

Wetlands

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I

She felt smothered hearing that quiet flurry on Central, that roar and whistle of the Caltrain. Her mother had left the house smelling of lilies, wearing a green dress that shimmered against her olive skin. Gone to a cocktail party with Eva's father, with his colleagues. Dr. Morris. The sun sank and the temperature dropped; the rush hour began and then drew to a close.

She refused to acknowledge that she was waiting for anything and instead kept busy cleaning her room, feeding her hamsters. She made popcorn and seasoned it with rosemary, garlic, olive oil, salt.

"Can't ever leave work, can you," Sal joked from where he sat in the living room, watching a nature documentary with Marj. Eva grunted a laugh in reply.

Barnacles possess one of the largest penises in the animal kingdom, relative to their size. A barnacle's penis can be up to eight times the length of its body.

She was almost dismayed when the text finally did come, the anticipation she had built crashing bluntly down. He would pick her up at 9:30. Of course. She unglued

herself from the documentary with a sigh. *See you later*, to Sal as she walked back to her room.

She swapped her yoga pants for a short pink dress and shaved – careful, careful, the soapy water washing grimily down the drain. Wondered absently how much of her the sink had consumed of her over the years, all that hair and blood.

Start at the top. First to prod her hair into a side part, and then smoky cat-eye make-up on heavy, sleepy lids – purple to highlight the brown of her irises. A common color. Then down to lips, with \$25 lipstick from Nicole, pouting red in the mirror. A foreign face on her; eyes startled in a mirror surrounded by ticket stubs, fruit stickers, pictures of her in places whose names she has forgotten.

Nicole’s pretty face: small lips, eyes that could be made to appear large; features that were not so delicate as to appear refined, but not so large as to appear crass.

Finally, she threw on boots and a coat and went outside, where the streetlights were just turning on. It was May, but she felt the cold on her skin as she stood with her arms tight to her sides, staring distractedly at the apartment complex down the street. A younger Eva would have been thrilled to see James, but now, she wasn’t sure. A brief encounter at a party, mostly small talk, and there she was. No sense worrying, she supposed, maybe he just wanted to catch up. *It’s a shame I haven’t seen you in so long, you look great.* Back and forth, like Ping-Pong. She knew him through other people; meeting one-on-one was strange, almost taboo. Maybe, without her realizing, she had transformed into something desirable and her plain beauty had become something more, something new. There was no way to know.

The sky darkened to a purple bruise, and the sodium streetlights cast an eerie orange glow on the houses, the road, her hands. She hummed to herself, pirouetting shyly to feel the rustle of her dress against her smooth legs; that pleasing scratch of fabric suggesting intimacy, or glamor. So often hand in hand. She felt a childish, impish delight at her unexpected freedom, at the crunch of the gravel beneath her rubber-soled shoes and the silence of her street. Just an open purple sky.

She thought about Sal, thought about their parents; wondered why Marj had been permitted to move into their house weeks before. It could have been an upwelling of her mother's vague bohemianism, or maybe a reference to some past era during her father's time at Columbia. Most likely, she supposed, this was their way of not doing anything; that allowing Sal's girlfriend to move into the guest room with him was simply the path of least resistance. Live and let live. Maybe some new faith in humanity. A new way for Sal to show responsibility – now 22, still living at home taking general education classes at community college. His old room, they decided, would be offered to any guests.

Marj was always friendly, but it was impossible to get a read on her, impossible to get past those chilly grey eyes. Eva had tried. Tiny speech, tiny body language, quiet laughter at all the right times, but always the feeling that she was being evaluated; the sensation that she could be passed over at any time for someone better, someone who could elicit real laughter and real conversation. But maybe now, between seeing her in the living room and the kitchen, they would be friends.

She could never do it, could never be dependent on a boyfriend and his family, trapped in one place.

Headlights appeared around the corner coming closer, closer. The window of the car lowered as it pulled in front of her.

“Hello there, Miss Morris,” James drawled from inside. “Long time no see.”

His car smelled like stale cigarettes and the scent took her outside herself –inside his car, she was no longer Eva; in the dark, she no longer needed to be anxious, graceless.

James hadn’t shaved in a few days at least, and she admired the dark stubble on his chin from the corner of her eye, his hooked Eastern European nose. He didn’t ask her where she wanted to go or what she wanted to do, and the relief she felt as a result surprised her.

“Do you know this song?” he asked, putting the car into gear. “And do you want a cigarette? I forget if you smoke. It’s been a while since we last hung out.”

She said it sounded familiar, but she couldn’t place it. And she didn’t want a cigarette. He had phrased the question as though they ever *had* hung out; as though she had ever been more than peripherally there, while he flirted with and smoked with and talked with the people around her.

“Well, then I’m honored to introduce you to the glory that is Ariel Pink’s Haunted Graffiti.”

“I can’t wait,” she said, and she meant it, though she was unsure if he was referring to the musician or the song or the album.

“You do smoke weed though, don’t you?” he asked her.

She nodded, keenly aware of her nobbled knees and the tiny patch of leg hair that she missed on her right shin. The floor of the car was covered in a layer of fine sand and a mix of fast food wrappers and textbooks. Red and white checked In-N-Out, *A Brief History of Western Philosophy*. The music played, and she listened.

“Well, so, how have you been?” he asked finally, turning onto Central Expressway.

“Good, good,” she said.

“It was good to see you at Eliot’s the other night,” he said. “I hadn’t seen you in a few months.”

“Yeah, a lot of months, probably,” she said with a laugh. “I’ve been really busy.”

“Did you graduate this year?”

“Yeah, and I’ve been working at a hummus shop.” Had to make money somehow, had to do something.

“Do you get to make the hummus?” he asked.

“No, we have a prep team that does it.”

“For sure,” he said. “That sounds like it could be fun. Even if you’re just walking around the restaurant, looking pretty.” He glanced over to her with a smirk and she smiled back to him, tight-lipped.

“I don’t know about that,” she replied, immediately regretting this sudden display of insecurity. “I try.” But he didn’t push the subject. She never would have expected him to call her pretty.

James drove fast, the dark road unfolding ahead of them like a ribbon. She felt liberated by the lit streets, by the pools of yellow that disappeared into the darkness of the hills. They passed Foothill College on their right – vacant parking lots, empty sports fields, the light of the observatory pointing up, up into the sky – and then started climbing.

“What are you doing next school year?” he asked. “You’re the smart one, always getting good grades. At least, that’s what your brother says. Are you going to college?”

She was starting to feel interrogated, but she had no idea how to further engage him in the conversation, or how to make him think she was interesting. She was overwhelmed by his presence, his music, his cigarettes. The idea that he found her pretty, or pretty enough.

“Nah, I’m just going to go to Foothill. Footsy. I don’t really know what I want to study yet.”

They talked about Foothill culture and what kind of people went there. For the time being, it didn’t matter that she wasn’t going to a four-year school; she didn’t need to think about it. All that she cared about was how to make him laugh, how to present herself in a favorable light. She knew from her job that the best way to make people like you was to make them talk about themselves. So she did.

“What are you up to?” she asked as they hit the straightaway on Moody Road. The darkened hills fanned out before them, the sea of the valley glinting momentarily, in fragments. She always found this part of the drive the most ominous: there could be anything there in the darkness, waiting unseen in the shrubs and the sage.

He sighed, and she bit her lip.

“I’m going to take some more classes at Stanford this summer. I’ve got a 4.0 with my credits from there and they transfer pretty well to Hampshire. A bunch of philosophy stuff. And I’m tutoring some kids. Making some money.”

“Nice,” she said, momentarily picturing the Stanford quad, Hoover Tower, the mosaic of the church. “And didn’t you go to France for a while?” she asked.

“Yeah, during my sophomore year.”

She wondered if he still thought about Nicole.

The lights of the valley appeared more and more frequently now, as they climbed higher, and as the road twisted in sharper and sharper turns – a C-shaped hairpin turn that made her stomach drop with fear, and then a series of smaller, serpentine curves that shot them out along a ridge, the road dropping off abruptly on both sides. The only lights were below them, along the basin of the valley floor; around and above them was darkness, the moon illuminating the creeping wisps of fog, and the tendrils of pine, eucalyptus, oak that stretched over the road and into the turn outs. She had driven, and been driven on this road countless times and it always surprised her, as curves seemed to appear from nowhere, or as the moon and the lights of distant houses and the reflections of the eyes of animals shone from startling angles.

Until suddenly, unceremoniously – they were there at the vista point, pulling into a darkened parking lot distinguished from the steep drop into the valley only by a thin wooden fence and concrete slabs in the front of a dozen or so parking spots.

“See that car there?” James said, pointing to their left as they pulled in.

“Yeah?”

“They’re totally having sex.”

Eva glanced over, but only saw the outline of a parked car. She couldn’t even see the people inside.

“How can you tell?”

“Why else would the car be that dark? If they were smoking a blunt, you’d probably see their silhouettes. Or they’d open a window,” he laughed. And he had a point.

So, they sat there, James rolled a joint, and they passed it back and forth as the windows fogged with their breath and they talked about music. She confirmed that she did indeed like Ariel Pink, and also liked whatever he put on after that – maybe John Maus?

“No, Brian Eno,” he said. “But good guess. It seems like we have pretty similar taste in music. Not many people can listen to a song and appreciate it right off the bat.”

“I think I’m a pretty intuitive person,” she said, not necessarily because she thought it was true, but because she wanted to sound agreeable, amiable.

“I guess I’m lucky. A lot of my friends have good taste in music. Like, Andy’s taste in music is just *killer*.”

Nicole had been there, the last time she hung out with Andy.

They talked about friends, talked about James’ older sister who he hadn’t seen in years, a steady stream of conversation about his life, his people. She didn’t mind – it seemed cathartic for him, and there wasn’t much she wanted to say, anyway. She didn’t

mind listening. And then they talked about James' parents' divorce. And James said that his mother was crazy, that there was no logical reason why she would want to divorce someone like his father.

"Well, maybe there's more to the story than you know. They might both be rational people, they might have good intentions, but maybe they just don't get along," she told him.

"No, you don't know my family. She's crazy. She's such a bitch to him."

They sat in uncomfortable silence in the car, listening to whatever he had put on. A light flicked on, and then off, in the car to the left.

The valley sprawled ahead, a sea of dusty yellow pooling gently below the blackened outlines of the mountains. The water of the bay was indistinguishable from the black of the marshes and the silhouettes of the foothills and the light-polluted sky, though inlets of light in the form of roads and freeways, the occasional factory, dotted bright orange along the shores of the artificial coast. She felt a sort of aching nausea, an irrational homesickness as she looked over the mass of twinkling lights. Up there, surrounded only by blackness and the clean smell of the hills, she felt like an astronaut, suspended high above the Earth.

"Did you miss this view while you were at school?" she asked him.

"Yeah, definitely. And the people. Everyone's just so much more open here."

"I don't know if I could ever leave. I like it here too much. I mean, there are ups and downs, and it sort of sucked when so many people left after graduation, but it's pretty alright here."

“I could see myself living in Seattle, maybe. Or maybe Austin. Both of those cities are supposed to be really hip right now,” he said.

“Yeah, I’ve heard that. They’re supposed to be pretty similar to the Bay, I think.”

She paused, trying to read his face to see whether this was the right time, the right place, but she got nothing.

“Do you miss Nicole?” she blurted out.

“I think it’s sad that her parents sent her away because of her drug problems. That was definitely something she really struggled with,” he said. “Treatment might have been a good idea, I don’t know. But I don’t really miss her. I barely think about her at all.”

Her eyes had started to adjust to the darkness, and she noticed a pile of broken glass near the fence in front of them.

“The last time I was up here, it was New Years,” she said. “I came up here with a bunch of people – Katarina, Nicole, Matt. Oh, and I think Sal and Marj stopped by for a bit. It was great. We lit off these firecrackers that Matt got in Chinatown. They were screamers – or whatever those are called. They made this horrible whistling noise and we had to be careful where we stood, so that our clothes didn’t catch on fire.” She laughed at the memory, hoping they weren’t the ones who left the glass.

“You heard about her death, right?” he asked.

“Whose?”

“Katarina. She died a few months ago.”

A sharp intake of breath, and that sudden, horrible clarity of disbelief as she struggled to feel something, anything at all.

“No way. You’re fucking with me,” she said, but she had no idea why he would do that, why anyone would want to do that.

“She hung herself.” Not making eye contact, focusing bluntly on the railing that fronted the parking lot; the railing that did a pitiful job separating the cars from the sharp incline of the mountain. Far below, Eva thought she saw the fog creeping in from the ocean, which meant that it was bound to engulf them soon, too, blowing in thicker and thicker tendrils over Half Moon Bay, Tunitas, La Honda.

Katarina couldn’t be dead. She had laughed with her, had covered with her behind parked cars as the sparklers cracked and fizzled out with a shriek, lighting up the sky as they looked for shooting stars, finding none. She remembered waiting with her for Sal to come back from Safeway with beer, heavy and damp in a paper bag. She was ashamed that she couldn’t remember more.

Emotion came, eventually, and she felt sad, in a nonspecific sort of way, like an approaching stomachache or menstrual cramps. She thought she remembered the last time she saw Katarina, when Katarina and her boyfriend were cuddling in their apartment while Eva sat curled on the sofa, unsure where to direct her eyes. She had never been close to Katarina, and she remembered her as a set of high-heeled boots, smooth coffee-colored skin, a swirl of long red hair that hung in limp waves down her back.

James described her boyfriend finding her, feet still and barely above the ground, head turned at an awkward angle, hands just turning cold.

“What’s worst,” he said quietly, “is that judging by the way she tied the rope, she didn’t mean to die. She wanted him to find her in time. Like, a cry for help.”

“That’s really, really awful,” she said at last, turning back to him.

And it was, and when they drove home, stoned and chilly after leaving the car to see the view better, driving all the way down those quick turns to the stable grid of Mountain View, to streets named after computers and operating systems. He dropped her off in front of her house, and then got out of the car.

“Let’s hang out again soon,” he said – for they were cheerful now, now that the night was coming to a close.”

“Definitely, definitely.”

And he held her so tightly she could barely breathe, savoring his warmth.

II

“This way.”

He had beckoned to her, Nicole at his side, turning just enough to make sure she saw. There was no need, she had thought, there was only one way to go.

“How much further is it?”

“Not too far. Are your feet holding up okay?”

She laughed. “Yeah, they’re fine. I like this more, anyway.”

Then, silence. Dappled light filtered through the trees and pooled as milky gold on the forest floor. The air, heavy with summer and the musk of the woods, clung to their skin. The cicadas hadn’t started yet. Footsteps, pad and crunch, were the only sound. Even the water drifting by in the gorge was deep enough to be silent as it reflected the rich reds and browns and pinks of the shore and rocks.

She remembered these details with perfect clarity as she went to work, waited tables and came home the day after she saw James and held him tight in her driveway, and she knew she would remember them years later – the sounds of the river and the wind, of the inky stillness that surrounded them as they went deeper, deeper. They had

existed in a vacuum to her; Nicole and James walking ahead while she lagged behind, separated from their conversation, taking photos of their feet and the canopy of trees stretching like skinny arms overhead.

Nicole had invited her to the river and they had planned for days. It was their junior year, and she had lost some of the padding on her hips to become almost thin, almost sleek, with Nicole's Adderall. James and Nicole had just gotten together – James was taking a semester off from his sophomore year of college – and she orbited their relationship like a moon.

But it was James and Nicole's day, that day when they went to the river. That had been her reasoning – that there was nothing for her to say that wasn't already being said. And so she took pictures, thinking of the chilly water, and melting mountain snow, and rivers cascading through an unseen wilderness, and how she had to squint to watch the water whenever she looked down from the railroad tracks.

"I really can't wait to see this place," she had said when Nicole had invited her, smiling conspiratorially in that way she felt that friends should. Even after years of stories and shared secrets, she felt like an imposter, and she was sure that Nicole would find her out the minute she let her guard down. Trailing behind, trying not to prick herself on pine needles as she picked her way between the slats of the railroad, she would not be discovered.

"You'll love it. I promise," Nicole had told her as they sat on her floor after school, shoes off, filing their nails. "James took me there a few weeks ago and it was gorgeous. There were all these crazy trees, and this gorge. It could swallow you up! You could

wander into the woods and nobody would ever know,” she had said. “It’s like another world, as soon as you get off the freeway.”

Nicole had a way of making her feel like anything was possible; like they could make up their minds to do anything when they were together, consequences be damned. Looking back, she was disgusted with herself for falling for this bravado, this false confidence. She was embarrassed by her unwillingness to speak up, to step outside the rigid confines she had created for herself, and she looked back on her high school self as something pitiful, to be mocked during stories told at parties. But not yet.

LA chic; rail thin. In junior year, Nicole wore clothing that Eva could only admire from a distance – lace and bows; gothic red lipstick that worked in a way it never would on an overweight body. For her, Eva: hoodies and jeans, sometimes a beanie. Always the battle to grapple with her thighs and full breasts, which she thought looked either sexy, or borderline pornographic, depending on her mood. The fabric always stretching, straining.

On that day in the woods with James, she remembered, Nicole was wearing a crop top to show off a flat stomach; short shorts to show off tan, muscled thighs.

Left foot, right foot, left foot.

Eva walked on the iron tracks so the rocks wouldn’t cut, her shoes in her hand. It was an active railway, but there was always plenty of warning – vibrations, that lonely steel cry. If you put a penny down, it would be crushed to a copper skin. The metal, shaded now, was smooth and cool underneath her toes. She laughed to herself as she

wobbled, unbalanced after the wine she drank in the car after they parked. She never drank before she met Nicole.

The dirt stretched red before her and, though she felt relaxed, her skin curled with fear any time she thought she heard the start of the long, low, shriek of the train. Up ahead, Nicole snaked her hand into James' and above, the tree branches swayed sinuously with a sudden high gust of wind. She strained her eyes against the rays of sun filtering through the red dust, almost able to see clouds, but suddenly –

“How’s the weather back there?” James asked. Eva jumped. He had addressed her in the car, too, where she had sat in the back, the smell of cigarettes emanating from the Camry’s polyester seats

“It’s nice!” she said. “It’s sort of hot, though. I want to go swimming.”

“We’ll get there pretty soon,” he said. “Right around this bend, I think. There’s a rope; you have to hang on to get down the trail.”

“I’ll be okay.”

“Maybe. But don’t fall off the tracks, you might get hit by the train!” he shot back, cackling. And she laughed too, though she was nervous again, and she again felt the sway of her hips as she walked right left right left down the tracks on the chilly metal.

“James comes to the woods a lot,” Nicole had told her, that day in her room. “He lived in Santa Cruz for a long time. I think he misses it.”

“I’d love to live there,” Eva answered. “Or maybe the desert.”

“You could move to the desert in SoCal and live in a cult,” said Nicole. “There are totally cults down there. You see cult people in like, Santa Barbara sometimes.”

“I mean, a lot of those people probably live in Santa Cruz, too,” said Eva. “Maybe his dad lives in a cult. Maybe that’s why nobody’s met him.”

“You’re gonna go south and you’re gonna go nuts,” Nicole replied. “You’ll be one of those people that gets naked and wanders away from a yoga retreat or something. It happens a few times a year but nobody talks about it. Like the people who fall off of cruise ships. Nobody wants to think about it. Plus, his dad doesn’t live in a cult. He’s an orthopedic surgeon.”

“But I don’t even do yoga.”

“You will, I can tell. You’re the type,” said Nicole. And that was that.

So a week later they piled in James’ car to make the drive over 280, 85, 17, 9, to get to the San Lorenzo River, where it wound through the mountains inland from Santa Cruz like the vein of something faceless, all the way to the sea.

“You come to the woods a lot, don’t you? You seem to,” she had asked James while they were in the car, even though she already knew his answer. He seemed to dominate the enclosed space, all lanky arms and sharp jaw, cigarette clamped between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. She felt trapped in the backseat, stifled by James, by his car, by James’ glances at Nicole’s legs, which were stretched ahead of her, her foot cream smearing on the windshield. She was too far away for conversation, so she listened to the music and watched them glide past the cars, buses of 85.

“Yeah, I lived around here until I was ten, until my parents split. My dad stayed here but I visit him a lot,” James said with a grin. “Or sometimes I come here just to

show my ladies a good time. I hope your mom's not too upset that I stole her daughter this weekend."

And Nicole laughed, but said nothing.

James was Nicole's to touch, hers to text when they were at each others' houses, hers to tell dirty secrets to, and to hold tightly when they watched movies together. This she knew because Nicole told her about it in confidence, all those times when they sat on her floor. She knew her envy was pathetic, almost gross.

She imagined his hair would feel wiry and coarse between her fingers, but in a nice way. And she knew from the car ride that he smelled good – like Old Spice and cigarettes. He was someone you could make out with on someone else's patio in the dark; a boyfriend your parents would watch from the corner of their eyes, waiting for him to slip up.

A year later, after their drive to Skyline, she remembered that car ride on their way to the river was when she realized how pleasant she found him to be around, when she realized how much she liked the dimple of skin behind his ear and the thin frame of his shoulders, shifting with the curves of the road.

They got high somewhere along Bear Creek Road so by the time they arrived the world had been turned down, and the sun seemed to cast a haze on the road. She moved as if through water.

"Here. We park here," he said, pulling the car into a turnout on the side of the road.

The trees flanked the road like sentinels, darkening the light to a liquid cool, even though it had been in the nineties in Mountain View – unusual for April, certainly. The dirt of the turnout crunched under her flip-flops and, looking left, she saw a set of carved earthen steps that cascaded down, down to a set of railroad tracks.

When she breathed in, she could taste the air on her lips – sweet and pungent. It had its own presence, this air, and it had a body. This was no desert air, though as she walked on the tracks, she imagined the desert Nicole had mentioned stretching out far away from her, sage brush shivering in a gust of super-heated air that roared through canyons and crevasses, howling into a dusty sunset as she spun faster, faster with the singe of the sun on her arms.

They climbed down the steps and set out along the tracks, stumbling occasionally over the wooden ties, poking themselves with fallen pine needles.

Suddenly, at James' signal, they stopped walking at a point that, to Eva, looked no different from the rest of the embankment.

"This is where we climb down," said James, gesturing vaguely at a toppled cairn.

"Here?" said Nicole.

"Yeah, it's not as bad as it looks, I promise. Maybe the thought of wine at the bottom will keep you motivated," he said, amber eyes glinting, almost feral in the early afternoon sun. "Just don't cut yourself on the roots on the side of the trail."

"I'll watch you and see how you do it," said Nicole. So down he went, lithe and tan, slipping on the loose sand and gravel until he was at the bottom. And Nicole followed.

“That’s my girl,” Eva heard James say as soon as Nicole reached the bottom, and she saw him kiss her forehead.

When it was her turn, she gnawed her lip, centering herself, James and Nicole cheering her on from below. Until – a slide and a stumble, the rope slipping from her hands and her stomach rising to her mouth – she was done, swigging wine from the green bottle James had produced, laughing at her past fear.

“Nice job, chica,” he had said, giving her a high five. And she had giggled.

Rocks dominated the bottom of the gorge, mostly small stones, but also some larger ones the size of a car. Thin sprigs of green rose in the cracks, up from the water.

“This river comes from way up north,” James said. “This was probably snow at one point. My dad told me that.”

“It’s beautiful here,” said Nicole. “I like it here, it’s soothing.”

“Yeah, I think you’d really like my dad,” he continued. “Everybody does.”

They settled on the side of a largish pool, on a sandy spot next to a rock that was just high enough for them to jump five or so feet into the water. The light hit the water from an angle, illuminating it so that it seemed to glow, opalescent with the shimmering light that refracted from submerged rocks and the hint of sediment just obscuring the bottom.

“This lighting is so nice,” she said to Nicole.

“Mhm,” Nicole answered, her mouth closed around the wine bottle. Swallow. “It’s gorgeous, isn’t it? I told you! And you doubted me!”

Eva laughed, and walked around the perimeter, taking up the space.

“I never doubted you,” she said.

More wine and some wild blackberries, then swimming. The pool was fresh, the water chilly to the touch. Eva could look down and see her feet, deathly pale with the green of the river, floundering below. Dead. The water nipped, but once she lost sensation it wasn't too bad. What sunlight made it through the trees was hot, and it brought her almost to a sweat when she was on the shore.

Indian face paint with ground up rocks and they were tribal, traditional. Chalky brown war paint mingled with the coarse brown-black of her hair, making it stick to her face and lips. They were the first humans on earth, bound to the land, sweating in the sun.

Imposters.

War dance, water dance, rain dance.

Still more wine, James' hand clasped around Nicole's waist like a hook, his amber eyes glassy as the sun sank lower on the horizon. His skin glowed bronze as if in a sunset, even though it couldn't have been past two; Eva admired him, looking at her pale skin in comparison. At one point, she ventured upstream, photographing waterfalls and making a wreath from the thin riverweed. Algae coated the granite and she almost fell, her right foot dipping deep into a pool.

Swimming again, then basking in the sun like reptiles, turning beady eyes on one another with satisfaction.

A train passed by at one point, huffing smoke through the trees up above. The roar of its wheels resounded on the walls of the gorge.

“It’s a freight train,” James said. “Sometimes they can get eighty cars long. They go on forever.”

And Eva had nodded along, picturing those snowy peaks melting into streams and tributaries all the way down to the sea, fluid pouring away from a crucible to condense again and again. You never doubted James.

He told them later – when they were curled on the picnic blanket that Nicole had brought – that he had ridden the rails once, when he ran away from home when he was fifteen. Learned to put out cigarettes with his feet, got beaded necklaces from a Hare Krishna commune. *But now I’m on good terms with my dad again.*

Nodding, nodding, she had nothing to contribute. A childhood spent in the claustrophobic world of the Silicon Valley, her hands shaped by her mother’s clay and her father’s conferences. *I might be back for dinner, but don’t wait for me* as he strode out the door, frantically tying on a tie, slicking back thinning hair. A peck on her mother’s cheek.

The water murmured, crystal grey. No sound except for the river and a late afternoon freight train. When she woke, blinking the sand from her eyelashes, face pressed onto the back of her hand, she realized that she had dreamed she was a fish, asexual. Do fish dream? Fresh eyes and murky minds. She imagined herself as a flounder, gliding over the mud of the bay, plumbing the depths as the water pressure grew; a dull, turbulent grey above her and the inky abyss of the continental plate below.

The sky breathed with the last traces of her sleep. Nicole and James continued to doze, his lips agape, hers pursed, a wrinkle creasing her forehead. A wind blew through the trees and the river broke out in ripples. She shivered. San Lorenzo. Everything was Spanish now; it was all Los Angeles and San Jose and San Francisco and San Carlos and Santa Barbara. A day trip from a valley school into the neighboring mountains and everything was different, inverted once again.

Invaders.

She sighed, collecting herself. There was no reason to wake them. Though darkness was creeping toward the horizon, it would be hours until nightfall and leaving the gorge wouldn't be a problem – all they had to do was climb; up to the tracks, then back up the trail to where the car waited, tucked away. *You'd love my dad. Everybody does.* She imagined that the presence of James' father stretched through the mountains, filtering down to where she sat, undecided about where to go, where to wander as the sleepers slept and the water pulsed south. Would they have liked her father? She wasn't sure. He studied anthropology, religion; that ancient desire to believe in a rhythm, a driving motion. The belief that, in some way, everything would come full circle eventually, it just might take some time.

By the river, she rediscovered a half empty wine bottle on the edge of the plot of sand, and she sipped it alone until it was nearly gone, then picked her way back through the rocks upstream, then back to the sand again, where she could sit with her knees against her chest. By then, an iron flush had fallen over the water and the river felt like ice against her feet. Far overhead, early afternoon clouds were starting to blot out the

sun; interrupted, the light fell heavy and grey, casting a gloom on the trees. She contemplated walking barefoot over the fallen leaves, whimsical and wild, breathing the sharp, crisp scent of the crushed needles beneath her feet, loamy with late spring rain. But no, the forest would bring darkness and obscurity, and suddenly she was sure she would go mad if she stepped so much as a foot away from the riverbank.

Surely she would go mad.

Surely she would,

Surely she,

Mad.

Hundreds of miles away, she knew the desert shimmered in air light as a feather, air that drifted in flurries and waves through the arms of Joshua trees and over ghost towns and peeling paint, gas stations rusting away as the occasional visitor squinted to see them, against the mirage of heat that rose up around sweaty knees and limp clothing. Hundreds of miles away, she was skinny, a specter in the desert, her glossy hair a mane, radiant in that old timey, pin-up kind of way. For there is nostalgia to the desert, where mod architecture recalls martinis, and straight white teeth, and color coordinated kitchens.

When she saw James in the times that followed the night on Skyline, she recalled the feeling of the silt between her toes and the reptilian green of her skin. Insulating herself from him even as she held him closer and closer. Next time. Always next time.

For they had woken up as she was tracing the lines of a redwood tree with her eyes and the lens of the camera, lighting on the fingerprint ripples in the wood grain,

and watching the whip-like red branches drift in the fog that was beginning to roil downward in waves, as the sky darkened to clammy white, then dull, exhausted grey. They awoke in grey scale, and they drank with her.

III

On Thursday night, she snuck out on bike after her shift was done, creeping through the side yard. She didn't have a curfew, but sometimes it was easier just to leave.

She had wanted to wear a dress – maybe something low-cut, something that showed off her legs – but biking and dresses never went too well together, so it was back to skinny jeans and a thin sweatshirt, ballet flats and hair pulled back from her ears so that the curls were under control.

It had been a warm day, and she could just feel the heat radiating from the bricks while she walked into the front yard. The air hung light, watery with the remnants of twilight.

Still, she had seen the fog rolling in over the hills as she drove home on Alma, billowing with icy fingers down to the still-golden valley. The fog was silence, a chilly numbness that muffled the distant sounds of the freeway and hid the light of San Francisco. When you drove in the hills at night, it was suffocating, coming on abruptly in thick waves that rolled over Page Mill and down Skyline, leaving you with only

asphalt, red earth and wild sage. It was lovely as it tumbled through the hills, but when it reached the valley floor, Eva hated the feel of it on her face.

But it was only just dark, and her parents weren't home yet, so she savored that early evening hum of the valley, when the wind blows just right and the sound of 101 seeps through the trees.

She sighed then pushed off, the backpack of beer swaying awkwardly with her movement as she worked her way through the lattice of streets out toward the Mountain View border.

James was at the Motel 6 on El Camino. It was, unquestionably, the worst motel she had ever been inside, but they went there – or at least James did – so semi-frequently for kick-backs that the night clerk knew them, and never got them in trouble. But why would he? They were often the only people there, and the other guests were hardly doing anything better. It was better than staying at home, plus, though they never used it, there was a pool.

The neighborhood was deserted after dark, cars stowed neatly in driveways, the wide streets beckoning. She could see the cold blue light of televisions shining through French windows and the roads – smooth, almost glossy – shone under the streetlights. From wetlands, to orchards, to a circuit board of streets with foreign names.

Eva passed the quiet apartments of Rengstorff, and then Mi Pueblo with its fluorescent lights harsh on the train tracks and the stragglers – round-faced Mexican men in plaid shirts, smoking – clustered together on the benches outside. And still that hum of the valley, a sort of growling murmur that rose off the factories out by the

marshes, radiated from the strangely blank warehouses out by the freeway, echoed from the walls of the hills that rolled into the distance. *More, more, more* it seemed to urge – louder at night, than during the daytime when the noise of cars and people drowned it out.

There had been about a dozen people at the Motel 6 before Eva arrived, sweat prickling over her chilled arms from the moment James opened the door. Now, the party was fading.

“Hey, thanks for the beer,” he said after a lingering hug. “We were down to the last part of this handle.” He waved a nearly empty bottle of Jim Beam in front of her. She nearly shuddered, recalling the searing, rotten taste of the whiskey she had drunk the past weekend. The noise inside had died down at her arrival, and she couldn’t figure out how to pass James in the doorframe without shoving him.

“It’s not that bad,” he laughed. “We do have chaser.” He grinned, and gestured to the cans of Monster distributed around the room.

“That still sounds pretty bad,” she said, snaking around him. “But it’s okay. Sal doesn’t mind buying me beer. I think he feels like he owes it to me, to buy me beer while I’m underage. He didn’t have anyone to help him out when he was younger.” She could tell that she was rambling, so she trailed off and sat down on the foot of one of the beds after he let her through.

“It’s nice to see you. We missed you at the last one, you should have been there,” he said, joining her.

The group had dwindled to only five people – herself, James, Andy and two of Andy’s male friends who she didn’t know. One of them – stocky, glasses; maybe named Zack? – had lapsed into silence that he filled by pouring, drinking, refilling a cup with the remnants of the handle and ice from the machine in the hallway. The other, a slight blond teenager with greasy hair and a Golden State Warriors jersey, fidgeted with his phone while glancing around the room.

She was always faintly uncomfortable when the gender ratio of a gathering was uneven, afraid that her voice would be drowned out as she sat alone, studying faces and wondering when she would think of something to say.

“Hey, Eva, long time no see.” Andy grinned at her from the other twin bed. “What are you up to these days?”

“Oh, nothing much. I work at a hummus place on University. Petra’s Hummus.”

Andy nodded enthusiastically. Eva noticed he had grown a mustache that stretched uncomfortably across his upper lip, like a caterpillar.

“Do you make the hummus?” he asked. I’ve always wanted to know how to make hummus. It’d be a cool party trick – ya know? Just go into the kitchen and bust out some hummus?” Eva noted his slur. “Just come back out to the party all, *hey!* I made this shit!”

Eva laughed. “Nah, I’m just a waitress. There’s a whole prep team that makes the hummus. I’d ask them how but most of them only speak Spanish.”

“Makes sense, makes sense. When I worked at Fraiche it was the same shit, everyone just comes over from EPA for jobs. There’s nothing to do there, unless you want to work at a taco truck.”

“Yeah, they work hard,” she said, thinking of her coworkers’ long trek across the freeway from East Palo Alto, from their tiny, low slung houses and gridded streets patrolled by kids – teenagers – with trick bikes and loose pants.

“They probably work harder than me.”

She felt out of place in this room, though she couldn’t put a finger on why. It was the same sensation she had once felt when she had gone to the storeroom at work and had come upon two of her coworkers, looking blankly at her as she opened the door.

She opened a second beer, and then a third.

“Do you want some of this?” James asked her, holding a rolled cigarette in front of her. “It’s a spliff.” He had come back from the ice machine again, and had flopped down next to her on the bed, his warm hand brushing her knee. She hesitated, but then said yes. Her lips had started to take on a gummy numbness, and her chest felt hot. She felt smothered by the heavy polyester blanket draped across the bed.

“My uncle grew that,” Andy called from across the room. “He lives up in Humboldt. I went to visit him last week. That’s some good herb, right there.”

“I’ve always wanted to go there,” said Eva. She couldn’t imagine Humboldt as anything other than a paradise.

“It’s actually really boring,” he said laughing. “There’s meth everywhere. There’s nothing to do.”

Andy’s friends still seemed as if they were on the brink of leaving. She glanced at the clock – an hour had passed. The hotel had been silent as she walked up the steps to

the second floor room, and she was fairly sure there was nobody else there. She felt exposed.

“My band’s single got picked up SURL Magazine last week,” James announced as the song playing on his phone trickled to an end. “They promoted it on their blog.”

“What the fuck is SURL Magazine?” asked Andy.

“It’s a French Magazine, man,” said James. “VICE does some stuff with them.”

Andy nodded.

“And what do you mean they picked you up?” Andy slurred. “Did they, like, promote you or something? Did they offer you a record deal? That would be cool if you were famous or something.” He trailed off with a maniacal laugh.

James chortled. “None of that, but they posted one of our videos on Twitter along. We’re getting bigger, I can feel it.”

“Is this the band you started in LA?” Eva asked him quietly. She was still trying to piece together the pieces of his life. It seemed like he was everywhere, like he knew everyone. “I thought you broke up a while ago.”

“Yeah, it is. I dunno, they found some of our stuff online. We haven’t put out anything new in a while.”

“For sure.”

She craved the intimacy he had with Andy, and that Andy had with his friends, who he continued to speak to quietly from the other side of the room; the intimacy James shared with Andy when they spoke for hours about the bands they knew, the people they knew, people she had never heard of and had never met.

Now four drinks deep, she felt her world blurring, but the knot in her stomach stayed tight. Impulsively, she grabbed James' hand from the bed next to her, and he grabbed back. The room was hot and smoky; she could barely breathe. She was on her way to the balcony, for a moment to herself where she could text Sal, to thank him for the beer – or was it really just an excuse to walk around – when James suggested they go swimming in the pool outside, and everyone in the room pounced on the idea.

The room, now quiet, had taken on a gauzy quality through the smoke, and the smell of Andy's cologne, and the raspy, biting smell of whiskey and beer; she felt almost sick, but also light to the point of weightlessness, free in the night and away from her house. The five of them whooping through the halls, suddenly electrified by the idea of a pool and anything, anything other than a crowded dusty room; thrilled by the thought of going in the hotel pool that they had only ever glanced at and stripping under the fluorescent pool lights, beer-sodden bodies gleaming yellow.

"The fog's coming in," James noted, pointing toward the hills. And it was – 1 a.m. and the air was starting to feel heavy; the droplets roiled silently in the lights, not shimmering so much as drifting. She nodded, jerking the skinny jeans from her feet, crouching to hide the pout of her stomach from James' eyes as he smoked a cigarette on the pool chair. And then a brief moment of weightlessness –

The water felt buttery warm when she dove in, pleased that she had taken the time to match her bra and underwear. Just in case, she had reasoned. Gliding under the surface with her breath held.

“Come in,” she demanded, looking up at him to where he sat, his feet – sallow skin, dark hair – inches from the edge of the pool.

His hair glinted in the light. Andy and his friends bobbed in the shallow end, the blond kid looking like a drowned rat with his greasy hair slicked across his head.

He shook his head, smiling.

“Come,” and she grabbed his foot.

“I don’t have a swimsuit,” he said. His hair stood out sharply against the streetlights and faded night sky, almost like a halo. She knew that the tattoo on his left shoulder was the silhouette of a crow, even though it looked like an eagle. There were only four cars in the parking lot, and she knew that at least two of them belonged to members of the group.

“Neither do I,” she said. Flirting felt heavy on her tongue, but she hoped he was too drunk to notice that she said it jerkily, the words tumbling quickly from her mouth before she could take them back. She flopped over to her back, floating in the deep end, her feet no longer touching the bottom. If she were sober, she would have felt brash and unfeminine.

“The water’s really nice. It’s really warm,” she said.

“I bet they haven’t cleaned that pool in months. It’s probably full of piss.”

“So what. It’s chlorinated. You’re being a brat.”

It only ended when she pushed him in – a sudden chill when she got out, as the air wrapped around her.

She splashed him as he gasped for air, laughing at her.

“Well that was unexpected,” he said. And he grabbed her ass underwater. He had taken the whiskey downstairs and they drank it – still floating in the deep end, occasionally joined by the three others who paddled over to drink. She splashed them too.

“Stop,” Andy said. He didn’t want to get his hair wet. And she laughed and splashed him again anyway, and he didn’t laugh.

The fog had come in abruptly and was snaking down the El Camino, blotting out the valley until she could barely see the traffic light at the intersection – *more, more, more* until the chant turned into a whisper, and then a tinnitus silence of loss. And James was holding her in the water water, chest deep in the pool, kissing her.

After that, her memory grew hazy. She remembered going upstairs and crawling under the cover with James, feeling the firmness of his chest, kissing him deeply, recklessly unconcerned by the presence of the three others in the room, most of whom were getting ready to leave. Then someone turned out the light.

She woke early the next morning sprawled on her back, James’ arm below her neck. They were alone. Her skin felt clammy with hangover, and a headache seemed imminent. Groaning, she glanced outside. The fog was burning off, but it still hung high in the sky, casting a pallor on El Camino, which chugged along with the Friday morning traffic. It would be warm later, but now – she cracked the window, feeling the morning chill rush in – it was marine as the bay rose groggily from a bed of fog.

Washing her face with the thin motel towel, Eva remembered slowly, carefully easing her body into a damp question mark around James' torso and thigh. She remembered when he stirred, putting his arms around her when she said she was cold, and letting out a wave of shivers from underneath the thin sheets, as the occasional pair of headlights shone in through the pulled blinds and as the faintest blushes of sunrise leaked through the windows. He had kissed her and had cupped her and she had felt a crude lightness at his touch, and had felt that surely he was making a mistake, surely he couldn't want her. But he had, he had said. He always had. And she couldn't think of a good reason to doubt him.

So she dressed and did her best to tidy her makeup. Her skin looked grey; she hadn't made it to the beach since wintertime. She pinched her cheeks and, satisfied, crawled back onto the bed.

"Get up," she whispered, nudging his arm. "Get up, get up, get up."

James groaned, rolling over into a ball.

"Let's get donuts."

He murmured in protest.

"I'll buy you coffee. Get up, let's get out of here." She shoved him more aggressively. "This room is disgusting." She opened the blinds, opened the windows the rest of the way, allowing the chill to rush inside, to push out the smoky air.

She could tell he was close to snapping at her, but she felt exhilarated by the memory of his touch. He had kissed her.

"Give me five more minutes. And I'll smoke a cigarette. And we'll go."

“Kay,” she replied. “Five minutes. Or I’m going to throw you into the pool.”

“Mkay.”

She would wait, and they would go, and she would walk with him on the grey half-mile down El Camino to the 24-hour donut shop, and he would place his hand on her lower back, and would laugh at her jokes. They would sit on the steps outside as he smoked another cigarette, and she would drink her coffee, and then she would go home. And they would do this again, and again, and again. She had a feeling.

So she waited, and he showered, and they paid, and then they left.

IV

A cold afternoon, once sea bright – now, the fog rolled in under them, around them, over the bald hills to the south. The sun faded fast, the water darkened over the bay, the hills and spires turned grim. The pale grass no longer shone green, and shadows elongated, pooled outside the shops and alleys across the street, along the curbs and gutters, from the palm trees shading the patchy grass where they sat in a loose ring of bags. Down, down, down. His pants felt damp with the wet of the ground.

They had been there for a while, too long, watching the pulse and swarm of groups, coming and going, the slow, mechanical windings of the Mexican popsicle vendor – *popsicles, cold drinks* – until the vendor, too, had walked down to the street and disappeared.

“What time is the show again?” His hair felt clammy when he swatted it back from his eyes.

“Doors open at 8. Tim goes on at 9, probably,” said Zack. “We should probably leave in like, an hour.” Checking his watch, radioactive green.

“For sure. And I guess we’ll meet Eliot there, too.”

“Yeah, he’s supposed to text me.”

So they would leave the park at 8:30 to stand in the front, by the stage of Bottom of the Hill – or outside, smoking, watching the lights fade over the city. To see Tim’s band. Sweat and other people’s cigarettes.

“How’s that burrito coming along?” he asked James.

“I killed it,” he said, laughing.

It was down to a husk in James’ hand, the tortilla slimy with salsa and tangled in the aluminum foil. His own burrito was long gone.

“You almost killed it, it’s still sort of hanging on. You should finish it off.”

James ignored him. “That place was fine. Gordo’s will always be the best, though. I mean, goddamn their pork is good. Nice and smoky.”

“You’re such an elitist. Always the burrito hipster. That place is literally a hole in the wall.”

“Different strokes for different folks. And it’s not literally a hole in the wall. It’s literally a restaurant.”

“Whatever, ya dingus.”

A play punch, then the burrito skin into the dirt, abandoned as James took another swig from the whiskey bottle.

Dolores Park was almost empty. Down the embankment from them, an elderly Japanese woman threw a ball for a dog, back and forth, while a young man who looked like he could have been her son looked on, holding a backpack. Near the tennis courts, a girl hula hooped alone, dancing in place, all yoga pants and taut stomach.

The playground was empty and he was tempted to ask if they wanted to go on the swings – weightless with whiskey, swinging up, up over the city, the park through darkened legs – but he was sure they would say no, so he stayed, legs crossed and arms deliciously warm inside his father’s heavy coat, a souvenir from his time as a park ranger. Zack was watching the dog, his eyes distorted behind his prescription glasses.

How old was too old to be in a park at night? When did it start being weird? He had at least a few more years, he was sure.

“Could I get a sip, James? Just one, I’m still totally fine to drive,” asked Zack.

“Sure thing,” and he passed the bottle.

He heard footsteps on concrete, heard snippets of conversation – a woman wearing a faux fur coat walking by on the path behind them, a dark silhouette against the lights of the park bathrooms. Probably on her way to the MUNI stop. It got you where you needed to go, if you could wait.

“Well, she said she really liked living there.” A pause. “Yeah, he did. Said it would go up to more than a thousand a month.” Pause, breathing audibly as she walked up the hill. “I know, right?” Pause. “Yeah, I visited her last week and it just wasn’t the same...”

“Was that girl wearing Google glass?” asked James. “I didn’t see a phone but she might have been wearing glasses.”

“Could have been Bluetooth. But I wasn’t really paying attention,” said Andy. “It’s pretty dark.

“My dad was thinking of getting Glass.”

“Of course he fucking was, James. Your dad loves all that shit,” said Andy. And it was true.

“Well, he’s fortunate he can afford it, with his job. He’s done well for himself. It costs, like fifteen hundred bucks.”

Again with the money. He could have punched him, but there was nothing to say, so he bit his lip. It wasn’t jealousy. James’ thoughts on money were simply irritating; they rose predictably, annoyingly. Zack was staring intently away from the two of them, now alternating between the tiled roof of Mission High School and the hula hooper, still dancing silently in the dusk. *Arms like tentacles*, he thought, and it almost made sense.

“Whiskey, please?” Andy asked James in a way that was meant to be humorous, gesturing to where it lay between James’ feet, almost hidden. James passed it to him, deadpan.

He took a swig, passed it back.

“Gotta love Bullet,” said James, looking at the label. “And Dolores. If you tried to just...drink like this in a park in Massachusetts, you’d be arrested like that,” he said, snapping his fingers for emphasis. “I wish I could live here. But it’s just too expensive.” Talking, talking, talking.

“You could live here,” said Zack. “You’ve just got to find the right place, with the right people.

“Maybe,” he said, worrying a blade of dried grass between his fingers. “I don’t know where I want to be. I’m not sure this is it, but I don’t know where else I would go. We’re lucky to live in a place like this. It’s sort of magical.”

“Definitely magical. I mean, that’s why I went to UCSC for school,” said Andy.

“Well, and you wanted to study kelp,” said Zack dryly.

“That’s part of it too, yes.”

8:15. The sun nearly down, a chill settling heavy over the land as the city skyline blurred with fog. The Mission was always sunny, never foggy; never gloomy in the way Golden Gate Park could be, mysterious and almost prehistoric with those heavy, gnarled trees; dew and grey sky, until you emerged at the coast.

“What’s up with you and Eva?” Zack asked James abruptly. “You looked pretty cozy at that hotel party a while ago. She got kinda hot.”

“Nothing, we’re just friends. We’re just keeping it casual. You know. She’s not really my type,” he said, digging in his bag for a cigarette. “I mostly just know her through Nicole.”

Zack silently knit his fingers together, looking again out over the city, over the bay.

Andy thought about when he had last seen Eva and James together – at Eva’s work, when she was on her lunch break. They had eaten with her on the back patio, sitting across from the painted mural – tiny white houses like teeth on an imaginary shore; olive trees all in a row.

We were around and we thought, we should see if Eva’s working, James had told her. And here you are!

She had been wearing a low-cut shirt, having taken off her work shirt for her break. Her skin was flushed and the water glasses refracted in rainbows on the fabric

tight across her chest. *It's always a good day for hummus*, she had laughed, playing with her hair – long, in loose black curls – and he had admired the sunlight on her brown eyes, how it made her squint.

“Aren’t you sort of friends with her brother, too? Isn’t his name Sal?” asked Andy.

“Yeah, sort of. I see him around sometimes. Mostly if I really, really need to buy weed. He’s kind of shady,” said James.

“Yeah, I buy from him too, sometimes. He seems like kind of a jerk,” said Zack. “It seems like he always goes for those really insecure girls. And then he moves on. Like, his girlfriend right now is this super hot blonde, but she barely speaks English. And he dated that girl Nikki in high school.”

“Sal’s girlfriend speaks English, it’s just not her first language,” said James. “Eva says she’s just quiet. Really introverted.”

He lit his cigarette, inhaled deeply.

“I’ve always been sort of fascinated by Sal,” he said. “He’s definitely got game. I mean, that’s not necessarily a good thing, but he does always get girls.”

Talk, talk, talk. Andy didn’t know Sal and he didn’t care.

“Could I get a cigarette?” asked Andy.

“You owe me like, a pack. But sure,” said James.

Andy flicked his lighter and the tip of the cigarette flared into life.

“Thanks.”

V

He felt a brisk ocean breeze as soon as he left his car, chilly against sunburnt skin despite the hot day. Savoring it, he took a deep breath and walked inside, then: *this way, right through here*, followed the host.

Dinner.

The high-ceilinged room that budded from the main dining room was cool, though the walls' peacock blue made the sky outside look almost shrill by comparison. Moody landscapes dominated the wall behind the table – dusky forest scenes; animal eyes glinting darkly. Three floor-to-ceiling bay windows faced the bay where below, the boats of the Sausalito yacht club bobbed in the surf like plastic figurines. James imagined the hollow smack of water against their hulls – a wet pop, weighty and firm.

Gran had seated herself at the head of the table, next to Hen, with the windows at her back. Against the southern sun, she was a backlit silhouette, her hair gathered tidily into a bun.

“They always maintained a pretty impressive collection of paintings at their house; they let us tour it once, a few years ago,” she was saying when he entered.

“They’ve always been good friends, the Mortensons. They have a son – Clark – who applied to Hampshire a few years ago, actually, but then he was accepted to Harvard.”

Turning to him in greeting – “Do you remember him, James?”

He did – a lanky young man with a round face and meticulously gelled hair.

James remembered smooth hands, an oversized Tissot watch.

“Yeah, we went to dinner with him and his father, I think.”

“Oh, of course! At the Explorers’ Club!” his grandmother’s face erupted into a smile. “That was such a nice evening. We’re so fortunate that your grandfather’s work gives us reciprocal privileges at so many places. How do you like the Bantam Club, by the way? We’re always happy when we have the chance to come out here. Stanford is lovely, this time of year.”

Gran’s eyes had always had a peculiar, hypnotic immediacy to them. Though she was, by now, in her early eighties, she still possessed a vitality that asserted itself in the strict alignment of her spine, her steely gaze. Her diaphanous floral shirt flattered, but did not soften her light blue eyes.

“So far, so good!” he laughed, still in an effort to break to downplay the fact that he had been late, quite late. Less time for posturing or false intimacy that way. But still: he was obligated to come.

Gran’s mouth pinched together in a smile. “What a shame your father couldn’t make it today,” she said. “I know how busy he is, but it’s always a pleasure to see you in his stead.” James nodded. “And especially given that your sister is so far away from us now!” Again, he nodded.

“Definitely, definitely. The Peace Corps keeps its members pretty busy, or so I hear,” he said.

“Oh, definitely. And she knows, I hope, how proud we all are of her.”

“Yeah, they work them hard in Cambodia, she’s probably teaching something like eight, nine hours a day,” said Leia from across the table. She had been watching the conversation in silence, combing her hair with her fingers. “When I was in the Corps, we were just swamped with work. Oh my god, and the kids. It’s hard to get any work done when you just want to play with them all the time!” she said, laughing. James nodded, dumbly. “You just can’t even imagine it, until you’ve been there. But the weather here is so nice. In Davis it’s just...*kill me* hot. And in Cambodia, of course.”

She was the kind of person who always spoke a bit louder than those around her, who would elbow ahead of you on the BART before glancing backwards with a tight-lipped, apologetic smile, as if there had simply been no other way.

“Well you always have the Sacramento Delta right there, in case you want to go out. I know you won’t, but it *is* there. And you’ve always got a fishing buddy if you want one,” said Hen.

“If you were ever around! You hardly ever come out from Chicago any more,” said Leia, giving him a playful push.

Gran nodded along, the light glancing rhythmically off her eyeglasses. “Well in any case, you’ve got air conditioning, and that lovely garden you made.”

James wondered what she would think of his father’s house, tucked in the shade beneath the trees on the outskirts of the UC Santa Cruz campus. It emerged from the

gloom like some sort of fungus, marine fog filtering around it in waves, until you could feel it in your lungs. He had been there over the past weekend, talking about his father's new girlfriend, and the woman who had consulted with him about her spinal surgery the week before. *A real tight ass on that one*, his father had said to him, quietly, as they sat at the kitchen table tasting the craft beer that James had brought down. Had it been Dogfish Head?

They ordered. For him: gazpacho, and then roasted scallops as an entrée – *what would they do with the toasted almonds?* He declined the offer of wine.

His father's girlfriend, Sarah, was hot. That fact was indisputable, and rightly so: his father was a draw. Wealthy, fit, educated – his had been in the top ten percent of his graduating class at Johns Hopkins, as James never tired of telling his friends. Though he usually treated the standard portfolio of clients – older, overweight men, bodies worn from years of abuse; frail girls with scoliosis – every once in a while, his father's orthopedic office would receive someone worth taking notice of. What he wouldn't do to have that confident smile, the perfectly timed smirks, the strategic touches on the leg, the shoulder. Still, Hampshire had done well for him – round-eyed freshmen; girls in too-tight formal dresses; hall mates who needed a friendly ear. He had made himself available, though there was never an expectation that he would continue to be. It was a game, yes. He found a mark and then circled in, closer, closer.

Out on the bay, a cargo ship wended its way to the sea, hundreds of tons of steel and fuel fighting the tide. A dark dot against the water.

He noticed that Chris had fallen deep into conversation with Hen about medical research opportunities at Harvard. Though they had a similar profile, Chris' thin lips and hooked nose were at odds with his just-protruding gut. He waddled faintly when he walked. Hen, too, had gained weight, though James also noticed a general heaviness to him – a sagging around the eyes, a limpness of his lips. His semi-retirement had aged him, it seemed, though he could still rise to the occasion when lecturing, hence his most recent visit.

Leia was telling Chris about her friend who had had luck finding work in a burn unit. Aunt Margot clucked sympathetically at her descriptions of the victims she treated – tiny mangled children, who would need to come to the unit multiple times a year as the burned tissue stretched.

“Or *doesn't* stretch,” she clarified. “The tissue is dead, so in rehabilitation, we need to work around that. Otherwise they won't have a full range of movement.”

“That's such important work that you do,” Margot said softly. “You're making such a difference.”

His body was firm, supple. He had inherited his father's strong jaw, which had made its way down from Hen. From his father, too, he had received thick dark hair that wouldn't recede. His white button down shirt fit him like a glove and though he had combed his hair only briefly in the car, he was confident that he looked tidy, respectable. And yet there was nothing to say.

Instead, he observed; sitting demurely until the conversation inevitably clocked around to him. He noticed that a thin crack in the molding led directly to one of the

arches of the bridge, down through the reinforced metal, down to turbulent water that sparkled in the light of the setting sun. He imagined it stretching open, until the entire Bantam Club cracked at the seams, leaving them exposed on the hillside. The cargo ship was nearly to the bridge now, its wake leaving a wide, choppy V in the deep blue of the water. The light was sinking, and the wind was dying. In the harbor, a smaller Catalina bobbed aimlessly in its slip, sails flapping limply.

Hampshire would be pleasant this time of year, one of the only pleasant times in the Massachusetts calendar. The sun would be high, but the air would feel fresh; the flowers wouldn't seem tired. Boston would hold some sort of promise – of adventure? excitement? He never been around to find out.

“So how was your semester off?” asked Chris. “You took one off your freshman year too, didn't you?”

“It went really well!” he said enthusiastically. “I did a lot of the same things I'm doing now. I'm reading a lot, I think I might have something in mind for a senior thesis. I'm thinking of doing a feminist reading of Marx.”

Chris smiled, and then laughed. “Okay then! That is not my area of expertise.”

James nodded. “Well, I took a feminist class last semester and it really resonated with me. My teacher joked that I understand it so well that I'm practically a woman,” he said with a chuckle. An implication of fraternal understanding – *can you believe that she could think such a thing?* “But yeah, I've been reading a lot of philosophy recently. That's probably my main interest, right now.”

“You’re going to be a senior next year, yeah?” Chris asked. Aunt Margo was listening intently to the conversation now.

“Well, sort of. I’m also sort of going to be a junior. Because I’m taking some time off now, and because not all my classes transferred when I went to France.”

That explanation was a mistake, he realized immediately. There was a chance Chris didn’t know he had gone to France, and now he would need to explain where he had gone. With whom. Why.

And sure enough, the deluge of questions followed, as well as his answers, now rote. He had gone abroad in the spring of his sophomore year to Paris. He had studied French history, as well as ecology and a rudimentary German class. He had enjoyed himself, yes, spitting words back.

He did not tell them that he rarely went to class; that his host family – la famille Arnaud – frequently took three or four day weekends to the south of France, to swim; that he had gone not because he cared about France or French culture, but to shake the memory of Nicole, who had lingered at the corners of his mind for months, digging her heels in, refusing to leave. Not even her, so much, as the Nicole of his mind – a golden-skinned waif with long, caramel hair and a tinkling laugh.

He had replaced her with les Arnauds: with Monsieur Arnaud and his large nose, who rarely smiled but who could play the piano like a mad man, and Madame Arnaud, a tiny woman with a silver pixie cut who would wander her Paris apartment for hours on the phone, smoking cigarillos that smelled like death. *Il ne peut pas comprendre, il faut qu’on parle doucement*, she would say, eyeing him in a way that didn’t quite seem

friendly. He can't understand you. Speak slowly. And they would, but he would inevitably lose them again. Sunning himself on their balcony (in the city) or the porch (in the south), the sun glinting off their China plates. *Doucement, doucement.*

He recalled the sleek lines of their son, Marc, on one of the days they went swimming. A lithe figure made radiant by the sun as he called down; sinewy legs and a speedo; gripping onto dark rocks with his toes. They had come to the beach for the rocks – *viens, viens* – and had spent the day with Marc's sister Chloe in the sticky, humid shade on the beach, eating yogurt and drinking wine. He could still remember the taste of his rolled cigarettes with the wine, the smoke mixing with the sweet bite. The sun, hot on their faces. Freckles, the smell of sunscreen.

Viens, viens, Marc had called, trying to wave him up so that he wouldn't jump alone, his dark hair illuminated like a halo, his skin a hazelnut brown. *Maintenant, nous sautons.* Now, we jump. The sky and the sea were so blue as to be unreal, while clouds lurked on the horizon, shifting. James and Chloe had smiled but stayed there in silence, sitting motionless, until their sweat pooled in their knees, their elbows; clustered in drops on their foreheads. The heat was suffocating, a backdrop for the blinding sun, and the bugs – mosquitos, and cicadas that sat in the bushes, on the thin telephone poles, whining mechanically. They had walked the twenty minutes to the beach so they could jump from the rocks into that eerily still water, but now they were paralyzed by heat and the apathy of wine.

Courage! James had cheered him on – one of the few words in French he felt confident using – and Jacques had dived, an arc in the still air, popping up moments

later like a cork, grinning. They had walked back hours later with the salt sticky on their skin, tight with sunburn, to sit on the grassy yard and swat mosquitos while Madame Arnaud brought them food, still smoking her cigarillos.

“Ah, and our dinner has arrived,” said Hen, obviously satisfied. Three servers had swooped into the room without James noticing and his dinner lay before him. The scallops, it turned out, had been prepared with a thin drizzle of browned butter sauce, the roasted almonds sprinkled on top with artful carelessness. A handful of mixed greens lay in an arc.

Through the bay windows, the city appeared serene, a twinkling gauze of lights hung above the oily water.

“Thank you for coming here tonight, everyone,” Gran said. “We’re so lucky to be back here on the West coast. It’s our favorite coast, you know,” she said with a wink. “Let’s toast to those who are currently *in absentia*.”

Clinking, laughter. James had given in to a glass of wine and he drank it greedily, the tannins bitter on his tongue. Hen had picked up his fork to eat, and he followed his lead. It would have been rude not to.

He took the long route home, looping down the eastern shore of the Bay to the Dumbarton Bridge. Near Oakland he had nearly collided with an 18-wheeler – the road had narrowed abruptly from four to two lanes, and the change caught him off guard. Stunned, he drove in silence with the window down, to focus. Far behind him, the lights of the city glinted on the black water, the bridge obscured. The sun had set late, but the

dinner had gone on and on. He couldn't find a good reason to leave, so he stayed and stayed for the stories, the silent comparisons; so that he could listen to Aunt Margot dredge up unfavorable stories about his father from thirty, forty years before, her eyes crinkling with glee, again and again.

It always took a while to recover from these gatherings. But as he drove home, there was something soothing in the road, in the flow of traffic, and he couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of calm, with the lights behind him and ahead of him and over the water, and with the cars – like schooling fish – that darted left, right, on, off.

In the darkness, the salt flats and the mashes seemed to disappear, leaving only their foul, earthy stench. In the daytime, they were a patchwork of colors, all pinks and reds and blues and greens. He remembered drunkenly lighting off fireworks near his friend's boat one summer, remembered walking barefoot through a dried flat, the salt prickling his feet until he sank to his ankles at one point; deeper, deeper into the anaerobic warmth. Blue – green – red above him, and slurred laughter, a blur of tanned skin, her blonde hair whipping in the light of the sparklers, of cameras, of the lights of the parking lot.

He had last slept with Nicole the night before he had gone back to Hampshire for his sophomore year – musky hair, the weight of her thighs. He remembered the feeling of her stomach muscles in the dark. Arm candy, but also witty, engaging. Hot, but not slutty. He felt himself growing aroused and he gritted his teeth, disgusted.

She had broken up with him only a few weeks after he had left. He had never been broken up with before. *I'm sorry, I just can't do long distance*, she had said. And

realistically, he couldn't either, but it gave him a sense of warmth, of smug contentment, to point to a picture and be able to say: *Look at my girlfriend. Here she is.*

Now Eva. Her quiet company, her ability to listen without comment or judgment. But he had no patience for her awkwardness or her anxiety, which she never expressed, but which he could feel, viscerally, whenever she was sober. In the darkness, they had fumbled together; had been drunk together so many times, too many times; had smoked weed that he bought from her brother. She was open, vulnerable. There was no prize – there was only Eva, with her frank, broad face and lumpy sweatshirts. She did have nice tits, though. It was true. She had invited him on a road trip – he wasn't even sure where, somewhere south, the Salt Sea? – and he had said yes, but had immediately questioned his decision.

In the middle of the bridge – after the toll, after the harsh lights at the booths, after the harsh ascent – the Dumbarton Bridge stretched out endlessly, a lazy curve over the water. The road spooled out into the black hills and the gaudy splendor of the bayside towns and freeway; the sound of the wind whispered through the pickleweed and grasses of the marsh, over the Caltrain tracks; over the bland, pastel-colored houses that lined El Camino, 101, Willow Road.

He didn't understand the allure of the open road, and yet he had said yes. In spite of himself. He preferred comfortable places, comfortable people. He enjoyed the cathedral of the Santa Cruz trees, and the icy embrace of the fog. If you waited long enough, it would always come to you. But just then, in what was pure silence but for the roar of the open window, he felt the road under his feet, the slap of the wind on his

cheeks, his nose, his hair, and when he arrived back at his mother's house, he was numb.

VI

The day she found the sea cave had been cold, even though the weather forecast had predicted sunshine. She had been about eight years old. At least, that's what she usually said. Sometimes the facts changed.

She had started telling the story when they were driving south on 152, just cresting Pacheco Pass, after a brief glance at the hills to the west reminded her. The sunlight glinted off the wild grass next to the freeway and the dark land ahead burned dully into her retinas as she spoke and drove, recognizing through her speech a strange, suppressed urgency. Saturday morning and the cars of the freeway were sparse, the drivers nonchalant.

"But yeah, it was sort of chilly. We had picked that day as a beach day because we thought that it would be warm. I think we were at Half Moon Bay. Maybe Point Reyes. I'm not really sure," she said.

James shifted in his seat.

“We were – it was me, and the Ehrlichs. We were there with my mom and my brother, at this rocky beach. It was before my mom and Nicole’s mom really started to hate each other.”

“They hate each other now?”

“Well, my mom doesn’t like her at least. She thinks she’s shallow,” she said after a pause. “And she always seemed really fake to me, if that makes sense.”

James nodded. “Well, yeah. She’s a bit psycho. She tries to be nice, though.”

“But yeah, so we were at the beach, and our moms were still friends, or at least they were trying to be, so they were glamming it up on the beach trying to sort of sun themselves on their beach towels even though it was pretty cold. I think they were drinking wine. It was like, 11 in the morning.”

James laughed and Eva laughed too, looking over and meeting his eyes.

“I know, it was sort of adorable, looking back. My mom can be such a goof.”

“What does she do again?” James asked.

“Like, as a job?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s an artist, technically, but she hasn’t made anything in a while,” she said.

“She has a studio next to our house”

“Oh, right. I forgot.”

James was watching the fog that shimmered between the hills and along the unpaved roads crisscrossing between the farms. The Central Valley was tantalizingly close, with its cow stink and sprawling, over-fertilized emptiness.

“So they were hanging out on the beach, and we were getting bored, obviously, so they said that we could wander off as long as we stayed within sight of them.”

She remembered their parting perfectly, for whatever reason, and could practically still feel the sting of the wind on her neck, her hair held up by a bright red clip.

“Just don’t fall in, and never turn your back to the ocean. You never know when the weather could shift,” her mother had said. “And try to be back in half an hour?” Eva had nodded, rubbing her thin forearms through the frayed fleece of a Gap pullover, shifting her weight on her birdlike legs.

“There were all these rocks to climb over, and some tide pools,” Eva said. “Mostly rocks though. My brother got ahead of us, he was tired of waiting for me and Nicole to catch up.”

“Oh my god this is a lot of lead-up,” laughed James.

“I’m setting the scene,” Eva growled. “But so we were following him, and we got ahead, and Nicole and I ended up finding this one really big stack of rocks – it was way taller than us, probably twenty feet tall. Obviously, we were intrigued. We sort of circled around, trying to find a way to climb it, but then we ended up in this gap between the rocks, on the sand between this rock-tower and the rest of the beach – and we saw this little cave. I think it was sort of a combination of stacked rocks, and the embankment along the beach. It was really small, just big enough that you could fit a few kids, maybe two adults in there.”

“Oh, shit.” Finally, Eva thought, he was paying attention.

“Yeah, exactly,” she continued. “But we weren’t thinking about what it might mean that there was a cave by the beach, we just wanted to look at it. So we crawled inside, and it smelled just...terrible.”

This part of the memory was the clearest – when they actually got on their hands and knees and crawled inside, their bodies blocking what little light there was, plunging inside into complete darkness, the wind still whipping at their backs. Grit on their palms, ducking beneath the rocks. *Watch your head.*

“Oh shit, it was probably a hobo hangout.”

Eva ignored him. “The cave went further back than we thought it would, not by a whole lot, but enough so that we couldn’t really see what was going on in there. We were too excited by what we could see – there were all these candles; it smelled like piss and candles and rotting meat in there, but the candles were really cool. They were melted all over the rocks. And then we found a journal – just a plain, black composition book, and it was filled with writing from a bunch of different people. We could tell because the writing was different on a lot of the pages. It was all this really dark poetry about waves crashing and death and stuff.”

“Wow, that sounds sort of cultish, almost,” James said. “Did you keep the journal?”

“No, no. It was too gross. And it seemed sort of...wrong to take something out of there. And what if the journal had been haunted or something?” She laughed. “But then – and here’s the weirdest, creepiest part – we actually looked deeper into the cave and there were bones. And they were big, too. They were propped against one of the rocks.”

“What the fuck. Were they animal bones?”

He liked the story, she could tell. She had thought he would.

“Well, that’s what we were wondering. But we didn’t want to touch them. There were still some...scraps. They definitely looked longer than most bones I’d ever seen, and bigger too. It looked sort of like bones from someone’s legs.”

“Please don’t tell me you just left those bones there. Seriously, Eva.”

“We were *eight years old*. We didn’t know what to do. The book was creepy, the candles were creepy, the cave smelled like shit, and now there was a corpse. Or something. I still don’t know what was in the cave.”

“Did you tell your mom about this?” James asked.

“Sort of. But only later, on the drive home. Nicole and I said we saw some bones, but we didn’t really say anything else about them. Just that we found some bones in the rocks. My mom just said they were probably animal bones. Because who ever really finds a corpse like that? In such a weird, creepy little place?”

She could feel herself deliberately forgetting the terror she and Nicole felt when they saw the bones propped against the rock, taunting them to react, to respond. She was willing to forget when she shoved Nicole to get past her, but only after prodding the longest bone and feeling a firm, almost resinous, dark brown coating on what was probably a femur; was willing to forget the calm she felt immediately after leaving the cave, as she watched the waves come in and out, as she stood feeling the damp grit of the sand between her toes, the wind that teased her thick dark hair into knots and ringlets, and as she was momentarily mesmerized by the swaying silhouettes of the

kelp in the creamy blue-green waves that crashed and hissed on the shore, where she stood shivering before heading back to the safety of her waiting mother.

“So, you don’t think she even suspected anything,” said James. “I guess I wouldn’t expect to find a dead body either. In a drug cave, of all places.”

“Why a drug cave?” asked Eva.

“I bet it was a junkie who died on the beach, writing creepy poems to himself. I bet some animal found him, or maybe part of him got washed away somehow.”

“But then why would the journal still be there? And the candles?”

“I dunno. It’s a pretty macabre situation, no doubt about it,” he said.

Eva imagined the rest of the bones drifting through the waves, knocking unglamorously through the rocks and surf, eventually drifting down, down, down, past deep ocean vents and trawling masses of worms and sea cucumbers, only to settle in a cloud of forgetfulness on the ocean floor. She imagined lying there with them on the sandy graveyard, cocooned in icy blackness.

“You’re a pretty morbid person,” said James.

“Really? I don’t think so.”

“No, you totally are. You sort of...reveled in the bones in your story, I could tell.”

“I don’t think that’s true. And you’re the one who always reads comic books about zombies. I remember the cover of one of those – there was a machete through a guy’s head.”

“Yeah, but you’re morbid in a more secretive kind of way. It’s sort of hidden.”

“Hmm.”

She had never considered herself morbid per se, just as she had never considered herself a particularly happy person, or a particularly sad person.

“A lot of guys don’t like that in a woman, but I think it’s sort of cool.”

“Thanks, I guess,” she said with a laugh. It was sunny now, and the road stretched far ahead in a dusty line. All of California lay ahead, all that sunshine.

“How’s the driving, by the way?” he asked. “Is it okay if I smoke in here?” Cigarette in his mouth, lighter outstretched.

“Yeah, go for it. Just open a window, please.” She glanced down at the directions. “We’re making good time.”

He lit the cigarette.

“Now that I think about it” – he inhaled with relish – “you’re also really serious. Sometimes I have to remind myself that you even have a sense of humor.”

“That is *not* true, James. That’s just mean.”

“It’s not mean. Sometimes you need to think about how the world perceives you, and you don’t seem to focus much on making people happy. There’s not really anything wrong with that.”

A lump swelled in her throat and she was silent. Sun, brown earth and the scrubby brush of central California. Everything was blurry with the morning light, and she could feel the stillness of the crumbling houses that bordered the artichoke fields, the strawberries with their black plastic matting, the sky so heavy and blue-white, waiting to grow hot.

James took the wheel near the intersection of Buttonwillow and 5, where town names like Caliente and Wasco started to appear on the road signs. The sun had become blinding, and the Central Valley's air turned rancid with the smell of cows and their shit, cows that competed for shade on factory farms, quietly huddled together under vast awnings. Their mottled hides blurred together until they were a lowing, shifting mass in the dry air. Eva's skin had beaded with sweat when they stopped for a snack, and she had felt her hair cling to her face, itchy on her neck.

"This is a long drive, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yeah, this is the hardest part, I bet," says James. "This road is so fucking boring. Just a straight shot through nowhere."

"You used to come down to LA a lot, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I have a bunch of friends that live down there. Or I did a few years ago, when I was eighteen. I'd come down for the weekend, back when I had a car."

"What would you do there?"

"Well, that was when I was doing a lot of coke. So we'd mostly do that."

She pictured wasted days of the sun arcing frantically through the sky, reflecting pale on quiet water as tourists walked on the beach. The sweat beading on a 40 of Pabst Blue Ribbon, drunk at noon, when the only thing to do was to sit on a threadbare couch in Echo Park. How could there be so much time?

"We'd also go to shows. I was in a band for a while. Shit like that."

"Yeah, you play the guitar, right?"

"Mostly bass. And I was the singer. We were called Yeast Infarction."

Eva laughed. "Was this a metal band, I guess?"

"Bingo!" He demonstrated his best pig squeal and she laughed.

Recently, she had felt herself closing down, drawing herself inward every time they were together. When in his presence, she felt as though she was folding herself into a tiny room that only she had access to, and ever would have access to. She envisioned it as a tiny kernel in the middle of her chest, veiny like a walnut. Even when they drank together, she was careful with what he said, how she reacted, for fear he would discover the room and prod at it, prying at any exposed cracks until he was inside. There would be no mention of those low-level fears that haunted her before she fell asleep – her weight, her single-ness, her recent decrease in tips. Silence was a better plan. There was no point in bringing anyone else inside.

She felt herself sweating into her shirt, which she removed to reveal a turquoise bandeau.

"What are you doing?"

"It's hot. I figured I might as well sunbathe," she said. She wanted him to look at her, wanted to feel his eyes on her, if only for a little while. She kicked off her shoes, too, and tucked her feet into the space between the dashboard and the windshield.

He glanced at her and smiled a tight smile, but then looked away, his profile blunt against the glare of the landscape.

She had said nothing, had done nothing just then to open herself to him, but she still felt hollow as he looked at the road through the sunglasses she had lent him, driving her car. She felt herself withdraw again, even further this time.

She wished she could be like her mother. Her parents had met in New York. Her father was a graduate student at Columbia; her mother was living in Brooklyn, working as a barista. They met at a party through a mutual friend and spent the night talking about art, about travelling, about how neither of them wanted to stay in Brooklyn, even though they liked its culture and people, the way everything and everybody was always right there at your fingertips, waiting to be found.

She would never have gotten into Columbia.

She envied her mother's thin wrists and firm thighs; her smooth skin and almond shaped eyes. She had inherited little of her vaguely ethnic good looks, and had instead ended up with wide thighs and hair that hovered awkwardly between curly and straight. She burned in the sun, and as they drove, she felt it searing into her like a brand.

Squinting out to the landscape, she watched the car's slow progress south. Far away, across the fields and the backs of bowed workers, the mountains loomed hazily on the horizon. The workers. The dust was probably getting in their mouths.

There is no noise near the Salton Sea. The silence weighs heavily on the land and the air gains a physical presence near the water, where on windless days the rising humidity lingers above the surface. And yet, there is little haze – the bleached landscape stretches outward in a vast plain, interrupted only by the Santa Rosa mountains to the west as they rise abruptly from behind a smattering of palms and dilapidated houses.

The Imperial Valley lies hundreds of feet below sea level; without the mountains, the entire region would be deep underwater.

What is left of the Salton Sea is full of tilapia, the shore lined with their bones. Families once came from Los Angeles and the Southern California suburbs to fish and swim. But no longer.

Eva knew this because, late at night sometime in June, she had learned about the region accidentally. At night, shivering beneath her thin duvet cover, she had felt the silence of her room. She had imagined the same silence falling over the desert far south of her, as the heat trapped in the earth dissipated into a cold, starry night. Based on what she had read, people don't go to the Salton Sea for the water, however blue it might appear from a distance. Instead, they go for the silence, and for the mournful cry of the wind as it winds through the mountains, and the apocalyptic landscape that lines the sea's shore. The pictures she saw of the sea were at once inviting and horribly, devastatingly repulsive. There was no good reason to go.

She wasn't sure why James came at all, but there he was there, dozing in the passenger seat as they left 29 Palms and the water appeared on the horizon. She would have gone alone.

"Look, there it is."

And he looked and nodded, sweat on his forehead.

They had met James' friend for lunch, and had taken a brief detour to drive by Joshua Tree. It was now late in the day but the heat persisted and Eva's hands felt

clammy on the steering wheel. *More*. She imagined herself and James melting into the ground to become a part of the soil.

The landscape had shifted slowly as they drove south; had faded into a sun-bleached tableau that sprawled almost grotesquely as it turned to white at the horizon, melting into an eggshell blue sky. The further they got, the fewer cars there were until – as the sea finally came into sight – it was only them, pressing forward into the heat.

GOD IS LOVE. JESUS I'M A SINNER PLEASE COME UPON MY BODY AND INTO MY HEART.

A beacon of Technicolor plaster, looking west. She felt the rough grit of sand, dirt, paint under her toes as she climbed to the top, shielding her eyes.

Salvation Mountain. A man – Leonard Knight – had been building it since the '80s, layer upon layer until it was a labyrinth world of sticks and winding passages; mirrored shrines that looked up and down and right back at you. Installation art for nobody in particular, if you were willing to find it. *Do you want to see a picture of it?* she had asked James as they drove. *I don't believe in seeing images of works of art*, he had said. *It ruins the actual experience.*

They would camp within sight of it in her tent, close to the shore of the Salton Sea and close to Slab City, which turned out to be little more than a collection of trailers and cars on a bluff. For dinner: convenience store snacks and leftovers from lunch – burgers and fries. They would drink the whiskey James had bought outside Los Angeles, and they would look at the desert sky.

They ate and they walked and they drank, until it was long dark and the bugs by the shore started to bother them. Then, they crawled into the tent, looking up at the sky through the screened roof. They had arranged a makeshift camp on the bluff – away from the water, the air was cleaner, and the stars pulled forward against the sunset – millions of pinpricks – before the rise of the moon. There was no light pollution and she felt weightless in the air, with her head dreamy and the sand between her toes, and Salvation Mountain off behind them.

“What do you think you’ll do after graduation?” she asked as they lay there, just barely touching.

“I’m gonna be a rock star,” he answered. “Be world famous. Make a million dollars and get all the girls.”

She laughed. “I could see it.” Pause. “But really. What do you want to do, you think?”

He sighed. “Maybe go into academia. I dunno. This philosophy path seems to be working out pretty well for me. And I’m good at it. That’s always a good combination.”

“Definitely, definitely. Didn’t you do really well on the debate team for a while?”

“Yeah, we won our division last year. That was a great moment.”

She waited for him to carry the conversation, to ask her what she wanted to do, but there was only silence.

“I think I might want to study science. Maybe psychology,” she said at last. “I was always pretty good at science in high school.”

“It kind of sucks that you’re going to Foothill, then,” he said.

She bristled. “Why’s that?”

“Because nobody’s gonna take a Foothill degree seriously. You really need to go to a four-year school for that kind of thing.”

“I was thinking of transferring. Foothill does really well when kids want to transfer to the UCs.”

“Maybe, but do you know anybody who’s done that and has actually gone to a good school afterwards? Like, UCLA? Or Berkeley?”

She thought hard, but she prickled with hurt.

“No,” she said bluntly.

“That doesn’t mean it’s not possible, but it’s gonna be really hard.”

If she strained her ears, she thought she could hear the water lapping at the shore, under the bright desert moon. Further away, laughter rose and then fell from Slab City. She swallowed hard.

“Why’d you have to do that?” she asked him after a moment.

“What?”

“Why couldn’t you have just said something nice like, ‘Oh, it might be hard to transfer, but you’ll be fine!’ Or something. Why couldn’t you just say something positive.”

“Because I’m being realistic. Sorry. I’m a blunt person, Eva.”

Even facing away from him, she could smell the whiskey on his breath. It was a losing battle so she decided to drop it, trying not to cry, trying not to act like such a girl. But she still felt his words like a slap, hard on her chest.

“Good night, James,” she said. “Thanks for coming here with me.”

“Thanks for driving. I like it here.” He grabbed her hips and she let him.

She cried silently, motionlessly, fairly sure he was already asleep, but not wanting to risk it. She thought of her father, straightening his tie, flipping through journals, trying to teach her about religion when she was young, and could only appreciate the most dramatic characters, the most outrageous adventures. *Do you know what the moral for that story was, Eva?* She rarely did. And Sal, stoned and playing the guitar in the sunshine with Marj for an audience. She thought of her customers, hungrily eyeing her hips, her breasts, as she took orders and brought them back waters, beers, lemon tea with a side of honey, hummus plates with olives, ground beef, mushrooms in a thick broth. *She got the math wrong. They should let them carry calculators,* a man had laughed conspiratorially to his companion when she brought back his receipt after a wrong addition by Nick, who had been working the register at the time. *It's okay honey,* the man had told her. *It's okay.* And she had gritted her teeth, smiling so that he would still tip.

Eva woke drenched in sweat, glued to the blanket. Though the car had shaded them from the earliest morning light, the sun had shifted and the light filtered pink, red through her eyelids. She had no hangover – instead, she felt hollow and lucid as she

wiped the salt from under her eyes, probing her cheeks with her fingers to see if they still felt puffy. James was asleep on his back, his arm stretched above his head in an arc. She unzipped the tent as quietly as she could and stepped barefoot into the soft, sandy dirt.

Outside, the air wrapped sweetly around her – not much cooler, but fresher, at the very least. She held it deep in her lungs: a rich, sulfurous smell of earth and muck and all those dead fish along the shore. There was something primordial about it, with the skeletal telephone lines in the distance, and the wide strip of mud that lay flatly between the plateau where they had camped, and the tiny, just-lapping waves at the shore.

This is what the beginning would have been; a day breaking as the naked sun glared hotly down. The earth would have cracked like skin, and the water would have spread in trickles, torrents, like blood through veins. Creation myths work from the ground up and she could see it here in the soil: red-brown and fertile. All that movement, all that driving, just to be here, where she could breathe. She stood there for a while, perfectly still with her arms outstretched, as a flock of birds dipped and dove near the shore. Her hair hung heavy on her back, smelling of warm skin.

Slab City was starting to wake, too. Though she saw no-one, she could feel life rising; through the dull roar of an air conditioning unit, she could hear the occasional sound of footsteps and cutlery, carried through the air on the faintest breeze. The morning sun dragged heavy shadows from the makeshift houses. To think – the day before, she had awoken in Mountain View.

Her stomach growled, but they had brought no extra supplies, only the tent and blankets. Surely, they had reasoned, there had to be something down there, some sort of civilization. But she couldn't imagine asking one of the Slab City residents for food.

Kicking the sand from her feet, she zipped the tent open and poked her head in, gritting her teeth. James was sprawled on his back, feet stuck out from under the blanket. His breath smelled sweet with whiskey and she shuddered.

"James." She prodded his shoulder, but got no response. "James, I'm hungry." He turned over onto his stomach.

"No," he growled.

"I'm really hungry."

"Let me sleep."

She could have waited, and could have watched the sun rise and felt it beat down on her skin once again. She could have walked to the shore of the lake or around Salvation Mountain, feeling the paint under her hands, her feet. The light would have been nice for photography, as the sun rose and people woke up, opened their doors and headed into the sunshine. And there was whiskey, too. Always.

I'm so hungry. I'm just getting food.

Instead, she walked to the car, her stomach clenched in a tight knot, begging. Still a half a tank of gas. She turned the key and the car shuddered to life, panting. And then back on the road, north. Just somewhere to get food.

But as the lake receded to her left, a flat sheet of blue laid out in the sun, she drove faster, for who would stop her? That white blue of the sky getting brighter and

brighter, and the sun beating on her left arm until it prickled, even so early. So it goes when you're only a couple of hours from Mexico. All those beaches she might never see, all those places where people have lived for eons, indestructible as the sage, persisting.

Faster, toward the mountains up ahead, where there were gas stations and strip malls and milkshakes, and Palm Springs wasn't too far away, she didn't think so, nor was Coachella or Indio. There had been a depression in the land, yes, and then a flood, and the sea, and families, yes, and most of them were gone, but some still persisted, clinging to the very earth, so tightly that they became part of the landscape with their clotheslines and their generators and their leathery skin. *Nothing to do but drink.*

There were miles to go, and she wanted nothing more than to feel them beneath the car, and to watch the land, with its dry desert scrub and its lake now a brown blue line alongside her – her hair wild in the rear view mirror and the sun in her eyes.

It was already so hot and she felt so confined, but also so wonderfully, perfectly open that she could have screamed and could have lost her voice in the roar of the wind beating by the open window as she flew by culverts and dry ditches waiting for water that would never come, the white stripes of the road blurring together into a smooth sea of white against the asphalt, under the white sky always threatening to fall. If she stopped, it would be silent once again, really silent, for she would be alone, just her and that cracked, bloody brown of the earth. Here there were palm trees mountains and old signs pointing to hotels, restaurants, yacht clubs that were built and abandoned long before she had breathed her first breath; it was hot on her face even then, hot beyond words.

At home, the sprinklers would have started, and the mourning doves would be sighing on the telephone wires, downy grey against a sky broken by wires and fences and airplanes, coming and going from San Jose, Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego. People would be walking their dogs through suburban streets, squinting through sunglasses at the glare from the sidewalks and cars. Sal would be sleeping, and Marj would be sleeping, and her parents would be curled together in bed, her mother's olive skin soft against soft sheets, her hands dreaming of loamy earth and clay – or awake, reading, learning. So much to see, so much to take in with quivering lips and open eyes. Out from that barren sea to get food, because she was hungry.