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STRANGERS AND INTIMATES: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by

Kathy West

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Kathy West

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

Date

Stephen Tuttle, Chair

Date

Kimberly Johnson

Date

Bruce Jorgensen

Date

Stephen Tuttle
Graduate Advisor

Date

Nicholas Mason
Associate Chair for Graduate Studies

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Kathy West in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including tables, figures, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

Date

Stephen Tuttle
Chair, Graduate Committee

Departmental Approval

Trenton Hickman
Graduate Coordinator

College Approval

Scott Sprenger
Associate Dean, College of Humanities

ABSTRACT

STRANGERS AND INTIMATES: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

Kathy West

Department of English

Master of Fine Arts

This creative thesis includes five short stories that explore paradoxical ways in which people can feel alone, even if they are together. Although a combination of isolation and intimacy can occur in any human relationship, the stories in this collection spend much of their time with family circles in particular, considering the way that our closest, most permanent relationships can simultaneously prove the most intimate and the most isolating.

The critical introduction that precedes the collection examines each story individually, discussing their strategies and subject matter in terms of this idea. The introduction also discusses the binary of intimacy and isolation, and how it relates to fiction's ability to evoke sympathy in its readers.

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I thank my parents, David and Sharon, for encouraging me to write since those first senseless scribbles; my brothers, Daniel, Adam, and Stephen, for their fortitude in the face of all the creative undertakings I expected them to witness (including my endless ballet recitals); my sister, Anne, for inspiring me with her own word count; and my sister, Sophie, for reminding me never to give up. Lastly, I want to thank Christopher for asking if he could read my stories on the first day we met. That question changed everything.

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STRANGERS AND INTIMATES: AN INTRODUCTION

The first time I moved truly far from home, I roomed with a girl I initially assumed was very unlike me. She arrived from China a few days before I flew in from Utah. We couldn't even pronounce one another's names correctly before she latched onto my arm and remained attached for most of my first day in Hawaii. As we walked around campus, she told me how lonely she had been for the two days that she waited for me. She told me how glad she felt that I had come. She told me, "Now, we can be alone together."

At first, I thought of Xue Lian's statement as one more example of her imperfect English. But as the semester continued, I saw how well she had described our relationship on that first day. We *were* together: we ate lunch at the same table, we slept in beds situated only a few feet from each other, and we undressed and dressed in the same room. We were one another's first friends in a strange place. But at the same time, we remained alone. I couldn't understand why she hated the beach. She couldn't understand why I cried in front of other people. We encountered endless differences: language, appearance, culture, upbringing, tastes in food and clothes and boys. While we became increasingly close as friends, I became increasingly aware of how little we really understood one another.

My friendship with Xue Lian provides a clear example of simultaneous distance and closeness—of feeling alone, together—mainly because of our obvious differences. But I have encountered the same binary in relationships with people who share more similarities with me than I shared with my Chinese roommate. Regardless of our shared nationality, native tongue, or even last name, we experience degrees of perceptual and

emotional distance. This collection, *Strangers and Intimates*, explores the implications of those distances in human relationships—gaps between people that can make them feel simultaneously alone and together. Although such gaps occur in a variety of human contexts, the five short stories in this collection spend much of their time with family circles in particular, considering the way that our most permanent relationships can simultaneously prove the most intimate and the most isolating.

The first story in this collection, “Diver Training,” follows a young couple whose relationship changes in the face of a strange illness. Rich and Julie move to Hawaii a year before the story actually starts, under circumstances different from mine: they each come with a spouse, a confidante. They arrive together, so they have no reason to feel entirely alone. As the story opens, Rich starts to experience odd and unexplainable symptoms of a disease that remains undiagnosed throughout the piece. The couple has already established a close relationship, and the illness reinforces it in certain ways. Rich’s illness makes Julie more attentive to her husband’s physical needs. She helps him to eat when he is weak. When she lies next to him in bed, she notices his clammy skin. Rich’s disease worries her on a personal, daily basis.

While it invites Julie to be closer to her husband, Rich’s illness simultaneously isolates her from him. She does not have a name to explain his symptoms, she cannot find anything he is willing to eat, and the activities they once participated in jointly—particularly SCUBA diving—are no longer options in light of Rich’s physical state. Before Rich falls ill, he is the charismatic weekend SCUBA instructor for college kids. When his illness prevents him from going, Rich asks Julie to take over his role, which she initially resists. She eventually takes the students up the shore by herself, a physical

enactment of the isolation they both feel. Rich's illness brings Julie to his side, but they each experience their pains and worries individually.

Rich and Julie's experience raises questions about why I write about this concept in the first place and why I bother exploring it through fiction, when reality offers so many examples of people moving together or apart. The paradoxical dynamics of intimacy and isolation have much to do with how well people sympathize—one of fiction's concerns that James Wood addresses in *How Fiction Works*. He explains that, reaching as far back as Plato, dramatic narratives have always engaged two particular issues:

One is centered on the question of mimesis and the real (what should fiction represent?), and the other on the question of sympathy, and how fictional narrative exercises it. Gradually, these two recurrent discussions merge, and one finds that from Samuel Johnson on, it is a commonplace that sympathetic identification with characters is in some way dependent on fiction's true mimesis: to see a world and its fictional people truthfully may expand our capacity for sympathy in the actual world. (171-72)

The idea of *sympathy*—a word whose roots mean “to feel with”—suggests that we can experience another's pain. But this assumption is not entirely true; we can only witness and imagine. We cannot fully feel others' pain, but we *can* express pity or sorrow in its presence. These stories circle around the paradox of sympathy: as unable as we are to understand others, we can choose to remain nearby and make the attempt anyway. I am interested in how well we might succeed. I often write about the ways we fail. I investigate these successes and failures through fiction in particular because the genre has

helped me investigate them in my own life.

Wood claims that the artist's rendering of content can elicit in us a sense of sympathy for fictional characters, which then extends to sympathy for actual people. Ten years ago, I encountered the fictional work that best accomplished this two-fold task for me as a reader—of making me believe in a “world and its fictional people,” and through that world, making me more sympathetic toward others: Wallace Stegner's *All the Little Live Things*. The novel follows the narration of Joe Alston, a pessimistic, sometimes drunk, retired literary agent who has retreated to the California hills with his wife to get away from everyone. When the Catlins move in nearby, he develops a fatherly affinity for Marian, the young, pregnant wife who wills the baby in her womb to grow faster than the cancer spreading through her body. Every time I read the book, I fall in love with Marian. I ache for her body's attack on itself, ache for her husband's struggle, ache for her daughter's loss, ache for her unborn child, and then watch her die.

But I do not return so often to the novel because of its tragic events. I return because the entire narrative—Joe's work in the garden, the Catlins' banter on the patio, and the neighborhood's mounting discord—enacts the binary that fascinates me. On every page, I see the conflict between Joe's tendency to isolate himself and Joe's attempts to connect. He acknowledges this conflict himself in the first chapter, as he reflects back on the summer the Catlins moved in:

Sympathy I have failed in, stoicism I have barely passed. But I have made straight A in irony—that curse, that evasion, that armor, that way of staying safe while seeming wise. One thing I have learned hard, if indeed I have learned it now: it is a reduction of our humanity to hide from pain,

our own or others'. To hide from anything. That was Marian's text. Be open, be available, be exposed, be skinless. Skinless? Dance around in your bones. (12)

Joe says he has failed in sympathy, but I disagree. Whether or not the narrator feels he has sympathy for others, he generates the sympathy in his reader that Wood talks about, perhaps *because* of his inability to sympathize. Marian's situation is potentially melodramatic: she dies of cancer. But Joe Alston, a grumpy old man who wishes to be left alone, narrates her demise from a distance. He loves Marian for challenging his isolationism, but never fully endorses her "text." At times, he still wants to remain a stranger to everyone and everything, in order to feel safe; he acknowledges that complete availability might display more humanity, but it hurts. Throughout the novel, Joe sometimes wants the benefits of being an intimate, while maintaining the advantages of being a stranger. He enacts a very human—and therefore, sympathetic—reaction to pain, emotional or otherwise, thereby saving the book from its melodramatic risks. His tendency toward distance and his stumbling attempts at intimacy draw readers into a story that becomes his, not Marian Catlin's. I return to this story often because I love its characters' simultaneous hesitations and efforts to arrive at open, available skinlessness.

In Stegner's work, I find this openness, even eagerness, to explore humanity's pain, to get close to it, and to make it familiar when other people (including characters like Joe Alston) might prefer to keep their distance. I generally want to remain a stranger to pain in my own life, but Stegner has convinced me that confronting it through writing is a worthwhile endeavor. Because he does so, his stories are engaging, his language rich, and his characters absolutely full. When exploring Stegner's strategies for achieving

these ends in *On Teaching and Writing Fiction*, I found that he said this of his own writing: “It is fiction as truth that I am concerned with here, fiction that reflects experience instead of escaping it, that stimulates instead of deadening” (1). I do not interpret “fiction as truth” to mean a transcription of events that actually happened. I interpret the phrase as an invitation to let the truth of my own experience inform my stories in order to inspire sympathy. In the five stories here, sympathy emerges in the shifting boundaries between privacy and personal disclosure.

While such boundaries exist in any human circumstance, I am personally interested in the way they shift in the face of illness—which often involves a trip to the doctor. Most interactions at the doctor’s office involve a binary of the impersonal and the private. Imagine sitting in a doctor’s waiting room. The nurse who calls your name asks, “How are you?” as you walk to the exam room together. If you answer honestly—your back hurts or your eyes burn—she may look surprised, as if she expected a response in the socially appropriate affirmative. You are, after all, strangers. A moment later, however, she matter-of-factly collects information that you don’t generally provide to strangers: your blood pressure, your weight, and, if you’re a woman, the first day of your last menstrual cycle. This tension between feeling simultaneously like a stranger and an intimate may continue through the rest of the visit, with a doctor who peers into your ears or asks probing questions about your bowel movements, while double-checking the chart in front of him to remember your name.

This personal-yet-impersonal interaction is not the doctor’s fault. Nor do the medically oriented stories in this collection aim to resolve the incongruity. Instead, they depict physical ailments in order to explore how those ailments affect boundaries of

familiarity that might remain unchanged if illness were absent. Complete strangers become privy to the personal because of their expertise. Family and close friends may find themselves left out. Robin Romm, who wrote about the last weeks of her mother's terminal illness in *The Mercy Papers*, explained that illness as subject matter becomes compelling because it ups the ante—in terms of sympathy, as well as everything else. “If life is at stake, everything is at stake” (1). *Everything* can include meaningful relationships; the stories in this collection often explore the way those relationships are complicated when the doctor's office gets involved.

My story, “Diver Training,” illustrates the way the space of the doctor's office enacts the personal-but-impersonal paradox. As Rich's symptoms persist, Julie invites doctors into their lives—people they have never met—who get to know Rich at the level of his cells, but do not know much else about him. After visiting several doctors, Julie and Rich encounter an overly decorated waiting room. The space looks cheery and inviting, but they feel like strangers in it, a feeling that prepares them for the distance Julie fears they may encounter in the exam room. In *Lost Bodies*, Laura Tanner describes a waiting room at a doctor's office as a place that “uncovers the body's vulnerability” by placing the patient in an unfamiliar space where everyone waiting there is potentially ill (70). The “threat of serious illness . . . shadows even the most routine mammogram or colonoscopy,” because results are still uncertain (65). The waiting room is a liminal space between being unknown and known. Rich does not just wait to become acquainted with his doctor; he waits to become better acquainted with his own body, which has become strange to both him and Julie.

Not all medical isolation happens in a doctor's presence. For instance,

“Unexpected Plans,” this collection’s final story, revolves around Ava Lee, who lives through most of her medical fears away from a clinic. Her family and friends do not know that she has scheduled an MRI to look for a possible brain tumor: not her sister, boyfriend, nor mother. And before she can tell anyone, Ava receives news that her father has just died in an accident. By the end of the story, Ava still does not know what is wrong; other events get in the way—burial preparations, a car accident, and a funeral—so the narrative ends before her MRI appointment takes place. But the story does not depend on Ava’s diagnosis. It depends on how she acts when she feels alone in her anxieties. It depends on how she attempts to bridge emotional and informational gaps between herself and her family. Ava feels initially paralyzed, unable to talk about her upcoming appointment because she fears the response. She worries that others might distance themselves from her if they know. And so she distances herself by saying almost nothing about it. Several other characters in this collection experience varied physical ailments, and their stories likewise do not focus on their diagnoses. They focus instead on the tensions I am most interested in—tensions that involve relationships and shifting dynamics of intimacy and isolation.

Frank O’Connor noted a sense of isolation in regards to the short story in particular. He said that the short story contains something the novel generally does not: “an intense awareness of human loneliness. Indeed, it might be truer to say that while we often read a familiar novel again for companionship, we approach the short story in a very different mood” (19). Human loneliness permeates Ava’s entire story, including flashbacks to her childhood, where a strange woman sabotaged the intimacy of her parents’ marriage. The story shows us how Ava’s father moves out, her parents become

strangers, and both spouses attempt to palliate their resulting isolation through someone else: Ava. Her mother complains: “While she took a bath, she called Ava into the bathroom to get her a lighter. She talked until the water went cold and her little plastic tray, floating next to her knees, filled up with ash.” Her father confesses: “Ava’s father sighed, leaned back on two chair legs, and looked at the ceiling. He put his hands on his stomach and said into the air that he never would have done it if he’d realized what it cost.” Ava is privy to personal disclosures from both parents, but carries the weight of both alone. If loneliness is indeed a hallmark of the short story as O’Connor claims, then the genre serves as the perfect genre for Ava’s narrative, as well as the others in this collection.

Isolation exists as a negative, as an absence. It is defined by lack of companionship—whether physical, emotional, or otherwise. You cannot feel lonely without wishing for isolation’s opposite. So, while the short story may traffic in loneliness, its sense of isolation inherently acknowledges, or at least suggests, the other side of its binary. In other words, O’Connor claims that the short story is characterized by isolation, while Wood suggests that the story—or at least fiction in general—is characterized by its evocation of sympathy. I agree with both of them by saying that the short story contains both. One cannot exist without the other. The gap between the two makes isolation or intimacy narratively interesting: the shadow of the other hovers constantly. In “Other Bodies, Ourselves,” John Gregory Brown states his belief that one of fiction’s great functions is to provide “the grand and glorious leap we make . . . from our own lives to those of others. The meaning of fiction is our empathy, our ability to recognize ourselves in others, others in ourselves” (33). This act of recognizing

ourselves in others begins with the recognition that we are different and that the leap must be made. We are alone first, together second.

The short stories I love most attempt the leap that Brown proposes. For instance, “Preparations,” by Kenneth Bernard, begins with a sentence that immediately sets the narrator apart from those around him: “I tend to become absorbed with possibilities that other people find absurd” (129). He then contemplates the possibility of being called for help while “making love, in conference, on the toilet, late for an appointment” or any other range of possibilities. “Come quick, . . . *someone needs you at once*” (129). He considers this hypothetical situation because of an anecdote he hears about Anya, a large Ukrainian woman who hurried to her dying husband’s side in nothing but her underpants. And this is where the leap occurs. Instead of sectioning Anya’s story off in his mind as an oddity or a joke, the narrator imagines himself in the same situation. He looks at his friends and wonders, “Would you rush naked to my dying side?” (129). By the end of the piece, the narrator even imagines Anya attending his own death in the same fashion as she attended her husband’s. What might have turned out as nothing more than a humorous anecdote becomes fiction that recognizes self in another.

Another of my favorite stories, Lorrie Moore’s “How to Become a Writer,” does not make the leap in the same terms. Rather than invite readers to step into a narrator’s shoes, she insists that they do so by commanding them in the second person: “First, try to be something, anything, else” (119). The narrator and reader are obviously not the same, but they become inseparable as Moore calls them both “you.” As the point of view draws readers closer, the narrative events keep them separated from other characters. Nobody understands “you”: not parents, not roommates, not boyfriends, not peers around the

workshop table. The reader is privy to fabulous moments of awkwardness at parties and at school in which the narrator (and therefore, the reader) fails to make others understand her. When the narrator instructs the reader to share a lofty creative idea with a roommate, the roommate just, “looks at you, her face blank as a large Kleenex” (123). Moore explains that, “awkwardness is where tension is, and tension is where the story is” (Interview). In Moore’s work, as well as other stories I love, I find that realistic details often serve as vehicles to generate this tension between characters.

My own writing approaches its subject matter through realism. My stories focus on actions that seem common, but true to life—baking bread, attending family parties, flying kites—in order to show how they can become weighted with importance when seen through an attentive perceptual lens. I agree with Gary Saul Morson’s discussion in *Hidden in Plain View* that some of life’s most important events “are so common. . . there is nothing dramatic about them. . . . History is made . . . only by the countless small daily actions, hidden in plain view, whose motives and cumulative operation we do not understand” (126). Charles Baxter might call Morson’s description “the storytelling of everyday life,” in which we tell simple narratives incessantly in order to better understand the everyday occurrences of our own lives (xii). In my life, I have observed that boundaries of meaningful relationships can advance or recede daily, depending on individuals’ levels of willingness or ability to sympathize.

Some might say that realism has exhausted itself. What more is there to say? What else might be rendered realistically that would offer anything new? Or evoke any new sympathies? In *Maps of the Imagination*, Peter Turchi reassures me by saying that only our lack of attentiveness limits us. If we “look more closely, more carefully,” we

will find that “realism is inexhaustible” (207). For the sake of looking more closely, I am often drawn to write about isolation in terms of illness specifically. Illness demands heightened attentiveness of its subjects. Physical pain announces itself and refuses to be ignored until it is cured or drugged up. The awareness of the body that pain demands can lead to greater awareness of other aspects of life.

Take, for instance, young Wesley, in David McGlynn’s story “Deep in the Heart.” Wesley knows he is dying when his parents ask him his big and final wish. Most children do not attain awareness of their own mortality so young. And we can speculate that fictional Wesley might not have gained it himself without his illness. Because his physical challenges force him to have greater awareness of his own limitations, “He understands the immediacy of choice in a way his friends will not comprehend for years” (52). Wesley’s situation is not my own, so we are basically strangers. But his body breaks down in a way anyone’s could—even mine. His fictional illness draws my attention to a possibility I have not personally experienced, and this heightened awareness gives way to greater awareness of my own body, my own choices, and therefore, my own life.

In an interview this year, McGlynn said that “Reading a story is sort of like sitting next to a stranger on an airplane,” which is a perfect explanation of the way fiction pairs readers and characters—perfect strangers—and expects them to spend some time getting to know one another in close quarters. My own life does not mirror the fictional Wesley’s in any obvious ways, but I still learn to pay better attention by traveling a few pages with him and hearing his story. After thirteen pages of narrative, there we are: alone, together.

Sickness obviously provides only one occasion to explore the feeling of alone togetherness. So many other options exist under the umbrella of realism. With every

choice of subject matter, I find I must avoid the urge to create “realistic” narratives by merely plugging in events that actually happened, or things that people actually said.

Turchi clarifies the danger that realism can present:

Realism, like every other artistic endeavor, fails when it becomes an exercise in filling in the blanks. Realism succeeds when the author remembers to question his or her assumptions. Why do we represent dialogue the way we do? Why are smells often absent? What is the relation of chronology to the way we think? . . . How are we manipulating the data? To what ends? The same holds true for surrealists, experimentalists, modernists, postmodernists, and romantics, hopeless or otherwise. (90)

To understand how Turchi’s warning informs my writing, we can look at “Over Breakfast,” a story in which a woman named Gabriela sits on the curb in front of her house. She watches her son play a catch-and-release kite game with a group of boys down the street. The image of the kite being let go, chased down, and caught again parallels her own feelings of helplessness about the illness that has returned to her body and her son’s demanding reaction to the news.

This story employs certain strategies—it manipulates the data, as Turchi puts it—in order to achieve ends that should be questioned. Unlike the other stories in the collection, which generally employ a third-person limited point of view, this story moves back and forth between Gabriela’s point of view in the present tense and Rodrigo’s point of view in the recent past. When I initially drafted the story, I attempted to filter the entire narrative through Gabriela’s perspective. But the gaps between her and her son in terms

of perception, age, gender, and relational power seemed too wide for the story to sound anything but inordinately one-sided. As soon as I privileged Rodrigo's perspective equally, the narrative felt more evenhanded. While the characters themselves become distanced from one another throughout the piece, the story's strategy of showing both sides of a perceptual gap may allow readers to develop sympathies for both sides, when they otherwise might not.

Realistic details, not just a compilation of narrative events, can work together to generate this feeling of sympathy. Wood explains that literature can seem, "lifelike because detail really does hit us" in reality, "in a tattoo of randomness. . . . The artifice lies in the *selection* of detail" (56-57). Because the selection of detail is so important, a simple retelling of action is insufficient. "Over Breakfast" might be summed up as follows: Gabriela sits on the curb, watching her son play outside with a kite she gave to him this morning in order to distract him from a phone call she received from the doctor. During the game, her son's kite escapes and lands on her roof; her interaction with her son both acknowledges and glosses over the tension between them regarding the phone call. The summary of the action is neither sufficient nor compelling without the story's details: the scrambled eggs Rodrigo complains about, the men drinking beer on the corner, the moment that Gabriela pays attention to the sound of her own heartbeat. Individual details might not sufficiently communicate, but the constellation of details makes the story's characters feel more like friends and less like strangers. Without these concrete, realistic details, a story's events could melt into the retelling of a mere incident. The characters' relationships would disappear, along with the reader's interest in the characters themselves.

When discussing the short story, Charles May says that fictional characters become interesting, regardless of a story's premise or events, through their exploration of the most important question of identity: "Who am I?" (19). Because the answer to this question depends so much on the context surrounding a character, exploration of identity also seems to raise the question, "Who are you?" In Hawaii, nobody knew who I was. New friends did not know my family background or my opinions about school or politics or the beach. They saw that my skin was white and my hair was blonde and made certain assumptions. The new surroundings and new people made me ask myself May's question in a way I would not have if I had just stayed home. Now that I was on my own, who did I associate with? Where did I go? How did I spend my time? What did all of that mean? Spending time with Xue Lian determined much of who I became during my time as her roommate.

But I started answering May's question of identity for myself long before I moved to Hawaii. Everyone has to answer this question, and everyone starts early. The context in which identity is first questioned and answered for all of us—the same context where people are required to be personal when they sometimes might want to choose distance—is the family. Family members ask "Who am I?" many times over as children age and families grow and relationships change. The question is so formative in familial contexts and can become so complicated when children, parents, siblings, aunts, grandparents and everyone else weighs in on what the answer should be.

My stories, "Amputation" and "Hystericalgia," provide some of the best examples of how my stories' family relationships illustrate interactions that simultaneously invite and isolate. In "Amputation," Penny's aunts blame her for her teenage cousins'

disappearance during an annual extended family trip. They could easily blame someone else, as Penny has not really done anything wrong. But a large family group has already decided the identities it assigns to its younger members. Some remain pardonable because they conform to the group's identity. And others do not—like Penny, who does not share the extended family's same interests and assumptions. This story becomes an example of the anonymity and solidarity of a group against the clear identity of the one. Penny's isolation does not apply just to her relationship with one person. She becomes a stranger to the entire family in the course of an evening. In an interview with *Salon Books*, Lorrie Moore discussed why the group dynamics in situations like family car trips and holidays are so interesting to write about: "People are thrown together in close proximity when in fact they don't ordinarily live their lives that way. And so you throw these people together and all the extremes of their character really start to emerge. And in a short period of time" (2). Because they inhabit such close quarters, families tend to establish or challenge personal boundaries with more determination than friends or mere acquaintances.

This same question of boundaries emerges in "Hystericalgia," when everyone surrounding the second-person narrator—family especially—expects her to get pregnant, which is something she very much wants to do. Because of the nature of the problem, neighbors feel comfortable to share opinions and ask questions about highly personal information. Acquaintances from long ago ask when the baby is due. While the strangers push back the boundaries of privacy, the family pushes even more so. Some cousins know the narrator's personal heartache and aggravate it. A group of aunts feels that the problem at hand allows for questioning and counseling the narrator about topics as

personal as her sexual activity. The narrator begins the story with the assumption that the strangers down the street, aunts, and husbands are privileged to varying amounts of her personal information. But the other characters muddle the boundaries. Everyone wants to get closer, but not all of them know how to do it in a comforting way. The narrator has to re-evaluate the spaces she maintains between herself and other people.

This story's point of view also plays with the distance of the narrator from the reader. I make a similar move to Lorrie Moore in the first line, when I ask readers to place themselves personally in the narrator's position: "If you gain some extra weight and already feel fat, people will ask you once a week if you are pregnant. If you ache for a child, people will ask you twice." My approach differs from Moore's in its if-then nature. Instead of speaking in the imperative, the narrator speaks hypothetically, as if readers have the choice of whether or not they will identify with the "you." The story complicates the question that May says interesting characters search for—Who am I?—by complicating who readers are in relation to the conflict.

I do not assume that my writing will definitively claim who characters or readers are. An attempt to do so would prove reductive. And I assume that even the people we are closest to often prove more complicated and unknowable than we imagine anyway. Even if we wanted to, we could not display, with our faces and utterances, everything that we truly are or hope to be. We will never resolve the binary of intimacy and isolation in our relationships as long as we are walking around in this human skin. My fiction acknowledges the permanent paradox and pokes around in it, not in an attempt to eliminate it, but to see how it works. What do we do that either widens or bridges the gaps between us?

I believe that stories—by showing us experiences that do not belong to us, by allowing us to engage in perspectives we might not have considered—allow us an opportunity to sympathize, both on the page and off. While I do not write fiction merely to achieve a definitive sympathetic end, I do see increased sympathy as a useful result of the stories I write. To better explain why my writing might focus on these particular issues, I turn to Stegner once again:

The point is, our fiction—what we write and what we read—is likely to be as frivolous or as serious as our lives are. If we never examine our lives, we are not likely to get much out of fiction that makes such examination its function. Sure fiction is made of shopworn materials: human lives. (97)

In my own life, I agonize over people's lack of sympathy. At best, it results in simple misunderstandings. But at worst? Full-blown war. I read the news and worry about the consequences of people remaining distant from one another. My stories tell me that I need to pay more attention to the people around me. My stories reveal to me that, like my characters, I misread or underestimate other people too often. My stories show me how little sympathy I sometimes have.

As different as we were, Xue Lian and I cultivated an unexpected sympathy for one another on that first day—possibly because we stood in similar shoes. We might have looked and sounded like one another's opposites, but we were both lonely. And our shared loneliness counted more than all our other differences combined. Xue Lian took advantage of that first bridge between us and took my arm without a doubt that we would be close. Arm in arm all day long, we started down a path where we would find other similarities that we might not otherwise have explored. We are still friends, seven years

later, because of what we found. My sympathies for her run deep, even if I do not completely understand her. And those sympathies have made me better than I was.

I like to think of the stories in this collection doing something similar: inviting readers to link arms with them and start walking, complete strangers on the first page—alone, together—knowing that they will never completely bridge the gaps between them, but that they will find value in the attempt.

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DIVER TRAINING

Their first year in Laie, Rich and Julie cruised down Kam Highway twice a month with fins, masks, air tanks, and college mainlander kids in the back of the university van. They had a routine for all of this. They rose early, packed fruit, sandwiches, and bottles of water into coolers, and then met their group near the Aloha Center's front doors. Most everyone showed up sleepy eyed and messy haired. Every group began on the concrete edge of the campus pool and graduated with an open water dive down at Magic Island. While suiting up on the beach, the kids usually chattered about potential shark and sea turtle sightings, without knowing that both were rare. Julie never knew what to say, so she let Rich make jokes until the dive made everyone go silent.

Julie felt crowded on land. Which is why she decided that, even if she weren't required for safety's sake, she would still stop for a few minutes—just as she had now—fifteen feet below the ocean's surface at the end of every dive. She loved the moment when she hung suspended between ocean floor and ceiling, with her eyes closed against the blue, hearing her breath push bubbles out into the water. Someone tapped her arm and Julie opened her eyes. Her buddy, one of the beginners, pointed up. Julie gave her the OK signal with her fingers, even though she felt miffed that her time alone felt cut short.

On the boat, Julie peeled the top half of her wetsuit off and went to sit next to Rich. She asked him why he'd been in such a hurry to end the dive. Why did he head up first, before waiting for the students to surface? Julie appreciated the way Rich usually let his groups' ascent stop last a minute longer than it needed to, just for her. Nobody else had a watch. But he hadn't done that today.

He felt strange, he told her. Not well. He leaned his head back and closed his

eyes. Julie apologized. She wondered aloud if they just hadn't been getting enough sleep lately. He should take a nap when they got home. Rich nodded and asked his students if anyone was hungry.

On their way back, Rich slowed the van halfway down Haleiwa's main road and pulled into the dive shop's gravel parking lot. The students piled out of the van to unload their weights and BCDs and wash them in tubs of soapy water. Before Julie got out to help, she sat in the front seat for a moment, watching Rich joke with the dive shop owner, who was the always-suntanned beach bum that Rich might have been if history hadn't interested him just as much as the sea.

*

Rich stiffened up the Tuesday after the dive. When she didn't hear anything from the bedroom, Julie came in from making omelettes to see what was wrong. His first class of the morning had already started. Rich looked at her and shook his head. She called up the street to the school and asked one of her co-workers in the admin building to put a canceled sign on the classroom door. Rich closed his eyes and said his joints ached. He said he wanted to move, but it hurt too much.

At first, they thought it was the bends. Which was ridiculous and they both knew it: Rich carefully mapped out locations, conditions, and timing for every dive; he had worn down the edges of his plastic dive planner from so much use; they never took the college kids down for more than forty minutes; and they took every precaution on dives to the Mahi Shipwreck and the Corsair Plane. Besides, last week's dive had been nothing but a simple, 35-foot, open-water run for the newly initiated. A few hours later, Rich sat up on the side of the bed and rested his head in his own cupped hands. He sighed and

stretched. He'd felt kind of achy and lethargic even before the dive, he said. Perhaps not the bends. Perhaps something else.

They started small. Kahuku Hospital was only a fifteen-minute drive. The nurse put Rich on oxygen and said that a clinic in Honolulu had some new treatment chambers, in case their bends theory was right. The doctor came in and said it wasn't—after looking at Rich's skin, touching his stethoscope to Rich's chest, and picking up Rich's arm and moving the elbow around for him. Rich said everything was fine now, that the morning had been rough, but now he felt better. Julie said they had been diving that weekend, but they came up slowly. They made the safety stop. All ten divers on the trip had floated for four full minutes below the surface before giving one another the thumbs up. The doctor said fine, fine, and wrote on a small slip of paper, instructing the lab to take some of Rich's blood before he went home.

The tests came back normal. But Rich woke up weak and throbbing the next morning. He said his heart raced and then he closed his eyes and told Julie that they burned. Perhaps it was only the flu. Julie hadn't pictured anyone getting the flu in Hawaii, but here Rich was with a headache and an urge to sleep through work.

*

Julie came home from the store that afternoon with liquids: 7Up, Gatorade, juice. She watched him while he took little sips and then pushed the glass away.

The next day, she made soup filled with chicken, herbs and vegetables. He said nothing tasted good and he was sorry for being too tired to help clean up the dishes.

Later that week, Julie made spinach orzo salad and brought it to Rich on the couch. He said it felt too heavy on his stomach. He asked for water.

Julie bought his favorite taro root bread that she did not know how to make. Rich said he was sorry. Julie ate leftovers. They canceled their next Saturday dive. Brad, one of Rich's scuba groupies, called to say he hoped Rich would get better soon. Julie took the message and hoped he would, too.

*

Rich complained of the same problems for an entire week. And then another. He ran out of substitutes and said he felt silly for cancelling any more classes. He went up the street to the school and came home with student papers and tests, instead of staying on campus long enough to grade them in his office. He said he would look at them as soon as he rested for a while.

When nothing improved, Julie drove him back to Kahuku, where the doctor referred Rich to a specialist in town, on the other side of the island. The doctor could see him that very afternoon. Julie worried that things might be serious, because most everyone in Hawaii acted like any crisis could wait until next week. They drove along the ocean, passing Rich's favorite beaches for watching the heavy north waves pound in. Passing fruit stands where they usually stopped. Passing the stupid kids who crowded onto the massive rock in one of the bays before jumping out into the water below, regardless of where the tide lay.

In Honolulu, Rich listed his symptoms to the internist, who nodded and muttered while scribbling on paper. He told Julie they better act quickly. Something was not right. This doctor signed another slip of paper and sent them to a lab. The clinic called the next morning to say in a cheery voice that Rich's bloodwork was normal. Mahalo. So did the nurses at the endocrinologist's, the rheumatologist's, the cardiologist's—all the nurses

who had welcomed Rich's pained expression and slow movements into their office with worried brows. When she hung up with the last office, Julie told Rich that nothing was technically wrong with him. He said that nothing was technically right, and rubbed his hands together. A broken bone wouldn't show up on a blood test either, for example. He said he needed to lie down and turn off the light. Julie wanted to sit in the sun, but she shut the blinds.

*

Julie developed pictures they had taken a few weeks back with their disposable underwater cameras. The first on the roll, like always, was a picture before the dive, taken on the beach: the students' wetsuits still unzipped to the waist, Rich standing on one side looking thrilled, everyone's thumbs and pinkies sticking out the sides of otherwise fisted hands, the new ones in the group with rounded mouths from saying "hang loose" while the shutter clicked, and the veterans with smiling faces, saying "shaka."

When she came home, Julie handed the pictures to Rich, who lay on the couch. He looked at the first one in the stack for a long time. Julie wondered aloud why only the American kids came on diving excursions. She suspected that they were just here for an easy semester to skip classes and spend daddies' money on surfboards and dive lessons. Rich gave them more credit than that. He theorized that the islanders—all the Samoans, Tongans, and Fijians who attended his history lectures—were so used to the ocean already that they didn't feel the need to know it any better. A guy from the Cook Islands who took Rich's world civ class last semester could hold his breath under water for over three minutes, a talent which he used to harvest pearls.

It was the landlocked kids—the ones from Montana, Kansas, Utah—who felt the tides pulling at them to come under and look around. And not everybody came loaded with cash, he said. Look at Brad. Brad came on every trip and worked for it. He overhelped with washing and arranging gear after everyone returned to dry land. Julie nodded. She mentioned that Brad always brought food to share with everyone—a very islandy thing to do. Every trip, he brought a giant bag of miniature pretzels, which he only opened after dives. The crunch and the salt after so much seawater on their lips tasted almost necessary.

*

Her mother and mother-in-law called often with phone numbers for mainland specialists or potential diagnoses they'd heard about on *Oprah*. One asked if Rich was losing weight. The other if he'd experienced any memory loss. The phone kept ringing.

The girls in Julie's office asked for updates almost daily. At first, it started as worktime chit-chat—*my husband's a little under the weather*. But after everyone in the office had finished up Julie's projects or filled in for her so she could go home early, and her boss had excused her from meetings that conflicted with Rich's doctors' appointments, they sounded like invested parties. The girls came to her desk to give her small gifts and advice. They asked what Rich had, what they could do, when he would get better. They only asked questions Julie didn't know the answers to. When she came up blank enough times, they stopped asking in earnest. Sickness was boring when it never changed or went away.

*

Julie hunted other, better doctors—other, better possibilities. When Julie thought she found something promising, Rich cancelled his afternoon 201 class and Julie drove him to St. Francis in Honolulu. She chose an Iranian doctor, thinking that a foreign physician might offer a foreign response. Rich didn't know what foreignness had to do with it, since most everybody on this island was foreign to it anyway. Julie told him that the doctor's picture just looked approachable—his teeth not quite straight, but bright against his tan skin. Rich said that made him sound Hawaiian. Julie said, no, not enough vowels in his name.

Everyone else had given similar answers. Which were not really answers, but a series of negative test results and vague instructional prophecies. The internist and the endocrinologist both independently believed that Rich's pain might merely evaporate in about two months by getting some sun, taking it easy. Nobody's sick for long in Hawaii.

Rich and Julie sat in the waiting room together. Someone had covered it in maritime decor. A treasure chest for a coffee table. A round life preserver mounted above the receptionist's desk. Thick rope woven between the legs of vinyl chairs. To raise the mainsail, perhaps? Julie wondered if this doctor ran his office like a ship.

Someone called Rich's name and he stood. Julie followed. They walked down the hall behind the nurse, who spent her time with the usual number-taking of inches, pounds, and beats that Rich amounted to. The nurse asked why they had come. To get an answer, Julie wanted to say. But Rich just offered her a symptom or two for her to write on the chart, so that she would click her pen and tell them to wait.

They sat in uncomfortable chairs in a small, blue room where a silver dial on the wall told them it was high tide. A small speaker in the ceiling played "Aloha 'Oe." Julie

touched Rich's hand and waited for the doctor to fill the empty revolving stool. She worried that when the doctor finally came in, he might not look her husband in the eye.

*

Rich asked Julie to take the diving group herself one week, just this one time, just so the kids wouldn't give up on him. He had promised, and so the students were counting on the dive. They had already paid the dive shop for rentals. The day would be perfect—he'd already checked. And he would go, he really would, but it wasn't wise to go with this tightness in his chest and this shortness in his breath. Julie didn't know which was worse—to leave him at home alone or to disappoint him. She wanted to convince him to just come, but she knew he never let anyone dive sick.

She packed up the cooler the night before while Rich brushed his teeth. When she came into the bedroom, he was already lying down. She rolled next to him and felt dampness through his shirt. She touched his chest and the fabric stuck to his skin. Rich said he was just sweaty. And yes, he knew it wasn't hot. He didn't know why. It came from nowhere. She offered to drive him to the hospital, to take him to the ER, to phone the doctor on call that night. He asked her to please just lie down so they could sleep. The doctor would only waste his time, his money, and his blood. He rolled onto his back and closed his eyes. She tried to think of how to convince him, but she had thought of no good reason by the time his arm twitched a moment later, the way it always did before he was completely out.

Julie lay in bed, listening to the breath beside her. When Rich had first told her he wanted to fill a teaching position in Hawaii, Julie's mind had created several clear images that constituted her anticipations: a balcony overlooking a clear ocean, a palm tree in

their yard, and a surfboard on their front porch. She didn't even know how to surf. Rich didn't either. And now that they were here, he seemed too pasty and stiff ever to learn how. Julie could not imagine him balancing on an unsteady board, burning his shoulders in the sun. But under water, he knew how to move. He taught his students the history of land and its people from books. But in the water, he interested them more in how the sea chronicled its past. He showed them layers of coral. He pointed out eels, flatworms, and urchins. He taught them the names of all the fish they saw. His students were used to looking forward. Rich taught them to look around, above, and especially below, usually when a sea turtle was rising to greet them.

She wondered if he would get out into the ocean again. She wondered if she could convince him to go home. Julie turned to face the window and imagined she could see the ocean between the glass louvers.

*

Before she took the kids down into the water on Saturday morning, Julie stood in her fins on the beach, feeling like she'd forgotten something. Rich usually carried the compass that doubled as a watch. He always noted the time, always put up the flag. He always gave the last-minute instructions and checked everyone's gear before patting them on the shoulder and reminding them to walk backward in their fins, otherwise they'd be waddling for weeks. Now Julie had to do all that: sound reassuring for the kids who had only done this once in a pool.

She had no fears of diving, but she usually didn't have to talk about her lack of fear. While the group talked excitedly, the way all groups did on their first jittery preparation on the shore, someone speculated about what they would do if they saw a

shark. Julie tried to make the joke that Rich always did: If we see a shark, take one for the team and give him your arm so we all have time to get away. But the words came out sounding serious. It wasn't a very good joke to begin with. Was it even a joke? Julie suddenly didn't know why it made the kids laugh every time. Everyone stood on the beach, fiddling with the air tanks. She suggested that they take a picture.

*

Because she spent so much time alone under the water, only keeping track of her buddy, she had never noticed how close Rich kept the kids together. She felt like she was herding them too much, following them too closely. She felt like she couldn't stop to hear her own breath.

Julie never got over the sound her breath made under water, the way she could fill her lungs when her eyes told her not to. She loved how quiet everything else went as soon as the water filled her ears, and then breathing became the primary noise. It made Julie feel acutely aware of her breath's power over her body: when she breathed in, then out, the rest of her rose, then sank.

While she noticed her own body, she felt as if it almost fell away, that it didn't even exist. While she breathed, her inner self floated along, unencumbered by muscles and bone. On land, she was grounded, held up by objects: the couch, the bed, the chair at the kitchen table. She could not leap into the air and remain there for more than a second or two. And while she knew that the water held her up when she dove into the ocean, she felt like nothing touched her but color and light.

She imagined that the dive students had experiences, too, that made them feel both fleshy and weightless, mortal and not, because they always came out of the water

quieter than when they went in. But they all had to wait to talk about these moments after they happened. And on land, Julie wasn't sure there were adequate words. So they said little about it.

*

Another week and Rich refused to cancel or find substitutes for his classes. Julie saw him rise each day from his bed with his fists clenched and his eyes shut in a sort of willpower meditation. Scuba diving might be dangerous like this, he told her, but teaching wouldn't kill anyone. One morning, over muffins, Rich said that whatever was wrong with him was going to stay wrong, and if nobody knew what it was, he would pretend it wasn't there. He hadn't decided yet if he could take the kids out diving anymore.

Julie said no and started to say more, but Rich was already late. He kissed her forehead and walked out the door in a Hawaiian shirt that she thought particularly tacky. Julie covered the muffins with wrap and sat down at the table. Her four open hours before her afternoon shift felt gloomy. Because the Windward Mall was further inland—because she couldn't see the beach—Julie went there.

The palm trees inside the mall looked fake, even though they were as real as the palms that lined the sidewalk on her street. She bought a pint of ice cream at Baskin Robbins and ate it with a purple plastic spoon while she wandered the wide space, passing Foot Locker and Radio Shack and Zales. The names felt familiar. She stopped in at Sears to look at the shoes. They sold mostly sandals.

The night before, she had tried to persuade Rich to move back home. They didn't have any support here. And they were new enough that they had no roots to pull up. They

could go back to their old neighborhood, where their friends would commiserate, and their families would have less distant advice. Her parents knew an excellent doctor. Somebody on the mainland had an answer to his morning aches and shivers, his shaking fingers, his ringing ears, and his nightly sweat. Right now, she felt as if they were just pretending. For some reason, she couldn't take the doctors seriously here when they entered exam rooms looking dressed for a luau.

Julie tried on several styles of strappy sandals with tall heels, which she would never wear. A woman with a nametag and a black braid wandered over to the display. She said they didn't get many tourists in Kaneohe, and what was the occasion? Julie explained that she wasn't a tourist. She lived up in Laie and was trying on shoes just to try on shoes. The woman asked what size she should get from the back. Julie said she didn't actually want any sandals. The woman asked Julie why she was looking, then. The question felt like an invitation to stay, rather than a suggestion to leave.

Julie sat down on one of the padded benches next to the display and noticed her feet in the slanted mirror of the bench across from her. She wanted to tell the woman that her husband was horribly sick. She wanted to say that sometimes, she didn't believe him. Not because he lied—just because she didn't want it to be true. She wanted to say that the way he left the cap off the milk or wore his socks to bed still drove her insane, illness or no. And that she sickened herself every time she got after him, every time she raised her voice and the milk carton up in the air to show him—again—how much his bad habits ruffled her. And that her husband sometimes just turned his head away, without even enough energy to fight back or tell her to get over it. She wanted to say all these things to the woman with the braid who had just finished rearranging the shoes that Julie had

cluttered on the display table. But Julie didn't. They weren't the sorts of things she could tell a woman selling shoes. And Julie didn't have the answer to the question everyone asked when she talked about Rich—the question the woman in the shoe department would also surely ask: What does he have?

*

One afternoon that week, Rich asked if Julie wanted to walk to Hukilau Beach with him. Even though it was down the street from faculty housing, they had only gone once or twice because the diving there was terrible. Not as much to see. When they left the house, the wind blew their hair flat against their heads. They said nothing while they walked. The closer they got to the beach, the more Julie could hear the sound of persistent waves echoing between the neighborhood's wooden houses that were built low to the ground.

They walked along the side of the road until they saw the Hukilau sign and the beach's little parking lot. They crossed during a break in traffic and kicked off their shoes. Rich reached down to carry both pairs. Julie felt the wind get stronger as soon as they stepped from among the trees and into the sand that stretched to the water.

Rich walked down to the wet sand and rolled his pant legs up. Julie followed him. They walked along the beach that way, slowly, not saying anything, and letting the salt water sneak up around their ankles. They passed an old man sleeping in swimming trunks on the bare sand. A closed book rested on his chest and Julie imagined it leaving a pale square in his sunburn. A woman called to her children in the water. Julie didn't know what language the woman spoke, but it was filled with oo's. Someone at a picnic table

strummed a guitar. Julie wanted someone to notice them. She wanted someone to wave to.

Rich stopped walking and asked if she had ever thought of drowning. She asked him if he meant on purpose or against her will. The water came in and then out, burying Julie's toes underneath the sand. Little air bubbles broke the surface of the beach. She saw a tiny white crab hurrying away from them. Not so much the intent, but the sensation, he told her. He said he'd always thought it silly that people actually died from water. Silly until he thought about other ways he could go.

The water came back in. It felt colder than the last wave. Julie said it was stupid to think about dying, and even stupider to think about death by drowning—he was practically a fish. More stupid, Rich said. Julie knew he hated the look she gave him. And anyway, he said, he might not go diving again for a long time. He might never have the chance again. It just made him think of what would happen if he did die, that's all. If they couldn't figure out what was wrong until too late. He was just sick without an answer yet, Julie told him. She said nobody was going anywhere. Except for home. He said they could walk home. Julie said no, she wanted to fly. The wet froth died and flowed back out into the waves it came from.

Rich said no. He sat down on the sand, and shook his head when Julie suggested they move farther up the beach where the sand was dry. The water rolled in just far enough to cover Rich's feet and the seat of his pants. Julie asked if he was okay, if he was feeling dizzy, if he needed help to stand. He squinted up at her and then looked back out at the rippling blue. He patted the hard sand next to him. Julie said she didn't want to get her clothes wet. She asked him to get up. She told him she wanted to go. She reached

down for his hand and he crossed his arms. She crossed her own. She told him he was even more stubborn than he was sick. They remained like that for a moment—Rich sitting with his elbows resting on his bent knees and his forearms folded over themselves, Julie with arms tight against her body, picking at the sand with her toe—until she forced out a sigh and sat down just as the remnants of another wave washed up the shore.

Fine, she said, and told Rich that he won. The water that soaked into her underwear felt gritty with sand. Rich said nothing. She leaned over and nudged him with her shoulder. He said nothing. She asked him to please just tell her what he was thinking. Nothing. She said they could talk about drowning again if he wanted. She was sorry she changed the subject. She told him they didn't have to talk about going home. She stared at her husband, who only bit his bottom lip and looked at his feet.

Dammitall, she said, and demanded that he speak. Rich told her that he didn't want to fly home: he could be sick here, he could be sick there. What difference would it make? Julie had plenty of reasons, including the name and number of a doctor she'd written on a scrap of paper, which she now remembered was tucked into her back pocket, the ink probably gone runny. The doctor, a family friend, had agreed to see them when they returned to the mainland. He liked mysterious cases. Rich could get well. He could be the way he was again.

Rich shook his head and counted things out on his fingers: more tests, more appointments, more needles, more scans, more money, no answers. He went on. If they went home, they might never come back. Flying back felt too much like giving up. He would probably get better. Maybe his body just ran into a little glitch, had some psychosomatic response to a mid-life crisis. Julie told him this better not be the middle of

his life. Rich wondered aloud if it might be the end. That. That, she said, and pointed her finger at him. That was Julie's problem. Yes, he could be sick here. Yes, he could be sick there. But what if he died and wasn't anywhere? Rich shifted his weight and Julie saw his eyebrows pinch together. That, she said again. She told him she was so afraid, so alone. Which wasn't fair to say. He was the one alone in his body without any answers, but she felt lonely, watching his pain, but not feeling it. Not knowing how close the end was because he couldn't truly tell her how he felt. What if he waited things out until he waited too long? Julie saw the rest of her life stretch out as flat and lonely as the sea in front of her. She told Rich that she didn't want him to die and she didn't know what to do about it. The water came in again. They sat in silence for longer than Julie felt comfortable.

Rich looked at her for a moment and then he stood, his bottom dripping. He held out a hand to her, but she stood without his help, wondering if he felt weak enough today that she could pull him over. He asked if she really wanted them to see this doctor. She said yes. He said he would book the tickets for the day after the semester ended if she would take his dive class out one more time. If she would promise. That's it? she asked. She didn't know why that would matter. But she didn't understand most things Rich felt these days. She promised. He handed Julie her shoes and turned away from the water. On the way home, they walked down the street with wet behinds, wearing shoes that rubbed in odd places against their dry and powdered-feeling feet.

*

Many of the dive students had abandoned Rich as an instructor. Julie tried to contact them to make good on her promise. Some had stopped halfway through certification and wanted to come with, while others had found different programs to help

them finish up. She called the dive shop and made reservations for a boat and driver. She let Brad know they were diving the Makaha Caverns so he could spread the word. On Saturday morning, Julie left some food on the counter for Rich to eat while she was gone and then she drove the van to the school by herself to pick up the students she had rustled up.

They drove out to the west side of Oahu, where Julie had never been, and where most of the maps showed roads that led to dead stops against the mountains. Julie drove in the narrow asphalt ribbon between the aquamarine horizon and lush peaks that rose above her line of sight. Morning mist lifted as the van followed the curves of the beach. Every tree looked dewy. Brad spoke. Nobody answered. The drive was longer than usual.

Their small boat waited with its captain under a morning sun, tied to a dock that bobbed with the rhythm of the water beneath it. The students were awake enough to pick their buddies, to strip down to their swim trunks and start negotiating their skintight suits. Brad helped Julie load and secure the air tanks. Someone found the cooler and brought it aboard. Julie checked everyone's weight belts, regulators, and fins. She made sure she had the red flag. She double-checked her depth gauge and her compass. Nobody's tanks were missing an O-ring and every air regulator worked. They took a picture.

Julie sat at the front of the boat with her legs crossed, and heard the engine start. They pulled out of the dock and she felt the air rush over her cheeks. She thought of Rich at home, lying quietly in the still air. One of the girls in the little group sat near her. The motor and the splash made too much noise for them to speak. Julie saw what looked like little, silvery blades come spinning out of the water in front of them and heard the girl shout and saw her point. Julie shouted *flying fish*, but with all the wind, her hair flew in

her mouth and the girl cupped her hand behind her ears. Julie made gestures: she flapped her arms like wings and then made a fishy face. She didn't know if she made any sense.

The boat captain slowed and eventually set down anchor. Everyone zipped up their wetsuits. Julie spat into her mask and wiped the spit around. She reached over the side of the boat, rinsed the mask in the ocean, and pushed it tight against her face until it sealed. Rich's students checked their various straps and clips and tubes and asked Julie questions before they went overboard, back first into the water. After each splash, the kids gave OK signs with their fingers, even though it wasn't really necessary at this point. Julie zipped and strapped and clipped and double-checked all her gear and then stood in her fins on the wooden seat next to the railing. She took a deep breath and fell back.

When she surfaced, Rich's three students looked at her. She motioned to the anchor line reaching down from the boat and took hold of it. She adjusted the regulator in her mouth, and pressed the exhaust valve to deflate her BCD jacket. When the water covered her head, she looked down at the uneven coral spread out so far below her and then turned her attention to the students and all the bubbles their respirators and jackets released. She realized she was holding her breath and she let it out. Bubbles filled her vision and she took a breath in. She used her fins to move away from the anchor line and motioned reminders to the other divers to equalize their ears. They went down slowly but nobody stopped on the way down.

The caverns weren't really caves to enter and explore. They were tall, uneven rocks on the shallow ocean floor. Or coral. Or coral on top of rocks. Julie wasn't really sure and she was glad that nobody could ask down here. She gave the kids space this time, but kept them in her line of sight. Every so often, Julie's buddy turned back and

made eye contact. Brad motioned to all of them and pointed excitedly at little golden fish hiding near anemones, at spiky sea urchins, or at things that looked like rocks and were, indeed, rocks. Julie stopped watching for interesting sights and paid attention to the sound of her own breathing.

From behind, Julie saw that the students kept their legs straight and kicked slowly, letting their fins do the work. Just like Rich showed them. They approached what looked like a massive cave with a skylight. Julie saw the light ahead and knew it was not a dead end. But the surface sunbeams filtering through the water threw all other exits into shadow, making the uneven floor of rock and sand look like a stage with a solid concave backdrop. The three other divers passed into the spotlight and swam all the way through its middle into the dark on the opposite side, in search of a turtle maybe. But Julie waited to enter it. She breathed in and her body rose in the water so slightly that she would not have noticed it if she had been swimming. She breathed out. She started swimming through the light.

On the other side, Julie turned around to look at the expanse of blue, illuminated by the sun so far above her head. The light shafts shifted with the water's surface movement that Julie could not feel at this depth. Particles floated and glinted in the light's wide column. For a moment, she thought she saw Rich, sinking face up from the surface and down through the light. She waved at the other divers who had turned to wait for her. She motioned widely with both arms, pointing, unable to speak. But when she turned to show them what she thought she saw, he was gone.

HYSTERALGIA

If you gain some extra weight and already feel fat, people will ask you once a week if you are pregnant. If you ache for a child, people will ask you twice.

Accept that those people will not limit themselves to any demographic: friends, neighbors, strangers in supermarkets, women at church you've only talked to twice, boys you haven't seen since high school who have gained more weight than you ever will.

At first, your husband will not understand. For example, an old acquaintance might bump into the two of you at a used book sale. If that acquaintance winks and asks, "Is this your first?" your husband will ask, "First what?"

Do not cry—not yet. Buy the books in your hand and hurry out into the cool March morning. When your husband sees the tears start in the parking lot, he will know. And then he will vow to punch anyone in the face who asks if you're expecting.

*

Your friends will call up with their happy news. You will attend showers and wrap their gifts in pretty paper: board books or rubber duckies that measure bath temperatures. Be grateful if you are such good friends that they fail to send thank-you notes, reminding you how generously you bought rattles and teething rings for a baby who is not your own.

You may see pregnant girls crossing the street, shopping for shoes, strolling the length of the mall. There is no way to stanch your surprise at how many of them are pig tailed and seem especially under-dressed. Try not to stare at their bulging bellies that announce their unprepared maternity. Try not to overhear any of them say this pregnancy came at a really bad time.

Perhaps you will see a five-year-old girl at the supermarket, begging her mother to buy her sugar cereal; she has the same color of hair your daughter might. Don't feel stupid or guilty for imagining that you would never buy your daughter sugar cereal, that you would get up in the morning and cook her gourmet breakfast. Poached eggs, seasoned with creamy cilantro-onion sauce. Whole-wheat pancakes made from scratch, topped with fresh strawberries. Your daughter would look at sugar cereal and scoff. Leave the grocery store. Eat something. Do not make poached eggs.

If you crave a girl—or a boy—or have already picked out names for both, know that once a month, nobody will blame you for crawling under your covers for an hour or so and crying.

*

Brace yourself for large family gatherings, especially if you have many aunts or stupid cousins. You should only attend if you can exercise a few Do Not's.

Do not hold a grudge for more than a month. Your family, regardless of its size or type, is probably good at being nosy and offensive. And they probably don't throw parties often enough to make grudges worthwhile. You would just simmer for weeks until you arrived bitter and silent at the next get-together. If Aunt Lisa pats your tummy and winks, wear something even more slimming next time and get over it. Hating her forever would eventually make you dislike her shortbread and raspberry preserves. If your sister-in-law swears that she just knows you'll have a baby as soon as you learn what God is trying to teach you, breathe deeply and don't assume that she is emotionally flipping you off. She's too sincere. If your cousin Carl brags that it only took one shot to knock up a blonde from work, allow your eyes to look as aghast as you feel, but don't bother with

reprimands. You will probably just make him laugh. Rise and walk into the other room, unless it is filled with relatives who have proven themselves the kind who will elbow you in the ribs and ask what's different about you.

Do not give anyone reason to pity you. You will know that the extended family wants to hear about possible pregnancies when they ask, *and then what?* after every life event you report on at these gatherings: your college graduation, your new job, your new house, your raise, your two-week vacation in Italy, your promotion, your latest remodeling project, fulfillment of your life's calling. Just remember that the aunts want babies to play peek-a-boo with, that they're waiting to throw the shower, that they just want to know how to connect. Provide short answers about what they want to hear. When you talk about the size of family you want, tell the truth. Describe your life with words like hopeful, optimistic, soon. Sound happy and keep talking, even if you're not—even if the ache has settled in your gut.

If you don't, the aunts will eventually retreat to the kitchen together, where nobody will bother them for fear of dish duty. They will talk about how unfair it is, how you'd be a good mother, how maybe you don't really want a child. If this goes on too long, or during too many family parties, they will stop seeing your face. The aunts will look at you as an absence—a barren blank. That is why you must enter the kitchen and offer to help with dinner cleanup.

If an awkward silence does not disband the aunts, you might be able to abbreviate the conversation. Use the word *sex*. Many times. If your aunts are the type of women who love babies, but not where they come from, you might drive them off.

But if you have overheard Aunt Lisa bellowing that word when you entered the

kitchen, overuse of it will only get the other aunts excited. You can try resorting to the absurd if nothing else can be done, especially if they start talking about the best positions for fertility. Tell them you suddenly sense that you're ovulating, and shout *where's my husband*, and ask if you can use the restroom, and is it very big? Aunts of the right kind might laugh or even point you in the right direction. And then you can say *Ha, wouldn't that be a story to tell the grandkids?* And they will laugh and love you again. Do not approach the bathroom. Stay somewhere conspicuous and in the way. Wash every dish.

*

Let your husband hold you whenever you return home from these sorts of family events—or from lunches with old high school friends, or neighborhood barbecues, or church. Every so often, you should even let him convince you to stay home. He will feel like he is helping. He probably will be.

If the two of you stay home from your grandmother's birthday party—where she most certainly would sigh her wish that you give her a grandbaby before she goes—you may end up cuddled together on the couch. He won't care what you do, as long as you're not at Grandma's, so he will probably even let you pick the movie. And as you weep when Marilla tells Anne that she does not want to adopt a girl at Green Gables, he will know that you are not really crying that Marilla does not want to adopt a girl. And he will hold you close and say, *Isn't it good?* He will not mean the movie. You might feel his shoulders sort of shake when he takes a breath in. And you will hear him whisper, *We get to be sad together.*

*

Select confidantes with care. If your next-door neighbor asks if she can host a

shower for you, do not assuage her embarrassment by telling her that you are trying. Do not say that you are trying a lot. A chagrined woman will insist on giving you advice, and she will say it doesn't matter how often you try. It only matters when. And then she will begin to ask questions.

If you make this mistake, you will find no way out of her questions except exposure or refusal. Refuse. She will then resort to personal anecdote about her own child. You could waste your time trying to figure the difference between her apparent age and her only daughter's surprising toddlerhood, but if you just ask her, she can tell you it took seven years, four months, and expensive medicine before the correct configuration of blue lines ever showed up on a home pregnancy test.

If you let her talk long enough, she will stop and tell you what she considers to be the best advice: Be pragmatic as hell about it. Do not make the mistake of lightly wondering aloud how pragmatic hell must be, unless you don't need to go anywhere for another thirty minutes.

If you confide in your neighbor, she will tell the neighborhood. Ignore your initial distress. People like a secret they can pity. A secret that relieves them when they think—*thankgod*—they do not have to live your life. But the secret may make them think of your life merely as temperatures taken every morning and the words *in vitro*. They do not know what your life might actually contain: a fascination with Byzantine mosaics, a passion for rockclimbing, a list of countries still to visit, a goal to clean out the garage one of these summers, or a membership at a kickboxing gym.

*

If your husband punches anyone, it will probably be your cousin, Carl—the one you would charge with statutory rape if he ever touched the daughter you don't have. If you *do* end up at Grandma's birthday party and you walk into Aunt Lisa's dining room to see Carl flat on his back and your husband rubbing his knuckles, do not overreact. Do not shout. Do not even ask what happened. Your husband is the kind of man who only swings for good reasons. And Carl will not press charges, if only to avoid admitting someone beat him at anything.

Carl quite possibly deserves the shiner that will develop underneath his left eye. You know Carl. He wants skinny girls and his own way. But more importantly (and what you do not know), he wants to feel important enough to be loved. Do not tell him you forgive him; he will stagger to his feet with his hands over his face and tell you to go to hell. Tell him that you love him, even if he's a jerk. He'll almost warm up to that, even if he won't look you in the eye.

As you leave the room with your hand on your husband's shoulder, someone may say that Carl deserved it, that it took one punch, pow-thud, and he was down. You might not know if you should be proud of your husband. Just give him space. He may tell you in his own time what prompted his fist.

If Aunt Lisa leans in toward you later—after the punch has cleared most everybody out and Grandma has gone home—and whispers that cousin Carl has actually impregnated another girl—this time the unfamiliar teenager you haven't known how to approach—be grateful that the news doesn't hit you right away. You will have enough time to get another baggie full of ice for your husband's knuckles, say your final good-byes, and drive home, where you will realize how quiet your house is. Then you can

throw your coat on the floor and shout damn, damn, damnit. You can even huff around the room and kick the furniture. But stop wondering why any teenager can pull her pants down once and find herself gravid. She just can. Maybe you could have back then, too.

After you brush your teeth, you can ask your husband if Carl's new girlfriend is the reason for blackening Carl's eye. Your husband will easily call Carl a jerk, a loser. He will probably be free with his condemnation of Carl's politics, his job, his swaggering promiscuity. He may lament the adorable children that Carl has fathered and abandoned in his three decades on Earth, all of whom would be cherished in your home if they would only come. He might move to abstractions: the inequitable nature of life, the suffering of the fatherless, the irony of the universe. But he will not tell you what Carl said.

You can press him for it if you want. You can be his confidante. Say, yes, the universe is unfair and Carl is a dirtbag, but nobody at a family party ever punched him over it before. If you say this, your husband will sit on the edge of the bed and have trouble speaking. He may want to relate Carl's words that preceded the punch in the face, but be unable to repeat them. He might say it was just something in the way Carl talked about women, or babies, or both. You can mention that Carl's a jerk, so was his father; but your husband will grump about how that doesn't make it right, how he shouldn't be excused and protected by the whole family tree. Say, Every family has one like him. Your husband will stand and go to the closet. He will push the coat hangers back and forth on their rack in the closet, looking for nothing and not finding it. Say that you're glad he did something, that Carl deserved it. Listen to the scrape of the hanger hooks on metal.

*

When you see your cousin Carl's girl again—perhaps at the family Christmas party—you might be surprised. You may wonder how such a lovely girl ever found her way to the guy you always saw as spindly and thin-haired. Do not spend too much time marvelling. She will probably interlock her fingers with his, lean her head against his shoulder, and love her man as much as you love yours. It does no good to wonder how this is.

What you know of Carl, she does not know. Perhaps she knows things you could never guess. If she whispers something in Carl's ear and then goes to the veggie platter, follow her. Learn her name, ask where she found her adorable shoes, tell her your favorite part about the holidays is the eggnog.

She will probably not mention that she is pregnant. Do not ask her due date. Notice that when she talks about the future, her hands keep returning to touch her tummy that hasn't yet begun to swell. Be willing to feel alternately happy and sad for her. After all, you know that despite his promises and façade of affection, Carl will probably leave her. If he does, you can hold a grudge against him. Perhaps for even longer than a month.

Try to forget what you heard from the aunts when you passed through the kitchen—that maybe she wants to keep the baby, or maybe abort it, she can't decide. If you don't know what to say, pay attention to the reasons that she smiles. And most importantly, if their baby ever does manage to enter the dialogue—when she's due, how much she hopes that labor won't be painful, how she will name the child Sky whether it's a girl or a boy—don't tell her you want one.

AMPUTATION

When the mothers look around the campfire for someone to blame tonight, they choose Penny: not the two thoughtless teenage cousins, not Penny's clueless fiancé, Doug, who hauled the monstrous four-wheeler up to the campsite, and not even Lily—who upset the Huffs' summer traditions this year because she had to have her foot cut off.

The whole family knows that a doctor diagnosed an odd bump on the bottom of Lily's big toe as cancer nearly two decades ago, when she was in high school. While it was the real deal—anesthesia, surgery, prescription pain meds, and countless follow-ups—Lily usually talks about it more like a wart she once had dramatically removed. She had a wart more glorious than anyone's. The family in general has always approved of her brave nonchalance.

At first, they did not worry much about how Lily, the family optimist and jokester, would handle the story they heard over the phone via her mother last winter: when Lily rubbed lotion into the soles of her feet one morning, she discovered what the whole family pictured as another glorified wart in her right arch.

Lily's foot came off right after Christmas. The cousins who lived close enough went to the hospital. They spread the word to other states about how Lily opened her arms wide from her bed to greet them when they walked in the room. How she held flowers to her face. How she bought earrings for the aunt who took her kids for a few days. How she winked when she asked her cousins to sneak a Diet Coke in past the nurses' desk. They smiled and sighed when she made odd jokes about doctors being greedier than cancer: the cancer only took half her foot, but the doctors wanted the whole thing, she told them. When they requested specific information—how far the cancer

went, why they took the leg off all the way up the shin—she said not to worry. They only wanted to be sure. The doctor got an absolute: if she had no foot, cancer could not grow in it. Made sense. While she talked, they noticed the way her left foot made a little hill of pleated sheet, and the way the right side had no hill to match.

While driving the nine annual southwesterly hours to the reunion this August afternoon, most of the aunts looked forward to Lily's stories around the fire. They wondered how her prosthesis would hold up on the Huffs' summer hikes. During lunch after first pulling into camp, the adults—aunts, uncles, and grown-up cousins—kept their mouths too full of Aunt Gail's fruit salad and the chicken she had grilled over briquettes. Everyone wanted to know more about Lily's foot, but nobody wanted to be the first to ask. They waited for her to say something about it, and when she didn't, they didn't bring it up.

Lily did, however, pull up her pant leg and take off her shoe. Lily's 9-year-old daughter hovered, supervising how much her second cousins marvelled at her mother's prosthetic ankle. She told them not to touch, and no they shouldn't ask if they could try it on. Lily laughed when her daughter explained that she and her brother were the only ones allowed, and only when they were home, and only when Mommy was helping.

Lily unstrapped her lower leg, which left the stump for everyone to stare at, until she held the foot upside down in her hand and gave it a voice and a name: Tootsie the Footsie. Tootsie tried to kiss the kids on the nose with the tip of her toes. Lily always does this—turns crisis or boredom into laughter. On hikes years ago, she gave names that stuck to every hiker: Constable Ken to her uncle, Charlie the Barbarian to her father who measured around about as much as the walking stick Lily picked out for him. She ran to

the tallest rock at the end of every hike and made her uncles take pictures of her flexing. On the way down the trail, she pretended that mud along the trail was cow dung and threw it at her cousins. They had eventually pinned her down and rubbed some in her hair. Lily held her foot aloft and sang a song in Tootsie's high-pitched voice until her cousins' children screamed with laughter.

Everyone laughed and clapped their hands, but the aunts didn't feel sure they should. Each wanted Lily to love her, to think she was the best aunt. But they also wondered what led her to think it appropriate to allow her children to try on her foot. They ignored their own children, Lily's cousins, now mostly grown, when they said they were almost jealous their own mothers hadn't had fake feet while they were growing up. Aunt Gail said it was time to clean up dinner and build a fire.

They had almost finished eating when an unfamiliar diesel truck pulled up. The trailer behind it held a four-wheeler with thick tires, secured with bungee cords. Most of the family didn't wave because they figured the driver was just passing by on his way to another site. When Penny stood and told them it was Doug, her fiance, and she wanted everyone to be nice, one of the aunts asked why he didn't just bring up a couple of drunk Republicans? Penny ran to the truck, but nobody could hear what she said to him. It sounded like a very pointed whisper.

I brought it so she could hike, he said loud enough for all of them to hear, and got out of the truck. For Lily, he announced, identifying Penny's cousin quickly because her pant leg was still rolled up. Doug waved. Lily looked up from her camp stool next to the firepit. They looked away while she reattached her leg. She stood. Most everyone watched her walk over to the truck.

Lily's voice sounded gracious. She even made her husband take a picture of her sitting on the four-wheeler, holding the handle grips, which the Huffs thought riotous, as they knew she wouldn't ride it. They expected that of her. Lily slid from the seat and said thank you and limped away.

Someone said something about not needing one of those here; look how well Lily's walking; we'll take the trail at her pace. But her foot could just sit there, Doug insisted. The only thing she had to do was push a little trigger with her thumb. The word trigger was enough to send Aunt Catherine into crazies. Some of the aunts threatened to go home. Some of the uncles, seeing Lily's predicament with her foot and the hiking, sounded understanding. They also asked how fast the ATV would go.

Doug borrowed the four-wheeler from a friend, he told them. He didn't own it. In fact, he could even take it back if it bothered everyone that much. The kids climbed on the trailer and touched the handles, threw their legs over the seat, until their mothers shooed them away.

When everyone finished eating and piled their mess kits on the table under the food canopy, Doug hopped up on the trailer, looking like he was deciding whether or not he would unhook the bungee cords. Someone sent Penny to tell Doug that they were taking a trail this afternoon that wouldn't work for the four-wheeler. Nobody suggested they might need it tomorrow. Lily put some water bottles in her bag. When they took a group picture, all the little kids wanted to stand next to her.

Clay, the family's most responsible 15-year-old, was assigned to stay in camp to hang out with Catherine's stepson, who refused to hike—not because the two boys were like one another, but because they were the same age. Catherine took her nephew aside,

and made him promise to keep her stepson safe. While Catherine loved the outdoors as much as her siblings, they frightened her. She saw death looming everywhere and warned her nieces and nephews away from it: they are too close to the ledge, they'll get giardia from touching that water, they shouldn't throw watermelon seeds in the bushes or bears will come. When her brand new stepkids asked for sparklers this 4th of July, she told them absolutely not. Her new husband bought sparklers anyway. She also said things to Clay like *make him feel welcome, part of the family*. Nobody felt like her stepson was part of the family just yet.

Which may be the reason the aunts did not blame him first when they hiked back into camp after the sun had gone and they found the four-wheeler and both boys missing, with nobody knowing how long they had been gone or where they went. Perhaps that is why these ten women, sitting in the semi-circled camp chairs tonight, covered in dusk, still do not blame him—even though they imagine he was the one to rev up the engine and back the loud, dirty vehicle off the trailer, the one to convince Clay to do something he knew he shouldn't do. They barely know the boy, even if they can all conjure him to mind by his synecdoche of painted nails, or his pained expression, or his consistent use of the word *lame-ass*. How unfair of them to make assumptions about him, just because his tongue is pierced.

Exactly, Catherine tells them all. Of course Mitch isn't to blame.

For what?

The question comes from outside the circle and the mothers turn from the fire to squint into the darkness. Lily comes from it, back from the latrine. She passes through the circle of chairs, and sits down in the only empty space, next to Penny. The aunts go silent

and Lily looks up from the pant leg she has leaned down to roll up. She grins and asks if she's making everyone uncomfortable again. She tells them she can leave her leg on until they go to bed. Nobody smiles. Lily lets her pant leg alone.

Mitch who? someone asks. And the mothers remember to worry about their children. Nobody even bothered to learn his name? Catherine says. She points at several of her sisters and sisters-in-law who do not seem to notice because they are all staring at Penny, who makes eye contact with no one. Not even his name, Catherine says. No wonder he felt like he needed to run away. And because none of them remembered his name before now, the mothers absolve Catherine's step-son, wherever he is, and whatever damage he may have exacted on his cousin and on an expensive but useless piece of heavy machinery. They shift uncomfortably, wondering. They hope that their husbands, armed with flashlights and walkie-talkies, do not become as lost as the boys out in the woods.

For the next few minutes, they pardon others, too: Clay, for his willingness to go along, Doug for the way he took the mothers' hands when he heard the boys were gone and said he was sorry and jumped in his truck to go and look for them, and the four-wheeler, for existing. But they need someone to blame. And they somehow feel the need to blame a Huff. Some of them think of mentioning Lily, but nobody will say it now that she's sitting in the circle.

They say: someone must have heard the engine, someone who was still here in camp when the boys took off, this group is too big for one person to watch, everyone has to look out for the kids. Everyone is responsible, they say. But because only Penny and

her mother stayed behind to finish packing up dinner, they alone can take responsibility for the 15-year-olds gone missing.

The two of them sit across the fire from anxious interrogators: Penny, the bird-boned version of her mother, Gail, who crosses her hands in her lap. Gail asks for the blame. She should have gone to look when she heard the ignition. But the mothers wave her away. You must have been up to your elbows in mess kits, they say.

But Penny. They focus their attention on Gail's daughter, sitting across from them in the firelight. Penny could have run to check. Penny should have done something. Penny probably didn't even stay to be helpful—she stayed because she didn't want to hike. And Doug went. She sent him without her? Penny doesn't say a word. Embers crack.

Now wait, Gail tells them, that's not fair. The boys *are* fifteen and can take as much responsibility as anyone. She places her hands palm-up on her knees and asks why they can't stop blaming and spend their time tonight looking for the boys with their husbands who are out in the woods. Why don't they hold their judgment for Clay and Mitch, is it?—who deserve it more than Penny does—when someone finds them tonight or in the morning? Gail feels certain someone will find the boys only two miles from camp, turned around and a little hungry.

Catherine shakes her head and asks about the moment the engine revved. Why did Penny not go look? Did she think the boys would be responsible all by themselves? Where did they go? Did she even know how irresponsible she was? Catherine only asks questions that Penny doesn't know the answers to.

Penny tells them the boys will come back and all will be fine and she's so very

sorry, but it's not all her fault. How could she have known Mitch planned to steal from her fiancé? And if she had, what could she have done to stop him?

Someone murmurs that's what you get from dating a man like that.

A man like what? Nobody answers. A man like what?

Catherine says what the other women think: We all knew that he was trouble when he first pulled up.

Wait: Lily says it. And she asks what is really going on. Aunt Catherine tells her the boys ran off on that damn ATV that Penny's fiancé brought and Penny did nothing to stop them. Lily says no and asks again what's really going on. Catherine says her stepson is lost in the woods because of Penny. Lily reminds the circle of women that *she* is the reason Doug brought the ATV in the first place. They know this. They have all let it cross their minds. But Lily is their favorite, the one who always makes it first up the hill. The one who made it last today, but made it, just the same.

The mothers say nothing.

I mean, aren't I? Aren't I the reason? She asks the question more than once, but nobody answers it aloud. They cannot say that they blame Lily, even if they do.

Because Doug's different? Is that why we're here? Because he might not want to climb up and down every single hill around before the weekend's over? Because he might be thoughtful enough to realize that I can't? Is that why we're sitting here, chewing Penny out, instead of looking for the boys? She asks questions that receive no answers but the popping of a log and the heat released into the air between them. They do not know how to answer. Lily never speaks with barbs.

She tells them it's a good thing she hasn't taken her leg off, yet. She's going out

to look for them. When she stands, the wrinkle that passes over her face tells them that she hurts and needs to rest her stump. But she limps out of the circle that the fire's flicker reaches. The mothers hear her hunting around in a bag near the tents. They see a small beam click on. They say nothing—to Penny or to each other—as they watch the light move down the trail in rhythm to Lily's uneven crunching in the dirt.

OVER BREAKFAST

Gabriela knows that the bad news has already changed her son. Even though it is just the possibility of bad news—not really news itself. She watches him run away from her, new kite in hand, toward the group of boys at the far end of the street. She finds a sunny spot on the curb in front of her gate and sits down. Normally, she'd lounge inside on the couch on a day as hot as this and leave the door open to let in a breeze. But today, she would rather live outside, watch Rodrigo throw kites into the air with his friends, and hope that he notices she is there—that she will watch until the afternoon.

The neighbor boys—a crowd of feet and faces gathered down the dirty street—compare their creations, trailing makeshift homemade kites of plastic bags or folded notebook sheets. They toss scraps toward the sky, cross lines and disagree, point and shout and shove. The power lines will be a kite graveyard by the end of the summer. Rodrigo runs the length of the road, waving his red kite in front of him the entire way. Some shout her son's name. Some run down the middle of the street toward him. Some remain fixed on their own kites, their heads facing the sky.

They crowd around Gabriela's son, until she can only see the top of his head. Her son's three best friends seem to have bodies too big to be interested in paper and string, but she knows they will admire the bright color and the wooden frame, along with all the younger boys. Gabriela bought him the real tissue-paper kite at the paper shop for two *reais*. She meant to save it for his birthday next week, but she had to give it to Rodrigo today. And when she did, it had felt like a bribe.

Get ready, she hears Rodrigo shout, and all the boys back away from him in a circle. He flings the kite upward, tugging the string, pulling it taut against the air. His

right arm goes up and yanks down again and again without stopping, and his left lets out more thread, almost as if he knows how to sew up the sky. Twenty other boys stand behind him, eyes heavenward, squinting.

The kite appears above the rooftops, pulling against its string. The boys collectively bend their knees and stiffen, as if given a signal to the ready. Rodrigo's fingers open, releasing the line for anyone to catch. With no anchor, the red square teeters above the street, its string slack. The wind gusts it from reach. The crowd of boys erupts and runs, straining after the white twine. They scramble over and around each other, each with a hand in the sky and every boy barefoot. Gabriela's son laughs like he is yelling. Taller and tanner than the rest, he outruns them all, snatches the string out of the others' reaches and jerks it hard, urging the kite back up. He secures it for a moment, then lets it loose again into the bright humidity.

*

The morning had started with scrambled eggs and tangerines. Typical. Rodrigo liked them both, but he wanted the breakfast cake that his mother sometimes bought from the little bakery the next street over. He had compared: eggs and cake cost the same, so the money should make no difference, like his mother said it did.

Ro moaned about the eggs when he slumped into a seat at the table. His mother turned from the frying pan, smiling. She whined, in her most dramatic voice: My poor little man can't go a day without cake for breakfast. She laughed and came to the table, spatula and pan in hand. She asked how much he wanted.

"I don't want any." He folded his arms and shook his head.

She gave him that raised-eyebrow look that said *chega*—enough. He sighed and

gave her a half-smile. He watched a pile of eggs grow in front of him as she loaded his plate and told him that he could buy breakfast cake every day of the week when he lived in his own house.

“This *is* my own house,” he told her. He knew what she meant.

Ro picked up a fork and poked at his eggs. His mother sat down across the table from him with her own plate. She took a bite. She told him to eat.

“Where is everyone?” he asked. His mother told him that his father left early for work this morning and his sister was still sleeping. He told her that the eggs would go cold. His mother smiled and said she made eggs just for him, then. He would have to finish off the pan. Ro rolled his eyes and he asked if they could eat cake tomorrow. And then the phone rang.

His mother stood and went to the ringing receiver on the wall next to the stove. She picked it up and said hello. Ro took a tangerine from the bowl on the table and started peeling. He didn't like eggs because his friends called it the meal of the poor. He would tell his mother this when she got off the phone and she would ask what the problem was with being poor. She would tell him all his friends ate eggs, too. She would have a teasing sound in her voice, but he knew she would be serious. *Eggs if your stomach and your pockets are empty.* Ro knew how to pull back one section of the tangerine peel at a time so that it looked like a flower when he finished. He realized that his mother's voice sounded quieter on the phone than it usually did. He tried to listen. She turned to the wall and he heard her say the word results. He heard her say that eleven o'clock tomorrow would be fine. She hung up the telephone, sat back down at the table and put a forkful of eggs in her mouth.

“Who was it?” He watched her eyes. She scraped her plate with her fork and said not to worry—he said he wasn’t worried—it was just someone from São Cristovão, asking if she could come and clean a house. She had stopped smiling, though, and a job usually always made her glad. He thought of other times when she got off the phone and asked what he and his sister wanted her to buy on the way home from cleaning.

She did not do that today. Instead, his mother put her silverware and her glass on her plate and asked what he wanted to do that afternoon. The first day out of school for holidays deserved a celebration. Ro asked what would happen at eleven o’clock tomorrow. She asked if he was finished with his eggs, or if he wanted her to give him some money to run down the block to get some cake. Ro set the fruit on his plate and held out the petaled peel to his mother.

*

The mob follows the falling kite, brown bodies squabbling with grunts and elbows. The wind dies and the red paper drifts low to the ground across the street. The string trails in the dusty road, followed by boys who run hunched over, their fingers getting dirty. The three oldest boys on the street—the ones whose voices sound deeper every time they come by to see Rodrigo—usually catch it first. But when the kite crashes in the gutter, they let the younger boys squabble over it, retrieve it and hike it up into the clouds for them. Once it rises high enough above, everyone yells to let go and the thick cluster fights again over the dangling string. As far as Gabriela can tell, nobody ever wins.

She glances across the street at two old men sitting outside the little corner bar, drinking Skol. Huddled on the curb with her knees hugged up to her shoulders, Gabriela

rubs her bare arms as if trying to wipe the sun off them. Sighing, she puts her cheek down on her knees and gazes up at the red kite that weaves the air at the other end of the dirt road, that bobs when an excited hand yanks at it too hard.

She does not want to live this story again. She does not want to take the bus to the clinic tomorrow morning, just to sit in line, waiting for whichever doctor is free to flip through papers and give her news that cancer has returned to her body. She does not want to hear about her forecast now that her follow-up did not come back clean. She will not take her children along to hear it. She cannot bring her husband because he has already taken too many holidays from work to care for her. Gabriela will have to go alone.

*

Ro asked if it was a doctor. No, she said, a lady needs a clean house. His mother was a bad liar. She stacked the plates and took them to the sink, where she ran tap water over them. She slid the window open and Ro could hear a solid kick against a ball and his friends calling up and down the street.

A few months earlier, Ro became accustomed to the nurses' regular calls and the messages his mother asked him to take for her on the little pad taped to the wall. He knew the nurses' names, and some of them knew his, but they all refused to answer his questions. He knew someone gave his mother injections, but of what and why, he never felt clear. He only knew her appointments seemed to come as often as he went to school.

Ro asked what was wrong. Ro asked if she would go to the hospital today. His mother called him *anjo, meu amor, querido*—all of which he hated—and told him nothing was wrong. She felt good. Whatever the doctor had to say to her could wait until tomorrow.

“Then it *was* the doctor,” he said. She asked him if he wanted to go outside. He shook his head. Ro reminded his mother that she had promised once she would never go back to the doctor again. She sat down at the table and put her hand on his arm, which felt suddenly sweaty. She said that sometimes we don’t get to choose which promises we keep. He stared at her fingernails, clipped and filed. He wondered why she spent so much time painting them.

Ro’s mother lifted her hand from his arm, and then stood and disappeared from the kitchen for a moment. He didn’t know what she wanted him to do: to wait? to pretend they hadn’t spoken? He hated how he never heard every word—the way his mother never finished conversations, the way his father closed doors when he noticed Ro standing in the hall near his parents’ bedroom when they talked about “treatments.” His mother returned to the kitchen holding a kite she produced from somewhere in their little house. She told him she’d been saving it for his birthday.

He knew that the guys outside would jump and punch their fists in the air when he came out onto the street with it in his hands. When the weather had turned hot, he and his friends had entered the little paper shop on their way home from school every day to buy candies and wish over kites. They had huddled around the counter, which was piled with stickers of ponies, and chocolates shaped like hearts, wrapped in pink foil, and they stared up at the kites pinned high on the wall. They had drawn pictures and constructed their own versions, but the kites in the shop just seemed better. He and his three best friends had asked their mothers to lend them money. Their mothers had said it was silly to spend two whole *reais* on a piece of paper that would get caught in the power lines and torn.

Ro's mother set the red square of tissue on the table.

"No," he said. He put his palms out in front of him and spread his fingers wide.

His mother put the pan in the sink and turned back around. She leaned on the counter and shook her head. She said she would go to the doctor this once and see what he had to say.

"I don't believe you." Ro put his hands on the table and looked at the kite. It wouldn't be once. He asked what the nurse had said—why they called up after so much time had passed, why they called when she was already better. He wished he could read his mother's mind.

*

Gabriela sees the boys jostle for the kite. They fail to notice a car that turns the corner and heads straight toward them. Gabriela shoots to her feet and shouts at the same moment that the car's horn scatters the boys to both sides of the road. Her son safe, she sits back down slowly in her place in front of her house. With nobody to catch the string in time, the kite flutters down to the middle of the street, settling in the dust the car kicked up. Rodrigo runs to retrieve it. He yells at the departing taillights of the car with such authority that it nearly makes him look like he has muscles. He runs after the car, but his friends call *Rodrigo!* before he goes too far. Rodrigo throws the kite back in the air. He hikes it up into the sky, lets the string go and then lunges for it again.

Gabriela knows something is not right inside her. After the last time—so many days of lying on top of her covers with her eyes closed—she senses her body's agitation, things stirring up when something grows inside that shouldn't. She could feel it even before she went to the clinic last week to give them blood. Sitting on the curb this morning, acting like she is concentrating on her son and the neighbors wrestling over kite

strings, she pays attention to the throb of her blood in her neck, the sound of her breath in her throat, and the question of what her children will do if all those beats and noises grow too weak this time.

*

Ro and his mother sat across the table from one another, looking over the top of the kite that he had longed to fly. He did not know which question to ask to get the answers that he wanted. He worried that he already knew the answers and he did not know how to make them go away.

He thought of the first time he went to the hospital, sitting in the hard chairs next to his father, who said that his mother would not come home with them. He had felt stupid when he started to cry and his father told him to stop it—could he not live one day without his mother in the house? He hadn't known his father meant just one night. He had thought his father meant forever.

That night, knowing his mother did not sleep on the other side of his bedroom wall, he tried to imagine what it would be like if she never slept there anymore. Ro prepared himself for the idea. He got used to it. But after a long time, the worst had not happened. Rodrigo stopped worrying about death and he let himself go unprepared. At the breakfast table that morning, he promptly replanned the ways his life could possibly turn out well if something happened: he could convince his father to buy only breakfast cake; his father would probably buy new kites for any bright summer day, not just once a year when it was time to blow out candles; he might never have to clean the tiles in the kitchen again. But when he looked across the table at his mother, he could not imagine how anything else would turn out right if her seat were empty. He did not know how to

tell her this. He didn't really want the kite. He wanted to run.

*

Gabriela sees her son free the kite again, in a sudden windy moment. With no hand to anchor it, the kite escapes and flies halfway up the street toward her. Falling, falling, it pulls out of the boys' reach and threatens to drop onto a neighbor's roof. The wind picks up and the kite sails closer to her. She sees the press of hurried bodies come her way. The kite finds home and finally lands. Gabriela hears the red paper catching on the roof tiles of her house, sees the kite mob rushing to her gate.

Rodrigo keeps running until he nearly jumps on top of her. He stops. He stands in the sun's way, and Gabriela can look up at him from the curb without squinting. His sunburned face is still smooth like such a little boy. Little boy almost twelve. She has not cut his hair yet this summer.

"My kite!" He stands high on his bare heels and points to the top of their house. She turns to look back and up, noticing the red kite's tail already tangling in the antenna on the roof. Gabriela sighs. This seems too predictable: she gives her son what he wants and then it finds its way to irreparable destruction within twenty minutes. Her limbs feel warm and weak. She wants to walk inside and lie down on the couch with a cold cloth over her eyes. But she knows she can't or Rodrigo will know he's right.

*

Ro's sister entered the kitchen in her pajamas, yawning. Something about the way they stopped talking when she came in the room must have told her to leave because she turned around without saying a word.

Ro's mother told her to wait because Rodrigo didn't eat all the eggs. She should

come and eat. His sister went to the counter where his cold eggs sat and brought them to the table. She looked back and forth between Rodrigo and his mother when she sat down.

His sister asked what was wrong. She filled up her mouth with eggs. Ro's mother asked if she slept well. His sister nodded.

"Does *she* know?" Ro looked at his sister.

"Know what?" His sister took another bite of eggs. Rodrigo wanted to throw something at his mother.

"You never would have told us!" he shouted. Rodrigo grabbed the kite from the table, told his sister to forget it and ran to the door. His mother tried to stop him. She said please, wait, I'll explain, please, Ro. He opened the door and hurried out into the daylight. She could be dying and he would never know.

*

Gabriela rises from the curb, looking into her son's eyes. She wants to cup his face in her hands. She wants to stroke his hair. She wants the phone never to have rung, to tell him the story over again so he actually believes she will clean a house in São Cristovão tomorrow, or to tell him everything, tell him *something* so that he won't look at her that way, so that he won't point at the roof as if she tore and stranded the kite there herself.

"I'll get it down," she says. "I can buy you a new one."

Rodrigo says he doesn't want a new one. He stares. She stares back. They say nothing. The boys who have crowded around behind Ro look up at the roof and seem to realize the new kite is gone. Some turn away, some start to talk, some poke each other in the ribs and start to wrestle in the street. Gabriela feels the crowd disperse from the space

where she and Ro stare one another down. He says again that he doesn't want a new one. He didn't even want that one.

“I know,” she says. “Let's see if we can fix it.” Gabriela turns to the gate and fiddles with the lever so she can let herself in to climb up onto the roof.

UNEXPECTED PLANS

Ava Lee began attending cooking classes after Benjamin teased her for not knowing how to make a white sauce. They weren't exactly classes. They were free product demonstrations that she attended at Williams-Sonoma on the second Sunday of the month, sometimes with her sister. Ava knew the recipes and samples all advertised some new can't-live-without cookware, sold exclusively in the store. But she never bought the pans or presses or cutters or shakers or mats for ten percent off, as offered after each show. It was enough that she knew how to make much more than a white sauce now, that she saw Liz every month or so, and that she consistently did something without Benjamin, as she imagined he might go away soon.

On the second Sunday in March, Ava set her coat, purse, and shoes on the bench next to her apartment's front door. She walked into the kitchen in stockinged feet and picked up a scrap of paper on the counter with Benjamin's handwriting on it: ran some errands. He hadn't signed it. He hadn't done a lot of things—hadn't shut the microwave after using it, or closed his box of cereal, or locked the door behind him, whenever he had gone out. But most importantly, Benjamin hadn't kept her up last night or woken her this morning to ask where she had gone the day before. When she had come home, the evening news was wrapping up and he lay on the couch, an empty plate on the floor in front of him. Her appointment had been brief, the blood-draw nearly painless, the appointment for the MRI set for late next week. She remembered him glancing at the clock when she came in and took off her coat. She came home at the same time every day, but he mentioned nothing about her delayed arrival.

Ava checked her watch. In three hours, they would either laugh over Benjamin's

caricatured impressions of people walking past the sandwich shop window, or she would transfer her lunch from a plate to a box, tighten her scarf and hurry down the sidewalk to catch the next train. All men left eventually. She went to the door and put on her shoes. She stepped out onto the landing, shut the door behind her and buttoned her coat.

*

The demonstration of the month was artisan bread. The chef from a local bakery was coming to teach them how to make airy, golden loaves. When Ava had told Benjamin about it, she said that a baker was coming. Was that what they were called? Bakers? Benjamin had laughed and told her that he knew what she meant, so the right word didn't matter.

Ava arrived early enough to find a seat up front, next to the counter where the baker concentrated on arranging his ingredients and bowls. Before sitting down, she turned to look around for her sister and did not find her. Ava's phone beeped. Her mother. Ava silenced the noise and set her purse on the seat next to her.

The baker welcomed the little group seated around the counter and asked how many of them were anxious about breadmaking. A hand or two went up. Ava lifted her hand up out of her lap, but did not raise it high. She had never made bread, mainly because she assumed she would do something wrong and it would not rise, and then she would have to throw away all that work. She knew that after everything she did to the dough, she had to leave it alone. And when she came back, the bread would or would not have done some important thing on its own that she could not control, only encourage. The baker told them that he couldn't remember a time when bread worried or mystified him. He told them that by the end of the hour, they would all know how to make an

ordinary wheat dough look professional when it came out of the oven. Ava crossed her right leg over her left and straightened her pencil skirt around her knees. She imagined Benjamin would be delighted about the smell of freshly baked bread in their apartment.

The baker had arranged his ingredients in order of use on the counter. He went from bottle to jar to can, all in a row. He showed them a successful yeast mixture. He demonstrated how to make a rim of flour on the countertop to pour the dough into when the hand mixer couldn't handle any more. He showed them how to keep hands from getting sticky while coaxing the dough to a manageable consistency. He turned the piles of flour on the countertop into the dough that he pushed with the palm of his hand. He turned the dough again and pushed. Push, quarter turn, push, quarter turn, push. He made eye contact with everyone in his little audience.

He told them this was the proper way to knead. But, he said, enough with propriety. He told them they could do it the "right" way, or really just smack it around. The point was that the movement got the little yeasts going. Ava didn't like the sound of *little yeasts*. The baker told them to just punch the dough, or whatever they wanted, as long as they kept at it for ten minutes. He asked them a question that Ava thought he meant as a joke: What better way to get your frustrations out than doing something productive? Nobody laughed. He asked someone to come and try. Ava looked down to write a little note to herself about kneading properly. When she looked up, the baker's hand was extended toward her. She put her hand on her chest and raised her eyebrows. He nodded and turned on the tap for her to wash her hands. Nobody ever did hands-on demonstrations during Sunday classes. Ava approached the counter and the baker handed her the big lump of dough. He dumped a cup of flour on the counter in front of her and

spread it around with the palm of his hand. She set the dough on top of the powdery white and pushed down on it with her hand stretched flat.

The baker told her to go at it stronger—to punch it. Ava wasn't the type of woman who would punch bread, especially in front of strangers. She turned the dough, folded it over on itself like she had seen him do, and pushed down hard with the heel of her hand. The baker approved. He announced to the half-circle of chairs around the counter that once they did this perfectly like Ava had, they should stop adding flour to the dough and let it rise.

*

When the demonstration ended, Ava declined a discount on the non-stick rolling pin and the set of fluted bread pans by putting her phone to her ear. Benjamin did not pick up. Ava wandered around the store for a while, looking at cutlery and a maple cutting board she'd hoped would go on sale. It never did. She checked her watch again before stepping out of the open doors onto the tiled floor of the mall.

She took the elevator up four stories to this month's compromise with Benjamin. He liked Thai cuisine, while she preferred food that he called bland. When they met for Sunday lunch after cooking demonstrations, they took turns. This month was Ava's: sandwiches. She examined her reflection in the elevator door. For all her bundling up, ruffled blouses, and scarves gathered around her waist, her legs still stuck out skinny from the bottom of her skirt. Even Benjamin had commented on how much weight she had lost in the last few weeks. She didn't try. The elevator dinged on the fifth level and she stepped out to find Benjamin standing near the elevator with his hands in his pockets.

She surprised herself with how happy she felt that he waited there for her like they had planned.

*

When they sat down with their food, Ava arranged her coat on the seat next to her and her purse and phone on the table. She wanted to tell him about yesterday's appointment, about the possible outcomes of her testing. She had a pamphlet about MRIs in her purse. She wanted to show it to him—especially if he felt bored with her, if there was someone else, or if he had any reason to leave. Then Benjamin would have all the necessary information to make logical decisions. She told herself that he would laugh at her doubts and tell her to trust him more. She imagined herself dressed in a hospital gown, hooked up to tubes. She imagined Benjamin sitting stalwartly in the chair beside her bed. She hardly knew what went on in his mind now. She couldn't imagine what he might think about then, watching nurses take her vital signs. She put a straw to her lips and looked at Benjamin.

Ava didn't know how to say anything she wanted to, how to say that she had never really been afraid of dying, but that now she saw it as a likely possibility. Not likely. Possible. A possible possibility. She would have to phrase everything accurately when it came out. She tried to formulate as clear and cautious a speech as the doctor had when he laid out explanations about her weight loss, her headaches, her vision gone blurry around the edges. Not explanations. Possibilities. They didn't know anything yet. She could die.

Benjamin dug into his sandwich and shredded lettuce spilled out the corners of his mouth. Ava watched him wipe the mayo from his lips with his knuckle. He looked up and

wrinkled his face into a funny expression. She wanted to talk seriously, but the pairing of death with sandwich-eating felt incongruous. So she asked him if he knew she had always wanted to be a dancer. He asked what kind: modern, ballet, hip hop, tap? She told him she had never thought about the differences. She had only ever considered satin pointe shoes. He said he never would have guessed. He touched her knee under the table, said that she had the mile-long legs to do it. She took a deep breath and a bite of her sandwich.

Ava's phone lit up and rattled against the tabletop. She apologized, but it was the second time her mother had called this morning. And her mother rarely called. Before Ava could say more than hello, her mother shouted: Where are you!

Ava rolled her eyes and said, Hi, Mother, it's nice to talk to you, too. Her mother started crying. Ava put both hands to the phone and spoke softly. What's wrong? What happened? She felt like she needed to defend her reasons for eating a sandwich with extra tomatoes and Italian dressing while her mother had reason to cry, which hadn't happened in a long time. Ava swallowed and said something about being with Benjamin.

Ava's father had been killed. Well, not killed, really, her mother clarified when Ava asked, by whom? It was more of an accident. If anyone killed him, it was himself. Something about falling off a roof. Christmas lights? No. Your roof? No—his. Who falls off a roof in March?

Ava pressed the phone to her ear with her shoulder and wrapped her sandwich's remains in a napkin. She gave Benjamin a look that told him to do the same. He stuffed the rest of his sandwich in his mouth and made a face. Ava shook her head at him and stood, saying into the phone that everything would be okay. She gathered her coat and

purse in one arm. Benjamin chewed his sandwich until she hung up the phone.

*

Ava spent the afternoon being responsible. She put together a phone list and began informing family members—her mother just couldn't call anyone on Ava's father's side—and practicing the phrase, "in lieu of flowers." She called her boss and said she was leaving next week to be with family. She made a note in her planner to reschedule her MRI on Monday. She threw out leftovers. And the next morning, she and Benjamin shut the windows and locked the front door, and pulled out of the parking lot with plans to return after a week had passed.

Benjamin insisted on driving Ava to her hometown for several reasons: it was too far to go alone while grieving, she shouldn't drive emotional, he loved her and he wanted to be there for her during the wake and the funeral. She knew he loved her. But she wasn't sure where he wanted to be. In the first twenty minutes of their three-hour drive out to Freeport, he mentioned twice that he would miss the opening of his best friend's exhibit at a gallery downtown. She hadn't yet mentioned anything to Benjamin about the doctor or her coming brain scan or the pressure she imagined pushing out from the middle of her head. While she worried about its being there, she worried more about what people would do if they found out about it. Not just people. Benjamin. She didn't want to tell him yet, but she could think of nothing else to talk about.

As the blinker clicked them into another lane, Benjamin asked about what he called "the deceased." Of course. They could talk about her father. Ava wished now that Benjamin could have met him, something she had never wished about a man she was seeing. Benjamin rolled the window down a bit. Ava shivered and he rolled it back up.

*

Ava once stole a chocolate bar from the Road Ranger gas station down on Galena Ave when she had gone with her father to fill up the truck and buy some milk. She had snuck the candy while her father flipped through car magazines, waiting in line to pay for gas. She thought he hadn't paid attention, but he must have seen her take it because when they got home, he stopped her in the driveway and asked what she had in her pocket. She told him nothing. He had shaken his head and looked at the ground.

He didn't take her back to the gas station. He didn't make her return the chocolate. He didn't make her apologize to the teenage clerk behind the counter, like she heard in later years that so many other parents made their children do when caught. He told her to eat it—all of it, all at once—somewhere where nobody could see. He told her it would taste like dishonesty and she would never want that taste in her mouth again. She went to her room, pulled a chair over to the open closet and climbed up to hide the chocolate in the corner of the highest shelf. She never opened the wrapper.

*

Benjamin drove like a crazy man outside the city. He wanted to look closely at everything, except for the road. Ava asked for the wheel often, but he teased that she was in no emotional state to be operating a vehicle at high speeds. He made her promise he could have some time alone that weekend to work on sketches of her childhood neighborhood. He asked her why they had never come out here before. Why did he not know the place that she was from?

They drove for hours on flat asphalt until she told him to take the next exit. Ava opened her mouth to yawn when Benjamin lifted his hands in the air and said, See? See?

She didn't see. Benjamin told Ava to see, her hometown wasn't nearly as far away as she always made it sound when she talked about it. She said it still felt very far away.

Benjamin checked the mirror and Ava felt the car shifting down beneath her. She rearranged her purse in her lap, looking in to see wallet, keys, weekend make-up bag all in their place. She closed the clasp and aligned the purse's edge straight against the hem of her skirt. She knew she was good at putting things in order, at lining things up. Ava suddenly wanted to toss the purse out the window. She moved it so it sat at an angle in her lap.

Ava looked over at Benjamin and told him she had been thinking about how pointless dying was, how many things were lost when people went. She looked out the windshield at the orange horizon that had been fading into blue for the last twenty minutes. The headlights clicked on and the world turned dark except for the illuminated pavement out in front of them.

Like what, he asked.

*

Both Ava's mother and father had continued to live in Freeport all the years after the Alsop woman had broken them up and moved away. Their houses stood only two streets apart. Ava walked between them during her senior year of high school. Her older sister had already married and moved to the city, so her parents only had one child to share between the two of them. Ava usually slept at what she considered her real home, but she could hit up her father—lenient and vulnerable—for cash, or late curfew, or a chance to borrow the car. It almost made her feel bad, until she thought of Mrs. Alsop's car parked in her driveway one afternoon when she came home from school.

For the year before Ava left home, her mother told her everything. While she took a bath, she called Ava into the bathroom to get her a lighter. She talked until the water went cold and her little plastic tray, floating next to her knees, filled up with ash. Ava sat on the bathroom counter and crossed her legs and looked away. Whenever her father asked how her mother was, Ava tried not to think of the sound the water made when it started to drain.

Ava wanted her father to talk all about it, to explain. But she froze when she tried to phrase the questions that might get him started. She wanted to ask what on Earth he saw in that Alsop lady, and didn't he care that Ava was friends with that woman's daughter, and did he not think about her having to sit on the countertop next to the sink while her mother made her promise to never get complacent in her trust of a man, and why. Why, most of all.

She might not have visited his house so often had her mother not begged Ava to check in on him, to make sure he ate enough, to see if he brought other women around the house. One afternoon, right before she graduated and left Freeport for what she imagined might be forever, Ava walked to her father's house after her mother had emptied the tub and sat down on the couch with a gossip magazine. When Ava came in, he was sitting at the table, peeling an orange. Ava sat down. They said nothing while he piled small bits of pith and dimpled skin on the edge of a plate. She knew how to peel an orange in one spiraled piece. He picked the stringy white threads from the cracks between each section, and then set the whole peeled orange on the table in front of Ava. She placed her thumbs in the middle and pulled the sections apart to offer him half. He shook his head and said he didn't want any. She set one half on the plate in front of him and

pulled a section from her own half.

Her father sighed, leaned back on two chair legs, and looked at the ceiling. He put his hands on his stomach and said into the air that he never would have done it if he'd realized what it cost. Ava knew what he was talking about. He opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something else, but he just balanced in his chair like that until Ava had finished eating her half of the orange. He came back to all four legs and looked at Ava in a way she never understood, even when she thought about it later. He said he would be true from here on out. From the look of his house, Ava suspected that no other woman besides herself had set foot in the place.

She had often pictured her father the way she saw him that day, and realized that nobody else ever had. Nobody else saw him peeling an orange and confessing his sins to the sky. Nobody else watched him set the chair legs all back squarely on the kitchen floor and rest his head on the table and wish—she imagined—for certain moments to undo themselves. Ava's mother always loved him, but never let him move back in. And now, she never could.

*

Ava gave Benjamin directions from the highway. She knew the road signs without reading them. She could tell him where to turn, where they could stop for something to eat if he was hungry. New buildings had materialized since she last visited, but the arterial roads remained unchanged.

She started talking, wanting to say something important before they reached her mother's house. But she could only speak in small bits: Not really fair. Things could be different. But they weren't. (Benjamin nodded.) Can't now. We only get one shot. You

get one. I get one. Then boom. Fall off a roof. It's over. Benjamin looked over at her with a straight face and said nothing. He looked back out the windshield.

She said it was just the unexpectedness of it all that bothered her. You couldn't plan for it. You didn't know when it was coming. You go up to fix the floodlights in your old age and don't even know what's happened until you've launched yourself over the rain gutter onto the concrete. She said that, in a way, she guessed her father got what he deserved.

Benjamin laughed a single ha! He said he knew she didn't like surprises, but she seemed rather unfeeling toward the dead. She hadn't meant it that way. She just meant that the end of her parents had come so unexpectedly to them all. The end of his life came so unexpectedly, too. It just seemed fitting. Appropriate. She couldn't find the word.

Benjamin told her she was sick.

She said that was exactly the problem. She might be sick. Deathly sick. She didn't know what she had. Benjamin leaned away, laughing, she'd made a joke and he was in on it. He said he hoped she wasn't contagious. Ava told him to be serious, that you didn't have MRIs for communicable diseases. Or maybe you did. She didn't know. His smile disappeared and he said, What? But the car did not slow down. She went for the pamphlet in her purse and held it out to say, see, she wasn't teasing. Then she leaned across the stick shift to touch his arm.

It looked to Ava as if Benjamin flinched when she touched him—but certainly not enough to make him lose his grip on the steering wheel. Perhaps enough to swerve. The headlights veered away from the yellow line, toward a phone pole. Ava leaned hard against her door, realizing in the same instant how useless she was—she could not alter

the car's path. She reached across the seat to grab at Ben. Tires skidded in dirt. Ava shouted. Metal crunched. When everything went still, Ava could only see the hood popped up in front of the windshield, hear the hiss of air escaping somewhere, feel the burn of the seat belt's edge that had caught against the base of her throat.

*

Liz had to come pick them up in the dark. Ava's mother sat in the passenger seat, blowing smoke out of the cracked passenger's window. Both doors opened and the dome light shone out across the pavement until the slams shut it off. Everyone gave hugs all around and sighed expressions of relief that at least the worst hadn't happened. At least everyone was okay.

Ava asked her mother if nothing would convince her to put out her cigarette. Her mother said, I know, I know, it's going to kill me. At least your father went first.

Benjamin extended his hand and Ava's mother took it. They shook. Ava's mother waved the glowing ember around in the air as she spoke. No more heartache for me, she said. Only lung cancer. Let's go home.

*

When Benjamin insisted on a walk the next day, Ava worried what was coming. He would take his car back into the city and remove his things from their apartment. She would cry that week over even more than just her father. Perhaps her mother would drive her back for work the next week. Or maybe she would rent a car. Or quit her job. Or move away. Or die. Stupid. She was stupid, she told herself. And she told Benjamin that she would love to go for a walk.

It took all day to get out under the feet of incoming family she wanted to hug and

a mourning mother she wanted to comfort. They walked outside together after the sun had already gone down. Ava started taking Benjamin on a route of habit—one that would take them past her father’s old house, her best friend’s street, and eventually up the hill to the school. They linked fingers in the pocket of Benjamin’s jacket and said nothing until they reached the end of the street and turned left.

Benjamin spoke first: An MRI? Ava nodded. She wasn’t sure how many other questions were packed inside that one question, but she wanted to answer them all. An MRI of her brain. A likely tumor. Surgery may/may not be necessary/possible. She mentioned that she didn’t really have answers for him. Only suppositions. She kicked a rock into the gutter.

He asked about the MRI appointment. Ava thought of tomorrow’s 7:00 am appointment at the imaging center that she had canceled and then crossed out in her planner with a single, black line. The woman on the phone had rescheduled her for the following Wednesday without any problem, as if MRIs were as routine as oil changes, which to her, they probably were.

They reached an intersection and Ava pointed out her father’s house on the corner. The house was dark, but the porch light was on. They crossed the street and Ava asked if Benjamin had any more questions. He said he didn’t know what to ask. Ava said she did. She wondered if he would leave her because she might ruin his plans.

Before he said *of course not*, he paused long enough for Ava to wonder. She started to cry. Benjamin wrapped her in a hug and said it again. Of course not. He told her he’d do anything to help her feel better. She pushed back from his chest and said she wanted him to explain his hesitation. Why did he pause? He sighed. She said she wanted

the truth.

The truth? The truth was that he had been thinking for a little while that maybe he wasn't good for her or that they should take a break. But not now. Of course not now. What kind of a guy would walk out now? Ava turned around and crossed the street they had just crossed. Benjamin followed her and told her she had asked. He said he was here, probably for a reason, and he'd go with her to the funeral and to her appointment and wherever else she wanted to go. She told him thank you. She also told him she didn't want to talk about it anymore—not until after the funeral, which she felt would never come. She could put off this hurt indefinitely.

*

Ava expected the funeral preparations and observance to trudge over ages. But family and the neighbors' casseroles crowding her mother's kitchen left Ava breathless and full. The wake loomed and receded with a Doppler effect that only gave her enough time to wonder if her own face would look so plastic in a coffin. And then the lid shut over her father and someone placed the oversized flower arrangement on the top of the casket sooner than she had thought anyone should have.

Ava and their mother sat in silence in the backseat on the ride to the cemetery while Benjamin drove them, like a chauffeur, behind the hearse. They slowly passed the cemetery's expanse of lawn that was punctuated with polished stones and fenced in with metal. The hearse pulled to a stop in front of them. The brakes of Ava's mother's car squeaked like they were tired.

Walking to the gravesite, Ava noticed vases propped up against stone, pinwheels stuck in the ground, a Christmas wreath that had been battered by weather for the last

three months. Someone had laid a Diet Pepsi and a package of miniature frosted donuts at the foot of a marbled monument.

Benjamin went for the casket with the other pallbearers, leaving Ava alone. She walked in a zigzag through the cemetery's soggy grass, moving by herself, slower and slower, until nearly all the friends and family and neighbors and obligated acquaintances had passed her. She watched women punching into the wet earth with their pointed heels. She watched men in suits put out hands to steady them.

A little ways off, down the hill, a man in a beard and a dirty, olive jumpsuit stabbed at the earth with the edge of a shovel. His back had faced the funeral procession when it first drove up. He must have heard the line of cars shut off ignitions and slam its doors, or perhaps he had heard the murmur of mourners approaching, because he turned, knee-deep in dirt, and raised a single hand in the air, the open palm facing their direction, as if to welcome or to warn them. Nobody lifted a hand in return. Ava had thought a machine dug the holes—a backhoe or something. She lifted fingers to her temple and rubbed. She wondered how many of the people surrounding the grave would fall off a roof, or crash in a car, or go out in some sort of accident. She hoped none of them were dying right now, from the inside out. Or that if they were, they hadn't yet suspected.

*

Ava woke up early the morning after the funeral and found her mother at the kitchen table, cutting out obituaries. She opened the refrigerator and stared inside—at the eggs, the milk, the small jar of pickles—long enough for her mother to tell her that the fridge wasn't meant to air-condition the whole damn house. She shut it and sat down at the table. From Ava's side of the paper, the blades of her mother's scissors cut through

the middles of sentences, the corners of pictures. Her mother clipped the edges tight around the little columns announcing local deaths and arranged them together in a pile on the tabletop.

Ava wanted to tell her mother what they had not had time or energy for all that week: the MRI. But she did not know a way to make it sound unremarkable. And her mother didn't need to worry about a second possible family death in so few hours. So her mouth started with Benjamin. Ava said she knew her mother liked him, even though she had not met the man before his trip out for the funeral. Ava's mother nodded and snipped the newsprint in her lap. They discussed his height, his art, his prospects. And then Ava's mother said she knew that Ava worried—because not all men were true. Ava said that wasn't all. There was more to it than that. Her mother did not ask about the more. She said that Ava was getting too skinny. She should eat something.

Ava asked if there were ingredients in the house for making bread. Her mother put out her cigarette and began opening cupboards.

*

Ava poured the yeasty mixture into the crater of flour she created on the counter. She tried to fold it into the dough in the way the baker had, but the thick blend of eggs and wheat flour stuck to her hands. Her fingers were deep in dough when Benjamin wandered in, wearing a clean shirt. He kissed her cheek when she held up her sticky hand and said the flour wasn't keeping things as tidy as the class had made it look. He needed to run to the mechanic's, see if the repairs were finished. Liz would let him borrow her car. Did she want to come? Ava reached out to touch his face, but he dodged her goopy thumb. She went to the sink, put her hands under running water and scratched the bread

dough off with her fingernails. If she came, Ava explained, she wouldn't have time to knead the bread, the timing would be off, and then what would the baker think of her? He jingled the keys and said he'd be back before the bread even had time to rise.

Ava floured her hands, front and back, and turned back to the bread mass on the kitchen counter. She added handfuls of flour to the sticky spots until they thickened up and the mixture stopped oozing out from between her fingers. The lump turned to actual dough and then Ava started kneading—push, quarter turn, push, quarter turn, push.

Ava's mother left the kitchen with a fistful of newspaper clippings and Ava almost called her back. She wanted to tell her to come in here and listen to what was really wrong. It was the way Benjamin always said, take care of yourself. It was the way he liked surprises. But it wasn't Benjamin. It was what Benjamin might do, where Benjamin might go, now that he'd heard about things Ava hadn't even been able to explain for sure. It was the as-yet-unidentified, undiagnosed snag in her system that might make her worth leaving. She suddenly hated that she wanted to know exactly how to plan on him.

Push, quarter turn. Ava pushed the dough harder and harder into the unforgiving surface of the counter.

*

When Ava heard tires crunch in the driveway gravel, she rose from the couch in the front room. Her mother was sitting at the table in the kitchen opening sympathy cards, where she met Benjamin and noticed that her dough had ballooned under the dishcloth on the windowsill. She lifted the towel from the rounded top and moved the bowl to the counter while Benjamin told her the car would be ready that afternoon, for even cheaper

than he'd thought. They'd had to wait extra days for the last part to come in—some kind of belt. She shushed him and made him watch her bury her fist in the middle of the risen wheat and tip it out of the bowl. Ava sprinkled flour over and around the lump and began working it again with her hands. She said they would probably leave that evening then, wouldn't they.

Benjamin said he'd rather wait, rather spend an extra day or two where it was quiet and open. Ava's mother stood, said she needed some fresh air. Benjamin kissed Ava's forehead and said he would head outside to think and draw. She'd had a rough week, he said. She should come and sit with him.

She wanted to ask him what he was going to do. She wanted to ask if he hadn't mentioned her MRI after the wreck because she'd asked him not to, because he thought she'd had enough death for the week. Or if it was because he'd been considering contingency plans before they really talked about it. She wanted to offer explanations. She wanted to ask for some. She folded the bread over on itself.

Before she spoke, Benjamin told her again to come with him outside. They could talk. They needed to talk. And he wanted to sketch her face. She nodded and he left the kitchen to get his pencils.

Ava put her small hands down heavy on the dough, pushed on it one last time. She separated the dough into rolled ovals, set the ovals inside greased bread pans, put a clean towel over the growing loaves, and left them to rise.