

Stranger Songs

An honors thesis for the Department of English

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I was conceived in a radio station on a yellow leather couch. Leonard Cohen was singing about Jesus and a woman named Suzanne, pouring forth poetic lines about love and intimacy and trust, you know, the kind of lines that make you want to fuck bareback in a public place—this was the effect they had on my parents at least. I guess no one can pinpoint the exact moment of conception and I'm told coitus went on for some time so other songs must have come on after that but I think it was Leonard who provided the initial spark. Basically what I'm trying to say is Leonard Cohen is pretty instrumental to me being on this earth.

My mom was a junkie and my dad was one of those DJs who thought he was a rock star, even though he just sat there and pressed play. They didn't really have time for me, so I was raised by my devoutly Catholic grandmother in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Being the pink-haired product of a drug-fueled, one-night-stand is pretty interesting when your grandmother's fixing to be the next Mother Theresa, but without the kindness. It's even worse when all your neighbors are Amish. People usually think I'm joking about this but I grew up right across the street from an Amish community. I mean bonnets and beards and buggies. The whole shebang. Did you know that Amish people don't wear shoes during the summer? I mean like never, not even to go into town. If there's anything that can make Catholics seem normal, it's the Amish.

I have to admit, I got pretty into the whole Catholic scene until I was about thirteen and caught on to how ridiculous it all was. I still can't fall asleep at night until I say the rosary. That stuff is hard to shake.

My town was really divided between the Amish and secular people so my grandmother decided to send me to the next town over to attend St. Mary's Prep, an all-girl's Catholic school. I went there from kindergarten up to a few months ago. It was dreadfully boring until my sophomore year and then it got pretty fucking exciting. I really do think Grandmother was just

setting me up for failure by sending me there. Poor, sweet Grandmother thinking she had a hetero grandbaby. I do think I could have played it straight for a lot longer had I not been surrounded by so many women—exclusively women in fact.

Anyway, sophomore year was when I met Lydia and she was perfect, and kissing her in the bathroom between classes was perfect, and everything was just perfect until right after Christmas.

Lydia was—or, I guess, still is—this tiny, beautiful brunette with a pixie cut who loved running her fingers through my long, wild hair and saying, “I couldn’t handle such a mane myself but I love seeing it on you, Cor.” We were in love and things were great and I know I’m belaboring the point here a bit but it’s just nice to remember how awesome it was a little while ago. Things really started to go downhill following my fifteenth birthday. You see, I’m a little young for my grade because my grandmother saw such genius in me she insisted on enrolling me a year early, or at least this is what I like to believe. She’s since told me that I was so freakishly tall as a child, that she was convinced I would scare the other children if I were given one more year to grow. So I suppose the genius narrative is less applicable than the gigantism one. It’s never really been a problem except for when puberty hit and all the other girls started to grow in previously unheard of directions, namely out in a few strategic areas. I blossomed fucking late.

To get back on track, I’m fifteen now, I’m fully blossomed, and my birthday was about a month ago. I was born on December 20th so it’s often the last day of school before the Christmas break. My mom always visits during that time. It’s sort of nice and usually only mildly upsetting. This year the choir had a Christmas concert right on my birthday. I was actually pretty excited about it. I love to sing and our choir is really good this year. We did the typical Jingle Bells stuff but we also sang pieces of a Czech Christmas Mass. The school decided it would be sacrilegious

to sing the whole thing through since it was still technically Advent. That's a funny thing about the Catholic Church. We can't fucking say "Merry Christmas" a second before midnight on December 25th even though the date has nothing to do with Jesus and actually was set to coincide with pagan winter celebrations. One of our teachers told us that. She was fired the following year.

The concert went great and both my mom and grandmother were there, which I have to admit was special to me. Lydia was too, even though she had to pretend she was there to see her cousin in the elementary school choir. After the concert, my grandmother drove me and two of my chorus buddies around caroling because that's what I've been doing on my birthday for years. And yes, I know that's just about the dorkiest thing possible.

That night, my mom and I sat up and talked. She told me the story of my birth, or more like the story of my creation, while taking huge swigs from a bottle of Smirnoff Ice. It's kind of neat to hear how you came into this world, but that Smirnoff Ice shit is just fucking embarrassing. My mom "got clean" about five years ago and ever since she's become a grade A alcoholic with the tastes of a freshman sorority girl. If you're going to be an alcoholic, at least have some dignity about it. Pick up a bottle of Wild Turkey or maybe even some grain alcohol. Anything but Smirnoff Ice.

After all that mother-daughter bonding, my mom was too hung over to get up the next morning so my grandmother and I travelled to a local tree farm to pick out our Christmas tree without her. We've always done it the day after my birthday for as long as I can remember. We used to measure the trees in "Coralines," a unit of measurement based on my height. My grandmother would get one of the guys who worked there to lift me up while she eyeballed it, her head cocked to the side and her eyes narrowed. As previously mentioned, I was an

abnormally tall child so we never bought a tree over two Coralines tall. Sometimes I dream of going to the Redwood Forest and climbing one of the trees in order to measure it. I bet they're hundreds of Coralines tall.

The Christmas break is usually my favorite time of the year. Singing carols, hanging ornaments, dressing in red and green. I eat that shit up. Christmas dinner is pretty quiet, just my mom, grandmother, and me. She's been coming round, my mom, for the holidays and birthdays and stuff, for the past five years, the aforementioned clean-ish years. Before that, she'd make an appearance every once in a while but there was no regularity. My grandmother would usually usher me into my room and tell me to turn the radio on. But I could still hear them. My mom would always cry, begging my grandmother to let her stay. When I got glimpses of her she'd be so skinny, like the people in those anti-drug commercials they show you in middle school to scare the shit out of you. Those ads didn't convince everyone, though, and so I really think of myself as lucky, that I had this negative example to steer me in the right direction. It's like, I'm an experiential learner, really hands on, and I experientially learned that being a heroin addict is not conducive to motherhood and it seemed like something I didn't want to emulate. So, thank God for that, right?

Anyway, my grandmother never did let my mom stay. She eventually got arrested and sent to court-ordered rehab and has been "sober" ever since. I find her comparatively high functioning. I was kind of expecting that with this new lease on life—she's living in one of those depressing NYC suburbs and even has a steady job as a spritzer lady/perfume pusher at the mall—she was going to ask for me back. I was anticipating this big showdown between my grandmother and my mom and I was disappointed to be deprived of that entertainment. It's

funny; I just never really came up as a topic of conversation. I'm not my mom's favored subject and that's fine because she's really not mine, either.

So, I'm still here—or rather, I was still there until recently—living with my grandmother and seeing my mom about three times a year. They've created this kind of fantastical peace, like when U.S. leaders visit Putin and pretend like everything's ok when we all know that Putin's batshit and everything is not ok. I just want to clarify, Putin here represents my mother although the resemblance is limited. We know she's a drunk and we know that, if action ever needed to be taken, my grandmother has some nukes in reserve. However, it's all going along ok and that is pretty much the best anyone can ask for so both factions have set aside their animosity in favor of feigned amnesia. The Cold War, and also frequently quite hot war, is over in my family and, you know, we can't even remember what it was all about. We are so fucking cohesive now and really always have been.

Taboo subjects at the holiday table include religion, politics, the past, the future, and several aspects of the present. In lieu of those things, we talk about food, mostly the food that we're currently eating. Every Christmas we eat exceedingly dry rump roast and we sit there and talk about how good it is. There are crescent rolls—the Pillsbury Doughboy kind—which we can get a little more excited about and there are also Brussels sprouts about which we talk at great length because the cooking of these things is apparently such a delicate process in which so many things could go wrong and wouldn't you know it all turns out perfect every single time. Then we bring out the pecan pie and discuss that quite a bit less than the others because this dish actually tastes good and we're too busy actually fucking eating it.

So it's not the meal that makes Christmas for me. It's the Christmas Eve Mass. I really believe that my grandmother cooks such a horrible meal on purpose in order to increase my

appreciation for the actual Christ stuff. We go to the church affiliated with St. Mary's which is, confusingly, named St. Aloysius's. Those church ladies really go all out, too. Every pew is hung with a wreath and gold ribbons and holly is strung across the windows. No mistletoe, though. That would be counterproductive to the sexual shame St. Aloysius's has been so assiduously cultivating in their parishioners for years. That doesn't prevent the annual choir hanky panky, though. Christmas Eve Mass is the only time the boys' and the girls' choirs sing together and we get to pick our own outfits instead of wearing choir robes, providing the Catholic girls of Lancaster, PA hours of fun as they try to find just the right dress, the one that says, "I am reverent but not too reverent." The arrival of the boys is pretty exciting for me because we get to have four-part harmony without the unnatural addition of the female bass section. I'm not saying that female basses don't exist, especially within the context of those close harmony groups and what not, but they don't fucking exist at St. Mary's.

The other girls think I'm really lucky because I'm at the edge of the alto section so I get to stand next to the tenors. Like, they get really fucking jealous and ask to switch with me because it's not doing me any good anyway—which is always said with some superiority, so fuck that. I always say no because it will mess up the blend and if you put someone with a bright voice next to a nasally tenor, we're all done for. The parish would revolt and/or commit mass suicide. No one wants that. I think all this commotion merely proves that when single-sex education does not produce homosexuals, it leaves you with horny little heteros. Anyway, I just like to sound good and Christmas Eve is really our time to shine. I know that pride is a sin but this is really collective pride that I have in all of us, the whole choir, so I think it's probably ok. Also, if this whole sin business is true, I probably have some bigger things to worry about, like the mortal sin that Lydia and I engaged in in the second floor bathroom. It was to celebrate my

birthday, kind of like a Bat Mitzvah. Like reciting the Torah for the Jews, covert lesbian sex on school property is a rite of passage for many a bright, young Catholic woman.

And that's really getting at my main point. This Christmas break was not as fun as the other ones because this year Lydia was in my life so I knew that things could actually be a bit better than they currently were but I couldn't access that higher plane, if you know what I mean. You see, Lydia and I were secret friends so we could only hang out at St. Mary's, a place that we weren't allowed to go back to for nine whole days. And by this, I mean we were secret from my grandmother, not the other St. Mary's girls. Like all good Catholic institutions, the place is crawling with queers and we were just one of many couples finding love in the handicapped accessible bathroom stall.

So, we were lonely and maybe a little desperate and that was when we got reckless. My mom went home the day after Christmas because a week of family togetherness is really all a body can take. This was always the moment when my grandmother and I would let out a little air, suddenly realizing we had been holding our breath the whole time. With my mother, you were always waiting for the shit to hit the fan. We smiled at each other for an uncomfortably long time before finally recognizing that our shared sensibilities ended at a mutual discomfort surrounding my mother. Obviously it would not be proper to vocalize such a sentiment—we really ought to have been ashamed even to be feeling such a thing in the first place. She wondered aloud if we should go to a movie but there are very few productions these days that don't upset her delicate sensibilities so I just shrugged and ran upstairs to call Lydia.

She picked up on the third ring.

"Hey babe," she said, "What's up?"

"Nothing. I just, um, I miss you."

“Yeah. I miss you too. Listen, I was thinking I could maybe come over today.”

“Hell no,” I said.

She laughed. “Jesus, Cor, will you let me finish? I was thinking, like, we do have this big math test coming up and so then we could say that we’re in the same class—‘cause we are, Cor—and we just want to get a jump on all that studying. Like, we’ll say we’re study buddies.”

“Yeah...”

“This way we’re not really lying that much ‘cause you’re really bad at lying, you know.”

“I am not,” I said.

“Yeah, you are,” said Lydia. Then she continued, imitating my voice, “Oh, Ms. McCarthy, we weren’t fucking in the bathroom. I had a nose bleed and Lydia was just helping me. It was really flowing, Ms. McCarthy.” Then, switching back to her normal voice, “There’s no way she believed you. Thank God she’s a dyke or we’d be in serious trouble.”

“You don’t know that she is, Lydia,” I said.

“Oh, I know.”

“Fine,” I conceded, “but that’s not exactly how I said it.”

“It was pretty damn close to what you said. Anyway, I’ll stop teasing you. I still think you’re great, you know.”

I knew. “Yeah, sure,” I said.

She continued, “So, it’d have to be at your house because my mom’s getting a little suspicious.”

“Oh, fuck me, Lydia.”

“I said ‘a little suspicious.’ It’ll be fine,” she said. “I don’t really think stuff like this is on your grandmother’s radar. And, anyway, we’re just studying together, right?”

“Shit,” I said. “Ok. Come on over but it’s strictly platonic.”

“What?”

“Until we get to my room. Jeez.”

“Ok, great,” Lydia said. “See you at five. Bye.”

I hung up the phone.

“That girl’ll be the death of me,” I said, shaking my head. Even at the time, I was aware of the ridiculous melodrama of that statement. I felt like the grizzled cowboy in one of those old Westerns shaking his head before he went off to save the girl. As things stand today, it may be a truer statement than I realized back then. It remains to be seen. But if I die out here, I want her credited on my tombstone.

Anyway, Lydia arrived at 5:04 pm and I introduced her to my grandmother as my study partner and my grandmother said she was happy to see me taking my studies so seriously and then Lydia and I ran upstairs and instantly started making out.

“You were really great at that Christmas Mass,” she said kissing my neck.

“Oh, yeah. It was a team effort,” I said. I was always stupidly shy when we first met up. It really wasn’t about Lydia at all. It was more this nagging feeling that maybe I was going to hell after all. Not really because of the gay thing but more just the sex thing in general. But, I don’t want to make it sound like I wasn’t into it or anything, because after the initial guilt stuff, I, well, I was really fucking into it.

This is going to sound really weird but one thing that I always found kind of unsatisfying during these make-out sessions—which were mostly great, don’t get me wrong—is that I had nothing to grab onto. Lydia would usually run her fingers through my hair or kind of play with my breasts which I must say was always nice for me but there was just no equivalent with Lydia.

She just has no butt or boobs or anything and hardly any hair. And like, that makes her happy so it makes me happy too and I also think she's hot but sometimes you just want a hand-hold, you know. It's purely a tactile thing. Logistical even, to keep me, like, anchored. I think what I'm trying to say is that Lydia and I have fairly different anatomies.

I'm what people call a chapstick lesbian, like a lipstick lesbian but less red. I have long hair and I've been known to wear a dress now and then but I really can't be fussed to put on makeup. I actually did pretty recently but, uh, I don't think it particularly showed off my more feminine traits. The day after Lydia and I dyed my hair pink, staining her mother's bathtub in the process, I went into school with purple lipstick, a Bill Cosby-like cardigan, and commando boots. I got fucking noticed—and sent home for violation of the dress code. I feel like now might be a good time to discuss my relative popularity. I wasn't cool but I certainly wasn't uncool and, most importantly, people fucking knew me. I'll be honest, a few of them were indifferent but 3 out of 4 students agree—I was worth some notice.

Lydia's more of a soft butch—like a Peter Pan type. She's no priss but she's too tiny to pull off the k.d. lang aesthetic. She's got the bone structure of a bird and to clarify, I mean that as a good thing. Basically, she's pretty fucking delicate.

Sometimes people at school would ask us who was the man and who was the woman and I'd say, "Fuck you. We're both fucking women," but if you want the real answer, it was me—I was the fucking man.

I actually messed around with a boy in between eighth and ninth grade, a confused summer of mischanneled libido. I was the man in that relationship as well.

Anyway, at this point Lydia and I were lying on my bed and she had found her hand-hold in my mass of hair. I moved my hand down to her crotch and stuck it part of the way into her

pants. Then I stopped because I read in a book that respecting your partner's boundaries is crucial to having a healthy relationship and, like, our relationship wasn't just healthy, it was fucking fecund. Or, maybe that's not what I mean because I learned that word in Bio in the context of, like, Mendel's plant cross-breeds and Lydia and I are actually explicitly incapable of producing offspring but, you know, I think it is what I mean because our relationship was, like, emotionally and spiritually fruitful. My grandmother would say I've gotten a bit out of my depth here language wise but that's just because she's never experienced anything as powerful as what I had with Lydia.

So, basically, I wasn't going to desecrate this fecundity thing that we had going on by fingering Lydia without the go ahead. We were actually still locked at the lips so I just gave her a thumbs-up and then shrugged my shoulders. Coming up for air, she said, "Yeah, yeah, go for it."

Just as I was making my second pass at Lydia's, uh, lady bits, my grandmother opened the door.

"Holy Mother of God!" she yelled.

Under different circumstances, I would have told her not to take the Lord's name in vain but I knew better. This was not blasphemy. She was saying a real, on the fly prayer—for her eyes to be deceiving her, for an asteroid to come and strike us dead right then and there, for anything that would exempt her from living with this for the rest of her life.

I had expected her to yell more but after the first outburst she fell silent. She just stood there in the doorway. If I hadn't been so busy being terrified, I think it would have been pretty fucking awkward. Like, if she wasn't going to say anything she could have at least shut the door so that Lydia and I could collect ourselves with some dignity.

As things were, I had to turn to Lydia in front of her and say, “You should really go home.”

She nodded and we both walked out of my room and down the steps to the front door, leaving my grandmother standing transfixed in the doorway.

Lydia turned to face me. “Oops,” she said.

“Oops?” I repeated. “This is fucking serious.”

Her face changed to a more appropriate look of solemnity.

“Yeah, I know,” she said. “Are you going to be ok?”

“Yeah, definitely,” I said.

She hugged me super tight then moved to open the door.

“Shit,” she said, “I don’t have a ride home.”

“Ok,” I said. “Call your mom. We’ll wait on the porch.”

“What? It’s really cold, Cor.”

“While I’m not waiting inside that fucking house,” I said. “It’s killing me.”

“Yeah, ok.”

So, Lydia and I sat and shivered on my front steps, waiting for her mom to drive over from the adjacent town. And her mom came, after what felt like hours, and we told her we were so prepared for the test we hardly had to study at all and she frowned at me but didn’t say anything and then Lydia got in the car and left. I trudged up to my room, whispering Hail Marys under my breath, sure I was not long for this world.

It had to have been twenty minutes but my grandmother was still there, now sitting on the edge of my bed. She raised her head as I came into the room and we stared at each other like

wolves in a battle for dominance. I thought back to last year, when I finally got my period, and all the altos in the choir synced up to my cycle. *I'm the alpha* I thought. *Do your worst.*

What I said was, "Surprise."

"Surprise?" My grandmother looked at me with fury.

I wasn't too happy about it myself. Surprise? Of all the things I had thought to say while making that long death march up the stairs, "surprise" was not one of them. I had considered contrition. I had considered defiance. But flippancy? This was really not the time. I guess the one advantage to this approach was that it made my grandmother too angry to even be in the same room with me.

"Ah, Jesus Christ," she said, again reverently like an exasperated prayer. "I'm going to make dinner. Be down in an hour." And then she finally stood up and walked out the door.

Dinner was fucking harrowing. I assumed that my grandmother wouldn't go so far as to poison my food but I wasn't as confident as I would have liked to be. Dinner was lamb which I guess she had planned in advance because I didn't hear her go out or anything but it still felt eerily appropriate. Like, what do you do when you catch your granddaughter getting hot and heavy with her "study partner"? You sacrifice a lamb. It made me think of that fucked up Bible story where Abraham's ready to kill his own son just because God told him to. In the end, God swoops in and is like, nah, I was just testing you, which is pretty psychotic if you think about it. So then Abraham finds a ram and he sacrifices it instead of his son. I think my grandmother would have been happy to trade me for the lamb.

We ate in silence and when we were both done, I got up to clear the plates and tried to run back up to my room.

"Sit down," my grandmother called.

I sat back down.

“We’re going to say the rosary while reflecting on the sorrowful mysteries,” she said.

“We’re going to pray for God to, to cure you of these unnatural proclivities.”

“No we’re not,” I said.

My grandmother opened her eyes so wide I swore they were going to pop out of her head and come sailing across the table. “We most certainly are,” she said.

“You can do whatever you like. But I’m fine the way I am, thanks.”

With this, I stood up from the table and truly did run up to my room. My door doesn’t have a lock—which really would have prevented this whole mess in the first place—so I leaned my desk chair up against the handle.

While defiance had always seemed like more of a possibility than my previous levity, I was still pretty shocked at my forcefulness. Jesus. I should have just said the Goddamn rosary. I like saying the rosary, or more accurately, I have to say the rosary. I’ve been fucking brainwashed. It wouldn’t have been so hard. I could have just reflected on something else. Like a world in which I wasn’t beholden to that old bitch, for starters. It was like living with the Catholic Margaret Thatcher.

My brain filled up with so many what-ifs that it was overwhelming. Even though it was only 8:30, I crawled into bed, trying to sleep just so I could stop thinking about everything that had gone so perfectly, spectacularly wrong. Like, wrong to such an extent and in such detail that it was almost beautiful. There I was, less than a week into my fifteenth year, and I had already created a true masterpiece of fuckery. I must be a prodigy.

Anyway, the whole sleeping business was doomed from the start because, as I’ve mentioned, I can’t fall asleep without saying the rosary. Thinking about that really pissed me off.

Like, if I had been born into a different family—a fucking normal family with functional parents, and grandparents who only showed up on holidays, making their religious fanaticism irrelevant—my life could have been so much better. Or, so much different at least. I'd settle for different. I lay there imagining all these different realities but eventually my brain doubled back to my current, actually real, reality.

That's when I knew it was time to get the fuck out of there before I ended up like Natasha Lyonne in that "But I'm a Cheerleader" movie—except she ends up with Clea DuVall so it might not be that bad but I figured I already had Lydia and the chances of a positive outcome in this whole situation looked small. I climbed out the window that night with a canvas backpack containing three sets of clothes, two hundred bucks from my babysitting job, and—God help me—a rosary. My first stop was Lydia's house which I fucking walked to because the rivers of my love are so fucking deep. It took three and a half hours and, despite the puffy green jacket I was wearing, it was cold. I got there well after midnight.

Lydia has this big tree in her yard and one of its thicker branches conveniently leads right to her bedroom window. I scrambled up the tree which was another sacrifice as I am not particularly fond of heights. Then I got to the top and realized I didn't have any way to wake Lydia up. I had left my phone at home in case my grandmother had one of those "I don't trust my teen" tracking devices put in it. She doesn't seem savvy enough to know about those but I'm sure if she does, my phone has one. I inched out farther on the limb, stretching my hand out to knock on the window. I couldn't reach. So, I cursed a bit, or maybe a lot, climbed back down the tree—which is really the worst part I think—picked up some rocks off the frozen but snowless ground, and climbed back up.

“Jesus, Lydia. The things I do for you,” I whispered to myself, feeling once more like a crotchety John Wayne type.

I clutched the branch with one arm and unsuccessfully tossed the first few rocks with the other.

“Fuck,” I said a little more loudly than I should have.

Lydia’s light went on. I like that she wakes up to my voice and, at the time, I didn’t mind her waking up to my cursing because I was feeling—perhaps unfairly, as she did not actually ask me to walk all the way to her house—a little put out.

She appeared at the window and opened it, shivering in her large flannel shirt.

“Cor, you’re in my tree,” she said tiredly.

“Yeah.” I smiled. “Listen, I’m getting the hell out of Dodge. Come with me?”

“What?”

“Sorry. I, uh, I’m leaving and I want you to come with me.”

“Oh, Cor,” she said. “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“My parents don’t know yet,” she said. “And they really wouldn’t care that much anyway—or at least they’d get over it eventually. This is where my family is, my friends. My life is here.”

“But—but I’m leaving,” I said quietly.

“Well, yeah, but you don’t have to. Not really.”

“Don’t have to?” I asked. “I most certainly do. You don’t know what she’s like.”

“She’s not that bad, Cor.”

“You don’t know her like I do,” I said.

“I’m sorry Cor,” she said. “I’m not leaving.” She looked down at her feet then back up at me. “I love you,” she said.

“I have to go.”

I climbed back down two-thirds of the tree and then jumped from a lower branch. It didn’t look that high but the balls of my feet throbbed as I hit the ground, causing my eyes to water. My cheeks grew hot and I realized that I was full-on crying. As a lump formed in my throat, I worried that I might actually lose it. I figured it was probably two parts emotion, one part phlegm so I tilted my head back and then launched forward, letting a great wad of spit and mucus exit my mouth. This both relieved my vocal constriction and served as a nice distraction—hocking up a good loogey takes some concentration. I’m fully aware of how fucking gross this whole thing was but, hey, we all have our coping mechanisms. And I think it helped immensely because, after a few sniffles, I was able to pull it together and stop crying. Inappropriate bodily reactions have seen me through many an emotional crisis. I find the most effective tool in my arsenal is something the Church calls “self-abuse.” Yeah, women do that too. All the fucking time. Anyone who says otherwise thoroughly underestimates the female intellect.

Anyway, after I had collected myself in a manner unlikely to land me on the sex offenders’ registry, I straightened up and practically ran from Lydia’s house, back toward the highway. I didn’t look back to see if she was still at the window. I wasn’t sure if I was angry or not but I knew if I turned back to that window, I’d end up doing something stupid, like staying. I still don’t know who these friends she talked about are. I guess she meant the cluster of friends she had made through the History Society, a co-ed club with guys from our partner school, St. Andrew’s. These were the friends who constituted her “life here”? Fuck them. They were just a

bunch of nerds whose lives were so boring that they had to look to dead people to get off. I mean, gross! And her family? Her thin-lipped mom; weirdly-proportioned, stork-like father; and toddler brother, too young to contribute much to anyone, didn't exactly scream "stay." In the movies, when the small-town girl is plucked from obscurity, she has some doubts about leaving her family, but she goes in the end. Lydia staying was like if Thelma had stayed with her husband when Louise asked her to go on their road trip. I know Lydia's parents weren't nearly as bad as Thelma's husband but the level of boredom they subjected her to had to constitute some form of abuse. Besides, I never would have driven us off a cliff.

As for what I was leaving behind, my friends were mostly girls I had known since kindergarten and we had been growing apart for years. As we approached and then hit puberty, they grew more and more enthralled with boys while I watched apathetically before developing my own tortured obsession with an older girl from the choir. Then I found Lydia and began a normal fucking relationship with a real person while they were still fawning over the brawny boys of St. Andrew's and the smaller, but ever so out of their league, men of One Direction. I had kind of surpassed them romantically. We didn't really share any interests and we didn't have the glue of mutual dick lust that binds so many ailing friend groups. I also had friends from choir, my aforementioned caroling mates, but we really didn't have anything to talk about once the singing stopped. Unlike Lydia and her perceived wealth of community, I had nothing tying me to St. Mary's or even Pennsylvania for that matter. Nothing except Lydia and there was no way I'd ever be able to see her again, not with my grandmother breathing down my neck. Even at school, I knew she'd find a way to meddle. She'd actually probably transfer me out and send me to a reform school for disrespectful dykes and other miscreants.

I guess my grandmother was a link to the county, but not a particularly desirable one. The bonds between us were more like chains than lifelines. By the time I came along, my grandmother was done raising kids. She had done her duty and all it had gotten her was a son who died in infancy and a daughter who, despite all her hard work and all her prayers, ended up a drug-addled bum. But she took me in anyways, grudgingly, like the martyr she is. My grandfather died my first month in the house, suddenly, of a heart attack. He didn't drink, he didn't smoke, he wasn't heavy, but I think my presence caused it somehow. At two months old, I killed my grandfather through my sheer inconvenience. They were almost sixty years old; they weren't meant to be raising babies. What a hassle. And I think that's what did it. He had survived the literal death of a child and the figurative death of another and he had no need for another living being in his house. I threw off the balance. At a stage in life when loss becomes more common than gain, my grandparent's scales were disrupted by the addition of a new life. Something had to give and so my grandfather's heart said, "Fuck it," and took one for the team. The end.

So my grandmother and I lived alone in our Amish-adjacent house, talking to God just for the company. There were some things I'd miss, like my grandmother's piano playing which I'd often hear while I did my homework in the dining room or the one time—one time—that she laughed in church. It was during the homily and a visiting priest from Ireland was talking about the breakdown of the traditional family, a phenomenon which he blamed primarily on "prophylactics." "We have scientists now, who, who... are developing male birth control. Imagine that, will you, ladies and gentlemen?" And that's when my grandmother let out a loud snort. The people up to three pews ahead turned around to look at her. She just smiled and then

turned to me, still smirking, and said, “He’s right, you know. Interfering with God’s will is very wrong.” Then she winked at me as I stared at her, aghast.

But some piano playing and one solitary display of humor in the fifteen years we’d known each other didn’t make up for the silence—not an icy silence, but more a tired, worn-out quiet—and the excessive devotion to a church that got its kicks from excluding people—queers, divorcees, adulterers—and shaming the lucky ones it did let through the door. So I found happiness outside the home and I found it with ladies and in my grandmother’s jealousy, in her Catholic, sexually-crippled fear, she tried to take that away from me. Running away wasn’t even about getting to keep that happiness; Lydia wasn’t coming. It was about escaping that house before it crushed me.

By the time I got to the highway, I was too tired to keep walking and I had no intention to freeze out there like some less virtuous and therefore less worthy Little Match Girl, so I stuck out a thumb and prayed for a kindly female trucker and/or the strength to kill if need be. The first person to stop for me was a southern transplant, wearing a bolo tie and looking quite out of his element.

As soon as he rolled down his window and took a look at my fresh-faced, youthful beauty, I knew it was a no-go. “You all right?” he asked. “Need a ride back to your folks?”

“Nope, nope,” I said shaking my head. “Not interested. Keep moving.”

He was incredulous. “Are you a prostitute?”

I was impressed by how quickly he came to that conclusion—like in a sick way. What must your life be like to just assume that? Pervert. Of course, he could have been one of those people on the opposite end of the spectrum, so afraid of sin that they see it everywhere.

“Yes, I’m a prostitute,” I said, trying it on for size. “And I only service men with really bushy beards, just fantastically hairy men... And women with mustaches.”

“Good lord.” He closed the window and drove off to his church revival/orgy.

It had to be at least two in the morning and the cars were getting fewer and fewer. I hoped that one of these drivers would be immoral enough to give a ride to a clearly fleeing minor but moral enough to leave me well alone, at least carnally. As I was just about to give up and start my self-imposed death march—well, partially self-imposed, I *was* kind of fleeing an oppressor—an ancient red Buick station wagon pulled over and slowed to a stop in front of me.

The driver was a pretty ordinary looking guy. Middle-aged or maybe a bit above with deep, deep bags under his eyes, his only distinguishing figure. He looked like the kind of person who drove long, innocuous distances late at night, the kind of large-scale travel that doesn’t end with rape or murder.

“Where you headed?” he asked.

“Where are *you* headed?” I countered.

“Philly.”

“Ok, me too.”

He nodded and reached over to unlock his passenger side door. I ran over and practically fell into the car, warming my hands in front of his heating vents.

“You been standing there a while?” he asked.

“Shit yeah.”

“You have family in Philadelphia or...”

He trailed off waiting for me to fill in the blanks. All his questions were really statements fading out into uncertainty. I kept quiet, pretending like I actually expected him to finish.

“So, then, are you a runaway?”

I ignored him. I felt kind of bad about it. I’m not one of those girls who act like a bitch to everyone over the age of twenty-five, you know? At school, they always said I had “a problem with authority” and “an insistence on pushing boundaries,” and, yeah, that’s definitely true but I’m not an asshole. I might be disrespectful but I’m not rude—at least, not without provocation.

But, yeah, I was being rude to this poor, tired man, who was so uncomfortable in his own damn car he couldn’t even finish a fucking sentence.

After a full minute he said, “Eh, you know, not that I care one way or another.”

“Then why’d you ask?”

This shut him up again. Feeling kind of bratty, I decided to do him the courtesy of confirming his suspicions—of completing one of his pitiful hanging sentences.

“Yeah, I am,” I said, “A runaway, I mean. But...”

He cut me off. “I’m sure you have your reasons.”

He was a nice man—kind of pathetic, but nice. Still, I tried to keep my eyes open, because, you know, you never know. I’m sure a lot of serial killers are kind, awkward men with a deep respect for privacy.

I woke up an hour later—thankfully unmutilated. We were already in the city. He dropped me off at the bus station and that was the end of it.

I was pretty wary of the whole sleeping in an interstate bus depot situation but I was tired and the sleeping in a stranger’s car deal had worked out fine, so I thought I’d give it a try. I felt like someone or something was looking out for me. They could have started a little bit earlier; right before my grandmother walked in on me finger fucking my girlfriend would have been a good time. Still, I appreciated it. Like a uniquely Catholic version of Pavlov’s dog, I said a “Hail

Mary” to keep the good luck coming, falling asleep right before I got to the “hour of our death” part.

The next morning, I boarded a bus to Massachusetts mostly on a whim but sort of also, to “find myself,” B-grade movie style. My specific destination: the radio station, the famed locale of the couch, the coitus, and the conception. This high-brow establishment was a self-righteous, marginally communist organization, operating out of Cambridge. I figured it would be a good first stop on the Catholic banishment tour.

I realized, even at the time, that this whole journey of self-discovery was a pretty well-trod genre. It wasn’t like I was particularly close to my mother or looking to gain any insight into her pre-me life or anything. I felt like I’d gotten that insight already; I imagine it looked a lot like her post-me life—you know, drugs, vagrancy, and eventually perfume. I wasn’t looking for my father, either, not really. The prospect of finding him just seemed... awkward. Like, hi, remember when you impregnated that cute heroin addict? I mean it might have been kind of nice to see the look on his face when he was finally forced to acknowledge my presence. But that was more about revenge than family-bonding. I wasn’t looking for a fucking reunion. It just felt right—the location part, at least. It seemed important to get back to my roots, to try to find some backstory separate from the dysfunctional Amish-Catholic repression thing—The Real Coraline Connors, Chapter One.

To my dismay, my bus buddy was a chatty prep school kid—the expensive, non-Catholic kind—decked out in business man attire and wearing a tie with, he told me, his school’s insignia embroidered on it. He said he wasn’t really into that kind of name recognition thing but if he ran into another “Chesterfield Man,” it was nice for them both to be able to identify each other—for

networking purposes. I knew what he meant. When I first met Lydia in gym class she was wearing a Tegan and Sara shirt and rocking some triangle “You Do You” earrings. It was nice to be able to identify her as one of the fold—for make out purposes. After my aforementioned pre-high school summer of confusion, I took to the internet with a vengeance. By the time I was fourteen, a glut of internet searches had educated me on the ins and outs of woman-loving-woman culture and I could pick out those lesbian beacons from a mile away—this visibility, I suppose, is kind of a crucial part in the whole being a beacon thing. I decided not to share these Chesterfield Man-Queer Lady parallels with my seatmate.

He carried on fine without my input. “Are you school shopping too?” he asked.

“Like, getting notebooks and stuff?”

He laughed. I had clearly said something ridiculous. “No,” he said. “I meant are you visiting colleges?”

“No, I’m only a sophomore.”

“Well, it’s never too early.”

I agreed noncommittally and tried to get back to my book, *50 Things Every Woman Needs to Know*. I had seen it at the station and decided to buy it. I figured if I was going to be on my own, I better start reading up. I knew I was living on a budget but this struck me as an invaluable source on female adulthood and therefore a good expenditure. It wasn’t. One of the most laughably irrelevant things that “every woman needs to know” was “the inner workings of the male brain.” This, the book informed me, can help us not only in our romantic lives but also in our professional lives, especially if we are working in “traditionally male-dominated fields.” I decided to read it anyway. After all, I had paid for it and it posed an interesting anthropological

study, a how the other half lives kind of thing. I was learning a lot about the inner lives of thirty to fifty year-old heterosexual women.

My reading attempts were, however, constantly interrupted by another study in foreign cultures—Kevin, the prep school kid.

“Boston has some great schools,” he continued. “Harvard, Northeastern, BU, MIT—I mean I’m not really a science person but you know, it’s an option...”

“I’m not sure I’m gonna go to college,” I said.

“Really?” Kevin looked at me with the kind of shock usually reserved for finding out your neighbor is a world famous art thief or your great aunt once made a sex tape. “But college affords you so many opportunities,” he said. “It’s the most formative four years of your life. Why wouldn’t you want to go?” He sounded like a fucking brochure, the kind that they pass out at St. Mary’s at the beginning of junior year: “Planning for your future.” This kid was really drinking the Kool-Aid.

I was ready to put an end to this. I looked up from my book and stared at Kevin like an escaped cow I had once seen walking along the street, holding up traffic of the horse and buggy and machine-powered persuasions, rejecting my Amish neighbor’s attempts to call it back over. Basically, it was a uniquely bovine “Fuck you.”

“Because I’m effectively homeless,” I said.

“Oh, oh gosh. I’m really sorry! Would you like half of my sandwich?”

Kevin showed me a painfully white, chicken salad sandwich.

“Fuck no,” I said, “I don’t need your pity sandwich.”

I returned to my book and began reading chapter three: “Cooking, Dining, Dieting.” As I learned how to cook the perfect Thanksgiving turkey, I became increasingly hungry. My last

meal was a stale bagel with half-frozen cream cheese at 6 am. It was now 12 pm and Kevin was taking the plastic wrap off his sandwich. It was really just mayonnaise and chicken on Wonder Bread but my tastes have never been super refined anyway. I waited for a dignified amount of time, letting the “pity sandwich” line sink in. Then I said, casually, as if I didn’t really care that much, “Actually, may I have some of your sandwich?”

This made Kevin very happy. He handed me a triangular slice of sandwich, beaming at me like an overzealous teenager doling out soup to the homeless—the kind of kid who pads his resume with other people’s throw-away lives and then writes a college essay on their experiences helping the “underprivileged” and “housing-challenged.” I’m sure Kevin was into that kind of shit.

“So, Harvard, huh? You’re aiming pretty high.”

Kevin smiled sagely and dispensed with the following wisdom, “You know what they say: Aim for the moon; even if you miss you’ll land among the stars.”

Jesus Christ.

“So, BU and Northeastern, those are your stars?” I asked. “Your life is sad.”

“What?”

“Your universe is fucking tiny,” I said. “Besides, that’s a stupid quote anyway. Most stars are a hell of a lot farther away than the moon. I got a D- on my seventh grade astronomy unit and even I know that.”

Kevin looked hurt and confused. I guess no one had ever poked such a large hole in his worldview. “I’m trying to be nice to you,” he said.

“Your prep school, pity sandwich won’t buy my silence,” I said. “I’m just being honest.”

“Well, if you’re going to be like that, I don’t think I want to talk to you.”

“Eh. Fine with me.”

I have to admit the rest of the ride was a little awkward. Kevin buried himself in his college brochures, searching for some shred of meaning. I felt kind of guilty. I'd done worse things in my life than speak a little harshly to a chatty prep school kid but I usually hadn't stuck around to see the aftermath. Now, the aftermath was my seat mate on a seven hour bus ride. I'm actually not even sure I have done anything worse. I mean, a lot of them look worse on paper, but I don't actually feel that bad about them. I've had sex—homosexual sex at that—on school property, I've sworn in church, and I've disrupted a handful of classes in my ten years of schooling but who did that hurt, really? It wasn't like Father Francis had never heard the f-bomb before; I don't think I was a particularly corrupting influence in that instance. And the sex, I was *corrupted* for that. That one's on Lydia. In regards to the classroom disruption thing, I think it's crucial to shake things up every once in a while; I've heard it promotes learning. I guess running away from home and leaving my grandmother could be seen as morally suspect but I had no other option. This whole Kevin scenario was not *the* worst thing but probably tied for first with some other regrettably frank moments. Still, if some mild—or perhaps moderate—call-outs were all I had to report in the afterlife, I felt I was on the right track, or at least not on the wrong one.

When the bus finally pulled into the station, Kevin was sleeping with his mouth open and brow furrowed, probably dreaming about intergalactic collegiate success or some such shit. I had been awake the whole time. My circadian clock is too finely tuned. Doctors always say this is healthy but I think uncontrollable sleeping while alone in a stranger's car and wide-eyed wakefulness on a crowded bus with a Chesterfield Man is fairly fucking hazardous to one's health.

I said bye to Kevin, wishing him luck in all his endeavors. He thanked me coldly, giving me one last look of mingled fear and hatred. I hope I haven't played an overly significant part in his life—like the girl who taught him cynicism, leading to his withdrawal from the college circuit and subsequent downward spiral into drugs, alcohol, and missed test-prep classes.

I was actually confronting my own naivety as well. In all my Devil-may-care, happy-go-lucky nonsense I had overlooked some important details. For example, the exact location of this famed radio station. I ended up wandering around Harvard Square—which I only found through the grace of God and the kindness, or at least grudging attention, of strangers—asking clean-cut students and professors, seemingly all wearing Harvard regalia—we get, you're smart—, if they knew of a communist collective radio station nearby. After countless blank stares, a man in a moth-eaten, tweed suit nodded his head in acknowledgement.

“Yes, yes,” he said, still nodding his head like a very grave, slow bobble head. “Well, yes. It's changed, you know. Very different, very different.”

Over the years, the station had transitioned from the male-dominated, communist collective of its inception to an occasionally contentious partnership between the steadily aging comrades and a group of new-age lesbians who preferred to call themselves queer. It turned out my dad had left at least ten years prior to my arrival and some people had even heard rumors of his premature demise. A kind man in a giant, green sweater that smelled like cat piss reminded me that they were just rumors. I reminded him that, besides sperm-donor, my so-called father had not really played an active role in my life so I didn't actually give a fuck.

It struck me as a pretty clear, Godly sign that my half-assed quest for my presumably heterosexual father had landed me amongst a gaggle of quasi-separatist dykes. God, in His infinite fucking wisdom, was steering me away from even the memory of that grossly

heterosexual concept, procreation, and instead toward a life of sinful girl-on-girl action. Even a priest in the confessional would excuse my lesbianism if I explained that it was the result of Divine Intervention.

I had gained admittance to the ramshackle broadcast center by confirming to the Sinead O'Connor look-alike who opened the door that I was indeed “someone’s kid” and leaving out the whole illegitimacy, never met before part.

The station was above a fancy wine and cheese shop, the kind of place frequented by elderly white couples and excruciatingly cultured grad students. Even in the odor-dulling, winter cold it smelled like cheese—specifically Manchego, as I later learned. The only door in was behind the shop. It was hardly noticeable but if you got up really close you could see a black, metal sign: “KMLX- The People’s Station.” Underneath it someone had duct-taped a laminated paper sign, reading, “Now with more dykes.” The first thing you did after walking through the door was walk down into the basement and then back up a narrow, dark stairway with exposed brick walls on either side, until finally you were above the cheese shop and the dark staircase opened up into a dimly lit hallway with horrendously stained, red wall-to-wall carpeting. To the left, were a couple of broadcasting and recording rooms and to the right was a lounge with orange carpeting, a circular wooden table, green filing cabinets, and the famous yellow couch. Not only had the station not been updated since 1998, it looked frozen in the seventies. That’s over four decades worth of sex on that couch. Jesus.

“So, who are you looking for again?” Sinead asked me.

I hadn’t actually told her yet. I was blanking on my dad’s last name—kind of uncool of me but if you add everything up I think I’m still the wronged party here so I’m not gonna lose any sleep over it.

“Eh... Mark.”

“We’ve got a couple Marks,” said Sinead.

“Yeah, uh, Mark... Fischer.”

That’s how it went in the stories, right? Hunky disc jockey, Mark Fischer, takes a fancy to local addict, Laurie Connors. They have one night of passion. He tells her he doesn’t want to see her anymore. I come along, get shipped off to Grandma Connors, and eventually end up here. Might have been Fletcher, though.

“Yeah, I don’t know any Mark Fischers but I actually don’t know that many of the dudes,” said Sinead. “You know how it is.”

I went to an all-girls school for the majority of my life and have no interest in dick. Believe me, I know how it is.

Sinead went to get Bernie, the guy in the green, cat piss sweater, to ask him about this Mark Fischer. Turns out it was Fletcher. Whatever.

That’s when Bernie told me that Mark Fletcher had left the station sometime in the early Christopher-McCandless-style somewhere in northern Canada.

“But there are so many different stories out there—all hearsay really—that make me think he may still be, you know, alive,” said Bernie.

Later, an ancient woman named Magda shared her theory with me. “I think he changed his name and became an investment banker,” she said. “He looked like those corporate dudes even when he was DJ-ing here. That’d be just like him. He was a real piece of shit.”

I liked Magda. She had been at the station since its founding and, being both a communist and a lesbian herself, was the sole bridge between the comrades and the queers. When the station started to experience some financial hardship about five years back, she talked to some of her

friends who talked to some of their friends who scrounged up some money to bail out the indebted comrades, becoming half-owners in the process. I liked Magda for stuff like that. She was a problem-solver and even though she had been the only female comrade, she never let the rest of them push her around. I mean, it would have been pretty fucking hard either way. Magda had to be as old, or older, than my grandmother but at six feet, 220 pounds she was a lot bigger. She was the biggest old person I had ever seen. Her face was pretty wrinkly and her lips were pretty colorless, but she didn't stoop at all. I also liked Magda for saying that thing about my dad. I didn't care a whole lot about what happened to him but I guess I was partial to the stories that included him living, some natural preservation of the family line type thing, the seed. I liked her confirmation of his shitty-ness, too, as it validated some of my long-held convictions.

I didn't meet Magda for a while though. On my first day there, the only people who acknowledged me were Bernie, Sinead O'Connor—who turned out to be named Claire which did fuck all to stop me from calling her Sinead—and a woman who insisted on being called Q. For fuck's sake.

Bernie was super nice to me that first day. He was obviously assigning more meaning to the suspected death of Mark fucking Fletcher than I was. He offered me tea which also smelled like cat piss, leading me to believe that his odor came from the tea and not an actual incontinent cat. When I took a sip of the tea, though, I revised my theory, concluding that Bernie's odor was indeed due to sustained contact with cat urine. What I mean is that he was drinking the stuff. Or, like, I don't really believe that because that's just sick and Bernie wasn't exactly sick, just odd, but at the time I was pretty convinced that Bernie had fed me animal waste. I was a little on edge.

The other thing that Bernie did was ask me a lot of questions. Most of them were focused on the immediate, like “do you have a place to stay tonight” and “do you need bus fare,” but

some of them drifted more into the realm of the past, which is not something I've been trained to talk about. The Connors ignore the past as much as possible. And I don't even mean the distant past, I mean like last week. This line of questioning was more about how and why this fifteen-year-old girl had ended up at his radio station totally lacking any sort of plan. I told him I came to maybe meet my dad but it wasn't, like, the top priority and that I had to leave home for reasons that were private. The end result was predictable: "Should I call your mother?"

"I live with my grandmother."

"Ok, then, should I call her?"

"Ah, don't do that to me, Bernie," I said. "Come on, man. I'm an oppressed person."

"You are?"

"Yeah. Shit, yeah, Bernie. My grandmother kicked me out for being gay. She was gonna send me to some conversion therapy camp."

Bernie looked puzzled. "Wait. Did she kick you out or send you to a camp?"

"It was an ultimatum, Bernie. Either leave the house or go to the camp. I chose leaving. I mean it wasn't even really a choice, was it?"

Bernie took a large gulp of his tea and started to choke. I reached out to pat him on the back.

"I know, Bernie," I said. "Fucking shocking. The bigotry."

I know none of that was true in the strict word for word sense, but I am gay and she probably would have sent me to a camp and she wasn't going to let me leave which really just forced me out even more so I feel that it was true in the more general sense. It was truer than the truth. My loose depiction of reality also had a pretty great consequence. Bernie, who said he had the authority to do this because no one was really in charge and therefore everyone was, told me

I could stay at the station if I did some cleaning and maintenance work every once in a while. He said it was just for a little while but that's really all I needed. I also think it was a win-win because Bernie felt really good about himself afterward. He was a straight, white man with—as I later found out—a very large, anti-Marxist, inheritance. He probably felt guilty all the fucking time. But not today. Today Bernie was a hero. He saw oppression and suffering and he did something. He took action the way he hadn't during the whole station debt crisis when he had been too afraid to reveal his wealth. In reality, Bernie was chicken shit, but he was nice, cat-smelling chicken shit and he kept me housed for a whole month.

That night, I slept on the couch under a blanket that Bernie gave me. It, too, smelled like cat piss. But, hey, beggars can't be choosers.

Also, just to clarify, there were two couches in the lounge: the famous, birth of greatness, yellow one and an equally beat-up grey one. I slept on the grey one. And it's not because of the sex, or at least not because of sex in general. I'm sure people have had sex on both those couches, countless times. People are gross. It's more of an existentialist thing. If I sat on the yellow one, it'd be like sitting on a part of me or what could have been a part of me. Or maybe more like sitting on countless brothers and sister who could have been, who I beat to the finish line. I didn't want to crush them. I'd already put them through enough. I think about how fucked up that is—that I couldn't sit on a couch that might have had my dad's semen on it for fear of committing fratricide. That's some Catholic level bullshit. That's anti-masturbation legislation crazy, bombing Planned Parenthood crazy, locking Margaret Sanger up in jail crazy. But what can I say; I'm a product of my upbringing. I slept on the grey couch every night, drifting off in the middle of my rosary.

I learned a lot about myself during that month at the station. One of the first lessons was that I'm not a particularly adept electrician. Not all lesbians are, not all men are for that matter. In fact, I am really not handy in any way. These butch lesbian and handy husband stereotypes are fucking dangerous. Who knows how many "heads of household" and dykes with something to prove have accidentally zapped themselves trying to fix a faulty light switch. I'm pretty sure I do know, however, how many teenagers, desperate to earn their keep and at the mercy of a cheap ass radio station that refuses to hire an actual professional, have crawled into a hole in the wall armed only with a flashlight and a Jesuit-style liberal arts education and proceeded to electrocute themselves and disable all broadcasting capabilities for the next five hours. Probably just me.

On the Friday of my first week at the station, the lights went out in the hallway. I was lazing away on the couch—the grey one of course—contemplating the purposelessness of life, or at least my life, when Bernie walked in.

"You know anything about electricity?"

"Like, practically speaking?" I asked. "No, nothing at all."

"Well, our lights are out."

"Yeah. I can see that," I said.

And then fucking trust fund Bernie says to me, "We can't really afford an electrician and you're the only one small enough to fit into, you know, our access point. Do you think you could take a look?"

The whole thing was patently ridiculous. First there's the whole issue of trusting your electrical needs to a run-away teen. I hadn't exactly demonstrated the stick-to-it-ed-ness required to learn a trade. Then there was the "access point," which was actually just a misshapen hole in the dry-wall. It looked like someone, in a fit of anger, had taken a hammer to it. I mean, that's

probably what happened. Either way, the station guys justified their laziness and unwillingness to patch it up by referring to it as the “access point,” disregarding the fact that all of them were too broad-shouldered to fit through it. I really think they should have just hammered out a bigger fucking hole. Of all the station regulars, Sinead O’Connor and I were the only ones with the necessary physique to actually fit—the narrow shoulders of a lady combined with the totally straight hips of a prepubescent boy, making it relatively easy to fit into small spaces. And Sinead was not in at the moment.

So I climbed into the “access point,” knowing there was some kind of joke there but too frustrated at the inherent bullshit-ness of the situation to think of it.

“If you can describe what you see, maybe I can figure it out,” Bernie yelled from the other side of the wall. Bernie’s first career was as a writer of children’s folk music and his second and true calling was that of the perpetual student, constantly spending his deceased parents’ money on a growing list of correspondence and adult education courses, all focused on the obscure and impractical. I doubted his ability to blindly solve our electrical problems.

What I saw was a tangle of wires. Some of them had lost their plastic coating and were completely exposed. I relayed this information to Bernie.

Another impediment to the involvement of an electrician is that most electricians, like most people, don’t really want to die. As such, they’re pretty safety conscious and usually like to turn the power off before working with exposed and maybe sparking wires. But, the station can’t do that if it wants to keep broadcasting. Self-respecting, functional radio stations have back-up generators for these occurrences. It’s a pretty standard part of not being horrible at what you do. The People’s Station used to have a generator but it broke a few years ago and they never bothered to fix it. Seriously.

The whole system had been patched together so many times it was difficult to figure out which one of the countless irregularities was causing our power outage. Eventually I found two huge bundles of cords, both held together by duct tape and, it seemed, duct taped to each other at some point. Both of the bundles ended in frayed, sparking wires. That's when I should have called it quits, not just on this specific, electricity situation but on the whole station. This whole wire situation was some Grade A bullshit, shoddily constructed and lazily maintained, just like everything else there—the lounge, the carpet, the people, the relationships between said people. Everything. Shit. That's exactly the kind of place I would have come from—a fucking wasteland full of fucking dysfunctional people, masquerading as rebels. What a fortuitous beginning.

I didn't call it quits, though, not in either respect. What I did, instead, was grab hold of both of the bundles and try to tape them back together. I don't know what happened because I never touched the bare wires but as I pushed both ends together, I heard a sizzle and felt a fuzziness travel from my fingertips to my shoulders.

“Ah, fuck! Ah fucking shit.”

“Are you all right?” Bernie called.

“Fuck no. I just got electrocuted,” I said, crawling out of the hole into continued darkness.

“I think you crashed the station,” Bernie said. He ran to check the studio. “Yeah, we're down,” he said.

“Your priorities are fucked up, Bernie.”

As is common with almost all forms of pain, getting electrocuted can range from mildly annoying to fucking fatal. My experience was somewhere in the middle, I guess more skewed toward the mildly annoying side. Actually, I learned recently that it's not called electrocution

unless you die—placing it pretty solidly on the fucking fatal end of the spectrum—so I guess what I experienced was really just an electric shock. I like “electrocution” better though. “Hey, Bernie, your lazy, stingy cowardice resulted in the electrocution of a fifteen-year-old girl” sounds better than “Your lazy, stingy cowardice resulted in the electric shock of a fifteen-year-old girl.” I mean that could happen while doing the laundry. Static cling and what not.

As I lay on the floor where Bernie had left me, wiggling my fingers like I was in some sort of Broadway revival, I saw a giant emerge from the darkness. For a brief but embarrassing moment, I was genuinely afraid. I guess I was still a little disoriented. The giant, of course, was Magda. At the time, however, this was not very comforting news. Despite Bernie’s assurances of a parallel leadership structure, this woman seemed to wield authority simply as a result of her immense stature and, to my knowledge, she had not been notified of the station’s newest resident.

Magda still hadn’t seen me and was approaching at quite a clip, making me wonder if she was going to step on me. I turned my flashlight on and waved it above my head, looking like a tiny sail boat pleading with a cruise liner not to run it over.

She looked down at me. “What are you doing?”

“I just got electrocuted,” I said.

“Well, are you all right?”

I had to think about that one for a bit but as I sat up and looked around, all my parts, unlike the station, seemed to be in working order. I nodded.

“Are you responsible for this?” she asked.

“I suppose I was the immediate cause,” I said, “but history is really a long chain of cause and effect and I’d argue that this starts with Bernie.”

She raised an eyebrow, sighed, and called out, “Bernie.”

Bernie had been in the studio for a suspiciously long time, probably hiding from Magda. He leaned out of the studio door and then slowly moved his whole body out to stand there timidly, touching the door lightly with his fingertips.

“Who the hell is this?” Magda asked, gesturing towards me.

And that was how my residency got the official approval of Magda. Instead of provoking her ire, my electricity fiasco seemed to have gained her admiration. I guess she appreciated me trying and placing the blame, justly, on Bernie. Minutes later, Magda had called her friend Therese who was, in Magda’s words, “smaller than any grown woman should be” and “good with wires.” Whether she was a certified electrician, I never found out.

“She’s not doing it for free, though,” Magda said, “You’re paying, Bernie. As far as I can tell, this was your fuck-up.”

Bernie nodded.

“Good man,” Magda patted Bernie on the arm.

True to her reputation, Therese was skinnier than me and covered in tattoos. She managed to get our station running again so I guess she was also good with wires. I have to wonder if it would have taken a professional five hours but, like I said, that’s just not the way it was done at the station. Looking back on it, some of this reluctance to call in electricians and other qualified people probably stemmed from fear of getting shut down, in addition to the general cheapness. Magda was fully entangled within this dysfunctional world. Addressing the station’s larger issues, like the lack of a generator, never occurred to her. Like I said though, the woman got things done.

My days at the station were an odd mix of boredom, loneliness, and exhilaration. For the most part they revolved around meals. I'd wake up at 8 am, just in time to catch the "Mornings with Sunny" show, in which "Sunny"—real name Josephine—played up-beat techno songs designed to jolt her listeners awake, or as she preferred to call it, "instill them with the energy necessary to start their days." In between songs, Sunny would guide her undoubtedly limited audience in meditation and Wiccan chants. Not that Sunny was the weirdest one there. Not by a long shot. The real weirdoes came out at night, like Mike who had a show from 2 am to 4 am and always wore round glasses with incredibly thick lenses and a flannel top paired with some kind of flowery, usually quite tight, shorts. Mike specialized in "soundscapes" and I would sometimes wake up in the middle of the night to what sounded like a pod of whales. My interaction with Mike was minimal which kept us both happy as I was somewhat startled by him and he was somewhat startled by all humankind. He told me this when we first met, saying, "I'm a little disappointed that you're here. I prefer not to speak to people."

Anyway, I usually slept through Mike's show and woke up to eat my breakfast, the only meal I paid for all day, while Sunny paid homage to various goddesses and spirits. Breakfast was always a cereal, which I hid in one of the green filing drawers, and some milk which I stored in the station mini-fridge. I bought that milk and a lot of people used it, particularly Bernie for his cat piss tea. It didn't bother me, though. Even though it was a small contribution, it helped to assuage some of my guilt as all my other meals were on the People's dime. I spent eight am to noon trying to entertain myself until one of the DJs ordered some food for "anyone interested." As communists, the DJs had a collectivist approach to money, keeping a stash of it in a jar and half emptying it every day to pay for pizza or Thai or something like that. Everyone paid into it as part of an honor system and I guess I didn't have much honor. To be fair, though, I was in

pretty dire straits. I had a roof over my head for the time being but no source of income and a quickly dwindling stack of cash. The bus ticket, book, and first round of rather limited groceries set me back fifty bucks, leaving me with 150. I couldn't exactly get a job, either. I had actually had an ice-cream scooping job over the summer and even that cash-only business included at least six forms and a parent/guardian signature. In my current situation, it seemed best not to leave a paper trail.

After I scarfed down as much lunch as possible, I'd go exploring. This was one of the fun parts. I know Cambridge is not a very big city but for a girl from Lancaster County who grew up across the street from an Amish compound it was pretty fucking exciting. One of my favorite things to do was walk around the Harvard campus and make up stories about all the people I saw. The preppy, all-American boy who walked around with a popped collar was secretly a government operative designed to see how douche-y a person could be while still eliciting the respect of at least some of his peers. This, of course, helped each political party know just how far they could go when choosing political candidates. This is how the right got Mitt Romney, the left got John Edwards, and the super-left got Ralph Nader. St. Aloysius's made a big deal of that whole John Edwards thing. Father Francis was just obsessed with it. It was tricky territory for him as it so clearly depicted pride before the fall and the consequences of immorality but it also involved details of a rather sexually explicit nature. Anyway, Father navigated that minefield and worked John Edwards into his sermons for a month. Grandmother was not entirely pleased that her ten-year-old granddaughter was being exposed to such things but it was not for her to question the Father. Even back then, she seemed suspicious of me and I imagine she hoped some good would come out of Father's John Edwards obsession, scare me straight or something like that. Not that she had any idea I wasn't straight, like heterosexual—even I didn't know back

then—but I did have a sullenness at home and a rambunctiousness at school that concerned her. Something just wasn't right. With an absentee father, drug-addled mother, dead grandfather, and ever-so-burdened grandmother, I wonder what could have possibly gone wrong. Given my background, how dare I be an unhappy, troublesome child?

Another favorite Harvard pastime was watching the tourists. I realized that Prep School Kevin's ideology extended to people not even applying to college, at least when it came to Harvard. People from all over the world came to tour the campus. I suppose it's prestigious. I don't really know why, though. I guess if something's old enough and rejects a large enough percentage of the population, people will flock to it. I mean it worked for the Catholic Church. I know it's a little bit different. I mean the Church is all about evangelizing. They lead you on before they close the door in your gay, divorced, liberal, what-have-you face. But so does Harvard really. All those colleges distribute brochures. St. Mary's always has some Harvard literature at our college fair. You can learn a lot about the way the world works from attending Catholic school and stalking international tour groups around Harvard Yard. It's fucking depressing when you really think about it.

One thing that always did give me a laugh, though, was watching all the tourists rub John Harvard's feet. In the middle of the Yard, there's this statue of this dude and it says it's John Harvard but John Harvard actually died before they could commission the statue so it's really just a likeness of this random Harvard student. And, as if this were not bad enough, the Harvard establishment has pulled another fast one on the unsuspecting public, convincing them that rubbing this imposter's foot will bring them good luck. This would all be rather harmless if it were not for the Harvard football team because according to the Sinead O'Connor from the station, the members of the team pee on the foot regularly. Sinead says it's just another example

of male arrogance, how they like to dominate everything in their world, even by the most degrading methods. She has a point but I honestly think she's taken the whole thing too far. I mean, you don't see Bernie walking around the station marking his territory by peeing on everything. Frankly, Bernie gets pissed on more than anyone else at the station, metaphorically by most of the women and almost definitely literally by his cats. Anyway, I find the whole thing quite amusing—a big fuck you to everyone who buys into the whole charade.

After a thrilling day of tourist and student voyeurism, I always returned to the station by 7 pm, when the lesbians would gather for their daily vegan potluck. You can't make this shit up. It was at one of these dinners that I first met Suzanne.

She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She was small but I never noticed it until I stood next to her. She had a tall presence, reminding me of Lydia in that way. She was never domineering but, nonetheless, merely as a function of her personality, entire groups were transformed just by being in her company. I know I'm not the only one who felt that way. I can't have been. I fell in love with her the moment I saw her and, despite their carefully constructed facades, I'm sure the other ladies must have as well, at least for a little while.

The potlucks attracted a rotating cast of characters, with Magda and Sinead O'Connor its most common members. That day it was the two of them, Q, Sunny, and four other women I had never met—one of them Suzanne.

"Hey, ladies. What's on the menu for tonight?" I asked, sliding into the lounge and leaning against the doorframe.

"Hey, freeloader," said Sinead, looking up as she uncovered a steaming dish of lentils.

Side note: Vegan food is pretty good, especially if you like beans, which I do apparently.

"I prefer destitute minor," I said.

The tiny table in the middle of the room wasn't big enough to accommodate all of us, so Magda and some of the other women sat in a semi-circle around the table, facing the rest of us who sat crossed-legged on the sinking, spring-less couches. I sat on the grey one. So did Suzanne.

"Hi, I've heard about you," she said, extending a hand towards me. "I'm Suzanne."

I looked into her eyes and was immediately disarmed. As I returned her handshake, I felt a shiver run through my whole body, simultaneously more painful and more pleasurable than the electric shock of the previous week.

"I'm Coraline," I said. "But you probably already knew that."

"No, actually," she said. "They've just been calling you the kid."

I laughed awkwardly, sounding like a cross between a goat and that one gossipy neighbor that everyone has. I instantly flushed with embarrassment. I had never felt this way before. Like I said, she reminded me of Lydia but there was something different about her, something more. She was more graceful, more mature, just more of a woman.

She was black with tightly curled black hair that she wore in an elaborate up-do, kind of like a bun pushed toward the front of the head. She later told me this was called a pompadour and laughed when I expressed confusion about what that meant. She laughed at me a lot actually, but her laugh was gentle and made me feel like I had just told a good joke even though I usually hadn't. She didn't exactly laugh with me but she also didn't laugh at me per se, at least not with malice. She more, like, laughed *towards* me. I was always entering rooms that she was already in, getting flustered, and then blurting out something stupid. If she had her back to me, she had this way of simultaneously turning to look over her shoulder and throwing her head back in a

laugh. Then she would close to a smile, pointed right at me, always at me. No matter how embarrassed I had been moments before, I could never keep from beaming when she did this.

Suzanne was 27 and worked for at a non-profit aimed at providing free “arts” experiences to the public. She seemed to know everything about everything. She was never braggy about it, though. I mean, she wasn’t overly humble or bashful either. She was just herself. If she knew the answer to your question, and she always did, she said so and she said so confidently but without a trace of arrogance in her voice. Honestly, I think she *was* a bit arrogant but she hid it well and I couldn’t really blame her. In fact, I didn’t, not at all. To me, she was perfect and if she knew it, all the better.

It might seem like I’m forgetting Lydia here and I think in a way I was, but also not entirely. I did think about her a lot but I often found myself comparing her to Suzanne and she always came up just a bit short. But I still loved Lydia. I think it was because of what Lydia and I had that I clung to Suzanne so much. I just wanted that again. I didn’t want to go back to life without it. I had already started measuring my life in pre-Lydia and post-Lydia epochs.

Lydia wasn’t perfect and I loved her for it, not because I particularly liked her flaws, but because they made her more human. I think now, looking back on it, that that’s what really doomed me and Suzanne, my inability to see her flaws. One of Lydia’s flaws, in my opinion, was that she just went along with everything. Among the student population, she was shockingly out. She would proposition anyone who she liked, gay or straight, even the older girls. If they said no, she just moved on. She was fearlessly herself—with us. But with the teachers and her parents and any peers outside of St. Mary’s she just disappeared. I don’t just mean the gay thing. Who am I to tell anyone how to live their life? The girls who felt the need to broadcast everywhere were never my type, anyway. They let it subsume them. A girl with straight A’s and

the fastest record on the track team suddenly became nothing more than a neon flashing sign G-A-Y. That's not what I wanted from Lydia. The issue was that she was not even "out" as herself, as the full person that she was. Outside the walls of St. Mary's, outside my bedroom or her bathroom, she became this piece of clay, totally malleable, totally blank. She let people shape her and she was so soft and easily molded that they never even saw it. But I did. Suzanne wasn't like that. She wasn't brash or anything but she asserted herself without even trying. Suzanne was constantly Suzanne and she drew people to her effortlessly.

I think Lydia would have described my biggest flaw as my excitability—but she wouldn't have called it a flaw. She would have called it a "quirk." She said I was always moving too fast, always pouring out my feelings before I even knew how I really felt.

"Babe, slow down," she would say whenever I got upset about the latest Sister Margaret lecture on "womanly virtues" or any of the other shit that was going on at St. Mary's, which, by the way, was a lot. "I love this about you," she'd say. "I love that you're so passionate about things. But not when it makes you unhappy."

How could she know I was unhappy? Just because I talk about the bullshit that other people won't talk about, doesn't mean I'm unhappy. Hell, I think it's pretty fucking therapeutic.

I actually think Lydia was wrong about a lot of things about me, but she was also so interested. She just cared so fucking much. That's where her theories came from. She just spent a long time thinking about me. And that's something that I really appreciate. I loved her. I probably still do. I loved Suzanne at the same time and for totally different reasons. What I loved about Suzanne was her benevolent disinterest. She always had time for me but she never told me how to feel or what to do. To her, we were just two people sharing a space quite happily. From the moment she walked out the station door to the moment she walked back in, I doubt she

thought of me at all. I only existed for her as part of the station and she had a life outside. The trouble was that I did not.

So there I was worshipping this seemingly perfect woman while Suzanne just found me somewhat amusing and enjoyable. I know this sounds dramatic, but I think the trouble was that I wanted Suzanne to be my God and my lover. Lacking daily exposure to organized religion for the first time in my life, I made her my Jesus and I was her Mary Magdalene, waiting to be redeemed, to be pulled into the folds of a new Church. Without my Catholic routine, I was lost. This is one of the things that makes me angriest of all. That for years, St. Mary's, and St. Aloysius's, and my grandmother, and all the other representatives of the Catholic Church impressed upon me a certain way to live. And then, when they threw me out—at least metaphorically—for daring to transgress their stupid, fucking model, I had nothing. I honestly believe that's one of the worst things you could ever do to another person—teaching them that there's only one acceptable way of doing things and then telling them that they need to find a different way because something about them doesn't fit with that first way. Something's just a little off—a little gay, perhaps.

Anyway, Suzanne's show started at midnight which was when I usually went to bed. Like I said before, my circadian rhythms are so well developed I can sleep anywhere, through anything. So, I had been sleeping through her show for about a week, not knowing that on the other side of a few walls, the woman of my dreams was playing Tracy Chapman and leaning into the microphone as she spoke. Our meeting changed everything, including my sleep schedule.

Suzanne's show had a certain schizophrenic quality, with a particular emphasis on sensitive 1970s era ballads and songs by queer women and women of color, to “balance out all the old white dudes,” she said. This latter category was in itself quite diverse and the constant

changes in genre and tone created a charged atmosphere, somehow energizing the listener and encouraging tranquility at the same time. Or at least, that was how I felt about it. That was how I felt about Suzanne in general. She set me on edge with her effortless magnetism, causing me to stumble and grow tongue-tied, but I was comfortable in my discomfort.

After that dinner, I counted down the hours to midnight, making casual small talk with Sinead O'Connor, who despite taking herself painfully seriously, was actually a pretty decent person. Taking note of my limited clothing rotation, she offered to bring in some of her old stuff. When she did this a couple days later, I ended up with a bevy of black cut-off sleeveless t-shirts, most with band logos on them, a thick maroon cardigan to wear over the shirts, and a black turtleneck sweater. Aside from being a bit butcher than my regular attire, the t-shirts were not a huge stretch for me, sartorially. Substitute white or some other, slightly more vibrant color in for black, change the band logos to something more current, and add some sleeves, and you had the shirts I had brought with me. The turtleneck was not really my thing but sometimes I wore it on days where the station was fairly empty. It was warm. Sinead was really pretty good to me, all things considered. We fought quite a bit, mostly about my refusal to call her by her real name and sometimes about my general presence at the station, but I think she liked me, secretly, deep down. I guess I liked her. I appreciated the clothes anyway.

By 11 pm, everyone but the current DJ and I had left the station and I was lying on the couch, holding the book I had bought at the bus station over my head, looking for something interesting enough to keep me awake. I settled on a chapter called, "How to Make Him Love You."

"You've got the guy," it began, "Now the only problem is keeping him."

One of the things the book talked about was something called, “availability,” both emotional availability and literal, physical proximity. Apparently, absence does not make the heart grow fonder and a better strategy, at least as I interpreted it, is to just be there all the time, until your significant other forgets what their life before you was and just resigns themselves to your general presence. I mean maybe that’s a misreading. Who knows. It’s certainly the strategy I employed on Suzanne. Every vegan dinner I was there early hoping to get a seat next to her. Every night at midnight, I was there sitting on the couch ready to be invited into the studio. Every weekend afternoon, when some of the DJs would come in to work on various projects, I would be there just in case she showed up. I was ready to wear her down. Like radiation poisoning and all that other stuff you hear about going on near nuclear waste sites, I figured with enough exposure I could worm my way into Suzanne’s DNA, becoming an inseparable part of her, or at least a part of her life at the station. This, I’m sad to admit, has always been a pretty integral part of the Coraline Connors courtship method. As many people as I dislike—and really it’s a lot—when I do like someone, I tend to glob on.

When I first met Lydia, I actually didn’t think much of her. Sure, she was cute and obviously gay but that was about it. It wasn’t until she propositioned me that my interest really blossomed. From that point on though, I was fucking attached. I followed her around school, I followed her after school when she went over to St. Andrew’s for her history stuff, I followed her home. That’s another reason why our Winter break separation was so hard. We were never ever apart. And, like, I’m worried about how I’m coming off here, like really desperate and clingy. But with Lydia it wasn’t like that. She fucking loved it. I was always up for anything she thought of, including dyeing my hair.

We had been lying on her bed, our legs intertwined, practically braiding our bodies together—but not “scissoring” because that seems well-nigh impossible and was obviously made up by straight men. She was running her hands through my hair as she always did when suddenly she stopped mid-stroke.

“You know what would be fun?” she asked.

“What?”

“If we dyed your hair.” She was excited. “But, like, only if you want to,” she added.

“Oh, yeah, of course I want to,” I said. And this was true, not just something I said to keep her around. I may have been obsessed with Lydia but it worked out because she was obsessed with me right back.

“Great,” she continued, her hands still in my hair. “Your hair’s such a light blonde it’d really take almost any color.”

“Wow, Lydia,” I laughed. “I never knew you spent so much time thinking about my hair.”

“Yes, you did!” she said. “I fucking love your hair, Cor. Just because *I* don’t have much, doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate a good head of hair when I see it. Besides, I thought a lot about this haircut.” She pointed to her head. “I didn’t just do it to get it out of the way. I think it looks nice. I think a lot about hair.”

“It looks great,” I said before kissing her. “I didn’t mean to question your devotion to hair.”

“Nah. It didn’t bother me. I just want people to know that I can be, hmm—” She trailed off.

“Girly, too,” I suggested.

“What does girly really mean anyway?” she asked.

I rolled my eyes.

“All right, all right. It’s a social construct. Now can we get back to our societally-sanctioned feminine behavior and talk about my hair some more?”

“Well, it *is* a social construct.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “So, anyway, I was thinking pink.”

“For what?”

“My hair.”

“Isn’t that a bit…” she trailed off again.

“Girly?” I asked.

She sat up and shrieked with a mixture of frustration and mirth. I sat up too.

“It’s so hard to be the politically correct lesbian you know you should be,” I said, smiling.

“Oh, shut up.” But she was smiling too.

“Besides,” I said. “Girly girls don’t dye their hair non-natural colors. Pink’s really more punk than girly. I think Joan Jett had pink hair at one point.”

“She did not,” Lydia said.

“She fucking did.”

I did a Google search later that night. I was wrong but we still dyed my hair pink the next day. It’s lasted for a long time too. It’s still pretty pink right now.

So, I think my whole point with that is I hang on but I’m no hanger-on. I’m an active participant in my own life. I’m fucking self-actualized or whatever the motivational speakers call it. With Suzanne, I might have been a bit of a hanger-on but I was still wanted, at least in a fairly

limited context. I was her station buddy and it was only when I followed her out of the station that things got bad.

But anyway, let's rewind back to where I was before, lying on the couch, reading about how to stalk your romantic targets. Back when I hadn't really met Suzanne yet, not properly anyway.

My arms started to get tired and I dropped them to my sides, making it unfortunately easy to fall asleep. I was disappointed in myself. It seemed to me that one of the true marks of adulthood would be the ability to stay awake until at least quarter of twelve. I guess it came so easily to other people, was such an obvious prerequisite that the author decided not to include it in her *50 Things Every Woman Needs to Know* book. She also failed to include anything interesting enough to keep us youthful, weary folk awake. My eyes half-shut and I was just about to drift off when a fuzzy green figure walked across the room, opened the mini-fridge, and taped something to the bottom of my milk carton.

I sat up, opening my eyes fully in order to get a better look at this mysterious stranger.

"What the fuck, Bernie?" I said, recognizing his iconic linty, green sweater.

"Oh, I didn't know you'd be here," he stammered.

"I'm always here."

"Well, yes. I thought you'd be asleep. You usually are by now."

"And do you always sneak in here while I'm sleeping," I asked.

"Oh no, oh no," Bernie said. "I had a mission this time." He opened the fridge back up and picked up the milk carton, showing me the bottom where he had taped a twenty dollar bill.

"Bernie, are you in the CIA?" I asked. I was mostly joking but it did occur to me that Bernie's bumbling, mild-manner-ness would be a great cover. I imagined him ripping his

sweater off to reveal a black spandex spy suit. It was actually kind of a disturbing image. I had no idea what Bernie looked like under all that wool and I was happy to keep it that way.

“No, I felt bad about the whole eh, electricity incident and you did do some work on it so I thought I’d slip you a little money,” he said.

“How was I supposed to know it was for me?” I asked.

“I know you could use it,” he said. “I thought you’d just take it.”

“That’s dishonest.” I was offended.

“Well, I figured people don’t really lose money underneath milk cartons, do they?”

“I don’t know. It’s pretty strange. I probably would have asked around about it.”

“So you wouldn’t have taken it?” Bernie asked.

“No.”

“I just figured you’d be too proud to accept it if I gave it to you.”

“But I’d take it from the bottom of a milk carton?”

Bernie looked exasperated. He pulled the twenty off the carton roughly and held it out in my direction. “Thank you for working on the electricity,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” I said, walking over and taking the cash. “That was very nice of you, Bernie.”

I grabbed my bag from behind the couch and put the cash in my wallet. Dropping it back down, I turned to Bernie and put a finger to my lips. “You saw nothing,” I said.

“No one’s going to steal from you,” he said.

“You never know. Especially with this milk-based thievery you seem to have going on here.”

Bernie didn't say anything. I had talked him into a corner. This was partially because I'm quick-witted—which I think is different from being smart—and Bernie is not and because I'm an asshole and Bernie is not. He had just done a very strange thing but his intentions were good and it was pretty thoughtful, too. I think deserved in a way—I did get shocked—but nice still.

“Seriously, Bernie, this was nice.”

He smiled. “So what are you doing awake at this time?” he asked in a kind of annoying, parental way. Bernie would have made a bad parent. His kids would have walked all over him.

“I couldn't sleep,” I lied.

I had sat back down on the couch and Bernie took a seat next to me. “Do you want me to stay up with you?” he asked.

“Uh, no,” I said. “In fact, I will pay you the twenty bucks you just gave me for you to do... you know, precisely not that.”

Bernie stood back up with a wounded expression on his face.

“Actually, Bernie,” I said. “I'm kind of waiting for someone. It's a clandestine love affair kind of thing.”

Bernie looked shocked. “Who is it?”

“I can't tell you that or it wouldn't be clandestine anymore.”

Just then Suzanne came through the door and walked in casually. “What wouldn't be clandestine?” she asked.

“I once had a relationship with a very famous nun,” I said. “Think Mother Theresa but bigger.”

Suzanne laughed and walked into the studio to start preparing.

Bernie shook his head, quite vigorously actually. It was like he was trying to express his disapproval and clear some of the confusion from his head at the same time. "I'm going home," he said.

"See ya, Bernie."

I stayed in the lounge, feeling awkward and accomplished at the same time. I had made her laugh but now what? She came back in, grabbing records from the filing cabinets. I sat there awkwardly not saying anything, until she turned around and said, "Hey, do you want to be on the air with me?" This was a better offer than I was expecting. I thought we'd just hang out but now she was going to let me talk on the radio. I must have really impressed her with my nun joke or maybe she believed it and wanted to hear more. No. I realized that was dumb. I nodded and followed her into the station.

She set me up in a swivel chair next to one of the mics and I foolishly shimmied back and forth, not saying anything, while she introduced the show. After she had shut the microphone off and put on a 1970 concert recording of "Ain't Got No, I Got Life" by Nina Simone, she swiveled to face me and asked, "So, what's your story? What brought you here?"

I had to think about that for a little while. "I guess, my dad used to work here so it was you know, a place to go but I wasn't really coming in order to find him because we never actually met and I think he was kind of an asshole. I don't know. I guess I'm kind of like a refugee."

"Really? A refugee from what?"

"Uh, my grandmother, St. Mary's, Catholicism, that sort of thing."

Suzanne was like an interviewer. "Why do you need refuge from them?" she asked.

"Well, for starters, I'm gay," I said. "Did you know that?"

Suzanne smiled at me, in that knowing but not mocking way. “I thought you might be, yes.”

“Well, yeah. So, that’s one thing but I’m also just, like, kind of different from everyone back home. Does that sound stupid?”

“No. It doesn’t sound stupid at all. I’m not sure I’d call you a refugee, though.”

“Yeah.”

“But that doesn’t mean you’re not important.”

My face felt hot.

“So, tell me more,” she said.

And I did. I told her about my grandmother and my mom and St. Mary’s and Lydia. I told her how awesome Lydia was and how great we had had it. I also told her about the fall, about being caught, and about Lydia not coming with me. I told her about being in my church choir. I even told her about having to say the rosary every night in order to sleep peacefully. I could—and did—drift off quite easily but I’d always wake up cursing and have to say a few “Hail Marys.”

And in turn she told me her story, how she had grown up in San Francisco, or Oakland really, she said—I didn’t know where that was anyway I said—and then moved to Cambridge for college. She had gone to Harvard which didn’t surprise me and she had hated it which also didn’t surprise me. She was too smart not to get in and too smart not to hate it. She was the kind of person who hated any kind of “establishment” without being hateful herself. Then she had decided to stay which I thought was dumb because California, especially San Francisco, sounded so much cooler. She said it wasn’t really and that, besides, she had met someone here and

decided to stay for her. She said that they had broken up but were still friends. I said that that was nice. I especially liked the broken up part.

I didn't actually get to speak on the air that time but I was still pretty ok with what had just happened. In fact, I was fucking euphoric.

The rest of my time at the station was a mix of seemingly endless boredom and painfully short-lived elation. What semblance of a life I had had before completely evaporated. I spent all day in the station lounge, praying for Suzanne to show up. When I wasn't with her—which was actually most of the time—I thought about what I would say to her. I replayed each glorious word she had ever spoken to me. Every once in a while, when I was just so restless I couldn't take it anymore, I risked missing Suzanne and left the station to run around Harvard Square for a bit. I always came back after an hour or so.

I'm not a jogger. Before leaving home, I never did it by choice and I always hated doing it in gym class. I hated gym class in general actually. St. Mary's was really sports oriented and there was surprisingly little sporty girl-dyke crossover, not that that would have really made a difference for me anyway; I just thought I'd mention it. Anyway, in most schools, I think I could have blended into the middle of the pack, athletically speaking, but, amidst the field hockey and soccer stars, I made a pretty poor showing. Lydia was a lot better than me. She never played any sports but she was light and quick. While she was up with the six minute mile folks, I was in the back with the lowly ten minute crowd. This, as my gym teacher pointed out, was particularly embarrassing given my height and long legs.

“It's not like you're carrying around much weight either,” she said.

I pointed out to her that while I was fairly skinny, my increased height meant that there was just more of me and it was therefore completely reasonable that it would take more time for me to move myself around.

She said that wasn't the way it worked and when I asked her what "it" was she told me not to back talk.

One time when this girl who *was* kind of overweight—her name was Alison—crossed the finish line before me, Ms. Pilchik, the gym teacher, yelled, "Jesus, Coraline. Are you even trying?"

I thought this was a really shitty thing to say and I told Alison that later.

"Don't listen to her, Alison," I said. "She's a real bitch."

"Yeah, she sucks," said Alison.

"She's a cunt, really."

Alison didn't like that as much and she walked away from me into the locker room.

When I repeated this to Lydia she told me I shouldn't say cunt. I told her that people said it in England all the time and she said that she bet feminists in England didn't say it. I told her that feminists, in England or anywhere else, should care a lot more about people like Alison than people like Ms. Pilchik who were probably responsible for like eighty percent of the world's eating disorders. She said maybe and then added, "I don't think you should say bitch either."

So, yeah, I hated running.

Things at the station were different, though. I had so much energy and did so little with it. Every little moment with Suzanne left me ready to burst open. And then she'd disappear, leaving me with a bunch of middle-aged, small-talk-challenged eccentrics. It was quite a come down and

sometimes I just couldn't stand it anymore. I guess the only thing that could get me to run was unfulfilled, unrelenting, passionate longing. It's a shame Ms. Pilchik didn't elicit such feelings.

Something that always amused me on my runs was how many buildings, streets, fucking benches, everything, were named after John F. Kennedy. My grandmother would have appreciated it. God said, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" but I'm sure He's made an exception for the Kennedys. If not, I know a lot of Catholics who are in for a rude awakening. Personally, I'm not that impressed. I think it just goes to show that if you die young enough people will forgive a lot. I think that's kind of sad actually, knowing your legacy is dependent upon your premature demise. Because if you believe in heaven—and I'm not sure I do—you know that he knows—JFK I mean. I wonder if he feels bad about it. I don't really care one way or the other. If a philanderer like Kennedy could become such a Catholic hero, I think this gay panic is a little unfair. I'm thinking about writing a letter to the Pope. It's probably the early death thing, though. I don't know for sure but I'd rather not test it out.

Anyway, every time I got back to the station I'd always run around all the rooms to see if Suzanne was there and if she wasn't, which was usually the case, I'd sit back down on that grey couch. Looking back on it, I find it all kind of disgusting, the way my days revolved around food and Suzanne—and not necessarily in that order. My fact-finding mission, my aforementioned quest to figure out the building blocks behind this Coraline Connors story, had been de-railed. My journey of self-discovery was not yielding too many finds. And then again, maybe it was. I didn't really like what I found, though, so I think I'll move on.

My favorite part of each day was, of course, the time I spent with Suzanne. I especially liked talking to her alone during her show, which she started inviting me into regularly, but being in a group with her was nice too.

One day, after dinner, we were all sitting around the station—me, Suzanne, Sinead O'Connor, Sunny from the morning show, that Q. lady, Magda, and, inexplicably, one of the younger comrades. He was the kind of guy who loved to lecture women about sexism, black people about racism, poor people about classism, etc. He was a born educator.

Not wanting to diverge from her usual joylessness, Sinead had brought up “the discourse surrounding gay marriage” and how it really pissed her off. Across the room from me, this Karl Marx wannabe started to speak but Magda cut him off.

“It’s these fucking yuppies, wanting to be like every other Tom, Dick, and Harry” she said. “I’ll tell you, my generation was not like this.”

“But Magda,” said Sunny. “We can’t all join lesbian biker gangs.”

“I don’t see why not.”

“It’s not like you’re still in one,” said Sinead.

Magda grumbled.

“You were in a biker gang?” I asked. “Like Dykes on Bikes or something like that?”

“No,” said Magda. “Too corporate. I was a disciple of Bessie Stringfield.”

“Who?”

As usual, Suzanne had the answer. “Bessie Stringfield was the first African-American woman to complete a solo cross-country ride. She was a pioneer. Magda fell in love with her.”

“Metaphorically,” said Magda. “We never actually met. But she was the inspiration behind my group, ‘The Bessies.’ We travelled all across the country, staying in friends’ RVs and camping out. I didn’t speak to a man for two years.”

“Didn’t Bessie have like six husbands, though?” Sinead asked.

“We all make mistakes,” said Magda.

“I’m not saying we need to be separatists,” said Sinead. “Personally, I’d prefer it but... well...” she trailed off but cocked her head toward Karl. “What really gets me is how the marriage thing has overshadowed everything else. I mean hello? Some of us have bigger things to worry about.”

“I’d like to get married,” I said.

Sinead and Q. looked horrified, Magda and Suzanne just looked amused, and Sunny had stopped paying attention. Karl, though, Karl was excited. The conversation had finally circled back to something he could understand.

“That’s the problem,” he said. “They’ve totally got you buying into their system.”

“I’m not buying into anything, Karl.”

“My name’s Kenneth.”

“Whatever.”

“Oh man,” he said. “This is really sad. You want a part in their heterosexist paradigm.”

“No. I want a part in domestic fucking bliss with a white picket fence and some Valedictorian, child prodigy gaybies.”

“I don’t think you understand—”

“Uh, yeah, I do actually but thanks for your concern, Karl. I have to admit, between all this fucking women and trying to fit into the heterosexist paradigm, I sometimes find myself just too tired to understand these more complex societal concepts, especially the ones that affect my life intimately.”

“I—”

“Fuck off, Karl.”

Karl got up, rubbed his stubbly beard a couple of times, and stalked off.

Sinead let out a long sigh. “Shit,” said Q.

I was waiting for the slow clap that they do at the end of sports movies, after the protagonist has just made a really rousing speech, spurring his underdog team on to victory and glory. But no one clapped. I got the feeling that, for all their talk, in their minds, I’d gone a little too far. Sunny looked downright fearful.

As St. Mary’s Dean of Student Welfare—officially called the Dean of Student Discipline until the late nineties—told me, sometimes the things I say “are liable to make others uncomfortable.”

I told her that sometimes the things other people say are liable to piss me off, which she did not find “particularly amusing.”

I told her I wasn’t trying to be amusing, leading to a lovely “Parent”-Teacher conference and a subsequent apology letter addressed to the entire St. Mary’s faculty, written by me of course. I really hated it whenever they called my grandmother in. You know how business executives and hired assassins like to keep their work life and home life separate? That’s how I’ve always felt about school. It’s a lot less scary to piss off a nun, who’s legally forbidden from hitting you and all too happy to send you back home at the end of the day, than to piss off the person you rely on for food, clothing, and shelter and who has the legal right to make important decisions about your life. I tended to behave myself pretty well at home. That’s why I never told my grandmother about Lydia. At school, they all knew—the students of course but most of the teachers as well. I liked it that way. Like the provocative statements that got me sent to the dean’s office, I could tell our relationship made them uncomfortable. They had no real proof, of course, so they couldn’t do anything about it. The school’s healthy lesbian population plunged the administration into an ethical limbo. Sin was walking its hallways, sitting in its classrooms,

and fornicating in its bathrooms and they knew—well maybe not about the fornicating part—and could do nothing about it. I fucking loved it. As my escape in the dead of night proved—or the necessity of said escape—proved, Grandmother could do a hell of a lot about it.

Anyway, while I was contemplating my innate ability to disturb others, the rest of the group had recovered. Suzanne, who was of course unmoved to begin with, spoke first.

“So, who do you think you’d marry?” she asked.

“Uh, I used to think maybe this girl back home, Lydia. We were dating but then, you know, I left and she... didn’t so... yeah I don’t know. It could come full circle, though, you know? Like, I could meet her ten years from now and then bam, back together.”

“How old are you, Coraline?” Sinead asked.

“Fifteen.”

“And you want to marry your high school sweetheart?”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said. “You got a problem with that?”

“No,” she said. “It’s just not something I hear very often these days, especially from queer women.”

“I’m a throwback,” I said.

“How do you think you’ll get back together?” asked Suzanne. If anyone else had asked I might have been offended but with Suzanne I didn’t mind. The question was challenging but not a challenge. Unlike Sinead, she wasn’t treating me like some kid who needed to be talked down. She was just curious. She cared. She thought I was interesting.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe at a high school reunion or something?”

“You’d go to your high school reunion?” asked Sinead. “Didn’t you, like, run away? What would you say to everyone?”

“Uh, I’d start with ‘hello’ I think. Things could progress from there. I mean, I don’t know if I’d go. A lot could change. I might end up with someone else.” I looked at Suzanne quickly and then looked back down at the reddish, stained carpet.

“You’re quite the romantic,” said Sinead.

“Nah,” I said. “Not really. Like I said, I could find someone else. It’s not like I’m gonna wait around for her, for Lydia, my whole life or anything. I’m just not as jaded as some people, you know. I don’t go around ripping up pictures of the Pope and stuff like that.”

“Will you stop it with the Sinead O’Connor references?” Sinead was pissed. “My name’s Claire Abbott. I’m not even Irish.”

“Whatever, Sinead.”

“I really don’t understand why this is so funny to you.”

“To be honest,” I said. “I don’t have much else going on in my life, right now.”

I meant it as a joke and that’s how Sinead took it, not to say that she laughed at it or anything, but she knew my intentions. After I said it, though, it felt a little too real. I thought back to my bus buddy, Kevin. I was starting to think that his life might be a little richer than mine despite his misguided astronomical philosophy. It was not a pleasant thought.

That night, as had become our custom, Suzanne invited me into the studio and we chatted while she played some softer selections from the Rolling Stones catalogue, followed by Cat Stevens and this female rapper named Angel Haze—I liked her especially.

Then she turned to me and said, “Hey. You’ve never actually played anything. Why don’t you pick something?”

For what felt like an hour but was probably more like a second, I sat there silently. This was an honor that I was not ready for. In my cloistered world of Suzanne-directed obsession and

Sinead O'Connor jokes, this was make or break. I thought of a song my choir director had played for me. I was staying after school—actually for detention—when she called me to her “office,” which was really just a corner of our on-campus chapel, which itself was really just a classroom at the far end of the hall in which they had installed pale green carpeting, a few pews, and a cross. I don't know why the carpeting was considered integral to the religious experience, but I guess it was.

Anyway, I hadn't even done anything very wrong that day. I had been a few minutes late to class which is definitely not detention worthy. It was because Lydia and I were making out in the bathroom and we got a little carried away and lost track of the time. This was detention worthy but it's not like Sister Margaret knew about it. I don't know, maybe she did. Sister Margaret was one of the few nuns left at St. Mary's and you could really see how she had made it this far. She was adamantly opposed to the “secularization,” as she called it, of St. Mary's and she expressed it almost daily to all of us unfortunate enough to be placed in her Algebra I class. Despite this firmly held belief expressed in the company of her students—her inferiors you could say—she was surprisingly docile around our Principal, who was not a nun and who—even more egregiously—had received a PhD from Harvard Divinity School, a “known breeder of subversives.” I had sat through two years of Principal Wiley's talks on sexual morality—talks that all girls in ninth through twelfth grade were required to attend at the beginning of each year, just in case any of us had fallen into sin over the summer break—and she didn't seem particularly “subversive” to me. Either way, Sister Margaret, as a career-nun, was well-versed in when it was and when it was not appropriate to voice her opinion. The answer was that it was usually not. I think that's why Catholic schools are so famous for our angry nuns. Their failure to acquire a Y chromosome during fertilization has barred them from so many opportunities for

promotion. A religiously-minded—and ambitious—young man could be Pope someday. His equally conniving—or perhaps I should say devout—female counterpart’s best bet is to become a teacher and carve out her own little religious dictatorship within her school. I’m not a psychologist but I think that’s what it all comes down to—frustration. Sister Margaret’s reign didn’t even extend beyond the walls of her classroom, Room 218, but what she lacked in size, she made up for in intensity. So, she ended up being the kind of teacher who makes kids give up hours of their day in exchange for a few minutes lateness but, I guess I really can’t blame her. Nuns have it pretty rough.

Not that there aren’t some cool nuns. The choir director, Sister Agnes, was a cool-ish, or at least kind, nun who could be relied upon to get me out of detention and other tricky spots—such as the time the Dean of Student Welfare thought it would be spiritually and emotionally beneficial for me to portray Mary Magdalene at our school’s Passion play—by saying she needed me for “choral business.”

This particular time she showed me a song that she herself had just discovered on YouTube, having learned to use a computer just weeks before. Sister Agnes was old school. As she struggled to get everything set up just right, her whole body bounced a little with excitement. I really don’t blame her. When I chose this song for Suzanne, I was trying to impress her with my knowledge but I was also just excited to share it with another person. It’s a fucking awesome song.

“Can I play something kind of obscure?” I asked Suzanne.

“Sure,” she said. “What is it?”

“I want to play it first.”

“Ok. Will I know it when I hear it?”

“Definitely not,” I said. “Now, how do I set this up?”

I was talking about the computer, an embarrassingly large, slow relic of the early 2000s. It had decent internet capabilities and could somehow be manipulated to play whatever you were listening to over the radio. I actually felt a bit of a kinship with it. After all, I myself am a somewhat large—or at least tall—slow-moving product of the early 2000s. Still, I don’t really think a radio station should be relying upon technology that’s as old as a high school sophomore. Suzanne showed me how it worked but she was incredulous that I’d need it.

“I’m sure you could find it in the station,” she said. “We have everything.”

This was very close to true but still not particularly helpful. While every drawer, shelf, space between couch cushions, etc. was overflowing with records and CDs, none of it was organized in any way I could decipher. There’s this scene in *High Fidelity* where the main character is arranging his vinyl collection autobiographically—because this is what mature adults, aware of their relative insignificance in the world, do—and I think that’s what must have happened at the station. Like, some self-important dick rearranged all the records to reflect his life’s journey and then fucked off, leaving everyone else to deal with this organizational travesty. Maybe it was my dad. I wonder if I feature anywhere in it. Probably not. Maybe my mom did, though. Perhaps her influence would surface in the *Sid and Nancy* soundtrack listed under “Fletcher, Mark 1999” or maybe just the Joe Strummer single “Love Kills.” You know, a collection of whimsical, first-love, drug-fueled, self-destruction type songs. I wonder what my mom’s soundtrack would be now. Who’s writing songs about fairly functional, alcohol mall ladies? Maybe some not very popular country western singer. I’m not sure what my soundtrack would be. I think it can be harder to tell with your own life.

In this particular instance, though, the station's disarray really didn't matter. They wouldn't have had my song anyway. Suzanne got it queued up and then faded out from her last song, "Trouble" by Cat Stevens. She turned on the mic and put on her "radio voice," a slightly lower, smoother version of her usual speaking voice. I don't know if she realized she was doing it or not. With Suzanne, these things were hard to tell. She was so self-possessed, I felt that she had to be aware of it but she was also so unaffected that her purposeful use of a slightly, different radio voice would have surprised me. Regardless of her intentions, both voices were nice. They were the kind of voices you'd listen to. Lydia was always a big Bill Clinton fan, like to the extent that she would listen to his old speeches on YouTube and analyze them and talk to me about them for hours. It was a bit draining. Also, a little demoralizing. Because, like, she *really* liked Bill Clinton. Knowing that your ostensibly lesbian girlfriend would leave you for a guy pushing seventy—if given the chance—can shake your confidence. She always denied it but when I pushed her a bit more on it she eventually said, "Romantic attraction can be complicated." Ok. Bill Clinton, though, he definitely has multiple voices and you know his are on purpose. My point is that people—or some people at least—are really captivated by Bill Clinton and I think Suzanne has that same power. I'm more inclined to listen to her but I've heard that Bill's had some decent ideas as well.

Anyway, Suzanne dropped into her deeper voice, and said, "Next up is a song selected by the lovely Coraline Connors, a regular listener and a frequent presence in the broadcast studio. I hope you enjoy it."

She turned the fader up and hit play. The song I had chosen was the "Seikilos Epitaph," which is the oldest full composition we know of today. People were obviously singing before then but we don't have any written record of it. The song is from around 100 AD and was carved

into a marble column. It was written by a man in honor of his dead wife but the song is actually all about life and living it to the fullest. It's the kind of carpe diem shit that well-read but not particularly well-experienced high schoolers throw around to try to sound deep, only it's not shit, partially because that sentiment wasn't such a fucking cliché back then and partially because it's just so well expressed. The song was written in ancient Greek but in English it roughly reads:

While you live, shine
Have no grief at all.
Life exists only for a short while
And time demands its toll.

A lot of different groups have recorded it and Sister Agnes found this Celtic-sounding choral version. She had promised me we would sing it before I graduated. I suppose there was the unspoken assumption that I'd stick around for that long. That was the version I played for Suzanne.

She was impressed but, in my opinion, not adequately. I told her all about it and how Sister Agnes had shown it to me but she seemed a lot more interested in my choral career than in the song itself. I usually reveled in Suzanne's attention and I did like it even then but I also felt, like, a moral imperative to adequately represent this song. If Suzanne was not crying over its beauty—which she was not—I had done something wrong. That's how I felt at the time and I still feel that way now, I think. I guess that's some comfort really. Suzanne and I didn't work out but if she couldn't properly appreciate such a masterpiece the relationship probably would have floundered eventually. Lydia wasn't super excited about "Seikilos" either and look how that turned out.

What was really fascinating to Suzanne, though, was my choral involvement. It was as if I had told her I was part of a Bulgarian throat singers' group. When I asked her why the acute interest, she said, "I guess I'm surprised. I thought you didn't really like your school."

"I didn't but Choir wasn't really part of school. Or, I guess it was, but it never felt like it. I just fit better there. I'm not really good at anything else so... Yeah. Not that I'm a great singer either, I'm just better at it than other things."

"I bet you're really good," said Suzanne.

"I'm really not."

"Could you sing for me right now?" she asked.

"Absolutely not."

"Wow."

"I don't sing by myself," I said. "I don't like it at all. If you can find me ten other people who'll agree to sing with me, then maybe."

"Then, definitely," she said.

"Maybe."

This was the most peer-like Suzanne had ever been with me. She'd always been nice and she never treated me like a dumb kid but there was always some kind of distance, some kind of age-gap awareness. We were standing very close to each other, much closer than usual. The studio table was really made up of three tables pushed together to create a U and Suzanne and I were usually separated from each other by the studio's sound board. She sat in the U's opening, while I sat to her right, basically at the mid-point of one of the tables boxing her into that U. But I had come over to her side of the table in order to play my song and we were now both standing in the small, box-like area between the three tables.

“Oh, come on,” said Suzanne, nudging me gently with her elbow, the way that people do in sitcoms and movies in order to indicate that they’re friendly with each other. If it’s a romantic comedy, this indicates that the couple, who has been arguing for the first half of the movie, is starting to reconcile and are about to fall in love. Since Suzanne and I had started out getting along quite well, I thought that our falling in love—I had already fallen but I needed to wait for her to get there—might not take as long as it does in the movies. I know I’m young but my life was fairly uncertain at the time and I didn’t know if I had time for a whole *When Harry Met Sally* type of deal.

“Ok,” I said, leaning towards her and equally gently bumping her with my shoulder. “If you get the people together, I’ll sing for you.”

She never did get them, though.

A few days later, it snowed. Like a lot. I love the snow so this was a welcome development for me. Sinead was less pleased. She told me I’d like the snow less when I was an adult and had to shovel my own driveway and sidewalk. I told her that I lived with my elderly grandmother, across the street from a bunch of strong Amish men who were unfortunately prohibited from interacting with us, and that I therefore already shoveled my own driveway and sidewalk. My grandmother really isn’t that frail so she actually helps too but it’s at least a fifty-fifty split, probably sixty-forty in my favor.

It was one of those winters where it never really snows but just rains constantly—like a really cold rain that’s almost snow but just can’t be bothered to go all the way with it. Because of all that rain, the snow would probably melt soon or at least turn to slush after yet another downpour but for the time being it was there, descending down in its most perfect form—mostly

powdery with a little bit more moisture so it'd stick together and you could make a snowball or a snowman.

It started during one of the vegan dinners and the DJ, an older, pretty normal man—at least by the station's standards—ran in to tell us. The broadcast studio had the station's sole window, opening out onto a small alley behind the cheese shop—not a particularly great view but still good enough to see the snow coming down. I pulled on Sinead's hand-me-down turtleneck and my warm coat and ran down the stairs, out into the square. Suzanne, Q., Sinead, and Sunny came down too.

My footwear, an old pair of Doc Martens, was not exactly weather appropriate but it wasn't as bad as say a pair of sneakers and I really didn't care either way. I was so ecstatic. There was already some accumulation, although not much. I bent down, grabbed as much snow as I could, and threw a snowball at Sinead, hitting her in the back.

“What the hell?” She turned around, genuinely angry but also a little amused—I could tell. She squinted her eyes in determination, squatted, picking up a handful of snow, and, swinging her arm like she was bowling, chucked her snowball at me, hitting me in the shoulder.

Things escalated from there. Sunny got caught up in the crossfire of Sinead and my two-woman snowball fight and decided to join the fray. However, instead of retaliating, she challenged Q. who readily accepted. Now, we were all running around in a very contained circle, on a brick sidewalk, on the edge of Harvard Square. Sunny had slide-tackled Q. and they both ended up lying on the ground, parts of Sunny resting on top of Q. Then, Sunny kissed Q. lightly on the lips, stood up, and pulled Q. up after her.

“I hope that was ok,” she said.

Q., who I had actually only heard speak once, nodded, grinning like a middle schooler whose first ever dance invitation has just been accepted. It was pretty cute, actually—or, I hate calling things “cute” but it was nice to see. I had no idea there was anything between them.

Emboldened by this example, I ran up to Suzanne who had been standing slightly back from us, smiling.

“Come on, Suzanne,” I said, dragging her closer to the rest of us even though the short-lived fight had pretty much stopped. “You’re not too professional for this.” She had come from work and was wearing a hound’s-tooth pattern pants suit. But she had changed into sensible, rubbery, black shoes so she didn’t really have an excuse.

“You’re right,” she said, making her own snowball.

We stared at each other for a while but she didn’t throw it. I once read this book where everything was “palpable”—the anger, the discomfort, the sexual tension. Well, I think our sexual tension was palpable, Suzanne’s and mine. I wanted to run at her and start making love to her right then and there. That’s actually kind of an embarrassing thing to say but it’s how I felt. Of course, I didn’t do that. I guess I *am* a bit of a romantic but I’m not delusional. I knew I probably would have been rebuffed. I also respect my fellow women and I don’t think I’d particularly like to be charged by some sex-crazed teenager—I mean maybe if it were Lydia but even then it seems too violent. Like, wouldn’t it hurt when you hit the ground? In my Suzanne fantasy, she received me with open arms and we fell into a cloud-like, snowy abyss. It looked better than it ever could have been.

“Hey ladies,” Sinead called. “It’s too cold. Let’s go back inside.”

“No,” I shouted, stretching my arms out and looking up at the falling snowflakes. I stuck my tongue out to catch them and then did a bit of a twirl, my arms still outstretched. I know

that's pretty dramatic and I'm not usually like that—well, maybe I am but not in that whimsical way—but I couldn't really help it. Everything just felt so beautiful. I think it was partially the moment I had just shared with Suzanne—or at least, the moment I thought we shared—and partially just the opposite. It was good to leave that station, to remember all the things outside, to maybe even forget about Suzanne, just for a few seconds, as I had at the very beginning of the snowball fight. Obviously, everything always circled back to her, but for a few minutes I was free.

After my theatrics, I did feel kind of cold and decided I was happy to head inside.

“Actually, never mind, yeah. That's fine,” I said, heading for the door. As I turned my back, I felt something hit me in the middle of the back. I spun back around to see Suzanne smirking at me, snowball no longer in hand. She made her fingers into a gun, pointed it at me, and then lifted it up to her lips to blow the smoke away like they do in old Westerns.

“Well done,” I said.

She did a deep bow. Then she walked over and put her arm around my shoulder.

“Truce?”

“Truce.”

Snow, Suzanne and the combination thereof were intoxicating enough but when we got upstairs, Magda and another one of the older lesbians had opened up a bottle of whiskey. Where they got it, I have no idea. Within seconds, Sunny had procured peppermint schnapps and Q. had found an electric kettle that I never knew about, as well as some Swiss Miss packets. We had only been gone for about twenty minutes but somehow Magda was already drunk—a seemingly impossible fete given her tremendous size. She was still Magda, though. Fun, in control, a bit brash, just with a few more slurred words. She wasn't like my mom. There was nothing pathetic

about it. In fact, after living with my grandmother for fifteen years, the sight of an old lady kicking back was fairly refreshing. Magda passed a glass of whiskey under my nose, shakily.

“Want some?” she asked.

The summer before eighth grade, I had tried a spiked lemonade in my friend’s basement. I had maybe two bottles’ worth, maybe even less, but I was only twelve and it was enough to get me quite drunk and later quite sick. Other than that, my drinking experience was pretty limited. Actually, other than that one time, my drinking experience was non-existent. Just the smell of the whiskey hurt the back of my throat. I passed.

“Schnapps then!” Magda yelled. “Schnapps! Get this woman some schnapps.”

And so a mug of hot chocolate and schnapps was passed my way. It was definitely nice at first, just like chocolatey peppermint or maybe minty chocolate but the aftertaste was somewhat bitter and unpleasant. I finished it, though, and was promptly given another, and by the time I finished that one, I really wasn’t feeling the aftertaste at all.

No one had really explained the sudden urge to get drunk and be merry but it was clearly weather related. It all seemed a bit coven-y—this weird snow-based celebration initiated by our white-haired leader. Q. was, after all, a practicing Wiccan. I didn’t mind it at all. I think being part of a coven would be kind of neat. I can think of lots of people I’d curse. It would also really piss off the Catholic establishment. If I went public with it, maybe I could even get excommunicated. I’ve been thinking of that, lately, as a good exit. Like, this slow skulking out of the Church doesn’t particularly satisfy me. It makes me feel weak. Witchcraft would really make a statement. Go out with a bang kind of thing.

Things seemed more and more otherworldly as the night progressed. After my liquored-up hot chocolates, I was feeling pretty good. Embarrassingly, I was actually feeling pretty drunk.

After two drinks. At least I wasn't sick. In fact, I was feeling so good I decided I could try some of that whiskey.

As I reached for the bottle, Sinead, who along with Suzanne was still pretty sober, said, "I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Ah, let her live," said Magda, sinking back into the couch, sitting with her legs spread apart.

I poured myself a large glass, trying to sip at it at first and then abandoning that strategy and just downing it all in a series of three shots. Someone had started playing "Whiter Shade of Pale" on an old boom-box. The new couple, Sunny and Q., were now up and dancing with each other. Magda was conducting a fake band, woefully out of time with the music. I had sunk slowly to the ground and was resting my head on the infamous yellow couch behind me.

The next thing I remember I was being jerkily lifted into the air by a still drunk, but apparently no less powerful Magda. She didn't lift me too high, just enough to get me onto the couch. I guess I had fallen asleep. I didn't really want to open my eyes and have to talk to people so I kept them shut, pretending to still be asleep.

Someone covered me with a blanket and I was about to fall back asleep when I realized they were talking about me.

"I forget how young she is," said one of the women, I think Q.

"Really?" said Sinead. "I don't."

Fuck you, too, Sinead.

"She seems to have a little crush on you, Suzanne." This came from an unfamiliar voice, probably the older woman with Magda. It also seemed like quite the unjust statement. She was right, of course. In fact, it went further than that. I didn't just have a "crush" on Suzanne. I was

madly, deeply, profoundly, obsessively in love. But I really didn't think I had shown it. Who was this woman anyway? What did she know about my life? Then I remembered a series of dreams that came somewhere in between the dancing and my drifting off. In the dream, the party would still be going on around me but would slowly melt away until it was just me and Suzanne and I'd stare at her, sometimes making long periods of eye contact. That was it. Nothing fancy, nothing fantastical. It was all pretty realistic. In fact, it *was* fucking real. I realized that for however long the party had continued after my third gulp of whiskey, I had been periodically opening my eyes, staring at Suzanne for a while, and then falling back asleep. I knew that was a creepy thing to do and that I should be embarrassed but in that moment I really wasn't. Maybe it's because I was still drunk or because I just assumed they wouldn't make too much of it. I had just been drifting off and I was drunk and Suzanne had happened to be in my line of vision. But I think really, it was that deep down I just assumed that Suzanne felt the same way about me that I did about her. Sure, she probably was a little thrown off by the staring at first but at least it gave her a clear message. She was probably thrilled for an indication of my reciprocated love.

"I don't know," said Suzanne, "She's a sweet kid."

Or maybe not. That kid line stung. I think I even let out a slight moan but was able to pass it off as sleep talking.

"Sweet?" repeated Sinead. "That's not exactly what I would call her." She was really hamming it up. She liked me. I could tell. Deep down anyway, at least enough to give me the remnants of her 1990s fashion choices. She was providing a good foil to Suzanne, though, forcing Suzanne to defend my honor and all that shit.

"You just don't know her like I do," said Suzanne.

I liked the sound of that quite a bit. It seemed to imply a certain level of intimacy, the somewhat elevated level that I had been hoping for. Instantly, the disappointment of her previous statement was washed away. I was back on cloud nine.

I woke up in the middle of the night to find that I had fallen from that cloud and experienced a rather harsh landing.

As I sat up slowly, I felt like my head was about to explode. “There is no god,” I muttered, at which point I promptly vomited so, you know, counterpoint.

Cleaning up your own vomit is fucking awful. I know some people will say that it’s worse to clean up someone else’s vomit but they’re wrong and here is why: when you’re cleaning up someone else’s vomit, you usually feel fine, if a bit disgusted, but when you’re cleaning up your own vomit, you have just vomited, meaning you are liable to vomit again and you may be set off by the sight and smell of your previous vomit, causing a horrible vomit chain. Those who doubt the “vomit chain” have never experienced a hangover of such epic proportions. After I got paper towels and some water from the bathroom, I got down on my hands and knees to begin my work and proceeded to vomit again. To spare you the gory details, I’ll just say that this happened multiple times but I eventually got everything cleaned up, even using some vinegar I found in the storage closet in order to mask the smell. I don’t know if this torrent of vomit was a punishment for drunkenness, my blasphemy, or my lust for Suzanne. I guess it could also be my body’s natural, totally scientific, approach to being fucking poisoned. Shit. Lesson learned: Don’t try to keep up with giant, former biker gang lesbians, especially if you are a skinny fifteen-year-old with no built-up alcohol tolerance.

After I finished my cleaning, I lay on the floor for a while, mustering the energy to cross the lounge and lie myself back down on the grey couch. They had placed me on the yellow couch to which I had that aforementioned, slightly crazy aversion. Just as I managed to stand up, Suzanne came out of the studio. I guess it wasn't really that late, but actually only about 1:00 am when her show ends. The lights were off in the lounge and she didn't see me. I was suddenly gripped by this profound urge to follow her, just to round out my night of creepiness I suppose. I didn't fully think it through. I slowly—partially due to the fact that if I walked too quickly I got dizzy and partially in order to be quiet—walked down the stairs. I watched Suzanne leave the station and then exit the cheese monger alleyway. For some reason, I still wanted to follow her. This hadn't been far enough. I was not satiated.

The problem was that if I left the station the door would lock behind me and I was never actually given a key—perhaps Bernie has more trust issues than his milk carton dollar scheme would suggest. With sudden, immense clarity, I calmly took off one of my shoes and placed it in the doorway in order to keep it open. Then, my head still spinning, I partially hopped, partially limped my way out of the alley, wearing only one shoe. I'm sure if anyone had seen me, it would have been a frightening sight.

When I got out of the alley, peaking around the edge of the cheese shop, Suzanne was still standing in front of the building, seemingly waiting for someone. After several minutes of very, very cold toes, someone did come. I couldn't see much of her in the darkness but she looked a little like a larger, more voluptuous Sinead. She also had a shaved head or at least a very short haircut and her wardrobe was fairly similar. She approached Suzanne and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. She grabbed onto Suzanne's hand and started to walk away with her but Suzanne pulled her back, almost like the way a guy pulls his dance partner back in after he spins

her. They began to kiss. I couldn't make out any details but it went on for what felt like a long time. Then they clasped hands again and walked off.

I realized I was crying and hated myself for it. I don't like crying over women; it makes me feel stupid. I also didn't think I could really spare the water at a time like this. My headache began to feel even worse, something that had not previously seemed possible. I trudged back over to the door, not even trying to keep my un-shoed foot out of the snow. Then, I stuck my wet foot back into my boot and dragged myself upstairs. I filled up three paper cups of water from the bathroom and took them back to the lounge, where I re-made my bed on the grey, less unholy couch. As I drank the water, I kept telling myself not to cry.

"You can't cry and drink," I said to myself. "You have to pick one or the other, you sad-sack alco."

This was a harsh thing to say to someone in such a fragile state of mind and even though I had been the one to say it, it just made me cry even harder. I dug around in my backpack and pulled my rosary out. Lying down I began to say a decade of the rosary while contemplating the sorrowful mysteries, the same ones my grandmother had employed a month ago in her desperate quest to straighten me out.

First sorrowful mystery, the agony in the bedroom, Coraline and Lydia are caught in a compromising position.

Hail Mary, full of Grace. The Lord is with thee.

Second sorrowful mystery, the scourging at the table, Coraline is interrogated by her grandmother.

Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

Third sorrowful mystery, the crowning with booze, Coraline suffers for her stupidity.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of death.

Fourth sorrowful mystery, the carrying of the shoe, Coraline discovers that the one she loves is in love with someone else.

Hail Mary, full of Grace. The Lord is with thee.

Fifth sorrowful mystery, the crucifixion, Coraline learns that she is unloved and unlovable.

I fell asleep, daring God to strike me down for my incredible sacrilege but knowing He wouldn't have the guts.

The next few days saw great improvement in my mood. My jokes were being well received, I had shown Sinead the "Seikilos Epitaph" which she had approached with the appropriate veneration, and I was spending more and more time with Suzanne. I was loved. I was lovable. I could win Suzanne over, girlfriend or no girlfriend.

We were in the station, hanging out during her radio show when it all went down. She was playing "Suzanne" by Leonard Cohen.

"I was named after this song," she said.

I was conceived after this song, I thought. What I said was, "Mm. I love Leonard Cohen," which was dumb because you can't like *love* Leonard Cohen the way you love the Beatles. The reason teenage boys emerge from their rooms after listening to "Songs of Leonard Cohen" and declare, "This speaks to my soul" is because it fucking speaks to your soul. I'm not some insufferable guy who thinks he's the first person to discover Leonard Cohen so I've never told anyone that Cohen speaks to my soul but Cohen speaks to my soul. He speaks to everyone's soul. I know all the words to "Rocky Raccoon" but it certainly hasn't touched me to my core.

I hadn't known about Suzanne's Cohen connection. I felt that that spoke to the inevitability of us—of me and Suzanne. I knew we were different ages and came from different places but I had this naive faith in the power of our common Leonard Cohen origin stories. For that month, the three prongs of my religious doctrine, my own Holy Trinity if you will, were Suzanne, Leonard Cohen, and my Pavlovian commitment to the rosary. I think there are worse Gods to have—the religious right's God for instance, or those people who worship the sun and don't think they need to eat or drink water.

Suzanne had stood up and was dancing in a way, swaying at least. She was wearing a suit, as she always did, men's cut but much smaller. Her movement seemed a bit out of sync with the outfit. It seemed more appropriate for some tunic-wearing hippie in a floor length skirt, not the woman I actually saw before me, dressed in a perfectly tailored suit, wearing perfectly quaffed hair. In some ways it was a rare moment of abandon but in other ways it was not. Suzanne never hid anything; she was never calculating, so there was no false rigidity, no keeping-up-appearances mentality to abandon. She was just doing what she wanted to do in that moment, just as she had in a more stately moment when she had stood at the edge of our snowball fight, arms crossed, surveying us. Now, her arms were also folded across her torso but this time it was like she was hugging herself, holding on to each shoulder with the opposite arm.

“You're beautiful,” I said, without thinking.

I was immediately embarrassed. I even felt guilty. That's kind of a weird thing to say to someone, you know? Like out of the blue. I've never had anyone say it to me other than Lydia and then it felt great but I wouldn't like it from some random person—not that that's what I was, of course, but I did occupy a space in the expansive middle ground between rando and girlfriend.

Perhaps closer to rando. It would just make me uncomfortable, I think—being called beautiful like that.

Suzanne seemed fine with it, though. She didn't deny it. She knew she was beautiful. I guess it wasn't a very shocking statement for her to hear.

She smiled, then said, "This song is beautiful."

I agreed and we were quiet for a few minutes, me sitting there, her swaying, me watching. I felt so close to her then. I felt like we were tied in that moment. Who cares if she didn't like the "Seikilos Epitaph"? We were children of Cohen. We had a psychic connection. We were meant for each other.

The song transitioned neatly into another Cohen classic, "Take This Waltz." Suzanne continued dancing, her unmeasured swaying turning into a regimented 3/4 step. She did a little twirl, using my face for spotting, something dancers do so they don't get too dizzy and fall over, only breaking eye contact for a few milliseconds.

"This must look rather strange," she said but she didn't sound like she cared very much. It was a little weird, this impromptu dance show, but I was so enthralled with everything Suzanne did that nothing struck me as odd or out of place—at least not in a negative way. While her usual, cool composure could be haughtiness in others and this surprising interlude of passionate movement, somewhat outside the norms of society, might be awkward if attempted by someone else, to me, everything she did—everything originating from her—was perfect, was beautiful.

"It really doesn't look that strange," I told her.

"You should join me," she said, reaching her hand out.

"Eh, I'm not sure."

“You’re all talk and no game, Coraline Connors.”

“I know,” I said.

I did know. It was true.

The popular division of St. Mary’s took ballroom dance lessons, starting in sixth grade, increasing their coolness by interacting so intimately with members of the opposite sex. It was the popular girls who knew the names of most of the St. Andrew’s boys—at least the ones from our year—and it was this connection that landed them dates to all our horribly awkward, shared school dances. It was a never-ending cycle of increasing status. I, of course, was never particularly interested in such things, first because I didn’t like the stiff formality and then because I didn’t find interactions with my male peers particularly rewarding. But now, I found myself wishing—harder than I had ever wished for anything in my life—that I knew how to dance.

“I don’t know how,” I said. “To dance, I mean.”

“I’ll teach you,” she said, pulling me to my feet.

I felt like a pimply nerd from one of those 1980s teen movies. The awkward guy who the popular girl takes pity on and teaches to dance or dress well or something like that. Or like the shy girl who finally breaks out of her shell, changes everything about herself, and ends up wrapped in the arms of the school’s coolest guy, who really just wanted a nice girl all along. I was thrilled to even be touching her, I was thrilled at the prospect of being close to her for a prolonged period of time, but this whole dance lesson did feel rather John Hughes-esque. I felt vulnerable not because I was nervous around Suzanne in any way, but because I didn’t want anyone to walk in the room and see us. It would have been embarrassingly cliché. I felt like Ally Sheedy in the *Breakfast Club* ready to be transformed into a proper young lady.

I put my hand on Suzanne's shoulder and she rested her hand gently on the middle of my back. The positioning was a little awkward given that I was significantly taller than her and had to hold my arms at a downward angle in order to reach her shoulder. But I had heard that the man usually led during a waltz—a design flaw if you ask me—and since Suzanne actually knew what she was doing, I figured she should take the man's part.

“My mother made me take dancing lessons in middle school,” she said, gently but firmly guiding me forward and backward with a slight pressure on my back. “I hated them but it's a nice thing to know how to do. I actually kind of appreciate it now. That's the way it goes, I guess.” She laughed softly.

I agreed with her even though I had never derived any personal benefit from anything my grandmother had forced me to do. I guess she sort of forced me to go to St. Mary's and that's where I met Lydia but her involvement was just the indirect cause of all of that and the jury's still out on whether that was beneficial or not. I guess it probably was. I'm not sure.

Suzanne and I smiled at each other as she whispered, “one, two, three, one, two, three...” And that was about it. She never really told me what to do or how to do it, just counted, moving me gently around the room. I stared into her eyes as Leonard sang, “Oh, I want you, I want you, I want you.”

I began to get dizzy. It was partially from the spinning but also partially from the sheer pleasure of it all—we weren't really going very fast. Anyway, I think that's what did it, what spurred me on and made me bolder than I ordinarily would be. I took a step forward, towards Suzanne, and this time she followed *me*, pulling her hand in to match my movement and, I think, drawing me even a bit closer to her. We were so close now that we couldn't really make eye contact; we were more looking over each other's shoulders. I surveyed the studio walls—the

stencil drawing of Karl Marx, the clipping from “Dykes to Watch Out For,” a picture of the crew back in the seventies. I sighed, then pulled back, simultaneously pushing Suzanne forward. Then I leaned down and kissed her.

And she kissed back. I don’t remember exactly what it felt like—not tactilely anyway. I hadn’t really kissed many people in my life. There was that boy from my unfortunate summer and of course Lydia and a girl from the St. Mary’s choir and now Suzanne. Kissing her was different from kissing any of the rest of them—in a way that I can’t really describe. I remember that it was wetter but in a good way. She was wearing a very liquidy, red lipstick. And that’s about all I’ve got. It lasted maybe five seconds, ten tops.

Then she stopped and said, “I’m sorry. I can’t do this.” She reached down to straighten out the bottom of her suit-jacket, pulling herself back together as if she had just done something dirty. She smiled but for once it didn’t put me at ease. It was totally fake. It was the first fake thing I had ever seen her do and I hated her for it. “I just got caught up in the music,” she said. “In the dancing. You’re a very good dancer.”

“No, I’m not,” I said.

“Well, I think I should go,” she continued. Her voice was high and strained in a way I had never heard before. She didn’t sound like herself. She was feigning a lightness that she never really had. She was usually happy and I guess light-hearted but that’s different from being light. Being light is when your statements don’t really mean anything, when they’re just throw away lines. Suzanne’s words always had weight, even if she was talking about something as banal as the weather. Now she sounded like one of the church ladies from my childhood who would ask me where my mother was and then have to force a smile and some kind words after I had the

audacity to discomfort her with the truth—that I didn't know, but that she was probably high, wherever she was.

“You can wrap up, right?” Suzanne asked. “You know how it all works, pretty much. The next guy should be in soon anyway.”

Before I could answer, she moved toward the door but then turned back to look at me. She smiled again, genuinely this time, and walked back over. “You have some red around your lips,” she said, wiping it off with her thumb. I was angry that she was already ok. I was angry that she had been so fake with me, so blustery and dumb. That had been a betrayal of the image I had in my head, the cool, collected, Suzanne who never succumbed to the weaknesses that so many others did. But this was worse. This was a betrayal of me, of “us” as a viable concept. It meant I had not meant that much to her after all. I was a little blip on her radar, a footnote in a long and illustrious life. Did she know what she was doing to me? Why was she so fucking calm? Didn't it bother her what had just happened? Didn't she know that things could never be the same between us? Didn't she care?

She left and I stood there, listening to a chorus of “la, la, las,” feeling stupider than I had ever felt in my entire life.

The song ended and there was dead air but Suzanne was wrong, I didn't really know what to do, and I didn't really care either. I ran out the door and down the steps, catching her as she turned the corner out of the alley.

“Wait!”

She paused, as if wondering whether to keep walking or not. When she turned around, she looked annoyed. Just for a moment. Then she flashed another fake smile.

“Coraline...” she began.

I interrupted. “I love you.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I fucking do.”

“You don’t,” she repeated. “I know you think you do now but soon you’re going to meet someone new, someone more age appropriate. Maybe you’ll get back together with your girlfriend. I think it’s time for you to go home. Don’t you?”

“No,” I said. “I do not.”

“I’m sorry, I really am, but this,” she gestured to me then back to herself, “This can’t be a thing.”

It was raining. Again. I knew that that wasn’t my fault but I still hated it. It made me feel more like a character in one of those movies—a victim, this time. It made me feel like someone else, like not me. Like my sadness was just part of some role I was playing. Like it wasn’t real. But it was fucking real. I dared any onlookers, any members of my imaginary audience to think differently.

I didn’t have anything else to say. I started to cry, one of those horrible pouty cries, where your face gets red and you look like an oxygen-deprived frog—or, at least I do. I let my head hang down, trying to hide my face. My shoulders began to shake up and down, uncontrollably.

“I’m sorry,” said Suzanne, “I, I don’t know what to do.”

She put a hand on my shoulder, awkwardly.

“Why don’t you want me?” I asked. “What can I do? I’ll do it, Suzanne, I will.”

“There’s nothing *to* do,” she said. “I already have a girlfriend. I’m too old for you.”

I looked up at her. “I hate this.”

“I know,” Suzanne said

Then she kissed me on the forehead and walked away. After a few steps, she turned around and said, “Take care of yourself.”

I’ve been staying in at a youth home for the past week. At first, I felt kind of bad for taking up a bed there, for stealing it from someone who actually needed it—someone caught up in that cycle of poverty shit. My family seemed to fit more into the cycle of middle class daughters disappointing their elders. It didn’t seem like as worthy a cause, perhaps more trendy, though. I feel ok about it now, though, because I actually was in some fairly dire straits back there. After my rejection by Suzanne, I knew I could never go back to the station again. I ran back in just to get my stuff and then spent the night sleeping under a bench, to try to keep dry and also to hide—I was a little scared. That’s where some do-gooder found me the next morning and plucked me from obscurity, scoring me a very coveted spot at the “Charlestown Center for Street-Affiliated Youth.” They made it sound like a club, like being affiliated with the DAR but less prestigious.

It’s an ok place. I’ve been spending a lot of time in the computer room, watching shows on an old friend’s Netflix account. I think we’re supposed to use it for job and school stuff but no one has to know. We’re also probably not supposed to be taking up bandwidth by watching shows. I also probably shouldn’t still be using this girl’s password because she’s not actually a friend in the strict sense of the word or in any sense really. She’s just some girl I overheard in the St. Mary’s bathroom sharing her password with a friend; I wrote it on my thigh with a blue pen, while sitting on the toilet. I’m not particularly proud of it but I had heard that Netflix had a lot of Michelle Rodriguez movies—you know, the woman from the *Fast and Furious* movies, the one who finally admitted she likes pussy. Well, I’ve *always* admitted to liking her so it seemed like a

natural, reasonable thing to do—taking down the password I mean. It turns out there really weren't very many Michelle Rodriguez movies and the whole thing is pretty embarrassing to look back on because of how desperate it was, but it was before I met Lydia and I hadn't even kissed that girl from the choir yet and my life was really fucking dull. Anyway, I still remember the password somehow and I've been watching a lot of TV shows, like kind of all day. My favorites are the ones about dysfunctional families because they make me feel less lonely. I like watching these actual families, with more than two people in them and a more reasonable age distribution, but I also like that they aren't too happy. That would be unrealistic, if they were happy.

I've actually been thinking about going back home. I wrote my grandmother a letter, outlining the terms and conditions of my return: 1) She let me be with Lydia; 2) She at least grudgingly accept the situation and not try to change me; and 3) She let me keep going to St. Mary's—because I know they're fucking brainwashing me over there but I'm pretty far gone already. And that's where Lydia is anyway and that's where the choir is and I just feel some weird connection to the place. It's as surprising to me as anyone else. I'm not sure I belong anywhere else. I don't know.

Other than that, I've mostly been keeping to myself. Most of the kids here are pretty nice, some of them are fucking nuts, and a few of them are pretty annoying. I'm tempted to give those ones a hard time but I don't think it'd be right. I spent one night under a bench; who knows what's happened to them, you know?

I'm just cooling my heels here, as Grandmother would say. I'm sort of anxious to hear back from her but I'm not like dependent on it or anything. I'm pretty competent already and I'm

sure my unflagging devotion to the rosary has scored me some major points with God or Mary or someone who'll watch out for me. It'd be pretty fucking unfair if they didn't.