

UC Riverside

UC Riverside Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Catalina

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3mf108k6>

Author

Jacobs, Liska Bettina

Publication Date

2015

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Catalina

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Liska Bettina Jacobs

December 2015

Thesis Committee:

Professor Mark Haskell Smith, Co-Chairperson

Professor Andrew Winer, Co-Chairperson

Professor Mary Otis

Copyright by
Liska Bettina Jacobs
2015

The Thesis of Liska Bettina Jacobs is approved:

Committee Co-Chairperson

Committee Co-Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the UCRPD staff and advisors. Thanks especially to Mark Haskell Smith, a wonderful mentor and friend.

DEDICATION

To S.W

1. It's just past breakfast

It's just past breakfast so I order up a pitcher of Bloody Marys and a bagel. I dash off a text to mother: "I've landed safely—sorry I couldn't stay longer." The phone is one of those slick new things, the buttons too small for my fingers but they make a satisfying *click click*. I turn the ringer off and slip it into one of bedside drawers.

The Miramar is a bougainvillea and jasmine hotel, with cobblestone circular drives, its name written in gold letter cursive on a black iron gate—and golden California light spilling everywhere. My room faces the pier, and when I'm on the balcony it's like walking on the jumble of palm trees below.

All the cocktails are named after celebrities: the Hemingway is some mess of bourbon and mint, the Marilyn has gin and a cherry. The bloody Mary is the only one named for what it is.

I try not to think of mother's face or my older brothers' knowing glances once they've realized I've left.

They come over for Sunday dinner—something that did not exist when I was young but became a tradition once my brothers bought houses in the Bakersfield area. They show up with their families, their perky almost two-of-a-kind wives, their darling, demonic children. They are surprised to see me.

My younger brother does his best Donald Trump. *You're Fired*, he's saying, pushing his thinning hair to one side. His wife pinching him and saying, *Don't listen to him hun, it's happening everywhere*, while her boys tug at her jeans, chanting *Mom*,

Mom, Mom, Mom. They look at me and tug harder, hiding their faces in their arms. And my mother isn't just holding down the blend button on the blender, she's pulsing it—the ice for her margaritas *crunch-crunching*—the children chanting in between.

I take the first flight from Bakersfield to Los Angeles. It is quick, filled with businessmen and women who fly as part of their morning commute.

Then it was just a cab ride from the airport.

I hang my dresses and blouses and slacks, calling up for more hangers. I arrange my shoes in the closet as if I am moving in. I read over the dry cleaning services and note that they will press your socks free of charge.

The bed is wide, a California king, with a down comforter that puffs up around you, as if it were hugging you saying, *just wait, just wait.*

I try not to think of how few options I have left. How being fired feels like an end that rings on and on. How Eric did not ask me to stay—how in that last moment, in his office, he did not stand up and say anything. Just sat there, hand beside mine, close but not touching—until the human resources woman coughed politely and he moved it...

But let's not think of that.

I look at the ceiling, a ceiling fan made to look like palm fronds circles in quiet arcs. Just beyond the eggshell walls is a bustling little beach city—that old friend. Remember college here? What fun! And those friends—*your clique*. Charly and Jared living in Santa Monica. Southern California homeowners for God's sake. I think of their wedding five years ago, when my divorce was final, how I almost didn't go. And Robby, now my ex-husband, how he sat and looked at me from across the bar. I thought I'd

crumble and give in again if he cried. But he didn't and instead we danced and toasted the bride and groom and I left for my big New York job.

We've all done the sensible thing since then: kept in touch online. I know about Jared's promotions and Charly's big flu last year and how the year before they started renovations on their house, and how a few months ago they were in New York and did not call. And how Robby's dating a woman who takes a lot of selfies, all outdoors, usually summiting some peak. Do I call? And hear Robby's voice—all tense and faintly hurt, waiting to be let back in. Or Charly? Maybe she will want to go shopping—she will definitely want to go shopping. And we will get frappuccinos with skim milk and try on dresses and talk about whatever argument she and Jared are currently in the middle of.

God how exhausting to be back—you can almost feel that old self, that girl who likes art, likes pretty things—thinks she can turn it into a career and get the hell away from here. Well jokes on her—here you are. And it's been waiting for you, like some second skin.

When I called Charly from Bakersfield and said yes she nearly whooped with excitement. *Elsa had finally said yes to one of her reunion trips.*

And that second skin goes *zip*.

During eighth grade, mid-school year, Charly's parents divorced and her mother took her to California just outside Oxnard. We drifted apart only to reconnect at UCLA some years later. We fell easily back into it, discovering that whatever made our friendship necessary was still there. Then sometime after the divorce with Robby, as she settled into a life that consisted of pleasing Jared—an impossible task, we fell out of

touch again. It was easy to do. I urged it along, not returning phone calls, ignoring emails, keeping my New York life secretive.

This is when being sober is the worst. I call to check on my room service order and when they come they bring extra pillows and Advil too. The room service boy flirts with me, says he thinks redheads are pretty. I can tell he's young and breakable and it would feel so God damn good to break something. I tell him he's cute—he's got one of those clefts in his chin—but I'm way too tired to do anything about it.

I shower with my drink and take one of mother's Vicodins. *Let it begin*, I think, rolling myself into one of the hotel bathrobes, the fabric wonderfully impersonal—soft and stiff and vibrantly white. Could I ever curl up enough?

2. Only a week ago

Only a week ago I'm in New York in my small one bedroom apartment. Beside the set of Alvar Aalto vases is a file box, heavy with pens and papers and an automatic stapler I took from the museum supply closet. I'm thinking about what will happen if I flee. How in Bakersfield mother and I will barbeque pork chops and chicken breasts and rosemary potatoes, getting drunk on cheap Chardonnay that will coat my tongue like a lump of butter. How at the salon I'll catch her frowning at my reflection *too thin, too pale, too much, too much*, but we won't talk about that. We'll talk about my brother's kids, the Lakers, whether or not she should buy an electric car, but not about New York. And I'll be nearly bursting with it. She'll smile when I say I miss him—a polite smile that isn't really at me but at the red bell pepper she's chopping for the grill. And she'll say, "Try this, it's from the farmer's market. It has the best crunch."

So I will not call. Not yet.

I spend the rest of the week organizing things in my apartment. I think Eric will call but he doesn't. I rearrange furniture, I dust, I scrub, I throwaway papers. I wait for the severance package to hit my bank account and when it does I spend a day at the department stores near MOMA—the ones I used to shop at with Eric. I do not see him. I avoid calls from my mother and ex-coworkers—I practice saying *ex-coworkers*.

I buy a package of yoga classes, but after one session I go instead to the bar across the street. I call a friend or two from the museum, they do not call back. I develop a taste for the whiskey Old Fashioned, which the bartender shows me how to make. He's Cuban and I let him make out with me one afternoon, both of us whiskey drunk, our breath tasting exactly the same. He doesn't kiss anything like Eric, who had not been properly kissed in a long time. Always trembling, his lips a little too wet. Whispering against me, *Oh God, Oh God*.

The Cuban wants to go into the back, I tell him who will watch the bar? So we lay down on one of the black leather booths, my hands in his hair, which is soft and yielding like animal fur, and I dig my nails into his scalp when I come.

Then I'm without a bar, drinking at home instead. One morning I'm up or maybe I never really slept, either way I'm walking through Central Park, making my morning pilgrimage to MOMA.

I've started to go early, when the city isn't exactly quiet, but it's quieter than later in the day and everything is blue, blue, blue. There are the personal trainers, in shorts and sweatbands, shoulders defined, foreheads pinched in hurried lines, mouths shouting,

“Let’s go! Let’s go!” Across the lawn sleepy women practice Tai Chi, their walkers and canes rest against a maple, where someone’s dog sleeps, yawning without opening his doggy eyes. Dragonflies dart toward the pond, their wings like shiny plastic wrap. And there’s the smell of onions on a fryer, coffee roasting, and somewhere not too far off that animal smell drifts up from the zoo, sharp and earthy.

Then I’m in front of MOMA buying iced tea because the heat has already settled thick and hot across Manhattan. This is when I see her, Eric’s wife. She’s coming out of the employee entrance, a to-go coffee in her hand. And there’s Eric, a similar to-go coffee in his. He leans down and kisses her on the cheek. They’re an attractive couple. His hair almost white. Mary’s curly and black. She’s very small, she has to stand on her tiptoes to reach his cheek. No other parts of their bodies touch, just Eric’s lips to her flat pale face. How sweet.

They’ve been together for thirty-six years. I’m there for the last five. I help shop for anniversary and birthday gifts, stealing away mid afternoon together and having lunch at some rooftop restaurant. He tells me how he wishes he could get away more. She’s a lovely woman, he says, but he craves solitude sometimes. He misses those days of freedom, he tells me. He remembers what it’s like to dream a different life and still think it’s possible. He envies my youth, he says. And touches my hand, his is warm, moist but strong and heavy over mine. His eyes cloudy with some plea, *Yes*, I tell him with my own eyes, *Whatever it is the answer is yes*. Is this when it started? Or further back, when he interviewed me, when he first shook my hand and my name rolled around in his mouth and came out like something blooming—*Elsa*.

They part at the bottom of the steps. I watch him disappear back into the museum. She watches him too. His poor cuckolded wife. She's a sharp dresser, one of those museum wives with silk scarves and bold prints, chunky jewelry and German made shoes. The scarf is a nice touch, it waves from behind her—catch me, it says. Come and get me.

So I follow her.

We go up Fifth Avenue back to Central Park. I'd have lost her if it weren't for that beautiful scarf taunting me. At the Plaza she turns and enters, saluting the doorman with a sweet little wave. I can't see her face but I can see everyone else's as she walks by: the mustached old man at the front desk, his eyes crinkle at the corners, his face says, *What a lady*. And the plump women smile from beside him, their teeth flashing like tiny paparazzi.

In the Palm Court she speaks quietly to the hostess, who stands a little taller. It occurs to me now that I'm not dressed for the Plaza. I look down at my shorts, they're pre-ripped and cost almost two hundred dollars, but I don't think that matters to anyone here. I'm wearing a tank top with a built in shelf bra—and it's cold with the air conditioning on—and running shoes. The same mustached old man from the front desk brushes past me. He doesn't speak but I see him eye me, his moustache shifting from side to side.

I wait until Mary is seated, at a table alone and out of the way near the windows. I put two tables and a fan palm between us. I still can't see her face, I'm looking at her

back. What is she doing, eating lunch alone? Had she gone to take Eric out and he declined?

I watch her order and think about when their only son was killed in Afghanistan. How Eric and I were working late, rewriting the Picasso program. We're looking at his sketches some of his line drawings too—of donkeys in flagrante, of women with their legs spread open—and deciding how best to word the labels.

I love Picasso, Eric's saying, and I'm watching his intelligent face, how he frowns a little when he's really focused. *He always leaves you feeling a little seduced, a bit abandoned*, he says to me. His eyes are very blue—*But he's got you by the scruff of your instinctual being, you can't help but return to him again and again.*

We're so close I can smell his breath, I want to climb right up in there and taste it. We do not pull down the blinds, the city noise riffs up from below: a siren, a car horn—some helicopter beating above. The women with their naked bellies and crooked eyes and Eric's hot wet mouth on my skin. And then his phone rings, it's some official, and he's vibrating with some primal kind of pain. It's frightening, even his tears look painful.

He buys me the Alvar Aalto vases when he comes back from his grievance period. To thank you, he says.

A plump waiter, clean-shaven with a damp upper lip brings Mary sparkling water and a bowl of sliced lemons. I can tell her chin is propped up by her hands, she might be sighing, she might be looking out at those clouds and sighing. I look too and we stay that way for a moment.

Then the same waiter comes over to my table. He's very good at pretending. He doesn't even let his eyes slip to my clothes, just beams and asks if I'd like still or sparkling water. I order from the breakfast menu, and when he opens his mouth to say it's past noon I give him a look that shuts him right up. It's a good look. I use it on babies or noisy couples in movie theaters.

I order eggs benedict and a Belgian waffle.

Mary takes the scarf from around her neck. She puts it over the back of her chair. It's from MOMA's gift shop. I recognize the silk, hand dyed in a third world country, the pattern bold.

The waiter brings her a salad, a bowl of rolls and balled butter in a shallow dish. I watch her smear the butter—well really I watch her elbow and shoulder work at what I can only guess is smearing butter. I think about how Eric told me she likes to garden, how she loves a good nursery and could spend a whole day deciding between types of hydrangeas. And how her favorite place is the Catskills because of the fall foliage. He tells me she describes the colors as *fruit loops*. This makes me like her more than I probably should. And for a moment I think we can be friends.

When my food comes Mary gets up. I look down at my plate, then out the window. I feel the wind her body creates when she passes by. My mind goes completely blank—an excuse would be impossible. I have a very strong urge to barf down the front of me. When I look up she's not in the room. I call the waiter and ask where the woman went. I'm almost shaking.

He plays coy, "What woman?" he asks.

“The one eating a salad right over there, where did she go?”

He leans in, “To the bathroom miss.”

I push my credit card in his hand and say if he’s quick about it I’ll tip him in cash. I put a handful of twenties on the table so he knows I mean business. When he’s gone I can feel the hair on my forearms, how it runs up along my shoulders and neck. I’m holding my breath.

It’s just the scarf and me now. It’s draped over the chair like a silk refugee, trembling under the ceiling vent. Outside in the hall I can hear the hotel staff and customers, phones ringing, elevator doors opening and shutting, the satisfying click of heels on marble.

I’m very quick about it. I cross the room and shove the scarf into my purse. I meet the waiter at the front desk and sign there. He offers to-go boxes.

“Not hungry,” I say, and head for the door.

Outside the humidity beats down. I’m fingering the scarf and breathing something fierce. It’s exactly how I thought it would feel, stiff and smooth and very sturdy. Once in Central Park I examine it closely.

It’s perfumed, some floral scent that tickles the nose. I have several thoughts at once: turn it into a lost in found; rip it to pieces; keep it for myself.

3. There are large glossy photos

There are large glossy photos of Santa Monica in dark frames just above the hotel bathroom toilet: the Ferris wheel at night, slightly blurred and out of focus; and some

seashells shot in the style of Edward Weston—but are not Edward Weston. I remove them, pausing to consider launching them over the balcony, but instead hiding them in the closet. I unpack my bag, a small carry on filled with prescription pills stolen from my mother, lining the pill bottles in a neat little row on the marble countertops. Some are from last year, the labels worn. Thank God mother is a vain nervous woman. She keeps a collection of doctors. It makes her feel good, I think. To have someone to call, someone paid to listen. *And where does it hurt Mrs. Fisher?* She rarely takes them, a comfort just to have them. She amasses pills in great quantities. This one for nerves, this other for energy and this for arthritic pain, migraines, sleep deprivation, sluggishness. They are pretty pale colors in various odd shapes—like wedding sweets or old timey valentines.

To keep them from rolling around in my carry-on I had wrapped them in Eric's wife's scarf. I should practice using her name. It will make her real: *I wrapped my mother's pills in Mary's scarf.*

There are a great many bottles, probably too many. I combine a few, those that look similar. Why not? Who cares? I definitely do not. What was it Eric had said in his office on that last day? *Go back to Los Angeles, see you Mother in Bakersfield—be open to possibility.* Fine, a blue one if the mood strikes, a white or sea foam green. Surprises are welcome.

I tuck the scarf into the bedside drawer, pausing to rub the fabric between my fingers. It's beautiful, the fabric heavy and light at once.

Why did I do this? I picture Mary coming back from the Plaza bathroom, the Palm Court empty, her scarf gone. She'd ask the waiter and what would keep him from

describing me? Jesus, would they try to hunt me down? Would Mary know me by description? Would they have video?

It's one of the few gifts I did not help pick for her. I consider calling Eric then. I've never called him at home. I'm not even sure I can find the number. Instead I call room service and order a Bloody Mary, which, I tell myself, is basically a salad.

It's a different room service boy—this one a man, with gray whiskers and a wrinkled uniform and judgment in his eye. He tells me he's never delivered just one drink to a room before. The drink is perfectly cold though and has the right kind of garnish: two olives and celery that goes *crunch*.

At sunset I decide a jog is good idea. Except there are bloodthirsty raccoons living in the Santa Monica sewers. I see two little brown hoodlums pillaging the dumpsters behind Third St and Broadway. Two more pacing me along the bluff, tackling trash cans as I jog by. Their black-masked faces pause when I pass. I think I hear one hiss. I pick up my pace, believing I might be mauled to death by a Santa Monica raccoon.

What a way to go.

And the bloody Mary is doing me no favors. I'm slow, barely able to jog, and with each block can taste tomato and cracked pepper.

By the time I reach the end of the bluff, I'm sweating and my right calf is screaming. I stop to sit, the bench wet from the marine layer. They call this June gloom. The ocean and sky the same matte gray color, the horizon one big wash. I take a painkiller or two and settle in. I can see the Ferris wheel from here, which is down below jutting out at the end of the pier, its lights flashing in the gloomy grey day.

When I was five mother took my brothers and me here, almost the exact spot. It was the first time I'd seen the ocean. We didn't come to tan or swim or eat corndogs. We lined up with everyone else in Palisades Park to watch a winter storm finish off what was left of the Santa Monica Pier. The lower half of the pier had crumbled in January and just when they started to rebuild, another storm had come. Mother was upset she missed the first spectacle, scouring the newspaper and magazines for photos and taking them to show her friends at the salon.

I remember how crowded it was, how we were bundled up like babushkas' and how the man next to me had a tripod and scowled whenever I tried to look at it. The storm was furious, I was scared at how the palm trees bent, as if they might snap and impale us, and I cried—and mother said to me I'd have to get in the stroller if I was going to be a baby. Then the ocean shrank and grew all at once. A crane, which was being used to repair the damage caused by the first storm, was swept into the water and everyone grew excited. My brothers hollered like beasts—rain pelting them—and mother smiled. She *smiled*. And the crane beat with the waves against the pier until the pier cracked and gave way and everyone yelled into the storm to congratulate it.

I don't remember my second or third trip to Santa Monica, probably when a friend got a car and we discovered the beach for ourselves. How you trek across the sand forever until you reach the water; or if you drive north you're in Malibu and there are cliffs and mountains and camping and everything that makes you feel like the world has done all this just for you—it's been waiting and you're finally there to tan and swim and explore tide pools. And if you head south there are even sandier beaches, and bonfires

and boys whose schools have stables and will—if they like you—sneak you in to see their horses. But then you're alone with them and they always, always, want something in return.

A group of homeless men wake up behind a public bathroom. I can hear one of them smacking his lips together in an exaggerated yawn.

I take the long way back to the hotel through the manicured neighborhoods behind Palisades Park. It smells better back here, less like piss and more like the flowering magnolia trees that line the sidewalks. People are jogging in pairs, beautiful, athletic doubles. A flock of cyclists peddle by, I catch words from their conversations: “behind, ahead” “go right—go left”. A group of stroller-toting mamas speed-walk across a four way stop. Finches and crows hangout on a park lawn together: a screeching racket.

Could I move back to this place?

But it's too soon to be thinking of plans. I still half expect Eric to show up and—I don't know what. Leave his wife? Give me my job back? This morning I lay in bed with the sheet over my face, eyes open so everything was soft and warm and I thought of him.

I only got up when maid service entered with her little white uniform and creased brown face and looked at me with horror, which she buttoned up real quick, and said with professionalism and something like shared feminine tragedy, “Excuse me, I come back, I come back.” And backed out of the room, picking up one of the Bloody Mary glasses, lying empty on the floor.

4. My favorite beach

My favorite beach to sunbathe is private and just past Malibu colony. I haven't been in years but if there's anywhere I can be alone and be ok with it, it's this beach. The only way to get down is by scaling some rocks and then ducking through an abandoned beach house that many years ago burned down.

I rent a compact car with electric windows and drive Pacific Coast Highway with all the windows down.

It's a Tuesday so the roads are clear and when I get there the place is empty. I mean totally empty. No surfers, no one sitting out on their decks, not even a breeze—nothing. The burned down beach house is exactly where I left it. The sun glints off the wave tops, which are soft and rolling, and the palm tree tops flutter as if they had tinsel hair.

How does anyone go to the beach and not instantly want to be naked?

The sand is warm, almost scalding at first. I find my spot, tucked behind a boulder on a gentle slope so even if someone walks by I'm hidden from view. I leave my clothes and bathing suit in a neat pile and lay out without sunscreen. I want to roast.

There are some gulls very far off, the waves; a breeze caught up in the palm treetops, their trunks creaking and somewhere a wasp.

The silence hits me all at once, ringing and shrill. A vicious little shiver crawls up my back.

I'm about to put my clothes on when a figure blocks the sun.

He's tall, broad shouldered and whistling a tune I can't quite place.

I grow indignant under his gaze, why doesn't he walk on? But he kneels down, tilting his head, watching me.

"The water is warm," he says with an accent.

I push myself up, "What song were you whistling?" He has very dark eyes and a mop of black hair.

"That?" He says and sits as if the question were an invitation. "A very old Mexican song about lost love—*que tengo miedo a perderte, perderte despues.*"

"Tragic," I say without moving.

He continues to watch me.

I realize he's dug his feet into the sand. I look out to the ocean, he follows my gaze and we stay that way for what seems like minutes.

"Do you plan on swimming?" He asks without looking away from the water.

I shrug, "The water has always frightened me."

He laughs—a very beautiful rehearsed laugh, and holds out his hand, "Come."

I take my time with my bathing suit. When I'm done he's waiting by the water. I can see now he's already been in, his trunks—which are European and small—are wet and clinging to his thighs.

The water is warm and he swims with magnificent strokes. I can make out his clenched fists, punching the waves as if they were small mountains and he a giant destroying them.

Past the wave breaks we float on our backs and he laughs that practiced laugh.

"I don't usually see anyone on *my* beach."

“Is this yours then?”

He smiles, very good teeth, and takes my wrist gently.

“I’ll show you how to body surf tandem.”

And we do this a few times, I can feel him beneath me, the water pulling us toward the beach, and then we’re tumbling, falling beneath the wave. My legs are shaking from the effort. When he notices he says he’ll massage them, holding them tight and rubbing with his thumbs.

Back on the beach I still don’t ask his name. We go up to his house—the light blue one I, many years prior, had walked by not knowing who lived there. It’s funny where you end up, places that were background, mere scenery, suddenly become center stage.

He lets me shower and change and asks if I’m hungry. We walk down to the cafés and other women look at him, pretending not to but catching him whenever they can. I see men look too. He orders us sandwiches and buys two bottles of wine. We hold hands now and he strokes my forearms and talks about the entertainment industry. He tells me he’s a producer of Latino television programs.

None of this matters to me, frankly I’m just glad not to be alone, not to have that ringing silence. So I ask him questions about his life and his job, and couldn’t care less if he is telling the truth or lying. I suspect the latter. Back at his house he says he’d like to see me naked again.

“American women are always nervous about their bodies, but you’re different. You’re something else.”

So I undress for him.

“Radiant,” he says. “But ah, a sunburn! Lie down mama, I’ll be back.”

I’m obedient, and when he returns it’s with a bottle of cold aloe, which he rubs on every, single, part of me.

The familiar boil of warmth always starts at my knees, and this is when you know you’re at the mercy of your body: when you’ll pant and sigh and ask him to come in you. Your bodies work well together —and you do not think of Eric. Except at odd moments: when you slide into pleasure, when it’s just the skylight swimming far above you both; and when you’re on your stomach, the pillows, which are soft and moist from your efforts and smell of the same laundry sheets used in the motels where you and Eric met. It does not take either of you long to finish.

After he asks my name and if he can see me again. Not this weekend, you say. This weekend you’ll be in Catalina with friends.

I give him a fake name. And yes he can call—here is a fake number to go with Susanna—the girl from San Diego County visiting her ailing grandparents in the city.

You only hope you’ll lay like this, with him behind you, one arm around your waist—so that you are not alone.

He gets up then, to pour us more wine he says.

Back at the hotel the wine has worn off and I’m sore and my head hurts so I take something for that too. The room seems smaller now, and the Latino’s cologne is stronger than the smell of the beach. I shower and take two little white pills that might be Xanax or possibly Percocets. I let them dissolve under my tongue.

I've left Mary's scarf draped over the back of a chair near the open window so that it tangles a bit in the breeze. No matter how much I air it out, it still smells like her perfume. I'm afraid it will look terrible on me so I've demurred from trying it on in front of a mirror. The color of the scarf is similar to prescription pill bottles, only darker, a burnt dusky red, and when the breeze lifts it up the light catches the underbelly and it's two toned—bright and dark all at once.

Looking at it depresses me so I decide to people watch in the lobby. The hotel boy—the one with the cleft chin—rides down with me in the elevator. He makes little circles with his black converse on the floor; chews his lip and then says, “Are you enjoying your stay, everything in your room alright?”

“The toiletries are shit,” I tell him seriously.

The lights on the elevator buttons blink gold at each floor. I can see his throat working. He's very young. His mouth opens and closes, there's a blemish above his lip like a grotesque beauty mark.

“But I'm probably taking too many showers,” I give him my slow smile. And when the elevator doors open with a pretty *ding* he's smiling too. I don't ask, I read it on his badge—“Bye Rex.”

I walk through the open lobby, the breezy sunlit lounge. There are potted ferns and mirrored walls so that the light slants every which way. Outside there's a group of black women sitting together, drinking white wine and eating shellfish. It's late in the day, the light warm and thin. They laugh and wave their manicured nails. I wonder if they go together to get them done. This kind of sisterhood makes me want to cry but instead I

sit at a table beside them and order a bottle of pinot grigio. The waiter eyes me, his expression saying *lush*.

Don't judge me old man—just bring me my bottle of wine.

The biggest woman of the group, her turquoise earrings brushing the tops of her dark shoulders says to her girlfriends, “Well if he can't satisfy me I'll get a piece on the side who can.”

The other women laugh into their hands, rocking back and forth over their little table of empty oyster shells. Each of them saying, “You're terrible” and wiping at their eyes.

I try to be okay with sitting by myself. I take out my phone and scroll through it, pausing on Robby's number—is it a good idea to call your ex-husband? It's a rhetorical question because the answer is always no. I scroll through to Charly's. I should let her know I'm here.

An older couple, a disastrous older couple, the kind you find in Los Angeles—or maybe Miami—seat themselves across from me. His shirt is unbuttoned way too low, I can see his stomach hair. And she has the face like a bloated frog painted up like a marionette. They order a cheese platter and he sends his drink back twice. I hear him say to her, “Get anything you want.”

The waiter brings my bill and I say a little too loudly, “Charge it to my room.” The pinot grigio has gotten me drunk quick. I stumble when I stand. I can feel these people looking at me, there's really no one else to look at. The black women are suddenly very regal, their pretty mouths shut up tight, and that couple, he's squinting at me as if I

might be a painting in a museum. There's always so much in *that* look. I've seen it often and always at some exhibition. You do it when you're deciding that fine line between what is beautiful and what is hideous—because it is *such* a fine line.

It's not very late and back in my hotel room everything is spotless, the bed made, my breakfast tray removed. And on the writing desk is a travel size kit of facial creams from the hotel spa.

I decide then there is really no avoiding it. Plus I'm a drunk and those pills were most likely opiates. So I stretch the hotel phone cord all the way to the balcony and sit facing the nighttime beach. There are streetlights and headlights and across the way people going up and down Second Street to bars and restaurants and the shopping mall.

Jared answers and I can hear Charly in the background, washing dishes. It's a funny image, the domesticated Charly. She once famously claimed she wouldn't marry until she had done three feature films, a sitcom and written a book. Her biggest accomplishment to date is staring in a car commercial—and that was many years ago.

“Hey!” Jared shouts into the phone. “Long time no talk, let me get Charly. She'll squeal.”

Down on the pier, someone lights a red sparkler. Just electric red against black.

“Oh my God,” Charly says breathless into the phone. I hear the water shut off.

“Are you really here?”

A breeze picks up, it's cold and wet and the sparkler dies out. I'm suddenly sure she can hear the waves, smell the Pacific through the phone.

“No,” I lie. I tip toe back inside, stretching out on the bed with the little facial cream kit beside me. “Not yet. I’m at JFK.” It’s one of those expensive cream kits, where everything is organic—Shea butter and lavender and sweet almond oil—the ingredients written first in French and then in English.

“Oh,” Charly says sounding disappointed. “But you are coming?”

“Yes of course, just some last minute stuff with work.”

She sounds reassured. “You know you can stay with us. We’ve had the place remodeled.”

“Come stay with us!” I hear Jared shout in the background.

“Thanks, but I’m treating myself to the Miramar.”

“Oo very nice! Remember how we used to sneak into their pool at night? Hoping someone would buy us fancy drinks, they always had such funny names.”

“They’re even more outrageous—There’s one called the Absolute Burroughs.” I rub a little of the cream into the back of my hands; it smells powdery and expensive.

“Did you hear that babe? There’s one called the Absolute Burroughs,” she pauses; I can tell she’s smiling. Jared says something about old Uncle Billy.

“Jared says we’ll come to you then. He loves some beat culture. How’s tomorrow?”

This other Elsa can’t stay in the airport forever so I agree. “Good for me,” I say.

She’s thrilled, “This is really happening! I can’t believe you’ll be here after so long.” There’s a moment of awkward silence, I think I can hear the line click.

“Have you told Robby?” I ask and some curiosity licks up in my insides at having said his name. I can’t help but smirk. I think of that hotel boy—Rex, how breakable he is—how the smell of the facial lotions makes me almost giddy.

“Yes,” Charly says simply. “He and Jane, they want to come for drinks too. Have you met her? She’s lovely, real down to earth sort. When I told them you were coming she insisted we go to her restaurant. She’s the manager of Sycamore Grove.”

“I don’t know what that is,” I say but catch myself. “I bet it’s swanky.”

“You’ll love it. All the waiters are adorable,” she giggles. “See you tomorrow Elsa, I’m so glad you’re coming home.”

That *home* hangs between us. I don’t know what to reply so I hang up. And for a moment the silence in the room is overwhelming—the flowery scent of lotion everywhere.

5. The Old Gang

When I arrive I see *the old gang* before they see me. I hang back a bit. There’s Robby—I wish there was something other than this faint sadness when I see him. It’s really more for him than it is for me; I never had much to lose. Remember when he asked you to marry him all those years ago? After finals, on the way to the desert, the sky clear, taillights pulsing up and down the 10 freeway, and Robby looking at you a little breathless, in awe at what he considers to be his prize.

And there’s Jared—short and muscular—in tight trousers, the bottoms rolled up. A too small meathead who likes to flirt, while poor Charly eternally looks on—if only

she recognized her own power, that Jared would crumble if she walked out. Even now she half watches him at the bar her face a little pinched, while Robby's girlfriend talks at her. She's very animated, this Jane—her arms and hands waving as if she were an instructor. I can only see her back, her bare muscular shoulders flexing as she raises her arms above her head, fingers flicking under hotel light.

Charly greets me first, holding my body against hers. I feel small in her arms, her breasts pushing up against my chest. She's unbearably soft, almost colorless. It isn't her clothes; they're bright and new. Something about her face and hair, they're subdued and mousy—even her voice is mousy.

“Elsa,” she squeaks.

Robby's girlfriend is next, we hug as if we had small bug arms. She still has the same pixie cut from when we met in New York. Her hair is dark, almost black, with bangs swept to the side. They had come for a restaurant convention a few years back. I had been busy with work and only time for a quick chat over bagels and coffee. I remember the hair and that she insisted on paying, but I don't remember her smile being so full, so bright.

“Elsa,” Robby says and tucks me in the crook of his arm. “You remember Jane?” Now that I'm closer I can smell cigarettes on him. This surprises me. Robby only smokes when stressed.

Jane's looking directly at me, as if we were once sisters blown miles apart, only to be reunited at this moment in the Miramar hotel bar. “I was just telling them about the

hotel, did you know they just finished a multi-million dollar renovation?" Her arms raise again, her fingers stiff like conductor wands at the ready.

"No I didn't," I say hoping to deflate her. "How have you been?"

They lower to her sides and she reaches out to touch my dress. "Really good," she says. "I love your dress."

It's bright blue and cotton and cut low across the chest. It was one of Eric's favorites. It won't slip down but pushes up.

"Elsa, you changed your hair!" Jared says lifting me up. We laugh and when he sets me down he says I make a great redhead.

Charly gestures to the empty stool beside her, "Sit with me, sit with me."

"So what's everyone drinking?" I perch on the stool. The pill I took in the room has reached from behind and smoothed out my head. I'm feeling generous. "I'll buy the next round," I tell them.

"I'll have a whiskey," Jane says, holding Robby's sleeve.

"My kind of girl. Let's all have whiskey," I say.

"A white wine for me please." Charly is looking at her husband, who shushes her.

"Oh have something stronger than white wine," Jared says.

Robby's brought the drink menu from the bar. "Want to drink poolside?" He suggests.

I'm happy to flaunt a group on the hotel grounds so I lead them outside. The pool is jellybean shaped, the bottom teal colored so the water is very dark. There is no one in it, but beneath a cluster of palms a mom rubs sunscreen vigorously onto two children.

The little girl looks over at us. She clutches a towel across her body; the boy is picking his nose. Across from them, near the bougainvillea trellises the Miami couple lounge shirtless, the man paunchy, his chest dotted with coiled black hair, except for a patch of shining white around his belly button. His girlfriend rests a manicured hand in that tuft of hair, her thumb stroking.

We take over the chaise lounges on the opposite end.

“Did you guys bring your bathing suits?” I ask untying my dress and slipping it over my head.

“Ou! That’s a cute bikini,” Charly says sitting at the edge of the pool. She’s rolling up her pants. “You always did have the best suits. I couldn’t find mine this morning.”

“You found it, but you hated it,” Jared says, winking. He’s a gym guy, quick to take his shirt off but slow to get in the water. He stands near Charly, chest flexing.

“What about you Jane?”

She’s put on sunglasses so I can’t see her eyes.

“I came from work,” she says.

“I might have an extra in my room,” I offer but she shakes her head.

Robby leans over so his chin is resting on the arm of her chaise lounge. I can’t hear over Charly, who’s shouting at Jared, he’s dove in and splashed her pants. But then I hear Jane say, “No babe, really, I don’t mind. Go in.” She kisses him, sweetly on the nose. Robby pulls his T-shirt over his head, throwing it playfully at her, she whistles softly.

The pool is something. I swim from one side to the other in one breath.

When I surface the children have splashed into the shallow end, their fluorescent arm floaties bobbing gently around them. The little girl jumps from the step into the mother's arms. I can't see the mother's face, her floppy hat is pulled down low, but the child is enraptured. Total delight. Her little body glides through the water, held afloat by her mother and those pink floaties. The boy stands at the step now, holding his arms out, "I'm next, I'm next I'm next!" He shouts.

"So how long do we have you?" Charly says to me from the pool's edge, "I was starting to think we lost you to MOMA."

I'm still watching the two children. The brother whoops each time he jumps toward his mother, splashing his sister who watches from the pool steps. "Oh I haven't taken a real vacation in ages I thought I'd stick around for another couple of weeks."

"And MOMA can spare you?" Jane asks *so* politely that I think maybe she isn't so nice after all. She isn't looking at me though; she's sipping her drink and watching Robby over the rim of her sunglasses.

"The show is practically done and Eric, (god it feels good to say his name out loud),"Eric," I say again, "Really thought I deserved a vacation. He insisted really."

"Who's Eric?" Robby asks.

"My boss, Eric Reinhardt."

Jane raises her brows, "Eric Reinhardt is your boss?" She turns to the others, "He's a big deal in the art world. Got the Chicago Museum running again."

Jane is one of those girls who get prettier when she knows the answer to something—she fluffs up, becomes erudite.

“He planned the Mike Kelly retrospective. Groundbreaking.” Those taught arms and fingers gestate. “His career is really admirable. I read his essay in Art Forum on all the Getty drama in Italy. He must be fascinating to work with.”

“It’s been educational.”

“Oh let’s not talk about work,” Charly says. “I’m so excited about Catalina! Won’t it be wonderful? And Tom’s great, his boat is so, so gorgeous.”

“It’s a Morris Yacht Ocean Series,” Jane adds. She’s on a roll now. “A friend of my grandfather used to build them in Maine back in the 1960s.”

“Who’s Tom?” I interrupt.

Jared smirks, draining his whisky, “ You’ll love him. Or he’ll love you. Just your type, practically royalty. His family owns a potato chip company or something.” He wades over to me and squeezes my shoulders.

“How do you know this guy?”

Robby answers, “We did some design work for one of his companies. Took a real liking to Jared.”

Jared is proud, although it’s clear Robby’s meant this as some sort of slight. There’s a bitterness about Robby for a moment, a sneer that’s hidden by the tip of his drink. This surprises me. I swim closer to him but Jared catches me underwater.

“You should stay at the house,” he says.

I motion to the hotel grounds, “It’s not too bad here.” Just then the little girl in pink floaties starts shrieking. Jared lets go and puts his fingers in his ears. Each of us looks in the mother’s direction, who’s holding one of the girl’s pudgy arms and talking to her in a sharp voice.

“Come stay with us!” Charly begs over the noise. “You haven’t seen the renovation, unless you saw the pictures I posted.”

“I saw them, it looks beautiful.”

The mother climbs out of the water. She’s in a sensible one piece, bright with a pattern. Her thighs are dimpled, although she isn’t fat.

“There’s a big jazz festival on the island,” Robby says. He’s floating on his back. I forgot how nice he looks in swim trunks. He used to swim competitively and has one of those long torsos. He says, “Buddy Guy, Boney James, George Duke. It’ll be bitchin.”

“Bitchin?” I laugh because this reminds me of young Robby, and I can see gray in his chest hair.

Jane tilts her chin at me, I sober up for a moment.

“Jane,” I call. “Have you been sailing before?” It wouldn’t surprise me if she had raced sailboats professionally.

“I’ve always wanted to learn.” She pauses for a moment looking at her feet.

“Tom says he’ll teach me.”

The skin around the mother’s arms is soft, malleable but then she picks up the little girl and the muscles are sinewy and firm. She wraps each child in a towel as if they were giant burritos and carts them off, giving us an apologetic wave.

“As soon as you called I made up the spare bedroom,” Charly admits looking after the mother. “So you must stay with us—at least the night before we set sail. It’ll make things easier.”

Jared massages my shoulders. “Keep my little wifey company,” he says near my ear. “I’m at work all day and she’s on summer break.” I can smell him, the spice of his cologne, the perfume in his shampoo. I think the oil streaks on the water must be from him.

“Don’t forget about dinner on the pier,” Jane adds from her chaise. Now that the mother and children are gone it’s just the Miami couple. They’ve ordered drinks poolside and when the man sits up he has to work to get a gold chain out from between his stomach folds. He winces and cusses. The girlfriend rolls over then, the backs of her calves pink. She fusses over him, trying to get the chain untangled. “It’s stuck in the hair,” I hear him say. “You’re making it worse,” she says. His face has grown red beneath his tan.

Charly gets up to lie beside Jane, “Oh yes, yes, dinner with Tom. Elsa, you’ll come too? Are we totally overwhelming you?”

I assure her she’s not, “Of course I’ll come.”

She looks relieved, lies back on her elbows and kicks her feet out in front of her.

“He’ll probably buy us all dinner, the guy’s a real asshole like that,” Robby says.

Jane frowns. She looks like she might object but instead asks Charly instead about the restaurant’s vegetarian options.

Robby splashes me, “Hey, want to race?”

“I don’t want to upset your girlfriend.” I’m still watching the Miami couple. The woman has left. It’s just the fat man now. He looks small by himself. He slowly collects their towels and deposits them into a bin. When he walks by he’s holding his shirt against his body, face averted.

“Jane?” Robby says, as if the thought never crossed his mind. “She’s not like that.” He’s smiling at me like how he used to.

“Is she anything like a woman?” I ask.

“Jane’s one of those cool girls.”

I laugh. “Am I one of these cool girls?” I swim around him so he has to turn to talk to me. Now that it’s wet, I can tell his hair is starting to thin. A pity. He had such great hair.

His blue eyes flash something.

“We better not,” I say. “I’ve had too much to drink.”

I retire to my room after another round of whisky cocktails—after our talk begins to go circular and Jared’s repeating the same stories. *Remember that one time?* When Charly’s mother remarried at the Beverly Hills Hotel—when Trader Vics was still a tiki bar and restaurant? Like being in the hull of a ship, wooden gods and ferns and very strong mai tais. How Robby and I weren’t married yet and he held my hand tight, hung onto my waist. And Charly and her sister and cousins all dressed up in stiff raw silk the color of milky toffee. Such a grand old hotel, like stepping back in time—we all agree.

And the parties at Jared’s place near campus: the wicked punch, the music; the awkwardness of partying in a tiny apartment. His roommates, so-and-so now in Texas

crunching numbers; bald but drives a Maserati. And oh yeah old what's his name—lives in Silverlake married with two kids and a dog. We saw them in October, had our own little Oktoberfest; barbequed alligator and rabbit and fennel sausages; pale Ales, white beers, Belgian darks. His wife makes the best sauerkraut. The little kids eating Hebrew nationals and drinking apple juice in tiny plastic beer mugs. Cheers—they say and crash them together—their parents taught them. It's the cutest thing, Charly tells me.

I nearly push them out the hotel doors when I say goodbye.

It's quiet in my room and I'm worked up. My head swimming with their voices, Robby saying *It's good to see you*; and Charly pushing her breasts against me in one last hug, *I miss you* in my ear. Jane waiting, sober by their car door.

So I call room service and when the boy with the cleft chin appears—Rex—a bottle of sparkling water in hand, his young face irresistibly eager, looking smart in his hotel uniform, I smile and ask which bathing suit I should wear for a sailing trip.

“What's your name?” He asks a little breathless. He's the type that would need an inhaler.

I give him a fake name—here is *Ingrid* a wine rep from Portland in town for a trade show.

“All the good wine is from Oregon,” I say. He nods yes, yes.

I make him wait while I try each bathing suit on. I like the look of oxygen stuck in his chest. He keeps glancing at the door as if someone might come in.

I rattle my prescription bottle like a tambourine and offer him some. I ask if he can get coke, he says he thinks so. The waiters do it in the hotel restaurant. He'll be right back. But I make him stay and have his waiter friend bring it up. His name is Austin—the one with the coke. He shows up, baggy in hand, crushing Altoid mints between his teeth so it sounds like he's breaking things in his mouth. He eats several at once, holds my hair back so I can lean into the coke easier. His menthol breath cold on my neck.

Austin wants to help pick out a bikini too but I don't like the way he clenches his jaw at me, how when he talks to Rex he nearly barks. I put on music, and laugh sharply when Austin suggests we rent porn.

"Not that type of party sweetheart," I say and hold the door for him. "I'm going to bed and you should get back to work. Thanks for the coke." He stalks out, knocking over an open bottle of wine.

Rex won't stop apologizing. I help him put towels down, which doesn't help at all and for some reason this makes us laugh. And then the boy is just looking at me, all full in the face, eyes nearly black. I'm reminded again of Robby's face all those years ago—on that desert highway, looking at me all astonished wonder.

I tip him outrageously even though he refuses to take it. I push the bills into his hands. "You have the cutest smile," I say my voice shaking only a little. "Let a woman pay for the pleasure of seeing it—it's even in your eyes."

He has a very high blush when he leaves.

I feel better and sleep in a gold and turquoise bandeau bikini.

And there is Robby— younger because you’ve just seen him in the pool at the Miramar Hotel and his hair is thinning and turning grey— so you know how it ends and you both end up older. But this is young Robby, schoolboy Robby, with thick dark hair and a sparkle, he’s there after finals, a trip planned to Joshua Tree for the two of you because he knows how you like to fuck under the stars and the night sky in LA is flat grey and dull. He asks you again, this time there’s a small gold band involved. You’re in the passenger seat and there’s traffic and he slips the ring on your finger and you betray yourself. You say yes, believing you love this man because you want to love him. And so you head down the freeway, out of town, listening to Big Mama Thornton with Robby’s hot hand on your leg, his face bright because you’ve finally said yes.

At the hotel he’s giddy. His hands shake when he takes off his Hanes, he’s breathing hard as if this were your first time together. It is, he insists. It is the first time you make love as man and wife— and he says it like that, “make love” as if what you did before was what animals did. But you are an animal— you know this much about yourself. Gold help him.

You fake your orgasm. He tells you he loves you.

When he falls asleep you go outside to look at the stars. There are many. You wonder where is Hydra— that far-reaching galaxy, the snake in the cosmos? But there are too many. It’s overwhelming. It could be a blanket with pinholes stuck up into it. How suffocating.

In the morning he makes you both coffee, kisses you and wants to go back to bed. You insist on a hike and wait outside while he showers.

That's when it happens. Your confirmation: you do not love him, because outside you watch two fourteen-year-old boys playing in the pool. One is dark the other very fair. They're athletic in a small frame sort of way with well-carved shoulders, crooked necks and manly chins. They're almost unattractive in their awkwardness, but you see the defined jaws, tight from rough housing, and those forearms just beginning definition, forceful and unapologetic—their hands like large puppy paws. Your mouth wonders what their mouths taste like and you join Robby in the shower.

6. The hotel phone is ringing

The hotel phone is ringing. It is an ungodly shrill noise, making my head rattle, rattle, rattle. I refuse to answer it. Maybe it's Robby. Asking why I've come back. I could see it in his face last night, the way he looked from Jane to me and then, the more he drank, the less he looked back and forth. That question getting bigger and bigger. *Why are you really here?*

My hangover is wicked, everything fuzzy—somewhere between memory and dream. Robby and me under the night time sky, speeding down the 10-freeway. That hot hand on my leg, Big Mama Thornton roaring. Am I remembering it right? The phone stops ringing. I watch for the little red light to blink, telling me I have a message from my ex-husband. Sure enough the little light blinks, more maroon than red.

Beside me is a stack of untouched pillows, as if the maid snuck in and plumped their white satin cases, stacking them perfectly on top of each other. As if to empathize how empty that side of the bed is. I reach over them to find a pill bottle.

I'm not sure exactly when but sometime in third grade I suspected my father was only been coming home to kiss us goodnight, leaving after we were asleep. It was his side of the bed that gave it away—in the morning it had that untouched look, the pillows all neatly stacked.

I let the pills dissolve under my tongue. I wait for those covers to creep up around me, the promise of soft plush hotel sheets—they're starchy, stiff like beaten yolks. The air conditioner clicks on, a hum you could drown in...

When mother leaves to pick the boys up from summer camp I sneak into her bathroom. I expect father will come home now that the boys are coming home too. It's been a long summer of just mom and me: phone calls from father to say goodnight, cereal with coffee creamer because the milk's gone bad. The house smelling like lavender and cleaning solution because even if she wears pajamas all day she'll clean the house.

Her bathroom has shag carpet, stone grey, and a mirror over the sink that faces a full-length mirror so if you stand in front of it there are many yous walking down many halls. I want to look nice but I can't use her make-up yet because if she sees me I'll have to wash it off. So I steal one lipstick called "Party Pink", my favorite because it smells like My Little Ponies.

And then suddenly my brothers are home. The house is loud, we have pizza for dinner and then my brothers make mother and me laugh with stories of camp and I can smell the mountain air too, feel those icy streams, and those stars! They charted the sky and show us their sky maps: Pegasus, Orion, Hydra with its deep sky galaxies...

But my father doesn't show, the boys do not ask why. Or maybe they do but no one asks in front of me. The boys go to bed still rambunctious, filled with their stories, the smell of campfires stuck against their skin, their faces bright. Mother goes to the garage to smoke a joint.

I take my book to the pantry, which is large and has its own light. I keep the door cracked because small spaces still scare me a little.

Hours pass. The television clicks on in the living room. I wait to see what show: a late night game show. It's my mother, I'm glad I stayed up—neither of us is alone now. I think, this must be what it's like to share a room—how my brothers must feel, being comforted by the soft sounds of someone else just beside them.

But not long after this there is another sound: a key in the lock. The television is muted. I listen closely. I concentrate on the bit of white lace the pony on my sweater is wearing. I watch it rise and fall on my stomach and I try to make it completely still. Outside big rigs roll down the main highway like waves; a bird makes a noise, as if the sun has already risen.

The familiar drop of keys, the soft pulling off of his shoes, the way the floorboard creaks under his weight. I think: I'll wait until he sits at the kitchen table, and mother has hugged him and right when they reach for the warm beer that's just above where I'm lying, I'll pretend to be asleep. This will be a very pretty picture for father to see. And mother too, she cannot be mad at beauty. So I spread my hair across the pantry floor, it smells like Dove shampoo and it's long and dark and I think of sleeping princesses, the

kind I've been reading about in my book. I take out the "Party Pink" lipstick and apply it to my lips.

But neither parent comes into the kitchen. My father finds mother on the couch. I can tell by their hushed angry whispers. I hold my book in my hands thinking I should throw it against the floor, shout, "I'm here!" And they'll have to stop. But I do nothing. I stay silent and listen to her protests, to his voice tall and desperate. The sounds heighten, the couch thuds, clothing tears, the sound of physical violence—skin against skin, and then nothing. Only for a moment nothing. And then sounds worse than before. Grunting, his grating moans. Her breath deep and loud, a kind of voice all on its own.

7. The sounds of some other world

The sounds of some other world: laughter and shouting and bicycle bells. No sterile smells of lavender and bleach. The air here is salty and warm and smells like the ocean, like my brother's clothes after returning from camp, only without the added sourness of boy. They got back together after that night. Stayed that way for a few more years, long enough for the boys to go off to college. Then they separated for good.

I check the message when I'm fully awake. It's not Robby but Charly. She wants to go to Jane's restaurant for lunch. I call back and say I'll be ready in twenty minutes. I don't invite her up. There's a small bag of coke on the counter and my mother's prescription pills lined up in a neat row. Austin's left an empty Altoid tin, the mint dust spilled onto the sink. And crumpled over the wine stain, is Mary's scarf. There's a dark violet patch across the raw silk from where the wine seeped in and a piece of its knotted

fringe has twisted right off. It's still beautiful though, perhaps more so. I ring it out in a soapy bath and hang it over the shower.

Down in the lobby Charly's in jeans and sensible walking shoes. She catches me wave at Rex, who blushes a little and turns back to the elderly couple with their bags. She doesn't say anything about it though, just rushes me out of the hotel and into the bright sun. There's blue sky today and short stumpy shadows. People ride bikes in bikinis and swim trunks, groups of women push strollers—the kind with big heavy-duty wheels—kicking up dust and little rocks.

I walk a little behind. Her gait has changed or maybe mine has, either way we can't seem to get in step. She marches past the panhandlers sitting in a small circle, their arms outstretched, and a sad fat man with a dancing monkey; she doesn't seem to see them. She's talking about her new teaching job, how she loves the children. At first I think she's joking. She was always the first to throw a look at an annoying child. But she's deadly serious. Every once in awhile she turns and smiles at me, babbling on about child psychology, finger painting and the price of automatic pool cleaners.

“The Principle asked me to start assisting in the Studio Lab too,” she's saying. I try to catch up—her pace is breakneck. “Which is really exciting because I'll implement material-based lessons. It'll mean integrating multiple content like STEAM—science, technology, engineering, arts, mathematics—with Common Core State Standards.” She sidesteps a group of moms' breastfeeding, which puts us back in step with each other.

“Have you booked any gigs lately?”

She waves her hand dismissively, smiling at one of the mother's, "Oh that's all in the past. But I am thinking of talking to the parents at the school about starting a theater program."

We can still hear the breastfeeding women; one of the babies is fussy.

"How's Jared's job?" I ask because Charly's gotten a faraway look about her. She's almost stopped walking completely.

"Oh it's fantastic," she says resuming her pace. "He was able to get Robby some work—he's been struggling financially. We even lent him some money. I don't think Jane knows about that. They're moving in together." She's paused to watch me, ready to comfort should this news prove distressful.

I laugh, "Really, Robby and I are old news."

She sniffs and starts walking again. "I always thought you'd guys get back together. Don't get me wrong, I adore Jane, I really like her. We just don't have that much in common." She hangs onto arm, "This is why I need you back—Jane's always doing some marathon or on an impossible diet."

The pill I took before leaving the hotel has kicked, everything's softer now; that sadness that I'm walking beside a stranger has softened.

We've turned onto Montana Ave, there's the smell of the magnolia trees and the California sunlight is lax, syrupy, my limbs pleasantly heavy. I have to stop myself from saying, *We don't have that much in common either.*

"I missed the weather," I manage.

8. I wonder if Jane greets

I wonder if Jane greets every customer like this. The same blank, brilliant smile; she looks supercharged, amped up, ready-to-go. It's exhausting just looking at her. She's one of those pretty, fit girls, like Eric's wife. Like some retired long distance runner, all severe lines, cut to exaggeration. You wouldn't find a curve on them.

When I first met Mary it was at the close of an exhibition. We're celebrating at some dive bar drinking with colleagues, and Eric with his white hair, long as if he were from some California beach town instead of dry dusty Loma Linda, is smiling at me from over his white wine. We stand in the corner; I'm excited we're alone and drink quickly. The second drink is much stronger—a gin and tonic or maybe a vodka soda. There's a shuffleboard table in the corner of the room. The other assistant curators are playing, all ties loosened and shirtsleeves rolled up. I start to feel lightheaded and lovely. I touch the back of his hand. I want to know what it feels like. *Is it soft?* Sunspots over the knuckles, the skin dipping over veins, the cuticles pushed back over flat milky nail beds, little half moons peeking from beneath. Is this when it begins? Maybe.

His wife comes in then, not smiling but pleasant. Eric and I play a game of shuffleboard, his wife hovering over a bar stool and flicking pretzel crumbs from around the counter. I ask her about Santa Monica because Eric's told me she's from there. He's also told me she played softball and was state champion her junior year, how they met in graduate school; how she likes her eggs at Balthazar on Sunday mornings. But still I ask her questions, nodding politely when she answers in short clipped sentences while fingering a silk neckerchief and looking toward the bar door with increasing impatience.

When our shuffleboard game ends her purse strap is already over her shoulder. Eric holds the door open for her when they leave. I remember him glancing back—giving me a funny little wave.

Do you miss me? I want to know.

Jane seats us outside on the restaurant patio. It's one of those sparse modern restaurants with an exposed kitchen and blonde wood floors. The bar is crowded with business suits and girls in wedge heels, the back of their slim calves the color of milky coffee.

I order a bottle of sparkling wine. I ask for a bucket too. Jane, with authority, directs a busser to angle a white umbrellas over us.

“Sit down,” I tell her and when she objects I'm reminded of Mary again, the cool tilt of her head the polite immovable smile. “You have to, I'm making you,” I say. “I want to hear all about this restaurant. I want to hear all about you.”

She relents when Charly joins in, even laughing at herself when the cork pops and she jumps. I make her talk about herself. *Why this restaurant? What does she really want to be doing?* The pills have me now, and the wine helps too. It's blush colored, and the bubbles are sharp, exhilarating. It goes right to the head. When you look through it the sky is rose gold. *And how long have you been working here?* She's telling us about the art on the walls, which is really hideous.

“It's all gallery quality” she's assuring me. I nod, get distracted momentarily by the breeze. There's a great big sycamore growing over the roof and I watch the leaves nod in the breeze.

And how long have you been with Robby? Are you planning to get married? Her blue eyes get large, she might even be blushing—or it could be flush from the champagne—there’s a second bottle now.

“Oh don’t be silly,” I’m saying. “If I cared I wouldn’t have divorced him.”

Have some more champagne, and I’m refilling our glasses. The little bubbles racing to the top. *Do you have oysters?* I want a pile of those opalescent shells surrounding around us. She looks at me strangely and I quickly bring the conversation back to Robby.

We laugh about his snoring, how he loves slapstick and standup, how he has to be up and outside before seven in the morning. I don’t allow her to do anything except laugh when I make little jabs about his inability to understand most politics, his prejudice against money, I even make her laugh about how he orgasms. *Isn’t it always the same though?* I’m cackling.

We make eyes at the young waiters.

Jane is laughing: tears in her eyes. She’s saying, “You’re such a bad influence!”

Charly is making a high nasally noise too, which tells me she’s enjoying herself immensely.

“How old is he really, Jane?” I say pointing.

The waiter in question knows we’re talking about him. He’s made sure to be attentive. He’s young, with a thin moustache, his hair pushed back in a severe pomp. His jeans could not be any tighter.

“Shhh,” Jane says. “I’m the restaurant manager—I have to work here.”

“Tut-tut, you’re the boss.”

She bites her lip, leans in. “He’s twenty-one, from Montana, wants to be an actor.”

“Poor guy,” Charly says. “He has such a long way to go. He’s so young. Doesn’t he look *so* young?”

“We hired a host the other day who still has braces.”

“I think they are lovely,” I say with moxy. “I’ve picked one up at my hotel.”

The two women look at me, waiting for the joke.

I raise my glass to the young waiter, “Salud.”

“What do you mean you picked one up at your hotel?” Charly asks, her voice so low I almost laugh in her face. “Do you mean a prostitute, Elsa?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. One of the room service boys has a crush on me, you saw him this morning—broad shouldered and clumsy, cleft in the chin. He brings me little treats,” I enjoy the look on their faces. Jane has the same expression Mary had when I told her I was divorced and single in New York.

So I add, “I modeled bathing suits for him too.”

Charly’s mouth is in a small ‘o’. Then she laughs so loud and suddenly that the table next to us looks over.

Jane covers her mouth with her napkin, and then we all three are laughing.

When we’ve recovered Jane says, “Robby must have had his hands full with you,”

“He’s a man darling,” I drawl, “They love to be miserable.” The alcohol and pills have lessened their hold. I have a headache right behind the eyes, there’s a cool drip of desperation down my back.

“A scary thought,” Jane says frowning.

I refuse to let them pay the bill. I hear myself saying something about having just gotten a raise and that this is celebratory. We toast to old times, and to new ones. My hand shaking only a little.

Charly walks me back to my hotel, I’m already replaying the afternoon. Had I been too loud? Did I laugh hyena-like or just right? I can feel the heat in my face. When we hug goodbye Charly says, “I missed you Elsa. You were always so carefree—nothing touches you.”

9. Back at the hotel

Back at the hotel my room is clean again. A dress that slipped from the chair onto the floor is now folded on the bed. The sheets and comforter have been plumped and smoothed over like some layer of fondant. Someone has taken the rug with the wine stain and replaced it with a different one, although it is the exact same pattern just a different color. There’s a clean stack of towels, new shampoo and conditioners; the counters have been wiped, my makeup and pills and Austin’s Altoid tin all in a neat row; the end of the toilet paper roll has been folded into a point.

Mary’s scarf is gone. It’s not folded with the dress or the towels. No one’s hung it in the closet or placed it in my suitcase.

Something climbs into the back of my throat, it's metallic tasting and swollen. I've thrown off the bed pillows and I'm rummaging through the couch when there's a knock at the door.

Rex is there, his hand behind his back. I'm telling myself to calm down. "Look," I say. "Help me look—the fucking maid stole my scarf."

"Oh no, I—," a smile twitches at his lips. His hands fidget behind his back.

I'm breathing heavy, and for a moment I want to smack him. I want to really hurt the kid. If he were any closer I'd swallow him whole, spit his little pearlescent uniform buttons back to his mother in Idaho or Iowa or wherever he's from.

"Give it to me." I can feel the wet on my upper lip. He brings out his hands. On his right there's a class ring. He spreads his fingers wide and empty.

"I thought you'd be happy. I sent it to dry cleaning. It won't be charged to your room." He's backed away from me, still holding his hand out.

I touch his class ring gently. It's very cold, compared to his hand, which is soft and warm. I can almost twist the ring clean off. It's only his knuckle that keeps it on.

"Can you get it back?"

"They won't have cleaned it yet. I just took it down an hour ago. There was a wine stain."

I shake my head, "I don't care about that. I just want it back."

He looks at me.

"Wine stain and all," I say. "Can you get it for me?"

He nods and leaves and I'm suddenly exhausted. I crash down onto the freshly made bed. I think of Jane and Charly's face when I said *I modeled bathing suits for him*. Had they looked appropriately envious? When I wake it's dark and the curtains are drawn. The power in the hotel has gone off sometime in the night. My bedside clock is blinking. I get up and pull the curtains back. The scarf is near where I had been lying. I take it up, fingering the stiff silk. It's gotten stiffer where the wine stain has dried. The smell is comforting. No, more than comforting. It's reminiscent of some memory, some past: a sharp floral smell that is half Mary and half her perfume. I take what I hope is a sleeping pill and curl up with it. I take a little white one too because the light in the room is slanted and spooky. A note on the floor reads:

INGRID, I'M SORRY – REX

It's in a neat almost girly hand—the 'G' in *Ingrid* is buoyant looking, the rest of its letters evenly spaced. What a nice capable name. At the window I can see the tiny lights on a buoy out in the bay. It must be early because the sky is soft and grey. I can just make out Catalina Island on the other side. It's a looming lump of land right on the horizon. It seems indifferent, a little judgmental.

I've only been once. I did not like it. Avalon's a terrible touristy town with fat people spilling out of golf carts because there are no cars and the town is only one square mile of waterfront, which I guess is too far for most tourists to walk. I remember being twelve taking the Catalina Express, a bucket of a boat that crashes headlong into swells rather than ride with them. It just plunges right in, launching deck trashcans at the crowd of summer camp kids who are goofing off, daring one another to walk up and down the

deck stairs without holding the rails. A fat blonde boy falls to his knees, skidding a little, father saying *Good* and mother giving him a look that says we will not be having any fun.

All the summer camp families are there for the day. We meet after disembarking. My parents are in much better moods now that they can talk about their boys with others.

Mother beaming, *they learned to scuba dive!*

Father telling a fat man and his wife, *they'll be better off for it of course.*

And there's a dusty bus ride to the boy's camp, eucalyptus trees and someone peeling an orange. She's a teenager, probably not yet fifteen. A pretty girl with dark hair, she puts her finger to her lips and winks. The peel flies off and into the dust kicked up by the van.

The boys are tan and smiling some secret joy. They show us the kayaks they used to paddle into coves where they learned about seaweed and ocean currents. One of them saw a leopard shark, the other a sea turtle. We must have stayed until dinner. I remember coming back to Avalon, to Hotel Atwater, an aging Victorian style building with sloping floors. I make my parents laugh by showing them if you place a marble on one side of the room it rolls easily to the other side.

How clever, mother is saying.

There's a bar on the ground floor that has all night karaoke and I dance in our hotel room to someone's dramatic rendition of Journey's "Don't Stop Believing."

Such a silly girl, my father—hugging me tight.

We play cards, I pretend the stick pretzels are cigarettes and talk with what I imagine is a mobster accent. But then they start to fight, about something, anything, and my father leaves for the bar and mother tells me to get to bed.

A great baritone wakes me. It's coming from the bar below. It's my father, his speech slurred.

I call into the darkness, but no one answers. The room is strange at night, with it's sloping floors and peeling pink walls.

In the morning my parents take me out for waffles and buy me a hot pink hat that says "Island Style." They buy me a caramel apple too and let me play games in the arcade.

And then I'm at the back of the boat; mother and father are below where it's warm. I have the hat in my hands and I'm thinking of that older girl with her dark hair and secret hush. How the orange peel disappeared out the window. It's very loud, that thundering, that fierce beating engine. The hat wrestling with the wind. One finger at a time, starting with my pinky, I let go until it's grasped delicately with only two fingers—bellowing out like a handkerchief. And then it's free, shooting out and up against the sky, and for a moment I think it might fly on forever. But then it shoots down, down, and into the boat's wake.

10. I read and reread the message

I read and reread the message: *I still think about you when I touch myself—Elsa.*

I've slept through the morning and clear into the afternoon. The television is on. Everything seems to take place in New York. There's Central Park, the Flatiron Building, ferries coasting back and forth to Ellis Island; I almost see MOMA a handful of times.

Why not send this to him? It says everything. I let my finger hover over the send button until I'm almost sweating. Instead I turn the television off and send this:

Hey you, I'm in Los Angeles—on vacation. I miss everyone though. Write me back when you can—Elsa

I remember at the last Christmas party the curators saying, *Things are changing*, and I did not believe them. What silly spoiled children, I thought. Because there is not a full bar, only wine and beer, they think the world is ending. Eric telling them *It will be ok*, and wandering away from the party, with me, down into the vaults below. What soft-lit corridors, everything in blue shadow, even those hot searching fingers.

I take two blue pills and shower for dinner. The restaurant where we're meeting the potato chip heir Tom Cooper is on the pier, one of those commercial places where you know the fish is flown in frozen and they use the cheapest liquor in their drinks, but you don't mind because there's a gift shop, and someone might come around to sing or do card tricks at your table.

I wear sandals and a sundress, something that would make Eric look at my shoulders, his eyes saying *Yes, Yes, Yes*.

The streets let off heat, the sun slants over the Pacific, the hotel thermometer reads eighty-five. When I step into the lobby young Rex is talking to a valet. He waves

when he sees me. It's such a small gesture but it's full of so much innocence. But I refuse to feel guilty—I haven't done anything.

Outside there are people everywhere. A young French family argues on the corner, the son crying, "Papa! Papa!" His pale, freckled face is sunburned. The pregnant mother holds her stomach and looks away from them both, out toward that lovely orange-pink sky. Couples are sprawled on blankets along the grassy bluff, caretakers push despondent elders in wheelchairs, pigeons and gulls waddle among trash from an overturned trashcan. There are dogs on leashes: fat ones, skinny ones, shaggy ones; some so ugly you want to kick.

At the beginning of the pier the air is different. It smells saltier, maybe even a little nasty. I hear a lifeguard tell a couple in bathing suits that the blue algae is blooming. The surf is pea soup green.

"It's too warm," he's saying. "But don't worry, it won't hurt you." The couple look disgusted. They turn away from the water.

There are tourists in flip flops with sunburned thighs buying cotton candy and corn dogs and tickets for the rollercoaster, their babies crying—sand in their diapers; their older children crying—they want a picture drawn by the cartoonist. The children know that life is incredibly unfair.

Down at the end of the pier the old men and Mexican families cast lines and gut fish. The wood pier groans from the weight.

The klonopin—or whatever it was—puts all that noise at a distance. It's not too far though, not out of earshot. There's just enough so the crowd strikes me as amusing.

The restaurant is a cluster of Budweiser posters and cowboy hats, perfectly bearded men all greeting, “Howdy little miss”. So I sit at the bar to wait for Charly and the gang. In the corner a woman laughs at her companion, beside me two men hold hands and speak in quiet voices, every table has tourists and out of towners. A man asks my name, I think of telling him *Susanna* from San Diego, or *Ingrid* the wine rep, or somebody else entirely, but something about him is abusive, daring me to lie, as if it would please him. So I give my real name.

“Thought so. Jared described you to a ‘T’, I’m Tom,” he says, smiling but I swear I can see his jaw clenching, biting that smile in half. He touches my bare shoulders. Tells me, “What a beautiful dress.”

Tom Cooper should be ugly by all accounts. His nose is hooked, his chin and eyes small and he’s completely bald, smooth and shiny bald. But he has a certain aristocratic attractiveness about him. He meets me with a firm, lingering handshake. He’s tall, broad—athletic looking, the way rich men tend to be. He tells me about windsurfing, how he scuba dives, rock climbs and sails boats. His uncle has a horse ranch in Wyoming, he’s an excellent horseman, invites me up sometime. He’s well-groomed, scrubbed clean, tan, and absolutely menacing.

“And how do you know Jared?” I ask. I can tell he’s enjoying talking about himself.

“He did some design work for one of my companies—real good guy. We took the boat down to Baja a few summers back. That wife doesn’t let him get out much. Got the guy on a tight leash.”

“I don’t think Charly could leash a dog.”

Just then they arrive, Jared and Charly. Jared bounds over to slap Tom on the back. Charly hangs back a bit. I can tell they’re fighting. She’s withdrawn, icy. She apologizes for being late but won’t say why. This I remember. For a moment I’m relieved at just how familiar this is. Jared and Charly fight, they fight like high schoolers, each one hurting the other, almost delighting in it. Then they reconcile, disappearing into a bedroom or bathroom stall.

Jared orders himself a double margarita Cadillac. Charly orders one too, which means the fight must have been a doozy. She gives Jared her back and talks to me with a loud smile. She doesn’t touch her drink though, just fiddles with the straw. Robby arrives with Jane, who is all happy liquid energy.

“We ordered at the bar,” Tom says, pointing at Jared. “This guy couldn’t wait.” He kisses Jane on the cheek, takes Robby’s hand.

“Hey man, I’m on vacation as of today.” Jared tosses his drink back and orders another.

The six of us squeeze into a booth. I’m between Tom and Jared. I can smell Tom’s aftershave; even this smells expensive. He rests his thigh next to mine, all coiled muscle. He smiles that same biting smile at me.

“You ok, Jared?” I ask. “You took that first one pretty fast.”

His mouth slants, “Aw Elsie. What happened to you? Where did you go?” He puts an arm around me. “Remember the fun times we had? Remember those desert trips? Coachella in its early days?”

“Before it got filled with shitty hipsters,” Robby says from over his drink.

“Yeah man! We used to pack up my jeep and smoke pot the whole way.” Jared leans his head back, his eyes are slits.

“Remember that highway patrolman?” I say to Charly who laughs.

“I thought we were done for!” she says.

Robby has his face in his hands, but he’s smiling. “It was my fault. I shouldn’t have been driving.

“What happened?” Jane asks politely. She’s scooping a chip in salsa and watching Robby.

“I think that cop gave me a free pass. He saw that shit-heap I was driving—“

“Hey!” Jared interjects, “That was my baby!”

“It was a pretty crap car. The seatbelts didn’t work in the back.”

“But it was roomy,” Jared says and nudges Charly, who smiles at the napkin in her lap.

We’re quiet for a moment, the past kicked up like pleasant dust.

Jared still has his arm around me. “What does New York have that we don’t?”

The bartenders with their perfectly groomed beards are doing tricks with tequila bottles, throwing them back and forth between each other. It’s like an old west show. When they finish one pretends to fire a pistol, blowing his index finger as if it were smoking.

Jane jumps at the chance, her hands dancing, “New York’s got the money and the jobs. It’s the center of the financial world. I just read an article on it in the *New Yorker*. California is dead.”

“Who reads the *New Yorker* anymore?” Tom says. He has a distinct drawl I can’t place. “Even *Harper’s* sounds old fashioned. I’ve been thinking of going into the magazine business, print is dead and all, but I think it’ll just take the right interactive app. You wait and see. After my next trip.”

“Where are you going next?” Charly asks him. She’s perked up a bit since Jared teased her about the backseat.

Tom stretches against the crusty leather booth. He makes a show of thinking about it.

“Don’t tell me,” I say. “You haven’t decided.”

He arches his eyebrows in my direction.

“Maybe you can help me,” he says in his lazy drawl. His tiny eyes catch the restaurant light.

The waiter comes over then, spreads a bounty of guacamole, fish tacos, grilled yucca, and a pitcher of margaritas.

I check my emails, nothing from Eric. Only a couple of spam emails for Viagra, a monthly email from a power yoga studio in Greenwich—an impersonal email from the Democratic Party urging me to contribute to his campaign.

The group is talking about sailing to Hawaii versus Mexico. I rummage through my bag and find the two pills. They've been crushed a bit in the bottom of my bag, I have to wet my finger to get all the pieces.

Robby catches me taking them. I pantomime a toast with my water.

"How many cabins are on your boat?" I ask Tom quickly.

"Three but sleeping on deck is half the fun."

"Should we bring sleeping bags?" Jane asks. She's practically climbing up Robby's shoulder in excitement.

"The boat's got everything you need. If you forget your swimsuit I have extra on board."

"Bikinis too?" I say.

I sense the wink before it actually happens. "They get left behind."

Charly makes a face. "Do you clean them?"

"I think we'll bring our own suits," Robby says.

Jared leans his head on my shoulder, "I'm going to sleep here, if that's ok."

"Ok!" Robby says, patting Jane so he can get out of the booth. "Jared's done. We better get him home before he pukes. How many margaritas did he have?"

"I don't know. Maybe three?" I say. "Can he still not handle tequila?"

"No," Charly says bitterly.

Tom and Robby help Jared outside, with Jane guiding.

"Everything ok with you two?" I ask when it's just the two of us.

Charly nods, handing her keys to the valet. “He doesn’t like the back splash tile I put in the kitchen.” She turns and looks at me. Her eyes are dark, they catch light easily, and under the pier lights, they sparkle. In junior high she outlined them in black eyeliner, giving them a bruised look. It was her signature style, I remembered it long after she left for California with her mom, newly divorced from her father. I doubt she’s even wearing mascara now.

“I’m really glad you’re coming to stay with us,” she says and I think I can make out tears in those dark eyes. But then the valet is back, handing her keys to a Prius wagon.

“Whose car is this?” I ask.

“Ours,” Charly says and climbs behind the wheel. “The gas mileage is great.”

I can see the baby seat perfectly for a second, it’s bright blue with white trim, eerie in its emptiness, then Jared is shoved in front of it.

Charly leans out the window and yells, “See you tomorrow Elsa!” And they drive off, the Prius falling into traffic on Ocean Ave.

Robby shakes Tom’s hand. They make a joke I don’t hear. I laugh anyways. Robby hugs me with one arm, climbs into a sports coupe. Jane smiles from the driver’s seat and gives Tom and me a wave.

I’d shiver if it weren’t such a peaceful night. It’s warm enough to be in a dress, drunk and feeling the breeze. I can smell fried food and the Ferris wheel is lit up, a bright spot against the black sky.

“Can I walk you back to your hotel?” Tom asks from somewhere in the darkness.

“You didn’t drive?”

He moves further from the streetlight, I can’t make out his face. “No, my boat’s in the marina,” he says. “I took a cab here.” That drawl really is something else—like syrup, thick and marinating everything.

“Well,” I say reaching into the dark to find his arm. “What’s the name of your boat?”

11. Morning is thick in my mouth

Morning is thick in my mouth. I slept in my clothes; they smell like cigarettes and Tom Cooper’s cologne. I roll onto my back. My jaw hurts from his kissing.

At the hotel bar he ordered White Russians. Insisted I drink one, saying, *You need a proper cocktail.*

He’s one of those types of men, the Indian burn because it builds character type. I had to work very hard to get him to leave. Young Rex saved me. Said management wanted to speak to me about some property destruction. That got Tom leaving real fast.

I remember Rex helping me to my room, and me worried—*is management really mad at me?*

No, he’s saying, they aren’t, it’s ok.

And he watches from the doorway while I rinse until the travel size mouthwash is empty. I want to ask if he’ll hold me, but don’t. Instead I ask if he’ll check my emails. Everything’s a bit fuzzy, the room spinning. *No new messages*, and I feel vulnerable and sick and briefly touch his face, somewhere near his lips—or maybe it was his lips. Then

tell him to leave, but first—but first, help me from this dress. Now goodnight sweet boy, goodnight, goodnight.

This morning is bright, each part of the room clean and perfectly arranged: the polished writing table by the window, the mid-century chairs and couch in the small living room, glass table tops with glossy magazines stacked in tiny spires, a dresser cabinet where the TV is playing on mute. I can hear the hum of the air conditioner click on. The room is empty except for me.

I try to remember how I got to this place, lying here in this room, surrounded by things I won't be able to afford dreaming about in a month—two months if I max out my credit cards. There is someone in the hotel room next to me; I can hear their shower turn on and off, the sound of their television. I shut my eyes and imagine moving through the building, down to the street below, out to the city in the distance, beyond, to New York City and Eric.

I start to imagine this other Elsa who's still with him. She'd be at work already. Eric by her side. And they'd find ways to stay close, get closer. For a moment I can't recall his voice and panic. His *Oh Gods*, how he says my name—*Elsa*. None of the real things. So I drum up his voice making pretend—*Don't go*, he says. *I'm sorry this Human Resources woman is here, watching us. If she wasn't I'd hold you, ask if I could go with you.*

I check my messages. There's an email from Eric:

Had coffee with the new interns this morning, they all look terribly young and incompetent.

Take care of yourself, Eric

I imagine him writing this at his desk, his office door closed, the cursor blinking. What could we really say to each other? I want to cry. Instead I begin my regimen of pills and phone calls to room service.

It isn't Rex today but a woman my age who brings a bottle of champagne and a carafe of orange juice. I tip her more than I should because I'm horrified this might be my future.

My phone rings while I'm packing. It's Robby.

"Hey, crazy night last night, huh?" I say packing my toiletries. I combine some of the pills, tossing out the prescription bottles with my mother's name worn off.

"Yeah, about that, what were you were taking?"

"I'm proud of you Robby, just coming out and asking like that." I rinse the Altoid tin Austin left behind, drying it with a towel. "Those were pain pills. I'm also taking Xanax and possibly Klonopin or maybe they're Percocets. I'm not sure—there's some fun pink pills and some blue ones too." The champagne has hit me hard.

"Jesus Elsa, is everything ok?"

"Don't worry about me darling," I say shooting for fabulous but even I can hear the edge in my voice. I try again, "I'm on vacation. Just blowing off steam." The pills I like to dissolve under my tongue I put in the tin, hoping they'll taste minty now. I slip the tin into my purse

"Maybe Catalina isn't a good idea."

Rather than folding my clothes I wrestle them in, and zip the case. I sit on top of it drinking my mimosa, the scarf wrapped around me like a shawl. I think about our wedding in the desert, that convertible mustang—black and tan—how the wind changed once you hit Joshua Tree, all sun baked earth and desert flowers. Mrs. Robby Bishop. Were those happy days? What a blur those moments turned into. A year drilled down to one-sentence, a moment carved into the timeline: *They divorced in 2002.*

“Please don’t be like that. I wouldn’t have told you—and please god—keep it to yourself. I’m fine. Like I said, just unwinding a bit—you don’t know what New York’s like. Very high stress. Now, be a good boy and push some pixels around. That’s what you’re doing these days, yes?”

“I do UX design.”

“Great, buy Jane something pretty. I’ll see you tomorrow at the marina. Ok?”

“Elsa, I’m worried about you.”

There’s a knock at the door.

“Wonderful honey, you and me both. We were always such a good team. I have to go, someone’s here. Goodbye Robby, see you tomorrow.”

I hang up before he can say anything else. My hands shaking only a little.

It’s Rex. I hardly recognize him without his hotel uniform. He’s wearing a hoodie and shorts and the same black converse as when he’s working. His legs are strikingly exposed, pale and hairy, knees pink.

“Here’s my number,” he thrusts his hand out. His face is very red. He’s taken one of the hotel cloth napkins he brings with breakfast and written his number in marker across the bottom.

“It’s just in case you don’t want to go home yet. I live with some guys on campus but you can stay with us for as long as you want. You can even have my room. I’ll sleep on the couch. If you don’t mind parties and dude stuff everywhere, it’s not too bad.” He smiles. He must have recently gotten his braces off; it’s one of those uneasy smiles, his lips creeping back over his teeth, which are perfectly straight, perfectly white. *Gleaming*.

“You’re very sweet Rex. Thank you,” I manage.

But he’s already cleared the tray of champagne, and walked out the door.

12. Charly and Jared’s house

Charly and Jared’s house is in Ocean Park, a part of west Los Angeles that sits on top of a hill, beneath the Santa Monica Airport. It’s a modern house with skylights and a slanted tin roof that makes the place sort of look like a space age barn. The last time I saw it was at their wedding reception, which they held in the backyard. They had just landscaped it with California native plants and small paths of white stone. I remember watching them, the newlyweds, dance with a canopy of tiny lights twinkling overhead. Robby looking at me all sappy eyed; all of us drinking champagne from coupes like some old fashioned movie. We were very grown up.

The house looks the same. Except for the Prius wagon parked in the driveway with a baby seat in the backseat. It isn’t new, it looks well used, as if Jared and Charly

had a baby and it grew up and moved off and someone had forgotten to take the car seat out.

Charly answers the door barefoot and dressed in a flannel shirt and cuffed jeans. “Sorry I’m a mess. I just got home this minute from a doctor’s appointment.” She hugs me and takes one of my bags. “I don’t know why you didn’t stay with us from the beginning. The Miramar must have cost a peach.” Her face looks a little pale, even with the smattering of freckles across her nose. “I’m sure you can afford it, I’m not saying that. But we have a Jacuzzi in the back and I’ve turned it on. Jared’s had to go into work—-it’s *so* nice to have company. Usually it’s just Sibley, and me—Sibley’s our cat.”

I don’t ask about the baby seat in the back of the Prius. The house is too spotless for a baby to be living there, the plank wood floors and stainless steel too cold.

I think of her Internet posts, the ones of cat photos. Here’s Sibley the cat on the bed; here’s Sibley making a bored expression; Sibley and me at Christmas, Sibley looking out the window. There are no babies in those pictures.

“Just Charly the cat lady,” I mumble, forgetting I’ve already had a bottle of champagne at the hotel.

Thankfully she hasn’t heard me.

“Here’s the guestroom. Do you recognize the curtains? You gave them to us as a wedding present.”

“Your house is really beautiful.”

She grins, turns on her heels, “You haven’t even seen the remodel!”

I follow her through the house. They've redone the kitchen, added a modest library, and extended the master bedroom to include a deck.

"It's weird to plan where your reading chair will be in forty years—but that's what we did. I'll be here and he'll be there."

She slips on a pair of bright colored crocs. "These are my gardening shoes. They're hideous, I know. But super comfy."

The backyard is lovely, with jasmine and honeysuckle and a tall sycamore hanging low enough to climb on. They've added a birdbath and a family of little gnomes. A jet takes off overhead, rattling the windows.

"We're trying to get the airport shutdown, there's been such gruesome crashes," she tells me. "Just last month one went nose first right into the golf course. That's a mile away from the elementary school I work at—*a mile*. Can you imagine?"

Champagne is lovely but it's quick to give you a headache. I ask for water.

"Of course. Sit here, you can see the black phoebes hop around in the fig tree. They're my favorite, Jared prefers the Blue Jays—did you know they aren't really blue jays at all? Jared got me a bird guide last Christmas. What we call blue jays out here are actually scrub jays. Not as pretty a name, I know." She stands for a moment, her hand touching the back of my chair. "I'll throw something together for lunch."

We sit on the backyard deck, eating cold pasta with basil pesto and cherry tomatoes, watching what she calls black phoebes dart and flick their tails. He's a rather dashing bird, with its sooty black body and crisp white belly. We laugh when it scares a squirrel from the bird feeder.

“Jared and I grew the basil and tomatoes ourselves,” she tells me. The cat Sibley is on her lap, a fat British shorthair.

“You guys are doing really well,” I say but it comes out sounding flat and insincere. I try again, “I love the landscaping, the Jacuzzi is a nice touch too.” We look at it, the steam working up, bubbles swirling.

Charly shrugs pleased with herself, “It’s no MOMA I’m sure.”

Even the wine is good. She brings it out in a bucket of ice but refuses a glass.

“I’m off alcohol for awhile,” she says.

We finish our lunch and talk about our upcoming trip. She’s nervous about wearing a bikini. I tell her we’ll end up skinny dipping drunk anyway, so what’s the point? This makes her laugh and she tells me again that she’s missed me.

We spend the afternoon going through photo albums, drinking iced tea and reminiscing.

“Remember Miss Sandy?” Charly says shyly, flipping over a page that shows much younger versions of us standing in front of the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

“Jesus,” I say touching the photograph. I had forgotten my first trip to New York was actually *with* Charly.

She’s excited now; tucks her feet and watches me closely. “Remember?” She prompts.

“Oh yeah, there were twenty of us—we stayed in a hotel that had kitchenettes and in the lobby we could buy gumballs or press on tattoos from a vending machine.”

“Yep,” she smiles and points to the plump enthusiastic woman standing with us in the photo. “She insisted we call her Miss Sandy.”

“That’s right even though we were in seventh grade—Hadn’t we wanted a summer trip to Italy?”

Charly nods, “But we failed to raise the funds.”

“And New York City was the consolation prize. I forgot about that.”

“Gosh, look at our clothes,” Charly says and leans closer to the page.

I’m starting to remember an exhibition, we were learning about Greek gods and goddesses. “Had they removed part of an ancient city and assembled it there—could that be right? Could they have moved a city in parts?”

Charly doesn’t remember either but I can imagine walking through ancient stone arches, able to reach out and touch them. I don’t mean I was supposed to, I can see the signs that say *Please Do Not Touch*. But there aren’t ropes or glass. I can stroke the face of Medusa, tickle a lion’s tongue, his nose slightly rubbed off so he looks friendly— and the snakes around Medusa’s head are worn too. She looks just like those women in hair commercials, all wild eyed and free. It’s fuzzy, part memory part dream. Possibly all imagined.

And there is Miss Sandy leaning towards me, saying, *Can you imagine working here? I would love it*. I think there might be tears in her eyes. Was this the beginning, was it this moment?

“I don’t remember an ancient city,” Charly is telling me. “But oh my god do you remember when the Jenner brothers stuck gum on the boobs of Central Park Alice so it

looked like she had two pink gummy nipples? I had a crush on the taller one but they both fancied you,” She’s laughing so I don’t think anything of it. “Poor Miss Sandy,” she’s saying. “And when one of the girls—was it Magda? Or Mimi? Whichever, one of them wandered off to buy an ice cream and got lost and it was absolute chaos finding her.”

I’m surprised Charly can recall all this so clearly. It sounds faintly familiar, but again it’s murky. The only thing clear is Miss Sandy, who I can suddenly picture perfectly. A plump high school art teacher who asks for Diet Coke on the plane ride back, reads a travel magazine, petting the pictures with something like longing but only much, much sadder.

Charly lightly pets her own image with her forefinger. “We were so young. I almost put this one up online, but I didn’t want to share it. You know?”

“Then it wouldn’t be yours,” I say.

“Exactly,” she looks at me with her dark eyes, crows feet just beginning at the corners. She looks so sad suddenly I take her hand. It’s warm, a little damp, but soft like a child’s.

She looks at our hands, clasped together, one with a wedding ring, sun spots over the knuckles, the other willowy and smooth.

“Even your hand is prettier than mine,” she says and moves away.

When Jared gets home with pizza and beer we’re in our bathing suits, about to get in the Jacuzzi. He smiles, kisses my cheek, tells me I look wonderful.

“Have you been working out?” He asks. I tell him the most exercise I get is lifting a wine glass to my mouth, or opening a prescription bottle. This enralls him. I can see it in the way he’s looking at me, his nostrils flare.

He watches us swim. Drinks a whiskey and smokes a joint on the edge of the Jacuzzi, half in shadow. This too is familiar. And I start to feel uneasy.

Charly is trying to tell me about how the real Blue Jay is native to the eastern United States. Have I ever seen one? No. In New York City there are only pigeons and sometimes gulls.

Jared is in the water now too. His hands invisible beneath the bubbles. We’re very close to one another. He asks if I want to share a joint.

Charly gets out. “I’m too tired for this shit,” she says her voice far away.

“Come on,” Jared slurs. “It’s not even midnight.” He puts an arm around me. “Oh!” he says. “Better yet, bring out more drinks.”

I can smell him, a sharp smell that isn’t unpleasant but very, very strong. His arm is hairy, and I can feel it like a wet brillo pad against my neck.

“Get it yourself,” she says and shuts the door with a heavy thump.

In the dark with Charly gone the uneasiness is full pitch. I say goodnight and move away from Jared. He hesitates. I can’t see him in the darkness but there’s splashing and for a moment I hold my breath. Then there’s the thump of the door again and I’m alone. I shiver, the water level is much lower when it’s just one person.

13. Sleeping has become treacherous

Sleeping has become treacherous. In dreams everything converges, what's real and what's not. I linger at the beginning of sleep, or maybe it's the end, whatever it is it's right at the edge. Everything just about to happen. The lines so close—if you imagine hard enough maybe they'll bend. That curve of her hip, how the buttock and thigh almost share a line with that other hip that other leg—everything primal and animal like. What a mess of lines. Picasso was a madman.

I can hear Sibley's collar, but make it the elevator bell—the one just down the hall from his office. Everything is at that moment of anticipation, where you know his hand will touch yours, it will be unpleasantly hot, but you want it anyway—you need it. You exist in that moment of suspension, of non-intersection for as long as you can exist in this stage of sleep. Because that moment of convergence will be too short, will never be enough. Because it will be the past—is already.

I jerk awake, it's like waking up in a bed of molasses. Everything sticky with fantasy. Are your eyes even open? This is the problem with drinking and pills: at some point you wake up like this. And then it hits you all at once. This usually happens during the ungodly hour when the moon sets and the sun rises, so for a moment you believe you're in complete darkness. Maybe I've died. Maybe the world has sucked you away.

At the hotel I could cry and no one bothered me. I could pick up a bottle of something and swallow down medicine. But at Jared and Charly's, in the guest bedroom, I'm confronted by the curtains Robby and I bought for them as a wedding present—

reminded that we picked them out together. I'm listening to Jared's snore, I can hear Sibley's cat jingle out in the hall. It's a kind of impotency, I can't cry here.

I stumble into the kitchen and drink a glass of water as if I've never learned to drink from a cup. I get the water everywhere, on my nightgown, the floor, the cat. In the black morning the chrome kitchen is even more unwelcoming. I take the water to my room. It's already morning in New York so I text Eric:

-What are you doing?

I pull the sheets up to my chin, waiting.

Nothing.

I want to text something else, but don't. It would be too pathetic. I wish I hadn't turned Mary's scarf into the hotel's lost and found. I'd sleep better if I had it. I'd curl up like a child with a binky blanket. But I turned it into the front desk, told them it was by the pool. *I'm sure the owner is missing it*, I said. It pleases me to think Mary considers it lost on the East coast when really it's on the West coast in some bin with sunglasses, hats and lost fanny packs.

The curtains glow softly. There's a knock at the door. It's Charly.

"I thought I heard you in the kitchen. Everything alright?"

She's wearing an oversized man's robe. She sits on the end of the bed.

"I think I might still be a little drunk." I can barely make out her face; the light in the room is so pale, so delicate.

She's quiet. I wonder if I spoke aloud or only thought I did. She's looking around the room, sort of staring off.

“I think I’m going to lose Jared.”

“Oh stop it.”

“It’s true,” she puts her head in her hands.

I reach out but hesitate.

“You saw the way he was with you last night. And you’re our friend. How do you think he is with all the other pretty girls? The ones at work and the gym? I can’t compete with gym girls.”

I tell her to hush, I say he loves her. “He’s always been that way with me—it doesn’t mean anything.”

“He wants children Elsa. I can’t give them to him. We’ve been trying.”

“There’s ways around that now,” I say.

She sits up, her long hair stuck against wet cheeks, “We’ve done another IUI this month. That’s why I shouldn’t be drinking—but I already feel it. It didn’t work.”

She isn’t facing me, but looking out at the room. My hand is still hanging in mid air between us.

“This was supposed to be a nursery.”

The morning is brighter now as if to prove that this is indeed not a nursery, only a sparsely furnished guest room with my clothes thrown around it.

My mouth is dry. I don’t think she can hear me when I say “I’m sorry.” It sounds like some whisper I’m telling myself.

“We got the Prius for family trips. Jared’s mom got the car seat for us last Christmas. What am I supposed to do? I can’t take it out—I won’t take it out. The day I do is the day I give up trying.”

I jump when she laughs or barks or makes some noise that is half choked sob and half primal cry. She holds her head in her hand, making a low moan. Then she’s looking up toward the window. Her face trembles—I can just make it out in the soft light now—the whole face; her eyes, her lips, even her nose and the pillowy jowls beneath her jaw.

I’m about to say something, anything to try to comfort but I feel horribly unprepared for this type of pain. She inhales sharply.

“What am I telling you all this for? Nothing touches you, you were like that even in grade school.” She’s up and walking toward the kitchen, “We have blueberries from the farmer’s market. I’m making blueberry pancakes for breakfast; be ready to go by nine.”

14. Jane and Robby arrive

Jane and Robby arrive an hour later, bags packed, all eagerness and well slept energy. I get the feeling they’ve been over before for what Jane calls, *Charly’s farmer market breakfast*. The three of them talk about the trip excitedly while I look on, Robby throwing me inclusive looks.

“I can’t wait to get sailing,” Jane says, squeezing her coffee mug.

Jared stays in bed until just before we have to leave for the marina and then he wants Charly to warm up his pancakes.

We get to the marina late, it's overcast and the gulls and sea lions are making a fuss; the water is glass-like; Tom waiting at the slip entrance. He's looking smug, wearing expensive sunglasses and a baseball cap.

"Hi-ya landlubbers," he says and swings the gate wide so we can walk down the dock.

Jane is giddy. She's the first on the boat, first to exclaim how beautiful it is—and it is beautiful. The boat's fifty-two feet long, handmade in Maine, with three cabins, a pullout settee, varnished teak deck, with cherry wood trim and a saloon with not one but two wine coolers.

"Do you like it, Elsa?" Tom asks me.

"You can sail this by yourself?"

He smiles, puts a leg up on the U-shaped seat. "I sailed it from San Francisco—no island trip. The wind was brutal. At night the fog was so thick you couldn't tell whether a light on land was a fog light or a headlight from a car. But I did it."

"It sounds exciting!" Jane exclaims. She and Robby have already chosen the second cabin, a cozy two-person tucked in the port side of the boat, directly opposite the one-person berth I'll be in. There's a little curtain on each for privacy.

Jane is looking out at the harbor, the various masts and flags and usual marina litter blocking the horizon. "You will teach me how to sail?" She asks Tom.

Tom laughs; it's a big august sound. "Sure kid. Come up to the cockpit with me. I'll show you the gadgets. Jared you want to cast off?"

"Right-o Captain! Robby can help."

"What should I do?" I ask.

Tom takes hold of my arm, steering me, "You can be in charge of the booze, you'd like that, wouldn't you?" He says through that clenched smile. He has that same look from the other night. His grip on my arm says he's angry and turned on, a little shiver crawls over me. He releases my arm and says casually, "Choose something good. The coolers are stocked."

I try to smile at him. But those blueberry pancakes did me no favors. I can feel them like one big lump. I'm relieved when Jane calls for him and he turns to go.

Charly is rubbing sunscreen onto her face downstairs.

"I'm feeling a little woozy already," she says.

"That's just nerves, I'm excited too," I give her arm a squeeze.

"Don't be gentle with me Elsa, I don't want your pity." She plops on an oversize hat, one with flaps that tie under her chin. She ties the flaps tight, hands me the sunscreen. "Don't want to age any quicker, do we?"

I shake my head no, and she ducks back out to the deck.

Robby comes down, his hands in his pockets, pretending to inspect the cabins. There's the rumbling of the engine starting so he shouts, "Pretty nice piece of craftsmanship!"

“Could you imagine living on one of these things?” I wait for him to mention our phone call, “What a life!”

He comes close so we don’t have to yell over the engine.

“If you like that kind of thing,” he shrugs. “I prefer a real job. These guys that inherit never have any authenticity. They’re all pretense.”

“Dial it back Robby, we haven’t even left the marina.”

The boat bounces gently off one of the buoys tied to the slip.

“Sorry!” Jane shouts down to us.

I busy myself with looking in Tom’s wine storage. He has a good selection.

There’s champagne and prosecco and three or four different kinds of whites—not one of them is a chardonnay. The labels are all smooth, exotic, some still have price stickers—in a foreign currency, of course. I choose a bottle that makes me think of country estates and powdered wigs. The label is in French, but the price sticker is in rupees.

“Elsa,” he says, and I can feel him looking at me.

“Who wants wine?” I shout up to the deck.

“I do!” Jane says. She’s standing at the wheel, with Tom behind her. Jared is sitting just beside them looking miserable and hungover.

“Jared? Some hair of the dog?” I yell. He shakes his head no.

Tom smacks him on the back, “The Pepto-Bismol will kick in soon. Then I’ll break out the scotch.”

Jared seems less than convinced. The engine kicks up a notch as we make our way through the harbor.

“I’ll bring up some sparkling water,” I shout to him. I can feel Robby waiting for me. Whatever he wants to say, ignoring him will not prevent it. He’s standing in front of the wine glasses, cupping one in each hand, waiting patiently.

“Robby, what would you like to drink? Some wine?” I hold the bottle up.

“Sure,” he says trying to catch my eye.

My cheeks burn. I think maybe I’m sick. This isn’t a hangover, I’m actually sick. Something serious and old fashioned, like tuberculosis. God does that sound nice. I’ll go to the hospital and be diagnosed: this is the reason why; it’s because of this. And then I’ll lay in a hospital bed looking out a hospital window (don’t they always have a window looking out onto something? a garden, a busy street, maybe an ocean...) I’ll watch the clouds, I’ll listen to soft chatter between the nurses and doctors all of them confirming there was something wrong, *She was ill* they’ll say, *She needed rest*, and the air conditioning switching on and off on schedule, with purpose; the room smelling of antiseptic and new carpets. A diagnosis. What a luxury.

“Raising sails,” Tom shouts and there’s commotion above, a great vibration when the motor shuts off followed by a lurch and thrust forward.

The room spins, the bile threatening to come up.

“Oh Jesus,” I say and turn for the bathroom. “Where’s the toilet in this place?”

But Robby is there, steadying me as the boat rocks violently. The bile recedes, a bitter aftertaste.

“I’m fine—I don’t have my sea legs yet.” I try to swat him away but he grips me tighter.

We were together for three years before that wedding in the desert. The final year was spent back and forth between Los Angeles and New York. Even those first years dragged. Funny how they seem like a blip now. How you can look back and think, everything's changed, but at the time you thought you'd never make it. How he took the same route home from UCLA every day—even if there was traffic we'd just sit there, all the way down Wilshire, slowly inching forward.

He's pulled me to him. "Come on girl, you're gonna be ok," he says into my hair. I can feel his breath. I remember the intimate smell of him, the taste. It's thick in my mouth, and in the hull of the boat, suffocating.

"I'd be fine if you wouldn't hug me."

"Maybe you should go up, get some air. I can bring the drinks."

He looks at me for a moment. I can feel him studying my face. I'm sorry I don't love him still.

"How many have you taken today?" He asks.

I pull away. "Let's not start the trip that way. If we start out badly I don't know where we'll go from there."

"What happened in New York?"

I busy myself with finding the wine opener. Thoughts of Eric already invading, and its visceral—the smell of him, how it's different from Robby's, how they do not mix. The hull of a boat cannot contain them both.

"Elsa, tell me," he says.

I've found the wine opener, but it's one of those expensive ones that inject air into the cork. I'm struggling with it and thinking of Eric, and his office overlooking Fifty Third St and how when I'm called in a woman from Human Resources is there too—she is the one who asks me to sit. Speaks about cutbacks—that the Assistant Curators are the first to go. Eric chimes in too. Tells how he fought for me but in the end it wasn't up to him. I don't understand anything they're saying. They are both standing, both talking about things that don't matter and in the same voice. As if they both know me in equally intimate ways. My face must have concerned the HR woman because she's repeating herself, says the severance package is *quite generous*. The lights are on in the building across the street, I can make out people standing and talking together, their backs turned to me. Eric's hands are in his lap. They are as tender as bird wings. *Did you hear us Elsa?*

I'm thinking, Who is this us? I tell him *I want to work with you*.

He puts his hand near mine.

It's better this way. You see don't you? And his hand just sits there, so close I can feel its heat—he is on fire.

Something about this memory is clear, final. It needs action, something to make it different from this.

He's the one who suggests the vacation. *See your mother. Go back to Los Angeles and see your friends. It's been years hasn't it?* You shake your head yes, it's been almost six years.

The city swallows us up, the HR woman says.

And then Eric says, *It's really a generous severance package*.

And you're thinking haven't they already told you that part?

And they are sharing a look, and saying *I know, I know*.

And then he moves his hand further away...

"Nothing," I say to Robby, who's leaning on the counter with casual intent. He's taken the wine bottle and opened it. "Nothing happened. Work has just been stressful."

He sighs and shakes his head. "I always knew New York was a terrible idea. Didn't I say?"

"I remember something about it."

"Los Angeles is the last frontier for the American dream. If you can't make it here you can't make it anywhere." He hands me a glass of wine.

"Still a very pretty speech," I say. "Even if it is total bullshit."

He looks embarrassed. "Yeah, I hope so."

"I thought the new job was going great? That's what Charly said anyway."

He shrugs, uncomfortable, "I'm lucky to have the job, everyone's a fucking designer these days. You don't know what it's like competing with these kids—they're hungry, really fucking hungry—and they all went to CalArts or RISDI, and I took night classes at Northridge for a certificate. There just aren't enough jobs for us all."

"But you've got Jared, isn't he the boss?"

"Yeah and he used to do keg stands in college for cash." His face is strained. He looks old. "He's *my* boss."

We drink. The motor shuts off, the silence is deafening. “I give that speech to the interns sometimes—the one about this being the final frontier. They always seem to be from Ohio and I like to scare them a little.”

Jane shouts down to us, “Prepare to Tack!”

I take the bottle and some glasses.

Robby stops me, “I think the original speech ended with: please don’t go Elsa.”

His eyes are sad, clouded with an expression that makes me think land is already too far behind us. Maybe there’s still time to swim back to shore.

I take the bottle of wine and glasses to the cockpit.

Jane is at the helm. She’s a surprising type of girl. I thought I had her figured out. Early thirties, a bit too sun damaged but that’s only because her zest for life is all too consuming. Maybe she has some competitive older brothers. But then Charly tells me she’s from Palos Verdes, her parents are pilots and her younger sister is an engineering PHD student at Berkeley. In her family Jane is the black sheep. She went to Santa Monica College, got her associates degree and then started managing a restaurant on the pier. She competes in ultra marathons, actually won one last year. She met Robby online. She was lonely, Charly says. They moved in together pretty quickly; they are good together, in a partnership, she says. This legitimately bums me out. Jane does not strike me as a woman willing to exchange love for solace.

Even now she stands at the boat’s wheel with a look of such fierce determination and unflinching ache to be alive, I cannot accept she is in a relationship for comfort. That she would settle. Facing the horizon with the Los Angeles coastline disappearing behind

her, smiling at nothing—a big toothy grin that you sort of hope a bug splats against because she’s not embarrassed of its mystery. How can she settle? Her short hair whipping beneath her hat and for a full minute she does not blink and I think I see tears at the corners of her eyes

“From the wind,” she tells Robby. She wipes them away with the back of her hand.

Tom sits beside her with a gadget in his lap, but he’s looking at her with something like awe.

“I brought drinks,” I say a bit too loudly because his expression worries me.

“Ah, you found the *Chateau Smith-Haut-Lafitte Pessac-Leognan*,” Tom says in perfect affected French. “I knew you’d pick something expensive.” He pours a glass for Charly and Jane.

Robby returns from below deck with an Alka-Seltzer for Jared, who laughs.

“Thanks buddy, I’ve got it bad today.”

“You’ll be ok,” Robby tells him.

“Once we break open the scotch,” Tom says with satisfaction. “It’s twenty-five years old. It fixes everything.”

“Let’s get to it then!” He says brightening. “To a grand weekend!”

We all hoot, and Jared downs the seltzer.

The wine is delicious, it settles right behind the eyes. Loosens things up back there. The sun comes out. The swells are gentle and occasional ocean spray cools us. Once the city is out of sight the wind picks up. We travel at 6 knots, making a steady

slice across the bay. The sky is huge, the clouds moving across like giant graceful elephants, but then they're morphing, shifting into something else. The wind must be fierce up there.

A pod of dolphins trail in our wake, we scramble to take pictures.

Jane leans over the line, touching her fingers into the sea. "I want to touch one!" She shouts into the wind.

But they glide easily to the bow of the boat, with Jane following, her shoes slipping on the deck. The pod takes off, leaving her at the bow of the boat to stare after them. Against the horizon her silhouette looks boyish and solitary, and she doesn't answer when Robby calls out for her to be careful.

Before we reach open water I've vomited. Everyone above deck is pointing and yelling at a sea lion and her cub, and I'm chucking up blueberry pancakes and expensive French wine in the toilet. I rinse my mouth and administer medication for the pain. The boat jerks and the open bottle goes crashing to the floor.

"You ok?" Robby calls from up top.

I hastily pick up the pills. The bottle's cracked, the lid won't click into place.

"Elsa," he says, popping his head in, "You ok?"

I shove the pills into the Altoid tin. "Fine, Robby, fine," I tell him, and give one of my slow burn smiles. Dazzle a man and you blind him.

15. The trip across the bay

The trip across the bay on the Catalina Express takes about an hour but sailing the twenty-two miles takes half a day. The excitement of being out at sea wears off about halfway there. Charly has started to catalogue the kitchen's contents, getting excited when she finds it's fully stocked. Robby lies out at the front of boat yawning and flipping through a book. Even Jared and Tom look muted. But not Jane, who is at the wheel of the boat, lips set in firm determination. I can see her breathe deeply every once in awhile, puffing her chest out like some proud animal. The wind picks up, rocking the boat so that most of us are sitting with one hand holding onto something.

Charly says to Jared, the wind beating the words back, "I packed lunch!" She produces tuna salad sandwiches.

We tack with Jane steering and Tom pulling ropes. Charly repeats herself now that the wind is with us. "They're tuna salad," she says.

"You didn't have to do that," Jared says embarrassed. He looks at Tom, who has climbed back behind Jane, his perch since we left the marina. "I'm sure Tom has plenty on the boat," he says.

The sun glints purple off Tom's polarized sunglasses so that I can't read him. He smiles though. "We're camping the first night so any extra food is great," he says taking a sandwich. "Thank you Charly," he looks at her softly so that she blushes a little.

"I put red bell pepper in it," she says.

Tom offers Jane a sandwich.

“No thanks,” she says. “Where are we anchoring?” Her gaze is unflinching on the horizon where the island is quickly growing larger, more defined. She takes a power bar from a jacket pocket.

“Paradise Cove,” Tom says taking a bite of his sandwich.

“Is that on the Westside of the island?” Jared asks. Now that the swells have quieted, he’s brought up the bottle of scotch.

Tom nods, “It’s a sandy cove you have to boat in to camp. If we’re lucky we’ll be the only people there.”

“Sounds like heaven,” I say.

Tom looks at me, pushing the last bite in his mouth with his thumb. “It is,” he says.

The trip up the Westside of the island is gorgeous. The cliffs are dramatic, their exposed clay earth dark red. A herd of bison stands in profile on one of the ridges, the wind rustling the long grasses around them like some wild waltz. The ocean is bluer than any water I’ve seen off the California coast. It’s clear too, and cold. I run a foot in the wake of the boat, laughing when flying fish jump nearby. Maybe it’s the twenty-five year old scotch or being in the sun, or the wildness of the cliffs, or maybe a combination of them, but we seem to get a little slap happy, more adventurous.

Jared is drunk, shirtless and joking with Tom and Robby. Charly calls me to the bow of the boat, there’s a school of garibaldi swimming bright orange and curious. She seems to have forgiven me, or at least forgotten last night.

“Like Finding Nemo,” she says pointing.

Jane has stripped down to her bikini and given the wheel back to Tom. She joins us at the bow of the boat squealing, "Finding Nemo!"

For some reason the two women, one in a baseball cap and sports bikini, the other wearing a ridiculous bonnet type hat, sunburned where her jacket has exposed her neck, both referring to a children's movie, leaves a sobering taste in my mouth. They point and Jane takes out a camera.

"I'm getting a drink, do you ladies want anything?" I ask to their backsides.

"We'll be mooring in ten minutes and then we can breakout the blender," Tom says to me.

"There's a blender on this thing?" Robby has that lazy look he gets when he's been drinking in the sun.

Tom nods, "Tequila and limes too."

"WE ARE KINGS!" Jared yells from the boat's stern, "KINGS." His chest is puffed up, he shouts again, but Tom has turned on the motor, drowning out his voice.

Robby gets up and yells with him, his face pink from the exertion. They chant together and Tom too. "KINGS," they howl.

When the boat motors into Paradise Cove the sun is low. There are no other boats, and no one on the beach. Once we've moored, the engine is shut off and we can hear the lapping of water against the hull and the ravens cawing beneath the palms.

"How do we get over?" Jane asks.

"Do we swim?" Charly looks at the water disappointed.

Tom smirks, "You're welcome to swim. I'll take the dingy."

Jared lets out a whoop, throwing an arm over Tom's shoulders, "This guy," he says pointing with his beer bottle.

The girls busy themselves with sunscreen and packing beach towels. Jane brings hiking boots and a backpack with a first aid kit. The boys do push-ups on the deck. We drive the dingy right onto the sand, laughing when Charly tumbles into the water.

"But I haven't changed into my bathing suit yet!" She says good humoredly.

"I told you to wear it under your cloths," Jared says helping her up.

"Ow, you're lucky," Jane says hoping off the boat. "There's rocks."

Robby picks her up, throwing her over a shoulder, "I got you babe!"

"Robby!" she cries, and looks relieved when he puts her down again. She has her arms around him though; her face freckled from the sun, red on either cheek. She kisses him, a very pretty kiss. He rests his hands on her hips, swaying them gently.

"Oh get a room," Jared says and plops on the blanket Charly has laid out. "Who wants a beer?"

"Me," Tom says. "The first thing I do after sailing is drink a beer, maybe smoke a joint."

The beer is cold, the bottles already sandy. We sit so we're facing the boat, looking out at the ocean we've just crossed.

"Look at that," Tom says pointing. "Out there is Los Angeles."

"You can't even see it," Jane says, taking a beer from him.

"Out there is the empire," Robby says, holding his arms wide.

"It does feel a little lawless here," I say and shiver.

“Are you cold?” Jared asks, and moves so he can put an arm around me. His breath could be flammable.

I get up to put my feet in the water.

“Is it cold?” Jane asks.

It is. It is very, very cold. My feet are numb and for a moment it takes the air right out of me.

“Can you even feel it?” Robby slurs from behind me.

I slip my dress off, I’m wearing the bandeau bikini I tried on for Rex.

“It’s freezing,” I say and do my very best to kick water on all of them.

Charly and Jane shriek and jump up. They are out of their clothes and chasing me on the beach. It’s a dizzying type of day. My chest tight, but light like a bird’s. And the more I run, the lighter I feel. I might just fly away.

I run into the water, but the girls chase after me, their shrieks growing louder at just how cold the water really is.

It doesn’t take long for our bodies to warm though. The water is salty. We can taste it on our lips—it feels good to be *We*. Look at our fingers—we lace them together. Look at our bodies—we float on our backs. We smell of the sea and sunscreen and something sweet. I think of those women eating shellfish and drinking white wine. The boys watch from the beach. We play with each other so they can see that our skin is wet and slippery.

Jane splashes and wraps her arms around my waist underwater. Charly kicks on her back and puts a strand of seaweed around my neck.

“Beautiful,” she says.

“Come in scaredy cats!” Jane calls to the Robby and Jared who are still on shore. She swims over to a cluster of rocks. “I’m going to be king of the hill!”

Robby stays on the beach but Tom and Jared splash in, whooping and daring each other to go further. Tom dives head first, leaving Jared knee deep in the water. Tom swims very well—long smooth strides—and when he surfaces, it’s beside Jane at the bigger of the rocks. We can hear them as they struggle to reach the top.

“Oh come in!” Charly calls to Jared, waving her hand at him. “It isn’t that bad.” We’re treading water, watching Jared pace back and forth, the water barely wetting his trunks. “He’s always peacocking around you,” she says to me. “But when it comes down to it, no follow through.”

“I’m sorry about last night Charly, nothing happened.”

She shakes her head again at Jared who throws up his arms. “I know,” she says. “No follow through.” She floats on her back, stretching her legs. “I think this is the most gorgeous place I’ve ever seen.” Her eyes glitter.

Tom has started heckling Jared from the top of his rock. Jane is perched on a smaller rock, her knees tucked to her chin. She’s waving to Robby.

“Come in!” she yells.

“I’m good here,” Robby shouts back. “It’s getting dark, “I’ll work on a fire. ”

“I’ll help with that,” Jared says, joining Robby, who is already trucking up the trail.

“There’s a locker at the top of the campsite with wood in it for us,” Tom yells to them.

“That’s lucky,” Charly says.

“I never rely on luck,” Tom says to her. “I called ahead and had the rangers put a couple bundles in there for us. There should be fresh water too.” He pinches her chin between his thumb and forefinger as if she were a child and dives back into the water.

We watch him swim to shore, us girls, with the wind picking up so that the saltwater on our shoulders and mouths dry like a second skin.

“He’s fantastic,” Charly says before following him in.

“He scares me a little,” I say to Jane.

“Me too,” she says.

16. We build a massive fire

We build a massive fire and eat black beans and avocado and grilled skirt steak with onions and potatoes that we’ve rolled in tin foil and roasted in the fire. It takes awhile for the island to darken, but suddenly there are thousands of stars, and across the bay the soft glittering light of a city very far off. Tom makes nightcaps, Irish coffees, which are strong.

Everyone is sleepy, like tuckered out children. Charly wraps herself in a blanket, Jared nods off, his head in her lap. She rouses him and helps him into a sweater.

“Don’t get cold,” she says.

He smacks his lips together, “I’m definitely sunburned.”

“SPF 70 for you tomorrow buddy,” Robby says.

“Shut up,” Jared throws an empty water bottle at him.

Robby has his arm around Jane, who moves to protect him with her body. The water bottle bounces gently off her side.

“Did you just throw something at Jane?” Robby says with significance. He pushes himself up but then reaches out for Jane to steady him. He flops back down. “I should’ve passed on the Irish coffee, I drank way too much today,” he says and pushes his palms into his eyes. “I haven’t drank like this in a long time.”

I struggle to pay attention, to maintain some guarded expression. But I’m very close to sleep. I look at Tom who’s sitting with his legs sprawled out in front of him. He’s watching me, one hand behind his head the other holding his drink. He looks away from me then, toward Robby and Jane.

“How long have you been together?” he asks.

“Jane and Robby?” Jared asks, pointing at them with the sleeve of the sweater covering his hand. “Almost three years, right?”

Robby has his arm around Jane again. He’s looking at her quizzingly.

When she doesn’t answer he says, “Two years and four months. I thought you’d have kept track by now.”

I can see her shrug in the firelight. She wraps her arms around his side, tucking her face into his stomach. He puts a hand in her hair.

“When were you and Elsa...” Tom motions to the two of us.

“Oh that’s ancient history,” Charly says. “Elsa left us a long time ago for New York.”

“Were they still married?” Tom asks as if Robby and I are not there.

She nods her head yes. Jared points his sleeve at me. “No they divorced that year,” he says.

“Let’s go look at the moonlight on the water,” Jane says to Robby.

“But I’m comfortable,” he whines but she’s already walking off.

Tom has pushed himself up on his elbows, he’s watching them walk off into the darkness. Jared and Charly continue to argue.

“Why the sudden interest in our sordid past?” I whisper.

He leans toward me. I can feel the heat from his skin. It’s oppressing like a furnace in a crawl space. He refills my drink from his thermos.

“I’m just trying to figure out why you’re here. Are you back for Robby? Is that it?” His teeth are very white. I can see him biting his tongue a little.

“I care about Robby,” I say. “But that’s old news.”

“Just out to cause trouble?”

I shake my head, which is swimming, and watch Jared and Charly, who have moved on to arguing over their kitchen remodel.

“I hate when you’re this drunk,” she hisses. “We can’t discuss anything.”

“And I hate when you’re the sober martyr,” he says, getting up. She follows him, leaving Tom and me alone.

“I didn’t want to be in New York anymore,” I say. I can hear the waves at the shore. The tiredness is back, it settles in my chest like a weight.

Tom throws water on the fire. “You remind me of my very first wife,” he says holding a hand out to me. “Absolutely bonkers, but hot as shit.” He yanks me upright, holds my arm at my side. I can feel the bones in his hand. “She was a pill popper too— don’t think I haven’t noticed. I can hear them rattling around in your purse.”

“Come on guys,” Charly calls out to us from beside the dingy. “Before Jared and Robby pass out.”

But Tom is still holding me, the smoke from the extinguished fire stings.

“This coffee is bitter,” I say, dumping the last of my drink into the fire pit. My legs feel rubbery. I’m wind chapped and sunburned and completely exhausted.

He lets go of my arm. “Like life baby, just like life.”

17. The morning is one of those

The morning is one of those quiet drifting ones until suddenly it’s afternoon. The water barely taps at the hull, even the grass up on the cliff waves without sound. There are no seagulls and ravens the size of rugby balls soar so high they look like patches of black cloud. Even the seals dive in and out of the water in silence.

I ask Charly and Jared if I can help in the kitchen. The others are already snorkeling.

She laughs and says, “I like my toast toasty, not burned.”

“I’m not that terrible at cooking.”

“Aw, poor Elsa. You can help make the orange juice,” Jared says, handing me a mechanic juicer. Charly’s in an apron and humming along with a song on the boat’s radio. She tells me she’s making an omelet Espanola, and pronounces ‘Española’ as if she were Spanish. Jared smiles from over the bowl of oranges, there’s the sound of his knife against the cutting board.

“I feel so domesticated with the two of you,” I say.

“I’ve never cooked on a boat,” she says with satisfaction.

Jared hands me an orange half, “Nothing like fresh squeezed O.J. in the morning.”

“As long as we can spike it with vodka.” I push the fruit hard against the juicer, which vibrates and hisses and sends pulp everywhere.

He pulls down a bottle of vodka from a cupboard, waving it at me.

“Leave some un-spiked,” Charly says, she’s greasing an earthenware bowl and reading a recipe from her iphone.

“Poor wifey—back to being sober—and while on a trip with Elsa. This must be torture, huh?” He gives her a quick kiss on the nose.

“Poor me! I don’t mind one bit. Alcohol is just empty calories.” She says, pouring the egg mixture into the bowl.

He grabs her bottom, a firm smack. “And you don’t need any extra of those.” He laughs his boyish laugh and hands me the last orange half. “There. All done. Do you need me for anything else or can I join the others for a swim?” He doesn’t wait for an answer, but gives Charly another quick slap on the behind and heads for the deck.

“Elsa, you coming?”

“I’ll stay here. I don’t think my hangover can handle swimming just yet.”

He shrugs and disappears up top.

Charly has her back to me, the back of the apron coming undone.

“You ok?” I ask her.

When she turns she has a high flush. “Perfectly Fine. He knows I can’t drink if I’ve taken my hormones.”

The omelet goes into the oven and she slams the oven door. “I think I’ll take some of that O.J.—the spiked stuff—please.”

“But what about...aren’t there side effects?”

Her face takes on a hysterical slant.

She makes her fist into little balls and slams them onto the counter, hard enough to send the salt and pepper onto their sides. “It’s just not fucking fair!”

There’s egg on the front of her, a bit of yolk, smeared. I want to point out the metaphor, maybe she’ll laugh.

“You know I do hormone injections in my ass?”

I shake my head.

“That’s what I got to do this morning: a needle in my ass. He doesn’t even help with that—I do the injections myself.” She motions to the deck where Jared has gone.

“And I can’t go drink a bottle of whiskey to cope.”

I still haven’t moved to comfort her, and I know I should. Eric would ask occasionally, usually while we were a tangle of hotel sheets and limbs, *Do you want children?* And I’d think about saying the truth, that No I do not. But something about his

face—about anyone’s face when they mention babies, such whimsy about something so serious. It’s a look you worry is a deal breaker so you lie. You say, *Yes, oh Yes, babies, babies. Yes please.*

“We’ve been trying for two years,” she says looking at me, her cheeks wet.

“It’ll happen,” I say lamely.

“But when? I’m almost thirty.”

“That really isn’t that old.”

She looks at me as if seeing me for the first time. “You don’t want children do you?” I think I see her lip tremble.

I pour a large spiked orange juice. I can still feel her looking at me like that, even with my back turned to her.

“Babies are adorable, don’t get me wrong,” I say taking a drink. I can feel the vodka in my sinuses. It makes me momentarily light headed. “Let’s talk about something else,” I say looking at her. “You’ve got egg on the front of you. Here, let me clean it off.” I take a damp cloth but she’s crying now, great big heaves, shoulders shaking as if she’s having a small seizure.

“Charlotte, please,” I say.

“I’m ok...I’m ok. It’s just the hormones.” She stops crying and looks at me with those dark twinkling eyes. “Maybe—instead of drinking—since I can’t drink—maybe...those little white pills you’ve been carrying around. Can I have one?”

“I’m not fooling anyone am I?” I kiss her forehead. “If you think that will help,” I pull out the Altoid tin.

“What’s their milligram?”

“ Point five, I think.”

She takes two and sets them beneath her tongue. “Thank you,” she says

18. It’s a short sail

It’s a short sail from Paradise Cove’s terracotta cliffs and rocky beach to the village of Two Harbors. Jane barely has time to get the sail up before she has to pull it back down. It’s a small looking village, Tom tells us there is one general store and one bar, which is inside the only restaurant.

“Don’t worry,” he says, “They make a fucking great cocktail.”

There are more than a dozen other boats already moored, and at the water’s edge is a small group of men and women in summer dresses and island shirts. It’s almost four in the afternoon and the light in the harbor is gentle, making the water in some spots turquoise and in others lapis. There are palm trees along the shore, tall and bent in lazy halos of shimmering light. Coming from the shore is the sound of a ukulele.

“Is there a festival this weekend?” Charly asks sleepily.

Tom shrugs, “There’s always something going on.”

“As long as it isn’t pirate themed,” Robby says. “That would be so cheesy.”

“It could be fun,” Jane says to him. “Silly but fun.”

“I don’t think it’s got anything to do with pirates,” Charly points to a figure dressed in white, walking down the stone path to the beach. The ukulele is clearer now, joined by a melodica and a hand drum.

“It’s a wedding,” Jane says softly.

“Well we’ll have to wait to go to shore now,” Tom says depressed.

“Do you recognize that song?” I ask. It’s the same the Latino TV producer was whistling on the beach.

We stand for a moment, listening.

“Besame Mucho,” Tom says. “You know it?”

“I’ve heard it before is all,” I say.

We watch the bride walk across the sand and stand before the groom. Cameras flash. The ukulele stops. A man in a straw hat—one of those you can only get away with wearing on an island— reads from a book. The bride faces us, she is speaking and wiping at her eyes.

“I bet they aren’t even in their mid twenties,” Robby says tersely.

“How can you tell?” Jane is holding her hand to her forehead, squinting.

He shrugs and sits with his arms across his chest.

“Why do you think her Dad didn’t walk her down the aisle?” Charly asks.

Jared sits beside Robby, “Maybe he wasn’t invited.”

“Oh. I think that’s him standing right there, he’s got a cane. Maybe it would have been too difficult to do in the sand.”

“Shitty thing to do, have a wedding in the sand when your dad is handicapped,” Robby says. He points with his chin, his arms still crossed. “He probably paid for the whole damn thing too.”

Jane sighs, “She’s a beautiful bride.”

“How can you tell from here?” He asks shaking his head. “She could be a Cyclops.”

Tom goes below deck and comes back with a bottle of champagne.

“Oh yes!” Jane cries. “That’s just the thing, we’ll toast them.”

“Wait until they pronounce them man and wife first,” he says, handing her the glasses.

Robby slouches further in his seat up, “How would we know when that is?”

“You’re quite the sourpuss this afternoon,” I say. “They’ll cheer, of course.”

Robby drops his sunglasses over his eyes, “Wake me when that is.”

The groom takes the bride’s hand. He’s a tall thin man and from behind he looks completely capable of being someone’s husband. He’s got that rigid spine, his feet firmly planted in the sand—but then he fidgets, moves from one leg to the other and scratches his lower back, tugs on his earlobe, and I think, *Oh God, that poor woman he isn’t sure about anything.*

The man in the straw hat takes both their hands and the crowd erupts into cheers. We pop the champagne and Tom goes below deck to blare the horn, which makes the crowd erupt again and wave at us. We hold up our glasses and shout *congratulations!*

We motor in soon after, each of us packing a small day bag. The wedding party has moved into the restaurant, we can hear their plates and silverware and glasses when we pass by.

Behind the restaurant are open fields and sloping mountains and nowhere is there a golf cart. This is a different Catalina than the one I visited with my parents. It is wild.

The conservancy rangers drive trucks with heavy wheels. There is one schoolhouse, which is red, and looks out onto a playground that is made up of the usual stuff but also rope swings in a grove of Eucalyptus trees. Charly and I play on those first. We laugh like we used to. When we were kids, before junior high even. From here we can see the second harbor, the isthmus, which is a turquoise so light in color and calm in temperament that it could be some exotic lagoon.

“It’s like Neverland,” Charly says. “I feel so free here.”

We watch Jared and Robby play disc golf with Tom and Jane. Jared is taking the game very seriously, which is making the others laugh.

“It’s a serious game,” we can hear him shout at them. “Take it seriously!”

But Robby picks up Jane who has the disc in her hand and runs her to the basket.

“GOAAAAL!” Tom shouts.

“That isn’t proper play,” Jared yells, pointing. “And that isn’t proper terminology, there’s no goals in disc golf.”

Charly asks if she can push me on the swing. I tell her yes and she takes the swing and pulls me way back until I’m shouting not any higher. She let’s go and I’m flying forward so low to the ground I involuntarily let out a whoop. I tell her to do it again, and we repeat this until we are both out of breath.

“I could’ve done that all day,” I say when we’re walking to rejoin the group, who’ve gone to explore the isthmus’ edge.

“You weren’t doing the heavy lifting,” she says squeezing my arm.

“Hey! Be nice.”

We loop arms and walk side by side. I remember sleepovers at her house—a grapefruit orchard on the edge of town. How there was a reckless sense of abandon because Charly’s parents were old, almost like grandparents and when I spent the night it was mayhem. We watched whatever we wanted, ran around with an old airsoft gun, catching lizards, which we wore as earrings until the creatures wiggled too much and we were forced to let them go.

Ahead the mountains grow dark, the sky brighter. Jared, Robby, Tom and Jane are small against the horizon. The wind picks up. I pull my jacket collar up against the wind.

“Thank you for the Xanax,” Charly says quietly.

“Oh it’s nothing,” I’m worried she might start talking about babies again. “I hope it helps.”

She takes my hand in hers and we walk in silence for a moment.

“I mean it,” she says squeezing my hand. “I sometimes get so twisted I think I might really lose it. Today was the first day in a long time that I felt relaxed.”

“Any time,” I say, and shake my hand free.

19. The Wedding Reception

The wedding reception has rented the restaurant, so we eat burgers and drink Buffalo Milk cocktails in the bar.

“It’s the best drink I think I’ve ever had,” Jared says about the Buffalo Milk. He has whipped cream at the corners of his mouth. “I’m only sorry you can’t try any of it.” he says to Charly, who sips on a Shirley Temple. He sounds sincerely apologetic.

“Is it real buffalo milk?” Jane asks.

Tom gives her a sweet pitying look. “No darling, it’s just the name. Should I order you one?”

“I can do that,” Robby says. He’s been in a mood since seeing the wedding party in the restaurant.

The groom is with his bride, both very young, and dancing terribly awkward to Billie Holiday’s “At Last”.

“That is so cliché,” Robby snarls at them. “Can’t young people do anything original?”

Tom puts an arm around him, “Kid, there’s nothing original about love or weddings.”

“Look at you three, what wonderful men we’ve brought along with us,” I say to Jane and Charly.

“Hey, what did I do?” Jared says. I expect him to hiccup.

Charly pats his arm, “Nothing honey, you never do.”

He smiles over his straw. “We should order ten more of these. Do you think they make it in a bigger size?”

A group from the wedding party comes into the bar. They discover we’re the ones from earlier and thank us again. One of the women has dark hair, pulled back in a wedding up-do. There’s little plastic pearls tucked into the knots. She has the kind of face that would be pretty—that *is* pretty—except she has spent a large amount of time outdoors, and she doesn’t have the type of skin that tans well.

“You guys were great this afternoon,” she says to us.

Charly, always eager to make friends, lightly touches the woman’s arm, her eyes a little sleepy. “I love weddings,” she says. “And it was so beautiful from the water.”

“They deserve the best.” There are smile lines like small gouges in either side of her lips.

A mustached young man—her cousin, she tells us—offers to buy us drinks.

“Nothing for me, I have to get up early to sail back,” she tells him.

“You sail?” Jane asks interested.

“Does she sail?” the mustached boy says with wide eyes.

“Oh don’t start with that,” the woman says, blushing modestly.

“Polly’s a champion sailboat racer! Hey, is that the Buffalo Milk cocktail?” He asks Jared, who nods. “Any good?”

“I’ve already had three.”

“Fuck yeah, I like your style. You guys wanna play pool?” He points to a good-looking boy his own age that’s stripped off his suit jacket and is polishing a cue stick. “My buddy’s fuckin wasted and a terrible player—he’s wagered money. Like some serious fuckin cash.”

“You shouldn’t take his money,” Polly says and looks at me apologetically.

“How much is a lot?” Tom asks amused.

The boy leans in, “Like fifty fuckin bucks.”

I can see the look on Tom’s face. It says: *how cute*. I want to smack him.

“I’ll match that,” he says, reaching for his wallet producing a hundred dollar bill.

“Alright, man!” The boy’s eyes are shining. “What’s your name? You guys were so fuckin cool this afternoon. Like seriously, thank you for doing that. It’s my sister’s wedding—and I’m just so happy for her, you know? So fuckin happy.” The boy grins but his moustache is slightly wet from his beer and it hangs over his top teeth so I only think he grins because his moustache tips up on either end.

“Jared, you coming? Robby? You want in on this?”

Jared and Robby slide off their stools and follow.

“Not really,” Robby says under his breath.

Jared squeezes Charly’s shoulders, “Babe, order me another Buffalo Milk.”

“He doesn’t need another one,” she says to me after they’ve gone.

“Sorry about that,” Polly says to us. “I don’t think he’s ever played pool in his life but he gets that way around grown-up men.”

“How old is he?” I ask.

“Oh, I don’t mean he’s a child—he’s twenty-one, but his Dad died awhile back and he gets all puffed up around older guys. I think maybe he’s trying to impress them. You should see him around my boyfriend.”

“Which one’s your boyfriend?” Jane asks. She’s drinking a margarita and licked all the salt off the rim.

“Oh he couldn’t come, he’s on call. Well we both are. But I couldn’t miss Essie’s wedding. She’s the sweetest girl, studying child psychology at Chapman.”

The bride has changed out of her wedding gown and into a flouncy blush colored dress that belts at the waist. I watch her pull something from her new husband’s hair, adjust

its perfected pomp; she's about to brush something from his sleeve but he catches her outstretched hand and pulls her into the crowded dance floor.

“What do you do?” Charly asks.

Polly looks embarrassed. “I’m a firefighter actually,” she says

Jane’s eyes grow very big, “Are you really? You’re a female firefighter?”

“And you race boats?” Charly adds.

Those lines on either side of her mouth deepen, “What do you ladies do?”

“Oh God, who cares?” Jane says laughing. “You race boats and fight fires. That’s amazing. Tom is teaching me how to sail—he’s the one who so modestly pulled out a hundred in front of your cousin.” Jane looks at Tom across the bar with that teasing expression a teacher might give a student.

“Where have you sailed?” Charly asks.

Polly pulls out a stool beside us. “All over really.”

“What’s your favorite place?” I ask her. She looks at me for a long while and I get that feeling of having not talked aloud.

“Probably,” she stalls. “Probably just on the other side of the island.”

Jane looks disappointed. “I thought you’d say the Keys, or Mexico—everyone always says Mexico. What’s so special about the Pacific?”

Polly continues to look at me, or just behind me, where the isthmus lets out to the Pacific. She dips her chin to her chest, relaxes her eyes as if she were dreaming.

“Have you seen the ocean on that side?” She asks us.

“We walked over to the isthmus earlier,” one of us says, but Polly just shakes her head.

“Then you didn’t see the *open* Pacific. Have you ever seen it?”

Jane laughs, “Of course we have.”

“We’re from Santa Monica,” I tell Polly.

But Polly shakes her head again, “Then you’ve seen the Santa Monica Bay.”

“I’ve driven up and down the coast hundreds of times,” I tell her.

Polly sighs, “That isn’t the same as what’s out there.” She jerks her head toward me, out beyond me. “It’s wild *open* ocean. Nothing for miles. You can see the different swell patterns, how the wind can change the current in an instant.” She snaps her fingers. “And after San Clemente it just drops off. The ocean floor just drops off and there isn’t much wildlife or anything at all—just barren ocean floor and a sea so tumultuous and dark and dangerous it’s overwhelming.”

“Wow,” Charly says a little alarmed.

“I think I’d prefer sailing to Mexico,” Jane says and asks Polly how the bride and groom met. The conversation changes then, it takes a more normal path of peacocking and giggling and looking around the room to see who’s watching us. But I’m still lost in the idea of the open ocean—out there, calling. I steal away to the bathroom to take some medicine and fix my makeup. The mirror is dirty, someone has carved on it “Justine was here”; I touch it lightly but still somehow manage to cut my finger. I wrap it in toilet paper. There’s a knock on the bathroom door.

“Just a minute,” I say. The doorknob jiggles. “Someone’s in here,” I shout. I wipe the blood from the sink and flush the toilet.

Outside is Polly’s mustachioed cousin. He’s even drunker, his eyes dark, lazy.

“Hey,” he says and leans on me. “You’re fuckin hot.”

“I’m taken,” I say.

“That’s not what your friend Tom says,” he pouts.

I take his face in my hands so roughly that he whines and backs up against the wall. “Not for you,” I say pushing it away. He looks as if he might cry.

“You have a strong grip, for a girl” he says holding his jaw.

I feel bad for him. I think I can see how he might have looked as a baby. I close my eyes and think of Eric and how when he kissed me the slight pressure of his hand felt like he could hold me up forever, and I think of the *open* pacific just outside the bar—how it must be roaring—and when I open my eyes the mustached boy is grabbing my breasts, his mouth hot on my neck and I’m groaning—*groaning*—with pleasure.

Robby is there too—coming out of the men’s bathroom. I see his face and there is hatred in it. Real hatred. This surprises me, the groan catches in my throat and I pull away. But then he isn’t there and I think I’ve imagined it.

“You’re so fuckin hot,” the boy says. “Wait, where are you going? Fuck. Seriously?”

I find Charly and tell her I want to go back to the boat. I ask if she’ll go with me. She’s watching Jared who has his arm around a bridesmaid.

20. Charly is quiet

Charly is quiet on the ride back. She doesn't even brighten when the coastguard flirts with her. He's older, with white facial hair, whiskers you'd call them because they're sturdier than most other beards, rough looking. A real seaman who motors us over the water, the restaurant lights reaching out across it, the water cracking and sending it even further.

On the boat she presses her hands to her face, says, "I cannot believe how tired I am."

I make a joke about Jared and his bridesmaid, but she only looks at me with little recognition. "Go to sleep," I say directing her to her cabin "Things will be better in the morning." But she hesitates, chewing her lip almost viciously.

She asks where I disappeared to at the bar. I tell her there was a line at the bathroom. I suggest we make hot chocolate.

"I don't think I should," she says screwing up her face. "I'm just so tired, but I don't think I can sleep. There's this vibrating, I think I'll go crazy soon."

I want to tell her I have the same feeling—it's been this way since we used to sit in front of her vanity trying on lipsticks, or maybe even before that—something knocked it loose, who knows what did it. It just started to vibrate and shake and now it fucking rings all God damn day. I want to tell her this but instead I produce the Altoid tin.

Take it, I tell her. Take the whole tin.

And she does, slipping it into her pocket shyly as if she'd been waiting for it the whole time.

Sweet dreams, I say but she's already shut her cabin door with a polite click.

My bed is a thin mattress with a curtain to separate it from the rest of the boat. With it closed I have only a tiny porthole window for light. But the night is very dark and outside the water in the harbor is so still I can't get my bearings. It's like bathwater out there—tepid and stagnate. So I keep the curtain open.

For awhile I drift in and out of sleep—my heartbeat thumping against my ribs, the roaring of that open ocean just on the other side of the island. I think back to earlier that afternoon, when we are at the isthmus, when Robby hikes up the ridge, his form in profile against mountain and sky. But we don't want to hike further, Charly and I are wind chapped and Jared hungover; Jane wants a shower and Tom is ready to start drinking again. But all the while the Pacific crashes a half-mile away, around a bend and up a small hill—just there. I think about how monstrous it must look—the wind churning white caps into waves, the swells, large like in nightmares, bulging and roiling a sea that stretches seemingly endless—the depth as black as just outside that porthole.

Something knocks against the boat. The sound so gentle, like a stone plunking into a pool.

“Charly?” I call. I pull back the curtain. The cherry wood cabinets are bluish in the moonlight. I can hear gentle snoring from her cabin.

The sound again and this time it's recognizable: the dingy against the side of the boat. There is male laughter, female shushing. I let the curtain fall back.

“Grab his feet,” Tom's voice, which is sober and direct.

“I got them, just worry about his head,” Robby’s growl and then Jane’s husky, petting voice, “He’s just trying to help.”

There is swearing and Tom, “he’s heavy for a little guy.” Which makes Jane giggle. I think I can feel Robby tense through the curtain.

I wait for them to finish. They say their goodnights, and I hear Tom retreat to the deck, his sandals flopping against his heels. I wait, I want to be sure Robby and Jane are asleep.

I find Tom pissing from the stern of the boat. It’s still dark, but out across the bay, Los Angeles twinkles in soft grey light.

“Morning kid,” Tom says when he’s finished. He takes my chin between his thumb and forefinger and pinches it. “No sleeping beauty, are you?”

“You don’t look so hot either.”

He makes a sound of dismissal, “Please, I only need five hours of sleep.” His attitude changes suddenly. He pulls down the collar of my sweater. “You come to get some?”

“No thanks,” I say pulling away.

He shrugs, “Not ripe yet—no problem. I can wait. What can I do for you?” He rolls out a sleeping bag. “I always sleep on deck. Air’s better up here—doesn’t matter if you have models or aristocrats below deck, it’ll smell like farts in the morning.”

“Lovely,” I say. “Listen, I was wondering which way we’re going to Avalon in the morning?”

He stretches out in his sleeping bag, arms propping up his head. “What do you mean? The only way. Suddenly interested in sailing? Jane’ll give you a run for your money.” He smiles some private smile.

“Do we go around the island, I mean.”

“Ha! Hell no. That would take an entire day, and that’s with a strong wind.”

“Could we though? I want to see it.”

His eyes soften and I think he might be falling asleep. But then he tilts his head in an inviting sort of way and pats the seat beside him.

“Come here.”

I sit down. His eyes are shut now, but he puts his hand in my hair.

“Your hair is soft,” he says.

I try again, “We could sail around and make it to Avalon in time for the jazz festival.”

“I thought from all that dye it’d feel like hay—but’s it’s baby soft,” he says sleepily.

“I’ll even help pilot or steer or whatever it is you do to make this thing move.”

He smiles a tired amused smile and sighs. Seals somewhere in the murky dawn begin to call to each other.

“Poor Elsa, come closer.” He moves so he’s lying on his side. I hesitate. He smells of whiskey and something faintly sour.

“Will you take me? Us, I mean. Will you take us?”

He sits up then and moves so close I recognize that sour smell. It's bile. I turn my head and he clicks his tongue.

"I don't think so. Better get some sleep kid," he says. He lies down and looks beyond me. "What a boat of light sleepers we have."

And there is Robby. He turns when I see him. His back's slightly hunched, a windbreaker taut across his shoulders, hair standing almost straight up. He disappears back below deck.

Back below deck I try to sleep but there is Robby and Jane's curtain, so close I can reach out and touch it. I decide to shower instead. The sound of water gurgling in the pipes is almost therapeutic, the sudden rush of spray. It thunders, vibrating the shower door. I have a distinct feeling of uneasiness though. I hesitate mid undressing. And then I hear it: a soft brushing at the door.

"Elsa," I hear Robby whisper. He slides in.

"What are you doing? If Jane wakes up..."

"She drank her weight in tequila last night she'll sleep past ten —and that's late for Jane."

I shut the water off.

His face strains, "No keep it on, I don't want her to hear us."

"Then you probably shouldn't have come in." The pipes struggle to turn back on. "Can you hand me my robe, please?"

He could throw it to me. But he doesn't. He takes it slowly from the rack, grasping it with both hands.

“Elsa, what are you doing?”

“About to take a shower,” I say. “What the hell are *you* doing? I like Jane, I like you guys together. I’m glad—happy for you two. I really am.”

The mirror is steaming up; I can see streaks from where someone tried to wipe it with a towel.

“I mean last night. I don’t like Tom. He’s one of those rich pricks who thinks he owns everyone. I don’t want you to get wrapped up in his shit. ”

He’s still holding the robe. “Have you...?”

“Oh Christ Robby,” I say taking the robe and wrapping it tightly. “Don’t do this.”

“Jesus Elsa, if you saw yourself at the bar, just now up there with him.”

“I was there thank you very much.” Our whispering is louder now.

“You’re out of control”

Jane calls for Robby. We stand completely still, the steam clinging to us like some oppressive rainforest mist.

“I’m fine,” I say as quietly as I can. “Now get a towel and splash some water on your face for fuck sake. I’ll hide in the shower. Get her to go back to sleep. Jesus Christ, Robby.”

I shut the water off and climb into the shower. I hear Robby tell Jane he needed a shower. He woke up drunk and thought it would help.

She asks where I am. He says I slept on the deck with Tom. She wants to get up, go for a swim. He convinces her to lay down with him.

I wait. I lick at the salty mixture of sweat and water that's gathered above my lip and think how I should take my mother up on her offer. I should catch a plane with the last of my savings and move into the guest bedroom. She'll wake me up at dawn, offering some freshly pressed juice the color of sludge, her face pulled back by a sweatband. *Let's jog together*, she'll say or, *How about a Pilates class?* And she'll cart me around to the salon where she works blow drying hair, showing me off. But the effort she'll have to put into it now. How she'll need me to play up the role too. And the questions she'll ask: *Where did you run off to?* Then it will be *How is Charly? Still acting? And Robby, poor dear Robby—still a lifeguard?* No mother, No. Nothing's the same.

I try to imagine Eric, but all I can picture is his hands. The sunspots over the knuckles, the skin dipping down over delicate veins, the cuticles pushed back over flat milky nail beds revealing those little half moons sneaking up from beneath.

I emerge from the shower and steal back to my berth. I try with great effort not to make too much noise but when I roll onto my side the berth's curtain gets stuck and Robby and I see each other over Jane's sleeping body. His eyes are red rimmed. He looks old. He opens his mouth to speak, but something about his expression embarrasses me. I think he feels it to, because he just shuts his mouth and looks helplessly down at Jane.

21. On the way to Avalon

On the way to Avalon we pass the same cliffs and bluffs and mining quarry with the keep out signs half submerged in the turquoise sea. The buffalo are still in profile on the ridge

but now facing the opposite direction like some weathervane that's changed directions. The seals make a fuss when we coast by. A few splash into the water to play in the boat's wake. Jane takes out her camera. I point and call for her.

"I see them," she says, her mouth firm. I try to read her expression, but she's too quick. Her smile is back up.

Charly does not make breakfast. We instead eat little boxed cereals and bananas. She isn't hungry—"Too tired," Jared says to me.

"Poor old girl, sailing isn't your thing," he continues. "When we get to Avalon we'll get some Dramamine."

As we round the last wild cliff, the grass jutting out, waving us on, we see on the horizon a cruise ship anchored, ridiculously large, smoke billowing from its stacks; little orange boats gliding back and forth from it like ants on a log. And suddenly there are sailboats and yachts, people in caps and bikinis shouting "Ahoy!" Jared and Robby holler back. Speedboats race by, some jazz band plays from a beach covered in white umbrellas, a helicopter whizzes by. The noise is monstrous. I cover my ears.

There are people everywhere: on glass bottom boats, like tiny cabooses, chugging along near the rocks; and on skidoos teenagers in life vests—fishing boats blaring their horns at them to get out of the way—there are scuba divers and snorkelers, and standing on the rocks and pier, fishermen young and old, fat and thin playing hand radios. The Catalina Express, the boat I took with my parents years ago, sits in the harbor with its engine roaring, spewing exhaust.

Tom puts on the boat's radio. He seems ambivalent to this sudden attack—they all do. Jane is peeling off her jacket, rubbing sunscreen into her muscular shoulders. Charly has her eyes closed, tilting her head toward the music. Jared at the bow of the ship with Robby, both perked up, their faces lit with excitement.

“This is what I'm talking about,” Robby says.

“It's gonna be fucking wild,” Jared turns back to us and beams. “We should've been here the whole time. This is where the party's at.”

Jane glances at Tom, “I liked Two Harbors.”

“You and me, kid,” Tom says and winks at her.

The boats and skidoos create a nauseating artificial swell, the boat lurches.

“Where are we mooring?” I ask.

He motions with his chin to a small cove, and we motor with care through the various boats already anchored.

“Look at the golf carts, how adorable!” Charly says pointing to land. “Can we rent one Jared?”

Jared nods, “Comes with the villa.” He stretches so the sun hits his face. “Aw fucking land, thank God. The boat's beautiful Tom, but I'm looking forward to toilets with plumbing.”

Tom shrugs, “Sailing life isn't for everyone.”

Robby's holding Jane, his face bent down on her shoulder. “I for one am looking forward to some golf.” He kisses her neck.

“I thought we'd do the spa together,” she says.

“You can’t get Robby into a spa,” Jared says looking at me as if I’ll agree but I know better. I just sit back and watch a group of pelicans lined up along the dock who watch a seal glide in and out of the sea. A group of children throw pennies until the birds launch up without making a sound and sweep off across the top of the water. They must have seen the other side of the island—those graceful large birds. Maybe they nest there and that’s where they’re off to now. The children celebrate the pelicans fleeing, rushing to the end of the dock, their parents shouting, “Careful! Careful!”

Charly seems to have woken up a bit, she smiles at Jane, “I’ll come with you to the spa. That sounds just the thing.” Her voice is funny though, sort of far off and dreamy. Jared puts his arm around her and squeezes.

“Wifey needs some pampering,” he says this so we can hear. “Some Dramamine and some pampering.”

But Jane still waits for Robby to answer. She’s turned away from me but I can see him. He’s dropped his arms to his sides, and then self-consciously touches the back of his head—she must be looking at him something fierce. He finally shrugs, tittering a little, and says, “I’m not one for massages. It’s not really my style.”

“I didn’t know that,” Jane says quietly.

We get the boat anchored and Tom radios to the Hamilton Cove dock house, a set of luxury villas tucked on the mountainside like Santorini. They even have private moorings for those with a sailboat, and a water taxi to bring us ashore.

A young girl, hair bleached-blond motors out to us. She's driving a flashy speedboat, painted navy with teak flooring and handrails. The side of it says: Hamilton Cove.

Two plump Mexican boys in white polo shirts take our bags.

"Welcome," the girl says. Her uniform is short, low cut: navy skirt and matching polo shirt. Her nametag says *Rachel*. When she smiles she looks right at Jared. You can see her feeling out who has the cash. "How was the trip over?" She's finally landed on Tom, who's hopped down from the wheel of his boat.

"Perfect weather," Tom says. He taps her nametag. "Rachel... means little lamb, doesn't it?"

She has enough sense to blush and take a step back. "Is this your boat?" She asks after we've settled into our seats.

Tom makes a show of modesty. He breathes in long and hard, turns to look it over. The water's gentle, rocking it as if to show it off more. It gleams under the summer sun, looking hand polished and expensive.

"It's my baby. I've sailed it all over, down to Costa Rica, out to the Cape. Last year we took it to the Mediterranean." He says 'we' as if he means all of us, so she looks at Jared and me, who sit closest.

"He doesn't mean us," I tell her. "I'd have killed him if we sailed further than the Santa Monica Bay."

Tom laughs that big august laugh. "And just this morning you were begging me to take the long way around the island."

Rachel doesn't know what to make of this banter. I think, or at least I hope, she's too young to understand, so she just looks straight ahead and concentrates on directing us back to the dock.

"Hamilton Cove is brand new," she tells us when we've come ashore. "We've opened only a year ago."

And you can tell this is true, everything's clean and a little plastic looking. They've shipped real sand by the boatload to make the beach at Hamilton Cove. Moms in floral cover-ups watch children with sand toys, digging away, while Dads mingle at the tiki bar—they're watching the flat screen T.Vs. A fake parrot lords over them, and sitting on the bar, a large rum keg with the words *It's Island Time* in distressed font.

Rachel leads us through a winding pathway, pointing out the tennis courts and swimming pool.

"We have a saline pool and a lap pool," she's smiling what I think must be her tour guide smile.

I'm walking beside Jane who's stopped to look at where she's pointing. "I've read you have free transportation to the Zip Line Eco Tour, is that right?"

Rachel nods enthusiastically, "Yep—just arrange it through the front desk."

"It's the longest zip line in the country," Jane tells us.

"And the spa?" Charly interrupts. Her cheeks are pink from climbing the steps to the clubhouse.

“Right across the lawn, there should be spa menus in your villa,” she says. “Try the papaya mango facial scrub.” She touches her smooth young face, tells us it does wonders. “Makes your skin feel so soft.”

“Oh, that sounds heavenly,” Charly sighs. “It’s so nice to be off that boat—oh!” She gets embarrassed and touches Tom’s sleeve, “Don’t pay any attention to me. I haven’t been sleeping well.”

After check in, Rachel is there again, sitting in a golf cart, her blonde hair pulled into a ponytail as if she might do some heavy lifting. One of the boys is behind the wheel. We climb in, teasing Rachel about her age. She’s enjoying the attention, I can tell by how she’s looking sideways at Jane and me. Charly has checked out so this show of modesty is for us.

The golf cart is not fast so the breeze is gentle, kicking up our hair and fluttering them about. Charly looks peaceful. “The air is so clean here,” she says to no one in particular, tilting back in her seat, eyes half shut.

I am not as taken with the place. Everything about it feels forced. The villa itself is large and high up on the cliff so there is a view of everything coming and going into the harbor. The cruise ship sits horizon level with the deck. A helicopter whisks just above the sea, sea-dooes and sailboats and yachts cut frothy, chalk-colored paths across the water. On the deck are sun tan chairs and a fire pit that lights with a key. It smells of new paint, and the floors, which are laminate made to look like wood, feel hollow.

But Jared is ecstatic. “Look at this kitchen,” he says, running his hands across the granite tops. “I love the color, now I wish we’d gone for charcoal in our kitchen.”

Robby comes out from one of the master bedrooms. He's rubbing his hands together. "Did you see the mini bar?"

"There's nothing mini about it," Jared sniffs.

"The prices are pretty steep," I say flipping over the menu. "Nine dollars for peanuts."

"Says the girl staying at the Miramar." Tom comes out from his room. He takes the menu from me, studying it.

"It's not the prices," I frown. "It's the quality."

He taps the menu on my nose, "Gallo not good enough for you is it?" His teeth seem very white indoors. His baldhead is pink, the rest of him burnished that brown only white boys get when outside all the time, it's the color of a soft leather purse—but those teeth, they're fluorescent.

"Come on Jared, the ladies request better quality wine. We'll go into town and stock up."

Jared's got his head very close to Charly. They're having some private tiff. But when Tom says his name he looks up all smiles.

"Perfect," he says. "The girls can check out the spa and by the time they get back we'll have the barbeque queued up." He kisses Charly on her face, not her mouth just somewhere shy of it. "Get anything you want at the spa," he tells her. "My treat."

Her face is pink when the boys walk out, her chest drawn up real tight.