

2009-01-01

# The Exquisite Pain of Sunny Afternoons

Jessica Jeanne Miller

*University of Texas at El Paso*, [jjmiller@miners.utep.edu](mailto:jjmiller@miners.utep.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open\\_etd](https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd)



Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Miller, Jessica Jeanne, "The Exquisite Pain of Sunny Afternoons" (2009). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 2731.  
[https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open\\_etd/2731](https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd/2731)

This is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UTEP. For more information, please contact [lweber@utep.edu](mailto:lweber@utep.edu).

THE EXQUISITE PAIN OF SUNNY AFTERNOONS

JESSICA JEANNE MILLER

Department of Creative Writing

APPROVED:

---

Johnny Payne, Ph.D., Chair

---

Marion Rohrleitner, Ph.D.

---

Daniel Chacon, MFA

---

Patricia D. Witherspoon, Ph.D.  
Dean of the Graduate School

THE EXQUISTITE PAIN OF SUNNY AFTERNOONS

by

JESSICA JEANNE MILLER, B.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERISITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

December 2009

When I started this novel I wrote from a largely personal basis. It was a sprawling, repetitive, adventure story that set out to describe the coldness of the world; the inability for the conventional world to grasp the complexities of madness. It was a tome on the flailing rant of madness against the quicksand that is the “sane” world. I wrote from frustration and isolation and it showed. The novel was bleak, and it exhibited a lack of technique; if it had linguistic flourishes in places, that may be the luck of the first time novelist. My vision for my novel was to expose the futility of life, no less. Life was merely poetic gibberish posed against Darwin’s survival of the fittest and a relentless sense of seeming order. Two main characters inhabit the novel: Julia, the mother, and Amy, the daughter. Their relationship was structured through Julia’s tireless devotion, and Amy’s equally tireless suspicion. It was through working with this relationship that the novel began to evolve. The tie between mother and daughter brought out a different perspective—one that was more open and character-based.

Focusing on these two characters forced me to concentrate on more technical aspects of the novel, because it needed to be less sprawling and convoluted. The relationship should be set against a backdrop that was tightly woven and intricately related to the dynamic between mother and daughter. Dialogue, setting, extraneous characters, all needed to be worked on. There was an intimate link between a spare, character-based plot and the mechanics of novel writing. It is not that this link did not exist before, but it was smudged and hard to discern against the drive of my personal message. Once I shifted the focus from psychosis angst, or the mental illness blues, to how one functions in this world among people, the novel began to take shape. I am satisfied with the shift, and feel that in working through it I learned many things. Each major difficulty, or challenge, or discovery, needs to be discussed further alongside the outside sources that

inspired me and helped me along. I pulled from many sources. No writer creates in isolation. This work is an example of personal vision that was tempered by the process of writing itself and outside influences.

The first challenge I dealt with was setting. The action took place in a vacuum. In my drive to depict the inner world, I forgot that the outer world (in a novel) is a further exploration of this world, if not a reflection. I struggled to include details that would set the scene of the novel. Foucault's "Docile Bodies" from his book *Discipline and Punish the Birth of the Prison* was influential.

The classical age discovered the body as object and target of power. It is easy enough to find signs of the attention then paid to the body—to the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obey, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces. The great book of Man-the-Machine was written simultaneously on two registers: the anatomico-metaphysical register, of which Descartes wrote the first pages and which the physicians and philosophers continued, and the technico-political register, which was constituted by a whole set of regulations and by empirical and calculated methods relating to the army, the school and the hospital, for controlling or correcting the operations of the body. These two registers are quite distinct, since it was a question, on the one hand, of submission and use and, on the other, of functioning and explanation: there was a useful body and an intelligible body.

This quotation reflects a one of the ways I dealt with the problem of setting. In the book, the body can be seen as the setting and Amy's and Julia's inner psychology as the mind. In the beginning women come from a place of docility. Amy has spent time in a mental hospital while Julia has been on a short circuit between work, the mental hospital, and home. The setting as

described in the beginning for Julia is one that depicts heat. Her prison is the overheated nature of her emotions and her feelings that things should go a certain way. The grass is dying and she is surrounded by concrete-- she is Foucault's soldier facing too much repression, too much control. She has been drawn taut, and might break. Amy is in much the same condition. Her thought processes have been shaped by exposure to the psych ward and even when she escapes and goes to Mexico the city seems foreign, overwhelming, and absurd. In the course of the novel the women must train their minds towards perceiving a more expansive environment. They realize they have choices, and suddenly the setting is full of scenes of spectacular views of the city and the mountains. They are opening up. They begin as Foucault's soldier, both willing and unwilling, and end in a place where the madness of external controls may creep in, the traffic may signify this, but it does not overwhelm. Although Foucault proposed no solution, and may have simply been relaying his version of the facts, the women in the book find a solution to his somewhat dark depictions of restrictions within society. They find this solution through relationships; their bodies reflected in the setting, more and more free through connection. "Description in a good novel is never just description" (Lodge, 57). Setting cannot be arbitrary, but it should be subtle as well. There is no need to hit the reader over the head with symbolism, but it is also important that the setting colors the emotional needs of the novel. The emotional needs of a novel may be the character's psychology—her wants, fears, her reactions. In the beginning stages of my novel, where setting did not play a strong role, the novel lacked architecture. Just as people's homes often describe their personalities uncannily, the setting begins to do this in my novel in the later drafts. It is far from perfect, but as Foucault describes the mechanisms of control in our environment, expressing repression, the inner turmoil of Amy and Julia's yearning is expressed in my text.

Alongside this lack of setting I began with long inner monologues. So the novel became a stylized diary entry almost. Logging thoughts, circling, expressing emotions that may be tied to the overall structure of the novel but may also be tangential. Lodge speaks of Joyce's *Ulysses*. He writes

We become acquainted with the principal characters not by being told about them, but by sharing their most intimate thoughts, represented as silent, spontaneous, unceasing streams of consciousness. For the reader, it's rather like wearing earphones plugged into someone's brain, and monitoring an endless tape-recording of the subject's impressions, reflections, questions, memories and fantasies, as they are triggered either by physical sensations or the association of ideas. 47

This was similar to my novel, although the results were vastly different. Reading Joyce's *Ulysses*, and wearing the earphones plugged into the narrator's brain, is like listening to a symphony. It is complex, moving, beautiful. Rhythmical and harmonious, the reader is swept along and does not fail to see the poetry. My version of stream of consciousness was more like reading a grocery list. How did he do it? Lodge states,

Interior monologue is indeed a very difficult technique to use successfully, all too apt to impose a painfully slow pace on the narrative and to bore the reader with a plethora of trivial detail. Joyce avoids these pitfalls partly by his sheer genius with words, which renders the most commonplace incident or object as riveting as if we had never encountered them before, but also by cleverly varying the grammatical structure of his discourse, combining interior monologue with free indirect style and orthodox narrative description. 48

Taking this into account I began to revise my moments of interior dialogue. First of all, and this took very little insight upon re-reading, I began to cut places where I had repeated myself. I watched the language, making sure that it was of good quality and interesting. But I made sure, as Lodge states the importance of this, that it was also varied. I tried not to write in simply a poetic, elevated style, but instead tried to mix up the words some with more mundane, but hopefully accurate and relevant observation. I found that as a novice writer I often strove to make every line speak with the ferocity of Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury*. This is misguided. There is much to be said for being straightforward in writing and over time, possibly, one can develop the virtuosity to experiment. I cut the first fifteen pages of the novel; a supposed journal entry in language that my classmates commented was beautiful, but it was ultimately useless. There was no meaning behind the poetry and so a story was not being told.

The story, as it was, is told through the perspective of two women. Once I got a handle on that the novel began to flow. It came more easily. I sat down and wrote and ideas came to me. This was also a result of mastering setting and overcoming the endless inner dialogue, which both were weighing my writing process down. Attempting to correct those two things in an almost surgical manner, the rest came somewhat easily. This also had to do with the organic nature of telling a story from the perspective of a mother and daughter. Amy may be the main character, but Julia is a close second. I looked to the writing of Julia Alvarez to inspire me and also inform how I would go about writing this dualistically perceived novel. Her book, *In the Name of Salome*, also describes a mother-daughter relationship. She uses both the first person and the third person as I do. Chapter three opens with these lines "She loves riding on trains. She feels like a heroine, suspended between lives, suspended between destination," (107). This is from the daughter's perspective. She writes a third person that is very close to the character,



as I did, which basically shadows the character but remains distant enough to view them objectively—at times. It is only for very rare occasions that I reserved this objectivity. I chose to write Julia, the mother, in the third person because she was overlooking Amy. Just as Alvarez’s daughter reviews her mother’s life and is fascinated by it, Julia shadows Amy—fascinated in an almost horrified way. Amy I wrote in the first person because there is no objectivity involved. Her experiences are immediate and overwhelming. I wanted no distance. *In the Name of Salome* depicts a mother in the first person whose experiences are also violent in nature, although the violence is not in her mind as it is in Amy’s. The book is much different than mine in that it covers the span of both women’s lifetimes while mine is focused more on a few weeks, but the alternation of characters and perspectives are things that I found in this book and utilized in my own. To balance the voices out, each woman gets a chapter. Julia, at first only obsessed with finding and saving Amy, gets her own voice. She writes a song and sings, she goes out with Amy’s friend’s, on her own, and has a good time. Amy, starting from a place of suspicion and paranoia, opens up to her mother’s independence and finds that she can actually reach out to people, although they may not be perfect. Each woman is vital to the other’s growth.

The narrator is always a made-up character, a fictional being, just like all the other characters whose story he “tells,” but he is the most important because the way he acts-- showing or hiding himself, lingering or surging ahead, being explicit or elusive, talkative or taciturn, playful or serious—decides whether we will be persuaded of the reality of other characters and whether we will be convinced that they are not puppets or caricatures. The behavior of the narrator establishes the internal coherence of a story, which, in turn, is an essential factor in determining its power to persuade. Vargas Llosa, 42-43

It is not only one narrator that persuades in my novel, however, but two. Each woman plays off of the other one creating the other characters in the novel. Amy's seriousness is what shows us reality from fiction in the novel. Her over-thinking exposes her as unreliable. Just when you begin to trust her, she doesn't laugh and you realize she is on a mission fueled by madness. It is Julia's maternal devotion that also exposes Amy as unstable, and yet Julia's self explorations reveal also what Amy needs—a little respite from her crusade. Amy also, by recovering to some degree, shows that Julia's need to mother her can be too much; Julia must also find her own place. So the two characters play off of one another, providing a space for dynamism in the novel. A space where real growth through writing can occur.

Another chance I had to grow as a writer during this process was in my explorations of dialogue. I took as my model for dialogue *The Crying of Lot 49*. This novel by Thomas Pynchon contains excellent dialogue. The following example also leads to my central problem:

“I didn't think people invented any more,” said Oedipa, sensing this would goad him. “I mean, who's there been, really, since Thomas Edison? Isn't it all teamwork now?” Bloody Chiclitz, in his welcoming speech this morning, had stressed teamwork.

“Teamwork,” Koteks snarled, “is one word for it, yeah. What it really is is a way to avoid responsibility. It's a symptom of the gutlessness of the whole society.”

“Goodness,” said Oedipa, “are you allowed to talk like that?” 68

Are you allowed to talk like that? While I took *The Crying of Lot 49* as my example I also got carried away at times. I had a lot of fun writing dialogue, and sometimes pages and pages would come out. These bits of dialogue served to explain the story, describe the setting, describe characters, and move forward the plot. This was too much. Dialogue, my thesis advisor explained, should be used to reveal character. I needed to dampen my enthusiasm for dialogue

and find a model of storytelling that exemplified the proper time and place for dialogue.

Looking to *The Crying of Lot 49* was too ambitious; it was too intricately woven into the plot.

Although excellently done, it was too ambitious for a beginning writer. Louise Erdrich, although no less a writer, was a good example. Her book *Love Medicine* opens this way:

The morning before Easter Sunday, June Kashpaw was walking down the clogged main street of oil boomtown Williston, North Dakota, killing time before the noon bus arrived that would take her home. She was a long-legged Chippewa woman, aged hard in every way except how she moved. Probably it was the way she moved, easy as a young girl on slim hard legs, that caught the eye of the man who rapped at her from inside the window of the Rigger Bar.

1

It is not until the bottom of the second page that the first dialogue takes place: “‘What’s happening?’ She said. ‘Where’s the party?’” This dialogue reveals her character quite bluntly, and the narrator does the work on setting and character description. Reading through this book I realized that I was caught in what is perhaps one of the pitfalls of writing in workshops for years. Although workshops can spark creativity and inspire through the reading of other’s writings, they can also stifle ramblings. These ramblings can be valuable at times. They can be full of sound description, insightful characterization, and simply, needed narration. It took wrenching my eyes from the process of writing in a group, and simply reading, to understand that dialogue could be put in its proper place. In a rush to create, I leaned on dialogue. Slowing down, I employed it to let the characters speak about themselves, and their place in my novelistic world. I found my balance somewhere between Pynchon and Erdrich.

The characters also needed a tightly woven plot against which to reveal themselves. The plot, as I stated in my introduction, began as a sprawling escape journey. Amy ran from one

place to the next, trying to find herself, never quite succeeding. Her world was dark, and she only had herself to rely on while her mother followed behind, a bastion of love and caring in an indifferent world. A bastion which Amy could not accept. However, through writing I realized that the more interesting way to portray the story would be to explore this maternal connection and Amy's inability to grapple with it. The plot itself became simple and more focused. Vargas Llosa writes "To equip a novel with power of persuasion, it is necessary to tell your story in such a way that it makes the most of every personal experience implicit in its plot and characters; at the same time, it must transmit to the reader an illusion of autonomy from the real world he inhabits" (27). I found in order to do this I needed to whittle down the plot. In its original form, the plot was not reflecting any growth or "making the most of every personal experience". It was, rather, a repetitive journey that only reflected the vacuum of the modern world. This idea may be romantic, but it is not quite realistic or, more importantly, novelistically interesting when it is told in such a way that there is no nuance. It was simply a message, not a story. In its new form, the novel relates real change in the characters and a grappling with life that is independent of any pedantic message. It lives on its own through the techniques I mentioned before and also a bare-boned plot that lets the characters move freely through different psychological states. It began as the story of a lonely, deluded girl fiercely struggling to make meaning. In one sense, it did not change much; the only difference is with the new plot structure this character is allowed to make meaning, to negotiate with the world around her on an intimate level, whereas before she was simply hitting one brick wall after another. Freeing up the story, ironically, required paring it down.

It was not only the plot that contained extraneous, needless episodes, but there was also the need to pare down the characters. I began with a character named Randall, the hapless,

workaholic husband who was not very involved in the life of Amy. Julia showed relentless devotion, Randall exhibited cold detachment. He added very little to the story. In one preliminary draft Randall was called by the police, although Julia had been the one to go to the police, and they informed him that Amy was missing. Randall's response was to wait for Julia and then report it in a helpless manner. Julia quickly took control. There are several problems with this; most importantly that Randall does not serve in any way as a catalyst. He is merely a static character that comes in sometimes to simply report something or simply to assure the reader that Amy has a biological father and was not brought into this world through miraculous conception. I felt that the novel could do without Randall on a second reading of my first draft. This would mean taking out all conversations. He would still exist, but he would exist in the consciousness of Julia. She would remember conversations and reflect, but he would not physically be present. This solves the problem of an awkward character that takes up space and even often angered readers through his coldness. The following is an example of Randall's character before any significant transformation (or winnowing him out):

Randall arrived at the house an hour later. The lights were still off and it was silent, but the mail was on the table and the family photos smiled uninterruptedly. It was like coming into the middle of an abandoned life. That was how Julia felt about Amy's life. Julia was crying on the couch with photo albums scattered around her.

"I wanted something to show the police," she said.

"What?"

"Didn't you get my messages? I've been trying to call you all day."

"I was in meetings all day. I thought you had called once. What happened? What about the police?"

“Amy got out.” Julia almost laughed. The absurdly theatrical aspects of the situation struck her as inappropriate. All she felt was somber.

“Got out? Of the mental hospital? How?”

“Well I guess she said she had to go to the bathroom. They were on an outing and they were at the grocery store and it was crowded and she never came back. She’s gone.”

“She’s not gone. She must be somewhere.” Randall couldn’t believe this degree of incompetence but he kept his anger to himself. “She’s not gone,” he repeated and began to close and stack the photo albums.

“What are you doing? I need to find a picture.”

He pulled one out of the last open book and handed it to Julia. “Here, this will do.”

“But it’s five years old.”

“You can look later,” he began to pick up the mail from the table and started arranging the couch cushions. “Have you eaten dinner?”

“No”

“Good. I will cook and then we can talk over dinner. I want to know exactly what happened and what you have done about it. And then we’ll talk about what to do tomorrow. And you can find a picture then. But you have to eat.”

They ate and they talked. The conversation was almost silent itself, so much was not said. All the years of dealing with Amy’s illness existed in the undertones. All the late nights and bewilderment. Julia thought of her lists and prepared to wait. Already the waiting had begun.

Here Randall exhibits his carelessness and impotence. When he does care, he doesn’t do anything about it. Perhaps he was written in such a way because the story really is of two

women, and how they negotiate their emotional worlds. Randall, in later versions, morphed to Julia's recollections. Here is an example:

Julia knew what Randall would say,

“If only she'd take her fucking medicine,” that's what he would say, and maybe crying, but sometimes Julia couldn't shake the feeling that it has something to do with choice. Something about how Amy would hide, when she was very young, before dinner and tell stories to herself as she hid. Julia would find her under the sink in the bathroom, in her closet, anywhere good for hiding and Julia could hear her talking to herself. Now as an adult she was doing the same thing. She was telling herself horror stories and running from one hiding place to the next in a frantic flight to escape. Escape what? Julia wanted to make a new list. Things Amy was escaping from she would call it. And then, where is Amy hiding? That had to be added too. Julia turned back to the house. She would call the police now. She had meant to take a moment to calm herself but instead was confronted with hysterical silent absence.

I believe Randall is much more powerful this way. Julia filters him, adding emotion, and yet he still serves as a foil for her focus and drive. It was necessary to turn him into a figure of memory and recall because he was not functioning in the novel when he was physically present. He was pulling the novel down with his weight, serving as a tangent that didn't add to the relationship between the two women, nor did he have a direct relationship with either of the two women. He was buried in his work. Through appearing in this way, through Julia's memory, he has a greater impact on the story because his influence actually has a psychological impact on Julia. She carries him with her and learns from him, speaks to him on her own level, and he contributes actual emotion through her eyes.

In working on this novel I learned much. The novel transformed through its drafts, and I learned to write in a different way. Instead of pouring out pages, I slowed down and took it scene by scene. This slowing down allowed me to focus on the techniques mentioned above. Grappling with these problems in the novel was a learning process. It was a matter of holding the work at arm's length and studying it in a different manner. I learned, as a novice writer, to simplify but also to expand on details concerning setting, not pushing forward too fast in a rush to get to the finish. I believe the novel has come a long way and will end somewhere surprising for me, but also pleasing. It is my first novel. I am happy with the results, not so much in my novel, but in my learning process. I feel that the second novel I write will profit greatly from what I learned in writing this one.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PREFACE.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	xvi
THE EXQUISITE PAIN OF SUNNY AFTERNOONS.....	1
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	125
CURRICULUM VITA.....	126

Amy

My face floated like a moon on the bus station walls, made of imitation glass. My big nose caught the light in an almost humorous way. I couldn't see my blue eyes. My sister had always commented on my eyes. I consider them average; she called them big and would notice how they changed in the light. I saw a man with a bushy moustache on the telephone. He was leaning in; I couldn't quite make out what he was saying but it seemed important. I thought *maybe he's one of them*. In his plaid shirt and black jeans he looked neat; the shirt was nicely tucked in and the jeans were free of wrinkles. He was trim and fit and I thought *he's a murderer* but then noticed he was too young. My sister and I had been here about five years before. Still, this was the place. The bus station was grey with concrete floors and walls, bathrooms that cost a couple pesos, little restaurants here and there, and maps. I went for a map, pushing through a family with a small crying child. Her black hair stuck up from out of her head in all directions. The mother, the grandmother, and the father all tried to soothe her. I was jealous of that little girl. Still, she cried. Maybe it doesn't do any good anyway. Yet I wished somebody would still the silent cry I was making. I thought of my sister again. The way she said my eyes looked pretty when I cried as if forgiving me my break downs. I was here looking for her. I was here to find the traces she had left and give her a resurrection. Even though I had seen her dead body she must be here.

It's not easy to forget. We came to Mexico in our early twenties, simply to have a good time. We came to Oaxaca and we were having a good time. We were drinking and hiking through the city buying clothes and pottery and mirrors, we even went to the beach one day. Well, it took a few days. We met people. My sister was, no is, tall and dark skinned and dark-haired with hazel eyes. We look nothing alike and our temperaments are just as different. I spent time on school, I spent time reading but she was the one who would drag me out to play.

“You've been reading all day!” she'd accuse me, “get up and get out of here.”

I would be torn from my book and suddenly lost in a game that involved climbing trees and shouting. She was the one who absorbed all the attention, like a plant growing in the sun, while I hung back. With her gone, I don't know what to do. It's my chance to shine? That isn't how it works. I wasn't meant to be center stage; I am happy watching. I'm simply miserable. She was three years older than me. She taught me to drive, read me her poetry, introduced me to her friends and boyfriends. She was the wing I traveled under—enjoying the scenery.

It happened so quickly at the beach, but it all started in Oaxaca. We met some people. Five people maybe. They were all men but one tall, slender girl with dyed red hair. They were interesting, intelligent, relaxed. We spent time with them, going through the city. The girl had a white car. She took us to a house one day. And a man who looked like the man on the telephone when I got off the bus was there, dressed in black with a bolero tie. Also, an overweight man in a white tank top, and a small man who reminded me of a mouse. The house was dank, with moldy yellow carpet and cheap dark curtains covering all the windows. They brought out some cocaine, and while my sister and I did not do it, she did not seem concerned. I was disturbed. I didn't know much about cocaine and had always stayed away from it, but I had the feeling that my sister wasn't doing it simply because I was there. They became somewhat more animated,

talking fast and gesturing. Still I was glad to see the cocaine didn't change them too much. They began talking about the beach and the man who looked like a mouse offered to drive us there. The red-haired girl laughed out of context and hugged him and said she had been dying to go to the beach but was terrible with maps.

The next day my sister woke me.

"Let's go Amy. Everybody's leaving." I knew she had done this on purpose, waited until the last minute to tell me we were going because she knew I would back out otherwise. I didn't have much time to think, and I didn't want my sister going alone, so I got up and got dressed.

The beach, to be honest, is a blur. I think there were eight of us but I wasn't paying attention; we started drinking in the car and didn't stop all day. Maybe I swam, maybe I didn't. The waves were big. Maybe I talked to the English kid about how cars negated the meaning of life, maybe I didn't. There was too much drinking and talking. My sister was getting drunk and I wasn't doing a very good job watching her. Maybe it is because I am younger. Maybe it is because I was thinking about the automotive industry, but I did notice, in a helpless kind of way, that she was beginning to flirt with the overweight man, who was now wearing a blue Hawaiian print shirt. Maybe he was trying to look like a tourist. Who knows what they had in the car, but the man with the moustache kept walking out to it. It was parked out of sight. He would go to the car for awhile and then return. I barely took note. Only afterwards did I think about it. The day passed, the sun set, the waves remained ferocious. We sat in a cabana under torchlight. Everybody's faces turned into flat planes lit in geometrical patterns. I was having a good time.

Some of them went for a walk, except for me and the English kid and another friend. My sister went, and for some reason, I was comfortable without her for once. Perhaps it was my extreme uneasiness around the other three men. But then I look back and think that uneasiness

must have meant that I should watch her. I look back and cry and nobody tells me I look pretty when I cry and makes me laugh at the idea that a red nose and puffy eyes look good on me. We talked for a long time. We might have been talking about the Bible, a book I have never read but what else do drunks talk about? We were exposing the meaning behind the mundane. But after awhile, we went to look for them. They were gone quite some time. We walked up the beach, asked a few people, but they were nowhere in sight. Finally, we came across a very stoned curly haired guy with an open shirt. He pointed us to a house right behind him. We went in.

The rest remains unclear. I saw my sister, naked on the floor, her eyes wide and white, with a string of blood flowing from her mouth. I didn't scream. I was about to run to her but the English kid had his hand on my arm, holding me back. The other people sat in a hammock and on the floor, simply smoking pot out of a fancy pipe. My soul flew out of my body.

The police asked me later why I didn't do more. Why didn't I call them right away? They had been looking for these guys. I went to them the next day because I'd been drunk the day before and in a panic we had left the straw house. I wasn't sure of what I saw. The police searched for the men and my sister's body but didn't find anything. My mother was heartbroken; she treated me as if I were dead too.

They never found her body though. This gives me hope.

I'm searching for her. I'll search until I find her.

Julia

"Doctor, what do you mean?"

The doctor kept twisting his hands. “We don’t know what happened,” he was saying but Julia couldn’t follow. She kept looking at the various diplomas on the wall, the green potted plants bending slightly in the breeze of the fan. It was an unbearably hot day. Julia felt herself sweating. She had put her daughter in the best psychiatric hospital in Texas and now she’d turned up missing. It couldn’t be. She was not comprehending this like she couldn’t comprehend nuclear physics or the abandoned violence of road kill.

“There must be a way for you to find her. My daughter is naïve and unstable at this point, she needs help not....” she was going to say independence but that had the wrong ring to it. She looked at the fake gold-framed photographs of what she assumed was the doctor’s family. They were blond and smiling where he was dark and nervous. He kept playing with his glasses. She couldn’t find the right words, “Not this. How could you let this happen?”

Only an accusation followed. She could have been saying it to herself.

Julia had been watching her daughter for four weeks straight. Amy wasn’t eating, she wasn’t sleeping. She’d been living with a family friend but she ended up knocking down one of the doors with a kitchen chair and had to be taken home. Home didn’t do her any good so she was taken to the hospital, which was in a nice colonial building, tree lined, equipped with tranquil blue easy chairs and big windows which showed off the maple trees. It was, unfortunately, right next to a cemetery. Julia watched Amy deteriorate further until she wasn’t speaking to anyone. She was hostile and talked to herself loudly through most of the day. Julia continued to show up for visiting hours anyway—she sat in the waiting room and looked at the bland paintings of swings and pink flowers for her half an hour. Then she went home. Amy’s anger needed to be worn down with steadiness because she was flying all around in chaotic circles in her mind; maybe all she needed was a safe landing. Maybe she required the ordinary.

If Julia only talked about the weather, the grocery list, the vacuum cleaner she would come around. What was the doctor saying?

“I’m sorry but it’s simply not our responsibility.”

“Excuse me?” He looked like a rat with his big nose and squinty eyes peering sharply at her.

“If a patient leaves the premises knowingly and is not a minor, there is nothing we can do.”

“I’m afraid she was your responsibility and you know as well as I do that she should not be out on her own right now especially with so little money. This is neglect of the worst kind. Knowingly left the premises—she thought she was in Disneyland half the time! You’ll be hearing from me sir. Yes you will.” While she was saying this she had her finger pointing at him at about mid-tie level. The tie was blue with grey checkers on it. She was tempted by it. She had to restrain herself from reaching out and tightening that tie around his scrawny little neck. That would have given her some satisfaction. His facial expression would have changed at least.

It was summer. The grass was a dead yellow and the sky was a sickly blue and the city moved around Julia with persistent indifference but she didn’t cry. She was tired. She had not eaten or slept much in the previous weeks. She turned to leave and thought about slamming the door but couldn’t quite work up the drama. She went out into the parking lot and realized she had forgotten where she parked her car. Her feet felt the heat of the tar. It was a sea of asphalt in the back of the hospital. She wandered for awhile among the cars. She realized that the front of the hospital was beautiful, with the shady trees and the big white columns of the building standing in a dignified but comfortable way against any winds that might blow, but the back was

another story. It was only cars and cigarette butts and a plain view of the cemetery. She felt a strange anxiety until she located her car in the back of the lot. There was no breeze.

Julia had a list in her mind. It consisted of reasons her daughter had lost her sanity. Was it the mercury? Had they eaten too much fish? Was it the time she yelled at Amy too loudly about her coloring at age four? She'd made her put up her colors and come have dinner with the company they'd had over, and when she refused Julia lost her temper. Now Amy said she was a famous painter who was getting no credit. Julia drew the connection. In any given museum Amy would be convinced that she'd painted over half the works. At times it was a donation Amy had made, at times it was a theft. There were other examples of parental failure that somehow pointed to this; maybe Randall had been too hard on her. She was slipping away everyday fading further and further into a flat horizon of insanity. Julia could see it in her eyes. She could see the "flat affect" the doctors were always describing patients with. She didn't have the range of emotions on her face anymore; she just had a permanent look of deadened anxiety. *I don't know* was all Julia could think. The list, which had once been extensive, broke apart in the noise of a mother's panic. *I don't know. I don't where she is. I don't know what she's thinking. Who she's with. What she's eating. How to deal with this.* There was within Julia a wall of impotent rage building towards the doctor but there was nothing more to do at the hospital. Julia started home, to tell Randall. She drove through the streets, hitting traffic on Lamar and then on Mopac. She turned the radio onto NPR and tried to concentrate on the news. She tried to brake at the right moments. She found herself gripping the steering wheel in such a way that her hands cramped. The news was bad; the people in the cars were frowning. She inched home. Finally she made it to the back roads of the hill country leading to their house. She sped but she didn't cry.



Randall was not home yet and she didn't know why. It was six; of course he often didn't get home until seven. The small grey house was dark and uninviting. Most days, Julia found it a place of solace but the clutter was clinging to her mind, cramping it. Was she going crazy? Papers were everywhere and books and other odds and ends. She started to clean but changed her mind. She took out the broom and got ready to dust the rugs only to find herself standing in the middle of the dust, on the red rug she had once loved but now perhaps found to be another possible element of Amy's insanity (she had heard something about red). She was looking out the window. Out the window she saw the old pecan tree that had been there when they moved in. She liked how it yielded nuts every year, generously scattering them across the lawn. She wanted to take a warm bath but even the water might not help. It might just feel cloying. She went out to the back patio to water the plants. The heat hit sticky and heavy. The plants looked wilted. Amy was out there in this heat—who knows where. Everything that everything was supposed to be wasn't. Julia was supposed to grow old gracefully and her daughter was supposed to be living a life of boyfriends and new jobs and first apartments but all she seemed to care about was the way her broken mind turned through her past and made it monstrous. Julia knew something of this; she had read her journals. It's true she shouldn't have but she'd been worried. It became the only way to communicate with her world although it was a silent communication. Amy didn't know. She left them scattered through the house and brought home boxes of them at a time. Julia knew the height of her fear and the weight of her fantasies—she knew the shape and texture of her disease in her slanted handwriting and dark pen strokes. She knew it so well it almost broke her too. If only Amy would look sometime out of her distorted mirror into reality. Into real memory and the presence of the moment which was so wonderfully ordinary. If she could sync herself to the change of the seasons and other natural

rhythms instead of the artificial lights of a freak show. Freak show? Perhaps that was too harsh and Julia knew what Randall would say:

“If only she’d take her fucking medicine,” that’s what he would say, and maybe crying, but sometimes Julia couldn’t shake the feeling that it had something to do with choice. Amy would hide, when she was very young, before dinner and tell stories to herself as she hid. Julia would find her under the sink in the bathroom, in her closet, anywhere good for hiding, and Julia could hear her talking to herself. Now as an adult she was doing the same thing. She was telling herself horror stories and running from one hiding place to the next in a frantic flight. What was she escaping? Julia wanted to make a new list. Things Amy was escaping from she would call it. And then; where is Amy hiding? That had to be added too. Julia turned back to the house. She would call the police now. She had meant to take a moment to calm herself but instead was confronted with hysterical silent absence.

She dialed the number, shaking. “My daughter is missing and I just wanted to call and,” what was she saying? “And report that.”

“Ma’am, you say your daughter is missing, since when?”

“Sometime today.”

”For how long?”

“Since, it must have been noon.”

”How old is your daughter?”

”She’s twenty six.”

”Twenty six? And you think she’s missing because you haven’t seen her since noon?”

“Well she was in a psychiatric hospital and she got out.”

”Oh, I see.” Always people could see then. Still he might give her trouble.

“She’s in a psychotic state of mind and doesn’t have much money so I would just like to report her as missing.”

“I’ll see what I can do m’am but seeing as how she’s not a minor I’m not sure there’s much I can do. Maybe she’ll show up at your house too if it’s only been a day or so.”

“Yes, but I don’t think so. Do you want a description of her? Do you want to know what she was wearing?”

“I’ll write it down.”

“Thank you.” Julia was relieved—progress. Something happening. “She’s about 5’2 and blond with blue eyes. She’s thin. Getting thinner. She was wearing pajamas. A blue tank top and pink sweatpants.”

“Anything she might be carrying? Is she violent?”

“I don’t think she’s violent. She hasn’t been talking to me recently and she only talks to herself from what I can see. She’s normally a very nice girl. I don’t know what happened in these last few weeks.”

“That’s all right. Anything she might be carrying?”

“She might have a purse with her. Just a small leather purse. Brown. But other than that I don’t think she had anything. She has nothing.”

“I see. I’ll file the report.”

“What will happen? Will I hear from anyone?”

“You will if we find her and you can call anytime.”

“I have some journals. They might be of help—do you want them?”

“Let me file the report. Come to the station tomorrow and we’ll talk more.”

“Please try to find her. I’m very worried.”

”We will. We’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yes, Goodbye.” In a gesture she couldn’t quite explain, Julia held the phone to her heart and began to cry.

Julia sat down on the couch, still cradling the phone, and waited for Randall. She wanted to call him but something stopped her. She dreaded telling him. She didn’t know what his reaction would be after all this time of dealing with Amy’s illness. When he worried he got angry and couldn’t think. That’s what Julia thought anyway. She watched the room darken and thought about what the doctor had told her. Amy had been allowed to go on a field trip. She was allowed to bring her debit card in case she wanted to buy anything. They were going to a strip mall in the middle of Austin to buy toothpaste, deodorant, and other personal supplies, maybe some nice shampoo. While one of the workers was in the bathroom with another distraught patient, Amy was waiting to pay for her body lotion at the counter. The worker who was with her, trusting Amy, went to see what was taking the other two so long. When she got back, Amy was gone. She was gone with her debit card and her student loan money along with some money Julia and Randall and given her. Julia imagined the crowded store, and the harassed workers feeling that at least this one was stable. Julia didn’t know why. When she had visited Amy she seemed very lost to Julia, but perhaps Amy was better at giving off a cognizant impression than Julia knew. She knew that Amy was quiet, and could appear to be without any bizarre thoughts quite easily. She was a student and did quite well in her classes. Only recently had she dropped out. The room was darkening, turning the red rug maroon; Julia felt her eyes getting heavy in spite of herself. She was picturing Amy with that smile on her face that she had

when she thought to herself. The smile could disappear with conversation. She was picturing that and she fell asleep. The sun set.

## **Amy**

I ignored the maps and started looking for messages. They would be encrypted in the scenery. I walked through the streets in the midst of a parade. Paper Mache monstrosities passed by like garish musical notes—I pictured drunken children singing Happy Birthday loudly. The streets were close together. I knew I smelled but it didn't bother me so I thought it shouldn't bother anybody else. I had been wearing the same clothes since I got on the bus. It wasn't hard to figure out, after being locked up in that place for so long, that nobody knew the truth. Or they weren't saying it. This meant I had to find her. Responsibility weighed on me. My sister was an avenue like one in this very city, leading me away on a tangent but worth following. I had been writing to the cops. I knew they were watching me but they weren't responding. It was time to carry out my own plan. I thought I might have some money hidden somewhere here as I had blacked out a lot of that trip. Maybe I had prepared to come back and search for her. It was mid-afternoon. The streets away from the parade were silent. Stray cats worked their way down the avenues and the sky was a surreal blue. My long pants caused me to sweat while my bare upper arms burned. I thought everybody was involved. I just didn't know where they were coming from. I decided to think it over at lunch, and ask about the hostel. The messages were very strong. They were all pointing to the fact that my sister was in Brazil. I had no need to give voice to all of the unspoken communication going on around me; it flowed like a river of

sewage. All the covered up pregnancies, murders, and drug deals gave off a stench that was dangerous and pointless to acknowledge verbally. I knew wherever I had lunch if the man knew about a hostel then my sister was in Brazil. If not, she was in Oaxaca and it would only be a matter of disentangling her from whatever plot surrounded her. They wanted to get to me through her. They were upset that I had escaped, no doubt, the “doctors” and “nurses” back in Austin. As I walked, I saw that instant coffee was everywhere. I realized it was ground up bones. So over-reaching was the conspiracy that I knew going to the police was out of the question. If they weren’t involved, they weren’t interested in oral reports from me either. They probably knew about the coffee in the first place. But in case they didn’t I wrote it down and thought that the cameras and bugs all around me would pick it up. I didn’t know if they had cameras this far south but there was a good chance they did. I often felt ambivalent about the police and their lack of definite action. They left me here in limbo; on the run like I was in some kind of sadistic reality TV show. Discovered and left in the snake pit to see how long I could survive. It was this indifference and their extreme surveillance that made me question the dividing line between them and the gangsters I had encountered in Oaxaca. It was the classic question of the dividing line between authority and criminality. The police were playing God with me too. For all I knew I was a suspect but the thing is I couldn’t imagine committing a crime. For one thing, I didn’t have the energy. I had twisted thoughts born out of the pain of silence or the pain of my loss. I’m not sure but it seemed to go no farther than that. Loved ones dwindled with time. My family was a distant memory to me now. My childhood was a blank slate where new memories sprang up. I had never realized I was so alone and couldn’t imagine what my sister was thinking. She was probably not in a good situation right now. But would she even know it? Would she be like me?

I found a place to have lunch. The waiter knew of a hostel. He even drew me a map. I began, after eating, to walk over there, forlorn. My sister was in Brazil. For now I was being chased and there was no way I could afford Brazil. The afternoon grew sinister with this news. I would have to hitchhike maybe. But first I needed to find some clothes and rest. It had been a long bus ride. Forty eight hours. And I had been awake the whole trip.

I found a hostel. It was the same hostel my sister and I had stayed in. Then I slept. The morning traffic woke me up. I felt more exhausted than before I went to sleep. I assumed I had been up all night doing things. The stress of the situation made me black out. It was easy to see that my journal which had been left open was now closed. I looked up at the bunk bed above me. I heard the quiet snoring of the woman with dark curly hair above me. She was short and wore a lot of jewelry. I had seen her the night before. I found myself wanting to go back to sleep and thinking about where she had come from. The day before seemed like a nightmare that still vibrated through me. I could see clearly who I was. I was Amy. I shook off the fear about my journal. My days were without gaps, interruptions; there was no way I existed in a sea of surveillance. The buzzing of my mind yesterday made me feel electronic, inhuman. I walked through the world with rapid thoughts that my only reaction to was fear. I went out to the hall and found a few people there. I quickly avoided them out of a vague embarrassment. Today I would go to the market and buy groceries but for now I had to buy breakfast. I went down the street a ways and found a little restaurant. The waitress brought my eggs and beans and I looked at her and suddenly she was just a woman and I was a woman who had escaped a mental hospital. The machinations stopped. The lights in the building buzzed, there was a slow pointless reality to the situation and I realized I was broken over lost time.

I went out onto the street with my fantastic memory. I was constantly opening it up for revision and somehow this mental exercise only wiped it away like staring at the sun. My real memories were replaced with my broodings that sprang up, that I couldn't trust. The buildings were tall and it was about one o'clock. I look to people and am reminded of ghosts. I see my sister in stranger's faces and I think not of the resemblance but how she must have survived and wonder at the advancement of plastic surgery. I don't need to think about the logic or puzzle it out. I need her to be alive so she is. I need somebody who doesn't drift in and out momentarily but returns and promises me redemption. This is how it goes every day. I try to soften the bloody circus my life has become.

Days go by in Oaxaca. I wake up and go out through the city simply wandering. I thought my sister was an alley way a side street a dead end. I drink. I drink in the morning, in the afternoon, at twilight. I don't get drunk but I continually keep something by my side. To have that shift of focus, that softening of edges that jump out sharply and from the great heights of my solitary existence. It is not too expensive in the city and I have a good amount of money left. It's not even on my mind. I've gone in circles. I started drawing them. I've gone in so many circles that I've bumped into myself but not even recognized myself. I am cornered by silent dramas. The surface of my life is ordinary. I am an asocial girl on vacation; only a traveler who carries little. But beneath the daily transactions I wonder how much time I have. What they are planning. It could be that a terrible death is waiting for me through door one. It could be they'll let me go but I am skeptical of that. I don't want to die a terrible death, but at least I'm not afraid of it anymore because I have tasted the cold snow of an isolation and confusion and fear so complete that death becomes friendlier. I can say I lived. I can know how I live and keep living that life but the living is background music. Two weeks. I am floundering. The messages are



increasing, threats to me I'd see on the streets, but at the same time nothing is happening. Then I met them.

## **Julia**

She re-read some of the journals. She found them scattered haphazardly through the house. Amy would put them behind plants, in the fridge, in the garage. There was one she had missed in her own bedroom, under a stack of magazines she hadn't moved in years. She sat down to read and found the entries ghoulish and hard to follow. They were full of references to her sister's murder. Her sister was alive and well with a child, living in south Austin and happily married. But Julia knew Amy thought differently. That much she divulged. But between the "moon eating daylight" and the "gravity of blood" there was not much that spoke clearly to Julia. She read this journal straight through; it was three in the morning and darkness would soon break into grey morning light. Towards the end was a passage she hadn't noticed before. It had slipped by in its simplicity:

Janine with the hard rubber tan. Janine with the words shiny and shaped like country club silverware. She has unhinged me. I have told her too much.

Julia blinked. I have told her too much. She sighed, so elated that she allowed herself to feel tired. There it was—perhaps Janine knew something? It could be nothing. But it could have something to do with the trajectory of her running. Did Amy have a destination? Had she been thinking about this? It had appeared random to Julia until she opened the journal. It wasn't just the few sentences about Janine either; it was the urgency of the writings; the way her

daughter felt she was caught in a dangerous world. Julia carefully replaced the journal, in case Amy came home. It had been worth something after all to read it. She always found herself thinking that. In the verbal silence of Amy's disease there was no telling where she was coming from. When Amy had been at home before she went to the hospital she stayed up for days and days writing but barely said a word. She was the ghost of the girl in the picture frame in the living room. She was searching for the bucktooth grin and easy conversation of her daughter. Maybe somewhere in the conversation with Janine she was there—trusting, open, whole. Julia turned off the lights to Amy's room and prepared to go to sleep but didn't. She stayed up re-reading the journal under the soft quilt and yellow light of the old blue lamp, bought in Mexico. She was struck by the comfort of her room-- it seemed like the edge of another world that scraped at her consciousness, keeping her awake. She didn't know when she fell asleep.

She woke up at eight to find that Randall had left a note—I will try to get home early—it said. She called work. Family crisis. I hope it's not too serious, in hushed tones. *I do too*, she thought. *I will have to take the week off. A week? Maybe more. No. A week. In a week this would be resolved*, she wanted to laugh. They gave her the week. She went upstairs and got the journal and ate with it under her arm. She might need to read it again. Highlight certain parts. Study it as if she were a student again. She called the police.

“Please come to the station.”

So she went.

“Hi, Mrs. Nehran. How are you this afternoon?” It was obvious, in the circles under her eyes and the paleness of her skin, how she was.

“I'm fine,” she said. They shook hands. She shook hands with three cops—two men and one woman. The woman was a blond, built like a model and almost too frail looking to be a

police officer. The men could have been brothers; they were pale and thin too with freckles and red tints to their hair. She mistrusted them. They were too delicate. They took her into a small room and began asking questions. They asked her if she knew anywhere Amy might go, about her friends and lovers. They asked her if she might be high, drunk, dangerous or suicidal. Answering the questions, Julia realized how spare Amy's life had become and how this sparseness might have led her to this. She answered though, to the fullest of her ability. She was afraid she'd leave something out in the barrage of questions. It seemed as if her daughter was being left out. She was a subject suddenly. Julia clutched the journal, wondering if they might want to read it but sure that it wasn't the right time to ask. She didn't know whether there was information in the journals so much as something to make the police cry along with her.

“And money, what kind of money does she have?”

“She has her school loans from this semester. She has an ATM card with Olive Branch Bank.”

“Great.”

“Great?”

“This is very good. We can notify the bank and start tracing her use of the card. That should help us locate her Mrs. Nehran.”

Julia looked a little less pale. “That's wonderful. When? How long will it take?”

“It shouldn't take more than a couple of hours. We'll call you when we have our first tracing.”

“So I should go now? Would you like to read her journal?”

“Yes, go ahead and go. You can leave the journal with us. We'll examine it maybe but mostly we'll be going off of her bank statements I think. If we find that she's in the

area then you might see her later today.”

“Later today?” Julia was bewildered, overjoyed, and too weak to believe it.

“At the very least we should know her location. Unless she’s not using the card and chances are she is.”

“Thank you,” Julia said, and got up to leave, trembling with relief.

She left the station reeling. It was so obvious that Julia was surprised it hadn’t occurred to her earlier. She could have told the first policeman about the debit card and the process would be a whole day ahead. She had been too upset though. She still wanted to talk to Janine. What had her daughter told her? She felt a twinge of jealousy over the fact that Amy had confided in her when she barely spoke to Julia. She drove to Janine’s impeccable near-mansion set in the hills of Austin. The rocky hills and blue skies wobbled in Julia’s sight. Her daughter would be back and would be safe-- maybe tonight.

She hadn’t called ahead but Janine was home. She answered the door, petite and slender, with her hair perfectly combed. “Why Julia, please come in.” She offered her a drink and Julia acceded, letting herself be seated, listening to Janine make small talk. Maya was doing well in pre-school and George had come by to fix the sink but it was still broken so would she mind having anything but water? Lemonade?

“Lemonade. Yes.”

And to what did Janine owe this visit?

“Janine, I have news. It’s not good. Amy, well I’m sorry about what she did to your door and after we took her home she just got worse and worse so finally we put her in a psychiatric hospital. Okay breathe, ha, I tell myself that all the time now. Anyway she was put into the hospital and she ran away from it. Nobody knows where she is.”

“That’s awful. I wasn’t going to say anything but you do look a little—well—  
overwrought. But what can I do?”

“What can you do?”

“I don’t like to get involved in something so....messy. I was already worried about how  
much time she spent with Maya. I don’t think she can live here again.”

“I’m not...I was... it occurred to me that maybe you...that when Amy was living here she  
might have said something to you, something about anything. No not about anything but about  
wanting to go somewhere. Maybe she had plans?”

“She honestly didn’t talk much. She kept to herself. You always did let Sylvia dominate  
her.”

Julia swallowed lemonade. She almost choked on it. Not crying, she said “So there was  
nothing?”

“Well, I do remember she said one time that a friend and she were planning to go to Brazil.  
Honestly, I don’t want to tell you this but I think she was drunk, and she was ~~just~~ being, much  
more effusive. I think she said they’d go by bus, after I asked. She...”

Julia sat up in her seat, leaning forward, “And what was this friend’s name?”

“Rebecca I think.”

“I know her. Is there anything else she said?”

“No, I just came home one day and she’d broken down the door. That was telling  
me something I guess.”

Julia laughed nervously, “Yes, I guess it was. I’m sorry about that. She won’t even talk  
to me e,” Julia stopped herself, watching Janine’s polite frown deepen.

”I think that’s all I know Julia. Come by again anytime.” Janine’s smile looked frozen on her face.

Julia left Janine’s house with a nervous flutter in her stomach. Rebecca Thomas. She had been Amy’s only friend throughout college. Julia wondered if this would lead anywhere. She wanted Amy home where she could watch her and take care of her. To what extent would she do that? Amy was an adult now but what did she have to show for it? She was floundering in a sea of delusion. Julia was prepared to become Amy’s worst nightmare. That is her keeper—to feed and shelter and clothe her.... until when? If Amy didn’t get better Julia saw a deadened future for her. Amy would live a life of austere simplicity and yet intense mental anguish. But Amy would get better somehow. It was a matter of medicine maybe, a matter of doctors. They always claimed she was high functioning but the weekly visits weren’t enough. But the hospital hadn’t helped so much either. In there, on medicine and being monitored, Amy had continued to deteriorate. So maybe she wouldn’t get better. Julia was prepared for this. .

Julia arrived home. She felt the same edges interrupting each other—her anxiety and the wonderful familiarity of the little house. It was almost as if it were a cardboard cutout she couldn’t quite enter into. Randall was still at work. There were messages on the machine. One from him; he sounded small and vulnerable. He wanted to know what was for dinner. He would be home late. Julia wondered what always kept him. He was removed from their lives. He thought Amy was grown, this shouldn’t be happening so it wasn’t. The daily routine erased it. Then the phone rang.

It was the policeman she had talked to earlier today speaking to her with a nasal voice. She could tell right away from his tone—patronizing, ready for a breakdown-- that it wasn’t going to be good news. She listened to him talk and watched the birds outside. She was

removed from the situation. She was sitting outside. She wasn't standing in the living room with the cordless phone, then pacing, then standing. No, she was watching the birds fly. The nest they had built in the branches of the pecan tree outside was falling apart. She thought she should do something about it. She thought she should put car coolant at the bottom to keep the neighbor's cat away. Then she almost laughed and he was still talking but he didn't seem to notice the glitch in her breath. The neighbor's cat was beautiful, sleek, shiny, and she couldn't kill it. Well it was the cat or the birds. Think of the tiny fledglings, they needed a chance to fly. *The birds or the cat*, she thought.

"You're handling this better than I expected. You should be proud of yourself," she heard the policeman say.

"Thank you. Thank you very much."

He began to talk again but she hung up. It was only afterwards, drinking water in the small kitchen, with the faded white counters and light wooden (worn just the way they would be in a commercial exploiting families) cabinets, that she realized what he had said. He had said that Amy took out a big sum of money, probably anticipating that she would be traced, and had not used her ATM card since. She could be anywhere. Had she really let Sylvia dominate Amy?

Amy

I was drinking in the hostel. I had that spinning feeling. You know that kind of swaying and skidding while sitting perfectly still. They were all around me but they were multiplying. I couldn't keep track. One. Two. Three. Five. One two three six. How many of them were

there? It was these guys from Canada. I had recognized that they were undercover. They were me and my sister's friends from Oaxaca. They had probably been murdered too. One was an old boyfriend of my sister's—he had the car and he was pouring drinks now. And we were talking. It was glorious to talk to these old friends, to talk to somebody, anybody after so much solitude. They had come crashing into the hostel last night while I slept—I heard their voices down the hall—and they had befriended me. We were supposed to talk but it being a set up didn't really bother me.

“Amy? Amy is it? Have another drink.”

We were drinking rum and talking in the kitchen. We were sitting around the big, wooden topped table scarred with knife marks. We sat under a dim swaying light bulb. I felt dizzy looking at their faces, placing them. I said I wanted to go to the beach. My sister's boyfriend started talking to me. He was sitting next to me and leaned in as he spoke.

“You want the ocean?”

“I have some memories I want to take care of.”

“Memories? What kind of memories?”

“I'd rather not talk about it.”

“Fine. Memories need to be taken care of indeed. Then we'll go. We'll go. Do you remember our names?”

I shook my head.

“I'm Manny,” he said, “and that's John and that's Charlie.” He pointed to John, who looked serious with dark hair and a thin mouth, and then Charlie. Charlie was rounder, with a light complexion and always looked like he might smile.

“I'm Amy,” I said.



“Amy who wants to go to the beach for memories. An old boyfriend?” Charlie asked.

“It’s settled we’re going to the beach. And we’re not talking about it,” Manny said. There was something gentle about him.

So it was decided. We would go to the ocean tomorrow. It was probably a site where one of them was attacked. But they had a car. And they were alive. I couldn’t think of a better combination. All this time with ghosts was getting to me. They might head south too, with all their talking and laughter, nearer to my sister. I couldn’t keep the smile off of my face. They started imitating me and called me happy and sweet.

“Andy, I mean Amy you’ve got to wake us up in the morning,” Charlie said.

“We have a far drive. Yes we do.” This was John.

“So Amy you’ll wake us up?” Manny asked, smiling.

“Then I’d better go to sleep,”

“Take your happy ass to bed then.” Charlie said.

”No, stay up with us.” John said.

”She’s our alarm clock, essentially. We need her to go to bed.” Manny said.

”One more drink.” I said.

”One more drink.” Manny poured me a weak one.

I woke up in the morning at eleven thirty. I felt the night before the same way I felt my morning breath. At first I didn’t know where I was or where I was supposed to be. Then I remembered the beach and panicked—what if they had left me? It was important to go, collect memories by association, and write them down for further examination by me or by the police.

The ocean was no doubt part of it. I somehow got out of bed and went to the kitchen to find them. Charlie was in the kitchen. He seemed even shorter and stouter in the morning light. He

was eating his breakfast hunched over the cereal bowl and looking bleary eyed.

I sat down next to him, "You're still here."

"Still here? You think I'd take a one-day vacation?"

"What about the beach?"

He hit his head in an exaggerated gesture. "The beach! You've got that on your mind. It must have been some boyfriend you're remembering."

"Are we going?"

"We are if you wake them up."

I stood outside their rooms and knocked quietly but they heard and got up and got dressed. I thought they were getting ready fast for my sake.

"Hurry up. The ocean's calling," John said to no one in particular.

"It says swim Amy swim Amy." Manny smiled at me and I wondered if he hadn't been my boyfriend, not my sister's.

"I don't have a suit."

"That's no excuse."

"That's a reason."

"We'll get you a suit."

It was a five hour drive to the beach. Manny drove. He played the radio loud and we rode fast through the mountains. The others slept while I dozed. Sometimes I glanced out the window at the forests going by so fast, so lush. I thought of the people who lived there. The conversations they might have, the food they ate, the romances and rivalries. All of that life was invisible among the trees. Then I thought of the bodies hidden there. There was a silence that surrounded violence. How it is beyond the scope of human emotion but said to be a part of life.

People say: survival of the fittest, competition, these keep things going. Yet when blood spills the mind fractures just like mine had. I heard Manny singing in the front seat along with the song and that made me wonder what it was like to be him. To seem so carefree but to have been through so much. His glasses and spiked hair made him look young, and his clothes made him look wealthy enough that one would think he had nothing to worry about, and he gave off that impression himself. They all did and I enjoyed it. I got a little nervous going around some of the turns but that added to the sense of safety in the end—an ignorant recklessness that didn't know all the boundaries because they hadn't been an issue ever. It was going to be a long drive so I went back to sleep, listening to Manny sing and letting the forest hold what it would hold.

“Are we there yet?”

”We're fucking here. We're at the beach. Get your lazy asses out of bed.”

I opened my eyes to see the waves rolling in on a sandy hill. They were big waves. “It's perfect for swimming.”

“Ah, she likes the looks of this here ocean, eh?”

“It looks good to me.”

We got out of the car and walked to one of the cabanas set up on the beach. I looked at the vast ocean and the tiny cabanas and the people burning in the sun. There was a background of laughter and the hiss of waves. I could feel them moving me already. It was strangely as if I were on vacation. Especially with the Canadians, who purportedly were on vacation. I could slide into their world easily and forget my sister. I had a beer. I reminded myself that maybe it was time to talk business with these guys. I had to think of how to phrase it. I was here to remember their stories but I needed to remind myself. I had another beer. There was a coating of warmth now over everything. It was lucky it was daylight or I might have been reminded too

readily. Around me was the banter of the three Canadians and the sunshine and the sound of the waves and the wind. There was no overriding need to be somewhere else. It was an afternoon by the ocean not what happened before. It was not an after school special but the set of an after school special. We sat in safety as the story of death and loss caused by inhaling things from the garage unfolded around us in a scripted manner. I looked at Manny again. He was smiling at a joke Charlie had made. He looked soft, blurry. Suddenly I was struck by how vulnerable he was. The shadows looked longer, darker. I was riding those big waves, being crushed by them. I saw my sister's face.

I had paid attention to brushing my teeth and how I had tried to brush off my sweatpants. They were getting a little questionable. I didn't want to scare them off. It was funny how the small details still retained importance. Here we were re-visiting a place where Manny had been almost murdered but I didn't want them to comment on my shabbiness, maybe finding deeper meaning in it. The attack began to come back to me as I sat nodding my head to the conversation. We were there, sitting in torchlight—faces lit in slanted spots defined by orange, in a circle of welcoming night. Night—was it welcoming, or threatening? It was one, then the other. I used to wander at night when everyone was sleeping and there is a great, hushed peace. I flee into the night to be welcomed with a silence that surrounds me with rhythmic breathing like listening to a heartbeat. It's been a long time since I did anything like that because the night can be cover too. And that's what I worry about now. A cover for fractured bones, black eyes, screams, barely beating hearts. It was one of those nights so long ago in Mexico, by the beach. Still at that point the night seemed welcoming—wildly fun, with stars out to be the compass to the next party. We were under a hut drinking beer. We were travelers enjoying things the way they were meant to be enjoyed, talking about skinny dipping or going dancing. Why was I

there? Why am I always there? The witness, the one who breaks down and out of herself and can't recall anything, there with her sister, and a tall, thin girl with red hair, and Juan from town, and of course Manny. This is all that memory mostly allows me now. It fractures then. Somehow we are in a closed room, almost empty. Drugs are involved again... I don't know if I did any of them are not. Yelling. Screaming. The night chokes as the evening shatters. The façade blocks out everything like a high tech security system, everything wrong that happens inside. How he lived I don't know. Only I know he drove me to the beach today and I owe it to him to remember. I finish my beer and I look at him. He is staring at me.

“Amy, are you all right?”

“Yes, I'm fine. I'll have another one.”

“Wait, let's go for a walk. Get some air.”

“We're outside.” He winked at me then, his glasses glinting in the sun. “I'll go with you. Anywhere you want.” Then I blushed, feeling that that was too effusive. He looked pleased however and even took my hand to help me up. He dropped it as we walked. I felt slightly disappointed and wondered at myself-- after my sister's boyfriends?

We walked up a hill, diagonally, so we were leaving the others behind but not too quickly. He was silent, taking slow drinks from his beer occasionally. We reached a smooth spot, hidden by miniature dunes, and he gestured for me to sit down.

He pushed up his glasses. “You looked a little anxious out there. I thought I'd get you out of the fiesta for awhile. Here you can think.”

“I looked anxious?”

He nods. “Must be some heavy memories you're looking after.”

“I don’t feel like talking.” So he didn’t say anything more. We just watched the surf come in and out. I listened to the sound of the ocean until it rocked me into some kind of oblivion; where I wasn’t worrying about the way my sister’s body had been slightly twisted at the waist (grotesque), or how my mother bought flowers sometimes; daisies and roses. For some reason she liked white daisies with red roses. She bought them around this time of year and she always said it was to cheer me up but I knew they were a memorial. Nobody could speak about it. I wondered why not.

“Manny, what if something was happening, and you knew it was happening, and everybody else knew it was happening, but nobody talked about it. What would you think?”

“I don’t know. That sounds like life. There’s a lot of stuff like that.” He was sitting about a half a foot away from me. That seemed far. But any closer would have been awkward. I was wondering if his hair was as stiff as it looked, if I rubbed my fingers through it. I was sitting with my arms wrapped around my knees, I didn’t know why so protectively, I just felt a sudden need not to say too much. He was sitting with his hands back in the sand, and his legs crossed Indian style. Soon, he shifted, pulling out his arms, and big piles of sand with them that he let fall. I analyzed how we were sitting for a few minutes; I had read about body language. I decided my posture was one of near vulnerability: protecting secrets and the chest, or heart, in a defensive way because one feels that one is about to be attacked perhaps. That was easy. Of course I didn’t see Manny as a threatening; I saw the conversation as threatening. I felt I had a lot to lose. Manny was more difficult. The crossed legs indicated a willingness to engage in ritualistic endeavors, while throwing the sand might seem to be some kind of invocation.

“Amy. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking you might be a shaman.”

“A shaman? Do I look like Jim Morrison?”

“It’s your body language. It says a lot.”

“So does yours.” And he took a stick, as we had just met each other he used a stick, to remove my hands from my knees.

I tried to smile but I put them back. He shrugged. He imitated me. “It is comfortable actually. When somebody knows you know they know I know you’ve got to go fetal sometimes.”

I laughed. “No it’s that you know and they know and everybody pretends not to know.”

“So what does that refer to?”

There he had asked the big question like I knew he would. He took me out here and we were going to talk. I knew that. I wanted that even; to talk to this guy who was possibly my sister’s ex-boyfriend but was funny and seemed sweet. To talk to him here on a beach in the middle of nowhere with the sun beating down and the water calling us with sweet lullabies would be refreshing. But pretty soon he was going to spot my problem. Pretty soon he was going to be calling me crazy. And I wouldn’t know if something kept him from telling the truth or if I was keeping myself from the truth. “Shit. Manny, my sister died on this beach.”

He obviously didn’t know what to say. He broke his stick and fiddled with it. “Is that why you wanted to come back here?”

“I want to settle it. Settle the memory. And figure some things out. Some things you probably wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“Well I saw my sister’s body but the police went back and never found it. I’m hoping she’s alive.”

“Amy. I wouldn’t hope that. If she’s gone, you saw a body. Amy. Wow. I don’t know what to say. Here,” he handed me the stick, “If you’re angry there’s probably something you can do with that.”

“Of course my sister told me we weren’t even at this beach.”

“When did she tell you that?”

“About a month ago.”

“And this was this sister you were down here with, the one who died? When were you two down here?”

“Yes, it’s the same sister. We were down here about three years ago.”

“So you commune with the dead?”

I looked at him. Now I realized I had said too much and we were going to enter into that slippery territory where nothing I said made sense according to the other person and they held the truth. “Look Manny, I’m telling you something very difficult so I’d hope you’d be sensitive.”

“I’m not being sarcastic Amy. Sorry, just being around John and Charlie too much. I really want to know how you spoke to your sister a month ago.”

“My sister has been replaced. She is now another person. I call her my sister but it’s not really her.”

“How do you know this? Who knows this?”

“My mom and my dad know it, but they deny it. I know it because she does little things differently. She doesn’t smile the same way. It changed when we left Mexico.”



“I’ve felt that. I felt that people have changed and become different people, almost like they’ve been replaced, but usually something happened to make that change come about. The lived in another country, they went to school, they met somebody.”

“Nothing like that happened with my sister,” Emphatically. There was no way I was going to explore the psychological impact of her meeting Brian with this stranger.

“Nothing?” He knew I was lying. “Well let me ask you something. If your parents know why don’t they do anything about it? Wouldn’t parents do something?”

“They’re scared.”

“Do they seem scared?”

“Nothing is as it seems.”

“That only takes you so far. At some point you’ve got to trust a little bit of the world around you.”

“Why?”

“To live. To live fully. There are choices we make about our life that affect us. We get to decide how we perceive the environment. If we choose to suspect everything and everyone, that’s going to wear us down. Erode us.” I looked at him. He was starting to make sense. Not that anything he said was so out of the ordinary. It was just that it was coming from him. And he said it all so matter-of-factly, as if it didn’t matter to him whether I believed him or not. I wanted to tell him I wouldn’t destroy my life the way I had been, and suddenly it was true that I had been destroying my life. I wanted to reach him, to touch him. Here was a person who would sit and talk with me about this the second day of knowing me and not laugh, not run. It seemed that my survival was contingent upon reaching him.

“Manny, she did meet somebody. She met somebody right before we came down here. And it got serious when we went home.”

“Amy!” He stood up. “Amy that’s great. That’s the key. That’s where it is. After my brother met his girlfriend he didn’t wear the same clothes, his hair was different, and he even talked differently. You can’t underestimate the significant other factor. That’s what we call it anyway. It’s a mathematical equation that figures out how severely the friend or relative will be impacted.”

“Maybe we should figure it out for my sister.”

“Amy. The thing about you is I think you know it’s really your sister. Just from the way you talk I think this.”

“I’m never sure is the thing Manny.”

“Well why not try being not sure that it isn’t her.” He sat back down and looked me right in the eyes. I noticed his blue eyes had flecks of grey and green in them. I thought about my sister meeting somebody. Neither of us had had many boyfriends, none of them were serious. I thought, *could Manny change me?* I didn’t know why I thought that, but before I could argue with it I just pushed the thought out of my mind.

“I’ll try it.”

“You will? Really?”

“Yes. Can we go swimming now?”

“Not until you say my sister didn’t die here.”

“My sister didn’t die here.” I said it. I said it and suddenly believed it. All the suffering of these years for her death, for the lie that I was living, popped suddenly and the beach looked vibrant with color. The sounds reached me even more and the feeling of heat on

my skin. "My sister didn't die here!" I yelled. I yelled it at the top of my voice. Manny sat beside me, with his arms crossed across his chest. This signified a feeling of great satisfaction and self confidence, just as the warrior chiefs of days gone by crossed their arms when surveying the land they survived off of.

## **Julia**

Julia woke the next morning and as she brushed her teeth she practiced what she would say to Rebecca Thomas. She was nervous because sometimes Rebecca was cold. Sometimes she was warm though; it seemed to have to do with things Amy said to her. Sometimes Rebecca would sit with Amy for hours during one of her episodes; Julia heard singing and laughing and crying but never knew exactly what was said. She hoped Rebecca would be open with her; not letting Amy's disease become Julia's judgment. The two of them had many classes together because they were the same major, and although she was younger, twenty years old, Rebecca was fairly mature. Amy had worked slowly through her undergraduate degree, often taking breaks because of her condition. It had hit her sophomore year of college and had slowed her down considerably. Rebecca had an aunt who was schizophrenic and so seemed to have a lot of empathy for Amy. Julia was grateful to Rebecca.

She called her before she ate breakfast. Not surprisingly, she got the voice mail. Rebecca called back a few hours later. She sounded sleepy but greeted Julia in a friendly manner, much to her relief. She said yes she had heard from Amy. At that point Julia began to cry and Rebecca assured her she was okay, and Julia had to explain that they were tears of joy. But where was she? Where was Amy? She was on a bus to Oaxaca, she planned to stay in a

hostel but hung up when Rebecca asked where the hostel was. She thought Amy was on vacation, so she hadn't called Julia. Don't worry about it (don't offend the link to Amy's life) but if she calls again, could Rebecca call Julia? Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

Julia cradled the phone to her, this time thinking of all the pulsing beauty in the world.

\*\*\*

She packed her things. They sat out in the hall by the doorway. She called the police. They agreed to keep tracking her daughter's purchases and she would call them periodically to check. The airplane tickets were too expensive on such short notice. She called into work and explained the situation. They gave her two weeks and if it took longer she could call them. They were being very understanding probably because she had been Dr. Holstein's secretary for so long and did a good job. Randall was at work. He told her to be careful. He told her to bring her home. Julia couldn't voice all the ways Randall's parting words had annoyed her so she had simply kissed him goodbye.

At the bus station it was much different. Her certainty seemed to give way beneath her. Once she was on the bus, Julia looked outside from her window seat for a very long time. They passed through the city streets slowly. She saw the mall in the distance. The white concrete walls snaked through the trees in an outdated modern kind of way, like the futuristic house in Disneyworld. She didn't know why she felt so anxious. She felt she was on a dangerous mission

indeed. If she didn't find her daughter she would be without hope. If she did, she would somehow have to bring her home.

"I know how you feel," said the woman next to her. She was heavyset with bright red lipstick and dyed brown hair. "My husband went with me everywhere until he died. He was with the FBI and I always felt safe around him. I always felt that no matter where I was or who I was with if he was there it was all right. Do you know what I mean?"

Julia nodded. She didn't want to have a conversation. She just wanted to think.

"I was in some pretty messy situations too. I was a drinker. And bars are messy. There are bar fights and that's not the worst of it. The worst of it is the day to day goings on at the bar. All the gossip and the intrigue." As she said intrigue she raised her eyebrows and leaned in closer to Julia.

"Well really, I wouldn't know." Julia said, hoping to silence her.

"Well, I would," the woman said and laughed. "I would." But it seemed to work, and the woman stopped talking. Julia worried that this was the type of person that Amy would become: hard, caked around the edges, clinging to strangers with strange stories. She wouldn't be surprised to find out that this woman had never even had a husband. It would be a two day trip to Oaxaca; it might be a long one. Julia decided to read. She tried to read for awhile, distracted, and then she started to doze. Pretty soon it was a deep sleep absorbing the motion of the road and the voices of the other passengers.

"My husband's in the FBI." Julia awoke to hear the woman beside her yelling. "If he catches you trying to steal my sandwiches again it'll be jail time for you."

“My cousin’s in the CIA and if he catches you lying about me like this you’ll wish you hadn’t been on this bus, or even born. He’ll make you cry for your mother before you can even say ham.”

“It’s not a ham sandwich; it’s roast beef. You think I bring low class ham sandwiches with me when I travel?”

“I don’t care what kind of sandwich it is. I wouldn’t eat it you paid me. And if you paid me my cousin would get you for bribery. Trying to kill a United States citizen with your smelly meat.”

“That’s it. I’m telling him. I’m telling my husband about you. You just better watch your step for the rest of your life because they’ll be following you. Watching.” The rest of the bus was silent, waiting for a punch to be thrown or at least a sandwich. It was dark outside now and they were encapsulated by the night. The driver ignored them.

Finally Julia reached out her hand and put it on the woman’s arm. “It’s all right,” she said, “sit down.”

“Sit down? That bitch tried to steal my dinner when I was sleeping she walked by and reached down into my lap.”

“But you have the sandwich?”

“Yes, barely. Thanks to my reflexes I woke up and stopped her. My husband is definitely going to hear about this.”

“Well, tell your husband and sit down.” Strangely, the woman sat down. There was something compelling in Julia’s voice. She had a calming effect on people and rarely argued. Sometimes she felt like she was swallowing every unpleasant thing whole and choking on it but she didn’t have the energy, like this woman, or Amy, for dramatic outbursts.

“My cousin will get you,” the other woman called from the back of the bus.

“Keep sitting and don’t answer her,” Julia said. The woman blinked. Her lipstick had faded some and her red suit came up to overwhelm her face. She turned, hesitated, and then turned back again.

“I’ll be damned,” she said, “I don’t usually give in to wrong like this. It’s just wrong that she tried to take it. I should smack her in the face.”

“Then you’ll get thrown off the bus.”

“Better than being on the bus with this bitch.” She mumbled but kept tight in her seat.

“CIA” was called out from the back of the bus. But Julia’s seat mate did not turn around and soon the bus was quiet again. Then they were quietly tumbling through the dark towards Mexico while the majority of the people slept.

“Hey, do you want a sandwich?”

Julia felt it would be unwise to turn her down. “Sure,” she nodded and took the slightly warm and soggy roast beef sandwich from her companion.

“What’s your name?”

”Julia and yours?”

“Crystal. Look even though my husband passed I still have connections to the FBI. That woman doesn’t know who she’s messing with.”

”I’m sure she meant no harm,” was all Julia could think to say. It was like trying to reason with Amy on a bad day. The conversation just went in circles.

“Meant no harm! No harm to her stomach that is. I spent a long time making these sandwiches and the meat’s not cheap either anymore. By the way, how is your sandwich?”

“It’s very good.”

“Where are you going anyway? I’m going to Laredo to visit my sister. It’s not much of a town but she’s lonely.”

“I’m going to Oaxaca.”

”Oaxaca, that far? You’ve got a long ride ahead of you. Family there? You don’t look Mexican but you never know.”

“Family? Yes. I hope so.”

“You hope so. That’s a strange thing to say.”

Before she knew it, Julia was telling Crystal about Amy. She was there. She was listening. She was alive. Amy would be furious. “My daughter, she’s having some problems. We put her in a psychiatric hospital and she ran away. She’s in Mexico now.”

“Wow, that’s heavy. I’ve known some people from mental hospitals. I had a cousin who went in after he did so many drugs he couldn’t see straight. He never recovered. I think he lives in a group home now, around Laredo. I should probably go see him. Although he did steal fifty dollars out of my purse once.”

*That’s encouraging,* Julia thought. She said “I want her to come home.”

“Well, honey, she will when she’s ready. When she’s ready. You can’t make them do anything. I kicked my son out once, he was drinking too much and bringing people over at all hours and stealing the car when he wanted to. At first I thought I could yell at him enough to change him but then I saw that wasn’t working. I took away video games and grounded him and nothing worked. I had to kick him out. But now that he’s older he’s manager of a gas station. He’s married with kids of his own and nobody could be more responsible. I never would have thought that punk kid would turn out like he did.”



“I guess so,” Julia said. It was getting late. Telling a complete stranger about Amy had drained her, although she felt lighter. All the time she was edging around the subject with people, trying not to say too much. It felt good. Still she felt slightly ashamed, as if she had betrayed her daughter. She had finished her sandwich and started nodding off. It was getting late. Crystal said something and Julia nodded and nestled down into her seat.

When she awoke the sun was bright, the scenery was different, and her seating companion was gone. She had a headache. She hadn't slept that much for at least a week but her body was cramped by the strange contortions she was forced to make in her bus seat. The overwhelming impression was of yellow. The scenery was burnt against the pale blue sky. There were small, thirsty trees every once in awhile but mostly it was burnt grass outside the window. The seat beside her was empty now and Julia didn't know whether to enjoy the silence or abhor the vacuum.

She thought of what Crystal had said and didn't know how it was exactly that Amy would come home with her. Technically she was an adult, but she was a broken adult behaving incredibly irresponsibly and perhaps dangerously. Which was the point—how to make her come down? Julia started a list: remind her of the things she used to love like swimming, cooking, reading, remind her of her childhood; how Julia used to read to her, remind her of her father taking her swimming in the summers, playing with her sister. Then tell her she had things to look forward to. Graduation, what else? Nothing else Julia could promise. Tell her that she is only wounded and needs help. Tell her she was on a broken rocking horse going nowhere. The list was disintegrating. Maybe focusing on the past would be better with Amy breaking from the family lately. She would concentrate on rebuilding the connection that had been so abruptly thrown away. Julia felt the need to sleep again. She had been awake for so long it seemed. Now

the humming of the bus and its new quiet were warm-feeling. Before she drifted off she thought of something else: tell Amy that she thought of her, constantly, and she had, somewhere, some kind of solution growing. Somewhere, she had it.

Amy

I was in the ocean. My clothes were on the beach. I kept riding the waves onto the shore, but I was getting crushed-- spun and crushed. I felt like I was in a washing machine. But the water felt good next to my skin; it was a second skin, warm and salty.

“Amy, don’t go so high on the waves,” Charlie yelled at me. They were all screaming quotes from movies I didn’t recognize. “You’re catching the wave too high; that’s why you’re spinning around like that,” Charlie offered.

“Thanks,” I said, “I was wondering how you guys got up so fast after riding the wave in.”

“It’s simple,” Manny said, “we’re in great shape.”

“Oh, I hadn’t noticed,” I said.

“Pretending indifference, I see.” Another wave came in. We got ready to ride it in; they screamed movie quotes. The waves really were incredible. They were higher than any beach I’d been to. When I rode them, I went in fast and then we had to swim back out far enough to catch the next one. The power of every wave told me that my sister was alive. She was alive and all was well. We swam over the tops of the waves then, which is what I really liked. Coming down from the top of a wave gave my stomach a dip too. We swam for two hours. I had not stayed in the water that long since I was a little kid. But we lost track of time. The waves kept coming and we kept being thrilled by them.

We got out and toweled off and I got dressed. I hadn't had anything substantial to eat for two days; now I was hungry. We all were.

So we walked down the beach. It was sunset. This is not difficult to imagine-- a beach at sunset, walking in the sand, with the sound of the waves coming on like a lullaby.

"This is why they make those tapes of the beach," I said.

"Yeah. I wish I'd had that idea. We used to go the ocean every summer when I was a kid and it put me to sleep every night. I could easily be a millionaire by now if I'd only put a tape in my window," Charlie said.

"Or what about rain water? Has that been done yet? That's another sound," Manny said.

"Any water sound," John said, "and I think it's been done."

"I don't know about a flood," Manny said. "That would be stressful."

"A flood is a good point. Nobody's paying to hear that as they fall asleep."

"Or a dripping faucet. That can be really annoying," Manny said.

"Fine. You got me." We had reached another restaurant that was built as a cabana.

"You want to eat here?" Charlie said.

"Yes," I said loudly.

"She's hungry," Manny said.

"She's starving," I said. A few rounds of beer later the food came out. I had fish enchiladas. The food was good, and the beer made it better. It was dark now and the stars were out instead of a sunset. It is easy to imagine, a cabana lit by tiki-torches under the stars on the beach. The waves continued to make a hissing, whooshing sound.

"So Amy, tell us about you. What do you do?" John asked.

“I’m a student.”

”What do you study and where?”

”I study anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin.”

”Shouldn’t you be in school right now?” Manny asked.

I was quiet. I nodded. They laughed as I took a drink of my beer.

“She’s cutting class!” Manny said. “Those were the days. I’ll drink to that. Skipping out on school and going to Mexico. When I skipped school I went to the mall!” They laughed some more and everybody had a drink to the fact that I was possibly failing out of school through my absence. One drink turned into another turned into another until the beach was spinning. Manny wasn’t drinking as much, as the driver, but he was still drinking. The weather was breezy and warm and our voices got louder and louder, filling the cabana with the comforting sound of conversation. After awhile, the waitress told us to move on and we made our way back to the car.

In the car Manny rolled down his window and put on the radio softly. We drove in silence for awhile. The car was like a womb; I was tired from swimming and sunburned too but it felt good on my skin, the air coming in. It gave me chills. After a while I looked back and saw that Charlie and John were sleeping. Manny was singing again, to some new kind of punk, and I hated to interrupt him. Still I said, “Manny, I thought I knew you.”

“What?” he asked, turning down the radio.

“I said, I wondered if I knew you.”

“Yeah, I get that feeling too. You seem strangely familiar.”

“No I mean, you... you were hurt, you were my sister’s boyfriend.”

He raised his eyebrows. “That I don’t know about. How about this kind of déjà vu thing where maybe we knew each other in a past life or something? Maybe we were on the frontier together, hustling cattle.”

I laughed. “I don’t know about that.”

“Sure. You seem like the cattle hustler type. I could see it.”

“I don’t even like cows. I thought you were hurt too. But I don’t think that anymore.”

“I’m glad it’s out of your mind. I wouldn’t date your sister anyway, unless I hadn’t met you, and if I met you I’d be in trouble. Just remember, every time I’ve been to Mexico only good things have happened. Look, I met you here, didn’t I?”

I laughed again. “Meeting me can be taken many ways. Not usually as a good thing.”

“No, I mean it. I always meet the strangest, and I mean that in a good way, people down here. Here you are the student who doesn’t study and swims in the ocean naked. I have to respect that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Am I sure I’m glad I met you?”

“Are you sure you’re not the guy I’m thinking of? That I’m not wrong to put it out of my mind?”

“Yes I’m sure.” Then it was silent for awhile. I looked out the window wondering if I should believe him or not. And I wondered if it even mattered.

“Amy,” he said finally, “I think, just from knowing you these few hours that you think too much.”

“I try not to.”

“Do you really?”

“Fine. Maybe not.”

“You should try not to,” he said and smiled at me. “Look you’re here in Mexico and you should enjoy it. You’re seeing a part of the world not everybody sees and it’s beautiful. You have to agree to that.”

“Yes, I agree.”

“So you’re going to promise me to keep the wheels turning a little slower in that mind of yours, and take everything in and try to savor it.”

“Yes. I promise.”

“Pinkie swear.”

“This is getting ridiculous.”

“No, I mean it. I need an oath from you.”

“Pinkie swear,” so we locked pinkies and he smiled at me again.

“I still think we were cattle hustlers together.”

Julia

Julia awoke at dawn. She slid up in her seat and looked out the window. Mexico was passing by now mountainous where it had been flat. The bus leaned one way then the next going through the steep roads. There were stops sometimes, to pick up people at apparently random places in the road. They gathered together along the road and the bus driver would pull over to pick them up. A woman got on who was selling tamales but Julia wasn’t hungry. They would be there in a half an hour if the bus was on schedule. Julia thought about getting to the hostel. How was she going to get Amy to talk to her? Julia had researched and found only one hostel in

Oaxaca. Had Amy left? Maybe Amy would be behaving like any other young woman living in a hostel might, maybe this had all been good for her and she wasn't deteriorating and there wouldn't be some kind of confrontation. Julia was prepared for the worst. She imagined having to tackle Amy, she imagined Amy screaming obscenities, or worst of all, simply ignoring Julia and going on her way. There would be distance and silence. The bus stopped to pick up a family, an old man, and a pair of tourists dressed in black, gothic clothing. That would be the last stop. They were ten minutes from Oaxaca, Julia didn't know this, but she sensed they were close and straightened up in her seat, watching out the window closely. She had never been this far into Mexico and caught herself thinking more about the scenery than about her daughter. The houses were squat and square, built into the mountain. Some were bright, others were a plain white. She could see the steeple of a church off in the distance. She felt strangely excited, as if she weren't here on serious business. The bus driver played what sounded like the Mexican blues on the radio as they jolted back and forth through the hills. Julia braced herself for a long day and began to gather her things.

They pulled into the bus station a few minutes later and soon Julia was getting off the bus. She carried her bags (they were heavy, she had packed too much,) to a small store to buy a cup of coffee. One cup of coffee and then she would see Amy. She reached for her wallet and found nothing. Maybe this was Crystal's way of saying goodbye. Luckily, she had kept everything else important close to her body in a belt, and had only left twenty dollars in her wallet. Still Crystal had enough for some sandwiches.

She walked off the bus, blinking. She went to an ATM for some money. She stood outside waiting for a cab. Soon, she would be at the hostel.

Amy

I was eating breakfast in the kitchen when I thought I heard my mother's voice. She had that tone she gets when she wants something. That sweet, slow and infinitely patient voice that understands. It was just murmurings I told myself and continued to eat my cereal. My mother wouldn't be here. I was safe from her here. I closed my eyes and listened. It sounded distinctly like my mother's voice.

"Amy," my mother said suddenly. I opened my eyes. She was standing in the kitchen doorway, short and round with her brown wavy hair out of place for once. She wore jeans and a red shirt. She had sunglasses on her head. Even though I knew this is what she wore every day she still managed to look like a tourist somehow.

"Mom," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here? That is the real question." I noticed she had tears in her eyes. "I'm so relieved to see you. Your father and I have been very worried."

I played with my food to avoid looking at her. Here was the woman who had put me in the hospital, who had hovered over me, for what? For a simple mistake. "You know how I feel about you," I said.

"I know you've been angry with me Amy. And I know I don't always know what to do and the whole thing has been hard on all of us, but I think you need to come home with me. Will you do that? We can get you on your medicine again and talk to the doctors and pretty soon you'll be back in school and you'll finish your degree. I was getting close to finishing my degree but I'd had some problems, some setbacks. It had taken me until now to figure out that my mother was involved in all of this. She was holding me back through excessive worry. She was finding problems and playing them up. School was now her favorite subject, one of them, and



she had become so fixated on it I thought there must be an ulterior motivation although I couldn't figure out what that was.

"I'll think about it," I said.

"Amy," she said, "give me a hug."

I did. I didn't think it would be right to argue with her. I didn't want to anger her. I was afraid of myself. My body shook as I hugged her. Everything she said sounded calculating to me and I was miserable. After last night I had thought that everything was going to go well, but now my mother—posing as a kindly well-intentioned middle class woman—was going to take me away. Probably she would put me back into a psych hospital where they medicated me into oblivion.

"That's better, isn't it," she said, smoothing my hair. "I missed you."

"It hasn't been very long," I said.

"Still I missed you."

"What are you going to do when I move to Oregon?" I asked, pacifying her. I had wanted to move to Oregon for quite some time.

"That would be different," she said. It angered me that she said that but I tried to hide it. It would be different because I would be under her control again if I was medicated enough.

"It would be different because it would be colder."

"It would be colder and you would have a job," another favorite theme. What was I going to do after I graduated?

"Mom," I wanted to change the subject, "do you want some food? Have you eaten?"

"No I haven't," she said. So I poured her some cereal and we sat down to eat. It was strange because she was so familiar and yet so terrifying. Part of me was completely

comfortable, I suppose that what's not talked about when speaking of domestic violence, the way you can feel at home in a situation that is precarious. Then I caught myself. Domestic violence? That wasn't the situation. More like domestic silence. And I was perpetuating it. I watched her eat and noticed that she wiped her mouth several times with the paper towel she had asked for.

"Well Amy," she said when she was done, "I think I need to rest a day before we head back. That was a long bus ride. So we'll head back tomorrow. That is if you have decided to come with me. But I think it's best that you do, I really do. I think," she started to cry, "I think you need help Amy."

"Don't cry. I'll go back with you tomorrow," I said, almost meaning it.

She wiped her eyes. "So what do you want to do today? I have to call your father and get some money but we can do anything you want today."

"I'll try to think of something," I looked at her. Something about her misplaced hair softened me a little. "I don't believe those things anymore Mom."

"You don't?" Her hair fell, and looked almost perfect again, just a little wind-blown.

"I don't," I said.

She hugged me. I cringed a little. "Then today will be a celebration." She went out of the room looking a little dazzled. I sat in the living room area, which was adjacent to the small room the phone was in, and tried to listen to her. She moved around the room some; I thought I heard sobbing. I sat. I thought of going in but remained. After ten minutes or so she came out to me, drying her eyes again.

"Amy I'm so glad to see you," my mother said. "I'm so relieved."

"There was no problem," I said, somehow with a serious face.

“That hospital, I should sue them,”

“Oh yeah. The mental hospital. Well I wasn’t enjoying myself there.”

“Obviously,” my mother said a little harshly. “I mean, that’s unfortunate. I’m not sure they’re the best places,” she said, softening her words.

I laughed “That’s one way to put it.”

“Well how would you describe them?” she asked.

“They’re institutionalized nightmares,” I said.

She laughed now too. “That bad?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation.

“Well, you’re out of it. So what do you want to do?”

“You don’t want to rest?” I asked.

“No, I’m euphoric. I’ll rest later. Let’s see the city.”

I was a bit surprised my mother wanted to go sight-seeing after tracking me this far, but that was how she was. She didn’t talk about things; she smoothed over everything one way or another. Once she had it in her mind that I would go home with her then her goal was accomplished and no further attention needed to be paid to it. So we went out. We went to a museum, then we ate lunch, then we went to a church. It was awkward. Everything we didn’t talk about. We commented on the masks we saw and the snakes carved into the door of the church and the taste of mole but we didn’t throw angry words around (as I certainly wanted to do) or wallow in the past (as she might have wanted to do). She accepted my sudden recovery simply and unconditionally.

Then we had dinner at a small place on the plaza with outside seating. We had a view of families and other people passing by and could hear the orchestra that was playing in the pavilion

at the center of the plaza. There were tablecloths and napkins folded into complicated patterns on the table. I thought it looked too expensive but my mother insisted that we eat there. It turned out the food was very informal. There were small, circular candles burning on each table. In the light they had little effect but at night they would have been very subtle and romantic. I found it kind of funny that my mother was taking me to this restaurant but we were hungry and there were three kinds of margaritas listed on the chalkboard that announced the daily special outside the door. I think this attracted her too. The waiter immediately began to speak English to us. The city was full of tourists.

“You are from the United States?” he asked.

“How did you know?” my mother asked him.

“I have an eye for these things. Where would you like to sit—inside or outside?”

“Outside,” I said.

“Yes, outside,” my mother added. We were led to a table. It took about fifteen minutes for the waiter to come back and take our drink orders. I watched a man play with two small children who were chasing birds, until my mother spoke.

“I’m worried about you Amy,” she said.

“Still? I’m fine, I really am,” I said.

“Let me go on. Your behavior lately is strange and dramatic. It’s not like you. Usually you have focus and determination. I’m happy that you don’t have these ideas anymore, but your overall behavior...”

“Will it change? Is that what you’re asking? I don’t know. I don’t see what’s so dangerous about me.”

“I don’t think you’re dangerous. I’m worried. I just wanted to say that.”

“Well mom, I know it seems strange. The way I’ve been acting, but I’m doing better than you think. I’m traveling. I’m on my own. I have some independence that I really needed,” I said.

“That’s what I’m worried about. You’re on your own. How much time do you spend alone a day?”

The waiter came back then. He had a big margarita for my mother and a glass of wine for me.

“Can I take your orders?” He asked politely.

“Please come back,” my mother said, “we haven’t decided yet. We’re talking.” She said the last with quite a bit of emphasis so the waiter looked startled. The sun was setting and the candles were beginning to reflect shadows on the table cloth. He seemed to study them out of embarrassment.

“Take your time,” he said, still studying the table cloth. As he was leaving, my mother apologized to him. He nodded, and his expression looked like he thought of changing his mind about us.

“Now maybe they won’t spit on our food,” I said.

“So what were we saying?” My mother asked, blushing a little.

“You were asking me how much time I spend alone.”

”Yes, that’s what I worry about.”

“Well actually I’ve been spending a lot of time with some new friends. I made some friends, which doesn’t seem to have occurred to you, and I spend very little time alone. I’ve been exploring.”

“You have?” my mother raised her eyebrows. Her voice went a little higher with a kind of pleased lilt to it.

“Yes, I went to the beach.”

“And who are these friends?”

“They are some guys from Canada. They are down here to escape the cold weather.”

“How old are they?”

“I don’t know.” My mother was itching with curiosity. I could see that so I said, “If you want to meet them I’m sure they’ll be back at the hostel.”

“So you met them at the hostel?” she asked.

“Yes, but there’s no need to ask all these questions. You can meet them and find out everything yourself. After dinner we’ll find them.”

“So you haven’t been spending too much time alone? You do that sometimes.” “No mom, I haven’t.” She had almost finished her margarita and the waiter came back to take our orders. She asked for another one and we ordered. Rapidly, because we hadn’t been paying much attention to the menus, which were printed in both English and Spanish in curly cue letters. We got nachos to share. Not what you would expect in that restaurant, but there they were on the menu. When the waiter left my mother reached out and grabbed my hand,

“Well I’m so happy you’ve been meeting people,” she said. “I can’t wait to meet them.”

Julia

The dinner was finished. Julia felt warm from the margaritas and didn’t want to return to the hostel yet. “Why don’t we go listen to the orchestra?” she suggested.

“It is a nice night,” Amy said hesitantly, thinking about it, “I’d like that,” she said finally. The music of the “orchestra” was attracting a crowd. Really it was a quartet of older men in grey pants and flowery white shirts playing string instruments. The man in the front was thick, with a belly and a streak of white in his black hair. The other two were older than him, with small hands and arms that moved rapidly with the music. Their feet tapped. A tall, thin, rubbery man with snow white hair was playing the bass. His long fingers easily reached the right positions. They played waltzes and minuets. People sat, scattered around the crumbling bricks of the plaza, leaning back and listening. The buildings were painted various bright colors, and the plaza was lined with connected storefronts—restaurants, clothing stores, tourist shops full of knick knacks (from skeletons dancing in fine clothing, advertising the day of the dead, to clay suns with smiling faces), and finally a church. It was tall and made of yellowish stones, with several doors to enter through and long, sweeping, circular steps leading up the front door. The church was opposite the quartet and people flowed in and out of it, along with pigeons.

“Let’s sit near the front,” Julia said. So they made their way close to the pavilion. They sat on the ground; there was no room for them anywhere else. The benches were taken up with families eating ice cream and couples holding hands. Everywhere the birds flew, gathering and scattering with the movement of the adults and especially the children, several of whom gave chase to them. Amy messed with her skirt for a few moments, finally settling down. Her mother had bought her a calf-length flowered summer dress which was covered in small red flowers with orange and green centers.

“Mom, are you sure you want to sit here? I think we could find a table,” Amy said.

“No, I want to hear the music. This is fine,” Julia said, “just sit with your legs crossed.”

“It’s not that. I never saw you as sitting on the ground,” Amy said, “but I don’t mind.”

“You don’t mind. I don’t mind. I’ve been on the grass at many concerts,” Julia said.

Amy laughed, “But you don’t remember them so does it count?”

Julia stopped to listen to the music for a minute. They were playing Vivaldi now, Julia couldn’t quite place the song but she knew it was Vivaldi. Her father had been a great fan and she remembered him in their small dusty garage, fixing the car with this music playing on the record player. He always found something to fix on the car; it was never finished.

“I remember. I’ll remember this,” Julia said at length.

“What’s the problem with forgetting a few things?”

“I hope that’s not a reference to your own life.”

“Maybe not.”

Julia tried to frown but it turned into a smile. “The ground’s not so bad, is it?” she asked.

“No, it’s not bad at all,” Amy said. A few children came up, wrapped in old blankets, and extended their palms. Julia felt around in her purse and gave them some money. It must have seemed like a large amount because they ran off smiling. They had been very thin. A little while later Amy pointed them out across the plaza. They were huddled together and had their own ice creams. “They must make a fortune,” Amy said.

“Off gringas like me I guess,” Julia laughed. “No really Amy, they looked hungry.”

“They did. And they were small. I just wonder where the money goes.” Amy commented.

“Probably to their mother, and it’s none of our business where it goes. Nobody asks me where I spend my money. I spend a lot of it on you.”



“I’ll never have a job,” Amy said and raised her arms, palms up, not unlike the children. “I think it’s starting to rain,” she said. It smelled sharp too, and the heat from the concrete was almost steaming.

Julia looked up; her concern for what Amy had said unaddressed. She saw great rolling clouds had sneaked up on them. The sky was filled with smoky charcoal formations that were moving quickly, and in the distance smudges of grey that reached the ground showed rain was falling there. “It’s not so bad,” Julia said.

“Nothing is for you,” Amy said, “I think we need to take cover.” The drops were falling at a steady tempo now, bending the flowers and adding a soft drum beat to the song.

“Cover where? What about the music?” Julia asked. The crowd was beginning to leave, some people running, others covering themselves with newspapers and paper napkins from the various restaurants. The rain was coming down fast now. The music was almost drowned out with staccato beats of the rain, and the plaza was misty in the downpour. Each rain drop hitting seemed to splash on impact.

“I don’t know, but somewhere,” Amy said. The musicians played on. Now they were playing a song from “Peter and the Wolf” with a build up not unlike the rain and dark overtones. Thunder sounded in the sky. It went with the music perfectly. Julia gave them a wistful look.

“I really wanted to hear them play,” she said, getting up anyway. “And they’re sitting out here in all this.”

“I know Mom but you can barely hear the music,” Amy shouted so as to be heard.

“Come on Amy, we’ll find somewhere to hide from this,” Julia shouted back and she offered Amy her hand.

Amy took her mother's hand and they left the green and white pavilion. Made their way through poinsettia shrubs and crossed the low steel fence that surrounded the white wooden pavilion. They didn't discuss anything; Julia just followed Amy as she made her way through the streets. They were getting wet. Amy's dress was sticking and wrapping around her like a swirl pop and Julia's flawless hair was flattened to her ears. Three blocks later was a church, and they went inside. The church was small compared to the others around the city. It was painted bright green with a huge wooden cross at its peak. A middle-aged Mother Mary was carved above the door, the only stone evidenced on the stucco building, welcoming everyone in with embracing arms.

Closing the heavy door (tall and painted black, but simple, with four panels) behind them, they were overwhelmed with the smell of cedar. They walked through the front hallway, which was bare and consisted of polished, light colored wooden archways, and went inside. It had the high ceilings that were to be expected and stained glass windows with simple pictures in them. The windows depicted the birth of Jesus with cartoonish, stylized forms. Everything was square, from the people's faces to the cradle Jesus was born in. Perhaps the most noticeable things were the wooden carvings of Christ being crucified. In the one to their right, he wore a real crown of thorns, and his lips were painted red and dripped with wooden droplets of blood. These came from his hands and his bare torso, which was slashed painfully. Oddly, the paint was bright and cheerful. He had pink skin and a bright white toga, and very blue eyes that looked upward in agony. On the other wall another carving of Christ hung, this one painted white and grey and ghostly. He also hung from the cross and every rib on his ribcage showed. The only color on the piece was the red of the blood that was similar to the other wooden carving. At the altar Mother Mary was depicted, in plaster, holding Jesus as a baby. A smile was on her face. This was

different from another Mother Mary depicted in a window behind the first. Here she was holding Christ's body as an adult. Her expression was twisted with pain in the depiction, and a single tear fell from her eye. The church was empty. Votive candles burned the small, white round candles most likely sold outside in better weather. They stood on the steps leading up to the altar, burning in the silence. At the ends of each long step larger, white, conical candles burned. There were four of them, two at each end, and they burned in tall golden candle holders.

Julia, who was uncomfortable with the gore of the Jesus carvings (she didn't like to think about those things), whispered "Let's go somewhere else. It isn't right to make a church a pit stop."

"When did you get so religious? This is perfect. It's dry and warm."

"It isn't warm," Julia said. She was right. The church was drafty and cool with its high ceilings and loose wooden and stone construction.

"Let's just sit here for awhile. We can pray. You can pray for me."

"Amy, don't make fun. I know I don't go to church but this is still a holy place."

"You think I'm kidding? I'm serious."

"Let's leave."

"In a few minutes the rain will stop," Amy said. "In the mean time, we're in church." She made her way to one of the pews and sat down. It was dark inside, with little light but the candles, and now she could make out a few people towards the front praying. Julia realized Amy wasn't kidding and followed her. She heard her praying as she knelt on the rough wooden bench.

"Dear God, I don't know if you're there, but if you are and you hear this please remember me and the people I love."

She paused and Julia took over, “Our Lord who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name... I don’t really want to follow that prayer it just seemed like a good opening. I want to say thank you for bringing me to my daughter here in Mexico, and I want you to know it’s been a hard year, with everything going on, and I spend a lot of time worrying about my daughter; she really goes into dark places sometimes, but I guess you know that and you also know that I’m proud of her too. She does incredible things and has an incredible mind. Help her and look after her in this time of her life which is uncertain and see her through; help her get grounded. I think she’s on her way.”

Julia stopped to take a breath so Amy followed her, “Please help my mother to find all she needs. Any time of life can be uncertain and please help her to not take things so hard. I know she worries about me; I know I’ve kept her up nights. Please help her to sleep on those nights.”

“Whisper Amy, whisper,” Julia said, laughing a little. Amy’s voice had boomed and carried through the whole church. “I didn’t know you ever thought about me staying up nights,” Julia said.

“I do. Let’s just say on my good days I do,” Amy whispered. Just then a woman with unmoving dyed blond hair, about shoulder length and in the shape of a helmet, and wearing a pink dress suit with green eye shadow and too much light pink lipstick walked into the church. Julia and Amy looked at each other, feeling interrupted by her presence, and suddenly they quit speaking about the things they hadn’t talked about before. She was thin, and wore high heels which she wobbled on to some degree. She walked straight to Amy and Julia and sat down next to them.

“Can I sit here?” she had a heavy accent.

“Of course,” Julia said.

“Sit,” Amy said. Their conversation interrupted, they turned their attention to the altars at the front of the church—Amy trying to meditate seriously upon them and looking with what appeared to be feigned reverence, while Julia closed and opened her eyes and mumbled prayers to herself that seemed fearful, if deeply sincere. The woman, who they both cast sidelong glances at, bowed her head. She began praying loudly in Spanish. This went on for some time. The rain hit the ceiling with a fevered speed that mixed with the sound of her voice. When she was done, she put her hand on Julia’s arm.

“I sat next to you for a reason,” she said.

“Oh yes?” Julia asked.

“I could tell you were both very blessed and had come here for good reasons.”

“Well, thank you,” Julia said. “We’re really enjoying our time here.”

“No, I mean to the church. I could tell that I had seen you here for a reason and I have something very important to tell you.”

“All right,” Julia said, beginning to feel uncomfortable. The candlelight flickered across the woman’s face, highlighting the mask of makeup she wore and her still hair. She looked like a doll that had just been taken out of the attic after many years.

“I wanted to tell you that your daughter will be pregnant soon, that is your daughter isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Julia said.

“I knew it. She will become pregnant and she will be married but she might die in childbirth. So be very careful with her,” the woman said.

Julia laughed nervously.

“Don’t laugh. It’s very serious. Make sure you are careful with her in her pregnancy.”

The woman removed her hand. She got up to leave. She didn’t say goodbye, she just nodded at them in a very serious manner as if they were all there on a mission. She had completed her part so she left, leaving Amy and Julia bewildered.

Julia laughed again, “You don’t have anything to tell me do you Amy?” she whispered.

“No, not that I know of.”

“Not knocked up this time?”

Amy shook her head. “No chance.”

“Didn’t meet anybody in the hospital?”

“Hey, it could happen. It just didn’t. There were some fine men in there.”

Julia suddenly got serious and in a strict tone of voice said, “Don’t take that seriously Amy.”

Amy rolled her eyes. “I won’t Mom. Why would I?”

“Good. She was no prophet. She was just a lonely woman.”

“That’s fine Mom. I don’t believe her.”

“Good.”

“Let’s see if it stopped raining so we can get out of here,” Amy said, ready now to take flight from the sanctuary.

“I don’t hear rain anymore.” Organ music started and well dressed people started filing in. Children ran and fell, fathers called out to them, mothers held smaller children.

“Our mass is over,” Amy said.

“I think it was over when that woman walked in,” Julia said.

“Don’t think about her mom,” Amy said. “Like you said she was probably just lonely. Loneliness can do strange things to a person.”

Julia wondered why her daughter spoke so authoritatively. She felt Amy had a strange sympathy for the woman and didn’t seem disturbed by her. Julia was impressed with Amy’s empathy but it worried her at the same time. Her tolerance for the odd caused Julia a little pain, knowing what it had grown out of. The rain had stopped as suddenly as it started, at least the sound of it had, and she was ready to go and meet Amy’s friends. They got up to leave and only after opening the heavy wooden doors and testing to see if there was rain did they walk out into the evening.

Julia

Manny was making his way over with drinks for Julia and Amy and himself, balancing precariously. He seemed to move to the music, which was some kind of salsa now. The drinks bounced up and down in rhythm, and his body adjusted to that. They were sitting outside, at metal tables made of what looked like frozen lace, and the stars were out. You couldn’t see too many of them in the city but there was enough to tilt your head back and be satisfied that other worlds existed. There were paper lights strung around the small courtyard and stone paths that nobody really used. There were about ten tables out there so the space was crowded; tiki torches burned as well. They were on the outskirts of town at a small coffee shop. Another song started, this time it sounded like flamenco. Julia took her drink from Manny as he stood over her. He had gotten her lemonade, Amy a coffee, and himself a beer.

“I’ll have a beer next time,” Julia said.

Manny smiled. “That’s fine with me.”

Charlie leaned over. “That’s a good choice.”

“Mom, you had a few at dinner,” Amy reminded her.

“I know but a few more won’t hurt,” Julia said. “I like to enjoy myself sometimes, my dear, and you don’t need to worry about it.” “All right, you’re right. I’ll have a beer next round too,” Amy said. “Why not?”

Julia frowned.

“That’s the spirit girls,” Charlie said.

“I hope I’m not becoming witness to a mother daughter drinking contest,” John said.

“It might be interesting.”

“You’re right,” John said. “The night just got that much more entertaining.”

“I could drink Amy under the table,” Julia said. Amy laughed. They involuntarily smiled at each other. The music continued now with the flavor of the rancheros, low and mournful. The cracks in the paint of the building, the broken quality of some of the stones laid out on the ground became that much more apparent and took on an almost wistful quality in light of the music. Everything appeared to be full of longing and speak of the histories of those who had been before. Julia sighed.

John leaned over and said, “You remind me of my fourth grade teacher.”

Julia nodded.

“She was my favorite teacher.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” Julia said. “Teachers at that age make such an impression. I remember I hated my fourth grade teacher.”

“I had some teachers I hated. I just kept trying to place who you reminded me of and it was Mrs. Nora. She even had a nice name. There isn’t anything bad I could say about her.”



Amy put down her drink. John leaned in. Julia smiled.

“Fourth grade teachers. Who really remembers them?” Manny asked.

“She was pretty. Pretty and young,” John said a bit too emphatically.

“Then she can’t remind you too much of me.”

“But she does.”

“She reminds you of her in a prepubescent way, right John?” Charlie asked. Everybody ignored Charlie’s comment, as they were not quite sure what he was getting at. It sounded as though he was defending Julia somehow, somehow, against something.

“My mother wanted to be a teacher. But she married my dad instead. Now she’s a secretary.”

“That’s nice. Julia, how do you like your work? I always found secretaries fascinating.”

“Well it is interesting. Sometimes they even take us out to lunch.”

“I’ll take you out to lunch.”

“Oh, John, you’re too nice.” She put her hand on his shoulder.

“I’ll go with you guys,” Amy said.

“John can’t afford lunch,” Charlie said.

“We’ll all go.” John and Julia weren’t paying attention. They were smiling at each other across the table and Julia quietly took sips of her beer, looking away after what she thought might have been too long. John was confusing her. Besides the man at the meat counter at the grocery store, nobody had flirted with her for awhile. Amy sighed. Julia looked over and her face looked pinched. Julia listened to the music, reminding herself not to relax. She wanted to see how these Canadians interacted with Amy. She wanted to see how they interacted with each other. She was watching, but the slow buzz from the beer and the conversation were slowly

making her forget what she was there for. Soon, the band was playing its last song and she was talking to John.

“You need to understand,” he was saying, “this is the second time I’ve heard this band. You need to understand what they do. They mix music and it’s totally original.”

“Yes, they are very good. And they have a violin,” Julia said.

“The violin is phenomenal,” John said. “It makes about half the songs. I’m interested in violins.”

“I used to play,” Julia said.

Amy laughed. “She played in the school orchestra.”

“That’s not easy,” Manny said.

“And for a band,” Julia said.

“You did?” John asked.

“You mean you played in a band? I never knew that!” Amy’s face flushed and she leaned closer to Julia. Then John smiled and Amy leaned back.

“Yes, it was with one of my old boyfriends. We were a folk band. The band broke us up. It was too much strain on the relationship. But it was fun at first. At first we were busy writing music and practicing. It was trying to get publicity that killed us. We didn’t know how to handle it.”

“Mom, that’s great,” Amy said.

Julia didn’t answer her; she was thinking too much.

“Who wrote the music?” John asked.

“I did, and my boyfriend.”

“You should play for me sometime,” Amy said.

“If you come home with me I will,” Julia said and immediately began to laugh nervously and her lip twitched. There was an awkward silence.

“Well,” Manny said, “the music’s over. Somewhere else?”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” Amy said. They all tipped the band and then piled into Manny’s white car to find another spot. As they were on the outskirts of the city they had to drive for awhile. Manny knew where he was going though.

“Where are we going?” Julia asked.

“To this hole in the wall I know from other trips down here. It’s really laid back and comfortable.” Julia thought it was some place he might want to impress Amy with; she had noticed that the two of them got along really well. She didn’t know what to think of that.

“I’ve been to it too,” Charlie said, “it’s not a bad place.”

“But where is it?” Julia asked, she looked outside at the low walls of the city highway, lined with advertisements, and watched the cars coming and going alongside them.

“Oh, it’s in the basement of this club that’s close to downtown. We might have to walk some to get there.”

”That’s fine,” Amy said. “I don’t mind walking.”

”Not with you three with us, right Amy?” Julia said.

“Right Mom,” Amy said laughing. “The Canadian pacifists will protect us.”

“Hey, we’re not pacifists just because we’re Canadians,” Manny said. “We settled the frontier as well, remember?” He winked at Amy.

“Of course that’s nothing to brag about,” John said. “It turned out to be a great tragedy.”

“Thank you for reminding us,” Charlie said. “Look, we’re almost there, and you have nothing to worry about: our violent streaks are ready for action.”

“Well thank you Charlie,” Julia said, “it’s comforting to know that.”

“No problem.” As they exited the car, he took her arm and they walked to the bar like that. John looked uneasy with their new friendship. Charlie was a drinker, and he hated drinking alone. Soon, indeed, they were doing a shot at the bar.

“Is this what you did when you were in that band? You really handle your liquor well,” Charlie said.

“We did some of this kind of thing, of course. But it was mostly music.”

“Mostly music. I see,” Charlie said. “I think my life, too, is mostly made up of making music. Just so you know.”

Julia laughed. She was laughing a lot. They went back to the table, and Manny was apologizing to Amy for the bar. It was painted all black, with black wooden tables, and blue lights alternating with bright white lights. It had the feeling of a pick up joint.

“It used to be different,” Manny was saying.

“Maybe we could go somewhere else,” Amy said.

“Nah, we drove all the way down here; we might as well stay,” John said.

“It’s empty now anyway,” Amy said, “it’s not so bad, but the lighting is strange. It reminds me of a place you would like, John.”

Amy sat down next to Julia, but John managed to get in on the other side. He turned halfway to face Julia and looked longingly at her.

“Amy how are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m doing fine. I’m glad you came out with us Mom,” Amy said.

“So am I,” Julia said. She patted her daughter’s knee. Amy put her arm around Julia and half-hugged her. Julia, through a woozy haze, wondered at Amy’s sudden friendliness. Would it turn? John began to speak. Amy began to interrupt him but Charlie spoke across the room.

“Julia, come over here. We’ve got to do another shot!”

“Excuse me, Amy, John,” Julia said. “I will be back.”

They ended up carrying Julia home.

Amy

Manny helped me put my mom to sleep. She was mumbling something about tempo and why it had to be that she was going to her grandmother’s that summer, and she was jerking away from us wildly, saying “no!” It took about twenty minutes. Manny was very patient with her.

“Your mother has more in common with Charlie than I knew,” he whispered to me after we had finally gotten her to lie down on the bed.

“I’ve never seen her like this,” I swore, then started laughing in an empty way; the situation seemed to somehow say something about my mother’s marriage.

“Hey, are you all right?” Manny asked me. I looked up at him, “I’m,” I’m laughing, I was going to tell him, but he saw my smile I guess and he kissed me. We kissed for awhile.

“Come to my room,” he said. “Please,” he added. I went to his room with him. There was a hurry of belt buckles coming undone and shirts coming off. My dress was a little trickier, being something to pull over my body. We moved to the bunk beds that go along with hostels, and the other guys were in there too but I didn’t care. I felt good. Manny felt good. His hands were doing soft circles around my breasts and he was kissing me everywhere.

“Amy. Amy. Amy.”

“Amy, we get it,” John said from the top bunk.

“Manny, I think we should stop.”

”That’s just John, ignore him.”

”No, I think we should stop. I want to cuddle.”

“Are you serious?” But he stopped kissing my thigh and began to spoon me. He licked my ear. “You smell good.”

“Manny I’m really glad I met you.” The morning light was coming in and exposing the dust on the white tile floor. The dresser looked scratched; it was short with four drawers: a kind of faceless dresser from a hotel room.

“Now we’re going to talk. I see how you are.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“You’re sweet. Are you going to have a book for me to read? Are we going to be in a book club?”

“Hey, that tickles.” He was sweeping his fingers lightly over my belly. “I thought we’d read *Gone with the Wind* first.”

”Predictable. Why not *A Clockwork Orange*?”

“Predictable. Now you’re going to go on about how he invented another language.”

“It was incredibly detailed and gave the book an other-worldly accuracy.”

“An other-worldly accuracy sounds funny. Are you saying it approached the perfection of God? Or that space aliens could have written it?”

“Are you religious? I’m just saying that although the book was based in a kind of science fiction hell, it became realistic.”

“Oh, I see. I don’t think that phrase quite conveys that. I think it conveys a kind of accuracy that is not found in this world.”

“So, are you religious?”

“No, but me and my mom did go to church today. There was this woman there who predicted my death.”

“Some of the churches here are cool. Wait, what did you just say?” He took my arm and raised it above my head then wriggled his way into the crook of my armpit. “I like to be held.”

“Why are you whispering?”

“I don’t want John to hear.”

“I think he might be asleep now. But yes there was this woman there, and she said I might die in childbirth.”

“That’s disturbing. How do you feel?”

“You need to get your own room.”

He looked at me quizzically. “Amy I asked you if you were all right.”

I kissed him instead of answering. Then we kissed for awhile. He was breathing heavily and I noticed he had a mole on his chest, right below the left nipple. This filled me with tenderness: it was shaped like a small giraffe. I wondered if there was any poetic symbolism to that. There was something about Manny that seemed fragile, as if he needed adjustments to be made for him—like he had his glasses because precise vision would be too much for him; he was always letting them get fogged up.

“Amy, let’s go outside and watch the sunrise.”

“I think it rose.” The light in the room was distinct by now, but Charlie and John slept on. The shadows were dark against the light coming through the slatted blinds.

“Shit, well let’s go get breakfast.”

So we got dressed, in our rumpled clothes from the night before, and I tried to run my fingers through my hair but in the end I just tucked it behind my ears and we left the room to go outside into the sunlight with our hangovers. There was a stray dog running down the street, limping, and a woman in a black shawl with pink thread running through it encasing white geometric designs; she was selling something on the corner. Manny grabbed my hand and we made our way down the street. “Let’s pretend we see the sun rise.”

“It’s morning to me.”

“The dusky pinks are gorgeous.”

“Against the watercolor grey the glowing orange.”

“And the air is refreshing.” Actually, it was hot already and muggy still from the rain the day before, so my dress stuck to me; I tugged at it to feel a breeze, but no breeze was forthcoming: there was only the humid sunshine.

“We must eat soon. This sunrise is hurting my eyes.”

“Its beauty is punishing.”

“Punishing?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Sounds like a guy.”

“Well, we get it from our lives.”

“Rough life.”

“It is. It’s seriously hard drinking as much as I did last night.”

“I agree there.” I took my hand from his, and put it up to my forehead.

“Speaking of drinking too much, do you think your mother’s all right?”



“I hope so, I’ll check on her when we get back. She was in bad shape.”

“She might have taken off for her grandmother’s house last night. I was pretty sure she was going to go there.”

”She wanted to. Yeah, I’m a little worried about her.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, just drinking so much and some of the things she’s said.”

“You’ve got to watch out for your parents.”

“Yeah, you’re telling me.”

”No really. I send my mom money every month. My dad, I don’t worry about. He has his work as a banker and his other family and everything, but my mom is another story.”

“You send your mom money every month?”

“Yeah, she needs it more than I do.”

”It’s the opposite for me. My mom ends up giving me money. It’s not that she can’t manage, or wouldn’t manage; it’s more like she’d manage too well. Do you know what I mean?”

”My dad might be like that. I say I don’t worry about him but actually he gets all inside his head and works too hard sometimes. Nobody can ever help him. He just goes and goes and goes.”

“That’s more like my mom.”

”Hey, you might be like my mom.” We looked at each other. “I just weirded myself out.”

I laughed, squeezing his hand. “They do say you look for your parents in people.”

“But that’s just wrong.”

“All I know is I want my check then too.”

“I hook up with you one night and you want a check?”

“Hmm, that did sound bad actually. How about breakfast?”

“Don’t want to get too greedy. Let it build up.”

“No, really, breakfast may be over there. I’ll buy you breakfast, but I think that might be a good place.”

“That sounds good. I’m hungry, and I’m all twisted up in my head right now; I need some coffee.”

“Coffee sounds good.” And they went in to the restaurant.

When I got back, I went to the room my mother and I were sharing with another guest. The light looked pale with my hangover, and she lay under the thin rumpled blanket. It was grey and reminded me of the hospital. I had to think about the lobby outside with the brown tiled floor and plants to calm down. Suddenly she looked inviting to me; I decided to lie down next to her. I lay on top of the blankets and listened to her breathing. I remembered that she used to stay up nights with me. Maybe that is all she had been trying to do—stay up with me through the nightmare of the last years. She snuffled and turned, then turned and looked at me out of drooping eyelids. She began to talk to me. I wasn’t sure if she was really awake, but she wanted to know about how I had finally realized my perspective was that of a dream. She said something like that. I said it was kind of like a dream, and I had talked to Manny and it had all come together. It had all come together in a way I wouldn’t accept before, and suddenly, I had wasted time, wasted time with fear. She told me not to be afraid. Don’t be afraid of life; don’t let that happen. It’s a poem, open to interpretation, but hopefully beautiful. I laughed at the hopefully. With my laugh, she opened up her eyes wide and looked at me with a startled sigh.

“Amy, are you coming home with me?”

“No, I’m staying.”

She looked up at the ceiling for awhile. She looked like she had a headache. “Then I’m staying too.”

I shrugged, suppressing a smile.

Julia

Julia awoke with aches all over. She turned her head and squinted into the sun that was coming hot and bright through the window. She was on the bottom bunk, with her clothes on, and her mouth tasted like it had been stuffed full of dust. The woman who Amy and Julia shared the bedroom with was coming in and out, fully dressed in jeans and a pink and white striped shirt, looking as if she had already lived a full day.

“What time is it?”

“It’s noon.”

Julia shifted onto her elbow and realized that she would have to move slowly. Her head was spinning on the outer edges in a queasy kind of turning, but at the center were knife points of pain. The woman, after answering, had left the room again without returning. Julia was alone. She was at the mercy of the throbbing silence. She decided to take a shower. Why she hadn’t taken two aspirin before going to bed she did not know. She moved slowly to gather her things and made her way towards the bathrooms.

The bathrooms were communal, with pink shower stalls and a row of three small sinks, rusted, with personal mirrors hanging above them. The mirrors were dirty, with scratches on

them and Julia decided her pasty appearance was due to the smudges on the mirrors; the flecks of toothpaste that had gathered there adding a blotchy appearance to the overall paleness of her face.

“Never again,” she said to her reflection. Her reflection agreed in unison and then disappeared as she headed towards the showers. She wished she had brought flip flops to wear in the stalls: clumps of hair gathered around the drain that made her want to throw up. She thought of calling Randall after her shower but decided she was in no shape to talk to him. She didn’t know how his voice would affect her. The florescent lights in the bathroom were bad enough. She almost needed sunglasses. The woman from her room appeared out of one of the toilet stalls; her combed dark hair and tucked in shirt looking very put together.

“Hope you feel better.”

“Oh, I don’t feel bad.”

“No?”

“No, I feel worse than that.” The woman smiled and left without another word. She seemed to be on an important mission, whereas Julia felt diffuse and directionless. She didn’t know what she would do today. Where was Amy? Had she had a conversation with her? Well, it was twelve o’ clock. Maybe she was up and was moving in synch alongside their roommate. Maybe she had experienced a multitude of wonderful things already while Julia had been sleeping. Maybe she was lying in a ditch. Julia turned on the faucet and turned off those thoughts.

After the shower, Julia looked around for Amy. Not finding her, or any of the Canadians, she finally decided to eat breakfast. She ate a banana. Chewing anything else would have caused her great distress. She didn’t drink coffee. She drank three glasses of water. Maybe they

had all gone somewhere. Maybe they would be back soon. Julia waited for about an hour and a half and then got incredibly bored. She thought she had grown past boredom in her maturity, but she felt like a child waiting for her parents to come home and take her to the zoo. She realized they weren't coming back anytime soon, no matter where they had gone, and she prepared to go out. She knew where she wanted to go. She wanted to go to the art museum. It was quiet. The market was out of the question today with its plethora of colors and noises and textures. All of that would be too confusing and disorienting. The art museum was close too. She had already been there with Amy, but they had rushed through it. It contained mostly black and white photography and was in a small, air conditioned space. Julia walked out into the street and turned white. The traffic was a steady stream and parked cars lined the street. They were most often worn-out looking cars. The make and model ten to twenty years old but occasionally they were painted bright colors—blue, green, even a purple that oddly seemed to blend in with the scenery more than the neutral colors did. The glaring colors of the plants, the old fashioned stucco building with double doors, and the same bright colors as some of the cars made it seem natural that color would announce itself here, and not stay quiet and subdued. Strangely, mixed with the heat, the traffic and scenery made Julia feel better. She was walking alone except a grandmother with a long braid and a little girl in a white lace dress with a balloon. They walked ahead of her at some distance. She watched the girl's balloon jerk up and down as the two of them walked. She thought it would make a good picture. But in Mexico, so many things would make a good picture. Julia wondered at how different it was, although only two days away from Austin.

She reached the art museum in little time. The plaza where it was located was crowded with a children's fair. They were painting faces and selling candy and toys. The children were

making art on the sidewalk. Although she had been tossed and turned in the crowd in the plaza, the museum was almost empty. She walked through the heavy wooden doors of the museum to its narrow, silent hallways with pleasure. She walked through the well lit rooms looking. Pictures often reminded her of people and places she had known. Amy was on her mind, and one picture stood out as representative of her daughter. She didn't know why and wouldn't have told Amy this because the picture was not beautiful or uplifting. It was a picture of a chubby woman in a flowery summery dress brushing the hair out of her eyes in the wind. She stood in a field, by an old truck and her eyes were wrinkled and leathery with the sun. She had a look of defiant sadness in her eyes and weariness in her body language. She wondered if Amy was upset about her talking to John. She had seemed upset. It was just a little conversation. Julia stood looking at the picture a long time, at the woman's defiant eyes. What she most feared and loved about her daughter at once.

She thought of the first time she had noticed something wrong with Amy. Amy had come home for the weekend. It was her first year of college and she had been living in the dorms. Julia noticed that Amy had not bathed or brushed her hair in a while and she looked older than her age. Her eyes had a wizened, anxious look and her thin fingers kept moving. She kept twisting the rings she wore in a nervous, constant movement. She had asked Julia why they had taken her sister. Julia said they hadn't. When her nieces and nephews were born she was cold. She was afraid of them. Amy felt the whole family was watching her. It may have been true.

Julia looked at the black and white photo. The grays matched her mood. She was experiencing profound doubt. Had she made a mistake? Amy was here, fresh from a psychiatric hospital and managing just fine. The Canadians were very nice, very sincere. She hadn't

encountered any disasters. Julia went outside to the plaza and looked at the art the children had been making. There were stick figures, not just of people but of elephants and fish and lions. There were flowers and houses and lopsided suns. She looked at the children. They were running around, but they always went back to their mothers or whoever had brought them. They always went back to that shelter. She saw Amy as a child, realized she was seeing Amy as a child, and realized that she was gripping her purse with all her strength. She eased up on her grip.

As her hand loosened she felt lighter. Maybe she was hung over. Maybe she hadn't called her husband all day. The sidewalk chalk pictures appeared bright, their motion and movement caught her attention. She was like those simple pictures: going through life with set directions, like their strong lines, and reacting with scripted predictability. She was happy, sad, angry, laughing without measuring anything in between. There was a picture of a balloon carrying a flower that a little chubby boy in a striped shirt was drawing. This was the picture she liked. Maybe she was like it? She wanted to be swept by the wind, to leave seeds. And somehow she was doing that now. She smiled to herself as she weaved through the children to the outer edges of the plaza. She had gotten drunk last night. She had gone over in her mind what she had said, what she had done, and nothing dire had happened. The worst was this feeling she had woken up with—crushed physically and spiritually, but she was recovering. So she wouldn't get drunk again, that would be easy. What was one night? She reached an alley way that led her back to a big street and she began to walk to her left, away from the hostel. She wasn't ready to go back there yet. She was suddenly enjoying the city too much.

She walked for awhile. She saw: children getting out of school in plaid and white uniforms, chasing each other down the street, buying ice cream, skipping, an old man with a

cowboy hat walking with a cane and smiling, a young mother to be talking on a cell phone, dogs. Dogs with mangy hair, little dogs big dogs all looking hungry. She took in these sights, and they made her think of a song. Before she knew it she was writing a song in her head. The melody was simple, the words too, but catchy. She saw a coffee shop and stopped inside. After conveying that she needed a paper and pen she sat down and worked out the lyrics and the tune. She scratched this out, and added twists and turns until it had become complicated; she decided to strip it down again. Simplify. A man about her age was smoking a cigar at the table next to her reading a book. Julia noticed him watching her and noticed the wedding band on his finger. She looked intently at her song to block him out. He was a round man with a big belly, a broad face and a salt and pepper beard. He had dark skin, and Julia noticed his clothing appeared slightly bohemian, from his suspenders to his fedora. A guitar lay next to him. The next time he looked at her, Julia cupped her face in her hands and stared back in an unfriendly manner. This only provoked a loud laugh from the man, who seemed to take it as an invitation to pull up a chair by her.

“No hablo espanol.”

“I don’t either. What are you working on?” He had an accent.

“A song.” Julia instinctively covered it with her hand. But it turned out the man, whose name was Raymundo, was a musician. He was playing in a half hour in this very coffee shop and he was short on songs.

Julia finally uncovered the piece, which she had childishly been hiding, and laid it out in front of him, feeling vulnerable. The man studied it for awhile, rubbing his beard and nodding. Julia studied the paintings of flowers on the wall against the pale blue plaster. They were at white plastic tables and a fan blew overhead so he had to smooth down the paper of her music



with one hand. There were daisies on the tables in tiny glass vases that shook with the fan. The woman behind the counter counted money, oblivious to Julia's pain. She scratched her legs with anxiety, finding small scabs to pick at. The man finally grunted.

"Good," he said.

Julia smiled.

"I am not just saying that. This is very good. It's simple but it's memorable."

"I was going for simple."

"I can see by the marks that you were. It could have been a much more layered, loopy song, but you took that out. I think that was the better thing to do." He began to take his guitar out of his case.

"What are you doing?"

"I am going to play it." He began tuning the guitar. "And you are going to sing."

"Oh no."

"Oh yes. We are going to hear this music."

Julia thought for a minute. She wanted to hear this music. It had been in her head almost all day and she wondered if she could bring it to life that way. "I'll do this. But you have to promise not to laugh."

He laughed. "I won't promise anything like that. If I laugh it's because the music is good, going well. I hope I laugh."

The guitar was tuned. He began to run through it slowly at first, then faster, smoother. He practiced it a few times and told Julia she needed to start singing. She began humming with him at first so that there was this scratchy guitar playing with a humming sound that had its own appeal but soon she started singing. At first, she was off key and a little high, so he laughed, as

he promised he would, and Julia laughed too; but soon her voice settled and it began to sound clear and deep as the guitar kept strumming along with it. He was a good player. Because the song was so simple, it didn't take them long to start sounding good and the three other customers in the coffee shop had soon gathered around their table. The fifth time they went through the song, the people clapped loudly.

“She wrote it.”

“You wrote that?” A woman with black curly hair and a fake rose tucked behind her ear asked. “That is very nice.”

“Very nice. I am just the player. I am her muse. I was sitting here the whole time that she wrote it. She must have been thinking of me.”

“I was thinking of my home actually.”

“I am ruined. I thought you had me in mind.”

“Well here,” the woman said, laying down some pesos on the table. “That is for the beautiful music.”

What seemed to be a father and his teenage son smiled and nodded and laid down pesos too. The man pushed the money towards Julia. “You are the creator, you take the money,” Julia said.

“But you brought it to life. You should sing with me tonight.”

“I don't know.”

“You have a nice voice. We could work on a couple of songs now. I could give you some pesos for it. Ah, now you look interested.”

“It's just that I'm here with my daughter and I haven't talked to her all day. I need to see what she is doing.”

“Here with your daughter. That’s nice. How old is she?”

“She’s twenty six.”

“Twenty six! You don’t need to check in with her. I thought you were going to say she was younger. You don’t look old enough to have a twenty six year old daughter. Teenage pregnancy?”

“Yes, and that’s when I started writing music. They sent me to my grandmother’s and I was alone so I sang to myself.”

“Really?”

“No. I was just kidding.”

“Strange sense of humor. Anyway, you should stay and play with me. Your daughter will be fine.”

“It’s also the people.”

“People? What people? There won’t be anybody here. It’ll just be you and me. Let me buy you a coffee and you can think about it.”

Julia was nervous. She really wanted to sing. If only he’d had another guitar or a violin she could actually play. Her hands were shaking, and there was a cool layer of sweat forming over her skin. She was nervous. Her excuses weren’t falling on sympathetic ears, and they sounded false to her own. She scratched at scabs. Raymundo came back with the coffee.

“Well, what do you think?”

“I think I will. I think I will sing with you.”

He clapped his hands together. “Wonderful!”

I gave you everything

You ran away

I'm not complaining  
Not asking you to stay  
Because when you left me  
I began to see  
How traces are left by the sun,  
How the day had just begun.

That was how the song went. Julia took a deep breath and started to doubt it. Wasn't it childish? Then she thought of the chalk drawings outside the museum. They were beautiful. Childish, wasn't that a compliment? She got ready to sing. Raymundo was across the room, unpacking his guitar. He plugged some things in, tuned a bit, then gestured towards her. As she walked across the room she felt like she was in high school again, self-conscious about her body or some other thing, getting ready to sharpen her pencil. She heard somebody laugh and turned to look. It was a woman laughing at the antics of her child. She breathed. She reached the front of the room and stood at the microphone. There was no stage, but they were conspicuous. There were maybe seven people in the coffee shop: some studying, some eating, a few playing chess. Only one young man in corduroys was watching them. Raymundo smiled and nodded as if he knew them. Raymundo started playing. He played one solo piece while Julia stood nervously, looking at the flower paintings again. In her nervousness they moved a little bit to the music. It must be the blood pumping fast through her veins that made them do this. It reached her brain and shook it. She almost laughed. Then Raymundo announced the song, and introduced Julia; she smiled and waved a kind of half wave, the young man clapped loudly, and one of the chess players, waiting for the other to make his move, clapped a little absentmindedly. Everybody else kept eating and talking. Julia went through the moves of the singing, but she couldn't hear her

voice. She kept going over and over the lyrics. She did it three times instead of two, and Raymundo started late the third time. Then she sat down. A few people were clapping. The mother who had been laughing clapped. Raymundo announced her leaving and began to sing himself, beautifully, mournfully, along to his guitar. Julia was shaking as she sat down. It had not gone well. She could see that in the faces of the people around her. They avoided looking at her. She was elated. She hadn't done anything like that in years, she felt music throbbing all around her, through her. She felt the pulses of rhythm and beat and tapped her foot in perfect time to Raymundo's songs. She was just getting started she felt. She went out into the street. She was close to the hostel and happened to run into Amy and her friends as they walked down the street.

"Where have you been?" John asked her.

"Nowhere."

"We're going to play pool. You probably don't want to come," Amy said.

"I'd like to."

Amy walked fast in front of her: in front of all of them, in silence. But Julia didn't notice. She heard the words of a new song coming on.

Amy

I walked back to the table and my mother was leaning in as John lit her cigarette.

"Where'd you get that?" I asked.

My mother slowly inhaled then she looked at me with half raised eyes. "I bought them," she said.

"Old women shouldn't smoke," I said. "Can I have one?"

She handed me one. She looked like she was about to say something, but thought better of it. I thought better of my own thoughts too. She was slowly drinking a beer. We had been there a half an hour and she was still on her first one. John lit my cigarette, and I took a drag. I was starting to worry about her, but I didn't know how to voice it. It seemed like another night in another dark bar, although ostensibly we were here to play pool. This one had green felt tables and mugs with half pool balls at the bottom, pictures on the wall, some signed, of people who had been there. It had gleaming wooden picnic tables to sit at and medium light: not too bright, not too dim. Manny and Charlie were playing pool at the tables at the other end of the bar. I had just played Manny and lost. I suddenly felt I was interrupting John and my mother who seemed to be having an intense conversation.

“We were talking about my garden,” my mother said. “How nicely it blossoms in the spring.”

John nodded. “I've been thinking about starting a garden, I have a nice little yard in the back of my apartment.”

I raised my eyebrows at him, “Oh, were you.” I smiled, frustrated almost to tears.

My mother looked at me. “Don't think I smoke regularly.”

“I know you don't, or I don't think you do.”

“No, it's just that this brand of cigarettes reminds me of my mother, and the way she used to smell when she came back from evenings out. It's just nostalgia. You sometimes smell like cigarettes when you come home too.”

I laughed, “I smoke on cold nights.”

“What about cold nights?”

“Nothing too much, it just keeps you warm then.” I was grateful that my mother didn’t say anything. Winters were hard for me. I was prone to erratic behavior then; the long nights rattled me. The long hours of darkness.

Manny came over to the table. “I lost if somebody else wants to play.”

My mother and John looked at each other. “No,” they said at the same time.

“I’ll play,” I said, feeling a little uneasy leaving my mother at the table with John. I felt loyalty to my father welling up inside of me, but reasoned that the two of them were only talking, and tried to take what my mother had said into account. My father could be very distant and he threw himself into his work periodically, so much so that he became like a ghost around the house. For example, he wasn’t here. He was working, but my mother had traveled by herself through Mexico, a place she had never been before and where she didn’t speak the language, to find me. It wasn’t that one of them was right or wrong. Maybe my mother should have let me be; it was that they had very different approaches.

“You can put that out now,” Charlie said to me.

“What?”

He put the quarters in for the game, “Smoking to fit in with your mother and John and simultaneously break the bond between them that is obviously developing.”

“Is that what I’m doing?”

“Obviously, you don’t approve for various reasons, so you’re smoking.”

“You’re right; I planned it. It’s working I think.” I put out the cigarette.

“Oh, is it?” He pointed with the pool stick to them, “It looks like they’re actually sitting closer now.”

“Manny’s fault.”

“And how you depended on Manny.”

“I see that I need more deviant minds than Manny’s to carry out my plans of separation. Should I wink at you now or would that be too obvious?”

Charlie ran his hands over the faded green felt of the table, pulled out the triangle, and proceeded to arrange the balls. “You should be doing this but I can see you’re distressed. I can talk to John if you want me to.”

“What would you say to him? Why is he doing this?”

“He just likes older women. I don’t know why. Well, he has many reasons . They’re more mature, less emotional, better in bed...”

“Does he say that? That they’re better in bed and all that?”

Charlie shrugged. “Well, we talk about women. What do you think? I guess it bothers you that he’s looking at your mother that way?” Charlie executed a near perfect break but didn’t make any balls in.

“I see you’ve had this conversation a lot?” I took a shot, failed miserably.

“Normally I find a young lady that doesn’t want her mother or aunt or cousin or friend to be used in that way, then I comfort her and I take her home.”

“Charlie.” I suppose I made a face.

”Don’t look so disgusted. It works out for everyone that way. She thinks I’ve talked to John and she feels better and eventually she comes to accept that John isn’t so bad and everyone goes home happy.”

“So you’re not really going to talk to John for me.” Charlie had just sunk three balls. He pointed his pool stick at me.



“Wrong. Your turn. I will talk to John for you. I will make the exception for you because I see that you and your mother have some kind of bonding going on that shouldn’t be interrupted, and I know she’s married and you don’t need that kind of mess in your life.”

“How can I believe you?”

“Simple. I’m not after you. I know you’ve got a thing with Manny and plus I’ve told you my strategy. Do you think I would tell a girl that normally I am lying and still be lying?”

“Let me think about that. Maybe I should deal with this on my own.”

“And do what? Talk to your Mom or John? As the daughter you’re at a distinct disadvantage. They’ll say you’re trying to stop them because of some irrational reason or another, and think you’re too involved with how your father feels to be aware of what makes them happy. If I talked to John then he just might listen. He might see that this mature woman is not worth disturbing the nest of.”

“Does he disturb nests often?”

Charlie made another shot. He just looked at me. I didn’t need to ask again. I looked over at my mother and John. They were talking and talking and laughing and laughing. John seemed to be leaning in close. Manny had his feet on the table, his arms crossed behind his head, and appeared to be staring at the ceiling.

“No, let me talk to them. I’ll take care of this.”

Charlie sunk the eight ball. “No, don’t. Let me take care of it. Trust me. You don’t understand the situation; the last thing you want is to get their defenses up, or embarrass them, and a daughter saying anything will definitely do that.”

“No, it’s my mother Charlie. I know what to say.”

He raised his cap at me, “Yes, yes of course.”

We continued to play and I lost. I continued to watch John scoot closer and closer to my mother on the bench. At first he had been sitting across from her, but then he maneuvered over to the other side of the bench, and now she was tilting her head flirtatiously and laughing with an open mouth. She looked... I was disgusted... she looked like a teenage make out queen wannabe wearing a fanny pack. She didn’t have the fanny pack on, but she wore it by day. My father would be heartbroken. I went over to them and sat by Manny. He was studying the wall in order to avoid all eye contact with me. I guess I looked upset. He began a conversation with Charlie and put his hand on my leg at some point and patted it. I removed it. I wanted to leave. I wanted John to be in another galaxy and I didn’t want my mother with her false concern picking up on guys in front of me. She had become like a friend, and friends are complicated. There’s only so much you can put up with from them before you want to go home. She was destroying my home.

“ Mom, can I have another cigarette?”

“Sure.” She pushed the pack towards me and kept talking to John.

“Let’s get out of here.”

“You want to go home?” Manny asked. “Why?”

“Why? How can you ask that?”

“Why not ask it? This place is pretty nice.”

I stared at my mother and John who didn’t even look at me or break their flow of words: awful words of seduction that became absurd and embarrassing in their mouths. Manny got the picture. “We’ll go.” So we got up to leave. At first I thought John and my mom were going to

stay but eventually they gathered up their things and walked to the door with us. I followed them out into the street.

“John, come here. I’ve got something to tell you,” Charlie yelled. He was drunk and John ignored him and I gave him a look. I wanted to take care of this. I walked behind them the whole way home and still they talked. I was practically walking on my mother’s heels. They talked about the weather, their pets, the pecan tree out front. That really panicked me; everything seemed innocent until my mom mentioned her beloved pecan tree. It was her secret joy. She didn’t talk about it unless she felt close to somebody. We made it to the hostel. I was fuming. I couldn’t see what there was about John that was so attractive. They put their coats aside and sat on the wicker couch in the living room. Incessantly talking. I looked around me helplessly. Charlie and Manny had gone to the kitchen for food. I did what I thought was best. Although it was a small couch I crowded my way in-between them.

“Mom, you can’t do this.”

“Do what?” Nervous laughter.

“You can’t cheat on Dad.”

“I’m not going to cheat.”

“Amy, what happens between me and your mother is our business.”

“Nothing’s going to happen! I remind him of his teacher!”

“You told him about the pecan tree.”

“Don’t play innocent, Mrs. Nehran. There’s something between us.”

My mother got up and raised her voice. “I will do what I want to do. Both of you. And if I say nothing is going to happen then nothing is going to happen.”

“Well quit flirting. You’re upending my peace of mind. Isn’t that what you’re here for?”

“Maybe everything isn’t about you Amy.”

“Yeah Amy.”

“Or you John. I went out and sang tonight. That’s why I’m in such a good mood and willing to talk to you John. And maybe I just needed to talk to somebody. Your father, Amy, has been very silent.”

John moved forward in his chair. I pushed him back. He glared at me.

“You sang?” I asked.

“Yes, I sang a song I composed.”

“You’re losing it,” I said. “Congratulations. Now you get to go to bed with a guy twenty years younger than you and leave your daughter homeless.”

“Amy.”

“Mom, I’m sorry. I just don’t understand you. You follow me down here to complicate my life even more? I’m simply tired.”

“Well I’m tired too.” I looked at her. Her mascara was running, had she been crying? She looked abashed and maybe she hadn’t been aware of what she had been doing with John. She had never dated much she had once told me. I got up. I hugged her.

“I didn’t know you could sing.”

“Well I’m not that good. You don’t have... Amy I’ve been too friendly maybe. I wanted to spend time with you. I wanted to get to know my daughter.”

I laughed. I laughed loud. “Well you’re not going to do it talking with John.”

“Oh, I’m getting to know you anyway. I didn’t want to be to overbearing.”

My mother always had an answer. I didn’t want to wrestle with her logic and in the end, feel like the depraved one. She had been flirting with John. Still, it seemed that she had

no intention of sleeping with him. “Mom, I’m tired. I really am. Are you going to sleep now? You want to lie down?”

“Yes.” I felt a little better somehow.

I got out of bed, pushing aside my institutional covers—white sheets and a thin blue blanket tucked tightly into the bed-- and by the light of a streetlamp I fumbled through my mother’s things, and stumbled upon the pack of cigarettes she had bought that night. I needed an excuse to think and stare off blankly into space. My mother hadn’t killed me yet.

In fact, although she was bothering me, she was surprising me. Maybe flirting with John tonight was evidence that she was overwhelmed with her circumstances. She was falling and catching herself on anything she could. I only wondered how much of it had to do with me. I wondered what I was doing to her. I made my way down the narrow hallway and stubbed my toe on a heavy wooden chair by the door, swore, and opened the doorway. I propped it open with a phone book I had picked up by the entrance. Then I smoked. I watched the smoke curl, cat-like, then expand like waves in the ocean as they fell, and I thought about my next step. I turned the lighter around in my hand. It was smooth and I pretended I was making it smoother like it was a pebble and me the rain, and I wondered about the woman in the church. I felt the urge to run again.

It had been so easy to leave the hospital. A screaming patient, a bathroom break, us all out on an outing, and she forgot I had my debit card. I just headed for the door, and by the time she had herded everybody together again I was half way to the bus station, most likely. Now my

mother had found me here, but she wouldn't necessarily find me somewhere else. I thought of her face though; I thought of the worry lines like scratches showing on her forehead and around the corners of her mouth. Did I want to deepen those? They were evidence of the strings that attached us. Although sometimes I thought I could forget her. Sometimes I thought I could forget everybody, and only the biological fact of loneliness would ever drive me to socialize. I just needed the distraction of a voice; I didn't need to be cradled by it. Or did it make a difference to me either way? I could forget both. Then I thought of Manny. He had wanted me in his room tonight but I thought after the argument that I might leave. I thought I might be gone by the morning so I told him I had a stomach ache.

I stubbed out the cigarette and threw it into the street. I watched flicks of orange blink through the night. I guess I hadn't put it out all the way. I looked both ways. I looked at the parked cars, wondered about the places they would go in the morning. Where would they end up? Would they return? I turned back around and walked into the hostel, stubbed my toe again on that damn chair, and decided to stop by Manny's room. I knocked on the door. I stood. There was no answer. I turned and made my way back to the room I shared with my mother. I guess I would see him tomorrow.

Tomorrow came and I was still there. The late morning light heated the room; my mother was still in bed. Her motionless spoke of her exhaustion. She looked like a lump of pillows left under the covers to sneak out. I felt the sudden urge to check on her, so I pulled back the blankets and kissed her on the forehead. She grumbled. She looked pale but she was there. I went out into the kitchen; Manny was there looking cartoonishly animated. I kissed him too.

“You look happy.”

“I have an idea. And I slept well.” He put down his cereal, with a little milk on the corners of his mouth, and came and put his hands around my waist. He kissed my neck. His mouth was cold.

“You didn’t miss me?”

“I missed you so much I figured out a way to steal you for the day. I want to take you to the ruins. Or the jungle.”

I smiled. I could feel the corners of my mouth hurting. I was going to get away today somehow. There was that feeling of flying I had in dreams sometimes. I reached up and wiped the milk off the corners of his mouth. “You’re sure you won’t disappear or something without Charlie and John?”

“I’m hoping to disappear. You can come with me if you want. I’ll go by the name of Henry and you can be Arlene. I’ll grow a moustache and wear sunglasses.”

“Well if you put it that way, how can I not disappear with you?”

“You’ll have to wear red heels.”

“You’ll have to go get ready Manny; I’m ready to go now.”

“I thought you’d like this idea.”

We got into the car an hour later. We had water, sunscreen, whiskey, and oranges. Manny had the map. He wore his sunglasses and looked around him with the eager happiness of a dog. I left a note for my mother, and told her to be careful, and I tried to stop thinking about her. I didn’t know what I would do if she ended up with John, even if it was just for a night. My father would be heartbroken. I think. On principle he would be heartbroken at least. I just didn’t know the mechanics of their relationship anymore; I hadn’t been paying attention. I’d

been busy with other experiences; the language of the universe made clear to me and brought to me in terrifying messages. But last time I'd looked my father was concerned about my mother, always thinking of her, and telling me to do nice things for her. I put my feet up on the dashboard, with the whiskey bottle between my legs, and played with the cap. I concentrated on the wind and the buildings passing by. Pretty soon we would leave them behind and I'd feel like I was on a boat, (pleasant sensation) being rocked by movement from established points.

"Pass me that bottle." I unscrewed the cap and passed it to Manny. We passed it back and forth for awhile. The sting woke me up, and the booze made me giddy. I tried to hold Manny's hand. He held mine for awhile then mumbled something about having to drive.

"Manny, if we were cattle hustlers together it must have been in Mexico."

"It was definitely in Mexico. You played the guitar and I sang boleros."

"I get to play the guitar?"

He nodded. "Well, you don't have a good voice."

We got to the ruins. It was three o'clock so the sun was hot. The bottle of whiskey was halfway gone. Manny got out of the car and stretched. "I should take you into the forest."

"I wouldn't mind."

He dusted off his sneakers and bent down to tie one. "Maybe we'll go there next."

There were crowds of people there in khaki shorts with cameras and dreadlocks and bags with Mayan or Aztec patterns on them. Some had spread out blankets and some were walking laboriously up the stairs. I got out the oranges and threw Manny one. I noticed his hair was sticking up in every direction. I thought he looked good. The juice from the orange made my hands sticky and squirted me in the eye. Manny thought this was funny. I looked around me.



Everything seemed to be a map come to life-- perfectly planned and predictable. I wasn't too impressed with the pyramids.

"Manny, let's go to the jungle." He looked at me surprised, the exaggerated surprise of Goofy or Donald Duck eyes, almost that wide, and ruffled his hair. I ruffled his hair.

"I like you. I think we should get going too." So we got back into the car, and Manny started taking any turn he wanted to, and soon we were in the mountains with thick green trees surrounding us. We were far up one peak when we saw what looked like a look out point. Manny stopped the car and we got out to look. We passed the bottle of whiskey between us. I put it back to save some. I was rationing. Manny was drinking fast, thirstily, so I asked him what was wrong.

"Well I don't know."

"Yeah, but something is?"

"Nothing's wrong if you can't name it."

"That's not true."

"Amy, there's no point in trying to figure it out. It just is what it is. I have some things on my mind is all."

My feelings were hurt, and I went and sat on the car, barely noticing the view. It was outstanding, mountain peaks and bits of the ruins. "I think I like the ruins better from here." I was coming out of it a little bit.

Manny came over to me and began to kiss me. "I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?" I dodged his kisses for a minute and then shrugged. If he didn't want to talk he didn't want to talk. He was very absorbed in kissing me, but at the same time he seemed just as distracted. I didn't know what to do. I took off my shirt. "Thank you," he started circling my breasts with

his tongue and then he seemed to try to be swallowing them. They are very small, I was afraid that maybe he would, so I brought his face up to my lips. I kissed his forehead, I kissed his eyelids, and his nose, and then his lips. “Amy, I love you.” I took a breath that seemed to sink into my chest. It was stuck there. I almost gasped. I take these things very seriously. I had to say something. He was looking at me with big eyes.

“I think about you a lot.”

“That’s what I mean. I think about you. I care about you. There are some things I should probably tell you.”

He kissed me again. A long kiss. Then he picked me up and took me to the back of the car. The sky was so blue it looked like you could peel it like paint. I guess he didn’t want to talk then, and I didn’t want to break him making him talk about things. I’m always worried about people breaking, even with the smallest things.

Later he held me in his arms and we finished the bottle of whiskey. We stayed there a while having sex in the back of the car. Him with a tormented look but serious about it. Serious about it and gentle and concentrating, but somehow distant. I saw my body unreel like brightly colored yarn and spread out through the jungle. I imagined tying tin cans to it and playing telephone, each serene, joyous piece communicating something jumbled to the next piece. Until, childishly, the reality of the original sentence got lost. I knew I was getting into something that was probably going to be unpleasant with Manny, from the way he was acting, but I simply liked the way his hands covered my breasts and his hair brushed against my stomach. The sun was setting.

“Amy I care about you.”

“You keep saying stuff like that?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Well we haven’t known each other very long.”

“But I feel like I know you. Even you said you felt like you knew me.”

“Manny it wasn’t just that. It was that I thought I knew you from before and all sorts of strange things happened. My mind isn’t stable.”

“I thought you thought that.” He was getting dressed. I stayed in the car, naked, not wanting to leave.

“Thought what?”

“That you have this messed up mind. And your mother thinks that too. But really you’re just lonely.”

“I have a lot of friends and other people.” I began to get dressed.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not saying that. So do I. And I’m lonely too. And that’s how I recognize it. You’re lonely. That’s all. It happens. Like how you didn’t want to go to the ruins today. You saw all those people reading their tourist script, and you fled.”

“I didn’t think anyone was reading a tourist script. I thought maybe something else would be nice.”

“You didn’t want to be in a post card. Most people spend their entire lives trying to live on postcards, in one way or another. Even us. Running off like we do; it’s-another postcard.”

I was completely dressed now, and we weren’t in the car anymore. We were standing on opposite sides of the car looking at each other. “Manny, what’s wrong? One thing: if you’re in love with me why aren’t you happy about it?”

“Because you’re not in love with me.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “That sounds insincere.”

He went around and sat on the hood of the car and mumbled something. I sat down next to him. He sighed. “Amy, I have a girlfriend. We’re getting married when I get back.”

I looked at him. All the yarn, spread festively through the trees, got yanked back and wound inside my body again where all the telephone lines it had carried chattered in my head. “Well you shouldn’t be fucking me then,” I said finally.

“It was just for,” he gestured with his arms, “it was one last final fling. But it doesn’t feel that way. I mean you’re making me question even being with her.”

I twisted my shirt in my hands. “Go back. Get married. Live happily ever after. This is nothing. This is just nothing.” I looked out at the sun setting. I wondered where my postcard was, why I was always falling out of them.

Julia

“Where’s Amy?”

“Where’s Manny?”

The three of them were sitting in the living room of the hostel on the wicker chairs. The plants bent in the wake of the fans, and people roamed in and out of the room dressed in summer clothes.

“I saw them leave early this morning,” a guest they ate dinner with sometimes said from behind his novel. “Anybody want to trade me for this book? I need sunscreen and I’m almost done.”

“I would.” John went to his room and got a bottle of sunscreen. “It’s almost new.”

“I’m almost finished. Let me take a look at it then.”

“I’m getting the book for you Julia.”

“Oh, don’t.”

“You said you needed something to read.”

“John, she’s a happily married woman. You’re becoming obnoxious.”

Julia laughed uncomfortably. “John, what about the young girl in the pink tank top? She looks nice.”

John blushed. He shifted his eyes and rubbed his face in his hand. “I’ll read the book. But where do you think Amy and Manny went?”

“Who knows but we’ve been up awhile and we haven’t seen them. The car’s gone probably but I have an idea. Let’s rent bicycles.”

“Julia? Bicycles?”

“Yes, that sounds fine.”

They walked, their shadows long in the sun. They followed their shadows as they warped and twisted, and ended up by a shop three blocks from the hostel. Outside were bikes of all shapes and sizes. Julia picked an old fashioned blue one, John got a modern navy blue one, and Charlie green. His had a basket. They paid the man and were off. They cycled through the city streets, finding silent rich neighborhoods with perfect houses and poor neighborhoods with shacks and children playing in the streets that they had to maneuver around. They went all over the city until they were hungry, and then they found an ice cream stand. They went to it. There were flavors like avocado and cheese, and it was creamier than ice cream from the United States. Julia was in love with it. She commented on the taste and remarked on the sun, how it was perfect this afternoon, not too hot not too cold. She was red in the cheeks from riding a bicycle and she stood with a kind of half smile on her face eating the ice cream. In her mind was music.

John noticed then that they were standing under a sign. It was navy blue and had a moon and some stars all over it, a floating glass ball, and it said “Miranda, fortune teller.” John looked at them. “Should we go in? I really want to.” It seemed like John to Julia-- wanting to tie things up neatly with a prediction, or feeling energies without really talking to anybody. She shrugged. Charlie shrugged. “C’mon, it’ll be worthwhile. Look,” he pointed to some white paint on the window. It was a circle with the words birth and death written on two opposite sides, and a squiggly line drawn through the circle connecting them, “she even predicts death. I want to know mine. I want to know what she’s going to say.”

“I’ll go in. I want to see how I’m going to die.” Julia rolled her eyes but she was curious. She always got a slightly nauseous feeling around psychic paraphernalia. She knew they told her things she wanted to hear, they didn’t happen, and she forgot them. But there was always the taste of bile in the back of her throat because they might trip up, not tell her what she wanted to hear. They might be honest. Weren’t they just good observers of human character? She thought they sensed that she couldn’t handle the truth. They beguiled her so she would pay them. Not that she went to many fortune tellers. She had been once with her cousins back when she was a kid, and once with Sylvia before she got married. Sylvia left in tears. Julia sighed a little, but followed them into the fortune tellers “office.” It wasn’t what she expected. There were bright yellow walls and a long, rectangular plywood table. A stack of cards lay at one end. Other than that the table was empty. On the walls were pictures of Aztec gods, Julia presumed although she wouldn’t really know. She recognized Quezecotle, who lay maimed in the picture frame surrounding her. Julia was studying a photograph of a stone head when the woman from the church walked in. The woman who had predicted Amy’s future. She wore high blue heels and a grey suit and her hair still didn’t move; it was blond to perfection, blond past real and pink

lipstick. She sat down at the table, in a plain plastic chair and started shuffling the cards. She asked how she could help them in a very polite voice. Julia stood watching her. The woman looked at Julia and smiled and went back to shuffling her cards. She didn't recognize her. Julia was angry. She knew she was angry because her throat was dry and her fingernails were leaving marks on everything she touched—her purse, the soft insides of her hands. She watched the woman though. That was all, she simply watched her. The woman's slender fingers ran over the palms of both young men's hand in turn and she read her cards for them. She explained to them that she predicted death because it was in one's death that one's life could be seen. She based it on the Aztec religion. Whether this was true or not, Julia questioned. She also questioned the value of springing a picture of somebody's mortality on them. But she saw, as the woman talked with Charlie and John, that she would speak of their deaths and then weave in details about their lives and the absent minded way they were living them. She warned John not to live in a fantasy world, and Charlie not to skate over everyone's feelings, especially his own. Julia admitted she was good. Which is what had bothered her in the first place. She seemed oriented towards tourists who were looking for an authentic Mexican spiritual experience.

“And would you like to have your fortune read?”

“Oh no. No, I would like one of your cards to bring to my daughter though,” was there a flicker of recognition? The woman smiled, showing her unnaturally white teeth. She handed her a card. It had the face of some god Julia didn't recognize, and was green and gray. It had her first name printed on it like the sign, but nothing more. They walked out into the street. “So I'm going to fall off a bridge, and you're going to be set on fire.”

“I'm worried. That's the metaphor though. It was a stroke and a heart attack. “How boring.”

“I can’t believe it’s leading up to that. She didn’t say when.”

“That’s good. I like that woman. That’s a good gimmick. A fortune teller that looks at you and describes your death. Kind of old fashioned.”

“I’ve seen that woman before, in a church.” Julia explained the story. The rain, the high ceilings and dust and the way the air circulated making the candles flicker. How she had sat right next to them and smelled like candy, looked like a doll, and had drawn blood from Amy. Figuratively of course.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“We’ll tell Amy about today.”

“C’mon, I want to show you something.” So they straddled their bikes and followed Charlie through the streets. It was cooling off; their shadows blended more with the concrete at this hour of the day, and people were coming home from work. Horns honked. Sometimes it seemed like they were lost they took so many twists and turns, and sometimes Charlie stooped, scratched his head, and look confused. They barely spoke. They watched the way the light shifted and danced on the building above them, and when a flock of pigeons flew by they hoped they wouldn’t get shit on.

“Water.”

“Almost there.” Then he was leading them up some alley that went at a steep climb and had graffiti sprayed on the walls. Skeletons outlined in black doing the mamba, skeletons of all sizes, skeletons of dogs and cats and men and women and children, celebrating. Soon they were at the top where the stone wall crumbled and yielded to a view of the city that was vast; the mansions, the shacks and churches, the lights coming on in the windows as dusk fell were all visible, mixing.



“This is it.”

“Wow, Amy and Manny are really missing something.”

“This is quite a view.”

Amy

“Manny.” They were back in the car. Manny was taking the turns with determined speed and looking straight ahead. I had to yell his name. “Manny I love you too.”

“What?”

“I love you too.”

“What?”

“Never mind.” He smiled at me with his mouth but his eyes stayed on me with an anxious intensity until I finally pointed to the road. He looked back, we had the windows down because we said we wanted to feel the air, but that way we couldn’t talk to each other either. What was there to say? I had been a side dish before the main meal. I hadn’t known what I thought I was but I knew that hurt. And I thought about his girlfriend, the curve of her cheek, the rhythm of her walk, the way she traced his back with her fingernails. Looking at Manny I knew she was beautiful and she didn’t forget to brush her teeth at night like me. Or wake up at noon. I felt small. My heart was beating rapidly.

“Here,” Manny yelled, looking at me. I rolled up my window, he did the same.

“Here, where?”

“Here is the restaurant I remember. You want to go?” He looked again like the cartoon he had in the morning, eager and happy. I wondered how he could just switch from one to the

other. This was the problem, I thought, his emotions were like rubber—plastic and bouncy and durable. He would live to an old age.

“What do you think?”

I shrugged. “Why not?”

“I’ll buy you shots, and if I have to carry you out to the car by the end of the night I won’t leave you there but get you into your bed.”

“Thanks, that’s wonderful. I don’t think I need to do shots.”

“Shots to recover from this afternoon. Not that it was bad, mostly. Mostly it was good. But I think we both need a drink now.”

I followed him out of the car and into the bar. It was a rectangular wooden building with an overhanging roof. Lanterns hung from posts. On the door was a blue sign with a black silhouette of a cowboy on it.

“It’s kind of touristy but it’s not a bad price.”

“It looks like it would be expensive.”

He ignored the comment. “We can get dinner here.”

I didn’t really feel like eating, but soon Manny was ordering a steak and I suddenly wanted one, and I was drinking a beer, and I was forgetting his girlfriend’s blond hair and white teeth (she had to have blond hair and white teeth), and I was thinking it smelled good in the place surprisingly-- like sawdust and there was a man getting up to play a fiddle, and there was never the right moment to tell Manny that I loved him too and see what he would say. Those feelings were dust motes; it was hard to see that they exist except when the sun hit them right. Then Manny reached out and took my hand.

“I’m glad you said what you said.” I raised my eyebrows at him. “About going back and getting married. That’s what I need to do.”

I squeezed his hand and removed mine. “That’s good. Of course then we will have to cool off. You do what you want but I think you know I’m not really happy with sleeping with somebody who’s about to get married.”

“Of course,” he sighed. “It wasn’t going the right way anyway. I can’t believe I was thinking about leaving Hilary. You did a number on me Amy.” He dug into his steak and shook his head while he chewed, as if he had just survived a close call.

You did a number on me too I didn’t say because I have too much pride and I wonder sometimes what if I just said what was on my mind? Here I am with Manny and my heart is in my mouth on fire and I’m simply nodding and smiling and everything is slipping out to sea unanchored. He is smiling at the thought that it is all settled, but he said he loved me, and the corners of his mouth wrinkled with the concentration and effort he put into saying it and all I could do was send him off. But he would have gone off anyway. He would have gone off anyway. I didn’t think I was just telling myself that.

Suddenly I didn’t want to think about it anymore. The taste of Manny was still in my mouth but I removed myself from it. I traveled from that point, the salt of his skin with sunscreen, to the light on the ceiling, the flies collecting there, the tourists in long skirts and T-shirts and the rancheros in button down shirts and cowboy boots were surrounding me. I swung from here to there and I barely heard Manny when he asked me to pass the ketchup and I raised my fork to my mouth and didn’t taste the food.

“It’s only a matter of time before you find somebody.”

“What?” The meat in my mouth surprised me, I was chewing endlessly.

“You’ll find somebody is what I said.”

“I don’t care.”

“You don’t care? Everybody cares.”

“I have my own things to do. If I find somebody that’s something but I don’t necessarily need it.” And I meant it. I thought I meant it.

“You’re too pretty to be left alone.”

“Manny, it’s, it’s not time to comfort me. I’ll be all right.”

“I know,” he swallowed hard. “I’m not comforting you really. I’m the one that needs to be comforted.”

“I think you really mean that.” He looked away. “I’m just joking.” He looked at me, looked away again and then back.

“I’ll remember you. You’ll be like that dog I had growing up that is buried in the back yard under my favorite tree.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. “You’ll be the movie I was never allowed to watch that when I was grown up I always forget to see.” I smiled. I looked down. I cleared my throat; I was going to say it. Then I looked at him. He was drinking his beer and he looked like a stranger; affable, approachable, but closed and unknowable in some way. He put down his beer and wiped his mouth.

“Let’s get out of here.”

So we got back into the car without touching; just like the stars in the sky. I thought that the stars live their whole lives without touching; they burn off of their own light. I thought I could do that. Even though stars aren’t really alive. There’s always something. Some little flaw in my theories that shows me I’m really only trying to make it out alive.

When we got back to the hostel John and Charlie and my Mom were sitting in the living room in the wicker chairs. They looked exhausted. “What did you guys do today?” Manny asked.

“We were going to ask you guys the same question,” my mom said. “We were very curious.”

“We went to the ruins. Then we went to the jungle.”

“We,” Charlie said, “rented bikes and then we saw the most incredible view”.

“It was beautiful,” my mother said, “and you should have seen the pictures leading up to it. The city was lying there, blinking in the twilight, and we were above it looking.”

“We saw a good view too,” Manny said.

“The ruins in the sun,” I said. I noticed with satisfaction that my mother and John were sitting quite far apart, and John seemed to be reading a book.

“Were you worried about me?” I asked my mom, trying to stir up trouble for some reason. I felt like getting a reaction.

She looked up at me, surprised, and tilted her head. “No, not really. I didn’t think about it.”

“That’s good.” I felt good about it. But I also felt small today, and tired. “Mom, I’m going to sleep.”

“All right.”

“Will you tuck me in?”

She smiled at me so small it was almost a frown. “I will.”

I was exhausted. I lay down in my clothes on the covers. I was wearing jean shorts and a green tank top that my mother had bought me. The green was the faded color of seawater, as if

sunlight had rubbed out its glare. The shorts were stiff. I suddenly felt like I was much younger than my age, feeble but tender, dependent. I lay there with my hand on my stomach because I didn't dare to put it over my heart and listened to my own breath, short and shallow, waiting to hear my mother's footsteps.

I woke up, I don't know how long I slept but my mother was adjusting the pillow to rest underneath my head; I had pushed it aside.

"Amy, don't wake up," she whispered.

"I'm awake."

"What's wrong?" She began to unbuckle my sandals. I turned, even though she was in the middle of that.

"Nothing. I don't want you staying out late tonight."

"Are you serious?"

I laughed. "Turn around Amy, let me take off your shoes." Now I was wide awake. I heard dogs fighting out in the street. Nobody was in the room. It was vacant; the woman who had been there had taken all of her stuff out. She must have left. For some reason that made me sad and I ground my teeth, *something should stick in this world, something should have permanence*. I was biting the rope that moved the world and swung us in all directions. I was making my teeth weaker.

"Amy go back to sleep,"

"I'm awake now."

"You don't look it." She leaned closer. "Well maybe you do. I didn't mean to wake you up."

"I'll go back to sleep. Tuck me in?"

“Yes yes yes. But put your pajamas on.”

I sighed. My body felt heavy but I clumsily got out of bed and put on the boxer shorts and T-shirt that my mother had also bought me. I almost wanted to put on the old sweatpants; as if to remove a stain from my mind. What stain was that? The shit colored coffee stain from the drink that woke you up too fast and too hard and left your hands shaking and your eyes shifting. My legs were trembling as I got dressed. My mother pulled back the covers and smoothed them out. She had lipstick and eye shadow and mascara on, her hair was neatly brushed in a wave. She had on a striped blue shirt and matching blue sandals. I thought she was probably going out. She looked satisfied and far away from me. I don't know why, but when she worried and her eyes acquired extra lines and her lips became a thin line (but her hair stayed the same), it was as if she was cemented to me. I liked the gentle, effusive air she had now. As if she could float around me in a loose hug that would make everything all right.

I lay down in bed. She covered me and patted my arms. She kissed me on the forehead. She got up to leave. “Mom, tell me a story.”

“What?”

“A story, like Sylvia used to when we were younger.”

“I don't know what Sylvia told you.” She sat back down on the bed. “What's the matter?”

“Manny's getting married.”

“Manny's getting married? How?”

“Well I guess he'll go to the court or the church and get a priest or a judge or whatever and him and his girlfriend will say that they'll live happily ever after and then maybe they'll do that, maybe they won't. Maybe they'll have 2.5 kids and good jobs and nice cars and join the

country club. Maybe he'll feel a burning love for me that eats him up inside and he'll hitchhike across the United States to find me and we'll go off in an old beat up old Ford and have a parakeet and 2.5 dogs and 6 kids and live on an old farm in Indiana in the barn, which won't be cold in the winter because he's good with his hands."

"Do you really believe that?"

"What? That people can have 2.5 children?"

"No, that he will come and find you?"

I turned on my side and faced the wall. I put my finger up to trace the plaster. It felt good. I pretended I was blind and the wall was Braille; it told me stories. My mother wasn't telling me a story. "Mom, I don't know. I don't know. No. Will you tell me a story?"

My mother smoothed my hair. "Yes." She sighed. She patted her own hair and then smoothed it down again. She shifted on the bed. "There was this girl, a young woman really. She lived in an old barn in Indiana with a young man. They had everything. Kids, radios, TV's, TV dinners, tractors, cars, pets, and she wore dresses with lace. She had married him fast and it seemed to work out until one day. One day she was feeding the dog, and putting the baby down for a nap and cooking herself lunch. This was after she had made him lunch and she looked out at the road, and she remembered. She remembered that once she had been a young woman who traveled all the way to Mexico by herself. And she had plans to go back to school but this guy picked her up in a beat up old Ford and off they went with the cans and the rice and everything into the sunset. So she felt a twinge. She was being played like a violin. She put down the crying baby and walked through the door, down the road. She didn't know where she was going. You might say why'd she leave her kids? What about the pets? What about the man? But the pets and the kids knew how to take care of each other and the man and his secretary did too; so



everything was fine at home without her. One clock stopped. One measly clock complained but the young woman didn't know this and she set out on the road. At first every day was a nightmare. This is what the clock knew and why it was so worried about the woman that it couldn't bear to move anymore: the woman saw the world as a mirror. Every ache in a joint, every doubt about where to place her foot, every runny nose, reflected back at her in a cold burrito or dirty look or even a bouquet of flowers. But the flowers didn't come too often. Because the young woman was confused and when she saw herself she thought of the color grey. She traveled far and wide and all she saw was grey. She forgot what colors looked like. She even went back to school and studied, she ate three meals a day, she woke up at sunrise, but it was all grey. Then one morning, before she graduated, she saw a piece of blue on her shoe. This was because the afternoon before she had been studying and she figured out a very tough problem and she began to feel good. Then the next day she saw yellow. She had given a ride to a very old woman with groceries to her house. Normally she would have been afraid of that woman but on that day she only saw the weakness with which the woman pushed her grocery cart. Things like that started happening all the time. Little things. The mirror broke, and the young woman saw that she didn't have to be afraid. She met another nice young man and they lived together traveling the country, doing magic shows. Because by then the young woman could turn the shade grey into any color that she wanted."

"Is that the end?"

"Yes. You're not asleep?"

"No. It ended kind of abruptly. How did the young girl really get the mirror to break? Just by figuring out one problem?"

“Well, that’s for the young girl to figure out. The most important part right now might ~~just~~ be for her to know that she’s holding the mirror.”

I smiled, drowsy. “Cheap ending.”

“I tried.”

I sat up to kiss her. “Thank you. You can go out now.”

“You think I’m going out?”

“Have fun.”

“I will.”

I lay there in bed for a long time. I was tired. I was bone tired, but sleep escaped me. I turned one way and then another. I would get so tired and comfortable that my muscles would spasm and I’d have to wake up. Finally, in the middle of the night I got up to pee. I found myself in the cold tile world of the bathroom. I was thinking about the girl with the mirror when I looked in the mirror. What I saw was small and sad; my eyes narrow, my nose big, my lips little, my ears sticking out, my hair an un-dyed blond that showed up muddy. A make over and I would be fine, I knew that. But I didn’t want a make over. I wanted to be accepted as beautiful naked, unvarnished. I wasn’t. I thought of Manny’s hands on me and I tried to call back exactly how they felt so I could understand exactly what he meant. So I could see, tangibly, some bond between us. Then I felt a kick. I looked down at my stomach. Not a kick, a little twist. I put my hand over it. It looked a little bigger today. The bathroom air conditioner hummed and I couldn’t help but listen to it for awhile. It seemed to me to move along with my stomach. I was vibrating. I decided I wouldn’t tell anybody. I decided that I’d wait. Should I get an abortion? I’d think about that. But I wouldn’t speak to anybody about it. Nobody needed to know. Manny had his life. I had mine. It was grey. I had my grey life. Maybe a baby would pick me up.

What was I thinking? I wasn't crazy. But I had gotten pregnant today. I tiptoed back to bed. My mother would be worried. I fell asleep with my hand on my stomach.

Julia

Julia awoke the next morning and climbed down out of the bed. Usually she slept on the bottom bunk but last night Amy hadn't thought about it, and she had crept into the lower bed, lying there through the night like a wounded animal. Tossing and turning and Julia imagined twitching and moaning. Julia decided she would wake her up. She had gone to bed early and it was already ten in the morning. Julia went with the Canadians to see a show—a blues singer Amy would have liked, in a blue silk dress with flowers in her hair. She had a guitar and wore very high heels. Julia would tell Amy about this and maybe Amy would want to go see her. She sang on Wednesdays.

“Amy,” Julia held her hand. “Wake up.”

“I'm awake.” Amy opened her eyes. She looked a little groggy but mostly awake. She had a supernatural calm about her this morning, like she might levitate or grant world peace to all earthlings.

“Amy, did you sleep last night?”

Amy sat up. “I slept, that's why I'm awake now. It's been sunny for some time now...I wanted to lie in bed for a little while.”

“Well let's get going. I went out last night to this place you would love. A blues singer.”

“Oh, you should ask to sing with her.”

“I don’t think so. This woman was good. She had a presence.”

“Well at least we should go to a karaoke night.”

Julia smoothed her hair. “I’m glad you’re feeling better. I was a little worried.”

“I’m feeling good. I think it was the story.”

After Julia and Amy got dressed they went out into the hall to find the Canadians standing there by their bags. They were loading up the car.

“What’s going on?”

“We’re leaving. It’s been nice but it’s time to go back to the verdant hills of Canada.”

“Oh.”

“Well let me help you with your stuff.” Amy grabbed a bag.

“She can’t wait to see us leave”

“Manny you drove this girl crazy. And I don’t mean that in a good way.”

Manny brushed past Amy carrying a bag. Julia thought he looked serious and upset, while Amy was still, with the floating calmness of a plant; she didn’t like it. Young people take life like a roller coaster ride. *Hormones*, she thought. “I don’t want you to leave. I just thought I’d help. I don’t want you dragging out your goodbyes either.”

They laughed. “Well at least she’s honest.”

“I’m glad we saw you so we could say goodbye.”

“Oh, we’re taking you to breakfast.”

Somehow, they all got into the small white car with all the luggage in it. Arms were plastered to the window and legs stuck in positions that were incredibly uncomfortable, but they got to a small restaurant. It looked like a gas station.

“This used to be a gas station,” Manny said.

“They have good coffee.” John helped Julia out of the car with formal obsequiousness and kissed her hands. “Let me buy your coffee.”

“John, I don’t think that’s appropriate.”

“Oh, c’mon, he’s leaving. It’ll make him happy.”

“He can’t afford the whole breakfast.”

“I was thinking I would buy you young men breakfast and coffee. You have shown me such a good time.”

“Thank you,” Charlie said. He rubbed his stomach. “But I’m going to eat a lot.”

“It’s not a question of who buys what for who, it’s just that we spend more time together. I think we should all buy our own stuff. But I’ll pay for Julia’s coffee.”

They went inside. It was that they didn’t know what else to talk about, arguing about who was buying. It was that and the fact that they each wanted to leave a token. In reality, Julia was the only one who could afford to buy anybody breakfast and so she did. She watched Amy and Manny throughout. They were sitting at the end of the table. At one point Manny reached out to take Amy’s hand, and Amy looked down shyly at her eggs and bacon, and they seemed happy. Julia thought they would have been nice together but young men don’t settle down so easily and maybe her daughter would have been better off not knowing him although he was clean and polite. He smiled too much at everybody. Julia thought her daughter would be better with a more serious type of young man. She thought maybe she could meet some; she had been very successful with these young Canadians, and she would set Amy up. She would miss the Canadians. Charlie’s irreverence and John’s yearning. She would go back to her husband now, and back to work, but these days had broken her open. She would bleed in her routine; she would remember feeling like singing. She would remember aching looking at the blue sky

which spread endlessly above her, surprised at the sun and the day's possibilities. They had finished eating. Julia paid. There were a few protests and John pulled out a piece of paper. "It's a picture I drew for you." Charlie rolled his eyes. "And this." He handed her the card of the woman psychic, "In case you need it."

"Thank you John." She kissed him on the cheek. He held his cheek.

"Thank you." She shook Manny and Charlie's hands. Amy hugged them all. They gave her big bear hugs.

"Stay safe."

"Don't buy a swimming suit."

"What?" Julia asked.

"Nothing."

"Your daughter the great dipper is all."

Julia shook her head. They walked out to the car. "Well I guess this is where we leave you. After all we've said our goodbyes."

"Let us in."

They rode back to the hostel in silence. Julia felt like she was at the end of a movie with the credit reeling and sad music, or maybe triumphant. It had been good knowing them. She would miss them. Amy was smiling in the seat next to her, crunched like a pretzel in an awkward position. When they got to the hostel Manny opened the doors for them. He hugged them each goodbye and then got back into the car. They drove off and Amy and Julia watched them for awhile. They were gone and Julia sighed.

"It'll be different without them."

Amy shrugged. "I think I'll take a nap."

“Amy, you don’t need a nap.”

“I think I’ll go inside and lie down.” Julia looked at her daughter out of the corner of her eyes; she was still watching the street. A stray dog rolled his hips to the beat of some unheard music in the distance. Cars passed. The Canadians were gone.

“You don’t need a nap.”

“Mom it won’t be for long. I’m just going to sleep off the week. Those guys really wore me out.”

Amy left. Julia reasoned that it had been an exhausting week. She looked down the road for a few more minutes. The sun hit her hard and she began to sweat. She went inside and looked at the piano sitting in the living room. She began to play the piano, humming to herself. A simple song she knew.

Amy

I found myself lying in bed again. I went in and out, like I was riding waves. I was tired and miserable. My body ached. I felt kicking. I dreamed I was running from an old man with a cane, but he caught up to me, and he touched me. He had soft hands. I woke up knowing that the woman in the church had spoken the truth. I would have this baby and die. Maybe I would live nine months with Manny but there would be no growing old together. He hadn’t left me with any way to get in contact with him. He had just left. So he would come back. I knew this the way a flower stem bends in the wind, then springs up again. He would go a little ways and be back for me. The woman in the church had spoken it with her pale pink lips.

“Amy.” My mom was in the room suddenly, sounding concerned. “It’s almost five. I was thinking. We should go back soon.”

“We should stay.”

“I think you might be homesick. I think we’ve had our fun here and we could get back to your father and jobs and school. Think about it.” She kissed me on the cheek. That kiss was heavy with knowing. My mother knew about my death, coming soon to a theater near you. And she knew about the baby. Maybe she would bring it up.

Since she knew, I asked her, “Will you bring up the baby?”

“What baby?”

“I think you know.”

“No, I don’t know. Tell me.”

“Our baby. My and Manny’s baby.”

“And why won’t you be bringing it up?”

I sat up on my elbow and sighed. “Mother, I’m going to die.”

“Is this about the woman we saw at the church?”

“She knew all these things. I didn’t believe her at first but they seem to be coming true. I know I’m pregnant. I feel weak and the baby kicks. Mom I can feel it while I’m lying here. And Manny will come back. He said he loves me. He can’t go too far. He’s in love with me.”

“Well, I’m sure Manny has feelings for you but he left this morning. I said goodbye to him. I saw him leave and he has commitments in Canada that he can’t just turn away from. I saw the woman you were talking about. I went into her shop.”



“You saw her?”

“Yes, and she had a business card. She gave it to John and I even took one. She’s a fortune teller trying to make money. That’s all. She predicts your future for a tip.”

“Mom. I don’t know why you’re denying all of this. I could feel by your kiss that you know it’s true.”

My mother’s face, in the late afternoon light, was sagging underneath her make up; it looked like it was being pulled by fishhooks-- she was worn. She was tired and sad. I could see the grief that my death would bring her. Maybe this was why she was speaking in such a way. “Amy, I’m not. I’m trying to tell you not to worry. Everything is going to be fine. We had a wonderful time here and I know you’ll miss your friends but think of all they showed you and how it was good to know them and don’t think about losing them. Let’s go somewhere. Get dressed. Put on a nice dress and we’ll go out and then we’ll go back home soon and you’ll go back to school.”

I looked at her, looking like she was breathing somehow after being drowned, and I thought I would do what she wanted. I put my hand on my stomach, but my mother gently removed it. I held her hand for a minute. What was required of me was to lie, and to wait. To wait until Manny came back and to live the rest of what I had of my life with a bravado having to do as much with keeping others’ strength up as my own. “Where do you want to go?”

“I want to go dancing.”

Suddenly I was laughing. “At a club?”

“Salsa dancing. I’ve always wanted to.”

“Fine then.” Because you are going to lose your daughter and be left with a baby to raise while you are becoming frail and wisps of wind will be able to break you, hopefully though not

the responsibility of a child. Fine because the years ahead will be hard. I put on my dress, my mother put on hers. I brushed my hair and my mother put on her lipstick and her high heel shoes and I put on my sandals. We were ready. We went to dance. My mother danced with several men and laughed, and one put a flower in her hair and her face slowly lifted again. I couldn't help but imagine this was how it would be. She would quietly, surely come to herself again after losing me and the smile on her face would radiate heat and joy again but I would be dead. I sipped water all night so the baby wouldn't be harmed and danced with a few men and I started to wonder if any one of them was Manny come back disguised. But I felt he would come to me whole, so I didn't pay too much attention to the dancing. Only the music was sharp with yearning to me, it almost cut me. I wondered at how I had spent my life and I wondered at what I would leave behind and there were so many soft prints I left, nothing permanent. And nothing to live for anymore. Nothing would be helped by prolonging the few months I had to live. The baby wouldn't even have a mother. I would die. I would live my days in terror until then. No, not terror, but with a strange, heightened sense of life that was so vivid, almost supernatural, that it hurt. I decided to have a drink, just to take the edge off. And then I had a few more. Soon my mother was walking me home and there were cars coming and I was walking towards one. Off of the sidewalk. My mother was yelling something and I saw the traffic blurring past me. It had messages. Messages about my mother about God about the life of the baby inside me and I was walking closer and closer, fast, to a car coming down the road. There were so many things to work out and I didn't want to worry anymore and the thud, the crushing of my bones sounded good to me. The car honked. It honked loudly. And I jumped back. I was standing there shaking and I realized I had almost died. All I saw was the car in the road so close to me and then sound and instinct took over and I was dodging it. The driver yelled something out of the

window and raised his fist at me. Instinct took over. Coward—I could have been in front of it. I walked back to my mother. I realized I was shaking. She was crying and looking at me through the darkness, from underneath a street light and I stepped into the circle of light. “Amy, Amy. What were you doing?” I shook my head. I felt the urge to laugh.

“I was committing suicide Mom.”

“There’s no need for that. You need to remember your mother and all the people who care about you.” She hugged me. “Don’t you remember us? Don’t you know how much we care?” I stood limp in her arms and I thought that I hadn’t thought about that for a long time. For a long time I had been seeing only distances to cross.

“Mom, I’m not pregnant. I don’t think I’m pregnant. I’m confused. I’m confused about why I’m like this.”

“You’re not like anything Amy. You’re simply you.”

I started to cry. I wasn’t pregnant. I knew that now. Manny wasn’t coming back. The glow that had permeated everything seemed to disappear and I was getting oriented again. I was a young woman walking down the street, slightly drunk, with her small mother beside her. Maybe I was lonely. I was lonely because the trees grew anyway, in spite of pollution, and cars almost ran you over and didn’t stop to ask why? Only yelled obscenities through the window. And I could work out a million ways to live but in the end it was only my breath.

“Amy? What are you thinking?” She took my hand. Hers was warm.

“Mom?”

“What Amy?”

“Manny isn’t coming back is he?”

“No.”

I looked at her and I saw that her lipstick was fading, especially in the middle of her mouth, and her hair was falling to one side. Her eyes were still shining from crying.

“You look pretty Mom.”

“I don’t care what I look like. Amy what are you doing? What can I do for you?”

“I’m working it out. I,” my heart was still pounding, “I love you. I think I’m ready to go back to school.”

“You don’t have to go back to school. You just need to start understanding what makes you happy.”

“I think that may take me a while.”

“Take your time.”

We both slept late the next day. My mom suggested we go have lunch somewhere but in the end we went to the markets and came home for lunch. We were in no mood to absorb the scenes of Mexico. My mother was jumping at the sound of cars and I knew I had rattled her. I felt a little shaken myself, but mostly I remembered the rush of living afterwards, after being so close to annihilation. The driver’s screwed up face, twisted with anger, shaking a fist. The shock of the sound of his voice and the feeling of the rain on my skin. I felt alive now in a way I hadn’t felt for years. I wanted my mother to see it but I didn’t know how to show her. Magic tricks? Fire works? Something was working inside me towards a new life, which would mean returning to my old life but with a clarity I had only imagined before. My mother played piano all day with a far away look in her eye and I read. Before dinner I went out. I found a marigold, I picked it for my mother, and I wrote her this note:

After a long winter, I have found my spring. Here is the first evidence of it.

Then I went for a walk. I went for a long walk. I saw the setting sun and the stars come out. I walked through neighborhoods and saw children playing in the street, the men mowing their lawns, the women walk or run by in jogging clothes. The pigeons circled, they kept time to the neighborhood's rhythm, sweeping in circles like a metronome to the rushing of children of the crunch of jogging shoes. I walked it seemed for miles. To feel my legs stretching under my feet, and when I got back to the hostel my mother was there to meet me out front.

“How you been?”

“Good, I went for a walk.”

“I got your note. I'm happy you feel that way.”

“I think it's true.”

My mother wiped her eyes. She looked away. Her face looked crumpled up and small. I thought she was upset. “I'm so happy for you,” she said. “Amy I'm so happy.”

“Mom, it's going to be all right. I'm going to be all right.”

“I finally believe that.” And her shoulders shook with the release of all the weight of the burden she'd been carrying. I cried too. Suddenly I was blubbering as much as she was and it was good. We were overjoyed. We looked like we had come back from a funeral. Really, it was the pain of growing into something new.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alvarez, Julia. *In The Name of Salome*. Middlesex, England: Plume, 2000.

Erdrich, Louise. *Love Medicine*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.

Llosa, Mario. *Letters to a Young Novelist*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.

Lodge, David. *The Art of Fiction*. England: Penguin Books, 1992.

Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1965.

## CURRICULUM VITA

Jessica Miller was born in Canutillo, Texas. The third daughter of David and Ellen Miller, she graduated from Keller High School, Keller Texas. She went to community college and The College of Santa Fe before entering The University of Texas at Austin in 2002 where she earned her degree in 2005. Her degree is in English Literature with a minor in Art History. She has done volunteer work for both Safeplace and the Keller Community Storehouse. She has worked as a scorer for the TAKS test and had an internship with Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center in the summer of 2009 where she wrote grants. She presented a paper at the Graduate Students Literature Conference in El Paso in March of 2009. Her poem, *Sometimes I Wonder About Ed* was published in *The Rio Grande Review* in the fall of 2008. She currently works as a TA for Dr. Weber in the Humanities Department of The University of Texas at El Paso. She entered the Bilingual MFA program at The University of Texas at El Paso in August 2006.

Permanent Address:           148 Frank Lane  
  Keller, Texas 76248