

ABSTRACT

LAURA USSELMAN

The Shifting Space Between the Trees / Espresso Lane
(Under the Direction of REGINALD MCKNIGHT)

The study of literature is often obsessed with the examination of voice in fiction; the free indirect discourse of Jane Austen, chorus of stream of consciousness narratives of William Faulkner, unreliable narration of Wilkie Collins, and first-person dialect of Mark Twain all gain their interest from the question of who is speaking, and how they are doing it. The work of developing one's own voice, through some combination of originality, mimicry, and practice, is one of the most important tasks any inexperienced writer can, either consciously or unwittingly, take on. The two stories in this volume are an exploration of multivocality, the way in which the voices of author and characters blend, work together, and manage to stay distinct within a work of fiction. By working in both the third and first person, the two pieces paint a composite portrait of the difficulties and rewards of finding or forming an authorial voice in the short story.

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THE SHIFTING SPACE BETWEEN THE TREES / ESPRESSO LANE

by

LAURA USSELMAN

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LAURA USSELMAN

Approved:

Reginald McKnight

Professor Reginald McKnight
Faculty Research Mentor

4/15/2010

Date

Approved:

Judith Ortiz Cofer

Professor Judith Ortiz-Cofer
Reader

4/15/2010

Date

Approved:

David Williams

Dr. David S. Williams
Director, Honors Program, Foundation
Fellows and Center for Undergraduate
Research Opportunities

5/7/2010

Date

Approved:

Pamela Kleiber

Dr. Pamela B. Kleiber
Associate Director, Honors Program and
Center for Undergraduate Research
Opportunities

5/7/2010

Date

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PREFACE

The question of whether or not anyone can actually *learn* to write creatively is a very much unresolved one. *The Atlantic Monthly* seems to publish an article on the subject at least once a year, and Louis Menand wrote an essay for *The New Yorker* last year that both rehashed the question and provided a rather comprehensive history of the debate thus far. A slew of MFA and PhD programs has sprung up in the last century to foster the teaching and learning of writing, but as Menand says, it's possible that the top-notch MFA program "merely admits people who are really good at writing; it puts them up for two years; and then, like the Wizard of Oz, it gives them a diploma" (Menand). Even the programs themselves seem a little unsure of their own mission; the Michigan MFA website offers the vague "students choose this program because they intend to prepare for a lifetime of writing and professional publication" under the bold heading of "Purposes," while the Iowa Writers' Workshop proclaims, "we exist and proceed on the assumption that talent can be developed, and we see our possibilities and limitations as a school in that light...we continue to look for the most promising talent in the country, in our conviction that writing cannot be taught but that writers can be encouraged."

If, given the source and the sentiment, this last is the closest the writing community comes to the Gospel on creative writing instruction, we students of "the craft" are left in an interesting position. If we cannot be taught, only encouraged, what is it that we are being encouraged to do? Write, certainly, but what does one learn in order to become a "writer?" There is no textbook, despite the abundance of writer's guides floating about. An aspiring writer cannot study the life and works of her predecessors and thus crack the code to good writing and a

successful career; after all, what, other than an amazing facility with the English language, could Samuel Beckett and Charlotte Smith possibly have had in common?

Despite all of this uncertainty, I have spent the last four years enrolled in a number of creative writing classes, and I am about to begin three years of much more of the same. And after a year of directed study, the question of “what have I learned?” seems a fair one to pose. In her guide “on writing and life” *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott says, “I honestly think in order to be a writer, you have to learn to be reverent. If not, why are you writing? Why are you here?” (99). While I think this is true, I suspect it’s the kind of Truth with a capital T which I would be hard-pressed to master in two semesters. The work of “being a writer,” learning and relearning reverence, is work I want to continue for the rest of my life. So for the time being I will put these larger concerns aside and address a much smaller issue: what have the two stories bound here done for and to me? How have these two semesters encouraged, in the words of the Writers’ Workshop, me to develop as a writer?

...

A year ago I spent a week in Maine for Thanksgiving. Though I’ve been to Maine more years than not since I was born, I had never been outside of summer, the tourist season when snowbirds flock north and Acadia National Park is packed. In November, the coastal farmhouse where my great-uncle and –aunt live was a changed place; unused rooms closed off and cold, blueberry fields mowed to the ground, and the surrounding woods full of frightened deer and the surprising sound of gunshots. I came home with two paragraphs of a story, far less than I’d hoped to write, and the sense that I’d missed an opportunity. I’d been affected by that place, but I hadn’t managed to write anything about it down.

It wasn't until later that I encountered this quote from Richard Russo's essay on location in storytelling: "The simple truth of the matter is I've never written effectively about any place I was currently residing. I not only need to leave but actually need to have been gone for some time for my imagination to kick in, to begin the process of necessary tempering of knowledge" (77-78). Once I was back in the South, writing about the Maine winter became far easier. As Lamott says, "the writer is a person who is standing apart, like the cheese in 'The Farmer in the Dell' standing there alone but deciding to take a few notes. You're outside, but you can see things up close through your binoculars" (97). In Maine, I was too close to the action to focus through those binoculars, too captivated by the concrete details of an unfamiliar world to give my mind any room to breathe.

Back in Georgia, I tied myself to that quiet, gray coast. That place became my anchor to reality as I explored a much more imaginative world: the space inside my own head and that of my characters. I think it's perhaps a sign of the things I have yet to learn that, as I discovered the way in which a real, geographical place could unlock the part of my mind that creates, the process was mirrored in the story I wrote. Location and imagination became so intertwined for me that the resulting story was an explicit meditation on both. "The Shifting Space Between the Trees" seems to me, now, to wear the things it taught me on its sleeve. That's not meant to be dismissive or self-deprecating. Rather, the story tracks my personal realization of another claim Russo makes in his essay: "Writers have to recognize and accept an essential artistic paradox—that the more specific and individual things become, the more universal they feel." (72 Russo). By delving into a specific place and the individual feelings it inspired, I stumbled into a contemplation of a far more universal phenomenon.

When I started writing my next story, I did so without the strong sense of geography that had inspired the first. What the two stories did have in common was an ambition to adhere to Charles Baxter's injunction (a paraphrase of Schopenhauer) "that the business of the novelist is not to relate great events but to make small ones interesting" (48). Though *Espresso Lane* is no novel, the events in it are certainly small: after her parents separate, an eleven-year-old girl begins a friendship with an older girl who works in her aunt's coffee shop. I began writing with a climactic incident in mind, but the story took longer to get there than I anticipated, as I got happily sidetracked in what Lamott calls the "ecstasy in paying attention... anyone who wants to can be surprised by the beauty or pain of the natural world, of the human mind and heart, and can try to capture just that—the details, the nuance, what is" (100). This, like Lamott's instruction to "learn reverence," is a tall order, but one it is worthwhile to work towards. It is that fiction that seems to capture "what is," no matter how small or mundane, that compels us, captures us, that we still, in some cases after hundreds of years, want to read.

If my first story was an exploration of place and its effect on character and reader (and writer), my second was written with something like Baxter's interest in the coexistence of oppositional emotions—"What is a bored ecstasy like? What does one feel in the midst of pessimistic hope? Is there such a thing as a furious tenderness?"—in mind (47). I wrote about a seventh-grade girl, and if there is any time at which we are least equipped to deal with the onslaught of complicated and contradictory feelings, it is middle school. While I hope there are some traces of Baxter's suggestion that "instead of making our narrative events and our characters more colorful, we might make them thicker, more undecideable" present in both of my stories (47), I think that with *Espresso Lane*, I was ultimately more interested in yet another thing Anne Lamott has to say: "If you start to look around, you will start to see. When what we

see catches us off guard, and when we write it as realistically and openly as possible, it offers hope” (101). My second story was about learning to write what I saw, and, no matter how bleak, to find hope there.

At this point, I find hope in the prospect that, with every story I write, I will be able to take some step towards “see[ing] people as they really are” (Lamott 97). Ultimately, the most important step I took in these past two semesters may have been in deciding that fiction is something I want to continue producing. One of Lamott’s final pearls of wisdom has to do not with what good writing looks like to a reader, but what it feels like to a writer: “To be engrossed by something outside ourselves is a powerful antidote for the rational mind, the mind that so frequently has its head up its own ass—seeing things in such a narrow and darkly narcissistic way that it present a colo-rectal theology, offering hope to no one” (102). Though the writing community cannot be said to have completely eschewed such navel-gazing—if such was true, no discussion of the teaching and learning of writing would exist at all—the production of good fiction does indeed require that the writer look outside of him- or herself, and that is a continuing lesson that I would be loath to give up.

THE SHIFTING SPACE BETWEEN THE TREES

Julia moved into the cottage in November, which was a relief for the owner, since the house had been empty for almost two months. She rented the cottage through the end of January, with an option to extend her stay, since the owner knew he would have no other offers for a New England summer house in February. He knew her circumstances from the friend who had gotten them in touch—her parents dead fourteen months ago in a car accident, Julia leaving art school just before finals a year later—but all she said in her note was that she wanted a place to work on her photographs, so the landlord didn't mention it. They both knew artistic aspirations were a safe reason to rent a lonely house in winter.

She drove into Maine with a beautiful sunset behind her, watching the sun sink below the horizon in her rear view mirror at only four in the afternoon, then drove on in the dark. When she stopped at the grocery store three hours later, she saw there was snow in the grass and in the parking lot, though she had not noticed it from the road. She walked down the aisles with the letter from the house's owner in the child seat of the shopping cart. She had not bothered to condense the scattered references to what she would need at the cottage—"there's kindling in the box by the wood stove, but no matches," "I think the last renter took the ice scraper, or maybe he just put it back in the wrong place"—into a list, so she made long pauses at the end of each aisle, scanning the handwritten page. By the time she arrived back at the checkout, her shopping cart was full, boxes of crackers and macaroni and cheese piled on top of the essentials. The cottage was almost an hour away from the nearest supermarket, and she did not want to come back soon.

When she finally did pull up to the cottage the temperature had fallen below ten degrees and the wind was whipping off the water. The house was just as close to the ocean as the owner had promised—the waves moved in her headlights thirty feet from the front steps, and the rocks that covered the intervening distance reflected the light in a way that made Julia think they must be frozen. As she sat bracing herself for the dash to the house, flecks of salty water began to accumulate on the windshield, leaping against the glass when the wind gusted. She turned off the engine and opened the door during a lull in the wind, but it picked up again as she sidled around to the trunk, and she grabbed only her backpack and the grocery bag with the matches before sprinting to the back door.

The key that had come in the letter turned easily in the door, and she stepped into the kitchen. The room stretched across the back of the house and had windows in three walls, through which the moon now shone, illuminating the empty counters. The faucet trickled and the vent in the floor whirred as the heat struggled to keep the house at 55 degrees. The owner had come up a few days earlier to turn on the heat and water, but had warned Julia that the old radiator system would need the help of the wood stove to warm the house. As Julia stepped across the narrow kitchen and into the rest of the house, the sound of the wind breaking against the front of the house and streaming around the sides increased, while the light lessened as she crossed the threshold into the living room. She wondered for a moment whether the front windows were painted or frosted, but as she walked towards them she saw they were just coated with a heavy film of ice and salt. The bedroom was similarly dim, sharing, as it did, the seaward side of the house, and Julia headed back to the kitchen, which seemed to glow after the muted light in the other side of the house.

Julia picked up her bag from where she had left it by the door and carried it back to the bedroom, switching on lamps as she went and drawing the curtains across the ice-covered front windows. Only when the glass was covered in the living room did she notice more about the room. The front wall was lined with bookshelves, and there was, as promised, a large wood stove in one corner. She suffocated the fire once before she figured out the mechanism that opened the flue and drew up the smoke. Once the fire was burning she sat back and listened; the wind occasionally gusted straight down the chimney, making the fire leap forward and adding another strange whistle to the wind symphony already in full swing around her. She ate macaroni and perused the bookshelves. The books appeared to be those that the previous occupants had decided weren't worth the trouble to take with them when they left: paperback romances, cookbooks for those on a budget, and two different copies of *War and Peace*, both with spines that bore the marks of being picked up in fits of ambition and then abandoned midway through. The bottom shelf was filled with evidence of the various creative endeavors of the cottage's inhabitants: *How to Publish, Promote, and Sell Your Own Book*; *Survive Your Dissertation*; *The 101 Habits of Highly Successful Screenwriters*; even a copy of *Music Composition for Dummies*. Julia suddenly felt intensely foolish. People had evidently been coming to the cottage for years on a series of, judging from the orphaned books, failed artistic retreats.

Julia yanked the curtains open again. Just as they had when she first walked into the room, the crystalline patterns on the windows and the light that illuminated them made the books recede. She peered out of the side window, which faced away from the water and didn't have the layer of ice of the front windows. She could see the outline of a house twenty yards away that she hadn't noticed when she'd parked the car. She remembered reading something about a

neighbor, and picked up the owner's letter from where it lay on the table. "The house next door has been mostly empty for three or four years, but in case the owner is there, make sure to park near the house." Julia wondered for a second whether she had driven onto the neighbor's property, but decided it probably didn't matter. The windows of the house had been dark since before she arrived.

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When Julia awoke the next morning the front windows were still thoroughly frosted. The wind had died and the sun shone brightly through the ice, illuminating the webs of salt more clearly than the moon had. These would be her first Maine photographs—the beautifully intricate and illuminated windows, bracketed by the shelves of cheap paperbacks. As Julia ran out into the cold to get her tripod from the car she was already thinking of titles.

When she got to the car the doors were frozen shut. The same ocean spray that produced such beautiful effects on the windowpanes had blown all night on her car, parked completely exposed at the side of the house. She started back to get the ice scraper from the house and realized she had left it in the back seat the night before. Her tripod was on the passenger seat, where she had, cleverly she thought, stowed it in case she saw anything worth photographing in the low light on the drive up. She hadn't known it would be fully dark at 4:15.

She sighed and turned back towards the ocean. It was the first time she had seen the view, aside from the pictures the owner had included with his letter. She had been struck by how beautiful the cove was in the photos, but now it seemed unfriendly. The rocks leading down to the water were coated with nasty looking black ice and clouds were gathering over the water. They would soon cover the sun, ruining the pictures of the windows she wanted to take. She ran back inside to heat water to unfreeze the car doors. She put pots on all four burners and ran

outside with the smallest as soon as it began to steam. It took her two more trips before the driver's door was melted enough to open, and by then the light was gone. The sky had turned entirely to gray. Julia drove the car behind the house and went inside, not bothering to thaw the rest of the doors. She wasn't expecting any passengers.

She spent the rest of the day reading at *War and Peace* and poking the fire in the stove. When the wind picked up again after the sun went down she looked out of the side window and saw that the clouds had finally blown away. The moon was new but there seemed to be more light than dark in the sky; the spaces that looked blank at home were in fact filled with tiny pinpricks, clustered between the closer and brighter stars. She had an urge to see the whole sky as it reached to the low horizon over the water and began to slide her feet into her shoes, but the wind gusted around the house and she remembered how cold it was outside. She closed the curtain against the framed square of sky, and turned back towards her book instead. She was making progress—already the underlining of a previous reader had petered out.

It stayed cloudy for three days. Each morning she made a fitful attempt to work, wandering around the point with her camera. She told herself that she was scoping things out, finding intriguing places to shoot, experimenting with them a bit, and writing them down so she could come back when the light was right. But by the third morning she was passing all the same places. She sat for an hour shooting the rotten apples under a tree that grew in the neighbor's yard, even though she knew the light was wrong and the pictures wouldn't work. Each day when her alarm went off at six, in time for her to shoot in the pre-dawn, she turned it off and fell back asleep for hours. Nor did she ever stay out late enough to work in the late afternoon, never mind that the late afternoon started at 2:45 in November. It was too cold, and she never reemerged after lunch. Julia knew she was shooting only in the worst part of the day,

but when she reviewed the digital pictures she had snapped, sitting by the fire after the sun had gone down, she blamed the results on the place. There was nothing she could do in a place so bleak. She had imagined winter in Maine as a favorable variation on summer, with blue skies, blue water, and white snow on the ground. Instead the world was unabatedly gray, and she was greeted not with snow when she walked down her back steps, but with frozen mud.

Julia was fascinated only by the salt and ice patterns on her windows. Photographing them was like photographing the patterns on the inside of her eyelids. The level of light that shone through was the only evidence that there even was a bleak gray sky outside. When the light filtered into her living room it became manageable and contained, captured as it was in the squares between the self-help books. Julia wasn't sure the pictures she took from her living room would capture anyone else the way they did her, but she was more inclined to be generous to these photos. Her tripod became a fixture of the living room, standing on spindly legs, at odds with the boxy shapes of the armchair and the stove.

On her fifth day Julia had to concede that she would need more firewood, and much sooner than she had intended. She kept the stove lit all day and almost all night, letting it burn down only after she had gone to bed, and rekindling it in the morning before the coals were cold. She spent so little time outside, and so much time in the living room photographing the windows, reading Tolstoy, and stoking the fire, that the wood was disappearing at an alarming rate. She picked up the letter she had abandoned on a side table to see what her landlord had to say on this front. "If you run out of wood, there is plenty of blowdown in the woods at the back of the property. Cut whatever you like—the saw and hatchet are in the chest in the kitchen." When she checked they weren't there. She walked back out to the woodpile and saw the hatchet stuck in the ground, just to the left of the shelter the owner had built for the firewood. She reached down

to yank it out, but when she pulled on the handle it broke off with almost no resistance, leaving the head buried in the ground. The wood had rotted through in the months since the last tenant had left it there. She saw the saw leaning against the house, the blade rusted into a similar state of uselessness.

That night she let the fire burn down early and took a hot water bottle to bed. She didn't want to drive back to town so soon, but she was too aware of the possibility of a snow or ice storm, that could keep her holed up for days and possibly without power, to let the woodpile get too low. She picked up the letter again from where it lay on her bedside table. "The house next door has been mostly empty for three or four years" she read again. Julia had seen a shed, more substantial than the one at her house, at the rear of the other house on one of her photography rambles, which she had assumed held tools or firewood. Either way, it would be a good place to look for a new saw. She doubted it was locked, and she just needed something to use until she went back to town in a few weeks for groceries. She turned off the light and hugged her hot water bottle, planning.

...

Her alarm went off at ten the next morning. Her quest for firewood was enough of an excuse not to try any pictures that day, but she knew she would sleep until the afternoon if she didn't set an alarm at all. Julia set off without her camera for the first time since she had retrieved it from the car. She had developed the habit in her first two years of school of looking at the world as a series of interlocking tableaux, overlapping panels that she could isolate and frame whenever she walked with her camera. Sometimes she would stand in place with her viewfinder to her eye, turning in a circle, separating the space she moved through into a set of flat images. Now, without her camera in hand, the peninsula seemed more expansive, less

containable. She hurried across the lawn and out of view of the ocean and the sky above it. The shifting expanse of fluid gray was, for some reason, more stifling than the cluttered living room in which she spent her time.

As Julia rounded the corner of the house she glanced at the uncovered windows. The house was bigger than her own, with a number of wings and appendages that made it appear much larger. The cottage she was renting was part of the rather unimaginative but practical school of design so common in older and smaller New England houses: a rectangular building with interior walls stuck in almost as an afterthought, dividing the space into the few rooms necessary to make the house livable. Julia had even been in one such house where the walls stopped three feet shy of the ceiling, which did away with any semblance of luxury or even permanence. This house, on the other hand, was a mishmash of architectural styles. It had the look of being designed with care by an amateur, too enthusiastic about each individual feature to care that together they made for an incongruous whole. As Julia traversed around the back of the house she had to make way for two bay windows and a strange rectangular outcropping with no windows at all before arriving at the shed.

The door to the shed was unlocked, but Julia's hopes that she would find tools in it were immediately disappointed. The little building was filled almost entirely with paint cans. Each can was marked with a brush stroke on the lid, and the cans had been carefully stacked in chromatic order. Julia stood for a moment, her interest piqued, before closing the door. She continued her walk around the house, this time peering into the windows with more interest. She passed two bedrooms and what looked like a study, but none of the rooms bore any trace of the person who would design such a hodgepodge of a house, or put those paint cans stacked in the shed to use. The furniture was old but looked comfortable, the walls were painted tasteful

neutral shades. She passed quickly around the front right corner of the house, the only room where the windows were curtained. When she arrived at the side door, which she could see from her own living room window, she glanced through the panes into the kitchen. There was a built in storage chest along the wall just inside the door, above which a hatchet hung from two pegs.

Julia tried the door without thinking, expecting it to be locked. The door didn't open, but the knob turned in her hand and the door shifted slightly. She looked up and saw a crust of ice around the top of the door, where melting ice from the gutters must have run down and refrozen overnight. Julia stopped a moment. She hadn't considered actually going into the house, but she could see what she needed from the window. She would just duck in and get the hatchet, check the storage unit for a saw, and duck out again. She could return the tools that afternoon. She leaned her shoulder into the door and pushed harder. The door gave suddenly, and Julia raised her hand to her face as the ice at the top of the doorframe shattered and rained down around her.

Julia stepped into the kitchen and looked around. The kitchen was neat and looked almost lived in, though the refrigerator door was ajar and there was a Weber grill in the center of the room, where it had presumably been moved in from outside. There were empty fruitbaskets hanging above the sink and, she saw as she stepped in and closed the door behind her, a single dirty table knife on the counter. She turned back towards the chest, took the hatchet off the wall, and opened the bench below it. There was the saw, lying on top of a pile of neatly stacked firewood and next to a pair of men's work boots. She picked up the tools and turned back towards the door.

She couldn't go through it. Julia was captivated by spaces like this one. When she was growing up she had always commanded that her parents wait outside the door when the family arrived to open up their lake house, so she might go inside and walk through all the rooms before

the work began. They would smilingly comply with the orders of their domineering little six year old, and as she grew older they would pretend to have pressing tasks in the garage or on the dock so she would have her time by herself. She would quietly walk to the threshold of each room and look, leaving everything as it had lain all winter. She loved the subtle change to a lived-in space that occurred when it had been empty a long time. A book casually left on the coffee table looked different through stale and too-cold air. A chess game abandoned halfway through grew significant and sad as winter passed.

Julia put the hatchet and saw softly down on the chest and stepped into the next room. It was a dining room, facing the ocean on the front side of the house. This house was set slightly farther back from the ocean than her own, which was enough to protect it from the spray; the front windows were clear. None of the curtains had been drawn and large faded patches streaked the floor and the rug where the sun shone in each morning. Her landlord had said “mostly empty for three or four years,” but this room looked neglected for longer than that. Julia moved towards the back of the house, silently pausing in each room. She could see her breath. The bed in one of the rooms looked like it had just been slept in, the quilt pulled back to reveal wrinkled sheets.

She made her way through all the empty rooms. The house felt on the inside the way it looked on the outside: eclectic and slightly amateurish, designed in a fit of enthusiasm. Some of the rooms were too small or the wrong shape. One bathroom had two showers and was the size of a small bedroom. There were four bedrooms, and all but the one with the rumpled sheets had the look of guest rooms, with almost empty walls and suspiciously little clutter. The only movement in the rooms was cluster flies buzzing at the windows and crawling on the windowsill. Julia was about to turn around and head back to the kitchen when she realized she hadn't seen

the corner room, the one with curtained windows she'd noticed from outside. There was a closed door at the end of the hall that she'd assumed was a closet, since all the other doors stood open. She headed back towards it now and opened it, stepping inside the room.

The light at this end of the hallway was dim and Julia crossed the room to open the curtains. They were heavy but moved easily and the cloudy light from outside reached the corners of the room as she slid all three pairs back. She looked out of the side window at the woods before stepping back, her hand still resting on the curtain. As her eyes traveled to the wall she saw that this was where the paint in the shed had been put to use. Julia stepped back farther and saw that the streaks of color on the wall were tree trunks—a forest on the wall, the same forest she could see through the window, she realized. She backed up until the view through the window locked into place in the wall like a piece in a puzzle. It was slightly off, though. Some of the branches didn't align; one tree had fallen in the forest, though it stood on the wall. This was the forest of some time ago, Julia realized, maybe twenty years old. Also, though the woods outside the window were starkly bare, the woods of late November, the trees on the wall seemed plucked from every month of the year and stuck together in a fanciful bouquet. Some trees even seemed half rooted in winter, half in summer, new green growth covering half of the crown while the other side stood bare. Lupine bloomed under a late-fall maple, only a few orange leaves hanging on. Each leaf was painted with a near reverence for the real, but the collage of these faithful portraits was strangely abstract.

Julia pivoted towards the sea-facing wall. This, too, was a faithful representation of what lay outside the house. There was no variation in season on this wall, however. The view was the same one she had been avoiding for a week, the ocean gray, clouds looming above. The mural seemed later in winter—there were patches of snow on the ground between the house and the

ocean—but the sky dominated the wall just as it did the view through the window. The paint was thick on the top half of the wall, as if the artist had come back over and over to change the view of the clouds. The sun seeped through the clouds at the top of the wall, while the sky darkened as it crept down towards the ocean. Perhaps the person who kept changing the wall wanted to watch the clouds move in the painting, just as Julia could see them moving through the windows now.

Julia continued her survey of the room, turning left to the door through which she had come. The wall around the door was covered with photographs, some black and white, some color. Many of the photos were of places on the point that she too had passed with her camera, but she had paused at few of them. The trained photographer in her felt no qualms at ignoring the places this photographer had stopped: the compositions were imperfect, the light was poor. Still, these amateur photos, tacked to the wall in uneven rows, were more affecting together than any of her own coffee-shop exhibits. There was one truly beautiful or haunting image in each photo, though the photographer hadn't seemed to care if the whole frame was as satisfying. She approached the wall and saw that some of the photos had been cut up and taped imperfectly together. A beautiful cloudless sky was pasted onto a picture of the meadow behind the house, full of wildflowers and in the peak of summer, never mind that the two photos were clearly taken at different times of day and maybe not even in the same place. There was a forest composed entirely of brilliantly red and orange trees, the kind of fall colors that normally blazed out from a background of more subdued yellows and browns. These alterations were more frequent at eye level, as if someone had restlessly attempted improvement only when the mood struck. It also seemed an abandoned experiment—in some places new, unaltered photos were tacked over the

changed ones, and Julia could see why. It was easier to spot the beautiful aspects when they were surrounded by the more mundane.

The back wall was the plainest in the room, and the only one where the beige paint of the rest of the house could be seen. All the art on this wall was framed, and some of it was clearly not the product of the person responsible for the rest of the room. There was art of every sort—an oil painting, a number of cheap-looking prints, photographs, a few quilt squares, and even a cross-stitched sampler. It was harder to tell what had drawn the room's decorator to each of these items, but Julia suspected that, as with the photographs, all it took was one striking aspect to earn a place on the wall. There was a fireplace in the center of the wall, and stacks of thick drawing paper and books to either side. The piles reached above Julia's knees in some places. She picked up one of the sheets. It had a sketch of a house—the house she was staying in now, she realized—on one side, and what appeared to be a diary entry on the other. It was dated eighteen years earlier.

Julia lay the sheet down and moved to the center of the room, where the only furniture sat in a group. There was an overstuffed armchair, a square wooden table with a record player and a tape deck on it, and a hammock chair which hung from a hook on the ceiling. Julia sat down in the hammock chair and spun slowly around, studying the room.

She stood up, pulled the curtains shut, and walked out, closing the door behind her. She picked up the hatchet and saw from where she had left them in the kitchen and left the house. She knew she was coming back.

...

The next morning Julia got up with her six o'clock alarm for the first time since arriving in Maine. She had found a number of trees blown down in the woods the afternoon before, and

now she headed off to the closest one, bundled up against the cold. She sawed the logs into large sections and carried them back to the side of the house, where she finished sawing them and then split them before stacking them on top of the older wood. She worked ferociously, carrying sections of trunk under each arm on her way back to the house and only taking a break from her sawing in between loads, though her shoulders were unaccustomed to the work and they ached.

After three trips to the woods Julia went back into her house, packed two sandwiches, and walked across the lawn to the other house. She didn't pause in the open parts of the house, as she had the day before, but walked straight down the hall to the closed door. The journal pages and sketches stacked against the wall had been on her mind since she picked up the first one, but now that she was back in the room she approached them circuitously, unwilling to delve right into the piles. She walked around the edges of the room instead, studying the photos more closely, running her hand over the layers of paint in the sky on the front wall. She looked up and saw that the ceiling too was painted, something she hadn't noticed the day before. The ceiling was a day stretched over the course of the sky, the sun rising on the right side of the room and setting on the left. The shifts in between were fluid, morning fog becoming a bright blue sky, then fading into the clouded one of the late afternoon. The ceilings in the house were high, maybe twelve feet, and though the task of painting this one was hardly of Sistine proportions, it must have taken days of standing on a ladder and craning one's neck.

Julia wandered back to the table at the center of the room and pressed play on the cassette player. It was battery powered and she half expected it to make no sound at all, neglected as it had been for years, but classical music blasted from the tinny speakers as soon as she touched the button. She quickly pressed stop. The sound was loud in the empty house, and drew her attention unpleasantly back to the fact that she was not supposed to be there. She stood still,

bracing herself for the house's owner to come angrily through the door. No one appeared, and Julia started breathing normally again. She shook her head at herself but turned decisively away from the tape deck. She would not try that again.

Finally she turned to the stacks of paper at the side of the room. They were stacked in order from left to right, the earliest entries at the bottom of the left-most pile. Each page was dated, starting twenty-four years ago. Julia slid the first sheet out from the bottom of the pile. Every time Julia had started a journal it had begun with the standard apologies for having waited so long to start this diary since the last failed attempt, and fervent promises for more faithfulness in the future. She found it hard to avoid thinking about her desultory past efforts when starting anew, knowing she had to temper the optimism of starting afresh with a little acknowledgement of her bad track record; consequently most of her collected autobiographical works consisted of sentences like "I think if I do this right before I go to bed I'll keep it up" and "I just read my last diary—didn't make it very far, but I feel different about it this time." This diary, if that's what it was, didn't follow that apologetic rubric at all. "There were twelve seals on the island today," it began. "I went out in the kayak to see them and they didn't slide off until I was close enough to count them all." Below this was a Polaroid of the empty island—Julia recognized it as the small rocky one nearest the shore—with a few seal heads floating above the water around it. It had a caption. "I didn't want to scare them so I waited until they had already left to take this." This made some sort of sense, but the resulting picture was disappointing. Julia flipped the page over and saw a watercolor sketch of the same island, this time still covered with seals. She slid out the next page from the pile.

Julia kept sliding and reading for the rest of the afternoon. There was no consistency to the diary pages—some chronicled moments like the seals leaving the island, but most were more

untraditional. One page began with “Isn't it strange that self-aware and self-conscious mean two different things, when they really shouldn't?” and then had a sort of etymological puzzle below, with copied definitions and quoted passages. “Oh well” was written in pencil at the bottom, as though the writer had come back later and decided that after all, it probably didn't much matter. Some of the pages had copied passages from other books and nothing else. “In uncertainty I am certain that underneath their topmost layers of frailty men want to be good and want to be loved” one page said. “Vice has always a new fresh young face, while virtue is venerable as nothing else in the world is.” East of Eden was written at the bottom of the page. Another sheet had a long quote from Mark Twain: “No land with an unvarying climate can be very beautiful. Change is the handmaiden Nature required to do her miracles with. The land that has four well-defined seasons cannot lack beauty, or pall with monotony. Each season brings a world of enjoyment and interest in the watching of its unfolding, its gradual, harmonious development, its culminating graces—and just as one begins to tire of it, it passes away and a radical change comes, with new witcheries and new glories in its train. And I think that to one in sympathy with nature each season, in its turn, seems the loveliest.” At the bottom was written “Started painting today.” This entry, some two months into the pages, was the first mention of the room or of any of the concrete tasks involved in the house. Julia hurriedly glanced at the drawing on the back, which seemed to be a sketch for the front wall, before stacking the page face-down on top of the others she had read. She did not like to think of this person as someone with chores or plans. They seemed to exist so entirely separately from the routines that dominated her own life, and it was an aloofness Julia wanted to preserve.

Julia read until the light filtering through the windows had turned to orange, and then back into a deeper gray. Finally she stood from where she had been sitting on the floor, realizing

that her feet were numb and she was almost painfully hungry. She had never touched the sandwiches she had brought. Julia picked up her things and walked back out of the room, not bothering to shut the door or close the curtains this time.

Julia paused outside on her way back to her own back door. The evening was growing perceptibly darker but she could still make out the island from the first page of the diary. Had there been seals on it since she had been on the point? She would have to look tomorrow. Her eyes shifted upward from the island to the still-moving sky. It was still cloudy and gray, still bleak, but not in the dull and confining way she had thought at first. The sky and ocean rushed outwards from the rocks on which she stood, they didn't press in. The dark blue-gray of the water, streaked with white farther out where the wind was blowing harder, was worlds away from the translucent and darkening grays of the clouds, swirling in the same gusts of wind. The whole scene was churning. Julia stayed and watched until the light was truly gone, only a few minutes in the quick twilight.

This began Julia's new routine. She woke early in the morning and worked hard, chopping wood or working inside the house. She scoured the kitchen. She pulled all of the books off the bookshelves and rearranged them alphabetically. One morning she even took a bucket of hot water outside and scrubbed the ice and salt off the front windows. It was back in a couple days, but Julia liked the unobstructed view while it lasted. Julia had tried to go straight to the other house one morning, but she found she needed the interval of the mundane before she could sink into the world of the diaries. The author was too separate. Julia needed an immersion in the everyday before she could spend time in a place so unaffected by the necessary.

On her sixth day in the house Julia found a Virginia Woolf passage she remembered reading in high school on one of the pages: "Did it matter that she must inevitably cease

completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the houses there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself.” On the back of the page was a watercolor less distinct than the rest, of a face, the first Julia had seen amongst all the pages, she realized. It was a woman, blonde, but the features were too vague to tell her age. In fact the whole face seemed blurred, faded, like it had had water spilled on it. At the bottom of the page was written “Self-Portrait”. Julia took the page with her when she went back to her house that afternoon, and tacked it next to the side window, through which the other house could be seen.

Julia also took to leaving the house early, an hour before sunset, so she could wander the point and find the places the woman referred to in her diary. Maybe half the pages were devoted to the things she saw outdoors, with accompanying drawings and sometimes photos. After reading a kind of ode to the tidal pools at the bottom of the shore Julia attempted a scramble out across the icy rocks one day, arriving finally at a pool only to find it frozen over and empty, save one dead sea urchin, halfway out of the layer of ice. She almost cried when she saw it. It was a too-stern reminder of the distance that loomed between she and the diarist in the house next door.

The men’s boots she had seen on her first day in the house also plagued Julia. Was it possible that this woman had lived with someone else in this house, a husband, brother, father who shared her meals and read her books? Julia did not want to think so. Never did another human appear in the diary entries. The blond woman existed entirely within herself, it seemed,

never going into town or making lunch, certainly never saying “We’re out of toilet paper” to someone over breakfast. No, Julia decided, she must have worn the boots herself when she went traipsing off into the woods. Julia tried it one morning, putting on two pairs of socks and slipping into the boots before heading out to cut firewood. The boots slipped off her feet occasionally, tripping her when her arms were loaded with branches, but it was doable, she decided, for someone with slightly bigger feet.

Julia sped through the years of diary entries, consuming whole seasons in a sitting, reading her way from October to March in a single afternoon. When she arrived at the first gap she almost panicked. One page read “2/12/91,” the next “5/4/91,” no explanation provided on either page. She flipped frantically through the piles to the right of the one she was reading, searching for the missing sheaf of papers. They weren’t there. Julia sat on the floor for a long time trying to think of a reason for the break, but she had to admit at last that the woman must have been gone—visiting a friend, perhaps, or staying with her family. Julia didn’t do any more reading that afternoon. She felt owed an explanation for the absence, but the May 4th entry just began “There is a family of thrushes in the box at the edge of the woods” and never mentioned a trip, or apologized for the break. Few people stayed year-round in these coastal houses, Julia knew, but she couldn’t help feeling a little deserted. She went to explore the birdhouse at the woods’ edge, but it was a halfhearted trip and she went back into her house early, picking up and leafing through *War and Peace* for the first time in two weeks.

The next day, however, Julia returned to the house in a conciliatory mood. She seemed to have moved through her neighbor’s absence as quickly as she relived her presence, enduring and forgiving the three-month break in the span of an afternoon. She even made a point of cleaning out the birdhouse in the morning, though she knew no thrushes would nest in

November—December now, she realized. She stayed late that afternoon, long after the sky was completely dark, reading by the LED lantern she'd bought for camping trips. She felt as though they were catching up.

After that Julia was prepared for her friend's occasional absence, absences that came with more frequency—maybe once a year for a month—as Julia moved further through the stacks of paper. She viewed these departures the same way she thought of her own trips to town for groceries and even, once, to see a movie. They were necessary evils, concessions to the outside world, and return to the point was always a relief. Never mind that her neighbor's absences were weeks, sometimes months long, while her own took her away from her friend and her house for only an afternoon.

Julia stopped taking pictures, but it didn't matter. The point had become startling and beautiful in its cold grayness, not threatening and bleak as she had at first thought, but she had no desire to photograph it. It seemed unfair to isolate parts of the scene. The photos in the other house were enough. The same quality that had left her unsatisfied with them at first, the sense of their incompleteness and imperfectness, was now her favorite thing about them. They never pretended to show a complete picture, always conscious of what lay beyond the edges of the frame.

Christmas came and passed quickly and quietly. Julia celebrated by hanging the kind of pinecone birdfeeders she remembered making as a kid, using a bag of birdseed she'd found in the storage chest in the kitchen next door, though she'd noticed her neighbor never acknowledged the holiday in her diaries. Julia admired this, but wasn't ready for it herself; she couldn't help but be aware that people all over the country were moving in concert, opening presents and saying "Thank you so much!" and "Isn't that nice," opening the door and saying

“Merry Christmas” to the grandparents on the front steps. She stared at the page from Christmas, 1998, trying to find a sign that the woman knew the rest of the country was putting everything on hold while life on the point went quietly on. There was nothing, only a sketch of some rabbit tracks through the snow and the story of how she followed them, leaving her carrot peelings outside the hole they led to.

After Christmas Julia started spending even more time in the painted room. The woman next door was a blueprint Julia studied obsessively and desperately. The unread piles of paper, which had seemed almost inexhaustible at first, were quickly dwindling, and Julia had the feeling she sometimes did when watching her bookmark move through a favorite book, almost angry at the speed with which the pages slipped behind her, but unable to slow her own progress. Only this was far, far more important. Julia was saving up the woman’s life, consuming the details. For weeks she had been making preparations—getting a card for the nearest public library, buying photos for her bedroom walls on her last trip to town—but it wasn’t until Christmas that she acknowledged what it meant. She was staying. And she knew that as soon as she had finished the diaries, her friend would leave, and she would be staying alone.

On New Year’s Eve Julia stayed outdoors longer than usual, wandering around the point. It had snowed three or four days earlier but she had been too busy with the diaries to explore, and had merely spent one morning shoveling a path between her door and her neighbor’s. Now she put on the work boots from next door and went walking out through the woods. The snow was brittle and icy—it had melted and refrozen several times since it had fallen—and her feet sunk deep through the frozen crust. It was a sunny day and water fell constantly and in large drops from the trees around her. Occasionally she heard a soft thump as a clump of snow slid from a branch to the ground. There were bare spots under some of the pine trees and a blue jay hopped

around one of them, searching for the worms that had crawled there for safety from the melting snow.

Julia made her way to an old quarry she had found on a previous trip. It was a small pit, mined by hand by the farmers who had lived on the point years ago, only about twenty feet across and ten deep. The first time she had come she had picked up larger and larger rocks from around the rim of the quarry, heaving them down into the pit, trying to break the ice that covered the pool of groundwater at the bottom. It had seemed important, somehow, that she make her presence known. She had even rolled a rock that was too heavy for her to lift off the edge, trying to break the thinner ice at the edge of the pool. It hadn't even cracked. Now the stones were covered with snow, lumps on the smooth surface of the pool. With one more snowfall they would probably be gone.

Finally she went back to her house to pick up a basket of food and the bottle of champagne she had bought on her last trip to town. She felt sheepish about the wine and tucked it deep into her basket before heading over to the other house. Her neighbor surely wouldn't approve of such a conventional New Years celebration, but Julia wasn't ready to give it up yet, and this was a going away party too. She was going to finish the diaries tonight, and though the woman would probably find Julia's inability to simply let her go softly even more objectionable, Julia didn't have it in her to simply put the last page down as the sunlight through the windows changed and dimmed. She couldn't glance at her watch and head back to fix dinner after watching her friend disappear.

Instead she arrived at the house at the time she usually left it, the sun sinking perceptibly as she walked the short distance to the other house. High, unthreatening clouds had appeared in the clear sky as if on cue, too late to obscure the blue sky she had been wandering under that

afternoon, but in time to catch the orange light of the end of the day. It seemed slightly cruel to Julia, the perfection of the day she had so braced herself for. She hurried to the door.

She had slightly more pages to get through than she usually read in one day, and the unheated house was colder, the warmth of the middle of the day quickly leaving the room. She had brought the quilt from her bed, which she wrapped herself up in now, sitting in the armchair in the center of the room. She drank champagne from a mug and read the pages slowly, pausing to study each sketch or watercolor for much longer than she usually did. These entries were barely five years old, and often less than a month of consecutive pages would be followed by an absence of more than twice as long. The breaks grew longer as she went. Finally she arrived at the end. The last page was more than a year old, dated the previous October. "The last apples came down today. It's a good time to leave." The drawing was a sketch of the front wall of the room, the mural recreated in miniature, the open curtains revealing a bright sun and a clear sky.

Julia began to cry. Fifteen months would have been the woman's longest absence, certainly, but she could still have come back, perhaps in the spring when Julia was planting a garden and taking the storm windows down, opening the house up to the warmer days. But this last page was too uncharacteristic and too final. The woman never mentioned her departures or arrivals. Why had she decided this time to make the change permanent, to write it down in a place usually so carefully insulated from the practical?

Julia fell asleep in the chair with the last page in her lap, the basket still full next to her. The champagne was the first drink she'd had in more than a month and she didn't wake up when the sun began to shine through the still-open curtains. She woke only when a car pulled up outside the house, the sound so unexpected on the point that she jerked upright, the last page sliding to the floor. The kitchen door opened and keys were dropped onto the counter. Julia

tried to slide her feet back into her shoes and stand up, but she still had the quilt wrapped tightly around her and she struggled to untangle herself as footsteps moved down the hallway. At least she had come back, Julia thought, until she realized that this was wrong. The footsteps were too heavy and too purposeful. They slowed at the doorway to every room, as if their owner was glancing inside, looking for something. Julia remembered the path she had shoveled between her door and the door to the house she was sitting in. For the first time in a month she was excruciatingly aware of the fact that she was not supposed to be there.

The door opened before she had time to even find her feet. A man stood there, still dressed for the cold, except he held his wool hat in both hands, and his gray hair stood in tufts where he had pulled it off. He did not cross the threshold into the room, he just stared at Julia, who had stopped struggling to free herself from the quilt. He shifted his weight slightly and pulled the hat, like he was trying to stretch it to fit a bigger person, and stepped forward with one foot but still didn't move all the way into the room, as if he was torn between indignation and hesitancy. Julia spoke without meaning to.

“What are you doing here?”

“This is my house.” He seemed to gain confidence, or at least momentum, from his answer, and stepped all the way through the door.

“Your house? You live here?”

“Sometimes.”

“She sold it to you?” The thought that the woman had sold her room, her things, was awful.

The man's eyes slid to the page that had fallen from Julia's lap, and the stack of paper beside her. “No.”

They were silent for a moment. Julia didn't know what to ask. The man said "You're from next door." It wasn't a question. Julia nodded. The man's eyes moved to the wall and he examined the stacks of paper. Julia followed his eyes and realized that each stack had shifted about a foot when she restacked them. She looked back at the man. He looked angry for the first time, as though the shifted papers had reminded him that it was she, not him, who was here without permission.

"You read them all."

"Yes." Julia knew that this was when she should explain, tell him how she had come in for a saw and found this room, how she hadn't mean to stay but she couldn't leave until she had soaked up everything the woman had left here. She stayed silent, though. It seemed, even in this moment, too personal.

"You shouldn't have done that. They're not yours."

Julia felt herself grow angry as well. This man had nothing to do with her neighbor. The hope that the woman had come back, followed by this man's appearance at the door, was too much. She finally found her way out of the quilt and stood up.

"You can't live here. She lives alone. She never said anything about anyone. I bet she doesn't even know who you are. You shouldn't be here. She wouldn't want you here."

The man merely shook his head, over and over. He didn't seem to know how to answer her or explain. Julia took it as a sign of guilt.

"I read them all, and she never even says your name. She was always alone. She was happy being alone. She wouldn't want you here," she repeated.

The man shook his head more violently. “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. “This is my house. My furniture.” He gestured to the boots Julia had left next to the empty fireplace. “My shoes.”

Julia was shaking her head now. “No, they’re hers. She lived alone, she was always alone.”

“Where is her bed? Where are her clothes?”

Julia stared at him. These weren’t problems she had considered since her second day in the house.

“She’s not real. She was never real,” he said, looking down. A moment ago he had sounded angry and triumphant. Now he just sounded sad. “I made her up.”

Julia almost laughed. “But what about the diaries? She wrote in them every day! And the walls. And the photographs. And the sketches.”

“I did them all. I wrote them all.” He walked over to the stacks of paper and began rifling through them, looking for a specific page. “I wrote one every day I was here.”

Julia sat back down on the chair, dizzy. “How could you do that? It’s sick. You’re sick. You pretended to be her? You’re sick.”

“I didn’t pretend to be her, I was her! I made her up! I was always alone here and I made her up. I started doing it because I needed someone to remind me of what was good, on the days when I couldn’t see it at all. And so I did it every day. I made her up because she saw all the things I couldn’t see that were good.” He opened his mouth to speak more but just opened his palms and shook his head. He didn’t seem to know what else to say, or how else to explain.

“But I was going to be her. I was going to live here and be like her.” Julia was trying hard not to cry again.

The man shook his head again. “No one can be her. She’s not real. None of us can be like her because we are, and we get hungry, and lonely, and bored, and sad. She doesn’t, she never needs anything, she never wants anything.” He smiled, not at Julia, but at something else. Then he pulled a page out from the pile he was searching for and handed it to Julia. It had a quote across the top: “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” The man pointed to it. “That’s all she knows. We know better. She isn’t real,” he finally repeated, his energy gone.

Julia sat with her head in her hands. Finally she pulled a sheet of paper out of her picnic basket. It was the page she had brought back to her house and tacked on the wall, the self-portrait. “Why doesn’t she have a face?”

The man just looked impatient. “Because it didn’t matter. It didn’t matter what she looked liked. I shouldn’t have even drawn it. She wouldn’t have. She wouldn’t have cared.”

Julia stood up and picked up her basket. She slid her feet back into the boots, and the man didn’t say anything, though they both knew now that they were his. She walked down the hall and out of the house, back down the path she had carefully shoveled, and back into the house in which she lived.

For four days Julia stayed in the house. She finished *War & Peace*. She kept the fire going all day long, burning wood from the pile that had been growing larger and larger in the mornings since she had discovered the room. She watched the man next door come and go through the side window in her living room. He took long walks twice a day, heading along the coast or back through the woods. He was rediscovering the point.

After the fourth day Julia packed up all her things and loaded them back into her car. She was glad that she had not sent her landlord a letter, telling him she wanted to stay. As it was she

was only leaving three weeks early, which no one would regard as strange; after all, it was January, and they would just assume she had had enough of the cold. Julia dawdled with her packing. It was almost lunchtime, when she knew her neighbor would return from one of his walks. She had something to ask.

Finally she saw him coming back down the drive, and swung her backpack on her shoulder, opening the door and walking down the path to her trunk. He stopped and looked at her.

“You’re leaving?”

She nodded. “It’s a little too cold for me this time of year.” They both knew that wasn’t the truth, but he just nodded and turned to go inside.

“Why did you leave the door unlocked?” She blurted the question out quickly, as he reached for the door.

He turned back towards her and shrugged. He looked a little sheepish. “I guess I was hoping she might be found sometime.” He turned around again.

“Are you still writing the diaries?”

He shook his head. “No, she finally rubbed off on me.” He grinned. “I figured out how to do it without her. I notice the things she would notice on my own.”

Julia closed the trunk and went to open the driver’s door before she heard his voice again.

“You know, she never saw anything that wasn’t there.”

Julia just stood there, her hand on the door handle.

“She was always better at seeing the good things than me,” he said, shrugging again.

“But she never made them up. They were always there.”

Julia nodded and ducked into the car, as the man went through his door. Her camera was sitting next to her on the passenger seat, as it had been on her drive up. She was ready for the early sunset now. She might take some pictures before the light was gone. The sky was cloudy and she saw, as she turned onto the main road, that the snow at the sides of the street was piled up in ugly brown drifts. The spruce trees were still very green, though, and she thought, as she drove quickly south, that they looked very beautiful, draped as they were in shifting gray mist.

ESPRESSO LANE

When I was eleven years old my mom caught my dad cheating and he moved out. It was Mom who told me what had happened, the truth coming out in short, forceful mutters, bursts of anger I couldn't share and didn't want to hear.

“Walked in and he was right here...in our own *house*, for Christ's sake...we had them to dinner last month.” And as an afterthought, “Don't worry, sweetie, your *father* won't be far away, he just won't be living here anymore, that's for damn sure.”

She always referred to him that way during the divorce, the word *father* coming out sarcastically, an insult, as if she had her doubts about whether or not he still held the title.

For his part, Dad took to picking me up from school and sneaking slow, sad glances at me as he drove me home, not even asking me how my day was, as I stared out the window and pretended not to notice. I felt a little sick when I saw him those days, the cruelty of what he'd done to Mom and the pitiful front he presented to me churning like baking soda and vinegar in my stomach. Before the divorce he would have sat at the kitchen counter with me, playing card games my mom didn't know he'd taught me and batting his eyelashes ridiculously, imitating the popular girls I had begun to encounter in my first painful year of middle school until I snorted Sprite out of my nose. Sometimes we would still be there when my mom got home from work at six, in which case she would cock her eyebrow at my dad and then glance upward, towards the home office to which he had never returned. Now he just dropped me in the driveway and said

“See you tomorrow, Anna” until he got an apartment across town and didn’t even do that. I started taking the bus instead.

I wasn’t allowed to take the bus home; Mom had begun stewing about the problem of leaving me alone all afternoon as soon as Dad moved out. I was past the age of babysitters, really, but she seemed to think that if Dad left and I became a latchkey kid in the same month I would be permanently damaged, scarred by what she called “more abandonment than she can handle” when she talked to Grandma on the phone after she thought I was asleep. So instead I climbed onto a bus headed in the opposite direction, towards the strip mall where we bought our groceries. The kids on this afternoon bus seemed so much older than the ones from my neighborhood, the gap in our experience so large. As they tumbled off of the bus, scattering to different apartments or heading in clumps across the street to the strip mall, I followed slowly behind. My fellow sixth graders careened across the street and into the fast food restaurants with casual abandon, while the eighth graders slunk away in small clusters or pairs, the most adventurous with a fascinating air of knowing that I wouldn’t even recognize as sex until years later. The bus driver offered to drop me off separately at the other end of the strip mall, where she knew I was headed, but I couldn’t give up the moment of solidarity when I climbed down the bus stairs at the same time as everyone else. So instead I walked along behind the others until I was the only one still moving towards my aunt’s coffee shop.

When I was younger Aunt Susan ran a café that I thought was the most thrilling place in the world. Most of the food came in pre-cooked and was just assembled in the restaurant’s small kitchen, but I was delighted rather than disappointed by this trade secret. I felt like an insider, buoyed by this bit of illicit knowledge every time I walked in the door. Then, in what my mom said later was her first ever moment of economic insight, Aunt Susan saw the writing on the wall

and decided that the age of Susan's Soups and Sandwiches was drawing to a close. In a second flash of good business sense, following so closely on the heels of the first that my mother was frankly flabbergasted, Aunt Susan took down the old Susan's Soups sign, put one that read The Espresso Lane in its place, and opened a designer coffee shop. I took advantage of the opportunity to be as self-importantly involved as possible, dragging one parent or the other through the front door with its "Come check out our new menu on SEPTEMBER 27th!" sign, delighted that it didn't apply to me. I supervised the delivery of the espresso machine and looked on as my father hung the prints my aunt had ordered, saying "higher" and "it's crooked." The day before the store reopened we brought Aunt Susan takeout while she hung lights and I wanted to stay and eat with her, perched on the couches she had bought at yard sales and thrift stores, and which all now smelled like Anti-Mite spray. But my mom said the smell gave her a headache, and we just put the Styrofoam containers next to the cash register and left Aunt Susan still screwing on lampshades.

In the three years since the café closed I had developed some serious doubts about The Espresso Lane. I had at first been thrilled by the similarity between the glass lampshades hanging in Aunt Susan's new shop and those I'd seen in Starbucks, but as I studied them I decided they were hung wrong, at equal intervals throughout the store, instead of clustered in attractive bunches. The couches, instead of being "vintage," just seemed old, uncomfortable polyester relics with springs that dug into my back and legs. Even the name bothered me, especially since Aunt Susan had decided to run with every possible interpretation of the pun. She ordered a customized street sign that read "ESPRESSO LN." and hung it behind the counter, which seemed to suggest a quiet cobblestone street somewhere in Italy, but also painted the menu to look like a highway, the drinks grouped in categories ranging from "Slow Lane" to

“Espresso Lane,” a system based vaguely on caffeine content. She also, to my dismay, decided to order aprons for the employees that were designed to look like retro bowling shirts, with a cursive *Espresso Lane* printed across the chest, bookended by two bowling pins.

The final blow to The Espresso Lane came when I spotted the same set of prints I had helped my dad hang, already framed and roped together with a plastic cord, in the HomeGoods section of TJ Maxx. The tag read “Coffee Theme, Set of 4.” When I pointed them out to my mom, who was flipping through fabric swatches, she didn’t even recognize them, and said “Do those look like throw pillows to you?” I was left with the disconcerting impression that Aunt Susan had gotten nothing in the coffee shop quite right, but had failed to notice, and was now proceeding as if everything were normal.

And so I bent my head as I trudged across the parking lot to the coffee shop, walking slowly to ensure that everyone else would have disappeared inside before I arrived at the door, none of my classmates there to witness my quick duck inside. On my first day of the new routine I yanked the door open, slid inside, and pulled the heavy glass door shut behind me, glancing over my shoulder to evaluate the mercifully empty parking lot. I had concentrated so fully on making myself inconspicuous from outside the store that I didn’t consider the impression I would make inside. The adults looked up from their newspapers and laptops, apparently surprised by any movement as urgent as my entrance. As their heads lowered again and I blushed, an aproned figure emerged from behind the counter and walked towards me.

“You look like you just robbed a bank.” She was grinning, peering out the window. “By the looks of it you got away clean, no one seems to be on your trail. You must be Anna, I’ve been watching for you.” She started to walk back to the cash register and I stayed pressed

against the door, not knowing what to do. “Come sit at the bar, I’ll get you a muffin or something.”

I followed behind her and perched at one of the stools that sat under one side of the counter. This was another thing I was sure Aunt Susan had not gotten right, this low bar that ran perpendicular to the refrigerator cases and cash register, penning the barista in on her left side. It was a residual feature from the Soup and Sandwich days, and it had made sense as a lunch counter, but I had never seen another coffee shop with such a thing. No one ever sat there; the proximity to the barista was too great, standing as she would be just on the other side of the counter, directly in front of whoever was sitting at the bar. It was too easy to feel like you were staring, or like you needed to talk to whoever was behind the counter as he or she steamed milk and rang up orders.

“Blueberry or cranberry orange? Or do you want a Danish instead?” The barista bent her head towards me and lowered her voice. “To be honest, I’d recommend you take the muffin. Don’t tell that guy, but we’ve started buying our pastries from Food Lion. Apparently no one can tell the difference.” She nodded towards a man wearing headphones by the window, who was at that moment taking an enormous bite of apple turnover.

I hid my laugh and said “Blueberry, please.” She slid a plate across the counter to me and I asked, “Where’s my Aunt Susan?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Your mom didn’t tell you? She’s not around in the afternoons anymore, she’s trying to get everything ready over at the new location. It’s just me here on weekdays. I’m Caroline,” she said, extending her hand towards me solemnly, and I wondered for a moment if she was laughing at me until I realized she was laughing at handshakes.

A middle-aged couple came in the door and Caroline moved away to the cash register. I unwrapped the paper from my muffin and studied her surreptitiously. She had long hair held loosely back from her face and big colorful earrings shaped like fish. She wore shorts, a t-shirt, and bright blue sneakers. I admired the shoes privately, wishing I was brave enough to draw so much attention to my feet.

After serving the couple Caroline stayed at the other end of the counter, wiping down the drops of milk under the steamer and clearing the dishes from the return tray. I thought for a while maybe she didn't want to talk to me, until it occurred to me that I was still studying her with my head down, and maybe she was just giving me a chance to finish. When I lifted my head and looked at her frankly she draped her cloth back over the faucet and came down to my end of the bar, leaning her elbows on the countertop.

“So...eleven. Your aunt told me. You're in sixth grade?”

“Seventh,” I said. “But I turn twelve in a week,” I added, not wanting her to think she'd gotten it wrong. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-three.” She raised her eyebrows, as if this was news to her too. “What did you ask for? For your birthday.”

I stopped. Usually my mom asked me a month in advance what I wanted, posting a list on the fridge where I could write things down as I thought of them, and then I would receive some selection of them on my birthday. My dad, meanwhile, would have been collecting small, unasked-for things, which he hoarded in the bottom of his closet and didn't wrap. I would open all of Mom's presents and then run in to their bedroom, shifting through the pile of paperbacks and drugstore paraphernalia, looking at him for the story of where they had come from, why he had picked them out. I had always loved them for giving me these two separate birthdays every

year, surprising each other as well as me. Now it seemed like a sign I should have noticed, a reminder that my parents never did anything together, that the end was near.

I hadn't realized until Caroline asked, though, that my mom hadn't clipped a list to the fridge this year, that I hadn't, in fact, asked for anything. With everything else that had happened my birthday didn't seem to have the same urgency it had had in the past, important only because my age would tick forward one more year. "It's going to be a surprise," I said, but my voice wavered up at the end, my statement a question for her to answer.

"I'm sure you'll get some good stuff. I love being surprised by presents. What day next week is it?"

"Tuesday. I'm not coming that day, my dad is going to pick me up from school and take me to see his new apartment." That was right, we had talked about my birthday, it just wasn't about presents.

Caroline nodded. "Oh that's right, your mom told me." I frowned and she said "She has my cell phone number, Susan gave it to her so she could get in touch with me about you." I didn't like this affiliation between Caroline and my mom and I was looking down when she bent under the counter and brought up a CD case and a pack of Sharpies. "Want to help me decorate CDs? It's what I do when there aren't any customers. I burned all my ex-boyfriend's music but I hate the way blank CDs look."

She opened up the case and evaluated the rows of silver CDs, each with a slip of paper in front of it in the sleeve, labeling it. I nodded and she took out two from the first page, sliding one across the bar to me.

We sat across the counter from each other for the rest of the afternoon, coloring. I hadn't drawn like this since elementary school, unhurriedly but with a driving desire to cover my page

with color. I started each CD with an ambitious plan for colorful geometric patterns or lacy flowers laid sparingly across its silver front, a work of beauty and restraint. But when I reached the point when I knew I should stop, when Caroline would look across the counter and say “Ooh, look at that, you’re putting me to shame,” I couldn’t give up the satisfaction of watching the color lacquer effortlessly over the shiny surface of the CD. So I would keep coloring, filling in the spaces between my more careful lines, until no part of the CD was still showing, only stripes or swirls of red, blue, green, yellow. We were only interrupted four or five times for Caroline to take customers, which made me think perhaps the neighborhood shared my doubts about The Espresso Lane, but I did not stop to think about it long.

At five-thirty I saw our van pull up outside and my mom came into the shop. “Time to go Anna. And you must be Caroline, thanks so much for keeping an eye on her.”

“Of course. I like the company. We had a good time,” and she smiled at me.

As she looked at me I realized she was waiting to see if I wanted to show Mom our CDs, tell her what we’d done all afternoon, but I just scooped my things off the floor and said “Bye,” shy again. She waved to us both and we headed out the door.

In the car my mood faltered and faded. “You know Aunt Susan isn’t even there in the afternoons,” I could feel my mother’s eyes swing towards me but I kept staring away from her, my eyes fixed on a thumbprint on the inside of the glass instead of on what lay outside the window.

“I know that, Anna,” and she sounded more strained and more tired than I had intended. “I just need you to do this. You don’t need Aunt Susan there to work on your homework for a few hours until I come get you.”

“I do all my homework in study hall. I don’t even have anything to do.”

“Then read a goddamned book, Anna. Play solitaire. Bring that string you like to play with and make some necklaces.” Bracelets, I thought, she knows I hate things around my neck. I’d made her one that weekend but her wrist was bare now. “I told you we can’t afford a sitter every day until after the divorce is final. What else do you want me to do?”

I just want you to feel bad, I thought, but when I looked at her I saw that she did, so I didn’t say anything and we drove the rest of the way in silence instead.

...

Caroline became, that week, a new center for my days to revolve around. I would leave my sixth period classroom as quickly as I could without running, climbing up my bus steps and sliding into my customary seat, always pressed against the window in case the bus was more crowded than usual and someone needed a place to sit. Sometimes it would happen; a trio of eighth graders would saunter down the aisle and the least popular would perch on the edge of my seat without a glance in my direction, back completely towards me, straining to hear the conversation of the other two sitting cozily smug in the next seat. If that happened I would spend the bus ride wishing for privacy, willing my seatmate to get off the bus early, but if my seat was empty as it was most days I missed the extra human presence. Either way I welcomed nothing more than the bus’s painstaking swing into the strip mall parking lot, the rush of bodies past my seat, my own slow trudge across the parking lot as I smiled at my feet and I felt the relief of being there spread past my elbows and to the edges of my stomach.

She did not always have something for us to do, but after the first day she always had a blueberry muffin on a plate waiting for me when I came in. One day she said she had had to defend it from a regular customer, a fierce-looking woman with a cane, who, when told there were no more blueberry muffins that day, spotted my reserved muffin in the back of the case,

already resting on its green porcelain plate. Caroline widened her eyes and gestured with an imaginary cane when she reenacted the scene, frightful enough even in her mock indignation to convince me to relinquish the muffin immediately, but she made me play her part in the drama, "standing firm in the face of frightening blue-haired women," she said, staring into the middle distance, "standing for our Espresso Lane way of life." She reminded me of my dad in those moments, her voice swelling with false pathos as she laughed with her eyes.

When Caroline was busy I watched her instead, studying her face as she interacted with the sparse clientele. She braced herself each time the man who sat by the window eating turnovers got up to ask for more hot water, ready for the awkward foray into flirtation he made upon each trip to the counter, but preened on the rare occasion she saw anyone her age, male or female, approach the register. She remembered some regulars' orders, filling a cup with coffee and setting it on the counter before they even made their way across the shop, but seemed to consciously forget others, making them ask for the same thing every time. Caroline never talked to me about the customers after the muffin incident, apparently deciding that such cronyism didn't suit her, but the look on her face when she looked up at the sound of the door was transparent.

There were usually only a few new customers each afternoon, but after the monotony of the regulars they were the most interesting. On my fourth day a couple a little older than Caroline walked in during the modest afternoon rush, the girl silently walking a few steps in front of the boy she was with. They ordered coffees and walked to the condiment table, where the girl poured milk from one carafe into her cup, studying the liquid and then reading the label on the side of the thermos. "Oh, damn, this was two percent. I'm going to go get another cup."

She got back in line and her boyfriend fell in behind her, muttering something in her ear. She jerked her head aside as if he'd spit on her. "I just don't like it with two percent. Why do you care?"

It was an attempt at bravado and it was too loud in the hushed shop. I turned to look at Caroline, and though she was still ringing up another order, I saw her take another cup off the pile and pour the girl's second coffee as quickly as she could, placing it on the counter where the girl could see. She took it and shot her boyfriend a look as she made a show of picking up the skim milk, upending it over her cup. Only a few drops fell into the coffee.

"I'm going to wait in the car," the boy said, not muttering this time, as the girl headed to the line again, the carafe held down by her side like it was too heavy to lift. The look on her face was tired and set, but it was nothing compared to the grimace on Caroline's. She was trying to smile, the skim milk jug in one hand as she reached for the carafe with the other, but it was obviously all she wanted for the girl to be out of the shop. I watched the girl as she walked stiffly back to the door, ready for whatever harsh words waited for her in the car, but Caroline was already turned away, scrubbing the tiles below the grinder as hard as she could.

By the end of the first week I felt charitable enough towards my mother to try to invite her into my world at the coffee shop, my attempt at iciness losing out to my enthusiasm about everything Caroline and I did. I dragged Mom over to the shelf of used books for sale beside the counter, explaining how we had pulled all the books off the shelves, reorganized them by price. It had been my idea to mark each spine with a colored sticker, a technique I'd seen once at a yard sale--blue for one dollar, red for two, yellow for anything higher.

"Caroline said we should do yellow because it's like the traffic light, 'proceed with caution,'" I said, peering up my mom, but she had her head turned towards Caroline, thanking her

for watching me, her apologetic "I really hope she's not too much trouble" making it clear that she thought I was, that this sticker business was just an embarrassing example of what a handful I could be. I had grabbed her hand to steer her towards the bookcase but now I released her fingers violently and swept up my backpack, heading towards the door.

"She's been a little upset lately," I heard Mom start to explain as I pushed the door open, and the now-familiar ache in my throat, the burning that ran from my tonsils to the place behind my eyes was beginning when I heard Caroline say "No" so firmly that I caught the door with my heel, my back to the counter but their voices coming clearly out through the open door.

"I mean, yes, she's been upset. But no, it's no problem. She's no trouble. I look forward to her coming. I watch the clock. I like the company. I like her."

When I turned back Caroline was looking at me, not my mother, and I smiled at Caroline as my mom looked at me too, evaluating the possible truth of this statement before saying "Well, I'm glad you two have hit it off so well," and walking with me out of the shop. The smile stayed on my face until I was in the car and fastening my seatbelt, when the burning in my throat spread and spilled and I cried in the passenger seat because of all the people I saw every day, Caroline was the only one who would say she liked it better when I was there.

...

On Sunday morning I pestered my mom to take me to The Espresso Lane, pleading my case from every angle—we were out of cereal, our newspaper had gotten wet, it was a beautiful morning and we could eat at the table on the sidewalk. "With its stunning vistas of Ace Hardware and Marshall's," she snorted, but relented nonetheless.

I privately thought that this might have something to do with the fact that before that summer the Sunday paper had been a moment of weekly harmony between my parents, two

hours of passing the sections back and forth, casually remarking on an article the other had already read. Now, when Sunday came and I asked Mom for the weather map she directed me to the recycling bin, where I had to extract the map from an untouched newspaper, still coiled protectively around the coupons and classifieds. I had thought the old Sunday routine tedious while it lasted and looked forward to the moment both of them lay the paper down and went about their separate business again; my chances of attracting the attention of either parent were higher once the paper had been stacked and the dishes cleared. Now, though, I couldn't help but remember it as the happiest of times, a sign that they were meant for each other, and on the infrequent occasions when I imagined my parents reuniting it was over coffee and the New York Times, Dad casually walking into the kitchen and picking up Arts and Sciences, saying "Did you see that article about the NASA budget? Ridiculous." It crossed my mind as I grabbed my coat that we shouldn't leave the house on a Sunday morning, that perhaps my father was going to show up in a half an hour with a dozen donuts and a conciliatory expression, but I decided that Caroline was more of a sure thing and left the house at a run.

When we got to The Espresso Lane, though, Aunt Susan stood behind the counter, dishing up pastries and pouring coffee for the heavier Sunday crowd. I remembered then that Caroline had said she worked on weekdays, and I accepted a muffin, cranberry orange, from Aunt Susan and left my mother chatting with her sister as I slumped down in a chair on the sidewalk. When my mom appeared outside with a coffee and a paper, looking cheerful, and said "This was a good idea, Anna," I just snorted and continued to pick the cranberries out of my muffin, creating a conspicuous pile on the side of my plate closest to my mother.

I sat needling my mom with my sighs and eye rolls until after a half an hour she snapped, saying, “Goddamn it, Anna, I thought you wanted to come here. I wouldn’t have driven all the way down here if I’d known you were just going to mope.”

She stood up and grabbed her paper, waved goodbye to Aunt Susan through the glass, as I turned an injured look in the same direction. I imagined myself a victim of a cruel mother and expected to see this registered on Aunt Susan’s face, surprised at her own sister’s barbarism, but instead she just shook her head and pursed her lips.

At home the phone rang as my mom unloaded the groceries we had picked up on the other side of town. “Get it, Anna!” she snapped, trying to close the trunk with a hand draped in plastic bags.

“What,” I growled into the phone and glanced towards the open door, both hopeful and afraid that my mother may have heard this unapologetic flouting of telephone manners.

“Anna? Is that you?” My father’s voice was surprised.

I considered for a moment being relieved to hear his voice, but decided instead that my anger was expansive enough to include him too. “Oh, it’s you. I’ll get mom.”

“Wait, Anna! I wanted to talk to you. It’s about your birthday.” He sounded vaguely pleased with himself with this last pronouncement, like he was revealing a winning poker hand to a surprised table.

“What about it?”

“Well, I know we said I would pick you up from school, but I thought maybe you could ride the bus over here instead. Your mother knows what route it is, she could write you a note to give to the driver. And that would give me some time to get home and get everything ready.”

The thought of riding another bus of strangers was too much and I drooped, hearing my hardened voice turn to a whine. “You stay home all day. You don’t go to work. Why can’t you just come get me?”

“Anna, I have some errands to run, and I need to meet some people for lunch. Plus, I need a chance to tidy up the apartment. I don’t want it looking shabby your first time over here.”

“I don’t want to see your apartment. I don’t want to go over there.”

“All right, sweetheart, that’s fine.” He sounded calm and smooth, ready for me to rail. “We can go out for the afternoon then. To the zoo, maybe? Or the aquarium?”

“I’m not a little kid, I don’t want to go to the zoo. I don’t want to go anywhere. I just want to stay home.”

“Do you want me to come see you there, Anna?” he asked, growing warier.

“No. Mom will just be mad.”

“Well, Anna, what do you want me to do?”

“Nothing! You don’t have to do anything. I don’t want to see you. I just want to stay home and not see you.”

“I got you some presents, sweetheart. If you don’t come on Tuesday, when should I give them to you?”

The idea of the familiar pile of gifts on an unfamiliar closet floor across town hit me and I started to sob into the phone, saying “I don’t care! I don’t want them. It’s probably just a bunch of junk anyway.”

I could hear my dad breathe in twice over my sobs, bracing himself, before he said “Ok, Anna. I love you. I’ll call you on Tuesday.” And he hung up the phone.

I was upstairs in my room before my mom came in, and I didn't tell her until that night that I would no longer be going to see Dad on my birthday. When she I asked why I answered "He says he has to run some errands," and felt guilty about the lie until she said "Can't even make time for his own daughter. Typical," and I realized how pleased she was to have another reason to hate him.

...

On my birthday Caroline pushed a blueberry muffin with twelve lit candles crowded into the top across the counter. When she leaned back and started belting out "Happy Birthday" most of the customers looked up in surprise, and a few joined in, petering out again when it came time to sing my name. She only sang louder when they paused, and once the problem of my name had been overcome the final chorus was almost rousing. I looked only at Caroline, avoiding the kind stares of the other singers, and grinned, embarrassed. I was relieved when I blew out all the candles in one breath, an accomplishment that was greeted with a smattering of approval before headphones were reinserted and heads were lowered.

I spent that week and the next collecting an encyclopedia of information about Caroline, my methods comprehensive and unsubtle. I asked about her favorite books and then demanded that my mother take me to the public library, where the librarians looked at me strangely as I heaved a stack of modernism across the circulation desk. When Caroline saw a copy of *To the Lighthouse*, which I had started first because of its modest size, in my backpack she intuited what was going on and brought in her own copies of her favorite books from middle school, the covers falling off and, in some cases, large portions of the pages coming unglued from the spine. I took them home and treated them with a sort of religious fervor, consuming hundreds of pages in a sitting but turning each one painstakingly, flinching every time the glue cracked away from

another page. When I asked her about her favorite movies she was prepared and her list was suspiciously full of PG-rated films. I watched them alone in the evenings while my mom slept on the other couch, her reading glasses perched on her nose and her book open across her stomach.

Eventually, as October came and began to pass, I even confided in Caroline all the doubts I had accumulated about The Espresso Lane. I had never voiced them before and it felt like a family betrayal. Caroline didn't add anything to my list, her self-imposed edict against criticizing Aunt Susan or my mother still in place, but she nodded silent agreement as I unburdened myself. I was stuck, that night, between relief that my suspicions were correct, and deep unsettlement that Aunt Susan, Mom, and Dad had all been so wrong about something. Caroline's sympathetic agreement felt like the gospel to me.

A few days before Halloween, two months after I began my trips across town, a man came in who I had seen before, though he wasn't one of the regulars who smiled at me when they ordered their coffee. His visits were less frequent, but it was clear from the way he walked in that he expected us to remember him, perhaps even to wait for him to come through the door on the days he didn't appear. The way he looked at Caroline was especially strange, like a fond pet owner who expected adoration in return. He fascinated me, though he ignored me entirely, and I was always left disappointed by Caroline's behavior towards him. When she was too kind, her indulgent good humor too evident, I wanted her to be cruel, to disappoint his expectation of appreciation. When she grew short with him, though, declining to ask the follow-up questions that his calculated conversation encouraged, I was angry at her, not wanting her to dismiss this somehow important man. He managed to relay in ways that I couldn't detect that his off-hand

affection was privileged, and he often had me believing that Caroline needed to do all she could to cultivate the regard of this man.

He usually came in alone, but that afternoon he had a woman with him who seemed by turns older and younger than Caroline, her face tired but her motions skittish. The woman was thin, her hipbones protruding in the space between her jeans and the hem of her shirt, where his hand also hovered. She wore heels and had a huge bag slung over her shoulder, a combination that seemed as though it should threaten the stability of her tiny frame, but her steps were practiced and even. I was awestruck, at first, by those small, perfect steps, and by the way she swung her hair out of her face without breaking its even plane.

When the couple arrived at the counter and the man ordered their drinks I kept my eyes on the woman at his side. She tugged at the hem of her shirt every ten or fifteen seconds, and even this movement seemed practiced, her right hand creeping to the small of her back, out of view of the man on her left. His hand on her waist had made her seem more substantial at the door, but now that he had come detached, both hands occupied by the business of paying for the coffees, she seemed slightly afloat, unsure of where she should be or what she should be doing. At close range I could see that the skin on her cheeks was scarred, her makeup not quite concealing this evidence of adolescent bad skin. I imagined her as she might have been an hour ago, standing in her heels in front of the mirror to apply the makeup, believing in the import of this man and this date. I could imagine her in another hour as well, slumped on her couch, exhausted from an afternoon of tight and careful movement.

The man had kept up a steady stream of conversation with Caroline as I watched the woman, and when they had their drinks he did not turn to find a table but rather sidled onto a

stood next to me at the counter. His date remained standing, eyeing a table in the corner, but he didn't seem to notice and after a moment she sat. Neither of them looked at me.

"I'm just saying, I didn't take you for a 'Slow Lane' type of guy," Caroline was saying. "Maybe not 'Espresso Lane' material, but 'Passing Lane' at least." She was enjoying herself, the mockery in her voice every time she gestured towards the menu clearer than she ever allowed it to be when I was the only one there.

"Who do you take me for? I live a quiet life. Two cups of coffee in the morning and then it's all herbal tea all the time."

The woman next to him giggled and slid her hand onto his arm. "That's right. Blake takes two cups, no milk or sugar." She looked up at him, her face serene but her eyes a little frantic, waiting for some sign of approval. None came, and she looked at Caroline instead. Caroline was regarding her with polite expectation and detachment, waiting for her to continue, though it was clear that the woman had nothing else to say. She squirmed for a moment, until Caroline turned back to Blake.

"So did you watch the World Series last night? Or is baseball a little too rowdy for your slow lane lifestyle?"

"I usually try to keep it on the Golf Channel after eight P.M. so things don't get too crazy, but I make an exception in October."

"One week a year can't hurt. You better hope it doesn't go to seven games, though, I'm not sure you have the stamina for that."

"Oh, I've been praying for it to be over since game two. I'm a nervous wreck. I don't even care who wins at this point, I just want it to end so I can get back to watching Jack Nicklaus win the career slam."

“I heard that ESPN Classic is running the complete 1991 series this week. Perhaps someone with your nervous complaint would be better suited to watching the World Series on a twelve year broadcast delay.”

I had never seen Caroline this way. Whereas the woman’s face was immobilized, her vague smile turning from Caroline to Blake as they spoke in turn, everything about Caroline seemed to be in motion.

“Well thank you, doctor, for that suggestion. Perhaps, if you think it’s wise, I will have something from the Passing Lane. A café au lait, maybe?”

“Good choice. And this one’s on the house, since I talked you into it.”

Caroline moved to the other end of the counter. The woman slid her index finger through one of Blake’s belt loops and looked up at him, saying “I like this place, it’s cute. Those tables over by the corner look so cozy.”

Blake looked down at her and laughed, patting her hand. “We can move over there in just a minute. I don’t want to be rude. She must get so bored, working here.” He glanced around distastefully.

I resented this, but he didn’t seem to remember that I could hear him or that I was even there. I waited for Caroline to return with the drink. The couple would leave for the other table and we would return to our game of hangman, both feeling slightly smug about how clearly Caroline had outperformed this other woman, heels or no.

However, when Caroline returned, mug in hand, Blake showed no sign of leaving for the other table. Instead he leaned forward across the counter, taking his hand off of his date’s so he could hold the mug in both hands. “So why do I keep seeing you in here? You’re too smart to be working here all the time.”

Caroline laughed. “Well, I’m glad you think so, but unfortunately I’ve had some trouble finding gainful employment. I thought for sure when I added that philosophy minor that my skill set was complete, but apparently most companies in the area are looking for two to four years of experience, not a rather tenuous grasp of Nietzsche.”

“Oh, philosophy? How interesting.” The woman seemed to have regained some confidence while Caroline was gone. However, as Caroline looked at her, again with the air of someone waiting to hear the woman’s real reason for opening her mouth, her smile slipped entirely off her face, and she gripped Blake’s belt loop tighter.

Blake ignored the exchange. “You should look at work in sales. I never thought it was where I would end up, honestly, but it’s great. You set your own schedule, work at your own pace. Of course, you’re paid on commission, so if you really want to go places it can get a little stressful.”

Caroline looked skeptical. “You don’t seem to be challenging yourself too much.” And her eyes flicked, for just a moment, to the still nameless girl at Blake’s side, a glance that could have been inadvertent, even coincidental, but I knew it was calculated. The woman’s gaze stayed blank but the hand she had hooked into Blake’s belt fell back to her lap. Blake just laughed, apparently insensible to his release or Caroline’s sliding eyes.

“You’re right, I’m taking it easy lately. Having some fun.”

“Well, don’t take it too easy. Easy is only good to a point.” Caroline’s glance was more noticeable this time.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m not taking anything too seriously.”

The woman's face was growing more and more carefully blank and frozen. Even I could tell that this conversation was actually about her. I looked at Caroline, willing her to stop and the couple to leave. Her eyes were still on Blake.

“Well, I suppose you're doing better than I am, working here forty hours a week. Can you believe they're opening a new branch? Apparently there are enough people who think this sort of stuff is 'cute' to support a whole new location.”

Blake laughed. “You know, Becky here was just saying that she thought this place was adorable.”

I expected Caroline to look sheepish at this, to qualify what she'd said, but instead she looked the woman in the face for the first time, and said “Really,” in a tone of complete disinterest. I realized, with a churning feeling in my stomach, that she had heard the woman from the other end of the counter, had been waiting to repeat it in this casually cruel way.

“I like the sign,” Becky said, her eyes seeking the safe territory behind the counter, away from Blake and Caroline.

“It doesn't even make sense,” Caroline said. “I mean, where exactly is “Espresso Lane?” On I-20, or in some quaint neighborhood somewhere?” She gestured to the novelty street sign, and then towards her apron. “And bowling? Where did that come from?”

I couldn't believe it. Caroline was taking my words and spitting them back at Becky, who now looked like she might cry. However, as I watched, the blank veneer slipped back over her face, which struck me as even sadder, this trained ability to sink away from meanness.

“I guess I didn't realize,” she said vaguely. Blake wasn't speaking now, just leaning back in his chair, watching the action play out.

Caroline opened her mouth to speak, but before she did she looked right at me, remembering I was there for the first time since Blake had walked into the shop. She was so eager to say the words in the back of her throat that, in the moment of suspension as she turned her face to look at me, she seemed to almost choke. And as it hit her that I was horrified, that I couldn't blink with the disappointment of her cruelty, I thought for a moment that she would choke, bring back the words that were already halfway out her mouth. But instead, as the heat drained out of her eyes and the tense predatory air went out of her, she turned and said it anyway, like someone bound by oath to utter a sadly inevitable truth.

"I don't know how. A child would notice. She did," and she nodded towards me.

Caroline turned away and Blake, sensing that the show was over, set down his mug and stood up, offering his hand to Becky. She stood but didn't seem to see the hand, and she walked to the door in front of him, her steps still faultless but her eyes on her feet this time. I waited until they were in the car and then I got up and almost ran to the door while Caroline still had her back turned. I rounded the corner of the building and threw myself down on the curb, my back against the stucco wall. I had started to cry before I made it out the door and now I heaved sobs, the same toxic combination of love and bitter, uncomprehending disappointment that had been percolating in my insides for months bubbling up out of my throat and eyes, reaching new heights with the knowledge that the two would always coexist there in the volatile area beneath my skin.

Caroline emerged around the corner after only a few seconds. She slumped down next to me, her head against the wall, her eyes pointing towards the sky. "Sometimes I just get so tired," she said, softly, to herself, and then turned towards me. "I get so tired," this time concentrating on me, wanting me to understand. And because I knew that she was saying she was sorry, telling

me to never do what she had done, I let her put her arm around my shoulders. And we sat huddled together against the blank wall until my mom came, the space behind the counter empty and the air getting cold.

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That weekend my mom drove me across town and waited in the parking lot as I climbed the stairs to my dad's second floor apartment. When he came out onto the landing at the sound of my knock he waved towards the car, and she nodded up at him before she drove away. The hall was dark and the living room was almost as dim, the plastic slats of cheap vertical blinds still closed across the sliding glass door. There was nothing on the walls. "I don't want to put any holes in the walls since this place is only temporary," he said when he saw me looking. "I'm going to move out in a couple of months, as soon as I find a better place. With a bedroom for you and an office for me."

My mom came to pick me up at exactly the agreed-upon time as Dad and I sat at the kitchen table playing gin rummy, the dinner dishes pushed to the side. She came to the door this time and when he went to answer it I cleared my plate quickly to the dishwasher and looked around for something else to tidy, some way to make the place seem nicer, but I gave up as I saw that Mom was beckoning me from the door, Dad standing aside to let me out and not to let her in. He gave me a hug with one arm and said he'd pick me up on Thursday, but when I looked back at him from outside the door I saw that he was relieved, the encounter with Mom over and the hours of careful glances at me, fear that my anger would reappear, behind him.

On the way home my mom said "I need to swing by and get some whole beans from Susan," and we pulled into the Espresso Lane parking lot. As we walked towards the illuminated building I saw that only Aunt Susan stood behind the counter, and I found myself surprised to be

disappointed, not realizing I had hoped Caroline might be there. My feet may have slowed, because Mom looked down at me and said “Don’t worry, you’ll see her on Monday.” I looked startled and she laughed, saying, “I’m your mother. I can read your mind.” She opened her eyes wide, starting into my face with mock concentration, and I snorted but let her pull me into her side. I had extricated myself before we reached the door, my seventh-grade pride recovered, but I could tell from the look of surprise on Aunt Susan’s face that we were both still smiling, at least for a moment, as we walked into the store.

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