

Hooked

by

Jacqui Sahagian

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Readers: Linda Gregerson and Keith Taylor



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## Abstract

This collection of stories, all set in Jackson County, Michigan, where the author grew up, are at their core about the wonderful loneliness and terrible boredom that comes from living in the middle of nowhere, and the tension between staying there and leaving for elsewhere. Jackson County's an awful place to live and a wonderful place to write about. These stories are about obsession, addiction, and co-dependency, things that occupy most of the author's time. "Twins" is about a brother and sister trying to understand their lives without each other after the sister flees Jackson to go to college. "Swamp Song," is a creative non-fiction piece about falling in love in rural Michigan, being a teenager, duckweed, divorce, and the author totaling her mother's car. The author would like to expand that story into a full-length memoir someday. The second half, and bulk of, this thesis is a collection of seven linked stories called *Blood on the Tracks*. All the stories take their titles from the Bob Dylan album of that name. *Blood on the Tracks* tells the story of a love triangle and alternates in perspective between each of the three characters involved. In writing about a love triangle, the author wanted to explore the differences between love and friendship, and the importance of femininity. In the stories in this thesis, the characters' complex relationships with place are as important as their relationships with the other characters, if not more so. The author would like for the stories in this thesis to be simultaneously elegies and hate-mail to her hometown.

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## Twins

“Don’t tap it against the ashtray like that. See, it comes unpacked here.” Kale pointed out the dents in the side of the Marlboro Menthol he’d given to his sister. “Just tap on it with your finger like this. Or flick it with your thumb. Some people call it ‘flicking the cherry,’ but that’s gross.”

By some people, you mean the meth-mouth white-trash brats you hang around now, Colleen thought, squirming on the sticky red vinyl of the diner booth. Kale was teaching Colleen to smoke. Up until that point Colleen had taught Kale everything. She was older, after all, and the age gap was bigger than the mathematical reality of one year and twenty-two days. Now she felt like his child as he taught, and she liked it.

Kale taught Colleen to place the cigarette slightly to one side of her lips, because if you put it in the center, you look like you don’t know what you’re doing. She’d quit letting him light cigarettes for her because she thought it made her look dumb, and though he said buddy lights were more intimate, she used her own lighter. Kale told her how to judge someone by the brand they smoked. Boring sluts smoke Marlboro Lights. Hipsters smoke American Spirits because they’re organic. Black men and slutty white girls who want to sleep with black men smoke Newports. Badasses smoke Lucky Strikes. Colleen became obsessed with watching people smoke, especially since, on her healthy college campus, smokers were ostracized for being a public health risk and polluting the environment.

The slouching waitress came to refill Kale’s coffee and bring Colleen more hot water for her tea. The siblings were killing time, flying through coffee and cigarettes,

before Kale had to start the graveyard shift at the local hotel. “Thank you, Chelsea,” Kale said loudly, so that everyone in the establishment would know he was in with the staff. Chelsea looked at them, *new weird girl in the diner*. She was probably trying to figure out if they were related or if they were dating. That was generally what that expression meant. Kale and Colleen had a vague physical similarity which hinted they were siblings, but were also physically affectionate, communicating through hand squeezes and eye contact, which made it difficult to read their relationship.

The two wouldn't have looked anything alike if they hadn't had the same attitude about beauty. Kale was a full foot taller than Colleen, Colleen had brown eyes and Kale had blue ones, but since they dyed their hair black and shared oversize black T-shirts advertising punk bands, strangers could sometimes guess they were siblings. They avoided the sun like the plague, which was reflected in their milky white pallor, and ate little. They often ruminated on the attractiveness of a fully visible rib cage and egged each other on in their efforts to look like skeletons. Every pants size dropped triggered a celebration and a challenge to the other.

Kale had never actively taught Colleen anything before. Knowledge wasn't gold to him as it was to her, and he thought Colleen was smarter than he was anyway, or at least not interested in learning the kinds of things he might know that she didn't. He was better at painting and drawing than she was, but he never tried to teach her. Just encouraged her, bought her art supplies for Christmas, painted his grotesque cartoonish ravens and skeletons sitting across from her, but never taught her. Kale used various mixtures of thick black, white, and red oil paints, and Colleen's still-lives paled in comparison to his abstract horrors which bled before her. She'd taught him to play guitar,

drilling each chord, offering the perfect tidbit of advice when he got stuck, but that was forever ago. Now Kale was better than Colleen at that, too. She told him all about different musical and literary movements—the punks, the Beats, the Lost Generation in Paris—and he retained some of those facts through sheer repetition rather than interest. She taught him to write poetry simply by forcing him to do it. He hadn't beaten her at that yet, but although she'd recently won some money for a poem she'd written, she was sure her brother would soon outstrip her in that area, too.

They offered each other the art they created like cats leaving dead birds on the front step. Each time he outdid her all she could do was scoff and snarl, "Remember, if it weren't for me, you wouldn't even know who Sid Vicious is." Colleen had given him all the artists she loved, so Kale was better than Colleen at everything, but she had a bigger impact on his life than he had on hers. There was no way to tell what he'd be like without her, while she'd more or less be the same, and she saw this as another defeat. If Kale hadn't been born, as their parents hadn't intended him to be, Colleen would've still been an artist. He couldn't say the same. He had no way to conceive what his life would be like without her, although such a life was peeking out from around corners since she'd abandoned him to go to college.

All the employees at Denny's appeared to know her brother intimately. The hostess gave them his favorite booth in the smoking section, knowing that he'd be expecting more people. The waitress, Chelsea, only asked for Colleen's order and automatically brought Kale coffee and buffalo chicken wraps with extra sauce. He put two regular sugars, one sweet-and-low, and a generous helping of cream into his coffee while she drank her tea black.

Colleen thought Denny's was one of the most depressing places the kids stuck in this wasteland could hang out. The waitresses stank of prescription drugs, trailer parks, and terminated pregnancies. There was nothing on the menu Colleen would allow herself to eat. The air conditioning was always on too high. The place felt like sitting on the inside of a garishly lit, empty refrigerator, but you could smoke there. The only other thing young people in the town could do for fun was loiter in Walmart or brew meth. Their hometown was predominantly working class, if you were lucky enough to even have a job, and recent declines in the economy had ravaged the small city. There were as many abandoned businesses as there were operating ones, but still many people who'd been born there never left—including their parents.

Their parents were hicks, but Colleen hadn't learned to hate that about them until after the divorce. They split up when she was ten and Kale was nine. The worst thing about it was realizing she'd been too dumb to see it coming. The family never had any money to begin with, so the drop to relying on a single income destroyed the slight degree of stability their parents had been able to provide. Growing up, Colleen had hero-worshipped their father, while Kale was closer to their mom. Their dad was an artist, a writer, and a musician, but was also angry and melancholic, prone to mood swings and alcohol abuse. All his faults that Colleen had been too young to see surfaced in the wake of the split. After the divorce, he took a job that required him to spend six months of the year installing security systems at research bases in Antarctica, and the other six months unemployed in the States, living in a four-hundred-dollar-a-month hotel room. The job doubled as an escape from all responsibility related to his children. When he moved out, Colleen, Kale, and their mother couldn't afford to stay in their house. They moved ten

times in the next eight years, but their living situation had stabilized some after Colleen left for college. Their mother still worked sixty hours a week at two minimum-wage jobs, and they still lived in a dilapidated basement apartment in one of the poorest neighborhoods of the dying city, but one fewer mouth to feed eased the financial burden, and they hadn't moved for the two years Colleen had been at school.

The city where Colleen went to college was only forty minutes from where she and Kale grew up, but it might as well have been the opposite side of the earth. The college town was prosperous and thriving on the money brought to it by overpaid professors and wealthy out-of-state students; a fake utopia of the Midwest. People there renovated cute, old houses and filled them with expensive art and ironic kitsch. Adults and students held public protests against war, education cuts, and pollution. Wealthy ex-hippies who liked to pretend they were still radical grocery shopped at Whole Foods and sent their kids to prestigious public schools with lovely facilities. They hung out and drank sustainable coffee in cafes, used book stores, and ethnic restaurants. There were no cafes, book stores, or ethnic restaurants in Colleen and Kale's hometown. But you could get unlimited coffee for two dollars at Denny's, which at least attracted some business by being open twenty-four hours.

Kale's friends trickled in and out of the diner—they knew to look for him there—while Colleen smoked and plunged her tea bag in and out of the hot water. She said hello to everyone—if they hadn't met her before they knew her by reputation. Colleen listened to the conversations, but didn't feel she had anything to say that wouldn't sound like a thinly veiled insult. She watched Kale interact with the others through a curtain of smoke. People Colleen knew and didn't know came and went, and she observed the new phrases

and facial expressions Kale used around them. He'd picked up a few annoying catch-phrases, including calling anything he liked "hot" and referring to girls as "tricks." He cocked his head to the side at a sharper angle than he used to after saying something he thought was clever, but still rubbed his nose with the back of his hand the same way he always had, with a lack of the self-consciousness that'd invaded his other movements. He was changing, but she wasn't going to lose him.

Kale refused to learn the importance of education no matter how hard Colleen tried to teach it because evil education, which he'd always associate with the rich people who filled the city she lived in with their superfluous possessions, had taken his beloved sister away. Colleen, on the other hand, did not associate education at all with her rich neighbors whom she too despised. She felt education was saving her from becoming a white-trash teenage bride like every other girl she'd graduated high school with. Without the university she thought she'd have to start abusing prescription medication to cope with existence, and so being away from Kale was just an unfortunate side effect of having her life saved. Neither could come close to fathoming the other's point of view, just as neither could understand how they'd come to be so dependent upon each other.

Colleen had taken up smoking, conscious of all the negative health effects, conscious of how her university friends would turn up their noses in disgust, in an effort to remain close to her brother. It was a desperate and carcinogenic attempt to salvage common ground. Colleen kept herself estranged from her peers by acting more white-trash than she actually was, much as she'd kept herself estranged from her high school classmates by acting more cosmopolitan than she actually was. Her fellow university students reeked of money and easy living, with their smart phones and designer bags that

their parents paid for along with their tuition. They just confirmed her low opinion of human beings. Her brother escaped this filter, and Kale was the only one who got past it.

Seeing Kale and his friends, people who'd made the incomprehensible choice not to leave, contentedly hanging out at Denny's reminded Colleen of how odd her simple decision to get the hell out of there was. Neither of them was quite sure how she'd come to the revelation that she could leave. The act of leaving is simple. The realization that it's possible to leave is the hard part, the part her brother couldn't accept even with her ecstatic ravings about classes and city life. He came to visit her sometimes. Colleen didn't have much room in her matchbox apartment, so they would sleep next to each other, scrunched together on her twin bed. They walked around the city, him holding her hand even though it reduced his chances of getting hit on. They stared at the cars and people and businesses as if they were at the zoo. They both felt that the bustling humanity before them was something outside themselves.

Colleen was loneliest after Kale left, maybe because of his eagerness to do so. He made walking out the door of her apartment look so easy, so natural, that she was forced to understand he didn't belong there. She'd mope around her apartment when Kale left and clean up after him, cataloguing the things he left behind: crumbs from lime-flavored tortilla chips, dirty dishes, guitar picks, empty packs of cigarettes. The most interesting and annoying finds were the ones he left in Colleen's bed. His random pocket change imbedded itself in her space, continuing to turn up long after he left. She'd wake from an afternoon nap with a nickel stuck to her bare thigh, former president's face pressed into her flesh. She'd pull back the sheets to find Abraham Lincoln glaring up at her. Change

on the kitchen table, bathroom sink, under rugs—she didn't know how so much money could flow from a kid so poor.

Shortly after Kale got his tattoo he left behind black skin peelings on her blue-and-white checkered sheets. The tattoo was a quotation from Dr. Seuss, one of Colleen's favorite authors. On the inside of his bicep in Gothic black lettering he had printed the word "UNLESS." Their entire lives she had to whine incessantly to get him to read *The Lorax* with her, so the tattoo was a small victory. There was no way he could look at it or tell someone about it without thinking of her. Kale left dyed black hairs too, but Colleen's were longer. Their dead hairs sought each other out on the floor of her apartment to form tangled black knots. Once he left his rotting leather wallet, full of the forgeries of Denny's coupons that he lived on. Kale left things behind wherever he went because the tight jeans he loved were meant for women, who were meant to carry purses, and everything spilled out of his shallow pockets.

Kale had picked Colleen up from the Greyhound station earlier that evening. Colleen didn't have a car because she was terrified of driving and had no use for one in the city. She had to take a city bus from her apartment to the Greyhound station, then the Greyhound to their hometown where Kale had to pick her up. This stretched a commute that could've taken half an hour to almost two, but Colleen felt she met interesting people riding buses, so she didn't really mind. Traveling alone made her feel self-sufficient. The long journey increased her anticipation of seeing Kale, and so as long as the bus didn't smell too strongly of urine, she found the trip pleasant.

Kale's enormous, fifteen-year-old, green Lincoln was sitting in the parking lot when Colleen arrived, music blasting from the cassette player, and she clumsily ran out

of the bus with her acoustic guitar on her shoulder. Kale got out of the car to let her in—the passenger door didn't open—and gave her a hug and kiss. The pack of cigarettes bulging in the pocket of his flannel crushed against her cheek. “I wish you'd clean some of this shit out of here,” she said as she shoved fast food trash and empty cigarette packs onto the floor. “Maybe you could get a girlfriend if your car wasn't so nasty.” He ignored her.

Though Kale had one of those car ashtrays that could hold hundreds of butts and put the cigarette out for you, the front seat of his car was still covered in ash. The backseat was full of everything he needed to live: a guitar, a banjo, his entire wardrobe, a Tupperware container full of tobacco and cigarette tubes, a blanket, and more trash. Rarely did Kale return to the apartment he shared with their mother. He ignored his hunger pangs and crashed at friends' houses, napped in a booth at Denny's, or went without sleep.

Colleen was glad of her decision to skip dinner as they drove away from the bus station. The Lincoln had no suspension, so she became horribly nauseated if she rode with him for longer than twenty minutes. Every bump felt twice as high as it should have. Each time Colleen visited their hometown things looked different. More businesses had gone under, so places where there should've been neon signs, advertisements, and parked cars were vacant. Walmart was reliably well-lit and crowded. The movie theater was still there, though it had been reduced to showing only the two biggest blockbusters at any given time. The street they drove down was lined with fast food joints, some operating and some empty.

“So, what do you wanna do?” Colleen asked. “We have a while before you need to be to work.” Kale made some vague I-don’t-know-what-do-you-wanna-do type noises in his nose. “We can go to Denny’s if you want. I don’t know why you think I hate all your friends, but I don’t, okay? Let’s just go there until you have to work.”

“Okay.”

She was kind of lying. Something about Kale’s new friends put her on edge, but she couldn’t figure out exactly what it was and decided to try and be diplomatic. Through their childhood and until she moved away they’d spent most of their time together and had the same friends. Partly Colleen was jealous because Kale’s new friends got to spend more time with him than she did. Partly she felt they were replacing her, and this filled her with rage. Partly she felt that his new friends were unintelligent and not very interesting, but she wasn’t sure if she was just being a snob. When Colleen visited home, she was always self-conscious about acting like a snob, because she thought the spoiled rich brats she went to school with had turned her into one.

Colleen blamed Kale’s friends for their new rifts in communication, which scared her so much she’d erupt in tears if Kale didn’t hear something she’d said or misinterpreted a facial expression. The real cause of the problem was distance. They both knew it, but refused to do more about it than complain about how little the other visited. She’d been shy her entire life, but for the first time she felt her brother was misreading her shyness. Kale should’ve been able to distinguish between her I-hate-this silence and her I’m-ok-with-this-I-just-have-nothing-to-say-right-now silence. Kale should’ve known that Colleen not saying a word the entire time she was with him and his friends didn’t mean she wanted to leave. Sitting at Denny’s for hours on end was the thing to do for

community college drop-outs in her town, and Colleen sometimes found it interesting from an ethnographic standpoint.

The caffeine was making Colleen more nervous than usual; she bit at her cuticles and tore the Lipton tag dangling from her tea bag to shreds. There was a new girl in her brother's life who was bound to show up at some point. Kale wasn't good with girls, he'd never had a serious girlfriend, but every new bimbo he became infatuated with put Colleen on edge. Being displaced in her brother's affections by a white-trash loser with the IQ of a Barbie doll wasn't going to happen. Sure enough, Jane strode into Denny's with a confidence inappropriate for a shitty highway diner, obnoxiously well-dressed in an artsy-bohemian vein, clothes purchased from Urban Outfitters with her parent's money.

"Hey! Look at us. We spend, like, everyday here. We're, like, best friends." Jane giggled, but stopped abruptly when she noticed Kale's discomfort. "I mean, except for your sister. Everyone knows she's your best friend." Jane laughed another fake female laugh and was saved by the waitress. "Hi, Chelsea. I'll just have an order of chili cheese fries and a Coke."

"What the fuck, Jane? I've been tryin' to get a hold of you all week. What, am I supposed to sit at Denny's by myself?" Kale said loudly, ignoring his sister's presence.

"Oh my God, Kale, I haven't called you because I got, like, really fucked up last weekend and lost my phone. I thought it'd be here, but no one's found it, so it must be in the backyard of the place this party was at..." Jane continued babbling, but Colleen quit listening, her previous suspicions about Jane's character confirmed.

The bitch can eat nasty food and still be that thin, Colleen thought, hunger gnawing at her, giving her the low blood sugar shakes that her brother never got. Colleen knew this little blonde idiot was trying to fuck Kale, or at least manipulate his affections to her own advantage, but she had the nerve to try to cultivate a friendship with him first, maybe in preparation for some deep, meaningful relationship. Since finding out about Jane, Colleen had started having the dreams again. Colleen thought Kale's crushes would suck every ounce of his time and personality until what little of him she had left would be taken. In the dreams, Colleen murdered his female suitors, ripping skin and hair to shreds, beating flesh against concrete, left with nothing but an inanimate bruised body. These dreams made her question her sanity sometimes—was she capable of doing anything that violent? Colleen knew that their father had spent some time in jail when he was young for almost killing a man with a golf club, and she felt that same blind rage heat in her veins.

Jane glanced flirtatiously at Kale from under blonde bangs and heavy eyelashes while Colleen picked at the dead skin around her cuticles with shaking fingers. Colleen saw Jane's relief when their friend Ben came in, greeting the entire staff of Denny's before coming to their table.

“How's it goin', man? Hey, Chelsea, get me a coffee and a cup of ice.”

“It's goin' great, man. I came up with this new guitar thing today. I'm tellin' you, it was some hot shit.” Ben's arrival was a relief for Colleen too because she was under less pressure to talk. Over the next hour, five more of Kale's friends showed up, crowding into the red booths. Kale's conversations with his friends irritated Colleen because they were full of ridiculous narcissistic posturing, tasteless jokes, and references to different situations in which they'd gotten fucked up and done something stupid. His

words, tone of voice, and subject matter were completely different when he talked to her, which made everything he said over his Denny's coffee sound fake.

After sitting in the sticky booth for a couple hours they went out to Kale's car so he could get high before starting his night shift. He used the same excuses to justify his marijuana habit he'd used when he started smoking cigarettes; it helped his anxiety, he needed it to stay awake, his stomach hurt without it. Colleen had succumbed to the cigarettes, but she hated the weed. She thought marijuana made people stupid, and the loss of her intelligence terrified her more than anything. She wasn't pretty, or nice, or funny; being smart was the only positive quality Colleen possessed. She recognized the hypocrisy of refusing to smoke pot because it's bad for you while she starved herself, but decided to ignore it. Maybe she smoked cigarettes instead of pot for no other reason than because she thought one would make you skinny and the other fat, but she stuck to her familiar excuses. She knew her brother was just as intelligent as she was, and if Kale could do something stupid on purpose, so could she.

Kale lit up with his stupid penis-shaped lighter that he thought was funny. It was made of fleshy rubber and had huge veins sticking out. Colleen sat next to him in the Denny's parking lot and stared out the car window, covered with ash and reeking of marijuana. "I fucking hate that lighter—it's disgusting," she said, not turning to look at him.

"Fine. You know what? I'll just get rid of it then." Instead of chucking it out the window like she hoped, Kale began to pick the rubber apart and throw the pieces at her, until nothing but the metal tube was left. "Happy?" Tears streamed down Colleen's face, dragging track marks through her mascara, but she had turned away and didn't make a

sound. She felt trapped by this malevolent person she no longer knew, her own hometown a strange foreign country she had no way to navigate without him. “I have to go to work now.” Kale started the car and waved at his friends milling around the parking lot as the Lincoln bounced over the curb and drove away.

Since Colleen worked at the library and had class during the day, one of the only ways they could spend time together was if she accompanied Kale to his night shift working the front desk at a hotel. Colleen was afraid she’d get him fired, but Kale insisted it was fine and he didn’t care if he did get the axe. She sat on the couch in the lobby reading Shakespeare or Faulkner for her English classes while he worked, and he came to sit next to her when he didn’t have anything to do. They didn’t talk as much as they used to, just sat next to each other, her head on his shoulder, his head on her head, dyed black hair blending together.

The new physical tics and facial expressions her brother had developed in Colleen’s absence made him more fascinating to watch. She’d always been obsessed with watching his hands. They were odd-looking; large, flat, with incredibly long fingers that ended in nails bitten to the quick. Tobacco stains had appeared between the first two fingers on each hand. Kale’s hands looked new to Colleen when they cradled a cigarette, confidently flicking the end with his thumb. They were too large for his pockets, and she loved the strange, uncomfortable way he rummaged about in his pants, spilling spare change in the search for his lighter.

There was a deep, jagged scar on Kale’s right thumb from an incident with a hand-saw when they were in high school. He’d been cutting branches in the yard as Colleen watched, and they were discussing their mother’s new boyfriend. Kale sliced his

thumb open and looked up at her in shock. Always useless in emergency situations, Colleen cursed and screamed while Kale spattered blood all over them, the yard, and the kitchen. Their mother tried to save them a trip to the emergency room by closing the wound with the glue she used to apply plastic fingernails, but it wouldn't stop bleeding. After putting in ten stitches, the nurse at the free clinic said he'd come close to cutting a tendon that would've rendered his thumb useless. The scar still hadn't lost its raised, purple presence.

Kale and Colleen's father had abandoned them, but their mother was no paradigm of perseverance either. She nursed her loss with a new sexual promiscuity both frightening and disgusting. She courted men in online chat rooms designed for people looking for sex. It wasn't uncommon for her to send Colleen and Kale a text in the day telling them not to come home after school until she called them. Kale was angry, but he was so good at pretending, deluding himself that there was nothing there. Colleen became homicidal, picking fights with her mother's boyfriends until her mother stopped bringing them home, then stopped coming home herself. Sometimes Colleen thought Kale was being reasonable and handling things better than she was; other times she thought he was just a coward. When she saw him slice his finger nearly in two, she realized they shared more rage than she'd thought.

His hands might've seemed foreign to her while he smoked, but Colleen hated watching them fiddle with his phone. She considered herself pretty anti-technology, but Kale was the opposite, and Colleen was more jealous of his phone than of any friend or girlfriend he had. Kale was constantly stroking it, touching it, checking its various bodily functions to make sure it was all right. She'd glare at him as soon as she heard it

vibrating, curled up in his pocket. Kale would spend his free time at Denny's with Ben while both of them texted other people and barely said a word to each other. This pastime seemed completely useless to Colleen, but that was the key to their difference—he wasn't obsessed with finding a use for all of his time.

Colleen enjoyed accompanying her brother to the hotel. She loved being awake while everyone else was asleep, the intense solitary feeling of early dawn. Only the hotel's strangest occupants were awake during Kale's shift, standing outside to smoke and taking dozens of the complementary cookies he baked. She read the old issues of *Time* and *Newsweek* sitting in the lobby, took an occasional cat nap on the couch, and sat next to him on the benches outside during his cigarette breaks. She loved how eerie the streetlights looked when the sky was beginning to lighten in the morning.

The night shift at the hotel consisted of hours of boredom punctuated by moments of incredible weirdness. Around one a.m., Ben stormed into the lobby, completely drunk, freaking out about having lost his credit card at the local bar. He'd stolen the card from his mother that very morning and now was without funds to buy cigarettes. Though Colleen found him mildly amusing and they shared an interest in Edgar Allen Poe, she regarded him as if he were from another planet. Colleen couldn't understand how one could still be sneaking out of one's parents' home at the age of twenty-five and not be too addicted to hard drugs to have friends. When a handicapped hotel guest limped out the front door for a cigarette, Kale and Ben sat in the lobby and waited until the guy was out of earshot to laugh at him. Colleen laughed meanly too, but at her brother and his friend, not the disabled man.

After Ben stumbled drunkenly away to go steal more money from his parents for cigarettes, a tall man with an afro came down from upstairs, told Kale he was expecting a guest, and that, if she wasn't blonde and cute, not to give her his room number. The woman in question appeared not thirty seconds after the man disappeared up the elevator. She must've passed inspection because she was directed to the man's room. After she left, Colleen and Kale raised eyebrows at each other from across the lobby and Kale mouthed, "She's gonna have sex with the afro guy." When the woman re-appeared two hours later to weave her way back out to her car, they exchanged the same glance behind her back and smothered their laughs. That night it was raining while they sat outside for four o'clock cigarettes. They wore leather jackets, and his arm was around her shoulders. The droplets fell hard and straight down, and Colleen thought the rain in the parking lot was one of the most beautiful things she'd ever seen.

Around five she drifted off on the couch, crushing her Shakespeare anthology beneath her, but Kale shook her awake soon after. "I've gotta make breakfast, and people are starting to come down. You gotta get up," he whispered. A reporter on the television in the breakfast room was re-glorifying the horror of September 11<sup>th</sup> for the disaster's tenth anniversary. Kale let her eat the breakfast he made if Colleen pretended she was a guest and didn't let on that she knew him. They never had any problems because, with her head stuck in a book at 5:30 a.m., no one said any more than good morning. That morning when she finished, she pretended she was leaving and sat in Kale's car in the far corner of the parking lot before his shift ended, striding out of the too-eager automatic doors as if she had somewhere important to be.

He'd agreed to drive her back to her apartment that morning. He could sleep there in the day, then drive back to work that night. Neither of them was in a fit state to drive, both so exhausted they felt as if their bodies were made of cement. Colleen offered, but since the car had no title, plates, or insurance, Kale refused. He didn't want her to get in trouble if they got pulled over. If you got arrested, I'd make them take me with you, Colleen thought. Where else would I go?

Colleen preferred when Kale drove. She'd been terrified of driving since she'd totaled their mother's vehicle, nearly killing the both of them, a month after getting her license, in one of the moments of intense stupidity that punctuated her high intelligence. The four a.m. rain hadn't diminished, and the windshield wipers smacked at it pathetically, smearing water across the window and making it even harder to see. Colleen's heart raced with the sickening mix of terror and excitement she loved about reckless driving. Kale wasn't a very attentive driver, but riding with him was exciting because then she felt her life was in his hands, and she liked being unsure what he'd do with it.

"Will you roll me a cigarette?" Kale asked, as they dodged traffic cones and semis, the road before them a watery blur. That highway was in a constant state of construction from March until November every year. The sedentary cranes and bulldozers rose regally above the muddy median like dinosaurs. She reached into the back seat for his plastic container. Colleen was horrible at rolling cigarettes; she ruined at least three tubes before managing to do it correctly. "It needs some more tobacco. Here, turn it upside down and clean it out. No, no, leave the thing open while you're doing that." Kale tried to coach her, but she was pathetic.

“I can’t do it.” She threw the container into the trash pile at her feet.

“Ok, then I’m gonna have to stop at the next exit and do it myself. I’m falling asleep.”

The sun strained to get out from behind the clouds, but it was losing, and the white sky turned everything grey. Colleen stuck her left thumb in her mouth, peeling off chunks of her cuticle with her teeth. Kale hated this nervous habit of hers and yanked her bleeding hand out from between her lips. He held it firmly—the same way their father used to grasp the back of their necks so he wouldn’t lose them in crowds. She’d done it this time, the sticky blood slid between their hands and dripped into the cup holder. They clutched each other’s hands as they flew.

## Swamp Song

The house I grew up in bordered a man-made swamp, as did most of the homes in rural Jackson County. These swamps weren't supposed to be swamps. They were supposed to be canals that led into lakes, which were not man-made, so residents could keep their pontoon boats and canoes in their backyards and have easy access to the lake during the one or two months of the year warm enough to fish or swim. They say that in Michigan you're never more than a half-hour's drive from a lake of some kind. Our lake was called Swain's Lake. I don't know who Swain was. The canals were dug to increase property value in a part of the world homes sold for not much more than mini-vans or tropical vacations. The canals silted up, growing shallower and muddier each year, turning themselves into swamps.

One of the most exciting events of my childhood was the summer our canal, which led into Swains Lake, was dredged. The canal had grown so shallow that, while canoes could still float atop the mud, pontoon boats couldn't move. They rested, idle and rusting, on the fetid brown sludge until the neighbors were able to pool enough money to have the canal dredged. I was five years old and shell-shocked from kindergarten. Cranes drove through our backyards to scoop out the mud. I imagined the machines were brachiosaurs and walked along the muddy ridges they left behind as if I were tracking them, as if in my backyard a portal to the Jurassic period—a time and space where I'd have rather been—had opened. The adults complained that the dredging left our backyards as muddy as the canal. The swamp was growing in revenge for that assault, crawling towards the houses on the top of the hill. Our house was yellow. It had a carport

instead of a garage, and a red wooden deck in back with the grill and a picnic table. Mom would call out, *Jacqui, Emily!* to my sister and me from the house, and I'd pretend not to hear her, that her call was the shrieking of a pterodactyl from above.

Dad, Emily, and I fished pathetically in the canal when he still lived with us, catching the bluegill and sunfish hiding from the fishers on the lake, the occasional small bass. We threw everything back. The fish disappeared under the pale green duckweed when my father tossed them in. They always looked dead to me, lifeless after suffocating in the air while being unhooked, but Dad explained that, if you tossed them up so that they smacked when they hit the surface, they'd come out of shock and swim away with nothing more than sore lips. I thought my dad was tall, but he wasn't really. He had black hair, grey stubble, and wore wire-rimmed glasses. Dad loved fishing, even though the fishing on the canal was miserable compared to how it'd been when he and my mother lived up north, before Emily and I were born. The fish we caught most frequently were what Dad called "Madagascar weed fish," which weren't fish at all, but long trails of prehistoric-looking weeds from the bottom of the swamp. He'd pretend to struggle with them, impersonating the wildlife adventurers from the Discovery Channel that I idolized. I'd laugh, and wish we could actually pull something that interesting out of our muck.

We also caught the painted turtles that sunned themselves on logs. Dad would groan when I dragged up a turtle on my yellow Snoopy child's reel. Dad hated catching them because they often swallowed the hooks. He'd pull his fishing knife out of the front pocket of his flannel shirt, cut the line as close to the turtle's mouth as he could, and let the struggling creature with its long, sharp nails slide back into the water. I asked, Will they be ok? What's gonna happen to the hook? He'd say, They'll be fine. It'll just rest

inside their stomachs. Like silent anchors, like waiting death, I thought, and knew he was lying for my sake.

The people living on Swains Lake spent most of their time outdoors in June, July, and August—no one had money for any other kind of entertainment. The swamp's smell became overpowering by mid-August. You were reminded of the water's presence even in the front yard where you couldn't see it. The odor of rotting matter was ignored or masked by the smell of campfires. At that same time, when the swamp smelled the most putrid, the snapping turtles mated. They writhed and rocked under the duck weed, and it looked as if the swamp were boiling. I would watch the water swirling from the snapping turtles' furious mating while I sat on my rusty, yellow swing set on the top of the hill. The snapping turtles would traverse the empty country roads slowly to cross from swamp to swamp. When Emily and I were kids, if we came upon a snapper while driving, Dad would pull over and pick it up by its dragon tail. He'd poke a stick between its jaws so it couldn't bite him (a full grown snapper can easily take a man's finger), then place the turtle on the side of the road toward which it had been heading—Emily and I thoroughly impressed with his heroism.

When I was in middle school, after the divorce, my dad converted me to punk, though he wasn't even a punk himself. Mocking me for my typical adolescent taste in music he said, "Good Charlotte's not punk, the Sex Pistols used to spit on their fans." That sentence changed my life. At first I thought, why would a band spit on their fans, aren't bands supposed to love their fans? But I was intrigued enough to go to the library and read every book I could get my hands on about the Pistols, about CBGB's, about

Kurt Cobain. I needed something to spend my energy on, school and friends sure as hell weren't going to cut it, so my father's sentence came at the right time. I read everything punk was about before I listened to any of it. By the time I found a copy of *Never Mind the Bullocks* I was already hooked. The Pistols had something important to say in their music; it had purpose. The Queen can go fuck herself because we live in garbage outside her window. Destroy me, I'm begging you, but I'm already dead and I'll drag you down with me. *Please Kill Me* was the title of one of the books I read (taken from a t-shirt Richard Hell made for himself), and I carried it through school, jacket facing out, waiting for someone to say something to me about it, but of course they never did. I imagine the teachers at my middle school were so busy fighting off the urge to commit suicide that they didn't have the energy to worry about the weirdo in the class, especially since I got good grades. Punk became all I listened to, all I read about, all I did. I'd play three chords on my guitar in my room alone, mimicking Courtney Love's slutty stage presence, trying to sing like Johnny Rotten. All of my time outside school, and most of my time in school, was devoted to the bands I loved. I tried to get my more trusted peers in on my incredible secret, this thing only I knew about, but Johnny Rotten sneering, "She was a girl from Birmingham / She just had an abortion / She was a case of insanity" wasn't embraced by my fellow seventh graders. I could relate to these punk characters like I couldn't to my classmates, and a bunch of dead musicians became my best friends. Kurt Cobain came from a shitty small town and had divorced parents, too. Sid Vicious was beautiful and awful at the same time and I needed to figure out why. Debbie Harry was sexy in a way the celebrities on TV weren't. I wanted to look like her, something I'd never felt staring at the actresses whose appearances I was supposed to aspire to. I pasted pictures of the

CBGB crowd on my wall, begged for New York, and shoved my weirdness in the face of every redneck I was forced to speak to like a bloody deformity.

It would've been poetic if my first love had come from the swamp—like the Creature from the Black Lagoon, who I'd imagined would make an ideal husband when I was six—but he didn't. Spencer came from school, where all first loves come from. Spencer grew up on a swamp a few miles away from mine. I never imagined I'd have a boyfriend in high school. I created elaborate fantasies about the beautifully tortured punk rockers I'd meet in college, but there was no way, *no way* I'd find anyone to like, much less like me back, among the hundred-fifty redneck losers I suffered through high school with.

Spencer noticed me because I was weird and because his older brother Steven told him I had nice legs. I met Spencer at marching band camp a few weeks before school started in the fall. I'd cut my hair and bleached it blonde, letting the dark roots stick out. I was almost as short as my mother, and thin, with oddly large hazel eyes that I thought made me look like a bug, or an alien. Spencer was tall and as skinny as I was, with long light-brown hair that hung in his eyes, which could be either blue or green depending on his mood. I saw Spencer—a new freshman, a percussionist like Steven was and his younger brother, Skylar, would be—watching my sunburned and bug-bitten thighs while I marched with the flutists, and was caught off guard by the idea that someone would be attracted to me. As the only punk rocker in my high school, guys were generally too intimidated by my feminist babblings and confused by my outfits to be interested.

Spencer wasn't very socially observant and completely ignored my desire to be left alone. I sat in corners, arms crossed, folding myself to take up as little space as possible, face stuck in the rock musician biographies that I rabidly devoured. No matter how many icy glares or one word answers I gave him, he kept talking to me. It didn't take him long to figure out that asking about whatever band was splashed across my t-shirt would get me to talk. I was hungry to convert anyone and everyone to punk. I wouldn't admit it, but I wanted someone to share my obsession with.

I noticed Spencer because he wouldn't stop noticing me, and because for his first day of high school he bought a pair of black Converse sneakers like he'd seen me wear at band camp. Mine were rotted from years of overuse. His were new, the black and white contrast still sharp. I wrote "I wanna be your dog" on his in black pen at lunchtime, and he wrote some dumb line from a Fall Out Boy song on mine during a water break from marching band rehearsal. I ignored the stupidity of his taste in music, then fell in love with him when he let me change it.

The sixteenth summer of my life was nothing but Spencer and me visiting each other's homes and swamps, begging our parents for rides between houses. I got my driver's license in June, but had no car. I stared out the kitchen window at the swamp and read outside in the hammock while Mom was at work. I pretended to do the things I enjoyed, but was really waiting for business hours to end, for Mom to come home so I could whine and plead until she let me drive the five miles to get Spencer, as long as I promised to return him to his own swamp and be home before midnight. Sometimes Spencer would catch a ride to my house from Steven or his parents, and I'd sit on the

cold concrete of the front porch, pretending to read *The Catcher in the Rye* for the twelfth time, heart racing like a caffeine overdose with every car that passed.

The suddenness and severity of our attachment to each other scared me because it was outside of my control. It was as if my affirmative response to his whispered “Will you go out with me?” on the way to our separate school buses had deliciously cursed me. We fell into a wild, intolerable selfishness. We wanted to care about the people around us, but couldn’t. I was sixteen when Spencer gave me my first kiss. I was in bed, sleeping off one of the chronic migraines I still suffer from. He’d stopped by to wake me up and see if I was feeling any better. His lips were full and covered small crooked teeth. The Nirvana and Green Day posters on my pale yellow walls swirled from prescription pain killers and lust.

Mom, my younger sister, Emily, and I took a short vacation to Saugatuck that summer, and that trip was when I realized I was in deep, so much deeper than the mud of our swamp, deeper even than Lake Michigan. It’d been two months and many hundreds of kisses since he’d kissed me for the first time. I spent my family’s only summer vacation daydreaming about home, about the first time he put my breasts in his mouth, pulling apart my white bikini top while we lay half-naked in the sun on the picnic table, pulses throbbing with the thrill that someone could’ve been watching.

In Saugatuck, my family and I stayed in a cheap, rustic motel for five days, and I missed Spencer so much I thought I was going insane. I wanted to enjoy the beaches and kitschy shops—I told myself in my adult voice that it was good for us to spend time apart—but the thought *I wish Spencer was here* kept surfacing no matter how hard I tried

to ignore it. I have carried that thought into every stressful moment and period of depression in my adult life, years after we broke up. It sits in a pile with my other ineffective knee-jerk responses to catastrophe, along with *I need a cigarette* and *I wanna go home*. *I wish Spencer was here*: a mantra that still brings no comfort.

When we got home and I'd washed the Lake Michigan sand out of my hair, Mom let me drive her white Ford Escape to pick up Spencer and Skylar, and bring them back to our house for a campfire. I drove seventy miles an hour on the un-policed back roads because that's how my older classmates drove and I thought it was what I was supposed to do. Emily rode in the passenger seat, window rolled all the way down, her naturally blonde hair whipping across her round face. She frowned in disapproval at the speedometer, but I was high on recklessness. Spencer and Skylar lived down a meandering dirt road where the houses were a mile apart. Driving out to their place made my neighborhood feel cosmopolitan. The summer had been dry. I thought of Steinbeck as I watched the pale dust fly up behind us in the rearview mirror.

Spencer and I offered to clean up the campfire when the others decided the mosquitoes were becoming too oppressive despite the smoke. It was cloudy and there was a new moon. After Spencer put the fire out, and Mom had pulled down the blinds in the house, there was no light. Graham crackers, marshmallows, and Hersey bars piled in my arms, I turned to walk towards the house guided by memory, not sight. Before I made it to the foot of the hill, Spencer grabbed a fistful of my hair and threw me under him on the damp ground. Dew soaked through my red Stooges t-shirt and tattered jeans. The swamp sounds were deafening and mosquitoes chewed every inch of my exposed flesh. Spencer was thin, but wiry; each of his ribs was visible, but he always defeated me in

wrestling matches. I couldn't see anything, only heard the graham crackers crunch when they hit the ground and felt his fingers digging into my hips through my jeans, his lips on my neck.

Dad left when I was ten. After that the fishing stopped, and I spent the rest of my childhood summers with a butterfly net slung over my shoulder, capturing frogs and turtles. I mentally catalogued their traits, and let them go, convinced I'd be able to recognize individuals if I caught them again. The most important thing was to be observant. I'd let the evidence of my parent's unhappiness slip through my filters; I hadn't paid close enough attention. I thought everyone's moms and dads ignored each other. I thought everyone's moms and dads slept in separate bedrooms. Dad had told me he had trouble sleeping, so he had to sleep by himself, and I bought it—hook, line, and sinker. It wasn't until my first friend slept over in the third grade that I realized something wasn't right. When I gave her a tour of the house, she'd asked me three times, confused, *why don't your parents sleep in the same room?* I should've seen it coming.

Spencer was the first person I ever wanted to be around more than I wanted to be left alone, and our affection made me understand how frigid, how non-existent my parents' marriage had been. I knew that because we were so young, our affection was exaggerated, but I also knew my parents hadn't had a shred of what Spencer and I did. Six year later, I was glad they had split up. I understood how lonely and frustrating it must have been to grasp for their evaporating love and keep coming up empty-handed. Six years later, though I could hardly comprehend my own behavior, I understood my parents.

So after the divorce I went catching to make up for the lost fishing, because I had a compulsive need to hold wild things. The duckweed grew so thick and the water was so still that the canal looked like land covered in pale grass, what it originally had been and was trying to become again. Mostly I caught frogs and painted turtles, and sometimes I caught garter snakes sunning on the bank. Those were the most exciting catches because they were the hardest, they required the most skill. I couldn't use the net on snakes. I snuck up as close as I could, then in a strike I thought was fast as lightning, I'd grab them just behind their heads, the way the men on the Discovery Channel caught venomous adders and rattlers.

Emily and I had never spent much time playing together, at first because of the three-year age difference and later because we shared no interests. Emily would swing back and forth on the rusted yellow swing-set next to our deck and jump on our neighbor's trampoline while I'd venture out catching. Our yard was large with at least a dozen gardens holding different varieties of flowers, fastidiously maintained by my mother. Each week-night, when she got home from work, she changed out of her pants-suits and into matching sweatshirts and sweatpants to work in the yard until it was too dark to see. I smelled always of mud and excrement from the Canadian geese that lumbered through our backyards, goslings in tow. I counted the yellow fluffy babies and ran in terror from the hissing adults when I got too close.

Mom grew so tired of trying to brush my hair after my days spent catching that she chopped it all off. She was always tired of everything; intrinsically fatigued. The yard work was like meditation for her, she said it didn't feel like work. What felt like work was holding me down, enduring my screams while she tried to force a comb through my

dirty hair. My mother was so short I realized she was short even then. She had high cheekbones, thin and arched eyebrows, and a gap between her coffee-stained front teeth. Mom never went anywhere, not even to the grocery store, without applying perfume and a face full of makeup. She was disappointed that her oldest daughter refused to wear dresses or play with dolls. I let her convince me the haircut would be like hers—short, stylish and perfectly quaffed—but I only looked even more like a skinny boy. As is the case with many young children, my long hair had been the only signifier of my gender, so I spent more time alone, refusing the companionship of the neighbor kids, after my brown tangles fell to the bathroom floor. I could feel the ugliness like a permanent grass stain when friends, family, and neighbors saw me. I wanted that shame to spread to my mother, who'd done this to me, but she just kept smiling, spreading painted lips, flashing her gap teeth. I couldn't decide if she was oblivious, or if she just didn't care because she'd saved herself some time and effort.

But I got older. I realized what time and effort means for a single mother. I let my hair grow long again. I allowed myself to make a few friends I didn't care much about. We'd go out on the lake in our neighbor's paddle boat, swimming if it was warm enough, just drifting if it wasn't. Mom built campfires almost every night in the summer; there was always debris in our yard that needed burning. We'd roast marshmallows while she tended the flames, adding dry leaves and kindling, manicured fingers encased in thick leather gloves. When it got too dark to see the swamp from the fire-pit on top of the hill, we still felt its presence in the millions of swarming mosquitoes. The mosquitoes were so out of control that even the ample bat population couldn't keep them down. We'd be covered in itchy bites from mid-May through September. Apparently whoever had made

the decision to dig out the canal hadn't known that mosquito larvae develop in stagnant water. We slathered on DEET and lit mosquito candles and worried about catching the West Nile virus. Mom scolded me when she caught me scratching the bites into bloody welts instead of smacking them with my palm to relieve the itching. To this day, I don't feel like it's really summer unless my shins are covered in swollen red bumps, runny with blood.

I want to say Mom, Emily, Spencer, Skylar, and I became like family my sixteenth summer, but that didn't come until later. I never had much capacity for family or friends, and I let everything become Spencer. I constructed elaborate fantasies in which everyone in the world was dead except Spencer and me. We'd go everywhere and do everything—somehow visiting the Eiffel Tower and the Coliseum even though there'd be no one to operate a plane to get us there. I recognized it was a sick thing to fantasize about, but I didn't stop.

That summer was Spencer, but also Spencer and me trying not to break my curfew, which could result in us not being allowed to see each other for a few days. My learner's license forbade me from driving past midnight, which gave my mother a perfect excuse to enforce a rule she would've imposed anyway. My relationship with Spencer scared her more than it scared me. I wished the clock could just go slower between five in the evening and eleven-thirty when I had to take him home, but I'd never seen time pass more quickly. We watched movies on the couch, hands frantic under unnecessary blankets, and played hide and seek with our younger siblings, scrambling to find separate

hiding places long after the countdown ended. I cursed the minute hand: *Stop moving. Stop moving.*

The night of the accident was a movie night. I wanted to show Spencer *Sid and Nancy*, the best and worst love story of all time. Emily and Skylar played volleyball before dark and a board game in the basement afterwards. It wasn't easy to watch movies with Spencer and me. I don't remember a single film the two of us watched that entire summer. For purely selfish reasons I was glad our younger siblings had become friends; they could entertain each other and leave Spencer and me alone. Emily and Skylar were in the same grade, loved sports, and even kind of looked alike: athletic build, hair lightened and skin darkened by the sun, sweaty t-shirts bearing our high-school mascot and basketball shorts. Now, when I think of them, I say *family*, but then I thought *obstacle avoided*. The transition amazes and humbles me.

Spencer and I started out sitting up, but were horizontal on the red-and-white checkered living room couch the instant my exhausted single mother said goodnight and closed her bedroom door. I watched the minutes fly on my watch, thinking, *It can't be ten already, It can't be eleven already*. Spencer lifted my black Sex Pistols t-shirt over my head and pushed my purple bra up to my chin. Spencer had a long torso; his hip-bones peeked out of a gap between his Ramones' t-shirt and his red skinny jeans. I counted his vertebrae with my fingers. I knew we had to leave—I was already on slippery ground from being a couple minutes late the previous night—but I didn't do anything. I stayed on that couch and screamed in time's face, *Watch me defy you*.

At ten to twelve, we heard Emily and Skylar coming up the basement stairs and hurriedly adjusted our rumpled clothes. “Shouldn’t we, like, leave soon?” Emily asked, glancing nervously at the wooden clock in the kitchen.

“Yeah, let’s get going!” I was glad that she was having too much fun to pay attention to the time as well, even though I was older, and only my head would be on the platter if we screwed up. We piled into the car, filled it with nervous energy. I drove fast. Too fast, and I knew it, but didn’t slow down. All the windows and the sunroof were open. The air smelled like swamp and cattle. No one said a word. We were bracing ourselves for whatever it was that we knew was going to happen.

When we tore onto the dirt road from the paved one, we were in the final stretch, but the digital clock read 12:03—I was already dead. The bullfrogs and katydids from Spencer’s swamp were deafening even over the roar of the engine. The gravel was loose under the tires. Somehow I knew, but didn’t stop. I pushed fifty on a road that should’ve been traveled no faster than the Amish in their horse-drawn wagons that passed Spencer’s house each morning before dawn.

As we rounded the final turn, the dirt slid out from under the tires, and everything was suddenly darkness, vertigo, and clamor—glass shattering, metal scraping metal. I heard the car noises, but not my sister screaming, Spencer yelling. When we stopped rolling, luckily landing right-side up, I thought I’d been hallucinating. I thought maybe we’d just gone off the road a little, that I could put the car in reverse and continue as if nothing had happened. People later asked me what my mistake was: *Did I slam on the brakes? Was I not watching the road?* I don’t know. It happened so fast I don’t think I

had time to stomp down on the brake pedal (which, they said, you're not supposed to do when losing control of a vehicle). I wasn't messing with the radio or distracted by conversation—none of us had been talking. Like Bambi on the frozen pond, the car's legs slid out from under us.

When my vision stopped spinning and I saw the crack in the windshield, I realized there was no getting out of this. Scared shitless, I played the adult. I was the oldest. "Ok, are you guys ok? Anybody bleeding? Check and make sure you're not bleeding. Can you move everything? Check and make sure you can move everything." My top lip and front teeth throbbed from my face slamming into the steering wheel. The airbags never went off, and I'm still not sure whether that made it better or worse. Mercifully, no one was seriously injured. We climbed out of the wreckage and stared at the crippled automobile, counting our hit points. The headlights were still working and the brights bathed the ditch we'd crashed into in harsh light.

I had a swollen lip, two cracked front teeth, whiplash, a burn cutting across the left half my neck from the seatbelt, and my hands had gripped the steering wheel so tight I could barely straighten my fingers. Spencer had cuts on his face from broken glass, a knot growing on the side of his head where it'd hit the ground after the passenger window shattered, and a black eye from a fallen branch that'd struck his face through the hole where the window should've been. Skylar and Emily, who had sat in the back, suffered less severe injuries—bruises on their ribs from being shoved back and forth against the door handles and sore jaws from clenching their teeth. We were all covered in dirt and

glass. Dirt was in the pockets of my jeans, in my bra, tangled in my hair, crunchy between my teeth.

The swamp had not fallen silent out of reverence for my mistake. On the opposite side of the road was a steep tree-covered hill sloping straight down into the muck. On the side of the road where the car had landed, a small embankment covered in thick weeds led up to some undeveloped property. No houses for a mile. As soon as we'd figured out everyone was all right, Emily started crying. I wanted to join her, but felt strangely emotionless, hollow. It was all my fault, and I would've felt like a cheater crying for something I'd done to myself.

There was no cell phone service. We knew that so well none of us bothered to check our phones, undamaged in our pockets. Spencer grabbed my cheeks with both hands and leaned down to touch noses with me. "I love you, Jacqui. I love you no matter what."

"I almost killed you guys," I whispered through chattering teeth.

"We're fine, Jacqui. It'll be fine. I love you." He turned to Skylar. "Wasn't that kind of awesome, though? Like don't you wish you could do that again without breaking a car?" Skylar laughed and nodded.

"That was not a fucking rollercoaster you psychos," I snapped, wanting to be mad but secretly happy that no one was angry at me. Spencer decided to head toward the nearest neighbor, and told Skylar to run toward their home to wake their parents. My sister and I stayed with the car, frozen and pathetic females. It didn't hit me until later how brave Skylar was, running a mile alone through the pitch black night, thick with

swamp and bugs and animals. I stood, leaning against the back bumper, crunching broken glass under my sneaker. Looking more scared than hurt, Emily kept asking, “What’re we gonna do?”

“I don’t know, Emily. We have to call the police and get Mom.”

“What if they don’t come back?”

“They’re going to come back, ok?”

The twenty minutes we waited for the boys passed slower than the evening had been fast. Spencer returned first, with our high school history teacher, who happened to be his closest neighbor, in tow. If I hadn’t been in so much shock I probably would’ve passed out in embarrassment. I prayed that Mr. Renieche would forget all about this before school started, but still had horrific visions of him re-telling the story to the entire teachers’ lounge. Then headlights appeared from the direction of Spencer and Skylar’s house. Seeing that we were all right and had help on the way, Mr. Renieche walked back through the mosquitoes, down the dirt road to his house. The boys’ mother, Barbara, who’d always made me nervous with her own reckless behavior and unpredictable morality, hugged Emily and me. I wanted to be an adult, to make a real apology, but I could scarcely bring myself to whisper, *Sorry*, into her hair, messy from sleep. Spencer’s dad, Steve, had called the police from their home phone when Skylar arrived, and he instructed me to get anything we wanted out of the car. Maps, registration, and a safety kit were all Mom kept in her vehicle. Both of Spencer’s parents wore oversized t-shirts and plaid lounge pants. I was so embarrassed I could hardly speak. Barb left us with the ruined Escape to wait for the police, and drove to our house to wake Mom and bring her to us. I later found out that Barb had to go in through our unlocked door and roust Mom

out of bed; she was sleeping so deeply she didn't hear Barb knocking—that's how much she trusted me. I wouldn't have been caught even if we'd gotten in late.

I didn't know what to expect in Mom's reaction, but was numb and ready for anything. She ran toward my sister and me, wearing a nightgown and her work boots, glasses and no make-up. She pulled each of us to her chest, thanking God that we weren't hurt, and I realized she knew the accident was a better punishment than anything she could've come up with.

The police arrived and interrogated me. I didn't know how fast I'd been going, only that it was too fast. I hadn't been drinking, I was just stupid. The vehicle had rolled more than once before it stopped. They issued me a ticket for "driving too fast for conditions" and made it a point to tell me how charitable they were being for not giving me one for "reckless driving." They made a few condescending comments about how the middle of nowhere was a bad place to get in an accident. It had gotten cold enough that the humidity turned to dew, coating the wrecked car in tiny droplets, leaving goose bumps on my bare arms.

While the cops were scolding me, Steven pulled up with his girlfriend of the moment, coming back home from town. His jaw dropped as he went past the wreckage and the cops, but there was also a smirk in his wide eyes, the same color as Spencer's. He and his red-headed girlfriend, Erin, the two most popular, well-liked and well-hated seniors at our high school, joined the gathering crowd. Party at two a.m., corner of nowhere and the swamp. Before Spencer, I would've hated them both, but post-love I just

envied their freedom—Steven had a car so they could have sex and drive places—and the way their age made their relationship seem legit.

One of the cops was a tall, blonde woman. Steven made a show of looking her up and down, clearly pleased with what he saw. He elbowed his father in the ribs and nodded his head in her direction. Of course I couldn't get a fat, ugly cop—I had to endure the humiliation of having Officer Barbie chastise me for my sins, Steven making obscene gestures in the background. I almost felt bad for her.

*Did we know what would've happened if we'd crashed on the other side of the dirt road? Of course we did. You all would've had to be airlifted to the U of M hospital. The SUV would've wrapped around the trees like I wrapped myself around Spencer. The swamp would've sucked us in.*

Policewoman Barbie and her average-Joe partner told Mom the car was totaled. There was no saving it. Out in the wild staring at the wreck, being eaten alive by insects of all kinds, I couldn't think about logistics—not in swampland. Standing on the dirt road, I thought about death, what it meant to kill someone else accidentally. I thought about the phrase “love kills”—how ironic that we'd been watching *Sid and Nancy* before we went veering off the dusty path. Barbara gave Mom, Emily, and me a ride home. Once I was inside a civilized house with lights and indoor plumbing and screens on the windows to keep the bugs out, I thought about logistics. I thought about how Mom would get to work, if she could afford a new car, the inevitable spike in insurance premiums. These things caused me the most guilt because, no matter how much luck it had taken, none of us were hurt. It was the real-life shit, most of which would fall on the shoulders of my tired mother, that would matter.

I asked Emily if she'd sleep in my bed with me. I was scared and didn't know how to apologize. She wrinkled her nose at first, then agreed. I was scared about how Dad would react when he found out. I was scared that Spencer's parents would hate me and not let us see each other. I was scared that my mom would decide Spencer was a bad influence and not let us see each other. Spencer could kiss me and hold my face and whisper soothing things, but he couldn't erase the dead bodies or broken cars that our recklessness might cause. Reality turned the selfish magic of love into selfish idiocy; I should've known better and I knew it. It scared me that my obsession with Spencer could make me do something so stupid, so out of character. I'd been responsible until he came and stole my attention. It scared me that the recklessness he coaxed out of me might've been what I loved about him. When I awoke the next morning, for an instant, I thought I'd dreamed the accident. A cool breeze carried no scent of mud through my open window, and I wrapped the comforter around my shoulders. Then my little sister, whom I'd almost killed, stirred next to me and I knew it was true, true, true.

Blood on the Tracks

A Collection of Seven Linked Short-Stories

## Lily, Rosemary, and the Jack of Hearts

I'd thought staying at home with Ray—going to community college even though I had the grades for Ivies, taking art classes because that's what he wanted to do—would finally push us together, as if the years we'd known each other were like gravity and eventually, if I waited long enough, the force would add up.

But when Sarah walked in late to our first painting class at Jackson Community College, the only institution of higher education within an hour of where Ray and I grew up, she crushed four years' worth of dreaming under the heels of her studded combat boots. She wore black jeans and a scruffy fur coat over a white crop top. She smelled like cigarettes. She painted her nails black. She was a bad-ass. She sat in front of us in the only seat available and Ray stared at the back of her head with such intensity, if the back of her head had clothes on, his eyes would've torn them off. Her hair was dyed black and unwashed, with bangs that hung in her eyes. I became invisible.

The next week Ray set his bag on the chair to his other side, the one where I wasn't sitting. Just as he'd planned, Sarah had to sit next to him when she finally showed up, because the other seats were all full. In comparison to her, everything about me looked worse. She probably weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet, which made me look obese instead of just curvy. Her milky-white skin made my acne seem redder. Her giant green eyes accented with black eyeliner made my muddy brown ones look smaller, my refusal to wear make-up more immature. Her waist-length black hair was messy in a good way, in a sexy bed-head way. My hair was bobbed, a cut that maybe could've been flattering if I'd ever bothered to style it. Even my D-cups, which I'd previously been proud of, which had previously been the only feature I ever attempted to accentuate, now

just seemed like extra fat. She pulled the flat-chested, waify, visible rib-cage thing off really well.

Ray and I painted next to her in studio. It didn't help that she was actually good, with her primitive lines that reminded me of Picasso. While Ray and I painted impressionism landscapes or dirty cities she was doing weird abstraction. Ray and I liked painting, but were really just taking art classes because they were easy. Sarah was the only person in our class who actually seemed to care, who actually stayed after to finish projects. When she lifted her arm in a particularly passionate brush stroke, her signature midriff-baring paint-stained t-shirt lifted to reveal a tattoo on her ribs: *tangled up in blue* written in cursive. I knew Ray noticed too. He stared her down, memorizing the nicotine stains between her fingers, her furrowed brow, how her flesh fit on top of her bones. Following his gaze, I did the same.

Sarah looked like you could light a match on her skin.

Like if you talked to her wrong she'd dump gasoline on you and light you ablaze.

She was hot.

I scrambled for my best friend slipping through my fingers. I'd make a joke and elbow him in the ribs while we waited for class to start, but in his reverie he didn't hear me. So I focused my attention on her, too, if only to have at least that in common with him. We'd both know her shaky hands, her chipped nail polish, the fuzz on her lower back. I had memorized Ray in this way already. I knew his large, flat hands, fingernails chewed down to the cuticles. I knew his blue-green eyes. I knew his chipped tooth from where a childhood friend had accidentally shot him in the mouth with an Air-Soft gun. I

knew his lithe torso and sinewy arms. I liked watching Sarah, too, imagining what it would be like to be like her.

For some reason, Sarah wanted to be friends with me. She approached Ray and me as a unit mostly. She forced him to remember I was still there, sometimes. At first, I thought she was just trying to be polite. Later, a few weeks after we met, she forced me to pile into the trash heap in the front seat of her enormous, ancient green Lincoln during a break between classes to go pick up tampons and have “girl time,” she explained to Ray. She tossed him (he who hadn’t yet started smoking) a pack of Marlboro Menthols saying, “We’ll be back before you finish those,” smirking behind knock-off Ray Bans. “Tell me about yourself,” she said. “Is he your brother separated from birth or what?” I could tell she was hoping this trip would push her into being friends with Ray and I outside school. We drove past the abandoned businesses and barren fields that covered Jackson County. Even gas stations were few and far between. It’s hard to keep a business running when there’s no one there to buy anything.

“We’re bros,” I responded. “We went to high school together.” She drove too fast, without the confident handling of an experienced driver. “He’s crazy about you, you know.”

“I get that a lot,” she replied. She was so deeply sarcastic that she didn’t say sarcastic things in the right voice. She said them straight. It would’ve been easy to misread her.

When we got back, just in time for painting, Ray hadn’t smoked any of the cigarettes, but I was sure he’d looked at them, jealously. They had been in her mouth to

look forward to. I think Sarah was glad to have found a couple of possible friends. But all I could feel was the tension between her and Ray. Now I realize she could've slept with him without even speaking to me, without asking my permission, but at the time I thought she was courting both of us because she had to go through me to get to him. In painting class that day, she didn't squeal when Ray wiped a wet brush, heavy with toxic-smelling oil paint, across her bare stomach.

“Jackass,” she muttered under her breath.

“Sarah, you got a little something on you. Do you need me to wipe it off?” Ray and I stared at that flat, flat stomach.

“Fuck off,” she responded, glaring, holding the gaze for a few seconds too long. A couple of our twelve or so other classmates could've seen, but if they did they'd gone back to painting white-tailed deer or four-wheelers and talking about sports or how wasted they got last weekend. I wondered if anyone else in the class really noticed them. I wondered what this would mean for me.

The next week she got him back, sneaking up behind and painting a white skunk-streak through the middle of his dark hair with acrylic. We didn't have much adult supervision. The professor would stick around for ten minutes of the three hour period, then disappear to the teacher's lounge or play Farmville in the computer lab. The next week Ray painted his hands red and grabbed her waist from behind. “Great, now it looks like you hit me. I don't let people hit me without hitting them back.”

“That or we had some really hot sex.” He smirked at her, memorizing the pores on her nose, her narrowed, angry eyes. My own heart was racing, watching them.

“Get a fucking grip.” She wiped the handprints off with a cold, wet paper towel that made goose bumps rise on her torso.

I could see Ray molding himself into the kind of guy Sarah would date, although I admittedly knew nothing about her past. His jeans got dirtier, shredded. He wore only black t-shirts and grey wife beaters. They spent a lot of time in class glaring at each other hatefully. He had her with the glob of cold paint smeared above her belly button, a gesture like an animal marking his territory. I think she admired that he had the balls to do something that was both really silly and incredibly sexual in front of the whole class. But despite his charisma, Sarah was still way out of Ray’s league. He had pouty, movie-star lips, but his teeth were crooked. He was a lot of fun to be around, but wasn’t very smart. Ray was six-three and skinny as a flag pole, the kind of guy that would hold the door for you without thinking about it. His laugh was contagious even though his sense of humor was a bit idiotic. I was frequently baffled by the confidence with which he carried himself; where did that come from and where can I get some?

One morning Ray called to tell me he’d gone to campus early and couldn’t give me a ride. I was used to him being unreliable, but not for getting to class early. I drove the red pick-up I used to share with my sister and found them in the parking lot, sitting in Sarah’s car, smoking. He’d come with her. His pathetic little white Malibu wasn’t there. It was ten a.m. My heart sank, and my mouth watered with nausea. I shouldn’t have gotten so upset; it wasn’t like I hadn’t seen it coming. I considered turning around and going home, but he spotted me in the rearview mirror and stuck his head out the

passenger window, waving. He'd dyed his hair turquoise. Sarah hadn't put on any make-up and she looked drowsy.

She and I sat on either side of Ray in painting class and I imagined them fucking for the entire three-hour class period. I was turned on and pissed off. I saw him try to hold her hand under the desk, but she refused and he settled for resting the hand on her thigh. After class Ray hastily explained that he had to go with Sarah to get his car and he'd see me later. She covered her face with her hair and lit a cigarette from between raven tendrils. I couldn't even grunt "fine" like I wanted to. I said "ok" in my disgustingly cheerful voice and she handed him a cig from her pack.

That night I imagined all the sex they were having at that very moment. I thought Ray would be gentle in bed. He'd want to kiss her and look into her eyes the whole time. He'd run his hands through her long hair, but he wouldn't tug it. He might kiss her neck a little, but he wouldn't bite her. This kind of white-washed, honeymoon, romance-movie sex is all a virgin has to imagine. I masturbated, cried, and fell asleep.

The real insult, I figured out after co-existing with them awhile, was that she looked like my older sister. Kate had gone away to school and I thought I was rid of that particular type of female presence, the horrifically beautiful girl that made me worthless, see-through. If Kate started listening to punk, smoked cigarettes, and became anorexic they could've been twins. They had the same long dark hair and pale green eyes. I spent as much time with Sarah as I had with Kate, hanging out with her constantly when she and Ray weren't too busy doing boyfriend-girlfriend things, inviting her to my house for dinner because I felt bad that her parents were divorced and she had to cook for herself.

As I let Sarah get closer to me, I decided I was a masochist. My man-friend, guy's-girl façade was nothing to her brand of recklessness.

So, much to my chagrin, Ray and Sarah became my best friends. Emphasis on the plural. It had never occurred to me that I could make new friends at college. When you're from the middle of nowhere you kind of have to take what you can get. In Jackson the worse the economy got, the more people seemed to disappear. We graduated high school with roughly fifty red-neck losers and most of them went to JCC as well. There were some new faces at the community college, but it was mostly people we'd graduated with, plus the least ambitious graduates of surrounding high schools, plus some old people that had decided to go back to school. Making new friends isn't the goal of anyone who stays at home and goes to community college. Keeping your old friends is. Sarah didn't have any old friends to cling to because she'd just moved to Jackson County with her mother from somewhere up north. The only time she mentioned her high school was when I complained about all the hicks Ray and I went to school with. "You think that's bad," she'd say, "You should see the people in my high school. Half of them were illiterate and the other half couldn't read." She said things like that, phrases and jokes that reminded me of old movies. We bonded over a shared disgust with our community.

Eventually, Ray didn't exist without Sarah anymore. It got to the point that, when Ray was working his part-time job at Hot Topic, Sarah and I hung out without him. At first I thought it was weird, but then I saw how happy it made Ray that he could have his cake and eat it too, that he could have the sexy girlfriend every guy dreams of having without the guilt of losing his best female friend that's closeted in love with him. Sarah was oblivious. She'd never had many boyfriends to guard and didn't know to be

suspicious of me. Sarah spent a lot more time reading and a lot less time going to punk shows than I'd imagined. She bought what I told her, hook, line, and sinker.

"Me and Ray are like best friends," I said when she asked about our past one day over hot cocoa (with skim milk, she insisted) at my house. "We've known each other forever."

"But did you ever go out? In high school I mean?" I could tell what she meant to say was, *how could you not be attracted to him?*

"No way, that would be totally weird. We're like man friends." I talked frequently about the importance of friendship over sex and she just sat there, nodding into her mug. I wanted her to know she would lose if Ray had to choose between us, even if I wasn't so sure. She didn't tell me to fuck off—just sat until one of us changed the subject.

Sometimes, Ray would call Sarah after work and be too tired to come meet her at my place. "That's cool, I'll just hang out with Melanie and her family. Get some rest. I love you, too," she'd say. He always said "I love you" before she did. Then we'd look at fashion magazines and drink coffee. I would stand outside on the patio with her while she smoked no matter how cold it was, wondering how something that smells so bad could be enjoyable. We'd joke about stupid things Ray had done and Sarah would ask my advice if she thought something was wrong. Sometimes, I'd have to coax it out of her when she was particularly sullen.

"What's your deal, Sarah? You've barely said a word all day." It bugged me that she could have Ray, who turned out to be an even better boyfriend than I'd imagined he would be, and still have these constant mood swings. He liked her that way, though. He

liked that she was unpredictable. She stayed silent for a minute, picking at her cuticles and twisting snarls into her hair, but I could usually get her to talk.

“I’m fine.”

“You know what ‘fine’ stands for? Freaked out, Insecure, Neurotic, and Emotional.” She gave me a look that said *where the hell did you read that?*

“Fine. Me and Ray got in a fight yesterday. I was supposed to stay over at his house, but I left because his mom was acting like a psycho and he was just defending her.”

“What was she doing?” Sarah peered at me from behind her black curtain of hair. Ray rarely talked about his parents’ divorce. He’d give me one-word answers until I got so frustrated I’d stopped asking. I’d known his family briefly, they seemed normal enough to me, but after his parents split up he stopped inviting me over and started showing up at my place unannounced, until he almost lived with us. I knew things with his mom had been getting ugly.

“It’s really fucked up, Melanie.” Sarah told me Ray’s mom was popping pills like there was no tomorrow. Sarah told me Ray’s mom was still sleeping with Ray’s dad, and several other guys. Sarah told me she didn’t want to do another divorce. “And Ray just doesn’t think it’s a big deal,” she said, after spilling it all. “His mom is a fucking disgusting whore.”

“Ray’s mom is a good person, Sarah, she’s just confused right now. And you can’t just say shit like that to Ray. He loves his mom. He knew her before she acted like this and that’s the mom he loves.” My voice was sticky-sweet. I thought I was going to

believe what I said, but once the words hit the air, they mutated. I reached over and pushed her hair out of her face, behind her ear, as I'd seen Ray do.

"I guess," she said, defeated. I knew Ray ragged on her for being pessimistic, so I liked to point out when she was being cynical. I don't know why she listened to me. It could've been because by that point it would've been difficult for her to date Ray and not be friends with me. It could've been because Ray and I both told her she was a pessimist and so she started to believe it. I never figured it out. The ability I had to make Sarah question and doubt even her strongest gut instincts made me feel powerful, but I still thought I was doing the right thing. I thought turning her around on herself, encouraging her to be optimistic to the point of delusion, was me being a good person. She listened to me tell her how to be a good girlfriend even though I'd never been one.

"Do you wanna spend the night here? My mom's making clam chowder and beer bread for dinner."

"Thanks, Mel. That sounds great." The dark cloud still floated around in her head, but it cleared for moments when she was given warm food, when she asked Mom and Dad about their boring days. My parents always loved fostering and feeding my broken-family friends.

That night, the first time she slept over, I couldn't believe she'd agreed to it.

"Where should I sleep?" she asked, after my parents had gone to bed.

"Just sleep in my bed, with me. It's no big deal, I have a queen-size." I was so surprised by my own response, my blood thumped in my ears. I was certain she'd say no and make some excuse to leave. Was I really trying to sleep with Ray's girlfriend?

“All right,” she said, hesitantly. “I’m just gonna wash my face, can I use your stuff?”

She pulled her hair back when she slept. I watched the tendons shifting in her white neck when she lay down on the other side of the bed. We said goodnight and I turned off the lamp on the bedside table. She smelled delicious, like perfume and toothpaste. I lay stiff as a corpse, trying not to move while my heart was leaping out of my chest, feigning sleep. Eventually, I must’ve drifted off, because I awoke startled from dream in which I’d been kissing Ray, with my eyes closed. His hair seemed to grow longer and longer, until my hands were stuck in it, and in the dream I opened my eyes to Sarah staring back at me.

Sarah woke up long before me in the morning. She didn’t seem to sleep very much, but I made her promise me she’d work on it. By the time I dragged myself out of bed she was dressed, had her make-up on, and was nursing a cup of coffee.

“You shouldn’t drink so much coffee when you can hardly sleep,” I said while she drove us to JCC’s campus. “What does Ray say about it?”

“He passes out the second his head hits the pillow. I just lay there with him for a few minutes, then crawl out of bed and read or paint or watch TV and he’s never the wiser. His snoring keeps me up even when I feel like I can sleep.” We both laughed. I thought about Ray telling me how much he loved to sleep next to her and laughed harder.

Ray met us at JCC before class and they kissed for longer than I thought was appropriate for a public place, his hands roving through her messy hair. They smiled at each other with ridiculous joy, happiness that I’d never seen in Ray before. In high

school, his most common emotions were apathy and mildly entertained. “Careful, you guys, you’re gonna ruin your tough image,” I’d tell them.

They joined my family for Thanksgiving. It was Sarah’s idea. She was sick of hurting the feelings of whichever parent she didn’t have Thanksgiving dinner with. Ray was reluctant. He didn’t want to piss off his mom. “You know what? Thanksgiving is for eating and being around people you like, so I’m gonna be here, not with my parents or your parents who would just make me projectile vomit my turkey. You can do what you want,” she told him when he protested. Ray caved and convinced his mom to go visit her family without him. Kate was coming home, which made me nervous because somehow she always seemed to know what I was thinking. We were kind of like twins in that way. We didn’t get along, but we could sense each other’s motives. She knew how I felt about Ray without me ever telling her and she’d know about Sarah, too.

Dinner was painless at first. Kate wore a cocktail dress and was mostly silent. Sarah and Ray sported their usual punk-band t-shirts. I introduced Kate and Sarah, and caught Kate rolling her eyes at my mother while putting finishing touches on the green bean casserole. *Where’d she find this one and when’d Ray start dressing like that?* her look said.

“That’s Ray’s new girlfriend?” she whispered after calling me into the kitchen to help her and Mom. What she meant was, *you think you can compete with that?* “She’s cute, but she looks like she’s on drugs or something. And I don’t really think he needs a girlfriend with no family.”

“She’s not on drugs, she just doesn’t sleep much.” Kate knew everything I felt about Ray, and now she was trying to be nice. Everyone else said Ray and Sarah made a great couple. Kate’s skepticism felt better than it should have.

Ray and Kate had barely acknowledged each other in their entire lives, despite the fact that he spent almost more time at our house than at his own during high school. Ray thought Kate was a bitch, because of what I’d told him about her, because she was an ice queen. Kate was more beautiful than Sarah—I could see it now with them in the same room. Sarah had dark circles under her eyes, her cheeks were sunken, and she really needed to wash her hair. Still, Ray’d never shown any interest in Kate and maybe that’s part of what made me love him. He didn’t watch her like he watched Sarah, not even for a second, and I would’ve noticed.

Sarah picked at the holes in her shirt while my parents said grace, and then we loaded our plates and feasted like good Americans. My parents asked the usual questions, how’s school going, what’re your plans after graduating. Ray, Kate, and I all responded with one word answers. Sarah was the only one who told them what they wanted to hear, either because she was grateful my parents let her and Ray join us or because she was the only one of us who actually had plans.

“Well, after I finish up here, I wanna transfer. Probably to Eastern or Western. I think I could get in to the art schools there. But I really wanna move away and get my own place. Then I could go to grad school maybe,” Sarah said through mouthfuls. Ray stared blankly ahead. I knew Ray didn’t know what Sarah’s future plans would mean for them, but it seemed too far away for any of us to think about.

“Oh, that sounds great!” Mom said, too enthusiastically, happy that one of the young adults at the table had goals. Dad grunted his approval, which was more than I could usually get out of him.

Kate didn't even do anything mean until dessert. We were almost friends. Neither of us wanted to talk about school, neither of us thought Sarah was right for Ray. But, when I reached for a second slice of pecan pie, after Ray and Sarah had both eaten two, Kate sighed at me. “Melanie, do you really think you should have that?”

“Kate, leave her alone. It's Thanksgiving,” my mom defended me, albeit softly. When Kate and I fought, my mom just got quiet and embarrassed until it was over.

“Ok, Mom, but you're the one who talked to me about her needing to lose weight over the summer and now she's just gorging herself.” Mom was trying to be quiet, but our large kitchen wasn't big enough that Sarah and Ray couldn't hear us across it. Noticing the uncomfortable silence directed at her, Kate excused herself to go study, leaving the dishes for Mom.

“What's your problem? Maybe if you ate more you wouldn't be so grumpy,” Ray called after her. She'd started climbing the stairs, but she heard him, pausing, then stomping harder and slamming her door. He was censoring himself in front of my mother. My heart soared. I actually laughed when he said “grumpy.” Ray continued eating while Sarah picked at the edges of the cotton tablecloth. I sat down across from them without the extra pie, and pretended to blow the whole thing off.

“Sorry, you guys. She's such a bitch. I don't know what her problem is.”

“God, that was totally rude. She isn't exactly a size two, herself.” Sarah said. She wasn't gloating when she said things like that. Much to my confusion, she sometimes

said she wished she could put on some weight. It's possible she said things like that to be nice to me. It's also possible she believed she could use some more flesh to weigh her down, to hold her shakes still.

“You're the best,” I told Ray, and we high-fived.

“I know, I get that a lot,” he said, wiping the whipped cream from his plate and sucking it off his finger.

When months turned into a year, then a year and a half, I told myself I'd given up. Ray and I would never be anything other than friends. Sarah stuck around for longer than I'd thought she would. Spring break of our second year at JCC—the semester Sarah would be getting her associate's degree but Ray and I, with our refusal to take pre-requisites, wouldn't—Sarah took a trip to Seattle to visit an aunt. It would be the longest they'd been apart since they met. Sarah was ecstatic; she'd never been anywhere, she said. This aunt was not really her aunt, just a friend of her mother, but she had a home on a lake right outside Seattle, a place that Sarah said had the perfect weather. She hated the sun. Ray was apprehensive. Mostly he wondered what he was going to do with his time for an entire week besides play video games, but she'd also mentioned looking at schools while she was there.

I couldn't wait to do things with Ray without her. Even if I just ended up sitting on his couch watching him play Halo, at least she wouldn't be there. He called me every day that week, and I felt like we were in high school, before Sarah ever existed. We played video games together, watched superhero cartoons that Sarah hated, and drove into Jackson to hang out at Denny's, where we drank coffee for hours and made fun of

the customers, imagining the pathetic stories of their lives. Denny's was one of the only places young people in Jackson could congregate, and it only cost two bucks for unlimited coffee. Getting Ray to myself again made me realize how much I missed him, and I dreaded Sarah's return. I thought about the time in high school that we'd had an anti-Valentine's Day party at my house, just the two of us. I baked cookies shaped like weapons instead of hearts and we frosted them together with black and red icing. We watched violent comic-book movies. We made each other little cards that said things like "Your breath smells" and "You have no morals." I thought we were so clever.

"Only three days 'til she gets back!" Ray exclaimed upon opening the door to his mom's latest dilapidated apartment for me that Wednesday, bursting my bubble.

"Yeah," I replied, more cheerfully than I'd wanted to. "Unless she met some hot grunge boy and decided never to come back. Glad to see you, too." His glare was more angry and less playful than it should've been.

"I found my other controller, so we can actually play together this time."

I watched the familiar way his long spine slumped with terrible posture, the familiar way his t-shirt clung to his broad shoulders, the familiar way his mouth hung open when he was concentrating, and adored all of it. I kept losing, dying, from watching him instead of the TV. Then I knew I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't take their public make-out sessions, I couldn't take trying to patch up their arguments, I couldn't take her beauty. Something was going to give, and it wasn't gonna be pretty.

After playing Halo for three hours my brain felt like it was going to melt out my ears and finally he said something. "It's weird."

“What?” I knew he was about to be earnest because the only time he couldn’t articulate was when he wanted to say something important.

“This is gonna sound crazy, but I can smell her. I swear I can smell her on me, like she took my old smell and switched it with her smell. It’s really weird.”

“Um, ok. Not sure how to respond to that. Are you sure she didn’t just spray her perfume on all your stuff to mark her territory?”

“No, it’s not her perfume smell, it’s her smell-smell. Sorry, you haven’t had, like, a boyfriend before, so I guess you wouldn’t get it.” My heart raced at the insult and instantly I was on the verge of tears. I imagined that was how Sarah felt when I flaunted my knowledge about Ray, and I realized how cruel I was being to her. I threw my controller on the carpet next to Ray. “Mel? What the hell?”

“Do you ever think, maybe, I don’t wanna talk about her all the time?” Usually when I snapped at him, I received a surprised blank stare. This time his eyes narrowed, comprehending.

What that comprehending could’ve meant! He finally knew. I wanted him to pull me into his lap, facing him on the floor. The abandoned video game noises would’ve been drowned out by our kissing, the blood rushing past our ears. His hands would be firm. I would finally get to touch that spine, whose arc I could recognize anywhere. He’d lay me down underneath him on the carpet and we’d hold hands with our arms stretched above our heads, chests pressing together. And I’d get to be more like Sarah. My hair would be long and my waist would be narrow. I’d have her knowledge of him. I’d know how he liked to be kissed, whether he liked whispered endearments or silence. Maybe he

wouldn't be as gentle as I'd imagined. Maybe he would pull my long, long hair and bite the tendons in my thin, white neck. And maybe he would want me to dig my black-painted fingernails into his back. From the floor, he'd carry me easily, as if I were weightless, into his room, where he'd lay me on his bed and kiss the tattoo under my breast. What that comprehending could've meant.

## You're a Big Girl Now

My older sister was and still is much more attractive than I am. Unnaturally so. Siblings are supposed to have some kind of similarity, whether it be in their faces or bodies or way of moving, but for Kate and me there's nothing.

Kate has long, dark curly hair, a milky white complexion, perfectly arched brows, bee-stung lips, and the kind of hourglass figure that makes fat people like me unable to call themselves hourglass as a way to avoid that more unpleasant but still fake word—curvy. Her natural beauty would've been bad enough to live with, but on top of it she's a slave to the gods of fashion and make-up, *Glamour* and *Vanity Fair*. She never had that middle-school phase where you draw big circles around your eyes with eyeliner and wipe mascara across your lids on accident and are still too afraid of eyelash curlers. It was as if she was born with an innate knowledge of every beauty routine.

She is perfect. And I'm her ugly sister.

When we were young, I cultivated a tom-boyish attitude in response, arising at the very last second before I needed to leave for school, never wearing make-up, doing my hair, or plucking my eyebrows. Any attempt at those things and I would just have been more pathetic, my failure to compare would've been more obvious. I adopted a carefree, guy's-girl type demeanor stolen from a Mary-Kate and Ashley straight to VHS flick that I thought would make me appealing to the opposite sex because it seemed to work in romantic comedies.

Kate's an ice-queen. People regard her as if she's too beautiful to exist and they let her get away with anything. In high school she wasn't popular with guys, though.

Guys went for the slutty cheerleaders because Kate was unattainable, perfect and closed as a sphere. Kate likes to read Victorian romances, plays flute, paints still lifes, and is overall exasperatingly feminine. So much so that back then even her love of fishing seemed womanly, the way she held the reel and focused her shadowed eyes, flinging long tendrils of dark hair over her shoulder. She never had a lot of boyfriends, but I bet a lot of guys have masturbated while thinking about her.

One of the things that drew me to Ray was that he didn't seem too intimidated or even very mindful of my sister's beauty, and maybe that's why I've never been able to shake him. Every guy I sleep with now I think, if he knew Kate, he'd realize how inferior I am, he'd realize what he's missing. Maybe Ray wasn't affected by Kate because she was three years older than us, which in high school made her out of reach due to age alone, but also I think it was because her beauty was like some Greek statue. She was nice to look at, but it would've hard to imagine sex with her was even possible.

Kate's smart, but not as smart as me. I solved high school calculus problems in my head with the same simplicity as our mother washing and stacking dishes, cleanly and quickly without much effort. Kate could stare at the same problem for days and still see only numbers. She looked the way the harpies in Dante look, as Sarah later explained to me—beautiful and furious and more dangerous for their beauty.

One afternoon I came downstairs on my way to go to a movie with Ray. In the process of becoming his best friend I had destroyed any desire he might ever have had to date me. This was something of a relief because ugly girls with boyfriends are always kind of a bad joke. Kate of course knew how I felt about Ray. We have the twin-like ability to intuit what the other's thinking and even get sympathy headaches. We used to

be friends, kind of. When we were kids, she was still cuter than me, but she let me fish with her. I feel like we could still be that way, if I could only decipher what how she wanted me to be.

Kate sat at the white kitchen table, organizing her tackle box, fingering the flies, delicate and sharp. “Is that what you’re wearing?” She glanced at me, then back at her work. At that moment, I was certain if I got close enough to feel her breath it would be cold. I stood in front of her, imagined my waist and thighs ballooning, my acne reddening, the dark hair on my flabby arms growing thicker. I was good at math, but she could do magic.

I hid in the bathroom, crying into the mirror, when Ray showed up to get me.

“I don’t think she’s coming,” Kate told Ray when he knocked and entered, as I listened from under the bathroom door. “I just tried to give her advice on what to wear and now she’s all upset.” I could picture her, at the white kitchen table, fishing flies that never cut her fingers spread before her. I could picture Ray, standing there, teenage boy wondering what to do. I knew he knew she was beautiful. But, like the boys who she wished would like her, he dismissed her. Advertisements don’t want us to know, there is such a thing as being too beautiful.

“Uh, I guess I’ll wait then?” he asked. Something about Kate makes people to speak to her hesitantly, as if only she could know the right answer.

“Suit yourself.” It certainly annoyed her that he didn’t just leave. I hid, waiting for him to go, wondering why I didn’t just open the door and come out. Ray never noticed what I looked like, and I wondered if that was good or bad.

I waited there until the movie would’ve been over and he left.

## Simple Twist of Fate

When Sarah finally left, I knew I was on my last chance. Her desire to leave Jackson County and make something of herself confused Ray, which frustrated her, which left them unable to communicate. In the few weeks before she left for college in Ypsilanti everything fizzled out. The sexy, hateful staring that had begun their courtship disappeared. They spent less time staring at each other and more time cutting sarcastic remarks, him slashing her hopeless ambition, her slashing his laziness. I watched my best friends chopping each other down and waited.

Sarah suddenly had more important things to do than drink coffee at Denny's after class with me and Ray. "If you wanna hang out, you just have to come with me to the library. I have shit to do," she'd say to Ray, who never studied. The library was a new habit for Sarah. Her new habits, developed in the face of university applications and graduation from community college, replaced the ones she and Ray had cultivated together. I stood and watched and in their frustration they ignored me. I was a voyeur to their arguments like I'd been a voyeur to their courtship.

"I don't really wanna go to the library, Sarah, ok? I'll just go home or hang out with Melanie."

"Fine, have fun getting nothing accomplished. Apparently you guys are immune to boredom or something. You never fucking do anything."

"What'd you want from me?"

"Don't worry, I know better than to ask." Then she'd storm off, and Ray would remember I was there.

I decided the first thing I needed to do was console Ray, and give good advice while I was at it. I needed to be authoritative. I got a subscription to *Psychology Today*, which was full of words and data to use when you want someone to think you're right about something. My parents hoped I was thinking about becoming a therapist. They wanted me to do something that could give me a future after finishing my associate's in art and design, which I was only doing because it was what Ray wanted to do after we graduated high school. I remember walking arm in arm with him down the gymnasium aisle in our hideous purple robes and square graduation caps. His hair was ash brown and short then, instead of turquoise and messy. Ray had been a head taller than me since I'd known him. He strode through the gym towards our diplomas as I stumbled after, taking two steps for each of his. Instead of thinking about how I'd never have to return to that bullshit high school with its total student body of eight hundred redneck kids who weren't learning anything, I thought, *now, now, it'll finally be now*. But when malnourished, tattooed Sarah stomped into our first painting class sporting combat boots and unwashed black hair, my plans were derailed.

On the days Ray and Sarah were fighting, he and I went to the mall or drank hot cocoa at my house alone together. I hadn't had him to myself since we'd started college, since Sarah and her mood swings took up all his attention. I told him it was good for them to be apart so they could figure out what they wanted. I actually started to think that Ray dating Sarah for those two long years was good. He would now be properly heartbroken, feeling what I'd felt watching them collide, and he'd have to turn to me, his best friend, for support. In those couple weeks before she left, Sarah acted suspicious at first. The more shit Ray did to piss her off, the more she tried to ignore me. *Oh boy, she*

*thinks we're sleeping together already*, I thought. I clung to anything that would make her look irrational. I thought I would need to present it as evidence. I was young and bored and had nothing else to do with my energy than try to reclaim a person who'd never belonged to me.

Cruising the country roads in my pick-up and painting together at my parents' kitchen table felt like a time warp back to high school, when Sarah didn't exist. I knew this time he was spending with me (mostly me and my family, I'll be honest) was causing more trouble than it was curing, but I didn't tell him that. Several times she called while he was at my house, and before he ducked outside for privacy and better reception, I could hear her screaming.

Back when we were friends, especially when I was feeling particularly mean, I liked to remind Sarah of her place. I'd never been anything more than a buddy to Ray, but for Sarah I created a different past, the one I would've preferred to have been real. I'd talk about stories he'd told me, ones that I knew she didn't know, and over-emphasize their importance, over-emphasize the fact that even though she was the one sleeping with him, I'd known Ray longer. I told her that guys have a hard time expressing their feelings or comprehending the significance of past events. I told her that I was a lot like a guy and had those same problems. The more I constructed myself as male, as one of Ray's man friends, the more she trusted me. She'd respond with furrowed brows, cringing as if I'd hit her. "No, he never told me that." And I'd say "oh" and feel like a priest, turning a meaningless tidbit of information into something crucial. I knew this wouldn't hurt her if she didn't trust me, and I knew she only trusted me because she was prettier; there was no

danger of me stealing Ray, so I shouldn't have been threatening. My friendship with Sarah was built on the fact that she was so much better-looking than me that we couldn't compete. She was out of my league.

A week before Sarah was to move into her dorm at Eastern, I invited her and Ray over to hang out at my house, my parents' house, so my mom could cook for us, and we could go for a last late-August swim before my dad closed the pool. I had the nicest house of the three of us, and I invited Ray and Sarah over all the time. Children of divorce, they loved my mom's cooking, loved my parents being in the same room without wanting to kill each other.

They were having one of their fights. I could practically sense their arguments. It released some kind of chemical in the air, displaced lots of molecules. You could feel it. They were waiting on the wood deck for me to come out bearing fresh-washed towels and fresh-squeezed lemonade, both courtesy of my mother. They didn't stop their arguing in time for me to pretend I hadn't heard them, to pretend I wasn't a topic of discussion.

"Melanie." Sarah turned to me and I froze, a feeling that reminded me of Kate telling me I should watch who I called fat after a meaningless remark I made in a McDonald's drive-through; Kate telling me dark colors were a better choice for me when I wore yellow; Kate telling me if I got up an hour or two earlier and put in some effort she'd teach me how to put on make-up. Sarah was scary when she was mad. I pulled an expression that I hoped made me look clueless. "Don't you fucking play dumb with me." She bared her teeth like a predator. She wore nothing but a black bikini and I could tell that she'd lost weight. Her ribs were heaving.

“What’re you talking about?” I tried to sound defensive. Ray stood there like a deaf and dumb idiot, with a slack-jawed expression, as if he didn’t have any control over this impending doom.

“Don’t fucking play dumb with me. You really think I wouldn’t know? Did you really think I wasn’t gonna figure it out?” She turned to Ray and shoved him into the deck railing. “You want her more than me, you fucking jackass? What the fuck is wrong with you two?” She started crying and looked so, so thin, her spine jutting out like she was some kind of dinosaur. For once I wasn’t self-conscious about the fatty bulges in my one-piece. She left, taking Ray’s car and leaving her clothes behind. At dinner my parents pushed food around on their plates and talked about work. Ray and I hardly said a word to each other, and they didn’t ask where Sarah had gone. We ignored the empty plate at the table.

By the time Ray and I actually went on our first date Sarah was long gone.

After Sarah tornadoed in and out of my living room, the last time I’d ever see her, I had to tell him. Ray and I were sitting on the couch and watching cartoons, but he wasn’t paying attention. His worried expression—wrinkled brow, lip chewing, nail biting—was new to me. Normally, he’d sit sprawled out, leaning sideways against throw-pillows, but now he was hunched over, head in his hands. He kept sighing and rubbing his eyes. These were Sarah’s anxious mannerisms, not his. We heard a car pull into the driveway, and looked at each other, confused. It was too early for my parents to be home. The car door slammed, the sound ripe with anger, and I turned off the TV. I knew it was

Sarah. We heard her stumble up the front steps and she threw the door open, doorknob thudding against the wall.

“What the fuck is wrong with you two?” She wasn’t screaming, but a scary tone had entered her voice. She looked like electricity was running through her, a live wire.

“Sarah,” Ray said, cautiously, the way you talk to soothe injured animals. She ignored him and pounced on me, dragging me down onto the living room carpet and shoving her cigarette into my neck.

“Who the fuck do you think you are, you fat fucking whore? I’ll fucking kill you.” Now she was yelling, her lips touching my ear as she held me down on the floor. She was shaky, stuttering, like a circuit shorting out.

“Get out of my house,” I moaned, trying to wriggle out of her grasp. Ray grabbed a fistful of her hair and dragged her off me. I was disgusted with my own cowardice, but finally he got to be my hero. He was saving me, just as I’d imagined he would if it came to this, to choosing her or me. He pulled her back out the open front door. I crawled to the window to watch them cussing and fighting in the front yard. Sarah broke free of Ray’s grasp and lunged at him. Ray was thin, but outweighed her by at least thirty pounds. He blocked her, shoved her away from himself and into the pine tree next to my driveway, with more force than he probably meant to. She landed in the grass and pine needles at the foot of the tree and gasped for breath. She pushed herself upright, wiped her mouth on her sleeve, and then started screaming at Ray again. “You fucking woman beating asshole. You see this, Mel?” Sarah made eye contact with me through the window, calling me out for the voyeur I was. “This what you want, you goddamn fucking whore?”

He hadn't hurt her bad enough to stop her rage, but how much was she running on sparks of fury? Was it like how if you shoot a raging gorilla, it can still destroy everything in its path before its body realizes its dead? Would she have bruises tomorrow?

"Get out of here," Ray yelled. "I can't believe you just hurt Melanie like that." He came back inside, locked the door and drew the curtains. We heard what sounded like heavy glass breaking against a car door. Afraid she'd destroy my truck, I parted the drapes enough to peer out and saw smashed pottery in the driveway, a dent in the red hood of my beloved pick-up. She apparently didn't have anything else to throw and got into her own car, parked crookedly in my front lawn, and left. Ray was leaning against the front door and looked nauseated.

"Ray," I said, crying on my living room floor and clutching the burn on my neck. "I love you. She's known it all along. I want to be with you. You're my best friend."

"You're my best friend, too, Mel." He got antibiotic ointment and Band-Aids out of the bathroom cabinet and dressed my wound. The burn stung, but I was more shaken up than injured. I'd never seen anyone so unhinged. I think she would've really hurt me if Ray hadn't been there to stop her. I was bigger than her, but she scared me too much to fight back.

"Will you just stay here with me?" I asked when Ray started to get up.

"Yeah, I will." We sat next to each other on the periwinkle carpet until my parents got home.

Ray didn't talk to Sarah anymore after that, as far as I knew, and I stopped feeling guilty; her violence made it too easy to justify my behavior. I made Ray saving me from her into a declaration of love.

So we tried going to a movie together, not like we used to, but like I wanted us to from then on. Kate wasn't there to criticize me, but she also wasn't there to help me pick an outfit or put on a little makeup. I chose a navy dress with black tights and flats. Dark colors. Don't wear heels if you can't walk in them. He picked me up from home and my hands were shaking when I slid into the passenger seat. "You look nice," he said, and I blushed.

"Thanks." I kept waiting for him to say something else, looking up at him every time he cleared his throat or shifted in his seat, but there was no conversation on the half-hour drive from the middle of nowhere to the movie theater. I figured most people were nervous around each other on their first date, but something of our chumminess had disappeared. We didn't joke about ridiculous radio commercials or stop to get candy. The cigarette dangling from his lips could remind me of no one but Sarah. He flicked it with his thumb so hard I was afraid it was going to fly out from between his fingers and hit me in the face. He put his arm around me at the theater, but I felt like the random strangers around still only thought we were friends. I felt like an imposter.

On the ride back he said, "I had a nice time tonight, Melanie." Ray rarely called me by my full name.

"Me too." When he dropped me off at home he kissed me half-heartedly on the lips. I thought that kiss was chivalry rather than what it really was—disinterest. I imagined our relationship wasn't going to be all about sex which, being a delusional

virgin, was how I had decided to write off him and Sarah. The excuse let him off clean, a blank slate for me to scribble my future onto.

It got harder for me to maintain the charade as Ray became more elusive. With Sarah gone I didn't know who he was hanging out with, but it wasn't me. I tried to hold his hand in class a couple times, but then he started skipping more than he ever had before. I knew our classmates were probably wondering, scoffing, why would he leave that hot chick that disappeared for *her*? I tried to rationalize. They're supposed to guess that I'm a better person than she is. They're supposed to guess that my friendship with Ray is so strong, so mutually great, that her malnourished and visible stomach couldn't compete, in the end. What I miscalculated was that this moment wasn't the end, even though Ray and I had been so close for so many years. We were only twenty, and weren't anywhere near the end, and I was going to have to wait longer than I had the patience for.

I could usually pull Ray out of wherever he was if I invited him over to my family's home. Sometimes I wondered if he liked my family better than me. He even let me hold his hand in front of them, which is the only way I could attempt to explain both my recently weird behavior and Sarah's sudden absence. I now realize that Ray's only real connection to me was that I provided the family he lost when his parents split up. I didn't want to just tell my parents that Ray and I were together, partly because I didn't completely believe it yet, and partly because I was afraid it would jinx me. Thank God neither of my parents was home that day Sarah's car skidded into our driveway, fucked

out of her mind on pills and jealousy. I didn't tell them what the burn on my neck was from and hoped they assumed it was a hickey.

So after Ray had skipped class for an entire week, I called him. I left a message on his voicemail asking him to have dinner with my family, coaxing him out of hiding. For some reason it didn't occur to me that he might be talking to, or even seeing, Sarah. The day when she tried to kill me, when he dragged her by her hair out of my house and knocked the wind out of her in my front yard, I didn't see sadness or concern. I saw in his expression that she'd finally crossed the line. She'd finally done something so crazy that her giant green eyes and waif figure didn't matter anymore.

He came over for chicken parmesan, salad, homemade dinner rolls, and zucchini cake. After dessert, he sat next to me on the couch. "Do you wanna go to a movie or Denny's or something?" he asked, putting his arm around my shoulders. I nodded, goose bumps rising on my arms, delirious from affection I'd been waiting years for. "But I don't have gas, so can we take your car?" I nodded again. I grabbed the keys to the pickup, and was glad it was too late and too dark to see the dent Sarah had left on the hood. It was also too dark to see all the vacant businesses that could no longer pay for neon lighting in their windows we passed on the way into Jackson. It was too dark to see the whitetail deer always lurking on the side of road, prancing across two-lane country roads where no one drives the speed limit, crossing to adjacent cornfields. The orange end of Ray's cigarette lit up his face when he inhaled. When he inhaled it wasn't too dark for me to see him staring out the window into the blackness. I didn't turn onto the highway when I was supposed to and kept cruising the snaky back roads lined with fields of corn and soybeans.

“What’s going on with you?” I finally asked, palms sweating on the steering wheel.

“What do you mean?” he mumbled, lighting his second cigarette, lighter clicking.

“Please, don’t just pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about. Things haven’t been the same. Between us I mean.” Silence. I’ve never met anyone so difficult to talk to, so able to slide out of any conversation as if greased with Crisco. “Would you please just talk to me, like you used to?” Creating the past I’d wanted to have had become a compulsion. We’d never spent much time talking about our feelings. What we talked about was dumb movies and our high-school classmates.

More silence and then: “I don’t know what I want. Melanie, I’m sorry, but I’m just really confused right now. I miss her.” I focused on the flood lights attached to cow barns that we passed every quarter mile or so just to make sure I could still drive through my tears.

“Why don’t you just give us a chance? We’ve been such good friends for so long, we know each other so well. We should be perfect.”

“I don’t know, Melanie.”

“She fucking tried to kill me, Ray. She’s mentally unbalanced, ok? Is that the kind of person you want to be with? Someone who goes around burning her own friends with cigarettes?”

Silence.

“Melanie, half the time you made her feel like shit, ok? She said you made her feel like she was never gonna be good enough for me.”

“I made her feel like shit? You’re the one who stopped answering her calls like a week after she left, and the few times you did pick up you always said, ‘I’m hanging out with Mel, I’ll call you later’ and never did. You’re a fucking liar, too.”

We went around in circles, arguing. The cabin of my pick-up filled with words and smoke, but we didn’t get anywhere. I couldn’t twist Ray around my finger like I had Sarah. Maybe because he was a guy. Maybe because he was a narcissist and so had too much confidence in his own ideas. Maybe because I worshipped him so much I couldn’t fully believe he was wrong about anything. We ended up in the huge, empty parking lot at JCC. It was almost midnight on a Friday, all the buildings were dark and no one was there. I turned off the car and looked at Ray. Even with his cigarette and his faded blue hair, I loved him so much it ached.

“Won’t you just try to be with me?” I could barely get it out through my sobs. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Melanie.” He kissed my salty mouth for real for the first time. My heart beat so hard I couldn’t hear anything else. The moment felt fake, partly because I’d been imagining what it would be like for so many years, partly because watching too many romantic comedies had made me feel that any outpouring of emotion was cinematic, and partly because Ray was lying to himself and to me and I knew it. He felt up my thighs under the hem of my dress and over my black tights. He swung my body to face him, lay on top of me across the front seats, and pressed against me so hard I thought he might be trying to crush me. I was trying to have my big romantic moment, but before I really knew what was going on he was yanking off my tights and unzipping his fly and even though his tongue was in my mouth I could tell he was crying. I was stunned, not

sure if I should just go with it and let this be my really big romantic moment or if I should insist we stop, get a condom and do it in a bed like normal people in a legitimate relationship. I let him keep kissing my neck and I was dizzy and it got to the point where I couldn't really tell if we were having sex or not and finally I shoved him off and whispered, "Stop."

Ray zipped up, pushed himself upright in the passenger seat, and lit yet another cigarette while I adjusted my clothes. We sat in the car, him looking out the window and me looking at him, for what seemed like forever before he finally said something.

"I'm really tired, Mel. Will you take me back to your place so I can get my car and go home?"

"Yeah, sure."

When we finally got back it was almost two in the morning, but I knew my parents were asleep and not worried. Ray and I always used to stay out that late, talking and laughing and eating junk food and making fun of whoever we'd run into. We sat in the car after I turned it off.

"Melanie, I'm really sorry." He put his arm around my shoulder and kissed the side of my head through my hair. He smelled like cigarettes, but I suppose by that point I probably did too.

"I can tell you're really confused right now, so I'll just give you some space, ok? Let you figure things out for yourself."

"Yeah," he replied, getting out of the car and searching the pockets of his leather jacket for his keys. "I'll see you later."

He disappeared after that, and I should've seen it coming. It was a long time coming. I didn't call at first. Ray had dropped out of classes by that point and I had stopped saving a seat for him. Listless, I did terribly, but at least I showed up. Without him there, I realized how little I cared about school. I tried to smother the suspicion that he was talking to Sarah again. And when it didn't die I told myself that reconnecting with her would make him realize she was too crazy to deal with. Who she was that day she pushed the ember of her cigarette into my flesh was the way I decided to remember my former friend.

Two months of bullshitting art history exams and painting fruit-bowl still lifes, but he was all I thought about. Finally, at the end of the semester, I ran into him grabbing coffee at Denny's, sitting in our usual booth. Jackson is a small city, ever shrinking with the economy, and I knew if I scoured our old stomping grounds I'd find him eventually. He didn't look happy to see me, but I sat down and made him fake it.

"Hi. What've you been up to?" I asked, pathetic. "Have you been sculpting lately? Or drawing?" I couldn't think of anything else to say. "I miss hanging out."

"Me too," he said, unconvincingly, looking at his mug instead of me. "But I've gotta get going." I followed him outside. I needed an explanation.

"Where are you going? Where have you been?" I asked, walking behind him toward his car.

"Listen Mel," he said, stopping in the middle of the frozen parking lot. "I went and saw Sarah last weekend." My first reaction was to wonder where she was, how he'd found her wherever she'd been hiding. Our warm breath hitting the cold air made it look

like we were smoking. “I want to be with her, Melanie. I love her, ok? I don’t know what else to say to you.”

“You’re ditching me. We’ve been friends for so many years and you’re leaving me for that fucking anorexic whore who assaulted me in my own home. Well, fuck you, you goddamn cocksucker.”

That’s what I said in my head, is what I would’ve said in the movie version. In real life I just said, “Ok.”

“I’m sorry all this crap happened.” He hugged me, our embraces muffled by two black pea-coats, then went to his shitty little white Malibu and drove away without looking back.

## Tangled Up In Blue

Ray and Sarah decided to go to the art museum because it was free (suggested donation of five dollars, but suggestions are just suggestions), and the art museum was a place where he couldn't yell and she couldn't cry. It was a warm spring day in late March with clear skies and ample sunshine. This was Sarah's favorite weather, the temperature for optimum comfort while wearing her faux-fur coat and high-heeled boots. No humidity to ruin her hair and no sweat to ruin her makeup. She'd rather have gone on a walk, but Ray didn't share her pleasure in meandering. Besides, they needed social pressure to keep them quiet.

The building was owned by the University of Michigan. It was bizarrely divided between the older, original section and a newer addition for modern art. The older half, where they entered, was huge and stone with giant columns, while the newer half was all glass, metal, and sharp angles. Sarah took a last deep breath of the fragrant spring afternoon before entering. She and Ray had been to many art museums together, and it'd always been a solitary date experience, another reason she'd agreed to it rather than a walk or dinner. Sarah had met Ray studying art at Jackson Community College. Actually, Sarah had met Ray *and* Melanie studying art at JCC. Sarah liked to try to forget about Melanie's existence. The three had quickly become close friends fresh out of high school. The disappointment of not being talented enough to get into a real art school was bitter, and people to share that foul taste with helped.

After entering the museum, she and Ray wandered into the first room on the right, with lame oil portraits of Victorian aristocrats lining the walls. The violent, dark lines in

one black-and-white lithograph caught her eye. Called “Lion Devouring a Horse,” the cat was all vicious claws and demonic eyes. The lion had between its fangs a limp, dead horse with its tongue lolling out. Sarah smiled, envisioning herself turning into a huge, powerful male lion and ripping Melanie to shreds with her teeth.

Ray, Sarah, and Melanie had been completely inseparable during their first two years at community college. Ray and Melanie had known each other before, in high school, and Melanie followed him everywhere, copying everything he did. Of the two women, Sarah was more attractive, more reckless, and more passionate, so Ray had gone after her first. He was tall and junkie-thin, dyed his messy chin-length hair an assortment of colors, and wore black t-shirts he decorated with bleach stains. His confidence—which Sarah later decided was narcissism—was overpowering. He made girls feel they were lucky he was looking at them. The most important lesson Sarah learned from Ray was that getting in deep with a narcissist, letting him rub his opinion of himself onto you, was dangerous.

Sarah had thought she didn’t have anything to worry about with Ray and Melanie’s friendship—he wasn’t supposed to be Melanie’s type. Melanie was fat (well, she wore a size ten, but that was gigantic to Sarah, who’d carefully cultivated her size nothing figure since middle school), had terrible skin, and a vague mustache. Melanie was supposed to like responsible slightly-nerdy boys she could take home to her Methodist parents. By that Sarah meant Melanie was supposed to like any boy who would take her, not sexy ones who drove too fast. Sarah’s shiny black hair flowed past her waist; Melanie’s was lifeless, poufy and short. Melanie never wore any makeup,

while Sarah didn't leave the house without powdering her pale cheeks and artfully applying smudged black eyeliner. While Melanie could've used the help, Sarah didn't even need to wear makeup. Sarah wasn't vain, she simply knew she looked good. Looking good was what allowed her to trust Melanie in the first place. What does it mean when a guy abandons a girl for someone uglier? Sarah thought the only predictable thing about men was that they're entirely governed by their sexual appetites and desire for the most attractive woman who'll have them, and that one assurance she'd had to hang onto failed her.

Despite the constant presence of Ray and Melanie—the three hung out every day regardless of whether they went to class—Sarah couldn't really stomach the failure of living at home and going to a shit school. Ray and Melanie, on the other hand, hadn't cared. They didn't really seem to give a shit about anything, which made Sarah feel like an enormous snob in comparison, so she quit talking to them about wanting to transfer. Most students at JCC said they were going to get their associate's and transfer, but the majority never even got their two-year degrees, especially not the young ones. Sarah felt she was too old to be sneaking a quickie in the laundry room while her mom was upstairs. Hell, she was too fucking old to be living with her mother, but Ray never understood why she felt that way. His oldest brother was still unemployed and living at home, and his family thought nothing was unusual about it. All their classmates still lived with their parents. The college was really just an extension of high school, with more freedom to fuck up if you wanted to. When Ray giddily yanked Sarah by her partially removed pants into closets while her mother was on the phone or went outside to get the mail, she knew he'd never leave home until some girl made him marry her.

Sarah began feeling uneasy about her friends a couple weeks before moving into her dorm. Sex with Ray had suddenly lost its previous intensity. No sex in the back of the car, no sex after getting high, no making out in hallways. Ray was tall, as thin as Sarah was, but stronger than he looked. His skin was pale and soft. He moved with that strange confidence men have that their bodies are going to do exactly what they want without the effort of concentration. Sarah could fake that kind of bravado, but most of the time she stepped gingerly, hesitated, never sure if her body would listen to her or not. Ray's ego made his body look sexier than it actually was. It used to take all of Sarah's willpower and several cigarette breaks to stop her from jumping his bones in the middle of painting class, but by the time Sarah was packing to leave, Ray had become disinterested and didn't bother to hide it. He'd also started spending more time with Melanie, sitting next to her instead of Sarah in class and hanging out with Melanie on the weekends without Sarah. She'd had a few tearful conversations with Ray about her suspicions, but talking to Ray never went the way she wanted both because he artfully dodged agreeing with her about anything, and because she couldn't seem to explain herself. Ray wasn't good at dealing with her when she was being emotional, so he'd only patted Sarah on the shoulder and told her not to worry, talking circles around her until things she'd thought were concrete truth became feminine delusions.

Eventually Ray and Melanie quit trying to hide it. Their excuses became increasingly feeble and then stopped existing. The first weekend after Sarah moved to Ypsilanti she drove home to confront Ray and Melanie, neither of whom had answered her calls or returned her hysterical messages. She found them at Melanie's as she knew she would, sitting on Melanie's parents' couch, holding hands. It would've been less

insulting if she'd found them parked in some field somewhere, fucking in the back of Melanie's red pick-up, rather than to find them sitting on the couch pretending to be so legitimate. Sarah was furious and lonely and disoriented and didn't care that she was about to act completely bat-shit. She threw open Melanie's front door without knocking, Marlboro burning between her claws.

"What the fuck is wrong with you two?" she screamed. Sarah grabbed Melanie by the shirt and dragged her down on the periwinkle living room carpet, burning her neck with the cigarette. "Who the fuck do you think you are, you fat fucking whore? I'll fucking kill you."

"Get out of my house," Melanie screeched from under Sarah. Ray grabbed Sarah by her hair and dragged her into the front yard. She lunged back at him, but he blocked her and shoved her hard into a pine tree. Sarah fell onto a bed of needles.

"You like fucking that fat slut better than me you stupid jack-ass," Sarah didn't know what she was saying, so much pure hatred was pouring through her she couldn't control herself. It felt like a demonic possession. It felt good.

"Get outta here. You just hurt Mel, you fucking psycho." He went back inside, locked the door and drew the curtains. Sarah screamed unintelligibly for a few more minutes and got back in her car. She grabbed a ceramic rose Ray had made for her off the dashboard and smashed it on the hood of Melanie's truck. It didn't leave the huge dent she'd hoped for, but scratched up the paint enough that Melanie would have to look at it and remember why it was there. Driving back to Ypsi she was afraid she'd swerve off the road and more afraid that she didn't care.

Sarah was still lost in “Lion Devouring a Horse” when a large tour group consisting mostly of elderly people came into the room. Ray and Sarah slipped out while the guide discussed the rise of portrait and landscape painting. Deciding to skip the rest of the first floor— which at a glance appeared only to have more oil paintings of people who looked like George Washington and scenes of westward migration complete with stagecoaches and savage Native Americans—they climbed a curving, granite staircase. Ray stopped immediately at the top to stare at some of the university’s ample collection of Tiffany glassware. Sarah like painting and ink drawings, but Ray was obsessed with pottery, glass-blowing, and sculpture. The pieces he was observing were metallic blues, greens, and purples that resembled the feathers of a peacock.

Sarah’s life seemed to deteriorate after she transferred to Eastern Michigan University and moved to Ypsilanti, a time when she thought her life would be truly beginning. She hadn’t gotten into the art school, but planned to study art history, do art in her spare time, and suck up some of the creative energy that would surely accompany living in a city. Ray and Melanie hadn’t completed their associate’s degrees and had nothing better to do, so they kept taking classes at JCC, contentedly living at home with their parents and siblings like overgrown children. Sarah decided they were idiots, but she couldn’t stop missing Ray, was tangled up in him. The more she thought about it, the more she believed that the reason she couldn’t get free was as much because she was addicted to his flesh as because she loved him. Sarah was jonesing for Ray’s skin, for Ray’s smell, for Ray’s weight holding her down, but losing Melanie also hurt. She realized she couldn’t trust her own judgment and it made her feel insane. She questioned

herself about every decision she made, avoided talking to anyone because she was sure she'd pick out the people holding knives and crossed fingers behind their backs. She had taken Melanie's advice so seriously, almost religiously, but she now understood that Melanie had hated her from the moment she walked into freshman painting class and locked eyes with Ray. Melanie had only put up with Sarah, had only feigned a relationship with Sarah, in order to keep Ray stitched to her side.

On the drive home from Melanie's, Sarah swore to herself that she would never see either of them again. But Ray called, apologized, and said he wanted Sarah to stay friends with him and Melanie. Sarah told him to fuck off, but hung up wishing he was there. Ray was an expert at shifting blame. Now if she missed either of them she would have to remember that Ray said they could've been friends if she hadn't acted like a psycho. Sarah's grief was so intense it frightened her. She reasoned that it was the perfect time for the break-up to happen, that she could make new friends at EMU and forget Ray or Melanie ever existed, but her body shut down. Blood vessels popped in and around her eyes; she stayed in bed for days on end, and threw up everything she ate. She got so sick she had to drop out midway through the fall semester—she was failing all of her classes and hadn't made friends anyway. Since she was no longer a student, she had to move out of the dorms into a tiny studio apartment for winter semester. She thought the solitude of living on her own would be better for her mental health, but she never enrolled in classes.

Sarah got a job at the Starbucks, which was more degrading than she'd imagined it would be, and bought art supplies but never used them. She dreaded going to work even though she was only there twenty hours a week, scarcely enough to pay her rent.

Sometimes she'd spend all morning persuading herself she was too sick to make frappuccinos, but she ended up making herself go. She dealt with the horrible Bob Dylan covers that made her wonder if ruining a beautiful song could be made punishable by death; why couldn't they just play the original? She dealt with the fact that the Ramones' "Rockaway Beach" CD was for sale at the counter next to the new Maroon 5 album. She asked the customer's names, scribbling them on the green-and-white cups with a black Sharpie to make the customers feel as if they were getting a personal, small-business experience despite the fact that they were purchasing five-dollar coffees from the Walmart of caffeine addicts. The smell of the Sharpie stuck to her fingers no matter how many times Sarah washed her hands. The snobs from Ann Arbor with their designer bags jacking up on coffee before work or class kept refilling their Starbucks loyalty cards and trying to devise ways to make mochas less fattening.

Sarah caught Ray's eye from across the marble room. He was standing in front of another pottery display. The quiet, sacred space of the museum was calming. Here she was allowed to look pensive and frown into space without strangers asking if she was all right. Ray flashed her a crooked-toothed smile. She smiled back, and remembered the same dirty grin from countless times he'd lied to her. Though she now associated it with his lies, the smile itself was charming, almost boyish. One wouldn't expect a grungy, serious-looking boy to smile like that. When they'd first met, that smile, those small and misshapen teeth, made her heart turn over. It had been there all along, was perhaps his most common expression, but Sarah had noticed the deceit behind it for the first time when she managed to corner him about Melanie.

“You guys are both acting really weird, Ray, and I want to know what the hell’s going on.” She’d started strong; she wasn’t going to let his sentences tie her up like usual.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. We’ve been friends for a really long time, but you’re my girlfriend, okay?” They repeated several variations of the same question and answer before he cracked a little.

“What about her? How do you know what her motives are?”

“Well, you know, she hasn’t had any boyfriends and I can see why she would have feelings for me. We’ve been friends for awhile and we know each other really well. But honestly, no matter what she’s feeling, nothing’s gonna happen between me and her, okay?” He turned Sarah’s insecurities into Melanie’s fault. Sarah was gagged and bound.

Three months after Sarah attacked Melanie, Ray turned up again, breaking the Starbucks-crying-Starbucks-crying monotony of Sarah’s winter no-semester. His ratted black Converse, pouty lips, and tobacco stained fingers broke her heart and made her crazy with lust. He said he wanted to try to make things work between them, but Sarah couldn’t, and didn’t want to, get over her jealousy. She couldn’t, and didn’t want to, figure out what his motives were. Sarah thought Ray had mostly come back because she was better in bed than Melanie. It was as if he wanted to make a sick fusion of the two women, combining their characteristics into some kind of ideal girlfriend.

Sarah replayed the early February afternoon Ray finally had shown up so frequently that she no longer had any idea what had actually happened and what she’d exaggerated. She only knew she’d acted opposite of the way she’d rehearsed. Sarah didn’t remember what the weather was like that afternoon because she hadn’t left her

apartment since her last shift at Starbucks three days earlier. He showed up on the doorstep of her apartment building and pushed the buzzer over and over for twenty minutes until she buzzed him in. Ray probably knew that she'd spent the morning moping and the afternoon crying; he definitely knew she was there, even though no lights were on. In her depression, Sarah had granted Ray the supernatural power of being able to know what she was doing at all times. Sarah had a half-hearted impulse to run to the bathroom and put on makeup before he reached her floor, but then remembered she was incapable of running.

The way depression had ruined her body was at first terrifying, then fascinating, and finally only frustrating. Leaving the building felt like running a marathon. Getting off the floor to push the buzzer had exhausted her—a bad sign, since she'd intended to fight. Sarah was only five feet tall and barely weighed a hundred pounds, having dropped weight steadily since she'd left Jackson, but she'd always believed in the cartoon mantra, *It's not the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog*. She thought her fury would strengthen her at the last moment. She thought she could call on the rage in her genes: her father had almost killed a man. Sarah told that story like a cowboy looking for street-cred; *Yeah, my daddy smashed that asshole's brains in with a golf club*. She imagined her father's semen boiling in her blood, granting her the gift of homicide. Sarah knew every object in her apartment that could be used as a weapon, and which one she'd pick, depending on where she'd be standing at any given moment in their argument. But Sarah didn't react before Ray put his arms around her, a gesture of affection and restraint.

Ray picked Sarah up easily with her arms pinned at her sides and carried her to her bed. He was rail-thin, but over a foot taller than her. His confidence always

intimidated Sarah too much to defend herself. He'd walked into her apartment that day knowing she'd sleep with him. He'd cut his hair in the style of a fifties greaser and dyed it black since she'd last seen him. She loved James Dean and knew Ray had done it on purpose, to let her pretend he was the tortured, chivalrous Jim Stark. Corny as it sounded when she thought it, she knew it was true, but she also knew the prominence of her spine and rib cage would turn him on just as much. While she'd only changed out of her salt-and-mucus-stained pajamas when she had to be at work, underneath she always wore her sexiest lingerie, hand-washing it in the kitchen sink each night, in preparation for just such an occasion, even though she'd told herself she wasn't going to allow it to happen. There were tiny red dots that looked like puncture holes around her eyes from crying face-down on the floor, but she still shaved her legs every day, just in case. Ray undressed her so quickly she doubted he'd noticed her matching bra and panties, or her shaved legs. Sarah felt as if she was going to suffocate underneath him. *I must be weaker than the last time*, she thought, struggling to catch her breath as he pushed against her with increasing pressure.

Lying next to Ray while he slept, Sarah could feel where on her body bruises would form the next day, gingerly touching her hips, ribs, and breasts with her fingers. When he started snoring, she climbed out of the damp sheets to have a cigarette, leaning out of her window, hoping not to set off the smoke alarm or wake Ray. She'd smoked since high school; she'd taught Ray to smoke. Now the habit steadied her hands when she couldn't keep food down. Made her forget she was hungry. Someone once told her that menthols were the worst for you, that the delicious mint flavor was created with miniscule shards of glass. She couldn't remember who'd said it, and was pretty sure it

was a lie, but she liked the image of glass in her lungs, the way the menthol freshened her breath after vomiting, and the feel of the alliteration on her tongue when she asked gas station cashiers for Marlboro Menthols—it sounded sexy, like Marilyn Monroe. Sarah wondered whether Marilyn Monroe smoked menthols, then realized that she hadn't thought about Ray in two entire minutes, longer than she'd gone without thinking about him for months, even though he was asleep in her bed.

Sarah left Ray to admire the pottery and walked around the second floor, a large loop with a hole in the middle so you could look down to the floor below. Even in better times, their museum visits had been solitary, each drifting to the objects that most interested them. Sarah came to a small section of Impressionism, and her stomach turned upon seeing the small museum's only Monet: "The Break Up of the Ice." Blues, greens, whites, and grays blurred together close up, but when viewed from a few feet away, she saw a lake in the winter. Monet was what Sarah had been dreading and hoping the museum wouldn't have. Monet was Melanie's favorite artist; she collected prints and knick-knacks of his work and tried with the best of her community college training to paint like him. Sarah would never be able to see a Monet without thinking of Melanie. In a different life, Sarah would've liked the painting, and that's what infuriated her most—Ray and Melanie had taken not only her health and her self-esteem, which were to be expected, but also this beautiful painting she'd never be able to love.

Ray came up and stood next to her in front of the Monet. He looked for a second, said nothing, and moved ahead of her, clockwise around the circle. Sarah's tears made the painting look dreamier and vaguer than the artist had intended. Ray disappeared into

one of the storage spaces for the museum's pottery and small sculptures, and she left him to cross into the modern half of the building. The floor changed from tile to wood, and the ceilings got higher. Some renovation was going on in the first room she entered, but the next held what was always Sarah's favorite part of art museums, the African art. She loved the terrifying tribal masks, colorful textiles, and bone necklaces. She could never create it with any authenticity. Maybe she should just be a scholar, but dropping out of school in depression wasn't so good for that plan. Her favorite pieces were a red-white-and-blue bull-head mask and a warrior mask with a pig nose, rectangular teeth and a grass beard. Sarah imagined herself donning one of the terrifying masks in preparation for battle. If she had a warrior mask to hide behind, to provide the illusion of strength, maybe she could finally stand up to Ray.

Sarah was ecstatic Ray had come back, and she hated herself for it. Ray started visiting almost every weekend. Sarah knew he was still sleeping with Melanie and admitted it to herself Monday through Thursday. *Thank God she's so ugly no one else is sleeping with her, which reduces my chances of catching some sexually transmitted infection or something*, she thought. The only promise she made to herself that she managed to keep was not to tell Ray she loved him during his visits. She chanted a mantra of *do not say I love you, do not say I love you*, in her head through the days Ray stayed with her. Her tongue was the only part of her body she could control. She ran the water in the bathroom when she threw up after dinner and smoked her cigarettes out the bathroom window so he wouldn't smell the regurgitated entrée on her breath. This was the happiest she could remember being in over a year. All previous moments of

happiness were so distant they felt fake, like a lie she'd told or something she'd seen in a movie and decided to incorporate into her own past.

Sarah checked to see if Ray had caught up with her before moving out of the room. Not a word had been spoken between them since they'd crawled out of bed and left her apartment, but here they could pretend the silence wasn't rooted in hostility. She stepped into a secluded corner to catch her breath, which always seemed to be getting away from her, and there was an African sculpture tucked next to the elevator, as if whoever had put it there only wanted handicapped people to see it. The label informed her that the three-and-a-half-foot tall man carved of dark wood was a nail figure of the Vili people of Congo. The man's entire body was covered with dozens of rusty nails and other sharp, metal pieces piercing the wood. He was called a nkondi; a human nganga priest could use the nkondi to detect and punish witches, criminals, and other wrongdoers. Sarah imagined herself in shamaness costume, hair teased out, muttering incantations and impaling Melanie with hundreds of nails and shards of scrap metal.

From her corner, Sarah saw Ray examining the African masks and joined him without bothering to show him the nkondi. By mutual, unspoken agreement, they skipped over the Asian art, climbed the stairs to the modern section, and split up again. Here the ceilings were even higher, letting in light from the floor to ceiling windows. There were stark sculptures consisting of either many sharp angles or flowing, circular edges and a strange assortment of paintings, with at least one example of each important style developed in the twentieth century, lining the walls.

Ray walked around the sculptures while Sarah stayed near the walls to look at the paintings. Some were boring canvasses filled in with solid colors, corresponding plaques describing the artists' intent in great detail. The Picassos with their crazy, swirling colors were the best pieces in the place. His portrait of Françoise startled her, a fierce woman, all eyebrows and pursed lips. The plaque said that the real Françoise had a strong character: "Her forceful nature is conveyed by the intensity of her gaze and the erectness of her posture." Françoise had two children with Picasso and after he left her she said that, though it was what she was best known for, she had done much better things with her life than pose for him. Sarah stared into the painting, willing herself into it, wishing she were Françoise.

## Shelter from the Storm

My daddy almost killed a man. Why I take pride in this story I don't know. He tells it to me to drive home the inconstancy of the female sex. He's always had a temper, anger to blame on someone else. His weapon of choice was a golf club, something a movie mobster would kill someone with, which you'd know was appropriate if you knew him.

So I told you there was a girl, which is always the case in this kind of story. This girl had an old boyfriend who'd beat her to a pulp on a regular basis when they were together. The low self-esteem these kinds of women have is like an insect-zapping lamp for men. My daddy liked the idea of a woman he'd have to protect.

He was with this girl at a bar in Detroit they liked. The owner of the bar was a huge pussy, my daddy makes a point to say. They're drinking, having a good time, and suddenly the ex shows up. He bellows pathetically outside for a little bit and the pussy-ass bartender won't call the cops (but honestly, this is Detroit, and the cops have bigger fish to fry than some asshole crying about the girlfriend he can't hit anymore). So the boyfriend makes a big scene, takes a brick and starts smashing up the girl's car. The pussy bartender is worried, this could slow down business and get him in trouble, and so he and the girl start pressuring my daddy to go do something about it. My daddy, being machismo with a capital M, won't listen to reason when his manhood is involved.

So he goes out to the parking lot to try and get rid of the guy, who by this point had banged up the girl's car pretty good. Daddy tried to reason with him, but got a brick chucked at his head. So Daddy went to his car and pulled out a golf club, wrapping his callused hands around the cold, smooth metal. His rage about the million different

injustices heaped on him in his life makes him dangerous to fuck with, which of course the ex-boyfriend didn't know. He swung for his two dead parents, for being stuck in a dying city, for drinking too much, for his five itinerant and broken siblings. Daddy reared back with that club and beat the guy into the asphalt until he was almost dead.

That same rage is in my DNA, passed to me from him. It couldn't be diluted by my mother's kindness and love and I'm glad that it wasn't. It gets me higher than any drug, grows me sixty feet tall, gives me fangs.

When I ask him who won the fight, Daddy shows some humility and says neither of them did. Daddy hurt the guy a lot worse than he got hurt (which is still a win in my book), but Daddy had to spend the night in jail, got fined a whole bunch, and had to go to court-ordered anger management classes that didn't help worth squat. Daddy didn't have any money back then, so it was bad that he had to pay the big fine and take time off work to go to those classes. He doesn't know what ended up happening to the guy, but if he would've died they would've tracked Daddy down and gotten him into more trouble. I assume the guy was fine and don't really care if he wasn't.

But here's the punch-line, here's the point of the story: a little while later the girl broke up with Daddy and got back with the boyfriend. The lesson he wants me to take from the story is, women suck. The lesson I take is, if my Daddy would do all that for some slut and his machismo, imagine how much he would do for me, which makes me think I don't have to be scared of anything.

## You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go

We were lying in bed in Sarah's studio apartment in Ypsilanti. I'd never been in a studio apartment before. I liked how everything she had was in one room, plus a bathroom. I felt safe, something that could only be called love making me warm, lulled close to sleep. It was grey and raining. In the moments when Sarah felt like she was in love with me she said, that's the kind of thing that turns my heart right over.

"Let me ask you a question," she said. "But I'm going to pee first." I listened to her urine hitting the toilet water, then the flush. She crawled back under the blankets and lit two cigarettes at once. When she reached for the pack, the Bob Dylan lyrics tattooed under her breast stretched across her washboard ribs: *tangled up in blue*. She handed a cigarette to me and I watched both ashes inch closer to the green print that said Marlboro.

I thought of a story Sarah'd made me read, the one about the soup taster who smokes three packs a day and can't taste the soup anymore, her taste buds wrapped in tobacco, and has to quit cigarettes to keep her job. In the story, the narrator tapes her right pointer and middle fingers together. It wasn't as good as the other one, Sarah's favorite about the teenage girl and guy who fall in lust and he cuts x's into her mosquito bites with a razor to stop them from itching. I only read when Sarah made me.

"Did you know you were going to ruin our friendship like this?" she asked, referring to Melanie. I brushed her hair back from her face onto the pillow and kissed her pale cheek. I wished I could live in that apartment with her, never ever leave that one room, but was too afraid to ask, too afraid she'd say no.

“Do you miss her?” she asked.

“Why do you ask me questions when you don’t believe a word I say?”

She didn’t have an answer.

## If You See Her, Say Hello

The tattoos started shortly after I moved to Petoskey, the piercings a little later. I got the tats and piercings, self-mutilations my sister called them, when I was upset. They hurt, and I wound up engraving whoever or whatever had been upsetting me in my flesh.

Here's a list of them, so you can see how bad it got. A black and white outline of the god Shiva, who had no relevance in my life whatsoever—I don't even practice yoga—on my thigh; the words “liar” and “evil” behind my ears so everyone would know my psychological problems and so I could make my psychological problems look cool; a lightning bolt on my ribs that I still had to lose twenty pounds to be able to show anyone; the stereotypical angel's wings on my back (while some people's actually look real, mine were cartoonish and dumb); a sleeve of every tattoo cliché including anchors and skulls and flowers on my right bicep; some Latin that I forget the meaning of on my wrists; a psychedelic-looking eye on the back of my neck to warn people that I was watching them even though I couldn't possibly be watching them and my hair covered it most of the time anyway; and perhaps the most honorable one, my mom's favorite flower, an orange tiger-lily, tramp-stamped on my lower back. That's just the tattoos. I had two rings through my lower lip, two rings through my nose, one through each of my nipples, one through my left eyebrow, and about twenty in my ears, including gauges that were always growing.

Nicole came to pick me up in her fifteen-year-old purple van that reeked of cigarettes. I almost spent more time in that van than in my house. There was a trash can

between the driver and passenger seats that was constantly overflowing with McDonald's wrappers, Slurpee cups, and empty cigarette packs. In the back were piles of clothing, more trash, but no one ever sat back there, anyway.

Nicole peeled out of the driveway, tires crunching on gravel, and tossed me a tiny round plastic container. "Mel, check this out." Watermelon OMG incense; not for human consumption. It didn't really smell like watermelon, but that wasn't the point. "This shit will get you fucking *blown*," she said. I hated the high you get from K-2, but did it anyway, trying to punish myself for a million different things.

"Cool."

We stopped at the Seven-Eleven to get Slurpees.

Mostly what I was up to when I wasn't getting tattoos was sleeping around with loser, working-class-hero-type boys I met in pathetic bars that served one brand of beer, just to say that I could. Just to say that some guy besides Ray would fuck me. And also smoking a ton of synthetic marijuana, even though it supposedly could make you crazy enough to eat some homeless man's face off. Mostly it was cheaper than pot, and got you three times as high three times as fast. The thing about K-2 is it makes you straight fucking depressed and angry at yourself for no reason. I smoked it with people who I said were my friends, but really we just wanted other people to get fucked up with. They had tattoos and piercings, too. We came out at night and slept all day. Old people and summer tourists avoided us on the sidewalks because our presence spoiled their scenic vacations.

We drove to a small parking area that looked out on Lake Michigan. This spot would've been crawling with tourists in the summer, but it was November and cold. Nicole broke open a Marlboro, tapped some of the tobacco into her roller on top of the K-2, and rolled up a joint. After only two hits the world was spinning. She started rambling on about something, but I couldn't pay attention to the words.

My wrist tattoos seemed to be crawling, the cursive, meaningless Latin sliding around like snakes up my forearms. Across the water one of Petoskey's famous sunsets was painting the sky, orange then pink. I watched until I couldn't keep my eyes open, then listened to cold waves slap the rocks.