

WE ALL FALL DOWN

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WE ALL FALL DOWN

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A Thesis

Submitted to

the Graduate Faculty of

Auburn University

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the

Degree of

Master of English

Auburn, Alabama

May 9, 2009

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THESIS ABSTRACT

WE ALL FALL DOWN

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Master of Arts, May 9, 2009
(B.A., University of Alabama at Birmingham, 2006)

66 Typed Pages

Directed by Judy R. Troy

On a general level, *We All Fall Down* is a collection of stories that is unified by the theme of personal connections between family, friends, and significant others. Often, their driving force is exploring what happens when something fundamentally changes the meaning that someone has to you.

All of these stories are about (and sometimes narrated by) women. They focus on what it means to be a woman in this culture - how you find your identity, and what it means to fulfill or not fulfill the expectations of those you care about. These stories are about young women, and thus are also about growing up. In these stories, the main characters have what might be called “adult realizations,” with the implication that after the events of the story end, the characters’ lives may be permanently changed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Professor Judy Troy for assistance with the writing and editing process and Dr. Jonathan Bolton and Dr. Michelle Sidler for their assistance and suggestions. Thanks are also due to her husband Thomas and her family for their support for the duration of the project.

MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers

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The Liar

It was not the first time that Renee Kendall had lied, but it was the first time she had outright invented someone who didn't exist. Neighbors whose dogs needed looking after while they were out of town—a convenient excuse for being late to work—didn't count. Neither did the two or three great-aunts and grandmas she'd made up to keep from failing classes in college. She'd never given them names, hometowns, had never imagined what they looked like.

This was different. Kevin Abercrombie was twenty-eight to Renee's twenty-five. He was an Army man stationed in Adak Station, Alaska. He had sandy blond hair, stood at a well-muscled 6'2" and he was absolutely pining away for his next two week leave to Birmingham. And she was engaged to him.

Renee knew it was wrong to lie. She remembered the first time that she'd gotten caught lying; it was when she broke her mother's ceramic cat figurine and tried to blame it on her little brother. Somewhere along the way, though, lies had just lost the fear factor. What did it matter if you got caught? Everyone did it, and she was only filling in the gaps. If nobody knew any better, it wouldn't matter if she made her own life a little less isolated and unadventurous. Call it meeting other people's expectations creatively.

The words had come out of her mouth easily this time – in the break-room, over a cup of stale coffee. Once the excitement had worn off, she'd been a little shaky and

retreated to the bathroom. She splashed cool water from the tap on her face. It seemed to steel her, so that by the time she rolled down the rough brown paper towel to dry it, she was no longer nervous. She was inevitably going to rub most of the makeup off her face, but it didn't matter much if she was just going to go sit behind her desk. She hated the way it made her look. No amount of makeup could take away the fact that the desk itself seemed to have powers: to deemphasize her willowy frame, to make her smart office clothes look gray and dumpy, to physically steal some of the snap out of her alert blue eyes.

The desk seemed far away now, perhaps because she was sitting on top of a story that had grown exponentially in size.

Her parents were planning a huge wedding for them—that worked because nobody really knew anything about Renee's parents, so she could tell them that her mother came from money, and her father was an engineer.

Her father was a plumber. Her mother ran a tiny baking company out of their basement that barely managed to break even each month.

She made her way back through the winding sea of desks, each topped by a smart little Mac. As she reached her desk, she sat down in its rolling chair carefully, almost regally. The relative silence was satisfying. She heard only mouse-clicking and keyboard-tapping—the signs that resignation had set in after the lunch break. Three o'clock was always when the clock made its death march. The final two hours seemed like twelve, or like the whole day rolled into 120 agonizing minutes. But once they were over, she could go home to her dry chardonnay and her leftover stroganoff and an entire

evening to finish re-reading *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches*.

“Hey Renee!”

The voice came in a hoarse whisper that jolted her out of her thoughts.

Julie was leaning back in her chair, leaning around Kacy's empty cubicle (she was out on maternity leave). Her thin blond bob swung forward as she rolled her chair an inch closer.

“Yeah?”

“Lemme see it,” Julie said, gesturing towards Renee's hand.

The ring had been an impulse buy from behind the counter at Belk's—fake, but it passed well enough for tasteful, she thought. And it had fit into her story rather well when someone had noticed it.

“Ooooh...” Julie cooed her cool fingertips pressing against Renee's hand as she looked at the ring. Dutifully, its stone sparkled even under the fluorescent lights.

Renee shrugged. “Yeah, it's nice enough... the real one's nicer, though.”

“Wha...” Julie looked up, her eyes widening in interest.

“Kev doesn't like for me to wear the real one unless we're going out somewhere nice. It's just that,” she said, leaning closer and dropping her voice, “it was expensive, and he worries about me being here in the city by myself, and... well, you know how people are.”

“Yeah,” Julie said, nodding sympathetically, “I can see why he'd be worried.”

Julie dropped her hand and Renee pulled it back into her lap. She was on a roll now, the words coming out of her mouth before she even had time to think about whether or not they sounded believable.

“It must be pretty hard for you,” Julie said, her gray eyes reflecting seriously for a moment. “I don't know how I could stand my fiancé being away like that.”

Julie was engaged to Derrick—it seemed like forever. People were always joking about Derrick using it as a way to keep her quiet. Renee just shrugged.

“Oh, it's hard, sure, but I know that when he gets out, it's gonna be just him and me... so I've got that to look forward to, you know?”

“Awww!” Julie's face lit. For whatever else Julie might have been—a little plain, almost too reserved—she seemed to possess a capacity for genuine empathy. It was something Renee could appreciate.

Suddenly, Julie scooted back to her desk, her chair scraping across the thick gray carpet only with effort. The bosses were making their 3:30 rounds early today, it looked like, so everyone was pretending not to be interested in their game of solitaire, or whatever article they'd been reading online. Renee scooted back under her desk and clicked diligently over to the design project she'd been working on before she'd gotten distracted after lunch. It was a chair, or rather it would be when it was done. There wasn't anything particularly exciting about it, but it was stylish enough—that was all B&R Designs asked for when it came to their home furnishings, which would eventually go on to be sold in big box stores across the country.

Her eyes stuck on a crumb beneath the translucent S key. Corporate would die if they knew anyone was eating at their computer. The last time Renee had done it was when she stayed late a couple of weeks ago to finish something for a deadline. She wondered whether it was the pot pie crust, or a piece of oatmeal cookie, but there was no way to tell. But the closer she examined it, the less she thought about it—another thought soon grew much larger than her scientific inquiry.

That look of squealy happiness on Julie's face had been enough to set her off. People had mounds of sympathy for this sort of thing. So much sympathy that the rumors that she'd cheated on her last boyfriend (she hadn't – he had cheated on her, with someone right here in the office) might just outright disappear.

Maybe this little incident had an upside after all.

The next day came too quickly, but at the very least, Wednesday was halfway through the week. Renee had found herself more eager than usual to get out of bed. Even the white cheddar vending machine popcorn didn't taste stale today, not as it always seemed to when Renee wasn't going to get her lunch break. She was all smiles, even able to enjoy the sun coming through the smudgy window, despite the fact that a November wind had kicked up outside, and was banshee-shrieking around the buildings.

She popped another kernel into her mouth, enjoying the chewiness, before she noticed that her cup of water was almost empty. As she stood up and moved airily over towards the water cooler, she noticed Shelly.

Normally, that would have sent her skittering back to her cubicle. The name

seemed to invoke dread the office round for the singular fact that Shelly was a renowned busybody.

Not today. Without so much as girding her loins for the encounter (however one did that), Renee jabbed her cup under the cooler and smiled politely.

“Hi, Shelly.”

“Hey Renee,” came the response. But it was only a moment before Shelly, all smiles, folded her arms and adopted a conspiratorial posture. “So what's this I hear about you getting married?”

If nothing else, the woman was blunt.

“Oh, well, we've just really set a date—he gets out of the army in June, and we thought it would be best to wait, even though he could get leave if he really needed to.”

“Well, June weddings are the best ones, I think,” Shelly said with a smile.

Renee laughed.

“I wish you'd tell my mom that. She's having a time finding a venue for the reception!”

“Don't even worry about that.” Now Shelly had a hand on Renee's forearm. “I know a handful of places—and I can pull some strings if you need me to, you just say the word.”

“We'd sure appreciate it. I--”

“So what's he like?”

Shelly cut in without really seeming to notice that Renee had been mid-sentence. For a moment, Renee was fishing without bait, trying to reconstruct the story she'd told everyone yesterday.

“Well... His name's Kevin Abercrombie, he's three years older than me... He's the son of one of the business partners that my dad's engineering firm worked for last year. I met him at the Christmas party—let me tell you, I usually hate going to those things, but it was just like we were meant to find each other there.”

“Honey, I *knew* you'd find you a good one. That Dave was just a waste of your time... Abercrombie, huh? Did you pick him out of that catalog? I heard he was cute!”

Suddenly, it was like a door had opened. Renee couldn't see too far beyond the slice of light that was slowly growing in size, but her adventurousness was getting the better of her. Why the hell not?

“To tell you the truth,” Renee said, lowering her voice, “Kevin doesn't really like to make a big deal out of this, but his great uncle helped get that company started.”

“Abercrombie and Fitch?!” Shelly's face reminded her of a fan-tail goldfish.

Renee nodded.

“Yeah... he sends Kev an insane check for his birthday every year, but I really think all that embarrasses him. His family likes to play it up, but he's just so much *simpler* than that.”

Shelly still hadn't recovered from the information overload. Her jaw was still hanging open, as though filing away all those tidbits had overloaded the muscles that would have otherwise fastened it shut again.

“Well, I better get back to work. Talk to you later, Shelly!”

Renee had to suppress a small, triumphant smile until her back was turned. She was beginning to wonder why she had quit her theater group in college—*she* was starting to believe this guy was real.

The end of the week had brought an impromptu get-together at Miranda's apartment. Deadlines had blazed Thursday and Friday to a close, and, to boot, it was the third anniversary of Miranda's divorce. This was cause enough for celebration. For once, Renee had felt like coming along.

She didn't usually enjoy this sort of thing—the crowd, the pressure to fit in—a whole evening full of fruity cocktails and feminine one-upsmanship, as she had once said when explaining what her mother called her “antisocial behavior.” Where she had expected sympathy, though, she had received it in abundance. The past three days had almost made her into a people person.

“So why didn't Derrick come?” someone was asking Julie.

“He said he didn't feel like hearing chickens cluck all night,” Julie responded. She was engulfed in a hail of rowdy boos and proclamations of Derrick's newly earned outcast status.

Outside, Renee was trudging back up the concrete stairs to the door, having had no luck starting her car. It'd been driving funny for the past week or so, but evidently had decided not to wait until pay-day to finish its drawn-out death scene, as she had previously requested of it. Several faces turned towards the door as she opened it.

“Any luck?”

That was Miranda, from the kitchen, where she was making cider.

“Nope, looks like it's dead.”

A few people consoled her, but she could barely make out the words from underneath the cloud of irritation that felt like it was hovering oppressively. She plopped

back down on the ottoman she'd been sharing with Julie before, resting her chin in her hand. After fending off another Derrick quip with a smile, Julie turned her sympathetic eyes to Renee.

“Do you need me to drive you home? I'm not going to drink much more than what I've already had, so it'd be no problem.”

Renee didn't look up. “Don't worry about it. I called my mom to come get me so nobody'd have to cut their night short. She lives like two neighborhoods over.”

She also went to bed religiously at 10pm every night, which meant that Renee's party was, for all intents and purposes, over. Conversation faded into a dull background roar, most of her thoughts now focused on where on earth she was going to find the money to pay for a new alternator in her crappy Ford Focus.

The knock at the door jerked her upright like a cattle prod to the ribs. Nobody'd knocked all night, so it had to be her mother—only she'd told her mother to call instead of coming up.

As someone opened the door, Renee caught sight of her. She had the rather uncharitable thought that the woman would ask Death itself to wait so she could put on some lipstick before she had to go. Renee waved lamely, hoping that would stave off any urge her mother might have to start a conversation by reminding her that she was here for a purpose.

But Renee had never been lucky, and her mother had never been quiet. As she started getting her things together, she heard a characteristically too-excited introduction.

Miranda, like Renee, had lived in the South all her life – which meant that she'd developed from assiduous training, most likely from her own mother, the ability to make

small-talk. Renee, trying to keep from visibly cringing, met this sight as she turned from the stack of purses and scarves on the table.

“...so how's the wedding planning going?”

Renee didn't have time to react—now more than ever would have been a fantastic time to come up with the one-liners she was always spouting in her head.

“Wedding?” her mother was saying, her eyebrows quirked in curiosity. “No matter how much I'd like him to, my son Alex just isn't ready to get serious with his girlfriend. I wish he'd pick this one of all of them, though.”

It didn't make sense to Miranda, who couldn't suppress a strange look.

“Oh she meant Renee, Mrs. Kendall.” That was Julie, as always, attempting to be helpful, to prevent embarrassment where it was possible.

And then it was her mother's turn to look confused.

“Well... I'm sure Renee would have told me if she was getting married...” The nervous laugh seemed to come from the idea that she might've chosen not to.

“I'll just come back and get my car tomorrow,” Renee said.

Nobody looked at her. Nobody answered.

Renee didn't find it necessary to think as she moved towards the door, purse clutched underneath her arm. She was practically clattering down the stairs, carried on adrenaline. Her mother was panting trying to keep up.

They didn't speak until they were into the parking lot.

“Renee... are you getting married?”

“*No*, mom!”

Her mother grabbed her by the back of the arm. She'd always called it the Church

Pinch when she was little, and even now, it had the ability to make her squirm. Her mother's eyes were positively fierce.

“Then what the hell did you tell your friends?!”

Renee's mother only swore, even mildly, when she was furious.

At no point in her adult life had Renee felt less mature than she did right now. Sitting in the basement of her parents' church – Vestavia Hills Baptist Church, which they had attended assiduously since 1973 – with a self-esteem support group was outright humiliating. There weren't even any windows to stare out of, not that a bunch of dead trees would have made a good excuse to stop paying attention.

She was sorely tempted just to stare at the wall, and ignore all this talking. It wasn't her idea of fun, group therapy, but it had been her therapist's idea. Her therapist, of course, was her mother's friend, who squeezed her into the already full group as a favor after her mother's lecture was over.

“Normal” other than “self-esteem issues” had been Rachel's conclusion. Rachel would have made that conclusion no matter what, since it meant having another warm body in her clutches for two hours a week, at 180 bucks a pop.

If having self-esteem issues wasn't normal, Renee figured she knew a lot of nutcases, but she'd followed the therapy advice just to get her mother to chill out. She suspected, somehow, that it had a lot more to do with her mother finding it personally insulting that Renee had made a spectacle out of herself while she still carried the Kendall reputation. Or maybe she liked the idea of Kevin and a wedding even more than Renee had started to.

She hadn't told anyone a reason yet, and truthfully, she preferred to keep what reason she had to herself. It wasn't that she felt like lying was fun, or easy. It was really neither, and she knew that, had known that even when she'd constructed Kevin out of the flimsy papier-maché of imagination.

It was because of the communion. Finally, other people understood her, and she them—or at least they acted like they did. For three days, Renee had been one of the girls. Though even more of a fantasy, she wondered if, had she kept it up, her mother would have stopped fretting over her lack of a social life and what seemed to be her low prospect of getting married before thirty.

They were nearly around the circle with introductions. Renee didn't know how she'd ended up last, and sincerely hoped she wasn't expected to remember these people's names, because she had only the vaguest idea of what they were. She didn't know their stories, either, but constructing stories for each of these people based on appearance had been an amusement while the group leader was talking. Finding out the truth over the next eight weeks of meetings would no doubt be disappointing.

One thing that Renee had learned in the past week and a half was that truth was always disappointing in the face of what you could have, *might* have.

It was her turn.

“Hi everyone...” she said, not seeming nervous. Everyone else would be too nervous to notice that. “Um... my name is Renee Kendall, but most people call me Neely.”

Nobody have ever called her Neely in her life.

“And where are you from?” the group leader (Rachel's office colleague, Necia) prompted.

Renee's eyes scanned the group. “Well, I've lived here for a lot of my life, but I was born in Holland.”

It was a good thing Rachel wasn't leading this therapy group. That one probably would have gone straight back to her mother—if Rachel hadn't called her on it in front of the entire group.

“Good,” Necia said, nodding. “Everyone welcome Neely to our circle.”

“Hi, Neely!”

They'd only been told to introduce themselves, to say their names and where they were from. Renee didn't have the patience for this kind of thing, and anyway, did any of these people actually believe they were going to improve their self esteem by sitting around talking about their problems with a bunch of people they hardly knew? Nobody was going to make a magic turn for the better, so Renee didn't see the need to try. She folded her hands calmly in her lap, turning her eyes attentively upwards for the next instruction.

We All Fall Down

It was a brutal-hot summer day the last time I saw Holly. The chrome on the grill of her dirty beige Mazda caught the sun and nearly blinded me as she pulled into the drive, and we hugged casually, as if it hadn't been over a year since the last time we saw each other. She was sweating as she came in the door of my parents' ill-maintained Pelham townhouse, complaining about how much worse the heat was in Alabama than in Kentucky. She'd moved there on a colorguard scholarship to Louisville; I'd stayed here and eventually ended up at UAB – half an hour down I-65 from where I lived – after one miserable semester at a private college.

“Mind if I get a glass of water?” she asked, dropping her huge black duffel bag on the floor in the living room. She casually averted her eyes from the deeply stained carpet that my mother never cleaned.

I made some sort of gesture that meant yes, not that she was waiting for one. It had always been the rules at my parents' house that if you wanted something, you got it for yourself. Everyone was welcome, and most of them treated the place like their home—except me, but that's another story.

She took a long sip from the plastic glass she'd grabbed out of the cabinet before saying anything.

“You know my mom wanted to see me this week... Not sure I have the patience to deal with *that* shit.”

That, at least, I could identify with. Neither of us got along famously with our mothers. Holly, at least, didn't have to see hers every day like I did. That was the elephant in the room at this particular moment, an elephant that I would have happily kept under the worn throw-rug, had Holly not pointed it out.

“Christ, Shannon,” she said, “What are you still doing here? What happened to... what was it, Vancouver?”

“Seattle.”

“Yeah, that's right.” She paused, looked at me, shook her head. “You should come visit me some time. You've got stuff to *say*. It's wasted here.”

I looked down at the bland linoleum, feeling cornered by my friend of nearly ten years. She was a good eight inches shorter than me, but I was the one who was feeling tiny. She leaned back, done with the sermon, and as her spine bumped against the counter, her purse turned over. At the noise, my eyes caught on the plastic prescription bottle that fell out. I couldn't read the neat, square type. She caught it before it rolled too far and carelessly jammed it back in.

I wanted to say something to change the subject. I didn't want her to think I was nosy, even though I was. But Holly didn't seem bothered in the least, and rolled her eyes.

“They've got me on anti-depressants,” she said, not identifying who *they* were. “I guess the pills are supposed to even me out or something.”

“Yeah? How's that going?”

I didn't realize how stupid it sounded until I'd already said it.

“How does it always go?” she said.

“Right.”

I laughed sheepishly. She seemed alright with me laughing, and I remember wondering why that was. There wasn't anything funny about it, not her being on pills, or the way it seemed like all of us, all the people who had mattered to me a year ago, were suddenly struggling to cope.

That was the first inkling I had that maybe Louisville wasn't the solution to all of her life's problems, and Seattle probably wouldn't have been for mine either. Holly certainly seemed to be afloat in the same old sea of unanswerable questions that she had been before she ever left.

Holly never smoked alone; I never smoked. But the next day, I found myself outside as soon as she woke up (around 11:30), smoking a cigarette and sitting on the hood of her car. That was when she told me, matter-of-factly, that six months ago she had given up her scholarship and quit school. Holly had gone to school for a theater degree, so she could produce plays. I could have imagined her doing it, bullheaded as she was. I squinted at her in the midday sun, a drop of sweat rolling down the side of my face, uncomfortably close to my eye.

“So how are you gonna produce without a degree?”

She laughed at me then, and called me *bouge*. It was the term she and her Kentucky anarchist friends used for anything that smacked of “the establishment.” What I'd meant to ask was how she expected to do what she wanted to do without the

knowledge to do it. Try as I might, I couldn't see that there was a better place than a university to get that kind of experience, but then, I'd always bought what I'd been told about an education instantly catapulting you into a good job, into everything you've ever wanted.

“I don't know what I want to do, that's the beauty of it. I get to take every day as it comes right now, and I don't have to worry about getting up, or missing classes or tests... none of that *bullshit*, Shannon. Because make no mistake, it is *bullshit*.”

I had to admit, it sounded pretty good to me at this moment, when I had spent a year buried in tests and papers and self-doubt during a brief stint as a Psychology major (there would later be another identity crisis that caused me to return to English, my first love). I called myself cynical, but it seemed to me that Holly had gone beyond that.

We were quiet. Over the years, we'd spent night after night lying in bed talking to each other until five in the morning, and she'd always had a keen appreciation for the silence that comes after a deep revelation. When we were younger, those moments were comfortable. They were times when I felt kinship with her, when my existence as an only child suddenly seemed much less lonely, because there were sisters, just not the blood-related kind.

She was speaking from a realm I couldn't even see the path to, much less live in, understand. There were six inches between us on the warm hood of that car, but I felt like I was locked in a dark room by myself. I didn't know what had changed, only that a river had been cut between our existences, where before there had been only a stream, easily crossed with a jump.

She didn't seem to notice as she leaned over to scratch her leg. I found myself, once again, staring at her as though she were a complete stranger, watching her natural motions as though I'd never been in her presence before.

She flicked her cigarette to ash it, looking out across the scrubby, dry yard. But she kept clawing at her leg, and it made me think of mosquito bites, the way I used to scratch them until they came to a head when I was a kid. The seam at the ankle of her loose pants lifted three inches, maybe four, and then I noticed the cuts, criss-crossing up and down her leg. They were long and thin, scarred over with faint ribbons of red. They seemed fresh, but not so fresh that they were still bleeding. They went up as far as I could see.

We finished smoking in silence. I stamped out my cigarette with the toe of my ratted Converse All-Star, but she let hers roll into the seam of the driveway still burning.

The air of the house hit me full in the face as I opened the door. I shut it behind me and let her walk into the living room ahead of me. My stomach turned, along with the words in my head as I searched for an opening.

“Holly, what happened to your leg?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

I didn't look away from her. I watched her pupils dilate over ten long seconds.

“Uh...”

She'd been a cutter in high school, hiding under long-sleeved shirts year-round when things got bad for her. I never understood why she did it, even though I was one of the few people who knew. But then, she'd never asked me to understand; she had shown her scars to me like they were combat medals. I never understood what war she was fighting.

“It's rough right now for me,” she said, sighing. It seemed impolite to look at her, so I stared at the wall while she talked in a low, soft voice. “I went up there thinking things were gonna be easy, only to find out I know jack about what I want, about who I am. So I quit school to find it all out, but there's nowhere for me to live. I'm crashing with my friends right now, but they want me to save up on a deposit for my own place. I don't have a job, man, there's *shit* jobs up there.”

Holly always started talking like an old hippie when she was bitter. She looked at me through brown eyes that held a wild expression, like an animal about to grab the first thing it can between its jaws. Her energy was frantic—it seemed like her hands were shaking, even though they weren't.

“C'mere,” I found myself saying, without thinking about the need to say it. “Let me at least put some gauze on that so it won't get infected.”

She followed me silently. I've never been a commanding person, but I've always been the ear, the one people go to when they need to spill out all the frustration, all the latent anxiety with the world that comes with growing up in suburban Alabama and not buying into the dream. People like Holly and me wouldn't ever be satisfied with a white picket fence and 2.5 children, but that's why we'd had each other. Only, even then, it seemed like that wasn't enough to keep us from splitting at the seams.

I focused on her injury while I fixed her up, using the old tube of Neosporin that never seemed to run out, and had been sitting in my parents' first aid kit for years. Later, I wondered, as I'd often wondered, exactly what Holly must have looked like on the inside if she had to make her outsides look like that to make the feelings go away.

A week after she left, I heard from her that the cuts had healed. Her voice came over the line from Louisville full of its same old sarcasm, like those moments of vulnerability had never happened except in my dreams.

“Itches like hell,” she told me.

I figured it was the only truthful thing she said for the entire conversation. A week and a half ago, she'd needed somebody to tell her that she was okay, even if it never came out in those words. And now, everything was miraculously fine. Her friends had kicked her out of their house, but she'd moved on to a new one, was thinking of squatting in one down the street that had been unoccupied and unsold for the past year.

She didn't listen to anything that I said. I said I'd been glad to see her, and she mentioned that she'd had a fight with her mother when she got back. I said that I missed being able to hang out, and she told me, once again, to ditch school, to come up to Louisville and “do something.” She didn't describe what that something might have been.

A month passed, and I started to forget what we'd said to each other over that week, hunkered down under the air-conditioner like panting dogs during the day, and sitting out in the humid air smoking and philosophizing at night. I was an under-tipped waitress at Sonic, and I came home and fought with my mother a good many of those nights. Thinking about Holly, about the depth of those conversations (they seemed like revelations) was the last thing on my mind.

When she called me again in September, I was on my way home from class, driving south on I-65 in a sudden rainstorm. I could barely hear her. Hazards flashing, I pulled over to the side of the road. The rain came on in a sudden torrent, and I crushed the phone against my ear, trying to hear.

“Holly?”

“Shan, I'm going to rehab.”

Despite the noise from outside, those words needed no amplification.

I asked questions, but don't remember now what they were. She never really said what it was that she was addicted to, and all those ugly rumors from high school about cocaine swirled through my head in a mass. She didn't seem the type. Nobody seems like the type when you look them in the eye and see the human underneath all those layers.

Holly didn't know how long she'd be in. Nobody would be able to visit her for awhile, but she never told me where she was, so I couldn't have, even if I'd wanted to. I found out later that she was in Memphis, but how she got there from Louisville was a mystery to me.

Holly and I had been friends since we were ten years old. Even then, we'd seen something in each other, a likeness, a kinship. I wondered now, as I wished her well and hung up the phone, what it was that we thought made us so alike.

We were different people, always had been. It was more than just Holly the hippie and Shannon the metalhead. It was more than Holly the actress and Shannon the writer, Holly the party girl and Shannon the awkward wallflower. I stood out when I was with her, not just because I would never smoke pot at any of her parties, not just because she was short and never wore makeup and I was lanky and never without my black eyeliner.

All those things were glaringly obvious now, but more obvious was the fact that somewhere along the line, Holly had given up. Somewhere up in Kentucky, her dreams had finally turned into the prison she'd always believed they would be. I could see that now—I'd always called myself the cynic, but it was Holly. Maybe I was still believing that one day, my voice would matter, while she'd drowned hers in alcohol and whatever other nasty habits she'd managed to pick up.

The rest of the way home, I was scared. To this day, I remember the way the pit of my stomach felt, twitching with discomfort every time I thought about her, or me, or where I believed I'd be a year from then.

It was that fear that reminded me I existed. I didn't know anybody then (still don't) who wasn't scared that they'd never end up being who they wanted to be. When fear knocked Holly over, she didn't get up again. She buried herself.

I haven't heard from Holly since. I know she's out of rehab now, but I haven't even heard the usual rumor – that she's doing “well,” whatever that means to someone who's been around the backside of hell and back again. The little things have started to

fade from my mind, like the exact strawberry blond of her hair. I remember that once it fell to her waist, but that she'd chopped it all off when she visited me that last time. The thing I remember most vividly is the color of those cuts – not rust red, like you'd expect dried blood to be. They were bright, angry, demanding attention. Those were all things that I would once have said of her, now that I think of it.

Serendipity

I was keeping the books for this tattoo shop, 8th Street Ink, just drifting really. That was back in Maryland – Baltimore to be precise. I had just screwed up college really bad, and my parents didn't want to pay for me to be on academic probation anymore. It was also about the time when I thought I might die – serious stuff, stomach cancer, had the doctors running all kinds of tests. About when they said “65% survival rate,” I figured that was it for me. Turned out later, it was just an ulcer. That's what made me start feeling like I had some kind of natural luck, but this story's not about that. It's about Todd, whose luck ran out.

“Cami,” he said to me once, while I was flipping out on him, waiting for the next batch of results, “What's the use of being wild if you can't be free?”

Todd always said stuff like that. He used to tell me that for such a badass, I worried an awful lot. He was a surfer, moved to Hawaii's North Shore two years ago. He lived down the hall from me at Oakside Terrace, my apartment building on South Paca Street. The first time he talked to me was when he met me coming in from roller derby practice one night, with me stinking something awful and a pair of black Riedell Vixen quad speed skates hanging over my shoulder by the laces.

“You skate roller derby?” he asked. I had no idea why he would have thought roller derby and not speed skating or taking a lap around the skate park or something. All he'd ever tell me was that he saw it in my eyes.

There was a lot about Todd that I never understood. We came from different worlds. He liked jam bands; I listened to punk. He had that long blond hippie mane; I had a pink and black mohawk. But there was more than just superficial stuff that was different. He was the son of a couple of burned-out flower children who had made it from San Francisco to Baltimore, thanks to the university system, and believed you should never constrict your children's dreams in any way. I'm the offspring of two chronic nine-to-fiver workaholics who were, well, are “very disappointed” that I didn't turn out to be an accountant. Todd and I shouldn't have liked each other. But we did. It was the sports thing that somehow cemented our friendship in ways that I never could completely figure out. Maybe it's just that we were both physical people – people who understood the world in terms of a gut instinct that would have been ruined by words. So the two of us getting along was never one of those things you had to force; it just happened.

“Roller derby saved my soul,” I said to him once.

“I wasn't aware that the great Cami Conda needed any soul saving,” he fired back, a look of mischief in his blue eyes. He always liked to rag on me about my derby name.

“No, I'm dead serious,” I told him. “I saw this flier for Charm City Roller Girls and tried out. It gave me a direction, you know? I felt like I could do something and not screw up. Every time I put on skates, I feel like I've got wings. Total control and total freedom at the same time.”

I felt like I was rambling, but Todd was nodding.

“Like surfing,” he said. “It's like you're under the control of a force of nature. You know you could die out there, or come back paralyzed, but once you're standing up on that board, you become a force of nature too. It's like being a god for thirty seconds or so.”

We just looked at each other and shared a smile, because it's like we were soulmates or something, only we didn't have any strings attached, no expectations, no sex, no anniversaries to remember. And soulmates are important when you think you're dying. You don't just turn your back on a relationship like that.

In a parallel universe, I would have been some long-haired hippie who didn't wear makeup and worked in an organic food store instead of a girl with twelve piercings and a sleeve of tattoos up her left arm. In another universe, I wouldn't have been gay, and Todd wouldn't have gone through girlfriends like they were daily newspapers. We would have gotten married (or not), moved to Hawaii together, and maybe started our own little commune and eaten only the stuff we grew in our backyard. If I had lived, anyway, because this was back when I thought I wouldn't see my next birthday.

I did love Todd in my own way. The kind of love that makes you smile, even when you feel like you should be sad because it's gone. Now that I live in Birmingham, Alabama, and Todd's not anywhere anymore, I miss him. His number is still taped to my fridge, but he died on the beach seven months ago. He was stooping down to pick up a seashell and this kid on a four-wheeler slammed right into him and fractured his skull – total freak accident, nothing that he could have prevented.

I'd believe that Todd had been a ghost to start with, if it hadn't been for the footprint he left, the one that left a gentle imprint on my life and didn't wash away like

footprints do in the tide. If it weren't for him, I'd still be sitting back in Baltimore, too scared to open my own tattoo shop like I did as soon as I came down here.

Serendipity Studios is all because of Todd, because he taught me what I already thought I knew – to get anything done, you have to live your life like you're looking over your shoulder and giving the Grim Reaper the finger. Because you never know when your clock will run out, and you never know when a person will be the miracle you didn't even know you needed. It was no shame to die, he used to say, if you were doing what you loved.

The Crossing

Jess crammed the crumpled-up paper into the shallow hole she'd dug with her own hands. She had crumpled it, she didn't know why, and now, handfuls of the loose, loamy New Mexico dirt were making it not exist. At least, that was what she'd told herself on this windy April Thursday, after seventh period Senior English, after her two and a half hour shift at work, when she found herself on the ground, pawing out a hole like a dog with a bone.

Her manager at Best Rates Heating and Air, Michael, had given it to her just before her shift ended this afternoon.

“Two seats in June,” he'd said, with a goofy kind of half smile that Jess had often found endearing—it was the same way that he had looked at her before he kissed her the first time. She had found it exhilarating, mostly because she knew she wasn't supposed to do it. He was twenty-four, she'd been seventeen then (though she was five days past eighteen now). But the business was his uncle's, and his not having to pay attention (nor work very hard for that matter) meant that he had plenty of time to get involved with an average-looking, too-cynical high-school kid. Sometimes, she wondered if she were the only one, or if Mike had others, a string of girls that he filled full of dreams and took back to the stock-room to do things that weren't sanctioned in the company handbook.

It was an Expedia itinerary—June 10, flying out of Albuquerque, arriving in Chicago. That much she'd seen before somebody called Mike from the back. Jess had turned her attention back to the half crossed-out list in front of her. She'd never finish calling them all before her shift ended, but nobody would care. It wasn't like phoning their former customers about promotional specials was particularly effective, but it was something they could give Jess to do other than sit at the front desk and stare blankly, or occasionally, do her homework. Jerry, Mike's uncle, seemed to subscribe to the idea that it was better to do even pointless tasks than to spend your time doing nothing at all. Sighing, she picked up the receiver and dialed the next number.

“Good afternoon, sir, this is Jessica Mylam with Best Rates Heating and Air. Could I interest you in our monthly special?”

There was yelling in the background.

“Half off a new heating unit if you order now, and you'll be entered into a drawing for--”

“Oh, go to hell!”

He slammed the receiver down in her ear.

It was just one of those days where the world was going to bite you if you didn't bite first. Four years ago to the day (one that had been much like this), Jess's mother had died in a car accident, five days after her daughter's fourteenth birthday. Her mom hadn't been in town for the event, something Jessica had been very upset about at the time. When her mother was on the way home from the airport, the accident happened—an older man lost control of his car in a seizure and hit her mother's car head-on. Jess looked at their family pictures sometimes, especially around this time of year, all the way back

to her mother and father and her own stroller perched on the Grand Canyon's South Rim. Nobody ever said Jess was like her mother, though with her hair bleached blond, her face had a clear resemblance. Now – five days after her eighteenth birthday – she hadn't looked at any pictures for the first time since the wreck happened. But the resentment was still there, that her mother had missed another one. That in four weeks, she would not see her daughter graduate from high school.

Jess didn't feel like thinking about Michael right now, and about how badly he wanted her on his arm when he left to go back home to Illinois. Having not applied to college, she'd have no real ties holding her to the place she'd lived for all her life. Something, she wasn't sure what, made her want to go along with him, even though she liked New Mexico well enough.

She patted down the dirt and winced. A slim white cactus spine jutted out from under the first layer of skin on her left index finger. She pulled it out quickly, like ripping off a Band-aid, and for the most part ignored the blood welling out of the tiny hole, except to swipe it on the side seam of her jeans.

She was trudging on towards the railroad crossing now, over a carpet of red rocks that came loose underneath her sneakers. One by one, they tumbled down the embankment, but she didn't look at the ground. Her eyes were focused on the thin, dirty ribbon of black asphalt that crossed over the tracks. There were no lights, no mechanical arms. Chaves County didn't have enough in the coffer to worry about fixing shit outside of the big towns. Big towns, of course, was a relative expression in New Mexico, since you could drive twenty miles on even the Interstates and see only one town the whole way.

Flying H, where she and her father shared a modest split-level house, was the only town for sixty miles if you went east *or* west. It was a little point of nothing in between Alamogordo, in the next county over, and Roswell, whose hokey alien tourism business brought in just enough money to keep refilling the potholes county-wide. Like the wide-eyed conspiracy theorists, the potholes would be back next year, just as screwed up as ever.

She thought of Flying H now, as she crossed the tracks that put her within the city limits from unincorporated land. She thought of its features as she saw them from the passenger seat of Ben's car each Saturday night, when they were usually headed out to catch a movie or go play mini-golf at Crazy H Putt Putt, a run-down course at the west edge of town. There was the local burger joint Pixie's. The Stop 'n' Go where the owners always tried to prevent teenagers from loitering because they thought it scared off business—what little there was. Nobody listened. And just before the turn onto La Nina Road, towards her house, an old service station sat abandoned, with the letters falling off the sign. Underneath the plastic U, hanging upside down like a horseshoe, was a stark white spot, the color that the sign must have been before years of wind-flung sand turned it a tawny beige. Once, it said Hunt's. Her father had worked there when it was still open. Now, three jobs later, he was a night security manager at a tiny girls' college in Alamogordo. It paid pretty well—and meant that Ben could stay the night sometimes.

Jess had dated Ben Arroyo since she was a freshman. He was a football player – that was one of the first things he had told her when they met. Third or fourth string, it turned out. Nothing much had changed. A senior now, he still had dreams of playing DI ball when he and Jess graduated. He never really seemed to get better, though, as many

late nights as he spent practicing, but God help her if she ever said so. Ben was constant—four years later, on the cusp of graduation, he was the same old Ben he'd always been. He bored her, but maybe it was okay to be bored sometimes.

She was fifteen minutes from home, if she kept a brisk pace. Now she was passing the spot where, five years ago, a brush fire had made a clearing in the woods not fifty paces in. It was starting to be overgrown now. She'd lost her virginity there when she was sixteen, on a faded plaid horse blanket, with a rock pressing into her lower back. She was sure at the time that it would make a bruise, but when she lifted up her shirt to look in the mirror at home, there was nothing, no mark to show that it had ever happened. She'd broken up with Ben two days later, and started dating him again after three weeks of pointed looks at one another across the hallway.

They always came out to the crossing when they wanted to do something they weren't supposed to—smoke pot, hold a séance, as they did once with a mutual friend, Ellie, who badly sprained her ankle and then blamed it on a skating accident when they were fifteen. Now the crossing held another half-buried secret.

The house was quiet when she came home. Her father would be home after midnight, but he'd forgotten to set the frozen pot pie on the counter to thaw. Today, of all days, Jess could understand why he would be preoccupied thinking about his wife. But the thought of eating another bowl of canned Hormel soup with a dry lunchmeat-filled sandwich (they were out of mayonnaise again) really pissed her off.

Ben was a nice guy. Jess could say that even as she sat across the booth from him at Pixie's annoyed as hell that he wouldn't tell her what kind of news he had, even though he'd been holding news over her head since fourth period that day. There was just something *about* Ben, something that made even what she guessed was going to be surprising news seem boring. It wasn't fair to just assume that, she knew, but that didn't stop her from doing it, either.

She twirled her straw in her milkshake, staring down into the half-drunk chocolate bubbles. Ben was still silent, or at least not talking. He was still doing that smacky thing he did when he was eating one of Pixie's big burgers. Had to bulk up, or that's what Coach Peterson told him. Jess didn't think that meant eating a bunch of gristly Number Ten's, but she didn't say so. There were a lot of things that Jess didn't say. Finally, though, she had to break the silence.

“Ben. Tell me what's going on, you're about to drive me nuts,” she said, quirked her darkish eyebrows at him.

He smiled, ruffling his black hair. That was one thing Jess had always found attractive about Ben: he had a gorgeous smile. Straight white teeth set against suntanned skin. He wasn't a model—had too many scars from working on the ranch—but his smile lit up his whole face.

“Got a phone call last week,” he said, hastily swallowing the mouthful of beef he was just finished chewing. “Coach Smith at New Mexico says he can work me in for a tryout. Says if I can take some core classes at one of the community colleges out there over the summer and do well, he'll let me tryout for the fall squad. Probably won't play or anything, but it's a door open, you know, and if I work hard...”

He stopped before finishing his sentence, she guessed because of the look on her face.

“It's not even a sure thing?”

It was really the wrong thing to say. March had come and gone with no word from any of the programs Ben was applying to late. February had been a bunch of closed doors. April wasn't looking much better.

“No, Jess, it's not a sure thing, but it's a *chance*, you know?”

“Yeah, I know,” she said, looking up at him and softening her tone. This was really one of those times when she hoped she had the look of one of Hugh Hefner's girlfriends—angelic blond hair, soft brown eyes, and long eyelashes that made you completely forget what you were pissed about. “I just want you to actually, you know, have something aside from a promise. You deserve that much.”

He wiped his hand on the napkin in his lap and laid it across hers on the table. The conversation was, for all practical purposes, over, because she knew Ben wasn't going to give up on this.

“I know. Gotta take the chance before you can get the payoff though, right?”

“Right...”

A week and a half after Ben had dropped his big bombshell, she had sex with Mike at work. It was in the back stockroom, where everything smelled like wet cardboard and propane. As long as she and Mike had had a thing (which was about four months), they'd never gone this far. It occurred to her, in an almost out of body experience, her back up against the cold cinderblock wall, and the sound of the pouring rainstorm outside

filtering in only slightly muffled, that she didn't feel guilty. She didn't feel great either. Just different.

Now she was standing outside after the end of her shift. She hadn't put up the hood on her light pullover, and every now and then, a fat drop would land right on top of her head, on the exposed skin of her part. Ben was going to pick her up today. He was thoughtful like that, when he wasn't focused on something else. The high of his imaginary Heisman Trophy had worn off a little bit by now, and normal Ben was returning.

Much as she wanted to be alone today, it didn't look like it was going to happen. Behind her, the chime of the shop door sounded, artificial and electric. Somehow she knew (or maybe dreaded) that it was Mike before he ever put his hand on her shoulder.

“Jess,” he said softly, his fingers gently pulling so that she had to turn and face him. “Have you given any thought to it?”

She looked away from him and into the parking lot, staring off into the distance with a focused gaze. “About what?”

“You know... June? Chicago? Me and you?”

“Jesus, Mike, I don't know...”

She slipped out from underneath his fingertips like a spirit just passing through a room. Her feet thudded dully on the sectioned-off concrete of the sidewalk as she moved away from him. Mike was nothing, if not persistent.

“C'mon, Jess, I need to know,” he said, catching up to her. And then his lips were touching her neck, his fingers clearing away strands of her long hair. “Just me and you... a chance to get away from all this and make something of ourselves.”

She leaned her head to the side at first, distracted by the goosebumps running up her spine. Her fingers had a mind of their own, though, and were suddenly pushing him away. Her feet followed suit, walking further down the walk.

“Dammit, that's Ben that just pulled in up there. Do you want him to see?”

Mike laughed.

“What's it matter?”

“It fucking matters, okay?” she snapped, turning to give him a sharp look. He fumbled for words in response, but nothing came out. She'd never been so happy to see Ben or his ugly-ass teal Geo Tracker in her life.

She climbed in with only a cursory glance in his direction.

“Hey.”

He pulled away from the curb without responding to her greeting, adjusting the rearview mirror with the precision of a surgeon. It was a weird habit of his.

“How's it going?”

She didn't detect any hint of anger. Not that Ben would have suspected her of anything in that regard.

“Okay.”

They drove to the end of the complex in silence and turned onto County Road 12.

“You sure nothing's wrong?”

“Yeah... just tired.”

Ben was in a rotten mood—she could tell because he was silent. He shouldn't have been, because they'd just finished their final exams, and they were going to graduate three days from now, on Thursday. Finally, after eighteen years in this shithole, Jess felt like she'd have something to show for it—if a high school diploma was anything to show nowadays. But Ben wasn't on the same wavelength, hadn't been for days.

She didn't say anything, though, as they walked along, too close to the railroad. Same spot as always, of course, this same old crossing, on the unincorporated side. Jess couldn't count how many times they'd walked here on April days like this, before the weather got too hot and dry and the wind too high for you to walk without getting sand whipped into your eyes. She squinted now, like it was one of those hot days, the summer days when they came out here with Ben's parents' cheap whiskey.

“Heard anything from New Mex yet?” she asked, breaking what seemed now almost like an ominous silence.

Ben didn't look up from the ground. He kicked a rock with his shoe and it went zinging off in front of them, bouncing off the rail with a dull metallic clang.

“Nothin' to hear. I start classes in three weeks.”

“Oh yeah...”

He'd only told her a hundred times before. Jess felt like she should have remembered that, and it frustrated her that she didn't.

“Excited?” It was probably one of the dumber questions she'd asked him.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Jess shoved her hands in the shallow pockets of her jeans, swinging her hair behind her the way she'd seen horses do when they were irritated.

“Ben, what's the problem?”

“I know about you and Mike.”

His answer was immediate and firm. But he still wouldn't look at her.

“What the...”

“I said I know about you and Mike.” He said it louder this time, and sharper, driving the point in with a hammer. She had to pick up her pace to keep up with him.

“I heard you before.”

“You don't have shit to say for it, do you?”

“What do you want me to say?” Jess asked, her voice rising in volume and tone along with his. She could never stay calm when he was angry with her. She got pissed too easily.

“Maybe you could explain to me why I heard from Carrie that he was bragging about screwing you in the stockroom a week ago?”

Carrie. She was rather non-descript—short, a little pudgy, and a mutual friend of both of them. More in the distant sense for Jess, who had met her only after she started dating Ben, and had never been as close to her as he was. She worked at Best Rates, and had gotten Jess her job, as a matter of fact. And Jess couldn't believe how stupid she was to not think about how much of a big-mouth Mike was—something that had kept her from going too far up until last week.

“You're gonna believe Carrie over me? I've been dating you for four goddamn years, Ben, and you're going to just decide I'm lying to you before even talking to me about it first?”

“I saw him last week. I saw you. Standing right out in front of the building while you were waiting for me to fucking pick you up.”

“Ben...”

What the hell was there really left to say? At a point when she should have had an excuse, there was none. She'd thought about this moment, because she knew it'd come eventually, but all those words were gone now. The convincing explanations that would clear her of all guilt were gone.

He was walking faster still, and she was reminded how much shorter she was than he—she came up to Ben's shoulder at best. She was almost running to keep up, the familiar scenery passing by without her even getting the chance to casually take it in like she normally would've. They were passing the burnt-out grove, closer now to the pinyon pine that bore their initials on the trunk. Ben had carved them there with his pocketknife in tenth grade.

She tripped over a mound of dirt that she hadn't been watching out for. That reminded her of another familiar spot, one that was not hers and Ben's, but just hers.

“He wants me to go to Illinois with him in June,” she said. Jess knew from the moment it slid from her lips that she shouldn't have said it at all. It was almost a triumphant note. “He wants to start a gardening business.”

Ben stopped, frozen before he could drag his boot across another handful of gravel. He turned in what seemed like slow motion, his shoulders hunched and tense, but her senses didn't register normally over the pounding of her heart in her ears.

“Why don't you fucking go, then?”

“Ben, I didn't mean it like that...”

“Why don't you go with him, and get the fuck away from me?”

He turned on his heel without waiting for an answer. In his mind, he didn't need to wait—he already knew what Jess's answer was.

Jess turned in the opposite direction. The adrenaline racing through her veins made her run. She didn't know where. Anywhere. In the opposite direction from Ben, from town, from the pinyon pine and the clearing and the piece of paper buried in the hole, which she hoped was being chewed on by a thousand ants right now.

Jess had ended up at Mike's trailer. She'd been there once before, the weekend that Ben had been visiting colleges in Colorado with his dad. Mike wanted to play it off like it was an elegant bachelor pad; he'd had wine and everything. She didn't know who the hell he thought he was kidding.

She pounded on the door. He'd be home today. Monday was one of his off days.

“Hey,” she said breathlessly as he opened the door, and almost before he'd had a chance to realize who it was, “Ben and I..”

Mike looked like hell. He drank on Sunday nights, mostly, as he told the tale, to horrify his religious Uncle Jerry. It was one of the stories that had made Jess like him immediately. Mike ran his fingers through his scrubby brown hair, still spiked with gel from the night before.

“What? Chill out, Jess, what's going on?”

He put his hands on her shoulders, like trying to contain her within a forcefield. She looked up at him, and he found her eyes unreadable.

“Ben and I broke up.”

That was putting it simply.

“Really?” Miraculously, that woke him up.

“Yeah, he... Carrie. Carrie told him about us, about the stockroom...”

“Aw, Christ, and he actually believed her?”

Jess's brow furrowed gently. “Well, he's known her forever. And it was true anyway...”

Mike leaned forward, pressing his lips against hers.

“Yeah. Makes our lives a whole lot easier though, you know? You don't even have to worry about figuring that situation out, and we can get away to Chicago, free and easy.”

He kissed her again, this time deeply. It felt wrong somehow, but then, it had never felt right. Jess jerked her chin away, looking up at him resentfully.

“What?”

Jess pushed his fingers away from her face. She was starting to feel like a Himalayan cat the way he kept doing that.

“It's not like that, Mike.”

“What's not-?” He stopped halfway through the sentence.

“I don't want that.”

Jess didn't know where the words were coming from, but it was too late to stop them now. She drew herself up to her full height, and for once, she didn't care about whether or not that looked silly, or like she was trying too hard.

“Tell Jerry I won't be coming back to Best Rates for the summer.”

Mike's hands fell to his sides without her having to shove them away this time. She stepped backwards, almost off his porch.

“The hell are you gonna do, just stay here?”

It was inconceivable to Mike, because he'd hated New Mexico from the moment he'd moved here. But Jess had grown up here—it was where she'd put down roots. The soft-packed dirt held her when she walked, and going to Illinois wouldn't change that. It made her angry now, the way he assumed that this place couldn't be at all important to her just because he couldn't see it himself.

“I don't know, Mike. Maybe.”

She didn't owe him an answer. She didn't even owe him goodbye, so she didn't give that to him either as she turned and walked back through the six-inch high grass of the lot towards the main road. There was no reason to look over her shoulder. He'd be confused, and if she went so far as to look back, he might try and convince her otherwise. Jess didn't need convincing, though.

That one answer she'd just given Mike was the truest thing she'd said in months. *She didn't know*. She wasn't going to go to Illinois with Mike in June, leave everything she'd ever known, and end up ditched when he found somebody else that held his interest. She wasn't going to pick up and move to Albuquerque in the fall to work a crappy job as a waitress just so she could be close to Ben. Neither of those paths were hers to walk. What was her path was another question entirely—but she was fine not knowing. Maybe you didn't have to choose at the crossroads. Maybe you just had to turn around, get your walking stick, and start through the desert alone.

Verse-Chorus-Verse

This is a love story about a girl and a song. Like all love stories, it starts with a starry-eyed illusion, though that illusion does not, in this case, involve Southern Comfort or the bed of a pickup truck. Nor does it involve an evening of Bob Marley records and pseudo-philosophy. Some of Nadine's love stories were like that. This one did at least have a fairy-tale ending. The song couldn't leave.

It had crept into her head while she showered, not bothering to close the blinds as usual. She'd never understand why someone would put blinds in a shower, but her third-floor window afforded her a nice view of downtown Atlanta, at least. By the time she'd scrubbed the green apple shampoo out of her short red-and-pink-dyed hair, she'd been humming it. Aerosmith's "Amazing." It was not the best song ever written. But Nadine had loved it ever since she was a little girl—probably because of her dad.

Her parents had divorced fifteen years ago, when since she was twelve years old. Not too long ago, Nadine reflected that not much had changed, even though she was twenty-seven now, which was around the time when you supposedly became friends with your parents. She still didn't see eye to eye with her mother, who was a fifty-seven year old investment banker with some firm or other whose name Nadine was always forgetting. She still got along better with her father, for reasons she couldn't entirely explain, but perhaps related to the way in which he'd always pursued what made him

happy, regardless of the consequences. He was a brave man, even when that bravery meant that he wrecked his marriage. He'd left his wife for love—and had dated Debbie officially once the divorce was final, even though neither of them was inclined to marry.

In the car, Nadine had put in a mix-tape, trying to get the song to go away. It was a little too soft for a band-practice night. They had a gig in three days, another club in Atlanta's music district where they'd be just another chick punk-rock opening band, and probably, no one would notice them. But 500 bucks a piece was 500 bucks a piece, and The Restraints never said die, not since they'd formed in the back of an eighth grade science class at Randall Williams Junior High. Nadine wasn't paying much attention to the Misfits, though, nor Joan Jett. Her mind was still on *it*. Steven Tyler's simplistic rhymes, over delicate violins and the adequate, but not particularly passionate guitar work of Joe Perry. It was the kind of music that Ellie, her bass player, would have called boring. "Got no bite," she would have said, as she often did when one of her bandmates suggested a cover song.

She pulled her car into the driveway of her father's house, and turned it off. Nadine felt like she'd been crying, even though she hadn't. She looked in her rearview mirror, as if to make sure, but her eyes looked no different than usual, except maybe more tired. Nadine never got enough sleep, though. Maybe she'd just done a worse job today covering those dark circles. Her hair was messier than usual—not that it mattered for a punk rocker.

Debbie was here. As Nadine walked in the door, she heard her in the kitchen. The place smelled like Murphy's Oil Soap, which was something Nadine would have to get used to—her father wasn't much of a cleaner, but for some reason, Debbie had been

doing it obsessively. It all but obliterated her father's smells, the Pall Mall cigarettes and canned corned beef hash, which was about as complicated as he knew how to get with meat aside from a barbecue.

“Hey hon,” Debbie said, her broad Southern accent coming around the corner as the screen door banged shut. As usual, Nadine had forgotten to catch it with her foot as she came in. Debbie looked like she always did as she came to hug Nadine. Tight straight-leg jeans, and a buttoned-up red plaid flannel shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbow. It was spring, getting too warm for that kind of stuff. Debbie's Windsong perfume smelled stronger than usual, because she'd been sweating. Nadine returned her hug awkwardly.

“If you wanna go on up to the attic, there's some boxes of records and pictures up there I figured you'd want to look through,” Debbie went on. She was already halfway back to the kitchen, where Nadine could see a huge stack of pots and pans piled in the sink. “I moved 'em to the front by the ladder so you don't have to go diggin'.”

Nadine didn't answer, she just went. Somewhere in the hallway, she set down her bag.

Nadine's hands went to the records first, standing soldier-straight next to each other in an old cardboard box. Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, The Who, and of course, Aerosmith—the classics. He always had respect for the classics. A good many Neil Young and Bob Dylan, a good many CCR, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Allman Brothers Band. All things she would have expected from her father, who, though a self-avowed Good Ol' Boy, was also more eclectic than he liked to give himself credit for. There were a few surprises, though—The Velvet Underground. Almost every Ramones record. Every

Clash record, and in the back of the box, a stack of Social Distortion CD's. Behind those was a tape—Nadine knew what it was before she picked it up. The pink plastic cassette was a Restraints demo from maybe ten or eleven years ago. It had been their first tape, and Nadine remembered recording it, each of the three band members spending about all she had in savings to put together funds for studio time and post-production. It was a rough cut, and it hadn't paid off at all, but her father had always been a fan. They'd only produced seventy-five of the things, and that had seemed like a lot at the time. Now, her father's was probably the only copy that still existed, outside of the three copies Nadine, Ellie and Mary had kept for themselves.

Nadine's dad hadn't told anyone he had pancreatic cancer until the week before he started aggressive chemo. He was matter-of-fact, like he had been when Nadine's dog had gotten hit by a car when she was seven. He'd said a bunch of words Nadine hadn't understood—unresectable, gemcitabine-based chemotherapy, aggressive pain management, poor prognosis. It wasn't that she didn't know what they meant, it was just that, at the time, it had been too much. That had been four months ago, nearly to the day. He'd told them on a nasty-cold January day, when the rain was halfway between solid and liquid. And a week and a half ago, he'd gone. By that point, he'd finally agreed to the dermal narcotic patches.

Debbie and Nadine had agreed that he needed a proper send-off. He'd always said that when he died, he wanted people to remember him for who he was, not make a saint out of him. They'd wanted to play "Freebird" at his funeral, but his family had pitched a fit. Didn't matter that they'd only stepped in for the last two months when, before that,

they'd gone months without talking to him. His sister had sung "Amazing Grace" in a warbly soprano that had only made Nadine cry because it wasn't her father at all.

An idea, so simple that it should have been obvious, made Nadine smile. She heard footsteps in the hallway below the attic, and Debbie's voice called up to her, concerned.

"Hon? Are you okay up there?"

Nadine hadn't realized that she'd started sniffing. It was the first time since the graveside service, but somehow, this felt different, more relieving.

"Fine, Deb," Nadine answered, her voice ringing strong, without even a hint of a tremble. "Just looking through Dad's records... Hey, do you mind if I take these pictures home and go through them later? I just remembered something that I have to do."

"Sure, I didn't figure you'd want to sit up in that dusty old attic all day. They're all disorganized, you know how Marc was about putting things in order. All I want's the pictures of us that he has saved in there somewhere, so if you find 'em, let me know."

"Of course," Nadine said, hefting the record box and starting down the ladder with it. Debbie took it from her gently, holding the box as Nadine went up to retrieve the larger box of pictures. She glanced down into it as she grabbed it—a bunch of old family pictures on top, things that her mother had stored in old albums with cheesy captions. Her father didn't need those kinds of labels; he just remembered.

Once both the boxes were set securely in Nadine's crowded backseat, Nadine hugged Debbie goodbye. She'd never been much of a hugger, but that didn't matter to Debbie. She still insisted.

“I’ll see you in a couple days, alright?” Nadine said. Debbie was coming to The Restraints' next gig, because it was at a bar she liked.

Nadine thought of Debbie as she drove off. She was more of a friend, not so much like a mom, but then Nadine's dad had gotten to be the same way, after awhile. Debbie would understand why Nadine had to leave when she came to the gig. At band practice tonight, Nadine was going to let Ellie and Mary know what song they were covering. She usually took a vote, but this time, it was a personal matter—even if Ellie thought the song had no bite, they were going to play it. Somewhere, in the back of the closet, in a notebook full of guitar music, Nadine knew that she had the tabs for “Amazing.” They could speed it up, add a little bit of the fuzz pedal on the bass, and they'd be good to go. Nadine didn't think she was going to write up an introduction of any kind—that was too formal. Sometimes, the music did all the talking for you.

Jerks

I've never fallen for someone who wasn't a jerk in some way or another. And that applies to Carey Gosset especially, my almost current boyfriend, i.e., my boyfriend as of five minutes ago. Carey has a mohawk, an honest to God shaved one, not like those kids who leave all the hair on their head and only spike up the top. He's a big guy – a little on the overweight side, but he's stocky, too, built to be all muscle. And impossible to disagree with. One of those guys who punches the wall and breaks his knuckles when you won't back down (he really did that).

“Luce,” he said to me, “sometimes I wonder how nobody's absolutely throttled you.”

That made me cry. Not because I was scared of him – Carey'd never hit me. Carey doesn't hit girls. The only person Carey's ever hit is his former best friend, and that was over some girl, one of Carey's exes. Carey broke Bry's nose and spent a night in jail over it.

The reason I cried was because I was so mad. Wouldn't you have felt the same way if your guy had been talking nonstop about how awesome some other girl's guitar licks are? Carey's in a band, and guitar licks are something he cares about. Because that's what he had been doing before we got in that fight and I started knocking stuff off the kitchen table in his apartment. I mean, I'm sorry I don't care about how awesome her guitar licks are.

When I think about it, though, I'm not sure that Carey's any more of a jerk than Ryan, who I was with at nineteen, who got mad at me for kissing one of his friends on New Years' Eve. I mean, come on, I was hammered, and Lee was cute, and kissing him didn't mean I was going for him or anything. Besides, Ryan blew off that party to go to his friend's performance art thing and help him clean up ten gallons of blue paint when it was over. Was it my fault that he decided to leave me alone all night at the party? Plus, I had just had the worst day *ever* at Clark's General Grocery Store. On New Years' Eve, can you imagine? You wouldn't believe the moods people are in before their New Years' Eve parties. Ryan would have broken up with me over the whole kissing thing if Lee hadn't showed up and said, "Ease up. It was a kiss, man. It's not like we fucked." It made me mad that Ryan wouldn't listen to me, and that only reason he shut up was because his friend said something.

So Ryan and I didn't break up over that. We broke up a month and a half later, though, because Ryan said I was impossible, whatever that means. Impossible how? He never explained, but it's not like I'm dumb; "impossible" is one of those things somebody says when they've already made up their mind to dump you and probably have somebody else waiting or something. The whole Ryan thing was when I was living in Sea-Tac, halfway in between Seattle and Tacoma. Ryan and all his friends lived out there and commuted to Seattle for school every day. I usually hung out at Ryan's house (I lived with him for awhile)

and I'd clean up for him most mornings. All that stuff they say about single guys and the way they live is true – would you believe we got into a fight once about whether or not he tied his socks together once they were out of the laundry? “You *have* to,” I told him, “or you'll never find a matching pair again.”

I always had this weird feeling about Ryan, like maybe he didn't care as much as he said he did, and maybe he was being way more than neighborly when he helped that blond woman across the hall with her groceries one day. We got in a fight about that too, but he never made me feel better about it. Any normal guy would have maybe gotten me flowers or maybe a pair of high heels, along with an apology, but Ryan just said “You know how much I care about you. I tell you fifteen times a day. I even wake up and tell you in the night sometimes.” Is that even an answer? I felt like he hardly ever said it. Like it went right through me, like I was a thin t-shirt on a cold day.

Ryan dumping me is how I ended up back on Bainbridge Island, where I came from. It's just across the Sound from Seattle, and when I came back, I lived at home and got my job back trimming flowers and taking orders at Eton's Florist. My mom knows the guy that owns the place, and I figure one day, he'll let me do arrangements if I try hard enough to show him that I can. I turned twenty the day before I moved back, not that I had a big party. Just me and my friend Stacy sitting on my couch, talking after a long day packing up my stuff. I remember this one thing she said like it was yesterday and not almost a whole year ago now.

“Lucy,” she said to me, “you gotta stop dating the wrong guys. You need to treat yourself better than they do.”

I thought she was trying to be funny. We both laughed, anyway, but I've thought about her saying that an awful lot since then. About how maybe Stace was right, and I don't date the right kind of people. Maybe they do take me for granted. But how can you help it when these are just the people you're around? I mean, it's better to date the people you know than to have go out to some club and try to figure out if some guy's just a creep or really wants to get to know you.

Before Ryan, there was Logan, who I was dating when I graduated from high school. Logan was a *real* jerk, the kind of guy who's the prototype for all other jerks out there. Logan didn't like me looking at other guys. He'd get this weird, squinty look on his face, even when I only glanced at somebody, and then he wouldn't talk to me for an hour or two. Logan was just like that. He might have been the kind of guy your mom's proud that you're dating – no tattoos, no drinking, no trouble with the cops – but I think all that good stuff about him really got to his head.

But he never really talked about anything but Logan. Every conversation with Logan was about his future plans and what he wanted to do with his life, and one day, he told me that he didn't see me being a part of that anymore. He told me I was short-sighted and that he hoped I would figure out what I wanted to do with my life. And he was going to college in the fall, which I wasn't. I thought about

applying, but in my opinion, it was a lot of work for a degree you probably can't do anything with. I wanted to ask Logan how he knew our plans wouldn't work together, since he never let me get a word in when we were talking. I could've been a housewife, or a diplomat, or *something*, but you know, when you're getting dumped, these things don't really come to mind. You'd do what I did – get your crap out of his apartment and go back home, and eat two Hot Pockets instead of one, and cry while you watch *The L Word*.

I don't know what it is about me. It's not like I've got low self esteem. I think I'm pretty enough – long straight red hair, almost waist-length; wide green eyes; and straight teeth (thanks to the torture chamber they like to call braces that I had until I was 13). I'm not overweight, but I'm not one of those anorexic girls either. I've got some curves to hold on to; guys like that, right? So I've got something going for me, even if I'm not Tyra Banks. But who wants to be Tyra Banks if you can be happy without all that celebrity jet-set stuff? I could be happy living on Bainbridge Island for the rest of my life, if I could just figure out who I was gonna do it *with*. And don't tell me I'm supposed to be enlightened and feminist and strong even without a relationship. I know that. Everybody knows that. I just can't be happy when I'm alone.

Living with my parents, though, I'm constantly thinking about why I'm not where they were, at my age. They met their freshman year of college in some general studies course (I forget which one). If you listen to how they tell it, it was

opposites attract. My mom was a small-town girl from Kapowsin, Washington, whose parents lived on the lake and had a poultry farm. Dad was born and raised in Seattle to an engineer (my grandpa) and a blues singer (my grandma). Mom was impressed by his city charm, or so she says. They got married at twenty-one, and Mom had my brother Vic when she was twenty-three. So here I am almost twenty-one, and I've got no idea where my life is going.

I've thought it would be nice to open a flower shop of my own. Then I wouldn't have to worry about George Eton, my boss, being anal about whether or not I sweep all the corners in the shop twice a day. I think it would be kind of cool if I could be my own boss and do all the arrangements myself, and hire somebody else to worry about scheduling those wedding flower deliveries. I'd never have to listen to Sammie Norton's mom screaming at me over the phone again – or anybody else's mom either. But it might be pretty hard to meet a guy that way. The only guys you would see are the ones coming in to get flowers for their girlfriends, which I think might break my heart. I guess you might find some single guys coming in to order Mothers' Day corsages, but guys who are attached to their moms kind of weird me out.

My mom says that the most likely time to meet a husband is during your undergrad years, but like I already said, I'm not the college type. Though I used to want to go to the moon and be a for-real astronaut, until I found out, in middle school, how much I sucked at math. Now, I'm wondering if not going to college

means that's it for me meeting a guy I can marry. My mom gets excited when I bring somebody new home; then, when he and I break up, she seems disappointed. Is it because she knows my feelings are hurt, or because she thinks I screwed up somehow?

Those are the kinds of questions you can't answer, the questions about what goes through my mom's head when she's lecturing me about what to do with my life, and why Tyler, the guy I dated between Logan and Ryan, didn't pay attention to my new haircut and then acted surprised when I got my feelings hurt. Maybe my mom tells me what to do because she thinks I don't know how to think for myself, or maybe because she wants me to have more choices than she did, or maybe because she sees something inside me that's just broken. You never really know what's inside somebody else's head, and so you guess, and then you get hurt, because unless you're brave enough to look close, you can't see the truth.

I guess Adam came the closest for me. He came between Ryan and Carey, Carey being that guy I started this whole story with. I had the hots for Adam in high school; he was friends with my friends, but I was always too shy to talk to him. Something weird about Bainbridge Island kids, we seem to stick around the same place after we graduate unless something goes really crazy, or there's like some scholarship to NYU. That happens sometimes. But not with Adam. Adam played bass in the band that my friend Jaycee was in, so I got to hang around him a lot when I was seventeen. Adam was amazingly cool – one of those guys that

doesn't have to try too hard to look like he doesn't care.

He was still like that when I moved back to the island after Ryan dumped me. When Adam asked me out, he told me that he'd always thought I was cool back in high school, and that meant a lot to me. He was always saying the right thing. Even when he dumped me, he said the right thing. He said that he'd had a kid with this girl named Carly a couple of years ago, and he felt like he should try to work things out with her for the kid's sake. How can you get mad at a guy who breaks up with you for that reason? And I know it's true. For two months now, they've been living together, and I see him walking at the park sometimes with their son, and I wish I could be that girl. Maybe if I'd had a kid with Adam, he would have stuck around.

The thing about Adam was that I always felt like he was interested in me. He always looked me in the eye when I talked to him, and he asked questions about the things I said and the stories I told. Like how nobody had ever asked me why I was scared of horses except for him. I had a nightmare, I told him, about being carried away into the dark on a big black horse. And he said, "Maybe that horse is your fear, Lucy."

It was after Adam and I split that I started dating Carey. Adam used to be in a band with Carey too. Seems like Adam's been in a band with just about everybody on Bainbridge Island who knows how to pick up an instrument. Anyway, they were friends, I guess, and Carey seemed like a nice change. He

didn't get in my head about everything; he didn't get deep like Adam did, which was good, since I'd just gotten my heart broken. There are some times in your life where you want to take it easy, and being with Carey was the taking-it-easy solution. He wanted to take it slow, and I did too.

That's how we got where we were, as of five minutes ago. We had taken it slow for two months. And you'd think you'd know after two months whether you wanted to stay with somebody, I didn't. All all I knew was that having someone to fight with was better than sitting around by yourself. Until Carey called me just now.

“Luce,” he said to me, “we need to talk.”

Those are always the words that come right before “we're done,” or “I can't do this anymore,” or “I have feelings for someone else.”

“About Tuesday? Listen, Carey, I'm sorry, you know I don't like to make you that mad...”

Tuesday was when he broke his middle knuckle on that brick wall he punched.

“That's the thing,” he said. “I don't like to *get* that mad. I know you don't do it on purpose, it's just how our personalities work together. That kinda bugs me.”

“Carey, if it's me, just tell me,” I said, “I'll do whatever I need to do to fix it. You know I care about you.”

“Luce, don't make this harder,” is all he said. He was quiet for a minute, and then he said, “I don't like that you're so jealous and that you don't trust me. I'm tryin' to keep my nose clean after what happened with Bry. If I end up in jail because I can't control myself around my girl, I would *never* forgive myself. And I don't want you to be on the wrong end of it.”

“So... you're breaking up with me.”

“Yeah, I am.”

I don't remember the rest of the conversation. I guess it's not important; I wasn't even really surprised. Except for the copout: “I'm breaking up with you because I'm afraid of what I'll do when I get mad?” He was dead serious too, using that tone of voice he does when he means something.

“How do I keep finding these people?” I'm asking myself now. He was a jerk too, like the rest of them were, though maybe we all have something inside us that makes us a little bit of a jerk, including me. Maybe that's why all these people feel like they have to get rid of me.

Or maybe it just goes to prove that I should have listened to myself. I should have known that I didn't care enough about Carey. Just like I should have known that Logan was too into the college and career thing to give me the kind of emotional connection that I needed. And I should have known that Ryan would get the hots for the girl next door.

The only thing I couldn't have known about was Adam. Every other guy

I've been with, I had some feeling about, like I knew deep inside me that sooner or later, it was going to fall apart. I never felt that way with Adam. He was the only one who surprised me when he broke it off.

That's what happens when you really fall for somebody, when you find the guy who isn't a jerk, even though he didn't tell you right from the start that he had had a kid with somebody else. But that's understandable, isn't it? Aren't there degrees of jerkiness? Doesn't it make sense that he would want to give his kid a family? And that that family would be more important than me? I think it does. At least that's how I see it.