

For Weightlessness: A Portfolio

by

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For Weightlessness

Tell me how it feels to be light and have so much time. I know only heaviness. I know only not enough. Not enough time and too few words. I am being crushed. I am being

That was what I found in my mother's notebook after her suicide. I won't call it a letter – it wasn't addressed to anyone; it wasn't signed. She didn't even finish it. But still I ripped the page out and kept it. It's in my desk drawer and before I go to bed, I read it; try to read between the lines, to understand. But I can't even imagine her saying the words. Tell me how it feels to be light.

I have started writing back to her: *there is no such thing as lightness. I am choking on time. I am choking on the smell of you burning.*

We cremated her. It was what she wanted: her ashes joined with the Earth, somewhere to be re-grown. In a field of flowers. In the roots of a willow tree. How it feels to be light.

It's been three months since the funeral and my father hasn't spoken. My sister and I call him, he doesn't answer. We stop by, he watches us in silence. Last time I was there, I pulled out a notebook. 'Are you ok?' I wrote. He took the notebook. 'Yes,' he wrote back. 'I simply don't wish to speak.' So here I was, communicating with both of my parents – one dead, one voluntarily mute – through a pen, trying to understand them: *Mother, I am forgetting your voice. Father, do you want pork or fish for dinner?*

My sister Bethany doesn't understand my father's muteness.

“He can’t just treat us like this. I went over there yesterday, to make him dinner, and he just stares at me the whole time. What am I, his cook? He could at least do me the courtesy – ”

“Bethany,” I interrupt, “this isn’t about you. Have you tried using the notebook?”

“Please, like I’ve got time to sit there and write dialogue with him. I’ve got a family of my own to take care of, you know. I don’t have all day like you do.”

“I don’t –”

“I was thinking,” it was Bethany’s turn to interrupt, “we should get him help. Maybe there’s something really wrong with him.”

“There’s nothing wrong with him. He’s grieving, that’s all.”

“It’s been three months, Ana. It’s time for him to grow up.”

“Well you tell him that, then.”

“Sure, because I always have to be the bitch, right? Listen, I’ve got to go. Roy is playing with the cat litter again.”

The line goes dead. A few miles away, Bethany is yelling at her kid. Bethany will continue life as usual. For Bethany, life has always had the same weight; she finds nothing to be remarkable and nothing to be devastating. Sometimes I admire it. Sometimes I don’t.

When I was younger, we had a study. There was a huge bookshelf, a carved wooden writing desk, and a large ornate mirror. I wasn’t supposed to go in there – that was my mother’s private place, where she went to work.

One day when I was seven years old, the door to the study was left open, and on the desk lay a Chinese hair stick. It was bright red, with gold dragons painted on it, and I wanted to hold it, to see how it would look in my hair. As soon as I picked it up, I heard my mother's voice and her footsteps outside the door. I left the hair stick, and hid behind the lounge chair, not wanting to get caught.

“I've got a headache, Horace. I'm going to lie down.”

She was dressed in a light blue silk robe, and her long dark hair lay across the middle of her back. Instead of lying down, she sat at the mirror, and looked at herself, pale and unsmiling. She drew her fingers across her brow, her sharp jaw, the outline of her lips. Slowly, she lit a cigarette. Her eyes never left her own face. I even thought she might not notice if I just got up and left, but I was rarely this close to her, and I wasn't ready to leave her yet.

After a few minutes, I saw she was crying. She made no noise, no movement to wipe away her tears, just continued to watch herself: crying, smoking, silent.

She sat there until the sun went down. The room slowly getting darker and darker, until she couldn't see her reflection anymore. Then she turned on the desk lamp. She cocked her head to the side and lit another cigarette.

She began to pull her robe up, above her knees, above her hips. She spread her legs. Clustered between her thighs were little wounds – circular burns, constellations of them. With her pinkie finger, she traced them, connected them. Her pinkie finger stopped on a part of skin that was fleshy and smooth; she brought the cigarette down, and pressed the lit, burning end into her thigh. She made no sound. She held it there. She breathed deep breaths. After a minute or

two, she put the now-dead cigarette on the desk. She got up, slid down her robe, smoothed it out. She swung her hair back and let.

Once again, the door was ajar, and I ran out. I never did go back to the study.

She comes to me in dreams, smoking and wearing silk.

“Why are you crying?” she asks me. “I’m here. I’ve been here this whole time.”

But I can’t reach her because she is floating, and I am sinking.

“I can’t reach you,” I tell her. “You’re too light.”

“I’m here,” she says. “I’m here.”

I wake up frustrated. I wake up heavy.

My drawer is filled with my responses to my mother: *I said you were never really here, did you hear me? Why did you jump? Dad has lost his tongue. It was you, the whole time. Is there such a thing as infinity. Did you know I was there, that day in the study? Did you let me watch? Is there such a thing as knowledge. How many burns did you have by the time you sat whole and burning in a box in the basement of the funeral home? How many burns?*

Bethany stopped going over to our father’s house. She left, crying, a few weeks ago. She was begging him to talk. Screaming at his silence. And still he wouldn’t say a word. I was in the kitchen, pouring wine.

“I can’t take this anymore,” she shouted. “It’s like I lost both parents that day.” And she left.

I came out of the kitchen. With the notebook, I wrote, ‘Tacos for dinner?’ and he wrote ‘Yes.’

We sit in the dining room, eating our tacos in silence.

A few years after the incident in the study, I had woken up early, before the sunrise. There was something about the darkness that was especially pregnant; there was a thin horizon of light, and it smelled like the beginning of spring; fresh and new. And so anything was possible. And so the world opened.

I had to go outside to watch the sunrise – not to do so would be pale, lifeless. To do so was a claiming of color.

When I slipped outside in a heavy sweater, I saw I wasn’t alone. My mother, too, must have been possessed by the same urge. I wondered if she would send me back inside so she could be alone, as she often wanted. But when she saw me her face broke into a rare smile.

“Ana, my dear heart. Come, sit.”

My dear heart. I came. I sat. I breathed in her perfume, the lingering smell of cigarette smoke. We watched as the sun rose.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” my mother asked. “Like it was made just for us. For you and me.”

What a wonderful thought that was. It seemed possible, in that moment, that we were the only two people in the world, and if the sunrise was for us, then the rest of it was, too. All the fields and all the oceans. The possibility of it all rose up like a tightness in my chest. I felt dangerously light – like I could float up and away. But what fun that would be – to fly. To fly. The sunrise was for me and I could fly.

“Sometimes things are so beautiful it hurts to look at them,” my mother said. But she wasn’t looking at the sunrise anymore – she was looking at me. “You have my face,” she said, cradling my chin. With that, she got up and left, all the possibility crashing down around me: the sun was up, and everything already was.

It’s been six months since the funeral, and I have three drawers full of my one-way correspondence: *Lightness is to not be beautiful. You were heavy. You were so heavy we had to scrape you off the driveway. Tell me how it feels to decide to die. Tell me about relief. Tell me about closed eyes.*

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I re-trace her words. Over and over again, I write, *Tell me how it feels to be light and have so much time. Tell me how it feels to be light. Tell me how it feels.*

I’ve stopped leaving the house except to make dinner for my father. I don’t eat unless I’m with him. It’s less grief I feel than a sort of dread. A coming on of a storm. Tell me how it feels.

Sometimes I think I’m becoming her. At the market yesterday I bought cigarettes – the long thin ones she used to smoke – even though I haven’t smoked since high school. I didn’t

make the decision to do it; I only realized after I finished putting away the groceries and saw them at the bottom of the bag.

When I got home that night, I sat in front of my mirror. My mother was right – I do have her face. Her pale face, her pointed face. I smoked cigarette after cigarette, my mouth heavy with smoke. I looked at my thighs – soft and unblemished. The smoothness of the skin like cruel laughter: look at how whole you are. Look how fine.

I brought the lit cigarette down and held it against my skin.

I have started to think about death more and more; my death. How would it feel to jump – to be falling.

After dinner with my father, I went up to the roof. I sat with my legs dangling over the ledge. Right below me is where the paramedics came to pull my mother off the driveway. It was gravel, then, and since paved over. I had gotten there before the ambulance, and I saw the sharp little stones piercing her face, stuck in her arms and legs.

I imagined that if I jumped, there might be a split-second of weightlessness before gravity pulled me down. Maybe that's why she did it, for the weightlessness.

I stood up, leaned over the edge. I could do it. I could jump. I held my arms wide. I breathed the night in. If I just took one little step.

But then I felt something – something sharper than the dull dread that'd been covering me. It was a beating of the heart; it was the breathing. It was fear.

I ran back out of the house. I drove home. I took my drawers full of letters, the cigarettes. I dumped them on my cement lawn.

I burned them. The fire was hungry for it all.

When my father answered the door, I burst into tears. After the fire had died down, I drove back. I couldn't keep the silence anymore. My crying was loud and gasping.

My father took me, he held me, he sat with me. After a while the tears, like the fire, had quieted.

"How about some cake," my father said. "For dessert."

His voice was like a steady hand. Like a familiar friend.

"Yes," I said. "I'd like that."

Kaddish (For My Grandmother)

In late November of 2019, a few weeks after my grandmother was diagnosed with stage four Pancreatic cancer, she called me into her room, closed the door, and asked if I would help her kill herself.

“You’re the only one I can trust,” she said, near-whispering.

It was evening, so there was not much light. What light there was was filtered through orange blinds and a deep red lampshade, encasing the room in a reddish hue, casting a reddish hue around the room, as if we sat in the embers of some dying fire.

I always thought I would be one for heroics, or, at least, poetics, at times like these. I thought I would always know what to say. But, more often than not, I found myself in silence. What do you say to a person who knows they’re going to die? What do you say?

“Ok,” I said. “Ok.”

My grandmother’s bathtub was Pepto-Bismol pink. So was the rest of the bathroom, except for some black accent tiles. It hadn’t changed in the entire 23 years that I’d been visiting.

I stood over the tub, waiting for it to fill up.

The water was hot. Too hot. I stuck my foot in, and it burned, it’s burning, and I think, unbearable, this is unbearable. But it must be bearable, because I stood and bore it. I didn’t remove my foot. Instead, I lowered the rest of my body down into it.

And it hurt. Like a million needles. A hurt that morphs and pulses like it has its own rhythm, the heat. Its own breath. Eventually the sharpness gave way to a kind of numbness, and I could breathe out again.

This tub: where I used to play with bubbles when I was a little girl; where I accidentally broke the nozzles when I was six years old and my grandma was so mad that I cried and refused to get out of the tub; where I sat, anxious and excited, before we left for our first trip together, and she stood just outside the glass partition, telling me our itinerary (“first we’ll fly into New Delhi,” she told me. “Do you think we’ll have time to eat? Do you think they’ll have scrambled eggs at the hotel?”); where I sat and thought about how it feels to be so close to death; where my grandmother wanted to take her last breath.

After I had agreed to help her, she told me her plan: fill the tub with warm water; gather sleeping pills; pour some vodka; put a record on. Swallow, drink, fall asleep.

“And you slip beneath the water and you drown,” she said. “Just like that. Painless.”

“If that’s what you want,” I said.

“I can’t go out like all of this,” she said, motioning to her too-thin body, her flattened hair, the bedpan on the floor. “I don’t want to be remembered as some pathetic thing. Besides,” she said. “I did it for my mother.” And again she’s whispering. “She wasn’t waking up. She kept rattling. Oh, that breath. That breath. I couldn’t take it anymore. So I upped her pills. And I kept upping them. I gave her more and more until finally it stopped. The breathing stopped.”

I was quiet for a moment. “I’m sure that’s what she would have wanted,” I said.

“My mother?” she said. “My mother? No. No. She would have wanted to stick it out until the very end.”

I was never able to fulfill my promise to her. A couple of nights after our conversation, my cousins and I sat outside on the cold stone patio, smoking a joint and listening to the cars honking on the Long Island Expressway just a few yards away.

It was a few hours earlier when we realized we couldn't wake her from her sleep. She was in that in-between place. My grandfather, even though they'd been divorced nearly thirty years, hadn't left her room yet. He was in bed with her, still, holding her. But for us, there was not much to do for it except remember. So we sat; we smoked; we remembered.

My cousin Rebecca is the oldest, and so thought of herself as chief-rememberer. She smoked the most and talked the most. She seemed to take up all the space.

I took a long drag of the joint and ashed it onto the stiff cold grass. “Do you remember,” I asked Rebecca, “when I was six years old and you locked me in the closet and turned out all the lights? And when I cried you said that everyone was gone, and that no one would come and help me? Do you remember that?”

“No,” she said, and laughed. “Maybe it was a dream.”

“Sure,” I said. “Maybe.”

After that I went home; got onto the Long Island Expressway, got lost a few times because I was still stoned, went across the George Washington Bridge, and made it home around two AM.

The next morning, when my mom called to tell me that it happened, that she died at around 5 AM, all I could think about was food.

“Ok,” I said. “I’m on my way. Will there be something to eat?”

My grandmother was a lot of things. One thing she was not was a good cook. She only cooked (and ate) about three things. Her favorite was what she called Jewish Spaghetti: plain pasta, ketchup, and butter. Mix it together and, viola, “a poor Jew’s marinara,” she would say. “This is what we used to eat when we were too poor to buy tomato sauce.”

Her pickiness suited her. She was beautiful, truly, and very thin. She was obsessed with her weight. “Weigh yourself every day,” she used to tell me. “That way, you can see when you have to go on a diet.”

D.I.E.T. diet. She was always on one. My older cousin, Rebecca, following suite, never ate carbs. I ate a lot and I ate often. I was chubby. I realized this when I was about eight years old and my grandmother sat me down on the couch.

“You’re so beautiful,” she said. “But I’m concerned that you’re gaining too much weight. How will you be able to fit into a nice Bat mitzvah dress?”

I wasn’t even in Hebrew school at the time. What Bat mitzvah dress was she talking about?

I have thought of that conversation so often that it’s as if there is a place where it is always happening; as if a part of me has never left.

I didn't feel thin enough until I was fifteen, when I smoked often and ate very little, and I fit into a size two. When my grandma took my cousin and I shopping, Rebecca said, "It's like you're a woman now, all of a sudden."

My grandmother, watching me from our shared changing room, said, "look at how thin you are." She said, "look how beautiful."

After I quit smoking cigarettes at 18, I gained the weight back. And then some. And then it was, "we're just concerned about you," and "chew your food 43 times before you swallow," and, "have you been weighing yourself? What are you eating?"

In the weeks after my grandmother's diagnosis, I'd gained ten pounds. We were driving to Queens almost every other day, stopping for donuts, for bagels, for coffee. Anything to take the edge off, to relieve the boredom, for something to do with my hands. Shiva, when we covered the mirrors with bedsheets, was a relief; to not catch my own reflection out of the corner of my eye – a relief. To not have to think about how disappointed she might have been in me. A relief.

When we were going through her things, I found my grandmother's old leather jacket. I wanted it, and so did my mom. When I tried it on, it was a too tight around the shoulders.

"Oh well," my mom said. "If you lose weight, maybe I'll give it to you."

I hung the jacket back up in the closet.

I didn't cry when I heard the news. This was not unexpected. I was waiting for this.

But just before the funeral, I went to the mall with my partner to pick out a black jacket for the ceremony. In Macy's, I started crying. I sat on the floor, between the racks of suits and sports jackets. I took off my shoes and I stared at the popcorn ceiling. My partner had to pull me up, help me put my shoes back on, and walk me out to the car. I had never felt such a heavy grief. I was wading through, struggling to breathe. So this is how it feels to be in aftermath, I thought. To live in the wake of things.

I expected to dream of her, but I didn't. At least, not for a month. And then one night I did. I dreamt of her: her, there, standing in front of me, reaching for me.

"My sweetheart," she says. "What took you so long?"

"I've been looking for you," I say.

"I've been here," she says. "I've been here this whole time."

And before I can reach for her, I wake up. I wake up sweating, wading through.

A year after, we all gather again, for the unveiling of her tombstone.

“Is there an actual unveiling?” my partner asks as we drive through New Jersey to the cemetery where she’s buried.

“I think so,” I said. “It’s all quite dramatic.”

When we get to the cemetery, my mom is standing a few feet away from the gravesite.

“This is my aunt Edna’s grave,” she said. “You never met her. She killed herself before you were born.”

I know the story of Aunt Edna – beautiful and brilliant; too much so. I wonder how she did it – the bathtub method? Or was she one for dramatics, for blood? Perhaps a gun to her head. Later, I’ll ask how she did it.

The tombstone was covered by a patterned shawl – red and yellow hued. My aunt pulled it away, and her husband began to read from the kaddish. He moved the way that Jews do when they pray – like the power of God itself is inside them, leaning forward, falling backward, all on the heels of their feet, a little bend at the knees.

My cousin Rebecca face-times us from California. She talks about my grandmother’s fashion sense; how cool she was. How soft her hands were. And that’s the part that gets me – her hands. So I’m crying again, eyes closed tight, trying not to think about the new grass growing above the coffin. Has it been that long already? Two inches of grass, already?

Instead of flowers, we leave stones. My aunt passes me a tiger eye stone. I hold it in my palm until it’s warm and press it into the soft earth beneath the tomb. The next time I come here, how tall will the grass be? Will it be tall enough to mix with those plots around us? They should

leave the grass uncut, so I can measure – it has been eight inches of grass since it happened; 12 inches; two feet. For a moment I imagine staying here forever, letting the grass grow through me, swallowing me whole. But before I know it, the unveiling is over.

We are turning our backs. We are leaving.

Sylvia, Part 1: Paralysis

Sylvia was five years old when she felt, for the first time, an inability to move. It was the nightmares.

She often dreamt that she was in a cold white room, wearing one of those thin, paper-like hospital gowns, and she was tied down, strapped to the bed. There was a small red lightbulb in the corner of the room, and it kept fading in and out, in and out. The heart monitor beeped tirelessly, melodically, a metronome. There were men all around her. They were tall and wore white coats, and they leaned over, creating a canopy of heads above her. They poked at her and spoke to each other, but in a language she couldn't understand. They looked down at her and smiled, smiled so wide their lips reached their ears, and just when Sylvia thought their faces would split in two, she would wake up, sweating. And it was as if the dream had bled into the night, into her conscious mind, because she still couldn't move, and she could still see their smiling faces looking down at her. Sometimes she would lie there for hours, paralyzed, seeing their immovable faces, their smiles etched in the darkness, until she realized she could finally move again.

By the time she was seven, she was used to the feeling. It's just a dream, just a dream, just a dream, she would tell herself, and she would wait for it to pass, for her body to soften. Sometimes it was even useful. When her parents would start yelling in the next room, when they started throwing things, when she heard them making noises like wounded animals, heaving each other up against doors, she would pull the blanket over head, and she would practice her

paralysis. If I am still enough, I will become a part of the bed, she told herself. If I am still enough, I will disappear.

Sometimes she thought it worked too well, and she had really become invisible. Sometimes she could go a whole day without saying more than a few words. But that was before she met Anne.

Sylvia thought maybe she was in love with her. Anne. Anne who lived down the street. Anne who was soft and round and warm. Anne who was always giggling. Anne who was nice to her.

Anne was always well-behaved. Sylvia's mother said Anne was a good girl. "Look at how she wears those pretty dresses her mother picks out for her," she said once, looking at Sylvia regretfully. Whenever her mother would put her in a dress, Sylvia would inevitably ruin it – staining it, or ripping it, or both, for good measure. She finally gave up and Sylvia wore her favorite pairs of overalls, day in and day out.

Anne had a brother. His name was Stanley. Stanley was fat. Fat in a kid way, still, but fat. Sylvia knew this because her mother often said so. And he was always eating something. Their dad was always making fun of Stanley. Sometimes he would lock him in a room and not let him out, even if Stanley cried. Especially if he cried. Crying was for babies. And girls.

Sylvia liked Stanley alright. She felt bad for him, more than anything. She felt she understood, perhaps, what he was going through.

Sylvia would look in the mirror, poking at her face and neck and arms and belly and thighs. There was too much of her – that much she was sure of. She took up too much space. Her mother was tight and thin and small. She barely took up any space at all. Sometimes Sylvia imagined taking a knife and sloughing off the extra layer of fat. She just didn't look right.

And she wasn't the only one who thought so. Her father would sometimes come into the kitchen, see Sylvia eating chocolate or a piece of bread, and shake his head. If he were annoyed already, or if Sylvia ate two pieces of chocolate, he would take the food out of her hand and throw it in the garbage.

So any time she saw Stanley, which was often, she would talk to him. He was a few years older, so he liked to tell her about the teachers she'd have next, how to get on their good side. He liked to teach her things.

One day when Sylvia went to Anne's house after school, Stanley cornered her on the way to the bathroom. Their mother was home – she always was – but she was three martinis deep and locked in her bedroom.

“Hey, Sylvia,” Stanley said. He was eating a poptart.

“Hey,” she said.

“You look pretty today.”

“Thanks,” she said, and tried to slide past him to the bathroom.

But he was bigger than her. He put his arm up and blocked her.

“My friends and I were talking about what it’s like to kiss a girl,” he said. “You ever been kissed?”

She said no. She said she really had to pee.

“We could try it,” he said. “I could show you how.”

She said no. She said she really had to pee.

He swallowed his mouth full of poptart. “I’ll show you,” he said. “It’s easy.” And he pinned her against the wall.

Sylvia went very still. If I’m still enough, she thought, I’ll become part of the wall. If I’m still enough, I’ll disappear.

He kissed her, poptart crumbs on his lips, then on her face, dry and scratchy.

Anne called for her. Stanley stepped away and smiled. “Shh,” he said, fingers to his lips. Smiling, smiling, like the men in white coats in her dream. Smiling.

A few days later, Sylvia told her mother that Stanley had kissed her.

Her mother looked up from the frozen peas she was about to put in the microwave.

“Did he?” she asked. “Well, sweetheart, I don’t know about that. You can do much better. Especially when you lose the baby weight.”

Sylvia liked being still. She felt at home, safe. It was a box she could lock herself in. Nothing that happened when she was in the box was real. Not really. It wasn't happening in the same way that she ate cheerios that morning or smoked a cigarette with a friend outside the movie theater. It was different, like a dream. Just a nightmare, and soon she would wake up, leave the box, put the box away. And so she forgot about the incident with Stanley. It couldn't have happened that way, the way she remembered it. She was in the box, she was part of the wall, it was just a dream.

Sylvia went years without bringing out the box. After Stanley kissed her in the hallway, she went on a diet and lost ten pounds. Her mother said how beautiful she looked, and how proud she was. She dated Michael, a red-haired, red-faced boy in high school. He was nice. He told her she had pretty eyes. He told her he was in love with her. They had sex once, right after graduation, and after, he told her he was going to college in California, and did she want to come with him? California was so warm, he said. So warm. When she said no, he cried, and Sylvia thought that was so sweet of him, to cry like that, and she said she would be sure to come visit.

Sylvia, Part Two: The Ad

Sylvia hadn't thought about the T.V. ad until her mother called, and she certainly didn't think anyone she knew was likely to see it. The ad was supposed to be obscure, only on a few stations and only between 1 AM and 6 AM, or something like that, and, besides, it was good money. The most she'd had in a while.

She had recently been fired from her fifth waitressing gig in as many months, and was, by now, pretty much blacklisted from any half-decent restaurant in all of Manhattan. Waitressing was the only job she was qualified for – she was young and symmetrical and thin enough – but it turned out that she wasn't much qualified for waitressing either. She wasn't practical, or even useful, she often thought, in the way most people conceptualized the word. She thought she would have had to wrap it up and move back in with her parents if she hadn't met Woodrow, a British man with uneven facial hair and an air of hyperbole about him, a little while earlier.

She had been manning the salad bar at some nondescript diner on the Lower East Side when she met him.

“What can I get you?” she asked him, brandishing a white plate and metal tongs.

“Just some iceberg and croutons, please,” he said.

“Oh, a real artisan, then?” Sylvia said.

“Just call me Chef Boyardee.”

Sylvia laughed. “Iceberg and croutons,” she said, passing him the plate. “There you are, Chef.”

“You know,” Woodrow said, popping a crouton in his mouth. “You got a real nice voice.”

“And a face for radio, too, they tell me.”

He waved the statement off. “More like TV, I was thinking.”

“You a producer or something?”

“Or something,” he said. “Here’s my card. Call me if you want to get out of this shit hole and make some real money.” And he poured half a cup of ranch on his iceberg and croutons before walking away.

A couple of days later, Sylvia was fired from the restaurant. She had poured ginger ale over a particularly rude and impatient balding man, and, well, that was that. And when she found the Woodrow’s number in her dirty pants pocket, she said, “fuck it,” and called him up.

It turned out that Woodrow was the manager of a local phone sex company. “It’s easy work,” he said. “40 cents a minute, 60 cents if you go past half an hour, and no risk of STDs!”

The sessions hardly ever went past the thirty-minute mark – either they came quick or couldn’t keep it up – but she could do as many sessions as she wanted, and she soon started making decent money. She enjoyed it, too – slipping into characters, becoming something other than herself; it was like a meditation, a wholly in-the-moment act, and she reveled in the anonymity, her new-found chameleon-ness. She would lay on her stomach across her bed, legs curled up at the knee like a teenage girl, wearing sometimes sweatpants and sometimes nothing

at all, sometimes faking it and sometimes making herself come to orgasm, breathing hot and sloppily into the phone, hearing the man other side of the line as he, too, came to climax. She had power, there, on the phone. Even if she played a little girl, even if she play-cried and play-begged and play-succumbed to a play-dick, she knew her power. She stood over them, really, a giant, their bodies in her hands and she could crush them, if she wanted. If she wanted. And each time the call ended, the man spent and panting, she sat vibrating, thrilled.

So, when Woodrow called and asked if she would want to be the face for the new 1-800-KISSYOU TV ad, she thought, why not? And when he said it would pay \$500 per spot, she thought, yes, absolutely.

“So, you are a producer,” Sylvia said to him when she entered the old Brownstone where they were going to film the commercial.

“I’m a fucking artist,” he said, and handed her the script:

Girl 1 [on the couch, moaning]: oh, baby

Girl 2 [also on the couch, also moaning]: mmm, you make me feel so good

Girl 3 [laying alone on the bed, phone is next to her]: are you lonely? Don’t you wish you had girls like us to talk to? Give us a call at 1-800-KISSYOU and we can have a good time.

[Girls 1 and 2 kiss on the mouth. Lots of tongue]

Girl 3: Don’t miss out on any of the fun, boys. Call now.

Girl 2: Rates start at 40 cents a minute. Must be 18 years or older to participate.

[All 3 girls laugh. Touch each other's hair. The phone rings]

“Wow,” Sylvia said.

“What’d I say, huh? Fucking art. You’re girl three.”

“Great,” Sylvia said.

It wasn’t until a couple of weeks after the commercial went out that she got the call from her mother.

As soon as Sylvia answered the phone, her mother said, “Did you get the invite to cousin Matthew’s wedding?”

“Nice to talk to you to, Mom.”

“Yeah, yeah. Did you get the invite?”

“No, I guess it’s late.”

“Sure, it could be late. Or, I don’t know...”

“What?”

“Maybe he saw that... commercial you have on the television.”

Sylvia didn’t know how to respond. Perhaps her panic response would hit in soon and she leave the phone hanging on its cord and jump out of the window.

“My what?”

“You know what I’m talking about. Your *commercial*,” she hissed the last two words, and of course Sylvia knew what she meant.

“How do you know about that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe your father and I had Mel and Sally over for dinner and a card game, and when your father went to watch some late night TV, there was his little girl, wearing nothing but a camisole on some strange bed, talking crazy about calling boys and having a good time. And maybe our dear good friends saw the whole thing, and maybe everyone was so mortified the rest of the night was canceled and Mel and Sally went home and your father went to bed. And if that wasn’t enough, maybe I heard about it again two days later, when your uncle Harry thought he should give me a call and tell me that he saw that same advertisement. And then I had to sit there, of course, and say thank you, Harry, for passing that along, because apparently it’s a little too abrasive to tell your father’s loud mouthed brother to go fuck himself, and then I had to sit there for another goddamn half an hour while he complained about Ellen, that dear woman, and having to take her to the hospital all the time, for her dialysis, you know, and, well, I’m just exhausted, frankly, and I’m feeling very embarrassed. What were you thinking?”

“It paid well.”

“Well, that’s something.”

“I had to cover rent and I was out.”

“Naturally.”

“It was good money.”

“So you’ve said.”

So Sylvia was silent.

“Well, I’ll go hunt down Marla, see why your invitation hasn’t gotten to you yet. Either way, go buy a dress, because you’ll be coming with me. Perhaps this will put some of that money to good use.”

And her mother hung up before Sylvia could say Wait, stop, I don’t want to go, don’t make me go, I’d rather be hit by a bus than go, don’t make me go.

But, of course, she found herself there anyway.

Matthew and Laura married on the lawn of their father’s estate, bordering the edge of a lake in Western Massachusetts. They stood under the chuppah near the softly breaking shore, Laura in a traditional white dress, sleeves to her elbows, veil over her face.

Sylvia felt slightly discomfited by the perfect-ness of the lawn and the lake and the pearly white house with its long deck and glittering pool, and the fitted-ness of all the people around her, sitting all straight-backed in their tight dresses, all polite and smiling.

Even so, Sylvia registered that there was at least a modicum of organic beauty there – the softness on Matthew’s face when Laura was finally revealed beneath the veil; the way they grasped at each other like rafts in a swelling sea. At least, Sylvia thought, the love seemed real enough. And suddenly she felt very lonely, and all the people around her very cold, and she wondered if she would ever find something so warm and comforting as Matthew and Laura had, if she would ever find her life-boat.

After Matthew pressed his heel onto the covered glass on the floor, and it shattered, and the whole family cheered, Sylvia felt tension rise in her throat. The show was over.

She found her way over to the bar. There were fake (or, at least, she assumed they were fake, but didn't want to test them and be proven wrong) vines making their way up the walls of the house, and plants that looked like they were some distant cousins of palm trees placed evenly around the pool.

"I see Sylvia is modeling the latest in Lesbian Chic," her cousin, David, said, smiling hugely, always the sole beneficiary of his own jokes.

Sylvia was wearing a mustard yellow jumper. Her mother had shared David's distaste that she had come without a proper dress.

"David," his wife admonished. "You're so behind the times." David's wife, Sarah, was soft and flitting and kind if you paid only half-attention to what she said, and Sylvia hated how her voice sounded as if it might disappear at any moment, be whisked away by faeries.

Matthew came over, then, too. Sylvia had always liked Matthew most of all; just a little older than her, and gentle, always nice.

"Sylvia," he said. "So great you could make it."

"Congratulations," Sylvia said. "Cheers to you and Laura." And she raised her glass, and drank fitfully, fully, swallowing the swirling amber liquid and feeling its warmth spread through her throat, to her chest. No one else had raised their glass, and instead they made awkward

glances at each other. But a couple more drinks and Sylvia wouldn't even care. She needed a good loosening up.

“So, what are you up to these days?” Matthew asked.

“I'm still in school, trying to get my degree. It's going slowly, but...” and she trailed away. She found often that she couldn't locate the ends of her sentences, especially with so many people watching her.

“What are you going for?”

“Art. Well, sculpting, technically.”

More raised eyebrows. Sylvia refilled her drink.

“Surely you don't need a degree to know how to be unemployed and starving,” David said.

“Shut up, David,” Sarah said, hitting him on the arm like a slight gust of wind might brush against a tree trunk.

“Surely, with all your fancy law degrees you could think of something original to say,” Sylvia said, the liquor boldening her, if only slightly.

David scowled, bristled. He started to say something, but Sarah interrupted. “Well it's all about who you know with that art stuff, isn't it? It's all networking.”

“Sure,” Sylvia said. “Networking.”

“At least I can make myself a living without having to talk to lonely, desperate men just trying to get off,” David said, so determined to injure, to not let Sylvia have the last word.

She suspected they might know, after that conversation with her mother, but not that they would confront her about it. She was ill-prepared.

The silence was thorough. And Sylvia wanted so desperately to say something clever, something snippy. Like, *I thought as a lawyer that's exactly what you do*, Or, *It takes one to know one*, Or, *Next time you call, ask for my friend Sandy, she'll be expecting you*. But she couldn't manage any of it. Instead, she felt panicky and hot around the ears.

"What?" is all she could say.

Everyone looked uncomfortable. Eyes lowered, cast around. Sarah put her fingers to her forehead.

"Everyone knows," David hissed. "We've seen the Ad, you know."

"The ad?" she said. Could she lie? Should she own up to it? The person she should be, the person she wanted so much to be, would own it. *And what about it*, she could say. *You are sheltered and naïve*, she could say. *You are small. You are nothing. I could crush you. I –*

"I think you should drop it," Matthew said. "It's none of our business."

"Quite right," Sarah said, but Sylvia saw a shadow behind her eyes.

Sarah had passed her judgement, and it was final; Sylvia could never be one of them. She could never drink Mimosa's at brunch with her feet in the pool, a caftan barely covering her bikini, talking with the ladies about how you-know-who did a TV ad for phone sex and how bizarre the whole thing was, and don't her parents seem normal enough?

No, Sylvia had solidified her status as outsider; in a simple glance, banished forever to the sidelines, an object of whispered conversations and armchair psychoanalysis.

“Excuse me,” Sylvia said, pouring herself another large drink before rushing away to find some unadulterated corner where she might be alone.

**Sylvia was brought back to reality by her mother. She stood in front of her, holding a thin cigarette, her golden dress wrapped so neatly around her, her hair immovable, her eyelashes long and her lips a soft red.

“What are you doing over here by yourself?” her mother asked.

“I just needed some fresh air.”

“We’re outside.”

“Just give me a fucking break.”

Her mother sighed and offered a cigarette. “I just got a call about your Aunt Rosalind.”

“And?” Sylvia asked, concern overriding her suffocating hatred for everything around her. Her Aunt Rosalind had been in and out of psychiatric hospitals the past year. Enigmatic and unreachable, Sylvia had known Rosalind at a distance always. But there was always something about her that she admired – she was one to speak frankly, boldly, and tell everyone to go fuck themselves, if she saw fit to do so. How Sylvia wanted to be like that.

“She’s dead,” her mother said. “An overdose.”

They stood quietly together. Sylvia lit her cigarette and noticed that her mother had to wipe away a tear – surprising, slightly, as she was one to stave off all emotion (apart from anger) until she was good and alone. And here, of all places, where there were so many people around,

she must stay composed above all else. Sylvia supposed that her mother must have known Rosalind better than she did, more intimately.

“I suppose we should leave,” Sylvia said.

“I suppose we should,” her mother agreed.

Sylvia put the cigarette out, watching with satisfaction as it stained the clear white wall with a small grey mark and pulled one of the plastic leaves (it was plastic, she was sure of it now) off the plastic vine, and watched it fall slowly to the stone floor.

Sylvia, Part Three: Rick

Sylvia left Queens on a sort of whim in the first week of July. She pulled out her map, marking possible stops along the route; it would take nearly 20 hours to get to Minnesota, and she planned to meet Rick at the house by tomorrow evening.

It was not yet noon and Sylvia was carrying boxes of clothes and books and painting supplies out of her house – well, her parents' house, now – to her car parked somewhat haphazardly on the curb. She was going quietly so as not to wake her mother, but when she reached the front door again, her mother stood just inside the door frame, bleary eyed and naked except a short, patterned robe pulled loosely around herself. She struck Sylvia then as a sort of caricature; an exaggerated version of some other, normal woman. Exaggerated in her beauty, her drooping tiredness, her particular half-asleep beauty of the late morning, like a Lolita, some vulnerable nymph. And suddenly Sylvia felt the pull of her watch, the desire to get on the road already.

“Were you not going to wake me up before you left?”

“I thought you'd like to sleep.”

“Well, thank God your father woke me up. When might you be coming back?”

“I don't know. We've got to get settled in and all that.”

“Yes, well,” her mother said. “And you'll be so very far away.” And something passed over her mother's face, then. Was it sadness?

Sylvia always had the impression that she hadn't had much use for a daughter, that she'd had a child because that was what was expected of her, and that Sylvia was always something of

an albatross around her neck. When she told her mother her plan to move with Rick to Minnesota, her mother had said “What, that boy who came around last month?”

The diction had irked her. “He’s a man,” Sylvia corrected her.

“Is he going to marry you?”

“What an old-fashioned thing to say.”

“I just want to know that you’ll be taken care of.”

“I can take care of myself,” Sylvia said.

“Yes, what with your two years of college and no degree to show for it.”

And that was the last they talked about it. Perhaps she had thought that Sylvia had given the thought up, that she was staying put and going back to school in the fall. At the very least she seemed surprised to find Sylvia packing her things into boxes and now, as Sylvia loaded up the car, she seemed dazed.

“I’ll be back soon enough,” Sylvia said. “And we’ll talk soon.” She kissed her mother on the cheek, hugged her father after he helped her lift the final box into the very full trunk of her car, and sped away from the small, claustrophobic, house-lined Little Neck lane and towards the Long Island Expressway.

If it weren’t for Rick, Sylvia wouldn’t have moved to – or even thought about – Minnesota in a million years. She had met him in early May that same year. A sophomore in college, she was unofficially living with R.J., her boyfriend at the time, who was a junior and a philosophy major and had an apartment off-campus with three other roommates. Sick of

commuting to campus, she stayed over at R.J.'s and simply never left, and he either didn't notice or didn't find it worth a conversation, because he never mentioned it. She liked R.J. fine, though she found him a bit self-aggrandizing, even for a philosophy major, but was mostly happy to be away from her mother and her tiny square of a gated backyard and to be in a place where people fucked openly on the couch and still played vinyl records and lounged on the floor smoking joints until the room was heavy with smoke and there was forever a sticky sweetness in the air.

On one of these evenings, where there were people draped over the furniture and over each other and Simon and Garfunkel radiated from the record player, Sylvia lay flat out on the floor and realized, too late, that she had taken too many hits from the joint. Disjointed and uncomfortable, she registered the waviness of sound; people's voices were both too loud and too far away to be understood. She felt hot and scratchy around her ears and eyes. She wondered if something harder had been cut into the pot. She wanted to get up, get away from the cascade of light and sound that enveloped the living room, but she was laying flat on her back and she wasn't sure how to get up. Like a turtle she rocked herself back and forth, until she got onto her side, rolled onto all fours, and pulled herself up on the couch. By the time she got to the bathroom, the door was locked, and so she slid down the wood-paneled wall onto the scratchy beige carpet, leaning her head back against the wall to remind herself that she was on solid ground.

A man came out of the bathroom. He was tall and brown and had his hair slicked back into a ponytail. "Hey there," he said. "You alright?"

"I'll be OK," Sylvia said. "Just a little too much..." she trailed off.

"Can I sit with you?"

“Sure.”

He sat down. “Rick,” he said.

“Sylvia.”

“That’s a pretty name.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I chose it.”

“Really?”

“No.”

They were silent a moment.

“Well, sort of,” Sylvia said. “It’s really my middle name. My first name is just so... typical.”

“And you don’t want to be like everybody else?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Well you seem different to me, Sylvia. Special.”

“You don’t even know me,” she said, but she was smiling.

“Sure, I do,” he said, and he pushed a strand of hair out of her face.

And maybe it was the weed, or the mystery drug, or his pale green eyes, but Sylvia felt she knew him, too, knew him always, and she had simply been waiting for him, here, on this thin, dirty carpet, all her life.

Coming from NY, Sylvia thought she understood the cold. She thought winter was winter and cold was cold. But she realized, come mid-November, that Minnesota had a different kind of cold; an immediate, seeping, stiffening kind of cold, and when she stepped outside she started shaking, her body rejecting the temperature and the wind and the wide expanse of nothingness that stretched out beyond their tiny cabin.

She wasn't sure what she expected from Minnesota – she didn't have much time for expectations in the month before her departure, only logistics. And at first everything was warm and soft and lovely, and she felt adventurous and spirited and she spent her afternoons painting and her evenings with Rick, drinking and making love on their too-small bed. And she would tell him about her parents, their aching middle-class normalcy that she had wanted so desperately to escape from, how she never really knew them because they refused to talk to her, really talk to her, and so she turned to painting instead, to try to figure herself out, figure something, anything out. And he listened, and watched her, and kissed her softly, and didn't offer much about himself, except that his mother left when he was very little and he hasn't spoken to his father since he left his home on the Cherokee Reservation in Tennessee ten years ago.

Rick had inherited the land from some great aunt, he told her, and it included a second house, even smaller and less house-like than theirs, on the property, which they rented out. But it wasn't enough income for the two of them, so, after summer began to wane, Rick started to spend more time out on odd jobs, sometimes staying out a night or two before coming back. So the chill seeped into the house through cracks in the floorboards, through drafty windowpanes and poorly insulated door frames, and the loneliness came, too, as she walked around the cabin alone in three pairs of socks, feeding the fire two times an hour and waiting listlessly in arm chairs and by the hot plate in the kitchen warming water for tea.

And when he did come home, he seemed frustrated, harassed, starting fights for no reason at all. One night he came home at around 6 in the evening after being out for two days.

“Where’s dinner?” he asked.

“I can get started on it now,” Sylvia said. She had been reading.

Rick took a beer and sighed heavily as Sylvia went to see what she could make. There wasn’t much and she had never learned to cook well, only sufficiently, so she grabbed a box of macaroni and cheese and, when it was ready, gave a bowl to Rick.

“What the fuck is this?”

“It’s macaroni and cheese.”

“What are you, twelve? This is what I get to eat after working two days straight?”

“Sorry,” she said. “There’s not much else.”

“You’re pathetic,” he said. “Like a little girl.” And he left the food sitting on the table, grabbed his coat, and didn’t come back for three days.

When he gets back, he says he’s sorry. He didn’t mean to get so upset. He’s afraid she’ll leave him, because everyone leaves him. So she tells him that she isn’t leaving him, that she would never, that she loves him absolutely.

And so they took each other, had sex on the cold floor, and fell asleep together, entwined for the warmth of the other’s body, a talisman against the freezing air and the dying fire.

Rick had been in NY for a job contract and was only going to stay the month. The last week he was in town, he picked Sylvia up from her parent's house in Queens, her parents standing outside, just beside the gate. He waved at them. Everything about them and their house and their yard was so neat and tidy, all blades of grass the same length.

He took Sylvia to some dive bar all the way out in Brooklyn, with girls and boys in neon green leggings standing outside smoking cigarettes, loud music from different bars clashing with each other, creating some unrecognizable throb against the night. Inside, Rick ordered shots, and downed three at once. They started dancing; he pulled her close, ran his hands over her hips, gave her a little twirl, and pulled her back. She was lightheaded and giggling. He kissed her with an open mouth and she melted into it.

"Come away with me," he said, and he seemed to remarkably steady for all the alcohol he'd drunk, so impossibly in his right mind.

"Sure," Sylvia said, and turned to leave.

But he pulled her back. "No," he said. "Really. Come and live with me. Away from here." But the music was too loud and she felt dizzy.

"What?" she said, nearly shouting.

They left the bar. It was almost one in the morning, and even though it was newly summer, there was a damp chill in the air.

"I got some land up in Minnesota," he said.

"Minnesota?"

"Yeah, and it's got a little cabin on it. For the two of us."

“You’re crazy.”

“Yeah, well,” Rick said. “Isn’t that why you love me? Isn’t that why we’d be so great together? Me, off my rocker, and you, so level-headed.”

For some reason that bothered her. “I’m not so level-headed.”

“So prove it,” he said. “Let’s be romantic and spontaneous. Let’s go and make a life for ourselves.”

“Maybe,” she said. She’d have to think about it.

He seemed to take that as a yes. He picked her up like a bride and carried her to his car, signing “When a Man Loves a Woman,” and dropped her into the thread-bare passenger seat.

He drove back through the city streets recklessly, too fast and too hard, and Sylvia put her head out of the window and looked at all the lights in all the buildings as they passed them by, and wondered how many lives were sequestered there, all squared away in those small apartments, and she felt for a few moments very much alive, in heat and filled to the brim with something that was like lust but wasn’t, filling her until she couldn’t stand it anymore and she screamed out of the window, screamed and screamed.

When they pulled up in front of the quiet, dark lane, Sylvia felt that the street, all the houses and all the people on it were two-dimensional, created but left to lie there like dolls in their dollhouses at night, so flat and uninspired, and she thought that if she had to live there any longer she might die.

“Yes,” Sylvia said. “I’ll go with you. Yes.”

One afternoon when Rick had been gone for a few days and it was unseasonably warm, Sylvia put on her heaviest coat and went for a walk. She had been out on the land before, scoping out the property and listening to the renters fucking loudly and roughly in the house – shack, really – that bordered Rick’s property line.

As she walked by the house, she heard shouting, and something smash against the wall, a woman screaming. She was going to turn around and go back to the cabin, but she stopped. She mustered the courage and knocked on the door.

A woman in her early 20s opened the door, her makeup under her eyes like she’d rubbed at them in tiredness, and flakes of mascara or eyeliner had settled below the lid lines, deepening the bags beneath her eyes. “Yes?” the woman said, holding a cloth to a bleeding lip.

“Is, um, is everything OK in here?”

“Everything is fine, lady. Who the fuck are you, anyway?”

“Oh, I’m Sylvia.”

The woman stared at her.

“I live over there,” Sylvia continued, pointing to their house, “with Rick.”

“OK, Sylvia. Why don’t you mind your own damn business now, OK? It was real nice to meet you.” And she slammed the door in Sylvia’s face.

A few hours later there was a knock at the door, and Sylvia was surprised to see the woman with the bleeding lip, and even more surprised to see her holding a bottle of whiskey.

“Hey, Sylvia, was it?” She said and proceeded to step through Sylvia’s open arm and into the cabin.

“Um, yeah,” Sylvia said. “And your name is?”

“Doreen,” she said. “And I just wanted to apologize for being such an awful bitch to you earlier.”

“Oh, well,” Sylvia started.

“It’s just my husband,” she said, ripping off the plastic casing around the top of the whiskey bottle with her teeth. “He really thinks he’s God’s gift, you know? The smug asshole. Hey,” she said, “you got some glasses or what?”

Sylvia got two coffee mugs and motioned for Doreen to sit on the futon by the wood stove.

“Thanks,” she said. “Where’s that hunk of yours, huh? Rick? Where’s he at?”

“Working.”

“Well at least you get some goddamn peace and quiet.”

“I suppose,” Sylvia said, gingerly sipping the whiskey, which was sweet and overly spiced.

“So how long you been out here?”

“A few months.”

“Where’d you come from? Somewhere warmer, by the looks of it,” she said, eyeing Sylvia’s layers and blankets.

“New York.”

“Oh, so you seen the Empire State Building? You live near there?”

“I’ve seen it, yeah.”

“Is it really that tall?”

“It’s pretty tall.”

Doreen gulped her whiskey and looked Sylvia up and down. “Drink up, sweetheart,” she said. “It helps with the cold, anyway.”

So she poured herself a real healthy glass of it, and she did indeed feel warmer, and she even started to feel happy that Doreen was there, and she laughed when Doreen laughed, and it all felt so earnest.

A few hours later, when they were good and drunk and no longer strangers, Rick came home.

“Who is this?”

“This is Doreen,” Sylvia said. “She and her husband are renting from us.”

“Well hi, then, Doreen. I know your husband, Jack.”

“Well would you look at that,” Doreen said. “Me, too.”

Rick smiled. “It’s pretty late, huh?”

“Message received, mister,” Doreen said, and pulled up her boots. “Enjoy the whiskey, Sylvia. See you around.” And she left.

“That was a little rude,” Sylvia said as the door closed.

“It’s two in the morning.”

“So what are you doing back so late?”

Rick ignored her.

“What did you guys talk about, huh? Did you talk about me?”

“No,” Sylvia said, watching as Rick poured himself a glass of whiskey from the half-empty bottle. “She talked about her husband, mostly.”

“Making you realize how good you have it here with me, huh? Cause you know no one can ever love you like I love you,” he said, and sat next to her, and pulled to hair, to be playful, but he pulled it too hard.

“Ow,” she said. “Don’t do that.”

“What are you going to do about it?” he said, and pushed her lightly, laughing. “Where are you going to go? Are you going to leave me?”

“Maybe,” she said. “If you keep getting back at 2 AM.”

And he pulled her hair again, harder. “You have no where to go,” he said, and he seemed drunk already, even though he’d barely drunk the whiskey.

“Get off,” Sylvia said, and she moved closer to the fire, sitting on the floor.

“I know you will,” he said.

“You know I will what?”

“I know you’ll leave me. Just like everyone else.”

She was getting tired of it. She knew the whole shtick already. “I’m not going to leave you,” she said.

He came and sat next to her, his hand in her hair, but gently, this time. “You won’t?” he said, and he seemed so genuine, then, like a sad puppy who’d been abandoned too many times, that she softened to him.

“No,” she said, and they were kissing, then, and he was taking off her clothes, and he was on top of her, in her, and they moved together, breathing hard in each other’s ears, saying I love you, I love you, I, until they collapsed into each other.

Afterward, in that post-sex, post-drunk haze, he lay in her lap. He put his mouth around her naked breast, like a child, and she laughed a little. He closed his mouth, like he was suckling, and the skin around her nipple seemed to wake up and stiffen.

“You’re not going to leave me?” he said again.

“No,” she said, enjoying the odd sensation on her breast.

And he bit down, hard, the softness of her breast and her flesh full his mouth, and screamed, and he was grinding his jaw, grinding, until skin gave way to open wound. When he drew away, he stood up, and said, “What about now? Will you leave me now?” and he took the bottle of whiskey with him out of the room.

Sylvia cupped her raw breast in her hand and looked down; around the nipple was a jagged red circle of a wound, like territories drawn. With his teeth he had become the cartographer of her body, marking ownership.

The next time Rick left on a job, Sylvia called her mother.

“Amy, is that you?”

“Well, I go by Sylvia, now, remember?”

“Right, right,” her mother said. “How are you doing? How is Rick?”

She was quiet for a moment. She wasn’t sure what she wanted to tell her, how honest to be. She imagined crying, telling her that she was hurting, that she wanted to come home, to just be back home, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it.

“Things are OK, I guess,” she said. “Mom, listen. I need some money.”

“Money? What for?”

“Well, Rick is working all the time, and I... I just need some money. To take care of myself.”

“Do you want to leave?”

Sylvia was caught off guard by the straight forwardness of the question. “I, I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Did something happen?”

“I just think maybe we moved too fast.”

“Well, I can’t just give you money for no reason.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you got married, then I could give you a gift, maybe. Would that be nice?”

“I just told you that I might want to leave.”

“Yes, but, getting married will give you security. You know, my friends all ask about you, and it’s so embarrassing, Amy, to tell them that you’re shacking up with some guy --”

“It’s Sylvia, mom.”

“Sylvia. Right.”

There was silence on both ends.

“I’m not an ATM and you’re not a charity case, Sylvia. If you do the right thing and get married, I can give you a gift. How is \$10,000? Would that help?”

After she ended the call, Sylvia sat with her head in her hands for hours, her breast still raw. She grabbed the bottle of whiskey that Doreen had brought over and downed the last quarter of the bottle. She focused her mind on the coldness of her toes, and eventually drifted off to sleep.