

HEARTS OF SAN FRANCISCO

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HEARTS OF SAN FRANCISCO

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Lacy Marschalk

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Lacy Spring Marschalk, daughter of Stan and Alisa Marschalk, was born March 22, 1983, in Hickory, North Carolina. She graduated valedictorian of Pleasant Home High School in 2001. She graduated *magna cum laude* from Huntingdon College in May 2005 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and creative writing and a business administration minor. After teaching high school for a year, she entered Auburn University's Master of Arts in English program in August 2006. Upon graduation in May 2008, Lacy plans to pursue a PhD in eighteenth-century British literature and continue writing fiction.

THESIS ABSTRACT
HEARTS OF SAN FRANCISCO

Lacy Marschalk

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This thesis is comprised of a critical introduction and three short stories. The introduction explores my writing process and the struggles and frustrations I encountered and overcame when writing these stories. In the first story, “The Trappings of Mice,” twenty-nine-year-old Webb, estranged from his wife after she has suffered a miscarriage, must dare to imagine a life without the only person he has ever loved. In “Ice,” a college professor waits until she and her husband are deep into a mountain backpacking trip to confess to having an affair. The final story, “Hearts of San Francisco,” follows the journey of a young woman trying to find her biological brother, who does not know that she exists. The characters in these stories, while not connected by age, place, or problem, are all caught in moments of decision that could change the course of their lives.

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WRITING WITH HEMINGWAY, DRINKING COFFEE WITH KEROUAC:

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

“All my life I’ve looked at words as though I were seeing them for the first time....”
~Ernest Hemingway

I would be lying if I said I went to San Francisco over spring break to write; in fact, I went to do just the opposite. By mid-March my thesis was not progressing the way I had intended, and with just three weeks until the graduate school deadline, my stress-level was climbing daily. The trip to San Francisco had been planned for months (I was going to a conference), and while I had originally planned to have my thesis out of the way by the time my plane took off from Atlanta, instead I found myself running to the West Coast to escape writing, to escape my life in Auburn, where I felt myself slowly suffocating under the weight of graduate studies.

At first, my trip was entirely successful in this regard. I’m usually so busy when I travel that I rarely have time to sit down and write—I’m always running off to an art museum, climbing to the top of a tower or cathedral, or hanging out in a pub or café with friends. Writing is limited to the occasional journal entry, scribbling names of restaurants, streets, and descriptions of parks into the blue suede notebook I bought in 2005 when I went to Paris. On the first page of the journal I inscribed a quote from Augustine: “The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page.” Perhaps it is because of this quote that I don’t write when I travel—I’m too busy soaking

up the culture(s), exploring neighborhoods, rubbing my heels raw from long hikes through parks and across bridges.

An odd thing happened in San Francisco, however. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get away from writing. At the conference an entire book exhibit was dedicated to creative writing, in the Museum of Modern Art gift shop two books on journal writing grabbed my attention, and in the observation tower at the M. H. de Young Museum I found a book entitled *A Writer's San Francisco: A Guided Journey for the Creative Soul*. In the first paragraph of this book, author Eric Maisel writes, "I'm American by birth but an urban writer by nature. My true homes are Paris, London, New York, Tokyo, San Francisco, and the world's resonant cities." After reading those two sentences, I was hooked. They expressed an idea I had long felt but had never been able to put into words. For writers, home is not the country where you live or the place where you lay your head at night; it is the place where you feel most inspired, the place you try to recreate in your writing.

Although I grew up in the country, I have always felt more alive in the city. I love high-rise buildings, city squares, crosswalks, and public transportation, especially subway systems. I love walking around the corner and finding a beautiful building, a fountain, or a park I never knew existed. There are treasures around nearly every corner of major cities, and perhaps more so in San Francisco, where hilltop views of the bay or ocean almost always await.

Out of all the cities I have visited, it is in Paris and San Francisco where I feel most at home. Gertrude Stein said, "America is my country and Paris is my hometown," a quote I have découpaged into my scrapbook beside pictures of the Eiffel Tower and the

Jardin du Luxembourg. I spent two weeks in Paris in the spring of 2005, and ever since then I've suffered pangs of homesickness. Being in Paris—eating its pastries, exploring its art museums, hiking up to its rooftops, relaxing in its gardens, and hopping from one Metro line to another—was like having a passionate love affair with a gorgeous foreigner. I wanted to share this passion with my friends, my family, the stranger on the street, but I could never find words profound enough to convey the love I felt. When faced with a similar problem, Hemingway wrote, “Maybe away from Paris I could write about Paris as in Paris I could write about Michigan,” but nearly three years after my affair with the City of Lights I still hadn't found the words to describe it.

One of the goals of my thesis was to overcome that mental block, and I wanted part of my thesis to be the first chapter of a novel set in Paris. Unfortunately, the chapter did not develop as easily as I would have liked. My writing usually shapes itself; it does not come from an outline or predetermined structure. As I work, I self-edit, subtract superfluous wording, add more precise descriptors, but I don't make global plot changes—I put the characters in a situation and then intuitively allow them to direct where the story goes. While this process normally works for me—even when I was writing my novel in high school—it did not work for writing this chapter.

My first obstacle was coming up with a name for my protagonist. In all three short stories in this thesis, the characters were given the first names I thought of without any active name-searching on my part. Only Ethan's name required more thought, and I spent about ten minutes searching on the Internet before I found a name that suited him. But when I tried to write the novel chapter, I went through dozens of names trying to find the perfect combination to fit the character's personality—if I was going to write about

this character for 300+ pages, her name had to be an exact fit. At various stages her name was Sarah Colson, Keely McCoy, and Riley Vanoy, but these names were all rejected for being too traditional or girly or cute. Finally, she became Riley Cahill, but once that problem was solved new problems appeared.

Riley, having just graduated from college, was alone in Paris for a month. She knew no one and did not speak the language. I wanted to convey her isolation, her loneliness, but I did not want the reader to become bored, which was difficult when writing a chapter that contained almost no dialogue and mostly followed Riley from one museum or café to another. I started the chapter twice, making it to page six each time, but the story wasn't working. I decided point of view was the problem and decided to switch from third person to first, but that required me to change the entire tone of the story. I also knew where I wanted the chapter to end—with Riley getting locked inside Père Lachaise Cemetery and meeting a British man who helps her escape—but I had a difficult time getting her to that point, since knowing the ending of the chapter is so contrary to my writing process.

In an attempt to make the chapter work, I read everything I could find about Paris—about the people, culture, food, fashion, landmarks. The two memoirs that I found to be most inspiring were Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* and Alice Steinbach's *Without Reservations: The Travels of an Independent Woman*. Both of these writers focus on the inspiration they find in Paris, a city artists and writers have been escaping to for centuries. While Steinbach is more concerned with her personal journey as a writer and solo female traveler, Hemingway recreates the lives of the "Lost Generation" in

1920s Paris, providing “irreverent portraits of other expatriate luminaries such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Gertrude Stein.”

Since I have been in love with Fitzgerald’s writings since I was fourteen and first read *The Great Gatsby* and *This Side of Paradise*, it was his portrait I was primarily interested in when I picked up *A Moveable Feast* in November 2007. I had just passed my comprehensive exams, for which I’d spent three solid months studying, and Hemingway’s memoir was the first book I’d read by choice in months. I came across it by accident while wandering through Books-a-Million, its black-and-white cover photo—several men and a woman sitting around tables in a Parisian café, smoking cigarettes and drinking wine—starring up at me from a bottom shelf.

Once I started reading it, I couldn’t put it down. Hemingway’s descriptions of cafés and people colored the landscape, his philosophies on the writing life and process echoed my own. Although Hemingway “maintained that it was bad luck to talk about writing,” in *A Moveable Feast* he seemingly cannot *stop* talking about his writing. In the first chapter, he describes writing in a favorite café: “I entered far into the story and was lost in it...I did not look up nor know anything about the time nor think where I was nor order any more rum St. James.”

As a writer, I frequently get lost in writing a story—the words tumble across the page or the computer screen, and they cease being words or letters and become something far more visual and colorful. The door to my imagination slams shut behind me and I am locked inside a dream, only one that is often more real than the world in which I reside. But this wasn’t happening with my novel chapter. The more I tried to work on it, the more frustrated I became with myself and with the story. Finally, I gave

up working on the chapter and began to read *A Moveable Feast* again, this time ignoring the portraits of people and places, and focusing specifically on Hemingway's thoughts on writing.

Even Hemingway had bad writing days. When the words wouldn't come, he says, "I would stand and look out over the roofs of Paris and think, 'Do not worry. You have always written before and you will write now. All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know.'" As my thesis deadline approached, the bad writing days became more and more frequent. My mental space was being consumed by reading for class, researching for seminar papers, teaching, and working. There was little room left for fiction, and I had a hard time coming up with story ideas. Earlier in the semester I had had lots of ideas, but one by one I had shot them down, and I was losing confidence. I knew how to write, but did I know how to tell a story? My plots were too predictable, the stakes weren't high enough, my characters were too repetitive.

In San Francisco, while my friends went out for the night, I sat alone in my hotel room, twenty-seven stories up, looking out over the rooftops of the city, like Hemingway. Mentally, I paraphrased his words—if I had written once, I could do it again. But still the words did not come. I dropped characters into high stakes situations but didn't know what to do with them afterward. I wrote entire conversations and realized they weren't moving the plot forward. I realized I was pushing too hard, trying to force the story onto the page, and it just wasn't ready. Accepting this, I listened to music and read for awhile, then went down to the conference to hear a late-night fiction panel.

The writers had all published novels or collections of short stories, and some read from their books and others from works-in-progress. Some were good, some I had difficulty following, and others were so laughable I wondered what my thesis director would have said if I tried turning them in. What I noticed about all of the writers, however, was how much they enjoyed sharing their stories with the audience. They were proud of what they had written, and they had all stayed true to the types of stories that interested them. While I may not have enjoyed all of their stories, not all of them were written for the type of reader I am, and someone else in that audience may have preferred those stories to the ones I liked. Perhaps Ann Beattie said it best: “You must do your own work—the work you are compelled to do—rather than capitulating, and letting your arm be twisted like Gumby’s. There is only so much time, and you have only so much energy...and your obligation is to yourself, and to your work.”

After attending this fiction panel, I realized that I was trying too hard to please other people when I wrote. When I first started writing fiction at age seven, I wrote strictly for myself. I wrote the types of stories that I would enjoy reading. Perhaps my stories weren’t always “literary” in quality, but they were entertaining and fun to write, and that’s what I loved about creating them. Somewhere along the way, writing had stopped feeling that way; it stopped being fun. I was too analytical when I wrote, thinking about the structure, the theme, dichotomies and ongoing details, when in reality, I had included all of those things before intuitively. Now that I was thinking in those terms, however, I wasn’t getting lost in my stories, in my characters. I was too busy psychoanalyzing them and thinking about them as just that, *characters*, not people. In my most prolific writing periods, especially during high school when I was writing my

novel, my characters were much more real to me; they were like imaginary friends. Now I had a harder time leaving my own head to enter into theirs.

In her essay “The Reading and Writing of Short Stories,” Eudora Welty describes this divide between the analytical and creative mind:

The mind in writing a short story is in the throes of imagination, and it is not in the calculations of analysis. There is a Great Divide in the workings of the mind, shedding its energy in two directions: it creates in imagination, and it tears down in analysis. The two ways of working have a great way of worrying the life out of each other....When I see [my stories] analyzed—most usually, “reduced to elements”—sometimes I think, “This is none of me”....I could not remember *starting* with those elements—with anything that I could label.

Although I “learned” the formal elements of the story as a child, I, too, had never thought about writing in those terms. My stories had themes, characters, plots, and settings, but I didn’t deconstruct them in those terms—as I said earlier, I had just allowed them to grow naturally. Over years of fervent reading, I had absorbed the various ways of adapting and using story elements, so I didn’t have to think about how to write. But in graduate school, for the first time in my life, I struggled with my writing.

This problem was partly due to my lack of experience with the short story form. Before I went to college, I never wrote short stories and I rarely read them. Everything I attempted to read or write was novel- or novella-length. In the fifth grade I wrote a series of 54-page books about a group of girlfriends in Orlando. Over the next few years, I attempted to write several novels (each one over a hundred pages before I abandoned it),

and finally completed my 296-page novel called *Of Sunshine and Daydreams* about a teenage violinist who must choose between a life of fame and her family. When I started college, though, my fiction writing classes required me to work within the short story form. At first, I saw this type of writing as a challenge and as a way to give life to the multitude of characters living inside my head instead of limiting myself to only one or two, as I did when I wrote novels. But the short story did not allow me to reach the kind of character depth I loved in novels, and it also forced me to more frequently face my least favorite part of writing—the ending.

Writing endings has always been difficult for me. Part of this is due to the fact that when I find characters I am particularly drawn to, I am reluctant to let their stories end—I want to keep them alive as long as possible. As Hemingway writes, “After writing a story I was always empty and both sad and happy.” After I finish writing a story, I’m always happy to have it completed, to feel that sense of accomplishment, but I’m sad to see the characters go, to know that the next time I begin writing I will be looking at a blank screen or piece of paper, what Hemingway called “the white bull.”

Although I struggle with endings, one goal for this project was to become more comfortable facing them. In addition to a novel chapter, when I outlined my thesis in the prospectus I intended to write a short-short story (flash fiction), which I saw as a tremendous challenge. The heart of the short-short story is in the ending—with only 750 words or so to convey an entire tale, a short-short story must hit hard and quick and leave the reader gasping for breath at the end. Mark Twain said, “If I had more time, I would write a shorter story,” because the shortest stories can be the most time-consuming to perfect. Unfortunately, while I wrote several short-shorts over the last few months, none

had satisfactory endings. I read several collections of short-stories, hoping to stimulate my brain to think in this form, but few of the stories succeeded in inspiring me and none were as memorable as the first short-story I read, “Alfalfa” by Terry Thuemling, a one-paragraph story that fully creates the complex relationship of a competitive couple battling over a crossword puzzle.

Since endings are so difficult for me, it would make sense that my favorite part of writing is the introduction. I love opening lines. I would even describe myself as a first-line connoisseur. I collect them like fine wine, typing them into lists on lemon yellow paper and pinning them over my writing desk to read when I need inspiration. Favorites include “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (*Pride and Prejudice*), “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (*Anna Karenina*), and “Dr. Weiss, at forty, knew that her life had been ruined by literature” (Anita Brookner, *The Debut*). When browsing bookstores, one of the ways I decide which books to buy is from reading the opening lines. If a story has a dull first line, it is rare that I will continue reading. While this may seem superficial, librarian Nancy Pearl agrees that first lines can tell you a lot. “I think when you read a good first line it’s like falling in love with somebody,” Pearl said in a 2004 interview. “Your heart starts pounding...it opens up all the possibilities.” Although a good first line does not guarantee a good book, Pearl believes the chances are better with a strong opener.

My story ideas almost always begin with the first line. These lines come to me at times when my mind is free to wander—in the shower, on long car trips, on walks around campus. “Ice,” the second story in this thesis, originated one stormy February morning

when I was making the trek from the C-zone parking lot to my office in Haley Center. As I was walking alongside the stadium gates, the wind blowing sharp blades of rain under my umbrella, lightning struck the building beside me. The accompanying thunder was so loud it made me jump, and I quickened my pace, all too aware that the metal umbrella I was holding could double as a lightning rod. The quicker I walked, however, the more my legs were exposed to the rain, and by the time I reached Haley my jeans were soaked from the knees down. The first line of “Ice”—“Ginny didn’t know which was worse—being wet or being cold”—was born in that moment, and when I got up to my office I wrote the first few paragraphs of the story before I had to leave to teach.

The third thesis story, “Hearts of San Francisco,” came at one of those moments when I was afraid I would never have another good story idea. I was a day back from San Francisco, feeling sick and exhausted, but I decided to take a shower to try to feel better. While in the shower, the first line—“When the plane hit a patch of turbulence somewhere over the Sierra Nevada mountains, Erica was on her knees in the restroom, retching into the toilet”—came to me suddenly, and I knew immediately what story to attach to it. While at breakfast one morning during the conference, a friend had relayed a true story about a set of heroin-addicted siblings separated at birth, and after I wrote the first line, a fictionalized version of their story quickly followed.

The first thesis story, “The Trapping of Mice,” began out of one of these mundane moments as well, although its opening sentence was not conceived at that time. I was working as a file clerk in a doctor’s office one summer and one of my “projects” was to alphabetize thousands of x-rays. I was given almost the entire second floor to work in, and for hours I would work alone in silence, stacking the x-rays into large piles. With

little mental stimulation from the work in front of me, my mind would wander, and this story was born. The story originally began after the time break, when Webb crawls into bed beside Lauren. The title came to me in that moment as well, although it would be months before I knew what mice would have to do with the story. It was a story that I held on to for some time before I actually wrote it, letting it ruminate in my subconscious until I felt the time was right. Of all of the stories, it is my favorite, perhaps because I had so much time alone with it.

I have not given up on my other stories, though, either the ones included in this thesis (which don't seem complete, and perhaps never will) or the ones I had to abandon along the way. My journal of opening lines, each sentence an uncut diamond just waiting to be sanded and polished and given a story of its own, contains enough material to keep me writing for a year. Perhaps later, when not burdened by deadlines and the demands of graduate courses, I will revisit the short-shorts as well.

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As is probably evident, some of the greatest lessons I have learned while writing these stories have come from quotes by other writers. Hemingway has been especially inspiring, as he tends to verbalize literary truths I subconsciously know but have lacked the discipline to practice. As the thesis deadline approached and I began to panic, fearful I would not finish and not graduate as planned, I returned to *A Moveable Feast* for advice. As always, the words of Hemingway guided me when I lost direction, encouraged me when I was disheartened:

When you were empty, it was necessary to read in order not to think or worry about your work until you could do it again. I had learned already never to empty the well of my writing, but always to stop when there was still something there in the deep part of the well, and let it refill at night from the springs that fed it.

To keep my mind off writing sometimes after I had worked I would read writers who were writing then, such as Aldous Huxley, D. H. Lawrence or any who had books published that I could get from Sylvia Beach's library or find along the quais.

This section of the book comes from a chapter in which Hemingway and Gertrude Stein are arguing about literature and Stein is mocking Hemingway's reading choices, especially those mentioned in this quote. Although Hemingway respects and admires Stein, he still continues to read what interests and inspires him. Most importantly, these writers keep him from thinking about his own writing.

Similarly, Roberta Jean Bryant says, "I've learned to avoid reading the types of things I'm currently writing. Instead, I look for the kind of reading that inspires and renews me, but doesn't lend itself to easy comparison." Throughout the writing process, I had been blatantly disobeying these words of wisdom. For months, with the exception of the thick eighteenth-century novels I was reading for class, I had only read short stories in my free time, and they had become a chore to read. I wasn't enjoying reading anymore, so I wasn't enjoying writing.

In San Francisco, I decided to remedy at least the first part of this problem. After purchasing *A Writer's San Francisco* and reading the chapter on City Lights Books, I

headed to North Beach to visit the neighborhood and landmark bookstore where Jack Kerouac and other Beat writers took up residence in the 1950s. City Lights, like Shakespeare & Company, its sister bookstore in Paris, has become an artistic icon but lost none of its character and integrity. In three cramped floors of crowded bookshelves and old wooden chairs and stools, the owners of City Lights have provided a haven from the mega-bookstore chains, selling literature from around the world and both alternative and mainstream reading selections. After exploring the store for over an hour, I made my final selections—Jack Kerouac’s *The Subterraneans* and Lorrie Moore’s *Like Life*.

Moore’s book was an easy choice. She is my favorite short story writer, and *Like Life* was the only collection of her short fiction that I didn’t have. It helped that I was hooked by the first line in her first story: “For the first time in her life, Mary was seeing two boys at once.” Her most anthologized story, “You’re Ugly, Too”—“You had to get out of them occasionally, those Illinois towns with the funny names: Paris, Oblong, Normal”—was included, too, and since I’d been suffering from writer’s block for so long, I thought Moore would be the perfect inspiration.

Moore is the type of writer I aspire to be—her stories are always fun, witty, eloquent, and emotional. Her collections are the only ones I can read straight through, like novels, without growing tired or restless. But I was afraid if I started reading her now, I would become even more discouraged, knowing that with my impending deadline I would not have time to make my stories as artistic or poetic as hers, and knowing that I was breaking Bryant’s rule about not reading the types of things I was trying to write.

I decided to start with *The Subterraneans* instead. I walked next door to another Beat hangout, Vesuvio Café, and sat at an upstairs table by an open window overlooking

Jack Kerouac Alley. I ordered a cappuccino and opened my new book, immersing myself in San Francisco as Kerouac had seen it fifty years before. Although I had never read anything by him before, his voice drew me in. It was original and engaging—it was like nothing I would try to write but was inspirational at the same time. His paragraphs rambled on for pages, his sentences were long and circular, asides inserted with dashes, on-going details tossed in with little transition. But it worked. It worked for the type of story he was constructing, and it also worked to open up new areas in my mind, to loosen the ideas that I had packed into a mental closet and locked away.

That afternoon, feeling happier and healthier than I had in months, I took the bus to the Legion of Honor, another journey recommended by *A Writer's San Francisco*. This museum sits on a hill in Lincoln Park overlooking the Pacific Ocean and Golden Gate Bridge. It is a replica of Paris's Palais de la Legion d'Honneur and in some ways resembles a miniature Louvre, complete with a shallow glass pyramid in its front courtyard. Rodin's *The Thinker* also occupies this space, and inside the museum an entire gallery is dedicated to Rodin's art, including *The Sculptor and His Muse* and *The Fallen Angel*, abstract sculptures rising from bronze in a way that fuses person and mineral into one organic being. Rodin's art is sensual and emotional and moving, and seeing these statues transported me to a different time and place—the Musée Rodin in Paris in 2005, to be exact.

The Musée Rodin, a museum and gardens housing some of the greatest works by the sculptor, is in a gorgeous old Parisian hotel where Rodin once lived. When I visited it, I was in a similar situation to when I visited the Legion of Honor—facing graduation and all of the life-changes it entails, finding a job, moving somewhere new, leaving old

friends behind and making new ones. The quarter-life crisis it is frequently called, the not knowing, the stress of trying to figure out what to do with one's life. I had faced the crisis twice now, and each time it was my travels and my writing that saw me through.

Standing beside Rodin's art that day, many of the sculptures familiar copies of those I had seen in Paris, I felt my panic begin to dissipate. With confidence, I walked through the different galleries and finally came to the one I had been searching for all along—the wall of Monets, *The Grand Canal*, *Waves Breaking*, *Sailboats on the Seine*, and *The Coast of Normandy* all beckoning me forward. And there in the center, three times as large as any of the other paintings, *Water Lilies*, my favorite of Monet's oft-repeated subjects. For nearly ten minutes I stood in front of the painting, studying Monet's brushstrokes, the light he infused into the water, imagining the way the pond at Giverny must have looked through his cataract-covered eyes. Despite his handicap, Monet continued to paint for the rest of his life—he just painted the new way he saw things.

I realized that I had to do that with my writing. I couldn't let the pressures of graduate school or stress or exhaustion or anything else keep me from writing. I had to stop making excuses, no matter how creative or easy they became. Perhaps I saw things differently now than I had as a teenager or as an undergrad, perhaps I wasn't even as astute as I was then, but I had to continue to write, even if I saw things in a new way.

In the silence of the gallery, Hemingway's voice spoke to me again—I had written before, and I would write again. For the first time, I believed him, and I went back to the hotel to read Kerouac and wait for the words to come.

THE TRAPPING OF MICE

It was the first time he had spoken to her in days. Usually his shift at the UC-Davis library ended at 6:30 and he got home around seven, long after she had gone to bed. But today the library had closed early for spring break, and he surprised her by coming home at five. There was music playing when he opened the unlocked front door—lilting harps shingling the murmur of ocean waves—and a smell like baked apple pie. A cluster of cinnamon-scented candles burned on a black tray in the center of the coffee table, and the music flowed from a Sony boom box on the windowsill. In a black sports bra and spandex pants, Lauren lay prostrate on a purple yoga mat, hips and thighs pressed to the floor, her stomach and chest curving upward, so that from the tips of her pointed toes to the top of her proud head her body formed a perfect right angle. Just watching her pained Webb, who was perpetually aggravated by a slipped disk in his lower back.

She held the pose for several seconds—*Cobra*, Webb believed it was called—before melting back to the floor. Then she was up on her toes, *Downward Facing Dog*, her bottom high in the air, her outstretched arms supporting the weight of her torso and head. The lines of her body were straight and graceful, the muscles of her thin arms and legs taut and unwavering. She still did not notice her audience, until Webb dropped his backpack onto the tiled floor and whistled flirtatiously.

The noise surprised her so much that she dropped to her knees and whirled around. “What are you doing home?”

Not quite the response Webb desired. It wasn’t that she sounded upset or disappointed—worse, she sounded indifferent. “Spring break, remember? We closed early, though not early enough. There wasn’t a soul in the place after one. Everyone had headed for the beach already, I guess.”

Lauren nodded, her lips pursed in silence, then sunk back into another pose, *Wheel*. Yoga had been Webb’s hobby originally, something he decided to try as a stress-reliever while writing his graduate anthropology thesis three years ago. But after accompanying him to a couple of classes at the YMCA, it was Lauren who purchased discounted books on the subject, perusing the “Health and Body” section at Barnes & Noble, spending hours memorizing the different techniques and *asanas*.

The activity had been faithful to her in the past, and Webb hoped it would help her now, when she most needed relief. He headed for the kitchen in search of a pre-dinner snack, or at least a beer.

“There’s a mouse in the kitchen.”

Webb turned, surprised by the sound of Lauren’s voice. Over the five years of their marriage, he’d grown so used to hearing it that he had forgotten how sensual it was, how her voice on the late night airwaves of K102 Campus Rock was one of the first things that attracted him to her. After days without speaking, her voice struck him in the chest, as if he were falling in love with it all over again.

“A mouse. In the kitchen,” she repeated. “Well, in the walls or something. There were droppings under the sink and I heard scratching in the walls, but I never saw it.”

“Must be coming in around the pipes.”

“Well, I picked up some traps today. They’re on the table. Do you mind putting them out?” It wasn’t really a question.

“Sure. I’ll get right on it.” Webb didn’t try to hide the bitterness in his voice. *Traps.* Of everything going on in the world, she could only talk to him about mouse traps.

On the kitchen table she’d spread the contents of the Home Depot Deluxe Rodent Kit, an assortment of traditional snap traps and glue boards, as well as more humane metal boxes that captured the mouse without harming it. “The snapping ones will probably work best,” she called. “They get the deed over with. Those glue ones tend to get stuck to everything except the mouse.”

Webb had no intention of using the “snapping ones” or the “glue ones.” He hated the idea of killing something for the simple transgression of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Instead, he baited two of the metal boxes and placed one under the sink and one in the corner, just in case a mouse happened to escape its walled prison. Then he cleared the other traps and put them in the garage, where he was sure to forget all about them.

His dinner was also waiting on the table, twigs of asparagus and a ginger-glazed chicken breast wrapped in caramelized bacon. The food was still warm, and Webb sat down to have his first non-microwaved dinner in weeks. It depressed him to know that

when he arrived home at his normal time his dinner had been sitting there at least two hours.

Beside his plate was a folded piece of paper. Because she went to bed before he got home, Lauren had taken to leaving him notes, reminders of chiropractor appointments and household chores, mowing the lawn and changing the oil in her Nissan. Every time Webb saw one of the pieces of yellow stationery his throat swelled shut; he feared the letter would say she had moved back to her father's or overdosed on painkillers. But the notes were not nearly so passionate. This one simply read: *Mouse droppings under the sink. Please put these traps down. Thanks! P.S. Jim Fiorenzo called.*

Webb crumpled the sheet in his hand and tossed it at the trash can, but missed. When he went to retrieve it he saw a stack of brightly colored brochures lying conspicuously at the top of the trash—the adoption literature he'd brought home the day before. With tears in his eyes, he rescued a pamphlet on international adopting, young and middle-aged couples hugging tan, gap-toothed children. As idealistic college students, he and Lauren had talked of saving a child from the injustices of Africa or Cambodia. Now, in spite of Dr. Lawrence's encouragement to "explore other options," Lauren rejected their only chance at parenthood.

Webb tossed the pamphlet back into the trash and sat down at the table, tearing into the meat on his plate. Lauren had outdone herself with the bacon-wrapped chicken. Sometimes her recipes worked; sometimes Webb wished they had a dog to feed under the table. Tonight's recipe surpassed even the spicy chicken with almond salsa that won her the Emerging Chef Award three years ago. The almond salsa had been a fluke—Webb clumsily knocked a can of chopped nuts into Lauren's chile sauce—but it had sold her

first cookbook, affording them the comfort of their own home and a state-of-the-art kitchen.

The kitchen was Lauren's laboratory; she spent eight hours a day experimenting with herbs, nuts, and fruits. Because her newest cookbook was a collection of easy chicken recipes, each prepared with a delicious, innovative sauce, Webb had eaten chicken every night for two months. Even during the week she was in the hospital, he lived off of KFC and McDonald's nuggets, joking about his addiction to chicken when he visited her every evening.

Webb got up to get a glass of water and saw that Lauren had disappeared. No doubt she'd gone to bed, locked herself away in the room they had until recently shared. She had made it clear when she came home from the hospital that she needed some alone time, even if that meant he had to sleep in his study every night. She started going to bed before he came home from work, and when he awoke in the morning she'd gone to the gym or to the farmer's market, so their paths rarely crossed.

Sometimes he longed to touch her so much that he masturbated in the shower, picturing her wide turquoise eyes, her mouth forming a small orgasmic "O." He wondered if he would ever see her like that again, feel her body contract beneath his, hear her sweet moans and whispered "I love you"s. She wouldn't even let him into their bed, much less into her body.

Webb finished his food and went to the fridge for a beer. Then he called Jim Fiorenzo.

* * * * *

That night, a week after being asked to leave the bed he and Lauren had shared for five years, Webb surreptitiously slid into the mahogany four-poster beside his wife. In sleep Lauren was a creature of habit, hugging the left edge of the mattress, avoiding the rectangular zone reserved for Webb's constant tossing. Lately she had taken to sleeping in cotton tanks and his old gym shorts, drawstrings loosely tied, the elastic waist slung low on her narrow hips. Webb studied her back, the knobs of her spine pressing at the thin material, the pool of pale blonde hair tangled on her pillow. One arm cradled her head, the other followed the curve of her side. An intruder in his own bed, he dared to touch her arm, to lightly trace the line from elbow to wrist. Her skin was soft; it smelled of lavender and chamomile, the scented soaps she ordered from Roger & Gallet.

Beneath his thumb, Lauren's muscles tensed—she was only pretending to sleep. He wanted to say something to her, wanted to ask if they would be all right, but he could not find words meaningful enough to fracture the silence.

Lying inches from her rigid, distant body, he did what a week ago he would have thought impossible—he imagined a life without her. He imagined packing a suitcase and driving off into the night, perhaps going up to Tahoe and spending spring break at the lake house of Jim Fiorenzo, his old college buddy, who'd made millions working in Silicon Valley. He hadn't talked with Jim in nearly five years, and out of nowhere he'd invited Webb and Lauren for a visit. What would happen if Webb went up there, if he spent a week away from Davis, from Lauren, from his life? How long would it take her to notice he was gone?

Webb squeezed his wife's hand, kissed her bare shoulder, his lips lingering longer than necessary. Lauren did not react; she had finally drifted off, her breathing deepening

to a low hum. The glowing red numerals of the alarm clock bent and shifted, a barefaced reminder that he too should be sleeping. When the liquid numbers morphed into 3:00, he kissed Lauren once more and went downstairs to the kitchen.

Stomach growling, Webb opened the fridge in search of leftovers. The shelves were surprisingly empty: an open bottle of Charles Shaw chardonnay, a gallon of milk, some fresh fruits and broccoli. A plate of rosemary focaccia and a Tupperware-sealed bowl of banana bread pudding were on the middle shelf. Webb grabbed a piece of focaccia, the wine, and a jar of Cheez Whiz, and sat down at the table. He could imagine Lauren's disgusted face if she saw him dipping gourmet bread into artificial cheese dip, but the combination was surprisingly edible.

He took a swig of the chardonnay. The bottle had been open too long—the wine had soured—but he drank it anyway. He needed something to ease his nerves, to help him sleep, to make him forget the past fifteen months—the three first-trimester miscarriages, the three failed attempts at parenthood, the last one being the reason he and Lauren couldn't meet each other's eyes.

Despite their mutual desire for children, Lauren had taken the loss much harder than Webb—she spent the week following the miscarriage in the psychiatric unit of the hospital, undergoing treatment for depression. Webb doubted that Lauren's problems could be cured with the mild antidepressants the doctor prescribed, but he had visited her every evening, filling her room with Gerber daisies and Hallmark cards, assuring her that they would make it through this, they would find another way. Now Webb thought of the adoption literature he'd brought home, the brochures Lauren had trashed unopened.

He emptied the wine bottle and decided to sober up with a cup of peppermint tea. As he filled the kettle with water, he heard a faint scratching beneath the sink. The mouse-catching box had worked; he'd captured Lauren's pest. Webb lifted the lid of the small box, and a scared gray mouse met his gaze. This was the problem with humane traps—he never knew what to do with the rodent afterward. If he released it outside, it would be scraping at the walls again in twenty-four hours. But he couldn't bring himself to kill it either. Instead, he spooned Cheez Whiz onto the metal food platform and watched the mouse eat.

He finished making the tea and sat down, the box on the table in front of him. The mouse had stopped ramming the box walls and was nipping at the liquid cheese. As Webb sipped his tea, he imagined being trapped in a rodent box, wandering through the dark in search of sustenance and hearing a metal door slam shut behind him, trapping him in a windowless cell. What was worse, stumbling into a snap trap and ending it all immediately, or prolonging the inevitable locked up in a metal box, someone else's idea of "humane" treatment? Lauren's snap traps suddenly seemed like a far more sensible solution. But the damage was done now; Webb was stuck with one scared mouse and a metal box.

Knowing Lauren's kitchen must remain spotless, he rinsed his cup and placed it in the dishwasher. He picked up the box on the table and paused in front of the key rack by the door, debating between taking his bike or Lauren's car. Finally, he grabbed Lauren's keys off the hook and went outside. There was a field eight blocks away, and he would give the mouse a new home there.

As he fumbled to unlock the car door, clouds rolled across the moon and the shadowy light played across the brick walls of the house. In the upstairs window Webb saw a silhouette. Lauren was barely visible between the wispy curtains, but her hand was pressed to the glass, fingers splayed. It was an eerie gesture, as if she were reaching toward him but restrained by an invisible barrier. Box tucked underarm and keys in his fist, Webb lifted his hand to wave, but she did not repeat the motion. Instead she disappeared inside the room. For several minutes he waited for her to emerge from the house and ask where he was taking the car so late at night, but she never appeared.

Webb cranked the car and sat the box on the passenger seat. Inside the miniature jail, the prisoner scratched at the tin floor, slapped his tail against the walls. Several miles passed before Webb realized that he'd long since passed the field and was pulling onto I-80, heading east toward campus. The interstate was nearly deserted, most people having reached their spring break destinations or waiting until morning to depart. Webb exited at the Davis arboretum and turned down Old Davis Road, a new plan forming in his mind. When he reached the oak grove, he parked the car alongside the road and hiked into the woods, the box tucked under his arm.

The arboretum was Lauren's favorite place in Davis. She loved the white flower garden, where they had been married, and for years they had picnicked every Sunday afternoon in the gazebo there. It had been months since their last visit, and the park had blossomed in their absence, welcoming the first sunny days of spring. Even the oaks were vibrantly alive, their lush foliage creating a canopy that nearly blocked the moonlight.

Webb stopped in a small clearing and sat the box in the grass. The mouse had stopped moving inside, and when Webb opened the door it didn't come out. He cautiously lowered his head to the ground, half-expecting the rodent to lunge at his face. In the faint light he could just barely make out the mouse's silhouette, tucked into the back corner of the box. Webb tapped the side of the trap, but the mouse didn't move. He shook the box, banged on the top, but still the mouse huddled in the back. Finally, he called, "Come out, come out," and it moved timidly forward. He could see its black eyes glittering, its small wet nose sniffing, and he hit the box one last time. The mouse ran out and scurried into the grass. Webb expected it to disappear, but after running two or three feet it turned around and looked up at him. Webb could not remember making eye-contact with any animal, but the mouse was meeting his gaze without fear, without even curiosity. Several seconds passed, and then the mouse turned and scuttled away.

Webb picked up the trap and walked back to the road. He put the box back on the passenger seat and cranked the car. Instead of turning around, he continued east along I-80, wondering how long it would take Lauren to realize her car was missing.

ICE

Ginny didn't know which was worse—being wet or being cold. The ice had cracked so suddenly that she didn't understand what was happening until she was already in the lake, the broken ice forming a soupy film above her, the frigid water shocking any movement from her limbs. She had always wondered why people didn't fight to survive when they fell into frozen water, why they didn't pull themselves out. But now she knew. In the seconds she was underwater, she could already feel herself giving up, accepting the futility of struggle. And then Daniel was pulling her toward the surface, first by the hood of her anorak, then, when she was close enough, by hooking his wrists beneath her arms and lifting until she was sprawled belly-down on the ice beside him.

They sat on the beach afterward, a small fire burning between them. Daniel had peeled away her soaked clothes and wrapped his down sleeping bag around her. Her clothes were drying across a decaying tree trunk, and Daniel was making instant coffee from the water he'd heated in his collapsible sauce pan. He handed her a cup without looking, his dark eyes diverted toward the woods.

"We'll have to make camp here," he said. Without drinking his own coffee, he began emptying their matching navy blue backpacks, preparing to set up the tent at the edge of the beach several yards from the forest, where the ground was even and there was no chance snow-heavy branches would crash down on them in their sleep.

They were three days into a five-day hike through Colorado's Collegiate Peaks, and they hadn't seen anyone since they'd dropped their Jeep off at the ranger station. Ginny knew they were both lucky to be alive—she because Daniel had been there to rescue her, and he because he could have fallen in saving her. No one would have found them for days or weeks, maybe even until spring, when the lake would melt and backpacking through the gray-blue mountain ridges would become more popular. Then no one would have known that the happy couple at the bottom of the lake wasn't so happy, that Daniel was probably going to leave her when they returned to Kansas City, that she was going to lose her job at Harvey-Princeton, the liberal arts college where she taught psychology. The cynic in her thought that Daniel had only saved her because letting her drown would have been too easy a punishment for the crimes she had committed.

After hiking in near-silence all morning (*See those tracks, Look how clear the sky is, and Watch out for that rock*, their only topics of conversation), she had told him about her affair with Ethan while they were lunching at the top of a ridge that overlooked Lake Isabel. She had wanted to be deep enough into their trip that turning back was not an option, wanted to force him to listen to her side of the story. Whether he had listened or not she didn't know, for he hadn't said a word to her until just now, about setting up camp. When she had finished her story, he had leaned down, double-knotted the laces on his boots, put away his empty food baggies, and then stood and began the long trek down to the lake, consistently staying several yards ahead of her. He hadn't stopped moving since.

Now he was preoccupied with building camp, sweeping away dead leaves and sticks to have a smooth bed for the tent. At thirty-two, he was still extremely good-looking, lean and athletic from coaching high school basketball, his cropped black hair not yet beginning to thin, his hands still strong and youthful, not creased with the tiny lines that radiated from her knuckles and joints. It was unfair, made her angry even, that though she was more than two years his junior, she was already beginning to show signs of age, threads of gray weaving through her sandy brown hair, her hips spreading as her metabolism rebelled against a diet of fast food and Snickers bars, her skin blemished from a lifetime of too much sun and not enough moisturizer.

He finished setting up the tent and turned towards her, but his eyes were distracted, searching for something in the fading twilight that would take him away from this place, away from her. They'd been together for five years, married for almost two of them, and she felt like he was the only person she truly knew. He was completely predictable, she thought—eating corn flakes with two spoons of sugar every day for breakfast, buying gas exactly when the gauge reached the quarter-tank line, calling his old basketball coach at LSU the first Sunday of every month, using two different kinds of dandruff shampoo each time he showered. At school he was the “go-to” guy—always there to move a desk or break up a fight or judge a costume contest. He never forgot important dates or anniversaries. He was dependable.

He was the type of man everyone wanted to befriend—sweet, funny, and loyal—the type of man she had never thought would be interested in her. He was too good-looking, too charismatic. By the end of their second date she had related the entire history of why she was attracted to psychology—how she thought it would help her

understand why her mother had stayed thirty-four years with her father, a verbally abusive alcoholic, until he died of liver failure—and how she wanted to write a book on the effects of parental alcoholism on pre-adolescents, topics that normally prompted her dates to look for the exit. But Daniel had held her hand and nodded attentively.

Afterward, he lightened the discussion by telling her about the two consecutive state championships his team had won and describing each of the twelve players he coached. His kids, he called them. He was a natural storyteller, and his anecdotes were entertaining, but after five years of basketball stories she worried that this was all there was to Daniel, that they were wrong for one another, even though he often knew what she was thinking before she herself did. She wanted him to ask, *why did you do it, why did you walk out onto the lake, knowing that the ice was thin, or why'd you sleep with Ethan, of all people*, but she imagined he already knew the answers.

Ethan, a twenty-one-year-old junior at Harvey-Princeton, had taken her courses the past three semesters: Psychology of Women a year ago, Human Sexuality last spring, and Dream Psychology this fall. He had been a favorite student of hers, so much so that in their second semester together she had invited him over for dinner twice, and while she and Daniel were backpacking in the Andes last summer he had cared for their two dogs. He wasn't a psychology major—he was double-majoring in International Studies and Spanish—but he brought a humorous energy to her classes that reminded her of why she'd decided to teach psychology instead of practicing it.

They had first bonded over cappuccinos in the student union, not an unusual experience for Ginny, who believed in getting to know each of her students personally. She often met with them individually, on-campus or off, to discuss research projects or

graduate school plans. But she and Ethan had bumped into each other accidentally at the java bar, and their conversation quickly detoured from the typical student/teacher topics. At the time, he was a sophomore and had been in her class for a month, so they talked about his desire to be a Spanish-language translator and their mutual loves for exotic travel, salsa dancing, Borges—he was writing a paper on “The Circular Ruins”—and Bob Marley.

Marley was a new fascination of hers, discovered earlier in the summer when she and Daniel spent six weeks backpacking around Jamaica, soaking up the tropical sun and laidback attitude. Ethan had never been to Jamaica, but his admiration for Marley had been imparted years earlier by an older brother. As he explained Marley’s philosophies and legacies, the student became teacher, and Ginny left the union that day thinking it had been years since she’d had such a lively, engaging conversation. Although they didn’t share another one for the rest of the semester, Ginny was elated when she saw his name on her spring class roster. It was inevitable, really, when she thought about it. Something had ignited in her that day in the union, something that she hadn’t felt before, even with Daniel. Especially with Daniel.

Her friends were jealous of her. They had married too early, most of them right after college. Two were already divorced, one on her second marriage, and those that had stuck it through were endlessly griping about what pigs/jerks/lazy bums their husbands were. To them, Daniel—charming, adventurous, romantic—was the ideal husband. Ginny and Daniel did not have kids yet and were not close to their families, so they spent every school break backpacking through some of the world’s most beautiful places—Tanzania, Brazil, India, Costa Rica, New Zealand. They’d climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro,

hiked through the Himalayas, skied in the Alps. For spring break they were planning a trip down the Nile from Luxor to Cairo and a hike up Mt. Sinai. It was only when they were traveling together, just the two of them in a climate or culture completely foreign to their own, that she could convince herself that they were meant to be together. But when they returned home, when she had to watch his team play on Friday nights or chaperone a school dance because he had volunteered the two of them, part of her wished it were she on the dance floor, only instead of at a high school prom, in one of the dark, strobe-lit clubs she and her friends had frequented as undergrads, knocking back shots of Jäger and flirting free drinks out of the bartenders.

The only bars she and Daniel ever went to were in other countries because Daniel was afraid he would run into a player's father or, worse, one of his "kids" at the Kansas City bars. His fears were not irrational; the two or three times Ginny had maneuvered a night out with her girlfriends, free of their husbands and children, she had bumped into several of her students, only she didn't feel uncomfortable having them see her with a drink in her hand. She hoped having a life outside of class made her seem more real, more accessible.

Over the fire Daniel was framing a tepee out of logs, insulating the base with tree bark and pine straw to coax the flames higher. His movements were controlled, his eyes intense, his jaw locked.

"Can I have your coffee if you aren't going to drink it?" she asked.

He blinked, as if startled by the sound of her voice. He handed her the cup, and when she took it she purposely brushed her fingers against his. He didn't respond but took a step closer to the fire, his eyes never stirring from the flames.

The woods were dark now—she couldn't even see to the other side of the lake. Her back was growing cold, but her face and hands were warm from the fire, so she inched toward it, moving closer to Daniel in the process. He walked away under the guise of checking on her clothes.

“They're dry,” he reported. “You should probably get dressed.”

She stood up, the unzipped sleeping bag still wrapped mummy-style around her as he passed her clothes to her. He didn't offer to hold the sleeping bag around her while she dressed, so she let it fall to the ground, instantly feeling the shock of icy air against her naked body. In the warmth of her down cocoon she had forgotten how cold it was. He didn't look as she pulled on thermal underwear, jeans, sweater, sweatshirt, socks, boots—all stiffened with lake water and scratchy against her dry skin—and went to stand closer to the fire, her hands extended over it. She knew he was punishing her with silence, knowing that the psychologist in her needed to verbalize her feelings in order to deal with them. But this was one conversation she could not begin.

The affair—if she dared call it that—had happened so suddenly, so spontaneously. Just a ride home from class one Tuesday when her car wouldn't start, the spark plugs finally failing months after Daniel told her to have them changed. She had invited Ethan in for a glass of lemonade, and when she'd opened the front door for him, he had lightly placed his hand on her lower back and nodded for her to go ahead of him. That brief touch, feeling his finger tips through the thin material of her silk blouse, had aroused her enough that later, when he went to hug her good-bye, she did not back away, but pulled him closer, kissing him timidly at first, then more aggressively, not realizing until that moment how long she had been attracted to him.

For the next two months they met once a week at her house, always on Tuesdays when Daniel's team had games and she "worked late," confining themselves to her study, the only space she felt comfortable seeing Ethan in. She didn't know how long she expected the affair to last, but she had thought Ethan would be mature enough to keep their secret from his best friend, Charlie, another student of hers and the dean's son. Just before the Christmas break began, Dean Ridgmore had pulled her aside and said they would need to have a serious discussion after the break about her future with the college. As an untenured professor, she knew what that meant. Although there were no written rules concerning sleeping with students, her conduct had violated numerous unspoken ethical codes.

Although only eight years separated her from Ethan in age, she knew that her position as teacher and role model meant she had committed an unforgivable sin in Daniel's eyes. Two years ago another coach and close friend of Daniel's had gotten a student pregnant. The girl was of age, so no legal recourse could be sought against the man, but Daniel was so upset that he never spoke to his friend again. "Pedophiles, all of them," Daniel had said, followed by a list of swears she'd never before heard him utter. At the time she had agreed with him, not understanding how easy it was to lose sight of the gap between teacher and student, the gap between position and person. There wasn't a huge difference between her and Ethan, she had thought, and being with him was an adrenaline rush, a high. It wasn't about love or safety or predictability—until he did something she couldn't predict, which was telling Charlie. And then it was over.

Ginny turned away from the fire and walked back down to the water's edge. Through the dark she could make out where she had fallen in earlier, about fifteen feet

out. The jagged hole was visible in the moonlight sparkling on the water. It was three feet across, and surrounded by serpentine tracks made as she and Daniel were shimmying away from the hole. Maybe Daniel should have let her drown, she thought bitterly. At the very least, he could have made her wait awhile before saving her, made her contemplate her own death and the things she had done. But he didn't. He saved her from her recklessness, and even now she knew that he was watching her, ready to follow if she should try to cross the lake again.

Then she noticed a set of footprints, faintly distinguishable in the thin layer of snow on the ice. As she took a step toward them she saw that they were just a yard from the hole and were not hers, but Daniel's, firmly outlined in the snow, as if he had been standing there, not walking. Perhaps watching her flounder beneath the water, suspended between life and death. Perhaps wondering if she was worth losing his life for. Perhaps wondering if he should let her drown. In the moments in which that footprint had been formed, he had had doubts.

He called her name now, and she turned to see him standing near the fire, holding the cooking pan. She couldn't tell from his tone what he wanted—whether it was for her to come have supper, or whether he was worried about how close she was to thin ice. He was looking in her direction but seemed to be searching the dark for her face, as if the brightness of the flames were blinding him. She wondered if he could see where she was, and if he knew what she had seen. It didn't matter. For possibly the first time, it was she who could see him.

HEARTS OF SAN FRANCISCO

When the plane hit a wave of turbulence somewhere over the Sierra Nevada mountains, Erica was on her knees in the restroom, retching into the toilet. The jolt threw her forward, and she almost hit her head on the toilet's metal rim. A flight attendant banged on the door, ordering her back to her seat, and Erica wiped her mouth on a paper towel and flushed. She stood shakily, grasping the sink with her right hand and pushing against the wall with her left. In the mirror she glimpsed her reflection, brown eyes red-rimmed, skin pale and splotchy, lipstick smeared across her cheek. She leaned against the sink and tried to wipe off the burgundy streak that cut her from lip to jaw, but the lipstick was an all-day blend and left a bruise-like stain. Her hair was also hopeless, mousy brown cords of it springing in every direction, unmindful as she tried to comb it down with her fingers. Finally, she gave up and unlocked the door.

The plane lurched again, and Erica stumbled down the aisle to her seat, just five rows from the back. The man with the aisle seat gave her a nasty look and refused to get up, so she squeezed past him, butt in his face, and dropped with a sigh into her own seat by the window. Outside, the terrain was unchanged, the sky mostly clear. No storm on the horizon to indicate why the plane was rocking. Most people continued to listen to their iPods or watch movies on the screens in front of them, unrattled as the plane bounced and bumped against air currents 35,000 feet from the ground. Normally, Erica would not have been bothered by the turbulence either. Sometimes it made a smooth

flight more exciting, more unpredictable. But today she saw it as a sign that maybe she shouldn't have boarded the plane, shouldn't have decided to fly to San Francisco to meet her brother.

Adam didn't know she was coming. In fact, he didn't know she existed. Adopted at birth, Erica had grown up in Atlanta knowing she had three biological siblings somewhere in the world—a twin and an older brother and sister. Until she went looking for Adam, it had never occurred to her that some parents were not as truthful with their children, that some would try to hide the past. Her parents had always called her their “chosen angel,” the daughter they got to hand-select when most parents were stuck with what nature gave them. They had shared everything they knew about where she came from, and when she was eighteen, they had even helped her track down her twin, Meredith, who had been adopted by a wealthy family in Connecticut.

Meredith, too, had been told she was adopted and that she had a twin, although she'd never had the ambition to go looking for her. Meredith's parents had assumed Erica would not be interested in meeting her sister because Meredith had been in and out of rehab most of her life. In fact, Erica was the only sibling not addicted to drugs, and she had Meredith to thank. Their junkie mother had passed on her addiction to Adam and their older sister Stephanie, but since Erica and Meredith were twins, only one of them was born with a drug dependency.

The twins had first met two months before Erica planned to begin college at Chapel Hill, when she and her adopted mother, Lillian Ashford, flew to New Haven to meet Meredith's family, the Kings. Erica had been nervous meeting her twin for the first time, wondering if Meredith would resent her for being born addiction-free, but the twins

had shared an instant connection. The next week, Lillian returned to Atlanta alone, and for a year Erica lived with the Kings, helping Meredith stay sober and out of trouble. Then she enrolled at the University of Connecticut so she wouldn't be too far away, but without her constant presence, Meredith quickly fell apart. She went back to rehab—this time for cocaine—and it was three years before she was well enough for the twins to track down their oldest sibling, Stephanie, who was living in Queens.

Stephanie was twenty-eight, six years older than the twins and four older than Adam, when they met her. Unlike Erica and Meredith, her parents had not known about her siblings or her mother, and they had been far from tolerant of Stephanie's addictions. Kicked out at fourteen and homeless for four years, she had lived in shelters and with pimps and drug dealers. She'd never had the luxury of rehab or even drug counseling, and she supported her habit by hawking her abstract paintings outside Flushing Meadows, colorful bursts of oil and acrylic that she said were inspired by drug-induced hallucinations. Erica and Meredith wanted to take her back to Connecticut, rehab her in one of Meredith's clinics, but Stephanie refused to leave. She was happy, she said, right where she was, though she was glad to have met them and to have some understanding of her past. Two weeks later she was dead from an overdose, unintentional it seemed, but the shock was bad enough to shake Erica and Meredith from their previous goal of finding Adam.

It was another three years before Erica had the heart to restart the search. During that time she graduated from college and returned home to Atlanta to begin graduate work in counseling. Meredith tried getting an education as well, taking courses at a community college and earning a degree in paralegal studies, but when she succumbed to

her addiction once again, the Kings sent her to France for a year of alternative treatment. Erica hadn't seen her twin in nearly six months and was reluctant to meet Adam without her, but Meredith had insisted—if Erica found him, she should go to him.

In the end, Adam had been the easiest to find. Erica knew his name and that his parents had raised him in San Francisco, and she had run his information through a social networking site on the Internet. There was only one Adam Staschak in the San Francisco area, age twenty-seven, and one glance at his profile picture assured Erica that she had found her brother. They shared the same unruly brown curls, high cheekbones, and small brown eyes, although his were faded and sunken, much like Stephanie's had been.

Although Erica knew this was her brother, she was reluctant to contact him without knowing more, so she first found his parents, a Nob Hill couple with two biological children still living at home. Adam, they said, did not know he was adopted, did not know there was a biological reason for his addiction, and they preferred to keep it that way. He lived in the Mission district in a small house they owned, doing who knew what. He was unstable, always high, and could be a danger to himself or others if approached with this information. Erica, however, was undeterred. She disapproved of the Staschaks' secrets, believing that knowing the truth would not destroy her brother, but breathe new life into him, letting him know that his problems were not his fault.

But now that the plane was minutes from touching down, Erica was having her own doubts. She wished Meredith were beside her, that they were on this journey together as they had planned. Her insides were coiled in knots, warm tendrils of nausea crawling over her face and neck, and she lowered the window blind to block out the

California sun. As the plane hit another bump, she reached for the bottle of water she'd stowed in the seat pocket in front of her, anything to cool her down and calm her nerves.

She had Adam's address in her backpack, his picture, a map of the city, and the scrapbook she had begun compiling seven years before, but no definite proof that they were biologically connected, should he ask for verification. The scrapbook contained memories she had collected of her sisters, including the boarding pass from her first trip to meet Meredith and photographs of Stephanie and her paintings from the weekend she spent in Queens. These pictures, the obvious family resemblance between the four siblings, was the only proof she had to show Adam. That and the journal she had kept ever since she and Meredith began searching for Stephanie, including all of the contacts and private detectives they had enlisted for help along the way.

Erica drummed her fingers nervously on the journal's brown leather cover as the plane skidded to a halt on the runway and finally stopped alongside San Francisco International Airport. All too quickly, she was out the plane and on the curb outside the airport, stepping into a cab. Used to Atlanta's airport, with its distant concourses, trains, and moving sidewalks, she'd had no time to reflect on her new location, on the reason she was there. She didn't even have any baggage to claim on the lower level—all she had brought was the backpack she'd carried on board.

She had no hotel to check into, no friends to visit, just a single destination in mind, and when she told the cab driver Adam's address, he nodded without speaking. They drove for almost half an hour, weaving up and down the San Francisco streets, but Erica was too distracted to admire the city around her. Finally, they passed Dolores Park and the cab turned down a side street and stopped in front of a blue Victorian with white

trim. The house was in need of several coats of paint, but it could have been a very nice house, Erica thought. She asked the cabbie to wait and stepped out of the car, hitching her backpack up on one shoulder.

Erica climbed the steep steps to the front porch, a narrow space with no plants or furniture. The floor creaked beneath her shoes as she stepped onto the edge of the porch and leaned towards the front door. There was no doorbell, so she knocked once, lightly on the frame of the screen door, and waited. No noise of footsteps came from inside; in fact, the house looked shut up, all of the shades drawn tight, no signs of life. Erica was beginning to wonder if she had the address right when she saw a folded sheet of paper that had fallen behind the screen door. Erica opened the door and picked up the paper. It was slightly weathered, stiff from the heat, but she couldn't tell how long it had been there. The message inside was scrawled in green ink: "C. J., gone to the Union Square heart today. -A." Erica copied the message into her journal and replaced it where it had fallen. She didn't know how long ago Adam had written the note or who C. J. was, but she had to go to this Union Square heart just to see.

The cab driver did not seem at all perplexed when she asked him to take her there. He drove toward downtown, the buildings gradually rising around them, and finally stopped in front of the largest Macy's Erica had ever seen. A concrete square sat to their right, full of people eating lunch under palm trees or sunning on the steps.

"One of the hearts is around that corner," the cab driver said. "Across from the Westin. Want me to wait again?" He was enjoying their scavenger hunt, the meter continuing to run, the fare approaching sixty dollars.

"*One of the hearts?*" she asked, reaching for her wallet.

“They’re all over the place,” he replied. “But the most famous one is there. Just read the sign.”

Feeling slightly discouraged, Erica paid him and stepped out onto the sidewalk. The sun was blinding and she shielded her eyes, having forgotten her sunglasses at home. Instead of walking around the corner, she decided to cut through the middle of the square, weaving around professionals on their lunch breaks and young women surrounded by piles of shopping bags. Union Square appeared to be the shopping district, surrounded by super-sized versions of the stores she knew from home: Saks Fifth Avenue, Macy’s, Victoria’s Secret, Louis Vuitton, Niketown. Erica felt underdressed in her comfy traveling clothes, jeans and an old college t-shirt, but no one paid her even a passing glance as she climbed the steps toward the Westin side of the square.

The heart, she could see now, was directly in front of her, a puffy red sculpture on a concrete block. On the Powell Street side an artist had painted a scene of San Francisco Bay and the Golden Gate Bridge, the hills of Sausalito rising in the background under a clear blue sky. Next to the heart was a plaque, and, to Erica’s surprise, she read that the heart had been painted by Tony Bennett and was one of 130 heart sculptures exhibited around the city.

Since there was no other heart in the square, Erica was sure that Adam had meant this one in his note to “C. J.,” but she did not see her brother anywhere nearby, nor did she know why he would have been drawn to this particular spot. It could have been days or weeks since he had written that note. Where was she supposed to go from here?

“They’re really beautiful, aren’t they?” a voice said from behind.

Erica turned and came face-to-face with a smiling blonde woman in her mid-thirties.

“You seem lost. Do you need directions?” the woman asked.

Erica shook her head, surprised at the woman’s hospitality. “I’m just looking for my brother.”

“Oh, is he lost?” The woman seemed genuinely concerned.

“I’m not sure. There was this note saying he would be here, but I’m not sure when he wrote it. Is there any reason he would choose this place? I mean, does it draw a certain kind of person?”

The woman seemed confused. “You mean besides bums and street musicians? This is a tourist area, so it draws plenty of those, but I’m not really sure what you mean.”

Emboldened, Erica took the picture of Adam from her backpack. “This is what he looks like. Have you seen him around here before?”

The woman studied the photograph, and then her face flushed. “Yes, actually. He’s a musician, plays guitar and sings Bob Dylan songs. I eat lunch here everyday and he’s here about once a week—on Mondays, usually.”

It was Tuesday. Could she really have missed him by just one day?

Erica thanked the woman and listlessly walked back into the square. She sat down on a bench and pulled her journal out of her backpack, flipping immediately to Adam’s note. “Gone to the Union Square heart today.” That was yesterday, but where was he today? She knew now that her brother was a street musician, that he played guitar and liked the same kind of music she did. He came to this square to make money from tourists. Had he gone to a different square today?

Erica ran back to the street corner and hailed a taxi. She needed to find more hearts.

By five o'clock, Erica had been to seven other hearts and still hadn't found Adam. However, at a yellow heart in the Yerba Buena Gardens, she met a man who told her that there were no longer 130 hearts left in the city, most of them having been auctioned off after the exhibit ended in 2004, and that he had in fact seen Adam performing on multiple occasions near this very heart. Her spirits buoyed, Erica went back to her waiting taxi. Her cab driver, Tom, the one who had been driving her all afternoon, knew the location of one more heart, a blue cloud-covered sculpture in Huntington Park in front of Grace Cathedral. Although doubtful that her brother would be playing so far from the center of tourism, Erica decided to make this heart her last stop. She was tired and hungry and needed to begin thinking about a place to stay for the night.

As the car climbed Powell Street again, she dozed in the backseat, mentally and physically exhausted. Images of the different hearts haunted her dreams, and she didn't notice when the car stopped on the south side of the park. Tom prodded her and said, "Do you think that's him?"

Beside the blue heart, a tall, thin young man with cropped brown hair hunched over his guitar, crooning passionately, his eyes squeezed shut. Erica took her picture of Adam out of her backpack and compared it with the man. Although he did not have her brother's dark curls, she felt deep down that he had to be Adam, so she thanked Tom for

his help and paid him most of her remaining cash. Her heart thumped as she opened her car door and stepped out onto the curb.

For a minute she stood at the base of the steps in front of the musician, watching him sway left and right as he played, the guitar held tight against his body, his voice soothing yet strong. There were a few mothers playing with their children in the park behind him, a student reading on a blanket, a homeless man lying on a bench, but the young man wasn't playing for them. He was playing for himself. Locked in his own musical world, he had shut out everything around him.

Erica climbed the steps to where he stood, and he finished his song. His eyes opened, blinked rapidly, and settled on her face. His eyes were light-hearted, clear, focused. No half-moons darkened the skin beneath them. They weren't bloodshot, tired, or sunken, as Meredith's often were, yet Erica knew this man was her brother—they shared the same bone structure, the same dimpled chin. She tossed her last few dollars into his open guitar case.

"Thanks," he said, smiling. "You don't have to do that, though. I don't do it for money."

"What do you do it for?" Erica asked, leaving the money where it lay.

"I enjoy playing. It makes me happy."

"It makes me happy, too," she said. "Hearing you."

Adam thanked her again, and, thinking the conversation was over, went back to playing his guitar, but Erica interrupted him.

"You play at the heart in Union Square sometimes, right? And in the Yerba Buena Gardens?"

Adam nodded. “You’ve heard me before, then.”

“No,” she said.

He looked at her warily and fidgeted with his guitar. “Do I, uh, know you from somewhere?” He took a step away from her.

Erica shook her head. “Could you play me some Dylan?” she asked. “Do you know ‘Simple Twist of Fate’?”

“Sure. It’s one of my favorites.” He bent his head over his guitar, plucking at the strings, and then he began to strum.

Erica sat down at the top of the steps and listened to him sing: “They sat together in a park as the evening sky grew dark, she looked at him and he felt a spark.” She closed her eyes and leaned against the rail, shutting out everything but her brother’s voice. Her brother. After years of imagining this moment, it felt surreal having him so close, yet in all of her dreams she’d never thought he would be like this—sober, happy, independent. Unless his parents had lied to her, even they did not know he had reformed—he had done this without their help, without her help.

She didn’t know exactly what she had expected, but somehow she thought he would be more like Meredith, more like Stephanie, in need of her support. She had often imagined his happiness at learning the truth about his history, but the man in front of her was already happy, and, knowing what had happened after meeting Stephanie, she couldn’t jeopardize his future just because she wanted to give him a past.

While Adam continued to sing, eyes stitched shut, Erica stood to leave. She knew that Meredith wouldn’t understand why she couldn’t tell Adam who she was, that she would think the entire trip had been a waste, but Erica knew that even if she wasn’t

leaving with a brother, she had gotten what she came for. Before she turned to go, she took out her camera and snapped a single photo to finish her scrapbook, a full-length portrait of Adam with his guitar, the fading sunlight a golden halo over his head, the shadow around his feet heart-shaped and growing.