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editor's note

I have been an *Outbreath* staff member for four years, and an editor for three. And for this editor's note, I wanted to construct a few perfect paragraphs to accurately express my passion for this small, square magazine. After hours of writing and rewriting, I could only think how ironic it was that the editor of a literary magazine was incapable of finding the right words to express herself. That being said, my deadline approaches, and therefore I would like to conclude my second to last editor's note by saying:

Outbreath continues to exist, and thrive, because of the exceptional submissions from the Tufts community. The most difficult task the staff faces each semester is deciding which pieces to include. While previous editions have been composed of stories encompassing a broad range of ideas, we decided to more narrowly focus this issue on the themes of personal growth and developing self-awareness. We hope you find the content interesting, meaningful and thought provoking.

I am greatly appreciative of the effort and commitment to excellence demonstrated by everyone who worked on this semester's edition of *Outbreath*. It has been a pleasure and a privilege for me to work along side this very dedicated staff and I look forward to continuing our work together next semester.

Sara Kaplan
co-editor



photo by dorothy bandura

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a photo by dorothy bandura

her wooden foil

claire oppenheim

Tying the ragged patchwork quilt around her neck, the girl holds on to the iron bedpost and sails the tiny cot out to sea. Whipping about in the brine and salt, the Jolly Roger flies, its two bones crossed beneath a grinning white skull to warn those ships unfortunate enough to cross her path. A silver comb engraved with the initials of some long forgotten relative is tucked into the waistband of her paisley dress, a treasure discovered in the dusty attic of the fading country farmhouse. Posing on the cot, hand on her hip, the girl brandishes her comb, its teeth glinting treacherously in the hot Caribbean sun. Her fearsome vessel had just claimed its latest victim, an overturned trunk filled with toys and extra blankets. Its captain died violently in the battle at sea, and bits of stuffing stick out of the hole where his corduroy paw used to be. The bear stares at the chipped ceiling with his one remaining button eye.

Brushing tangled, dirty hair out of her face, she holds a grubby hand up to her eyes as she gazes across the ocean, a queen standing at her balcony, lording over her domain. As the bow of the ship crashes through the waves, ocean spray flecks her face, mingling with the beads of sweat forming at her temples. Spotting a black dot on the horizon, she grabs the telescope from her front pocket and squints into the distance. Sailing toward her with the wind at its back, the bloodstained masts of her enemy's ship looms before her. Its captain stands at the helm wearing a necklace of human teeth bleached white by the sun, his pet crow perched upon his shoulder, but she is not afraid. Jumping off the bed and landing with a loud thump on the deck, she grabs a candlestick off her dresser, wildly brandishing it in the air and shouting, "To the starboard oars or I'll make ye walk the plank . . . mark my words, ye'll be sleepin' with the sharks tonight." Her ragtag crew sits leaning against pillows, their painted eyes smudged with dirt and their miniature dresses tattered by the rough life at sea. As she sails on towards the fearsome ship, the captain barks at Anna from the bottom of the stairs.

"Anna, what are you doing?"

Saying nothing, Anna opens her door and shoots a reproachful look down at her mother. Skinny and sagging, her mother stands with her hands on her hips, her accusing brow perpetually frowning, making her face pinch and fold inward like a rotting tomato.

"Mrs. Prater will be here in half an hour. I want you dressed, and for God's sake, brush your hair." Untying her apron and viciously folding it over her arm, she tips her chin up, revealing wrinkles indecorously caked in makeup.

"This farm don't make me much money, but I still sacrifice to buy you nice things and here you are looking like a beggar."

She begins to walk back into the kitchen, but instead she turns around to hiss, “Show some respect for God’s sake.”

Anna looks at her mother’s recently dyed hair, thinking of the expensive beauty salon down in town. “Cause nobody’s gonna love you when your hair’s all grey,” the girl smirks, wrinkling her nose. But she keeps her mouth shut and is instead content to slam her door with extra emphasis, rattling the picture frames in the hallway. From inside her room, Anna flips her middle finger at the door and feels momentarily satisfied.

The girl looks out the window, but the shining sea is gone, replaced by the same tired blanket of green and yellow corn, its patchwork squares ragged and thinning. She selects from her closet a dark green dress that reminds her of a soldier’s uniform she had seen in a magazine. Looking at its row of brass buttons and Mandarin collar, she gives a salute to the mirror over her dresser. She has matching shoes, still in their box collecting dust in the back of the closet, but decides to leave on her mud-spattered work boots and a smudge of something brown on her cheek to play the part more fully. Shoving the silver comb into her dress pocket, she pauses at the door and takes a deep breath, readying herself for what lies ahead. She steps into the hallway and marches into battle.

The kitchen is unusually clean. A pile of neatly folded dishtowels sits by the sink covering the cracked counter tile. The old rusting toaster, its face like the cramped cages they sometimes kept their chickens in, hides in the corner behind a brand new radio her mother had bought a few months ago. Mrs. Prater visited that day and she and her mother had stood around for hours, admiring its dials and knobs, inanely chattering about the filth that was now broadcast over the air. How those radio hosts could sleep at night, knowing the smut they put into the minds of the god-fearing American people, she just did not know. Mrs. Prater could not agree more.

Not more than two steps into the kitchen, the girl is ambushed from the side by her mother who wields a wet comb and begins to furiously attack her daughter’s hair. Her mother’s critical gaze, so quick to spot a patched skirt or dirty collar, rests for a moment on her daughter’s grimy boots. Anna holds her breath, waiting for the reprimand, but this time it does not come.

“Sarah won’t be coming this time. She’s up at St. Johns, rehearsing with the choir.”

Anna does not respond.

“Maybe you could go with her sometime.”

Anna pictures Sarah, Mrs. Prater’s fleshy daughter, her bonnet tied tight around her fat face and her vapid, watery eyes staring blankly into space. Pink and sweaty, Anna imagines a pig in a choral robe, squealing to the droning of the organ. Sarah could not count past ten because she would run out of fingers, the girl thinks to herself with a smile.

“Right,” scoffs Anna under her breath, a bit louder than she had intended.

“What did you just say to me? You better watch your mouth,” her mother spits. Anna stares at the smudge of mascara on her cheek.

“If you can’t love God then he’s not gonna love you back come judgment day. And God don’t love ungrateful people.”

“So?”

But before her mother can begin her usual diatribe, the doorbell rings followed by a series of insistent knocks, and Anna runs to open it. Behind her back, she hears her mother hiss from the kitchen, “For God’s sake, can’t you just pretend to be normal?”

Mrs. Prater is a large woman whose ankles and wrists have slowly become swallowed in folds of fat. Anna once saw a dead Negro boy floating in the river down the road, whose clammy, waterlogged fingers reminded her of Mrs. Prater’s stubby hands. She oozes out of the tight sleeves and neck of her dress, pressing out against the dark blue sweat stains under her arms. Anna doubts that her brittle, hair-sprayed helmet would move even in a windstorm. As her mother serves the vegetables, Mrs. Prater looks down her nose at the considerably smaller potato on her plate, which cannot possibly feed her. She takes up an entire side of the square table by herself. Impatiently clearing her throat, she helps herself to three slices of bread from the wicker basket on the table, covering them in thick slabs of butter laid down like floor tiles.

The girl stares at the film forming on her gravy and tries to block out the dinner conversation that is slowly filling the room like a stifling, stale perfume.

“Did you hear ‘bout what happened to the Bakers?” says Mrs. Prater through a mouthful of chicken, which she gripped between her greasy fingers.

“The ones down by the junction?”

“Don’t know how they can stand the noise of those trains, howling by at ungodly hours of the morning.”

“S’not right.”

“Well, anyway, you know how Mr. Baker’s always been a boozier.”

“I never allow it in my house,” says her mother, her chin in the air, folding her hands primly in her lap.

Anna stabs one of her potatoes with extra vengeance at this lie, scraping her fork against the plate. She tries harder to ignore what she has now deemed a pointless conversation. She no longer listens to her mother.

“Well, he went out yesterday afternoon with Mr. Garson, you know that old man who lives down by the lake? They were hunting squirrels.”

“Vile sport.”

“And,” Mrs. Prater pauses for emphasis, “he shot himself in the foot,” she finishes, leaning back in her chair to wipe her mouth. Anna is surprised that the groaning chair does not break.

“Well truth be told, I’m glad he shot himself. It’s sad really, how some people just can’t

see themselves clearly. And God doesn't love drunkards," says her mother, who had spoken with God that morning.

"Well, I doubt he'd seen anything clearly for a good long while." Mrs. Prater leans back into the table and winks, to conclude the conversation.

Anna concentrates on practicing faces in her food, seducing her roast chicken with sultry eyes and coldly appraising her one remaining fingerling potato. She pushes the gravy and bits of vegetable around on her plate, forming a lumpy house in a broccoli forest. Hearing only bits and pieces of the conversation, the voices of Mrs. Prater and her mother begin to fade as they hum softly in the background.

"Hurt my ankle the other day stepping off my porch, twisted it up pretty bad," says Mrs. Prater.

Never to be outdone, her mother reaches across the table for the salt and gasps as she grabs her back. Reclining in her chair with a soft moan she looks sideways across the table at Mrs. Prater.

"What's wrong?"

"Well, we don't have any help 'round here like you got," she pauses to readjust the seat cushion with another pitiful moan. "And when I was weeding my vegetable garden I strained my back real bad. Doctor says my spine's twisted, might not ever right itself."

"That's cause you're old and ugly and weak," Anna thinks, watching her mother's maudlin drama. She clenches her jaw tight and picks at her wilted broccoli. She had weeded over half of that garden and knew that, ever the victim, her mother was delighted to have something to complain about. Martyrdom would suite her mother quite well.

"And he just up and left them all, can you believe that? Wife and daughter alone on that big farm. Some men." Mrs. Prater had moved on to another neighbor.

"Lord, don't I know it."

Anna immediately recognizes the beginnings of the story she has heard so many times before.

"Sunday morning, I'm in the kitchen fixing breakfast and I call him down to get some 'fore we leave for church. And he calls back down to me that he's got a cough or some nonsense like that, but being a faithful wife just like the good Lord says, I brought him some toast and told him to get his rest."

"You were too good for him," says Mrs. Prater, fanning herself with a napkin.

"So I come home that day, from church for God's sake, and I go to get the tomato seeds from the barn and there he is."

But her father had left in the dead of winter and there were no seeds in the barn.

Anna ran from the house listening to the screams of her mother. She heard a plate shatter against the door which slammed behind her. Her shoes still untied, she ran through the muddy grass, feeling the wet laces whip about her ankles like rat tails scurrying beneath her. It was early in the afternoon, but the sky was the same slate grey it had been that morning and it seemed as though the sun had never risen.

She reached the barn door and wrenched it open. Eight feet high, it swung outward on rusty hinges and she had to dig her heels into the dirt-packed ground to close it. Resting against the door, she closed her eyes and breathed in the familiar mulch smell, letting the cool darkness invade her body. Feeling her throat tightening, she knew she wanted to cry but she squeezed her eyes tight and held her breath.

“No, no, no, no, no,” she whispered. And the feeling went away.

She slid to the ground against the barn door and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes letting the coolness of her palms sink through her eyelids. She pressed harder and watched the sparks of color flash behind her eyes. But there in the stillness, interrupting her sanctuary, she heard a heavy masculine panting and the rustling of hay. Anna let her eyes adjust as she slowly walked towards the curious sounds. She took off her shoes, setting them aside on top of the table saw and slowly crept past the shelves and stalls of farming equipment. She let her toes feel every straw underfoot as she expertly shifted her weight, making no sound like she had practiced. She heard a moan, softer and higher. The heavy breathing got faster. The outline of the old tractor materialized in front of her and she touched the grimy metal. It smelled like gasoline. She heard the hay rustling faster and it sounded so loud in the dusty silence. Standing on tiptoe, she peered over the tractor’s huge, muddy wheels and saw her father’s bare back, arching and heaving like it did when he plowed the fields. Silently, she stood in the half darkness, watching.

“That lying, cheating, godless, son-of-a-bitch and you know what he says to me?” Her mother does not wait for an answer. “He says, ‘Well, I guess now you know and I guess now I can leave.’ Can you believe that?”

Her mother sent him away and he left without looking back. Anna watched him go through the curtains in her window. She watched him all the way out the gate and down the road until he disappeared around the bend and not once did he look back. From the kitchen she heard her mother crying and did not understand. Her mother had sent him away. Her mother wanted him gone.

“While I’m in God’s house, he’s laying with the devil.”

“Some men,” says Mrs. Prater.

“Amen,” says her mother.

“I don’t blame him for leavin’,” says Anna. The kitchen goes quiet as if all the air has been suddenly sucked from the room. In the tense silence she watches her mother’s face contort and purple with rage as she slowly stands up from the table. Anna is surprised to see a glistening wetness in her mother’s eyes, but she does not care. Knocking over her chair, she sprints through the swinging screen door, letting it crash behind her. Soggy tomatoes hanging heavily from their stems squish on the ground

as Anna runs through the vegetable garden, their pulpy innards leaking from the puckered flesh.

Peering between the branches of an old pine, Anna watches as Mrs. Prater leaves the house waving a hasty goodbye to her mother. She squeezes into her rusting 1931 Ford station wagon, rust stains boring holes in the door panel like third degree burns, and drives back down the road, stirring up clouds of dust in her hurried wake. Anna expects her mother to come out shouting for her any minute. She waits, but her mother does not come and so she walks deeper into the woods to find her next adventure.

Her feet carry her to a familiar spot, a small clearing where she has dragged old tires, a rusting oil drum, and various broken glass Mason jars in which she has collected acorns and interesting rocks. To one side stands an old chicken coop, its roof caved in at the center as if it has been stepped on and its walls have buckled inward. Roofing tiles and splintering cedar boards lie in piles about the defeated structure. It is fall and the forest floor glows warmly with oranges and browns as the last light filters through the trees. Dragging her feet, she kicks the leaves aside leaving twin furrows in the rotting debris. She jumps on branches, listening to their satisfactory snaps. She kicks a rotting stump, watching it crumble and writhe as hoards of ants scurry out of the decaying wood.

“You think you’re always right.” Anna throws a rock at a knot on an old twisted oak. “You think your life is so hard and can’t anybody else understand that.” She pictures her mother’s pointed face, frozen in a permanent frown, her lips pinched and bloodless. She throws another rock and it bounces off, hitting the flaking oil drum with a resonating clang. “And that’s why you’re alone,” Anna thinks.

“Daddy didn’t need you and neither do I,” she says out loud. Unearthing a stick from the mossy ground, she jumps up on a sagging tire and whirls around, holding her wooden foil en garde.

With a shrewd eye she stands alone in the clearing, scanning the rows upon rows of trees all rigidly upright, a forest of soldiers at attention. Their trunks are dappled in patches of light and nothing moves as if the scene has been painted. The air is still and the branches no longer whisper and crack. Anna walks around the clearing with her arm outstretched, sword in hand. She swings her sword in wide arcs to her left, and then to her right, listening to each swish as it breaks the silence. But the forest remains still. Sticking the sword in her waistband, she climbs a stack of tires and stands on her perch, listening to the silence. She knows they are hiding, waiting to ambush her. She will be ready when they come. Leaping from the tire she lands and spins around, viciously swiping the air, but the forest remains still.

Feeling a branch brush her shoulder, she turns and suddenly they are all around her. She feels their blades stinging her bare arms, leaving ragged scratches on her skin. She dodges and slashes; she is too quick for them all. Branches rake across her face but they do not faze her. She leaps off tires, swings from limbs and one by one they all fall to her furious blade, until there is only one left. Stepping out from behind a gnarled oak tree, he stands on the other side of the clearing. His sword glints in the fading twilight as he raises it up to meet her threatening glare.

She jabs to the left, to the right as leaves are ripped from the branches around her. Her hair whips about her face. Her skirts catch on branches and they tear as she spins about. A strong wind begins to blow and she feels it breathe down the back of her dress. It makes the leaves swell up, dancing about the clearing in billowing clouds. It blows the last clinging colors from the trees and they float down, following the motion of Anna's swinging blade. They whirl around the girl in swirls of red and orange. They whirl around her and the September light catches their warm hues. Pulled this way and that, spiraling about, the flocks of leaves fly dipping and weaving through the speckled light and all about her, the clearing shimmers. She ducks as he swings at her head and she falls, rolling on the ground, twigs clinging to her blouse, watching the leaves settle.

"You lying, cheating, godless son-of-a-bitch," she gasps. She watches her blood seep into the soft earth beneath her. She lies on the ground and listens to the leaves rustling mixed with her heavy breathing, which sounds so loud in the dusty silence.

Bracing against the stack of tires, she struggles to her feet, one arm hanging limp at her side. She turns to face the second onslaught, but the sky is getting darker and the night is settling in with the cool breeze now blowing about her, whistling through the trees. She turns back around, but he has left her, and so with one last look into the twilight, she heads home.

The moon has risen by the time she gets back to the house and yellow squares of light shine through the windows, checkering the ground. Dragging her toes in the dirt, eyes down, she makes her way through the backyard towards the house. She hates the way it smells, a combination of putrefying carrots and tomatoes, which grow in her mother's garden along the side of the house. As she approaches the side door, she reaches her hand out to the handle, raises her eyes and stops. Through the half-moon window in the door she can see into the kitchen, and sitting at the table is her mother. Head in her hands, she is hunched over next to an uneaten plate of food by Anna's empty chair. Her back shakes as she draws a ragged breath. Anna can see each bone in her mother's spine shake as they stick out against the blue checkering of her dress. Ducking back out of sight, Anna sits on the steps, pressing her ear to the door and listens to her mother cry. Goosebumps rise on her arms as she sits there, tracing a figure eight in the dirt with her boot. Listening to the muffled sobs, she feels her chest tighten.

"Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry," she whispers to herself, squeezing her eyes still tighter. She is stronger than her mother, she knows she is stronger.

A shiver runs down Anna's back as she watches the first stars in the cloudless night blinking furiously. Biting her lip, she watches her mother at the kitchen table. Staring down at her feet, she reaches for the doorknob.



a photo by dorothy bandura

Five minutes in and I'm lighting my second cigarette. I flick the match into the parking lot, and then tilt my head back to let a huge drag billow from my throat. Smoke signals. *Save our souls.*

"You're an idiot," Elaina says. "Every drag's a minute of your life." I guess she has a right to be so righteously opposed to smoking. Her father died from it at forty-four. "When did you start this anyway? You didn't smoke a few months ago."

"I picked it up at school."

"It'll kill you."

"Yeah, well, so will a lot of things. And it's not like I'm smoking two packs a day, that's why it killed your father. They're lights, anyway."

"You guys were just in the news," Marcus says, replacing his coffee cup on the wobbly metal table.

I have known Marcus for five minutes, and only through the distorting fumes of my chain-smoked rage. I hate him. He's the prim, sober type Elaina and I used to make fun of while we walked the hallways between classes. Far worse than the mythologized jock who physically and/or mentally tormented every un-athletic, un-ego-obsessed male in high school. At least you knew those guys were destined for some rude realization. But the Marcus-type had this certain assurance, an abrasive, threatening confidence about how they—*instead* of you, *in place* of you—were destined for success, prosperity, the good-life. Most distressing of all, they were usually right.

"Who's in the news now?" I ask him.

"You 'light' smokers. You won a class action lawsuit. Two-hundred billion dollars for Big Tobacco's 'campaign of deception,' advertising cigarettes as 'light' and all."

When he says "campaign of deception," he makes bunny ears on both hands and twitches them, once up and down for each syllable. A junior now, at BU with Elaina, he majors in Political Science and already has his future laid out—BU Law as a graduate student, internship and then employment at his uncle's Boston-based firm, then (I speculate) an excess of golf and Miller-Lite, a ballooning gut and a disenchanting wife, a tenuous marriage and intolerable kids.

"You won't see a penny though," he continues, "the corporations have appealed."

"Good. I hope they win. What smoker doesn't know it's bad for them? They know the risks. It's slow suicide. It's suicide 'light.'"

"I guess so, but—"

"Can we stop?" Elaina interrupts.

“Sorry babe,” Marcus says, smiling apologetically. “What should we talk about?”

“I don’t know. Anything. The weather.”

“Alright: the weather. I can tell you one thing, it’s nothing like California.”

This is where he’s from. And from the way he speaks of his native coast, the way he wears his fresh-pressed salmon-colored polo and leather flip-flops in November, he seems yearning to be back there. But, already entrenched in the militant, mercenary mindset of the lawyer he will surely become, he refused to pay the airfare to return home to spend the few days of Thanksgiving break with his family. Instead, he wheedled Elaina into inviting him to spend the holidays with *her* family, into free room and board and a goddamned gorgeous feast—into my ex-girlfriends pants by the end of the night.

“Yes, well, that makes sense,” I inform him. “This is Massachusetts.”

Now Elaina, exasperated: “Can you stop being such an asshole, Jacob?”

“Me? *Me?* An asshole?”

Marcus stands abruptly, his chair spilling back behind him. “I’m going to find the bathroom.”

Disappointingly, he seems more fed-up than uneasy.

Before he can take a step I start in again. “I’m an asshole!?! You’re the one who brought this schmuck with you.”

“Jacob—what happened to you? You’ve got this whole new cocky attitude since college started. And you smoke! You’ve changed completely.”

“So have you.”

She sighs and shakes her head, the way she does when her mother acts “unjust.”

“You should have told me, that’s all,” I say.

“It’s not the end of the world, Jacob. It was bound to happen.”

“That’s not what you said three months ago. Three months ago you said, and I quote—” (here I make the little bunny ears Marcus was so fond of, and I aim them at him too) “—you said, ‘it’s a break, not a break up.’”

“It is what it is,” she declares, and then hammers down her coffee cup on the table with the stiff authority of a judge with his gavel. A few droplets escape from the little sip-hole in the cup-cover. They splatter onto her wrist. Marcus marches away. She looks after him. I go for another cigarette. I tug away at it while we share a moment of tense, carcinogenic silence.

She’s starting to shiver now, dressed like a retard. This tight little t-shirt to show off her tits and her belly. No, that’s unfair. No belly. She’s still thin. Even while sitting her hipbones press out against her skin. I think, not long ago my lips were there. And there. And hidden in her jeans there’s a spot that for whatever reason I always think about when I am thinking about her. Right where her pubes stop growing there’s a row of freckles, a little line-up of dots. It used to amaze me, how it was there every time. I used to kiss it. But this time when I think of it all I see is Marcus’s gangly tongue coating it in saliva.

I suck down the last half of my cigarette. I imagine Marcus, in the bathroom by now. I hope he slips in his own piss and shatters his skull on the sticky, shitty rim of the toilet.

“Have you fucked him?” I ask.

“Stop, Jacob.”

“No. Tell.”

“Who have *you* fucked Jacob? What about you, huh? Try and tell me you haven’t been chasing pussy up at school. Come on, don’t lie.”

Honestly, I hadn’t. I couldn’t. At a party once, dancing with an unfairly drunk girl, I leaned over and kissed her. It tasted rotten—a mix of bile and rum—so I pushed away. Besides that, the closest I’d gotten to a girl was when—unable to sleep on a pitifully lonesome night—I went into the shower stall and jerked off. Thinking of Elaina of course.

“So what if I have?” I ask her.

“How many?”

“I can’t count.”

“Fine. Give me a name. Just one.”

I don’t take my eyes off of her. I think. But can’t. The word, the name, spills out from my mouth effortlessly. Like smoke. “Autumn.”

“And have you fucked Autumn?”

Again, it just tumbles out. “Of course! After the first date. Twice. She’s indescribable. Best sex I’ve ever had.”

Elaina looks into her lap and fiddles aimlessly with the handles of her purse. A tear rolls down her cheek and plops onto her jeans. It soaks in, stains, leaves a little dark spot.

* * *

Autumn. My favorite season. Ever since an elementary school exercise in which I was forced to write the word in cursive thirty times over, I’ve loved it. Somehow, I’m simply enamored by the motion of my hand while laying out the word’s landscape. The sharp peaks of the capital A and the tiny t. The two u’s scoops. There is something positively warming about the neighborly collaboration of the t and the u, the m and the n. And the n’s enigmatic silence, safe behind its cohort.

I am meeting Elaina and Marc, her new boyfriend. For two months they’ve dated; I’ve known for one. They pull up to Starbucks a little late and park. As soon as Marc steps out of the car—I can’t help it—I begin scrutinizing his outfit, drawing conclusions about his character from the tear in the knee of his jeans (too large to be fashionable; rather, it’s lethargy or apathy or poverty), his ratty hooded sweatshirt with the hood half-up, clutching to the lift in the back of his head (an illustration, perhaps, of the term

hoodlum), and the tattoo around his wrist, a generic vegetal entanglement that's too large to hide beneath his watchband (no doubt one of his many unoriginal and regrettable decisions).

Elaina is aglow. She's wearing what might be one of Marc's sweatshirts. Maybe to cloak the new plumpness that fills out her jeans. The notorious freshman-fifteen, I wonder? Overall, she appears less appealing since the last time I saw her. That was only three months ago—and honestly, the differences are minor, but it is the details here that matter.

As I said, she is glowing. Her face looks close to pain, strained from the smile that tests the limits of her skin's elasticity the whole walk towards me. We embrace. I catch a whiff of her smell. Her old perfume, a pink one with a French name that comes in a clear glass bottle shaped like a female torso, like the Venus de Milo. A gold spray-top stood in for the head. She used to spray it twice on either side of her neck, then once on each wrist, and finally one more spritz into the air. While she pranced through the globs of scent that hung in wait, she rubbed her dampened wrists against her shoulders and slowly, seductively, down her shirt to her waist. Her waist—my favorite part of her body, and her most sensitive region. Tucked away from sight, not far from her prominent pelvic bones, lay an enchanting little collection of freckles. Similar sets of speckles populated her body, but this quartet stood out. They seemed united, involved in some organic alignment. A magical, anatomical harmony.

"You drink tea now?" I ask her when we finally sit down, a nice table outside, more private than the raucous, cluttered interior.

"Yep. Gave up coffee."

"Not me," says Marc before he takes a giant swig. Beneath a splotchy film of stubble I see the motion of his Adam's apple. *Glug glug glug*. Like a car, which he now tells me he works on in his free time. "Car's are my passion. The stuff I'm doing in school is alright, and I'm going to finish up, but I just know it's not for me. Not even the engineering courses. I just don't need all that." After college, he plans to work for his uncle, a mechanic who migrated to Boston from the West Coast a decade ago to open up his own garage.

"You should see him," Elaina says, proud. "Mom's Toyota was making this clinking sound, and she just imitated it for him, and he knew what it was. He told us and took us out to the car and fixed it up with just a little..." She puts her hands in the air and starts fidgeting. She's gripping the invisible handle of the elusively named tool.

"It's called a wrench, baby," Marc says.

They laugh together.

"Thank the lord something like that happened," he goes on. "I was trying to figure out some way to make myself liked. I *am* crashing Thanksgiving and all."

"Well, I'm glad it worked out," I add, pushing out a smile.

We sit silent for a moment. I watch Marc as he takes in the scenery. We're at a Starbucks in a tiny

shopping plaza just off the main road, nothing special. He could find something identical in California, where his entire family (sans uncle) originate and still live. But the leaves have all turned, a New England novelty. The trees wear their flashy outfits, some eager ones, having already disrobed, leaving their brilliant debris scattered in the streets. During our little moment of peace a few leaves escape their branches, hang airborne and sweep dramatically downward. Marc's eyes follow. He breathes hugely. Sniffs hunger.

"You have a light?" Marc asks me. "Or some matches?"

I'm alarmed by the question. Light and matches and fire and leaves all merge in my head in a swift and bright and fierce muddle. "No, sorry."

"Alright, I'm going to go find some." He stands. "I need a smoke."

He leaves.

As soon as he's out of earshot, Elaina starts. "I know I know. He's a smoker. He's not my type. I know what we said before we left. But it's just—well you and I didn't talk for a while and it's just—"

"—Hey, hey," I stop her. "Don't worry. Things change."

She smiles, the smile she used to give to teachers and probably now professors, to her mother's guests and even my own parents the first few times she met them.

"I shouldn't have brought him," she laments. "*I shouldn't have.*"

"Elaina," I say. "You like him, right? You enjoy being around him?"

She bounces her head side-to-side, debating. "Mostly."

"Does he make you laugh? Smile?"

Then her smile shifts, becomes the one she can neither hide nor summon—the real one. And she giggles, about to topple into laughter should I give her the softest nudge.

"That's all that matters then," I tell her.

"Not always," she says, looking down into her lap.

* * *

Or, this time she'll come alone. Still late. Despite the weather—the November cold that slaps until it burns—she wears a snug t-shirt that fails to meet her jeans. Above them shows a thin band of skin, her hips jutting out at either edge. They look like fleshy parentheses, her body being the interruption squeezed between.

We embrace. Before I get a chance to utter a greeting, she gives me an arresting stare. "Are you set on coffee?" she asks, "or can we go somewhere else?" Her house, she offers. Or mine. "We can put down the seats in the back of the car like we used to." She has a wily little smile on I've never seen before. Without taking any sort of precautionary glance, she tugs at one of my belt loops and drives her hand into my pants.

More to get out of public than anything else, I agree. Like I had agreed to coffee in the first place mostly to escape the traffic of my house, uncles and aunts and grandmothers and siblings all home for Thanksgiving.

I feel nothing. Just the mellow, somber gratification of returning to an old habit to find it's still there. It's amazing, the hands. How once they learn—to write a word or hold a body's shapes and weights—they never forget. Yet as her pants come off I do feel something, I nearly topple over I'm shuddering so violently. Braced against the frilly border of her underwear is her little bundle of freckles. They hit me, each one, right in the pit at the base of my sternum, each with the concentrated rampage of a bullet. I knew it was there, yet somehow didn't expect it. This aggressiveness is so unlike her, I think maybe it isn't her at all. But there it is: my little cinnamon constellation, shining against a milky sky.

And now I do topple over. She hurls me onto my back, my pants and briefs off before the bed springs can stop creaking beneath me. And she tries, for two dragging, agonized minutes to get me aroused.

A blush of worry blooms on her face. "What's the matter?" she asks.

I am vindicated, but horrified by and apologetic for my failure. Or hers. "I'm not sure," I tell her.

* * *

Another go, just to see:

She hasn't shown yet. I decide to buy a coffee even if I have no one to drink it with. I order, and while the barista measures out my "grande drip," I look around. At the parking lot first, curiously; then the tables to both my sides, hopefully; finally the line gathering behind me, desperately. At one of the tables a girl is sitting, alone, reading *The Times* and sipping some whipped-creamed slushy thing through a thin green straw.

"Sir." It's the barista with my coffee. "—Sir, can you please move on?" He juts his head as politely as possible to the irritated couple waiting to order behind me.

"Sure," I say, accepting my coffee.

I move on, over to the girl. I rest my hand on the back of the empty chair across from her, waiting for a moment until she looks up. "Mind if I join you?" I ask.



a photo by unaza khan



a photo by amanda brower

brook water

elizabeth kulik

Caroline curled her toes around a greenish stone at the bottom of the brook. The water was waist-deep and cool against her naked skin. She put a small hand on a mossy boulder to steady herself as she looked over at Emmy. Emmy was almost a year older than Caroline and had just had a sixth birthday party, with a unicorn cake and toy puppies in the goody-bags. Caroline watched as Emmy dipped her face into the water and came up sputtering and shrieking, with her curly hair matted over her eyes. It was almost like she was bobbing for apples at Halloween, but no one would eat the things in the brook water: minnows, tadpoles, skeeterbugs and boatmen. Caroline uncurled her toes and slipped down into the water up to her neck. She tilted her head back and looked up at the pine trees that shadowed the water on both sides.

A few days later, the girls were back at the brook. They had carried the baby ducks down from Emmy's shed with them. The ducks floated happily on top of the water. Emmy pointed and wrinkled her nose when one of them made a mess on Caroline's arm, but it washed right off. When it was time to go home, the girls walked backwards and the ducklings followed them in a little row, bobbing their heads and shaking the water from their downy feathers. One duckling, all black with an orange bill, turned around and walked back toward the water. Caroline followed him for a few steps and then picked him up with both hands. When she turned around, Emmy had already rounded the bend, and she had to hurry to catch up.

Later, Caroline and Emmy were ponies grazing in the garden. Emmy's mother pulled carrots from the ground and wiped them on her old workshirt, smiling. She offered them to the ponies and they tasted like clean, fresh dirt. Emmy galloped to the tiny playhouse with real windows that her father had built in the woods and Caroline followed her inside, where they became sisters living in a first apartment, eating bark sandwiches and pine needle spaghetti. There was only one plastic teacup in the playhouse, so Emmy gave Caroline a broken seashell to use instead.

Sitting on the plank bridge spanning the thinnest part of the brook, Emmy told Caroline about the bear that chased her home through the woods one day. It was hard to tell whether or not her story was true, but Emmy said she could prove it because her dad saw the bear himself. Emmy said the bear's paw prints were as big as supper plates.

“Can I sit here?” Caroline stood in the narrow aisle.

“Hey, yeah. Sure.” Emmy slid her backpack onto her lap as the school bus hissed and lurched forward.

“So how was your summer? I heard you worked at Red Fox Stables.”

“Yeah, I mucked the stalls so I could ride for free.” Emmy paused and pushed a strand of pink hair out of her eyes. “It was good to be outside a lot. I’d rather that than high school.”

Caroline nodded and self-consciously rubbed off some lipgloss. She tried to look out the window but it was fogged up. Some middle schoolers across the aisle doodled hearts and suns on the glass.

Emmy pulled a pair of headphones from her bag and slipped them on. Caroline could hear the hard beat of the music but couldn’t make out the tune. She traced the creases in the fake leather seat with her forefinger.

Under Emmy’s porch was a land of empty flowerpots. The girls crawled quietly between stacks of them. Caroline glanced up and hoped that they wouldn’t come across any spiders. When they had crawled all the way around to the front of the house, they sat still and peered through the diamond-shaped gaps in the trellis. They growled at Emmy’s dad when he walked by and he gave a little girl’s shriek, slapping a palm to the side of his face. He fell to his knees in shock, almost dropping his bucket of brown eggs, before peering through the diamonds of the trellis and winking.

Apart from the brook there was a pond, big enough to skate on in winter but not too deep. Caroline and Emmy speared clumps of frog eggs with sticks, picking the jellied mess up out of the water and watching it splash back in. Dark green salamanders swam around in the patches of underwater plants. The girls caught some, then took off their wet sneakers and made them into salamander cages. The salamanders weren’t interested in eating either carrots or duck food. Emmy announced that they were not worth keeping and shook the sneakers out over the water. Caroline watched her salamanders wiggle their way to the bottom of the pond.

Caroline pushed through the double doors and entered the sea of ninth-graders who were chattering eagerly, slamming lockers, and, in some cases, making out. She found her circle of friends and they took their bagged lunches to a coveted table by the door of the cafeteria. They discussed the upcoming weekend, the girls’ soccer game, and the fact that Mrs. Zimki had worn an entirely Halloween-themed outfit to school, replete with orange eyeshadow.

As Caroline got up to throw away her empty Ziploc baggies, she nearly collided with Emmy, who ducked swiftly out of the way.

“Oh my god, I’m sorry.” Caroline frowned. Emmy flashed a quick smile and shrugged

one shoulder. Caroline opened her mouth to speak, but instead looked down and brushed crumbs from her designer jeans. Emmy pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her hair, then turned and sauntered off toward the door. Caroline looked up and watched her until she remembered that she was still holding her trash.

During a week when fierce thunderstorms cooled the summer afternoons, Caroline and Emmy stayed inside, on the sun porch. Raindrops pummeled the glass walls and ceiling and filled the room with noise. The girls gave themselves kitten names and curled up on cushions. They lapped milk from a saucer on the floor and mewed at Emmy's mother's feet, while old Ferguson, the cat, watched with one green eye. Emmy said that Ferguson was eighty-four, in people years.

Caroline stayed past suppertime that day, so Emmy's mother made the girls toast with butter and jam. She had long red hair and freckles on her arms. After supper, the three of them went to the shed to collect the brown duck eggs. Emmy wanted to do it herself. She told Caroline to wait at the gate to the pen, but Emmy's mother said that that was silly and led Caroline to one of the nests. Caroline cupped an egg in her hands. It was small and warm.

In the summer after ninth grade, Caroline traveled through Europe on a youth trip. She was gone for three weeks and on the night she came home, she talked happily with her parents for hours about seeing Michelangelo's David, eating fish and chips and baguettes and cheese, sitting in stone cathedrals, and riding the Tube. When she needed to catch her breath, she asked her mother if she had missed anything while away.

"Well." Her mother paused and took off her glasses, folding them in her lap. "Emmy's mother died. She was in an accident on Route 8." Caroline's hand went to her mouth and her body stiffened. She looked from her mother's downcast eyes to her father, who said nothing but retrieved the obituary, clipped from the newspaper, and laid it on the arm of Caroline's chair.

"It was a private burial, they had it right away," said Caroline's mother. She stood up and placed her hand on Caroline's shoulder. "We didn't want to upset you. It's been so long, anyway, since you saw her."

Caroline and Emmy sat indian-style on the ground, surrounded by raspberry bushes. Their fingers and clothes were stained reddish-purple and they had filled an old, cracked flowerpot with berries. The golden light from the sun was filtering in through the prickles. It was almost dusk, and Emmy and

Caroline could hear their mothers calling them from the back porch.

Emmy whispered that if they were quiet, they could stay in the raspberry patch forever, eating the berries and drinking rainwater. Caroline pulled a berry from the flowerpot and examined it. She saw a small black beetle crawling around inside and quickly tossed the berry into the dirt. She watched Emmy bite her lip in concentration as they listened to their mothers' faraway voices. The brook gurgled pleasantly in the darkening woods and it seemed odd that the water kept running even after dark, when no one was there to play in it.

"I'm going for a ride," Caroline shouted through the window to her mother, a week after her return from Europe. She wheeled her bike out of the garage and brushed the dust and dirt off the seat with her palm. The gears squeaked as she began to pedal down the driveway.

Caroline hadn't been to Emmy's house in six years, but the dirt road that led to it was still familiar. She stopped and lay down her bike just short of the driveway, suddenly panicking. She and Emmy hadn't sat together on the bus after that first day. Since then, a friend had been giving Caroline rides to school. She was thinking about turning around when she saw a white duck waddling down the driveway toward her.

"C'mere, you," she said, and she picked him up. Pebbles crunched underfoot as she neared the house. She put the duck inside the duck pen and swung closed the unlatched gate. When she turned around, she could see a figure in the vegetable garden.

Emmy looked up as Caroline approached. She was sitting, cross-legged, in between the carrots and the snap peas.

"Hi," said Caroline. She stopped walking and focused on scratching an imaginary mosquito bite.

"Hi." Emmy motioned toward the ground and Caroline sat down in the dirt so that they were side-by-side. She looked at the pine trees to one side of the garden, and at the house in front of them. She could hear the brook.

The girls sat in silence for a long time. Finally, Emmy looked up at the sky and squinted.

"Why did you come here?" she asked, softly. There was silence for another moment, and then Emmy looked at Caroline.

Caroline looked down and ran a finger over a tiny pea plant, its leaves only partly unfurled.

Emmy pulled two small carrots from the ground. She wiped them on her shirt and handed one to Caroline. She closed her fingers around the other and squeezed her eyes shut. Her chest rose and fell with deep breaths, but otherwise she was still.

Caroline, unsure of what to do, took a bite of her carrot. It tasted like clean, fresh dirt.



a photo by maya shoham



a photo by anonymous

surf wax

jenna nissan

We pulled away from home and I had the sudden sensation that it was the first time I'd really left in years. Wes was driving. The tangled strands of his hair rode the wind like surfers as he tilted his head back to sing with the radio. I was riding shotgun. Behind me, Evan held my gaze in the side-view mirror as his hand glided through the wind. He drew his hand back in the car and we looped our fingers together, as if by habit. I'd only once been to the ocean, but if you had asked me in that moment, I would have sworn we could ride those waves.

"Where are we going, anyway, Wes?" I asked, elbowing him gently to get his attention. He was bellowing out "It Must Have Been Love" at the top of his lungs, and Evan had joined in, pounding on the back of my seat as he sung joyously. I wondered for a moment why they knew it better than I did.

"For a ride, my lady, for a ride." Wes winked at me, flashing a crazy crooked-toothed grin. His hair hung past his shoulders now, slightly covering the "G" on his tie-dye Grateful Dead T-shirt. He had been trying at dreadlocks for months, though I was sure he was using it as an excuse not to shower. The grease made the top of his head shine in the fading sunlight.

I caught my reflection in the side-view mirror as I turned back toward the window. Everything on me matched, from my pale lipstick to the color of my shirt. I looked out of place sitting between them. I tugged at my neat ponytail and let my hair fall down to my shoulders, as if this would help.

The engine faltered as we moved uphill, and Wes grinned as he gave it more gas. "There ya go, girl," he soothed the car. "Take it easy." The AMC Eagle station wagon was ancient. Wes had worked for a mechanic for three years running, and the car had been given to him as a sort of favor, provided he was willing to fix it up. As far as I knew, he'd been working on the engine and the body for months, and he was finally ready to take it for a spin. Wes and Evan were old friends, and the three of us always had a good time together, but Wes wasn't someone we normally spent our weekends with. For whatever reason, he had insisted that Evan and I be the ones to ride with him the first time he took his car out on the road. I wasn't one to decline a good offer. It was rare that any of us even escaped the town.

For a long time, no one in the car spoke. We kept our faces to the wind. The radio kept blasting all forms of country, and we tapped our fingers gently on the side of the car, singing loudly to the songs we knew. Soon I didn't even recognize our surroundings. We did seventy down the long roads through cows and pastureland that stretched toward the horizon. In inland North Carolina, that was usually all you saw for miles. We could have driven right on through to the sky and passed not so much as a slab of concrete.

It wasn't until I noticed the sun sliding down into the west that I remembered I still didn't know where we were going. "Wes," I asked again. "Where are we headed?"

"You just sit back and don't worry about a thing, you hear me? I promise it'll be worth it. Always is." Wes had this smooth way of talking. His voice just floated over your nerves and soothed them in a deep baritone. A few years ago, he helped this lost little boy in a department store find his mom, and the boy clung to him and held his hand like Wes was his own father. It was one of the most amazing things I've ever seen. He just had that way about him.

"All right," I sighed. "I'm putting my trust in you."

"Oh, come on now, Jimmy, you can always put your trust in me," he replied with an innocent grin. Wes was big on nicknames. He'd been calling me Jimmy for quite some time now—Jaime had become James, James became Jimmy. It just sort of stuck.

"Uh-oh, Jaim," Evan laughed. "We're in for it." He squeezed my hand tighter and my eyes met his in the side-view mirror. It was a comfortable gaze we'd shared for more than two years. I could practically tell his thoughts just by his eyes. Some people found that overbearing. I found it intimate.

Wes suddenly let out a loud, crow-like scream. I started in surprise and looked at him questioningly. He turned to me crazy-eyed and laughed. "I bet no one could hear me for miles!" He threw his head back, as if this realization freed him, and he screamed again, this time with his head out the window into the wind. His voice resonated deep within his throat and was captured by the wind and swallowed whole. He drew his head back into the car and turned to us, exhilarated. "Is this the farthest you've ever been from home?"

Evan answered first. "Not really. My mom took me up to New York once, to stay with my grandparents for a few months right after my dad passed away. But that's the only time I've been out of state."

Wes nodded, closing his eyes as if he were letting the words soak into his skin like rain. I would have told him to keep his eyes on the road, but I knew it didn't matter. It had been minutes since we'd even passed another car. He opened his eyes after a moment and asked, "What about you, Jimmy? Is this the farthest you've been?"

Last summer, my parents had taken me on a two-week long tour visiting colleges. We'd been through Massachusetts, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and most of the states on the East Coast. The ride had been spent listening to my father talk about how it was all up to me—to get an education, to make something of myself, to go on and succeed, and finally give meaning to the family name. I'd been privileged with opportunity and to waste it would be a disgrace. "Yes," I answered, without hesitating. "It's the farthest I've been."

"Well, let me tell you something, little lovebirds, this here car can take us as far as we want to go. I could drive 'til my gas tank was empty, and then we could get out and just keep walking, and not stop 'til we felt like it. You know? We could just go and go and go—." There was a loud pop

from somewhere at the front of the car and then a persistent sputtering. Wes jerked the wheel, and we swerved sharply off the side of the road, where the car coasted through the high grasses before coming to a slow, crawling stop. We were silent, staring at the hood, which was covered by a blanket of steam. It was another moment before our instincts kicked in, and we clambered out of the car in a mad rush.

Wes moved to the front of the car and threw up the hood, waving his hands and coughing as smoke rose from inside. Evan peered over his shoulder, helping to prop up the hood, while I stood farther back, gaping at the impossible tangle of wires and piping and steel. Wes waited a minute for the engine to cool and then he put his hands in to check around. “The engine’s blown,” he concluded, almost laughing. He wasn’t even angry. In all the years I’d known Wes, there was only one time I’d seen him angry. About a year after Evan’s dad drank himself to death, some kid told Evan his dad was a lowlife alcoholic and a wife-beater. We were ten at the time. Wes popped him right in the jaw. No one ever breathed a word about Evan’s dad again after that.

“It’s blown?” Evan asked. He brought his hand to his forehead in distress, gazing at the empty fields for a sign of life. “Christ. We’re in the middle of nowhere.”

“What are we going to do?” I asked, slightly panicked. I hadn’t even told my parents that we were leaving town. I’d said we were just going out for pizza and a movie. “Is there any way you can fix it?”

Wes thought for a moment, fumbling around in the hood and surveying the engine. “I’m afraid not, Jimmy. I knew the engine wasn’t going to last me long. But I thought it would at least last us one good ride. All we can do now is sit and wait.”

“Wait for what?” Evan asked.

“Another car, Ev,” Wes replied, leaning against the side of the broken down station wagon. “I’d suggest we all get comfortable.”

I felt my stomach drop as I imagined the likelihood of another car passing by on its way back to Greenville. Evan slung his arm around my waist gently. “It’s okay, Jaim. My mom will cover for us if you need her to. We won’t tell your parents.”

Wes threw his long, scraggly hair behind his shoulders and crawled onto the roof of the car. “Settle down, Jimmy. Look at it this way—we’ve got ourselves a great view of the sunset out here. Another car will pass by. Until then, we can just kick back and enjoy.”

Evan smiled at me weakly, motioning towards the roof. “He’s right. Come on. We’ll just have to wait a little while.” He led me to the roof of the car, helped me climb up, and then he sat down next to me. I sat between them, each with an arm around my shoulder. Wes was humming one of the country songs we’d been listening to. Evan was staring a long ways off, lost somewhere along the horizon. He got this look to him sometimes, like he just went some place else, and I couldn’t reach him. Usually, if I waited until he was ready, he’d start talking. There were all these memories he blocked out about his

dad from when he was a kid, and lately they'd just started coming back to him. He'd never talk about it with his mom. It was too much for her to relive.

His voice came hesitantly from beside me. "Did you hear back from any schools today, Jaim?" I bit my bottom lip. "Yeah," I said. "Georgetown said yes. And Brown. And Amherst, last week."

"And Harvard?"

I hesitated. "Yeah. Them too."

Wes whistled in admiration. "So where are you going to go, little lady? The big H?"

I was lost somewhere in the sunset. The sky was turning all shades of red and orange, like a canvas dashed with watercolor. The colors were smeared by the scattered clouds, and the light intensified and then faded as the sun moved in and out of the treetops in the distance.

I didn't want to go to any of them. I wanted to get out, believe me. But when I left, I wanted it to be for myself. I'd always feared that I would become one of those people who wake up at age fifty and realize they've never lived. I was eighteen. It was time to start living. "I don't know," I answered. "I really don't know where I'm going to go."

Evan's fingers closed gently over mine. I didn't have to explain to him. He already knew. And though I didn't realize it then, Wes did too. For a long time, none of us spoke. We lay back on the roof of the car and stared into the subtle pink hues flowing overhead, as if they would tell us our future. It was quiet all around. There were crickets in the field, orchestrating the sunset, and they were better music than any of the country we'd heard on the radio. We watched as the colors dimmed and the sun settled behind the trees. Darkness washed over us. Evan leaned over and kissed my forehead.

Suddenly, headlights flashed in the distance, and we could hear the faithful sound of an engine as a car came speeding toward us. We all sat up and looked at each other in a kind of disbelief. I held my breath as the car approached, not knowing whether to feel relief or disappointment. Wes hopped off the roof of the station wagon as the blue pick-up truck approached. He held his thumb over the road. The truck came to a slow stop, and the window rolled down. A man wearing a cowboy hat and a flannel shirt leaned toward Wes and flashed a wide, jovial smile. "Well, hello there," the man said with a grin. "You kids run into some car trouble?"

Wes rested his elbows on the open window and nodded. "Blew the engine. It was the Eagle's last flight on the road. Good car, you know. Took us all the way out here."

"Really? That's a damn shame. Where are you kids from?"

"Greenville," Wes answered. He glanced back at Evan and me. We were still sitting on the roof. "Where are you headed?"

"I'm on my way up to Raleigh. Meeting some friends for a night in the big city. I'd take you on back to Greenville, but that'd make me a few hours late by the time I got there and back, ya know?"

Wes nodded. "Of course."

Evan squeezed my hand. "Do you wanna go?" he whispered. His voice was so quiet that for a moment I thought I had imagined it.

I felt my heart quicken, and I looked frantically from Wes to Evan to the pick-up truck.

"I'll go if you do," Evan confessed beside me. For the first time, I realized he was as eager to escape as I was.

I didn't speak. I took a deep breath and hopped off the roof of the car, then walked over and stood next to Wes. Evan joined me, and the three of us stood in front of the truck, staring at one another. Wes looked to the man in the truck. "You think you could take us with you?" he asked, finally. The question had been waiting on our lips maybe for our whole lives.

"Sure thing," the man answered. "You can call your parents when we get up to Raleigh."

"Yeah," Wes answered, glancing at us. "Sure." He opened the door and climbed into the seat next to the driver. Evan and I stood outside for another moment, looking to each other uncertainly. Then Evan slid in next to Wes, and I took a deep breath and climbed onto Evan's lap. The car door closed with a slam, and we moved off down the road.

Wes was already humming with the radio. I was staring straight ahead. "Wes," I said. "Where were you taking us, anyway?"

"Doesn't matter, Jimmy," he answered.

"Come on, just tell me," I said.

He turned to me with that wild look in his eyes, long greasy strands of hair sticking to his forehead. "You're always making plans for something, aren't you?" he asked with a light laugh. "You don't always have to know where you're going, see. You just get out there and trust it, and you'll end up in the right place, sooner or later."

I turned my eyes back towards the road and held Evan's hand tighter. He rolled the window down and brought my hand out with his, our fingers interlocked. I felt the breeze rush through our palms, and our hands flew backwards. Our eyes locked. And then we just rode the wind.



a photo by dorothy bandura

confessions

louise place

Angular elbows and raw knees jutting out from under her over-stretched sweatshirt, Allie struggled to fall asleep inside the abandoned bulldozer. Long ago, the mustard-yellow fossil had grudgingly accepted its fate to rot into the earth. Almost all of the levers had snapped off and the door clung desperately to the apparatus by one rusty hinge, like a nagging ex-girlfriend. The fur and pines snuck up on tip-toe, encroached upon her and whispered conspiratorially as though making bets on how long she would last on this merciless November night. Her thin, athletic, five-foot-five frame cowered against the fierce cold that tore through her flesh. Her blue eyes squinted; she tucked her chin in towards her chest. To pass the time, the mosquitoes nipped nonchalantly at the nape of Allie's ivory neck, daring her to join in a lethal game of tag. A spider crawled up her arm and she let out a shriek. A shard of wind sliced past Allie and her goose bumps rose to welcome it.

Her pronounced shoulders shuddering against the seat, Allie mused that she was probably the only sixteen-year-old crouched in a bulldozer on a school night. Instinctively, she groped for a seatbelt, but then saw it stranded on the dashboard. Someone – “probably hooligans, teenagers,” her mother would have interjected matter-of-factly – had savagely ripped it out, leaving a jagged hole in the seat cushion. Allie wished that the seatbelt was still intact so she could yank with both fists and tear it out herself. She fingered the seatbelt – a souvenir - and tied it around her waist triumphantly as though it were a black belt.

Allie couldn't believe that only a few hours ago she had been strapped in a red BMW. Her mother never let Allie drive anywhere without wearing a seat belt. “Click it or ticket,” she chirped sternly every time they entered the vehicle, broadcasting the fact that her insistence was for strictly legal reasons, rather than protective maternal ones; Allie found this a misnomer as safety belts ensured entrapment, not safety. The car's interior was suspiciously clean, as though it had committed a heinous crime and was offering physical catharsis in exchange for redemption.

Allie fiddled with the lock/unlock switch. *Lock. Unlock. Lock. Unlock.* No matter how she tried to time it, she could not coerce the staccato into making the legato-quick-quick waltz symphony that resonated in her head.

“Could you just cut it out?” her mother snapped, pursing her thin, peach-glossed lips.

Her French-manicured finger nails drummed against the steering wheel to no particular rhythm. For a mother, she looked young, hands unused, honey skin tight around her cheeks, and wrinkles decidedly missing in action. She used to explain, “When you throw a penny into a fountain – and really one always should because really what’s a penny in the grand scheme of things? – you should always wish for youth because that’s the one thing you can’t take with you.”

In response, Allie had always groveled, soaking in every pearl of wisdom her mother offered, but now she wished she could argue, “Well, a *lot* of pennies can be pretty significant in the grand scheme of things. And why wish for youth when one could wish for world peace or a cure for cancer?” That would have been a conversation-stopper, she thought, chewing her gum furiously.

“You’re going to ruin your jaw,” her mother insisted, meticulously tucking a strand of golden straw behind her ear. She eyed the rearview mirror suspiciously as though it were about to snatch her good looks.

“Well, it’s my jaw,” Allie returned curtly before seeping into a thick silence. She glared at the spasmodic windshield wipers and bit her nails until pinpricks of blood appeared.

“Sometimes I just don’t know...” her mother trailed off, sucking in her cheeks, her face oddly triangular.

Snow flakes ambled down the car windows. Allie turned on the radio to a classic rock station playing Led Zeppelin’s “Immigrant Song.”

Her mother punched on National Public Radio. The car halted at a red light, the windshield wipers spewing off snow.

Allie sunk into the leather seat.

“You always do this,” her mother accused, staring firmly ahead as though willing the light to change.

“Do what?” Allie was bored of holding a defensive hand in a pre-shuffled, trick deck.

“You know what I mean.” Her mother spat her words and screwed up her face as though she had mistaken vodka for water.

“Clearly, I don’t.”

“Oh, stop it!” her mother yelled, clenching her teeth.

“Stop what?” Allie’s voice swelled jaggedly up to a forté. The BMW lurched forward, flashed on its automatic light and squealed, demanding fuel. The seat belt cut into Allie’s shoulder, branding her olive skin. Her green eyes were too ancient and dull for those of a sixteen-year-old.

“God, you’re hopeless,” her mother exhaled, shaking her head. She pulled up to a gas station in a woody area only a mile or so from Wallace Preparatory, Allie’s high school. Black stilettos scratched the pavement and the door slammed. Allie’s mother commanded a gas attendant to fill it up with super unleaded – what did he think this was, a pick-up truck? – and strutted into Dunkin Donuts – why weren’t there any Starbucks? — for her third mocha of this evening.

“Thanks, Mom.” A pool of saliva rose like a tide inside Allie’s mouth. She pressed an imaginary

acceleration pedal, wishing she could scoop all of the pennies out of the fountain and chuck them in again— she would wish more wisely this time. She felt trapped in her skin and she squirmed, tensing her shoulders and forming fists. Her breath came in shaky gusts and she knew that she had to get out...right now, before she lost her nerve. She unclicked her safety belt, opened the car door, and began walking swiftly away from the vehicle. Before she knew it, she was sprinting into the woods, trees whizzing past her like power boats. She would have cried if she had possessed the energy.

A few hours later, the Vermont wind moaned melancholically – a homeless man’s lullaby. The stars played hide-and-go seek behind a thickening dark blue sheath. Giving up on sleep in the bulldozer, Allie grasped the rusted door handle and pulled herself up from the seat only to flinch from, and curse, the splinters that wedged themselves into her palm. The flat, front right tire let out a cantankerous, resigned groan as she stepped on it and jumped to the ground. She wiped her throbbing hands, now black from the grease, on her ripped Sevens jeans and used her nails to pry out the splinters. Beneath the abrasive moonlight, the crimson words “Wallace Prep,” once etched harshly into the sweatshirt, now only glimmered faintly.

Ever since kindergarten, Allie had attended Wallace Prep – a K-12 prep school with a definite attitude. Established in 1798, Wallace Prep donned the title of the oldest preparatory academy in New England like a jeweled crown. At Wallace Prep, students were required to address their teachers as “Professor,” rather than “Mr.” or “Mrs.” Latin letters were scrawled all over the buildings, plaques and school stationary; no one was quite sure of the exact translation, but no one had the courage to ask so everyone just accepted its rough translation: “Behave with honor.”

Lined with street lamps, peppered with patches of fake grass, and populated with brick buildings the size of small countries, Wallace Prep had taken the liberty of knighting itself an affluent liberal arts college; it didn’t need anyone’s permission, and it certainly wasn’t going to ask for it. Uniformed minions repainted the campus signs daily and watched helplessly alongside the manicured lawns as the ivy strangled the gothic towers. Wallace Prep boasted a state of the arts sprinkler system that cost as much as the town’s public library and possessed more police cars than the three surrounding suburbs combined. As Wallace Prep peacocked around and splayed its feathers, the nearby towns shrunk in fear and scuttled away. Both of her parents had attended Wallace Prep, and every day, Allie surrendered to the required uniform – a white polo collared shirt and a French blue skirt that fell just below the knee.

Until her junior year, Allie had enjoyed school. Her professors had baptized her a ‘lover of learning’ in highlighter ink. Her parents made it a point to invite all of her teachers over for dinner on a regular basis because, after all, education extends far beyond the classroom. History, math, science and French came easily to her; she loved English and earned her teachers much acclaim whenever she won

a regional writing competition. This year, Allie had the best English teacher in the school, arguably the best in New England – Prof. Whitterfield – for Utopia and Redemption Literature.

She had known Prof. Whitterfield for as long as she could remember. He came over for dinner once every month to compliment her mother on her Caprese salad – “absolutely to DIE for!” he would insist, throwing his head back and shaking his mane of wispy brown hair. When her father was out of town on business – as he was for most of the year – Mr. Whitterfield took Allie and her mother to Red Sox games; once at the games, he complained about the stock market and mispronounced the players’ names.

Convinced that he was a hybrid of Emerson and Thoreau incarnate, Mr. Whitterfield seemed to hail from a different time period. He was forty-five years old – one of the girls had been dared to ask – and he was the spitting image of Robert Redford. And he was a bachelor. Insert the ooohs here. Girls often incorporated him into their games of Marry, Fuck or Throw, and he never got thrown; he even made it to several rounds of risqué hypotheticals at hushed lunch tables. A sarcastic, equal opportunity offender, he made his students work for his respect. He possessed a contagious, theatrical presence. Whenever students read aloud around the mahogany table, he always instructed them to orate as though this sentence were their last.

During the third Thursday of junior year, Allie’s enthusiasm for school and admiration for Prof. Whitterfield plummeted when he ambled his hand up her skirt during a mandatory one-on-one progress workshop. His hand felt strong, rough with occasional creases like a piece of paper crumpled in one’s pocket. At first he massaged her knee cap, circling it with his index finger and then he moved upward – all the while holding his red pen in his other hand and skimming her analysis of Eve’s fall in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. He wore a tie crawling with cartoon characters and looked over the bridge of his scholarly glasses, which she suspected were more of an accessory than a necessity. His fingertips grazed over her Victoria Secret underwear and gripped her hipbone before inching beneath the cotton fabric.

“I forgot – I have a piano lesson this afternoon,” she stuttered. She hadn’t touched the ivory keys since her third grade recital. Smoothing her skirt down, she clumsily forced his hand out from under her. She snatched her backpack, scooted her chair backwards, knocking it over, and rocketed out of the classroom; her fleet flung themselves one in front of the other, not stopping until she reached the girls’ bathroom. Her face flushed cherry in the mirror and she felt oddly faint, like the air around her was becoming thick and snowy. She turned on the water but the noise grew distant; the light blue sink counter lost its color, graying from the edges in and the bathroom morphed into a still-born, black and white movie. She hit the floor, slamming her head against the paper towel dispenser on the way down. She didn’t know how long she lay for, limbs splayed like a discarded marionette puppet.

When she revived, the first thing she noticed was the chill of the tiled floor and the fact that she had never seen the bathroom from this angle before. The paint under the sink’s counter was chipping; the paint minions had neglected that. There were no shoes under the stalls and she could hear the water

running lightly above her. She reached onto the soap dispenser and the edge of the counter and pulled herself to her feet only to feel something lumpy rising in her throat. She crawled to the toilet, doubled over, and threw up until there was nothing left. Even after the tears raced down her cheeks, she kept dry heaving. Finally, the retching having ceased, she flushed the toilet and watched it swirl downwards, spinning and then disappearing. Wiping her mouth with a square of toilet paper, she nudged herself into an upright position, wrestled her hair into a pony tail, and craned her neck under the faucet. She coughed, trying to purge herself of the taste and his touch. When she met the mirror, she didn't even recognize the girl staring back at her - mascara streaming down her cheeks, veins jutting out of her neck, face puffy and greenish-white. Fortunately, English always occupied the last period of the day.

When she returned home that night, she marched straight to her bedroom. Equipped with a *New York Times* and a mug of Earl Gray, her mother knocked on her door and told her that she was sorry Allie was sick. Her mother rubbed her back.

"It's fine," Allie assured her, smothering a stuffed animal against her chest.

When she was younger, Prof. Whitterfield had brought Allie a little something every holiday — a souvenir from his latest travel. He used to claim that since Allie was from Alice in Wonderland, she needed a token from all of the wonderful lands he had visited; on her tenth birthday, he even went so far as to suggest that he would take Allie on one of his 'adventures' — anyplace she wanted to go. Until now, this offer had appeared fairly innocuous; now, she wasn't so sure.

Sloughing through the virgin snow, she left a trail of Nike sneaker paw prints, almost hoping someone would trace her as in *Hansel and Gretel*. Her jeans were too long; the damp, fringed edges dragged behind her in the snow. Snow made her sweatshirt soggy, her jeans glued to her thin thighs. She rifled through her pocket, finding three fortune cookie slips, a nickel, and her bottle of Zanic anxiety pills through a web of lint. She fingered the little white pills and placed two on her tongue before spitting them out. Every five steps, she tossed a few out into the dark wilderness as though feeding birds in a park. The little pills camouflaged themselves as the snow buried them within moments. Looking back on her cryptic path, she realized that no one would find her from those.

The day after the 'incident' with Professor Whitterfield, Allie inched into her English class at the last possible second, stepping over backpacks, asking people to pull in their chairs and squeezing past to crouch in the chair furthest from him.

"Allie," he smiled broadly, the smile that made other girls swoon.

She avoided eye-contact. "Yes, Prof. Whitterfield."

He circled around the table towards her and she felt her shoulders cave in. He touched her shoulder and leaned in...his breath smelled of tuna fish.

Allie sunk down in her chair, wondering if anyone else was seeing this. *Stop flipping through your notes!* she silently implored her classmates, feeling a rush of dizziness swarm in around her. The room began to fade and the conversation around her swirled into a soft buzz. *If he keeps his hand there for one more second,* Allie vowed herself...

His six-foot-two frame towered over her. “You forgot your Paradise Lost essay yesterday.” He extended his arm with the paper.

All of a sudden, her panic halted. “Oh! Erhmm, thanks.” She bent to put it into her backpack, feeling his eyes searing into her, her thigh twitching with remembrance.

The rest of the class passed without incidence. Allie didn’t answer any questions and took notes furiously, making sure that her handwriting was impeccable. Five minutes before class ended, she began packing up so she wouldn’t be the last in the room, left alone with him.

“Allie!” Her name sprung from his lips and shot through the air.

“Yes,” she exhaled jaggedly, her throat closing up.

“Please don’t pack up before the bell has rung. You know better than that.” He winked at her, tilted his chin and raised his left eyebrow, as though he and Allie shared a secret.

Breath unsteady, Allie felt trapped...in the classroom and in her own skin, which he now owned. She stopped packing up, but remained tense, poised and ready to bolt. When the bell rang, she shoved her books in her bag as fast as she could and elbowed people out of the way to get to the door. Once again, she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Oh, when’s a good time to reschedule yesterday afternoon’s meeting?” he asked offhandedly.

“Ummm, I’ll e-mail you,” she stuttered and pivoted around, tripping over the recycle bin. She fell to her knees, scooping up papers frantically and apologizing as tears sprung to her eyes.

For the next few weeks, Allie perfected the art of cramming her notebook, text, and binder into her hands, running to the bathroom, and then taking the time to carefully place everything in the appropriate compartments; she was afraid that she wouldn’t have time to pack her backpack before she was left alone with him. Then she began skipping class. She deleted Prof. Whitterfield’s e-mails without reading them and clicked the e-mail recycle bin compulsively. In her stead, she asked her friends to take notes, claiming that she had just become a writing tutor and had to reconfigure her schedule.

Eventually, her mother found out and insisted that she go to class. “God, what has gotten in to you? You love English, honey, and Prof. Whitterfield is *wonderful*.” Her mother’s mouth opened – all sparkling teeth — and her eyes bugged out from their sockets.

Allie looked down and kicked the snow into piles. The night air enveloped her and she shivered. “Hey!” a voice sounded from somewhere in the trees. A thin flashlight beam bore through the trees’ skeletons.

Allie jumped, her shoulders pinching upwards and her eyes widening. She stood stiffly, terrified to let out a breath as the beam raked over her. Every shadow reminded her of Mr. Whitterfield and her thigh began to quiver.

“I see you, Al,” the voice announced triumphantly, directing the beam in her face.

She relaxed. “Slater?” Slater had attended Wallace Prep since kindergarten as well. He had been her first kiss, technically...on the jungle gym in first grade during a game of tag gone awry. For years, they had see-sawed back and forth, taking turns liking one another – never overlapping and always escalating into nothing. The infamous cooties, love triangles and awkwardness had restricted them to ‘friends,’ tiptoeing around one another. He was lanky, goofy, and perpetually unshaven with an unfortunate affinity for dead baby jokes and mayonnaise sandwiches.

“What the hell are you doing out here at this ungodly hour?”

“Nature walk,” she shot out.

“Uh huh, yeah me too.” He rolled his eyes and chuckled softly. “No seriously, what are you doing out here?”

“Already told you.”

“I’m not buying.” He crossed his arms on his chest.

“And I’m not selling,” she returned.

“I disagree.”

“That’s your prerogative.”

“Are you always this evasive?” Slater quipped.

“Are you always this inquisitive?” she volleyed.

“Are you going to speak in sentences longer than four words?” His eyes glimmered as a boyish smile flickered at his lips.

“Yes.”

“Prove it!”

“I don’t have to prove anything to you.” Or anybody else. She snapped a twig off of a nearby branch, sending granules of snow in every direction.

“You just did,” he chuckled, counting her words on his hand. “Eight words- impressive.” He was dressed in a suit – a starched, crisp white button down shirt, one tail hanging out. Breath forming a cloud in front of his face, he rubbed his hands together and explained that his parents were having a huge dinner party. They had forced him to play the piano and then he had booked the hell outta there. He went on to say that he was just waiting for ‘his boys’ to escape and then they were going to start the ‘real party.’

“The *real* party? On a Tuesday night?” She eyed him skeptically, resisting laughter.

“Hell yeah, the *real* party.” He boasted that he and ‘his boys’ – he relished the accessory of a gang of sidekicks - were equipped with all the essentials for a Tuesday night – a thirty-rack, a can of spray paint, a handle of Jim Beam, two girls, three baggies of weed, one permanent marker, five double-shot glasses, and four packs of cigarettes.

Allie took the liberty of translating the grocery list in her head: half a keg of disappointment, six pints of ennui-induced restlessness, two sloozies on the prowl for attention or, more likely, two bored younger sisters, and three plastic bags worth of a desire to get ridiculously fucked up. By the end of that Tuesday night, they would flip off their inner Jiminy Crickets, polish off several bottles of self-respect, gain two red cups of taboo admiration and wake up with spotty recollection. They were on a mission for inspiration, even if they had to forget themselves to get it.

“Sounds like quite an evening you boys have got planned,” she observed, lips curling to a grin.

“Oh yeah, well you know, gotta live life to the fullest; be spontaneous. Carpe fucking diem-” he cut himself off. “—and shit.”

“Spontaneous with pre-packaged ingredients and a to-do list? Sounds pretty bad-ass,” she challenged skeptically.

“Oh yeah, well, what have you done?” he questioned defensively.

“Plenty of stuff,” she countered quickly, rifling through her imagination to concoct something risqué.

“Care to elaborate, miss mysterious?” He eyed her expectantly.

“Well, you know,” she smiled. “The usual – sex, drugs, rock’n roll.”

“Cop-out!” He threw up his arms.

That Thursday, Allie had attended English class for the first time in three weeks.

“Glad to have you back, Allie,” Prof. Whitterfield commented.

She didn’t speak the entire class. When the bell rang, she scooped up all of her stuff and prepared to whisk past him.

“Allie.” Prof. Whitterfield’s words cut through the air as he reached to stop her. “Do you have a minute?”

“Umm, well I actually, there’s this thing...I can’t be late...I mean...” She ran out of breath and choked on her saliva.

“Sit down, sit down,” he coaxed, ushering her towards a chair, placing his hands on her hips.

Her mouth went dry. She resisted and remained standing. “Listen, I really have to...” The last student shuffled out of the classroom and she felt the walls caving in.

He closed the door behind him and her throat tightened.

“Listen, Allie, this is important. Now, I know that you’ve been missing class, and it seems like you’re having a hard time.” He sighed and folded his hands together. “And I just wanted to let you know that if you ever want to talk, I’m here for you.” He stood between her and the door. “Is there anything you need to talk about?” His face was only a few inches away from hers and she could taste his breath.

You! She wanted to scream, right in his ear and deafen him. How dare you! The screams filled the corridors of her head and she wondered if he could hear them muted. “I’m fine.” The foreign words forced their way past her trembling lips.

“Are you sure?” He stepped closer, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and reaching around her lower back with the other. He enveloped her in a hug, as her arms stiffened at her sides. She remembered the Christmas hugs he had given her beneath the mistletoe; somehow this hug didn’t seem like Christmas cheer. He breathed into her hair, inhaled her perfume, and caressed the back of her neck.

She stood paralyzed and the room began to swim. Sweat formed on her lower back and she felt her lungs contracting.

He kissed her softly on the forehead. She heard it and she felt it, and that was it. She dropped her books, heard her mechanical pencils clatter to the floor, and used all of her strength to shove him against the wall. His head hit his own teacher’s award certificate plaque on the wall and his chin jerked up unnaturally. The plaque clattered to the floor, breaking into two pieces. He flailed for her wrist but she wrestled herself away from him and sprinted out the door. She didn’t stop until she arrived at the middle of the academic quad. She lay down and waited for the sprinklers to go off around her. For a split second, the streams of water seemed to lift her up, but then she seeped back into the grass.

No one would have believed her anyway. When she had finally mustered the courage to tell her mother that night as they were unloading the dishes, her mother practically dropped the salad bowl. “He did what?” Her whole body tightened as her eyes widened and her eyebrows pointed diagonal.

“He put his hands—”

“Christ, I heard you the first time, Allie!” She swept back a strand of hair that had fallen into her eye. “That’s ridiculous,” she muttered coolly in a barely audible voice.

“I know,” Allie’s voice wavered. She bit her lower lip and felt her heart pulse. “I know it sounds crazy.”

“That’s because it is.” Her mother selected a pair of forks and delivered them to the appropriate drawer. “You know, Allie, if you got a bad grade, it’s okay; you can just tell me and we’ll...we’ll get you a tutor or something.” She patted Allie on the arm reassuringly.

“Mom, it’s English! Why would I need a tutor?” Allie shrugged her mother’s arm off of her shoulder as disbelief coursed through her veins.

“Well then why would you do something like this?”

“Do what?”

“Lie!”

“Lie?” Allie recoiled as though she had been stung. She snapped her head to face her mother.

“God, you really do crave attention, don’t you?” She stared at Allie, forcing her to make eye-contact.

“This has nothing to do with attention – why...why would I even *want* this kind of attention?”

Allie sputtered, setting down a freshly dried bowl.

“You tell me.”

The temperature rose in Allie’s chest. She screwed up her face. “Why don’t you believe me? I’m your daughter!”

“Yes, and Prof. Whittier is—”

“—is what?”

Her mother paused, sucking in air through her expertly-whitened teeth. She put down the plate she was drying. “Is,” she stumbled, “a very good *family* friend. He would never, *never* do anything like that.”

“Oh, and I would lie about something like this?” Allie jumped on her mother’s words, chasing them in quick succession.

Her mother shook her head, grimaced, and rang the dishtowel dry. Silence filled the kitchen except for the splattering of soapy water. “Allison Victoria Edinbergh, this is taking it too far, *way* too far. Christ.”

Allie’s face burned from the acidic tears. She marched upstairs to the bathroom to get a washcloth, but found a razor instead.

Later that week, Prof. Whitterfield had come over for dinner. Seeing his car pull up into her father’s empty space in the driveway – he was away on business — Allie yelled down the wooden staircase that she was sick. Without waiting for a response, she sprinted back to her room, dove into bed and began a snoring drone. No one came up to check on her, so after a while, Allie crept down the stairs on the balls of her feet. She knew to avoid the fourth step from the bottom because it creaked.

“For the past few weeks,” her mother was explaining, “I have tried to excuse Allie’s behavior as an unruly adolescent phase. Perfectly normal, as I assured my book club.” The clink of a China tea cup placed on the dining room table. “But sometimes, Chris, Allie is just simply intolerable – making up stories. I just don’t understand it – she was fine a few weeks ago.”

“Well, Lily, I didn’t want to have to mention this outside of a parent-teacher conference, but Allie really hasn’t been up to snuff recently, even when she’s been in attendance.” There was a pause. “She may fail my class.”

“You haven’t said anything, have you?” Her mother asked, sounding anxious. The air pressure seemed to change.

“Oh gosh, no, Lily – I would never.”

“Oh, thank god,” Lily sighed.

Allie craned her neck and strained her ears. She closed her eyes and plugged her nose, hoping that by shutting off other senses, she could somehow strengthen her hearing. *Said anything about what?* she wondered. She overheard her mother suggest that Allie stay after class to work on her interpretation of the text and Prof. Whitterfield welcomed the offer enthusiastically, arguing that Allie simply had to “remount the proverbial bicycle” in the voice that usually came garnished with a wink. Allie vowed to politely decline.

It wasn't long before ‘his boys’ – Charlie and Dan from her English class - and a girl named Emily from the grade below, trampled through the woods.

“You got the stuff, man?” Slater jerked his head and raised his eyebrow, his eyes scanning his up and down, the international body movement for sketchiness.

“Yeah, I got the stuff,” Charlie heaved. “But it was so fucking close, man. I could barely get away from my mom. She was all, ‘Where you going? When will you be back?’ How old does she think I am? Fucking ridiculous.”

They must have spent at least an hour – Slater checked his Mickey Mouse watch — complaining about the cold and bragging about the obtainment of the ‘stuff’ before they hiked over to Wallace Prep. They climbed onto the playground – any kid’s paradise – and started to smoke up. Allie inhaled and the lights got brighter, the trees sharper against the skyline. Her head began to spin and she leaned back onto the slide, trying to count all of the stars; she kept losing track because they kept jumping out of the way, however much she willed them to just stay put. The alcohol tasted foul. They chased with beer and smoked more, taking hits of a joint as it danced around the circle. The beer bubbled down her throat and the world got hazy.

In a moment of infantile spontaneity, they decided to play hide-and-go seek. But there was a catch—they had to streak, lose the clothes. Allie hesitated, fiddling with her jean zipper inefficiently.

“Allie’s not gonna do it,” Slater teased.

“What makes you think that? I’m not afraid of nudity. I’ve gone skinny-dipping before like a thousand times,” she lied, grateful for her empowering altered state. Allie shivered in the dark, all the while defiantly claiming that she was not cold. They placed their clothes on top of the empty beer bottles and half empty handle sloshing with Jim Beam beneath a tire swing. Then, by unspoken agreement and self-consciousness, they scattered in every direction. They had elected Slater the seeker.

Within five minutes, Slater discovered Allie shivering and curled up in the opening of the big slide. “Gotcha!” he clamped his hand on her shoulder, looking down at her chest for a moment before quickly averting his eyes and releasing her awkwardly. He wore his puffy Northface coat without the rest of his

clothes, arguing that it wasn't cheating as long as he was naked underneath. He handed Allie her coat and the bundle of clothes. She put her clothes aside and zipped up her coat around her, tucking her raw legs beneath it so that only her big toes stuck out.

Slater plopped down next to her, setting down what was left of the Jim Beam. Allie smiled as she realized that he had already found the only person he intended to that night.

The Vermont wind chafed their bare forearms and the underbrush prickled their ankles. The shards of feverishly icy cold clung to their bodies. "Hey, it's fuckin' freezing outside; you wanna try to get into the gym? Coach gave me a key," Slater offered, reaching for his jacket and fumbling in the pocket.

"Yeah, before we die of frostbite." Allie stood up, pulling her coat down around her as low as it would go. "What about Henry, Dan, and Emily?"

"Don't worry about them; I only live a little ways away. They'll head back," Slater insisted.

"Some friend you are!" Allie accused playfully.

"Oh, hush you!" He reached for her wrist and felt the neat ruler marks from her cutting.

She winced, recoiling and cradling her wrist with her other hand.

Slater stared. "You know that that's a really stupid thing to do," Slater said.

"Don't knock it 'til you've tried it."

They approached the gym in silence and Slater opened the door. The smell of sweat greeted them and the door creaked, sending echoes bouncing off of the walls. They sat down on the bleachers. Slater leaned in close so that his warm breath warmed her shoulder. "So, what's the most risqué thing you've ever done?"

Allie laughed. "You are so..."

"Dark and mysterious?" He offered.

"I was actually going for poser-ish and anticlimactic," she joked, taking care to maintain eye-contact and not look down.

"Really? See, now that's a shame because I was about to attempt flirtation and call you intriguing, but now I think I am going to have to go with plan B."

"And what's plan B?" She raised her eyebrow.

"Dismiss you as cynical, rude, and jaded."

"I think I would have preferred plan A."

There was a silence.

Allie opened her mouth to speak but Slater cut her off. "Shhh, don't break the awkward silence." She smiled. "You're too much."

"Too much of what?" He bit his lower lip.

"I don't even—"

He reached for her chin and brought it to him, leaning over her. He stared into her eyes

and kissed her. “You’re beautiful,” he whispered, nuzzling his head against hers.

“You’re full of shit,” she smiled crookedly and apologetically, shrugging him away.

“No, I’m not. If there’s one thing I know, it’s beautiful girls,” he assured her, inching closer.

“Okay, Casanova,” she countered, hating that her cheeks were turning red. They must have sat there for hours, just talking, sitting next to each other without making bodily contact anywhere except for hesitant kissing. She felt oddly embarrassed that they were so comfortable naked sitting so close together. She felt that could be naked with Slater for hours and never feel the discomfort she felt sitting uniformed with Prof. Whitterfield.

Neither fell asleep.

“We should do this again sometime,” Allie suggested, fitting her head into the nook between his head and shoulder.

“Don’t ever do that again,” she heard the voice of her mother echo in her head.

Allie put on her socks with grizzly bears swinging bats and then fondled the hemp bracelet on her left wrist. She shook her head slowly and let out a sigh.

“What’s wrong?” Slater questioned.

“Nothing.” Allie stared into the dark gymnasium, looking for something, she didn’t know what. “I’m just afraid of the dark.” He held her hands between his and rubbed his together.

“We have to talk,” her mother had begun a few months before this cold Tuesday night and a few months after the first classroom incident. She suggested that they sit down in the kitchen and make some tea; it sounded innocuous enough. Her mother filled up the kettle with water and put it on the stove. Then she began explaining that she had been seeing Prof. Whitterfield since August of the previous year and that she had felt horrible sneaking around but she didn’t want to make it awkward since he was her teacher. Originally, she wasn’t going to tell her until after junior year but then after those ridiculous lies about molestation, the situation had surfaced as a necessary order of business.

“He’s my teacher, mom,” Allie said quietly, once her mother’s lengthy confession had come to a halt.

“Look, Chris and I –”

“You mean, Prof. Whitterfield and I,” Allie corrected, remembering the hand on her thigh and shuddering.

“Allie, he was a family friend of ours long before he was your teacher,” her mother snapped, yanking off her wedding ring; it flew through the air and landed in the sink, teetering on the edge of the drain. She dove to recover it and quickly placed it on the cookbook shelf above the oven.

“Oh yeah, he’s being a great friend to Dad,” Allie growled, eyes narrowing.

“Your father,” her mother sighed. “is a very understanding man.”

“Well forgive me if I’m just not as *understanding*,” Allie seethed.

The water began to boil and the kettle whistled shrilly. Her mother busied herself locating two mugs and placing in each an Earl Gray tea bag. She poured the water and placed Allie’s mug on the counter. “When I choose to tell your father,” she continued, “he will be fine.” She glared at the mug in her hand before exhaling deeply. “Let’s just keep this as our little secret, okay?” She spoke to Allie as though she were five years old and stroked her head.

Allie swatted her mother’s hand away. “This is not right, mom.”

“When you’re older, you will understand that these things aren’t absolute matters of black and white... Besides, Chris...” her mother trailed off and Allie could tell she was in another place. Her mother smiled and clasped her hands together over her heart. “Chris is a wonderful man.”

The word ‘wonderful’ felt like poison. “He touched me, mom.” Allie felt her stomach turn over as she thought of his same hands touching her mother.

Her mother’s face grew stormy. “Now, that’s got to stop. This lying – I don’t know what has gotten into you.”

“Neither do I,” Allie choked. She looked her mother square in the face, eyelids trembling and lashes obscuring her vision. “I have no idea what has gotten into me.” Allie pivoted and stomped up the stairs. When she reached her room, she opened her closet door, separating coat hangers to clear a space for herself. Huddled and rocking back and forth, she felt herself drowning in a sea of school uniforms.

The next morning, Allie braced herself for her appointment with Mrs. Jameson. Leaning against a locker in the hallway, Slater offered to accompany her, but she knew she had to go alone. They hugged for longer than was socially acceptable, releasing only when Allie noticed other kids beginning to stare.

“Are you sure? I really don’t mind.” His eyes searched hers, flicking back and forth. “I want to miss French anyways; I think we’re having a pop quiz,” he insisted, wrapping his hands around her wrists to hide the cutting marks.

“Its okay, Slater, but thanks anyway.”

“Because I will go with you... if that’s what you want,” Slater assured her, loosening his grip on her wrists until her fingertips slipped through his own. He tilted Allie’s chin up to face him and seemed unsure of whether or not to kiss her. He quickly released her chin and fiddled with her sweatshirt hood strings, tying them into a bow and then untying them. “Allie, I would *love*,” he paused, eyes shifting to the floor before returning to meet her own. “...to go with you,” he whispered, each word rippling out of his mouth slowly. He reached for her hand once again, tracing her lifeline.

Allie could feel his breath on her forehead. Listerine and cheap cologne engulfed her. “I know you would...” She wriggled her hand free and smiled, turning away. As she began to

meander down the corridor, she looked over her shoulder and found him still leaning against the locker. “Hey, I had a lot of fun last night.” The words seemed to catapult themselves from her lips.

“Can I get that in writing? You know, before you change your mind?” His eyes twinkled and a lopsided grin spread across his face.

Allie felt the corners of her mouth forming an arch. “Good luck on that pop quiz.”

As soon as she saw Mrs. Jameson’s car turn into the parking lot, Allie immediately felt that this visit was a “bad choice,” a “poor decision,” an “unwise move” – to utilize the plethora of phrases her mother had made cliché over the last few months. Her mother had always chided, “Make good choices!” Before junior year, she had chorused this lightheartedly as though it were a nursery rhyme; lately, however, the tone had shifted to one of knowing apprehension and preemptive disappointment.

Haphazardly shredding the Chinese fortune cookie wrappers in her pocket, she hunched over as though weighed down by cement blocks...only there was no where left to sink, or fall, or drag herself down to. Lord knows in the past two months she had tried. Her short-lived resume was quite impressive, quite a read. She had modeled an eclectic cast of personalities – the rebel, the poser delinquent, the black sheep, the bully, the devil’s advocate, the smart-ass, or the just plain pain in the ass; she’d even played the tragic hero card, just to change things up a bit.

In Chemistry, she had even sworn. At first, Prof. Levine appeared to relish the projectile emotion, interpreting it as an uncontrollable reaction to her powerful lecture. Prof. Levine patted Allie on the back for comfort and herself for her stellar teaching skills. She handed out the benefit of the doubt like a pamphlet; she seemed on a mission to save Allie.

Allie sucked the offered redemption through her front teeth and spat the vile stuff right back out and onto Mrs. Levine’s over-stuffed face.

After class, Prof. Levine approached her. “Don’t do this, Allie. You have so much potential.”

Potential for what? Allie wondered.

“Don’t do something you’ll regret,” she advised. “We don’t want to make any poor decisions, now do we?” she chirped.

Don’t do something I’ll regret? Allie thought incredulously. She was merely reacting to someone else’s regret, someone else’s poor decision.

“Don’t be *that* kid,” Prof. Levine hammered into her head.

But who, Allie wanted to ask, exactly was *that* kid? The designated kid frowned upon across the dinner table, glorified in movies and whispered about in bathroom stalls. She dedicated herself to becoming the ‘lost cause.’ Flitting between characters, Allie never settled on one; none of the costumes seemed to fit. After this playbill of guest appearances, she was finally doing what she knew she had

to...talking to Mrs. Jameson, the school counselor, about Prof. Whitterfield. One of them would leave the school. Either way, her mother would be crushed.

Mrs. Jameson always advertised meeting with her as a “freeing experience, a catharsis, an opportunity, if you will, to clear your mind; get some stuff off of your chest.”

But if getting stuff off of one’s chest was supposed to make one feel better, then how come Allie felt as though she was removing one burden just to make room for an even heavier one?

Mrs. Jameson bustled down the hallway, snapping Allie out of her reverie. “Sit down,” Mrs. Jameson said, shepherding Allie into her office and coaxing her into a plump arm chair. Allie carefully bent her knees, sunk into the chair and crossed her legs, hoping that her skirt wouldn’t wound her case.

Mrs. Jameson busied herself organizing a collection of paper clips on her desk. “Now, how can I help?”

Allie hesitated; she had rehearsed the script every night since the incident, but she found her jaw locked in place, tongue immobile. Her palms began to sweat. She straightened her skirt. “I- this is confidential, right?” Allie asked.

“Of course.”

Allie let a gust of air escape from her lungs.

“Unless,” Mrs. Jameson interjected, “you are in danger of hurting yourself or someone else.”

What? Allie’s heart rate accelerated. *She was in danger of hurting everyone!* “I don’t think this is such a good idea,” Allie sputtered, pushing herself up from the chair and struggling to get her balance. “I’m sorry to have taken up your time.”

“Oh, Allie,” Mrs. Jameson’s arm shot out. “Please don’t go; if something’s bothering you, it’s very important that you let it out.”

“I’m just not sure that this was the right decision.”

“Now, Allie, there are no right or wrong decisions- only the consequences of one’s actions.” She recited this kernel of wisdom as though she were an embroidered proverb hanging in the kitchen. Mrs. Jameson urged Allie back into the chair, not releasing her arm until Allie re-crossed her legs.

“It’s about Prof. Whitterfield,” Allie began and the story began to unravel itself, coming out in staccato spurts, crescendoing crests, and then legato swells.

Mrs. Jameson’s eyes widened as Allie relayed the classroom scene. She set her pen down on her desk unspeaking, paper clips forgotten. Mrs. Jameson’s tongue clicked and she sucked in the air unevenly.

Allie paused, trying to decide whether or not to introduce the dimension of her mother. “And my mother,” she began, her chest collapsing in on itself. “It’s just so horrible.” She gripped her own knee, wishing that she had a blanket to cover her exposed legs. Her sobs sent the arm chair into trembles. “How could he? How could she? And what about my dad? I just don’t-”

Mrs. Jameson handed Allie a tissue wordlessly.

Allie crumpled it up in her fist without using it and let the salty drops trail down her cheeks. One tear remained creviced in the corner of her mouth. The sticky tears stung her face, but she eased embraced the discomfort – torture for another’s sin.

Mrs. Jameson’s silence persisted even after Allie’s words had faded.

Allie wanted to crawl beneath the desk. She looked down at the rug.

Finally, Mrs. Jameson spoke, “Allie, this is a very serious accusation. I hope that you understand the gravity of your words...the repercussions.”

“My words? And what about his actions?” Allie demanded, but quietly, just above a tremor.

“If this really happened—”

“I wouldn’t make this up. You know how much Wallace Prep means to my family,” Allie argued.

“Yes, I do. I also know how much this school means to Prof. Whitterfield and how much he means to the community,” Mrs. Jameson exclaimed. “I’m just saying that if there is any doubt...” she trailed off.

Silence drummed in Allie’s ears and then she remembered. “I can prove it; his “Professor of the Year” plaque on the wall...” Allie replayed the scene in her head; it had a dream-like quality. “I tried to get away from him and I shoved him against it.”

Mrs. Jameson eyed her quizzically.

“It’s broken, right down the middle.”

“Is that your decision then?” Mrs. Jameson asked.

“I don’t have a choice.”

An hour or so later, Allie emerged from the office.

Slater was still waiting outside. “Are you okay?”

“Do you ever—” She paused. “Do you ever just feel like you’ve gotta take some time off?”

“From what?”

“From life.” She gratefully accepted his offer to drive her home. They drove in silence, his hand brushing against hers as he turned the steering wheel and she reached for the radio. Suddenly, a tear sprouted in her eye, followed by another, and another. “I’m really sorry I’m such a mess, Slater,” she blurted out. “Sometimes I do stuff and I don’t even know why...it doesn’t even make sense.” She cried, burying her face in the sleeve of her sweatshirt.

“Hey, hey!” He rubbed her back with one hand. “You don’t have to apologize.” He paused at a stop sign. “After all, nobody’s perfect, Allie; nobody’s perfect.”

They drove past Prof. Whitterfield’s house. A light on upstairs glowed and the red BMW crouched in the driveway.

about the authors

elizabeth kulik is a senior majoring in Sociology. She hails from rural western Massachusetts and enjoys baking bread, following celebrity gossip, and talking to wild animals.

jarrett lemer is a sophomore here at Tufts. Although currently “undecided,” he plans to major in English and, should he feel especially adventurous, perhaps also minor in History or Art History. He loves to read and write and be with interesting people—which his family and friends fortunately all are. He likes autumn weather, the color purple in all its moods, and drinking coffee. Recently, the piles tyrannizing his desk have been filled with the work of Philip Roth, but he has lately also enjoyed Saul Bellow, Anton Chekhov, and John Updike, among others. The past decade of his life has been spent in New England, which if pressed he would most likely call his “home.”

jenna nissan Jenna Nissan is a sophomore majoring in English. She sleeps through the end of good movies, received the ‘secret weapon award’ for dodgeball, and misses nineties Nickelodeon. She believes in stars. Her favorite baseball player is Paul O’Neill, and she named her first fish Rumpelstiltskin. She wrote her first poem about a horse in second grade, and has wanted to be a writer ever since.

claire oggenheim is a freshman and so therefore does not yet have her life planned out. She has only a vague idea of what she wants to major in: English? Creative Writing? Comparative Religion? Psychology? She enjoys field hockey, eating, writing and napping like a five year old. She does not like math, salmon, cracking her knuckles or the color orange. Her dorm room has many leather bound books and smells of rich mahogany. She hails from Chardon, Ohio and no, she does not have cows nor does she live in a cornfield.

louise verriest glace is a masshole in her third year, studying International Relations and English. Confessions constitutes her first story in *Outbreath*. In her spare time, she loves highlighting the newspaper, singing a cappella in sQ!, traveling, rallying for Tufts Democrats, speaking in accents, dancing on tables, quoting Disney songs with her housemates over gmail in the next room, morphing into a professional body builder, and chewing gum so that her jaw creaks. This Belle also bites, so be careful if you run into her around campus!