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Steal yourself

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Steal Yourself

By

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Accepted in Partial Completion
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Kathleen L. Kitto, Dean of the Graduate School

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Abstract

Steal Yourself is a quest for identity, bursting with stories -- a hairdresser falls in love with the man who is robbing her salon, a wife steals a car that used to belong to her dead lover, two women trying to have a baby set off on a road trip filled with family secrets -- held together with a ribbon of flash fiction. The women in these stories are trying on lives -- however likable or unlikable, or self-aware or delusional those discovered identities might end up becoming. This collection pursues its obsessions with intensity and clarity of mind as it balances explication and implication, edginess and pure storytelling, with theft and love.

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She wasn't like a car. You couldn't open her hood and tinker around. Besides, there wouldn't have been anything under her hood. Just empty space. She was afraid that there was no herself, that somehow she had gotten into this body, but she was too small for it, tiny.

- Abigail Thomas

PROLOGUE

Angelique

Love makes a family, says our bumper sticker, but we need something more than love if I'm going to have her baby. She has a brother in L.A. but they don't talk. He's a big-shot movie producer – well, he's a movie producer, anyway. I've heard of one of the films that he worked on, even if I never watched it. He has a lot of money. Fancy house, double alimony payments, new French girlfriend. She hates him. Not his girlfriend. My girlfriend. His sister. He was always mean to her growing up and now he's an adult and he's still mean, so she hates him. But suddenly his genes seem very desirable because their other brother, the good one, isn't alive anymore -- which sucks because he would definitely agree to help out -- and it seems like probably the meanness wouldn't come along with the genes, and here's the thing: his new French girlfriend looks just. like. me. Different hair, I mean, but suddenly we have a plan: a wig, a road trip, some whiskey.

Sowing

And a wise woman sat before them and offered them bread and aged cheese and small round fruits and offered them wine. And when they had eaten and drunk, she said to them, "O my daughters, listen carefully now because I will not tell this again. There was a man who provided for all he encountered. When he was sowing his fields and came upon a nest of mice, he filled this nest of suckling mice with barley from his pockets because he wished them neither to go hungry nor to eat the food he needed for his own family to survive. When he was walking to the marketplace with his donkey and his load of harvested grain, he came upon a young man and woman arguing passionately, and implored of them to be silent, and they were, and he continued on. When he sat at the table that night among his wife and many children, and they thanked him joyfully for the bounty he had brought home from the market with his profits, he closed his eyes and listened and waited until they had stopped and begun to eat. This man gave away all he had, and at the end of his life was left with nothing and did not know why. He walked through the fields that were no longer his and, hungry, knelt to dig in the furrow where he remembered putting seeds so long before, in hopes that he had left so much that there was some remaining still. When he pulled his hand out from the earth, he was holding every bit of barley and the tiny bones of the mice he'd suffocated."

SECTION ONE: BOARDING SCHOOL FOR BAD GIRLS

Love Child

I'm sitting on the bump in the middle of the back seat in between two cousins. My aunt and uncle have forgotten we're behind them. We're on vacation together. I don't know them very well. My aunt's voice is high and urgent. Her hands rise off the steering wheel together, paired – imploring, settling, imploring. Some other time, I'll come across an injured seagull launching itself proudly again and again off wet sand, falling back each time into its own scratches, and I'll think of these hands today. "Bastard children," booms my uncle's voice. "Damned to hell," keens my daddy's sister. "No fault of their own. Their parents' wickedness," says I don't know which one. Their impassioned agreement cuts me off from the blue patches of sunlight riding outside the car, compresses me. I'm very small. I know they're not thinking of me.

Hymns

I sit in the front yard under a cherry tree, my legs crossed, my gaze tilted downward. I've planted a secret here and want it to grow. I remember the press of the elastic waistband of my blue shorts, the underwear I've taken off, peeled down one leg at a time to remove without removing the shorts. I've hidden them, embarrassed suddenly, unavoidably, by something about them. Do they have cartoon figures which I've become, since morning, too old for? Tiny flowers faded out of newness? I don't remember. The blades of grass, though, which press against my bare legs, I'll remember. The gentle feeling of maternity I feel toward the flower bulb I've planted in secret, I'll remember. My absolute trust in my mother, I'll remember. My mother told me that if I sing to flowers it will help them grow. I desperately want my secret iris to grow, mine, here under the cherry tree. I won't remember what songs I sing. Lullabies.

Window Shopping

I'm in a dressing room at a department store. My best friend's friend is with me. We're trying on clothes, more and more clothes. She's brought in a white lace bodysuit. "White is my color," she says. I'm awed by the knowingness of her. I want a color too, want to be able to imagine someone looking at me the way I know they look at her. I want to be like her but not make it look like I'm being like her. I choose the same bodysuit in black. Black will be my color. We're giggling, putting layers of clothes on. I'm wearing three pair of panties over the bodysuit, a new pair of pants, two shirts more grownup than any my mother would allow. The skintight wardrobe fits easily under the baggy clothes I usually wear. My T-shirt covers everything, and my jeans have no obvious bulges. We've been in there a long time now. I don't know what time it is. I wish I had a different bra, but it's time to go. We walk out together, stand in front of the elevator, smiling full at each other, full of our secret. My heart is racing. It won't be real till we step through the doors. I see a security guard watching us, hear the elevator chime. I steel myself.

Boarding School for Bad Girls

I spend four weeks at a boarding school for bad girls before I run away. The boarding school is for bad boys, too. The boarding school is set in a tiny town. We go to school with ranchers' daughters, ranchers' sons. They aren't bad like me. Week one, I hear that I am a drug addict. Week two, I hear that I am pregnant. Week three, I hear that I am a lesbian. Week four, I hear that I am a boyfriend stealer. I am not, though I have certain inclinations. Each week new information about me accumulates without writing over the previous information. I grow more certain that the implicit contradictions will evaporate the accusations. They do not. The fact remains that I could be all these things at once. The fact remains that I might be.

One day, the principal meets with me in a small room attached to the library. There is a window in the door, through which I can see only another wall. I don't belong there, he tells me. I don't fit. I'm the wrong kind of bad. I don't know why he tells this to me instead of my parents. I don't know why, instead of planning and packing and riding home silent in my father's truck, I sneak out that night and go to the highway with my backpack and my thumb angled out.

Afterschool Special

The boyfriend who'd sent me postcards, the boyfriend I'd clung to while making out with boys whose chewing tobacco wore rings in the back pockets of their jeans, boys with girlfriends of their own, disappears when I don't call him. I don't think to miss him.

I'm at school again, then another school, another school where they don't care what kind of bad you are. I charm the male teachers and ignore the female ones. My mom trusts me to use my bus pass, stops driving me to school, I accumulate high school credits before I stop caring. I use my bus pass to go downtown, where I smoke clove cigarettes until I feel dizzy, pay rent in hourly cups of coffee.

Returning

Years ago, I want to tell you, I was selected from my Catholic youth group – by whom, I’m not sure, and for what reason, I’m not sure either. I can only speculate. They needed a girl my age, 13, one who looked young, healthy, innocent. Or they just needed someone with dark hair. Or maybe, really, nobody else was still there to ask by the time they got around to it, to pose as part of a fake family for brochures, posters, I’m not really sure what else. I remember there was a bicycle involved. There was a “father,” “mother,” “brother,” and me. I think I was the little sister. There may also have been a baby or toddler of either sex. I’m not sure, though if I had to bet, I’d say there hadn’t been, but still I’m not sure. We stood near the bicycle. I remember it was a sunny day, the sky was blue. The grass was green on the expansive lawn. The lawn rolled on and on. It stopped only for the building we were near, in which I would be raped less than a year later. We weren’t in its shadow.

Brochures, posters, bumper stickers, pamphlets showcasing teen abstinence, abstinence from sex of all kinds. Pre-, extra-, protected- marital sex of any kind. As I reflect, I think that the purpose must have been to show the earthly rewards of such abstinence, but then, I didn’t know what was appealing about a normal, boring, happy family. Besides, I was a virgin, and intended, vaguely, to remain one.

The lawn on which we posed – somewhat awkwardly, as I remember. The photographer kept repositioning us. Moving the bicycle. Come to think of it, there definitely wasn’t a baby to reposition – surrounded this grand and slightly mysterious building which had recently, or not so recently been, probably, a

convent. The convent had a number of small rooms in it, and on occasions other than this day, I had explored them, never with permission. I remember feeling the holiness and asceticisms of the previous tenants as I crept carefully through the hallway, trying, silently, the hollow brassy doorknobs. Every unlocked door led me to slowly, quietly, push it open a crack, ready at an instant's suspicion of occupancy to pull it back closed and flee on my short, skinny legs down the hall and down the staircase 2, 3, 4 steps at a time where I would emerge, casually, onto the main floor where I was allowed to be.

I never made it to the far end of that hallway. I never found a nun in her little cell.

La Perdita

Last night I dreamed that I was given explanation for certain things I had suspected were being said about me but had been unable to find proof of. Ten minutes after you walked in, we knew, she said. Don't trust him, she said. He won't lie. He won't lie exactly. There's no way he doesn't know what he's doing. You think he'll be there for me, but he won't. Relieved at last to have my accusations arrayed in front of me, I disagreed with them. Counterpoint by counterpoint, I took apart support for the widespread beliefs regarding my behavior. Each point was conceded by the man who had confessed the situation to me, but the dismantling of each portion of the argument did nothing to affect its conclusion: I am la perdita, a loose woman. A whore. My actual behavior and actual desires had no bearing on the shared beliefs of all those around me. When I trusted him, I lost the trust of those around me.

SECTION TWO: CAR AND DRIVER

Steal Yourself

Rhiannon was a hairdresser. She loved other people's hair in a way that she'd never even loved herself. Her own dark hair pushed behind her ears, she would immerse herself entirely in her clients, gazing at their reflections through their eyes, then quietly cutting their hair the way she would want it if she were them; she was always right. Nobody praised her, or left unhappy. Rhiannon worked in a small shop that the owner, one of other three female hairdressers -- they all took separate shifts, and worked alone -- had named, creatively, Ten Bucks A Whack.

One evening, as Rhiannon waited, alone of course, in the already cleaned shop, to see if another client would come in in the ten minutes before she locked up and went home to her dog and boyfriend, she heard a knock. She turned from her magazine and looked up, a smile appearing on her face even though she'd privately decided months ago that the job didn't pay enough for that. She smiled because the man coming in was, first of all, a man, second because he was handsome and third, belatedly, and here her smile got wider, a man she recognized.

"John," she chirped. "Here for a haircut?" She thought she was asking a rhetorical question, and that she was being clever in using his first name to remind him of their shared past. True, it wasn't much of a past -- three years of high school and never in the same classes -- but the memory of the charms with which he'd beguiled all the girls still lingered, and leapt to life again within her at the sight of his

still appealing, though scruffy, face. Perhaps he was here for a shave? Ten Bucks A Whack did not regularly provide barbering services, but Rhiannon was more than willing to lather and scrape each plane and hollow of his face. She checked her manicure, and, pleased with its readiness for close-up, turned to her adolescent crush. What was he doing?

The butt of what certainly appeared to be a gun wedged itself out of the back pocket of his Levi's -- god he had a nice ass -- a gun? He was whistling, and doing something odd in the corner with the cash box. "John?" she said more hesitantly, "what are you doing? Did you want to look at our men's portfolio?"

"Oh, Ray-Ray," he replied cheerfully, not looking up, "no, I'll be out of here in a minute, don't mind me."

A shock went through her. He remembered her name! He had noticed her after all. Noticed and remembered. She stood up now, sucking in her stomach the tiniest bit, and walked over toward him. She felt that she didn't want to get too close, but she wasn't sure why. "Well, the portfolio's right here," she went on, "you could flip through it while I -- I mean, do you want -- well, why do you have a," she laughed, nervously, "you look like you could use a shave!"

John laughed with her, and moved from the now empty cash box to the safe

under the desk. "The touch of a good woman," he said dreamily, crouched low, ear to the safe door, fingers turning the combination lock.

Rhiannon was so confused.

She moved toward the desk and propped herself up on it, legs crossed at the knee, head angled down, trying to get a better look at what he was doing. John touched her gently on her stockinged knee and it vibrated through her being. "Light, doll," he said, and she obediently moved over, bringing her shadow with her and out of his way. Now she could see. *Theft. Crime. Criminal.* The thoughts solidified her suspicion that something unbearable was taking place.

"Don't do this," she pleaded, but in the absence of a response she found herself caught in a fantasy. The month's profits she knew were in the safe would supply them with hotel money, diner food, and the perfect love she knew they could have. Endless romance and adventure. She saw herself as Faye Dunaway, but John she saw only as his handsome, dashing, charismatic self.

"Don't do this, don't rob the place," she said again, more lightheartedly. John was standing now, back a few feet, pointing the gun at the safe. Rhiannon looked over at her sweater then looked away. It would not be cold where she was going.

The *clark* of bullet hitting steel should have jolted her, but she didn't move. She stood there and watched him. No longer was she a woman skittish at every sound, anxious and jumpy in all situations. She had changed.

He fired again, and the door stood weakly open, jarred somehow into a place where locks no longer mattered, where "security" meant only a barrier to one's desire.

"Well, Ray-Ray. Rhiannon, my love," he said, and stretched out his hand to her. Her heart was in her throat but she felt no doubt and she reached back out to him.

Suddenly, he was gone. He'd been shaking her hand, not joining his life to hers. The back door, the door to the kitchenette and then the alley, was swinging.

Stiffly, Rhiannon called the police, and then Ms. Ten Bucks A Whack. She went to the plate glass door at the front, the door which led to the sidewalk, the strip mall, the parking lot, her old Toyota that would take her away, take her anywhere she wanted to go, the highway and the rest of her life, and unlocked it then locked it again behind her. She could answer questions later. She'd been traumatized by a violent robbery. She was in shock. They would understand.

This is Not a Child

When I sat on the side of the tub and watched those two lines appear, I did not think of the baby daughter you've spoken of. I did not think of your hands on my belly, or of gently sleeping darkness. I did not imagine calling you in and showing you evidence of what we have made.

Umbrella

“Why did you pull away from me just now?” she asked. “Where are you?”

“These last weeks have been really stressful for me,” he said, not moving from the edge of the mattress.

“Oh,” she said, wanting to be understanding. They’d just come through a major hurdle, after all. It had been stressful for her, too, obviously. But she didn’t want to be selfish. Here they were in the honeymoon suite. It seemed that all the sacrifices would be worth it. “I’m going to fill the bathtub, then. I’ve been looking forward to the Jacuzzi since you booked this room. It should help you relax.”

The next morning, they’d sit at a table with the proprietress who would have made their delicious breakfast. She would talk about food, and the lovely old house they were staying in, and love. She’d assume they were a couple – married, to each other. Sharing a home to which they’d return after the weekend here. She’d offer them, strangely, an umbrella.

She sat in the bathroom at the side of the tub. This was what she had wanted. She was totally sure. She wouldn’t have done what she’d done if she hadn’t been. And he had proven himself to be an ideal partner over the last few weeks: at last calm, understanding, humorous, affectionate. The way he’d held her proved that. “Don’t discount our relationship,” he’d said, when she’d questioned his sudden devotion. “I love you.”

If he hadn't loved her, her decision would have been so easy.

The water ran and ran. The tub was so deep, it would take forever to fill. She put her hand in. Not quite warm enough. Turned the cold off and cranked the hot. Pulled off her socks and put her feet in. The sight of her socks reminded her of getting dressed that morning. She'd planned the socks because she'd thought that she'd want to leave them on during the appointment. And now they were off. Everything was done.

The next morning she would tell the proprietress that she liked the blue umbrella, while he would hold onto the black one. Neither offered compromise to the other. Confused and possessive, the proprietress would allow them the two umbrellas, but withdraw. The rest of the weekend would be awkward. Years later, the blue umbrella would still be in perfect condition, the most expensive umbrella she'd ever owned.

Her knees were almost covered in water now.

She went into the other room – the turret room, that he'd chosen excitedly and painted as a romantic getaway. As a honeymoon of sorts, despite, of course, the fact that they wouldn't be having sex. He lay there, his eyes open. Pinkish. Blinking. "The water's ready," she offered. He didn't answer. Not even an 'oh.' He didn't move. As she looked at him, she realized that she shouldn't go in the water either.

Not in her condition.

Car and Driver

She walked in from work and her husband caught her eye. “The kid down the street,” he said. “He got another car, and I think it’s – I mean, you’ve told me about it – and I thought it might be the same....” He stammered into a silence uncharacteristic of his usual certainty.

She looked at him, amused, the question on her face.

“Well,” he said. “He’s got a car that I thought you might recognize. That’s all.”

Susan had never had much interest in cars. She’d only noticed a car’s make or characteristics when she became involved with someone who owned one. Once, when she was eighteen and new to another relationship, she had seen green Volvo station wagons everywhere, appearing out of fog to cruise past her as she watched, matching each other down the street as they multiplied and ran everywhere. She still noticed the green Volvos, though they weren’t so numerous in her life anymore. After the Volvo, there’d been a maroon Toyota Tacoma, a gray Jetta, briefly a Jeep whose color she couldn’t now recall, the sight of which now brought no memories, and then, of course, the Acura.

It had been red, this car, and festooned with white stickers proclaiming its aftermarket modifications. When she’d first noticed its driver, she hadn’t known what type of car it was, somehow missing the giant lettering spelling ACURA across its sunscreen, and had looked closely, desperately, inside every red and vaguely sporty car which came near her. By the end she had known that car so intimately that she could tell it from a nearly identical car by the shape of its headlights or a

slightly different spoiler on the back. She could dismiss a car as not being *his* after less than a second of intense anticipation.

Her husband now drove an American pickup truck, large, well-kept and clean of individual characteristics. She always lost it in the parking lot when she borrowed it. What did he think would interest her about the latest acquisition of the college kid down the street? Susan had once pointed out a Karmann Ghia and told her husband she thought it was cute. Perhaps it was that?

She didn't see the car herself for nearly a week, and when she did, she noted it with the inevitability of a marriage proposal one didn't quite want, and pulled calmly past it and into her own driveway.

She took the dog for a walk that night, her husband's job normally, and walked past the other house twice. The license plate was different, the dent in the side panel had vanished, the bold white stickers were gone, but she was sure it was the same car. She could feel it.

In bed that night she read by headlamp until her husband ceased his gently amorous leg strokings, and, kissing her, turned and fell asleep. She stared at the open page until the letters twisted into DNA patterns and then awoke at dawn feeling that she had neither slept nor needed sleep.

The kid down the street wasn't a child, of course, but college-aged. Twenty years old, give or take. Only ten years younger than her, but they were long years.

She couldn't stop thinking about him. She imagined his denimed leg flexing on the gas pedal, his arm across the back of her seat, the pads of his fingers pulling lightly across her neck. He was waxing the car when she strolled by, casually, walking the dog again. "Nice car," she said, and laughed when he held the rag out to her. His confidence amused her, turned her on.

The day passed and again she was in bed, sleepless next to her sleeping husband. She remembered the strong hand over hers while she rubbed the hood of the red car until it gleamed. He had kept accidentally touching her, brushing against her. His hip had pressed hers into the sideview mirror and she replayed the moment now, again and again. He'd smelled so clean. She glanced at her husband and moved her own hand down her body to the curve of her hipbone and pressed against it. Slid her palm across her pelvis. The steady breaths of her husband became the rhythm by which she pulled herself to a silent release.

Her husband faced their kitchen sink, unpeeled orange sliced neatly next to him. He took one, sank his teeth into it, pulled out the juice and the pulp, and, while chewing and then swallowing, deposited the emptied rind into the trash and took up another slice. One after another he ate them. They were gone; she walked in and he turned toward her with an orange peel covering his grin, juice dripping down his chin.

"I'm feeling..." she paused. He spat the peel into a paper towel. "I'm feeling," she said again, "as though we need a break. Perhaps. What do you think?"

“A break,” he repeated after her, slowly. “A break. From what? From me? From our marriage? What are you talking about?”

“I just don’t know if I can keep doing this,” she said. “It’s so hard sometimes, and I don’t feel that connected to you. You know that. I mean, you know, I wouldn’t ever have been with you at all if ...”

“The thing is,” he spat at her, “you are with me. You are doing this. We’re married.”

“We are married,” she mocked.

“He’s *dead*,” he almost yelled at her.

I hate you, she thought, and turned away.

The kid’s bed sat on cement blocks, magazine spilling out from under it. Posters on the walls. Girls, girls, girls. Girls with shiny white teeth, girls with bikinis that had never been in the water, girls with guitars, girls on cars. She sat on the edge of the bed, her knees bent, her feet on the floor. The kid lay behind her, his shirt off, his hand on her lower back. Her clothes were still on.

She felt suddenly too old, too desiccated, too droopy and just too tired to go through with it. This wasn’t what she wanted. He wasn’t who she wanted. She saw that now. She turned to the kid, whispered, “I’m sorry,” then walked out, went home, paced. Ignored the boyish, hesitant knock on her front door. She went into her basement and opened the box she’d packed away years before. Paved through it.

Pulled out old photos, delicate seashells, homemade candles. Dumped everything back in, carelessly. This wasn't what she wanted, either.

Dinnertime. She didn't eat. Bedtime. She didn't sleep.

Finally, finally, she went back to the basement and into the box again.

Reached under the photos and pulled out the key ring: two keys, one alarm beeper. She was terrified. Went in her nightclothes to the door, the porch, the street. The car. She could scarcely breathe. The air felt so heavy and her heart had stopped moving. The key slid in but still she feared it wouldn't work, that it was the wrong key, the wrong car after all, that he was forever gone from her again.

Sitting in the driver's seat she knew she'd been right. Scooted the seat forward to its familiar position. She remembered calling the hospitals, the police station. He hadn't been there. She hadn't been able to pray. She was driving now, faster and faster, the car gliding down the residential street under the lights. She was on the freeway and laughed at the word. She was breathing now, and free, she felt free.

The dark stretched limitless before her and she followed it. Forward, curve, curve, forward. She stopped slowing for the curves and shot through them, exhilarated. The trees reached up on either side. There were no other cars. She wanted right then to see the stars and turned the headlights off. It was cloudy. She

could not even find the moon. She left the lights off. A car passed her going the other direction. Blink, blink, blink, the neighborly warning. She turned her lights back on and hoped the passing car noticed. She always felt satisfaction when another car turned its lights on at night because of her. The thought slowed her, made her come back into herself, and she let up on the accelerator, suddenly exhausted. She wanted only to sleep.

Desperate to be back in bed, to sink into her pillows, she searched for a place to turn around and drive home. There was none, and she kept driving. The road widened a bit and without thinking she angled a bit to the right then pulled the wheel as sharply as she could to the left, aiming back into the oncoming lane. The turning radius wasn't what she remembered and instead of facing home, she shot through the guard rail, the wheels catching on greenery and underbrush. For a long moment the car hung in position and she felt, without surprise, a disappointment that she hadn't driven off into the gorge. Then she fell in the car. They fell together.

Susan knew it was a hospital room before she opened her eyes. Her skin felt very warm and soft and she felt delicious. She saw tubes trailing from her arm, plaster on her exposed right foot, a wheeled table full of sterile flowers and tiny cards, and turned her head. Her head didn't turn. A pressure on her left hand turned into Arthur and she looked at him as he moved his face over hers. His eyelids were red and the crow's feet she loved had multiplied. He looked freshly shaven and she longed to press her cheek against the smoothness of his jaw.

“You’ve been out for two days,” he said softly.

“It’s...” She cleared her throat and tried again. “It’s...” He handed her a cup of water, angling the straw to her lips. She sipped and tasted lip balm.

“I still love him,” she said.

“I know. I still love you.

She looked away, then back. He held her gaze.

Two Lines

“I can’t wait to start showing,” I tell the man across the small table. We are sitting in iron café chairs. The legs won’t all touch the sidewalk at the same time, and I’m balancing myself because I’m embarrassed by the unpredictability of the chair.

“How far along are you?” he asks, but I look at him so sadly that he answers himself.

“Four months, right. I’m sorry. I miss him, too.” He pauses, looks at me. “I just want to look pregnant, you know?” I say again. “Like it’ll be real then.” The corners of his eyes expand, rounded with concern. Delicately, like a real-life surgeon playing the kid’s game of Operation, plucking tiny false organs out to avoid the buzzer, he asks, “Have you taken a test?”

SECTION THREE: ROAD TRIP

Road Trip

“Stevie’s sounding a little tired,” said Cate, reaching forward and turning the volume knob to the left.

We were driving away from a year of failed baby-making, One of us --- I don’t remember which one, anymore --- had dreamt that we lived some place we’d never been, and awoken full of certainty that we had go there. I’d never been to Colorado, and neither had she, but seemed perfect. We believed in dreams.

So there we were, in the car on the way to her sister’s house in San Francisco. We planned to spend a few days there, maybe a week, before cutting away from the West Coast and whiling our way to Boulder. We were desperate to have a child together, a little boy we’d call Moshe, after her late brother’s Jewish name, but we needed the summer off. No more perusing sperm donor lists looking for the male version of the woman I was in love with. No more wishing I hadn’t been talked into aborting my ex-boyfriend’s baby right before Cate and I finally met each other. No paying for insemination, or medical exams, or dealing with the rolled eyes of the receptionists when we came in together.

I already knew some about her sister Jaime, but hadn’t met her in the three years that Cate and I had been together. I knew the sister was a bank vice president who liked to call her sister on her lunch break and crunch carrots into her ear. I knew Jaime had been, before she was a bank vice president, a stripper at some famous stripping place in San Francisco. I think probably there were steps in between stripper and vice president, but I had no idea what they were.

We'd been in the car for eight hours already that day, everything we thought we could want for the summer packed into the back of my beatup little Chevy Blazer when we left home in Portland that morning, leaving the dogs and cats behind in the house with our roommate, who was thrilled to have the house to himself in exchange for taking care of the menagerie. We had clothes, a stereo and its speakers, my cameras, pillows, blankets, a portable CD player plugged into the cigarette lighter, and a half-dozen stuffed-full CD portfolios splayed in the passenger footwell. I'd once told someone I was trying to impress, "Oh, I love him." The ensuing embarrassment and desire to prove myself knowledgeable, prove it was only a slip of the tongue, had driven Miss Stevie Nicks into one of my favorite singers.

This doesn't have to be anything at all, Stevie drawled, slower than ever.

"Might need new batteries," said Cate, clicking the CD player off.

With the music gone, the spring wind blowing past the half-down windows seemed louder, and Cate started talking again to cover it up. I loved listening to her, loved the way she seemed to know everything. "If you're lucky, you won't have to meet Dennis," she said. Dennis was married to Jaime. "I call Dennis 'The Worm,'" she laughed, then answered my question before I asked it: "He's a little guy, and he's just slimy."

"Does Jaime know you call him 'The Worm'?" I asked, curious.

“She knows. She thinks it’s funny, but she doesn’t call him that. He doesn’t know I do, either. It just makes me feel slimy to be around him, you know? You’ll see.”

I knew. An out lesbian ever since she’d left her nice Jewish dentist fiancé, she had fewer reasons to dislike men than most women. Still, those who struck her the wrong way received no quarter.

“He doesn’t know her tits are fake,” continued Cate.

“They are? I mean, what? How can he not know they’re fake? I mean, does he not touch them? Is he stupid? Do they look really real?”

“They look fine,” she answered, “you know, not... they’re just regular fake tits. I don’t know why he doesn’t know. Maybe he does and just doesn’t say anything. But Jaime wants to make sure that neither one of us says anything to him about it.”

I was silent for a moment. I was trying to imagine a situation in which I would find myself talking to my girlfriend’s sister’s husband about the authenticity of her breasts. Nope. Couldn’t imagine it.

“Okay,” I agreed. “Seems like an easy promise to keep. Why’d she get them?”

“To make more money. She didn’t get fake tits because she was ugly or anything. She knew she was hot. That class of dancing that she was doing, at the Mitchell Brothers, you gotta have boobies. She didn’t get huge ones... she didn’t want to risk any saggage.” Cate smiled at me. “She had them lifted and enlarged. It was before she and Dennis got together.”

It made me nervous, for some reason. I was used to the beauty standards of our hippie-infused town. I hadn't ever known anyone who'd had plastic surgery.

"Hey," I ventured, glad I didn't have to compete with my semi-sister-in-law for the attentions of men, "do you think she'll like me?"

"We'll find out soon enough," said Cate.

I kept asking her questions as we drove. Anything to keep her talking. I didn't want to think about the babies we were driving away from. I'd snuck my ovulation kit into my toiletries at the last minute. I knew there was no point in having it – it wasn't as if a plus sign on the stick would lead to some sort of Hey honey, tonight let's make a baby affection. Not that I resented her for the lack, but I thought it would be so much easier for us if only Cate had the kind of body that made sperm. It was the only thing I wished were different about her. I'd never say that to her – she knew it, anyway. I'd never found her on the lists we looked through together. The hair would be wrong, or the height, or if they weren't, then the hands might be wrong, or there wouldn't be any freckles. We'd tried, still, and in the days that would pass between another clinic visit and another wished-against start of another period, I'd wake up in the morning certain I was pregnant, convinced I felt a twinge of morning sickness, wondering if Cate would love as much a baby she didn't carry, a baby not tied to her by blood. I didn't tell her that, either. I knew she was certain she would.

Warm wind pulsed in at me through the unrolled passenger window. My bare feet were on the dashboard, and I could see toe prints on the inside of the

windshield from my last non-driving shift. I knew she'd notice them later, comment on them in a way that made me feel she loved every part of me. "I knew you couldn't keep your feet off the glass," she might say in her raspy voice. Or maybe, "Some people might think you made toe prints on purpose, like snow angels, she might say. But she didn't say it now. She was talking about her brother Craig, the one who'd died years before I'd met her, the one we wanted to name our baby after, whose spirit lingered so tangibly that I felt both that I knew him and that I wished I'd known him.

"... once," she said, sounding amused and tolerant, "Sal came tearing out of the bathroom insisting that someone was watching her take a shower."

I wished Craig were around to donate the male version of Cate's gene pool to our quest. I didn't think through the details of that too clearly. If it were possible to bring him back from the dead, it seemed like a much smaller thing to clear his sperm of the HIV virus that even I wouldn't be willing to risk for the perfect baby.

"I knew it was Craigie right away. He loves watching girls shower. He was a total lech like that. He was just like me, he was like the male version of me." She looked over at me and waggled her eyebrows up and down. I'd never experienced Cate as a "lech," but I knew she'd been a player before we got together. All the girls always wanted DJ Cate. "That's why we got along so well," she continued.

"We would go out together, try to pick up girls. I was always more successful than he was, and he'd say, oh, I want to watch!"

"His own sister!" I interjected.

“Well....” She paused. “I don’t think he really wanted to watch me exactly. I don’t think he really would have done it. It was just that fantasy, you know, watching two girls together. He loved girls.

“Anyway,” she went back to my question. I’d asked for more ghost stories. Cate believed that Craig haunted our house, and I wanted to believe it with her. “I don’t really know how it all started. I remember I had a dream, right after he died. I had this dream. I think I told you about it.” She had, but I stayed quiet. “And, um, it had to do with a bus. A school bus. And there were a bunch of people on it, and Craigie was there, and I was there, and he wouldn’t let me get on the bus, and he was wearing a bandanna on his head, a yellow bandanna, a bright yellow bandanna, and I had never seen Craig wear a bandanna in my life.

“And I would say maybe a week or two later was when Sal was taking that shower, and she flipped out, and said, ‘I feel like somebody’s in here with me!’ And then through the years, just about every girl who ever took a shower or took a bath in my house, like if someone stayed over after the bars closed, or was visiting from out of town, at some point would say, somebody’s watching me, I feel like somebody’s watching me! And I just sort of thought it was Craig because he’s sort of like that.

“I remember talking to Jaime one day about this, maybe a month after he died, and I was like, Dude, I feel like he was in my house, like actually in my house, and I told her about the dream and how Sal felt like someone was watching her in the shower, and Jaime said, ‘Oh my god, that’s so weird, because *I* had a dream and it

had to do with wind chimes, and Craig was *there*.' So. So throughout the years, everyone who was in my house said, I feel weird, there's this weird energy... Two girls said they actually saw somebody, and when they described who it was, it was Craig. One time one was taking a shower, and she started screaming, I mean flipping out screaming. One time another girl was like, your brother is haunting this house, man. I mean duh. It didn't just happen once, to Sal, it happened over a long period of time. Every single person who ever took a shower..." I laughed to myself at the thought of all these showering girls in Cate's life. I'd never been jealous of her past. I knew she'd been waiting for me. "... freaked out, thinking that someone was watching her."

"But not you, right?" I asked, lighting a cigarette of my own off the end of hers. It was easier than trying to keep the lighter flame going with the windows down, and the cigarette lighter, taken out for the CD player, was wedged down in in the crack between my seat and the gearshift mound. "I mean, you never felt him watching you in the shower, right?" This seemed important to me. I just couldn't get behind a guy who wanted to watch his sister naked. Other girls, ok, fine. Totally normal. I'd probably do it, too, if I were a ghost and invisible, not to mention bored. How much fun can it be to be dead?

"No, never me," Cate answered.

Cate drove with an elbow out the window, pulled occasionally in to raise a cigarette to her lips, and the other hand draped atop the steering wheel. She pulled

the seat forward when it was her turn to drive, saying always that a friend of her dad's had told her once approvingly that that was how race car drivers sat, close up, for total control of all aspects of their tiny, powerful cars. She never mentioned that her height – or lack of, at five foot three even – had anything to do with her preferred driving position.

“Why do you think Craig was on a school bus in your dream?” I asked now.

“Well,” she said, playing for time. I don't know if I ever heard her admit she didn't have an answer. “I actually think the bandanna was more important. I never saw him wear a bandanna, ever. He always wore hats. The bus... probably the bus was because. Well, it was just like the bus we used to ride to school from our house when we were growing up, when we lived in New York. I remembered that when I woke up, how the year that he was in school before I was old enough to start, he would get on the bus with Jaime and Adam in the morning, and I had to stay behind. I always wanted to get on the bus with him, but he wouldn't let me. You're too little, he'd say. He always took care of me. He had to, with Adam.”

Cate looked angry now. The youngest of four kids, she had one brother she loved and one she hated. She didn't talk to either, but only one was dead.

“Adam was mean to you when you were that little?” I asked. Most of the stories I'd heard about him I'd quietly chalked up to adolescent sibling rivalry. I wasn't sure he was as bad as Cate thought.

“He was allowed to beat the crap out of me whenever he wanted to, his whole life,” she said. “Even when I was little, yeah. My mom would say, ‘It's just sibling

rivalry. It's ok. He'll grow out of it. Just give him what he wants, then he won't hit you.' He never grew out of it.

"I was seven, maybe eight years old when he pushed me out of that tree. I told you about that. I'd climbed this tree that was in the back of our house, this huge tree, I think it was a maple tree, and I was sitting on this branch feeling, you know, the air. Just sitting on a branch, and Adam climbed up the tree, too, and he wanted to sit on the branch, sit on my branch, but there wasn't room for both of us. So instead of sitting on a different branch, or asking me if he could have a turn, or whatever a normal person would do, he just pushed me off. He practically broke my back. I fell... however far it was, it was pretty far, I was a good climber. I fell all the way down onto my back, and I just lay there. I couldn't move. Adam knew I was there, but nobody else knew I was there, and he didn't care. He just wanted to sit on my branch. Finally, a long time later, even after Adam was down from the tree, I finally got up. I made up to the house, and I was hurting. He fucked me up. And my mom was there, and I said, 'Mom, I think I have to go to the hospital, I think Adam broke my back, he pushed me out of the tree,' and Mom just said, 'You're fine, you're fine, you walked up here, you're fine. You shouldn't have provoked him, you just have to let him have what he wants.'"

"What about your dad?"

"He wasn't there. He was probably out buying up an estate sale or something." Cate's parents had been antiques dealers. "There's something you have

to understand. My dad was an extremely weak individual. He went along with whatever my mom said just to get along.

“Adam was THE SON. He was the opposite of Dad. None of us met my mom’s expectations other than Adam. Whatever Adam wanted, Adam got.”

I couldn’t imagine. I had siblings, too. Two sisters. Our parents had never favored any of us, not really. Sometimes I thought that I was the favorite, the luckiest one, the one they both wanted at the same time. But nobody in my family was ever mean or neglectful. Part of me listened to Cate’s stories with disbelief.

“You have to remember that my mom had had polio,” said Cate. I knew she loved her mom. I knew her mom loved her, too. One of my favorite stories was about the time when Cate told her mom she wasn’t going to marry the dentist, wasn’t going to marry anyone, was gay. Her mom started yelling at her, and crying. Why would Cate choose for her life to be so hard? It was hard enough as a Jew! Hard enough as a woman! Why would she choose to be a lesbian! Cate’s mom apparently climbed through the kitchen window onto the decorative balcony and threatened to throw herself to the ground two stories below in protest. She hadn’t done it, but she’d shaved her head, in mourning for the grandchildren Cate would never give her, for the life that Cate would never have. Then, and this is my favorite part: By the time her hair grew back in, she was trying to set Cate up with nice Jewish girls.

Cate’s mom had died, too. Both her parents had, her mom after a long bout with cancer, and her dad, who’d been expecting it and had bought a little villa in a fishing village in Mexico where he’d planned to spend the rest of his days, had had a

heart attack the next day. Gerald and Geraldine, their names had been. Jer and Jer. I know it sounds like too much coincidence. I know it .

“One of her legs was so much shorter than the other,” said Cate. “So this isn’t something that started with her. It started with her mom treating her like a second-class citizen. My aunt was the prodigal daughter, but my mom was a defect. Even though she was gorgeous. It didn’t matter. She was a defect. Her mom never saw past that, never treated her fairly. “

Cate took a breath. She didn’t look angry anymore. Something about this trip was calling out all these family memories that I loved to hear. It was probably that she hadn’t seen her sister since their parents died. Three deaths in one year. Maybe they wanted to distance themselves from each other in case anybody else died. Maybe they’d needed space so they wouldn’t have to say goodbye. I wanted now to devour the memories. I would have climbed inside my girlfriend’s brain and taken a nap in her past if I could.

“When we were kids, for instance, I learned how to ride a motorcycle before Adam. My friend Donna had a little road bike that was like a motorcycle in terms of gears, and I learned to ride on it. We were at my house riding up and down the driveway, one day. Adam comes up, says I wanna ride the bike. Donna and I were looking at him saying you don’t know how to ride and he says I know how to ride, so he gets on it and rides right over the fucking cliff. At the end of the driveway, about 20 feet in the air. We got down there, we ran to the bike, didn’t run to him. That’s the kind of bullshit he would do. I think he was very competitive on me. But the thing is,

I never realized that he was being competitive, I just realized he was being a piece of shit. Anything I had, he wanted, anything I did, he thought he could do better.

“I was a speed skater. He thought that was bullshit. I played softball, he thought that was bullshit. He played tennis for a year.

“Anything I did was bullshit and stupid and whatever. I realize now that it was just... I didn't realize then that he was that way. I don't know if it was insecurities or what. But my mom fed into that. My mom told my brother from the day he came out of the hospital that he was the greatest best and most perfect person in the world. He was her prodigal son.

“I remember when Craigie died, after the funeral. No, wait, that was when mom died. He went kayaking after mom died. After Craigie, he comes to my house because he knew I had a motorcycle. I had the Harley then. And says ‘Gimme the keys.’ ‘Keys to what?’ ‘To your Harley.’ ‘No.’ ‘Gimme the keys, it'll be fine, if I wreck it I can buy like 20 of them,’ and I said no fucking way. So what does he do? He calls my mom. So he calls my mom and he calls my sister. Because of Craig's death they were both in Portland. I get a phone call from my mom. ‘Adam wants to ride your bike. Give him the keys.’ I'm not giving him the keys.

“Then Jamie. ‘Catie, rather than having an argument, just give him the keys and let him go for a ride.’ Adam just stands there smirking.

“So after an hour of arguing, I made him sign this paper that if any damage happens to the bike, he has to pay me twenty-five thousand dollars, and I gave him the keys.

“After awhile it was like, fuck it, I’m just going to fucking give him the keys. And I’d like to point out, that was the last time I ever gave anything to him. That was it.”

I was looking out the window. I’d never been to San Francisco before. I was waiting to see the Golden Gate Bridge. I knew it wasn’t really golden, but I still had an idea that it would be shiny. Then there it was, the bridge. It wasn’t shining, not at all. And not because of the fog that you’d think would constantly be in San Francisco the same way that you’d think it really always rained in Portland.

“Hey, look over there!” exclaimed my girlfriend. “It’s the Golden Gate Bridge!”

* * *

I looked at her tits first thing. I couldn’t tell they were fake, either, but then, she had a shirt and a lightweight hooded sweatshirt zipped up over them. “So this is your Sara,” she said, wrapping her arms around me. She smelled like perfume, had long hair. If you took Cate to a salon, gave her expensive highlights, traded out her baggy jeans and staggering collection of the sweaters she wore in all seasons, you might think they were twins despite the ten years between them.

“And you’re Jaime,” I said, then wondered whether I should say more. It suddenly occurred to me that I didn’t know if I liked her or not. It didn’t seem as important as whether or not she liked me, though. I smiled, and surreptitiously kicked Cate’s foot with mine. We were standing by the Blazer. Cate had opened the

back and grabbed our overnight bag from the collection of everything we'd stuffed in in our pre-dawn packing excitement. Jaime, taller, thinner, I noticed now, pulled the strap off Cate's shoulder and ushered us to the front door and inside her house.

We stood in the living room, which seemed, though not dark, dimmer even than the dusk outside. There was no apparent light source. Everything was neat. A glass coffee table abutted the gray leather couch, but there was no other furniture. The table was bare, no magazines, no ashtrays, no dog hair or knickknacks or scribbled poems. No dust. The couch looked soft and inviting. I longed to stretch out on it, on its cool surface, and unwarp the muscles of my body which felt shaped by the long drive into the angles of the seat.

"Come say hi to Dennis," she said to Cate. Her teeth were white when she spoke. She was so cheerful, guilelessly so, it seemed. Her sister always seemed to be cocking an eyebrow, holding an awareness that the world was not as it seemed and an invitation to join her in laughing at it. Jaime, in comparison, seemed light and lovely.

She took us to the garage. Dennis was in there, bent over a shiny motorcycle. "Nice bike," Cate smirked down at him, her hands buried in her jeans pockets. "The one thing about Beemers is you wind up getting a burn on your leg from the carburetor. But the new ones aren't that bad." The Worm just looked up at us, then turned back to his bike. After a moment of awkward silence, Jaime leapt in.

“Dennis just got this motorcycle,” she said cheerfully. She leaned over and touched his shoulder. I could see the striped cotton shirt he wore press into his skin where her fingers rubbed. He seemed to relax, and he looked back up toward us.

“Nice to meet you,” he said, finally, with his eyes again averted. I realized then that Jaime hadn’t been looking at me directly either, that everything she’d said to us had been directed only at her sister, and I started to feel a little spooked. We walked back into the house, leaving Dennis hunched over his motorcycle.

Every room in the house seemed to want light, but I didn’t comment on it. Cate reached back and squeezed my hand. I leaned in for a kiss, then Cate tapped the box of cigarettes in her pocket. I nodded, and looked at Jaime.

“Oh! You want to go for a walk!” said Jaime, more loudly than seemed necessary. “I’ll come with you, you can see the neighborhood.”

Once outside, Jaime plucked a cigarette from Cate’s pack and put it to her lips, inhaling daintily as Cate held her Zippo flame to the tip. “Dennis doesn’t know I smoke,” she said, smoke curling from her words. “Don’t tell him.”

Now, on our walk in the mild comfort of California air, I walked a little ahead of the sisters, figuring they’d want some time to reacquaint themselves. I wasn’t sure if Jaime thought of me as a family member or a guest. I didn’t want to get in the way.

“This is really freaking me out,” I heard Jaime say to Cate before lowering her voice. The breeze pulled the smoke from my cigarette back toward the sisters, and I wondered how The Worm could not realize his wife smoked. Didn’t he smell it on her?

“Sara, guess what?” my girlfriend called out, trotting up to me. Her untied boots skidded on the perfect asphalt. Then she turned back to Jaime, who laughed and looked at me.

“Tell her.”

Jaime smiled at me, but addressed Cate, apparently repeating the information she’d just given her. “Sara looks just like Adam’s new wife. Exactly, except for the hair.” My hair was short, platinum with dark roots. I was going for the Tank Girl look, and I liked to think that I pulled it off.

Cate picked up from Jaime.

“So ADAM,” Cate said. “Adam apparently just got remarried, to a French girl named Angelique.” Cate drew out the last syllable of Angelique’s name. Ahn-zha-leeek. “French as in from France, as in speaks French, as in probably can’t understand what Adam is saying, which is the only reason anyone could possibly want to marry him. ANYWAY. She looks exactly like you. But with long dark hair.”

“She’s beautiful,” said Jaime, matter-of-factly. “And the same age as Sara. I’ll show you a picture, I think I have one.”

We kept walking. Cate held my hand now, kept me close to her. The sisters talked to each other, and I drifted back to my own thoughts, only half-listening. I liked seeing this side of Cate. It was different than how she was with her friends.

Back in the house, Jaime took us into the kitchen. We still hadn’t seen the other rooms. I decided that I was there as a family member, not a guest. There was

no need to show me around. I'd just fit in. This room, too, was spotless, unlike our kitchen back in Portland, which always seemed to have dog hair in the corners, a newspaper unfurled across the dining room table, and too many coffee cups on the counter. But I preferred our chipped, painted cupboards and cheerful yellow walls to this dark gleaming granite. Jaime pulled three drinking glasses out of their careful alignment on a shelf above the dishwasher and filled them with ice chips and thin streams of refrigerator-door water. "Lemon slices?" she asked Cate, who nodded for both of us. I wasn't used to Cate's silence.

I turned all of my attention to my glass. The water tasted fresh, and I wondered if it was because of the lemon or because Jaime's refrigerator was better than ours. I never used the refrigerator water at home, and had stopped reloading the ice compartment when I'd finally accepted that no matter how fresh the ice was, it always tasted stale, like maybe the air that circulated through the freezer picked up the flavors of all the plastic-wrapped food in there, infusing frozen-carrot-ness and chocolate ice cream crystals invisibly into each tiny cube. I made a mental note to buy lemons, then remembered that we wouldn't be home for months, if ever. Maybe we would fall in love with Boulder and stay there forever. Maybe we would make enough money somehow to pay someone else to pack up our house and ship the contents to our new life.

I put my empty glass on the counter, then picked it up again and walked over to the sink. I wasn't sure if I should put it in the dishwasher or the sink, and was afraid to ask. I was afraid of making the wrong decision. The intermingled tones of

Jaime's and Cate's voices shook me from my quandary. As long as they were talking, everything felt okay. I heard something about a photo album, and the two of them went back into the living room. I followed. "Wait here," chirped Jaime, who reappeared moments later with a thick leather case.

"I don't have Adam's wedding photos right now. I guess I haven't developed the film yet," explained Jaime, "but I thought we could go through these together. They're just, mostly, random family photos. I finally had them put into an album last year."

"I've never gone through these," said Cate, opening up the leather photo album, to her sister. "I only have one picture of Craig. You know," she said, looking at me. "The one where he's sitting on the wall."

That unframed Kodak print showed a young man sitting on a stone wall with the sky behind him, his knee drawn up under his cocked elbow. A guitar case sat beside him, a black fedora angled above his dark eyes.

We'd brought that photo with us, from its spot on the long shelf over our bed where it normally sat, surrounded -- along with the tiny ceramic container that held a sprinkling of his ashes -- by paperback books and jars of the flowers I'd bring in from the yard or from walks around our neighborhood of hundred-year-old houses. We'd brought the tiny ceramic container, too.

Cate was flipping pages now, laughing. "This one!" she said, to Jaime who was sitting next to her on the carpet, their backs against the soft skin of the couch I had curled myself into. "Remember this one? That was from the night we all went out in

New York, and I made the mistake of sitting between Adam and Craig, and they were acting like ten-year-olds, slapping each other in the back of each other's heads while I sat between them." She faced the page up at me and I leaned over her soft shoulder to look at it. There was Cate, her hair longer than I'd ever known it, looking smaller than I'd ever known her – younger even than the years that had happened since the photo would merit. My girlfriend looked my age now – I hadn't guessed she was ten years older than me when we'd met – but in this photo she looked childlike, timid – sitting with a half-smile on her face between two men. I'd never seen a photo of Adam, and I was surprised to see how much he looked like Craig, who I recognized wearing the same black fedora he wore in our photo of him on the wall. I thought of them as opposites, but they had the same short dark hair, dark eyebrows, full lips. Adam glared at the camera. He looked sullen. I recognized Cate's smirk in Craig's smile. Craig had his arm over Cate's shoulders, while Adam sat stiffly.

I was intrigued. Why would Cate have chosen to sit next to Adam?

Adam was the second oldest, just younger than Jaime. The four kids had been born in pairs. Jaime, then Adam. Then Craig, then Cate. Adam was a movie producer in LA who'd gotten his start on "Stripped to Kill II: Live Girls," and now at Warner Bros. Cate had never commented on the oddness which occurred to me now, of one sibling being a stripper while the other worked on a movie about a stripper-serial-killer, and I didn't bother pointing it out. She didn't need more reasons to hate him.

"We basically got kicked out of this restaurant because they wouldn't stop slapping each other, then we were in the street and they still didn't stop. Craig and

Adam were grabbing the tops off garbage cans, trying to bash each other with those, with pieces of broken wood they found in an alley. We're watching these two idiots in the middle of the street, and Craig is laughing and Adam is so serious. You could see it in his eyes, thinking 'I'm going to kill you.'" Cate took a breath now, and I heard it catch in her throat. I sat up and sat behind her, so that her body was in between my legs, and squeezed my calves against her sides. Jaime didn't seem to mind my foot against her sweatpants. She put her hand on Cate's thigh and squeezed, then patted it, in a very motherly fashion.

I wondered where Dennis was. Maybe he was going to stay in the garage all night.

"Jaime, this is so trippy!" exclaimed Cate. She turned to look at me, and stabbed her finger at the photograph in the middle of the page. It was below two photographs of strangers at a wood-paneled party, and above one photo of a skyline I didn't recognize. The photo was bleached, somehow, taken outside. The sky looked like it had probably been blue, but on the photo paper, it appeared grayish-white, washed out. There was one person in it – Craig or Adam, and I was guessing it was Craig – his right hand brought up in a mock gang sign or peace symbol, two fingers scissoring across his smiling face. He was sitting on brown, faded grass, and squinting up at the camera. The only bright spot in the photo was the yellow bandanna tied around his head.

"This is just like my dream!" said Cate. "Remember, Jaime? My dream after Craig died, with the bus and the bandanna?"

Jaime smiled, but without recognition. "I don't remember," she said. "Are you sure you told me?"

"My *dream!*" Cate said again. "Jaime, I know I told you about it, because you told me about the one you had. With wind chimes?"

"Wind chimes," said Jaime, slowly. "I'm not sure. It's been so long, though, I'm not sure it really matters. It was just a dream, right?"

Cate's body tightened between my legs. "*Jaime,*" she said, agitated. "I dreamt that Craig was getting on a school bus, and you dreamt something about wind chimes. It was right after we all split his ashes."

"Oh!" said Jaime suddenly. Air flooded back into the room. "Yeah, Catie. I forgot about the wind chime part."

"What else happened in your dream, then? Tell Sara, okay."

"Okay, Catie," said Jaime. But still I didn't feel like she was talking to me. "It was on the beach. I was staying in a cabin on the beach. I saw Craig outside – that's right, I heard wind chimes, and I looked up, and I saw him walking on the beach. He came up to the cabin, or, wait, maybe I went down to the water."

"Were you really staying in a cabin on the beach when you dreamt this?" I needed to know. I could see the beach in my head, and a log cabin, with wet trees dripping down over it. It looked just like the cabin that my family used to stay in, at the beach we went to.

"No..." said Jaime, slowly. "I was just at home. I think I was at home. The beach was just some beach, I don't know."

“Then what happened?” said Cate.

“That was pretty much it,” said Jaime. “I saw him walking, then we talked for a little bit about the wind chimes. They were made of spoons. He said that the wind chimes sounded the way they did because they were made of spoons.”

“Well, did he like walk away from you after you talked?” demanded Cate. “Did you try to follow him?”

“No,” said Jaime. “We just talked about wind chimes. It was just a normal conversation. It was just a dream.”

“What about Lisa’s dream? That same week!” said Cate.

I was confused. I didn’t know who Lisa was. For once, Cate didn’t sense my confusion, or fill me in. I had to ask.

“Who’s Lisa?”

“Lisa was Craigie’s girlfriend,” said Jaime. “Very sweet girl.”

“Lisa,” said Cate, “is the other person who got some of Craigie’s ashes. After we scattered them – on the *beach* – we saved some so that we could all have some. And that same week, we all had dreams about Craig. Like he was visiting us. That’s why he haunts my house, because his ashes are there. It lets him visit us somehow.”

Jaime smiled. “Adam got some, too,” she said. “We all did, Catie. And he didn’t have a dream. Neither did Mom and Dad.”

Cate shrugged it off. “Maybe they did, and just didn’t tell us,” she said, bored at the challenge to her theory. “Or maybe he just didn’t want to visit them.”

“So what was your dream, Catie?” Jaime said gently. “With the bandanna?”

“First, do you know where he got it?” said Cate, still holding the album open on her lap. “Because I have never in my life seen him wearing anything but a hat, and I’ve never seen this photo before. So there’s no way I just made it up in my dream.”

“From Lisa, I think,” said Jaime. “I forget why. It doesn’t have to mean anything.”

I wasn’t convinced. I believed Cate’s stories. The yellow bandanna had to mean something. Or how could she have dreamed it? I ignored the tiny wriggle of doubt that reminded me that I had never heard or seen any paranormal activity in all the years at Cate’s house. I wondered what Lisa’s dream had been. I wondered why I’d never heard of Lisa before. Would I disappear as quickly from people’s memories? Become an afterthought as quickly? I wanted to know more about Lisa, but not yet. For now, I would just listen to Cate and Jaime.

Cate finished telling Jaime about the school bus dream, and Jaime listened but didn’t ask more. Neither mentioned the other dream, or argued about meaning or hauntings. The pages resumed turning, and the sisters kept exclaiming, partly for my benefit, as though my audience brought them together, over faces and moments past.

“You guys must be tired,” said Jaime, finally. “Let me show you to your room. I’m going to the gym in the morning. You can come with me.”

* * *

Jaime perched on a giant inflated ball. “You guys can work out if you want,” she said. “I just have to get my exercise in so I can eat.” Gingerly, she planted her sneakered feet on the gym mat, and began to do the most uninspired situps I had ever seen. Neither Cate nor I worked out, and we looked at ourselves in the giant wall of mirrors. There we were, in jeans, boots, and ratty T-shirts. In a fancy gym. In a fancy neighborhood. Cate gestured to the weight room.

“Come on, baby,” she said. “Let’s work *out*.”

The weight room was empty, and Cate inserted herself into a contraption that seemed designed for pain. “Yeah!” she crowed, pulling her arms in against her chest, the empty weight stack shooting upward. “Yeah, baby!” Her enthusiasm was catching, and I fumbled my way onto a very high padded chair with no seat. My legs were hanging in the air, and I wasn’t sure what to do. I felt ridiculous, and was glad there was no other audience. I went back over to Cate, who’d moved onto a machine that seemed to belong more in a gynecologist’s office than an exercise room. She pulled the pin out and set it midway in the stack of rectangular weights. “Yeah, ba... by... oof!” She grunted, but the weights didn’t move.

“You look like you’re getting a PAP smear,” I teased her, and she laughed back and pushed her hair out of her eyes.

“I’m probably actually due for one of those,” she said, looking at her watch. “Maybe I could come with you to the fertility clinic and sneak one in. I’ll say I’m you. Like they’re going to know who they’re looking at from that end of the table.” We both laughed again.

“I’m so glad I don’t have to go back there for awhile,” I said. And I was.

“We’ll get pregnant when it’s supposed to happen,” she said. “Maybe we’ll meet the perfect sperm donor in Denver.”

“Sure, maybe,” I said. I was pretty sure the perfect sperm donor didn’t exist. Maybe there’d be a medical breakthrough and they could splice our eggs together. Like starfish. Or sea horses? “Insurance wouldn’t cover it out-of-state, though.”

“Insurance doesn’t cover it anyway,” said Cate. “Not till you’re actually pregnant.”

I winced.

“It’ll happen, sweetie,” she said. “We just need a break. This summer is going to be awesome.”

It was.

“Hey guys.” Jaime stood there, not a drop of sweat on her. “Let’s go get coffee.”

We walked around the corner together, Cate and I holding hands, Jaime telling us that on Sundays she went to what she called a latte bar after the gym as a treat. I couldn’t imagine a latte being a treat that one had to earn by working out, but then, I’d spent the past four years slinging espresso for a living. Espresso was a necessity to me, and the two hours since we’d woken up had already dragged on far longer than I normally ever waited for my caffeine fix.

“I’d have to quit drinking coffee,” I whispered to Cate. I couldn’t keep my mind off pregnancy, no matter how many times I decided to.

“And cigarettes,” she whispered back, holding the pack out to me, then lighting my cigarette for me. I took the lighter from her and returned the favor.

“You guys are so cute,” said Jaime. “Catie, I’m so happy for you. Can I get a tall sugar-free vanilla latte? With a straw?” she continued on without a break to the guy behind the outdoor counter. “And...” she gestured at us.

“Black coffee,” said Cate. “And a decaf double espresso for her. Just kidding. Not decaf.” Then she whispered again, and squeezed my hand. “Yet.”

* * *

The afternoon sun cut through the sky into the backyard garden where we stood holding plates. The warmth and light were welcome after the hours we’d spent in the gloom and sharp corners of the house, dialing into the Internet with Jaime’s computer to search for information about Boulder.

Jaime pulled a giant leek off the barbecue then added some fat zucchini slices and an ear of corn to my plate, then did the same for herself and Cate. Dennis was nowhere to be seen, and Jaime hadn’t mentioned him.

I’d eaten leeks, and was prepared to be polite about it. The first bite drove my worries away. How come I’d never had a grilled leek before? This was amazing. “This is so good,” I said to Jaime. “Thank you.”

She beamed at me. “She’s so sweet,” she said to Cate. “The garden is my favorite thing about this house. I eat from it probably every day in the summer. I love having you guys here.” Then she looked worried.

“What is it?” asked Cate.

“It’s just Dennis. He’s really weird about some things. He told me to make sure you guys didn’t go into his office, he’s afraid you’re going to steal his change jar.”

“What?” exclaimed Cate. “Why the fuck would I steal his change jar? What the fuck is his problem?”

“He’s just really weird about stuff like that,” said Jaime. “It has nothing to do with you. I told him that was ridiculous. You’re my sister, for god’s sake.”

“Fuck him,” said Cate venomously. “He’s such a fucking worm.”

Jaime shrugged. “It’s no big deal,” she said. “Just ignore him. I do.”

Cate looked over at me and I raised my eyebrows back. I couldn’t understand why Jaime was with Dennis at all.

Reading my mind, it seemed, Cate looked back at her sister. She seemed, for a moment, like the older one. “Jaime, honestly. Why are you still with this guy? I know you were lonely after Craig died, but it’s been years. You guys have nothing in common.”

Jaime smiled. “It’s more complicated than that, you know that. I don’t expect you to understand. It’s OK. Really.” Her teeth gleamed, and I thought again how much she looked like my Cate. “He was there when I needed him.” The two sisters

kept looking at each other, and I felt like I wasn't there. "Just hang on a few minutes," Jaime said. "I'll make dessert. You guys are going to love this."

I went back in the house. I had to pee, and I wanted to take a look at Dennis's precious change jar. His office was in the hallway on the way to the bathroom, and I opened the door quietly and looked in. Here, too, even with the large window, was duskiess. The walls were lined with bookcases. There was a weight bench sitting dusty in the corner, and a lamp on his desk casting a feeble circle of light that didn't seem able to reach more than a few inches into the air. I walked into the room, my bare feet sinking into the carpet, and turned around slowly. "Fucker" was right. What the fuck was wrong with this guy, who didn't know anything about his wife, who hid from guests, who thought they were going to steal loose change from him?

I was sure somehow that the change jar was a giant glass water jug, full of so many coins I'd be unable to lift it, full of hundreds and hundreds of dollars, enough to pay for our gas and hotels all summer long. Not that I would take it. I'd never stolen anything in my life. Well, I'd never stolen anything from an actual person. I just wanted to see it, but it wasn't there. I looked more closely, scanning under the weight bench, over the desk, on the bookshelves. The only container I saw was a bright orange bowl, the kind you'd pour cereal into and eat from in front of Saturday morning cartoons. I looked in the bowl, but there were no coins in it either. Instead, it was full of tiny, flesh-colored pieces of plastic. I picked one up, between my thumb and middle finger, and looked at it. The tiny, perfectly formed baby was just like the ones my Catholic youth group director had handed out at the beginning of a

weekend-long workshop on sex the year I was thirteen and still a lifetime away from starting puberty. Then, it had been meant to show that babies were babies, no matter how small. Then, I had listened solemnly, and lost the doll at the bottom of my toy chest. Now, it seemed like a sign. I slipped it in my pocket. Suddenly, I didn't want to stay there anymore, in the room or at the house. I didn't even want to use the bathroom.

I left the office and closed the door behind me, holding the doorknob carefully so it wouldn't click. As I let go and began to walk back toward the sliding glass doors to the garden, Dennis materialized next to me. I stood still, looking at him. His hair was spiked up over his broad face and fair skin. His shoulders filled the hallway. He had surprisingly beautiful eyes, eyelashes so thick he might have been Valentino. "I hid it," he said to me, then pulled the office door open, brushing up against me as he did so, the buttons on the shirt over his belly rubbing against my forearm. He looked proud as he vanished into the room.

I went back outside.

"And the best part is, it's totally fat-free!" said Jaime, handing me a plate piled high with whipped cream and vibrant red strawberry slices. I squeezed the tiny, pointed hand of the baby in my pocket, then let go of it to reach for my dessert. "It's totally fat-free!"