

Reflection: A Love Story
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Introduction: The Mirror

“What's your senior project about?”

That's a question I heard a lot this semester – from professors, from friends, even from my parents. I usually tried to avoid the question altogether by saying something like:

“It's, umm, you know, creative writing. It's a story.”

But that inevitably prompted people to ask what the story was about, so I gave up trying to avoid the topic and told them:

“It's about incest.”

Or, more bluntly:

“It's about identical twins who fuck each other.”

That response usually prevented any further questions, but it did produce a lot of odd looks and awkward silences. My second reader, Professor Bair Van Dam, suggested other ways I could frame the project – for example, I could say, “It's about two people in a relationship that isn't working out,” but for some reason – even though my writing itself focuses more on the romantic relationship between the twins, and their siblinghood is not revealed until later in the piece – for some reason I could not get their twinness out of my head. The twins' similarity brings them together in a bond that makes them more than lovers, more than sisters, more than twins – they become almost the same person – but it is also their downfall. Ultimately, the twins become too close – they collide and explode. And yet – how can one break up with one's twin sister? The end of a relationship is always painful, but imagine that pain multiplied by the necessity of breaking contact with not only a sister, but a twin – someone who shares not only your physical appearance but thinks similar thoughts, someone with whom you share a

connection so close that you can practically read each others minds.

This impossibility – the impossibility of the twins' relationship, and the impossibility of ending it – is central to my project, but in such a way that it lurks in the background. It is rarely mentioned explicitly, but the twins are constantly aware of it, as I was while writing the story. Even readers who know that the two lovers are twins may forget at times, and yet that fact drives each of the twins' actions. In Katie, the twin that narrates the story, it provokes an existential identity crisis. She cannot conceive of herself as an entity outside of her relationship with her sister, Kathy, because her relationship with Kathy has changed her. She admires Kathy and wishes they were more similar, but they are not the same person. In addition to difference inherent in their personalities, the twins were separated at birth until the age of twelve; their formative years were drastically different. Katie cannot become Kathy entirely, no matter how similar they are. And yet, for practical reasons, she cannot be herself, either – at least not physically. Katie dyes her hair, wears colored contacts, and takes other measures to conceal the fact that she and her lover are physically almost identical. Through her relationship with Kathy, Katie becomes alienated from herself.

In his essay, “The Mirror-Phase as Formative of the Function of the I,” Jacques Lacan describes a state of development in which an infant recognizes itself in the mirror for the first time. This first image, the “Ideal-I,” is perceived prior to any socialization, and is solidified into a fictional identity that will never be reconciled with the infant's true, fragmented self. According to Lacan, the “I” then becomes alienated from itself because it is so absorbed in trying to reach this “Ideal-I.” Because of this, the “I” becomes insecure.

In a way, Kathy becomes Katie's “Ideal-I.” She appears to Katie as a perfect version of

herself, but she is not perfect, and she is not Katie – she is, in fact, just as fragmented as Katie.

What Katie does not realize is that Kathy is not her mirror image – she is more like what Lacan calls the “other”: an alien outsider that provokes anxiety because we want to prove to them that we are our “Ideal-I,” when we are not.

Every time Katie looks in the mirror, she sees someone who is not herself; every time she looks at Kathy, she sees her “Ideal-I.” The gap between herself and her self-perception widens. When the twins ultimately end their relationship, Katie shirks the alterations to her appearance. When she looks in the mirror, she no longer sees herself; instead, she sees Kathy. In the end, Katie is not only alienated from herself, but even from her “ideal-I,” leaving her with nothing to hold onto.

My intention, however, is not to apply Lacan to my story, although I think it makes for an interesting reading, nor was Lacan my inspiration. My motivation was simply to write the story of twin sisters who fall in love with one another and find that their relationship cannot work. In a way, it is a simple love story. I don't remember where the idea came from and I can't even explain why I'm so compelled by it, except that I think it raises so many questions: about identity and self, about family, and most of all, about love – about forbidden love, about the consequences of love, and about the difficulty of loving someone so similar and yet so different from ourselves.

As it turns out, this is a lot to cover. I found that I had a lot to say, and that Katie and Kathy have rich, complicated lives. I chose this topic because I had never had the opportunity to explore something as deeply as I would be able to in my capstone. However, a semester is a short period of time, and I soon realized that I was writing a novel-length piece, whether I liked it or

not. Because I still wanted to turn in quality work, my advisers and I decided it would be best to only turn in excerpts from my story. I have completed two of what will eventually be a five-part story – parts one and three. I have provided a brief summary of what will happen in part two in between these two sections.

Part 1

This is us: Kathy sits in the bright kitchen, her hair golden with the setting sunlight from the open window, legs crossed at the ankles. I watch from the living room. The old blue chair I sit in is worn but soft, and I sink into it and close my eyes, Kathy's afterimage glowing on the backs of my eyelids. With my eyes closed, I imagine her, motionless and golden in the kitchen, the way the sunlight gleams along the hard wood of the kitchen chair's legs and her skirt casts a shadow over a portion of her calf, leaving her light pink toenails to sparkle in the sun. Her skin is pale, but glowing with health, and it feels silky and warm. I cannot see her face, and strain for her reflection in the window, but it's not dark enough yet. All I can see is a dim outline of her wire-rim glasses, the light catching her eyelashes, which are not made-up and are raised over her green eyes, absorbing the oranges and pinks from the sky outside.

I used to get so caught up in the way a sun might light on a certain object and I would think about how I might mix the colors of my paint and bring out that particular highlight with my brush. It would strike me as so profound when I saw anything that beautiful. One day, last spring, every light and shadow seemed to shine crystal clear like a stained glass window, and a plain brown bird lighted on the sidewalk in front of us and I noticed, for the first time, that those little brown birds we see every day are as pretty and complex as a tropical parrot – maybe more so for all the tiny markings on their wings that we never notice unless we get close. But now, in the kitchen, Kathy is so golden and I don't even want to paint her. I sit, and I watch with my eyes closed.

She is still motionless in the kitchen, her mouth set, eyes unblinking, arms crossed – she looks unhappy. Why? I love that skirt on her. It is pale, a light fabric, printed with flowers. She

wore it a few weeks ago, on a similarly sunny evening. It wasn't too hot, so we had opened the bedroom window, and the breeze made its light fabric flutter in the wind as she picked it up off the floor.

“Shit! It's 6:00.”

I rolled over lazily on the bed, naked. She pulled the skirt up to her waist and I watched her disappear into her bra, the skin of her chest still flushed.

“Aren't they coming at seven?” I said.

“No. Six thirty.”

“Oh. I told Jane seven.”

“She and Drew will be fashionably late, then,” she said. She pushed me back onto the bed and kissed me, the thin fabric of her skirt soft on my naked body, and stood up again.

“I'll start dinner. Get dressed and do your make-up,” she said, and clicked out of the room in her heels. I wanted to lay there and feel her skirt tickle my skin, but I did as she said, not bothering to put on lipstick because my lips were still so red from her kisses.

I stretched and walked slowly into the kitchen. Kathy's back was to me, and I wrapped my arms around her from behind. She was so soft. She ran her hand down my arm without looking up from the jar of pasta sauce she was reading.

“How do you do this again? You just head up the sauce?”

I opened my eyes. On the stove, Kathy set a pot of water to boil – without salt or olive oil – and a too-small saucepan to make enough sauce for six people.

“Let me take over.” I let go of her and pulled out the cutting board. I began chopping the garlic and onions to add to the store-bought sauce while Kathy moved around the apartment,

clearing the clutter from the living room, her heels ticking frantically on the wood floor in contrast to the soft thuds of my knife against the cutting board.

I had a canvas left in the living room, I think – what had I been painting that week? I don't think I've painted since then. It as a tree, I think – the weeping willow that had grown in my backyard growing up. When I was a child, I had always imagined it had magical powers. One night I had stayed out until dark pretending I was a queen and the area protected by that tree was my solitary kingdom. I made myself a garland out of fallen branches that gave me magical powers and climbed the rough branches until I could see over the fence that enclosed our backyard. Everything I could see was my kingdom. The branches of the tree arced downwards, forming a kind of dome, and I imagined that no one outside of that sphere could see me. I was so high up, and I could see everything. I felt like I was truly a queen until I heard my mother's voice:

“Katie, come down from there! It's dinnertime!”

She could see me after all. I climbed down, dismayed, and set my willow garland aside on one of the lower branches. When I returned the next day, I found it had dried and withered. It was no longer magical but dead. I tried to make another one, but could not seem to twist the branches into the right position, and when I climbed the tree I noticed all the gaps through which I could see the sky, my house, and the ground below me, also allowed others to see me. My crown had been stolen and my kingdom ransacked. The world seemed dimmer, like I had lost something important and could never get it back.

It had been a willow tree, too, under which Kathy and I had celebrated our move to Hillstown. We explored the woods behind our apartment complex until we were lost. The town

seemed so far away that we chanced a kiss – no one was around. She pushed me against the tree trunk, which was thicker than my hips, and ran her hands over me, and mine replied until we found ourselves half-naked. My jeans rubbed into the mud on the dirt path and my fresh-cut dark hair tangled with hers until we finished, sweaty and exhausted. No one would know. We lay on the path like that for a long time, not speaking, until we walked home in the twilight – to our new home. We held hands until we reached the main street. On that path, together, I felt like I had regained my crown. I was queen again – no longer of my backyard, but of something smaller, but more exquisitely beautiful – perfect and secret.

That tree – the willow tree in my backyard, and the one under which Kathy and I had made love – that's what I had been trying to paint. I never finished it. I should take it out sometime. I think Kathy put it in our closet the night of the dinner party, and just after, someone knocked at the door.

I dumped the pasta into the water, which had begun to boil, and smiled at the sound of Heather's enthusiastic greeting.

“Oh, my goodness – am I the first one here?”

“Yep. Katie's still cooking.”

“Hey, Katie!” she shouted from the living room. I turned and waved.

“You'd better pour Katie some wine before I drink it all,” she said to Kathy. “Who else is coming?”

“Jane and Drew, and I think Mark is bringing his new boyfriend.”

“Mark has a new boyfriend?” I shouted from the kitchen.

“Don't you remember? That's why he wasn't there last weekend. He had a date.”

“Yeah, but Mark has dates all the time.”

“He's really into this one. He works for Coalition Pink, I think he's been supervising Mark's -”

“He's dating his boss?”

“No, I mean, I don't think – Mark only volunteers there, anyway.”

“That's almost worse,” I mutter into the pot of pasta.

“That did happen awfully quick,” Heather said. “He was really into the last one, too, so we'll see how long this lasts.”

Someone knocked at the door again, and I made a face into the sauce pan where no one could see me. Mark was here.

“Hey girls, hey!” His whiny, high-pitched voice echoed into the living room. “This is Adam, the new love of my life!”

I raised my eyebrows. Really? It was getting hot in the kitchen. I opened the window so I could breathe.

“Oh, my God, it smells delicious in here! Katie, I just love your cooking,” Mark said, hugging me tightly, and I couldn't help but smile. “This is Adam! He's amazing.”

“Nice to meet you,” I smiled politely.

“My pleasure,” Adam said, his handshake a little too firm. He had honest-looking gray eyes, but his smile was crooked. I felt like he was somehow being rude to me.

“Katie makes the best pasta sauce,” Mark raved. “I've tried to make it like hers, but I just can't get it right.”

“It's tough to get the onions just right – you have to cook them for a while -” They were

burning! “Excuse me.” I turned back to the stove, turned it down several notches, and slowly poured in the store-bought sauce, stirring it carefully. The spice rack was a mess. Where was -

“Kathy, where's the cayenne pepper?”

“No idea. Are we out?”

“No, here it is.” I sprinkled a few dashes into the sauce. Mark left the kitchen to mingle with the other guests.

Just when I poured the pasta into the colander and as about to ask Kathy to set the table, there was a knock at the door – Jane. Thank goodness, she'd be here for dinner. I heard Kathy open the door and brought the plates out myself.

“Good to see you – where's Drew?”

“Oh – about that. He's, uhh, not coming. Hey, Katie!” She waved to me.

“Hey! You're just in time for dinner. Drew's not coming?”

“We, uhh, broke up.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry -”

“No, no, it's fine, it was for the best.” Her blue eyes seemed sad, but she smiled. I could get the details from her later.

“Hopefully we can cheer you up! This is Adam, and Mark, and Heather,” Kathy said, gesturing to each as she said their names.

“Nice to meet you,” Jane said, nodding awkwardly.

“The food's ready. Help yourselves,” I said to diffuse the awkward silence.

“So, Adam,” Kathy said once we were all seated, “Mark tells us you work for Coalition Pink.” I glared at her. I don't want to hear about that. She glanced back at me, her fork poised in

her left hand in the same position as mine in my right, and smiled slightly – sorry.

Adam chewed and swallowed before answering. “I’m the fundraising manager. It’s a wonderful organization – you two should get involved. We actually do a little work with lesbian advocacy on the side.”

“I might be down, actually,” Kathy said.

“Katie?” He looked at me, eyebrows raised. His hair was graying at the temples.

I shrugged. “Advocacy isn’t really my thing.”

“Not your thing? What do you mean?” I looked to Kathy for help, unsure what to say. Sorry, her face still said, but with a bit of a smile.

“I don’t know. I just don’t see it as political, that’s all. I just want to let it be, you know?” I wrinkled my nose. I felt so inarticulate. I don’t like talking about things like that. People like Adam bother me – they make everything into a political issue that needs to be discussed in forums and voted on and reduced to legal language. “Civil unions” aren’t good enough, it needs to be “marriage.” We need to have gender-neutral pronouns. I don’t know, I can’t make myself care about it. It’s not about that for me. It’s just about me and Kathy.

“Let it be? How can you let it be? It’s a life and death issue. You’ve heard of Matthew Shepard, right?”

“Well, yes, but -”

“We need to stop things like that. We need to make it so that any gay couple can walk down the street holding hands without fearing for their lives. How can you not care about that?” Adam slammed his fist on the table. His face was red.

“That would be kind of nice,” Kathy said.

“It would. I just don't think that's the way to go about.” I was shocked at the disdain in my voice. I don't usually voice my opinions like that. I looked at Jane, sitting to Kathy's right, diagonal from me. She was quiet, and her eyes flicked back and forth between me and Adam. I wondered what she was thinking.

“And what would you suggest?” he snapped back at me. “How are you going to stop prejudice?”

“Bring them to a gay club,” heather said, her mouth still half-full of pasta. I smiled. Jane giggled nervously. “No, seriously. My parents are really conservative. I was borderline homophobic until my freshman year of college, when my gay friend brought me to a gay club. Men in thongs can fix any prejudice.” Everyone laughed except for Adam. “It's – what do they call it in psychology?”

“Flooding,” Jane said. “If a patient has a phobia, one therapists sometimes expose them to it in large doses. It's called flooding.”

Heather laughed. “Yeah. That.”

“Do your conservative parents know what you do on the weekends, Heather?” Kathy said, smiling.

“Jesus, no. Oh, my God, Mark. You weren't at Matt and Stacey's last week. This random guy showed up – he was so drunk -”

“No one knew who he was,” Kathy jumped in.

“I don't think *he* knew who he was,” Heather said. “He couldn't even stand up. We all thought someone knew him and were trying to figure out who he was so we could get him home – but I think he just wandered in.”

“Oh, I missed all the fun!” Mark whined. “But it was worth it to hang out with this guy.”

He ran his hand down Adam's sleeve. I almost gagged. They just met!

“Katie, were you there?” Heather asked.

“Yeah.”

“Oh, that's right, I remember. You guys are almost like the same person.”

I smiled, and said nothing. Kathy's eyes met mine with the same mischievous expression.

I open my eyes slowly to look at Kathy, to compare her to the image of her in my head.

She was happy, playful, her eyes glinting with secrets that only we knew. But now – the kitchen had darkened enough that I could see her reflection in the window – her eyes seem dull, the light in them overwhelmed by the kitchen light, and her smile was gone.

A dull shrieking penetrates my hearing. The tea kettle! I didn't even hear it go off.

I stand up slowly. The golden light has faded to a dim pink, almost purple. I switch on the kitchen light and turn off the stove. The kettle calms down.

I pour the tea over the two cups I had left sitting by the stove, each with a teabag cradled inside them. Kathy still has not moved.

“Kathy.”

She turns and I see myself reflected in her glasses, only for a moment.

“Do you know where the honey is?”

“I think I left it in the cupboard.” She stands up, sleepily, as if she had been dreaming, and reaches for the cupboard. The jar of honey is nearly empty; she hands it to me and I split the remaining amount between the two cups of tea, watching it swirl and melt at the bottom. I throw out the bottle and scrawl “honey” on the grocery list taped to the side of the fridge while Kathy

stretches, catlike. I take a spoon from the drawer and stir the tea.

“You looked like you were thinking about something.”

“I was. It's been a long day.”

“What's up?” I lean against the counter, licking the spoon clean. Kathy returns to her seat, sitting sideways in the chair.

“You know how I've been feeling about work lately.”

“Mhmm.”

“I don't know. I couldn't write today. I felt this big wall – I mean, I've had writer's block before, but this is different. Everything felt forced, and I couldn't get rid of it.” I walk behind her and place my hands on the top of her head, running my hands through her hair to the ends. It is smooth, with only a few tangles. I work through these with my fingers, pulling them apart gently and working through each individual hair that will not come free on its own.

“You've always been brilliant.”

She leans her head back into my hands, and smiles at my, catching my hands and holding them on her shoulders as she closes her eyes and lowers her head again. Her neck is warm and my hands are cool.

“Thank you,” she says, “but I just don't feel it anymore. I feel like everything is crumbling – like *I'm* crumbling. I can't get my thoughts to flow the way that I used to, I can't write, I can't even think straight. I don't know what it is. But even my boss notices.”

I clasp her wrists and let go, and turn to draw the teabags from the cups. I sit at the other chair, across from her, and hand her one teacup, holding mine with both hands wrapped around it, hoping to warm them.

“What did she say?”

“She asked about that review I was writing, about the new restaurant, and I said I hadn't gotten very far. She said she noticed I'd been slow lately and that I need to step it up.”

I take a first sip – too hot. “I'm sorry.”

“She was nice about it. But she's right. I'm not working the way I used to.”

I've been feeling the same way, and I feel a twinge at the realization that I can't help her.

“Maybe I'm just getting old,” she sighs. “You haven't painted in a while.”

“No. I was just thinking that.”

“What happened to that one you were doing with the tree? You never finished it.”

“I know, I should. I haven't felt like painting lately.” I shuffle my feet and look down at the steam rising out of my tea cup, then across the table at Kathy's. It swirls around her face like a thin veil, and behind it her eyes are tired, with bags under them. She doesn't look like herself. She was so happy about that assignment, only a few days ago. As we walked there, she had said:

“This place just opened. I'm really excited to try the food. It's like a Mexican-Italian fusion.”

“That doesn't seem like it would work well,” I said.

“No, it doesn't, but supposedly they make it work somehow. I want to know how. And I feel like it will be really easy to write about – it's so unique. I think I'll have a lot to say.” And as we had sat facing each other, waiting for our meal, her eyes were bright. The menu alone had her talking nonstop.

“Cheese manicotti tacos? This is brilliant! I'm going to have so much to say. And these decorations!” The restaurant was decked with elegant Roman pillars and vines, punctuated by

bright Mexican colors and colorful Christmas lights. I had been skeptical, but I had to admit that it worked.

But now, she can't seem to get anywhere with it. She's stuck, and there's nothing I can do because I'm stuck, too, so I suggest pizza for the night, and she goes to bed soon after.

I remain in the living room, sinking into the blue chair and staring at the accumulating clutter – some of Kathy's notebooks, my purse, a few crumpled dollar bills, and now the pizza box with the half-eaten crusts waiting to go stale before morning. I should throw it out, put the leftovers in the fridge, I should clear the change off of the table and replace it in my wallet before hanging my purse on the hook by the door, I should stack Kathy's notebooks on the endtable by the couch, but instead I sit, unmoving. The kitchen light is the only one lit in the whole apartment. One of the bulbs is out, and it casts the kitchen in an ugly brown. The bright red flecks on the stove bring me back to the dinner party a few weeks ago – the apartment cleaner, brighter, the guests chattering and cheerful, Kathy tipsy and playful.

After everyone had left, I kicked off my shoes and stumbled over them a little. A few dirty plates remained on the kitchen table, but I ignored them and sat on Kathy's lap in the blue chair, the one I sit in now. I closed my eyes, rested my head on the back of the chair behind her, and felt the room tilt pleasantly. Kathy's eyes were closed, too, and I listened to the sound of her breathing calmly as her fingers trickled slowly over my thighs just above my knees.

But now the apartment echoes not with the voices of Heather and Jane, deep in conversation, or Mark's cheerful whine, but with Kathy's soft, sad whispers from earlier, her voice cracked, tired, and old, and the pizza that had come to our door already cold squishing flavorless between our teeth. I should get ready for bed. Sleepily, I turn off the kitchen light and

shuffle to the bathroom.

I wait until the door is closed before turning on the light so that the sound doesn't wake Kathy. The full moon, shining through the window, floods my vision with light. As I reach for the switch, I see my reflection illuminated by the moonlight in the mirror, and I drop my hand. My eyes, unnaturally blue, rimmed in thick eyeliner and mascara that has smudged beneath my eyes, make me look tired and ugly; my face somehow distorted. My bangs partially obscure my eyes. I need a haircut, and yet my hair still looks too short, although it has grown past my shoulders, and too dark, barely even glinting in the moonlight. My lips are pale and colorless. I feel unattractive, but it's almost as if the reflection isn't me – it's somehow false, a poor facsimile of my usual face, as if a stranger had stolen my clothes and tried to copy my make-up. I examine each of my facial features in isolation – my nose is still my long, thin nose, and when I push aside my bangs my eyebrows are still the correct shade of light brown – but as a whole, it doesn't come together right. My reflection's eyes droop, her skin looks greasy. I feel the same heaviness in my own eyes, feel the grease seeping out of my own pores, but somehow the physical manifestations of my tiredness feels disconnected from their appearance in my reflection.

I turn on the light, squinting in the brightness. My reflection squints back, miming me. The light changes nothing, although now the ugliness is more harsh, my skin sallow, and I can more clearly see the creases below my eyes where my make-up has collected. I switch it off again. The moonlight casts a silvery blue light over my reflection, and I see Kathy earlier, in the kitchen, golden.

Quietly, I open the bathroom door and cross the hall into the bedroom. Kathy is sprawled across the bed in her nightgown, her face hidden behind the mess of her hair. My own nightgown

lies crumpled on the floor. I step out of my jeans and slide the silky white fabric over my body, and barefoot, I cross the bedroom to the closet where Kathy stashed my easel and painting supplies.

Back in the bathroom, the reflection is unchanged, only now she's wearing my nightgown. I stroke the canvas once, my brush coated in black paint. My reflection does the same, her eyes parallel to my own. The way she watches me feels malicious, like she's mocking me; she's not real, she isn't really painting me. I set the easel aside. Any beginning art student knows not to paint a portrait straight-on – my high school art teacher called it the “yearbook photo” composition. It's boring. I lean forward with one elbow on the counter, my chin in my hand – too contemplative. I step back, taking more of the bathroom into my visual field – no, that skews the focus. Then I notice a third reflection in the mirror fixed to the medicine cabinet, at a right-angle to the larger mirror. I wave with my right hand, and the first reflection moves back with the opposite hand – her left – but the second waves back with her right.

I reposition the easel and begin to paint again, imagining a perspective from behind my head that captures both of the reflections. I begin with the outline of my head, the back of my hair – then move on to the twin reflections. Repeatedly, I take too much paint onto the brush and have to rinse it to thin the paint.

Before I move onto the highlights, I step back. From a distance, I can see that the proportions are off. The reflections are too big. They overwhelm the canvas; even the back of my head appears to be a background detail. I blink, staring, listening to my eyelids creak. It's too dark. There's too much shadow. It's a mess. I sigh and remove it from the easel, and once I've brushed my teeth and removed my make-up, I throw it in the back of the closet, not bothering to

leave it out to dry.

Our alarm clock goes off at seven o'clock three days later, on Friday morning. I roll over to slap the snooze button, then roll back the other way into Kathy's arms. She is warmer than the air in the bedroom, and I relish the feel of her. I close my eyes. She kisses my forehead and pulls away, standing up. The sheets turn cold without her.

“Just five more minutes?”

“Okay.”

She crawls back in beside me, and I shut off my thoughts, melting into her. The alarm shrieks again. I groan, and do not move as she stands up and turns it off.

“You're awfully tired this morning.”

“Mmm. I couldn't sleep.” I had spent the night before exhausted, pacing the kitchen, trying to convince my body that it was bedtime.

“How late were you up?”

“I don't know. Three.”

She laughs. I sit up halfway to watch her pull on a solid pink sundress. “Going to work early today?”

“Yep. I have to finish that assignment from yesterday by nine.” Her skin glows healthily, and she blinks her eyes, her pupils rapidly expanding. She opens the blinds. “It's lovely out!” I roll away from the window again, mildly annoyed by her cheer. She hits me with a pillow. “Let's eat breakfast. You'll feel better.”

I stumble to the kitchen in my nightgown. The apartment is warm with sunlight as I place two bagels in the toaster. I walk back to the bedroom and sit on the bed, watching Kathy fix her

hair in the full-length mirror. She opens the closet.

“Do you know where I put that brown belt?”

“No.” She kneels on the floor and pulls a few shoes and other items out of the dark mess of the closet floor. I admire the highlights in the back of her hair.

“What's this?” From the corner of the closet, she pulls out the canvas from the other night – the mirror painting.

“Oh, don't look at that. It's so bad.”

“Why? It looks interesting.”

“I'm not happy with it.”

I watch her eyes flickering over the canvas, examining every corner.

“It's a little dark, but it's a good start,” she says. “What's going on with her eyes here?”

“I don't know. I thought my reflection was making fun of me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don't know. I'm going to shower.” The painting disturbs me, the anxious way my eyes bulge, and I don't want to think about it or talk about it, not even with Kathy. Something about it excludes her, something I don't know how to explain to her or even to myself. I wish I had just thrown it away.

Beneath the flow of the hot water, in the clean white bathtub, I feel the grease and sweat of yesterday slide off of my body, leaving me fresh. It's odd – in the shower, we are so absorbed in our body without actually looking at it. I slide my hands over my wet skin without thinking. Through the clear shower curtain, which is beginning to develop a few specks of mold in the corner, I see the outline of my body in the fogged-over mirror. I'm throwing out that portrait.

Afterward, I wrap myself in a fluffy towel and step out of the bathroom. Kathy has left already – something is burning! I forgot about the bagels. I run to turn off the toaster; the bagels have been burned to a black, inedible mess, and I throw them in the trash.

After I dress, I return to the kitchen. There should be a banana or two in the basket above the fridge. I reach up without looking, and my hand meets something unpleasantly squishy. The rotten banana is brownish black all the way around, and breaks off in the middle when I hold it, the other half landing on the floor with a sickening splat. I gag.

I sink into my chair in the living room and close my eyes. Sleepiness pulls me into the soft fabric. I don't have to leave yet – I can wait a few minutes – no. I'll just fall asleep again if I stay here.

The portrait – I need to take care of that before I go. It is still lying on the bed where Kathy left it. I pick it up, curious what she saw in it. Maybe it's not as bad as I thought. I try to think through what I was feeling that night. Somehow, it resonates with my current mood. I open the closet and push it all the way to the back, covering it with the half-finished painting of the willow tree so that Kathy won't ask me about it again.

Outside, it is not yet too hot, but I can tell that later it will be the kind of day where you start sweating the second you step outside. The sky is cloudless, and the humidity hangs heavily in the air. Nonetheless, Kathy was right – it's lovely. A woman walking a golden retriever smiles and says hello as she passes me. The thick leaves of the overhead trees provide a delicious, green-tinted shade, beckoning with their branches. Down the entire block, coffee shops are opening for breakfast, the dry-cleaner and the shoe store turning their signs to “open.” A pair of teenagers – probably skipping school – push past me, giggling. Everyone I pass smiles at me,

and the sky is wide open, inviting me to fly into the blue abyss, but I turn my eyes downward, watching the lines in the sidewalk pass by one by one beneath my sneakers. I wish people were less friendly, and I pretend to ignore their greetings.

Finally I reach my destination, the Hillstown Public Library. I wave to Jane at the circulation desk on the way to my cubicle at the back of the staff area. Several carts full of books requiring spine labels are waiting for me.

Most of these books are old, their covers torn in places, the call numbers written in some ancient library assistant's abysmal handwriting. Some of them are faded; in other cases, the label was illegible to begin with. A few newer books are sprinkled throughout; some of these are mislabeled, while the labels of others are falling off entirely, leaving the book's spine bare. With no call number, it has no place.

Before I begin working, I draw back the window shades; my window faces west, and the brick wall of the building next door is dark. I turn on my computer and plug in my headphones, trying to find music that will suit my mood – something not too happy, but loud enough to wake me up.

I turn the volume up on a playlist titled “Teenage Angst,” and turn toward the first cart with the music thumping into my ears. I printed the labels just before I left yesterday. I pull the first book – a brown, leather-bound volume of an encyclopedia of trees. Who would read this? I cover the call number, which had been written so small that I doubt anyone over the age of forty could decipher it, with a thick piece of brown bookbinding tape. I place the new label over it and cover it with laminate, smoothing it with a wooden tool.

I yawn. The entire volume set is here. Occasionally I'll stop when I'm working to read a

few pages of something if it looks interesting, but this cart is all reference books. I work slowly, struggling to keep my eyes open.

I took this job because I wanted something quiet and boring. It means I have more energy at the end of the day to exercise my brain in other ways – mainly painting. But that means I have to shut it off while I'm here, and on days like today I can find nothing remotely interesting or worthwhile in it.

Kathy's job is different. I picture her at her desk right now, typing frantically, occasionally sipping at an iced tea. She is focused intently, pounding away at the keyboard and scrolling up and down periodically to reread what she has written. I see her hesitate over an imprecise word, an awkward phrase, imagine her suddenly noticing and deleting a superfluous comma. Her boss asks if she'll have that article finished within half an hour, it needs to go online, and hear her reply affirmatively without looking up. Half an hour later, she sighs and attaches it to an e-mail, giving up on developing a kicker that doesn't sound cheesy.

She loves it, but she never gets a break, and then she beats herself up when she gets burned out. I remember her in college, in the library at three in the morning, as we wrote our papers for freshman writing with no hope of finishing them by morning. She glanced back and forth uncertainly between her glowing computer screen and the upperclassman offering to sell her some of his Adderol prescription.

"I'm going home," I said, closing my laptop. "I have drawing class at nine o'clock." I'll turn it in late."

"Goodnight," she whispered absently, rubbing her eyes behind her glasses. "Maybe just a small dose," she said to the upperclassman.

She had long since given up artificial stimulants, but still expected the same results. I'm definitely the night owl, but some days she stays up long after me, frantically scribbling at some project.

After two hours I've barely made it through two thirds of the cart, and I can no longer see straight. I stare at a label, and catch my eyes as they close, jerking my head upright. Maybe just a few more, and then I'll take my break.

"Katie!" A voice comes muffled through my headphones. I snap my head up and remove them – Jane is poking her head into my cubicle.

"I'm on break. Want to grab Millie's?"

I yawn before I can answer. "Yeah. I was just about to take mine, too. I'm starving."

Across the street, Millie's is empty – we hit the lull between breakfast and lunch. The dark wood tables gleam; the silver barstools are polished as if brand new. It's too bright. My stomach turns, queasy; I order a bagel with plain jelly, hoping to settle it. The cashier hands it to me with a smile, exposing her perfect white teeth. I turn my lips up slightly in reply.

"You look so tired," Jane says, and bites her vegetable sandwich with enthusiasm.

"Yeah. I think I need food. I didn't have breakfast today."

"Couldn't sleep?"

I shake my head.

"I always drink warm milk and honey before bed. It works wonders."

"People actually do that?" If anyone did, it would be Jane.

"I don't have scientific proof, but it works for me."

"Maybe I'll try it."

We eat silently for a moment. The bagel is helping, although I wish they hadn't skimped on the jelly. My head hurts, but my stomach seems to be slowly returning to normal.

“I had lunch with Drew yesterday.”

I swallow, hard. “What? Really? How was that?”

“Fine,” she says. “I think I'm okay to be friends with him now.”

My mind flashes back to her face the Monday after they broke up, sitting in these same seats after work. It was more crowded then, with families eating dinner, and people like us relaxing after work. She had been sad, but so calm. I wondered how she did it, how she ended it so seamlessly - “mutually” - how she had let go of someone who had shared her life for over two years. And yet she had shrugged it off, dealt with it quietly and calmly, until now her eyes told me she was back to herself.

“And him?”

Her mouth turns up at the side sarcastically. “He could use a little more time. But he thinks he's okay. I can't tell him what to do – he has to look out for himself.”

I nod, admiring her intuition.

“I'm enjoying the single life. I went out with your friend, Heather. She's – good at it.”

I smile. I've never seen someone enjoy being single as much as Heather. “She's really more Kathy's friend.”

“How is Kathy?”

“She's good. Stressed about work, but that's nothing new.”

“I'm glad. You two are so similar,” Jane said. “I don't know how you do it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don't know. You carry yourselves the same way. You talk the same way. And you both have this undercurrent – it's sort of anxious,” she says. She screws up her face. “It's fascinating to watch, like you're these two pieces of a puzzle and you fit together more perfectly than you ought to. It's uncanny. But I don't think I could do that. I need someone more different from me. Drew and I were too similar,” she continues, looking upward contemplatively, “but not now. I need a long break from boys.” She glances at the thin silver watch on her wrist. “Speaking of breaks – ours is up.”

Back in my cubicle, I process her words. Sometimes people hit a little too close to home. For the millionth time, I question whether it's safe to live as we do. Some people see so much.

I glare at the cart of books as if trying to finish it with my mind. Thank God they pay me to be here. It's so stupid, sometimes. Some of these call numbers are perfectly legible. It's like they don't have anything better to do.

At Millie's, I had felt better momentarily, but now I'm gloomy again. My hands become dusty from handling the books, but when I wash them too frequently, they dry out. The walls of my cube, covered in some kind of drab gray fabric, feel too close today, and the line of carts that flows outside the entrance makes me feel like I'm enclosed in a prison of books. No matter where I turn my mind I seem to hit those same gray walls or bump into a cart of books, knocking them over to form a mess I can't clean up without knocking over more. By the end of the day, I'm angry at nothing in particular, and all I want is to stare into blank space.

Part 2 (summary)

In Part 2, Katie's insomnia worsens. She has difficulty focusing on her work and on her painting. Kathy and her friends become concerned; Kathy is also experiencing difficulties in her life. Once Katie starts calling in sick to work more often, her friend Jane talks to her and suggests that she see a therapist.

Part 3

No hurry, Dr. lake thinks as she walks slowly down the twisting corridor that leads from her office to the waiting room. Katelynnne Bellevue had not been there five minutes earlier, at six, when she last made her way down this path. Dr. Lake didn't mind that she was late. It gave her the chance to lounge in the comfortable leather chair behind her desk and watch the beginnings of the sunset outside her window.

She opens the heavy oak door to the waiting room. A girl with frazzled, artificially black hair, the roots showing light brown, is bent over a clipboard of forms and writing frantically, occasionally pausing to read.

“Katelynnne?” The girl looks up. Her eyes are heavily made-up, eyeliner smudged beneath the bottom lid. Her skin is clear, the faintest beginning of a wrinkle on one cheek, but her large eyes and something in her manner might make her appear childlike to a less discerning eye.

“Oh, that's me,” she says, standing. “I, um, haven't finished these forms.”

“I'm Dr. Lake. You can finish those after the session.”

“Oh. Okay. I go by Kate.” The girl holds out her hand for Dr. Lake to shake, and Dr. Lake notices that the skin of her fingers is peeling.

“Nice to meet you. Follow me, please.”

Once they reach Dr. Lake's office at the end of the hallway, Dr. Lake gestures to Kate to sit on the couch. Kate looks around the room; Dr. Lake sees her eyes rest on the box of tissues at either end of the couch. Dr. Lake settles her weight into her chair and pauses before asking her standard first question.

“Why don't you tell me what brings you here today?” She already has an idea, of course. Over the phone, Kate had clumsily articulated her lack of interest in her daily activities and her difficulty sleeping.

“Oh. Well – I guess I haven't quite been myself lately.”

“How so?”

“Part of it, I guess, is that I can't really sleep. And I've been tired all the time, so I've been calling in sick to work a lot, so that I can sleep during the day.”

“So you can sleep during the day.”

“Yes. It's just at night. I stay up until dawn, just thinking.”

“Thinking?”

“Yes, just thinking.”

“Is something on your mind that's keeping you up?”

“No, no, it's not like that. I just can't sleep, and then I'm awake, and I think. But that's not the main issue. It's, well, I call in to work, and then I sleep until three or so, and I just don't do anything. I mean, I usually cook dinner, for me and my girlfriend, but that's it. I don't want to do anything. I paint, sometimes, but I never finish. It's just not satisfying.”

Dr. Lake nods slowly. A classic case of depression. Kate's face is tense, like she's trying to think of something else to say. Dr. Lake begins speaking again, slowly.

“Tell me about your girlfriend.”

“She writes for a website. We're very close. We live together...I don't know, what do you want to know?”

“How is your relationship?”

“Oh, it's wonderful. No one really understands me like her.” Kate looks down and picks at the skin around her nails. “But I think that lately I've been kind of hostile.”

“Hostile how?”

Last week she came home late and I was lying on the couch staring at the fraying old fabric and the ugly brown pattern. I didn't move when she came in. It was dark.

“Did you eat dinner?”

Maybe I won't even answer. Pretend to be asleep. “No.”

She threw down her bag and turned on the kitchen light, her flip flops slapping the floor cheerfully.

“Want some?”

I listened to the cupboards creaking. No. No, I don't want anything.

“Katie?”

“No.”

Then the sounds of the sink running, plates clinking, the fridge opening and closing. I closed my eyes.

“Are you sure? You should eat.” Her voice was so energetic, so awake.

“I'm fine.” A crash as she dropped something on the floor.”

“Oh, and do you know where the olive oil is?”

I sighed dramatically. “No, Kathy. Can you please leave me alone? I don't want to talk.”

“I don't know. I snap at her. She always wants to know what's wrong, but I can't figure it out myself.”

Dr. Lake nods again. She puts on what she thinks of as her “sympathy face” - eyes

scrunched together, looking the patient in the eyes with an air of thoughtful contemplation, head cocked to one side.

“Do your friends and family know?”

“Know what?”

“That you have a girlfriend.”

“Our friends all know. My dad doesn't.” Kate's voice trails to a mumble.

“And your mother?”

“My mother.” Kate nods, looking down. “She, umm. She killed herself when I was twelve.”

The master bedroom, still warm and cozy, suspiciously tidy – the pink and brown quilt made for once with only a few wrinkles where she had stood on it to tie the rope to the ceiling fan. The rope that swayed gently. I couldn't scream. I couldn't move. I stared. It had to be a nightmare. It took me at least ten minutes to realize that it was real and that I should be calling 911. Even if I knew she was dead.

Dr. Lake nods. “That must have been very hard for you.” Her thoughts raced, wondering how this was all connected. Depression...relationship trouble...father doesn't know about girlfriend...mother suicide.

“Umm, yeah. Yeah, it was. I grew up with just her, and I didn't even know my dad or – or my, umm, stepsiblings.”

Dr. Lake gently allows this to sink in. Then she gently asks: “How did she kill herself?”

Her body was swollen, bloated. She looked fat, I thought, and stifled the thought. Not appropriate. It couldn't be real. What could I do? I couldn't take her down. I couldn't reach, and I

didn't want to touch her. It wasn't my mother. Not my thin, pretty mother, not with those swollen toes and bulging eyes behind her coke bottle glasses. She had kept her glasses on.

But that was so long ago. No, I don't need to think about this. I don't want to talk about it. It only bothers me when I think about it.

"She hung herself."

Dr. Lake nods. "I'm very sorry."

Kate shrugs. "I mean, it was a long time ago." It sounds insincere. Too cheerful.

"How is your relationship with your father?"

"A liar and a cheat. Never trust a man, Katie. They'll steal your heart and they won't give it back. And they won't say they're sorry, either."

"It's okay. We don't talk much, but I don't hate him. But I think the divorce was his fault. I think he had an affair. Mom always said things about him." A subtle anger laces her voice.

"How old were you when they divorced?"

"I had barely been born. I moved in with him - after." Dr. Lake nods. "He wasn't as bad as she made him sound."

Dr. Lake nods again. She's holding back. She doesn't like talking about this – it's traumatic. She's still suffering from it. Fear of abandonment, my guess. She always thinks everyone will leave her.

Still, Dr. Lake thinks, maybe not now. Next time. She smiles, friendly.

"You told me you paint sometimes. Are you an artist?"

"It's just a hobby. I haven't been doing it as much lately."

"How come?"

“I – can’t. It just doesn’t work.”

Tuesday night, after I did the dishes, I observed Kathy, still in her seat, while she stared out the window. The gold sunlight struck her, like that day, only a few weeks ago, when I was so entranced by her that I didn’t even hear the tea kettle. Only the light was different – no less bright, but somehow colder. Summer is ending.

I set up my easel in the doorway to the kitchen.

“Next weekend, Mark and Adam want to do something with us,” she said, examining her nails. “Are you free?”

“I think so.” I adjusted the height of my easel to the right level.

“They want to double date. They want to try this place – oh, you’re painting!” She looked up hopefully.

“Yes. Don’t move.”

“Do you want me to pose for you?”

I didn’t answer. She waited for me to tell her how to sit, but something was off. I moved the easel back a few paces. The kitchen transformed into a pale gold box surrounded by the darkness of the living room. Kathy looked like she was imprisoned by a glass box, held in suspension. I frowned at the canvas.

“Yes. Just like you were a moment ago.”

“Like this?” She put her chin in her hand and stared out the window again.

“Yes, well, sort of – maybe cross your legs. No, that’s not quite right.” I turned my head sideways, the box rotating in my vision. “Maybe try thinking about whatever you were just thinking about.” Her shoulders slumped slightly, but her eyes were still missing something. I

tapped my chin with my finger.

“I don't know. Stay like that, I guess.” I picked up my pencil and tried to sketch her before painting. My pencil seemed to slip out of my grip, trailing into places I didn't want it to go. The canvas became covered with pieces of eraser, and the erased lines left a faint residue. Eventually I scratched out something that resembled her outline, but by then, the sun had set.

“It's no use. I can't see you anymore.”

“I can turn the light on -”

“No. I wanted to get you in the sunlight. Nevermind.”

“What do you mean it doesn't work?”

“I don't know. I try to start, and it doesn't go right. Then I get frustrated and I stop.

Dr. Lake nods. She had never been a creative person herself, but her friend Stacey, a writer, always complained about her writer's block.

“Maybe you're too worried about making it perfect.” Dr. Lake had seen patients like this before. They wanted everything to be just right, so they froze and did nothing. Kate insists to Dr. Lake that that isn't the case, her paintings aren't even good let alone perfect, the usual. Dr. Lake reassures her until the session is over, and sends her to reflect and absorb what she has learned.

The next week, Kate is on time for her appointment. The dark spots under her eyes have grown darker. Her eyes are red, and she blinks them as if they are dry, occasionally rubbing them.

“How are you today, Kate?”

“I'm here, so I guess that means I'm still crazy.”

Dr. Lake smiles. “I don't think you're crazy.”

Kate shrugs.

“How are things with Kathy?”

Kate stares at the oriental rug. Dr. Lake watches her eyes follow a thin, vine-like structure to its conclusion at a round bulb before she answers.

“I don't think she quite gets it.”

“Gets what?”

“This. Whatever this is.”

“Therapy?”

“No, no. My – feelings.”

“I see.” Dr. Lake nods. “And this is bad – why?”

“Well, she's my – she's – we're like two sides of the same coin.”

Dr. Lake nods. “No relationship is perfect. There's always some kind of disconnect.” She smiles. “When my husband and I fight, we set a certain amount of time to cool off. Then we talk about it rationally.”

“But this is different. We're not like that.”

“Different how?”

“We don't ever fight.”

Dr. Lake nods, skeptical, but plays along for the moment. “How long have you known each other?”

Kate sits up straight, her eyes wide.

I waited on the bench at the airport with Grandma, my legs shaking so hard that they jiggled beneath the bench, not knowing where I was going or what to expect. I wouldn't fly out

to meet them alone, so they were coming to get me.

“How – how long?”

Then I saw them. He looked younger than I expected – dark, straight brown hair, khakis and a blue shirt, and I knew it was them immediately, because there she was. She rolled a hot pink suitcase behind her, chewed a piece of gum, and her hair was long and her bangs were cut straight across. She was wearing the exact same dress that Mom had bought me for my birthday two months before, the dark blue one I had almost worn today but decided I would rather be in jeans. They didn't even have to say, “Katie, this is your twin sister, Kathy,” because the second we saw each other we both knew everything.

“I guess – we met in college.”

“You guess?”

“No, no. We met sophomore year.”

Dr. Lake nodded.

“And how long have you lived together?”

“About five or six years.”

“And you've never fought, or even -”

“No. We've barely even disagreed on anything.”

Dr. Lake nods, slowly. Kate is shaking. Dr. Lake makes her voice extra gentle.

“Sometimes fighting can be a healthy part of a relationship.”

“I know, but -”

“It's perfectly normal, especially if you've been together for so long -”

“I know it is! But we're not, we're – we're – there's something wrong! If she can't reach

me – something isn't right. How do I fix it?" Kate's voice cracks. She looks Dr. Lake straight in the eyes, and Dr. Lake thought she could see tears beginning to form.

"Are you happy with your relationship?"

Kate looks down. "I'm not happy at all right now."

Dr. Lake cocks her head to the side. Kate's brow is furrowed.

"Let me ask you this. Is Kathy anything like your mother?" She speaks softly, as if addressing a baby animal.

Kathy stops moving.

"She looks a lot like her."

"And are their personalities similar?"

"What does this have to do with anything?" Kate snaps, her voice impatient.

"I'm just trying to get a sense of how your childhood affected your current relationship dynamics. You'd be surprised how much of our childhood we carry with us."

Kate nods. "That does make sense." She bites her lip and thinks for a moment. "Kathy is a lot like my mother."

"How so?"

Kate thinks about this for a long time. "She always needs attention. And she doesn't seem like she does. She won't say it out loud. But you can tell, she needs it. She needs to feel secure."

Dr. Lake nods. "And you feel like you need to take care of her."

"No, I think I might actually be the same way. But – more explicitly."

Dr. Lake nods.

"But Kathy is more stable than Mom was."

Dr. Lake nods. "I'm afraid we're out of time for today," she says quietly.

Kate raises her eyebrows and her eyes flick to the clock on the wall. "Oh – I didn't even realize."

"What are you doing tonight?"

I look up from my work. It is Friday afternoon, and Jane is leaning casually against the side of my cubicle, arms crossed

"I had plans with Kathy. Why?"

"Would she mind if you canceled them?"

Yes. She's been talking about this double date for weeks, but I want to know what Jane is getting at, especially if it means avoiding an evening with Mark and Adam.

"What for?"

"I just got invited to this dinner party. You'll like the people hosting it. It's this married couple, and the guy is a five-star chef. They told me I could bring one person."

"I don't know, Jane. Kathy wanted to do something with her friends."

"I can see if she can come, too."

"Well – let me text her." I text Kathy and ask if she wants to come.

"I'm not dressed, though." My hair isn't done. I'm wearing worn-out jeans and yesterday's t-shirt.

"Come to my place after work. You can borrow something."

"I guess that would work." My phone vibrates.

"They'll be upset if we cancel."

"Is it really a big deal?" I type back.

“I don't know, she's really set on hanging out with her friends tonight.”

“Would she really be that upset if you came without her?”

“Well, it's a double date...” I picture Mark's obnoxious, nasal laugh in response to something Adam has said that he for some reason finds intelligent.

“You know what, I think I'll cancel.”

A few hours later, I am sitting at dinner in one of Jane's tight-fitting dresses and heels, my ankles crossed self-consciously beneath the table. The food is served. It is some kind of salmon dish with a creamy sauce. It is lemon flavored, the salmon cooked exactly right. I tell the host so, and he nods in gratitude. Jane sits to my right. On my left is an art history professor, and we have been speaking about German expressionism for the past twenty minutes while sipping red wine.

My phone buzzes.

“You should have come. We're having lots of fun.”

I respond:

“What did you end up doing? The food here is amazing!”

I feel it buzz again, but the man on my left is talking to me again.

“Try the asparagus,” he says. It is tender and fresh.

“Have you traveled much?” he asks. I shake my head.

“Just within the U.S.”

“You should travel more. You'd like it.” He takes a bite, chews, and swallows before continuing. “You should go to Africa, or South America.”

“I've always wanted to go to Italy.”

“Everyone wants to go to Italy.”

“I just don't think I could handle Africa.”

“No one can – that's the fun of it. Until you get malaria – but that's not the worst thing that can happen to you in life.”

I lean back in my seat and turn to face him, sipping my wine. “What is the worst thing, then?”

He takes a long sip.

“Being trapped,” he says finally. “Thinking yourself into a hole you can't get out of, and being trapped by nothing but your own inhibitions. Holding yourself back.”

I ponder this for a moment before answering. “But then how can you hold onto anything? How can anything be stable if you can't even keep your thoughts constant?”

“That's the trick, though,” he says. “You can't hold onto anything. You have to let go, because the tighter you hold on, the more you realize you're holding on to nothing, that there was nothing there to begin with.” He appears to be thinking this through as he says it.

“But how can that be nothing, if something is important to you? What about love?”

“Love,” he repeats, “love. Hmm.” He appears lost in thought, and I don't want to interrupt, so I check my phone again.

“We went to a party. There are a million people here. Mark was upset you didn't come.”

I close my phone without answering.

“Love,” the art history professor says, “is the greatest trap of all.” He leaves the table.

“He was flirting with you,” Jane whispers in my ear.

“What? No, he wasn't!”

“Oh, he was. You don't know how guys work,” she says.

“You'd be surprised.”

“What do you mean? You mean you're not - ?”

“No, I'm not a lesbian. I was into guys before Kathy.”

“I never would have guessed.” She holds my gaze a moment too long, then looks down quickly.

After dessert, she drives me home. Kathy is still out; the apartment is cold and dark. I unlock the door. I change out of Jane's dress and look around as if I had lost something, trying to decide what to do. I notice that the trash is piling up in the kitchen, but ignore it.

I open my closet to hang up Jane's dress. I push some clothes to the side and notice the corner of a canvas, dark blue, hidden behind something else. The mirror painting.

I push the debris aside and remove it carefully. I was right, there are still a lot of problems with it, but it's not as bad as I remember. My eyes hold no emotion. I try to remember how I felt that night. Like I couldn't hold onto myself, like I was lost somehow.

The door opens, and I set the painting aside. Kathy stumbles into the bedroom.

“How was the party?” I ask, embracing her.

“Good,” she snaps. “You should've come.”

“I know. I feel bad. I didn't think it was a huge deal. It sounds like you had fun anyway.”

She takes off her shoes and continues speaking without looking at me. “Katie, we've been planning this for weeks. I thought you were excited about it.”

I sit on the bed. “Well, *you* were planning it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don't even like Mark and Adam. They drive me nuts.”

“They're your friends!”

“No, they're your friends.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I just – I want my own friends, okay?” I'm shaking. I've never shouted at her before.”

“What? Katie, what are you talking about? You can't yell at me like that!” I stare at her, both of our eyes wide. We can't believe we're yelling at each other.

“I'm sorry, Kathy. You're right. I shouldn't have gone. Let's not – let's not do this.”

Her face is still stunned, but she nods.

“Maybe we can go with them some other time.”

“I think they would like that.”

I'm shaking. Tears slide out of my eyes, and she puts her arms around me.”

“It's okay.”

“I know. We've just never -”

“I know.”

Later, we lie in bed, and I'm still shaking. I can't seem to stop.

Kate looks better this week – less pale, with a healthy glow in her cheeks. Her hair is still tousled, but she's fixed the roots, and even smiles nervously when Dr. Lake greets her. Dr. Lake isn't sure where to begin.

“What do you want to talk about today, Kate?”

“Oh. I'm not sure.” Instead of staring at the rug today, Kate glances out the window. It's not a terribly hot day, and dry, the faint scent of autumn hanging in the air. The view from Dr. Lake's office overlooks a park. The tips of a few trees are even beginning to yellow.

"You have a nice view," Kate says. Dr. Lake nods, but stays silent, waiting for Kate to answer.

"I don't know," Kate says, finally. "I've been feeling better the past few days."

"Better how?" Dr. Lake says, cocking her head.

"I suppose – I went out and had fun the other night."

"With Kathy?"

"No, not with Kathy. Actually, Kathy was kind of upset." Kate picks at her nails. "We had plans. But Jane, my friend from work, invited me to dinner."

"And Kathy was upset about that?"

"Well, we had plans – but I don't – she wanted to go on this double date, but honestly, her friends kind of annoy me." Dr. Lake furrows her brow. Kate is speaking rather quickly today.

"Annoy you how?"

"I don't know. They're too – flamboyant, too gregarious. And they try to simplify things." Dr. Lake is about to ask what this means, but Kate continues.

"And at dinner, I talked to this man – he was so interesting – and we talked about being trapped. He said the worst thing in the world was to be trapped.

"But then I got home and we almost had a fight. I don't know what to do. I feel like it's always her friends. But I don't want to fight." Her voice drops to a whisper.

"I told you last week – it's natural -"

"I know. But it feels wrong."

Dr. Lake nods. "Have you tried just telling her how you feel?"

Kate pauses. "It isn't like that."

“Like what?”

“Like I can just say it – just fix it with words. If I have to do that, something's already broken.”

“Maybe you should just try it.”

Kate doesn't answer for a long time.

“She can't read your mind,” Dr. Lake says softly.

Kate wrinkles her brow. “Can we maybe end early today?”

“Of course.”

“I just need to think some things out,” she mutters.

I press the elevator button impatiently. I had to get out of that office. She didn't get it, didn't get it at all. I couldn't do that, couldn't say something like that, couldn't have a “let's talk about our feelings” talk. Because she could read my mind. That was the whole point. That was what love was, wasn't it?

On the street, I walk without knowing where I'm going. An asphalt path leaves the sidewalk and trails into the park I had seen from Dr. Lake's office. I follow it, watching my feet slap quietly against the pavement. I try to focus on the rhythm and the steadiness of my breath. Try to calm myself. I need to sit. I need to be somewhere away from people.

The path twists into a cluster of trees. Quiet! The trees open onto a small creek, and I find a bench overlooking it. I sit with relief, exhaling sharply, allowing my body to cool, not moving. I try to see my reflection in the creek, but I can't.

I remember a moment when Kathy lay on her bed, and I traced my fingers lightly over her arms, around her face, through her hair. She closed her eyes and smiled. I imagined I was

touching her for the first time, that she was the very first thing I had ever touched. It wasn't sexual. And I knew that this was impossible, that I could not be feeling a connection like this, that it was wrong, it defied the laws of nature, but I felt it. Looking into her face, I saw a mirror of my own. She opened her eyes, and grabbed my hand, and we both knew, without a word, that our minds were one, that we were thinking the exact same thoughts.

How could that be broken? We spoke without speaking. But the connection has gone dead, as if someone snipped the telephone wire that connected our minds and our hearts.

I put my face into my hands, pressing my cool palms into my eyelids, and breathe. I try not to think, to listen to the creek and not think about anything. But it's broken.

A fat, wet raindrop hits my arm, then another. I stand and pull my umbrella out of my purse. I should just go home.

The rain patters against my umbrella pleasantly, and the air is cool against my skin. I watch the rain splattering in the puddles on the street, at the people hunching under umbrellas and scraps of newspaper. Distractions. The sky is gray, but bright, and everything is green and fresh. It feels more like April than August. I close the umbrella and the rain seems through my clothes, into my hair.

I stop for a moment and look up. The rain hits my cheeks and rolls down my neck like tears. It's like looking into a tunnel, the rain pouring around my face, but open. I feel like I'm falling.

I return my eyes to the street. It appears cluttered. I don't bother to re-open my umbrella, but continue on, allowing the rain to soak through my clothes. People stare at me, and I don't care. When I reach my building, I look up the brick face, not wanting to enter. In the elevator, I

think of what the art history professor said. It feels like a cage. I turn the key in my door. Kathy is sitting in the blue chair, reading a book, in only her underwear. She barely looks up when I enter. It is hot and humid in the apartment.

“The A/C is broken,” she says.

Love is the worst trap of all, he said. I stare at her until she looks up.

“What happened? You're all wet? I thought you brought your umbrella?”

I throw my umbrella in the corner and begin to remove my wet clothes. She stares at me. She thinks I've finally lost it. Maybe I have.

Wordlessly, she finds a dry towel and hands it to me. The air is so thick that it is hard to breathe. I am naked in the living room now, wrapped only in a towel, hair clumpy and dripping. Kathy's eyes bulge like a little girl's.

“Kathy,” I say, “do you remember that time, on your bed, when we just touched each other, and we knew...?”

She nods. I see tears in the corners of her eyes before she throws herself into my arms. I'm not sure what to do. I hold her, and feel her tears hot on my bare shoulder. She is suffocating me in this heat, but I don't let go, until she does, and she leads me to the bedroom, sniffing, without looking at me. She wraps herself around me from behind on the bed and cries into the back of my neck. She runs her hand down my arm and it is too much, too much like the other time and I feel it in the pit of my stomach, in my whole body, like a wave, and I cry, too.

“It's not there anymore, is it? It's just – gone.”

“I know. I've felt it, too.”

She pulls me tighter, and we lay there until the heat becomes unbearable.

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