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A Lamb To His Left

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by

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Thank you

Wyatt, for your help.

My friends, for your company.

Mom, Dad, Paulina, for your love.

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Fourteen, bullied, Malcolm changed schools.

St. Joseph's was a massive brick building with a statue of the Virgin Mary in front of it's dented steel doors. Mary's robes, cut from stone, flowed like cloth. Pigeons cooed on her head. White tears streaked her face. In the mornings, before class, Malcolm waited on the steps, gripping the straps of his backpack so hard they imprinted his palms.

Word had spread of a new student. Each boy hoped for a friend, and each girl for a crush, and so when Malcolm, with his hiking boots and arms like hams and acne-studded cheeks, stood up to announce his name, everyone was disappointed, and predisposed to hate him. "Thank you, Malcolm," said the teacher, in the front of the class, as the rain tapped the window, and the shadows of drops on the glass slid down the whiteboard.

It was October 9th, the Feast of Saint Francis, and after attendance the students left class, lined up, and walked three blocks to church. The grey sky glistened in the dampness of the grass. Homeless people were stains on the steps. The teachers walked up and told them, quietly, with averted eyes, to leave. Their carts, full of cans, resounded as they descended the stairs. The students watched from the curb, and then filed in, touching their head and their

shoulders as they passed through the door. The boy in front of Malcolm had a Yankee logo in the back of his head.

Malcolm shot his fingers in the white marble bowl and crossed himself. As he walked down the aisle a bead of water crawled down his forehead, to his nose. He wanted to wipe it but resisted the urge.

Candlelight beat on the brass crucifixes, the varnished pews, the fresh-shaven cheeks of the priest. The pews were crowding, and in the uneven, wavering light, Malcolm could see dandruff drift gracefully to the polished wood. Father Pozarowsky, standing at the dias, beat the mic with the palm of his hand, and then began speaking. Unable to understand, Malcolm leaned forward; the pew creaked; he could hear the priests' voice and his own breathing and the rain rake the pavement with a sound like applause. Wax dripped from the candles. Pozarowsky raised his voice. The flames on either side of him trembled. The teachers, on the end of the rows, bobbed their heads. Malcolm found the psalms, opened his mouth, and then stood there, silent: the words seemed too pure for his lips.

He looked up and saw that everyone moved their mouths formlessely, without voice, as if eating. A teacher tapped his knuckles in time to the back of the pew. A rosary spilled from his fist.

“Any who wish may now take the sacrament,” said the priest. Malcolm followed his row out of the pew and up the aisle, to the dias. He watched the Yankee logo nod. Malcolm took his place. Pozarowsky stood with the chalice in one hand and a wafer in the other. His face shone smooth as marble. Malcolm closed his eyes and opened his mouth, as if at the doctor’s office – and felt the touch of the wafer, subtle as God, on his tongue. The father held

out the chalice. Malcolm put back his head, and took the wine in his mouth until it ran from his lips, spotting his shirt and the flagstones by his feet.

Malcolm swallowed. The eucharist was gone. He sat back down.

The class waited in the entrance for the rain to pass. Malcolm stood in the back, in the corner, looking at the stained glass windows over the heavy pine doors. Jesus, a crown of thorns on his head, worms of blood down his face, lay in his mother's arms. The rain ceased; the clouds broke, and the sun flushed Mary's cheeks.

He felt a pull on his sleeve. "Can I speak to you?"

In the corner, under a staircase, before a stack of plastic bottles labeled Holy Water, Mr. Delmonico, the Religious Studies teacher, asked Malcolm if he was baptized. He wore a wedding band on his ring finger. His stomach, straining through his shirt, rested on his black leather belt, like a money bag.

"I don't mean to put you on the spot," Delmonico said, and tapped his foot. The toe of his dress shoe rang on the stone. Malcolm shook his head. Delmonico looked down with kindness in his eyes and a smile on his lips.

"I appreciate your enthusiasm, Malcolm, but you can't take the eucharist without being baptized."

For the rest of the day, Malcolm kept looking at the splotches on his shirt. Three dots, they sat on his chest, heavy as lead: he could feel their weight on his breathing. At home, he went to the basement, and stood at the sink, among the pipes and the boilers, scrubbing the shirt in soap and hot water until his hands were red and throbbing. The shirt was still stained. He put it in the wash.

Shirtless, he went up three floors and found his mother at the kitchen table. The fat of his stomach and chest shuddered as he sat. Janet had brown hair and high cheekbones. Wrinkles showed by her eyes when she smiled. Tendons, soft as shadows, flit from her throat as she spoke. The window was open, a breeze beat the pages, and soft, blue twilight gleamed on the teapot, from which, into the cup, she poured.

Malcolm said that he would like to be baptized.

"What do you want to be, a priest?" she said, and then, "where's your shirt?" looking at him from over her glasses.

"I got it dirty."

"Your grandmother tried to baptize you," she said, as her palms shuffled through her papers, papers on which he glimpsed words like "liability" and "actuary."

"You let her?"

"She tried to take you on the city bus. I beat her on the train."

A devout Catholic, his grandmother had hidden Holy Water in their bookcase, behind "The Second Sex" and "The Feminine Mystique," and given Malcolm baseball cards emblazoned with the faces of saints. Mother Teresa. Padre Pio. Malcolm kept them in a shoe box, under his bed, with rolling papers, a come sock, and a leaf that he saw on the street and thought looked like pot.

Her fingers chattered on the laptop keys. Malcolm went to his room and took out the box. Sliding off the top, taking out the sock, he moved slowly, quietly, as if to keep his actions hidden from himself. The leaf was in a sandwich bag. The card was under a yellow-spotted sock that felt like sandpaper.

He held up the card of Saint Theresa. The wrinkles in her face were deep as wounds; he put the card to the light; her black pupils, like pins, froze him where he stood.

In the kitchen, he asked to use his mother's computer. She was at the stove, boiling water. "Sure."

Sitting at the table, he looked up "saints" in the search bar. The only results were helmets and water bottles and digital edits with the logo of the New Orleans football team. He specified. "Christian saints."

He scrawled slowly, the tips of his fingers grazing the pad. "The crucifixion of the flesh is the test by which true lovers of Jesus Christ may be known," he read, again and again, until each word beat like blood in his ears. He clicked on a picture. It showed a balding man in brown robes, his feet bare, his head haloed, his eyes and palms raised to the sky. There were slits, like closed eyes, on his palms.

Malcolm realized he was sitting in darkness, and turned on the lamp, on the floor, with the tip of his toe. He had been staring at the image so long he saw it when he looked away. He sat at the table, his hands on the keys, blinking at the coffee cup that read, in big letters, Best Mom Ever.

When his mother came back to the table, he turned the computer away. "What are you doing?"

He told her it was science homework, closed the tab, and gave it back, with the same nervous jump to his voice as after he watched porn.

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Malcolm had spent barely six weeks at Brooklyn Tech; the building was so large, and his obedience so great, that he once spent an entire period taking notes before he realized he was in the wrong class. The halls were all elbows. One time, between classes, a white boy with cornrows put his hand out to Malcolm. Malcolm slapped it and shouted. A thumbtack was buried in his palm. He went to find the dean, got lost, and walked into class ten minutes late, only to be reprimanded and sent to the dean 'for tardiness.' He sat in the office with his fist in his pocket, blood seeping through his fingers, while the dean spoke sternly and the Mets bobble-head, on his desk, nodded. But what he remembered best was his excitement when he first saw that hand.

A two-inch carved crucifix bolted into each wall, below each bell, was the only difference between the schools. The bell never rang; the sound came from a loudspeaker in the corner. At lunch he would go up the street, to the church, and sit in a pew with his boots on the kneeler, eating from a paper bag. Ham and cheese on white bread; an apple with a bruise. As he ate he watched the faces of the old women soften as they came in, closed their eyes, and kneeled. Some of them had rosaries dripping through their fingers; others had granny carts, with boxes of pasta, pork chops in plastic, cartons of milk with photos of cows.

He didn't speak much with the other kids. "Yo, Malky," said a boy named Jake one morning. They were under the Virgin Mary, waiting for the doors. Jake had a long, skinny face with shadows under each cheekbone. Malcolm turned up his music and pretended not to notice. To show himself he didn't care, he beat his head to the song, "Where Is My Mind," hooked his thumbs in his pockets, and tapped his fingers, to the beat, on his thigh. When he looked up, Jake was doing the same.

After school, on his mother's computer, he read about the saints. He read that St. Francis was so at peace with nature that doves would sit on his shoulders and babies would quiet at his touch. One time he embraced a leper. In the bathroom stall, with his pants around his ankles, and the door bolted shut, Malcolm read that,

> A Freesmason decided to make a mock confessions to Padre Pio of sins
> he made up. As he began to confess these sins, Padre Pio
> stopped him, and then told him his real sins, as well as the time, the place,
> and how he committed them. The Freemason wept. Then he converted.

on a Catholic priest's blog, between advertisements for Local Brooklyn Women, and Sick of Pop Ups? Download This.

Sitting on the toilet, day after day, Malcolm developed a hemorrhoid.

Religious Studies was his favorite class. He drew such pleasure from the steady drone of Delmonico's voice, from the rap of the radiators beneath the windows, their wet breath whitening the glass, from the dribble of sun on his textbook and fingers, from the saints' pale faces printed on cheap, oily paper, from the mustaches and genitals drawn on these faces so forcefully by the book's prior owners that he felt them through the page, like braille, that gradually, some classes, he fell asleep. When called on, Malcolm was so knowledgeable that he knew exactly how to answer wrong.

One day, after school, the red sun clinging to the trees and long shadows across the pavement, Jake stopped him on the steps. Students cascaded down the stairs around them. "You smoke pot?" he said. Malcolm nodded. Jake laughed. Then they were quiet.

Malcolm's apartment was five stops away; his mother was at work. They shut the black metal cage behind them, and went up the stairwell, with the grated steps, the naked bulb, the flowered wallpaper that curled in the corners. In the living room he told Jake to wait. He went to his room, found the papers, the leaf, the lighter, and came back out.

"Is it real?" Jake asked.

"I think so."

"Where'd you get it?"

"I found it."

They ground the leaf, rolled the pieces in the paper, and smoked on the rooftop, over the street, coughing into their elbows. They lay down on the cornice. The sun burned the plaster. The sky was a perfect, terrifying blue.

"I'm so high."

"Yeah."

"I think this is the highest I've ever been."

"Me too," said Malcolm, who had never smoked weed before.

They were watching Cops when his mother came home. The beat of her shoes, on the doormat, throbbed in Malcolm's stomach; the door opened with a scrape. "This is my friend Jake," said Malcolm. He had rehearsed the words in his head.

"I'm Janet."

A scream from the television turned their heads. A man lay on the pavement. The handle of a knife stuck out of his side, as a cop, standing up, wiped his palms on his pants legs. It was night-time in Florida and the siren lights beat on the palm trees. "Dope," said Jake. Malcolm was looking at the pattern on their Persian carpet, a delicate interweaving of

horses, men, and temples that blossomed from itself, like a flower. The carpet was a knockoff. They had bought it on the street.

"Yeah," said Malcolm.

When his mother came in, with a chilled glass of wine, Jake stood up to leave. "Peace," he said, and put out his hand to dap. Malcolm shook it, very lightly, up and down.

"You don't have to leave because of me," said Janet.

"He's leaving because he has dinner," Malcolm said.

"I've got homework," Jake said. "Yeah, I've got dinner."

The man, handcuffed on his stomach, was screaming a woman's name into the asphalt. The cops stood around with their thumbs in their suspender straps.

Janet sank into the couch, holding her glass in her fingertips. "He seemed nice," she said, when Malcolm came back from locking the door. "I'm glad you're making friends."

"Yeah, he's pretty dope."

When people asked what Janet did, she said she was an artist; really she just wrote press releases for United Healthcare. She had a manuscript in her dresser, photographs in her drawer. Sometimes she would take them out to look and, sitting at the kitchen table, spread the prints across the cream-colored cloth. A girl looking up, with fat black pupils, as an advertisement for eyelash curlers peeled, in long shears, behind her; a man walking in midtown, a suitcase in his hand, while the shadows of the lampposts slant across the sidewalk; a child and his father sitting on the train. On the back of each print, she had written the date, the place, and the title, as if for posterity, or a museum show that became paradoxically more vague the older she grew. The worst part of the pictures was that they were not that bad.

Most days she woke up at 7, rode the A train six stops, and sat at a desk in a room where the world was a movement of light from one ceiling corner to the other. She could type the words “premium” and “liability” with her eyes closed, her fingers alive to the touch of the keys. Her bracelets jangling and the tendons of her hands flashing, like piano wires, under the skin, she worked quickly, as if to slip the work unnoticed past herself. She ate lunch in a nearby Chipotle where the shadows of the homeless people in the window – their outstretched arms, their coffee cups and walkers – shifted softly over the tables. She ate without tasting, and then, coming back to herself, to an empty cardboard bowl and 1:55 on her phone, was unable to remember what she had just thought about.

Thirty-nine. The number was all sharp edges, and when she said it, Janet felt as if giving name to a strange, malevolent force. She rode the train with popping wrists and a bottle of aspirin, trying to look nowhere. She could hear music, Taylor Swift and gangsta rap and doom metal, very quietly through other peoples’ headphones. At home she ate dinner with Malcolm, and then lay on the couch with a book on her chest, watching TV. She enjoyed the sound of their silence: the sound of silverware clinking, knives scraping plates, sips, mouths, and the occasional “sorry,” because it felt more true then all the words she had spent that day writing. When he was unable to eat, and his lips seemed to droop downward, as if under the weight of his sadness, she wanted to ask him what was wrong, how was his day, but everything she could say sounded, to her ears, like it was stolen from a movie. So she said nothing.

Now they sat in the room staring at Cops, neither of them really watching. She realized her glass was empty and went to pour another. He lay on the couch, his thumbs

beating into his flip phone as if to bruise the keys. The opening credits played, and the light of the sirens throbbed on his face and his hands.

How had it happened? When? She had known him better than herself, could see through to his heart from the way he held a glass, cut his food, passed the remote. Now, no matter where he was he was somewhere else, and when she spoke to him she felt as if speaking to an inanimate object, to the vase on the table, or the fabric by the stove that read: "No Place Like Home." She couldn't remember when he had become so distant, only when she was first aware of it.

Once, in September, he came home and sat at the kitchen table with his backpack on. He stared at the tablecloth as if he could see through it, through the table and floor and three stories below them. Unconsciously, without even thinking, she put down her computer and got up from the couch and went beside him, only to stand there with her hands at her sides, unsure what to do. His breathing was heavy. She went back to the couch.

She loved him but the words seemed false to the feeling. The next week, he had asked to transfer; she did not press, and agreed.

Janet was thinking of that afternoon, six weeks earlier, and thinking of what she would have rather done, when, now, in the middle of October, he stood up and said, "I'm tired." He was already down the hall and out of sight when she responded; his door shut on her "good night."

Imagining herself getting up – washing out the wine glass, turning off the lights – she sat and watched TV. A mother stood in a white kitchen, cleaning a stain from a counter with a yellow plastic implement. *$19.99* flashed across her delicate, white hands. Pots and

pans gleamed behind her. Through the woman's window, Janet saw sun, trees, and green hills as gentle and sensuous as a nude.

Janet took off her shoes, hung her blouse in the closet, and put on a Springsteen shirt, from the Born To Run tour, his face chipped and fading to white. The clock, on her bed-stand, blinked 10:19; getting into bed, they burned red against the black of her eyelids, throbbing with menace. The bed stand, brown wood, with a white lace cover, bristled with glasses and pill bottles; a vanity mirror, on the opposite wall, reflected the branches of a bonsai tree, half-dead on the windowsill. Janet took a klonopin, drank some water, and lay in bed, reading. The words could not get through; they lost themselves somewhere between the page and her mind; she put the book down and turned out the lamp.

Her wall was veined with the shadows of branches. She could hear thuds on the ceiling, voices in the street, a breeze moving through the leaves. Janet put a pillow over her head, and dreamed that she was in bed with the light on, reading. The words were heavy. Her eyelids sagged. She had to go to sleep.

She rose to turn out the light, and opened her eyes to darkness.

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On Wednesday, after school, they went to Jake's apartment. He lived on Degraw Street, a block from the Gowanus. Beneath an American flag, plaster figurines – Leprechauns, the Virgin Mary, a duck with an orange beak – stood in the front yards. The wind was still, and the flag drooped in folds like Mary's robes.

Jake wore jeans with ‘Tommy’ stitched in each cheek, and a gold chain with a bare cross. The chain was fake: his neck was roped with red abrasions. They sat in his room listening to music. Maxim posters, so shiny they looked wet, blazed across the walls. The models, with their curls damp, their lips parted, their stomachs taut and bronze, coiled upward from their knees. Malcolm looked away, but felt their presence on the back of his neck. Styrofoam planets hung from strings over his bed. “This is Nas,” Jake said, putting on a record. The speaker was off but they could hear the needle scratch a tiny voice from the grooves. Then Jake hit the speaker, and the force of the music kicked Malcolm in the head like a horse.

Malcolm didn’t really listen to the music but just thought about how to act as it played. He put his hands in his pockets. He bobbed his head up and down. When the song was over, he smiled, looked at Jake, and said, “awesome.”

Malcolm liked Jake. He liked the way he laughed at everything – school, parents, girls – as if the whole world was a joke only he knew. He had a nose with a hook. He had a closet full of sneakers – Jordans, Nikes, Guccis, Yeezys – that he found online and ordered from Japan. The sneakers had been flown across the Pacific and driven over a dozen state lines, past Days Inns and stubbled fields and burnt-out barns with realtors signs, only to live in their boxes at the bottom of his closet. He only took the sneakers out to dust their soles, brush their leather, and rub their tags between his finger and thumb. Opening the boxes, his hands trembled; he wore Janoskis, with duct tape on the soles, to school.

He showed Malcolm each pair for only a moment at a time, as if his gaze, maintained too long, could stain them. Between each sneaker, he sanitized his hands from a bottle by the bed. Malcolm felt as if he were in the presence of a devotional act, and through the crunch of

the white tissue paper under Jake's fingers, the clear smell of the polyethylene wrap, the untouched white of the soles, the way the light clinked the Gucci bee on the side of the shoe, felt another world, sublime and perfect, glancing through his own.

Besides the sneakers, Jake collected nudes of ninth-grade girls. They lived on his laptop, in a password-locked folder, the code of which was his dead mother's name. M-A-R-I-S-S-A. He punched the letters one at a time, the keyboard turned away.

The syllables of their names pulsed Jake's lips: Kaylee, Mady, Amanda, Clair. Some of them kept their faces out of the photos. Others looked straight at the camera. Past hips and shoulders, Malcolm could see their lives: plastic horses on bedside tables, rippled pink canopies, bar mitzvah photos in fake gilt frames, loose cigarettes in Altoids tins, a father with a firm handshake, a mother's whose voice was all throat, silent footsteps on deep-red carpets, hands on brown bannisters, the watery reflections of aunts and uncles in cabinets full of glasses, the crucifix shimmering above the plastic-wrapped couch as the light of *Real Housewives,* from the television, flickered on Jesus' feet. Moving through the photos, Jake caressed the mousepad, tenderly, with his middle and index finger.

Some of the nudes he had received himself, others he had gotten from friends, each laptop circulating between burroughs and schools and social groups until it ended up on his computer. He told Malcolm there were times that, hooking up with a girl, he realized from a birthmark on a breast or a scar on a thigh that he had her nude in his folder.

Their pupils shone in the phone flash. Some wore training bras, or no bras, tan lines so deep they looked like lingerie. Some, in mirrors, had the flash over their faces, their bodies sliding out of the white light. Jake knew every name. Between a picture of one girl

and another, Malcom caught Jake's screensaver: a picture of a mountain, topped with white, doused in heavy, rich, golden light.

"Isn't she hot?"

Malcolm nodded, pulling at the hairs of the carpet with his fingers. It felt worse to look away. When Jake showed him a picture of McKayla, a girl who had waved to Malcolm on his first day and, after class, said "I'm McKayla, what's your name?" in a high voice, with a tilted head, as if he were retarded, Malcolm could not help but stare. Malcolm's hands were trembling. He shot them in his khaki pockets, but the pockets were stitched-closed.

Malcolm hated the sound of his voice as he said, "I've got to go." The front door had six locks, and Malcolm looked around as he listened to them open. A gaudy painting of a flower bed, red and white and blue, hung over a pin-striped couch with yellow foam oozing from its arms; faded china shone from a cabinet; the white lace tablecloth brushed the floor with each breeze; for some reason, the lights were on. He could hear music, The Misfits, playing faintly from behind a closed door. "I'll see you around," Jake said, looking at that door.

"Yeah."

They dapped up, and as he walked up the street to the train, Malcolm focused on the cracks in the sidewalk, the dead leaves in the gutter, the Giants flags in the front yards, to avoid seeing the naked girls on the back of his eyelids.

His mother was not at home. He went to his room, found St. Francis, under his pillow, and read the prayer on the back of the card:

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is discord, union;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light.

in a voice like a kiss, that he could not hear but only feel on his lips. Then he put the laminated paper in his wallet, between a MetroCard, a gift card for Five Guys, and a Trojan condom, waiting to expire.

The sounds of the prayer stayed in his ears even after he'd stopped reading it. He lay with his face to the wall. Then he clicked on the lamp and picked up his phone. His fingers left sweat on the keys as he typed in the name.

In her profile picture, McKayla was at a wildlife reserve with a monkey perched on one shoulder. She wore a tank top and khaki shorts. She was smiling, her braces so thick her mouth was black. The monkey was straight-faced.

A skinny branch, lit by the moon, trembled in his window. The traffic light changed; red light hit his shades, and a motorbike in the street purred to a stop. Malcolm heard the door open and slam, his mother shout, "hello?" He reached for a Kleenex from the box by his bed. When he looked back at his phone the screen was black: he saw a pale, bulbous face in it's reflection.

***

Janet spent the day in the office, and then in the park, sitting on a bench. The sun dripped through the trees, yellow and simmering: it touched her face and the back of her hands. She closed her eyes, and followed the crunch of steps up and down the gravel paths. She heard the rise and fall of voices, the wash of traffic, the rustle of leaves. Cars caught the sun, up and down Broadway. The windows of an office building reflected clouds and blue sky. Janet looked at her hands. The sunflowers on her nails, hand-painted, were chipping off. She got up and lay down in the grass, with her head on her sweater and the sweater on a root. Trash – old receipts, plastic bags, flattened cans and needles – slithered in the weeds. Park employees stooped with garbage bags and pincers, the black bags rustling the grass as they walked.

When she woke up it was 5:55. The sunset reverberated on the skyscraper windows and her shadow was seven feet tall; her lunch break had been four hours long. She went to the train, and as her foot touched the first step down into the station, it occurred to Janet that she was having a moment of inspiration. She leaned on the door, put her bag by her feet, and, lulled by the rock of the train, the hum of voices, the roll of a half-empty Coke bottle from wall to wall, missed her stop. She got out and turned around.

Janet assumed he was asleep. She made a cup of Sleepytime and opened her computer. The blankness of the page struck her like an open hand. She went to her bedroom closet, and, her hands brushing the bottoms of her dresses, took out a stack of papers titled, “Baby Steps.”

Reading her manuscript, Janet clicked her pen in-and-out, in-and-out. She saw through the words to her life behind them. Growing up in Long Island: the pine-panelled walls, the *Serpico* poster. Her father was a pool installer, her mother was a mother, whose

devotion to her husband drove him to hate her. There were always lilies in a vase and pictures on the wall and so much food in the fridge that the kitchen reeked rot. At family dinners, with dusk seeping through the black branches, candles flickering, steam rising from the china, it was not her fathers' emptied glass that annoyed Janet but her mothers devotion: her meticulous setting of the table, the mathematical straightness of the knife and two forks, how, night after night, she ate not the dinner she'd made but the left-overs in the fridge about to go bad. When Sunday dinner devolved, inevitably, to screaming, Janet kept her eyes on the cabinets across the room, and found that her parents yelled so loud their wedding presents – a dozen cut glasses, with roses for bowls and stems for stems – clinked, as if in toast.

High school, night classes, and then, at nineteen: Brooklyn College. She graduated dreaming of reporters notebooks and print bylines and magazine profiles with her, the writer's, picture on the page, only to find Carlos, and a two-room apartment so small that the TV fogged when she took a shower. Carlos said, "I love you," like each syllable was a strenuous effort of his tongue and his lips. Awake at 2 p.m., he spent twelve hours in a kitchen and came home to birds chirping, only to work eight more hours in his dreams.

Reading her manuscript, Janet confused the interior lives of her characters for that of real people, until they were one in the same.

The sound of the sink, the slab of light under the bathroom door, the creak of the floorboards and the murmur of his voice, as he climbed into bed, each word burning liquor in her nostrils. Three months later, she was twenty pounds heavier, counting the cracks in the sidewalk outside of Planned Parenthood: even, she went in, odd, she didn't. Birds chirped from golden branches. Janet counted to ninety-nine.

As she read, she clicked the pen in-and-out, and Malcolm, trying to sleep, pressed a pillow over his head.

At 2:18 am, on the two-hundredth-page of her novel, Janet understood that if she had written this much it must be good. She paced the kitchen, but it was a tiny kitchen, about ten-square feet; she paced little circles between the table and the sink. She didn't do any writing but for an email that she sent to eleven friends and went:

> Hope you're well! I've been great. Still in NYC, working, writing. Was going through some old documents and found that manuscript I told you about, all those years ago.
>
> Thought you might be interested in reading it. It is not, I think, half bad. Let's get a drink or dinner sometime.
>
> Love, Janet.

She sent this email to editors, journalists, slush-pile readers; all she changed, in each, was the name.

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Malcolm didn't sit with Jake that Monday: to look at Jake's smile was to see his own guilt. He sat alone in a pew, his paper-bag lunch uneaten in his hands. He watched people

come and go from the confession booth. Their voices were murmurs, nature sounds, like wind or grass or water. He felt he could listen to them on headphones to fall asleep at night. Then they stepped out, rosaries in their fingers, the door of the booth swinging shut behind them, whining on rusted hinges.

He sat with his posture perfect and his shoes on the kneeler, hoping that someone else would go in. When a minute passed, he went inside and shut the latticed door. A two-inch carved Crucifix came within three inches of his face. Christs mouth was open. His palms were painted red. Malcolm's knee bobbed; he put his hands in his pockets, and then in his lap. He heard Pozarowsky lean back in his seat.

Malcolm tried to remember the words he had read online.

"Forgive me father, for I have sinned. It has been a long time since my last confession."

Father Pozarowsky nodded, and Malcolm heard his crucifix clink against the button of his cassock. There was silence: a dark, candle-lit, Catholic silence, in which he could make out, just barely, the drip of molten wax, the clatter of rosary beads against the back of pews, the whisper of brittle pages, the flush of a toilet.

Malcolm said he forgot what to do next.

"What?"

"I forget what to say." Malcolm whispered, as if not to let God hear.

"What would you like to confess, my son?"

And Malcolm was silent.

Pozarowsky sighed. "Do you have any siblings?"

Malcolm paused. Jesus' lips, on the Cross, were a black line of paint. "Yes."

“And are you jealous of your siblings?”

“Yes,” Malcolm said, and, remembering Padre Pio and the Freemason, waited for Pozarowsky to sense his real sins, and to name them, like a bear slapping trout out of water. Lust, masturbation, and for course the greatest sin, the real one, that Malcolm felt in his heart but could not name on his lips.

“Jealousy is a sin. Say three hail Mary’s.”

“Hail Mary, Hail Mary, Hail Mary.”

“Do you ever lie to your parents?” the priest said.

“To my father,” Malcolm said, after a moment: another lie. He hadn’t spoken to his father in four years.

“Lying is a sin. Say four hail Mary’s.”

“Hail Mary, Hail Mary, Hail Mary, Hail Mary.”

“Do you have anything more?”

“No,” Malcolm said, and held his breath. “Don’t you?”

The priest blew his nose. Malcolm stepped from the booth. The church was empty, and the sun, cascading through the open door, reverberated conclusively on the pews and varnished floorboards. Malcolm walked out, digging his nails into his palms. Birds were chirping.

Going home after school, Malcolm caught Jake and his friends in the corner of his eye. He watched his shoes miss the cracks until he heard “yo”; then he looked up.

Three of them lined the fence: Jake Borthwick, Mike White, John Gracey. They were white boys who wished they were black, and so misused slang and sagged their pants and showed the bands of their boxers, Fruit-of-the-Loom. “What's good, shawty,” they would

say, dapping each-other up in the hallways. “That's bet.” They sat by the subway, on a black metal fence, with their butts on the top rung and their feet on the bottom, inhaling so little they could smoke the harshest cigarettes, Marlboro Blacks, one after another. Basketballs throbbed on the blacktop behind them.

Malcolm sat beside them, his palms braced on the fence so the weight of his backpack wouldn’t drag him down. They were talking about girls, parts of girls, as their eyes strayed from the light on the leaves to the butts of the woman who went walking by. When they laughed he laughed too; he got down from the fence, and followed as they walked into the station.

They jumped the turnstiles. Malcolm stood behind the black bars looking for his MetroCard as he listened to their sneakers vault the stairs two at a time. He found them, down the platform, and then stood on the train with his feet planted and his hands in his pockets. He’d seen men sneeze into their hands and then, without even wiping, hold the pole.

“You get it, Malky?” Jake said, and brought Malcolm out of himself, into the scream of the tracks, the roar of the crowd, the glint of their pupils. “What’s so funny?” Malcolm looked into the window and realized he’d been laughing.

“It’s just funny.”

“Yeah, but why? Why’s it funny?”

“It just is.”

“What’d I even say?”

Malcolm couldn’t remember. He didn’t respond. He stared at the window, at the dark flying by, the yellow hats, the graffiti and streaming light, until their reflections turned away. Heat climbed his neck. His face stained the glass. When the conductor announced 7th

Avenue, Malcolm said he had to go, although it was not his stop. He got out and waited on the platform for another train to come.

After this, Jake called him Lil Malky. Soon John did, too. The name was meaningless, held no poison, but in the way the boys said it – with curled lips, each syllable the thrust of a knife – Malcolm heard an inside joke he was outside of. For a week, in class or on the fence, he refused to respond. Then, one day, sitting on the steps, Jake called to him and Malcolm looked up.

He had no idea that the name was not an insult until he ignored it, and that it was only his resistance that made his surrender humiliating. Jake laughed, patting his head.

"What are you doing tonight?"

Malcolm, who had absolutely no plans that night, tomorrow night, or any night thereafter, responded, "I'm not sure yet."

"We're gonna go to a girl's house, if you wanna come. Clair's house."

Malcolm found himself nodding before he answered.

At home, he groped through his drawer, and piled his clothes on the floor. Khakis that climbed his shins when he sat; blue jeans with worn-out knees; a t-shirt reading, "I'm With Stupid," that he had worn, for the most part, alone. The clothes struck him as soiled, used, a reflection of himself he didn't want to see; he washed his hands after touching them.

Janet's "hello?" was answered by the slam of a drawer. She lit a candle and opened her laptop. She thrummed with anticipation like an idling motor. The candle sent wax down the wine bottle. She had just typed the date across the top of the page when Malcolm came in and asked to go shopping. "One Man Wolfpack" read his shirt, with a picture of Zach Galifinakis from The Hangover holding a baby in a bjorn.

"You want to go shopping?" she repeated, as if to keep the words in the five feet between their faces would let them wither and die.

She took him to Atlantic Center, five stops on the A train and down the Avenue with the sun in their eyes, shadows sliding noiselessly on the pavement, dust sighing from a drill in the street, construction hats, bodega signs, We Accept EBT*,* 99¢ Beer*,* a woman in hijab praying east, towards Target, a Dunkin Donuts cup of coins between her down-spread hands. They took the escalator three floors to Gap.

Malcolm went down the aisle, brushing the price tags with the tips of his fingers. Janet walked behind him. She watched the price tags dangle. "Chandelier" played on the store-speakers, and the pop song, the sway of the tags, the smiles on the faces of the clerks and the squeal of his boots on the laminated floor, all bristled across her nerves.

Malcolm went into the dressing room with three shirts over his arm. Janet stood outside and stared at the sign on the door reading: "Private." She could see his feet move. When he came out, in a purple Ralph Lauren shirt with a green polo player leaning, mid-swing, on the breast, he looked down, then up. "Doesn't he look good?" said the store rep, a woman with hoop earrings and black hair. She was chewing gum. The smell of mint stung Janet's nostrils. Malcolm stood before the mirror; Janet, unable to look at his smile, watched the back of his head.

"You look hella good."

"Yeah."

"Don't you think so, mom?," the rep said. Janet nodded, watching his hair-line, wondering how it was possible that the baby she had held and fed and rocked and kissed

could, fourteen years later, annoy her this much. Constellations of acne stood on his cheeks; very softly, looking at the shirt, he smiled at himself in the mirror.

He stood to one side, then to another. The clerk, still smiling, typed a text on her phone. Her acrylics tapped the screen. Malcolm held out the shirt, with the tips of his fingers, and then let it droop. Creases showed across his stomach.

"I think it's too small," Janet said.

Janet was not sure why she was angry with him. Her feelings stood outside of herself, like a monolith, a solid object she was in awe of. Her eyes strayed from the back of his head and, with a jolt, so sudden she wasn't aware until it passed, caught his in the mirror. He looked away.

She bought him three polo shirts – blue, purple and white – and a pair of jeans with tears across the thighs. When she handed over her card, part of her hoped it would decline.

Passing a Nike store, on the way to the escalator, he stopped in a window and stared. His shadow, a dark blot, pressed so heavily on the glass it seemed it might break. He asked to go inside.

"I've got stuff, work I've got to do."

"Just for a second."

"Hot Nigga," dense with bass, beat on the store speakers. The window rattled in its frame. The sneakers went in rows along the wall, swishes faced out, price-tags dangling, the name of each shoe in a tag under the shelves. Malcolm kept his hands in his pockets. A store representative came up with a Nike shirt and a name-tag, on his chest, reading, "Vincent." Dimples showed from his cheeks as he smiled.

“You looking for some new kicks, my man?” he said and looked at Malcolm’s shoes: green-and-brown hiking boots, with steel-tipped laces.

He tried on Dunks, AF 1s, Jordans. The cardboard boxes piled high on the bench. Janet watched from the wall, her arms across her chest. The numbers, in sharp black print on the dangling tags, cut at her: $165, $180, $210.

“Those look sick.”

Malcolm was walking back and forth on the pads of his toes, his heels above the floor, as if to avoid soiling the sneakers with the ground.

“They’re comfortable?” Vincent asked.

“They feel great.”

Janet squatted before Malcolm and, pressing her fingers to the toe of the shoe, read their price: $225. “I think they’re too big.”

“They don’t feel too big to me.”

“They should be the right size.”

“They feel perfect to me.”

“You just have to be careful,” she said, keeping her index and middle finger on his toe, as if to take it’s pulse. “You get blisters if you wear sneakers that are too big.”

Vincent squatted down beside her. He felt the toe. He looked at the tag. “No,” he said, “they fit,” and let a smile, like a worm, slither across his yellow teeth: Janet wanted to stamp it out.

“Maybe let’s try another pair, maybe?”

When Malcolm looked up from the bench, smiling, a pair of Air Forces One on his feet, she said, “I’m not buying those. I can’t...your boots are fine, I can’t buy those,” and heard her voice, against her ears, like it belonged to someone else.

They rode home in a spring-loaded silence, his bags knocking into her knees, as he leaned on the door and read off the stations: Hoyt, Lafayette, Clinton-Washington. As he said, “Nostrand,” the breaks screeched; he stumbled. She dropped the bags and caught him, and for a moment they stood there, her arms over his shoulder, their hearts beating through the other’s chest. He said “sorry,” and leaned out of her embrace.

“It’s okay,” she said. But the words died in her throat.

***

The white button, by Clair’s door, made a sound like a church bell. He wore hiking boots, the polo shirt, the pre-ripped jeans that showed white from the wounds. “What are those?” John said, leaning and pointing, as Malcolm wiped his shoes on the mat.

“They’re Merrells.”

The four of them were in the living room, legs crossed on the Persian rug, drinking Hennessy from a bag although no-one was there to see them. An oil painting of a half-peeled orange, in rich browns and golds and burgundies, hung over their heads. Jake told them he had bought the Hennessy from a homeless man and kept it, for three weeks, in the back of his parent’s freezer: the bottle was so cold it made dark spots through the paper.

Malcolm dapped Jake, John, Mike, bobbing his head and saying “what’s up,” each time, in the same tone of voice, as if he had a button in his spine. Then he sat on the rug with his legs crossed and his hands in his lap.

“I fuck with your shirt,” Jake said. Jake was wearing beat-up Janokis, black jeans with lines across the thighs, and a white polo shirt with a checkered pattern and Aeropostale climbing, in unreadable font, up the side.

“I like yours too,” Malcolm replied, which was a lie.

They passed the bottle back-and-forth, Jake’s adam’s apple pumping, Malcolm holding the liquor in his tongue and his lips, then lowering the bottle and wiping his mouth with his sleeve, as if he had taken a sip. The TV was on. The sound was off. Malcom couldn’t tell if the women on the screen were laughing or crying. He watched the TV so he wouldn’t have to look at Clair, but saw, from the corner of his eye, that she wore as much make-up as a corpse. Concealer was clotted in the corners of her eyes and her mouth; studs of acne showed, like braille, through the paste.

Fiddle leaf figs, flat as supplicant palms, rustled under the windows. A Japanese lantern glowed from the corner, and its red light, burning through the paper, shone off the leaves, the bowed legs of the coffee table, the sheen of Clair’s face. She raised the glasses and put down the coasters. Jake took a sip and put his back on the wood.

“Let’s go to the park.”

Malcolm looked at Clair as he stood up from the floor, and the shock of recognition was so strong his lips parted to speak: he had seen a picture of her, in a bathroom mirror, with her shirt up and her bra down. But she had no breasts to speak of.

They went into the kitchen. Jake poured shots and passed them around; Malcolm's was half the mug. Jake looked at him.

"Drink it."

Putting their shoes on in the hallway, Malcolm saw a pair of Jordans, once white, now grey, black creases across the leather. "Whose are those?"

"They're my brothers."

"Can I wear them?"

The NIKE logo, on the instep, had been worn to show the black beneath. They were a size-and-a-half too large: he felt the frayed heel bob up and down as he stumbled down the stoop to the street. The store-shutters were down. The sidewalks were empty. The four of them walked in the middle of the street, the amber street lights burning on the damp asphalt. The light of televisions glowed from the windows over their heads.

They sat on a bench, in the park, passing the bottle by its throat. They drank so they wouldn't have to speak; they didn't speak so much as think about what next to say. John played SchoolBoyQ on his phone on his thigh, his own voice, rapping along, louder than the voice he sang along to.

The more Malcolm drank the easier he found it. He took the bottle by his throat and put back his head. The burning in his chest spread through his limbs. There was a tingling at the tips of his fingers. He stood up and, crossing the gravel path, touching his forehead to the trunk of a tree, realized he was drunk. He sat back down. "I'm okay," he said, to John, who hadn't been listening, and didn't even hear. "What?" he said, and then resumed rapping.

Malcolm's cheeks hurt; he realized he'd been smiling. He put back his head and felt the wooden bench dig into his neck, as he looked up the trunk, past a black spread of leaves, to the sky, where he couldn't see a single star but imagined that they shone.

It was only when he woke up that Malcolm realized he had fallen asleep. The bench was empty. Blinking through his drunkenness, he watched the shadows of the leaves sway on the path, as if his friends would, by some trick of light, soon appear.

His throat was dry. His phone was dead. He walked listening to his shoes on the gravel, to the sound of his breathing in his ears. The darkness was dense with crickets. Golden lamps shone from the leaves. The Jordans ate into his heels. He recited his ABCS, frontwards, then backwards. Saying P, he realized he was sober, and no sooner had he realized it than a dull pounding began on his temples. His mouth was dry. His tongue clung to his teeth. He stopped at a water fountain, bent down to drink, and found a condom, thick with white fluid, hanging from the nozzle.

He walked without knowing where he was going. When he saw two men approach, from up the path, he turned around and walked in the opposite direction, his heart beating out of his chest. His socks were wet. His heels had opened up. The pain, when he finally stood and acknowledged it, struck him as something he'd known for a while but hadn't thought of. He sat at a bench and, very tenderly, with both hands, slid off the Jordans. He touched his heels and his fingers came back wet.

He walked on, the light of Flatbush Avenue burning through the black trees. He stood at an intersection, closed his eyes, and waited for the voice in his head to tell him which way. He walked to the right. Then, after two blocks, he turned around.

Homeless people curled up in a bus stops, bags by their feet, beneath advertisements that read, Are You Beach Body Ready? and Welcome Back The Baconator. He could see the LED deli light play the doors of the parked cars from two blocks away. He started running, seethed with pain, and stopped. He speed-walked. ‘Grand Opening’ read a plastic banner over the door, among printed balloons and birthday hats; the words were faded; it was hanging half-way off.

He got a honey-bun and a Poland Spring, and paid through a spiderwebbed plexiglass window. He watched the clerk’s fat brown fingers smooth out the wrinkles in the bills. His fingers, with bristled black hair and a golden ring, moved with indescribable tenderness over the face of George Washington. When he handed back his change, the coins falling noiselessly in the softness of his palm, Malcolm said, “thank you.”

Malcolm ate the honey bun and drank the water in two gulps and, crumpling the bottle, lost in thought, didn’t notice the man until he was standing there before him. Malcolm looked up and, before he could make sense of what he saw, felt a leap of fear through his chest. The man’s long black hair clung to his emaciated face. His cheeks were full of shadow. His eyes were red, and his grey hoodie was bunched up in one hand to reveal, on his stomach, a rumpled bag full of fluid. The fluid was brown. His shoes were untied.

Malcolm stopped crumpling the bottle; silence filled the space between them. He reached into his pocket, touched the tips of his fingers to his black leather wallet, and stood there. Imagining every scenario – giving the man his wallet, running away, screaming for help, crying – he stood absolutely still, under a plastic awning that flapped, perceptibly, with the breeze. A car passed, radio playing, a woman’s hand making waves in the window. Malcolm held out his wallet. The man stared at Malcolm’s cheek. A smile slid across his

teeth, and he began laughing, a high, braying laugh, that crashed around Malcolm's ears like pots and pans. Then the man turned and walked down the street, bobbing from foot to foot.

It wasn't until he turned the corner, a full block up, that Malcolm put his wallet away.

Birds were chirping when he got home. The street was hospital-gown blue. Gripping the rail, Malcolm looked up at his window; the lights were on. He opened the door and went up the stairs, and to the sound of his shoes on the back metal steps, thought about what he would say. He was fourteen years old. He wasn't a kid. He was an adult, essentially, and an adult deserved privacy.

But the movement of the door stopped the words at his lips. His mother lay across the couch, with a quilt between her legs and a glass of wine on the table, her arm dangling from the cushion, her wrist hanging limp. Dawn touched the back of her hand. Fruit flies floated in the wine. Sunrise was flaring on the windows and cornices across the street, but every light in the room was on.

Malcolm eased the door, and then let it slam. Dust rose from the counter. A paper, on the table, fluttered to the floor. Janet did not move. He stood there and listened to the crack of the door fade from the walls, until the room was so quiet he could hear her breathing.

Malcolm peeled off his shoes, then his socks. The socks hung heavy with blood; he put them in a plastic bag. He went to the bathroom, and washed the blood from his feet with a beach towel printed with a map of Italy. Then he shuffled around, turning the lights off one at a time. He turned off the lamp by her head and took the bottle from the floor, holding his breath so as not to wake her up. His face was within inches of hers; he could see the beads of moisture clinging to her eyelids; he could smell her humid, yellow breath. She slept

peacefully, air in through swollen nostrils and out through dry lips: she slept, he thought, like a child. He poured the wine into the sink. He rinsed the bottle until the water ran clear.

It was only when Malcom went to brush his teeth that he saw his face in the mirror. A penis had been drawn on each of his cheeks, in blue and black ink, the heads pointing towards his lips, veins squirming up the shafts, the pubic hair striking out from the balls like rays in a child-drawn sun.

2

Jake Borthwick was twelve and a half when he found the bird in the basement. He was in Connecticut for the week, Chester, a postcard township of falling leaves, white-frame houses, evening light burning blue over the hills. Ears of corn, in paper husks, hung from front doors; brown leaves gathered in the wind-shield wipers. Jake heard the bird before he saw it, heard the shatter of of glass in the silence of the house; home alone, he went downstairs. A window was broken, cold air poured in, and a strand of golden sunlight, full of dust, revealed the twitch of a bird on the floor.

Jake went upstairs and stabbed holes in a shoe box. Then he came back down and took the bird in his hands. The sparrow was brown with white cheeks and mottled white on its wings; it's black pupils darted as Jake, staring into them, tightened his grip. He felt the delicacy of it's bones, their brittle tension, how easily they would break. He couldn't tell if the heartbeat, in his hand, was the bird's or his own. His thumb came to his knuckles. He put the bird in the box.

For five days, Jake took care of the sparrow, feeding it worms and tap water from a Sprite cap. He named the bird, "Marcus," and wrote the name in MagikMarker across the top of the box. Then, at the end of their trip, with Hurricane Sandy passed and schools reopening,

he put the shoe box in a garbage bag and took the bag down to the Connecticut River. A blinding sky resounded over the trees. A light breeze touched caps of white from the river. Jake found an old red brick, among arrowheads and beer bottles. He set the brick on the bottom of the bag, listening to the faint tap of wings against the shoebox. He skipped a rock. Then he tied the bag and threw it in the river.

The water splashed and settled. Styrofoam cups and plastic bags and empty cans moved against the tall, brown weeds; the lip of the black bag, sticking up out of the water, caressed the breeze.

The first time Jake saw Malcolm, on the Feast of St. Francis, he asked John, "who's that?," and then watched from over his Bible, his lips still moving to the words. It was a week before he spoke to him, but watching Malcolm, the dart of his eyes, the moistness of his smile, the flit of his hands as he spoke, Jake felt his stomach run to ice. He could not look away. He practiced what to say in the mirror. "You smoke pot?" he asked, as the class poured down the steps. It was 4 o'clock. A plane streaked pastel across the sky.

Jake lived in a spring-loaded silence. He hated to step, for the creak of the floor; he hated to eat, for the sound of his mouth, chewing in his ears. He stayed in his bedroom, the music on the speakers so consistently loud that it became a kind of silence. At night, he heard the creak of the scratched wooden floorboards under his father's knees, the murmur of his lips. "Lord forgive me my trespasses." Jake put on headphones and slept to a recording of rain through trees.

His father was a former punk who had traded in his bass for a crucifix and his mosh pits for pews, but kept the goatee. He worked at an Amazon warehouse in Forest Hills,

barking orders in a rasp while he kept his hand in his pocket, around a Bible so small he couldn't even read the print.

His father never really hit him, but in his grey eyes, his thin lips, the back of his hands spread with blue veins like branches, Jake sensed a cruelty that a bruise would have spoken to. His mother had been dead three years; her make-up, Glossier and Chanel and Maybellene, still filled the bathroom cabinet.

After that night, Jake could tell Malcolm was avoiding him. He didn't pass by the fence after school. He didn't come to the cafeteria during lunch. Finding him nowhere, Jake sensed him everywhere: in the back of each head, in the turn of each corner. On the inside of his own lids, he saw Malcolm's face; in the silence of his room, at night, he heard the squeal of his boots on the laminated floor. He was not sure what he wanted to say but trusted that, when the time came, his lips would find the words.

One day in early November, sitting in a bathroom stall, watching a video of a woman give head to a man on a train, Jake heard a belt hit the floor, looked under the wall, and found two hiking boots planted in a puddle of khakis. Branches and trees blurred past the window. Jake zipped up. He washed his hands, watching in the mirror, waiting. When Malcolm came out he turned to face him.

"What's good?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing's good?" he said, and before Malcolm could respond: "I'm sorry about the other weekend, it was a joke. It was just a stupid joke." He felt his face spread into a smile.

In the school bathroom with wet toilet paper pasted across the yellow tile and butts in the sink and a drain in the middle of the floor, amid the humid hum of yellow fluorescents,

they shook hands. Jake stared into Malcolm's eyes, tightening his grip, until Malcolm looked away. "I'll see you around," Jake said. Malcolm wiped his palm on his leg. Then he washed his hands, listening to the door swing, back-and-forth, back-and-forth, to stillness.

They were learning about the martyrs in Religious Studies. "A man shouldn't go to bed until he can fall asleep where he stands," Mr. Delmonico read from the rules of Calumbanus, while the sun, through the window, kissed the Crucifix over his head. A nail winked from Jesus' feet. Malcolm could hear music bleed from headphones, the scratch of pencils, the flutter of pages, and the wet inhales of a kid in the back, snoring into his desk.

Saint Christopher bore Jesus across a river, watched a garden bloom where the Savior had stood, and went to preach in Lycia. There he was arrested, beaten, and locked in a cauldron over a flame. Finally, in a fit of mercy, the blind king ordered his beheading. Christopher told him that if he spread his blood across his eyes his sight would be restored. The axe fell, Christopher rose to heaven. The king took a handful of blood and then looked around, at the rooftops and hills, blinking.

Mr. Delmonico told this story. Then the bell rang. Malcolm packed his bag and rummaged around in his books and papers – taking out a notebook, flipping through the pages – until the last student left and the class had cleared out. He went up to Delmonico's desk. Delmonico was bent over a stack of paper. His sodden black hair was thinning, and a wet, shiny scalp shone like a tonsure through the down. "Excuse me," Malcolm said, in a voice so quiet it startled him. "But how did they know?"

"What?"

"Saint Christopher. And the other ones. How did they know before that they would go to heaven?"

“If they knew before, it wouldn’t have really been martyrdom, would it? It wouldn’t have really been a sacrifice,” said Delmonico.

“So they just did it.”

“Well they trusted – they trusted in the holy spirit. They trusted in –”

“But they didn’t really know.”

“That’s not the point.”

“What is the point?”

Delmonico looked to his knuckles, to his papers, to the pool of sun on the windowsill, but could not, in all these things, find the answer. There was a stain on his shirt in the shape of a turtle.

“Would a saint know today? If there was a saint, would he know he would go to heaven?”

“If he believed...or she...if they believed, that’s enough.”

On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays they had Religious Studies; on the alternate days, in the period after lunch, Health. A plastic skeleton hung from a nail, in its head, in the corner. Glossy posters with acronyms like S.H.I.N.E. and W.OR.K. glistened from the walls. A six-inch Mona Lisa poster hung from thumbtacks near the door, and a giant poster above the blackboard, read DON'T PANIC, in bold, anxiety-producing front.

Condoms were not given out, which was all right, said Jake: he preferred it raw.

They were learning about the dietary system, a diagram of the stomach projected on the wall, Mr. Heim, to the side, caressing the deep pink lining with a laser pointer. Mr. Heim was the gym teacher. His arms were wound with veins. He wore a tight latex shirt that read

Warrior across the shoulder blades, above a Spartan helmet. Once Malcolm had seen him alone in his car, the radio off, staring at nothing; Malcolm had looked away.

"This is the...the liver, no – this is the stomach," Mr. Heim said, squinting at his notes; the room was dark; the shades were down; Malcolm watched motes of dust move in the shafts of light from the projector. He raised his hand.

"Yes, Malcolm?"

"What's a colonoscopy bag?"

Mr. Heim put his chin in his hand, stumped. He took out his phone and looked it up.

"A colonoscopy bag is a plastic bag that collects fecal matter from the digestive tract through an opening in the abdominal wall called a stoma," he read, his face blue in the light of his phone, bristle showing damp from his chin and his cheeks. His mouth shriveled in concentration: "it's like for when you can't go to the bathroom."

"What happens if you don't have one?"

"And you can't go to the bathroom? You'd get sick. Constipated. Eventually, you'd die, but it'd take a while."

"How long?"

"A while. Like a few weeks."

"But you could do it for a few weeks?"

That night Janet brought home Chinese. They ate under a ceiling fan, a sea-shell light, and a beaded string that swayed. Candlelight wavered in the creases of the tablecloth. Dusk seeped damply through the black branches. Janet rubbed her fingers on the napkins, dipped the pancakes into the sauce, eased her white plastic fork, slowly, into the chicken. She ate through a smile, and spoke to Malcolm while she covered her mouth with her hand.

Drawing conversation out of him was like beating twigs to coax a flame. He ate like a tight-rope walker: staring down with extreme care, face tight with concentration, like a man accomplishing a difficult task.

"Listen to this," Janet said. A cookie was cracked on the table. She held a fortune in poised fingers, the grease-wet pads bleeding through the paper: "No man is lost who is loved."

Malcolm lay in bed, staring up, as if he could see the movement of his bowels in the cracks of the ceiling. When his mother was asleep and the light of the street striped the black furniture, he went to look at his reflection in the bathroom mirror – at his cheeks, his nose, the shape of his mouth – and in the morning he wasn't sure if he'd done this or just dreamt it.

***

That night, a week ago, Janet had ridden red wine and klonopin to a place soft and deep, and woken up to a pounding on her temples, the sun in her eyes. A drill hummed in the wall by her head. A white band of sun struck from the hardwood floor. Standing up, her legs rippled. She grabbed the armrest and sat back down.

Janet had been eating a bowl of cereal and drinking day old coffee when Malcolm came in. Two faint shapes were visible on his cheeks: she thought, at first, that they were arrows. She looked at her cereal. She listened to the drawers open and slam. She blew on the coffee and took a sip.

For weeks afterwards, it was not the drawings on his face that Janet kept coming back to, but what she had done about them: nothing.

Why hadn't she done more? Her mind circled the question, getting nowhere. He made a bowl of cereal and sat across from her, looking at the byzantine game on the back of the box, reading the same word ("award") again and again, as he waited, she saw, for a response. She sat and thought about what was expected of her, receding into self-consciousness, while, parting her lips, she blew on the cold coffee. She watched him from over the cup. The penises on his cheeks moved as he ate. The worst part of being bullied, she was sure, was the pity in the eyes of mothers and fathers and teachers and friends.

She realized the mug was empty. She rinsed it out in the sink: when she turned he was gone.

For the rest of the week she was so aware of herself she felt like someone else. Looking into her actions, she saw embarrassment, pity, fear: she saw an over-sensitivity that had curved towards callousness; she understood all this, but could not comprehend the truth: that it was the very mechanism of self-analysis that trapped her, that it was her very ability to articulate her problems that kept her beneath them.

She went back to the manuscript and found it middling. The words on the page were words on a page. She looked at them as if across an enormous distance. She saw the imprint of other writers, in a description of a face, in a line of dialogue, and turned, by reflex, away. Her inbox was empty but for promotions, advertisements, junk mail; in the silence of her friends, of those editors and writers and journalists, she heard laughter. The chatter of her fingers, on the keys, prickled her ears. The sheen of red sun along the top of the A train as it

emerged from the tunnel, the throb of basketballs through the leaves and the clink of the flowered glasses in her parent's cabinet seemed, all together, to mock her: she would never do them justice.

Walking down Canal Street, the afternoon after they'd had Chinese, she stood at a red light and looked to her side. A man sat on a prayer rug, with his legs crossed and his feet bare and a field of wares spread on the woven fabric before him. Black gas masks; Disney princesses encased in plastic; t-shirts with the face of John Lennon; Bic lighters with sunsets, crucifixes, naked Asian women spreading their legs; a black hat printed with a pistol; a white hat printed with a heart; t-shirts with the face of Obama, in blue and red, and a pair of Gucci sneakers wrapped in plastic.

"Are those real?" She pointed with a finger.

"Yes, real. All real." She watched his hands grope through the caps, the toys, the masks. His fingers were long and black, with scabs, like rubies, on the knuckles. He held up a denim cap that said I ❤️ NY in silver sequins. "Very real." There was blood in his right pupil.

"No, those. The sneakers." His hands turned the sneakers back and forth, slanting them with one hand on the heel and another under the toe. The price read from a taped barcode. The golden bee, on the side of the shoe, in the red and green stripes, blinked through the plastic. Cars tore winds from the street behind them.

She walked without thinking, sunset burning from a skyscraper window, until the slide of the door, at the bank, startled her out of herself. She withdrew the $60 in fives, so it felt like more money, and went back to the corner of Canal and Essex. He shot his tongue across his finger and thumb, and counted the bills so fast they shimmered. Then, smiling, he

handed her the shoes. They crackled in their plastic wrap; on the train-ride home, she kept spacing out and opening her purse, in a panic, as if the sneakers had gone somewhere.

The Gucci box she found on EBay cost $10 more than the shoes. She took the wrapping paper from the crawl space, over the closet, where it lay eleven months of the year among red-and-green string lights and plaster Nativity scenes and ornaments wrapped in newspaper. She put the sneakers in the box. She wrapped the box in the oily paper that seemed to come off on her hands; she kept the gift in her sock drawer, beside a Xanax bottle with someone else's name on the label and a vibrator in a Walgreens bag.

Mornings, before work, she came out to find Malcolm at the table, a cup of coffee in his hands. The early morning sun burned from the pans over the stove. She could hear his stomach groan like a chair scraping the floor: he shifted his feet and paced, drinking the cup to the end.

"Since when did you drink coffee?"

"I've always liked coffee," he said, in a tired voice, as if to speak was a chore. He drank it as a test, and, walking down the stairwell with the daylight, pale, on the bannister and the steps, felt every beat of his foot reverberate in his stomach. His stomach hissed with gas. He walked with his hands on the rail.

It had been six days since he took a shit.

His stomach felt, by turns, like a knot, a sandbag, and a bronze bell, empty and ringing. He felt the ringing through his hands and his arms, almost as if it were coming, in reverse, from the pencil in the tips of his fingers. Delmonico was speaking. Pencils were darting nervously. The only note he had taken was his name.

Delmonico was discussing Islam, reading from a textbook called “The World’s Religions,” animated graphics of Jesus and Mohammed and Buddah on the cover, a CGI sunset bleeding behind them. Jesus was barefoot. The Buddah was meditating, with his hands on his knees. Malcolm’s hand shot up, again and again, before Delmonico had even finished asking the question. His answers were, more than often, wrong. Delmonico looked through his palm and said, “any guesses?”

Jake found him in the hallway and asked him what he was doing after school. The halls were crowded. Lockers slammed. They spoke into each other's ears. “I have plans,” Malcolm said, and then spent two hours walking down Church Avenue, watching his shadow lengthen until the top of his head touched the trash in the curb.

The sunset quivered through the branches; the tree trunks were darker than the sky; an ambulance passed, and the red-blue siren lights, beating on the cracked stoops and boarded-up windows, made it seem much later than it was. Malcolm stopped at a Dunkin Donuts on Cortelyou Road, the leaves, frozen by the street light, shining disembodied through the glass without a branch or a trunk. He bought a double-chocolate donut and ate it watching an employee mop a thick red substance from the white tile floor. A group of people sat in the back, black under their fingernails, their hair in dreads. One of them was quietly playing Gucci Mane on his IPhone, set in the middle of the table, on top of a paper cup. Another slept in his chair. His chin touched his chest.

Malcolm went to the bathroom and looked at the stillness of the toilet water. He breathed in and out, exhaling so strongly that the water rippled. Then he washed his hands with soap and water, reciting his ABCs.

The traffic light flashed red on the wall of a church, on the corner, with the sign: St. Mary's. The church, built from brownstone, stood behind a wrought-iron fence lined with black spearheads. A huddled mass waited on the steps: an earring, a dress shoe, the calf of a woman under the hem of her coat, flashed, with each headlight, from the crowd; Malcolm waited on the curb, moving a plastic bottle of urine with the toe of his boot. Incense, perfume and cigarette smoke all stung his nostrils, bringing him back to something he couldn't quite remember. A hem of red slipped through the overhanging branches, at the end of the street. The street lights turned on. He could see his breath.

The floorboards creaked as the crowd moved inside, the women laying their hands on their husband's arms as the purses, on their arms, swayed: Malcolm followed.

He sat alone in a pew, in the back. A forest of candles smoked around the altar, the flames, reflected in the bellows of the organ, darting nervously on the brass. The priest spoke with his right arm out, his palm open. He read the story of Jonah and the Whale, and as he spoke of the forty days, bluish strands of incense curled from the altar. The wooden pews creaked as he raised and lowered his hands. A wicker basket went between the rows, and under the priests' voice, the creak of the pews, whispers and coughs, Malcolm could hear the crinkle of bills.

The pews began to empty. Malcolm lined up, took the eucharist, and said, "thank you." Walking back to his seat, he stepped gingerly so as not to upset his stomach. He coughed into his elbow to cover his farting.

He stepped into the street and, walking home, watching his breath plume the air, knew that he breathed for no other reason than the joy of seeing it before him.

He slid his key in the lock and heard a woman cry through the door. The TV was on. Janet lay across the couch, blue light touching the rings on her fingers. She stood up and walked over, as he sat in the chair and, staring down, picked at his laces. He looked at his laces so he wouldn't have to look up, but thinking of Janet, as her shadow fell softly across his hands, his fingers could only grope blindly at the knots.

"I got you something," she said at his head, bent over his shoes. "I got it for your birthday, I know it's early, I got it for your birthday but I wanted to give it to you now."

And, smiling, she handed him the box in both hands.

The wrapping paper was printed with sleigh-bells, mistletoe, red berries clinging to pine branches. He broke the tape and tenderly peeled back the paper, with the tips of his fingers, careful not to tear it. The word "Gucci" leapt from the box. He lifted the top, and stared at the sneakers, in their plastic, with as much recognition in his eyes as if he were staring at someone's organs. The green and white stripes beat through their plastic. The Gucci bee shone.

"How'd you get these?"

"Aren't they nice?"

"How'd you afford these?"

"Don't worry. Don't worry about that. That's – I got a deal. You don't have to worry about that." They sat in silence for a moment. There was laughter on the TV; the light of a passing car unfurled across the couch.

"Are you going to try them on?"

He united his boots and slid them off, wincing at the sting across his heels. He wore three Band-Aids and two pairs of socks. He drew the sneakers from their plastic, put them on, and walked the room, on the pads of his feet, staring down, then looking up:

"I love them," he said, like he'd read the words off a sheet of paper.

Rings of blue flame burned from the stove. Two pots steamed: spaghetti and meatballs. His mother filled his bowl and brought it to the table. Malcolm put out his hand: he had already eaten.

The next morning he woke up with a start, as if to a noise, and searched the room for the source of his fear. He found only the play of light across the books on the shelf, the sound of an idling engine, his closet, half-open, with a dangling coat hanger hung with a scarf. His breath moved through his stomach as if through a vast space. He put his palm to his belly. Fear climbed his neck. He drew his hand away.

He went to the bathroom, tucked his shirt in his chin, and looked at himself in the mirror. His brown hair clung damply to his pallid forehead. His stomach stretched taut, round, like a blown-up white balloon. His chest looked, by comparison, caved in. His body felt like something apart from him.

He was back in bed when she knocked on the door, three raps with her knuckles and ring. He said, "coming," got dressed, and sat at the kitchen table, watching the quiver of the yolks on his plate as Janet typed into her keyboard.

When she was gone, getting ready, he opened the trash-can with the toe of his boot, and threw the eggs away.

That afternoon, a Thursday, he came home from school to find Jake on his front steps, looking, sideways, into an empty Arizona bottle. An enormous blue sky resounded in the

silence of the street. “Check it.” A fly struggled in the dregs of the bottle. Jake held his hand over the top.

“Where you been?” Jake said.

“I’ve been around.”

“I haven’t seen you around.”

They sat at the kitchen table, with blue sun and birds in the window, watching YouTube videos on Jake’s iPhone, propped against a flower vase. Grey leaves, like insects, crackled from the tablecloth. The lillies hung their heads. They watched videos of a shirtless white kid throwing himself down flights of stairs. The camera shook with laughter. The dead fly floated in the tea. “This guy’s crazy. He’s actually crazy,” Jake said, and changed the video before the recommended one, a lyric video of The Beatles, “Julia,” could play.

His background photo was of Malcolm on the bench, his head back, his mouth open, Sharpie across his cheeks. Jake stayed on the picture for a moment. Then he went back to YouTube.

Malcolm pretended not to notice. He looked at a stain on the cream-colored tablecloth. His hands were folded on his stomach, and the pain was so agonizing he breathed only when he had to. His belt buckle bit into his stomach. His sweater swelled over his stomach.

“Are those yours?”

Jake was looking at the Gucci’s on the floor, shining, beside the mud-splattered Merrell’s and tattered running shoes and paint-chipped walls, even whiter than before. He got down on the floor beside them, touching his finger to the Bee with careful tact, as if to the tip of a blade.

"Where'd you get them?"

"Online."

"Where?"

"A website."

Jake, kneeling like a penitent on the scratched hardwood floor, held the sneaker in his hands, reading the logo on the sole. Silent, he put down the sneaker and came back to the table, his chair creaking as if resigned to his weight.

Malcolm heard shoes up the steps, the brush of paper bags against the door, the dangle of keys, the turn of the lock.

"Hi, mom," he said, turning to the door before it even opened.

Her eyes flashed across them. She put the bags on the floor, by her feet, and filled the fridge, listening to the voices from Jake's phone. She was putting away a container of pesto, Rana on the label, when she realized her hands were trembling.

She knew it had been him. His laughter clanged in her head; she heard, through his laughter, the dart of pens across Malcolm's cheeks, the flash of phone lights as they took pictures, Malcolm's open, gaping mouth as, sleeping, he dreamed of home. Jake would have laughed then, in the bedroom or the park or the basement or the party, as he laughed now, in her kitchen.

She stood up so quickly that the bag toppled over, spilling the groceries onto the floor. "Nice to meet you," she said. She extended her hand and, shaking it, squeezed. His hand was soft. His eyes were a deep, sad brown, so dark she could see her reflection, from the frizz of her hair, to the necklace on her chest reading: J.

"I'm Janet."

“We’ve already met.” She released his palm and watched his skin, pressed to pink, fade to white. He rubbed one hand with the other. She walked back to the sink and turned on the tap. Testing the temperature, she kneaded the water, like silk, between her fingers.

“I’m gonna go read,” she said, and lay in bed with a book in her hands, her eyes slipping between the lines as their voices rose and fell. They went into the living room. Jake put a boxing match, Garcia vs. Matthyse, on the TV. The boxers faces, shining and wet, played in the glasses on the table. Each blow sent sweat bursting from their bodies. Sheets of blood ran down Matthyse’s face. Jake had seen the video a million times before. He mouthed along with the commentator.

Garcia was flagging; his eye was bruised. “He’s gonna fall, he’s gonna fall,” Jake said, while Garcia leaned into the ropes. Then he fell forward, clutching Matthyse’s hips as he slid to his knees. Matthysse raised his arms. The stands broke into applause. Garcia, his eyes shut, his face slack, ropes of blood trailing from his lips, held onto his opponent's legs as to his mother, with tenderness and desperation.

“Lord help me,” Malcolm thought. “Lord, please help me.”

It was 9:30 when Jake put on his shoes to leave. The ends of his laces were split and frayed. The Nike logo, on the side of his Janoskis, had been worn to show the white underneath. He looked at the Guccis as he put on his shoes.

“You can have them,” said Malcolm.

“Mm?”

“I don’t like them, I don’t even want them,” he said. “You can have them.”

Jake was too shocked to even say thank you. He stood in the hallway, with the sneakers in a Zabar's bag, staring at the closed door until the click of the lock faded from his

ears. Then he rode the train, his hands tightening around the cord with each step someone took so that his nails, unclipped, dug into his palm. He put them in his closet, at the bottom of the pile, and wore them once, a year later, at a Sneakershead conference at Javits Center. "You know those are fake," a man in a Nets jersey told him, the pock marks on his cheeks showing through his wispy black beard. The embarrassment was like ants crawling up his neck. He went to the bathroom and took off the Guccis. He realized he didn't have another pair of shoes, and sat there in his socks with the seat down, listening to the fluorescents. He put the Guccis back on.

Jake thought of Macolm very little before that conference in early December. When he thought of him at all, he remembered not Malcolm but the feeling he had given him; he remembered this feeling as if it was a physical sensation. It was a feeling between pity, helplessness, guilt, desire. It was the same feeling as when he had nursed the bird to health knowing, all the while, that he would kill it. Malcolm's act of kindness, that afternoon in November, only fed Jake's guilt; his guilt only fed his hatred. Or was it not kindness at all? Did Malcolm know, somehow, that the sneakers were fake, and give them away as vengeance? Jake, sixteen years old, lying up in bed with relief in his heart and the Guccis in their box on his floor, could not tell.

That day, in the middle of November, was the last time they saw each other. Malcolm never came back to St. Joseph's.

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Janet's knock the next morning found Malcolm on the toilet, his pants bunched around his ankles. His arms pressed red into his thighs. His hands were clasped. A fly buzzed, lazily, in the air by his head. "I need to get in there."

"Coming."

"I need to get ready."

"I'm coming," he said, as he lifted his pants and buckled the belt and put up the seat. His stomach was so bloated he had to use another notch. The pain reached up from his stomach, gripping his throat like a hand. He avoided his face as he passed by the mirror.

"I was just peeing," he told Janet, as if she cared. A stick of incense burned from the toilet. Grey ash floated in the water.

Malcolm sat in the back of the class, his head ringing, his textbook closed. The clock, reflecting the shadows of leaves, ticked five past eleven. He shut his eyes, and exhaled so deeply that flecks of dandruff moved across the cover. The pain in his stomach pressed against his spine.

He looked back at the clock, and found that it still read, somehow, five past eleven.

The pain was so consistent there were times he almost forgot it, until finally it seemed that it wasn't so much his mind which stayed and the pain which came and went as the other way around. Flipping through the textbook, alighting on a graphic of a Viking helmet, following the line of Sherman's March up the Georgian coast, he could, for a moment, forget the pain; it was in his remembering that he suffered the most. His breath seized, his jaws tensed, his eyes strayed from the illustrated map to the chair scrapes across the laminate floor, and those two seconds of forgetfulness became, to him, infinity.

Malcolm couldn't eat his lunch. The din of cafeteria voices, the slam of metal trays on tables with chipped corners, the brightness of the light falling, through the barred window, across the tables: he went to the church and sat in the pew. Little beads of transparent plastic stood out on Jesus' cheeks. His painted eyes stared up to the ceiling. Malcolm put down the kneeler and got down from the bench. He clasped his hands and closed his eyes, and, in this movement, forgot his pain, only to find it waiting there behind his lids. He rested his forehead on the pew. No words came to his lips.

He threw out his sandwich, drank from the water fountain, and went back to class.

In Religious Studies, Malcolm tried his best to focus, but found his eyes pinballing between the long wooden pole in the corner of the room, the branches in the window, and the metal chain that swayed from the shades, clinking on the wall. He imagined his eyes darting, his forehead gleaming in the light of the window. The girl beside him, scrunching her nose, moved a seat over. To distract himself, he took his pencil and drove the sharpened point into his palm, his hands in his lap, under the grey metal desk with his textbook set, neatly, in the middle.

When Delmonico came over and asked if he was okay, Malcolm's suffering was such that he could only nod his head.

The nurse, Mr. Rodriguez, blinked from his computer, as if from a trance, and asked, "what's the problem?" He was looking at a picture of Shakira.

Malcolm went to the bed and listened to the paper sheet crinkle under his back. He held his hand to his stomach. He said, "my throat hurts," and lay there, looking, with his eyes shut, his hands folded on his stomach, like a picture of peace and harmony.

The office was in the basement. The shadows of legs shuddered across the wall, and sometimes sneakers, pummeling the concrete by his head, would shake the glass in its frame.

Rodriguez tapped his knee, pressed his tongue with a popsicle stick, and then, after holding his chin in his hand, brewed a cup of tea. The steam, breathing from the brown liquid, glistened in the lines of his face. The tea was in a little paper cup printed with blue flowers. The flowers went in a band below the rim. Between loud, sucking sips, Malcolm held the cup on his chest, in both hands, like a chalice.

Rodriguez put a thermometer in Malcolm's mouth, under his tongue. Then he went to the bathroom.

Malcolm heard his belt unbuckle, the toilet seat go up. Listening to piss hit the water, he dipped the thermometer into the tea. The steam wet his fingers. The mercury climbed. When he handed it back, his temperature read 195 degrees.

Rodriguez scratched the back of his head. He looked up at the window, and then back down. "98.9," he said. "Just like I thought."

Malcolm listened to his mother's voice through the phone. She was at work, she was busy, she would come if she could. "I'll call a cab."

Mr. Rodriguez walked Malcolm out, and left him on the concrete steps, under the Virgin Mary. Wind strummed the \ puddles in the street. Dead leaves scuttled across the asphalt, and the chain of the American flag, flying above the school, clinked rhythmically against its pole.

The Virgin's face was weather-eaten, her nose was chipped, a white stain dribbled down her cheek, and yet a look of such terrible, sincere pity came through her blank eyes and open palms and flattened nose that Malcolm could only look down. To distract himself, he

paced up and down, counting the cracks in the sidewalk. When he got to eighty-seven, the taxi pulled up. There were tears in his eyes.

Rihanna's "Diamonds in the Sky," was playing on the radio, yellow foam oozed from the rips in the black leather seats, and a Hula girl, in a grass skirt and puka-shell necklace, dangled from the rearview mirror, beside an Puerto Rican flag and a Little Tree. Malcolm sat against the door, watching his breath on the glass. PIX-11 played from the front seat. The flashing lights and graphics and voices beat against his head. With trembling fingers, soft as feathers, he pressed the screen. "Excuse me," he said to the driver, his voice no more than a breath. "How do I turn it off?"

"I don't turn off here," he said, looking at Malcolm in the rearview mirror. Black hair scurried down the back of his neck. "I turn off up ahead."

Church Avenue slid by. Storefront mosques, misspelled graffiti, fold-out tables spread with knock-off purses, and a man on the curb, following the cab with his eyes. Malcolm spent the ride with the window cracked, feeling the flutter of air on his face. The road throbbed under the wheels. The sound of the potholes, like the beat of someone else's heart, was soothing to his own; he closed his eyes, and felt sleep tug at his limbs, the brown leather seat soften, and the voices of the anchors, on the screen, recede. The voices were coming from his under door; he was in bed with the blanket to his chin; he had just woken up; the whole day had been a dream.

Then the cab pulled up short, and his head, thrown back, banged into the window.

The steps of his stoop were cracked. The driver stopped the meter. Malcolm dropped a $20 bill on his seat, and walked the stairs with his hand on the railing, marrying his feet on each step before he took another.

He spent the rest of the day in bed, the blanket up to his chin, watching the afternoon retreat from his walls, and the shadows, in the folds of his quilt, get longer. The poster of Steve Irwin gleamed from the back of his door. Then the room darkened; there was a tapping against his window; the black shadows of rain drops slid down his hands. Darkness closed ranks around him, but the tears that crawled, like worms, down his cheeks, shone faintly in the last light of the window.

The street lights turned on, slithering on the wet branches. Beads of rain glimmered on his window. There were animals, elk and bears and caribou, stitched into the quilt; Malcolm traced them with his finger. He traced the tops of the Alaskan pines, the racks of caribou, the paws of a grizzly above a stream of blue cotton. With damp, weak fingers, he caressed each ray of the sun.

He felt, at times, inside the pain. He peeled back his shirt, like a layer of skin, as if expecting to see a sinkhole where his stomach had been. His belly bulged out. The moon lay across it. A fly, buzzing in the darkness of the room, alit on his knuckle, and then on his mouth. He felt its legs probe his lips; he did not move.

Malcolm was still lying in the dark when his mother came home. He followed her, with his ears, up the stairs, down the hall, and into the apartment, where the front door slammed like a period ending a sentence. A blade of light slit the darkness from beneath his door. Steve Irwin's white smile sprang out of the poster. "Malcolm?" she shouted. He opened his mouth to respond, but the pain choked the words.

She came in and clicked on the switch. Light blue walls shot up around him. The light rang from the brass knob, the varnished arms of the rocking chair. He closed his eyes.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't feel good."

"What doesn't feel good?"

"My stomach," he said. "Also my back. There's a weight on my back."

There was so much moisture on his lids that they shone white as the eyes of the blind. His fingers clutched at the quilt. She peeled back the cover; her purse hit the floor.

She had seen this on CNN, *60 Minutes,* footage of malnourished African children with bloated stomachs, the fatness of their eyes accentuating the emaciation of their faces, their fingers in their mouths. His stomach was bulging so far past his belt his chest looked caved in. She lifted the quilt and, very tenderly, careful not to touch his stomach, slid it back over him.

Thinking that she must do something, anything, Janet sat at the table with her face in her hands. She sobbed so hard it sounded like laughter, and with each heave the purse, on her arm, knocked against her chair. Headlights shimmered from the wine bottles on top of the fridge. Her palms were sweating; her face kept sliding through her hands. She went to the bathroom and fixed her hair and stared at herself in the mirror, as if to give herself a pep talk, only to be surprised into silence by her own face. Her curls, light brown, almost blond, clung to her cheeks. Bags sagged under each eye. The whites of her eyes were webs of red veins; she could see herself, miniaturized, in her reflection's pupils.

Janet went to his room and stood over the bed, watching the tendons of his neck tense like cables through the skin. She was on the phone, repeating the doctor's questions from her ear to Malcolm's. Had he been eating? When did this start? When was the last time he went to the bathroom? Janet could hear a TV playing in the background, behind the doctor's gruff,

grey-haired voice. Between questions and grunts, she could hear the doctor chewing potato chips.

Janet left in such a rush she forgot her umbrella. At CVS, she found the laxatives in their aisle, and then was in her bathroom, pouring the pills out in her hand. Her brown hair, black with rain, clung to her cheeks.

She came in with a glass of water and a white pill in the nexus of the lines of her palm. “Take this, and you’ll go to the bathroom, okay?” she said. He opened his eyes, and saw a drop of rain quivering on her lip.

He nodded and opened his mouth. It stayed open for a while: she had to clear the table, set down the glass, sit on the bed beside him. He felt her weight sag the mattress. He raised himself up on his elbows; the sheet was damp where his back had been.

She set the pill on his tongue. She put the glass to his lips. The water spilled down his chin, to his chest and neck. None of it got in his mouth. “All good?” He gave a thumbs-up. Then, when she had left the room to call the doctor, he took the pill from his cheek and slid it under his pillow, like a tooth.

He couldn’t hear her voice but not her words. She was on and off the phone; louder than her voice, he could hear the creak of furniture and she sat and stood and sat. In between calls, she would come into the room, look at him, and pace. Her feet, in socks, scuffed roughly on the wall-to-wall carpet. “Stop,” he said. She sat in the children’s rocking chair, in the corner of the room, eyes going long and distant as the wood creaked up and down. The creaks irritated him more than the sound of the socks. He put a pillow over his ear. His face was too hot. He lay on his back staring at the ceiling.

His breath rasped in his nostrils. He trembled through a quilt and two blankets; his finger shook so much he could not follow the lines of the antlers. She kneeled on the floor beside him, running her hands in awkward, shuffled movements across his forehead and cheeks. His skin crawled. Chills raced from the touch of her fingers. Leaning forward, to caress his face, she pressed her elbow into his stomach. “Leave,” he said, “just leave,” and lay there with his eyes closed and his arms crossed over his chest.

She went into the hallway and stood staring at the blank eggshell wall a foot from her face. This wall, unchipped, with it’s Eggshell paint that she had bought from Lowes and brought home in cans and put up with Malcolm one day four years ago, with newspaper on the floor and sunshine in the window, seemed cruel and unforgiving.

She had done something to deserve this, she knew, but no matter how hard she stared at the wall could not find what it was.

With trembling hands and tears in her eyes, she made him a cup of Sleepytime tea.

The mug sat on his table, unsipped. The rain stopped. A pool shone from his sill. He asked her to open the window, and for a moment the cool breath of the night, moving over his face, drove the pain from his body. The street light quivered on the branches. Drops of rain plopped from the AC to his windowsill with the steadiness of a metronome.

The pain came back with each breath, until each moment before he inhaled seemed an island of relief. His sanity lived on these islands so that, exhaling, coming out of a wave, he wondered how long he had been unconscious: barely a second.

He kept an arm to his side, to avoid touching his stomach, and another clutching the top of the quilt. His eyes hurt. He kept them closed, and in his stillness, with his eyes shut, his arm out, his palm open and shining, drifted from himself. He was in a bed with the light

of a lamp by the window, caressing the creases of the sheet; the sheets were the color of chianti; the window was dark; he could see construction cranes in the distance. He was sitting across a man's back. He was pulling at the hairs on the back of a man's head. "Ow," the man said, but laughing. Malcolm felt his laughter through his back.

Then a door, slamming, a car, sliding through the rain with the sound of an exhale, brought Malcolm back to his bedroom. His stomach was bulging through the blanket. Chills were crawling across his skin. His eyelids were heavy and the clock, by his head, blinked 9:58.

Looking at the popcorn ceiling, through eyes blurred with moisture, he listened to his mother on the phone. Her feet shuffled the floor. A chair creaked as she sat. She was saying their address very slowly, one syllable at a time. He could hear her fear in the clenched restraint of her voice.

His hand touched his stomach and shot away. His damp hair was sticking to the pillow; he picked up his head. His neck hurt. He lay his head back down and, mid-movement, heard a screen door slam shut. A male voice was speaking, quietly but with force, and the sound of his steps fell through the fire escape in deep, resounding tremors.

Malcolm's stomach caught in fear. He closed his eyes, feeling the beat of his breath on his knuckles, following the dart of light across his lids. He began to make an image out. A man in rippled white robes was standing in a field of green, the yellow sun lulling on the hills, with a lamb to his left and a monkey on his shoulder. Malcolm gripped the sheets. His breath fell with a thud in his ears. He opened his eyes, to escape the vision, and found not his room, with its bookcase and blue walls, but the face of the homeless man, in white robes, his

hands out beside him and slit like closed mouths, the slant of the sun striking shadows in his cheekbones, his laughter resounding out across the fields, the animals, beside him, smiling.

His scream was so loud it froze her where she stood. Then she was through the door, running to his side, the wine wine splashing over the glass onto her fingers. His eyes were open. His pupils were darting. Beads of saliva clung to his lips, and his hand gripped so tightly to the sheet that his knuckles were white. She dropped the wine on the carpet and got on her knees and put her face to his stomach, speaking into his skin, as the stink of shit shocked her nostrils. Brown spots seeped through the quilt. She took the smell, which repulsed every part of her, as a personal test of her love.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she whispered, breathlessly, although for what she did not know.

She was still kneeling there with her face on his stomach as the EMTs, having come up the stairs and down the hall, stopped in the doorway with their kits in their hands.

The light of the ambulance throbbed on the house fronts. The windows were open; men and women, in robes and slippers, their children under their arms, watched from the stoops. The light of televisions pulsed on their backs. The EMTs carried Malcolm in a stretcher down the stoop, under a grey flannel blanket that flapped with each step. The blanket was too short, and his socks, sky blue, with white clouds, stuck out of the end. Janet followed, holding his coat and his shoes. Her collar fluttered with the breeze, and the tears fell so heavily on her sweater they seemed, almost, to thud. A man on the steps, to her side, held his shirt over his mouth.

She stopped with one foot on the middle step, and the other on the bottom, as the ambulance door swung out to reveal her future: so many hours in the hospital they stopped

passing, the peel-back cup of orange juice, the styrofoam trays, the prickled red hairs on the fresh-shaven cheek of the doctor, the Cross on the wall, the flatscreen in the corner, the dampness of Malcolm's hand as, for hours, she held it in hers. She saw her future with so much clarity it felt like the past. Then she went up to the stretcher and took Malcolm's hand as the EMTs, their knees bending, lifted him into the port.