from the front passenger seat, "is an outdoor mall of sorts. We're going to eat at Javier's there. It's my favorite Mexican restaurant."

"People in North Orange County don't know what Mexican food is," I tell Elizabeth. "You want real Mexican food? We should go to Tijuana. TJ tacos can't be beat."

Howard straightens in the driver's seat. "Vanden, you are not to take anyone to

Mexico," he says. He eyes me in the rearview mirror, this time unsmiling. I smile at him. "Vanden?" Howard says. "Did you hear that? Young lady?"

"Don't worry Old Man, we'll be safe. I only buy from the most legitimate dealers."

"Vanden!" snaps my mother. "Please don't provoke your stepfather." Howard places his hand over my mother's as he parks the car. *Step*father.

"Vanden," Howard says, "All I'm telling you is that *nothing good happens—"*

"*After-midnight-or-in-Mexico*," Elizabeth finishes, reciting a line she has heard many times. "That's probably why he let me live with my mother during high school," she says to me. "To me keep me out of Mexico."

As we are climbing of the car, I move my lips close to Elizabeth's ear: "We're definitely going to Mexico this summer," I whisper.

As we walk the grounds of the Irvine Spectrum, I am taken with the ambiance. The Spectrum is lit up to compete with the sky. Palm trees tower over the walkways. A Ferris wheel and carousel turn perpetually in the center of the complex.

We pass a lit fountain. Twelve life-size, white marble lions guard the basin of the fountain. Jets of water gush from each of the lion's jaws into a mosaic-tiled mote.

"Much of the architecture here is based on the Alhambra in Granada, Spain," Howard explains.

"No one cares," I tell him. My mother pretends not to hear me.

∞

At Javier's, the seats are cushioned and the tables are candlelit. Clusters of palm fronds deck the stone walls. The décor is akin to the restaurant's guests: simultaneously

upscale and casual. Beautiful women wear diamond drop earrings and gray cotton T-shirts. They run manicured fingers through messy blonde beach hair.

My mother sips a margarita and tells me I look pale. She pauses to choose a second adjective, but can't seem to settle on the right word: "Maybe a little fatter?" she suggests. "Well," she says, "I suppose you *have* been on the East Coast." As if we all agree that there is a different standard of beautiful on the East Coast. Then she looks at me as if expecting gratitude for the defense. When she catches the hurt in my eyes, she adds quickly: "Not *fat*, honey. Of course you're not fat. I don't mean that. You probably couldn't get fat if you tried. You just look a little—have you gained weight?"

"That's funny. Marshall says the same thing to me all the time," I tell her. "It's as if people in California don't know what *fat* is. I've *seen* pictures of fat people. They live in Alabama. We are *not* fat."

Everyone looks at Elizabeth, who might take offense to this since she has been living in the South. "Who's Marshall?" she asks, and everyone relaxes.

"Vanden's going to marry Marshall," my mother says. She sips her margarita.

"I am not!"

"Oh honey, Elizabeth is family," my mother says. "We can tell her these things. Besides, Vanden, who is she going to tell? You haven't even introduced her to anyone yet." Then she adds: "Don't worry about the weight gain, all right? It's not a problem, honey. We'll get you a gym membership, maybe set up an appointment with Louisa. She's worked wonders for me this year." She turns back to Elizabeth: "Louisa is my Swedish personal trainer—and a miracle worker."

"Mother," I say, "will you *please* stop talking about my weight?"

Howard frowns at me. "Vanden, we're only home for one night. The least you can do is be nice to your mother for one hour while we pay for dinner."

"Excuse me," I say, "but *she* is the one being mean to *me*."

"Where are you going?" Elizabeth asks her father.

"What do you mean, Honey? I'm not going anywhere. I'm sitting at dinner." Howard laughs.

"You said you're only home for one night," she presses. "You're—are you leaving?"

"Oh. Oh, yes. We're going to Napa Valley."

My mother's eyes grow wide. "Wine country!" she says. "We're very excited."

Howard leans back in his chair. "We'll tour the vineyards, taste some vino—"

"Oh, that's right," I say. "I think I remember you mentioning this, Mother—that you're getting your tits redone?"

"Vanden!" Howard says. He looks at my mother, and then at me. Finally, he says, "Don't say *tit*."

"Why? Cows have tits," I point out.

"No, cows have *teats*," Howard says.

"It's alright," my mother says. "I'm not very private about these things." She looks into her margarita and shrugs. "Then again, when you live around here, you tend to forget what there is to be private about!" I don't laugh. "Anyway, that's right. I'm getting my breasts redone." Elizabeth nods hesitantly. "Just a lift," my mother says. "Nothing too invasive. I had my second augmentation about three years ago, so just a lift this time around."

"We decided to have the operation done in Napa so that Lori can relax," Howard says. "We'll spend a couple weeks up there while she recovers."

"The doctor we go to up there did my eyebrow work last year, so we have a relationship with him."

I study my mother as she says this. It seems like the only thing that remains unchanged about her now is her hair: short, blonde, tousled and curly.

My mother wasn't always like this. Piece by piece, she crumbled before my eyes after my father died. Then she emerged, like a phoenix from the ashes—colorful new feathers: jewelry, dresses, and all the glittering plumage that came along with marriage to a new man. Each marriage was like this: a death, and then a birth with renewed vigor.

My mother shifts uncomfortably in her chair. "I know you don't approve of these things," she says to me.

"But I'm not your mother, am I?" I say.

"Frankly, Vanden, I don't know where you get you distaste for elective surgery. Because elective surgery is really about happiness, when you get right down to it."

"I just have one question for you," I say.

"What's that?" she asks.

"W.W.J.D."

"Excuse me?"

"The acronym for 'What would Jesus do?' "

"What are you talking about, Vanden?" she asks.

"I just wonder, since you seem to be so religious these days, whether you think Jesus approves of plastic surgery."

"Jesus wants us to be happy," my mother says.

Howard coughs. "We should all take a trip to Napa this summer."

"It's beautiful, *really* beautiful," my mother says. "I think you girls might like it. We have several wineries we just love, and we always stay at the Auberge Du Soleil."

"A beautiful vacation for a beautiful woman," Howard says.

"Oh, Howard," my mother says, and blushes.

∞

The waiter at Javier's comes to take our orders. My mother looks flustered, as if she did not realize the restaurant served food. For a brief moment in her vulnerability, behind the strands of blonde hair that fall over her face, I see my mother's eyes the way they used to be.

My mother orders another margarita and no dinner. The waiter moves on to Howard, who orders a lobster enchilada. I order a salad with crab. Everyone waits for Eliazabeth to order. She seems to have just noticed the menu for in front of her.

"Do you have a recommendation?" she asks the waiter. The waiter recommends the Enchiladas Poblanos. She smiles, relieved, and nods.

Before the waiter leaves, my mother orders a round of house margaritas for the table.

"Don't make me drink alone, girls," she says playfully.

"Never," I say.

"Did anyone bring the puppy inside before we left?" my mother asks.

"How long have you had the puppy?" Elizabeth asks.

"Since before we left for Paris," Howard says. Like the rest of the world, I have

read about their trip to Paris in *The New York Times*:

EX-AMERICARE MORTGAGE CORP. CEO HOWARD MOORE STEPS DOWN, JETS TO PARIS WITH SOCIALITE WIFE LORI WEST AFTER SIGNING CONTRACT TO RETAIN $80 MILLION IN UNSPECIFIED 'CONSULTING FEES.'

According to the papers, Howard and my mother had spent a month in Paris to let things cool down in the United States, before returning two weeks later to fresh allegations that called the exorbitant consulting fees 'hush money'. *The New York Times* had had something to say about that, too:

MOORE'S ATTORNEY CALLS SUIT 'HOGWASH.'

"When does Alexandria get home?" Elizabeth asks.

"Alexandria," my mother says, as if remembering. "When does Alexandria get home?" She looks at Howard.

"Who's Alexandria?" I ask.

"My little sister," Elizabeth says.

"I think Alexandria is at tennis camp this month," my mother says. "I'll have to check my calendar when we get home. Is that right, Howard? Tennis camp this month? Don't worry about her, Elizabeth—really. We sent her nanny with her, and she's probably having the time of her life right now."

"Alexandria wanted the puppy," Howard says. "We got the puppy for Alexandria."

"Sound like good parenting in a nutshell," I say. "Puppies and summer camp. What more could any child want?"

"Maybe love?" Elizabeth says. The edge in her voice pleases me. So something

is going on behind those brown eyes.

"Girls, girls," my mother says. "Let's be nice now. Vanden, why don't you tell us how you've been. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"As a matter of fact," I say, "I, uh—I got something that I've been meaning to share with you."

"Got something?" Howard asks.

"You didn't get a puppy, did you?" my mother asks.

"Nope."

"What did you get, Sweetie?" Howard says. *Sweetie.* He's so quick to ingratiate me into this new family. My mother waits for me to speak. Her eyes search my face for hints.

"Well, *technically*, I got an F in math," I say.

My mother's mouth drops. "What do you mean 'technically?' " she asks.

"Technically," Howard says, "it sounds like she got an F in math."

"I mean, according to the *facts*," I say.

"What else *is* there, Vanden?" my mother says, "besides the *facts*?"

"Oh, *lots* of things," I explain. "Fiction. Feelings."

"Really, Vanden!" my mother says, and it's clear the news has sunk in now. "So you didn't graduate?" I don't answer her. "With everything we're going through right now? How could you *do* this to us?"

"Vanden," Howard says, shaking his head. "Now why would you do that, Honey?" *Honey.*

"Actually, I didn't *do* anything," I say. "That may have been the problem."

"Where's the waiter with my damn margarita?" my mother yells. "Waiter!" she calls. When the waiter brings her the margarita, she sips deeply, without using the straw. She swallows and then asks again, "So then you didn't graduate?" Salt and ice coat her upper lip, a strange eyesore on her otherwise meticulously made-up face.

"You could say that," I say.

My mother appears deep in thought for a moment. She takes another sip of the margarita. She laughs—high, shrieking, like a broken bell—and smiles. "So tell me, Sweetheart," she say, "since you've come home single and without a degree, what have you been *doing* for the last four years?"

"Lori," Howard says.

"I think I'm going to be sick," my mother says, and stands. "I just—after everything—after *everything* we've done for you, sometimes you are the most ungrateful—"

"Everything you've *done* for me?" I say.

"Don't argue with your mother," Howard says.

"Who do you think has been paying the bills to fund your tuition?" my mother snaps.

"Not you," I say.

Her eyes narrow dangerously. "You've depleted the college savings account your own father worked tirelessly to save for you, and you don't even *graduate*?" At the mention of my father, my skin goes cold. "Now what?" she asks. "I suppose you're going to ask Howard to pay for another semester?"

"This isn't about money," Howard says.

"Not another *semester*, Mother," I correct her. "Another *class*. Jesus."

"Maybe we should go," Howard says.

"Maybe Elizabeth should go back to college," my mother says, still standing, "and then come home when she graduates, which, given her track record, may be *never*!" Patrons at the other tables turn to look at us. My mother notices their eyes and sits down, suddenly deflated. She studies the cream-colored tablecloth and shakes her head. "I really wanted you to graduate, Vanden," she says, and she sounds as if she might cry.

"It's really not a big deal," I say. "It's just one class."

"In all honesty," Elizabeth says, "I haven't heard of very many people graduating in four years anyway. At least, not recently. People don't do that anymore, right?"

I look at Elizabeth, whose eyes are sincere. She seems genuinely interested in smoothing out the matter. "No, they don't," I confirm.

Then she adds, "College isn't about graduation. It's the *journey* that counts, not the destination. Isn't that right, Dad?" I have to laugh.

"Well, Vanden," my mother says, "I hope you enjoyed the $200,000 dollar journey."

"I did," I say.

"Who needs *math* when there is so much else to do in college? Right?" Elizabeth says, and I find myself liking this girl.

"Graduating from college on time is like leaving the party early," I say, and watch my mother for a reaction.

Her eyes are fixed on me as she takes another gulp of margarita. I think she hasn't heard me, but after she swallows she says coolly: "Don't be smart with me,

Vanden."

"So what are you girls going to do while we're gone?" Howard asks. "Any plans?" I smile. What does he *think* we're going to do while they're gone? "Vanden?" he asks. "Do you have something you would like to share with us?"

I shake my head slowly from side to side. "I'm warning you, Vanden," my mother says, but does not finish.

∞

When we return home, the house is just as we left it: too large, too white, too full of air and pale light, even now that it's evening. Light floors, white walls. I can already hear my mother's voice in my head, the way she corrected me about the poodle: "Not *white*, Vanden. *Eggshell*." Eggshell walls and eggshell floors.

In a house like this, a family could live together and never come within thirty feet of one another.

Alone in my new bedroom that night—my first in California after four years—I think about this strange new family. I think about Howard and my mother and Elizabeth. Leaving the restaurant, I had whispered to Elizabeth, "I think the two of us might just get along," and she had smiled, flattered. I think about the missing little girl called Alexandria. In the space between wakefulness and sleep, I imagine a tiny pig-tailed child floating around an endless summer camp.

Then I think about the California I used to know, the California of my childhood. It hasn't been anything like that for a long time now.

LUNA THE CAT

El Cajon, California. 1995 - 1997.

When we lived in El Cajon, my mother commuted every day to the University of California, San Diego, where she was an administrative assistant in the English Department. She liked working in the English department for its scent: the dusty-sweet smell of old books. Like a library, she told me. During the day, she answered to sleepy-eyed co-eds. At night, she wrote poetry.

Beneath the gray slacks and tweed coats she wore to campus everyday, her slight frame was graceful. Of course, she never appeared remotely feminine to me at the time—mothers are a different breed of female when you're young. Today it's clear to me that my mother was always attractive but that, back then, she did not know it. Or maybe she didn't care.

But there are photos of her, photos my father must have taken because she's smiling a smile that I have not seen since his death, a smile reserved only for her high school sweetheart. The other thing that never made it out of that house in El Cajon was my mother's poetry.

When I was very young, the three of us took a road trip to Northern California. He donned a huge, floppy brown park ranger hat and took the driver's seat of a rented motor home. During the hours of driving, my mother and I invented our own version of "I Spy" in which we named everything we could think of that was a certain color.

"Snow!" I screamed, looking to mountains out the window.

"Angels," my mother said softly.

"Milk."

"Albino animals," she said.

"What's albino?" I asked.

"Lacking pigment."

"Can pigs lack pigment?"

"Can rhinos be albino?" my mother quipped. I cracked up. "Alright. Back to white," she said.

"Eggs."

"Not all eggs," my mother said.

"Yes so," I said.

"What about Robin's Eggs? I think Robin's Eggs are blue, Vanden," she said.

"Then let's play Blue," I said. "Me first! Sky."

"Ocean," she said, looking out the window.

"Blueberries!"

"Boys," my father said.

"*No!*" I scowled. "Daddy, you're ruining it. *Boys* are not *blue*."

"Yes, they are," he said. "Just like girls are pink." My mother shook her head. She was taking a course at the college in Gender Studies at the time. She had liked the course, but not the professor, a squat lesbian with four cats.

"Blue Jays," I said.

"Liberals," my father said.

"Daddy, stop!"

"It's true, honey. Democrats are blue and Republicans are red."

"Eyes," my mother said.

"Not all eyes!" I objected.

"Yes so," she said, imitating me.

"Not mine," I said.

"Then let's play Green," she said.

We had other games, too. Back then, my mother loved similes. She would point out the window at a flock of birds in the sky and we would all come up with comparisons.

"Like pepper!" I screamed, my giddy seven-year-old voice squeaking with excitement.

"Like ashes," my mother said.

"Chocolate chips!" my father said. "I'm hungry. Where's lunch?"

Sometimes I like to think that my mother is the same person today and always has been. That all the things she is now were seeds inside her all along. It's much harder to admit that she is nearly unrecognizable now.

As I grew older, my mother's answers to our games became more abstract: for black, she might say 'secrets.'

After my father died, my mother bought me a kitten. *Something to occupy her*, my mother must have thought, and bought me a kitten. The kitten, named Luna, had been born at the house of the Gender Studies professor, and if that was not enough reason to hate the new kitten (even I knew that my mother didn't like the woman), I always considered Luna a twisted consolation prize for my father's absence. Something to occupy me while my mother pulled her hair out and stayed awake crying until 3 a.m.

every night for the next year.

Even as a kitten, Luna had an awful personality. She bit from time to time. If you were walking by, she might suddenly attack your leg—just for kicks, just because she had the energy.

"But she's *beautiful*," my mother said. "Isn't she beautiful?" It was true. Luna looked like a tiny blue-eyed lamb. To my mother, Luna was living art. Whether she had a soul was sort of irrelevant. She was another piece of the house, a decoration.

Even as a child, I could never escape the feeling that if Luna had been gray and homely and unfriendly, we might have gotten rid of her, but because she was a solid white, sapphire-eyed Himalayan, because she was *beautiful*, she stayed.

ROBERT

New York City, New York. 1998.

When I was in sixth grade, my mother's second husband, Robert, flew my mother and me from California to New York City to visit him.

Robert was a pale, good-looking man who carried with him an air of effortless perfection. His hair was very white, like his teeth and the whites of his eyes. He maintained a tan year round, though he was still pale beneath it: a sort of stark cleanliness that never left him. His skin reminded me of a stained glass vase my mother and I had at home. I couldn't escape the sense that just beneath his translucent tan lay a pallid body of water, a lack of color, or nothing at all.

Beside him, my mother looked like a small woodland creature with her light hair and rabbit-soft eyes: something to be chased out of the way of traffic. My mother incited in men the urge to protect. She had the face of a Barbie doll, her features tiny and defined. She was very feminine; there was nothing strong or self-sufficient about her. I suppose she was just incompetent-looking enough to be found attractive.

Robert starred in movies. Robert was, according to millions of American fans, an *actor*. It would be the first of my mother's celebrity relationships. She was made for them. We had no idea until my father died. The irony still causes a sudden pain to bloom in my chest when I think about the things my father's death opened up to us.

Even then, Robert's 'acting' seemed like a flimsy career in my mind: abstract and unreal. So he stars in movies, I thought, but what does he really *do*? I had heard of Robert before my mother began dating him. I knew what he looked like, what his voice sounded like, and so did all my eleven-and-a-half-going-on-twenty-year-old girl friends.

Though I missed my father in excruciating ways, I knew my mother needed someone. Robert Ransom was that someone. Well, the *first* someone.

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It was May. My mother and I were in New York City, and I was wild with the bliss of over-stimulation: words scroll around building tops on huge electronic screens; beautiful women are splayed across walls, their rose-red lips as tall and wide as houses; taxis whiz by us like comets, leaving behind streaks of squealing yellow; ten thousand rainbows of lights glow like stars and debris.

Beneath all of this, the asphalt street, like a long black tongue, was soft and faintly moist from the day's rain. The air was as muggy as a mouth. And the rain, it seemed, had fallen just to remind me that we had *really* left California. (Rain during the *summer*? *This* was a new concept.)

This memory comes back to me as a series of images: impressive legs stuffed into sky-scraper high stilettos, wiry hands clutching purses, pinstripe suits crumpled from humidity, the many shades of skin and hair, so many textures, so many souls, so much *noise*! Walking down 5th Avenue with my mother and Robert, the people of New York City seemed to me like bees crammed into a jar, the lid cruelly twisted shut, and all of them squealing in high-pitched voices to be let out, struggling, suffocating, screaming. That was New York City.

Robert walked ahead of us, babbling about the restaurant: how the chef, Nobu Matsuhisa, was world-famous, and had opened locations in London, Milan, Dubai, Moscow, Athens, Mykonos—fluttering names I had never heard.

"I'll slip in and check on our reservation," he said. "You two wait here."

Though we didn't know it at the time, Robert had gone to peek inside the restaurant and scan it for his other mistresses. My mother was only one of them—the most persistent; perhaps, the most naïve. My mother had wanted a ring. She had wanted *him*, or at least she had convinced herself of this. The *other* girls had wanted jewelry, houses, cars, puppies, coats, autographs for friends. They weren't like my mother, not the way she was back then.

Robert's other girls knew about my mother. *Of course* they knew about my mother: She was Lori West. People knew her now. Her marriage to Robert had catapulted her to a level of fame that we—my mother and I—were not accustomed. My mother and I were not accustomed to fame.

For his part, Robert had never lived *without* fame. He was the preeminent playboy of the day, the catch that could not be caught. Their marriage was the talk of the gossip rags. The tabloids loved my mother. Imagine their rapture: Here was a beautiful, unsullied young *secretary*, blonde and blue-eyed, bushy-tailed. Here she was, engaged and quickly married to a womanizing *celebrity* who had never been committed to anything but the Quentin Tarantino films he so flourished in, let alone married. The tabloids lapped up my mother and Robert: *She didn't know who he was when they met!* they screamed. *He fell for her because of it!*

Thanks to the tabloids, there was nothing Robert could have done to hide my mother from his other women. So of course they knew about her. Still, they didn't need her traipsed across their three-course meals with another gentleman. And so Robert was careful to head off a scene while we waited outside.

(My mother did *not* know about them—at least, not yet, not on this particular

summer night in Manhattan.)

The restaurant, named Nobu after the chef, was a Japanese-fusion place on West 57th Street. It was one of those extravagant affairs with simple, spare dishes. There were eighteen entrées on the menu. Robert waved the waiter over and ordered them all.

"We'll have all eighteen," he said.

"Anything else?" the waiter asked, eyes blank, poker-faced, as if people ordered the entire menu all the time. Maybe they did. I found the waiter's question amusing. Anything else? What *else* could Robert possibly order?

"And a bottle of white. The Chassagne Montrachet," Robert said. It was the second-most expensive wine on the menu. It cost almost two hundred dollars.

"But there are only three of us," my mother could have protested. Or, "Robert, Vanden is only twelve, we wouldn't want her to think this is normal behavior at a restaurant." Or: "Robert, you know, I'm really trying to watch my figure these days. I would be fine with just the sashimi salad…"

My mother said none of those things. Instead, she sat there, in a brown leather chair that struck me as regal, with her hands folded in her lap, cheeks flushed. Cobalt blue candles glowed on the table.

"Oh, Robert," she said. "Really?" You could tell from the gentle awe in her eyes that she wanted him to say: *Yes, Lori, really. No, Lori, you're not dreaming. I am, in fact, ordering the entire menu.*

Smiling, Robert said, "Anything—no, *every*thing—for you, darling." My mother beamed like a child who has received too many presents on her birthday and knows, smugly, that she is spoiled. A tight-lipped smile hid her guilty ecstasy.

The waiter moved us to a larger table in order to accommodate the food we had ordered. The food arrived, plate after plate of succulent ocean jewels: scallops; salmon; shrimp; lobster; bluefin tuna; bluefin toro tartar with caviar; yellowtail; yellowtail tartar; monkfish pate with caviar; oysters with salsa; fluke sashimi; whitefish; and a variety of appetizers made of braided green spinach and seaweed. It was an intimidating display, mostly because I had no idea how to eat it.

Fortunately, I was twelve. I was comfortable diving in with my hands, pushing a salmon roll off a serving platter with my index finger.

But I remember how my mother's face fell when the table was set, the food was served, and she realized we would only be receiving chopsticks. She had always been such a stickler for manners, for the when-in-Rome respect every culture deserved, and yet here we were in a land that was foreign to her and she hadn't the slightest idea how to be Roman.

She struggled with the chopsticks for half an hour, eyes flitting nervously around the restaurant. Every once in a while a single grain of rice made it from her plate to her tongue, while Robert talked on about his most recent film, and famous friends of his who regularly frequented this restaurant. Finally, Robert must have noticed that roughly the same amount of food had remained on my mother's plate since the food had arrived: a few spoonfuls of white rice, which had diminished only minimally in the past thirty minutes, and three pink slabs of fish, untouched.

"Something wrong with the food, Lori?" he asked.

"Oh, I just—no, nothing," she said. I watched her swallow the single grain of rice she had managed to transport to her mouth. "Nothing, nothing."

"Why aren't you eating?"

"I am," she insisted, reddening. "I just—do you think perhaps—"

He leaned across the table. "Lori," he whispered, "Are you—an anorexic?"

"No," she said, eyes widening. "No, I'm not at all! Certainly not."

She needs a fork! I wanted to scream. *We don't come to restaurants like this! We don't eat Japanese food at home!*

"Are you bulemic?" he said.

"No, no," she said. "I'm—"

"Well then what do you have?" He leaned back in his seat as if to say, 'Bring on the disorder.'

"Have?" she asked.

"I *mean*, what's your food issue?" he said, gesturing with his chopsticks at my mother. A roll of sushi clung to the end of his chopsticks like a snail. "All the girls have them. Just tell me so we can work around it. I know these things," he said, and plopped the roll of sushi between his lips.

I swallowed the lump of fish in my mouth, which had moments before been salty and tender; now it slid down my throat like a doughy ball of flesh. Robert continued on, bits of rice flecking the darkness of his mouth like white maggots in a hole: "I don't care that you do, I just don't want, you know, to embarrass either of us in public, and I'd really prefer, too, that if you—"

"She needs a fork," I said. Robert looked first at me and then at my mother, who nodded, almost imperceptibly.

"Jesus Christ," he said.

I scanned the restaurant, hoping for a waiter. "Could someone bring my mother a fork?" I said weakly to the air around me. The room felt empty when I made this request, but fifteen seconds later, a petite woman in a white collared shirt brought a fork, a knife, and a spoon rolled in a thick cream-colored napkin and gave them to my mother.

By the end of the evening, my mother's face had faded from crimson to pink. Still, I couldn't shake what I had witnessed in her: an inability to ask for the thing she needed, a painful desire to measure up in a world she barely understood.

This is my first memory of a sort of vicarious insecurity: the realization that my mother and I were different from Robert, that there was something different about us, our lives, something that my mother wanted desperately to hide. My mother had always told me that manners were "the grace of common sense," and I saw, suddenly, that that wasn't true. There were different echelons of grace and common sense and manners in this world, and it mattered where a person fell.

In the end, my mother realized there were other rules in that upper echelon with which she was not familiar: namely, that some marriages involve one man and a few women, one with a ring and three with expensive Christmas gifts.

Much later, my mother and I would be able to joke about that dinner: "Something *fishy* about that man," I would say and my mother would dissolve into giddy peals of pleasure, grateful that the embarrassment was over. Her third husband, the famous pianist Giovanni Giacomi, would smile and look confused.

To this day, though she laughs, my mother will not speak badly of Robert. He rescued her from grief, taught her things she did not know. For instance, that life begins over, and over, and over again.

I like to think Robert wanted to save my mother, and my mother wanted to save him, but that they wanted to save the wrong parts of each other, the parts that did not need saving. As for the parts that did need saving—the parts that were *not* saved—those parts filed for divorce exactly one year and three days after we returned from New York City.

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That spring, I arrived home from seventh grade one day to find my mother splayed across the couch in her pink bathrobe. She wore one white slipper. Her other foot was naked, the slipper's mate hidden partially under the couch. A stack of tabloids rested innocently on the coffee table beside a pair of blue-handled scissors and a pile of small paper squares. A nearly empty bottle of wine lay sideways on the table.

"I tried to buy them all," she said. I picked up one of the magazines. On the cover, a photo of Robert. In the photo, a young smiling girl leaned into the crook of Robert's arm. The girl stared straight into the camera, her eyes large and deer-like. Robert was kissing her cheek. The caption read:

THE NEW GIRL: ELLIE MORROW

I picked up a different magazine to find a picture of my mother's face. In the photo, my mother appeared upset, but I could see she was only frowning in a bewildered sort of way—as if maybe a waiter had asked her if she needed more time to decide what she would like to order. The headline read:

LORI WEST: HERE TODAY, GONE TO (ELLIE) MORROW.

"I couldn't buy them all," my mother explained in a voice drenched with wine, "There were too many." I noticed a second wine bottle, uncorked and empty, peeking out

from beneath the couch.

"What are you doing with them?" I asked her.

"What do you mean, Sweetie?"

"What are the scissors for?"

"I'm going to wallpaper the bathroom," she said. "I thought a collage would be lovely in there. Don't you think? I'm cutting up these magazines, I've got wall glue and everything, and then I'm going to paste these pieces all over the bathroom. Because that's where Robert in Ellie Morrow belong—in my bathroom!"

Before we moved from El Cajon, my mother had taken pride in decorating her own home. I imagined a collage out of neon-colored tabloid pages in the bathroom and began to feel ill. "Mother—"

"I'm wallpapering the bathroom with rejection," she said.

"Are you sure—"

"Haven't you made a collage before, Vanden? Don't you know how to make a collage?" She looked at me, then, with a sort of scathing accusation: *How can you just stand there,* her eyes seemed to say. *Don't you know what's wrong?* And I did know what was wrong: it was not that Robert was cheating on her; it was that my father was still gone, and would be gone forever.

I stood there in my plaid jumper and knee socks, holding a light blue backpack full of books, and tried to decide what sort of mature response the situation required of me. According to Robert's movies, my mother should have kicked him out of the house. "Once and for all!" she should have screamed. The women in Robert's movies did it to him all the time. I could see the problem already, though: In our case, the house was his.

My mother sat up and I slumped down beside her on the couch. "Are you going to leave him?" I asked, swallowing, not sure what I wanted her to answer.

"Oh, I don't know, Vanden," she said. "I don't know."

She picked up one of the magazines and looked like she wanted to spit.

"What an ugly girl," my mother said. "Ugly, ugly, ugly," she repeated.

"Mother, are you okay?"

"No," she said.

"It's okay," I said quietly, and touched her back. The pink robe felt soft and childish.

When she lifted her head to look at me, her make-up ran down her face in black tracks. "But Honey," she said, "who will mow the lawn…"

"We'll find someone," I assured her, though I found her question peculiar. Then I changed my mind: "We don't need anyone," I said. "We'll be fine."

"You don't understand how the world works," she snapped. "Who do you think pays the gardeners? Who do you think pays for this goddamn *house*, Vanden?"

"I don't know," I said, lips trembling. A wave of sadness rose through me, from my feet to my stomach, to my shoulders, to my throat. It was so tangible I felt my legs begin to go numb. "Robert?" I asked.

She picked up the wine bottle from the coffee table, and threw it. It moved swiftly through the air, a bottle-shaped bullet, through the open doorway into the kitchen, and careened into the far wall, shattering. Flecks of red wine splashed the eggshell-white walls.

I jumped at the sound. I looked anxiously at my mother. "We'll find someone," I

said again, but this time my voice turned up at the end and it came out like a question.

I sat beside my mother, looking into the kitchen for a long time. I stared at the broken green pieces of wine bottle on the kitchen tiles. *If only we could get those jagged triangles into the ocean, and wash them away into sea glass*, I thought. It seemed the most important thing: how to clean this mess up, make something beautiful out of something ugly.

With nothing left to say, I went into the kitchen for another pair of scissors. When I returned to the living room, I knelt down beside the coffee table and began cutting up the remaining magazines into small paper squares. My mother and I spent the rest of the night cutting up those magazines. The next day, we smeared a white sticky paste over the squares and wallpapered several square feet of the bathroom before my mother said, "Let's not do this anymore."

In the end, we did find someone. Giovanni Giacomi was only too happy to pay the gardeners for us. That is, in exchange for my mother. And my mother, of course, was only too happy to give herself away again.

GIOVANNI

Laguna Hills, California. 2000.

My mother's third husband, Giovanni, is a story himself. He and my mother were married for one year. Each of her marriages, it seemed, was failing quicker than the last. One of those old Jack-and-Jane spelling books could tell this story more succinctly: "See Lori run. See Lori fall."

Giovanni Giacomi was a world-renowned pianist from Italy. He and my mother dated for three months before marrying. During those three months, he sent my mother flowers every single day. Giovanni sent so many flowers that my mother asked him to *please* stop sending her flowers (but she said this with glittering eyes and schoolgirl giddiness). When he refused, my mother began giving them away, sending bunches of bouquets to hospitals and nursing homes. Giovanni approached life, and romance, with a drive I had never seen in any man before him.

I did not live with my mother the year she was married to Giovanni. Giovanni had me enrolled in a boarding school in Connecticut. "Only the best education for the best little girl," he said. When I objected, my mother shushed me and talked about gratefulness. So I spent eighth grade with two hundred younger versions of Giovanni himself, many of them prodigies, all of them neurotic.

Giovanni was a perfectionist. He left no stone unturned as a husband, or as a stepfather. From across the United States, he hired tutors for me in every subject—especially those at which I already excelled. "You can always be better," he explained.

My mother has said that the things you love about a person are the things you eventually hate about him, too. She loved the way Giovanni doted on her, the way he

tended to her every desire—that is, until she hated it, which became clear when I visited them for Christmas.

After a while, it had all became tiresome to my mother. When he was home, Giovanni chose what my mother wore. "He just has preferences," she explained to me while she was dressing for a holiday party, though I hadn't asked her to explain. "I want to look nice for him, after all," she said.

Their relationship was a series of compromises, exchanges. Giovanni wanted to feel needed, and my mother believed she needed him. It was exceedingly clear that there was very little love between them.

But Giovanni's demands became more trying, more obsessive. My mother began to look forward to Giovanni's trips abroad, when he would be gone for months at a time, traveling and playing concerts around the world.

While I was home, Giovanni once criticized my mother's caprice salad because she had not cored the tomatoes. When my mother tried feebly to defend herself, Giovanni looked at her with disgust. My mother began to cry, but Giovanni refused to apologize.

"I'm sorry I'm not perfect!" my mother told him.

"If only the Drama Queen could do *anything* half as well as I play the piano!" Giovanni shouted. "The only thing you're good at, Lori, is crying!"

My mother looked as though she had been slapped across the face. Her eyes narrowed to red slits. I couldn't find any love in them.

It wasn't just this moment that made me hate Giovanni—there were others. But this was the first time I disliked my mother. I disliked her for pretending to love a man so

much less a person to her than my father.

By the end of my week home for Winter Break, I had come to see Giovanni in a completely different light: a placeholder, a living, breathing, warm-bodied placeholder. He was a thing to occupy the space in my mother's heart, the hole my father's death had left. She and Giovanni were not *people* to each other, at least not in the way that people should be to each other.

Months later, when my mother tried to end things with him, Goivanni wouldn't hear of it. When she officially filed for divorce, he proved himself to be unstable. When she finally insisted on moving out—we moved in with an old professor friend of hers for a few months when I came home for the summer after ninth grade —Giovanni canceled a tour in Europe and turned up everywhere my mother went: the grocery store, the dry cleaners, the summer camp where she came to pick me up in the afternoons.

"Being stalked by my own husband," she said with a laugh. She was so careless towards herself then. I worried about her. What if Giovanni did something crazy? She didn't seem to realize she was all I had. It was around that time, I think, that I resolved to detach myself from her: I couldn't care too much about her, I told myself, because what if she left me too? Or, allowed herself to be taken. She certainly wasn't paying any attention, didn't seem to have a preference one way or the other.

When her divorce from Giovanni was finalized, my mother ended up with enough of Giovanni's money to live comfortably without working. The judge forbade Giovanni from coming within a one-mile radius of her. Giovanni was gone, and money was no longer a problem.

Still, I was afraid.

Though we weren't religious, there was the idea, always the hope, that my father was floating around somewhere in the sky, among clouds and angels and winking stars and spinning planets. I always felt, with a sickening instinct, that the idea of joining him was nestled somewhere in the darkest parts of my mother's mind. I could never be sure. My deepest fear was this: What if she left me for my father?

It was a precarious world. In a way, I responded by closing my eyes and resolving not to open them again until I could leave.

ROGENY OR PARAMOUR

El Cajon, California. 1995.

Back when my mother and I understood the same jokes, before my father died, we had another little game we played. The game was called Progeny or Paramour. My mother-the-poet, always. Maybe she considered the game educational—after all, by the time I was nine, I knew that one's 'progeny' were one's children, and that 'paramour' was an old-fashioned word for the partner on the unmarried end of an extramarital affair. "A floozy," my father said. "Don't say 'floozy,' Jack," my mother said. "That's slang. Let's not teach her slang."

It is August. I am nine-years-old. My mother and I are shopping for back-to-school clothing at discount stores in an outdoor shopping complex in Carlsbad, half an hour from our house in El Cajon. Music and the sweet sugary scent of something crisp and baking sneaks out into the summer air. We walk past a Greek restaurant with white tablecloths.

"Have you ever had baklava?" my mother asks.

"Had what?" I ask.

"Baklava," she repeats. "Have you ever eaten Greek food?" I shake my head. "Let's go inside," she says, and holds open one of the glass doors to the Greek restaurant. I pause at the entrance. It is a rare treat to eat a meal out.

"Shouldn't we go home and make sandwiches?" I ask. "And ask Daddy if he wants to come too?" It is a Sunday. I think of my father, alone at our house right now, probably settled into a beach chair he has dragged out to the backyard from the garage rafters. I could imagine him clearly: the beach chair is driving tracks into the spongy

grass of our small, square-shaped backyard, and he is holding a can of beer and staring at the sky by himself.

"Just you and me," she says, and shrugs. I feel guilty already for keeping an adventure to ourselves. "Oh, what the hell?" she says, smiling.

"Don't say *hell*," I tell her, aghast.

"You're right," my mother says. "I shouldn't have said hell."

"You just said it *again*."

Inside the restaurant, we are seated near the window. After the waiter delivers our menus, my mother spots a couple—she is always the first to notice them—and says urgently, in a low whisper across our table, "Vanden, the table to my right. In the corner. Progeny or paramour?"

I follow the quick little nods of her head to an older man and a young woman at a booth in the back of the restaurant. The man is well-dressed and balding. Something opaque and white drips from the corner of his lips as he eats—salad dressing, perhaps? His wrinkled fingers are like chicken bones in cooked, flaking, poultry skin. A gold band digs angrily into the ring finger of his left hand. Across from him, a young woman with dark hair sips her water. She laughs at something he says, then purses her lips. Her eyes are bright, like two flames. She shakes her head, still smiling, and her hair swings and shines like a silky fringe, then settles back into place, undisturbed.

My mother raises her eyebrows. Her face is tinted with glee.

"I don't know!" I say. "I don't know!"

"Keep watching," my mother says, and we exchange a knowing glance.

The young woman takes her napkin from her lap, folds it delicately as if she

hasn't had any use for it at all, and places it cleanly on the table. She pushes her chair from the table and stands. Her movements are smooth and fluid, as if underwater.

The man stands too, wobbling ungracefully. The woman grins blankly at him, allowing him to teeter with a sort of patient denial that suggests her help to steady him has been refused before. As they leave the restaurant, the young woman takes those chicken-bone fingers in her own smooth hands, and just outside the restaurant, stands on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on the man's lined jowl. Then, she kisses his mouth.

"Paramour!" I shout victoriously. Then I recoil at the thought of that beautiful woman kissing lips like wet toad skin—cold, cellophane lips that only moments before were leaking salad dressing. I shiver. "Yeeeuuck!"

My mother laughs so hard the waiter comes over to ask if he can bring her water. My mother is all pastels today: her face is radiant with delight; her eyes the blue of atmosphere, lips as smooth as pink seaglass. She wears a pale bluish blouse and khaki slacks. She has always looked especially lovely in blue.

I remember everything about that lunch. The grainy, sugary taste of warm baklava on my tongue; the sun like honey on my shoulders after we finished lunch and left the restaurant. And most of all, I remember how my mother and I couldn't stop laughing. How we shared the same jokes back then.

I sometimes wonder: When did her fascination with a system she didn't quite understand become an effort to pick the locks and break in?

I can't help but wonder, sometimes, if we were really sharing the same joke? Or if, instead, she was simply taking in the world around her, filing it all away somewhere, and only pretending to laugh.

MY NEW STEPSISTER

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

Elizabeth Moore has been living with her mother in Nashville, Tennessee. From what she says, it sounds as though she has spent most of her life raised by a rotation of maids while Howard and her mother were busy golfing and gallivanting and socialite-ing for most of her childhood. It seems fitting to me, then, that she should be a nanny for the summer. The circle of life.

Sweet, sheltered Elizabeth strikes me as a character out of a movie. When I tell Elizabeth that I have—"How shall I put this?" I say. "Somewhat *liberal* values…"—she tells me that she, too, is 'liberal.' I quickly remember she has grown up in the South, where the scale of liberal to conservative must be readjusted. "Right," I say. (In Boston, we had a different term for Elizabeth's brand of 'liberal'—we called that 'moderate.') Elizabeth tells me proudly that she is very religious—she still attends church every Sunday, and she trusts that God will "find" her a boyfriend.

"That's, like, *so* cute," says my friend Maura, when I tell her this. "And she just, like, told you all of this?"

"In all honesty, I didn't want to know it," I say, and shrug. "People just open up to me, for some reason."

"It's because you have such deadpan facial expressions," my friend Isabella says. "They think you're listening."

It's not that religious people or Conservatives (or "apathetic" or "moderate"—whatever it is the frightened ones want to call themselves) bother me—it's just that there are so God-damned many of them in Orange County already. And frankly, I've never been one of those girls who sits around and waits for God to find me a boyfriend.

"God gave us girls the ability to have sex," Maura says. "Then he tidied up, wiped his hands off, and left the rest up to us."

In the sunlight, Isabella adjusts her sunglasses. "Wait," she says, and sits up. "Do you think she's a virgin?"

"No idea," I say.

"I sort of doubt it," Maura says. "The religious ones are always the sluts. They just cover everything up better."

"I bet she *is* a virgin," Maura says, getting excited. "Dawson is going to have a field day with this one!"

"Why?" I ask. "Does Dawson like virgins?"

"It's his latest thing," Maura says.

"No way," I say.

"It's true," Maura says. "He's all about virgins these days."

"You know, I've never understood Dawson's sex appeal," Isabella says. "He's so wiry. He's so—"

"Careful, Isabella. Vanden had sex with him," Maura says.

"Oh. Sorry, Vanden." Isabella rolls over onto her stomach.

"It wasn't a big deal," I say. "It was a long time ago."

"Actually," Maura says, "I sort of remember you saying it *was* big."

"Grow up," I tell her. "You're a bitch sometimes."

"Don't call me a bitch," Maura says. "You know what the feminists would say. If we call each other sluts and bitches, how can we expect the men to treat us with respect?"

"Right," I say, "because instilling guilt in women for their poor treatment by men is

completely feminist."

"I can't believe you had sex with Dawson," Isabella says. She looks confused. "Were he and Marshall best friends back then?"

"It was a *long* time ago," I remind her.

"*Long*, indeed," Maura says. "Long, indeed."

DAWSON AND MARSHALL

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

Most days, Elizabeth is at the Christiansons, but she is often home on the weekends. On the weekends, she stays in her pajamas all day and drinks coffee slowly. It occurs to me that she is probably bored and lonely. (Then again, anyone who has morals and values as boring as she does must make friends with boredom.) So, one Saturday, out of the goodness of my heart, I invite her to the beach with me and Marshall and Dawson.

"Marshall's your boyfriend?" she asks.

"Basically."

"Who's Dawson?" she asks.

"You'll like Dawson. Everybody likes Dawson," I tell her, which is true. Sometimes I hate him for it. "Well, *almost* everyone. My mother certainly doesn't."

Two hours later, Elizabeth and I are at the beach, flipping through magazines and not saying much of anything to one other. I'm not sure what to talk to her about. I have the strange feeling I'm babysitting an eight-year-old child.

Marshall and Dawson arrive wearing navy board shorts and white T-shirts. For a moment, I see them the way Elizabeth must see them, observing them for the first time: Dawson stands a few feet behind Marshall, his sidekick. Marshall smiles when he says hello to her and in that instant—the sun glinting off his teeth, his shiny blond hair, the whites of his eyes somehow unexpectedly white—he strikes me as some sort of Adonis. I understand why my mother loves him so much, why she hopes we end up married. Everything about Marshall is healthy: his skin glows, his posture is perfect.

"So this is your stepsister," Dawson says. It makes me uncomfortable that he says this while looking at Elizabeth, and not me.

Elizabeth smiles. "I guess that's me," she says. She sounds like a child. It makes me sick. I have the sudden urge to point out all of Elizabeth's flaws to Dawson: her skinny legs, her thin hair, the plainness of her face.

Dawson kicks off his leather Rainbow sandals and strips off his T-shirt. He still wears the lip ring he's had forever: a tiny silver loop, dangling from his lower lip.

"Let's swim!" he says. Marshall laughs and follows, stripping to his boardshorts.

Then Marshall and Dawson are running the twenty feet or so into the water. Elizabeth and I watch their backs: Marshall, broad, muscular, fair-headed and tan; Dawson, slighter in build, equally tan, with dark brown hair. They tear into the ocean, sending wings of spray up behind them.

"You two are disgusting!" I call. I turn to Elizabeth and explain that I never swim in the ocean: "It's so public, you know. It's like sharing water with—"

"Come in!" Marshall calls. Elizabeth watches Marshall and Dawson splash around in the water, as if she wants nothing more than to join them. Has she never seen a beach?

"Right," I say, shaking my head. "As if you'll find any girl who would be stupid enough to go swimming!" Not in California, at least—up and down the shoreline, the beach is peppered with girls whose hair is dry, eye make-up perfect, bikinis unsullied.

"This is so refreshing," Dawson calls, drizzling a palmful of water over his body.

"I think I'm going to join them," Elizabeth says.

"*No*," I say, and am surprised to hear myself pleading with her—a sad, high note

in the syllable. But there's Dawson, smiling up at us from the water, and soon Elizabeth is wiggling out of her ugly khaki-colored shorts and T-shirt.

"Just for a minute," she says.

"No," I say again, my voice reaching a higher, more desperate pitch. "What am I going to do? Stand here alone?" I'm embarrassed at my desperation.

"Come in," she says, and then, without waiting, she moves toward the water.

I realize I have no choice—either stand here and be pegged as the party pooper (which, for the record, I never am) or take a dip in the cold water.

The cold is more refreshing than I have imagined. I have forgotten what wading into the ocean feels like—that tingling change from atmosphere to liquid, the life-renewing quality of it all, like stepping into a new skin.

When we reach the boys, they splash us. "Your stepsister's not so bad," Dawson says loudly to me, over Elizabeth's head, over the roar of the breeze and the waves.

"Yeah, I guess not," Elizabeth says hesitantly. I realize she thinks Dawson has spoken to her.

"Thanks a lot, Elizabeth," I say, splashing past her.

"See?" Dawson says to me. "What's so bad about ocean water?"

"Do you know what's *in* ocean water," I say.

"Fish?" Dawson asks.

Marshall looks at the water. "You know, we never even see them—the fish, I mean. I wonder if there really are fish in the ocean anymore." The water is cloudy, brown with sand. I drag a finger through the surf, which is cold and deliciously wet—but murky, not clear.

"Yeah, fish," I say, "and their *shit*. And all sorts of horrible things lurking under the water."

"Like what?" Dawson presses.

"Like pollution," I say.

"Pollution, huh?" Dawson says. "Since when do you care about pollution?"

"When it affects me," I explain.

"Oh really?" Dawson says, but there's a softness in his voice when he says this. That same softness is in his eyes when they meet mine. "Ms. Political Activist," he says. I smile and look away. When Dawson blinks, I remember the blue of his eyes, as if seeing them all over again—more blue than this ocean. They are as blue as this ocean should be, could be, if it weren't for all the fish, their shit, the sand, the pollution.

Elizabeth bends her knees and sinks into the water until her head disappears completely beneath the surface.

"New girl's sort of weird," Dawson says.

"Tell me about it," I say. "And she's a virgin." As soon as I say it, I wish I hadn't.

"Virgin, huh?" Dawson says, just as Elizabeth comes up for air.

∞

Back on shore, Marshall and Dawson have used my pink-and-green towel to dry themselves off. The boys have not brought towels.

"Marshall," I whine. "I'm soaking *wet*." I stand on the shore, trying hard to look sexy, until Marshall comes over to give me a hug. Despite his handsome looks, there's always been something puppy dog-like about Marshall that repels me from him. I wish

just once that he would tell me no. As he comes toward me, I realize what Marshall reminds me of—his golden robustness, his barrel chest: a Labrador Retriever. It's his eyes, too—those brown eyes. It's the way they follow my every movement, and never settle on anyone else. As if his next meal depends on me. Maybe that's why I still find Dawson so attractive. Isabella is right about his sex appeal—it's strange, gangly, carefree, and oblivious.

The heat of the sun dries us all within a few minutes and suddenly no one is wet or uncomfortable. We arrange the two towels perpendicular to the horizon and sit on them, beaming, feeling warm, exuding life. For a moment I feel part of this place, these people.

After a while in the sun, Marshall stands. He pats the sand off himself and it falls through the air like glitter.

"I'm going to buy some water," he says.

"There's water," Elizabeth says, and points at the ocean.

Marshall rolls his eyes. "I don't know if humor is your forte, Elizabeth," he says, "but I'll try not to make any swift judgments."

When Marshall leaves, Dawson tells us he's having an End of the World party.

"Again?" I ask.

"Yes, *again*," he says. His tone is playfully exasperated. I look at him, then, his legs bent up to his chest, elbows on his knees. His slim, sinewy body seems folded, like a doll with moveable, well-oiled joints.

"What's an End of the World party?" Elizabeth asks.

"You don't know?" Dawson asks her gently.

"Of course she doesn't know!" I say. "No one does this sort of thing but you."

Dawson ignores me. He clears his throat, smug at getting to explain his parties to someone new. "All right," he says, and pauses as if turning over a math problem in his head to identify the best way to teach it. "It's like this. What would you *do* if this were the very last night of your life? What would you *wear* if this were the last time anyone were ever going to see you?"

"I have no idea," Elizabeth says slowly, and I can see her mind turning with the prospect.

"Well, the party isn't until August," Dawson continues, "so you have three months to decide. People will come naked, lose their virginity."

"You know virgins, Dawson? I don't believe you," I say, and watch Elizabeth for a reaction.

"A few," Dawson says, and shrugs. "They're around."

"Virgins are not an endangered species," Elizabeth says. "I know virgins."

"You do?" Dawson asks, perking up.

"Are you sure?" I say. "A lot of people lie about that sort of thing, you know."

Dawson pushes a hand through his hair. I wonder if he is dreaming up images of the virgins he knows. If confidence were a competition—the type of confidence that courses through some people's veins, that is their very essence, the kind that makes them certain that success is not only available to them but their God-given right—Dawson could give anyone a run for their money.

"The point is, at my party you can do whatever you want," Dawson says. "There will be kids getting high for the first time, snorting shit, drinking themselves into

oblivion."

"How is that different from any of your other parties?" I ask.

"It's not. Okay, Van? This one just has a theme built around it."

"So what do you do when you wake up the next morning and you're still alive and you've just— "

"What? Lived a little?" he asks.

"It's not *actually* the End of the World, Dawson," I say.

"Feels like it sometimes though, doesn't it?" he says, thoughtfully now.

"And it wasn't the End of the World the last time you threw one of these parties, either."

"Isn't that a good thing?" he says, his one last attempt at self-defense. "You're no fun today, Van," he says. "You used to like shit like this. I thought you would be into this."

"Well, I'm not," I say. "I don't see why we need to call it an End of the World party. We do this type of thing anyway. So why are we putting a name on it that makes it—makes it sound like—I just think it's dangerous—"

"The way we party?" Dawson says, and there is hurt in his eyes.

"No, to call it an End of the World party," I say. "I just don't like it."

"Hey, lighten up, Van," he says, softly. "I can hear it in your voice—you could use an End of the World Party."

I shake my head, but I'm beginning to smile again. "You and your parties, Dawson. Everything always with a theme, some sort of label."

"But aren't my parties always the most interesting?"

I answer without hesitation, because this much I know: "Yes," I say, "You're the least boring person I know."

Dawson beams. "You'll come too, won't you, Elizabeth?" he asks.

"I don't know," she says. She laughs, embarrassed. "I don't—I'm not much of a—"

"Aw, you don't have to do any of that stuff if you don't want to." He looks at her, then, his gaze clear, open. I can almost see him sifting through her private thoughts, gently, like they're precious possessions. Elizabeth looks away from him. He waits until he looks at her again and then he adds, "But I think, by the end of the summer, you might want to."

Marshall returns empty-handed, and does not sit down.

"I'm thirsty," he says, "and there is nowhere to buy water."

"I could leave," I say. Dawson nods.

"Good. Let's go," Marshall says.

As we shake out the beach towels, there's that sand again: a million tiny pieces, sparkling in the sun. I find myself thinking of our universe—*one tiny grain of sand on the longest stretch of beach you've ever seen*—of my father, of aliens.

FREE

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

Every time Dawson likes a song, he leans up front between Marshall and me to announce that he likes the song and to sing. I know he's jealous of the way things have turned out—the automatic way in which seats are assigned now that Marshall and I have been hooking up again.

"Free Cone Day!" Elizabeth shouts, pointing to a sign in the window of a frozen yogurt shop. "Let's stop."

"Oh I used to love Free Cone Day," I say. "I've missed Golden Spoon on the East Coast."

"Fro yo's not my thing," Marshall says. "But I'm always a team player. You all know that." In the rearview mirror, he glances at the little shop, the line of people trailing around the block's corner. "I don't know though. I prefer to pay for my ice cream," he says.

"Don't be silly," Elizabeth says.

"I mean it," Marshall says. "That sort of thing depresses me—all those people, just waiting. Standing around and waiting and waiting and waiting for something because they have the time, and because they're used to it, used to *waiting*. It's so *sad*. I don't even like to think about it," he says. He looks out the driver side window, as if there is something very urgent in the purple jacaranda trees that dot the island between traffic lanes.

"You don't like things that are free?" Elizabeth asks.

"You get what you pay for," Marshall says.

"No, this is actually free," Elizabeth tells him, as if he's never heard of a Free

Cone Day. "They do this every year in the summer. For one day, it's free."

"Nothing is free," Dawson says.

"That's true," I say, staring out the window.

"No," Elizabeth says, laughing, "this frozen yogurt is *free*."

"I'm going to have to change teams," Dawson says. "What we seem to have forgotten," he says, leaning forward between Marshall and me, "is that the very *best* things in life are free." He winks at Elizabeth.

"Sorry," Marshall says, "I'm not going to stand in line with all those—those people."

"I agree with Marshall," I say.

"Is there something frightening about *people*?" Elizabeth says, mocking us.

"He means," I say, "*those* people." I look at the line growing further away in the distance—mothers with sticky toddlers in strollers, young bright-eyed couples, badly-dressed middle-aged parents, packs of ugly teenagers.

"What's wrong with them?" she asks.

I turn around in my seat to face her. "Hey," I say. "Do you think you can get over the ice cream already?" I am wearing sunglasses that obscure my expression, and I can tell Elizabeth is unsure how to read my tone. She shrinks back, tugging absently at her seatbelt, confused. I let her feel unsure. She looks at Dawson.

"We'll get frozen yogurt another day," he says. I turn around in my seat, and stare out the windshield.

Then, softer this time, I hear Dawson whisper, "Some other time, El." I want to tell her that that tenderness when you least expect it is what's so addictive about him, but

I don’t. Let the new girl live and learn.

DAWSON

Laguna Hills, California. 2001.

There has always been something about Dawson's mind—the way he organizes information, the way he approaches problems and people—that reminds me of my father. I met Dawson in ninth grade, when I found myself back at a public school again.

During our freshmen year of high school, Dawson spoke constantly about politics and philosophy. I liked listening to him, liked being his pupil. He was full of witty political strategies. He wrote me notes and passed them to me in the hallways of our high school between classes.

Then, during our sophomore year, Dawson introduced me to his best friend, Marshall. Marshall had spent elementary school and middle school at private schools. Like me, Marshall had shown up to high school with no friends. Dawson, already well-liked and popular, took us both under his wing.

Marshall and I began dating during our senior year. My mother, who had never liked Dawson—because of his lip ring, because the color of his hair was constantly changing, because he probably smelled like weed—was thrilled. Marshall had a prep school background that my mother found comforting. Marshall was clean-cut. Marshall wore cologne to cover the smell of the weed.

Marshall and I dated off-and-on while I was away at school in Boston. Once, when Marshall and I were taking a break ("A break from what?" I had asked, perplexed, when Marshall proposed this during our sophomore year of college. "From each other," he told me, evenly), Dawson visited me in Boston and I slept with him.

Just once. But once was enough. Enough to make me think of Dawson every

single time I fuck Marshall.

MARSHALL

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

Marshall. Marshall whose grandfather invented the hoola-hoop and whose family has been living on the money ever since. Marshall who throws away pennies, and nickels, and dimes. Marshall who tosses coins into the trash—*plunk!*—because the hassle of sorting them out is not worth his time. Marshall who buys me jewelry. Marshall who tells me I'm beautiful. Marshall who wants to run for public office one day. Marshall who has plans to go to business school. Marshall who wears polo shirts and belts his slacks and always smells nice.

Marshall who my mother loves.

BERLIN OR PARIS OR SWITZER-WHEREVER

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

When my mother and Howard return from Napa, they spend only one night at home.

"Did they leave again?" Elizabeth asks me, alarmed.

I explain that this is normal. What I don't mention is that I owe my high school popularity to my mother's frequent absences. In high school everyone agreed that I threw the best parties. My parties lasted the whole weekend.

"But where did they go?" Elizabeth asks.

"Maybe Europe," I tell her.

"Europe?" she asks.

"You know. The usual," I say. "Berlin or Paris or Switzer-wherever."

"Oh," she says. "I see."

MAURA AND ISABELLA

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

While my mother and Howard are away this time in Berlin or Paris or Switzer-wherever, I spend the days lying out in the backyard. The backyard is lovely: a palm tree-lined saltwater swimming pool and spa; smooth pink cement; everything else brick and stucco. In the distance, green-and-white tennis courts with clean white lines stand like a pack of mint gum.

Some days Maura and Isabella join me. They usually arrive unannounced from around the side of the house. They spread out pink and white beach towels patterned with large hibiscus flowers, prop huge sunglasses on their tiny doll-like noses, and stare into the sun.

"How's that stepsister of yours?" Maura asks.

"Oh, that's *right*," Isabella says. "Sometimes I forget she's here. She works so much. I feel like I haven't seen her very much at all."

"She's fine," I say.

"Still a virgin?" Maura asks.

"As far as I know."

"You should invite her out," Isabella says. "Wouldn't it be fun to watch her?"

"I do, sometimes," I say. "I've already introduced her to Dawson and Marshall."

The backyard buzzes with the sounds of suburban nature – breezy flowers, a few lonely bees, and palm fronds chafing glass windows that peer into the living room.

"Do you have any water, Van?" Maura asks.

"In the kitchen," I tell her. "Help yourself."

Maura stands, stretches. "I need to take a couple pills."

"Anything good?" I ask.

"No, just Meridia and Topamax at the moment."

"Ew," I say, wrinkling my nose. "That's gross, Maura. If you're going to eat chemicals, at least have some fun."

"What are those for again?" Isabella asks. "I always forget."

"Clinically?" Maura says. "Or why am I taking them?"

"Are the answers different?"

Maura glows with the role of pedagogue: "Meridia is prescribed for the medical management of obesity and Topamax is for seizures," she explains, flicking hair over her shoulders and enjoying the sound of her authority. "*Off-label*, they both make girls like you and me into models." Maura takes hold of an imaginary dress and curtsies. I watch her in the sunlight. Everything about her is gold—her skin, her hair, her pale yellow bikini. She is already very slim.

The sliding glass door to the house clicks open and we turn to see Elizabeth standing there, a dark shadow in the doorway.

"Come out here, honey!" Maura says. "We were just talking about you."

"You were?" Elizabeth asks, taking a hesitant step forward. She is wearing her same I-read-books-in-my-spare-time-and-am-determined-to-be-unpopular uniform: khakis and a pastel-colored polo shirt.

"Yes, we were just saying you should spend more time with us," Maura says sweetly.

"Oh," Elizabeth says. "I'd like that." She smiles weakly. Her vulnerability is painful. She's like an animal slipping off a cliff, clinging to a ledge. There is a fear in

her eyes.

"Come sit out here with us," Maura says.

Isabella stifles a laugh. Elizabeth pulls up a patio chair and sits down, awkwardly, fully-clothed still. Her white skin pinkens almost as soon as the sun touches it.

"I'm going to go get that class of water," Maura says.

Perhaps to hide her laughter, Isabella returns to the old conversation: "Are you sure those pills are safe, Maura?" she asks.

"It's all relative, Isabella," Maura says, and shrugs. "I mean, is it a drastic measure? Yes. But I don't take them all the time. I have a photo shoot in like eight days."

"You model?" Elizabeth asks.

Maura laughs. "That's so cute," she says, "that you think I'm a model." She shakes her head. "Elizabeth – that's her name, right? – Elizabeth, I'm an *actress*. I'm taking head-shots."

"Oh, wow. Professionally?" Elizabeth says. Her effort is painful.

"Getting there," Maura says.

"She's not professional," I tell Elizabeth. "And she has a crush on her photographer so she keeps retaking her headshots."

"My photographer happens to like working with actors. In fact, he prefers them. More lively. Models are, like, so lame." Maura adjusts her sunglasses and sighs. "James just hates them. He's only dating actresses from now on. And he wants my headshots to be perfect."

"Like you?" I say.

"I'm not saying I'm *perfect* but—"

"No," I say, "I mean from now on, he's only dating girls like you? Actresses. How convenient."

"So maybe he hasn't actually asked me out yet," Maura says, "but he will." She pauses, considers what she's said, almost doubting herself, and then nods, her whole body shaking with the strength of her head-bobbing. "Ten more pounds and James is mine."

"It's good to have goals," Elizabeth says.

"Don't encourage her, Elizabeth," I tell her. "Maura, if you lose ten more pounds, you'll look like you've just spent a few months in Auschwitz."

"Vanden!" Maura says. "Don't be insensitive. And yes, *that's* the goal. You sound like you haven't even opened a magazine lately. All the models look that way."

"You know, I've been meaning to get some more Vicodin from my dad for my back pain," Isabella says. "Maybe I should ask him to add Meridia to the order."

"You should," I say. "I'm running low these days on Vicodin."

Isabella stands and disappears around the edge of the house with her cell phone. When she returns, stomping toward the pool, she appears absolutely furious.

"My dad is at a medical conference in Boston all week, and *apparently* you can't prescribe narcotics across state lines!" Isabella says. "So I can't get anything until Sunday. How fucked up is that?"

"Not fucked up, and not a big deal," says Maura. "Just have one of your dad's partners order it. That's what my mom does all the time."

"My dad's the only doctor in his practice," Isabella says.

Maura shrugs. "Bummer."

"This isn't just about me," Isabella says. "This is going to be an issue for everyone. You know you two steal my painkillers."

Maura shakes her head in mock devastation. "Even our most reliable dealer has let us down. Whatever will we do without your father for five days?"

Isabella seems ready to burst. She throws her cell phone across the backyard. It hurtles through the air, arcs steeply, and then plunges into the blue water with a splash. Isabella watches her own phone, stunned, as the blurry gray shape drifts toward the bottom of the pool.

"Really, Isabella? Get a grip," I say.

"I'm going home," she says. She gathers up her pink and white towel, her flip-flops, her yellow skirt, and walks toward the side of the house.

When Isabella is out of earshot, Maura laughs. "Isabella's father should probably have his license revoked," she says.

"Those who live in glass houses—" I begin, sing-song.

"That's ridiculous!" Maura says. "You have to admit Isabella's father is worse than mine. He prescribes her almost anything she wants."

"Personally, I don't have a problem with it," I say. "As far as friends go, I have to admit it's a bonus."

Maura and I remember at the same time that Elizabeth is still sitting there, in her park ranger-khaki, watching us.

"Is that all legal?" Elizabeth asks. "That her father, you know—I mean, is that

really even possible?" She is squinting. I wonder if she owns sunglasses. Her eyes are almost tearing from the brightness. She shadows her eyes with her hand.

Maura cocks her head to one side. "Possible," she says. "I can't think of anything that's not *possible*. Can you, Vanden?"

"I sort of like this girl," I say to Maura, nodding toward Elizabeth.

"Me?" Elizabeth asks. "Why?"

"Because it means that not everyone—that there are people out there, like you, who aren't as fucked up as we are. Your ignorance is refreshing," I say. "It's so sweet, in a way."

"Are you just going to let her call you ignorant?" Maura asks Elizabeth. Maura waits, but Elizabeth doesn't say anything. "Well, I'm not going to let her call me fucked up," Maura says. "Speak for yourself, Vanden."

"The most dangerous faults are the ones we don't admit to," I remind her, and lay back down on her towel.

Maura rolls her eyes. "Vanden gets like this sometimes," she tells Elizabeth.

"I'm just kidding around, Maura."

"She pretends to know things the rest of us don't," Maura says.

"For the record, Elizabeth, I *do*," I say. Elizabeth smiles weakly and nods vigorously, unsure with whom to side. I can't help but begin to like this girl. Who doesn't like having a pupil around?

LISTENING TO THE OCEAN

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

The waves hit the shore and Dawson says this is why he lives in California.

"Why?" I ask.

"You never have to hold a shell to your ear," he says.

The three of us—Dawson, Elizabeth, and I—are sitting on the sand, waiting for everyone else to get to the beach. Dawson pulls a bowl out of his pocket and packs it. He places his lips over the hole, breathes in and then exhales smoke, which hovers—a gray blur—against the black horizon. When he is finished, he passes it to me. As I'm breathing in and he's exhaling smoke, he says, "This too. I wouldn't smoke the shit they have on the East Coast."

"Where's Marshall?" I ask.

"Not coming tonight," Dawson says. "Wanted to, but he's at some show.

"Oh," I say, and I hear a sadness in my voice that I haven't meant to be there.

"I'm sure he'll be around again once he realizes this could be our last summer together."

"Don't be so dramatic," I say.

"It's true," he says. "Everyone will move onto their own separate lives after this summer. It's the End of the World."

"Do you want a hit of this?" I ask Elizabeth. She shakes her head.

Cars pull up and there are headlights and lots of long thin legs and baggy jeans running toward us. We stand and Dawson goes to help start the bonfire.

Then a girl is running toward us, blonde hair swimming through the air like she's running through a photo shoot. "Van!" she wails, "I've missed you!" Lacey reaches us

and presses her arms around me in a hug that feels out-of-place and artificial. I have never been a friend of Lacey's and yet here she is, trying to get into my circle again now that she knows I'll be throwing parties all summer.

"I hear you've been on, like, the *East Coast*?" she says to me, as if I've been on Mars. She stumbles a little and touches my arm to steady herself. I study Lacey and her long blonde hair and her blue eyes and thin, tan legs. I think of the East Coast girls who stand around with their long, brown hair and North Face fleeces and jeans tucked into fur-lined Uggs.

"Yes, the East Coast," I say, without really looking at her or wanting to answer her question or talk about it.

The last I heard about Lacey was that she was in a coma after a party over Winter Break because she took twelve shots and fell down in the sand. This sand, right here. People walked over her for two hours before anyone called an ambulance. Lacey watches Elizabeth and me with those frighteningly empty blue eyes of hers, and waits for one of us to say something.

"So you woke up, huh?" I say. I look past her, to Dawson, who is putting sticks in the fire pit.

"Yep," Lacey says, not missing a beat. "And back at it," she says. "Nothing keeps me from a good time."

"Where are you coming from tonight?" I ask her.

"Brad's house. Brad's having this outrageous party right now. But I had to come say hi to *you*, Vanden. Glad to have you back in California."

"I've missed California," I say, surprising myself.

"Really?" she asks. "Then why'd you go to college out in Bumfuck?"

Not Bumfuck, I want to tell her. Boston. But instead I just say: "Had to get out of California."

Lacey looks me over, her eyes running unapologetically over my legs, torso, arms, my white bikini. "God, you are so skinny," she says.

I am watching Dawson again. The firelight makes his skin tan.

"I know why she came back to California," Lacey says to Elizabeth.

"Why?" Elizabeth says.

"Because it's addictive," Lacey says.

"What is?" I ask, still watching Dawson.

"This place," she says. "Everything about it."

"There are plenty of addictive substances on the East Coast," I tell her.

"But not the place itself," she says. "California's like a drug."

"Maybe," I say. "I'm going to go find a beer." I turn to Elizabeth. "Actually, Elizabeth, do you think you can grab us a couple beers from that cooler?"

"Okay," she says. When I turn back to Lacey, she has left and I am alone.

I take a few steps toward the water. The waves are navy blue and endless in the distance. In seventh grade, my mother's second husband, Robert Ransom, taught me the Japanese word for ripple. *Sazanami*. It's a word that is both singular and plural. It seems clear now, watching the horizon, how that's possible: there are so many, many ripples and yet, just one enormous ocean.

"What are you thinking about?" Dawson asks, coming up behind me.

"The Japanese word for ripple," I tell him. "How it's both singular and plural,

and how it makes sense because there are so many waves—"

"And just one ocean," Dawson says.

"Yeah," I say, without turning around. "Exactly." Then I blurt out, "Is Marshall over me, Dawson?"

"What do you mean?" Dawson asks.

"Is he done? I mean, are he and I still together or are we just—"

"Does it matter?" Dawson says.

"I guess not."

We stand there for a minute, without saying anything.

Dawson puts his arm over my bare shoulder. "Isn't it crazy?" he says. "Just one huge ocean."

For a moment, the salty air smells like nostalgia. I've missed these palm trees.

BIRDS

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

On a Sunday, Elizabeth and I wake to find my mother and Howard home again.

"Did anyone feed the birds?" my mother asks us. When no one answers her, my mother asks the question again: "Did anyone feed the birds while we were gone?"

"Marta does that," I say.

"Marta is not here on the weekends," my mother says. She puts a hand over her breasts, and grimaces. "You know that, Vanden," she says tensely. "The birds cannot go two days without food. Do you mean to tell me your birds have been starving every time Marta goes home for the weekend?"

"I didn't know Marta—"

Howard, who has been opening and closing the refrigerator, turns to her.

"Did you think she came in on the weekends just to feed your birds?" he asks.

"I didn't know," I say.

"Lori, do we have anything for breakfast?" Howard asks.

"You know who's probably asking the same question?" my mother says. "Vanden's birds."

Howard and my mother are both fully dressed. My mother paces across the kitchen in khakis and a crisp white blouse that covers the bandages around her chest. A diamond necklace she had made from the wedding ring she wore when she married my father bounces gently as she walks.

"I just—I haven't been home in a while. I forgot about them," I explain.

My mother shakes her head. "You forgot? If you want to keep your little

menagerie, then you had better start thinking about these things. Go feed them now. Why don't you show them to Elizabeth?"

"Your birds?" she asks, speaking for the first time since my mother and Howard have come home.

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At the end of a hallway on the third floor of the house, double white doors give way to the heady odor of fowl. I am hit by a whiff of avian dandruff, and feces, and birdseed—the unmistakable combination of dirt and life that always seems to accompany pets. Four bell-shaped birdcages stand at each corner of the room: a pair of yellow-breasted canaries; two peach-faced lovebirds; one violet masked lovebird; and two speckled finches. A mixture of seed hulls and dust and feathers coat the hardwood floor around each cage.

"These," I tell Elizabeth, "are my birds." I feel like a child at show-and-tell.

"What are their names?" she asks. The collection is a menagerie of colors: yellow, blue, peach, orange and black.

I run through them quickly: Luxeria and Avaritia, the pair of lovebirds; the third lovebird, Invidia; the canaries, Gula the fat one, and Acedia who never sings; and the finches, Superbia and Ira.

The room has no lamps or light bulbs—it is entirely lit up by the sun coming through the skylight.

"My father and Lori let you use a whole room for the birds?" Elizabeth asks. I open a hinged door on one of the cages and gently nudge the breast of the lone lovebird, who happily hops onto my finger.

"What else would they use it for?" I ask.

"I guess that makes sense," she says. "My father has always lived in houses with too many rooms. And empty rooms are the most depressing thing. I don't think he minds me filling them up. When we were in elementary school, Alexandria and I once had three rooms each—a bedroom, a playroom, and a room for our pets."

"You each had a *room* for pets?"

"We had a lot of animals," Elizabeth says. On my finger, Luxy coos. "My mother was an interior decorator and she used to use the rooms in our house as show rooms," she continues, "so they were all beautifully decorated, but just for show. I wasn't allowed in any of them. When she moved out, I don't think my father wanted to think of all those rooms as hers. Suddenly I had free run of the house. It was like an amusement park—I'd barely seen any of the house, really, and I'd never had so much freedom—then I realized all those new rooms meant my mother wasn't coming back." She reaches out to stroke Luxy. "And the pets," she says, "it started with one, just one goldfish, and then kept growing. I had snakes and turtles and frogs. But I mostly liked the warm-blooded creatures—rabbits and hamsters and mice. The chef didn't want animals on the same floor as the kitchen. He was worried about the smell. So we kept the first bird upstairs, and my father must have figured, we have all these rooms, and all these maids, so why not let her make a mess, distract herself with pets?"

"I used to have a cat," I say, remembering Luna. "My mother got me a cat after my father died."

Elizabeth looks up at me. "My father told me about the accident," she says. "I'm sorry."

"Why did your mother leave?" I ask.

"She was in love with someone else," Elizabeth says. "He was transferred to Tennessee on business. She realized she couldn't live without him. And, I guess, that she could live without us."

"But you went to live with her didn't you?" I ask.

"A few years later. She didn't ask me to live with her, but she didn't tell me no. And Alexandria stayed with Howard, who shipped her off to boarding school and summer camp. Families are a funny thing, aren't they?" she says.

I slip the lovebird back in its cage. I've heard enough for today. The lovebird steps off my finger and onto a finger-sized wooden branch.

BEACH HOUSE BRUNCH

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

The next morning, my mother insists on a celebratory brunch at the house in Laguna Beach.

"To celebrate what?" I ask. My mother is standing in the kitchen, wearing a lacey pink nightie that barely covers her thighs. She cups a white ceramic mug.

"That Howard and I are home," she says, as if this should be obvious.

"Didn't you like Europe?" I ask her. "Does it really make sense to celebrate the end of a vacation?"

"I was only trying to make plans with the whole family," she says. "Celebrations are just pretend anyway. Like celebrating birthdays—no one *really* likes getting older. Or celebrating retirement. Or celebrating—"

"So you're not happy to be home then?" I say.

"I didn't *say* that," she says. "I don't know why you're so difficult these days," she says, taking a sip of coffee.

∞

A few hours later, we all pile into my mother's SUV to drive to Laguna and eat breakfast on the balcony of the beach house—the bachelor pad Howard apparently never sold after marrying my mother. Marshall stops by the house just as we are leaving and my mother invites him along without consulting me. In the car, Howard and my mother sit up front, Marta and Elizabeth sit in the middle, and Marshall and I share the back seat.

"Haven't seen you much this summer," I say to Marshall, while everyone else is talking up front.

"Yeah," Marshall says. "I was going to come over and talk to you about that, but—"

"Now you're coming to brunch with us instead."

"Yeah. I guess so." Marshall looks away, stares out the window.

"I don't understand," my mother is saying. "The little girl doesn't know how to *swim*? And they have a *pool* there?"

"Well, she won't take swimming lessons," Elizabeth says.

"They should make her take swimming lessons," Howard says.

"That's just it," Elizabeth says. "They don't force her to do anything she doesn't want to do."

"A *five-year-old*?" My mother sits up straighter, alert. "They don't force a *five-year-old* to do anything she doesn't want to do?" she says. (As if *she* were a perfect parent when I was five-years-old.)

"That's negligence," Howard says. "That child is being neglected."

"Howard," my mother says, "let's not jump to conclusions about the neighbors."

"Remember, Howard, they're celebrities," I chime in. "We wouldn't want to judge *celebrities*. They're higher up in the social strata than we are. Throw stones up there and they'll fall back down and hit you." I turn back to my mother: "Is that what you mean, Mother?"

My mother seems unable to piece together what I have just said, and then continues: "I just don't think Misha Christianson—well, from everything *I've* heard about her, she sounds like a wonderful mother."

"What have you heard about her?" Elizabeth asks.

"Well, for one thing, she's at most of the kid's events. Whenever we went to Alexandria's school plays and poetry readings and things, Misha was there for Aster. And you know how hard it is to go anywhere when you're a celebrity. She's got the whole entourage with her, the body guards and everything—"

"That hardly has anything to do with being a good parent," Howard says. "I don't think I went to one of Elizabeth's school events when she was a little girl and it had nothing to do with my parenting, frankly—"

"Does she eat vegetables?" my mother asks.

"Well, she eats whatever her personal chef puts in front of her," Elizabeth says. "He's a nutritionist, too, and he's coaching her through a ten pound weight loss right now. So, yes, I'd say she eats—"

"Not *Misha.* The *little girl*," my mother says. "Does she eat vegetables? I don't see why a child would choose spinach over candy if it were up to her."

"Oh no," Elizabeth says. "She doesn't eat much of anything healthy."

"Maybe that's why she's so tiny," my mother says. "I've seen her—she's a little toothpick compared to Alexandria."

"Alexandria is, like, five years older than that little girl," Elizabeth says.

"I'm not suggesting Alexandria's fat," my mother says, "not necessarily *fat*—"

"Lori, let's not talk about Alexandria's weight?" Howard says.

"*Mother*," I say.

"She's only eight years old," Elizabeth says.

"I was simply pointing out that the Christianson child is very small—that's all I'm saying." My mother sits back in her seat. "It just seems strange that a family with so

much, with every resource at their fingertips, with everything that money can buy, would raise a child on ice cream and potato chips. It's disgusting. I don't even know anyone these days who buys non-organic. And you're telling me the Christiansons let that poor little girl eat refined white sugar? That's almost worse than not making her take swimming lessons! It's sad, really. That's all it is."

"I agree," Howard says, "but enough about this little girl. I don't want to hear anything more about it today."

"Did anyone feed the birds while we were gone?" my mother asks. I nod. "Aren't those names creative?" she says to Elizabeth. "Vanden made those up."

"Well, she didn't actually—" She stops herself. "Yes."

"Have you girls been enjoying yourselves?" Howard asks.

"Yes," I say.

"Elizabeth, honey?" he asks. (Does he not trust my answer?)

"Yes," she says. Howard looks in the rearview mirror, calculating whether he can wrestle more of an answer from either of us. "Did you have a nice time in Europe?" Elizabeth asks.

"We did," Howard says. My mother smiles tightly, doesn't add anything.

∞

At the beach house, we are sitting on wicker patio furniture, overlooking the Pacific Ocean, and eating a breakfast that Marta has prepared in the beach house kitchen.

"Fifteen thousand," my mother says to Marshall. "That's—what is it? Last summer, Elizabeth made three thousand, and her tuition, room and board cost us—let's see—"

"Over fifty-five grand," Howard says. He takes a bite of blueberry-spread toast and scatters breadcrumbs on the cream-colored outdoor rug.

"That's—what percentage is that?" my mother says, enlivened by the impending revelation.

"Well, Marshall's tuition, room, and board at UCLA cost $27,000. Isn't that right, Marshall?" Howard asks.

Marshall nods. "Yeah, that's typically what a University of California school costs, Sir," he says.

"I've told you before," Howard says. "Enough with the Sir, Marshall. No more Sir. Call me Howard."

"My mom is from Georgia," Marshall says. "Southern habit. Sorry, Howard."

"Elizabeth has been living the South!" my mother says. "Did you know that Marshall?"

"No, we hadn't talked about it," Marshall says. Elizabeth smiles kindly.

I sit in silence, interjecting nothing, and follow the conversation like a verbal game of pingpong.

"So Marshall will be making—" my mother begins.

"Over half—" interrupts Howard.

"Over half his semester's tuition, room and board, in one summer!" my mother finishes.

"That's my boy, Marshall!" Howard bellows, looking proudly at Marshall. "I knew I always liked you! You're a hard worker after my own heart."

"No, *both* semesters, Howard!" my mother adds excitedly. "Marshall's summer

salary paid for more than half a year of his college." Her diamond wedding ring catches the setting sun, sending prisms of light across the table.

"Marshall, Marshall," Howard says, smiling. He looks out over the ocean and shakes his head in disbelief.

"Very impressive," my mother says. "How much were you making at that public relations firm last summer?" my mother asks, turning to me for the first time since we've arrived at the beach house.

"It was an *internship*," I remind her.

"That's not what she's asking, Vanden," says Howard. "That's not what she's asking at all."

My mother looks frightened. "Was it minimum wage? Oh, Vanden, was it really minimum wage?" My mother cuts off a piece of vegetarian sausage and forks it into her mouth, smearing the corner of her colored lips.

"You knew that, Mother," I say, becoming frustrated with the conversation. I watch the seagull on the railing bob up and down. "This is exactly why I decided not work this summer—because nothing is ever good enough," I say.

"That's not true, Vanden," Howard says.

"What an unfair thing to say," my mother says.

"At least I *worked* last summer," I say.

"Oh, stop pouting," my mother says. "No one likes a whiner." She closes her eyes, savoring a spoonful of yogurt. When she opens her eyes, they snap to my hand, which is hovering just above the breadbasket in the center of the table.

"Didn't you already have a piece of bread, honey?" she asks, taking hold of my

wrist. I'm instantly mortified by the piece of toast dangling from my fingers. It looks so out of place there now, something to be embarrassed of, with my mother's sleek white fingers attached to my wrist.

"Marshall, would you like another roll, honey? Vanden doesn't need it," she says. And then, to make light of the situation: "Don't we all wish we could eat like boys?" I drop the toast, fingers frozen, and it lands on the tablecloth, amidst a spray of crumbs. The seagull is still watching.

"Oh Vanden!" my mother says. "Vanden! Really!"

Marshall looks at me, at the bread, at my mother. I feel my face go red.

"I'm full," he says. "Thank you so much for breakfast, Mr. and Mrs. West."

Yes, Marshall, full of bullshit.

COFFEE

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

The next day, my mother corners me in the kitchen and asks me if I would like to get coffee with her while she's home.

"Just the two of us," she says. "You know, to catch up."

It seems strange to me to 'get coffee' with my own mother, but she looks so vulnerable for a moment, her eyes darting back and forth between my own eyes and the floor, that I agree.

Howard walks into the kitchen then, in his oblivious, bumbling way. "What are you two ladies discussing?" he asks.

"Vanden and I are going to get coffee next week," my mother says proudly.

"Where?" Howard asks.

"We haven't decided," my mother says.

"Maybe that place down in Laguna," I say. "Next to Starbucks."

"Ah. That's a good shop," Howard says, and nods. "I like that shop. I've always liked that shop. I like to support the little guy. The underdog. I've always believed in the underdog. The independent. The guy who's short on his luck but not on his optimism. That's what I always say."

"Howard uses his camera phone to videotape policeman arresting people," my mother says.

"Someone needs to look out for the criminal, Lori!" Howard says, pouring himself a glass of milk. "Authority should always be accountable to witness. Elizabeth, I've said this to your mother, and I think it's true: People your age are complacent with the wrong authorities and rebel against the wrong powers. Your mother and I are not the

enemies, you know. The corporations, the conglomerates—*those* are the enemies. " He shakes his head sadly. "A small government is a safe government. That's all I'm going to say about that. It's sad that the kids these days—that they've all taken to Democracy. Republicans used to stand for something. They used to stand for the little guy. They used to stand for—"

"Anyway," my mother says. "The coffee shop."

"Ah, yes." Howard is quickly smiling again. "I like that coffee shop. They know me there," he says.

"They don't know you," I tell him. "They know what type of coffee you order."

"They know me," Howard objects. "They say, 'Good morning, Howard. The usual today?' "

"Exactly. They know your usual. Not you. Why do people love that? Thinking everyone knows them. No one knows anybody."

"Honey, I wish you'd improve your attitude," my mother says. "Anyway, let's not get coffee if it's going to create all this fuss. Caffeine makes me nervous anyway. We'll get lunch instead. Next Friday."

JELLYBEANS

El Cajon, California. 1996.

When I was in fourth grade just a few months before my father died, my mother accused me of stealing a bottle of Vicodin from her medicine cabinet. In seventh grade, I didn't know what Vicodin was, and I certainly hadn't stolen anything in my life.

Turned out my father had taken it. He thought she was taking too many pills, wanted to talk to her about it. My mother and father weren't doing a lot of talking at that point—not about anything important, at least—so my father had just taken the bottle.

"I know you took it," my mother had said, hovering over me. "Who else would have taken it?"

Ten-years-old and with an identity that was wrapped up in pleasing everyone, I didn't know what Vicodin was, or why I might want it, or why my mother was upset: less so because she believed I had taken the bottle of Vicodin, and more so because she wanted it back.

"Just give it back, Vanden. Go find it and bring it back," she said, hands on her hips. Staring up at her angry red face, I began to doubt myself. I almost believed I had taken it.

I remember searching my room, worried I didn't remember taking it, or that perhaps I had stolen it in my sleep. Thinking of my mother's face – stoic and certain of the grievance I had committed – I didn't trust myself. Maybe it was in my pencil box, or behind this stack of books, or over here on this shelf, or under my bed. "Vicodin, Vicodin, Vicodin," I repeated as I searched. "Find it, Vanden," I whispered to myself.

I turned my entire bedroom upside down, convinced that my mother was right. After all, my mother knew things, and she had never been wrong about anything I could

think of. I kept searching until my father came home from work, and my mother came upstairs and told me to stop.

My mother never apologized for the accusation. How could she? There was no way to explain to me that my father was worried about her, that he didn't think she still had back pain, that the pain was in her heart or her mind or somewhere much deeper than her bones, and that the Vicodin wasn't helping anything. Instead, she said nothing.

But I still remember the accusation, the burning in my face, the embarrassment, the regret over something I hadn't even done.

When I see false confessions on television now or read about them in the news, I always feel sorry for those wrongly-convicted criminals. "How could they have confessed if they didn't do it?" everyone demands. I know how. It's easy. When people lose faith in you, you lose faith in yourself. The worst part is that once it happens, once someone thinks he's a criminal – whether he is or not -- it's too late to ever go back.

At least, it was for me. Something happened after that. My desire to please everyone broke. She thought I took her Vicodin? Okay, fine. I would take her Vicodin.

I began checking my mother's medicine cabinet every week. When the bottle returned to the third shelf, between a clear bottle of eye make-up remover and a child-proof drugstore bottle of glossy green Extra Strength Tylenol, I opened that orange prescription bottle and took three of the white capsules.

I wasn't sure what to do with the capsules; I had just wanted to take them. Yes, Mother, I wanted to tell her, as a matter of fact, I did take your Vicodin. You were right, after all. I put the three pills in one of my doll's miniature lunchboxes.

I had always been obsessed with miniature things, which was why I had so many

dolls – for the accessories. I sculpted miniature food items out of clay – pink cupcakes with painted rainbow sprinkles, clusters of purple grapes, flat pizzas with thick crusts – and hand-sewn miniature T-shirts and skirts. There was a comfort in this tiny world, everything perfect and small.

Over the next few months, I kept collecting the pills from my mother's medicine cabinet, slowly, patiently, and filling the rest of my dolls' lunchboxes. When the lunchboxes were filled, I began filling their purses, stuffing pills inside their shoes, pockets, underwear – anywhere there was room. My dolls' quarters were a regular pharmacy.

One night, when my mother was tucking me in, she picked up a lunchbox and shook it.

"What on Earth did you fill the lunch box with, Vanden?"

"Jelly beans!" I shouted, bolting up in bed. I watched, frozen and fear-stricken, as she fiddled with the clasp of the lunch box. My mother had lovely hands and nails which I had always admired. When she scuffed a nail on the clasp, she shook her head, gave up, and returned the tiny lunch box to its place on one my bookshelves. My heart pounded. She moved to my bed and sat down, stroked my hair.

"Jelly beans? Why do you have jelly beans in there?"

"Because I like them," I said quickly. "Jellybeans, jellybeans, jellybeans. I love jellybeans!" I laughed, nervous and uncalculated and loud.

"Dolls shouldn't eat jelly beans for lunch," she said. "It's not healthy." Maybe you shouldn't eat Vicodin, I thought. It's not healthy.

"I know," I said. "But they like the jelly beans."

“Sugar rots your teeth, honey,” she said.

Vicodin rots your mind, Mother.

LUNCH WITH MY MOTHER

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

"That sounds disgusting," says Maura, who is flipping through the latest *US Weekly*, skimming an article about Britney's kids and her fucked-up childhood and how the media has ruined her. "I mean, that's where you get to the point that you stop eating – and *that's* when people notice."

"You don't think they notice before that?" asks Dawson.

"I mean, no," says Maura, who pauses for a moment, thinks, and then adds, "No."

"Huh," Dawson says, exhaling bong smoke into Maura's pink curtains. "I mean, don't get me wrong," says Maura, "I love cocaine, but I don't want it for fricking breakfast. Ten A.M. is a bit extreme for me. Unless it's a special occasion or something."

"Do you mind if I smoke in here?" Dawson asks, re-packing the bong.

Maura laughs, and goes back to her glossy paparazzi photos. "A little late, Dawson."

"You want a hit, Van?" Dane says, turning to me. I look up from a copy of *People*. "I'm actually meeting my mother for lunch."

"So that's a yes," he says.

"When I get back," I say, and hop off Maura's princess-style bed.

∞

"I just don't know what to do with you," says my mother. I am sitting in the passenger seat of her SUV, and we're driving down the 101 headed to The Beach House for lunch. My mother is wearing a hot pink T-shirt with the letters W.H. I.M.S.I.M. in

sequins: *What happens in Mammoth, stays in Mammoth!* (the motto of her most recent moms-only ski trip) and a silver bracelet with the initials WWJD. I want to ask her if Jesus sees what happens in Mammoth. I have been in the car about thirty seconds. She wastes no time getting to the point.

"With a degree from Lords University, you could have done anything," my mother says.

"Maybe that's why I failed," I say.

"Why?" she asks.

"Option paralysis. 'Anything' is scary."

"Oh good grief, Vanden. So instead, you come home, without a degree? And I have to tell you Howard has confided in me that he doesn't feel like the two of you are bonding. I do wish you would make a little bit of an effort to bond with the family, especially since there's a good chance you'll need to ask Howard to pay—"

"I won't be asking Howard to pay for anything."

"I just things would be different. I thought you would interact with the family—with Howard and Elizabeth. I'd just like to see you make some effort, that's all."

I look out the window, don't answer. I can feel her staring at me during lulls in traffic.

"Have you been exercising?" she asks. I am surprised at the question but relieved for the change of topic. "You look a little thick around the middle," she says. She checks her face in the rear-view mirror, fixates on her eyes, the fine lines around them. "Oh Vanden, I'm getting so *old*," she says sadly, sounding defeated. "I really hope Dr. Ray can fit me in before the church retreat next week."

"You really think I'm fat?" I ask, hurt.

"I just think you could prioritize your health. I don't want to see doors shut to you because of your weight, Sweetie," she says.

"Because of my *weight*? You act like I have a weight *problem*. What doors would be shut to me?"

"Vanden," she says, softly, sweetly, as if she's sharing with me a great truth of the world. "You're beautiful. You're intelligent. If we ignore the way you treat me, you have a great personality. You have almost everything going for you – money, and parents who love you. Now if you would only make a little effort to…" she pauses, choosing words, "prioritize your fitness, then you could have it all."

"Maybe you should put less emphasis on appearance."

"Maybe you should be more realistic about the way things work in this world."

"Maybe you're a shallow bitch." As soon as I say it, I know I've screwed myself out of lunch.

She pulls over and unlocks the doors. "Get out of the car, Vanden," she says, her voice tense. I get out.

Clouds of sand spray up under the wheels of her SUV as she pulls away. "I didn't want to get lunch with you anyway!" I yell after her, feeling like a child.

I stand on the side of the 101, and watch her Bush Cheney 08 bumper sticker grow smaller in the distance.

∞

I call Marshall from a pay phone on the side of the 101.

"Where are you?" I ask.

"At home, Vanden."

"Can I see you?"

"What do you need?" he asks.

"I just—I just—" I can feel tears rising in my throat. It doesn't matter to me that my mother hates me. I'm not sure why I'm crying.

"Where are you?" he says.

"At the beach," I say, which is sort of true. There is sand under my feet. Cars whiz by.

"This isn't your cell phone number," he says.

"I'm on a pay phone."

"Jesus, Vanden. Okay. I'm coming."

When Marshall picks me up, I have dried my tears. He doesn't ask me questions. He doesn't ask why I have been crying. Emotion doesn't effect Marshall. He's like a robot in the face of hysteria. It's convenient sometimes.

"Are we still together?" I ask.

"I don't know, Vanden," he says. "What do you want me to say?"

"I want to know the truth."

"Okay," he says. "The answer to that is probably no. I think we should still hang out though. Obviously we'll still be friends."

"And still have sex?"

"Yeah," he says. "Because it's not about attraction. It's about emotional connection. That's what's lacking. You know?"

"Really, Marshall? Emotional connection? You sound like a fucking girl," I say.

Because he does. "Maybe I'll go sleep with Dawson," I say.

"It wouldn't bother me," Marshall says. "I think there's something sexy about other guys knowing how great you are. And you *are* great."

"Great, but emotionally-disconnected."

"Yeah," Marshall says, "I guess that's what I mean." There is a pause. "Haven't you *already* slept with Dawson?"

"Can you just drop me off here?" I ask.

We are almost home anyway.

This time, I call Dawson.

∞

Legs dangling over the ledge of a construction tower, sixty feet above the black asphalt of the street, Dawson and I are watching airplanes land. We have climbed four stories of wooden scaffolding to watch the silver giants descend toward the landing strip at San Diego International Airport. Each time a plane roars by overhead, wind from the engines ripples through the leaves of palm trees in the distance, and seconds later, we feel the mechanical breath of airplanes on our own skin.

Dawson takes rolling papers out of his pocket, and with a flick of his pink tongue, licks the papers and begins to roll a joint.

"We're overdue for an earthquake," he says. "We have been for a while."

"I hope it doesn't happen while we're up here," I say.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Sort of."

"You sound like you probably need a break."

"A break from what?" I ask.

"Everything," he says. "And you know what else?"

"No. What?"

"That's what my End of the World party will be."

∞

"Let's take a drive," Dawson had said when he picked me up.

A hour and a half later, at the corner of Ivy and Front Street, we had climbed a chain-link fence that cordoned off a construction site and made our way up four flights of stairs. "Don't fall," Dawson said when we reached the top, and then pretended to push me.

Here we were now: on the unfinished fifth story of this almost-building, without walls or ceilings, watching planes land, watching the stars.

∞

"Speaking of parties," Dawson says, "we should throw a huge party for your birthday."

In the distance, the Pacific Ocean ripples like black silk.

"Sounds like a plan," I say.

"You know, this is my favorite place in California right now," Dawson tells me. "This is the future. By the end of the summer, this building will be finished. It won't be the future anymore. I love that. I love this. Being here. Don't you?"

And in that moment, sitting high up on that scaffolding beside Dawson, I think this is my favorite place, too.

Night is both yesterday and tomorrow, I realize. The safest place in the world.

∞

My mother and Howard are waiting for me when I get home. They've decided that I'm going to help Elizabeth with the Christianson's little girl.

"You need a job," Howard says.

"Some sort of direction," my mother says.

"What do you think of that?" Howard asks.

"You know what I think about babysitting?" I say. "I think it would make a great ad for a condom commercial."

"Excuse me?" Howard says.

"They could show a girl babysitting," I explain, "and then they could have a voice that says something like 'Motherhood: you never get to leave and you don't get paid.' "

"*Vanden*," my mother says.

"Or one of those Priceless commercials, except with time: "Orgasm: thirty seconds. Committed relationship: two years. Kids: forever."

Apparently my mother and Howard are not high. They do not find this amusing. Howard and my mother stand up, look uncomfortable.

"Vanden," Howard says. "We're leaving tomorrow for New York. We've already spoken with the Christiansons. We hope you'll demonstrate some responsibility while we're gone."

THE WISH

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

It is the night of my twenty-second birthday. I am perched on the white marble countertop in my mother and Howard's master bathroom, painting my nails.

In the bathroom mirror, I see myself the way Howard and my mother must see me: young sly eyes, the easy sweep of my windblown hair, the wicked click of my straight teeth. I am frighteningly cavalier tonight and full of a delicious disregard for rules—especially theirs. Can I help it that their little chat with me feels like a challenge?

I spread my toes and admire the bright polish in the soft light that drops from twelve bulbs nestled in the vaulted ceiling.

Someone knocks on the bathroom door.

"Come in," I say.

Elizabeth steps into the bathroom. "Vanden, you're *naked*," she says. (As if I did not already know this.) "What if it had been Marshall or Dawson knocking?"

"Do you like this color red?" I ask her and show her my fingers and toes.

"Sure. It's your birthday, make a splash," she says, though she knows as well as anyone that I don't need to be told to make a splash.

"Elizabeth, you *never* think it's a good idea to make a splash," I say, teasing her. "You're just humoring me."

I study myself in the mirror. I move my hair from one shoulder to the other. "Are there people downstairs yet?" I ask.

"There are," she says, and tells me that she has just come from downstairs to tell me that someone has propped the double front doors open and hundreds of people are streaming in.

∞

Half an hour later: So many sloshed twenty-somethings teetering on the edges of things – the brick lip of the spa, the rim of that great blue pool, six inches from a split skull, a concussion, a fatal fall.

With all these edges, all these brinks, the margin for error is slim.

Here I am—in the midst of it all—treating boundaries like they are something to be devoured. Holding a glass of wine in one hand and a joint in the other, I balance on the slippery ledge of fountain that connects the pool with the spa. Water gushes between my toes like ropes of foggy glass.

"To my twenty-second birthday!" I say, holding up my wine glass, and everyone erupts like a splash, cheering.

Now Marshall enters the backyard from the side of the house, sauntering with that quick, cool stride of his. He whispers something to Dawson. The two of them get eye contact with me, and then disappear into the house. I know what that means. I watch the lit end of Elizabeth's joint draws gentle orange hills in the air as she skips after them.

∞

"Happy Birthday, Birthday Girl," Marshall says. The four of us are in an upstairs bathroom.

"There's nothing *wrong* with coke," I am explaining to Elizabeth. "No one's pressuring you to try it, but it's not, like, *dangerous* or something. *Coca Cola*, on the other hand—there's something dangerous about *that*. I mean, some huge company making upwards of thirty billion dollars a year pumping sugar into people? That should bother you. But cocaine? Nothing wrong with cocaine."

Maura and Isabella come bursting through the bathroom door.

"You bitch," Maura says to me. "You were going to leave us out?"

"What did you want me to do, announce it to everyone downstairs?"

"Don't be greedy," Maura says. "We always share with you."

"Locks the door," I tell Isabella, and she does.

Marshall takes a tiny plastic bag out of the front pocket of his jeans and pours a little trail of white powder on the marble surface of the bathroom counter. I can feel the beat of the music from the party downstairs coming up through the floor.

"I don't know," Elizabeth. "Cocaine seems a little extreme for me."

"Extreme?" Isabella says. "That's so cute that she thinks coke is extreme."

Maura puts a hand on Elizabeth's bare shoulder. Elizabeth is wearing a bikini, and shivering. "Honey," Maura says, "dropping acid is a little extreme. Coke is pretty run-of-the-mill."

I take a credit card from my purse and hand it to Marshall, who begins chopping up the coke with the thin edge of it. "Seriously, Elizabeth, do whatever you want to do," I tell her. I trace the lip of my wine glass with a finger and take a deep breath as I think about the rush we're about to feel. My heart beats a little faster.

"Can't you die the first time you do coke?" she asks. It occurs to me that by asking us questions, she is asking to be convinced.

"That's a myth," I tell her. I shake my head. "I don't know where people come up with stuff like that. Do you know how much coke we all do? And look at us—we're fine."

Elizabeth takes a sip of her Cranberry Vodka. "I think I made this drink too

strong," she says, and puts the drink down on the counter. "I don't mean to be in this bathroom. I didn't mean to leave the party."

I realize we're losing her. I reach over, pick up the drink, and take a long gulp. She is right—the drink is too strong and burns my throat. I finish it and lick my lips: "Not strong enough, I'd say!"

Marshall stops cutting up the coke. "Listen, Elizabeth," he says. He speaks as if he is explaining something complicated to a three-year-old. "Maybe if you had a heart condition or something, there would be some danger. But you can die the first time you take Advil if you have an allergic reaction to it. So you can basically consider this as safe as Advil. Okay?" Despite herself, Elizabeth seems to find his tone comforting.

"Elizabeth, can you think of anyone who has died from doing coke?" I ask her.

"And think about how many people you've met this summer who do it," Maura adds.

"I'm sure I've seen people die in movies," she says.

"In *movies*?" Marshall says, laughing.

"No, you're mixing up coke and heroin," I explain. "It's always heroin that's the problem. Take Pulp Fiction: it's not that she does too much coke—it's that she mistakes heroin for coke. Or Brett Easton Ellis novels. But this, *this* is not heroin."

Dawson, who has been quiet, shifts his weight. "Let her make her own decisions," he says.

"Suit yourself," I say. I finish the last of my wine. "Personally, the only regrets I have are over things I haven't done. And frankly, Elizabeth, young adulthood is a Get Out of Jail Free card. You can't be fucked-up now. You're still young. If you're young

and reckless, no one cares. You won't be young forever. Now is the time."

I can see it in her eyes that we've convinced her.

∞

We are all downstairs again, this time high. My heart races. Someone has turned up music and the sound of things breaking punctuates the music every few seconds. The alcohol is nearly gone; a couple girls are throwing up in the grass in the backyard.

"No one had better die here tonight," Elizabeth says, sounding more confident and authoritative than I have ever heard here before. "My father is already in enough trouble, okay? He doesn't need a bunch of morons splashing his name all over The L.A. Times."

Marshall laughs. "Isn't it too late for that?"

"Elizabeth, how do you feel?" I ask her. She seems to consider this for a moment.

"Exquisite," she says. Marshall and Dawson find this very funny, and begin laughing. "I'm functioning *perfectly*," she says. "*Exquisitely*. In fact, that's exactly what everything is right now: exquisite. More beautiful than I've ever realized. This beautiful backyard, this beautiful pool, and all of these beautiful, beautiful people."

∞

Later in the evening, Dawson presents me with a round mirror so that we can chop up and snort our cocaine in the backyard.

"Outside. With music and people. Beneath the stars. Just the way drugs were meant to be done," Dawson says.

I am standing waist-deep in the blue pool water. Marshall brings the round mirror to me without so much as a word, kneels down on the brick lip of the pool, and holds the mirror steadily beneath my face. Dawson hands me a rolled-up dollar bill and I erase

another powdery line as if I were merely breathing, nothing more. Elizabeth watches us with a wide-eyed, ecstatic fascination.

When it's too cold outside, we move to the kitchen. Someone has bought me a cake. It is an enormous tiered cake so large that it takes two men to carry it into the kitchen from a white catering van parked out front. The men are clad in white aprons. They place the cake carefully on the kitchen table and leave without waiting for a tip, hurrying back into their white catering van and out of this awful smoky mansion, clogged with culpability.

I stand before the cake, ready to blow out my candles. Everyone fans out behind me like a peacock's tail. I stare at the cake before digging three fingers into a stretch of frosting roses. Feeling unpredictable, I turn around and spread the handful of icing onto the face of the boy standing nearest to me—a boy I don't even know. He licks up the sugary puffs of pink petal from his cheeks as if he's grateful for my attention.

Everyone is watching me now. I turn back to the cake with its little trench of missing roses. There is music playing, but this moment will remain forever silent in my memory.

Years later, I will close my eyes and remember this moment. That beautiful glittering city of candles—winking lights, possibilities, and then, with one hot breath: all of it extinguished.

MRS. PEED

El Cajon, California. 1996.

As a child, I used to get a bad feeling about things and I used to wait for something to happen so I could say, "You see, I had a bad feeling about this." That is what was going through my mind in sixth grade when everyone else was developing first crushes. I was just waiting for things to fall apart. I've always been a little neurotic, but I like to chalk it up to intuition.

Children, I think, fear things innately. They fear things before they even know what they have to fear. The worst thing for a child who is paranoid is to have their paranoia confirmed.

In fourth grade, we had a reward system in our class called The Fish Bowl. If you did a good deed—helped a classmate, picked up a piece of trash—your name went into The Fish Bowl on a little folded piece of paper. On Fridays, our teacher, Ms. Peed, drew a name from The Fish Bowl and took someone out to lunch. I know my name never went into the fishbowl. Maybe Ms. Peed had something against me because she had misspelled Einstein on the board one day, as E-i-n-s-t-i-e-n, and I had pointed it out to her. Maybe she was touchy about last names.

On a Wednesday in fourth grade, I had a bad feeling. While I cut colored construction paper into stars and squares, my father, who had taken the day off of work and was somewhere in the clouds, flying his Cessna, disappeared in one whooshing pocket of air and a scissor-click of broken wing metal.

Of course, the Friday after my father's death, my name got called. I've always wondered whose name was in that scrap of paper she drew out of The Fish Bowl, who missed lunch with Ms. Peed that day. Everyone in the class knew she was just taking me

out to lunch because my father had died.

During lunch, I didn't say anything. Sitting across from Ms. Peed on a plastic swivel chair, I swallowed a cold hamburger, bite by painful bite, and thought of elephants fitting through the eyes of needles. This, my father had once told me, was how hard it was for rich people to get into heaven: "Like an elephant fitting through the eye of a needle, Van." When my father said this, I wasn't sure if we were rich or not, but I sure hoped we weren't. An elephant fitting through the eye of a needle was what that hamburger felt like sliding down my throat.

"I'm so sorry," Ms. Peed said to me. I stared at her white blouse, crisp and clean, and noticed the outline of her breasts, which had recently begun to enthrall some of the boys in our class. The boys were right—there was definitely something under there. I hated Ms. Peed for having all the things I didn't: for having breasts *and* a father. Staring into the starched white of her blouse, I thought of angels and heaven, how they probably didn't exist, and wanted Ms. Peed to feel as sad as I did. I said the meanest thing I could think of:

"Your name is a sentence," I told her.

∞

At the end of that school year, my mother explained to me that now we only had one income now—hers—and that our current house was a two-income house. The private elementary school I attended was also a two-income elementary school. She and my father had scrimped and saved in every way possible to send me there. After my father's death, paying the tuition became hopeless.

I sighed deeply, and lifted my eyes to my mother's. "Okay," I said. "I'll get a

job." I'm not sure if I really believed I could work, or if I was simply regressing deeper into childhood because it was easier to take this pain like a child.

I didn't mind moving. My father was everywhere in the old house, and just to get to the grocery store, we had to drive over the portion of the freeway that looked onto the field where the accident had happened. Somehow I knew in my heart that to move away from his death was not to move away from my father himself.

So I began fifth grade in a new place, with new teachers, new classrooms, new playground rules, and no friends.

On the first day of school, my mother dropped me in the parking lot and drove away before I could run after her car. It only took me a few seconds to figure out that my button-down polo and khaki skirt were the wrong choice.

I walked as slowly as I could, but I finally reached the classroom. I slid into my assigned seat, and remained as quiet as I ever had, hoping no one would notice me, or my embarrassing clothing.

At recess, I sat down on a concrete plantar, carefully shredded a string cheese my mother had packed for a snack, and ate it strand-by-strand in order to take up the entire fifteen minutes allotted for the break.

∞

In bed that night, I lay awake on the cool sheets, dreaming up ways I might walk back into elementary school and rocket to popularity. After some careful thought, I decided to drop the rest of my name and introduce myself as "V." Something with a little more syllabic confidence: Just V. I figured this new V might wear sunglasses, and talk to boys.

The next morning, I found my new teacher, Mr. DeLillo, a tall willowy man in his thirties, and told him my name was actually V.

"V?" he said. "Well my apologies, V. I see." He laughed. "Do you hear that? *V*, I will *see*. That's a poem!" His banter about rhyming made me think of my mother and I immediately felt better.

That afternoon, he announced to the class that my name was V.

Later in the day, the girl next to me passed me a crumpled-up note. When I passed it to my neighbor, assuming it was for someone else, she smiled at me. "It's for you," she said.

"Who's it from?" I asked. The girl shrugged.

My heart beat quickly – a *friend*! I unwrapped the paper, careful not to make any tears.

Dear V:
You smell like pee.
Signed, Me.

My heart sank. "Who's this from?" I asked my neighbor again. This time, my fingers shook as I held the note. The girl shrugged her shoulders again.

If I had been teased like that at my old elementary school, I would have had more compassion and might never have made fun of Ms. Peed's name. The thing about paying your dues in elementary school is you're a better person for life. Anyone who was never teased in elementary school generally grows up to be an asshole.

Driving back to school that day from lunch with Ms. Peed, I had pretended to look out the passenger window, but I could see Ms. Peed dabbing away tears out of the corner of my eye. Whether Ms. Peed was crying over my loss, or the misfortune of her

surname, I hadn't been sure.

I suffered through fifth grade, but not through sixth. By the end of sixth grade, my mother had met and married the actor Robert Ransom and I returned to private school.

HUBBLE'S CONSTANT

El Cajon, California. 1997.

The first time I saw my mother cry was almost a year after my father's death. It was Halloween. I was well into the throes of that awful fifth grade year. My mother had brought home a colleague's daughter, Caylee, to spend Halloween with me. She was several years younger than me, and I felt a little silly about it, but my mother had told me to think of it as having as a little sister for the evening.

Caylee and I were adjusting our Halloween costumes in the mirrors of the upstairs bathroom. As a fifth grader, I had passed the acceptable age of trick-or-treating; however, I had not passed the age at which it was acceptable to pretend that it was just about the candy, don a half-assed costume and con the neighbors out of chocolate meant for preschoolers.

At least, I this is what I would tell all the girls at school, I decided. They were all going to a Halloween Party at one of the boys' houses to which every girl in the class had been invited except me. I would tell them that Caylee had wanted to go, and that my mother had made me take her.

Caylee was a French maid and I was a mummy. Since I had been eleven for some time now, and knew a thing or two about boys and their minds, I made sure she wore a white turtleneck under the French maid costume.

"It's gonna be cold, Caylee," I told her.

"*Is not*," she said, and turned around in front of the mirror, admiring her long legs in fishnets.

"Just put on a turtleneck," I said, as I wrapped toilet paper around and up my arm,

from my wrist to my shoulder. The toilet paper-wrapped mummy was the least expensive costume my mother and I could think of.

"Caylee," I said, "I'm only going to say it one more time: *Put – on – a – turtleneck*."

"You're bossy," she said. "Who do you think you are?" She put her hands on her waist and cocked her hip out in a way that made me want to cry. We were all holding a lot of emotion in back then.

"Caylee, if you put on a turtleneck," I told her, "you won't get cold, and if you don't get cold, we can stay out later and you'll get more candy."

Her eyes lit up.

"Oh. You promise you'll wait with me no matter how many houses I want to go to?" she asked.

Before I could answer, my mother's voice poured up the stairs and into the bathroom in the form of a rippling scream. Then we heard the clatter of metal on tile.

Caylee and I dropped everything we were doing, and ran downstairs as fast as we could to the kitchen, where my mother had been carving a pumpkin. The pumpkin was on the table with an awful, crooked mouth of carefully-carved snaggleteeth. The hollow of the first eye was a lopsided triangle whose left edge was a seam to the bottom of the pumpkin. There was blood everywhere – on the table, running in rivulets down my mother's arm, and falling bead-by-bead onto the white tile: brilliant red drops like a trail of rubies in snow. My mother stood beside the pumpkin, holding her hand, and wailing.

The carving knife was on the floor, where she had dropped it from surprise when it had slipped through the pumpkin flesh so unexpectedly easily and cut open her other

hand, which had been positioned below the eye of the pumpkin, steadying the round, laughing, head.

My mother didn't move, didn't try to stop the blood, didn't try to hide her tears. She just wailed, the sound moving over the walls of the house, climbing up to the ceilings and sliding back down again, taking over every crevice.

I guided my mother to the sink and ran the faucet water, put her hand under it. The blood mingled with the faucet water, pink foam collecting in the kitchen sink.

My father had always carved the pumpkin. This was our first Halloween without him, and I hadn't even offered.

"Mom, I'll finish it," I said.

"No," she said, "No, Vanden." And then: "You can't do everything. You just *can't*." She shook her head, tears flying into the sink. It had been almost a year, but I knew we weren't talking about the pumpkin. I pretended we were.

"It's just a pumpkin, Mom. I should have been the one carving it. I should have offered. I'm sorry. I'll finish it." I could feel an ocean rising in my throat, and I wanted desperately to leave the kitchen.

"It's not your fault," she said, and then went back to crying.

Listening to my mother's pain in a way I couldn't shut out, my throat became a damn too weak to hold back the ferocious ocean that had been building up inside me all along. So I started crying too.

It was only a second before Caylee joined in—probably too stunned and frightened to understand what we were all crying about.

If my mother had ever cried before that—and I'm sure she had—I certainly didn't

remember it. But that night, the three of us stood there in the kitchen, wailing at the top of our lungs, holes in our hearts like the eyes of that ugly jack-o-lantern, dark and wrong and broken.

Caylee was the first to stop crying. "I don't like it here," she said.

I used to think a lot about Hubble's Constant and how we're all moving away from each other, every second, every day, every week, every month. Sometimes I still wonder when this expansion of the galaxies is going to stop, when someone is going to reel us all back in, snap this universe back to the beginning, or if we're all just going to keep spreading out forever, growing further and further apart from each other, like particles in the universe, reaching but with nothing to hold us down.

WHERE THE BLUE BEGINS

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

The morning after the party, Elizabeth and I are too tired to clean up. We sprawl out on the couches in the living room, ignoring the stench of stale beer. In the kitchen, mauled remnants of cake dot the counter like an obstacle course.

I am scheduled to work for the Christiansons today for the first time. Elizabeth seems relieved for the break. Still, she seems intent on conveying to me just how much she loves the little girl.

"Did you ever babysit?" she asks me. "In high school maybe?"

I stretch my bare legs over the arm of the couch. "Yeah," I say. "God, little kids are crazy, aren't they?"

"I don't think so," she says. "I think they're the sanest among us."

∞

The Christiansons live in a custom home at the end of a cul-de-sac on Mount Diablo Drive. The circular driveway is the size of a traffic circle. A stone fountain marks its center. Four white pillars espouse an arched dome above the front porch. Draped from end to end of the second story, a red, white, and blue 'Support Our Troops' banner billows gently. The mansion resembles the White House. Still, there is an unmistakably Californian air: huge palm trees with trunks the size of pillars themselves obscure windows on either side of the double doors.

Standing on the Christianson's front porch, I hear a little girl's shrill voice:

"I want to answer the door!" the voice shrieks. "I want to answer it! Teresa, no! *Me!*"

The door swings open and a tiny blonde child stands there, staring up at me with large round blue eyes. Her hair is almost white. She is pink from the sun.

"Beat you, Teresa!" the little girl screams giddily.

The Christianson's personal assistant, Teresa, stands behind her.

"You always beat me, Aster," Teresa says tiredly, a tight smile painted across her face.

"I *know*!" Aster says. She laughs—a little girl's laugh—and then begins laughing a deep, throaty laugh. She leans back and clutches her stomach, as if she has a large belly. "Ho! Ho! Ho!" she bellows.

"That's enough, Aster," Teresa tells her.

Aster straightens suddenly and looks up at me. "That's my Santa Claus impression," she says.

I realize how long it must have been since I have seen a small child. I am captivated by the adult-like proportion of her figure—captivated, really, by this miniature human being.

"Aster loves to do impersonations," Teresa says. "She'll have an impersonation of you soon enough. Aster, why don't you show your new nanny your room?"

Aster takes my hand, as if she has always known me, and leads me up a staircase and down a hallway to her bedroom.

"This," she says grandly, "is my room." An oval-shaped floor-length mirror hangs on one wall. Aster runs to the mirror and stares at her reflection. "Do you want to watch how many faces I can make?" she asks. She runs through a repertoire of expressions—surprise, happiness, sadness—her eyes locked with those of her reflection.

When she tires of this, she picks up a hairbrush from her dress and pretends to run it through her hair. It's an uncoordinated gesture—the brush skims the surface of her hair without actually brushing it—but Aster seems satisfied with herself. "My mom says I can be a beauty queen," she says. She chooses a lipstick from a case on the dresser and applies it in two streaks: one streak a red mustache, the other covering half her lower lip and part of her chin. "I'm a cool colors person," she tells me, selecting an eye shadow case of mauve, violet, and light blue. "Do you know what you are?"

"I'm not sure," I say, taking a seat beside her on a pink-cushioned stool.

She looks at me, astonished. "You don't *know*?" She appears genuinely concerned for me. "Didn't your mommy teach you?" she asks.

I imagine my mother when I was Aster's age—in her slacks and her jackets, carrying her masculine brief case—and the question almost makes me laugh. I can't remember my mother ever wearing make-up when my father was alive.

"No," I say. "No, she didn't."

Aster's eyes drop at the corners. "Oh," she says quietly. She stands still, watching me carefully. Then she puts an arm around my neck. "It will be okay," she says, patting my back with her other hand. "Shhh," she whispers. I'm not sure what else to do, so I put my arms around Aster's tiny rib cage and hug this fragile child.

She pulls away. "It's good to have a mommy," she says, "because daddies are never home."

"Is your daddy never home?"

"My daddy…" Her voice trails off. "He's a very important man," she says in a deep voice, as if imitating a middle-aged businessman, "and he has very important things

to do!"

"Well I think *you're* pretty important," I tell her.

"Will you read me a story?" she asks.

"Sure," I say. Aster immediately sets to work pulling an array of books off her shelves. She runs a finger over a book with a picture of a little girl in a red dress and yellow raincoat.

"Will you call me Nataline from now on?" she asks. "Like Madeline, except I made it up."

"Alright," I say. "Nataline it is."

"No, no, no!" she says. "Jasmine. I'm Jasmine. Princess Jasmine."

"You can be whoever you want to be," I tell her.

She sighs. "No, no, I want to be Pocohantas. No. Maybe Ariel? I know! Sleeping Beauty!"

"Sleeping Beauty?" I say. "But Sleeping Beauty is asleep. I bet you don't like sleeping."

Aster smiles elfishly. "Maybe I *would* if I were a princess," she says. Aster looks in the oval-shaped mirror again. The streaks of red lipstick are dark against her pale skin. "I just don't want to be Aster anymore," she says.

∞

I decide to take Aster to the beach. We walk the dunes of sand, pace the boardwalk and look at the Pacific Ocean. Aster stands breathless, watching the waves.

"This ocean," Aster says slowly, looking out over the Pacific, "this is the edge of it?"

"The edge of what?" I ask.

"You know. The *edge*," Aster says. "On a map."

I dig a toe into the sand. My head is pounding. I feel nauseous and shaky and weak. I haven't been this hung over since my freshman year of college. "I never thought of it like that before," I say. I breathe in the salty air, trying to feel better.

"This is where the green ends and where the blue starts, right?" she says.

I study the blue of the Pacific for a long time, let myself get lost in it. I think about the endlessness of it all.

"Yes," I say, looking at the ocean but thinking of something else, "where the blue begins."

BLUE CHRISTMAS

El Cajon, California. 1994.

When he was alive, my father loved to listen to music, especially during the holiday season. He would come home from work, throw down his suitcase, and turn on the stereo in the living room. Best of all, he always sang along.

I can still see him, putting one foot on the linoleum floors in the kitchen and doing a little spin. Elvis Presley's "Blue Christmas" blares from the speakers in the living room.

"It's a blueeee Christmas," he sings.

"You're *silly*," I tell him.

"Oh it's a BLUEEEE Christmas!" he croons.

"Daddy, stop!"

"What? I don't look like Elvis to you?" I shake my head. "Dance with me, Baby," he says, reaching for my hand. I watch him, unsure. "Baby, dance with me." He does another spin on the shiny floor. He looks up at me. His face begs me to join him. "If you won't dance with me, Honey, well then *it's a Blueeee Christmas*!"

Many families may have been happier than mine back then, but not all fathers impersonate Elvis with such sincerity. Not all fathers ask their daughters to dance. Not all daughters are their father's loves the way I was. I was one of the lucky daughters, and I knew that.

We would have many blue Christmases after his death, but this was not one of them. A Charley Pride song came on next, one of my father's favorites.

My father sang along: "Oh, the crystal chandeliers light up the paintings on your

wall! The marble statuettes are standing stately in the hall! But will the timely crowd that has you laughing loud help you dry your tears? When the new wears off of your crystal chandeliers… Oh, when the near wears off of your crystal chandeliers…”

THE CRASH

El Cajon, California. 1997.

What I know of the crash is this: My father was supposed to be at work. He was not at work. Instead, he was flying his Cessna in the clouds. Something went wrong—pilot error, like most plane crashes—and then he was gone. In one instant, the world swallowed him up whole.

∞

The suddenness of my father's death had been the strangest part. That one moment he was there for me – something physical, alive, a person I could touch – and the next he was simply gone. For months afterward, I dreamt about him. In my dreams, he was warm and huge. His deep voice bellowed from the corners of my mind and swept through my blood.

When I woke up, it was as if I was learning of his death all over again. Remembering that he was gone after a dream had tricked me into a carefree conversation with him about my school day or what my mother was cooking for dinner were some of the most difficult moments. It was a disappointment that continued for days, months, years after he had passed away.

Still, I yearned for these dreams—for his blurry face, his warmth, the feel of my father—even if only fleeting, and unreal.

THE HOUSEWARMING GIFT

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

When I get home from the Christianson's, my mother and Howard have found the round mirror that Elizabeth is trying to explain was a housewarming gift from a friend. My mother is shaking her head and furiously tapping her freshly-manicured red nails on the marble countertop as if playing the piano. Howard leans against the refrigerator door. He does not look as though he wants to be a part of this conversation.

"For you and Howard," Elizabeth says. "That's all. A housewarming gift from our friend." Her eyes plead with me to save her, but I'm not sure how.

"A housewarming gift from your friend the addict!" my mother says. The mirror is about a foot in diameter, no clip on the back, shiny, perfect. It reflects my mother's face: angry, beautiful, red lips and diamond earrings.

My mother's house—Howard's house, this home, whatever it is—is the kind of living quarters that aren't really lived in. The result is that everything has a place—an unchanging, indefinite place. I can imagine how when my mother and Howard walked in to the mirror propped against the knives on the granite kitchen counter, they zeroed in on it almost immediately: like some sort of prop, a hint to my mother and Howard that rehab was calling.

"Do you need help?" Howard asks. He looks from Elizabeth to me and then back at Elizabeth. "Do either of you need help?

"They don't need *help*, Howard," my mother says. She turns to me: "You're just not having any more of your little parties in this house."

Wrong on both accounts, Mother.

MEXICO

Tijuana and Rosarito, Mexico. Summer 2008.

The whole thing is my idea. The Christiansons are away for the weekend at one of Nolan's tennis tournaments. And this is the way life works in California that summer: one minute we are standing on California soil, the next we have clicked through the border turn-style—Visitor Number 71,232 of the day—and we are passing over a bridge to Mexico.

We are four: myself, Elizabeth, Marshall, and Dawson. With the bridge behind us, we near Tijuana's famous arch. A green-and-red sign that reads *Bienvenidos a Tijuana* dangles, transfixed, from a crisscrossed mesh of wires. We pass donkeys painted white and black like zebras. Street vendors hawk jewelry and purses and dolls and women sell multi-colored blankets. Men scuffle after us in flannel shirts to sell us pills from their pockets. We pass tattoo parlors and open-air bars and pharmacies selling drugs to clean-cut, nervous American teenagers. The lull of Mariachi music and the spicy scent of roasting carne asada calls to us from empty, dimly-lit restaurants.

In the street, we hail a cab to Rosarito.

"Why don't we just stay in Tijuana?" Elizabeth asks.

"You can't do that anymore," Marshall tells her. "It's not safe."

"Safe," she says. "That's funny. I mean, in the scheme of things, compared to Mexico, what you all do is really not so—"

"Elizabeth," I say, interrupting. "It's not as if you haven't been partaking."

"The problem is that no one trusts anyone else there," Marshall says, still talking about Tijuana. "No one knows who anyone is. They're turning roles upside-down."

I wonder if he's talking about Mexico or our own little foursome, which has lately

felt unstable.

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On the beach in Rosarito, we are sipping fruity drinks and admiring the ocean. I am feeling light-headed and woozy from the alcohol. The ocean is the same Pacific Ocean from Orange County, the same blue—a few hundred miles south of Orange County.

Dawson and Marshall are debating something about magic mushrooms. Dawson is insisting that the best shroom shack in the world is in Negril, Jamaica: a family-run magic mushroom restaurant called Tedd's. He explains that Tedd, a Jamaican man in his seventies, distributes menus and patrons order mushroom smoothies or hot tea. Tedd asks, "Mild, medium, or potent?"

"According to who?" Marshall asks.

"Mush Magazine," Dawson says. "They know their stuff."

Marshall tells Dawson that this is nothing new, that Amsterdam has been doing drug cafes for years and years and years.

"Tedd is seventy-something-years-old," Dawson says. "He's been doing it for years and years, too. Tedd was the first. Tedd was the original."

"I want to do coke," Elizabeth says, surprising us all.

"That can certainly be arranged," Dawson says.

"Elizabeth," I say. "Really? Now don't go become an addict on us."

"Look who's talking," she snaps. I wait, but she does not apologize or retract her comment.

"*I'm* the one who invited you to come with us today, Elizabeth," I remind her.

"Don't forget your place."

"My *place?*"

Dawson stands up. "Come on, El," he says. "Let's go find some yay." She stands and follows Dawson.

As they are walking away, she calls to me, "I'm not your dog, Vanden."

I close my eyes and lay back down. The sun explodes orange on my eyelids.

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Dawson and Elizabeth are gone for at least a couple hours. When they finally return, they are high on coke and far drunker than Marshall or me. The four of us find a taxi van to take back to the border. Marshall and Dawson sit up front and speak to the driver in Spanish. Loud Spanish music blares from the speakers. Elizabeth and I are sitting in the back. She is asking me something about truth, about the concept of truth, and its place in our lives. I have never seen her so talkative, so confident.

"You're so naïve," she is saying.

"Deception never gets you anywhere," I tell her, half paying attention to our conversation. "Tell it like it is. That's my motto."

Outside, the scene is like a faded photograph: all pale yellow and grays. In the distance, pastel-colored houses look like a child's drawing: crooked lines, colors smeared, none of it quite right.

"Vanden," she says, and leans over to whisper into my ear: "I want to tell you something that you should know."

"About what?" I say, turning to her.

She turns her face away from mine and whispers again: "Do you think your

father was alone in that plane?" she asks. "Just him? Flying around by himself?"

"He *was* alone," I say.

"Why do you think his photos disappeared? Why do you think your mother never talks about him?"

"My mother would have told me if—I know everything about that day," I say.

"His secretary's name was Bernadette," she says, and stares coldly into my eyes. "Why would I know that?"

"I don't know." And momentarily my world goes silent.

"Because he wasn't alone," she says. "Because they found two bodies in the wreckage." Everything stands still. I only see her eyes, two spinning orbs. "I just thought you should know," she says, "since you're so obsessed with truth and everything." Pain cuts through my torso and I feel my heart split open.

The cab driver pulls over near the border. Elizabeth steps out of the cab without looking at me. I wonder if she will even remember what she has said to me. We hand over a few dollars and walk toward the border to cross that bridge again, to cross back through the turnstyles, to California, to the rest of the summer, to a life with a rewritten preface.

BERNADETTE

El Cajon, California. 1996.

My mother and my father and I are at a company Christmas party. Someone with whom my father works begins to insist that she has already met my mother.

"No," my mother says, "no, I don't think so. We haven't met."

"Yes," the woman who knows my father says, "we met at the conference in San Francisco."

"I didn't attend the conference in San Francisco," my mother says.

"Yes, you did," says the woman. "And I remember meeting you at Paul's wife's birthday party, too. And at—"

"You must be thinking of Bernadette, my secretary—my assistant," my father cuts in.

The woman's mouth curls into a tight little 'O.'

"Oh," she says. "I'm sorry. You look just like—I'm so sorry."

My mother lets out a sound—involuntary, a tiny, faraway squeal from her throat—and then she excuses herself to the restroom.

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I remember calling my father at work as a child. I remember using my best speaking voice: "Hi, Bernadette. Is my dad there?"

I think of my mother, sitting at the breakfast table, making omelettes and pancakes while the memory of my father slices like a blade through her heart. And how she, smiling, eyes wide, swallowed that knife into her stomach, zipped it up, deep inside her, all those years, while I learned how to do cartwheels, and started new schools, and missed my perfect, perfect father.

MORE LIGHT

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

When Elizabeth and I arrive home that evening, Howard and my mother are both in the entryway, admiring a chandelier they have just purchased. My mother is holding a silver ladder, and Howard looks perplexed.

"Isn't it beautiful?" my mother asks. At her feet, a twenty-four armed crystal chandelier sits like a monstrous spider.

"We're still figuring out just how to hang it up there," my mother says, and gestures to the domed ceiling above us, already sparkling with embedded lights.

"Why do you need a chandelier when you have those lights up there already?" Elizabeth asks.

"Well, for *more* light," my mother says.

"Where were you two today?" Howard asks, as if just noticing we have been gone all day.

"San Diego," I say.

"I'm tired," Elizabeth says. "Going to sleep." My mother and Howard are focused on the chandelier again. Elizabeth starts up the stairs and I follow behind her. My mother and Howard's voices carry up the stairs after me, still discussing the chandelier.

"I don't know, Howard," my mother says.

"Trust me, Lori."

"It's fragile," she says. "Howard, it's breakable. I think it's a job for a professional."

"It's not breakable."

"Howard, you're being silly," my mother says. "It *is* breakable."

"Lori," Howard says, "If you just hold the ladder steady for me, I really think I can handle this just fine."

"I'm not comfortable with this," my mother says. "It's made of glass and light bulbs and all sorts of delicate little pieces, Howard—"

As if this house needs anything else breakable.

METAPHORS

El Cajon, California. 1996.

"There's a metaphor in astronomy for everything," my father used to say. Now that he's gone, I come up with these metaphors myself.

My father taught me the names of the planets and the order of things—universe, galaxy, solar system, planet—the way other children learned the order of colors in the rainbow. I learned the order of colors too, of course, but I also knew something about what lay beyond our blue marble planet.

"Our Earth, third planet from the sun, the Blue Planet," my father told me, sometime around the Halloween before he died, "is part of the Milky Way Galaxy." He took a bite from the Milky Way candy bar he was chewing at his desk and pointed to a picture of the Andromeda Galaxy in an open textbook. "There's a galaxy for you, Ellie," he said.

"I want to see the Milky Way," I said.

"This Milky Way"—he held up the candy bar— "is all I've got for you." I watched him, confused.

"But the Andromeda Galaxy, now there's a beauty. Two point five million light years away from us and look at all that light—"

"I want to see *our* galaxy," I said.

"Well now, Van, there's the funny thing. We can guess what it looks like. We can draw it. We can speculate. But we can't take a picture of our own galaxy because we can't get far enough away. And we might never have enough perspective to take a photograph." He lifted me onto his lap so I could have a better look at the Andromeda

Galaxy. "It's sort of like people," he explained. "If you think about it, you're the only person you can never see. You can see your reflection in mirrors, and you can look at photos that other people have taken you. But you can never really see yourself, not the way that other people see you." He popped the last bite of the Milky Way in his mouth, and shredded the wrapping of another candy bar. "You think your mother minds that I'm eating all the Halloween candy?" he asked. I shook my head. "Well, if she asks, you just tell her I'm munching on galaxies, okay? That won't be lying, alright?"

"But she won't know what that means," I said.

"Better not to know. The trick-or-treaters still have enough." He sighed. "Better for her not to know."

My father was right. It's difficult, if not impossible, to see yourself. We have photographs of all the galaxies surrounding us—even those millions of light years away from us—and not a single photograph of our own galaxy. We probably never will.

You're the only person you can never see.

THE WHITE PARTY

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

Every summer, the Christiansons host an end of summer White Party. All guests are asked to dress in white. The party is always in the name of whichever charity is the Christianson's latest pet.

At the Christianon's annual White Party, everyone is there: my mother, Howard, Marshall's parents, Dawson's parents. As a reward for all her hard work over the course of the summer, the Christiansons want Elizabeth to be able to enjoy the festivities so—at my mother's urging, I'm sure—they have asked me to watch Aster for the evening.

I am with Aster in her bedroom, helping her to get dressed for the party. She is wearing a lacey yellow sundress.

"I want a raincoat," she says, rummaging through her closet.

"You don't need a raincoat," I tell her. "It never rains here."

"Yes it does," she says.

"Denial is my umbrella," I say, and touch one of her stuffed animals.

"I have a polka dot umbrella," she says. "It's black and white."

"Nothing's black and white," I tell her.

She comes out of the closet, holding her umbrella, wearing yellow galoshes and a raincoat, looking both adorable and ridiculous.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Yes. I'm sorry. Let's go outside to the party." I help her take off the rain boots and the coat, and she doesn't object, just watches my face with her large eyes, her all-absorbing gaze.

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Outside, it is early evening. White tents with pyramid roofs shield guests from the pale blue sky. Tiki torches glow at the perimeter of the square lawns to the right and left of us. My mother and Howard sit at one of many long rectangular tables spread with white tablecloths and ringed with white wicker chairs. They are silhouetted by the green of the lawn, the bamboo trunks of the torches and their dancing flames, a procession of palm trees. Behind them, the blue of the Christianson's pool meets the horizon. Beyond the pool, all of Orange County stretches out like a pink stucco gingerbread city.

"Well, no one *believes* in torture," my mother is saying. "I think it's not as much of a debate as everyone makes it out to be. It's not like anyone is really saying, 'I'm *for* torture.'"

Caterers are busy in the kitchen. Servers distribute grilled salmon on Nolan Christianson's mother's gold-and-white china plates.

Marshall's parents are sitting across from my mother and Howard.

"Is she serious?" Marshall's father asks, gesturing at my mother and looking at Howard. Howard shrugs, as if to explain that my mother hasn't always been a part of these circles.

I spot Elizabeth at the backyard's edge, admiring the view of Orange County.

Marshall's father turns back to my mother. "Lori, you're mistaken," he says. "*I'm* absolutely *for* torture, as you put it. As long as they're Iraqi." It isn't meant to be a joke—it isn't a joke—but the table erupts into polite laughter, an uncomfortable tittering. The product of discomfort at my mother's naivete.

Mymother opens her mouth. "I— " Her mouth remains a small red-lipped oval.

Please, Mother, defend yourself, I plead. I wish I could coax the words out of her mouth, but there is only silence amidst the gentle clanking of wine glasses and silverware.

"Let's go swimming," Aster says, and tugs at my white dress.

"No, Aster," I say.

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After I have put Aster to bed, I pour myself a glass of wine (white wine, of course—no red is served at the White Party) and join the party. The air is soft and cool. I think of the humidity of Boston and don't miss it. The Christianson's backyard is truly magnificent. Strands of tiny white lights climb the palm trees like vines of ivy dotted with fairies.

Marshall's father and Howard stand nearby, at the edge of the pool. They are discussing the sophistication of pools these days, how many options there are, what with the saltwater pools and the negative edge pools.

"Which looks like a magic trick, it really does," Howard is saying to Marshall's father. "Lori really gets a kick out of it."

My mother is standing at the other edge of the pool with a cluster of women. A server offers them chocolate truffles and white chocolate-dipped strawberries. They shake their heads delicately.

Pieces of conversation flit through the air like moths:

"It might take me five gin-and-tonics to say so, but what it comes down to is that they should all stop eating potato chips and watching television, and find jobs instead of using our tax money to—"

"We're not living in a forest, and I don't need my president to be a fucking Robin

Hood."

"We don't *camp*. Four stars is 'roughing it' for us. Do you have a choice of thread count when you're camping?"

Peels of laughter spill out into the summer air, like beads from a broken necklace.

"Where is Aster?" Mrs. Christianson says, coming up behind me. "You're supposed to be watching her."

"She's in bed," I say.

"You should be in the house, checking on her, then. And she's not in bed. I just saw her in the kitchen."

"All right," I say. "I'll go find out."

And as I turn, something in the pool catches my eye. I know immediately what it is and I feel my chest collapse as I realize: Beneath the glittering surface of the pool, Aster's tiny body is drifting, sinking – a tight, dark space.

I hear myself scream. Mrs. Christianson follows my gaze. Elizabeth stands nearest the pool. Elizabeth does what anyone would—she jumps in. At the same time, several of the men jump into the pool. Suddenly there are half a dozen men standing waist-deep in the pool water, soaking wet white collared shirts, dripping slacks, gasping. Many of the women have burst into tears. There is the sound of crying.

Aster's tiny body is pulled from the pool and laid out on the grass. Mrs. Christianson is crying and throwing herself over Aster's body. Paramedics are coming through the side entrance to the backyard, dressed in white, like the caterers and the party-goers. Mrs. Christianson is holding Aster now and Nolan Christianson hovers over

them. The child's body is like a doll: limp, unmoving.

The paramedics ask for room. There is a momentary lull in the screaming and crying, except for the high-pitched shrieking of Mrs. Christianson, as everyone waits, breathless.

In the pool, a thread of blood floats like a cord of red light.

THE END OF THE WORLD PARTY

Laguna Hills, California. Summer 2008.

The Andromeda Galaxy is approaching our sun at 186 miles per second, and maybe Dawson's party is a bit premature—we have about 2.5 billion years until the Andromedy Galaxy and the sun collide—but it *is* accurate, I realize.

Just as I had predicted, Dawson's End of the World party is like any other party that summer—except that nothing is the same to me now. The partying that had so enamored me just a few months ago seems lifeless and dull; dead. The laughter, the clinking of wine glasses, the splashing of people jumping into the pool seems self-conscious now.

Mrs. Christianson managed to tell me at Aster's funeral, in a voice that was dry from crying, that she didn't blame me, that she knew I could never have meant for something like that to happen, that there were hundreds of people at the party, that any one of them could have noticed, done something, seen her sooner, that this is just all part of God's plan.

I'm not so sure. My mother takes me weekly to visit a therapist. We talk a lot about guilt, about self-awareness.

No one blames me for Aster's death.

Still, I blame myself. I've replayed that day, that evening, this summer, a thousand different ways. Life is like a prism that must be held up to the light to see anything—it must be turned and examined from each angle. From each angle, the perspective is different, always different.

It has been only a few weeks since Aster's death. Elizabeth has flown back to her mother in Nashville.

"I can't believe Elizabeth missed my party," Dawson says, shaking his head.

"She didn't really fit in here anyway," Marshall says.

"Where?" I ask.

"In California," he says.

But there are many Californias. The only California I know is the California I met the summer after I graduated from Lords University, and standing in that California for too long was like putting on 3-D glasses that did the opposite of what they were supposed to do—glasses that sucked the dimension away from everything and made the world flat. Suddenly, everything was clearer than it had been. Simpler. Questions had only one answer, whereas before it had seemed like each question had a rainbow of possible solutions.

I should have known better. Life is never simple. Even math is relative.

At Dawson's End of the World Party, I am thinking about turning points. Some of us have many. Some of us have only a few brief moments that hang like raindrops on a spider's web—and these quivering, glittering drops are so beautiful and so powerful that they shake the whole web.

In the face of death, these turning points become crystal clear: like a studded row of diamonds, one after the other, as clear as the sun. For me, Aster's death was one of these painfully beautiful diamonds: a turning point.

Her death cracked open all of those possibilities for me again, the relativity of everything. This is life: a special relativity.

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Someone has started a fire in the fire pit in the backyard. The summer air is warm, full of anxiety and wistfulness. Dawson and Marshall and I sit around the edge of the fire. Silvery smoke tiptoes upward on some invisible stairway into the sky, like nostalgia. Heat, palpable and

blurry, rises into the sky.

Marshall throws a beer bottle into the pit and the three of us watch its slow transformation. Orange tongues lick at the glass, sooty fingers charring its paper seal black. Melting, melting, melting, gone.

A breeze washes over the backyard. The late summer air is cool like the vapor of memories before they are frozen: lively film reels spun into clicking, inanimate images.