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The Former Things

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The Former Things

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2024

*The whole business of
what's reality and what isn't has
never been solved and probably
never will be. So I don't care to
be too definite about anything.*

—Mary Oliver, “Angels”

I have a recurring nightmare that Jackie is having a nightmare. In the dream we're lying in bed together, like we do every night, only she's sweating and delirious, clawing the sheets, yelling help help, I'm just a city girl, I don't want to live among the cows. Help help, I don't want to live in a white house next to a drugstore. When I wake up, she's the one looking at me, asking me is everything alright, and I say yes.

Thou shalt not commit adultery. As a child I wasn't sure what adultery meant, although the fact that it began with 'adult' seemed to me an ominous clue. The ministers said that it meant hurting marriage. I hadn't known that marriage was something which could be hurt. Later, when they told us about sex, I learned the etymology of the word. Turns out 'adultery' doesn't share a root with the word 'adult,' which comes from the Latin *adultus*, past participle of *adolescere*, to grow up; and is instead a putrid bloom off the same plant as the verb, 'to adulterate', both stemming from the Latin *adulterare*, meaning to pollute a substance by adding in a small amount, a drop, even, of a baser substance. To water the wine. To spit in a vat of white milk.

I wasn't afraid of having sex with a married man. This seemed easy enough to avoid. What scared me was this more encompassing definition: perversion, corruption, a single sour drop spoiling the whole.

When I was twelve, I read something in a book. I loved books and was used to them creating sensations in me, stirrings of the heart, etc. But this was a new sensation. I wasn't exactly sure what the girl and boy in the book were doing, but I followed the fiction like instructions, while standing up straight in the bathroom. I am a quick learner. I got the hang of

things, and suddenly I wasn't just doing something to myself, something was happening to me. It began swiftly and was swiftly over.

Soon afterwards, there was a knock on the bathroom door and it was my mother. She had something to say to me, surely something ordinary. I could have pretended to be on the toilet, or getting in the shower, but instead, I frantically covered my nakedness and opened the door. Are you alright, my mother asked, you look flushed.

Yes. I'm just feeling a bit warm.

She touched my forehead. You do feel warm. Are you feeling sick?

She went to fetch a thermometer, and I stared at my face in the mirror. I had done something. No one had told me not to do it. The moral consequences of doing it, if there were any, were entirely unclear. All I knew was that I had introduced a foreign element into myself, and I would not be the same again.

We meet in the mosh pit of a student show. The room is small and her body becomes a familiar molecule almost immediately, thin and hard and eternally upright. When she rams into you, it hurts. I keep looking for her face, but the yellow hair is a fiery halo and consumes everything down to the shoulders. Everyone is sweating, and smells like themselves. She smells like herself, it's my first dose of it.

The first set ends, and everyone files into the dark backyard to smoke and sit around on the grass. I look around but I don't see her.

When the second set begins, there she is onstage with a guitar. The underarms of her white shirt are discolored with sweat. Her band begins to play, loudly. The lead singer is jumping around, the drummer is volcanic, but she stands still, only her fingers attack. It feels like

watching some bodily process, like digestion, or the pumping and distributing of blood through a body. Partway through the second song, I begin to think she's looking at me. You think you know what eye contact feels like until you're in a concert, watching the musicians' faces.

After the show, the yard is full of smoke. Excuse me, she says, and asks for a lighter. I don't have a lighter, have never owned a lighter, but I root around in my bag anyway, just in case this will make me appear cool. That's ok, she says.

"By the way," I say, "You were in the band earlier?"

"I was."

She introduces me to Maya, the singer and rhythm guitarist; Isolde, the bassist; and Fergie, the drummer, all of whom are standing in a circle, talking and drinking out of a small silver flask. Her own name is Jackie. They all live in a house together, ten minutes down the highway in the next town.

"I'm Mary," I say.

When Maya pulls a box of cigarettes and a lighter from her pocket, I am filled with ego, imagining Jackie thinking of a reason to talk to me.

Jackie's room is small and wallpapered with posters of sullen, beautiful women wearing tank tops and guitars. Jackie goes around switching on lamps while I stare greedily at her things. In the corner is her guitar, and a keyboard, with sheet music propped against it.

"Debussy," I say. I recognise the name of the piece, *Deux arabesques*.

"Yeah, this is the last real piece I ever learned, back when I took lessons. Only ever got through the one arabesque. And I can't really play it anymore." She sits at the keyboard, and

launches into a long arpeggio which trips and crashes. “See,” she says, but she’s already started playing something else, something slower.

“What piece is that?” I ask, when it’s over.

She shrugs. “A Song for Mary.”

“What? Really? Who wrote it?”

“I made it up,” she says.

“You mean just now?”

“Yeah.”

When I get home, I feel a hopeless itch all over my body, just under the skin. It feels a little like panic. It’s an urge to create, stronger than I’ve ever felt. It’s too bad I have no skills. I can’t draw, I can’t play an instrument. I sit at my desk and try to write a poem. I try to allow the divine forces to flow through me, to refract some celestial light through the prism of my desire and record the colors of our mutual attraction. I come up with a draft, and read it through expectantly.

I feel like Emma Bovary in the scene I’ve just read for class, where Emma watches her young daughter sleeping and thinks, *ugly fucking baby!* or something like that, in French. So much for impressing Jackie. I bury the poem deep in my computer, where hopefully it will bloom, like a weed, in the dark and stony environment of total neglect.

I start coming to band practices, sitting around doing work, carrying things when they need me to. I go to every concert, I know the words to every song. A couple weeks in, it strikes me that I have become a groupie. Being a groupie is like being a disciple. I don’t make any of the

miracles happen, I only recognize them for the miracles they are, and hang around close by. There is a certain exhilaration, being so close to the magic, feeling it dripping over you, though I sometimes think it must have felt better to be one of Jesus's seven disciples, than to be one Peter hanging out with five Jesuses.

What I really want is to be in the band. Sometimes I have dreams about it. In the dreams I never look down to see which instrument I'm playing, I only play it, and feel a sense of satisfaction. After the show we walk all the way back to the band house, holding hands in a row like paper dolls. We block the whole highway, and the cars have to pull off to let us go past.

One day after class, Maya finds me between the classroom and the door and hands me a small glossy card. It's an anthropological project, she says, winking. The rest will be explained on site. But I sure hope you'll join us. Just please don't tell anyone. We want it to be a focused and intimate group.

The card says:

When: Saturday February 19, 12 am.

Where: by the waterfall, next to the old water treatment plant.

What: the experience.

You will give me your cell phone, and your clothes.

They will be returned to you after the experience.

We will be taking photographs of each other. We will be journaling. We will be seeking.

The experience is non-sexual. Anything sexual may be negotiated after, and separate to, the experience.

I feel like I should ask questions, but Maya has disappeared into the sunshine like an animal into a hole. I read the paper through again and put it into my pocket, feeling strangely elated. Since getting to college I have become aware that there is a category of girl who has seen all her best friends naked. How, specifically, this happens, is still a mystery to me. Hazy imaginary montage of first waxes, sleepovers, boob-to-fruit size conversions. My highschool cohort was never this way. The only real life vagina I've ever seen, other than my own and presumably my mother's, belonged to a girl in my after-school dance class. During the end-of-year dance concert, if you were in two numbers in a row, you got to change in the elevator shaft backstage, instead of the green room down the hall. Between the first and second song, the only girls in the elevator shaft were me, Carissa, and two of her friends. They were all older than me, tall and cool, with pale angular faces. We had thirty seconds to change from pink leotards to black leotards and fasten our bejeweled velcro skirts. We were supposed to wear a nude leotard beneath our other leotards, but Carissa wasn't. "Pardon my hairy pussy," she said, and her friends laughed, but I saw it and her hair was very neat, dark and curled close to her skin.

Clearly, Maya doesn't expect me to be a prude. I am flattered by the thought, even though I have no intention of participating in her experiment. Really, I only have one question: will Jackie be there?

I don't see Jackie until partway through the week. She doesn't ask me whether I'm going, so I don't ask her either.

Saturday dawns hot, and the night promises to be mild and full of stars. All the better to see your friends naked. I've been to the waterfall at night. I imagine a body would look more organic, lit up pale blue against all that water. It almost makes you wonder why there isn't more

overlap between devout Christians and nudists. Why not show off the divine design, the image of God? Because of Eve, that's why, because of the knowledge of good and evil, the twin births of sin and shame, etc. But still.

It is hard not to picture someone naked, when you've been trying hard not to. Suddenly the human form becomes an afterimage of everything else. It feels like when I was fourteen and determined to go a full day without eating sugar. Morning and afternoon I would distract myself with prunes, crackers, and gobs of peanut butter. Every night I stole through the dark kitchen like an animal, eating everything sweet and vile. I didn't even need to turn the light on. I already knew where the good stuff was. At some point, you come around to the idea that it is acceptable, perhaps even noble, to eat a bit of sugar after lunch, indulge the temptation to forget it.

I can't really picture Jackie going to this event. If I know her at all, it is not her style. But I don't really know her, not yet. And she and Maya are friends, so who knows? They've probably seen each other naked plenty of times already.

On Saturday I see Jackie in the garden by the arts building. She's sitting on a bench with her arms crossed, watching the patchy sky through her sunglasses. She sees me coming and pulls the earbuds out of her ears.

The light shifts, and suddenly everything white is brilliant white, like in a dental commercial: the petals on the dogwood, a caught plastic bag shuddering in its entrapment, Jackie's shirt. I can see her nipples through the shirt.

Jackie squints her eyes at me, then laughs. "You're not going to Maya's thing tonight, are you?"

"What? Why?"

"Oh god, you are!"

“I never said that. I’m not going.”

She nods, soberly. “Well, that’s too bad, because I am.”

“Really?”

Jackie laughs. “No, not really. It’ll only be hippies and perverts. I like Maya well enough, but she rolls with a funny crowd. Anyway, I don’t need so many people to see me naked. I like to keep the list short and sweet.”

My parents call often, and I only sometimes pick up. It makes me uncomfortable to rip time and space in this way. If you draw two dots on a sheet of paper and fold so that they touch, what happens to the sprawl, the fields, the gas stations, the transformers, New York City and Philadelphia and the highway and the driveway and the pine tree in the front yard?

Besides, the last time they called I was drinking with the band.

“It’s my mom,” I said.

“It’s Mary’s mom!” said Maya. “Let us meet her.”

“No, I’ll call her back,” I said. I spilled a little beer trying to turn the ringer off, and considered it a sort of libation. Honor your father and your mother.

When I was little, I thought that to have sex you had to keep the penis in all night: that’s why it’s called sleeping together. I tried to imagine sleeping naked, screwed in tight against a man who’s also naked, most of my skin touching most of his skin all night long. It didn’t sound appealing. I imagined it would be hard to get to sleep. I thought, no wonder you have to love someone so much to do it.

The first time Jackie and I do it, I don't stay the night. We each have to be in class the next morning, she has calculus and I have a seminar on Jacques Lacan. Back in my own bed, with the lights off, it feels very wrong to be apart. How strange it is, I think, becoming one flesh and reverting to two.

Jackie goes away for a week, to see her parents. We don't text much. We don't sext. I touch myself when I wake up, before I go to sleep, between classes in the bathroom. I try picturing her, her face between my legs and stuff like that, but it doesn't usually get me off. I don't want to be in the school bathrooms too long so I picture the dirtiest thing I can imagine, for example five or six women in rubber catsuits bent over the church altar with their bottoms in the air.

"So, do you always feel like you're being watched?" says Jackie.

We're eating cheap olives out of a jar. We've washed our hands but they still smell like each other.

"Not really," I say. The question sort of irritates me, though I'm not sure exactly why. "I guess I think of God in a more abstract way, now, not as a being with eyes. And even then, I don't always think about it."

She pops an olive in her mouth, juice drips on the mattress. She spits the pit into an empty beer bottle and shakes it to test the rattle. I try to imagine how it feels, being alone and feeling that no one can see you.

Sometimes, as we make love, I imagine what we would look like to a man. Our similar bodies, like two sides of the same coin. Flushed cheeks and hard bright eyes and skin. When we touch each other, we might as well be touching ourselves.

Jesus shaves, says the billboard hanging over the highway between us and the concert we are driving to on a Saturday night. The ‘h’ appears to be spray painted.

“Shaves what, do you think?” says Jackie. “Legs? Armpits?” One of her hands is on the steering wheel and the other is on my thigh, electrocuting me with casual pleasure while the sun goes down outside the windows of the truck.

“I’m sure he would try it all at least once,” I say. “People talk a lot of shit about Jesus, but if you actually look at the scripture, he was very open-minded.”

“Mmm.” Jackie squeezes my thigh. “What’s the deal with the saving thing, anyway? What is he supposed to be saving us from? Sin in general?”

“I guess so.”

One summer, when I was seven, I had a fever so bad I saw Jesus Christ coming to me personally down a giant water slide from the sky. He had the ten commandments on cue cards, but they all got wet in the water and so he only took my temperature and tucked me into bed and walked back up the slide to wherever he had come from. My fever broke that night, and I woke up cold and damp like a beached clam.

I step inside and remember what the house smells like. My parents are there, looking too much like themselves, like figures in a wax museum. I’m happy to see them. We stand in the entryway for a while, then my mother makes tea while my father tells me the story of Saint

Kevin. Once upon a time Saint Kevin was praying, and he held his hand out the window towards heaven, and a blackbird landed there, and began to make its nest. In his compassion, Saint Kevin held his hand in the same position for days and nights until the eggs hatched.

When I finally cum, Jackie reaches into her throat and pulls out a small dark hair, like a magician un-swallowing a sword.

I ask her, in horror, how long it's been there.

"I don't mind at all," she says.

My parents drive me back to New York, and we pass through a long street filled with "vice stores" as my mother says, smoke and vape shops and places with no windows and a sign from the eighties that says Adult World. "Just look at that logo," she says. "That's what happens when you don't do your thumbnail sketches." The logo for Adult World is two silhouettes, male and female, next to a big globe. The Earth is as big as they are. They are as big as the Earth. *And God blessed them, male and female, and he told them to be fruitful and multiply, and not to try any funny business.*

My mother unpacks the sandwiches, and the car smells like turkey on rye. "How are things with Jackie?" she asks, twisting to look at me, holding out the saran-wrapped object.

I take it. "Fine."

"Sean, do you want yours now or later?"

My father says nothing, his eyes on the road.

"Just fine?"

"Fine meaning good," I say.

“So you want me to put it back for you?”

“I’m driving. I don’t see why we can’t all wait to eat until we get there.”

“You never asked us to wait.”

“Well, it’s not really up to me, is it?”

“If it’s going to bother you, you should have said something.”

I can’t tell whether the car is going faster or not, but my father is leaning over the wheel and it makes me feel like we’re falling forward. A red light comes out of the blue and the car lurches to a stop inches from the Jeep in front of us, so the view of it fills the whole windshield. “Will you let me *drive*?” My father says. Shock waves radiating from his body bounce invisibly over everything, and my ears feel funny from the interference patterns.

“Sure, I will.” my mother puts the sandwich back in the bag at her feet. The car in front of us begins to move. *Just married* is written in the layer of dirt.

“So, is it serious?” My mother is looking at me again.

“Is what serious?”

“Between you and Jackie.”

“I’m always serious about that stuff,” I say.

“Of course you are. That’s not what I meant.”

It’s Jackie’s birthday party, and so she has to give everyone equal attention. She’s like that, concerned with other people’s feelings. I think about other people’s feelings too, but I act selfishly. At the party I hold a cup and follow her around, as she speaks to all the people she knows. Time passes, and the liquid in my cup changes colors several times before settling on a

horrible blue which I can't seem to finish off. Then we all go outside to smoke, and I'm having trouble not staring. "What?" Jackie keeps saying, when I haven't even said anything.

People start to dance. Jackie is over at the table with the snacks and drinks, talking to a girl she has class with. I pull myself out of orbit and find the center of the room, so there are people dancing on every side of me. Maya is there, waving her arms above her head. I start dancing too. I move my arms around. When I'm sober, I never know how to move my arms, but now it makes sense again. I wait a full song before allowing myself to look back at the table, where sure enough, Jackie is looking at me. A moment later, she's beside me. She leans into my ear and says something.

"What?"

"Sorry if I was ignoring you. I just wanted to make sure everyone was having a good time."

"I know," I say, and we dance.

When the party's over I throw up on the carpet. From her bed, I can hear the sounds of her cleaning up the sick in the other room. She's with me all the time, now, and when she isn't with me, the lack of her is, and in a way, it's the same thing.

Jesus died for somebody's sins, but not mine.

We're sitting at the bar, me and Jackie and Isolde and Maya and Fergie. The bar is still pretty empty, but the old man with the beaver tail hat has announced the start of karaoke and a moody looking woman in a jumpsuit is summoning the spirit of Patti Smith. Or is Patti Smith still alive?

"Good fucking song," says Jackie.

“Is Patti Smith still alive?”

“Yeah of course she is, I’m on her emailing list.”

Isolde and Maya are talking about Catholic school.

“That’s just how it works,” says Isolde. “Every girl I knew who graduated from Catholic school either had a baby or a threesome, within the year.”

“Which did you have?” says Fergie.

Isolde grins and sips on her whiskey sour.

“Mary grew up religious,” says Maya, leaning flat over the bar to look at me. Isolde and Jackie lean out of the way, and I’m greeted by a wall of eyes. “Didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Where are you from?” says Isolde.

“Small town Pennsylvania.”

“Aren’t there a lot of Amish over there?”

“Yeah.”

“Wait, you were Amish?”

“No, just Christian, a smallish sect.”

“Did you know the Amish don’t use electricity?” Maya fishes around in her shirt for a fallen bra strap. “And they don’t wear underwear.”

“Oh, come on,” says Isolde. “You’re making that up.”

“I heard it on NPR.”

“You did not.”

“I swear, I did. And anyway, it’s common knowledge.” Maya turns back to me. “Are your parents very religious?”

“Sort of. Yeah.”

“Do they know you’re gay?”

“Yeah.”

“And they’re alright with it?”

“Well, mostly. I don’t think they understand it. But they’re trying.”

Maya nods at me gravely. “Well, I’m just glad you got out of there. Some people never do, you know.”

This whole time, Jackie has said nothing. A silver dollar is flipping over her knuckles and disappearing like a dolphin.

Jackie is a few drinks in, and keeps touching my waist. “You should sing,” she says. The back of the room has become a dance floor, circles of young women shedding their leather jackets, smelling of underarm sweat and perfume. Someone is on the mic singing highway to hell, wearing a sweatshirt that says assholes live forever.

“I can’t,” I say. “What would I sing? And besides, I’m drunk.”

“It’s karaoke, you’re supposed to be drunk.”

“Are you going to sing, then?”

“Sure I am. My name’s on the list.” She slides her hand in my back pocket. “Sing something from your angel playlist.”

“Haha. I don’t think it’s the right crowd.”

“Hey,” she says, slipping her hand from my pocket and touching my wrist instead. “I’m sorry if my friends made you feel weird. They don’t know what they’re talking about. I mean, Isolde does, she had a bad experience with it all. Her school was really hardcore, nuns and

everything. And she doesn't talk to her parents anymore. But they don't know it's different with you."

I ask if she'll hold my drink while I pee. She says of course, are you ok? I say yes and I go into the bathroom and sit on the toilet. Someone has pasted a picture from some magazine low on the wall. The woman is naked and holding a guitar in front of her nakedness. And Eve noticed for the first time that she was naked, and felt ashamed, and tried to cover up with fig leaves, and wore clothes all the time after that. I think of Jackie out on the dance floor. It sounds like the song has changed, but I can't bring myself to go back out there. I feel suddenly strange and inconsolable. I feel like there's a child trying to come out my throat.

I slip out of the bathroom and look around for Jackie. I find her in front of the mic, saying something to the man in the beaver hat. My beer is sitting on the table beside the monitor which shows you the lyrics.

The speakers start to play "Angel of the Morning."

Girls I knew in highschool are starting to get married. Rebecca Thorpe is Rebecca Leyes. Paige Brown is Paige Williams. Elena Walsh is Elena Egg, and she and Mr. Egg have a small purplish baby. Elena and I used to pass notes in French class together. Now she seems very distant to me, a perfect rose in a bouquet of roses, resting at the bosom of the church.

"Elena Egg? Shit. The things people will do for marriage."

"I know," I say. "And they're only twenty."

Jackie puts on the turn signal, turns to check the blind spot, and switches lanes. The window is open, and her hair whips around her face. “Imagine pledging your entire life to a man,” she says.

“And afterlife. We were always taught that marriage is eternal.”

“Oh god.”

“Yeah, I know. I always thought it was sort of romantic though. People wouldn’t say til death do us part, at weddings, because it didn’t apply.”

Jackie changes the channel on the radio, switches through a couple stations. “Here,” she says, “You be in charge.”

I take over, silently.

“Must be hard to start a relationship, when eternity’s on the line,” says Jackie.

“Yeah. But it’s also hard if you know it’s going to end, don’t you think?”

There was a girl I used to look at in middle school. She was a couple years older, and very beautiful, and always buttoned her sweater up to the neck. I wanted to turn into her. At lunch recess, I would sit across from her in the library, reading a book, and spy on the books she was reading, which always appeared very sophisticated. When she passed a hand over her face, my eyes riveted to the texture of the skin, the long cadence of the fingers, the nails. Once, as she lowered her hand to turn the page, she looked directly at me. I felt the small thrill of evil.

Back in homeroom, I thought about the ten commandments. Thou shalt not commit adultery is one thing. Thou shalt not covet is another, a more secret sin, a sin you can slip into and out of so quickly that if you push hard on the tongue of memory you can almost forget you’ve committed it.

For Christmas my grandfather gives me a chocolate Santa Claus in a plastic box. He is a special yacht-themed Santa, his bermuda shorts, Santa hat, and bare chest rendered in extraordinary chocolate detail. This is part of a running joke, that I am supposed to marry a man with a yacht. He is to fund my writer's lifestyle, which everyone knows won't fund itself.

Everyone laughs, even me, even my parents.

Some Christmas there will be a human-sized present under the tree, warm beneath the wrapping. Open it, I will say, it is a present for the whole family. Rip rip rip and there will be gasps of delight. The man will kiss me right there by the artificial Christmas tree and then lead us all to the front yard, where his jet will be waiting to take us to the seashore. You will all have to see his yacht another time, I will say. For now I need to be alone with him, because I am in love, because I am insatiable. My grandmother will cry.

"God, I love you." Jackie is standing next to the bed looking at me and also at my tits. It used to bother me when she would use God's name, but sometimes I like the way she says it, like God is no one, or like God is me and my tits. I think if God is real he would forgive something said with such conviction. Anyway, he would forgive her, because she doesn't know better.

The record player begins playing, something with a pounding bass and women wailing. At some point, it stops, and don't stop, and her hand comes over my mouth and when it comes off oh god, I say, and I say *god* like *fuck*, and a godlike fuck is when you see the angels invisible around you.

Sometimes I wonder whether my parents still have sex. If not, then there is a last time that it happened. I try not to think about it, not to picture them looking each other in the eyes or their glances askew, glasses off or glasses on, whether or not they are speaking to each other as they do it.

I find the picture in a dresser drawer in Pennsylvania. My parents are young, college age, wearing matching Temple University sweatshirts, sitting besides each other on a white bench. He has his arm around her, she is looking at him. I take a picture of the picture and when I'm back at school I show it to Jackie. Her arm is around me, strong and thin. We get to talking about where we're going to live. I ask her about her dream house, and as she describes it I place myself in every room. It's a brownstone in the East Village, filled with stuff we find on the street, chairs and lamps and records. Everything is cheap besides the wooden floorboards. We've been indulgent with the floorboards. I fill the house with books. I read all the great French novels of the last few centuries and Jackie reads comics, and then we come together and talk about them. I sign up for swimming classes. Jackie works for the record store across the street. One day we are sitting on the stoop and a woman walks by with a baby carriage and we look each other in the eyes, and I pull myself out of that life and into this one like twisting a kaleidoscope. I feel suddenly tired, like I've lived a long time, and I run a finger up the inside of Jackie's wrist, into her palm. Can we fuck, I say, and we move the quilt aside. Afterwards we are lying looking at each other, and she says, now if only we could make a baby, I would be completely happy.

It's not too late. I can still dig photographs out of drawers and study them, I can become my mother and I can marry my father and I can do everything exactly as they have done it. Only,

if I do everything they have done I will give birth to me again, to something shifty eyed and strange.

I read Flaubert's letters for class, and walk around worrying about morality. *Concern for morality makes every work of the imagination false and stupid.* I consider this idea, that morality is an inhibiting force which prevents us from accessing truth and beauty. Perhaps the search for good and evil blinds a person to the minute gradations of color. But if one ignores morality, and instead searches for truth and beauty, will she find morality? Could an objective, aesthetic inspection of the universe reveal some divine logic?

I ask Jackie what she thinks.

"I think morality is a sham," she says. "Sure, there's good and evil, but most of the time, when society tells us not to do something, there's an ulterior motive."

In ninth grade, I tinted my hair coppery red, with an expensive paste from the health food store. It was close enough to my natural hair color to comply with the school dress code. In the cafeteria the principal came up behind me, I knew it was her because of her heels clicking on the linoleum, and she put her wrinkled hand on my shoulder. "I usually find that women look best in the hair color God gave them," she said, "but that color suits you."

Sometimes we run out of things to talk about, and then we have too much sex and it gets weird and then we have to find other things to do. On these occasions I write in my journal and Jackie plays the guitar. Sometimes she plays songs. Mostly she'll choose a pattern of notes and play it over and over, sometimes for extraordinary lengths of time, until it almost disappears into

the walls like the sounds of the radiator or the fridge. Then without warning she'll twist it around into something else, something else, something else. One time, I asked her how she decides when to move on. When I want to hear something new, she said.

We are on the porch in the dark. The air is cold and thin, the stars obscured. Jackie looks good blowing smoke out of her mouth. She always turns away to do it, though, and I want to tell her just to blow it on me. "You'd look good in a halo," I say.

"You and your angels," she says, smiling.

"What does that mean?"

"You're obsessed."

"I'm not obsessed!"

She turns to let a small cloud out of her mouth and passes me the joint. "That playlist of yours says otherwise."

It's true. The ultimate angel playlist is getting longer and longer, and even the mention of it sets Juice Newton singing in my head.

"I just like it when people sing about angels," I say. "For some reason, it's always good."

"You should add the whole Catholic church's discography."

I'm holding the joint now, and Jackie is looking away, over the dark yard, where the grass and the lawn chairs suck the light into null, while the white fence shines faintly like a set of teeth.

"I think it's gone out," I say.

Jackie pulls the lighter from her pocket, and holds it out to me.

"Will you do it?" I say.

The air is still, so the thing lights easily. I just wanted to see Jackie's fingers golden red in the lighter-light. I feel a sudden awareness of my mouth, of the tongue inside it, and of hers. Two tongues near each other, but in separate cages, like dogs at the pound.

"What do you think happens to us when we die?" I say.

Jackie looks at me, then upward. She puts her elbows on the railing. "I don't know."

"But haven't you thought about it?"

"Of course I have."

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"I'm just worried I'll offend you, somehow."

"You won't."

"Well," she says, "I kind of think it's one of those things we're not supposed to know."

Home. Laundry waits in the basket, cycles of sunlight move in and out of the living room. Father spills coffee on the carpet. Silver fish like slivers of mercury make their way through the house. The house is like a religion to them because they haven't gone outside of it. I find one in my bed, even though I've just changed the covers. The microwave is on and the food inside goes round and round. Mother takes the duster to the plates above the sink. The stool is sturdy and does not tip over. I find a house centipede in the bathtub. I've already turned the water on, and it's struggling. I don't want to see it struggle so I kill it instead, kill it inside toilet paper and put the toilet paper in the trash and wash the whole experience off my body with soap. Father makes more coffee. He spills it on the carpet. Mother goes to the grocery store. Wind touches the house. The laundry waits. The cat sits on the laundry and leaves hair in it. I go in my room and sit on the bed.

I have a dream that everyone at school is speaking to me like I'm stupid, and I don't know why. Finally I glimpse my own reflection in a dark window and realize I've bleached my hair chemical blonde. My high school principal comes out of a doorway, click click in her low black pumps. "I get it," she says. "You needed a change."

Jackie looms over me with a pair of silver scissors. "You keep saying you want a change," she says.

"I don't know," I say. "Maybe I like it long." In the mirror my eyes are doubtful between twin walls of brown. Jackie lifts the hair off of my shoulders and twists it up into a knot. I watch mirror-Jackie do the same thing to mirror-me. I watch a kiss find a neck. I feel it, hot, above the collar of my shirt.

"It would look good short, though," she says. "And it would be easier for me to get to you."

"Aha, now I know why you're so persistent." I close my eyes and lean back into her. My hair is still twisted in her fist. "I haven't properly cut it since first grade," I say. "I've only trimmed the split ends."

"What if I do it while your eyes are closed?" she says. "Then you don't even have to make the decision."

"I would never forgive you."

Another kiss makes the promise difficult to stand by, even in jest.

"You know the story of Samson and Delilah?" I ask.

"Nope."

Tongue to ear.

“Don’t think you can seduce me into a haircut.” I’m practically panting.

“Fine,” she says, and lets my hair fall. She leans in towards the mirror and cuts her bangs over the sink. When she is done I help her clean up the hair and we fall into bed.

In eleventh grade health class, there was a week in January when every girl became a mother. Our babies were fleshy plastic with eyes that closed if you cradled them on their backs or left them on the floor. It was like a gameshow: who could be the best mother? We carried them to all our classes, appeased them with bottles of eternal milk at lunchtime. Every hour or so, a kind of sludge came out the back end. Not everyone was a good mother. The intermittent sobs of twenty mechanical babies created polyrhythms in the hallways.

“That’s twisted,” says Jackie.

“It was like a rite of passage. We couldn’t wait to hit eleventh grade.”

“Oh god.”

“I know.”

“I bet you were a good mom, though,” she says. “I bet that little bitch never cried.”

“Well...”

Jackie pauses with her tongue on the thin paper of the joint she’s rolling, to raise her eyebrows at me.

“I can’t even lie. I was a great mom.”

“I knew it.”

Later, smoked up and wandering between buildings in the dark, she asks me if I’d ever want to be pregnant. I say, yes, would you? She says, yeah.

“What if we were pregnant at the same time?”

“We’d be like tweedle dum and tweedle dee in the photo shoots.”

“We could go into labor together.”

“Would that make them twins, sort of?”

“Mine could look like you, yours could look like me.”

At lunch one day, I run into Isolde, sitting by herself. I’m not used to talking to her alone.

We recount the details of our mornings and then there’s a lull.

“Sometimes I miss going to church,” she says.

“Really?”

“Yeah, I mean, where else do you get to hear old women sing like that? They were singing their hearts out. One of the nuns at my school had had a previous, failed career as an opera singer. She knew how to hit that descant. It was sick.”

“My grandmother wrote one of the hymns in our hymnal,” I say.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Well, she didn’t write the lyrics. She took them directly from a psalm, I think. But she wrote the music.”

“The book of Psalms always went kind of hard,” she says.

Jackie and I are going to New York City to see a band whose members are all women and all blacklisted by the Russian government. We don’t want to spoil the show by listening to their music right beforehand, so on the train we listen to one of Jackie’s playlists. She asks if I want to

queue anything, but I don't want to, I only want to hear the songs she has selected, and to watch her hearing them.

We go into a second hand store which has a whole wall of CD's for a dollar each. The CDs are all crammed into little cubbies, two CD's thick, so that you have to carve out the first layer to even look at the second layer, and Jackie gets a gleam in her eye, like those people on TV who buy up old storage units full of trashbags and root around for treasure. "This, right here, is what I love," she says. "I can't stand it when you walk in a place and everything's organized and labeled, when they know what everything's worth. I'd rather find the diamond in the rough, the Blondie in the Handel's Messiah. You know?"

Further down the wall a small man with long gray hair is sitting on the floor, surrounded by piles of plastic cases. He looks over at us, and I think he's recognized a kindred soul in Jackie because he nods solemnly and holds up a case. "Grateful dead, 71," he says. "I met my wife at this concert. And now I find the CD. Just goes to show."

Jackie starts to build a small pile. I try to look around on my own, but I hardly recognize any of the names, besides the classical composers who my grandfather likes. I start to sweat. Maybe none of the artists I listen to are from the right era. I run my fingers over the plastic edges and pull out titles at random, looking through the liner notes for pictures, watching Jackie out of the corner of my eye.

An unknowable amount of time passes. I find a CD by a band I've heard Jackie talk about before, and bring it over to her. "Find anything good?" I ask.

She gives me a tour of her stack. I can't recall whether she's ever looked at me as passionately as she is looking at the stack.

She asks me if I've found anything, and I show her the single CD in my hand, feeling foolish.

She looks up at me solemnly. "Mary," she says, "That's a very good album." Her eyes move between me and the CD. I feel hot. "Do you mind if I see it?"

I hand it to her. "Do you want it?"

"What do you mean? You found it. This is a good find, Mary."

"I don't have a CD player."

"I do. You'll bring it over, and we'll listen."

There's an hour to kill between dinner and the show, and we spend it drifting through balmy parks, watching the colors change on the high buildings. The approaching twilight gives me a kind of thrill. We're counting the coins in a dried up fountain when a woman comes up to us. Her eyes are bright, and she stands so close that I can smell her breath. "Do you mind if I say a short prayer for you?" she says.

"Sorry, we're in a hurry," says Jackie.

We step around the woman, and I'm afraid she's going to follow us, but she only calls after us. "Bless you!" We keep walking, and she keeps calling. "Bless you! Bless you! Bless you!" Someone's dog starts barking. She blesses us all the way through the iron gates of the park and into the next street. I feel my heart in the bottom of my stomach.

"You alright?" says Jackie.

"Yeah. I just wasn't expecting that."

"It happens all the time," says Jackie.

“Why don’t you put some music on?” my mother says. We’re making a cherry dump cake, which is where you pour a lot of batter into a cake pan and dump in cherry pie filling at intervals. My mother doesn’t like when I call it cherry dump cake, because she thinks the word *dump* makes it sound sort of trashy or slovenly, even though she’s the one who first told me this name for it. When confronted about this, she laughs but doesn’t change her opinion.

“What do you want to listen to?” I say.

“Anything you like.”

I beat the eggs and try to think of what to put on. I can’t remember which songs have swear words in them. I guess it isn’t something I normally keep track of. All the indie artists are too sad, all the punks are too angry or too sexual or both. Finally I connect my phone to the speakers and put on Janis Joplin, the Pearl album.

We’ve listened to all of “Move Over” and half of “Cry Baby” when my mother says, “Do you like this music?”

“Yeah,” I say, “it’s Janis Joplin.”

“Right, Janis Joplin,” she says. “I always thought her voice was very harsh. It’s like she’s yelling the whole time.”

“I’ll put something else on.”

“No, that’s alright.”

At my insistence, she adds a couple songs she likes to the queue: Jack Johnson’s “Banana Pancakes” and that other song by him that goes, *it’s always better when we’re together*.

I tell Jackie that I’m thinking of going to church again.

“Around here?” she asks.

“Yeah, I guess. Just anywhere.”

She asks if she can come with me.

That would be nice, I say.

On Sunday we take my car and drive to the church, which is a pale blue building with a steeple and a graveyard. I have driven past it many times on my way to the grocery store. There is no human activity in the parking lot; it is ten o'clock exactly, and everyone must already be inside. *Here is the church, here is the steeple. Open it up, and there's all the people.* We undo our seat belts, and Jackie turns to me. “Is orange and green ok for church? I didn't know what to wear.” She has on a green and orange sweater and khaki pants.

“Yeah of course, you look nice.” She does.

We are fingers on separate hands, waiting to fold together into the shape of a church, transform into tiny church-goers, and disperse.

An hour later, we are sitting in the car outside the cafe. I've pulled close to the curb and collapsed the left-side mirror on the car, something I always do no matter how wide or narrow the street. We should go inside, but we've gotten caught up in conversation, the way we sometimes do, such that neither of us wants to interrupt the other.

“I wish more buildings had stained glass,” Jackie is saying. “I mean, why should the rest of us settle for the clear stuff?”

I ask her what she thought of the service.

Jackie is quiet a moment. “I liked the hymns,” she says. “Even if I wasn't really singing them.”

“You didn’t have to sing,” I say.

“I wanted to. But I was having trouble with the lyrics. I don’t like to say things I don’t believe, even in a song.”

“That makes sense.”

There’s a honking fit over at the intersection. Jackie says, “Do you feel like you know better, having grown up religious, and moved away from it?”

“Better than who?” I ask, but I’ve already seen the words *better than me*, haunting her face.

“I don’t know,” she says. “Everyone.”

“No,” I say. “I don’t feel like I know much of anything.” I watch the cars shoot past in the rearview mirror. “What about you? Do you think it’s silly that I still believe in this stuff?”

“No,” she says, but as we go into the café, I feel a sensation in my chest like a curtain closing.

It’s like a *Pride and Prejudice* situation, I think, only I haven’t read the book since eighth grade and I can’t remember how they overcame the pride and the prejudice. I’m pretty sure they kissed in the rain. On Monday we’re caught in a brief squall between the art building and the cafeteria, and I pull Jackie in by the face, but when we pull away, nothing has changed. I start to wonder whether our mutual attraction can save us.

I start to wonder whether wondering whether our mutual attraction can save us is a sign that we should break up.

We break up.

It's spring. Students I've never seen before come crawling out of the woodwork, in pairs of two. They lean against each other on benches. They peck each other on the lips. I trip over them in the library, on my way to the hot, stagnant fourth floor room where everyone is bent over their computers, toiling, gnashing their teeth, not looking at anyone else.

Whenever I dream of Jackie now, we're back in the church.

The nave of the church is like looking out from inside a bruise. Everything is purple under the red and blue stained glass. I feel calm. I feel restless. I feel Jackie beside me in the pew. Someone's dog is at my feet, lying still like a rolled up rug. I stroke the fur, and a damp nose emerges, along with two dark marbles. I stare into the eyes of the dog and an understanding passes between us. Jackie's hand begins scratching under the other ear; I see the pleasure of it coming out through the dog in waves. Please rise for the hymn.

Home again. Wasn't I just at school? Wasn't I just at home? Every place seems to be touching, now, nowhere is only itself.

"Walk with me," says my mother.

"But it's raining."

"Are we made of sugar?"

We walk around town in the drizzle. The night hangs low over everything, and I feel it like a kind of peril, kept at bay only by the anchor of my mother beside me. She looks small and

solid against the shadows. Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, etc. I ask her about work. I like to hear about the trouble kids, I like how she never calls them trouble.

“And how are you doing?” she says to me.

It isn't an accusation, but I feel accused.

The altar boy brings out a tray of pale wafers and a chalice. The blood and body of Christ. “But I’m a vegetarian!” I yell. “The only body I eat anymore is Jackie’s!” No, I yell nothing. I watch silently as the altar boy brings the chalice to the elderly man sitting at the organ. The man’s hands are trembling; the boy lifts the silver cup to the man’s lips and tips it while he drinks. Everyone is welcome to come forward, the minister says. And if you can’t take communion, you can cross your arms over your chest and receive a blessing instead. I don’t know what the rules are, for taking or not taking. I remember vaguely that in some churches, you can’t take communion if you haven’t been cleansed, through confession, a coin in the offering box, etc. In a way these ritual cleansings make sense to me. If I believed I could slough off my sins in the confession box, I wouldn’t want to carry them around either. I put down my hymnal and stand. Jackie stands too. The dog is on my foot; I move out from under it and get in line. Jackie follows. When I reach the altar, the chaplain’s face is wide and bright and full of holy grace. The altar boy stands solemnly with his tray of holy concessions. I cross my arms over my chest. Now he knows, I think. This is how the aliens feel when they unzip the skin suit, and everyone can see that they have gills instead of ears.

The chaplain only smiles wider. “In the name of the father, the son, and the holy ghost, amen.”

It has been four months since the breakup, and already I'm sure that I will never fall in love, or even have sex, ever again. I have not simply loved and lost; I've loved and failed to love, and I see this as the sign of some irredeemable defect within myself which precludes any more auspicious future. In the end, I find a morbid kind of comfort in the finality of it all. I feel the way I sometimes picture my parents: chaste and resigned, having passed through sex to the other side.

How's the new place? my mother texts me.

Place is good. Small. But I might take that table from you after all.

I start working at a café. My vocabulary expands a hundredfold, to include words like macchiato and cortado, while the rest of my mind shrivels to make room. Rain or shine I smile at the customers, although in my heart I resent them, and this is perhaps the worse sin. Love your neighbor as yourself.

In first grade religion class we talked about who exactly constitutes *the neighbor*. Oh, I said to the minister, so the word neighbor is used here in a metaphorical sense. He said yes. This was good because I was not sure whether I could love the boy living next door who watched Spongebob and played on our swingset without asking.

Love your neighbor as yourself? No problem, I think, washing out the espresso machine. I resent myself and others equally.

I try to put Jackie out of my mind. I try to think of the ugly things about her, the pitiful. Didn't I sometimes find her hairline unattractive? Didn't her rigid walk sometimes fill me with despair? But the thought brings me no satisfaction, and anyway the good things creep in, the smell of her creams and soaps, her interest in unusually minted coins, her face.

Some faces fade with memory. Not Jackie's. I have often felt that I can see her best when I'm not looking at her at all. I noticed her jaw first, when I first saw her face. I would have noticed her eyes first, very long and beaked at the corners like small gray birds, only her eyes were closed. Her jaw comes a long way from her face, and contributes to the feeling that she is, voluntarily or involuntarily, set firmly in the world. An anchor of a jaw, trapping shut around a soft and moveable tongue, lazy when the mouth is open, sometimes very active while the mouth is shut, probing the crater behind her molars where the wisdom tooth has split the skin. You can see the force of the tongue through the cheek, as it feels around in the dark for trapped sweetnesses and sinews. The cheeks are narrow, shaping themselves around the bones, but soft towards the ears with a dusting of golden hairs. Her forehead is long, like the women in medieval pictures who chased their hairlines back with tweezers. She has a permanent wrinkle to the left of her mouth. It comes from smiling, but when she's serious the righthand wrinkle disappears and only the lefthand wrinkle remains. I wonder how old she will be before both wrinkles will stay. Will one catch up to the other, or will her smile always be sharper on one side? Dagger smile. When she sleeps her mouth falls open and sounds fall out of her throat and nose, in rhythm, like sonar, feeling out the contours of my inner ear. When her eyes are closed, I am aware of her pupils under the lids, like the keys of a piano shuttered under wood.

It's at the height of my misery that I meet Sarah at the bar. "God isn't fragile," she says, lifting her pint to her lips. "And so I'm writing a lesbian adaptation of the Bible."
"You believe in God?" I say.
"Yeah, I do." She gives me an appraising kind of look. "I also believe in lesbians."

She asks what I'm having. I'm having whatever she's having, which turns out to be a dogfish, which turns out to be a kind of beer.

“What brings you to the edge of the world, here?” she says, and it does occur to me briefly to reinvent myself, but in the end I tell her lamely about the breakup.

“I’m sorry,” she says solemnly. “It is the nature of the divine plan to be unknowable.” Then she nudges my beer with her beer. “Wanna dance?”

She calls it the Lesbible, although she stresses that this is only a working title. From Genesis to Revelations, every story recreated, to varying degrees of abstraction, to be about lesbians. “It may take my whole lifetime,” she says. “I don’t really care though. I like to have something continuous to do.” She asks me if I write.

“A little,” I say.

Her bedroom is small and full of books. Where there are no shelves, she has used books to hold up other books. To get to the bed, we tiptoe between towers of knowledge in various states of stability.

“Someday I’ll go to divinity school,” she says, setting her keys and rings on the dresser. “I would be good at it. Giving sermons and all. I’ve always been alright with literary analysis. And I’m good at telling people what I think.”

I am sitting on the corner of the bed.

“Sometimes I talk too much,” she says, and sits beside me, and puts her hand on my leg.

Sarah asks me to stay the night. I don’t have any of my things with me, but she gives me a shirt to sleep in and shows me to the listerine and the dental floss. Mind if I join you? she says.

The bathroom is small, and there's nowhere to look but the mirror. There we are, me and Sarah, wearing Sarah's shirts, using Sarah's floss. Something about this strikes me as very intimate, more intimate than the sex, and suddenly I feel my eyes welling up.

"Oh, dear," she says, lowering her strip of floss. There's a piece of plaque on it, and she rinses it off in the sink. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No," I say.

She nods. "I understand," she says. "Let me know if you want to talk about it." She finishes flossing, gives me another significant nod, and leaves the room.

"I'm sorry about last night," I say.

"For what?" she says.

"You know."

"It's good to cry," she says, boiling water for the coffee. She has a pour-over. "Jesus wept, and all."

"Yeah, well, I don't think that's a fair comparison. Lazarus was actually dead."

Sarah stops pouring to look over at me. "So you said you grew up religious?"

"Yeah. Went to school for it and everything."

She nods, keeps nodding as she pours the water through the grounds. "It makes us different, doesn't it?"

"Different how?"

"Just a little bit different from everyone else. Don't you think?"

“You said you were writing some poems?” my mother asks. We’re walking up a hill by the nature preserve, along a trail carved into tall grass. It’s been a while since I’ve gone hiking, and I’m out of breath, but my mother seems unaffected by the incline.

“Yeah,” I say.

“That sounds like fun.”

“Yeah.”

“I’d love to read them, sometime.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “They’re not really finished yet.”

“That doesn’t matter. It would just be nice to see something you’ve made.”

I nod.

“What do you like to write about?” she says.

“I don’t know. Different stuff.”

We reach the top of the hill, and all around us the golden grasses are bending over. The sky is very flat and blue. If we turn back, there’s the path and the gate and the thick trees by the parking lot; if we keep walking we’ll reach the horses, the pond.

“Is there a reason you don’t want me to read your poems?”

“I didn’t say you couldn’t read them,” I say. “But yes, they’re sort of private.”

She says nothing.

“Some of them are about sex,” I say.

“Ok.”

“And I don’t want to shock you.”

“I’m fifty years old, you’re not going to shock me.”

“Well, I know how you feel about sex outside of marriage.” An old man jogs up behind us, and we sit down on the bench to let him pass.

“Do you?” she says. “I don’t know that we ever fully talked about it.”

“I guess not.”

“Well, I do think that sex is about commitment. That it’s not something to be taken lightly. You can call me old fashioned for that.”

“No, I agree with you.” I pick a long weed from the dirt, for something to hold. “It’s the marriage thing that I find arbitrary, I guess—not that it’s meaningless, but you can be committed in other ways.”

My mother nods slowly.

“It also bothers me how people define sex,” I say. I think a lot of people in the church draw a hard line at penetration—but that’s arbitrary too. I think that when you’re queer it’s not that simple anymore, and you realize it’s all just degrees of intimacy.”

There’s a trill of birdsong in the trees bordering the field, and she squints in the direction of the call. “I guess I never really wanted to have sex with anyone, before your father. I mean, I did some other things, with a couple boyfriends. By your definition, I suppose we had sex. But that was mostly because they wanted to. I always regretted it.”

The sun slants over the grass.

“Well, I don’t regret it,” I say.

“Well,” she says. “I guess that means you found the right person to do it with.”

Because of the long hours spent poring over the gospels and watching classic lesbian cinema, Sarah speaks like a sort of prophet.

“Come here,” she’ll say, propped naked against the headboard of her bed, flipping through channels on her flat screen television. And once she’s found a program she likes, and has her arm under my shoulder, her foot tucked under mine: “What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.”

In the morning, I’ll wake up and come into the kitchen, and she’ll have eggs in the pan, a pencil behind her ear, a bible in her hand. She’ll look up with a glint in her eye and say, “Good, you’re awake. You’re Jonathan. I’m David. Your father has become enraged against me, and is readying the killing spear. I’ve ordered you to flee. You’re weeping. I’m weeping too, but you’re weeping more. What do you say to me?” And we’ll eat our eggs, and brainstorm, and she’ll pour the whole concoction into her word processor.

On Sundays we go to church. In the pew she’s a saint, she’s the Virgin Mary. All clasped hands and solemn eyelashes. In bed at night, we relive the sermon in endless permutations, intellectual and physical, reverences and irreverences collapsing in on each other until the sun comes up.

It should be exhilarating.

My hair is beginning to tangle. I brush and braid it every night before bed, or Sarah does, but in the mornings when I let it loose, it’s already too snagged to run my fingers through. By the afternoon, it’s a labyrinthian mass. “It gets like this when I need a trim,” I say. Sarah has just gotten back from her shift at the drugstore, and is poring over a volume on American Sexual Politics. “I can do it,” she says. “After dinner?”

“Sure.”

Dinner is macaroni and frozen peas. Neither of us can cook. Then we are in the bathroom, and Sarah pulls a kit out from under the sink. “Just a trim?”

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t know. I keep saying I’m going to cut it shorter.”

She lifts a strand of my hair. “What’s stopping you? Besides the fact that you look like Botticelli’s Venus.”

“I don’t know. It’s just been long... for so long.”

“Then let’s cut it.”

Not enough people have drunk the wine, and the chaplain holds the chalice out to the altar boy, but he shakes his head. She offers again, he shakes his head. So she hinges backward at the neck and drinks and drinks, will she ever stop drinking? This is another rule I was unaware of: once you’ve consecrated the blood, you have to finish every drop.

During the peace-be-with-you’s, she seems almost drunk.

Sarah and I are lying in bed. It’s hot, and we have both bedroom windows open, in the vain hopes of seducing a cross breeze. We are each taking up as much of the bed as we can without having to touch. “Do you ever think we’re too similar?” she says.

“What do you mean?” I feel heat-sick.

“It’s funny, but sometimes I feel like we’re the same person.”

“I’m pretty sure my finger was just in your ass, not mine.”

“Hah. Touché.”

“Maybe that’s just what it feels like, you know, being with another woman.” I spread my fingers and toes to let the air in between. “It’s what the church was always afraid of. That was their whole shtick, man and woman as total opposites, pairing up into these alien couples where one’s from Venus and one’s from Mars. I had to let go of that bullshit a long time ago.”

“I agree. But maybe they were onto something, you know. It’s uncanny.”

I twist my head to look at her. Her eyes are closed, her hair splayed out on the pillow.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just uncanny, sometimes,” she says. “That’s all.”

“Do you ever pray?” I ask Sarah. I’ve begun to notice how after we say goodnight, she always clasps her hands together for a moment, with her eyes closed.

“Yeah,” she says. “Every night, mostly. Do you?”

“I did when I was a kid. My mom would tuck me to bed, and my dad would come say a prayer with me. We said the Lord’s prayer, “our father” and all that, and then he would tell me to create my own prayer in my head. Mostly I would list off all the people I loved, so that God would consider letting them into heaven. I put myself on the list, too. I wasn’t sure if that would seem selfish, but I didn’t want to take any chances.”

“We could pray together,” she says.

“Sure,” I say, feeling unsure.

That night, we say the Lord’s prayer, and I feel, for a moment, like I’m a child and Sarah is my sister. We know all the same words, except that when I say, “forgive us our debts,” she says, “forgive us our trespasses.” Then we are silent for a moment, and I address my thoughts to God. It feels funny, after all this time, like talking to someone through a wall, when you’re not sure if they’ve left yet or not. Dear God, if You’re listening, You know and understand my innermost workings, and if You’re not listening, I’m not embarrassing myself. I start to think of Jackie. The thought comes suddenly, with a pang of loneliness. Now it’s just me and God and Jackie in my head, in my body in the bed with Sarah’s body containing Sarah’s head where I

don't know what she's thinking about. Dear God, please help me not to screw it up this time.
Thank You. Amen.

It takes me a while to notice that I'm always the one putting music on. Sarah has no speakers at her house, so I always bring mine, a long rectangular thing Jackie bought me for my birthday. When I ask her for suggestions, she usually requests songs I've shown her.

Finally, I interrogate her. "But what kind of music do you like?"

"I like your music," she says. "I don't have very good taste."

"I don't believe that."

"It's true."

"I like you, so I'm going to like your music."

"I just remembered I was supposed to wash the egg pan. I'll do it now."

"You're not getting out of this."

"But it's embarrassing."

"Show me."

She opens a music app on her phone, scrolls through her list of liked songs. "Well, this one's sort of good," she says. "Can we use your speaker?"

We go into the kitchen, connect to bluetooth, the song plays.

And I don't like it. I don't like it at all.

Sarah is on her last roll of toilet paper.

"I can just get some tomorrow," she says.

"No, it's ok, I'd like to go for a drive."

“I would come with you, if I wasn’t so tired.” She’s already changed into her pajamas, a pair of shorts with pineapples on them and a tee shirt from a Red Cross blood drive that she’s too humble to wear in public.

“Don’t worry about it. Just write down anything you need, and you can pay me back later.”

I leave the house, get in the car, and pull calmly out of the driveway. It isn’t until I’m on the highway that I start speeding. I reach the grocery store and sit in the parking lot, listening to loud, ugly rock music on the radio. I try to think rationally. Everyone has something wrong with them. I do, everyone does. That’s why love is a choice, love is choosing someone, flaws and all.

So what if her music taste is bad?

Taste can be learned. She likes the songs I play.

But does she? Or does she just like that I like them?

Do I like the songs I play?

Mostly, I inherited them from Jackie.

I walk into the grocery store thinking of Jackie, and so it startles me when I turn into an aisle and there she is at the end of it. I feel like I’ve touched a live wire and taken fifty volts through the heart. Her eyes are wide. I panic and redirect into the neighboring aisle. Jackie enters it from the other end and comes towards me. “You weren’t going to say hello?” she says.

“I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“Your hair.”

“Yes.”

“Did you cut it yourself?”

“Not exactly.”

“Well, it looks nice.”

“Thank you.”

“You eat cereal now?” She’s looking at my hands. I look too, and they’re clutching a bag of lucky charms.

“No,” I say, and put the bag back on the shelf.

I open my mouth to speak when a girl enters the aisle behind Jackie and stands at her shoulder expectantly. We make eye contact and I feel like I’m looking in a mirror, at my own reflection right before it mutinies.

Jackie introduces us. Mary, Rachel. Rachel, Mary. I leave the store without buying anything.

In the car, I iron out the list from Sarah with my fingers. Eggs, milk, beer. That yogurt she likes, with the animal on the front. I don’t think it’s very good yogurt. The thought depresses me as I drive to the next town over, to do the shopping.

It’s July, and Sarah has skipped ahead to work on the Christmas story. Mary is a lesbian artist who has gotten pregnant through IVF. How can this be, her parents ask, since you do not know a man? Sarah asks me whether I would ever want to be pregnant. You have a good name for it, she says. Maybe, I say. I’m starting to feel sort of superstitious about imagining future babies. I don’t like having to unimage them.

I see a poster for Jackie's band. They're going on a sort of summer tour. The dates sear themselves onto my eyelids, and I feel them as they pass.

Another missed call from my mother. Nothing from my father, but I know that if I picked up the call, he would be there too, listening in.

Hope you're doing well. Call me.

"I keep hoping for some senseless tragedy," Sarah says. The deadline is coming up for a freelance piece she's writing, and she's lying on her stomach on the living room floor. "This morning I felt a pain in my breast and I pictured how life would be with only one tit. I just need to get the diagnosis before August fifth."

"I'd miss your tit," I say, but I'm thinking about senseless tragedies, and which ones might plausibly happen to me. Car crash is one I think about a lot, because there is very little lead-up, it could happen to you at any time. I picture myself crashing my car just off the interstate, at that intersection with the abandoned pancake house. I would be minimally injured, but shaken, and because the abandoned pancake house is only a five minute walk from Jackie's apartment, I'd call her, and she'd know something was wrong as soon as she picked up the phone, and she'd say, don't move, I'm coming to get you.

"Where did you go?" Sarah is saying.

"What?"

She looks at me, lowers her cheek to the carpet. "You were somewhere else, for a minute there."

A week later, I crash my car. Not on purpose. It's just the kind of thing that can happen to you at any time. It's a dark night, and on a curve I've driven a hundred times, I go into a tree.

I call my mother. She picks up on the first ring.

In the end, the car is totaled. Sarah drives me home in her Subaru, fussing and taking her eyes off the road to look at me. I am, miraculously, physically unharmed, except for a rash where the seat belt pressed into me to save me.

I start having dreams that I'm dead. I take the curve, I hit the tree, I get on the escalator. Some nights I go to heaven and some nights I go to hell. But always there's someone frowning at me, waving me back the way I came.

I don't tell anyone about the dreams. I don't want to be told that they mean something, and I don't want to be told they mean nothing, either.

One night Sarah and I are sleeping in her bed, and she wakes me. I'm sorry, she says in the dark. I had a bad dream.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

It's a long story, full of ghouls and parking lots and estranged relatives. I try to be a good listener. I even pet her hair. "I'm sorry," she says again. I don't tell her that when she woke me, I had been halfway to paradise.

One morning I have a massive knot in my hair. As Sarah teases it out with a comb, she tugs a little too hard, and I almost knock my head back into her nose. I can see the scene, as though another version of myself is splitting off into a separate room, just like this one, where I knock her in the nose, and she bleeds. Why did you do that? she asks, red pouring over her lips,

and I gallop away like a scared horse. The rest of the day, I am plagued by visions of myself hurting people, tripping them or punching them or stealing their bags. In the visions, they are all surprised. I don't look like the sort of person with a motive to wound. The more I try to suppress these thoughts, the more vividly they pan out in my head.

“Do you believe in evil spirits?” I ask Sarah. “Like, ones that influence our thoughts.”

“I don't know,” she says. “Maybe. But most of the time, I think evil thoughts are caused by something more desperate trying to get out, fear or pain or love.”

“Do you ever picture yourself hurting people?”

Sarah looks at me. “Not really,” she says. “Do you?”

I have already come too far to deny it. “Not for real,” I say. “Just as a kind of intrusive thought, sometimes.”

Sarah is quiet for a moment. She seems to be considering. “Sometimes I think about being hurt,” she says.

“Being hurt, how?”

“Well, sexually,” she says.

“Oh.”

“I think it's natural, to want to hurt and be hurt,” she says, coming around the table towards me. “We may be spiritual beings, but we're also animals.”

That night, in her room, she opens a drawer I've never seen her open.

“Pick something,” she says, kissing me, taking off her shirt. “I want you to do whatever you want with me.” I choose an object from the drawer and turn around. She is lying naked on

the bed, looking very pale in the light from the window, almost overexposed, and very helpless, like a too-earnest girl in a magazine, like a child.

I feel suddenly like the men in that Bible story, when the demons are cast out of them and into pigs, and the pigs run down into the river and drown. "I'm sorry," I say. "I think I need to lie down."

"It's ok," she says. " You shouldn't do something you don't want to do." But I can feel her retreating into herself.

With my car totalled, Sarah has to drive me to work every morning before her shift at the drugstore. It's my job to switch through the channels on the radio. My shift is shorter than hers, so after work I have to wait an hour for her to pick me up again. Usually I sit at a table in the cafe and flip through the pages of a book, peeking resentfully at the other customers whose ranks I've joined. Sometimes I walk across the interstate to the home improvement store and wander the aisles. It's a large store, and very well stocked. In the back there is a labyrinth of half-constructed rooms, walls of various colors set up to display window panes and doors and sinks and mirrors. I feel sort of affectionate towards this place, this non-house, collection of human furnishings advertising living.

By the time Sarah picks me up, she's tired and I'm restless. It feels good to sit down in her car, but I wish it was my car, and I wish I was going anywhere.

"If you're falling out of love, you can tell me," Sarah says one day.

A bolt of adrenaline runs through me. "What are you talking about?" I reach for her hand, but she only squeezes mine and sets it down in my lap.

“Mary. I trust you. But if you’re falling out of love, you *should* tell me.”

When we break up, I feel briefly distraught, then so relieved I could kiss her.

I call my parents, ask them if I can come stay for a few weeks. My mother is overjoyed. Sarah drives me to the train station. “We’re going to be friends,” she says, leaning out of the car window. “We’ll still be David and Jonathan, only the chaste interpretation.”

“But that interpretation is bogus.”

Sarah laughs, and I start crying, despite myself.

“I know it is,” she says.

There’s a small red ribbon on the driver’s side mirror of my mother’s car.

“You need to have a way to get around,” she says. She’s giving me her car and inheriting my grandfather’s car and my grandfather is getting a new car, like he always talks about doing.

I don’t get a chance to drive anywhere, because the next day I’m in bed with a fever. My mother brings me an empty silver bowl and a glass of grape juice, and sits with me while I heave and spit. Better out than in, says my father. It’s your body telling you to rest, says my mother. They empty my bowl, refill my glass. My cup runneth over. I feel an overwhelming relief at this new simplicity; all that is expected of me now is to receive and expel.

Once I feel well enough I go out for walks, and the grass looks green again, and three dimensional. There is a field nearby scattered with tiny yellow blooms. It occurs to me that even if I took a pair of scissors, or a lawn mower, the task of total eradication would be insurmountable. The thought gives me comfort, a slight relaxing around the heart.

I've been avoiding my phone. When I check it again there's a post on Isolde's instagram. They've added one more concert for the summer, at a venue in Woodstock. It's tomorrow night.

I spend the rest of the day with my parents. I accompany my father to the library. I walk with my mother, all the way down the trail to where the water moves fast.

The next day I load my things into the car. My father gives me some cash from his wallet for gas and candy. My mother gives me a sandwich for the road and a bag of cut vegetables, and keeps finding something else to go back into the house for.

"Here," she says, handing me a CD. "I know you collect these now." Cindy Lauper is on the cover, dancing with her arms flung out, red hair whipping over her shoulder. *She's so unusual* it says, in yellow cursive. "I saw her in concert, back in the eighties."

"Really? You never told me that!"

"Why, do you like her?"

"I mean, I haven't listened to her much, but she's cool."

"Yeah, she is sort of fun. Aunt Leah and I used to do up our hair to look like her. I'll have to find a picture for you."

I'm leaning on the hood of the car. My mother is standing against the backdrop of the white house and the blue-black pine tree. My father has already gone inside. I feel a sudden and painful love.

"It's Jackie's show," I say. "The one I'm seeing tonight."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

“Have you been talking again?”

“Not really. But I want to.”

“I can tell you really care about her,” she says.

“Yeah. I do.”

I get in the car and lower the window, and my mother comes up to the window like she has something to say.

“Mary,” she says. “Did you pack a water bottle?”

When the working day is done, says Cindy Lauper in the car, girls just wanna have fun.

As I reach the venue it starts to rain, hard. I park the car and run inside.

Inside the bar, everyone is dry. I don't see Jackie or anyone from the band. Of course, they will be backstage somewhere, anticipating.

Sitting at the bar is the girl from the grocery store. I recognize her immediately, and sit on the open stool beside her.

“Mary,” she says.

“Rachel,” I say.

“Are you here for the show?”

“Yeah.”

“Does Jackie know?”

“Not yet.”

She waves down the bartender and orders a beer, to replace the empty glass in front of her. I order one too.

“You picked a good night to come,” she says. “They're playing new material.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. It’s pretty good. Jackie will be happy for you to see it.”

Will she? I want to ask, but instead I take a sip of beer. So does Rachel. Finally she looks at the door and stands up. “My friends are here.” She points a finger at me. “You should talk to her.”

“I will.”

I’m alone again as the lights dim. I bring my beer to the center of the room, where people are starting to gather. A band comes onstage, not Jackie’s band, but the opener. There’s another blonde girl with a guitar in this band, and I watch her play, as though to practice for watching Jackie. Her fingers strike the strings with reckless precision, like a match striking the box. Her hair hangs in a golden curtain over her face. She reminds me of Jackie before I knew Jackie, a Jackie not of flesh and blood, but of pure kinetic possibility. Only her dark roots keep me from tumbling into the illusion. My Jackie has already been set in motion.

Stick around, says the blonde girl, the next band is sick.

And there will be a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth have passed away. I think of her face, and then I see it.

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