

DISTEMPERANTIA DE AMARE

By

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“Distemperantia de Amare” is a collection of love stories exploring the more disagreeable aspects of love, affection, and attachment. The characters range from a young student in a post-apocalyptic setting to a flawed accountant struggling to cope with the loss of her brother. Each story presents a different version of love gone awry. When read together, the stories in this collection show that real relationships are much more complex than fairy tales and fantasies.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. THE MODEL.....	3
II. NICE GUY.....	16
III. ALLUVIAL.....	28
IV. TRIPTYCH.....	36
a. PHILIA.....	36
b. EROS.....	44
c. AGAPE.....	53

## *The Model*

The whisper of imported Chinese silk against Joon's skin made her head swim with sensual delight. She tugged the robe tight against her flesh and cinched it about her waist before emerging from behind the thin paper screen and into the studio proper.

Anybody who called commercial photography glamorous was deluded. The room was dimly lit and the floor was a sticky layer superimposed on concrete. Joon was forced to perch on the edge of a wooden workbench to change. The lighting and special effects and money were all directed at the large green screen at the end of the room. It would take additional on-screen manipulation before the final product, her own over-processed face, would be fully ready for consumption. The room now crept her out; it had the derelict air of an abandoned industrial building, and the vague echoes made her think of unwanted visitors lurking around the edges.

"Baby," a voice came from her left. She turned to see the man in the grey three-piece suit approaching her with one of his wide smiles. His teeth were unabashedly yellow. "Joon. You did great today. Here's your first installment." He handed over a manila envelope, which she clutched close to herself. "We'll send more when the processing is done, and be in touch about another shoot. Say, baby, we're heading out to the clubs now. You should join us." His voice was heavy with some sort of accent resonating in his nasal cavity in particular.

Joon turned away. Every time there was the inevitable offer of company, the slight pressure to spend more time in the studio, the underlying suggestion of more jobs or a career. She wanted to remind him of her reasons for shooting in the first place, but instead all she said was, "No thanks, Klemp."

"Hey, baby. I've told you before to call me Dan!" He nodded at her as she walked away, still clutching the money to her chest as if it were an infant.

There was a park just outside the creaky studio. She entered the public bathroom and changed swiftly. White blouse tucked into plaid skirt, and buffed suede penny loafers: she recited the mantra in her head as she wiggled her heel into the last shoe. The silken robe was crumpled and thrust into the bottom of her bag, where it would not be seen. The manila envelope fit inconspicuously between textbooks. She slung the heavy strap across her chest as she began the short walk, hoping as she did that she'd be able to slip back in without any comments on her absence.

As she navigated streets deserted save for a couple of hurried pedestrians, her hands worked her hair into a loose ponytail. She secured it with an elastic as she arrived at the front steps of her school.

The clock on the wall behind the desk read early afternoon. Joon squared her shoulders and focused her thoughts on anything but the fact that she had been skipping classes to engage in disreputable activities. The woman behind the counter didn't comment, though whether it was because she was convinced by Joon's act or simply too distracted by the monitor before her was unclear.

Joon found her classroom, still empty before class began, and sank down into a chair weakly. After the first few shoots, she had thought she would get used to the rush of guilty adrenaline. But without fail there came a heady sense of pleasure rather than the shame of wrongdoing. She licked her lips and closed her eyes, looking up only when the door opened and a stream of students entered.

Joon tried to focus on the lecture, but the dim lights of the photo studio and Klemp's yellow teeth kept resurfacing in her mind. The teacher was discussing the growth of corporations in the latter half of the twenty-first century, and Joon knew that she should be paying attention, because they'd have to write an essay about the topic. However, she was unable to concentrate.

By the time the final bell rang and the school disgorged its students onto the street, Joon felt completely disoriented. She took the stairs to her apartment two at a time, then paused on the sixth floor. After fishing her key out of her bag, she inclined toward her door. No sound issued forth, but Joon knew that didn't mean anything; Lora was often quiet.

She let herself in and closed the door behind her. At first glance, the room was still; the couch was empty and the large screen on the wall was black. Joon dropped her bag on the table before fishing out the manila envelope. She caressed it, appreciating its creases and folds before fingering the flap slowly.

"What's that?" a voice asked from just behind her.

Joon jumped, and whirled around to cover it up. Lora stood still, weight poised in her toes. Her large blue eyes darted from Joon's face to the package in her hands.

"Just a paper the teacher gave back to me," Joon lied smoothly, already sliding it back into her bag. Lora, with her perfectly-combed blond hair and her strange blue eyes and her awkward way of moving about the apartment like a newborn baby bird, didn't know about Joon's side jobs. Joon knew instinctively that the girl would not approve. Lora's parents had sent her from their small town in the country to have the chance at receiving the education neither of them ever had.

"How was school today?" Lora slid past Joon and took a seat on the couch, folding her legs under her.

"Fine." Joon resisted the urge to tell Lora to mind her own business. Lora's gaze was somehow accusing, even though she looked away a moment later to examine her nails. "I'm going to study." She took her bag and went to her room, where she could put an inch of wood between herself and Lora.

Joon threw herself on her bed and sighed. Again, her hands sought out the crinkled manila envelope. She finally opened it, spilling bundles of money across her bed and scattering a thin stack of glossy photos on top. She picked them up and leafed through them. The stack was the result of the previous photo shoot. Joon thought that the figure on the paper looked nothing like her, which could only be a good thing, since her school would no doubt terminate her contract if they knew how she was paying her tuition. Again, Klemp's voice filtered out of her memory. *"We're heading out to the clubs now. You should join us."*

Joon picked up a bundle of money and shook her head. She'd get more if she took a bigger career like Klemp wanted her to, but how could she take a bigger role without sacrificing her education? School was the reason she'd begun the shooting in the first place. If she spent any more time in the studio, she might as well not bother going to class at all.

She sat up and looked down at the digitally-enhanced photographs. It was a week until rent and the next month of tuition was due, but she had enough to pay it now. Tomorrow, she decided. She gathered up the neat bundles of cash and shuffled them together before carrying them to her desk.

The picture perched on the wood drew her eyes, as it always did. A framed vignette of a smiling girl gleamed up at her. Joon looked down at the aged picture of her sister and heard a slap echo across the intervening years to reach her ears. Sometimes, her only memories of her mother seemed to be the violent ones.

From the day Ellen had left, Joon had known that she could never get an education from her parents in that same way. At the time, it was just how folks in the country did it; there was no organized schooling if you didn't live in the city. Her parents had been furious when she told them she would be leaving. She was pretty sure they hadn't really believed her until she had packed her bags and headed for the city.

Joon looked out her window at the great tangle of skyscrapers. Heat waves rose from the pavement in thick, undulating curtains. She'd been enamored at first, fascinated with the city. Everything was so different from the rural settlement she'd come from. In that way, she was just like Lora: a transplant from the country's heartland to the urban center. She'd learned quickly not to expose herself as a "farmie," for they were treated with disdain. She learned to blend in. She seemed as naturally a citizen of the city as if she'd lived there her whole life.

And since her parents wouldn't pay, she would find a way to pay herself. Joon squared her shoulders and looked down at the heap of money lying on her desk. It might have been immoral; it was definitely illegal. But it made ends meet, and it allowed her to maintain the gap between herself and her parents. She picked up the picture of Ellen, and slid it out of its frame. In a way, she had run from her parents, just like Ellen had. But Ellen hadn't had any answers, whereas Joon knew exactly what path to take.

Joon reached into her bag and pulled out the silk robe, now creased and limp, and hung it in her closet next to others just like it. Consolation prizes, as she called them. Klemp had explained that the models had to have something to wear when they left the studio, or else they'd be giving away for free what the customers paid for. He always thought he was funny.

Joon went back into the shared space but Lora was nowhere to be seen, so she made dinner. She remembered the first time she'd met Klemp. He'd been just as greasy then as he was now; he'd explained to her what the customers really wanted, and where the big bucks were. She could pass for a barely-legal schoolgirl with the right amount of digital assistance. He'd seemed to have no moral compunction about taking on an underage model. Joon hadn't liked it at first, but facing eviction or a mid-semester termination, she'd seen few other options.

And now she had grown not to mind it as much. She made enough money to get by comfortably, and she never had to worry about anything too compromising. Klemp was persistent, but he had a personal investment in her continued success. She could maintain a comfortable distance and keep them both happy.

Joon finished dinner and began to work on her assignments. Every day it was an endless stream of writing for the classes. Even the more easygoing teachers usually requested some paragraphs every day. Joon thought of Lora, likely holed up in her room and working on schoolwork as well. The girl had confessed, within the first week of moving in, that the schoolwork was exciting to her. It was so different from her small town; "back home" the classes were boring and lacked the distinction of certified teachers. Lora probably thought that their state-mandated education was essential to

improving her mind and understanding the world. Joon was pretty sure she'd started to understand the world the minute she signed her contract with Klemp.

Distracted, Joon stood and padded over to the wide window. The city was alive with the movement of vehicles and the sparkle of lights illuminating the night. Joon couldn't remember a night that had been different; the stream of traffic constantly leaving the city filled the lanes, and activity filled the sidewalks without pause.

At first, Joon had been like Lora. The city had been bustling and exciting. She'd never experienced a lifestyle so full of energy. Learning from proper teachers at a proper school seemed like the most meaningful thing in the world. She'd been fueled by the need to get away from her parents and the desperation to not follow her sister's path. She hadn't heard from Ellen in five years. Nobody knew where the girl had ended up.

Despite herself, Joon felt a rush of resentment for the city below. What had been appealing bustle and energy at first had become a monotonous and endless stream of constants. Even the days mimicked each other. Joon's hand ached from the constant writing, and classes had begun to blur together. It had begun to feel like school was a holding pen for people her age, until they aged into adulthood and could be exploited by the businesses and companies that controlled the city. Lessons that had once seemed important to shaping her future had become busy distractions. Even the mantra reminding her of the necessity of school had grown stale. Joon gave the city one final glance before she turned off the lights and went to bed.

The next day, Joon braced herself for the swarm of classes yet again. She carefully packed her money into her bulky messenger bag, and then tucked the picture of Ellen in too after some consideration. She pondered her glossies once again before

tucking them away in her desk with the others from previous shoots. They were all the same, really. Joon wondered again if there would ever be an end; the repetitive pictures fed the repetitive schooling, which in turn fed the repetitive grind of city life, day in and day out.

Joon was too distracted to sit through morning classes; she slipped out into the side stairwell and took the stairs two at a time until she could go no higher. Then she burst onto the roof and stood breathing for a moment, tasting the pollution in the air but not caring because there was at least a sky above her and not a flickering, incandescent light bulb.

Caught in a reverie, she looked out over the city. Rigid skyscrapers stood between the bulkier plants and warehouses, all belching smoke and soot into the air; the cityscape was familiar to Joon now, and she could trace most of the major buildings with her finger extended far beyond her and one eye shut. The faint grumble of traffic reached her ears. For a long time she stayed still, leaning against the railing of the rooftop and gazing out over her restless domain.

A far-off siren began to wail, breaking her trance. She turned away from the plants and factories. The city was screaming activity, from the foot traffic clogging the streets below to the fumes puffing out of the slender smokestacks topping the tallest of the buildings.

The clamor of a bell nearby reminded her first of the class she was not in, and then the guilt of skipping when she was working so hard to afford it. Without a backward glance, she turned and headed for the doorway at the edge of the roof, leaving the smoggy shingles behind.

Five creaky doors and twenty stairwells later, Joon stood on the smoldering pavement in a sea of traffic. Strangers pushed past her without even a glance, intent on finishing their business before the workday ended. Joon found herself caught up, as always, in the sluggish movement of bodies and the sights and smells of congestion. Everybody was headed somewhere, all away from here. Joon wondered why people fought so hard to come to the city if they were all going to try and escape it once they got here.

“Baby,” a voice said, drifting out from the multitude. She found Klemp among the hurrying pedestrians as he approached her; his easy smile and yellow teeth mocked her. “Joon. What are you doing out of school so early?”

“Classes ended. I wanted to get out.” Never mind the fact that she hadn't even paid for the next part of the semester, she thought grimly. The stack of money weighed heavy in her bag.

“Have you thought about our next offer?” He was pulling a huge cigar out of one of his pockets. His large sunglasses reflected the hot, sterile street behind them.

Joon didn't know what made her say it. “I'm not going on your spread.” To cover up her own surprise, she schooled her features into a haughty, aloof expression and carelessly flicked a speck of dust off of her shoulder.

“Come on,” the man continued. His tone became wheedling. “The boys love to see a barely-legal virgin on the papers.”

Joon resisted the urge to worry her lip between her teeth. From the past photoshoots, she knew that Klemp was ruthless in following body language, and he would pounce on any uncertainty she showed. Now that she had said it aloud, though, she

knew it was true. She didn't want to do Klemp's next spread, or any other spreads.

Finally, she shook her head. "I've got to get going, Klemp," she responded. Her eyes remained on his reflective lenses.

"Hey, Joon, baby. How many times do I have to tell you to call me Dan? The boys want to see you again." He had already stuck his hands into his pockets and taken a step back.

"I'll see you later," Joon finished before turning and vanishing in the crush of foot traffic.

#

Her large apartment building, which stood at the tip of the metropolis, overlooked the heat of the city impassively. Joon stood at the window, staring out with an air of abject misery. Lora moved somewhere in the room behind her, but she didn't turn to see.

The bright, stark white of flashbulbs echoed somewhere beyond her eyes. Klemp's voice chanted a circle in the corner of her ear. *Come on, baby. Come on.* The disgust rose in the back of her throat, unadulterated this time, as she recalled the stiff matting underfoot and the artificial spray of water in the foreground.

Once, she'd read, people would take a stroll to the corner store and receive a smile from the stranger working there. Even back in the country people smiled at each other. Joon recalled the last smile she'd received. A man, swiveling a kebab over an open street fire, thrusting her own picture at her. The flashbulbs erupted behind his head, and she sunk into the soft foam on which she stood, the reflective glasses on the faces holding those flashbulbs, and Klemp's choking, overriding satisfaction.

“You have a project due tomorrow,” Lora said softly, reeling Joon back to the present. Joon turned from the window and resisted the urge to scratch out Lora’s large blue eyes from where they rested, watching, in her pretty face. “You’ve been quiet all afternoon.”

“I’m quiet every afternoon,” Joon said tonelessly. Lora fixed her gaze out the window, and Joon didn’t need to ask to know that Lora was thinking about the constant movement and energy of the city. About how there was always something exciting going on. “I’m going out.”

Lora watched her leave without comment.

“Do you see what I see,” a singsong voice floated out of the darkness like the stench from out of a sewer grille. Joon ignored the voice and continued to walk. The city at this time of night would be full of carrion beetles scuttling from one slum to the next, leaving a trail of infectious waste as they went.

“Look at those hips,” a second voice commented, with a low whistle.

“This precinct is no place for a lost schoolgirl at night.” Joon knew they were as pack-minded and ravenous as wolves, and begging for a bone to be tossed their way. She continued walking, ignoring the comments.

The city vibrated around her, a dead, molten thing. She felt a song rising from the greasy sidewalks, humming all the way up the skyscrapers. The windows whistled along. Passively, she realized that she’d forgotten the kind of song a tree or a strawberry made. She couldn’t even remember what a strawberry plant looked like. Without remorse, she continued walking, through the dirt of the city’s underbelly as freshly exposed as a flower garden unearthed by a dog.

This wasn't what people thought about when they thought about the city. It wasn't the technology the scientists bred in their tall buildings and sterile laboratories. It wasn't the monotony Joon had come to loathe. It was the filth of real people, their best and worst sides tumbling together to form a kind of mosaic—a melody Joon had once loved. Full of constant, detached activity though it might be, the city had a music of its own, sung by each of its beaten-down inhabitants. The rich, bitter stench of cigarette smoke filtered through the air from somewhere nearby. The night felt thick, and Joon thought she detected a hint of moisture. It was real, and she reveled in it as she walked, this feeling of dirty, gritty voicelessness. It was not the weight of loam or the sand of a beach, but a different kind of life within iron and steel and blisters on your hands. The grime that made life real. There were no flashbulbs here, and no chalkboards. There was only the wild air of the night.

Joon stood before the bridge, watching the crawl of traffic too fast for the eye to see. Luminous and waxy, the beams of light washed over her. They were pale and yellow, burning through the smog and bounding away in echoes and ripples. She watched them marching past, little soldiers preoccupied with their own chaos, moving forward, into the future. She watched them revolving, circles gravitating away and away from the city, away from the filth and pestilence and glory of it all.

Joon's bag still had the bundles of money and the snapshot of Ellen. She clutched at the strap as the city's music swelled around her. She had come to the city to escape the rigidity of her parents, but she had found herself entrapped in a different kind of rigidity altogether. The night hummed with life.

Without regret, Joon looked once back over her shoulder. One glance was all she needed, and then she turned away, exhilarated, stepping into the light.

*Nice Guy*

*Five years of graduate school and here's what I have to look forward to.* A wailing infant brandished a tiny fist at the woman holding him, a brunette who might have been beautiful if not for the harassed look on her face. "Excuse me, I'm here to pick up a prescription."

Chad pulled his eyes up from the smear of snot across the child's face. "Last name?"

"Romero," she replied, not looking at Chad as she fished a tissue out of her coat pocket.

Chad moved back into the stacks, searching for her name among the back half of the alphabet. What medicine would a nicely-dressed woman like her want that she couldn't get over the counter? He cast her a surreptitious glance and took in her curvy figure and coiffed hair. Maybe something from the kid's pediatrician. He located the little basket with her name on it and glanced inside. Levocetirizine, under the name Xyzal, for allergies. Definitely not for the kid. He pulled the envelope out and brought it back to the front counter.

She didn't speak except for a brief "thank you" when he gave her back her credit card. The child on her hip was still crying loudly. Chad felt the beginning throbs of a headache and distracted himself by staring at her legs as she walked away. *Shame. She's gorgeous. What's she doing with a kid already? Maybe she's a nanny.* He'd forgotten to check her left hand for a ring.

"I saw that," a voice came from behind him.

Chat turned around, already raising his hands defensively and grinning sheepishly. The newest intern, Tilly, was standing with her head cocked, twirling a lock of nut-brown hair around her finger and surveying him with amused exasperation.

“What? Can’t a guy look?”

Tilly rolled her eyes but grinned. “Don’t be a jerk. Anyway, I wanted to ask you, what are you doing after work tonight?”

Chad leaned back on the counter, leafing through the stack of prescriptions he had to refill and not looking at Tilly. She was cute, a few years younger than him, and hopelessly naïve. She’d returned his flirtations over the past few weeks with sweet innocence. In fact, with the horrendous customers the pharmacy brought in and the boring coworkers, Tilly had become one of the only points still making work bearable. He glanced up at her and shrugged. “I don’t have any plans right now,” he said casually. He had planned to play Halo with his roommate until the early hours—a very quiet Friday night, indeed—but the prospect of spending time with Tilly caught his interest.

“One of my friends is having a housewarming party,” she said, blinking up at him. “Would you want to come?”

Chad shrugged again. “I guess I could come along,” he said, aware that appearing overeager might make her retreat a bit.

“Hey, if you two are done chatting, I could use some help back here,” came an irritated voice from behind the shelved baskets of medication. Chad glanced over. His coworker Gabriel was reconstituting a powder by the basin and had one of the drive-through tubes open on the desk next to him.

“Sure, coming,” Chad replied. Out of everyone else who worked here, Gabriel was the least irritating. They hung out occasionally outside of work. Although they weren’t particularly close, Chad preferred Gabriel’s company to that of the rest of his coworkers. He exchanged a grin with Tilly as they both got back to work.

#

“Thanks for coming,” Tilly told Chad as she parked her car on the side street.

Chad glanced around the street. Even though it was dark out, there were plenty of street lamps, illuminating massive, perfectly manicured lawns. “Who exactly did you say this friend is?”

“Just a classmate,” Tilly said as they walked to the nearest house. “He’s in his final year of pharm school. His wife just finished her residency as an orthopedic surgeon.”

Chad took in their surroundings in silence. If he was married, that was some relief, because he wouldn’t have to compete for Tilly. But would all of the guests be wealthy and successful socialites? Chad wasn’t exactly badly off, but he doubted he could compete with any of the people who lived in this neighborhood.

A young, blond, twenty-something wearing a massive diamond on her left hand greeted the door. “Tilly! Hi! We’re so glad you could come!”

*The wife*, Chad thought distantly. *She’s not bad looking*. He smiled and shook her hand before following Tilly into the living room.

The party was already in full swing. A group of people about Chad’s age were flailing in the middle of the room, to the tune of a loud, thumping bass. Chad smiled tightly. They probably weren’t particularly high income, at least. Usually people of that

income bracket looked down on dancing. “I thought this was supposed to be a housewarming party,” Chad yelled in Tilly’s ear.

“It is,” she yelled back. “Come on, there are the snacks.” She grabbed Chad’s hand and dragged him over to the table at the edge of the room.

While she poured herself a flute of champagne, Chad took the opportunity to appraise her. She had straightened her hair and pinned it back with a headband, and was wearing a loose top and short skirt that were polar opposites of the scrubs she usually wore in the pharmacy. Chad mentally complimented himself on his good taste in girls. Tilly was short and brown-haired and didn’t seem remarkable at first, but she cleaned up nicely. And it wasn’t like she could do better than him. Chad was aware that he was an excellent boyfriend. He moved over to her side and reached for the bottle of champagne, meeting her eyes briefly and exchanging a smile.

#

“But she’s a really great girl, you know?” Chad crossed his arms and looked over at Gabriel.

Gabriel shrugged. “I guess so. She seems kind of spacey though.”

“No she isn’t,” Chad contradicted him. “She qualified for this internship, right? She’s really smart, driven, motivated—“

“Beautiful?” Gabriel suggested, looking up from a prescription.

Chad refilled the drive-through tube and sent it back out to the car in the lane.

“Well,” he said in an off-hand tone. “I mean, yeah.”

Gabriel looked up again, eyebrows raised. “Are you really that into her?”

Chad shrugged. “Well, she’s a good-looking gal, and she’s great. What’s wrong with me being in love with her?”

Gabriel pretended to think the question over. “Have you ever even talked with her outside of work?” He clearly didn’t think much of Chad’s sudden affection for Tilly.

“Of course I have!” Chad didn’t say that it had only been once, over the weekend, when they were at her friend’s party. “Look, I just don’t want to... pressure her or anything. If she doesn’t feel that way, I don’t want to make her uncomfortable. We’ll still be working together and I don’t want to make it awkward. So maybe I’ll just... be there for her, you know? It’s not like I need to tell her.”

Gabriel frowned but changed the subject rather than fighting with him about it. “Did you take inventory? We’re filling out a new order form.”

Chad grunted. “Yeah, yeah. I’m on it.” He moved back into the storage area and grabbed the clipboard off the shelf. Sometimes, it was nice that management took such a hands-off approach, but at other times, Chad seriously considered trying to get a job in a hospital, where he would be able to do his job without being responsible for helping run a pharmacy too.

He was midway through the painkillers when he heard Tilly arrive for her shift. Gabriel greeted her and they chatted amiably for a bit. Chad tried to eavesdrop but they were not talking loudly, and when he realized she was talking about horses, he dropped his efforts and returned to his work. Taking inventory required precision and concentration, so he didn’t notice when Tilly came up behind him until she brushed up against his shoulder and said, “Hey you.”

Chad was instantly aware of her scent, a faint mix of caramel and vanilla, and of the soft warmth emanating from her body. He drew a line on the form he was filling out and looked up. “Hey you,” he echoed. She was in scrubs again with her hair pinned up in a messy bun, but he decided it didn’t matter. So what if she didn’t dress up when she was coming in to work? She was obviously comfortable with herself around him. She was unexpectedly alluring in the dim light of the storeroom, and he had to resist the urge to kiss her there. Gabriel would never have approved.

“Thanks for coming with me this weekend. I don’t know many of his friends, so I was worried it might be awkward.” She chewed on her lip for a moment. “But I was much more comfortable with you there.”

Chad nodded. “Yeah, sure, no problem. Listen, did you already get lunch? I was about to run across the street and get something.”

Tilly shook her head. “I was going to wait until *my* break,” she said.

“Well, I’ll bring you something,” he told her, and ignored her soft protest as he strode out the door. There were a variety of fast-food places on the street nearby, but the closest was McDonald’s, so he ran through the drive-through and headed back to the pharmacy before too much time had passed.

Tilly was sorting prescriptions when he got back. Gabriel gave him a disapproving look as he hefted a bag. “Here you go.”

“Oh, thanks, Chad,” Tilly said and reached for the fast food eagerly. “How much do I owe you?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Chad said lightly as he pulled out a burger. “So how are your classes going?”

Tilly grimaced as she stuffed some fries into her mouth. “Dr. Roderick is still talking about the final. I’m not really worried about it, but the more he brings it up, the more nervous I get.” She frowned. “I’ve taken practical exams before and not had any trouble, but he makes it sound like it will be a lot of pressure.”

Chad leaned forward. “Didn’t I tell you I’d give you my old notes if you needed them?”

Tilly nodded. “Yeah, I might have to borrow them,” she agreed.

Chad was distracted by a smear of ketchup across her cheek. He decided it was endearing, especially when she wiped it off with a napkin and blushed and rolled her eyes self-consciously. “Anyway,” he said as they finished dinner, “we should hang out this week. Are you free after classes?”

Tilly wrinkled her nose. “I finish early on Wednesdays, remember?”

Chad nodded seriously. “I remember everything about you, Tilly.”

Tilly smiled hesitantly. “Um, well, alright. We can hang out.” She seemed somehow slightly disappointed, although Chad couldn’t put his finger on the reason. As they returned to work, Chad caught Gabriel’s eye and gave him an I-told-you-so look. Gabriel rolled his eyes and shrugged.

#

Chad waited just by the entrance of the coffeeshop, glancing out the window occasionally. She’d be coming from the east, right off of campus, and wouldn’t see him waiting by the door. After some minutes, she finally appeared on the sidewalk, and he smirked to himself. Just as she entered the shop, he stepped out from behind the door and dropped his hands over her eyes.

He could feel her whole body going tense and rigid, but then she laughed.

“Chad!”

Chad dropped his hands and grinned at her. “Guess who,” he said teasingly and led her to one of the nearest tables. “If I remember right, your drink of choice is...”

“A dirty chai?” Tilly asked and took a sip. Her eyes lit up and she flashed Chad a beaming smile. “Yes, you remembered!”

“I told you, I remember everything about you,” Chad said seriously.

Tilly shifted uncomfortably and looked away but didn’t reply immediately. After a brief, awkward pause, she said, “So, how’s your life? Besides the pharmacy. Are you seeing anyone?”

*You*, Chad said silently. Aloud, he replied, “No, my ex and I broke up at the end of last year and I’ve been taking some time for myself since then.”

“Oh.” Tilly looked surprised. “What happened, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Well, I was just too nice,” Chad explained. “She couldn’t handle it and she called it off.”

Tilly paused mid-sip and shot him a look. “You were *too nice*?” she repeated.

“Yeah. I’m a nice guy,” Chad said defensively. “It’s not my fault that girls are always running away with bad boys who don’t treat them well and break their hearts. Nice guys always finish last,” he muttered bitterly.

Tilly frowned at him. “I don’t think that’s true,” she argued. “Girls don’t *want* to be treated badly. Everyone makes mistakes in relationships at one point or another.”

“Not me,” Chad shot back. “If we were dating, I’d treat you right.”

Tilly scoffed. “I’m not looking to be in a relationship right now.”

Chad crossed his arms. “Jeez, it was just a joke. Don’t you have a sense of humor?”

Tilly frowned but changed the subject. “Listen, finals are coming up. Do you think you could bring your old notes from Dr. Roderick’s class to work tomorrow?”

“Yeah, of course,” Chad agreed. “You’ll be fine, though.”

“Well, I know, but I’d rather be as prepared as I can,” Tilly replied uncertainly. “Thanks, it’ll really help me out.”

“No problem,” Chad replied. He leaned back in his chair and finished his coffee, watching her. Maybe she’d want help studying. He had done well in that class. But Tilly finished her drink and said a quick goodbye, leaving Chad alone with only the cooling dregs of his coffee for company.

#

“I just don’t really get her sometimes,” Chad complained as he handed jars of pills to Gabriel. “We seem to have really good chemistry, but then she says she doesn’t want to be in a relationship.” He shot Gabriel a look. “She’s probably playing hard-to-get, right? You know girls don’t like to seem too eager or whatever because they think if they admit that they want to date a guy, then he’s not interested in them anymore? She must have dated some pretty awful guys,” he reflected.

Gabriel shrugged. “Listen, you know how college guys are. She’s still in school so she’s probably surrounded by that sort of guy. You know, if the girl sleeps with them then they don’t call back because they’ve got what they want. Give ‘em a few years, they’ll grow up.” He paused and looked thoughtful. “Then again, she was telling me

about a ranch she volunteers at on the weekends, and she mentioned a few male coworkers there.”

“What?” Chad stared at Gabriel. “She works at a ranch?” He frowned. “I thought she was going to go to pharmacy school.”

Gabriel raised his eyebrows. “She volunteers, yeah. You’re the one who’s in ‘love’ with her.” His voice held the faintest mocking edge when he said it.

Chad waved away Gabriel’s comment. “Anyway, I want Tilly to realize I’m not like that. I would treat her well. I’m just... not sure how I can get her to see it.” He sighed and handed Gabriel the last of the stock.

“Well, I can talk to her when she comes in,” Gabriel offered. “She’d probably be honest with me. We get along, and it’s not like she’s invested in making *me* think she doesn’t want to date you.”

Chad agreed and went back to the front, where an elderly couple was waiting to pick up their refills.

Tilly’s shift started in about an hour and before she came in, Chad entered the back room to work on the eternally unfinished inventory. They’d gotten a new shipment of allergy medicine and he concentrated on filing them into the proper bins. Distantly he heard Gabriel greeting Tilly. He held his breath, working as quietly as he could.

“Hey, Gabe.”

“Hey, Tilly. How’d your date with Chad go?”

A noise of derision. “We didn’t go on a *date*, Gabe. We just went to get coffee.”

“But he paid, didn’t he?”

“Uh, yeah, but I promise, it was just two friends hanging out.”

“Yeah, alright. Whatever you say. But you’re into him, aren’t you?”

“Of course not! Chad is just a friend. I don’t want to be in a relationship right now.”

“Well, yeah, with some jackass college guy maybe. Buy Chad’s not like that, you know. He treats you well. I mean, you guys get along great.”

“We get along fine. We’re friends. Just friends.” Chad heard the noise of bottles of pills being shifted around. “I’m not interested in dating Chad, Gabriel.”

“Why not? You should at least give him a chance. Look, I’ve worked with him for a while. He really is a good guy.”

“I know he’s a good guy. I’m his friend. Why are you harping on about this? I’m not *obligated* to date him just because he’s interested in me. Are my feelings irrelevant? I said I don’t want to date him and I meant it.”

Gabriel was filling prescriptions by the drive-through window. Chad could hear the whooshing of the tube as it was sent back out to whoever was waiting. “Calm down. No need to get so worked up.” A pause. “I was just asking.”

“Yeah. Know what? Maybe I’ll tell him next time I see him, so that you’ll both get off my case.” The clear sound of angry footsteps followed this pronouncement, but Chad didn’t emerge from the back room until the slamming of the front door reached his ears.

Gabe looked over at him and shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you, man. Women are strange creatures.”

Chad nodded once, glancing around the store to make sure it was empty. “I don’t think she’s telling the truth,” he said calmly. “Did she seem suspicious to you?”

Gabriel wrinkled his nose. “I mean, she got angry pretty fast. You know girls are pretty emotional.”

Chad rolled his eyes. “Yeah, maybe. I think she’s just scared. She isn’t used to being treated well, and she doesn’t know how to handle it.”

Gabriel shook his head sympathetically. “Sorry, man. Wish I could help.”

Chad nodded. “Thanks, Gabe. Don’t worry. She’ll come round.” Already he was thinking ahead, planning for the next time he would see her. She’d come to her senses sooner or later. There was no reason why a nice girl like her wouldn’t be interested in a nice guy like him.

*Alluvial*

I come to myself under the dappled light of the trees. Bright sunshine slants through the canopy and leaves holes where the shadows fall.

The earth is flat and hard beneath the grove and I peer out from under the circle of shade. The sunlight pours down onto a flat, dusty expanse. I do not expect to see the girl peering between the branches.

Her hair is a red I have never seen before. Her voice is cinnamon-warm as she says, “What is your name?”

I move into the sunlight, leaving my holes behind. “Sydney,” I answer. My voice is hoarse, as if I haven’t spoken for some time.

“It’s nice to meet you, Sydney. I’m Victoria.”

I just stare at her without speaking. *Who are you*, I want to ask her, but I can’t form the words. There is only a big grey ocean where my thoughts should be.

“Follow me. Come on.” She grabs my wrist and I let her drag me out into the dirt, which slopes downward. “Let’s be friends,” she says.

*Alright*, I decide. We can be friends.

#

The flat dirt road is hugged by a tangle of slick greenery on either side. Everywhere there are hills, though the land appears flat to the eye. Victoria brings me to the top of a hill. When she steps off the dirt and onto the plush green carpet, I hesitate. Something feels wrong about this lush vegetation. She tugs at my wrist and I follow reluctantly. The sky is fading to inky blackness and I wonder where we will spend the night.

The grassy hill gives way to another copse, this one as riotous as the previous one was somber. For a moment, I do not know what I am looking at, but then I realize there are faces among the leaves and branches.

Victoria introduces the faces. There is Maria, who is little more than a swath of bruised, purple-and-navy skin glimpsed under wavy black hair. There is Jason, who looks up into my face and asks me how I awoke.

Victoria scolds Jason and turns her back on the trees. I follow her uncertainly. She seems to think Jason's question is rude. I do not know why. I am wondering how I awoke, too.

Victoria perches on the ground next to a ring of rocks. I can feel the others in the trees. I sit next to Victoria. "Where are we? Who are they?" This feels easier to ask than *who are you*, although I do not understand how Victoria found me in the trees either. I am aware of an empty swirling in my mind where I am certain I should have memories.

Victoria doesn't answer at first. She looks over at me, and I realize she finds my question quite as rude as she found Jason's. She is still contemplating whether to tolerate my rudeness when I hear Maria slip from the trees and settle in the dirt beside me.

"It took me a long time to find the others."

I look over at her. There is a big bruise on one cheek, and another below her eye. I don't answer. I am not sure what to say. Jason has slipped from the trees and he crouches on Maria's other side. I see that they are holding hands and I sense a strong reluctance from Jason, as though he does not want to be there.

A fire flares to life within the circle of rocks. I did not see how they started it. "I didn't find you. Victoria found me."

“You drew her to you,” Maria whispers.

Again, I am not sure what to say, so I remain silent. The way she is looking at me with acute hunger stretching her lips, I have to wonder if I am drawing her to me, too.

#

In the light of the full sun, Victoria takes me to the green, grassy hills. I wonder where the dirt road and my dappled grove have gone. “Victoria, where exactly are we?” She has avoided my questions but I remain unsatisfied. I can remember nothing before waking under the dappled light of the trees.

Victoria simply laughs at my question. She lies back in the grass and traces an imaginary path in the clear blue sky. “Some people say that this used to be a big valley with a spine of mountains running through it. Supposedly, the ocean came in and separated the mountains into islands. Some people think we’re on an island and there are other islands nearby.”

I cannot help but feel there is no truth to this story, or else Victoria wouldn’t tell me. “Then how did I get here?”

Victoria looks straight at me and the smile slides off her face. Her voice has the clarity of spearmint. “You know just as much as I do.”

I think about this for a moment. If none of the others can remember anything, either, then I wonder if this is even real. “Maria said that she couldn’t find... you. She said I found you much more quickly.” I remember waking up under the trees, and there was Victoria, watching. “Only, you found me, didn’t you?”

Victoria smiles, bitterly. “She’s right. You drew me.” She raises an eyebrow, and I know she is angry. I don’t care. I need to understand. “She drew me, too,” she confesses.

“You are drawn to us?” I echo.

Victoria lifts her shirt. There is a deep hole in the pit of her stomach. Suddenly, I am afraid.

Before I can back away, she touches my arm. The scent of warm milk fills my nose and my skin is swaddled in downy-soft warmth. I remember a feeling of contented fullness.

I break away from her. Though she cares for others, I fear that I have learned too much. I understand her earlier anger.

She smiles at me, unconcerned. “Do you remember *children*?”

#

I stand beneath the canopy of trees and let the slanting sunlight wash over me once more.

I am inexplicably aware of Maria’s presence, even before she steps out from behind the branches. “You’re only part of yourself.”

She is staring at my chest and I look down to see the sunlight casting holes on me. “So are you.” I look up and see her bruises yellowing, leaving holes far deeper than those from the shadows of the trees. Holes as deep as the one boring into Victoria’s belly. “Do you remember *mother*?” I ask, with a hint of desperation.

Maria looks straight at me, and she smiles. I realize that Victoria must have passed the memory on. “We are all trying to remember.”

Victoria's memory of children nestles gently against Maria's bruises. I know Victoria would not want me to ask, but I cannot stop myself. "What is missing?"

Maria does not answer. Her bruises seem to grow livid. She smiles sadly at me and shakes her head. I realize Jason is standing just behind her. I watch him take her wrist. He studies my face, and I can taste the sad reluctance on his lips.

#

Victoria is sitting in a tree, and her eyes are lost amongst the leaves. I know she will not look at me, but I feel her ears straining all the same. I climb into the branches and meet her gaze.

I wonder if I am drawn to her because of the memory she shared, or if she is using me to fill her emptiness. The word *child* jangles around the air beside us.

For a moment I do not speak. I understand that she finds my questions rude. But I know that she needs to teach me as only a mother can. I know that I am not the child she is missing. I wonder if I am filling her. "What has Maria lost?"

Victoria smiles, pityingly. I realize Maria wears her loss on her flesh. I know Jason must be the one who helps her remember.

I look back. I shake my head.

Very soon, there are voices below. Without straining, I know it is Jason and Maria. She pleads with him. He laughs but he is angry. There is a noise I cannot name, something like a heavy weight being dropped, and I hear Maria fall to the leafy ground.

Victoria is watching me. She has wisdom in her eyes. She has known Maria for much longer. She cannot shelter Maria, so she shelters me instead.

I cannot see Maria below. I understand her bruises now. It is sad, I think, that she can only remember by giving herself more holes.

#

The next time I see Maria, she is sitting beneath a tree. The air is sweet and cool around her. She is alight with brilliant fire. I am hesitant to break the peace, but she looks up at my approach.

I know now how Maria is empty. I know of Victoria. Maria sees this knowledge in my eyes and I know she will not answer my questions. Unlike Victoria, she has no compulsion to protect me or raise me.

“Doesn’t it hurt?” I squat in the dirt at her side.

Maria smiles and touches my shoulder. Something strange happens. The dirt below me grows wet, and the air heavy and damp. The nearby hills flatten and ridges grow on the horizon. Everything is purple, and there is the hint of color in the sky, as if to confirm the presence of freshly fallen rain. In a moment, Maria is leaning over me, her lips hovering near my face and the hard ground pressing into my back. The sky is as blue as ever, the ground as dry and dusty.

I know that this did not come from within Maria but myself. The blank stretch of memory is punctuated now with *motherhood* and with *rainfall*. I stare at Maria in shock. I know that she has remembered *rain* too.

I do not know how these memories connect. Maria answers the question in my eyes. “There used to be others here,” she tells me softly. “There was a boy, Greg. He brought the salt of the ocean.”

These words mean little to me. I am quite certain that I've never seen any ocean except for the giant swishing one in my memory. I know that *ocean* feels like *rain*, but it is different. "Where is Greg?"

Maria's eyes have turned hollow and yearning. She does not touch me, but from her look, I understand the thick, damp air, the tang of salt, the murmur of the tide. I can taste the black water rushing forth, creeping into the very edge of my consciousness.

Maria smiles. She seems relieved to have passed on this memory that is not hers. "Greg drowned."

#

I am shocked to find Jason alone, because I have never seen him without Maria at his side, but when I come to him, nobody else is nearby. Jason is curling the grass in his hand and he smiles up at me, lazily, as though he has been expecting me.

"So. Sydney from the rain."

I guess that Maria has shared my memory with him. I wonder if he has anything to share. "Why do you help Maria remember?" *Why do you hurt her.*

Jason laughs, crookedly. "I am looking for gold."

I cannot see a part of Jason that is missing. He alone seems to be whole. I wonder if he remembers *ocean* and *mother*. Somehow, I know that he shares all of these memories. "Have you found any?"

His hand twists through the air. I see a coin on his palm where there was nothing before. He smiles at me. "Victoria says I can create something out of nothing."

I watch him teasing the coin between his fingers, and then, just as quickly as it came, it vanishes. "And that helps you remember?" Slowly, I think, I am beginning to

make sense of his position. He hates what he does to Maria, and I have tasted his despair, but when he gives her a memory, he can take one for himself.

He sees the understanding in my eyes. He tastes like honey and wheat and I don't fight him when he kisses me. "Rain," he whispers against my lips. I know that he is thinking of my memory. I hardly expect him to return with one of his own. "*City*." His hand on my shoulder brings forth sheets of steel and concrete, hot ribbons of asphalt, coils of copper wire. I remember the feeling of hot sneakers pounding against the pavement in a world far removed.

I look at him. "Have you found any gold?" He has given me *city*, and I have seen him create money from thin air. I wonder how long he lived in those tall, polished buildings before he went astray and woke up here.

He smiles at me for an answer. I suddenly see his hollowness, shining just beneath his skin. I know then that he grows emptier with each act of creation.

The stars are emerging now, peppering the dusk sky. I can see Maria, caught up in the tangle of head and heart, covered in a broken patchwork of green and purple and brilliant fire. I see Victoria, spilling over in heartbreak and misplaced love, reduced to sound and color. I remember the slow rustle of raindrops on the hard dirt soil, the colors bleeding across the sky. I know then that I've lost myself in the others. Without speaking, I turn and leave them there in the dark.

*Triptych*

*Philia*

Tansy stared up at the dismally grey sky as she walked, quite unconcerned with the other pedestrians on the sidewalk. Although she supposed there was some importance in watching where she was going, she was more concerned with the possibility of rain. A fat, wet drop landed squarely on her nose at that moment, and she shook her head as if disoriented.

The rain began as a slow sprinkle, so Tansy did not rush. A little water wouldn't hurt her. She clutched the envelope in her coat pocket more tightly. She would be on her way back from the post office before the rain began to fall in earnest.

The blue mailboxes outside of the post office were vacant, and Tansy had remembered to stamp her letter. She dropped it into the slot with a feeling of lightness and turned back the way she had come, walking more briskly now to avoid crowding the walkway.

The streets emptied quickly as the rain thickened, and soon, Tansy was nearly alone save the cars trundling down the asphalt. She paid these no mind. The post office was not a far walk from the doctor's office, and in fact it was only a matter of minutes before she pushed through a swinging glass door and stood dripping on the welcome mat.

There were the usual forms to fill out before her appointment. Blank spots beckoned the routine information: *Name, Birthdate, Address, Social Security*. She'd memorized the form by now. It seemed each office used the same one.

#

Tansy had stared with shock at the envelope in her mailbox. It was industrial brown with cramped handwriting on the front, and even before she opened it with shaking hands, she knew it would be from Jimmy's roommate.

At first, she didn't know what to do about the letter. Should she read it or just throw it away, unopened? She knew he could not have any reason for writing except to talk about Jimmy. At the least, he would mention Jimmy. Tansy did not want to share Jimmy with anyone.

But eventually she had opened the envelope and read its contents. It had been surprisingly nice. He had a talent with words such that she imagined she could hear a kindly voice speaking, even imagined the inflections in the voice. He was quite careful not to cause offense. And Tansy, who was still quite raw, felt soothed.

#

The spicy, astringent scent of medical chemicals was comforting. Tansy stepped onto a scale, held out her arm for an inflatable cuff, and put the plastic rod under her tongue as she was directed. Though the routine was familiar to the point of monotony, she found the repetition as soothing as the acrid scent and the corridors and offices. Tansy was relieved to know that this office was as thorough in taking its data as the other offices she had visited.

Finally, a yellow-coated man entered, gesturing for Tansy to take a seat on the paper-covered table. She did so without complaint. This man was stout and balding, and Tansy somehow found this comforting as well. She stuck out her tongue as he looked into her mouth with a flashlight. She let him direct the flashlight into each of her eyes. She tipped her head when he put the little triangular lamp into her ear. She waited patiently

while he scribbled away on a clipboard, and watched expectantly as he set his pen back down.

#

Tansy was surprised that she had received a response so quickly. She had only written back to his initial letter five days prior, and that included Sunday.

She gathered that he was missing Jimmy, yet he hadn't dwelled on it in his writing. Instead, he talked about the orchard where he was working now, the different scents of the trees, the colors of the blooms, and the other orchard workers. Tansy might have thought it odd under other circumstances. She was exchanging letters with a man she hardly knew, and he was discussing people she certainly didn't know. He was in the South, far from her current home as well as her childhood home. He mentioned once a desire to visit Jimmy's hometown, but she did not reply and he did not mention it again.

Tansy struggled to make her letters sound as easy as his. The words felt bumbling and clumsy in her hands. She talked of shallow things, like settling into her new office. She told him about her coworkers, few of whom she knew and none of whom she liked. She explained to him what she had not explained to her mother—that she was living in such a small, cheap apartment not only to save money (which she was doing quite successfully) but also to try and ease her survivor's guilt. She'd tacked up the map of Belarus that Jimmy had sent her. She got a houseplant, and then another. She recalled these empty details in a series of letters as the events unfolded in real time. She told him about the stray cat who had started hanging around her place. He was concerned about rabies but she assured him that the cat was harmless.

They had exchanged letters for at least a year before Tansy tried to name her feelings of unease and distress. She supposed it was what others might call sickness or disease. When she'd tried to explain this, he had told her to visit the doctor. She supposed he was right. She'd begun making appointments with various general practitioners and specialists in the area.

#

"Miss Vera?" He tapped the clipboard with his fingers.

"Tansy," she corrected him. "Have you found what's wrong with me?"

The doctor frowned at her. "Miss Vera, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with you."

Tansy felt as if she had been knocked off the table. She'd been so *sure* that this time, they'd find something. "You must have missed a step," she said calmly. "You didn't remember to swab my throat."

"Miss Vera, I have the data from the lab used by the previous ENT specialist you visited. Their analysis is consistent with mine. Your flora all appear to be normal."

Tansy sat very still, clenching her hands so that her knuckles turned white. She couldn't think of anything to say except to repeat that he was wrong.

The doctor shuffled the clipboard again uncomfortably, and then said, "Miss Vera, I'd like to offer you a piece of advice. You're wasting your money. What you really need is to talk to a doctor who is qualified to help you."

"*You* should be qualified," Tansy told him resentfully. "And money isn't an object."

The doctor gave her a slightly pitying smile. "I mean a psychiatrist, Miss Vera."

Tansy sat rigid for a moment, and then said stiffly, “I don’t need ‘help.’ I just need to get better.”

The doctor sighed and shrugged. “Well, I can give you a list of qualified specialists anyhow. I’ll print that up for you and you’ll be free to go.”

Tansy tried not to scream as she accepted the printout and saw herself out of the office.

#

She had thought that he’d reached an understanding with her by now, but his last letter had mentioned Jimmy quite candidly and openly. Reading Jimmy’s name, and the recollections he shared, made Tansy feel as if she had received a blow to the face. She couldn’t breathe. She staggered to the couch with his weight bearing down upon her.

She knew she had two options now, and only two. She could ignore the letter, never reply, bury it where she had left Jimmy’s dog tags. She’d have to pretend that none of it had ever happened. This was a surprisingly painful thought. The other option was to simply continue on as if nothing had ever happened. She chose the latter. The men she usually had to cut out of her life were little more than fiction, and she found it was much harder to do it to a real flesh and blood man, even one she had never met, even one who had printed Jimmy’s name in cramped, military-standard handwriting.

He brought it up once more, though he didn’t press it. He was more interested in her doctor visits. Tansy wanted to know more about his orchard job. He started taking art classes to cope with his PTSD. He sent her sketches of the first blooms in April.

As long as he did not directly mention Jimmy, she took comfort in his words. As her doctors’ visits grew increasingly frustrating, his letters grew increasingly calming.

She felt as though her mailbox was becoming a kind of portal, linking her real and chaotic world with the sheltered cove she could occasionally retreat to.

And then, accompanying a watercolor of a tall oak, was the same request he had made once before. Only this time, there was a caveat: not only Jimmy's hometown, but Jimmy's hometown with Tansy on his elbow. Tansy again felt that sense of betrayal, the inevitability. She could not—could *not*—visit Jimmy's hometown.

Well, he continued in a reasonable tone. Perhaps he would come up north. Maine was past her, but she might enjoy getting out of the metropolis for a bit.

Tansy thought he was going insane. It was he who needed to be seeing the doctor, not her. He claimed that he had been healing through art, through nature, but he hadn't at all. He was just short of raving. The lunacy of the situation was absurd. Tansy didn't even allow herself to imagine meeting him. There was a very real possibility that such a meeting could have occurred, in a different life, in a parallel universe. She tried to summon up a mental picture of him. She found she could not. She did not know if he would be a good father. She did not know if he was a gentleman. All of the signs suggested these things, and yet, he had been Jimmy's roommate.

She declined politely, and said that she hoped sincerely that he was not put off and that they might be able to go next year. He answered her letter with the same rhythm as before, without mentioning it again.

#

She wandered the sidewalk slowly. The rain had cleared but the sky remained gloomy. She'd been hoping that this time, this time they'd finally find what was wrong with her. She sometimes felt, especially in the early mornings or late at night, that she

was accumulating a slow weight in her sinuses. She imagined her Eustachian tubes were beginning to close up. Not a single doctor, whether neither general practitioner nor specialist, had been able to comment on her approaching illness. She knew without a doubt that if she did not find someone who would listen soon, then it would overtake her. The air in her head would solidify and her face would turn hard. She needed to continue boosting her immune system.

She had reached her apartment. Hers was two flights up, and she trudged the distance, certain that even walking in the dirty air of the stairwell, she was beginning to be taken by the disease. *They'll be sorry*, she thought as she opened the door of her apartment. *When they find me in my apartment, they'll realize they should have taken me seriously.*

Sir Gregory, the stray she had taken in, was waiting by the door. He greeted her by twining around her ankles and leaping to the couch. Tansy followed him.

It was too early for dinner, and anyway, Tansy didn't feel like cooking. It would only nourish the disease that was slowly consuming her. The only table in her little studio unit was a low coffee table she had rescued from the dumpster the day she moved in. A cheap frame sat facedown on its surface. She reached forward and picked up the picture.

This, too, was habit. Tansy stared at the small photograph, spotted with age and framed crookedly. There was a smaller Tansy, lost in the past, and a smaller Jimmy as well. She thought of his dog tags, hidden beneath the cushions of the couch (she thought they'd be safest there), and fished them out. They were tinny and scratched, and the one hardly legible, but the other still bore his name. *Vera, Jimmy*, embossed above the lettering *Christian*. She thought again about their childhood, notably devoid of any

church attendance. He would not have included that if their mother had not had a fit of sentimentality. And then Jimmy had been buried in the cemetery rather than cremated as he'd wanted. Tansy continued to stare blankly at the picture.

Jimmy had left one message for Tansy. He'd been convinced that he would make a difference. He'd always kept her safe when they were little. This, he said, was to keep her safe again.

But it hardly mattered, Tansy thought dimly. She was falling under a cloud of sickness, and she became more certain with every moment that she would be unable to break free. The picture slipped from her fingers and she did not pick it up again.

## *Eros*

Life is a long blur of monotonous moments interspersed with glimpses of crisis. You had realized this long ago, fresh out of graduate school, and remind yourself of it every day. Occasionally you feel like looking beneath the dullness to see the calamity beneath, but you're certain that you will find simply one long and never-ending disaster only briefly obscured by the normality of everyday life, and you know that you can't handle that knowledge. The mere thought of it makes your chest feel tight and your head begin to swim. As if to comfort yourself, you brush down the front of your skirt and remove an invisible speck of dust from your hem.

Aside from the fact that you have been dwelling on uncomfortable thoughts over your morning coffee, the day is quite unremarkable. You take comfort in that, too. The typical buzz of office murmur provides a soothing background noise, and the sky outside the wide window is a calm grey. You glance into your neighbor Alan's cubicle and are surprised to see Seth Holmes from Human Resources leaning against the divider and chatting animatedly with Alan.

Alan is a quiet, withdrawn, modestly dressed man who habitually wears too much hair gel and cologne. However, you decided long ago that this is preferable to the alternative—absolutely no cologne or hair gel. Still, he is fond of insisting loudly that Reagan was the best thing that happened to this country, and you dislike politics, so you've kept your distance.

Seth, though, has kept to himself since he joined the company four months ago. This is the first time you've seen him besides in the elevator or break room, where he has always avoided eye contact and conversation alike. He's not bad looking, with closely-

curling brown hair and a young, clean-shaven face. He's probably aware of his good looks, but he's not the kind of guy who would take advantage of them. He's probably a gentleman, and if you were dating, he'd treat you well. He'd bring you flowers on Sundays and cook you breakfast while you stayed in bed and he'd probably read to you from whatever book he was reading, because he looks like the kind of guy who reads. His sudden chattiness provokes your curiosity. Perhaps he's made some acquaintances and worked up the courage to meet them after work. Maybe he's building a fragile friendship with Alan.

You're not close with Alan, but you're neighbors, after all. You think that if you ask Alan, he'll introduce you properly to Seth. For a moment, you imagine what it would be like to go home with Seth. Seth is usually so shy at work that he'd probably be shy on a date, too, but you'd win him over with your guile, and in about a month he'd realize he can't stand to be without you, and you'd move in with him. You'd probably carpool, since you both work at the same company and in the same offices. He'd probably be a good father, too. You can tell from the way he leans against the cubicle divider. He'd want to move into a two-bedroom house, maybe downtown, and since you like cherries, he'd make sure you could have a cherry tree in the backyard. Since he's not very traditional, you wouldn't have to completely quit work to raise the kids. Perhaps you'd have twins, one boy and one girl. They could have matching cribs and matching blankets and matching outfits. Seth wouldn't grow a beard, though—he'd keep shaving. This would probably give him an edge at work. He'd use his apparent youth to his advantage; he'd let his competitors in the department underestimate him. He'd earn a promotion and a raise and start a college fund for the kids.

Then again, you wonder if he really would make a good father. He's very casual, almost sloppily dressed. You can't help but watch his conversation with Alan. Alan is the type of guy you're most familiar with—the guys who majored in engineering in college—and because he's socially awkward, he's eager to have any conversation he can. But Seth is definitely slacking on his job. He's been here for at least fifteen minutes. Maybe he's too young for the responsibility of kids. Maybe you'd end up getting pregnant before he was ready, and he would be unwilling or unable to commit. Your twin children would have a deadbeat dad who didn't commute with their mother to work, and who didn't earn a raise, and who didn't even try to move them to a new house. You imagine trying to raise twins in your tiny, one-bedroom apartment. Seth might come visit once a month, but he probably wouldn't be much of a parent. You don't want this life for your children, so as you begin to file through the stack of papers in your inbox, you mentally discard Seth.

When you stop at the water cooler a short time later, you overhear Laura and Nicole discussing an outing from the weekend. You're not offended that you weren't invited, because you don't know either of them very well. You also don't feel bad listening in on their conversation. If they didn't want you to know, they wouldn't be talking so openly.

You gather that they had been at a club and that there had been a group of unfamiliar women who had been—from Laura's perspective—causing trouble. Instead of just having a good time, it sounded like they had been engaged in inappropriate behavior with some of the other guests. The term “date-stealing” is used a few times.

You're pretty sure you'd be hopelessly uncomfortable at a club. Your previous experiences involving dancing—swaying with Jake Wright in the school gym under the hawkish eyes of the chaperones, or drunkenly giggling into Carlos's shoulder during senior prom—remain prominent in your memory as those glimpses of the crisis underlying your carefully constructed lifestyle. Still, if Nicole and Laura are to be believed, they're an easy way to meet guys. Briefly, you let yourself imagine going to a club after work. Before leaving your apartment, you'd press a slinky, black dress to the bottom of your briefcase. At the end of the day, you'd change into it in the work bathroom. The very notion feels powerful and seductive, and very unlike you. You'd drive to the club and head straight in. There would be no trouble at the door. Maybe you'd order a drink, or, more likely, a tall man with dark hair and the beginnings of a beard would lean over and insist on buying you a cocktail. You'd be coquettish and finally accept, and not long after beginning the conversation, he'd ask if you wanted to dance. He'd probably know that guys who were too aggressive with girls on the dance floor weren't often successful, so he'd plan his moves carefully, with a false casualness. You'd be falsely casual back, telling him that you might enjoy dancing with him and sure, why not, even though you hadn't been planning on doing anything more than relaxing and having a drink. In reality, of course you had been expecting him to ask you to dance.

He will turn out to be a gentleman, of course. He wouldn't notice your uncertainty while dancing because he'd be so busy admiring your appearance. Maybe you'd get a little drunk, to cope with the panic of dancing, and so he'd sober up and offer to drive you home. Since you wouldn't have work the next day, you'd agree. He'd take you to his

place, a high-rise apartment much nicer than your own, and you'd admire the view and the interior design until he invited you to bed. Of course, you'd demur, and say you didn't normally do things like this after just meeting someone, but he'd compliment you and you'd give in, joining him on the king-sized bed like you had initially wanted anyway. His sheets would be either satin or 800-thread-count cotton.

You'd stay up all night, listening to stories about his life. He'd tell you he's not the kind of guy who usually goes to clubs; this evening had been his first night out in a long time. He'd explain that as a young business executive, so much of his life was full of work and responsibility that he had a hard time meeting other people and getting to know them. He would add, in a slightly shy tone, that he was nervous when he was ordering you a drink. He had been sure that you would reject him. You'd smile mysteriously and maybe tell him a little bit about your life, but you wouldn't reveal too many details. He'd be attracted to the mystery you presented.

This might last for a couple weeks, you realize, but eventually, he'd want to know more. You'd finally start to give him details: your family, a thousand miles away in the Midwest; your work, a boring office job with great employee benefits; your friends, consisting mainly of your houseplants and Sir Gregory, the grumpy stray you took in. You could play it off as being busy with your career, like him, instead of sounding like a desperate loner—because you're not desperate, and you're not a loner.

You return to your desk with a sense of disappointment. The reason you haven't ever spent time with Laura and Nicole outside of the office, and why you don't go to clubs anyway, is probably the same reason the guy in the club would eventually call it off. Assuming he wasn't the type of guy who thought every woman should know how to

dance—and there were plenty of those guys out there, guys who weren't willing to overlook self-doubt on the dance floor—he'd probably realize eventually that you viewed life as one long crisis covered up with pretty paper until it poked out uncomfortably in a few places. He wouldn't understand this, probably ever, even if he somehow decided that it didn't matter and wanted to be with you anyway. It just wouldn't match up with his view of life as a game. And you couldn't ever possibly explain your life to someone like that. You resent the world at that moment for taking away the suave, attractive man that you never had.

When you leave your office building in the evening, the sun is setting and foot traffic is at a minimum. You pass a café that has outdoor seating and a patron sitting by himself, reading the newspaper. You only get a brief glimpse of his face and his shaved head before you are past, and as you reach your traffic garage, you entertain the thought of turning around and getting a seat near him. You know by now that you would never actually approach a stranger, that strangers are off-limits. At least with Seth, you'd have Alan to introduce you. Even in the club, you would have a real reason to meet a stranger, whereas you have no real excuse to meet this one beyond your private desire to find someone else who can sense the chaos of life vibrating quietly when everything else is still. You're torn for a moment because there's no way to tell. He might be the same as the others, unable to see beneath the paper to the crisis within. But then again, maybe he would understand it. You could stop for a cup of coffee, and he might not be annoyed. If you could ask a few well-placed questions about his outlook on life, then you might be able to make a connection this time. He might not be like the others.

Of course, you know you can't start out like that. You'd have to start slow, and work your way up. But if he was the kind of guy who understood, he'd probably be suspicious at first. You would have to disarm him with your charm. He probably doesn't like to be interrupted when reading the paper, so you'd have to make sure he was receptive to you. You could show your knowledge of the financial sector to impress him. An intellectual guy like that, one who reads the paper in public—he'd like that. He'd be glad for an intelligent conversation partner. Maybe he'd smile and take your hand and introduce himself earnestly. He'd be impressed because he's used to seeing women in cocktail dresses and hearing them discuss fashion and celebrity gossip. A woman in business attire with a sensible head on her shoulders would be welcome. Maybe he'd even be taken off guard. This could give you the chance to blast him with your seductive, flirty smile—the one you practice in the mirror every night after brushing your teeth—and he'd be so dazzled that he'd ask you on a proper date then and there.

He'd pick you up in a sensible but high-end car, nothing too sporty or eye-catching, and he'd take you to a quiet restaurant on the edge of town. He wouldn't expect you to go home with him after the first date. He might drop you off at your place with a chaste kiss. He'd send you flowers in a few days, nothing too gaudy but something simple and traditional. He'd phone you up and ask you out again. You'd allow this, of course. You'd start seeing him regularly and you'd encourage the progression of your relationship into something serious. He *would* be more serious than Seth or the man from the nightclub. He'd be looking for stability rather than fun. He only shaves because the male pattern baldness that runs in his family was beginning to set in and he decided to embrace the inevitable. He wouldn't want to immediately start a family. He might not

even want to move in together immediately. In fact, he probably wouldn't be too keen on a physical relationship as much as the simple act of dating itself. It was one of those things that was expected of a man of his caliber. As a solid businessman in the financial industry, he would take more pleasure in the noncompetitive pursuit of an intelligent woman than in searching for passion and love. You'd wait until the third date at least to mention your haunting sense of imminent destruction, and if you'd planned things right, he'd agree humorlessly. Life is simply hiding from the disaster and pretending it doesn't exist.

But he might not want to dwell on it. He prefers to chat about the financial world, since, after all, that is where you both live. You have to wonder suddenly if that makes you seem stodgy somehow, or otherwise uncomfortably close-fitting to his career and lifestyle. Practical but not stylish. Functional but unattractive. Certainly, you pride yourself on your functionality. You're self-sufficient, enough to hold down an apartment and take care of Sir Gregory. You only forget to water the plants once a month or so. You'd be functional enough to maintain a regular relationship. But unattractive, that's not something you want to be pursued for. You'd prefer to date a man who had passion, not a stolid and straightforward automaton.

So the bald investment banker won't work for you. Your drive home is uneventful and you park your car outside your apartment. Sir Gregory is waiting for you just inside the door, demanding a can of cat food for dinner. You feed him and stare at your small, empty apartment. When it's quiet like this, when you don't have the voices of imaginary men to distract you, you imagine you can hear the calamity of life chipping away at the

neat order. While you listen, you stare at the framed picture of you and Jimmy that is hanging crookedly on the wall.

You are happy working a nine-to-five job for a large corporation that probably dodges taxes and pollutes the environment and exploits workers in third-world nations. You distantly remember that the term third-world countries is neither politically correct nor socially attractive, but you hardly care about that sort of thing. You're not trying to attract a guy like Alan, after all. Besides, it's the second world you've got to worry about. Outside of the comfortable confines of corporate America lurks the specters of those who are trying to catch up, trying to spread their disorder and inefficiency. The only way for you to have stability in your life is to find a serious relationship. You know just what you need—no deadbeats, no Seths, no kids who can't handle the responsibility. You'd like someone young, but if you have to go a little older to get that maturity, you can be flexible. You don't mind alcohol as long as they don't party as hard as they did in their college days. You need someone who will be accountable to you, someone who will treat you with respect. You'll just have to keep looking until you find it.

## *Agape*

When I was seven, I pinky-promised my next door neighbor Ellen that I would never tell the secret she'd told me. To this day, I have kept that promise, even though the secret wasn't important—it was about how much she hated the carrots her mother made for dinner, and what she did with them instead of eating them. I wonder occasionally if Ellen would somehow know if I had broken that promise. An itch in the finger, perhaps, and the sudden feeling that you've forgotten something important. I don't even know if she remembers that secret, or if she remembers me at all.

Those were innocent times, I think, as I buy a box of six greasy doughnuts from the corner store on my way home. For old time's sake, I get one that is chocolate icing *and* chocolate sprinkles. I eat it on the way home, spilling crumbs into my lap and licking my childhood from my fingers.

Ms. Pond, the widow who is also my neighbor, has left her trashbags in the hall again. She does this sometimes, when she is cleaning or is going to be heading out later, and doesn't want to make an extra trip downstairs. Normally this might annoy me but since she shattered her hip last year and got a metal plate replacement, stairs are difficult for her. I wonder if she'd like a doughnut but I don't want to knock on her door, so I go straight to my unit instead.

My shabby apartment is dark and quiet, as I expected. A map of Belarus covers the far wall, behind my couch. I eat another doughnut, one of the plain ones with a sugar glaze, and count the cities on the map. The capital, Minsk, has a red pin marking its center. The rest are blue.

I've never been to Belarus. Jimmy's death lurks somewhere within Minsk, and besides, it's too close to Russia for my tastes; I have a very faint memory of a grainy TV displaying the Berlin Wall, and my dad's voice saying distinctively, "It's a mistake. Should leave those commies rotting where they are." I don't really think Russia is a communist country, at least not anymore. Everyone knows the US and Russia engage in international trade. If they're our economic ally, they can't be communist. But maybe they were, once, and I don't think they'd have any use for a corporate drone like me, even if I do know a bit about the stock market and the side effects, both good and bad, of privatization. (Neither socialist USSR or semidemocratic Russia handled utilities well.)

After the doughnut I have a microwave dinner, and as the wilted broccoli sits on my tongue I imagine that I can taste the nitrates and preservatives entering my bloodstream. I would cook, rather than eating this junk, but cooking takes much more time than tossing a frozen entrée in the microwave, and besides, cooking for one is difficult because there's always too much food left at the end. Maybe I should have picked up a burger and fries instead of a box of doughnuts, but that probably wouldn't have been much better for me.

I think about the first time I ate a microwave dinner. This incident has stuck with me for many years and is not one I'm likely to forget. There was a boy in Mrs. Mallory's fifth grade homeroom class who I always sat beside. His name was Jake. Jake Wright. One day after school I went home with him and when we got to his house, he made us each a Kid Cuisine—chicken nuggets and fruit snacks for him, mac and cheese and a brownie for me. Then, it tasted as delicious as an exotic delicacy. Now, I'm horrified that

I ever skipped eating my vegetables, but then, with the processed chocolate flavor melting in my mouth, I thought I had never known anything so marvelous.

The next year he asked me to the school dance, or more specifically, my best friend Kaitlyn told his best friend Christopher that I wanted to go with him, and Christopher told Kaitlyn that Jake didn't really want to go but he would go with me if she'd give him her gummy bears, which she did because she was my best friend. Sixth grade was the first year we were allowed to go to the school dance, and I remember my mother sewed my dress herself, and even though it wasn't really fancy I was so pleased to be *wearing a dress* and *at a dance* that I didn't even notice if it was constructed from some simple polyester fabric rather than the satin and tulle and chiffon that all the other girls wore. I didn't even know how to dance so mostly I just copied the other girls, and I know that Jake probably didn't enjoy himself as we revolved slowly in one spot, swaying from side to side, with my scrawny arms wrapped around his collared neck and his hands resting uncomfortably above my bony almost-hips.

That makes me remember all of the dances I ever went to. Jake Wright and the Spring Fling in the sixth grade. After graduating from middle school, and transferring to Ironwood Prep, there was the Junior High dance. I didn't get to go until eighth grade, and I went with Paul Andrews, a boy I had only spoken to twice (we sat near each other in biology) but who really needed a date because he wanted to try out for the football team the following year and if you couldn't even get a date then you obviously couldn't be on the football team. After the dance he'd tried to kiss me clumsily in the back of his mom's car while she drove us home. I still remember the vivid sense of unease I felt as his lips mashed against mine.

Then in sophomore year, when I started to fit into those nice dresses with the satin and tulle and chiffon, and long after I'd rejected my mother's sewing as unfashionable, I was asked to prom by one of the seniors, Anthony Black. I vaguely knew that he was unpopular and probably only wanted me to go with him because he couldn't get a date among any of the older girls, but I was in advanced calculus then, so I knew some of the older kids. I thought that his skinny legs and his combed, slightly greasy hair were devastatingly romantic. My dancing skills weren't much improved but this time I was conscious of it, so I spent much of the time hiding behind the punch bowl or in the bathroom, only emerging for the slow dances and one or two faster songs. Maybe he thought that it was fun, although I am certain now that he was annoyed by my uncomfortable disappearances. "*Why don't you come dance? Can't we just dance for a bit?*" I only set down my cup of punch reluctantly, but he did, at least, smile. Even as a sophomore, when I wasn't ruining school dances for my dates, I was displaying a startling ignorance that I can hardly bear to look upon. I remember when Anthony asked me to prom, he confessed that I wasn't the first girl he'd asked. He said he'd asked Vivian, one of the Chinese-American girls who sat near him at lunchtime. Stupidly, I had asked, "Which Asian is she?" because I couldn't remember anything about her except her ethnicity. I remember Anthony's look of shock at these words, and my hurried explanation. "I can't tell them apart." That, of course, had only made it worse. It wasn't until I got into MIT that I realized the accidental racism in my words.

The following year, I had gone to prom with a girlfriend, mostly because I hadn't been asked by anybody that time. I hadn't been particularly close with Michelle, but it had been one of those things you do when you don't have many friends—fastening upon

those you *do* have and making them seem much more than they are, because you don't have much at all. She was prettier than me, but we'd both been able to dance with guys at some point. I still tried to avoid the fast dances because I didn't know where to put my arms. Michelle usually put them in the air above her head but I didn't want to do that in case my Lady Speed Stick stopped working, so I shuffled back and forth in the corner and didn't make eye contact with anyone. Near the end of the dance Brian Harris offered me some of his spiked punch, and even though I refused, I still went home with him while Michelle went home alone.

Senior prom I had a date as well, Carlos Turner, who was in the calculus class I'd taken two years before. That time I *did* take his spiked punch, and all I really remember is giggling into his shoulder while he held onto my waist during some slow Celine Dion song, and afterward, doing things in his car that my mother would have been ashamed of and that Jimmy would have assaulted him for.

I say a quiet prayer to the universe as I dump my dinner tray in the trash under the sink. I am apologizing to any boy I have ever subjected to a dance. I know they probably only did so to spare my feelings. Especially Jake Wright. But would it have mattered so much to disappoint a scrawny eleven-year-old? Did he have to sacrifice his own comfort for one fleeting night of happiness that would only become painful in future reflections? I wonder where Jake is now. He didn't come to Ironwood with me, but went to Eastside—he lived in a different district than I did. I wonder if he ended up taking calculus. I wonder if he works in business now, too.

Dances aside, I might have been too harsh on my mother. I remember the distinct embarrassment on the first day of Freshman year as I'd entered high school for the first

time and been faced with an array of brand names. It was clear that nobody would have recognized a sewing machine if it had chewed their fingers off. Clothes didn't come from bolts of fabric, but malls and department stores. I'd felt exceptionally stupid in what I had only a few minutes ago thought was one of the cutest dresses I'd ever worn. Not long after, I'd also realized I had to wear foundation and mascara, and had learned that, too, from eavesdropping on and imitating the girls I saw in the bathroom at lunchtime.

I had learned more than just applying makeup in my first year of high school. I remember, at first, picking up *Ender's Game* with only faint curiosity, but one chapter in, I regretted beginning the book that morning, because I would never be able to wait through classes to resume it. I did something I'd never done before—I snuck the book under my desk and tuned out my history teacher's drone on Lincoln. I suppose I might not feel the burn of shame now if I hadn't been caught about ten minutes later. I still remember Mr. Rosenberg's look of angry triumph as he wrested the skinny paperback from my clutches, and in the end it was a full month until I was able to finish. I can hardly believe I ever tried to get away with it. Mr. Rosenberg, if he ever remembers me, likely wishes me ill. Two years after *Ender's Game*, I'd met Michelle for the first time, in Mr. Rosenberg's third-year history class. And one day, Michelle had asked me to pass a note to Zoe, who sat on my other side. And I had done it, and I had been *caught passing notes*. I hadn't even written the note. But I still got in trouble, and in those days—well, my whole life, really—I didn't get in trouble. Mr. Rosenberg commented sourly that if I didn't want to pay attention, I was free to leave class early.

But it wasn't really my fault. I had just wanted to fit in. It was hard enough, being the only girl in the advanced math course. If I was able to make something even slightly

resembling a friend, I was pleased. It was as if those few sparse acquaintances could make up for every mistake I had ever made. I still remember that dumb dress I'd worn in the sixth grade. How ugly it had been, how unsophisticated. It would have been better if I had never gone with Jake, rather than having forced him through that. He probably only remembers me with resentment. *And all for a bag of gummy bears.*

That wasn't all, either. Even after I'd convinced my mother to stop forcing her handmade clothes on me, I hadn't been much better off. Ill-fitting T-shirts or hoodies that made me look even more boyish than I was. No wonder I hadn't had a date to junior prom. Leaving out my inability to dance properly, I'd spent much of that year sporting straight-legged jeans (*why* did I ever think those looked good) and the free shirts that I got from the company I was interning at. Well, it had been cool, on one level. I had been able to subtly advertise my intelligence. Everyone knew that *I* was preparing to enter the real world. And wasn't that the point of a prep school? But somehow, somehow, those very real accomplishments had been reduced to meager crumbs in the faces of the girls who wore push-up bras and knew how to apply eyeliner correctly.

None of that matters anymore. I have a good job and a good salary, something I would not have earned if the mistakes of my youth had been tallied. Obviously the shadows we leave in the past don't mean much.

But I remember when I worked at math camp once, after I was in college and needed a summer job. I remember my coworker, Kelly Rice. Short black hair, rocking the punk look. (The next school year I started shaving my legs again and wearing short black skirts and metal-studded accessories and plaid vests.) She'd been seeing Hunter, one of the other counselors. I remembered walking with her into the clinic. I wasn't her friend,

not really; I didn't even know her middle name. But we shared a cabin, and that summer, we shared more than just that. They let me go back with her and I held her hand the whole time, even though my eyes were closed. I remember thinking, *Hunter should be here, not me*. I remember once, the nurse touched my shoulder and told me I had to leave the room. I squeezed Kelly's hand and said, "No." I had never denied any authority figure before. The nurse left me alone after that.

I wonder what happened to Kelly. I wonder if she remembers that—I am sure she does, it's not something you can forget even after years of separation—and I wonder if she remembers me. She might remember someone who drove her to that clinic. She probably just remembers me as her annoying co-counselor, who wore low-rise jeans and a ponytail every day. She probably thinks I was plain, or even ugly. There's no reason she'd remember anything more. She probably doesn't know how often I laid awake at night. She probably doesn't even think of me as her friend. Just someone who was there when she needed it. Does she even remember my name? I don't *really* blame her, because she was too preoccupied with more important things to remember my name or face or unfashionable outfits.

There is meaning in those shadows. Kelly alone has substance amidst the insubstantial faces of Mr. Rosenberg, Michelle, Carlos Turner, and even Jake Wright. She offers a moment of redemption, however small, before the shame returns as strong as ever.

Should I forget the past, rather than reliving times that have gone by? Must I continue to bear the burdens of my former faces? Must I drown under the weight of the times that have passed? Quietly and without compromise, I walk over to the map of

Belarus and stare at it with a sense of disappointment. *This is how it is*, I think. I can't help the events that happened fifteen years ago any more than Belarus can escape its proximity with Russia. I know I can never visit the country that claimed Jimmy's life. If a whole country can't change the world, how can I?