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LIVING ROOM

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Claire Cain Teter



# **Living Room**

A Thesis  
Presented to The College of Graduate Studies  
Austin Peay State University  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in English

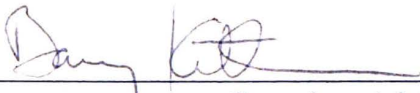
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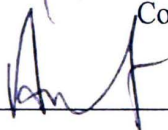
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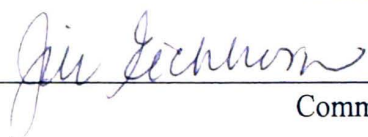
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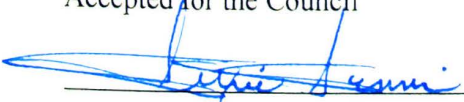
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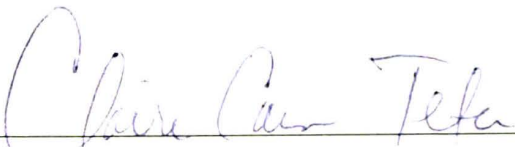
  
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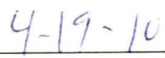
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## Where I'm Not

I spent much of my early years resenting my birthplace and the location of my childhood—I can only explain this as youthful angst and desire for what I didn't have. When I was seventeen I went to Antelope Island with a group of friends. We spent the night on this strange island in the middle of the Great Salt Lake. In the morning I woke and watched the sun rise. The beams of light spread through the dusty sky as the sun filled the valley between mountains. I saw the light rise and cover my world, my home. This time, I didn't want to leave. I was seized by fear of leaving this place—not just the island, but this familiar square of the world.

Missing mountains is inevitable when most places don't have mountains, and if they do, they aren't the Rockies. For college, I moved to New York City. I loved that in New York there's a refreshing sense of metropolis, of culture, of culinary genius floating around... and of course buildings to remind me of the absence of mountains. The manmade towers are specters of industry denoting missing or forced nature.

In the South, at least where I live now, pushed to the West and Northern-most cusp of Tennessee's border, there are no mountains. I've heard the Smokey Mountains in East Tennessee are something to see. I'd like to visit, but I know the pang of missing home will jolt me at the sight of their peaks. They aren't the same peaks—the Mount Ogden Peak, or Malan's Peak. They aren't the Wasatch Range, home of the Indian Trail, of Powder Mountain, or Snow Basin.

While I miss Utah, that version of home, I'm also always missing New York. I miss walking everywhere surrounded by people I don't know. The subway and the architecture and the food and the music—I ache for these. There I walk in the valleys

between buildings and feel the wind press against me. I tilt and work against that wind, and think this same wind came whistling through the Ogden Valley, sweeping through the place between heights I love. When I'm away from the city, I miss the bustle, the hurry, and yet the still of Sunday mornings; there is nothing like the knowledge that eight million of my neighbors are resting, that we're healing together from the week's battery of responsibility and delight.

I can't find a way to solve the problem of nostalgia; if I return to one home, I miss the other. Inevitably wherever I choose cannot be both. For now, I remain in the valley between.



## Big Girl Shoes

My mother's closet is a place of wonder—a menagerie of colored shoes and silk scarves and impeccable coordinated outfits so ordered and magical that it feels like the other side of the hole Alice fell down.

I love the shape, the color, the feeling of her shoes—big girl shoes, the ones with heels that will make the coveted and satisfying click-click down the hallway to the wood-floored kitchen. The heel announces a woman's approach. To become a woman I know but one way: obtain heels, and click myself down the hall; announce myself to the world. My world is a kitchen of tall barstools I need help to climb onto, two obnoxious and beloved older brothers, and giant dog-beasts that I incessantly attempt to ride as horses. The women in my world are grown; my sister Kimberly is eighteen years older than me and her shoes prove it. She and my mother have long hair, pink lips, soft hands, and high heels.

I choose the blue ones—royal blue, shiny and cloth-covered. They are three-inches high with a peep to present delicate and most likely hosiery-adorned toes. I smear some bright blue eye shadow over my lids as Kimmy has taught me, pink my lips with a glistening tube from my mother's drawer. Ultimately my foot more than peeps—my foot slips through and I drag the heels into the hall. Sliding and scraping, I debut my womanhood to the world that is my kitchen.

## From The Wrist

In whipping cream, we aspire to the divine. We begin with cold cream—there must be perfection in the state of the ingredients to begin. The whisking must come from the wrist, or else the triceps will give out and the cream will merely thicken. The anticipation mounts with each whirl of the stuff, and finally the resistance of the silken fluff proves the accomplishment. The original ingredients—only cream, sugar, vanilla, and energy— have transformed into something new and better. This act of creation, when the air forced between molecules changes the cream, will not happen on its own. The product, not stiff like meringue, not heavy like butter, not runny like cream, is whipped cream. It is essentially different than it was: new and divine.



Jim gestured to the white ceiling and smiled brightly at the neat couple. They were dressed in their middle class finery, him with slacks and a button-up shirt, her with a coordinated blazer, skirt, heels, and the requisite Coach purse. “You’ll want to notice the crown molding featured here in the dining room, and of course we saw this same look repeated in the master bedroom and guest bedroom as well.”

“Oh, yes, that’s just gorgeous,” the woman said.

“We really love this house,” Mark said, “we really do, but it’s out of our range by 10,000.”

Jim felt it welling up in him; this is the game.

“Listen Mark, I know what you’ve said about your budget...”

“You do.”

“And I fully respect a man’s desire to keep things within the means, to keep it simple and make sure the plans are followed through...” He paused here a moment to smile at them again. He could see the woman’s hopeful eye as she clutched with both hands her brown leather purse. The man was uptight; he stood straight with his blue-collared shirt pressed and perfectly tucked, his hand stretched to rest on the small of his wife’s back in an effort to find some comfort.

“But I’ve got to tell you guys this—you aren’t going to find another house like this. And you know what I mean. We’ve seen three other houses and they just don’t compare to this place...it’s your mansion.”

“It is kind of a mansion, Mark.” Cindy, his wife, sparkled as she glanced around the dining room.

“I understand that, Jim, I know it’s the top shelf—”

“It *is* the top shelf, Mark, and I have to tell you it’s worth every penny.”

Interruption was a tactic he sometimes used. It was not that he bullied his clients, he wasn’t interested in that. He wanted to sell, but sell the best possible home.

“I see that, I do, but we’re stretching already with this budget and to add another ten thousand—”

“Consider ten thousand in this context, Mark. It feels big, but really, a drop. And looking ten years down the road...you’re just not going to regret it. You’re going to look around as you sit in front of that granite fireplace in the living room on your leather couch next to your beautiful wife, and you’re going to watch your kids grow up, and you’re going to be ecstatic that this castle is the place you call home.”

Mark shifted back and forth on his heels, and shook his head. A smile crept from the left corner of his mouth to the other side and he looked down into his wife’s face. “We’ll talk to the bank.”

As he parked his car in the garage at the end of that day, Jim was bursting. This was what he had been working for. He couldn’t wait to tell her. He needed this, she needed this, they needed this.

“It sold! They bought it, El! They loved it and they bought it and finally someone didn’t back out on me,” he said as he walked in the door a quarter after six on a Friday night. His wife stared back at him with her grayish blue eyes and batted her lashes twice for effect.



“That’s great, hon,” she said as she turned back to her baby pink plastic mixing bowl full of the guts of a casserole.

“Well, Elaine, it’s pretty incredible. I’m the first to sell a house this year, and just in time, too. This is saving me big time here,” he said as he hung his coat in the closet next to the door and approached her.

“I said it’s great, Jim, and I meant it,” she said with an unusual irritation. Her eyes met his and it was then he saw that hers were red and puffy from crying. Elaine shifted her eyes back to the concoction and rotated away from him.

“Aw, El, what’s wrong? I’m sorry, I didn’t realize. I’m so sorry.” If he had known, he wouldn’t have started. And he would have brought flowers or something. Something.

“I tested again today, and...” she set down the bowl and leaned with both hands on the tiled counter. Her chin quivered as she pursed her lips together like she did before sobbing.

“And...?”

“It was a no. It was a no, Jim, like always.” Her voice was a husky whisper, as if her vocal cords had rejected her statement.

“Honey, I’m so sorry. But we’ll keep trying, and when the timing is right it’s going to happen, you know? I mean, things are getting better for me at work and soon we’ll be in a great place to afford a baby.” He tried to reason these things; it was the only way he could keep it together. Her bright yellow spatula held his gaze as it sat on the counter oozing with mayonnaisey goo.

“We’ve been trying for three years. *Three* years. I don’t understand what’s wrong. Doctor Milner said there is nothing wrong with me, and I hate to say this—”

“Don’t say it—”

“But it has to be you. It has to be something with you.” She hadn’t ever said it out loud before, and he had prayed she never would.

“Ellie,” his voice stuck to his throat, “I mean....” He had no response and was pretty sure she had just punched him in the neck. He stared at the floral print backsplash behind their sink to escape her.

“Jim, go get tested. Ask them what we can do. This is our family. This is our future. This is *your* legacy that can’t continue unless we figure this out.”

“You know I hate this, Elaine. Why can’t we just keep trying? I mean maybe you’ve got your days wrong, or something.”

“I don’t see what is wrong with asking the doctor to just check. It doesn’t make you less of a man, Jim. That’s what medicine is for. That’s why science and doctors exist...to help normal people with this stuff.” She was begging but her tears had stopped.

“I know.” He paused and stared down at his feet. He couldn’t look at her desperate face; he couldn’t stand seeing her this way.

Jim sat with his knees pressed together and ankles touching, scrunched between two other men waiting for their turn. He looked down at the clipboard with the forms neatly piled under the clip and his lip curled up with discomfort as he looked at the next questions. He glanced to either side of him and attempted to keep his head still so no one would notice his embarrassment.

*Please Circle One:*

*Do you find yourself easily aroused? Yes No*

*Are you able to achieve orgasm during intercourse? Yes No*

*Do you ejaculate regularly? Yes No*

*How Often?*

*Have you ever conceived? Yes No If Yes, When?*

He tried to keep his expression neutral as he slowly circled each answer. Other than the last one, what did these have to do with making babies? He wasn't naïve to the process, but these questions seemed particularly uncomfortable. Perhaps it was due to being sandwiched between two sweating and overweight men who alternately snorted and hacked as they rubbed their thighs anxiously. "They must be brothers," he thought.

"James Thompson," a shrill voice called from a door next to the front desk.

"That's me," he said and handed her his clipboard.

She looked it over as she turned, and once completely turned around said, "So you're having trouble conceiving. Well don't you worry, James. We'll get this figured out." James winced as he followed her through the door and into the bowels of the office. Did she have to say that out loud?

As she ushered him to a scale—"please stand here, shoes off,"—she was still surveying his forms. "I see here you've been trying with your wife for three years. Why did you wait so long to come in?" she said, her eyes questioning him through her thick-framed glasses. Her reddish brown eyebrows raised and her lips pursed expectantly.

"I guess I didn't know anything was wrong." He could feel the sweat gathering under his arms and at his back. He was sure his forehead was glistening and he had to be bright red.

"Oh honey, please. You didn't know?"

"Well, I—"

"182, five feet eleven inches."

"I guess I..."

"Follow me." She whirled around in the opposite direction and took off before he slid on his loafers. He followed her to the exam room, and took his place in the chair next to the exam table. After the nurse left, the doctor finally arrived. "You'll need to have some blood drawn, and we'll need a semen sample. Now that I've done the standard exam here, I think all we need is a few tests to make sure, but at this point I think everything is just fine," he explained with a closed-lip smile and his hands folded neatly in his lap.

"Semen sample?" It was all he could muster. His eyes were wide as he waited for the doctor.

"Yes, James. Obviously if we're testing your capacity to conceive we'll need to get a sample of what makes it all happen." He stood and opened the door. "Just outside to the left you'll find a men's restroom. There should be a selection of visual aids to help you obtain your sample. Take as long as you need." Before Jim could respond the doctor was gone. The nurse shuffled back in and he crossed his dangling ankles awkwardly.



“You can go ahead and get dressed. I’ll let you change and then give you the cup,” she smiled, beige lipstick gathering in the creases of her widespread lips, and shut the door as she left.

Alone with his thoughts, Jim could feel the deep red color returning to his cheeks. He tore off the cotton robe, hopped up from the waxy paper covered table, and dressed as quickly as possible. He hopped a little as he slid on his socks from a standing position, puffed his quick breath out at once in an attempt to relax, and shook his grey button-up shirt as if that might make the sweat stains under the arms disappear. He thought of how Elaine had ironed it for him the night before and how happy she was he was finally doing this. He emerged from the room and found the nurse awaiting him.

“How did it go? Is everything... working?” She was standing at attention as he walked in the door.

“Oh...it was fine. It’s all fine.” He couldn’t face telling her just then. She was so expectant, and he wanted to sit and mourn this veritable castration.

“So...that’s it?” She seemed hesitant to push, but apparently couldn’t resist.

“No, Elaine.” He paused. He walked to the living room and sat down in his blue-covered chair. He looked at her, standing there with her apron around her slim waist and stood back up. “My damn sperm is weak,” he yelled at her into the kitchen where she stood in the doorway, clutching the edging around the entry. “I’m a mess, apparently, and that’s why you’re not pregnant. It’s because of me.” He couldn’t remember the last time he had yelled. He slunk down in the chair with exhaustion.

She came to him and put her hand on his wrist as she crouched down next to the chair. It was a loving gesture, one she often used in public or when she didn't use words, and yet at this moment he felt weaker at her touch. She was strong even now, and being so kind, and he couldn't give her what she wanted.

"Are they sure?" she whispered, but it blasted him.

"Elaine, they're sure," he said, almost without volume.

"We'll figure this out, Jim. We will." Then she leaned up over the arm of the stuffed chair to kiss his cheek. She lingered close to him and he could smell her flowery perfume and hairspray. She'd smelled the same for seven years, ever since he'd first met her.

He sighed and looked her in the eyes for the first time since he entered the house. "I suppose we will."

A few weeks after the news about his semen, Jim found that he and Elaine had not, in fact, figured it out. Her thirtieth birthday loomed and he was on eggshells trying to muster up the courage to end all of this.

The Monday evening before her birthday, they sat down to dinner at their table. She had laid out the salad, the low-fat ranch dressing, the barbecue chicken breasts and corn on the cob. She served herself some chicken, then corn; Jim coaxed some salad into his bowl. He opened his mouth several times and thought about speaking, but before sound escaped he clamped his mouth shut. As if she knew he was attempting to speak, she exhaled sharply and said, "Sometimes it's nice when we can both just sit in silence." She picked up her fork and speared a piece of lettuce.

Jim nodded his head once and took that as his cue. Silence had reigned lately. It had been impossible to talk about anything. He was thankful things at work were utterly normal and even improving. He thought he would gain some gusto after a few small triumphs including his win of top seller for the first quarter, but by the time he came home he couldn't dream of approaching his inadequacies with her. On the day he got the good news, he walked through the door with a little bounce in his step. He was thinking of all the things his boss had said about him: he was the best seller the company had, he was reliable, and he had a damn fine handshake. His boss had declared this to the circle of his coworkers that surrounded Jim and the boss, Mr. Reynolds, and everyone there nodded in agreement. Jim remembered the day he had interviewed for the position at Reynolds Realty and how conscious he had been of giving a firm handshake. He had repeated his handshake motto each time he shook hands with his boss or with a client: *strong closers close strong*. It was a small thing, but for Jim, it was his signature. After Mr. Reynolds had handed him the plaque, he took it and shook his boss's hand with his usual firm assurance. When he received the award he couldn't wait to show his wife.

"El, I'm home, I had such a great day at work!"

She sauntered into the kitchen and rinsed her sage green mug in the sink. She slowly turned to face him as she wiped a checkered towel over the ceramic surface. He hung his coat and smiled at her and opened his mouth, but her cold eyes stopped him. "How was your day?" he said.

She turned around again and slid her mug onto the shelf in the cupboard without a word. He thought he'd try again, "Elaine, how was your—"



“It was fine,” she said abruptly and faced him again, but kept her eyes on her hands, turning them over from palm to wrist, scrutinizing them. He shifted and moved further into the kitchen. He thought of sitting down at the table but dreaded the noise that the scoot of the chair might make, so he leaned against the wall instead. Finally he began, “I got an award—”

“—So what’s your news?” Their voices overlapped and their words jumbled. “Sorry, go ahead.” She gestured with a wave of her hands for him to continue.

Now that he had her attention, he was aware of how worthless his award was. The small, engraved plaque was irrelevant. “Dan told me this great joke at work but I’ve forgotten it. I’ll tell you when I think of it.” His accolades for being reliable and a good hand shaker were inadmissible.

“Yeah, ok. Great.” She said flatly. She glanced at him again, then was somehow immediately in the other room, and gaping silence filled the space between.

All week he had been gathering his courage and had prayed that she would be ready to celebrate her birthday. Maybe they could push aside all of this and remember why they were here, what they had to celebrate.

He dressed in her favorite outfit of his—his khaki pants, his dark blue button-up shirt that would bring out his eyes, and the light yellow tie she had given him the year before for Father’s Day. She had said that even though he wasn’t a father yet, he would be soon, so he deserved a gift. His brown belt and shoes matched well, and he felt ready to sweep her off her feet. He always coordinated his belt and shoes—Elaine had once told him that this was imperative, and he adhered to the matching rule still. A clean and presentable appearance was key when showing houses, and especially when gaining trust



of clients. As he dressed he felt himself revving up, much in the same way he would before a showing. *Jim, you can do this.* He had planned carefully all week so the plans wouldn't seem rushed, or thoughtless, or possibly be misconstrued as an afterthought. He arranged an evening out, and bought her a fruit tart from her favorite bakery. When it approached time to leave she was sitting on the couch reading.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked cautiously, but with an urging enthusiasm, as if his excitement might coax her into happiness.

"I'm not in the mood. I'd rather stay in if you don't mind," she said without lifting her head.

"But it's your birthday, Ellie."

"I just don't feel like it tonight, Jim." She didn't look up.

"Oh...alrighty then. I'll go pick us up some Chinese or something." He lingered there, squeezing his hands together and holding his breath. He wanted to explode. He wanted to yell. He wanted to scream at her, to make her happy again, to make her smile. He saw himself yelling "goddammit why can't we just be happy again?" but instead he turned soundlessly and released his breath as quietly as he could. He moved to the kitchen and opened the cupboard. Soup. Rice. Seasonings.

He slammed the cupboard and strode into the living room, his heartbeat getting louder inside his head with each step.

"I can't do this, Elaine." His voice was surprisingly calm even though his heart was now beating wildly and his breath was heavy.

She stared back at him from her place on the couch. She closed her book and set it aside, and turned to fully face him. "Go ahead." Her voice was smooth and ready.

"I can't do this. I love you, and I can't have you in this fog, reading books on mourning and walking around like we hate each other. I don't feel like a man anymore, I don't feel like your husband anymore. I won't do it another day. What needs to happen here?" He walked toward her and sat next to her on their red couch. She looked up at him and grabbed his hand. It was the first purposeful contact they had had in weeks.

"Something. I don't know what. I thought I could put this aside and just move on but I want to know we've done everything possible before I give up something I've always dreamed about." Her voice broke and her eyes welled and glistened. She turned her head away as she began to cry. He put his hand on her shoulder and drew her into his arms. He embraced her there, and with his arms around her he felt empowered.

"We'll figure this out. We'll see what it takes to really make this happen," he spoke softly into her hair. She nodded her head into his chest.

"Whatever happens here Ellie, we're in this together. You and I are already a family." He squeezed her closer.

"I know," she said.

He hugged her tightly again and they rested there together. He held her in silence.

The following months were improved, but not perfect. Jim didn't expect things to return to normal—whatever that was—but he was relieved that Elaine wasn't always moping. Their renewed commitment to find a way to have a child terrified him; he didn't know what it would mean. After the conversation on her birthday, she had been researching and reading everything in sight like she had done before her mourning phase, and was approaching their sex life with renewed hope and regularity. He got home that Friday with more good news.

"El, I'm home." Jim said as he walked through the door. He set his briefcase down near the garage door, and hung his coat in the hall closet. The kitchen was fragrant with whatever she was preparing for dinner.

"Hey honey. How was your day?" Elaine said with unusual excitement to see him.

"It was great. I think I'm going to get an extra slice of commission off one of Dan's houses that I referred to him."

"That's fantastic. I'm so proud of you!" Elaine approached him with her arms spread wide, her smile genuine. She hugged him and kissed his cheek, then his lips softly.

"How was your day, Ellie?" Jim asked. He was impressed by this reception, and relieved to find her still in good spirits. He felt that finally, their lives were returning to normal.

"Good! Really good," she smiled again at him and turned to the counter where she was assembling their dinner. "I feel like I was actually productive today. I made my dentist appointment, and cleaned the house, and did five other things that have been on my to do list for weeks."

"That's great. Thanks for keeping our chaos under control, the house looks amazing," Jim said. She turned for a moment and smiled at him. He had learned it was important to acknowledge the more mundane things. They weren't particularly rewarding for her, but she did them anyway and without complaint or guilting him, and he knew that was commendable.

He retrieved a beer from the fridge and set it on the counter next to a pile of mail. He opened the beer and took a swig as he sorted through the mail. They were constantly



getting credit card offers, and Ellie's cooking magazine renewal forms. "Are you going to renew your Fine Cooking subscription? Looks like they want you to re-up." He waved the envelope at her.

She turned around to look, chef's knife in hand. "Yeah, I'd like to, if you don't mind." She turned around and continued chopping the garlic he could smell when he walked in.

"Definitely. I know we've had some really good meals from that magazine." He set aside several other envelopes, mostly credit offers and local car dealership ads, and stopped at one he didn't recognize as a bill or a credit card offer. He picked up the last envelope addressed to Ellie from Hope Fertility Clinic. "What's this?" He held up the envelope for her to see.

She squinted and pursed her lips. "I don't know. I'll check it out later." She set down the knife and took the envelope from him quickly. She folded it in half, and shoved it in the back pocket of her jeans. After wiping her hands on the towel next to the cutting board, she returned to her preparation.

Jim admired her as she stood there. She was standing tall, and was wearing an apron. She didn't often wear aprons, but he liked when she did. The tie around her waste highlighted the perfect dip at her hips. "You need any help with dinner?"

"No, I'm fine. Go relax." She turned and smiled at him again, and he knew he was released from any kitchen duties. He stood another moment, enjoying the view of her, chopping and focused and his.

Jim grabbed his *Sports Illustrated* and wandered into the living room, ready to enjoy the weekend.



## At Fleur De Lys

Once, I ate a piece of cheese from a birdcage on the French Riviera. This piece was a dry-aged chevre, the shape of a miniature bell with the middle filled in. We entered the restaurant just off the boardwalk where the Mediterranean's salty breeze escorted wanderers with relaxation and envy, with the sun still high over the city of Cannes. Hours later, half way through our meal, we were presented this cheese. Flecks of forest green herb patterned its lavender-gray substance. To serve it, our waiter used miniature tongs made of smooth oak, appropriate for the small, thumb-sized serving of cheese. Another waiter, dressed in the same tuxedo uniform, held the cage, made of maple with a large door of metal chicken wire-like grating, from a golden hook that latched onto the top. The grating gave preview to the four small shelves that housed the hand-molded goat cheese. The display was quaint, and I couldn't help but laugh at a ceremony so silly and lovely and ingenious. Our waiter opened the cage with two fingers and carefully presented each of us one bell of cheese on a new plate we hadn't noticed had been placed before us. The manager, in his quick yet lilting French, explained the cheese was aged in the cage much like barrel-aged wine. My fork, a dainty one placed next to my new plate, sliced through the cheese effortlessly. The piece was large enough to last several bites, but so small and ethereal that my mouth ached for more before it was gone. It was smooth, and dark, and it felt mature. This gift from the chef, a mid-meal palate cleanser, satisfied.

## In the Box

The three men sat in a small room with plywood walls and sand-splattered floors. The room's four metal folding chairs were arranged two on either side of a small rectangular metal table. Fluorescent light painted the room in a yellow haze; the plywood's rough texture and the grit under their boots added to the stripped feeling of the room. A bright red poster tacked to the wall near the door screamed in bold black letters, *Never Surrender! Suicide is not the answer. Soldiers fight, and ask for help!*

"How many hours a week would you say you spend talking to Sergeant Wood?" Sergeant First Class Richards crossed his arms and stared at the young man in front of him.

"I couldn't say." Specialist Flitt leaned back and exhaled slowly in an attempt to stay calm.

"You couldn't say? As in, you are incapable of estimating a number? Or you will not divulge the amount of time you spend with her?" To Richards, Flitt's twenty-four years seemed like half of a life to his forty-two years on this earth, his twenty-two years in the army. Flitt was stocky and short; Richards outweighed him by twenty pounds and had an easy four inches on him. For some reason Richards had gotten in the habit of sizing up folks, even as a superior.

"Sergeant, I'm just not sure. I'm not really clear where all this is going."

Richards held the boy's eye contact then shifted his gaze to his folded hands as Lieutenant Tallon next to him tapped his foot and the sand beneath his boots grated against the wood floor. Tallon's face was thin and intense—he didn't seem like he'd be friendly, but he was congenial to everyone. Richards guessed he'd lost twenty pounds

since he'd arrived four months ago—the stress of a first deployment will do that to most men.

Tallon cleared his throat. “Specialist, you’re married, correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sergeant Richards and I have observed you spending quite a bit of time with Sergeant Stephanie Wood. I’m sure you know that cohabitation earns you a demotion, and adultery...” Lieutenant Tallon paused. “We’ve noticed the amount of time you’re spending with a woman you’re not married to, and we’re checking in.”

As Tallon spoke, Richards nodded occasionally in agreement. The lieutenant was a kid too, twenty-seven, but he was good at his job. He didn’t show up six months into the deployment and expect to tell people how things were done like so many rosy-cheeked L-T’s. He listened, and for that Richards could respect the guy.

“Ok. But Sergeant Wood is my mentor. She has been helping me study for the promotion boards so of course we’ve spent more time together, but I mean she’s my mentor.” Flitt rushed through his words, his voice tinged with panic and confusion.

“So that’s how you would describe your relationship with Sergeant Wood? You’d call her your mentor? When you came into this company as a private, I told you to steer clear. I told you eyes forward, don’t be an idiot, don’t fraternize with the female soldiers. And here you are, making me feel like I’ve failed you by not making the rules clear enough,” Richards said.

“No Sergeant, she’s my mentor. Well. I guess she’s my friend too.”

“So she’s your mentor, and your friend?” Lieutenant Tallon asked.

“Yes, sir.” He paused a moment and quietly cleared his throat. “Yes. She’s my best friend.” Specialist Flitt’s gulp was audible from across the table. He was flushed and sweat glistened on his forehead just in front of his stark widow’s peak and his dark high and tight hair cut.

“She’s your best friend,” Sergeant Richards repeated.

“Yes.”

“What does your wife think about this?” Richards asked.

“Monica? She’s fine with it. She’s happy for us,” Flitt said.

“Your wife is happy for you and Sergeant Wood? Now what the hell do you mean by that?” Richards jumped in.

“Well, I mean, she’s glad I have a friend here. Who I can talk to.” Flitt shifted in his seat, and shifted back. He would not look the men sitting across from him in the face. He kept his eyes pinned to the toes of his dusty boots.

“You mean to tell me that your wife is happy that you are spending every waking hour with another woman? I don’t care who it is, my wife would not tolerate that.” Daniel Richards thought of his own wife Julie. In just over a month he would see her again. She had sent him some pictures the week before and he’d spent the few hours he had alone staring at them and thinking of all the things they’d do together. She had grown her hair out in the thirteen months he’d been away from her, and she looked gorgeous. She always did, even after two kids, but God, she looked great. Her brown hair twisted and curled down her shoulders and rested on her chest, which, if he did say so himself, was looking pretty damn good, too. Her eyes were that same blue that had caught him off guard



seventeen years ago. When they said goodbye this time, he knew it would be his last deployment, and for some reason that made it all harder.

“So... I’ll write you. And we’ll e-mail, and call, and all that. This is so much easier than Desert Storm, and Bosnia, I mean we really can’t complain.” Richards tried to comfort her with the obvious.

“We’ll be fine. You’ll be great, and you’ll come home, and we’ll be here waiting.” She said this with a tender voice as she looked him straight in the eye as if to drink in his nearness in those last few moments. He could not say anything but “ok” in a grunt at first. He looked down for a moment and studied their intertwined hands. He touched the gold band he had given her a lifetime ago.

“Julie. I know we don’t talk about this—“

“—Daniel, please—“

“—But I want you to be happy,” he choked out. His eyes were red and he could feel warm tears slither over his lashes. She was still looking at him, her look focused and pained. Her cheeks were wet and her face flushed. “If I’m gone, I want you to be happy.” His throat was tight and the words felt voluminous and hard as they came out, like they might cut his tongue. “I want you to move on, if I can’t be here.”

“Daniel, you will be here. I will be here. You’re going to have to get used to the idea of my boobs sagging to my belt and my ass spreading to the size of Tennessee. You’re going to have to find my dentures because I lost them, after I lost my glasses. You’ll be here.”

He shook his head slightly to rejoin the situation at hand.

“I think you’re getting the wrong impression here. I’m not cheating on my wife,” Flitt said.

“You mean you’re not sleeping with Sergeant Wood,” said Richards.

“No, I am not sleeping with her. She’s my best friend. You don’t sleep with your best friend.”

“Well if your best friend happens to be your wife, you do.” The lieutenant was keeping calm but Richards felt his patience withering. He had a hard time empathizing with a kid who was a newlywed, had been away from his wife for less than eight months, and couldn’t stay faithful. He had kept tunnel vision for Julie through five deployments, countless trainings, and two very serious years without sex or laughter while their first child was sick.

“I’m not really sure what to say here. I have a best friend who is a girl, and I have a wife. I don’t know what to say other than that I’m not cheating on my wife. If you’re accusing me of infidelity I hope you’ll be straight with me. I’m not cohabitating, and I’m not sleeping with Sergeant Wood, or anyone else for that matter.” Flitt was getting frustrated and it made Richards clench his jaw and press his lips together in a straight line to control himself. The lieutenant had apparently anticipated that this would provoke Richards and he interjected before Richards got a chance to release the snarl behind the lines.

“You’re sure your wife knows about this? When was the last time you spoke with Mrs. Flitt?”

“Oh, I sent her an e-mail four days ago, and called her probably ten days ago.” He looked smug now.

Both Richards and Tallon sat and waited. Richards had no idea what he wanted to say, but somehow he knew this kid was lying. He suspected Tallon felt the same way. Maybe the silence would unveil out the truth. So they waited. Richards stared at the crack under the door where white light streamed in. His eyes were wide as his pupils contracted and he thought of home. He thought of being with his wife again, really *with* her. He felt as though his insides had been scrubbed down by steel wool and bleach... it was the cleansing and numbing of war. He was ready to breathe in her sweetness when he hugged her, and graze her neck with his cheek. Her skin would be soft—it would patch him up.

“Can I go?”

“No,” came in unison from across the table.

“Then...”

“I’m tired of this, you little sonofabitch. I don’t know what you think is going on here, but I have several accounts of you and Wood getting cozy in the CP, at lunch, and God knows where else.” Richards was standing now, hunched over towards Flitt with his hands flat against the table. His face was flushed and his voice was loud in the small, plywood room.

“I’m telling you, Sergeant, this is bullshit. They’re just jealous.” Flitt said this before he could stop himself.

“What the hell are people jealous of?” Richards’s neck was tense, each vein raised to the surface to prove there was blood pumping to his head. With his jaw clenched, hands still on the table, he awaited Flitt’s reply.

"I don't know," Flitt said, barely audibly.

"What was that?" Richards eased himself back down into his chair, glanced at the lieutenant who was watching the interaction, ready to reel things in if they got off course.

"I said I don't know, Sergeant." Flitt kept his head down and avoided eye contact.

"I'm sure you don't, you little weasel." Richards was frustrated, but past anger.

"Alright, Sergeant, let's wrap it up. We're not getting anywhere here." Tallon pursed his lips in a regretful smile at Richards, then turned back to Flitt.

Richards shifted forward again in his seat and placed his arms on the table, as if to reach out to Flitt. "What you need to know is this. You will be demoted. You will reap the consequences of your actions here. Not only could you lose your shot at sergeant, but you could lose your marriage. I'm sure Mrs. Flitt feels very far away, and you probably think there's no way she'll ever be able to relate to you, but the day you step off that plane back home, she's back in your life, and Sergeant Wood is gone. I guarantee you that." That was all Richards could say. There was nothing they could actually do to the kid since he hadn't been caught doing anything but talking and flirting, and that was hard to document.

Flitt sat, stiff and small, across from them. His chin was almost to his chest. After a moment he said, "I know you think I'm guilty here, but I'm not." He raised his head and met Richards's eyes with his own. "Sergeant Wood is my best friend and my mentor. Nothing else."

Richards and Tallon were silent. Each stared at Flitt in hopes of discerning the truth. He seemed to be telling the truth now. At this point, why would he lie? They'd laid



out the consequences clearly, and he still wouldn't budge. Maybe the kid wasn't full of shit.

"So you're telling me we're wrong?" Richards said.

"No Sergeant, not wrong, just... misunderstanding the situation. I see that it must look like more, or you wouldn't have called me in here. But I'm in here telling you it's not what you think it is." Flitt was gaining confidence now.

"Alright then. If this looks like the thing, and acts like the thing, but isn't the thing, then you might want to consider changing the way you act. If you're innocent as you say you are, you should work on appearing innocent too. Does that make sense, Specialist?" Richards felt almost sure now, but he did think there was room for improvement in this friendship. Before Flitt could respond, Richards said, "and I don't mean to seem like I support this kind of friendship between a male and female soldier. I don't. But if you're dead set on it, I want you to make clear to me, and everyone who sees you two together, that it is a friendship and only that."

"Roger, Sergeant. That makes sense. I love my wife. I don't need anyone other than her. Sergeant Wood is my friend, and I'll draw that line in the sand more clearly," Flitt said.

Tallon was feeling confident with the outcome of the meeting, clearly relieved he wasn't dealing with any cohabitation charges or other possible drama. "Alright, Flitt. Alright. I feel like we've got this straightened out. Do you?" He looked at Richards.

"That I do. And I'm glad—just don't screw up now, Flitt, or we'll be really pissed," Richards said with a smile. Flitt was relaxed now that he had made his side of the situation clear.

“Ok sir, Sergeant, can I go?”

“Dismissed.”

Flitt got up quickly and left the small room without another word. The light and heat swarmed in through the door and met Richards and Tallon at the table. They each squinted against the brightness and sat looking after Flitt as the door closed and their eyes readjusted. They were both slightly slumped in the chairs with relief. Tallon was the first to stand.

“Want to get some coffee or something?” Tallon said as he stretched his arms above his head.

“Sure, yeah, let’s do that.” Richards said. He was thinking of Flitt and how glad he was to be wrong in this case. It was not the first time, and he couldn’t help thinking of wrongly accusing Julie a few years back.

“I don’t know who this guy is, but I want an explanation, now.” Richards had come home from work and found Julie on the phone. When he walked in, she abruptly hung up and wouldn’t say who she had spoken with. It was unlike her to be secretive, and when she avoided telling him, he was seized with the thought that he was like every other jerk who got cheated on. He’d never see it coming. Julie went outside with the kids and he redialed the last call. He couldn’t breathe when the answer came:

“Hello, this is Mark Anderson.”

Richards couldn’t respond. He just slammed down the phone and stood there, paralyzed.

Julie came in, and he began the questioning. She wouldn't acknowledge his suspicions. "I don't know what you're talking about, Daniel."

"Julie, who were you on the phone with when I got home?"

"I don't really even know. I've made a bunch of calls today." He was sure she was avoiding the issue now.

"I called the last number back. Who the hell is Mark Anderson?" Richards said with a snarl. He was seething and hardly heard her when she responded—he was too alarmed at her now blushing cheeks.

"He's no one." She avoided his eyes.

"Julie, dammit, if you're cheating on me with this Mark idiot just tell me now. I won't be lied to by my own wife in my own house." He was yelling now.

"Alright, Daniel, fine," she said. She looked directly in his eyes and didn't waver from stepping straight in front of him. "If you're going to jump to the worst possible conclusion and won't just trust me, I'll tell you. He's the event planner at the golf course. I was planning a surprise party for your 40th. So... surprise." She walked out of the room and back outside before he could speak.

The door swung open again and brought Richards back to the stale present. Specialist Adams cautiously entered the room. She stepped one boot inside the door, then the other, her petite frame barely noticeable, even in the small room.

"Hello sir, hello, Sergeant," Adams said quietly. She cleared her throat and remained stiff, standing at attention. Having a woman in the room, even one so quiet and unimposing, changed the atmosphere.

“Specialist, what can we do for you?” Tallon asked, and gave her a nod to stand at ease. He sat back down next to Richards, deflated by another interruption keeping him from a cup of coffee and escape.

Adams shifted her weight and rested her hands behind her at the small of her back in the more relaxed position. “Sir, I came to give you a report from the MED-O.”

Richards’s attention was piqued. So far everyone had been healthy, and there was not a lot of business for the Medical Officer of their battalion. “Let’s have it.”

Adams leaned forward to hand Lieutenant Tallon the paper she held behind her back, and retreated immediately back across the table to her standing position once he took it from her. Tallon read the paper, shook his head, and handed it off to Richards. Richards nodded—they were too late.

“Well, send Sergeant Wood in and we’ll get her paperwork done quickly. We’ll need to ask her a few questions first, then she’ll be on the first plane out of here as far as I’m concerned. I have no use for a pregnant soldier.” Richards was surprised he said it before the lieutenant, but he was the one who had been tracking the situation all along.

Tallon put a hand on his shoulder and gave him a quick, consoling pat on the back. “Let’s get Flitt back in here.”



## How Butter Behaves

You can't pour hot butter on dough and be surprised when it puffs up and gets mushy. This is only a problem if you have plans for the dough. I did have plans for the dough, but by the time I sprinkle sugar and cinnamon over the now bulging slab of butter-treated stuff, there is little hope I'll be able to give the finished product away. I roll the dough slowly, all thirty inches of it rejecting my best efforts, and all the butter, sugar, and cinnamon oozing out spitefully towards the end of my log of would-be rolls. It is ugly. The sweet sludge slips down off of the dough, onto the counter, and promptly follows gravity's call to the floor by way of my cabinets.

Fortunately, the wisdom of the recipe I'm following suggests the division of dough into two parts to make rolling out easier. The second half turns out better—I learned my lesson with the warm butter, so I take the time to cool it completely before drizzling it across the fragrant dough. The filling does squish out as I roll the log as tight as I can, but not as much. I decide I'll modify the recipe next time to prevent the problem—I'll soften the butter and spread it on, not melt it.

To finish, I slice the cylinder of sweetness into half-inch pieces, place them in a buttered pie dish with plenty of room to rise, and bake. When they emerge from the oven they transform from lopsided gummy dough into golden swirls of cinnamon and sugar nestled inside a blanket of breading. I drizzle a maple and coffee icing over the hot dish and let the rolls bathe in and absorb the mixture. These will satisfy, will heal. These will make all things right.

## Extended Stay

The sleet fell as she shuffled into the hotel. Mondays were once hard, but after working for fifty years, she had gotten used to it. A Monday at this place meant there were vacant rooms that needed the turn-around cleaning, usually only one or two. Those took longer than the daily pick up and scrub down, but she didn't mind them. As the automatic doors parted she scuffed her feet across the mats to dry them and pulled off the plastic kerchief she had fastened over her hair. She only got her hair done once a week so it was worth keeping dry, even if it meant wearing a plastic kerchief.

Louise shook off the cold feeling that lingered in her polyester gray uniform dress, started sliding her long jacket off, and cleared her throat meekly. "Morning, Rich. How's the morning been so far?" Her voice leapt from her lips lightly. He did that to her, this young boy behind the desk. Maybe it was a crush. Silly for a seventy-five-year-old woman to blush at the sight of a twenty-something, but she couldn't help it. Jimmy had been gone more than five years and there wasn't anything wrong with looking, was there? Rich was a nice boy, certainly the opposite of her historically absent husband, and she liked him. It kept her entertained at least.

"Oh, just fine, Miss Louise. Your usuals and one new couple checked in two nights ago, nothing more to report." He cleared his throat, shuffled some papers and gave her a quick smile before returning his concentration to the screen in front of him.

Admiring his black suit and red tie, she touched a hand to her cheek. "Well good, good. Have a nice morning, Rich." She continued past the desk and found her way to the supply room. She enjoyed restocking her cart—a certain sense of immediate gratification trilled through her each time she set another miniature shampoo in an empty spot. Louise

pulled her cart out and surveyed the stock. She packed a few more small hand soaps on the middle shelf and piled rolls of toilet paper on top of the already bulging cart. People liked a spare roll when they knew they'd be there a while, even if they knew she would give them more each morning, and she liked to keep her cart well stocked.

Wheeling the cart out of the supply room, she started with room 102. The day was already flitting by and she wanted to get the turn over rooms finished before lunch so she could finish up the dailies in the early afternoon. She worked vigorously and was in the peak of her efficiency mode. Her mind wandered and finally latched on the Oprah episode she had seen the week before about finding the right bra size. All those women wandering around without the right bra size.

Louise left 112, the last vacant room, and as she walked down the hall, a petite woman and her husband made eye contact with her. Knowing they probably needed something, Louise smiled at them warmly and wondered what they were doing there, in the area. Maybe they had family nearby? Once she passed them she heard the man grunt, "just ask her" in a low voice.

"Excuse me, ma'am?" The hesitant voice came just as she had suspected.

Resisting a full smile after predicting the phrase, Louise turned slowly. The woman in front of her was well-dressed in jeans and a cream-colored blouse with silver earrings and bracelet. Her heels added a few inches to her very short frame. Her husband's button-up matched her blouse. Her face was expectant, and a bit nervous. "Yes?" said Louise.

"I know it's only 11:30 and we're just now leaving our room and I just wanted to make sure you would have a moment to make up our bed today. We've been here since



Friday night and haven't had it straightened up and since there's not much space, we can't keep everything tidy and we sure would appreciate it, if you have a moment. I hope we didn't miss the service window." The woman was apparently embarrassed to suggest that Louise, clearly the maid, should be the one to make up her bed. Louise figured she reminded this woman of a grandmother. Younger people had a tendency to appear uncomfortable with the fact that she was in her seventies and working full time. Personally, she didn't mind. What else should she do?

"Certainly ma'am. I'll be getting to your room this afternoon if that's alright. I'm sorry you haven't had your room serviced sooner," she said.

"Oh thank you so much! Thank you!" The prim face smiled and clapped her hands together lightly in triumph.

"Not a problem, have a great afternoon." She appreciated when people were polite. After a lifetime of being a maid, she had learned to take her thanks when she could get it. She continued down the hall to the break room where she parked her cart outside and found her way to the break room table.

Her napkin was neatly folded in a triangle and resting on her thigh as she sat at the empty table, her ankles together, and she let her mind wander. Her turkey sandwich on wheat with lettuce and mustard crunched in her mouth as she thought about the morning before her first shift at the hotel.

"Jimmy, I'm fixing to leave, honey. When you coming back from this one?" She smiled at herself as she adjusted her smart uniform. This morning she felt put together; she felt ready. She had worked at a motel for ten years leading up to a bankruptcy that put



her and everyone associated with the place out of work. After staying home for two weeks—the longest vacation of her life—she was hired for an immediate start at the third place where she interviewed. The start was today at 9:00.

“Don’t know.”

“You thinking Sunday?” It was Wednesday and he usually took four days there and back; two days from Maryland to Idaho, two days back.

“Said I don’t know.”

“Alright, well... I’m off! Wish me luck!” She managed to say this brightly—the prospects of her new job had lightened her load.

“Luck.”

Louise glanced at him on the way out, slumped in the easy chair with a mug of coffee in hand, the morning news the apparent cause for his limited responses.

“See you Sunday, Jimmy,” and with that she was out the door and headed to the bus.

After she finished her sandwich she crumpled her napkin and tossed it into the low garbage can. It was a small accomplishment to toss her napkins in the wide can without standing. She tucked the sandwich bag into the right pocket of her uniform and slowly made her way back into the hallway.

While surveying her cart just outside the break room, she noticed Rich approaching with his coffee mug in hand.

“Have a nice lunch?” He smiled politely at her.

"Sure did," she said. He continued into the room but she stayed behind staring after him. Did he see her as a seventy-five-year-old grandmother? Did he notice the wrinkles, the worn skin on her working hands? Did he laugh to himself at her wild hair dyed just shy of platinum blonde and rolled into a traditional, acceptable, elderly woman style? Could he smell the hair spray she used, or the Ponds lotion that coated her soft cheeks and made them gleam under the fluorescent lights? Did he see her graying light blue eyes and know how damaged and clouded they had become? Probably not. If he was a man in his twenties like any she had ever known he was certainly not that observant, but his eyes hinted that they had seen her. He didn't disdain her for working, at least.

"You alright?" She heard a husky voice interrupt. Opening her eyes wide, she blinked as if to physically clear her thoughts.

"Oh fine, just the post-lunch daze I suppose." She grinned lightly at Ed the maintenance guy who was heading in for his lunch. He spoke to her at least once a day in an effort, she supposed, to remind her of the time he'd asked her to lunch. She had refused, unready or unwilling to be with any man again, but was clutched with exhilaration after the fact.

"Alright then." He was never pushy. He had taken her at her word, which she liked. She felt sorry that she wasn't interested.

"Louise, what do you want me to say? I make my money on the road. I don't have time for kids, I don't have time to go to parks. I sure as hell don't think it's what you signed up for when we started this thing ten years ago." Jimmy was always harsh, but this conversation seemed particularly hardened.

“Well, Jim, I thought we’d talked about kids. I mean, if you don’t want them, that’s ok, I guess.” What else could she say? At this point she knew it wouldn’t happen, but she brought it up before she could stop herself. She was almost thirty, he was coming up on his thirty-fifth birthday, and it wasn’t a surprise to her that he said no now. Her friend at the motel had just told her she was pregnant and she couldn’t shake the image of herself bowed with life inside her.

“I don’t have time for kids, don’t want kids, and if you had a kid you’d have to stay home or we’d pay for a sitter, and I don’t want to spend my money that way. I work long, hard days. I want to come home and sit in peace and watch the news and have a beer and not hear some kid crying all night before I head back on the road.”

“Ok Jimmy. I see what you mean, it’s better this way.” Her voice was soft and resigned. She looked down at her hands. They were already worn and dry from work. She didn’t mind work—she liked it, even. But she’d always thought she’d be a mother too.

“Don’t go making me the bad guy. You married me this way and I expect you thought you’d change me. Well you didn’t. And don’t think for a second you can leave me and go find someone else to love you.” He glared at her with such anger. It was a symptom of too many miles logged on the roads, she knew, and he knew she’d never leave him.

“No Jimmy. No one else can love me like you do.” She believed that.

No one else could love her, whether like Jimmy or not. Louise was out of the love business anyway, though she did like knowing Ed thought of her. She stood for a beat, then turned and decided to start with 114, the room where the couple she had spoken with



earlier was staying. She rolled the cart to the door and slid her key card in the lock. The light flashed red; she tilted her head to the right, and tried again. Green light. The lock slid back mechanically with a metallic groan and she pushed the door open, ignoring her fleeting wish for regular keys again. Her wrists wouldn't appreciate turning the key anyway, so she guessed this was better.

Stepping inside, she noticed the faint smell of cooked mushrooms and a bolder lavender scent. The people who stayed at the hotel often cooked in their rooms. The small hotel was an extended stay place with small sinks, fridges, and two burners in each room. It was convenient for occupants, but often messy for her. These two didn't seem particularly prone to spraying spaghetti sauce on the white walls, so that was a start. She spritzed the area where grease had splattered around the stove and began cleaning with her worn rag. In order not to disturb the patrons' belongings, she worked her way around the room carefully.

The bathroom was her favorite part, so she always saved it for last. In the beginning she had thought bathrooms would be the worst, but it turned out for her they were the most interesting. She liked to see what products the guests used. She imagined the toiletries of a person to say a little something about them. Expensive toiletries might hint at extravagance. No toothpaste? Well, that was just unsanitary. She was at peace with her judgments. Anyway, if all that were true, she thought, then these people were pretty predictable.

The woman's bag slumped against the wall and a small explosion of miniature plastic bottles and pots had evidently occurred upon opening it. Lotion, shampoo, face soap, mouthwash, toothpaste, various makeup items... the usual. The lavender scent was



embedded in the room. A search of the shower revealed the source—lavender body wash. “Soothing Lavender Scent” the bottle claimed.

The man’s small bag was more structured and less full and contained more standard fare. Louise hummed as she wiped the mirror and the counter. She stocked the shelf with fresh towels. She turned to the toilet and wiped the seat, refilled the toilet paper, and washed her hands. She washed her hands after the toilet. It was just a habit. Then she did the sink.

She sprayed down the already wet sink and wiped carefully around the faucet. This was strangely rewarding to her; she thought of her rag as an eraser effectively cleansing the metal spout of any watermarks or spots, and it felt good. While finishing her bathroom routine and about to start vacuuming, she noticed a unique sparkle of color. She wasn’t used to noticing small things; her eyes had gotten progressively worse and if it weren’t for years of practice, she wouldn’t be much good at her job. Carefully, she leaned down and eyed the bluish glint coming from the woman’s small bag to her right.

Her policy, and the hotel’s, was to touch guests’ belongings as little as possible. Slide them left or right, nudge them here or there, lift them and replace them, and rarely, pile them elsewhere, but never root around in them. Never touch them without a cleaning excuse. Never get noseey. And she really never had.

This strange little colorful shine that had caught her eye, though, had an odd pull on her curiosity. She knew her motive was curiosity alone and so she stretched out the index finger on her left hand—as if using her less dominant hand would make it less invasive—and touched the blue spot. It was hard. She looked at herself in the bathroom mirror and chuckled at how silly she felt. She shook her head in admonishment, but felt

her eyes pull her focus back down and she felt her right hand reach in and grasp the small thing.

It was no larger than the tip of her pinky. It connected to a long gold chain and as she pulled the blue stone out of the bag the thin chain of the necklace slithered out of the bag behind it. She brought it close to her face and examined the lovely little piece of polished rock. Well, she realized, better than just a rock. She had seen a stone like this in a Good Housekeeping magazine decades ago and tore the page out so she'd have it to look at. This was sapphire. Polished to a shine sapphire. Perfect.

It was a dainty oval with all the right angles and the utterly blue color only a dark sapphire can have. She continued to stare. After a few moments her head jerked up and she winked in the mirror as she looked in her own eyes. They were bluer, somehow. A thrill of nervousness ran through her and she carefully placed the necklace back in the bag. Regretfully, she took her hand away and returned it to the scummy cloth. She wiped the sink once more and backed out of the bathroom, flipping the light off as she left. She exited the room almost quickly, except she hardly did anything quickly anymore. Once the door shut behind her it occurred to her that she hadn't vacuumed. Oh well. She'd do it tomorrow.

The next day as Louise entered the hotel, she found herself scowling at Rich who stood there so straight and sure behind the front desk. He never acknowledged her genuinely, she realized. That was fine. Acknowledgement was not something required of him. She marched past him without a word and from what she could tell he didn't even notice that she didn't speak to him, which only irked her further.

After hustling through her duties that morning, she sat listless at her table staring at her turkey sandwich. Something pulled at Louise's mind but she couldn't identify it. A longing. Something unfamiliar to her routine and practiced mind. Perhaps it was that she hadn't slept well the night before.

She worked down the hallway after lunch and finished with room 114. Entering slowly, she was unsurprised by the room's tidy disarray. She wiped counters, changed the sheets, and she dusted. As she finished the bedroom she felt her breath quicken. She approached the bathroom cautiously and flipped the light on before the black of the windowless room could cause any more suspense. Her eyes flitted immediately to the woman's toiletry bag where she knew all too well what her eyes searched for. Secret deodorant, Crest toothpaste, and Jergens lotion... she skipped nervously to the bag to inspect it from directly above. There was no gleaming blue rock, no sparkle of the golden chain. Without thinking her hands jumped into the bag and sifted around until they felt the cool delicate metal. She watched as her thumb and index finger pinched deliberately and pulled the long chain out from the bag. The tiny links filtered out, out, out until the subtle rock popped out of the bag at the end.

Her heartbeat slowed as she cradled the stone in her palm and admired it, and cooed at its bluey brilliance. She blinked tenderly at it and smiled, then shook herself lightly away from her gaze and closed her hand around it. The rest of the bathroom was cleaned one-handed; she scrubbed the sink, wiped the toilet, and refreshed the linens all with one fist closed around the cool beauty. At last she released the necklace back to its home in the bag and covered it up again. Releasing it, she felt a tingle of loss creep in to



the corner of her heart, but buried it with the darkness as she extinguished the bathroom light. She vacuumed this time, content to bear the monotony of her day as usual.

That afternoon as she trudged to the doors she gave Rich a slight chin nod, a curt movement that was strange for her. He didn't notice.

When Friday came and she knew she would not clean the room that held the alluring jewel over the weekend she felt truly sad for the first time in years. She left the bathroom reluctantly and only by the sheer power of her practiced will. She found herself thinking of Jimmy on her way home that afternoon. Jimmy had died five years earlier, mostly due to drinking and a terminal scowl. Early on, she had made a note to be happy with whatever came and it turned out she was stubborn enough to do just that. Jimmy had been a trucker for Covenant Trucking based out of Maryland. His route took him to Idaho and back at least once a month and by the end he took his time. Their marriage was full of what others might regret or pity, but what she was accustomed to. She worked hard, loved little, and stayed strong. Jimmy wasn't a bad man; he was more than anything a working man.

She had been a maid when he met her, and as it was turning out she'd be a maid when she died. She thought of the time she told Jimmy what she did for a living.

"So what do you do, Miss Louise? Such a pretty girl's gotta have some kind of job, ain't she?" Jimmy had a way of making every sentence sound exciting. Thrilled, she announced that yes, she did have a job.



“Well I’m a maid at the hotel downtown right now, but I’m hoping to save up in the next few years to go to nursing school. I could really help people, I think.” She said this with a coy smile, and touched his arm. His eyes brightened at her contact.

“I don’t know Louise. If you were my girl I wouldn’t let you do nothing but sit around and look gorgeous like you do. Keep that blonde hair blonde and those lips rosy red, and you’ve stolen my heart.”

Of course, she never could save up anything. Everything she made went to “fun money” which felt like “down the drain.” Fairly quickly, she learned not to argue and to keep doing what she did as a maid; in the end they needed her income, too, no time for school or nonsense like that, and she got it. She never felt discontent with this lot—she knew she was good at it, and it gave her time to think and hum and be alone with her thoughts. She hadn’t asked for much, and she hadn’t gotten much either. It wasn’t like Jimmy was abusive. He hadn’t left her, and she made decent money. Long days on her feet, sandwiches for lunch, bus rides to work, and a simple life were what she was used to. Maybe that’s why that blueberry diamond had caught her eye. It was unlike anything she’d ever owned, or thought to own.

The weekend felt long, but restful, and she welcomed the break, as she always did. She managed to enjoy watching TV, bingo on Saturday night, attending Sunday morning service, and keeping her mind away from what she wanted. What she felt she needed, on some level. When she approached the hotel again the next Monday morning she found herself moving quickly inside the doors, removing her coat agilely, and passing right by Rich with only a simple grin in his direction. As she trotted down the hall to

retrieve her car the young couple from 114 wandered casually in the opposite direction. She felt a fondness at the sight of them hand in hand. She turned to smile as they moved closer to her but felt her smile twist into a disgusted grimace as the woman beamed back at her. On the woman's dainty neck lay a delicate gold chain weighted at the bottom by a small blue stone.

"Hello ma'am," the woman offered sweetly as she passed.

Before Louise could say a word, or think, or move, the couple was off in to the lobby and out the front doors. Staring after them, she just stood there. She felt shocked at the sight of this silly young woman wearing her necklace. She felt irked that someone else should wear it when clearly she, in all this world, was one who could appreciate its simple beauty. She had never asked for such a thing, and that was precisely why it should be her own.

The rest of the day passed in a haze. Room 114 was treated professionally, but perhaps with less care than if her earlier encounter hadn't occurred. She left the building with a shrug and stepped on to the bus bound for home. That night she slept soundly.

In the morning she moved slowly, purposefully. One at a time, she pulled on her knee-high stockings as she sat at the end of her bed. She slid on her slip and then stepped into her gray dress. After zipping the zipper steadily up from her waist to just under her arm, she smoothed the front of her dress. She straightened the white collar and admired its stark contrast to the gray of the rest of the dress. The shock of frizzled hair framing her pink face was unavoidable in the mirror. She rubbed some Vaseline on her dry lips, pulled on her long black coat, and slid her feet into her black loafers. It had been a decade

since she had worn makeup and she wondered what she would look like with a little blush and maybe some color on her lips.

As she stepped into the hotel everything was heightened. A gust of warm outgoing air brushed by her while she slid through the doors and her feet slowed when the tread on her shoes met the pile of the carpet. Her mouth stretched into a friendly greeting and she met Rich with a simple “morning,” then scuttled past the desk towards the supply room. Once she had loaded her cart she wheeled it into the long hall. Glancing down the length of the hallway she noticed, for the first time, how ugly the hunter green carpet looked with the orangey-gold wallpaper. The fluorescent lights drenched the walls in sallow brightness but as she had done so many times before, she began pushing down the hall again. She stopped at her first room and entered carefully. She spent extra time cleaning each room. Today she would be thorough. Very thorough.

Her lunch break was quiet. She was happy to sit with herself and eat her sandwich. Turkey again.

After lunch she worked her way down the hall further, and finally came to her last room. She entered 114 with controlled anticipation. She scrubbed the kitchen vigorously. She wiped out the fridge. She neatly piled the scattered clothing back onto the suitcase in the corner of the dim room. She made the bed. Her eyes stole glances at the darkened bathroom. She vacuumed. She wiped the bedside tables. She grabbed two rolls of toilet paper from her cart, and moved to the bathroom. She piled the various toiletries onto their respective bags and wiped the counter. She cleaned the toilet. She washed her hands. She cleaned the shower. She washed her hands. She wiped the sink. She sprayed and cleaned



the mirror. She replaced the empty tissue box. She reached into the bag on her right, found the necklace, and pulled it out slowly as she had done so many times in the past weeks.

She looked for a long time at her reflection. Her thick arms held the necklace out in front of her, nearly a foot from her body. Her eyes saw only the dangling jewel since the chain had disappeared into the blur of her poor vision. Her face was missing in the mirror as well, obscured by the clouds in her eyes. She held the necklace in that way for what seemed hours, but when she finally broke her stare and glanced at her watch, it had only been three minutes. She scooted closer to the counter and the mirror and her face became clearer. Her eyes looked bright and her cheeks rosy.

Gently, she laid the necklace around her neck and let it fall over her dress. She admired the shiny addition to her perpetual uniform. The spot of blue against the interminable gray was delightful. Her aging fingers struggled to clinch the miniscule clasp behind her head, but eventually she secured it. The jewel fell down on her chest and she was surprised that she could feel the weight of the small thing underneath her dress. She looked at it around her neck in the mirror. Calmly, she dropped it down under her collar so it hid beneath her dress secretly. The cool metal around her neck and the chilly sapphire dangling against her skin felt new, yet familiar. She patted it in place on her sternum, and walked out of the bathroom.

She wheeled her cart back down the hall and stowed it away in the supply closet, as she did each day at 3:00. She grabbed her jacket from the hook where it hung and moved towards the lobby. When she reached the lobby, she approached the desk and Rich eyed her curiously.



"You alright, Miss Louise? You seem a bit flushed." He was really looking at her. The jewel burned underneath her dress and for a moment she longed for him to see it. Not just for him to see the necklace, but for him to see it on her, to see how it changed her.

"Oh Rich, I'm just fine. I've been meaning to let you know I'll have to take a few days off. I mentioned it a while back but I'd like the rest of the week off if that's ok." She made eye contact with him as she spoke. Her mind pictured how her lips shaped the words as she spoke them.

"Sure, Louise. You never take days off so you really can have them any time. Molly is back tomorrow anyway."

"Thank you, son." She dragged the son slowly from her throat.

"You sure you're alright?" His disconcerted look startled her. She felt no different, not really. She hadn't surprised herself in years and maybe that's what this feeling was: a little shock at knowing what was underneath it all. Her cheeks warmed and she pressed her hand to her chest. The bump underneath her palm made her smile slightly.

"Oh honey, I'm just fine. Just been a long few weeks and I need me some time away so I can come back refreshed." She smiled with her eyes and gave him a quick wink for convincing good measure. After she spoke the words she felt them settle in her chest, just below the jewel, and she felt that they were intensely true. She wanted things. She would start with time off.

"Alright, well have a good few days then," he said carefully, his attention already returning to the work at hand. His head dropped back down to focus the paper in front of him and he dismissed her with that. She turned and worked her way to the doors. They

slid open reflexively and she paused at the threshold. Looking back at the desk, she noticed again the strange color of the décor. She studied the boy's serious face as it searched the computer, and she pursed her lips. Cold air wafted in from beyond the doors.

“Bye then,” she whispered, and stepped outside, her palm still resting on her chest.

At Club Paradiso on the left bank of the Arno River in Florence, Italy, I ate my weight in Tuscan bread. Tuscan bread is made without salt. This tradition stems from a feud with Pisa, Florence's salt supplier, and even after the battling was over, Florentines refused to use salt in their bread. They had discovered that the layers of flour and yeast provided the perfect palette for the flavors of their food.

My friends and I ate at the members only club often. The owners, Andrea and Elizabetta, were a welcoming Florentine couple of opposites; Andrea was short, plump, and gray-haired, while Elizabetta was six inches taller than her husband and extremely thin. They both wore large eye glasses that magnified their wide and dark Italian eyes. The club provided a feeling of home in that foreign city. The price-fixed meal included an appetizer, meat course, pasta course, vegetable side, and all the bread and house wine we could drink.

Tuscan bread comes in loaves of all sizes. The crisp and crunchy outside contrasts with the gummy, forgiving inside, the crumb. Andrea brought us our first basket of sliced bread and we finished it before he could return with our appetizers. We ate our cured meats and Pecorino cheeses on top of the bread. When our meats came (I ordered the Polpette—a giant meatball, usually slightly larger than my fist) we alternated meat and bread. The ideal bread eating came when the fresh pasta arrived. Elizabetta rolled it earlier in the day, and hand-made the sauces, no doubt based on the traditional recipes from grandmother. We wiped the small bowls clean with our bread. We enjoyed the dessert, whatever Andrea and Elizabetta offered in the place where they made their home, but we left full of each course and the correlating helpings of bread.

When I left Italy, Andrea and Elizabetta cried as we hugged goodbye. I saved my emotion for later, and I reflect on their kindness still, each time I taste the dry crunch and malty crumb of Tuscan bread.



## When You Talk to Strangers

“Ma’am, could you help us with some groceries?”

He stopped me at a moment when I had decided not to ignore solicitors, but to engage them, to learn their stories. My idea had been to take people to have a meal rather than just to throw money at them. This had worked charmingly in the past. I had enjoyed several pleasant breakfasts with strangers in lieu of dropping coins in hats. Here the man wasn’t asking for money, he was asking for groceries. His son introduced himself with a hand outstretched to shake mine.

“I’m Leonard. My dad is Leonard too.”

I was walking to the store anyway, they might as well come alongside these last few hundred feet with me. Leonard Sr. grabbed a cart. Each time he placed an item in the cart he looked at me, his brown eyes genuine, and asked if it was ok. He placed wheat bread, eggs, peanut butter, cereal in the basket.

“Is this ok?”

Leonard Junior seemed light-hearted—not that I’d known him long before, but as these basic items filled his cart the size of his smile increased.

Leonard Senior placed apples, a group of bananas, a gallon of milk in the basket.

“Is this ok?”

I found myself unable to say no—how could I say, after I’d agreed to help him, that no, he could not buy milk, that a loaf of bread might put me over budget? It wouldn’t. My chest tightened with each item. I sweated. I flushed. The cart was getting full. But I was glad—I knew I was glad I’d said yes. I could feel better about this later.

He continued to pull staples into the cart—food that seemed so reasonable, and as though it was my place to judge, I noticed it was all fairly healthy. We checked out with perplexed and amused baggers and checkers eyeing the Leonards and me. They pushed the cart out the doors and onto the street, then gathered their bags, each of them weighed down with the purchases. They incessantly thanked me, God-blessed me, even bowed. I said no problem, and I smiled. They smiled and we parted—we'd never see each other again. Not in a city of eight million. They walked away, two silhouettes looking relieved as they retreated East on 8<sup>th</sup> street. I kept the receipt so I wouldn't forget—how much I have, how much they didn't, how strange it is to interact so intimately with someone for a few moments and then never see them again.

## Is it Love?

My brother carves the centerpiece of our Christmas dinner, the Beef Wellington that my mother has been preparing for four days. His knife must be sharp so he can create clean servings; he'll cut through the first crusty layer of puff pastry, and we'll listen as the flakes of flour and butter bristle and give under the first pressure of the steel. The pastry, a golden, protective layer, binds the pâté to the beef hiding just beneath the flakey surface. The knife cuts deeper, passes the Madeira, mushroom, ham, and parsley pâté, and meets the tenderloin of beef. This takes only a moment, and the knife doesn't hesitate when it meets the beef—the meat has been marinating for three days and is tender, and soaked with the flavors of vegetables, bay leaf, sage, peppercorns, vermouth, and brandy, so that we can taste it already. When, finally, he finishes the cut, the piece of perfection awaits our appreciation; perfectly pink in the center, the juice glistens in the meat, and we anxiously wait for him to dish out the pieces. Once he's served each plate, my mother walks around, dips her face to the side of each person, and smiles as she offers the sauce. She drizzles the Madeira reduction over the warm, pastry-wrapped dish, crowning her creation with the last flourish of care.

I changed schools in tenth grade. I opted out of the privileged halls of my brothers' prep school and joined the ranks of neighborhood kids at the public, and only ten minutes away from my house, Bonneville High School. The hour drive to Salt Lake City had become unbearable, even if the fruits of that labor were a supposedly superior education (and implicitly a more satisfying and happy life). With this change came new traditions, a new dentist (Dr. Simonson was, after all, a children's dentist and wasn't I growing up?), and a stark decrease in the consumption of the hallowed Banbury Cross Donuts.

Somewhere between home and school, about halfway, was our dentist's office. Our dentist was Dr. Simonson whom we cleverly referred to as Mr. Rogers due to his unflinching habit of cardigans and whom I credit with my deep and significant love of the dentist. Already late for school after our appointments, we almost always stopped at a cottage-like building that, within its doors, contained glazed, fried, doughy heaven. After ten years, I left that school, and I left those donuts behind, too. My years in high school and college took me to places far away from that cottage, and I nearly forgot about it.

After college and marriage, on a visit home at Christmas, I attempted to show my husband the chapel-esque donutery, but could not find it. My husband grew up in Utah, too, but never had the privilege of tasting the Banbury version of donuts. I remembered the shape of the shop including a tall steeple, and it was made of white wood and red brick. I felt let down by my own absence from Salt Lake, and specifically Banbury Cross, which was tied up in a relationship between donuts and the perfect French I would have obtained had I continued at the old private school where I spent my first ten years of



formal education. My longing for the expertly puffed glazed donuts and two percent milk belied my true concern—that I had somehow sacrificed my intellect and success on the altar of convenience and a better musical theater program. As the youngest of four children I had convinced myself I was the stupid one of the bunch. The halls of our private school still held memories of my brothers' escapades and their successive reigns as student body president. Though I am five and seven years younger than my brothers, the idea of being compared to those heroes I was so sure were geniuses was all too intimidating. Even now, after I've taken my academic education farther than either of them and we are all far removed from high school, I see myself as the weakest link.

In Clarksville, Tennessee, there are several local donut shops within a few miles of my house. I've landed here, states away from Utah, as an Army wife while my husband is stationed at Fort Campbell. On Sunday mornings my husband and I have picked up the unfortunate habit of patronizing Southern Maid Donuts located conveniently on our way to church. The owner, Ed Hunter, greets us with a friendly hello, and serves up our donuts himself.

Ed says that more than 85 percent of his customers are repeats. He knows us by sight at this point, and as we sit at one of the four tables in the small shop and watch others come and go, he is familiar with them all. Southern Maid Donuts has been open for four years, and on the day I spoke with Ed, it had been exactly four years and four days. I liked that he knew the time in operation to the day. They offer over 60 kinds of donuts, but the classic glazed is the persistent top-seller.

In all my years of donut eating I have never been drawn to the bear claw. I'm not sure what a traditional bear claw consists of, but I remember seeing them at other donut shops. Plain glazed was the reliable and safe option, much how I've always viewed myself. I don't need sprinkles and strawberry frosting to be delicious; I am straight up flavor stimulation, without those gimmicky frills. At Southern Maid though, their bear claw grabbed my attention. It looks like a chubby hole-less glazed donut with some dark and spicy cinnamon rubbed lightly between the bear's fingers. I dared try it when no plain glazed were available (which is inevitably how I try anything new—being forced—I am a staunch creature of habit), and indeed know how donuts in heaven taste. The bear claw is a fat rectangle of two-layered dough with four “fingers” cut down the long side to create the look of a (maimed) paw. The glorious aspect of the claw is the part where the fingers join, and where, ideally, there is some gummy, gooey element of only partially cooked dough awaiting consumption. These yeasty, almost salty bites are the true pleasure.

I love gooey things. I can trace a pattern of all things goo through my childhood. The classic licking of cake-battered spoons was my introduction to tasty goo, but even non-edible forms appealed to me. My friend BZ (I couldn't say her full name Elizabeth) and I reveled in squatting in her sandbox and combining water and sand to create our own version of wet cement. We'd combine sand and water, then let the mixture flow through the cracks between tiles of the sandbox's sides into dry sand. On hot afternoons I wish I had a sandbox, and BZ, so we could construct our sand cities with the initially gloppy and squishy combination again.

Now, I'm thinking about donuts and how good the donuts are at Southern Maid. I'm thinking of how I never thought I'd have a donut better than Banbury Cross's, and yet I have. And then I think that maybe I didn't miss out by changing schools. It is likely that had I stayed at the school in Salt Lake I'd be in a different place now—away from Southern Maid bear claws. I loved my choice to move to Bonneville, after a while, and I don't regret the change. But I do wonder, and as I encounter old school mates that I grew up with from kindergarten to ninth grade, I feel an ache for what I missed in the years that followed. That school, the one I left, is what taught me to love learning. It helped me to think, to embrace different kinds of people (which was rare in the culture of Utah at the time), and to love language. I learned about ABC gum from Jane Butter in Kindergarten. I learned to hunt for ghosts in the parlor of the historic building of our school, and watch suspiciously as the eyes in the paintings of former headmasters followed us from one side of the room to the other. I discovered Laura Ingalls Wilder, and I discovered I'm a peacemaker. Perhaps my nostalgia is only possible because I missed those hardened teenage years that followed ABC gum alongside the people I had learned to read and write and multiply with. I'm missing a memory of myself at that school where my brothers and friends made parts of themselves—I'm disconnected from them in this way, and I fear we can't meet our raveled ends because of it.

I miss more than the friends. I never completed the Cain family tradition of being student body president and superior French student. I purposefully missed this opportunity, and yet I am sad I did. I was in fifth grade when my oldest brother Ian was named president. His acceptance speech had something to do with a fork and an eyeball.



There was a joke in there, and he was wildly entertaining any time he took the stage. Gavin, my middle brother, campaigned for the office by wall-, ceiling-, and floor-papering the entire school with catchy little sayings, or simply his last name printed on regular printer paper. After this, the school made a policy against wastefulness and signage—he still smiles wryly if we discuss his use of several hundred reams of paper for personal gain. I extricated myself from being compared so directly to the titans of my upbringing, and yet I might have flourished in that. I did learn my French like a good student, even without the brilliant and intense Mr. Wortham who had coached my fluent brothers. But if I had seen myself walk in their steps and fill them in my own way, maybe I wouldn't still be looking for ways to prove myself.

BZ and I are friends now. We had vastly different high school and college experiences and maintained our relationship at a strange distance, we have come back together. I am delighted by her brain, and the fact that she and I share an interest in writing and languages that neither of us saw coming when we were making “witches’ brew” out of various yard items and garage wreckage and irrigation water. Though she evolved into Liz as a high school and college student, for better or worse I call her BZ. Only a handful of people do, and that links me with the rest of her family. When I left the private school in Salt Lake I dreamed we’d have more time to play together, join the same soccer team, or at least have sleepovers. Though we didn’t manage to spend any time together in high school, we have spent time in the mud together. Hours and hours of time. As adults this translates to being in weddings and visiting at Christmas and e-mailing when we can. She is now engaged, and I have her wedding to look forward to. I



feel proud of who she is—as if I had something to do with that. Maybe I did. She is running up the corporate ladder of an international business at incredible speed. She writes in her free time, runs marathons, and reads avidly. I don't actually *know* her that well anymore, not in the way you know someone you see every day, or month, or year. But I know we both remember the mud, and the day we brushed our teeth for nineteen minutes in an effort to set the world record, and our 4<sup>th</sup> of July ballad aptly named “Four, Fourth of July” that we accompanied with rubber band and Dixie cup guitars.

Just down the street five miles from Southern Maid Donuts is another donut shop strategically named Best Donut. While interviewing Ed Hunter, I was tempted to ask whether Best Donut's arrival had affected the loyalty of his customers. Had such an overtly declarative store name lured Ed's faithful? Ed beat me to it. He mentioned that people always want to know who his competition is. He claims it is not Dunkin Donuts, Krispy Kreme, or Best Donut. He says it's all in my head. That is, his biggest competition is the memory of the donut shop I grew up visiting that his place can't live up to.

After months of consuming Ed's homemade delicacies, I was shocked to discover that my efforts at supporting the “little guy” local donut shop had been in vain; Southern Maid is actually a Texas-based franchise. According to their site, Mr. and Mrs. J. B. Hargrove created Southern Maid in 1937 out of the “throes of the depression.” They named their store Southern Maid after the South where the recipes originated, and because the name “encompassed a feeling as well as humble southern traditions and memories.” Though this humble beginning is heartening, I am still baffled by the reality

that this is more than simply a “mom and pop” operation, and that things aren’t always what they seem.

Like my idea of the “mom and pop” shop I’ve created, I idealize my brothers too, and yet in some ways they are just another franchise. They’ve messed up, they’ve faltered. When I see this truth I am not so bound to feeling inferior or out of place in their midst. My memory of them has crafted new histories—I’ve glazed over the truths and found my own versions that allow me to keep my picture of those childhood heroes. I suppose this is one reason that Ed is worried about that donut shop I remember; of course he can’t compete with a version of reality perfected by memory.

In order to better compete with the donut shop of my childhood, Ed makes sure he’s got the appropriate amount of local-guy feeling with his picnic-table cloths, his local milk products, and the vague sense of chaos and cramp that floats around the shop with the smell of sugar and chocolate sauce. What I’d like to tell Ed is that the donut shop in my mind is not his competition. The donut shop in my mind is what brought me to him. And though there is another shop a few miles down the road (and a few miles closer to my house), I’ll stick with him. I’ll keep visiting even now that I’ve found out Southern Maid’s dirty little franchise secret. Though I could switch to Best Donut and save myself a few miles and perhaps continue on my quest to support the little guy, I can’t ignore the cold hard facts: I like Ed, I like his employees, I like their odd little location sandwiched between a community bank and a gyro place, and I love their bear claws. Oh, and I like looking at all the strange industrial looking machines where Ed and his donut-making family create those bear claws; I know the pastries are made in-store.

There is a picture in the hallway that leads to the kitchen of the house I grew up in, the house where my parents still live. This wall holds pictures of all the important people in our lives, all the adventures we've had, and some of our more excellent pets. The picture that I admire when I am home is the one of me and BZ taken when we were ten. We're dressed like tomboys and holding umbrellas to shield us from the rain in front of my house, while our open smiling mouths reveal the action behind the photo. We are barefoot, and I can feel the cool rain running over my toes and onto the hot concrete of the driveway. I am breathless from shouting out our song and addled by the sound of my own voice bouncing back into my ears off of the umbrella. My two dogs are trotting around us with tongues out. We make this rare desert rain even better for them. We don't see the camera or hear my mother laughing as she takes the picture. We're busy singing in the rain.

Though my memories began with the thought that Banbury Cross's little Rocky Mountain cottage contained the perfect glazed donut, I know that donut satisfaction doesn't end there. Now that I've seen the light of the bear claw I don't worry so much about missing those plain glazed, and when I taste the yeasty stretches of dough on those claws, I know I'm not missing a thing. I'm stuck with the realization that Ed's sense of competition with my memories applies to me; I am in direct competition with my memories. I miss the childhood I had with BZ and my friends at the prep school, and I ignore how much we've all changed. I've idealized my brothers through memory, and I've disparaged myself. The competition between my idea of my brothers' genius and my perceived ineptitude has repeatedly been proven to exist only for me, not them. I



functioned with the thought that these boys were unique, they were individual, and they were different from me in some essential way.

On Saturday mornings when their G. I Joes captured my Barbies, strapped them with fireworks, and blew off their pretty plastic heads, I watched. I was a gleeful spectator to their action and achievement, and since they were older, the momentum propelled them forward towards college and life, after helping me with homework. By the time I was acting my own part, lighting my own fireworks, achieving my own goals, they had grown up. It's only now, as adults, that we can remember together what it was like to grow up, constantly pestered by each other's presence. What I'm realizing—that I've focused too much on the sweet and not on the savory components of the dish I'm serving myself—is that all three of us are franchises. We're parts of a whole—each slightly different, each rooting for himself as the little guy, each ultimately connected by the same version of history.



## The First Taste of Spring

We have, the four of us, consumed several carafes of the table wine by the time they bring our pasta. The deep yet small bowls, placed on top of larger plates at our places, silence us with their arrival. I peak over the edge of the bowl and see them: three hand-formed ravioli. They sit in a circle, fat and bulging with their succulent fresh ricotta stuffing. The pasta's translucent skin glistens like mother of pearl. Drizzled with shining flavor, the voluptuous pasta rest, nestled in the bottom of the bowl. The fragrant sauce startles me; the sweetness of the butter and pear balances the woody sage leaves that rest atop each raviolo. I break one perfect boat-shaped pasta with the side of my fork, and lift it to my lips. The pasta itself is light, just substantive enough to encapsulate the ricotta and carry the flavor of the pear and butter sauce. My lips shimmer with the rich remnants of the sauce before I know the pasta is gone.

## Plum Worm

The tree stands tall above raised beds of romaine lettuce, tomatoes, and blueberries. It flanks the small creek that slices our land; it is a beacon of production while another hulking tree across the creek waits for the neighbor to explore and get caught by my brothers' booby traps.

Each sweet yellow or dusty magenta plum I eat inevitably hides a worm, but I can't resist these near-bursting orbs. The sweet candy flesh lures me back and my father excuses the worms as extra protein—a side effect of his staunch opposition to pesticides. I bite, and each time eye the colored meat for the white head of a pest. I stand, feet in the softer grass that grows at the base of the thick trunk of this tree my father planted before I was born. I contemplate another plum, knowing what awaits me.