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For Jules

poor your soul

Disclaimer

This is a story of my truth. In some instances, I have changed names of individuals and places in order to maintain anonymity, and I have recreated events, locales, and conversations based on my memory of them.

one

Every few Sundays, Segundo, the very short superintendent who lives in the basement at 223 East 32nd Street, opens the back pages of *The Village Voice* and orders two very tall call girls. He doesn't know we know. Segundo avoids all interactions with us. At most, Andrew and I might get a muffled response to the "hello" we pitch him when one of us is coming and the other is going, but most of the time Segundo just stays in the shadows. Sometimes we'll see him taking out the garbage or hosing down the sidewalk. Once in a while, I'll spot him sitting on the stoop, alone, vacantly staring straight ahead.

I find Segundo quite remarkable and often speculate about his place in the universe: What does he eat? And does he cook it, or order takeout? Is he Catholic? Has he ever been in agonizing,

consuming, can't-live-without-the-other-person love? His recent haircut (buzzed—I imagine he sheared off his raven-black hair by himself in a dimly lit bathroom of his subterranean apartment) is growing out. Both Andrew and Segundo shaved their heads within the same week; Segundo's grows faster.

One recent evening, after arriving home from a walk around the block, five of us—me, my husband, Andrew, our little dog, Maybe, and two leggy women—clogged the narrow hallway of our apartment building. As the ladies slithered past us, I got a close enough look to notice that they weren't dressed appropriately for the cool October weather. Their skirts were short and sequined. They wore stilettos. They were giggling. To me, they looked like panthers. I nudged Andrew, who was unlocking the door to our bite-sized apartment. As he pushed it open, the two women exited the building and, without even a glance, Andrew said, "Look out front. There'll be a man waiting in a minivan."

There was indeed. I was stunned.

"They're prostitutes," he declared.

"Two of them?!"

"*Two* of them. Segundo's been getting busy."

"No. I don't believe it."

"Right next to *our room*."

Only a thin wall separates one life from another, but unless we are in the right place at the right time, the truths of others remain unknown. Some choose not to think about it, but I can't help it. The world inside of New York City is just a terribly interesting place.

❦ ❦ ❦

"Assistant?" Andrew asks from the kitchen.

"Yes, assistant?"

"The cabbage."

"You got it."

Andrew stirs the tomato soup as I step out of the shower and open the door a crack. Then, leaning out of the bathroom, stretching my arm into the kitchen, I take the frozen cabbage from him. As I grab it, I see Maybe hovering on the floor by Andrew's feet. She's waiting for fallen scraps. She's one year old, and a rescue. Andrew adopted her before he met me.

"Thank you, assistant," I say and quickly slide back into the bathroom. I'm trying to be polite. I'm trying to be a good wife, but I'm not sure how.

The bathroom is less steamy than the kitchen. I set the cabbage down next to the faucet, wipe off the mirror and look at my face. To me, it looks worn. I blame it on Manhattan: too frenetic, too cruel. Also, I'm not smiling. I once heard or read somewhere that if you force yourself to smile, the muscles activate something in your brain, trigger synapses, or massage a gland; something that makes you feel good, like a switch to a lever moving a pulley that tilts a bucket and produces a feeling of contentment. All I have to do is turn my frown upside down.

Dr. Reich explained that if I stuck frozen cabbage in my bra, things would improve. She said that the common green cabbage has some chemical or enzyme that is used for "engorgement therapy." In other words, something in the cabbage stops breasts from producing milk, and if I consistently wear these leaves,

production will cease. I don't need the milk because there is no baby. All that's left is the milk.

Dr. Reich used the word "engorged." No one has ever used the word "engorged" in the same sentence as my breasts—typically, they're the size of small plums. But not now. This body is not mine. I used to think I had some say in how it conducted itself. I am twenty-eight years old.

The bathroom door is closed, so I am alone. With this hollow rectangle of white-painted wood, I've created isolation, solitude. This is all I want. Lately, I don't want to be seen, especially not like this. I don't want my husband to see my skin. Skin provokes primal urges in humans, urges that, unlike my newlywed husband, I am not having. Naked invites sex, and I don't want to initiate anything. Whenever I start to entertain the notion of sex, I just get tired. I just want to sleep. So it's out of the question. He should realize this. How can he not realize this? I shouldn't have to spell it out. I'm tired. I'm angry.

I take the cabbage off the counter of the sink and slip it into my bra. It's not something I'd describe as pleasant—the cold, frosty leaves piercing my nipples on contact. In several minutes they begin to warm, and I will smell like my mother's *gołąbki.* At night in bed I sleep on my back because every time I turn onto my side, my arms squeeze my breasts together like an accordion and they leak milk. It's embarrassing. The stuff goes right through my athletic bra, which I've also been instructed to wear. I don't want Andrew to see any of this. We're to believe big breasts are lovable and playful, little breasts are cute and sweet, breastfeeding is beautiful and natural, but what about swollen,

leaking breasts with no baby to feed? Would you put this in the same category as burping and passing gas—functions that sexy women do not do? Do I keep this a secret since it's not sexy? What good is a sad, broken machine?

Andrew told me, in some sort of attempt to make me laugh again, that he would make use of my milk. That he would churn butter or make cheese out of it (what, Parmesan? Brie?) and we would save some money. I did laugh at this. Manhattan is expensive.

"Maybe! Roll over! Maybe, roll over!"

"You've got to pitch your voice higher," I tell him. Dogs prefer higher-pitched voices. Andrew says okay and repeats his command, this time in the voice of a man imitating a little girl.

The dog. She's what we talk about now. Maybe is the safest topic, the most neutral, the least baffling thing to discuss. You might say we're avoiding more challenging topics, that we're walking on eggshells, but there's nothing left to break. Really, we're just tired. And we've only just begun. We're trying to wrap our heads around the idea of wrapping our heads around something, quietly trying to accept what *is*. And when you don't quite know how to do that with someone you've only just met, you talk about the dog.

"Yes, Maybe," Andrew says. "Good girl."

This month marks the third year since I uprooted from Portland, Maine, the tranquil oceanfront city where I'd moved after graduating college in Kalamazoo, Michigan. In Maine, I had a steady editing job, saved up a good sum of money, and experienced nothing that would qualify as either anxiety or ambition.

But I was making my parents proud and, I believe, lowering the collective low blood pressure of my family. In Portland, my days were pleasantly unsurprising. The people focused little on work and a lot on leisure, farmer's markets, and things like parades. Winters weren't bad or ugly—you could snowshoe to work—and in the fat of summer, the Atlantic sea breeze would seep through my open window and augment my slumber with a parental embrace. In the mornings, the sun would move across my bedroom floor and bake it like bread before my bare feet touched it. I never felt rushed. In my mud-colored kitchen with uneven shelves, I would brew coffee and polka-dot my cereal with blueberries. And yes, they were local and organic and they were affordable. Life felt flawless. I was at peace. But it wasn't enough.

In Maine, all the pine-tree license plates and rest-stop billboards said things like The Way Life Should Be, and Vacationland, which Maine is. The state motto is *Dirigo*, which means "I direct"—which I did not. In Vacationland, I didn't live with direction. I didn't live with force or drive or intensity. In Maine, my life wasn't so much about *dirigo*—it was about acquiescence. It was about settling into an uncomplicated life, watching days glide by like little clouds. And even though that's what I'd been aiming for, even though that's what I thought I wanted, or was supposed to want, something in me refused to settle. So I left. I came to New York to be a writer.

"Dinner's almost ready," Andrew calls.

"One more minute! I'm just brushing my hair," I answer, then put my head in my hands for one more moment of solitude. But right as Andrew is pulling the bread out of the oven,

the fire alarm goes off. It happens nearly every time we cook, so we developed a system: knock on our Hungarian roommate Attila's bedroom door, grab his giant fan, turn it on high, open the front door of the apartment (for air flow), lift the giant fan over our heads, blow air onto the fire alarm, be nonchalant. The situation is taking place inches away from where I am in the bathroom. It seems as if there is no silence in this city.

In retrospect, I wish I had transitioned into a metropolitan life a little more gradually. My mother had warned me, "Why be small fish in big pond?" My father wasn't a fan of my sudden upheaval either. He knows how sensitive I am. And my friends all wanted to know what I was going to find in New York that was so important, why it was so much better than our town. I thought I'd figure it out, that I'd show them. In retrospect, I wish I'd understood that one must ease into these things, these giant life changes. I simply thought this was my chance to make something of myself. But I didn't think much about all the things that it would involve, about what had to happen between the introduction and the conclusion: the body. There was no set path to follow, no guidebook or road map. Back then I thought that in life you either had to comply or act out. Prove something. So I packed up my car and put it on I-95 and just drove. It hurt a little, because tearing yourself out of a nap always hurts, always just a little. New York City. Three years ago this month.

"Be careful. It's hot," Andrew says.

"Thank you for cooking dinner, assistant," I say.

He blows on the soup. "Mmm-hmm. You're welcome. What's the plan for tomorrow? Will you get a chance to write?"

"Doctor's appointment at eight-thirty in the morning. Will you come?"

"Sure."

"It's going to be our very last one."

"Weird."

"I know. Weird."

With nothing else for us to say, Andrew and I sip our soup as NPR fills the apartment with talk of bailouts, meltdowns, audacity, hope. Change.

We are leaving the apartment the next morning, and I am trying to remember if my doctor's appointment is on 13th or 16th Street. We're running late, but so are they—they always are—so it doesn't matter. We'll take the subway. Yellow cabs speed down 32nd Street. The garbage trucks are swift and brutal. The sidewalks work as highways. And soon, the streets will marinate in cigarette butts and urine—dog, bird, human. Soon, middle-aged Mexican men will deliver Indian takeout to young bankers from Connecticut. What is this? I find the word "misanthropy" resurfacing again and again in my mind. The people of New York generally coexist peacefully, which is impressive, considering there are 27,352 people per square mile. But it is a class-divided society. The city has a rich cultural environment, full of galleries and restaurants and museums and shows, but unless you're incredibly wealthy, it requires sacrifice to enjoy those things. Unless you are rich, you struggle every day. You grind away. You ride the subway for two hours just to work at Starbucks. We go to New York to make our careers, and we end

up stepping over homeless people lying flat on the sidewalk as we walk to work.

I just hate what we are allowing ourselves to do in this city, just to survive. For instance: my classmate Grace. Grace has decided to sell her eggs so she can pay her bills. The fact that Grace has gobbled down hormones to pay off her student loans really pisses me off. I hate how she is harvesting her goods just to make a dent in her educational debts. And no one will know, and no one will care. But she is my friend and needs my care, so I'll be picking her up from the fertility clinic and taking her home today after my doctor's appointment.

I recall how Grace once theorized that Manhattan was an alien spaceship that hadn't taken off yet. "You see," she explained, "it's still chained to the ground and keeps filling up with systems upon systems, people on top of people, all with a giant conveyor belt rolling food in and garbage out. Someday we'll feel beneath our feet a great rumble: the giant New Yuck spaceship taking off."

Since moving here, I'd like to think I've become a proficient bullshit detective: I can spot a professional dogwalker who hates dogs, a nanny who wants children of her own, and people maniacally texting because they're afraid of silence, afraid of themselves. "I've felt the ground rumble a million times since I moved here," I told Grace. "It's called the subway."

It was a couple of Thursdays ago, the night of the big 2008 vice-presidential debate, when Grace revealed her plan. We were scrunched into a packed bar in DUMBO to watch a girl and a boy, all grown up in stiffly pressed suits, race for God knows

what. "Going through with it" was what Grace had said. "Men sell sperm all the time," she told me. "All they have to do is fist their mister into a plastic cup and their rent is paid."

Governor Palin royally botched the image she'd recently branded herself with: representative of Americana uteri. I sipped my drink while Grace finished hers off heartily. We ordered another, then another, and watched as Palin's ticket shifted into one backed by moose hunters and white people scared of black people. "*Nucular*," she said. "*Nucular* weapons."

Moments before, Grace had gotten us into an uncomfortable situation with a gaggle of French people who had strewn their coats and legs across the seats of one of the booths of the packed bar.

"You can't save seats here," Grace told them.

"Grace, just let it go," I said.

"They're not even American. I'm sitting down," Grace said, looking at their faces. Hers was pale and round, and her mascara had settled as it always did—right under her eyes—making Grace look like a rabid kitten. Or a scary babysitter. Or the moon. I didn't know at the time that this was due to the hormones she was taking.

"I'm sorry," Grace persisted. "But your feet can't just claim territory that's not yours."

"Come on, Grace, let me buy you a drink," I said and peeled her away.

From the balcony, we watched the crowd below. The lighting washed the room in a soft, scarlet haze and made the people below look like red devils. Everyone faced a huge projector

screen set to PBS. Their faces flickered, as if they were looking into a fire pit. We stared at it, too.

This was when Grace told me about the harvest. "I guess I fit the bill," she said. She explained to me that she'd been on hormones, and they made her moody and act weird. Before all this happened, someone from school had forwarded a Craigslist ad to Grace and me and a bunch of the other girls from the Sarah Lawrence MFA writing program. The subject line said, *Give the Gift of Family. Think of it this way,* the ad read. *You are not selling your eggs or your body; you are being compensated for your time and commitment.*

I prodded the Internet to find out more. One site explained that in the United States it's illegal to "sell" eggs, so the handover is labeled a "donation" followed by monetary compensation for "time and energy." One site had a picture of a chicken laying an egg. With egg donation, another site read, women who are past their reproductive years or menopause can become pregnant. Thus, the oldest woman in the world to give birth was sixty-six.

I read more about the procedure. It begins with up to ten self-injections of a drug called Lupron, which stifles a woman's natural menstrual cycle. After the Lupron, she starts taking hormones to put her egg production into overdrive and produce not one egg per month like they're supposed to, but up to nearly twenty, just like a chicken. After the harvest, she'll be listed in a catalog that includes her photo, SAT scores, and academic degrees for the potential buyers.

"The procedure is two Fridays from now," Grace said, "and

I was wondering if you could pick me up." I had told her of course, anything she needed. "Thanks, dude," Grace sighed. Then she put her head on my shoulder and fell asleep.

New York. We step over homeless people. Does that make me a misanthrope? Maybe I'm just depressed. I find both terms too scientific sounding to be the root of the problem. I can't just be a misanthrope. I can't just be depressed. There are too many variances for it all to fall under one word; too many pedestrians outside to be dodged, too many isolated faces staring at smartphones to find God in the details. I have been introduced to an unfamiliar feeling. Misanthropy. Depression. It sounds so very academic.

This new feeling must be temporary. It must come from somewhere, from something. There are all kinds of anger.

It's 9:45 A.M. now and we've been sitting in the exam room for over an hour. It's to be expected. During these appointments to Phillips Family Practice, Andrew always manages to keep himself occupied. During all the hours we've accumulated in waiting rooms, he's managed to distract me from the boredom and frustration of this run-down, sliding-scale, open-access medical clinic. He's figured out how to access the Internet on the computers that have replaced paper patient charts with electronic ones. He reads *The Times*, checks his email, and browses cuteoverload.com and hotchickswithdouchebags.com. He puts the sphygmomanometer cuff around his neck, and, with his hand on the pump, turns to me as I roll my eyes and says, "I'll do it. Don't make me do it. I'll do it!" He fills the rubber examining

gloves with water from the sink. Later, when the doctor finally knocks on the door, intern at her side, he will extend this glove to shake the intern's hand.

I sit on the exam table and bang my feet against its metal base, then finally lean back, rest my head on a paper pillowcase and close my eyes, wishing I had picked up a cup of coffee on the way here. I didn't sleep much last night. I thought the hot soup and drinking no coffee after 3 P.M. would put me down and keep me down, but it didn't. Before we got into bed, I stuffed earplugs into my ears, took a valerian root tablet, and made Andrew inhale some anti-snoring vapor from Rite Aid. I used to find his snores soothing, soft and endearing, but last night his breath was like water torture. I nudged him with my elbow and he mumbled an apology, then rolled onto his side. Within seconds, he was sawing logs again. I sat up, livid, listening and waiting for the next snore to push me even closer to the edge. He snored again. I kicked my feet from under the comforter like a child. Andrew's peacefulness was driving me crazy, filling me with something that felt like hatred. And even though I was exhausted, I kept myself up, thinking, wondering, *Why does he get to fall asleep and not me?* Which really meant: *Why does he get to feel better and not me?*

Last night I started to accept the idea that I'd feel this way forever: afraid and alone. That the person sleeping next to me had already started to move on. We were only newlyweds and I was beginning to resent the person I was going to be spending the rest of my life with. Andrew snored again and I kicked him hard on his shin, then cried.

Segundo was up, too, drinking. When he listens to the Eagles late at night, he's getting himself drunk. *He was a hard-headed man, he was brutally handsome.*

"Life in the Fast Lane." He turned it up, loud; even with earplugs I could hear the lyrics through the wall. I thought he might be homesick. I pictured him drinking to Ecuador.

"Congratulations."

"Sorry?"

"Congratulations on your wedding, you two," says Dr. Reich, slipping off the powdered, pale rubber gloves and dropping them into a trash can.

"Thanks, Danya," I say and sit up.

"Do you guys have anything planned for the honeymoon?"

"We're going to Puerto Rico for a weekend in February," Andrew says. "For Valentine's Day."

"But we're saving up for a real honeymoon," I tell her. It's part of our plan. "A long one. Like three months or longer. Outside of the States—maybe someplace like Spain or Greece or New Zealand." It's unrealistic but a nice fantasy.

Danya looks into my eyes and nods. "I think that is a good decision," she says. "I think you guys should try to live a normal life from now on. And I'm gonna plan on not seeing you around here for a very long time. At least six months, which is when you should have your women's wellness exam. Six months. Got that?"

I almost don't believe her when she tells me this. She promises that it's over, that we are finished, there's no more, that this

is the end of it. I don't believe her because it can't possibly ever just end.

"Thank you for taking care of us, Danya," I say. "I hope we've prepared you for when you become a real doctor."

"Most memorable residency ever," she tells us, and I think about how we just gave her the experience she might have only read in textbooks. Or heard about in a lecture. But Danya experienced it in real time. Helped navigate us through life and death in just a few short months. And now those months are over.

"Oh, it was my pleasure," she says.

Andrew and I leave the room, and Danya leads us down the long, familiar corridor of the health clinic toward the exit. She turns to extend her hand, but the three of us hug instead. "Send me a postcard," she instructs.

Promise, we say.

Good luck, she says.

Thanks, we say.

Goodbye. Goodbye, Phillips Family Practice.

two

In Battle Creek, Michigan, if you smell Froot Loops in the morning, it means rain in the afternoon. Pretty much most of the sixty thousand residents of my hometown, a city in southwestern Michigan, engage in their own surefire practice of predicting the weather, and they're usually right—something about the humidity and the air pressure and the exhaust pipes from the cereal factories and our deep embedded instincts. In the city where I was born and bred, cereal is not just a breakfast staple or a harbinger of the weather. It's an after-school snack. And a midnight snack. Kids find mini-boxes of cereal (sugary, sweet ones, of course) in their Halloween bags when they go trick-or-treating. During the summer, life-size Tony the Tigers and Snap, Crackle, and Pops wander among the picnic

tables at the carnivals, giving away autographs and hugs to little ones. Cereal—artificially flavored toasted corn floating in cow's milk—is the theme of the city museums, festivals, and fairs. The production, distribution, and marketing of cereal is what once employed more than half the population. It is the town's foundation and livelihood.

Besides the exports of cereal, Battle Creek's exports include: Carlos Gutierrez, our nation's 35th secretary of commerce (and father of the boy with whom I had my first kiss); the ardent abolitionist Sojourner Truth; Ellen White, cofounder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church; Del Shannon, the guy who wrote "Runaway"; and Jason Newsted, the former bassist for Metallica. Still, Battle Creek is best known for being Cereal City USA, the world headquarters of the Kellogg Company, established by Dr. John Harvey Kellogg and Will Keith Kellogg. They're the brothers who invented cornflakes.

At Kellogg's Cereal City USA museum, you could get your photo on a box of cornflakes. During the summer, Battle Creek's residents put together "The World's Longest Breakfast Table" at the Cereal Festival—a weekend community gathering of local food, blues bands, face-painting booths, Harley-Davidson displays, and dance recitals put on by local dance studios. The highlight of the whole event is an eat-off, annually pitted against "The World's Longest Pancake Breakfast" of Springfield, Massachusetts.

Battle Creek is the city my parents migrated to after falling in love, getting married, and conceiving my sister, Sabina, in Chicago. It's the place where, in 1979 at Leila Hospital, I was

born. It's the town where my family attended Catholic Church. It's the town where my dad opened his own private medical practice and my mom started her own gourmet restaurant. And it's the city where my mom decided to adopt a child from her homeland, Poland. It's the city where, in August of 1983, I met my brother Julian.

"Where are da keys? Where are da keys?"

From behind the passenger seat, I watch my mother press her face against the second-floor window's rusty screen as she calls out, in her sharp Polish accent, to no one in particular.

"Who took da damn keys?"

Her lips are cranberry colored and wet looking, and she's wearing pearl clip-on earrings. She is trying to remember everything from her mental checklist: car seat, bag of Apple Jacks, wet wipes, *We Sing Silly Songs* cassette tapes, grape juice, car keys.

For months she's known he is hers. She would never say he belongs to her; it's more as if they were meant to be; this was meant to happen. She's been holding onto the one small picture of him as proof, carrying it around as a reminder, as encouragement to keep pushing, as hope. In the photo, she thinks her little guy looks like a concentration camp baby—round, dark eyes, weak limbs, pale skin, and a rather large head.

"Did you check on the dresser, behind my stethoscope?" Dad calls from the garage.

"Dey not dere! We have to go!"

Below her, my father is in the cluttered garage, searching and scavenging through boxes of our neglected Smurfs, Trolls, and

Strawberry Shortcake dolls, which have all been replaced by our trendier Cabbage Patch Kids—blue-eyed, top-heavy, bald-headed dolls that smell like baby powder and plastic. He searches among the hammers, the jam jars full of nails, the Dutch bike, the wheelbarrow, and the storage bins. He is looking for the infant car seat.

"I set the keys there last night," he calls up to her, "right before we went to bed."

Dad is a tall, lanky man with sympathetic blue eyes and curly brown hair. His personality is a blend of Jesus (patient, self-sacrificing, wise) and Steve Martin. My sister inherited our father's long, giraffe-like legs and optimism, but I've got his metabolism as well as his penchant for absurdity.

"Now where the heck is that baby booster?"

Dad finally discovers the cushiony egg buried behind the old doghouse, dusts it off, and brings it over to the car—a boxy, beige Buick—in the driveway where my sister, Sabina, and I await. We're being very good girls, buckled into the hot leather seats, not fighting, which is rare. We're dressed up very nice and pretty and we're being good. We understand the importance of today. Special occasions require our maturest behavior.

I am four and a half years old, and wearing a huge, yellow satin dress. It's from Jacobson's Department Store in Lakeview Square, the brand new mall that developers destroyed the most beautiful wheat field in the whole world to build. After the golden meadow was killed, confused and homeless herds of deer spewed into our yard and our neighbors' yards, and soon after that, dead ones started to appear on the side of the highway more and more. We got used to it.

Beanie is six, and bouncy. Her hair is blonde, her lips are rosy, and her cheeks are pink. Whereas I'm a brunette and always pale, which worries my parents, so I get blood tests once a month at Dad's office just to be on the safe side. The dress I'm wearing belonged to my sister until just recently, when she outgrew it. It's still too big for me, but I've always loved it, so Mom let me wear it today, even though I look like I've just been swallowed up by a tulip. Also, my bangs are too short and crooked because earlier in the week I found some scissors and gave myself a haircut. The car is parked in the driveway and is running, which is why Mom can't find da damn keys.

As this scene goes down, it doesn't occur to my sister or me that our mother was once a little girl, too, just like us. That she had small kitten feet and ran without shoes along the foothills of mountains. Once, she picked wild strawberries, collected sticks, and played games like "housekeeping station" and "survive in the wilderness" and didn't have two real little children of her own to look after. Once, Mom's life was understandable. Her momma was warm, and her father was a big, silly bear who did not yet seem cold or difficult or corrupt. There was once a time when my mother's life was as simple as it is for Beanie and me at this very moment.

Before I was born, before my brother or my sister or even my father or my mother were born, this Midwestern American city was a bit of a phenomenon—a miraculous, magical destination renowned for its special brand of lifesaving. Before the cereal and the cornflakes, a doctor came to Battle Creek from New York City, raised forty children and adopted seven. He opened

a holistic sanitarium, a place where rich folks and prominent Americans like Warren G. Harding and Mary Todd Lincoln and Henry Ford traveled to address their dietetic concerns and indulge their gastronomic curiosities.

The Battle Creek Sanitarium, first opened on September 5, 1866, was a combination hotel, spa, and luxury hospital and the only regional bastion of self-improvement at the time. Patients participated in breathing exercises and postprandial marches to promote the proper digestion of food. They took classes in meal preparation for homemakers and embraced the sanitarium's vegetarian, low-fat, low-protein, fiber-rich diets. The founder of the sanitarium also considered enemas to be very important, so patients participated in frequent cleansings, ones in which the doctor irrigated their bowels with several gallons of water. This was followed by a pint of yogurt—half of which was eaten, half of which was administered by enema, "thus planting the protective germs where they are most needed and may render most effective service."

The doctor also insisted that sex drained the body of life. He encouraged the application of pure carbolic acid to the clitoris, claiming it was "an excellent means of allaying the abnormal excitement." He believed that masturbation was the cause of cancer of the womb, nocturnal emissions, urinary diseases, impotence, epilepsy, insanity, mental and physical debility, and that circumcision could remedy the "solitary vice." He believed the procedure should be done without administering an anesthetic, "as the brief pain attending the operation would have a salutary effect upon the mind, especially if it be connected with

the idea of punishment." He believed he had the answers to what we should do with our bodies, and people believed him. This man, Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, went on to invent Toasted Corn Flakes cereal, and put our hometown of Battle Creek, Michigan, on the map.

Mom slams the passenger-side door shut just as Dad begins to back the Buick out of the driveway. In a tubercular wheeze, our old four-door putters past Kellogg Community College and the sleeping jungle gyms of Meyer's Toy World, past Kellogg Auditorium, past Farley-Estes Funeral Home, past Community Hospital and Dad's office, and past St. Philip Catholic Church. It's very early in the morning. The sidewalks are rolled up and the sun has barely shown its face. We climb the ramp of The Penetrator, which merges onto I-94 towards Kalamazoo, and Dad pops a cassette tape into the deck. *Inchworm, inchworm, measuring the marigolds . . .*

My parents have been waiting a long time to take this drive. The gears of the adoption machine started nearly ten months ago, maybe longer. At the very least, it all began sometime after Mom had settled into Battle Creek and after Sabina and I were born. When her dust storm settled; when she just felt right. Maybe she felt loved, and finally loved America. Or maybe she was restless. Her stocked Frigidaire made her feel awkward. Maybe my father's love reminded her of her mother's unhappiness, and maybe that struck her with grief. Maybe she felt guilty. Maybe she was inspired. Maybe she wanted to save a life. Maybe she wanted to save a child that someone else considered an accident.

It started with the women: Lucia, Ducia, Vita, Jeanette, Vera. One by one, they came to us. Poland was in terrible economic condition, so Mom invited the women to live in our home in Michigan, and stay until they could afford to set out on their own. She could get them here and help them find work, but after that, they were on their own. Mom wanted to do more. Save a life more fully. Save someone completely helpless.

There was a woman in Warsaw, an impoverished, unwed girl pregnant with her second child, and she was giving the baby up for adoption.

We are in the car on the highway heading to pick up this little baby boy from the airport.

It has taken months to get to this point. In Poland, a birth mother has a month to change her mind about following through with her decision. Have baby, give baby, keep baby. During the first month, the baby stays at the hospital. Mom and Dad paid the nurses in Poland to take extra-special care of the baby during its holding period. We didn't know if he would come to us or not, but Mom kept sending money anyway because she said he just wanted to be loved. So the nurses named him Christopher and loved him until the baby's mother never returned. That's when Mom hired a lawyer, petitioned a congressman to speed up the adoption process, and paid Vera to take over loving the baby until she could put him on a plane to Michigan and deliver him to her, to us. So now, here we are, over five months later, driving to Chicago's O'Hare Airport to get this little guy. The drive will take about three hours.

We'll wait, and Mom's brother Matteo, his wife Mary, and their first child, a newborn named Marek, will greet us at the terminal. With our faces smeared against the windows, we will watch the plane touch down, and Uncle Matteo will capture the baby boy's arrival on his brand-new Zenith video camera. My new baby brother will arrive at the same international airport where both my mother and Uncle Matteo landed when they started to become Americans.

The little boy will be sick, and will need someone to take care of him. He will have the flu and a crusty nose, and a big head, too, just like he did in the photo. Beanie and I will take turns kissing him on his dimpled dumpling forehead and argue about whose turn it is to hold him, how the other got to hold him longer. My father will cry, overwhelmed with joy, and all at the same time everyone will be touched and amazed and exultant. During the drive back home, the new boy will sit in the front seat of the Buick, nestled in between my parents, and he'll stare at Dad the whole time, wide-eyed, in a trance, like Dad had come from another planet. Sabina and I will sleep.

Eventually, the little boy will get better—Dad will fix him, make his flu go away. Mom will feed him, and he'll gain weight, gain color, and soon we'll all be there when he's christened at St. Philip Catholic Church. There will be a reception in our backyard under a little white tent, and Sabina and I will take off our clothes and run around naked, pushing balloons into the air. Dad will hang a tire swing. Mom will make deviled eggs. And the newspaper will write up a front-page

story about Julian, the adopted baby boy from Poland and his foreign mother, Maria.

But for now, Dad will pull our car onto the highway and drive us home. Through the back window, I will stare behind me at the airport as the bustling runway steadily diminishes into a thin, sharp, quiet line.

three

I wasn't planning on having children, or at least I hadn't given it much thought. Even though I'd been taking birth control pills and never missed a single dose, I still got pregnant. (I'm that 1 percent.)

I was a graduate student in Sarah Lawrence College's creative writing program. It's fair to say that the hefty tuition influenced me to work that much harder, but that's not what caused me to walk the thin line between ambition and obsession about my success. It was my neurotic tendency to avoid anything that would cause my parents to worry. They didn't want me to go to graduate school for art, and so I felt compelled to work that much harder so they wouldn't worry. They'd had enough anxiety in their lifetime. Plus, my mother had recently had a stent

placed in her heart. I didn't want to do anything that would bring her stress.

Even so, age twenty-seven, September 2007, I bought a Metro North ticket from Grand Central Station to Bronxville, New York, and, twenty-seven minutes later, arrived at Sarah Lawrence College—the institution that, weeks later, was to be voted, once again, the most expensive college in the United States. Four months after that, I'd meet the man I was going to marry, despite the fact that on the train ride to my first day of class, I promised myself this: I would go, I would fight, and I would win. This meant no dating and no codependencies while I earned my MFA. No intimacies other than literary ones with my new classmates. Outside of graduate school, when the girls of Sarah Lawrence did hang out socially, we spent our time doing nerdily fruitful things like attending poetry readings or going to book launches where the most harm done was too many glasses of red wine remunerated by our Grad PLUS loans. No distractions until I'd earned my MFA, sold a book, and come up with a brilliant way to quickly pay off my loans. No relationships, at least not until the choice between purchasing a MetroCard and buying groceries was an old memory, fuzzy as mold. Which, back then, and on bread, I'd probably have eaten.

It meant having to leave my desk and interrupt my work. I wanted success and there was urgency about it. My mother always told my siblings and me, "First you work hard, then you play hard." This mantra worked for her quite well, so I reckoned the stricter I was about my labor, the quicker the payoff would arrive. When I wasn't in class, I was sharpening my sword. I read

and studied during the day and I wrote at night. Sometimes, I'd forget to eat. I would get annoyed when I had to go to the bathroom. I isolated myself. There was an imaginary hourglass sitting on my shoulder: the sooner I could soothe my parents' discomfort, the sooner they'd be at peace with my decision to pursue my own path. I wouldn't be causing any heart attacks. I didn't know exactly how to achieve the sort of success I was after, but until it came, all I had to do was placate them. This is what I was thinking at the time.

"You should go online."

I was home for winter break after finishing my first semester, and we were hiking—Dad, me, and our family dogs, Yolanda and Gonzo—in the Kellogg Forest the day after Christmas. Despite being bundled up in layers of mismatched wool, flannel, and polyester, I couldn't cover up the fact that I was pale and slightly underweight and possibly in the beginning stages of becoming a recluse.

"It's important for you to meet other people, Mira," my dad told me. "Get yourself out there and connect with others. No man is an island."

"But I don't want to meet anyone. I'm too busy with school," I said. "Plus, I'm not going to shop for a boyfriend the same way I shop for my shoes."

"The older you get, the harder it's going to be to meet people. Several of my patients at the office have done it. You should give it a shot."

I wanted to suggest that those patients were probably divorced

and over fifty, or that even if I were looking for companionship, it wouldn't be some mail-order mate, but I said nothing.

"Just a thought, Mira. Just a thought."

The next day, my mother found him. The minute I had given them permission to create an account for me, which, really, was so that my mom and sister could "window-shop for boys," the two of them were glued to the computer screen, browsing men and reading their online profiles aloud to me as I ignored them from the other room. I was making guacamole.

Big sister yells: "This one has a dog!"

Mother declares: "Yes. Yes. This one. He is it, Mira. Good-looking. Good job. Nice boy. He is the one!"

The photograph is of a dark-eyed, dark-haired guy on a couch with a dog on his lap. *Cute dog,* I think, and study the picture closer. White T-shirt, blue jeans, round head but not too big. Athletic build, sort of looks like a G.I. Joe figurine. Scar on left eyebrow. Pretty lips and a quizzical smirk. Quite handsome. Looks like he must have liked digging for worms as a boy. Looks like he'd be the kind of kid that tried to sell them for profit, too.

I'd like it if you enjoyed words, alcohol, science, smooching, live music, art, and buildings. Or if you could teach me to like things that I don't like right now. (I don't really trust picky eaters.) But you shouldn't be ugly either. Or male. Or an alien zombie, powerful in life, unstoppable in death. I ride a bicycle whenever I can. I have a puppy that loves the dog run and licking my face. I eat everything (except cilantro). I'm

comfortable speaking in front of a crowd. I enjoy parenthetical asides, not abbreviating in text messages, and semicolons.

Hooked and curious, I slide between my big sister and mother, tap the keyboard, and respond:

My favorite place to be is outside. My idea of a comfortable relationship is not ordering Applebee's takeout, renting I, Robot*, and raising pit bulls. I have no tolerance for womanizers, aspiring Don Juans, Casanovas, wandering eyes, men on missions, etc. etc. etc. Who I'd like to meet: You. Or Abe Lincoln. Or Mark Twain. Or Sir-Mix-a-Lot. Or world peace.*

I remember what I was wearing the night I first met Andrew: a long black dress, brown boots, and a rose-colored wool coat—a gift from my mother. She said it made me look French. The ends of my hair tickled the tops of my shoulders, and I wore red lipstick, just as my mother had instructed me to do. It was January 4th, 2008. A Friday night. I did not shave my legs.

Ten minutes before we were supposed to meet in Union Square, I slipped away into a bookstore. I wasn't sure if I planned on ever leaving it, either; I was just being a coward. I wasn't sure if I was brave enough to go meet this stranger, so a voice in my head suggested that I buy a book instead. I needed a book. I *had* to get a book, and I would stay in the bookstore until I found the perfect book for that moment. He could wait.

The idea of Internet dating—digital window-shopping for a

mate—struck me as extremely bizarre. The guileless logic of it, of paying money to proclaim your vulnerability and your need for care, was difficult for me to take seriously. *I am looking for love.* I was embarrassed. *I am in need of love.* I just wasn't sure if I was willing to let someone else, some complete stranger from the Internet, know this about me. *I am in need of love.* I was. But who isn't?

Then I spotted the book: *Pigeons: The Fascinating Saga of the World's Most Revered and Reviled Bird.*

At 8:00 P.M., precisely when my blind date was leaning up against a brick wall outside a noodle joint on 17th Street north of Union Square, perhaps rubbing his hands to stay warm or checking his phone and trying to look like Mr. Cool in case I saw him first, I was inside a warm, crowded bookstore on Union Square and East 17th Street, reading about pigeons, trying not to think about what was going to happen next.

> *Pigeons have a fixed, profound, and nearly incontrovertible sense of home. Pigeons have been worshipped as fertility goddesses and revered as symbols of peace. It was a pigeon that delivered the results of the first Olympics in 776 B.C. and a pigeon that first brought the news of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo.*

At 8:10 P.M., using my graduate school loan money, I purchased the book, slipped it into my bag, and walked out of the bookstore and into a gusty winter night. Two minutes later, I stepped onto one specific square of sidewalk in New York City where I met my match, Andrew Michael Jackson, my first and

last blind date. I still have the receipt for that pigeon book, which I bought and never read.

Three months later, I am cautiously aiming the stream of my urine. Knees bent, back hunched, panties shackled around my ankles. My hazel eyes are frozen in a look of punctilious concern.

It is April and raining outside. To my left, a bathtub. To my right, a brown wicker basket of magazines—*Cook's Illustrated, Runner's World, The New Yorker*—all marked with a small white label revealing the address of the man who lives inside this apartment: 223 East 32nd Street, Apartment 1D. Across from me, a smudged window with a pigeon roosting on its ledge, and behind the bird, the superintendent of the building, tossing garbage into a bin. And then there's me, a brown-haired, elk-faced, slender-bodied woman, straddling a toilet, peeing onto a plastic pregnancy test. My eyes, my face, my entire body—all numb. I am petrified, and targeting the stream of my urine as scrupulously as I possibly can, because I feel as if the fate of my life were being carried within it. My urine, like a crystal ball, will reveal my future.

A one-knuckled tap on the bathroom door. "You okay in there?" Andrew asks.

My knees lock together. *Please don't let him come in and see me like this. God, please don't. What could be worse than a beautiful man walking in on me crouched over like this, trying not to pee all over myself?*

"I'm Fine! Fine in here. Just finishing up!" I sing. *Frog-legged with your pants down, squatting like an old granny. Nothing much less flattering than that.*

I pull my underpants up, zip up my jeans. I am one of four million women living in New York at this very moment. What is the likelihood that one of those other four million women in New York is doing and thinking and feeling the same exact thing that I am right now? Who else is squatting over a toilet taking a pregnancy test? Who hadn't planned on it? Who will be pleased with the results? And what will happen to those who aren't?

This is how it happened: It was wild and universal and complex. We were charged and unaware of what was going on underneath the surface. We let go, and I let him take me in. We fell in love. Exposed kneecaps and collarbones, and entire evenings spent devouring one another; we were like wild forces. I knew it was a bit much—we were just so drawn to one another; we were so brand new. Then suddenly, three months later, I was pregnant. I thought we were safe. I never missed a pill. We *were* safe. And then, pregnant. It was as if my body had been wanting and waiting for this and I hadn't even realized it. *Pregnancy*. I didn't find it beautiful. I found it disturbing. But can't something be both disturbing and beautiful at the same time? Can't things be tremendous and lonesome at the same time? Simultaneously heartbreaking and glorious? Wasn't that New York?

At first, I believe the plus sign is a negative sign, and a perpendicular line has floated out of its boundary. It has migrated out of its home base. At first, and deludedly, I am calmed by this. Not pregnant. But after I take two more tests, it finally sinks in.

Next, we are sitting on his couch and I am crying. "I don't

even have health insurance," I say between huffs. Plus signs. Sniff, sniff. Positive. Andrew is leaning on the windowsill, waving two pregnancy test sticks in front of him as if they are Polaroid photos. He is calm, and appears almost glad. This offers a tiny bit of relief, because I'm not yet thinking about my parents and what this might do to them. I'm not thinking about disappointment versus approval, or my mother's heart. I'm just trying to formulate some kind of game plan, to treat this like a math problem. We look at all the other options and possibilities with barely a glance and say "no." *Abortion?* We don't consider this a mistake; we don't want to wipe anything out. *Adoption?* Neither one of us can fathom having our creation disappear into the same world we live in. It would be like having our very own ghost.

"I love you," Andrew says.

"I love you, too."

Behind us, the sound of children shrieking on a playground is making me want to smoke a cigarette, or maybe three hundred, all at once. It is spring, and I am not ready to be a mom. I don't want to be a parent. But now I am. There is a baby growing inside my uterus and there is nothing I can do about that right now, so I will not smoke cigarettes and I will not drink alcohol and I will not do anything that may cause the least bit of harm to this tiny speckle of a human I'm nurturing. Is that what they call motherly instinct? Maybe jumps onto my lap and licks my face. I will do my best here. It is my responsibility.

"Your dad is a doctor. Can't he help?"

I can't think about my father, or my mother right now. Dad

used to be in the seminary. He's from a large Catholic family. And my mom is Eastern European, and intimidating.

"My dad practices in Michigan," I say. "And I'm not asking my parents for help. Or money."

"What about your school's health insurance?" Andrew asks. He sits down next to me on the couch. "Doesn't health insurance just come in the student package?"

I explain: I have no health insurance because I opted out of Sarah Lawrence's plan so I could save an extra two thousand bucks. I was willing to risk it. I have an excellent immune system. I wear a bike helmet. I hadn't planned on getting pregnant.

"Medicaid," I decide. "That's the only option I can think of. Tomorrow I will go to the Medicaid office and fill out an application." It's government assistance or no health care. They can't turn us away. Medicaid. Just until we figure out what to do next.

"I'm not going anywhere," Andrew says.

"Don't say that. You don't know that," I tell him. You can't go back from here, but you can always go away. Things will never be like what they were five minutes ago, two hours ago, two weeks ago, one month ago. Nothing will be the same from here on out. We're not just dating anymore. The simple stuff is over. We won't be fresh anymore—we'll be raw.

"I love you. We'll get through this together," Andrew says.

"I love you, too." And I do.

It's only been three months since we met, but we are in love, and we can't really comprehend much more than that, so love is what we agree on. Love, and just letting the rest unfold on its own, seems to be the right choice for now.