IF ONLY TO HAVE IT FOREVER

By

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She thinks, is it really all that complicated or couldn’t we just take a bath together? Maggie can see Logan is reading a comic book under his desk. Get into the bathtub with me. Let’s rub our skin around. She thinks she would probably like to soap him and bite him a bit and ask him not to talk much. Ugh, inevitably he would talk, she thinks. She would let him read to her from his comic book. She might like that. She might even let him do some voices. She thinks she’d like to hear his best hero voice. She would laugh at him. You’re just a baby, she would purr. She’d like to grab his comic book out from under his desk. Aha! What’s this? He would be humiliated. After class she’d keep him around. She’d berate him. Oh, am I boring you? She’d touch his fly. Something better to do? She’d unbutton slowly. There would be a moment of hesitation. Then: this desk. Right here. She would demand his touch from him. Pull the hair from the roots. I demand it. Rip whatever needs ripping. I’ll be bruised up and scratched, but I will prefer it. She thinks this as the class silently responds to the daily prompt.

Daily prompt? Her students had asked when she walked in. Will we be freewriting?

Shit, she said. Maggie hadn’t thought of a prompt on her walk to campus. She had been thinking about a problematic scene in her novel. All her scenes were problematic. They were clinkers. They made her uncomfortable, these terribly written scenes. When she felt uncomfortable, she placed the cause and the moment into a web of other
moments from her life. She often organized them—held them up to each other, side by side, trying to remember. The Swim Party was a moment that always emerged. Often, whenever a new discomfort occurred, the words *Swim Party* appeared, drawing a line back to the memory. She could see them, floating in front of her as she walked. They were huge, these words. In black, block lettering. Lights lit up. *Swim Party*. The bulbs blinked on and off.

I don’t know, she said to the class. *Swim Party*. I don’t know I don’t know. Ok Ok, let’s think. Then Sam appeared in her mind, too. He was smiling. He was thinking all of this was funny.

Ok, she said, write about the first time you saw something dead in the road. Like, an animal. What were you, ah, fascinated? Repulsed? Go back there. Let your writing spring from that place. She hung up her coat. She avoided looking at any faces directly. She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hands and the Sam in her head laughed. Then she made him say something trite, but affectionate like, You are a real piece of work. Then he touched her face and looked at her. Then he just liked her.

Thinking of Sam had made her eyes hurt so now she looks at Logan. Logan, her favorite. He looks soft to her. Pliable. She thinks about chewing the slight roundness of his stomach. She wonders about the smell of him. He isn’t writing. He is reading a comic book. She blinks her eyes at him slowly.

He looks up, briefly, but it is enough time to catch his attention. Write, she hisses. She snaps her fingers and then points, first at the space in front of her on her own desk and then at him. This is freewrite time.
At home, her cat is waiting. She had forgotten to feed it. The cat cries at her feet. The cat will die soon. It’s old. It can’t find the litter box and instead pees on the cushions of the green armchair in the living room. At first she had tried to clean the chair, but the stains seemed permanent and the cat just peed there again so she failed to see the point and stopped. Really, it keeps her focused. Sometimes she thinks about inviting people over, maybe some of her colleagues, but the smell and the thought of someone accidentally sitting in the piss stop her from calling. She is finishing her novel. She needs no human distraction. She’ll get rid of the chair when the cat finally dies. Her apartment will smell better. Her novel will appear everywhere on every shelf of every store. They’ll promote her to tenure. She’ll have a party.

She has considered putting the litter box in the seat of the green armchair, but she worries that the cat will be confused and will pee somewhere else and then there will more things that must be thrown away.

She drops her bag on the floor of her kitchenette. Into the sink she scrapes food from old dishes. The sink smells. She tries to jam scraps through the holes in the drain. Clumps catch. This will have to wait, she thinks. On the walk home from campus she thought of a problem she faced in her chapter five. Work, she thinks, and unplugs the phone on the wall of the kitchenette. She closes her eyes and moves down her hallway, blind. She always does this now. Her fingers brush the wall as she walks, but it is only for the feel of it, not a necessary act for balance. She reaches the end of the hallway, her writing room. It is only after she is inside, door shut behind her, that she allows herself to see again. Here I am, she thinks. She pretends to have simply appeared in the room. She
does this so that the room is never connected to any real space. Never a part of all the space she has to navigate with her eyes open.

When Sam had lived with her, they had fought often about the time she spent closed off from him there and that, in their small apartment, she had a room of her own, one they didn’t share.

“Not allowed in?” he used to grumble through the door, or “My own home?” Sometimes he would make her laugh by shouting, “I’m bigger than you! My desires shall be recognized” and she would let him in and they would have sex on her desk or on the carpet and it would be exciting because he had been aggressive, invasive. She had liked feeling invaded by him. She had liked feeling forced upon. She had wanted him to bite her, slap her. She had wanted to spit on him, eat parts of his face. But theirs was a committed love. A smart choice. Too much time spent shuffling around the apartment wearing sweatpants and socks made it hard to do much more than a thoughtfully placed nibble or a popped button, but even then fleeting embarrassment mediated it, lessened it.

But some nights her need for him could be so sharp that she thought about swallowing him whole so that he would finally, finally be still, carried inside her. Sometimes it scared her, her desire to consume his entire body, but she didn’t know how else to make him fit closely enough. Other times he would stomp past the door of her writing room in a way that made him seem needy, pathetic; and when she relented to sex on those nights, she did so with pity. I have a novel to write, she would think, looking at his shut and sweating eyes.

She opens her file cabinet and finds chapter five. She sits at her desk and remembers that, when they had moved in, Sam had helped her assemble her bookshelves
and he had painted the corners she, even with a chair, had been too short to reach with her brush and that he had found the desk she was sitting at for thirty dollars at a garage sale and that she had loved the desk and still did because he did, at the very least, understand her taste and that the desk was all the tangible reminder of him that remained. That had been on purpose, of course. She had rid the house of him, his things, the things they had collected together. She had hired men to repaint the writing room. She had given them an extra twenty dollars to move the bookshelves and desk around, too. Then the room was new. Then she began to simply appear within it.

Sarah is not Maggie’s favorite student. Sarah is terrible. Logan watches Sarah read her short story aloud to the class. The story is awful. Logan watches Sarah’s mouth. Sarah sucks. The class loves Sarah’s story. It is about a college freshman named Sarah whose grandmother dies, but before she does, tells Sarah to follow her dream of becoming a writer and so then dead grandmothers really won’t be dead, but will be captured on the page and will live on into fucking forever. The class says things like, “So moving” and “Emotional” and “We are here for you.” Sarah’s been absent for a week. She thanks the class for their comments. She tears up. She shuffles her pages around. She looks at Logan shyly. He mouths, I missed you. All of Sarah’s relatives should die off, one right after another, so that Sarah would have to miss the rest of the semester.

The bells ring. Leave, Sarah, leave, Maggie thinks. Do not linger over Logan. Sarah exits alone and Maggie is glad. Logan gathers his bag slowly and walks out of the room and she follows him. She likes the way he wears his pants and would like to look at him. They walk out of the building, then away from the courtyard where students crowd
picnic tables or sprawl in the grass. He seems unaware of her completely. Maggie is close
behind him. He doesn’t stop to talk to anyone. He moves slowly and she moves slowly
with him. He tilts his head. She watches. She thinks she sees his lips moving. It is hard to
tell from her angle. Someone passes him, passes her, too, because she is right behind him,
passes them both and says, Hi, Logan, but he doesn’t notice. Lost in thought, she thinks.
Wandering inside his head, she thinks. He is seeing something—a word, an idea, an
image in front of him as he walks instead of seeing people on the street or other things
that might be available to touch and confirm, she thinks. He finds less busy paths. He
prefers the streets lined with fallen oak leaves. He is just like me.

She follows him for another block, but then he turns into a parking lot and seems
to be looking for what she can only assume is his car. Soon he will find it and then drive
away in it and she will not be able to follow him any more so she turns around and goes
home.

She can’t get her characters to fall in love. That’s the problem. She knows they
have to, here, in chapter five. They have to fall in love here so that they can fall out of
love in chapter twelve and live in agony in chapter thirteen and reject the advances of
nice people who try to get them to love again in chapter fourteen. They will not be
reunited. They will not find something lost. But the reader must know what can never be
recovered and how it was built. She has the structure of her novel drawn onto note cards.
She pins them above her desk. She sees an arc. She draws it in ink, in chalk. It floats in
front of her—the arc of her story, her chosen movement—whenever she walks. It is
tangible, bright. She looks, she extends her small finger, she traces the air in front of her.
She sees only this and forgets to return graded papers or grade them at all. She finds her car keys in the refrigerator.

She is watching out the window of her writing room. She notices she is also gently tapping on the glass. How long has she been doing this? It feels like hours. Perhaps she had been trying to get the attention of a bird. She was thinking of her problem. She can’t write about love and that is the problem. She knows romantic love exists. She sees it, but it creates no space in her. It is like the Russian alphabet; she just doesn’t know it. But she and Sam had had some love, she is sure of it. Now they weren’t in love. She can’t remember any specifics. The feeling has left her and she can’t recall it. Seven years sit between their last conversation. She tries, now, to see him in her mind and he appears, smiling. He is watching her and shaking his head. Wait, is she doing something strange? She looks for her hands; they are tugging at the ends of her hair. She is making a soft clicking sound with her tongue. Where did that bird go? Sam, she sees him. He is looking at her. He is both good-natured and incredulous. You, she thinks he says.

Logan reads his story for the class. It is about werewolves taking over a small town. One man saves the town. One man kills all the werewolves with his fists and intellect. Maggie loves the story. She sees delicate loneliness in it. A man fighting the demons of the world. He has to do it alone because no one else understands him. No one can help him. Maggie gets it. Maggie understands.

A student says, I like the part where he rips off the jaw with the claw of the hammer. Very vivid.
Umhmm. Maggie nods. Maggie tries to keep her face still. Inside she glows. She tries not to look too much at Logan, but fails.

But the themes, Maggie prompts the class, what is at work here? What is this man feeling?

Violent, says a student.

Ok, says Maggie.

I don’t think he’s feeling anything, says another student. This story is just a structureless bloodbath. It lacks any of the emotional resonance that Sarah’s story had.

Sarah’s story was manipulation, not emotion, Maggie thinks, but then she sees the faces of the class looking back at her realizes she has also said this out loud. Swim Party. I mean, Maggie says, Sarah’s story played with our emotions because we all knew it was something that actually happened to Sarah. How can we critique how Sarah, a person we know, feels about the dead people in her life?

The class shifts in discomfort. Or maybe they are all shifting, in unison, against her.

The student says, But she was writing from a place that was true.


That sounds so limiting, the student says. Who is this student? Maggie is bad with names. She looks at her roster. Ricky Crisp, his name is Ricky Crisp. He says, That just sounds like rules from a textbook.
What Maggie has said had come a chapter of a textbook. The chapter was titled “Craft and Intention.”

Ricky Crisp continues, What if Sarah was trying to use our knowledge to lend an additional weight to her story? Why is that a bad thing to try in fiction? What if the ‘trueness’ is a device in itself?

Maggie has no response for this. She feigns a coughing fit.

Listen, Maggie says, This is Logan’s time anyway.

Yeah, let’s talk about werewolves, Ricky Crisp says.

Yes, please, Maggie thinks. There is a sharp pain behind her eyes, like an incision. Knuckles aligning with her eyebrows, she rubs her face with the back of her hands. Let’s please, please just talk about werewolves.

When class is over, Logan and Sarah walk out together. Maggie follows them. The three of them seem on their way somewhere. Maggie follows closely. She could reach out and push them. She sees them speaking silently to each other, brushing arms and then edging back to their own sides of the sidewalk. Maggie can see that something is being acknowledged. Attraction, she thinks. How did they learn the gestures? How do they know when to touch and retreat? How can so much be agreed upon, recognized, go unspoken? Sarah stops at a vending machine to buy a soda. She searches through her pockets, but it is not enough and Logan hands her a quarter. Their fingers touch in the exchange. Maggie feels light, her face feels like it is pulsing. She sits down on the grass. She watches. Sarah is answering a question and drinking her soda without looking at Logan at all. He is looking at her soda, her hands, his hands. Sarah laughs at something Logan says. She laughs low and long and bends over and when she is righted, strands of
her hair are stuck in spit on the side of her mouth. Then Logan lifts two fingers to Sarah’s face. He brushes Sarah’s hair from her mouth and tucks it behind her ear and she looks at him and everything makes adds up to the same thing and means the same thing for them at the same time and how is that possible when Maggie is alone, sitting on the grass, unsure of all that can be seen with her eyes.

Logan and Sarah look away from each other and in that action see Maggie staring. Maggie realizes she has forgotten her schoolbag back in her classroom and has nothing with which to provide a reason for her being here. Sarah walks toward Maggie. Swim Party.

Hi, Sarah says.

Hi, Maggie says.

Can I ask you a question?

Sure.

Did you really hate my story so much?

I did. Do you think of yourself and wonder how smart you are?

What? Logan says, joining them.

Haha. Just kidding. No, it had its moments, Maggie says. She has nothing to do with her hands. She pulls up grass. Can I ask you both a question? Maggie says. Sarah says nothing, but looks at Maggie fully, looks right at her face.

Have you talked about being attracted to each other? Is that a question you’ve already answered?

What? Logan says.
I’m not being weird, I’m writing a novel. I’m observing things for my novel.
That’s all.

That question makes me uncomfortable, says Sarah.

Oh, ok. Well, I just mean, how do you know that it’s OK to touch her face like that, Logan? I’m just wondering for my characters. Does that make sense? What are the signals that can be read? You know? What can be known? Right?

We’re going to go now. Sarah says it slowly.

They look at Maggie in a way that Maggie can read as not good. Everything was coming out wrong. She can’t make herself clear. She just questions about what she sees and no one will answer them. Maggie’s head begins to feel like it, alone, is the only thing pulsing. Shame. Swim Party.

Oh, sorry, Maggie says. I think I’m acting weird because I’m worried about my cat. My cat is really sick. My cat is dying. I’m sad and confused about it. Sorry, she says again. Logan and Sarah walk away. See you in class tomorrow, she says and then sits in the grass for a few minutes or maybe longer than a few and then walks home.

The swim party had been for Steve, Maggie’s brother-in-law. It must have been his birthday. This was ten years ago and Steve and Maggie’s sister, Emily, just had a baby so the swim party was for everyone to look at the baby, too. Maggie brought Sam. They weren’t new to each other anymore, they had settled in a bit. They had successfully avoided meeting each other’s families, but their luck had run out. She liked Sam very much and was happy when he agreed easily to go with her.

Yes. Maggie said. She drank the drink her mother had given her—something with whiskey and lemon. Her mother sat at the edge of the pool, Steve and Emily’s pool, her feet touching the surface of the water. Her mother was drinking the same drink. Steve was wearing only red swim trunks. His stomach was hairless, Maggie saw.

But what are you doing? Steve asked.

I’m studying writing. I’m writing fiction. I’m working on a novel. I teach classes. Maggie said.

She just started teaching, Sam said. She’s great. She works hard. Her students love her.

Do they send you love letters? Emily, Maggie’s sister, asked.

What? Said Maggie

Are you writing your novel about a teacher who falls in love with a student? Do your students love you? said Emily.

They love her, Sam said.

People love stories about sexy teachers, said Emily. She looked at Steve. I love my sexy teacher, she said. Steve was a journalism professor. He wrote articles for local and regional publications. He owned a house with a pool and two nice cars and had time to have a baby. Emily did some sort of work in an office building downtown. Maggie didn’t know what work. Or was it a bank downtown? There had been mail on their kitchen table from the Society of Actuaries. Maggie never saw Steve on campus. Or once she had seen him limping up a hill carrying a towel and goggles. Steve swam at the faculty pool every day between noon and one. Steve was regimented about his exercise.

He had a bad back. Everyone in the world had a bad back. Emily had a bad back after
birthing the new baby. Maggie thought her back hurt now. She reached to touch Sam. She wanted to touch him on the spine. Maybe Sam, too, had a bad back and she could knead the muscles around. She would do this as if to say, Does that feel better? Maggie dropped her hand. One cousin had a bad knee. Earlier he had been balancing on one leg and Maggie had asked why and he had said, Bad knee. Maggie had nodded then eaten a chip that was in her hand. That cousin’s name was Fred and he did something in heating and cooling. Everyone at the swim party seemed happy enough.

Maggie is writing about a writer who thinks a lot, Sam said. He smiled at Steve and Emily. He smiled at Maggie’s mother who wasn’t paying attention. Maggie’s mother was knee-deep in the pool now. Some uncles and cousins went inside to watch television.

Oh, really? Steve said. God, only writers want to write about writers.

You’re a writer, right? Sam asked.

I’m a journalist. There’s a difference in priority. Listen, I had a student once. Great student. He came from the creative writing program. Your people. Steve pointed at Maggie. He begged to get into the J School. I asked him why he left creative writing. He said, ‘Turns out I don’t want to write a novel, I want to be able to get a real job.’ He was one of my best students.

Steve touched his hairless belly. He was practically naked. He had already been swimming. His body had wetness, like sweat.

Maggie felt unsure of these people. Who were they? She barely knew them, but they hugged her and looked like her. She touched Sam’s wrist then she rubbed his earlobe. She tugged on it. This comforted her. Sam leaned down and whispered, smiling, I’m here meeting your family, aren’t I? Are you going to act like you own me, too? He
pushed her hand away from his ear. He kissed it, then dropped it. She felt flattened. She
smiled, too. At him and her family. Who was on her team?

What’s that book you just read? Emily said to Steve. He’s always reading
something, she says to Maggie. What was it about? The antelopes?

The Andes. Steve said. You ever think about writing something that’s real?

Wait, what’s your novel about? Emily asked.

It’s about a woman writer, said Sam.

What else? said Emily.

Fascinating, said Steve.

It’s good, said Sam.

Sure sure, said Steve.

I think it’ll be good. She hasn’t let me read anything.

But what does the writer do? asked Emily.

Everyone in the department really loves her. They think she’s doing great. They
love her.

We love you, too, Maggie! Steve said. He cheers’d her glass with his. He had said
his words like a lounge singer sings songs.

You say it, Maggie. You explain it better than I do. Sam said.

It’s about how hard it is think around people so stupid, Maggie said. Maggie was
drunk. Maggie remembered her mother once saying that when the women in her family
got drunk they made what they thought were urgent and philosophical statements that
really held no meaning at all. Maggie’s mother had said, This is your inheritance.
Oh, are you being mean? asked Emily. Maggie looked past her, over her shoulder. Their mother was fully submerged in the pool now. She was jogging in place. She was holding her drink above her head. She was humming. Inside, uncles and cousins cheered. The hometown team had scored.

She’s just being weird to be weird, said Sam.

Steve and Emily laughed.

You hold on to that one, Emily said.

Oh, he gets you. He knows you. Steve pointed to Maggie and then Sam and then Maggie. Then: Who’s ready for a dip? And Steve dived in.

On the car ride home, Maggie said, I hate that baby.

What? Sam said. He changed the radio station. He tapped on the dial that said how much gas was left in the car.

Babies are the only true solipsists.

Where’d you read that?

What?

You read about some idea you like and then you talk about it over and over until it sounds like the idea was yours all along. It’s so transparent. So where did this one come from? What book?

Not a goddamn book about the Andes.

What? Sam said. He had stopped listening. He rolled down his window.
I mean, nobody cares if the baby is thinking whatever the baby is thinking. The baby gets to think whatever it wants. No one demands the baby to remember or recognize anything. They just love the baby. You know? Do you understand?

Sure.

You don’t understand anything, Maggie said.

Is it possible that I can understand without caring about it in the same way?

What I’m saying is I’m jealous. Doesn’t that make sense?

Sure.

It’s so lonely to be so misinterpreted all the time, Maggie said.

Save it for your novel, Sam said.

In class, Logan and Sarah are holding hands under their desks. Everything has come to fruition. It was so easy. Something expressed, received, and built overnight. Maggie feels the full weight of something she senses has always been in her, but that she has been shifting around, in hopes it would dissipate. She feels tired. She dismisses everyone after ten minutes. She asks Logan to stay. The room empties.

She says, My cat has died. It’s dead. I found it dead on the windowsill. What do I do? Can you help me?

What? Logan says.

Do you understand me? Do you understand what I’m saying? she says. I don’t have a yard. I can’t bury it near me. I live in an apartment complex. I grow some basil, though. Basil is a weed and will grow indoors, or anywhere practically. But that’s it. As
far as soil goes. I can’t flush the cat down the toilet. What do people do? Do they put cats in shoeboxes and then the dumpster?

What? Logan says. He stands. He gathers his things.

Well, hold on, she says. I had a cat that died when I was a kid, but I can’t remember what my mom did with it. It was in the driveway and its eyes were totally dislodged from its head. That cat had been run over. But what then? I can’t remember. Did my mom let it rot? Did she take it up with a shovel and move it somewhere? We had a pond. Is that cat in that pond? Is there a pond nearby? There’s one on campus. Could I put it here, in the pond? Would my dead cat float? For how long? How long until it just became a skeleton at the bottom? Are these things you wonder about? Are these questions you ask yourself?

Logan moves to leave, but she is standing near the only exit so she only sees him walking toward her. Her eyes soften to him. She lowers her voice and says, Oh, am I boring you? She touches his belt loops. She touches his zipper. He steps away from her and does not look the way she imagined he would.

Oh, wait, she thinks. I’m doing this wrong.

She is confused. She had not foreseen the necessary transition between dead cat talk and sex.

I want to just push it out the window, she says. It’s dead on the windowsill. She laughs. He tenses, a bit. He makes his shoulders bigger.

Seduction, she thinks. What do people say? How do people signal with a shift in their bodies?
She hops up and backward so that she is sitting on top of her desk. You’re a big
guy, she says. It comes out flat. Can you help me? she says. He can now easily move to
the door, and he does, and he shuts it behind him. So that was the wrong thing, again, to
say, she thinks, because he left.

At home, the cat isn’t dead, but looks hungry, weak. It doesn’t come up to her,
crying, when she comes through the door, but instead looks at her from the middle of her
living room and pees on the carpet, right where it stands.

I hate you, she says to the cat. You never listen to anything I say.

Finally Maggie can close her eyes and she does and when they are open again
they see the file cabinets that hold her novel. At the end of each year, Maggie starts a new
round of revisions and seals what has been written into its own drawer. There were
eleven of them—each labeled on the front, the year written in her tight, cursive. She
rarely looked back at her earlier drafts, always embarrassed when she did. She decides
now to look at what she had written first, the first draft. She wants to see what began this
and what of it is left. She wants, so much, to know how to do everything right. She never
reads the first draft because when she reaches for it she sees the date, eleven years ago, is
not written in her handwriting. Had her handwriting changed? No, the other labels, years,
words confirm it—this is writing that didn’t belong to her. She touches the numbers,
traces the black, block lettering. Sam had written this for her. And then she remembers
something—a moment. Once, in an afternoon. He had been helping her move in. She
didn’t live with her yet. They were still so new to each other. He had wheeled the file
cabinet into her writing room on a metal trolley. He had labeled the drawer for her,
knowing what she’d put in it and when. She had been reading. What was I reading? She
can’t remember. He came near her and watched her. Had it been a Sunday? Had I been
reading on the couch or in a chair? In her memory, she can’t see herself clearly. She
thinks she had been wearing an ugly blue sweater. The long one, full of buttons. She still
has the sweater. She remembers that her hair was balled in a tight bun on the top of her
head. “The Samurai,” he had called it. Her hair is in the same style now. She has only to
walk to the mirror and look at herself to make his voice appear in her head. *The Samurai!*
She has only to open the closet and put on the ugly blue sweater and suddenly she would
be back in this moment with him. With him watching her as she read.

“What?” She had asked.

“Nothing,” He had said. “I like to watch you read.”

She remembers suddenly feeling as though she was seeing herself through his
eyes and, briefly, she liked what she saw. A woman who read in the afternoon. She took
him into the bedroom.

He had entered her from behind and when he came, he wrapped his arms around
her neck and squeezed. A few minutes ago he had been kissing her deeply, but now she
couldn’t breathe. She gagged. You’re choking me, she said. It came out quietly; she was
so robbed of her own breath. Something cut a space, shard-like, within her. There was a
feeling she recognized as like terror, only sharper, newer. How had she been so foolish,
thinking that one person could ever know another? She had moved someone in to her life,
only to be fucked and choked to death in a crappy apartment. She was alone, always
alone, how had he tricked her into forgetting that? He released her and she didn’t move,
she could not look at him, she didn’t know what she would find in his face. You’re choking me, she said.

He made a sound, a yelp, and flipped her over. His face slack and white and she saw in it what she felt. He had hurt her. He was afraid, too, she saw it clearly. It had been an accident. “I thought I was squeezing your shoulder? Your shoulder? Was that your shoulder?” She touched her red throat. He recoiled from her. And then she felt it; she was laughing. Slowly at first, and then it flushed out of her, fast, and he then was laughing, too. He rolled off of her. Without looking or touching, they laughed and, for a moment, she felt they were impossibly, illogically a part of each other and all she could hope for was that this feeling would be less brief than the fear of him that had preceded it.

When he thought she had fallen asleep, he kissed her shoulder gently. He tuckered her hair behind her ear. She heard him say softly, *You. You. You.*
Soon Maggie will ask Sam to move out of their apartment. She will end their relationship. She will end it in numerous and spectacular ways. The process of ending has already begun despite not yet being a fully formed thought in her mind. Instinctually, she begins with a withdrawal of physical affection. She doesn’t listen when he speaks. She slams the dishes around in the sink, breaking a plate and cup. She spends more time alone, writing, reading, being within herself. She gives excuses and he says he understands. She has begun graduate school. It is her first year. She’s a teacher now, also an advanced student. She has so much work to do.

Take a break, give yourself a break, he coos to her while she pouts on the couch. He holds her hand, asks what she wants for dinner, makes the dinner, brings it to her. Sam plugs headphones into his guitar to keep his music silent for her. He plays while she reads or writes or grades papers. The moment she puts down her work, he unplugs his guitar. He puts it down. He smiles. It all, all his kindness, makes her love him less.

He does all of this with one hand. The dinner he brings is messy and ugly. He makes burgers and they lie crooked on the bun and he needs her to open the ketchup bottle for him, which she does without looking at him. He plays guitar with one hand, really just touching the frets. After a show, his hand had been smashed between an amp and the wall of the bar. This had flattened his hand. It is not even a hand anymore. It is shapeless, the bones inside being crushed completely. The doctor had made an explosion
sound when looking at Sam’s x-rays. Maggie cannot imagine the horrible sounds Sam is making when playing the guitar with his one good hand. Often, when he thinks he is not being seen, he holds the guitar, staring at it as if it were now an unrecognizable object.

She will cheat on him, but that won’t be what ends it. People cheat. People make mistakes. So much can be forgiven between two people who choose to love each other. She must give him something that he can never forgive her for. She must forever ruin herself to him.

But first she just lies awake next to him. Maggie has tried to sleep, but instead has just stared at her ceiling. The light coming through the blinds start as bars, but grow brighter and the bars fade into larger rectangles and then the room opens with light. She sees her shelves of books and records, but finds no comfort in them. Nothing feels familiar. Where is she? She is in her room, like she is any other morning. Sam is asleep next to her as he has been for the last five years of mornings. His back is to her, his head tucked deeply into his pillow. He is breathing. He loves her. She could touch him if she wanted to and he would stir and reach for her or keep sleeping. She could hug him or kiss him and he wouldn’t mind. He would kiss her back. He would pull her head onto his chest. It is as if she now owns two bodies, her access to his is so complete. She could probably pull out a marker and draw on him, onto his breathing back, and he would maybe think her odd, but he wouldn’t leave her. He wouldn’t yell. He lives with her. They live together. He has made space in her apartment for his things. He has made efforts to make himself permanent to her. She wonders what it would take for him to undo that.
Maggie considers kissing him, but then she sees his hand, bandaged to the elbow. She is certain that if she kissed him, and if he kissed her back, and if he touched her with that hand that is not a hand but something else, something so misshapen and grotesque, that she would scream.

Maggie’s alarm will go off in an hour. She will get up then and make herself coffee and get dressed and get into her car and will go teach her first ever college course. She is starting a new life and that life has a plan and that plan seems socially appropriate to everyone she tells of it. Advanced degree, teaching writing, time-tested partnership with a good man who sleeps gently next to her. People nod approvingly, hearing this. She is doing something that people recognize as good and communicate that to her by saying, Congratulations! or Good for you! or That sounds good. Today this all begins officially.

Maggie pretends she is getting out of prison. She imagines that when the alarm goes off, a guard will appear with a large set of keys and will unlock her cell and say, Good luck. I’m set free, she thinks. Today she will no longer be what she was before, a prisoner. Today she will be a teacher and forty faces, forty bodies perched patiently at desks, will confirm this. She remembers something Mrs. Balm had read to her from one of her self-help books. Sometimes one thing changing changes all other things.

Sam rolls over in his sleep and drops a heavy arm across Maggie. She slides from underneath it as gently as she can. His touch, now so available, seems suffocating to Maggie. She doesn’t want to share this moment with Sam, with anyone. She wants coffee. She sits in the kitchen while the coffee is brewing. She presses her palms into the wooden table, she breathes in, she enjoys the morning, it is hers. It is silent. She closes
her eyes and imagines herself in front of her students. She is confident at the chalkboard. She is smiling. The coffee is ready. When she fills her cup, her hands shake, but she doesn’t notice until Sam is standing in the kitchen doorway. Your hands are shaking, Sam says. Then Maggie looks down and sees. She drops her coffee cup and it breaks when it hits the floor. Oh, baby, Sam says. You’ll be fine. Look at you, you’re so scared. Hey, I’m here for you, I’m here. Soon she will end their five years together with a series of cruelties only she, because she is the person who knows him best, is capable of.

Maggie sees the concern in Sam’s face. The concern is for me, she thinks. Because I was shaking and I dropped the coffee cup. Because I seem scared. But Maggie hadn’t felt anything until Sam walked into the kitchen. She hadn’t felt scared until she had seen him and his face, reflecting a fear he assumed was hers.

He holds her against him. He pushes so that together they sway back and forth.

Maggie feels a pain in her chest that she cannot convince to subside. She takes deep breaths. She focuses on the trees that line the street she is walking on. Her town is small, focused around the college and a quaint downtown. There were a few bars that she and Sam liked to drink at, a handful of decent restaurants, an easy way of life that she pointed to when anyone asked why she didn’t leave after getting her undergraduate degree the year before. She had applied to several graduate schools and had been accepted to one in New York City and another in Minneapolis, but had chosen to stay in Kansas. She already knew the professors in the master’s program. They knew her. A quiet girl who had done well in their courses. If only she could look closely at that, if she could hold onto that, that esteem, to be lifted above herself, her thoughts about herself, to
be lifted up by the way they looked at her. She was distanced, unimportant, and good in
their eyes. There was no need; just their praise. If she could keep that, maybe she’d feel
better. She’d be what they believed her to be when they encouraged her
to apply to graduate schools, for teaching positions. She’d be what they believed her to be
when they said, *wonderful asset*, in response to her formal acceptance. They had been
talking about her when they had said, *wonderful asset*. She had purchased a black dress
with those words sounding in her ears. She had repeated them over and over while she
had looked at herself in the dressing room mirror. She bought the dress and wore it now,
on her way to her first day of teaching, and said the words to herself over and over as she
through streets with trees in full bloom, on her way to campus. Her classroom. Herself. A wonderful asset.

*Stand outside of yourself*, Mrs. Balm had instructed her so many years ago. *What
do you see?*

Maggie stands next to the copier in the English Department. She holds forty
copies of her syllabus. She feels the pressing need to put her face down into the copies to
smell their fresh ink and paper smell. She puts the copies into her leather shoulder bag.
She removes them. She counts them again. Still forty, perfectly collated and stapled. In
black, block type, her name is stark and neat at the top of the page. MAGGIE FIRMIN.
Professors and graduate students approach the copier, some she recognizes and smiles
politely to. Richard walks by and stops to talk to her. Maggie doesn’t know Richard well,
but is somewhat afraid of him. He is in his last year of his PhD program. He had come to
talk to her class during the graduate teacher training a few weeks before. He had stood at
the front of the room looking exhausted.

During the training he had asked the group of incoming students if any of them
had a part-time job they were planning on keeping. Maggie had raised her hand. She was
a part-time waitress. She planned to keep her job. She and Sam were saving up for a car.
She raised her hand and said as much and Richard had laughed.

That’s cute, he’d said. I’ll give you three weeks before you quit. Maggie didn’t
understand. What had he, specifically, been referring to? Quit her part-time job, quit
teaching, quit saving? This was the first of a series of things Maggie will mishear Richard
say. She is often unsure of what Richard means when he speaks to her.

Richard doesn’t acknowledge her as he walks past the copier. He doesn’t seem to
remember her. She follows him down the hall, past the mailboxes, past the offices of the
English Department secretaries. He turns into an office and Maggie pauses, waits around
the corner. She hears another man’s voice say, Richard, sit down. The other man is a
poetry professor that Maggie knows by sight, but has never spoken to. The poetry
professor has published a few books that people talk about with reverence and awe
although Maggie has never heard of him in any other context other than in the University.
She listens to the two men talk. Richard’s voice sounds tight and exasperated and
charming. The other man laughs in a way that intimates that all of this, this conversation,
this tone, this space these two men occupy belong solely to them. No one else could
possibly understand this is what Richard’s voice and the poetry professor’s laugh say.
They talk about Richard’s dissertation, which has something to do with a poet named
Don. Maggie writes the words ‘poet’ and ‘Don’ on her hand. She is always mishearing
him. Later, Richard will laugh at her and correct her curtly. He will say, What? No. Dorn.
DORN. Who the fuck is Don? Then Richard will run his fingers through her hair, right to
scalp, and pull. He will say something else, but his hands will be over her ears, reaching
for her, pulling her to him, ripping at her hair, and so she will mishear him when he
speaks and think he has said, I love you.

She checks her watch. She must go teach now.

Sam is in a band and the band has a show that night at a bar downtown, but Sam
takes Maggie to the bar early to celebrate her first day of teaching. Sam tells the
bartender that Maggie is a teacher and that it was her first day and isn’t she so smart and
beautiful, my girl. Just look at her, Sam says, and touches Maggie’s cheek. The bartender
gives him the first round free. The bartender offers Maggie a high-five.

Maggie and Sam find a booth outside. It is warm and breezy and Maggie is still
wearing her new black dress. She tries to speak about this day, her first day, but is
interrupted by people coming up to talk to Sam. People in the town like his band. They
have a deal with a small regional record label. Sam smiles and talks to people and sells a
few records. He talks about the setlist. They will play a few new covers. Look for them,
he says to a friend Maggie has never met. Listen for something special. Or he says to
someone else, Oh, man, you’ll like the new song for sure. Or, Thanks for coming out,
should be a good. Should be good. When whomever walks away, Sam turns back to her
and says, Ok, sorry, go on. How’d you do?

Maggie wants to say, I was fucking miraculous.

One of Sam’s bandmates comes up to tell him it is time to unload their gear.
One minute, Sam says. Hey, man, listen, today was Maggie’s first day of teaching. Let’s do a shot? Yeah?

Sam leaves to get the drinks and his bandmate, whose name is Dirk, stays behind.

Dirk says, So what are you teaching?

English, she says.

What grade?

At the University.

Hot shit, Dirk says. Professor Maggie.

Not exactly, but yes.

I put you on our guest list, Dirk says, Sam never even remembers. He didn’t even graduate high school is why.

Sam returns with the shots and hands them out. Dirk takes his and says, You think just because you have a smart girlfriend that you aren’t dumb as shit.

Sam kisses Maggie. He smiles at her. That’s exactly what I think, he says.

When Sam walks through the bar, people talk to him. People are always saying hello to Sam. He has been playing in bands around town for years. It is a small town.

Sam had been playing a show in the bar they were in right now the night Maggie had met him. She had been nineteen years old and was in the bar with a fake ID. She had felt strange and powerful getting into the bar with a fake. She had brought up, from some strange place within her, a confidence that translated to the bartender as her belonging in the bar. She was admitted access. She had looked like someone who should be admitted access. It was as easy as that. The ID said she was blonde and six inches taller than she
was. She had watched Sam play his show and decided she wanted to have him. She wanted to make love to him. She walked up to him and looked at him. She made her face say, I am your lover.

Later that night they held each other on her porch. Quite drunk. They both were. Will you dance with me? he’d said, and she did. I like your eyes, he said as they danced. If anyone ever comes to you and asks to trade eyes, tell that person, No. Then he had kissed her and then he had asked to come inside. Then they spent the next five years together and they had been good years. Maggie often watched Sam sleep, but not in the way that she thought women ought to watch their lovers sleep. Instead, Maggie watched Sam asleep and hated him a little bit. Why do you say you love me? Maggie silently asked his dumb, closed face.

He gave her little clues sometimes. He said he liked her quietness, her calmness, her ease with him, he liked to watch her read. He thought she was smart. When she shut him out, he told her he admired her independence. When she disappeared into her writing room, he marveled at her dedication. You’re an artist, he said. You’re a brilliant artist.

Maggie knew that it had only been that look though, that first night. A look of belonging and bravery that had been surprisingly easy to keep up. It was just like putting on the same shirt everyday. An easy, meaningless action. She had looked at him everyday with a bravery and assuredness so false. And by believing it was real, he had made it easy for her to hate him.

Sam’s band is called Turtle Wax and Sam plays guitar and sings and writes all the songs. Tonight Dirk plays lead guitar and Sam only sings or, on some songs, he light taps
a tambourine against his bandaged hand. Maggie sits at a booth and watches. She stirs her
drink. She draws a cartoon of the keyboard player. People are dancing. Girls up front call
out names of songs. There are about thirty people in the bar. Half are in bands that have
played already or would play later. Maggie likes Sam best when he is onstage. He isn’t
looking at her. He looks as if several pieces of himself have suddenly slid into place. He
is beautiful to watch. Maggie doesn’t care for his songs much. She knows little about
music. She wonders if she looked this way to her students. She wonders if she looked
liked she belonged in front of them. Sam looks like he belongs and the crowd sings his
lyrics back to him and Maggie’s students nodded back at her as she spoke and Sam is
singing now, onstage, the commanding spectacle in the room, and he sings without any
fear or awareness and Maggie suddenly wants to get very, very drunk and she wants Sam
to want to dance with her again on her porch. She wants to want to be alone with him
again. She wants him to look at her again with longing and ask if he can come into her
house, which is now their house. She wants him to ask her again so that the choice is hers
to say, Yes.

Sam’s set ends and Maggie knows her job is to wait and smile reassuringly from
across the room. Sam does not want to talk to her now. Now is his time to get affection
from others. The crowd. His bandmates. Hers is for later, much later, when he’ll ask as
they fall asleep, Was it OK? How was the sound? And she will tell him, Great.

Now she waits. She gets another drink and sits by herself. Sam will drink and
pack his instruments and when the bar is closing, she will take him home. She draws
again on a napkin. She makes lists. She writes down all the ways that people say, You are
welcome. It’s nothing, think nothing of it, forget about it, my pleasure.
When she looks up, Richard is sitting in the booth across from her. He says, The worst one is *No problema*.

Gross, Maggie says.

This is nice, he says, picking up one of her napkins. Maybe if this teaching thing doesn’t work out you can be a caricature artist on a boardwalk somewhere.

I was thinking Venice Beach, she says.

Sure, he says.

I’m just bored.

You look bored, Richard says. He lifts her drink from her hands and puts it up to his forehead. Ugh, my head, he says. Maggie looks for signs of swelling or redness or anything in face that would explain that statement. What do you mean? Are in pain? she wants to ask, but doesn’t. She is surprised by the sudden concern she feels for his head. He drinks from her glass. He nods and finishes what is left. He walks away. Maggie watches him. He moves slowly toward the stage and places her empty glass on one of Sam’s amps and then leaves the bar.

Sam falls heavily into bed. Tonight he is too drunk to ask for her congratulations. Maggie lies awake and stares at her ceiling. She imagines she is on a talk show. She has just won the National Book Award.

Work ethic, she says to the host. It’s simple, really. I love my work. You have to. That’s how you get good. You work. Once you are good keep working hard and then you become great.

Do you think you are great? The host asks.
I do, Maggie says.

It is a performance. It doesn’t matter that the teacher doesn’t have all the answers. She stands in front of the class and is their leader. They did not get to vote for her, she just arrives, on time, prepared, and leads them. It’s so simple. She gives them something to read, something to look at. She asks them what they see in words and ideas and they answer.

Teaching allows her to ask any questions she wants under the guise of ‘writing prompts.’ What do you love? she asks. Why do you love it? How is what you love a sort of definition of who you are? Be specific.

They answer. They love hand-written letters, sleeping in on a rainy day, the smell of their dog, a boyfriend’s sweatshirt, filing their nails, making lists and then blacking through tasks with heavy lines, the warmth of a hair dryer on scalp in the morning.

They are fascinating to Maggie. They are hers. They seem to like talking about what they love. They smile back at her and laugh and read their lists sheepishly. One student asks Maggie if she had written anything down? What did Maggie love? Will she tell the class? Maggie nods, but says, Oh, you’ll hear enough of my voice this semester. You don’t need any more out of me. This time is about you.

This, too—this demurring—is a part of the performance. She lowers her eyelids slowly and opens them slowly. Are waves of admiration moving from them to her? It seems a tangible force. Maggie is doing everything right. One student waits for her after class and asks more questions.
Could you explain that first assignment again? the student says. Her name is Marjorie. The rest of the class exits. A few students wave good-bye.

See you next week, Maggie says casually. She stacks papers, packs them away. Have a nice weekend. Then to Marjorie she says, Walk with me.

Maggie and Marjorie walk outside and the leaves on the trees are just beginning to change and the air is warm and Marjorie is looking at her with seriousness and respect and Maggie is looking back with seriousness and knowledge and they are speaking to one another so carefully and it is just how she wants to be seen, if only someone could see her right now, see this moment, if only she could hold on to this feeling she feels and have it be what guides her, what grounds her. If only she could remember this forever. And she will have to write this down to never forget it. She wants to draw a picture of it. She wants a photographer. She wants a documentary film crew following her right now. She wants a voice-over saying, They walked together and spoke and here is Maggie, so brilliant. The artist. The educator. And then Richard is walking toward them and Maggie sees it as some sort of miracle, some sort of perfect, fated moment. She is not imagining it. He is walking toward them carrying a shoulder bag similar to Maggie’s and a cup of coffee and Maggie, too, is holding a paper cup with coffee in it and he sees her. He nods. She nods back. My colleague, Maggie says to Marjorie who also now sees Richard seeing them. The word ‘colleague’ is the most beautiful word Maggie has ever said. They keep walking, they pass and say nothing to each other, but she knows that she is in on something now. She is a part of something.
How could Sam understand that she wasn’t excited about Saturdays in the same way anymore? He wanted to have a picnic, how could she hold that against him? Sam hands her a thermos of coffee and stretches out on the blanket next to her. He reaches over and holds her wrist lightly. He closes his eyes. The sun is bright and in the park there are couples with babies and dogs and Maggie wishes, so much, that she were in her office on campus. She would like to say to Sam, I have to go, I have a meeting with a student. She’d like that to be true. She’d like to sit in her office chair, legs crossed, listening to a student discuss their frustrations. I know, she would say to the student, it is so hard. I, too, stare at my computer screen for hours, hoping words will come. But this is all part of it. This is our work. Staring, pacing, thinking. Beware those who mistake this for laziness!

The student would smile, relieved to be understood, and say, Yes, exactly.

Along with sandwiches and salad, Sam brings a Frisbee out of a basket and places it on Maggie’s lap. He closes his eyes again. Maggie can’t think of anything she’d like to do less than run out on this warm day, chasing a Frisbee.

This feels so nice, to just relax with you, Sam says. Maggie’s jaw tightens. How had she gotten stuck out here without even a book? Nice to break from your academic shit, huh? He says.

I’ve only been in school and teaching for a week. I don’t really need a break yet.

You’ve been sitting around the house all spaced-out.

I’ve been thinking a lot.
Well, I’m here to help you find your way back to reality. So you don’t drown in your head. He rubs her elbow and then kisses it. Reality, remember? The place where people love you.

People love me.

*People* think you are smart, he says. I love you.

How can Maggie explain to him that she wants those two things to mean the same thing?

Look at you, Richard says. He leans against the doorframe. Just then she had been thinking of him, pretending to have a conversation with him in her head. In this conversation, she had been listening to him speak of the poet Don. He spoke beautifully of Don, passionately and he shared his love with her. The unexpectedness of his actual appearance makes Maggie feel as though her office is flooded with light, exposing. Suddenly, she can be seen too clearly. She wants to make everything dim again. What does her office look like to Richard? She tries to see the exact image of herself through his eyes. She straightens her back and smiles slowly.

Look at you, she says. She has stacked her papers on the floor. Her books are everywhere, out of order, lying sideways on the shelf, stacked on her desk. Her shoes are off. She bites the eraser of the pencil in her hand. She is exactly right. Busy, messy, a writer in her element. A woman of serious thought and practice, the evidence of which is falling from her desk and poking out of her packed shoulder bag. This is just how she wants it to be when he looks at her.

Should we have a drink, he says?
How’s your manuscript coming along? She says. She drums her pencil on her
desk. She crosses her legs.

It’s terrible. I hate it. Let’s go somewhere and drink those adult beverages and
never talk about poets again.

Maggie sighs in way she hopes reflects a knowing exhaustion.

Fantastic, she says.

Her desire for Richard begins like this. Like a sickness, an unabating dizziness.
Like when she has had too much to drink and tries to close her eyes to make the
drunkenness go away. It does not go away easily and things spin inside her closed eyes.
And she thinks, If only this feeling would stop and she asks it to stop, but it is too late.
When Maggie is this drunk there is nothing that can be done or achieved. She could not
save anyone from death or speak reasonably or read or even make it to the bathroom in
time. She has peed in her bed. She has lost control of every part of herself and all she can
think of is that she has created this. She knows, when she drinks, that there is a line ever
approaching. All one has to do is stop drinking and that line stays in the distance. This is
what it is to desire him. It is like those nights when everything seems to be going well
and the weather is warm and there are friendly people at the bar and she is feeling good
about herself and she drinks too much and, later, wakes up puking. She has woken up
feeling exhausted and depressed and still unable accomplish a single task. She has lain
next to vomit in her bed for hours in the morning because she cannot clean it up and it is
her vomit after all, it has come from her body and choices she has made so she’ll lie next
to it if she wants to and she’ll think about Richard if she wants to and people can be so
judgmental. There is no one to whom she could tell any of this or anything at all because people will look at her and find her disgusting, or worse, they will try to help her. She wants to left alone with her vomit and she wants to be left alone with her desire for Richard and does this make her a bad person? And even if the answer is yes, is she not still a person? And if the answer to that is yes, then aren’t there billions of people, and, if yes, then how can anyone know what is good or bad for anyone else and isn’t it all relative? Don’t some people stab other people in face?

She will, many times, have to ask Richard for clarification. Much later, long after Sam is gone, she will be at a bar and Richard will say, after his girlfriend goes to get another drink, Richard will say, I can’t introduce you to her. I’m sorry. I still feel weird about us. Then the girlfriend will return and Maggie will pretend not to know them. A second more alone with Richard and she would have said, Weird? Please define that. Be specific. Tell me all the different things that could mean.

She is always misunderstanding him. She is always thinking he means something he doesn’t. Later, he will push against her and kiss her in a way that feels desperate and she will be sure that he feels the pain she does, the urgency. She is sure he has said, I fucking love you, but then he sees her face and speaks again. I’m being vulgar, I know, but really. It’s true, he says. In the morning, after he has left, she realizes that what he had really said was, I love fucking you. She will shower, make coffee, feed the cat, and when Sam comes homes later that day, she will tell him that she has fucked another man and ask him to move out.
Sam is reading in the green chair. He pretends to not look up from his book when Maggie enters the apartment, but she has already caught his look. Sam is not a reader. He is someone who looks at the occasional newspaper article, but he is not a reader. Maggie knows because she lives with Sam and because she, Maggie is, a reader. Maggie holds books and looks at them and sees her bookshelf and thinks, often to herself, *There is so much to look forward to.*

I’m home, Maggie says.

Sam raises his book and mutters.

Maggie knows she has to make a choice. She wants to lie down, to read her own book, to be left alone with her thoughts which would be, she knows, about Richard. Instead, she bites. What are you reading? she asks.

Oh, this very interesting book about writing, Sam says. I thought maybe I’d write some stories, too. I write songs. I could do this. Writing could be something we could share.

Maggie wants this to be meaningful. She wants this to make her feel loved, moved, neutral even. Instead, for this, for what he has said and how he has said it, she thinks less of him.

Sam continues. Writing stories and songs are practically the same thing, he says.

Her fingers rest on her keyboard. She doesn’t know how long she has been looking at her wall. She wishes she could hear something else, something beyond the buzzing of her own voice in her mind. She wishes her mind could make another sound.
Her fingers are positioned on the keyboard as if she were about to play the piano instead of write a story. She can hear Sam getting ready for bed. She knows he will brush his teeth, take a quick shower, then will settle between the sheets, slippery and cold and wet and will wait for her. She listens to faucet sounds and water. She arches her fingers over the keyboard, her hands in playing position and she moves them lightly, pretending she is playing something shocking, loud, beautiful. When she was younger, she had played the piano. She had been good, but has forgotten how to play any song now. But her hands remember the correct position and how to move gracefully, how to stretch out for a chord. How can her hands remember this movement, but not be able to control the movements to make a song anymore? Not a single song? She must have known hundreds at one point, but all that knowledge, that naturalness at the piano is gone. Where did it go? How can it be so easily unlearned? She doesn’t type a word, but keeps fake playing, her hands moving as if with separate minds to make separate sounds that somehow fit together.

She is tired. Sam has turned out all of the lights in their apartment. She leaves her writing room and moves blindly to the kitchen. It is easy to move around her apartment in the dark now. After so many years, she knows where everything is, where walls end and where turns are. Her body knows how far to move itself down the hallway before curving into the kitchen. Her hand reaches, at the right moment, to brace what frames the kitchen’s entryway. How long had it taken to know her way in the dark? she thinks. How easily could it be unlearned?

She remembers the night Sam had moved in. He had taken off his clothes in the bright light of their now shared bedroom. She had watched him, feeling no hesitation or
resentment in her love for him. She’d looked at him with a lust that suffocated her, made
her feel heavy, rooted to where she sat on the bed, waiting for him. This had been four
and a half years ago. Then, he was so new to her. This love was the love, she had been
unshakably sure. He had been sure. Soon he would walk toward her and kiss her and curl
her to him and her idea of home would change to include him, and her days would
include him inescapably, and they would learn to share themselves and everything. And
he had stood there, looking at her, in the light of the bedroom, he’d stared at her, he’d
said, I love you completely, and it hadn’t seemed trite or dumb, but had seemed like the
only time anyone had ever said those words and meant it, but now, as Maggie remembers
those words and that feeling, as she thinks about it now, alone in the darkness of her
kitchen, she can’t think of anything more trite and dumb than those words and her once
sure faith in their singularity.

In the kitchen she sees a bowl on the counter and in the dark she thinks the bowl
holds grapes. She suddenly wants to eat grapes very badly. She wants the sweetness of a
grape, the sensation of biting and breaking the skin. She eats one, but they are not grapes,
but small tomatoes and she is so disappointed that the desire for a grape consumes her.
The taste of tomato is not unsweet, but is not a grape and the not grape taste in her mouth
makes it so that all she wants is the taste of a grape and she can’t have one. She now
hates tomatoes. She feels as though she may cry out from hatred of tomatoes. She drinks
a glass of water to expel the wretched taste from her mouth, or she drinks the glass of
water hoping that if she just doesn’t taste tomato than maybe the desire for a grape would
also leave her. She drinks. She moves water around her mouth and spits it out. She sits on
the floor of the kitchen and cries. She is glad that Sam is asleep because how could she
ever explain to him why she is crying about grapes? He would laugh at her, or worse, he would try to understand and comfort her and she would hate him for that. He would nod like he knew her and could fix her and she would hate him for that. He would hold her and tell her to calm down and that she was being irrational and she would never be able to explain it to him and why didn’t he get it? It isn’t about grapes at all! It’s about the impossible, implacable sadness that comes from wanting something that doesn’t exist!

Tomatoes are what exist in her kitchen at this moment and it is Sam who is waiting in her bed and so she lies down next to him and is grateful that he is heavily asleep because if he were to turn over and touch her, she would cry out for Richard. She would drive to grocery store and eat grapes as fast as she could. She breathes. If she could sleep now, maybe she would wake up without any desires at all. She stares at the ceiling that she knows is there, but cannot see in the darkness. She remembers a child on a bus talking to his mother. She had been sitting behind them on her way to school. This had been many years ago. The child had said, The sky is pretty, and the mother had said, Yes it is. The child had said, I want it. The mother had said, You can’t have it. It can’t belong to anyone. Do you understand? And the child had said, Yes. But I want it. And then the child had cried until the bus reached their stop and mother and child left.

Now, the mother probably tells the child, who is many years older, about that story and they both laugh and they can laugh about it because the child has, by now, probably forgotten his desire to own the sky and sees the memory as just a folly of youth, but Maggie had seen how despairing he had been in that moment. How consuming that despair had been for the child, but now it’s gone and just a funny story, and how can that be? How can anyone trust anything they feel in a moment when in the next moment that
feeling can be an anecdote? And who was the child in that moment and why isn’t he that person now? And who was she when she said, on that first night, when her apartment became theirs, on their first night of living together, that she, too, loved Sam completely. And he had turned out the light and had followed the walls with his hands in the darkness, barely making it back to where she sat, waiting for him. And he had kissed her and made love to her and then they had laid awake in the dark, trying to see shapes emerge, and they couldn’t see anything, just as she, now staring into the dark, can’t see anything, but then, when they had stared together, they had been certain that shapes would emerge. That if they looked long enough together, they’d see anything they wanted to see. It would take time. And she had lain in the crooks of him. She had put her ear in the place that made his elbow.

She had said, When you die, I’ll keep your body.

I’ll make a necklace with your teeth.

I’ll make earrings with your eyes.

I’ll make blankets from your hair, your skin.

She’d said, I’ll take your arm with me. I’ll wear it like a scarf. And people will ask: great scarf, who is it?

And Sam had said, Just put me in the ground.

And Maggie had been, in that moment, so deeply sad, so consumed with the fear of his death, consumed with the desire to keep him with her forever that she had cried into his chest and said, How could I? How could I put you in the ground? How can anyone?
Maggie’s mother had fainted behind the wheel of their Ford pick-up and crashed it, so now they are out shopping for a new one. They kick tires.

Nobody listens to what you say, Maggie’s mother says. Only actions count. Look like you belong here.

Maggie leans down and squeezes a tire with her hands. She sniffs at it. She doesn’t know how to look like someone who knows about trucks. Her mother has only taught her how to choose the ripest fruit. Her mother nudges her up with her foot.

You’re embarrassing us, she says.

Maggie’s mother injured her wrist when their truck hit the light pole. A bystander saw and insisted on calling an ambulance. Maggie’s mother doesn’t eat much. They had been coming back from the grocery store when the accident happened. They had collected a cart of food, but then Maggie’s mother got into an argument with the checkout lady who was also the mother of a school friend of Maggie’s, and then they left without the food. Maggie thinks her mother should eat more and then she wouldn’t faint and they wouldn’t hit light poles with their truck.

Maggie had hit her head on the passenger dash and felt a little dizzy so she sat down on the curb and watched her mother speak with the bystander. Her mother said Fuck off to the bystander and it was the first time Maggie heard the word Fuck said by an adult. No ambulance came. Now her mother’s wrist was wrapped in white gauze. Under
the gauze, Maggie knew the wrist was purple and twice it’s normal size and was too soft
to hold or squeeze. If it were fruit, Maggie would know not to choose it.

A salesman approaches and Maggie’s mother says, When we’re ready, we’ll
come to you.

He puts up his hands and walks backward, smiling.

Tough customer, he says and shakes a finger at Maggie’s mother. I’m ready for
you. He steps forward again. He leans down to be Maggie’s height.

Where’s your Daddy? he asks. He reaches to touch Maggie’s head, but her
mother catches the man’s hand and holds it back, holds his eyes. He stands so that he is
now taller. Taller than both Maggie and her mother.

Great-looking little gal you got, he says. His voice has changed. Each word now
sounds the same. Before there had been a rising and falling. Listening to him, Maggie had
thought of being at the carnival. She wanted cotton candy. She is hungry. Now he sounds
like one note being played over and over.

She’d look great in this truck riding around with her great-looking mom. This is a
fine truck for two fine ladies, he says. Good choice you’ve made here.

This is not a choice we’ve made yet, Maggie’s mother says. The salesman’s hands
go back up, palms facing them. He walks away. He smiles. Maggie still wants cotton
candy.

Her mothers turns back to the truck and says, I do the choosing. I make the
choices. That’s how we don’t get screwed.

Maggie wants a yellow truck. Yellow is her favorite color. A few weeks ago,
Maggie asked for yellow shoes and her mother sent her to her room. Later, Maggie’s
mother called her to the kitchen table. They sat across from each other. Maggie’s
mother’s hands were folded together.

First, she said, Don’t ask anyone for anything. She rubbed her eyes with her
knuckles and sighed. This was before the truck crashed and her wrists were still the same
size. There is no second point, actually, she said and sent Maggie back to her room.

Later, Maggie’s mother stood outside Maggie’s closed door and said, I will know
if you need shoes and then I will buy you shoes and those shoes will be black and will
show fewer stains than yellow shoes. Her mother sounded tired. Her mother sounded as if
her mouth were pressed directly into the wood that separated them. That is called
practicality, she whispered.

This morning Maggie had found a pair of black sneakers in a white box on her
bed. They were a size too big and soon blisters formed and hurt her. She couldn’t find
bandages. They were out of them. She would not ask for more. She taped bits of a paper
towel between and around her toes and that worked pretty well.

Maggie’s mother is reciting a list; she is whispering the list to herself in the
parking lot of the new and used car and truck store. Maggie listens. She thinks she
understands what each word means by itself, but does not know what they mean when
they are put side by side.

The truck must track when hands come off the wheel, her mother says, hushed
and mumbling. The truck must brake in a line that is straight. The truck, when at full lock
right and then left, must not make any weird sounds. Maggie’s mother stares at the
ground and nods her head in a slow, steady rhythm. The transmission must move
smoothly through all gears. She says the list again and then once more and then looks coolly at Maggie. She says, We’re ready.

That truck was no good, Maggie’s mother says on the bus ride home and Maggie is glad because the truck was an ugly green and the salesman had told Maggie that it was the same as the color of her eyes and now Maggie hates her eyes. Maggie wants pancakes for dinner.

The bus ride is long and it is abnormally hot, even for July, and all the seats are taken, so they stand. Twice, people bump into Maggie’s mother’s wrist and Maggie looks for an expression that signals pain, but her mother smiles once and does nothing with her face the other time. Their bus arrives at the downtown station. Forty minutes later, the rural line comes and takes them out of the city, down dirt roads, and drops them half a mile from their farm. They are wet and red-faced when they arrive home. The gauze on Maggie’s mother’s wrist has loosened and bunched and so she rips it off completely and puts it in her pocket. The bend of the break makes her arm and hand look like a swan’s head and neck. Maggie thinks it is beautiful. Maggie’s toes hurt.

My feet are bleeding, she says to her mother.

Convince yourself that they are not.

I’m tired.

Tell yourself you aren’t.

Near the front door are eleven boxes that hold items that belong to Maggie’s father. Maggie’s mother had packed them on the same day that Maggie’s father had left.
They were neatly taped and labeled and stacked. With her index finger, Maggie traces the words, *RECREATIONAL CLOTHING*, marked in tall letters on the side of a box.

Can we look at dad’s things? Maggie asks.

Why would one do that?

Can we have pancakes for dinner?

Think in simpler terms.

Cereal.

Ok. Maggie’s mother gets down a bowl from the cupboard.

I’m sleepy. Maggie yawns. She wants to remove her shoes. A show she likes is on television tonight.

Can I have my cereal in the other bowl? Maggie asks.

Your father did a terrible job of raising you.

Dad let me eat out of the bowl. Even when we ate sandwiches.

Heartbreak accompanies those who attach themselves to things as insignificant as bowls, she says, but then replaces the one she has already taken down and finds the yellow bowl in the sink. She washes it carefully and dries it. The cereal she fills it with is yellow. She places it in front of Maggie and hands her the milk jug, too.

The answering machine has three messages. The first is from Maggie’s sister Emily who didn’t come home from college this summer, but instead stayed in New York. The message tells them that Emily has an internship at a printing house that produces textbooks and consumer manuals. So much paper, Emily’s bright voice says. You wouldn’t believe how much paper there is in the world!
Maggie’s mother stops the message before it is over. She’s out of our hands now. Nothing we can do for her anymore.

Maggie nods. Maggie thinks Emily is the prettiest girl in the world and wants to be just like her.

The second message is from the salesman at the truck store. He says, We couldn’t convince you to buy a truck today? Will you give me another chance? Come back.

Satisfaction. Hello to the little one. Frank Brick, here. From today. Please call about that truck. It was talking about you after you left. It said, I really wish that woman would come back and buy me. I love the way it felt to be driven by her. Ok. You think about it. Frank Brick, here.

The third message is also from Frank Brick. Hello, there! Seems like the little gal left her coat behind. Better come back for the coat. Or I will drop it by. Got your info on some forms here. I could come by in that truck you drove today. It misses you. It would love to see you. Ok, give us a call.

Maggie’s mother’s face looks tighter. Her mouth turns down. Her fingers stay on the answering machine. I’m going to the barn, she says. Her fingers move to her wrist and stay, lightly, there.

Can I come with you? Maggie asks.

Not tonight.

Please?

Flashcards.
Maggie spoons in as much cereal as she can, knowing her mother won’t wait for her to finish eating. The flashcards are spread on the table. Each hold a word on one side and the meaning on the other. All are written in her mother’s small, neat cursive.

She gathers the cards and hands them over and her mother is out the door. Maggie chews faster. She leaves the bowl on the table. It will be there in the morning and through the next day until the milk smells so badly that one of them dumps it down the sink. The sink is full now. The mailbox outside their house is full. They’ve stopped bringing in the bills. The washing machine is full of clothes they intend to wash, but haven’t. They keep forgetting to buy laundry soap.

Maggie’s mother is already half way to the barn so Maggie runs to catch up with her.

Trenchant! Her mother yells.

Sharply perceptive! Keen! Penetrating! Maggie yells back, out of breath.

The space between them shortens.

Specious! her mother calls.

Seeming true, but actually fallacious! Maggie replies.

The space around them is vast. Two hundred and forty acres of wheat and woods.

Maggie’s mother raises and trains horses. She used to travel around the country giving lectures about proper handling techniques. She had to cancel her travels and speaking engagements because Maggie’s father moved out months ago and gave no notice and Emily was staying at college instead of coming home for the summer and now who would raise Maggie but her? There is no other choice, Maggie’s mother had said on the
phone to someone who arranged her affairs. Cancel Dubuque. Cancel Albuquerque. Cancel everything for…? She looked at Maggie. The next nine years, I guess.

Her mother is raising an Arabian now. They are getting to know each other. The horse doesn’t like anyone and often stomps the ground and makes noises that scare Maggie. Maggie doesn’t like horses. Maggie likes her mother. Maggie likes to sit on stacked hay bales and watch her mother work. Before her father left, no one was allowed in the barn. It is different now. Maggie is allowed watch.

Her mother brushes the horse and feeds it by hand. She cleans the horse’s feet with a pick and rubs oil into the hard hoof. The horse is sick and Maggie’s mother carefully gives injections. This is his favorite spot, Maggie’s mother says and scratches him near the base of the neck. The horse’s head lowers. Ok, Ok, she says. Shhh, you’re Ok, she whispers as the needles go in.

Maggie has long brown hair and horse has short gray hair. Her mother has set down an oval, rough-bristled brush and Maggie picks it up and strokes her own hair with it. It hurts her. The bristles, too sharp, pierce her scalp. It is meant for horses, not for her. She puts it down.

How do you know that’s his favorite spot? Maggie asks.

More flashcards, her mother says.

I’m tired. My head is bleeding. I’m sick.

Study. This will be helpful came fall. I am trying to arm you against a world that dismisses nearly everything and everyone.

Oh, Maggie says. She thinks the world her mother refers to is more than fourth grade, next year. It’s something more.
In the house, the answering machine blinks. They play two messages but both are only the sound of a phone hanging up. Maggie’s mother looks at the clock on their kitchen wall. It’s late.

It’s late, she says. Bedtime.

Who called us? Maggie asks.

Bedtime, her mother says.

Maggie cleans her teeth carefully. Gargles with purpose. She changes her clothing. Their house is shaped like a long, shallow rectangle with Maggie’s bedroom on one end, her mother’s on the other, and their large kitchen in the center. Maggie hates bedtime because she has to walk away from the brightness of the kitchen, its lights always on in the night, to her dark end of the house. Alone in it, her bed feels enormous and the country can be so quiet, black, and big. She tucks her blankets tightly on either side of her, closes her eyes, and tries to sleep. She wonders how many people would be able to find her, find their farmhouse, so far out of town, so many acres to search through. She runs her fingers along her scalp, through her hair, she scratches her neck, her own shoulder. She finds some horse hair the brush has left on her. She holds a few strands, rougher and much thicker than hers. She rolls them through her fingers. Ok, Ok, she says quietly. You’re Ok.

Maggie’s mother has a box of frozen waffles and syrup set out on the breakfast table. She hasn’t changed her clothes from the day before. She is sitting in the same chair
she was sitting in when Maggie went to bed. Maggie would like to eat her breakfast next to her mother. She’d like to share the chair her mother is sitting in.

   Eat, her mother says. She digs the fist from her good hand into her left eye. She drops the fist to the table. She looks punched. She watches the phone.

   Maggie stands as closely as she can to her mother. She wants to sit on her lap, but doesn’t ask for what she wants. Her mother lets Maggie stand near her for a few seconds and then says, I’m going to the barn.

   Maggie’s mother is in the barn the rest of the day. Maggie draws and looks at her flashcards and watches television. The phone rings, but she does not answer it and no one leaves a message. She eats twelve frozen waffles and nothing else and tucks herself into bed at nine, which is her bedtime.

   Hours later—or it could have been minutes later because it is hard to tell time in darkness and sleep—a bright light moves slowly through Maggie’s room and the sound of tires crunching gravel can be heard. In the moments before waking, Maggie dreams that her father is home, then she dreams it is her mother coming home from a horse show, then she remembers that her dad is gone and her mother is no longer traveling and that they don’t have a truck anymore that would make that sound, that crushing sound made only by something heavy moving up the drive, toward the house. So it must be someone else.

   Maggie opens her eyes. The headlights fill the room with so much light that there is nothing else that can be seen. The lights keep moving and when they pass, her room comes into focus a bit. From the corner of Maggie’s room, a form emerges—a body, a person, her mother, her mother’s face. She is sitting upright in a hard-backed chair. Her
mother isn’t moving, just looking straight ahead. The headlights are moving. They reposition. Whoever is here is leaving. The headlights cross Maggie’s room again.

Are we scared? Maggie asks quietly.

Her mother doesn’t answer. Maggie wonders if her mother has heard her. Then Maggie wonders if she has actually said the words out loud.

Should we cry?

Accomplishing what, exactly? Her mother says.

Jody’s mother cried. Remember? We saw her crying in the grocery store?

Who is Jody’s mother?

Jody’s in my class. Her mom works at the grocery store. She asked you about Dad? She said, ‘Sometimes people cry’ and then she cried? Remember?

The world will forget Jody’s mother.

Will the world forget us?

Yes.

Will you sleep in here tonight? Maggie asks.

No, her mother says and stands and leaves, but doesn’t shut the door all the way, allowing a tiny glow of light from the kitchen to stay present in Maggie’s room.

In the morning, Maggie’s mother is lying on the floor of the kitchen. She has a blanket wrapped around her, but no pillow. She is awake, staring at the ceiling. I didn’t prepare any breakfast, she says.

It’s ok. Maggie opens the fridge. She unwraps a chunk of cheese and takes two bites from it. She rewraps and replaces it in the fridge. She drinks a glass of tap water.
The kitchen table, the countertops, corners of the floor are covered with evidence of their life together. Books about horses, doodles, notes, flashcards, plates with crumbs and crusts, cups with water in them, her mother on the floor.

Did you sleep here last night? Maggie asks.

Sleep is hard.

What do you mean?

Closing your eyes is hard.

What does that mean? Maggie whines. I don’t understand.

Maggie’s mother sits up and faces Maggie and Maggie feels a little nervous. Her mother’s hair is matted flat and she has not changed from the clothes she put on three days ago. She says nothing. She walks to the door and Maggie follows. She follows her mother to the barn. She watches her mother care for the sick horse.

How do you know which spot is his favorite spot? Maggie asks, watching her mother scratch the long neck. Again, needles go unnoticed.

Maggie’s mother doesn’t answer. Maggie suddenly wonders if she doesn’t understand the act of speaking, of making sound. She thinks she is producing words, but they find no reaction, so how does she know she has spoken out loud? Maybe the problem is hers, her brain’s connection to her vocal chords. Maggie touches her throat. She presses down. She tries to feel a vibration, a physical feeling that something inside is moving tangibly out of her and toward her mother. Her mother says nothing.

Maggie says, Hello Mom, in what she thinks is in just her mind. She tries not to make a real sound. Her mother does nothing. Then she screams, Hello Mom, in what she thinks ‘out loud’ means. She screams, Hello, hello, hello. Her mother tenses a bit. Is that
a sign of recognition? Maggie doesn’t know. She can’t tell. She tries to go back and forth between speaking within herself and speaking to be heard. She tries to feel a physical change in her body. Both times, in both cases, Maggie hears herself, but sees nothing.

A few hours later, Maggie’s mother walks back into the house. Maggie follows. They spend the rest of the day in the kitchen, sitting in what Maggie thinks is silence.

In sleep that night, Maggie dreams of bells that ring and never stop. She sees them, heavy brass, swinging. She tries to hold them still, but can’t. As she begins to wake, she realizes the bell she hears is the phone ringing. She gets out of bed and moves, blindly, down the dark hallway to the kitchen where her mother sits, wrapped in a blanket. Her mother can’t see her because Maggie is standing outside the kitchen door in the darkness. Maggie can see her mother and watches her. She watches the phone. When it rings again, Maggie’s mother crawls slowly, on all fours, to it. She picks up the receiver and asks in a very quiet voice, Please stop calling.

Maggie walks into the light of the kitchen, walks to her mother. Her mother lets out a little cry. Maggie sits on the floor with her and does not try to touch her, but sits very close. Her mother shares the blanket. This seems to steady her and when the headlights appear in the drive and when the knock sounds on the door, she seems to have been expecting it all along. She seems ready. They stand up in unison, still wrapped in the same blanket. They are one lumpy body and two heads and they open the door together and see Frank Brick standing there. They see him at the same time. He is smiling. He is holding keys and a cardboard box.

Oh, good. You’re home, he says.
It’s so late, says Maggie’s mother.

Came by to return the little gal’s coat. He is not holding a coat.

It’s so hot, says Maggie’s mother. Maggie hadn’t worn a coat in months.

Came by to tell you about our new promotion deal, Frank Brick says. We’ll just loan you the truck for a few weeks. Then you call in and tell us how the truck is doing. If it’s treating you right. If it’s saying nice things when you tell it to get up and go. What do you think? Want to take care our guy for a while? Maybe this is his home.

What’s in the box? Maggie asks.

This is for you. Frank Brick hands Maggie the box. She opens it. Inside is a sleeping kitten. The kitten moves. Her mother screams.

Thought the girl should have a kitten, Frank Brick says without blinking.

Maggie’s mother raises a hand from the blanket to shut the door. The hand she raises is her injured one. The bruises are fading into green and gray. Frank Brick leans into the doorframe and catches her hand at the wrist. He holds it gently, encircles it completely with his thumb and middle finger.

You should really have someone look at that, he says.

We don’t want the truck, Maggie’s mother says.

Oh, well, it’s too late for that. He moves to the side of the doorframe, no longer blocking it entirely, and from around his body they can see there is a second set of headlights in the driveway. The truck stays, he says.

Ok, her mother says.

You call to tell us how it’s doing, he says.

Ok.
He places the keys in the hand he still holds. Her mother cringes. Pain. Maggie sees it clearly.

What’s all this? he says, and taps the eleven boxes stacked next to the door with the hand that is free.

My husband’s things, Maggie’s mother says. She is shaking. Maggie wonders what her mother has eaten today.

Gone is he? Flew the coup? Left you ladies lonely?

Maggie’s mother’s eyes look dulled. Slackened. Even though they are open, they look like they can’t see what is in front of them.

You know what you should do? You should take these boxes to the driveway. You should take that bright, shiny truck I brought for you and you should run this shit over. You should smash his shit with my truck.

Ok, Maggie’s mother says.

He releases her wrist. The three of them look at each other for what seems like too long. Finally, he smiles then turns to leave. Goodnight, he calls over his shoulder. He walks toward the headlights until they engulf his figure and they can no longer see him at all.

Maggie brings her pillows from her bed and she and her mother lie on the floor of the kitchen. They wrap themselves in separate blankets and do not touch or speak. The kitten sleeps on Maggie’s chest. She pets it. She kisses its sleeping head. It doesn’t mind. She names it Banana.

Are we scared? Maggie asks. Can we cry?
The kitchen begins to brighten with light from outside.

Do you want to cry? her mother says.

I think so. Maggie is hungry. Her body hurts from lying on the floor. Every sound she hears that isn’t her mother makes her uneasy. She is so tired. She wants to cry. She wants her mother to cry. She wants to watch her mother smash things with the truck.

Cry like a baby. Go ahead. Her mother sits up. Stop looking at me, she says.

Maggie squeezes Banana closer. She wants to make breakfast for Banana and her mother and herself. She wants her mother to feel better. Could we drive over stuff with the truck? Maggie asks. Would that be a good thing to do?

Her mother thinks for a while then nods. She stands. She takes something from the sink and begins to walk out the door. Come on, she says. Bring that kitten. I want the kitten to see this.

Her mother takes long strides to the truck. So quickly, she covers the space between where Maggie stands and where the truck is. Maggie thinks her mother is graceful, fast. Her mother is thin and tall and has long, black hair that she never ties up. Her mother has pale skin and Maggie remembers a morning when her father reached across the kitchen table to touch her mother’s face. He had said to Maggie, You’re so lucky. Look at your mother’s face. This is what you’ll look like someday. You have so much to look forward to.

Maggie sees her mother bend and place something on the ground near the truck’s front tire. It is Maggie’s yellow bowl. Her mother gets into the truck, starts it, and runs over the bowl twice. Forward first, then backs up. She turns the truck off and walks away, toward the barn, leaving Maggie alone to watch.
Every night, Maggie and her mother sleep on the kitchen floor. Items from their rooms and other corners of the house accumulate, here, in the center of their house. Maggie’s pajamas are folded in a drawer with the silverware. They eat very little. They talk less. They move from the kitchen to the barn and then back; the rest of the house forgotten. Maggie’s mother gives one-word answers into the phone when it rings. It rings many times a day. It is the only sound her mother seems to recognize and respond to in a way that is clear to Maggie.

When slow-moving headlights move up their long drive again one night, Maggie feels afraid, but also feels joy. She wonders if her mother will share her blanket again. She wonders if they will move together, at the same time, to see what is coming toward them, who will knock. Her mother had been in pain, Maggie had seen it, and Maggie had been there and her mother had let her be there. Had let her sit next to her on the floor for the rest of the night, awake and scared. Maggie wants this again, but when the headlights stop their seeking and sound of car doors open and close, Maggie’s mother says, Stay here. Don’t move, and Maggie is left in the kitchen while her mother talks to the man at the door. Maggie kisses the top of Banana’s ears and scratches the kitten’s neck. She would feel worse, more alone, if she didn’t know that a greater fear, much greater than Frank Brick, would arrive soon for her mother and when it arrived, this fear, her mother would be cut wide open. The horse was dying, Maggie knew. But she would still be there. At the house. With her mother. Maggie would be the only one left.
The horse dies at night while Maggie is asleep and dreaming about singing. Her mother is singing in her dream, but the singing keeps changing and Maggie starts to wake and realize that her mother is moaning. Her mother is not moaning in the kitchen or in the house, but far away somewhere, so Maggie’s mother is probably not moaning, but is more like screaming and it is the distance between them that softens the sound.

Maggie follows the sound to the barn. She hears her mother. She sees her. Her mother is trying to keep the horse on its feet, but the horse is heaviest in death and wants to fall to the ground. Her mother’s hands, arms, shoulders, all push against the leaning horse.

I need help. Her mother is screaming. Her body struggles, it shakes under the weight of the dead horse. I need help. Where is everybody?

Maggie runs to her mother and together they strain to keep the horse, the hugeness of this animal, from falling down.

He has to stand! Keep him standing! Maggie’s mother says. She is weeping. It was more than Maggie had hoped for.

They lasted only a few more seconds because the animal is a thousand pounds and they are not, together, even two hundred and so the horse gets its way and falls into the dirt. Maggie’s mother falls with the horse and holds its belly and cries. The crying is grotesque, horrifying. In the way it wrecks her mother’s pale face, makes it unfamiliar, unstable, covers it in wetness, snot. Maggie sees that she gets to cry, too, and does. It is ugly and great. Her mother reaches for her. Her mother reaches for her! Death has allowed this, Maggie thinks, and is glad. Now she knows when it is appropriate to feel badly.
Maggie does not want this to end, their embrace of each other, but it does end and
in the days that follow, Maggie’s mother doesn’t speak at all, won’t look at her, leaves
the kitchen to sleep in her own room at a far end of the rectangular house. But Maggie
now knows how to fix this. Her mother has given her the tools, just as she has taught
Maggie to kick tires, to deal with strangers who show up late in the night, to choose the
right fruit.

Maggie kisses her sleeping kitten on the head. She cradles it in her arms. Ok, Ok,
she says. Shhh, you’re Ok, she says. You’re the best, Banana.

Maggie waits until it is dark and then takes the kitten out to the driveway and
places it next to the front tire of the truck. The kitten curls into itself in sleep. It yawns.
The keys are still on the driver’s seat. Maggie’s mother has left them there. Maggie turns
the truck on with some difficulty. She can’t push the pedals and see over the dash at the
same time, so when the truck jumps forward, she just hopes the tires are aimed true. She
pushes the gas pedal softly and hears a flattening. She puts the truck in reverse, she has
seen her mother do this many times, move the lever at the base of the wheel to get the
truck to change it’s direction. She backs to flatten a second time. Now it is Maggie’s turn
to moan and she does loudly until her mother appears in the drive next to her.

Help! Maggie screams. I need help! Where are you?

Her mother sees and vomits soundlessly. This, too, looks grotesque, horrifying,
and so Maggie sees it as the signal and begins to cry. She reaches for her mother. Her
mother lets her reach. Her mother picks her up and carries her back into the house.
Maggie’s mother holds her tightly. Maggie holds her mother tightly. Maggie feels so
much love.
Maggie’s mother sits in a chair in Maggie’s bedroom and says, I’m trying. I’ll try. Maggie wakes to that sound, her mother’s voice saying words softly. This has become a common occurrence. Maggie wakes from sleep to the sound of her mother speaking. Maggie’s mother seems to be talking to her all night. Her words filter into Maggie’s dreams. As soon as Maggie stirs, her mother leaves the room, so Maggie spends hours pretending to be asleep. At night, in the dark, Maggie stares at her ceiling and listens. Her mother says things like she is having a conversation with someone that Maggie cannot see or hear or know. Her mother says things like, You have to understand. You don’t know. How could you not know? She pauses often. She sighs. She breathes. She says, I don’t know. Does that make sense? How could anyone? She scratches at her skin. Sometimes, when seated with her mother at the breakfast table, Maggie can see long redness, cuts, irritation on her mother’s arms and face.

Maggie must make a choice. If she keeps pretending to sleep, she will get to listen. If she wakes, she will get to sit at the kitchen table with her mother and look at her. It is August. School will start soon. Maggie will be in class, for hours, unable to see or hear her mother. Maggie sneezes and her mother stands and walks out.

Today we will go to the grocery store, Maggie’s mother says when both she and Maggie are finished with their breakfast. She has said this, first thing in the morning, every morning, for the last ten mornings. Maggie’s mother buys lots of food. The house is now filled with food.
Maggie’s mother makes pancakes and bacon and coffee and eggs and anything Maggie wants for breakfast. Yesterday Maggie asked for spaghetti and her mother made meatballs and in the meatballs Maggie’s mother put garlic and fennel and some spices and Maggie didn’t know which ones, but did know that they made the meatballs taste good and specked them with flecks of green and they both forgot the spaghetti itself. Maggie’s mother made many meatballs and they ate them all that day, for every meal.

They’d gone to the grocery store each morning since Banana died because after Banana died, Maggie’s mother had shaken her and shaken her and Maggie had said, Stop, my stomach. I am hungry. Can we eat?

Maggie’s mother had cried and cried and sat on the floor, she lumped herself down around Maggie’s black shoes. Quietly, she’d said, What do you want?

Lasagna, Maggie said. And then her mother, still on the floor, hugged herself for a little while.

Or cereal is fine, Maggie said. But, lasagna? Her mother stood and they had taken the truck keys and Maggie’s mother had driven very fast to the grocery store. She bought twelve boxes of frozen lasagna. There were nine boxes in the freezer, still. Parts of Banana were in the driveway, still. Teeth and tufts of fur. Maggie’s mother drove over that spot often, grinding Banana into the gravel.

They also went to the grocery store to talk to Jody’s mother. Mrs. Balm. Maggie’s mother, when buying all the lasagna, suddenly began breathing strangely. Or she hadn’t been able to breathe at all was what she had been to be trying to say. Mrs. Balm had been working the checkout line and said, Hello, Mrs. Firmin. Hello, Maggie. Then she had looked at them with a face of great concern. Did I make you uncomfortable when you were here the other day? I cried
for you, Mrs. Firmin. My husband left our family, too. Left me alone with Jody and Yolanda. I understand you. I am just like you.

I doubt that, said Maggie’s mother. She tried to pay, reaching out a fist of bills. Mrs. Balm didn’t move. She looked at them at sighed.

I see that, she said. I recognize that anger. Resentment. It’s OK to lash out. I’m a safe receptacle.

What? Maggie’s mother said.

Have you heard the term Guarantor of Meaning? Are you familiar with that concept? Do you get much time to read, Mrs. Firmin?

What? Maggie’s mother shouted.

Oh, I’m sorry. Of course not. You are too new to this pain to have gotten to the stage where you can really do things to heal. It took me most of a year, but then I began to seek out ways to heal myself. I read healing books. I surrounded myself with healing ideas.

My pain? How do you even know anything? My husband? Can I not just pay this now? Maggie’s mother motioned to the boxes on the conveyor belt.

How do I know? Look at yourself. Now imagine someone looking at you. Seeing you. Do you not think your disarray is apparent? Do you not think your pain is clearly seen?

This is the first thing that makes sense to Maggie. Her mother’s hair is matted flat, she walked slowly, her face looked tight, her hand and wrist were swollen, she and Maggie both smelled awful. Maggie felt gaunt with hunger and exhaustion. Maggie had picked at scabs from bug bites and there were dried streams of blood on her arms and legs.

Everyone can see that you are not doing the right things, Mrs. Balm said.
Let me out of here, Maggie’s mother said, shaking the money now. Get me out of here.
Mrs. Balm smiled. Maggie’s mother looked at Maggie. Fuck this lasagna, she said. She put the
money back in her pocket.

I’m so hungry, Maggie said quietly. She could already smell tomato sauce and cheese
warming in their oven. She wanted to eat until neither she nor her mother could move. Then they
would lie on the kitchen floor together and she would be able to hold herself against her mother
and her mother would be too full and tired to push her away. They couldn’t leave without the
lasagna. Maggie moved to stand between her mother and the door. Her mother looked at her,
startled. Her mother looked at Mrs. Balm, who was still smiling. Behind her, an elderly couple
pulled their cart into the narrow checkout aisle.

Maggie’s mother kept looking around, meeting the now four sets of eyes. This is when
she started making small sounds, like wheezing and choking.

Mrs. Firmin, you don’t look well. May I make a suggestion? Mrs. Balm had said calmly.
Mrs. Firmin, look at me. Maggie’s mother did. Mrs. Balm said, Look only at me. Maggie’s
mother’s face was red and she was sweating. She looked. Mrs. Balm lowered her voice, she
spoke smoothly, like song. She said, It seems you may be having a panic attack. What I’d like
you to do is recognize that you are having a panic attack. That is what this is and it is not unusual
and can occur for any number of reasons. The world gives us many reasons to feel stress, Mrs.
Firmin, and that is OK and you are going to be OK.

In front of Maggie’s mother was Mrs. Balm. Mrs. Balm was speaking from behind the
checkout counter. The platform she stood on was elevated and the register on it was tall and so
Maggie could just really see Mrs. Balm’s bright, unmoving face and her hands placed lightly on
the sides of the cash register and Maggie could hear her voice emanating from her position above
them. Behind Maggie’s mother was a display holding candy. Maggie’s mother swayed dangerously. Would she fall into the display? Should Maggie stand behind her? Brace her?

Chocolate bars were on sale, Maggie saw, but knew that this was not the time to ask for chocolate bars as she was already getting a lot of lasagna.

The older couple began to speak with confused, hushed words and Maggie’s mother saw them and saw them seeing the strangeness of the situation and her small sounds grew louder. Maggie then moved between the older couple and her mother. She made a wall between her mother and these staring strangers. Don’t look, Maggie said. The couple moved their cart to a different checkout stand.

Do not look to them, Mrs. Firmin. Look back to me and think in your mind, I am having a panic attack. Think, this is uncontrollable and not my fault. Think, this will not be forever. Think, the scariest part was not knowing what was happening to my body. Think, the fear of the unknown is powerful. Anything can cause anxiety, Mrs. Firmin. Perhaps the lights here are too bright. I cannot lower the lights. Oh, how I wish I could. You cannot lower the lights, Mrs. Firmin. There is so much outside of our control.

Yes, Maggie’s mother said, nearly inaudibly.

Yes! Mrs. Balm said. Good. Now is the time to breathe.

Maggie’s mother began to breathe. Maggie’s mother was soon able to pay for the lasagna and did and Maggie wondered if it would now be OK to ask for a chocolate bar, too. Maggie stared at the chocolate bars. Mrs. Balm saw and said, Maggie, bring me a chocolate bar. Maggie set one on the high counter. Maggie, Mrs. Balm said, you did a good job just now. You were another face your mother could have looked to in order to see a calm face of love. When one of you is sad, look to the other. Be calm faces of love. Be still pools of love. Be endless. Be the
foreverness of your love, and look at each other that way, and then the other person look back
and will see only good and it will trick their eyes into believing that is all that is real and then it
will become all that is real.

Ok, Maggie said.

I’d like to gift you that chocolate bar, Mrs. Balm said.

Ok, Maggie said.

And then Mrs. Balm took her hands from the cash register and moved from the platform
to stand beside them. She put a hand on Maggie’s head and one on Maggie’s mother’s head and
then Mrs. Balm cried a little and said, Human touch. The power of human touch. It is so
important to touch and be touched.

At home, Maggie put the lasagna in the oven and her mother stared at the kitchen. She
was still for hours. Maggie cooked and ate the lasagna and watched her mother. She stared at her
and her mother stared into the kitchen. Then, Maggie’s mother’s eyes scanned the room and she
saw Maggie and they looked into each other’s eyes. Maggie’s mother looked at her as if she had
no idea who she was. She looked so confused. Then scared. Then she said, Stop looking at me!
Stop staring at me! She yelled it and then stood and picked up the blankets that covered the
kitchen floor, making their bed. She folded them with quick movements and then handed them to
Maggie. Linen closet! she said incredulously. Of course, the linen closet! Or the pillows can go
back in your room! Why did you bring these in here? This is the wrong place for pillows?

Ok, Maggie said.

Your pajamas are in the silverware drawer? Maggie’s mother said, her voice raised. She
spoke with a confused whine that Maggie had never heard from her before. Get them out of here!
She said. Maggie took pillows and clothes to her room. She took blankets to the linen closet. She
put books back on shelves. Her mother began furiously scrubbing the kitchen floor. She shined metallic surfaces. She took toys and magazines and Maggie’s drawings out of the cupboards and put only cleaned dishes there.

See, this is a kitchen. This is what a kitchen looks like, she said. She left the kitchen and when she returned, she had showered and changed her clothes. She sat and began to pull a comb through her wet and tangled hair.

Maggie didn’t understand what was happening. Was her mother listening to Mrs. Balm? Was she following her advice? To make things look as they should? What should this matter to Maggie and her mother? Did they not believe that Mrs. Balm was boring and crazy and that the world would forget her? Did they not believe that Mrs. Balm and most everyone else was an idiot? That even her sister Emily was an idiot? That her father was an idiot? That other people and the rest of the world did not make sense to them, that they were different, that they were special? Isn’t that what her mother always said? Or maybe she didn’t say it, but isn’t that what she meant when she let Maggie into the barn, let Maggie watch her work, hugged her, cried, let her so close to her body as she slept? Did this not mean that they, together, were one thing and that the world was another? So why was Mrs. Balm being trusted? Why was she allowed to touch Maggie’s mother and cry? Mrs. Balm was not on the team. The team was Maggie and her mother.

Maggie walked toward her mother. She kneeled in front of her. She put her head in her mother’s lap. Her mother tensed, but said nothing. She did not touch Maggie. She kept combing. Her hair was so tangled that the comb made ripping sounds and strands of hair fell out with each stroke. Maggie’s head was turned so that the left side of her face was pressed warmly into her mother’s legs and the other side was facing her mother. On her upturned cheek, her mother’s hair
fell and gathered and Maggie took some and smoothed it and tucked behind her ear. She so wanted to keep all her mother gave her.

They drive to the grocery store in silence. Mrs. Balm greets them as they enter. She hugs them both. She says, It is so nice to see both of you today. She keeps her hand on Maggie’s mother’s shoulder and says, We just got a special shipment of Pink Lady apples this morning. They are so lovely. So crisp. Would you like to try one?

Maggie’s mother nods. Mrs. Balm leads them to the produce aisle. She hand-feeds apple slices. It’s good, right? She says. Fresh. On sale. Have you thought about what we discussed yesterday? About giving gifts to yourself? About finding good things and getting them without thought or guilt? Maggie, what do you think about the apples? Delicious?

Yes, Maggie says. Delicious.

See, Mrs. Firmin. Maggie likes it.

Maggie’s mother puts a bag of apples in their shopping cart. Mrs. Balm leads them through each aisle, telling them what is good.

I like you so much, Mrs. Firmin. I am always so happy to speak with you. You’ve been under so much psychic pressure recently.

Yes, says Maggie’s mother.

It is hard to raise a child by yourself. They need so much.

Yes, says Maggie’s mother.

Mrs. Balm says softly, You also have needs. You must acknowledge and care for your needs. Your home is broken. Your heart is healing. Your child is growing. Do you take baths,
Mrs. Firmin? Do you take the time for yourself to have a nice bath? Here are bath salts. Here are lotions.

After they have filled the cart and paid their money, Maggie and her mother drive home in the truck still on loan to them from Frank Brick.

They no longer sleep in the kitchen. Maggie’s pajamas are back in the drawers in her bedroom. The kitchen is for food and plates and kitchen things only.

We have so much food, Maggie says, helping her mother unpack the groceries. There is no more space in the cupboards. Every shelf is full. Cans of beans and soup are stacked, making tall towers that line the walls. Maggie’s mother had emptied and cleaned a bin that had once held food for the horse and filled it with small boxes of raisin and nuts and crackers, all in little packs. They called it the snack bin. It was too big and blocked half of the entrance to the kitchen.

Maggie walked in and out of the kitchen and each time had a snack. Maggie took snacks to bed and ate them and woke in the morning to new snacks placed on her pillow.

Boxes of cereal and quick rice dishes and food that needed only water or only one egg or just a little oil to be a complete meal crowded the counters, made borders, lined the edge of the kitchen table. There was no more room for what had once been there. Maggie’s flashcards, her mother’s books, bills, pens, drawings, anything from their shared life in the kitchen was tucked safely away in other drawers in other parts of the house. Blankets and pillows were back on beds and they slept in their beds, or Maggie slept in her bed, and Maggie’s mother sometimes sat in Maggie’s room talking to her or to herself or to someone else who wasn’t there.

Maggie misses sleeping in the kitchen with her mother. It had been cold and uncomfortable and Maggie had been always hungry and tired, but she had been able to be so
close to her mother. To touch her. To lie silently and to know, without doubt, that her mother was alive and breathing and safe and that, she too, must be alive and breathing and safe because there was someone next to her to confirm this. Sometimes, when Maggie wakes in the night, she is so unsure of everything at once that she wonders if she has died. She cannot see, knows not where she is, sees images from her dreams, hears other sounds, tries to speak or move. Where is she? Slowly, something sharpens for her. She is in her room. Some of things she has just seen so vividly are not real. Dreams. She had asked her mother what dreams were and why she had them and her mother had said, Who knows? I don’t know. Why would I know?

Maggie continues unpacking groceries while her mother begins their dinner. Her mother rolls out small disk of dough, spoons on softened potatoes and onions and peas, folds and fries them and calls them pierogies. They come to the table, little half-moons on the plate.

Maggie’s mother cooks and serves the food carefully, slowly, because of her injured wrist. Sometimes Maggie’s mother vomits from the pain. Maggie knows nothing about this sort of pain or broken wrists, but feels that somehow they are not doing what is right.

Should we go to a doctor about your wrist? Maggie asks her mother.

Maggie’s mother looks at Maggie with an expression that Maggie cannot quite figure out. It seems that her mother wants to speak, wants to answer, but cannot. She looks back at her plate of untouched pierogies. Maggie has already finished her pierogies. She liked them very much. She wonders if her mother will eat any. Can I have one? Maggie says and reaches across the table with her fork. Her mother lets out a gasp and her chair scrapes the floor as she is propelling herself backward, away from the table. Maggie pauses, her fork pointed at her mother. What is the way her mother looks back at her? Is it with fear?
That night, while Maggie pretends to be asleep, her mother sits in a chair across from her bed and speaks. She seems to be making a list. School, she says. Good work. Partnership. Loving another. Caring for another. Allowing others to care. To accept help. Human touch. To touch and be touched. Maggie’s mother is silent for a long time, then says, so softly, I am trying.

That night Maggie dreams that she is on a raft with her mother and that they are floating on the ocean. On the raft are all of their favorite things. There are many books and notebooks and coloring books on the raft. Her mother is drawing a picture of a horse. He’s alive, she says to Maggie, smiling and hugging her. Then her mother draws a picture of Banana. Alive! Here with us! She says. Outside of the raft are only sharks, she says. Together, we must lie in this small space we’ve made. Maggie’s mother wraps her arms tightly around Maggie. We must protect each other.

Maggie wakes in the morning with the feeling of complete access to her mother’s body. She thinks she is still on the raft and that all she needs to do is reach over and touch her mother and then she will be completely enveloped by her. Such immense joy, Maggie feels, but then she opens her eyes and wakes further and sees that she is not on a raft, but in her bed, and that her mother is no longer in the chair across from her, but somewhere else.

We learn from watching others do things successfully, Mrs. Balm says. Then we look at ourselves and we see if we, too, are doing everything right. Stand outside of yourself, Mrs. Firmin. What do you see?

I don’t know what you mean. Can you explain it? Maggie’s mother says.
People are here, in the grocery store. There are people in this aisle with us. There are people everywhere. Imagine you are one of them looking back at you and your Maggie. What do they see?

We are shopping, Maggie’s mother says.

Exactly! The most normal thing in the world. No problems with Mrs. Firmin! She and her daughter and just shopping at the grocery store just like everyone else!

Yes, Maggie’s mother says.

Yes. Here they are. The Firmins. Just buying their cereals and vegetables. They are not feeling pain. They are not a broken family if they can shop and eat and do what is right. See, that is how you are being seen? Do you see the looks you receive back from your fellow shoppers? Smile at one of them, Mrs. Balm instructs.

Maggie’s mother smiles at a young woman coming down the aisle toward them. The young woman smiles back.

Hello, Maggie’s mother says.

Hello, says the young woman.

How are you? Maggie’s mother says.

I am well. And you? The young woman says.

I am well. And you? Maggie’s mother says.

I’m fine, the young woman says, but is frowning a bit now.

Let’s keep moving, Mrs. Balm says and leads Maggie’s mother by the elbow further down the aisle. It is very nice to see you today, Sharice, Mrs. Balm says over her shoulder to the young woman. That grape juice that Tommy likes is on sale today!

Thanks for the tip, Mrs. Balm! Sharice says.
Thank you, Sharice, Maggie’s mom says and smiles and waves. Thank you! Good-bye. Nice to see you. Have a nice day.

Mrs. Balm grabs Maggie’s mother by the shoulders, stopping her. I think it’s time to make some real changes, Mrs. Firmin. Now it’s time to take certain steps forward. The first is easy. It’s time to see a doctor about your wrist.

This is how Maggie’s mother ends up married to Frank Brick.

Today we will go to the grocery store, Maggie’s mother says. She hands Maggie a duffel bag.

What’s this? Maggie asks.

Look in it.

Maggie opens the duffel and sees some of her clothes, two notebooks, a package of unsharpened pencils, and a white envelope. She opens the envelope and inside is twenty dollars.

Let’s go, her mother says and is out the door, striding quickly to the truck. They drive in silence. Mrs. Balm is waiting for them in the parking lot when they pull in. Maggie’s mother gets out of the truck and walks into Mrs. Balm’s outstretched arms. Shhh, Mrs. Balm coos. Of course. Of course. This is will be OK. You are doing the right thing. Everything will be fine. She speaks quietly, directly into Maggie’s mother’s ear. It’s hard to make out all that is being said between the two women, they hold each other so tightly. A few times Maggie sees her mother jump or shake a bit in Mrs. Balm’s arms, as if she is trying to get out of the embrace. She makes a few soft noises, cat-like throat sounds. Mrs. Balm holds her tighter. Time for yourself, Maggie hears Mrs. Balm say and also, The gifts a man could give to your home. A child needs two. You cannot do this alone. You need to be taken care of. You need protecting.
Maggie sits on her duffel bag in the parking lot and watches. There is a new flower shop moving into a building across the street. The building used to be an ice cream parlor, before that it was a real estate office, before that it was a store that sold all sorts of small items like fancy rocks, crystals, geodes, and flat, metal pictures of fairies or wizards or horses that could be nailed to the outside of a house. The building had been painted many times, many colors, but nothing lasted there. Maggie imagines what store she would open if the building were hers. Maybe just a store that sold everything that was good, like books and food and drawing paper and TVs and radios and she would make a milkshake for every customer and her store would never go out of business. How is it possible that no one had thought of this before? Maggie wonders and stares at the wide windowpane that stretched across the building’s face. Something moves between her line of vision and the building and Maggie refocuses her eyes to perceive in shallower depth and sees it is her mother, in the truck, driving away. Maggie looks up and sees Mrs. Balm and they are the only two people in the parking lot.
5.

Maggie takes the bus. Seated next to her is a man who looks to be about seventy years old. He is thin and bald. He sits with a sort of quietness that Maggie feels she recognizes. Not in herself, certainly. She is sure she has never looked calm like this. But she has seen it before, in someone else. He is wearing a black suit and holds a hat on his lap. He can look out the window without moving. What is he thinking about? Maggie wonders. She believes he isn’t thinking about anything. Nothing registers on his face as the bus moves past gray buildings, parked cars, sidewalks made slick with winter rain and snow.

When Maggie sees the sidewalk, she sees herself slipping, falling down. She thinks she needs new boots. She hates her coat, it is too thin, impractical for the long Kansas winter. Her hat is ugly. It had been a purchase at a thrift store. Cheap, and it covered her ears sufficiently, so she had bought it. Why does she do things like this? Why couldn’t she have a beautiful hat and scarf and long, white coat? Why does she feel she is undeserving of looking dignified? Because winter is stupid, she thinks. It takes away all dignity. She remembers nearly falling down her porch stairs this morning. She had awkwardly grasped her railing as her feet flew from underneath her. She had slid down two steps, uncontrolled, before catching and righting herself. If she had been twelve and in a red, sequined dress, ice-skating for the first time, holding the hand of her mother, this near fall would have been endearing, cute. But she is thirty-five and wears ugly woolen clothing and impractical boots and she is just a sad sight. Alone and awkward, trying not to crack her head on her steps. This is why she doesn’t buy long, white coats and cashmere hats. It would give her the look of someone who didn’t fall down and at least Maggie is not a liar. It would give
her the look of someone with grace and when she betrayed that grace—which she would, she knew, almost immediately—everyone would know she was a faker.

The old man sitting next to her does not look like a faker. Maggie begins to fall in love with him. His face looks soft. She is suddenly desperate to see him smile, to see what creases would form. If I had married this man, she thinks, I would know all his wrinkles by now. I would have seen them appear, slowly, over time. I would know the way he holds his face when he was happy. She wonders if there is a woman, equally calm and dignified, waiting for this man at a home somewhere, near wherever the bus stops, when it stops for him. Maggie imagines having been married to this man for thirty, forty years. She imagines him getting out of bed, his age making all familiar movements slower. She imagines him getting dressed in his pressed, black suit. He would still dress in a suit for her! After all these years. And she would still tie up her hair for him or she would curl it with little curlers or she would pin it back with an ivory comb or she would just pull him back into bed and they would talk about how their love had endured so many things, so many years. She thinks this for a while, but then catches herself, feels sudden shame. She hears Richard’s voice in her head telling her how common she is being. How cliché. He is telling her to stop romanticizing everything, to find what is real. After all these years! he is saying in her mind. Ugh, what an awful, trite sentence to be thinking. Old people in love? Are you not boring yourself with this? Is there not a better observation to be making?

Maggie looks around the bus. It is dark. The dim winter day framed in the windows is the only source of light. People look cold, are hunched; faces bundled into scarves, hoods up. Nobody looks at each other. Maggie looks at everyone. Some people are reading newspapers, some are closing their eyes. People get on and off the bus. They shuffle silently past each other. Say, excuse me. This is normal behavior. People sit and stand and exit and someone new enters
and takes their seat and no one speaks much. Maggie hears Richard in her head saying, *Take it all in! This is the world.* Richard had ruined something for her, maybe. She can’t see anything the way she used to.

Maggie remembers reading about a woman who had died on the bus and no one had noticed because they just thought she was sleeping. The woman had ridden the bus for an entire day before she was discovered as dead. Would anyone notice if Maggie died? Right now? On this bus? How long would it take for someone to see her as dead? She looks at the old man next to her. He would notice, she thinks and is in love with him again. This is why people fall in love, she tells Richard in her head. If we were in love, if he loved me, this old man would take my hand and notice if it were cold and dead and would care and I would not be alone. I would not be a corpse riding the bus for a day.

Maggie remembers sleeping next to her mother, cold on their kitchen floor. Maggie remembers feeling a safety in the certainty that she was not dead and that her mother was not dead and that they could know that because they were sleeping and touching and breathing so closely to one another. To sleep is to be completely within ones head, Maggie thinks. To touch another person is to be completely outside of ones head. Human touch. It is simultaneous, Maggie thinks. It is forceful and absolute. It is to know that another exists, and to touch them forces them to know that I, too, exist, Maggie thinks. Touching. It, and the knowledge it brings, happens, for two people, at precisely the same time. Maggie feels amazed and moved by this idea. Who could she tell about this? Who else might think this way? If she touched the man next to her, if she reached out and just put her finger on his cheek, would he realize that they were, at the exact same moment, proving that a world existed outside of themselves?
Maggie feels like crying. She feels suddenly hungry. She longs to touch this man and receive his touch. She feels so tired. She could shut her eyes and fall asleep in seconds, fall asleep on this bus until someone woke her, making sure she was not another dead woman fooling everyone. Maggie closes her eyes, but her brain keeps moving in a way that is dizzying. She wishes she could shut off many parts of herself. She wishes she could cut out certain parts of herself and put them aside. She wishes these parts could fit on her shelf with her books and that she could occasionally pick them up and revisit them, as she does her books, and feel things because she is again experiencing parts of herself, feel things like sadness and anguish and that dull hum that often sounds in her mind and feels dangerous; uncomfortable. She could experience those parts of herself, but then close them up and replace them on her shelf and do other things peacefully. Then she could do laundry or grocery shop or ride the bus. Then she could do many things without feeling anything at all.

If this man loved her, this old man, she would maybe learn from him this calmness. This ability to look out the window and think of nothing. To look out a window and feel just the sensation of eyes seeing objects—moving objects that were neither beautiful or important or sad or bearing metaphorical importance, but just present. Maybe, if he loved her and wanted to spend time with her, lots of time, eventually she would learn to look at things as they were and not wonder if she were seeing them correctly or interpreting them correctly or what they all added up to or how she would describe them in her novel and how, in her novel, she wouldn’t be able to describe them directly, these objects, these buildings, but rather she’d have to come to their rendering artfully, in a sidewise manner. In art, nothing could be looked at directly, accepted, named. In art, to name meant to lessen. To extract the meaning of one thing, art must, instead, heighten the meaning of everything else. She hated herself for having thoughts like that because
she had no idea what they meant. It is exhausting to live this way! Maggie thinks. If only, if only this old man loved her, had loved her for forty years. If only he had simply read the newspaper on the bus with her. Had looked at her and liked her and not made her think anything other than, What will we eat now?

If only she could learn to look and see at the same time, like he is now, out the window. Simply: Here is Kansas, in the winter, moving slowly by.

The bus stops and the man stands. Maggie shifts her legs to the side to allow him room to move around her, to get off the bus. As he moves past her, he sneezes and a long string of snot drips from his nose onto Maggie’s lap. He doesn’t notice or doesn’t care and says nothing and exits the bus. Maggie stares at the snot on her lap for a long time. She is unable to move or clean it off of her. She has no handkerchief or tissue and anyway the snot is starting to dry. No one else on the bus seems to have noticed this. Maggie feels ill; somewhat violated. She feels angry at the old man for putting her in this position—to feel revolted when all she wanted was to go home and go to bed and fall asleep and stop thinking and stop thinking about being in love with the man, the old man who has just dropped his snot on her lap. When the bus arrives at her stop, she does not get off. She doesn’t stand, but waits. She thinks. The bus keeps going and, after another hour, begins its route again.

Maggie stares at the snot in her lap and, slowly, begins to remember something. The smell of Sam’s hand in his cast. It had smelled, rightly so, of rot. It had smelled sick and sweet and heavy and like something dying. It was Sam, a part of him, his body, causing that stench. It was part of him, his smashed hand, dying. They had gone, many times, to the doctor together to
get the cast removed and then rewrapped and bound. Each time, the smell of Sam’s atrophied flesh would enter the room and make her feel sick. But hadn’t she still loved him? She had.

The smell was Sam’s pain made tangible—it was something they could share, that smell. They could both feel it, sense it, at the same time. They could both feel awful, ill—together. She was a part in this. She had been able to smile at him and try to make him feel less embarrassed. Once, she had even dipped her head, put it right next to his shriveled, pale hand and she had kissed it. She had said, to the doctor, When will I get to see this hand? I will miss it. I love it. She had said this, at the time, in order to get information about how much more of these doctor’s visits they would have to endure. And would he ever get better? And she had asked other subtle questions that Sam was too proud to ask and she had asked the question that Sam had been too scared to ask. She had asked, Will he play music again? Will he have his hand back? She had asked this when Sam had been in the bathroom, cleaning his hand, drying it carefully, looking at it, flattened and excruciating, knowing that in a few moments it would disappear back into the cast. Not to be seen or used for another two weeks. The doctor had told her, No. The doctor pointed to the x-rays and began to explain, once more, the seriousness of the injury. He’s lucky to have his hand at all, the doctor had said. Maggie had never thought of it that way. She had never thought of the possibility that he, Sam, could have been handless altogether. In that moment, Maggie thought, with a great seriousness, that she would cut off her own hand if it could be attached seamlessly to Sam’s. She would do it, right here in the doctor’s office, with no anesthesia. She would endure any sort of pain, any amount of blood. She wouldn’t look away or blink. She would cut off her hand and give it to Sam if it meant that he’d be able to play music again. Her body was not hers, but theirs. This loss felt new. She had felt sympathy for other’s injuries or misfortunes before. Great sympathy, but this was something new. Sam’s body was her
body and his loss was her loss and she loved him, more than seemed possible, and she would have done anything to save him from this. And that had been the moment that she had decided to love him less, to leave him soon. To spend each day moving in a direction that was away from him and deeper within herself.

The doctor had been watching her. He was looking to see how she was absorbing the information, if she were even listening to him. Maggie heard the doctor’s voice say, again, No. No. No. She saw Sam in her mind, coming home to his room full of guitars he’d never play again. She was struck, so deeply, by the weight of that moment. The moment when Sam would have to admit to himself that these instruments were to be only objects signifying moments that had past. She felt something move up inside her. Something real, a physical reaction, and she knew that this was when most people would cry, but she could not cry so, instead she began to laugh. She laughed so loudly that a receptionist poked her head into the examination room. Maggie laughed until the doctor look worried. She laughed until she was dizzy and her face felt bruised. Then she excused herself, went to the ladies restroom and vomited into the toilet.

When she returned to the examination room, Sam was back, his hand clean, but still smelling. The doctor was about to wet the plaster that would harden and become Sam’s new cast. This was when Maggie lowered her head and, gently, had kissed Sam’s hand. It was purple. It was wrinkled and small. It would never regain its shape. I love this hand, she had said. I will miss it. She had kissed his hand with a love that was not rooted in need or comfort or what was right and good for a life, but came from some other place within her. A place that made her feel as if she were split open, as if the doctor, instead of wrapping Sam’s hand, had slit her body with a scalpel. Why did so many people seem to want this sort of love? Why did so many people speak of the “trueness” or the “salvation” of love? If this pain had come from a tumor, would
people not ask for it to be cut out? Had she not loved her mother this way and had her mother not
left her alone in that love? Could Sam not, just as easily leave her to be alone? Could he not
grow tired of her or love someone else or just die? His hand was dying now. Every part of him,
of herself, or the doctor in front of her, or of anyone anywhere was dying so why was this so
easily forgotten? Could she not just decide to be without this?

She could. And so when she kissed his hand and said that she would miss it, she also
began a list in her mind of ways to break apart from Sam. She would shut herself off from him.
School would help with this. Lonely hours writing her novel would help with this. She would
soon meet Richard and he, too, would help. And then, so soon, she would be alone.

Maggie remembers this while sitting on the bus, not moving, not getting off, staring at an
old man’s left snot on her lap.

Sam appears to her. He walks toward her. He sits next to her on the bus. He holds her
hand. But she is alone on the bus. But isn’t he here? Can’t she feel him next to her? The sun has
gone completely. The bus is dark and will run all night. The bus driver is listening to a sports
game on the radio and seems to not even notice that Maggie has been riding the same route for
hours. Is she even still on the bus? Or has she gone home? Is she in her bed, imagining this as
she imagines so many things, lying alone looking at her ceiling? She touches the window. It is
cold. It is winter outside although she can no longer see winter. She touches the seat next to her.
It is empty, but she can see Sam. She can speak to him. She says, I fucked up.

Did you? Sam says. It is dark, but somehow she can see his face. Can feel him with her.
He has always been with her, his face so easily conjured up in her mind. And Richard, too. But,
she thinks, isn’t it true I have not really seen them for ten years? But what does it mean to have
not seen them if she can see Sam now? Can hear his voice?

I’m probably going to be fired tomorrow, Maggie says.

Did you do something bad, Maggie?

Yes.

What do you want?

To have not fucked up.

What do you want from me?

I don’t know. Could you save me, maybe? Please, Sam. Could you do that? Please, Sam.

I have come to a place of danger. Like, my head is eating me up. It’s swallowing me up and there
used to be a good person in there but now I can’t find her. I touched a student. I tried to have sex
with a student. I don’t know why. Why did I do that? And I was on the bus or I am, now, on this
bus and a man sneezed on me and his snot got all in my lap and I remembered that I loved you
and that if you sneezed on me I would still love you. You can put your snot all over me and I
wouldn’t care. You could piss and shit and puke all over me and I would still love you. You
could get old and die and I wouldn’t be mad about you dying, I’d love you. But you’ve got to
help me. You are the only person that can help me. I can’t understand anything anymore.

Something is happening. I don’t know what it is. Please help me. Please. Sam. Please help me.

The cat pisses on the chair and I don’t even clean it up.

Why am I here, Maggie?

I told you, the guy on the bus.

A guy sneezes on you and you realize you’re in love with me still?

I’m in love with you still.
You didn’t love me enough.

I didn’t love you enough.

I was so angry.

Because I cheated?

Because you cheated and because you existed. Because I knew you were possible, loving someone like you was a possibility.

It still is.

No, it isn’t.

Because I left you?

Because you left. Because you are now only speaking to me in your head. I’m not even a real person anymore. Somewhere else, I exist.

What are you doing there? In the place where you exist?

I don’t know because you don’t know.

Could I call you? Should I find you?

You would find a familiar stranger. What would be the good in that?

Maybe you could help me? You’re helping me now. Just being here.

The Sam you are speaking to now is just your memory, your thoughts, you.

But you were real.

Yes, I was real, and you didn’t love me. Why do you think that is? Why do you think that you didn’t love me?

I did, I think. But what was I supposed to do with that?

Trust it?

How could I have possibly trusted that feeling? Why that one? Why you?
Why didn’t you?
Because you were unknowable.
Right. As a person. As a real person, I was unknowable.
But if you are in my head then I can trust you and love you because you are my mind.
How would the real Sam have responded to a conversation like this?
You wouldn’t have had a conversation like this.
Nope.
You wouldn’t have cared.
I would have thought you were being pretentious and boring.
So, I talked to Richard.
Yes, but what was the real Richard like?
He was pretentious and boring.
Right. But your thoughts and questions and confusions are not pretentious or boring to you.
I talk to myself now.
What do you really want to ask yourself? I’m listening. I’ll talk to you for as long as you want. What do you want to know?

Was it the right thing to leave you? Even though you were good and nice and it hurt to be without you and I was lonely and still am and I was mean to you and that’s bad, but was it the right thing to do? To leave you. Even though it didn’t make sense to anyone and everyone thought I was crazy and I am and I’ve been getting worse and worse without you, but still. I think it was the right thing to do. Maybe I could get you to agree with me on that? Maybe I could get you to understand? What do you think?
Explain it me.

One time I killed this cat. When I was a kid. I ran over it with a truck. Why did I do that?
Did I kill the cat because I wanted my mother’s attention? Did I kill it because I thought that was
how one gets to feel badly? Did I kill it because I am a bad person? Did I kill it because I felt
abandoned by my father? Did I kill it because I was afraid to love something? Do I not have the
correct concept of love? Is there something chemically wrong with me that could be fixed by
myself in the head? Drilling into my head? Having someone send electric shocks through my
head? If I had told you what really happened, you could have believed any of these things about
me. You could have believed any combination of these things. Then you would have looked
back at me with the combination of beliefs that you had chosen and you would have reflected
back a version of me that would not have been, could not be actually me. Then whom would you
have been loving? Who would you have been committed to? A compilation of your beliefs and
what you perceived as Maggie facts.

I could have helped you if you had told me the truth.

Exactly. You would have tried to help me. But how? How could you have helped me?
You would have had to have made a decision about what was wrong with me and then work to
find a solution from there. How could you have made a decision about what was right for me
when no one can really ever know another person? What was wrong with me? Was it seventy
percent fucked up childhood and thirty percent psychosis? What would fix that? The right
number of hugs and pills in the right balance at the right time and I’d be fixed? What if your ratio
was off? What if it was different for me everyday? What if on Tuesday I was sixty percent
psychotic and forty percent dwelling on the past? And then on Thursday I was thirty percent
psychotic, twenty percent fucked up baby, and fifty percent coming down with a flu virus that
made me sleepy and more susceptible to emotional stress? How would you treat that? Or maybe
one day I saw a sad movie and felt worse, but the next day I read a good book and felt better or
one day I saw a leaf on the ground and it triggered some memory and I felt like dying. How
could I explain that to you? How could I explain that a fucking leaf made me feel like dying?
How could you understand that the leaf makes me want to kill myself, but then when a guy in the
post office brushes past me, touching my arm that I want to live again? Anything I would explain
to you would be a lie. It would feel like a truth and then you’d believe that and then the truth
would change and you’d feel like I was lying to you again and I wouldn’t know how to tell you
that I just didn’t see anything the way you saw things. I mean, sending electric shocks through
someone’s skull used to be acceptable, but now it isn’t. But they believed it was right at that
time. But now they don’t. The truth changed.

And I would have wanted a truth.

You would have demanded a truth. You would have demanded that my brain be a
recognizable object. You would have asked my brain to function in a way that was knowable.
You had a view of the world that you were able to accept, but that I was unable to accept because
I felt that so confused about what could be known about anything or anyone. But you would have
given me some advice about how to function in the world and it would have been the wrong
advice, no matter what, because it wouldn’t have been advice about how to function as myself
despite the expectations of the world, and then you would have asked my brain to function
logically so that I could have entered into the world safely and that would have maybe saved me,
your advice, your love, but it would have also been a great death.
She breathes. She feels as though she has just figured out something very important. And then Sam is gone and she is just alone on the bus. She longs to be in her writing room. She knows how to end her novel. She will end it with a series of great, direct proclamations. To exist within the confines of the world is to deny the self! To save yourself you must love your mind! To be normal is both salvation and death! What can you afford to lose? What is more important to keep? She would have her protagonist stand up on a bus and make these declarations aloud and there would be people on the bus and they would be inspired and then her protagonist would walk away, into the sunset, alone, loveless, but alive. Aware. Filled with a truth she could finally accept. She was alive and living uncomfortably! She is a genius.

Maggie gets off the bus and walks to a grocery store. I will eat what I desire, she thinks, and buys a lot of ice cream and no fruit or vegetables. I am solving problems, she thinks. I am doing things the right way.

She realizes that she has left her school bag on the bus and in that bag was her wallet so she cannot pay for the food so she just walks out of the store. Problem solved! she thinks. A young woman, a cashier maybe, calls after her and Maggie turns around and starts to scream. The young woman looks confused and breathes in sharply, holds her breath, does not know what to do. Maggie smiles to the woman and says, I know! It’s hard to know what to do in a situation like this. I used to be just like you. Maggie turns and runs out the door. She runs for blocks and blocks, the bag of frozen foods banging against her legs.

At home, Maggie sees problems. Her answering machine has a message from the head of the English department and the message sounds angry and that could be a problem, but then
Maggie erases the message and it is as if it never existed. Solved! There are bills in her mailbox and they are so easily thrown away. Why had she not thought of this before?

Her cat has pissed on her green chair again. Maggie takes a frying pan from her sink of dirty dishes and hits the cat on the back on the head. Stunned, the cat is easy to throw out the window, which Maggie does, then watches it die on the cement below. She sets the green chair outside the door of her apartment. Her kitchen is a mess. Maggie finds dish soap and washes the frying pan and then washes all the dishes in the sink.

Maggie eats ice cream from the cartoon and stares at her apartment. She hears voices coming from the street. Someone has found her cat. She hears her neighbors returning home. Her phone rings, but she doesn’t answer it and then it stops ringing. She hears voices outside of her door and then a loud knocking and the knocking goes on for a long time, but Maggie just keeps eating the ice cream and then the knocking stops.

Maggie feels good. Maggie feels a foreign stillness within her. This must have been how the man on the bus felt, just staring out the window or reading the paper or getting off at the right stops. Making all the right choices. It had taken her a long time and a lot of struggle, but now she is finally free. Free to move about the world correctly. Agency, at last! She takes the carton of ice cream into her writing room. She locks the door behind her. She sits down at her computer. She looks at the chapters that have been, always, so difficult to write. So difficult to get her characters to do the things they needed to do. To fall in and out of love. To come to epiphanies about the world. To come to these epiphanies artfully, through careful movements, logical plot development, complexity of character, conflict, reaction, craft and intention. It had all been so impossible. It had all been so unnecessary. How had she not seen that she had always been in control? She had created these characters and she could get them to do whatever she wanted. Her
protagonist did not own Maggie; she owned her protagonist who, just as a placeholder until she came up with something better, was named Maggie. She was Maggie, she controlled the Maggie she was and the Maggie she created and the Maggie who talked in her mind and the Maggie who talked in the world and they were all the same and they all were her and were hers.

Maggie finds the page on which she’s worked last and writes, “And then Maggie came to many epiphanies!” Maggie shuts off her computer because the novel is completed. Now, calmly, triumphantly, she looks for more problems to solve.