

Just People

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Just People

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For Marshall—

Just give me some time, and

I'll find the words for you, yet.

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Reprieve

I figure I've got maybe forty-five minutes - an hour, tops - before I die, and I'm wondering if it's worth trying to wash my hair before I go. My hair's already wet from the bathwater I'm soaking in, and there are bottles of my L'Oreal Kids shampoo and conditioner right there on the tub's ledge. Or maybe I should shave my legs, which I haven't done in weeks because it's dead winter and I hate the prickly chill of goosebumps beneath my jeans. When my body's turned over to the undertaker, someone will brush out my hair, I know, make it look nice, but they won't really *wash* it once I'm dead, will they?

I decide it doesn't matter, which is how I got into this mess to begin with. If my hair mattered that much, I'd just wash it; end of debate. If I cared about having friends, I'd just make some; if I cared about Pre-Algebra, I'd just study. And if I cared about anything, really, I'd be out of this bathtub, trying to get better.

Instead, I wonder whether my note is properly punctuated and idly carve a comma into my right thigh, using my last pink plastic razor, which settles the shaving debate once and for all. Now that it's decided, I've got nothing but time. I've swallowed ten Tylenol so far, but I'm taking a break now, just a little one. Just until my life starts flashing before my eyes, which is the way I know it's supposed to go. I figure there's got to be a bright light, at least - something eerie and obvious to mark the beginning of the end. I deserve at least that much, after the week I've had.

Yesterday, Mr. Balest pulled me out of chemistry class for the third time this year. He said he was just checking in with me; was everything all right? Any troubles at home? I could tell he hated having to do this; I wished it could be Ms. Catania instead, but she took care of it last week. My teachers took turns pulling me aside, trying to get through to me. Each one used a different tack - Ms. Winschel made a sad face and talked in a baby voice, Mrs. Corraine gave me lollipops. Mr. Balest just patted my shoulder roughly and barrelled on through. I've still got an A in his class, so I told him I didn't have anything to talk about, *just haven't been getting much sleep lately*. He nodded, glad for the excuse. We went back to class.

Now, my parents are out of town for my kid brother's soccer tournament. They'll be gone all day, so this is my chance. I can't fool everyone forever; I know my excuses can't hold up for much longer. By next week, teachers might start sending letters home; someone from the school might call my parents in for a meeting, and they'll never be off my back, after that. Best to go

now. I snap the razor apart, and slice a little deeper this time, a little closer to the blue veins I can see even through the pinkish water.

I'm glad when that pre-death slideshow kicks in as expected; I swallow five more pills and close my eyes to concentrate. My arms and feet are floating; my head feels heavy and cold. The slideshow is a pitiful distraction, no better than an after-school special. It's going backwards, so I see Mr. Balest and the rest of them; I see a bunch of kids I don't even like singing Happy Birthday to Ashley at last weekend's bowling party. I see my brother kicking a ball around out back with some neighborhood boys; I see my mother washing dishes, our old golden retriever nuzzling her kneecap. I see nothing I can't go without. I slide underwater, hold my breath to the count of ten. Twenty. The slideshow goes on.

I know it's getting bad when my mind slips into a slow-motion sequence. The convention is tired, pretentious, but I've yet to hit an artery, so I'm obviously not going anywhere, anytime soon. One more cut, then two. The third goes deeper than the rest, and for a second, I can't see anything at all. I surface - sputtering, swearing.

And there he is: Krishnan, the three-year old I babysit for on weekdays after school. Jumping in the autumn leaves I'd tried to rake into a neat pile, smearing yellow fingerpaint on my favorite jeans. Forehead creasing in frustration when he failed to mold the perfect Play-doh airplane. His bright eyes and bowl-cut, his tiny fingers pushing a blue train along its track. Even as I wince at the taste of chewed-up Tylenol, I recall that surge of pride I felt when I

taught him the alphabet song and he didn't skip the letter Q.

Krishnan's allergic to cats, so when he asks to play with mine, his mother tells him that Spunky's gone to school. When my parakeet died, we had to tell him that the bird had gone to school; when the old man who lived on the corner fell sick and couldn't stop by on his evening walks anymore, he - absurdly as I felt to tell Krishnan - went to school, as well. I don't even have to wonder what Krishnan's parents will tell him when he asks where I've gone - I'll join our aging neighbor, my cat, and my dead bird at some elusive boarding school from which none of us will ever return.

I can't blame his parents for the lie they'll serve up to him, nor for hoping, as I know they will, that he'll forget me before he's old enough to recognize the lie. While Krishnan knows his colors and shapes, his vocabulary doesn't yet extend to words like "suicide" or "overdose." He will know only that I am not coming over to play racecars anymore, that no one will take him trick-or-treating in a few weeks. His polyester pumpkin costume will hang in his closet, deflated; by next year, he'll be too tall to fit it.

Which ruins everything. Because when stockpiling pills and writing out farewells, I always assumed that my reasons for leaving would be a given. Sure, some would cry, but it would be less about me than the fact of my youth. *Don't you hate when the young ones are called home?* While my parents and almost-friends are sure to miss me, I'm not exactly irreplaceable. But although it isn't much, I'm Krishnan's bathtime buddy, the girl who takes him to see the Disney

films his father can't stomach, the girl who taught him his ABCs. You can't just replace the only person who understands your secret language, who understands just how important it is to find your special stuffed lion before bedtime.

I sit up, lightheaded but full of resolve. I grab a few washcloths that won't be missed and dry off carefully, bandaging my arms and crumpling the note I'd left on the counter for my parents to find. I vomit, then gargle mouthwash; I brush my hair and pose before the mirror, wondering if I've left any traces of madness unchecked.

Still slightly off-balance, I shrug into some jeans and an old sweatshirt that won't rub against my cuts. I walk outside, locking the front door behind me, and make my way to the house across the street, knocking on the door with the hand that had wielded a razor only minutes before. It's nighttime now; two hours since I sat down to write my note, and I've missed the sunset entirely. I hear raucous, childish laughter and steady footsteps on the other side of the door, and find myself smiling up at the sky, head still heavy, hands still shaking. The stars are coming out, now, and it's about time someone showed Krishnan how to find the Big Dipper.

Friends of Dorothy

Just before stepping onto the ship that would contain us for an entire week, a chipper Carnival employee ordered my family to gather around a mounted lifesaver and stuffed parrot for a pre-cruise photo opportunity.

"Act like you know each other!" the photographer said. Another employee moved my father's reluctant hand to rest on my shoulder, and asked my brother if he would mind smiling. I blinked just as the flash went off. My mother, with her fanny pack and forced smile, was the only one who looked genuinely happy in the picture - fitting, since this trip was her idea.

Poor Mom - she genuinely believed that, crammed onto a ship with two thousand strangers, we would naturally cling to each other and become one of those families that can't exist outside of television reruns. My mother, the quintessential soccer mom: she parked her minivan proudly, and couldn't fathom why the rest of us never gave her the fantasy family she strove for. My father, the doctor, worked long hours

at the hospital and hadn't hugged anyone in at least a decade. When he was home, he skipped out on the fatherly advice and spent late nights sitting up, solitary, sipping beer and studying sarcomas in glossy, graphic medical journals. My kid brother, Greg, came close to my mother's ideal; he offered her soccer games to videotape and a busy social circle to bake cookies for. He was a jock, but one of the nice ones - nothing like the football players that had kicked me in the hallways and slipped nasty notes through my locker vents when they found out I was gay. Of course, I was the one who let my mother down most consistently. At age fifteen, I found this something to be proud of; by the time I hit twenty, the grudge was something to accept when I had to and escape when I could.

Escape, though, became thirty times harder to achieve when we were crammed into two adjacent cabins with a connecting balcony. The Miami humidity drove me to change into a skirt and sandals the second I separated from my family; I was unpacking when my mother burst in through the balcony entrance, just to check in. She frowned. "You look so pale, Jenny. Want me to bring some blush over?" When I declined, her gaze sunk to my unshaven legs: the source of a five-year battle between us.

"Please," she said, in a dangerously quiet voice, "don't go out looking like that. This is supposed to be a nice family vacation. We didn't come all this way to be

embarrassed."

We'd had this fight before, in ten-decibel tones, but the word "embarrassed" was new, as was the oceanside setting. Angry, but unwilling to become the scapegoat for a ruined week at sea, I sulked into the shower and shaved my legs, cursing every time I nicked the skin, resolving to get away as soon as possible. The cruise's daily agenda had been slipped under our door, and I scanned it, searching for an escape route. And there, amidst notices for the Newlywed Game and Welcome Aboard Show, I noticed an abrasively inconspicuous entry: 'Friends of Dorothy Meet-and-Greet - Jeanne's Wine Bar, 9:00.'

I caught the reference immediately and cringed. 'Friends of Dorothy' is an archaic term for gays - it hails back to the 1950s, when Judy Garland's tragic life resonated with the struggling underground queer scene. Back then, it was a coy way of seeking one's own kind; in 2006, it was hopelessly quaint when I was bent on being radical. I hated all of those silly euphemisms: 'family,' 'in the life,' 'of the lavender persuasion.' This gay fashion of code-talking felt so closety. But after the third quarrel with my family before our ship even left Miami, I made up my mind to attend the meeting - as long as no better prospects came up. After all, karaoke was on the schedule, and I couldn't imagine a gayer time.

Karaoke night onboard the Carnival Valor was hosted by a bald queen named

Terry who spoke in a completely flat affect to express his disdain for the crowd. I'd arrived early, taking a seat that afforded me unrestricted view of the entire room. There were tables packed with sunburned cowboy-types, chugging beer and reading off the country-western titles in the songbook; a few kids congregated near the front of the room, and there were a fair number of frat boys in our midst. No clear queers in the crowd, not that I could spot, but the night was young. Terry began calling for singers to sign up, but we were all too shy and too sober to take the stage. That is, until thirteen-year old Danny stepped up and busted into a Britney Spears dance routine he had committed to memory.

The boy was fierce - his voice, unspoiled by puberty's onset, was higher than the pre-recorded backup singers who chimed in for the chorus, and by the second verse, he was crawling down a long table, winking at a middle-aged man before retreating to the safety of the stage. The applause he received was immense, and he rocked three more Britney songs *and* a falsetto rendition of "Moon River" before dashing from the karaoke lounge at eleven, something like Cinderella. I caught him on his way out and thanked him for being so fabulous and brave, and he promised he'd do a song for me sometime.

"Do you have a favorite Britney Spears song?" he asked. I told him I'd think about it.

By the time Danny left us, the crowd's mood had shifted to someplace near hysteria - after two hours of rowdy drinking and some rough vocals, the lounge was packed, and Danny's absence left us with a string of terrible country renditions and a fair amount of booing from the audience. I decided to seize my moment and officially come out to the crowd with a lascivious rendition of "Come On Eileen."

Two men in the front row whooped and whistled for me through the entire number. They sat suspiciously close together, and took turns calling out, "Ooh, *tell* it, girl!" so often that I began congratulating myself immediately. I'd found some 'family' of my own, without the help of a closety meet-and-greet, and my pride was immeasurable. When I finished the song, the loudest, leathery-looking man stood up and engulfed me in his arms, shouting into my ear that his name was Dave, and his buddy was called J.P. J.P. winked at me, then slung an arm around Dave's shoulders: they looked alike, the way so many long-term gay couples start to do, with fake tans and matching Lacoste polo shirts. Dave told me that they'd flown down early to spend some quality time in West Palm Beach, and that they planned on spending Christmas together in Key West. By this point, my gaydar was nearly deafening. They begged me to perform something by George Michael, and my rendition of "Faith" got them all riled up - a good thing, I thought, until Dave slid his hand up my thigh and whispered that he'd been wanting to fuck me all night. After about five

minutes of explicit imagined detail, I executed a theatrical yawn and bid the guys goodnight, then scurried off to the cabin I shared with my brother, whom I woke when I stumbled into the dark room.

Only six hours later, the bleating phone startled me awake. Greg, in the act of smearing on sunscreen, answered it, handling the phone with his greasy hands. When he set it back on the receiver, he told me we were meant to meet our parents for breakfast in ten minutes. I was late, of course, and when I sat down with my scrambled eggs and cereal, I was dismayed to find myself the subject of their conversation.

"Greg tells us you were out pretty late last night," my father mumbled, his mouth full.

"Yeah, well, I was only at karaoke."

My mother nods. "We know; we walked past and saw you in there. You were sitting with those two men who looked kind of - well, you know." "Gay," my brother offered, stripping the fat from a piece of bacon.

I couldn't help but feel validated by their assumption, even if they had been spying. "Actually, Mom, one of them was hitting on me. I felt really violated."

She considered this, then answered, "Well, they looked a little too old for you. But I'm glad you're making friends, Jenny."

"And with people who aren't just like you," my father helped. My parents still couldn't bring themselves to speak the word 'gay,' but it was implicit here.

The subject shifted to my brother's upcoming soccer tournament, and which players deserved starting positions, and I was grateful for the chance to tune out.

That night found me lurking around the corner from Jeanne's Wine Bar, the locale of the second Friends Of Dorothy Meet and Greet. The bar was packed, and after the past night, I wasn't putting a whole lot of faith in my gaydar. I did spot three men, though, who set off some alarms. Two were leaning against each other, while the third told a story, swiveling on his stool and sipping a martini. When that one broke out into Donna Summers' "Last Dance," I decided to act - even my recent lapse in faith couldn't account for their heterosexuality.

"Friends of Dorothy?" I choked out, praying that I wouldn't have to repeat the embarrassing term.

To my luck, the three men twirled their seats so they were facing me, all grinning. The man in the middle answered me: "Ooh, finally: a *lesbian*. Here, girl, have a seat."

Introductions were in order. There was Neil, the Jamaican albino disco fiend. He was legally blind, but this didn't keep him from making direct eye contact, which immediately endeared him to me - as did his flamboyance. When a Kylie Minogue song came on, Neil talked me into dancing, something even my girlfriend couldn't get

me to do. Ken was the quietest, tilting his head forward whenever anyone started talking in a way that made me sure he could write a really juicy tell-all book, cataloguing the secrets and idiosyncrasies of everyone he knows - that is, if he weren't such a nice guy. Ken was with Robert, whom Neil insisted upon calling "Barbie", since he and Ken were this perfectly well-matched couple. Robert was disarmingly open where Ken was reticent; Ken used cocktail napkins to wipe up the wine Robert splattered due to such extravagant hand gestures. The three immediately took me on as an underage mascot, slipping me drinks under the bar, assuring me that I wasn't the only lesbian on board.

"We just sat next to a lesbian couple at the magic show," Robert assured me. "They're here, believe you me, and they travel in pairs."

"They probably brought their cats on board," Neil added. "I bet they're curled up in their cabins right now, petting their feline friends and having meaningful conversations, having sex to Melissa Etheridge."

I opened my mouth to react, to fight on behalf of the elusive cruising lesbians, but found myself saying, instead, "I wish I could've brought my cat onboard. I hate leaving little Sal at home alone for so long, he's a really social fellow. You want to see a picture of the little guy?"

Neil rubbed my shoulders, while Robert handed me the rest of his pineapple

daiquiri. "Drink up, sweetheart. The road is rough, and we grow weary so easily."

The next two hours were a slightly-blurred whirlwind. We moved from Jeanne's to a sports bar to a glitzy lounge, until we felt buzzed enough to hit the club. There, we lay in wait until Madonna came on, then swarmed the dance floor, pushing past a crowd of bronzed teenage girls and picking up three fellow queers in the process: Neil's long-term lover, Howie, and two of Howie's friends from home. Lights pulsed from the floor, the reflecting walls, the low ceiling, and for four glorious minutes, we were the only ones in the room who knew all the words. When our song ended and Jay-Z kicked in again, we packed into the piano bar, where Robert demanded Bette Midler songs and we all got raucous. Neil was feeding me maraschino cherries he'd filched from the other guys' drinks when the bar began shutting down.

Robert and Ken were staying in a cabin only five doors down from the room I shared with my brother, and so we made our way, stumbling slightly as the ship rocked, to the sixth floor. When we reached my door, I was swept into two pairs of surprisingly strong arms, still slick with coconut oil. I murmured the standard "I had fun tonight" line most people reserve for awkward first dates, and Ken pulled me in even tighter.

"It was our pleasure, kitty," he said, his voice muffled slightly by my shoulder. He pulled back, then, and gave me a once-over. "You know, Robert and I always agreed

on one thing: we didn't want to have kids."

Robert jumped in at this point. "We're pretty happy just being the cool uncles. I think it's better that way. Honestly, hand me a squirming, crying little thing all swaddled in pastels, and I won't be good for a thing."

Ken shook his head. "But being with you tonight made me kind of wish we'd done it. I would've wanted a girl like you."

My eyes got wet at that, but I managed to play it off as sleepiness. "Yeah, well, you should meet my parents; they'd talk you out of it." I wiped my eyes. "Little girls are brats, anyway. Better luck with a boy; Mom says they're easier to raise."

"Easier to please, too," Robert cut in, winking at Ken. We hugged again - for longer, this time - then said our goodnights. When I tiptoed to bed, I heard my brother's deep-sleep breathing from across the small room. At one point, the sound stopped and I held my breath, waiting for Greg to wake up or resume snoring.

A long moment passed before my brother's breathing became heavy again, and I lay awake for another hour wondering at the possibility of bringing anyone into this world and bringing them up right. *If I had a kid, I realized, I would never be able to sleep, not even for a second. I'd just pace the hallway all night long, checking in on every lap.* My brother mumbled a few words without waking, and I fell asleep waiting for him to say more.

This affection for my brother lasted for about four hours, until he woke me with static-ridden rap music our television picked up from satellites in St. Thomas. It was some song about bitches, or hoes; when I squinted at the screen, I could make out a man with a sparkling shirt and a shiny gun, flanked by half-dressed women dancers. My brother rapped clumsily along while doing push-ups on the pinkish carpet.

"Greg, this shit is so demeaning to women. Can we switch it?"

"No!" my brother huffed, bracing his arms into sharp corners. "Those women like it. Lots of women would love to be in this video."

"Lots of women go through their entire lives feeling objectified and unsafe, Greg," I started. It was well-worn territory between us.

"Yeah, well, lots of women shave their legs," my brother said, switching to sit-ups.

Realizing that his exercise routine, shitty music, and irritation were all destined to outlast me, I decided to hit the ship's library. Shocked to discover a decent selection of bell hooks books in the stacks, I skipped breakfast with the family to read feminist theory on my favorite shady deck. Neil and Howie passed me on their way to the pool, and I promised to meet them at the comedy show later that night. The next few hours passed peacefully: I fell asleep on a deck chair and woke up with sunburned toes and only two hours 'til I was meant to meet up with the guys. I managed to shower and dress in time for dinner with my family, and even shaved my legs again to

avoid scrutiny. Conversation was civil, but I finished my dessert quickly and slipped out of the dining room in time to save seats for the show.

I sat in the front row, sandwiched between Robert and Ken, bouncing between them as they laughed at the comedian. He was a puffy-looking man whose too-short pants revealed black socks and brown shoes, a fashion faux pas Neil proclaimed unforgivable. Howie's catty commentary kept us all distracted, until the comedian slipped into a routine about gynecologist appointments. He detailed the examination procedure, likening it to something from a sci-fi movie, exaggerating the already-awkward nature of these appointments. The guys, who had, of course, never paid visits to a gynecologist, were staggered by these stories, and when the curtains closed, they were full of questions.

"Do they really just shove something inside you and start opening it up?" Ken winced.

"Does it hurt when they scrape cells from your, um. . .?" Howie fished.

"How much time do they spend feeling you up?" Neil asked, characteristically matter-of-fact.

By this point, we'd reached the piano bar and clustered seven chairs around a tiny table.

"It's not that bad, you guys," I shrugged. "Hell, it's even a bit of thrill, if you've

got a doctor fetish."

"Princess," Neil drawled, offering me a sip of his martini, "you simply *cannot* leave us hanging like this."

"Yeah, *show us*," Howie pled, and the other boys with him.

This is how I ended up reenacting my latest gynecological appointment for my newfound friends, stepping up my act as I went along. I waxed poetic about the scratchy paper gowns and embellished slightly when describing the bracing coldness of the speculum. I was just explaining how the gynecologist looked *exactly* like my second grade teacher, Mrs. Sides, when my parents stepped into the bar and glanced my way.

No doubt, what they imagined was worse than the reality: they happened across their only daughter with her legs spread wide and propped up, surrounded by six grinning men. To my parents' credit, they did not cause a scene, that night - they preferred to keep their shame at a slow burn, so that our fights only broke out over major holidays and other times of high stress. They simply stood, staring, in the doorway, while oblivious cruisers elbowed past them. I watched their eyes move from my legs (still shaven) to my hand (holding a mixed drink) to Neil's hand (resting on Howie's knee) to Ken's mouth (whispering in Robert's ear), and then I watched them walk out of the piano bar without a word passing between them.

I waved to their retreating figures. "See you, Mom and Dad."

Robert gasped. "Those were your parents? The ones who were staring over this way?"

I nodded, and Ken squeezed my knee. A look of concern clouded his mild features. "We should get you out of here, sweetie, just in case they come back."

At that, I smiled. "I know a place we can go. Just follow me."

The karaoke lounge was packed that night, and sleazy Dave was onstage, performing "I Will Survive" in a scratchy falsetto. He shouted out to me, mid-song, but I avoided eye contact and led my newfound friends to the back of the room. We crammed around a circle table, all facing front, just in time to watch young Danny take the stage again. He was wearing a heart pendant from Tiffany's, which dazzled under the dramatic karaoke lighting, and he performed "I Will Always Love You," closing his eyes as he sang and hitting every high note. Needless to say, the Friends of Dorothy adored him, and asked me if I'd bring him over.

I cut through Danny's throng of fans and gestured for him to come with me. "Danny Boy, there's a whole table of gay men back here who are just dying to meet you."

Danny beamed. "Let me grab my handbag, then - they might want to see it. It's Prada!"

Unfortunately for young Danny, my new friends weren't the label queens he was hoping for. They *did*, however, ask him if he took karaoke requests. Neil took his hand imploringly, begging Danny to perform "My Heart Will Go On."

"On a cruise ship, honey?" Howie asked. "I mean, is that really appropriate?"

Neil scowled. He was a brutal top, and one of those guys who yelled a lot at hockey games, but he had never met an occasion that wasn't begging for a soundtrack by Celine Dion. Luckily, Danny was with him on this - he had *already* signed up to sing the love theme from *Titanic*, which was, of course, his all-time favorite movie. He squeezed into the booth with us until it was his time to shine onstage, and we began to interrogate him in the friendliest way possible. We learned that he lived in small-town Wyoming - not unlike Matthew Shepard had, before he was beaten and tied to a fence, left to die, because he was gay. Danny was too young to think much about hate crimes, but he knew enough to be afraid, to dread returning home at the week's end.

"I wish we could adopt him," Robert told Ken. "Both of them." "You'd make such a fabulous family," Neil said. "You could take Jen out to hockey games and Danny to ballet recitals. Can you imagine?"

For a moment, it was impossible *not* to imagine a family I'd found on my own, one who might choose me as I am; to envision the kind of family who would find room

for such a crazy bunch of misfits and sissies. I looked on as Ken re-tied Danny's pink silk scarf for him, and Neil and Howie worked on picking out Danny's drag queen name. Robert, who had grown up singing in a barbershop quartet with his brothers, coached Danny through some vocal warm-ups, and I gave the boy a lecture on exfoliation when he asked how my skin got to be so smooth. Together, we suffered through what seemed to be Garth Brooks' entire catalogue, until the moment Danny's name was announced and our boy took the stage to belt out Celine Dion's crowning achievement, making us proud as he brought down the house with his high notes and chutzpah.

Danny received his first standing ovation that night, started by a rowdy group of gays at the table in the back - Neil even cried a bit during the song's final chorus. The boy was a star, and we let him know it loudly, losing our voices in the process. Karaoke closed for the night soon after, ending with a boozy middle-aged woman's slurred performance of "Rhythm Is Gonna Get You," and I returned to my cabin early, around one a.m., to find my brother still awake, still watching rap videos that cut out sporadically when reception got touchy.

"You have to call Mom right now," Greg said, not taking his eyes from the television screen. "She told me to stay up and tell you that."

I took a deep breath. "Is she really pissed at me?" I flashed back to the way she'd

looked in the piano bar, shocked and hurt and -

"Not really pissed, no," Greg answered. "She just seemed kind of sad. And tired." I was relieved for the excuse. "I shouldn't wake her up, then. It's too late to call now. She'll be in bed."

"Yeah, but it's not like she'll get to sleep 'til you call. You know how Mom is." Greg finished a set of squats, then climbed into bed. "I won't have a single problem getting to sleep, though. I've just been waiting up on you."

True to form, Greg's snores were starting up by the time I'd brushed my teeth. I switched off the television, slid beneath the covers, and waited for sleep to kick in. Half an hour passed that way; my brother's snores grew grating, and finally, I decided to call my mother, if only to drown out Greg's sleep sounds.

She picked up on the fourth ring, sounding groggy. "Jenny?"

"Yeah, Mom, sorry to wake you up; Greg just said I should call."

"Don't worry. I wasn't really asleep yet, anyway." She yawned into the receiver.

"Your dad was up late reading, keeping the damn light on, and now he's out cold. He's even snoring."

"Yeah, Greg's at it, too. Fell asleep with the TV on, watching rap videos."

My mother yawned again. "Oh, I hate that stuff. All those women dressed that way, and they have to bleep out every other word."

So Mom hated Greg's music and my father's late-night isolation, too. And still, she had spent hours on the phone with a travel agent, shopped for snacks and sunscreen, even packed for my father and brother in addition to herself, so that our family could spend a week together, keeping up the same isolating habits that made life at home so tense. I'd spent four days acquiring a brand new family, who, though temporary, appreciated my leftist politics and karaoke renditions of tired pop songs. My mother had spent four months thanklessly preparing for this trip, so that my father could read about rabies vaccines while breathing in salty air, so that my brother could work out to rap artists who weren't from the United States, so that I could spend late nights singing with strangers.

"Did you have fun tonight, Mom?" I asked, the question feeling foreign in my mouth. I realized that I didn't even know what my mother's idea of a good time was.

My mother was ready to go to sleep; at least, I hoped that's what her long pause was meant to indicate. Finally, she answered me. "I won a little money at the casino, and I got your dad to check out the midnight buffet with me." Another long pause, and then: "Did you have fun?"

"Yeah," I told her. "Best night of karaoke yet. My friend brought down the house." I knew as I said it that this would be the extent of our conversation.

"That's good," she said, and then, "I think I'm gonna head to bed now, Jenny. Get

some sleep, too, okay?" I promised that I would, but even once I committed to bed at last, sleep was a long time coming, that night.

Saturday night was the last we'd spend onboard, and the Friends of Dorothy are gathering for our final night out. Karaoke was set to go until two, and Howie heard it was eighties night at the dance club, and insisted that we attend. We had a breakout Cher moment, a few more minutes of glory, before we sighted Danny waiting outside the club: he was underage, and couldn't come in. Unwilling to leave our boy alone, we took leave of the dance floor and made our way down the hall to the karaoke lounge, where we decided to host our own eighties night. I signed up to sing, and danced with Neil in the aisles while waiting my turn. When Terry called my name, I sauntered onstage, winked at my friends, and blushed at their premature cheering.

The opening notes of Boy George's "Karma Chameleon" came on louder than they should have, and I started in, nearly shouting the lyrics so as not to be overpowered. I scanned the crowd for my fan base, and spotted Neil and Robert dancing in the back, and Howie's lips forming the lyrics as they lit up onscreen. Searching for Danny, my eyes swept the room, coming to rest on my mother.

She stood just two steps inside the lounge, holding her camera, training the lens on me while I wailed on the microphone, doing that sad, limited sort of dancing that karaoke calls for and feeling not a trace of shame. I leaned into the chorus, getting

catcalls from the Friends of Dorothy, and watched my mother glance towards my new friends, taking in the sheer spectacle of them. Her look might have meant disapproval, denial, or complete incomprehension of this lifestyle I embraced. It could just as easily have been a look of unexpected gratitude, a gladness that these strangers were there to cheer me on. I didn't have much time to interpret my mother's glances, because I was awkwardly dancing my way through a twelve-measure musical interlude.

Just before the chorus began again, though, I watched my mother step further into the lounge, and saw her raise her camera, ready to commit the moment to an unsatisfactory square of film. I was sweaty and my hair was a mess and I just knew my mother would pass the resulting photograph around to the girls at work. I prepared myself for mortification, wondered what my mother would tell her co-workers about this night, and nearly tripped over the microphone cord. And then I smiled, hard, missing my cue to begin the chorus, hoping I wouldn't blink this time, that the camera might capture more than I'd managed to say in my twenty years.

Break-Ups, Buses, and Bloody Knuckles:

Scenes from a Greyhound

I'm lucky enough to score a seat right behind the bus driver. I'd always heard these stories about Greyhounds - my friend's dad was molested on one of these buses as a boy, and I met a girl just last week who had a knife pulled on her on the way to Knoxville. These stories are common enough, and comprise a whole array of bad-news scenarios, but I've heard enough to notice a common thread. The really dreadful things always go down at the back of the bus, where the tiny overhead lights have burned out, where the fabric seat covers smell like cigarette smoke and the bus bathroom. A seat up front is a rare bit of luck, especially on a bus as packed as this one. The seats fill up quickly, and the boy with red-rimmed eyes who slides into the seat next to me is already leering.

"Hey, baby," the boy addresses me. I make eye contact with his foggy reflection in the bus window, then glance away. "Who's that girl you were with back there?" He jerks his thumb in the direction of the Elyria terminal, and I can see the girl he's referring to leaning against the bricks of the building, arms crossed, eyes fixed on my window. Her shoulders are hunched under her corduroy jacket and her chin juts out. It's the pose she takes on when she's trying to look tough; I recognize the intention in my own crossed arms and clenched fists.

"Her name's Kara," I tell him, hoping this will be enough for him.

"You two looked pretty close, huh?" He nudges me, leans closer. "Are you fucking her?"

"Probably not anymore," I answer, closing my eyes. We've left the building, and the girl, behind now; we're rolling onto the interstate. "We just broke up."

"That's still pretty hot," the boy says. "Try not to stop fucking her unless she makes you, okay? That's what I always do. You get the best of everything, that way."

I excuse myself, brush past my helpful seatmate and rows of weary passengers on my way to the bus bathroom. It's all gray and smells of shit and antiseptic; I lean against the locked door and let myself cry for the first time all day.

It's two hours to our next stop, and when I leave the bathroom, I'm able to find another seat, near the back, where I've got the whole row to myself. I pull my knees to my chest and pay careful attention to the exit numbers. Back in Elyria, Kara slipped me a CD she'd burned; I put my headphones on now and find that it's a collection of break-up songs, the soundtrack of our sorry weekend. Track one is a poppy ballad lamenting lost love; track two is more of the same. None of the songs seem to capture the rawness, the bleak reality of our time together. Accustomed to long-distance after two years of holding separate zip codes, we'd learned to write epic love letters, to carry on phonecalls 'til four a.m. before embarking on extended farewells. We kept notes on our days, spent a fortune mailing care packages full of greeting cards and glitter, exhausting every avenue of communication available to us.

Get us together in person, though, and the long silences set in. Faced with each other, and a limited number of hours together, it suddenly seemed shallow to waste time listing our favorite songs that tell stories, or comparing notes on our kindergarten teachers. We had sixty-eight hours together this weekend; sixty, if you allowed for a few hours' sleep each night. Sixty hours to fill with all the things we couldn't fit through the telephone lines, and it seemed a shame to fight. Easier, then, to agree upon a breakup right away, so we'd have fifty-nine hours to divide between sex and torturous crying jags. Kara finally turned the clock facedown upon her desk,

setting the alarm for two hours before my departure via Greyhound. Now my circadian rhythm's been jolted, and my body's as confused as all the rest of me. I wonder when she found the time to compile all these songs, to draw up this tracklist and come up with cover art. Why she felt the need to include Dan Hill's "Sometimes When We Touch" when she *knows* I can't stand that song. It all seems so dramatic, so desperate, until I remember that I'm the one traveling 1,300 miles in a weekend when, apparently, a mix CD would have sufficed. I fall asleep listening to sad songs and wake up in Toledo with dead batteries and a headache.

The shining magnificence of Toledo's Greyhound station is enough to shock me out of my misery, if only momentarily. The fluorescent lights are harsh as ever, but they buzz and flicker less, and there's even a food court with clean counters where I order a soft pretzel wrapped in wax paper. I find the last empty table and squeeze into a seat against the wall, sizing up my fellow travelers.

Greyhound stations are a gathering place for the insane; the trick is in deciphering whether the insanity is a cause or effect of someone's presence here. Enough time spent packed into dingy stations and buses reeking of smoke and sweat; having your ass grabbed as you walk down bus aisles; waking to find a wino watching you, his hand resting on your thigh - this will make anyone edgy. But some people come in

here crazy: hopping cheaply as possible from city to city, looking for a place to make a decent living; commuting to court hearings every weekday 'til they find out whether they're facing jail time or just a staggering fine; leaving a lover on the night bus, hoping to be hundreds of miles away when they're discovered missing. I'd like to claim craziness-by-proximity, but I'm not sure whether I don't belong in the second, scarier set of passengers. Counting other cases of insanity, attempting to categorize them, makes me feel a bit better about my own situation.

When one of them approaches my table and asks to sit down, I say yes without even looking at him. It's when I see two tiny feet clad in red tennis shoes swinging under the table that I glance up and realize that it's a father and daughter sitting in front of me, sipping blue slushies. When the man speaks to me, I can see that his tongue is blue and his eyes are tired.

"You takin' the southbound?" he asks, gesturing to the gate I've been keeping my eye on.

I nod, and he smiles. His teeth are blue, too. His daughter kicks my leg by accident and apologizes in a tiny voice. Her father rubs her shoulders through her torn pink windbreaker, and asks me where I'm coming from.

"I went to visit my girlfriend," I admit, watching his face for signs of condemnation.

"Mm, that's nice. Did she know you were comin' up to see her?"

"Yeah, we'd been planning it for weeks," I say.

His eyes narrow, and he clicks his tongue against his teeth. "Now, now; that's no fun. You shoulda surprised her, girl!"

"I did, actually," I say, remembering the way Kara had kissed my cheekbones as we lay in bed exhausted, how she said something had changed in me, that the set of my jaw was not what she had spent months remembering. How my voice kept steady while I told her I couldn't do this anymore, that I wouldn't be coming back. She'd changed, I said, or I had, and our lives had become too heavy and too separate for phonecalls to carry. We couldn't share our days, as much as we tried to; couldn't reconcile such starkly separate lives, however much love went into our efforts. We were both afraid of being the first to walk away from all our history, I told her, but honestly, didn't she want this just as much as I did? She didn't, and said as much, but didn't say the one thing that would have changed my mind: she never once said that

our love was enough to carry what phonecalls couldn't. Neither of us quite believed it, so our argument gave way to melancholic acceptance.

I change the subject with the slushie-sipping man and ask where he's heading. I can count all his blue teeth in the smile that comes on, then, and his daughter answers before he can.

"My big brother's turnin' ten!" she tells me, holding all her fingers outstretched for emphasis. "And *he* doesn't know we're comin'!"

Her father nods. "I ain't seen him much since his mama moved down to D.C., but we're still tight. I got him his first basketball, taught him how to play. Me and Jordan here are gonna catch one of his games before we leave."

Jordan nods, the beads in her braids clicking. "I made him a card all by myself!" Her dad elbows her, and she amends, "My daddy helped a *little!*"

An irritable voice comes over the intercom, calling for all southbound passengers to make their way to Gate Two. Jordan skips, and her father and I follow her winding path through the terminal. Jordan's father asks me questions about where I go to school, what I'm studying - those safe things you talk about with strangers. I answer simply, asking nothing more of my own, and Jordan's father finds better fellowship in

the folks in front of us, a rowdy young couple from Albany wearing animal-print smocks and matching caps.

When we board this bus, I take a window seat, knowing well that the bus will be packed. The southbound bus runs from Ohio onto Georgia, driving straight through the night. I'll spend ten hours on this one, and I'm hoping for a better seatmate than the prying guy from Elyria. Thus, I am thoroughly unthrilled when I meet Carl Stewart.

Carl is skinny in a way that suggests terminal illness or a drug habit. His hair grows long and gray, and carries the scent of ash and old age, and his clothes are all shades darker than they must have been when he bought them, with holes worn through each layer. When he smiles at me, his teeth are as yellow as his jagged fingernails.

'Long night ahead of us, eh?" Carl pats my knee, and I shift slightly away from him.

"Looks like it." I yawn, really playing it up, hoping he'll get the hint and cut the conversation short. One thing about Greyhounds is, though, that *everyone* is tired, from the chainsmoking bus drivers to the bleary-eyed passengers.

Carl squeezes my knee, and that's when I notice that his knuckles are bloody. Not just bloody, but *bleeding*, in the act of pumping more blood out; it pools in the deep lines on his joints. When I uncross my legs, one of his hands smears against my thigh, leaving a smudge of his blood on my blue jeans. Carl does not seem to notice.

Here's another thing about Greyhounds: although everyone on them is tired, they are also generally too paranoid to allow themselves to sleep. They're afraid of being robbed, probably, or taken advantage of; probably most passengers make it through without worrying about being bled on, but these things happen, especially on Greyhounds. I yawn, louder this time, and completely unfeigned, but I settle in, gearing up for another round of small talk with a tired, crazy person.

"Girl, what happened to you this weekend, huh?" he asks, squinting at me in the darkened bus. "You look a real mess."

I'd be offended, but he's right: I haven't showered in two days, having no time allotted for it, and I lost my hairbrush at some point this weekend. I tell Carl it's been a rough weekend, and he nods.

"Me, too, man. I got kicked out of my place, and when I went back to get my shit, the door was already locked-up." Carl scratches furiously at his hair, dandruff raining

down onto his shoulders and my legs. "I just left after that. Shit, I don't need that shit anymore."

"Why didn't you call the landlord?" I ask, unhelpfully. "Your stuffs gotta be somewhere. I'm sure you could get it back."

Carl shakes his head. "No, look, I needed to leave anyway, and I couldn't take all that shit with me. Shit, that's what was *keepin'i&Q* there; bitch was doin' me a favor." He emits a dry, pack-a-day chuckle, then squeezes my knee with his bloody hand. "When you get to be my age, you look forward to leavin'."

I gracefully disentangle my knee from his grasp again, then ask where he's going. Carl says he doesn't know, doesn't care. Probably he'll stop in Nashville, see if he can get a job in a gas station or somethin', he tells me, just as long as he doesn't have to go back to Cleveland. I'm silent in the face of these vague plans, which is a mistake, because it leaves an opening for Carl to ask me what was so wrong with my weekend.

Now, maybe it's just my earlier unsuccessful attempts at talking about Kara, or the certainty that Carl's recent past has been much worse than my own, but I forfeit the worst-weekend contest and say, instead, "I'm trying to give up all the things I'm not sure I still believe in."

"Sounds like a good idea," Carl tells me. "I reckon everyone does that, from time to time.

"Yeah, maybe," I sigh. "But it should be a whole lot harder than *this*."

Carl laughs again, and tells me that I wouldn't be traveling all this way if I didn't believe in something pretty powerfully. "And anyway," he says, squeezing my shoulder, "leaving's good for you. Easier to believe in what's next than what you've already got, sometimes."

He utters this uncomfortable sentiment as the bus veers slightly off the road, rolling into a gas station. The aisle lights come on, and the driver shouts that we've got ten minutes to stretch our legs. Since I'm sleepy and bent on a bit of suffering, I decide to stay in my seat, curled against the cold windowpane. Carl shuffles out, and I'm left on the bus with three other passengers, all asleep. I close my eyes, hoping to nod off for an hour or two.

Carl comes back before sleep can claim me. He nudges me with his hand, which is still bleeding, somehow, and drops a bag of powdered doughnuts into my lap.

"Eat up, sweetheart," he says, opening a plastic container of orange juice and passing it to me. And even though I hate orange juice and eating in front of people, I

take a sip and smile, letting myself sink into the seat. This display of comfort has a strange effect on Carl, who suddenly tells me I remind him exactly of his favorite daughter.

"You have a favorite daughter?" I ask, appalled.

"Course I do," Carl says, yellow grin growing. "She's dead now, but she was a real looker, believe me."

"I'm sorry," I say stupidly, the way people do when anyone brings up death.

But Carl shrugs it off: "Ah, my daughters are both dead, now. It's just me and my bitch of an ex-wife, and I'm better off without all of them. This way, I get to travel!" He gestures toward the aisle, littered with paper napkins and cheap luggage, and although I can't understand exactly why, he really *means* it. Carl Stewart is heading to Nashville, where he may, after lots of phonecalls from payphones and nights spent in the Greyhound terminal, get a job working at a gas station. His kids are dead; his wife is gone; and, defying all logic, his knuckles have bled continuously for the eight hours I've known him. We are silent, then, until our bus pulls into Carl's transfer station.

He stands, shakily, and slings his khaki knapsack over his shoulder. His bloody hand strokes my hair for a moment, and he says, "Baby, don't be afraid. Just think what's next." A young woman carrying two kids stands behind Carl, who is blocking her exit, and he takes off before I can answer him.

I've got an empty seat 'til Knoxville, and when we pull into the terminal, I let my legs stretch for the first time since Toledo. The Knoxville station is under repair, and the women's bathroom is not in operation. (The tetchy desk clerk tells me it's been out of order for three weeks.) I stumble into the men's bathroom and enter a stall, where I pull clean clothes from my backpack and change out of my smoke-smelling, blood-smearred ensemble. Along with my hairbrush, I've left two mismatched socks, a ballpoint pen, and a couple of highlighters back in Kara's bedroom - all things I'll probably never see again, but not that much to lose, really. Nothing compared to what Carl's gone through.

Once the bathroom is empty, I unlock the stall and move to the sinks, where I brush my teeth and tug my fingers through my long hair. Two men walk in, notice me, and step back to check the 'MEN' sign on the door. I step past them and back into the terminal, blinking into the fluorescent light and matching my ticket to the gate I'll be leaving from. The bus is due to leave in ten minutes, so I buy some gum from

the convenience store, and browse a rack of tacky postcards 'til the intercom tells me my bus is ready to leave.

The ride from Knoxville to Asheville doesn't even take two hours; I sit alone, in the front of the bus, and contemplate sleep without having the nerve to try for it. I wonder whether my roommate will be awake when I come home, and try to work out what I'll tell her about my time away. I finish the doughnuts Carl bought me, coating my clean clothes in white powder. I start on the reading for my night class, and draw out an outline for a paper I've got due tomorrow. Mostly, though, I watch the landscape grow wild once we leave Knoxville, see the mountains grow taller as we go on. I call my friend Robert when we hit the Asheville city limits, and ask him to pick me up at the station.

Just before we pull into the final terminal, we drive through a tunnel. It's short: we can see the end before we've even entered, and at six a.m., it's brighter inside the tunnel than out. The bus slows behind the line of cars that drive ahead of us, and I realize that I am holding my breath like I did as a little kid, making a wish without any idea of what that wish might be for. The bus grows darker when we exit the tunnel and turn, sharply, into the Greyhound station. I breathe again, and pick up my

backpack, and walk out into the dim-lit morning, where I shiver and wait for the friend I know is on his way.

Father Figure

I'm only half-watching the Miss America pageant, up until the Tampax commercial shatters something in me. All the models are wearing skimpy white bikinis and smiling so much that they can only be acting, but I hate them anyway. I'm four weeks late, I threw up this morning, and I haven't yet been bothered to tell anyone. When the next commercial is for Pampers, though, I start to worry.

"Hey, Robert." I nudge my friend who dozed off during the bathing suit competition. "I haven't had a period in eight weeks."

Robert blinks up at me, then reaches for his jacket and jingles his keys.

"Right now?" I ask. If I'm knocked up, I probably won't be able to schedule an abortion 'til next week anyway, so we might as well see whether the judges find Miss Ohio's dress as trashy as we do. Robert tells me to quit being morbid, and I tell him all right, I'll go with him, as long as I get to pick the music we listen to on the way. Robert says that this isn't a game, but when I slide into his messy car, he hands me

the CD wallet. George Michael seems so far from the realm of pregnancy that he seems the safest bet; when "Father Figure" comes on, Robert skips ahead.

"Come on, it's funny!" I plead with him. But "Careless Whisper" comes up next, and I let the moment pass. Even Robert starts singing along.

There are four different pregnancy tests on the same shelf; I pick the box with the prettiest colors. And then, because I don't want to waste this trip, I pick up some powdered doughnuts and a package of Pop Rocks. Robert holds my hand in the checkout line. He says he doesn't want me to feel awkward if the checkout lady looks disapproving, which of course, she does. Wal-Mart's bad lighting makes me think about delivery rooms, and I laugh, wondering why Robert isn't finding any of this as funny as I am.

Robert hugs me goodbye when we reach my door; he says I probably need to be alone, right now. I have to throw up again before I can even unwrap the EPT, and while I kneel before the toilet, still coughing, I remember how my mom told me about morning sickness, how she was sick all the time when I was in her belly. It was just one more reason she couldn't wait for me to come out, she said, tugging a brush through my tangled hair before school. I know that there is no way I can tell her about today, and even though there's nothing to tell yet, the thought makes me feel awfully alone.

When I'm done retching, I take the plastic stick out of its plastic wrapper and piss on the end, just like the diagram tells me to. Now I've got two minutes to kill. While I wait, I brush my teeth until my gums bleed. I think about names: maybe Blake for a boy, Charlie for a girl. I think about carseats and spit-up and tiny fingers wrapping around my thumb. I catch myself humming the song my mom always sang to me when I couldn't sleep. It only takes eighty-three seconds to convince myself not only that I am pregnant, but that this will be okay. I'll have to leave school and go back home, and I'll have to tell my parents, and these aren't things I'm jazzed about, but I can't be so selfish anymore. Everything has to change.

I know I'm pregnant even before I remove the purple lid, and so at first, the minus sign doesn't register. This piece of plastic says that I'm only living for one; it grants me freedom from difficult phone calls and permission to keep on living exactly as I am. I feel heavy with something closer to regret than relief, something which is neither. I fall in front of the toilet again, but this time, nothing comes up.

Lucian is a Pig

I wrote the song, but it was John's idea to add swear words and Kristy's suggestion to record it: a collaborative effort in cruelty. My kid brother kept time with plastic maracas while we sang into a Fisher-Price microphone. The playback sounded faraway like songs on the radio, and we toasted our accomplishment with juice boxes. It was Katelyn who gave the song its title: "Lucian Is A Pig".

We hated Lucian Oleskowicz. He had an unfortunate crew-cut and a lisp, and he wore sweatpants even in the summertime. His desperate attempts at friendship made us hate him even more, and we spent three summers devising ways to make him suffer. Headquarters was our clubhouse with the blue tarp roof; we wrote obscene things about Lucian's slobby mother on the inside walls with Magic Marker and had a stash of toys that John had lifted from Lucian's garage, which we buried for scavenger hunts. When Lucian wasn't around, we tormented the Mullins kids: their mother had an intense mistrust of the ice-cream man, and we let our Freeze-Pops and

Klondike Bars drip onto their driveway while they watched longingly. The Mullins kids never yelled at us or tried to pull my hair like Lucian did; they didn't even try to fight back. Lucian never let us down.

On overcast, jacket-weather days, we killed time by putting on plays. We favored whodunits, and at the play's climax, we always broke character and argued onstage over who could be the baddest bad guy. These plays were, inexplicably, almost always based on the board game *Clue*. One evening, we gathered to rehearse the very ambitious, very ambiguous "Case of the Missing Lady". There was a battle of artistic differences - I thought that a shoot-out in the first act was overkill - and John told me I was too ugly to be Miss Scarlet.

I fled the scene before anyone could see me cry. Pacing the cul-de-sac in tears, I caught sight of Lucian across the street. He was sitting on his front porch, chin in hands, shoulders shaking. I thought I could hear him crying, but it was hard to tell over the drone of Mr. Mullins' lawnmower. When Lucian caught me watching him, I stuck out my tongue and ran back to the fort, where my absence had unnerved no one.

Later that night, I would sneak outside in my pajamas to dig up Lucian's G.I. Joes and leave them on his front porch. I'd replace the toys with the cassette recording of "No Ice Cream For the Mullins Family" and "Lucian Is A Pig", patting the dirt down

deliberately. In that moment, though, I stepped into place and accepted the role of Mrs. Peacock without arguing.

Lapse

We were eight, sneaking to read *Seventeen* in Kate's basement after lights out. We felt so far above the cootie-ridden boys of our grade: we were saving ourselves for Jonathan Taylor Thomas. I was mortified when recounting my first kiss with spastic Ryan Duff, but pleased by the giddy awe that my experience commanded. Melissa said she'd practiced with her pillow; Melody promptly demonstrated, nearly suffocating herself in the process. Kate kept quiet. She was always so far ahead of us - she was the first to wear a training bra, the first to own a mini-backpack and see an R-rated movie. That night, she asked if I'd show her what I'd done with Ryan, and there, with our classmates and ragged stuffed animals as audience, I kissed Kate.

She tasted like vanilla ice cream, and I forgot to keep my eyes closed. Kissing Kate felt like getting shocked when I came too close to the television screen. She pushed me away, laughing, and we settled into sleeping bags soon after. When we picked partners in science class on Wednesday, Kate scooted her desk closer to Garni

Rudder's, but on Friday night I was back in Kate's basement, and we were alone. She suggested truth or dare; I dared her to kiss me again.

Thus, a routine was established: we spent the school-week apart, but Friday nights were spent in her basement, immersed in what Kate called "practice." I let her use this word, though I could not fathom anything beyond our lipgloss-sticky kisses - not until she suggested something she'd read about in her mother's magazine, which we practiced gracelessly but in earnest. One night, she let me count her freckles (at 273, she giggled and I lost count); another, we paged through my mother's ancient copy of *A Woman's Body*, which I smuggled over in my pink Jansport backpack, tucked under my pajamas. The book gave us many answers and even more ideas, though it would prove to be my undoing.

One Friday night, nearly two years after that first sleepover, Kate kissed the inside of my elbow, then looked up suddenly and asked what boy I was thinking of. I knew as soon as I answered that I should have named Jonathan Barton or even Ryan Duff, that the correct answer could not be, "I just think of you." Kate's reaction confirmed this: she sat up abruptly and said that she wasn't one of those lesbians we had read about in my mother's book. She said she always pretended I was John Waggoner. She said we should probably get to bed; it was getting late.

The next Friday, I sat Indian-style on my bed alone, listening to Mariah Carey on

cassette and wishing I'd known enough to lie. Across town, Garni Rudder unrolled her purple sleeping bag in Kate's basement.

Just People

"Right here's where they opened me up," my grandma wheezed, only hours out of anesthesia. She tapped her left knee twice. "It's all plastic and metal now."

The doctors told her to stay at our house until she made a full recovery; my mother started the car and I buckled my grandma in before sliding into a backseat. On the way home, I filled Grandma in on the waiting room drama.

"See, there was this woman with a little girl, and we figured the guy next to her was her husband, right? But after he kissed her goodbye and walked out, she made a call, and this other guy came in. And *he* kissed the woman, too, and not at all in a friendly way. The little girl seemed to know them both."

My grandma turned around, a lopsided grin on her wrinkled face. "You watch people just like I do, Jenny. But tell me: who are you kissing these days? Have you got yourself a fella?"

My mother's knuckles went white from gripping the steering wheel so tightly.

"Not really," I said. It wasn't exactly a lie, and I couldn't very well tell my grandma that I was dating a girl. Mom said it would give her a heart attack.

"Playing the field, huh?" my grandma asked. "Well, when you get tired of that, you should bring that nice Jeremy boy around again. I think he's keen on you."

"He's kind of seeing someone," I said, neglecting to mention that the 'someone' was a leather daddy named Jerome.

"Well, maybe when you're ready, he'll come around." Grandma smiled, closing her eyes.

Five years later, the doctors take out her right knee.

"I don't know why they have to keep cutting me open like this," my grandmother says without a trace of complaint.

We're parked in the mall lot while my mother returns something. On the way here, my grandmother reminded me that I'm the only grandchild who's never brought a date to a family function. Mom placated her: "Oh, Jenny's so busy with school that I doubt she even *notices boys*"

Now we are alone in the van. I trace vertical lines on the frosty window while my grandmother tells me a story about her neighbor.

"There are so many things I can't tell Lois," she says in a low voice. "If she ever

found out that I go to the casinos with your mother, she'd never say a word to me again! I almost slipped up last week; I thought I was done for!" My grandmother laughs a little, but her eyes look sad in the rearview mirror.

"Grandma," I start, and then, without allowing myself to think about what I am saying: "You know I'm a lesbian, right?"

Her penciled-in eyebrows go up immediately: of course, she had no way of knowing this.

But when I am uncomfortable, I tend to keep talking. "I mean, please don't say anything about it, ever. None of the family knows or anything. And Mom would be so, *so* pissed if she knew I told you, so you really can't say a word -"

My grandmother has collected herself by now. "Why wouldn't she want me to know?"

And, as if she's heard us, my mother exits the store, striding toward our van. I feel a cold hand come down on my shoulder; Grandma tugs on my scarf.

"You're just people, like everybody else," she tells me, just before the doors click, unlocking.

Mom slides into the driver's seat, smiling. "What are we talking about, ladies?"

My grandmother slides right back into a story about Lois, like nothing has changed, but when I catch her eye in the rearview mirror, she winks.

"No one should have to keep that many secrets, Mom," my mother tells her mother. "Lois could damn well handle the truth. . ." When my mother's not watching, I wink back.

Going Back

Kara knew how to use a semicolon and talked very seriously to her cats when she thought no one could hear her. We met when I stole her boyfriend, a real charmer called Doug who made fun of handicapped people and drove drunk, and we got really close when I spent two years dating her best friend. I knew Kara was straight, but stupidly, I professed my love while she drove me home one night, and was shocked when she admitted that she'd been waiting for me to do something about it for months. We had one illuminating summer together, full of broken curfews and invented histories and the kind of love Kara tried so hard to capture in her poetry, which I taped to my wall. We broke up when I left for school in Asheville, but were together again within a month, resolved to try the long-distance thing. Kara and I were no good at endings, though she was the best storyteller I knew.

We spent summer nights in elementary school parking lots, curled up in the backseat of her father's car, where she'd listen to me complain about my summer job

at the downtown YMCA. The ad in the paper had looked so promising: I wouldn't start work until June, and since I'd be working a day camp, my nights could be spent as I liked. These were the job's perks, which almost cancelled out the fact that I'd have to wear a fanny pack for every minute I was on the job. At the interview, my future boss told me that I'd be in charge of running the day camp, armed with a duffel bag full of board games and sports equipment, in charge of scheduling activities and keeping the kids out of trouble.

My campers were a ragtag group, mostly foster kids, mostly minorities, and mostly mean. Within a week or so, though, I'd managed to gain affection and some authority, if not actual respect: Baby D gave me cornrows during craft time, and artistic Matt with the absent father made me a construction-paper card for my birthday. My biggest problem was a silent kid named James.

You had to feel bad for James. At six years old, he was the youngest kid at Camp Frontier, and the scrawniest. He looked breakable, so I was relieved when he sat out of our football games. The few times that he'd join in our play, no one passed the ball to him or cheered him on when it was his turn at bat. He was so tiny, and his arms were so weak, that he couldn't drink from the water fountain on his own, and he was always the very last one in line, the last one picked for any team game. When I asked his foster mother why James didn't talk, she just laughed and said, "Oh, that boy is

just goin' through some kinda phase. He'll grow out of it soon enough." Another counselor insisted that James showed all the signs of a kid who had been molested, but really, it was anyone's guess.

Weekdays were spent trying to force James to open up, and weeknights were spent griping to Kara about my workday failings. When I became inconsolable, she would make up stories about our high school teachers, my neighbors, the woman who worked the drive-thru at Dairy Queen. Kara was a writer - she had the fingers for it, the perfect handwriting and the dreamy countenance - and being around her was like living in a movie.

"Ooh, look at him," she whispered, gesturing toward a man in patchy jeans and a fraying sweater. We were in the cafe of our favorite bookstore, where we went when it was too cold to stay parked outside. "He's waiting for someone. Look, he's tapping his foot."

I watched the nervous man stand up to greet a younger, hipper-looking guy. They sat at opposite ends of the leather couch, both sipping coffee and tapping their feet.

"That's his son," Kara told me, her voice low. "He hasn't seen him in years. See, his wife left him for another woman, a lesbian separatist who really has it in for men. Her, ah, father was really abusive. So they kept their son away from his father, mostly, but they've just gotten back in touch. This is only the second time they've

met since the kid was fourteen."

"It was the dad's idea to meet," I offered, getting into it. "He flew in from somewhere on the west coast."

"Portland," Kara said. "He flew in from Portland, and he read Alan Lightman's *Reunion* on the way. He had to turn on the little light above him to read it, and the woman next to him was really irritated, but he just had to find out what happened."

We left at closing time two hours later, and I had to talk Kara out of following the two men back to what she swore would be the father's hotel. I was in love with the way she drove, so steady and methodical, and the way she chewed on her lower lip when we got stuck in traffic. There wasn't much to do in Erie past ten o'clock, but there were always stories to follow, complicated histories to work out. There were sunsets to see (from our vantage point on the polluted beach), fictionalized families to reconcile, books of poetry to sift through.

Nights were spent listening to Kara, and days were spent trying to coax speech out of James. The most I could get out of James, though, was a shrug - it was his signature gesture, and one his fellow campers would spend weeks mocking. James's shrug was a full-body gesture: frail shoulders lifted his twig-like arms as high as they could go, then sent them falling again in a terrific slump. His gaze did not leave his ratty sneakers at any point during the shrug.

I was determined to get James talking. When positive reinforcement yielded no results, I turned to bribery. "Hey, James," I whispered, leaning across the picnic table. "You want an animal cracker?" I took his shrug as a sign of keen interest, and continued, "All you've gotta do is play charades with us. It'll be fun. Come on, I'll give you *two* animal crackers!" James shrugged again, and I gave up for a while.

"I feel like I'm failing him," I told Kara. As it was midnight, we had the playground to ourselves; we were sprawled out on the woodchips beneath the jungle gym. "I just don't know what to do, anymore."

"You're doing your best," Kara said, not for the first time.

"Exactly!" I whined. "And my best isn't even *cJoseto* being good enough!"

This was Kara's cue to reassure me. I'd never known anyone with Kara's unshakeable faith in humanity. Besides, our whole dialogue was practically scripted. She was supposed to kiss my forehead at this point. She was supposed to tell me that my best was more than anyone had probably ever done for the kid, and surely he would remember that. I waited for her to comfort me, giving her the pleading look I normally reserved for James.

"I get that," she finally said, sighing.

"What do you mean?" We lay there watching the stars through the holes in the metal structure above us; I thought I could see Orion. Silence loomed for long

enough that I began to wonder whether I'd actually asked my question out loud.

Sometime around one, she checked her watch, wiped her cheeks with the sleeve of her sweatshirt, and said, "We should probably get you home, huh?" I didn't have a curfew, but nor did I have an argument, so we stood, shaking woodchips from our hair, and drove home in silence.

The next morning at camp, we were scheduled for a visit from Miss Jackie, a high-energy social worker who came out to talk to our kids about non-violent conflict resolution and the value of respect. Miss Jackie was really into art projects: she seemed to believe that, given enough pipe cleaners and fingerpaints, kids could work through any dilemma. During that day's lesson on self-esteem, she passed out construction paper and markers and told the kids to each draw something they were really good at.

Matt sketched himself beating up his sister, which, in all fairness, he *was* very practiced in. Hallie drew a herd of misshapen ponies, then smiled enigmatically when asked what her drawing meant. Tricia made a whole collage of activities in which she excelled. James sat silently, looking down at his blank purple page and the still-capped marker Miss Jackie had handed him.

"He don't know what to draw," said Michael, who was drawing a gigantic basketball on his own paper.

When Miss Jackie asked everyone to explain their drawings, she skipped over James. She had come to accept James's silence and unwillingness to participate; she said that some kids just couldn't be helped.

After Miss Jackie had gone, Matt and Shaquil started up a game of Knights and Dragons. I played a few rounds, narrowly avoiding being bludgeoned by a playground ball, and then decided that the kids could run their own game for a few minutes. James hadn't left the picnic table since the self-esteem lesson, and he still sat there, chin propped up by tiny hands, staring at his blank page. I jogged over, fanny pack bouncing against my hip, trying to think of a question I could ask James that wouldn't be met with a shrug. When I slid onto the bench next to him, he didn't look up.

"Hey, buddy," I said, leaning in. "You waiting for inspiration to strike, or what?"

James shrugged.

"Well, you sure are good at shrugging," I said, and regretted it immediately. He looked up then and, for the first time, I noticed how big his eyes seemed, and how sad. I felt about three centimeters tall. "Hey, you're good at other things too, I bet. Like, um." I fumbled for something, anything, noteworthy James had done that week that didn't involve his signature shoulder movements.

James waited for me to finish my sentence.

"Well, I saw you use the water fountain today," I announced lamely. "All by yourself!" It was all I could think of.

James looked down again, then mumbled, "I got water all over myself." His voice was a high whine, and it thrilled me.

"Hey, you can talk!" I said, feeling so stupid even as I heard the words leaving my mouth.

James shrugged. Well, there went my big after-school special dreams. We sat together in silence, a habit I was getting used to by this point. When I realized that James's speaking up had been a one-time thing, I rejoined the rest of my campers, playing Spud while James sulked on the sidelines.

That night, Kara cancelled our plans together. The night after that, too. That weekend, we watched a documentary about penguins that made us cry so hard that we remained in our seats through the credits. Kara, I noticed, had started crying long before the first penguin death occurred, and I spent the drive home trying to find a way to bring it up. I figured it had to do with the end of the summer, which was only two weeks away. Leaving wasn't something we liked to talk about, though a year of long-distance longing had made it inevitable.

"You're saving my summer," I whispered while we reclined in the passenger's seat of her father's car. We were listening to a mix CD she'd just made that day, all love

songs from the nineties. "I've gotta say, I'm going to miss this when I'm back in Asheville."

Kara started crying. This wasn't so shocking: not only did Kara cry at films about penguins, she cried at the previews for such movies. We were both getting more emotional as summer nights grew chillier, as the suitcases in my room started filling up.

"We've still got time," I whispered, when it was clear she wasn't going to stop crying. "We have half of August yet, don't we?" Kara cried harder, with renewed desperation. The streetlight we had parked under started to flicker.

"Don't we?" I asked again. My cheeks were still dry. Kara shook her head no. No.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered when her crying had slowed enough to permit speech. "I just don't know who I am anymore."

I held her, dry-eyed, handing her tissues I'd found in the backseat. Every now and then, she'd stop crying for long enough to offer another attempt at exclamation.

"I'm almost twenty, you know?" she said, sobbing. "I haven't been to Korea and I haven't learned to play guitar and I haven't written a novel."

I reminded her that she *had* written novels, two and a half of them, but that only made her cry harder. That was just the *point*, didn't I see? She couldn't finish the

third one. She told me she didn't know what she wanted.

"But it isn't me," I said. It wasn't even really a question.

"We're too serious for me to stay. I'd only break your heart."

I started crying just as "Everlasting Love" started playing.

"When other love is gone, ours will be strong!" sang Gloria Estefan.

"It's better if I go now," sobbed Kara. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to hurt her, but I didn't know how to fight with Kara. The only argument we'd ever had had been over the ethicality of placing punctuation between quotation marks, and we'd even left that unresolved. Instead, I said all the things I wanted so badly to mean. I told her that it was all right; I thanked her for her honesty. I said that she probably shouldn't be with me, anyway, if she was so uncertain.

"I'm sure that I love you, though," she said.

"I wish that were enough," I whispered, then spent the next hour trying to find a way to take it back. At that, Kara went silent. By the time she started her car again, the streetlight above us had burned out.

Even though I spent the night doubting the sun would rise again, the next morning at eight a.m., I was back at Frontier Park, wiping down our picnic table and trying to scrub off the swear words Devion had scrawled there. James and Michael showed up first, and to my surprise, James spoke to me without provocation.

"Miss Jen," he whined, "will you play catch with me?"

"Well, sure," I found myself saying. "But we're gonna play Question Catch, okay?"

"I never heard of that game," James muttered mournfully. I couldn't blame the kid; I'd only made the game up seconds before. If James was going to speak to me, I was going to take full advantage of the opportunity. I explained how Question Catch was just like regular catch, except that I'd interrogate him while we played.

"It's really easy," I told him, and he agreed to my terms with a shrug.

In the next fifteen minutes, I learned James's favorite color (red, like the playground ball we were bouncing between us), his tentative career aspirations ("I maybe wanna be a police and put bad men in jail, maybe."), and his favorite animal (really little dogs that didn't bite). I'd started calling him "Jamesy", and he'd started turning the questions back on me.

"Who's your favorite person in the whole world, huh, Jamesy?"

He bounced the ball back at me, saying, "Who is yours?"

The ball hit the pavement six times before I answered him. "This girl, Kara." Bounce, catch.

"Mine's my sister, Heavenly." He said her name carefully.

I'd never heard of Heavenly before, and so I pushed on with my questions. I found

out that Heavenly was one year older than James; that she gave him her old blankie when she moved out of the group home they had all lived in. Someone had adopted Heavenly a year ago, and now James only saw her every other week.

"Her new mommy's really nice," he told me. "But she didn't want me."

"Sometimes people can't do what they want to do, because they have to do other things." Bounce, catch. "And sometimes, they don't even know what it is they want."

"Yeah, I know," said James, catching the ball and then throwing it down again. He was getting stronger, now, I realized; he could use the water fountain without soaking his t-shirt in the process. Bounce, catch. "Who's your favorite cartoon?"

James and I played that way until the others showed up, and even after. That night, Kara came over. She told me she had more to say, but then spent two hours crying while I held her tentatively, tried to be comforting. She whispered, "I'm sorry," until the phrase started to sound foreign, ridiculous. I wondered whether Heavenly's new mom had apologized to James when she left him in the group home, taking his sister. I wondered whether that would have helped, anyway. I didn't mention this to Kara, but I didn't stop her from kissing me goodnight, either. She left quietly, in tears, and I wasn't sure whether I'd see her again.

The next day, Miss Jackie was back, carrying crates full of safety scissors and

multicolored sheets of foam. That day's project involved making door-hangers with threatening directives like "BEWARE OF DOG!" or "STAY OUT!" James was first in line to pick out puffy paint, and I helped him paint his name onto the asymmetrical door-hanger he'd cut out of red foam. His letters were humongous, and he ran out of space for the S; this made him laugh hysterically for five minutes. When Miss Jackie asked him to please quiet down, I had to quickly cover my smile and help Hallie squeeze out a puffy paint raccoon.

Later, I took my campers for a walk down to the Octopus Tree, their favorite place in the entire park. The older kids climbed high into the branches, imitating birdcalls and trading insults. James and I sat on the bridge, watching an older couple walk along the creek with a hyperactive child.

"Hey, Jamesy," I said, nudging him. "You see those people down there?"

James nodded, just as the child below us began to howl. "Why's he makin' that *noise*?" James asked, covering his ears in melodramatic alarm.

"See, Jamesy, buddy," I lowered my voice conspiratorially, "that boy was raised by wolves. Really wild ones, up in the mountains somewhere."

James's eyes grew wide. "Really?"

"Well, he could have been," I said, then added, "Those people found him while they were hiking one day, and they thought they'd save him. See, the wolves that

brought him up were pretty mean, sometimes. They couldn't help it; they were just wolves. They didn't know what to do with a baby. They had wolf-things to do. The humans knew better how to take care of him."

James watched the little boy splashing in the creek, his jaw slack. "What's his name?"

"Um, Paul," I said. It was Kara's favorite boy name.

James wrinkled his nose. "Paul?"

"What, you got a better idea, kid?" I teased, turning to check that the rest of my campers were playing safely.

James," he said.

'All right," I said. "You know, I think it's a good name. Sure looks like a James to me.'

"Does he ever miss the wolves?" James asked. We watched the man below us show the boy how to skim stones across the creek. "Yeah," I answered. "Yeah, I think he does."

James nodded, still watching the boy. "But he can't go back there?"

"That's right, Jamesy," I said. "He can't go back, now."

We sat there silently, watching our unsuspecting heroes skip stones until it was snacktime, and then I rallied our kids together and led them back up the hill to our

picnic table, James holding my hand the whole way there.

At four o'clock, the usual procession of beaten-up cars and vans clogged the parking lot of Frontier Park. Kids scrambled to collect their various art projects, which had been left to dry in the sun, and climbed raucously into their parents' vehicles, screeching out goodbyes. James shrugged into his backpack, then shyly handed me his latest art project before boarding his foster mother's minivan.

It was another hour before all the parents had come to claim their kids, and I drove home swearing and singing along with the radio. Dropping off my fanny pack and dirty duffel bag in my garage, I scoured the kitchen for some Scotch tape and then ran up to my room. Carefully, I peeled down one of Kara's poems from the wall above my bed. I read through it once, tearing up a bit at all the promises it contained, then I tucked it into my top dresser drawer. In its place, I taped up a sheet of purple construction paper, covered with childish scrawling. In the center, two stick figures held hands: one taller, with a ponytail, and one half her size. Both of them wore gigantic smiles, slightly lopsided, and they stood together in a field of four-leaf clovers, a red ball at their feet.