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The Sustenance of Sound: A short story sequence

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*The Sustenance of Sound:
A short story sequence*

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

Dr. James Bennett

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

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Louisiana State University
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Baton Rouge, Louisiana

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Statement of Intent

The purpose of this portfolio is to examine the lasting psychological effects that high school, a symbol of identity crises and a catalyst for change, exerts on people. This portfolio is designed as a short story sequence, involving three characters from the same graduation class in a neighborhood high school, but at different points in their lives. Julia Schneider in the short story of the same name is still in high school; Rich Moore in “The Tree,” is only out of school by a couple years; and Claire “Chloe” Thompson, in “Development” is in her mid-twenties, returning to the same school as a teacher. In each story, these three characters struggle to find their identity and their place in the world. Each is dealing with a certain amount of guilt for having lost an essential part of themselves at a time when they had opportunity to develop it. At the same time, this sequence includes an element of personal potential—in an artistic as well as a self-efficacy sense—the realization of the ability to fail as well as to succeed.

Under my thesis director James Bennett’s advice, I utilized the short story sequence to tell these three stories. To do this, I specifically read Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* and Professor J. Gerald Kennedy’s *Modern American Short Story Sequences* (Cambridge Press, 1995). These readings assisted me in examining my own character and situation, as well as putting the various pieces of the story together.

In preparing this portfolio, I found a quote in Kennedy’s collection to be applicable. Robert M. Luscher remarks that “the discontinuity of the short story sequence emphasizes the fragmentary nature of the attempt to recall the past.”¹ This portfolio is an attempt to reconcile one’s past with current living. Each character intensely struggles with this concept, and each

¹“John Updike’s *Olinger Stories*” in *Modern American Short Story Sequences*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy, 155 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

story is placed on a spectrum of human experience. “Julia Schneider” and “The Tree” are the extremes in this reaction and “Development” forges a middle road, while also concluding the sequence. In this progression, the narrative voice edges away from third-person to first-person present. The narrative of “Development” becomes increasingly fragmented and disoriented, as the character struggles to hold herself together as she returns to her past.

In his own article, “From Anderson’s *Ohio* to Carver’s *Cathedral*,” Kennedy explains that the “breaches” of short story sequences “remind us that characters . . . rarely meet or become conscious of one another and thus remain unaware of the ways in which their situations may be similar.”² In my own portfolio, I would say that I both adhere to this statement and deviate. I deliberately repeated characters or names in each story, but never allowed the primary characters to contact directly or even through a third party. This was done to emphasize the near-suffocating atmosphere that high school can create, to give the impression that there is no escaping anyone or their own dramatic troubles. At the same time, the three primary characters are unaware of each other, unable to realize that their situation is shared with and understood by others. Each character is completely isolated in his or her own crisis, while at the same time not unlike the others.

² *Ibid.*, 196

Julia Schneider

Julia Schneider was a force to be reckoned with. She overflowed with a rage that couldn't be filtered. She wore her brown hair straight and long to shield her right eye from view. The seen eye was covered thick in makeup and regarded everyone with an angry gaze. The hidden eye observed all and was seen by none. Julia thought this gave her an air of mystery. Her father said it made her look like a prostitute, but she didn't give a fuck what her dad thought about anything ever since she had found those poetic letters from that woman in Arizona. Her mother also didn't approve because it didn't fit into the June Cleaver sitcom she always tried to recreate. But Julia had never been able to find a part in that script. Each morning, her mother made clear her disapproval of the new turn of appearance.

"Honey, why don't you pull that hair back?" she would say. "Let everyone see your pretty face."

Julia resolved not to eat breakfast with the family anymore. She considered not eating breakfast altogether. She was getting fat, even if nobody else could see under the weight of baggy, black jeans and oversized death metal hoodies. The rare moments when she saw her naked body in the mirror only made her more frustrated.

Julia Schneider was queen of nonconformists at Jacobson High, most notably because of her refusal to associate with other nonconformists. Also notable about Julia Schneider was her past as diva of the drama department. As a mere freshman, she had waltzed onstage, full of cock and attitude, flashing brilliantly bright eyes and a razor-toothed smile. She created her own dressing table when she couldn't get a private room, and she guarded it so fiercely that although the upperclassmen made fun of her for it, no one dared wreck the table to teach her a lesson.

Julia Schneider was convinced no one had ever crossed a stage, recited lines or embodied a character as fully, as intimately, and as convincingly as she did. The awful truth was that, at least for Jacobson High, no one had.

Mrs. Crown, the theater teacher, had found her diamond in the rough. It was a deeply buried diamond, in very rough places, but Mrs. Crown knew that it was a diamond that she could smooth down, polish intently and determinedly, and set on a pedestal as the Savior of Jacobson High's failing theater program.

When auditions began in the fall of Julia Schneider's junior year, Mrs. Crown hunted her down, finally cornering her at the water fountain next to the boys' bathroom. Mrs. Crown's flaming honeycomb hair flew in all directions.

"Am I going to see you Thursday?" she asked, slightly panting. Her face attempted three different looks at once: her eyebrows were raised coyly, feigning an ability to pierce through Julia's brittle exterior, into the invisible eye; her own two eyes betrayed her, widening in a secret hope; worst of all was her smile, too wide and too white—fully convinced of an answer that wasn't coming. Mrs. Crown had seen, more perceptibly and more emotionally than anyone else, the talent and promise of Julia. Just because of that three-year blip when Julia took up a crusade of darkness didn't mean Mrs. Crown was going to let her slip through her fingers.

The desperation of Mrs. Crown's pathetic appearance almost made it hard for Julia Schneider to flatly tell her, "No," and walk away.

Almost.

Julia had once socialized with the more upper-crust, Republican chic of high school, back in her days as raging diva and brilliant actress. Then, just as suddenly as she had stormed through

the ancient doors of the high school, Julia returned in twelve months, a monster of her former self. She only exposed half her face, which was hard and tight. She renounced her former friends as “fake,” and “posers.” She took her rightful place at the head of the table wedged in the back corner of the cafeteria, where the other anarchist and antisocialists congregated in moody silences. But as time moved on, Julia renounced this brave new world as well. The anarchists were just as overdramatic, just as insecure, just as immature, as the polo-wearing collar poppers. The only difference was this new group wore black instead of pastel, greased their hair down instead of spiking it up, and wore black Keds with white-out art instead of clean, white K-Swiss.

Julia Schneider was now superior to all demeaning and useless cliques. She hated them all, equally, with a proud and disdainful regard.

If Mrs. Crown was known for anything, it was persistence. It was that which had allowed her to suffer long years at a school that once considered selling the old theater costumes so the football players could have new jerseys; it was that which allowed a privileged thirteen students (as many as could fit into the school van) to drive across the state and compete in the thespian conventions. And it was that which allowed her to lie in wait at Julia’s haunts around school and ambush her. She used every well-worn, tried-and-true technique known to wrangle many a reluctant student into star performances. She was firm, she was the caring mentor, she was the best friend, she was the hip teacher. By Thursday, the day of auditions, Mrs. Crown was just short of begging.

But Julia Schneider said no no no no no no no, until her jaw ached with the word and her voice rang in her ears, singing her to sleep.

Mrs. Crown had played every card in her hand. In frustration, she threw them down and cast Anne Harding in the lead role. She knew better than to force a short fuse like Julia into a lead role. But Mrs. Crown wasn't through, yet. She had one card up her sleeve, one she was sure would get her diamond in the vicinity of that auditorium.

On Monday morning, Julia Schneider was condemned by Mrs. Crown's sloppy handwriting on a piece of notebook paper taped to her door. There was her own name, not next to a principal part, but under Crew, next to Lighting Director.

In a boiling rage, Julia stormed on Mrs. Crown's last-minute lunch. The freshmen in the classroom looked up from the textbooks, gaping in silent fright at the legend that was Julia Schneider. She yelled and cursed at Mrs. Crown, but her hot anger was no match for administration.

"You still need a theater credit to graduate," Mrs. Crown explained calmly. "I'm willing to give you that credit for doing *one* play."

"You can fuck off," Julia hissed. "This is bullshit."

"Listen, Julia. Let me be honest. You know more about theater—not just acting, but how it's put together, how it *works*—better than anyone else. I finally get enough money for a state-of-the-art soundboard, and I'm not going to have some freshman who doesn't know what he's doing spill his Coke all over it. I need someone who knows how to use it."

Mrs. Crown was an actress, after all. A persistent, bargaining one. She knew Julia Schneider's type, though never in such intensity. This kind had to be handled gently, but unrelenting; persuaded by subtle threats and flattery; led by a reward for obedience.

"Do this play," Mrs. Crown said, a slight edge to her voice. "Or don't graduate."

Her talons were sunk into Julia, now, and there would be no releasing. She had hit Julia where she hurt most—getting out of this damned town, getting far, far away from her father and the suspicions of another woman who may or may not still be a threat, away from her mother’s buried head and blind eyes.

As it was, Mrs. Crown drove a fair deal. So Julia Schneider was forced to mingle with drama queens and theater nerds. A few of her classmates from freshman year waved at her, but one glare from the exposed left eye stopped their hands mid-air. Julia surveyed the rest, her outer eye looking bored and annoyed. Her hidden eye noted their poor blocking and their amateur diction.

Julia Schneider knew she was a better actress than everyone else in the auditorium, but she also knew she couldn’t get onstage again. She couldn’t pull back her hair and be exposed, even if it was only to put on a new mask and another false identity. She was beyond being open to anyone ever again. On-stage, in life, she was either thoroughly embarrassed or nothing at all. And Julia Schneider preferred to be nothing.

Brian Beaumont was a tall and hazel-eyed senior. He played first baseman on the baseball team. He was a talker—he talked about anything and everything: baseball, his Calculus class, the music he listened to. Especially music. Brian Beaumont was a music junkie. He was also the assistant lighting director.

“I need two people in that sound booth,” Mrs. Crown had explained, speaking of the tiny room that could barely hold the massive soundboard within it. “I need two of you to focus on lighting and sound so I can keep an eye on what new thing our stage manager is screwing up.”

Julia Schneider was just starting to like the sound booth. It was her hermitage, safe and remote from the rest of the crew. She didn't like Brian Beaumont, a foreign presence in her private place. She spoke little, but Brian's incessant talking began to wear on her, or at the least, wear her down. There was something about him that was physically, spiritually *clean*. He exuded good-naturedness and innocence.

One afternoon at rehearsal, he pulled out the small stereo Mrs. Crown stored underneath the soundboard and put in a blank disk.

"Tell me what you think," he said as the CD began. "I just discovered this band."

It was only a few moments of listening before Julia said, "That's Minus the Bear."

"You know them?" His voice sounded a little too shocked.

"Yeah," she snapped. "Why wouldn't I?"

"I don't know," Brian shrugged his shoulders uncomfortably. "I would've thought Nine Inch Nails was more your thing."

"It's not." Julia replied. She let the weight of the insult sink in. "And fuck you. Who the fuck gives you the right to judge me?"

"I'm sorry—"

"The hell with you. Don't apologize and make an asshole comment like that."

"Well, what do you expect, Julia? You dress like a walking nightmare. You hide in this *thing* of darkness," – he waved a hand over her, taking in her hair, her makeup, her clothes with a wild gesture – "and you get pissed when people tell you what you look like? Get over yourself."

"Fuck you." Julia stomped out of the sound booth, seeking the sanctuary of the restroom.

That night she sat on her bathroom floor and made another notch on her leg, another line in her physical narrative about everything in her life that was beyond words and beyond control. She thought about what Brian said and how much they sounded like her father's. Julia wiped at her tears with the back of her hand, feeling like a little girl. Julia Schneider hated Brian Beaumont almost as much as she hated herself. She despised his clean-cut look, that gentle smile, those soft, sweet hazel eyes.

And yet Julia couldn't stop thinking of Brian. He made her heart pound. He made her voice shake. She was awakening to a virginal blush that she couldn't slice away from the inside. She counted down the hours until their next rehearsal. In the sound booth, she kept her right eye hidden behind the curtain of hair, knowing that if it showed, everyone would know. Under this cover, she studied Brian as often as she could get away with it, memorizing every detail: the way his sleeves pulled away from his muscled arms when he bent over the soundboard, how his hair fell forward and just barely covered his eyes when he tilted his head down.

At the next rehearsals – during class, after class, in the evenings – Brian was quieter; when he did speak it was much softer. He continued to bring blank CDs and Julia continued to name each and every band, even the song and which album. They worked quietly together, keeping a safe distance as in dealing with a wild animal. Every time Brian Beaumont's bright hazel eyes looked at her, Julia Schneider's breath caught in her throat.

One evening, she was early to rehearsal and headed to her locker to get her English textbook. An eruption of boys' laughter stopped her just short of rounding the corner into the next hallway. Voices and clomping footsteps neared her. Julia froze against the wall. It was the boys' baseball team, finished with practice.

“Dude, that’s sick!” One voice called out.

“Yeah, Brian—stuck in a box with Voodoo Julia? How do you survive?”

“It’s not bad,” Brian’s voice was confident, louder than the snickering around him. Julia’s heart skipped another beat.

“Yeah, I bet she’s not bad!”

“Shut up, Bloom,” Brian quickly retorted. “The only woman you’ve ever made out with is your mom.”

The guys whooped again, laughing at their new prey. Their footsteps were nearing Julia, and she ducked into the nearby restroom before they rounded the corner. She heard their predator’s laughter as the door shut behind her.

Then Julia Schneider did a rare thing. She looked in the mirror. Really looked.

Her tangled brown hair hung low and limp, barely attempting the seductive waves she once coaxed out of it. Her left eye was smudged over with the black makeup she had been so careful to apply in straight, full lines.

She looked like a spoiled child after a tantrum. Her stomach grew sick when she thought of her dad, berating her for not being as beautiful as the woman who wrote him love letters. *You look like a fucking prostitute.* The memory of Brian condemning her for acting just like all the cliques she’d worked so hard to distance herself from almost made her cry.

She tried combing her hair through with her fingers, but they only got caught in the thick mess and worsened the tangles. She had half a mind to just rip out all her hair, wash her face, and

disappear in some corner of the backstage. *How am I supposed to fix this?* she thought desperately.

When Brian found Julia in the sound booth, it was just a few minutes later, and she was deeply engrossed in her English textbook.

“Hey, you’re early,” he said. Julia Schneider snapped up to see him, heat rushing into her cheeks in spite of herself. Her heart pushed through her ribs in hard, foot-stomping *thumps*. She clenched her nails into her palm to resist the urge to cry. “I’ve got a new one for you,” Brian flashed an unmarked CD, reflecting rainbow rays in the dim lighting.

“Let’s have it,” Julia said good-naturedly. In the next instant, she was horribly worried about sounding too excited; when had she *ever* been good-natured?

The CD began, but not even ten seconds passed before Julia knew the answer.

“Pinback. ‘Tripoli.’ From the self-titled album.”

“You are amazing.” Brian’s hazel beautiful hazel eyes widened as he looked at Julia. A smile slowly drew his thin lips wide. “Seriously, you’re, like, the Almighty Music Goddess. Who knew you were hiding that from the world!”

Brian laughed and Julia joined him. When she caught Brian’s eye, she suddenly stopped. He wasn’t laughing. He was watching her with a silent, piercing gaze.

“What?” she snapped, drawing back from his judging stare.

“Nothing.” Brian shook his head and turned away.

The mellow, somewhat melodramatic, sounds of Pinback continued to whisper through the sound booth. She stared at her textbook, and Brian pulled out his script to study his notes.

Julia Schneider replayed the scene in her head on loop. Finally, with shocking clarity, she realized why Brian had looked at her so strangely. She hadn't smiled in almost two years.

By the time rehearsal actually began, Julia Schneider's thoughts had only increased in frantic frequency. In split-seconds she conjured up images from the few romantic movies she had seen, then banished all feelings to the outside of her being. They left no room to think about anything else.

"Spotlight five!!" Mrs. Crown's shrill voice rang through the empty auditorium. She glared up at the sound-booth. Behind her, actors stood dumbly onstage, waiting in tense anticipation for the next reprimand coming to them.

"Here," Brian said, his voice cool as ice water, smooth as caramel. He reached in front of Julia, his hand only inches from her chest, and flipped a switch. Another light flooded the stage and the actors squinted helplessly.

"Thank you!" Mrs. Crown yelled.

"Are you okay?" he was looking at Julia, straight in her eyes if she would meet his gaze. Julia mumbled an incoherent reply.

It was only a few days away from opening night. Soon Mrs. Crown would be there, sitting in-between them. She would fuss and yell and stress without ceasing. There would be no room for any of the thoughts Julia had. No thoughts but: *Spotlight Five. Spotlight Three. Stage Left Lights One, Two and Four.*

"How about Chorus Lights One?" Mrs. Crown called out.

Julia reached for the switch in the neutral zone between her and Brian's portion of the board. But Brian had already moved for it, and their hands collided in an awkward, fleshy embrace. They quickly broke apart. With her other hand Julia flipped the light.

She could feel his gaze on her again, and with trepidation she stole a glance up, then away. He was still watching her, alright. She flipped through the script, cleared her throat and popped her fingers. She banished Brian from her thoughts, banished her thumping heart, banished the feelings that sprung within her, and fought for control.

It was late that night when they left the auditorium. The moon was only a crescent and the stars were dim under the fog. The actors were already getting in their cars, calling out to each other and driving away. Julia Schneider stepped into the cold, winter air.

But Brian was right behind her.

"Hey, Julia, where are you parked?"

She tried to speak, but her throat was suddenly dry. She pointed in the distance, away from the others.

"It's pretty dark, let me walk you there," Brian said. Julia Schneider kept walking, not knowing how to act. Brian Beaumont followed her. "So, Mrs. Crown told me you did a lot of theater a couple years ago. I didn't know that. She says you were really good. Didn't you try out for this play?"

Julia Schneider shook her head, and mumbled something incomprehensible. She was lost in her own thoughts, unable to focus on Brian Beaumont and his praises. She was lost in thoughts of going home, hiding in the darkness of her bedroom, hiding from her world. She was

lost in Brian's strong arms, his hazel eyes. She was lost in the way he looked at her—the way he had always looked at her.

At her car, Julia pulled out her keys and turned to face Brian. She thought she could muster up the strength to say good night, but the words stopped cold in her lungs. The moonlight glowed in his eyes, those eyes that never left her face.

“I really like you, Julia,” he whispered.

With a soft hand, he gingerly pulled aside the limp locks that protected Julia from everything and everyone out to hurt her. Her right eye squinted slightly, even in the soft moonlight.

Julia Schneider was exposed. She trembled in the cool breeze. She was frightened and excited. She suddenly realized how overwhelmingly and miserably alone she was.

Brian's two eyes looked into her two, and he leaned closer.

She thought about the loss she had felt for so long. She could see the scars on her legs that told no one how unhappy she was. She remembered the dark nights she had cried herself to sleep, out of misunderstanding, out of betrayal, out of isolation. She saw her father, standing in her driveway, the cement cold beneath her toes. The last look he gave her when she finally returned the letters. Letters written by a strange and unknown woman. Letters that Julia was certain weren't the only ones that had been mailed. She thought of her mother, stupidly duped and complacent, smiling desperately.

Brian Beaumont's lips were soft and wet, and Julia Schneider, queen of anger and angst, let herself swoon.

The Tree

With the sigh of a thirty-five year old, Rich lowered his nineteen-year-old body into a leather couch that had been fashionably worn down to match the cozy atmosphere of the student café. Work from the art students at the nearby University filled the walls. The college radio station played through the speakers.

The café was surprisingly empty, given the time of evening. Rich himself had just gotten off work and wasn't in the mood to join the construction guys at the bar. He was the youngest full-timer on the crew. Over the summer a few guys in high school and college would join, but once school was back in session, they were few and far between. And going home to Anne would mean nearly an hour in traffic and yet another macaroni and hot dog dinner.

A few philosophy students clustered at a table near Rich, discussing the finer points of human existence. He caught phrases like, "paradigm shift" and "consciousness of reprobation inconsistent with filial desires." It interested Rich, but he didn't have a clue what any of it meant. He liked the limited philosophy classes he had been able to take in high school, but any pursuit of higher study had been put on hold.

Rich suddenly froze where he sat. He had barely been listening to the music in the café, but something had wriggled its way into his ear.

It started with the guitars. Electronic, lazily strummed minor chords warbled through the speakers. The student art that Rich had been looking at blurred into a pool of color and emotion. Drums soon accompanied the guitars: *Rat-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat.* The excited flow of the philosophy students' conversation at the next table ebbed away from him. A voice mumbled

through lyrics that Rich realized he knew. From deep within the speakers, from a dark and hidden part of Rich's brain, the words emerged.

“Leave your shoes by the door, how worn your soul will become. I'll haunt this home; I'll roam the halls just like the ghost of your Great Aunt Juniper Jean. . .”

Note for note Rich matched the melody. A new picture came to mind with each verse: Tucker Daniel and a giant oak tree behind the gym, a sanctuary of all kinds; Cassidy Langham and her cat eyes looking up at Rich, through a haze of pot smoke; late nights riding through the town, with this music – who *was* this? – pouring out the windows.

The song drifted away, taking Rich's resurrected memories and emotions away from him. Immobilized, he struggled under the weight of reality returned. He staggered to the counter, where an anarchist-in-training wiped down coffee machines.

“What's up?” he asked, approaching Rich.

“Who – who was just playing?” Rich stammered. “Something about the ghost of great-aunts?”

Both of them were silent, searching through catalogues of repressed and regressed memories. Then the anarchist snapped his fingers and pointed triumphantly at Rich.

“Wood for Clutter.” He laughed and resumed wiping down the counter. He spoke more to himself than to Rich. “*Good* song. Old school.”

Rich couldn't respond. At the name of the band, an abyss had opened inside him. Closed off for what seemed to be so long, it now gaped frighteningly wide. He stood on the edge, without any other choice but to fall into its depth.

Jerked from the reverie by a light and quirky ringtone, Rich stared dumbly at his cell. The screen glowed back at him: ANNE.

Rich lived on the edge of the next town over, in a small village of cheap townhouses, ready to serve the poor public. Just down the road one way was a trailer park, and in the other direction was a strip mall of failing businesses, although the twenty-four hour Arby's was doing well.

When he got home, Rich stood outside his pickup truck for a brief moment, looking up at the night sky. The neighborhood around him was busy with packs of friends roaming aimlessly and kids riding tricycles. There was always some commotion; it was like living next to an amusement park, listening to a roller-coaster's strangers' screams at all times of the day and night. After a deep breath, Rich started the endless routine that neared religious ritual, with its somber acknowledgement and unwavering consistency.

The townhouse he and Anne shared was a mess of dirty laundry and discarded magazines. It was always way too hot, even with the October chill setting in. The TV raged advertisements at no one in particular, since Anne was in the back of the house, stirring steam in a pot. The house had a way of boxing Rich in, constraining his limbs and narrowing his eyes. Maybe that was just because he worked all day in the open horizons, setting up buildings where there was nothing. But tonight, he felt especially cramped in.

"Hey—" Unseen, Anne called out to him.

"Taking a shower!" Rich yelled and ran up the carpeted stairs.

In the stream of icy water, Rich stared mindlessly at the shower tiles. He repeated the verses he had heard that day in the café, remembering every little beat on the drums and the chord arrangement. Had it only been two years since he had been there?

At the table, Anne set down a large bowl of mac-and-hot dog, just as Rich expected. He tried to hide his grimace with a smile and scooped a heaping helping on his plate. That's what husbands did, after all. And Anne was new at this. Soon enough she'd learn how to cook something else besides toast. They ate in silence, the television in the next room providing enough chatter for the two of them.

"So, I went to Second Stage today," Anne said toward the end of the meal. Rich looked at her blankly. "You know, the smaller theater in town." Rich didn't know, but he nodded anyway. "I got a call back."

"For what?"

"For the upcoming play. I told you about this, Rich, remember?"

"Apparently not." He leaned over his plate, head down, and ate some more.

"They're holding auditions for the upcoming Christmas play in December. I went last week and they called me back. I think I'll have a part."

"Cool." When Anne didn't reply, Rich looked up. She watched him expectantly. "What else does that mean?"

Anne wiggled in her chair like a toddler. "That I'd, um, have to go to rehearsals. A lot. Over the next two months."

Rich stared at Anne. "No."

"C'mon, Rich—"

“Anne, you *do* know we’re barely paying the bills? You *do* realize that you’ve already spent twice as much on gas than you did last month? No.”

“I really want to do this—”

“Well, I really don’t want to freeze this winter.”

“Damn it, Rich, give me a fucking chance! *Listen*. I’m working all day just like you. I’m on my feet doing thirteen hour shifts, too. Doing this play isn’t going to change any of that. Rehearsals are only at night, and you don’t want me working at Arby’s then, anyway. I’m not going to lose any shifts because of this.”

Her face was flush with the outburst, and she leveled her gaze at Rich. It was the look saved for the worst arguments: *Don’t mess with me*.

“I don’t want you to be exhausted every night because you’re doing so much.”

“I won’t, I won’t, Rich. I’ll be doing something I really enjoy. I haven’t been able to do anything in theater since senior year. I really miss it.”

“Fine.”

“Oh, thanks, Rich!” Anne jumped out of her chair and kissed Rich hard on the cheeks.

Anne had been his ticket out of a world that Rich wasn’t so sure he wanted to be a part of anymore. She was the white rose in the exotic forest he was trying to navigate through. They had dated since sophomore year, including a few off-and-on flings during Rich and Anne’s fights. She was a StraightEdger, intensely for indie punk music and intensely against drugs and alcohol. Rich was the opposite, but when he was with Anne, he thought he could change; he even convinced himself that he really wanted to.

When there was a baby scare the fall of their senior year, Anne bought every drugstore pregnancy test available, and worried whether or not she'd show during the play she had *finally* gotten a lead in. Rich contemplated the end of his life. He rehearsed his speeches to their parents, how he would care for her and the baby, what provisions he could offer Anne. He quickly realized he had to have something to offer her.

Half-hearted college applications fell to the wayside. Thoughts about long-term commitment stable jobs and health insurance filled his mind. Even after multiple tests gave the same results, and both could breathe a sigh of relief, Rich couldn't shake off the mantle he had become so prepared to assume. He was ready, Anne seemed ready enough, and at least they didn't have an unexpected arrival to stress them out. With a semester's worth of savings, Rich bought the best ring he could afford and got down on one knee over Christmas break. The next June, two weeks after graduation, Anne joined him.

At night the newlyweds settled into the hand-me-down bed a cousin had given them. With a trifle of possessions between them, they had relied heavily on obtaining all furniture and appliances as castaways from relatives and thrift stores. The result was a hodgepodge of possessions, in which no pots matched and the bed linens combined three different patterns.

The house was full of stuff that wasn't theirs. Every item told Anne and Rich that the only thing they really owned was their broken bodies.

"Hey, Anne," Rich whispered into her hair. He held her small frame close to him.

"Mm?"

"I was at this coffee shop after work this afternoon."

“Yeah, you told me,” Anne responded, then let out a yawn.

“Guess who I heard there? Wood for Clutter.”

“Who?”

“Wood for Clutter. Don’t you remember listening to them? They’re old school.”

“You always listened to stuff like that. I never did.” With a more definitive shift in bed, Anne indicated to Rich she was done with this conversation. Rich reached around her side and grasped one soft breast, a ripe apple, within his hand.

“Not tonight, Rich,” Anne sighed. Whether or not she continued with reasons as to why this night, like every night, wasn’t appropriate, Rich didn’t hear. He had already turned into his newfound fantasy, the sound byte playing on loop between his ears.

A few nights later, Rich was knee-deep in the dumpster that was the guest room, the drop off point for anything their lives couldn’t handle at the moment. Guitar riffs and drum beats, the few that he heard that one evening, haunted him at all hours of the day. The melody, only half-finished, coaxed Rich into a mild insanity. He stopped by the café a few more times after work, just to see if he could hear another song, but he had no luck. When he went, there was a heavier presence of college students and young professionals. His obvious blue-collar outfit made him stick out like a sore thumb.

This night, at three in the morning, Rich launched himself out of bed, determined to put an end to it. It took a good half hour of searching and turning over boxes, but finally Rich found his Wood for Clutter collection. A euphoria of renewal washed over him as he salvaged each album, tragically scratched and beaten down, from the box. He felt the same as when he had

heard the band for the first time, only now he knew full well the musical genius he was falling into.

The religious ritual of work, dinner and sleep continued, an endless cycle of smog and boiling water. But there was a new coloring to it now. The ceremony had a soundtrack, one that made everything new, different, alive. All eight albums followed Rich on his long commutes, in the bedroom before he fell asleep, anywhere he could afford five minutes to revel in master musicianship. Anne protested about the bedtime music, but eventually she recalled her own memories: getting in Rich's car after theater practice ended, hearing it play in the background; the stage music for their endless makeout sessions; a lullaby in her ears when she stayed over at Rich's house too late, falling asleep in his arms.

Rich listened to Wood for Clutter like it was oxygen for his ears, desperate to recall the lyrics and chords that had so imprinted his memory when he was younger. The music brought a new meaning and purpose to his life. The more he listened, the more he remembered. The more he listened, the more he realized how much he had forgotten.

As November moved in, Anne became a rare spot in Rich's daily life. Rehearsals took her away as soon as her shift ended. Since that was usually an hour before Rich even got off, their usual greetings occurred somewhere around midnight, in bed, when Rich was almost fully unconscious.

Ordinarily, Rich would have missed Anne terribly. It was a lonely returning to a home that so fully expressed two living persons, only to see himself in the mirror. Eating frozen pizza

or Arby's for dinner was quickly getting old; Rich would soon have to take up cooking for himself.

Some nights he could convince Anne to bum a ride to rehearsals, just so he could pick her up afterward. It gave them fifteen minutes together, awake and coherent. He let her talk about practice, although it was hard to focus on her chatter and the dark road.

Now that an old love had reentered his life, Rich's mind was full of other thoughts. When Anne drove herself to practice, he took his time driving home, picking up fast food on the way. In the living room, he would sit and play one of the Wood for Clutter albums as loud as their meager stereo system could manage. There was more than just the music that came to him. There were the resurrected memories.

High school had ended all too fast for Rich, although at the time it had dragged on excruciatingly slow. Most of the guys Rich graduated with moved to the next town over to go the University, and the rare catching-up that he or Anne did with old classmates told him that, for most of them, the parties of Jacobson High had morphed into never-ending ones in college. Most of their classmates continued the late-night-get-high-get-trashed-take-a-drive-do-*something-somewhere* lifestyle. This time, there were fewer restrictions and more opportunities.

Tucker Daniels must be loving that, Rich thought to himself. Everyone loved Tucker, his lanky walk, and that headshake that spoke volumes of coolness to anyone who didn't know better. On any given Friday night, Tucker would leap from a THC-induced trance and demand, "We should go to that *poetry reading* tonight!" and like sheep, everyone jumped up and followed him to the reading. Or to a club. Or they would just sit on the sidewalk and play music.

Tucker made an appearance at every party and drank himself into adventure or oblivion, whichever came first. When he could stumble out of his unconsciousness, he gathered the scribbles that had been madly wrought by the pot. With these notes, Tucker wrote essays that made teachers run out of red ink singing his praises.

The reason why Tucker was anybody important at all to Rich was because Rich was his only best friend. Everyone thought Tucker as his or her best friend, but Rich was the only one who knew what it was to have that regard reciprocated. In fact, it was privately, in Tucker's bedroom, that Rich listened to Wood for Clutter for the first time. Lying on a futon below the window, the afternoon sun the only light in the bedroom, Rich was paralyzed. The music slithered through Tucker's frail speakers, undulated on the wooden floors and slid into Rich's ears until it had wrapped itself around his brain. A peace beyond words and a heart-stopping stillness set in and lasted for hours.

"I'm so glad you got off work early tonight!" Anne called from the bathroom. Rich lay on the bed, half listening as he fumbled with the stereo remote. "And for once, I don't have rehearsal!"

"Mmm-hmm," Rich responded. "How is rehearsal going?"

"Oh, it's great! It's coming together so well! Honey?" She poked her head around the doorframe, her auburn hair hanging long, shining from her brushing. "Do you think you could play something more . . . *romantic*?"

"Wood for Clutter *is* romantic. We made out to this music. You almost got pregnant over this album."

Anne laughed embarrassedly and emerged from the bathroom. She wore a faded black negligee, one of the few wedding presents that hadn't already been used. It was just a little too big for Anne, though it hadn't always been. She was caught in the divide between sexy and haggard.

"You look nice," Rich said, taken aback. It had been a couple weeks since he had last seen her so close to naked.

"Thanks." Anne giggled, then leaped onto the bed and bounced next to Rich. She swung a leg over him and squeezed her thighs tight. She kissed him, lightly at first, then more passionately. She moved down to kiss his neck, her hair gently falling on either side. "Doesn't this music get old for you?"

Rich laughed and looked at the ceiling. The water marks on it reminded him of the ones in Tucker's bedroom.

"No; this was my *life*. This music was all that Tucker and I had for a while. That, and the tree."

"The hmnp?" Anne's voice was muffled on Rich's warm skin.

"Our tree. We'd hang out there and smoke pot. It was awesome."

Anne stiffened, her lips hovering over Rich's neck. He knew how she felt about having a "pure system," and that he agreed to make the same commitment when they married. His experimenting had always made Anne uneasy; she usually removed herself in those situations when they were in high school.

But at that moment, Rich was so lost in the sea of fresh memories about the tree, that he didn't notice Anne's tense body, or the fact that she had stopped kissing him. He only saw the

large oak with low-hanging branches, behind the gym and at the far end of the school grounds. Away from benches and tables, it was where the loners ate lunch and couples made out, but Rich and Tucker always called it, “Our Tree.” After games, after class, sometimes *during* class, they would climb onto the low branches and hang out. Tucker would bring his guitar, carelessly strumming random chords; Rich would lie down on one of the thick branches and watch the afternoon sky, broken to bits and pieces by the leafy branches above.

“We’d pass the blunt and watch the world pass by,” Rich suddenly realized he had been talking aloud the whole time. Anne was no longer on top of him, but sat on the edge of the bed.

“So where *is* Tucker now?” she asked, her voice thin and strained, but patient as a psychiatrist.

“I . . . I don’t know. After we graduated, and we were getting married . . . I didn’t really hear from him.”

“Didn’t he go to our wedding?”

“No, he couldn’t. He was . . . mountain-biking in Colorado or something like that. The last time I saw him was at the senior party, at Cassidy’s. I had to leave early, because I started working construction the next day. Yeah, I was going to ask him to be my best man, but I never got a chance.” It was quiet for a moment. Rich started chuckling. “He thought the whole thing so fucked up.”

“*Really?*”

“Oh yeah. I can still hear him, ‘Oh, *shit, Rich*, you getting married!’” He imitated Tucker’s trademark stoner laugh, high-pitched and squealy. Anne didn’t move. Rich lay still,

letting the music counsel him through his memories. Wood for Clutter worked its power on him, and all Anne could do was listen.

“Man, high school was such a bubble,” Rich continued, desperately searching the music for the right words. “We were so isolated – in this . . . bubble, safe from reality. It’s an anomaly, you know? I don’t think a lot of people get that; and after you leave – everything gets destroyed. Like a paradigm shift. You step out of one world, that was so cool, and into another one. And the new world isn’t as inviting, or as cool – there aren’t weekend parties and sleeping in on Saturday mornings, there’s no hanging out and smoking pot. There’s not. . .”

Rich rambled his way into another deep sleep. When he awoke the next morning, Anne had already left the bed, and he was cold and alone.

Rich didn’t exactly prefer the life he had, or the construction job he worked. A June wedding and parental pressure to provide for his new bride drove him into an anxious fit to find something that would pay, and quick. An uncle on the other side of the family had pulled through in a gracious last-minute move and offered Rich a position on a construction crew the next town over, where the small university town was expanding to handle more students and faculty. It had all the “benefits,” which Rich didn’t understand in the least, but he did understand it could pay his rent if Anne could work full-time, too, at a fast food place.

Anne’s desperate pleadings to have the wedding she’d dreamed of since she was a girl and the sudden demands of a sixty-hour work week launched Rich into a stumbling daze. He was lucky to pass his exams and lurch across the stage at graduation. Ever since, the ritual of work-sleep-not-tonight overtook every waking moment. It blocked out names of friends and events and

final get-togethers, the last hurrah before everyone moved out into whatever college accepted the lucky bastards.

At first the calls were plentiful. Anne was always begging to take off of work and go see her girlfriends, home for the holidays. Rich never called anyone back, or if he could, he was too tired to talk much or go out for drinks. And when he did go out for drinks, his truck was usually abandoned at the bar because he would pass out and have to be escorted home. Post-StraightEdger or not, Anne always had a lecture and a frown ready for him when he got home.

The phone calls lessened and eventually stopped, all without Rich's full awareness. The fact that he hadn't seen his best friend since they graduated never fully sank in. The fact that they hadn't spoken in a year slipped past him. Wood for Clutter was working its magic to illuminate these truths and facts to Rich.

He had other plans, after all. He really did want to go to college. He was in the middle of four applications when he was faced with possible fatherhood. He wanted to study political science, or business management, or accounting. Something logical, sequential, tangible, infallible. But at seventeen, watching some high school crush about to spit out a living being that would never leave his life, logic took a new turn.

Late night drives through this small town, parties that lasted all night and ended up with everyone passed out on couches or stumbling through front yards, trying to escape before parents came home or the police showed up, whichever came first, Tucker's sofa and Cassidy Langham, Rich's backup girlfriend when Anne was in a tiff over his partying. It wasn't so much for Rich to ask to have that again, just a little bit, was it? It wasn't so bad to remember these things, to relive

them, was it? Everything had just moved so fast. Who could blame him for wanting to grasp at it? It wasn't fair, not when everyone else was still partying it up in college.

None of this would have happened if Anne hadn't given him that baby scare.

The flowing material swirled around Anne's body, showing off her curves; the green fabric complemented her olive skin. She was giddy as she looked at her reflection in the bedroom mirror. Her grin stretched from ear to ear, as happy as a kid in a candy store.

"Isn't it *great*?" She looked at Rich for approval.

He sat on the edge of the bed, his lips pursed tightly together.

"How much did that cost?"

Anne shrugged it off. "It wasn't much, especially for this type of dress. *And* it was on *sale*."

"How much?"

"Seventy-five."

His jaw actually dropped. He looked at Anne. Maybe he hadn't heard her correctly. "*How much?*"

"Rich, it's really not that expensive for a dress—"

"I hope your mother bought you that dress. Because you sure as hell didn't spend my fucking money on that." Rich pushed himself off the bed and walked downstairs into the kitchen. Anne's little feet padded behind him on the carpeted stairs.

"Hey, it's *my* money, too, you know!"

“Yeah, all three hundred dollars worth. It makes a real big dent in what we have to cover every month.”

He reached into the back of the near-empty fridge and grabbed a beer. He slammed the door shut.

“What do you need a dress for anyway? Is Arby’s going all sophisticated now?”

“It’s for opening night. We’re going to have a little after-party to celebrate.”

“When is this?”

“Rich, I’ve *told* you – it’s the fourth. Next week? You said you’d try to come.”

“Why don’t you just get one of your old dresses from your mom’s? One of your homecoming dresses?”

Anne rolled her eyes. “Because then I’d look like I was still in high school. And they wouldn’t fit me anymore. Paul came shopping with me today; he had to get a new shirt, too—”

“Who?”

Anne leaned away from the intensity of Rich’s gaze. “Paul. He’s one of the actors in the show. I’ve told you about him.”

“You and some guy went *shopping* together?”

“Yes, Rich. We did. Don’t be so jealous, Paul’s gay. I’m pretty sure he’s banging the sound tech guy. Anyway, Paul saw the dress, and he said it is totally functional for all kinds of parties. He also thought it was an absolute steal at seventy-five dollars.”

“I’m surprised at where you’re getting all this free time from. I mean, I’m working on the yard as soon as the sun is up, and I’m not back until seven. And you’re already gone – acting or shopping or who knows what—”

“Acting. That’s it. Tonight we had an early rehearsal. I had to get a ride from someone, since *you* took my car because *your* truck’s in the shop. Remember?”

“Anne, I swear to God, don’t talk to me like a fucking five-year-old.”

“I had to get a ride from *someone*. Paul offered, and when I talked about needing something to wear for next week, he said we should go shopping. No big deal.”

Rich finished his beer and grabbed another one from the fridge. Anne sank into a chair at the table and attempted to give him a disgusted look.

“I really wish you wouldn’t drink like that.” With the wear and tear of being a middle-class girl who didn’t understand expenses and consequences, her disgust looked more like a six-year-old turning up her nose at green beans.

Rich chuckled mirthlessly. “Trust me, babe, drinking is the best thing I can do right now. You go out and buy an eighty dollar dress—”

“—Seventy-five—”

“—Whatever. You spend a month’s worth of cell phone bills on a dress so some gay guy can tell you how stylish you look. You take off hours from Arby’s so you can be some aspiring actress in a nothing town. And just to remind *you*, I’m only driving *your* car because *you* wrecked the clutch trying to drive *my* standard. You better be glad the only thing I’m doing is drinking and not smacking you.”

They were quiet, staring each other down. Heat rushed into their cheeks. Anne turned her gaze away and slumped in the chair. Her perfect dress contrasted every other part of her appearance.

It was tensely quiet. No one moved for while. Anne slumped in the chair in the kitchen, her perfect dress contrasting everything else about her appearance. Rich surveyed the kitchen/living room, wondering how so much could possibly change in less than two years.

As Anne disappeared more frequently under the excuse of “rehearsals,” Rich searched for a lost best friend. Tucker was always an easygoing guy – if he could just get in touch with Tucker, they could mend old ties. They could pick up where they left off. Tucker was probably full of adventures since he left high school – lighting up on the beaches of the Bahamas, spelunking the caves of Colorado, drinking absinthe in Europe. All Rich had to do was find him.

He joined Facebook in his quest and pulled out old yearbooks for his classmates’ cell phone numbers. Claire Thompson, an old classmate, gave him Tucker’s latest phone number. She was studying photography upstate and had hosted him for a while.

“Yeah, Tuck was here last semester – he slept on my couch for a few weeks, picking up odd jobs. He’s the same ol’ Tuck, you know. I talked to him last month, I think, he said he was trying to go to Amsterdam.”

Rich tried the number, but it was disconnected. He was collecting a stash of emails and numbers, all changed, re-routed, disconnected. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he was only two steps behind Tucker’s journeys. Like he had called a number just minutes after Tucker pulled out the connection. Or he had emailed him just days after Tucker left the country. Trying to find him was like tracking down a ghost.

In the house tense silences slowly turned into awkward familiarities. Dinner was always made for two, but eaten alone. Rich came home from work, and the silence of the house rang in

his ears. Over the weeks it grew louder and louder, a noise that Wood for Clutter on full blast couldn't quite drown out. Rich began to feel frantic about his entire life.

The repressed memories had dislodged themselves and rocketed to the top of his mind, like a beach ball held deep within a pool and suddenly released. But the promises they made to him, the desires they set aflame, couldn't be quenched. They mocked him for his debilitated state – trapped in this construction outfit and husband life – and offered no opportunity for escape. If he could've just found Tucker, just heard his voice.

Anne passed through the bedroom less frequently. The play had run its course, it was over and done, but she still stayed out late. One night Rich lay in bed, undressed, all the lights out, wide awake. When the front door finally opened, a little past one in the morning, Rich turned over and pretended to be asleep. Anne turned on a small lamp to see her way around, and Rich squinted one eye open. She wore the curvaceous green dress she had to have and heels, her hair swept stylishly up. When she climbed into bed, she didn't whisper to Rich or kiss him. She didn't even lean against his body to gain his warmth.

He didn't sleep that night. As the day broke, Rich studied the water stains on the ceiling, alternately missing his friend and missing his wife.

Everything he had done with his life in the past two years had only been for Anne's sake. He really wanted to be a good person. Or, at least when he was with Anne, he wanted to try; being with her made him think that it wasn't such a bad thing to do well in life, staying "pure" in body and mind. He worked sunup to sundown for her sake.

She was the memoriam to his new life. Under the parties and drinking and pot, Rich had a terrifying anxiety about himself and his placement in the world. It was something his old life

couldn't block out. But when faced with the role of husband, even that of father, Rich found a purpose in life. He had a position, a motivation. Anne gave his life purpose. Her love was a buoy, keeping him afloat through his years of loss and growth, of self-doubt and realization.

He wanted Anne to pursue what she loved. She *was* good in theater. Rich hadn't forgotten the plays she did in high school—he went to every performance—and he wanted her to have something in their miserable life together that she could look forward to. And yet . . .

There was something about all the late night “rehearsals,” and now these disappearances after the show had ended, something about “gay” Paul, that didn't sit well with him. Lately, Anne was a woman that he didn't quite know or understand. He couldn't help but feel a little deceived by her; he felt as though he had been persuaded by an image of naïveté that wasn't true.

When Christmas was only a few days away, Rich and Anne hopped on the bus to visit his parents in town. They had insisted that the newlyweds spend a few nights with them, to get some kind of vacation from their daily lives. Anne's parents had already taken off for New York to celebrate the holidays. She and Rich weren't invited.

The bus was crowded with haggard-looking shoppers weighed down with presents.

“Shit,” Anne said. It was the first thing she had said to Rich in a couple of weeks. “We didn't buy any presents.”

Rich kissed the top of her forehead. “Merry Christmas.”

Like all relics of lost youth, his old home was much smaller than Rich remembered. The backyard that hosted baseball games, touch football, family picnics and camping expeditions

now seemed cramped, defying all logical principle to house so many memories and pastimes.

Rich sat on the porch swing, studying his backyard. The door opened and his mother stepped onto the porch. She handed him a cup of coffee, and sipped out of her own mug. She sat in a nearby rocking chair and looked at the yard.

“Well,” she sighed. “It must be nice for you to have a few days off.”

Rich nodded.

“You go back to work soon?”

“Day after Christmas.” Rich drank his coffee. It occurred to him that he had never had coffee with his parents before. It was so . . . adult.

“I know you and Anne want to have your private time, but your father and I really appreciate you coming over here. It’s—important to your father, to be able to see you.”

Rich laughed a little. “Really, Mom, it’s okay. That house is so f—fouled up, it’s nice to get out of there.” Rich smiled at his mom. When had her hair started turning gray? When did she get those lines around her mouth?

She sighed and stared at the yard again.

“Another Christmas,” she said. “Comes by so fast, don’t you think? Everything is always moving so fast.”

The door opened again and Anne silently walked through. She sat next to Rich on the swing without saying a word.

“Frank’s gone to take a nap, hasn’t he?” Rich’s mom asked. Anne nodded. “He’s sleeping so much more often these days. Just getting old, that’s all it is. Just like, you, Rich.” She smiled, not quite meeting his gaze. “Getting your first truck, graduating, getting married. It

moves so fast, you almost can't catch it while it's happening. Now that you've got your own bride, you treat her right. You'll want her when you're too old to remember what's happening."

Anne smiled shyly and Rich put an arm around her shoulders. He kissed her hair.

He could remember doing something similar, to another girl he had grown tired of, in the middle of his and Anne's fights during high school. Cassidy Langham. When the blow was delivered, she had clung to him, sobbing into his shoulder in the middle of her driveway. Rich remembered holding her there, more focused on the moonlight and his car headlights throwing their shadows on the garage door, slowly awakening to the reality of the situation, and wondering if what he was doing was really worth it.

That night Anne sat on one side of Rich's twin-size bed, brushing her hair. On the other side sat Rich, staring at his old Lego collections, unmoved from where he last placed them, but clean. As though his mom had dusted them in expecting their arrival. The room was quiet. It was late and his parents had long before gone to bed.

"Anne," Rich spoke her name as levelly as he could.

"Hmm?" She was distracted.

"Anne. Don't fuck around with me. If—if there's something going on, just tell me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, bored. Rich turned around to face her. She kept her back to him.

"C'mon, don't bullshit me. I've seen you when you get home—your hair all done up, wearing that dress you bought with *Paul*—"

"Who's *gay*."

“Is that who you’ve been going out with? Have you been out with Paul and his fucking boyfriend?”

Anne turned to face him. Her face was set hard and she stared straight at him.

“Why do you even care, Rich? What’s it to you whether I’m working on a play or fucking a gay guy or working the graveyard shift at Arby’s? Because no matter what I’m doing, it’s never enough for you. So I buy a fucking dress to feel pretty. Because nothing I’m doing in my life right now makes me feel that way. So I go out a few nights a week to feel *alive*, to do something besides listen to you bitch and moan about your work or *Tucker* and your god-damned Wood for Clutter. Shit, if anyone should feel like they’re being cheated on—” she cut off in sarcastic laughter.

“What the hell do you mean?” Rich stood up to glower down at Anne. She stood up, too. The divide of a high school bed held them apart.

“Oh, God, it’s all you’ve been on for the past three months! All about high school and getting high and acting like a complete asshole—your ‘glory days.’ You’re not in high school anymore, Rich—grow up!”

“You don’t know what it was like, Anne. You have *no* idea what it felt like to have a friend like Tucker. To have some guy tell me that no party was cool unless *I* was there. I’ve been trying to tell you, it’s a paradigm shift—”

Anne threw her hairbrush at the wall. Rich felt the wind blow past his ear. The brush fell to the ground with a wooden thud.

“To hell with your fucking paradigm shifts, Rich! I don’t give a shit! I’m working my ass off to be something of a wife to you, and I don’t *get* anything for it! Of course this isn’t like your

life was in high school—of course there’s a shift, you idiot! You don’t get to keep all your friends. You don’t get to keep everything. That’s life! Life *is* losing. Life is remembering what you’ve forgotten and then losing more.”

Anne’s rage had subsided into a controlled tone, on the brink of tears. Rich shook his head. He picked up his jacket.

“I just want my friend back,” he mumbled to himself as he crossed the room to the door.

“Where are you going?” Anne called after him, the tears harder to keep out of her voice.

“Rich?”

The door slammed on her cry.

Even when Tucker wasn’t with him, Rich would sneak out to the tree, just to chill or to make out with Cassidy (if Anne was in a fight with him), or to be away from everything. One night, during a football game, the cheers barely reached him from where he lay on the upper branches. The moonlight filtered to him through black leaves. The headlights of passing cars illuminated pieces of the tree in bright white.

Before Rich realized what was happening, he had begun to cry. Something in the scene—the gnarled, old tree, smoking pot by himself, the crescent moon overhead—disrupted him. Everything he did, everything he saw, was tainted by the bittersweet knowledge that it wouldn’t last. Knowing he was young and reckless, but only for this moment. Knowing that in this very moment, everything was perfect, but also knowing that it never would be again. Knowing all of this would quickly and abruptly end.

And so Wood for Clutter was his anthem, his deep fears locked away in mysterious musical strumming. That was the revelation of the music and his pot-induced trances: the

knowledge that nothing would ever last, that everything in life was so wonderful and so grippingly transient at the same time.

A late night joyride in his father's clunker, roaming deserted streets, searching for a place to land—Rich was sixteen all over again. Only this time he had a wife, crying alone in his bedroom.

He idled at the intersection. Right, and he'd drive by Tucker's old place; but he knew that no one was living there anymore. No one he knew. Rich turned left. There was something more there, something that couldn't relocate and then never get in touch with him.

Anne and her pregnancy scare, always using her tears to get him to do something he was never sure he wanted to do. And who spends five nights in a row going out with a gay guy? Watch her, if she gets pregnant, that's her own fucking fault. Rich wasn't about to fall for it a second time. She didn't understand the things that were important to him; she didn't think about all that she had cost him—was costing him—she didn't know what it was like to live the way he had.

With Wood for Clutter blasting in the speakers, Rich gave himself over to the wild abandon of his emotions and memories. He felt like crying. Sadness, ecstasy, alienation, solidarity—all rose and settled within him, rising tides in his soul.

At Jacobson High, Rich parked in the Seniors Lot and turned off the ignition. As he crossed the school grounds he felt the sharp chill of the winter air; his breath formed thick clouds in front of him. His fingers were already feeling numb, and they clutched tightly at the plastic bag between them.

The school was deserted; buildings white-washed by the moon were set against black trees of the night. Rich headed toward the gym. The only sound was dry leaves crunching beneath his feet.

Rich thought about Cassidy and the tears he made her cry, and about Tucker who left him behind, and all the meaningless conversations they had when they were high, thinking themselves so pronounced and philosophical. He thought about Anne, that drawn look of tired hurt that she had been haunted with lately.

There were too many people to remember, too many emotions to consider. It was hot and stifling, like their house on the edge of town, lost in bills and dead ends. Rich just needed to clear his head. To go to his tree, their tree, relax. Smoke some pot.

He had found the plastic bag in the back of his drawer earlier that afternoon. He had no idea whether or not it was any good, but he'd find out soon enough. He knew all he needed was to lie down on one of those thick branches, watch the broken moon through the leaves and have a good smoke.

Once he can finally get in touch with Tucker, Rich will tell him all about it. He'd tell him everything—how much he missed him, how much Tucker meant to him as friend. He'd especially tell him about tonight, this night at their tree. Tucker would think it kick-ass, of course. He's the same ol' Tuck, just like Claire said. He'd say this adventure was "classic," so cool.

How can a person just up and leave without even saying goodbye?

Rich rounded the corner of the gym and stopped cold.

The tree had always stood at the edge of the school grounds, with nothing around it. There was the vast emptiness of the end of the yard, and a great, looming tree in the middle.

But now, it was just a vast emptiness.

There was no large oak with thick branches reaching high overhead and dipping low to the ground. There was nothing but a stump, a stunted black shape in the darkness. The emptiness glared harshly at Rich in the moonlight, dark and foreboding as the gallows.

Driven by sick shock, Rich stumbled forward. He stood over the stump, looking at its countless, decaying rings. It was barely a foot and a half high. He towered over it.

Rich's chest contracted involuntarily. His breath grew short and thin, quick spurts of smoke shot out of his lips. He chuckled. It was a short, ironic chuckle that had no joy behind it. It didn't end. It grew louder, harder. The chuckle took control of him, until Rich was laughing loud and wild. His eyes closed tight; he didn't notice the car headlights shining through the chain-link fence, even though it was blinding without the oak to block the glare.

He struggled to sit on the stump, his outdated bag of pot falling into his lap. His laugh turned hysterical, taking up everything within him and pushing it out. Rich looked at the moon. Tears ran down his cheeks. He didn't hear the horn honking, or the woman's voice that called his name. Suddenly his stomach lurched against him. His own laughter was making him sick.

He had lied to himself. He realized that now. Anne had been right. Life is losing. Life is remembering what's been lost and then losing more. He couldn't speak over the laughter, but Rich desperately wanted to shout into the wild darkness. He didn't want closure. He didn't want to think, he didn't want to let things settle.

The black night was getting the best of him, and as warm arms held his head to a soft bosom, Rich's laughter turned to sobs.

He wanted to be sixteen again. He didn't want to give a fuck about anything anymore. He wanted to leave everything behind and capture the past that continually tempted and eluded him.

Development

At the park the sun is already cutting itself on the horizon. It bleeds over dogs catching Frisbees and tongue-tied lovers on picnic blankets. I rehearse the yoga positions that had paid my rent for a year or so after college, and concentrate on controlling my full-fledged panic attack.

Calling Tucker had been a bad idea.

The “Mr. Holland’s Opus” delusion I had for a photography class at our old high school has dive-bombed into just another Fine Arts class, and I’m too desperate to demand my way. I’ve only just wound my way home, sashaying backwards from a liberal arts school upstate. The thought of working as a barista with no health benefits or retirement plans makes me feel suicidal. I whisper consolations to myself, but it’s no use. We’re all stuck in the same desks I used to doodle on, hating each other and collectively hating the textbook that governs our lives in fifty-minute increments.

If anyone out there can understand me, it’s Tucker. I never fully appreciated him in high school; he was just another pothead who threw awesome parties and knew how to bullshit his way through anything. But when we left for college, something clicked. He visited me upstate, sleeping on my couch for a few weeks and then disappearing to Amsterdam, or Prague, or California, or somewhere else. One time he mailed me a small canvas he had painted of a North Carolina sunrise. The rich black night and purple mountains took the foreground of a large, orange sun. On UNC stationery he had scrawled: “*This is my morning!*”

I called him last night, lying on the kitchen floor. My feet kicked up against the wooden cabinets. He knew the real world plus art world. He could understand the struggles of a working girl and distilling passion.

I looked out the small window over the sink, only able to see a few stars beyond the neighboring apartment complex.

Sun salutation.

Tucker answered after a few rings. Once he figured out who I was, he launched into his story, before I could begin my own.

“Chloe, baby, you wouldn’t believe it! I’m *living* in *New York*! I moved out, I don’t know, six months ago! Living in my car, working at Krispy Kreme, you know! The life, right?” His laugh was that high-pitched one he gets when he’s really stoned. “But I met DiFranco. You’ve heard of him right?”

I lied.

Swan dive.

“Isn’t he the *shit*? I met the motherfucker! He got me a fucking exhibit! He’s let me crash at his place! Baby, I’ve been living in a fucking penthouse, right? Smoking so much dope I don’t even think I’ve *tasted* oxygen!”

Tucker always said, despite his usual states of inebriation, that when it came to *art*, true, soulful art, it had to be unfiltered. He said his twisted mind and deliberate passion would be the only things to dictate his art.

“Shit, why am I running my mouth off to *you*? You only called to talk about yourself!”

Like a bandaid, I tried to rip it quick.

Downward dog.

“I’m teaching at our old high school.”

The other line went quiet. I wish one of us had died.

Thoughts rattle against each other, but I am straight and tall, a puppet on a taut string, clutched by the Three Fates, by Jehovah Jireh, by Buddha, by Joey Ramone himself.

“Shiiiiiiiiit.” He strung out the word like used to take drags off of cigarettes in my freshman year, desperately trying to prove to the ceramic seniors I was a nicotine connoisseur. “You’d corrupt their fucking minds. What are you teaching?”

“Fine arts.”

“Huh,” Tucker said before he got caught in an emphysematic wheeze. He was coming off his high, speaking lower and slower. “So, how’s your photography coming along?”

I opted for brutal honesty.

This grass on my feet is blood-red green, a rich, soft grave for my life.

“It’s not.”

The rest of the conversation fizzled into a stinking corpse of good intentions, where Tucker tried to say something meaningful and consoling, and I made a quick excuse and hung up on him. I slept in a half-awake state, the linoleum cold and hard against my back. Today passed in hiding under the bed sheets. Now the moment had come and I had to release this essence out in the open, where I couldn’t damage myself more than I already had.

Eagle. Tucker and his penthouse apartment with his mentor or lover or whatever. He just packed up and left for New York. He took a chance. That was Tucker. Always working, always pushing himself harder.

Reverse Warrior. Back in college, with other artists and strangers, we would talk for hours on plastic chairs in foreign backyards. We’d discuss our “statement,” art, a little of politics and a lot of travel and of the future. We talked about the human condition and our obligation to

its correction or exposure. Talks that never acknowledged but were fully influenced by the fumes of Bacardi and marijuana, black skies, open futures as broad as the horizon on a road trip, three-dollar Goodwill dresses, smoking on back porches and passing out in backyards and on couches.

But now my Goodwill dresses have returned to their origins and ironed blazers take their place; midnight mixed drinks are substituted by seven a.m. coffee. I danced my way back home, stopping in one place to work a coffee shop then almost setting up residence in another town to become a yoga instructor. The next thing I knew, I had come back home, alone and lonely. Mom and Dad moved north after retirement while I was in college, and everyone else I had grown up with had taken flight to other fantasies. Infected by some thought of goodwill, some idea I could impact society through *art*, through *kids*, I took up teaching.

The moldy classrooms are the same as I remember, most of the teachers are still here, and everyone smirks behind their coffee cups, bemused by the fact that I'm here again, taking bets on how long I'm going to last.

What happened to me?

Sun salutation.

Tucker just up and moved on to wherever else he was supposed to be, wherever he could be to make art. And me? I found my OFF switch and I don't know how to turn it back on.

Mrs. Crown has hardly changed from the flighty theater teacher I remember. Her hair is just as awry, graying at the roots, glasses I don't remember her having are all askew, and a frightening hunger of tragedy follows her, something I never realized back when I was student.

She catches me off-guard when I'm pouring a cup of coffee in the faculty lounge. I've been daydreaming about severing the limbs off my sullen students Blike Bernie Grenald and his slack jaw, and Janice Lake's foot for good measure, just for being an asshole. And take pictures of the ensuing chaos. I could make a whole exhibit out of the anarchy; I'd call it *Social Constructivism*.

"Thinking about Collins?" Mrs. Crown's dreamy voice drifts its way into my thoughts, so casually I'm afraid she somehow knows what I'd been thinking.

"I'm sorry, what?" I turn to face her and confront an enormous purple and blue three-piece suit. Her eyes are extraordinarily large and moody, even for her.

"Katherine Collins. They had to put her in the psychiatric ward at the hospital."

"What happened?" The faculty door opens behind me.

"Oh, she slit her wrists," Mrs. Crown hums, just as nice as you please.

"Oh, *yes*," Helen Guillory, the guidance counselor, glides past me. She smiles at Mrs. Crown. They practically look like twins, except Helen is more stout and had broader horizons in *her* moody eyes: the next generation's moral beliefs and academic ambitions. Lucky for me, she didn't come to Jacobs High until after I graduated. Helen sits at the rickety table in front of us.

"She sent me a riveting expose, you know," she chats to no one in particular. "All about a male relative who's been molesting her for years now."

"Jesus Christ," I say. Both women have glazed expressions as they smile emptily at each other. There must be more in their coffee than the mudsludge that percolator puts out.

"Well, it's always something like that these days," Helen continues. "Suicide, drug addiction, pregnancies"

“BAbortion , alcoholismB” Mrs. Crown interjects for good measure. Helen keeps nodding.

“BAbuse, incest. It’s a lot to handle.”

“You remember when *you* were a student?” Mrs. Crown gives me that smile I catch when my back is turned, the one that says I’m a hopeless case in this school. First as student, now as teacher. “You’re closer to their age than the rest of us.”

“Not too much,” I hide my face behind a deep gulp of “coffee.” What I remember from high school I drank, smoked and lied away while in college.

“You should try talking to themBmaking a connection with them,” Mrs. Crown advises.

“Yeah,” I laugh at her. “Next time I return tests, I’ll be sure to ask who’s dealing with domestic abuse or suicidal tendencies.”

“I can only help those who *want* help, who are willing to come to me,” Helen says.

“Think of all the hurting this building holds. Think of the suffering students that only these walls know about.” She even touches the peeling wallpaper behind her for dramatic effect.

“That’s a little twisted.” I hold back from saying, *You’re a little twisted.*

“It doesn’t make their sufferings any less real.” Mrs. Crown’s parting shot as she floats out of the room. Helen flips through the *Teacher’s* magazine on the table, as though nothing were odd about this conversation.

Once in high school I thought I had enough trouble to become a teenage runaway.

“I’m never coming back!” I yelled in the evening light and slammed the front door behind me.

My mother dove off the front porch, a bird of the night, and tackled me like a red-shirted freshman linebacker. The grass was soft and wet with our tears. Her tears always get me to come back. Despite the fact that I once told everyone in college that she died from lung cancer; I said I smoked to her memory.

She wants me to do something practical with my life. College was practical, and since she and dad paid my car note, there wasn't much choice. At least I got to major in photography, but when I didn't pick the practical route of portrait studio or development, well, then, "What *are* you doing with your life?"

Now I'm home again, their house lost to me in their retirement move, paying my own bills, racking up my own debt, and I still can't get past her. I can't escape the slowly emerging image of my mother looking back at me in the mirror. She must be emerging within me, too, rebuking my conscience and dispelling my passion.

Nobody ever really cares about Fine Arts. Most of them just try to ignore me, Bernie tries to find new ways to annoy me, and Sophia Berger flips to the back of the text to look forlornly at the Salvador Dali prints. But recently, nobody cares about Fine Arts because they have a Physics project to fail.

Towers. The same Physics teacher, the same project from almost ten years ago. Watching all the students sweat over making a wooden tower that can withstand weights from the boys' weight room makes me think of Michael.

He was always building something when we were growing up: LEGOS, airplane models, popsicle-stick houses. When he had to make a Physics tower, he made blueprints. Blueprints. A

few years later, while he was studying construction management at State, I dug through his old notebooks and made copies for my own tower project. I didn't understand all of it, so while he got an A+ the best I could manage was a B-. But it was the highest grade I ever got in that class.

I wonder what kind of profit I could make off of selling those blueprints to these kids. . .

Now Michael's building homes and offices in Canada. He and his lab technician wife have constructed two babies together. He calls me to talk about his second fusion of geniuses, a 5.7 pounder named Kelley Anne.

"Suzanne and the baby are doing fine," he answers my unasked question. "How are things going with you?"

"Pretty shitty, to be honest. I'm teaching a subject I don't really care about to students who don't give a rat's ass about me or what I'm teaching. And, well, it's the end of my life."

Michael laughs awkwardly. I decide not to take advantage of the opportunity to be righteously offended.

"Things are going to get better, Claire. You've only just started. And it's much more grounded than what you were doing beforeBall that coffee shop, yoga stuff."

"Yeah," I say. We're both quiet.

"Well, you know, Mom and Dad are making dinnerB"

"They're up there, too?"

"They wanted to help out with the baby and everything. Did you want to . . .?"

"No, I do not want to speak to our mother, so don't even finish that question and have her hear you."

"Oh, that's too bad you have to go."

“Nice coverup.”

“So we’ll see you at the next holiday, right?”

“I’ll be there for Christmas.”

“What about Thanksgiving?”

“Come on, I really do have to get off the phone, Michael. Congrats and all.”

“Don’t get down, Claire. It’s just a phase.”

I’m always “in a phase.” Michael’s crazy days lasted four and a half weeks, and then he resumed a life of normalcy. My “phase” edges on eight years, and I can sense everyone’s discomfort with it.

Egyptian pyramids. Ancient burial grounds. Agamemnon’s death mask. Temple ruins. Mosaics. The tome that is Fine Arts is extensive, and a typical class rarely gets past the Renaissance. In nine months, they just expect all of us to push our way through it, never assuming we’ll reach the end, where those Salvador Dali prints are. When I get back from this “vacation,” I’m digging through that closet. I’m going to find something else we can all do with this class besides read stale passages.

Wood-paneled walls, ice-cold vents hidden in the carpet, the never-ending stench of potpourri and dirty diapers. It must be Thanksgiving. I’ve only been to this new house since Mom and Dad moved north five years ago, but they’ve carefully reconstructed “my” bedroom, using all the memorabilia I left behind when I graduated high school. Which is great, because it lets me leave the torment of high school to return to memories of the torment of high school.

At the dining room table, Michael and Dad immerse themselves in serious dialogues hedged in business and construction jargon. I'm left alone to defend myself against Mom. Suzanne is here, but she's only a model for Mom, and no actual help to me.

Mom zips through my points of fault: Projects are nice, but if my students wanted a more engaging arts class, wouldn't they have just taken an *arts class*? And if Sophia is so in need of creative expression like I think she is, then why is she in some useless class like mine? Why doesn't the school make provisions for talent like hers? And where is some young man on my arm, at this stage of my life?

"Now's the time to be settling down." She shovels a fork full of sweet potatoes in her mouth.

"Well, you know, Mom, I've been so busy with teaching."

"Hmm," she says in that tone that means, "I don't believe it."

"Just look at Michael." She turns to Suzanne, the counterpart, the sub-part of Michael. "He's always busy with his contracting and bids, but he found time to settle down. And now they have their careers, starting a family, and a big house for all everyone."

And not enough bleach to drown them all when life crumbles. Setting their esophagi on fire with a burning purity, peeling back the skin to expose broken bone and severed arteries. Burning Man, in the fullest sense of the word. Now that is a picture.

I can't get Tucker out of my head. All that "grow some balls and just do it" crap has been in my head, and he makes it look like some blind, beautiful leap into the darkness. But then

what? How far would I fall? Would it hurt when I finally landed? What kind of embarrassment would that be to recover from? Or would I ever land? Would I keep falling for the rest of my life?

Those who can't, teach, right?

But then what's the point of creating something about mankind if it never gets shared? A commentary on human existence doesn't sit on bedroom floors or hang in closets. It needs to be out in the world, exposing and losing those within it.

I once took a picture of my mother, standing in front of a bed of weeds. I wanted to tell her how her maternal overloading was stifling—beyond stifling, a poison to my growth. She didn't exactly get the message.

“Look how well you've framed those flowers, Claire!”

How do you make a commentary on humanity when humanity itself doesn't even get the point?

School can't start soon enough for me. I spend the weekend digging through the supply closet and find an abundance of blue and white tiles and loose cardboard. It's exactly what I need for a class project: mosaics.

Now that everyone can move around and interact, everything's lightened up in the classroom. They're talking and laughing with each other; they're even starting to talk to me.

Like the nerdy sophomore boys in third hour. They're willowy and awkward, huddling together and reciting jokes from *Futurama*. They've spread out more, and I can see a few of the girls taking notice, not that it even dawns on any of the boys. They're busy asking me an excess of questions about college, picking a major and starting a career. As if I'm some expert on that.

And Sophia Berger is absolutely amazing. She asked for more cardboard and tiles and is in the process of recreating Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*. She asks me about modern art and about the sections of the book we'll never get to.

Then there's Bernie Grenald. By the time I realize what he's doing, he's already halfway through creating a replica of his member.

"You *said* make *anything*," he defends, casually holding his mosaic over his lap.

"It's inappropriate," I tell him as I walk away. Any time spent close to Bernie is too long.

"It's freedom of expression. Art is free to express what I want."

I almost fly off the handle after him. Using phrases about art and about freedom of expression, and he doesn't even know what the fuck it all means. He doesn't know when a phallus is used as an oppressive symbol, as dominance and as ignorance. He doesn't realize it's used to denote a sexually blossoming freedom, and the *implications* of that. He just wants to make a drawn-to-scale mosaic of his dick on a two-by-three piece of cardboard.

To clear my head from the whole day, I go to Coyote Moon, a hybrid of night bar and café. It's overrun with plaid-clad, skinny-jeaned emo boys and overweight goth girls. They can't be older than twelve, and their chubby pock-marked faces stare at me out of strangers' eyes. All I can think is, *What the hell happened to everyone?* and, *God, do I look thirty-five or something?!*

I sit on a barstool near the back, watching the two guys playing on stage, a jamboree drum and keyboard between them. They're barefoot; the drummer has long kinky hair and the other imitates that mysterious sweep across his eyes. The keyboardist whispers sweet nothings into the microphone. American tribal worship.

Only a few people gather in front of the stage. In the back there's me, the merchandise guy, and a girl in a long peasant top and fishnet stockings. She furiously scribbles poetry on napkins strewn across her table. I take out my own pen and napkin and furiously doodle stickmen all over it; they play guitar, get in fights, have coitus, high-five.

The night is nice and easy, but before I know it, it's time to leave. I used to make my arrival at clubs *at* eleven. Now I have a real job and just not enough energy

"Ms. Thompson?"

I look up, but I do not know this character, dressed like everyone else, calling me *Ms* in a college hangout and establishing my patheticness by addressing me as an adult. His hair is obviously purposefully tousled to look like he just got out of bed, and his eyes squint at me in the haze of the bar. A cigarette burns between his slender fingers. Suddenly I remember those long, delicate fingers, carefully gluing tiles to cardboard

"Marcus?" He literally winces, as though I had punched him in the stomach. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm eighteen," he stammers, defiant all the same. He sounds like my nephew, when he thinks he *could* be in trouble, but doesn't think he should be. He notices the cigarette in his own hand and leans away from the foreign object. With a pleading face turned to me, "You-you're not going to report this to the school, are you?"

There is a full moment of weighty consideration. So this is what administrative power feels like, holding someone's life in my hands. How much can I possibly do off-campus, anyway?

"I won't tell if you don't." I smile and relief washes over his face.

“Oh, totally,” he agrees. “No way, Ms. Thompson.”

He adeptly weaves his way through the thickening crowd, away from me. The Bohemian fishnet girl next to me is now taking the stage.

Ms.

Ouch.

A pixie face and illegally spiked fohawk pokes itself into my classroom during my planning period today. She strides in as though her 5'2" frame was a foot taller.

“Hey, Ms. Thompson,” she says casually. “You know Mark, right?”

It takes me a minute. Marcus, fingers smoking and gluing tiles.

“Yeah, yeah. But I don’t know you.”

“Oh, I’m Lucy. Mark and I have been kinda going out, but *lately* he’s been acting kinda weird. He’s just not *there*, you know? And I know, y’know, you talked at Coyote MoonB”

“Who told you that?” I steal a glance into the hallway, where anyone could be eavesdropping. Lucy is stunned for the moment.

“Mark did.”

“That really doesn’t need to go around, okay?”

“Um, okay.” Her energy has been derailed for the moment, but it quickly picks up speed.

“Well, he’s only told me and maybe a couple others. But he’s so *odd* lately. Like he doesn’t call me when he says he will. We haven’t gone out in over a *week*.”

“Uh-huh,” I say. Not *Why are you telling me?* like I want to.

“So, I don’t know. I thought maybe, since you saw Mark out, maybe you saw him with another girl or something.”

So that’s it! I’m her spy!

I ramble about how if she thinks there’s a problem, then she should talk to him. But she’s persistent.

“It wouldn’t be so bad if we could both go out—but he’s always going to the bars ‘cause he’s eighteen, and I can’t even get past the door.”

“How old are you?” I ask of sudden curiosity. She could pass for twelve.

“Sixteen.” She puffs out her chest like age is a merit badge. “I try to talk, but I can’t ever get a straight answer out of him.”

“If you start off your interrogations with, ‘Why didn’t you call me last night?’ or ‘Where the hell were you?’ then I’m sure you didn’t get very far.”

“Yeah,” Lucy agrees, looking a little sheepish.

“You don’t prove anything by being angry at him. If you want to go on a date, pick up the phone and ask him. If you want to know where he’s been, ask him. Just be cool about it; nobody likes a clingy bitch, Lucy.”

She chokes on a laugh.

“Th-thanks, Ms. Thompson.” She giggles out the doorway.

I’ll show passion. REDROOM was fucking Amazing. Too long since I was there all undergrads reading poetry that was I can’t describe anymore. No idea what they meant. Would I have now if I was there again????

Somthing abotu shoes and orgams, one reseprents the other. . . or itw as all symovolic of suomtihng else.I don't know.....Idin't know anyone ether. **AWKWARD**. But Rilling Rocxs and Im OKA. Everything reeeeeeeeked of weeeeeeeed nad cigartttes. I got a smoke off of fof a emo-chick I thought was gonna cry on me as soon as I asked.....She mademe thinki of Jooliah-Shhhnider, actuly.

i haved nneeded a good FCIKUNG cigarette, ar agamsBor shoes,apprentlyBa hard night of driniking. I remember Miek & Davy, oldr than us, they lived thre when I wnt. I hope they haven't gooten ODL and gottin wives and teacching jobs and strted families and careers and lost tehmselxves. Totally exxitedBCAMERA ha been eebben rescued from the moving boxis!! 17 picturues of my toes. I am an orgasm. I am peotry-s orgams spilling over like Emli Dixconson. I am my bare feeeet and they are ograsmic.

I'm still recovering from last night when Mark comes up to me, before our class starts. He hands me a bright green paper, folded over twice.

"I wanted to tell you," he speaks low and confidentially, glancing to the right and left. "I got a gig at Coyote Moon."

"That's awesome! I didn't know you were a musician."

"Yeah, I play guitar."

"That's greatBI'll definitely be there."

"That'd be cool." He tries to be laid-back, but his eyes are bright and he can't restrain his smile. "So, listen, it's Wednesday night. I, um, may not be in Thursday morning, you know?" He attempts a chuckle that leans dangerously close to a smoker's wheeze.

“Mark, you know I can’t excuse you if you don’t show up.”

“C’mon, Ms. Thompson, this is the first time I’ve gotten a gig in a place like this. I couldn’t get on the Friday bill, this was all they had.”

“I’m not saying you can’t go. *Go*. Play. Have a fucking awesome time,” Bthe word’s out before I can catch it. “All I’m saying is, you can’t not come to class and expect me to look the other way.”

He nods his head and studies the floor.

“This is an awesome opportunity, Mark. I’ll definitely be there Wednesday night, but I’ll be here on Thursday morning, too.”

He doesn’t say anything else and shuffles off to his seat. Is it such a big deal? It’s just a stupid night, what does it matter if he comes to class or not?

I don’t know. I’m sure Helen Guillory’s got enough of a file on me as it is, I don’t really need to give her fodder for more.

Wednesday night. I really need some adult friends. All these college kids everywhere make me feel old. Coyote Moon is packed. I get a cranberry and Vodka to calm my nerves and then almost spill it over somebody.

Hazel eyes. Bright hazel eyes. Curly, brown hair. Like a Greek God.

“I’m sorry,” he starts, then stops when he looks at me. “Don’t tell me,” he snaps his finger. “Claire. . . Thompson, right?”

“Actually, it’s Chloe.”

“Yeah, but from Jacobs High, right? Just up the road? Class of 2000?”

“Yeah.”

“Brian Beaumont.”

“Oh, yeah, *yeah*,” You don’t forget someone like Brian Beaumont, but I pretend to “remember” him. I try to recover from the shock of old crushes resurfacing. “How the fuck are you?”

“I’m good, I’m real good.”

“I didn’t know you were still in town.”

“No, I haven’t been. I only moved back a few months ago. My uncle has a downtown gallery he wants to hand over. What are *you* doing here?”

I wave at the awkward kid on stage, already a song or two into his set. “I came to watch my student play.”

“Your student? Wait, let’s sit down.”

We squeeze through the crowds and find a booth near the back.

“So, you’re teaching him music?”

“No,” I wish I was that cool. “I’m teaching his Fine Arts class at Jacobs.”

Brian gapes at me and doesn’t say anything for a long time.

“Wow,” he finally manages, unenthusiastically. I take a long sip of my drink, wishing I had made it a double. “I never pinned you as a . . . teacher. Maybe when you got old and tired yourself out of photography. But now . . .”

He turns around and feigns interest in Mark’s performance. I concentrate on the dull, nauseating ache that has settled firmly in my lungs.

“He’s not bad,” Brian says. “You said you teach him Fine Arts?”

Yes, Brian. I teach him Fine *fucking* Arts. I teach him about ancient burial grounds and how to glue tiles to cardboard. I have no significant bearing on his life. Or anyone else's.

“So you work in a gallery downtown?” I ask him.

“Yeah, it's really great!” He eagerly hops aboard the escape I give him, and I follow him, weaving in and out of my own inner narrative. In high school, his group and my loneliness never orbited in the same spheres. But get him out of school and suddenly everything changes. The playing field is even.

“You should come check it out,” he ends. His voice is engulfed by a roar of noise. We look to the stage where Mark is already putting away his guitar. I look at my watch: quarter after eleven.

“I've gotta go,” I grab my jacket and stand. “School starts at seven.”

“Wait,” Brian pulls out his wallet and passes me a business card. “You really should come check out our exhibits.”

All I can do is nod dumbly and clutch his card so hard it folds under my fingers.

MADISON GALLERY. BRIAN BEAUMONT, MANAGER.

“Yeah,” I stutter. “I'll call you or something.”

We look at each other awkwardly for a moment, then Brian stands and wraps me in a spine-crunching hug. “It's good to see you again,” he says.

I go out into the cold, dark night, and all of a sudden it's too big and too quiet after so much atmosphere.

I should be in my classroom, grading quizzes and staring out the window. Biting my nails down to the quick, watching the clock push toward three. I should be doing something at least

productive because my last class has left for a college expo and now I have the time I always complain about not having.

Instead I'm in my car, the windows down for crisp, blue-skied December air to pass through. I park in an empty lot downtown and cross the placid street to Madison Gallery, a window and nondescript white door wedged between a bistro and an attorney complex. I try to remember the last time I came to this area, where local artists are finally getting a word in edgewise about what *is* art. I can't remember.

The gallery is warm and tranquil. Barely audible classical music, freshly waxed wood floors, walls painted an off-white. Large paint-splattered canvases fill the lobby, great red and blue mountains rising and spilling over one another. Near the door is one of a nude woman, sprawled on her back over the armrest of a couch. The colors behind her are sharp and jagged—blue and white and orange—striking each other and penetrating her every pore. Paint pours from her mouth like blood. The card next to it reads: “Artist’s Rape.” *Susan Jackson*. \$975.

“Can I help, Chloe?” Brian enters from a room behind the front desk, holding a clipboard thick with papers.

I wave at him like some ten-year-old, rocking back on my heels.

“Just thought I’d stop by. . .”

“Yeah, ahem, well, let’s see.” He looks around, like he’s searching for a tour guide. He gestures at the paintings in the lobby. “Well, this is Susan Jackson. She has more in the main room. Clint Thomas’ textiles are in the side room, just through that hallway” he points at an opening in the main room. “And in the back hall there’s some newbies on temporary display.”

“Newbies,” I repeat with a smile. Trying desperately hard to flirt. Brian just looks distracted.

“A few graduates from the university, trying to branch out a little more. It’s just to get them exposure, you know, a firm foot. I’m sorry,” he waves his clipboard. “You caught me on a hectic day I’m the only one in here.”

“Oh. Well, I’ll just leave.”

“No, stay. Look around as long as you like. I’m just tied up here.” On cue, a phone in the backroom rings. “I’m sorry please, look around.”

He disappears. I’m ready to walk out the door, get in my car and drive myself off a cliff. Jesus Christ, I’m twenty-six years old, why can’t I just be *normal* about these things? I’m ready to deny any motivating part of my body, any encouragement that I’m not the same mess I was in high school, and just leave. Then I hear it.

A song. Just loud enough to subtly cut through the lapses in the classical soundtrack. An *old* song. From freshman-sophomore year, when I was still fumbling with my first camera and eating lunch alone. Nobody had ever heard of the song or the band.

I follow the music, tracing it to the back hallway, through an entrance marked FRESH VOICES, into a dark room. Track lighting spotlights a myriad of art pieces: small sculptures and ceramics on pedestals, paintings and photographs hanging from the wall. A large white block serves as a bench, set in the middle of the room. A projected film fills up one entire wall. On screen, large marionettes pirouette across a stage, and performers in black crawl between them. It’s all set to that song, that old, nostalgic song. Just a couple of punks tinkering in their garage, creating sweet harmony to match an age in life, a setting and a milestone.

Where did I go wrong? Where did I go?

The deliberate passion, the determination to ride above relentless mediocrity, neckties and nine-to-fives, is overwhelming. Stifling, if it didn't open all kinds of thoughts and guilt in me. And that song, tugging me back to the place I don't want to think about, to the place I don't want to be.

All this time in a high school, and I didn't realize until now how hard I've been trying to forget it. Lunches alone, corralled cafeterias, roaming free during lunch period, camera and art pass in hand. The escape in college. A place to be anyone, anyone at all, anyone except Claire Thompson. Call me Sylvia Vane. Call me Esmeralda. Call me Chloe. A camera as the ultimate alias. Call me the artist. Call me the artful voyeur of your brain's exposed and darkened combs. Now take off your clothes. Let me lick your soul with my lens and black rooms.

Where did I go since then? Where did I *go*?

"Chloe?" Brian is next to me, his large warm hand on my shoulder, as though he's always been there. I look at him, realizing I'm sitting on the bench. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just. . . taking it all in."

"I'm just going to close up shop early"

"And you've been waiting on me. I'm sorry, I'm just clueless about those things."

"No, it's okay. We're just slow today."

I search for the jacket that had come off me at some point.

"Well, I won't keep you. I'm sure you've got other things to do."

"That depends. Do you want to get a drink?"

It must be the music. The photographs on the wall that remind me of my early work. This trance I've been in, delving into a part of myself I've avoided for years. But, "I'd love one," spills out before I can think twice.

We walk to a small, plain bar full of smoke and slowly filling with people. We sit at the bar and Brian, being a gentleman, pays for our first drinks. Modern-day woman that I am, I pay for a couple of shots.

We talk. We talk about high school. About the old baseball team, the photography contests I entered and won but no one found out about. About Mrs. Crown's ever-increasing strangeness, and Helen Guillory, her protege. About that goth girl he dated right before we graduated. About Tucker and his exhibits and DiFranco, whoever the hell he is.

Third and fourth drinks come by, and we forget who was covering who. We throw money at the bartender and let him figure it out for us.

Brian talks about himself. I let him because it's better than the alternative, talking about me. He tells his post-graduate adventures in Europe and San Fran. His uncle bought Madison Gallery a few years ago and was looking for someone with a business degree and an artist's eye to manage it. So Brian returned.

"I didn't know you had an artist's eye," I attempt to say, but I'm sure it doesn't come out near so eloquent.

"You know," he shrugs lazily. "Not in *Bnot* at *Jacobs*. But in college, you know, experimenting and all. There's more fun to be had in business and art than business and . . ."

"Paper factories."

"Exactly."

Our conversations fade with our money, and we stumble back to the gallery. Rosy-cheeked in the bitter air, we stroll under the premature Christmas lights wrapped around trees and light poles. Legs giddy, lungs tight, but we manage. We prop ourselves against my car. He says he'll wait for the bus.

Then he leans in. Soft, wet lips touch mine. I almost collapse on the sidewalk. He's rich with the musk of whiskey. The wind whips past us, too busy to pay any mind. Heat rushes from my feet to my head. This is no drunk kiss. This is no flippant thing between a rekindled (firstly kindled?) friendship. This is *passion*.

My car is stale with the cold. I grip the icy steering wheel the whole way home, until my knuckles are snow white. Through the fogging windshield, Christmas lights and traffic stops glow blurry and warm at me.

Alive is the only word for it. I must have been dying before, because *this* is living. Coyote Moon again, then Red Room, the bar near the gallery, Brian's apartment, my apartment. He resurrects everything that was dying in my sub-consciousness. With him, I can remember the person I was, the person I was determined to be. He makes me believe I can be her again.

He asks me why I don't take pictures anymore, so I pull out my camera and snap half a roll of his sleeping body. I try to manipulate the lighting without waking him up, but my hands feel so awkward. Except for that one night of my toes after too many drinks, nothing I take feels "right."

Brian and his adventures have pulled me out of the mire. We travel to ambiguous towns and abandoned fairgrounds, searching for the old woman in the diner, the little girl who exudes

innocence. Brian knows just how to act around an artist. He never says a word, walks into the perfect spot when a lone observer is exactly what's needed, kisses my hair when I'm in deep concentration. I wish I could live up to his behavior and *be* an artist in return. Nothing I do feels certain.

Every day this school grows smaller. Everyone looks down at their toes and counts the passing minutes. This afternoon, I realize that 75 % of my day is spent looking at the student's heads, their bare napes exposed to florescent lighting as they work tirelessly on mundane quizzes.

Then it hits me in the gut: *Holy shit. I'm an executioner.*

Executioner of dreams and ambitions, of wandering minds and independence, threatening with the ultimate end. A life doomed to the narrow corridor offered to high school dropouts. Unless they have some artistic ability to pull them out of that prison.

Class class class can kiss my ass. Pop quizzes abound because I can't think of anything else to do. All I want to do is get one fucking shot right. Sophie asks if we can do more class projects, "Something more fun." So they're going to give presentations of their favorite artist. Before the holidays. It'll give her an excuse to look at the Dali prints.

Bernie says something I can't hear, but it doesn't sound flattering, so I send him to the disciplinarian. As he leaves, he mumbles, "This is bullshit."

"You're bullshit!" I yell. "Now get the hell out of my classroom!" Everyone is stunned into silence. I spend too many mindless hours not saying what I want. I'm tired of fighting it.

Mark has dropped off the radar. To compensate, Lucy has doubled the visits she and her anarchist haircut make, each time with a new mindless question:

“Have you seen Mark today?” “Did he play a show last night?” “He wants to go to L.A. Do you think he could really *make it*?”

Meanwhile, I’m dreaming of the abandoned fairgrounds, poking through the bones of last year’s fair, trying to capture the remains of their souls with my lens. Trying morph them into something deep, with a soul of its own.

When Mark is here, he’s sleeping. When he’s not sleeping, his blood-shot eyes and dark rings underneath stare blankly at me. I can hear him coming down the hall, sniffing and coughing his way to class. I told him his girlfriend was looking for him and he nodded longer than was necessary.

“How you feeling?” I asked. He shrugged his shoulders and studied the blackboard behind me.

“Aw, you know. I think I’m coming down with something.”

“Been playing more shows?”

“Not really. Just partying, hanging out the usual.”

“Well, take it easy. You’ll do better if you can finish high school.” That’s as far as I can take my “mentor speak,” but he’s already nodding at the floor, deep in a world where my voice is just a bass note, incomprehensible, unneeded. Charlie Brown’s teacher echoing between his ears.

.....My orgasmic toes. Frail and pink, bearing the weight of my soul and body. Carrying me beyond my will. Tagged for identification. Lost in the shuffle and two-step. Crammed into

leather and stiletto. Dragging me on and on, buried under sand, upright and free in summer breezes

Brian's in the shower. I'm in a circle of black and white death. Five rolls developed, and not one of them right. My orgasmic toes are clearly faking it for the shot, Brian's naked body is listless under garish lighting, or lost in shadows. Abandoned stuffed animals eaten by rain and fairgrounds dirt don't look helpless, or poignant, or anything. Can't do anything with them. Except maybe that one of my toes, blurred, slightly off-center, the broken macaroni necklace almost all the way out of shot.

Soft lips on my ear, a warm and wet chest against my back, Brian's stubble rough against my neck. I twist out of the intrusion.

"I thought you were going to shave."

I turn over another photograph and find the back of Brian's head, set in front of growing storm clouds and a straight hedge of trees. It would've been good if there hadn't been so much of his neck.

"Are you getting these ready for a show?"

I give a laugh rich in sarcasm. "Yeah, that's it."

But when I turn to look at him, all I want to do is jump back into the bed we just crawled out of. When he comes in, I fall even more inside myself, a womb within a womb. A nest that lets be anyone. I could stay there sorting through catacombs of memory and identity, never emerging until I know who I am again.

“You know,” he says, leaning back to sit on the ground. His towel hikes up his hairy thighs. “I was looking through our old yearbook the other day and I couldn’t find a Chloe anywhere.” His look is one I can’t be sure of. A look that’s more convinced than not that we know each other, but laced with doubt. Or suspicion. Or a look that’s putting together pieces that appear to fit. “It *is* Thompson, right?”

“Yeah,” I nod at him. “I just go by Chloe. Is it such a big deal?”

He shakes his head. “Only a little strange. Claire is fine.”

“I’m not Claire,” I tell him, and kiss him so hard my cheeks flush from the heat he’s still emanating.

These presentations are not fulfilling my need to stay awake. Mark gives his presentation as a conglomerate blob of mumbles, shrugs and snuffles. He looks as restless as I feel. He loses his place quickly and barely finishes a thought. When someone snickers at him, I Shhhhhh her in a loud, spitty stage whisper.

Bernie wants to present a porn director, with video links in his Powerpoint to illustrate this “master of cinematic art.” I tell him to pick an artist from the book or get an F. He picks a random Renaissance painter and reads straight from the textbook. At least he’s smart about being a punk-ass. I still think a heavy dose of corporal punishment would take care of him once and for all.

I leave Brian in a mix of snores and musk, tightly wrapped in thin sheets and venture to Red Room again. Alone, because he’s too tired from planning the gallery’s benefit night. I meet

a girl I thought I knew, and she did too, but our memory can't match the names. We decide that good intentions are good enough, and travel back to her place with a few other unnamed strangers. She lives in a community of shotgun houses, cheap rent and plastic chairs. We close ourselves in her backyard and drink beer and smoke tobacco, sweet after all this time away. The intensity of our dialogue reverberates around us. I study the torn jeans, the spiked hair, the plaid suspenders, and blow smoke at the stars. The only thing missing is my camera.

No sign of Lucy. She must be cornered by Helen Guillory and her pleadings to "just let it out." Helen has been on my back lately, questioning me about "trouble students" and "hot issues." I briefly consider sending Bernie to her, but I don't want to do that to her. Or to Bernie. Or to me, since I'd have to hear it from both of them. The further I can get away from the psychological dilemmas people are going through, the better off I can maybe make myself.

I wish those pictures had come out better than they did. I wanted to send some to Tucker and get his opinion. Hear him tell me how fucking badass they are. Tell me I'm going in the right direction. Tell me it's not too late to do something with my life.

To start over.

Back home, thoughts racing around; deep hungers awaken in my mind, overtake my senses, render me restless in a classroom, at home, with Brian. Desire to contribute, to cultivate a body of work, blocks out all noise, keeps the chaos from seeping into my brain and paralyzing me with the stench of fear and the fear of unfinished sentences andB

“Let’s act like adults,” he says. “Let’s be reasonable.” But I don’t have time to be an adult. I’ve already lost so much time just by standing still, moving backwards without fighting. Now I’m fighting just so I won’t sink underneath the weight of the whole ordeal again.

Dark nights I turn over again and again, under layers of blankets and clothes. Too poor to turn on the heat. Cold means moving, moving means I’m LIVING, once and for all, finally, after all this time. Toss and turns prevent death, worm’s food in a tomb.

Squatting on the sink, cold feet in the silver basin, lean out the window over it and blow sweet, mentholated tobacco into the blue-black sky. Breathe out pane. Pain. It’s not all lost. Everything isn’t lost in brick, mortar and promise-teasing window panes. There’s a big, wide world Mama, and I’m going out there, I’m stepping out into time and life.

Can I?

BIG gulps of air and smoke, hold my breath until my lungs threaten to break open and spill thick clouds of condensed water vapor into the barely black night. The darkness is soundful of engines humming, night clubs open and bodies spill into the streets.

I think Helen Guillory suspects something. She caught me today in the lounge, while I was studying the coffee. The more I drink it, the more it takes on a licorecy taste. Maybe it’s acquired...?

“Hey hun,” her voice is full of false affection. “How’s it going?”

“Oh, you know,” I sniff and wipe at my nose with the Kleenex that’s always with me these days.

“Sounds like you have a cold.” This wouldn’t be such a trying conversation if: 1) she didn’t talk to me like a ten-year-old, and 2) she actually meant it.

“Well, you know, I stuck my head out of a window at two a.m. last night. I think I’ll make up for it and stick my head in the oven tonight.”

Helen chokes on her own coffee, and I see a smile struggling against many years of self-restraint.

“Well,” she croaks finally. She clears her throat. “Sounds like you’ve picked up on the students’ humor. How is relating to them progressing?”

A heavy sigh escapes me without warning. Words spill out like they’ve been colliding in my mind, without buffers or boundaries.

“I’m trapped in lesson plans no one really gives a fuck about, and everyone’s stuck in a class that no one, including myself, really want to be in. They’re just *here*, not doing anything, just *here*, to pay their dues and move on. And I can’t blame them. I’m jealous they can move away after some time, I’m pretty much terrified that this is my last stop. So, you know,” I grab my briefcase, ready for my escape. “Just ‘making a difference’ in the youth of today.”

The switch inside me flips off. Helen gapes at me, her jaw working its hinges, struggling for the right mantra for this situation. The door is only three long strides away. I’m out and down the hall, internally combusting.

BIG fight. *The big fight.*

“I’m never coming back!” I want to yell and slam his door behind me. But would he follow me? Would he tackle me in the stairwell until our tears and bruises blended together, and coax me back to him?

He doesn’t like my “attitude.” I tell him, “Fuck you. You’re the one with the fucking attitude.” Getting on me about my job—the job he never liked, never thought was suited for me, never believed could be mine, just playing games with everyone—and then getting on me for *escaping* that job. Telling me I’m out every night in the week, when it’s only three, maybe four nights. And that’s more than I went out before I met him, when I was miserably horribly alone.

Again. Needs to breathe. Says I suffocate him. Which isn’t logical if I’m never around to suffocate him and his “attitude.” Fine. If I’m such a clingy bitch, so attentive for his love, I’ll go home. I have an apartment I still pay rent on. It’s cold and only lit by street lamps. It suits me.

Red Room Reading again. Purple thumbs, lesbian love, developing families in the age of a nuclear holocaust are the topics of choice this month. I see the unnamed familiar girl again; she reeks of that herbal, mind-altering haze. We sit on the bistro chairs outside, lighting up and throwing back.

“Fuck!” She exclaims in the middle of a thought. “I know you!”

I nod patiently. The hit she took must have been a heavy one.

“No, I mean, I really fucking know you.” She looks at me hard. “Didn’t you go to school upstate? We took a ceramics class together!”

“No shit?” I take a long drag off my cigarette. She does look familiar in an art-school kind of way.

“Shit, yes!” She nods eagerly. “You’re Esmeralda! You were all over that bandBwhat was it, Jake Falstaff, Jake something.”

“Oh yeah,” I smile. “Jack Falls Down.”

“Man, I looked *everywhere* for them, with the way you went on about it. I never found them.”

“They don’t exist. I made them up.”

Her face is priceless: blue eyes glazed in pot and confusion, mouth open, like I was explaining quantum physics.

“You . . . made them up?”

I shrug my shoulders. “Just like my name. I went by Esmeralda, for about half a year.”

“Why?”

“Hell if I know . . .” I sip my beer and watch the freshly legal kids awkwardly approach the entrance near us. They warily eye our obvious adulthood and maturity. “Not to be me.”

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck if I say it long enough I’ll strip all meaning and strip all reason from it and tear everything apart, uproot the truth and set it out to sea. Words on a loop until they lose all meaning. Until I lose all meaning. Nothing left but a hole wearing itself away.

Brian’s couch is soft and forgiving, just like he shouldn’t be but always is. He wraps me tight in blanket upon blanket so I can sweat out the fever I haveBsweat out the cancer of my mind. I can’t make my bed, but he can and I can at least lie in it. He kisses me on the forehead, like my dad did with soft tender graces that lasted longer than my rebellions ever could.

Flyers and assemblies and private meetings with Helen, swelling with victims' tears, her talons outstretched for more. Lucy weeping, her hair tamed down, no makeup out of respect for the dead. Frightening as a church mouse. Anarchy is annihilated by grief, bringing us back to our normal, respectable selves. She's just a little girl in eyeliner and hair gel. She thinks I can give her answers, give a solution for a heart that's not supposed break yet. But Lucy isn't the anarchist, she's the frail child, and I mishandle her; I can't give her the hope of life or kindness. All I do is break her a little more.

Brian is on the phone with Mom. Let him handle her. He can explain why I can't possibly leave this apartment, this couch, this deep and hollowing out going on inside me, even if it is Christmas. It's good that he's talking, because my vocabulary has diminished to "yeah" and "okay," which isn't much protection against the likes of Mom.

I really did try. I tried to be adult and reasonable. I slept in my cold coffin, still as a corpse. Death winds howled outside my windows. I smoked and I drank until my pagan knees collapsed in prayer and the wiccan wood was cool on my face. I followed the traces I left behind, through the night, and begged under tears, at Brian's door, to be understood.

Strung out on Ecstasy, a body burning itself from within, blood dripping out his nose from when he hit the floor. When his mother found him, his tongue had swollen like a sponge in water. Did she find him in the bathroom? Was the linoleum cold enough for his pyre of liver and esophagus and lungs? Did he stare at his reflection in the mirror, until the darkness burned out his eyes like reels that melt on-screen in movie theaters?

Brian's still on the phone with Mom. I can hear his voice over the COPS episode on TV. A black officer handcuffs two crying women and puts them in the back of the squad car. He tells

their mascara-lined cheeks, their cries for mercy, “If I don’t take you to jail, I wouldn’t be doing my job.”

Job.

Job tested by God. Why would anyone take his model of suffering beyond denial, his everlasting tribulation, and say that “earning a living” is equivalent to his own life?

.....3:47.....3:48.....3.....
.....3:51.....am or pm?.....where ar
.....e.....my .
.....t...t...t...t...o.....oes.....tight.....warm.....you won’t.....you
will..... won’t
you?.....leave.....no.....no.....n.....oooo.....not hungry
.....

It's all shifting apart. My orgasmic toes can feel it within their bones. The walls behind the Jerry Springer TV, the walls behind me, fall open like wet cardboard.

Steel I am Steel. They are wet plaster, I am too strong for its strength.

They are too big, bigger than I ever will be they are
a very big box for a very small mouse Lucy the church mouse in small coffins with
a stupid stupid boy. In a minute the roof will lift and Suzanne the lab tech will drop food and jot
notes on her pad.

He's done

My life is sweeeeeeeeeetest

For.

Sleep.

Sleeping all day.

no thought

all day gave

ME

to you.

Burst your

LUNGS

how it feels,

bear

down trapped

*I'm sorry you never knew
me, I was like that,
I'm not sorry you're never
going to know me.
Not sorry.*

itsnotfair

Don't yell at me, don't yell, I don't know. I don't know because I don't want to see a dead body and Lucy-the-church-mouse and not Lucy-the-anarchist, and Helen sucking the blood of all who come near her, and the homilies of someone, built on a foundation of lies.

When I die I don't want a whole lot of bullshit. I want the cold facts
Byou, you can tell them
Btell them:

“Claire Thompson was a liar. She lived in a new persona as it suited her, never settling down to one, and never settling down to anyone or anything. She failed to live any life she tried to make, much less her own. She maybe could have been a decent okay photographer, but she chickened out and spent the rest of her miserable life either reliving or relieving this colossal fear.”

Tell them that.

He was no Tucker. What was he going to do, anyway? Where was he going to go? Just a kid with a guitar and the same music and the same looks as everyone else. Wouldn't he just burn

out in the light of his realization? What if he were allowed to be loosed into Alice's wonderland of his own imagination? The open and most liberated of all his parts only choking in the virtue of open horizons, suffocating on all that free air.

In the darkest of night he comes to me. Screams I don't remember starting. I call him Bor did I Bor do I call him because he's already here? Is it because he's there there that's . . . that's . . . yes or no? It's dark in my mind and behind my back and my eyes, everything is clenched tight, because I want to fall deeper and deeper away from the rest of him. He buries me in his sweat, and I claw at his back with nail-bitten fingers, trying to grip his liver and kidney and squeeze out his essence into me.

The apartment is full of the stench of death and the heat of dismemberment, but I don't have the strength to withstand it.

Downtown people swell in eddies of cigarettes and complimentary champagne, dressed in every flavor and status. Everyone has made it out to witness the birth of a new world. I'm wearing the only nice dress I have with me and a large coat to hide it under. Brian used his artist's eye to help me with makeup. We mingle in the cold death of the old year, neither of us fond of choking on the grieving heat in the bars. We don't talk. Our hands are a communication of soft flesh and gentle touches. Outside city hall, a laser display gives our red-numbered countdown.

It is precisely 11:55:07 when I wake up.

Like memories returning after amnesia, like bones snapping back into place, I see the timeline of my life. It's as clear as the stars in the sky over that small town we once drove through, again and again, when I was desperately searching for meaning. I can see the pattern of passion matched with destiny, desperation met by fear, the moment of absolute truth.

Everyone threw off their caps and gowns and left for New York or L.A. or Europe. I told them I was going to start my eighteen-kid family with a farmer in the foothills of South Carolina. They laughed and said, "We'll see you in New York."

And I never went. My doors were flung open and the breeze of freedom I tasted was sharp and frightening. I was afraid. Mom's tears and a deep thudding echoed in my ears, the sound of my own heartbeat. I misinterpreted its rhythm, turned and RAN RAN RAN RAN. Straight back to Mom, crying on her shoulder for the first time in eight years. She gave me an elixir and I drank deep the hemlock to get rid of the shaking fear. I moved out, moved on, swallowed big gulps and hoped my hands would be destroyed in a freak accident, so they wouldn't guilt me for what I had taken from them.

But it all has caught up. Binding passion has twisted my heart out of contentment. *Settling*. I have settled. I gave up something that was closer to me than my own marrow, then my own capillaries.

11:59:53. Brian smiles at me. His eyes hold my locked secrets and malcontent. Alive with knowledge of himself, what he's doing, where he's going.

I don't want to know where I'm going. I don't need to know. I want to find whatever there is to find. No parachute, no net, no guidebook. I want to find whatever it is I ran away from not so long ago.

Every yells suddenly, and the laser display rains black and white balloons, black and white confetti. With one romantic arm, Brian sweeps me into him and kisses me deeply. I watch the fireworks explode just behind his left ear, over the tops of buildings. Red, green, blue, gold.

I am a firework, too, all this time burning down to my fuse, only just now realizing it.

When Brian lets go, I take the rest of my champagne in one gulp and throw it to the ground. It breaks into tiny pieces that glitter on the pavement. I stare at my feet, not hearing the latest rendition of “Auld Lang Syne,” only barely sensing Brian nudging my arm. The shards of glass reflect the dirt beneath and the fireworks above. I know exactly how to capture it on film. In a photograph. Part of a series. In an exhibit.

In New York.

“Dear Claire Thompson,” the reprimand begins, before diving into a list of infractions and “unprofessional behavior,” things Helen has probably been stocking up since we first met. It goes into the trash. Left behind with my bed, my couch, everything else that won’t fit in my car. Survival mode. Only the smallest survive.

My classroom has few mementos: a few papers, that picture of my mom and the weeds.

“It’s important you don’t blame yourself, Claire.”

The woman is a fucking witch. I almost throw my box of souvenirs at her. Helen faces me in the hallway, across a distance of four classrooms. The hall contains only the two of us, devoid of people two days into the new year.

“Mark had many issues,” Helen continues, leaning forward earnestly but never taking a step. “It’s not your fault.”

I can't help laughing. "I don't blame myself. It's not Mark. Or Sophie. Or even Bernie, God damn the little bastard. It's me. This!" I gesture at the empty classrooms, the lockers, the hallways full of repressed memories and undiscovered potential, the desperate clawing from today's youth. "It's just not for me. It's not me."

Helen strains against gravity, edging toward me. I can see her hungry, desperate eyes reflected in her glasses.

"If you ever need to talk!"

"I'll be sure to spell my veins with your name, Helen."

I shift the box to the other hip and turn around. The only sound I hear is my shoes echoing in the empty corridor.

He lets me back into his bed tonight. We grope hungrily between the sheets, our kisses hot and thick. The abyss between us widens a little more. He sleeps heavily afterward, and I stand to look outside his window. There's a view of downtown, lit against the dark sky, and the freeway is congested even at this hour. I imagine everyone out there is getting the hell out of this town; I almost wish that Lucy was in one of those cars. A renewed and hardened anarchist heading West, telling the world, "Fuck it, *I'm* going to make it big in L.A."

Brian sleeps like a baby, dead to the world. His feet stick out of the sheets at odd angles. Never wearing shoes has let all the adventures of his life be written on his soles. Through lines and bruises and dirt I can read his adventures abroad, the new lives and new women he's picked up across the country. His toes point crookedly, a burnt black shade in the soft moonlight through the window.

Whether he suspects or not, I can't tell. He has that ability to look deep within me, taking apart my pieces and reading my self better than I ever could. Maybe he's known all along, read it in the lines on my face and the fire in my eyes and has stayed mute, giving me the confidence to shrug him off.

I climb onto the footboard and level my camera at his world-worn toes. The darkness lies around in quiet sobriety. Brian fakes sleeping, punctuating the silence with convincing snores. The freeway is full of Lucys and Marks and Tuckers, racing off a side of a cliff, willing to take the risk.

It's the perfect shot.

I pull on my clothes slowly, watching Brian all the while. I place the picture of my toes, from that night after Red Room two months ago, under his cell phone on the night stand. Everything I need is already in the car.

The air is bitter cold and my breaths come in short as I cross the parking lot.

I understand the potential now, to fail and to succeed. The wide leap it takes to find out which one it will be. Denying that opportunity to know, to be proved one way or the other, is to deny myself as an artist. To deny who I am.

Inside the car, there is a breaking of life—freezing and bone-chilling, but *life* all the same. It's time to fall face-first into my own abyss. Where or when I'll land doesn't even matter. Just to fall is enough.