

University of Massachusetts Boston

ScholarWorks at UMass Boston

Graduate Masters Theses

Doctoral Dissertations and Masters Theses

6-1-2014

The Alternate Lives of Claire MacKenna

Lauren von Hagel

University of Massachusetts Boston

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/masters_theses



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

von Hagel, Lauren, "The Alternate Lives of Claire MacKenna" (2014). *Graduate Masters Theses*. 254.
https://scholarworks.umb.edu/masters_theses/254

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Doctoral Dissertations and Masters Theses at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact scholarworks@umb.edu.

THE ALTERNATE LIVES OF CLAIRE MACKENNA

A Thesis Presented

by

LAUREN VON HAGEL

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,
University of Massachusetts Boston,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

June 2014

Creative Writing Program

© 2014 by Lauren von Hagel
All rights reserved

THE ALTERNATE LIVES OF CLAIRE MACKENNA

A Thesis Presented

by

LAUREN VON HAGEL

Approved as to style and content by:

Fanny Howe Chair of Committee

Askold Melnyczuk, Professor

Joyce Peseroff, Professor

Jill McDonough, Program Director
Graduate Program in Creative Writing

Cheryl Nixon, Chairperson
English Department

ABSTRACT

THE ALTERNATE LIVES OF CLAIRE MACKENNA

June 2014

Lauren von Hagel, B.F.A., Emerson College
M.F.A., University of Massachusetts Boston

Directed by Professor Fanny Howe

THE ALTERNATE LIVES OF CLAIRE MACKENNA, a collection of short fiction, seeks to explore the intricate ways choice and identity shape one another. As a kind of character-driven, literary take on the “Choose Your Own Adventure” books of childhood, these linked short stories explore what central character Claire MacKenna’s life would be like had she made different decisions at points in time both momentous and ephemeral. Each tale stands in communication with the others, working to illuminate how different potentialities can exist within one person and within one lifetime. Claire MacKenna is a contemporary young woman, and as such the permutations of her life explored here are not only structured by this exploration of choices but informed by the thematic idea of choice and what it means for being a woman today.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Three years ago I made the choice to dedicate my life, whole-heartedly, to writing, and to do so in pursuit of a creative writing MFA at UMass Boston. Here at the end of the narrative that particular decision birthed, I am most grateful to the recurring characters I am proud to call colleagues, mentors, and friends: Fanny Howe, Askold Melnyczuk, Joyce Peseroff, Jill McDonough, John Fulton, Ryan Vautour, Sarah Alexander, Drew Arnold, Alex Sladky, Kate Carito, Nazila Hafezi, Lynn Holmgren, Jennifer Martin and Shilpi Suneja.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
STORY	Page
IN A BASEMENT ON COMM AVE.....	1
NOTHING ON DECEMBER 6.....	18
A TOUR OF OBJECTS LEFT BEHIND.....	21
SEDUCTIONS.....	39
BIRTHS.....	58
THE FIRST LAST STORY.....	79

IN A BASEMENT ON COMM AVE

It is December 6, 2013, and it is snowing in Boston. Claire MacKenna leans against the wind and pulls the wool scarf over her mouth like a muffler, but it is one of her earliest knitting projects and the sharp air comes through the gaps.

This winter is her tenth in the city and she tells herself she is used to it. Her childhood in southwestern Pennsylvania was good training but Claire will never admit as much. She wears the differences of her new life like a badge of honor, clings to them as a lifeline that will always bungee her back and away from the old white house and her father's stern gaze.

And really, what could be more different from the fields of cows and country clubs than these streets, with their slush and steel grey buildings and trolley cars limping past traffic? And what could be more different than her, what she has made of herself through sheer force of will? Claire steps beneath a milk-orange streetlight as a T car pulls even with her. Its lights flicker off as the car stutters of the snow-clogged tracks and for a

moment she can see her reflection in its windows. She smiles at it— the monochromatic black of her dyed hair blunt beneath a loose knit hat, thick-rimmed glasses perched on the red snub of her nose, pea coat buttoned tight over thick layers – and thinks how closely the vision matches the one she conjured nearly eleven years ago to the day, the imagined self that tapped the hand holding the acceptance letter from MassArt. Claire gives herself a furtive thumbs-up, but it is returned by one of the students in the crowded T car as the lights shudder back to life and her reflection disappears. The girl has the same hat.

Claire turns away and tucks her face inside the flap of her hat, heat rushing through her cheeks. It occurs to her that this moment would be an opportune one to light a cigarette but she has none in her pockets or bag. When everybody had decided – separately but somehow simultaneously in that magical way of groups that Claire had never mastered – quitting was the way to go she had gladly cleaned her desk of rolling papers and tobacco tins, thanking the God she only believed in half the time that winter meant nobody thought to verify the presence of a patch underneath the layers. They still gathered outside the back door of the restaurant, on the loading dock that brought them pallets of organic vegetables and grains, but now instead of trading cigarettes they traded tales of withdrawal symptoms. Claire continued to join them. She had yet to mention that what she missed most was having a prop.

Especially at moments like this one. Objectively she knows that the girl on the train is not laughing at her now, that the gaily tilted head of her doppelganger shook in response to a joke told in the musty confines of the train, but still Claire wishes she had

something with which to fidget, something to hold. She wants to look removed and occupied, spot-lit but not highlighted beneath the streetlight. Then the stoplight flashes green and the trolley bell rings and in the empty space it leaves, on the platform, stands Bobby. Their eyes meet and he raises a gloved hand, a grin splitting his face. Claire flushes again.

He's not there for *her*, she reminds herself, although that is hard to remember as they stand looking at each other through the slipstream and slush sprays of the cars rushing past. Bobby has neither gloves nor a hat and snowflakes grey his blond hair, but there is an easy warmth that seems to surround him and spread across the street to where she stands, waiting for him to cross to her.

When the light finally changes he lifts his bass case in his left hand and slings his duffel bag behind his right shoulder in one easy motion and lopes across the street with an unhurried grace. Not even the signal quickly switching to the blinking red hand can make him hurry. He reaches her and steps close. The guitar case nudges her knee and his breath hangs between them when he speaks. "Hey there, you." He takes one finger and lifts the rim of her hat away from her eyes. It is cool and sharp against her temple.

They met at the Middle East in Cambridge last year, at a Battle of the Bands on the club's sticky secondary stage. Bobby's, a conglomeration of college friends based in every major east coast city, was up from D.C. to reclaim their bassist's home turf. Claire was there with Meag, who was tussling in the sheets with one of the bouncers and had promised Claire a "palatte-cleansing rocker man."

Bobby – simply dressed, un-showy on stage, clean-shaven and carrying only one drink all night that he never seemed to sip – did not meet with Meag’s approval but Claire liked the way he talked, the intelligent questions he asked about her paintings while the after-party whirled around them. He walked her home after the busses and trains stopped running, and when she invited him up to rest and have a glass of water – least she could do, really – he had accepted and then helped her make grilled cheese sandwiches. He sat on her couch for three hours at a careful distance, talking until she had chattered and chewed her way back into sobriety. They took another walk, this time all the way to the tucked-away gallery on Huntington Ave that held her first solo show, and it wasn’t until they were standing in front of the glass gazing in at the swoops of green and silver and red that he bent down in the gauzy dawn and kissed her.

“They look like shooting stars,” he said.

“Close enough,” she said, and did not clarify further.

They kept things easy; she made sure she was the first to clarify it so. She was not much for monogamy, she said, much less the long-distance variety. Meag had helped her rehearse, and her careful preparations made Claire almost disappointed when Bobby had merely smiled and slid a lock of her hair between his thumb and forefinger.

“But can I call you?” he said, and even though Claire had not rehearsed with Meag she said yes.

Meag, of course, had not approved, had watched Claire with her mouth open as they stacked produce boxes onto a cart at the organic grocery where they both worked. “He’s just— so not your usual type.”

“Meag, I was with my childhood friend for years and look how that turned out. I haven’t had a real relationship since I don’t remember when. I don’t think I’ve figured out a type beyond straight and probably un-Gus.”

“Gus’s not so bad. And relationships are overrated, you know that.” Meag studied a pear with her tongue tucked into her cheek, frowning, before tossing it into the discard pile. “I just mean, Bobby’s not the type to really fall easily into our group, you know?”

All the more reason, Claire thought, but she patted Meag’s shoulder as she started to wheel the cart out onto the floor. “You introduced us, didn’t you? And invited him to the party. There’s common ground there.”

“Oh there’s common ground there. And common beds, and common showers.”

Claire stopped halfway through the stockroom doors. A carton of pears tipped against the swinging door and balanced precariously. “Why didn’t you tell me any of this before?”

Meag sighed loudly and tossed her hair over her shoulder. “I don’t know, I guess I had this crazy idea it didn’t matter Claire, Jesus. We’re not in goddam middle school, are we?”

Claire frowned at her and reached up a hand to settle the pears on the stack. “That’s a weird thing not to talk about, Meag. Like, really fucking weird.” Him too.

“That’s not just it.” Meag bit her lip and looked, for the first time that Claire could remember, guilty. “I may have asked Bobby to look out for you at the party. Take care of you, make sure you got home safe, all that. I asked him right before we did the second shot.” When Claire didn’t answer, merely looked at her, her hand still on the tray of pears, Meag shifted from foot to foot and bit at her thumbnail. “He’s always so responsible and shit. I’ve never even seen him drunk, and he’s got that whole chivalry thing, and he was sober, for fuck’s sake, I thought he’d be the safest guy. Keep you away from Gus and . . .” She trailed off as Claire let go of the pears and let them slide and bounce onto the cart and floor. “Please don’t be mad.” Meag added her most wheedling tone.

“I’m not mad.” Claire said it automatically. And why should she be? What right, really, did she have? “I’m not mad, Meag. I’ve got to get this stuff unloaded.”

She pulled the produce cart through the double swinging doors, and left Meag to deal with the pears.

He had showed up again that night, clutching a bouquet of calla lilies and a stuffed duck. Claire had just gotten home, still wore the dark green polo and comfortable-not-fashionable shoes the co-op required. When she opened the door he grinned at her, in a way that was so winning and without guile that she automatically stepped back to let him into to the vestibule.

“How are you?”

“Better, now that I’m here.” He brushed his lips lightly over hers and smiled.

“Again.”

She wanted to ask him, now, while his face was so open, what exactly Meag had told him, how much he had already known about her, about his past and why he had agreed to, as Meag termed it, look out for her. But he had brought the duck, and the lilies, and surely whatever duties had been assumed had been dropped in the light of sober day, shed along with their clothing.

“Anything wrong?” he asked, brushing a thumb over her cheek.

“No.” She shook her long red-at-the-time hair out of its ponytail and forced a small laugh, punched his shoulder lightly. “You could have mentioned *how*, exactly, you knew Meag.” Claire pushed another sound through her lips and shifted from foot to foot, looking down at where her mismatched socks went toe-to-toe with his sneakers. A finger tipped her chin back up and she found herself matching, now, his eyes.

“It was a long time ago and it was nothing. I am sorry, though.” His eyebrows knitted together as he studied her face, and as Claire’s stomach swooped she found herself wishing she could look back down at her feet. She could not remember the last time somebody had apologized to her, much less while looking her in the eye. “To be honest, when I met you that night you didn’t seem like you were even friends.”

Claire does not know what to say in response, does not know what to make of the sudden slinky sensation of relief passing through her body, so instead she rises on tiptoe and brushes her lips over his. “So Meag tells me I was your baby-sitting charge last night.”

“Did she?” He lifted her, easily, and her legs wrapped round his waist. “Did she also tell you that I only agreed after I saw you? And that my assigned duties officially ended come morning?”

“No,” she said, as he carried her up the stairs. “But I’m glad you did.”

And since then she had stayed glad. Whenever the band or his family called him back to Boston he would call her, and then when those rituals and rehearsals were done he would come and dive into her bed, the hesitancy of that first meeting replaced with an urgency she attributed to the clock ticking toward his departure time. Once, when they were lying still, his cheek pressed into her stomach and her fingers knotted in his hair, inexplicable tears pierced her eyes. She tilted back her head and stared at the swaths of material Meag had helped her pin to the ceiling, willing herself not to drip on him or let him note a change in her breath. After a few fraught minutes she disentangled herself with a rough jerk of the blankets and told him, “You should probably be going now,” and did not look at him again as she walked to the bathroom and started the shower. The water was loud against the cracked ceramic, but from the spot on the stained, worn rug to which she sank Claire could hear Bobby: hear him gathering his things, hear him pause before the bathroom door, hear the weighted moment before he turned away from it and exited the apartment with a slammed door. In the silence that remained Claire turned off the shower and let herself cry.

“You should have it out, for real,” Meag had said, when she had wandered home – Meag floated between couches and extra beds, Claire’s the most often – to Claire’s tear-

stained face. “Just call him up and let it rip.” Her eyes gleamed and she gripped the tissue box so tightly it was concave when she finally relinquished it to Claire. “If he’s not going to fit into your life here you just need to cut him out of it.”

Claire nodded but it was Bobby who called, a week later, his words soft beneath a background noise of traffic and swirling wind. “Whatever line I crossed, I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s just hard to tell where they are.”

“I don’t want there to be lines,” Claire told him. “I don’t want there to be rules. This is supposed to be easy.”

“Easy *is* a kind of line, Claire.” The phone connection jumped with static and Claire imagined him holding the phone away from his head, his other hand gripping his hair in frustration. She felt such a strong urge to smooth his ruffled strands that she held the phone away from her face for a moment, so he wouldn’t hear her shuddering breathing, and when she brought it back he was speaking again. “So I’ll just try until I can’t, anymore. Can we do that?”

Claire had agreed, and now here he is.

She takes the finger that is so cool against her temple and grips it in her hands, pulling his hand toward her body. Then that is too much as well and his eyes are so close, so she sticks his finger in her mouth and sucks.

“Sorry,” she says. “Oral fixation.” When he cocks his head and knits his eyebrows she adds, “I miss cigarettes.”

“Sure.” Bobby leans close and kisses the hairline by her ear. “Bullshit,” he whispers, and grins.

“Well don’t you two look cozy.” Meag’s voice cuts through the snow and Claire jolts away from Bobby, backward into the brick building. As she lifts a hand to rub the back of her head and opens her mouth to greet Meag, as she sees Bobby bending in concern through the stars dotting her vision, the entire street goes black.

From a block away the hum of the trolley dies, and far in the distance tires screech while horns echo off the brick and the pavement. Claire looks at Bobby and lifts her hands, lets them flop back down at her sides with a small shake of her head. He laughs.

“Downed tree on the wires.” Meag is somehow watching them with narrowed eyes and typing furiously on her phone. She taps a few more times in staccato rhythm and plunges the phone into one of many pockets. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Claire turns automatically to follow her and then pauses, abashed, when Bobby drawls, “Why? And where?”

Meag lifts her chin and points it at him. “Gus and Blake’s place. They’ve got a back-up generator. And heat. And whiskey and a fresh stash.” When Bobby doesn’t move she adds, “This was always the plan, rocker boy. Claire asked me to plan a night of debauchery to welcome you back. Nothing’s changed except we’re going to have to hoof it, not T it.”

Claire stares at Bobby's guitar case. "I thought it'd be better than just hanging out at my place. I thought we'd actually live the life, you know?"

"What life? Claire—" Bobby pivots his body between Claire and Meag, who snorts and retrieves her phone for more furious tapping and scoffing laughter. "Claire, you don't have to entertain me, I'm here to—"

"Play in the show, I know, but you should relax beforehand and Gus always has the most mellow stuff." Claire lifts her eyes to his and licks her lips. Her mouth is suddenly dry. "It's a real artistic crowd."

Bobby studies her face for another moment and then sighs, reaches up and tucks her hat flap back down over her face. "As you wish. Let's go."

"Finally." Meag links her arm in Claire's and begins the tromp up Comm Ave, leaving Bobby to trail in their wake. Claire does not dare glance back, but in the quiet of the powerless city she keeps her ears open to the rhythmic thud of his guitar case against his thigh. It is steady all the way there.

Meag chatters happily for most of the walk, pitching her voice low in a confidential, girlish tone she accompanies with glances over her shoulder at Bobby behind them. Claire allows a vague sound of assent to escape her every so often, which is all that is required to keep Meag happy. It's a small price to ask in repayment, Claire figures, for the guidance and assistance the younger girl had provided when Claire landed in the city with no plan and no connections. Meag had introduced her to friends, to her day job filing in the Suffolk registrar's office, to the gallery that showed her small art

show; the two had been roommates, for a brief period, and together, of sorts, for even briefer. Meag didn't especially believe in monogamy or relationships, but she bounced from one to the another with the confidence that what she wanted must be good and come from a good place, and once what she wanted had been Claire. A month later it had been general connection with other human beings – ones, she claimed, she could only have if she were free to explore. Claire gave up the relationship with good humor and for the most part nothing had changed. Meag was still her guide to the city, her Sherpa through the streets and MBTA, her guide to the trappings of the life she had envisioned for herself when she flung herself away from Pennsylvania. If the price for that was a little passive-aggressive chatter, the occasional hot kiss on the mouth, then Claire would gladly pay it.

When they reach the yellow building, graffitied not by neighborhood boys but by its inhabitants, Meag darts left and pulls open a grate, descending one step to the basement stairs. “Welcome to the den, rocker boy,” she says. She kisses Claire on the mouth and winks at Bobby before disentangling their arms. Claire's face burns and she cannot make herself look at Bobby as she follows.

The chorus that greets Meag dims when Claire's face appeared in the hazy light and dies when Bobby's lanky frame descended below the door. Claire reaches behind her and feels a rush of relief when Bobby slips his hand into hers. She does not know where Meag is – she has disappeared into the winter light made green through the slits of basement windows – but she recognizes Gus, stretched on a couch on the side of the room, and she tries to walk as if she belongs to sink into the space beside him. They fell

into bed together, once, not long after she moved to the city. It is as solid a claim as she has to anyone else there.

“Who’s the stranger, Claire dear?”

“Bobby. He’s the bassist in Echo Chamber, they—”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of them.” Gus’s eyes loll in his head and he reaches out to rub Claire’s knee. “Kind of similar to like, U2, aren’t they? That kind of big arena stuff my parents like.” The room laughs and Gus grins.

“Not in the least.” Bobby bounces a little in place and whistles, softly. “But hey, no hard feelings, alright buddy? Nice to meet you.” He holds out a hand to Gus and looks at Claire.

The room is quiet. Gus laughs, hard and loud. “Sure. Let’s see what you’re packing, eh, *buddy*?” Gus reaches across Claire, grazing her breasts – she does not let herself wonder if he does it on purposes – and snatches the guitar from Bobby’s feet. Tossing the case away, he lifts the bass to his lap and strums. The chord is out of tune, harsh and high, and Claire feels Bobby shudder beside her.

Suddenly she is sick, sick as she has not remembered being in a long while. Her stomach twists and her memory flashes, for a moment, on Pennsylvania, and her father, and his shaking head as he put her on the bus after her last visit, several years ago. “I’m never going to get your career, Claire, but at least I hope you follow it with integrity,” he had said into her hair as they hugged, all elbows and empty space. His voice was full off

brandy and doubt, and Claire had pushed herself away and boarded the bus without another word.

“Give it back.” Claire’s voice falters as she says it but she looks at Bobby standing beside her, the beads of sweat on his hairline, and she pushes the words out so that they slither like a shy snake’s hiss but the back snaps and rebounds against the cinderblocks at the back of the room.

Meag’s head snaps up from where she has had it pressed to one of the shadowy figures’ faces, male or female Claire cannot tell and does not care. Meag’s lips are prepared in a smile but when she finds Claire’s face, does not find the joke she expects, her features harden.

“Chill, Claire. We share everything here. Bobby understands, don’t you dear?”

“Don’t call him dear.”

A low laugh rumbles through the room. Meag joins in and her chuckle is high and hard. “What, are you going to pee on him, MacKenna?”

A voice from the shadows asks, “Going to let the little bitch fight your battles for you, rocker boy?”

Claire does not look at Bobby but feels him jerk beside her, senses his foot moving forward and she lays her still-gloved hand on his shoulder. “Just give him the guitar back, Gus, for fuck’s sake.”

Gus glances at Meag, who gives him the smallest of nods and un-entwines herself from his lap. “Fine. I got my own in the back anyway.” He smirks and rises, and Claire

takes a step back as she realizes he is tall enough for his head to brush the low ceiling. The guitar is proffered but just as her lips start to form a thank you Gus reaches out and snaps every string with a sickening, scratching twang. The room rumbles again with low laughter.

Somehow they are outside, somehow Bobby is guiding her with one hand on her shoulder and gripping the neck of his bass with the other. Claire is yelling, “Not cool, Meag, this is not what cool is,” but Meag is not there anymore and Claire does not want to go back to fight her. They sink onto a nearby stoop.

“I’m so sorry, Bobby.” Claire cradles her face in her hands. She cannot look at him. “I’m so sorry.”

“Claire.” His hand lies heavy on her knee. “Look—”

“I know. I know. I’m so—”

“No.” Bobby squeezes and whispers. “Look.” She does. The lights are still out in the neighborhood; the ambient light is missing and Claire can see— “Stars. Look, Claire.”

Claire looks, and takes his hand.

There is always an or.

The room is quiet. Gus laughs, hard and loud. “Sure. Let’s see what you’re packing, eh, *buddy*?” Gus reaches across Claire, grazing her breasts – she does not let

herself wonder if he does it on purpose – and snatches the guitar from Bobby’s feet.

Tossing the case away, he lifts the bass to his lap and strums. The chord is out of tune, harsh and high, and Claire feels Bobby shudder beside her.

Claire squeezes his arm and tries to smile, reassuringly, but Bobby looks between her and Gus and furrows his brow. She shrugs and tries to guide him to a seat but Bobby shakes off her grasp.

“Hey, dude, what was your name? Gus-Gus? Can I have my guitar back?” Bobby makes eye contact with Claire with the corners of his eyes and grins, winks. Claire takes a step backward.

“Chill out, rocker man.” Gus stares between Bobby and Claire, and then bares his teeth in what is surely intended to be a smile, but looks like a wild ape about to strike.

“Trade you for your girl.” The room erupts in laughter.

Claire joins, and is grateful the low light hides her blush. “It’s fine, it’s a joke,” she tells Bobby, and as he snatches back his guitar with shaking fingers she walks over and sits gingerly on Gus’ lap. “Seems like a fair trade,” she calls out, and the room whoops and applauds.

“Claire.” Bobby says her name with a kind of wonderment, drawing out the syllables. He stares at her and gestures at the door. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.” Gus snakes an arm around her waist.

“I’m fine, Bobby.” Claire makes her voice stern. “I never should have brought you, clearly. Have a nice flight back, OK?”

He does not protest, or argue. Bobby simply turns on his heel, and leaves, and Claire ignores the sudden ache between her shoulder blades.

“Well done, Claire-baby,” Meag calls from across the room. “He just wasn’t right for you, girl. He doesn’t get it.”

At that the city rumbles to life, and light reflected off the falling snow streams into the basement, highlighting the murky greens and faded yellows of the room. Claire looks around, shifts her weight from Gus’ proprietary hold, and agrees. There was so much here, not to get.

NOTHING ON DECEMBER 6

It is December 6; it is always December 6 when Claire MacKenna studies her life. It is the date from which all her beginnings stem; it is her New Year's Eve.

After her mother died Claire gathered up into herself and made a plan and followed it. College on schedule at eighteen, at a school far enough away from home to garner independence but sufficiently close to keep the tenuous, careful bond with her father, who never remarried. Claire studied art and history and business, dated two or three boys on the cusp of being men and disposed of her virginity with the gentlest one in a dorm room on Valentine's Day freshman year. She spent February 15 washing rose petals and the remains of Hershey's kisses out of her clothes.

Claire did not marry any of those boys, and instead moved to the city where she entered the merry-go-round of clubs and Internet dating and reconnaissance brunches with the requisite group of girlfriends, small but close-knit and codependent. She met her husband just as the panic was about to set in and joked at their wedding that she had won

the race to be married before thirty. Her laugh did not reach her eyes, and when the wedding march started and her stomach dropped she thought, “Oh. There’s the cold feet everybody talks about.”

The vows were picture-perfect and sincere, beneath a lilac tree in spring. Her groom was kind and happy.

Is kind and happy, in the townhome they share on an old street lined by poplars. They have been faithful and will be, always, in this life Claire has chosen. And if she feels a sudden heat in line at the art supply store – static dancing in the space between her and the man a hands-breadth away with the dark eyes and ready quips and helpful hands – that is nothing. It’s nothing, the fleeting thought: “If I’d known you were coming, I would have waited.”

Nothing, this strangeness that makes her wander her clean and comfortably appointed home at three a.m. while her husband sleeps. Nothing to feel her attention snap away and wane in the board meetings of the arts education nonprofit she now heads. Claire regrets never having heartbreak, never going bankrupt, and in the next moment knows that regret to be silly, and goes instead about her business. On weekends she shows what art she can – what she has squeezed out of herself in odd moments – at craft fairs and open artists’ studios. Claire knows it to be good, this life she has crafted; it is as correct as the still-lives she manages to sell, far more popular than the swaths of color on dark backgrounds she paints without intention.

And if her stomach drops every December 6, if she loses sleep wandering the halls of her home and then outside to look up at the stars, if there is something empty about the cold that enters her bones on this date— why that is nothing. Nothing at all.

A TOUR OF OBJECTS LEFT BEHIND

It is December 6, 2013, and a Washington, D.C. night of cold frost paints the walls of a comfortably-appointed apartment where Claire MacKenna turns in her bed. She reaches out a hand and beneath the quilt beside her finds empty space; the only things full in the room are her slippers, with chocolates and nuts. It is the feast of St. Nicholas and Claire finds herself – again – abruptly bereft.

Claire MacKenna and Jordan Dere, childhood friends turned sweethearts, married one spring night in April when the moon was new and they were twenty-three. They married with all the hope and aplomb of youth – Jordan with a bowtie tied by his mother, Claire with a penny in her shoe – at the country club where Claire’s parents had been members, situated at the base of the Allegheny mountains where the Pennsylvania border gave way to Maryland. Claire’s father footed the bill with great good humor and insisted only on the use of gardenias, which had been Claire’s mother’s favorite flower. Claire and Jordan were glad to oblige.

They moved – after the wedding and a honeymoon in St. Lucia – to a two-bedroom apartment in D.C., crossing the Mason-Dixon line to live in the U Street Corridor with the other young professionals filling the district with demands for free-trade coffee and farm-to-table cheese. They painted one wall of their kitchen with chalkboard paint and on it wrote their goals, their grocery lists. Jordan would leave Claire notes in his small, looping handwriting before departing for work and Claire would draw him pictures of cats. Inside jokes grew and twisted on that chalkboard wall until they resembled the bulging, gnarled roots of an ancient tree. Erasure was done by hand and left smears of the jokes that were like ghosts, smoky and white.

When Jordan Dere disappeared Claire started a tally, right in the center of the latest smear. Jordan vanished on the sixth of December, a night of cold frost, and Claire read the smudge as a record of his breath, visible in air that was crisp and still. Claire imagined it hovering in the kitchen by the refrigerator before sticking instinctually to the wall on which they had inscribed so much.

This one is a love story. Or so Claire would tell you.

The cell phone on the bedside table is Claire's first clue that something is wrong. It is no phone she has ever seen him carry, older and more scratched than the smartphone he is constantly pulling from his back pocket at the urge of phantom buzzing. The background picture on this mysterious flip phone shows Jordan with a man – young

enough to almost be a boy, his chin devoid of Jordan's ever-present shadow – and they are smiling.

Claire does not look at the messages. Not yet. Instead she places it back on the nightstand, flipping it closed and relishing in the pressure, the hesitancy of the hinge before it finally gives way to her. It is a dark slate against the pale sandy table.

She leaves it there and prepares dinner, a roast surrounded by carrots and potatoes. When it is finished Jordan is still not home from work, her calls to the smartphone – the right phone, the one she must assume is in his back pocket as it always is – unanswered. Claire sets a place at the dining room table – inherited from her aunt and squeezed into the alcove – for him anyway, and after waiting an hour she finally eats, the carrots cold and soggy on her tongue.

Claire does the dishes, takes a bath, dusts every mite she can find and still Jordan is not home. The immaculate state of herself and their home would normally be a comfort to her, insure a full night of sleep between the sheets that smell of lavender or mulled cider in correlation with the season, but tonight she cannot, feels herself rolling aimlessly on the queen mattress without Jordan there as a counterweight. The old flip phone is a smudge on her clean nightstand.

At four a.m. Claire flips it open and gnashes her teeth at the small squeal of its protesting hinge. She starts with A and works her way down the list of unfamiliar male names, getting muffled voices wrapped in down comforters, scratchy mutterings

bouncing off tiled bathroom walls, high-pitched yelling of “What? Who?” over the pulse of electronica. Nobody tells her anything she can use and a few simply hang-up.

Six hours and thirty-one calls later, Claire uses the landline to call the police and scratches a chalk mark on the kitchen wall.

She thinks there will be a search, some flyers. Police attention in those first vital forty-eight hours. A leave of absence from her job at the Hamiltonian Gallery and a new full-time position for Claire: husband-hunter. She writes a check-list on the chalkboard wall and ticks steps and strategies off one by one.

The investigators who arrive inspect the phone, glance through the laptop and then look at her, shake their heads. They tell her she is worrying the wrong threads; they use words like “left” and “legal rights” and Claire hears cardinal directions, not verbs she can attach to the actions of her missing husband. The messages and records they count as evidence have no part, she tells them, in the narrative she and Jordan decided on long ago; they have no weight when balanced against their shared histories, the inextricable bonds of their childhoods. They suggest, not impolitely, that she read the writing on the wall, and she looks at the chalk and insists that’s what’s she’s trying to get them to do.

The detectives are unimpressed; they press their version of events in flat twangs while glancing at their watches. The kindest – a reedy woman with a severe French twist and tired eyes – pats her hand and tells Claire to call them if anything changes. “Go about

your daily life,” she says. “There’s no evidence you should be worried about his safety, so worry about yourself. Maybe this is a fresh start for you.”

Claire steps back from the woman and shakes her head, her eyes round in her pale face. “Evidence,” she repeats, and gestures at the objects in her home with flapping, inarticulate gestures while the detectives avert their eyes and move toward the door. A love story, Claire tries to tell them as she follows in their indifferent wake, like a marriage, is about other things entirely.

When there are seven chalk marks on the wall Claire becomes obsessed with finding the potato peeler. She remembers packing it, moving it from the jumbled plastic crate that had lived under her dorm room bed to the cardboard box clearly marked “Kitchen,” had stuck it with other implements inside the flower vase currently holding roses on the coffee table. There is every other tool available in their small-but-well-appointed kitchen: skimmers, spatulas for every possible use – pancakes, fish, icing – slicers and mandolines, separate whisks and bowls and wineglasses for every variety of vegetable and pastry, drink and meat. Before their wedding Claire and Jordan had scampered through Williams-Sonoma and Sur la Table holding the barcode scanners like guns, registering for gifts in their own version of laser tag. Their guests, most invited by their parents, dutifully purchased each and every one.

The potato peeler, however, was a campus C-store purchase, all bright red flimsy plastic and blunt, water-stained metal. On a whim Claire had promised Jordan – at this

point in their junior year, her finally-official-boyfriend of twenty-three months, fifty-nine if you counted their elementary schoolyard partnership – a romantic home-cooked dinner of chicken and mashed potatoes, only to realize that her supply of culinary tools was limited to two knives, three spoons, a handful of forks and a few pairs of plates and bowls. Jordan had laughed gently at the perplexed face she raised to him from where she knelt on the dorm room floor, surrounded by this meager store and a bag of potatoes and rapidly thawing chicken breasts, and taken over, sending her scurrying to buy the potato peeler and a miniature bag of frozen broccoli florets. When she returned he stationed her in the corner of the dorm’s shared kitchen and set her to peeling. She watched Jordan balance a sauté pan over the meager flame of the ancient stove, one foot tucked behind the other as he hummed to himself, and for the first time allowed herself to picture a forever life with him. She remembered her protesting fifth-grade proclamation to her mother that Jordan was *better* than any dumb boyfriend and in the echo of her mother’s chuckle Claire heard now gentle approval. When she skimmed a layer of skin off her thumb and he bandaged it so carefully, ducking his head over the wound so that all she could see was the soft dark down of his head, his neck, she knew for sure that he could care, and would take care. She would be safe with him. He didn’t even mention the bright spot of red in the potatoes. Together they stirred and whipped it away.

Some part of her believes, now, that if she finds that potato peeler and makes that meal again, on her own this time, Jordan will return. Claire knows it’s an insane thought and she does not speak it aloud, especially not to his parents who call every day and insist

she pray with them. They have always loved Jordan with a squeezing, exacting kind of care that could never expand to include her – the odd shadow who appeared when she and Jordan were eleven and who finally stole him away to a city of politicians and their attendant vices – much as she believes they truly tried. Their voices warble when they call. She has never, in nearly two decades, had to talk to them without Jordan’s back-up.

“Just know that we forgive you,” his mother says today, the seventh day. “We do not hold this against you. We know you want him back as much as we do.” The first Mrs. Dere’s voice whispers down the wire to the second.

It is these words that send Claire in search of the potato peeler. She searches all day and when she eventually finds it, fallen down behind the utensil drawer, she shrieks sharply. The noise echoes off the chalkboard wall and Claire claps her hand over her mouth, forgetting she cannot disturb Jordan now. She looks at the wall half-expecting to see a record of the noise amidst the smudges.

In the silence – it weighs something heavy now, a sensation Claire tries to ignore – she peels potatoes. They have two large bags tucked into the pantry because they buy most supplies in bulk. Jordan likes to plan ahead; he writes a menu for the month on the wall. These potatoes were supposed to last them through February, at least through the Super Bowl and batches of homemade fries and chips.

Claire peels every single one. She mashes them into the largest mixing bowl they own, adds sour cream and cheese and chives. She holds them up toward the window and whispers, “Look, baby, look what I can do for you.” The silence in the kitchen presses on

her and she rolls her tear-filled eyes at her own insanity. *Little girl*, Jordan calls her, sometimes.

Then she eats them, every last bite, and her face flushes. When she looks in the mirror Claire smiles at her reflection, proud that she has fed herself outside of the confines of the menu – she is always asking Jordan to go out, to be more spontaneous, to not work such long hours – and thinks she finally looks the part of a MacKenna: hearty, Irish, potato-fed. *Dere*, now, she remembers, and is horrified, and vomits into the sink and then into the toilet. Claire pushes her own hair back from her face. She scrubs the bathroom, the kitchen and then the bathroom again until the apartment gleams even cleaner than it did the night he disappeared. It is only six o'clock but Claire showers and cries and climbs into bed and cries, pulling the quilt over her head and whispering *Dere, Dere, Dere* into the dark until the litany finally lulls her to sleep and the seventh day ends.

The thing about a love story is once you're in, you're in it; the beginning and the ending are inconsequential. It's the thing on which Claire has pinned everything, in this life.

On the twenty-third day Claire goes through Jordan's desk— perhaps there is something she missed before, something the police would overlook in their preferred version of events. A clue. She wakes late, having kept watch the night before with the

explosions and catchphrases of the action movies Jordan will never watch with her as company, and makes herself a smoothie. Yesterday, on day twenty-two, she ventured to the indoor farmers' market for the first time by herself, picking out strawberries and Greek yogurt and a pungent goat cheese, sampling a sliver of fudge and for a moment shivering in pleasure, thrilled at the way she could wind aimlessly through the stalls to what struck her fancy. In the next moment she was hit with a cold, yellow flash of guilt and she backed away hurriedly from the smiling fudge girl. Claire told herself that it was simply a reaction to the controlled nature of the recent holidays, the heavy sparseness and grief of the Deres' Christmas Eve piety and the quiet, forced relaxation of the morning with her father, and resolved to refocus on the search. Look again, look again, try again.

Claire sips her smoothie and trails in her bathrobe to Jordan's office, swiping a finger through the thin layer of dust on his laptop, still closed with the weight of the detectives' pronouncements. She rifles through the drawers and returns them to her closest approximation of his careful order, disturbed by the police investigation and her own prior searches. Finally, in the bottom drawer, tucked in the back behind a folder of receipts, she finds it: wrapped in a plastic bag emblazoned with the word *Pulp*, a Mardi Gras mask of vibrant purple with glitter and sequins. There are feathers at the edges, bedraggled and bent toward the back of the mask from living so long in the drawer. A few have fallen off and settled in the bottom of the bag, next to a torn, yellow receipt that shows Jordan bought the thing the day before he disappeared.

Claire sits back on her heels and cups the mask in her hands, her fingers sliding through the thin eye-slits. Through the doorway and down the hall she can see into their bedroom, where the old, mysterious flip-phone mocks her from the bedside table. Jordan was scheduled to go to New Orleans in February; he had told her it was a business trip.

It occurs to Claire that she should be angry, and she tells herself that is the emotion fueling her as she stands up and thrusts the mask back into the bag and then into her purse, as she looks up the address of the store and resolves to return the mask. It is anger that has her putting on red lipstick like war paint, a blue wrap-dress and knee-high boots like armor, that pushes her out the door and into the sharp light of late December.

Never mind the sudden slide of invisible weight from the back of her neck. Never mind the raised tilt of her chin and the stretching of her cheeks into a smile. Claire is angry; Claire is a lover possibly wronged. She wraps herself in the role and walks down 14th Street, and when she passes people she knows she waves jubilantly and they forget to think of her as a near-widow, to imagine her deep shame, to pity her sad role-playing.

Once in the store – a jumble of bright fluorescent bags and games and cheeky greeting cards with surprisingly vulgar cuddling animals – Claire can't bring herself to return the mask. Instead she finds herself buying an orange feather boa and laughing with the tattooed saleswoman, who her memory places, vaguely, as an occasional patron of the Hamiltonian. Claire forgets for a moment that she has not worked in weeks and promises the woman free admission, and the woman in turn invites her to an event that night at the club down the street.

“You can only come if you wear that boa, though,” the woman says, and Claire laughs again and agrees. She leaves the store with it wrapped around her shoulders. The wind picks up and Claire feels light; she holds her arms out as if she could fly and runs headlong through the push of shoppers ducking their heads against the cold. When they stare she laughs and holds out her hand for a high five; when a few return it, Claire whoops in delight and twirls the boa like a lavalier.

At their wedding Claire and Jordan had done a surprise, choreographed routine. Jordan was a connoisseur of first dance YouTube videos and had been the one to set their choreography. He wanted to record theirs and post it online, too, but the friends and colleagues of their parents had shifted uncomfortably on the edges of the dance floor, clutching the stems of their champagne flutes. It didn't occur to anybody to record the moment when the slow music stopped and shifted into a faster, rhythmic rap number. Claire remembers the collective snap of heads and raised eyebrows and laughs to herself on the D.C. sidewalk. She had looked at Jordan dancing beside her, his eyes screwed shut in concentration, and thought that no matter what happened after, that one moment had been worth it. Today, pulling the tag off the purple mask and slipping it on, Claire feels it again. She stretches out her arms and marvels at the space so open to her in these winter hours.

The rest of the day she spends born on the breadth of that wind, floating from cafes to bars to pastry shops and ordering whatever she chooses. She returns home only to change into a slip of a dress and a pair of heels high enough that she would have

towered over Jordan by several inches, ones that she had stashed in the back of their closet beneath a pile of old handbags and posterboard. It takes her longer than normal to make her way to the club on their thin stems, but when the bouncer gives an approving glance to her legs and smiles in a way that sends flashes of heat up her thighs, Claire deems the walk worth it.

Inside she finds the saleswoman and shimmies at her so that the orange boa flutters like wings around her bare shoulders. The woman, Meg, returns the greeting with a boisterous kiss that lands halfway between Claire's cheek and lips and Claire feels her face glow warm in the darkness of the dance floor. Lust dances with a wild excitement in her belly for every human in the room, from Meg to Meg's friends to the bassist in the band, and Claire throws herself amidst the slick sweating bodies with arms and legs flung wide. An arm snakes around her waist, a hip bumps against her back; there is hot breath on her neck and a palm skimming her ribs. For a moment her skin hums with beaded pleasure and then she is off again, pressed through whatever thin spaces of air open between and around the roiling dancing mass. Claire bounces from body to body, partner to partner, dancing and rolling between Meg and strangers, familiar faces and new. Words leave her brain and there is nothing there but the hard loud notes of the music, bright colors. For a moment across the floor she thinks she sees Jordan, gripped in the firm arms of a tall, glistening Adonis, and her face splits in a wide grin. Claire raises her arms and twirls.

At the end of the night she tastes the sweet, minty breath of the bassist while perched on a speaker, the sticky floor of the dance floor visible over his shoulder. They exchange phone numbers, and so do she and Meg, and when Claire gets home she writes them on the wall above her tally. She wants to remember this moment, inscribe forever the first time she's made a connection, a friend, on her own, here in D.C. For a moment she thinks that Jordan will be proud, and there is a flash of that yellow guilt, and then she tells herself *he would have been proud*, would have. The shift to past tense comes easily and she shivers, and as she scratches another tally mark on the wall she reminds herself to cry.

It isn't until she turns on the radio – late at night, imagine, past the bedtime the two of the them had so long dutifully kept – and the song from their wedding dance comes on that the tears come. Claire imagines Jordan, eyes screwed shut and lithe body dancing on the streets of New Orleans, a boa around his neck, and she sobs with great heaves. She tells herself, *This is acceptance. This is mourning*. She thinks of the mask in the drawer, how easy it would have been for him to slip it into a pocket instead of leaving it for her, how carefully he hid it until he left himself. Claire moves to the kitchen and erases every chalk mark on the wall. In the blank space she says to Jordan: *I'm sorry. Thank you.*

Chalk, a potato peeler and a mask. On smaller, shakier things have other love stories been built.

The call comes at three o'clock in the morning, a time that once Claire would have found alarming but that now seems natural, right somehow, another note in the record she has spinning on the turntable. She picks up the handset and says hello, her voice calm and friendly and ticking up at the end.

“Mrs. Dere, ma'am, we have your husband.” Claire thinks she's imagining the note of apology in the intern's voice, but then the next two words this man says – Claire imagines him young, barely able to grow a five o'clock shadow, his scrubs clean and stiff in their newness – are *I'm sorry*. “I'm sorry ma'am, but you're the one listed as his emergency contact. I know it's late ma'am, but I think you should probably come. He told us to try his parents and we did but they— they won't come. They say he's your responsibility now.”

For a moment Claire's apartment tilts; she feels her whole life scratch and skip even as Bessie Smith's wail rises unhindered from the turntable. She reaches out and steadies herself on the wall, her hand brushing beneath where she has swabbed a line of navy blue, a deep green, a spot of yellow. The paint chips lie on the entry table next to her keys.

“Is he OK?” Claire imagines a coma, the blinking of machines in a white room where Jordan lies motionless on a narrow bed. She remembers her mother's room, hears in the way the young intern draws in his breath the pause before that long-ago doctor's

diagnosis. His hand had rested on her eleven-year-old head; there was a smell of lemon antiseptic.

“I guess so ma’am, but the thing is—” His voice cracks a bit; he fills the pause with a tiny groan. “The thing is we took him up to psych, ma’am, because he was just so sad. It was cold and he wasn’t wearing the best clothes, but I would’ve thought he was OK except he was just so sad.” There is a flurry of noise in the background and the young intern lowers his voice. “I’ve never seen a man that lost, ma’am.”

It occurs to Claire to ask where he’s been – she thinks of the Potomac, underpasses scattered with needles, bridges – but instead asks for the hospital and says thank you – “It wasn’t a problem ma’am, again I’m sorry and I hope he stops being so sad soon, if you won’t mind my saying.” – and hangs up.

With effort she sends a perfunctory text to his parents, and then Claire is pulling on her wool coat and leather gloves, a pair of boots from the back of the closet, and walking out into the first snow of both the winter and the new year.

It is late into the night of January 6. Not yet January 7— to Claire’s mind a day does not end until she sleeps, does not begin until sunrise. The transition of days must happen without witness. Earlier that day Claire had slipped into a Twelfth Night service. The church was hazy, the light of winter weakened even more by its passage through the narrow stained-glass windows set in dark stone arches. Claire sat in the very last pew and watched the entrance procession, led by three tall, gangling teenagers in jewel-tone robes with frayed sleeves, plastic crowns on their heads. One giggled softly and Claire felt a

shock of pleasure to see the long hair and heels of a young woman— a girl really, not much younger than herself. The priest followed the trio to the almost-life-sized crèche to the right of the altar, and the Magi and congregation bowed to the Christ child. Claire bent her legs to the heavy padded kneeler but allowed herself to half-sit on the edge of the pew; she crossed herself and whispered *Mother, Daughter, Holy Spirit*. The blank days ahead were blessed, she believed with a shiver, in the name of something redefined and real.

Claire's feet lead her in the opposite direction from the church. She walks the shoveled sidewalks, the call of sirens screaming somewhere to the right where she knows the hospital is, though she can't quite make herself turn, yet. Her feet sound with a soft rhythmic crunch on the salt and her breath drifts ahead of her. It looks like empty cartoon speech bubbles. She thinks of the procession from this morning, the girl-king's giggle beneath the choir's harmonies, and finds herself humming. Claire had always liked to sing, but she had forgotten, when she grew up.

A sudden softness beneath her foot, and Claire slides, nearly falling. She looks down and finds half a footprint, just the mark of her toe, in snow that suddenly fills the sidewalk. As far ahead as she can see there is nothing but fallen flakes— no salt, no resumption of shoveling.

Her mind travels to the long-gone snow shoveler. Claire imagines him stoop-shouldered and wrapped in multiple scarves, a maroon one encircling his jaw as a makeshift balaclava. In her mind he shifts back and forth across the sidewalk, pushing

and scraping to the very edges where dark remnants of grass poke through the white like a stale spilled carton of cookies-and-cream ice cream. He sprinkles salt and ice-melt behind him, a shower of blue and white pellets. His boots are stained with grey streaks. When he reaches the point where Claire stands now – she reaches out a hand, she can almost smell the sweet sweaty damp rising from his puffy coat – she imagines him looking up and staring at the white expanse before him. The sentinel street lamps are the only markers of a distant, unending stretch, a Mobius strip that curves back behind him to the concrete already gathering the thinnest shimmers of fresh fall. The scrape of the shovel and the smatter of the salt echoes in his mind, in Claire's, a monotonous refrain like the electronica background of her first searching calls for Jordan.

Fuck it, the shoveler thinks – perhaps he shouts it to the sky – and throws the shovel over his shoulder. He twirls it as he walks off into the night, where he will down a stiff drink by the fire of the Irish Whiskey Public House.

The path isn't clear here, Claire feels sure, because the person entrusted with the task simply got bored. It is a thought that makes her laugh and catch gasping breaths in the cold, early morning of January 7, the first day of Jordan Dere's reappearance. He's been gone for thirty-three days.

Of course this is a love story. Look at where she drew a heart in the slush, a quick draw with her toe before turning right toward the sirens. Look where she wrote their

initials before walking away from the clean expanse of snow. Her breath has frozen above them in the air.

SEDUCTIONS

It is December 6, 2013 and it is a dry, cold day in Littlestown, Pennsylvania, where Claire and Jordan Dere have made a home. Claire – twenty-nine and in torn blue jeans, Terps hoodie cinched tight around her neck – regards seriously the paper turkeys in her dining room. The thin light in the room sweeps over the deep wood of the furniture, dusts the faded browns and oranges and russets of the homemade decorations and comes to rest in the forgotten gold tones of her dark hair. It, like Claire, is starved for sunlight, but in the right room at the right time of day, it remembers its more varied hues.

It is an innocuous enough day for once upon a times, one weighted more by the past than the present, clean in this current span of seconds. The moment hovers in the shifting light, and as the mother tilts her head in the silent house to listen for proof of her child's survival, it tips into significance by the mere fact of looking, of listening. A

narrative forms and shifts out of short-term memory into long. Claire MacKenna edits her story as she lives it, and so this story begins with light and cold.

Claire at this moment is more concerned with the leftover Thanksgiving decorations. The tiniest turkey – the one she had traced from Eleanor’s pudgy fingers – has already been outgrown by its model. The baby’s breath comes steadily through the monitor resting by the cold cup of tea.

After the drama of her birth, Ellie’s babyhood has been as picture-perfect and peaceful as Jordan had told her it would be, back when he painted the baby’s room with mint-green and Claire’s imagination with triangular family portrait configurations and tiny shoes. The guilt Claire feels for sleep-walking through her daughter’s first few months is mitigated by Ellie’s undeniable health, her comforting baby fatness and the way her small rosebud mouth forms the syllables of “Mama.” Jordan’s mother was visiting the day that first word left Ellie’s mouth and Claire had taken small, secret pleasure in the way her eyes, which seemed always full of unshed tears, had rounded in shock.

“She’s a little young to be speaking yet, isn’t she?” the first Mrs. Dere had said. “Jordan certainly never spoke so early.”

“It’s not unheard of, Mother.” Jordan patted his mother’s shoulder. “Eleanor must take after Claire; she certainly looks like her.”

Mrs. Dere had merely grunted and handed her drink to Jordan for a refill. When he had left the room she said to the ceiling, “I thought all children said ‘Dada’ first.”

Claire had let the words hang in the silence until Jordan returned, but as she put Ellie to bed later that night she taught the baby to high five. It was the first time she had felt truly bonded to her daughter.

Claire is grateful for the bond especially now, as she walks into the kitchen balancing her tea and the baby monitor, Ellie’s soft snores accenting the echo of her footsteps across the hard bare floors. There are days when Ellie is the only person Claire has to talk to; she thinks, but does not tell Jordan, that perhaps these constant conversations account for their child’s prodigious verbal skills. The world Claire once imagined creating with Jordan – an agricultural idyll full of self-sufficiency and crafting and a small but sturdy group of like-minded friends – has transformed into a kind of way-station, one through which her husband passes like a sleep-deprived ghost. Sometimes Claire stands on the porch of their old frame house, watching the sun sink behind the even older barn, and imagines the brown fields stretching out in all directions filled with grains coveted by a neighboring ancient tribe, cows and sheep precious to foreign traders, waves across which her sailor husband must travel to support her and their offspring in the way they have decided. They are glorious tests she imagines, waiting and cradling the baby monitor in her palms and waiting to see whether it or the approach of their rattling car calls first.

The monitor always wins. Claire pads into her baby's room and lifts Ellie from the crib. She coos to her daughter, her voice sliding up its scale with a smile: "I think Dada is having an affair!" Ellie chortles and claps.

They have not had sex in over a year. Looking at her makes him guilty, Claire can tell; his gaze avoids her body and the scar across her abdomen. Once, after she had felt fully recovered for the first time, she had grabbed his hand in the night and guided it to her breasts, then slowly brushed it down her torso. When his fingertips burned into the raised pink tissue Jordan wrenched himself away with a guttural groan that echoed off the exposed beams of their bedroom. He leapt out of their giant antique bed and pulled on his pants and left the house without a word, and when he returned in the morning for cereal and toast they did not speak of it.

So Claire talks to Ellie, although she does not say "sex" aloud to her baby; she calls the act "it," makes it sound like a game— hopscotch, leapfrog. She warms a bottle on the stove and reassures Ellie, and herself, that such a long wait is normal, both in marriage and after the trauma of emergency C-sections and long hospital stays. All the books said so, at least the ones she read during the long hours alone in her private room, turning pages beneath the incessant chirping of daytime television hosts. She had scanned idly – waiting for Jordan to get off from work, waiting for the nurses to allow her to hold her child, waiting for her father to return and make small talk and proffer more reading material – until she reached the page with the illustration of the young, smiling doctor, handsome in his lab coat. Claire recognized him; her father had probably bought these

books in the same place he had found *Our Mom Has Cancer* and *You Are the Best Medicine* and *Curious George Goes to the Hospital*. When she saw the familiar, smiling, line-drawing face Claire put down the books and ordered the nurses to change “Baby Girl Dere” to “Eleanor.” Jordan had not objected.

He had been nothing but solicitous and deferential, then and always through the past nine months, but from a kind of distance— more careful with her than with Ellie, even, with whom he had taken to waltzing through the rooms of the house they couldn’t yet afford to fill with furniture.

It couldn’t have been easy for him, Claire says to Ellie, and tickles her warm belly before shaking a few drops of formula onto her own forearm; he must have been so very scared. The baby reaches out her dimpled hands and tries to grasp the nipple of the bottle. Claire adjusts her grip on it and shifts from foot to foot, finding her best approximation of equilibrium. She looks at their hands arranged side by side on the smooth white surface – Ellie eagerly trying to assist in her own lunch – and again feels a pang that her attempts at breast-feeding had been so disastrous. Even Mrs. Dere’s raised eyebrows and pursed lips from the foot of her hospital bed had not been enough motivation— for herself, or for Ellie.

The woman in Jordan’s affair would be able to, Claire decides today; she adds qualities to the litany in her head every day. This other woman would be a natural, taking to it immediately after a drug-free home birth in a kiddie pool in the living room. In her imagination the woman is broad and sturdy, brown from work and play in the harsh

winter sun. Her name is something from an evangelical tract or children's chapter book, Sarah or Mary Anne or Susan, a name as reliable and tactile as she is. Susan can milk a cow and change a tire, would know how to get rid of the bat in the attic both Claire and Jordan are afraid to approach. She would recognize buying an old farmhouse and its attendant acres at auction for what it was, the natural progression of a life begun and destined for small-town Pennsylvania, rather than a project of reinvention. Mrs. Dere would approve of her and the updates on Jordan's old middle school, church youth group girlfriend – another sturdy girl with a practical name – would cease. Susan, Claire knows, has many practical skills, learned at the knee of a father who offers fishing lessons and gruff wisdom instead of financial advice and fumbling handfuls of cash.

Claire's own practical skills run to baking, to carefully piped cupcake icing and delicate creations in sugar; to decorating their home with thrift store finds and refinishing Ellie's second-hand crib while six months pregnant, a faded bandana pulled over her mouth and nose. She can follow any recipe and dutifully attempts to recreate Mrs. Dere's casseroles and Bundts, though as of late they tend to grow cold on the table waiting for Jordan. In recent months she has turned her attention to creating postcard holiday fantasies for Ellie in their echoing dining room, scouring the internet on her slow laptop for patterns and inspiration. While her baby sleeps she adds layers of construction paper and cotton balls and fabric recycled from outgrown onesies.

"Maybe you *are* too young to appreciate them," Claire tells Ellie, slumbering in her arms in a milk-drunk stupor. "But you're a little genius, so maybe you do." Claire

sways in rhythm with each word. For a moment, there in the kitchen with her infant and her paper turkeys, Claire feels as though all is according to design. Then from her back pocket her phone chirps with a message from Jordan: *Stopping by the parents for dinner. Sparing you the strain. Don't wait up.*

In her arms Ellie stirs and stretches her small limbs before tucking her face against Claire's chest. Her tiny point of a nose – one of the features she has inherited from Jordan – pokes into Claire's ribs. Claire feels herself shake, suddenly, with the strain of holding her child and she rushes upstairs to return Ellie to her crib. The sun has not yet set, but Claire pulls on pajamas and sinks into the coldness of her bed, the baby monitor propped on the floor. She is, she whispers to Ellie, so very tired.

Once upon a time two children grew into adults, and they claimed their adulthood with marriage and a down-payment on an abandoned dairy farm. Though the boy dipped into his trust fund he rejected the cushioning funds of his bride's father and claimed his financial independence as the first slice in a carving process that will make him a husband, a father, a man. Though the girl felt a pang at the turning of the page from her single years in the hive of her girlfriends to the settled chapters, she told herself she would as soon skip the rising and falling action and head straight to the dénouement. She refuses to thwart inertia and calls it, instead, destiny, and choice, and a mature happily-ever-after. The couple lies stiff and un-touching between white sheets as stainless as their

eventual daughter, and to that blank pink infant the mother practices a telling of their story. Claire counts on this still, preverbal time to perfect and shape their legacy.

Two hours later Claire stutters out of sleep to the insistent low tones of their doorbell. Ringing the bell is a person she immediately calls, in her head, a young man, although he can't be more than four or five years younger than her. His face is broad and smiling and clean-shaven except for a small patch of blonde stubble on his chin, visible only because of the way the light is angling across their porch. He wears work boots and a thick coat open to a dark green polo shirt. Claire thinks she can detect a damp spot on the right, where she imagines he has spilled coffee. Over his shoulder, parked in the packed dirt circle they call a driveway, sits a white van with a logo she can't quite make out in the evening sun. He carries a clipboard.

“Good morning, ma'am,” he begins. His voice is clear and low. “I'm with—”

“Are you selling Bibles?” Claire crosses her arms and leans against the doorjamb, crossing her arms over her chest. The air is cold and she is wearing only her thin pajama shirt and cotton shorts.

“What?” The young man's smile falters and he cocks his head. His eyes start to move lower across her body but when they have nearly reached the spot where her arms hide her breasts he moves them back up to her face. “No, ma'am, I am not, I'm with New Green Energy and we're going around spreading a very different kind of news.” He laughs a nervous chuckle and when Claire smiles at the joke his whole face relaxes. “All

you need to do is find your most recent energy bill and we can take a quick look to see if we can save you hundreds, maybe even thousands of dollars off your gas and electric—”

“Would you like some tea?” Claire uncrosses her arms and stands up straight. “Perhaps some dinner? I find I have extra tonight.” The salesman towers over her; his frame is wide and sturdy, so different from Jordan’s slight build. Something in his face flickers and then he smiles at her, an eager light in his eyes. One of his hands flutters away from his clipboard and toward the phone peeking out from his pocket as he nods.

“Come with me.” Claire pivots on her heel and leads him into the empty dining room, where she pulls out a chair and commands him to sit. “Here.” She hands him the baby monitor. “You can let me know if Ellie wakes up.”

The man shifts his weight in the seat. “I should probably get going.”

“Everybody’s got to eat dinner, I hear. Help me eat mine and I’ll show you all the energy bills you want.” Claire pivots away to return to the kitchen and reheat the casserole she had eagerly prepared and adjusted that morning for Jordan. Behind her she can feel the eyes of the young salesman and hear him typing quickly on his phone. When she glances over her shoulder he stuffs it hastily into his pocket. “You could take off your coat,” she adds. “You should.”

After sprinkling some parmesan, freshly grated, onto the top of the dish and sticking it into the oven, Claire returns to the dining room and engages the salesman in glib chat, absently fingering the display of gourds and mums on the sideboard. He is as solid and uncomplicated as a Susan, talking in level flat tones about playing football at

Spring Grove and putting snow tires on his truck. When Ellie's snores rise in volume he does not break stride but merely proffers the monitor to Claire, then resumes tossing it lightly between his hands when she remains unconcerned.

He is impressed by the casserole, which does not take long, and helps himself to heaping seconds and thirds while Claire sits cross-legged on a chair across from him and watches him talk with his mouth full. "This is really good," he says with an enthusiastic wipe of his forearm across his lips. "Why aren't you having any?"

"I'm not hungry tonight. I'm just glad to see somebody enjoy it."

He pauses with his fork hovering in the air and smiles crookedly. "You trying to poison me?"

Claire thinks of her first attempt at cooking for Jordan, his mocking distrust of her ability to boil water after it, and returns the smile. "Yes, you've discovered my evil plot."

The man's face flickers for a moment, and in it Claire comes around the table and kisses him. His lips are smooth with balm and Claire licks the chalky taste off her own before opening her eyes. The man studies her face, intent and wary and eager all at once. Claire gently removes the fork from his hand, takes the other between her own and leads him into the living room.

There is an old quilt, made long ago by Jordan's grandmother, folded over the back of the couch. Claire spreads it over the hardwood and then steps onto the edge of the blanket as she faces the salesman, who hovers in the archway between the two rooms. He

does not move toward her. Claire smiles. Her arms and legs are goose-dimpling but she does not feel the cold.

“So, how about those energy statements?” His voice is high and scratchy post-dinner. The sun has set and Claire has not flipped any light switches, and in the dimming light he looks even younger; maybe twenty-one. Claire and Jordan started dating, officially, when they were that age.

“They might be a little difficult to find.” Claire makes it a statement, not a question, and pulls her shirt over her head. When his eyes widen and he sucks in his breath, she adds, “I’m sorry if it wasn’t clear.” Claire pulls down her shorts and underwear at the same time and trips a little as she kicks them aside. She stands naked before the salesman whose name she does not know. “I hope it’s all a little clearer now.” He nods at her and she can see his throat ripple as he swallows hard. “Why don’t you come closer?”

He steps slowly onto the rug. His smile is gone. “I’m really just supposed to get your energy information,” he says. “Dinner was more than I expected.”

“After.” Claire’s voice is stern. “Come here.”

He comes to within an arm’s length of her and as he reaches out a hand Claire closes her eyes. Her veins are pulsing again and she starts to shiver, feels a heady rush. Then she feels his finger tracing the pink tissue of the scar on her stomach.

“What’s this from?” His voice, disembodied beyond her closed eyes, now sounds like a child. Claire’s eyes pop open and she scowls at him.

“Why does it matter?” She is nearly yelling at him now; she doesn’t remember deciding to raise her voice, but it is bouncing off the walls. “Why do you care? That’s not what this is about.” She grabs his hand and presses the palm against her body, tries to slide it downward. “Isn’t this some fantasy? Like in those movies?”

The young man yanks his hand away. He steps back and shakes his head, steps back again and mutters, “No. No.” He turns on his heel and walks away, hovers beside the chair where his coat is slumped. To his discarded clipboard, “I’m not some pervert, OK, I don’t watch that stuff. I don’t know what you’re expecting.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, and she means it. “I’m so sorry,” she says again, and lies down on the blanket. “We can start over, if you want.”

He runs a finger over his cell phone, punches absently at the keys, and looks at her. Finally he nods and walks toward her, shedding layers as he does and tripping as he kicks off his heavy work boots. He touches her dutifully, watching her face the whole while, and it is up to her to decide when it is time to escalate, to finish. Claire opens her eyes after a few minutes to find his face screwed up tight in concentration, and she touches his cheek and tells him, “It’s OK,” and he collapses. The full weight of him smoothers Claire and she feels, for a moment, blissfully encompassed. Then he mumbles something into the cloud of her hair and when she asks him to repeat it, a blush spreads over the nape of his neck.

“Was that alright? Did I do alright?”

“Oh,” she says, and frees her arms to round him and rub the grooves of his back. “Very much. Of course.” She repeats the validation for the next several minutes – rubbing his slick skin until Ellie’s cries on the baby monitor alert them to the time and they dress and she walks him to his truck – because, of course, she understands.

Once upon a time a man climbed into a tower, and for the hell of it the maiden hidden there let him keep climbing into her bed. Because it was cold, because the light hit the bedpost in a certain way, she decided to fracture her own tale. If anybody could write a fan-fiction of her life, she thought, it should be her. Claire lets herself have a disparate plot thread, a story she does not tell Ellie.

Jordan returns late that evening, starting in surprise at the sight of Claire in the dining room, the remains of dinner still spread before her. “I told you, you didn’t have to wait up.”

“I know.” Claire pokes at the empty plates, only one smeared with food. “I wanted to.”

“You have company?” he asks, and for a moment Claire thinks Yes, here is my absolution and nods. Then Jordan rounds the table and kisses her lightly between her eyebrows. “I’m so glad you found some company.” He squeezes her hand and smiles at her, and they go upstairs to bed, and sleep.

Once upon a time stories were confessions, warnings. They taught their girlish listeners about the husbandry they would one day practice with all varying kinds of beast and prince.

It was an interlude, Claire thinks, and nothing else. The goodbyes yesterday were slight; the man had seemed flushed and relieved as he climbed into the truck and drove away, lifting his hand to shake hers before remembering himself and offering a sheepish wave instead. He was of a Susan type, but not a Susan role; Claire does not even know his real name, although she imagines one like Almanzo or Thomas or Willard, Will for short. It was not such an important detail, really, compared to the feeling of waves returning to her body, the shudderings inside her of somebody else's pleasure. When she looks at the space reserved for the quilt in the living, room removed for washing – Jordan never noticing, as he made his nightly lap through the house, that it was out of place – the rush she feels is of pride, not guilt, and her body goose-pimples at the memory. She has skills the Susans know naught of.

And yet she knows, as she changes Ellie's morning diaper, that there is something tenuous rippling through her carefully constructed home now, something hanging on strings thinner than the ones from which she had hung the paper turkeys. Ellie seems to notice, is fretful and will not settle in any position, nuzzling impatiently in Claire's chest and bemoaning the lack of sustenance there. Her small face clenches and reddens in accusation and Claire feels her stomach tighten in response. When she finally gets the

child down for her nap she resolves to expunge the episode entirely, to reassert her roles in this life and this home. Her mind churning with plans, Claire decides to retrieve the Christmas decorations from the barn herself. It is a task usually reserved for Jordan, especially in the post-Ellie days, but Claire thinks of how solid she felt in her body the day before. She glances at the quilt and resolves, with a toss of her head, grabbing the remaining turkeys and marching across the yard to the barn.

There isn't as much resistance in the heavy wooden door as she expects, and Claire feels a surge of pride, making a mental note to tell Jordan. Ever since they were kids their mutual lack of strength – every jar and twist-off cap is a battle – has been a source of easy laughter between them, but in the months since Eleanor's birth what little teasing he does has been tinged with caution and sad eyes.

Claire steps into the barn. Standing in the musty air of their barn, breathing in the smell of damp hay and old wood, Claire feels a rush of such warmth and love that she feels, for a moment, dizzy. She resolves to hire a babysitter and reassure him of her strength with an elaborate, aggressive seduction. Her mind whirls with thoughts of new lace lingerie, candles; perhaps she will make a trip to the beauty parlor, dye her hair. The veins in her hands, prominent beneath her translucent skin and beside her thin bones, pulse excitedly at the prospect of flirtation, a kind of initiation into the dance their childhood friendship had never required of them. Claire actually claps her hands together in glee and the sound echoes around the church-like space, and in response there is a scuffling from the loft above, and Claire sucks in her breath and is afraid and falls silent.

It is the thought that she must be strong and brave, that she must convince Jordan that she does not need protecting that drives her forward to the ladder, that has her slipping out of her shoes to place careful silent feet onto the rungs. Her hands shake ever-so-slightly as she grips and pulls. Claire does not make a sound as she raises just her eyes above the floorboards.

They do not see her; they are so absorbed in each other they have not heard her enter. The silver winter light, dotted by dust, falls from the high window onto the pile of hay where Jordan has spread his grandmother's quilt beneath himself and his lover—neither a Susan, nor an Almanzo. Claire does not know what to call this slim, blond man with limbs like a swan's neck and a face of high cheekbones and full, soft lips. She thinks only some Grecian, androgynous name will do— Ganymede, Hyacinth, Iapyx.

Their clothes are flung over the boxes of Christmas decorations and childhood mementos. Jordan raises his face from the man's and stares at him, cups his face in an encompassing gesture both familiar and completely alien to Claire. His eyes scan this mystery man's face intently, as though Jordan is seeking to memorize some important coding writ large only there. Then he moves his lips to the man's neck and, kissing, moves slowly downward. Each pressing of mouth to flesh dances lightly and without sound. They are beautiful, Claire thinks, and so she moves back down the ladder as silently as she came.

It is only when she reaches Ellie's room that Claire realizes she still has the paper turkeys in her hands.

Once upon a time, Claire whispers to her daughter. Once upon a time there was a goddess who turned a man into a goat for spying, a girl into a spider for bragging; a woman who turned to salt for looking back.

“I do love you,” Jordan says that night at two a.m., sitting in a chair on the far side of the dining room table. He turns the baby monitor over and over in his hands, rubbing his thumb over the bumps of the speaker emanating Ellie’s soft baby snores. “It’s not that I don’t.”

“I know,” says Claire. She sits still, her hands gripping each other in her lap. From the trash can in the corner of the kitchen the orange wing of a paper turkey tries to escape.

“I think I thought you must have known for a while now. Maybe always. I hoped that, maybe you would find somebody, too, of your own.” Jordan raises his eyes to hers for the first time as he says it, his hands finally stilling.

“I did,” Claire says, and although the words come out sharp and fast she realizes she means them as comfort, not reciprocal betrayal.

Jordan takes it as such, his eyes lighting and his shoulders straightening. “Then we can make this thing work,” he says, and a sob sneaks into his voice. He rushes out of his seat and kneels before Claire, a posture that momentarily blocks out sound for her. She looks at him prone and can only think that he did not kneel when he proposed to her,

that the fervor in his voice then was nothing to compare to the earnestness with which he is arguing for their marriage to continue. The words – ones like “polyamory” and “open” and “parents” – seem to echo down a long tunnel to her and she shakes her head. Jordan takes the motion as denial and he grips her hands in his, increasing the speed of his words. He invokes his mother, the smallness of their town, and then finally their long history, the deep roots of their friendship into the dark places of their childhoods, and the weight of it all presses down, squeezing impressions of her wedding ring and his into her hands so tightly she finally yanks them away and tucks them protectively under her arms.

“Please.” Jordan drops to both knees now and presses his forehead to her knee. “We’ve always been there for each other. We can make it more like we imagined, now that we know the truth. We’ll have a good life, Claire.” He looks up at her again and she watches his next words swim through his eyes, watches him weigh them before he says, “Your mother always liked me.”

It was true; Claire can not deny it. “What a sweet child,” her mother would say after a visit, when he brought her gossip magazines and Claire her homework, the papers piling on the sheets amid the crisscross of wires. “You know it was eighteen years, yesterday,” Claire says.

Jordan winces. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here.” He rises and leans back into a chair, rocking it back on two legs. “Eighteen years. Wow.”

“That’s long enough to grow a person,” Claire says, and laughs a little. “What do you think Ellie will be like, when she’s that old?” It is then that their daughter begins to

cry through the monitor. Her anguished sobs float in the space between her parents. Claire watches them rise and imagines Ellie at twelve, eighteen, twenty-nine, and all the possible permutations those cries can take in two decades.

“I should go to my father’s,” she says, and before Jordan can complete the nod she adds, “And stay. Until I find a place of my own.”

Jordan crumples in the chair and begins to cry. The sound mixes with Ellie’s airborne sobs in a harmony of tears. Claire leans forward and places each of her hands on his cheeks, presses lightly and kisses the space between his eyebrows. “I’ll figure it out,” she promises him, and leaves him there.

Once upon a time there was a woman who left her story. It is the only one Claire knows how to tell.

BIRTHS

It is December 6, 2013, a cold dry day in Washington D.C., and Claire MacKenna wakes clutching her stomach. She has been having dreams about babies for four months.

Now that the dreams have started, Claire wakes up at 6:57 a.m., thirteen minutes before her alarm. Ever practically she tells herself that she can always use the head start and rises to press the start button on the coffee maker, which is programmed to brew at 7:05 a.m. Rising to the scent of fresh coffee is one of the small convenient luxuries Claire allows herself, compensating for the way her travel mug stands out in team meetings amid her colleagues' steaming creations from the lobby's artisan café.

On this morning Claire pours the brew into her grey mug and returns to her room to find Bobby in her bed. In the few minutes since she has risen, he has managed to slide to the center. He lies on his stomach with his face pressed into the lavender sheets, mouth ajar and ass raised slightly in the air. His arms lie straight out beside him.

Bobby's snores are the most contented sound Claire has ever heard. She allows herself to bend and kiss him softly, right on the chicken pox scar above his right eyebrow, brushing back his flop of blond hair before humming the opening bars of "Me and Bobby McGee." Bobby's eyes flicker open and he smiles up at her, so completely guilelessly that she feels something settle heavy and hollow in her abdomen as she watches realization chase sleep from his face.

She used to try to sketch him, while he slept, on the frequent nights when sleep remained a country barred to her entrance. By light made pink and dim by its lampshade she had tried to capture the smooth curve of his face, the stubble that resisted frequent shaves and the thin soft mouth ajar and breathing tremulously across her sheets. If she were in luck his cheek would be pillowed on his hands and she would be able to study them, the long fingers and the calloused palms that could repair any leak and mix any drink, steady and guide his band as he strummed his bass and set her skin to humming as they moved gentle and firm over her body. When they went out he would intertwine his hand with hers, skimming the other over her knuckles when they paused at a stoplight or in conversation. When Claire could not abide the steady gaze of his blue eyes, which seemed to so intently and patiently x-ray her thoughts even as he made no demands silent or verbal, she would grip his hands in her own and lift to them her forehead. She buried the ridge of her nose between them and breathe deep, and even in that position he would reach out a finger to trace her cheek, reassuring. Claire found it easier to breathe when

Bobby slept and his eyes were shuttered, but the sketches never came out. She told herself she was out of practice, a hobbyist but not an artist, and threw them all away.

Claire and Bobby ended their nearly year-long relationship a few months ago, after a dinner at the new Italian restaurant on U Street and a chance encounter with an old friend from college. Janice – who Claire remembered as pressed and powerful, the president of Kappa Gamma Chi – had lurched across the small dining room to say hello, clutching an infant to her chest and trailing a two-year-old on a pink leash. The small talk only lasted a few minutes.

“Never do this,” Janice stage-whispered, laughing, her eyes manic over deep purple shadows as she shifted the baby from one arm to the other. The toddler knocked the container of Parmesan cheese to the ground and proffered a half-chewed cracker to Bobby, who smiled and cooed at the wide-eyed infant. Claire helped Janice brush crumbs from her rumpled skirt.

That night Claire thought she saw Bobby hesitate – just for a moment – before putting on the condom. She pretended not to notice, told herself it was nothing, but found she couldn’t finish.

“Do you,” he said, stroking her shoulder with his fingertips and staring at the ceiling. The previous tenant had left glow-in-the-dark sticker stars there. Neither of them could reach to take them down. “Do you want to do that, one day?”

“I don’t know,” she told the stars. “I don’t think I do. I really don’t.”

“I do,” he said, and rolled so that they clutched each other, so that Claire burned her lips into the sweat of his chest and he breathed shakily into the top of her head, further mussing her dark hair. They stayed there, afraid to stir into the world their words had made, for two hours. They were both twenty-nine, and sad.

Over a midnight snack of their fettuccine leftovers, Claire and Bobby broke up.

Two days later Claire opened her apartment door to find Bobby there, swaying, flushed in faded jeans and a grey hoodie with a torn neck, drunk enough to be brave and sober enough to be unsure. She grabbed his shaking hand and pulled him in to her, and in between their tears they formed a tenuous pattern that had held for the past few months, until now, until the dreams.

In the dreams Claire is alone in the house. Sometimes it is her childhood house with its walls of ivory and alabaster and eggshell, every possible variety of white punctured only by pastel watercolors bought during the annual trips to Martha’s Vineyard. Sometimes it is the Boston-baked abode of Bobby’s mother, all wood paneling and shag carpet, the smell of corn beef and cabbage ever-boiling on the stove, the refrigerator stocked with its infinite supply of homemade coffee cakes that will be forced upon Claire as she leaves, never mind her nut allergy. Other times it is the preferred fantasy of her peers on the social media she frequents guiltily and furtively over her lunch of spinach salad, all shabby-chic and clean lines and artful clutter. The dreams rotate unevenly through these locations in no pattern Claire has been able to figure out, and her

aloneness – her alienation in these structures that are never home no matter how many nights she may have walked in other dreams there – in is the constant.

Claire thinks of herself as solitary because the babies do not count as company, appearing as they do suddenly and without more preamble than their wrenching cries. Slow, at first – a changing table in the dining room, a highchair in the foyer, a playpen of twins performing infant wrestling holds near the toilet – and then increasing rapidly, babies in cupboards, newborns in between couch cushions, a diapered toddler rolling out of the laundry chute. One small creature clad in a pink onesie with a tiny tutu of fringe and a mop of blonde curls appears, for one heart-stopping moment, in the oven. With the underwater pace of dreams Claire hurries as best she can from room to room trying to attend to the cries that knife her belly, but she has no bottles, no soft toys or swaddling blankets. Her breasts are still small and pert and milk-less.

When the house is full of the babies and their cries, when there is a veritable carpet of them, Claire lies on the floor and lowers herself carefully amidst the tiny limbs. She spreads her arms and scoops as many as she can into her embrace, onto her body. Eventually they cover her entirely.

She never knows what shifts at this moment; certainly nothing harsh enough to jolt her awake. Claire simply dreams on as the babies retreat, as they slide back into the walls, become wood paneling or photo prints of Thailand or simple, pure white. When they are gone Claire raises her head and that is when she finds that she is gone, that she is

nothing but a head, a pair of arms and one far-away foot in a black stiletto. They have eaten her, those babies.

It would have to end soon, Claire tells herself again, as she balances on the edge of the bed with her coffee and watches Bobby stroll to the bathroom with that loose, nearly-laconic grace that had first made her fall for him. They are being so careful. Claire picks up a stray slice of condom wrapper and tosses it into the trash bin. That care will carry them through, for now.

In accordance with their pattern he does not kiss her goodbye, but only squeezes her hand once before slipping into the watery December dawn. Claire leans against the doorjamb and watches him go. At the corner of her street he turns, like he had for every morning of their love, and lifts his hand, fingers curled, to his lips and then extends it to the sky. Bobby smiles – in the thin light it wavers and it looks to Claire as though he is laughing at himself – and turns the corner. When Claire goes back inside these moments have put her back on schedule.

It is so hard a habit to break. Being careful.

Claire is a careful person. She changes her smoke alarm batteries with her clocks, keeps a diary of what she eats. She does not ride the Metro alone after 11:30 p.m. and she calls home to her father in Pennsylvania every Sunday afternoon. Her nail polish is never chipped.

Claire graduated third in her class from College Park, her major in studio art balanced by her double-major in marketing communication and minor in finance. After one year at the Corcoran – one year with the paints and the printmaking, the smell of clay gestating in kilns – she took a job with Parkman and Bowles, an elite public relations firm that specialized in artistic pursuits and the power-brokers who funded them. Claire told her father it was the practical compromise and he, of course, approved.

Now it is six years later and Claire has moved up the ranks, with a promise of another promotion by the end of the quarter. As she strides into the lobby she imagines rising to lead the company, finally being able to justify buying the brews beckoning from the café. She could be a patron of the arts, fund bands like Bobby's and back the film projects of the students that look, in Claire's mind, like the progeny they will never have.

Claire rises quickly in the elevator and enters the office, taking satisfaction in the quiet that tells her she is among the first to arrive. The only other person in sight is the new receptionist swiveling back and forth behind the large mahogany front desk. The girl – Claire finds she cannot think of this red-haired pixie as anything other, cringe as she might at the incorrectness of the term – jumps up upon her entrance and offers a tentative hand, introduces herself as Meaghan. Claire grasps her hand firmly and shakes.

“I used to sit right here, not too long ago.” She smiles at the younger woman.
“Don't be too nervous.”

“Really?” Meaghan glances at the rest of the empty office and tucks a stray strand behind her ear. A small diamond glints on her left hand. “Any advice?”

Claire pauses and studies her, wonders how far into the future the advice should go. She watches as Meaghan twirls the ring around her finger; it is loose, possibly newly placed there this past weekend. The possibility of being a mentor entices Claire in a way that is hard for her to place. As she takes advantage of the entrance of a coworker, introducing Meaghan and brainstorming through the pleasantries, there is a sudden ache below her stomach. For a moment Claire cannot catch her breath, but by the time her coworker has moved on to his desk she is able to smile again. She makes a mental note to mention it to her doctor on Wednesday.

“The first week?” Claire leans her head toward Meaghan, who looks up hopefully. “The best thing I did was just listen, really listen and absorb and pay attention.” Claire thinks she sees a faint frown forming at the corners of the younger girl’s mouth and continues, forcing her tone light, “The best benefit was I never got the coffee order wrong.” She winks and immediately feels silly, but Meaghan laughs.

“Thanks.”

Claire nods, pleased that she judged rightly, and begins to move to her cubicle.

“Hey.” Meaghan’s voice has dropped to a near-whisper. “I know this is probably inappropriate, but can I ask . . .?”

When she first started here, a week into the position, Claire found herself in the break room with an older woman she admired. The woman was kind, and generous with feedback, and as she ate her spinach salad Claire basked in the warmth of their newly minted relationship. Every one of the career guides she had checked out of the library and

piled beside her desk had emphasized the importance of having a mentor figure, preferably female. Then the woman said, her tone light and friendly, “Can I ask?”

Claire had nodded with a full mouth. Of course.

“Any special somebodies in your life?” Still light, still friendly.

Bobby, and the concert where she would meet him, was still four years in the future. Her college boyfriend was six months in the past, and gay. Claire shook her head.

“Oh, good. Keep your options open. Of course you’re so young.” The woman’s careful smile faltered. “Youth is good, in this business. The energy, I mean, the excitement.” Claire chewed slowly and stared as the woman’s face settled into a seriousness she did not understand. “Do you see yourself losing that?”

Claire was startled into honesty. “I don’t know what you mean.” She had prided herself, in college, of always knowing how to answer her professors’ questions.

“Do you want children?” The woman’s voice hollowed and clipped the words.

Claire didn’t know. She tried to imagine raising them in the city, giving birth, and she couldn’t, and when she allowed that to spill out the woman took a breath and laughed a little. As one they stood to leave.

“Of course they don’t discourage anybody from having a family.” The woman said it so heartily Claire half expected her to thump her back or slap her on the ass. Then she lowered her voice. “But you’ll find it’s easier, when it’s, well, clear, that you’ll be here long term.” The woman winked, but her mouth was tight and small. Claire started eating lunch at her desk and returned the guides to the library.

The ache in her abdomen returns as Claire thinks of that wink and parrots to Meaghan, “Can you ask?”

Meaghan’s voice lowers another level. “Do you have any tampons? I’m so sorry, I know we—”

“Of course.” Claire pulls one from her purse and palms it to the girl as the rest of the office flows through the doors. There is no time for further conversation as Meaghan scurries back behind the desk with a small, grateful grin. The relief Claire is spared from studying by the distraction of another ache, this one like a knife, and she tells herself that if it doesn’t subside by lunch she will call her doctor and move her appointment sooner. When she reaches her desk and sinks into the comparative luxury of the adjustable seat with arms and lumbar support, she opens the bottom drawer, removes a bottle of water and a small pink tin of pain killers, and pulls out a tampon to replace the one from her purse.

It is the one thing Claire has never been able to control, and so she packs back-up the way television spies pack ammunition. Though she has shaped her body into the closest approximation of an actress or model with a regimen of running and yoga, despite her food journal and calendars, it has retained this one stubborn, capricious non-pattern, a mystery more unwanted and unwelcome and unknown than her health class videos had ever promised. Arriving first long after her mother had died and remaining a thing acknowledged by her father only with a seemingly self-replenishing variety of supplies beneath her bathroom sink, it went unchallenged until college, when the school R.N.

finally prescribed help. The pill helped somewhat but made Claire feel sluggish and sick, and when she met Bobby – safe and respectful, man enough to be both always prepared and unfazed by small, occasional stains – she went off it, pleased to rid herself of foreign agents both helpful and unwelcome, proscribed and potential.

Claire has not bled for three months now, something not uncommon in her history but that has never brought the kind of cramping she is experiencing now. She cannot work, though she tries for the first hour, and that more than anything frightens her. Claire has never been unable to power through the pain. The newsprint words of the papers she reviews every morning swim in front of her eyes and she bends herself in two, suppressing a groan as she grips the edge of her desk until her knuckles turn white. If the pain were higher on her body she would fear a heart attack, but the feeling of an elephant pressing down on angry feet is concentrated not on her chest but on her pelvis. A giant hand is squeezing her midsection as though she is a tube of resistant toothpaste. Claire feels a stickiness between her legs and when she reaches down, hunching to avoid the eyes of anybody passing through the office, her fingers become wet not with white paste but thick red. It has soaked through her just-in-case liner, her underwear, her pantyhose and skirt.

Gasping though another squeeze, Claire pulls on her coat to hide it; the elephant is pressing so hard, kneading in a rolling motion, that she can barely spare a moment of shame for the stain on the seat of her chair. She lurches from her desk and stumbles

through to the restroom, catching a glimpse of Meaghan's startled, white face opening to say something in the corner of her eye.

Her body grants her the courtesy of waiting until she is over the toilet, until she has yanked clothing down and up – so quickly the bottom half of her body goose-pimples in the sudden chill – before releasing a rush of blood. Claire shakes as though vomiting and tastes bile as the sweet copper smell fills the stall. Part of her wishes that somebody else would enter but nobody does; it is only 10:00 a.m., and they are all as dedicated, as organized as she.

When the heaving stops Claire draws a deep breath and lifts herself up, bracing against the walls of the stall. With a hand on her chest she forces herself to breathe and tells herself to check, so she can describe it to her doctor. She wonders, reaching for the toilet paper, if it could be stress, if she should use some of the vacation days she has hoarded for six years, and looks down.

There she sees, for one moment, a slick clear sac, and grey-pink tissue, sinking slowly before it disappears beneath the red.

That was the odd thing, she told Bobby, the first time she had the dream. Though the babies ate her, she didn't feel the pain until she saw how useless the stiletto looked around her dismembered foot.

“A hostile uterus.” The doctor speaks calmly in his lilting voice, as Claire stares up at the ceiling. There is a painting of blue clouds; the nurse told her it was there to give patients something soothing and nice on which to focus. Claire thinks it is too much like a nursery. “Of course without most of the fetal tissue it’s impossible to be sure what exactly went wrong, but that seems to be what we’re dealing with here.”

He pauses and Claire feels his eyes on her face. She knows he is waiting for her to ask questions, to make him clarify what that means, but Claire does not want to know. It is not information she will ever need. For once her body has been in synchronicity with what she wants, has taken care of something for her without her needing to plan and it is to this thought she clings as the doctor returns to his business, as she refuses to blink the tears out of her eyes.

She can return in a month, he tells her, to get the IUD inserted, to fulfill the original plan of their abruptly rescheduled appointment.

“You are sure?” he asks.

He asked the same thing at her first appointment, smiling broadly and cocking his head while she said yes, she was sure, she does not want children in the next ten years and would like the long-term IUD.

“Ten years is a long time. When it is over, you will be thirty-nine.” The doctor continued to smile at her, his eyes wide in both confidence and confusion. He was brilliant, came highly recommended for her particular problems, and the round soothing notes of his voice held the confidence of a man used to imparting knowledge, one who

had studied bodies and thus believed he could manage them better than their inhabitants. “It will be very difficult to have children.” He reminded her of the youth leader of her childhood church.

Claire kept her mouth in a thin line and stared back, considering switching doctors. “That won’t be an issue, for me. I don’t plan on it, ever.”

The doctor had made a kind of harrumphing sound and clicked through his computer to schedule the tentative appointment. “Call when menstruation begins,” he said. “That is the optimal time. And of course, we must be sure you are not pregnant.”

Claire remembers the qualification and silently curses the clouds as a rebel tear streaks down her cheek. She feels the eyes of the doctor follow it as he repeats, for a third time, “Are you sure?” When she confirms nothing has changed, not really, and nods, he sighs and they schedule a tentative appointment. He tells her to expect intermittent bleeding for a few days, maybe a few weeks, and prescribes pain killers. He tells her to be careful.

Claire nods. Of course.

In the dreams she is not so careful. There are doctors’ instruments – scalpels and stirrups, tongue compressors – chef’s knives, gardening tools. No matter which house hosts the dream, each room is a small torture chamber, and it fills to the brim with babies, babies who wield the weapons like lollipops and balloons. It is always sure of disaster

and rather than prevent it, Claire sinks to the floor pressing her hands to her ears so she does not hear the cries.

Claire still has Bobby listed as her emergency contact. It had not occurred to her to change it; she has so few emergencies.

He comes to the doctor's office with a band mate's borrowed car and has the old brown blanket they once picnicked on to tuck around her. Claire is shivering. Bobby drives one-handed and with the other rhythmically rubs the back of her neck. They do not speak.

At her apartment he brews tea, and brings her the phone so that she can call her office and for the first time in her career use her sick days, and sleeps on the couch during those days while Claire tosses fitfully in her bed. The dreams continue. Claire wakes more tired than she can remember feeling in years. The last time she can recall this heaviness was after her mother died, when she was eleven, and when Claire considers this connection she shivers. She looks at Bobby, balancing yet another cup of tea and some toast with jam on a tray, and she worries in a way she never has. She doubts.

At the end of the week Claire feels nearly back to normal. She no longer feels a lingering ache in her abdomen. She sits on the couch watching a talk show; the low hum of voices in conversations she does not bother to follow washes over her. Bobby joins her and sits so that there is only a hairsbreadth between them.

“Was it mine?” The question comes suddenly, a little shrill, as though he is trying to suck the words back in even as they leave his mouth. They do not look at each other. Claire reaches over and places her hand on his, and thinks.

She does not know the answer to the question. Soon after they broke up her friends – a hodgepodge group of classmates from high school, college and the Corcoran who came together to rally around her heartbreak – had insisted that she spend the last night of summer with them, that she let herself have fun. Claire quietly told Bobby in bed, that last morning of August, not to come over as one season tipped into the other, that she would be out, and he had left her bed and apartment without even pausing to pull on his coat. She watched him march down the street through her window and held her breath until she saw him pause, pivot slowly, and bring his hand to his mouth. It felt, in that moment, like he was bestowing a blessing, and she accepted it even as dread spread through her stomach.

That night she got it over with quickly, grabbing the attractive lawyer at midnight and pressing her mouth to his in hunger for she did not know what as her friends and the other party patrons crowding the club cheered beneath falling confetti. “I’ve never done this before,” she told him, as they slipped into a deserted backstage loft and he slipped his hands beneath her skirt to draw her underwear to her ankles. Claire gripped the pole of an empty coat rack and the stranger lifted her into the new month, and after she did not tell anybody, and the next night she and Bobby again took up their pattern.

“No,” she tells Bobby on her couch. “It wasn’t yours.” It never would have been, she thinks but does not say. Claire looks at their hands and her heart squeezes as she knows that she needs him to know this, that she cannot even give him the ghost of a child. The graveyard where her mother is buried in Pennsylvania has a grave where a miscarried baby was buried a few years ago. She thinks of her father, his head bent in the quiet of the house her mother decorated all in white, his voice catching on the “I” sound whenever he – suddenly disturbed from his newspaper or his golf game by her teenage presence – greeted her as Eleanor, so that for years her name became “éclair.” Claire does not want Bobby mourning.

“And you really had no idea?”

“No.”

He squeezes her hand in what she takes as gratitude, but she can see him doing the math in his head, his lips moving the way they always do when he calculates the tip or the band’s finances. After a moment he asks, “How do you feel?” and turns her face to his with a gentle finger on her chin. His eyes are blue, like all the eyes of the babies in her dream.

“The same,” she says, and breaks their gaze, leaning forward to rest the top of her head in the curve beneath his chin. “I feel the same.”

Bobby holds his lips on the top of her head until the closing credits roll on the talk show, and then he rises to leave. Claire leans against the doorjamb and watches him go.

He does not turn before the corner. He does not raise his hand to his lips. Though he calls, throughout the next few weeks, to check on her, Bobby does not come back.

The babies become invisible. Their cries mock her from room to room but she can never find them. Along her wanders they grip her ankles; she trips and bangs her head on doorjambs, and cries along with them. At the end of the hallway appears a woman in a yellow dress, one printed all over with tiny roses that Claire recognizes as her mother's, and she stretches out her arms to grasp the woman's shoulder. The infants protest, gird her steps until she is nearly frozen and can only manage to brush her fingertips over the thin lace of the woman's sleeve. Somehow she seems to feel it, to turn her head in response, but before even her profile forms Claire starts and wakes alone in her bed.

On the day Claire is supposed to return to work she rents a car and drives north, following the highway as it drops from four lanes to three to finally two narrow ones cutting past feed-corn fields, dairy farms and fairgrounds. As she crosses the border into Pennsylvania the asphalt turns to concrete, cracked and uneven in the winter snap. The car shakes and bumps her sore body until she reaches the cemetery, her tired stomach twisting in response until she stops, exits the car, inhales the sharp air and kneels in the crackled grass beside her mother's grave.

There are gardenias in the first stage of wilt in a small vase by the tombstone, their heads bending low from grey-green stalks. Claire studies them, reaches out a

shaking finger and strokes the nearest petal. It bobs for a moment beneath the weight and finally stays slightly askew, bent away from the blossom, and as Claire pulls a battered sketchpad from her coat pocket and puts the nub of a pencil to the page it inspires her first, hesitant strokes.

As the shadows shift beneath the willow trees and dart from marker to marker, Claire's hand moves more swiftly; she presses down harder on the paper and flips from scratchy page to scratchy page in a kind of trance. Her legs fall asleep on the cold ground and she does not feel the tingle as they come back to life, does not stop her frenzied drawing. Beyond the aborted sketches of Bobby she has not drawn in years, and underneath her contemplation of shadow and line a part of her wonders if she stopped before or after she stopped regular visits to this place. It is a connection too facile, too uncomplicated for the way she has crafted her life until this moment, and Claire discards the notion. A crunch on leaves preserved beneath now-melted snow behind her makes her turn, half-expecting the arrival of her father with a fresher stock of blooms, and when there is nothing there but wind she smiles to herself, sighs, and discards that notion, too. There will be no easy, unspoken, careful reconciliations; she will not present her father a new, blue-eyed Ellie.

Instead Claire tears the drawings from the sketchbook. She stacks them neatly, presses them to her lips and a finger to the gardenia. She leaves them pinned beneath the vase and then drives south again.

Claire arrives at the office fifteen minutes before six o'clock, intending to offer explanations and perhaps her new emergency contact information and instead – as Meaghan greets her through a hushed, careful voice – finds herself quitting her job. Meaghan stutters in response and pages Human Resources, and within minutes they have arranged for Claire to come to a meeting. She grabs an empty copier paper box on the way to the boardroom.

“We’d like to ask you to reconsider,” her boss tells her in a careful tone, as the H.R. rep nods approvingly beside him. “You have plenty of time accrued, take all the time you need.”

“All. I need it all,” Claire says. “I’ve made my decision.” She runs a hand through her hair and an errant blade of grass falls onto the carpet.

The H.R. rep taps lightly on the table as her boss shifts forward in his seat, then rocks back and studies her. “We’ll be sorry to lose you, but we wish you the best.”

“Yes.” Claire nods. “Thank you for the opportunity.” She rises to go, and the office pair does not move closer to her as she does.

“What is your plan?” her boss asks when she reaches the door.

Claire smiles; her hand flutters over her stomach. “I don’t have one.”

For Meaghan Claire leaves the box of office supplies, taking only a few snapshots of her and her friends, her and father, her and Bobby. In the back of the bottom drawer she finds a set of watercolor paints and she cradles them in her hands. She does not remember when or why she bought it, but the discovery makes her laugh, softly.

When her cubicle is bare and sterile Claire's eyes land on her office chair and the smear like mud across its lumbar-supporting seat. She asks Meaghan for some supplies and she starts to scrub, and though the red fades slightly and the fibers bend, she only succeeds in transferring the scene of pine into the chair. After a moment she thinks better of it, balances her few souvenirs on the chair and wheels it out the door. Nobody sees her but Meaghan, who smiles and waves goodbye.

The dreams continue but they change. When the babies retreat now Claire finds all of her body parts scattered about, not only her head and her arms and foot but her throat, her knees, her stomach. She gathers them up while the bright gold of summer limns the silhouette of her mother in the corners of her vision, while a single, remaining blue-eyed child gurgles and giggles in the corner. Claire puts herself back together in the wide-opened space of the silent house.

THE FIRST LAST STORY

Claire can tell how bad it is from how much they don't tell her.

When her mother was first diagnosed two years ago, her parents told her everything, seating her between them on the leather couch in the den and spreading out encyclopedias and medical pamphlets before her. They had clasped her shoulders and her hands, held their backs straight and smiled and explained terms like *oncologist* and *non-Hodgkins lymphoma* and *chemo*. Claire's parents had smiled on their only child and claimed her as a coconspirator in this war, assured her victory and moved her to Baltimore, supplementing a long-distance elementary education with lessons in blood cells and vomit and Johns Hopkins coffee machines.

Now, it seems, she has been discharged from their army. Her mother is tired, too tired even to pretend to smile. She has no appetite, not even for the Popsicles they keep in a tiny refrigerator beneath the window of their private room, and when Claire recites the preamble to the Constitution or reviews the layers of the Earth's crust her mother cannot

even bring herself to grunt in response. In the past three days her father has returned to the townhome they rent in Ellicott City once, to retrieve Claire's toothbrush and school books; he has not changed his suit. When Claire asks why he pretends not to hear her.

Claire does not mind, and does not miss the townhouse that smells of strange herbs. It is not home like their white home in Pennsylvania, which floats dreamlike in some deep part of her memory. Claire does not remember a time before hospitals. For her, life has always been this: a chair in a salmon room. The background drone of soap operas and Oprah. Jell-O cups. Tubes. The steady beep of the heart monitor, and her mother's eyes big in her hairless head.

She knows – in the same way she knows she was born on September 22, that the Earth's four layers circle the sun every 365 days, that there is something moving inside her mother that should not be – that her life before these past two years was different. She remembers friends and horseback riding lessons, ballet classes. For Christmas she gave her mother a cross-stitched sampler she remembers beginning on the wide porch overlooking a daisied lawn and a distant golf course. It's just that the memory of completing it, next to her dosing mother in the room where they pump her and the other bald women full of chemicals that still seem – though at eleven she knows she should know better – like magic potions to her, is so much realer. Everything before was underwater. Claire now lives fully above the surface.

Except her father insists on pushing her head back under, each time the young doctor – his face makes Claire's stomach flip and then she feels guilty – enters the room

to read the chart and speak to her parents in low tones. Mr. MacKenna sends Claire to the coffee machine and she hovers instead outside the door, trying to decipher the hollowed sounds. Her father doesn't notice she never returns with coffee.

At this moment Claire is alone with her mother. It is her father's turn to go for coffee, and to argue with the billing office over the price of boxes of facial tissues. Claire holds a cup of ice chips and proffers them to her mother's cracked lips. Mrs. MacKenna's breath comes in rasps but she speaks, anyway, reaching out a hand to tug at Claire's lopsided braids.

"Your father do your hair again?" Mrs. MacKenna smiles and Claire laughs.

"Yeah. He tries real hard."

"He's good like that." Her mother's eyes flutter shut for a moment as she draws a deep breath. Claire waits and stares at the couple arguing in arm chairs on the screen. The man is doing a joyous dance while the woman cries and the audience cheers. "Claire."

"Yes? Are you thirsty?"

"No." Her mother shifts herself slightly upward in the bed. "Do you want to learn how to do it yourself? I can teach you."

Claire tries not to stare at her mother's head, at her limp hands on the scratchy blue sheets. "That's OK. Maybe later."

Her mother's hand flutters toward her face and brushes aside a strand. "You sure? Can't do much worse than your father. That way you can practice with your friends when you go home."

“That’s OK.” Claire studies the pattern in the linoleum floor. “You can teach me then.”

“Claire, listen—”

There is no chance to listen because the young doctor is entering, with Mr. MacKenna close behind. Her father’s eyes are red. Her mother’s hands lie still on the bed. Claire starts to leave but the young doctor lays a hand on her shoulder and stops her.

“You should stay,” he says, and smiles, but this time Claire’s stomach does not flip, but lurch, and she thinks for a moment she will vomit. She smells something lemon.

Even though she is inside the room this time the words still seem to reach her ears through water, and they do not make sense. The young doctor says things like *nothing more* and *experimental* and *six months*. These phrases are new and foreign.

“I need some air.” Claire has heard characters on T.V. say as much and she parrots them now, because this seems like a time in which one should get air.

“Claire.” Mr. MacKenna says the word like a command and the young doctor frowns at him. Her mother, though, lifts her shaking hand and grips Claire’s shoulder.

“It’s OK, sweetie. You take all the time you need.”

She does not know where the air would be, but Claire wanders through echoing hallways, down emergency stairwells and finally into a narrow hallway beneath a blinking Exit sign with the T burnt out. Claire pushes open the swinging door at the end of it, surprised at the resistance she feels rather than the soft shudder the automatic doors give before they open of their own accord. Beyond these resisting doors is a small

landing and a short concrete staircase leading to a half-empty parking lot. Just across the asphalt a pair of nurses in light-green scrubs regards her through the haze of smoke circling their heads before turning to each other and continuing to chat. Claire thinks dully to herself that she's probably not allowed to be there before sinking down to sit on the top step. Remembering that she has not showered for two days she shrinks to one side and rests her head against the brick wall.

It is December 6, 1995, the feast of St. Nicholas, friend of children. Claire has a vague memory of waking once, two or three years ago, to candy in her slippers and her mother making hot crossed buns with icing.

Claire breathes in this memory, imagines the smoke shifting toward her to smell of cinnamon and sugar instead. She coughs and closes her eyes, thinks of maybe returning to the room to nap, and decides to wait, just a few more minutes. In six months it will be next year, and summer. So much will change by then. There will be new doctors and new rooms. Claire plans to do research and make a presentation. Her father has been teaching her PowerPoint. Her mother will be proud.

The doctor with the young, kind face is moving through the hallways calling her name, his eyes roaming at hip and stomach level for the bounce of her auburn ponytail. It will take him twenty-three minutes to find her folded on the stairs of the employee entrance. Twenty-three minutes for the stars to take their slow unchanging paths above her head, for her to remain as unchanging, as eleven, to hold time in her soft child hands like snow. One thousand three hundred eighty seconds to tick away before a hand will

weigh on her shoulder, before she will learn how quickly six months can dwindle to six hours, before she will learn to associate the smell of lemon with antiseptic and tears.

Claire, at this moment, knows nothing yet of time. She does not know that when the doctor's voice breaks on her name it will be the first break of a possibility splitting off from her life and drifting away. She does not know that the weight of irrevocable decision will come in her mind to equal the weight of a male human hand.

Claire MacKenna is eleven years old and has nothing but time. She stretches into new forbidden space and thinks of nothing in particular as all her lives spiral out before her.