

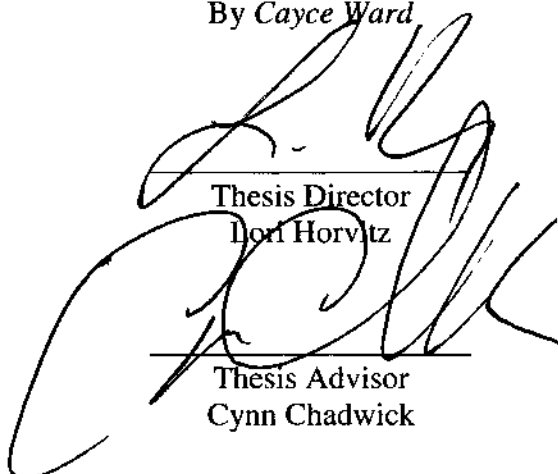
Against His Bones

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A Novel

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Against His Bones

The following chapters constitute the beginning of a novel. This work of fiction is intended to show how a seemingly strong relationship can collapse under the strain of traumatic circumstances and the inability to cope. It is approximately a third of the length of the foreseeable completed work.

When It All Falls Down

Tom Sounder gripped the faded armrest beside him, pocked and scarred with ancient cigarette burns, stuck his head between his legs and retched. The choked splash hit the floorboard of the cab. Through his sputtering for air he thought he heard the driver shouting and felt the car swerve to a halt.

Tom staggered out on to the street, dimly noticing he'd been dumped onto Avenue A. The sound of New York City buzzed around his head, like flies in the summer. As his jangled head came back together, he thought, *this must be how a flood feels.*

Overcome, charged with violent energy, he wanted to destroy everything he came across—even himself. For the first time, he wished that he could completely empty everything inside him, dump it out and leave it behind.

With the cab speeding away, he leaned over to spit orange and yellow globs onto the street. With the long sleeves of his grey shirt pushed up to his elbows, he saw steam rise from the bare skin of his forearms and swirl away.

“Fuck,” said Tom. “I left my jacket.”

The anger building inside him rumbled from his toes to his scalp.

“Goddamnit!” he yelled. He was angry at all the people walking around him, staring like he was crazy. They couldn’t understand the devastating emotion he felt. There, to his right, was a solid-looking maple. Without thinking too much about it he walked right up to the tree, balled up his fist, and struck it.

The sharp stinging in his knuckles felt good. It was a form of release he couldn’t quite describe. He hit the tree more to feel pain than to liberate his anger. He thought he deserved the pain, and everything that would happen thereafter.

Thinking of Sarah again, his anger vacillated to pity, shame, and back again like chills ripping through him. He couldn’t fathom the fear she felt when she was attacked. His girlfriend of six years, young and sweet, was the kind of person whose emotions filled up her face as soon as she felt them. She had blonde hair that she kept long because he said he liked it. She was just the tiniest bit pigeon-toed.

How did it happen? Who violated her? Each question rose, weighted his fist, and carried it forward into the bark of the tree until he could think of nothing but the pain slicing into his knuckles.

Tom had been trudging home from the art gallery where he’d worked for just over seven months. In his wool coat, warm like the memories of holidays spent at home long ago, he’d kicked a path through a tumble of golden, red, and orange leaves. His cell phone buzzed in the pocket of his jeans, an unfamiliar number. The sky was darkening rapidly, tainted with fading reds and pinks like a new bruise.

“Hello?” he had answered.

“Is this Mr. Sounder?” asked a female voice, heavy and gruff like a smoker’s.

“Yes,” said Tom. “Who’s this?”

The woman responded in a clipped, brisk tone. “Mr. Sounder, this is Nurse Jones at Bellevue Hospital. Your girlfriend is here and has asked us to call you.”

“What? You have Sarah there? Is she okay?” He struggled to keep the panic he felt out of his voice. The phone nearly slipped from his grasp.

Cabs, the color of mustard, sped by. An old woman bustled around him, as he halted on the sidewalk. Tom turned toward the sound instinctively, his bent elbow brushing the arm of her jacket. “Watch it!” hissed the woman, her face obscured by a thick purple scarf.

He tried to focus on what the nurse was saying, but felt as if his thoughts had been scattered around him onto the sidewalk.

“She’s alright, just a little shaken up,” said the nurse. “Is there anyone else we should call for her?”

“No,” said Tom. “There’s no one else.” Stopped dead in the pile of thickly fallen leaves, a dirty yellow one clung wetly to the side of his right boot. With a pang he thought of her father, probably drunk in a fishing boat somewhere, but definitely still alive. He’d said when Sarah turned eighteen she was no longer his problem. Tom was all she had in the world. “Please, tell me what happened,” he begged.

A million possibilities bristled through his mind in which Sarah was hurt, scared, and alone. After a tense moment he heard a frustrated sigh.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Sounder, I really can’t disclose that information over the phone...”

The hesitation he heard pulling at her words encouraged him to ask again.

“Please, tell me—I’m going crazy here.”

“All I can say is that she was assaulted this afternoon, she’s in with a doctor, and the police have already gotten her statement.”

“Are you telling me my girlfriend was raped?” He spat out the words with an utter, hopeless terror.

The nurse mumbled an apology, evading his pointed question, and said, “She’s still being examined at this time, but we’ll let her know that you’re on your way.” She hung up quickly.

When Tom flipped his phone shut, the contents of his stomach set off towards his throat. He remembered hailing a cab—the words Bellevue Hospital tumbled out of his mouth—and remembered the alarmed look in the cabby’s eyes when he went pale all over and broke out in a cold sweat. He had taken off his jacket, swiped the back of a clammy hand across his forehead and that’s when the esophageal pyrotechnics began.

He had gagged at the thought of Sarah violated. Raped.

Tom, when he could no longer justify punching the tree, wanted to shake all the leaves off it. Most of them had fallen to the ground overnight anyway. When he took a moment to breathe, he remembered he was on Avenue A, just a few blocks from 1st Street, where Sarah was waiting for him. Maybe hurt, definitely scared. *Maybe she’d regret ever coming here to be with me.* His throat felt raw and a stinging erupted in his nose and behind his eyes as if he were about to cry.

Stuck, his face crumpled with pain, his knuckles smarting at the cold air, an image of Sarah, lying helpless on the ground, skirt up around her waist, hair spread around her like a dingy halo, ripped through his head. Shocked into action, Tom broke into a run; towards Sarah, towards the unimaginable, towards the horror he didn't want to face but needed to for her sake.

Someone must have come across her, helpless and alone. She was supposed to be looking for a job earlier in the afternoon. Perhaps it had gotten late; the lampposts had begun flickering on in this new, unfamiliar city, making shadows big enough for grown men to hide in. One such man must have seen her without anyone around to protect her, and attacked. A bitter tang rose again in Tom's throat. He fought it down with a cruel swallow, trying to remember to breathe.

As he ran, recalling the long strides from running track in high school years ago, a steady trickle of thoughts charged his pace. Weaving through gobs of people, some alone, some in groups, darting past parking meters and under construction scaffolding, his heart beat violently against his bones.

As a surprise Tom had been intending to propose within a few days. It was only a month ago that she'd arrived on his doorstep in New York City. At 22, Sarah had quit school in the middle of her last year to be closer to Tom, a full-time art gallery attendant at the Hemboldt Gallery on Greene Street in SoHo and a part-time struggling artist.

With rain-slicked hair and big, expectant eyes, she'd just shown up. Happiness was too weak, too simple to describe the way he had felt. A volcano, storing up energy

and heat for millions of years, upon exploding couldn't even come close to describing how overwhelmed and ecstatic he'd felt.

Though the motions came back to him his lungs burned from years of inactivity. Breaking into a sweat, which chilled on his skin the instant it arose, a shiver ran through his limbs as he fought to think about anything besides Sarah until he could be by her side and know, without a doubt, if she was alright.

As his feet carried him the remaining few blocks, here and there he saw trees rise up singly from their homes in the sidewalk, looking eager for a cold wind to disrobe them. Reds and yellows fought for space with shades of dying green. They carried his thoughts above him, out of sight.

With the taste of vomit clinging to his tongue, he'd finally seen the hospital shooting up from the sidewalk like a mountain made of tan brick. He jogged through the front doors, breath lurching in and out of his lungs.

The floor was grey and white speckled linoleum, gleaming and new-looking, the ceiling was immensely high, the room well-lit, but an unmistakable weariness hung over everything like a draped sheet. To his left and right as he sailed in, rows of chairs, all stuck together like burnt noodles, held tired and anxious faces. At the curved desk, a thick white ring in the center of the room, a large man in a nurse's uniform sat tapping away at a computer.

"I need to see," he paused to gasp, "my girlfriend. She's here." One hand on his knee, one fist balled into his ribcage, Tom realized he must look like a crazy person.

Almost absentmindedly, he checked his watch, but somehow during the day the face had cracked and it had remained 4:30 ever since.

“Is she a patient here?” asked the male nurse, with raised eyebrows and the corners of his wide mouth drawn down like a gaping fish.

“Yes,” said Tom, forcing his ragged breath to slow. “Her name is Sarah Stewart.” In an effort to sound legit, he added, “Nurse Jones called me.”

“Hmm,” said the man. He turned to the computer before him, hit a few keys and picked up a phone.

In a discreet whisper, Tom heard, “Ms. Stewart’s boyfriend is here. Mm-Hm. Okay.” The nurse glanced at Tom and then subtly turned his head the other way, in what looked like an effort to shield Tom from something.

With evident pity in his eyes, the male nurse hung up the phone and stood up. “Okay,” he said, placing just the tips of his fingers on the white counter. “You’re going to go right over here—” he pointed the way with a nod of his head “—and get in the elevator. Go to the third floor and take a left. She’ll be in room 223.”

Down the wearily bright hallway, heads drifted up from their reading and waiting as he passed. It felt good to keep moving, to be able to go right on in and see her. He took that as a good sign. Wanting to get there quickly, but not wanting to worry Sarah by showing up looking like a mad man, he dashed into the men’s room before hitting the elevator.

Disheveled, with his longish brown hair blown back from his head, and a panicked look in his eyes, he splashed some cold water on his face, and let some drip

down his neck and onto the collar of his shirt. That's when he noticed the pools of sweat it had sopped up. Grabbing the hem, he tossed the fabric back and forth, fanning his chest and stomach with air.

Up the elevator to the third floor, down a wide hall with rooms to the left and windows staring out over 1st Street, he searched for room 223. He passed doctors in coats, nurses dressed like the man downstairs, and patients lugging IVs that rolled along beside them, their robes fluttering open to expose thin, papery gowns and shuffling legs.

And there it was. The door was closed.

He knocked twice before turning the handle and rushing in.

Sarah spun around, clutching a hospital gown to her chest, lips and eyes jerked wide. Wearing some other clothes than what she had left the house in that morning, it took her a long moment to step out of her shock. An army of emotions battled across her face within the span of a heartbeat. Tom saw that she didn't know what to feel.

Relaxing her arms, Sarah dropped the gown onto the hospital bed, its crisp corners already tucked back under the mattress, the wide, lumpy pillow fluffed for its next 'guest.' She tucked a lock of her blonde, wispy hair behind her ear, and took a breath as if to speak. Still looking down, away from him, she asked, "What took you so long?"

Eating up the space between them in an instant, he crushed her to him in a strong hug, felt her warmth through his damp shirt, and patted up and down her back,

pulled away and patted her shoulders, her face, the top of her head, as if he were counting her parts or feeling for something he lost in her like she was a deep pocket.

With her head tucked under his chin, she dropped her hands in his, and said, “You’re all wet.”

When Tom spoke, it was rushed and fidgety. “I came as soon as I could...nurse called...I had to get a cab, then I ran.” He struggled to look her in the eye, but gave up and decided to focus on her small hands, gripped in his. They were clean, normal. *But how is the rest of her?* he wondered.

Her eyes, leonine and angled back like a purring cat’s and greener than fresh grass, steadied him.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “You look terrible.” Slightly mocking him for his worry, her smile caught him off guard, as if she was only pretending to pull herself together for his sake.

“Me?” he asked. “I’m worried about *you*. What happened?”

The smile left her eyes then, but stretched the corners of her lips like taut fabric over bones. “I’m okay, really. Just a little bumped and bruised, that’s all.” She turned to pull her hands out of his.

Tom squeezed harder, catching the tips of her fingers tightly in his palms, warmed by her skin. “You’re not going to get off that easy, Sarah. You need to tell me what happened.”

When the line of her mouth hardened and she shook her head, he decided to tell her what he knew. "Look," he said. "The nurse who called me said you were assaulted. I know what that means, Sarah. You need to talk to me about this."

When she didn't respond, he said, "I love you and I want to take care of you."

And then he felt her sink onto the bed and saw a few tears break out of her eyes.

Her sobbing and chin wobbling thickened the words in his throat, weighted his tongue and made his body weary. Tom wanted to cover her with himself, to take the pain away, hide it from her so she could never find it again.

"I *will* talk about it," she asserted, softly without looking up at him. She sniffed once, and said, "Just not right now. I'm not ready. I've just been poked and prodded and questioned and I feel more like a branded calf than a person." Firmly placing her hands back in his, she stood up and said, "I want to go home, okay?"

"Okay. Everything will be okay." Tom spoke with his jaw clenched, into the folds of her hair. He pulled the stem of a leap from her fine, shiny strands and dropped it onto the floor. "I'll make sure you're okay."

The same nurse who'd called him earlier came by just a minute or two later and gave Sarah some paperwork to discharge her. Thanking her, Tom stuffed the brochures on rape counseling and Bellevue's compassionate care into his back pocket with only a cursory glance, wrapped his arm around Sarah's shoulders and marched her out of the hospital as quickly as he could.

In the elevator, down that first hallway, and out the door, Tom thought about everything but the current moment.

The first few days after Sarah had arrived in New York City, when they turned off the lights and burrowed under the covers, his doubts and worries would sink down to the bottom of his head, among the murky nothings that would soon tumble out altogether. Every night they had made giddy love to the tune of honking cars and the heat system clanking on and sputtering off at intervals. But then, just after Sarah began to snore softly, Tom would lie awake and wonder at the troubling thoughts that rose up to poke at him in the dark. Maddeningly, he would think: *Can we make it? Can we really get married?*

He had bought the ring a week ago. Like a guilty little secret, it was hiding in the back of their closet behind a box of summer clothes. He hadn't been able to ask her to marry him yet, couldn't rationalize binding her to himself like that without looking at it from all angles. He knew she would say yes without thinking, and that was the problem.

A sparkling, silver ring, it sat smugly between two cozy folds of black velvet. The dent to his savings account scared the shit out of him.

We're both so young, he had reasoned a million times. *But we're so in love*, would answer back.

Outside the hospital, the sky had grown fully dark. Lampposts illuminated the street with buzzing irregularity in both directions. A torturous silence had followed them both out of the building. Her black mascara had formed little smudged bruises under her eyes.

The hushed cab ride home gave Tom time to think. The smell of old Chinese food clung to the fabric inside. Sarah stared out the window, adrift from him and his thoughts. Her only anchor to him was the hand she clutched.

It figures, thought Tom, that the day I decide to ask her to marry me come hell or high water, they both roll in.

He pressed his forehead against the cool glass of the window and let the blur of lights bear his thoughts homeward.

One thing was clear to him: he didn't want to rush her. That first night, Tom refrained from asking any questions beyond "What can I do?"

Sarah locked herself in the bathroom following a terse shake of her head.

With split knuckles, he knocked on the door. Little angry rivulets of dried blood etched the back of his hands. No answer. A moment later he heard the squeak of the bathtub faucet and a rush of water. While he felt like knocking the door down or pacing their tiny apartment, he forced himself to lay down in their old, creaky bed to wait for her.

Tom awoke some time later, their bedroom stuffed with darkness. Through it he heard the soft click of the door shutting. The moist, humid smell of coconuts and honey filled room, and the bed compressed beneath the weight of Sarah climbing in with him.

Blinking at the blackness, he searched to find her outline. "Hey there," he breathed. Finding her beside him, she tucked herself under the blankets and he slid his arms around her, his hands skimming the damp skin of her back.

Sarah flinched and pulled away.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I don’t want to be held tonight.”

“That’s too bad,” said Tom, and reached for her again, but she had nearly flattened her body against the wall.

“No,” she said. The word bounced harshly through the quiet room.

“Okay,” said Tom. He felt like he had no choice but to give her what she wanted. It had always been this way with them, but now it felt like more of a struggle than ever—when all he wanted to do was hold her.

“Do you want me to go sleep on the couch?” he asked, daring himself to sound calm and understanding.

“No,” she amended. “Stay. Just stay over there, okay?”

Tom folded his arms across his chest, feeling like a scolded child, punished for something he didn’t do. He clenched his fists and then it passed. He couldn’t imagine how she must be feeling. Drifting off to sleep his thoughts lingered on her smile when they had first met, so clear and bright, like the corpuscular rays of light that find their way to the ground through the trees on a spring day, always brighter than everything else.

The sun peeked in on them in the morning before continuing in its pursuit of the next horizon. Tom’s alarm clock startled them both awake with loudly blaring beeps, syncopated and shrill. Sarah scrambled over him to turn it off, inelegantly leaning

across his chest to reach it. Rubbing their eyes in the silence that followed, they smiled at each other. For the moment everything sad or painful was gone.

Then, like a heart remembering to beat, a shadow passed across Sarah's face as if she recalled that she had been raped the day before.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Sore," she replied.

Unsure of what to say to that, Tom stalled.

"So, I think I'm going to play hooky today," he said as he pulled her closer to him.

Sarah froze.

"Don't you have that fundraising thing coming up soon?" she asked.

"Yeah, but I'll call Edwin and say I'm sick. One day away from the gallery won't sink the whole ship," said Tom. He sighed and stretched, feeling his spine elongate against their soft, navy blue sheets.

Sarah sat up. He studied the way her hair fell across her face, how she tried to hide her thoughts from him in this way.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I don't want you missing work for me," she replied.

"But, I want to be here with you."

"I'll be fine. I don't need you here."

For the first time in a year, Tom wanted a cigarette. He had to acknowledge within himself that the hard part had begun. After this point, the struggle would

continue until Sarah was okay and he could feel good about asking her to marry him. He knew for certain that he couldn't ask until she was back to the way she was before or better. Neither his pride nor his conscience would allow him to do so. No, what he needed to do was fix her.

"Okay," he said. "I'll do whatever you want me to do. I just want to help." With a penitently cocked head, he spoke in a tone of reassurance. "I'm here for you, Sarah."

Leaning down upon him, she rested her head against his chest. "I'm just overwhelmed," she said. "I don't know how to feel, what to think. What am I supposed to do?"

"Let's just take this one day at a time. There's no rush." He stroked her hair, her face, and began mentally composing a message he'd leave for his boss, explaining the situation with the barest of details.

Their tiny room, with its butter cream walls and high ceilings, had a warm feeling to it. It reminded him of his childhood bedroom in Pittsburgh. But this building smelled older than the other. The creak in the floorboards and the clanking in the pipes told in a gossiped hush of its oldness. There was a quaint living room and a kitchen along with the little nook of a bedroom. The fire escape led nowhere but the views were incredible. Rooftops extended for several blocks in every direction. There was constancy in the bustling movement beyond their walls that at times excited and bewildered them both.

Tom Sounder was drawn to New York City by the grit of it, the shadows and beautiful characters. Earnestly, he tried to fill pages of sketch books with their faces

and forms. He wanted, almost more than anything else, to show how he felt about it to the world, on canvases in oils and pastels, in galleries across the world—if only someone would give him the chance.

The glamour and excitement of the city, the unknown potential, is what Sarah claimed to love best about it. As the days had gotten shorter and the nights longer, they would hunker down together under piles of blankets, fighting the cold away with the warmth of their bodies, and talk until couldn't stop themselves from ripping each other's clothes off.

Out one window was Gansevoort Street and Patterson's Meat Packing Plant. Sarah cringed every time they walked by it, and said she imagined the meat swinging from hooks within and could smell the blood. In the evenings, through their windows they could see the light of endless chains of cars strung along like Christmas lights, circling each other in a frenzy of interconnected progress. Out the bedroom window, if you stood on your tip-toes and squinted, Sarah swore she could see the Empire State Building's slender needle, though it was clear across Manhattan.

"I would really appreciate it if you would let me help you," he said, as they resigned themselves to crawl out of bed, if only for the sake of coffee and breakfast.

Sarah demurred to respond, choosing instead only to nod.

He stopped her before she could lock herself in the bathroom again and drew her into a long hug. Before pulling away, his fingers circled a lock of her hair behind her ear and without warning he felt a chill swirl through his body. He imagined another man inside Sarah.

Finally, it had sunk in.

“Are you gonna make breakfast?” she asked, unaware of this change in his thinking.

Wrenching a smile onto his face, Tom replied “You couldn’t pay me to let you cook.”

She was something broken now to him. To hold her in his arms wasn’t enough. He wanted to fill the empty spaces in her before they could grow into something monstrous and beyond fixing. He sensed these new holes in her, created in the escape of her innocence, of her blind faith that everyone is good, and that bad things happen to other people, not her. These kinds of gaps weren’t like gaps in time, forgotten stretches that have no relevance to the present. No, they were much more than that.

While he cooked her scrambled eggs and she took her second shower in ten hours, it troubled Tom to realize that the shape of his thoughts had turned her into a thing; he was thinking of her in a way he never had before and it made him feel lonely and confused. Separated from her as he was, just by a thin wooden door, he felt a metaphorical space between them too. And it was growing.

He picked up his phone and dialed his boss’ number.

Edwin answered on the second ring.

“Hey, Edwin, it’s Tom.”

“What do you want?” asked Edwin. “You never call me.” His nasal, British voice managed to sound both hurt and skeptical.

“Um, well, I was calling to let you know that I don’t feel well today, so I’ll be staying home.”

“Well, that’s not very likely is it?”

“What isn’t likely?” asked Tom.

“That you’re sick.”

“Why not?”

“Well, for starters you don’t sound sick, and second of all you were fine when you left here yesterday. What’s really going on that you need to miss work when we have an event coming up?”

Tom could imagine the pinched look on Edwin’s face, his eyebrows up and all the rest of his features pointing toward his round nose.

“Well,” Tom paused to walk as far away from the bathroom door he could get in their apartment, which was in their bedroom, and spoke softly, “When I left work yesterday I had to go to the hospital to get Sarah. She’s okay,” he spat out, wishing he could talk about it with someone, just not his boss. “It’s just that I’m going to have to take off today to spend some time with her.”

“I see,” said Edwin. “In that case, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Really?” he asked, surprised that it took so little convincing.

“Yes, really. Take care of your girlfriend—I know how much you care about her. And if you *were* at work,” he continued, “you’d just be thinking about her all day and get in my way.”

“Thank you, Edwin. I really appreciate this.” Tom found himself looking at his boss in a new, benevolent light, before he remembered the eggs on the stove. Getting off the phone quickly, he dashed back to the kitchen to turn off the burner.

Bits of old toast and coffee grounds that never made it into the pot flecked the countertop. Here and there, knife marks from slicing microwaveable pizzas stood out on the faux Formica. Through the bathroom door, Tom could hear Sarah shut off the water. Buttering her toast, he realized that something was off—she didn’t hum a song like usual. It had always made him smile in the past. He slid the eggs onto plastic plates, stuck the toast in the toaster, and frowned over the massive amount of dishes in their single sink.

When Sarah opened the bathroom door it banged into the opened refrigerator, which startled Tom into knocking the skillet off their spitefully small stove and onto the linoleum with a dull clang.

“Jesus Christ!” said Sarah, with her hands clutching the bit of white towel that crossed her heart. “That scared the crap out of me.” Steam billowed out of the door in what appeared to be an effort to swallow her. She escaped, with pink cheeks and chaffed, raw skin. “What were you doing in there?” she asked, jerking her thumb at the fridge.

“I was trying to decide if I wanted butter or jam on my toast,” said Tom. He bent over to retrieve the skillet before anyone could slip on it and break their neck, very likely things with the luck he’d been having.

She grinned. “That’s too bad because I finished off the jam yesterday.”

Tom wanted to laugh, but then he noticed that an angry bruise had risen just under her collarbone overnight. Long, red scratches stood out sharply against her pale skin as well.

“Is that from him?” he asked. His voice barely wavered.

Mid-step on her way through the kitchen to the bedroom, Sarah hesitated. Droplets pirouetted off the ends of her hair onto the floor.

Refusing to answer his question, she fanned out her fingers, squeezing the skin on her arms, looking embarrassed. The effect, Tom supposed, of hiding the marks only magnified his attention to them. She ducked her head and made for their bedroom.

In the few minutes it took for her to change, Tom forced his raging heart and ragged breath to slow, and considered his next move. More than anything, he didn’t want to hurt her. Any hint of accusation, unintentional or otherwise, that might creep into his mind, would have to be drug out of his thoughts and thrown out the window, he realized, if he wanted her to talk to him about it at all. None of this was her fault. And it wasn’t his either. But, in these quiet moments, he reasoned that he had the right to know—he thought the details might make it easier for him to stop imagining it. He was wrong.

When Sarah emerged from the bedroom, wearing loose-fitting jeans with holes in the knees and a cotton tee shirt that said “Free Tibet,” Tom pressed her again.

“Look,” he said. “I would really like to know what happened.”

“Why do you need to know?” she asked. Before Tom could answer she said, “The eggs smell good, by the way,” stepped around him, and grabbed her plate from

the counter. She served herself and sat down at their two-person kitchen table in the brief space between their kitchen and the living room.

“Because I love you and it hurts me when you’re in pain,” he said, even though she didn’t look or act in pain at the moment, and then he couldn’t come up with the reason for why he wanted to know. She looked so good with her hair wet, darkened and slack against her neck. He shook his head and remembered that knowing would probably only make it worse, but now he couldn’t give up until she gave in.

With crushing detachment, she forked a bite of eggs into her mouth and said, “I don’t want to talk about it.” As she stood up to march back to the damn bathroom, her words spun out behind her like contrails, hanging forgotten and toxic in the sky.

“I don’t understand how you can be so calm,” said Tom.

Sarah paused with her hand on the door knob. Her reflection in the mirror gave Tom both sides of her—her blank face, and her tense, pinched shoulders.

“I get that,” said Sarah. “I just don’t know what to say.”

“You can start by telling me what happened,” said Tom. Concern for Sarah’s health and well-being sagged under the threat that she couldn’t open up to him. In all the time they’d been together, never before had Sarah not been able to say something to him, couldn’t share her thoughts or opinions. Tom didn’t realize how precious that was until he was faced with the possibility that she would keep something so life changing, so significant, from him. He felt the loss of her trust like vinegar poured into a fresh wound, the result of obdurate ignorance and damaged pride.

“I don’t want to,” she said.

Tom grabbed her shoulders and pushed his fingers into her skin.

“Ouch! You’re hurting me,” she cried and wrenched away from him, a look of anger and bewilderment on her face.

“You use to be able to tell me anything. How could this be too big for us?”

“This happened to *me*. I don’t want it to happen to *us*. Can you understand that?”

“No, not at all. Something bad happening to you affects me just as much, if not more. It all affects me whether you like it or not.” When she made no move to speak, he said, “I mean it, Sarah. I want you to tell me what happened. You need to deal with this, too.”

“What do you want me to say?” she asked. “I was raped, Tom. I was knocked down and forced to become somebody’s filthy garbage can. You can’t possibly understand what that feels like so I was trying to spare you the details.”

The enormity of Tom’s revulsion and fury spread through him like water flooding a sinking ship.

“See,” said Sarah. “I can see it in your eyes. You’re already looking at me differently. I don’t want to trade your love for your pity. I’m calm because I know that everything’s changed and I can’t do anything about it. There is literally nothing I can do.”

Soundness of mind, destroyed. Dependability and security fell away, massacred by her words.

Tom scrambled to answer, to pull his thoughts together to answer her. Her look, stern yet forlorn, found its way to his heart. Discovered like that, when just a few minutes before he'd felt so sure of himself and their love, Tom finally found the depth of his horror.

"It...It'll." He stopped, flummoxed by his own thoughts. "It'll be okay, Sarah." He could barely convince himself, much less reassure her.

She slunk away from his grip and slammed the door in his face.

Tom struggled to find something, anything that would fix the situation. Desperate, he shouted, "I love you, Sarah," at the door.

Shoring up his confidence, he said "But let's be clear here. I didn't do this to you. It's not my fault—I just want to help you." His voice cracked convincingly.

After a tense, silent moment, Sarah nudged the door open.

"I know it's not your fault," said Sarah. "I love you, too. But just a minute ago, you literally looked disgusted."

"I'm disgusted with what happened to you, not *you*." He dared himself to believe it, if only so it might catch hold of him and make itself true.

Tom folded her up into a hug. Her wet hair clung to his face as she pulled away.

"I guess I was just so scared you'd hate me," she said.

"Of course I don't hate you. I love you," he said again. "Come on, let's go heat up our breakfast and we'll figure this out together. Sound good?"

Sarah nodded and followed him into the living room.

That afternoon, after a stroll around the block and a grocery shopping expedition, Tom took Sarah to their local coffee shop, The Iron Horse Café, to figure out what to do next.

Small and intimate with only six tables and a few couches, the Iron Horse had been a regular place for them to drop by and spend an hour or two. In the evenings after Tom left work or on the weekends, they'd bring a deck of cards or borrow a board game from the Help Yourself-Shelf. Their favorite was Trivial Pursuit Junior, mostly because they could answer the questions easily.

The air inside was warm and bursting with the smell of coffee beans and toasting bagels. The couch that hugged the frosty windows by the door was open. Tom let Sarah take off her scarf and settle in before reigniting their conversation about the future.

"Okay," he said. "Whatever you want to do, I'm here for you. You know that, right?"

Sarah smiled. "Of course." She snuck her cold fingers into the caves his warm fists made in his lap.

"I was wondering if we could talk about something that I think is important." He tried to say this without wincing, but Sarah interrupted him before he could continue.

"Do we have to talk about that again? I thought you would give me some space after this morning. Wasn't this whole day to distract me? Let's keep doing that," Sarah said, rushing through her words.

“Wow,” said Tom. He couldn’t help it; everything Sarah did was cute to him. Even when she went overboard before she knew the whole story. With a grin back on his face, he said, “May I continue?”

She crossed her arms with a grumpy pout tugging the edges of her lips. “Yeah,” she grumbled.

“Thank you,” he began. “Let’s face it. You’re just as jobless as you were before. Have you thought any more about looking for a job?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “A lot of big stuff just happened. I’ve only been here a few weeks. I think I need a little more time.”

A barista shouted out Tom’s name. He took the time to retrieve their coffees to organize his thoughts. When he returned, he was ready to approach her from another angle.

Coffee in hand, she huddled her body around the warm mug and held it in front of her as if it were a camp fire, leaking out a meager warmth.

“Okay,” said Tom. “I’ve been thinking about this and I’ve come to the conclusion that it would be good for you, now more than ever, to get out of the apartment and find a job. You need to have some distractions. At least...” Sounding unsure, he continued, “I think that’s what you need.”

And then she smiled the smile that always made everything good again—the smile that meant she knew how hard Tom was trying to say the right thing and do his best for her. That little demon was still gnawing inside him, the one that blamed him for her getting hurt, the one that echoed through his blood that he was responsible for

her being raped. Tom got the sensation that if he didn't do something about it, it would eat away at him. At a loss for how to do that, he settled with helping Sarah in any way he could. He figured one means would be an end to both problems in some way or another.

"Alright," she sighed. "I think you're right." As if in apology, she said, "I'm still not sure how I'm supposed to feel. I guess I feel really empty." At this she lowered her eyes. "But, I'm trying not to let it show."

Over the next few moments, Tom became more aware of the clatter and chatter of the room around them, everyone and everything outside of their bubble of existence was oblivious to the big change in their lives. For some reason, Tom suddenly wished that everyone would speak louder and drown out the pain that hid under Sarah's words.

"I've got an idea," said Tom. "Why don't you try to work here? It's close to the gallery and the apartment, so I can be here to walk you to and from work so you never have to be alone."

"Maybe," she said, looking uncomfortable.

"What's wrong?" asked Tom. He sipped his coffee and let the steaming, black liquid soak in his mouth for a second, to acclimate to his body's temperature, before swallowing.

"Do you really feel like you can never leave me alone again?"

Surprised at the question, Tom asked, "Don't *you*?"

"I don't want you to feel like you have to babysit me."

“It’s not babysitting, Sarah. It’s being there for you whenever you need me because you’ve been hurt. I let you down and—” He noticed his volume rising. After a deep breath, he continued. “—and I can’t let that happen again.”

With a sudden ferocity in her eyes, she said, “All I have is you.” And then, in a whisper he almost didn’t catch, she begged, “Please, don’t ever leave me.”

From what felt like miles away on the soft leather couch in the bustling café, Tom whispered, “Never.”

The Knockout

Over the next couple of days, Tom couldn't quite get used to the idea of leaving Sarah alone in the apartment, but somehow she had convinced him that she'd be fine. She always had a way of tricking him into doing something he didn't want to do, in such a way that it seemed like his idea in the first place. Together, or so it seemed, they had decided if Sarah was going to leave for any reason she'd call him when she left and when she got back.

Still a bit upset that she hadn't called him immediately when it had happened, that the hospital had called him instead, the two-fold calls she promised to him were a scanty salve, but better than nothing. Refusing to let him miss more than a few days of work, Sarah began the process of shooing him out the door that morning.

"Tonight's the big event at the gallery," said Sarah, though Tom didn't need the reminder. "You have to be there."

"I know. I just can't believe I don't have a single painting showing tonight," he said, shoving his feet into his faded brown boots. Before she could say anything, he continued, "And no, the one Edwin hung by the bathroom in the back room doesn't count."

Sarah, in pajama pants with reindeer bouncing all over them and a tight long sleeve tee shirt that showed the outline of her breasts, kneeled in front of him to tie his laces.

“It’ll happen,” she said. “Don’t worry so much.”

Realizing that she referred more to herself more than to his flailing art career, Tom said, “I can’t help it, Sarah. Leaving you alone scares the shit out of me.”

With downcast eyes that rose pointedly, as if searching through him for something, she said, “I know that, but it’s never going to get any easier to deal with. It happened—let’s try to be normal. Okay?”

Yes, it happened, but Tom was unwilling to let it go. He didn’t realize that his stubbornness on this issue would be much harder for him to confront than it seemed to be for her.

Though he wanted to yell, “No, it’s not okay,” he struggled to swallow the words and said, “Okay. That’s up to you,” instead. And with that, it was out of his hands.

“Will you do me a favor, though?” he asked, as an afterthought. “Will you call the hotline or try and make an appointment with a counselor today?”

“We’ll see,” said Sarah, with a little hesitation.

“Is your cell phone charged?” asked Tom.

“Yes, sir,” she said with a mock salute.

As she shoved him out the door with a kiss, Tom in an old, forgotten jacket he’d found in the back of their closet, with such large holes in the pockets that everything

he stuffed in there would certainly fall out, he noticed that he'd just given all the power over to Sarah. He thought it would make him feel better, but in fact, it only made him feel weak and helpless.

Wanting her to feel good about herself and wanting her to figure this out on her own were two very different things. He wanted to spin around on his heels, open the door, and say so. But, upon facing the door he heard a muted humming coming from their apartment. Smiling for the first time that day, he spun back around and headed off to work.

With each step farther away from Sarah, however, he grew more anxious. Only two blocks away from their four floor walk-up on Gansevoort Street, the gallery might as well have been on the moon. He had doubts about their plan. *What if someone mugged her and she couldn't call? What if it happened again?*

Tom nearly turned back around and headed for home, but braced himself to keep going.

Striking upon a solution to his worry, he decided that whenever he felt like it he'd phone *her* instead of waiting around for a call that might not come.

With a deep breath, he took a few steps forward and noticed a lessening of his burden. Forcing Sarah from his thoughts as best as he could, he started thinking about the long day he had ahead of him.

At first, he'd been ecstatic to get a job in a gallery. Tom, fresh out of college with a useless degree in History, had always wanted to be an artist and living in New

York City seemed like the perfect way to get his wish. However, his career had yet to happen. At all.

Finding the time to paint was difficult, as was buying materials. Convincing Edwin, his boss at the gallery, to give him a shot at showing his work had proved impossible. It felt like Sarah, his darling Sarah, was the only one in the world who believed in him.

When he walked through the silvery glass doors of the gallery that morning, he noticed something odd about the heights of the first three paintings to the right. Before heading towards the back room to hang up his old coat, he went in search of Edwin, his supervisor.

“Edwin,” Tom called.

“Up here,” shouted a British voice from the loft above the viewing floor of the gallery. Tom ascended the stairs to find Edwin on the phone, snapping out beverage orders.

Almost barking into the receiver, Edwin cried, “I can’t believe you expect these people to drink ginger ale. What a stupid suggestion. Now, tell me, are you paid for suggestions?” When he turned to glance at Tom, he reeled back as if disgusted. Holding his manicured hand over the mouthpiece of the phone he whispered, “This’ll just take a moment. You look like bloody hell, by the way.”

Edwin turned his back to Tom and continued rebuking some poor guy at the catering company for another minute before slamming down the phone. He cringed at

the sight of Tom rubbing the back of his palm along the stubble of his chin, which made a noisy rasping sound.

“Ugh,” he cried. “Would it hurt you to shave?”

“I must have forgotten,” said Tom. Remembering to suck up a bit more since he’d missed a few days of work, he said, “I thought you liked the rugged man look.”

“Don’t get cute with me—I don’t have time for it today.” After a pause, Edwin asked, “I trust your personal matter is all taken care of?”

“Yes, thanks for asking,” said Tom, trying to sound thankful.

“Okay, then. Let’s get this showboat on the river,” said Edwin, clapping his hands twice for good measure.

Laughing genuinely at Edwin’s enthusiasm, Tom remembered why he’d sought out Edwin in the first place. “By the way, I wanted to make a suggestion about the Movila pieces in the front.”

“Save it,” said Edwin, holding up his palm in Tom’s face. “I already know. The placement is off.” Using his hands to simulate waves or something like them, he said, “But right now we’re focusing on the overall *flow* of the mediums. That reminds me—I posted lists. Go find yours.”

Tom turned to leave, but Edwin caught his sleeve. “And for chrissakes, Tom, make sure you clean yourself up before tonight.”

Edwin Middleton was a gay, fat, balding art aficionado from Essex, England. When patrons were present he tried his best to pull off a posh sound, but he could

never hold onto either the nasality or the formality of the Queen's English. To his own chagrin, a working-class inflection coated his words more effortlessly.

The back room of the gallery abutted the bathrooms and the staff kitchen. Its normal disarray had been replaced by an almost blinding cleanliness in preparation for the night's event. It was the twelfth anniversary of the gallery's existence, annually celebrated with a fundraising party. It was Tom's first since he'd moved to the city and started working there, and he found himself growing more and more excited. This was his chance to meet other artists, art lovers, and art managers from all over the city.

In a concerted effort to keep Sarah off his mind, he hung up his coat and got to work on the long list of things Edwin expected to be done before seven.

After almost an hour of moving various metal sculptures, egg-white podiums, and heavy frames back and forth across the increasingly dusty floor, he managed to slip out into the alley to call and check on her for the first time that day.

It rang six times before her voicemail kicked in. He heard a faint, "Hi, you've reached Sarah," before hanging up the phone in a panic.

Without telling Edwin he needed to rush home, without remembering to grab his jacket (again), he broke into a run. The clonking of his boots on the pavement, the lurch for breath, the chill on his arms as he ran to Sarah for the second time in a matter of days, made Tom feel very silly.

Ignoring this for the sake of worry for her, he made it to their building, tall and ugly with windows like missing teeth. Loping up the stairs to their floor in strides that

gobbled up several steps at a time, he shook and gasped as he shoved his key in the lock, and flung open the door to their apartment.

At that moment Sarah had been walking out of the bathroom with a white towel wrapped around her body, tucked in just above her breasts. She nearly jumped out of her skin.

“Jesus Christ!” she yelled, closing her eyes as her hands flew to her chest in fright. “You scared me.”

Tom reached out his arms and grabbed her to him. The door hung open behind him.

“Is everything okay?” she asked. Her still-moist face nuzzled his neck as she spoke. “Your skin feels on fire.”

“I’m okay,” he breathed. “You didn’t answer your phone. I got worried.” More than worried, he felt disoriented for some reason; something was off.

“You got worried? So you ran over here from work, even though it’s a big day for you, because I didn’t answer my phone?”

He nodded assent against her wet hair. That same smell, coconuts and honey, hung in the air like black clouds, heavy with rain.

“That’s a little silly, isn’t it?” she asked. “Can you shut the door now?”

Tom felt a little ashamed of his haste, but couldn’t let go of the nagging feeling in his chest. “I just wanted to make sure you were alright.” He broke away from their embrace to shut the door. When he turned back around he realized what was wrong:

she had taken *another* shower. Trying to think back, he recalled her taking at least six showers in the last three days.

Sarah folded her arms across her chest and shivered audibly. "I'm fine. Are you okay?"

Torn between dragging the new quirk she'd added to her daily routine out in the open and pretending everything was okay, he took the easy route. Happy, at least, that she seemed to be alright, and not knowing what to expect, he felt like he should take what he could get.

Without warning, without effort even, an image of her on the ground covered with some guy surged through his head, flung wretchedness through his veins and made him shake slightly with the effort to appear calm...again.

Forcing himself to speak, he said, "I guess I just needed to make sure you were alright." Having said that twice, he felt even more stupid.

Sarah, however, seemed perfectly normal. Like nothing had happened. Like she hadn't been raped so recently.

Not wanting to jinx her mood with his own insecurities or questions, he managed to hug her again, still shaking slightly, though pretending he was just as peachy as she was. When he kissed her forehead, the sweat from his lip slipped against the clean wetness of her skin.

"Are you sure you want to come tonight?" he asked, hoping that she might want to stay home and work on her resume. But more than that, he didn't want her out on the streets alone.

“Why wouldn’t I?” asked Sarah in reply.

Tom hesitated to answer. “Well, okay,” he said.

Sarah kissed him on the lips and smiled. “I’ll be there at seven.”

Trudging back to the gallery, he tried to stomp on every leaf he saw. Digging his hands into his holey pockets, he tried to think his way through the last few minutes.

Evidently Sarah was fine without him. He admitted that showering a lot wasn’t technically a problem, though it still vaguely alarmed him. Once again, Tom felt like there was nothing he could do. His only priority was to fix her, make her better, and then to marry her.

Back at the gallery, Edwin was in a tizzy.

“Tom! Where have you been?” he asked.

Before Tom could even open his mouth, Edwin said, “Ew! You’re all sweaty.” With a look that said he was just about to launch into his hygiene talk, which he normally saved for Benny, he settled with snapping, “Get in here and dust or something for heaven’s sake.”

Beads of sweat collected at the top of Edwin’s smooth head and trickled down his face to gather in darkening spots on his starched, purple collar, which dug into his fat neck. “The caterers will be here any minute.”

Tom spent the rest of the day pushing all but the immediate situation from his mind, though Sarah still strayed at the edges. As the evening approached, he began sweeping the industrial broom across the parquet floor, back and forth, back and forth

for what felt like an eternity. When he finished, he took the broom to the back and found Benny taking a break.

With his ham hock face and small eyes, Benny, his fellow gallery attendant, thought of himself as a great seducer of women.

"I'm gonna bag me a rich lady tonight," he said, as he took a swig of juice from a paper cup and tossed it at the giant trashcan by the bathroom. It hit the rim and fell, crumpled, to the floor.

Tom had felt like that cup at times throughout the day; both in the sense that he was not where he'd intended to be and because he felt a little broken, a little used. With a throttling pang, Tom realized that that must be how Sarah feels. Fighting an urge to call her again, he ran his eyes along the familiar planes of the gallery's back room, the dusty tops of cabinets and the set of stand-alone lockers, the soda stains on the counter, the dark blue walls and poor lighting, and then committed himself to appearing interested in what Benny had to say.

"What makes you so sure?" asked Tom. From the tall row of lockers by the door, Tom pulled a black blazer off a hanger and slipped it over his broad shoulders. The sleeves fell just shy of his wrists.

"Because I always do," said Benny. "You'll see."

Shaking his head, Tom forced a half-smile. "Whatever you say, Benny."

Using his thick, swollen-looking hands to illustrate his point, Benny said, "Christ! There was this one—she had these legs that went on for days. Real rich bitch, you know?" He stooped over a pile of broken-down cardboard boxes, shoved to the

corner of the room, and began shuffling them into a tighter pile. “Anyway,” he continued, “you might want to look into the situation for yourself. You could probably find somebody easy.”

Normally, Tom would just laugh it off. Benny, knowing all too well that Tom was in a serious relationship, liked to play up the fact that Tom was ‘tied down’ and couldn’t have wild nights at bars or sex with random strangers. Frankly, that kind of lifestyle disgusted him. But this time, it felt more personal.

Through his gritted teeth, Tom said, “You know and I know I’m with somebody. Her name is Sarah and she’s a lot better than anything you’ll find at this party tonight.”

Benny, who squinted at Tom from under two thick, pasty lids, said, “That was a low blow, dude. I’m just trying to help. You seemed a little tense, like you hadn’t been getting any tail, that’s all.”

For the first time, Tom realized that he’d hardly been able to touch Sarah over the last couple of days—either she’d pull away or he’d pull back. Benny smiled as if he knew he’d hit on a sore spot.

“Whatever, man,” said Tom. “I’m gonna get back to work.”

It was true that many sparkling and influential people would show up, smelling of opinions that mattered and money. Edwin had discreetly coached him on how to talk to some of them. Apparently, it involved ass-kissing and feigned attention. The whole point was to wrest some of their gobs of money out of their pocketbooks and into the gallery. Of course, there would also be a smattering of cultured artists and their managers. Tom couldn’t wait to pick their brains.

As he didn't have time to run home again, Edwin let him borrow his electric razor. Standing before the mirror in the men's bathroom, which gleamed with an abnormal dose of shine, Tom slowly shaved away his budding beard.

Hopefully, Sarah would be there soon. He kept checking his broken watch, absent-mindedly—more to look at something and think something else besides the growing anticipation he felt about seeing her again after a full day away from her. *Would she be different than I remembered?* He felt stupid even thinking that.

At 7:15 pm the guests began arriving.

Sarah was late. Tom weaved through the growing crowd, looking for a shining, blonde head, preferably the one that belonged to his girlfriend.

Unable to find her in either of the two viewing rooms, Tom grabbed his coat and decided to step outside to wait for her. Plus, he chose to think, being the first to greet the guests at the door could hurt either.

Though he'd quit smoking about a year before, every day he lived in New York City he'd wanted to pick it back up again. The smooth liquidity of the laced air, the chemical infusion in his lungs, is what he craved, not the act itself. Upon opening the door and getting hit by a gust of wind, which carried bits of leaves into the gallery behind him, he also smelled the burning tang of a lit cigarette. His hands clenched in his pockets for wanting it so bad.

There, to his right, illuminated from behind and above was a woman smoking. The flame bloomed and died as a puff of toxic blue air escaped her parted lips.

“Excuse me,” said Tom, ignoring the alarm bells in his brain, ignoring all his hard work to quit for Sarah, and stepped toward her. When he looked at this woman he thought of his mother when she was younger, when he was just a little kid. She used to sneak out of the house and smoke in the cold, away from her family, and hurry back inside smelling like a sickly sweet bonfire. This woman before him was in her mid-forties, in a buckled coat that hugged her curves.

Looking over at him she smiled. “Yes?”

“Sorry to ask, but can I bum a cigarette?” asked Tom.

In answer, she dug into her pocket for her pack of Parliaments and lit one for him from her own cigarette.

He thanked her, and went to stand back by the door to wait for Sarah. With the first drag, Tom was charged with ebullience. It hurt his chest, like dragging chains through his wind pipe, but the pain went away after a few more puffs. He felt light-headed, but like the ululation of a wave, once he sent a cloud of chemicals back into the air the panicky thoughts returned. Just when Tom began searching his pockets for his cell phone to call Sarah, the woman spoke to him.

“It’s cold out tonight, isn’t it?” she asked, a little loudly, as if shouting over a gust of wind.

“Sure is,” said Tom and nodded, politely.

“I’m Nancy,” she said.

“Tom,” he said, feeling stupid, with his right hand up in a half-wave, though she was only a few feet away. He took another deep drag of the Parliament and sent it

back out again. Only then did he begin to feel a little nervous about Sarah smelling it on him later. *Oh well*, he thought, *what she doesn't know won't hurt her*.

And then a nagging, guilty feeling crept into him. It slunk against his happy thoughts, the light and airy feeling in his brain, and made him wish he could go back in time and fix everything so neither he nor Sarah would ever have to deal with what happened. Though he knew he'd thought it, he'd never before wanted to speak aloud the thought: *I can't believe she was raped*.

"You here for the party?" Nancy asked, stubbing out her cigarette beneath the toe of her high heel.

"Yeah," said Tom, snapping out of his thoughts. "I work here."

"That's nice," said Nancy. She covered the last few feet between them and reached for the front door. Tom stepped forward and opened it for her.

Smiling indulgently, she said, "Thank you, Tom," and slipped inside.

His eyes followed her into the room.

A few seconds later, from behind him, he heard high heels clicking on the sidewalk.

"Tom?" It was Sarah.

Without turning, he flicked the last burning inch of his cigarette at the ground and wondered why he kept having to project a look of calm on his face over and over again that day—it was beginning to irritate him. That feeling dissipated the moment he saw her, however. In a long black coat that came down to her thighs, baring the hint of a blue dress, her glossy hair pinned back, she asked, "How do I look?"

Trying to remember how to swallow and breathe, Tom said, “You look amazing.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I needed to hear that.”

And then Tom remembered his anxiety. “Why didn’t you call when you left the apartment?” he asked, with a hint of accusation undercutting his worried words.

“I guess I forgot,” she replied. Hitting on the right thing to distract him, she leaned in closer and asked, “What’s that smell?”

“Oh, I think some woman was smoking out here before you got here and so it probably smells like smoke.”

Sarah laughed and said, “You’re cute when you’re nervous.”

Grabbing her gloved hands with both of his, he asked, “Did you get here safely? Did anybody bother you?”

Fidgeting, her hands stirring from his grasp, to the buttons of her coat, to her hair, she said, “No.”

“Good.”

“So, are you going to introduce me around this place?” she asked, looking up to admire the building.

Tom stood back with her and tried to see the gallery through fresh eyes. Before making a mental note to keep Sarah away from Benny, he realized he’d forgotten that she’d never been there before.

The Humboldt Gallery was lit up brilliantly from within. Large squares of recycled glass, which fit together like quilt patches, covered the entire face of the two

story building. Distorted colors and the movement of people flickered like fizzy, vibrant shadows on the sidewalk at their feet.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” said Tom. With an encouraging smile, he picked her up in a firm embrace.

Sarah giggled as her feet left the ground for a moment and shivered in his arms. “Let’s get inside,” she said.

Following her in, through the crowd that bubbled with conversation and laughter, Tom felt proud of the gallery. Right behind her, watching her try to find her way to the back room to hang up her coat, he wished they could have been celebrating their engagement that night as well.

The growing crowd mused in bunches around the art pieces in the room, most of which Tom had arranged himself. Grabbing her hand, as she was veering off in completely the wrong direction, he pulled Sarah over to Edwin, where he stood dabbing at his brow with a white handkerchief.

Edwin looked up with a start, as if surprised that someone would come over and talk to him, but he smiled when he saw it was Tom. Then his eyes shifted to Sarah. “Who do we have here?” he asked, smiling even wider.

“Edwin, this is Sarah,” said Tom. He gestured to Sarah with her own fingers, which he held tightly with his.

“Lovely to meet you, dear,” he said, sounding like an old maid.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” said Sarah.

It was difficult for Tom to release his grip on Sarah so that his boss and his girlfriend could shake hands properly, but after a moment, he was able to do so.

“Well,” said Edwin, exaggerating the length of the word, “I’m going to have to go mingle. Excuse me. Sarah, I hope you enjoy the party.” With a pointed look, Edwin conveyed to Tom that he had to mingle tonight as well. “I’ll be around if you need anything,” he called out as he sailed away through the crowd.

“He was nice,” said Sarah, when Edwin was out of ear shot.

“He has his moments,” agreed Tom.

“So did that look mean you have to mingle, too?” asked Sarah.

“He’s a little obvious, isn’t he?” said Tom, and leaned down to kiss her forehead, which smelled like some kind of melon that he couldn’t quite place.

“Though you are extremely perceptive, my dear,” he said. He almost wanted to mention how nice it was not to think about her being raped when he looked at her, but of course that only meant it had bubbled to the surface of his mind again. Instead, he chose to tell her how beautiful she looked and lead her in the direction of the champagne.

Through the clumps of heads in all sorts of shapes and sizes, he thought he recognized the shoulder length ginger hair of the woman from outside—Nancy, he remembered. She was talking to one of the artists featured in the evening’s showing. Putting that detail aside in his mind, he flicked his head back to look at Sarah who appeared a little bewildered.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, as they neared the buffet. It had been a very plain long, wooden-topped, folding table just a few hours before. After the caterers had found it, they draped it with shiny folds of blue and white fabric, which matched the wall of recycled glass, and piled it full of ornate swirls of sandwich meats, crackers, bouquets of fruit, and somehow made a tropical island out of shrimp cocktails and cookies.

“Maybe a little,” said Sarah, wide-eyed at the embellished display. “I don’t want to be responsible for turning that little island into another Atlantis, though,” she said.

Tom laughed so hard that it startled the people around him, choking off their sophisticated musings to stare at him. He held up a hand in apology and they turned back to what they were saying, while he rounded out his bout of laughter with a cough.

Smiling, with her arms crossed, he knew Sarah was glad to make him laugh but also a little embarrassed. Though she was very funny at times, she didn’t like drawing a lot of attention to herself.

His eyes watering, Tom brushed a tear away with his knuckle and said, “We can’t have that now, can we?” and smiled at Sarah. He felt like she was back to her old self, but somehow he knew it wouldn’t last.

From behind him, Tom heard his name being called. It was Edwin.

“Will you come here for a moment?” Edwin beckoned Tom over with his hand, his eyebrows raised as if to say it was not a question but an order.

Tom nodded once, even though the last thing he wanted to do was step away from Sarah's side. He felt good beside her and wanted that to last. There had been so little of that feeling over the last few days. The tense air he tasted around Sarah, the fragility she tried to hide, had been hard to swallow.

"Will you be okay over here?" he asked, grabbing her hands again and squeezing three times.

Her eyes swept along the food on the table and then came back to his. She smiled and said, "Oh, I'll be fine. I'm just hoping I'll save some for everyone else."

"I'll be back in just a minute," he said, hoping it could be true.

"I understand. You're working." She squeezed his hands back four times, as if to say "I love you, too," and then let go.

When Tom reached Edwin's side, he looked over and saw Sarah eyeing the table again, but not moving towards it, hugging her elbows to her stomach.

"Tom," said Edwin. "I would like you to meet Mrs. Gould." Before Tom could speak, Edwin continued, as was his habit. "Mrs. Gould is one of the reasons why we have to many young stars of the art world showing here tonight."

There were a few other ladies and gentleman clustered close by, which Edwin failed to mention, but that only gave Tom more reason to focus solely on the woman he'd met outside. Her hair, more auburn than ginger, curved around her face pleasantly, which was younger than it had looked in front of the building under the harsh, industrial lights that leaned over the entrance.

“Tom,” she said, letting his name roll out of her mouth like something delicious, though completely foreign—like she was trying to place where she’d heard that name.

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Gould,” he said, a little surprised that she didn’t remember him.

But then she winked as she said, “Call me Nancy.” It looked as if it took effort for her to focus her attention back to Edwin, who was praising her effusively to the rest of the loose circle.

Though he also wanted to keep looking at this lady, he felt he should turn and check on Sarah. Scanning the crowd for her hair or the brilliant blue of her dress, the one that fit her like coffee in a mug, he saw her beside Benny with a distressed look on her face. She was speaking to him, though her eyes flicked around the room, her shoulders squared.

“Excuse me for a minute,” said Tom.

“Sure,” sighed Nancy.

“Whatever for?” asked Edwin, his eyebrows kissing what should have been his hairline.

Under his breath, Tom grumbled, “Benny’s bugging my girlfriend,” as he stalked back to Sarah through the buzzing crowd.

Benny’s eyes, set back in his meaty face, were admiring Sarah’s curves while she inched away from him, almost imperceptibly. A look of relief ironed out her features when she finally saw Tom.

“Is everything okay over here?” asked Tom, anger cutting the words out of his mouth.

Benny took a step closer to Sarah just as she slid closer to Tom.

“I saw her first, Sounder.”

Ignoring that, Tom said, “I see you’ve met my girlfriend, Benny.”

“Girlfriend?” He sounded surprised, but impressed. “Well, then,” he said. “My apologies.” With a bow, which he used more to stare at Sarah’s breasts than in sincere contrition, Benny doubled himself over for a brief moment.

Tom wanted to kick his head so hard he did a back flip, so hard it would fly off his shoulders. The rage he felt was stronger than when he’d attacked that tree. Now he had someone he truly hated to focus it on.

“You better get out of my face,” said Tom, “Before I punch yours through your head and out the back.”

“Geez,” said Benny. “No need to take it so rough. I only asked if she wanted some company later this evening.”

At that, Tom’s blood began to boil, his molecules bounce.

“Tom, I’m fine really.” She tried to grab his arm, to pull him back.

But before Tom could even notice what he was doing, he’d taken his clenched fist and slammed it into Benny’s squishy jaw.

Benny crumpled to the floor, landing on his side. Quickly rolling himself onto his hands and knees, he bellowed, “Goddamn it, Tom! Why the fuck did you hit me?” He looked more befuddled than ready to fight back.

“Tom!” Sarah had shouted.

The room was quiet.

Suddenly, Edwin was by his side. “Tom, I think you should go home *now*.”

And then Sarah was pulling at his arms, trying to shove him backwards with all her might though he was almost a head taller than her. He wanted to wrap himself around her, so no one else could see her, could ever touch her again.

Benny was sitting on his heels, rubbing his jaw, Edwin flitting around him shouting for ice or a wet towel when Tom finally began to pace backwards. When he turned around, Sarah pulling him along through the crowd as he had done to her only half an hour before, he caught Nancy’s brown eyes sparkling at him. He couldn’t say why but they made him relax—made him feel like he’d done right instead of wrong, like he hadn’t just made an ass of himself, but had been a real man, worthy of her admiration.

Outside in the cold, his thoughts finally began to shake back into place. Sarah hadn’t said a word.

“Did he hurt you?” asked Tom, which he realized should have been the first thing he did when he chose instead to punch the lights out of Benny.

“No! He didn’t,” she yelled.

“You’re mad at me.”

“How can you be so pigheaded?” she asked, yanking him to a stop, her hand holding his as tightly as she ever had.

“Pigheaded? Really?” he asked, wanting to laugh.

"I meant what I said. Do you realize you might not have a job tomorrow?"

Tom paused to think about that, but it hadn't occurred to him. "Edwin likes me better than Benny any day of the week."

"I don't know if you were there, but *you* assaulted *Benny*."

At that word, the one that had been stabbing through him for the last few days, the word that made him shiver even in a hot shower, the word tucked so sweetly in between her emphasis, Tom felt a queasy rush spread through his stomach.

Sarah must have seen the pain he felt wind up his face. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Did you hurt your hand?"

And then she was kissing his knuckles, the same knuckles he'd split on the bark of the tree a few blocks down from the hospital. The thoughts never stopped, they were everywhere he turned. Sarah was raped and she'd never be the same to him. She held his limp fist to her cheek, so warm and flushed like an ember that's strayed from its home in the fire.

No, he told *himself*, *I'll never stop loving her*. He willed himself to believe it. And like that, he was back to normal.

"Sarah, I'm so sorry for embarrassing you tonight."

They were under a lamppost, just a block away from their apartment. Cold air swirled around them and shrugged away to caress others, to rip the last remaining leaves from the thinning trees. The wide avenue was nearly empty of people, though a few strode past them, hugging their coats tighter, oblivious.

“You don’t have to apologize to me. I know you were only trying to protect me. But, honestly, Tom, that was a sincere overreaction.” The words shivered out of her mouth.

Not wanting to concede the point or talk about it further, Tom chose instead to say, “Let’s get you home.”

Sarah nodded, giving in for the time being, and let him put his arm around her shoulders as they hurried the rest of the way home.

That night as they lay in bed, the sounds outside of their little room were magnified by their silence. Through the window, Tom heard the dim shrieks of a car alarm going off down the street and the soft, muddled sound of a television, humming on the other side of their bedroom wall. With the lights off, Tom had no idea if Sarah was still awake, waiting for him like he was waiting for her; to speak, to move, to sigh, to let him know she wanted him too.

He decided to go for it. Remembering how good it felt to rip his fist through Benny’s face, he felt like he’d earned her touch. In Tom’s opinion, it had been too long since they’d had sex. Of course, he wanted to wait until she was ready, but tonight, with the lingering traces of adrenaline speeding his breath and urging his fingers to stroke her skin, he couldn’t help it.

At first, he sought the warmth of her body with his hand. When he found her, though only a few inches away, it seemed as if she lay much farther off. She accepted his hand on her hip, let her heat melt through his bones and into his blood until his

hand blazed. Nancy's face flickered in his mind, almost too fast for him to realize it wasn't his girlfriend he was thinking of.

So slowly, like the trickle of a bead of sweat, he slid his hand up Sarah's stomach and pulled himself closer to her.

"Tom," she said, sounding very awake.

"What is it?" His words were muffled against her back, his lips moving, his hot breath reaching through her shirt to her skin.

"Not tonight." She wriggled away from him, almost squishing herself against the wall beside their bed.

"Please," he begged, scooting behind her to fill in the gap she left between their bodies.

"No."

"Please, baby. I know it's soon, but..."

"If you love me then you'll stop."

Tom propped himself up on his elbow, but kept his right hand on her side, feeling for her ribs. He knew she couldn't resist him when his fingers danced lightly across them. "I'm not going to hurt you, Sarah."

She knocked his hand away with her elbow and sat up too, backing against the wall as if he was intending to pounce on her. Through the vertical gleam between the curtains of their window he saw her panicked face. He reached out to stroke her jaw, to calm her but she flinched back further.

Looking resolved, she bit her bottom lip for just a moment before she said, “I’m still sore from the last man that entered me.” Her words were cold, matter of fact.

All of the desire he felt vanished. She must have known exactly what to say to snatch it away from him and guarantee it wouldn’t come back any time soon. Though he ached for Sarah’s pain, he couldn’t help feeling rejected, unwanted, like less than a man.

That night he slept on the couch, in turns seething and depressed, like the racking heat and bitter cold of a rising fever. He was angry at the circumstances beyond his control and sad for the same.

Excitement Is A Tricky Beast

When he cracked his eyes open in the morning, an unusually bright room rushed in to fill his vision. He'd been having a good dream. Something about his mother, but he couldn't remember. It had been a few years since she died. The memory sobered him, allowed him to recall why he was sleeping on their old sofa, the leather splitting apart from the padding underneath.

Their bedroom door was still closed when he staggered to the bathroom. A splash of cold water to his face brought on the full torrent in his mind of what he did last night. Not only did he punch the daylights out of Benny, his co-worker, but he had practically attacked Sarah. He couldn't quite recall why he was so mad about it the night before, what made him stalk away like a rebuked child.

The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her.

He checked his cell phone—there was a missed call from Edwin.

Great, he thought. Here it comes.

He dialed the number for his voicemail, waded through the bland voice telling him he had two messages, and sat down with a cup of coffee to listen. He sunk into their couch with a pleasing whoosh of air.

Tom cringed at the sound of Edwin's voice but was startled to realize that Edwin didn't sound mad.

"Tom, this is Edwin," he had spoken calmly. "You're a bloody buffoon, but I have a surprise for you..."

Intrigued, Tom leaned forward, away from any distractions, and willed it to be something really good, like Benny had a broken jaw and was moving to Iceland—far, far away from him and Sarah.

"I should be firing you right now, but I'm going to give you a second chance. While I was looking around the back room for an icepack or a rag for Benny's face, you know I don't know where these things are..." prattled Edwin.

"Get to the point," Tom groaned.

The message continued, "Anyways, when I was in the back room I heard someone behind me and wouldn't you know, it was Nancy Gould. She saw that painting I'd hung up, you know, the one with the outline of your girl's face in the bold orange and blue? Anyway, she liked it and didn't sound surprised that you'd painted it. She asked if she could take a picture! Can you believe it?"

Tom definitely could not believe his good fortune. Having an art manager discover his painting like that! Those kinds of things hardly ever happened. Before the message even ended, Tom wanted to jump up and down. That was his dream—to show his art to the world—and somehow, without even meaning to, he'd taken his first step in the right direction in seven months.

“I gave her your number, hope you don’t mind. Be on time tomorrow, I’m going to have a little chat with both you *and* Benny. See you then,” finished Edwin, as the line clicked off.

Tom deleted the message with a groan. So, he would have to see Benny again. He thought that would be the worst thing he’d have to face this morning, but he realized he had to apologize to Sarah as well. He sunk back against the cushions, his lucky break briefly forgotten in the light of his remembered troubles.

The next message started out with just a beat too long of silence. Then a soft voice sliced into it, like milk pouring into a glass or the sound a hand makes as it glides down the blank front of stretched canvas.

“Hello, Tom,” she breathed. “It’s Nancy—we met last night...twice.”

There was the hint of a smile in her voice as she spoke.

“I have a proposition for you. Meet me for lunch at this café I know near the gallery, on Washington and Fifth. I’ll be there at noon. Bring sketches, if you have any.”

And like that, her voice was gone. Tom felt a little overwhelmed at the turn the morning had taken before he’d had a cup of coffee, before he’d seen Sarah, looked into her eyes and begged her to forgive him.

Quickly, he began to mentally rifle through some of the images he’d sketched recently. Most of them fit into a single 11 x 14 sketch pad; he hadn’t had a lot of time to focus on his art. But, now that didn’t matter. If he could convince Nancy—the familiarity of her name in his thoughts was pleasing—to give him a shot at being in a

show then he wouldn't have to work at the gallery forty hours a week any longer, didn't have to put up with Edwin's griping or Benny's coarseness ringing in his head all day.

He could spend more time with Sarah, at home, where he could watch her and make sure she couldn't get herself into anymore trouble.

Instead of bounding into their bedroom, jumping on the bed and waking Sarah up with his excited kisses, which is what he wanted to do, he cracked the door open and peeked in. She was still sleeping. In the center of the bed, surrounded by the blankets she'd kicked off and tried to pull back over her in her sleep, one of the pillows knocked to the floor, Sarah lay breathing quietly. Looking so peaceful, rested, more vulnerable than a sleeping goddess, Tom sat on the bed beside her.

The dip in it he made bent her face closer to him on her pillow. He studied its angles, its lines. *Perfect*, he thought. *Absolutely perfect*.

There was a slight flush in her cheeks and her eyelids trembled at some image in her mind. Tom couldn't resist staring at her body, wanting to touch it again with almost as much force as he had the night before. He held back, however, and only allowed himself the pleasure of looking.

The bruise on her chest had mellowed into a mottled purple and yellow, like a battered pear, and had shrunk to the size of a golf ball. The scratches on her arms had faded to pink, but then his eyes caught something else, something he hadn't seen before. There, peeking out of her wrinkled silk shorts, the ones she wore when she knew she'd be sleeping in the next morning, were disturbingly crimson, angry cuts. Like the horizontal slats under the iron lines of railroad tracks, they ran up her inner thigh,

further than he could see. Before he could stop himself, his outstretched finger was tracing the outside of one long, red row up, up, up until he couldn't see it any longer. He lifted the edge of her shorts, peeking under them with horror at what he'd found, at what she'd tried to hide.

Sarah jerked awake under his touch and screamed. She jumped backwards on the bed, away from him, from the man she loved, her eyes wild, accusing.

"Sarah, it's just me." His hand hung in the air where her leg had been, guilty.

Shaking her head, her hands gripped her chest as if she struggled to keep her heart from bursting out. Scrambling backwards, her shoulders bumped against the wall as they had the night before.

"Please," she shouted. "Don't scare me like that ever again!"

"I'm sorry!" said Tom. "I didn't mean to..."

Tom saw Sarah's eyes flick down to her thighs, widen at the sight of her red cuts exposed, and she jerked a nearby blanket over her legs.

"I saw them, Sarah," was all he could manage to say. He wanted to look away, but forced himself not to. "They aren't fading like the ones on your arms, like the bruise on your chest. I know you're hurting yourself." His hands clenched into fists at his side and he slowly leaned back from her to kneel back on the bed, crossing his ankles to appear as open and calm as he could.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, each word felt hurled at him, like little stones or snow balls.

Startled by her vehemence, he gaped, “What? They’re plain as day right there on your thigh.” He reached forward again but she slapped his hand away with her own.

Trying to hold back his shock and terror, he said, “I’m just trying to help you.”

Her face softened for a brief moment—he thought it wouldn’t hold, but it looked as if she struggled to keep it that way.

“I know,” she said, though she still clutched the blanket close to her body, clinging fiercely to her secret.

“Can we talk about it?” he asked.

She shook her head. “It’s my body, so it’s my business,” she said, a little too harshly.

“But, you belong to *me*,” he reasoned, recalling an argument they’d had in the first year of their relationship. That one had ended on a very good note; this one seemed headed for disaster.

“No, I don’t,” she spat.

Realizing he wasn’t going to win any battles at 8 o’clock in the morning, he settled for a draw. “Look,” he said. “I’m going to go to work—”

She perked up at that.

“Yes, I still have a job,” he said, in answer to her surprise. “Like I said, I’m going to go to work and when I come home we’re going to talk about this. And, together, we’re going to call a counselor or a therapist or whoever and we’re going to work this out.”

Opening her mouth to protest him, to slink away from fixing this new problem, Tom held up a hand to quiet her.

“Save your arguments for when I get back. Can I kiss you now?” he asked.

The fear never leaving her face, Sarah nodded.

“Alright, that’s a good start,” said Tom as he crawled forward to plant a kiss on her forehead. “I love you.” He said this to her eyes.

They blinked, began to water, but with a tilt of her chin up to the ceiling the tears dammed up for a little while longer.

Looking closely at her face, he saw a delicate crease down the side of her cheek from her pillow. He stroked it and felt her shudder.

Walking to work like it was any other day was impossible. He couldn’t stop thinking about how startled and sad Sarah looked, how, pained and repulsed, her body had twisted away from him. He should be jubilant this morning, on his way to the job he still had, and later, to have a lunch date with his destiny. But he couldn’t shake the feeling that somehow, overnight, he and Sarah had been demagnetized and what had pulled him to her and her to him over and over again through the years was suddenly gone. Or, he wondered, perhaps the polarity had been reversed and, where once he had been unable to escape the attraction, the force of her draw, now he was repelled. By her.

No, no, no, he thought, wishing he could stop it, take it back. He wished he hadn’t been curious earlier that morning, eager to follow her scratches, to shed light on her dark secret. He wished none of this had happened at all—that he could have his old Sarah back.

But more than anything else he was afraid. *What if she'll never be the same?* he asked himself. *What if I can't fix her?*

At the gallery, Edwin was all smiles when Tom told him about the call from Nancy.

"Isn't Mrs. Gould delightful?" beamed Edwin.

For a second Tom wondered if there was a Mr. Gould, before he shamed himself into thinking about something else. One attempt at mediation between Benny and Tom, which ended with the two of them shaking hands, if not peaceably then at least calmly, and a few more hours that passed slower than a kidney stone, Edwin rushed Tom out the door to meet up with her.

"Don't hurry back," said Edwin. He looked as if he was trying to wink.

Benny hung his head, his jaw purple and swollen. "Good luck," he mumbled.

Tom wanted to clap him on the shoulder and apologize for hitting him, he felt so good, so joyous, but dashed out the door instead.

In her message, Nancy had mentioned a café on the corner of Washington and Fifth. Tom realized she meant The Iron Horse Café—the favorite he shared with Sarah. Wondering if Nancy had ever been there when he was, he shuffled through his memories of the place, looking for the auburn shine of her hair, the faded freckles that peeked out from under her makeup. He couldn't reconcile her, with her confidence and charisma, with a dusty little place like the Iron Horse.

She was already there when he opened the door, sitting on that same couch by the frosted windows. A gust of wind flung his brown hair over his eyes, obscuring her

from his view. When he combed the locks back with his cold fingers, he saw she was smiling at him.

In that moment, when she stood up and he caught the curve of her breasts beneath a red and gold scarf, the delicate sigh of her thighs as they parted and straightened to bear her towards him, he wanted to hold her in his arms. Three words shot threw him, splitting him apart: *I want her*.

Dazed by the heat that crept into his blood, that excited him, he realized he should have turned and run away. He should have sprinted home to Sarah, crawled into bed or into the shower with her and never let go. He should have run to her like he had twice now—though, not to save her this time, but himself. Maybe it was the feeling of a lost cause. Maybe it was the thrill and pleasure of this new, poised, self-assured woman. But he took her hand, shook it, and sat down across from her and smiled, enchanted.
