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Come Tomorrow

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COME TOMORROW

A Collection of Short Stories

By

Annemarie C. Messier

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Master of Arts

in

The Department of English

School of Graduate Studies

Rhode Island College

2009

THESIS APPROVAL SHEET

COME TOMORROW

A Thesis Presented

by

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Foo Foo

I asked April out the day we met, four months before I killed her pet rabbit. We met at a party and ended up sneaking out to walk around Boston, looking for a diner at 6 a.m. She was easy to talk to, and I was spilling details on my break-up with Liz—even though ex-girlfriends are at the top of the “what not to mention to girls you’re trying to pick up” list. April listened and nodded in all the right places, letting me get it all out over pancakes. She was single, designed book covers for McGraw, and had her own apartment. She tucked her hair behind her ear a lot. I liked her hair. I liked her ear, too.

I don’t know what she saw in me, but by the time we finished our breakfast it was time for lunch. We only stopped talking when her cell rang and she realized she was late meeting a friend. We got up to pay the tab and I asked her out to dinner that night. She said

that would be great and smiled up at me with great teeth, writing out the directions with a fat cartoon character pen. Cartoon pens! She was the polar opposite of Liz. Then she asked if I liked rabbits.

“Like, real rabbits?” I asked stupidly. Winnie the Pooh, that’s the fat bastard on the pen she’d used. I mentally pictured April’s bed, covered with stuffed animals. Was she into that rabbit from Winnie the Pooh? Hell, after what I’d been through with Liz, April could own every product Disney made and I’d still want to grab dinner with her.

“Of course a real rabbit!” she laughed. “My pet bunny is named Foo Foo. I hope you’ll meet him someday.”

“Yeah! Sure. Hey, I can meet him tonight. When I pick you up.”

April’s smile fell. I felt like there was suddenly a screen between us. “Well, maybe tonight is too soon,” she said, then rushed us out of the diner. I shrugged, moving along, her hand warm on my back as I folded her directions and put them in my pocket. Outside the door she looked up sweetly. “So I’ll see you at seven?”

“Seven it is,” I said, grinning like an idiot. She gave me a quick little hug on the street. She smelled great, like cookies, and I liked how her boobs squashed against my stomach. Then April headed toward her friend’s place and I wandered around a few streets, trying to remember where I’d parked the night before. I saw the orange ticket on the dash before I recognized my car.

That night, I got a little lost but finally found April’s triple-decker. When I buzzed for #2 she came right to the door.

“Hi!” she said, looking great in a little green dress. I felt like a jackass in my jeans and polo. “Ready to go?”

“Sure,” I said. “You don’t want to show me your rabbit first?” Again something odd crossed her face.

“No, he’s sleeping right now,” she said, and before I could ask anything else she had my arm and we were walking to my car. She had me talking again, and she was talking too, and before I knew it we were in the middle of dinner. Then a movie, then drinks, then laughter, then kissing. When I dropped her off it was 2 a.m. and I believed her when she said it was too late to come in.

April’s job had her reading textbooks and designing covers for them. She always lugged at least two or three galley proofs in her bag. Me, I’m a hands-on guy. I’m a facilities assistant for the Boston YMCA. My father was pissed about me wasting money on a biology degree to mop floors and paint walls, but it made me happy, and April loved the Y. She’d drill me on events we had going on, then volunteer us for stuff like chaperoning dances or organizing talent shows. By July, I was seeing April at least three nights a week plus weekends, and things were great—except I still hadn’t been in her apartment. It was hard not to think that was weird, that we always hung out at my place when my brother wasn’t there, or met downtown, but she seemed to be avoiding something. And she was so easygoing and perfect about everything else that not meeting her stupid rabbit was gnawing at me. I finally brought it up one night over dinner. “April,” I said, and I took her hand and leaned in. “I think it’s time for me to meet your rabbit.”

“Oh, Greg,” she said, and I thought she’d say no. But then she grinned and squealed like I’d just won the lottery, or maybe proposed. “Yes, YES, you can meet Foo Foo!”

I’d forgotten its name was Foo Foo. It made me think of the Foo Fighters. Guess I had bands on my mind ‘cause Liz had played bass in a chick band, the Mulling Vulvas. Or as I’d secretly thought of them, the Angry Vaginas.

April was still bouncing around. “Oh, Greg. I’m *so* glad you want to meet him. He’ll *love* you!” She shoved away her plate—more room to talk about Foo Foo. “I named him for the song. You know that song you’d sing as a kid about Little Bunny Foo Foo?”

She looked up at me with those big brown eyes, but I had no idea what she was talking about. So she freaking burst into song:

*Little Bunny Foo Foo,
Hopping through the forest
Scooping up the field mice
And boppin' 'em on the head*

A couple at the next table looked up when she started singing. The guy’s mouth dropped open and hung there. The girl was laughing so hard she dropped her fork.

“Uh, no. Sorry. Never heard that one,” I told April, putting my hand back over hers before she could go on. Thank God the waiter brought our dessert then. April didn’t try to sing again, but she did get up to pick up the girl’s fork for her, then fed me half her tiramisu. With a nice girl like this, what’s a little singing?

Later, at April's place, I followed her upstairs for the first time. Her apartment smelled like my grandmother's house, like three kinds of food cooking at once. She asked me to wait in the living room while she got Foo Foo. I looked at all the textbooks for April's job. Besides the bookshelves, the room was bare. A TV was mounted high in the corner, maybe so the rabbit wouldn't chew through its cords.

But the walls were a different story. They were covered in drawings of faces and fluffy bunny tails, in about a hundred different frames. They were all of a white rabbit. They were good, professional even, and I knew they were April's. So this was what she was afraid of me finding out: obsessive artwork. Maybe she wasn't so different from Liz after all...Except these were all cute. Harmless.

I was looking at a close-up of a bunny foot when April carried in a white rabbit and dumped it in my arms. "And here he is!" she cooed. "Here's my Foo Foo!" I struggled to hold the thing. It had to be two feet long, one of those freaky albino ones with pink eyes. Its front paws scrabbled on my shirt and its huge feet dug into my jeans for traction. They thumped my thighs, and it was like being kicked by a tiny pony. Foo Foo was all claws, and I started worrying it would shred my clothes right off my skin.

"He's a little nervous, aren't you, Foo?" April asked, nuzzling his demonic face as I tried to get him under control. "Here, bunny honey, say hi to Greg." I don't know how the rabbit was supposed to do that. Besides him being, you know, *a rabbit*, I had one arm under his butt and my other arm pinned his front legs against my chest so he'd knock off the clawing. April's hair was a little messed up and she had white hairs all over her dress. I must have been covered in them, too. But I didn't worry about that long because the fucker

let loose all these warm little round balls of shit all over my arm and stomach. They immediately squished into my shirt like gum. Some greeting. I dropped the rabbit like it was on fire and said some pretty unholy things. April was quick to put the rabbit back in her room and bring me a wet towel for my shirt, all apologies, but I got the feeling I messed up big.

She was still fussing over my polo as she led me to the door, saying she'd dry clean it for me, but she seemed distracted, and for once she didn't kiss me goodnight. I felt like the rabbit's little pink eyes were watching me through the walls. Back at home, I fell asleep dreaming of April, naked and smiling beneath me as we screwed on a white fur rug.

Somehow April and I survived the first Foo Foo meeting, then a few more after that, and some great nights spent at my place. When I did see the rabbit at April's I still didn't like it, but I put on a good show. I must have been a great actor because April surprised me one night over pints at Doyle's by suggesting I move in. I didn't even think about Foo Foo before saying yes. I hated living with my brother, and I really liked April. Liz and I'd slept over each other's place in college, but that was different. It'd be nice, coming home to April. Even if it was obvious she lived for that foul albino rabbit.

"You sure?" I blurted out, then went for the gold. "Uh, sure Foo Foo won't mind that?"

She looked psyched that I'd thought of Foo. "I was worried at first. But you've met him a few times now, and you get along so well. And you and *I* get along so well..." She scooted closer and nuzzled against my side, but I was thinking about living with that rabbit.

He hadn't shit on me again, but he always seemed to be thinking about it. April was always reading those books or designing, and Foo was the only thing at her place for me to play with. I guess he wasn't so bad. His fur was soft, better than a cat's. But he had a pretty low tolerance for letting me touch him. After a few pats he'd start charging at me and try to nip my wrist, and I'd back off. Still, I'd known dogs like that. April's place was nice, and closer to the Y than mine. And oh yeah, had *April* in it. How hard could living with a rabbit be?

I moved in while April was at work, and I put Foo's cage in the hall so I could fit my bureau in the bedroom. I figured it would give me and Foo privacy from each other. When April got home she squealed to see me but then got quiet when she saw Foo's cage. She sat on the bed, stroking him, and said, so quiet that I had to bend down to hear her, that she didn't like Foo being "all by himself" in the back hall. I hated seeing April look sad, so I said yeah, we'd find somewhere else for my bureau. I did make her put some of the rabbit drawings in boxes, though. I didn't want to look at fluffy bunny tails and ears on every wall, so we settled on every *other* wall. If I had to look at Foo's beady red eyes staring at me in the middle of the night, I had to have one small victory. It was still tough in the bedroom, though. April couldn't mask the smell of Foo's cedar shavings or the noise of him kicking around the metal cage or drinking water. I swear he stayed up all night, clattering around and sucking on that metal straw thing, just to piss me off. But I put up with it for April.

So fast forward to four days ago, when April had to leave for a book conference in California. She didn't like being away from Foo that long. I'd worked late at the Y the night

before fixing a leak in the locker room and I was still in bed as she moved around the room packing. She'd lean over me to grab a bra or a sock or something but otherwise I felt invisible. I wondered why she didn't say she'd miss *me* while she was gone. Nothing I said was cheering her up. Yet whenever Foo Foo hopped around her feet, trying to trip her, she'd laugh at him and scoop him up to nuzzle him. What did he have that I didn't? Oh yeah: shit. As is his MO, he left a trail of little brown pellets on the floor, and of course April had to be at Logan in 30 minutes.

“Do you mind cleaning these up, sweetie?” she asked me and leaned over the bed to kiss my nose. She smelled great, but she had a bunch of white hairs on her shirt.

“I guess not,” I muttered, swiping at the hairs, and she kissed me again.

“I love you, Greg,” she beamed. “I'll get you a present in California.” She caught sight of the rabbit again and her voice went up a notch. “And Foo Foo loves you too, don't you, bunny honey?” The look Foo was giving me was definitely *not* love. And I doubt my face was exactly showering him with affection, either. But April liked thinking Foo and I got along when she wasn't around, and neither of us bothered correcting her.

Over the last few months with April, I've been thinking more of Liz. Not that I'd want her back or anything—I'm not a total idiot. It's just I started feeling like April and Liz weren't that different. Liz had been more of the psychotically fucked-up variety, but April had a crazy all to herself.

Liz was tough and wiry. She would dye her hair different colors and then buzz-cut it all off when she got sick of it. Worse, she made sculptures out of used tampons. Blood

excited her. She thought it was beautiful. And she'd do other stuff like tell people to call her Moffit one day and Janice the next, or fling junk mail or dirty clothes around her apartment, or mine. The breaking point was when she screamed in a crowded bar that I'd given her herpes (I hadn't). I kept crawling back because when she wasn't psychotic she was the most interesting person I ever knew. She called her art "bringing nightmares to life." She wasn't afraid to really live, and she found beauty in the most fucked-up places and people and things. That's what we fought most about, that she couldn't stand the idea that nothing was beautiful to me. Who cares about beauty, though? My life was fine, with or without it. I liked to do stuff with my hands, but when Liz let me use her clay or her pottery wheel, everything I sculpted or threw fell apart. I just wasn't an artist.

A couple weeks before meeting April, I finally had the guts to break up with Liz. It happened the night Liz yelled out the herpes thing. I told Liz it'd been great, and I might even love her, but her craziness was getting old. I bet she knew that too, but it didn't make her reaction any less spectacular. She broke every one of my Pink Floyd records before I wrestled her to the ground, every fucking one. When I finally let her up, she cut her wrist with one of the jagged pieces of record. I dove at her again, thinking she was trying to kill herself, but she was laughing. She pushed over a picture of the two of us, the one of us drunk and grinning after one of her concerts. Then she ripped it out of the frame and dripped the blood from her wrist all over our faces. "This is what I think of your love," she sneered, then stood up and walked away. She stopped at the door and stared at me, not caring that she was leaving a trail of red drops behind her. "And I pity you, Greg, because you're still going to sit there and tell me this isn't beautiful." Fucked *up*.

I know how I must sound now that I've given you so many details, but I swear to God I had no idea what would happen to Foo that day. I mean, who could?

When April left to catch her plane, I finally pulled myself out of bed to look for coffee. Foo tripped me and I nearly face-planted into the counter. I forgot he was running around. I also forgot about the trail of shit April asked me to clean up, and I realized some pellets were stuck to the ball of my foot. They were dry and flicked right off when I shook my leg, but it was still disgusting. I turned and Foo was sitting by the bed on one of April's slippers. April always thinks it's cute when he sits on her slippers. She says he's trying to wear his mommy's shoes. (Yeah, that's right, she calls herself Mommy around the rabbit. She also calls me Daddy when she talks to Foo, but he and I both know I'm not his daddy.) So he was sitting on these big floppy blue Cookie Monster things that drag dust balls all over. He was looking at me, and it hit me I was stuck with those pink beady eyes for four whole days. I didn't want to see them.

"Hey, Foo," I coaxed. "Wanna go out?" He looked at me suspiciously. When April asks this question he always races for the door like a dog, but he didn't move for me. I didn't want to pick him up in case he had any more stockpiles of shit, so I tried April's way.

"Duzzy bunny wanna go outy?" I asked in April's singsong voice. Foo didn't want to react but couldn't help himself. He'd been conditioned for this crap. He leaped off the slippers and hopped over to me. He's actually kind of cute when he hops.

I couldn't stop my verbal diarrhea: "He does! Bunny does wanna go outy!" Jesus, if Liz could see me. I opened the back hall door and headed downstairs. Foo thumped down behind me, a step at a time. When we got to the back door he looked at me suspiciously

again, but he loved going out. The fluffy bastard lived to dig up my grass seed. I held the door and he hopped out and down both steps. Our yard wasn't huge, but it had a chain-link fence, so I figured kids and dogs couldn't bother him. Foo hopped over to some weeds and started eating, and I went back inside. Although the shit on my foot hadn't left any residue, I couldn't wait to shower.

It was a couple hours later when I caught sight of Foo's water dish and remembered him. *Shit*. He wasn't used to being outside without April watching him.

I stepped out the back door and straight into a cloud of dandelion seeds. What in Christ were they doing in the air in fall? I also stepped in something squishy and looked down to see reddish-colored goo. Other slimy pieces dotted the lawn. I bent over to inspect it and jumped back. It was a tiny kidney, flattened by my Nikes. Then I heard a screech.

I looked up and there was a hawk above the back door. Her beak was bigger than my nose, and her talons were bigger than my fingers. As I watched, there was a little "splat" and another organ landed on the stoop. There were more seeds flying around in the wind, too, until it hit me that they weren't dandelion seeds. It was fur, fucking fur and body parts, landing all around me. It was carnage. It was gore. It was Liz's wet dream.

I don't know why I looked for Foo. What else would the hawk be eating? But at the thought of April, I sprinted for the side yard, which is really an alley where we keep our trash and recycling bins. I was stopped by something floating down to me, real slow, like a feather. It was a round, white thatch of fur, and without thinking I caught it like a tiny baseball and stared at it in my hand. It was Foo's little rabbit tail. I turned it over and over,

looking for blood or tendons or something, but it was in perfect condition. It's like it was never really attached at all. I flung it in disgust and it floated lazily away.

The hawk ignored me as she ate. Hunt, kill, eat—that's all predators care about. The only real glimpse I got of Foo was one lone, white leg sticking up a little when the hawk shifted position, getting more gore on my stoop. When she finally took off, she left a "fuck you" present: a runny pile of shit, white as Foo, right on the stoop. It was the biggest plop of bird crap I've ever seen, like someone spilled a quart of ceiling paint from a ladder. What is it with creatures shitting at me?

It took me two hours to clean up the pieces of Foo and scrub the steps. I even borrowed a neighbor's ladder and climbed to the roof, expecting a carcass like Thanksgiving turkey, but there wasn't much there. Foo's little pink paw pads dotted the bottom of his uneaten foot, and I felt bad for him. He probably didn't know what hit him when the hawk got him. I wouldn't have. Except for that foot, the tail I'd caught was the only intact piece of Foo. I never saw his ears and I still wonder what happened to them. They didn't seem like something the hawk would have eaten, but who really knows. I returned the ladder and high-tailed it to a pet store, where they had rows of Foos in cages. I couldn't look at those accusing pink eyes, so I just grabbed one rabbit at random, and it promptly kicked my ribs. Just like old times.

The 3-1/2 days before April came home were the longest days of my life. I called in sick so I could get the new rabbit used to its cage and stuff. By Sunday it was sitting around in April's Cookie Monster slippers like Foo used to do, but my heart still pounded whenever

I looked at the clock. There was no way, no fucking way, April wouldn't realize what I'd done the second she walked in that door. Jesus, she'd drawn about a thousand pictures of him and talked about Foo more than anyone had ever talked about a pet, or even a kid. I'd never met a girl so obsessed, except Liz. Foo Foo was April's life. If she was Liz, I could imagine broken dishes, broken CDs, maybe blood, and a hell of a fight. With April, well...I had no idea what she'd do when she found out. I'd never seen her mad.

She was supposed to get in at 9:30 but her flight was delayed until midnight. When I met her at the door, smelling of guilt and Polo, all she wanted to do was crash. I watched every move she made, but she only blew Fake Foo a kiss before collapsing. She didn't even touch him! She was asleep in seconds, and I crawled in next to her and lay on my back. I watched every damn minute tick by until dawn, sweating about Fake Foo. I tried to imagine what April would do when she saw the rabbit. I pictured her kicking me out. I pictured her kicking me in the balls, *then* kicking me out. I pictured her breaking "Animals," the only one of my Pink Floyd records I've replaced since Liz's tantrum, and I tried to picture April slicing her wrist with it but the image wouldn't come. When I finally dozed off, I dreamed of Liz, flying around Boston with hawk wings, blood on her beak. And me chasing after her.

"I keep forgetting my lips are tasty."

"Wha'?" I ask, jerking awake. I roll over and see April watching me. Her arm is tan and lazy as she swipes some hair out of her eye. I look at the clock. It's 7:43 a.m.

“I have this new lip gloss from the trip. Candy apple flavor. I put it on when I got up to pee awhile ago.”

“Yeah? Candy apple?” I croak. My throat is sandpaper. I slide closer. “Can I try it?” She laughs as I find her mouth and start kissing. She hasn’t brushed her teeth, but neither have I. Our teeth knock against each other with a little clink as we dig in. I love it when she flicks her little tongue around mine, teasing. The lip gloss *is* tasty. Not really candy apple, more like a Jolly Rancher, but it’s pure sugar. I suck on her lower lip like a bottle. I’m wide awake now, even snapped to attention if you know what I mean. We’d been apart for four days and crashed last night without so much as a kiss. She’s snaking her arm toward my bicep. She loves to wrap her fingers and thumb around it as I flex, and I love it too. My hand is sliding down her back toward my favorite spot, that little flat, peach-fuzz triangle just above her butt crack. I love to just hold my palm there and feel her skin.

Then she ruins everything by looking over at the cage and the Fake Foo in it. “So how is Mommy’s Foo Foo?” Everything comes crashing back to me and I tense up. Or most of me does. What doesn’t tense goes soft.

I think I’m having a heart attack as she flings off the covers and gets out of bed. My chest thumps so hard it hurts, and I can’t get up. The cage is ten feet away, and as April moves I’m praying to God for the first time in years. *Please think that’s Foo. Please think that’s Foo.* Prayers won’t work now, any more than they worked when I hadn’t studied for math tests, but I can’t help myself. I watch as April opens the cage and Fake Foo huddles in the corner. She’s reaching in, making these burbling noises, and I’m ready to pass out. All I

can do is watch the rabbit, my mind recalling Foo's almost-trusting little face as he hopped down the stairs with me four days ago. What did I do? How could I forget him out there?

But then Fake Foo practically shrugs like, *oh, what the hell*, and hops into April's arms. My head is swimming and April is cooing and I fall back on the pillow, mopping sweat. It worked. I'm safe.

But then I'm pissed at April, kneeling in her Tweety Bird boxers, falling over Fake Foo. Who really can't tell their pet from something bought a couple days ago at a store? If I was eaten by a hawk and someone replaced me with another guy with brown hair and brown eyes, would she be able to tell? It's a stupid thought, but it stabs. I'm up and off the bed so fast I get a head rush. April freezes with Fake Foo in her arms to ask if I'm OK. I say yeah, I just need some air for a second, and I stumble down the back stairs in my boxers. Outside it's cold with early morning September air. I collapse on the same stoop Foo's guts had decorated. The concrete is hard and cold through the cotton on my ass. The boxers are a gift from April: Bugs Bunny.

It's here I remember I'd left my jacket in the alley while cleaning up Foo's guts the other day. I'd tossed it on the lid of the recycling bin to stay clean. Now I round the corner of the house to grab it, desperate to warm up, but I'm stopped in my tracks. Even though it's not cold enough, I feel like my breath comes out in a cloud.

The little strip of fence between our house and the neighbors' is covered in bits of soft white down. It's beautiful, like fresh-fallen flakes. It's caught in the pieces of twisted metal like prizes, or dreams. It looks like someone's hung cozy white tinsel on a Christmas tree,

and the tail I'd caught the other day and tossed away is there too, tucked in place by a breeze. It's so unexpected and strange, I can't move. It's the most amazing thing I've ever seen. It's fucking beautiful. It reminds me of snow angels, and childhood, and happiness. And things I don't even know yet. Liz couldn't have sculpted anything like it if she tried.

I know it's all the hawk's doing, and the wind's, and poor Foo who didn't seem big enough to contain so much fur, but right now, this is a gift. For me. I think of April's 500 bunny drawings and how she'd melt if she found out about Fake Foo. Then I think of Liz, how jealous she'd be of my furry little fence. How it always seemed we were nothing alike.

The blackest part of me calls out, "Honey, can you come out here a minute?" I pick a wedge out of my Bugs Bunny ass as I wait for April.

Like Father

Lisa

We'd only been in our apartment a week, and things were crazy. Boxes still unpacked, ladders and tarps mixed in with piles of clothes and CDs because the landlord wouldn't let us paint before we moved in. It was the first time I've lived with a guy, and I have to admit I was pretty excited. Sean had lived with another girl, a woman actually, before we met, but I don't know how serious they were. Sometimes I'm not sure how serious he and I are, either. I know I love him, but at the same time, we're so different. He doesn't really talk about his childhood, but I get the feeling it was rough.

Before I met Sean, I'd lived in Johnston, Rhode Island my whole life with my mom. My dad died when I was six, which was really scary and sad. But my Uncle Pete has always taken care of me, and Mom and I've worked out fine. We had conservation land all around

our house and Uncle Pete, who lived at the parish down the street, would come get us when he saw deer or foxes or whatever. We'd come out and stand still like statues. Pete's a big nature lover, but he's also a priest. I know he was praying over every bunny and robin we spotted out there. He wouldn't be able to stand one of God's creatures getting hurt. I once saw him run across the street to rescue our neighbor's cat from a dog, and then once the cat was safe Pete got down and played with the dog. It's kind of sweet, actually. He'd bend over backwards for anyone or anything.

I felt bad about telling Mom and Pete that I was moving out, but I'm an adult now. I have good hours at Forever 21, a great discount on clothes, and I already have half my credits for an X-ray technician degree. When Mom begged me to stay home another year, I wasn't interested. I know how she feels about Sean, and his stunt last month didn't help. It was pretty dumb of him. He'd been tagging a light post with silver spraypaint, the same "T.K.O." he's always writing on his sneakers or arm. It reminds him of the Fighting Irish. But when a cop nabbed him, Sean started pushing him, and all of a sudden it was assault and resisting arrest. Sean should've known better, but he just doesn't think when he's mad. He said the cop, Officer Sanchez, was harassing him because he was white. I didn't know what to say to that. Sean says racist stuff sometimes. I hope he's kidding, but it's hard to tell, so I just change the subject when I can.

Anyway, knowing he was arrested, even for ten hours, gave my mom more ammo against Sean. When I was coming downstairs the other week, I overheard her asking Uncle Pete how I ended up with a loser. She knows from all the media coverage that Sean's father was killed by his brother last month, so she should know what he's going through. But she doesn't even seem to care that Sean needs me. When I heard her say that to Pete, I was about

to turn the corner to yell at her, but then Pete reminded her I'd always made her proud, and she should trust me. I ducked before they saw me and went back upstairs. I know Pete can't really approve of living in sin because he's a priest, so it must have been hard for him to stick up for me and Sean. At least it meant that someone believed in us, though.

It was hard not to tell my mom about Sean, though. Even I'd heard about his fight at Mt. Pleasant High a couple years ago, when I was still at Johnston High. I guess a Hispanic kid made fun of Sean for his father being in jail, and Sean just lost it. The kid's jaw had to be wired shut. Realizing that the same sweet guy I met on the bus was the one in the news for nearly killing a classmate was a shock. But I didn't really believe Sean could do something like that, and since he never talked about it, I started believing it hadn't really happened.

Sean and I moved into Renaissance Court in Providence. I don't know who came up with the name. It sounds like knights and dragons, but it's really just a brick apartment building with graffiti on it—not the cool, pretty kind but the stupid kind where kids just write nicknames and dirty words. But I didn't mind. It made me think of Sean's "T.K.O." If it means something to him, then maybe the other words mean something to other people, too.

We spent the first few nights walking around, admiring the pretty State House all lit up down the street. I was thrilled that we were on our own together. Sean knew the neighborhood pretty well and showed me around. I'd always been curious about hot wieners after seeing neon signs for the New York System eateries around Rhode Island, so Sean bought me my first hot wiener. It turned out to be a really short hot dog covered with spicy meat sauce and cooked onions. I couldn't eat more than a bite and Sean finished it for me, laughing that I must not be a real Rhode Islander. I am, but the wiener was so gross. When

we walked by New York System the next night we both laughed at how I don't like my wieners hot. It felt good to share a joke with Sean.

Then came Wednesday night. We were painting the kitchen, him crouched down in the corner edging with a brush and me up on the stepstool, reaching on tippy toes toward the ceiling. It didn't occur to us to put on music, and someone's TV was blaring in Spanish through the walls. It was pretty annoying but I guess it got to Sean more than me because he hates everything being in Spanish now, like the yellow tape that says *La línea del Policía, No se cruza* when we walk by the housing project, or when we were in Home Depot that afternoon and Sean noticed that none of the gift cards they were selling were in English.

As we were painting and the noise kept coming, Sean would kind of huff every few minutes. Then his neck veins would stand out like the time he tried to rip a parking meter out of the ground when he got a ticket (but he just ended up hurting his wrists). The veins were a warning, but I guess I was lost in the paint. It was a creamy yellow called Spring Morning. I'd load too much on the roller and try to get it on the wall quick, and no matter how careful I was, drips would slide off the roller and leave little slashes on my arm and my sneakers like the marks my mom made on papers she graded. I wanted to cover up the brown water stains and a big crack in the plaster and the drawing of a penis that some jerk wrote in pen next to the fridge along with "Taquisha sucks dick." The paint took those away. With each coat, the walls got a little nicer and a little prettier. So I'd add more paint to my tray, and more.

At one point I hopped off my stepstool to get some water. I guess I wasn't paying attention and my sneaker caught the corner of the paint tray on the floor. It flew in the air, and a wave of paint cartwheeled from it because, even though Sean told me not to, I'd poured in nearly half the gallon. And instead of going on the wall, which would've been convenient,

the paint splashed all over the fridge and the ladder and the little table with our phone and Sean's wallet. And of course it splashed all over Sean's dog Mulch, who's already jumpy. Mulch sprang up and knocked over both folding chairs, which clattered on the linoleum and scared him even more. And I heard Sean starting to yell, "What the fuuu" as the painted dog flew out of the room and everything was splattered in yellow, but I don't know if he ever got to the "uck" because he was already diving across the room. He must have hit me right after the paint did, although I didn't know it at the time. One second everything was yellow and chaotic, and the next everything went black.

Blacking out wasn't like I'd have guessed, like when your eyes are closed at night. Instead I could see and feel black tides against a black sky and black shore, like Hades' beach. I don't know if I was swimming among them or watching them from the beach, but the waves were big and soothing, despite their color. It was like hearing my mom sing to me or Pete teaching me prayers when I was a kid, and I just relaxed and felt the waves ebb and flow. They became a little smaller, then smaller again, and then finally I opened my eyes. I was lying on the floor in a pool of sticky paint and my hair was plastered against the wall with yellow goop. Sean was looming over me. His blue eyes looked huge and his freckles stood out against his face because he was so pale. All he could say was, "I thought you were dead," and it took me a minute to figure out why I was on the floor, what had happened, why I was so dizzy and everything so swimmy. And then I leaned over and threw up all the sweet and sour pork we got at Yun Nan, adding shades of pink and brownish lumps to the pool of Spring Morning. Sean got his face out of mine fast.

I felt sick for a couple more hours after that. I was amazed that I wasn't bleeding from his fist, or from hitting the floor when I fell. I had a headache, but mostly I was just shocked. Sean had *hit* me. I never imagined he would do something like that. I don't think he could believe it himself, either. He walked me over to the couch and had me lie down, and then he attacked the spilled paint and my puke with half a bottle of Windex and fistfuls of paper towels. He didn't look at me. The neighbor's TV was still blaring, and I turned on ours to drown it out. I flipped through stupid reality shows but kept peeking over to check on Sean to see if he would say something. But the only time he spoke was to order, "Go see Lisa" just before a very sheepish Mulch padded over to watch TV with me. It was just a dog, but it felt nice to have a warm body against mine, even if his fur smelled from Sean rinsing paint out of it. It was soothing. Sean stayed in the kitchen, edging the walls by himself. He wasn't really concentrating on the painting, though. Sometimes minutes would pass and he wouldn't have finished more than a couple of inches. When I watched his arm it would be moving so slow I wasn't sure it was moving at all.

Sean

The first time I saw my old man hit my mother, I was nine. They'd been yelling in the kitchen, I don't know about what, and I was warming my ass on the hall radiator. Suddenly, BAM, he whammed her nose, close-fisted. She dropped like a sack of potatoes and put her hands over her face. I remember blood and tears streaming down between her knuckles, and my dad glaring down at her as she cried. He finally threw her a dishtowel and told her to clean herself up. He went out, drinking probably. Ma stayed where she was,

hiding behind the towel. I wasn't sure if she could get up by herself, but I didn't move. She finally got up, and when she took away the towel there was blood spattered all over her face. She washed the towel, and it turned pink from the blood. Then she hung it on the oven to dry and checked on the roast. He'd broken her nose with that punch, and she had black eyes for weeks that no one else ever asked about. Her nose's been crooked ever since. I used to feel guilty when I looked at that damn nose, like maybe I should've tried to help. Later I just figured it made my dad right when he called her ugly.

My brother Steve's a cop now, but he was like our father when we were kids. Fighting solved everything. Steve was three years older and made me spend hours after school in the basement, learning to fight like he'd learned. Our old man'd been some kind of boxer when he was younger. I don't know if he was a champ or anything, but he was big and he still had equipment in the cellar. Steve was good, and he taught me a lot. He said I had to know how to get out of trouble my big mouth got me in. That was his way of saying I was a little shit. I did like to give people a hard time, like those skinny fags at school. Steve figured I should know what to do if one of them ever swung at me. My father never tried to teach me anything, and I never saw him use the bags in the cellar. He had Mom instead.

I figured out Dad was a drunk when I was twelve and he lost his job at the factory. He'd sit around the house pounding beer and Bushmills and getting pissed about spics and niggers and everyone else stealing jobs and taking over the country. He'd still go out at night, too, and we knew he was picking fights because he'd suddenly have a shiner or a split lip the next morning. One day Mom was taking forever to count food stamps at Ruggieri's Market. I checked out a *Providence Journal* next to the register, and there was my old man on the front page being taken away in cuffs. He'd decked a black guy in a bar who turned

out to be a big-time judge, if you can believe that. The only advice the old man'd ever given me was, never piss off a cop or a judge in Rhode Island. All those assholes are in bed with each other, he'd told me. Fuck with one, you fuck with them all.

I guess he forgot his own advice 'cause he got put away for a year, and Steve got in a shitload of fights during that time. I only had one big one, with Whore-hey Rodriguez or whatever that spic's name was, but that was enough. I damn near broke my hand on him, and got kicked out of school and had to bus tables instead. But at least I knew I could fight.

When Dad got out of the slammer, he was worse than ever to Mom. He called her a whore and thought she cheated behind his back, when she didn't ever look at other guys, or really at anyone. But she didn't defend herself, and that pissed me off. She'd walk around with bruises around her neck from the old man's fingers or her arm in a sling, and I'd wonder what she'd done this time. Or I wouldn't think of her at all.

I was seventeen and sick of their shit, so I moved in with this chick, Rena, who danced at the Foxy Lady. I hung out there all the time 'cause they never checked IDs. In her routine Rena kept coming over to my little table, maybe because everyone else in the place was shitfaced and trying to grab her ass while she danced. I slipped all four of my ones into the sides of her g-string, strung out like socks on a clothesline. Her hips were tan and sweaty and I got hard just touching her. Later, she snuck me a free plate of wings, and then we fucked in someone's pickup in the parking lot. A couple days later, we found a shitbox apartment in the North End. It wasn't love, but it was better than going at it alone.

I never hit Rena, even when I wanted to, when she was being a fucking psycho. We fought all the time, mostly about money. She always had it, I never did. I'd get pissed when she was out past her shift, though. I knew she was screwing other guys, but I couldn't stop

her. I was bussing at Chelo's Restaurant then, same as now, trying to nick tips from tables when no one was looking. I found Mulch scrounging at the dumpster and brought him home to live with us, and Rena didn't notice the damn dog for two days. At least when I was with her, though, I didn't think about my family.

Me and Rena lasted three years, and then she moved on to some old guy who was connected and I got the hell out. I'd just met Lisa, and I wasn't sad to see Rena go. We met on the bus and she fell all over Mulch, who I'd pretended was a seeing-eye dog to get him on. I started telling her all this bullshit like I was Congressman Kennedy's son and I wasn't in the news much because he wanted me to live a regular life. (I don't even know if the guy is old enough to have a kid my age. He just happens to have the same last name as me.) I don't know why I lied about something so stupid. She just seemed, I don't know, *pure*, and I couldn't be me to get her. I just liked her. She's never asked why she's never met Kennedy, and I don't know if she forgot what I told her or if she knew I'd been lying. I may not be the world's best catch, but I've tried not to lie to her too much since then.

I never saw my old man alive again. He's only been dead a few months. The story is he whacked my mother a good one. He wasn't even drunk. Maybe it was just habit by then. Anyway, he got her so hard she was out cold with her front teeth knocked out. I guess Steve dropped off groceries every once in awhile, and he walked in on it. He always stood up for my old man when we were kids, but he went friggin' nuts finding our Ma like that. Steve grabbed a pan and beat the fuckin' life out of the old man. Isn't that rich? I thought only women beat guys with kitchen stuff. So now Dad's dead, Steve's going on trial, and I don't know what's up with Ma. No one's seen her since she checked out of the hospital. I'm not holding my breath that she'll come looking for me.

Steve and I aren't tight, but he's the only relative I got left. I saw him once, after he killed Dad. He's still on leave from the force right now and hangs around his apartment. I stopped by a few weeks ago, and he didn't look surprised to see me there. I didn't really have anything to say, and neither did he. When I was leaving, I almost walked through some oil in his garage, and he stopped me. "Watch out for the messes," he said. "Keep your house clean and your nose clean." He sounded like Buddha or some shit. I nodded and kept going.

Now I've fucked up everything. I hit Lisa tonight. I can't figure out what made me do it, I really can't. Seeing Mulch painted yellow was like...Hell, I don't know what it was. Lisa's been so sweet, all concerned about me since my old man died, and now I could've fucking killed her, whacking her like that. All because of some fucking paint. It's just a shitty apartment. Who *cares* about some paint?

Julia

The first time I felt Lisa, I was only two months pregnant. I knew she was only a tiny blob of cells at that stage, but I swore I could feel her growing inside me, sharing life with me. I'd talk to her, sing to her, read her stories. I'd constantly have my hand on my stomach as if I was reaching out to touch her. It amazed me that after the childhood Peter and I had, I could even grow a child. I vowed she would be perfect, and that she'd never meet my father.

She was a perfect little girl. When she was six and Bob got sick, she'd come with me to the hospital, all professional in her little pigtails, holding her little plastic Hello Kitty clipboard. She'd quiz the doctors and nurses on her daddy's progress, keeping a little record of his blood count in sparkly pen, drawing smiley faces next to the high counts. The nurses

loved her. She was the rock I clung to when Bob gave in to the leukemia, and if it wasn't for her and Pete I probably wouldn't have made it, wouldn't have gone back to teaching and gotten up each morning to see Lisa off to school. In my darkest days as a teenager, when we were all terrified of my father and I cried myself to sleep, terrified, I'd always been searching for something to live for and promising I'd find it. Lisa was my something to live for.

I didn't like that she dropped out of Rhode Island College, but she was level-headed about it, sitting me down to discuss her plan. Tuition was cheaper at the community college; the program only took two years, and the health care industry was booming. As she spoke I remembered her with her little clipboard, telling us that she wanted to be a nurse when she grew up so she could take care of people like her daddy. My tension lifted. She was being mature about her life choices, and perhaps in a way she was honoring her father by choosing a medical-related career. I hugged her, relieved, and said I'd never fail to support her or her decisions. This was 24 hours before I came home from parent-teacher conferences to find her half-dressed, making out with some punk on my living room couch.

Lisa has dated several boys over the years, but this Sean was definitely a cut below them. I admit I took an instant dislike to him. There was something wrong about him, something that reminded me of my and Pete's childhood. He had the same air of defeat we did growing up, but also an air of danger, like a coiled snake. He had a badly-drawn tattoo of a boxing leprechaun minus the Notre Dame insignia, and his language was atrocious. I'm sure I even heard him say the "N word," which I *hope* was just quoting a rap song like the junk my middle school kids listen to. I also hated how he called me "ma'am." I sensed

sarcasm behind the title, as if respecting an elder, or a mother, was a deeply funny joke to him. Sean's attitude scared me a little. I hoped he treated his own mother better than that.

When the phone rang late Wednesday night, I sensed it was Lisa. She was whispering so Sean, who was in the shower, wouldn't hear her. I'd dropped the book I'd been reading when she told me he'd hit her. When I heard that my baby had physically lost consciousness, I grew cold. Lisa didn't know how my and Pete's father would verbally abuse our father. We'd been so miserable as children that Bob and I vowed never to let Lisa meet her grandfather. I'd put my father behind me and found Bob, sweet and caring to the death. Our last conversation was about Lisa, with me promising I'd take care of her forever.

I admit I lost my mind a bit at the news. I was yelling something like, "I'll kill that little bastard!" which only made Lisa defensive. It hurt to hear her say she shouldn't have called me, that she should have called Uncle Pete, who wouldn't overreact. She was right that Pete had always been more level-headed than me, but I can't imagine he'd take kindly to the news, either.

I forced myself to calm down and assured Lisa that I was just shocked to hear the news, that I would never touch Sean. For her part, she claimed she was fine. I could still detect a faint quaver in her voice, but also a steely resolve to stay tough, just like Bob in his last weeks. She doesn't know how much like her father she is. She has Bob's ability to see the good in people, but also his stubborn determination to appear tough. I tried to convince her to go file a police report, or at the very least to come stay with me for a few days, but of course she refused on both counts—just like our mother had when other relatives tried to rescue her, and us, from our household of fear. The excuses were the same: she and Sean

needed time to talk, she had to stay there for her classes and work, etcetera. I knew them all, and I knew that coming on too strong would just push Lisa away. So I bit my tongue and let Lisa know I'd be here if she needed anything, and she sounded grateful. Then she was gone, her usual "Love you, Mom," said too quickly.

When the dial tone shook me from my memories of lying in bed listening to my parents argue, I was gripping the phone so tightly that my knuckles were white. My father never hit my mother, at least not that I knew of, but he could be so terrifying. Just hearing him shout through the wall would make me cower under the covers. In daylight, my mother would say how stressful his job was, but I knew she hated it. I could only fall asleep if I crawled in bed with my big brother.

I pressed the hang up button and then dialed Pete's rectory. As the phone rang, my eyes wandered around the room. They came to rest on Bob's baseball bat, autographed by Mo Vaughn. It was still on the wall where he'd hung it before he got sick, when the Red Sox visited the hospital and signed bats and mitts for some of the chemo patients. While waiting for Pete to pick up, I walked over to the bat. I had to see if it would come down.

Peter

My calling is to God, but I'd do anything for my baby sister and niece. Watching my brother-in-law fade away until called to heaven was among the most difficult times of my life, nearly as difficult as our childhood had been. It ripped me apart to see Julia and Lisa lose Bob. It may not be worth much, but I vowed to myself that I'd be as good a father to her as I could in Bob's absence. Certainly a better father than my own had been.

When Julia called me late Wednesday night, I'd been asleep. I came awake immediately. I don't remember the conversation we had, but I recall is my sister's voice, the raw anger and pain that traversed the phone line, just as our mother's voice had sounded all those years ago. For all intents and purposes we raised Lisa together, sister and brother but also parents. Hearing what happened to Lisa created a film across my eyes, darkening the rectory around me. By the time I returned the phone to its cradle, I was a man possessed. Before I knew it I was jogging toward the door, struggling into my coat, sliding the keys to the Taurus we all share into my pocket with one hand.

It takes twenty minutes to get to Smith Hill from our parish. I had hoped that would be enough time to get myself under control, to receive God's guidance. But tonight the ride seemed to take seconds, and before my plans were laid out before me, I recognized the sign for their street. I'd been there just last week, helping Lisa move in. I parked in the Visitor's section and just sat there, without a plan. Finally I got out and approached the front door of their complex, where only days ago I'd carried in boxes of Lisa's stuffed animals and photo albums, debating my next move. Would I confront Sean or simply ignore him? Would I ask Lisa to come with me to stay at the rectory, or at Julia's? Would the boy let me take my niece without a fuss? Would Lisa be willing to come with me? I needed know that she was OK, that this would never happen again to the girl I'd considered my own for so long.

Although a spotlight illuminated the doorstep and music blared from a stereo somewhere close by, the windows of the apartments were mostly dark. It occurred to me that it was after eleven o'clock on a weeknight, and I slowed to a stop before reaching the door. Pulling a sleepy young couple out of bed wasn't a clear-headed response, no matter what grievous act had occurred tonight. My eyes roamed to the second floor, counted to the third

apartment from the left, and yes, the windows were dark. If Lisa could go to sleep after what happened, perhaps she would be all right until the morning. Perhaps I'd get my answer then. I reached back into my pocket for the car keys.

Just then, Sean stepped out the front door, fumbling with a pack of cigarettes. I walked toward him in shadow as he stood outlined in the entrance's spotlight, then sat. He lit a cigarette, sucking in as the tip glowed orange. He looked younger than he'd appeared when I previously met him. His wet red hair was slicked back from his eyes, and his silly tattoo was covered by a long-sleeved shirt. I still had no idea what to do or what to say, so I just stood there. Then, a sound and movement behind me made Sean gasp and scramble to his feet. I whirled around to see my baby sister there. Julia's face was ghostly pale in the moonlight—and she gripped a baseball bat in her hands. Hard. She stared at Sean as if facing a pitch by Roger Clemens.

“What the fu—” Sean started to curse, but then he recognized my face, or at least my white collar, and Julia. “Oh, Mrs. Redding, Father...What are you—uh, what can I do for you?”

Ignoring him, I watched my sister, half-terrified. Julia appeared to be trying to relax her grip on the bat, but she wasn't dropping it. Ignoring Sean, she stared back at me like a cornered cat. I don't think she could have put down the bat if she tried.

“Sean,” I said, and had to stop and clear my throat. “Sean, Mrs. Redding and I received a very disturbing call tonight about my niece. We'd like to speak with her.”

“Lisa?” the kid asked stupidly. “Uh, she's asleep. I was about to hit the hay myself. Do you, uh, want me to go get her?” Julia watched him, still gripping the bat. She made no

move to speak, and I'm not entirely sure she was aware of me. I turned back to Sean, but I felt her presence behind my back.

“No, I'd rather not wake her if she's sleeping,” I answered. “I do, though, want to find out what happened. Specifically, why you hit her.”

He cringed, face aflame in guilt, and I heard my sister whimper at the words. Sean seemed to be fumbling with an explanation, and I didn't sense that he was constructing a lie. I got the feeling he truly didn't know why he hurt our Lisa.

“Sir, I swear it's never happened before—”

“It damn well better now have,” I interjected. I was surprised at the harshness of my tone. Physically, I was much larger than this young man. We were the same height now only because he stood on the front step. On level ground I was taller and thicker.

“Sir, Ma'am, I'm sure you're both upset,” the boy tried again. “To tell you the truth, I am too. I've never hit a girl before, and I never, *never* meant to hurt Lisa. I'll make it up to her, I promise. Please, I know I've screwed up a lot, but I swear it'll never happen again.” He looked Julia pleadingly, then back at me. His fists relaxed and became open hands turned upward to me as if receiving the Eucharist. I realized I was holding my breath.

When Julia finally spoke, I didn't even recognize her voice. She was spitting out the words. “If...you...EVER...touch my girl again,” she hissed, but the effort was too much for her. With a tiny thump the bat slid onto the grass, and Julia was sinking to her knees. I raced to put my arms around her as her body began to heave with sobs.

“Jules,” I coaxed. “Jules, let's get you home.” She didn't even glance at Sean as she nodded and let me help her to her feet and lead her to her car, parked right near the Taurus.

The fight was gone from her, and it was like leading a child. She looked up at me after buckling in her seat belt. Then she smiled through the tears sliding down her face.

“Pete, I had no idea what to do. I drove here, saw your car from the rectory...” Her face clouded. “All I could think of was Dad. You’ve always been Gentle Ben, but then I worried that you had some of *him* in you, that you were going to *do* something...”

I looked into that face with my own blue eyes, and smiled back. “Never,” I said. “He’s a ghost, Jules. Our father is gone. Even if he’s still living now, he’s dead to us. We’re fine. You’ve raised a great kid.” I smirked. “And if you play like you did T-ball in 1973, that bat wouldn’t have swung anywhere near Sean tonight.”

Julia’s laugh at the joke bordered on crazy. It took her a few minutes to get it all out, and I hunched by her open car door, waiting. Finally she calmed down enough to start the engine, ready to head home. But she paused, looking back toward Lisa’s apartment.

“Pete,” she asked, “Do you think we should...?”

I gently pushed her left arm all the way into the car. “I think we should both get some sleep,” I said. I shut the driver’s door as firmly as I could without slamming it.

Lisa didn’t wave as she drove off. She stared straight ahead as if concentrating on the task of driving, and it hit me how late it was. How tired I was. I needed to get home myself, but first I remembered Julia’s bat. I recognized it as the one that hung in her and Bob’s bedroom. She’d be beside herself if it was lost or stolen.

When I got back to the stoop, Sean was still lounging on the stoop, now playing with a cellular phone. He glanced up at me.

“Crazy night, huh? I thought Lisa’s mom was going to clock me with that bat.” He nodded at the bat, which I bent over and picked up.

“Yes,” I agreed. “Crazy night.”

Sean shrugged, still pressing tiny buttons on his phone, and began to head inside.

I didn't realize I'd swung the bat until it connected with a wet, sickening sound. Sean fell with a soft “oh” of surprise. The blue light on his phone blinked out as it clattered to the concrete next to his body, and he didn't move. He was out cold, possibly even dead.

I waited for God's instructions, my next step...Anything.

Birthday Girl

I turned seventeen the day after my father killed my mom. Nice milestone, right? We didn't have cake and ice cream that night to celebrate. I didn't even get any phone calls. My friends at school were all scared of me. I was the girl with the dead mother. Only Sarah and Jess came to the funeral that Sunday, and they acted weird and cried a lot, even though Jess'd never *met* my mom. They can both be dolts. I'm glad I quit field hockey and don't have to see them after school anymore. I was getting sick of plaid skirts and sticks flying at my shins when I chased the ball. What a stupid game.

I did get a seventeenth birthday present, though—a Dell. The card said it was from both my parents, even though my mom obviously didn't pick it out, being dead and all. *She* would have gotten it right. I'd wanted one of those Mac Books, not a clunky PC. The present was sitting on my bedroom floor, right next to my dirty jeans, and I knew *he'd*

wrapped it 'cause the corners were all lumpy and there were like 40 pieces of tape holding it together. Mom always said that you only need two pieces of tape, three max, to wrap a present. She would've put on a bow, too. I could hear my father moving around in the kitchen. Before I opened it, I went back to my door and locked it. I don't know why.

I ended up using the Dell a ton this past year—just not the way he would have wanted. I took my photo albums from Facebook and My Space and played with them in Photoshop. There were a couple pictures of my mom, and I taught myself how to remove her. I gotta be realistic, right? She's not around anymore. Except I don't really know how to use Photoshop, so I clone-stamped her instead of doing it the right way, whatever that is. You can tell there used to be something there (or someone, I guess). Now she's just a blob of color. Or a blur.

Actually, I don't remember the last time I logged into My Space and whatever. Those sites seem so dumb now. I don't care how many photos Sarah uploaded of her and Jim kissing, or what song everyone has in their profile. I wonder how long you have to not sign in until they delete your account.

Maybe it's because I was such a bitch to her the last time I spoke with my mom, the night before everything changed. Maybe that's what made it all happen. The funny thing is, I don't even remember what we fought about. It was the last time we talked, ever, and I have no idea. Shouldn't every word be, like, burned in my brain?

I don't pay attention to my father enough to fight with him. I tune him out, and he finally stopped trying to talk to me. But the shitty thing is, I remember *him* just fine on that day. I was sitting at the kitchen table eating Frosted Flakes. I was still sixteen that morning. What did I know?

My mom had been running errands that day. At eleven in the morning. You don't expect there to be drunk drivers at eleven in the morning, do you? I mean, you probably don't expect them anytime, but at least you'd find it more normal to hear of them at 11 at night. And on a weekend, or a holiday like New Year's Day, or maybe when the Patriots win the Super Bowl or something. Not at eleven o'clock on a Saturday morning in March.

I was reading the comics as I ate. It was one of the ones that aren't that funny, Mother Goose & Grimm or maybe Family Circus. Dad's cell phone rang, and he answered it while he washed his and Mom's breakfast dishes.

I remember the splash the most. He'd sounded normal at first, but then he said "what?" in this weird voice, like it went through that vice on his workbench in the garage. Then he dropped the phone—or he didn't really drop it, he just let go. He kind of sagged, like an old balloon. And the phone fell, real slow it seemed, and landed in the sudsy water with a splash. It never rang again, that phone.

He had me in his Camry in about ten seconds. I didn't even get to tie my sneakers. He drove like he was insane, and I was terrified the whole way to Mass General. I thought for sure we'd get pulled over, but we didn't. The hospital was huge. I'd never been in it before. He'd told me in the car what was going on, but nothing sank in. It's like I was dreaming. At one point we were standing in a long hallway with all these people rushing by us, talking with a guy who looked a little like President Obama. *Her heart had been stopped too long, and there's some brain damage*, he was saying. Maybe it's because his ears kind of stuck out a little that he looked like Obama. *We're trying to determine the extent*. He was wearing rubber mules—what guy wears mules?—and his blue scrubs had some spatters of blood on the knee. It didn't hit me until later that it was *her* blood.

He kept talking about her operation, how they had to remove pieces of steering wheel from her chest. How the paramedics resuscitated her as soon as they got there, but it took them six minutes to get to the accident scene. He looked at my dad most of the time but at me sometimes, too. He had nice eyes, shiny and brown like a puppy's. My dad stood there like an idiot. He was still holding the sponge from when he'd been washing dishes, and his shirt was soaked to the elbow. The sponge dripped a little, and there were drops of water all the way down the hall where we'd come in. I wondered if he'd held it the whole time he drove us over here, if there were suds all over the steering wheel. You can see her when she wakes up, the doctor told us, just before a nurse butted in and pulled him away.

But she never woke up. Two weeks later, my dad signed the papers to pull her plug. The brain wave machines weren't finding anything. She'd never be able to do anything. The doctors had all these excuses for her to die. My father refused at first, but then he gave in. *Gave up*. He bawled the whole time at the end, holding Mom's hand, and I didn't stick around to watch either of them. I'll never forgive him for what he did. He could have tried harder. And *she* could have tried harder. Both of them, failures.

You could say the past year has been rough. I don't even know how all this stuff happened. It's like I turned around one day and I had nothing. No friends, or at least not ones that get me. No father. He won't come near me. No mother. She left.

I couldn't stand my Jetta anymore for some reason, so I sold it. College money, I decided, and just stuck it in the bank. I started riding my bike around instead. I rode it to her

grave after school a few times. It was a good way to be numb, sitting there staring at the words on it. She has a granite headstone, kind of pink-colored and speckly, that says:

PATRICIA BYRNE SAWYER

BELOVED WIFE AND MOTHER

JANUARY 18, 1963 – MAY 30, 2009

Patty Sawyer, that was my mom. I'd stare at those words. Sometimes I'd trace them with my fingers. But I never cried.

I don't know why I thought I had the grave to myself, but one day, a couple months ago, I discovered my dad had been there. Pink roses—Mom's favorite—were sitting there when I pulled up, and I felt my fingernails digging into my palms. He was *here*. At *my* spot. As if lame flowers could bring her back. There was a big greasy handprint on the headstone, and I remember wiping at it as hard as I could with my shirtsleeve, trying not to picture how it got there. Was it his? Did he have to clutch the grave to help pull himself up? Had he been kneeling? Praying? Crying? I didn't want to know, but I still wondered. That was my last visit. When I got home to our empty house, I opened the fridge in the garage and found one of Dad's cases of Narragansett. He'd been drinking a few a night; I hear the clink every Wednesday when he brings out the recycling bins. He wouldn't notice a can missing, right? I didn't like the taste at first but I liked the numbness when I'd chugged two of them down. It was way better than being at Mom's headstone.

If he ever noticed those first few beers disappearing, he never said anything. Now we both had a secret.

I wouldn't say I was an angry person, but that's what Dad says I've turned into since she died, when he doesn't know I can hear him on the phone with his therapist. I wouldn't say he's been the best person to live with this past year, either. For one thing, he's *such* a slob. Mom would puke if she saw how he lives now. And did I mention the photo of my mom he keeps under his pillow? He doesn't seem to give a shit that it might get wrinkled there, with him sleeping on it every night. Once when I'd walked by his room he was kneeling on the floor, cradling it like a baby bird. It was disgusting. I didn't think a couple 'Gansetts wouldn't be enough to get that out of my head, but I found something better. I don't think he even knew he and Mom still had all those bottles of stuff in the back of the dining room hutch from when they threw parties. I didn't like how the first sip burned my throat and stomach, but now the Jack Daniel's is my favorite.

I started getting "angry Chris" notes sent home this past year, too. You'd think seventeen is too old to get teachers' notes home to daddy, or to have the principal sit you down in her office to ask if there's anything she can do, but there you go. Everyone's so worried, but I'm just getting through the day. And my grades didn't really slip that much, either. Jess getting hit in the nose my last day of field hockey was a *total* accident, too. Even she agreed it wasn't on purpose, but her parents told her to stay away from me, and she and Sarah both have. Who needs them, anyway?

In fact, my grades are still so good, I got inducted into the Honors Society last month. That's the night Jana Hurley's hair caught on fire. I didn't mean to do it. It's just that I was the only kid without parents that night, and Jana's mom kept calling, "Jana! Jana, over

here!” She had this awful voice, like something you’d make fun of, but Jana kept looking over and grinning for photos. Cameras were flashing and people were clapping and Jana and everyone grinned like idiots, like they’d make some huge fucking accomplishment besides doing their homework right. The wax in my candle kept dripping onto that chintzy little cardboard circle that was supposed to keep it from getting all over my arm. It wasn’t working too well. My mom would have rigged up something ten times better. Cuter, too.

And there were Jana’s curls, those big bouncy curls, brown like her mom’s hair. When she moved her head, her hair kept brushing my arm. Someone was blabbing into the microphone, and Jana tossed her hair, and I held up that candle just a little higher. I didn’t think it had done anything until there was this nasty smell of burning hair and people started whispering. Jana must have felt the heat finally, the way she whipped her head around so the hair almost clocked me. That pretty much put out most of the fire. Honestly, with all those curls, you could hardly tell one little section was burned except for the smell. It was God-awful, that smell, but Jana didn’t have to shriek so much over it, and her mom didn’t have to scream for someone to call 911. Come *on!* And who tosses her hair around burning flames?

But it was all over fast. A year ago I would’ve been embarrassed at being dragged down to Principal Silva’s office during a school function, or hell, it never would’ve happened at all. But I just didn’t care. I sat there and looked at what was left of my candle. A while ago it’d felt like a weapon. Now it was just a sad little burned-out nub, with strips of white running from my wrist to my elbow. I looked like one of those biscottis Mom dipped in icing. Principal Silva was acting like she was doing me this huge favor by not calling my dad and said I could go as long as I made an appointment with the school counselor soon. I

promised her whatever she wanted to hear, but I never did it. I was almost eighteen. I'd be out of here soon.

That's ancient history, what happened at the induction last month. Tonight's supposed to be the big night, my birthday hoo-hah. A little over a year ago I wouldn't've cared much about turning eighteen. Yeah, exciting to be an adult, blah blah, but it wouldn't mean anything big. Now, all I want is to get away from this house. No more curtains Mom sewed for every damn window, or that ugly pink chair she loved. No more Dad coming home at night, heating himself frozen crap instead of real food. I stay in my room when I know he'll be home. Once in awhile, I can hear him coming down the hall towards his room. He stops outside my door sometimes. He doesn't knock or say anything. I can't even hear him breathing. But I can see the shadow of his shoes under the door. He doesn't bother knocking. Why doesn't he knock?

I have a prom dress already. Did I mention that? My mom helped pick it out. She gets—got—so excited about stuff like that. When I tried it on she almost cried. She said I looked so beautiful. She was going to give me an updo. I wasn't dating anyone then, but it didn't matter. Next June seemed so far away, but we both knew I'd have a prom date. She always told me I was pretty. Guys used to ask me out. I turned them down back then. After she died I dated Jack, then Pete. Maybe because they were both kind of losers. That would've bothered Mom, but she's not around to complain.

To tell you the truth, even though I slept with Jack and Pete and a couple other guys, all of them make me sick. They chew with their mouths open. They grope you at stupid

movies. They play video games for hours. They drink and drive, like fucking Ray Fortunato. Did I mention Ray yet? Ray's the guy who swerved into my mom's lane that morning and hit her head-on. She was practically cut in half by her steering wheel from the impact. Good ol' Ray walked away with a couple of scrapes. Drunk piece of shit. How fucking stupid and selfish can you be?

So anyway, I won't have my mom doing my hair and makeup for prom, just like I won't have her with me when I try on wedding dresses someday. She won't make clothes for my kids like the little dresses and hats she made for me when I was a baby. I found the box in the attic just last week. It was all dusty but the stuff inside was still beautiful. Most of it was pink, but the really tiny stuff was green because they didn't know if I'd be a girl or a boy. Mom'd wanted it to be a surprise. I wonder if that's why I was Christina. She always liked the name Chris and called me that since I can remember. Maybe I would have been Christopher if I was a boy.

It sucks, thinking about how things could have been. I'm alone in my room, or almost alone. I have the photo of my mom with me, the one I've snuck from under my father's pillow. It *is* wrinkled, just like I thought. I smooth the face he's ruined. She used to be so pretty. Then I lay it in the scanner and open PhotoShop. Let's see, what face should go over her instead? Marilyn Monroe, maybe Paris Hilton? I could print a new one to slip under his pillow. What would he care? He's the reason she's gone, him and Ray Fortunato. I go with one of the Playboy bunnies from that reality show. The photo of Mom goes in the trash.

Oh, and I've finished the last two inches of the Jack Daniel's tonight. Happy birthday to me.

I'm putting the fake photo under my father's pillow when I hear him come home. Shit, he's early. I rush back to my room, but I don't hear anything. No TV, no microwave. Finally he calls for me to join him in the kitchen, and I'm so surprised I pop a piece of Trident and walk as steady as I can down the hall. Maybe it's the bourbon, but I'm scared, which is kind of interesting since I've felt so little lately. Maybe he knows what I did with the photo? I picture some kind of intervention: him, Principal Silva, a counselor. My former friends. Ray Fortunato, a slimeball in a cheap suit, trying to pretend he was sorry for running Mom down that day but not looking guilty enough. Mom, with the bandage wrapped around her head showing rusty blood no matter how often the nurses changed it. And that blank, blank look in her eyes that no one could have changed, even me.

But it's just my father in the kitchen. He's standing at the table behind a vase of pink roses and a birthday cake with my name. I fucking hate pink. The cake has about a million candles on it, all white like that Honor Society candle, and his tie flops right over them, but they aren't lit yet. I wonder how flammable ties are. Whether the flames would go up his collar and if they'd jump to his hair, or maybe his eyebrows. He's smiling at me—no, grinning. I haven't seen him smile in a year. It looks weird and creepy in our sad kitchen. I wonder if he can smell my breath.

"There's nineteen of 'em, kiddo," he said. *Kiddo*. Like someone who buried her mother could ever be a kid. "Eighteen, plus one for good luck."

I feel this little flame burn inside me, the one from the first few months after she died, when I'd come home to an empty house and just want to trash it. I really had, too. The first

couple of times I destroyed my own room, ripping down posters and stuff. But once I attacked her closet. I tore out all of Mom's clothes that still hung in her closet, that still smelled like her, and ripped what I could, which wasn't much. My father had walked in on me, kneeling in the middle of the floor, surrounded by tangled hangers and crumpled clothes, breathing in one of her blouses over and over. He didn't say anything, just knelt down and tried to hug me, and I got away and ran to my room. It wasn't until I was falling asleep that I realized it was Mother's Day. And I haven't let my father near enough to touch me since.

Now he has that same sad, patient look on his face as that day. He's wearing his best suit, but it's rumpled. He's never been good at ironing. Maybe he should have thought about who'd press his clothes when he unplugged Mom.

He's holding kitchen matches in his hand, the same beat-up box we've had for years. Its sides are bare, missing most of the rough gray stuff from being used so many times, and suddenly it's hard to breathe. I've seen Mom strike matches on that same box a thousand times, lighting candles for cakes or lighting the ancient convection oven she refused to get rid of, even though Dad tried to buy her a modern one. She said newer stoves wouldn't be the same. I thought she was being silly—everyone had a shiny stainless one now. But now I think I know where she was going. When something you're used to is gone, there's no replacement.

Dad is staring at me. "Well, aren't you going to blow them out?" he asks. Like tonight is something special to celebrate instead of the anniversary-eve of the day he unplugged her. Like we're still a family.

“Blow them out?” I say, and his smile slips a little. I step forward, and for a second I think he’ll step back. He doesn’t, but he’s frozen, the matchbox in one hand and the match in the other. I nod over at the calendar, and he turns and looks at it too. It’s ugly, a freebie from Webster Bank. Mom used to be in charge of buying the calendars. She always liked ones with cute kittens or big, bright flowers.

Today has “Chris is 18” written on it in Dad’s block letters instead of Mom’s pretty script. Tomorrow’s square, MAY 30, is blank. At least he didn’t write “Patty is dead” there. I guess neither of us needs a reminder for *that*. He turns white as he watches the calendar. He’s still holding the matches.

“Wishes won’t bring her back, Dad,” I say in my toughest voice. Then the tears start coming and I run, same as that day with Mom’s blouse. No one will see me cry. No one. He calls after me, then shouts something, but I don’t slow down to hear it. There’s enough Jack Daniel’s in me to make me crash into the little front table by the door, the one where he likes to drop his keys. I wipe out, not even feeling the scrape on my knee, and snatch them off the floor. He’s still running out the front door as I peel away in his Camry.

You can all kiss my ass. I’m the birthday girl now.

Omens

Four months into the pregnancy, Prajul and Sarah still can't believe their luck. They'd been trying to conceive for just shy of six years, to the point that sex often became a chore, the calendar running their lives. They'd both gotten fertility tests after feeling like everyone had children but them. "It just doesn't seem to be your time yet," one sympathetic doctor said. "When is 35 too young for kids?" Sarah had shot back before Prajul gently led her out of the office. The handful of times Sarah's period was late elated them, but it always came back. "Stress," Sarah's mother had announced knowingly, openly discussing her daughter's menstruation at the dinner table. "If you just have fun in the sack and worry less about what happens from it, you'll be fine." As the words "fun in the sack" floated out of his mother-in-law's mouth with the smoke from her cigarette, Prajul nearly choked on a crispy

bite of bhatura. Ignoring her mother, he tried to focus on his beautiful wife. Sarah was smiling at her mother lovingly.

Prajul knew Sarah battled depression and anxiety over this. She was sure the tests were missing something. Sure that he had somehow failed her, her pain became his. It was agony attending baby showers for others, seeing couples their age (or worse, far younger) with babies and small children everywhere they went. The two tried to avoid malls and family-style restaurants and started to watch more TV at home alone, but they couldn't escape programming with childrearing situations or commercials for Huggies. Sarah's sister and mother called constantly to discuss the topic. There was nothing intimate about him and Sarah these women didn't know, and Prajul often couldn't look them in the eyes. He couldn't tell his own family about the struggle to conceive, fearing that his parents would be shamed. Finally, when those two tiny blue stripes appeared on Sarah's EPT stick four months ago, the couple didn't know whether to believe them. Dr. Botelho, their obstetrician, confirmed their conception.

Now they've spent the morning readying the nursery in what had been their office. The computer equipment has been moved down to the living room and they've installed a soft green rug over the wood floors. Although their friends family have been pressing them for the baby's gender, the two want to be surprised with this gift, this developing little person. So they are painting the nursery walls a muted, cheerful yellow, and Sarah has pasted a sweet, soothing, green and yellow border around the edges. Prajul notes that the child will be able to see the border from its soft crib. If it wishes, it can ask to redecorate the room, pink or blue or any other color, when it's old enough to have opinions and tastes of its

own. The thought of their child growing up, voicing opinions, sparks a warm feeling in his chest.

They take a break from decorating to enjoy the uncharacteristically warm February day from their backyard, breathing in fresh air that doesn't cloud into puffs and screwing their eyes against dazzles of light from the drips of each diminishing icicle in the gutters. It feels nice to relax, and Prajul glances over the backyard, which sports various animal tracks in the slushy, melting snow. It's easy to pick out those made by birds, the smaller sets probably sparrows, the big ones crows. Squirrels. The Rottweiler, Scowl, from next door, has added a bright splash of piss to his large prints near their gatepost.

But another set of footprints throws him. They're small and paw-shaped, but they make odd tracks. There's a blurry line accompanying them, like an animal was dragging something as it walked. Prajul bends down for a closer look, and a curious Sarah joins him. As she leans over, they hear a horrible cry, plaintive and impossibly scratchy as if forced through sandpaper. They whirl around and spot yellow, indifferent eyes peeking from beneath the rhododendron. An ugly little face, brown with jagged white splotches. A confused nose, half pink, half black, crossed with a white stripe. A patchy coat on a scrawny body. "Bad omen," Prajul whispers involuntarily, meaning the meow of the cat. It's something he has learned from his family.

"What?" Sarah asks.

"Nothing," he says, watching the cat.

Seeing that it has their attention, the cat balances on its tailbone and proceeds to lick its stomach. With this motion its hind legs rise, one out to the side, two straight up in the air.

They both gasp, seeing the source of their footprint confusion. The cat has a fifth leg, jutting out from its side like an oar, where no leg belongs. It's angled to the side and touches the ground lightly as the cat grooms. *Freak leg*, Prajul thinks, staring at the protusion. It's a little smaller and weaker-looking than the others, but it's fully developed. When the cat stops licking, it stretches the leg out further as if for their inspection. Its little toes (two white, two black) splay out as it extends. Its claws are sharp and dirty.

Scowl barks at something from the other side of the fence and the cat starts. Yet instead of racing away, it gathers itself and its legs up slowly. The cat looks them in the eyes again, briefly, as if confirming their acquaintance. Then it turns, tail primly up, and walks. Its fifth leg swipes the ground from time to time, out of cadence from its sibling legs, and the cat's little pink anus winks goodbye as it stalks off. Later, despite that memorable view of its private parts, neither of them can recall the cat's gender.

Over the next two months, they start to see the cat more and more. Its ugly little face catches them off-guard when they step out the door. As the snow accumulates again, melts again, builds again, they continue to find its strange, tell-tale prints. The cat begins to leave them gifts: the bones and feathers of a careless blue jay, the mangled remains of an innocent rodent with teeny teeth clenched in pain. Prajul disposes of the little corpses with distaste, hoping each will be the last. Outside, Sarah leaves a small dish of cheap cat food. When they're not looking, small pieces disappear, a couple at a time.

By early April, twenty-four weeks into their pregnancy, those yellow eyes will now greet them, along with that three-pack-a-day meow. The cat has chosen Sarah as its companion and will approach her, allowing her to pet it. She admits that its coat is on the rough and mangy side, unpleasant to the touch, but she enjoys stroking its fur anyway. Prajul, though, is sickened by the cat's freak leg that angles down, bopping the ground when it walks. He only tolerates the cat for his wife. He does not have Sarah's gift for seeing

beauty in unexpected places, even though the trait is more suited to his family's culture than Sarah's Midwestern American heritage. But he admires that quality in Sarah enough to touch the cat on occasion, forcing himself not to shudder. He does not tell her that in India, it is bad when a cat crosses your path, worse when it meows. In America, they fear only black cats, but Prajul knows any feline can bring bad luck.

They're surprised when one day the cat follows them inside the house. Prajul moves to shoo it out the door, but Sarah grasps his arm in wonder. Her eyes are shining as she watches the creature, waiting to see what it will do. The cat inspects the property, then jumps into their worn recliner and gathers itself in almost gracefully. Its freak leg sticks out as it settles in. As easily as that, they have become cat owners. By that night Sarah's named the cat Likka, for licking its stomach so often. The cat doesn't seem to object, although it also doesn't respond to its new name. They relocate its food dish from the backyard to the kitchen. The cat still doesn't eat much, but Sarah notes that its tummy is beginning to round out. Likka follows her around on its five legs, often granting her a throaty, rumbling purr. Sometimes while Sarah pets its thin, rough body, one of her hands will rest thoughtfully on its extra leg and foot, stroking the additional limb. Prajul begins to immerse himself in books and horrible TV shows.

On May 1st, the day they register for their inevitable baby shower, they're tired and glad to return home. They've wandered Babies R' Us for hours with the scanner, fighting tides of Saturday shoppers, choosing between endless varieties of crib sheets and strollers, silicone pacifiers and fuzzy sleep sacks. They're still questioning their decisions. Should

they have gone with Avent brand instead of Medela? Who will pay \$320 for a breast pump, anyway? Is that digital turtle-shaped bottle thermometer, although the cutest thing ever, *really* necessary? They'd felt forced to register, knowing Sarah's family and fellow teachers would insist on throwing a large shower, but they have to admit that they're enjoying the fluffy Winnie-the-Pooh dolls and snuggly onesies. They're enthralled with each teeny pair of socks, each lettered little bib. Prajul imagines Sarah the perfect mother after ten years as a doting special education teacher. When he comes home at night she is always working on something for the next day's class, never ending the school day at the ring of the bell. While he scrubs grease off his hands with Gojo, she'll chat about what funny or sweet things the kids said in class that day. In seven weeks, just before the end of the school year, she'll start her maternity leave, which will stretch into her summer vacation. Soon, when Prajul comes home from work, Sarah will be telling him about the things their own child did that day.

Today Sarah, hungry and eating for two, is concerned only about dinner. She chats about the "American chop suey," a beef and macaroni dish, that she will make for Prajul. He in turn will prepare Sarah's favorite Indian dish, vegetable samosas served with garlic naan bread. While they move around the kitchen together, creating their meals, she is asking Prajul whether their child will have a British accent like his (as a child, he'd learned English from a British schoolmaster) or a Midwestern accent like hers. Suddenly, Sarah winces and clutches her stomach. When he rushes over, she admits low pelvic pressure, like the baby is pushing down. Perhaps gas? They know they shouldn't worry quite yet at this stage, but they call Doctor Botelho to be safe. She's unavailable; Prajul has forgotten she is vacationing in France. Dr. Botelho had planned to be back well in time for delivery, but now

that she's away, Prajul feels lost. Her answering service supplies the number of a fellow obstetrician for emergencies, and Prajul dials. This doctor, whose name Prajul fails to catch when she rattles it off, tells him to bring Sarah to the emergency room. The doctor is already at the hospital with another O.B. patient and will meet them there.

The news and the bedside manner aren't good. "I see signs of preterm labor," the nameless doctor announces flatly. "You're only thirty-one weeks pregnant. Did you have a history of pre-term labor with any other pregnancies?"

She hadn't even read their file. While Sarah tell her it's their first pregnancy, Prajul studies the doctor's nicotine-stained fingers as they tap on her clipboard. A medical doctor can't plead ignorant to the effects of smoking. Can this woman safely bring children into this world? He misses Dr. Botelho's quiet confidence. This doctor quizzes them on factors that could lead to pre-term labor, firing questions like an interrogation. Has there been use of any alcohol or drugs? A history of uterus, cervix or urinary tract infections? Any history of STDs? Diabetes? No, they shake their heads with each question. No.

Then she asks one that makes them pause: Did they try to conceive for more than a year before getting pregnant?

They nod glumly, hoping they're not being punished for their late luck.

They're relieved when the doctor is finally paged to another part of the hospital, granting them a few minutes alone. They hold hands, something that's always come naturally during their ten-year history. Sarah gazes down at Prajul, sitting in a chair next to her examining table. "I wish Likka was here," she says glumly. It's absurd that the ugly,

wild cat with its freak leg would be of comfort, but he finds himself agreeing. It actually *would* be nice to pet that rough, patchy coat and draw out a scratchy purr. It would certainly be more enjoyable than waiting helplessly for the doctor with no name.

The doctor eventually returns, telling them that as the pain and pressure is gone, there's no need to keep them any longer. However, she cautions them to come back at the first sign of trouble, as signs of delivery eight weeks early is problematic. She stresses that babies born too premature would have immature lungs, or even bleeding in the brain that could lead to brain damage, and, absurdly, she follows this information with instructions for Sarah to take things easy and remain relaxed at all times. She even suggests bedrest, if Sarah's school is amenable to the idea. Then the doctor is paged—her other patient is about to deliver her own baby—and she plucks two colorful brochures from a rack on the wall, handing one to each of them, before ducking out. Sarah and Prajul each glance down to see that the brochures list common complications in babies born before 34 weeks. Someone felt that large, cheerful font was needed to write things like:

- *Jaundice babies typically have a yellowish color to their skin and while most cases are mild and easily treated with phototherapy, high amounts of the waste product can lead to brain damage.*

or:

- Babies with chronic lung disease usually develop fluid in their lungs and need assistance with breathing from devices such as a ventilator. While the condition

generally improves greatly, some premature babies experience more problems in childhood that look similar to asthma.

Sarah is the first to toss her brochure aside. She looks a startled Prajul in the face and laughs. “OK, so if we have our child early, it may have low iron. It may have trouble breathing. It may be yellow. But at least it won’t have five legs, right?” Prajul shrugs, then laughs too. Extra limbs aren’t in the brochure. He tosses his copy as well.

When they get home it’s after midnight, the neighbors’ houses dark. As they stumble through the kitchen, they note the nearly empty food dish; Likka has been here. But the cat isn’t in Sarah’s big recliner, or anywhere else in sight. There are messages on the machine from each of their mothers, wondering where they are. Prajul deletes the one from his mother; it’s already morning in India and she is likely on her way out. She’ll lecture him about bad luck if he calls as she’s leaving the house. Meanwhile, Sarah calls her mother right back. Prajul settles into bed as Sarah wanders the house with the cordless phone, filling in her mother on everything the doctor said and agreeing to have her school arrange for a substitute so Sarah can rest at home. Better safe than sorry, he hears Sarah say. Likka doesn’t appear, and Prajul is glad. He firmly shuts the bedroom door in case it sneaks in during the night. Seeing a cat’s face first thing in the morning is bad luck.

The next morning, Sunday, Prajul has risen early to make coffee. When Sarah pads downstairs, she immediately exclaims that Likka must have come back during the night. Prajul hadn't noticed how empty the dish was, even of petfood dust. Likka probably won't be hungry again for awhile, but Sarah squats to pour in more, places a hand to her lower back for balance, looking like she has a basketball under her robe. It's funny how she's gained weight only in her stomach; her sister jealously reminds her that she'd had to endure ankles and legs like tree trunks. Sarah is thin and pale with curly brown hair and freckles, a contrast to Prajul's dark skin and hair. They've been a team for so long, best friends, partners. Now they'll be parents. He can't take his eyes off her bulge.

"Coffee ready yet?" she asks, lumbering up to a stand.

"No," he responds, as always. "Not for you." He knows it kills her that he can drink coffee and she can't. When they first learned they were pregnant they both vowed to give up vices that would affect the baby's health: alcohol, caffeinated soda, chocolate. But after three days of terrible headaches, Prajul had begged to continue drinking coffee. Sarah pouts. "Just a *little*," she pleads. "I had a rough night, remember? Come on, the baby is the one asking for it. He or she is really groggy today." She reaches for the mug he's holding, the one emblazoned with MSU, where they'd met in grad school.

"With all the sugar and cream you add, it's not really coffee anyway," Prajul reminds her, holding the dark liquid out of reach behind his back and then whirling around to down it. Black coffee makes her gag, but he knows she wants what she can't have. As soon as the mug is empty, he rinses it out as if destroying the evidence and brings her fresh orange juice.

“Look,” he says brightly as if to a child. “I got you the good stuff, Simply Orange.”

Sarah takes the glass and drains it, smacking her lips. Then she slaps the empty glass on the counter, eyes animated. “You know what this stuff reminds me of? Creamsicles. I haven’t had a Creamsicle in like twenty years.”

Prajul smiles, knowing what’s coming, and Sarah asks it. “Can you buy me some Creamsicles? Maybe some Fudgesicles, too?” He’s already heading for the stairs to put on pants, knowing not to refuse a pregnant wife her cravings. When he descends, fumbling to place his wallet in his back pocket, she is at the bottom watching him come toward her. He expects additional requests—potato chips, ice cream, peanut butter—but instead she looks worried. Before he can ask what’s wrong she blurts out, “Prajul, where’s the cat?”

“Likka?” he asks, as if there is another. “Around, I guess. It ate more food last night. Why?”

“I miss the little guy,” she responds. “I want to see that little extra leg dragging around our house. Hear that emphysemic meow.” He shrugs and once again searches for Likka, but has to tell Sarah he cannot find her. When he leaves, he knows his wife will heave herself around the house, looking for the cat in the same places he’s already checked, although she can hardly see her own feet under that baby-filled belly. He hopes, after yesterday’s horrible scare, that she does not find it. They do not need to cross paths with a cat today.

That night they're watching *The Simpsons* when they hear a noise from the next room. Turning down the volume, they make out crunching sounds and tiptoe toward the kitchen to investigate. There, facing away from them, is that familiar patchy coat, the fluff of its white tummy now visible at its sides. Likka is wolfing down its food as if starving and doesn't notice them. When Sarah takes a step toward the cat it startles, running off. Its freak leg doesn't hinder its zoom up the stairs. By the time they ascend the same stairs, Likka is nowhere in sight. She turns her head away from him, but Prajul can see that Sarah is upset and worried. He knows he should look for the cat again, but he just doesn't have the energy. Whatever it's doing, it's keeping out of their way, and Sarah doesn't press him.

Sarah calls the shop on Monday morning, while Prajul is elbow-deep in an oil change. "It just felt like a teeny trickle," is her greeting when he picks up, wiping streaks of black onto the bottom of his coveralls. "Like that time I peed myself just a little. I thought when your water broke it was supposed to gush. Gosh, my sister was running around the house looking for towels and mops when hers broke with my nephew."

"Your water broke?" he asks weakly.

"Yes, Prajul, that's what I'm saying. My water is broken. It broke."

"Stay there," he tells her. "Call Dr. Botelho—I mean her colleague, what's-her-name. I'll be right there." He is already throwing the used oil filter toward his assistant mechanic and racing for the door.

He arrives home in record time. Sarah is waiting outside when he pulls up, wearing her favorite pink maternity outfit, the one that makes her feel the least fat (and the one her kids at school says she looks extra pretty in). She's even clutching the fancy Coach purse Prajul bought her for her last birthday. When he rushes her into the Toyota, they've both completely forgotten to bring the overnight bag they've packed in advance. Prajul has grabbed one of the microfiber towels from the autoshop and placed it on her car seat in case her water is still leaking, which makes Sarah laugh. He catches on to the joke, attuned to her humor: soon they'll be changing wet diapers. Sarah doesn't look at the road as Prajul races to the hospital, instead timing her contractions with an old stopwatch he'd once used for coaching soccer. "Four minutes and fifty seconds. They're four minutes and fifty seconds apart," she reports. "That's close enough, right? I don't want to get to the hospital and have them send us home again. I think I read that 3-5 minutes is enough to really be in labor." Prajul just keeps driving. Four minutes and fifty seconds apart is very close indeed.

"Eight centimeters dilated," the doctor announces. This time they've caught her last name: Dr. Finklestein. "And contractions are less than four minutes apart. You're almost ready to start pushing. I guess this kid is in a rush." At least her yellow-stained fingers are hidden behind fresh white latex gloves.

The contractions feel closer together than that. It seems like every other minute Sarah undergoes another wave of pain, crushing Prajul's hand in hers. Amidst the craziness, he hopes he's still able to fix engines after this.

When Sarah is given the epidural, she simultaneously receives fluids to keep her hydrated. She tells Prajul she might float away with all that liquid inside of her, and he squeezes his brave wife's hand. The doctor is in scrubs and somehow Prajul is also wearing a gown, mask and gloves. Sarah tells him he looks like a surgeon. That's what his parents hoped he'd become—like his father. Prajul's parents didn't expect him to pursue two degrees in engineering and then give that up to work on cars. Or to marry an American girl and settle in Flushing, Michigan, a short drive from Sarah's parents and sister in Detroit but an ocean's length from his own relatives. Now he's about to become the father of her—their—child. Perhaps his other choices will be forgotten, or at least forgiven, with the good news.

Prajul catches phrases now and then from the two nurses in the room, but everything else is a blur. Sarah's face contorts in pain with each contraction, which will make her pant another half-scream breath: *Anggh*. Her legs are spread out, and someone has taken her pink pants and her underwear away. Normally modest, Sarah doesn't care that her womanhood is on display for the entire room at this moment. Prajul is relieved that the doctor and nurses in the room are all female.

Exactly when Sarah's cervix is ten centimeters dilated, the head starts to crown. Prajul can see a purplish blob with dark hair, and it seems that everyone in the room starts screaming at Sarah: "Push! Push now!" Sarah's face is twisted in pain, and her own screams drown out the others'. The baby's head fights to get out, and when Sarah gives a final big push, Prajul imagines a sucking sound when it breaks free of her body, like

when a plunger is disengaged. Its body, still attached to her via a slimy umbilical cord, follows surprisingly easily. The little blob is brutally held by its feet as a nurse slaps its bottom, but then it draws in air and wheezes out a sweet, oh so tiny cry that makes Sarah and Prajul collapse together in joyful tears. It's alive. Their baby is finally here.

Prajul's hands are shaking when he's handed the scissors to cut the umbilical cord. He's afraid he'll miss, even though the cord between the two brightly-colored plastic clamps seems to stretch on endlessly. *Snip.* The baby is cleaned and dried and placed in Sarah's arms, *just for a second* as the nurse warns. Sarah peeks down at the tiny being, then draws back the swaddling clothes so Prajul can see their child. He watches Sarah touch the tiny hands in wonder, those wrinkly little fingers like grains of rice, and runs the tip of her index finger along the bottom of the impossibly tiny, wrinkly little feet. Its skin is dark like his, but the baby has ugly white patches on its stomach and thigh as if someone spilled bleach on it, or as if pieces of Sarah fought for their place on its brown body. Sarah fingers the splotches, exploring the baby's soft, delicate skin. Its genitals are blue and of exceptional size. Although he knows they're just swollen right now, Prajul feels a flush of pride. It's a boy.

Later, while Sarah rests, Prajul drinks a foul cup of vending machine coffee, then locates their son in the Natal Intensive Care Unit. A handmade sign announces, "Baby Sandji, 5 pounds, 9 ounces" above a transparent incubator. Now that their six-year wait is over, now that they are parents, he's afraid to get too close to his own child. He is ashamed that his first adjective upon seeing his son's body was "ugly." He wishes he could be more like Sarah, the loving and accepting way she stroked their son's tiny body, the beam

on her face as she had looked at him and mouthed, “He’s perfect.” Prajul steps closer to see the child again. His baby boy.

He’s frightened by the blue plastic wires that slither up to the impossibly small body, but the blonde nurse (Kimberly, according to her smiley-faced name tag), assures him they are just a precaution in case his son needs help breathing. The baby’s kicking little feet are encased in doll-sized blue booties. His head is shaped funny, small and angular like an alien’s, and his eyes are a jaundiced yellow. His tiny fists occasionally pump in the air as if celebrating the victory of his birth. Each fist pump reveals additional splashes of white on his arm, snaking over the side of his wrist. As Prajul continues to watch his son those splotches take shape, start to form images. Tiny flowers. A hummingbird. A heart. The longer he stares, the more beauty he can see in those splashes of white. They are not unlike the henna tattoos his female relatives receive for their weddings—just a reversal of color, lighter instead of darker. He watches, transfixed. It’s not until a nearby machine beeps in alarm and the nurses swoop in to shoo Prajul away that he realizes the fists, the flowers, and the birds are still. His son has stopped breathing.

The next few minutes are a blur for Prajul. Shoved aside by the nurses, he has somehow wandered back into Sarah’s room. As soon as she hears about the close call their son has had, his wife demands information. As Dr. Finklestein joins them, Prajul notes with distaste that the doctor reeks of cigarettes. She must sneak outside to smoke between births.

“Premature babies often struggle with apnea, a condition where they can stop breathing for 20 seconds or more,” Dr. Finklestein informs them. Her voice sounds mechanical, and he wonders how often she must deliver such news. “While in the NICU, they are constantly monitored for these occurrences and nurses are always standing by to help re-stimulate their breathing. Your son is actually doing very well, considering. Babies’ lungs typically take 34 weeks to fully develop.” How long will the apnea last? they want to know, but the doctor can’t say.

“We’re monitoring him as best we can,” she tells them. “It may take several weeks in incubation before your son is breathing without interruption.” Several weeks without their son; several weeks of watching his tiny body in that little glass prison. They are holding hands again as the doctor speaks, holding them tightly. “The only thing you can do right now is to get some rest.” She looks at Prajul as sternly as she looks at Sarah.

Sarah must spend the night in the hospital. Her hair is plastered to her face from the delivery, and Prajul moves a loose strand away from her dark-circled eyes. She jokes that at least she’ll be able to see her toes now, and a nurse who overhears agrees that Sarah will have lost her water weight by the time she leaves the hospital the next day. She’s already well on her way. Sarah’s thin arm restrains Prajul’s arm as he’s about to leave. “Can you check on Likka?” she asks. He’s so tired that at first he thinks she’s asking about the baby, but of course they haven’t named him yet. She’s asking about the cat. He nods yes, he’ll check on the cat. Sarah smiles.

At home, Prajul finds the house dark and empty, more so now that his presence only represents a third of their family. He thinks of their son, wondering whether he is

sleeping or crying or needing nurses to help him breathe at this moment or whether he's beyond their help. He thinks of Sarah, whether she pines for their son, or for Prajul, or whether she is sleeping a peaceful, dreamless sleep. Remembering her request, he sets out to check on Likka. Forget what his mother reared him to think; a cat cannot dictate luck. Like it or not, his wife is fond of this creature. Likka's food dish is empty yet again, and as he looks around the house Prajul recalls those urine-yellow eyes, that splotchy nose and face. It's funny how he can recall its face first, before its freakish extra leg. He pictures the cat sitting in the recliner with Sarah, snuggling against her side, freak leg splayed, as it licks its stomach. Then Prajul is struck by a thought. Likka has been eating so much lately, and hiding even from Sarah. With all the focus on their own pregnancy, have they missed signs of the cat's?

He leaps from the old recliner. Turning on the hallway light, he takes the stairs two at a time to the top. The linen closet is often left ajar so they grab clean towels in the morning. It's the only place upstairs with soft padding, a place they hadn't looked closely for the missing cat. Sure enough, when he opens the door all the way and peers deep inside, he spies those familiar yellow eyes. It, or she, isn't alone. Likka reclines on some white linens, now stained with drying pinkish-brown mucus. The cat is on her side, exposing pink and black nipples on her now-smaller stomach. She is surrounded by five tiny kittens, still too weak to climb to the higher nipples. Two nurse, two mewl plaintively, and one is silent. Those suckling and meowing have cute faces and uniform coats: two black, one brown, one white. The fifth one, the quiet one, is patchy like Likka—and like his and Sarah's son. It also has a smaller version of the mother cat's

confused pink, black and white-splashed nose. Although it can't see yet, it crawls determinedly forward as if knowing there is more to see outside the linen closet. Prajul inspects it as he'd done with their newborn son only hours earlier, this time checking for extra arms, legs or tails. He finds only one flaw: the kitten has six little toes on each paw instead of five, 24 toes in all. Inbreeding, he suspects.

But he can't help himself. Prajul needs contact right now, and he gently strokes the kitten's tiny head with a fingertip, remembering how his son's tiny fingers touched his own. The moment he makes contact the kitten releases a noise. It's a sweet, tiny little meow, nothing like its mother's scratchy voice. Again Prajul remembers the superstitions upon which he was raised, the bad omen a cat's meow brings. It's fur is soft as down. He realizes that the white fabric Likka rests on is not just any linen but the beautiful silk sheets his mother shipped him and Sarah as a wedding present. They are ruined, stained with blood. The kitten meows again, butting Prajul's fingers with its soft, minuscule head for more contact. When the phone begins to ring, Prajul is still frozen in place, surrounded by blood, one multi-legged cat, and five kittens.

Come Tomorrow

It's lashing when Meg arrives at Heuston Station, but she's not concerned about the rain. It's her thoughts that worry her. Since boarding the train at Eyre Square, she's been consumed with Daibhi, or more so, with that, that *thing* he placed in her bag—the pregnancy test. She's no more settled than when she bade her family farewell this morning, ages ago. She checks her watch now; it's just half-two. If she walks straight on to O'Connell she'll make the 3:00 bus to UCD.

Passing a lunch counter, Meg briefly considers a bap. She hadn't been able to face her mother's full breakfast—bangers, rashers, beans, even black and white pudding. Meg should be raving by now, but she passes on the dodgy pre-made sandwich. If she didn't want her mum's fry this morning, she won't want this rotting stuff now. She and her flatmates must have left *some* food in the fridge before leaving for Christmas. Meg's just glad to be

back in the Pale, the Dublin region, especially for this break from Daibhi, the maybe-father to her maybe-child. She needs some time—even if there’s not much of it to be had. Only the day to settle in before Daibhi’s arrival tomorrow. And for the first time since she met him last summer, she’s dreading seeing him.

She swings her duffel bag over one shoulder and heads down Market Street into the city. Passing the River Liffey, she notes that its odor (her friend Katie calls it the “Sniffy”) is stronger than ever. It’s likely all this rain making the river swell, but her heart bolts anyway. Didn’t she read somewhere that that heightened sense of smell is a sign of pregnancy?

The city is quiet today. Few tourists visit Ireland in winter. They hold out for spring so their photos of Dingle Peninsula and the Blarney Stone have color, unlike today’s gray. When Meg passes the Guinness factory, though, a sudden ray of sun emerges from the sky and collides with the gold lettering, blinding her. Just like that, the bucketing rain slows to a drizzle and more rays of sun peek out. Her spirits lift a bit with the clouds. It’s good to see the sun in January, a rarity if ever there was one.

Brilliant! She arrives on O’Connell Street just as a #10 bus pulls up. Meg climbs aboard, fishing in her coat for two Euros, then heads up the stairs. She’d always loved the double-decker buses in the city with their view of Dublin from over the driver’s head. The bus is jammers with college students, but there are two seats on the upper level. Perhaps luck is with her after all. Now if only she can keep her mind off that damned test, and off Daibhi.

Out the window, passers-by dash down O’Connell. A man leaning against the bus stand outside is reading yesterday’s *Mirror*, but Meg can’t make out the headlines. They’re all rubbish anyway. The man is oblivious to a couple next to him getting off. As they kiss, the bloke’s hands explore the woman’s jabs. Instead of slapping his hands away from her

chest, she's sliding her hand toward his knob—right there in daylight! If anyone needs a pregnancy test, it's this tart. Daibhi would be horrified to see that. Or would he? After last night, Meg isn't sure she knows what he'd do anymore.

Then, Meg sees a young woman pushing a pram. Meg gapes as the woman's baby's little arm that waves blindly from the pram. She can't tell if the tot is being friendly or demanding. *Look up*, Meg entreats the young snogging couple silently as the woman with the pram approaches them. *See what's to become of you*. But of course the couple can't hear her thoughts. Meg watches the young mammy park her pram and lean in to check on the tot. She has long, dark hair like Meg, and she looks tired. Jaded, in fact. Meg stares at the woman, wondering what her life is like, what Meg's own life would be like...

"Excuse me, is this seat taken?" a strange voice asks above her ear. Meg jumps and looks up to see a blond bloke, perhaps five or six inches taller than Daibhi, standing in the bus aisle. From the looks of his baggy denims and the oversized white trainers on his feet, he's an American. Probably in the exchange program.

"No," she murmurs, pulling her bag into her lap to make room.

"Thanks!" the Yank exclaims and slides against her. To her surprise, he holds out his hand. "I'm Keith Groom."

She shakes the hand gingerly. "Meg," she responds.

"Nice to meet you, Meg!" No one should look that excited to meet a person. "Are you in college? I'm on my way to University College Dublin."

"I, too," she admits.

“No kidding!” he exclaims. His enthusiasm is unnerving. He reminds Meg of an expression her Da uses sometimes: *delira and excira*, meaning “delighted and excited.” Several others on the bus look up at his voice, but Keith Groom doesn’t notice. “What a coincidence!”

Coincidence. Right. Nearly all on the bus will be heading to the UCD; they’re on one of only two buses on the Dublin route to stop there. The woman outside is beginning to push her pram again.

“So what’s your last name, Meg?” Keith presses.

“Sorry?” Meg jumps. The Yank’s good-natured face is just inches from hers.

“Oh, gosh, don’t apologize. And don’t worry, I’m not stalking you or anything, I just want to see if we’re related. See, some of my dad’s relatives are Irish. I think some are still living in Ireland, but I’ve never met them. I’m studying here for the semester.”

No fuck, Meg thinks. “No, sorry,” she answers. “I can’t say I know any Grooms.” She’s beginning to regret taking one of the empty seats. As the bus lurches off, Meg forces herself not to crane her neck to watch the girl and her pram one last time.

“Don’t worry about it,” Keith pushes on. “Just thought I’d ask. It would be wild to meet a relative right off the bat.” He speaks so fast, it’s difficult to follow. “I’m just glad to finally be here. What a trip! A six-hour flight next to a snoring guy, then I get soaked waiting for the bus to show up in Shannon to take me to Dublin. And then, when I get there, they say I have to take *another* bus just to get to UCD, which it turns out isn’t actually in Dublin!” He pauses and looks past Meg to the window. Despite the complaints, his eyes are lit like a child’s on Christmas as they pass through City Centre. “This is so cool. I’ve never

been on a double-decker bus.” He pauses and Meg takes a breath. But then he leans back and starts in again: “It’s my own fault, though.” *Jaysus*. It was endless. “I wanted to do the independent study abroad thing instead of the BU program where they hold your hand every step of the way. They probably would have given me a bus schedule and stuff if I went with BU. But it’s all part of the fun, right?”

He’s still staring, and Meg looks blankly back at him. Is the lad thick? He doesn’t *seem* crazy, but he also doesn’t seem able to stop talking. She’s no idea what a BU program is, and though it’s a treat to take her mind off Daibhi and the pregnancy test for a moment, her head’s beginning to ache from this one. And her silence doesn’t seem to faze him at all.

“Of course, I didn’t think to get a phrasebook or anything. When I went to check my bus ticket reservation the woman asked for my second name and I said Jason! She laughed when she read my passport. I didn’t realize ‘second name’ meant ‘last name’.”

“Em, yeah,” Meg finally answers. “Second name or family name.” *A phrasebook!* Did he not know the Irish speak English?

“Yeah!” he exclaims and shifts even closer to her, encouraged. “There’s a bunch of stuff like that I have to learn. What else is there?”

“What else? As in, what other words might possibly be spoken in Ireland?” Meg is beginning to get a bit cheesed off. Does a sign above her head read, “Free tour guide”?

Keith plugs on. “Oh, I know there must be tons. See, there’s this pub, M.J. O’Connor’s, back where I’m from. They have this mural on the wall with Irish slang, so I knew some words. I’ve been writing down all the new ones since I got here. Let’s see what I have...” He pulls a small black notebook out of his jacket pocket with scribbled writing.

“OK, ‘knackered’ is really tired... ‘Chockablock’ is really full or crowded... ‘Jumper’ is a sweater and ‘Guard’ is a policeman... ‘Half-one’ means 1:30—that one really threw me off in Shannon!... And ‘second name’ means last name.” He looks up again. “That’s all I have so far. What else do I need to know?”

“Yeh need to know that Belfield is our stop,” Meg mutters, lifting her bag and standing. The bus is pulling up to campus. At least the ride seemed quicker than usual—and without drawing her thoughts to Daibhi. There’d been no way to think of her situation with this Yank jabbering away in her ear.

“Oh, cool, we’re here?” Keith asks, looking over her head toward the buildings. “Awesome. Well, Meg, it was really great meeting you. I hope to see you around sometime.” He snaps the notebook shut and hops into the aisle to let her out of her seat.

“Yeah, sure,” she lies. With 20,000 UCD students, she doubts their paths will cross.

Outside, the sun is still out, but it’s readying to set at only half-three. Fecking January. Keith has stopped to tie one of the laces on his trainers. His blond hair catches some of the sun’s final, desperate rays. Meg heaves the duffel bag back on her shoulder and escapes toward her flat in Merville. She hears Keith’s voice behind her, asking someone where Merville Hall is. *Fuck*. She doubles her pace.

At the door, though, Meg has to open her bag to take out her key. She tries to avoid looking inside, knowing she’d only glimpse the pregnancy test and get all out of sorts again.

“Well, look who it is!” Keith jogs to catch her as she slides the key in the lock. “The same bus, the same school, and now we’re even in the same dorm!”

“Amazing,” she mutters, but she holds the door open. He struggles past with two enormous suitcases and she walks in behind him.

“I’m in apartment 101,” he tells her. “Do you know where that is?” He stands staring at her expectantly, unaware of the giant “101” written on the door next to his head.

For the first time in days, Meg bursts into laughter. “What?” Keith asks, puzzled. Sputtering, she can only point to the room number.

“Independent programme?” she teases. The lad is useless, but it feels good to smile a bit.

Keith’s laugh is as good-natured as his face. “OK, so I have to learn to open my eyes,” he replies. “Hey, I get a little sidetracked when there are pretty girls around.”

It’s an awful line. He’s a terrible flirt. There’s the pregnancy test burning a hole in her bag and Daibhi, and her entire life, to worry about. Yet the damp Yank and his bright disposition remind Meg of that sunshine when she’d walked by the Guinness factory.

Still, she’s shocked to hear herself ask, “Would yeh like some tea, Keith Groom?”

He follows her upstairs to 214, where they discover that her flat is empty. The others aren’t back yet. She gives a quick tour, which consists of pointing at Katie’s, Edel’s, and Annaleigh’s locked bedroom doors, the common room, and the kitchen. At least they’ve left the place presentable. Meg pre-programs the wall timer so they’ll have hot water later, then lifts the kettle. Keith continues to talk as she wets the tea.

“I’m from Massachusetts,” he volunteers.

“Yeah? And which state is that in?”

He laughs, and she reddens when he explains her gaffe. “I go to school at BU, in Boston,” he says, and she’s heard of it. Daibhi’s a mad sports fan, even of American baseball.

“Ah, Boston. Home of the Red Sox,” she recalls, earning an appreciative “woo-hoo” from Keith.

“And you?” he asks. “Are you from Dublin?”

“Not even close,” she replies. “I’m from Gort, on the west coast. Near Galway.”

“Oh,” he nods, writing it down in his black notebook. “Cool.” He seems to recognize Galway, at least. Perhaps the lad has a basic grasp of Irish geography. The tea is starting to whistle and she gets up to fetch the milk.

The fridge is a shock. Their butter is lemon yellow, the milk curdled. A manky smell hits her nose. “There’s no milk, but we do have sugar,” she offers.

“Oh, no! Uh, well, pretty much everything else I eat is sugar, so I never use it in coffee or tea,” Keith answers. “I’m sorry.” The tragic look on his face is comical, as if refusing sugar is a personal insult. He even pulls wrappers out of his pockets, shedding tiny chocolate flakes on his trainers, to show her the Cadbury bars he’d bought at a vending machine when he landed in Shannon, as if she doesn’t believe him.

To avoid smiling at his earnestness, Meg walks the milk carton over the sink and plops spoiled clods into the drain. “Then I suppose we’ll have a pretty drab cup o’ tea.”

She seats him at the table and pours the Rosie Lee into two cups, adding sugar only to hers. On afterthought, she snatches the wrappers he's still holding and deposits them in the bin. Although the room is cold from neglect, Keith's hand is warm.

Keith's talk doesn't cease during tea, either. He's a computer science major at home, but is taking English and Irish history courses for his semester abroad.

"It's something I've kind of always wanted to do, and where better to read James Joyce? But man, you have such a crazy school system here. I can't believe I'm taking *ten* different classes! I just hope I don't get too confused between them all and, like, walk into the wrong classes with the wrong books. It's something I did all the time in high school. And I'd dream about walking into class naked, like, every night. Everyone would laugh at me, although I'd like to think they were just jealous. Did you ever have that dream, Meg?"

She's rattled by the way he leans forward as if he can't wait to hear her answer. "Em, well, em...I've always gone to Catholic school..." His head might fall off if he nods it any harder for her to go on. "So I'd have been belted by nuns if I walked around in the nip like yer dreams," she finishes, sipping her tea.

Keith's laugh is as loud as the rest of him. He may be a bit of a nutter, but he has a nice laugh. Friendly.

"I'm an English major myself," she tells him charitably. "Joyce and the like. We may have some of the same classes."

"Yeah? What are you going to do with that? A degree in English?"

Meg starts at the question. It's not that no one's ever asked what she'll do with her life. It's that no one's asked her that the day after she realized she might be pregnant. She's always seen herself as finishing college. But would she continue schooling with a baby? That is, if she *has* a baby. Daibhi'd been so insisitive last night on the abortion, she'd no room to contemplate another option.

She's been quiet too long. Keith's watching her, his broad forehead wrinkled, and Meg answers his question as airily as she can. "Oh, whatever I get into down the line."

"Oh," Keith says, and gulps the remainder of his tea. Then he says "oh" again, louder, after catching sight of his watch. "It's getting late!" Meg cranes her neck. Outside, the sun has dipped to the horizon. "I should go find my own apartment. You know, if I can manage that." He salvages one of his grins, and Meg makes herself smile back.

"I do hope yeh find it alright," she answers. "It was lovely meeting yeh."

"Lovely meeting you as well, Meg," he says. He bows to her, clearly in jest, and yet gallantly. She feels her smile grow a bit.

"See yeh," she says, then sees him out the door.

It's even worse after Keith leaves. It becomes harder to breathe the more the sun dips below the horizon, as if tomorrow is pressing upon her. For the first time in the months she's known him, Meg has no desire to see Daibhi. Last night was unbelievable, the dead seriousness on his face as he told her he'd reserved a train to Sunday—and thrust a Boots pharmacy bag into her hands.

“Here,” he’d said. “I’ll come to Dublin and we’ll do this together. If it turns out you’re pregnant, I’ll book us a ferry to Liverpool.”

She’d nearly dropped the package. “Liverpool! Daibhi, I’m only about a week late. They can’t even...Do that...So early, can they?”

His had eyes flicked; she suspected he wasn’t sure. They were both in above their heads. Meg didn’t want to be a mother at nineteen, and she wasn’t convinced she was meant to marry Daibhi, either. But traveling to England for an abortion would be wicked, whether now or later. How could she—they—live with that choice?

“They can do what they need to do, just like us.” Daibhi’s firm words shocked her. His mind was made up, even if Meg’s was still in flitters. Then they didn’t speak again until she’d finished packing and they’d said their goodbyes. Stiffly, like strangers.

Meg’s so lost in thought about Daibhi, she doesn’t hear Katie’s key in the lock. She jumps and turns when thin, strong arms fling around her, accompanied with a squeal.

“MEG! How are yeh, pet? How was yer Christmas? I missed yeh loads. The holliers seemed to go on for donkey’s years!” Katie steps back and slaps a hand to her mouth. “Oh, feck! I meant to phone yeh back. I didn’t have the mobile on when yeh called last night—I was with this fella. Was everythin’ all right?”

Meg stares at her friend. She hardly remembered dialing Katie’s mobile last night. Sure, she’d felt lost after speaking with Daibhi, but what had she been thinking to call Katie? Katie can be a right minx. Sex is her world. Meg can’t confide in someone like that, as

much as she loves her friend. The only help she might offer is the name of an abortion clinic. For all Meg knows, she's *had* one by now.

“Course,” Meg lies. “Sorry. I just wanted to, em, check when yeh'd be back.” Would this be one of many lies she'll have to tell? She feels herself flush, but Katie doesn't seem to notice. Instead she's off talking about ‘Steve,’ yet another fella Katie likely won't ring or see again. As she talks, Katie pulls out bags of food her mum sent her back from Glendalough with. They toss items aside to make room for the fresh food, and Meg is glad Katie doesn't notice the soiled teacups.

Katie chatters as she unpacks item after item for Meg to put away—“Look at this, Fairy has a new scent, green apple! Our dishes will smell like an orchard while we wash them! Ah, Mam's homemade bread! Glad I brought milk, looks like we're all out...” As she watches, Meg's stomach begins to hurt. She realizes she'd murder for some supp. Is that what being pregnant will be like, feeling this peckish, having to eat for two? *No, no, no.* She hasn't eaten all day, that's all. Save for that one cup of tea—but she doesn't need to think of the Yank now. She's no reason to ever see him again. Anyway, she's enough to think of.

“Fancy some takeaway?” she asks. Katie puts down the milk and grins.

“That'd be grand!”

They search their collection of takeaway menus and Katie selects a local chipper. Perhaps some food in Meg's stomach will help ease this sick feeling about Daibhi's visit tomorrow. Even if it's beer-battered and fried, *something* has to help.

Twenty minutes later they're in front of Merville, where a boy delivers greasy paper bags of fish and chips. As the car drives off, Meg hears her name. *Oh, for feck's sake*: Keith Groom is hollering and waving madly from a ground-floor window. She's forgotten his bedroom is so close to Merville's main door. Katie only pauses to shoot Meg a *where've you been hiding this one?* look before dragging her toward his window.

"We meet again!" Keith exclaims when they approach. "Who's your friend?"

"I'm Katie. And who are you?" Katie asks, practically rubbing against his window and then shaking Keith's hand. They chat dully, discovering that they're of no relation. Keith and his quest for relations! *That wouldn't stop the tart*, Meg thinks, watching Katie venomously, but then she shakes away the thought. *He's not my fella. Daibhi is...Or at least he was...*The food in her arms feels heavy, and she tries to catch Katie's eye. *Let's go, Katie. Come now, pet. Yeh can play with the Yank another time!*

Katie finally tears herself away and Meg sighs in relief as they head to the door. Then Katie stops and turns back.

"Keith, would yeh like to go to Temple Bar with us tonight?"

Meg's nails dig so hard into her own wrist, she fears she'll draw blood.

"I'd love to!" Keith says. "What time?"

"We'll see yeh at eight," Katie grins, and Keith winks before shutting the window.

Meg can only stomp into Merville behind Katie. Like everything else in her life, she's no power to stop things.

They haven't even topped the stairs when Katie starts in. "Where'd this Keith Groom come from? Why didn't you mention you had a new Yank friend?"

"Nothing to mention," Meg mumbles, pulling out her key. She lets them inside and collapses on the couch, opening a can of Lilt. "We met on the bus today. I made him some tea. That's all of it." She slugs some Lilt, then belches as the soda's bubbles hit her stomach. Could a fetus feel bubbles?

"Yeh made him tea!" Katie exclaims, slapping fried fish on their plates and pouring malt vinegar over the chips. "So did yeh get yer hole with him then? Shall I be phonin' Daibhi to find himself a new lass?"

Meg nearly spits out the Lilt at the mention of sex and Daibhi together. "Katie, shut yer gob! I hardly *met* Keith. How could I shag him?"

"How *couldn't* you?" Katie asks, shaking her head. "He's a ride. Ah well, Saint Meghan, I guess if you can be with Daibhi for months now and never get yer hole once, I can't expect you to ride a lad from a bus." She pops open her own can of Lilt and chugs.

But I did get my hole with Daibhi! Meg's voice in her head is so loud. Why isn't it coming out her mouth? *We shagged in my bedroom on Christmas day. And now my period is late, I may be carrying a babby that he doesn't want, and my life is bollocks!*

But she can't talk to Katie. She's her best friend, but she's no real advice to give Meg. Once when they'd gotten shlossed and stayed up drunkenly confiding in each other, Katie'd shocked Meg with graphic stories, including shagging two fellas *at once* in final year of secondary. When Meg admitted to being a virgin, Katie's response had been, "What, afraid of getting up the pole? That's why God invented Smarties!" and showed Meg her

birth control pills. Meg had been morto at her friend's free attitude about sex. After an entire childhood of church and Catholic school, sex before marriage wasn't something Meg could picture for herself. Until eight days ago, that is. Now she's much more on her mind.

Katie's staring at Meg, looking worried. It reminds Meg of Keith's creased forehead when she'd thought of Daibhi earlier. "Yeh know I was just having you on, yeah, Meg? I know you're pure as Virgin Mary. Right, pet? Yer not cheesed off at me, are yeh?"

Go on, tell her. Instead, Meg smiles. "I know, Katie. It's fine, really."

"Grand," Katie sighs, and collapses on the sofa, flipping on the telly. But Meg is too miserable to pay attention to the screen. *Virgin Mary indeed.* The fish and chips and Lilt seem to be battling in her stomach. Katie finally turns off the telly when old footage of Becks playing for Man U flashes on and then off the screen. "David Beckham," she sighs. Katie's no fan of sports. Just the handsome players. "He's still a ride, even after movin' to America." She slaps her hand on her knee and stands. "And speakin' of rides and Yanks, don't we have a date tonight?" She reaches an arm to Meg. "Whadyeh say we go get ossified?"

Now *that's* all Meg needs: drinking too much. But wait—drinking too much is better than thinking too much. And it's college, isn't it? Meg lets herself be pulled up, and Katie marches her to the mirror. "But let's clean us up a bit, first, shall we?" She smooths some flyaway strands of Meg's dark hair, then fluffs her own stylish spikes.

"Does it matter?" Meg asks from Katie's side. "It's only Temple Bar. Tourist traps. It's not like I've plans with Bono tonight."

Katie's reflection sighs at Meg's. "Pet, whatever has yeh puttin' on the puss tonight, it's time to get over it. It's Saturday evening. You're back in the Pale—and with *me*, I might add. Let's have some Ri-Ra with this Keith fella."

"Katie, we don't even *know* Keith," Meg pouts.

"A nice-lookin' lad like that? What's to know?" Katie winks. "Even if he turns out to be an eejit...He may have some nice-lookin' flatmates."

Can Katie think of nothing but blokes? But Meg can't stay in alone, thinking of tomorrow and whether she and Daibhi are in the family way and what's to come if they are.

So off she and Katie go.

"How's she cuttin'?" Katie asks when Keith opens his door, sweeping past him while he seems to be making sense of her greeting. Meg adds a "howyeh" and follows her friend. Inside, the flat is disgusting. The carpet sports nasty stains, the endtables hide under dirty cups and discarded fags, and the walls are covered in various banners: Carlsberg, Guinness, Harp, Murphy's, Caffrey's. The manky kitchen features a grime-splattered cooker, and an open door on the side shows off a toilet straight out of *Trainspotting*.

Katie shrinks back against Meg. "God, what a tip!"

"Tip?" Keith is looking to Meg for translation. Still his tour guide.

"Mess," she mutters.

"Oh! Yeah, it is. I get a feeling my roommates are gonna be slobs."

"Are they here?" Katie looks around as if expecting them to rush out from hiding.

“No, no one’s here. Well, actually, one guy,” Keith confesses. “Scott, another American, showed up”—he nods his head at a closed bedroom door and lowers his voice—“But I don’t think he’d want to come out with us. He’s pretty shy. He’s from Iowa...A different state than Boston,” he winks at Meg.

“Oh,” Katie says. “Right, then.” She brightens and snatches Keith’s arm in hers. “The three of us it is. On the lash we go!”

“Drinking,” Meg whispers to Keith before he can ask. “A lot.”

He laughs and holds his other arm to her. “On the lash it is!” When they get to the doorway, though, Meg lets go and allows him and Katie to go first. They’d never fit through the door all together like that.

“Are you hungry?” Keith asks as he locks the door behind him. “I could eat a horse.”

Of course not; their tumbs are full of grease from the fish and chips. Meg is about to say so when Katie replies, “Famished!” She winks at Meg, who rolls her eyes.

They board a bus to An Lar. “It means “City Centre,” Katie tells Keith as they climb in. “They put it on the buses to confuse the tourists.” *Good, let her play tour guide tonight.*

“It’s empty!” Keith exclaims. “Don’t people go out on Saturday nights?”

“We’re early in the route,” Katie reminds him. “As we closer we’ll fill with students from Trainers and DCC.”

“Trinity College and Dublin City College,” Meg translates before he can ask. Katie nods, then pulls Keith into one of the front window seats to watch the road ahead. Meg stands in the aisle near them.

“So, where can we find some Irish grub?” Keith asks, looking up at Meg.

“Irish! But we’ve just come back from holliers—from holiday,” Katie answers first. “Meg and I’ve had our fill of Irish fare. Wouldn’t yeh fancy some Indian?”

“Uh...” Keith falters. “I guess I don’t get to eat Indian food much...”

Meg’s reminded again of Daibhi’s finality last night. *I’ve booked us a ferry to Liverpool.* Keith seems as trapped as Meg had—even if the situation isn’t anything as serious as the rest of her life. She knows what it’s like to be unable to stand up for yourself, and she’d hate herself if she didn’t help Keith. She gives Katie an entreating smile.

“Come now, pet, what about Gallagher’s? You love their boxties.”

Keith pounces on the word. “Hey, boxties; I’ve had those! The little potato quesadilla things, right? Those are good! I’d love to try them here in Dublin.”

“Yeah, sure,” Katie agrees quickly. “If boxties are what yer wantin’, then Gallagher’s is your only man.” She smiles at Keith and settles against him with her hand on his leg, and Meg stares straight ahead. *Relax. Keith can handle himself.*

Once off the bus, Katie takes Keith’s arm again and leads him to the restaurant. Meg follows, wondering why Katie’s behavior bothers her. Meg’s taken, of course. More than taken: for all she knows, she may be carrying Daibhi’s child. But she isn’t sure she and Daibhi will be all right after tomorrow. And she isn’t sure poor Keith deserves to be just another one-night ride for Katie. But for now, she simply follows the pair.

Gallagher's is filled with locals, and they're seated straight away with two older men who crane their grizzled necks over Keith's head to view a match on the telly. Katie and Keith order Guinness ("the Black Stuff," Katie coaches him), but Meg freezes up over whether she can order alcohol. What if she *is* pregnant, and she somehow talks Daibhi into not going to Liverpool—what then? She finally asks for a glass of water. When their server brings menus she just orders a cup of potato and leek soup, which comes immediately. Meg dunks in pieces of brown bread, playing with her food. Keith's and Katie's large plates of rashers and boxties are delivered next and they dive in.

"This is great; these make Canadian bacon look thin!" Keith announces between gobfuls. "Delicious." Katie's head bobs like a swan's, her own mouth full. *Katie, you don't even like rashers.* Keith is riveted by the two men at the other end of their table who are arguing over the football match they're watching.

"Cork!" one is shouting. "Are yeh mad? It's Kerry yeh'll want to win."

The man's companion is shocked. "Kerry! That's blindin' mental talk, Eamon."

"Shut yer bleedin' cakehole, yeh gobshite," the first one orders, tipping up his pint glass. "There's to be no talkin' down to Kerry."

"I will in me arse," the other responds, cheeky as a naughty schoolboy.

Meg sneaks a look at Keith to see what he thinks of this display and finds him dutifully scribbling down every word in his little black notebook. She nearly doubles over from a laugh that bursts from some hidden cavity in her chest, and Keith turns to her.

“That’s the second time I’ve seen you laugh,” he announces. “It’s nice. I wish you’d do it more.” Before she can speak, he holds up his hands defensively. “I know, I know, you’re quiet. That’s cool. I’m just sayin’.”

I’m not always quiet! she wants to respond. *It’s just that my life is turned arseways right now. And Katie’s so busy actin’ the tart, Daibhi wantin’ to kill our babby, that I’m completely alone.* But none of that is Keith’s fault, and she caves at his expectant face, responding with a dig. “I guess you just need to be funnier.”

“I’ll try,” he promises. It’s nice the way he smiles at her poor jokes.

Katie is bored with their talk. “Come on, Keith. Let’s be off. We should be pissin’ up the night. It’s authentic Irish to get polluted, you know.”

Keith grins when he works out Katie’s slang for drinking. “That’s right, we’re supposed to be on the lash! Who could say no to that?” He winks at Meg.

Out on the street, Katie has again monopolized Keith’s arm, now gushing about UCD.

“It’s great craic here. I love it. Yeh can bunk off all yer classes as long as yeh pass final exams. I went to perhaps five classes last semester.”

Three, Meg thinks. She studies Keith in front of her as they walk. His head turns left and right constantly as he exclaims over the Spire lit up against the sky or the moonlight over the Liffey (which is less sniffy now). Again she thinks of her Da’s expression: “delira and excira.” It’s nice; he’s different. Polar opposite of Daibhi, in fact.

Katie stops short, nearly making Meg crash into her, and squeals.

“*Liam?* Liam McEvoy?” She’s speaking to a black-haired bloke climbing off a Vespa. He looks like what her Da would call a corner boy. A good-for-nothing. He’s just Katie’s type. Or aren’t they all?

“Howyeh, Katie?” Liam asks. “Nice night, innit?” Meg vaguely remembers him. He’d been at their flat once or twice last semester. He doesn’t seem to recognize Meg.

She and Keith stand politely as Katie introduces them. Liam eyes the queue at Supermac’s, and Katie asks if he’s after some curry fries. Meg’s eyes goggle. Katie’s already eaten a second meal to flirt with Keith. Will she now eat a third to flirt with Liam?

But Liam’s whispering in Katie’s ear, and it’s not about food. Before Meg or Keith can react, Katie grins and hops on the Vespa behind Liam. “I’ll see yeh at the flat!” she calls to Meg—and hardly waves as she and Liam zip off. Meg’s dark mood floods back, and she’s so livid she can’t see straight. Katie’s invited Keith out, dragged Meg along, and then abandoned them both! Now what would she do with the Yank?

“Well, hey,” Keith teases, nudging her. “Should we pick up a guy on a Vespa, too? Bet it beats walking.” Then he seems to realize that Meg isn’t in a mood to be slagged.

“Hey, look. It’s been a really long day, and it sucks to get ditched by friends. Why don’t we just call it a night and grab a bus back to campus?”

“Yeah, sure, right.” Meg nods, and they fall into silent step.

But as they walk toward the bus stand, Keith’s quiet unnerves Meg. She’d liked him better delira and excira, even with his notebook. On the bus, all she’d wanted was to be left alone with her thoughts, but he’d kept pushing—and it’d been nice, not thinking about

Daibhi's visit tomorrow and that damned test. Now, she and Keith just happen to be walking by the Elephant & Castle, the least obnoxious pub in Temple Bar. She pauses at the door.

"Say, this is a good spot for a pint," Meg suggests slowly. "Are yeh interested?"

"Yeah, you mean it?" he asks, and his eyes light like the Spire. "Cool! That's great. I'd love a drink." He holds the door for her, and they sweep in.

The pub is quiet, with just one other couple inside. The bar steward gives them a friendly "howya" and pours their orders, but also points at the wallclock. Meg gets the message: it's after half-ten, nearly closing time. She and Keith choose a snug toward the back, squinting in the dark. The candle on the booth's table isn't for atmosphere.

Keith doesn't take long to start the questions, but at least he doesn't take out his blasted notebook. "So, Meg. What's your family like back in Gort?"

Family! Meg keeps her eyes on the tiny flame. "Em...I dunno...It's just my Ma, my Da, three brothers..." *Possibly a child on the way.*

"Yeah?" Keith whistles, impressed. "I'm an only child," he sighs. "I love all my friends, and my mom is great, but I've always wanted brothers or sisters. Or both."

It's impolite, but she can't help asking. "Has yer Da passed?"

"Passed? Oh, *died*. No, he's alive. They're just divorced."

"Oh. Sorry." She's forgotten how Americans love divorce. She wonders what Daibhi would think about divorce. A week ago she'd have thought he'd be horrified at the idea. But that was before he'd professed himself so eager to kill a child....

Keith is saying, “No, it’s no big deal. My parents are cool. It happened when I was ten. I don’t get to see my Dad too much, though. He remarried out West, has a new kid.”

As much as they fight, Meg’s Da and Mam would rather die than divorce. But it also seems Daibhi’d rather die than be a father right now. Meg is confused about it all.

“So, do you have a boyfriend?” Keith blurts. It’s a fair question, as she’s asked after his Da. She only reddens because she’d just been thinking of Daibhi.

“Em...Yeah. I’ve a fella back in Gort. Daibhi.”

“Yeah? Davy? Is he a good guy?”

“Most of the time,” Meg responds truthfully. At least she’d thought so until last night. Keith laughs at her response.

“Well, I gotta tell you, Meg, he’s a lucky guy. I hope he knows that.”

Meg sips at her pint. Keith pauses, then asks, “You know why I’m studying here?”

“To have an adventure?” she guesses.

“Yeah, that too. But I knew my family was from Ireland and I thought it would feel like home here, even if not like the home I’m from. Do you know what I mean?”

She does—a little—and nods. Arriving in the Pale was a wonderful feeling today, if only to distract her from her problems. “And does it? Feel like home?”

“When I’m with you it does.”

She’s glad he can’t see her redden in this gloom. Doesn’t he know he shouldn’t be so bold with a complete stranger? And home, what *was* home? She’s no idea. She’d never had to dream what a future with Daibhi would be. They hadn’t even been serious. Now that she

might be with his child, she's not sure if they *have* a future. She can't guess what tomorrow will bring.

"Meg, what's a word you'd use for something great, something really terrific?"

Thank God he's changed the subject. "Are yeh going to write it in your book?"

"I think I can remember. Come on, lemme have it." There was that grin again.

She thinks. "Brilliant. Savage. Em...Legend. Deadly."

"I think you're deadly, Meg." Despite herself, she laughs. It's not a proper use of the word.

"Seriously! It's awesome to find such good company my first night here. I really appreciate you showing me around."

"Yeh must be desperate," Meg responds. "But thanks." She doesn't know what else to do. He's a nice bloke, he truly is. Nicer than most.

"No, really. I can tell you'd rather be somewhere else, and probably with someone else like Davy, but you put up with me on the bus, and the dorm, and pretty much all over Temple Bar. You're really sweet." *Poor soul. If you only knew how ruined I was.* Her eyes blur and Keith leans over the candle, concerned. "Hey, don't worry about it. I didn't mean to scare you or anything. That's cool that you have a boyfriend, really. We can still hang out sometime, right? As friends?"

"Yeah, sure. Right." Meg tries to sound convincing, and Keith sits back. If only Daibhi'd shown such concern last night. She'd cried then too, at the thought of having a fetus ripped from her, but he hadn't wanted the alternative. Apparently there was no future with her, at least not now.

Looking around the pub, Meg notes the bar steward has been trying to catch their attention. It's eleven o'clock, and they're the last in the bar. "Oy!" he shouts. "Oy, you there! Have yehs no blindin' homes to go to?" Before Meg's put on her coat the steward has stalked over, blown out the candle on their table, and shoved off.

"I guess that's our cue to leave," Keith says from somewhere in the blackness, and Meg nods in case he can see her. They stumble across the pub and into the chill. People are spilling onto the street, some langered, some sober, most heading for the clubs. There are quite a few couples, and she thinks again of the test she'll be taking tomorrow with Daibhi, the first test she's never studied for. She shivers and wraps her arms around herself.

"Cold?" Keith asks.

"Ay. It'd freeze the balls off a brass monkey out here." Until Keith sputters, Meg doesn't realize she's used one of Katie's expressions.

"It would *what?!?*"

"Sorry, it means...It's cold." He always focused fully when he looks at her. It's unnerving, but not entirely unwelcome. She shakes it off. "Anyhow, we'd best be off for the bus. 'Else it's 12 euros for Jo Maxi."

"Jo Maxi? Who's that?"

"The taxi service."

"Ah."

They leg it over to O'Connell, but—feck!—they just miss the bus to UCD. The next isn't for nearly an hour.

“Guess I’m about to have my first Jo Maxi ride,” Keith says, cheerful as always.

They cross Middle Abbey Street and climb into one of the cabs queued up in the taxi rank by Wynn’s hotel. The driver plays old pop hits at top volume. Meg laughs as Keith cods around, mouthing along to the words: “*Tell me what you want, what you really, really want...*” He’s a ham, but Meg focuses on the lyrics as well. It’s a fair question, what the Spice Girls are asking. And Meg’s own answer is changing by the minute.

Back in Belfield, most flats are still lit. As the taxi nears Merville Hall, Meg points out her flat to Keith. There’s a flickering blue light from the telly. “My flatmate, Edel,” Meg informs him. “She’s a complete dosser. Just sits on her arse watchin’ telly all day.”

“Sounds like a fun girl,” Keith laughs. “Not much like Katie, isn’t she?”

Meg laughs as well. “Katie’s somethin’ else, all right.”

“Yeah, she seems pretty wild. I wonder what she and Liam are up to—no, wait, I think I can imagine. Heyyyy.” He switches gears. “Look what’s going on at my place.”

They can see into Keith’s first-floor flat, and the bloke in the window must be the other American Keith mentioned, Scott from Iowa. His trainers are as large and white as Keith’s, and he sports similar baggy denims as he irons and folds clothes on the common room table. He’s tidied up the flat nicely, and Meg can’t suppress a giggle when Scott holds up a pair of sparkling white Y-fronts for inspection. She didn’t even know briefs *could* be ironed. When Keith laughs too, Meg feels guilty for spying and marches to the door. Keith accompanies her to the bottom of the stairs to her flat, then halts, looking down at her.

“Like I said, Meg, it’s been deadly meeting you. No, wait; that made you laugh before. OK, it was, uh...Legend meeting you?”

“Let’s just say it was nice,” she answers. It *has* been nice. Somehow, in the few hours she’s known Keith, she can’t ever imagine having a conversation about abortion with him. Or any conversation in the way she and Daibhi’d talked last night.

“So, what are you doing tomorrow?” he asks, glancing at his watch. “Oh, wait, midnight. I guess it *is* tomorrow. So what are you doing today?” His grin is impish.

She smiles back weakly, again reminded that Daibhi is coming tomorrow. *Come tomorrow, depending on a pregnancy test, I might be discussing murder of a child.* “I suppose laundry.” She isn’t completely fibbing. She hadn’t been able to wash much over the holiday, what with her mum’s machine taking ages to wash and then dry each load, and with six people in the house. She’d been sure to wash the sheets from her bed, though. Her blood and Daibhi’s jip had left smears that she feared anyone else seeing.

“Yeah? Well, let me know if you need help ironing your underwear,” he winks.

Surprising herself, Meg blurts: “Keith, have yeh ever pictured being a father?”

“Me?” He’s thrown off balance for once. “Well, uh, I guess someday... When I’m ready...I mean, doesn’t everyone?”

Not Daibhi. “Em, yeah. Yeah, sorry for askin’. I think I’m just really tired.”

He smiles. ““Knackered,’ right?”

“Yes,” she smiles back, wide now, remembering again how his silly black notebook had made her laugh so hard at Gallagher’s. “Knackered. Have a good night, Keith.”

He smiles, salutes her, and spins around on his trainers, heading back to his flat. He turns around once and waves his mobile in the air, pointing at it and grinning. After his semi-advances, Meg hopes it wasn't a mistake to give him her phone number in the cab.

'A good night,' Meg thinks as she climbs the stairs. They've never felt so high, nor her door so far away. *Which leads to morning...Which leads to Daibhi's arrival. Which leads to...To...* She's no idea. But she's not sure she wants tomorrow to come.

Once in the door, Meg feels too jaded to greet her flatmates or see if Katie's returned. She cleans her teeth, glaring at a gob of paste Edel has left in their shared sink. A pale face in the mirror looks back at her with tired eyes. She looks away from herself to rinse but then looks up again. *Deadly*, she thinks, watching her reflection. The face is sad but pretty. *Doesn't everyone?* Keith's asked. But is this about Daibhi being a father, or her being a mother? She's nineteen. Could she really have a child, even if Daibhi let her carry it to term? Could she ever look Daibhi in the eye again? How have they got in this mess?

She shakes her head. It's useless. *At least I've had a laugh today. Several, in fact.* But today's over. It's Sunday morning now. Time's nearly up.

A yawn nearly rips Meg's cheeks, but she knows she can't sleep yet. Her duffel bag is still on top of her bed, and its contents beckon. *Go on, get it over with now. You'll be up all night if yeh don't. Yeh don't need Daibhi by your side to piss on a stick.* What could Daibhi do for Meg tomorrow except read the test along with her? He's nothing else to offer.

She crosses the room, watching her fingers unzip her bag and remove the package. When she pulls the box from the pharmacy bag a Boots receipt flutters out. Daibhi's spent

ten Euro on the test. That'd be nothing to the expense of the abortion he's planning, too. She nearly drops the box, guilty, but then remembers his face last night, the face of a stranger. She'll never get to sleep if she doesn't do this now.

"Clearblue," the box reads below a logo like a peacock's feathers. Meg holds the hard plastic, admiring its smooth whiteness. The tiny folded instructions promise the process will take hardly a minute. Brilliant. It also instructs Meg to watch in the stick's little square for either a "+" or "-" sign. So that's what it all comes down to: a minus, or a truncated little cross. How holy. She remembers what Katie'd called her earlier. *Saint Meghan, indeed.*

Meg peels down her trousers and drawers and considers how to do this. Finally she places the left cheek of her bum on the toilet and lifts her right side so her hand can steady the stick under her muff. It's awkward to sit like this, but she tenses her muscles, holding it in as long as she can. Despite what she's just told her reflection, she's not ready.

It all comes down to this test. To a tiny plus or minus sign. Everything she and Daibhi talked about, the rest of her life, all of it—

—When the fucking mobile rings, Meg jumps a metre. It can only be Daibhi at this hour. She slaps the mobile to her ear and hisses. "*JAYsus!* Yeh nearly put the heart crossways in me."

"The what? Uh...Hey, does that mean you don't miss me yet?" Keith Groom's voice fills the tiny bathroom, swirling around Meg. "I hope I'm not bothering you. Just wanted to wish you goodnight." Meg sags, nearly dropping the pregnancy test *and* her mobile. She

looks down at her feet, feeling dizzy. She'd never noticed how much hair Edel shed on the floor.

“Meg? Are you there?” Keith asks. He sounds miles away, yet warm. How can a voice be warm? Meg remembers his hand when she'd taken his sweets wrappers away, ages ago, and the rush she'd felt when he'd complimented her. She lifts the phone back to her ear.

“Yeah, sure, Keith. I'm here. Just knackered still.”

“Cool! Listen, Scott—my roommate?” Everything sounded like a question with Yanks. “I didn't think to pack sheets, but he lent me some. And I was thinking I should buy my own, which means I'll need to wash them, and since you said you had laundry to do tomorrow...I thought maybe you could show me a good laundromat or something.”

He's something else, he really is. Meg nearly smiles, picturing his lit-up face, but she's nearly sick over the pregnancy test. She can't possibly talk now. Keith can't help her.

“Keith, I'll have to ring yeh tomorrow. I'm, em, in the middle of something now. Good night, right?” She nearly clicks off the mobile but pauses to add, “Sleep well.”

After hanging up, she stares at the mobile in her hand. A laundromat! She'd never met anyone like Keith. She grips the pregnancy test again, feeling something flush through her. She's Meghan Catherine Connell. She's deadly. She's legend. She can do this.

When she finally unclenches, urine pours onto the stick, splashing Meg's fingers. Disgusting. When she finishes, she counts to 60 before pulling the wet stick from beneath her. Then she holds it up to the light and squints. The digital screen has turned pink, with neither a + or - sign in sight. Pink, what does pink mean? Jaysus! Is she having a girl?

Then Meg notices the liquid in the toilet is pink as well. Eight—nearly nine—days late, but her period's arrive. Her vision swims for a moment, and she puts her head near her feet again, trying to breathe deeply. She nearly shouts in joy. She's never been so happy to need the jam rags in her life. When she straightens, she tosses the soiled stick into the rubbish bin with as much force as she can muster, hoping it breaks into pieces.

It takes Meg some moments to realize she's still clutching her mobile in her other hand. How strange of Keith to call her so late. She pictures him lip-synching to Spice Girls in the taxi. And taking her hand in the pub over a candle.

It's late, but she knows Daibhi will be up. Sure enough he answers with a shout, music pounding in the background. He must be at Icon, his favorite club in Eyre Square, back in Galway where his life is—nothing like her life here at UCD. The noise in the background makes it easier for Meg to tell him about the test results. And to ask him not to come to Dublin tomorrow, or ever. *What was it the Americans call it when they divorce, irreconcilable differences?* She lays out these differences to Daibhi, keeping her voice steady over the music on his end. She's brief and firm, just as he'd been with her last night. There's no room for protest. Now it's her turn to be on top.

When she hangs up, Meg turns off the mobile. The dizziness has gone. Menstrual cramps are already hitting her gut, but she doesn't care. She's warm, as if by that unexpected glint of sun by the Guinness factory—or by Keith's hand. She eyes her bed, which needs only her clean flannel sheets for sleep. She feels ready to catch some zeds at last.

She's laundry to do tomorrow.