

The Complex

A Novel

By Don Citarella

Don't change. She remembered his voice as clearly as when he first whispered it to her. Cat Stevens was blaring on the archaic radio in the corner of the coffee house. The place was littered with people, guitars, and the aroma of Tasmanian Peaberry and Orange Pekoe. *Don't let the city change you. Don't let it corrupt you. Don't let it destroy the person I love.*

1

Ambition. That's all it was. To a girl who never left the comfort and solace of the Big Rapids area, she could only describe it as that: ambition. After all, how else could she have explained it? She left her job as a telemarketer in a city fifty-some miles away. She left her family. She left her sister, whom she considered her best friend and most cherished confidante. She left everything, all the indelible marks of her life, to pursue a dream. She detached herself in pursuit of a wonder that flickered deep inside where it was protected from the world so that only her dreams could fan the flames. There, it burned, in the off-campus housing of a little, unknown town in the Midwest.

The Duplex, she called it. Above her were friends and students seeking a cheap place to sleep. The grime of her basement windows shone an evanescence that promised stars above. The quiet clicking of the water heater was a metronomic meter for visions to flash in her mind: the post-its on her computer screen, the euchre table stacked with beer cans, the unsigned lease on her fridge, the letters from her mother, the photo of her nephew on the Easter Bunny's lap, the outlined map to New York that Adam drew to guide them to a better life. Ambition was the only thing that could uproot a happy girl from everything that filled her life.

And so she left. Mothers constantly scold that too much of a good thing is bad for the soul and body, but Trina very rarely felt uneasiness or heartache and *The Duplex* never in the least bit offered discomfort. Yet she knew she had to go. Ambition, as it were, entranced her. It sunk a hook deep inside her breast and slowly, ever so slowly, reeled her towards the city. If she wanted to, she knew she could fight the desire, the curiosity. But she didn't. She merely brought in her knees, streamlined her arms, and watched the wake she created as she let ambition guide her blindly.

"We did what?"

"Overslept." Adam heard her voice but it continued to sound foreign. "I'm leaving to get the truck. I'll call you when I get home. We're still on, right?"

Still on? Of course. Adam had heard those words for what seemed like semesters. They chimed in him every time he and Trina had met and departed and he supposed the reason she asked her so frequently was to give confidence when it was needed. Each time, without hesitation, his answer was simple. Of course. After all, she had given him what she requested now tenfold. The aspect of him beginning a career that was states away, in such a bustling, brash place, had less an affect on him with this strength. The confidence that radiated from her was

impregnable. And even though he saw her trying to hide it, to constantly keep it beneath the surface where none could catch a glimpse of it, he didn't need a demonstration. Because he knew he felt it. And that was stronger than any gratuitous performance. Packing up the truck, he felt it. Watching her tears flow as she hugged her sister and kissed her baby nephew on the cheek, he felt it. Even leaving the state of Michigan for the last seconds of residence there, and trekking off late into the slowly darkening horizon, he felt it burn on into the evening sky, pulsating with every dotted line on the tarmac, flicker of reflection on the mile markers, and glint of light twinkling in the stars that pointed their way. Adam felt it strong enough, he had forgotten to even look back.

2

A 35-year-old Billy sat up from the steel cot that had replaced his bed a half a decade before. The straps that left his shoulders and encircled his arm pits were coated with a yellowed stain; damp from the night's tossing. The beating of a distant helicopter sounded like it was approaching and the blades diced at his brain. He pulled up the window that framed the Harlem neighborhood and most of 147th Street's nicest strip. Ritualistically, he placed a book in the jam to prop it open, and dumped an ashtray down to the street some three stories below. The butts fell like propeller-pods off the maples scattered in the streets, making mini-eddies as they plummeted. The ash gusted up in a haze, meshing with the overcast sky and disappeared a few yards out. The buses had come below again to ship off the boys that were expecting to stand on front lines halfway across the world. He swung his feet over the side of the bed and rubbed his eyes, momentarily resting his head in his hands and his elbows on his knees. He could feel the rotors churning at the base of his skull and scratched an itch on the back of his wrist with the stubble that formed on his chin. Leaning forward, he placed his elbows on the window sill and felt his pupils adjust to the grayness outside. Its cloudy ambiance was still glowing brighter and brighter, compared to the confines of his studio loft. Scooting backwards on the bed, he pulled is back into a straight line, stretching it for the morning like a cat aroused from a nap. Patting a spot of springy hair above his ear, he thought about the boys and how he envied their destinies, to be a part of history, a part of what people would read about for years. He glanced downward and saw the Sullivan boy on the stoop smoking one last cigarette before stepping onto the MTA bus, his hair jostled in the breeze. Soon it would be gone, shorn to a military coif and matching his future drinking buddies'. The polyester band on the sleeve of his tee-shirt hung loosely around his average male frame. Soon, it too would be gone, replaced by the uniform of ground infantry and a cadet's chevron, hiding newly-formed muscles and a tattoo of his unit and division. Billy decided the boy wouldn't have a hard time making friends in Vietnam. He'd probably have a loop of cronies by the time he'd cross the Brooklyn Army Terminal Ferry's boarding plank to Fort Hamilton.

Billy remembered last week when Andy came rushing into his office with a disconcerted look on his face, and a cigarette corked awkwardly in his lips.

"What is it, Andy?" Billy questioned, looking up from a stack of addresses for the night's intervention. "What's wrong?" Andy said nothing, hiding his hurt, somewhat less innocent eyes, from Billy with a plume of smoke. Instead, he handed an envelope across Billy's desk. The cover had an embossed seal of the United States government, which caused a degree of happiness in the pit of Billy's stomach. *Finally*, he thought, *a connection between him and the world, even if it came through Andy.*

"Look inside." Billy found the slit of the opened envelope and pull out a draft from the government. With it, a card fell out and landed amid Billy's addresses.

"You're drafted, Andy?" Billy spoke through the letter. Andy nodded. Billy continued to read as he pawed the card with his other hand and lifted it to sightlines. It was an MTA ticket to Whitehall Street, where the planes and carriers embarked for Vietnam.

"It's a one-way ticket, Billy."

The wind gusted into Billy's room and soothed the redness in his eyes. His joints ached from the deposit of residue from whatever he'd injected the night before. He spent his days at the Boy's Shelter, an adjunct of the First Harlem Reformed Church, as a counselor. There, he preached for abstinence and staying clean. He spent the evenings on call to troubled families. He spent his nights drugged up, reading as much about current events and history as he could, consumed by the world he resided in. He found a decade earlier that it helped pave the rough parts of life and allowed him a groove to continue his thirst for knowledge. A counselor's salary, however, was merely ample enough to provide for their lives. Fortunately—rather bitter-sweetly, it was now somewhat easier since his wife stopped returning his calls. The drugs, unfortunately, were from other sources of income, including his parent's four-poster queen-size that he sold for a stash years ago. Now, he had lightened his addiction to a fix a day and realized with each night it was getting easier to mellow, instead of what the pamphlets in his office said. His room was littered with empty cartons of Doral Lights and piles of aluminum foil squares, stacked, blackened and spent. The light from the window reflected off some of the squares and gave the room a through-the-looking-glass feel. A soot-cloaked mirror ball refracting light in splotches across the velvety wallpaper he and his wife put up in '63. It was whiter, back then. Now, he couldn't tell what color it was. He used the light outside his window to read at night, where he'd sit on the fire escape or the window sill. The bulbs in his apartment were dead, tungsten broken, glass clouded. He wondered why light bulbs glow the brightest just before they blow out. Maybe it's the same with people.

Standing up with a thud from the window sill, he walked towards the cinder block and two-by-four shelving and grabbed a t-shirt and boxers. His head was cushioned by the afro he wore, a typical and suitable cut for the trendy and unambitious. He didn't know how much a hair cut cost nowadays, but knew each fix was probably more. Once again, the Sullivan boy entered his mind before he exited his room and walked down the corridor to the floor's shower. I hope he makes it, Billy thought. He's a bright boy. I hope he doesn't burn too bright too soon.

While the shower ran and washed the stink off his body, the ache from his joints, and the lethargy from his disposition, he remembered the first time he met Andy Sullivan. Andy had an addiction to the same stuff that Billy used, nightly, probably from the same dealer. Billy sat the 17-year-old down in his office, and explained what the stuff did to young kids, ignoring the coincidental hypocrisy.

"You're a good kid, Andy. Please consider what you're doing." He went on to describe how his mom argued he was once top of his class. Billy didn't give a damn. He just knew that someone needed help, regardless of their achievement or their parents' love for them. "This is going to sound stupid, Andy, but you've got a lot going for you. Some kids aren't born with what you have." The boy was shaking and pale, his mind possibly weaving through his desires. Billy

brought out some pictures of kids like him. Some dead; some in jail. All of them were top of their classes, he said, though Andy was apparently oblivious.

"Look, your body is ripping itself apart. It needs a supplement for the natural endorphins in it," Billy spoke ardently, while Andy met his eyes for the first time. "Here," he said, pulling a pack of Dorals from the long, middle drawer of his desk. "If you gotta do something, do this." Andy just stared at the cigarettes. "Your body will replace the need for the crack with the need for nicotine. It's not the greatest for you, but it'll prevent you from looking like these other kids. Andy reached out and took the pack of cigarettes. "If your mom asks where you got these, tell her I gave them to you. Remember, if it's between this and crack, use this. 'Kay?" After a long pause, a mere blink was his only reply. "Please?" The boy finally nodded. The cigarettes, Billy thought, are merely a placebo. A depressant could never take over the effects of a stimulant, but what did Sullivan know? He trusted Billy. And the chances were good that the Dorals would work in kicking his crack addiction. To be extra sure, he slipped his dealer an extra twenty to ensure the transactions discontinued.

That was Billy's life, each day receiving self-worth and pride for the lives that he bettered. It helped him get through the nights' reading and research on world trends, prospects of conflict, and Vietnam. Billy smiled while he dipped his head under the faucet, semi-flattening his afro. He heard a popping sound and, when he opened his eyes, noticed the last bulb in the whole apartment had burst.

3

"Make a list, Trina," Rhonda had said. Her only sibling, and mother to her nephew, was pleading for her to return to Michigan. The pay phone was sticky and warm on her ear and Trina wondered how many diseases she was ushering into her mostly-untainted body.

"What kinda list?"

"Take a sheet of paper and divide it in half. On the left side, write a list of all the things you love about Michigan. I better be on it, Trina."

"This is stupid."

"You always say that," Ronnie replied. "On the right side, write a list of all the things that you expect New York can provide you with that Michigan can't."

"What's the point of this, Ronnie? I'm almost out of time." She searched her pockets for quarters but knew they'd soon be needed for laundry money. She only had one suit for interviewing and no idea if she'd even have the opportunity to use it.

"Two reasons. Number one: It's to see if you're going to be happier in New York than you were in Michigan, which, as far as I'm concerned, is impossible."

"Number two? And quickly."

"It's to see if you're following something or running away from something."

Trina had worked for several businesses in the Big Rapids area as closing managers, opening managers, night managers, day managers, before she had gotten the lofty position making phone calls for the automotive software's telemarketing department. When she ended up in the city, she and Adam had found a six unit complex and an elderly lady in need of help. She had agreed to let them stay there for half the cost of living, but only if they promised to take over the responsibilities of the building.

"Landlord? Me? What do I know about apartment management?"

"Trina, you've been doing it for three years."

"What, at the Duplex? People agree to move in and I collect the checks. That's not management. That's just being *neighborly*."

"What about the utilities? You saw that they were paid. You made sure service people came out to fix the plumbing, the wiring, even fixed them yourself when you knew what to do. You managed that place, Trina. Just like you managed the gas station, the yogurt shop, even the telemarketing department of—"

"This is different, Adam. This is a full-time job. It's a lot more responsibility than a two family house."

“So make it a full-time job. With half the rent, only I need to work.”

And with that, her excuses had run as dry as her pockets. For the first time in her heart, since she had left the Duplex, she felt the shimmy of the butterflies’ wings fluttering softly behind her ribcage. She had found, what she believed, to be the beginning of a new era for her: an era that demanded maturity to let the six apartment unit continue to sway securely in the Brooklyn bustle. It was an era that whispered adventure and tempted hopes as deep as the sap-lined veins of the oaks that flittered through the Greenwood Cemetery. Perched at the top of Park Slope, Trina found her new Duplex.

On the outside, Trina half-heartedly agreed that this was her current disposition, an honored place of respect and grandeur and possibly a blessing in disguise. Besides, she made Adam sweeten the deal to a 5-year lease with a fixed monthly amount and the kind elderly lady was happy to oblige. She was to live for free, where labor seeded her land and sprouted a miniature money shrub. She watched Adam plan vigorously for a route to midtown Manhattan via the people-infected capillaries of the city: the Metropolitan Transit Authority’s subway system. Trina thought that May of 2004, the end of the lease, was an eternity away.

“The way it looks, I can walk five blocks to the N or the R, get off on Pacific, follow the underground swarm to Atlantic and take the B, D, or Q straight into Herald Square.”

“You’ve lost me,” Trina returned, looking up from her Village Voice with her librarian-style reading glasses. They were half askew clutching precariously to the bridge of her nose.

“It’s only one transfer and I should make it to work in 45 minutes.”

Trina now removed her glasses and placed her thumb and index finger over the little red indentations that remained. “Can’t you just walk?”

“Trina, it’s miles away.” She half-way yawned, incapable and unwilling to stifle it, and tried to speak over it.

“Why don’t you work closer to home?”

“We went through this. I think it’s a good opportunity to get involved with this one. It’s a start up dot-com. It’s got good potential, internationally-based, and they pay decent money. Besides, I don’t think I’m qualified for anything local, unless I learn to cook halal food and find a stomach for curry.” At that, she smiled. It wasn’t necessarily because it struck a humorous chord in her, but that it hid the fact that she didn’t want him to be so far away in this strange and unforgiving city. She wanted to know that if she needed him, he’d be within a block or so and could come running without considering a transfer route. She knew he would, too. He’d sneak through the apartment early in the morning, to let the promise of Bustello wake her tingling nose, and watch her sink sweetly into a dream some fourteen hours later. And that’s why she held quiet. She didn’t want to burden him, didn’t want to suffocate him, and most importantly, she wanted to remain independent.

Trina had a history, as everyone seems to have. Some people, when they speak of their habits or past trends, would call upon their tendencies to look for danger, to find the unbridled mate and pretend to have them enamored and obedient. Some people know that what they have is special and like clock-work will seek the *something greater* when things get serious, or at the least, fall into routine. Trina’s history, though, the one she would barely mouth when her sister would ask why she’s not happily exclusive with a perfect guy, was what she thought to be the most self-destructive mechanism in her life. She fell easily in and out of love and, while there, became dependent. She couldn’t see what a reliance she had on the object of her longing. And though there were only a few, each ripe winner bore the seed of fruitful days to be nested in the heightening branches of their togetherness. When first discovering the sun, branches need to be

free of the weight of nests. Thick sprouts of yearning would only blossom and steal away its rays. The relationship would wither. It would literally, dry out and waste away.

Trina stared past Adam to the oaks in the cemetery. She watched them thrive free and unrestrained, their branches magnanimous to the world without ever feeling burden, and let the conversation slip away with the breeze that rifled through the leaves and acorns. She always thought it was better this way.

Instead, she turned back to him, and watched him twirl a little lock of hair behind his temple while he rested his head on his arm. She saw him study the shopper, beneath the subway guide and traced his form: past his fingers to his wrist, up the warm morning shadows on the side of his arm, to the cuff of his black t-shirt where it rippled under his shoulder. She followed the creases leaving his armpit across his chest that lost themselves behind his chin, laden with morning stubble, to stop at his lower lip, which he seemed to be unconsciously nibbling at. She had learned his quirks, the little things that lovers would come to recognize as miniature signatures of each other. She found them to be darling and amusing. He shifted below the table and her gaze left his lip to stop at his khakis, stained with coffee and paint and ink and whatever else designers use for transmitting their visions. Without the realization behind it, Trina sighed. Aware that something had caught him from his reading, she glanced up to see him staring at her.

“Coffee?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you want some more?” As if it were Greek, she missed his question, her jaw slackened and her face pivoted slightly, lost in matters she didn’t understand, feelings tied into and out of the heart, uncomprehending. Adam rose with argument from the hard wood floor, and reached out to her. She looked down to see herself caressing an empty coffee cup, cocked her head to the side, and squinted a bit as she tried to see his face in front of the beams entering from the kitchen window. His arm, still outstretched, reached further until she aided in allowing him to refill her morning grind. Her lips arched into a smile to meet her eyes, already there.

And that’s how she saw him, morning after morning as the weeks shuffled past, mechanized by the driving beat of traffic and business three floors down. She watched him sip half a mug of coffee, dump the rest into a thermos, topped it off from what was left in the coffee pot, and smile before he left for work. Entranced by the thought that the city had taken over where she previously reigned, she ritualistically got up when she heard him start his shower and put the coffee on. Gathering herself in a hallway mirror and wrapping a blanket across her shoulders she stared into its backwards world and wondered if it knew the future. Her eyes, surrounded by the puffiness of a morning face, seemed less impressed by this world and more...more wandering. At one point, she thought she hated the city, at another, she loved it. She realized how foreign it was and needed something to absorb herself into before she let these feelings get the best of her. The puffy-faced girl in the mirror seemed to be reacting more visibly to this frustration.

Trina heard Adam twist the shower knobs and decided she’d better leave the mirror before she let it convince her of more. Her twenty-two years hugged her frame well and anyone she passed wouldn’t think her a day over what it was. Somehow, though, she saw herself as she felt, and felt worse as a result. Stuck in a staring contest with the woman on the other side, she wished it would look away first. She wished it would look away forever.

4

Adam was spreading butter on a piece of toast when she entered the kitchen. "G'morning," he said, not even looking up. He pivoted his buttering hand, flipping the knife a bit, to glance at his watch. It was the same time it normally was when he did this, but today, his response seemed a more urgent one. Trina unseated the coffee pot and grabbed a mug from the cupboard.

"No, Trina, not today. I gotta get in and the D has been running a bit late this week."

"So take the B," she muttered.

He grinned uneasily and said, "The B is after the D."

"Take the 9."

"Trina, the 9 doesn't even run through Brook—" His voice was interrupted by the crash of a coffee cup, pieces spinning clockwise and counter on the hard wood floor near her feet. She stared at them watching them slow and replayed what had happened, though she missed it visually. She mistook the edge of the cupboard a couple of inches and the cup had not, undoubtedly, forgiven her blunder.

"All you all right?"

Silence.

"Tree?"

She hated when he called her that.

"Tree, are you feeling sick today? Do you want me to stay home?"

"I'm alright, go," she forced.

"Y'sure?"

"Yeah. Go."

He stood there for a moment watching her face for any inflection that disputed her words. The result seemed a shattered ambiguity. He picked up his bag and umbrella and opened the door. They had gotten into the habit of leaving their shoes in the hall since the other apartment on the floor was vacant, save for some of Beulah Barton's boxes, so she could hear only a muffled voice as it slipped into a pair of dress shoes.

"I'm bringing my cell. If you need anything, please call." She continued to stare at the pieces around her toes.

"Tree?...Y'sure you're all right?" A face, tinged red from bending over to tie laces, peaked around the deadbolt. "Tree?"

Trina nodded, but her inner voice vehemently screamed "No, please stay. I need you!" Her response was the quiet closing of the door and the slip of the tumblers to lock the bolt. She listened to his footsteps creak down the staircases until she couldn't hear them anymore. Tip-toeing around the pieces of the mug, she walked across the length of their apartment, into the front room where she peered out the window down into the street. She saw him step off the stoop and head west towards the subway station. You forgot your coffee, she wanted to yell, but

just traced his figure on the screen-less window as it walked down Park Slope and towards the thoroughfares, metro transits, and bustle of people. Her acceptance those four months before had left her as a prisoner, bound to her building, lonesome, doubtful, and miserable.

The morning after, she listened to his rituals as she lay in bed: the shower, the toast, the coffee mug, the deadbolt, the staircase, the city. The following morning, she didn't bother opening her eyes: the shower, the deadbolt, the city. The one after she heard the deadbolt. After that, she heard nothing.

5

Billy met Capathia at a Jimi Hendrix concert that took place in the city when they were both 26. Patie and Billy hit it off after sharing a joint on the lawn of Central Park, following the concert. They spoke about life and how they enjoyed studying and analyzing even the most trivial things, looking for trends, discovering the wonders of it. They set their scope on the reservoir and the jogger's path around it, detailing how each one was probably running from something on a less metaphysical level.

"What about him? What is he running from?" Patie pointed, about a Hispanic teenager.

"Coming of age? Alienation, maybe? Perhaps loneliness." Billy answered, taking another hit.

"The lady with the halter top?"

"Spousal abuse. Or maybe something deeper. Maybe discontent with her station in life."

"Why doesn't she change it?"

"She's afraid of disrupting the equilibrium. In order to alter someone's life, they must first sever some ties; some good, some bad."

"Like what?" Patie persisted, taking the roach from him.

"Let's say she's a teacher and she wants a kid. In order for her to have the child, she's gotta give up teaching, see?"

"What if she's not a teacher? What is she's just a girl that ended up in New York after deserting her family? What if she's tired of being the one to leave when things get tough?"

The girl with the halter top turned into the trees, disappearing, but Billy guessed the conversation had also taken a turn, focusing on someone else. He turned to Patie. "That's one thing we all have in common, then." He watched her eyes as she ground the remains of the joint into the dirt, and then wiped her hands. She looked up with red, watery eyes, not merely from the marijuana.

"What's that?"

"We all get tired of running."

He lifted his hand and gently caressed her face, arcing slowly to follow the line of her jaw. He could see her swallow hard as the motion was told through her throat and the emotion in her lips. She leaned forward and kissed him, tightly closing her eyes and releasing her desires. When they finished, Billy opened his eyes to a tear that followed the same line while they explored each others lips. She smiled deeply and looked away, exhaling.

"What about him?" Patie said, indicating a middle-aged white man with a tight-fitting cardigan. "What's he running from?" Billy continued to stare at Capathia.

"He's running from love," he whispered to her. She looked back into his eyes, which were swimming, and they kissed again. Finally, Billy turned to look at the cardigan.

"Maybe I was wrong. Maybe it's penis size," he joked.

They laughed, and leaned back, and studied each other. She fished for another joint while he continued to watch her, his smile growing steadily.

6

It was winter and the building shook with deficiencies. The pipes in the basement were frozen and the plumbing engineer (as he preferred to be called) was an hour-and-a-half late. Someone decided her bags of salt on the front porch were better meant for someone else's building and took them. A lock was missing on a mailbox in the entranceway between the unlocked door and the locked one and that resident complained about missing coupons. The first floor hallway light opted to be a strobe and the second floor opted for sweet darkness. To make matters worse, Mrs. Barton, the former "kind elderly" had decided to have Trina raise rent as the leases renewed. Adam had left a little over two months ago to live in an expensive rat-hole studio in Manhattan near work. There were days of apologies and promises to send rent money and visit frequently and consistently. As all instances when close friends and lovers "lose touch," the pop-ins became scheduled appointments, the appointments, phone calls, the phone calls, special occasions, the occasions, infrequent. That's exactly what had happened too: they lost *touch*. Their love, their mutually-pleasing, symbiotic growth and happiness together had strayed as had their rituals. Before, they used to stay awake until the sun came up, enchanting each other in storytelling and conversing that was unsuited for its denotation. Their talks with each other became pallid and malleable. Their dinners, once cherished and yearned over daily, became once-a-weekers. When things got to their extreme, and beyond their extreme, the contact between them, much less the badly-needed hugs, hand caresses, and un-categorical brushes and touches, became missed and ultimately lost. When this occurred, Trina knew the eye contact would follow and soon after, he'd leave. She would be lying to herself if she said she didn't see it coming, but she recognized how the city consumed him, how it tempted, and prodded him. And consistently, though she prayed for remission, she bit her tongue to let it be for the best. He wouldn't be happy with just her, outside the bustle, away from the glow, and she convinced herself it was her history that had interfered with her happiness. She felt she had gotten too dependent or that she had dared to believe that it was to be perfect forever and that very idea was heard by detestable fate and revoked. It replied that no one deserves that much happiness and whisked it away as quickly as the happiness came. He blamed it on the fact that he hated the commute, the transfers specifically. He said that they were too young to accept the situation they had and desperately wanted to remain close friends, despite what he had to do. Inside, though, she knew it needed to be this way. And though she felt physically nauseated, sickened in her mind and in her body by the very thought of him going, she let it happen. She let him go.

She lay in bed that night and listened to 278 in the distance and the transients motor or bipedal pass. The sounds were a cool undertone of the music that played daily while she tended to the tenants. And as she lay there she began to think about the Duplex. Around this time, they'd be gathering for the feast, a ritual that began about a year prior and continued on every

Sunday, even when it was too cold to grill. Those who lived there, their friends, and friends of those, would meet around 6-7ish and share. They'd tell stories of their days, trade insults lovingly, and joke about life. Those were days when it was possible to find humor in every waking second of the day because, she found, people laugh a lot more when they're happy. If it were possible, she would never be seen without a smile for she reveled in these days. Trina could see, dancing in the shadows that lined her ceiling, her friends and neighbors finishing a case of beer, a pack of Camel Lights, and a game of euchre, hearts (to which Trina helplessly foretold good hands by biting her lip), kings in the corner, or rummy. One would suggest a round of Pictionary, psychiatrist, or Star Wars trivia and they'd play endless rounds of the Kevin Bacon game; naming off every band that ever existed with an animal for their name. She could hear them calling out, Adam included, "The Beatles," "The Monkees," "The Byrds," "Was 'The Turtles' a band name?" "Imagine me and you, I do, I think about you day and night, it's only right..." "I really think we should count Grant Lee Buffalo." "Then we'd have to count Buffalo Springfield." "And Buffalo, New York!" Laughing again and criticizing the lack of band name status someone punctuated with a pelting from a handful of popcorn. *New York*. Her memories turned sour.

Trina realized her eyes were welled up with the saline provided from, what she heard, the world's 5th cleanest water supply, and she threw the covers aside. She didn't care how clean the water was, she wanted good, murky, sulfuric well water that tasted like hard-boiled egg yolks and streamed through the Big Rapids sewers and the Muskegon River. She jumped up from the bed and walked across the apartment, hesitating only briefly when she stubbed her toe at the runner of the pocket door, not even realizing what tremendous pain she was in. She walked into the bathroom, without flipping on the light switch, and pulled up the window. The screens, which she had newly-replaced, were easier to open so she flung it up and stepped out onto the fire escape in one fluid motion. There she slammed herself down against the L the railing created, back to the apartment, staring off into the sky. Adam said you couldn't see the smog that covered the area from inside the city, but you needed to be outside in order to view it. She stared up into the sky past where she believed the smog to be, and focused on the stars above her. They guided her every inch of growing up, twinkled brightly while the Duplex played the night away, and shone over her and Adam's U-haul as they drove into the area. And still they burned now, while she looked up. She wondered if they still promised the good times they had seen in the past. She brought her knees up to her chest and hugged them, pressing her chin against them and consolidating her against the cold night breeze. There, she focused on a particular grouping of stars she soon recognized as Pisces and began to smile, tears streaming down her face and soaking in her flannel PJ bottoms' knees.

"Phish," she said to the night, victorious with the stars.

7

"What do you think?" Patie said, a thick dribble of wallpaper paste dripping down her left forearm. She was on the top step of the step ladder and had turned to face Billy, who was measuring out strips on the floor by the dresser.

"I think it's spectacular."

"You're being facetious, aren't you?" she said, pushing some hair away from her eyes and leaving a splotch of the paste on her right temple.

"No. Truly. It's perfect."

"I thought so," she grinned. She turned to adhere more of the velvety paisley pattern to the wall in their bedroom, but not without an extra glance to Billy. He was sitting Indian-style on the floor in a pair of striped boxers and a sleeveless t-shirt. "We should put carpeting in here next. I hate walking across the floor in the middle of the night to pee."

"We should carpet the corridor too, then."

"Well, I was just thinking that I could just walk outside the apartment and squat right there in the corridor, so I'd never have to leave the carpeting. I figure the landlord has it coming to him."

"What?" Billy laughed, looking up.

"Besides, that would get me back to bed with you sooner."

"Oh," he laughed again. "Well, if that's the case, we'll just install the toilet where your night table is!" Now it was her turn to laugh. Billy watched her lips curl and her teeth glow. She tossed her hair to reposition it without touching it this time. Apparently, she was conscious of the paste that had begun to harden on her temple. She turned around again to reexamine the wallpaper for any newly-formed bubbles or buckles, her legs tantalizing above her tip-toes on the ladder. Outside the window, Billy could hear someone screaming something to a bunch of people and the people reacting, in eruptions of cheers.

"This is the time, Patie. This is what everyone will be talking about for years."

"What's that?"

"Listen to them out there. They're protesting, virtually rioting. They don't know what's wrong with the world, or what's right, but they know things must change. I heard the buses are afraid to come to the neighborhood because of mobs threatening to tip them over."

"What buses?"

"They're starting to ship people out to Vietnam for the draft. They've announced it on the news. It's all over the papers, Patie."

"I don't get it. Why are we doing this anyway?"

"North and South Vietnam are in their version of the Civil War, Patie. It's democracy vs. communism and people are dying over there for their causes. People are getting slaughtered because they live below a line on the map."

"So why are we getting involved?"

"That's what we do, Patie. When people are killed because of their beliefs, we step in. The U.S. is good like that."

"Well, then aren't we just going against someone else's beliefs for intervening?"

"Yeah, but we're preventing deaths."

"We're getting ourselves killed, Billy. We're sending people to some unknown country, some foreign land, to fight someone else's Civil War, and die for a country that they never knew existed, some out of high school."

"Not yet. The draft hasn't hit 18-year-olds yet. At the rate they're going, though they'll probably start before this time next year."

"Regardless, who helped us during our Civil War?"

"You mean 'who helped the North' or 'who helped the black nation'?" Billy questioned.

"I just, I don't think we have any business over there." Patie stepped down from the ladder and wiped her hands together, paste squishing between them. Her over-sized t-shirt had globs scattered randomly, one slowly inching its way down her left breast. Billy watched the glob. "It's not our place."

"What is our place, then Patie? We share the planet with these people. It's not like they're across the universe somewhere. Doesn't it bother you that there are people that are in pain right now? That there are people that are dying?"

"I just don't—" Patie tried.

"History is happening, Patie. This, right now, is going to be the answer on high school equivalency exams for the next couple of centuries, maybe forever. Doesn't it bother you that these multiple choice questions, these essays, are passing you by, along with places, people, and cultures you'll never know?"

"No."

"How can you say that?"

"I'm concerned with where I am, Billy Walker. I'm concerned with who *we* are. I don't give a shit about history. That's why it's in the past, y'know? *Carpé Diem* and all that shit?"

"You don't care that there are places where Napoleon walked, Caesar crossed, Jesus prayed, wh-where Shakespeare wrote about after only seeing glimpses of, that these places are, right now, being swallowed by the ocean? These places are being eroded by the winds, destroyed by wars, and demolished by civilization? This is happening, now, and soon, they'll be gone and you will never have known them?"

"No."

"Why, then?"

"Because, Billy. It's not my place." Patie spoke ardently, and crisply. She knew Billy's obsession with his place in the workings of things and figured this would be one of the things that stayed with their marriage all the way through it. She saw his brow wrinkle and furl. She decided he was reliving the conversation they just had in his mind, listening to her words again and again, dwelling on it. His painting of the back of the wallpaper had gotten brisker, and less thorough. He was frustrated.

They finished hanging the last strips in silence. Billy was bringing the bucket and brushes to the sink to wash off. Patie bit her lip while she searched the apartment for rolling papers.

8

Trina awoke on the fire escape curled up in the fetal position hugging a pillow. She recognized the pillow and blanket from her sofa in the living room but didn't remember fetching it in the middle of the night. She yawned and stretched and went into the apartment to put some coffee on and listen to an answering machine tape that was doomed to be full of complaining tenants. The building had six apartments. They, from the sound of the tapes, were the worst apartments in Brooklyn, though she couldn't understand why. She guessed the tenants were behaving as she did at the Duplex: complaining and making up injuries, while hinting at possible law suits until the kitchen of this place was repainted, or the toilet seat of this bathroom was replaced, or the light bulb in this closet was changed. She knew, now, why it worked.

Today, though, Trina had determination. She had awoken with the glory of more than a frozen flannel outfit, a stiff back, and a slightly drooled on pillow. Trina's awakening was much more spiritual. She had realized that her longing and misery stemmed from something. That something was lack of devotion. Her past had dictated to her that she was truly happy when she gave herself to something. So, now she had come to an agreement with herself—an agreement that would keep her sane and stable. Trina was on a mission.

While the coffee pot bubbled and gurgled, she slipped on a pair of loafers and trudged down the three flights to the mailboxes to tape envelopes to them and to collect whatever mail she'd received from the ASPCA or Fingerhut. Soon after, she peaked outside for Adam's subscription to the New York Post, which was still active here, and climbed the stairs back to her apartment to fix herself some cereal. She had gotten partial to Cap'n Crunch, Honey Bunches of Oats, and Kix, but sometimes Bran Flakes when her own plumbing wasn't doing so well. Her rear was just beginning to thaw from the night on the fire escape and she noticed that she had acquired a runny nose from it as well. At about 11:30, the phone began to ring, so she picked up her bowl and coffee mug, and sat in the easy chair, defrosting the blanket on top of her, to eat her cereal and listen to the messages as they were left on the machine, one right after another.

"Katrina, this is Mrs. Derring from 1B." Of course it'd be her to call first she thought. "This new rent price is ridiculous. I'm getting on the phone with Beulah right after this to explain the audacity of you to do this. Are the recreational drugs getting so expensive that you have to stoop this low, young lady?" she continued while Trina laughed. Mrs. Derring had been here, as it seemed, since the building was first erected in 1865 and apparently thought she was grandfathered in to everything, including the ability to ignore inflation. Trina admitted to herself that the jump from \$1100 a month to \$1500 was a bit sudden and steep, but she didn't care. She had a five year lease frozen at \$550 and Adam's checks for \$650 still came and, as he promised, would continue to come until half a decade later. Anyway, this only aided in her mission. "I want to talk to you, Missy. You stop by my apartment when you get this message."

Next of course were her bridge partner and her husband, the Labwicks. Trina knew them as the Crabwicks.

"Trina, this is Dottie—er—Dorothy Labwick. I received your note this morning. Celeste—" Derring "—and I want to speak with you...what?...oh, and Harold wants to know when the light in the closet is getting fixed. He can barely see his leisure suits," Trina thought, *what a travesty*. She wondered why anyone would refer to a blown light bulb as something that needed to be *fixed* rather than changed.

"Hi Trina, it's Bob." Bob Kroeger, probably a distant relative to the grocery store chain owners, had once tried to squeeze Trina's breast while she looked for the source of a sink leak. He passed it off as a misguided lunge for a glass that was about to *supple* off the counter. She found it sickly amusing being that he was encroaching on his fifties himself. "I can't afford this new rent price. Perhaps we can come to some arrangement? Otherwise, I'm sorry to say that I'll be looking for another place." Oh, damn, she thought. "Incidentally, my shower is dripping. Maybe you can take a look this week? Gimme a call, okeedokey? It's Bob, again."

Hmm. One more. "Let's see," Trina spoke aloud, crunching down some little powder-keg shaped sugar cubes that dismissed itself as cereal. "We've had Derring and the Labwicks on the ground floor. Kroeger on the second...that leaves only Marshall." Marshall P. Winthrop, Attorney at Law and renter for 2B. She imagined the P stood for pissant because of his ungentlemanlike demeanor. She giggled about the idea that he'd been single since she arrived in early summer and remembered him bringing home a client of his once, charged with (as she heard) prostitution. She seemed to leave in a hurry, Trina recalled, wondering if he was a minuteman or if she was too repulsed to—

The phone rang again.

"Ms. Fitzgerald. This is Marshall P. Winthrop, Attorney at Law, Apartment 2B," Trina mouthed the words as he said them, with such egocentric flare that he believed himself more godly every time he said it. "The other tenants and I have come to an agreement. We're suing you for breach of contract. The subpoena will be there by three. If you need to contact any of the tenants, you must see me, as they are all, now, my clients. Good day."

Subpoena? Law suit? Trina wondered if this was just another bluff for getting their way or if this was real. For about thirty seconds, she felt discomfort and began to worry that Beulah Barton would blame her in order to escape the suit and she'd soon be looking for new residency herself. Then, unexpectedly, an idea came and Trina grinned. She finished her bowl of cereal, set it in the sink atop the rest of her dishes, made a mental note of the need to tend to them soon, and left the apartment towards 2B.

"Ms. Fitzgerald. I see you have received my message, hmm?"

"Yes Martin—" she teased.

"Marshall, Marshall P.—"

"Yes, Marshall and I believe it to be very un-neighborly of you."

"Un-neighborly? Please, Ms. Fitzgerald, I'm not the one evicting five residents of their homes due to this absurd new price and breaching—"

"I'm not referring to the lease, Marshall. I find it very un-neighborly of you to bring...what are they called nowadays, *professionals* back to the house for midnight *consultations*. In fact, Marshall, I consider it so *un-neighborly* that it's illegal." The Piss-ant's jaw unhinged and Trina quickly imagined a puncture in his ego and the air escaping by way of his open mouth leaving a pinched balloon-neck sound. "...and your little breach of contract thingy, Marshall, we both know that doesn't hold water. The leases...I'm assuming you were referring to the leases when

you said contract...the leases become null and void February first—the dates are up—and this change goes into effect precisely one minute after they expire.” She imagined licking her finger and drawing a one in the air, inches from his face, while making a steaming hiss sound.

“Yes...well,” he attempted. “I see.” Trina threw her head off to an angle and grinned.

“Anything else, sir?” She heard Bob Kroeger’s door open from across the landing.

“Else? Er, no. Good day, Ms. Fitzgerald.” He staccattoed.

“Nothing else?” Bob said from behind Trina, causing her to whirl around. “Marsh, what about our—” he stopped suddenly, apparently getting a violent shake of the head from the Attorney at Law behind her. “But—” his eyes bulged as he prattled for understanding.

Trina began to walk past him, but found she couldn’t resist. She grabbed her breast in front of him, gave it a quick squeeze, and said, “M-yep. Still supple.” She grinned and pranced on up the steps to her floor. There, she ritualistically removed her loafers, stepped inside, and slammed the door, cheering behind it. Phase one of her mission was complete. She sat down immediately to finish her coffee and scan through the Post for its classifieds section. There she found an address, scribbled it down, and began to write up an apartments-for-rent ad. She knew she didn’t have to wait for the moving trucks to come, the Pissant would ensure everyone left quietly and no one was about to stoop low enough to pay the four-hundred more that Beulah demanded. This was mainly because they thought it was *her* who demanded it, and one even was convinced it was for drugs.

9

In moments, Trina was aboard the R as it scraped noisily toward her transfer point. From there, she'd find whatever train it is, that would take her to near where the Post was located. The doors had closed with their familiar two-tone warning that seemed to say "thank you" in the digital symphony of ones and zeros. She quietly hummed the Mr. Softee ice cream truck tune, Music Box Dancer, while she scribbled and rewrote sections of the ad, doodling vines around that paragraph like the ones that encased her fire. Soon, the subway let her off and she walked up the steps and into the cattle drive that the Native Americans once sold to the white man for \$24. Trina wondered who slipped what in the peace pipe that night—

"Tree?" she heard as she stopped dead in her tracks, smile and tune quickly erasing from her lips. "Tree? Is that you?" Trina slowly pivoted around to see an eager Adam.

10

Patie withdrew herself from Billy incrementally day after day. His deep obsession for history made their marriage sour. The lack of documented triumphs and defeats at Bulges and Trefalgars, heroes like Custer and Stonewall, and legends like William Wallace and Kublai Khan, made each day with him a Pyrran Victory.

The smell of eggs heated the house and bubbled and popped with the orchestra of the morning. She opened her eyes to the weight of being down—from the drugs' residues draining from her system, down from the thought of waking with Billy. Perhaps this is why Elizabeth herself never married. No lover could withstand the ever-present life force of her, which dutifully gained from others more than it provided. Radiance cannot be bottled or contained. If it could, it would surely wither and die.

The trudging from the kitchen floorboards seemed to encroach, if not to lighten the room with the glow it supported, shrieking itself from its life force being drained.

"They said on the radio this morning that the tension is growing. I don't think we're nearing the end, Patie. I think we're nearing the halfway point."

Patie yawned and probed for the deposits that nested in the corners of her eyes while she slept. "What halfway point?"

"Nam, Patie." He set a coffee cup down on the end table and pulled the curtains wide to throw sun in the room and an inverted fire escape across the line of Patie's face and torso. "The conflict is building."

Patie strained the last bits of stagnant blood from her system with a stretch that contorted the sheets around her waste. She could feel the toxins leaving her. Billy sat down on the bed in the nook between her hips and her chest and sandbagged the sheets in their constricting position around her. Patie lay with the back of her wrist over her brow, the shadow of pitted metal and ladders across her lips.

"You speak about it so much; you'd think you were in it."

"I am in it, Patie. Just as much as you."

Patie peeled her wrist off her forehead and pushed it along a trajectory to Billy's back. There she dragged her nails for a moment, to scratch and hopefully upset the conversation, wishing it to shed from this morning, and the fresh air that encircled their loft.

Billy leaned forward and administered a sock to his left foot. "I gotta work today."

"You said it was your day off, Bill. I thought we were going downtown. Remember? Seaport Sunday?" Billy stopped briefly and pivoted to place his arm on her other side, pinning the bedclothes around her more, like pins on a flayed frog's abdomen flaps.

"I know. I'm sorry, Patie. Next week?" He looked into her eyes and she, back. She could feel the tremble of his arm, as his body teepee'd her, the stubble on his chin, and the moistness of the temples as they glistened in the arch between the fire escape landing and the edge of the shadow.

"Next week, then," she replied, and attempted to throw off the notion as if it were a fishhook, caught deep in her gill. He, satisfied, leaned forward and planted a kiss on the red mark where her wrist formerly lied. She watched his jaw and remembered how it was just a small increment of what she used to prize; when her man was a catch, and not a tin can, or boot, just stuck in the net. Billy bent back over to locate his other sock, which now appeared MIA.

"What's it to be today, Bill?"

"Huh?" he strained, reaching deep under the bed.

"Your daily plan of attack? Your immediate circadian rhythm."

"Oh," Billy relieved, now victorious on his search effort. "Coffee. Paper. Work. Library. Drugs. Reading. Sleep. Do you want anything while I'm out?" Billy spoke, his voice following the dips and peaks of a man leaving the bedroom.

"Nope," she said. Just to be on that list.

"K." The voice spoke, and chimed with a set of keys. "There are eggs on the counter. I'll see you at dinner." She heard the door close and the keys stop jingling.

"I love you, Bill," she hollered after him and listened for a reply. The fire escape encaged her, the sheets, her leg irons, and the crying stairs outside felt the key man's footfalls as he whistled down the hall.

11

"Adam, hi. How've ya been?"

"Terrific, really. Things are going real well for me, how about yourself?"

"Oh, you know. The building's broken, the apartments are vacated, and I may be out on the street. Same-ol'-same-ol'." This won a smile from Adam, a prize she didn't necessarily need right now.

"You wanna get a bite and chat?" he pushed, still smiling. Trina knew this would happen: the uneasiness of the moment, the awkward feeling that followed from a loss of touch or a falling out. She didn't know how to say "no" and didn't want to say "yes." Her stomach was in knots, as was the strap of her backpack that she'd been mangling since she heard his voice. And, oh, how she had missed that voice for the last ten weeks, how she imagined it around the apartment, joking with her, being courteous with her, romanticizing her. She stared at him and lost the ability to choose her option. For the moment, there was a gap of silence until Adam chimed in.

"Good, there's a little café up here on the corner. How about that?"

Trina's head neither nodded nor shook, but performed a slow jerky amalgamation of the two that could've kept a miniature hula hoop afloat for about ten seconds. Adam wrapped an arm around her shoulders and nudged her towards where the coffee house resided. Her feet, disobedient, started walking in that direction. She released the strap of her backpack and felt the red, rawness of her fingertips, realizing that the twisting sensation still was there, inside her. She actually felt comforted by his arm around her, reminiscent of the way things were and, in her viewpoint, the way things should still be— could still be.

"Here it is. Do you want your usual?" A double latte with a half shot of cinnamon. He still remembered. And why shouldn't he? They'd been going to a coffee house in Big Rapids almost daily since they met and he consistently ordered and offered to pay. When he had gotten a part-time job there, amid his design classes, she was the only one allowed behind the counter and a steaming coffee drink was always present, even though she had always sworn he never saw her come in. Somehow, it was ready, precisely the moment that she hit the counter and would swear he never glanced up, but knew she was coming in. She had recognized that it took thirty seconds to steam milk—she preferred whole milk because it made the thickest froth—and thirty seconds to blow the steam through the espresso to create that thick bitter mixture that became part of her daily consumption. This gave her enough time to mingle or exchange brief words with the regulars before she crossed the café to the counter. But it was always ready, and always tasted great. She often thought the reason was because he was the one making it, and making it solely for her.

She watched him leave her at a table in the corner by the window that framed a certain section of the borough perfectly and walk towards the coffee minstrel by her instruments, and

thought of the mad rushes that the coffee house in Michigan used to have. These were the times he'd look up, a bit flustered by the flurry of orders and shouts for whole milk, skim milk, on ice or blended, with or without whip cream. She'd know what he was thinking and jump up to aid him, normally near the blender and sink. She did this, commonly, to erase the agitation she saw on his face, to try to permanently ensure no discomfort was felt by him in her presence, for the sole reason that it made her feel better to have him feel the same. And when those *slams* would die down, he'd lean against the counter dressed in khakis, a bowling shirt, and a green apron, wipe the chocolate syrup from between his fingers and ring, and swab the counter with the same rag, never letting his gaze leave her. His eyes would always show appreciation and thankfulness, not just for her help, but for her being in his life and for her consideration, care, and love. Yet, those days were gone.

"They didn't have the Monin, so I opted for the Torani, even though I think they taste different." He even knew which brand of flavoring she preferred. "Is that ok?"

"That's perfect," she said, half-biting her lip. "How's the job?"

Adam's eyes left hers and he subconsciously began to wipe down the table they were sitting at, possibly the force of habit that the days at their old coffee house instilled in him. "Work? Things couldn't be better. I'm working longer hours, and the deadlines are coming closer. Sometimes things get hectic, but, you know, I love what I'm doing. It's strangely not-that-different from collegiate life." He looked up again. "The grind," he said smiling, possibly to hide how he may've truly been feeling.

"Really?" He nodded. "Good. I'm happy for you."

"It's not where I thought I'd be, but it's a position that has a lot of possibilities for advancement. And if after a year or two things aren't going as planned, I'm networking enough to take some clients with me and freelance for a while. It pays better, is more sporadic, and allows me complete freedom in designing. How about you? How's Beulah?"

The name alone let the support of cloud nine turn to the consistency of wet bread. She plummeted. "Beulah's good. She raised the rent a tad and the tenants are creating a stink, especially Marshall." She thought, right after saying it that Adam hadn't been there long enough to learn the tenants' names, but figured he wouldn't delve for explanation. "We're still fixed at \$550, so no trouble. The extra money you send is adequate, really, but I need some more cash for laundry and groceries, so I'm going to get a job that offers hours later at night." Trina said, although she hadn't realized she had planned this until she said it aloud. It was good for her to talk again. She had been so used to the pointless small talk she made with her tenants when fixing this or that, and the unresponsive chats she had with her mirror up in the apartment that she nearly forgot how a real conversation went. Once she had pestered the mailman for five minutes while he complained about needing to finish his route just to hear if he had a family and if they missed him while he was at work. Finally, he ceded and spilled a brief abstract of his life just to please her yearning for conversation. She found that he and Mrs. Mailman had been trying for a child but haven't been successful as of late. This eased her longing and she stored it in her mind as a friendly voice with a story of wanting possibly similar to her own, and only then did she allow him to finish his route. He just smiled and shook his head while rifling through his three-wheel cart for the next building's mail. 'Same time tomorrow?' she added while turning towards her door. He kept walking away, but raised an arm in the air to wave and signal that he heard her.

"Where?"

"Huh?"

"Where are you going to work? If you'd like, I can send 700 to help you out. Do you need more than 50?" For some reason, she was struck with a feeling on the other end of the spectrum of gratefulness. She felt like he was pitying her, babysitting her, and considering money as an exchange for friendship.

"I've applied...I've applied at a coffee house in the area. Chloe's." she remembered from her walks to the grocery store. It was a lie and rarely did she lie. "They're eager for me to start." Another.

"It's no problem, really."

"I said *no*. Thank you," she snapped, sounding more abrupt than she had wished to be. "I need to be independent," she said, more for her own benefit than his. "...and it'll be good for me to get out of The Complex and back into the world again. Besides, I miss the coffee house."

This changed his hurt look into a reminiscent one and she could tell that he, too, remembered the nights of mad rushes and pleas for whip cream. He recalled the grateful glances from the counter to the sink and back again and for one genuine moment, she could tell that he missed her. She wondered why, if he did so much, he refused to come home. Home. How foreign the thought of a *home* sounded. These past months the word was still Big Rapids and NYC was just an extended summer camp that was snowed in until spring. She didn't consider The Complex home. She didn't know what was home now. The word and its meaning had completely slipped her vocabulary.

"Yeah. Me too," he said, adding to her side of the argument. "Hey, I gotta get running. We've got a press run at nine and the proof should be messengered any time soon." Trina looked perplexed, but agreed that whatever that meant, it sounded important. More than important, though, it sounded like a blow off.

"Sure."

"What are you doing in the city, anyway?" he asked as an afterthought. She often wondered this herself.

"I live here."

"No, I mean Manhattan."

"Oh, I've got to run to The Post." She looked up at the clock on the wall, which resembled a little kid's art project or something found in Alice in Wonderland, and thought how anything ugly all of a sudden was called Art Deco. "Shit, I gotta go before they break for the day. Good to see you again, Adam."

"Yeah, we should do this more often." The words were a letter opener, she, a tender care package.

"Sure," she said.

"k." he added and continued to stare at her. It was her that had to leave first. She had to get out of this place, away from the smell of coffee, the ticking deco clock, and most of all...away from his stare. He must've felt what she had for the past weeks. She saw him sitting at the table in the apartment's kitchen scanning the subway maps and a shudder of desire reverberated in her too. This feeling, she recognized, was self-destructive. She left the table.

"Call me sometime?" he shouted after her and she raised an arm like the mailman did, to show recognition, but not to turn so he could see her face. Her walking away, she prayed, was enough to hide the ache she felt and the redness that lined her eyes.

She dropped off the ad at the desk, barely saying a word, hoping the lady behind the counter wouldn't ask any questions, and walked toward the subway. She buried her hands in her pockets and stared at her feet, hoping to avoid any ice patches or snow drifts. Trina crossed the street

toward the entrance and stopped to watch some NYU students walking to and from classes. Many of them were coupled off, holding mittened hands, hugging, embracing, and smiling. The smiling was what affected her most and she continued to stare. She wished she was still back at the Duplex, remembering how her friends treated her like that. A warm gust from the subways climbed the stairs and brought with it the screech of a train about to stop and let people board and unboard. She ran down the steps, swiped her MetroCard, pushed through the closing doors, and threw herself in the corner by the Disabled Seating to close her tired eyes and attempt to erase the sights of happiness she saw on the students. The subway started with a jerk that almost sent a lady that didn't bother to hold a pole, flying. Trina heard her yelp and she grinned a bit, to soothe her wish for unhappiness on the rest of the world, not just her. It didn't help her, but it did make her stop thinking of Michigan, the Duplex, and Adam, at least for a little while.

12

The night air cast a breeze throughout the apartment and for the first time in a long time, Billy didn't hear military vehicles routing and rerouting on the streets below. Patie's hair jostled on her pillow as the gusts gently ushered their way around Billy's silhouette in the windowsill and towards her form, a Venus among the sheets and bed clothes that lay on their queen-size. The distant smell of burning mixed with the air and Billy wondered if it was possible to smell burning leaves this far north of the park. His reddened eyes shifted away from the Doral, that calmed his fix, and toward the South. He watched the crest of what once was a vermilion haze on the horizon as it pulled its circus tent stakes and rounded up the clouds that unicycled west of his glance. A stray entertainer leapt away from the caravan and now was caught in the sinking sky above the park and where Billy believed the roasted maple smell to churn from.

The park had seen its share of rallies this past week, as the death knolls across sea reverberated unto a steady drone. It tolled behind the newscasts on his plastic-wood television set and the oddly pinkish leafs of the New York Post that weighed down his radiator and provided a bit of cushion to his seat. Billy threw his head back towards Patie and thought of the last time they made love. She'd caress him with the tenderness of a nurse, careful not to upset the grief beneath the surface of his mind. She'd sponge over his temples knowing that the blood that pumped beneath them was vile, tainted with heroin and fury, stained with misery. Billy searched her for discomfort as she lay serenely on the bed. There was no discomfort there. On her face, Billy saw ease.

Again he swiveled toward the park and lifted his legs without breaking their angle to replace them on the metal escape, only slightly cooler than their hardwood floors. There he rested his arms, where on the end, a Doral poked through shaking fingers to burn the rest of its filter. Below, the leaves chased cops-n-robbers in the street and Billy noticed a purse vendor hauling a plastic bag of faux-treasures home. The asphalt sparkled and Billy eyed a pop-top or a tinfoil square shining beneath the streetlamp. Across from him he saw a load of clothes as it line-danced to the night, strung precariously on a laundry cord. The remainder of the filter dropped from Billy's finger as he brought his hand to massage his temples.

Billy didn't know if he hated her or if it was just the narcotics talking. Either way, he wanted out: out of the apartment, out of the marriage, out of Harlem. He yearned to see what the soldiers saw thousands of miles away. They were sirens, taunting him across seas and mountains, raising their dress to reveal the underbelly of lust and adventure. And Billy wanted to reach out to it, to for once throw down this tenderness and feel no pity or sensitivity, but cold, unfriendly life. It was as if he longed for hardship, to prove to him he was still a man, still a fighter, and still a lover of all that was thrown at him. He didn't want to be an unwritten part of the history books, but rather watch the words being written. And if, perchance, he entered them by a deed he

performed or a person he crossed, so be it. But as long as he was there, to drag his heels in foreign soil, breathe the tangy air, and see a distant any day, he'd be happy, regardless.

Patie poked at her pillow and found a pocket of comfort, only to drop back into her unconscious state. Billy removed his hand from where it held his forehead and the cool breeze meandered through his fingers and chilled the gentle patches of sweat left where they had rested. He turned his head again to gaze at the lovely, tender woman that emitted painful love. She lay still, facing the wall away from him as if to turn her back on him. For a moment, Billy smiled and wished freedom, unsure of why he could no longer be happy with her. And as he followed her lead and began to turn his head away as well, he heard her whisper a name.

13

Trina sat in the train feeling terrible. Sometimes when an incident occurs and it may be contrary to what the senses expect to feel, it is dismissed by lack of emotion rather than the one which is most expected. She thought about one time when she and a friend were on their way to South Haven's beach in high school and her friend tried to pass a car on M-43 doing 75. All was going well until a car came up on the horizon heading toward her at roughly the same speed. Not to be beaten, her friend pushed the gas down to the floorboards, rather than tapping the brake and slipping back behind the car, she was going to pass. Trina watched the event from the passenger seat as if she was watching a fifteen inch television set, across the street, through a pinhole camera. As the car sped quickly toward them, each driver refused to yield. At the last waking second, Trina's friend cut in front of the car she passed. Without her face contorting to reveal scared eyes or a half-cocked chin, they continued down the road. About three miles later, they both suddenly got scared, well after the thought, and laughed to force away the concept of near-death.

It was the same for Trina now. The subway pulled to a stop and the doors swung open to let passengers off and on. Two musical notes beckoned passengers to stand clear of the closing doors. "Hang on" they seemed to say. As the subway sped down the tracks, she didn't feel a single care for her personal safety, but thought about an underground collision to stop the passengers from staring. She wished something would happen to relieve her eyes of the tears that began welling, her face from the rush of blood and steam, and her heart from the throbbing. She brought her knees up to her chin and wrapped her arms around them as she became accustomed to doing, and leaned against the metal pole attached to her seat. The pole was placed on every train, some 6 feet apart, to ensure that people wouldn't be thrown by a curve, lose their stability, and fall. It did nothing for Trina as she felt herself doing the same, inside. She tried to focus on the 70s-style orange and yellow plastic seats, the mottled creamed-corn floor beneath them, and her shoes, which had begun to lose their grip on the edge of the seat. All she could see in that diamond-shaped view between her knees and forehead was a swimming pair of boots, torn and neglected.

"You okay?"

Trina, who had been fishing for the shape of the boots for a few moments, neglected to realize that they were more than likely on someone's feet. Startled, she looked up, forgetting about her puffy, watery complexion. The owner of the boots turned out to be a small boy. His head was cocked on a diagonal and his tufted shiny black Hispanic hair hung and swayed with the subway.

"Muh?" was all that Trina could attempt at audible coherency.

"I thought you could use a flower. Thought it'd make you smile," the boy said, reaching out with a dirty hand, clutching a vinyl-and-glue mess that once could've been in a wreath in a shop window. Trina's arm left where it wrapped around her knees and guided her hand to taking the flower from the boy. The moment she touched it, the conductor tapped the gas causing the car to jerk forward, almost tossing the kid. Were it not for Trina, he may've ended up cracking his head on the floor, the pole, or even the ugly hippy seats. Luckily, though, Trina had grabbed his arm first, causing him to swing around and land on the seat next to her with a thud.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Are you alright?" Trina could see his eyes, which changed their inflexion from a worried wondrous one to one that would often accompany a *wheeee* sound.

"My name's Marco," he grinned. "Who are you?"

"Trina." She said, wondering why the boy had picked her, out of a subway carload of people to talk to.

"My mom's one car up," he said with a disinterested grin. "Where's your mom?" *Probably forgetting all about me this very second*, Trina thought, but tried to remain optimistic in front of the child. Marco seemed to be around eight or nine, was lean, and clothed in a dirty pair of jeans and stretched out white T-shirt. He had a coat on over it that must've been a hand-me-down due to the amount of wear it had. "That's ok. You don't have to tell me. I understand," Marco said. "Sometimes. Sometimes I do the same thing."

"The same thing?" Trina questioned. Marco only nodded. Now it was Trina's turn to tilt her head to the side. Marco paused for a second, looking to see if his mom was coming through the doors. Then he began to whisper.

"I pretend I don't know where my mom is, sometimes, too. I pretend so that when I see her, I feel twice as happy," he said, while his face erupted in a smile. Trina saw Marco's front two teeth had fallen out and new ones were racing to full growth. She couldn't help but join in and laugh.

"MARCO!" a lady scolded from across the subway car. "You get over here right now and stop bothering that lady." Marco did as he was told, only after winking to her and flashing another of his toothless smiles. Trina felt warm.

"Mami!" he screamed across the car with such jubilation, it woke a man who had been sleeping against the window. He had placed a newspaper between his forehead and the glass to ward off any germs it might've collected while he slept. Now, he had an inked headline running diagonally up his forehead and Trina could just barely make out the name *Giuliani*.

"What have I told you about leaving my side? Do you know how worried I was?" the woman continued to yell.

"Mami, I missed YOU!" Marco yelled over her as he nearly climbed himself into her arms. She must've seen his famous smile because her face folded into a grin itself and she wrapped her arms hard around her boy and hugged him harder. This caused the little Hispanic boy to laugh, and loud.

"Promise me you won't do that again." Marco's Mom said laughing herself, as the train pulled to a halt on Whitehall.

"I promise." He crooned, burying his face under his mom's chin and planting a kiss on the side of her neck. She laughed louder as if the kiss had goosed her and sent shivers up past her ears.

"C'mon, buddy. We gotta get you home and start some dinner," she said and continued to talk about their meal. As they brushed past, Trina watched Marco. His face was visible over his mom's shoulder, red with excitement. He opened his mouth to speak, but this time, not to his mom.

“Gotcha to smile!” he said, grinning again. Trina smiled again and watched the doors close. Now she could see a greasy filmy figure in the station that looked like a Hispanic woman and child in a Goya painting. While the painting walked away, it waved. Trina waved back. Gotcha to smile, she thought, as she dropped her knees, leaned back and rested her head on the window, a grin ever so slowly erasing from her face.

14

Trina counted stops over the harbor and through the city until she was one short of hers. She opened her eyes to see the train had vacated and a figure hunched over in the corner. Its back was to her, but she could see a repetitive action involving both his arms. The lights in the car flickered as the train bumped through the tubes and she could see the bum concentrating on something in front of him, actions getting a bit faster, and more determined. From behind, Trina guessed what the man was doing. She gathered her things: walkman, book, backpack, and scooted over from seat to seat, attempting to get farther away from the man. Trina heard grunting sounds coming from behind the blanket that the figure was wearing and her heart dropped, wrought with disgust and fear. She tried to look away from him, but was too scared that the second she took her eyes off him, he'd be right behind her, doing whatever he was doing inches away. For this reason, she inched back against the door of the car and prayed that her stop would come soon. Trina tried to swallow, but from deep inside her, a guttural whimper came out and flooded the car. The bum, continuing his actions, whipped his head around and spied her. Trina's heart stopped. The bum's eyes were dark, surrounded in a sea of yellow cirrhosis. His nose was red and raw, his teeth jagged and discolored. His tongue emerged to wet his lower lip, cracked and poisoned. His mouth arched a sexual grin in her direction and he leered, mentally raping her.

In this trance, Trina felt her stomach starting to unsettle. She was paralyzed to the point that she didn't feel the subway stop. The doors against her back started to open and Trina, mortified, screamed at the top of her lungs. She fell back through the doors onto the cement floor of the terminal. She regained her composure, got to her feet and bolted for the turnstiles, the stairs, and the open air. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted the bum, pressed up against the window, one hand leaving thick condensation that melted on the glass, the other, buried in his blanket near his midsection.

As Trina hit the open air she continued to bolt. She flew past the two streets that led to the Complex and rounded the corner at speeds that propelled inertia. She continued on up past an avenue toward her home, tears streaming down her face. She didn't bother to hold her crying to herself, as she couldn't hear it beyond the wind that whipped in her ears, and the grunting that her head replayed over and over. She could see the apartment a block away, its light shining like a safety beacon, promising warmth and security. She flew into the street in time to see the

headlights of a cab inches away. With her last seconds of consciousness, beyond the loud siren of the taxi's horn, she saw a hand reach out for her and grab her shoulder hard. Her scream rivaled the horn as darkness answered swiftly.

15

"Miss?" Trina's head peeled away layers of dampers that eventually allowed sound to enter. "Miss?" the voice called again, calm and hopeful. "Are you alright, young lady? MISS?" Trina's eyes flew open and the muscles in her neck tensed as she pulled her head up off the ground. She awoke to see a face staring at her, a thick black and grey beard and two charcoal eyes. "Oh thank God that—"

"Get your hands off of me!" Trina screamed, bolting up into the sitting position with a flurry of prods and slaps.

"But Miss, you almost got yourself—"

"I said get off of me!" Trina hollered just before she realized he was about a yard away.

"But Miss. I'm not on you." It rasped, thick and muffled beyond the beard. Trina assessed the situation and realized, finally, that the bum wasn't the man on the train. Even still, she shook. "You almost bounced off the hood of a taxi cab." She began to move all her limbs and poke at them. She couldn't find a bump or scratch on her and realized that the man had pulled her out of the way of the car. She returned her glance to him and saw him for the first time, unprejudiced. His eyes were kind and deep, pushing in under his forehead. His eyebrows were the same, thick black and grey hair and they arched genuine concern. His skin was blacker than any coffee she ever had, as was his lips, which she could only see hints of beneath his beard. He wore a Mets coat that probably had been purchased way back when they won, or at least when the man's hair was black and he was clean-shaven, whichever came first. He smiled and slowly lifted himself to his feet. "You're alright, now, Miss. Counts helped you." He began to lurch away.

"Counts?" Trina called, hoping she deciphered him correctly.

"Yes?" he answered, turning back toward her. She sat staring at his sixty-some-year-old eyes, richer in care and kindness than most, and forgot what she was going to say. "You're welcome, Miss," he responded to her silence, turning once again, and limping down the street.

Trina pulled herself up, stiff and sore, but not bruised. Her legs shook with the edge of fear leaving her and she grabbed her bag, which had been jostled into a heap next to her. She picked it up and began to walk to her beacon, this time, checking for oncoming traffic.

Slamming her bag and keys onto the table, Trina went to the bathroom and turned the water on. She then trudged into her room and came out with a pair of PJs, underwear, and a bottle of Tylenol. She sat them by her bag on the kitchen table, and opened the cap, pulling two out. Fetching a glass of water, she popped in the pain killers, and slowly drank, focusing on her bag. Halfway through the glass, after the pills were fully washed down, she stopped suddenly. Placing the glass down, she went for her bag and pulled the zipper around. She reached in, and grabbed her book and set it on the table. The walkman, of course, was missing. Trina just smiled,

thinking to herself what the old man would buy with it to keep him warm and drunk this evening. *He deserves it*, she thought. She caught a glimmer of white in the folds of the bottom corner. Again, she felt for the contents of the bag and pulled out the tattered vinyl flower. Wilted, dirty, partially coated with glue, Trina thought it the most beautiful one she'd seen in a long time. Sticking it in her glass of water, and scooting them both to the center of the table, she grabbed her clothes and book, walked into the bathroom closing the door behind her, and laid down in the tub for a nice bath and story. Sighing deeply, she tried to shake all memories of the grunting man in the train, the taxi, even Adam. "Hang on" the subway echoed in her mind. Her brow furled as she dunked under; washing away the last thoughts she'd spend on them tonight.

16

"I don't know who he is, Billy. Maybe you just heard me wrong!" Patie pled innocently as traffic jostled the neighborhood and rocked their little apartment.

"No, I heard it very distinctly, Patie. You said *Aaron*." Billy's backside was still sore from the grid of the fire escape and his back cramped, but he ignored it. The sun pounced into the window and ricocheted off the coffee pot that Patie filled in the kitchen sink. "Who's Aaron?"

"I don't know an Aaron, Billy. And I also don't enjoy these accusations. If you have something to say to me William Walker, just say it. Quit beating around the bush with it!"

"Fine, then Patie. I think we should take a break." He threw back without hesitation. "We're obviously sick of each other!"

"Sick of each other, Billy? Sick of each other?" Patie spun around and let the sun dapple her hair and pelt her neck with warmth. "I married you Billy because I was sick of NOT being with you. I've given you everything I own, including my heart and my constant, constant love. What the hell else do you want from me that I haven't already given to you? Huh? What else can I *give* you that won't make you *sick* of me?" She screamed as tears flung from her eyes, as her head punctuated her words. Billy stared at her firm in his judgment, regardless of why he felt that way. His eyes bore no compassion, no regret, but burned forward without the aid of his mouth to retort.

"What, Billy?" her voice cracked and inflamed instantly. "What else do you want from me? What else do I have?" Again silence. "Just tell me, Bill. And I swear to God, if it is in my power, I'll give it to you!" Her hands shook on the edges of the sink, her legs slightly buckled, the corners of her mouth caught in a fishing line, tantalized by a bite. "WHAT???"

"Time," Billy whispered. His whisper resounded closure, and pronounced the end of the conversation. Her eyes swam back and forth among Billy's but they ignored the current and stared past her to the grease and smog-stained window behind her.

And she left. Patie picked up her suitcase as her throat burned and threw what little she cared for into it. Pressing the locks with trembling thumbs, she yanked it from the dresser. It was her turn to make the floor and stair boards groan as she gave Billy the last thing he requested of her.

Time.

17

Almost immediately, the phone calls started to come. College students, drop-outs, retired folks, young families, kids moving away from home for the first time, empty-nesters, pilots and flight attendants that needed a place to crash once every two weeks, each with their own story about how they got to where they were. She agreed, without prejudice, to meet with each, claiming to have five apartments to sublease in spring. The leases, which were all up around the same time, weren't even complete, the rooms still occupied, while Trina began the interviewing process. As time wore on, Trina became more selective with those that she interviewed, and even more selective about those that she considered. She wanted the Complex to become her haven of bohemian musings, her respite from everyday brushes with ugliness and melancholy, and a *home*. Besides, the weather had started to warm, after what the New Yorkers called a mild winter. She knew the rooms needed to be filled soon and it was late February.

The interviews would take place, before the prospective tenants even saw the apartments, at a coffee house. Chloe's was a few blocks up the Slope. There, she began the rigorous process of labeling and categorizing the people she thought would make great tenants; mainly based on her friends at The Duplex. They were to be young and free-spirited, employed at places that held no advancement opportunities (artisan work and McJobs), a detriment to all other rooming procedures, in love with the art of conversation, hobbyed in creation, and mentally stable. She chose the word *stable* because if she *reasonably sane*, she may've had to move out herself.

Of course, the interviewees didn't know that they were going through this process. They were judged inherently without knowledge and Trina remained smiling and optimistic in their presence. A week had passed and the interviews amounted to greater than thirty.

18

"Making a new phone book?" a girl whispered from behind Chloe's espresso counter.

"I'm sorry?" Trina responded, startled.

"You've had so many people in her these past few days; I was beginning to think you were starting a directory." She grinned. "I mean no harm. You're great for my business."

"Naw," Trina said. "Not a directory. I'm interviewing for sublets."

"Well, who wouldn't want to live with you?"

"Pardon?" Trina questioned the girl. The girl behind the counter, not more than 19 or 20 at the latest, threw the comment over her shoulder as if scared of a response. Finally, she looked back up, bedecked in apron, dishrag, and half-worried smile.

"Well. Look at you. You appear to be happy. You've got a personality, a sense of humor, and a killer smile. If you want my opinion, your place will be crawling with residents just trying to get close to you."

Trina blushed making the random scatter of freckles orbiting her nose stand out a bit more. She was utterly touched.

"Thanks," she said. "What about you? You looking for a place?...um..."

"Mayleigh," the girl interrupted on cue. "M-A-Y-L-E-I-G-H."

"Mayleigh?" Trina subconsciously created a word association and scribbled the name on her pad in front of her, a product of the interviewing process.

"Me, no. I'm living with a girl friend right now, off campus. My mom was Chloe." She said raising her arms to indicate *Chloe* of *Chloe's*, as in this coffeehouse.

"No kidding. Are you short of staff?" Trina asked, in true enticement.

"Sure, we're always looking. People don't like to work for us because we underpay, overwork, and produce so few tips. If you're willing to be slave labor, though..."

Trina laughed aloud. Knowing she needed money strictly for self-improvement devices, groceries, and laundry, she almost already took the job. "I'll consider it. What do you pay and what would I do?"

To which the responses were Trina's two least favorite words, words that described her life.

"Minimum. Management."

19

On a brief and breezy walk home, Trina thought about herself. She heard those words on loop track and since she wasn't the product of the LP generation, there was no skipping sound between them. It was just a smooth, flawless repetition in her head. She stopped at the Greenwood Cemetery to peer in. The stones had rotted to perfection and were now tilted at varying angles as if the deceased beneath them had adjusted to get more comfortable. The stones were pillows cocked off kilter over their permanently sleeping heads. The residents were patrons of shade, care of the towering oaks that scattered between them. These were the same trees that Trina wished upon so many times from her apartment in the Complex, the trees that never answered her prayers. She looked at them now, biased and betrayed, and quietly mocked their spotted skin and mossy stalks, hoping they would fall victim to whatever infestation now resided there. Let them fall, she whispered, to break the shade and let the cemetery residents roll over again, uneasy in their beds.

Passing the iron spines that encased the cemetery, she let her hand beat softly against them creating a ting-ting-tinging sound and keeping rhythm with her steps. Upon reaching the Complex, she saw a collection of crates, sitting around a forgotten cable spool. On the crates were three street-people, a term Trina's mother was fond of, and an empty one awaiting a friend. Between them, Trina saw a chessboard with wooden players, and an old black hand making them fight. The hand was Counts'.

"Nice board," she said crossing the street to her front steps. "Is it new?" she mused, knowing the response. Counts looked up, saw his benefactor, and grinned beneath his beard. Trina noticed a brand new pair of spectacles sat on the bridge of his nose and magnified his pleasant, warm eyes. His elderly frame shook with laughter.

"Well, if it isn't my jogger, friend—"

"Trina." She interrupted.

"Listen, I want to apologize for taking your radio. I—"

Trina swatted her hands about as if shooing invisible bugs, but stopping Counts' response. "No need. You saved my life. That was the least I could do," she said, as if she had any choice in the matter. She secretly rejoiced that the purchase wasn't from a liquor store, but from a toy store and a Goodwill, which sold second-hand reading glasses. Another street person nudged past her and sat on the awaiting crate.

"The change," the man continued. "It too went to a worthy cause. He reached under his crate and grabbed a brown paper bag. Trina, silently cursing her rejoice, guessed what was in the bag. "Dinner for my friends—" to which they looked up and greeted her with a wave, a how-do-you-do, and a toothless grin—"—and this, for you." He pulled from the paper bag a box wrapped in paper itself, not at all in the shape of a bottle. Trina tried to re-rejoice, but her curiosity caused her to leave it unfinished. She took the box and whispered a thank you. It was slightly weighty, and

un-elegantly wrapped, though she still took great care in undoing the tape from each side before unwinding it from the paper. It was a journal and pen, engraved with foil stamping and a pseudo-leather bind.

“Thank you,” she repeated, staring at the beautiful gift. “But how did you—”

“Know you wanted one?” he cut in. “You looked as though you needed to speak to someone. I figured this may suffice until you find that someone.” He grinned again and his beard enveloped what little lip she saw. He looked like a Santa Claus dipped in ink and sprinkled with dirt and pepper. A third time she whispered thank you, but was again interrupted by another member of the chess game.

“Counts, it’s your move,” he said, sounding genuinely hurt that the game hadn’t proceeded.

The black man responded. “Lod, Sam, Randy, this is—”

“Trina” they said in unison. She had assumed he’d forgotten her name already, though incorrectly.

“Trina,” he repeated, “my jogger, friend.” Once again, the barrage of hi, how-do-you-do, and toothless grin began. Trina made a mental note that Lod, the late-arriver, was the ethnic fellow generous with the toothless grins. Sam was the impatient one, currently playing and losing to Counts. Randy was the how-do-you-do, feigning richness of character and the least disheveled of any bum that Trina had ever seen. He even wore a stained, but elegantly tied, ascot.

“My pleasure,” she smiled and thanked the bobbing black beard a fourth and final time before turning towards the steps. “You kids have fun,” she called to the elderly men, memorizing Counts’ ever-present smile. She hugged the book to her chest as she climbed the steps and felt a happiness too rare.

20

The weight of Billy's body seemed anchored, pulling him down to the harsh steel cot. His head gyrated like a bobber caught in an eddy and he pivoted in a circle under the dim light of the room. The grating feeling that Billy felt times before was building in his gut as he watched the euphoria drain and leave behind traces of alcohol to sit in the folds of his striated muscles and throb and ache. His face, molded in a contorted cry for ease, began to relax, and he could feel the tendons whisper thanks for relief. Gut rot replaced his high, and he could feel the swelling begin behind his eyes and pressure build on his sinuses. Withdrawal now set in deeper and faster than it had in the past as Billy unknowingly searched his pockets for his pack of cigarettes, hoping to arrest him from this likely custom in his life. His mind was consumed with the thought of his next fix. Instead, he focused on the room.

An echo could be heard down the hall, but Billy couldn't tell the direction it came from. The metal door, with iron bars, bore stripes where the oils and acids of inmates skin ate through the paint for years. At shoulder level, he saw a rusted line that sat above a horizontal bar that connected with a hinge on one end, and a lock on the other. He imagined the two dimpled wrinkles that spattered various bars above it were where people rested their heads, temple oils digesting the paint as slowly as the time inside would allow. At least, to a degree, it provided some entertainment. But then, what else is expected of a confinement but that? Time.

"How you been?" Billy heard the memory of her voice on his phone line in the kitchen. "Good?"

He rose from the cot and felt the hardness of the floor as the nerves in his feet adjusted to gravity without substance assistance.

"Where are you?" he answered, though he didn't know origin, perhaps days, weeks ago.

His memory was stronger than he imagined, but he recalled how withdrawal seemed to make it so. His feet had retained their acquaintance with the forces of nature, but still felt buoyant as he swayed in circles throughout his cell. Unconsciously, he slipped his arms through the cell door and rested his elbow on the rusted stripe that sat pronounced on each bar, his temples slid gently against the rusted dimples; his fingertips probed his furled brow from outside the cell.

"A friend's house." And then, "Billy, I miss you."

The tension of the muscles on the side of his ribs, waist, and the back of his legs would begin a cycle of throbbing and releasing. He felt his eyes bulge from the pressure behind them, as if they were being scooped from the inside out.

"Who, Patie. Who's your friend?"

From the corner of his eye, Billy caught a fleck of reflection, a mirror extending from a cell to his right in the coal black hands of another inmate. Looking over caused the bulging to hurt even

more. His fingers jumped quickly from his forehead to his eyes, seemingly shielding them from the pain, though useless to it. Down the corridor, someone began whistling a song that Billy thought he recognized, but didn't have the energy to search his brains for a name.

"Billy. I want to come home. I want to be with you."

"Who's your friend, Patie?" He crackled back through the phone line, hoping to hear traitorous sounds in the background of her end.

Billy's knees buckled as understanding hit him and his elbows caught his fall but were unable to prevent his nose from cracking against the horizontal bar. There, he hung, like a kid about to hoist himself on a swing, awakened by the trickle of blood that sprang from his nose and ran around the pronounced line of his lips and down his chin.

"A friend. A co-worker, Billy."

The whistling got a bit louder as he heard footsteps slowly approaching from an unknown direction. The resonance of the jail built an impenetrable disguise for preparation of visitors. The whistler's tune hit something Billy believed to be the chorus as he switched to off-key singing under his breath. Billy hung there and listened as the voice sang.

I love you baby
And if it's quite alright
I need you baby
To walk a lonely night
I love you baby
Trust in me when I say...

His mouth whispered the words along with the jailer who slowly approached from the unknown location. *O pretty baby, don't bring me down I pray.* Billy's voice reverberated with the visitor, but the acoustics of the cell created a morbid harmony and he continued to hang, hands numb and slipping, singing sweetly. *O pretty baby, now that I found you stay, and let me love you, baby, let me love you.*

"Who, Patie? Who's the friend?"

"You don't know her, Billy. She's from the mission."

Billy hung up the phone, in memory, as his hands slipped from the bars and he fell backward to the concrete floor, head hitting hard, allowing the stream of blood to divert and drip warmly down his earlobe. His eyes blurred and distorted as he saw a pair of polished black shoes approach from the right, outside in the hall. His last seconds of consciousness were spent in disillusion as he swore the visitor approached from the left.

21

Unlocking her door, Trina heard a commotion. She walked into the kitchen and realized it was coming from outside, possibly on the roof. Leaning out the fire escape, she tried to peer past the ladder to where the voices were coming from.

"Put it back," one said.

"It's mine!" yelled the other one, younger and more violent. Trina straddled the radiator and stepped on the escape. There she grabbed the ladder and proceeded upward, not even realizing that her window was wide open when she came in. There, she popped her head up over the eave and stared across the tarmac to a little boy, trying to run away from a guy, Trina's age. The boy had something under his arm.

"You don't own it. You didn't pay for it. You sure as hell aren't going to keep it." Trina heard the guy answer while wrestling the item from the boy. She jumped up onto the roof just as the guy got the box away from the kid.

"What's going on here?" she scolded, realizing that it was her roof they were fighting on and that she had the right to know.

Frozen, the arguing couple dropped their commotion and stared at her like they were deer, caught between a Ford Ranger's headlights. The boy was the first to break the gaze when he turned to the guy, stomped his foot down hard on the other man's toes, grabbed the box and ran for Trina. Trina held her ground while the boy ran behind her and buried his face in the small of her back, clutching the box with one hand, Trina with the other.

"Why you little piece of shit. Get back here!" the guy yelled, limping towards Trina.

"Stop it! This minute!" Trina screamed, sounding like her mother. She made a mental note to never say those words again.

"But he's got—"

"What? What's he got?" She continued to yell. "Is it yours? Is it so important to you that you have to beat on a little kid?"

"No. And I wasn't beating on him."

"Yeah you were!" muffled words came from behind Trina.

"I was not, you little—"

"I said stop it. Now." Trina cursed her forgetting her mental note so soon. "Let's see what's so important that you have to pick on a poor little kid." She grabbed the box from behind her and held it to her face. "Cereal? You're fighting him for cereal?" She questioned, holding the box of Honey Bunches of Oats to the guy. The box looked familiar.

"Not just any cereal," the guy said quietly, and out of breath. "Your cereal." Trina looked at the box and remembered her window being open. She then pivoted around to the boy behind her, still clutching her sides. He swung around with her for a bit, but let go halfway through the

turn. Peering into the boy's face, she saw a smile returned more familiar than the cereal box. Its lips bridged a little boy's dirty face, framed in black shiny hair. Between them, Trina saw two front teeth continuing to emerge.

"Marco?" Trina asked in revelation. The boy smiled bigger and bolted away from her almost past the guy, who grabbed ahold of the back of his hooded, zip up sweatshirt, suspending him in a run.

"Let him go!" Trina said, sterner this time.

"But—"

"Now!" She screamed. He followed her instruction, but the boy just stood there, in awe. "Listen, if you're going to steal the cereal, at least come down for some milk and a banana. You're not getting a balanced meal." She said, her mind being made up. She had thrown in the balanced meal idea to sound unbiased but truly just wanted visitors and to know that this charade was over. The two looked at each other, blankly in wonder, and Marco stepped toward Trina, and turned around to get down the ladder. When he reached the escape, he disappeared into her apartment. Trina did likewise and climbed down to where only her head was visible from the roof. "You coming?" she said to the guy, still standing there. Then she climbed the rest of the way down, and pursued the boy into her apartment.

A few moments passed before the last of the group emerged from the bathroom, where he heard Trina and the boy talking in the kitchen.

"Don't eat so quickly, Marco. You're going to get an upset stomach." The guy peered around the corner. Trina noticed him, and pushed a bowl over to an empty chair. He reluctantly walked over to the chair and sat down while Trina opened the fridge and fetched the milk.

"Alright," she said. "Your turn. What were you doing on my roof?"

"I live there," the guy said, while Marco clanked away with the spoon on the cereal bowl. Marco, they noticed, wasn't the quietest or slowest of eaters.

"You live there," Trina repeated. "On my roof."

"Yes, for about two months now." Trina was silent trying to comprehend how the guy could be there for an entire winter without her knowing and without him freezing. Then she remembered her night on the fire escape.

"The blanket," she said. "And pillows?" The guy nodded, smiling. This was how she woke up covered in bed-clothes, and not frozen to the escape. Instantly, Trina looked at him a bit differently, a bit more passionately. He was, after all, around her age, lean, and relatively clean for his living quarters. He had thick brown hair that wisped past his ears, facial stubble, and deep blue eyes. His complexion was tanned, or dirty. Trina couldn't discern. His smile was genuine.

"I'm Mike," he said. "Well, Michael really, but my friends call me Mike and you can call me Mike."

"Nice to meet you, Mike." She poured his milk.

"Nice to meet you, Mike," Marco imitated in a mocking tone.

"Shut up, pest!" Mike harassed.

"Stop," Trina tossed over her shoulder, getting up and walking to the pantry. "There'll be no arguing in my complex," she said. "At least not in my apartment." When she turned around she saw Mike staring at her, perplexed at what she said.

"Your complex?" he questioned.

"I'm the sub-leaser," Trina answered, one of the first times she said it with pride.

"Pretty flower," Marco said, oblivious to their conversation. He flashed another smile, notioning the flower he gave her in the glass of water on the table. She smiled back.

"It's not going to grow. It's fake," Mike said, alluding to the water glass it was in.
"How do you know?" Marco said.
"Yeah?" Trina added, before Mike could taunt some more. "How do you know?"
The three of them laughed.

22

"There's a big difference," Billy mumbled from the particles of the shiv-etched table that he was seated at.

"I'm sorry?"

"There's a big difference," he responded, this time with self-assurance in his voice, rather than the cold confusion of disorientation that he felt seconds before. The fluorescent lights above him flickered and hummed at the last fragments of narcotics in his system, pinging them through his skin, and sending the photons away again.

"Between what, William?" the voice came anew, with nauseating cynicism for his age, and the age at which it denoted.

"Between being alive and living."

"I'm sorry?" it begged once more. This time it added the mommy-daddy voice of 'what was your reason for going in the street again.'

"Between taking a breath."

"And what, William?"

"And breathing *in*," Billy responded with a touch of hostility, photons pulling at the bag of gelatin that housed his mind. "There's a big difference between being awake and just having your eyes open."

"Start from the beginning, William. Tell me what happened as you saw it."

The case-worker continued to talk down to Billy as if he were a child, a custom that Billy neglected when speaking to his subjects at his job, particularly Andy Sullivan. Billy didn't care though. He just focused on the bulge of the brown striped shirt in front of him and tried to make out the brand of cigarettes behind the nametag.

"My name is Dennis Weildryr. Denny."

Billy ignored the voice but switched focus slightly to make out the sticker on the pocket: DENNY – CASE-WORKER. Above it, he thought he saw the word "Turkish" but still couldn't read the pack.

Denny prodded again. "Come on, man. Tell me what you know. Maybe I can help you a bit." He cocked his head to the side to imply punctuation and share a plastic expression of concern.

"A cigarette will help," Billy finally replied. The words sounded as if they'd been pushed through a water main filled with plastic playpen balls.

"Of course," Denny said as he reached into his pocket and pulled a soft pack of Viceroy's out, gave them a bob to raise one from the opening on the top, and ushered it to Billy's side of the table.

"Thanks," Billy muttered, removing the cigarette from its peers and corking it in the corner of his mouth. His eyes, for the first time, moved up to greet Denny's face as he traded the superficial glance in hopes for a light. Denny reached into his jeans and produced a silver Zippo with the words "Delightfully tacky, yet *something*eruther."

"What happened that night, William?" Denny interjected as the Billy drew in his first breath on a cigarette in what felt like months. The nicotine zapped through his body and relaxed the sweat-drenched sleeveless tee he wore. The photons repelled.

"It's Billy."

"Alright, then. Billy."

"How long have I been in here?" The case-worker sorted through his manila file and found the admission date and time.

"It looks like fourteen hours, Billy. Do you remember anything?"

Billy sat in silence for a second allowing enjoyment of the Viceroy. He, personally, hated the brand, but today it seemed divine. A brief glimpse of what occurred less than an evening ago shattered his comfort as he focused on a face that once was Capathia Walker's, though lifeless. He jounced in his seat, nearly losing the cigarette, but only letting the end ashes escape to land, unbroken, on the table. Its little frail cylinder sat there and Billy stared at it. His nose had been bandaged by the clinic as Billy realized he saw a bit of gauze peaking through below his lower eye lashes. Denny scribbled something in his pad, but stopped abruptly when Billy spoke.

"Karen."

Perplexed, Denny rifled through the papers of his file again, and found understanding.

"Yes, Karen Parnell. Do you know that name, Will—Billy?"

Billy sat silent, staring past the blurred gauze at the ashes on the table. He slowly lifted the cigarette to his lips.

"Karen Parnell, a desk clerk for the Bowery Mission, said you broke into her house where your wife Capathia was staying. Is that true, Billy?"

Billy looked up.

"Do you remember anything Billy?"

"Patie?"

Again Denny exchanged a confused glance for his inquisitive one, and began to shuffle the file again, but found an answer before he briefed through the pages.

"Patie Walker," he said. "Yes, Billy."

"Where's Patie?" Billy inquired. The smoke from his cigarette billowed in waves, mimicking the shaking of Billy's hands. In an exchanged glance of silence, Billy understood what happened. His entire body shut down its customary actions as if the engine was disengaged from the drive train. Vulnerable to the world, yet unable to react with motor skills and reflexes, a sudden torrent broke through him from his ankles to his face, striking every rib on the way, and erupting into the room as a twisted laugh. It echoed loud and resonant among the bars which hit a silent tuning fork and began to crescendo. The laugh, an alarum bell, droned maniacal as Denny, stood up abruptly. He collected his file and snatched his lighter from the table. Calling for the guard who had begun his approach from the laughter, he stood with his back the sickly bellowing hyena. Billy's laugh became percussion as he chorused in.

"Da-da. Da-da. Da-d-da-da..." sprang from his lips, though Bill on the inside was incapable of stopping. "I love you baby!" wrenched out, defending his vomituous tears with a god-awful song. "You know it's true! I need you baby!..."

Enraged, Russell Weildryr screamed louder, over the singing, to make his point clear, and drive it home. "YOU WANT TO KNOW WHERE SHE IS, BILL??? SHE'S FUCKING DEAD!!!"

Billy's reprise became mute as quickly as it gained its silver tongue.

The guard unlocked the door as Denny hurried through, too bitten to be calculated. "But then you know that, don't you?" he threw out as the guard bolted the door to the room closed again. Only then, did the case-worker turn to the screamer-turned-dogshit, while his face held a glorious red. "After all, you went to that house to make sure of that."

Absolved by the reaction he received, he marched away.

Billy tossed his head from side to side and felt the lower half of his face follow suit with his hands, shaking uncontrollably. The smell of a burning filter past through the room as the cigarette scalded his knuckle, but Billy just stared in the direction of the door, listening to their echo as they proceeded in an unknown direction. The noise poisoned the air as Billy's tongue tripped and lolled to cloud the footsteps.

"Da da. Da da. Da d-da da da da da da..."

The guard re-approached ten minutes later to return Billy to his cell, finding in the same position as when he left, jaw trembling, eyes soaking the gauze below, cigarette snuffed between his fingers.

23

Outside, the locust tree was tapping her twigs on the railing of the fire escape, waiting for March or April, or the day she would bare her new leaves—whenever it was, she would know, but she knew it wasn't now. Or maybe she was waiting for the sun to set so that the alley cats could take their cue to serenade her.

On the other side of the window, her silhouette cut up the shower mat that reached over to the door to the kitchen. Marco was stretched over the couch in the neighboring living room and Trina and Mike were still whispering in the kitchen.

"The fire escape," Mike said.

"I know that's how you got on my roof," Trina laughed, "but how did you end up there?"

"I like to think that I haven't *ended up* anywhere. This isn't the end of anything, Trina. If it's anything, it's the beginning of something."

"That's a really brave outlook but you don't have to be satisfied with tarpaper and cinderblocks. There's a lot of stuff you could do to be able to afford a room in this city. A room in this complex even—if you work a little harder, that is."

"I know how much it costs, I've heard them talking about you out front."

"The Labwicks?" she assumed, to which he ignored her.

"I do work, you know. If you want, we can pretend like I don't so that you can finish your speech."

"What speech?"

"The one that you've rehearsed for the next time somebody asks you for some money. I had one rehearsed too. Something about public facilities for homeless people, shaving, temp agencies and the like. I was..." he squinted, sort of smiling, sort of aching, "putting my own behavior in a class above other people. I had at some point convinced myself that I was some kinda guidance counselor and people wanted counseling and not just money. It's not like that."

"Mike, I'm not trying to talk down to you—them. I'm proud of how I earn my own money, and they could be—" She stopped, realizing that she in fact, isn't earning much. She's simply taking from other people who've earned money in exchange for the right not to be thrown out of their home. She felt dirty, so she did like most girls would, she changed the subject. "So you work?"

"Yep." There was a long pause. It was probably intentional and certainly uncomfortable, so Trina yawned and got up to switch off the coffee pot and put her mug in the sink. She turned on the water and reached behind her for his mug to also wash. He wasn't there. She shut off the tap and looked over the living room only finding Marco, who was now on his back with his face

buried between the seat cushions and the back rest. One foot was resting up above him on the back rest with his toes near the pull cord for the blinds.

She heard the window close and went to the bathroom. Mike was already climbing the ladder to the roof when she re-opened the window and looked up at him. He continued to climb up.

"I tune pianos he said. I've got enough money to pay for an apartment, but when you've got nearly nothing to store, it's sort of a waste." He reached the top and turned to meet her eyes. "I'm not trying to talk down to you either," he said, "but you're down there, and I'm up here."

24

Trina awoke the next morning to here splashing in her kitchen. She nearly fell off the bed leaning over to see Marco mixing up some Kool-Aid. The air was rich with the smell of spring, tainted by barbeques and the dew on the sidewalk. She recognized the sounds of her complex beginning their daily instrumentals and watched as the shadow of Marco swayed and moved in its music.

Inside her, Trina felt a wonder. Mike had left last night without conclusion or the natural “when will I see you again” words, but left, rather, a stirring inside Trina. She lay back down in her bed, now less precariously situated, and tried to remember his face. She saw his blue eyes and thicker eyebrows and watched him smile as the brows transformed from an obtuse, inverted V, to almost cover the top of his crescent eyes. Her version, concocted on the grogginess of the morning and this new-found wonder, had no pock-marks declaring childhood, pimple-marks declaring adolescence, or scars and shaving nicks declaring early adulthood. His face was lean, tanned, and perfect. She grinned to match his smile, and felt her eyebrows crawl as his did.

“I made you some cereal,” Marco jolted her from her dream, startling Mike out of her mind. He held a glass of orange Kool-Aid and a bowl half-full of Cap’n Crunch. His face wore his famous grin.

“Thanks Marco,” she smiled and did her last morning stretch on the bed, feeling the juices squeeze through each tissue of muscle in her legs and lower back. Reluctantly, she swung her legs to the floor, warmed by sunlight, and felt the blood rush down to them as she felt her equilibrium returning after its night-long hiatus. She wondered if it was the sleep that sent it away or if it was Mike.

“Your toilet is plugged,” he said, as Trina reached for the glass, noting the sticky edges and fingers that touched around it. He led her to the kitchen table and Trina glimpsed the reason the cereal bowl was half-full, its counterparts strewn in a path between her bed and the table.

“How’d my toilet get plugged?” she asked while eyeing other bits of cereal drop from the bowl Marco was carrying.

“I dunno.”

The day was fervent and Trina felt rich. She felt that soon, Mike would be descending for breakfast too, and caught the clock as she passed into the kitchen; 8:22.

Wow, I’m up early, she thought and instantly realized something that hadn’t occurred to her in her spell last night.

“Where’s your mom, Marco? Won’t she be worried?”

Marco had his back facing her and he stopped just before the table, staring down into the few-remaining bits of Cap’n Crunch. Slowly, he lowered the bowl to the table, with a steady precision he’d lacked in guiding it until this point. He took a step forward, still looking down, and grabbed the chair.

"Marco? Where's your mom?"

She saw his hand tense in front of him and realized something was wrong. She knelt down behind him and placed her hand on his waist, turning him around. He stopped, once again facing the table, arm still on the chair, eyes cast downward, but now watery.

"Mar—"

"She's dead."

"What? How?" Marco was silent. "How'd she die?" she pushed, cautiously, for an answer, noticing that Marco had begun to tremble. His lip glazed over and his mouth opened slightly. She moved to break his gaze so that he'd look at her and watched as his eyes studied her face to ensure that her care was genuine. He was embarrassed for crying but couldn't contain his pain. Then he looked down again.

"She...she was *hurt* by a man."

"How Marco? How did this man hurt her?" She proceeded, knowing that the boy was in pain, hoping to find some way to help him.

"He took his, I mean...he..." Marco began to whimper, muscles on either side of his mouth pulling down at the edges, nostrils flaring. "He put Mommy on the ground and she was screaming. She screamed for me to run away but I didn't run away I didn't leave I couldn't leave I heard her screaming but I couldn't leave I just stood there an-n-n-nd he *hurt* her." His face contorted and he finally looked back up at her when she touched his shoulder. He was pleading for sense, for help. Trina realized he needed to be held and pulled him into her. Marco threw his arms around her shoulders and squeezed her hard, wailing into her ear and digging his face into her neck, as he had done with his mother on the train. She almost fell backward and had to steady herself by bracing her elbow against the table leg. "He hurt her and she screamed" he sobbed, muffling the sound through her hair. "She told me to run, but-but-but..."

"Shhhh..." Trina calmed. "Marco, shhhh. Shhhh..."

Marco continued to release the pain and his screams had turned into whimpers similar to those heard from the victim of an asthma attack. The back of Trina's neck was raw with his prodding and squeezing, but she paid it no attention. Her heart tensed for her need to help this boy, with the inability to do anything but crouch there and hold him back. He was warm and wet against her neck and she could feel him twitching in pain, hoping to bury himself against her. She wished she could give him some strength, but at this point, she felt she had none to give.

"Shhh...Marco. You're ok."

Trina saw Mike enter amid the commotion and she looked up at him. He look startled when he saw Trina's eyes and mouthed the words "What's wrong?" under his breath. She shooed him and mouthed back to go away. Mike looked hurt, but must've felt it was for the best and disappeared again behind the bathroom door towards the fire escape.

Marco's whimpers now had faded to heavy, turbulent breathing and Trina lifted him up and carried him, clumsily, towards her bedroom. The emotional distraught had worn away at him and he hung limply against her as she lowered him to her bed, still dappled with the morning's light. His face peeled from her neck and rotated to the pillow. He lay in the fetal position, weak and shaking.

"Shhhh..."

Marco's eyes were closed, the skin around them swollen and red. His face was stained with salt and blood-patches beneath the surface. His temples were wet with sweat. His arm clutched weakly at her collar, but slid off to hold the pillow. She stared at him, kneeling beside him, and waited.

After about ten minutes or so, she heard his breaths become somber. They slowed and deepened and lost the wheezing that he'd been doing. Only then did she lean forward and kiss him on the forehead. Reluctantly, she left him there and walked toward the kitchen. Without an appetite, she dumped the cereal down the drain and set the bowl in the sink. She left the kitchen and advanced toward the roof to find Mike, in search of comfort herself.

25

A 13-year-old Mayleigh bounced up the steps on the side of the coffee house her mom owned, and into the apartment above. The hall smelled like Lavender, the same flowers that Chloe, her mom, filled the café with. Save for a beam of after-school light, the apartment was dark and creaked. Mayleigh plopped her books on the table, upsetting a milky glass fruit bowl, from which she swiped a waxy, green apple. Shining it in her hands, she walked over to the fridge and cracked it open to find a drink. Chloe was deeply opposed to sodas, though she still dispensed fountain drinks downstairs, and Mayleigh could only find an apple juice and a half gallon of orange-aid. She opted for nothing. Closing the fridge, the magnets rattled and sent a paper drifting to the floor. It was Mayleigh's report card, which had hit an all-time high of 3.3. There was pride in the house for the last few days, now in the form of the paper Mayleigh gently re-attached to the fridge door. Mayleigh felt some herself, though her thoughts drifted to another sense of maturity, beyond the school's grading system. She bit into her apple and walked through the narrow hallway to the mirror at the far end. She stood there, apple in mouth, and pivoted slightly to a silhouette view, staring at her chest. Her lips curled to a grin and the apple lost its grasp in her teeth, momentarily freeing itself to rest in Mayleigh's hands. A giggle later, she bounded into her bedroom and kicked the radio on. Pulling the blinds aside, she grabbed a teen magazine from the radiator by the window and threw it on her bed. Jesus Jones sang to her, from an eighties and prog rock station, as she situated herself in front of the magazine, munching her apple. On the cover was Julia Roberts, on the back, an ad for Jute cologne. Somewhere sandwiched in between were dozens of women smiling behind the breasts that someday soon Mayleigh could have.

Mayleigh rifled through the pages briskly, stopping on one of Madonna in her infinite fashion-shifting styles. On the opposite page was a Victoria's Secret advertisement. Taking another bite from the apple, Mayleigh resituated, on her stomach and the little mounds on her chest, feet crossed up against the Masonite wall by her pillows, and propped her chin with a hand, inches from the ad. There, she stared into the eyes of the girl showcasing the latest bra. Tracing her curves with her index finger, Mayleigh grinned and giggled again. A swatch phone on her night table digitally beeped itself to life, and Mayleigh bounded off the bed, sending the apple to the floor.

"Hullo?"

The voice on the other end was her mom's.

"Hi Ma! . . . No I'm fine. I was just—" Mayleigh tossed the magazine closed, and flung it off the bed, in a bit of shame. "—grabbing a bite to eat. We're out of bagels . . . No, Carol's closing today . . . Not sure . . . ok, what time do you think? . . . all right . . . ok, Ma . . . sure . . . see you at 7:30 . . . love you too . . . k, bye!" she hung up the phone and knelt down to pick up her apple.

As she picked the dust from her apple, Mayleigh found the magazine again, and after tossing the pages with a few sticky fingers, the Victoria's Secret ad. She hummed along to the radio and studied the curves of undergarment. At the same, across town, Chloe entered the waiting room of the Methodist hospital's breast cancer clinic. There, she reminded herself to pick up bagels, with the other groceries, that she'd use as the decoy for this week's visit.

26

Trina remembered how close she used to be with her sister, and how they'd hug several times daily for no apparent reason. She thought of how her sister would hold her and, for a moment, wished she could have one of those unexpected but tender hugs today. As she pressed up the fire escape, she realized that it had been a week now in the Complex; a week since she'd thought of Adam.

The nine o'clock church bells rang nine times which matched her steps up the nine rungs to the roof of the Complex. She looked over to catch a quick glimpse of Mike straightening up his living quarters for a visit he knew she would pay. He was struggling with a chaise lounge to bring it up to the sitting position near a chimney that was no longer in service since the building was retrofitted with electric heat. It was positioned along the east wall and Trina imagined that it must have run through her kitchen. A large rectangular mirror was bound to the brick with telephone wire that kept it securely belted horizontally from edge to edge. Below it was a black plastic coffee table holding a plastic bowl half-filled with rain water and a couple combs and toothbrushes. At the foot of the chimney she saw a big safe about a foot-and-a-half tall and wondered how he must have gotten it up the ladder. The chaise lounge was now upright and a plastic cushion of grey and blue plaid rested on it. Mike brought a wooden chair over next to the lounge and was trying to force one of the legs back into a hole beneath the seat. He didn't notice Trina as she walked up behind him and lifted a Sears catalog addressed to the Labwicks. When a postcard from New Orleans fell out and drifted to his side, it startled Mike and he knocked the chair over coincidentally pulling another one of its legs from the seat. He whispered a curse and she laughed.

"How about you sit on this chair and I pull up some tarpaper and a cinderblock."

"Sure," she said, still laughing.

"Is he okay?"

"He's lying down now. He's not okay. He lost his mom."

"Yea, I kinda figured."

Trina nodded and rocked on the chair as she scanned the various and unique articles that made up the yard sale that Mike called home. Mike had pulled up a clean block with perfect corners and folded a newspaper over it to soften the seat.

"This is—"

"My living room." Mike interrupted. The bathroom is just behind you.

"Yea, I saw the mirror."

"And the bedroom, study, library, and atrium, your sitting on 'em."

Trina looked down at her cushioned chair and back up at Mike. "What's an atrium?" she asked.

"Not a clue," he answered, and she laughed again.

"Mike, the piano-tuner?"

"Not on Sundays. A guy's gotta have some time off or his *strings* can be *wound* too tight."

A game, she thought. It had been months since she and her sister tried to out-pun one another, so she thought she had an edge. "A *grand* job for an *upright* individual," she added.

Not to be out-witted he jumped on her comment. "Well, one good *turn* deserves another—especially for a *sharp* guy in a no-rent *flat*."

"You're better than me," she admitted. "Listen, I'm sorry about *playing* the guidance counselor last night. You're right about me; sometimes I do get ahead of myself. I know I had just met you and the *tone* of the conversation was a bit *off-key*. I don't know much about you, but I know it struck a—"

"Bad chord?"

"It wasn't fair to judge you." Trina leaned forward to indicate that she was serious now. She wanted him to know how he filled her dreams. She couldn't say it though, so she told him about herself and about how she didn't end up anywhere either, but instead wound up in the city because the rain in Big Rapids lost its charming smell and the food in Michigan tasted so bland. "I couldn't find anything interesting. When the only life a town has is centered around a beer keg then you know you're in the wrong place."

He didn't comment, just stared at her.

"You think I'm a phony, don't you?"

"No." Mike decided. "You haven't really convinced me that you belong, though, here. New York isn't really a friendly place."

"I know. I'm still working on that."

Mike smiled. Trina was surprised how white his teeth were. "Working on letting New York change you, or working on changing all of New York?"

"Well I promised my sister I wouldn't become a cold-blooded New Yorker."

"So... instead, you're going to warm the blood of seven million people, and get them to all love one another like they do in Michigan?" Mike was mostly kidding.

"Not today. It's laundry day. Wanna come?"

27

On the way to the Laundromat, which was about a block down, Trina met the fellas out front in the middle of a quiet chess game. She leaned over the board letting a sock fall off the hamper's padded stack onto the table near an old man in a green pinstriped suit jacket. Randy looked up at Trina through a pair of hollow eyeglass frames.

As any fine gentleman would he rose to his feet and reached for her hand to kiss, a request that Trina sheepishly obliged. "Theresa you're looking splendid as always this morning."

"Merci beaucoup, Mon-swar," too flattered by the dry hand-kiss to correct him. "Randy, this is my good friend—"

"We've met," Mike cut in, and kissed Randy's hand which was still outstretched toward Trina. Randy appeared confused so Mike played along. "Y'see, Katrina, I'm Mr. Hogenstern's personal butler. May I take your jacket sir, it appears I've neglected my duties as tailor, your shoulder has become unstitched." And without skipping a beat, he walked behind Randy's chair and lifted off his coat, laid it over his left arm. Mike gently pushed in the chair for the old man to resume his seat.

"Please see to that Michael, I should hate to terminate your position so close to the holidays." Randy stated sternly, returning to his game.

"Hi Trina," Counts said, placing the sock back onto the hamper Trina had sat near her feet when she greeted the men.

"Hi Counts."

"Less starch today, Michael. Please."

Trina wasn't sure whether sport coats were typically pressed with starch, but didn't speak to keep from disillusioning anybody at the chess game this morning. With that, she picked up her hamper and turned down the street. Mike, who was just as amused with the whole charade as Trina was, flourished the gentlemen with a slow, deep bow.

"Allow me to speak with your wardrobe assistant about the Kelley green fabric selection. She's attired you like a New World leprechaun!"

"Nay." Randy averred with sincerest confidence. "A Celtic duke!" They all laughed except Trina, who was too many steps away to hear the whole thing, Mr. Hogenstern, who didn't understand why it was funny at all, and Lod, the ethnic fellow, who stared blankly, uncomprehending.

When they tired of the Identify the Undergarment game as it tossed and squeezed inside the triple-load washer, Trina capped the generic, unscented detergent and sat it on the machine. She then jumped up there herself and rested her feet on the top of the circular door's lip. Mike watched her with a grin.

"No spin cycle jokes, please," she commented before Mike could open his mouth.

"Moi?" Mike retorted, feigning disbelief at her slander of his character.

"Yeah you. Mike The Piano-Tuner. Ok, your turn. Tell me about you."

"What about me?"

"Everything. Spill it."

"Y'sure?" Mike jeered. "Once I start, there's no goin' back, baby. You may soon find yourself wrapped in a web of passion and lust. You may soon find yourself unable to contain yourself."

"Lets start *after* puberty then," she joked.

"After puberty? That's when it gets boring."

"Quit stalling."

"Ok, ok."

"Start with your last name," Trina cut in.

"Green."

"Green? Like, with envy?"

"Yes. Green."

"Continue."

"My mom was a secretary for Giuliani's office. She would come home oftentimes with gifts and trinkets from the campaign. Once in a while she'd come home with a bottle of champagne and the three of us would celebrate on the porch."

"You had a porch?"

"The fire escape."

"The three of you?"

"I'm getting there. I was about seven or eight. Mmmm-third grade, I remember. I had the teacher that would publicly announce that I had to pee-pee and that the class needed to wait for my brisk return."

"The hag."

"She was."

"You're getting side-tracked."

"I digress."

"Get back to the fire—the porch."

"It was the only time I was allowed to drink alcohol. My father, on the other hand, made up for it. He would be passed out on the couch before dinner was done. Mom would leave the dish in front of him and he'd normally kick it over at about two or three in the morning and finally go to bed."

"You remember this?"

"Of course. Unfortunately, most of my vivid memories are the ones that I would rather forget. A couple of times he'd think my room was his. Most of the time, I just heard him crashing into walls."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be, I'm not."

"The porch?"

"Yes, the porch. That was one of the good memories that stayed with me. I was on Dad's lap. Mom was swinging her feet off the edge. It was around the Fourth of July and some of the neighbors were shooting off fireworks and scaring the shit out of the FDNY."

"I can imagine."

"Dad was holding me so tight, I couldn't breathe. But I loved it. I felt like a family. He'd point out in the air and whisper into my ear the colors he bet they'd be. More often than not, he was

right. Mom laughed when he was, while clapping her hands. The alley cats below would make it three or four steps up to us before they'd hear the explosions and bolt for cover. I remember he smelled like old nails and the grease that he put on my bike chain. You know the red stuff that turns black when you rub metal on it?"

Trina nodded.

"Anyway. Regardless of the shit he did, those were the highpoints of family life. Mixed here and there with an occasional fight or argument."

"What happened?"

"Well, one of the things my mom brought home from the office one day wasn't a campaign giveaway."

"What was it?"

"It turned out to be a younger sister. Mom came home pregnant. Dad left."

"Just like that?" The washer began its second rinse.

"Just like that. Mom said he was worthless anyway, but I could tell she was deluding herself. She missed him. And. And I *think* she was sorry."

"You never asked?"

"I never cared. She had broken apart our family doing an act that I would later learn was called adultery. It was immoral, and a sin, but I didn't care about all that. I hated her because she made Dad leave, even though we were never that close. I think the reason was mainly because now we couldn't pretend to be a family that easily, what with Dad gone. Rudy was—"

"Rudy?"

"My sister. Don't worry, it wasn't Giuliani's. Rudy was six when I left. It wasn't her fault, but I think she was the only one that was hurt when I walked out. Mom didn't care."

"How couldn't she?"

"Well, remember I said she *was* a secretary?"

"Yeah."

"She was fired for violation of corporate culture. Along with an intern and the assistant campaign manager."

"Gruesome."

"At the time that I left, she was a junkie. If the moment struck her, she'd use the food stamps to roll the joints and when they switched from the stamps to the plastic card, she also switched and used that to cut lines."

"What happened to Rudy when you left?"

"Aside from the fact that she was crushed—and I wish I hadn't hurt her like that—she was placed in foster care on the charges of voluntary neglect and POIS.

"Pois?" Trina sounded it out.

"Possession of illegal substances."

"Go on."

"There's not really much after that. I floated for a while, staying with friends from school, relatives..."

"You were fourteen?"

"Fifteen by then. That's when I got my first girlfriend."

"Ooh, it gets PG-13."

"Not quite. I continued to go to school hitching a ride with whomever's house I was staying at. I got to be close with the music teacher before someone caught up with me."

"Caught *up* with you?"

"Realized my mom wasn't paying for my school anymore. Mr. Butera—the music teacher—let me live with him, and he paid for me to go to school. PS-125."

"Huh?"

"The school—Harriet Tubman Memorial."

"Oh."

"...in exchange for helping him with his job, cleaning up the house, and tuning pianos with him."

"What about the girlfriend?"

"Charlize Butera."

"His daughter?"

"Uh huh. I had lived in Mr. Butera's garage for almost a year, either on the lawn chair cushions or in the back of his Minivan. I slipped up a couple times and called him Dad. He said it was ok, so that's what I called him. Dad. It was kinda like my old dad never existed. Like, he was just a, a memory. A dream."

"I know the feeling."

"Your father?"

"My whole family."

"That's sad." Mike said.

"I know. Go on."

"Anyway, I never thought of Charlize as a sister. She was, was something to be admired. Adored from afar." Trina felt warm and realized she was longing. Mike realized the clothes were starting to spin faster, to wring out. Trina was oblivious. "She and I barely spoke. We barely looked at each other, but somehow I knew—I thought—I was in love. We started going for walks together, silent most the way. I got up the nerve one day and grabbed her hand, like this." Mike took Trina's hand and wove the fingers of his other hand between hers. "She said when people do that, it means they like each other. We stopped under a shop canopy on 33rd and stared at each other. The air conditioner, I remember, was dripping cold water down the back of my shirt, but I didn't really notice. We kissed."

Trina noted that they were still holding hands when the washer started to slow down. She stared into Mike's eyes, which were shining and wondrous. She tried to picture the scene: the embrace, the kiss, even the air conditioner. She wondered if it was a 15-year-old kiss or an adult kiss, if it was a lover's kiss or a—

"Dryer?"

"Huh?"

"Ready to dry?" Trina snapped back into reality almost as quickly as she bounded off the washer. Her feet zapped pins-and-needles as she struggled to stand upright.

"Y'okay?"

"Fine. What happened?" She watched him as he placed the basket below the washer, opened the door, and scooped the clothes into it. A pair of her Jockey's flopped over the rim and landed on the floor by her foot. She snatched it up quickly and balled it in her hands.

"Well, the relationship escalated. I started sneaking from the garage to her room in the middle of the night, only to be with her; fall asleep with her. She was all I thought about." He brought the basket to the dryer and began to toss the clothes in. "Dad found us one day. That night, he asked me to leave. Said I had broken his trust."

"Found you?"

"Holding each other."

"Did you...*sleep* together?"

"It wasn't about sex. I was fifteen. But, yes. We did. A couple of times." Mike blushed, though he wasn't at all embarrassed. Trina did likewise. Mike held the dryer door and reached out to her with his other arm. She wanted him to wrap it around her and hold her like she imagined him holding Charlize. Still, his arm hung there. She looked down to the pair of jockeys she'd been balling and unballing, wrinkled and wet from the wash. Automatically, she began to hand them to him, caught breath of reality, and threw them briskly into the dryer, blushing more. Mike slammed the door, tossed in the quarters and smiled.

They watched the clothes tumble dry, Trina's heart matching the machine's rhythm.

28

It was February 15th, the Ides of February, and the first apartment was filled. A Pratt graduate named Tony Gutierrez finally moved out of his parents' house and into 1B for independence. Mostly. He also didn't want his parents to meet his lover, Brian. Tony graduated summa cum laude from Pratt's photography department with an associates in technical photography and a bachelor in Medico legal Photography. Tony's only models at this point were corpses.

Trina and him joked over lunch about the dates he'd bring home from work and he explained that he had the intention of setting up a dark room in the remaining bedroom in his apartment.

"Aren't there chemicals?"

"Yeah, but they're not dangerous."

"What about Brian? Will he be staying with you?"

"Brian has his own place. We're taking it slow. Besides, I don't think we have enough closet space for the two of us." He laughed at his joke, funny on two levels. "In case you're wondering, Brian's the woman of the relationship."

"I kinda figured."

And with that, Tony was in. He moved in on the 14th and Mike and Trina finished arranging the bulk of his things at 1:30a.m., while Marco snored away on Tony's new loveseat. They decided to grab a beer at a western-themed bar three blocks up the Slope, to let Tony detail and accessorize the place. Marco slipped into his extra long t-shirt that he wore to bed without disagreement and passed out before Mike and Trina finished tucking him in.

"How does he pay? He's just out of school?" Mike said while the bartender counted his tips.

"He works for the state, so he's got the money coming in. His graduation present from his folks was a hefty sum of money. I checked him out."

"I just don't want you to make a mistake."

"Mike, I've been doing this for nine months now. I think I can handle it."

"Just trying to help," Mike said, quietly. "What kind of a name is Gutierrez anyway?"

"I don't know. I know he's Latino. Maybe Puerto Rican? Cuban, possibly?"

"Is he part of the Mexican Mafia?"

"MIKE! No. He's from Jersey. He's ok."

"Fine."

"Look, just, don't worry about me, ok? I can take care of myself." The words reverberated in her and somehow they seemed false. She never was one to enjoy being alone and making all the decisions to affect her future. She was never the independent one. She threw her frustration off as

if it was brought on by spending a full day working, and the need for peace and quiet. Mike was one step ahead of her.

"I'll see ya later," he said quietly, obviously hurt. It wasn't his fault, she thought, for caring about her well-being. She noticed a bit of friction today during the move and figured maybe he was just tired and sore and feeling a bit cabin-feverous too. Mike tossed a couple of quarters on the bar and walked out.

"Wait, Mike, I'm sorry," she called as she spun around on the stool. He was already passing through the threshold and into the night. "Mike? ...Shit."

She turned around again to finish her beer, noticing that Mike had only taken a couple of sips off his. She grabbed the two, and walked out after him.

When she found him, he was halfway up the block to 7th, nearing the Cemetery. He walked onto 7th and toward the corner where Greenwood turned west and pushed to the edge of 6th Avenue. She caught up with him on the corner, under the streetlight, and sat on the brick wall that encased the cemetery and came up to her waist. Leaning against the iron spines of the wall, she spoke.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

"I mean it. I didn't mean to snap at you. You're my closest friend here and I don't want us to distance already." She wondered if her prayers were genuine or if it was just the beginning of her becoming dependent on him and hoping that he wouldn't leave, like Adam had, half a year ago.

"It's ok."

"Promise?" she pushed.

"Yeah, but..."

"But what?"

"But I gotta say something to you." Trina felt worried that it was happening already.

"Shoot," she quivered.

"You're not my type."

"Huh?"

"You're not my type."

"I don't get it?"

"You're not my type."

"I gathered that."

"Look, don't ask me to explain it. It's just the way I feel. I, I think of you more like a sister."

"Like Charlize?"

"No, like, a *real* sister. I don't know why. It's just, I know how I feel. Ok?"

"Yeah, sure."

"And I wanted to tell you before we got, you know, closer. Before you started thinking other things."

"Too late."

"I'm sorry."

"It's ok." She looked up at him and, this time, lied to his eyes. "Really. It's ok."

"Y'sure?"

"I'm sure."

Trina watched the pigeons on the graffiti'd wall across the street. They buried their heads under their wings and nuzzled with each other while they slept. Trina wondered if they, too,

mated for life, like she heard ducks did. For the birds, the thought. At least they're humane enough to deal with love. And though she thought it ironic, her heart hurt too much to laugh.

29

Outside of Chloe's, the sidewalk was hopping with vendors. The evenings had begun to lighten up and stay warmer longer, and New York hadn't seen snow for over a month. Winter clothes were 3-for-10\$ again and all the bargain hunters were feeling among them like archeologists would the walls in some golden city. The cement had all dried off from the spring shower, earlier, and the sky was getting brighter. Mayleigh stepped through the herd and pulled herself up to the café's steel cage security gate. She heard one larger woman haggling behind her with the vendor about how she shouldn't have to pay full price for a green sheer scarf because it had a small snag in the middle—one that would be easily hidden behind her large neck if she did indeed fork over the three dollars and change. The gate was soon unlocked and pushed up into its recess behind the oversized shop sign and the glass door behind it was opened.

"Well, it's about time." Mayleigh heard the large woman approach the café door and she quickly locked it again behind her after stepping in. Her face was plain and unaffected by the woman's expletives and pounding on the glass. She just looked down at her watch and indicated that the café will soon be opened once some business was taken care of. The larger woman probably reacted with more expletives and gestures, but Mayleigh was already across the coffee house's pine floors to the counter at that point. Out of her pocket, she withdrew a chrome cigarette case, and from that, a cigarette. She tapped it twice on the counter and spun around to face the door. The large woman's eyes popped out as Mayleigh jumped up onto the counter and lit the cigarette. Behind the woman, the street vendor held up a silver scarf and tapped her on her wide shoulder to show it to her. She grabbed scarf, spit in it, and shoved it back into his chest, knocking him onto a couple large cardboard boxes filled with clothes. She then adjusted her breasts and walked down the street out of sight of the coffee house probably cursing the whole way.

To Mayleigh, the city was coarse. A bitter place filled with trivial conversation and false delight. In front of her eyes she saw greed and chauvinism. She saw a decaying roach motel where humans are the roaches and the structures around them were caves. The city was crawling with hot-headed sops that slink back into these caves nightly and abuse their wives. Unfortunately, she also saw potential, but expected this to be shown to her without provocation and without cause.

Behind her eyes, she saw something more—an air of daze and spectacle. A place that smelled sweet and the music was actually interesting. Mayleigh wanted more out of her life than merely serving coffee and sandwiches and often it showed in her work. She put out her cigarette and quietly decided that this day would be a good one.

By 11:00, the room was half full. By noon, it was teeming and her assistant hadn't showed up for work yet. She had nine new loaves of rye bread in the ovens cooking and a list of twice as many sandwiches that had to be made once the bread was sliced. A shy gentleman was asking her for directions, but she was only half-listening, trying to write down a list of groceries to have delivered from the store.

"Look!" she said. "I'm not a tour guide, go find a map!"

The man was shocked and stood there trying to find a way to apologize to her.

"You're not going to yell are you?" Mayleigh asked, without any real concern.

"No. I mean. Yes."

"Yes you are going to yell? Terrific."

"No. Yes I'm not going to yell. Please. I'm sorry." The man was hurt. Not necessarily by Mayleigh's attack, but more because he expected some kind of warmth from a coffee house named after a woman of so much. But he wouldn't have known her being in the city for just 15 hours now. He wouldn't have known Chloe and wouldn't ever know of her warmth since the café lost this warmth when it lost Chloe. Hot and fatigued, he pressed his finger into an ice cube sitting on the green counter, slid it around and watched it fall to the floor. Mayleigh, who had finished her list, fished a rubber band out of the register's drawer and pulled her hair up into a small pony-tail near the top of her head. She looked down at the man, who was stepping back out of a line that was newly clotting in front of the counter. The man, without trying to upset anybody else, casually watched the patrons—zombies with their necks raked and eyes pointed at the chalk menus above Mayleigh. She then produced a subway map and unfolded it over the register, letting it hang on the near side of the counter for the man to see.

"We're about five blocks from 9th and 4th. Take the M-N-R northbound to Pacific or straight through to the city. From Pacific, you can find the rest of the trains, k?"

"K."

"Well, go on..."

He just stared at her for a moment. "How did you know I was new here?"

"Because you asked for directions." Mayleigh still showed no immediately detectable interest in the man. The man slightly blushed.

"Oh." He smiled and turned toward the door.

"And because you said 'I'm sorry.' People don't say that here."

The man just smiled.

"Have a coffee before you go. A little welcome to the city, on Mom."

"I gotta get a—Mom?"

Mayleigh just pointed to the sign above the menus. "Chloe. She was my mom."

He looked up toward the wall and back to Mayleigh. The image of Chloe was a line-etch of a larger woman smiling behind big white teeth and silverish-black hair that was both tucked up above her head and streamed down the sides like the vines outside the building. When he looked back down, Mayleigh was already pouring a mug for him.

"Mayleigh, of Brooklyn," she said as she held it out to him. The woman at the front of the line was noodling through her pocketbook for a couple bucks and the man behind her rocking back and forth like he hadn't peed in days.

Puzzled at first, the gentleman stepped back to the front and took the cup. She just stared at him. "Oh. Dusty from Philly." He attempted a bow trying not to spill any coffee, spotting the ice cube on the floor which was now just a puddle about the size of a quarter.

“Well, Dusty from Philly, how’s fifty bucks sound to ya?” Dusty cocked his head a bit to the right. “My assistant decided not to come in today, I could use your help for an hour or two.”

“I have to find an apartment before the U-haul is due back.”

“Let me worry about that. Right now, we’ve got bigger problems to take care of.” They both turned toward the line to find it about six deep. Looking back to face each other, the man seemed to be put in an awkward situation. “You make some sandwiches for me for three hours and the rush will be gone. Then we can lock the doors for a bit, I’ll take ya down to this sweet girl’s place, and she’ll either show you an apartment or recommend one to you in the area. Fifty bucks and a new home. What do ya say?”

Dusty repeatedly wiped the sweat from the corners of his temples and saw the line thin and wane with each swab. The line, itself, seemed to have the consistency of a subway wrapping through the tubes; with each car that passed, looking like the last in succession, another one followed around the bend. It continued for most of the duration of his time behind the counter. Each sandwich he made, he wrapped in butcher’s wrap and placed on a stack that never stayed more than three deep. The cutting board that acted as a deli-man’s palate was soon dabbled and dotted with numerous pigments in the form of vegetables, forgotten edges of meats, and condiments. He also would break concentration on his *works* from time to time to toss a glance at Mayleigh in order to etch the lines of her face into his mind for a little while, hoping to contain her image as he continued his sentence in Chloe’s. He noted that she never stole a glance back though he swore she sensed his gaze. A flurry of frustration streamed through him, as it always does with people concerned with many chores, and he satisfied it by chewing on the inside of his cheek.

30

The line was gone. The hours had passed. Thankfully, Mayleigh had turned the deadbolt on the door and now accompanied Dusty, or rather lead him, to the complex managed by an acquaintance of hers. Mayleigh had, for the last three hours, hoped to see the girl again that frequented her café many times. She had begun to grow curious about the face she saw in her mind, wondering if she had laced it with perfection while she dreamed at night, or if it truly was the way she saw it. Youthful, defined, but stern. Her face looked as if it was always in deep consideration of it encountered. Upon reaching the steps, and passing through a bunch of chess players that had accumulated on the front sidewalk, she and Dusty climbed up the stairs. Her heart sped a little more with every step. She reached the top, Dusty behind her as a sheathed weapon and reason for entreating, and knocked. Mayleigh heard the floors creak near, the peephole slide aside, and the deadbolt turn, with a moment's hesitation. The door swung open.

31

Dumping the mop-water into the low yellow cleaning sink affixed to Chloe's back room, Mayleigh smiled. She had tenderness inside her that made the last hours of patrons and service seem impervious to it. She had handed innumerable items over the counter, retrieved the average day's collections, scrubbed, rinsed, and re-served many mugs of steaming java, and hadn't the notice that a smile never left her face. She didn't know what to think about the feelings that whirred inside her, while the air pots did the same. Now, in the closing hours of the coffee house, she felt like she could fly through it, scouring sections that hadn't been visited by a sponge and cleaning agents since its construction years and years before. She felt safe in here, with these feelings of utter compassion, armor riddled with kinks that could leave her helpless on the streets. She vowed not to leave the café until she had dawned the customary hard shell that protected her when walking home, however long that lasted. She laughed aloud.

"Mom. I think I'm in love!" she screamed through the place while turning the mop upside down and caressing the stringy dirty-white hair on it. "I wish you were here. I wish you could meet this, this paragon in my life." She let out a deep sigh and grinned, releasing the mop and simultaneously falling back against the wall, wobbling a piece of local art.

"I miss you, Mom. I want you to be proud of me. I want you to know that I'm doing ok. That I'm ok. That I feel...I feel good."

Her eyelids were inappropriate walls to hold back the tide and sprays of the salty water's surf began to lap over it. "I love you, Mom," she said as she gazed up at the image over the register, staring into the wood-cut eyes and remembering her smile. She leaned back forward, onto her feet, and reached into her pocket, retrieving a cigarette. Striking a match, she lit it, and jumped back up on the counter as she had done a half a day earlier. This time, though, she stood up on it and corked the cigarette in the corner of her mouth. On the tip of her toes, she leaned against the wall support and peered deep into the eyes of the sign, inches away. Tilting her head to the side, she slowly moved her cheek to her mom's and removed her cigarette. She pressed against the sign until the hinges creaked and the sign angled and closed her eyes, dikes in her eyes flawed with leaks. An exhale released the smoke in her lungs and it came out in tufts as she cried aloud. "I miss you, Ma."

32

Mayleigh awoke on the couch by the bookcase at Chloe's. Sun had begun to stream in the window and her neck twinged with pain as she tried to lean up. Her body felt raw and mangled from a night of tossing, but she had forgotten her episode that closed her evening and remembered the dreams that comforted her during the night. While the foggy blur that comes with eyes first aroused cleared, she saw the café door wide open, the gate up, and tried to recall the events of the store's closing. Leaning forward, trying to assemble the puzzle, she felt a vertical crack of the bones in her spine and a tingling begin to strengthen in her toes. She got up, rubbing the back of her neck and blinking and walked toward the register, below the gaze of her mother and half-consciously reminding herself to start baking the dough in the fridge. The register was open, of course, and empty.

"Fuckers," she whispered, and remembered how the night left her, armor cast aside. "I'm such a dumbshit."

"Hi," a voice spoke from behind, startling her. She spun around.

"Jesus, you scared the shit out of me."

"What's wrong?" Dusty said, smiling. "Hey, I thought you didn't open 'til 7."

"I don't," snapped Mayleigh, as she once again trained her eyes on the register. Dusty looked a little hurt, but decided to try again to warm Mayleigh's morning.

"Didja open just for me?" he smiled.

"No, you idiot, I was robbed!" Mayleigh yelled back.

Dusty's expression changed from a smile to concern. "Oh my God, are you all right? What happened?"

"I'm ok."

"Did they hurt you?"

"No, I'm fine. It happened during the night."

"How much did they get?"

"Look, Dusty. I'm sorry. I just don't feel like talking to you right now," she snapped again. She saw his eyes, filled with genuine sympathy, melt to shame. He turned and started out.

"Around \$400," she said, in a kinder tone.

"Oh," he turned back. "Well, at least you're safe. I mean, at least they didn't hurt you." He smiled. She kept her eyes to the floor. "And, I mean, \$400 isn't *that* bad."

"Isn't *that* bad?" she snapped a third time. "That was the entire evening's income. Now, I'm back on groceries, supplies, and in the fuckin' hole \$400." Mayleigh was screaming now, and didn't notice a girl with perky, bouncing breasts jog in the door with head phones on. The jogger shut off the music, removed the plugs from her ears, and spoke up.

"What's up?" Her voice broke the uncomfortable pause between Mayleigh and Dusty and the flood of anger surged past him into the girl.

"Where the fuck were you last night?" Mayleigh screamed at the girl.

"I couldn't make it," the perky jogger responded, covering her worry with a crooked smile. "Sorry."

"Sorry? Why didn't you call in? Is it that tough? Or did you hock your phone for a memory regression and a tit-job? Get out of here."

"But..." the girl tried.

"Come on, Mayleigh," Dusty tried to add, uneasy from the tension in the room, thicker than the dough in the fridge.

"Stay out of this, Dusty!"

"Mayleigh, please," the jogger tried again.

"You're fired, get out!" They stared at each other for a moment, the heat in Mayleigh's face enough to bake a full day's worth of bread. The girl put her headphones on, a trembling lip between them, and jogged briskly out.

"That wasn't fair, Mayleigh," Dusty said. "It wasn't her fault."

"Fair? What's fair, Dusty? What's fair in New-fuckin'-York? You tell me."

"I don't know. I know that wasn't, though."

"Fine. You leave too." It was Dusty's turn to protest his exit.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Out," Mayleigh shrieked, a little louder and more high-pitched from the last time she demanded.

"Ok. If that's the way you want it, sure." He started out, and turned around. "But first, let me you what's fair. Fair is getting a coworker for merely dolling out directions." Mayleigh felt enraged, but the fires were smoldered when she realized she forgot to pay him the fifty she owed him. "Fair is meeting a beautiful girl and getting an apartment in the same afternoon, for just being yourself. Fair is letting your guard down for one damn second to let people know who you really are." Dusty was on the verge of tears.

"She let you lease?"

"Yeah, because I was your friend and she trusts your opinion. My first day is the 20th." He turned to leave.

"She *is* beautiful, isn't she?"

He grabbed his wallet from his pocket, plucked a fifty, and set it on the table by the door. "Yes, but I wasn't talking about Trina." He looked into her eyes briefly, but turned away quickly when he felt the tears start to run. He began to walk out.

Mayleigh noticed the fifty and felt her heart throb as if it was moaning. "Wait, Dusty, please. I'm sorry!"

Dusty stopped in the doorway, with his back to her, and turned his head to the side, where she could see the tears and watch his lips.

"New Yorkers don't say *I'm sorry*." He walked out.

Collapsing on the couch, she clutched the throw pillow and clawed at it, fighting the tears that began to flow again. Coughing through her sobs, she muttered quietly to herself.

"I *am* a dumbshit."

33

It had been a week since she had seen Dusty. She trudged through the days and neglected most of the coffee house's cleaning routines, triple-checking the door lock and metal gate's security when she left. She went home ritualistically, turned on the radio and sat in bed until she fell asleep. She wanted out. The city had beaten her. She was finally sick of the war. More importantly, she thought of her mother and how she might feel about Mayleigh. Chloe had died when Mayleigh turned 18, a tender age to her. She didn't know about her alternate lifestyle, which she hid from the moment she realized it her freshman year. She didn't know about Mayleigh's troubled past, dealing with the roughness of the neighborhood and her inability to cope, although she had been born in Brooklyn. She didn't know how Mayleigh hurt inside, as it was disguised those last couple of years in the grief of her mother's struggle with cancer. She didn't want her mother to know she had problems, concerned that it would overload her own. She buried it and concealed it, a smile being her most effective mask. Chloe died leaving behind what she thought to be a good young woman, compassionate and loving. Nearly twenty, she thought Mayleigh to have a good head on her shoulders and all together high spirits. Mayleigh was a fantastic pretender, repressing all negatives and producing all positive. She worked well, but faked her feelings better. Chloe really left behind a scared little girl who now she needed a mother more than ever.

She vowed she'd walk over to the complex in the morning to see how Dusty made out with his job and his living situation. She realized she didn't know anything about him: his last name, his occupation, his hobbies. She knew his heart though. And she missed that most of all.

She even thought about asking Trina if she wanted a job at Chloe's, desperate for companionship, in addition to a hard worker. Since she had fired her closing manager, she worked the shifts alone, mechanically and emotionlessly. Mayleigh closed her eyes that night determined to make things right. She had to, she promised, or she really would leave New York.

The night was filled with howling, either from the street or inside of Mayleigh's head. She dreamt of her past, of her mother and of school. Her mother had worked as a lunchroom cook in Mayleigh's junior high school long before she ever signed the lease to a greasy spoon diner, ripped up the old wooden benches and yellow floor tile and hung a coffeehouse sign over the door. Mayleigh was a quiet student, never rebellious but never an over-achiever either. She avoided her mother at lunch time and often went out to the playground to swing the noon hour past. Mayleigh dreamed a reckless nightmare of one of these eighth grade days when the grass was a bit taller than usual on the schoolyard's recess field. She had bent down to pick up some change under her swing when she was struck on the back hard, and her face hit the earth. When she brought it up and wiped the sand out of her eyes and nose, she spotted a football a few feet

from her and a group of boys beyond that. They didn't apologize. They sort of laughed and watched her as she cried, still lying on her side. One boy grabbed the football and regrouped to form another play out on the field, all of them leaving her on the ground, vulnerable. Mayleigh remembered running up to the boys and grabbing the ball from them.

"Give it back!" they called. And she stood there.

"Come on, bitch, give us the ball!" But still she stood there.

Mayleigh's dreams had become terrifying at that point. Her face was pressed into the corner of the bedroom where the walls met, and her sweat-soaked forehead marked the paint. The taunts echoed throughout the room it seemed, and she gripped the corner of the mattress.

"Oh! She wants to play some football with the big boys!" In the center of the field, the mass of boys began to move around her like buzzards would an animal struggling to stay alive. She didn't know what to do, but she clung to the football and cried loud enough for the other children to stop swinging, or sliding, or playing hopscotch or jacks—to look past the huddle of boys and try to see who it was at the center.

"Well... why don't we humor her, huh boys? Let's show her our new play! It's called 'teach the bitch a lesson!'"

With that, Mayleigh threw the football hard at one of the boys, breaking his nose and sending him to the ground. She turned and ran toward the other side of the circle trying to break free. They kept grabbing her hair and pulling her dress. As she broke free of the circle, one boy leapt on her to tackle her. He caught her dress which tore from her waist exposing her underpants and sending her to the ground. Then, they all stopped. She inched away from the mob on her back, but they didn't follow, they just laughed and pointed. When she looked down to see what they were laughing at, she cried louder. The blood in her underwear had stained the center and ran to the edges.

Mayleigh tried to forget her dreams and got out of bed. She walked to the bathroom to wash her face and put her hair back in a few butterfly clips.

"Look at the little girl, bleeding in her panties!"

She grabbed some cardboard from a case of Campbell's soup cans and a marker from the narrow drawer under the toaster in her apartment. Tossing the cardboard to the floor, she knelt down in front of it and marked out a couple of words.

"I told ya not to fuck with us! I told ya to give us the ball back and go play with your dolls! Now look at ya!"

Mayleigh walked out of her apartment and down the street a block to the windows of Chloe's. It was too early for the vendors to be out this morning as she took some masking tape out of her pocket and fumbled to find the cut edge.

"Uh-oh. Look out boys, here comes mommy!" Without a second passing, Mayleigh was scooped up off of the ground and into her mother's arms. Her mother turned and walked quickly away from the group of boys without saying anything to them, without even acknowledging them as the ones who hurt her little girl. When she walked away, Mayleigh lifted her head from

her mom's shoulder to see them jeering and making faces and still laughing like her pain was a joke to them. And no matter how hard they laughed, it still wasn't enough to live out the humor.

"Closed till further notice?"

Mayleigh was pressing on the tape with the back of her fingernail to make sure it stuck a long time. She turned around to meet the eyes of Trina. "Huh?" she asked?

"That's a bummer; I really wanted some hazelnut this morning." Right about then, Trina noticed Mayleigh's eyes were red and filled with tears from what could have been hours of crying. She opened her mouth slightly in a motion to ask what was wrong, but Mayleigh just hugged Trina and let the crying become vocal. The masking tape hit the sidewalk and rolled down to a mailbox. Trina didn't know what to do.

At eight o'clock, the two girls were amid a round of *Jeepers Creepers*, the board game that Trina had come to the coffeehouse to donate that morning. The game was uneventful, and involved moving some plastic beetles around an ant colony's maze by answering biology and zoology questions. Trina was doing most of the talking while Mayleigh only reached out of her blanket to sip coffee and move her beetle, the pink one.

"Aren't we supposed to open this joint?" Trina didn't get a response. "I'm only asking because people keep looking in here like we're letting them down. Make you a deal. If I get the next one right, then you gotta tell me what's on your mind, k?" Mayleigh looked up.

"K."

"Okay, neat. Go ahead, ask me something." Trina was excited, like she was connecting. She smiled as a little girl would and it encouraged Mayleigh.

"But if you're wrong, I get to ask you stuff and you have to answer honestly."

Trina rolled the die and got a one. "Shit, marsupials." Mayleigh picked up a card and read the marsupial question.

"What plant makes up the chief diet of Koala bears?" She looked up at Trina while taking a sip of her coffee that was now cold. Trina got up to get some more coffee for herself, thinking aloud.

"It's probably something like bamboo or pinecones, right?"

"I'm not saying."

"Uh... That's wrong. I don't think there are pine trees in Australia. Maybe coconuts. What is it?"

"Eucalyptus. Why don't you have a boyfriend?"

Trina stopped mid-sip to sit down. She set the coffee down next to the game board and played with the die. "I'm not good with them." She said after a short pause. "Actually, I'm not dating for a while. I'm not going to try until I decide whether it's what I really want. Does that make any sense?"

"Sure it does." Mayleigh said. "Your question."

Mayleigh rolled the die and got a six. "Wild card," Trina said. "How does the black widow spider get its name?"

"Easy. She eats her suitors."

Trina turned the card over and nodded. "Gross. Imagine that, getting gobbled up after—."

"Your roll." Mayleigh interrupted, handing the die to Trina, who rolled it and got another one. "Primates. Go ahead."

"Where can the largest population of Lemurs be found?"

"In the rain forest?" Trina asked.

"No, they're looking for a geographic location."

"Africa? Madagascar?"

Mayleigh looked up from the card and stared at Trina. "That's right."

"Guess I got lucky."

"Bullshit. You knew that. You knew the Eucalyptus one too, didn't you, but you pretended you didn't." Trina nodded timidly. "Why?"

"Because I knew you wouldn't answer me."

"What were you going to ask?"

"Why were you crying this morning?"

"You weren't supposed to see that."

"What happened to your mom?" Mayleigh stayed silent again. She was pressing down on the green beetle so that its plastic legs bent up and its body was flat against the board. The legs pressed into the cardboard and made six dents in a star shape.

"How's Dusty?"

"We're not talking about Dusty, Mayleigh, we're talking about you."

"Then we're not talking. You might as well go home."

"Nope. Sorry. We're only half way across the board and I got a whole cup of coffee, so either we sit here in silence or you tell me why nobody's aloud to know who Mayleigh is. Or why she treats everybody so coldly. Or why she acts like a time bomb about to detonate. You may love telling me life's a bowl of cherries, but you're lying to me and to yourself and guess what—it won't last." Mayleigh got up rapidly but Trina caught her arm and held it down to the table, spilling some coffee onto the short stack of cards and the corner of the game board. "And running away is getting *really* old. Now sit down." Their eyes were locked. Trina could tell that Mayleigh's expression was of sheer anxiety, discomfort and even anger—a guile of routine dismissals and excuses. What Trina couldn't tell, was how thin the mask was, and how much fear was hiding behind it. Mayleigh, on the other hand, could sense Trina's eyes, shifting gentle to the left and right, were of quiet patience hiding frustration and empathy and her own fear. Mayleigh pulled her arm away from Trina and held it up to her neck, wrapping her fingers around the red marks of Trina's grip. Trina picked up the cards, shook them off on the floor of the café and threw them in the box. She folded the board in half and swept the beetles and the die onto it and put them also in the box. She reached for the coffee and a napkin but Mayleigh grabbed the mug before she could and threw it wildly at the wall behind the register splashing the counter, Chloe's sign and everything in the path. Mayleigh stood there with coffee running down her elbow, Trina just stared at the splash on the wall.

"Oh, Jesus. That was impulsive." Mayleigh laughed and sort of apologized, heading for the utility closet for a mop. Returning, she lifted a silver pail under the large sink behind the counter and laughed over her shoulder again to Trina. Her laugh, Trina noticed, was one of those snappy, abrupt chuckles that interrupt a normal sentence in attempt to disguise the intensity of the sentence's context—to make it easier not to cry.

"Mom was—" Mayleigh started.

"It's okay, Mayleigh. Really." Surprised by how much her voice quivered, Trina felt ashamed and knew her prying wasn't yet her place. Her ears were red with uneasiness, and she felt herself biting the corner of a perfect thumbnail.

Mayleigh turned the large, squeaky valve of the sink slowly until the squeaking stopped and the jet of water was reduced to a shy series of drips. She dipped a yellow and white rag below the

surface, upsetting the effervescence of city water settling in a new container. Then, with her back still to Trina, she twisted the rag gently, as if wringing out the hair of one of her childhood dolls.

"Mom was ... an outstanding woman. She didn't have any problems so grave that a hot cocoa and a board game with her little girl couldn't fix. I know. Sounds so Little Women. It's a good formula, though, for life's problems." Mayleigh knew she was on a tangent and shrugged, continuing.

"She would talk them down to basically nothing with me. 'The bank's been calling me, May,' she'd explain, and tell me how she'd have to keep the shop open a lot later that week to be able to afford my cereal or school clothes. 'Even if I wanted to go back to the school to handle their lunches, I don't think Mr. Roberts would let me, what with the way I left and all. They got new girls working there and they can run the kitchen as well as I did, so I'm not putting them in a weird position. No, I just need to stick it out and eventually I'll adjust to running my own business.'

"She was my hero, I guess. When she'd talk about her issues with me, a young teenager who could never understand their depths, I felt important; like I was helping her feel better about herself. Everything she dealt with seemed so petty once we discussed it—even though she did all of the talking and I just drank the cocoa. But somehow, I felt, we were a team."

Mayleigh pulled the steamy bucket out of the sink and sat it delicately on the wood below. She knelt down, reached under the sink and found a bottle of oil soap. Still on her knees, she poured a little bit into the swirling water and watched it spread out before re-capping the bottle and putting it away.

Trina crept around the counter and knelt down by Mayleigh, the bucket between the two. She looked empathetically at her friend, who was still gazing deep into the bucket's contents.

"She didn't tell me she was going to die." Mayleigh moved her head slowly to one side and back to the other but continued her stare. She saw herself painted on the water's surface, wrinkled by the liquid's gentle agitation. Trina wanted to listen, but Mayleigh didn't continue speaking. Then, Trina wanted to speak, but she didn't know what to say. An unprepared tear left Mayleigh's eye and landed not too far from the side of the bucket on the floor. Far enough, Trina thought, to go unnoticed by the rest of the water in the pail.

"Shit, you want a cigarette?" Mayleigh jumped up and found her usual spot on the counter, only facing in instead of out. Again, Trina said nothing. Mayleigh found a bent Camel in the chest pocket of her over-alls and a matchbook near the register. She tossed the warm rag, to the far counter under Chloe's portrait and stared halfway up toward it, and halfway down away from it. Trina dragged the bucket around the counter to the cold trail of coffee between May's back and the café door. The bucket teemed over the edge when it stopped abruptly, but Mayleigh didn't comment. As Trina mopped the floor slowly, she stepped cautiously around the coffee and kept her sneakers dry. Mayleigh felt a few splashes coffee soak into the bottom of her leg on the counter but didn't let it keep her from enjoying her cigarette and the rest of her silent crying. A couple of older men peered through the window wondering if they could have a couple hours of the café's time, but Trina just shook her head.

The mopping done, Trina set the bucket off to the side. She found a seat about 15 yards away where she could observe the pedestrian traffic picking up around the shop and still see her friend at the counter, watching the last few drops of coffee chase each other down the wall below the sign. Mayleigh's cigarette had long since burned down when she looked over toward Trina who stood up as soon as their eyes met. Trina stepped only a few feet toward her in the time her

friend had slid off the counter and ran into her arms. Rubbing her back, Trina still didn't know what she could say and chose to say whatever came out.

"It's alright, May. You don't need to keep this inside of you any more. From now on, we're going to do this together. K?" And somewhere, amid all of Mayleigh's sobs, Trina was sure she heard a "k."

34

Trina walked down Brooklyn's 5th Avenue toward the coffee shop carrying a paper plate of cookies she had made that morning. They had cooled and the cat-whisker icing was given enough time to dry and harden so the cookies wouldn't stick to the static wrap around them. Earlier, Dusty had knocked on her door to say "Thank you" again, the same warm conversation they've had over and over. She guessed that of the twelve or fifteen times they've come across each other, they've discussed his fortune and privilege, as he called it, during more than half of them. Dusty had moved into the Complex's apartment 2A, formerly the home of Bob Kroeger, the incompetent tempter with a leaky sink.

"Dusty, you don't have to keep thanking me for letting you rent. It's business. You understand." She had told him.

"Sure. I guess. You're actually the only one I've met here—besides Mayleigh down the street. I guess I need some new friends to pester, 'sides just you." Dusty sounded like a child, but not an annoying one. His words seemed carefully selected from a very small vocabulary list as though he knew larger words were pretentious and condescending to some people.

"Oh. Well, I could take you around to meet the gang if you want. We got me up here on the top floor, 3B. The other side's still vacant, but Beulah (the owner) keeps some of her old junk in there. My little friend Marco stays in my apartment most of the time, but he's at school right now. Uh, you're down in 2A, as you know, across from where Winthrop used to stay. He was a crazy old lawyer who tried to sue me, and, incidentally, was the first one to leave the building when I raised the rent last season. He actually scrubbed all of 2B clean to make sure he got his deposit back. The old kook. That's probably why the second floor still smells like oil soap and Lysol.

"Tony lives in 1B. He moved in a few weeks before you did and always pays his rent on time. I think he's a cameraman for the newspaper or something. I call him Jimmy Olson, like in Superman, but that'll probably just confuse you."

"Nope." Dusty said. "I'm taking notes."

"And that's it. Oh, and Mike. He ... stays on the roof ... for right now." Trina noticed Dusty was making a confused face, to which she threw in, "don't ask." Then, she decided to quiz him to see if she left anything out.

"So... One is vacant and Tony?" To which Trina nodded.

"Two is me and Winthrop?"

Trina nodded again, adding "Formerly, Winthrop."

"Formerly. 3A, vacant. You and Marco in B."

"Yep."

"And Mike on the roof."

“You got it. The boys out front are Billy, Randy, Sam and ...” Trina couldn’t remember the last one’s name so she just described him as being from the Middle East, or Jordan or something.

Dusty was very attentive and made sure to thank Trina again before mentioning his sink, which he volunteered to repair. She asked him to keep the receipts for any parts he needed and thanked him herself.

35

That night, Billy lied on his hard cot with a severe ache in his chest, neck and head. He had realized that withdrawal is never an easy thing for those he used to help, the others doing the coping, and he offering the support. But never had he imagined the type of physical pain it caused. As a social worker, the typical dependent child was forced to meet with him by school counselors or court magistrates. Billy regularly advised the child of the harm the poisons were doing to their young minds and bodies, but chose not to follow his own advice out of stubborn, selective blindness, as he told Patie so many times.

Now he learned his wife was dead, and the heartache exaggerated the withdrawal pangs, which made Billy hyper-active in his bed, but too weak to sit up. So for what seemed to him as hours, his feet peddled below the sheets an imaginary bicycle to take him away from this hurt to a place where he could sit on the grass, listen to the music, and everything was still safe.

As he fell asleep, he heard her voice.

"I got the damn letter!" he screamed over the phone, but Patie said she couldn't talk. "Do you hear me? They want me on the line!" Billy paced the floors of his apartment; his eyes were desperately looking around for some kind of solace. On top of the fridge, the stash was finished. In the plant pot, the bags were gone. "Patie. Please. I don't know what I did that made you leave me, but believe me, baby, we got to work this out now. Dammit!"

There was no smack anywhere. Billy was more frustrated than he was angry but he was madly pulling clothes off the dryer, looking through pockets and old purses. A few notes and receipts fell out, one reading *PARNELL* with an address, but no dope. He put that one in his shirt pocket and threw the empty purse to the side.

"I just really, really, really-really need you to be with me tonight, Patie. I really need you to just come over to me right now, or soon." *Under the sink*, he thought, knowing that he'd seen something under there a week or two ago. Patie was talking with her hand cupped over the phone, he could tell. She wasn't listening to him.

"Patie, come on!" Cradling the phone on his shoulder and neck he knelt under the kitchen sink and pulled out old cans of Lysol and slimy bottles of floor oil and steel wool pads. He heard quietly Patie making a remark and a man's voice laughing in the background. "Is that him?" Billy shouted. "What's this Aaron guy got that I don't? What the fuck is going on, Patie?"

"Billy? I'm in the middle of something; I'll call you back tomorrow."

"NO! Patie, don't hang up! I need you, baby, don't do that! Baby?! Shit!" *Damn, Aaron!* Billy's mind was racing: the letter wanted him that weekend at the pier, his wife was moved out and doing God-knows-what, and he needed a hit so bad he couldn't walk straight. Grabbing his coat, Billy spilled out into the stairway, jumped from landing to landing smacking into the walls and found himself on the street still trying to get his arm in the sleeve.

The trains were running on the half hour and it seemed like the *B* was taking more time than it ought to. He personalized the delays, thinking his own wife was against him, his habit was against him, and now the train.

On the train, he couldn't sit down. He paced the floor avoiding sneers of other late-night commuters and stopped at the door, gripping the stainless rails on both sides and watching his reflection appear and disappear in the window. Was it laughing at him? Billy was sure it was just his overactive imagination trying to take his mind off waiting for the train to stop at 34th.

Herald Square was its usual mixed-up hassle, and it seemed the tourists, too, were staring at him as he stumbled wildly about the sidewalks and hurrying through traffic. He stuffed the letter deep into his shirt pocket and pulled the sweat of his face through his hair to keep it from blowing into his vision. There, by the Macy's outlet a merchant with a yellow neon-colored blazer was vending watches and cigarettes. The man turned to put his merchandise away in a suitcase but stopped, catching Billy's eye.

"Dope man, good stuff." Billy said in a muddled handshake/embrace but the merchant just said "watches only, dude." Wiping his nose on his sleeve, Billy said, "Fuck you, *dude*, I know you got some. I'm here to buy!"

The vendor caught some downward glances of other passersby and gestured to Billy to leave him alone. He bent down and stuffed the collection of watches into the suitcase and pulled the two cartons of cigarettes from his blazer pockets and placed them in quickly as well. Billy, feeling stupid, pulled out three 5\$ bills and held them out to the man, who stopped his fussing and stared at the money.

"Here's five for the smack and ten for you. Help a guy out, huh, man?"

"Oh. You want smokes?" The man responded, smiling and winking to Billy awkwardly. He reached into the carton and pulled out a soft pack of Dorals. Billy was confused and agitated but said nothing. The vendor then reached into the yellow coat's breast pocket and took out a matchbook, saying "you're going to *want* matches with those Dorals." He slipped both the pack and matches into Billy's shirt pocket, crushing the paper below and scratching Billy's chest lightly, but Billy let the money slip from his hand and found himself alone, standing on the corner still staring at his shirt. He stepped down some basement stairs of the building midway down the block and backed against the wall, squatting. Gently, he removed the contents of his shirt pocket, set the paper and cigarettes aside and opened the matchbook. Inside he found a small bag containing one solitary brownish-colored pill and smiled. He'd never seen smack that color before.

A half hour later, Billy remembered he was in Herald Square and not in his apartment. He stepped out of the stoop and watched the crowds with his head cocked. They were walking slowly and their knees seemed to crack with each step. Confused, Billy pressed his eyes closed trying to re-collect his senses. In his mind, he saw trees with leaves like machetes, all glimmering, creating tiny stars that covered the inside of his eyelids. He opened his eyes as a truck lurched by blaring its horn at a clumsy pedestrian. The horn sounded like a bugle, and as the truck passed, Billy inhaled a thick cloud of its exhaust which left him doubled over. He vomited three times and wiped his face on the waist of the coat he was wearing. Standing up, his legs were weak and he heard both knees crack, which produced a sound like dead branches exploding in a fireplace. About twenty feet in front of him, he heard the cracking again and looked up.

Then, it was all around him. Crowds of tourists were marching like infantries in a deep formation, filling the streets from one side to the other. His legs straightened as he looked over their heads and saw the buildings all splashed in green with thousands of tiny stars spinning all

over their faces as well as the uniforms of the men marching all around him. He found himself pushing through the squadrons. With each soldier he pushed over, three more arose around him taking his place. Each one with a bugle blaring the same piercing note into his ears. He envisioned himself a pinball launched rapidly through the bowels of an encased world of noise and sparkling lights. In his hands he held a small scrap of paper that grew to the size of the letter he received earlier that day. He ran his thumb over the embossed emblem on top and read the words the letter bore in the center: PARNELL.

The horns blared again, this time sending Billy to the earth covering his neck and head with his arms. He screamed and screamed but heard no more noises but his own coat moving outside of his ears. He drew in a few quick breaths and pressed his eyes closed again hoping the leaves wouldn't scratch them. Tears fell from the corners of his eyes producing a tap on the pavement of a snare drum being rapped twice in succession, one right after another. Then he stood up at the wooden steps of a pale green tent that was spilling with light and more cracks came from his knees, this time sounding like bones snapping. He stepped delicately up the first step, the snare drum imitating his footsteps. At the flap of the tent he wanted to vomit again but held it inside him. His head felt cold, like mud and he reached into the tent and saw Patie sitting at a table, laughing.

Billy pulled the flap completely open and stepped in. It seemed like he was in a large clearing of a forest, where the walls of the tent were painted with leaves. He collapsed against a tree and saw Patie walking toward him angrily. Her face became coarse and hideous—covered in stubble and a mean determination that frightened Billy more than anything he'd ever seen. She was wearing a camouflage jumpsuit and an angled billed hat also painted green. She grabbed Billy by the neck and brought her rough face close to his, shouting something he couldn't understand. The leaves around her all turned sharp again, the lit edges glared in Billy's eyes and he began choking, clearly from the harsh grasp of the officer in front of him, spitting through his loud words, with breath that choked Billy even more. He tried to turn his head away and pulled at the wrists of the officer, pleading for breath. The grip was too strong and Billy found himself within the last few seconds of his life clawing at the air wildly. One of the leaves came free and its sharp edge cut into Billy's hand as he squeezed it. He slashed wildly about and saw the tent caving in, the leaves falling down and a million tiny stars burned out.

Billy learned the next day in the clinic of the Queens House of Detention for Men that he was brought there from his cell by five men the night before. He was found standing on his cot at the very edge of its tube-metal frame, hollering like a wounded animal. They had sedated him, signed him over to eight weeks of detox, and carried him to the clinic. He now stared into Denny's eyes and calmly said, "I killed my wife. I killed my Patie."

36

Trina reached *Chloe's* at two o'clock and saw Mayleigh pulling a paint-splotted drop cloth off of an old upright piano that was hidden behind several unused booth benches. She had a bucket of steamy water nearby the foot of the instrument and looked inspired at the something that would keep her busy that afternoon.

"Cool!" Trina said, walking over toward Mayleigh.

"Cookies?" Mayleigh asked, while taking some yellow kitchen gloves off her hands. "I remembered this was back here. Think it still plays?" Mayleigh hugged Trina and apologized about getting any dust-bunnies on Trina's overalls. With a mouth full of cookie, she walked back to the piano and hammered a distorted Chopsticks rendition on the upper register of the piano's ivory spread.

"No. Sounds like you've got a couple of dead dust-bunnies in there." Trina laughed. "Do you play?"

"Mom did." Mayleigh said. "Only a couple songs, but she did them pretty good." On the music rack were a few sheets of music by David Lanz, where letters were marked in blue ink above each note. Trina leafed through the pages and produced a Polaroid snapshot of Mayleigh, probably 10 years old, with a mouth full of missing baby teeth. "Me." She said. "I was a goofy-looking kid back then."

"Hey, May. I got an idea. Can I use your phone?" Mayleigh granted her request and pointed to the wall near the cafe's kitchen and grabbed the Polaroid from Trina as she walked away. She wiped it off on her thigh and stared at it closely.

She set the picture down by the plate of cookies and grabbed another sugary-kitten and bit the tail off. The phone rang a moment later and Trina answered it, speaking in a quiet voice as Mayleigh polished the keys, black ones first, then the white ones. As she washed them, they resounded a rhythmic, drawn-out rum-pa-pum, from high to low. Trina returned and sat down at the booth near the cookies.

"I paged a friend of mine who's good with pianos. He could probably get this thing back up to par." After speaking with him, she remembered how the two of them would go walking down to the Laundromat each Sunday and realized that it was probably three weeks since they'd done their laundry together. She told Mayleigh what little she knew about Mike, and tried to even use his "voice" when re-enacting some of the better conversations they've had. "He's cute. But what makes him so good-looking is probably his modesty. He's so grown up and seems to know exactly what's he's about."

"But you don't think so?" Mayleigh asked, facing out the window behind Trina, her elbow on the piano's C and D.

"How can he? He's 23. I mean, he lives on my roof and makes enough money tuning people's pianos to buy cereal and wash his clothes. There's something innately sad about that, isn't there?"

"On your roof?" Mayleigh asked, only then looking at Trina.

"Yea, but he's truly comfortable like that. I begged him to stay in my place a couple of times during the winter when it was cold enough inside the building much less on the outside. Even then, he only agreed to sleep in the unit across the hall. Beulah's got a recliner in there. I cleaned off for him, even wrestled a clean sheet around it, but he fell asleep on the floor before I got done and insisted he was fine down there every other time I got him to come inside."

"You sleep with him?"

Trina was more shocked than puzzled, but only shook her head, imagining him like the type that would probably be a very good lover. She remembered what he said about their relationship. How he could only see her as a sister and she dismissed the idea.

"I worry for him, May. Is that bad?"

"Yes."

"I know it is. But I think he needs me to."

"I think people don't need other people worrying about them. They don't anything from others."

"Companionship, they do."

"Companionship is over-rated."

"I think you're wrong. You can't generalize people or their feelings like that."

"And you can't sympathize with those who don't want sympathy. It doesn't work."

37

For almost three years, Billy served the primary trappings of his sentence in near silence, saying not much more than “thank you” and “good night” to the prison staff. Denny had closed the casebook on the murder and tried to convince the system to be somewhat merciful. He had explained the parallels to Billy between coercing a shorter sentence from a clearly racist official and performing dental surgery on a Louisiana crocodile. Neither of them found the analogy very funny. Denny reminded Billy that he would continue to visit annually for book-keeping purposes and this year asked, as a friend, if there was anything he could do to ease the ache of passing so much time. Billy requested a notebook and pencil. They denied him the pencil but agreed to a box of wax crayons instead.

“What are you writing, Bill?” Billy looked up from his page to meet the eyes of an older white man who was given the task of cleaning the block’s floors. He didn’t want to speak and simply shrugged to the man, apologetically. “I know you talk, I’ve heard you before,” he added, when he found himself unsatisfied with just a shrug. “Listen, man. This is Capital Block. You not in that cell for just petty theft or vandalism. You and me, we both gonna be in here for a long, long time. Let’s not be cold with each other. Let’s not be unkind, now.”

Billy looked around the break room at the others, playing cards and tossing dominoes. Everyone around him seemed like they were happy to be there, living it up. Billy longed for the days when he and Patie were playing Old Maid in the park, flying kites and tossing Frisbees. He tried to conjure up a memory to keep himself company. He had opted to share the days with what he remembered instead of what was occurring around him, but now, on this particular afternoon, nothing came to mind.

“It’s you,” he said at last.

“Me? Let me see it?” Resting the mop handle against the wall, he turned the book toward him and sure enough, found a short paragraph on that page titled *mopguy*.

“I didn’t know your name.” Billy admitted. “You’re the guy that’s always mopping.”

“...disciplined, high-spirited,” the man said, reading, “eager to help out, probably in extended denial, addict... What’s this?”

“You’re withdrawing, though you’ve been in here for a while. I suspected you were getting a monthly or bi-monthly fix every time you get company. True, that will ease the withdrawal, but it’s only making things more difficult to get clean.”

“My business is my business. You ain’t gonna tell on me, are you?”

“course not,” Billy said, peeling the last edge of paper from his brown crayon. “That would be against the doctor-patient agreement.”

“Spoken like a true counselor!” The man laughed loudly enough to startle a few others. “Randy, not *mopguy*, by the way. The dealer I used to know up in Buffalo has friends on the staff here. They’re real nice to me every three weeks or so. I figure, s’long as you’re getting some of it down, you oughta get it down right,” Randy whispered, spinning the notebook around on the table and sliding it back to Billy.

Billy quickly jotted down the new material—Buffalo, 3 weeks between administration, Randy. “You a good listener, Bill. When you out of here, you gonna make a hell of a counselor.” Randy laughed again, this time more discretely.

“I am a counselor,” Billy insisted. “I was also a smack-man, before this. There are tricks I can tell you. Tricks that will make withdrawal easier, help you get clean for good, Randy.” When he didn’t get an immediate response, Billy thought his credentials were being judged. He felt slightly insulted but pushed some more, believing it was his duty. “I’ve seen a lot of kids make it out, I can help you get through it too.”

“I got you, Counselor.” Randy shifted, obviously threatened, and began mopping past Billy. “You the first one I’ll come find, should I want to quit.” Billy acknowledged the resistance and began scribbling again in his notebook when he was interrupted. “Anyway it’s about time you talked.” Randy said.

“It’s your job to do the talking. All I gotta do is listen.” Billy said, satisfied.

38

The summer turned into a mild one and Trina was able to mark the months going by with the lines on the walls indicating Marco's growth. She took to the Greenwood Cemetery on days she wasn't at Chloe's and always brought her journal with her, though she never managed to open it once. In the Cemetery, she let herself daydream about her sister and her nephew. Lying on the grass, her backpack under her head and looking up through the trees, she imagined herself back in Michigan, far beyond the noise of the city; collecting rays from a Midwest sun, and so close to the lakes she could swear she smelled the lotions and hotdogs of the beach.

Trina wondered why she had adapted so easily and so genuinely to Brooklyn-life. She considered how different her life should be, out here, and how much it varied from her expectations of the big city. She closed her eyes and felt the shadows of the leaves moving over her eyelids, and mentally documented her new responsibilities (the complex's maintenance and rent, Marco's nutrition and well-being, her new friends...). She wanted to be sure that she hadn't let the city change her so much that she'd be as unrecognizable to her sister, as her nephew's school pictures were to her. Trina knew that if she could justify her behavior and decisions to herself, as behavior and decisions she still would have made in Michigan, then she's not really that far from the girl she was two years ago. And daily, even after completing her review of how she spent her time and the conversations she shared with those around her, she came to the same conclusions. That every encounter, every corner she turns, changes who she is. Trina couldn't help but change every minute of every day, because that's what growing up seemed to be all about. And so long as she's happy about who she was becoming, then letting the city affect her wasn't so bad after all.

Trina found herself thinking less and less about the what-ifs of moving to New York City, and more about the city itself. She found herself reading more books on the buses that described how New York was never an idle creature, but rather one in constant state of evolution. The slums of Old Brooklyn, past the park and into Crown Heights and Prospect Heights, were being renovated, and repainted. Local real estate agencies plastered their windows with notices of how the darker neighborhoods were brightening up, and now recognized as hot areas of shopping and culture. She'd return the books back to the library at Grand Army Plaza, only to find herself on the bus ride home with a backpack full of new narratives, all with the same fascination of her home "town."

In one, a man was convinced that he could imagine himself, so determinedly, in the same city he lived, only many years before, that one day he could wake up to the same city in progress a century earlier. He would be able to visit a Madison Square garden, when it still resided in Madison Square; ride an L train across the island, when it was still an elevated train; and read the names of the immigrants on the monuments of Ellis Island as they were still being written.

She visited the old Sears department store on Old Flatbush and tried to picture it as the only building above two stories in a sea of developing land. And back on the bus, she'd turn over a new cover and find herself along side an ambitious cable manufacturer still trying to sell the idea of a cabled suspension bridge connecting her home borough of Brooklyn to the chaos of Lower Manhattan's Chinatown. The caissons were dug, bricks were stacked, and cables spun with every page she turned, before Trina discovered she had taken the bus in the wrong direction and was now in Coney Island.

Making the best of a wrong turn, she picked up a ripe pumpkin from a vendor along the famous boardwalk, and watched as the men shot paintballs at "The Coney Island Freak."

"No, of course he's not a freak. He's just some guy dressed up in a padded suit," she heard some of the men say, in an accent Trina determined to be from Bensonhurst. And although it took most of the intrigue out of the attraction, Trina felt a little better about the spectacle even though she would never take a shot herself.

That night, she took out a package of acrylic paints she had bought and wrapped for her nephew's birthday, but never got around to shipping. She made a cup of peppermint tea, closed the windows tightly to keep out the cold, watched as Mike and Marco painted the sides of the pumpkin until there wasn't any of its natural skin showing, and settled in to embrace the last few weeks of fall and the first signs of winter.

39

It was mid-February. Earlier that month, Brooklyn felt its first large snowstorm of the year, which Trina kept assuring all the thin-blooded New Yorkers that it was “a gentle dusting” compared to what she and Adam were acclimated to. Chloe’s business had doubled, if not tripled that night, and Mayleigh was plenty busy behind the counters filling and refilling the warm coffee orders. It was for this reason that she decided to re-open Chloe’s doors to the world; *not* for the love. She’d exhausted that same scripted conversation she used on first-timers, the one about how they should all be home shoveling and not braving the arctic blasts just to visit her coffee shop. But since then, January had peaked with milder, almost-scheduled snowfalls, and the New Year was overseeing the end of its first successful month.

Dusty was now on permanent seasonal contract (as Mayleigh called it) on the counter, which was exactly what he was looking for. It was an arrangement that could supplement his internships and interviews and kept him in a position where he would no longer have to remind himself he did indeed have a social life, despite the constant poking and plunging of job hunting.

“Hey-hey, Della! Double-cap, my friend?” he shouted, not even looking at the door to see dear Della shaking off her snowy umbrella and letting her eyes adjust to the café lighting.

“How do ya do it, Dusty?” Mayleigh asked quizzically.

“What’s that?”

“The names, the drinks, how do you keep ‘m all straight?” Mayleigh was feeding a new roll of tape into the register’s throat, folding the lead edge into a point so it slid under the cylinder without getting hung up on the teeth.

“There’s a trick to it. Y’see, once you take your mind off the work and put it on the people, you begin seeing this shop as your own kitchen. And then, they’re your family coming down the stairs in the morning, looking for something to hold them over till they’re awake.”

“Well, I’ll be.” Mayleigh laughed. “I don’t think I’d want all these folks in my kitchen, but if it works for you, then so-be-it.”

“It’s not that hard, May. Give it a try. Who comes in here a few minutes before or after 10 every Saturday and Sunday?”

“Trina.” Mayleigh said proudly, pulling the tape through the slit in the lid and closing it with a swift smack on the surface.

“Well, yea. But Trina’s already here, she usually comes in around eight.”

“Trina’s here?” she asked as she subconsciously bit her lip gently, stood up on her toes and scanned the tables and booths.

“Rosie and Phil come in at 10, and what do they order?” Dusty continued, now squatting below the counter, feeling for a new box of wooden stirrers.

“I can’t believe I didn’t see her come in,” she observed.

"Mayleigh. They always get cinnamon hazelnut and extra biscotti." Dusty was opening the container of stirrers, which was designed like a paper carton of milk, only shorter. "Actually, that's not true. Sometimes when it's really warm outside, they'll get iced cinnamon hazelnut drinks, but that's not too hard to remember." He held the carton up to Mayleigh to retrieve it, and when he felt no reception looked up to find Mayleigh was still peering over the register on her toes staring at the darkly lit corner of the café.

From this angle, Dusty was able to see a whole new side of Mayleigh that intrigued him. She appeared innocent, youthful. She wasn't the busy manager doling out orders, but now seemed as a child, watching a freed balloon disappear into the infinite blue. The lashes on the bottom lid of Mayleigh's eyes stretched longer than he'd ever noticed, like forks lined up on the edge of clean Lennox dinnerware. Her eyes, still searching, seemed to glide, not rapidly at all. He could make out a few teeth cradling her bottom lip and he couldn't help but smile at how amazing she looked to him.

"Can I take you out some time, May?"

"I can't, I'm closing tonight," she responded, not making eye contact.

Puzzled, Dusty stood up, lifting her hand on his assent. "May, it's me. I hear you make that snub every day—twice already this afternoon. You should tell me why you don't want to if you really don't want to go on a date with me."

"Go on a ... Dusty, we can't go on dates, we're co-workers. That would be a conflict of interest or something." She admitted to herself that she didn't really hear what he said the first time around, but as she saw how deeply interested he was in her, it had become a very difficult conversation to maintain. "Oh, God, the brownies!" she shouted and leapt toward the kitchen to escape his snaring attempts at eye contact.

"Please, let me get them," he asked, following her.

"No, I can get them." She only had a few seconds to straighten out what had just happened. Why was Dusty pursuing her? She hadn't led him on. She hadn't showed the slightest interest in any romance between the two of them and couldn't think of one time she ever looked at him with anything more than a professional expression.

40

Earlier this evening, a light cloudburst broke and washed away the last of the snow on the ground. Counts said that New York normally gets about 3 or 4 good snows a year before it becomes spring. This year, we only got two, but since it's not yet March, we're probably in store for at least one more good one. He also said that it may be a good idea to write a little and I figure it'd be a shame to waste a perfectly good journal. So here goes.

I was cleaning out the hallway the other day and found a fleece in the closet. It was Adam's. I remember him wearing it when we'd close the coffee shop in Michigan, back when the snows were more frequent and much more wondrous. I can't tell you how many times it'd contain a splash of chocolate drizzle meant for someone's mocha java, or a caramel swirl meant for some kid's cocoa. The smell wasn't Adam's anymore, though. It was musty, and covered with the black dust that hits my apartment slowly and constantly. I almost didn't recognize it. I really miss his voice.

Marco got in a fight at school the other day. His fifth grade teacher and principal called here looking for his mother for a conference. He must've filled out some health or field trip form in class and attached my number. It was weird to think of me as a mother. But when I walked into the elementary school classroom, somewhat posing as the late Mrs. Gonzales, something felt right. His teacher didn't comment on my age, probably feeling that a lot of

teenagers in New York have their first babies before they're 16-years-old. God, when I was 16, I thought kissing a boy meant I was going to marry him years down the road. How could girls nowadays be ready for motherhood at such a fragile age? Maybe they're not. Marco's better now. Turns out someone just said a crack about his mom. He never talks about her. I don't know if that's healthy.

Dusty's become a real lifesaver. I'll come home and find the hallway smelling of fresh paint, the mailbox in the hall with a new lock, the light bulbs no longer flickering. He's good to talk to, but not like Adam.

I'm worried about May. Her brick wall to the world is starting to degrade, but not enough to save her for the emotional turmoil she's putting herself through. I've vowed to myself to continue helping her, since this is the only thing I can do for my friend. She doesn't seem to know what she's doing. Chloe's is open again, and has been for a month or so, but Mayleigh doesn't have the spirit for it yet. Thank God, again for Dusty, who's helping her out there, since she fired her last employee following that break-in. He's doing more than lifting Chloe's from its tattered state. He's pulling the wall down brick by brick. It's leaving Mayleigh vulnerable, but sometimes recovery is painful. Unfortunately, his first day at the Museum of Modern Art is March 3rd. I don't know what Mayleigh's going to do then.

The elms in the cemetery are going to be budding soon.

I remembered Counts's little ethnic friend's name today. It just popped into my head-Lod. Lod Serveka. Oh God, this is stupid.

-Trina

41

The smell of the extra-dark brownies rose from the narrow wooden doorway that separated Chloe's from its kitchen. Dusty broke threw the smoke surreptitiously, hinting the air with a tinge of the cologne he applied that morning to gain Mayleigh's notice.

"Y'aright?" he asked, startling Mayleigh at the oven. Her arm, cloaked in an oversized oven mitt, jounced up and bumped the inside of the stove. She gave a yelp.

"Jesus, Dusty, don't do that."

"Come on, May. Please answer my question."

Mayleigh regained her agility on the brownie tin and lifted it to the range, dropping it with a crash. Rapidly, she searched for a way to make the conversation as clouded as the air in the kitchen.

"Fuckin' things! Maybe I should just quit trying to play my mom. She was so much better at these things." Her abruptness caused Dusty to take guard, both oblivious to the glowing embers of fabric on the top of Mayleigh's mitt.

"May—"

"I can't even bake a damn batch of brownies anymore without getting the fuckin' FDNY in here. I'm no good at this shit."

"May, please."

"What, Dusty? You want me to say something to you? How about 'No'? How about '*I have no desire to date you, to be with you, and I'm not interested in sleeping with you*'? Is that what you want to hear?" The two of them stood shocked, Mayleigh at her audacity, and Dusty, wounded. His eyes welled up.

"Dusty, wait. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so brash. I just...I'm sorry."

"No, have no reason to be sorry. I'm the one that's sorry," he choked. Circles and circles of embarrassment and shame pushed the red into his face. He didn't notice, nor care. "But let me ask you something: What are you afraid of? Huh? Is it me? Because if that's what it is, May, I think you know me better. If you don't think, I mean, if you think I'm in this for the sex..." his face burned further. "I mean if you don't think I care about you..."

She watched her friend in torment and tried to think of something to comfort him. The lock has snapped shut, though, and nothing escaped through her lips.

"If you don't want me, May, just say it. Say it and I'll go," Dusty tried. His voice was so laden with the pain he felt, it came out nearly sing-song, like a child reciting the *Pledge of Allegiance*. The silence was ugly, to the point where they could hear the brownies sizzling in the background. Dusty, though defeated, took the glove off Mayleigh's hand and ran it under the kitchen's sink.

"May?" Mayleigh stood silent. Her eyes cast down at her blue shoes, placed side-by-side in the middle of one of the lighter blue tiles of the kitchen floor. Dusty moved a dirty fan to the door

and turned it on “high” to push the smoke toward the kitchen window and trap it from escaping the kitchen and out into the café. He wiped the grime from his hands on his apron as he untied it and set it on the counter by the sink.

“May?” again, he tried. But still, she was silent, not once looking up from the floor.

42

"So he just left?"

"Well, yeah, Trina. Come on, I didn't answer him."

"But Mayleigh, why didn't you say something. Even if you didn't want to date him, why didn't you tell him that you needed for him to be around? That you needed his friendship? Or at the very least that you need him to work?"

The fire escape was warmed with the late February sun, which, try as it might, couldn't compete entirely with the cool front that took the afternoon commute through Brooklyn. Trina was sitting against the window sill with her big toes pressed against the metal spokes, the other eight pointed outward. Mayleigh sat awkwardly on a rung of the ladder that led to the roof, fingers wrapped around the sides. Both of them stared at the Complex's back yard, through the fire escape, where some stray cats had gathered, looking back up.

"What did you do then?"

"Nothing. I pried the brownies out and into the garbage. Then, I guess, I went back to the counter."

"And he left?"

"Yeah, Trina, he left," she responded almost abruptly. Mayleigh decided she needed to reevaluate her tonality, convincing herself for the second time that an honest statement sounded rude. She also decided that she was starting to hate the sound of silence. "What?" Silence. "I couldn't say anything, I told you. Besides, he starts at the museum next week anyway."

"Are the brownies really more important than your relationship with Dusty?"

"It wasn't about the brownies, Trina. I just couldn't do anything. I froze, you know. No, they weren't more important." More silence. "And we don't have a *relationship*, Trina. We just work together. I pay him. In fact, I think there's some law against employers and—"

"Bullshit!"

"Huh?"

"Bullshit, Mayleigh. That's schools. There's no law about a relationship at work. If you didn't love him, you shoulda just said that. It would've made things easier. It would've stopped him from guessing."

"I told you I—"

"You froze, I know," Trina interrupted. "Dammit, why do we do that?"

"You too?"

"It was like that with Adam all the time. Every time I wanted to tell him something important, I just couldn't."

Trina realized again how long it had been since she thought of Adam. She wondered if it was going to keep coming up after a few months here and there to remind her, like a scab that

cracked open from time to time, but never really healed. The thought of him made her dizzy. The strays below were chasing each other with Spring fever, also convinced that winter was on its way out.

"It wasn't about the brownies."

"You said that already, May."

"No, I mean I wasn't talking about my mom when I said that she was always better at that shit. I meant she was always so good in dealing with...relationships. I guess you're right, that's what it was—a relationship. But we were friends, right? No illicit intentions, or-or building a romance. We worked together and enjoyed each other. That's it. Like you said, I need his friendship." Mayleigh rubbed the burn on her wrist. It was still red and shiny since she burned it on the oven a few nights ago, the night of the argument.

"You mean you don't think he's good looking?"

"No."

"You don't think he's romantic?"

"No—"

"—or sensitive?"

"I guess, but—"

"You don't wonder what he's like in bed?"

"Jesus, Trina, *NO*. I don't, ok?"

Trina realized that her spine was getting stiff from the window's brick lining. She ignored it and thought, briefly about Dusty and what he might be like, intimately. His face kept morphing into Adam's.

"I mean, *we* have a relationship, right? We enjoy each other's company," Mayleigh spoke, trying to mend the situation, but ultimately hinting at what she thought would be a good replacement for her mental images of Dusty in the bedroom. "...and a great friendship."

"Yeah, May, but it's different with a guy," Trina responded, with Adam in mind, smiling and half-buried in bed covers and dream dust.

Mayleigh felt a bit sore, but not enough to show it on her face. It was nearly like Trina had read her mind, and the secrets she tried to keep hidden inside it. She let out a quiet fake laugh to show agreement. They sat there for a moment in silence to reflect on their imaginations, each inwardly smiling.

"I wrote in my journal finally," Trina said, but not necessarily to Mayleigh.

"Good."

"You should try one sometime. It's very therapeutic." She hinted at her wish to be of some help to her friend.

Mayleigh nodded. The leaves rustled around their scenic platform, a loft in the crevice of their manmade mountain, sheltered by a sprinkle of nature and the protection of the mountains around it.

"May?"

"Huh?"

"Can you call me Tree?"

"What?"

"I know, it sounds weird, like shortening Katrina to Trina isn't enough, right?"

"Yeah."

"But will you call me Tree?"

"Sure," she replied and said it aloud in confirmation. "Tree."

Trina smiled and felt a bit warm. Perhaps a way to stop his voice and face from entering her mind was to give the ownership of his words to someone else. She pictured the bedroom scene again and noticed the face had changed. As if divine intervention descended from the sky, the face approached, causing Mayleigh to leave her perch on the ladder so Mike could come down to their landing. She playfully yelped about the indentation in her rear, and Trina followed suit with laughter. While her friend rubbed her bottom, Trina giggled secretly about the vision in her head, warm with embarrassment, until she was face to face with him in reality.

"Mayleigh, there's a dent in your ass," Mike said in salutation. She replied with a slap to the forearm. Trina did, with a hug.

43

Trina woke up extra early for her first day at Chloe's. It was 7:40 and the cartoons were blaring in the other room. Undoubtedly, Marco had gotten up too, she thought, as she heard the Cartoon Network's Cow and Chicken complaining about the milk reserves in their static, outlined world. She swung her feet to the hardwood floors and swayed towards the bathroom, stopping to admire Marco's strong concentration on the cartoon. Trina wondered if she'd ever be able to watch the Cartoon Network with such blind innocence and content. The idea dismissed itself when Marco chuckled at a little red devil-like guy who bounced down the street on his bottom. Hitting the shower, she reached for her pink, plastic loofah and squeezed a bit of shampoo onto it, ignoring the fact that she had forgotten to pick up soap again.

"Trina?" a voice squeaked from the cracked open door.

"Yeah Marco," she hollered back louder, over the rushing warm currents.

"What does this mean?"

Trina parted the curtains and focused on Marco, who was holding up the tag on his pillow. "What does what mean?"

Marco edged closer to her head, which emerged through the curtain and dripped puddles onto the floor mat. "Do not remove this tag under p-p—"

"Penalty," she helped.

"...penalty of law?"

"Sometimes, manufacturers will fill pillows and mattresses with things that people could be allergic to, like certain types of foam rubbers, or feathers, and things. That message is to retailers which could be fined if people don't know what they're purchasing."

"Oh, thanks," he replied as Trina popped her head in and ran it under the flow to warm up her neck again. She came out from the stream to hear Marco yelling in jubilation.

"Mike's here!" he hollered. Before Trina could interject that he should wait for her shower to be over before letting him in, the window was up and Mike was already stepping over the radiator and onto her t-shirt.

"G'morning, guys!" Mike's voice entered.

"What is this, a convention?" Trina asked over the curtain.

"I'm just passing through," Mike replied.

"No stay. Stay. Stay. Stay." Marco pleaded.

"Guys, please. Outside until I'm out, k?" Trina asked, to which she was returned no answer.

"What've you got there?" Mike asked as she turned to relaxing flow off, and heard the piston drop to let the remaining water escape through the faucet.

"Trina says that people put *a-lur-gic* stuff in pillows and this is to stop people from buying them." Trina grinned and whipped the towel over the curtain rod, to dry off inside.

"That's not true, Marco. She's trying to cover up for the secret conspiracies going on in the government."

"What are you talking about, now?" Trina questioned.

"Really?" Marco inquired, full of mystery and excitement. "Con-spear-en-cies?"

"Yeah, Marco. Trina didn't tell you about the Pillow Police. Or the Mattress Police, did she?"

"The pillow police?" Marco laughed, deciding it was a joke.

"Yeah, Marco, it's true. The government puts tags on all pillows and mattresses to track down people. They know when you're sleeping and when you're not. They know when you have pillow fights, when you have slumber parties. Even when you pee in your bed."

"I don't pee on the couch!" Marco protested, still in wonder.

"I hope not. The Mattress Police will come for you!"

"There's no mattress on the couch."

"But there is a tag on the couch cushions. Honest. Go look.

Marco bolted out of the bathroom just when Trina stepped out of the shower in a towel, dots of water resting on her shoulders, chin and nose. "Why do you do that?" she asked.

"That's what Mom used to tell me. She *was* a good mother for a while."

"You're filling his head with nonsense, Mike."

"Kids need nonsense, though. It's what makes them kids. You teach them the important stuff, and let them dream for the rest of it. This is just something to make Marco be a kid longer."

Trina thought about her wonders of innocence and cartoons, and felt bad.

"But he's going to find out it's not true."

"How'd you feel when you found out Santa Claus wasn't real?"

"Ok, I guess. Sad, though, that I didn't believe in him anymore."

"Important that you knew an adult secret?"

"Yeah, but sad, that I wasn't—"

"Innocent?" Mike shot back.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Same here. See? Nonsense is good for him."

Trina silently cursed the fact that he was right, but decided vengeance would be to kick him out of the bathroom. She smiled as she caught him sneaking one last glance at her towel-wrapped cleavage before he followed after Marco. Trina closed the door and removed her towel, baring herself in front of the mirror. She smiled again, and fumbled with drying the little dots of water off her shoulders and nose. On the edge of the towel, she felt a tag. Reading it closer, there was no remark about *penalty of law*. Nonetheless, the Towel Police are out there, she thought, and smiled again.

When finally she emerged from the bathroom, she saw that Mike and Marco hadn't gone far from the couch. Both of them were glued intently on the cartoons that had switched to a little kid with a foreign accent screaming about some robot something. Trina didn't know this one.

"Hey guys," she called, but the TV deafened the boys to the outside world. She swung open the door to the fridge and grabbed for the orange juice, which was nearly empty. Checking the clock, she finished the juice from the carton, a habit she picked up somewhere along the line. It was almost time to go.

A commercial hit the guys, so she decided to interject now, while she could.

"What happened to the milk reserves?"

Mike lay puzzled, but Marco shot back. "Super Cow came and saved them."

"Oh," she feigned interest. "I thought you," she motioned to Mike, "were just passing through."

"Yeah, but I had to see a bit of Dexter before I started out the day."

Now it was her turn to be puzzled.

"Marco, would you like to go with me to work today?"

"Sure."

"Work?" Mike asked. "Where?"

"I'm helping May out at Chloe's. Dusty started working at the museum, so she needs some extra help. C'mon, Marco, let's get ready to go."

"What's going on with Dusty?" Mike asked.

"Going on? What do you mean?"

"I mean, you guys are getting a bit closer nowadays, aren't you?"

"I guess," she shot back, knowing where he was going with this and felt that it was a woman's right to be secretive and evasive about these matters.

"That's good, Trina. It's good that you're seeing other people."

She was hoping that he would be jealous, however bitter that may be to feel, or ask for, but he seemed to be genuinely concerned with her happiness. This made her upset. Trina didn't like the fact that the one she wanted was hoping that she was happy seeing others, especially when she wasn't. "What do you mean '*other people*'?"

"You know, since Adam. Since what we discussed a while back."

"Yeah, I get it, Mike. Thanks."

Trina felt ashamed for her illusions and decided to leave this conversation where it was.

"Let's go Marco!" she hollered, and turned to Mike to finish. "Will you lock up when you go?"

"You're letting me lock up your apartment?"

"Uh yeah," she sang facetiously. This comment made Mike change position completely. He seemed startled by it, as if it was a tremendous responsibility for only the dearly trusted.

"Where's the key?"

"You don't need one to lock up. Just turn the latch on the inside and pull the door closed."

"What happens if I need to get back in?" he asked, to see that Trina was trying to discern why he would. "I mean, if I leave something in here? Or you get a delivery or something?"

Trina unwound the door key from the ring. "Get a copy made, just in case you can't get in through the window." She smiled, and ushered Marco out the front where he sat Indian-style working his shoes on.

"Alright, dear," Mike played the dutiful husband, "you have a good day at work."

Trina looked back at him and smiled. "Thanks, babe," she said, and offered him her cheek to kiss. He leaned forward and Trina relished it, but feigned neutrality. "Listen, Mike, I want you to seriously consider living in 3A. I can get Beulah to move her stuff somewhere else, or at least consolidate it. It sounds kind of stupid offering it *after* the winter, but hell, why not?"

"Yeah, maybe," he said, also in neutrality. But Trina thought he was also relishing the idea.

"K. Bye," she said and pivoted Marco by the top of his head. He stormed down the stairs, thunderously, and she followed in thought.

Hitting the landing, she ran into Dusty, who had come to see what the noise was about, toothbrush in mouth. He checked his watch, and then attempted to speak with the mint caking the sides of his lips.

"Huh?" she responded.

"What are you doing up so early?" he spoke again, moving the toothpaste to under his tongue.

"I'm taking over the shift at Chloe's."

"How's she doing, Trina?"

"May? She's alright. She's just, you know, *May*." Trina responded, unfulfilled with the way she answered. Marco continued bolting down the stairs.

"Yeah. Tell her I miss her, ok?"

"Sure. How's work going for you?"

"Great. They threw me right in between Early Cretacian and Pre-Mesopotamian"

"I don't know what that means, but good," she smiled and turned for the second level of stairs down. "I'll do that, Dusty," she continued down hearing him yell something about the plumber coming over for Tony's shower.

Hitting the first floor landing, she heard Tony's door open too. "Trina! Good. How you doing?"

"Great, Tony. I'm in a rush. What's up?"

"Where you going?"

"I'm working at Chloe's now."

"Till when?"

"Close."

"Can I stop by sometime? I gotta talk with you."

"Yeah, come by at 10. We close at 11, but it normally dies within the last hour."

"Great, thanks," he called to her back. "Oh, do you know when the plumber's coming?"

"Yeah, talk to Dusty about it!" she hollered back before the door closed behind her. She walked briskly down the steps and found Marco debating with Counts about something.

"The queen should have the poofy hat. The king's should be the pointy one."

"Perhaps you're right, Marco."

"Shoot. I wouldn't want to be a king with that little wussy hat. Maybe that's why he can't move as quick as the queen."

"You know I never thought about that," the black man laughed.

"Well, that's alright. I'm glad to help you, brother." Counts laughed again at his little Hispanic friend.

Trina and Marco left for the coffee house, chatting sporadically. Well, really Marco chatted constantly and Trina listened and responded sporadically. They arrived at 8:15, only fifteen minutes late. This was good for Trina.

Mayleigh looked up from where she was crouched on the floor, shoving a piece of paper under one of the feet of a table to stop it from wobbling. One of the Parsons students that were occupying the table was staring intently at her cleavage.

"Hi Trina, hi Marco," she called and stood up with a cracking knee.

"Sorry we're late, May. Dusty says hi,"

"No biggie, Trina."

"Hi Mayleigh!" Marco screamed and ran for the toy shelf under the bay window by the couch. There he carefully sifted through the board games for the object to occupy his mind.

"Do you mind if I fix him chocolate milk?"

"Nah, g'head," Mayleigh responded. "So, what did Dusty have to say?"

"He said 'hi,' May, and that he misses you. I think he wants you to call him."

"How's his job going?"

“Good, they shoved him between crustaceans and minestrone.”

Mayleigh looked up, a bit lost, and decided not to probe. Instead, she turned her attention to Marco, who was throwing the cushions off the couch and flipping the pillows over. “What are you doing?”

“I’m looking for *conspirencies*,” Marco called over his shoulder.

Again, May thought to probe, but a fixated laugh from Trina changed her mind again. She admired Trina’s warm, youthful grin, whipped an apron at her which struck her chest, and motioned for her to follow. “We gotta lot of work today, Trina. Unfortunately everything has to be scrubbed.” She thought of Trina on her hands and knees working the dried froth off the counter face. “That is, of course, everything but the tip jar; which is spotless.”

44

On the Thursday before Easter in 1982, Billy made a startling discovery that sneaked up on the man over the last twelve and a half years: that he was, inexplicably, illogically, and beyond a glimpse of a doubt, happy. He realized that he was no longer interested in what was going on outside the country, let alone outside of the prison, and rather felt a belonging for the facility and a kinship for the others held there. He was satisfied with enjoying the level of freedom he was given, living quite comfortably despite what his cold surroundings may have suggested.

Above all of this, Billy felt truly blessed, having made friends truer and deeper than any friend he'd had outside. The men, who others saw as criminals – not to be trusted and ugly to the core, Billy found remarkable. He regarded them all as his buddies—people he could meet anywhere and without the bias one would generally apply to an incarcerated convict.

“Penny for your thoughts, Bill?” Randy came by on his regular routine, mop in hand and bucket just a kick away. On his left arm, five inches above and below his elbow, he wore a bandage. He was no longer bruised, and his skin color and muscle tone beneath the wrap had returned to their natural characteristics, but since Billy's suggestion, Randy has sported the bandage anyhow.

It was six months earlier when Billy learned about the accident. He had become known as the block's unofficial social-worker, helping fellow inmates battle the phobias and compulsions that were either in their histories, or an invention of father captivity. In his notebook, Billy kept detailed accounts of each regular, so as not to let a detail slip away. The pages were now filled with ink instead of wax, one of the small victories Billy gained during the past few years of his social work. Towards the back, Billy itemized his personal triumphs and on another page had written a list of discoveries. He took this work very seriously personally, but interpersonally was very informal and warm.

On Randy's page, formerly titled *mopguy*, were more than a couple lines about his substance abuse. The fresh ink on the bottom of the page was what arrived at his ears after a few connections on a short word-of-mouth itinerary. Randy had begun cutting his free-basing in half. Billy realized that his friend's dependence was just as bad as his own had been, when he was first admitted, and that the anxiety of withdrawal, built up by all of Billy's stories, would inhibit Randy substantially from coming clean.

Randy was coping at the new level with mild cravings. His contact continued to bring the smack. Things were looking obliquely upward for Randy and his counselor, who was constantly adding passages to the notebook about cutting the dose in half again. Billy, however, wasn't given much opportunity to feel satisfied.

Since Randy was now shooting up half of each delivery, he began flushing the rest down the toilet—a sort of *empowering* ritual, as Billy called it. On a couple occasions, when Randy felt weak,

he'd reuse the needle and shoot the remaining half the following week. Or sometimes, the following day.

Without a needle one day, Randy nabbed one from the clinic. He washed it off several times in his mop bucket, and dried it thoroughly with the bottom of his prison shirt. He admitted himself back to the clinic when he woke, with a swollen, infected arm. Over the course of the day and the following two weeks, Randy received regular shots to prevent the spread of infection directly into the sensitive tissue of his arm. The pain caused him to cry out loudly each time. The blood test confirmed that the infection was gone, and Randy was sent back to his cell with a bandage and some bad news. That he had contracted the HIV virus through the unclean syringe.

"Surviving," Billy responded, "how are things with you, buddy?" They exchanged a few formalities, neither very enthused. Randy's depression was certainly justified but had a wide impact on the rest of the crew. Their friendships began to crumble, words were harsh and fights broke out more commonly. Things had changed, principally because the safety and trust was just not there anymore. They couldn't continue thinking that things can be safe and easy because Randy, the most harmless of them all, wound up bandaged, bearing a deadly virus.

It was Billy's mission, he thought, to mend this situation and restore the serenity before things got too far out of hand and too uncomfortable to maintain Billy's happiness.

45

Mayleigh and Trina halted their steady scrubbing at 11:50, when the lunchtime rush began to hit. There was a clear delineation between finished and untouched, and the ceiling fans wafted lemon scent in mini-eddies across the café. The two girls, feeling the beginning of aches, fetched their emptied cappuccino glasses and sponges and resumed position behind the counter.

"I'll take the orders and money, Tree. You hit the sink and frozen drinks," Mayleigh sang. The memory of Adam chiming the same melody caused Trina to reassess her position slightly, in taking the commitment of this job, however little it was. She never thought about the prospect of it being painful. And even though she ached, it was only her heart that felt sore. When she turned to the counter in slow-motion, to breathe in Chloe's, she half-expected Adam's face by the register, swabbing a bit of chocolate from between his fingers. *You're home. Deal with it*, she felt. *It's been two years*. She thought about her journal and how it was due a beating this evening, hundreds of lashes from an angry and self-pitied pen.

The crowd was as predictable as the NYC forecasts and as the people filed in the world's filter changed to cyanotype. The blue light abruptly shook her stability and she felt the cool spring breeze was unnatural, as if Michigan's enduring winter was summoning her back. Mayleigh cranked the CD-changer, which had shifted to a remix of a Faithless song called Don't Leave, unbeknownst to ASCAP and Trina herself.

"Three blended Nancy Sinatras, Tree. One with a double shot of Crème de Menthe," Mayleigh paraded. The money marched in tune as slipped coins cymbal-crashed the glass on the counter. *Where did all the love go*, Faithless cried. *Where's the love gone to? Don't leave*. Trina hummed along; hitting frappe to churn away the thoughts from her mind, the ache from her arms and heart, the song from the air, and the ice from the blender.

The ministry began and soon all Chloe's acolytes were preaching good times. The CD had flipped to something more upbeat and the habit mechanism brought inspiration and spring to Trina's step. Adam was gone and the day belonged to Chloe.

"Double-capp with caramel and give me some more pickle slices from the fridge in back, Tree."

All of a sudden, the nickname was hers again. She tossed the towel from her shoulder to the back of Mayleigh's head, giggled, and pirouetted towards the kitchen. She snagged a peep at Marco, who was pestering some more Parsons students about their kings' poofy hats. The smile would stay on her face for a few hours at least, if not indefinitely.

"They told me you were here!" Counts trumpeted and took his place as the baritone in the music of Chloe's afternoon. He lit up like a firefly when he saw his entrance graciously received, so much that Trina thought he was phosphorescent. She almost missed the crack in his Goodwill eyeglasses.

"Who unleashed the secret?" she beamed and leaned over the counter to give Counts her cheek. Upon his acceptance, Trina saw a small patch of dried blood on the meaty cheek above his beard. "Thank you, m'lord." She grinned. "What happened to your face, Counts?"

"Nothing for you to worry about, m'lady. Just a scratch. I trust the water is on the house?"

"If this weather keeps up, it may soon be," she responded coyly and retrieved a pitcher from the mini-cooler behind her. Mayleigh was about to object to the barrage of homeless that followed in Counts' wake, but thought that this might be the heralded Counts.

"Mayleigh," she said, and outstretched her hand. "You're?"

"Delighted to meet you," Counts responded.

"Mayleigh, this is Counts," Trina interjected. "He saved my life a little while back around the same time when my walk-man disappeared." Counts let out another hearty laugh and took her hand with a firm, but loving, grasp. Mayleigh noticed the hand's leathery texture and felt uneasy.

"Counts?" Mayleigh asked, obviously unsure of the etymology of his name. "Is that your last name or first?"

"Something I picked up along the way." He replied simultaneously to a tug that yanked the side of his jacket. "Ah, hello, Marco."

"Hi Counts."

"I want you to know something, brother," he teased, recalling the nickname the boy had given him earlier. "At my table, the kings are now queens, and the queens are kings."

"Really?"

"Sure, my boy. You brought up a very good point. I'd be foolish to not act on it," he jostled Marco's hair. "Want to help me set up the troops?"

"All right," he said, grabbing Counts' shoebox and running towards the couch. The cushions were still lying cockeyed on the frame—square pegs that couldn't quite fit their square holes.

"Marco, set him up in the middle, please," Mayleigh hollered over and Stan, Lod, and Randy halted in their tracks. Stan began to protest, obviously enjoying the idea of a window seat, but Counts raised a hand.

"Away from the counter," he said, "Away from the window."

"Just business, Counts."

"Say no more, Mayleigh. It's perfect," he said with a smile that almost ate his beard.

As Marco pointed out the chairs in which he thought Counts and his friends should sit, Trina finally brought up the topic that she'd been waiting to ask all day. The work of the day had slowed their ferociousness at attacking the scrubbing duties, and now they wiped and scoured at a leisurely pace.

"So, do you think you're going to talk to Dusty any time soon?"

"Trina, please."

"Please what, May? I *know* this isn't one of your favorite discussions, but you can't push people away from you when they care about you."

"Trina, I know this."

"Well?"

"Well, yeah. I'll call him sometime this week. I don't feel like dealing with it now."

"Dealing with his friendship? Or dealing with the fact that he wants to date you?"

"Dealing with him," Mayleigh snapped, and so the conversation snapped with it.

They continued scrubbing, each slowly edging away from each other until they were at opposite ends of the room. Trina rose to rinse out her bucket and fill it with Murphy's oil soap instead of lemon bleach. She was determined to make the chair-rail shine if it took all afternoon.

Besides, she thought, it gave her time to collect her thoughts on the matter. She realized that aside from her sister and nephew, Marco, Mayleigh, Dusty, and Mike were her family. Any conflict within was a family dispute that she couldn't handle. And though the arguments were common in Trina's childhood, it seemed that she couldn't resist without harmony in her new home.

Trina thought again about her sister, Rhonda, and how it'd been three weeks since they shared a Sunday phone call. Rhonda would normally talk about her turbulent college life while Alex, now almost three years old, chewed away at the phone line and left gooey bits of animal crackers in the carpet along side the kitchen. People always discerned that the major difference between her and Rhonda was Trina's necessity to seek attention and Rhonda's uncanny ability to have attention flock to her. It was beyond mere coincidence, though, in the fact that Trina actually sought more than just the attention. Slowly she started to realize that things had changed, though. The introduction of Marco into her life allowed her to flip the dependence problems that she had, completely switching roles. Suddenly, she was the one that was needed, even if it was from a Hispanic fifth-grader. A smile edged across Trina's face as she watched her knuckles and fingers glide easily in the slats of the chair-rail's molding. Perhaps she finally kicked her problem with dependence. Until today, the moments when Adam came to mind were few and fleeting and she dealt with them better and better each day. Today's memory of him at the counter would've reduced her to tears earlier in the winter. This morning, when realization hit, she quickly switched gears and brought her reality back from the flickering frame.

Randy leaned his chair back towards the rail and broke Trina's concentration.

"If I were made of stained cedar, Trina, I'd hope you'd polish me with such dire focus," he chimed.

"I wouldn't, Rand," Trina began. "I prefer natural grain, myself. It makes the character richer."

"Are you saying my character is flawed, Love?"

"Never," Trina attempted to imitate the bloke. "I'm just saying you're better unfinished." She grinned. Randy looked puzzled, momentarily, as if he was hiding something, but shared a grin himself. Trina remarked that his teeth were amazingly white for a bum.

"He's not cedar anyway," Stan muttered. "More like a tumbled driftwood, really."

Trina couldn't resist, "That's the kind I find has the most character. Sturdy, traveled, and pleasing to the touch. It has the air of wonder as if to say *'I've seen things you'll never see in your wildest dreams.'* It has a story."

"Well assessed," Counts built. "Now how about Stan himself?"

"Perhaps an elm?" Trina beckoned, pushing Randy's chair forward to continue along the rail.

"How do you figure?" Counts inquired. "Because he has a shady character?"

"Nope," Trina said, red-faced, as she knelt back down to scrub, blood rushing from her awkward positioning behind Randy. "He's the backyard tree that's never missing or questioned. Part of the family. His roots are also troublesome when mowing, as well as stubborn when relocating." She mused at her humor. "Though I bet he's had some women's names carved in him from time to time."

"She knows me too well," Stan joined. Trina laughed again, while her fingers pressed on slowly against the wall. Behind her was a shiny spine, where the wall glowed from the oil soap. She realized that Stan had said more to her today than the entire time she'd known him (or rather seen him).

"Now Counts. It's your turn. What do you figure you are?"

"You're doing so well, Trina. Continue."

"I'm torn, though. I would say a Paloverde. Majestic and far-stretching. Reaching out to all for support and guidance."

"You would," Counts threw in, "but..."

"But I can't get past the black oak," She grinned, and turned her head back to him to see if he took the joke. Of course, he did.

"Hard, labored, knotted, with decades on you!" he bellowed out.

"Filled to the brim," she added, "with tire swings, tree forts, fruit and memories."

"Acorns!" Lod screamed, and the group burst out laughing. Trina was proud to recognize something he said, even if it was mostly by context. The card game was issued a continuance, even through their musings.

"Go on, Trina," Randy pleaded.

"I suspect he's felt his share of pesticides and tarred limbs, the pains of nails were enough to bear knowing that the children would soon be loving his support. The ground beneath had soured a little while back, but he's spread his roots further to compensate." Again, a member of the table acted slightly perturbed by the reading, but this time it wasn't Randy.

"How do you mean?" Counts spoke abruptly.

"You're a mystery, Counts. But that just adds to your appeal." Trina smoothed it over nicely, not realizing the giant question mark in her head until it popped out in rhetoric. "I see your phloem swollen with history, your veins pumping narratives."

"You know me so well, Trina. More than even you think," Counts responded, half in question, half in jest.

"Well," Trina questioned, her back to them now, about a table and a chair away.

"Well, what, Love?" Randy cocked his head, sliding a bishop to the side.

"Well, let's hear a story, Counts."

"Well, why not?" he shook, somewhat laughing, else-wise getting into performance mode. "My Pop's Pop had a duffel of acres in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed," he began. "There was a gorgeous orchard there that encompassed nearly three-quarters the perimeter of the town in which he lived. He, the Pop's Pop, with his wife and three blood-hounds, each appropriately named for the distinguishing characteristics in their fur." Performance mode was in full throttle as he pushed back his frame, sliding the chair two tiles back to bring up a knee and cross a leg. "Armbrust, a Swiss bloodhound, had the shape of a crossbow across his tummy, loaded with an arrow, which only showed when you scratched him just right. Armbrust, you see, is Swiss-German for Crossbow. Talisman, the runt of the three, had a brown ring around his neck which led to a diamond shaped marking on his sternum, one that hung like a charm. Bumheart wasn't named because he was slow, mind you. He was the fastest and most accurate duck hunter of the hounds. Bumheart was named, though, because when he bobbed through the bogs along side Pop's Pop's property, all you'd see was a patch of fur in the shape of a heart bouncing it's way through the thick of grass and spit-weeds. A heart, perfectly centered, above his bum."

This arose a laugh from the group. Marco popped his head up over the couch edge and a handful of Jeepers Creepers scattered around his sneakers. Randy slid his queen over to perform a *check* in the commotion.

"I'm not telling you the names of the hounds because it's crucial to the story, though, even though I could go on for days describing their antics. I'm mentioning it, though, to prove the heritage of my Pop's Pop's land. As well as his own richness in character. He's a beech, by the way. Ashy, papery skin, and pole thin."

The image hit each of their minds as Counts continued, slyly moving his King out of check and proceeding with the plastic assault.

“On the edge of the many edges of the orchards, where Pop’s Pop was known for the ripest apples that barely fit in their perfectly red skins, there was a little dairy operation. The apples were known to burst from time to time, sending mini-red firework pops throughout the orchards when they couldn’t contain their own flavor. This was certainly a sight to be seen. Pop’s Pop, Bumheart, Armbrust, and Talisman were off on a duck hunt, which would later turn to a wild goose chase, when I went to the grazing land of the cow-dotted Appalachian country-side. The cows produced naturally, gallons each day, but Pop’s Pop had started to lose interest in the squirting and bucket-filling.”

Marco slowly wandered over while Trina rounded the corner, still listening. She was now poking a finger of cloth into the carved underside of the corner by the front bay window. It consistently came back brown.

“The cows, you see, had gotten conditioned to the milking and now would do it on their own. The milk they produced was unhampered by human hands and glorious buckets would be filled for the residents of Pop’s Pop’s Appalachian town to take freely. The cows had somehow unanimously agreed in giving the milk for free, pleased with their part of the production. Now this milk,” Counts gestured. “It was delicious. It was sweet and cloud-white. Folks came from the area and beyond to take their buckets and thank the cows. It was area-renowned.” Counts slurped a little bit, cleared his throat and continued. Randy picked up one of Counts’ pawns and replaced the square with his own.

“I had journeyed barefoot, this day, while Pop’s Pop, Talisman, Bumheart, and Armbrust were hunting for duck, towards these grazing grounds in search of the cows that produced this sweet and delicious milk, the cows that Pop’s Pop neglected and the town heralded. Entering the barn, I saw a few cows here and a couple scattered there. One, I noticed was near a stool and empty bucket. There were stacks of these buckets that were filled to the brim with not one drop of the precious sweet and delicious milk spilled onto the hay-combed floor of the barn. Each, I thought, belonged to a member of the town, so I stayed away. But that empty bucket perked my interest, and I longed to taste the sweet and delicious milk that the cows happily produced and the townspeople happily drank. Pop’s Pop, Talisman, Bumheart, and Armbrust were hunting, I thought, and the ducks in the air were plentiful, this time of the day, early afternoon, and my yearn for the sweet and delicious milk was brimming as full as the townspeople’s buckets in the corner of the perfectly hay-combed barn floor.

“I journeyed barefoot through the duffel of acres, round two of the three-quarters of the town; smack dab in the grazing grounds of the Appalachian’s cow-dotted country side. I was thirsty and prying and I wanted to taste the happily produced milk.”

Mike’s head popped in from the right near where Trina was shining and he tapped her on the shoulder. She placed a somewhat brown and oily finger to her lips and pointed in the direction of Counts’ story-telling.

“So what did I do?” Counts continued. “I slid the stool closer to the hind legs of the cow, pushed with my bare right foot the bucket to the swollen udder of the cow and leaned closer to get accurate positioning to release the sweet and delicious milk.”

Mike jingled a key in front of Trina and she looked puzzled for a moment. The pride on his face told her that Mike had made a duplicate to her apartment. He handed the original back and tried to speak again.

“I got it made this aft—”

"Shhh, Mike. Just a second," Trina whispered. She took the original, pocketed it, and began working on the chair rail on the other side of the bay window.

"What would they care?" Counts continued again, moving a rook to a counter-offensive. "They'd produce bucket-after-bucketful of milk daily for the townspeople. One last bucket for their rightful owner's grandsonny couldn't hurt a pinch, right?"

Well, slowly I took hold of that udder and slid my fingers down, ever so softly. The cow mooed loudly and kicked over the empty bucket. In a panic I fell back, crashing into the aisle of buckets of milk for the townspeople, toppling about twenty gallons and soaking my overalls, milk squishing through the toes on my bare feet. The cows, they left, you see. They scattered the countryside and in the cow-dotted hills in the Appalachians, it was an easy feat to accomplish. It took me until just after twilight to scout all the cows out, across the lands and bring them back to the edge of the many edges of the bursting red apple orchard. I quickly poured the milk back into the spilled buckets, lowering the levels evenly of all the others so they matched, and scurried on home barefoot, milk still sticking between my toes, tired as all hell from gathering the cows.

"Pop's Pop, Talisman, Armbrust, and Bumheart arrived shortly, without a duck at all. I had slipped quietly into the cot my Pop's Pop had placed on the porch, to pretend I was sleeping while the hounds all curled up around me. The heart, the charm, and with a little scratch, the crossbow were asleep by my cot. Pop's Pop pulled a hat over his eyes and slept soundly with a creak on the porch swing across from me. I heard the cows that night, mooing across the bursting red apple orchard, louder than the pops and flares of the bursting apples themselves.

"You see, I pushed. I wanted to taste the sweet and delicious milk for myself, to pry on the inside without letting it naturally come out. I sought something that wasn't to be produced yet, and attempted to force it out unnaturally. I didn't want to wait for my time, when a bucket would be filled for me. My impatience severed their bonds and the milk was never produced and the buckets filled by the cows alone again. The townspeople, upon seeing their buckets empty two days later, had done as I had done this day, and attempted to discover what I had discovered earlier, that something given freely should never be taken freely. The cows, now, put up no fight. They didn't stampede out like they did for me, across the Appalachian country side in the cow-dotted grazing lands around the bursting red apple orchard. They just stood there and chewed as the townspeople squirted the milk out of their udders.

"I don't know if the milk was sweet and delicious because the labor was free and we saw it with an unbiased eye. I don't know if the product was wholesome because we never questioned their insides but allowed them to exist and do their things alone, to share without prying, to delve without pushing. I do know, though, that the milk was never as sweet, and never as delicious again," Counts finished his story with watery eyes and motioned for Mayleigh, who was leaning over the counter with her head in her hands, for some water.

"You're just telling your story," Randy spoke up.

"Huh?" Counts asked, with a raspy voice.

"A friend of mine used to say that when he finished telling stories. *'I'm just telling you my story,'* he'd say. *'You take from it what you will.'*"

"Who's your friend, Randy?" Trina asked.

"Someone from my past. A convicted murderer, but a hell of a nice guy," Randy replied. "He's gone now."

"You were friends with a convicted murderer?" Mike questioned.

"At a time, Mike," Randy spoke as Mayleigh brought the water to Counts. "He was my best friend."

"Yeah, but a convicted murderer?"

"My best friend!" Randy called, a bit louder than he meant. "But now he's gone, and I don't question that."

"Don't push, Mike," Trina whispered to Mike noticing the trembling in the old Brit's voice. "Please don't pry."

The silence and sullenness was broken when Marco hollered out.

"You got his queen, brother!"

The three of them, Marco, Counts, and Randy looked down to see that Counts had indeed captured Randy's queen. Randy studied the board and responded with a wavering voice.

"Blast."

46

Randy found it very difficult to make friends once the bandage became part of his life. He had maintained Billy's support afterward, but between the two of them, it was different. He respected Billy as any patient might respect his doctor. There were hundreds of reasons why he preferred Billy's company over some of the others in the facility, but there was one thing he wasn't getting. He needed friends that considered themselves your peers, your equals, with no intellectual, chronological or physical senior in the pair. He wanted the face-value-friend. He wanted it the way it was before.

Billy, always smarter than he let on, recognized the trend of the community. He knew about Randy being shunned and outcast from their community, and about the newer, coarser relations that had developed between the others in the block. He was unhappy about it, but was worried that they'd all become accustomed to it—and he knew that at that point, it would be difficult, maybe impossible to reinstate the comfortable lifestyle, that used to be their block.

It was the fear that had changed them. Billy had been instrumental over the last twelve years in building the fabric of trust, companionship, and safety among the group. They had become oblivious to the harmful nature of their environment because of Billy's role offering guidance, settling disputes fairly and raising the general morale of his brothers. Now, Randy, one of their own, was infected with a virus that has been spreading madly throughout the world—one without remedy. Their bubble of safety was penetrated, and they felt betrayed, or lost, and chose apathy and malice to accommodate the change.

Billy knew he had to act, now. He didn't want to lose these men to anarchy. He had to find a way lure them away from their intolerances and temperaments when he remembered how he kept the attention of the misdirected kids years ago. With a story.

"It's not too high!" Billy shouted above the crowded cafeteria that morning. "Really, it's not! It's not too high anymore!" he earned the attention of nearly all diners as he stepped up on top of a table near the center of the room. He turned to those behind him and shouted it again. "Please!" And again, slowly, as if helpless, "Let me do this. It's not too high!"

There was about sixty seconds of silence as Billy concentrated on the floor and gathered his mind into storybook form.

"I used to live on a big green field the size of twenty football stadiums, as it seemed to me at the time. My great-great-grandfather planted flower seeds the size of tractor tires in the earth of my giant field in the mountains. It was my job, then, by progression of father-to-son and so forth progression," Billy was getting tongue-tied a bit, but appreciated this form of story telling as being repetitive, familiar, and therefore less threatening.

"...my job to tend to them, to keep the vines cut so they don't strangle these large, beautiful flowers. To bring water and food to nourish these large, beautiful flowers. And lastly, most

importantly, to climb up the stalks and polish the large petals of these large... beautiful... flowers." Billy could tell that people were confused, so he began explaining this story to them in more detail.

"You see, the large, beautiful flowers in my field in the mountains were unlike your typical garden variety. These weren't no fuzzy peach blossoms; these weren't no collard green blossoms neither. For when you shined up these petals, you could see the reflection of the sunshine, the skies and all the butterflies in them. This, my friends was a very important job. To polish the petals of these large, beautiful flowers in my giant green field high up in the mountains." He added with absolute nose-in-the-air-disgust, "I hated this job." He looked around and found some of the folks around him were laughing.

Billy spun around quickly to face those in the tables behind him. "Climbin' all the way up with a bucket and some sponges, man, it was a pain in the neck, back, AND ass!" He was happy to hear more laughter. "So I polished. And I climbed. And I polished some more. And I climbed. I polished, I climbed. Polished-climbed. And you know what I did next?" He waited for an answer. Some anxious younger men in the table near his feet shouted, "Polished!--"

-- I had a snack. And I climbed." Again he got a small chorus of laughter for tricking the table. "Well, after all day long in the hot sun, I finally got these large, beautiful flowers all shiny and sparkly. All of them, that is, except for one.

"Now this flower was... big. Put about twenty midgets on top of each other and that's roughly half the size of this one. Tellin' you all, this was one BIG muh-huckin' flower, see!" Billy felt his story needed some emphasis, and since he still had the collective interest of about 40 people, he was savoring it for as long as he could.

"I looked at this extremely large and extremely beautiful flower and thought to myself *why?* You know, why go that extra mile? Why make *more* work for myself. This thing's so tall, ain't nobody gonna know truth from spit if I've polished it or not.

"So what did I do? I packed up. I put my bucket under the sink. I put my sponges along the bathtub next to the soaps, and the shampoos, and the other little stuff I got back there. And I called it a night!" People were playing along, not really knowing the point of the story, but just knowing that it was different for them, and because of this difference, it was enjoyable. Entertainment from within, with no implied cost but their attention. And Billy, too, was enjoying it. He looked across the room, laughing, describing the bars of soap and whatnot until he caught the eyes of Randy, near the door.

"You see, there's this community of big, colorful butterflies. And they, well, they like to flutter down onto the flowers. The reflection of the sky, the grass, even the butterflies gets trapped in the petals and these colors are absorbed into them and down through the flowers keeping them large and keeping them beautiful.

"So as the story goes. They all continue to thrive, large and beautiful, except the big one, which progressively got paler and weaker. The butterflies, having seen this, became frightened. They were scared, the butterflies, that they might get hurt by it, or infected by this flower. They didn't want to have anything to do with any of the flowers on the field, no more. So off flew the butterflies, off flew the colors, off flew those good feelings and friendships and all that peace." Billy had tears in his eyes. He knew that he had to keep their attention, and keep the story convincingly powerful in order to affect their behavior. He paused to gather some strength.

"With the butterflies gone, the flowers turned cold; ugly on the inside and then ugly all over. They attracted the attention of the vines which, seeing their condition, grew quickly and greedily up around them like vices, and harmful intentions, and more ugliness. The vines tightly bound

themselves against each other madly. It was then, that I knew—I KNEW!—that it was too late. They would all have to be pulled. They would all have to be replanted. They would have to wait and wait to re-gain the butterflies' trust. And I felt awful." No one was eating anymore. No one stirred. They just searched Billy with their eyes, trying to guess an ending that would be happy.

Billy climbed down off of the table. He walked through the small collection of listeners, silent, patting them all gently on the shoulders and backs. "I ran..." he began again slowly, "back to find the highest, tallest flower. To put things right. But now they all bent at the waist. They were all rotting and dismembered and stinking. I couldn't tell which one I originally neglected anymore and I cried as I shouted *it's not too high. I can climb up there, please. It's not too high.*"

Returning to the center table. Billy sat on the edge. He shook his head as a parent would to a thieving child. "I'm not going to tell you how we ignored the one of us who needed the most empathy, the highest of us all. I'm not going to tell you that the thing about us that made us beautiful and remarkable has left us. And I'm not going to tell you what type of behavior has taken its place. That's all somebody else's business. I'm just telling you my story. You take from it what you will."

Needless to say, Billy felt good that night. His message had made its way through the imagery and was understood by the men. The tolerance and good temperament shortly returned to their block and peace thrived again throughout the lockup. Randy's depression waned slightly, but was still visible enough to catch the attention of Counselor Billy Walker.

Fridays became regular story days in the cafeteria, and others participated with stories of brawls and 32-hour car trips, and things like that. It was clear that of all the storytellers, Billy was the most talented, and therefore got the highest response from his listeners and calls for encores.

Not too long later, Randy stood on the table as the chatter of the diners settled down. He still wore the bandage around his left elbow, and looked over to Billy who was tasting some very hot soup. Billy suggested the notion of Randy telling his story one week, and after less than a moment of consideration, Randy insisted. Billy admitted he was a bit shocked by the excitement from the man who did little more than mope and mop since his incident. *It's my turn to go*, Randy said with clear diction, and that was that.

"I worked for twenty-one years at the same organization, it doesn't matter where, but I never complained once." It had been so long since Randy had spoken more than a couple words, this was probably his first complete sentence in years. Billy mused how it was a shame the sentence was a run-on. He was proud of Randy either way.

"Well, that's not quite true. I had a lot to say that day they abandoned cold milk for our coffee and subscribed to the artificial cream packets." *He opened with a joke, I told him to do that*, Billy thought. Billy was also surprised because he never realized Randy had an uppity European accent. Is it possible that this went completely unnoticed because of how sparing Randy was with his dialogue? Billy felt this, along with Randy's joke, was humorous, and laughed on both accounts.

"Every bloody day did I wake up at five o'clock and ever bloody night did I climb into bed at eight. So? What would most people do after all those days? Would you, uh, ask for more money? I didn't. Would you, uh, take advantage of your vacation? I didn't. Would you, uh, at least bitch every once in a while? I didn't do that either?"

"But what would cause a man to get in their Buick, drive back out there after work one day, splash some petrol about, and set the blasted place ablaze." The room fell abruptly silent. Randy continued.

“So that’s how you end up here in Queens with your thumb up your arse for 12-15 years. But I want you all to know something, about how I single-handedly cheated the system. Something I cherish personally that may or may not brighten your lives. You see, they put me in here because they said I harbored spite against a company for failing to advance me. A spite which led to the barbecue. The truth is that there was no spite. I liked my job. And here, they think I’ve served out the term to absolve the spite, or to sacrifice the contempt. None of which I’ve ever done because none of which I’ve ever felt initially!”

This commentary confused a few but raised one major question among those who understood. “Then why’d you burn the place down?” one man asked.

“Hmm?” Randy had expected the interrogation. He played along.

“You drove back down there after work with gas cans, you said.”

“I never said I did that.”

“Yes, yes, you said you did!”

“Mmmmm-no, I didn’t.”

The room roared. Those who didn’t understand what was going on were given a quick summary, and those who did understand, Randy had believing they didn’t. Everything was being turned inside out but obviously with a logical response which Randy still hadn’t surrendered.

“I asked why a man would do that. I, of course, didn’t. I said they put me in prison for spite. Which I had none. I said I cheated the system, which still remains to be heard. I will answer one more question, and then my story will be over. It is up to you to rectify this whole mess by asking the one question that will.” And with that, he was silent.

Nobody asked him the question because no one quite understood the story, and therefore didn’t want to deny others, who may know how to word the appropriate question, the opportunity to ask. For ten minutes it was quiet, save for some specific mumbles that rolled below the audible range. The men ate their meals thinking about what he said, and what they now know about Randy, this arsonist from Buffalo.

Finally, as if to end the scrutiny, Billy raised his hand. “The building burned down, but you didn’t do what they put you in jail for having done. You spend a decade in here but are still convinced that it is them who’ve been cheated by you---.”

“Your question, Bill?” Randy interrupted.

“What were you smoking on the roof?” Billy asked. And across the room of what seemed a hundred smiles, over the heads of his laughing family, Billy saw his friend Randy, slowly nod.

On Saturday, the following morning, a man in a uniform asked the group who’d like to carry on Randy’s duties with the mop. Billy knew instantly that Randy had been paroled. It sort of cleared up why Randy volunteered to speak to the group. *It’s my turn to go*, he remembered Randy saying. Warmly, Billy smiled and let out one of his rich, infamous laughs. The mop was passed to him, and he gratefully accepted it.

47

Counts, and the rest of the chess players, had decided to head home. The time clock made its familiar punching sound to stamp 10:00 into each of their minds. Now, the coffee house was littered with residents of the Complex, for the first time. Marco had begun noisily sawing logs on the couch near the bay window, a bolster and some plastic bugs clutched to his chest. Dusty stopped in and was quietly talking to Mayleigh in the table on the other side of the bay window's raised tier. A plume of smoke rose from Mayleigh's cigarette and reflected off the glass in the window. Tony and Bryan had hit the center of the room, parked at a table, and now exchanged whispers and glances. The CD tracks had shifted to a mellow rock song and Trina imagined a night from her past.

The coffee house was filled to the brim with the Campus Disciples, Adam's alma mater's Christian Activist organization. She hated Thursday night. Trina never signed on to a religion, and never found a need for one as long as she believed in herself, the ethic of goodwill, and the course of nature. She believed that there was a good force, but not driven by a man in the clouds. She didn't, however, shun any religion or mode to motivate people to do good. Around her, though, were those who responded with a triumphant "I DO!" when someone yelled sporadically, and frequently, "Who loves Jesus?" Trina loved Jesus, or at least what they say he stood for, but didn't feel the need to proclaim it every hour on the hour to the coffee house's regular patrons. She also didn't feel the need to sing Cumbayah in the meantime.

Adam also noticed they were lousy tippers. *Thankfully*, he repeated, *if they're right, they're forcing me to inherit the earth. They're making me meek*, he'd say. Trina said they just made her uneasy.

So this night-out-of-any-other-night, Trina noticed Tracy, the fellow worker at the coffee house this evening, hadn't showed for the first hour of her shift. The natives, a line of 20-or-so, were getting restless and the strumming of the Christian music was getting more abrasive.

When finally she showed, she had taken her own remedy to contain her frustrations of the Campus Disciples. It came in the form of three Jack-n-Cokes at the Hideaway down the street. Tracy smiled and fixed her drinks with a rigidity and bliss that can only be attributed to her elixir. Trina didn't have the strongest feelings toward Tracy, and felt the need to hide it less when Tracy smelled of alcohol—especially this night, among those professing the ideals of a book shunning excessive drinking, or something. She sat, facing Adam, and ignored everyone but him. As the tip bowl was polished more and more by rosary beads that clanked against it, and the dissonance of the music on the static-y radio behind them, she watched him fill the cups with grace and almost genuine, superficial smiles.

"Who loves Jesus?" someone shouted.

Tracy screamed back, "Who loves Cat?" as she ran for the radio and cranked it up; up high above the strumming and mumbling and rosary bead clanks. Mr. Stevens's "Wild, Wild World" had just begun. She ran to the front of the counter again and grabbed Adam by the hand.

There, she forced the line of customers who had started growing more anxious and impatient, to disperse. She pushed tables and chairs back, toppling some over. She waltzed in a circle around the space while the purity-of-soul abstainers shied away in temptation.

There she forced the line of what is done (and what is not done) in a coffee house to its limit, the blessedness of this Thursday night to be tempted by fruits of wonder. There she pushed the minds of those who set their path, or let God set it, back a notch to allow for instinct to supercede absolution.

There, in the middle of the coffee house, this Campus-Disciple-Thursday night, she danced with Adam, to a harmonious voice of the Free-love era. She draped her arms around Adam, laid her cheek to his neck, closed her eyes, and sang.

Needless to say, the Christians were shocked. And when the two of them had parted around the first refrain, and when Tracy grabbed for young impressionable men to come dance with her, they surprisingly heeded. Adam ran across the place and pulled Trina up. He led her to the center of the space where now 8 to 10 couples had wavered on shaking legs and woven fingers. He held her close. He pressed his face to hers and kissed her hard, chocolate drizzle staining her shirt from the fleece he was wearing. Trina's face, now tinted a customary red, responded in kind. And Trina felt herself kissing him back with the same exploratory fervor of the surrounding group. Amateur hedonists, turning like a caffeinated kaleidoscope, watched for a moment and some began to follow suit with their partners. Tracy planted a kiss on a startled guitarist's mouth, mid-Cumbayah.

"You gotta promise me something, Tree. You gotta swear to me."

"Sure," she tried to muster.

"Don't you change. Don't let the city change you. Please."

"Change?"

"Promise you're always be the person I'm in love with."

"Who's that, Adam?" she grinned.

"You," he beamed, and kissed her again.

The world spun, but in the center Adam had proven to her his love. And justification was set for Trina that New York was no longer a dream. Cat said it best, but no one could hear him or his music over the Disciples and staff of the coffee house that evening belting out his own words. People peered in the windows from the bar lines next door, just to hear the two in the middle whispering softly to each other: *It's hard to get by, just upon a smile.*

"That's it!" she shouted. Chloe's shook with her voice, which disturbed the whispering around the coffee house and the silent motionless embraces. "We're playing a game."

Upon her words, Mike had re-entered the coffee house wearing the same grin he wore when he showed Trina his duplicate key.

"In the center, everyone. May, I'm making two pots, put 'em on my tab and lock the front doors." Trina didn't remember that this could be considered a bit daring her first day of work but she conceded that it was time to live up to her promise to herself. It was time to fulfill her mission.

"What's the game, Tree?" Mayleigh spoke while locking the front door. Dusty stood up, waiting for May to get finished before they walked to the center of Chloe's together.

"It's called Magic. Everyone, Tony, Bryan, come on. Mike. Get over here." The air pots steamed as she plopped them on the table with a stack of Styrofoam cups from under the counter.

"Is this a role-playing game?" Mike objected.

"No, this is real magic. Sit down, all of you." Dutifully, and diligently, they all took their seats around the center two tables. Chairs were scooted over, and one tipped and fell. Marco rolled over and clutched his bolster tight, oblivious to the game that was about to begin. "Take a cup, all of you. It's 10:13 now, were going to be here for the long haul."

"What's this all about, Tree?" May questioned again.

"You'll see. Come on. Take a cup." She waited for the slow, but obedient. "Here's how it works. You guys are my closest friends, save for a sister, a few street people, and a designer in Manhattan. You are my confidantes, my loved ones. Each of you has magic to give and take."

"Black magic?" Brian joked.

"Do the voodoo that you do so well!" Tony added.

Trina ignored them. "Life, especially here in the city, is brash. It's unyielding and relentless. Life is coated with infestations and misery. Life can plain suck. But every so often, the coat is thinned and a ray of beauty shines through. This is when we witness something pure. Something beautiful. Something that is meant for us to see at that very moment to remind us how much we love it.

"The funny thing is that it's not groundbreaking. It's trivial. But we catch it and hold it for what it's worth. You're going to show me tonight that you've seen the magic. Those doors don't unlock until each of you has shown one small spark of it. Got it?"

"I don't get it," Mike said.

"Go on," May whispered.

"Mine is the boy that handed me a rose on the subway and told me to smile. What's yours?"

For about twenty seconds, the group was silent, save for a few slurps of coffee and glances that seemed audible. Trina spoke again.

"Mine is the journal I keep neglecting; the journal I purchased through someone else, someone who knew I needed one. What's yours?"

Quietly, the glances became curled lips where eyes slipped quietly to crescents while minds thought of their own, and pictured Trina's magic.

"Mine is the blanket from my apartment that kept me warm on the fire escape in winter. It's the blanket that appeared there when I awoke."

Mike stifled a buoyant grin and thought of the key in his pocket. His hand dropped to trace its outline through his jeans. Mayleigh suddenly spoke. It was quiet and crackled, like a victrola, but comprehensible.

"Mine is out-of-towners that don't mind waiting in line." Trina smiled at Mayleigh's remark and tilted her head, a notion to continue. "Mine is the service of a boy who helped me through a whole day's work without asking for payment." Now it was Dusty's turn to smile.

"Mine," Tony broke their exchanged glance, "is the second a photograph begins to appear in the developer bath, the second I can see their eyes looking back. I mean, it's trite, I know. But it's magic."

"It's not trite, Tony," Brian comforted. Then, putting on a more masculine side he changed his tone, "It's probably the chemicals." He followed with a forced laugh. Trina scowled at him

and he apologized and bowed his head. Trina noticed how Brian always tried to fit the Alpha male image when in public, though it obviously wasn't him. She suspected delusion is a powerful remedy for reality and confirmed it with thoughts of her own doses.

"It's just that in that light, surrounded by red, I always feel like a creator. A moment, a second, a fleeting glimpse of what I see everyday is forever frozen so that I can see it whenever I'm sad. Or if I'm depressed. It tells me that there are better days, and that those days will come around soon enough." A tear slipped down his cheek, and Trina placed a hand on his. He moved it, after a beat, a shared look, only to wipe his eyes. When he replaced it on the table, Brian's was there to hold it. He let down his guise. He let the table in and they accepted it. Even the reluctant Mike.

"When I used to help Mom out here," Mayleigh said, staring at the table grain. "She used to place a tip bowl right beside the metal one that's up there now. It was smaller, about the size of a teacup. People never put a coin in it, except for the occasional old lady who thought a penny was generous gratuity. Other than that, it remained empty. Somehow, though, by the end of the night, my little tip bowl would always be filled. I'd catch Mom tossing change in there near *close*. I thought she just did it to make me want to keep working day after day. You gotta remember I was only thirteen or fourteen back then. Anyway, that's what I thought.

"After she died, I realized I was wrong. She didn't do it to lure me back. She did it because she appreciated me. She did it because being there together was, for her, the happiest times of her life. It wasn't until after the funeral that I became conscious of the fact that they were the happiest times of my life too. And I took them for granted." Mayleigh's eyes were swollen with grief. "Fuck," she whispered as she wiped her face on her sleeve. She left her eyes covered there for a minute taking deep audible breaths and decided to finish.

"Mom was magic. I mean, everything about her was beautiful. And, she wasn't, uh, beautiful in the fuckin', uh..."

"It's ok, May," Trina whispered and tapped her shoulder.

"ummmh," Mayleigh continued in exasperation. "She wasn't Julia-Roberts-beautiful, but she was just remarkable. And everything she did, or-or said...was...—"

"Magic."

They all looked up to see Mike reiterate his point with his own eyes welling.

"She was magic," Mike stated with definition. Mayleigh nodded. "And to just say something she did or an exchange you had was magic is an understatement because everything else was magic too."

"Yeah," Mayleigh coughed. There were moments more where people wiped their eyes and poured more coffee, but Trina understood that this was only the beginning of the game, which had now turned into a truth serum.

"I used to have this Bigwheel," Trina said. People looked up to her to question how the Bigwheel was magic, especially following Mayleigh's confession. "You remember them, don't you? They had two little wheels in the back and one big one in front. They were entirely plastic and two weeks after you get them, there'd be big holes in the plastic tires from skids and peel outs. Anyway, I rode this thing in circles in my basement for hours and hours, all the time riding around the same pole over and over again. I guess I got pretty good at it because there was a point when I could do ten or so laps with my eyes closed before I got scared and opened them up again."

People looked at her for the heart-wrenching, touching epiphany to the story, but Trina just smiled.

"Magic doesn't have to make you cry. Sometimes it can be meaningless to anyone but yourself. Sometimes it's just a feeling. Sometimes you don't notice it until it's gone, but it's a great way to pull you out of the shit-times," Trina assured. "Just like Tony said, it's there to tell you that there are better days."

"Magic is a B-flat," Mike said, his second real contribution to the game. It was followed by puzzled looks as the tears on faces began to dry and pull cheeks taut. "This one guy's got a piano at a nursing home that's been playing Amazing Grace out of tune for as long as he's been there. And this guy's up there, so who knows how long that's been." A few cheeks ripped their dry-saline rigidity with grins. "So he brings me in to fix this piano and the damn thing snaps three B strings before I can get one tightened enough to be a perfect B. With the age of the piano, it had warped to a degree that it just didn't want to hold the note. Anyway, I finally got it and it matches the fork to perfection. It took me two hours."

"Eventually, the residents wandered in; some on two legs, some on three, some on four wheels. They all arced around it and this lady sits down to play Amazing Grace. Let me tell you she played it flawlessly. It was to be the first time that the group had heard Amazing Grace in forty or fifty years or so with a perfect B."

"What happened?" Brian questioned.

"She didn't finish. When the residents started getting uneasy, she gets up and walks out. She turned to me and asked me why I broke the piano."

What, some faces around the table seemed to say.

"Yeah, she wants to know why I broke it. After all this time, they had grown accustomed to the B-flat and when I finally put it back in tune, they didn't like it. They thought the piano was fine enough the way it was. So the guy that ran the place pays me my stipend and asks me to put it back. I'll tell you, it took me another forty-five minutes to get it to its original state, but when she sat back down to play, you should've seen their faces." Mike smiled and began to slowly spin his cup around on the table, staring intently in memory. Trina reached over and took it, with a careful pause to caress his fingers before she placed it under the air pot to refill. The steam and scent filled their noses and the room.

The group remained there, sharing, crying, and laughing for the rest of the pot, until their knees creaked and their bottoms ached from the café's chairs. Finally, when satiated with magic, Trina got up and walked toward the front of Chloe's. There she stared past the reflection with the exhausted smile to Manhattan. In its cyanotype haze, she thought of Adam, and how different Chloe's was from their coffee house. She thought of Mike, and how different he was from Adam. She thought of herself, and how different she was from the time she moved in: subleser, foster mother, independent. And now, finally, she was the employee of the coffee house to deliver the warmth to others that Adam had done for her for so long. *You're getting there, Trina.*

Only then, did she reach out and unlock the front door, noticing for the first time that it was her turn to be covered in chocolate drizzle.

48

Trina woke up to the sounds of Randy hollering out front. That isn't yours! Give the gentleman his bench or I'll give you havoc! I'll give you havoc, you shameful, foolish cur!

"What the hell?" she said, wiping the hair from her face and the sleep from her eyes. As she opened the window, she looked down to see Counts wrestling one of the cable spools away from a city employee who had evidently mistaken his bench as garbage. Without giving thought to grace or courtesy she yelled down to the street, "It's 6 A.M.! Cut that shit out!"

All feuding stopped for a moment as she saw Randy, Stan, a man with a stitched nametag and Counts all looking up at her, shocked or bothered or somewhere in between. She grabbed the closest thing to her, a tissue box from atop the radiator, and hurled it toward the sidewalk to emphasize her frustration. Trina realized the peculiarity of her behavior as she released the object, but at that point it caroming off of the front of the building and landing awkwardly on the canopy above the complex's front door. The small crowd followed the object with their eyes, with an exception of Counts, who took advantage of the worker's notice and yanked the spool free of his grasp.

As the garbage handler climbed back into his truck and drove off, Randy brushed off his green suit jacket and Counts let out a laugh. Subtle but hearty, Counts' laugh was quiet enough for inward amusement, but loud and rich enough to reach Trina three stories above.

Twenty minutes later, Trina stepped out on the street to find the boys within the first few moves a fresh game of chess. She carried a mop in her hand and wore a loosely wrapped cardigan. With one hand, Trina tugged the woolen wrap closed to keep out a persistent chill as she tried to jounce the tissue box off of the awning with the mop in the other hand.

"Why don't you give her a hand with that thing, Rand?" Counts beamed. He was ignored but the mop strands tapped the box which slid down the painted aluminum. It tumbled at the edge of the step and rolled into the card table's leg, knocking over Counts' queen.

"Ha-ha!" blurted Randy. When Counts stood up his queen, Randy added, "Nay, sir. You requested street-rules. She stays down."

"Randy, you wouldn't know a street rule if it sneaked up behind you and rapped you over your fool head with several dead fish."

"Ass." Randy, whined. "Nonetheless, put her down."

Lod walked up the block toward the game with a lollypop trapped in his toothless mouth, below a thick, wiry moustache. On his belt, he wore a key ring. The two men, seeing his approach cheered his name, causing him to smile. The grin was so broad; it reminded Trina of the face of a child in a television ad that guilts sponsorship from blue collars to support famine-stricken African countries. She was able to see the head of the candy pressed between his gums, but wasn't sure she was any better off now, having seen it.

"What's with the jingle-jingle in your step?" Counts asked, poking the key ring. Lod mumbled something around his lollypop that the men interpreted as him getting a weekday job in security at one of Brooklyn's libraries. Trina felt another attack from the winter's chill and went back inside to dress warmer for the walk to *Chloe's*, and continue her weekend behind the counter.

Marco had thrown a sweatshirt over his Spiderman pajamas and felt no shame in wearing the ensemble in public. The sweatshirt, itself, had seen better days, and Trina vowed this week to stop by the Salvation Army, yet again, to purchase clothing for the ever-growing boy. His altercations at school had subsided and he was even considered to be in the top of his class in academics, though he barely reached their shoulders in altitude. Trina had picked up, through the busloads of fantasies in his daily anecdotes, that he was revered among the others in the class as a do-gooder, and a well-accepted friend. He participated readily in playground marriages with the girls and eraser-clapping with the insubordinate, though he was rarely the one designated as the clapper himself.

The teacher of his class, an elegant Hispanic that dressed, in Marco's words, Nunlike, had hung a bulletin board by the paint sink. On the board it specified the blessings and burdens of the class, based on how the students had performed that week. Blessings would be watering the plants, carrying the bus-sign down to the gym, and walking kindergarteners to the bathrooms. The Burdens, on the other hand, were the eraser-clappers, the sink-cleaners, and the board-washers. Marco's name, since the fight, had yet to be seen on the latter.

A mother, or foster mother in the least, would be pleased, if not proud, of a son that continuously worked with blind obedience. The smile on his face, and eager eyes would allow her to brag at potlucks and Seder meals. A volunteer to do the dishes, stained with Cap'n Crunch, is an oddity among children his age, and Trina relished his willful work ethic. But deep down, she was worried. Emotionally-impaired children seem to block their anger and frustration, lacing it with a smile. They know their shortcomings on the basketball courts, and lack of achievement in the eyes of the popular, but continue, unwavering, toward perfection. Why does a child readily eat school lunches that others spit out in disgust, and take the tray back for seconds prior to washing it furtively and stacking it in the drying rack? Why doesn't he give up a simple game of horse that others excel so gracefully at while mocking the unskilled? What provokes him to want to be everybody's friend, not content that certain people just don't belong on the same team?

Trina didn't know any of statistics on children, but felt that there was a problem.

"Marco, are you playing with friends today while I'm at work?" He tugged at the bottom of his sweatshirt to try to get more comfortable in it.

"I want to come to work with you today."

"Are you sure? Don't you have anyone that you want to play with? Prospect Park is full of Little League kids."

"Nah, I like helping you out."

With that, Trina was defeated. She let her thoughts on the problem subside while she grabbed a sweatshirt herself. Together, they left the Complex to journey to *Chloe's*. Downstairs, Counts was missing among his friends. The table had a bare chair while the others continued to discuss Lod's new job, the remaining stick of a lollypop bouncing on his jaw.

"Where'd Counts go?" Trina questioned.

"He said he'd be back," returned Randy. "I wish he'd hurry, too. I do detest putting the game on hold."

They pressed on down Seventh with Chloe's a few blocks ahead and heard a commotion in the alley to their left. A group of three tatterdemalions rustled feverously through something on the ground, before Trina heard a yelp.

"Hey!" she hollered, as Marco took a step behind her. The men looked up, as if caught in a police searchlight and scattered out of the alley with a bumble of blankets and an overturned trashcan. The ruckus seemed to scare them more as they fled in terror from the scene. There, lying in a heap, was Counts.

"Oh, my God!" Trina yelled as she raced across the street, almost getting barreled by a car. She sprinted up to Counts who made no audible sounds but kept trying to get up, unsuccessfully. He'd reach out and steady a leg, seconds before his limbs would give away.

"Counts! What happened? Are you okay? N-no don't move!" She screamed, noticing a spring of blood the lined his moustache and lip, while staining his beard.

"Trina," he whispered, popping a blood bubble on his lip. "You have to stay out of the streets; I can't always pull you out of the way of cabs."

Trina cried a laugh, but pressed her hand on his chest to keep him from trying to get up. She yelled back, over her shoulder, for Marco to call the police. Marco stared zombie-like at the man on the ground, unaware of the request.

"Marco! Please! Get the cops!" she yelled again.

"Nonsense, Trina, I'm all right," Counts protested as Trina hushed him and held him securely down further. Marco continued to stand idle, a hollowed stare in his eyes, mouth agape.

"Marco!" Nothing. "Marco please look at me! I need you to do something for me."

The boy twitched his head away from the man but immediately it began a path back. His lip began to tremble, and slowly his legs propelled him to back away. Counts began to breathe heavily and Trina only sustained pressure on his chest and shoulder, holding him from trying to get up.

Marco was whimpering now, eyes welled and red. He was kneading his hands together and backed completely out of the alley, nearly tripping over a garbage can and its contents on the ground. Trina looked back at Counts whose eyes had begun to roll back in his head, while his body twitched sporadically.

"Promise me you won't try to get up, Counts. I'm going to get the police. Please stay here!" she pleaded, articulately and slowly. The bleeding man showed no sign of recognition, but Trina noticed the reverse pressure on her palm had lightened. She got up and ran out of the alley waving her hands over her head at passing cars. She saw, out of the corner of her eye, Marco curled up in a ball, his back against the brick, hugging his knees and crying. Finally a car stopped with a screech and Trina ran up to the open window.

"There's a man bleeding in here," she said, pointing to the alley. "I need you to call the police and tell them we need an ambulance."

The woman behind the wheel nodded, pulled her car over to the side of the road, next to where Marco sat by the wall, and dialed EMS on her cell phone. She was amazingly calm for the situation.

Trina ran over to Marco and touched his shoulder, he recoiled. The scene had obviously dug up a buried memory, its cold hand gripping the boy's mind.

"Marco, it's all right. He's gonna be ok. Don't worry," Trina assured him. The young child continued to stare out to nothingness with his jaw open and silent tears dropping from his reddened cheeks. He gripped his knees tightly to his chest and rocked gently. "Marco, I need you

to be strong now, please. I have to go back to Counts. I have to check on him. Wait here. Promise?"

The boy showed no understanding, but Trina caressed his shoulder and ran back towards the alley. At its mouth, she heard the boy mutter a word, crackled and sour. Marco said "Mama." It triggered a bullet of pain somewhere near Trina's heart, but she robotically called back for him to stay there.

Inside the alley, the sounds reverberated in Trina's head: Counts' breathing, the woman on the phone and her car's engine, Marco's pleading call. Trina knelt next to the man and tried to wipe the blood from his face. She caressed the side of his head with her other hand, and was all the while donating reassurances that everything would soon be better. The man looked at her with terror in his eyes, focusing on her face for the only comfort he could feel. He lifted up a shaky hand to her and Trina took it, holding it while the blood passed onto his fingers and squished between them.

"I'm sorry," he wrestled to say. "I'm so sorry."

"Counts, please. Don't try to speak." Trina tried to persuade him when she felt the man pull his hand away from her. It wavered into his coat flap, to the inside and pulled a notebook that was taped where it was hidden from sight. The tape let loose and the book was offered to Trina, now stained with blood-prints that smeared across the crayon writing on the cover. Trina reached out and took the book from the man.

Seemingly worlds away, she heard Marco crying. The lady with the cell phone apparently was trying to calm the boy down, which would prove to be unsuccessful. He wouldn't let a soul near without raising panic, wouldn't begin to quiet or be still, unless Trina was there to comfort him.

"I'm so sorry for what I did," Counts tried again to say.

"Shhh," Trina could only reply, looking to his eyes, then back down to the notebook. She made out C-O-U-N on the cover, but the rest was covered in blood. Above it, Trina saw the words "Journal of Patients" written in crayon.

"Please forgive me!" Counts begged.

"Counts, shhh," she whispered, the only thing she could say. "The paramedics are on the way. Just take it easy, Counts. Don't speak, 'k?" Her voice betrayed her and started cracking too, mimicking Marco's emotions.

"I need you to forgive me, please. Say you do, please? I..."

"Ok," Trina volunteered; to get the man to be at peace. "I forgive you Counts."

He suddenly stopped his nearly-violent pleading and started to close his eyes. Trina looked down at him holding his head as it slowly slipped to the side. There, he muttered one last phrase before his breathing sustained the even, legato strokes of someone deeply sleeping.

"I love you, Patie."

Trina arose when she saw the man in slumber, passed out from the pain but seemingly stable. The distant drone of an ambulance became increasingly loud as she clutched the bloody journal and walked stiff-legged toward the mouth of the alley.

A barely audible woman's voice hollered to take care of the boy, who had tried to beat on her when she neared. Trina walked to Marco who sprung up to her side, burying his crying face between her arm and stomach—escaping his pain. Her face bore a similar zombie-like expression as Marco's, as she turned past the woman, to the ambulance that was pulling behind her car. As

EMS workers in uniform jumped out, the woman pointed them to the sleeping man in the alley. Trina looked down; a wisp of white noise was all that entered her ear drums, as she turned the journal over in her hand. The boy's flurry to her side had wiped the blood from its cover. There, she was able to read the words in crayon, printed neatly on the front: Journal of Patients. Counselor Billy Walker.

Counselor? She whispered to herself as realization hit. *Counts.*

49

The sun glazed slowly over the hospital's foiled windows while Trina stroked Marco's hair in the chair across from Counts' bed. Not too long ago, during a restoration period, the hospital had all of the windows replaced with the latest gilded glass, a statement of technology that lasted about as long as the trend did. The foil remained unharmed, but the glass acquired a polish of soot from the neighboring industry that shut out roughly half of the building's natural illumination. The windows, Trina thought, looked sad. Beyond them, the city looked the same.

"I'm assuming he's a friend?" a nurse whispered from behind her. Trina was too tired and worn to jump from the break in silence.

"Yes," she responded, still looking to the slope, watching the newly-budded trees waver in Greenwood on the horizon.

"We tested his prints to find his medical record," she proceeded. "The police were already here inquiring about what happened. Standard procedure."

Trina wished she were beneath the trees, watching Marco play and grow like a privileged kid in a nuclear family. She wished she could feel the breeze that made the great oaks dance.

"The closest match was of a man that died in 1985 in the Queens Detention for Men."

Trina's eyes left the sepia-toned slope to glance at the boy, snoring noisily on her lap. When she was his age, fourth grade, she never dreamed of the hardships he was going through. She didn't know they existed.

"The police will be back to ask some questions before he's released," the nurse said, getting agitated by lack of eye contact or response from the girl in the chair. She turned to exit.

"What was his name?" Trina said at last, almost whispering it to the boy. The nurse turned back.

"Who's name?"

"The man that died in 1985. What was his name?"

She searched, slowly through the manila file she carried. "Walker," she said. "William Walker." Then she added, almost in repulsion, "on a murderer conviction."

The volume of her tone made the nine-year-old in Trina's lap stir. She used this as an excuse to lift him quietly off of her and placed him on the chair beside her. He continued, undisturbed, to snore on the armrest. Trina stretched, while knees and ankles popped and cracked, and walked on numb legs to the painted window.

The Slope was bronzed like an antique photograph by Trina's filtered view. The cars climbed the inclines without audible struggle and the trees stood still, as if posing for Trina's documentary view. Down the strip, Trina could see the commercial district that Park Slope had to offer; complete with Met Food Markets, Mom-n-Pop Stores, and the Salvation Army that Trina would visit this week. The Lutheran church, a virtual castle from Trina's storybook years, was the

resting place for an owl, probably weary from a night full of avoiding traffic and brownstone antenna wires. On closer look, Trina learned that he was cast in plastic and wouldn't likely have been bothered by the traffic one bit. Looking down the other corner, Trina could see Flatbush Avenue in the distance, the artery of traffic that carried her city bus past the library. There were no sirens to be heard from up this high. No angry motorists on their evening rush. No grinding semis drilling through the residential streets, shaking the buildings and spreading the disease of car alarms in their wakes. Everything was quiet from behind these sickly windows. Everything was cast in plastic, harmless and eternally mute.

Behind her, Marco was snoring in a loose ball on the hospital bench. Counts had moved once during the hour Trina had been there, but only a shoulder and only an inch. She felt like she had learned a lot about her friend during the last few encounters—his name and earlier profession, from the journal; his medical conditions and his method of coping in solitude to avoid pity or concern; even his imagination and prose, discovered at the coffeehouse.

“—Mayleigh!” she thought. “I forgot to call Mayleigh.” She touched Marco's head and whispered that she was going to make a call on her way out of the hospital room. He muttered or snored in response.

At the desk, Trina met a young aide or intern reading the horoscopes page of a teen-beauty magazine and interrupted her.

“Hi. Um. Miss.” She waited till she had the girl's eye contact. “Yes. I wondered if I could use your phone to make one quick call. I don't have change and it's kinda important.”

The girl looked back to her magazine pointing to the wall behind Trina. Trina turned and found a payphone hung below a sign that read: OUTGOING CALLS. PATIENTS AND FAMILY.

“Miss?” Again she waited for the slightest bit of professionalism from the reception girl, which, this time, took a bit longer. “Can I use your phone?”

“You don't got a quarter, lady?”

Trina waited a moment, patiently. “Miss. Please. It's important.” She offered instead.

The girl, annoyed, reached over to her phone, spun it around to face Trina, and licked a finger to turn a page in her magazine. Trina snatched up the phone, whispering, “Thanks,” and dialed Chloe's.

“Sun's up! Are you, yet?”

“Cute, May. It's Tree. Listen I can't—”

“—Hey Tree! I was hoping you'd call, I was going to tell you not to bother coming in today.”

“Well, that's the thing, see there's a lot I gotta—”

“—Yea, not too busy here. But I have been thinking a lot about what we discussed. The stuff you told me, you know? It's a breakthrough, so bear with me.”

Tired from the events of the morning, Trina was helpless from getting a word in and surrendered. “Huh? Well. Yea, okay May, what's up?” She turned away from the young aide who was making faces to her magazines like she was repulsed by a suggestion from the zodiac. Leaning against the counter, Trina could see down the hall to an old man helping his wife into a wheelchair just across from where Counts and Marco were sleeping. One arm hooked around her gentle husband's neck and the other hand struggled to grip the arm of her chariot. Her gaze never left his as he guided her to her seat and she smiled as if that very moment was the purpose she married him all those decades ago.

Trina could hear Mayleigh had already begun an off-the-cuff-and-whimsical-rant and Trina tuned in.

“...there’s no reason to play along with the bullshit of tact, right? No reason and no time for it, the masquerade, I mean. Just imagine the hours every week—every day—we waste being artful and skillful addressing people—”

“Well, I’m listening, so obviously you don’t have to worry about wasting any time getting my attention, May.”

“That’s right.” Trina waited for more.

“May?”

“That’s exactly right. You give me attention. You listen, and... I love you for it.”

“Well, I love you too, May.”

Mayleigh giggled. “You care back, I mean. And you understand me. Always where I’m coming from, you understand, and, well... I love you.”

“Yeah. And... I love you”

Again she giggled, this time revealing what she found so funny. “No, silly. I mean I’m *in* love with you.”

50

Trina decided to drop Marco off at school, Monday morning. Her schedule at Chloe's wouldn't begin until two so she opted to head to the city for the first time since fall. The Metrolink vending machine, new at the Prospect St. Station, dispensed to her an all-day pass and she slipped through the turn-style with a beep of the machine. She stepped onto a puffing Manhattan-bound R.

Dusty had begun to take over some responsibilities in the house, willingly, without thought of payment. This freed up some of Trina's time to gallivant through Brooklyn in search of the wonders she left Michigan for, nearly 2 years ago. She had no idea what she was going to do with the next 5 hours; the hours before she had to pass back through the turn-styles on her way to Chloe's. The doors slid open and she blindly walked across the Pacific St. platform and boarded a B train. The doors slid closed and recommended her to "ease on" with their calming chimes.

She sat alone in the "Please reserve for disabled or elderly" seats by the front of the car and tried not to think about all the events that consumed her weekend. She hadn't seen Mayleigh since the conversation on the phone and felt a little time would be best for her to work up what she needed to say in return. The mid-conductor stepped out of the little room in the front of the car, ready to journey to the next to watch riders board on the other side of the train. He saw Trina sitting there alone, and stopped.

"Where ya headed, Miss?"

"Dunno," Trina replied; her voice laced with apathy. The conductor continued to look down at her and wander her face for clues on how to continue the conversation. Trina tried her best to wear disinterest, but it didn't work.

"You know the third rail has over 300 volts of electricity going through it?"

"Hmm?" Trina replied.

The conductor, adorning an MTA hat and light jacket, parked next to her in the seats, beginning his entrance speech.

"Yeah. 300 volts. That's enough to fry a guy. You can see it happening to rats sometime when you're driving. It sometimes can hit speeds of 70mph, especially when it's going through the waterway tubes. You should see 'em scatter."

"No kidding."

"No kidding at all," he continued, unaware of Trina's sarcasm. "Now you think being a conductor is pretty boring, huh? Being a train operator is where the fun is at, right? Well, a conductor isn't all bad. It has it's ups and downs," he said, trying to make a joke. "And you get to be the voice of the train, helping the people and making their rides a pleasant one. We get paid somewhere between 15 and 20 dollars an hour. Now how boring does it sound?"

"No kidding," Trina said again, pushing her sarcasm a bit further.

“No kidding at all,” the man said. “I think of it as being a well-paid tour guide. I show folks the underbelly of the city.” Just then the train emerged from underground and began its trek across the Manhattan Bridge, showcasing tugboats and barges on the East River. “This place is legendary, as much as the Twin Towers and Lady Liberty herself. It’s been around for over a hundred years. The Brooklyn Bridge has got us beat, though. It’s been around since 1883,” he continued. “It’s responsible for a quarter of the world’s mass transportation. It’s famous.”

Trina opened her mouth to speak, but the man cut her off.

“And I’m not kidding at all,” he laughed. “The first train carried 22 passengers and sucked through the tubes powered by a giant fan.” He noticed her stifling a yawn and decided to give in. “Have a good ride, now. Thanks for choosing the MTA.” He popped up from the orangey-plastic seat, resituated his hat to fit more snugly on his head, and opened the door between cars. Reaching out, he unfastened the adjacent car’s door and slipped through. Looking back as the door came sliding shut, he touched his temple and disappeared into the conductor room of the next car. Trina felt the car begin to slow and she looked across its cabin and through the windows across from her. The ripples of the tugboat and barge passing under the bridge created a wake wide enough to spread nearly three-quarters across the river, before melding with the steady current by the retaining walls. Peeking out from beyond the Brooklyn Bridge was Lady Liberty herself, copper oxide glowing in the morning ambience. How does she do it? Trina thought. Welcoming the tired, poor and huddled masses, how does she continue to stand proud among these boroughs? I guess, from up where she is, she can’t see the masses continue to suffer.

A Brooklyn-bound Q train swept past the B rocking the whole train and seemingly the bridge with it. Trina, used to the drift and sway of the subways, had stopped clutching the handrails six months prior. When finally the Q passed, Trina’s train jerked to motion again, proceeding underground to get a closer look at those yearning to breathe free.

It was the third stop in Manhattan—West 4th Street—that Trina aimlessly meandered off. She subconsciously made a note of her exit and walked along the platform, following exit signs. A gust of hot, putrid air pushed her hair from its resting seat on her shoulders and allowed it to flourish behind her, like rows of wheat in a rolling wind. Her hand held the sticky residue of the rails and she dragged it across the banister as she headed upward. Passing a man in aviator-framed sunglasses, spouting *Amazing Grace* and dripping with soul, Trina pushed open the wide-exit swinging door and proceeded to the Avenue of the Americas. She realized that by walking the opposite direction of the train, she was headed south. Up ahead was a small rhombus of hexagonal-brick tile, surrounded by park benches focused on a light pole and sign that said Father Demo Square. Above it, hung another sign asking passers-by to kindly not feed the pigeons. From the splotches of white and green on the bricks below, Trina could tell people didn’t abide by the rule. On the benches were a litter of people and birds. There were easily a hundred cooing creatures lining the buildings around, the sky, and the center of Father Demo Square.

Trina sat on one of the benches and faced west. There was a white church across from her that seemed backlit, though the sun was rising behind her. New York had a tendency to distort the circadian cycle of the sun placing mirrors of great buildings as virtual prisms to light alleys and darken thoroughfares. It was as if a director had cast the city in false incandescence, powerful halogens, and neon flickers to propose a scene for a counter-culture flick. Trina felt Brooklyn was better lit and certainly better cast. She stared at the church across from her until eye fatigue set in and allowed her vision to turn the walls to a cool grey, highlighted with a silhouette of eggshell white as if someone had taken a church, flipped it upside down and placed it four

stories above a twilight plane. The negative space of the church created the one hovering above it and the only thing that disturbed this vision was the birds that flew through its translucent walls, buttresses, and triangular pediments.

Suddenly all the birds in the square launched upward in a spiraling path to escape what set them off. Across the park, about twenty feet from Trina, a man held a terrified pigeon in his right hand. The pigeons above circled, sporadically landing or continuing their holding patterns above. The man used his other hand to resituate the bird, pinning both its wings back behind his head and holding it between his thumb and index finger. The bird continued its terrified shuffling but was now in a position that nearly nullified any chance of escape. Aside him on the bench was a magnifying glass, crossword puzzle book, and half-eaten cranberry muffin. Trina watched, mortified, as the middle-aged black man leaned over and pulled a bag closer to his feet. For a minute or so, the man searched through the black canvas case beneath him, the bird continuing to shutter and flap. Trina began to feel sympathy for the bird, her anger growing inside her. Bums and coffee-drinking businessmen ignored the commotion and even the birds had started to once again congress in the middle of the square.

Finally, the man found what he was looking for in his bag, a pair of reading glasses and a large knife. Trina's heart started to pound as the man sat the knife on his lap and flipped the bird over to pin it between his thighs. Petrified, the pigeon had allowed its furious flapping to subside and lay catatonic upside down in his lap.

Trina rose and walked across the square, robotically, towards the man. The silhouette of the upside down church stayed in her view, even as she blinked. He, on the other side, seemed a bit disturbed by the pigeons parting in Trina's wake like the ripples in the East River from the tugboats. He looked down to the bird trapped between his legs and picked up the knife. Trina passed the center of the square and was ten feet from the man when she noticed him sawing near the poor bird's feet.

"Hey," she hollered. The man looked up, glasses on the brim of his wide, flat nose, and continued his business unguided by sight.

It wasn't until Trina was inches from his knees that she noticed a piece of fishing line that was wrapped around the bird's left ankle, a line that had rendered the pigeon's foot swollen and yellowed.

The man looked back down at the bird and worked skillfully, as a surgeon, with long, slender black fingers and oddly well-manicured nails. Finally the line was free, and the bird's toes moved gingerly, hinging in directions that hadn't been explored since before its foot became bound. He then leaned over to his bag again and produced a Q-tip which he topped with a generous dollop of ointment. Carefully, the man applied the disinfectant to the bird's swollen foot and cleaned the wound. Tossing the swab to a tree planter on his right, he reached back over to the muffin and broke off a crumb. Trina, spellbound, lowered herself to the bench adjacent to him and watched as he fed the bird a chunk. The bird greedily ate and flapped his wings. He then shouted, "GO," and released the bird into the air. It noisily flapped away, dropping a few loosened feathers, and landed itself on the eave of the apartment complex across from them.

The man then took off his reading glasses and picked up his crossword puzzle book. Holding his magnifying glass above it, he searched scrupulously through the clues for one he knew. Trina, in awe, could only manage a fragment of response.

"Was amazing," she articulated. He ignored her and continued his word hunt. Trina studied his face for a moment and looked over to the birds. After a few moments she noticed a tangle of black thread caught around another's foot. It limped on two toes and lifted it, as a flamingo,

when stationary. Trina's eyes darted to the man, and back to the bird. Finally, she spoke. "What about that one there?" The man looked to Trina and she pointed out towards the black thread.

"Oh, you're right," he sang, with a sing-song voice that seemed unfitting of his character. "So he is in need." With that, the man put down his book and magnifying glass, removed his glasses and picked up the half-eaten muffin from its resting spot on the green bench. He held the muffin out and carefully sprinkled little crumbs from it. Dropping to the tiles in a cascade, the birds scurried and fluttered in for their meal. Eventually, when the muffin was nearly gone, the threaded foot pigeon started meandering over.

"You have to be very still," he said. "So still that they can't sense your thoughts. Don't move, now, you'll spook 'im."

With a speed that seemed almost unperceivable, the man reached out and nabbed the bird, an action that more closely resembled a frog snatching a fly than a man catching a pigeon. The other birds scattered furiously, creating the din again, regaining their holding patterns above. Trina watched as he delicately pinned the bird's wings back and turned it over to cage it in his lap.

"Ooh, he's got good. Sometimes they leave traps for 'im. In Brooklyn they set down this net and I seen hundreds comin' my way with little pieces tearing up their poor legs. Up in Harlem the ladies like to do up they hair. They doing these weaves...corn rows...dreads. When they done with them, they just throw them on the streets. I fixed a bunch of 'em like that."

"What's your name?" Trina asked.

"Spencer."

Trina replied with her own name and watched the man extend a hand to her, amid his surgery. Trina took it, unsure of how she felt about shaking Spencer's hand. He can't be homeless, she thought, by the way he's dressed. Maybe this is just, what he does.

"Yeah, see, it's in there good. I normally have a pin with me to get it out, but I forgot mine today." Trina pulled out a little Swiss Army Knife and popped out the tweezers.

"This is the best I got," she said. He took it and tried, unsuccessfully, only to return it in silence. "How many birds have you fixed?" Trina asked.

"Oh, in the hundreds. I been doing this for a long, long time. They're such beautiful creatures," he continued. "God puts 'em here to sing and to be beautiful for us." Trina thought of a remark from a Chloe's patron that went by the name Gerst. He called them rats with wings. Something tells me, Trina thought, that Spencer would disagree.

"There's another," she said suddenly, noticing a twist of red yarn around another nearby. "Can I try?"

Spencer stopped his operation and reached over to the last few crumbs of muffin on the bench. He passed it to Trina.

"Remember, now: still enough that it can't sense your thoughts."

Trina scattered the muffin in slightly bigger chunks below her as Spencer watched. His hands continued to work at the thread while he peered up through his eyebrows.

Trina thrust her hand downward towards the bird and touched a wing, before the bird eked out. It flapped away in fright.

"Almost," she said.

"He'll never come back," Spencer replied. "They never do. You only get one shot and if you not quick enough, they never come back."

Trina felt humiliated, and a bit angry. The bird didn't know she was just trying to help. How could it? Stupid bird. She began to search around the sky and lamppost, the eaves, the roofs, the tiles below. She didn't see a sight of the red yarn.

"You lucky," Spencer said without looking up.

"How am I lucky?" Trina replied almost bitter.

Spencer, continuing his unbroken gaze at his patient's talon, pointed to the bench behind Trina. "I never seen 'em come back before." Trina slowly turned around to see the pigeon hopping, now under her own bench, towards the remaining pieces of muffin by her shoes. She held her breath and became a statue. Her eyes in their sockets clouded over as she refused to even blink. Quietly, reluctantly, the pigeon arced its way from under the bench to the tile in front of Trina's right toe.

"He's not going to wait for you," Spencer spoke, still looking at the bird as if he could see what was happening.

Like a snake, Trina struck. She snapped her arm down fast and unconsciously closed her eyes. A split second later, she heard Spencer's slight-Jamaican laugh and felt the flurry of feathers in her hand. Opening her eyes, she found success.

"You a natural," Spencer sang.

"Now what?" Trina screamed, holding back her jubilation.

"Now you fix 'im."

"How?"

"Try to flip 'im over."

Trina's hands shook as she tried to calm the bird down. She lifted it up to her lap and held it there for a second, planning her strategy. One of the wings of the bird was open and flapping. The other was compacted in Trina's palm. Slowly she rotated the bird and held it upside down around its stomach. It continued to flap its one free wing and Trina felt its feet perch inverse on her middle finger. It was trying to launch away.

Finally she was able to put it between her legs with minimal loss of feathers.

"Not too hard, now. Don't squeeze too hard."

"I got it," she rejoiced as she secured the bird. Slowly, she started to unwind the yarn from the pigeon's foot. It had created a slight divot around its ankle, and Trina felt for the suffering bird.

"How's 'e doing?"

"Scared."

"You?"

"Me too," Trina said, to which the slight-Jamaican laugh was produced again.

In less than a minute, Trina had the yarn removed from the foot and was waiting with the bird in her lap, for Spencer to finish. She wanted him to put the ointment on, as she was slightly queasy from the swelling. The birds in the square again darted upward, this time from a pair of chubby Arabian boys that decided to chase them and scream at them.

"Now what they doing? When I was younger, my daddy never told me not to do that, but I knew not to do it." The boys' parents followed closely behind with a stroller. Trina saw all the birds leave, but one, a runt that had a difficult time flying. "Stop it!" Spencer yelled and both the boys froze in their tracks. They looked over to the lanky black man, and then to their father, as if they'd been caught lifting Butterfingers from the corner deli.

The parents ignored Spencer and their children took it as a lead. They were $\frac{3}{4}$ the way through the square when they picked up their screaming and chasing. This time, Spencer merely shook his head.

"I swear, if God wanted me a millionaire, I'd give half of it to the birds," he said. Trina giggled at the thought of pigeons in tuxedos escorting their bejeweled madams to the Victorian-styled nests in Central Park trees. It was silly, she thought, but awfully candid.

Finally Spencer was finished and reached over for the Q-tip he cast aside earlier. He put a blob of ointment to the unsoiled end and smeared it on the lame feet of the inverted bird. Trina watched the consideration in his eyes as he carefully applied the cream. Tossing the Q-tip once again, he turned to Trina.

"Ready to set 'em free?" he asked. "That's the best part."

"What about a snack first?"

"Almost forgot," Spencer said. Trina handed him a piece of the muffin and they both smiled as they fed their birds. Trina's pigeon was too scared to eat.

"How 'bout now?"

"Ready," Trina replied.

Simultaneously, they both lift their birds above them and on Spencer's "GO," released.

"They beautiful," Spencer said as he watched them soar high.

"Beautiful," was all that Trina could say as she stared at Spencer, hands still shaking.

It took Trina an hour and a half to get to Chloe's after a misadventure on the express to Coney Island, though she used that time to formulate what she'd say. Eventually, she found herself standing in front of the door. She knew, however, like the birds, Mayleigh would sense her thoughts.

51

"It's been decades since I've ridden in a taxi, years since I've even sat in a car. The last time was in 91 when a boy asked me to buy him a beer. He said he was 17 and wanted me to pretend I was his father. He said he didn't want to get drunk, he just wanted one beer. I told him that it sounded innocent enough and then started a long-ago-rehearsed speech of the harmfulness of dependence on substances and he protested, saying *Aw man, forget you then.*

"*Drive me there,* I told him. I knew a beer certainly wouldn't be a threat and wanted to feel what it was like to be in the front of a car, moving through a city, coaxing time to slow down its hurry and fall into a lazy Laura Nyro pace."

Counts was sullen on the ride home. His words crept out steadily, but he merely stared out the window. Trina thought taking him for a cab ride may make him feel better after his two straight nights of sleep in the recovery ward. The 20 dollars, she thought, was nothing if it helped her friend to say what he felt was needed.

"I took his money and got some looks from the folks at the corner store when I bought only one MGD. He was grateful and promised not to drink it in the car.

"I asked him where he was going to and if I could come with him. He let me off in the Upper East Side to see a city I only remember sometimes while I'm sleeping." Trina thought he was finished. And when he continued, she was happy to listen.

"I spent the day walking around Manhattan and ended up at Schurz Park along the East River. Saw glimpses of the Renaissance most young kids only learn about from Langston Hughes, or Morrison, or Hansberry. It's hidden, but it's still there, Trina. You can smell it sometimes after the rains and only the old folks seem to look up and remember the buildings around them."

The driver made a right at the gated mouth of the Greenwood Cemetery and followed the cold spiked fences and crumbled barriers toward South Slope. Trina couldn't tell if he was listening or ignoring, but every minute or so he seemed to nod in understanding, as if participating in a secret, shared moment only a black man would understand. The driver was probably Counts' age too, Trina thought.

"They say *homeless*. I don't think *they* could be insulted by the word. Not like I am. Why would you assume that because we don't live in an apartment that we are without homes?"

"I don't know, Counts." Trina said quietly, thinking he probably didn't want an answer to that question.

"Brooklyn. Is my home. If you're not satisfied with that—New York. Is my home. I've got furniture. I've got food. I've got friends. I've even got a daughter, even if she is a white girl," with that, exchanging a smile and a squeeze on the knee with Trina.

"Counts, is your real name William?" Trina asked, delicately.

Counts turned to the window again and rolled it down an inch to cool off the taxi. He didn't struggle with the question, or even consider it. "Some of us are accused of talking to ourselves. People remark that people who don't live in houses like they do are *crazy*, they say. *Talking to themselves, mumbling stuff*. Well, talking to yourself certainly doesn't make you crazy. And who says we're talking to ourselves anyway, huh? Maybe we're practicing our New Yorker accents. I don't know, maybe we're writing poetry that we'll put down on paper one day when our secretaries come back from their lunch breaks. Maybe we're having an informal but pleasant conversation with God.

"*They're always begging me for money. Why don't they just get a job*, people say. As if it's an insult to ask them to spare a dime when they'll probably spend them all on junk they don't need. All that you need, Trina—all that you could ever need—you can carry with you should you have to. Get a job? Maybe we've all got jobs. Maybe we're collecting just enough to pay our employees each week—to keep them employed and keep the phones working and gasoline pumping. *They'll probably just spend it all on booze*, is my favorite. Sure looks like it though. But our employees, you see, maybe they're all so grateful that they get their checks each week that they buy us a drink in gratitude. See, people, they got it all wrong."

"What do you do, Trina?"

"I work in a coffeehouse and manage a complex."

"Well, I write and sing sometimes and dance because it makes me happy. Why is it that people always answer with their jobs?"

"I don't know, Counts," Trina found herself saying again.

"What is the most valuable thing you own?"

"Either the ring from Adam or my kitchen table and chairs, if it's not a real diamond."

"Well my high school education and my collection of memories are the dearest things I've got. Why is it that people always answer with material goods? Things that can be bought and sold. Traded or stolen. The luxuries that are only valuable because that's the way they're indicated in catalogs. And if that's your position, why don't you cherish your journal and what's recorded in it?"

"I don't know that either, Counts." Trina felt tricked. She promised herself that she'd be more cautious with her answers.

"What, in your life, do you love?" He asked as the taxi pulled to the corner and Trina handed the driver his money to count.

"I love my sister." Trina answered, knowing that truly, that was the strongest love in her life.

"And why are people so sure that the love between two people—souls that are arbitrarily put together at birth—are actually love and not dependence, comfortable and accountable? Maybe we're just secure, relying on them to always be there and grateful for that consistency. Without your sister, Trina, can you never love?"

"Counts, I love my sister. You're wrong. You make it sound like she's an addiction or some—"

"For me? I'd answer, *in my life, what don't I love?* The people in my life help me feel good, and it's the good feeling that I love. The city I live in, I belong to, and it's the belonging that I love. The things in this world, *in this world*, that hurt me, those are the things I exclude from my life. It's not that I don't love them, it's just that they don't exist to me."

"But you can't just decide that pain isn't there, Counts. That just because people are unkind to you, that they simply don't exist in your life."

"That's wrong, Trina. I..." Counts paused, to help her understand. His life, his world, couldn't be thrust upon everybody as it was unique to him, alone. "...I can only love. And since this is my life and no one else's, I do. Only this way can I be sure that every second of my life is filled only with love."

"Okay, this is getting a little too deep for me." Trina collected her change from the driver and passed him two dollars for tip. "You're saying that you've never loved a person, only the feelings they've given to you—"

"—shared with me..."

"Fine. That you've never loved a person before, but only when the feelings you *share* are positive do you let that person be a part of your life."

"Correct." Counts smiled. Hoping Trina could understand how much this conversation, this ride and her company meant to him.

"That you don't generically, genuinely love a person, ever."

"Correct."

"That you've never loved a person not ever."

"Correct." He repeated, still holding his smile.

"Did you love Patie?"

There was silence. Trina knew she did something wrong and wished for all her worth that she knew exactly what she had said. His smile lost all sincerity almost instantly and dissolved as if her eyes, her very company, was poisonous. He searched her face, trying to learn how much of his past she knew, if his every crime was exposed. His examination made her wonder if he were trying to exclude her from his life, like he would do for anything that caused him pain and had always done to keep him safe in his world filled only with love. Trina couldn't break the gaze that she unwillingly, morbidly fixed back on him. *Look away Trina, don't make this horrible moment worse*, she thought. She couldn't. The driver stirred impatiently, not knowing anything at all as Billy Walker left the cab and walked away toward 5th Avenue without a remark of offense or explanation.

52

Rhonda called this morning telling me that she's terrified. She had a dream where I had slipped so deep into depression that I'd turned to drugs. When I ran out of money to spend on the drugs, I gave myself to the dealers in order to compensate. She said she dreamed that I was passed around like a doll, to whomever needed something and didn't mind sacrificing a fix. Needless to say, I assured her that none of it was true. That it was all a dream. That I'm not depressed. And I'm not submersing myself into something I shouldn't be, just to forget this depression. And that I'm not getting violated in any way by things that could give me an iota of bliss to escape from how I really feel. That I'm happy. I think she could tell I was lying.

Marco and I have tried to bond again, picking up little hobbies that we can do together. We purchased a tray of tomato plants to raise on the fire escape—or balcony as Mike would say. They died the day after we got them. Marco swears there's a seedling sprouting up in one of them, but I just don't see it. And one invisible stem isn't enough to remind me of all the ones that aren't sprouting up; the ones that shriveled, hardened, and blew away in the spring breezes.

Now we don't buy plants anymore. He watches his cartoons and I sit at the table and read the dozen or so newspapers dedicated to New York City, Brooklyn, and Park Slope specifically. I should be pleased to hear that D.U.M.B.O. is building more high-rises

near Court Street. I'm not, though. All I can think about are the eight little plastic sections in the tomato seed tray, filled with dirt and peat. Maybe they're waiting beneath the surface for their turn to sprout. Maybe they're waiting until it's safe to grow.

Rhonda also said that if I need it, she'll front me a one-way ticket back to Michigan. "I have an extra bed," she said. Apparently, little Alex wants to sleep with her, now. She thinks that's a toddler's way of protecting his mom from bad dreams.

The scary part is that I considered it. Mike's moved in across the hall and he doesn't come by so much now. I feel weird going over there so it's been about a week since we've seen each other. I haven't heard from Adam in God-knows-how-long. I wonder if he's all right. I obviously can't keep calling him every time I think of him, which is getting more and more frequent. Billy's shut me out. Dusty works all the time. Mayleigh put up a brick wall since the incident and suggested that I should take a week off from Chloe's since it hasn't been busy at all. It was a poor excuse, but I acted oblivious and bought into it.

I can't remember the last time Mom sent me a postcard. Rhonda says she misses me. I don't know if I can keep doing this alone. She suggested that I take some time away from NYC; that I hop a plane home to ease it up a little.

It sounds like a really, really good idea. I'm just worried I won't want to come back. But maybe that would be okay. Maybe it'd be okay if I let go of this place. For a little while. Maybe I'll just take it easy and think about it then. I'll just leave for a while, forget the city, and think about it then.

53

The walk to Chloe's was brisk, and occurred without even Trina realizing it. She was pulling open the glass door and finding herself inside the coffee house, as it seemed, seconds after she left the Complex. The smell of Murphy's Oil Soap and espresso beans were strong in the air and she could see Mayleigh's shadow bouncing off various surfaces in the doorway leading to the café's kitchen. The place had a few patrons here and there, enough to warrant that they were open on this idle Friday morning. Trina walked directly up to the counter and rested her hands there, a flat glove of steam wrapping around them on the counter's surface.

"Be right with you," Mayleigh shouted from the kitchen, obviously hearing someone enter. Trina used the few seconds of silence to arrange her thoughts, cluster them into what was important and what she needed to say.

"Tree?" Mayleigh said, as she poked around the corner. Her face instantly turned from buoyant to a face that was weighted at the corners of her mouth. She tried to cover this up by asking how Trina had been.

"I'm good, May. Do you have a second to talk?"

"Sure. Do you want something?"

"Small black please."

"Coming right up."

When Trina left the Complex this morning, she realized it seemed empty. Dusty was at work; probably cleaning displays and fixing cultural life-size dioramas. Brian and Tony were more than likely off to the East Village to peruse the shops and outlets along St. Marks. Marco was at school. Even the chess players had decided not to occupy their crates and spool, making the entrance of the apartments somewhat trashier.

Trina left the counter and seated herself by the wall. She was in the same seat that she conducted interviews for the Complex. It seemed comforting for her to be there. Her head swiveled around the café and she realized no one inside looked familiar.

Mayleigh brought out two coffees, a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She sat across from Trina where she could keep an eye on the front door and the counter to her right and lit a cigarette.

"What's up? Where's Marco?"

"He's on a field trip to a maple syrup factory upstate. They're spending the night there."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm unhappy."

"I'm sorry?"

"I said I'm unhappy."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not you." Trina replied. "Well, it is you. You and all the others." Trina realized how brutal it sounded, but she didn't renege.

"I gotta get an ashtray," Mayleigh popped up, and quickly walked back to the counter. Trina watched her as she sunk behind it for the ashtray, taking somewhat longer than necessary.

Eventually, she arose and once again sat across from Trina.

"Why am I making you unhappy?"

"I don't know, May. I'm not sure."

"I didn't realize you get unhappy."

"What?"

Mayleigh chose her words slowly. "You break up with your boyfriend and you say it's a good thing. You're getting independent, you say. You are responsible for evicting a building full of tenants and it's a good thing. You're creating your bohemia, you say. I didn't think you get unhappy."

"I do, May. I am. More than ever."

"I don't understand why."

"Why I'm unhappy?"

"Why you're unhappy, yeah. And what I have to do with it."

"I guess it's because you're a New Yorker. I think I'm becoming one."

"I don't follow."

"Don't change," he said.

"Who said '*don't change*'?"

"Adam. And I promised him I wouldn't. But I have. I'm independent, yes. But I still need someone to be there for me. I'm responsible, yes. But I don't want the responsibility, even though I take it. Sure the Complex is great. The renters are great. The coffee house is great too. So why am I not happy?"

"I don't know, Trina."

"Maybe it's because you're not my sister. And Mike's not Adam. And New York is not fuckin' Michigan. I don't know. Every morning I wake up, I feel it. From the very first thing, I feel it. I pity Marco for the wretched life he has. I envy Adam for being successful and independent. He's probably got a girl right now that lives on the Upper East Side with a subscription to the New York Times for the Fashion Section, a Pekinese for the social banter in the Dog Park, and a balcony facing Midtown for the goddamn Southern Exposure. Now, what do I got: A filthy apartment with little-to-no sunlight, a boyfriend, if you can call him that, without a job but who's too busy to be my boyfriend, a sister who's a lesbian—no offense...

"None taken."

"—a bunch of friends that I see when a pipe bursts or when it's rent day, an adopted son or brother that would rather watch TV than talk with me. And you know what the worst thing is? The worst thing is that I had everything that I wanted in a shit-hole college town and blew it to follow ambition. *Don't change*, he said. Fuck you! I'll change if I want to. It's only natural. I'm so ready to just jump a plane and move in with Rhonda in Michigan."

Mayleigh took a while to digest Trina's rant. Her cigarette had burned itself away, wisped up to mix with the Murphy's Oil and espresso. She deposited the Marlboro's ruins into the ashtray's mass grave and got up again to get a tissue for Trina, who's eyes had begun to bathe in saline. An image, a reflection, frozen in her mind while she retrieved the Kleenex. It was a reflection of herself in Trina's watery eyes.

"Dry your tears," she said. "And let me know when I can stop sympathizing."

Trina did as she was told.

"Ok. Now let me ask you one question. Did you realize how good you had it when you were in Michigan?"

Trina dotted her nostrils with the wad of tissue and looked away.

"Of course."

"Seriously, Trina, did you realize how good it was?"

"Yeah, I remember being happy."

"Sure," Mayleigh remarked, becoming a bit stern. "Of course you *remember* how good it was, but at the time, did you *know* it?"

"What are you getting at, May?"

"You didn't. No one does. People always want something bigger. Something better. At the time, you were probably stagnating. Idle. At the time, you wanted something else. That's why you left Michigan, Trina."

"No," Trina shook her head, adamantly. "I left Michigan because I was in love with Adam. I wanted to be with him."

"You did not. You said so yourself. You left because of ambition. You were ambitious. You wanted something better. That's all ambition is."

"So?"

"People don't realize how great their lives are until they change, Trina. Look at me and Marco. We took our mothers for granted and now we're orphans. Do you think we woke up every morning and said *God it's great to be me! I'm so happy where I am in life, and having a loving mother who provides for me and makes all my worries go away.* You've got a Complex full of friends, regardless of how busy they are. You've got a foster son or brother that you don't think appreciates you. What do you expect? He's nine years old. Wait until he's a teenager! Remember how you were? I remember being a shit to my mom, before she died."

"But—"

"You've got a guy that lives in your little Bohemia, Tree. That does what you wish you could do: plays all day. He earns money here and there tuning pianos for old women in nursing homes. But he is who he wants to be. And maybe you should quit waiting for him to come to you to propose this grandiose relationship you want to have. It's not the nineties anymore. Women have advanced past dowries and arranged relationships. No one waits for gentleman callers or suitors or profitable landowners in this day and age. Besides, in New York, you'd have to marry the mayor, NYU's dean, or the preacher at St. Patrick's to be engaged to a landowner.

"I don't follow you."

"Look what I've got, Trina. I confessed my undying love for my sister, as you like to put it, and she promptly rejected me. I get hit on by men all over the place, and I'm not interested. My other good friend wants me, but I don't want him. I'm sexually repressed, frustrated, and ambivalent."

"Ambivalent? I thought you were gay."

"Listen Trina: You go to Michigan and you live with Rhonda. And if you don't regret walking away from the life you have here, then you don't deserve it."

For a moment there was silence, as if both of them were on the edge of epiphany, but unable or unwilling to lean forward and let themselves fall. Trina felt like an idiot so she used the only method to cope that she knew.

"How can you be so pretentious? I listen to your shit all the time and God forbid I have a problem and you lay into me with your own self-pity stories."

"Pretentious, Trina? Welcome to what I've dealt with for a long-ass time. Since my mom died, I've been dealing with the misery you're barely scratching the surface of. *My life sucks. I got the short end of the stick and it's covered in shit.* You've helped me, in the past, sure. Why don't you listen to the same thing you've told me—to deal with it? If you think it's unbearable, change it. It's your life."

"That's a sham. The whole fuckin' city is a sham. It started that way and it'll always be that way."

"What?" Mayleigh squawked, surprisingly loudly.

"The native Americans. The land was practically stolen from them."

"What are you talking about?"

Trina clued Mayleigh in to what she thought about from time to time; the white men stealing the land from the rightful owners for \$24.

"Is that what you think?"

"It's common knowledge, Mayleigh."

"This isn't about the past, Trina." Mayleigh was screaming now. She had the attention of the entire coffee house, but her face turned red from anger, not embarrassment. "This is about you. This is about your life."

Trina leaned back in her chair, staring at Mayleigh, self-consciously silent.

"And for your information, the Native Americans were just camping in Manhattan. They lived in upstate New York. They got paid \$24 to leave their campsite a day early. The so-called white men, they were the foolish ones. They bought property from somebody who didn't even own it."

Moments passed and the two girls looked at each other, daring one another to come up with a lamer argument. Finally, Mayleigh broke their quiet.

"My mom used to say everyone's heap of mystery meat comes from the same scoop." They both erupted in laughter, erasing a flush of tension. Patrons soon found themselves losing interest and without enough substance from either contender to align themselves with any one side.

"What does that mean?" Trina tried to say between laughs.

"How should I know? She was a lunch lady at the time!"

The patrons of the coffee house eventually turned their heads back to their dregs and biscotti crumbs, set to the soundtrack of two good friends vulnerable to each other and the city surrounding them.

54

The cool spring breezes slinked through the alleys as the commuters took their time getting from the trains and busses home. An unforeseen alertness filled their travels making tonight somewhat less routine and less mundane. The city's 5,800 subway cars channeled through the slowly-heating tubes 150 feet below the street. Rising to the surface, eight feet down, water boils on the steam pipes and sends cascading billows of vapor through the quarter-sized eyelets in the manholes like a carnival worker puffing circles of smoke into the eddies of a Ferris wheel. The stillness of winter was gone, and replaced by swooping pigeons and maples that yawned and stretched towards the moist, rain-promising air. The streets heaved outward, expanding and falling comfortably into the bed of arced cobblestone of New York's past.

Dusty stepped lightly over a misaligned, cobbled stone and up to the curb of Seventh Ave, Brooklyn. He could hear Adam Duritz's reverberating voice melodically pleading for the big town inside the glass doors of Chloe's. He followed the haunting query, thrust a door open, felt himself enveloped in song, and brushing lightly past a firefighter on his way out. Dusty, finally accustomed to New York, didn't give a second thought to the near-collision. Instead, he scanned the coffee house, littered with tenants of the Complex and regulars. Mayleigh was seated at a table of four, on the far right, facing the counter, and bearing five cards. If Adam were there, he'd have seen Trina giving away her hand by unconsciously biting her lip. The table, however, bore no thoughts of ex-lovers. Instead, there was peace.

"Wow, where'd you get all those aces?" he asked as he swung around the table, wrapped his arms around Mayleigh, and nuzzled her into a hug.

"Shit!" Mike called, and threw his stack onto the table. Mayleigh received the hug, warmly, and giggled while staring at her nines and tens, an obvious ace-less hand. "What? He's joking? Dusty, you're joking?"

"Too late," Trina called. "You've folded!"

"What? But I didn't know. That's not fair, he was joking."

Trina followed suit with Mayleigh, and the rest of the table chimed in laughing. Mike didn't think it was funny.

"Go ahead," Trina managed between laughs. "You can't fold in euchre anyway." She continued to laugh.

"Funny, Trina." He said, and resituated his cards in his hand. "What kind of name is *euchre* anyway? I still don't understand this friggin' game. How can a jack be higher than an ace?"

"It's a bower."

"Ooh, right. A *bower*. That's right. Even better word."

"What's wrong with the word *bower*?" Trina questioned, modest and amused.

"It sounds like what you call a bowel in a shower. *Bower*." They all laughed again. Dusty toted a chair over to the table and sat between Mayleigh and Mike's partner for the game, Brian. Mike made sure to mention that he was only Brian's partner for the game, nothing else. Naturally, an onslaught of humor erupted from that.

"And trump?" Trina asked. "Is there anything wrong with that word?"

"No, I guess not. But that doesn't make up for *bower*," Mike laughed.

Brian was the first to add to the humor. "Just be happy, Mikey. I've been turning tricks for you all night!" The five of them laughed.

"What?"

"A trick," Trina explained, to not disturb the mood of the table, "is when you win the hand. Like a *meld*, but different."

"I'll never understand this game," Mike said, trying to make sense of his cards. "It's gay," he added, noting to Brian that no offense was meant. "I mean, why can't we just play poker, or something."

"Because this is fun, Mike. This is what we play back in Michigan."

"Oh, that explains a lot!" Mike said, jeering. He suddenly bolted upright in his seat, staring around the table with nervous eyes. Someone had rubbed their foot lovingly against his leg. Except for Trina, the entire table looked confused. She tried to stifle a laugh but her eyes gave it away. Mike caught on.

"Ooh, you think that's funny?" He plotted. Lunging forward, he tickled her waist. She screamed with laughter as the table watched them. When she covered her waist with her hands, he moved to her knees. When finally her hands caught up, he moved back. She couldn't cover her ticklish spots fast enough and she had far too many to try. Instead, she gave in and pled, through streaming tears of laughter, for him to cease. Only after enough torture did he remit his assault on her.

Moments later, she managed to compose herself. Her face slowly started to drain from its reddish hue back to her pale cream color. She was never one to enjoy being tickled, especially in front of a bunch of friends, but she didn't mind Mike's fingers working their way across her body. She allowed the discomfort of her laughter in ready exchange for his touch.

Eventually, the four got into the swing of the game and dealt and threw like pros. Mike and Brian, hell-bent on building strategy to win, completely missed Trina and Mayleigh's slight eye gestures that would be deemed table-talk at a professional arena. Needless to say, the girls were quickly in the lead and the conversation went briskly and rampantly to match the game's tempo.

"One thing I've never understood," Dusty started, talking to the whole table but eyeing Mayleigh. "Why do they call the police the NYPD and the fire department the FDNY? Shouldn't it be the NYPD and the NYFD or the PDNY and the FDNY?"

"That would make sense," Brian noted, and stopped his strategizing for a moment to ponder. "Maybe they did it so that the fire department wouldn't be pronounced *knifed* if it were spelled NYFD. Too many people get knifed already. It'd create too much confusion and nobody wants to be called that anyway."

"I never thought of it that way," Dusty said. "Good call."

"No," Mayleigh added, "because then the police could be PDNY and the fire department, FDNY, and no one would have a problem." The group thought about it for a second as Brian sounded out PDNY. "Pid-knee? Pied-nay? I guess it doesn't make sense."

"Loner!" Trina called, to which the boys grumbled. "Lay 'em flat, boys. Let's see what you got." Brian and Mike couldn't compete with Trina's hand, so Trina added four spades to hers and Mayleigh's point cards.

Games later, Mayleigh and Dusty were doing the dishes and wiping down the counters. Brian left to meet with Tony outside the county morgue, where he had been stationed for the week on medico legal portrait day. Trina and Mike were making quiet chatter in the window table up front and watching a brightening moon crest over the lofts across Seventh Ave.

"Walk ya home?" Mike offered.

"Sure," Trina responded, "but—" and then she turned to Mayleigh and Dusty. "Do you guys need help?"

"We're all right," came Dusty's voice from the kitchen. Mayleigh had ducked inside there as well, and now their shadows danced to the sound of a pressure wash and dish machine.

"We're leaving, guys! I had a great time," she yelled.

Obviously not listening, Mayleigh yelled back, "Yeah, that'd be great."

"Mayleigh?" Trina called puzzled.

"Sounds good, Tree. G'nite!"

Soon the two of them were matching footsteps down the Avenue to the Complex.

"Where's Marco, tonight?" Mike asked.

"Sap."

"What?"

"Oh," Trina grinned, apologetically, deep in thought. "I'm sorry; he's at a maple syrup field trip. I told him to call if he needed anything."

"Good."

"Good? Why good?"

"He should be doing things with his friends."

"I know. I guess he's getting some friends now. He likes to go to the park across from his school after classes. I figure since there are chaperones and police around there, it's ok. Besides, it's a four block hike from the Complex."

"That's great."

"Yeah."

"What's wrong? You seem deep in thought."

"Nothing's wrong, Mike. I'm good. I just...I didn't know that I'd be ok. You know? I didn't know things would work out."

"I hoped you would."

She turned to look at him, but he just grinned and looked up and out, toward the cemetery and their turn to home. She continued to watch his eyes shift under the streetlights, focusing on something in front of him. She smiled, looking out and eventually down to her feet again. She suddenly felt his fingers weave between hers. Tensing up for a moment, she allowed her heart rate to quicken, and slowly forced herself to relax in his touch. Her hand and cheeks felt warm, but the spring air pushed the heat away from her leaving just a smile to decipher her thoughts.

Turning at the cemetery, they walked up the hill to the empty stools and table. Trina started up the steps, not releasing her slight grip on his hand, and hoping that the evening breezes would continue to blow inside the halls and her apartment. She was forced to a halt, realizing

Mike had stopped at the foot of the steps. Tenderly, she turned to look at him, nervous to perceive the look on his face.

He bore a look of wonderment that Trina could feel was good. His eyes traced and focused on her, as they had done earlier with the silhouettes of the oaks in the cemetery. The seconds stretched as they stood there, arms doing likewise. Slowly, he walked up toward her, taking great care with every step; every advance. Soon, they were face to face and Trina silently cursed that the wind did not blow between them. Her face, flushed with anxiety, must have radiated enough heat to cook a chicken, she thought.

The span between them decreased, Mike drifting closer and Trina hesitantly following with slow, calm gestures. He unwove his fingers and placed them on her cheek. Trina was ecstatic they didn't burn. His hand rested lightly on her jaw-line while his thumb gently caressed the edge of her lips. He locked his gaze on her mouth, while she stared into his eyes. Passionately, their lips met and opened. Her hand, still outstretched from holding his, made its way to his waist. His other hand pressed against the back of her shoulder. They pulled each other in and drew one another's breath. Mike's eyes, now slivers, closed as he pushed closer to her mouth. She could feel his eyelashes dusting her cheek as she too closed her eyes.

Beneath the house light, the two friends kissed and kissed hard. Trina had to open her eyes a couple times in order for her to truly believe what was happening. The feel of his lips on hers sent shivers the size of a Jacob's ladder through her. The shock propelled her to push further and closer as she stood on her tip-toes and moved her other hand to the back of his neck. She could feel his face, light in stubble, pressing against hers as heat passed between them. Finally, she pulled back.

Trina saw him standing before her with his head tilted, his mouth ajar and his eyes still closed. She removed her hand from his waist and unconsciously brought it up to her lips to ensure they were still there. The reverberations between them instilled numbness in her mouth and arched it to a smile. Her eyes swam in delight as she watched him and waited for his eyes to open. Slowly, they did, while his wanton mouth eventually matched hers in emotion. Broader, she grinned and watched him do the same. Grabbing his hand, gently, she led him into the Complex. The apartments were empty, she noted in the dim hall lights as she glided up the stairs and into her own unit, pausing only to grab a blanket, as she continued up to the roof.

There she stopped. Trina, feeling the tingle return to her lips, took courage in her flight upward, and this time drew him to her. He received her fervently and they explored each other's backs and shoulders with their hands. On the roof, the breezes resumed between them, but all Trina could feel was his touch; all she smelled was the tangy musk of the young man in front of her. She licked lavishly at his lips and stroked his hair, praying to stay there forever.

Mike's hands shook a little as they made their way over her shoulders and down her sides, thumbs caressing a line around her breasts. Trina pushed closer to him and worked her way down the sides of his face to caress his chest. She dared to leave his lips and migrated her mouth around the side of his jaw to the fleshy skin on the side of his neck. The scent of man was stronger there and she breathed him in deeply. Mike continued his trek down her sides and stopped around her waistline to bring his hands back up, this time cupping her breasts in his hands and lightly stroking them.

Trina felt the first button on her blouse open, letting a breeze in over her bra. Then, the second was unhooked, followed by the third. She could feel one of his hands slip in as she took to his waistline and began to pull his shirt over his head. For a moment, he released her breasts to allow the shirt to slide off.

There, she stared at his half-naked body as he continued to unbutton her blouse. He was fit and trim, like a swimmer's build and bore tufts of hair only in the pockets of his pecs beneath his arms and in a thin line that pushed below his belly button to disappear in the rim of his boxer shorts. Mike slid her shirt over her shoulders and grinned adoringly at her cleavage, only to step in to kiss her neck. Their chests pressed together and she could feel the heat of his body penetrating through her bra and into her. Lightly, she stroked the depression that followed his spine between his shoulder blades and the meat of his back. She felt her knees shake as his tongue gently touched her neck. Bending, she pulled him slowly down to the blanket.

As the oversized, white moon glimmered light across them, they made love. Brooklyn's traffic below faded into the night as they held each other and rocked melodically in one another's arms. At rare moments only, the constant smile left her face, to wash back over her again where it would remain all night long.

While the moon reluctantly dipped below the treetops in the cemetery, the entangled lovers slept deeply. Dreams floated from the roof, vivacious, but exhausted and stole their minds from reality to envelope them in relentless ecstasy and the warmth of the thought of one another.

55

"You did what?"

"We had sex."

"But I thought—"

"Yeah, isn't it amazing? There we were, just the two of us. And before we knew it, we were going at it like animals. It was so instinctive, so beautiful. He was very gentle."

"But—"

"Ok, I said it. Now what'd you have to tell me?" Mayleigh asked.

Trina just stood there. She had quite forgotten.

"Trina?"

"Dusty?"

"Yes, Trina. Me and Dusty."

The whirl of confusion and wonder replaced her inquisitiveness and Trina could only stare at her, slack-jawed and expressionless.

"It was magical," Mayleigh exasperated. "I can't believe it all happened. You left the coffee house and we talked for what seemed like hours. But *good* hours, you know. It was amazing the things we talked about. He opened up to me, told me everything. And I did in return. We just, related, you know? And afterward..."

"You *related*."

"Yeah, Tree, but not just related. We made love. I made love. With a boy. I had sex with a boy. I can't get over how strange that sounds. I had sex with Dusty. I had sex with Dusty."

"Wow, May. I mean. Wow."

"Yeah," Mayleigh paused, obviously lost in thought. "Wow."

The girls stood and stared at each other. They had neglected their brisk jog through the spring city and halted on a cracked sidewalk that passed over Prospect Avenue and the adjoining 278. Trina, now standing much closer to the same traffic she heard in bed at night, felt it sounded strangely as muffled and quiet as in the Complex. She watched Mayleigh, whose eyes glistened in the morning light, as they glided and defocused in their sockets, as if they were watching him undress again, watching him lift the weathered vale of virginity. Her mouth, when recounting the rapturous details of the night prior, echoed the words rather than spoke them. Her lips were a hollowed tree limb that repeated the wind's moan, rather than declared it unique.

"I'm sorry."

Trina broke her stare and replied. "What? Why should you be sorry?"

"Here I am ranting about how tender and sensitive he is and I'm doing the opposite myself. You had something to say. You have my complete attention."

Rather than speak her similar experience with Mike the Piano-Tuner, she slowly embraced Mayleigh and whispered her pride into the girl's ear. "I am. So happy. For you."

"Thank you, Tree. I don't know why, but your approval seems so important to me, right now."

"It doesn't need to be, May. As long as you're happy, for once, you know I totally support you."

"And I am," Mayleigh beamed over the shoulder of Trina's light jacket. "I am, truly happy. And scared. Is it ok to be 100% happy and scared at the same time?"

"What are you scared about?" Trina pulled away from the hug.

"It's stupid, but I'm afraid I'll never be this happy again."

Trina grinned and thought of her evening on the rooftop of Brooklyn. She knew the feeling well. "It's normal, May. And only because it's normal do we consider it ok." Trina, though puffed with pride, felt a piece of discomfort in the idea that Mayleigh and Dusty were together. Trina, however odd it seemed, didn't like the fact that she was no longer Mayleigh's love. She disguised her insecurity by pulling her friend back close to her, giggling while she hugged.

After a lifetime, the girls pulled away. In doing so, they paused for a moment to stare at each other; then they continued on down Seventh Avenue toward Greenwood Cemetery. It was to be Trina's first visit back to the graveyard in ages and, though she was excited to experience the peace she used to feel there, she worried about how it might have changed. Today, Trina thought, has had so many changes already. Please let my cemetery remain familiar.

"I was thinking," Mayleigh said.

"Humph?"

"I was thinking that since the coffee house booms a bit in the spring, and I still have extra money from Mom, well..."

"Yeah," Trina urged her friend.

"Well, maybe, I was thinking I would move out of my apartment."

"What?"

"Yeah, because the apartment above the coffee shop is \$1500 already and I figure since I'm paying \$1500 and all..."

"What?" was all Trina could repeat.

"I thought maybe I could move in the Complex. You charge \$1500 a month, right? I can afford that. I've been affording it for a while, now. You've got convenience stores and a Laundromat on Sixth, right? So that would be easier for me. Besides, all my friends live there: you and Tony and Mike and Brian. Plus, I can baby-sit Marco for you anytime you like—"

"And Dusty," Trina cut in.

"Of course. And Dusty lives there. All the more reason for me to move in. It makes perfect sense."

"No, Mayleigh, I don't think it's such a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Because, I don't know if I want you paying rent to me, May. That changes a friendship: landlord and tenant."

"No it doesn't. I mean, it doesn't *have* to."

"It does have to, Mayleigh." Trina wasn't sure if this was the argument she wanted to present. "And because I'm not sure if I want to let that apartment. Beulah isn't bugging me to fill it and I'm happy tending to Brian, Dusty, and Tony's, not to mention my own."

"You won't have to do a thing, Tree. You know I can take care of myself. I've been doing it since Mom died."

"Yeah, but there's something else, May."

"What do you mean?"

"Are you sure you should move in to the same building that Dusty lives in? This could complicate things. This could make him feel suffocated. Or maybe you might feel suffocated. You may be moving too fast."

"Listen, Tree," Mayleigh said sternly. "This isn't about Dusty. This is about me. I told you that. It's a happy coincidence that Dusty lives in the Complex too, granted, but I want to do this for myself. Living in the apartment where I spent the last months with my mother isn't doing much for me, not to mention the fact that I've taken over *her* business. I want get out of there. I want to take a step in an independent direction. You know? I want to do something for myself for a change. I could use that extra cash from renting out my old place. It will definitely make a difference in my payments. Yeah, so Dusty lives there. It's not like I'm moving there just so I can be near him. Chloe's is only a few blocks from the Complex anyway. Christ, I'm not that lazy."

"But, May—"

"Seriously Trina, is it really about Dusty?"

"Well, yeah."

"But you invited Mike to live across from you and he isn't even offering to pay rent!"

"He does offer...occasionally."

"How is this different?" The girls' volume escalated, slightly, though Trina's took a slightly apathetic pitch. She was reaching for a reason.

"Because Mike and I are friends, Mayleigh! We're not fucking each other like you and Dusty. And even if we were, the two of us are responsible adults. We're old enough to take this seriously as it should be. Living as a tenant in someone else's building is something that should be taken seriously. We're old enough to understand that."

"Big deal, three years."

"Three years is a lot, May. The government deems us old enough to drink responsibly. Why is this different for getting an apartment?"

"Fuck you, Tree! That's not fair!"

"I'm just stating the facts, May."

"I think I deserve a little more credit than that, Trina. I've owned my own business since my mother died. I am responsible for not only my own rent and utilities, but the rent and utilities of the business. I can take care of myself and we both know I can drink you under the table."

"Well then act like an adult! If you can take care of yourself, act like it! And quit prancing around here on tippy-toes because a boy finally kissed you. Act your age!" Trina was loud and bitter now. She didn't know why she lied to her friend about her and Mike's disposition, or why it was necessary for her to drill in her point about Mayleigh's maturity. All she knew is that she must defend this position as best she could for she felt her very authority in the Complex was contingent on it. She felt the sickening feeling of shame arise in her, accompanied by an entourage of tears.

"Fine, then," was all Mayleigh could say.

"Fine?"

"Sure, Tree. You don't want me to live with you, then just say so. But don't give me this holier-than-thou bullshit and pretend to be schooling me on my own good. Have some decency and say that you don't *trust* me." Mayleigh started to walk off.

"But it's not about trust, May," Trina tried to hold back her crying, but her flood gates burst.

"Yeah?" she spun. "Then what is it about, Trina? Honestly? What is it about?"

"I just..." Trina sobbed.

"WHAT, TRINA?"

"I don't want you to—"

"I knew it! You don't want me to!" Mayleigh laughed aloud, a sinister and forced, guttural laugh. She whirred back on her course away, determined to block away all rebuttals.

Reduced to a whisper among the coughing for air and wiping of tears, Trina mustered a response. "I just don't want you to get hurt." It stopped Mayleigh dead in her tracks and she stood there, wondering how best to respond.

"From what?" she finally asked. She threw it out in the opposite direction of Trina and when she didn't hear a response, threw it again. It was louder the second time and more abrupt, both to ensure her words were heard.

Trina cradled her arms and with them withheld a response from her lips.

"From what?" Mayleigh echoed a third time, certain that Trina heard.

"From them." Trina finally stated. "From men."

Mayleigh was unsure of how to respond. She felt thankful that her friend cared for her but insulted she felt her so naïve. In contemplating an answer, one was given for her.

"And you don't have to listen to me," Trina whispered. "Cause if you do, you're replying with the same skepticism of love and sincerity that I have. Maybe you shouldn't listen. You should do what you think is best. And if you get your heart broken, know that it's better that way than to live with reservation. To live...not loving...wondering. I mean, that's what I do. Since Adam, I can't accept him. I can't make love to him without wondering."

"Without wondering what? You can't make love to whom without wondering?"

Trina took a deep breath. "I can't make love to Mike. I can only give him my body. Without giving him my heart, I can hope for the least amount of damage."

"That's bullshit!"

"Why? Because I don't want to feel the way that Adam made me feel again? Last night when Mike and I slept together, it felt good. Our bodies worked the way they were supposed to. I felt every touch, every move. I just refuse to let myself believe it'll be happily ever after anymore. I've learned that there is no such thing or place."

"Idiot!" Mayleigh said. "You above all should know that it takes *losing* love to *learn* love? You practically just said it to me!"

"Yeah. But I don't buy it. I came out here on wings. I thought Adam promised me everlasting happiness. When he kissed me I believed it was his vow. I was wrong though. It was only ambition talking. Adam wasn't saying a thing."

"Sure he was, but it just didn't work out."

"What do you know about Adam?"

"Nothing, I guess. But I don't see you with a guy that would break your heart on purpose. Maybe you just grew apart."

"Maybe. And maybe we just grew up." Trina stared down at her toes, which now she scrunched and unscrunched voraciously in her shoes. A tear balanced at the center of her pupil and Trina watched it leave her eye and descend in perfect form to a terra cotta stone in the concrete. When the tear hit, the stone washed a muddy brown. She slowly looked back up.

"But look what it has done for you, Trina. You've left a pointless life in Michigan for New York. You run an apartment complex. You are surrounded by friends. Apparently, though

you've decided not to share with your best friend that you are sleeping with an incredibly attractive boy." This made Trina blush. Her gaze descended again. "You're young and exploring a huge city. And you think Adam or ambition (or whatever it was) was wrong in bringing you out here? God, if that's what ambition is, then I hope I'm cursed with it every day for the rest of my heterosexual life. Because that way, I'll never grow tired of loving it and myself."

"But you don't know the pain I've felt."

"Trina, no matter how much pain it was, it had to be worth it. And if you sincerely don't think it is, well then I guess you don't deserve all this good fortune." Mayleigh continued an already over-stated opinion, this time without emphasis or inflection. She repeated her opinion as blandly as she could utter it. "You don't deserve to live comfortably around friends with the security of a steady income and two jobs. You deserve to live in the Midwest without any ambition whatsoever. And when you die there, alone, because ambition never touched you, you can at least say thank *God* I never felt any pain."

Trina stepped forward; unable to carry herself upright any farther, and hugged her friend hard. She felt the fear she had for her friend was one between sisters. She never fully understood it before. It wasn't Rhonda at home that had shown her the truth. It was Mayleigh. And now, finally, she understood.

"If you do get hurt," she choked into Mayleigh's ear, while strangling the air out of her chest. "If you ever get hurt, I want you to know I'll be there for you. All you have to do is walk upstairs, Mayleigh. I love you." She cried hard. And with all her heart, she felt truly happy to welcome her younger sister to the Complex.

56

And without warning, Trina had accomplished the mission she started so long ago. She had her Duplex now, existing in the six rooms of the Complex, the front sidewalk, and the four walls of the coffee house.

It was almost as if Mayleigh didn't live in the same building though. Trina never saw her. Each morning Trina awoke to the sounds of Marco getting ready for school. His excitement for education and seeing his peers, coupled with the independence he'd learned following his mom's passing, allowed him to motivate himself each day. And when Trina would finally yawn her way to the kitchen, Marco had managed to set both the bathroom and kitchen in disarray. Instincts Trina never knew existed in her began to drum to life as the spring mornings stretched slowly through the rainy early months of rejuvenation. New York was reborn this year, as with all years, and Trina, too, had broken free of her chrysalis to gracefully exercise her new disposition on life. Pieces of maturity had grown in where her dying inadequacies lay frail, tucked deep beneath her skin in undisturbed darkness. As Trina straightened Marco's clothes and, on bended knee coerced his hair to the conservative nine-year-old swoop across his forehead, she thought the boy looked older and wiser with each day. It got to the point where she would draw him near, planting a kiss on his freshly-bathed cheek, adorning his Latino child sideburns. She'd think, at times, she could see the line where one day his moustache and beard might grow in. *Surely*, she thought, *he'd be a handsome man. He'll make some girls' hearts flutter.* Her diatribe with love sedated, she added a special wish for him to find happiness and never settle on anyone.

Is he losing his New York accent, she'd wonder. As impressionable as children are, especially in households where different languages and dialects are spoken, she thought it was just her imagination. And times when she'd steal an earful of Marco conversing with the neighborhood boys in Spanish, she prayed he would never forget his native tongue. Born and raised in Park Slope, he should never let the Puerto Rican blood dilute in her Irish-English-Michigander-mutt identity. *Let him take my ethics. But may the Gonzales remain in him.*

And when she'd open the door for him to leave for school, accompanying the chatter of school children flowing through the Brooklyn streets, she'd beam a bit of pride that she felt for the child she'd taken as her own. Perhaps she knew what Rhonda felt with her toddler. Perhaps she was truly a mother.

Dusty would normally pop out of his apartment at 8:15 when Trina creaked down the stairs to the front closet. It was here, Trina established, that the materials for the Complex's upkeep were kept. The bulky winter jackets (that the tenants felt safe about leaving there) were gone,

now replaced by spring wear. This year the jean jacket had returned, leaving enough room for paint cans, toolboxes, and 125-grit sandpaper. Trina had started mid-March to sand the woodwork in the halls back to their original wooden beauty. The Complex, born at the turn of the century, was grandfathered in to earning a new coat of paint every year. The job, though tough, brought Trina joy with the blisters. Every day, a new coat was shed, a passing conversation was shared with a tenant, and ancient pine was granted sunlight it hadn't seen in generations. As each new slat of the banister was exposed, so were more connections to her family and deeper insight into her own station in life.

He was always eating when he came out. Crumbs of waffles or toast would bounce off his chin as he wasted time with her in the hall, rambling about artists and exhibits that hit the museum. Trina enjoyed their talks, which eventually would leave the trivial splattering of pigment on canvass, fired clay on pedestal, and found objects, metals, polymers, (or whatever people used) to manifest their muses these days. They'd embark, while she sanded, on conversations spanning philosophy and religion, politics and ethics. Dusty, a vividly conservative type, always had something to say about the Senator. Trina, defending her position, would get increasingly frustrated until her tempo rose in exasperation and her hand scrubbed furiously at the newels and rails below. It was the dawn of April before the first floor was complete. And as abruptly as he'd emerge, he'd leave for Manhattan, only to dwell in the thoughts she'd leave him with. He'd carry their conversations through the towering halls of the Met, sharing them with curators and visitors alike. Listen and know. Think, however, and believe. Defend your points objectively. Say *yes*. Say *no*. But most importantly, say *you're right* when it's merited. Trina could hardly believe that Dusty ceded to the matter that maybe Picasso did go through a cheap period, instead of a depression, and that's what caused him to repetitively use the presumably frugally-priced blue paint.

A wealthy Brian would rap ever-so-lightly on Tony's door. It was almost as if they both thought their respective parents lived down the hall. Eventually, he'd be received as quietly. Neither of their parents had stopped by to visit since the two had taken the adjacent suites, and Trina felt more comfortable at times in one of their apartments than she felt in her own. The darkroom in Tony's front room was assembled and stocked, and oftentimes Trina would tiptoe under clotheslines of portraits—of passers-by, unnoticed celebs, and chic-boys on 34th and Seventh. The checks would continue to come, regardless of their folks' lack of visit, and seemingly each week Tony filled his home with something new from Pier 1 or Crate & Barrel. They'd never fight, Trina thought, as they acted more like sisters than a couple.

Discussing their thoughts on men once in a while, the boys would express their extreme approval in her selection of Mike, as if she had any choice in her affection for him. The mild animosity between the boys and Mike was subtle enough to keep him from protesting. Trina was happy about this too. Her lover should feel comfortable talking openly with her friends.

"Girl, you'd have every man in this city fallin' over you if you'd just let me do your hair," Brian would say.

Tony would eventually leave to do photography work. His aspirations for the glamour world and fluent Spanish tongue landed him a part-time job with a Latin/alternate lifestyle magazine

called Hombre. At times, he'd also submit works to the posh women's journals on Fashion Avenue obsessed with the idea of being *cosmo*. Still, he'd answer recurring pages to do medico legal and forensic work, a service which New York would always require. A slight alteration in reality, he'd say: Swapping the fashion scene for the crime scene, their pasty faces frozen in a tight-lipped, medium format glare. What did it matter, though? Some of the runway models were skinny enough to be corpses anyway. Regardless, models don't smile. They stare into the distance and try to look provocative. Conspiracy is sexy. Being ignored is sexy. Passion was passé.

Her favorite time was noon. Invariably, above her she'd hear her shower start. The boys would exchange a knowing glance, and she'd excuse herself to go make lunch. Packing up the tools and mess in the hall, she'd dump everything back in the closet and journey up to her apartment. For some reason, Mike used her shower every day rather than his own. She'd set some soup or leftovers in the microwave and if she was feeling frisky, slip out of her own clothes to join him in the bathroom. The afternoon light stretched through the window, spanning the room, to stop in a stretched stack of squares on the shower curtain. Trina and Mike made love daily. Normally it'd be only once, but it wasn't for lack of trying. If Trina had her druthers, they'd never leave the apartment. Eventually, pruned and spent, she'd shut off the water and dress for lunch. Their conversations consisted mostly of Trina talking about what the boys had said earlier, or what their plans were for the day. After lunch was done, they'd stand side by side, doing the dishes together, and exchange one last kiss.

During the humid months of spring, Mike said, pianos warped the worst. His work spurts increased and so they'd leave together; Mike destined for the back of a Steinway, Trina for Chloe's.

She had a hard time deciding what she liked the most about her morning. The brief walk to the coffee house, where Mayleigh had been since 5:30, allowed her time to update herself on which restaurant was under new management, how much the 7th Avenue brownstones were going for, and what new graffiti artwork was hung on alley galleries. Trina started her shift at three, but normally got there just after two, in time to catch the tail end of the lunch rush. May hired a boy to work 11-1 to make up for the frenzy of people that journeyed out of Brooklyn's businesses to fill up her lunch counter. His name was Aaron and though Trina had only met him once or twice, she deduced that he didn't talk much. He wanted two hours a day, between whatever else he did, and she wouldn't give up her afternoons with Mike. It worked out great for the three of them; *four*, if you counted Mike.

Marco knew to meet Trina at the coffee house each night, tired from a few hours at the playground after school. The aides would generally wait until dark before they'd eject the last few children, but Marco would normally leave before five. He'd sit at the same table daily and eagerly devour his homework assignments with the focus of a dedicated student. She'd buy him a salad and sandwich with her tip money and he'd sip a chocolate milk (or hot chocolate depending on the weather) while practicing his mathematics. Coffee, he decided, was gross.

When the rush would die down, they'd make time to talk. As independent as he was, he longed for family discourse. He welcomed conversation with the girl who assumed the role of his mother readily, to the point where Trina had to ask him to slow down. The slang he learned during the days at school he knew to keep out of the conversation with her. Trina had expressed

her dislike of him using vulgarities. She knew he could curse along side the best of them, but doubted he knew what the words meant. He was extremely cautious, however, and if she heard a profanity slip, it would be followed quickly by an apology.

Mayleigh normally went home for the night around 5:30, unless she had a date with Dusty in the city. If Brian and Tony had stopped by for the night, Marco would play in the park across from the café where Trina could keep an eye on him. If they were spending the night at home, Marco would end up watching TV there until Trina got out and gathered him for his bedtime. Mike, after his duties of the day were complete, would live at the coffee house almost as much as Trina did.

Traditionally, Trina would close Chloe's at around midnight, but there had been some conversations and card games that forced the doors to remain open until later. And that's when the coffee house was most like Michigan, and what she remembered of it: the gang around the table, the cards in their hands, the espresso maker steaming, the air pots slowly draining, and the conversation rampant. Unfortunately, the abundance of caffeine in her system forced Trina to lose the time quite frequently. On more than a few occasions, she and Mike would arrive home, past the first unit where Mayleigh was sleeping, and collect Marco as the new day was approaching its second or third hour. The boys had learned to keep an extra toothbrush for him there, complete with a tube of his sparkly tartar-control gel.

The day would end with her accepting Mike's invitation for a mug of peppermint tea or warm merlot. They'd wind up in each other's arms again and sometimes find their way to his bed. Trina knew she'd be slinking back across the hall, almost in the style of Brian, to crash in her own bed to give her enough sleep to start fresh the next day.

Tony and Brian were happy together. Mayleigh and Dusty had continued their relationship of sharing sexual exploration. Trina and Mike spent some of their best hours together, which forced Trina to wonder if she was in love. *What does it feel like*, she thought. When you doubt if you ever loved before, the answer is pretty certain.

57

I'm trying to figure out just how I got here. I know this is a stupid way of starting a page, but when you think about it, it actually is pretty frightening.

I followed a man out here that I don't even see anymore. The reason for me packing my belongings and leaving Michigan is no longer a figure in my life...much less a reason to move. Then, there's Marco. I never wanted to be a mother. I saw what Rhonda had to put up with and I decided that it wasn't for me. Yet, here I am. I'm 23 years old and I am solely responsible for the well-being of this poor Puerto Rican boy whose father abandoned him and mother was murdered and raped.

My best friends are a piano-tuner, a reformed lesbian and her curator boyfriend, two gay guys, and an old black murderer named Billy. I think it's safe to say that I may have the oddest household in all of Park Slope.

Speaking of Billy, or Counts, I haven't seen him in weeks. When we fought this spring, he became distant. I honestly didn't realize the can of worms I was opening when I asked him if he loved his wife. He acted deeply hurt, to the point where I should've believed that he did...though something seemed to say that he didn't. She must've been someone extremely special to pull him away from his counseling. I wonder if he started counseling before, or after, he killed her. Before or after he loved her.

I think that all terrible things that happen in this world allow for beauty to rise out of it. Marco and I sometimes watch the time-elapsed videos of animal carcasses in the wilderness decaying and giving rise to new and beautiful plants, while feeding thousands of families of insects. It almost made it worth it for the gazelle or buck or whatever to die. It's not just on the Discovery Channel, either. Wars create newfound alliances that lead to long-lasting friendships. Families spread across continents. Foreign aid is sent to countries that never before got relief. Terrorism leads to rebirth and rekindling fellowship in entire cities. And more personally, rape and murder left me a beautiful son. Exile and abandon left me a wonderful man. Cancer left me a friend. Secrecy brought me the boys. And Adam left me here. He sold me on heaven, deserted me in limbo, and slowly I sanded and smoothed those time worn banisters into the pearly gates they are.

58

On the morning of June 13th, Randy Hogenstern died of pneumonia. The disease took ahold of him when his immune system shut down, defeated and limp to the affects of the full-fledged disease of AIDS. Sam and Lod Serveka, stood over his casket and peered in. The wooden box was for show, and after the wake, Randy would be placed on a conveyor that would incinerate his earthly remains, leprechaun green suit and all. When Lod began to tremble, Sam gave him a squeeze and carefully forfeited the rough façade he always wore. Lod bawled aloud and turned his reddened face into Sammy's coat to hide his tears from the rest of the bereft.

What they saw was a street person, Mayleigh thought. They saw a tatterdemalion with an odd taste in clothing. They saw a wasted life. She remembered standing in front of her mother who was laid out in the very same way. Her family afforded her a pine box with the engravings of fat little cherubs in marshmallow clouds. The pretentious mob caroled a requiem that seemed forced, rather than sincere—as if they were disrupted from their perfect lives to see their lunch-lady-turned-café-proprietor sister or daughter or friend spend her last moments above the earth. They wailed, still, at her stoic face like the ethnic fellow did for his chess partner. They too, must've seen a wasted life. A barely buoyant business and a lesbian girl were all she had to show. They were the only cards she held when she deserted the game.

The small bustle of mourners was startled when the back of the church felt the din of a door being smacked open. It was Billy Walker and he was pulling a man by his shoulder. The two elderly men looked awkward advancing toward the casket as though they were part of a three-legged race. The man in front was swearing a blue streak and Mayleigh could tell, from his accent, that he was British.

"Look at him!" Billy screamed.

Trina had let her party of friends in on the secret that the thick-bearded black man that they called Counts was actually William Walker, a former convicted felon.

"You're hurting my arm you filthy bastard!" the man yelled. When they approached, Mayleigh could also tell that they were roughly the same in age and that the Brit's cranberry pants clashed greatly against Billy's dirt-stained slacks. "Let me alone!" the Brit kept yelling.

"I said *Look at him!*" Billy yelled again and gave the man a shove. He tumbled forward and used his hands to stop him from landing directly on the body of Randy. They landed on the edge of the casket, one at Randy's waist, the other at his chin.

"All right, I'm looking!" he covered back and stared at the man in the casket. The whispering of the others in the church became audible as Billy's eyes burned into the back of the man's head.

"Do you recognize him?" Billy screamed.

"Should I?" the Brit replied. Suddenly, Trina stepped forward. She had been amazingly calm and spoken only in polite whispers until this point.

"What's going on, Billy? Who is this man?" Mayleigh watched Trina's watery eyes dart between the man in the cranberry pants and Billy's beard-hidden face.

"His name is Randy Hogenstern."

The dozen or so individuals in the room suddenly sounded like twice their size. The air was laden with questions, swears, and gasps. Mayleigh heard someone name a jail in Queens. Others pointed at Billy. Brian and Tony were gossiping like mad.

"Your name is Randy Hogenstern, isn't it?"

"What?" the Brit replied, spinning around with a fury that almost toppled Randy's peaceful slumber. "My name is—"

"Counts," Sammy interrupted, "you know Randy's dead. What is—"

"—your name is Randy Hogenstern and you know the corpse. Don't you?" The man was shaking from head to toe and he looked to Sam for guidance. Sam was bewildered and decided not to participate again. "The man behind you worked for you for fifteen years. What's his name?" The man's jaw opened, but all he did was stammer. "What's his name, goddam you!" Billy roared.

"I don't know," was all he could whimper.

"He worked for you for fifteen long years and you don't know his name?"

"I don't. I swear I don't. He wasn't important. He was—"

"HE WASN'T IMPORTANT???" Billy advanced with his fists raised. To Mayleigh, it looked quite unnatural to see an elderly man with his knuckles white and protruding, raised in attack. To a feeble man, it probably looked like death itself.

"I don't know his name!" the man screamed and scrambled behind the casket, panting furiously.

Billy looked poised to overtake him but stopped when he caught sight of the corpse's face. He stared openly and lovingly at the man's peaceful sleep and tears glazed the little black cheek that was visible below his shiny coal eyes. There, they lost themselves in the forest of his massive beard.

"Mopguy," he said plainly. "He was the mopguy where I used to live." Billy started out slowly. "He was my first adult patient. The first of many successes." Billy reached out and stroked the corpse's cheek.

"He was placed in the Queen's Detention Center so full of dope you'd think he was a Columbian piñata," Billy continued. Brian snickered, but the audience ignored him. "What would possess a man to drive up to his job, a job for which he harbored no spite, and torch the place?" he grinned.

"Nothing," Trina said as she walked to Billy's side. Billy was surprised to find a hand in his and he looked over to Trina as tears continued to disappear in his beard. "A man who loves his job, but hates his life would never do that."

"But Mopguy here was an arsonist. His 15 year sentence said so," Billy mocked.

"Ran—" she caught herself as the congregation listened intently. "Mopguy wasn't an arsonist. My bet is that he wasn't even from England."

Billy beamed. "He was from Buffalo. I'm starting to guess that his fashion sense was also borrowed." The man behind the casket's breathing had slowed, but quickened a little when he caught the group looking at him again. "Mopguy was addicted to cocaine. Where's the best free rehab clinic that provides three square meals, a job, and support to dropping bad habits?" Billy asked openly to the group. Surprisingly, the Brit was the first to answer.

"The Queen's Detention for Men."

"The Queen's Detention for Men," Billy repeated. The man looked up and grinned at Billy, feeling smart for a moment. "He spent fifteen years of his life in jail for you. The least you could've done is remembered his name." The man started stammering again and backing away gently. "Get out of here!" Billy hollered as the man backed off. He hurried his aging frame towards the main aisle and hobbled out.

For a minute and a half, no one said a word. Marco stepped forward and placed a rook on Mopguy's lapel. Billy stroked the boy's hair and Marco gave a half-hearted grin and ran to Brian. Billy pulled his notebook out of his coat. The dried blood on the cover had bronzed the edges of the pages, but the cover was clearly readable. He opened it up, studied it for a second, and closed it again. He laid the book on the man's stomach and touched him gently where he remembered the arm band being.

"You may ask one question, Trina," Billy said, still looking at Mopguy's face. He recalled when the face said those words to him.

"Billy where have you been?" A bit of a huzz-buzz occurred again as they first heard him being called Billy.

"I was wrong, Trina," Billy said to the corpse. He finally turned to look at her face and she could see his beetle-black eyes were coated with saline. "I loved Patie, Trina."

Trina recalled their argument and blushed. She didn't, however, break eye contact. "Just as I love you and Mayleigh as granddaughters, Mike and Dusty as grandsons, and Sam and Lod as brothers." The two men were still hugging and exchanged their perplexed faces for endearing ones. "...and Marco as my great-grandson. I love people, not for how they make me feel or for what they do for me. I love them for them." The open declaration of his feelings was out of character for Billy. He thought somewhere Patie was rolling over in her grave, hopefully with a smile on her face. Lod and Sam must've thought it odd too.

"What where you smoking on the roof, Counts?" Sam asked. The entire group laughed aloud.

"Please call me Billy, Sam," the man replied and joined in the laughter. He pictured his cellmate and friend, beyond the crowded lunchroom, and swore he saw him nod.

59

"I know, but I still can't believe it."

"What can't you believe, Trina?" Mike had an indifferent air about him as he buffed the black keys on Chloe's archaic piano. "Lot's of people pretend to be who they aren't. I think everyone wishes they were someone else at some point."

"That's for sure," Mayleigh cut in. "I'm gonna get a *freefill*. Anyone else?"

"Yeah, but he went to jail for his manager. He spent some of what could've been the best years of his life in confinement for another man...without receiving anything in return. I don't know anyone else who would've wished for that."

"Sure, you do. I think you, yourself, wished for it," Mike said. "He got just what he has looking for, really. He made some lifelong friends. He kicked his drug habit. He got himself out of his miserable routine...one that may've killed him if he kept at it. Who's to say that spending the best years of his life, living as someone else, weren't what made it the best years of his life?"

"How is that like me?"

"You had your routines up in cow country too, Tree. You said so yourself. You followed whassisname out here to become a New Yorker; to, essentially, become someone else. Perhaps you, too, became a bit confined. You got stuck in a lease, a job, and..." he added, looking over to Marco who was coloring a stack of rave flyers, "maybe a position doing something that you may not have anticipated *wanting* to do. You're spending the best years of your life being someone that you weren't just a year ago."

"I guess. But that's different, Mike. I mean, I'm not being someone else. I haven't taken someone else's name. I like to think I'm the same girl who came out here."

"You're not," Mayleigh peeped in, over a steaming cup of java.

"Yea, I don't think you are either," Mike agreed.

"You don't get to comment, Mister," Trina replied. "You didn't have the distinct honor of knowing me when I first moved out here. And maybe I have changed, a bit. I'm still Trina Fitzgerald. It's not like I'm living someone else's life."

"*Mira*, I'm bored," Marco sighed over the flyers. They advertised an under-the-bridge party before the Puerto Rican boy added heavily armed robots to their glossy sheen. "You guys are boring. Can we go to Playland?"

"I told you, Marco, not until school is out. You've got two more weeks." Trina was doodling in the piano's dust. It was the same sticky black dust that covered her windowsills and most of New York. Subconsciously she wondered how much was in her lungs and contemplated the idea of coughing.

"How about we go now and we go again in two weeks?"

"Sounds pretty fair to me," Mike tossed out, over a clinking of slightly-off flats and sharps.

"Again, no comment for you."

Mayleigh broke the idle glare the lovers were giving each other. "Want to go to the post office with me, Marco?"

"N'okay. Can I go, Aunt Trina?" Marco pleaded.

"Did you finish your sandwich?" Trina remarked, sounding more like her mother than she intended. She could see a boomerang of crust sitting amid his crayons, salami eking through his bite marks. "Yea, you can go."

When the two of them had finished hunting down all 24 hues in his 24-pack, they noisily left. The coffee house seemed more hollow than normal. Almost gutted.

Mike had started to play what sounded like a Rochmaninov warm-up, which Trina would later learn was a Mike Green original.

"Aunt Trina?" he threw.

"Yeah, he was tired of telling kids at school why his mom was a young Irish girl from the Midwest without a touch of Latino blood."

"So he invented an Aunt?"

"Yeah. And when I came in to view their dioramas one day I heard some of his little friends remark that I was a *MILF*. I had to ask him what that meant."

"Mom I'd like to—"

"I KNOW NOW!" she screeched as her face brightened and she laughed nervously.

"Anyway, I can't believe how different youth is here in the city from Michigan. Those words, thoughts, I wouldn't...I mean, I didn't *think* about that stuff for years after his age. I guess you're childhood was pretty similar to Marcos?"

Trina quite forgot about her question as she started to listen to Mike's playing. She stopped drawing ovals in the dust on top of the piano to lean in, her head resting on her elbow to hear the vibrations of the piano as she watched his nimble fingers. With her nose so close to the piano, she actually did cough, out of necessity rather than curiosity.

"I mean," she said, trancelike, not even listening to her own words. "Ex-cons playing therapists and killing their wives. Innocent men serving terms for guilty ones willingly. Two cases of changed identity. Epilepsy, AIDS, arson..." and she thought of the boy. "Rape...murder? I didn't even know what rape was. *Rape*. And Marco had to watch..." she trailed off as the notes swelled below her.

Trina lay there and listened to the soft undertones of piano-wire vibrations against her elbow, which seemed to echo through the meat of her arm and into her eardrum. She began to hum with the simple melody of the tune. She loved the way his brow furled and his eyes labored over an invisible music sheet. His mouth slid slightly open as he brought his incisors down softly on the pink flesh of his lower lip, resting gently in a comfortable indentation. The veins in the back of his hands swelled and she could watch his individual tendons rise as each finger descended on the keys. His form was rigid as his wrists hovered gently over the lip of the Steinway. The melody built as the deep repetitiveness of his left hand complimented the melody of his right. He rocked slightly and closed his eyes.

Trina was helpless to watch them caress the keys, lost in the moment of the suddenly perfectly-tuned piano. She felt every vibrato; every sustain. Dust pulsed through the cracks of the old wood and drifted up with the ceiling fans as Trina watched Mike's jaw open slightly more. As the rhythm crested, he began to sing.

"Sorry," he sang. "Is all that you can't say? Years gone by and still. Words don't come easily. Like sorry...like sorry..."

Trina didn't recognize the tune, but hearing Mike sing was enough to still her breathing and purse her own lips. Her face tensed to awe as she focused on his mouth. "Forgive me. It's all that you can't say. Years gone by and still. Words don't come easily. Like forgive me...forgive me..."

Suddenly she felt her eyes moisten. She was transported back to River Town. Adam had her in his arms and was spinning her around. So fast, she felt. So fast.

But you can say, baby.

Why now? She thought. Just shut up and listen to him. This isn't Michigan. This isn't River Town. This isn't Adam. This isn't Cat Fuckin' Stevens. *Baby can I hold you tonight.* God, he's so beautiful right now. *Baby if I told you the right words. Ooh, at the right time. You'd be mine.*

The playing evolved back into a moment of instrumental as Trina felt her heartbeat quicken and her knees feel unsteady. She concentrated on solidifying her position on the piano as she saw him open his eyes and look from his hands up to her face. He gave a little goofy grin and looked back down to the keys. He started the refrain again and Trina hummed along, wondering why he'd never told her he could sing before. His voice was no longer the youthful New York accent she expected, but a soft, articulated tone. His face, so serious, emoted each vowel effortlessly and held a slight grin as he continued through the song. His fingers switched keys as though he was carelessly flattening a sheet. His rocking slowed and became less apparent as he finished the verse and let his fingers trail through the end of the melody. They progressed to near silence, paused, and played the flourish of a soft, almost saddening chord.

For a brief moment they just sat there. The dust stopped rising from the warped edges of the piano and the last notes' vibrations rang to echoes. The echoes rang to silence. She heard brass punch gently against wood, while he released the pedals.

"I...had...no idea," was all she could muster. He grinned and exhaled slowly, almost laboriously. "Why—"

"Because I don't play for people often. I played for Charlize, but never for more than one person at a time. And definitely not songs like that."

"I thought you were doing an exercise at first."

"I was. You just play notes that you know sound good together and fit transitions in between them. It's actually pretty easy."

"For you, maybe. You made it up?"

"Yea, but it started sounding like Tracy so I went with it."

"That wasn't original?"

Mike laughed. "The song? No. I'm flattered, but I can't take credit for it. It's Tracy Chapman," he said as he closed the piano and ran his hand down the length of the key cover, upsetting some last pockets of dust.

"The *Fast Car* lady?"

"The very same. You want to get running?"

As he stood up, Trina was helpless but to reach forward and pull his face to hers. She held it as she kissed him, slowly caressing his cheeks and the hair behind his ears. She ran her fingers down to his neck, over his clavicles and down his chest. He accepted her kiss and reached around her to lock his hands behind the small of her back. Carelessly, she pushed her chest into his, feeling the warmth of the air and his body. His face was slightly moist with perspiration and she

could taste salt in his kiss. She brought her hands up to his chin and awkwardly rested her wrists on either side of his throat, index fingers touching his jaw line.

“Mmmm,” Mike grinned as they took a pause. “Maybe I should sing more often.”

Slightly startled, Trina opened her eyes to look in his. She had expected to hear Adam’s voice and was bitter that she felt that way. Her eyes had welled and Mike saw the longing and mistook it as her longing to be with him.

Trina was grateful he didn’t see her doubt. She was completely and utterly enveloped in sheer desire for Mike, but couldn’t erase her former lover from her mind. As he leaned in to kiss her again she closed her eyes and said a silent prayer that somewhere, wherever he was, Adam was all right. And even more, Trina hoped he was happy.

60

"AIDS, Trina?"

"Yeah, but it was from a needle. I don't think he was gay."

"You don't think?" Rhonda's voice scratched through the receiver of the kitchen phone.

"And how can you act like a needle is nothing important. Like there's any difference between being gay and being a stoner."

"What? Rhonda, there *is*! I can't believe you just said that." In the year that Trina had lived in New York, she'd seen her nephew grow through email attachments and holiday wallet-sized prints mailed with cards that matched whatever attire she had dolled him in. Rhonda's approval of her sister's resolution to move to New York was as short-received as Trina's communication with her parents since. In short, no Fitzgerald breathed a word of praise for Trina's decisions or her situation.

"I don't know, Trina. You seem to be mingling with a sketchy crowd."

Trina was fidgeting with a toucan plush toy she won at Playland earlier in the week. Marco, Mike, Dusty and her traveled out to Rye on the Metro North while Mayleigh stayed behind to man Chloe's. "For your information, dear sister, homosexuals are not the devil's work, contrary to everything Dad may say. Some of my closest friends are gay. Besides, if you get the opportunity to sublet, I highly recommend them for roommates. I can't speak on behalf of their entire community, but they seem to be very clean individuals."

"I don't care, Trina. They're sketchy. And it's not only them that I worry about. It's the drug dealers and drug addicts, the mixed ethnicity of your neighbors, their lackadaisical work ethics. You're becoming one of them, you know."

Trina felt her heart flutter as it used to in school when she thought her sister would find her marijuana stash. It was a real shocker the day that Rhonda sat her down and told her that she was pregnant. Her straight-laced, A-student of a younger sister was knocked up by a red neck drifter. The Fitzgerald's record wasn't pristine when it came to nuclear families and the American ideal, yet the surprise of seeing Rhonda toppled from the top tier of a perfect life both amused and frightened Trina. Her mind erased the thoughts of status the second she saw her nephew Alex's smiling face and gigantic blue eyes. Besides, Trina thought, only her closest friends knew that the stand-up speaker/end table had a hinged top that concealed her stash. Rhonda was no threat on either level.

"How, Rhonda? How am I becoming a drug dealer or drug addict?"

"You eventually become like your friends, sis. I'm not trying to be mean." In a way, Rhonda would always seem innocent to Trina and she honestly was okay with that.

"I don't deal drugs, Ronnie. I have two jobs, both of which are legal."

"You and your bohemian friends are just what Brooklyn is about, isn't it? People don't want to apply themselves to become doctors or lawyers or anything of meaning." Rhonda was taking night classes at the local university and online to become a radiologist. The Booksmarts Fairy had given her a generous sprinkle when the two girls were younger, or else some of Trina's portion had drifted with their shared room's window draft to rest gently on her sister while the two slept. Either way, Trina was left with the average dosage, but made up for her sister's excess with personality, charm, and street smarts.

"Mayleigh took over for her mom when she died of cancer. Being an entrepreneur and proprietor of a coffee house isn't *bohemian*. Besides, she's continuing a family business and there's something to be said about the merit in that."

"Coffee houses are the bohemian's breeding grounds."

Trina scoffed. "And what about Dusty? He's training as a curator for the Museum of Modern Art. He has a degree from the AIPh."

"What does a bohemian live for except for art?" Rhonda was having a difficult time concealing her frustration. Her Michigan accent peaked out whenever she became agitated. "I told that to you when you got your tattoo."

Trina subconsciously brought her hand up to her shoulder and felt the slightly raised skin that pronounced the line drawing of a fairy sprinkling stars from a pouch on her hip. The stars fluttered in the breeze to plunk into a sea, instantly morphing to starfish around her elbow. She got the illustration from Adam in Michigan and decided she liked it enough to brand herself with it. It served as a reminder of his creativity and the immense impact he had on her back then. Even now.

"Tony has a bachelor's degree from Pratt and works as a photographer."

"That's art, Tree."

"Well he does it for the City of New York. The *government*."

"A bohemian's gotta eat."

Trina was exasperated. "I can't win with you Rhonda!"

Rhonda, realizing that her pining for the last ten minutes was getting an edge, continued along the same derisive vein. "I worry about you, Trina. You're dating a piano tuner that can't even afford an apartment. You have a little Spanish boy living with you and you don't know the first thing about being a mother. He doesn't have a father figure in his life either. You may be damaging more than yourself, here. Why don't you just come home?"

"I CAN'T, DAMMIT!" Trina screamed at the phone as her eyes began to well with tears. It was as though their ducts couldn't decide if she was mad or upset but decided to spring regardless. "And just because I didn't have nine months to plan for motherhood, Rhonda, I think I do know some things about raising a child. Besides, Marco is a smart, well-behaved boy. Marco's never had a father. That's no different than Alex, but Mike provides him the love and support he needs. And he's not Spanish. He's Puerto Rican, Ronnie. There's a difference."

"The piano tuner is his father figure?"

"MIKE," Trina enunciated. She made it obvious she didn't like her lover being referred to by his occupation, "MIKE is Marco's role model. Marco loves him and wants to be just like him."

"Bohemian breeding grounds."

"Now you're being ridiculous. Why not do what you love to do? As long as you can support yourself and dependents, then what's the problem with that? I have a good life, here Ronnie. Please understand that I'm happy."

"I know, sis. I just worry."

"You don't need to. Besides, I'm going to try to persuade Mike to take a job as a conductor for the MTA."

"That's at least a step up from tuning pianos. Leading an orchestra is promising, I guess."

"What?" Trina was lost.

"You said conductor. I figured the MTA was, like, a Theatre Association or something...Metropolitan..."

Trina giggled aloud. The pun had caught her off guard as well. "No, Ron, like a train conductor. Those guys get between 15 and 20 an hour to run those trains. It's safe, honest work." Rhonda saw the humor, finally, and joined her sister in laughing. The two had let their tension for each other pass and now talked as friends again.

"Will he go for it?"

"Maybe. It's good money."

"Let me know, ok? I gotta get running. Alex is due back from daycare and I've got a mountain of homework."

"You're taking summer classes?"

"The MCATS are in September. I'm thinking of switching from a neuroradiology concentration to pediatrics. Alex may be having some affect on me. Either way, with any luck I can graduate in three Decembers."

"Ugh. I don't know how you do it, Doctor. My less-than-four years were enough for me."

"Then, after that, I get 5 years of residency. And don't call me Doctor."

"Talking about school is getting me nauseous."

"Nauseated," Rhonda corrected. It seemed they were sliding back into sister mode so Trina opted to cut the call short.

"I'll letcha know what happens with Mike. *Buena suerte con tus estudios.*" She showed off a little of what she picked up from Marco.

"Please translate the Puerto Rican?"

"Good luck with studying. And it's Spanish."

"I don't get third world countries. Bye, sis." Trina opted to ignore her sister's lack of PC terminology and silently blamed it on Michigan's remote disconnection with the world.

"Adios, mami!"

61

“Was it that bad?” Mike asked with genuine concern in his eyes. He, Trina and Marco were walking through the winding paved lanes that made up the Greenwood Cemetery. Trina had promised herself to visit more this summer, yet somehow she kept finding reasons why she was too busy. It seemed a little bizarre to her how the things that she treasured the most were the ones that she convinced herself not to do.

The coat of slick, thin dew that clung closely to the outer edges of flannel and nylon had vanished, as always was the case when summer set in to shelf Spring for the following year. It was June and her flannels were long gone. The slickness was replaced by one that hugs closer to the body and licks at the skin. It lines the undersides of breasts allowing to them to revolve slightly with a more frictionless track. It adds a tang of musk to lover’s escapades and donates to the salty marinade of sex. It ejects into the air when vaporized and leaves a scent behind—a scent of natural, uncontained emotion. It’s what dries, like a sea-monkey unattended, on lover’s brows; only to rise again when the tanks are replenished. Trina felt its grainy residue between Mike’s knuckles as she walked thru the gravestones, clunking her other hand against the wrought iron gate that encircled the humid, green tranquility of Greenwood.

Marco had learned in class about doing gravestone rubbings and he now ran around frantically with a half a ream of paper and three skinless, broken crayons. He had a few army men that he’d set up on top of the headstone to guard him while he scribbled the rubbing onto another sheet.

“No, not really. It was pretty bad, but I’m just in a bad mood, I guess.” Marco ran back to the two of them and handed them a finished rubbing for them to look at. They had already received a dozen or so and gave up trying to be original with their approval of the artwork. “*Good job! Do another green one*” or “*Go for a world record of gravestone rubbings!*” and sometimes “*Marco, don’t forget your action figure over there*” would be their reply. Ultimately, Marco just handed the art to them so he didn’t have to carry it anyway.

“Why? What happened?” Mike’s concern continued.

“You know I worked a full day, right?”

“Yea, I kinda missed the shower this morning.”

Trina ignored his innuendo. “Well, Dusty came in this afternoon and I was already in a bad mood because I’m used to the half-day thing. Anyway, *he* had a half-day for some reason and he and Mayleigh were kissing and whispering for an hour or so.” She didn’t know if that warranted being a bad day or not.

“I could go in tomorrow and we can kiss and whisper for a whole day, if you like?”

Trina smiled. "I'd like that. Are you working tomorrow?"
"Nope. No pianos this week for some reason," Mike replied, mildly thrilled about the predicament.

"Have you thought about what I asked, before? About working for the MTA?"

Mike's expression changed quickly and returned quicker still. It was a slight alteration that only a lover could sense and Trina knew that the idea didn't sit well with him. She persisted, though, thinking it was best and caressed the grainy pockets between his fingers. Her other hand continued to clunk away.

"I don't think it's *me*, Trina. I'm happy doing what I'm doing."

"I know, Mike. Don't you get bored though? Don't you want to start paying off your bills and things? And maybe getting a little extra saved up?"

"Maybe, but I'm not in a rush." Mike wasn't bending on the matter. His inflection inferred that it was time to discuss something else; a polite *new topic, please, we're through with this one*.

Trina grabbed one of the iron stakes, out of frustration, and realized it tugged her back. Awkwardly, she recovered and looked at him. It took Mike a few steps to realize she wasn't by his side anymore. He turned around slowly and surveyed the look on Trina's face.

"Look, Mike. Please don't take offense to what I'm about to say. I'm probably not in the best mood to have this conversation, but I think it's necessary. Ok?"

"Trina, wait—"

"I know you didn't ask for this in any way. I like running The Complex and working with tenants. I have to fill your room, though. I have to have money coming in from that apartment."

"I know, but—"

"And with having Marco, my bills are higher so I can't keep eating the costs. I like having you over, and eating meals with you, and..." she thought about their mornings together "*being* with you, and all, but my bills are really getting tough. That's why I worked a full day today. That's why I'm working full days all week. And I'd rather work full days than lose those moments with you, honestly, Mike."

"I know, Trina."

"So I thought if one of us was working a job that brought in twenty bucks an hour, it'd be better. I thought you would like it because it's pretty laid back and it pays well."

"Yeah, but it's not *me*."

Trina's voice rose a little. "Then what is you, Mike? What can you do that pays well that allows us to afford our lifestyle: two apartments, you, me, Marco. How do we do it?"

"I don't know. But I'll start looking for something else, ok? This week, since I have off anyway, I'll start searching through the papers for something that I could do; something that's more my style. Ok?"

"Really?"

"Yea," he said. Though he didn't sound pleased.

"I know what I'm asking, Mike. I know how much you like what you do and how it's so much of who you are. You know I wouldn't ask for it if I didn't think it was necessary. Right?"

Just then, Marco walked up with tears in his eyes. Trina hadn't seen him cry for months now, though it was perfectly natural for a boy his age. Immediately, her motherly instincts kicked in and she knelt in front of him. "What's wrong, sweetie? Are you hurt? Did you fall?"

Marco shook his head and a tear flitted down his cheek. He clutched his rubbing supplies in front of him and Trina saw his saliva-webbed lips part slowly, shaking. He looked up briefly to

Mike and then back to Trina again, but said nothing. Trina pulled him to her and hugged him tight. "Whatever it is, Marco, its ok. I promise. Ok?"

Mike knelt down too when Marco started sobbing aloud. It was obvious what was running through his mind. Trina looked into his eyes and could see it there and it scared her. She saw his fear for this impending family that had somehow found its way to him. Mike, who Trina's sister referred to as a bohemian somewhat lacking in any responsibility, was scared to be considered a father. Mike, who never knew a loving family, was scared to take on the duties of a provider. And when Marco let go of Trina's now-red neck, she could see genuine fright in Mike's eyes that Marco would hug him next. Instead, however, the boy held up an awkward blue rubbing of Maria Gonzales' headstone. The boy had found his mother.

62

Mike did show some initiative, as promised, that he would search for a new job. He accompanied Trina thru her full work week and the following two as well. Each day, after the morning bathing rituals, the two of them would slip out of the Complex and march down to the bodega on the corner for a New York Post, Village Voice, and Daily Sun. Getting an early start on the day enabled them to also elude the solar tractor beams as which would weigh down on them as the sun rose higher. It would set in during the afternoon rush.

As lovers tend to do, they transcended the exploring-each-other's-bodies phase and moved into expected ownership. They, with automatic reluctances, passed quietly from that stage into the if-you-initiate-I'll-oblige process and now sauntered on the outer edge of routine. The well-polished luster of their relationship had been stripped deeper than the Complex banisters and the two were satisfied with a habitual regime. Truly, only stronger relationships succeed to this phase. Stronger still survive them.

Trina secretly wondered if three weeks of red Xs and ball-point circles dictated the narrowing prospect of a job that was Mike-like. How long would it take to track down that elusive career? It seemed a rigorous task for the couple and after the first week she stopped volunteering ideas. The reactions Mike provided, most being half in defense and the remainder in stubborn reluctance, increasingly agitated her; each one leaving a bit of doubt and frustration in her heart's apron pocket, next to the waning tips.

Marco hadn't recovered as quickly from his funereal discovery as Trina had hoped. Equally, she couldn't erase Randy's ashen face from her dreams and wondered if he was haunting her for some personal reason. She constantly stifled desire to speak with Billy about Randy's nightly visitations, but she hadn't seen him since the funeral, since he once again became Billy to the rest of the world.

Each night, she'd talk Marco to sleep answering his questions as best she could. He'd ask about the afterlife and what she believed. She told him her strong convictions towards cosmic good and evil. She said she wasn't sure if that cosmic good resided in a supreme being, one that Christians called Jesus, that Moslems call Allah, or that the faithless called That-no-good-sunuvabitch-in-the-sky. She handled his queries on benevolence verses malevolence the best she could. *Would he answer me if I prayed to him? I don't know, Marco. Why did he hurt my mom? I don't know Marco. Does he hate me? No Marco. How do you know? I don't know, Marco.*

And secretly, she was hoping his innocence might attract that greater being of cosmic decency to shed some light on why, when things seemed so wonderful months before, they started tasting acrid and sour again. She felt, at times, she was like a holiday village snow globe, domed over with a stratosphere of children's hands and gaping eyes. How is it that every time

the flurries settle, some sadistic hand tips us over; some evil mind feels it's better to face a blizzard than to deal with the static routine that is our lives? Does it feel I can't handle the morning papers and rejected Mike-likes? Or that I'm not ready to move past this sickening squall of memories of last month's happier times and next year's uncertainty? Or is it blind? Is the scale of malevolence verses benevolence giving the sticky fingerprints of a deity too much credit? Let me see it, Trina thought. I can discern if It shakes out of awe. I'm sure I'll see a smirk if It shakes out of pleasure. I hope to God I don't see the wonder-less, unaffected glaze of a face that shakes because it doesn't know not to shake.

So Trina would let him ramble on about how God might be mad because it's six months from his birthday and he has to wait a while until he can get presents again. And eventually, he'll yawn and fantasize about how, last year, God may have wanted his mom as a present, because she was such a good one to Marco, himself. God saw her endlessly dotting, never-tired arms that gave Marco his happy youth and he took it for himself. Is that what happened, he'd say, mid-yawn and partially unconscious. *I don't know, Marco.*

She would let him drift away thinking of presents and festivities, while tip-toeing to the kitchen and to heat a mug of peppermint tea and study the breezes in the back yard of the Complex. The radiators, long-cooled, were once again benches for her boxed PJs and slipperless toes. The tea, half winter's temperature, would settle her mind as she would wonder why Randy plagued her evenings' reverie. How could you be happy in someone else's life, Mr. Hogenstern? Are you trying to ask me the same thing? Her rhetoric circled as she stirred the soothing broth of lukewarm Celestial Seasonings and prayed that Billy would return soon and safe.

And though she bit her lip, an unconscious punishment for the thoughts she let flood her mind, she thought of Adam. In the schedule that was her relationship with Mike, she wondered if the very last moments in which Adam lived with her, he was straining against the impulses to shake the snow globe himself, each time he thought the routine would drive him mad. She sat alone, bumps of worn and layered semi-gloss white under her toes, and swore to God that she'd get through the every day frustrations of her love for Mike. If people can be married for decades, there must be a way to cope.

Maybe, she thought, the very reason she was conflicted now was because when relationships of the past neared this phase, Trina had subconsciously pushed her lovers away. She wondered if she had pushed Adam away. The only way she could have, she resolved, was if she pulled him too close. For the body's natural reaction to external dangers is always distance.

Bullshit, she thought and even partially believed. The same ambition that got my ass here in the first place is what took him to Manhattan. Equally, it's what got me in this predicament with Mike, with Marco, with the whole Complex. And distance, she realized, might be the only way to save what happiness she currently held. Strangely, the body's method of salvation is identical to its method of destruction.

Trina rose and shook Randy from her head as he squirreled through her waking thoughts. He left acorns of sleepy powder in the corners of her eyes and as she pinched the bridge of her nose, she hoped to squeeze his knothole closed, engaging him from the conscious thoughts of her day.

She walked lazily by Marco, who'd been sleeping in later and later each day. Remembering how he would wake her with cartoons, she wondered if his nocturnal squirrel hunts were healthy. He was sleeping awkwardly on a mound of his covers, his tiny butt pointed straight up in the air, his arms clutching a mass of comforter and pillow.

Turning on the shower and radio in the bathroom, which was used to fill her with the morning's local news and mask their sexual noises if Marco's cartoons didn't do the trick in the other room. Mike, who used to sneak up behind her and wrap her in a hug and neck nibble, had slipped into the custom of meeting her in the shower instead.

She filled the coffee pot and poured a bowl of cereal for the boy, who still seemed to be climbing trees.

"Up and at 'em, kiddo," she coaxed, and yanked lightly at his worn, unforgiving Underoo's elastic as she walked by. "You've slept enough, buddy."

She dug through her dresser for a bra and pair of panties as she heard the nomadic deadbolt in the kitchen slide happily home. Secretly, she wanted him to come to her and seduce her there as she bent over a pair of frayed Jockey's and hunted for a thong that never seemed comfortable in a humid café during a nine hour day.

Instead, however, she listened to the shower curtain rings collect for a group hug, and yawn back to equal distance like a marching band of un-oiled bike chains. Sojourning to march in as lead drum major, and hoping to join in their brief symphony with matching moans, she tried in vain again to wake up the boy. One last tug evoked a giggly pleading as the elastic gave away. His naked bottom greeted the sun, which was on schedule with its morning chores. She contemplated a picture before whisking off to the bathroom to greet her own daily routine.

Mike was facing the wall and scrubbing an ankle that he had perched precariously in the built-in ceramic soap tray. The hairs on his body were streamlined with the flowing water and flickered slowly in unison, like flags on funeral Lincolns.

He glanced over to her naked body and his eyes stopped on her breasts. They eagerly awaited a sensual cleansing and rotated a half a degree on their respective axes. His face, reddened by the flush of surprise and angle of scrubbing leaned in slowly and kissed her right breast beside the nipple. He leaned up, slowly, and the funeral flags wavered back to gravity's stop-sign-less trek downward. She glanced down to take the early vision in, promising to make the imagery last all day. His slender figure was taut and glistening as he backed up from the stream to let her in. Lines descended from his hips towards his penis, which now resembled a drainpipe as the water careened off it at the angle which it hung. A small ravine bounded off his shoulders and down the definition of his neck to rest and overflow where his clavicles and sternum met. He inhaled as she walked into the tub and sweetly pinned him between her and the wall. His eyes wandered over her face and smile as the shower head pummeled her hair and flattened it across her face.

"Not today, ok?"

The words were so alarming, so unwelcome in fact, that Trina's natural reaction was to pretend she didn't hear them.

"Seriously, Tree. Not today. I don't feel up to it. Ok?"

"Yea, sure," she volunteered, but her hips abstained and her chest, in half-degree revolution joined in with a full-scale denial. She searched his face as he grabbed for the shampoo. He must've noticed because he lathered up his hair and turned away from her. She watched him from behind, as the water bounced off her and splashed to his back, running down his slightly indented spine to disappear between the globes of his rear.

She reached out and stroked his shoulders slowly, as the back of her fingers hit his biceps which labored over a head of bubbles and froth.

"Not even a little, Mike?"

"Not today."

Mike, who joined the reluctantly conscious Marco for cartoons, drank his coffee without saying a word. Marco interjected a few comments about Supercow's get-up and Dexter's genius, but Mike didn't seem to be paying attention. Trina washed her mug and shut off the coffee pot.

"You're going to Brian's today, buddy. Tony's working," she hollered to the other room as she watched the suds and dregs spiral down. "Hear me?"

There was no answer so she shut off the water, dried her hands hastily, and popped her head around the corner to ask again.

"Can I play with Mike today, Aunt Trina?"

"Mike's going to the coffee house to find a j—"

"Actually, it's cool. I can stay behind today. G'head," Mike replied over his shoulder.

"Mike, are you sure?" she asked, with a stutter of disapproval.

"Yea. You go ahead."

"Can I talk to you for a second, Mike?" her tone continued. "In here, please?"

Mike slowly got up and walked to the kitchen as Trina got her shoes on and grabbed her apron. "You okay, Mike?"

"Yeah, fine."

"You sure? Because it's kinda been a confusing morning and I only got up," she looked at her watch, "about 28 minutes ago."

"Yeah, Tree. I'm just not feeling well. That's all," Mike rushed. Trina, who felt she could read him easier and easier over time, couldn't tell if he was being sincere. "Don't worry about me or Marco. We may pop by later," he said, turning back toward the television in the other room. "You're gonna be late."

"There's some Pepto in the fridge if it's a stomach thing."

She followed after him in hopes of saying a proper goodbye, but the phone chimed to life and, again, Mike raced away from her. "Hurry up, Tree. I'll take care of things."

With the intents for a good day kiss lost to an intruder on the phone line, Trina turned and walked out. She passed by Dusty, whom she neglected sharing morning conversations with since his half-day almost a month back, and asked him to inform Brian of his reprieve from Marco-sitting.

She walked to work, angered and tired. The sticky hand had given her globe a turn again and she wondered who was distancing who. Was she pushing or pulling?

Her morning alertness came as she trekked to the café, and was at full peak when she swung open the front doors. Mayleigh was sitting on the front counter smoking her morning Camel and swinging her legs.

"Hey cutie," she said, and immediately sensed her friend was distraught. She tried her best to arouse a smile. "You know, if you gave the slightest wink to me, I may still be a lesbian right now." It worked.

"Hi May. Thank you, I think."

"What's wrong, Tree?"

"Nothing," she lied. And moments after she had donned her apron and tied her hair up, decided to remit the remark. "We didn't make love this morning."

Mayleigh, who lacked any sense of theatrics, began to erupt in emoted, telegraphed monologue about the world coming to an end. "I need to locate two of every species and herd them into this café immediately!" she hollered.

Trina laughed. "May..."

“Seriously! We need massive procreation in this place, now! I need to flood the world with the love juices of every animal in God’s kingdom. That’s the only way to set things right!” Trina was crying now, almost entirely from laughter. Some scared and broken tears, however, used this as an excuse to bleed down her face.

“Ok, no wait, three animals of every species. That way if one turns out to be gay at least they’ll go out of existence with a bang! Hurry, people!” she screamed to passers-by. “We don’t have much time!”

The two of them laughed together as they set out the bagels and brewed the early blends. The clock ticked lazily past eight as the two of them gathered in the front window with their own cups of coffee.

“May, I’m so thankful for you.”

“Seriously, Tree. What’s wrong? It can’t be just the sex thing.”

Sarcastically, Trina replied. “Oh my God, you know me so well. How’d you know it wasn’t just because Mike and I didn’t get it on today?”

“You’re an open book, cutie.”

“Stop,” she grinned. “I don’t feel cute. I stood in front of him naked this morning. He kissed my tit and turned his back to shampoo. He said he didn’t feel up to it, but I can’t tell if he’s really sick. And that’s not it, May. I’ve been thinking a lot lately.”

“About?”

“About this,” she said, and her gaze gestured out into Brooklyn’s yawning streets and languid, orange shadows. “About this not being what I had in mind. I feel...Jesus. I don’t talk to Dusty anymore and he used to connect me to the world more than any Voice could. Brian and Tony are working so much and spending their other remaining hours together. I don’t see them at all. I’m with Marco all the time and constantly questioning if I’m just fucking the poor kid up more than he already is.”

“I know, Trina. We’ve talked about this before. People have their own lives. You’re still part of them, though, even if it’s not day-to-day.”

“Yeah, I know, but—”

“And you’re doing a great job with Marco, and you know that.”

“Yeah, I guess, but May. I don’t know if I’m happy. I see everyone else progressing and I find myself being jealous of them because I’m standing still. I’m jealous of you—you and Dusty—and what you’ve got going for you with Chloe’s.” Trina put her coffee cup down and stared out the window as long shadows of lashes lay down diagonally across her face. Her eyes had a sheen that could be mistaken for spring’s dewy coating, but glistened too strongly to be anything but a tear’s calling card.

Mayleigh touched her hand as it rested on the table and kept her silence staring out in the same direction as her friend.

“I hate being so God-damned indecisive. Why do I have to be discontent? Why should I care that you and Dusty are still glowing and you’ve been dating as long as we have? It’s just that it’s the same thing day in and day out and I constantly tell myself that it’s going to change tomorrow. It’s going to be better tomorrow. Or at least different.”

Mayleigh stroked Trina’s hand as a tear bounded off Trina’s cheek and landed near it.

“I’ve never been with someone this long. I’ve never slept with the same person for this long. What if the best of us is behind us now? What if I feel this way forever? Because I can feel a rift coming. I can feel one of us becoming so complacent that we throw up our hands and say *Fuck it! It’s boring anyway. I need something new. I need someone new.*”

"Trina, it's not that bad, sweetie. At least you have someone now. You'd feel so much worse if you were alone, wouldn't you?"

At last Trina looked over at her friend, noticing for the first time that her hand was being held.

"Would I, though? May, would I feel worse? Because at least then I wouldn't feel this ache wondering why he didn't want me this morning? And if being in a routine is so bad, isn't the best thing for me to break out of it?"

"No, Tree. Well. Maybe. I guess. But you love him."

"I know I love him," she said automatically. Then she stopped.

"What?" May asked. Slowly, she remembered their conversation months before when they first talked about making love and falling in love, when she first moved into the Complex. "Oh."

"I mean, I think I..." Trina spoke again, confused.

"What about just being with someone, though? Trina, you've definitely given him more than just your body, remember? When you told me to be careful with Dusty, you said you wouldn't chance it. You've given him your heart, too."

"I do love him, May," she said, slightly snapping out of it. "This is ridiculous, I mean, of course I love him."

"Good, I'm glad."

"Well, this is what I get, then. It's pain, in some form or another. Maybe he hasn't left me...but, I don't know."

"Why are you feeling pain anyway?"

"Exactly. Why am I hurting? I've been dumped before. Fuck, Adam upped and left me without saying a word and I've dealt with that. Slowly, yeah, but I dealt with it."

"So what's wrong now?"

"I don't know, May," she said, and felt as though she was answering one of Marco's rhetorical questions. "When I was in school, I used to fall head over heels in love."

"Yeah, you've told me."

"My entire sophomore year I was crazy for Patrick Van Horn."

"Tree—"

"Practically wet myself every time the phone rang."

Mayleigh, while trying to clear her throat, erupted in a giggle. The result was something of a snort.

"But right after finals week, it was like it never existed...almost, like *he* never existed. I guess, after Adam and now Mike, it wasn't love after all. Because, May, if it was love, I don't think I could fall out of it so easily. I don't think I could detach so quickly."

"So maybe it wasn't. But you shouldn't speak like that. I don't think you should lump Mike in there with Adam like that."

"I'm just saying that I didn't fall out of love with them. That they were different."

"What do you mean were? You're still with Mike. Don't make it sound like it's over."

"I don't know. Maybe that's where we're headed and I need to wise up to it. Otherwise, why would I feel this way?"

"Maybe you're scared?"

"You're damn right I'm scared. But I can tell you for sure that I don't feel anxious and frustrated because I'm scared. Maybe I've outgrown him."

"Maybe. But you two are so good together. Maybe he just needs a bit of time to grow too and you'll be back to your old selves again."

"Or maybe I'll just keep pulling him along: paying for him and his apartment, feeding him, indulging in his bohemian fantasies."

Mayleigh was confused. She'd never heard Trina refer to her boyfriend's lifestyle as bohemian before. Before she could ask, however, the phone rang and she scrambled to answer it. Trina took advantage of the silence to stare blankly out the window and collect her thoughts. *Of course I love him*, she said to herself. Again and again.

"Trina, phone!" Mayleigh called from behind the counter. Trina was brought back quickly when she went to answer the phone. She was overdue to abandon that thought process as customers had begun to file slowly in.

"Hullo?"

"Trina!" the voice on the other end of the phone cracked. "How are the drug dealers and homos treating you?"

"Hi Rhonda," Trina replied, silently biting the shallow comments her sister spewed. "Things are good." She also cursed the timing on her sister's phone call since, as most sisters, the two could determine inflections in each other's voices. "We're opening up the café. How can I help you?"

"*How can I help you?* I'm not a customer, Tree."

"I know you're not."

"You sound scatterbrained. And upset. I spoke to Mike this morning. He said you had just left and to call now, since it'd probably be quiet for an hour or so." Trina remembered the phone call earlier and her hollowed dreams of passionate parting kisses.

"I'm not scatterbrained, I'm at work. And I'm not upset."

"Come on, Trina. Talk to me. It's Rhonda, remember? Your sister."

"Yeah, Ronnie, I know."

"Did another junkie die? How are things with Mike and your kid?"

"No, Ron, no one died. Mike and Marco are good too. Why?"

"Good! Because the last thing I want to do is come during an outbreak of Mexican fever or whatever it is that strays get this time of year."

"Nice, Ron—"

"I'm coming to visit. I've booked tickets to arrive at LaGuardia on Friday at noon. I'll be there for three days before I'm checking out a few places to do my residency."

"What? You're coming here? You hate New York!"

"Try not to sound so excited. I don't hate New York, Trina. I hate impoverished, dirty cultures. I love you, though and that's why I'm coming. That and a Yonkers radiology clinic is flipping the bill. I have to spend Monday there with them, then I fly back to spend the day at Butterworth in G.R."

"That's great, Ron." She said with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. "Are you staying with me?" She asked before she could catch herself. "I mean, of course you're staying with me. Don't be silly." Now she was scatterbrained, though it was entirely Rhonda's fault. "I'll pick you up at noon on Friday from LaGuardia."

"I knew you'd be thrilled," she screamed with the utmost of authentic excitement that eluded Trina's voice. "An RN in Yonkers recommended I take a gypsy car in, though. I figured I'd just tell him to get me to Chloe's in Park Slope. Is that cool? Then you don't have to take the day off and I don't have to share a bus with a gay wino on PCP." It figured, Trina thought, she'd be more concerned with interrupting her work schedule than her emotional stability.

"Yea! That's even better. Then we can walk your bags home together."

"Great! I'm looking forward to it. I don't want to keep you. I'll see you in a few days."

"Wow! Ronnie. Yeah, Ok. Thanks for calling!"

"*Thanks for calling?*" she mimicked again. "Weirdo."

"I'll see you Friday," was all that Trina could answer. She hung up the phone and simultaneously peeled the plastic smile from her lips. Hiding distress on a phone call was doable. Hiding it on a three-day weekend with her sister was impossible. Trina knew this weekend would, in one way or another, produce some sort of forced conclusion to what her feelings were manifesting. And, beyond that, she knew that it would completely, and unquestionably, suck.

63

Eighty-three of the top psychics, soothsayers, and seers that set up shop in New York's five boroughs and sipped Frappuccinos (the city now had 122 Starbucks, with a dozen on the rise at any given time) couldn't even have predicted what occurred that weekend when Rhonda came to New York. Their biscottis were twirled over authentic Morano crystal balls in vain as the inauspicious stars were blind-sided. Trina had the time of her life.

One could argue that this was owed wholly to their first stop on the brisk walk home. As summer continued to do what it did best, they visited the Payless store to pick up a pair of Naugahyde faux-Birkenstocks. Trina, knowing the weekend would cause considerable wear on both their soles, felt she could at least be more comfortable in a new pair of shoes.

By the time Rhonda and Trina had settled on the roof of the Complex, much to the chagrin of the Brooklynite's aeroacrophobic sister, the two had reminisced themselves into fits of laughter.

"Alex would do this thing where he scrunched up his nose and blinked his eyes when I put anything green in front of him. He absolutely hated vegetables! I think it's genetic because Sam doesn't like them either."

"So," Trina laughed, inquiring about her nephew. "What did you do?"

"I introduced him to Mint Chocolate chip ice cream. I have to fight him for my broccoli, now. He eats everything green, even his plush raptor."

"Marco wouldn't touch green either," Trina laughed.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. I need all the green M&Ms I can get and I figure this way there'll be no competition!"

The two once again erupted in laughter. For once, the stresses and one-upping of sisterhood had fled them like sun-bathing cockroaches in a cloudburst. Trina noticed her sister stifled the urge to lecture her on a child's proper dietary habits, but didn't seem to care. That night, as the two sipped on a warm six-pack of Presidente beer, the only thing the bodega would freshly stock, and slowly got drunk, they wondered why they hadn't gotten together sooner.

"Seriously, Trina. Mom worries. I tell her you're fine and you're finally doing something that you want to do. She says you follow your heart too much and get that from her. Like Alex inherited hating vegetables from Sam, I guess she thinks you inherited being emotional from her. Says my rigi...riggiitee. Ri-gid-it-Eee comes from Dad. I worry sometimes too but I know you can take care of yourself."

"Now I know you've had too much to drink," Trina laughed. Her stomach pained from the constant jubilant flops it had done that day. Their noses, stricken with Irish epidermises, were noticeably reddened under the fading light. "You said you think I can take care of myself."

"I do!"

"Bullshit," Trina laughed. Her sister followed suit, more out of habit than hilarity.

"Seriously. You're my older sister. You've always looked after me. Yeah, we've had our fights, but come on. You spent your entire childhood caring for the neighborhood kids *and* your younger sis. You must've had your shit together. Otherwise..." Rhonda lost herself in a thought. "Remember when you went through that phase of carrying handkerchiefs just because Mom said proper ladies carried them. And Arnold Card rode his bike into the storm drain and flew into the Klockner embankment? Thirteen stitches right across the forehead. I stood there and screamed."

"You passed out is what you did."

"I sat down because I was out of breath from screaming."

"Whatever."

"Anyway, his mother came out to find you sitting down behind him, hugging him and pressing your handkerchief against his forehead. Said you saw it on the Surgery Channel or something and knew direct pressure was necessary."

"I must've thought all those years of playing doctor had earned me a degree," Trina giggled.

"Yeah, well," Rhonda paused. "I guess I admired that. That's what got me into medicine. If it wasn't for Sam being in the radiology program, I probably would've become a surgeon."

"But you fell in love with radiology and the father of your child instead."

Distantly, Rhonda thought about her family. "It's funny. All day long I take pictures of the heart. I observe visual differences in the texture and motion of atherosclerotic plaques during duplex assessment of the degree of arterial stenosis—"

"Whatever the fuck that means—"

"And think that somewhere in there is everything that life is about: love, attraction, lust, jealousy, envy, pain, loneliness, fright...I think 'in this sonogram of fat and tissue and greyscale blurs is the human essence.' It's what brought me my Sammy. It's what made my little Alex."

"I thought Sammy's *essence* was responsible for that," Trina interjected. They looked at each other, partially dazed, and burst into an uncontrollable flurry of giggles. "I think the two of you had your own little *duplex assessment of texture and motion*." The sisters weren't big drinkers, as obvious by the barely drained Presidente.

"You know what you need to do, Trina?" Ronnie said out of the blue. The alcohol had sent her mind wandering.

"What?"

"You should make a list."

"Oh God," Trina giggled. "Another list?"

"Don't laugh, it's serious. Take a sheet of paper and separated it in halves, vertically. Down the left hand side, write all the things that you've accomplished here in New York."

"Lemmie guess. The right side has all the things that I haven't accomplished that I wish I did, right? I did this in high school when we were trying to decide what to go to college for."

"That's not the purpose of this list, though," she said, taking a sip of beer. "The right side has all the things that you've given up so that you can accomplish them."

"This is stupid."

"You always say that."

"What will this achieve?" Trina asked, but thought she knew the answer.

"It'll help you to understand if everything was worth it."

They opted to sleep on the blanket they toted in sobriety to the roof. Trina hadn't slept up there since the first time she and Mike made love. The roof held a special sentiment for her, she thought, as she spent the last remaining thoughts of her consciousness on the black-and-white x-ray of her own heart. She wondered what those shades of grey and grey would bring for her.

The following morning, amid the haze of decomposing cerveza poison, Trina got up and showered alone. The thud in her head sounded like it had a salsa clavi and she shimmied to the coffee pot for Columbian accompaniment.

Mike and Marco had fallen asleep in front of the television. A homemade taco supreme had fallen to mush in front of them. They woke when they heard stirrings in the kitchen.

"You sneaking out?" Trina said. She struggled to dry the hair behind her right ear with the towel that lay over her shoulders.

"I should probably take one myself," Mike mustered. "Sorry I couldn't accompany you today."

"S'okay. You feeling better?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing. I saw the roof... you didn't drink two whole beers, did you?" he gasped in ridicule.

"Weren't you leaving?" she teased, though she wanted the opposite. Her headache allowed her to forfeit the argument before he even replied. "Phew, you stink. Go shower!"

A figure, too slow to blur by, did. Trina realized it must've been Rhonda sharing the same ailment that she had. She studied the coffee pot and watched the slow drip wondering if the combination of diuretics would make her acid reflux act up. Perhaps, she thought, lack of sex would be partially responsible but if a hangover couldn't kill her good mood, abstinence had a fat chance as well.

When Rhonda left the shower (some 30 minutes after she got in) and fully sated her hangover with coffee, the two of them left for Park Slope shopping with Marco in tow. They replaced Marco's tired t-shirts with new ones, glorified with the latest SpongeBob capers, and bought him a new pair of shoes. His last had seen better days, though children's shoes tend to be ready for the dumpster after their first wear.

Trina bought herself a designer impression perfume after Marco attacked her with the tester. He had a knack, Trina thought, for picking out a good scent before using it as chemical warfare. She expected this talent to make him a skilled suitor one day. Their headaches left them reluctantly as they grabbed a bite to eat from the truck-on-the-street. Marco played more with his halal beef kabob than ate it, though Trina forced him to pick two veggies. One of them had to be green.

They rode the train down to Coney Island and walked across the boardwalk. For a reason unknown to her, Trina felt compelled to lie about having visited the former nightlife haven on countless previous occasions. In truth, she'd been to the boardwalk only once in the daytime. Thankfully, Marco was out of earshot or else it would've been tough to perpetuate the lie. Trina made a mental note to revisit the reason that this triple bypass of the truth was important to her.

They stopped and got a Coney Dog, to add to the acid reflux potential of the day, and watched Marco strip down to his underwear and dive head first into the Atlantic. When he emerged, his English had left him like the aged pair of briefs and Trina silently thanked God that they had picked up underwear that day. He was at home with the Puerto Ricans of the neighborhood and cared nothing for the fact that he was fully naked among strangers. Privates

concealed by the murky depths of Coney Island waters, his innocence kept him from ebbing away in horror. What does a child care?

"Were we ever like that, Rhonda?" Trina asked as they finished their dogs and leaned over the wooden rail, facing the sea.

"Mom taught us about bacteria at a young age."

"I've taught him too. He doesn't care."

"Did we?" Rhonda thought, as images of pet slugs and mud pies conjured themselves. "I suppose not."

"I don't think he's going to find a real job, Rhonda." Trina said forcibly. The tone of their conversation changed on a dime. It was faster than Trina's hopes for an acid-free lunch. The boys had organized a game with a Nerf football and, seemingly, added Ultimate Frisbee penalties.

"How long has he looked?"

"It really doesn't matter, Rhonda. He could look for the rest of his life. I'm trying to change him, aren't I?"

"You're trying to make him responsible. It's all part of caring for someone."

"I'm trying to making him someone else."

"No, Trina. You're just caring for him."

"Then why do I give a shit if he gets a real job? I'm trying to make him take the role of Marco's father; to take the role of my wife."

"No you're not. You haven't asked him for money. You haven't asked him to move in with you."

"Then what do I want?"

"You're trying to help him become better, Trina."

"Are you sure? Because if I'm trying to change him I should know by now that it won't work."

"People change all the time, Trina. They get older. They grow apart. They grow together. This has nothing to do with that."

"And all I'm doing is caring for him?"

"Yeah, Sis. You're holding a handkerchief to his head. You're helping him get better. That's all you're doing."

Trina sighed and watched the children play. She hugged her sister and rested her head on Rhonda's shoulder, arm hooked around her neck. "Remind me to thank Mom for that."

Trina watched Marco play among the boys. A mother had offered him a towel when he emerged from the ocean, both displeased by his senseless comfort with himself and flooded by a mother's urges. Since the old pair of briefs were MIA, Trina handed him a new pair and listened to the boy communicate in his native tongue. Surprisingly, she understood everything.

"¿Estas cansado?" she said. The boy responded that he wasn't tired. "¿Deseas ir a Michigan este verano conmigo?"

"Absolutamente!"

"Did you just say something about Michigan in Mexican?"

"I asked him if he wanted to go this summer."

"What'd he say?" Rhonda asked.

"Hell yea!" Marco hollered and ran off to say good bye to his new friends.

"When did you learn Spanish, Trina?"

"I guess this year."

"When are you coming home?" Trina thought about the word *home* and wondered if Michigan was that for her anymore. The thought of seeing her mother, who was more prevalent in her mind these past two days than the entire time she spent in The Slope, brought jumping beans to life in her stomach. They commingled with the acid in there and popped like popcorn.

"Marco goes back to school on September 26th so it's got to be soon. Maybe the 10th through the 14th? That way we're back in time for back-to-school sales and I won't have much work at the Complex around then."

"Should I tell Mom? You know she'll go crazy preparing for you if I do."

"Nah. Let's surprise them. I don't want to get her hopes up if I can't afford the redeye or something happens."

"Let me know if you need help, ok?"

"I'll be fine. It'll be good to get away from here for a few days. Besides, maybe my absence will allow Mike to focus on finding work."

"It'll be a good time. You may not even want to come back." Trina laughed. An ache arose from her stomach and she pretended it was gas.

64

I honestly don't know the last time I've felt that I belong. I've been living here for over a year now and created my own little microcosm with The Complex and Chloe's. I've been surrounded by friends and my new family for months and yet it just now seems that I'm connected again. I don't know if I've taken Mom, Dad, and Ronnie for granted all this time, expecting them to always be there, frozen in the same order that I've left them. I don't know if I just believed that this past year was an adjustment period or if New York was and is always supposed to be a struggle for acceptance. God, I don't know what I was thinking. It's just that now, for some weird reason, I feel better. I guess I can appreciate more the things that Marco's counselor was saying about the importance of family and how it's incomparable to the importance of friends.

I don't think I've been isolated all this time and I certainly don't feel like New York has rejected me. I guess it's hard to explain how I feel, even now as I look back at what I just wrote. But the undeniable, unquestionable truth is that a burden feels like it's gone. I still have to maintain The Complex; still have to show up every day at Chloe's. I don't have any less responsibility in any way. Why, then do I feel at ease for the first time in a long time?

Oh God, what is it?

65

Trina's mad rush to pack the night before was set on autopilot, as though a somnambulist packed her toiletries and summer wear. It seemed that the last few months were set at a Yo-yo's pace. The kick start of Trina's resolution to build a family, aligned perfectly with the start of the year, had sped quickly to the length of the string. There, spinning in walk-the-dog fashion, her turbulence with Mike and their relationship had continued to neither progress nor recede. Then Ronnie's visit had passed the friction to catch her proverbial twine and careen her back to home. The whiplash almost made the few weeks since she watched her sister jump a yellow cab destined for LaGuardia blur with agitation. It wasn't long before her and Marco were on an airport-bound subway too, its route dabbling briefly in the plastic and chrome of Manhattan, only to return quickly to an outer borough. Queens had never looked so beautiful, she thought, as she wondered if the feeling was mutual.

Marco, who'd never been on a plane in his life, was shot-gunning the ambiance with his mouth agape and his eyes watering. She silently wondered if the drink cart had a Children's Nyquil juice box as she watched him tear through the Sky Mall catalogue and other seat flap literature. He had set up a heavily-vocal war on his tray table with the three plastic soldiers that she allowed him to bring to Michigan. They held fort behind a bunker of artificially-flavored pretzel twists and cellophane wrappers. Trina watched the other aero-commuters whisper to each other about Trina's disregard of his behavior and wondered if any of them would call security on her after they landed in Detroit.

"How was your trip to New York?"

Trina, startled, turned to her right. An elderly lady with a fishing line coif gazed serenely over her bifocal lenses. She looked a little like Celeste Derring, an ex-tenant of The Complex. "Did your son get to see the Statue of Liberty?" It took Trina a second to respond.

"What makes you think I was visiting?"

"Just a guess, dear. You seem too precious to be a New Yorker."

"Oh, well thank you," she blushed. "We had a good time. Didn't get to see the Statue of Liberty up close, though."

"That's too bad. She's a beauty up close."

"That's what I hear," Trina replied, wondering why she was playing along with the old woman's incorrect assumption. "So, you're from Detroit?"

The woman cackled and created a quiet tintinnabulation with the metal beads on her glasses chain. "Heavens, no, dear. I'm from down river. Allen Park area."

"Really?" Trina, ignorant of down river geography, pursued the conversation to distract herself from Marco's dying infantry. "What brought you to New York?"

"My husband," she grinned. "Well, his grave, really. It was our 50th anniversary this weekend. Ten years to the day he left this sweet Earth."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Sorry, dear?"

"For your loss," Trina squirmed. Again the chain jingled.

"Don't be, precious. We had a good run. Cancer won him over and he was buried in Greenwood by his family plot. I haven't been back to the city since a month after he passed."

"You left New York after he died?"

"Sure did. And the only reason I look back every now and then is because my sweet Charlie lived there. It's a little painful to walk the streets that he used to court me on; to sit in the parks we used to love together. I did it for us, though."

"You did it for what?"

"For us, dear. For Charlie and me. I'm sure he was with me. That's why I wanted to spend time with him." Trina was silent. A moment passed as the woman removed her spectacles and leaned back to reminisce. "New York is so full of wonder—excitement—when you have someone to share it with. When you don't, I believe it's just a congested, foul place. A place for hedonists and satyrs. Of course, you don't realize that when you're in love, dear. You're in love, of course, so you just see the beauty of it all. You forget the homeless and diseased and sinners when you're floating above the rooftops. They slink around the alleys and sewers but you can't see them from the Penthouses."

"I guess not."

"And who's your boy?"

"This is Marco," she sidestepped. "Marco, say *hi*."

"Lo lady," he said, and continued a barrage of automatic weapon fire in the same breath.

"He's a sweetheart too. Is his father in Detroit?"

Trina momentarily forgot herself. "Who knows where his father is."

"Oh." The woman protested, but didn't pursue the issue. "He's got your eyes, dear."

"Yeah?" Trina puzzled.

"Sure, look at them. Inquisitive. Sympathetic. Charming. He's going to grow up to prize your morals, I bet."

"Do you think?"

"Absolutely, dear. I'm sure the qualities he inherited from his father will be lost by the love you give to him. He'll stick around."

Trina hadn't realized a tear slip down her cheek. She wiped it away nonchalantly and watched the boy play. "I love him more than I thought possible."

"Of course, dear. Give him the wonder of New York, but bring him back before he sees the filth."

Ronnie was waiting at Detroit International Airport when the plane touched down. Standing beside her was a boy that Trina only vaguely recognized from pictures. But when he shouted "Aunt Trina" and ran up to hug her leg, it was clear that the last 16 months were an extended weekend to her nephew.

"Alex! Look at you!" she hollered, stricken with pure jubilation. "You're standing! And running! And absolutely gorgeous!" Rhonda sauntered up and joined the three of them in an embrace. When Trina knelt down to hug her nephew properly, Rhonda did likewise with Marco.

"Hi Aunt Rhonda," the Puerto Rican boy squeaked through Trina's sister's shoulder. He wasn't used to all the hugging, but he returned the embrace all the same.

"Hi Marco, we have a gift for you," Rhonda said. She then turned to her son. "Alex, this is Marco, Trina's friend. Will you give him his present?" Alex walked a step forward and handed Marco a box wrapped with Scooby Doo paper.

"Puedo abrir la caja ahora, Aunt Trina?"

"Can he open it now, Ron?" Trina translated.

"Si," Rhonda responded, mildly proud of her bilingual response. Inside the box was a Detroit Red Wings jersey, silk screened with "YZERMAN 19" on the back. "Steve Yzerman is the center from the Wings, Marco."

"Cool! Thanks Alex! Thanks Aunt Rhonda." Marco said, and stripped off his shirt right there. The two girls laughed as the boy slipped the jersey over his head. It was a little large, though he would soon undoubtedly grow into it.

Rhonda explained that Sammy was waiting in the car in the short-term parking lot anxious to start the three-hour drive back to Gladwin, where Mom and Dad had prepared the townhouse for visitors. Sammy had let it slip that Trina was visiting for a few days and their Mom flew into a frenzy of cooking and cleaning. "You'd think the prodigal son had returned. When I left, I was afraid Mom was going to slaughter the fatted calf."

Marco, looking somewhat disheveled in the oversized shirt, and Alex, who'd adopted his new cousin as his idol, took charge with grabbing their luggage off the conveyor belt. When the four of them lugged the two suitcases to the sliding doors of the arrivals entrance, Sammy swung his Ford Explorer to the pick-up lane. Trina had forgotten the state's obsession with all-things-domestic and exhaled in realization that she was back in Michigan.

While Rhonda related all the changes to the area, including a brand new S-curve in Grand Rapids and Circus Circus on the waterfront, and the boys chattered about cartoons and sports and toys, Trina stared out the window. Her mouth now resembled Marco's aboard the flight, as the twilight greenery and wide open expanses tickled her ribs and nestled in her tummy. It would be dinner time when they arrived in Gladwin.

Trina felt nervous and excited to see her parents after almost a year-and-a-half. Dusty had given her his cell phone for the trip, certain her and Marco would end up a wolverine's supper, and asked that she called when they landed. She dialed the number of Chloe's and was stunned when the answering voice ended up being Mike's.

"Hey Tree, how was your flight? We're missin' ya here, so don't go getting too comfortable."

"Like that would happen, Mike. How are things?"

"You know," the poorly connected voice crackled. "I've gotta hold down the fort while your gone, but the tenants know I'm the boss." Trina heard groans from Tony and Bryan in the background of the call. She giggled and asked him to tell everyone she was all right and would call later to check up on things. "Seriously, though, Tree. I miss you. Take care of yourself out there, ok?"

"I'm only gone for four days, Mike," she started. Marco was tugging at the phone to talk. "Hang on, someone wants to say hi." She relented and handed the phone to the floppy red cuffs that yanked from behind her seat.

"Hola tío Mike! Can you tape Cow and Chicken for me? Alex said he doesn't get Cartoon Network." Trina giggled to herself and waited to hear how the conversation continued. Sammy, however began a new one, distracting her from Marco's response.

"I hope you don't mind, Trina, but we set up two sleeping bags in your old room for the boys. We figured that since it's closest to the bathroom—"

"No, that's fine, Sam. Am I in the guest room?"

"Yep. Unless you wanna squeeze in with Ron and I," he joked. Rhonda laughed and gave him a playful swat on the shoulder.

"I'll pass, thank you."

"So as I was telling you, Trina, the radiology clinic in Yonkers loves me, but I told them I want to stay in the Midwest for a year or two, more."

Trina remembered the wiry haired woman on the plane's warnings about New York and felt a strange tinge of guilt.

"Just as long as I'll be seeing more of you than I did last year, I have no qualms sister-dear."

She turned her attention to the fading light beyond the streetlamp-lit I-75 and watched the silhouettes of trees skirt past. The slow rocking of the car, something Trina hadn't felt for months, eased her to a calming serenity. There she fell asleep to the backdrop of an almost inaudible stream of country music on the Explorer's radio.

When she awoke, the Explorer was minutes away from the Fitzgerald's driveway. Trina used those last remaining moments to wipe the sleep from her eyes and to wake up the boys. For some reason, she felt compelled to ensure Marco looked his best. He was sleeping with his head against the seatbelt in the far back seats, leaving a diagonal indentation across the left side of his face. Alex was hugging his new cousin as though they'd been friends forever. They were fast asleep.

Trina took a second to admire them and gently summoned them away from the Land of Nod with a soft stroking of their heads. When Marco realized the boy was sleeping on him, his face turned briefly to shock, followed by inquisition as to how to handle the situation. Trina just grinned.

Eventually the two boys were awake. As with most recently-woken kids their age, their wide, glassy eyes swallowed their faces. Slowly, as if without interruption, their conversation about toys, cartoons, and all things dire to kids, ensued. The two seemed almost oblivious to the gap in their ages as though each had compensated by two years to land somewhere in between.

As expected, Trina's parents burst out of the house as though they'd die if they spent another second away from their eldest daughter. It had been only 16 months, Trina thought, but she could understand the urgency. Her mother held her harder and longer than she ever had in her life and the two of them laughed and cried simultaneously, though neither had said anything funny or sad. Trina breathed her mom in and the familiar endearing smell took her back to her childhood. It was some concoction of jasmine and citrus and talc and butter with an undertone of boiled ham and a hint of Pine-Sol. Simply perfect.

Trina's father rocked on the balls of his feet and waited patiently behind his blubbering wife and daughter. His face was red and shined with anticipation. His eyes, glowing, never left his daughter's face (or what wasn't buried in her mom's bosom). Eventually, after much laughing and many tears, he got his turn.

Then came the onslaught of questions. How was your flight? Do you like the new Detroit terminal—you know the concourse is built right under the tarmac. Was the food all right? Did

you have any problems at baggage claim? What time did it leave? Your father said there was a turbulence delay, what happened? How are you holding up? Did you remember your way home? Are you hungry?

All Trina could do was beam a Cheshire grin and nod. They hastily hushed as Alex drew Marco forward, tugging at his hand. Perhaps this was a detail, Trina noticed, that had most likely been forgotten from the travel plans. The blubbering woman and red-faced man stared down at the Latino boy in an instant of awkward silence.

"Mom, Dad, this is Marco," Trina said and suddenly was at a loss of words as to how she could describe him. She thought about the woman on the plane, and then a quick summation of how Marco came into her care. In the end, she simply said "He's my boy."

Marco looked up from under his floppy matted mop. His eyes darted between the man and woman as he ignored Alex's tugging. The younger boy was hell-bent on showing his new friend the stash of toys his grandparents harbored for his visits. He ceased his yanking abruptly, suddenly aware of the odd situation, though not entirely of the reason.

"Well," Trina's father stated broadly as he brought himself down to Marco's eye level. "As long as he's not a Rangers fan, he's our boy too! What do you say, champ?"

Marco looked up at Trina, still unsure as to what to say. "Aunt Trina?" he inquired. Trina saw her folks exchange a quick glance. They had obviously done the quick mental calculations to realize that the boy was about seven years too old to be Trina's son.

"No boy of mine is a Rangers fan, Dad. Besides, Marco's a soccer player." Trina answered.

"Soccer, eh?" The ruddy face cracked a grin. "What position?"

"Forward," Marco said.

"Forward?" Mr. Fitzgerald repeated. "Offense, huh?"

"Si."

"Atta boy!" The man said. "If it's ok with your Aunt Trina, tomorrow we're picking you up a pair of roller skates and a hockey stick. We'll see how Pele here can handle a street hockey offensive. What do you think about that?" Marco grinned a wide, toothy smile and looked up at Trina for approval again. He wasn't used to family and the token showering with gifts that came with long-awaited visits. Silently, a sigh slipped through Trina's lips.

"Just don't expect any power plays right off the bat, Dad. Otherwise, it's fine with me." Trina smiled. Alex, meanwhile, had resumed his tugging and the two darted off up the walkway and through the front door.

"He's wonderful, Trina. Where are his parents?" her mother asked.

"That's a long conversation for later, Ma."

"Of course. Let's get you inside. Dinner is in twenty."

The very thought of a home-cooked meal from her mother's kitchen was enough to warm her insides. She felt the ease of junior high school summer vacations from a decade before. She picked up her suitcase and Marco's backpack, which Sammy and her father instantly relieved from her, and started up the steps. Her father, who was never a huge talker, had begun a gapless diatribe on his feelings of the world's economic climate. Every few minutes, he implied that he would feel safer if Trina just moved back to Gladwin. Regardless of the political tirade, Trina enjoyed her father's nudging and felt, once again, at home.

The menu was typical for Michigan: lots of meat, lots of vegetables. The steaming boiled ham was cut into eighth-inch slices and doled out to the good china (which was typically reserved for royalty). Trina watched her mother pile a mountain of carrots and potatoes in front of Marco, his

eyes agog. It wasn't long until their loaded plates were rendered empty of everything but juices and bits of condiments that a conversation begun about Trina's living situation. She knew that not all the details would be happily received by her parents, but felt too full to lie.

"Rhonda probably told you a bit about The Complex, right?"

"Not too much, Katrina," her mother said. "Anyway, we'd like to hear your version."

"Well, Adam split for the city about four months into moving out there..."

"Adam is the artist you moved to New York with?" Mr. Fitzgerald interrupted.

"The designer, yes."

"What do you mean *the city*? I thought you lived in the city."

"I live in Brooklyn, Dad."

"I thought that was part of the city."

"Well it is and it isn't. When New Yorkers say *the city*, they mean Manhattan. He moved to Manhattan. We got a nice deal on the apartment complex if I promised to look after the place."

"By yourself?" her mother questioned, obviously concerned.

"Well, initially it was Adam and I, but now just me. I've been taking care of it for the past year by myself. I get a little help from the tenants, but mostly it's a cakewalk. And it saves me big-time on rent. Adam sends a check once a month but I don't really need it, so I put it into a savings account for Marco." Marco, who had no concept of money, was shoveling more potatoes onto his plate. He continued to steer clear of the greens on the table. Alex watched in awe, then followed suit when Marco replaced the serving spoon.

"What do you do for spending money and food?"

"I work second shift at Chloe's, a coffee house in Park Slope. You'd never believe it, but I make all the pastries at night for the next day's morning crowd." She truthfully had grown greatly in her culinary abilities from her incident with the brownies almost a year ago. Her experimentation even allowed for two new varieties of scones to be added to the menu, as well as a curry chicken salad with golden raisins and walnuts for the lunch rush.

"Mayleigh, who owns the café, rents a one bedroom from me. Then there's Dusty, a curator at the Met across the hall. On the second floor are Bryan and Tony. Tony is a medico legal photographer but he's breaking into the fashion industry slowly. Brian is a yuppie.

"They're lovers," Rhonda interjected.

"Lovers?" The girls' father asked. "Oh. Lovers," he gathered on his own.

"I live on the third floor in a rent-stable one bedroom. Mike, er, lives in the apartment across the hall."

"Who's Mike?" Trina's mom inquired.

"He's my boyfriend, Mom. He's a musician." Trina looked up at Rhonda, who thwarted her gaze away, pretending not to hear the truth fracture. "He's amazing."

"What does he play?" Sammy asked.

"Piano. His stepfather teaches music at one of the high schools."

"Where are his parents, Katrina?"

"They're divorced, Mom. The dad split when the mom cheated. He was an alcoholic anyway. The mom went to jail for drugs. The sister went to foster care. His stepfather was the one that raised him, really. Straightened him out."

"Does he do drugs?"

"No Mom. He's a good guy."

"Rhonda, have you met this guy?" her father asked. "This...Mike, is it?"

Rhonda replied sheepishly that she had and assured her parents that he, indeed, was not a junkie. "His last name's Green, Dad. He's Irish too."

"All the more reason to be careful. Alcoholism is genetic."

Marco watched the conversation in wonder. The very concept of a family concerned for a daughter's wellbeing with a boyfriend was intriguing to him. His extent of family banter was the shreds of memories he had of his mother and the makeshift replacements that came from after-hours coffee drinkers in Trina's circle of friends.

"Do you ever hear from your artist friend, Trina?" her father asked.

"Adam? No. Not much. I don't go to the city too often since it's so much more expensive there and I doubt he comes back to Brooklyn at all. It's probably best this way, though."

"Have you thought about moving back here, Katrina? The cost of living is probably a third of what it is in New York."

"No, Mom. I like Brooklyn."

"She's in Bohemia," Rhonda added.

"What about you, Marco? How would you like living up here in cow country?"

Trina didn't give him time to answer. "He's a city boy, Dad. And it's not just that I like Brooklyn, but I think I've got a good thing going there. I've got The Complex and my job at Chloe's. Mayleigh mentioned the possibility of part-ownership, too," Trina embellished. "I've got my friends and Mike. My own little microcosm there."

"You've got one here, too, dear," Trina's Mom reminded. The *dear* triggered a reminder of the woman on the plane. *New York is a place for hedonists and satyrs*, she said. *Stay for the love, but leave when you see the filth*. Trina silently wondered what it was that kept her in New York.

"I know, Mom. Thank you. And if you keep feeding Marco like this, he's going to hate getting on that plane on Sunday."

"I guess I shouldn't tell you what's for dessert, then."

Trina felt her stomach struggling to digest the double helping of apple pie a la mode on top of the ham and veggies dinner. She brought a glass of wine to the back porch of her parent's townhouse and watched the darkened vapor trail behind a MSP-bound jet. Behind their house was Secord Lake, which stretched on for a half a mile to the other side of the county where it was land-locked in the middle of the Great Lakes, far from the Atlantic Ocean. The fish, rendered fresh-water from years of seclusion and salt-leeching minerals at the lake's bed, were restocked each year by eco-friendly politicians and the sport-fishing community. It was getting more common, however, to see more jet skis than paddle boats or fisherman and Trina speculated whether the hi-tech world had overthrown the traditional one, hook, line and sinker. She relaxed on the top step leading down to their private mini-dock and listened to the ripples as they single-filed ashore. In her peripheral hearing, if there is such a thing, Trina could hear her father describing the rules of hockey to Marco. Rhonda and Mom were clacking away at dishes (where Trina briefly admired the dishwasher after a year and a half of manual scrubbing) and Sammy had taken Alex up to ready him for bed.

Trina listened to the silence in front of her and slowly sipped her glass of Merlot. This Michigan September was warm and comfortable and Trina wiggled her unsheltered toes on the wooden step and leaned against the porch's support. Her heart beat deeply as she relaxed the base of her spine, which felt weary with stress and worry. It was to be her first vacation since

before she and Adam had set off for the Big Apple and she was uncertain if she remembered how to idle.

"Room on that step?" her mother's voice sifted through the mesh of the door.

"Of course."

Her mom sat down quietly next to Trina, and softly scratched her daughter's back. The two of them looked toward the quiet lapping and enjoyed each other's presence. Occasionally, they'd take a sip of wine or look at each other and smile. After five minutes, they caught each other's eyes and giggled aloud.

"My precious angel is home. I've missed you Katrina."

"Mom, I'm just a few states away. You know you can visit me. I've told you a hundred times on the phone that there's more than enough room for you and Dad."

"I know, I know. New York just isn't for me, I don't think. The second I step off the plane and see all the traffic and congestion, I bet I'd walk right back to departures and buy a ticket home."

"LaGuardia is in Queens, Ma. It's not that congested."

"What? People don't get mugged in Queens?"

"Yea, Mom, there's a Tourists Express line that offers a mugger for each new arrival. That way, you don't have to worry about missing the Complete New York Experience." The two of them laughed again. "Seriously, though. Please consider it."

"Your father hates planes."

"Now you're just making excuses."

"What if I just bought you a ticket once or twice a year? I'll get one for Marco too. That way you can come at your leisure and don't have to worry about money."

"Mom, I'm proud of who I am in New York. I'm happy there. I want you to see me happy."

"I see you happy, hon. I can tell on the phone that, for the most part, you are genuinely happy."

"...but you won't visit me."

"We'll see," she said. Trina knew from years of childhood that *we'll see* was a kinder, gentler, lower-case *n*, *no*. Rather than pushing her mother further, she resolved to drop the subject and continue enjoying the evening. Stubbornness, Trina thought, she evidently inherited from Mom.

"Trina?"

"Yea Ma?"

"Tell me about Marco's parents."

"You sure?"

"I think so."

"His mom was raped and killed. He never knew his father. I found him living on my roof and stealing food from The Complex."

"Holy Jesus. The poor thing."

"Yeah. But he's battled his demons and is otherwise like any other fourth-grader. I've enrolled him into public school and he's getting good grades. He has tons of friends and doesn't get into much trouble. He's amazing, Mom."

"Is he good for you, though, Katrina? I mean, is it wise for you to have a child in the house right now?"

"Like it or not, I do. And I love him so much, too. I think it's for the best."

"For his best or for yours?"

Trina was a bit perturbed by this question, but opted to take it in all fairness. She thought about it for a second and realized that she never looked at Marco as a burden. She never thought

of him as a nuisance in any way. But, also, she never deeply considered if it was best for him to be with an adopted 24-year-old, rather than in an orphanage or with a foster family. She never wondered if it would be better for him to have a married set of parents and maybe step-siblings to keep him company. A family is still a family, even if it's not the one he was born into.

Seeing Marco rapt in wonder of a family life tonight, coupled with the New York-bashing conversation she had with the old woman on the plane, was hard enough on her conscience. This talk with her mom was certainly not helping her absolve these fears.

"I don't know, Mom. He's happy."

"I know he is, sweetie. And you'll make a terrific mother one day. You know, if you ever decide to come back to Michigan, he's always welcome to come and stay with us as well. I'm afraid your father has taken an immediate liking to the little angel."

"Dad always wanted a boy."

"I know. Believe me, I know. Why do you think your sister and you spent so much time fishing and camping and watching hockey?" The women laughed again and silence fell over them as they paused to sip their wine.

"Your sister misses you too. She said the two of you had a great time when she went to visit you in the city," she said. "Or is it Brooklyn? Or bohemia?"

"Brooklyn, Ma. Park Slope. That's where you send my holiday cards. Brooklyn. And we definitely did have a great time. Who would've thought, huh? Ronnie and I haven't had that much fun for as long as I can remember. Caught me by surprise, anyway."

"Have you looked up any of your school friends?"

"No, not yet. But I have the rest of this trip to do that. I want to spend tonight and tomorrow morning with you and Dad. I'll probably call some of my old girlfriends tomorrow night. I also wanted to see what Adam's parents are up to. We used to have good rapport."

"Your artist-friend? I wonder if they know that the two of you aren't together anymore."

"Mom, that shouldn't matter. We're still friends."

"I thought you don't talk much, hon."

"Well, we don't. But there are no hard feelings that we're not together. People grow apart, right? You can't blame them for that."

"When did you get to be so smart?"

"Right after I left you and Dad!" she grinned. Her mom gave her a playful jostle and they rocked back and forth hugging.

"I like your hair short, Katrina. You look so grown up. So much of you has changed."

"I'm still your baby, though."

"Forever."

"Forever," Trina confirmed, and smelled her mother's aroma amid the swirling sensation that wine always brought on. She felt like she could fall asleep there on the step as the cool breeze blew and her mother rocked her gently.

The next morning, Trina awoke to the smell of bacon frying. She felt slightly dehydrated from the wine and the scent of food was both intoxicating and sickening. She lie in bed for a few minutes stretching and blocking her eyes from the sun that poured in the window. Downstairs, the murmurs of voices indicated that Alex and Marco were indeed awake.

Trina stood up with a creak and crack from her ankles, right hip and back. She stretched a few more times and searched her suitcase for some clothes to wear for the day. Sitting in the top

flap, next to her toiletries, Trina found the picture of Mike that she hastily threw in there during the packing rampage the day before. His boyish grin was more alluring as she thought of the thousand miles that stood between her and it. He was leaning over a piano and someone took a candid snap as the tendons in his hands and muscles in his arms were most defined. Save for the grin, he looked painfully dedicated to the black and white keys. Trina wondered if it was Tracy Chapman that he was playing. If it wasn't, she wished it was.

The water softener had provided Trina with a wonderfully relaxing shower. She even decided to shave her legs, having grabbed a pair of shorts from the suitcase. She filled her mouth with the water and swished it around to try to dilute the aftertaste of wine and toothpaste from the night before.

She stepped out and dried off, staring at herself in the full-length mirror. At the Complex, she only had the medicine cabinet mirror, and was able to get away with not seeing her body. It seemed more defined than it had the last time she studied it. Perhaps she lost a bit of weight or gained a little tone. New Yorkers are statistically the fittest people in the United States. Perhaps it's all the walking they do, Trina thought. It sure as hell isn't attributed to Famous Ray's Pizza.

Trina found herself descending the staircase to the kitchen. The cool breeze coming from the front screen door awoke the parts of her body that slept through the shower. Her tank-top and shorts allowed for little eddies of current to pass across her cleavage and thighs and she forgot the apprehensions she had about her physique. She felt pretty this morning. It stood in stark comparison to the one where Mike opted against their ephemeral love-making. She felt pretty *to herself*. Not to others. And cared not, at this moment, for how she looked to them.

"Look who's awake!" Trina's father sang. He removed his glasses and sat the Gladwin County Record aside to admire his eldest daughter. Trina noted that the cover mentioned something about teenage pregnancy and the local Meals on Wheels program. Obviously, she thought, they were two separate articles. Otherwise, those Meals on Wheels people are pretty sick.

"Hi, Daddy! How could I sleep through one of your famous omelets? Is Marco up?"

"He's been up for a few hours tormenting the cat. You'd think he'd never petted one before."

"Well, to my knowledge he hasn't," Trina yawned. "Most of the ones in our neighborhood feast on rats and fight each other in the alleys and fire escapes. You can imagine how the concept of petting a cat could be foreign to a city kid."

"You could say that," he laughed. "How'd you sleep?"

"Wonderful. But wine always procures beautiful unconsciousness," she grinned, trying to sound like a connoisseur.

Trina's father fixed her an omelet and they discussed the local events. They had planned to head out and teach Marco the fine art of street hockey this afternoon and Trina's mom wanted to take her and Rhonda shopping while the men played. Sammy had been called into work early as someone had come in during the night with a gunshot to his hand. It was self-inflicted, Rhonda said, inferring that the accident was nothing like a NYC trauma.

"Cleaning it and it went off?" Trina laughed.

"Actually, yes."

Trina's father, Alex, and Marco headed out to the local sports equipment store to pick up the hockey accessories and would meet Sammy in an hour at the local park. The parking lot there was normally reserved for basketball and street hockey players.

“¿Was a estar bien si te deajo solo?” she asked Marco, wondering if he’d mind her absence for the lessons. “I’ll be by with Aunt Rhonda and my mom when we’re done shopping.”

“Of course,” Marco said, but he looked slightly troubled.

“¿Qué?”

“¿Como te llamas a tu papa??” the boy said, and Trina smiled.

“Call him Papa. He’d like that.”

“Okay!” Marco said, slightly thrilled. It was obvious to Trina that the boy didn’t need any more people to call Aunt or Uncle.

In her sporadic state of physical self-acceptance, Trina felt rambunctious and carefree. The three women laughed whole-heartedly as they perused the aisles of the mall in Grand Rapids, a few towns away.

“...so your father,” Mrs. Fitzgerald chuckled, “is standing outside holding three different handbags and I’m stuck against the wall in the changing room because the hook somehow got twisted in my shoulder strap...” The girls were trying to stifle fits of laughter as their mother continued with the story. “And I think that all I have to do is slip the dress over my head and I’m free, because for the life of me, I can’t get the damn thing untangled. It’s halfway over my head when I feel my back seize up and I can’t move a muscle.”

“OH MY GOD!” Trina laughed.

“Were you okay?” said Rhonda.

“Ok, honey, I was fine compared to your father. He’s banging on the door, holding clutch bags and purses in his hands and I’m hanging off the wall like a poorly stuffed sausage on a meat hook with my face all red from laughing and wincing. He barges in to see what’s going on as a small crowd gathers outside the door—all these nosy women that are desperate for drama since the Twin Peaks series ended. He sees me dangling there and the purses go flying. He runs in and slams the door closed. Of course, I can’t see any of this because the damn dress is over my head and the zipper is caught in my hair.”

“The zipper?”

“Yea, in retrospect, I guess it would’ve been easier to just zip out of it? But then I wouldn’t get to see the worried, humiliated look on your father’s face when he finally freed me from the wall. God, I tell you. Married for thirty years and I don’t know if it’s the love or the humiliation that keeps us together.”

The laughter continued while the girls flitted through the racks and racks of summer clothes.

“How long were you stuck there, Ma?” Rhonda laughed.

“Probably for 10 minutes by the time he got me unhooked. My back loosened towards the end, but your father kept yelling to hold still...”

“Guess you were pretty well-hung?” Trina laughed.

“Oh Trina!” Rhonda’s eyes rolled. Their mother burst out laughing, flushed with embarrassment. Trina turned her back on her family to wipe away tears and try to calm her laughter. Her sides were throbbing with pain. She tried to focus on something outside the context of their conversation to ease the ache she was feeling.

Her eyes landed on Adam.

66

"You're a natural, Mike. Maybe you should consider the morning shift more often," Mayleigh joked. Mike had been put on Beggwich (bacon and egg on a bagel) patrol. Chloe's breakfast crowd had swelled over the summer as New York weather welcomed the early-riser and summoned them to receive their morning treat. On one of their no-sex mornings, Trina had unwillingly invented the PJR (peanut butter and jelly on rye) as she absentmindedly merged a few orders into one. In her haste, and inexperience in dealing with the morning crowd, she created a Chloe's favorite, which replaced the Beggwich as the number one selling sandwich. Mayleigh made some off-color remark about how Trina should be denied sex in the morning more often as it was good for business.

"Thanks, May, but I don't think I'm cut out for this morning work stuff."

"Maybe you should make yourself cut out for it, Mike."

Mike mentally bookmarked Mayleigh's comment as a *return to this later* for when the morning crowd died out. It wasn't for another forty-five minutes that he was able to reopen the file.

"What did you mean, May?" Brian and Tony had echeloned in after the morning light brigade began to charge off. The four sat lazily around the table closest to the counter, sipping steaming java.

"Nothing, Mike. Other than, thanks for your help, this morning."

"You've got a funny way of thanking someone for their help." Mike snapped.

"Whoa," Brian said as he flipped through a WWD fashion magazine. "Bystanders." His curt remark was a feeble attempt to curtail the onset of the argument due to Tony's and his presence.

"I just think," Mayleigh said, ignoring Brian, "that you should consider something more full-time."

"You too, huh?"

"Come on, Mike. Nobody likes supporting other people. Some of us dislike supporting ourselves."

"What does that mean? I have a job."

"I guess."

"You guess?"

"Tuning pianos isn't a full-time job, Mike. It can't possibly afford your slot at the Complex. Chloe's barely affords me mine, and I'm here seventy/eighty hours a week."

"Worry about yourself, then, May. Let me worry about my rent."

Mayleigh, however patient she'd grown with conversations like this, was not to be pushed aside so easily. She was concerned about her friend, who had entrusted her with the fact that she wasn't happy. Mike's nonchalance only made her react with more fluster and offense, in turn

making the conversation more heated and tense. And for Mayleigh, who consistently speaks her mind, this was an invitation to spar.

"I'm not worrying about you, Mike. I'm worrying about Trina."

"Why?"

"Mike, she's my friend."

"No, what is it that you're worried about?"

Brian and Tony exchanged a small glance. Bystanders or not, they were part of this and buckled down for the storm.

"Well, *you*. You're twenty-four years old. Your girlfriend is paying for your room and board, not to mention that she also supports a child. She stocks the apartment with food and works two jobs to keep it that way."

"You make it sound like I'm using her."

"Mike, look at it from an outsider's perspective. How would it appear if you were observing Trina's relationship with Brian or...well, bad example, but you get the picture."

"Did she say something to you?"

"I'm her best friend, Mike. What do you think?"

"I'm not using her, Mayleigh." Mike started to get a little angry.

"No? When do you stop by her apartment? To eat, to shower and to fuck. And you've been lacking in some of that as well."

"What?"

"Mike, all I'm saying is that you should reevaluate how you spend your relationship with her. You could be unhealthy for her."

"What concern is it to you? Our private relationship is just that...private! You really gotta learn to mind your own business, Mayleigh. You think you're perfect? You're the only one without problems, huh?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying, Mike. I'm just concerned about my friend. And you, too, Mike. I, obviously, consider you a friend too."

"Mike," interjected Tony. "She's not telling you how to live your life, buddy. She's just concerned about Trina. Believe me. She's definitely got problems too," he said, trying to make light of the conversation. Mayleigh was a little perturbed, but knew Tony was trying to calm Mike down.

"Well, she doesn't have to act all superior," Mike said to Tony, without removing his stare from Mayleigh.

"I don't think she meant any harm, Mike," Brian added. "I mean, Tony does the same thing and I don't mind being used."

"So you think I'm using her too?"

"N-no. I was just kidding, bud."

"Mike," Mayleigh said, quieter and slower. "I'm sorry. I really shouldn't meddle. I'm sure you and Trina have talked about all this already. And that you see eye-to-eye about your living situation and job. Sometimes I speak before I think and it comes out sounding assertive and arrogant. I'm sorry, really."

"It's okay."

"I just care about the two of you," Mayleigh said. "I love this little group that we've got. You and Tree, and Dusty and the guys are all I have in the world. I don't want anything to jeopardize our little family here. Sometimes I overreact."

"Seriously, it's okay."

“If you say that the two of you are cool, I trust you.” Mayleigh, unwittingly, was imposing a minor guilt trip on Mike. The conversations she mentioned had never occurred between Trina and him. In fact, the prospect of Mike getting a full-time job had sort of tumbled off the wayside. Mike figured Trina had shared her discontent with Mayleigh and felt partially betrayed and partially accountable. In all truth, he knew he was avoiding any responsibility in the relationship and provided only a meager amount that probably funded the alcohol and fast food in Trina’s home.

And Mayleigh was right about the sex. Mike had never thought sex could be routine before the months of their relationship had passed. And though her body still surged sparks through his loins and thrilled his senses, the morning custom had begun to grow stale and unwelcome; so much, in fact, that Mike created excuses to skip days. Every other day was bearable. But a daily routine was what he found to be intolerable.

He hadn’t faced Trina with this dilemma. And on many levels, he hadn’t *come clean* in over two weeks. His emotional self reminded him that sex wasn’t the root of their relationship; though he yearned for the passion they felt on the rooftop so long ago and wondered if it could ever return.

In truth, other aspects of their lives together had drifted southward as well. Mike had made the times that he, Trina, and Marco spent together rarer than ever, subconsciously irresolute about playing the padre in their cross-cultural nuclear family. Maybe Marco needed a father. Maybe Trina needed a provider and a lover. In fact, Mike thought, he hadn’t been much of a confidante lately either, much less an idle conversationalist. Mayleigh’s warning had been more of a premonition. Perhaps, Mike thought, it was a *shape up or ship out* and he needed to decide how he felt in the deep abscesses of his longing. Every relationship hits a point when people, whether consciously or not, decide if the idiosyncrasies are worth the overlooking and the mutual desire overcomes the covenant of monogamy...or monotony, rather. On the shell, without any sugar-coating, Mike needed to decide if she was worth the unspoken conversations that Mayleigh surfaced; if she and Marco were worth the full-time job. It had always been bohemia or concession...and Mike was at a crossroads.

67

"Fuck," was the only word that escaped her lips. And luckily, it eked through in the quietest whisper that not even the desiccant in the pocket of her new blouse could squeeze an iota of moisture from its utterance. Within seconds, the Cavendish Balance of Trina's world was spinning into chaos as she stared into Adam's eyes.

"Hello Trina."

"Hi. Adam? What are you doing here?"

Trina's mother and sister had abandoned them at checkout a half hour ago and now Trina and Adam had purchased Slurpees and sat drinking them in the food court.

"So you've been back in Michigan for six months now?"

"Yea."

"Why didn't you say anything? You didn't even tell me."

"We weren't exactly communicating too frequently, Tree. Besides, I didn't want to upset you."

Aah. There it was. He called me Tree. God, I missed that, Trina thought. "Upset me? Why would that upset me?"

"I don't know, Tree. I just thought you'd freak if you found out that the guy that convinced you to live in New York had upped and left for Michigan again."

"Well, when you put it like that..."

"I guess I know you better than you think," Adam said. Trina didn't like this confession, especially with his surly tone, but he had a fairly good point.

"Well, maybe I'd be a little...unnerved. But I wouldn't necessarily say I'd *freak out*," she grinned. "Besides, you didn't convince me to live in New York. I wanted to go myself. I wanted to be in control of my destiny. I wanted a life-changing event. Why did you leave?"

"I was offered a job here in G.R. that I couldn't refuse."

"Congratulations Adam! I'm so proud of you."

"Yea, I'm working for a little design shop that's grown in the last five years. It was started by alumni that graduated a few years before me. They saw my portfolio on-line and wanted me to apply. They said the job was mine if I could relocate."

"So you put in your two weeks and left?"

"Just about. Trina it's been a real trip! I can't believe how much I've learned and how well I fit in here." Trina felt the sting of rejection arise within her, knowing that a part of his odd-fit in New York had to be her.

"Someone had to see how talented you are, Adam. I mean, I told you you're destined for great things. It was just a matter of time."

"Thank you, Tree. That means a lot coming from you," he said sincerely. "So, what about you? How've you been?"

"Good. You know, same ol' thing. I'm still working at Chloe's, still running The Complex."

"Chloe's is that coffee house you mentioned right?"

"Yup."

"The one run by a lesbian?"

"Well, as it turns out, she was bi. She's dating Dusty now. I don't think you ever met him. He's a friend that curates the Met."

"Nope. I don't think I have. Er...The Complex?"

"That's what we call the apartment building."

"Is Beulah still runnin' the joint?"

"She actually lets me do everything now. I clean, collect rent, allocate it to the owners. She barely checks up on me, really. I think she's getting up there in age and doesn't want to bother with it much anymore. The only time she inquires is when the check is a day late or so, and normally it's just a reminder, not a gripe. She fully trusts me, so I guess that's..." Then an odd thought struck her. A little ear on the puzzle-piece seemed abruptly ajar among the rest of the image. "Adam, why are you still sending me checks?"

He blushed and paused for a moment. "I thought you could use them. Force of habit, really."

"Well, they're greatly appreciated, but you don't have to," she lied.

"I guess I feel a little guilty about abandoning you," he said. His tone, however careful, didn't indicate any interest in suturing up the jagged wound that left the two of them in twain. Adam had indeed moved on and away. Manhattan, she thought, was just too close.

"You don't have to, Adam," she repeated. "But wait a minute. The return addresses still say *Manhattan*."

"Yeah," he blushed again. His eyes darted quickly as though he was searching for a response. Trina made a note, but continued to be open about his response. "I'm still with Chase. You're a monthly scheduled bill in my Quicken account. That's all."

"That's all I am to you?" she joked.

"Trina, please." Adam's response to her joke was a little awkward and dangled the conversation for moments. Slowly, it returned.

"Are you seeing anyone?" she asked.

"Not really. I've been hanging around the old friends a bit, sorta like a reunion. Things haven't really changed too much out here, I guess. I kinda like it too. It's slower. It's...more gradual."

"That's one of the reasons we had to get out, remember?" Trina joked again. "We didn't like how slow it was."

"I guess I missed it, then."

"But you left New York for the job, right?" Trina asked. She was greeted with a nod and smile. They stared at each other for a moment and Adam's features warmed to her.

"So..." Adam started slowly. "What's your story? You got a man?" he asked, with a pessimistic intonation.

"Yup, for some time now." The cool, inquisitive grin that Adam bore momentarily deserted his countenance and Trina, ever so subtly, thought she recognized shock.

"Yea? Good for you."

"Yea," Trina thought, and felt a flutter of disdain for the feelings that stewed deep in her. They were, she calculated, heavy and goading empty hopes for Mike. Wonder replaced the

uneasiness as she thought about the distance between them and if that would replace the rift they felt as of late. Her recent phone conversation with him proved to be promising, though she knew she couldn't judge him so easily. Absence makes the heart grow deluded, she thought.

"Well...tell me about him?" Adam brought her back from contemplation and her sickening bastardization of clichés.

"Mike? Hmm... He lives in The Complex with me and Marco. I don't know if I told you about Marco. He's an orphan that I've sorta adopted."

"Wow! A one-man, one-child, woman, huh?"

"Yea," she giggled. "Don't forget one-eyed and one-horned too." The two laughed, though it seemed Adam's inquiries cut it awkwardly short.

"What does he do?"

"He's a fourth grader, what do you mean?"

Adam grinned and readjusted his seating. "No, not the kid. Your boyfriend? I assume not your fiancé, yet, huh?" Now it was Trina's turn to readjust the way she sat. She also felt a little heat rise on her face and sugared it down with a frozen straw-load of cherry slush.

"Nope. Mike is a musician though he's in the process of finding new work. He's hit a bit of a dry spell with his current profession. Perhaps your design firm is looking for a jingle-writer?"

"Not really, but I'll keep that in mind. Describe him?" Adam asked.

"I think he's pretty flexible with the style he writes. Mostly, it seems to be folksy or classic rock-*esque*? He's—"

"No, not his music. Describe *him*."

Trina felt like she was being put on the spot, and felt moderately bad about the glazing she had applied to Mike's vocation. "What's there to say? We see each other daily. He's great with Marco, which is definitely a plus. We share a lot of the same friends. He's got a Midwest-style sense of humor, which is definitely what attracted me to him. Besides, of course, the fact that he's an Irish-Italian mix and I'm a sucker for tanned, toned guys with dark features and blue eyes...uh, I guess I don't know how else to describe him without getting R-rated."

"I've been seeing someone too off and on, as well." Adam interrupted.

"I thought—"

"Well, it's nothing solid, so I didn't want it to sound like I was married to her like you and Mike."

"Well, I guess," Trina started slowly. "It's good that you're happy. Wait a minute, Adam, what does that mean? Mike and I aren't even close to getting married."

"No, but you basically just said you're spending the rest of your life with him, so I just inferred—"

"That's not true, Adam. And if I sounded that way, I'm sorry. We've got our problems, like most relationships, but we deal with them. We communicate pretty well. I guess that's why we've been together so long."

"Well, good. I'm glad. I mean, you're definitely looking for something special that not all guys can provide."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Whatever it was that made us drift."

"We broke up because you didn't think you could give me what I wanted?"

"I guess. To a degree."

"I thought you just wanted to be single in the big city. I didn't think..."

"Well, I think that was part of it too. But you found a guy that sates those needs?"

"I guess. Adam, I was happy with you. I was smitten. You think I moved to New York for the chance to expand my managerial career?"

"No, you said you moved there because you wanted to make a life—"

"I followed you. And when we broke up, it destroyed me. There were months that I hated everything about the Complex and Chloe's and my life there. Every time I saw the Statue of Liberty praising the free world I wanted to tell her to shut the fuck up. It took me a while to get over you."

"I distressed you that much?"

"Try not to sound so self-affected."

"I'm sorry, Tree," he said hurriedly. "But we've both landed on our feet." Trina silently gritted her teeth. Were it not for the ancient arousal of feelings, she probably would have walked away at that point. But still, she sat and listened. "And we're both dating other people. We're both happy, right?"

"Yea."

"Well, I'm not so sure."

"What do you mean, Adam?" Trina felt she was saying that a lot this afternoon.

"We were good together, right? I mean, we had a good run."

"Sure," she nodded. It was true that they did. She thought back to their days at River Town Coffee House, a sticky frenzy of caramel and honeyed desire. How she envied her own happiness back then. And now she faced the responsibility of two boys that were just too adolescent to take it for themselves. At least one had elementary school as an excuse.

"Sometimes I wonder what it'd be like to start again. Y'know?" Adam asked.

Trina wondered how fair she'd been in pushing him to get a job. Forget that, she thought. It isn't about being fair with him. It's about being true to myself. If Mike isn't ready for a nine-to-five life, and to treating Marco as a father figure rather than a playmate, then I should just give up any hope that he'll reform his ways. I've been more than fair with him—and more than patient. I've spent enough time waiting for him to decide. I've sacrificed my happiness long enough.

"Trina?"

Though I have been happy, she thought. He's brought me so much joy. The roller coaster of their life together had delivered a host of ecstasy and luscious tenderness and affection. Together, they shared the wonders of New York (or at least Brooklyn) together. They rejuvenated the children in them and satisfied their earthly desires on rooftops and porches (fire escape had fled her vocabulary long ago). They enjoyed the nightlife and, certainly, the morning-life. Truthfully, he was so much better for her than she admitted. Though she wondered if that time had come to pass.

"Trina, I asked you a question."

"I'm sorry Adam. I guess—" Did he just say that he wants to try to start again? "—I-I guess I haven't thought about us for a while. I don't know how I feel."

Trina clenched her teeth tightly enough to feel slightly dizzy. The nerve of Adam, she thought. It took me months to get over his leaving me. I'm still getting over it. And he wants to rekindle it? To stoke the cinders while the poker still glows? Out of the question. Un-fucking-believable.

"Just tell me, did you enjoy us?"

"What kind of question is that?" she snapped in a tone that was harsher than she intended.

"A sincere one."

"Sure, Adam. We were good together. But I'm with Mike and you're involved off and on too. Besides, we're totally different people now. Not to mention that you live in Michigan and I'm in New York."

"I know, I know. I was just reminiscing. No ulterior motive, Tree." Mike said.

Though not entirely convinced, Trina grinned at his response and patted his hand.

"Oh my God, I totally forgot. I'm supposed to meet up with Dad and Marco for hockey practice."

"Who?"

"Remember the kid I told you about? I brought him home with me to meet my folks. Dad's practically adopted him as a grandson and took him and Alex, Ronnie's son, to the play hockey." She looked at her watch. "I told them I'd be there in ten minutes. I've got to meet up with Mom and head home," she said gathering her belongings and tossing the rest of her Slurpee in the mall's trash bin. "I'm totally late!"

"Wait. How long are you here?"

"Just tomorrow and I'm probably hanging out with family and some friends in Gladwin all day. I'm glad we met up, though, Adam."

"Can I watch?"

"You don't have to come back to Gladwin. It's just hockey practice. I don't think you'd enjoy it much."

"It's no problem. Call your mom and tell her I'm bringing you home. That way I can meet your kid and we can continue this conversation on the ride."

Home. "I can't do that, you know Mom will make you stay for dinner. You wouldn't be able to get back until after midnight. Adam, I don't want to put you out."

"It'd be fun to see your folks again. And to meet Marceau."

"Marco."

"Marco."

Trina hesitated. In fact, she was downright worried about spending more time with Adam. She didn't know if she could trust herself to reaffirm the way she felt one more time. And the loneliness she felt sleeping alone for the past few weeks, coupled with the distance between her and Mike, made her feel a little vulnerable.

"Sure," she said. "What the hell."

Trina closed her eyes and let Adam talk. He filled her head with the adventures he had in Manhattan and Grand Rapids with every vivid detail bursting in emotion. She leaned back and listened as the car propelled them to Gladwin and the conversation brought ambition back to her life. It was more than a year ago, sixteen-and-a-half months, to be exact, that they last rode together. The wind whipped her poorly-conditioned, considerably shorter hair across her brow and temples. Her smile, devoid of sparkle-glitter and cracked with the cares of a girl much wiser than college, bridged ever so slightly across her sun-dappled face. The heavy, cumbersome load of burden slipped from her shoulders to lay at ease in the back seat of Adam's car. Trina was worried that she wouldn't accept it when the car came to rest in Gladwin. Luckily, Marco's excited laughter was enough to divert her attention as the load returned home.

"Aunt Trina! You'll never guess what I can do!" Marco hollered. Trina swelled with pride by the boy's eager smile and desires to impress her of his skills. It seemed her approval was the only

thing that could discern if he had achieved greatness for the day and conquered what he had set out to.

He had obviously shed his new Wings jersey a while back, as his shoulders bore the reddened tinge that shined of a mild flirtation with the sun. He skated back to the parking lot, hockey stick in hand, and swung around backward to arc across the pavement in reverse. Then, as Alex tossed the ball to him, a little behind where the trajectory should have been, Marco compensated flawlessly. He performed a controlled trap, righted his direction, and slap-shot the ball toward Trina's father. Mr. Fitzgerald shielded his eyes and waved at his daughter from across the lot. It was obvious to Trina that he was wondering who Adam was and what the hell he was doing there. Unfortunately, the ball truncated the thought as it ricocheted off his gut and bounced across the blue chalk line a few feet away.

Alex cheered heroically, as though the gut-shot was performed with surgical execution. Adam unwittingly joined in the jubilation.

Trina, conflicted with the mild frustration of sewing two worlds together, forced her mind to recall Adam's presence and call the game to a halt for introductions. It wasn't until a minute of gushing excitement and lauding talent had passed, before Trina was allowed to complete this task.

"Dad, this is Adam. I don't think you ever met him."

"Your mother phoned ahead and told us you ran into your old roommate," he said. Trina thought it awkward that he'd chosen the word *roommate*, rather than *boyfriend*.

"We ran into each other at the mall. He's living in Grand Rapids now."

"Nice to meet you, Adam," her father said as he approached. He used the excuse of rubbing his stomach to refrain from shaking Adam's hand. His intent was semi-apparent or, in the least, more real than the pain in his tummy. Marco came skating up in time to melt the momentary awkwardness.

"Good to meet you, too, Mr. Fitzgerald. I've heard a lot about you."

"And this is Marco, Adam."

"Hi, Adam. Did you see my shot, Aunt Trina? Wasn't that cool? Your dad says he thinks I'm a natural. And I can play hockey whenever I want. I wonder if Luis and Chris back home can skate. I think it'd be cool to play back at school, but Papa doesn't think they have a rink." Hearing Marco call Trina's father *Papa* struck a different chord in each of them.

"I'm sure there's free-skate time at Madison Square Garden, buddy. Or Prospect Park. If not, we can wait until the pond freezes over at Central Park, or they set up the rink at the Rockefeller Center."

"Listen to you," Adam interrupted. "Miss Manhattan! I thought you didn't make it to the city too often. You really have changed."

"I guess," Trina answered.

"Even after all that we discussed?"

"What do you mean?"

"Can I shoot again, Papa?"

"Of course, Marco. We'll leave Aunt Trina and her friend to catch-up for a little while. "Nice to meet you, Adam," he said and exchanged a glance with Trina that he meant to discuss later.

The boy shimmied backward across the lot as Alex ran in the general direction of the field hockey ball with his arms in the air, giggling.

"Alex!" Trina hollered. But her summoning wasn't enough to distract him from his ball-retrieving mission. "That's Alex, Adam. Remember Rhonda's son?"

"Oh my god! I can't believe how much he's grown."

"I know. That's what I said. Can you believe? He's two already."

"I mean you're different now," Adam replied, with no attempt at a segue back to their former thoughts. He looked in the distance as he spoke. "Remember what we spoke about in Michigan before? At the café when we danced, you promised you wouldn't change. And in the U-Haul when we moved. And countless times at Beulah's—"

"A lot has changed, Adam. You've changed too, I'm sure."

"Maybe," he grinned, but directed his eyes outward. "But what happened to the Trina Fitzgerald that I used to know a year ago? The one with long brown hair that never wore make-up because it was an injustice to the fairer sex. The one that used to go on hour-long diatribes about not letting New York turn you into bitter, impatient machines." Trina remembered the woman on the plane again while he spoke. She suppressed the cautionary voice in her mind's ear and listened intently to Adam. He somehow, for once, became less opaque, as though the latches and deadbolts at The Complex hadn't been thrown so adamantly on the overcast day a year before. He somehow freed the grit and grime from his peephole to let a shaft of light into his soul. "You promised that sweet, wonderful girl that I loved would always be there."

"For the record, Adam, you made the promise. And my acceptance of that vow was a manifestation of my love for you. You had a way of making me believe that no matter what, things would be all right. And when you left, everything was altered. Things were not all right. Things changed. And yes, I guess I changed as well. But I think it was justified. I mean, you were gone. Who did I have to uphold that promise to, then, Adam?"

"To yourself, Tree. We didn't make that promise for me."

"I did."

"Then you shouldn't have made it at all."

"Why? What was so good about Katrina twelve months ago? Why is she so much better than Katrina now? I mean look at me. I'm happy. I'm self-sufficient. That Trina would've given herself completely to anything love threw at her. Naïve."

"Naïve?"

"This Trina is in a good relationship with a decent, sensible guy. She knows this guy won't fly away to follow his dreams and leave her there alone."

"I'm sorry."

"This Tri—what?"

"I said I'm sorry..." he said, finally looking at her. "I got scared. I thought the routine that we felt was the way things were always going to be, and I was afraid of that. Afraid of living life in tedium. And that sounds so terrible, I know it does. I can hear myself saying it and it sounds like I mean that you're the reason I left and that's definitely not true. I was scared that we hit our peak and just became too comfortable too quickly to enjoy the surprises and unexpected joys of a relationship."

"So you just walked out?"

"I'm sorry. It was wrong, I know."

"There are other, better ways to add surprises to a relationship, Adam."

"I know."

"Though you accomplished your task, all right. Leaving was a pretty big surprise. It was the sledgehammer of all surprises."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"And Mike and I are working through the same thing, now. And I'm happy with who I've become, through the mistakes of our past. I'm happy with what New York has changed me into. And, damn it, I like my hair short too," she laughed.

"Mike. You and he have something special, I guess."

"We've been together for six months, now."

"Oh?"

"Well, I've known him for a lot longer, but six months since we—"

"Gotcha."

"Yea."

"So you're in love?" he asked. The question caught Trina off-guard and Adam immediately sensed the hesitation. "*Does* the new Trina fall in love?"

"Yes," she said hurriedly and thought back to Mike and their current slump. She considered his lack of income and their absence of communication. She wondered how things would be when she returned home. "Yes," she said again, this time ensuring that it sounded more confident.

"Well good," Adam said. "Good, Trina. I'm glad to hear. I'm proud of you. I guess New York hasn't changed you completely."

The old friends took their seat on the hood of Adam's car as Trina applied a bit of aloe to her nose and shoulders. They continued to speak further about their excitement in their respective careers and lives. Trina's eyes barely ever left the skating boy, convinced he'd crash or trip or careen off into danger at any moment. Her ears remained fixated on Adam's voice. Her mind, however, drifted to her worries back home.

Dinner was equally as cold, bland and acrid as the introduction that occurred an hour before. Though not too many words could be exchanged outside Marco's bragging and Alex's excitement and laughter. It was obvious that Trina's mom concurred with her father on the disapproval of their dinner guest. However, it seemed that if the couple was entertaining the notion of rejoining, perhaps her daughter could be convinced of leaving the urban rats nest after all. As doubtful as it was, she thought, there was a chance.

68

It was no sooner than the two had returned to the city that Trina launched back into the old routine. Marco was back into school, beginning his final year of elementary education, and Trina was pleased that it distracted him from his constant begging to play hockey.

Somehow, between baggage claim and the Gypsy cab home, Trina decided that she'd not dwell on the rift between her and Mike. Now, a week and a half later, she was just as resolute in her vow. The renewal of their morning rituals made forgiving his unemployment a little easier. The cascading jets of water flowed as rampantly as the couple's urges. They gushed out of grins, ricocheted off steamy crevices, and clung to sinewy landscapes of skin, like an espresso machine riding the Teacups. The times when Trina thought of Adam were few, though one or two admittedly arose during the morning ride.

Mike hadn't visited Chloe's since Trina returned to work and though the afternoons seemed longer as the fall approached, Trina used these moments to enjoy her solitude. Her love for the city returned as the seasonal chill of autumn bribed the greens from the leaves. Perhaps the sudden changes in temperature were responsible for the steep increase in piano tunings as Trina came home to an envelope once every week. I suppose, Trina thought, that I can live with assistance with bills during a busy season for piano-players. Though I'd prefer it year-round, it's better than nothing at all.

And that's how she continued her vow. It was almost as if Mike, no, New York, had detected her remembrance of Michigan and everything about it was displaced happiness. The sex had continued, but was it completely Mike that Trina caressed? The work had resumed, but was it entirely Chloe's that held captive Trina's mind? The city itself seemed to masquerade itself as the trees donned colors of the Midwest and migrating sugars cooled in their veins. Trina was oblivious to her delusion and raved about the trip to Mayleigh. Tony and Brian half-listened as they went over a contact sheet of a picnic photo shoot Tony took for Vogue.

"Seriously, May, I forgot how beautiful it is up there during the summer."

"I saw Marco's tan. I didn't realize Puerto Ricans tan."

"Tell that to Tony," Brian said. "He's got more mileage on his tanning salon card than Chita Rivera."

"Bitch," Tony snapped and went back to his contact sheets. He didn't seem to be pleased with his work, or the conversation.

"Sure they do. Everyone does," Trina replied. "Everyone but me, I guess," she added as she twitched her nose beneath more freckles than before.

"And that's after two weeks of burning and flaking. Are you sure you wore sunscreen?"

"Yep. It's the Fitzgerald curse."

"Could be worse, you could be stuck with our curse."

"What's that?"

"Judging from me and my family? Gay in high school only to grow up, gain weight, become a lunch lady, and die of cancer before you see your grandkids."

"I'll stick with the freckles."

"Good idea."

The café had been unusually vacant since Trina's return. Billy hadn't been seen since the funeral; never stopping by for his complimentary coffee. Even his foreign friend, Lod, seemed to wonder where he was. The group just figured he was soul-searching after the loss of his close friend. Between his absence, and Mike's lack of visits, Chloe's seemed much colder than the season in which it currently thrived.

And then Mike was there. He walked in as plainly as he'd done so many times before, but Trina felt a difference. Barring the fact that he hadn't come in weeks, his presence seemed oddly contrived.

"Hey gang," he called to Brian and Tony who were drawing lazy circles around monochromatic skies.

"Hey Mike," Tony said. "You wouldn't perchance be willing to stand naked in Central Park holding a fruit basket in front of your crotch while I snap off a roll or two, would you?"

"Er, no."

"What about me?" Brian asked.

"You're not accompanying my perfectly tan ass anywhere, hombre."

"How've you been?" Mike whispered as he looped his fingers under Trina's belt and drew her near. They kissed for a moment, awkwardly, until Mike broke away.

"Good, babe," she said. "You've got a little grease on you."

"Must be the pianos," he said.

"Mmm," grinned Trina, "I thought it was for *later*."

Mayleigh grumbled and decided that it was a good opportunity to go get a refill and attack the steaming dish-machine that was begging to be un- and re-loaded.

"What was that for?" Trina asked as the pair sat alone.

"The kiss? I've been missing your lips," Mike said. Trina was led to wonder if this had anything to do with the growing rumor about her visit with Adam back in Michigan. She wondered if he heard it through the Mayleigh-vine earlier in the week.

"I've missed yours too," she smiled and slowly caressed his thigh. "...among other things." Mike seemed a little startled by her boldness, but decided to play it off as a fleeting pass. Dusty's emergence in the doorway broke-off his need to continue the game.

"Look who's back from the Great White North!" Dusty laughed. He walked up and seated himself adjacently across the table so that a chair separated him and the lovers. His strategy, to block his view of any canoodling, also provided a seat for Mayleigh, as she'd soon act as his buffer zone. His tactics were obvious to the entire café, including a few strangers off to the side that were helpless but to overhear.

"I went to Michigan, Dusty. Not the Yukon."

"Same thing," he laughed and turned his head to Mayleigh. "I had a vision today, May."

"What's that, Dusty?"

"A beautiful girl, dressed in nothing but a Chloe's apron, leaping majestically towards me with two Venti Cappuccinos. Her hair was blowing in the wind and her smile was practically

dripping erotica. Not to mention of course that she had a perfect ass and the coffee was piping hot." Snickers caught the crowd more infectiously than a yawn.

"Oh my God, I never thought I'd hear that!" Mayleigh hollered as she left the dish-machine, now whirring in delight as it scrubbed at newly-added orts and bits.

"What? That a sexy boy from Philly is having wet dreams involving you and coffee?"

"No, that I have a perfect ass. Thanks!"

"What is going on in here?" Brian interrupted. "Is all of Park Slope in heat or did you slip something in the coffee?"

"Speak for yourself," Tony muttered. He'd given up on his prints and decided to join the group at the table. The dish-machine finished the rinse before Brian finally ceded and joined the group for a game of Hearts.

Within moments, the air was alive and electric. The oldies on the radio rang a little less tinny. The coffee tasted a little more Columbian. The colors of their world danced a little more vibrant. And Chloe's and The Complex seemed complete again. The dream that Trina had a year ago, when she first met Mayleigh, had come to fruition. Though as she retrieved her cards, thumbed her hearts, and thoughtlessly bit her lip, Trina wondered what Adam was doing a thousand miles away.

69

The familiar bing-bong of the NYC subway system (“take heed”) rang loud and clear as Trina ushered herself and Marco to a seat. Passers-by seemed to squeeze effortlessly out the doors before they slid to a halt, rubber-tongue in rubber-groove, to close off the car from the platform. Airbrakes sneezed and the train gave its precursory tug, as it always does before it’s set into motion.

Trina smoothed Marco’s unbridled coif and leaned back against the orange plastic chair, content in enjoying her ride back from the city. Marco kicked his rubber boots against the compartment below the seats where the heaters were dormant. Passengers had waned in the last few stops until there were only four of them, including her and the boy. The train’s air-conditioned interior felt numbingly cold as they rose from a tunnel into the starless New York night. Smith-9th Street was above ground and provided, among a scenic view, the ability to judge that Park Slope was a few stops away. Rain thundered on the roof of the train car, but sounded like a gentle clicking from the inside.

A little farther down the aisle was a college-aged girl with her head buried in her hands; possibly sleeping. Diagonally across and a half-car down was an older tatterdemalion, graced with the garb of a homeless shelter.

“What do you have there?” Trina found herself saying. Marco’s hands were entwined around a plastic flower or something that at one point resembled one. Trina smiled and took it from the boy, twirling it in her fingers. The oddly placed daubs of glue-gun adhesive surely had at one point resembled morning dew. Now they shown through their transparency the only remaining clean sections of the rose, preserved as though by amber.

Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw something impossible. She trained her gaze on Adam, just as he stepped through the sliding doors that separated the train cars.

“Marco, I’ll be right back,” she said in a hurry. “Will you be all right?”

“Yup.”

“I’ll just be in the next car. Stay here, ok?”

“K.”

Trina raced to catch the sliding door as it slowly hit the latch. She grabbed the handle and jerked it backward, pushing herself into the void between the cars. The rain pounded down on her and loosened her grip on the metal door handle behind her. Just as she grabbed the handle of the door that opened into the next car, however, she had an awkward sensation.

“You looked like you could use a flower,” Trina heard Marco say. The rush of the driving wind and metal on metal made it difficult to decipher, but Trina was sure of the words. She’d heard them clearly, just as she heard them before.

Forgetting her mission to track down the now-vanished passenger, she whirred around as the train door clicked shut. She stood with one hand on the handle and the other on the metal accordion that connected the cars, peering back through the window.

Marco had approached the college girl who was looking past him and back at Trina. A spotted pane of Plexiglas separating them revealed a pair of weary eyes that were stained with the redness of tears. She was staring into her own face.

Just then, the train gave a lurch as it bounded up the hill toward the station. Trina was taken by surprise as the metal floor's traction slipped from her heels. She fell onto the accordion which caught her abruptly under one of her arms. Her feet slid out from under her, bringing her forcefully to one knee. The rain beat down on her as she scrambled precariously to her feet, heart racing and anxious to survey the scene inside the window.

When she recovered her footing and hoisted herself back up, she saw him thru the graffiti-etched window, sitting beside the girl and chatting. The girl was holding the rose and smiling. Marco was again kicking his feet on the heater compartment, and speaking without pause for breath. Trina shifted her gaze to the man on the other end, which now sported a blanket and seemed to be working determinedly with something beneath it.

"MARCO!" she screamed and grabbed the handle to wrench the door open. *I have to get to him*, she thought. *I have to get him out of there, to keep him safe.* But as she yanked at the handle, it only remained stubbornly in place. "MARCO!" she yelled again and pounded the door with her hand, rubbing her sore knee with the other.

The man with the blanket drew his face into a sickly leer as the rain streaked and distorted Trina's image of the car's interior. "MARCO!" she screamed again in vain. "Come help me!" The rain pounded mercilessly, and Trina, still slapping the window, could feel her shirt clinging to her long hair. She had to get to him. She had to help him. "Come help me, Marco! Come help your Mama!"

"I'm right here, Aunt Trina."

Trina woke in a state that caused her to bolt upright in her bed. Her chest was heaving and she could feel the beads of sweat on her temples and upper lip.

"Aunt Trina? Were you having a nightmare?"

Trina looked over at the boy, who looked scared in the little bars of light that entered through her vertical blinds. She grabbed the boy and hugged him hard, closing her eyes only when she was sure that the room was hers and not some other terrible vision.

"Yes, I was, Marco. I dreamt I couldn't get to you. I dreamt you needed my help and I couldn't reach you."

"I'm okay Aunt Trina. It's all right."

"I know, sweetie." Trina said, consoling herself more than the panicked boy. She continued to hug him and opened her eyes again to ensure the room was still her own.

"Aunt Trina?"

"Yes," she said, with mild hesitation.

"Did you have a dream about my Mama?"

Trina quietly recalled the events of her vision, the ones that seemed all too real just a moment before. "No, Marco. I had a dream about me."

70

It was somewhere between the gentle caresses of his soapy, exploring hands and a carelessly intrusive thought of Adam that Trina found herself reengage with Mike. Her fingers lingered longer as she pressed against his spine. Her eyes flickered with a more invigorated sensual urge and she allowed herself to succumb to the undulating currents that penetrated her. These added gestures, which intensified Mike's reactions, provoked an unsettling feeling in her that she bookmarked for later review. If the rapids of climax weren't so close, it may have enough to kill the mood.

So when she gave him a kiss on the cheek and wiped a bit of shaving cream from behind his left ear, she allowed the mental bookmark to nag her quickly through the door. Her schedule dictated that this was to be a double-shifted week, so the morning walk would be put to good use.

Since Randy's funeral and returning from Michigan, Trina had been borrowing Camel Lights from Mayleigh regularly. It was the first time on this walk, however, that Trina popped into a bodega to purchase her own pack, complete with complimentary book of Winston matches.

October's chilled jet streams, coupled with the equally frigid topic at hand, sent shivers through her breast and compelled her arms to crisscross her heart. She lit a smoke and thought about the occurrence in the shower. Trina had recognized that when her mind wandered to Adam, amid the morning ritual, she subconsciously felt a moment of guilt. This unwelcome intrusion in both her mind and her psyche had automated the natural reaction of feigning extreme intimacy. She wasn't faking a climax, nor had she ever needed to, but she had unwittingly intensified her participations in the rest of the event: she had faked the foreplay.

The shudder that reverberated in her, however, wasn't an echo of the guilt she felt by letting her mind wander to Adam. It was, in all impracticality, a suspicion. When she returned from Michigan she initially thought that Mike's increased affection came from the rumor that Trina had bumped into an ex-boyfriend in the Midwest; one that, in the opening weeks of their relationship, plagued the conversations. Now she worried that it was more than mere jealousy and territorialism.

It's true that Mike's hours of piano-cleaning and tuning had increased dramatically. And beyond that, she knew she was receiving a weekly envelope to compliment her expense payments. Mike also stopped by the coffee house at sporadic times, rather than his regular visits and these visits were filled with romantic gestures and sensual connotations. Trina, who tended to measure others' reactions by the way she would react, redoubled her suspicions when she remembered more frequent times when he pulled her chair closer and rubbed her back; the times when he stole extra kisses before she got up to assist a new customer.

It was fortunate that Mayleigh was confined to baking duties in the back all day, as she only received a taste of Trina's foul mood in the morning. Trina was even a bit snappish with Marco's friend's mom when she phoned to ask if he could stay over their house for the evening. She apologized for her rudeness immediately, thinking that the last thing she needed was for another of Marco's classmates to think his Aunt Trina was a psycho. Most of the others already did.

Throughout the day, she let her worries germinate so that, when he entered that evening, a mighty tree of doubt was ripe for lumber. His swagger through the doors seemed connivingly charming. His eyes flickered across the room to survey its guests before igniting on Trina. His lips pursed and he subconsciously ran his tongue along them to lubricate his hopes for a kiss. Instead, Trina chirped a *hello*, and pretended to be searching for something behind the counter. She thought, while crouched on cracking knees, about how to broach the conversation when she stood again. Thankfully, the moment passed, when Brian spoke up.

"Hey Mike! Pull up a seat, we need a fourth." One of the chairs of their euchre game was empty and delaying the start of their game.

"Trina?" Mike called out. "Do you want to play?"

"Nope," replied her muffled voice behind the counter. "Mayleigh's restocking the entire baked goods menu and I've got loads to do. You go ahead."

Mike retreated from the counter and filled the chair across from Brian.

"What'd you do today?" Tony asked, as he studied his cards. Trina felt she was safe enough to stand and wanted to hitch the opportunity to see his face in hopes that a telltale wrinkle would cross his brow, or that his eyes would dart. Unfortunately, she both rose too late, and noted he was sitting with his back to her. She did, however, think she caught his head swiveling back from what could've been her direction.

"Worked for a few hours, had a doctor's appointment, worked again. Boring day."

"Why'd you go to the doctor, Mike?" Tony inquired. Trina noted that in the six months they'd never discussed any physical ailment or need to visit a physician. Perhaps, she thought, these are the little surprises that come with dating someone for six months—bitter that details are no longer being shared but happy to celebrate the milestone of first-six-month-check-up events.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Mike whirled around to see Trina a little red-faced at the eavesdropping. Her eyes, however, were filled with concern rather than embarrassment.

"Fine," he said matter-of-factly. "Picture of health."

"I haven't been to the doctor in a year-and-a-half," Tony said. His euchre partner, who Trina just now realized was Billy's ethnic friend Lod, grinned toothlessly.

"No doctor," he slurred.

"Why'd you go?" Trina inquired further.

"No reason in particular. Figured that I should schedule at least one a year to make sure I'm okay. My dad had prostate cancer when he was about my age and they were able to treat it pretty easily because it was caught right away."

"I didn't know that," Trina said.

"Yea, so I've always been a bit careful."

"You know," piped in Brian, "if you get your prostate removed you can't have an erection for the rest of your life. Just think: your father couldn't have had you if he didn't."

"He and Mom had me before he had the cancer."

"Oh, well, then your sister, then," said Brian.

"Nope, Rudy's father's different than mine. And Charlize is Mr. Butera's girl." He dealt the table a hand. "Besides, maybe it wouldn't have been so bad for Dad to lose his prostate. He might've stuck around longer."

"Alone," Brian shot to the table. "So much for nuclear families," he added, revealing his hand; a four-point hand. Mike grimaced. Lod giggled.

"But you don't blame your dad for leaving, I thought." Trina said. "It was your mom—"

"No doctor," Lod interrupted, grinning again. "Too money."

Mike flashed his I'd-rather-not-discuss-this leer in Trina's direction and she took the hint.

"Yeah," she said. "Too money is right. Chloe's certainly doesn't pay me enough to afford regular check-ups." The worries in her mind seemed to put her on the offensive this evening, especially since they had been percolating all day. "I didn't think that piano-tuning came with benefits."

"It doesn't, but it wasn't *too money*," he laughed. "I-it...was a favor." He faltered a bit but recovered nicely. "One of my clients is a doctor." Trina seemed to be the only one in the group perceptive enough to catch the hesitation.

"Clean bill o' health, then, huh?" Tony collected the cards and started to shuffle.

"Completely. Except for a hemorrhoid, but he says that's normal."

"Hemorrhoid? How'd I miss *that*, this morning?" Trina laughed, attempting to lighten her own mood, even if it was at Mike's expense.

"Yeah. He said it can be caused by a bad diet, or stress."

"What have you been doing lately that has caused you stress?" Brian said, picking up the cards that Tony laid before him.

"Nothing really. It could've been physical stress too," Mike said. "Like a really big turd."

"Physical stress?"

"Me and my anus have a little understanding," Mike said. "It does its job and I clean up after it. Other than that, we just exist and pretend like the other doesn't."

"Sounds like my parents," Tony said. "Especially because my dad can be an irritating asshole."

Suddenly, Dusty burst through the doors. He was dripping with sweat and his business casual attire was disheveled. His expression was marked with a combination of horror and sorrow. He hollered the news in a jumbled blur so that his expression infected the others without their knowledge; the comprehension marred their faces before it drove its spike into their brains. The volatile entrance caused Mayleigh to emerge from the kitchen, steaming cookie tray in hand.

She scanned the faces of her friends and the other anonymous patrons.

"You guys look terrible. What?" she joked, "Did someone die?"

Trina broke free of her glassy-eyed stare at Dusty to nod a reply.

"Counts."

71

Mayleigh closed the coffee house early that night. There would be no ritual of cards and coffee to wile the darkened hours away. The group felt too melancholic to even attempt the further berating of Mike's swollen bum. Instead, the couples in much need of consolation retreated to their respective rooms in The Complex and repaired their wills in the gentle caress of each other's arms.

The minute amounts of solace Trina received from the intimacy with Mike were ruined by the daubs of doubt and betrayal she felt. She insisted to herself that she would much rather spend the time curling on the couch with Marco, hugging and watching a movie. In fact, she purposefully skipped any cuddling time with Mike to escape to the roof. Nearly buried in her winter coat, she sat cross-legged and stared up, passed the labyrinth of rooftops to get a clear view of Manhattan. She remembered in the times when Adam first left her how she often fled to the roof to catch a glimpse of its twinkling skyline and wonder if he was trying to pinpoint The Complex's tar-encrusted crown. Now, knowing he was states away and he still cared for her, she felt that the repetition of this old habit might bring her a bit of comfort. Instead, it dulled the pain she felt.

Police found Dusty's business card stuffed in Billy's oversized coat and phoned him to attempt to identify the body. Since William Walker had no identification, the coroner applied a rubber stamp toe tag to the man indicating the cross streets and alley where he was discovered. The cop on the scene had relayed details about the body's physiognomy, which caused Dusty to suspect it was Billy. It seemed that the evening trainee was a bit flustered when Dusty came in to confirm his suspicions; he led the curator to a body he referred to as *Mr. Union N. Fourth*.

It was Billy all right. His charcoal skin and deep grey beard hid most of his face from view, but there was no mistaking his rich, beetle-black eyes. Underneath the starchy white sheet, his body looked darker than ever and though the glow was missing from his face, his warm appreciative grin from his lips, Dusty nodded and identified the man correctly as William Walker.

"Whom should I contact as next of kin?" the trainee asked.

"He has none."

"Who will take care of the burial?"

Dusty stared blankly at the elderly man on the stainless steel table. It seemed that Billy Walker had been overcome by sorrow and guilt for the loss of his friend. And just as birds are driven by coldness to perform the familiar rituals of their past, the former teen counselor quickly went south. Billy returned to his drug addiction as evidence by the darkened punctures to his

inner arms. The coroner said that an epileptic fit during a crack high is extremely risky, especially to someone of Billy's age.

Randy Hogenstern had a worthy competitor for chess again.

"Who will take care of the burial?" the coroner repeated. Dusty looked up but only continued his dull, emotionless glare. "I see," the man noted. "If he's cremated at our Brooklyn facility, you still may collect his ashes for dispersion but we can only supply a cardboard box."

Mike peered over the ladder's edge to see Trina hugging her knees in the middle of the roof, tears streaming down her face. She had a cigarette perched precariously in her mouth and it sent quiet smoke signals to the neighboring rooftops.

Mike swung over the last rung and landed with a soft thud. If Trina heard it, she didn't show any physical indication.

"I didn't think smoking was going to become a regular thing," he said. He examined her stillness and tried a different approach. "I'm so sorry about your friend," Trina still didn't move. "I know how much he meant to you and Marco."

Finally Trina sniffed and wiped her eyes and nose on the sleeve of her coat. She looked first at Mike's shoes and then scanned quickly up to his face. Abruptly, she bit her lip and looked away, towards the Manhattan skyline, repetition and solace. Her gut felt like a roast pork loin, heated and bound with twine. It yanked at her heart and lungs until breathing in felt difficult and it caused pain to attempt to speak. As confusion and grief bound the twine tighter, she forced herself to accept the pain.

"Are you cheating on me?"

Mike was thrown off-guard. All he could muster was a puzzled, defensive frown.

"Because if you are, Mike, I'd rather you just tell me you don't want to be with me rather than running around behind my back. You're not obligated to Marco and you know I can pay rent without you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb, Mike. I'm not blind. I see the way you've been acting lately: you're added affection since I got back from Michigan, your sparse appearances at Chloe's. You don't even look at me anymore. I know you're hiding something and I'm just..." She found tears in her eyes and cursed the fact that they'd risen without her knowing. She was angered by the fact that her heart was so weak when she had resolved to be strong about this. "I just want to hear it from you."

"Trina, I'm not cheating on you."

"Then what is it, Mike?" She gave in the fight to prevent the tears from coming and just let them flow. She silently hoped the chilling saline would reach her chest and sooth the pain inside. "Why are you acting so strangely? I feel like I should know you by now, but you don't make any sense anymore."

"You're just emotional because Billy died. And that's understandable."

"No, Mike. It's not that!" she forced through gritted teeth. The twine was pulled tighter and her constricted stomach felt like it was knotted into her throat. "I want to know what's going on with you. With us! What are you hiding from me?"

"Look, Trina. I love you. I'm not cheating on you, okay?"

"Then what is it?"

"It's nothing."

"Are you sick? Is that it?"

"No—"

"Is that why you went to the doctor but didn't want to tell me? It must be serious, because I know New York doctors aren't cheap."

"No, Trina, I'm honestly fine. If you want, I'll show you the report. Christ, I'll even show you the hemorrhoid."

"Then what is it, Mike? I told you I can't play this game."

"All right, Trina. Listen, okay?" Mike took a breath, allowing time for Trina to wash a bit of the crusting salt from her cheeks—to analyze his face. "There is...something. But it's not important to you and me. It's not important to *us*, I mean. But I assure you that there is no one else in my life. And that I'm 100% healthy, ok?" he waited briefly for a nod that never came. "I just can't tell you what it is. Not until I'm ready."

Trina was speechless. She didn't know how to react.

"Maybe..." she said after an eternity of searching his face. "Maybe it's time we took a break."

"What are you talking about?" Mike sighed, slightly annoyed.

"Look, this is a real puzzling time for me and I'm confused."

"I'm not, Trina. I told you I love you. I told you there's no one else but you."

"I know, I know," she sniffed, attempting futilely to halt the endless flow of liquids that leaked from her eyes and nose. "But I can't handle this right now."

"Handle what?"

"We never kept secrets before."

"You're mad because I won't tell you something that doesn't concern you?"

"Yes," she said adamantly, but knew it wasn't true. "No. I don't know. I know I'm confused. I know these things I'm feeling and I just need some time to sort it out."

"So, what? You're breaking up with me?"

"No, Mike. Just a break. Ok? Just some time off from this."

"Trina, relationships are about working through the tough spots. I'm sorry if Adam was Mr. Perfect and you never had a sad day with him—"

"What?"

"—and that he had all the answers and never kept secrets from you so that you never needed a break to sort out the way you feel—"

"This isn't about Adam, Mike."

"—but I don't know if I appreciate the accusations you're making. I don't like you telling me that I'm playing a game, here. I don't know if I care for your lack of trust. And I seriously don't like you throwing up your hands when you think it's getting too difficult."

"That's not what it's about, either, Mike!"

"Then what IS it about? WHY do you need time off from us?"

"I don't know," Trina cried. She started to get up, but Mike grabbed her elbow and held her down next to him. All she could do was look away. "I told you I'm confused right now." The distance between them made Michigan seem a rooftop away. The silence soaked oceans.

"Well, fine. Be confused. Sort it out. Take your time. I don't give a shit," he called and jumped to his feet.

"Where you going?" she hollered after him.

"Back to my apartment. I am still allowed to live there, aren't I?" he swung his legs over to the ladder and started a rapid descent. "Or should we take a break from that too?"

“Mike,” she moaned, as his head disappeared from the side of the roof. Trina continued sobbing and staring, hoping his head would reappear. She hated the way she felt right now. She hated herself for being so emotional. As much as she wanted to, however, she couldn’t follow after him to apologize for some of the things she said. She told him how she felt. And though she fully believed his fidelity, now, she couldn’t understand why this news should greet her so harshly. Deep inside, as the twine pulled taut, she felt guilt wriggle its way between her confusion and fear. It caused her to hug her knees nearer and recoil into her coat, gritting her teeth and sobbing through the pain.

Maybe, she thought, I wanted an excuse to let him go.

72

The entire Complex had shown up to scatter the ashes of William Walker. It was just before dusk at the center point of the pedestrian walk on the Brooklyn Bridge and all floors were accounted for.

Lod Serveka and Stan represented Apartment 0, the building's front step. It was the open arms and introduction to The Complex, providing character and establishing the mood. They graced the walk with their chess games since the first day Trina and Adam had moved in. In the short span that Trina had lived in New York, she had seen two players pulled from the game for good. Half of the pieces were swept from the board in what seemed to be the blink of an eye. They hugged and let their tears fall to blackened splotches on each other's dirty lapels.

Mayleigh and Dusty represented the ground floor. It was the sturdy foundation that held the supports for all others, while equally supporting itself. A girl who had turned away from the gender that abused her mercilessly had survived to accept them again. She clutched a transplanted curator's arm: Dusty from Philly. He was a simple New Englander that fell in love with a lesbian.

Tony and Brian stood when the second floor pleaded for counsel. It was the waist of community that shared and connected, while breathing life throughout. A product of rich life in neglected parenting rested its head on the shoulder of the product of intolerance and exile.

Trina and Marco represented the third floor. She was the shoulders that reached higher to allow for stature and growth, while boarding the warmth of a beating heart. She held in her hands the Quaker Oat box that housed Counts' remains and wished to be holding someone else.

Mike represented the roof. He was its steeple, filled with wonder, clouded by distance, and riddled with thought. He stood behind the group and blinked away the discomfort like a snowflake alit on an eyelash.

From each floor, each resident stood silently as Trina fumbled for a cigarette and found her thoughts pulled in opposite directions. Here, in five levels, were disease and poverty. Here existed sexual deviance, rape, decadence, fear, murder, abandon, suffering, and codependency. Here, in one house, were friends, coworkers, partners, lovers and roommates.

Mike wasn't cheating on Trina. Directly after the ashes dived and dipped with the gusty breezes that threaded the suspension cables, he gave her a hug and left.

While the group turned and headed for Brooklyn, Mike walked toward Manhattan and continued down to the Fulton Street station. There he accessed the utility room on the uptown side and changed quickly into his MTA uniform. It would have been right about the time that Trina collapsed sobbing onto her bed that he entered the train and began calling stops.

Mike wasn't cheating on Trina. He was simply taking her advice. He had applied for a job as conductor for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority while Trina had been home on vacation. She was away when he got the call to start training as mid-conductor. The job paid \$18 an hour and, to a guy that never held a steady position in his life, it was more of a whim than an opportunity.

"I'll try it for a week," he said. If I find out that I can't hack it, she'll be none the wiser.

The hardest part about leaving Bohemia is the knowledge that one can never return. Once the artist smock is hung up and replaced with a blue collar, it will never fit right again. Mike didn't realize the trade-off that occurred. He understood, though, that if he failed, he did it alone.

73

I can remember only one other time since I moved here where words themselves lost their meanings. When he left me, besides stewing in the loneliness that filled his place, I could only pace The Complex and utter questions that infiltrated my mind. Why did he abandon me, I'd ask. And the word "abandon" felt tannic and oily as it slid off my tongue. The meaning escaped my thoughts with its caustic aftertaste. What does that word even mean, I'd think. Abandon. And I couldn't place where I'd heard it before or label which feelings it should usher in. Abandon. There it is again; slitting the sides of my tongue and scratching the back of my throat. It was as though the very mention of the foreign word would draw blood from my gums and I didn't even know the reason I continued to utter it. Sitting on my favorite windowsill, I watched the shadows turn our kitchen into a tangram, cutting it into triangles and squares, and repeated the word over and over until I found the pain concentrate on my lips. At least, I thought, they focused my hurt into something physical. Remove from me the pain I feel inside and replace it with a gritty, turgid tongue; a stinging cheek.

I found, through the careful repetition of those questions in the weeks following Adam's departure, that other words lost their meanings too. Like "desolation" and "security." The latter meant nothing to me, even as I collected deposits from new tenants and showed ID when cashing checks. "I need last month's rent for a security

deposit," I would say and wonder if people were as lost as I was. Wonder if they could see me wince at the word. I would hand over my Social Security card and wonder if a cashier was tempted to call "security" for provision of false documents. I would imagine them saying "I'm sorry, ma'am. Your security is rejected;" a drop of blood framing the corners of their lips.

It was all in my head of course. Just as it is now. The simple vocalization of a word could never inflict physical pain, but somehow my desperate prayers to have it replace the hurt I felt inside were real enough to fuel this fantasy. Abandon sours my taste buds. Desolation cracks my lip and salts the creases.

I guess you search inside to find reason in yourself for the terrible things that happen. Both Billy and Randy within the span of a month, I attributed to my guilty happiness with Adam. I ascribe Marco's return to fighting at school not to my distance in parenting, but to his desire to leave the city. His tan is fading and replaced by black-n-blue marks; the glow of his eyes replaced with shiners. It's my fault.

I came out here to escape the security (old pennies on my tongue) of home and the protective shell I built there. I know that now. My ambition to be with Adam was built on the false pretense of our independent happiness with each other. And thank God he left when he did because he has created the legacy of "what could have been." I came here to live an unrestrained life, away from a family that cares for me, so that I could face challenges on my own. I willingly let my challenge relocate to Manhattan and remained in a new protective shell in idle desolation (a dozen slivers on the roof of my mouth). We were two of a kind, him and me. He didn't have the courage to stay. I didn't have the courage to follow.

And here I am again. But I beat Mike to the punch this time. I abandoned (swollen self-mutilation) him first. And if he's anything like me, he won't pursue me further.

Billy,

You sad, sweet man. You bought me this journal to keep me sane and I feel I've disgraced your memory. Consider this a eulogy from an inconsiderate friend. You abandoned me too, you fucker. And all I have left is a few empty pages and a crooked card table in the alley. I hope Patie has found you and you've forgiven yourself. At least you had the guts to follow.

74

"I know what you're going to say: I'm just influencing you on decisions that I know nothing about," Rhonda said through a crackly connection. The dissonance of the phone line provided a mask to allow Trina to be more honest than normal. "Adam's called here nearly every day."

"He's been calling here, too," Trina said. "Sometimes three or four times a day." She fished through the pocket of her hoodie and retrieved a pack of Camel Lights.

"He wants you here and you know Mom and Dad do too. The Greyhound ticket is only eighty dollars. I can pay for it online so all you have to do is pick it up before you get on the bus. Marco can ride for free."

Trina didn't speak, but rather twirled the cord in her hand, hoping to make the line scratchier. She lit the burner on the stove and leaned forward to light the cigarette in her mouth from the blue flame.

"Are you smoking?"

"No, Ronnie. It's a bad connection."

"You still haven't spoken to him?"

"Mike? No. It's been two weeks and I could tell that he wanted to, a couple times, but he would always grimace and storm away."

"Well, it serves him right if he's cheating on you."

"I know," Trina lied. She promised to herself over and over again that it was okay to hate him because of his suspected infidelity, but there were two problems: she didn't hate him and she didn't believe he cheated on her. But still she repeated to herself that she made the right choice and after two weeks, the "time off" that she requested bore the deadening weight of a break-up.

"Well?" Rhonda said. "What does Adam say?"

"He's practically begging for the opportunity to start over. He said that he has become a completely different person since he split."

"Different, how?"

"He reprioritized everything. He stopped keeping people in his life that he doesn't care about. He stopped doing things that make him unhappy."

"That's why he left New York?"

"Yes. On the other hand, though, he is more committed to keeping the things that he loves around him. And pursuing the things he lost. And pursuing me."

"That's amazing, Trina," Ronnie said. Trina wished she felt the same.

"I kinda feel like if he wants a second chance, he should come here. Why should I go to him?"

"Why shouldn't you? You hate New York."

"I don't hate New York. I hate being alone in New York. And I'm worried about what it's doing to Marco."

"Then take the ticket, Trina."

"I don't want to do something stupid because I'm acting irrationally, Ronnie. I don't want to move away because I'm feeling like I'm on the rebound."

"Maybe that's the most rational thing. I'll tell you what: When we get off this phone, you write a list."

"Another list, Ronnie?"

"Yes, another list. Split the paper in half and down the left side and write all the reasons why it's time for you to come home."

"And on the other side?"

"Write the reasons to stay."

"This is stupid."

"You always say that."

"And it won't do a thing."

"If it won't do a thing," Ronnie laughed, "then why not do it?"

"*You* always say that." Trina laughed too.

So Trina hung up the phone and ripped a page out of her journal. She drew a wavy line down the middle and found herself heading off each side with Rhonda's advice. After about ten minutes, the left-hand column was filled while she only traced the words "Reasons to stay" continuously until they were illegible. Ten minutes later, her head began to hurt and she colored in the column divider to be a half-inch thick. Trina crumpled up the list and flicked it off the table into the trash. She tugged gently at the bridge of her nose and let her stinging eyes relax.

In Trina's mind, the questions repeated in an endless loop. Her rhythm was finally broken by the jarring of the telephone.

"Hullo?"

"Ronnie said you may be headed home," Adam's voice trumpeted on a disagreeably clearer connection. "I gotta tell ya, Tree, that's the best news I've heard in a long time."

"Hi, Adam. I don't want you to get your hopes up. It's just an idea I'm kicking around." She thought about the balled-up list on the floor.

"Trina, I wish I could convince you that it's right."

"I know, Adam."

"I've got to say something to you and I feel like if I don't do it now, I won't be able to at all." Trina's heart thumped with every syllable in Adam's voice. Her attention snapped to crystal clarity and she felt she could interpret the silence where the fizzes and cracks should have been. "I'm sorry about everything," he began. "Since you visited this summer I haven't been able to think about anything but you, Trina. I'm remembering all the amazing times we had together. I'm remembering how vibrant you used to be, how much meaning you brought to my life. It's shitty of me to do this now, I know, but I need to tell you why. I know it doesn't make a difference to you, since you've left *us* in the past and moved on, but you need to know."

Adam took a nervous breath, which seemed to breeze through the phone line and gently caress Trina's ear.

"I was scared, Trina. I found an amazing person in you and I was afraid that you might see through who I was. I was afraid that after a while you might realize that I'm just a boring guy. I'm brimming with flaws, you know. I can't dance at all. I'm not even that good of a designer. Most of the stuff that I do is inspired by things I read in magazines or see on Web sites. I know you like to go out to lounges and clubs and things and each time you said it, I thought 'man, I'd rather just stay home and watch TV.'" His voice wavered as he spoke and Trina could hear a quiet rasp penetrating the static-less air. "I'm totally incompatible with someone like you. God, people love you and love being with you. I was exhilarated to be with you, and each time you answer the phone when I call." The man who left Trina with barely a word was gushing his heart to her on the phone. The words flooded her ears and bloated meaning to the word *abandon*.

"But you left me," was all Trina could say. Her hand felt slick against the receiver as she pushed it hard to her ear.

"And every day I regret it, Trina."

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why are you telling me this?" Trina said.

"Because you need to know, Tree."

"But, why now, Adam? After all this time, why are you telling me now?" Her voice shook with desire and she tried to make herself sound strong. The result was a mix of what sounded like anger and frustration.

"Because I don't care anymore, Trina. I don't care that I'm flawed because I know I can't change that. I don't even care that we're incompatible. All I care about is that you know that I'm sorry for what I did. And that you know how I feel about you now." Adam's voice was resolute. The undulating harmony was replaced by a strong, confident charge. "I need you to know I love you. I. Love. You. Trina."

Trina, who'd been trying to embed the receiver into her ear canal, released her grasp suddenly so that the handset hung loose in her fingers. She stared out past the kitchen window to the concrete garden lot. There was little evidence that the trees were changing color with the season.

"Are you there, Trina?" It sounded tinny an inch from her ear.

The soft, soothing traffic on the other side of the apartment provided a constant rhythm for the darkening evening. The days were getting shorter, Trina thought, as the traffic normally survives through the sunlight.

"Trina?"

She wondered if she would need a jacket if she decided to stroll through Greenwood Cemetery this evening. She promised herself at least a half hour alone with her journal to reflect on that week's lunacy. She decided on a sweater instead.

"Trina?"

She sighed to the dangling handset, creating a whisper that would travel 900 miles. "You can't do this to me."

"I love you, Trina. Tell me that you don't love what we were together. Tell me that you can't handle being with someone like me. Let me know that we're impossible and that there could never be a chance for us."

"I have to go, Adam." And very slowly, Trina lowered the phone to her lap. She could hear his voice as it inquired still in vain, but not make out the words he was saying. She caressed the handset slightly with her fingers and only after a moment, got up to replace it on the hook.

75

It was one of those October days when you could swear that New York was cooling on a window sill. It was seasoned carefully with orchard fruits and tingling spices and baked to perfection. Then, before its citizens even knew, the day was whisked off to the ledge to scent the afternoon air and tease the neighborhood.

Trina spent her lunch break in Greenwood. As awful as it sounded, the tilting elm in the cemetery was truly the spot that she cherished the most. The billowing earth around a hapless Plot 286 had begun to harden as Trina neglected her journal. It lay open on her chest like the reflecting glass of a sunbather as she stared past the mausoleums and headstones toward the sky on the other side. Marble graves caressed the knotted, rotting arms of Paloverdes and Spotted Oaks. They would spend eternity together, making love as they abandoned the reason of their being and melded into each other's skin. Colossal nimbus clouds sat lazily on the tent poles of spruces; their pinecones were Chinese lanterns, their bed of needles, oriental rugs.

Trina lazed like an inhabitant; the careless sub-leaser of Plot 286 ½. While her neighbors turned their backs on the sexual prowess of trees and stone, she wiggled her toes in the chilling air.

"You're what???"

"I'm going back to Michigan."

"When?" The whole of the Chloe's, including Tony and Brian, had frozen their games and conversations. Mayleigh would be lying to herself if she said she didn't expect it. Now, with the words penetrating the early afternoon crowd, it caught her completely off-guard. "Why?"

"I'm ready. I think I need to go."

"What about us? What about The Complex and Marco?"

"Marco is coming with me. Social services said that after a year of positive reports, and with Marco's approval, it'd be okay. In truth, I think they were thrilled to have one less child to worry about."

"Your lease is only half over. Why don't you just ride it through?"

"Beulah said she'd look for someone else to manage the apartments. She is trading the security deposit for the broken lease."

"And us? You're just going to leave us?"

"May, you've got Dusty and the guys. And it's not like I'm abandoning you. We'll still be friends...just over a distance." Behind her eyes, Trina pleaded for Mayleigh to understand, but kept a level face otherwise. She could see her friend writhing with hurt, but said nothing.

It was Tony who broke the silence.

"What about Mike?"

Trina slowly turned to face the boys at the table. Their faces seemed to match May's. For a moment, Trina considered lying to them and saying that she offered for him to leave too. She knew that New York was his home. Reluctantly, though, she uttered the truth.

"What about him? I don't think, right now, he would care if I was gone."

"Trina, you know that's not true," Brian said.

"Do I? I haven't spoken to him in three weeks. I think it's safe to say that we're through."

"Does he know this?"

"He's not *that* oblivious."

"Does he know you're leaving, Trina?"

"I haven't told him yet."

"I think you should," Brian said. "I think you should sit down and talk to him. Tell him the way you feel."

Trina was about to roll her eyes when she realized that he was right. Mike, in his absence, didn't know that she was speaking with Adam again. He was unaware of the list that Trina had made for reasons to stay in New York. He didn't realize how much of a void his distance had added to her life and how quickly she was willing to desert him to fill that void.

But he must have seen how the city seemed to rip her apart; how she was incapable of dealing with the harsh realities of her recent months. He had to notice how the loss of Counts affected her, the unhealthiness ebbed at her feet, and the emptiness of their relationship turned the wonder of the city to a cold, cruel vacuum.

It's true, she thought, that communication is the essential foundation to any relationship. Lovers need to know what each other are willing to do to keep it together or sever it entirely. She had a feeling, even with his secrets, Mike would work harder and push further just to be with her. She knew that if she spoke to him, she could jeopardize her determination. That is why facing him would be so hard. It's easier to feel strongly about a decision, even if it is the wrong one, she thought. It's easier than the complacency and wonder of a relationship in trouble. Sometimes, all a person has inside is their freewill. And in when you're in love, freewill is removed and replaced with consideration and care. You can't make a negative decision when you care too much about how the outcome will affect someone else.

"You're right," she said finally. "I'll speak to him tonight."

She and Marco went through their belongings that night and packed everything they needed in two large duffel bags. Most of the furniture that she and Adam brought with them was to be disseminated between the other tenants in The Complex. Her books and movies could be recollected in Michigan or she could have her friends send forgotten belongings back to her if she needed them. They mostly just brought clothing and toiletries as though they were heading back on vacation. Trina worried that this only added to the possibility that Marco thought the move was temporary. He only once left the boroughs of New York. Now, he would be leaving them for good.

Trina practiced in her mind what she wanted to say to Mike when he finally trudged up the steps after being gone all day again. For the last few nights, he returned home at around 10:00, which left her an hour-and-a-half to gather her thoughts and belongings. She knew she had to be firm in her convictions and tell him that they no longer had a chance to work things out. She had to tell him that though she still loved him, it couldn't be possible for them to remain together. The last three weeks reinforced that she could live with the pain of his absence, sometimes even easier

than the pain of the time they spent in each other's arms; the time that Trina could read him the least.

She accused him of being stoic. She accused him of having no feelings and being immature, but the problems lay inside of her. For when the relationship hit a large, mellow routine, she couldn't deal with the what-ifs. And rather than communicate her problems to her lover, a problem that came often to her, she preferred to speak to friends about it. The boys on the second floor had always been cynical about the men in straight relationships. Mayleigh thought all men, with the exclusion of Dusty, were scum. They each gave Mike their own form of demerits, which supplemented Trina's need to actually face the issues and speak to Mike.

Maybe they moved in too quickly, without ever considering how that would affect their love. Maybe she expected him to initiate everything important that needed to be brought in the open, and when he didn't she moved their relationship to the outbox.

That was her Complex in a nutshell. She couldn't cope with a relationship that fell into method. She confided in friends rather than him. She lacked the communication that enabled their healthiness. Trina suffered from The Cinderella Complex, the American Dream, and every other broken promise that she grew up to believe in. Mike communicated more than her, but he kept his secrets. Prince Charming was flawed and there could be no happily ever after.

Trina's dazed determination was interrupted, finally, by the creaking of the stairs. She screwed her courage to the sticking place and headed for the door.

"We need to talk," she said adamantly to his back as he unlocked the door to his apartment. He didn't turn around when he replied.

"I'll be over in a minute. Just let me change clothes and wash up."

She turned to close the door as her heart thumped panic and fear through her chest. Marco had finished his packing and retired to bed. His suitcase sat behind the kitchen door with a coloring book and a walkman on the top. She could see a Ziploc of Cap'n Crunch billowing out one of the pockets.

Trina turned and plugged in the coffee pot. She needed to remain focused and felt that putting her hands to work would help her ease her mind.

The pot was half full and puffing away when she heard a knock. Mike walked straight in and took a seat at the kitchen table. He was dressed in a T-shirt and pajama bottoms and his hair was damp around the edges of his face.

She saw him eye the duffel bags suspiciously, though he didn't comment on their meaning. "What did you want to talk about?"

"Us, Mike," Trina said, recovering two coffee cups from the cupboard.

"No coffee for me, Trina. I need to get up early tomorrow," Mike said.

Trina replaced the mug and poured herself a cup. She went to the fridge, which was nearly empty, and took a pint of milk out for her coffee.

"When did you start buying *pints* of milk?"

"This morning. I didn't want a gallon to go bad while I'm—" Trina stopped herself and turned to Mike while she spoke. "I'm leaving, Mike."

"For how long?"

"For good. I'm going back to Michigan. Marco's coming with me."

"When?" Mike questioned, abruptly and loud.

"Tomorrow morning," Trina replied. "I'm letting the guys and Mayleigh divvy up my stuff. You can have some of the furniture if you like."

"Can't we talk about this?"

"We are talking about this."

"You sound like you've made your decision already, Trina," Mike said. He seemed hurt as his brow was contorted to an upside-down V. "What the use in talking about it if you've already decided?"

"What *is* the use, Mike? I wanted to discuss it since I got back from Michigan but you're off doing your own thing and it doesn't seem like you care at all what happens to me."

"That's not true, Trina. And if you wanted to discuss it, you should have just approached me. I would have listened."

"When, Mike? When would you have listened? I've barely seen you for the last month; since we broke up."

"I thought we were taking time off. It was your decision, remember. Another decision that I had no input in."

"Well, it's just not helping anyway. I thought if we broke—if we took some time off, we would be able to start over. But instead you became even more distant. Before, we couldn't discuss anything important. Now, I can't talk to you at all."

"We're talking now, Trina," Mike said firmly. "Let's talk, okay? Let's discuss whatever it is you think is important?"

"Mike, please calm down. This isn't easy for me."

"Oh, it isn't easy for you? And you think I'm enjoying this? First my girlfriend wants to take some time off before I even get to ask her why. Then she decides to leave for Michigan without even speaking to me first. Is it so difficult to just tell me how you feel? Who knows, Trina, maybe we could have come up with some rational decision instead of you running away from this; instead of you running away from us!"

"What, us? There is no us, Mike. You can't even trust me with secrets!"

"I would like to think that trust is something you don't give to just anyone. People earn trust."

"Yea, I get it. You have issues with trust. Your father left you. Your mother slept around. Your stepfather kicked you out. You can't trust me even after all the time we have known each other. Tell me something, Mike. When would you be able to trust me? Five years? Ten? I'm sorry, I just can't wait that long."

"Now you're being ridiculous," Mike said. "Besides, this has nothing to do with my family. I thought we were discussing you and me. But while we're at it, what about you? You think I don't know you measure me day in and day out against Adam and your past relationships? We fall into a rut and you call it quits before I can run out on you, right? Just like Adam left you?"

"Leave Adam out of this."

"Why?" Mike hollered. Trina's face betrayed her and Mike saw a fleck of her soul. "You still love him?"

Trina turned back to the coffee pot and cleaned up a puddle that wasn't there. She bit her lip and returned the milk to the fridge, avoiding Mike's eyes at all costs.

"After all he's done to you, you still love him? Does he call you?"

"Mike, I—"

"Does he call you?" Mike hollered.

Trina couldn't speak, she merely nodded.

"That's fantastic," Mike gritted sarcastically. "My girlfriend wants to take time off from me to see if she can work things out with her ex-boyfriend a thousand miles away."

"That's not it, Mike."

"No wonder you're so eager to leave Brooklyn. You've got a lover waiting for you back home, right?"

"Mike, stop it!"

"And if things don't work you, you can just shut off all communication with him until either he abandons you again or the relationship withers and dies like ours did."

"Mike—"

"But believe me, Trina, you won't find happiness with him. If that's what you want, then you're deluding yourself." Mike stood up and kicked the chair out from behind him. It toppled onto its back and lay rocking from the impact. Trina could hear Marco stirring in the other room.

"At least he trusts me, Mike."

"TRUSTS?" Mike screamed. "You think I don't trust you because you need to know my every secret. Right, Trina? Well that's not trust. Trust is knowing that the secrets that I keep are personal to me, alone. And if those secrets ever," he paused to lick his lips, "EVER were to affect the relationship, you know I would be the first person bring them up to you. Trust, Trina, is letting lovers keep secrets. Trust is knowing that that's okay. Just as I knew you were still thinking of Adam, I trusted that you'd approach me if you wanted me to be involved." He walked toward the door and thrust it open.

"Mike—"

"You're expecting me to stop you. You're expecting me to resume the important communication that I always do to keep this relationship working. You're expecting me to give in to tell you every secret I have just so you can have the peace of mind that if this relationship crumbled it was my fault. It was MY lack of trust that killed it, right? My lack of communication, not yours. And my goddamn fault for not chasing after you when you told me you're leaving for good."

"Well apparently, I'm not worth that to you."

Though his chest was still heaving, his voice became quiet and calculated. He spoke to the hallway. "You're wrong, Trina. But I love you enough to let you go."

He started to leave and then stopped. "And if you need to know, I haven't tuned a piano in a month. I got a job working for the MTA as a mid-conductor." He turned to face her one last time and she saw the slick, red eyes of a person brimming with pain. "I'm sorry you couldn't know, but I had to do it myself." He blinked as a tear fell from his face and splashed on the hardwood floor. "The very first time I met you, I told you you're not my type. Maybe you didn't understand it then...but I hope you do now. Goodbye, Trina."

Mike closed the door and walked back to his apartment. There he quietly crept through the open door, closed it, and turned the deadbolt. Trina ran to her bed and buried herself in pillows. It was 3 a.m. before the sobbing replaced itself with the calm, monotonous harmony of someone lost in dreams.

76

The morning arrived like the thrashing of the D Express through a rush-hour commute. It sent the shivers and screams of its presence as a harbinger before the dawn fully set in the airbrakes. The winds of autumn channeled through the railroad-style apartment and ushered in the gusts of a Brooklyn dawn. Trina looked at her alarm clock and knew she overslept.

Upon waking Marco, she calculated that they had just enough time to enter Grand Central Station and grab breakfast there, with the business crowd. Marco lazily arose from bed with the glimmer of sleep in his eyes and the panicked excitement that graces only children. He robotically brushed his teeth and washed his face, diluting the last shreds of the night before.

Trina threw her remaining toiletries in a bag and snapped closed a coffee mug to accompany her through the commute.

Each tenant of the Complex heard her movements above and prepared to give one last hug before she stepped on the train and left Brooklyn for good. When it was Mayleigh's turn, Trina knew that Chloe's would be opening late today. Her expression showed no desire to follow Trina out into the world. She would only return to Dusty's arms in bed, hoping to quiet the quivers that come when someone terribly misses a friend. Brian and Tony sandwiched her in a hug as she spilled some coffee on her suitcase and magazine.

"Take care, girl."

"We'll miss you."

Despite their rushed situation, Trina stopped on the curb to view The Complex for a final time. Its squished, awkward stance in the middle of Park Slope gave it the resemblance of a straphanger struggling to retain his footing. The mauve and brick arches around the windows were the droopy eyes of a beagle, the yawning doorway begged for a treat.

"Say good bye to this place, Marco," she said to the boy.

"Echo de menos, mi casa," he whispered. The boy looked up to Trina and they exchanged a quick glance before turning down The Slope to meet the subway.

Trina knew her train left Grand Central at 9:10am and wouldn't arrive in Grand Rapids until 8:40 that evening. She dreaded the concept of being trapped in a berth with nothing but her thoughts to keep her company. It seemed she would be wrestling with her decision for the remainder of the day and, since most of her coffee had landed on the sidewalk and her hand, she knew it would provide no further comfort. Shortly after arriving, Rhonda would pick her up and drive her the remaining way to her parents' house. There, she would set up residence until she could find a place of her own.

Trina had no idea where Mike was. She'd decided in her head that he wouldn't just let her go; not with the simple goodbye from the night before. *Maybe he was right*, she thought. *Maybe the fact that he loves me is why he's not trying to stop me*. She briefly paused atop the steps to the subway to digest this thought.

"I can't start doing this now," she said aloud. Marco was almost at the platform below and the only person who heard her was herself. Her words sounded scared but resolute. She shook off the notion that she was making a mistake and proceeded to lug her bag down the steps.

He got a job, though, she thought. You told him that the problems in the relationship were stemming from his inability to be practical; to be responsible. He couldn't trust you with this because it was something he needed to do by himself. That deserves a bit of merit, she recognized.

If he really loved me, he could trust me with this, she responded to the air. Couples help each other to get through changes and problems. They confide in each other.

Marco slipped under the turnstile and waited anxiously for Trina to swipe her Metrocard. He hollered something about two open seats on the platform, but Trina was trapped in her mind.

He cares for you, Trina. He was crying last night. This is ripping him apart. Trina, you don't hurt people you love.

If he cares for me, Trina thought, he would've stopped me on the stairs...or in the hall...or on the street. He didn't even come out this morning to say goodbye. Maturity is sometimes doing things that you don't want to do. He couldn't even do that.

He's in pain, Trina.

He didn't say goodbye.

He's in pain.

The train arrived almost entirely without sound, as though the MTA was practicing a Noh theatre piece and Trina was in the front row. Marco, pulling her to the doors, awoke her from her inner debate and returned her to the sounds of the subway.

They snatched a pair of oily, orange seats reserved ordinarily for the elderly or disabled and tucked their bags under them. Marco's face bore the same wonder he awoke with a half hour before. The doors chimed closed ("he's gone") and the train slammed into movement, clanking along the tracks to Manhattan. They would switch at Union Square and take the 5 Express to Grand Central. It was already too late for Mike to rescue them from the confusion and isolation that ended their lives together.

"Are you going to miss your school, Marco?" Trina asked to change her mental topic.

"Nope. I'm gonna play hockey when we get to Michigan." His accent made the state sound like a Puerto Rican resort. "Maybe I'll make new friends there."

"Of course you will, Marco. You're a cool guy. Who wouldn't want to be your friend?"

"¿La gente hablará español allí?" Marco asked.

"Probably not, Marco. Maybe one person in your entire class will speak Spanish, but for the most part, everyone speaks English."

"Do you think people will make fun of my accent?"

"Maybe. People sometimes hate things that are foreign to them. They rebel against anything that they perceive as threatening."

"What do you mean?"

Trina thought for a second on how best to explain this to the boy. "Well," she said. "Imagine you never had a plantain before."

"I love pastelón de plátano!" he beamed.

"But imagine you never had Plantain Pie. Or any plantain for that matter. And you see them in the grocery store and they look like big, discolored bananas. Ok?"

"Ok."

"All you know is that they're not from around where you live. And they are different from things that you normally see. They look the wrong size and they're the wrong color."

"Oh, I see," he said quietly.

"What's wrong, Marco?"

"Do you think people will think I'm a plátano? Do you think they'll think I'm the wrong color?"

"Some boys and girls may, Marco. But what do you think would happen if they tried pastelón de plátano?"

"They'd love it as much as I do!"

"Right, Marco. And what do you think would happen if they got to know you?"

"They'd want to be my friend?"

"Exactly!"

"Cool!" Marco grinned. He seemed giddy about the idea of making friends. "But wait, Aunt Trina. Can we buy plátano in Michigan?"

"I'm sure we'll find some."

Marco sighed melodramatically and resumed his happy demeanor. Just before Trina's thoughts started slipping back to Mike, Marco asked another question.

"Aunt Trina, do you hate things that are foreign to you?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Do you sometimes re-bell against things that you think are threatening?" Trina laughed a little at his pronunciation.

"Do you know what *rebel* means?"

"Answer the question," he said.

"I guess I do, Marco. I mean, we all do."

"What do you hate, then?"

"I guess..." Trina thought. "Maybe people that make you feel bad. Even when they don't mean to."

"Uncle Mike makes you feel bad?"

"No...not really. But sometimes I feel bad when I'm with him." Trina was perplexed as to why she was having this conversation with a fifth-grader. She laughed a bit and attempted to change the subject again. But Marco was able to slip one last thought in.

"Maybe, Aunt Trina, you just need to taste the plátano."

The doors swung open hurriedly at 14th Street and Trina and Marco yanked their sleeping duffel bags from under the seat and rushed down the station toward the Lexington Avenue line. It was perfectly timed, however, as Trina's eyes had welled up with the thoughts of Marco's comment. Leave it to a child to make her see through her stupidity. The frustration and pain she felt were built on the fact that love was foreign to her. She subconsciously rebelled against Mike when he needed her the most. He was trying to better himself for her—*completely* for her—and she pushed him away because she wouldn't tolerate something as petty and infantile as a personal secret. She perceived him as threatening because she honestly thought she could spend the rest of her life with him.

Maybe she didn't sabotage the possibility that they had the real thing going. But she did call her sister, whom she knew would support her frustrations. She started answering and even returning Adam's calls, when she knew the person she wanted to speak to was Mike all along. She somehow changed the dynamic she felt for the past six months. Before, she saw flecks of Adam in Mike. Now, she was listening to Adam's promises over the line and pretending that it was Mike who was speaking the whole time.

"Aunt Trina, hurry! The doors are closing!"

"Trina snapped back into reality with just enough time to scoot through the closing doors. Her duffel bag got caught between them and she was wrenched backward to the side of the car. A voice came over the loud speaker chanting to stay clear of the closing doors while they snapped open for a split second. Trina managed to pull her bag out of the door before they closed again. They found a spot next to the wall to stand and saw the bitter looks of passengers whose commute was delayed by a matter of seconds.

"That was a close one, huh?"

"Yea, Marco. But nothing could stop us from getting out of here, right?"

The conductor announced that because of construction the train would be running express from 14th Street to 42nd Street/Grand Central Station. The ride would last about five minutes which would allow them to bolt up the steps and slip into their train. They would have to purchase their tickets aboard the train, which would cost a few dollars more, and Trina silently hoped for a bagel or coffee cart to be present during the ride. For a half-day trip, they have to offer something, she thought. If anything, now, it was merely her stubbornness that pushed her away from New York.

The conductor's voice again came over the subway's PA system as it swung briskly through the city's underbelly.

"Ladies and gentlemen, at this time we'd like to thank you for riding the Metropolitan Transit Authority and hope your commute is a pleasant one." The passengers heard the voice pause as though its owner had forgotten to shut off the microphone. Instead, however, it proceeded.

"Trina, I want you to know that I wanted more than anything to stop you last night."

Trina gasped and dropped her duffel bag to the floor. A few commuters noticed the startled look on her face and Marco, who hadn't been paying attention, asked her quietly what was wrong. Before she could answer, the voice continued.

"I went to bed trying to pretend that you weren't leaving but ended up pacing my apartment for most of the night, knowing that you would be heading back to Michigan in the morning. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't think. I could barely breathe."

The entire mass of commuters had stopped their fidgeting and reading and coffee-slurping and hung on the conductor's words.

"I went for a walk through The Slope and tried to figure out what was going on. I ended up by the tree in the cemetery where we used to lay together and whisper how much we loved each other. I knew then, in my heart, that if I stopped you in the morning, I'd be doing it for myself."

He sighed, briefly, and continued. "You want to go back to your family. You found someone that you hope will make you happier. If I stopped you..." the voice trailed off and the conductor cleared his throat.

"If I stopped you it would be because I couldn't bare living without you. I was concerned with myself, and how empty my life would be with you gone. And maybe that's not what's best for you.

"I stared out window and watched you looking up at The Complex this morning. You were beautiful. You seemed happy. I knew I had to let you go."

"Aunt Trina, is that Mike?" The commuters confirmed their suspicions of the awkward girl, mouth agape, standing against the door. The conductor was speaking to her. A mild murmur among the passengers showed that they were wrapped up in the man's confession.

"Well, I guess I'm self-centered, then. Add that to the list of being secretive, and stoic, and untrusting. I'm concerned with myself, because dammit, Trina, I can't let you go. I don't want to go back to being who I was before I met you. I don't want to work everyday if I won't be helping to support you; if I won't be coming back home to you. I love you, Trina. I want to spend the rest of my life making you and Marco happy." The voice wavered and rasped. It commingled with the airbrakes as the train slowed to stop at Grand Central Station.

"And if you walk out that door...if you get on that train...at least you'll know how I feel, and that I tried. As flawed and imperfect as I am, as much as I can't promise a life full of happiness, and as sorry I am for hurting you...I'm asking you to please—please—stay with me." There was a slight click over the microphone and a pause before the doors reluctantly opened. Even their tell-tale two-beated chime ("so long") seemed to be forgotten.

The entire train, frozen, stared at the girl with the duffel bag. No one moved. No one rose to get off. Trina could feel every eye staring in her direction. As tears streamed down her face, she grabbed for the duffel bag and flew out the doors to the station. Marco quickly and quietly followed after her.

Trina bore the force of desperation in her mind as eyes behind her swiveled to lock on her back. She pulled Marco across the platform's floor to the first bank of stairs into the station. The train was still plainly visible behind her and she cautiously turned around. She wished it would go away.

Another conductor's voice came over the PA which could be heard from the platform outside. "Stand clear of the closing doors." Trina wiped her face and stared at the train doors, as the chimes denoted their closing. Ball-bearings and hydraulics were set into motion and the doors slowly slid closed to the locked position.

It's over, Trina thought. The doors were closed and there was no way of getting back on the train. He's in there and he's told you he loves you. He's begging for you to stay. It's too late now. You missed your chance to turn around.

The train hung sluggishly in the station giving off various puffs of steel and grit. But still it didn't budge. Trina gazed out at it and the dozens of eyes staring back. *What are you running away from?*

Suddenly, the doors opened again and the passengers' glances darted to something inside. Bolting through the threshold was Mike, dressed head to toe in his MTA uniform, with eyes yearning for Trina.

He charged up the stairs, two at a time, and stopped in front of the girl. Marco didn't know how to react so he stood there, dumbly, between them.

Trina stared into Mike's eyes waiting for him to say something, but he just stood there. His face trembled as he searched her face for some sign of decision. Marco looked up at their chins and tugged on Trina's arm.

Without looking at him, she replied to the boy.

"Come on, Marco. We're going home."

77

"My great-great-and-five-more-greats grandmother was born in old Michigan a fair number of years ago. Old Michigan was a pair of landmasses lost from our maps and surrounded by lakes. That's the reason they named our New Michigan after it. Over time, people just stopped referring to it as New Michigan because they forgot about the old one.

Old Michigan's landmasses were shaped like slippers and surrounded by water on most of the sides. They used to be one, but the Grander Rapids, which churned and eddied, slowly squeezed their middle and pushed them apart. In between the two was a one hundred mile wooden, rope bridge that you had to take by foot. The peninsulas shifted 3 inches a day so that at the end of the week a troll and a yeti had to add a board or two to each of their ends of the bridge. This is partly the reason that people from the Old Upper Peninsula never mingled with the people of the Old Lower Peninsula. The journey was long and dangerous, inching along the cracked boards and knotted, twisted ropes. Lots of people were lost in the Grander Rapids, which churned and eddied, below.

Rumors used to grow between the peninsulas of the type of people that lived there. The Old Upper Peninsula dwellers called the Old Lower Peninsula inhabitants "trolls" because they lived below the bridge. The "trolls" used to call their northern neighbors "yetis" because anything north of the bridge was rumored to be arctic wasteland."

"What are yetis, Aunt Trina?" Marco wondered.

"You know the abominable snowmen you see in Bugs Bunny cartoons? The big monsters with white fur that eat live rabbits?"

"Yea."

"That's a yeti. But naturally the people of the Old Upper Peninsula were the same as you and me. And their land mass was nothing like the frozen tundra that the trolls thought it was."

"And the trolls weren't trolls either?" Mike asked. The three of them were curled up on a blanket on the roof of the Complex, Marco haphazardly woven between them.

Trina smiled. "No, Mike, they were regular people like you and I. My great-great-and-five-more-greats grandmother was from the Old Lower Peninsula and, consequently, a *troll*, too.

The rumors spread year after year about the differences between the people that had once shared a united country. The trolls would carry a dreadful tune. The yetis would bathe in mud and garbage. The trolls would play basketball with kittens. The yetis would lock up their elders and feed them mushy brown sprouts. They kept getting worse as time went on until the two different peninsulas almost hated each other. Ghost stories would arise of an escaped yeti that was roaming amongst the trolls. Or a troll that went on a rampage thru yeti villages.

But the stories of wonder grew with the years as well. It was rumored that the Old Upper Peninsula people—

“The yetis!” Marco laughed.

“...the yetis had raised a special type of bumblebee that produced a special type of royal jelly that turned into a special type of honey that they used in special types of sandwiches. It tasted like chocolate and sugarplums and wild raspberries. Its flavor was hinted with candy corns and peanut brittle. One person would say they tasted vanilla and another would say they tasted mint and still another thought it tasted like bananas. All the yetis ate dozens of special jelly sandwiches every day and all the yeti children loved it.”

“I bet the trolls had a jelly of their own?”

“Good guess, Mike. It wasn’t a jelly, but a spread. The trolls were amazing farmers and their orchards and fields and pastures and gardens and forests all met and swirled as they plowed and reaped and picked. One day, in the middle of their swirling lands, a special type of tree popped up. Within a few months a bunch more sprouted, then more and more. The special type of tree had special type of nuts, which has special types of flavor in their centers. The trolls took the meat of the nuts and ground them into a paste and spread it on their breads. It tasted like liquorice and hazelnut and lemon drops. Its flavor was hinted with cream cheese and cotton candy and butter rum. One person would say they tasted root beer and another would say they tasted raisins and still another thought it tasted like popcorn.”

“Had the yetis ever tasted the trolls’ special spread?” Marco wondered.

“Nope.”

“Had the trolls ever tasted the yetis’ special jelly?” Mike asked.

“Nope. But each one was highly coveted among the others. The trolls would hold meetings to discuss ways of raising the yeti bees. The yetis would have seminars to talk about ways of growing the troll trees. Neither was able to do it, though. So they just hated each other more.

“So my great-great-and-five-more-greats grandmother decides one day that she had enough of her special spread, even though it’s the most amazing thing she tasted in her life. She decides that her wonder and curiosity for the yetis’ jelly has consumed her mind and she was leaving at once for the one hundred mile rope bridge, which spanned above the churning and eddying Grander Rapids.

“She says goodbye to her family whom she loved so dearly. She hugs her friends, who think they’ll never see her again. She packs up two jars of special spread and heads off for the one hundred mile bridge.

“The journey is long and dangerous and the Grander Rapids are churning and eddying below. The wood creaks and the knotted ropes groan, as every step could be her last. And on she goes for miles and miles, stopping at points to have a special spread sandwich and rest her weary feet. She’s been gone for days now and misses her family and friends terribly. The flavor of her spread now tastes gritty and sour. The wonderful cornucopia of sensations is replaced by the meager need for sustenance and she eats the spread now only to keep her stomach from hurting. Her heart aches for the memories of her loved ones, but she continues to press on. She knows after fifty miles of careful steps and racing heartbeats she’ll hit the little flag that demarks the end of the troll land and the beginning of the yeti country.

“When my great-great-and-five-more-greats grandmother is weary and exhausted and ready to give in, she sees a figure on the horizon and a waving flag between her and it. Slowly, cautiously, she approaches the figure as it slowly and cautiously approaches her.”

"Who was it, Aunt Trina?" Marco questioned. "Is it a yeti? Is it another troll coming back from the yeti lands?"

"Less than a mile away from each other, my great-great-and-five-more-greats grandmother can see that the figure approaching is a person. The person is of normal size and stature and not covered by white fur at all."

"So it's a troll?" Mike guessed.

"The two of them come closer and closer until they can make out each other's faces and she notices that it's a boy, probably around her age.

"She's steps away from the middle of the bridge.

The boy says 'Hello.'

'You must be a troll too,' she says.

'I'm a yeti,' the boy answers. 'Aren't you one?'"

"They look normal?" Mike asked.

"Identical," Trina continued. "They were staring into each other's faces and they looked like they could've been neighbors, friends, or even family. They started chatting about their homes and realized they had a lot in common. Both were peaceful people that loved music and dancing. They played sports, but not with kittens, and cared for their elders. They bathed like everyone else, with soap and water, and giggled when they washed under their arms."

"But what about the spread?"

"That's what the boy asked.

'Is it true that it's the most amazing flavor in the world?'

"My great-great-and-five-more-greats grandmother, who'd grown sick of the taste of the special spread, told him he could have her second jar. She didn't care if she ever had another mouthful. The boy, bewildered by the notion of finally tasting the trolls' special spread, offered her a jar of the yetis' special jelly.

'I don't like it anymore,' he said. 'It doesn't taste good to me.'

"So they both sat down on the swinging wooden, rope bridge, while the Grander Rapids churned and eddied below, and opened each other's jars. Sticking in a finger simultaneously, they smiled to each other and pulled out a dollop of the special contents within. Without a word, they put their fingers in their mouths and tasted."

"What was it like? Did they like it?" Marco wondered.

"What do you think, Marco?"

"I don't know. I bet it doesn't taste like veggies. I don't know why anyone would like it if it tasted like peas or spinach."

"What about you, Mike? Do you know what they tasted?" Mike thought about it for a second, and realization slowly dawned on his face. He looked into Trina's eyes and could see her true appreciation for his presence. He rescued her from isolation and pulled her from her indecision. She was finally home.

"It tasted the same," he said.

"The same?" Marco asked.

"Exactly identical. Sometimes people dream of things far, far away." Trina replied, without escaping Mike's eyes. "Sometimes they look at the petty, trivial problems with their life and yearn to escape to other places and find other people to share it with."

"What do they do?"

"They go. They leave their friends and family and abandon the wonderful life that they have and the wonderful people they share it with. They walk out in search of something better."

"But if it's wonderful, Aunt Trina," Marco questioned, his brow wrinkled in the fading evening night, "why don't they stay?" He clutched at Trina's shoulder and she finally broke her concentration on Mike.

"Because they don't know, Marco. They don't know how wonderful it is until they go." She ruffled his hair and he skirted around her hand and tried to escape the blanket. Mike and Trina grabbed him and attacked with a flurry of tickles as he giggled and hollered in Spanish for them to stop, egging them on. He finally escaped, still laughing, and ran to the side of The Complex's roof. The night was chilly, but glorious.

The couple leaned into each other and pressed their lips together. They had spent the greater part of their relationship escaping each other, only to find how wonderful it really was.

"Wait, Aunt Trina," Marco called from the other side of the roof. "What happened to your great-great grandmother? What happened to the yeti boy?"

Trina reluctantly stopped kissing and pulled back to stare into Mike's eyes. He was completely devoted to her and she to him, but for the first time, independent of each other. Individually, they'd released themselves of their Complex and could see the reality of love in front of them.

"They each called town meetings in their respective peninsulas. All the trolls of the Old Lower Peninsula gathered in the Old Lower Peninsula Town Hall and the troll girl told them of the yeti boy and his jelly. All the yetis of the Old Upper Peninsula gathered in the Old Upper Peninsula Town Square and the yeti boy told them of the troll girl and her spread.

"The following week, trolls and yetis lined up on their sides of the bridge and everyone grabbed the rope and tugged. Slowly, inch by inch, the peninsulas began to slide. The Grander Rapids, which eddied and churned below, did so in a continually narrowing river bed. Board after board popped out of the bridge as trolls and yetis, together, tugged as hard as they could. Mile after mile, the peninsulas slid closer and closer. Finally, the land masses neared and touched as the Grander Rapids was split in half, eddying and churning on either side of the united land as the Great Lakes. The trolls and yetis, now called Michiganders, erected a statue at the very spot that the peninsulas met and drove it deep into the ground to safely secure the land so it could never be divided again."

"What was the statue?" Marco asked.

Trina smiled. "It was the boy and girl, Marco. Each with half of a sandwich they made together."

"The jelly or the spread?"

"Both, Marco. The Michiganders realized that together, the jelly and spread tasted even better than either one by itself."

Marco thought for a moment and then realization hit him. "Like the people, right? The yetis and trolls alone weren't as good as the Michiganders together, right?"

"Yup," Trina replied, and slowly swiveled her head to Mike. "People tend to believe, when their own lives are difficult, that it's always so much better somewhere else." Mike's gaze was locked on his lover's eyes as she continued to speak. "They run away. They abandon everyone

they love and everything they have at home. They sometimes can't see all the good things that they have."

"So, they just leave?" Mike asked.

"Sometimes. But *sometimes* they realize that it doesn't really matter where they are, just as long as they're together with the ones they love. And only then are they truly *home*."

"Then, what did they do," Mike asked.

"Well, they had a big party to celebrate their unity." The lovers beamed and thought of how they would celebrate their own, new lives together. Relieved of her complex, Trina felt vulnerable and excited about the future. "See, there are times when people need to go away in order for them to understand what they're leaving behind. The troll and yeti found that out. As they shared a sandwich on the middle of the bridge and stared back at their homes, the two of them realized their lands were really no different at all. But their friends and families are what made them special."

"What did they do, then, Aunt Trina?" Marco asked.

"They went home, Marco. They went home."