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What Humans Sound Like

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What Humans Sound Like
Lauren Browning

A departmental honors thesis submitted to the Department of English
at Trinity University in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with departmental honors.

April 13, 2010

Thesis Advisor

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Introduction

I write primarily because I am inspired by the human struggle for intimacy and connection and because I believe that literature can expose us as humans for what we are: complicated, striving, unsure beings. My collection, *What Humans Sound Like*, is therefore largely concerned with the theme of communication, which by its presence, or by the lack thereof, serves as the pivotal point of every human relationship. I feel that my writing tries to understand the inevitable difficulties involved in creating and sustaining the bonds of those relationships. I tend to explore this idea, at different times, in both familial and romantic relationships, as well as in seemingly minor platonic ones. Frequently, I approach the topics of communication and connection in the environments of ethnicity, sexuality, and the family, and often these environments are examined through such thematic lenses as redemption, the body, and normalcy.

In this thesis I chose to work in two forms to explore these ideas: the short story and the novella. By working in two different forms, I quickly found that each framework offered a unique way to explore diverse aspects of the issues that I care about. I found this to be especially true in terms of how my characters viewed themselves and their relationships within their cultural, sexual, and familial environments. My collection consists of two short stories and a novella. The characters of my novella and the characters of my short stories explore these environments in different ways, even though the environments remain the same: family ties are troublesome, yet strong; sexual relationships are frequently disturbing and always problematic, although—and perhaps because—they are essential; ethnicity and culture are inescapable, but also unifying. The extent to which I explored these issues, however, depended largely on which

form I was working in. In the short stories, the topics of family and sexuality exist throughout, while I felt that I did not have sufficient space to play with the complex view of ethnicity that I wished to portray. In the novella, however, there was room to examine all of the above issues, and I used it as an opportunity to focus on the intricacies of ethnicity.

As mentioned above, in addition to the environments of the family, sexuality, and ethnicity which I use to approach the overarching theme of communication and connection, normalcy, redemption, and the body are three important lenses through which I write.

I chose to examine the idea of normalcy through the themes of mental illness and physical inability. Mental illness appears most prevalently in “Not a Fluke,” as the main character has not only had personal family experience with it, but is also a psychologist. It is present to a lesser extent in *What Humans Sound Like*, as Mikhail confronts various ticks and phobias which develop because of his grief and isolation. In terms of physical abnormalities, in “Constellations” the protagonist wonders if she will ever be satisfied with her physical capability to have a “normal” life. Of course, mental and physical illnesses exhibit the extremes of abnormality—abnormalities that are outside of human control. By using physical and mental disabilities to exemplify this theme, I hope to emphasize both the seriousness and the inevitability of the human struggle with normalcy.

Additionally, the idea of the body is important to each of the pieces of my thesis in terms of its weakness, either sexual or physical. In *What Humans Sound Like*, Mikhail deals with his own sexual inconstancy, while in “Not a Fluke,” Patricia uses her body as a means of sexual warfare and redemption. These are two examples of people either misusing their bodies or using their bodies as tools. In “Constellations,” on the other hand, Ana’s own body betrays her. Although Ana doesn’t hurt her body or use her body to hurt others, her body turns on her for no

reason. I wanted to show that we are constantly fighting our own bodies, and that it is a two way battle: my characters mistreat their bodies or use their bodies for negative things, but bodies also disappoint their inhabitants and let people down. Like the previous idea of normalcy, the failures of the body are outside of human control and are therefore that much more frightening.

Redemption is another important focus in this thesis, perhaps more so than some of the other thematic lenses I implemented. Attempting to cope or move on from guilt or grief is a universal struggle, and in this collection, every protagonist deals with both their own perceived culpability in some event in their past as well as with some form of loss. I have always found the different ways that people achieve redemption to be fascinating, so it was very interesting to explore what event or what relationship would successfully bring a character out of their past and into a more fulfilled present. In “Constellations,” Ana’s inability to see her own value nearly destroys her relationship with Josef, but his unconditional acceptance enables her recovery. For Patricia, in “Not a Fluke,” she can only begin to focus on the future instead of the past after breaking all of the rules in her professional and personal life. Lastly, in *What Humans Sound Like*, a woman Mikhail meets for only a few days helps him learn to live in the moment and accept things as they come. I enjoyed seeing how so many different types of experiences and relationships could help refocus and rejuvenate someone’s life after tragedy.

In addition to these common themes in my work, I tend to choose settings and other details (professions and hobbies of characters, for example) that are somewhat unfamiliar to me in both my short stories and the novella. I find that the research process needed to write about these topics helps me to dig further into my characters. Choosing subject matter which I am unfamiliar with helps me to stay interested and actively involved in the development of my characters. For the same reasons, I enjoy occasionally writing in third person (although first

comes naturally to me) and from the male perspective because I like the challenge of investing myself in something that is not quite as familiar or comfortable

I enjoyed thinking about what order to apply to the pieces of my thesis as well. Although I played briefly with the idea of beginning the collection with my novella, I soon decided that I would prefer to organize the pieces based on scope. The novella covers the most ground in the most detailed way, so I chose to precede it with the two short stories. Within the two stories, I ordered them according to the protagonist's maturity level and stage of life: "Constellations" followed by "Not a Fluke." I feel that this gives the collection as a whole a sense of progression and unity, although the protagonists are not in any way connected by story line. This progression in the short stories is mirrored by the growth of character both in age and in maturity seen in the novella, *What Humans Sound Like*.

I. Short Stories

The first piece I worked on for this collection was "Constellations," which developed, in draft form, during a fiction writing class several years ago. This story revolves around a young woman who leaves her home and friends in an effort to re-envision her future and recreate herself after finding out that she is infertile. The piece developed out of the scene in the lamp store when Ana's best friend gets her period—an event which never comes for Ana herself. I saw the lamps as indicative of Ana's inability to ever really "turn on" as a woman or as a mother, and the idea of light also inspired the passages involving stars and constellations. I wanted to explore what it would be like for an infertile woman to try to recoup her losses and make a life for herself. In this case, she moves from England to France and attempts to rebuild her feminine identity with the help of Josef, a Frenchman who wants to show her how to move on, if she will let him.

As I wrote this piece, I wanted to lighten it, to a certain extent, with a little bit of humor, mostly in the snarky attitude of the protagonist, but also in Josef’s playful relationship with her. I believe that humor lends a greater deal of emotional honesty to an otherwise heavy storyline. Language also plays an important role in this piece, as it does in *What Humans Sound Like*. I enjoyed playing with the French in this short story, and because I am fairly fluent in French (as opposed to the languages showcased in the novella) it was a relatively natural impulse. Also, the dyad of English and French in this piece represents Ana’s dual selves: the self she was before she knew about her infertility, and the self that she became after finding out. I chose to keep the ending of this story somewhat open because I didn’t want to condemn Ana to an unfulfilled, sterile life. At the same time, though, I wasn’t sure how long it would be before she and Josef could potentially pick up where they left off—Ana has a lot of growing to do.

“Not a Fluke” is the second and final short story of this collection. It tells the story of a psychologist dealing with her own past and her inability to move emotionally forward in time after experiencing tragedy in her youth. One of the most intriguing parts of this story for me is the way that the protagonist, Patricia, has trouble understanding herself and her role within her various relationships. She behaves a certain way with her boyfriend, with her patients, and with her family, but she never seems fulfilled by those relationships when they are functioning normally. As we see by the end of the story, Patricia’s relationship with Wilson, one of her patients, becomes the relationship that she is most interested and invested in, but only after it transcends the traditional boundaries of doctor-patient relationships. This was important to the overall theme of communication because it showed how Patricia struggled with the different rules that apply to certain categories of relationships.

“Not a Fluke” relates back to the rest of the collection in part because of its implementation of quotations. For example, not only does Patricia’s brother collect quotations in his youth which bear special importance and comfort to Patricia years later, but the title of the piece comes from one of them. The novella, *What Humans Sound Like*, also uses quotations frequently: Mikhail often quotes different proverbs or writers, particularly because he remembers his parents doing the same during his childhood. Especially as this collection is so concerned with the themes of communication and connection, I wanted to use quotations in my work because it meant that I could share in someone else’s words and also share them with other people.

II. Novella

The novella, *What Humans Sound Like*, was a much different story in early drafts. My inspiration for the story came, in part, from Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. I fell in love with its magic realism as well as the maniacally driven voice that never ceased to command my attention. I became motivated to write a similarly surreal story and set out to write about a man who was somehow holy or divine. It was a fruitful endeavor because, through the long process, I came to know Mikhail on a much deeper level. I knew his voice, his character, his likes and dislikes, his view of the world, far better than I had ever known a character before. I spent months working with this concept before finally realizing that I had written myself into a corner. I set the piece aside for a month and when I returned to it I was able to see with fresh eyes that the real story embedded in that draft of the novella was the story of Mikhail’s confessions and his struggles with all of the themes I have already addressed: normalcy, ethnicity, the body, sexuality, redemption, and the family. That story, though, was lost in the current plot—it was far too busy for what I wanted to do. So, I decided to pare it down and start again, focusing this time

on the character and his internal existence rather than an overly dramatic plot. This time, the story seemed to write itself. Because I knew Mikhail so well already, it was easy to know what he would do in these new and different situations. Ultimately, although I abandoned my initial storyline and plot construction, it was still worthwhile because it helped me to understand my character more completely than I could have otherwise. As an additional benefit, there is, I believe, still a taste of the mystical and the supernatural rooted in Mikhail's voice which I truly value.

After that initial process—which did take a lot of time—I enjoyed being able to write my way to a conclusion. I stopped trying to plan out the plot ahead of time and just went wherever my characters seemed to want to go. It was a new, less Type-A way of writing for me and it was exciting to see the story develop.

One of the most important aspects of the novella, for me, is the fact that it speaks to more than just one generation of Mikhail's family. I hope to return to this manuscript in the future to expand upon it and really tell the story of his entire family—parents and grandparents; if I had had more space I would have liked to really make this a family saga. I tend to be interested in these kinds of family sagas and modern epics when I read as well. *Middlesex*, by Jeffrey Eugenides, was especially important to my understanding of this type of narrative. I greatly appreciated the amount of time Eugenides spent in that novel on the main character's grandparents and parents. I believe that writing about a protagonist's family is one of the best ways for readers to understand and care about the protagonist. As I read the Eugenides text, I certainly felt that I knew and understood his characters, especially Cal, despite his very unfamiliar identity and life and I think this was because I already knew his family and background so closely.

As I already discussed briefly, ethnicity was one of the themes that interested me most as I wrote this novella. Many points of Mikhail's life pivot on his outsider identity and his foreigner parents (both biological and adoptive). Indeed, part of the reason he loves Violet is because of her easy acceptance of his ethnicity and cultural position in society. Later, he has problems with his wife because of her choice to put his ethnic identity on a pedestal and to champion him as "other." I believe that his ethnicity is apparent in his voice as well—sometimes he turns phrases in an unexpected and slightly unusual way as the result of his upbringing. For instance, Mikhail's mother, Masha, doesn't allow him to follow the fads his peers get caught up in, but she also wants him to be distinctly "American." Because of this, Mikhail grows up with both old and new ways of doing things and this is apparent in his narrative voice. Even though he grew up in the United States, both sets of his parents grew up in a different time and place, and I believe that their innate sense of foreignness inevitably seeped into him.

I wanted languages to be an important part of this novella in order to enhance the theme of ethnicity. Both Mikhail and Violet are very interested in learning and teaching languages; it is a piece of common ground for them. Mikhail speaks several languages fluently, and many of the places where he uses other languages are especially significant parts of the text. Additionally, Mikhail's love of languages before the family's tragedy is juxtaposed by the comfort he finds in numbers after the tragedy. His choice to become a stock picker rather than a linguist or an ESL teacher is designed to depict the changes he undergoes in that period of his life.

I also wanted to emphasize language by carefully selecting my characters' names. Naming has always seemed somewhat mystical and prophetic to me, and I wanted this novella to have that dimension as well. In keeping with my original vision for this novella, in which Mikhail was somehow divine, I tried to implement names with connections to many different

forms of religion: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism. I chose, however, to keep those names when I moved forward to a new plot structure because I liked the additional underlying depth it gave to their characters. Mikhail's name, for instance, means "he who resembles God," and his parents' names, Masha and Io, are the Russian diminutive versions of Mary and Joseph: Maria and Jo. Similarly, Bahi is named for the monk, Bahira, who supposedly foresaw Mohammed's future as a prophet of God. I liked that Bahi would function in this story, therefore, as a prophet of a prophet. Violet's name also has spiritual connections: those who believe in the Chakras of the body (including many Hindus and Buddhists), believe that Violet is the 7th Chakra, the Crown Chakra, which is considered to be the color of spiritual mastery and represents peace of mind and body, something that I believe Violet always provided for Mikhail. He frequently describes her as an especially self-aware free spirit and I believe that this aligns well with her name. Additionally, the Violet Chakra is also said to symbolize unity—that everything and everyone is connected—a theme that I hope is evident in the novella's circular structure.

III. Conclusion

My hope is that this collection encourages my readers to observe and to interact with the ideas of communication and connection in an active, exploratory way. I believe it is fitting to reference Marc Chagall here, both because he is mentioned in "Constellations" and because quotations have had such a bearing on my work and on my characters' lives: "In our life there is a single color, as on an artist's palette, which provides the meaning of life and art. It is the color of love." I believe, like Chagall, that everything can be traced back to "a single color" of love and of human connections. Through the thematic environments of ethnicity, sexuality, and the

family, and through the lenses of the body, normalcy, and redemption, I hope to show that sustainable and fulfilling relationships are not only possible, but are also essential to our lives. Short fiction is frequently pegged as depressing or dark, and while I understand and appreciate that darkness, I believe that the darkness can be contained and examined and, ultimately, overcome. Writing this collection gave me hope for and a new understanding of our human struggle for intimacy and love, and I hope that that is what a reader might come away with after reading my work.

Constellations

In a French mobile home that summer, Josef made me hot tea every morning but the last.

“Ana,” he would whisper, “Ana, wake now. Careful, *ma cocotte*, it’s hot. *Très chaud.*”

This was his mantra, every morning, as he brushed a wayward curl out of my eyes and kissed my forehead. Then the blinds would open and early morning sunlight would fill the small room. His dark hair, those slanted brown eyes, the quirk of his one sided smile were the first things I saw each day.

The first time I met Josef he called me that, “*ma cocotte.*” I remember wondering that day, walking through the *métro*, if I had forgotten my French the first time he said it, since that particular phrase translates as “my little hen.” I had just broken the heel off of my shoe on the uneven ground in the tunnel, a fact which made his expectation that I would answer to the name of a barnyard creature even more maddening than it sounds.

Obviously, I didn’t turn around when I heard someone calling for their chicken—why would I think they were talking to me? Or to any sane person for that matter? I had never been called a hen before. On top of that, I had never felt less womanly, and my broken shoe was only the tip of that particular iceberg. When I heard someone running up behind me, I moved to the side to let them pass—typical *métro* practice. But when they grabbed my arm, I was in no mood for games. I spun around, broken heel in hand, ready to attack.

“*Pardon, pardon, ma cocotte,*” he panted, “it is yours, yes?” He held out a green wallet. When he saw my hand raised and the “weapon” I was holding, he looked down at the mismatched height of my shoes and laughed that French laugh which isn’t a laugh, just a loud breath, really.

I looked at the tall man in front of me, and crossed my arms uncomfortably. I didn't want to have to deal with men right now. That was part of why I left England. He held the wallet out to me and I reached for it. Before I could grab it, though, he was holding it high above his dark hair.

"A name?" he asked.

"A name? Why don't you just take a look in *my* wallet?" For once I was glad for my fast temper.

"Because, *m'amie*, that would be rude. Didn't they teach you over in England that the French are never rude?" He stared at me, completely straight-faced.

I stared back at him, stupidly, I'm sure.

"A joke, *cocotte*," he said, leaning towards me. And then softer, "A joke."

I stepped away a little unsteadily. I wasn't used to being on the receiving end of sarcasm.

"Look, I'm sure you understand," I said, "I have a train to catch. Now."

"A name."

I switched hips. "Why do you keep calling me '*cocotte*'?"

"Because you haven't told me your name."

"My name's Ana. Ana, ok?" I reached for the wallet again, but he moved it higher.

"Ana...?"

"Wycombe! Are you happy now?"

"*Très heureux*, Ana Wycombe." And with boyish flourish he handed me my wallet and walked away.

I got to my connecting train just in time, hobbling along ridiculously on one heel. I got to my seat and opened a magazine, but I could only think about the fact that I had just repeatedly

been called a chicken by a complete stranger, and that when he'd said my name it had sounded green. Full and alive.

When I decided to leave England, I already knew that leaving wouldn't help. I had gone out, sweating, from the gynecologist's office and walked straight to my uni to find out if they had any internships that would let me leave immediately. Of course, there wasn't anything available at such short notice, but I was still on the chunnel headed to France two days later.

I'd chosen France for the obvious reasons: I speak the language and I didn't know anyone there. Before I left, I rang my French professor to see if she had any connections so I could at least have a job when I arrived, and she set me up with the curator at *le Musée Picasso* as a tour guide.

I hadn't really told anyone where I was going, but once I was well on my way to France and figured no one could stop me, I rang Lisa. She knew better than anyone that I was a bit moody and impulsive, so I couldn't imagine she would be too shocked.

"What's the matter, Ana?" she asked, a little breathless, "I'm with Aaron and Liz at the park. Are you ok?"

"I'm fine. I just wanted to call you and let you know that I'm going to be in France for a while."

"A while?" she laughed, "Who calls to tell their best friend that they're going to be out of the country for 'a while' without giving a reason?"

"The next two months at least."

“Are you kidding?” She was pushing her kids on the swings, I could tell by the pulsed effort in her voice, “Ana—hang on a second, guys—” she stopped pushing them. “What’s going on?”

“I just need some space for myself. Some time to figure things out, you know?”

“I *don’t* know.”

“Look, I can’t talk now. Just tell people I’ve gone for a summer job. I don’t care what you say, really.”

“Have you told Darren yet?” she asked.

“No.”

“You know he’ll come to me when—Wait, is this about him?”

“No,” I paused, “Not really.”

Once I arrived in France, my walk to my rented mobile home was short. The train station and my new place were both in the 10th arrondissement in Paris: not the worst part of the city and not the best. Every Saturday afternoon they close the streets to cars so that cyclists and rollerbladers have the road to themselves. I didn’t imagine I would be doing much of that.

The walk to my place from the station wasn’t long, but it was dark. There weren’t any stars out that night and the entire sky was empty. When I was a little girl my mum and I used to lie out in our back garden and watch the stars. She knew all of the constellations and promised she would teach me. She just never got the chance. My favorite was Andromeda, but I didn’t remember much about her anymore except for the chains on her arms.

The mobile home was miniature. The front door, which also conveniently served as the back door, opened onto the combination kitchen/living room/dining room. There was storage

everywhere: under the couch, above the table, behind the refrigerator, beneath the microwave. I'd brought so little with me, I used probably an eighth of the storage space. Living space, however, was limited. The bedroom and bathroom had just enough room to turn around in, and everything was foldable. The bed, the couch, the tables, the countertops. It didn't look like everything could be unfolded at once.

Once I had finished exploring the vastness of my new home, I unpacked (it didn't take long) and realized that I had misplaced the business card Madame Girard had given me with the address of the museum on it. It also had the curator's phone number. It was getting late though, so I knew I couldn't go wandering around to find the place that night. I'd have to go early the next day and scout it out.

It was sheer luck, really, that I'd gotten work in a museum there so easily—yes, I was going to have a degree in Art and Art History in a year, and yes, I was good at what I did. But my topic for my senior dissertation was Chagall, not Picasso, and although they were contemporaries, they were also completely different. I wasn't exactly perfect for the job. My French professor told me, when she called to let me know she'd found a position for me, that the real reason I'd gotten it was because Madame Lillitov, the curator, "had a feeling about me," whatever that meant.

Before I got into bed, I undressed in the pint-sized bathroom. Lately I'd avoided mirrors, but in such a confined space I couldn't really do that. I desperately needed a shower, but standing there in front of the mirror, confronted by my small breasts and belly, I stopped: that body would never be another little being's cocoon. My stomach would always be flat. My breasts would never swell.

“Empty.” I whispered. I walked the two steps to the bedroom and got underneath the blankets to go to sleep.

When we were twelve, Lisa and I went with her mother to a lamp store near London. We’d just come from the mall and her mum promised it would only be a short side trip. Lisa and I walked around the perimeter turning lamps off and on. They were all the fancy kind with pull chains and stained glass shades. Suddenly I noticed that Lisa had stopped walking, that I was the only one turning the lamps on and off. I turned around and saw her staring at her leg held out from beneath her cotton skirt. There was a line of blood trickling down, closer and closer to her knee. Her eyes shot up to my face, before her cheeks crumpled towards her broad lips and she ran to her mother. After hurried whispering and gestures at the blood now near her ankle, her mother rushed her over to the counter, asking for a bathroom, “It was an emergency.” They were in there for quite a while, and I didn’t know what to do with myself, really. I just stood in a corner by some lamps, turning them from dark to light.

My second day in France, I woke up at 7:00 to go find *le Musée Picasso*. I showered without looking at the mirror and then dressed in plain, dark clothes. I went to the first *café* I saw—Bruno’s. It was really small, looked like a hole in the wall kind of place, but I still paid more for a cup of hot chocolate than I ever had in my life. That alone was more than I’d budgeted for breakfast each day. Before I left I asked the man, who turned out *not* to be named Bruno, if he knew where the museum was. He pointed me in the right direction, brusquely gave me the name of the *métro* line I needed and sent me off. After traveling to *le Chemin Vert* station, it was 9:00, which was alright—I would still be a little early.

The museum was in the *Hôtel Salé*, a huge old place in Paris that used to be the center of the area's intellectual society. It was truly magnificent—the immense courtyard was fenced in with a little pavilion area in the corner and the front of the building was engraved with different animals. I felt new and small in front of it.

However, it was nothing compared to Madame Lillitov. Her little angular face peeked out at me from beneath her huge wiry silver hair when she met me at the front door. Her welcome was a little overzealous, a little wild, but I liked it. She was so unlike me.

“This is the best possible time for you to have come, *cherie!*” She clapped her hands and kissed my cheeks, huge peacock-feather earrings swaying on her dried-apple earlobes.

“*Vraiment?* Why, what is happening, Madame?”

Her smile revealed her poor dentistry.

“Today is a Tuesday! Who knows what shall happen, *oui?* Marcie will show you what to do!” She licked her finger and wiped it across my cheek.

“*Chocolat!*” she proclaimed.

And with that she was off, walking briskly towards a large green door marked “*Privé*” with a bounce in her step that made me think she hadn't always been an art curator. My mouth, I'm sure, hung open and I could still feel the air cooling my cheek where her friendly saliva clung to me.

Marcie looked up from the welcome desk, her neat brown bun and modest cream-colored blouse a little bit of a disappointment after Madame Lillitov's near afro and magnificent sari-like wrap.

“Ana, *oui?*” she asked. I nodded and walked closer to her.

“I’m glad you found it alright, I got a call from a young man this morning saying he thought you might not be in.”

“I’m sorry?”

“He mentioned that he found a card with your name and the museum’s phone number, the address, what day you started. All sorts of things you might not have committed to memory.”

I was hesitant.

“Did he say who he was?”

“Oh no. He said you would know who I meant. Do you not?”

“No,” I lied, “I don’t.” *French people aren’t rude, my arse*, I thought. He definitely had taken his time with my wallet before giving it back. I wondered what else he had thought to take before chasing after me.

“Well, let’s get started. We open soon, you know.”

I followed her through the museum being told what to say. I knew the basics already, but it was good to have a refresher. What I hadn’t remembered, or I suppose hadn’t thought about since my doctor’s visit, was that Picasso often painted and sculpted pregnant women, and not in a pleasant light.

I gritted my teeth, forced myself to be pleasant and attentive, and followed Marcie through the various exhibits. When we were finished she handed me a name tag and a stack of note cards and led me back to the welcome desk.

“In *cinq minutes* you can open up the main entrance. I’ll be here at the desk if you need me. You start tours from over there each hour and the break room is just past that green door on the far side.”

I thanked her before heading over to the break room. I wet a paper towel and pressed it against my forehead before slumping against the wall.

The reason I left England: As a girl, I never got my period. I'd had that familiar conversation with all of my friends that would sound strangely like our conversations about sex some years later: "How was it? Did it hurt? What did it feel like?" My teenage years came and went, and I was still not menstruating. Having sex, yes. Menstruating, no. When my mum had died, I was only six. She only ever had time to teach me the silly things. A few of the constellations, how to tie my shoes, which hand was Right and which was Left. At age six, periods were only just becoming the dots at ends of sentences. They didn't have any other kind of meaning. The only time I ever said anything about it to anyone was on my sixteenth birthday when I told Lisa. She said I shouldn't worry, that I was just a late bloomer. She was always more world-wise than I was, so I believed her for a while. Then a few years later she had two kids to worry with, so I didn't mention it to her again. In my mind, it was obvious that I couldn't talk to my last boyfriend, Darren, about it. We hadn't been together that long, but every so often I pretended I didn't feel up to having sex so he wouldn't realize I was a bit off.

It finally sank in that I wasn't normal when I turned twenty-two a few months ago. Next to Lisa, or any of my friends for that matter, I was still less than womanly. Part of me knew I wasn't going to suddenly blossom into full-fledged womanhood at the rate I was going. I went to a gynecologist; legs were parted, smears taken, tests run. In the end they came back and told me I was empty. Not in quite those words, but effectively, yes, empty. "Infertility caused by anovulation." How could anyone stay in one place after finding out something horrible like that? I wasn't a real woman anymore. Not a full person. Empty. Barren. *Stérile*.

Five minutes after going into the museum's break room I opened the front doors. I had to get over my jealousy of pregnant women sooner or later. Picasso could help me out. It was just art. Funny that I could call it "just art" since I was in the middle of an education dedicated almost entirely to it. I had written a paper on Chagall's *Mother and Son* just before the term ended—Chagall certainly saw the beauty of motherhood, unlike Picasso. I realized, as my mental image of the painting grew clearer, that it was perhaps a good thing that I was giving tours on Picasso and not Chagall. I might have lost my nerve. Maybe Picasso's negative view of motherhood would be good for me.

As it was, guests began to slowly trickle in, and at 10:00 I started my first tour.

"This painting, called *Crouching Nude*, was done in oil on canvas. It was painted near the end of Picasso's life," and so I continued, glancing at my note cards occasionally, as I led them through the many paintings and sculptures. It was a fairly large group, so it wasn't until several pieces from the end of the tour that I noticed my (admittedly good-looking) stalker from the *métro* standing in the back. Of course, as soon as I saw him I unceremoniously tripped, half-losing my shoe in the process.

He looked up from the painting I had been talking about (to his credit, he *was* actually looking at the painting before my graceful spill) and looked immensely pleased with himself. The same quick smile flashed across his face as I struggled with my shoe, scraping it accidentally against the brick. I turned abruptly from the painting once my shoe was back on, now even more eager to be done with this particular tour, and found myself facing a sculpture that I had been dreading. I had to just get on with it.

“Now this is one of Picasso’s more controversial sculptures. Obviously titled, *The Pregnant Woman*, this work most prominently depicts the woman’s huge breasts and belly. The controversy stems from Picasso’s own view of pregnancy.” I paused here, trying to remember what I had read. “For Picasso, the belly is not seen as an element of femininity, but rather a strange growth, like a gourd. Picasso was rather selfish, and many believe he blamed his wife’s pregnancy for making her into what he portrays here as a sexually unattractive woman.” I looked up and noticed the chicken man (because that’s the only thing I could call him in my head) cocking his head strangely at me.

Flustered, I turned to the next card before I meant to, so I found myself hurriedly adding in my own unauthorized opinion: “I personally find other meanings here—‘The Pregnant Woman’ can also be seen as an example of how well Picasso mixed media: constructed with plaster, metal armature, wood, ceramic vessels and pottery jars, it can all be seen as rather wonderful symbolism for the blend of mother and child, two beings...in...in one body.”

I coughed. What was I saying? I swept everyone along through the rest of museum, dropping them near the gift shop. Any self-respecting capitalist would be proud of me.

My face was flushed. I headed straight for the break room, but sure enough, before I could get away I heard, “*Ma cocotte!*”

I stopped, suddenly furious with him.

“What ?” I said sharply, wheeling around, “What do you want with me?”

“Woah,” he said. The colloquialism rolled strangely off of his foreign tongue. “I was wondering what I would have to do to get you mad. *Merde.*”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

“When do you get to stop giving your tours?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said. When he didn’t answer, I asked, “Why, so you can stalk me some more?”

Again, that exhale parading as a laugh.

“Hardly. *Cocotte*, tell me, why did that sculpture upset you so much?”

“I—I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think your interpretation was better, Ana—the blend of mother and child, you know?”

He had said my name again, and again it felt lush and verdant on his lips.

“What’s your name?” I heard myself asking.

“I thought you would never ask!” He whipped off his cap, revealing those dark curls, “My name—you won’t forget it—is Josef Mollere. And, now that we’re officially acquainted, you can go to dinner with me like you’ve been wanting to do so desperately.”

“*What?*” I said, “I—”

“You’ll be hungry. And you’re a foreigner. You’ve probably already been to the most expensive *café* in town.”

I looked at him.

“Ah,” he smiled, “I thought you would’ve gone to Bruno’s. So convenient. And you assumed his name was Bruno I hope?”

“No!” I lied. I wondered for a minute if he really had been stalking me.

“Fine, *cherie*, either way, meet me at the *Delaville café* at 8:00.”

“I most certainly will not!”

“Tonight, *cocotte*.”

I stood there watching him go. He didn’t turn around once. Even as I swore I would never go anywhere with him, my cheeks flushed redder than the wine we drank that night.

If the wine was perfect, the company was better. Josef knew everyone that worked there and they were hysterical. Every other word, he was cutting up with them.

“So you work in an art museum, yes *cherie*?” Josef’s friend (and our waiter) Jon asked me.

“Yes, I’m working at *le musée Picasso* down the street”.

“You know, Ana, I used to paint,” he said. There was a gleam in his eye. “Josef, what do you think? Your *cocotte* here could be my model for some nudes.”

A few other waiters standing around laughed at this.

I looked at Josef trying to look serious, “Yeah, it would be a great experience for my field. What do you think?”

Josef smiled slowly. “That would be a good idea,” he said. “If you wanted to miss the best part of Parisian romance.”

“And what part is that?” I asked.

He leaned in closer. “You will just have to find out after dinner, *cocotte, non*? That is if you decide to stay.”

His friends started teasing him about suddenly becoming so romantic, but he just leaned back in his chair looking content.

I shrugged, “Sorry, Jon. How can a girl refuse that kind of intrigue? If this so-called Parisian romance falls through, though, you know where to find me.”

I don’t think I stopped laughing for more than a few minutes at a time. Since Josef knew everyone who worked there, they brought out an incredible variety of food for us to share. He wanted me to try everything.

“*Cocotte*, do you like your fish *piquant*?” he asked me. Then he whispered, “Don’t worry, their “spicy” isn’t very spicy.”

“That sounds alright,” I said.

Everything was like that. Before letting them bring anything out, he checked to make sure it would be something I would like. At one point I ordered the snails, which in French are *les cagouilles*. Something was wrong, though, because as soon as I finished ordering, Josef coughed suddenly. I glanced over at him and saw that he was struggling not to laugh.

I tried to ignore him at first, but by the time our food arrived, he was turning beet red. I couldn’t just pretend I didn’t notice.

“What’s the matter with you, Josef?” I asked.

As soon as Jon walked away, I picked up my fork, but he said to me quickly, “Ana, don’t eat yet, *cocotte*.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“What did you intend to order?”

“The snails of course. I speak French perfectly well, thank you,” I said since I was stubbornly still trying to feel a little antagonistic towards my chicken stalker.

“Well, then I think, *cherie*, that we should order you what you intended rather than *les cervelles*.”

“*Les cervelles*?” I asked, shocked. I looked at my plate. “Brains?” I gasped, “I didn’t ask for brains!”

“I believe you did, *cocotte*. But we will make a deal, *oui*? I will not tell our friend Jon about your wine-induced mistake, and I will even endeavor to get rid of this delicacy without being caught if you will go out with me again tomorrow night.”

I agreed, and we laughed all evening as he stealthily transferred bits of brains from my plate to his own napkin. If it wasn't so disgusting, it would have been romantic. Maybe it was romantic, I don't know. Either way, by the end of the meal I felt fuller than I had in a long time.

When we left the *café* that night, it was very late, almost eleven o'clock.

"Are you still up for the romance part, *cocotte*?" he asked.

"That depends," I said.

He took hold of my hand and led me along the canal. When we came to the street where I lived, he passed it. We continued along the path until we reached a small grassy area. He took off his sweater and set it down for me to sit on. Then he sat down too.

"Do you see those four bright stars that make a kind of square?" he asked me. It took a while for me to find them.

"Those form the body of Pegasus," he said.

"I'm not sure I see a horse there," I said.

"Why, Ana? What do you see?"

"I don't know."

"Well, if you don't see a horse, you must see something, *non*?"

"Well, yes, but I don't know anything about it. I only knew about them when I was a child."

"What do you see?"

I sighed. "I suppose I see...a mirror?" I said

"You aren't supposed to ask me, *cocotte*. Tell me."

“It’s a mirror,” I said. “With diamonds embedded in the corners.” Then I laughed at myself and lay back against his shoulder.

“Why do you laugh? You could be right. Maybe it isn’t Pegasus after all.”

We lay there for a long time. I may have dozed off once or twice.

“Do you know all the constellations, Josef?”

“No, *cherie*. Not all. Quite a few though.”

“I want you to teach me.”

“Alright.”

A week or so later, I was done for. He was perfect. One night as he walked me home from the *café*, I was very sure that I wanted him to come in with me. I was usually very forward about such things, but it was different with Josef. I stood there with him in front of the mobile home trying to work out what to say. Finally, he asked, “*Cocotte*, is there something you want to tell me?”

“Nothing I can think of, Josef.” I pressed my lips together.

He turned from me to look at the sky.

“I’ve been brushing up on my constellations, you know,” he said.

“Really?” I asked. “Tell me about one.”

“Tonight?” he asked. “Ana, there are other nights for stars.

He turned back from the sky and moved to put his arms around me. I leaned against his chest. He smelled of paper and wood smoke and bread.

“Come inside, Josef” I whispered.

“I was hoping for that, *cocotte*.”

With anyone else, the moment might have been ruined when in our passion he hit his head on the door frame. But for us it made it better even, because who would ever know this story but us? Who would ever know that on a night when we ignored the perfect stars, Josef and I ran into a foldable countertop and knocked into a door frame before falling into bed together, laughing for a while. And then not laughing so much anymore.

I should specify, though, because I need to, that we were not having sex, or making love, or any other epithet one might use. I was terrified he would somehow be able to tell I was only part-woman if we did. I put him off by telling him that I was very inexperienced. A lie of course, but in my mind, better than the truth. I told him there were other ways we could enjoy ourselves, and so we did.

I didn't have to worry about going to a *café* for breakfast anymore either: Josef was an excellent cook. Every morning, before I even got out of bed, I had hot tea and a cooked breakfast just like I was used to having in England. It was great for a while. The best, actually.

I met Josef in the park by the museum every evening after I got done working. He worked in the nearby library and we always walked by *le Canal St. Martin*. He liked to talk a lot on those walks. He told me about his dad leaving when he was only five. When I told him about my mum dying he kissed my eyelids and I felt young and light and clean again. We talked about our best friends. He was surprised and happy to hear that Lisa already had two children of her own. I abruptly changed the subject. Never in one of our talks did I tell him about my "condition." It was always there lurking, like the negative presence in my abdomen. At night he would hold me, his hands on my stomach. I would lie awake for a long time, feeling the heat

from his hands and imagining that I was pregnant, his fingers gripping me like a football. I knew Josef wouldn't think like Picasso. He would have loved my grotesquely pregnant belly.

About a month into my summer in France, Josef and I each took a sick day. We went out into the city early in the morning because Josef was determined to get as much of the rest of Paris into my system as he could. We did all of the typically romantic things--- *le Tour Eiffel*, bits of the *Louvre*. But that day isn't a good memory. There was a sadness in him. It appeared that day, and didn't fade. He repeatedly told me that he wanted me to tell him everything. That I could confide in him. Rather than opening up, I began to make it even more difficult for Josef to be with me. I started to pick arguments out of nothing. If he ever pointed out an especially exuberant child on the canal, or even more ridiculously, if we went somewhere for dinner and there happened to be a pregnant woman at the next table, I took it out on him. I started becoming unbearable and I knew it.

Maybe worse, I also had not yet let him make love to me. He held me closer at night, pressed his lips to me harder, felt more electric and present. I pretended I couldn't tell. One night, after everything, he whispered, when we were still and sleepy, "Ana, *je t'aime*. I love you. You know that, *oui?*" I pretended I was asleep. He rolled away from me onto his back and I heard his sigh.

On Saturdays I got off of work earlier than most days. At the beginning of the summer, Madame Lillitov had insisted that I leave early as soon as she met Josef.

"It would be a travesty for you to not really eat Paris up while you're here, *cherie!* You must sink your teeth in. Salivate! Lick your lips a little and taste the salt!"

“I came here to work, *Madame*. I do not mind working.”

“Go. Play. Just promise me you’ll give that man of yours a good hard squeeze on that perfect *derrière* for me!”

“*Madame!*”

“Shoo! Go on, now, or I’ll change my mind and do it myself!”

I ended up thanking her, because even the next month, Josef and I were still taking walks by the canal every Saturday. No, I did not squeeze his “perfect *derrière*.” At least not in public. But one Saturday late in the summer, when he showed up at the museum for our walk, I felt a friction in the air that was more intense than his usual frustration with my recently self-inflicted isolation.

“Ready for our walk?” I asked, getting up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek. I was an emotional tyrant, one day desperate to love him, the next disgusted with myself for trying. That day I was in one of my more amorous moods.

“*Oui.*”

“Did you have a good day?” I tried again.

“*Oui.*”

“We can make fun of all the cyclists?”

“*Oui.*”

“Josef, what’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

“You haven’t called me *cocotte* yet. Something’s wrong.”

“Nothing, *cocotte.*”

I let go of his hand and walked to the edge of the canal. The wind blew over the water and I busied myself patting the top of it down with the bottom of my shoe. I misjudged the distance and my shoe got soaked through.

He walked up next to me and laughed a little at my luck with shoes. I looked at him.

“Josef, you have to talk to me.”

“You are the one not telling me something,” he said, his hands folded.

And there it was.

He was looking at the sun, not at me, but I still turned away from him.

“You have this big shadow, *cocotte*. I thought you would tell me what it is, but you haven’t yet.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying. Shadow?”

“You know exactly what I mean.” He gently took hold of my arm and pulled me around to face him.

I stood there, suddenly furious with him for what he couldn’t see. I looked down at his arm until he let go of me.

After a long silence I told him I couldn’t have children.

“Don’t you see?” I said.

I saw the realization hit him, saw his brown eyes widen. But his gaze didn’t break, his expression remained soft. I was the one to look away.

And then I walked away from him, back to the mobile home. He didn’t follow me or call after me. He didn’t come back for hours, and when he did I was already in bed, half-asleep. The last thing I remember was Josef slipping into bed and wrapping his arms around me.

I dreamed that night of the sky. There were constellations that I had never seen before. Strange ones with no stories—umbrellas and frogs lay stretched absurdly next to all of that ancient beauty. I angrily told them they shouldn't be up there, that they would be found out, the imposters.

Then I woke up and Josef was gone.

There wasn't any tea on the table next to the bed, no breakfast. He wasn't there. I called for him. Finally, I went into the bathroom since I had to be at work, but there was a note taped to the mirror:

“Ana, cocotte,

You are not ready. When you are, you will know. And I will be here.

And—there are ways to be happy. Find them.

Until then, be careful with your shoes. You tend to destroy them.

J'attends,

ton Josef”

I sat down on the dirty shower floor and cried underneath the hot water for a long time. Then I made myself get out and look at my body in the mirror. The flat empty stomach. Meaningless breasts. Eyes that wouldn't be replicated. Then I put on my clothes, packed, and left for home.

I didn't let myself cry anymore after that. I called Madame Lillitov to apologize when I arrived in London and she certainly did scold me from across the Channel. I explained to her that I had to leave, but she was quick to inform me that “one never *has* to do anything” and that I only left because I was scared of myself, and of him. I didn't know what to say to that.

When I didn't answer, she sighed.

"Why didn't you just let him love you? He didn't care. You are still a woman."

Before I could ask her what she meant, she said, "Now, go find yourself and all of that *merde*. Then move on with it. Understand?"

I told her that I did.

Back at home, I made myself keep busy with things. I painted a lot. When I tired of painting, I went to museums. I had come back so early from France, I wasn't sure what else to do with myself. Eventually I told Lisa that I wasn't just a late bloomer. That I actually was never going to "bloom." She cried when she found out, something I realized that I had never done. She couldn't believe that I had never said anything after all of those years. I think it hurt her a little.

But life continued as usual. Eventually I started going to art classes again. I got a part-time job with a small gallery near my flat. I started making myself spend time with children. I wanted to numb myself to them, but I knew it wouldn't work. It was an impossible task.

During that time, Lisa's daughter, Liz, turned four. The party was going to be at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, and I didn't miss the irony. Before the party, even though I felt ridiculous, I obsessively made a trip to the library at uni to look up my old favorite constellation, Andromeda. Apparently, the story goes that Andromeda's mother boasted about her daughter's beauty until Poseidon ordered Andromeda to be chained to a cliff. In the end, though, she was saved by a man who saw more to her than just her mother's boasts. Then she bore him six children. *Six* children. I thought then that perhaps she shouldn't be my favorite anymore.

I did go to the party, though, despite feeling especially melancholy. I hadn't talked to Josef since I left France. After the candles were blown out and the presents opened in the party

room, the kids ran out to look at the stars, but mostly to run around and break things. I was sitting on a bench, quietly avoiding the telescopes, when Liz skipped up, grabbed the edge of my dress, and dragged me over to one to show me the “new constellator” she’d found. She excitedly described it to me as “A green fish. With wings! And a tutu!”

I told her I saw it.

When she scampered off, I leaned down to look through the telescope again and thought of Josef. Then I remembered him telling me that first night by the canal that I could know the constellations for myself. That I didn’t need validation from him or from anyone. I adjusted the lens and started looking for Andromeda. I decided that when I looked at the stars that made up her constellation, I didn’t see chains. Or children. I desperately wanted to tell him what I had realized.

And I remembered the way Josef said my name.

Full and green and fresh. Room to grow. Free.

Not a Fluke

Patricia eyed the Waterman fountain pen in her left hand, then the yellow pad in her lap that had been propped against the edge of her desk for the past half hour. As of yet, none of her strangely perfect doctor's handwriting crossed the page. It was blank. She looked up at her patient.

“Mr. Cobb, these sessions can't help you if you won't talk about your past at all.”

They had been meeting for weeks now.

His pale green eyes were trained on her, the same half smile on his wide lips. Fire flickered there somewhere on his face, but his eyes held the emptiness of a man who had lost everything and didn't care.

He was serious today. It was hard to keep track of his moods.

“Dr. Harmon, I don't believe in pasts.”

“You're an intelligent man, Wilson. You know that the passage of time is real. Where we have an after, there has always been a before.”

“Prove it.”

“That's not what I'm here for.”

“I need to take a piss.”

“You don't need to ask permission. Or use that kind of language.”

“I wasn't asking. I was announcing.”

“We don't even have to talk about your past. Talk about anything you want.”

In general, Patricia hated having to see patients who were only there because of court orders. Wilson Cobb had gotten into a fight somewhere over a girl and was convicted of assault

and battery. In addition to the damages and fine he had already paid, he had therapy and community service to do. Patricia had been briefed on his case before taking him on as a long-term patient: his Borderline Personality Disorder was right out of a textbook. He swung from intense admiration to hatred of others, acted impulsively in almost every aspect of his life, and experienced drastic emotional overreactions.

Patricia sighed.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to get worked up, I just wish that you could—”

Her phone beeped. She glanced over at the flashing light and frowned.

When she flicked her phone on speaker, Jasmine, her secretary, told her that her sister had called six times this morning and wouldn’t leave a message.

Patricia looked up at her patient. He sat there, legs crossed in what should have been a very feminine fashion. Somehow, he looked quite manly, and also quite bored.

She told Jasmine to tell her sister she would call her later. She knew that Jasmine was never pleased when she had to ward someone off, but the phone went quiet.

For a few more moments, the room was silent too. Wilson was looking around as though he were scrutinizing each inch of her office. Truth be told, there was much to scrutinize.

When Patricia first set up her own private practice, she wanted very much to seem “professional.” First, she was only 5’2” with a very angular body that looked like it had been stored in a box for too long—she didn’t exactly read “authoritative psychiatrist.” And second, she had this theory (she loved theories) that after dreaming of being or doing something since childhood, it inevitably ends up feeling like a game of dress-up. Patricia would never say she was superstitious, but she really did trust that physicality could manipulate the mind into believing something as truth: that she was a real grown-up psychiatrist. So when she finally hung her

diploma on the wall, she chose an office with the typical deep-mahogany fireplace and a soft yet structured couch upon which the poor ravaged patient would sit, and perhaps find solace in, when she finally led them to a breakthrough. Certainly, at this moment in her dreams, the poor beleaguered soul would press their blotchy face into the soft plush of the sofa and understand that they had been cured by Dr. Harmon and her impeccable taste in office décor. Then she would kindly ask them to please not stain the upholstery, it was imported from France.

On two of the four walls were her diplomas, one from Berkley and one from the University of Washington in Seattle. On the remaining walls were paintings like Matisse's *Dance*, and Wyeth's *Christina's World*. Around her desk and in various corners of the room were potted plants, all real, because Patricia had read somewhere that artificial plants are selfish. She couldn't remember why.

Of course, med school was now something of the past. Her practice was no longer new and she had long since learned that greenery and soft fabrics stand little chance against the elusive minds of the sick and the sicker that sat in her office each day.

And yet when Wilson finally spoke, despite her new-found sagacity and pessimism, she was still strangely disappointed to discover that he was not taking note of her once careful decorating:

“So,” Wilson said, licking his lips, “you have family problems.”

Her mouth dropped open with a quiet wet noise.

He leaned back in his chair, arms crossed behind his head. “Maybe we should start at the beginning, back in your past, where everything is buried.”

“I think we're done for the day, Mr. Cobb.”

And they were.

Or at least she tried to be done with him. He was only her third patient, it wasn't even lunchtime, and yet that evening, as Patricia stepped into the same beige Toyota Camry she had owned since college, she was still trying to decide what to do about her most frustrating patient.

Even if she had wanted to, though, she wouldn't have thought about Wilson Cobb and his strange thick hair for very long. When Jasmine had beeped into her office that morning, Patricia had instantly known what the trouble was.

In a few short weeks, the date she dreaded each year would come around again.

Patricia and her sister, Melanie, lived quite close to each other, but only spoke or met up a few times a year. They hadn't been close as children and they certainly weren't close now. But every year without fail, at the beginning of February, Melanie would start calling. Patricia had come to dread these calls, to dread her sister's insistent reach back to something old and not forgotten.

And each year she would end up driving to her sister's loft apartment downtown to sit cross-legged and barefoot on the floor while drinking passion tea and not listening to Melanie rant on about whatever she was doing with her life at the time: her new job at the salon, learning the art of "threading," or her Moroccan cooking classes where she met a man named Reynaldo who tasted of lemons.

None of what they ever talked about had anything to do with anything. It was more for the semblance of closeness—because each was the only sibling the other had left, and that had to mean something somewhere, didn't it?

This year, though, Patricia was not going to Melanie's house. They hadn't spoken since the previous year, not once. Melanie had tried, but Patricia never picked up the phone. She didn't

know why she had decided to not speak to her sister. Thus, the repetitive phone calls that morning: the eighteenth of February was swiftly approaching and Melanie had no one to ignore it with.

Patricia drove home that evening not thinking about her brother. She told herself this as she pulled out of her parking space at the office. She reminded herself of it when she turned at the corner of Woodlawn and McCartney. She said it out loud on the highway, softly at first, then with more volume, testing the air. She yelled it at the car in front of her for doing nothing in particular. When she arrived at her apartment, she sat in the car for a moment, breathing.

Then she thought about her brother.

The one who had always been teddy bear and protector. The one who came up with the name “Melanie from Hell-anie” and told their friends that Patricia had thought of it when they laughed. Patricia and Richie had only been a year apart, but Melanie was born six years later, an age gap large enough that they had never really done the same things or played the same games.

So when their childhood slowly dissolved into the melancholy woes of adolescence, perhaps that age difference was also why Melanie was the only one to notice when Richie changed.

Since that horrible year, Patricia had told the families of so many patients the very same lesson she had to learn at the hands of her ten year old sister: sometimes you're too close to someone to see what they have become.

The next morning, as Patricia blarily parked in front of the office after a late night with her patient files, she was startled when she saw that her boyfriend's blue Mazda was in the parking lot.

He did this sometimes. She pretended to not understand it.

It would be a perfectly fine morning, and then there he would be, sitting, not in the waiting room, not in his car, but in her office. Not in the two chairs against the far wall, not in the sofa for her patients, but in her chair. The one behind her desk.

Still, if her volatile family life had taught her nothing else, she had learned the fine art of passive aggressive warfare, and in the six months they'd been living together, Patricia's skills had only improved.

"Ruben. What a surprise," she said as she walked into the office with an unenthusiased smile. When she woke up this morning, he had already left for his rounds at the hospital, as usual.

Ruben stood up and stepped out from behind her desk. Whenever Ruben stood up, she was reminded again of the first time she saw him.

One day, like many other days during her second year of med school at the University of Washington, Patricia woke up at 7:00am after having slept for nine long hours in a quiet, cool room in a bed by herself. She was always in a bed by herself lately—her friendships were few, her romantic liaisons were fewer. On this particular morning, though, she realized that something had to change. She wanted someone, anyone, to take her apart, crack through the shell. To drag the naked pieces of her out into the sun.

The next day she bought a little blue dress shorter and lower-cut than anything she had ever owned. That night, sitting at the bar, she had one hand on her fourth shot of tequila, the other on her latest beer (oh yes, she was a beer girl). She turned to laugh at something—she didn't know what—and suddenly saw a man's eyes trained on her from across the room. She smiled at him, she thought, because his broad smile and broader shoulders were quite possibly

the answer to her problems. When he stood up, she wasn't sure if his immense height was augmented by the fact that there was probably more alcohol than blood in her veins at that moment in time, or if he actually was the giant he appeared to be.

She watched him approach. She didn't really have a choice: her legs were crossed and she couldn't seem to figure out if they could uncross so that she could stand up or if they would, even if she asked them to, pretty please with sugar on top. The last thing she remembered was tripping over one of his cowboy boots as they went out to his car because she was trying to walk seductively.

He was even taller as she looked up at him from the ground. He helped her stand up and then asked if she was okay.

"This is just the beginning," she had said, perfectly clearly.

But from where Patricia stood now, some years later, Ruben's height no longer trumped whatever it was about him that was getting on her nerves. On this particular morning, as he sat behind her desk, Patricia knew that she had left behind that other self, that delicious being from the bar. She had given up on that self, and all because of the stupidly comfortable big and tall niche she had found. The one with the bag of donuts on his lap.

"I thought you might want breakfast," he said.

"Do I ever want breakfast?" she asked.

"Well, no."

She hated that she was mean to him and that he never did anything about it.

"You know, there is such a thing as too much optimism," she said.

"Oh, come on, Tri." He always called her Tri. "You haven't been around much lately."

He stood up and came around to the front of her desk to pull her into his thick arms.

“Lighten up,” he said, looking down at her face.

No patients were scheduled, Jasmine wasn't in yet, and even though it was her own practice in a private building, she knew it was useless. No matter how sweet he could be, no matter how many donuts he brought her, a few months after they had each started their own practices after med school, and a few years into their relationship, sex became confined to their bedroom. In the dark. Quiet. Puritanical.

They hadn't talked about it, but she knew that he simply wanted to feel grown up. For business and pleasure to be completely separate. She forced herself to believe that she felt this way too. After all, she didn't even like having him in her office to begin with. But if he was going to insist on showing up, insist on bringing her a breakfast that she never ate, well, then why not?

But she couldn't remember if there had been a time once when he had made love to her on the couch in the mornings without hesitation. And if, at that same time, she had liked having him there.

Perhaps she had eaten breakfast then, too.

He left a few minutes later. All Patricia had to do was say that Jasmine would be there soon, along with her first patient.

Once he was gone, with the same old kiss on her cheek, she sat behind her desk and laid her head against the calendar on its surface. When she sat up straight again, she saw a greasy smudge from her skin on the box for that date a few days away.

Over the next few days, she had expected that Melanie would continue calling, but she hadn't. Then, the day before, she had called three times. Now, she sat at her desk peeling sticky

notes off of her desk and into the trash, each one from Jasmine testily reminding her that Melanie was still calling. She knew she should have been preparing for Wilson Cobb, whom she knew would soon either waltz or tromp or wallow into her office, but she sat instead, chewing on a pencil eraser.

Their last session had been particularly unsettling, partially because of the new nickname he had come up with for her:

“I’m telling you, Dr. Hard Moan, that’s just the way it is.”

She had sat stock still for a few moments until finally retorting, “Excuse me?”

“You’re excused.” And then he had leaned back in his chair a bit more, crossing his arms contentedly over his chest.

“It’s Dr. Harmon. *Harmon.*”

“Sure.”

Strangely, Patricia liked that she never knew where he would be coming from each day. Trying to decipher his moods and faces had for some reason become exciting to her.

As he walked in for their session today, she could tell he was in an especially giddy frame of mind. She decided to take control from the beginning and try a new approach.

“Alright. No time for games today,” she said, before he even sat down. “I’m your therapist, not your audience. You’re here by court order, so I have to treat you. If you don’t want to talk about your past, or your present, for that matter, what do you want to talk about that doesn’t involve making up profane names for your doctor?”

He stood at the door for a moment with a surprised smile on his face. He took the few steps across the room quickly. Before she could react, he leaned towards her desk, and without taking his eyes off of her, carefully selected a piece of chocolate from the glass bowl and

suddenly tossed it high up in the air above her head. She missed it of course. It hit her shoulder and then fell to the floor with a disappointed thunk.

As she leaned awkwardly over the arm of her chair to pick it up, he replied, “You.”

She sat up, candy in hand.

“I’m sorry. What?”

She couldn’t believe she was apologizing to a patient who had just hurled candy at her head.

“You. Let’s talk about you.”

“Even if I hadn’t already given you this spiel yet, which I know I have, you should know that doctors don’t tell patients about their personal lives.”

“Maybe that’s why some patients don’t get cured.”

“So you think that me telling you about my life would fix yours?”

“My life doesn’t need fixing, for one thing. And for another, who knows? Why not give it a try?”

They had been having sessions for more than a month now. Patricia thought she would be used to his bizarre bluntness, but he still caught her off guard. She handled all the other brands of disturbing that walked into her office on a daily basis, but she couldn’t figure him out.

And there he was on her couch, smiling at her. If he weren’t sitting there in a chair across the desk from *her*, he might have been a normal guy. When put that way, one might infer that Patricia was the catalyst for crazy.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Cobb, but I can’t tell you about my personal life.”

He sighed.

“Fine, I’ll make you a deal,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“I’ll tell you about your personal life.”

She thought about it for a moment, but said nothing.

“You were a quiet kid. A good kid, even. A kid like I was. Then something happened,” Patricia stiffened visibly, but he continued, “and your entire family fell apart. You derailed. Now, so many years later, you’re trying to grasp at the weasely little straws and you’re losing ground. So, obviously the answer is to tell Wilson Cobb that he’s your favorite patient, clear him from mandatory therapy, take off your shirt, and then the world will be righted again.”

Patricia was silent. She had been smiling when he started, pleased that at least he was talking, but now felt unnerved.

“Why do you assume you know those things?” she said, bone faced.

“Know those things? I don’t know anything, and neither do you. I just make good guesses. Besides,” he paused, “I’ve been there.”

That was all the progress they made that day. She wasn’t feeling particularly inquisitive, and now, thanks to Wilson Cobb, all she could think about was her brother.

Richie had been such a bookish guy—but not a geek. His *thing* was writing down quotes in a multitude of notebooks. Patricia had one of them still. She kept it on a shelf at the office because she never opened the books she kept there.

His mind for words was incredible. Once he was sitting on the couch watching the Batman movie with Jack Nicholson as the Joker, when suddenly he lunged across the room, grabbed Patricia’s arm, and started writing on it with a marker. Who knew how many times he had already seen that movie. But this time, a line must have hit him.

“What is it now, Richie? No paper?” she had asked him.

“Ever dance with the devil in the pale moonlight?” he said, scribbling furiously.

“Oh.”

She couldn't remember which ones were in the book on her shelf. She didn't want to look.

There had been signs of course, signs that over time should have meant something. Maybe if they had noticed, they could have stopped it, simply by sheer will. Melanie was the one who noticed that Richie had started to lose interest in everything he had once loved. He had been a part of several bands, playing bass. All of those fell apart one by one because Richie stopped showing up one day. Next, he broke up with his girlfriend, although those words are too active to accurately describe it. He simply stopped talking to her, whatever her name had been. Ellen or Meg, who knew. He spent entire afternoons in his room lying on his bed watching the wall—perhaps he saw something there. He even started showering less and lying about brushing his teeth, where previously he had spent ages in the bathroom just gelling his hair into place.

But he was seventeen. When you're seventeen, things get chalked up as phases. Even when they most definitely are not.

This “phase” was also why Patricia had only one of Richie's quote books.

After school one day, when both of her parents were working and Melanie was at a friend's, Patricia walked into the house and was overwhelmed by a cloud of thick smoke and the shrill beeping of their smoke detectors. She ran to the kitchen and found Richie, standing in front of their gas stove, holding one of his notebooks into the blue flame of one of the front burners.

She had frantically asked him if he were alright. What he was doing.

He didn't turn around.

She had yelled his name, and when he still didn't look at her, she had hit the arm holding the notebook, hard. He slowly swiveled around to face her, still holding the pages up to that ghostly gas.

"Yes?" he had said calmly.

Patricia snatched the remaining notebook from the counter and ran out of the room with it, smearing the pile of dirty gray ash across the floor as she went. She ran to the phone to call her parents, listened to them scream at Richie later that night, heard him say he didn't know what it was that made him not want the journals anymore. He just didn't.

But later, remembering this occurrence, she would only think about his eyes, the tranquil look of his dark green eyes, as the flames licked his fingers and the words he had once loved so dearly.

That night after she finished with her last patient, she wrapped things up at the office to have dinner with Ruben. Despite their busy schedules, he insisted that they make time to have dinner together every Wednesday. She didn't know what she had to complain about. Ruben was perfect. In a perfectly perfect way. He was a great cook, never found fault with her, wanted to get married one day, possibly soon, and, organized his closet by color and item. What was there not to like?

"Hey hon," he said when she arrived at the house. It was a beautiful home in a neighborhood "great for kids," he had told her one day with a wink. When he bought it, he said he knew she would like it, he didn't need to show it to her before closing on it. And she did like it, so what could she say to that?

It reminded her, in a way, of the early weeks of their relationship, when they were finally dating and not simply sleeping together. Patricia had asked him why he had approached her in that bar.

“I could tell you wanted to get out of there as much as I did,” he said, wrapping her in a huge bear hug.

Patricia thought this was strange at the time, but didn’t say anything because they were still at that point where anything you say can and will be used against you. Plus, when he hugged her, her face smushed into his chest, which made speaking or arguing difficult.

But she did think about it, and she thought she remembered that he was wrong: that she had wanted to stay there with the lights and the people and the soft counter top that she’d cozied up to so quickly.

She had already realized what kind of guy Ruben was though; put her finger right on that dot. The day after the bar, when she finally woke up (he had been up since dawn), the first words out of his mouth were that he didn’t want her to get the wrong idea about the way they met: he never drank, never partied, and never went out at night. And, he certainly had *never* had a one night stand. He said this with such emphasis that even someone less observant than Patricia (who could psychoanalyze a stranger in her sleep) would have realized that he was starting their relationship right then, like it or not. Patricia didn’t take much notice—she felt young, mysterious, and involved. She wasn’t going anywhere.

But tonight, as they sat down to dinner, she didn’t feel very mysterious at all: no matter when she got home, dinner was always exactly ready whenever she arrived. And on top of that, he predicted what she would want to eat so well that she had secretly turned it into a game: on

her drive home she would think about which of Ruben's dishes she most wanted that night.

Invariably, that was what would be on the table.

"You know, Ruben, it's eerie."

He looked at her.

"You always—and I mean *always*—know what I want to eat," she said, as she stuffed a bite of mushroom ravioli into her mouth, "It's ridiculous, really. How do you do it?"

"Well, I just...I just make what I want to eat. Honestly."

"Oh," she said. "That's it, then. Huh."

They ate the rest of the meal talking about the food and their days and the weather. Ruben mentioned at one point, with a raised eyebrow, that Melanie had called for her. Patricia said nothing. Not too long after that they went to bed. When she said she was too tired, he didn't press her.

The next morning, as Patricia came into the office, she noticed that it was overcast, again. It had been particularly dreary for a few days. Richie had loved cloudy weather. She would have thought about him longer if a sharp knock hadn't startled her as soon as she sat down at her desk.

"Dr. Harmon," Jasmine said with her usual worried frown, "Mr. Cobb is here to see you."

"His appointments aren't on Thursdays, what do you mean he's here?"

"He seems upset. And your sister called."

Patricia was blessed with a secretary who never thought her boss was doing her job well enough.

"When's my next *scheduled* patient?" she asked.

“Not for another half hour, Dr. Harmon,” she said, smirking, as if that were another of Patricia’s shortcomings.

So she sent for him to come in. A little guiltily—but why?

He walked in wearing a darkly stifled expression. As soon as Jasmine closed the door though (and she took her time, wanting to hear if her boss were guilty of some terrible doctoral transgression), another brilliant smile broke across his face.

Wilson sat down, smug and territorial, on her couch.

“Mr. Cobb, your appointment isn’t for a few days.”

“I know that,” he said. He brushed back his shaggy hair; his face was sober now. She was having trouble keeping track of his moods.

“Well?”

“Call me Wilson. I’ll tell you what you want to know, just call me Wilson. Please.”

He said it with such an expression that she didn’t know what to say.

“Wilson.”

“Yes.”

“Wilson, what is it?”

“I don’t know.”

They sat for a moment.

“Do you want to just sit here?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he sighed, “yeah, that would be nice.”

They sat.

Patricia didn't know what Wilson was thinking and she didn't ask. She wasn't even curious at that moment. She was simply glad for the silence.

She thought about when she had found the first in the string of overtly sexual notes that appeared in her backpack at school. Patricia had taken that first note to her parents. She wasn't sure why; it wasn't the type of note that a teenage girl got excited about sharing with her mother, or especially her father. But something about it felt very wrong.

“Sometimes when you're sitting at your desk, I think about what you're sitting on and wish that—” but that note had been blocked, and all the others, blocked, out of her mind. They were not to be thought of.

Patricia was furious when she found out that Melanie had told her parents that she thought Richie had written it. It was ridiculous, for one thing, and for another, it was disgusting. When their parents asked him, he promised it wasn't true. And Richie didn't lie, not to her. He did admit, though, and quite guiltily, that his friend Jason from school had a thing for her, and wouldn't talk about anything else when they hung out. Patricia had thought this was strange. She went to school with Richie and didn't know that he had a friend named Jason. Especially one who had a thing for her.

But Melanie was so insistent about Richie that finally their parents said that they would compare the handwriting from the notes to samples of his writing to put Melanie's mind at rest. There wasn't a single similarity. Even the spelling mistakes were different.

Melanie promptly ran for her room in tear-washed disgrace.

It wasn't until later that they figured it all out. Jason wasn't a friend of Richie's. He was an enemy, and one that lurked just within a distorted enclave in the brain. Their mother, Renée, was doing laundry when she went into Richie's room and found him at his desk, writing

furiously. Melanie's accusations had shaken her—she was not the kind of mother who typically invaded her children's privacy. She reached for the paper as she walked up behind Richie, socks in hand, but when she tried to grab it he swatted her hand away sharply and told her to get out.

It didn't take the doctors long to diagnose him. They decided that they needed to find a place for him out of the family house because he had started going into Patricia's room while she showered and staring at her across the dinner table in a way that made her feel as if she were drowning in a bowl of slimy wet paper.

But even then, even after all of it was out on the table, when Jason was gone, when it was Richie—he couldn't believe what they told him he had done, what he would still do. He would spend a solid hour crying with his head in Patricia's lap, completely innocent, completely Richie. When the shift came, it was always sudden, and always obvious. She had to learn to push her brother away.

They learned too late that they shouldn't have told him what his other self was doing.

They found him in the bathtub, naked and totally covered by the water. It hadn't been violent, he hadn't drowned by forcing his own head (or maybe Jason's head) to stay beneath the water—they would have heard him struggle, the splashes on the floor. They were never very far away from him after he was diagnosed.

He had simply filled the bathtub, tucked himself in among porcelain walls, and inhaled deeply. The water had filled his lungs instantly. There had been no sound.

Before he had gone to take that last bath, he told Patricia that he loved her. That he was sorry. Then he became a fish and left behind his other selves, both of them. She hadn't suspected a thing. He left her to the sun and the hard ground and the air.

Wilson didn't say anything for the rest of the half hour that they sat in her office. Patricia didn't even realize when it was time for her next patient. Another beep from Jasmine let her know that she was, yet again, in the wrong.

"Just a minute, Jasmine!" she said harshly.

There was no answer except for an exasperated huff and a very loud, "I'm *sorry*, sir," to whoever her next patient was before the speaker clicked off.

"Wilson, I have another patient. Give me something to go off of here."

"Roti's Indian has the best *sag paneer* I have *ever* had," he said.

"What?" she said, with an expression of disbelief. This was unexpected, even from Wilson Cobb.

"Are you telling me you've never had *sag paneer*?"

"No, I have, but—" but she stopped herself before finishing.

"Ah," he said.

"What?"

"The boyfriend."

"*What?*"

"Your boyfriend, probably some pure vanilla Cameron or Gage, don't like them 'ethnic foods'."

"His name is not Cameron *or* Gage—" his laughter interrupted her "—and" she continued indignantly, "I am not going to tell you what kind of food he likes! If *he* even exists. It's private and I don't go into my private life with patients. We've been through this before."

He looked at her from behind his thick lashes.

“If succubae were male,” a voice whispered in her ear before she pulled it back into the hollow of her throat where it needed to stay.

“I tell you what—our session is up,” he said with a smirk as he stood up, “and I really have to get to my next patient. But I’ll be at Roti tonight at 8:00. You should come. I won’t even ask you personal questions.”

“I can assure you I won’t be there.”

“You can bring Gavin along to protect you.”

And he walked out.

Wilson’s bland description of her boyfriend stuck with her all day. She ended up canceling her last appointment to go home early. Hearing Wilson’s not so flattering remarks had sparked a strange sense of loyalty within her. She wanted to get over her dissatisfaction and move forward with Ruben. After all, what was so wrong with sturdy loyalty, and kisses on the cheek, and breakfast?

As she drove, she made promises to herself to be better, to think better things, to love more. Et cetera. To pour her heart back into the ground where it would stay. She had never told him the story of her brother. Maybe it would help things, bring them closer together.

But when she arrived, he merely said, “Oh, what are you doing home early?” and fixed her dinner. While they ate, he told her about his day.

Needless to say, Patricia found it thrilling: a little girl had had a stomach ache and he’d sent her straight to the hospital because he thought it was serious. He was gloating because he had been right: she had eaten her mother’s earring. He stopped talking suddenly when he realized he had been gesturing wildly with his spoon. Patricia tried not to yawn.

A little bit later, he asked about her day, and she realized that she wanted to hoard up her good stories for herself. In comparison to his, they weren't even "good" stories. She had helped six or seven patients take the next baby step towards sanity, if such a thing exists. She had sat in silence in a room with Wilson Cobb for half an hour, and at the end, felt like they were the same.

Irrational as it was, she still wanted to keep her tiny triumphs secret—little aluminum-can flecks decorating the brain. And she certainly didn't want to talk about Wilson. Least of all, her brother.

She took a moment, chewing.

"Oh. It was nothing," she said flatly, looking at her plate.

He looked at her. Then, perhaps for the first time, he saw her and finally seemed to understand it all. If she hadn't been in such a state of shock, she might have jumped up and down.

"I think I need to get an early night. I have a meeting tomorrow," he said.

He stood up and put his full plate in the sink.

"You know," he told the drain, "I don't think even you know just what it is you want. But I've been here. And that's more than you can say."

He went upstairs, turning the kitchen light off. She still sat at the dark table, fork in hand, mouth open.

The next day, Patricia woke up at 7:00am like always. But she did not open her eyes. Today was the day that, over ten years ago, her brother took his own life. She tried to not think of it, didn't want to move. She lay there for several hours, letting the phone ring. She must have fallen asleep again, because the next time she came to, it was past noon. She decided she had to

go to the office—not to make Jasmine stop calling her, not to see any of her patients—to get Richie’s remaining journal from the shelf in her office and have it close to her body.

When she arrived, she gave Jasmine no answers and told her to take the day off. Once Patricia had the building to herself, she went into her office and lay down on her couch.

She had picked the journal up off of the shelf behind her desk, wanted it to keep her company. She turned her face into the curve of the armrest, holding the hard book against her abdomen. She waited for the guilt to settle in her stomach like stones. She wanted someone to explain to her the limitations of soap and warm water—to know just how much they can erase.

She lay there, waiting and waiting and waiting until finally it was dark outside.

Then she turned off the lights in her office, pulled the door shut behind her and walked out the front door.

As she walked to her car, she wondered where she had been. What this had all been for.

“We had an appointment today, Doc.”

She didn’t jump.

Wilson Cobb was standing by her car wearing the same blue shirt he had worn just two days ago.

“And,” he continued, his voice heavy, “you stood me up the other day, too. We had a date, remember? The way I see it, now you owe me twice.”

He walked slowly to her, set one hand firmly on the slight curve of her body. Led her back towards the locked door of the office building.

“Open the door, Patricia.”

“Yes,” she said.

When they reached her office, she opened that door too.

He walked in ahead of her with deliberate steps and sat down on the couch.

Ruben was a good man, she knew. He would take her back into his arms eventually with a kiss on the cheek. Perhaps.

She wished now that she had called Melanie back, that she had somehow changed the progression of what was now inevitable.

Richie's journal was there on the shelf behind her desk, huddled against its fellows.

She remembered her brother's words:

"Sloppy, raggedy-assed old life. I love it. I never want to die."

Don't you just want to tattoo that one on your forehead, Patricia?

Or this one: "Being happy is a decision, not a fluke."

Her brother's beautiful smile.

She looked up. Wilson was quiet on the couch, waiting, expectant.

She went to the green book on the shelf without breathing, picked it up slowly. She didn't know which page it would open to.

"All we have in common is our loneliness."

She kissed her fingers, pressed them to the spine and to the pages. It was quiet. She set the book down on the desk, gently, before sliding it away from her across the glass and going to Wilson.

What Humans Sound Like

I.

My parents moved us to Ann Arbor from the Ukraine when I was five. They were both being set up with new jobs at the University of Michigan. They wanted my mother for her pop culture work, and she, of course, wouldn't go without a job for "her Io" as well. Io, my father, was a music therapy specialist, and therefore wasn't in very high demand himself. In the end, Michigan got lucky in the deal: my father turned out to be a huge money maker, bringing more revenue and more musical genius to the University than ever before. His first group of incoming freshmen turned out to be quite eclectic, and by the time they graduated, he had established a firm following among these musical men and women who had never before found their place.

I am fairly certain that they would have followed my father to the end of the world and back on the strings of a banjo. More than anything, as a child, I wanted to be like my father—I wanted people to love and support me like that.

"The world spins on the edge of a fine toothed comb, Mikhail," my mother used to say. "One fad after another, after another." And I believed her. And yet, there have been days, years, in my life when my mother would have been ashamed of me. For leaving behind those dearest to me for a place far and distant from any memories of home.

But in any case, twenty some odd years ago, my parents were the reason I was in Michigan. They are the reason for many things, but for now let it be enough that Io and Masha Levkova were both from the Ukraine—[*Shche ne vmerla Ukrayiny i slava i volya*](#)—and I was

their only son. Thus, the rather uncommon name, Mikhail. When I first looked into Masha and Io's eyes, though, I was only three years old and already an orphan. I don't know what my name was once. Yasin? Mustafa? Ahmed? And would it matter if I had kept that first of names? Who can say.

I had been two years old when I was deserted by the world. No one knew what had happened to my parents, or even how I had turned up in the orphanage. But then, no one knew anything about anyone who died in Iraq in those days. A land of misty relics and freshly made bombs.

I don't remember anything before Io and Masha anyways, so when it came down to it, I never really minded not knowing my true parentage as a child. I saw my own face reflected in Masha's moon eyes as she sang me to sleep. Io's rough hands were the hands that crafted my own caramel skin as he jostled me on his knee. There was a time, not so many years ago, when, I confess, it might have mattered. When I wish, looking back, that I might have found them, those other parents.

But as I will say many times in this tale, I am a firm believer in fate and in the ultimate direction of things. And the parents I do know both taught at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and did very well for themselves once they immigrated. They both spoke perfect English, although there was always an ancient Czarist lilt lurking somewhere beneath their uvulas. It came out in Io more than Masha. There was only one English word which he ever absolutely refused to utter, though: "ukulele." And that was, I believe, because the l's were too much for his thick sweet-potato tongue. This was unfortunate for Io, of course, because he had to speak about ukuleles more than most people, but fortunate because even music specialists rarely verbalize

this poor younger brother of the guitar. When on rare occasions a ukulele simply had to be discussed, he would only ever refer to it as a uke.

“If one does something with confidence, one will never be questioned,” he told me as a boy. Io was very fond of the gender-ambiguous third person singular.

When I think of Io and Masha now, it is difficult to separate them. Their hair was the same dark color of still-wet mud bricks, their eyes were the same green that can only be found in the foliage on the outskirts of small villages. They always seemed rustic to me, even though they were from the huge city of Kiev. Perhaps all parents seem rustic to their children, but mine seemed to even *smell* of far away small places.

They were both atheist, and quite staunchly so. My parents used to tell me how shocked they were to arrive in the “New World” and find an almost identical percentage of Christian people here as in the Ukraine. They could hardly accept that, in this country of progress and capitalism, such a majority of people still believed in an ancient God. But soon after we arrived in the States, things began to change. By the time we’d been here for ten years, and I was fifteen, Christian adherence in America as a whole had decreased by about 10 percent. I only know the exact statistic because my mother, of course, was the one to notice it first. The one to publish a book on the “dampening of American spirits and spirituality” and to call it a new fad. It turned out that she was more right than anyone initially anticipated. Ten years after her book was published, America had descended into what I framed as an irreversible Gotham-like depression. I remember wishing then that I could tell my mother about my Batman-inspired insights and that she, with her peaking cheekbones, might smilingly quote me in her next book.

But there was no next book for Masha Levkova.

That should come later though. I must remember to tell things in the proper order, not to get ahead of myself, mentioning my parents' deadly pilgrimage when I haven't even introduced you to Bahi, the man who planted the seed, or told you how names, which seem so simple, never are.

But yes, to redeem my parents—as I am now something of a spiritual man myself—I like to say that they were each other's religion. There was nothing in the world, in my father's "humble opinion," that shone as brightly or in as heavenly a light as my mother's strong white teeth, or her thick, thick doe lashes. To my mother, my father's hair, full on the sides but with a monk's tonsure of baldness, was a sign that there was truth and meaning in this life; his wrinkled knuckles were the joints of her very existence. Each morning before they left for the university together (they only ever had one car to share), my father would grip his Masha by the arms, her sturdy arms, and tell her "My dear, I will love you all day, and again tomorrow," before kissing her soundly on the mouth. My mother would blush, as she did any time my father touched her, and say, "Don't forget the nights, Io."

Perhaps if I were their biological son and not just their son in every other way, their unabashed demonstrations of emotional and physical affection might have disturbed me. I have since learned that most children are mortified upon realizing that their parents kiss, touch, and God forbid, do other things when their children are ever so rarely not around. But I would watch, a serious-faced five year old, wide-eyed as my parents told each other their own sort of goodbye before entering the public world for the day, and hope that soon, very soon, I might find something like what they had.

I didn't waste time looking for it, either. My parents only laughed and called me an early bloomer, but the parents of my conquests were a different story all together. Maggie Hancock,

for instance, was the most beautiful kindergartner I had ever seen. And it didn't matter to me that I had never spoken to my chosen damsel. Some moments after laying eyes on her, I decided that my method of seduction—had I known what that word meant—would be serenading her with “Prince Ali” from *Aladdin* as I chased her around the playground during recess. It apparently was the perfect recipe for love because by the end of recess, I had my first girlfriend. But as I sat with Maggie outside after school and decided to kiss her on the lips like I had so often seen my parents do, her dad jumped out of the car and started charging toward us as she screamed “Cooties!” over and over. Carrying one of us under each arm, her father towed us into the school to find someone to blame. When he found my teacher he screamed, “What is the meaning of this? I bring my daughter to your school and I drive up to find this boy with his lips all over her! She is *five!*”

I remember being very confused: I knew that if it were shameful, my parents would not have done it.

I told Mr. Hancock, “But sir—I love your daughter all day! And tomorrow too!”

I'm not sure if it was my strange declaration of love or my bizarre Iraqi-Ukraine child-accent, but he demanded that they call my parents who, luckily for me, were good at diffusing tense situations. They listened to what happened quite seriously, and then after appeasing Mr. Hancock with their assurances that it would never happen again, laughed the whole drive home. I didn't get to play with Maggie again because her parents moved her to a different school, but that didn't stop me. I was heartbroken at first, but I directed my attentions to a new girl as soon as I could bring myself to do so, and that trend continued for most of my time in the American education system: I would fall ever so deeply in love with a girl, she would leave, and I would mourn before eventually moving on to someone else. Of course, looking back from where I sit

now, inside of a love so full and so heavy that it is boundless, I know that I felt then only a minute fraction of the love I now feel every day, and every night too.

But to explain my parents' infallible calm in the face of situations like a screaming conservative father and a scared kindergarten teacher, they each came from very large—very typical—Ukraine families: my father the youngest of seven and my mother the oldest of seven. My father loved that oddity; partially because he liked to say that, although he didn't believe in God, he believed in the number seven. He always mentioned during the first lecture in all of his classes that it was no coincidence that there are so many sevens in the Bible because there are also seven fixed pitches of the musical scale. Clearly, music had been carefully planned out, just as the days of the week and the days of creation, and so on. My father loved his music more even than he loved his atheism, so much so that he was willing to even use the Bible as evidence.

It is true that America fell out of love with religion during my adolescence. Masha and Io had decided long ago that religion was not for them, so they were separate from this trend. They were not negative or pessimistic atheists though. It was simply that Io and Masha couldn't trust something more than two-thousand years old. It went against Masha's desire to outsmart trends and Io's desire to love Masha. Hinduism, Judaism, and Buddhism were even older than Christianity (and each of them an "ism"—adherence to such category was rare in our house), and Islam was hardly better.

So I grew up with libraries for temples, textbooks for spiritual guides. Before I started kindergarten in the United States, I was convinced that the way to make friends would be to do well in school. Back in the Ukraine I was the most popular kid in my class because I could already read in both English and Russian.

But as it turned out, no one in Ann Arbor that I met really cared that I could read Russian. No one in my new kindergarten class really knew what Russia was. By the time I'd graduated from Peach Tree Montessori, and then later Haisley Elementary and Forsythe Middle School, I'd had my reality check and learned that intelligence, perhaps, wasn't the key to popularity. Very early on I learned that I was different, and that being different matters, that being "ethnic" makes you an oddity.

So yes, I was unusual, perhaps, but to this day, I have no explanation for why I ended up being so popular with the girls I went to school with. The other kids, and my parents as well, I'm sure, didn't understand it any better than I did. I would like to say that my classmates couldn't believe the girls loved me so much simply because I was ordinary looking. But no, I have never been close to that.

I believe—although I have no proof of this—that my biological parents were extraordinarily good looking. I say this because I have a theory: that two beautiful people mashed together in a deoxyribonucleic joke doesn't necessarily mean that the product will be beautiful as well. You have seen couples in which each member is sturdily attractive. You believe when you see them, with good reason, that the children which will spring forth from their collective loins will be very cute and grow up to be sturdily attractive like their parents. But when two gorgeous people procreate—a woman, say, with huge eyes and the fullest lips you can imagine; a man with a most distinct jaw line and a chiseled brow— I believe wholeheartedly that the result of their love will be mystifyingly ugly.

If you can imagine all of the aforementioned beautiful features crammed onto one face, you will be fairly close to viewing an image of me. I am undeniably a very strange looking man. It should pain me to say it, but it no longer bothers me. I can, in fact, go into very close detail

about how odd I look, and not bat a single beautiful eye. It's easier to describe it in detail than to show you an overall picture. You see, I have those huge eyes I mentioned earlier, the beautiful full mouth, the strong jaw, the defined brow line. I also have a broad yet purposeful nose, reflective thick black hair, and have even been told that my ears are remarkably beautiful. And therein lies the true irony of my face: each of my features on its own is unfathomably gorgeous. But squashed together, they merely look comical. A child's rendering of beauty, maybe: each feature drawn by a professional master artist, but then thrown from the palette by a toddler with sticky applesauce fingers.

During the extraordinary years when everything fell together and apart for me, carefree marketing execs at the company I worked for labeled my face as "a face for all nations". I think they were referring to the fact that I could pass as a patriot of any country: my nose is typical arrogant-tipped French or perhaps classic wide-bridged Nigerian. Each brown eye is a perfect milky allusion to my Iraqi doe-eyed heritage and somehow also to sacred Indian cow eyes. My jaw could hold its own in the American senate or in a cutthroat German business. My thick heavy hair belongs on a Nepali herdsman, a Mongolian warrior, or even an American Indian casino worker.

But once it all ends up together on one face, you're left with a lovely mess. Or I suppose *I* am. Which explains why no one understood how I could be a ladies' man.

Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately, if you believe in fate as I have come to do—my parents decided to move, and I was uprooted from the comfortable fabric of childhood friends during the first month of my freshman year of high school. They wanted to move into a better house both because we finally had some money and because they wanted to be closer to the University. My parents were in a bicycle phase and became infatuated with the idea of cycling to

and from work each day. It was inevitable, I suppose, that my parents follow a trend or two themselves, living and working and breathing within the context of a University like Michigan.

So I was lifted up and deposited on my backside at Huron High School in the middle of the semester, just about as close to the University as you could get. And I was remarkably startled to find that I had a hard time on my first day. Despite my strange face, and in spite of the fact that my mother obviously wasn't one to buy into typical teenage fads (so, for instance, I didn't have the sneakers with roller skate wheels or the baggy jeans that everyone else wore in high school in those days) I had for some reason assumed that going to school here would be just as easy as it had been at my old school. And to be honest, it did end up being easy once that first day was over.

But, you see, I never actually finished my first day. It was interrupted and I didn't go back. The second day, the third day, the fifty-fourth, the eighty-ninth all went fine. But that first day was important in three ways: it was the last day of my life without Violet, it was the day I met Bahi, and it was the day I first wondered whether I might be truly different.

It was also the first day I ever skipped school, something I fully attribute to Todd Dunham. Apparently news at this school traveled fast; fast enough that—although sorely mispronounced—this senior boy already knew my name when he introduced himself to me before my third period class.

I spoke to him with the carefree attitude of adolescent males, even when he began telling me that Mrs. Walsh, the Algebra teacher whose classroom I was about to enter for the first time, was a monster.

That is, until he told me she was a monster because she despised foreigners.

Foreigners. I didn't think of myself as a foreigner. My parents were two of the most highly respected academics at their school. I'd lived in America since I was five years old. Before you're five years old you only remember your parents, your toys, and your yard. And so what if I spoke Russian as well as I spoke English. I certainly didn't do it in *public*.

When I asked him why he thought I was a foreigner, he looked me up and down and said, "Duh."

It hadn't occurred to me that it was so obvious.

I started to feel a bit frantic. Then he told me that she had framed the last foreign student for sexual assault, and that everyone had believed her. Even his parents thought he did it.

I was only fourteen. What does sexual assault even mean at fourteen?

Todd told me I should skip. When I hesitated, he told me that the last kid had only been Canadian. In Ann Arbor, Canada is just next door.

I was in big trouble.

And with that, he shook my hand and firmly pushed me on my way.

Before I knew it I was off, running through the halls, attracting interested looks from all sides. I was terrified that this woman might really get me into serious trouble. I had never before had an experience to make me doubt someone's honesty. I can truthfully say that I thought Dunham had my best interests at heart.

It wasn't until I got outside and onto the sidewalk that I stopped and wondered if he could have been lying to me. I looked up at the school again, wondering if I should go back. Then Todd appeared in an upstairs classroom window, searched me out on the ground below, and gave me a thumbs up, banishing my doubts.

Because my mother hated labels, and because she certainly didn't want me labeled as a latch key kid, I didn't carry a key to my house. I wasn't sure where to go. I didn't have a cell phone, and at that time anyways they were so big that if I did have one it wouldn't have fit in my pocket. I could have walked to the University, it was so close, but for some reason I felt like that would be a bad idea. My parents weren't going to be very understanding of me skipping school. If there was one thing my parents enforced, it was being a good student. I needed better proof than some senior's warning. And then what if they believed Ms. Walsh? What if she made up some story about me just because I had skipped class?

I felt lonely. And very foreign.

I decided I would just keep walking. It was October in Michigan, which meant it should have been about 60 degrees outside, but I remember this particular day being very cold.

I finally stopped when I reached, ironically, the epicenter of the ethnic grocery market in Ann Arbor. I had never been there after nearly ten years of living in the city. My mother cooked many dishes native to the Ukraine, my favorite being her cheese paska, but she insisted that I not go with her to the ethnic market to get the ingredients she needed. I wondered why that was, until I realized that I *did* know: my mother wanted her son to be American. That thought sobered me, because she was going to be disappointed when she heard what had happened that day: her boy labeled as a foreigner.

Each street was lined with different shops like Yogi and Bombay Grocery, ZZ's Produce, owned by a Kurd, and the Sunshine Fruit Market. I was getting very hungry, but didn't know where I should spend the few dollars I had in my wallet.

Then I saw the Euro Market. In the windows were many of the things I knew and loved from my mother's kitchen: blini, spicy basterma, poppy-seed cakes, rich dadu. I peeked inside

the door. It looked friendly enough. Russian shampoos and jams and sodas covered the shelves. There were even packages of Russian cookies for diabetics.

I walked in, for some reason feeling cautious and out of my element. I walked up to the deli counter and ordered some sausage with sheep-milk feta. They had tables in the shop, but I walked out to the bench I'd seen on the corner, which (again you shall witness my unwavering belief in fate) just happened to be right in front of another shop: the Bombay Grocery.

So now we come to the point of my story where Bahi the prophet enters. I suppose I shouldn't call him that—a prophet—but I have no other word for it. A lucky man who happened upon coincidence? A scammer? A con? But for me, Bahi was and always will be a prophet.

I was sitting on my bench eating the sausages and cheese, feeling quite ethnic, and a little bit strangely pleased with myself, when an old Indian man walked out of the Bombay Grocery and sat down next to me. I was brought up in America in the nineties, so I would have found his bold approach a little unsettling anyways. Bahi, however, was truly remarkable looking. He wore a magnificent turban of green, blue, gold, and red that wrapped around his head like a twisty snake. His hair was hidden, but a long white mustache curved up on each side of his face, about as thick as the sausage that now hung halfway out of my mouth.

“A samosa?” he offered, holding one out to me. He bounced it back and forth from hand to hand. I could see the steam rising.

I blinked at him. Then I remembered the sausage and removed it from my mouth.

“Um—no, sir. Thank you.”

“I insist. On me.”

“Well, but I don't have any money and—”

“You deserve more than a samosa, young man. What is your name?”

“Mikhail,” I said, “Mikhail Levkova.”

I was pretty confused, but I took the samosa with my free hand when he forced it into my grip. His hands were surprisingly strong.

As I took a bite, his eyes got wide.

“You mean you haven’t realized yet?”

He spread out the fingers of both hands when he said it, shaking them a little.

“Realized what?” I asked.

I swallowed what was left of the crusty pastry in my mouth.

His wet-eyed grin didn’t change and he said nothing, so I said, “No, I think you have the wrong guy. I’m not even from here. I’m from—”

“Just wait,” he interrupted with a toothy frown, “Soon you will be wishing you had listened to old Bahi. You’ll wish you had asked me what to do and when to do it.”

“Well, sir, thank you for the samosa, but my parents are waiting,” I lied.

“Ah, yes, your parents! I can tell you this much: don’t you let them go back across the water. You can keep them if you just keep them in your sight.”

“Right. Yes, sir. My parents won’t be going back there anyways. They’re happy here.”

“We shall see, my boy. I hope I’m still around when you come back to this little city, but I fear I will be gone already.”

And with that he kissed my forehead, rose with unexpected ease from the bench and vanished back into the grocery.

I was left sitting there with the remains of my samosa, wondering what on earth had just happened.

When I got back to my house I had a lot of explaining to do. My parents had, of course, received a telephone call from the principal. My absence had not gone unnoticed and Todd Dunham had certainly not covered for me as he had said that he would. I attempted to cover for myself: “But *Mom!*—I was at school, people just must not have *seen* me!”

My parents immediately gave me the searing glare that meant I was not making things easier for myself.

Years later, I have wished, at times, that I were a better liar. The truth leaves the tongue much more easily for me, and so my efforts to keep my parents from ever knowing about my trip to the marketplace were quickly thwarted.

But when I did tell my parents the real truth, they promptly told me to not be so gullible as to believe a school bully and sent me on my way back to school the next morning. Only this time, I had to check in with each teacher or risk the vice principals teaming up and scouring the school for me.

You may be wondering if I told my parents about Bahi and the Russian shop. I tell you now, I left those things out. A fourteen year old boy feels silly about a lot of things, but in my mind there was not much sillier than what I would have to say in order to tell the whole truth: that I had been recognized and told I was “special” by an ancient Indian man named Bahi—especially at the ethnic marketplace—on the day I skipped school because a boy duped me into believing a teacher had it in for me because I was *foreign*. I felt more than a little ridiculous and my story sounded more than a little imagined.

So I didn’t want to tell them. Or I should say, I didn’t want to tell them then. Four years later, as a senior about to graduate from high school, I would consider finally airing the truth. To try to tell them.

I should have tried harder.

But that, like everything else, cannot be undone. For some things in life, I am glad of this fact. For others, I wish I had the kind of powers which, for a brief time in my adolescence, I truly believed I had. Before I get to that, though, I should tell you first about my reception at Huron High School after that initial unfortunate day.

It was with a wary spirit that I returned. I expected ambushes on every side, but I didn't see Todd Dunham. In fact, I didn't ever speak to him once that year, and then he graduated. Let us hope—yes, it is a long shot—that he now does something more worthwhile with his life than terrorizing young boys.

As I said, though, after my first day, things improved for me. I don't think I would have made many friends if it weren't for the fact that, as if by magic, my typical luck with the fairer sex returned to me yet again. Betsy Quinn sat in front of me in my World History class and for the first time in my life, my strange ethnic background became a benefit to me. My teacher insisted on hearing me speak some Russian. I would have declined, but Betsy turned around in her desk, her big blue eyes opened wide and looking at *me*.

So naturally, trapped between the gaze of a pretty girl and a dissatisfied public school teacher, my words suddenly eluded me, English and Russian alike. My mother used to tease my father about this typical Io-ism: "Io's gone down the rabbit hole again!"

Another way in which I followed my father's small brown feet.

Finally I heard myself stammering out a well known Russian nursery rhyme:

"Raz, dva, tri, chetyre, pjat'

Vyshel Zajchik poguljat'."

As soon as the sing-songy words escaped my mouth, I realized that I had to do something quickly. In my mind it was all too evident that now I would forever be associated with a silly kid's rhyme about counting and animals.

Luckily, when the teacher asked me what it meant, I had a sudden stroke of inspiration.

"It means, 'The girl is pretty...and also charming,'" I lied, looking at Betsy.

For me, it was one of the better lies I'd told in my life. I obviously wasn't very good, though, because I am fairly certain that charming is not a word typically used by ninth grade American boys.

But, something I have since learned about women, and this applies to high school girls too: they do not want ninth grade American boys. They want mature, responsible, sensitive, preferably exotic and foreign men. At the time, I fit about three of the five categories.

And more importantly, this anecdote is why Violet and I first met: she had heard about "the charming boy" from the other girls, and, in Violet's mind, this meant she needed to meet me and disprove their theory, because she hated the suave and debonair. I did not know it, but Violet silently cased me for a few weeks before finally saying hello.

When she did, I was deep in the angst of my breakup with Betsy Quinn. As I have told you before, I would feel the loss, swear it was the last time I would ever love again, and then move on within a few weeks. It was not that I was intentionally fickle or inconstant. I truly believed that each new love was my last.

So when Violet approached me during lunch that afternoon, I was not feeling very receptive to her large brown eyes or wispy blond hair.

She came alone.

"So you're that kid, huh?" she asked, leaning on one hip.

“‘That kid’?” I repeated, looking up at her with a forlorn expression from where I sat beneath a large cottonwood tree.

She sat down in front of me, neatly folding herself into a little cross-legged package. She was slight, and neatly compactable. She didn’t wear makeup. I think that was perhaps the first thing I actually took notice of as she sat down beside me in the shade: the clean cool angles of her pale face contrasted with the painted cheeks and eyes of her classmates.

“The ‘charming’ kid. You know... the one all the girls love.”

I was intrigued.

“All of them, huh?” I said, sitting up a bit, even with the memory of Betsy heavy on my heart.

“Well. Not all of them,” she said with her head cocked to one side.

She was still looking at me as if she didn’t understand what anyone saw in this large-nosed, collage-faced boy.

Violet didn’t hinder my honesty—in fact I found myself irresistibly drawn to telling the truth in her presence.

“I don’t know what it is that they see in me either, you know.”

She looked startled.

“I didn’t say that!”

“I know you didn’t, but that’s what you were thinking, right?”

“Maybe,” she said, looking down at her sneakered feet.

The bell rang just then, calling us all back in for class.

She sprang up in an instant with sprite-like vigor and started for the school, not waiting to see if I would follow.

I realized that I didn't know her name. Before I could say anything, though, she turned to me hesitantly over one shoulder.

"My name's Violet," she called, before making a direct beeline for the door.

I stood up myself after Violet left and walked into school. When I got inside, she was nowhere to be found, but I had a feeling that I would be seeing her again soon.

Violet, however, was not as sure about me at first as I was about her, a fact which she quite happily relayed to me later that year.

It was almost my birthday; Michigan was just starting to defrost. We were taking advantage of the warmer temperature one Saturday, eating lunch on the wooden porch swing that still might hang from the rough-barked sycamore outside of my parents' house.

"When I first met you," she said with a grin, "I was sure that you were just a fop."

"A fop?" I asked, not sure whether to laugh or be indignant. "Where the hell are you from that you call someone a fop?"

"Fop," she said, "is a very useful word! I can't think of any other word that better fits what I thought about you then. Just because it's antiquated doesn't mean it's not useful."

Violet loved words. They were her sustenance. I sometimes believe that that was the reason she was so slim and small: she got full on words and didn't leave room for food.

"But you're not a fop," she said, gathering our paper plates and chip bags and empty cups towards her end of the table in order to create her ritually organized collection of trash. After lunch each day, Violet would pick up our bits and pieces of dirty napkins and plastic cutlery and, pulling them to her like snow, create a dense little being comprised of all of the things we had just consumed. Her unspoken goal was to make her construction as small as possible, and I never

saw her replicate one of her previous little trash beings. They were transient things, thrown away upon construction. I am not even sure she was totally conscious that she made them. But I believe that it was the internal joy of gathering that drew her—the productivity of compaction, the satisfaction of the creation, and to make that creation smaller, smaller than it had ever been or could ever be as its individual parts.

And though each structure only lasted the few moments it took to walk to the trash can, they were all beautiful in my eyes because she had made them.

Our friendship in that first year was full of similar moments: me, observing Violet and loving every little thing she did; Violet, not seeming to care an inch more about me than she should care about a friend, even a best friend. I was still convinced, though, that my love for her—and for those heat-inducing eyes, like brown pools of the Kousmichoff spicy chocolate tea my mother still ordered from Russia—would be returned one day soon.

Almost exactly one year from the day we met, I found my true vocation. As a child I planned to be a rockstar, a veterinarian, a doctor. Those plans were only green dreams, a child's curious perspective on lifelong prosperity or intrigue, perhaps. With Violet, however, I began to reorganize my priorities without even being aware that I did so. And, again a matter of fate, Violet was the one who led me to my calling, my own benevolent guiding light.

I have not yet spoken much about Violet's family, I realize, and must do so before proceeding any further. Her parents, Alvin and Liese Engle, were both born in Germany, but each had moved to the States quite early in their childhoods. Neither of them spoke the language of the fatherland. Violet's paternal grandparents, however, had immigrated as soon as Violet was

born, and they had taken special care to teach their little *Enkelin* to speak German. She quickly became fluent, in part because of how dearly she loved her grandparents.

Because Violet was an old soul, she came to believe early on that she knew German for a reason other than just to spout off in it when she felt angry. And so, at the age of ten, she became the youngest volunteer at the ESL program her elementary school offered. Although there weren't necessarily many German speaking students in Ann Arbor, her family did live in the Old West Side Historic District, which some people still call the Old German district. Ann Arbor was not, of course, divided up by ethnicity to any real extent, but her family lived in a distinct area on Mulholland Avenue where the streets are closely lined on both sides by small revival homes from the 1890s where many people of German descent did indeed continue to live. It just so happened that many of Violet's neighbors, including several that ended up being her students, moved there straight from Germany with very little English. Violet always said that teaching other people to speak a language was one of her favorite things to do.

That being said, Violet had many favorite things, including some things that she had never done before, like skiing and hang gliding, or so she told me.

She continued, however, to be an ESL volunteer teacher in high school at a language center near the middle of town. And since she knew about my bilingualism—the reason we had ever met in the first place—she was convinced that I would love it as much as she did. So, because I was completely in love with her, I asked if I could go with her one day after school.

When I got home that evening, I was very quiet. My parents asked me, cautiously, how my day had been. I told them that I had just been at the language center helping a 72 year old *babushka* learn her English letters from the Cyrillic alphabet. When the lesson had ended, the little woman, Yekaterina, was in tears because she believed now that she would be able to read

the scripture at her daughter's wedding a year hence. She had lived in the States for five years convinced that she was "too old of a dog to learn new tricks," but her daughter's wedding was motivation enough.

It did not take me very long to realize that with this first lesson came a calling so dear that I could scarcely contain it. I knew that this was the vocation, the mission, to which I had to dedicate my life. Violet and my parents were thrilled that I had found a purpose. My parents made sure to warn me that I would never make much money as an English teacher, especially as an ESL teacher. When I asked them what that had to do with it, they were proud.

"We have raised our Mikhail right after all, Io!" my mother gushed.

Violet told me that it wasn't always as picturesque as helping a little old lady learn her alphabet, and I realized that I would have to learn other languages in order to be successful.

Still, I was willing to make those sacrifices and determined to make my new plan become a reality. I started taking French in school, Violet began tutoring me in German, and I went to learn bits of Spanish at the language center when I could in the evenings.

And so you see, perhaps, why it was that I cared so deeply for Violet. Not only did she fascinate me, but she also led me to my true calling. I was head over heels and decided to tell her how I felt, but like everything else with Violet, I was in for a surprise: the first time I tried to get her to go out with me, Violet attempted to put a quick stop to it by informing me that, actually, she was a lesbian.

"Really?" I said, and it shames me to admit that my voice cracked, whether from intimidation or arousal, I'm not sure. Realizing that I should try to sound cool, I said, "Yeah, I mean, I thought so," in what I imagined was a deep, brusque voice.

That was when she hit my shoulder, hard.

“You idiot! What does that mean?”

“But you just said...”

She glared at me but then lost her nerve and started laughing so hard I began to be concerned for her mental health.

I couldn't do anything but stare at this beautiful, insane creature.

When she finally pulled it together, she said, still laughing a little, “The look on your face was pretty funny—but what did you mean, “you thought so”! You thought I was gay?”

“I didn't mean that ... I just meant...” and then it hit me with a swell of relief: “So you're *not* gay.”

A smile appeared on my face so widely that I must have looked ridiculous. “Okay, so wait, now will you go out with me?”

She looked at me, stunned.

“You just told me you thought I was gay. Of course I won't go out with you!” she said, smiling as she walked away.

I knew enough to know when I had been bested.

But that didn't keep me from trying—and I soon discovered what an inexperienced suitor I was. Although I had dated many girls, I had never had to work for it. I wrote her terrible love poems almost every day (“Violet, as inviolate as the pure white of dawn...” etc.) and picked her flowers from around our neighborhood, all of which I put in her locker because I knew she wouldn't take them from me. I even tried to learn some songs by the Dave Matthews Band because they were her favorite. Luckily for her, my father told me, lovingly but firmly, that my voice would only scare her away. I planned picnics, took her to romantic movies (“just as

friends!’”), and found out about interesting museum exhibits and gardens we could visit on the outskirts of town just so that I could have an excuse to be alone with her on the walk there and back. I’m fairly certain that I used every tactic I could think of before reluctantly deciding near the end of my sophomore year that I would apparently never change the mind of this particular goddess. And so I decided to try to content myself with the knowledge that she was my best friend, and that I was hers.

I should tell you, and I *would* tell you if I could, just what it was about Violet that had me so infatuated. But even now, even today, it’s not something I can touch with my hands or explain with my mouth. She ate her mashed potatoes with ketchup and swore she hated cats, even her own cat, Milo, although I knew she’d saved him from a bad storm and let him sleep in her bed at night if he wanted to. When she got her driver’s license, she made high pitched angry noises at any bad drivers we passed if they offended her with their lack of indicating or tailgating. It was not unusual to find her before class some morning crying over a book. Once, when I asked her what the matter was, she told me she was mad at Anna and Vronsky: when you’re in love, you make it work, you don’t jump in front of a train.

There were other things too, of course. She sang softly to herself as she walked from class to class, not in the obnoxious way of people looking for attention; once I asked her about it and she said she had no idea what I was talking about. She never tried to make anything of my complicated ethnic background, my odd appearance, my un-American gait. I didn’t realize at the time how important it was—to have a best friend who allowed me to be my own strange melting pot without saying a word, positively or negatively, about it. I would only realize the value in that later, when it was no longer at my fingertips.

And it would be wrong to say that Violet went through phases, because once she started something she stuck with it. But almost every month she would begin some new regime or activity, seemingly out of the blue. In October she became a vegetarian, in November she was still a vegetarian but she also taught herself screen printing. By December she was studying opera, screen printing, and not eating meat. And so you see how it would be incorrect and unjust to say she went through phases.

Beyond these little things, which all combined to make Violet the most wonderful and fascinating person I have ever met, there was simply the creature she was at her core, which is unexplainable but essential for you to understand. She loved with a fervor that was difficult to take in—and not just those close to her, but humanity as a general species and for any living thing.

“It is not right for one person to have to care so much,” I told her one day as she cried over the body of the raccoon that had run in front of her car. I thought she would never stop shaking, so deep and so grief stricken were her sobs. We sat by its body for a long time that afternoon before, finally, I picked it up and carried it to her car. We drove home, wordless, and buried it in her backyard. My shirt was stained with the bloody liquid of its body, but Violet looked at me with such relief and such gratitude when I picked it up that I kept the shirt, even though it was ruined beyond repair.

Violet filled me with such intensity that I sometimes felt that my life would lose meaning and color without her soft melodic voice and spritely movement.

And there you have it. There is everything more to say about her, but for the sake of words and movement I will have to leave it for now.

II.

It was with immense reluctance that I finally decided to try to move on from Violet some time later. And when I did go out with other girls, they were less difficult girls, certainly, but also less fantastical girls. I would like to be able to tell you that I don't even remember their names—they were that inconsequential—except that I do remember one of them: the girl that Violet never let me live down.

I wish I could tell you why I felt like I had to move on simply because the object of my affections, namely Violet, didn't return my feelings. I apparently had missed the announcement that girls and women love to be pursued and that most will eventually give in. But regardless of what I should have done in order to sweep Violet off of her feet, all I can really speak to, after all, is what I did do and what really did happen, which was Violet's cousin, Irina.

Irina transferred to Huron High School at the beginning of her senior year (which was our junior year). Violet and I were, of course, still best friends and I was still, at my core, hopelessly in love with her. I managed to repress this, however, and my defense mechanism was such that I alternated between dating other girls and talking to Violet about them whenever I could get away with it and then taking out my anger on them when I failed to make her jealous by breaking up with them. Clearly, I was not a very good person, dating all of these girls with no intention of actually being with them in the long term, but I was in high school, and in high school I am fairly certain that no one is actually a good person. Except for maybe Violet. She was good, even then.

As for Irina, the cousin, she was everything that Violet was not. Violet was all light; a whirl of blonde hair and pale skin. Her darker cousin was a buxom olive-skinned girl with black hair and dazzling hazel eyes. Don't misunderstand me—Violet was beautiful, the kind of

beautiful that catches you off guard and makes you happy to be alive. You don't notice it at first, not really, but then out of the blue it sneaks up and knocks the breath out of your body.

Irina, on the other hand, was unavoidably gorgeous. There was no surprise to it. It was like she had just walked straight out of a movie, or a Victoria's Secret commercial, and right up into my U.S. History course that spring. Her chest had been a topic of conversation since the day she arrived. Each breast had already received so much individual attention that her silky blouses no longer held any mystery, even for the panting freshmen boys. That is not to say that each and every one of us was not fascinated by that chest, regardless. I am fairly certain that we were all so obsessed with the mere idea of viewing Irina's glorious breasts that if we ever actually saw either of her two amenities—in the flesh, as it were—we would most definitely fall over and be unable to rise for some minutes. Afterwards, our memories might be impaired, vision blurred, and the like, and that just from the thought of the bragging rights.

So when I asked Irina out one day after school, sometime late in the spring semester, it was not because I felt I had any chance. Even a boy like me, whose luck with women (at least before Violet) had never failed, knew better than to dream when it came to Irina and her “lactoids” as some of the more asinine boys called them. The reason I asked her, you see, was twofold. First, and let me make this clear: I did not know that Irina was Violet's cousin. That might sound strange or unbelievable to you, knowing, as you know, that Violet and I had been best friends for two years at this point. When I was not at my home, I was at hers, and whatever I did, I told her almost as automatically as if one part of my brain were reporting something to another. But I did not know that Irina was Violet's cousin.

The second reason I asked Irina out, was because Violet dared me to do it. I did not understand why she dared me at the time—in fact it upset me that her feelings for me were so

platonic that she would actually encourage me to date the girl with the biggest breasts in school. As soon as the words came out of her mouth, though, I knew I would have to go through with it, if only to make her sorry that she'd dared me.

I wish it were more of a climactic event, for the sake of this story, but I simply walked up to Irina after school one day, asked her to a movie, and she said yes. We went out that Friday night. However, the part that got me into trouble, the part that Violet never let me forget, is that I didn't tell Violet I was going out with Irina until after our date was already over. Friday night, after walking Irina to the door of her house, I got home and ran to my room to call Violet.

"Hey Vi," I said, "Guess what?"

"You lost a tooth?"

"What?—no. I just got back from a date."

The line was silent.

"Vi?"

"You went out with Irina?"

"And—wait till you hear this—during the movie I got to feel her... you-knows!" I paused, "Through her bra. And her shirt. Well, and her coat too. But still!"

I had never told Violet anything physical that happened with the girls I dated (not that it was ever very much... I only wanted to have sex with Violet) because it made me feel unfaithful somehow. But this time was different. Violet had dared me and I wanted to make her jealous.

That was when she said in a flat tone, "Mikhail, she's my *cousin*."

"Your cousin? You're kidding. How is that even possible?" I laughed.

That was when she hung up on me. I tried calling her back that night, many times, but she never answered. My response had been immediate and reflexive. I hadn't meant it as an insult.

But it was true—I couldn't believe that they were cousins, they were so dissimilar. I didn't talk to Violet the entire weekend. By Sunday, I was spending the day in bed, languid, hoping the phone would ring.

My mother was starting to worry about me when, late that evening, the doorbell rang.

“Mikhail, maybe you should get that, sweetie,” she called from the attic, her own personal study where she conducted research, wrote her manuscripts, and knitted.

“I'm in bed, Mom,” I called back.

But my mother was looking out the window that my father had installed in the attic so that his Masha could have a view while she worked. And from that window, my mother saw a wisp of blonde hair at our front door, and beneath it a small body standing lightly on one foot in the cold.

“Mikhail. Now.”

I have never been able to argue with my mother when she used that tone—the one she used with my father once when he wanted to cut down the magnolia tree in our front yard so that he could use the wood to build a flute, the one I'm sure she used with her gaggle of younger brothers and sisters growing up in Kiev—so I dragged myself out of bed and answered the door.

When I opened it, I gasped because Violet was standing there, looking at her toes, the crown of her head sheathed in a circle of light from our front porch lamp. But when she looked me in the face, the anger in her eyes made me take a step back.

“To answer you, yes, Mikhail, it is possible that Irina could be my cousin. Just because she is buxom and gorgeous and I am not does not mean that we couldn't be related. Alright?”

“Alright.”

“And I don't want you to date her again.”

“Alright.”

“And I don’t want you to remember that I said I’m not buxom and gorgeous.”

“Alright.”

She was silent then, toeing the ground with one small foot.

“Violet?”

“What?”

“My mom made apple squares.”

“Oh. Okay.”

We went inside and didn’t talk about that night again. I wonder if we ever will.

And, oh, the nights I have lain in bed, wishing I could return to that moment. To that evening when I knew deep in the quiet place in my chest that I had a chance, a real chance, to take hold of Violet’s heart. And I honestly think I could have had her, too, all those years ago, if not for the intrusion of fate and of loss. And of my own pride. Let us not forget that.

After I promised Violet I wouldn’t date Irina, things were different. I felt that there was an electricity humming along between our two bodies in the air. At first I thought I had imagined it, but as time passed I became more and more sure that when Violet sat next to me on a bench outside, she sat a very certain number of inches away from me—not so far away that I couldn’t feel the heat of her leg next to mine, but not so close that we were touching. At lunch, her hand might fall on the table quite close to my own, but never to the point of contact.

I was mystified.

I had already pursued Violet to the end of the world and back. I had done everything I could think of to make her see how I felt. And now, when I was just starting to make myself move on, it seemed that perhaps there was hope after all.

I talked to my father about it, partly because I talked to him about everything, and partly because I saw how he was with my mother. I knew that he would understand how I felt.

When I told him that I wanted to be with Violet, though, it was a little bashfully—after all, I expected that he would respond with condescension. I was only in high school and I had already had too many “girlfriends” to count. I wouldn’t have blamed him for thinking me disingenuous, perhaps, or erratic.

But it was my intuitive yet simple father, so I should have anticipated that when I told him, all he said was, “You have to be sure. You know that though.”

I just nodded. But in that nod, both my father and I understood that she was the girl I would one day marry, if she would have me. Before I had even finished the motion, I knew that this was the end of all other women for me. And by the dazed look on my face, he knew that I understood.

“Well, Mikhail, don’t give up. Women like my Masha and your Violet. They aren’t just everywhere.”

When I asked him what I should do, he told me I’d have to figure that one out for myself. He seemed to think I would know when the time was right.

Unfortunately, though, it was then when my life went right off of the track to which it had been so carefully guided. That very day we received a phone call in the middle of the night from my mother’s oldest brother, Kostya. One of the sisters, Agafya, had drunk herself into a hospital and was asking for my mother every time she woke up. She also suffered from renal disease and

Kostya said he didn't she would last very much longer, she had let herself get into such a bad state.

A long time ago, before I was even born, my parents decided not to return to the Ukraine again. When I asked them about it, they told me that they wanted to be fully American, but I knew that it was also because they didn't want to become like their families. And it was true—each of my mother's six siblings, save Antonina, the youngest, who had already died of breast cancer in her twenties, had gone down the dangerous alleyways of addiction. Kostya was a newly recovered alcoholic and he was the only one sober enough to call my mother about Agafya. But the Svorenko siblings were not an exceptional bunch: my father's family was the same way, and in those years in the Ukraine, forty percent of men and twenty percent of women died an alcohol-related death. While the life expectancy continued to rise in America, it decreased or stagnated in the Ukraine.

Once, in my early childhood, I heard my usually dry-eyed mother crying in the kitchen. I crept around the corner to see what was wrong. She was hunched over the sink, shaking slowly back and forth with a letter in her hands, murmuring in her native tongue. I heard the words "my precious Ukraine" drip from her mouth and although I was only a little child, I knew better than to go any further into the kitchen.

I can only think of one other time that I saw my mother cry—it was three days after I told my father I loved Violet, as she and my father were about to visit her sister in the Ukraine and to leave me to fend for myself for a week or two, "at the most," she had said.

I told her she didn't need to cry, that everything would be fine. I was big, nearly a man, I said. And in some ways, it was true. I had already applied to schools, gotten into Michigan, New York, and many others. I planned to go to school for linguistics and education and the schools I

applied to had excellent programs. I had never felt the urge to roam, so I was quietly planning to stay in my beloved Ann Arbor. Of course, that would have pleased my parents, who secretly would have been overjoyed that I would stay close to them during my college years. I had not told them yet what I had decided.

Violet, too, had applied to many schools, Michigan included. She had not yet decided where she would go, and I was somehow desperately hoping that she would stay in Michigan as well. I did not know how a distance of more than a few inches from Violet could be tolerable for very long. I certainly didn't want to test out how many miles I could make myself go from her without enduring some horrible consequence.

But as my parents left for the airport that stormy day late in April, I knew very well that I was not yet a grown man. The only reason I did not go with them was because I had classes to finish—I was set to graduate in two weeks. They planned to return a few days before the ceremony in order to be there to watch “their boy” walk.

“Mikhail, be a good boy while we are away. And remember what we talked about,” he looked at my mother, “they are rare.”

My mother tried to smile, although she didn't know what he was talking about. She cried instead and hugged me to her like I was a small boy again.

“My son.”

Those were her last words to me before they left. I hope she knew, in her last moments, that they were enough.

III.

Everyone creates an idea of themselves based on the roles they fill. Or, to honor my father's preferred pronoun at this point in my story, one creates an idea of oneself based on the roles one fills. And up to that moment in my life, I had been first and foremost a son. Through it all, that was what I had been.

And then, on a harmless Saturday morning, I was not.

I hope you will forgive me here if I don't go into detail about the accident itself, about that small country road in the Ukraine. I still find it difficult to think about the countless mornings after the accident when I would wake up thinking my mother must be sitting just above my bed in her upstairs workroom with a book, only to walk upstairs and find her chair empty. I cannot tell you yet what I felt when I realized one night that I would not again hear the sound of my father chopping beets for his *borscht*, his favorite midnight snack.

What I can tell you is that Violet came over as soon as she heard.

I'd barely had time to react before I heard a key in the front door downstairs. In those few horrible moments, I thought perhaps there had been a mistake—that someone had made an error and, in fact, my parents were still alive.

But no, Violet had simply known where our spare key was and let herself into the house.

I don't remember what she said to me after she ran up the stairs and into my room. I don't remember what I said in response to her. Perhaps we said nothing. I do remember that I lay on the floor, quiet and still, for what seemed like months. She was there too, somewhere, her fingers on my face, lips against my shoulder, hands over my heart. Our tears mingled together.

This was the turning point, my friends. It was at this crossing that I made an irrevocable choice.

You see, when the officer arrived at what I still call my parents' house, I knew before I even consciously decided anything that I would have to leave Ann Arbor. I couldn't believe that I was actually going to leave my city. After thirteen years, my home: the Borders flagship store, the Art Fairs in July, the U of M games in the Big Ten Conference, the painted fire hydrants downtown. *25 square miles surrounded by reality*, they said. And I believed it.

When I graduated a few days later, I did not walk in the ceremony that my parents had so wanted to see. Worse, after that first night, I did not see Violet once. And it was no fault of hers. She was at my door multiple times a day. After a week of me not seeing her in daylight, she came many times a night, but I had taken the spare key inside.

I was already eighteen, so I had inherited my parents' house, their fortune, their car, everything. And because I was eighteen, I didn't need a guardian. At least not legally. Who can say if a guardian would have helped?

What I did have was Dr. Howard Renstein, my parents' closest friend from the University. He helped me take care of everything down to the last detail and managed to do it without smothering me or trying to make some kind of emotional connection with me. It would be years before I spoke to Howard again, and it would be, in fact, to alert me to another imminent life changing event.

And so Howard helped me rent out my parents' house, sell their things (except for the few things I made myself keep, including my father's favorite pair of shoes, our family photographs, and my mother's recipe book), and fly to New York. What will surprise you is that I did all of this without seeing Violet.

I placed a note on her front porch in the middle of the night before I left.

It said, "*Es ist immer etwas Wahnsinn in der Liebe. Es ist aber immer auch etwas Vernunft im Wahnsinn.*"

And I believe the truth in those words to this day: there is madness in love and reason in madness.

What came over me? I don't know. How did I have the presence of mind to leave Violet a note in perfect German and not to know that I should have never left her in the first place?

For my father's sake, I wish I could say that I didn't cry during all of this. But I did cry, at home, at the post office, on the plane to New York. And it was a strange kind of crying, a kind I had never witnessed before. It felt so strange that I actually watched myself in the mirror once for what seemed like an age. I wasn't at all sure that it was me that I saw there in the reflection. There was no sound. My face was motionless. But still the tears covered my face and dripped down onto the last of my shirts still clean from my mother's last wash.

When I left for New York, it wasn't entirely on a whim. If I had wanted to go out of state, I would have chosen NYU either way, in part because of the significant scholarship I had received. "For academic excellence and ethnical diversity," it proclaimed. I could not argue with them on either count—I had been a bookish highschooler and an outstanding student. I was also an Iraqi brought up by two Ukrainians.

And, although I had technically already accepted the offer at Michigan, once I told them and the people at NYU what had happened to me, they were eager to bend the rules so that they wouldn't have to speak much longer, I'm sure, to someone with so much loss climbing, like the creeper vine in my parents' backyard, up my spine and out of my dry mouth. In America, as in

all developed countries, I believe, there is an unspoken understanding that loss and sorrow are highly and dangerously contagious. The grieving must be shunned and hidden away, out of sight, the better to ignore them. And so it was that I ended up in New York. I quickly acquired a cheap apartment near the university and a job as an accountant at an IP law firm so that I would have something to do until school started in September.

My plan, you'll remember, in high school, had been to learn as many languages as I could so that I could teach English to anyone, anywhere. And I had succeeded in my endeavors thus far. I was fluent in Russian and Ukrainian, English and French. My German and Spanish were passable, and I had just begun to study Italian. Michigan had a good language program, but NYU's was better—they had the American Language Institute, after all. But when I arrived in the city of lights and change, I realized that I was no longer interested in teaching. I was no longer interested in much of anything.

It was this new feeling, or lack of feeling, that placed me behind a desk as an accountant at Weil, Gotshal & Manges, the IP firm. And, it was this new job that set me on the path towards what would become my career in finance and stocks. There is a numbness in numbers, you might know it, one that seeps through the brain and covers the cornea until a dull shade of beige soothingly grips the mind. Or so it did for me that summer. I had excelled in math in high school, but it had never occurred to me to do anything with it professionally, even after I worked at Weil Gotshal for the summer.

It was not until I quit that summer job to focus on my classes that the thought first came to me. I hadn't enrolled in a math class that first semester, you see, and I soon found myself craving the normalcy of numbers. The way I could turn to the computer screen and drown out my own thoughts by solving a problem that required the entirety of my brain function. I

borrowed a friend's trig book and did the problems by hand at night just for some peace. A few times I sold the answers for a bit of extra cash. By day, I lurked in the computer labs, trying to work out new formulas or answers to any problems I could find online.

And really, it worked. I didn't think about my parents more than I could manage. I didn't think about what I had left behind, at least not while I did math. Violet was the one who continued to worm into my thoughts against my will, her cool fingers and berry-shaded lips.

There were reasons I had left her behind, though. More than one.

The first and most obvious of reasons was that I didn't want to be reminded of my parents at all. By my logic, this meant also to separate myself from Ann Arbor and all of the people in it who might have had even the smallest of connections with my parents. Violet was an obvious one to avoid: my mother called her "my little babushka, wise before her time" and my father had known that I loved her; worse, in my mind, he had already given us his blessing.

The second reason, the one I never said aloud, was that I had told Violet, my dear Violet, about what had happened that day in the ethnic marketplace: that Bahi, a man I had never seen since, a man who supposedly worked in an Indian pastry shop, had four years ago prophesied the death of my parents. His words, or what I remember them to be, have been emblazoned upon my heart, branded across the lined palms of my hands—

"Ah yes, your parents! I can tell you this much: don't you let them go back across the water. You can keep them if you just keep them in your sight."

And the worst part was that he had told me how to save them. And I had ignored it.

It wasn't that I hadn't thought about Bahi's words after that day, because I did.

In our world of skeptics and cynics, though, who is to say where I should place the blame? Was it my fault for not having the courage to challenge our image of the status quo? Or

can I hold each and every person who has ever lived on our planet accountable for shaping Ann Arbor into a city which, by and large, spat at superstition and believed in the stability of education and money instead? Perhaps if I had been living in a world where mole's feet brought good luck or ginger root was boiled beneath beds to bring babies, perhaps then I would have acted on Bahi's words.

As it was, there was no going back, and no gavel with which I could serve out the blame.

But that didn't stop me.

A day or two before my parents had left, I told Violet the story of Bahi and the market. She and I were in my room, studying for one of our last exams of the year. She watched me as I told the tale, but once I finished, she simply went back to her book with a shrug.

"Well?" I had said, somewhat sheepishly. I had believed the story to be the one mysterious secret in my otherwise usual life. I had never told another person.

Because she was Violet though, she didn't answer.

"Well??" I said again.

"Mikhail, you know I can't tell you what to do," she said, "If I tell you that it's rubbish, you'll be offended that I don't believe your story. If I tell you it's true, you'll have an aneurism trying to keep your parents from going to the Ukraine to see a dying sister. Neither of those are things that I want to do."

She was right, of course, but instead of giving up the conversation I continued, "So? If you think it's true, you *have* to tell me!"

"Mikhail," she said, "why don't you talk to your parents? Tell them the story and see what they think. Then you won't have to decide alone."

I knew then that the reason I wasn't going to tell my parents was because, even four years later, I was still embarrassed. Thinking about Bahi, and worse, actually telling the story, had been so uncomfortable that I almost hadn't made it through telling Violet. It took me right back to the day it happened, when I had gone home in ignominy after skipping school because I had actually believed, from the mouth of a perfect stranger, that a teacher would accuse me of sexual harassment just because I was foreign.

"Vi, I don't want to tell them."

So, with a sigh, she comforted me, sitting there cross-legged on the floor. And I was so grateful for the warmth of her fingers in my hair as she scratched my head in her lap, for the smile on her pale face as we talked, that I forgot all of my troubles.

But after they died I began to make myself believe that I didn't tell my parents because of *Violet*. Because *Violet* hadn't thought it worth warning them. And so, despite her efforts to stay out of it, I blamed Violet for my loss.

And yes, I will tell you now of that loss. I have put it off for too long, I know that I have. But you see, I have no wish to remember Masha and Io's death, just as I have no wish to remember much of the past ten years. But, for myself and for my story, I shall speak of it all now.

Of the sad yet distant knowledge that as they drove from the outskirts of town into Kiev, my parents were killed. On the rainy morning my mother and father were supposed to return home, after having witnessed Agafya's death just the night before, a driver carelessly scraped a slow-moving tractor while trying to pass and skidded on the wet asphalt into oncoming traffic. Three cars collided on that nameless country road. Five lives lost in the fiery blazes that soon engulfed them all. There were no remains to be brought home.

I starkly remember my decision to not have a funeral for them. I told Howard Renstein that they wouldn't have wanted it, that it would have been too close to religion for their tastes. And with no bodies to say goodbye to, I told him that he could hold a memorial service at the University, if it would help him, but that I would not be in attendance. I think those were my exact words, "in attendance." I was callous, cold.

But the truth is I *couldn't* be around anyone. I didn't want to hear my parents' friends eulogize them or speak about their violent end. I simply wanted to sit in my bedroom, alone, and meditate on the vision that still haunts me of what happened to my parents that day. I sat, and with closed eyes, I created my own ending to their lives. I replayed it until I could make myself believe the truth of it: that my parents embraced in those last moments, each holding all of the love and the meaning of their life within their two arms. I know it probably can't be true—merely my own Ukrainian reinvention of those entombed at Pompeii—but perhaps in their beloved country, my parents clung together there in their own ashes, arm in arm and still in love amidst the flames.

And that is all I can tell you about that period of my life. Those days and night are foggy and yellowed in my mind, concealing memories that I do not yet care to revisit, even now. That is why I must tell you instead what happened after I left Ann Arbor, after the thick salt of tears had coated everything, like pollen, or cornsilk.

You will correctly assume that I lost part of myself away from my mother city, from my parents, from the only one who could have cured me. It was with an empty heart that I began my life in New York City that year. With an almost mechanical mindset, I set out to find someone who could push the past out of me. Perhaps I was a sadistic or masochistic young man, but I

became obsessed with finding someone—anyone—who could fill, even temporarily, the void that Violet, and of course my parents, had left in me.

And although I must mention them briefly here, I do not wish to fascinate or bore you with the scandalous tales that came out of my search (they would probably do both). It is enough simply to say that I lost myself to the soft hands and come hither smiles of many a girl during those four years. I have already told you that I didn't want to have sex unless it was with Violet. I should be ashamed to admit—and to a certain extent I *am* ashamed to admit—that I did any variety of other activities with these women, but I did not sleep with them.

One cannot change the past, as my father would have said. Although each entanglement was a mistake, none of them lasted very long, and none of them can claim a real place in this story.

I made my real mistakes after college.

But before I can get to that, I must first explain a few things to you.

First, that Violet and I did not see each other once during my four years at school in New York. I wish I could fully explain why this happened. Yes, as I said, at first it was simply that I blamed her for my parent's death. But deep down, I could not deny my love for her. As time went on, I was busy with school and trying to save money, and I didn't want to call her because I didn't want the first time we talked after I disappeared to be on the phone. Then, gradually, it had been too long since I had seen her and I felt so terrible about it all that I couldn't get up the nerve to call her. Soon, I was a senior, about to go out into the working world, so I just decided that I would go back to Ann Arbor when I graduated and make it up to her then.

I don't know why I thought she would be waiting.

IV.

A month or so before I graduated from college, I received a phone call from Dr. Howard Renstein. Yes, it is here, so soon, that he enters my story again, with more news that would change the direction of my life.

He called to congratulate me on what he said he knew must have been four successful years and to find out what my plans were—mainly to see if I would be returning to Michigan.

When I told him that I was indeed planning to return, he was thrilled.

“You’ll be here in time for the wedding then, won’t you?”

“Wedding?”

“Why yes, of course, Violet, the girl you were always gallivanting about with.”

By the time I worked out what he was talking about, my mouth had gone dry and my eyes burned.

I made my excuses, got off the phone, and sat down on the edge of my bed. I lived in a studio apartment in East Village, the same one I’d rented as a freshman. Some of my friends had upgraded into larger one or two bedrooms or moved to better neighborhoods closer to the University as they had deemed necessary once they weren’t poor, lowly freshmen any longer. But I liked my studio. It was cozy, for one thing, and for another, it never felt empty. I’m not sure if there’s a word for it, but at some point after moving to New York, I developed a disliking for too big rooms with too few people. And in my studio apartment, it would be hard to feel like the room was too big.

But as I sat there on my small bed in the rear corner of my little apartment, the phone still in my hand, suddenly the room felt quite small. Unpleasantly so.

Violet, my Violet, was gone, for all practical purposes. Dr. Renstein had not been extremely clear and had not known many details, but I took his words to mean that Violet was about to marry a boy she had met at school and that they planned to settle down in Ann Arbor. He didn't remember what her married name would be.

And so, with that information in mind, it is now that I must tell you all of it that I have been trying to put off: perhaps you imagine that upon hearing this news of Violet's impending marriage, I raced back across the country to find my beloved, thereupon throwing myself into her arms and pleading with her to take me back, to swear my love in as many languages as I could, to live happily ever after.

How I wish, my friends, that this was the case.

But I tell you first that Violet was going to be married so that you can attempt to understand what I did next. My parents, as well as Violet, would have been ashamed.

At NYU I had majored in Economics and Mathematics. I suppressed my lingua-lust (it reminded me so of Violet and of my parents) and instead focused on finances and budgeting. And I turned out to be good at what I studied. So good that, after interning with them during my degree program, I was offered a job with Smith Barney as a stock picker straight out of school.

Before hearing about Violet, I was going to turn it down and find something in Michigan. And then, who knew, perhaps I'd go back to my old love of languages, or else find some way of incorporating it into my economics degree. The thought of Violet had made me optimistic again for the first time in years.

But once I found out that she was getting married, I suddenly had nothing tying me to Ann Arbor, no reason to go back. I was entirely and completely alone. I'm not sure what I had expected would happen—after not speaking to Violet for nearly four years, I had been stupid to

imagine that she might still care for me the way she once had. But for some reason it had never occurred to me that she wouldn't be waiting.

I quickly accepted the job at Smith Barney. For some reason, I felt like I had to rush. I had to accept the job as quickly as I could so that I could become good at it as soon as possible so that I could become wealthy and successful in the shortest amount of time so that...so that what? I don't know.

My ambitions fit in well with the style of the times. As you may remember, my mother predicted the diminishing of religion in America. It was her last book. And what I have not yet told you is that she was correct in another of her hypotheses in this book: that interest in religion in the States would continue to decrease as time went on and be replaced by a stronger focus on money than ever before. And so it seemed that I fit right in—indeed, I found myself possessing a life that many—believers or nonbelievers—would have coveted.

Everything that I planned for happened with relative ease. I had good instincts and good results with the stocks I chose for investors. I instinctively knew how to avoid air pocket stocks or worse, trusted totally in Activity Based Budgeting, and my return on investment for my clients was incredibly high. When my knack for languages and the global appeal of my face, as I have described to you earlier, were recognized, I was quickly assigned to the majority of our foreign clients who also happened to be some of the company's largest clients. I was well liked (they all thought I looked vaguely familiar—like someone from home) and I soon became one of the top ranked stock pickers at Smith Barney, and therefore one of the top ranked in the nation. As I told you, I was labeled “the face for all nations” by my proud employers and the marketing execs—a carefully monikered gimmick with which to ensnare an even larger number of foreign customers.

Within five years I had made a modest fortune. And, in a way, my work fulfilled me. It is a pleasant feeling, you will know it, I am sure: to complete a task which few can complete and to complete it successfully. Success, whether or not the source is inspiring, is hypnotizing.

I did look Violet up, several times, while I was at Smith Barney. On the Internet I learned that she had published several articles on ESL teaching techniques for children with learning disabilities, such as autism or dyslexia. I was surprised and perplexed to see that she was published under her maiden name: Violet Engle. There could have been, of course, many explanations for this. But I chose to believe that perhaps there was still hope.

I read her articles as quickly as I could, and then again, as slowly as I could bear. Her beautiful words were a salve for me—I knew that she was doing what I should be doing. Her love of language came through in each sentence, in each phrase. I could hear her voice in the pages, smell her sweet scent, I believed, as I read them. I wanted to swallow her whole, to take her as a medicine, to somehow *become* her in the process of loving her. I do not know how to explain myself: I craved proof that she could still one day be mine and yet never ventured back to Ann Arbor to find out or to make a stand, to claim her heart as mine.

And so, because I was a coward, I filled my spare time with a multitude of beautiful women and dropped a good deal of money on each one before ending things sometime the next month. I reduced life to its basest desires: wealth, sex, reputation. I returned to my old ways of flitting from female to female, and I abandoned my sense of duty and loyalty to Violet which had kept me relatively chaste throughout college. Without morals I didn't need to think about Violet: as long as I was unfit for her, there was no need to wonder if she would have taken me back, to wonder if I should have gone back to try to stop her.

I didn't tell anyone in my new life about Violet or about my parents. In New York, everyone has a past that no one talks about. Dreams of the future are what propel that city, not reminiscent conversations over hot chamomile about could have been's and I wish's.

It didn't take me long to lose track entirely of where I had once been going and what I had once been. I became a creature of habit—my days were dictated by and planned around business meetings and deadlines. My evening paper, my morning chai, my lunchtime workout, all took place at precise hours of the day. I only ever allowed my daily routines to be interrupted when I was forced to travel to various places around the world for business, and only then if I couldn't help it. You might be curious, but luckily I was never called upon to go to the Ukraine—there was not enough money in that poor country (in my mind a cursed country) for it to be worth my being sent there for Smith Barney— which was well enough, for I would have flat out refused to go.

Whether I was at home or abroad, I began to develop a fear of being alone, an autophobia the likes of which I had never known existed. The nights were brutal: as the lights flicked off, so did my ability to think rationally. But it was not a fear of the dark. Rather, it was a fear of my own consciousness. A fear of my own thoughts, of my own inability to think of anyone but Violet in the darkness, and the loss of her. I spent hours on the computer in the middle of the night for months, scouring the Internet for the marriage announcement I so dreaded to see.

I never found one.

I tried to train myself to stop thinking about her, but then thoughts of my parents rose up to fill the space which I had just emptied of Violet. Gradually, I was able to think more of the present, of the future, than of the past. And as I began to think of them ever so slightly less, I also began to crave something or someone else to focus on. I felt as though I were on a detox cleanse

and that I needed something, anything, to fill the void in the pit of my stomach. It was then, you see, that I decided it was actually time to try to date someone I was interested in and not just someone to go to bed with.

And that was when I met Elaina.

Every time I knot a tie, I still think of her. Her smooth cold fingers rubbing against the fabric. The snug pull against the back of my neck as she tugged the cloth firmly into the proper circumference. When I was with Elaina, I wore ties almost every day. The days of Smith Barney, of course, the days of impressing people with things. And Elaina was certainly impressed.

But I don't mean to make you think that that was all there was to her. Regardless of whatever happened later, Elaina's feelings for me were real.

Our story began the night a party was thrown for me by my division—I had gotten us our biggest foreign client yet. Elaina was there with her boyfriend, Ben, a coworker of mine, and I had Mary on my arm, a young secretary.

But almost instantaneously, as soon as Ben introduced me to Elaina, I knew that I would soon be leaving Mary behind. It was not that Elaina was particularly gorgeous. In fact, she wasn't at all what one would call conventionally pretty. Her mother was from Japan, I later found out, but her father was simply American, and the mix gave her eyes a strange slant that was reminiscent of a sad dog. Her always-cold skin was the color of cornsilk with flavescent undertones. She had straight black hair that came to her chin with bangs that reached to the curves of her eyebrows. It was actually the bluntness of that haircut that initially caught my attention. Each hair lay precisely in place with a heaviness that held it to the sides of her wide face. She seemed solid at first glance and I wanted to feel that weight.

So that I wouldn't hurt Ben, or Mary for that matter, all I did was give her my card that night. But I looked at her, almost the entire evening, and something that I have learned in my adult life is that most women know when they're being looked at.

I was anxious to see her, but our first date wasn't until about two weeks later. She was a kind woman, after all, and she didn't want to hurt Ben either. When she called me, she said that she was available now and wondered if I was still interested.

The next night I took her out to this French place, *Picholine*, just down the street from my apartment. I had finally given in and upgraded, you see, to a better place after graduating. I lived on 9th Avenue in the Upper West Side of Manhattan near Damrosch Park. It wasn't the Upper East Side, or not yet anyways, but it was a big improvement from my one bedroom studio in the Village. *Picholine* was less than five minutes away, so I suggested we meet at my place for drinks beforehand.

(My parents had never been big drinkers. They might have shared a small glass of vodka on a cold night in front of our fireplace, but I believe they were too scared to drink much more than that, given their family and national history. I, however, upon my arrival in New York City, had acquired a taste for fine wines and good liquors—to excess? No. But beyond what my parents would have thought healthy? Perhaps.)

When Elaina arrived, things felt very comfortable. I realized, upon asking her what she would have to drink (just a beer, she said) that she was not of the society I had so quickly grown used to. In fact, Elaina reminded me of someone from back home. Or if not quite from back home, then at least from somewhere outside of Manhattan, maybe the Midwest.

We talked cheerfully for some time about my work, and although she attempted to dodge the topic of her own profession, I soon got it out of her that she was a writer. She did not seem eager to say much more about it though, and I did not press her.

It is strange thing, the trite dance of human courtship. I have often thought that the intricacies required to win a woman's heart are quite less difficult to accomplish than the art of maintaining a relationship with her. Perhaps this is merely from my somewhat unhinged perspective, but I have always found that it requires much more effort to hold onto a girl than it does to intrigue one.

Elaina, for example, was nothing but perfection that first night at drinks, dinner, the lot of it. I was so excited to be talking with someone who cared about more than just stocks and where we each would "summer," that I think I would have overlooked any other minor flaw.

And she, it seemed, was pleased with me.

Our dinner conversation that night never lulled, and soon, I heard myself telling her that she should accompany me to the Lincoln Center to see Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the following weekend. I had not yet purchased tickets, but I kept myself informed about the various performances that took place at the Lincoln, first, since it was so close to my apartment, and second, because occasionally I would find a girl worth taking to see something there. And although I knew at first glance that she was worth a night at the Lincoln, our romance continued for some weeks before I realized that I had anything more than temporary feelings for her.

I am aware that I must sound cold and mercantilistic, saying such things. To use a word Violet would have used, I realize what I had I was. And yet I am still not sure that things could have been any different. I did, you see, meet her parents soon after that, sometime after I realized

I actually cared for her, and her mother and father are another reason I will always think of Elaina as I tie my tie: by the way her parents reacted to my wardrobe the first time we met, I knew I was the first of Elaina's boyfriends who had ever donned a suit. I impressed them both—though I'm sure that it was only because I was so different from the type of man Elaina usually dated.

I had found out a month or so into our relationship that Elaina wrote articles for one of the many artsy independent newspapers in town, *The Mocking Bird*. I understood, or perhaps I did, that the reason she had kept her profession from me initially was because she feared that I would look down on such work, given my own occupation. But I admired her writing, later on, when she let me read some of it. It was mostly about green living, local garden projects, vegetarian eating, and the like. While I did not follow most of her recommendations or share the passions she expressed in the magazine, it had been so long since I had truly cared about anything that I was inspired by the simple fact that *she* did.

But you can understand why her parents might have been pleased that I was involved in a slightly more traditional and well-paying job. My favorite story involving Elaina's parents occurred that very first night of our acquaintance at an Italian restaurant in town.

Elaina had excused herself for the bathroom and her mother had gone with her, which left me with Mr. Dan Lowry. He and his wife, Maura, had traveled from Virginia for the sole purpose of meeting me, "the new beau," as they said. They were not New York people.

And I understand that I was not "New York people" either, given that I was a simple Ann Arborite from childhood and a strange combination of Iraqi-Ukrainian by blood and adoption. But I felt New York in my bones in those years. I know now that I could never and will never live in that beautiful city again; it has been used up for me. But in those days, New York lived in

my breath and teeth and right up against my sternum, and I could tell that these were not New York people.

(Perhaps you will say that I am as fickle about my cities as I used to be about my women... and perhaps it is true. Or, perhaps the real and lovely truth is that fate drew me to the cities which called to my entire being. First Ann Arbor, then New York, later Cozumel, and now—well that must wait.)

But any way you happen to look at it, as I sat there with Mr. Lowry in silence, I began to sympathize with him, with the dour expression on his face and the uneasiness with which he clutched his napkin. After all, he had no reason to love this city: his daughter had dragged him out to an uncomfortably fancy restaurant, begging him, I'm sure, not to do anything embarrassing in front of me. He was worrying, most likely, about who was going to pay for such an extravagant meal, and I was at a loss as to how I could put him at ease without seeming rude. Every few moments I made a comment about something perfectly mundane and casual and each time, he jumped in his chair. It is rather remarkable to imagine that I was such an intimidating persona. In fact, I'm almost certain that it was not my character, but rather my career that did it. I'm not sure what it is about people who understand numbers that is so very terrifying to people who don't, but I decided to try to put Mr. Lowry at ease, thinking that perhaps if he knew I was not a native New Yorker, he would relax a bit.

I leaned in towards him conspiratorially and said, "You know, sir, I am not actually from around here."

He frowned, looking at me for a minute before lifting a hand and gesturing at my face, "Don't you think I know that, son?"

I was stung, just like I had been stung that day before the market with Bahi, *she doesn't like foreigners*. But I simply smiled hesitantly, attempting civility.

“I’m afraid that that is not what I meant,” I paused, “Sir.”

His eyes widened and he cleared his throat, grasping for something to say.

We sat there for a moment, each looking at the other, and who knows how long we would have stayed like that if it hadn’t been for the return of Elaina and her mother.

“Did you just stay like that—silent—the whole time we were in the ladies’?” her mother asked laughing.

“Oh, I’m sure that’s not true. Is that true, Mikhail?”

Elaina’s tone implied that there was a correct answer and an incorrect answer.

“No, no of course not. We said plenty,” and I smiled.

Later, with a little distance, I began to see the whole incident as quite funny. I was used to the fact that people generally thought me a little odd looking when they first met me, anyways, so I was fairly thick-skinned on the subject. Thinking little of it, a few months later I recounted the story to Elaina, thinking that enough time had passed that she too would find such an exchange to be humorous.

However, as you might have guessed, Elaina did not react well when I repeated her father’s words.

Once I realized that things were not going as I had envisioned, I tried to abort, to explain that he hadn’t had bad intentions, but she was already on a tear. Elaina’s temper was not something with which I was fully acquainted yet, and so I did not expect what she did next,

which was to call her parents that instant and to shout at her father over the phone for the next ten minutes.

I tried to stop her, given that I did not want her father to believe that I had ratted him out with some story of his supposed bigotry and intolerance, but she would have none of it.

By the conversation's end, they had gone around in circles several times and I had heard Elaina shout something along the lines of, "Your own wife is Japanese! And yet you insult him because he's foreign?" at least eight times.

At the time I blamed Elaina's anger on her typical persistence and stubbornness. Something I had not yet learned about her, though, was that she had decided early on to champion my "ethnic background" as she later called it. By the time she hung up the phone, her father had apologized and seemed to be repentant. I, however, did send him an email explaining the situation, to which he responded simply: "She gets her tendency to blow things out of proportion from me."

And from that day on, Dan and I were the greatest of allies to each other.

In fact, at the end, I'm not sure if he truly sided with his own daughter, or with me, his soon to be estranged son-in-law.

I must apologize if I move too quickly—it is simply that there is so much to tell. And at this point in the telling, I will be honest with you and concede that my mind is elsewhere. It has already flown, you see, harboring my own private thoughts, to Cozumel and back again, and then swiftly ahead to what I shall tell you now is my dear beloved Ann Arbor and whatever promise it may contain. It anxiously perches now over my shoulder as I sit at my desk this night, pondering what it is that shall come for me next.

But with that excuse in mind, please accept my words as truth when I tell you that Elaina and I were doomed from the start. Yes, you are correct in believing that we were a good match in many ways. We were both private people, we were both homebodies. Early on in our relationship, however, I began to think unceasingly of Violet. It became so painful that one night I got out of bed and called the only number I had for her: her parents' house.

It was late, perhaps one in the morning, and if I had been thinking clearly I would have known that this was not the way to do things. But I dialed and I waited as the tone sounded softly in my ear. Finally, after I had given up hope that someone would answer, I heard her mother's anxious voice come on the phone.

"Violet? Is that you, sweetie? What's wrong?"

I didn't say anything. I nearly hung up, I was so startled by Violet's name.

"If you're unhappy why don't you come home?" she cried.

I put the phone down and went back to my bedroom.

Violet's mother thought she was unhappy. For the next few days I held onto the knowledge that perhaps there was a chance. A chance that there was a time for us after all.

And, stupidly, with those thoughts in my head, I continued seeing Elaina. For many reasons, although many of them were the wrong reasons: her parents, after those first uncomfortable months, grew to love me. My bank account proved to have more appeal to them than any homegrown American man's genuine smile ever could. Their daughter had, after all, run off to New York to be a columnist for *The Mocking Bird*, which offered little in the way of security.

To Elaina's credit, she was not the source of her parents' knowledge of my wealth. They actually found out via her mother Maura's network of gossip that wound all the way into the

heart of New York City itself: through the Japanese restaurant near Coney Island where Maura's sister liked to eat and back through the hair salon in the Bronx that employed one of her cousins until finally hitting the Meat District where her racy niece lived and worked as a dancer, of what type she could or would not say. From there, Maura never revealed how the information reached her, although in the good years, Elaina and I used to joke that it was from her own secret visits to the dance club in the Meat District.

And more important than the notion that Elaina's parents loved me is the simple fact that in our own way, I think that Elaina and I loved each other.

I have to strain from where I sit now to remember the feeling clearly.

But I had loved her. I know I did.

It really only hits me at certain moments, though—the way it felt with her in the beginning. To explain, it is similar to when I try to remember where Bolivia lies on a map. I know it generally, vaguely, somewhere in South America. But if I had to put my finger on it, point to it, I would be at a loss.

The memories come in flashbulb: her short dark hair swaying stiffly as she walked, the secret smiles we exchanged on the subway when her hand slipped conveniently into the pocket of my slacks. Her habit of pressing her fingers against the back of my hand as if she were typing when our hands were clasped together. I do remember wondering sometimes what those little taps spelled out. I always wanted to ask her.

And I haven't forgotten the first night we slept together. That night—lying in bed with her—was the first night in a long time that my mind hadn't gone haywire in the darkness.

My fear of being alone had caused me to become quite the insomniac. I don't know if it was simply my repressed feelings lurking within my subconscious or my isolation from any sort

of true emotion, or some dreadful combination of the two. Either way, I spent many a long night contemplating my own futility. And I believe that my sleeping around with various women in my mid-twenties was caused in part by my desire to stave off those morbid thoughts. With a woman around, one rarely has time for private thoughts. Luckily (at least from my perspective—I am not sure how many men would agree with me), women always seem to ask what you're thinking about, in which case you never (if rarely) tell them the truth. So it comforted me to have a woman in my bed, for more reasons than a distant observer might believe.

With Elaina, though, it was something different. I don't know why having her with me at night helped so much. I suppose that she simply inspired me—her love for the written word, her compassion for the people of her city. Once I accounted for the comfort she gave me at night by framing her as an inspiration, I felt like I could perhaps move forward.

And I know it was my desire to have a family again that made me propose so quickly. Not that we spent too much time with her parents or her other family. It was simply knowing that they were there, at the same place in time that I was, when my own family only existed in my remembrances of the past.

And who knows if it was the right decision at the time. It felt right to me, to her, in that moment. Is that what matters? Or did my ever-lurking guilt and the small hole in my heart doom us from the beginning?

It stopped being the right decision somewhere along the way.

V.

Our ruin, the downfall of the married Levkovas, was a quick thing. An unraveling which, in a smattering of ways, led me to this new beginning.

When Elaina and I had been married for two years, she asked me to take some time off from work, from the routine of our busy urban lives, from my all too evident internal roiling. She told me that we could get away from it all and spend some time alone, “rent an island” she joked. We had the money to take such liberties, I suppose.

But I had said no.

I wasn't sure what had gone wrong, to be honest, with our marriage. As I told you, I had expected that being with Elaina would fix everything. That was the plan anyways, and perhaps also part of the problem: she didn't fix everything and I blamed her.

Well, to be clear, and to justify my initial theory, for a while, she did make things better. I was happier than I had been since my parents had died and since I had left the other half of my soul behind in Ann Arbor.

But the direction of my thoughts was unshakable. Whenever I was alone, I would find myself pondering the inevitability of my life, the loneliness.

I missed Violet. That was the core of it.

A few months before we got married, I wrote a letter to her. I kept it for a few weeks, unsure, but finally ended up sending it to her parents' house. I'm not sure what I expected—I think deep down I knew that if Violet responded, I would drop everything and fly to her.

But she didn't respond.

My letter had been a confession of sorts—much like what I am writing now, but much shorter. It contained only four things: that I was wrong, that I loved her more than ever before, and that I was sorry. Then a quote from Goethe in German: “Only by joy and sorrow does a person know anything about themselves and their destiny. They learn what to do and what to avoid.”

I signed it, “still your Mikhail.”

I knew when she didn’t answer that there could be any one of a variety of possible explanations. First, and worst, she might have received it and not responded because she felt nothing for me. Second, she might feel everything still, but could not allow herself to do so any longer. Or, and this is what I hoped for, she might never have received the letter. I knew in my heart that her parents would never have moved, but perhaps they might have kept it from her, if she was married and they knew she still loved me, or if they thought it might hurt her to hear from me after so long.

When I heard nothing, though, I went to the church on the right day and vowed to feel for one person what I knew in my core I already felt for another.

After marrying Elaina, it didn’t take me long to realize that nothing she did was wrong, but nothing she did was quite right either. Her championing of my ethnicity grew from a charming ego-boost to a patronizing irritation. In *The Mocking Bird* next to her columns now, her bio actually read, at Elaina’s request, “Elaina Levkova, wife to Mikhail Levkova (Iraqi-Ukrainian),” before continuing with a brief description of her life and work. Violet, on the other hand, had never felt the need to discuss my ethnicity. It was an unspoken part of who I was, nothing more. The same as my age, or the size of my hands, or my favorite color.

Another problem: Elaina's family, the one I had placed such high hopes in, had turned out to be nothing like my own or Violet's—they were distant and timid around each other. There was none of the open mouthed laughter that Masha, Io and I had shared, either on our own or with Violet's family. Maura didn't exude the same quiet comfort that I had found both in my mother and in Violet's. Dan seemed more concerned with what people thought of him than with the importance of being true to oneself, an ideal which my own father and Violet's had embraced. It hadn't occurred to me that a family wouldn't be to my liking.

Plain and simple, the problem was that Elaina would never be my Violet. She expected me to care about the mundanity of her world. A conversation about seasonable produce in which I did not pay perfectly close attention was a failed conversation in her eyes. She didn't understand why I could no longer find these things interesting.

When I thought about it, I knew that it was my fault. I knew that I should put in more effort and be completely invested in the life I had chosen. I was the one who left Ann Arbor, after all. Violet had married and moved on by this time, to the best of my knowledge. And so had I, to a certain extent. I wondered frequently if she were as happy or unhappy as I was.

For one thing, I knew that Violet would scoff terribly at how I had turned out. I could hear her words pounding in my head with every step I took. "A stock broker, for Christ's sake? Now you really are a fop." What had I done with the boy who made plans to save the world teaching languages to anyone who hungered for them? And where had the time gone, anyways?

And if the piercing glance I would get from Violet weren't enough, should I ever be lucky enough to receive it, I also had to accept that I was miserable and that I alone was responsible for my own miserable state. I was disgusted with myself every time a deal came through at work. I earned money for rich people, myself included. That was the extent of the

fulfillment of my job, no, of my career. My life's work thus far was stuffing the mouths of rich arrogant bastards. I had earned myself into a corner and found that there was nowhere for me to run.

My parents would have been ashamed as well. They had always told me to do something meaningful with my life and had been so happy when I wanted to become a teacher. Now, I didn't know what they would think. One of my mother's favorite French proverbs was, "*l'argent ne fait pas le bonheur*," and she was right—money doesn't make happiness. I am proof of that.

I was an angry man. Sometimes Bahi entered my mind in the night and I scorned him with an anger that I thought could burn holes straight through the mattress I slept on. I felt that he would be laughing if he could see me then, the mess I had made of it all. But it was also because of him that I clung to a shred of dignity, an insistence to prove him wrong, at least in some small way. And so sometime after our first wedding anniversary, I told Elaina I wanted to quit my job and go do something truly amazing. We could leave the city and come alive again. Together.

Even as I said those words to Elaina with tears in my eyes, I was thinking of how proud Violet would be—the Violet in my head, a girl who probably didn't even exist anymore, a girl who could be as changed as I was for all I knew—that I was taking charge and trying to make things right.

But I know now that Elaina hadn't forgotten our exchange some months before when she had approached me in much the same way, although not so melodramatically, perhaps. And I became more personally acquainted with the temper that Elaina usually kept hidden away from the smooth angles of her face.

She looked at me with utter disdain.

“What are you trying to do, save the world or something? I feel like I’ll never understand you, Mikhail. Never.”

And because I was proud and she had hurt me, and truly—secretly—because I had been in earnest, I said, “No, you won’t.”

I didn’t sleep in our bed that night.

The next afternoon, when Elaina came home from work, we spoke for the first time that day. We had had a very quiet morning over distinctly different breakfasts—I had made pancakes with Froot Loops fried into them, you see, Elaina’s strange favorite childhood breakfast. And when she came to the kitchen and saw my plate, she smiled first, and looked towards the counter. I had known that she would naturally think it was an apology breakfast. But when she saw that mine was the only plate on the table and that the pan was already soaking in the sink, I also had known that she would stop for a moment, her smile fading quickly.

What I did not expect was that Elaina would make herself a single piece of French toast, drenched in butter before seating herself two seats away from me at our long table.

It was juvenile—I know it was—for me to make her favorite, signature breakfast simply to exclude her from it. It was clever and justified, perhaps, for her to do the same to me. But when I realized, as we sat there chewing all too loudly, that this was our last method of communication—an argument via colored sugar and fried loaves—I think that was the moment when I knew it would end. As I swallowed the last bite of that breakfast, our last one together, I laughed, a harsh guttural noise.

She looked up sharply at me.

But I did not say anything. I did not think it was wise or kind to tell her that I was only laughing because I found it amusing that I had just eaten an entire plate of those Froot Loop pancakes—a dish that I despised for its gritty stupidity, and I had scraped it clean.

And so, that afternoon when we spoke for the first time, I was surprised when Elaina walked in grinning and triumphantly slammed two brightly colored pieces of paper down on the table in front of me where I had been reading the financial section.

“For us!” she announced.

I stared at them. They were plane tickets—Cozumel.

“We’re going away, just the two of us!” she sat down, smiling like a lunatic.

Perhaps our breakfasts had had an aftershock then, for her, because it seemed that she finally understood that I was close to running.

When I didn’t answer her, she brushed her long bangs out of her face. She was due for a haircut. The anxious look on her face told me that a lot of words were about to burst out of her mouth in very quick succession.

“Mikhail. We just haven’t been us lately. You know? It’s not anything that’s changed; it’s simply that we haven’t been on the same side. I think if we just went away, like you said—”

“No.”

I wasn’t prepared to listen to her for any longer than I had already.

And as I answered her, as I said no, I imagined the tingling pain she must have experienced in that deep place in her chest. I knew all too well the shuddering sense of disbelief that coursed through her veins. And for that moment, I was glad to be able to hurt her like that. To hurt anyone like that, really.

It made me feel better.

She tried, once, to change my mind. All she said was my name.

And I wanted to want to say yes to her. I wanted to love her again, even if it could never be like with Violet.

But then, “No,” I said again, “No, I don’t think so.”

I am ashamed to say that neither of us made a move for a week. I am more ashamed to say that it was Elaina who made one first, when she told me she was leaving me.

She said there had been someone else for a while.

I remember that, when she told me, I was looking down at my mug of tea. The warmth of the ceramic against the flesh of my fingers made me forget the January chill in the room. I wasn’t sure if I believed her about the other man. After all it wouldn’t take much for Elaina to be a better liar than I was. And I thought, perhaps my inability to lie to Elaina, my inability to convince her that I loved her enough, was the real problem.

While she continued talking, I imagined what the apartment would feel like empty. I did not think that it would feel any different, but suddenly, I felt a rush of regret.

I told her to stay. I told her it didn’t matter if there had been someone else. I wanted her to stay there with me.

“There *has been* someone else,” she said loudly, “It’s not an *‘if.’*”

She was looking down at her smooth hands—they looked lemon colored in the late afternoon glow of the window she stood facing in the kitchen.

When she spoke, her voice was strangely calm.

“You just wanted her, all this time.”

No words could have shocked me more. I had never told Elaina about Violet, I had barely even told her what had happened to my parents.

“You talk about her,” she said when she saw my confusion, “When you sleep.”

She paused.

“*Violet*,” she said.

I stopped breathing.

“And all of this, everything that’s gone wrong? It has everything to do with you and nothing to do with me. I could have been anyone; it would have all ended up the same. Just don’t, Mikhail.”

And she looked me in the face once, looking for something that she already knew wouldn’t be there. Then she turned away from me. I know it was so that I couldn’t see her, so that I wouldn’t be able to see the way she was going to look without me.

VI.

I went to Cozumel soon after that, using one of the tickets Elaina had bought. They were non-refundable and she had bought them with my money, after all. I had sold the other one, not wanting anyone I knew to come with me, and had worked up a tab at the cantina almost equal to the amount I had received from the sale. You see, I had been in Cozumel for more than just the week we were supposed to visit—I had not returned to New York. I had emailed my boss and told him I would be on an indefinite leave of absence. And because I was golden at Smith Barney, he allowed it.

I wasn't in the cantina so much because I was drinking a lot—it was simply that in that cantina, I relaxed. I had been on the island, largely in San Miguel de Cozumel, for so long that I had come to know it quite intimately. It is a thirty by ten mile island, no more, no less. I believe I liked the size of it because of its compacted feel, even more noticeable than Ann Arbor's because of the closeness of the sea. Although it is alive with tourists almost all year round for its perfect diving and snorkeling, there are certain parts of the villages where only the natives and the long-timers go. Places you can only get into and out of by giving a vehicle a death sentence, because, as my pal Enrique told me, "Nice car goes in, man, but comes back *mierda*."

It wasn't quite as bad as Enrique implied, but then again, Enrique thought I was a player, so perhaps he was trying to impress me. This is amusing because I had less "game," as he called it, in those days than I had ever had in my life. My schedule consisted largely of standing on my little terracotta-roofed balcony, watching the daily afternoon rainfall spatter the wide, fat leaves of the palm trees, the individual clinging drops implying artifice. Many a time I reached my hand out to touch the waxy surfaces, so plastic and surreal did they seem.

My nights were spent lying in a cold chill on my warm bed, tormented by my own mind in the dark. There was nothing to distract me, and so my thoughts ran on a continuous loop of dread. I counted breaths, wondering what could happen that could end the awful dry, spongy feeling, one way or another. I only ever felt lighter on my balcony, after the rain started to let up. As the sun smeared itself once again over the clouds, my heart would expand a little. The metal handle on the sliding glass door was always slick, slippery with humidity. But once I opened it, to go back inside, the optimism would be replaced by a call from the cantina—a lure to locate something worthwhile, a cure or a fix.

Although I knew there was nothing for me at the cantina, Enrique was always there behind the bar. After that first night, as soon as he witnessed my conversational Spanish, I suppose he decided I was alright for an *extranjero*, a foreigner, although our conversations usually consisted of an eclectic mix of Spanish and English.

Soon thereafter, he knew my usual, and I knew far more than enough about him than to say that we were simply on a first name basis. I knew that Enrique had a fiancée, Maricella, and two little girls, Rosa and Carolina. And in addition to a great deal more, I also knew that he had been born on the island and didn't plan on leaving "the good life," as he called it, behind. Worse, I suppose, is that Enrique knew more about me than even Elaina had known. Of course, at the beginning, he had asked me about myself the first few nights I went to the bar—why I was in Cozumel, what I did for a living, did I have a family? But soon, as the days flew by, and also the nights, I found myself telling Enrique little bits about my youth—mostly about my parents, sometimes about Violet. That's what I got for spending every night alone in a bar.

Each night when I came in, Enrique gave me my usual—a fairly strong rum and coke with a twist—for my three hour stay in the bar. I was still a creature of habit, and I usually ended

up leaving the bar within five or so minutes of my three hour mark, which was generally right after I finished my third drink. Sometimes I mingled with other guests, sometimes I merely listened to the conversations going on around me. You might think that I was drinking too much, and perhaps I was. But I never let myself have more than that. And, believe it or not, since I have left Cozumel, I haven't had another drink.

“*Por una mala noche, un colchón de vino,*” Enrique used to tell me. And it was true: for a bad night, a mattress of wine. Or in my case, rum. And that was all it was: a series of bad nights, a series of empty glasses.

Most nights, Enrique and I just shot the moon. On this particular evening, though, when I had been in Cozumel for almost two months, he asked me, “Whatchu thinkin’ about, *hombre?*”

I took a big drink and set my glass down on the counter.

“Another.”

“Aren’t you gonna go back to the States and be a big deal again?”

Enrique seemed to have mixed feelings about my job. He liked the idea that I was a player in New York too, but he didn’t have much respect for office jobs. He didn’t see the point of working your whole life so that one day you could retire. The way he saw it, it was better to enjoy your life as you lived it and to work only to be comfortable.

I avoided his question.

“I need something to do tomorrow.”

“What do you want to do?” he asked.

Then he started counting on his fingers, “Snorkeling good tomorrow...I could get you ATV to rent...there’s the ruins...”

As he continued to try to think of different things for me to do, I looked around the bar, not really paying attention to him. I didn't want to talk about going back to New York. It seemed like a different world, one that had been shut off to me.

As I turned back to face Enrique, my gaze stopped on a petite light haired woman in a sarong seated at the far corner table. There was something about her.

“So, man? What's it going to be?”

“I want to do something with that woman,” I said.

“Woah, man, I don't deal in the *prostitución*.”

“What?—no, I mean, what is her group doing tomorrow?”

“I dunno, I'm not their vacation planner. She's just another tourist man, haven't you had enough of them already? Besides, go ask her yourself if you're all hot over her.”

“I think I will,” I said with a grin.

And why shouldn't Enrique have thought I was a big ladies' man?

“I dunno how you do it, *hombre*,” he would say, shaking his head hard so that his long black hair swung at his shoulders. “You and that face. I just dunno.”

He had seen me leave the bar with a different woman at least once a week. But he didn't know that I had sent all of them away before we made it into bed.

They had all been beautiful, you see, and they had all been wrong.

But this girl in the corner reminded me of Violet in a way. Her pixie size for one, her short blonde hair for another. There was a simple air about her that seemed akin to Violet's own dancing spirit.

There were two nearly two and a half hours left in my bar-time quota at that point, I believe. I sat watching the light-haired woman's table. She was sitting with three other brightly-

clad women. I labeled groups like hers the “Sex and the City” tourists—each one sitting at a different side of the table sipping a fruity drink and secretly (or not so secretly) hoping that she looked better than the ones on either side of her. Elaina had watched that show and I had sat through it beside her many a time. These were the woman who went on vacation for female bonding and sex, although generally not at the same time.

There was an art to sifting through the four friends in such a way that you didn’t insult the ones you didn’t pick, (in case you changed your mind halfway through, or in case you had a shred of kindness in you, or both). It involved a careful approach, showy attention to all of the women, and finally a definitive choice at the end of the conversation.

I thought about trying that on this woman, but after watching for a while, I decided to try my luck from the bar instead. All of her friends, especially the big, green-eyed woman, looked like they’d had a little too much of their pink drinks—the kind that mask the flavor of the tequila—which would probably make going to the table more of a process than I wanted to go through.

As I continued to observe them, I noticed that the light-haired woman looked a little out of place. She was moderately attractive, but she wasn’t laughing at everything that her more gregarious friends were saying, or talking loudly, or pulling her top lower all the time like the other women frequently did.

Then, my gaze drew her eyes. She smiled slightly. None of the other women noticed.

I kept looking and mouthed, “Want to get out of here?”

She looked behind her like perhaps I was talking to someone else. I laughed.

She was cute.

When she turned back to me her eyes were wide, so I raised my eyebrows at her in question. She smiled again. I noticed the tiny gap between her two front teeth.

She said something to her friends that I couldn't hear in the noisy bar and got up from the table.

I glanced at Enrique, who had been watching the whole thing, and winked, "Didn't even say a word."

He scowled at me, but I knew he loved it.

I remember how strange it was when Elaina had first left the apartment. I expected her to come around each corner at me. Asking if I were listening, if I had bought peanut butter, if I had remembered we were going to see her aunt that night. When she didn't appear, I felt freer than I had in a long time.

One of the downsides was that Elaina's absence had made me feel Violet's absence more than ever. About a week later, I began to feel the ceiling get lower, the windows smaller. My eyes felt huge inside of my own head. More than anything, it was my own memory that scared me. All I had left were fuzzy pictures and too-strong feelings. Everything was molding over and nothing could preserve her, Violet, in my mind.

This had been the real reason I left New York for Cozumel when Elaina left me. I couldn't stand the small space of my own apartment anymore. I needed to get out; I needed open air.

That night, walking to the pier with this strange woman, reminded me, not for the first time, that I had made the right choice. There on that pier, with the sky's reflection resting upon the calm waves, that was the best place for me.

There were bright lamps at each end of the wooden pier casting long fingers of light onto the already darkening water. The sun had slipped mostly behind the sea, leaving us in a semi-darkness that smelled of mangoes.

“Well, what’s your name?” I asked her.

I turned to look at her. When she didn’t say anything for a moment, I raised an eyebrow at her.

“Oh!” she said, “Sorry, did you say something?”

“Your name?” I said again.

“Malie.”

Her voice is still with me now, as I write this, ethereal and organic. Nothing like I have ever heard before. Its gentleness was startling.

But I simply said, “Malie. I’m Mikhail.”

She smiled again, that same quiet smile. Then she turned back to watch the dusky water.

“You should know that I’m deaf,” she said. Her eyes were focused out somewhere past my line of sight.

I had been smiling, but I frowned as I repeated her words in my head.

“Sorry?” I said dumbly.

“It’s okay,” she said, as if in answer.

She swung around towards me again.

“Did you want to go somewhere?” she asked.

“But how are we talk—how do you—?”

“I’m deaf, not blind, Mikhail. Just look at me when you talk and we’re golden.”

For some reason, her use of that colloquialism was surprising to me. As if intricacies of the mind and tongue could only be expressed upon hearing them with the ear. I wondered if I could dig myself any deeper at that point. She didn't look angry though, just amused. A lot like how I imagined Violet would act in a similar situation.

We ended up walking down to the market together. Suddenly I became aware of all of the sounds around us. Her voice, for one, so supple it was ghostly. I wanted to ask her how she could speak so well, but didn't. Each word was perfectly formed, only her intonation gave her away as different: there was never any closure to her words, you see. Everything floated on and up after she finished speaking, an homage to some presence beyond the trees.

The chatter of loud, drunk Mexican women, the birds, the cars going by. I was astounded by the knowledge that she couldn't hear any of it. I found myself suddenly (stupidly) suspicious of her, clearing my throat to see if she would look over at me out of pure and involuntary reflex. Then I felt distinctly like an ass when she didn't look and decided to shut up.

I had thought when I'd gone to Mexico that it would be good for me to be with a woman, any woman. And so, I had set up the schedule I already described to you: three hours each night in the cantina from about seven to ten. If I found a woman I wanted to spend time with, I sometimes left early.

I felt like a scumbag, occasionally, for sitting there seducing whatever attractive tourists came along, and I would have felt guiltier if I had actually slept with any of them. It wasn't that I hadn't wanted to. It had been two months, mind you, since Elaina had left me, and longer than that since we had shared any kind of intimacy, physical or otherwise. I had even taken several of the women home with me to my suites at the hotel. But before things could get too involved or before anything got too serious, I would find a reason to ask them to leave.

I don't know why.

I thought if I could just be with someone, simply share a bed for a night with another body, I would be ready to move on and perhaps return to whatever kind of life I decided to pick up when I got back home. After all, when I had first slept with Elaina it had solved a lot of things for me (or at least postponed my eventual downfall).

With one woman on the island it had been close. She had worked for a non-profit organization. I felt like maybe that could be inspiring. I wanted so badly to be inspired again, like I had been with Violet. Like I thought I had been with my soon-to-be ex-wife.

But as soon as we got back to my rooms, everything suddenly felt so clichéd. It seemed as though I had fallen into this trap before with Elaina: the hurried removal of clothing, the rush for the bedroom, we barely knew each other.

I had to ask her to leave. She was already naked, I only had my boxers on. She laughed at first when I said it. But when I repeated myself, she covered her mouth, grabbed her clothes, and ran to the bathroom.

I still wonder why it was alright for me to see her naked one moment and not the next.

When she came out, she slapped me hard and left. I deserved it, I know.

The next day when I found one of her earrings on the bathroom counter, I dropped it down the drain and ran hot water.

At least that could be absolved.

For a long time on the island I had filled my days by going to many beautiful places: the Mayan ruins along the coast which required the treacherous jeep ride through uninhabitable terrain; the beach on the far side of the island that was completely empty at six or eight in the

morning; the village in the middle of the overgrown jungle where an old man sat on the corner with parrots on both of his arms and lemon rind half in and half out of his mouth. It was at these places that I was reminded most of Bahi, the prophet. I still call him that in my mind. I would call him that out loud if I had any reason to speak his name. I wondered what he would have to tell me, if I had been able to ask. I wondered if perhaps the rest of his prophecy would come true: *I hope I'm still around when you come back to this little city, but I fear I will be gone already.*

Would I return? Could I return?

Cozumel still felt open and new to me, despite its small roundness against the sea. But it was nothing compared to the cold blue streets of Ann Arbor, the shredded-paper white pines that lined the park in winter, and Cozumel smelled of forgetting, not of remembering, as my dear city did. But I felt that if only I would keep looking, the tiny island would find me something worthwhile. A reason. For I still believed in fate.

And any way you look at it, it has not failed me yet.

The outdoor market ended up being a good choice for Malie and myself: once the sun went down, Malie wouldn't have been able to read my lips in the dark. Across the market's main square, though, were strands of fat colored lights shining the colors of rainforest and hibiscus down onto our faces. Traditional paper cutouts lined the booth canopies, the kind you see everywhere in Mexico. One of the island's indigenous mammals, a small pygmy raccoon, golden in color, clung to the cord on which some of them were strung and gnawed at the colorful *papel picado*.

We stopped in a brightly lit corner of the square.

I began asking her about her life, her past, but she knew that I meant her hearing, and how she lost it.

I wondered, once she answered, if I should have been embarrassed that I was apparently so transparent, but she was open and candid—diagnosed with profound deafness at eighteen months old, she had a cochlear implant and extreme speech therapy with an oral speech specialist. She was deaf, but she didn't know any other kind of life. So, in her words, it couldn't be that bad, right?

“Besides,” she bragged, “I hide it well, don't I?”

I didn't know what to say to that, so she continued, “Now I teach at an oral school for the deaf in Arizona. And I'm happy.”

And with that she had turned to watch the musicians playing a ways down the street. I wondered what she imagined when she saw them strumming and hitting and plucking their instruments. They must look ridiculous to her. That, or god-like.

Just then, Malie turned back and saw my expression. I turned away guiltily.

“Don't be sad, Mikhail. Why are you sad for me?”

“How long are you here for?”

“Do you always avoid direct questions? Or is it just with me?” she smiled.

“Are you always so happy? You smile more than anyone I know.”

“By now, I've decided that life is too short. And besides, there's a lot to smile about,” she said.

“Like what?”

“Well,” she said, “You're here, and I'm here.”

We spent most of the evening talking at our table by the edge of the market square near a brightly painted fountain. I ended up telling her the whole story. Elaina. My fortune from Smith Barney. My parents. Violet. My old dream of becoming a teacher. Mostly about Violet, though.

I believe that the reason I was finally able to say it all was because she couldn't actually hear my confessions. Everything fell out of my mouth and onto ears that could not actually process my sorrow. The words of my mouth would go unheard but the meditations of my heart were understood.

Her eyes took it all in. When I stopped talking she shook her head at me.

“You only get this once. Isn't that enough for you?”

There was a light and hunger in her eyes. And I didn't know what to say to that.

On our walk back towards the cantina and my rooms, we passed the musicians we had seen from the market—pulsing rhythmic music to get the tourists turned on. Maybe the vendors had a theory that the more turned on people were the more they would spend when they reached the booths of shells and jewelry. Perhaps their theory was true, but I wasn't thinking about money at the time, or about Malie, for that matter.

I was thinking about Violet. And how our bodies would sound in my bed, our skin touching. I knew the sounds she would make, fervent yet unaware. What humans should sound like. What humans do sound like.

Helpless, hopeful, lost.

VII.

This is why I have written it all down. I have left Malie behind and Cozumel along with her. It is thanks to them that I sit today in Ann Arbor, my city, pen in hand. A more determined man, and indeed, a more spiritual man as well. I believe now, more than ever, in an order of things, a meaning and purpose to it all. I do not know what pieces of my story you will remember, but I trust that you will recall how each of my many errors led me here, on the brink, I hope, of fulfillment. I feel that there is much more to say, and at the same time, nothing more that can be said. Have I told too much? Too little?

I am back in my city again. When I returned from Cozumel to New York, I knew I would not remain there long. I soon called Dr. Howard Renstein, the man who had told me about Violet's engagement, you recall, and asked if there were any position openings at Ann Arbor in the Finance Department, or perhaps the Linguistic Department? There were, of course, as I had known there would be. Fate is a miraculous thing. He promised to speak for me to the committees first thing this week.

Beyond the joy I felt at the idea of doing work I loved for the first time in years, it was a surprising pleasure to speak again to a man who had once spoken to my parents; to have a reason to return to the place where they once lived and breathed and loved.

But yes, I packed up the few things I owned that actually mattered and flew to Michigan as quickly as I could. I have no regrets. My old life is no longer for me. I would rather teach and be happy in the city where I grew up than wallow in my useless money in New York.

I will be staying in what I still can only call my parents' house—you will remember that I only ever rented it out. I could never bring myself to sell. As soon as the current renters are out, I

will return. And perhaps I am cowardly, but I am only too glad that I will conclude this tale before having to write about entering that threshold again for the first time or about what it will be like without any of the same furniture. Without any of the same people.

Yesterday, when I arrived in Michigan, I toyed with the idea of returning immediately to the marketplace. Of returning to the precise bench where Bahi found me so many years ago. I have not, not yet. But perhaps, depending on how things go, I will return. And perhaps, as he said so many years ago, he will no longer be here. It is impossible to know

All I can hope is that I have sorted it all out enough in my head so that I will be able to explain myself. To Violet, you see.

I do not know whether or not I will be able to make her see as I have seen. To make her know that I have loved her through it all. And I do not know who she has become and what she has made of her own life. As I have told you, there are reasons to believe that perhaps she never married, that perhaps she can still be mine—her maiden name on the articles she published, her mother's fearful voice on the phone in the darkness, the missing marriage announcement, my unanswered letter.

But there are many possible explanations.

Perhaps there is no longer a place in her life for me after all.

My mother and father used to invoke Goethe whenever I was sad, or hopeful, or heartbroken: "Sometimes our fate resembles a fruit tree in winter. Looking at its sad appearance who would think that those stiff branches, those jagged twigs would turn green again and blossom and bear fruit next spring; but we hope they will, we know they will."

And I still remember the quiet afternoon beneath the black gum tree in Violet's backyard—it was a large tree, probably sixty feet tall but with a trunk I could wrap my arms

around—when Violet helped me translate that same phrase into German. It was early autumn, so the leaves were just beginning to turn purple. Soon they would be scarlet, I knew.

“Do you believe it, Violet? About fate?”

And she leaned her head against my shoulder.

“Sure I do,” she said with a quiet smile.

We sat there, my arms around her, her hair glistening in the dimming light of the day, neither of us knowing what would come in the time that lay ahead.

But I have always believed, dear friend, in fate, even in the darkest of times. At the very least, I will know that my parents are proud. I can see them now, and they are smiling. Soon, perhaps, Americans will flock again to their churches, the leaves will return to the trees in Michigan—I know they will, I hope they will—and I will hold Violet, my Violet, in my own two arms again.

And then. Then, it will have all been worth it.