

NAKED PEOPLE

By

Carmen D. Cain

Submitted to the

Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences

of American University

in Partial Fulfillment of

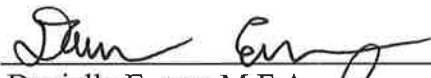
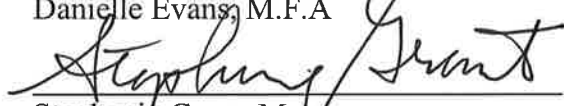
the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

In

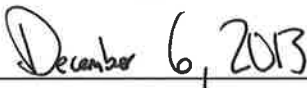
Creative Writing

Co-Chairs:

  
Danielle Evans, M.F.A.  
  
Stephanie Grant, M.A.



Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences



Date

2013

American University

Washington, D.C. 20016

© COPYRIGHT

by

Carmen D. Cain

2013

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

# NAKED PEOPLE

BY

Carmen D. Cain

## ABSTRACT

Naked People is an original work of fiction. This collection of stories follows the main protagonist from adolescence to young adulthood where she decides at various points whether or not to fit in with her peers.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b> iii
GRANNY SQUARES .....	1
FRIENDSHIP BRACELETS.....	13
HEARTS .....	28
NAKED PEOPLE .....	47
RAMBLES.....	67
SHARED HOUSING.....	84

## GRANNY SQUARES

Grandma Margaret cooked outrageous amounts of food for dinner: chicken or ham and once even a turkey with mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce, although it was July. For lunch she set out a bag of bread, a selection of cold cuts, and she, Amy, and Aunt Rose, who was really a great aunt, made themselves sandwiches. While they ate they listened to the radio. Grandma Margaret talked about politics and popular culture. Congress was full of idiots. Movie stars didn't wear enough clothes. Rose made small noises that could be assent or simply comprehension.

Rose was quieter than Grandma Margaret. Amy thought that she would like to be friends with Rose, but didn't know how to make friends with her. Grandma was her grandmother, Rose was a great aunt. Grandmothers loved you and paid attention to you and could sometimes be sharp with you if you were a handful, because they were your parents' parents, and that gave them almost as much right as your parents or maybe even more rights, because they had seen it all before and weren't as partial to you as your parents were. There were no rules for relationships with great aunts.

After lunch Grandma usually cleared the table and washed the dishes with the slightly louder than necessary bumping and clinking of someone who thinks that her days of bussing tables should be over. That day, Amy wanted to clear the table and do the dishes. Grandma planted her hands flat on the Formica kitchen table and began to lever herself out of her chair as usual.

"I'll clear up today, Grandma," said Amy. Amy liked helping and she didn't like listening to Grandma's sighing and commotion. She was more than tall enough to reach the sink, and she wasn't a clumsy girl. Why shouldn't she help with the dishes when Grandma and Rose were kind enough to let her stay with them all summer? Grandma sat down again.

“Thank you, Amy, how thoughtful of you.”

Amy put the leftover food back in the refrigerator and carried the empty dishes to the sink. She squeezed dish soap onto a sponge and ran lather over each dish before rinsing it under the tap and setting it on the wire dish rack. Amy liked having her hands in the soapy water and the feeling of the sponge over the dishes' surfaces. She could look out the kitchen window at the small back yard and over the chain link fences into the neighbors' back yards. Pretty blue curtains with ruffles decorated the windows. There were a few little kids playing in the yard next door, but most people were probably at work in the middle of a weekday. Amy's parents' house also had a window behind the sink, but they had a dishwasher and didn't appreciate it. That window didn't have any curtains and the little kids in Amy's neighborhood never seemed to have time to play outside.

When she was about five or six she had been allowed to fill up the kitchen sink of their house in San Diego with enough water to sail toy models of historical ships. She'd even had a submarine, but it wouldn't stay underwater on its own, she had to hold it with one hand and then she could only maneuver one other ship. It was supposed to be practice for when she was in the navy, but she knew that girls didn't go on ships. Maybe there were girls on land telling the ships where to go and what to do. She thought that was probably how it worked, because her father drove the car and her mother navigated. She would have liked to been able to go on a ship, but she didn't want to go on a submarine. Whenever one of her parents said that someone at work was a submariner she knew it meant that person was difficult. It was also a handy thing to call teachers and babysitters when they were being difficult, because they didn't know what it meant. But now she was twelve and didn't want to be in the navy when she grew up and she knew better

words to call her teachers, but she couldn't do it where they could hear because they probably knew that those words meant.

Amy enjoyed a sense of satisfaction as she lined up the three plates and three glasses in the wire rack, ready to be stacked nicely in the cabinet when they were dry. Maybe she should do all the dishes, since Grandma did all the cooking. It would be something nice for Grandma to tell her mother if she called. "She's so responsible, such a big help." Her mother would agree and say that she missed Amy. And then Grandma would rush her off the phone because she was calling long distance, from a naval base in Rhode Island, and there were probably other people waiting for the phone and she didn't want Amy's mother spending too much money on phone calls. Amy didn't know where Grandma had gotten the idea about other people waiting for the phone, but her mother had explained to her that old people were funny about long distance phone calls.

Amy felt a presence next to her that interrupted her dreaminess and then she was being nudged, almost pushed aside. Grandma Margaret was swabbing the counter with a dish towel. Amy hadn't realized that she had sloshed so much water on the counter. She felt the dripping water soaking through her cloth sneakers. She stopped stock still and stared at the mess she was making. She hadn't meant to let the water splash everywhere, it had just happened.

Grandma Margaret sighed so deeply that her exhalation could have made ripples across the counter and dropped the towel to mop up with her foot the water that had spilled on the floor. Amy's cheeks began to burn. How could she have let such a thing happen? She could smell Grandma's powdery, perfume smell. They were almost the same height now, and Amy looked down at the tiny stains and dusting of crumbs on Grandma's pale green sweatshirt.

"If you splash water when you do the dishes, you'll marry a drunk," said Grandma.

Grandma slowly began to kneel so that she could pick up the dish towel. Amy was quicker. She picked the towel up and ran to the laundry room. She was mortified, not only because she had made her grandmother have to clean up after her when she was old enough not to be making messes in the first place, but because of the prediction Grandma had made. She dropped the towel onto a pile of other linens and pressed her warm, damp hands to her warm, damp cheeks. Grandma was never wrong; she said so herself. Amy wondered what other mistakes she had made that would be punished at some future date. The laundry room door was ajar. Amy could hear Rose and Grandma talking.

“Did you marry a drunk?” asked Rose.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Grandma.

Did that mean that Grandma had not married a drunk or that splashing water when you did the dishes didn’t really have anything to do with your marriage? In either case, the reason for Amy hiding in the laundry room was the same: she was only trying to help and Grandma had been unreasonably mean about an innocent mistake. What did it matter that she splashed water on the floor? That was the point of kitchen floors, why there were made out of linoleum instead of chalk.

There was a clinking noise coming from the kitchen. Grandma was drying the dishes by hand. Amy had never seen her do that, though she knew that there were clean dish cloths in a drawer to the left of the sink. Grandma must be really angry. She must hate the sight of those dishes. Amy wiped her arms on the front of her tee shirt and felt her toes squish in her sneakers. It was soapy water that had dripped down her arms. Later it would probably itch. She couldn’t care about future itchiness, her stomach was tight and her cheeks still burned and her grandmother was angry with her. Maybe it wasn’t too late. Maybe she could prove that she



could be helpful and Grandma wouldn't tell her parents what trouble she was. If Grandma did that, her mother might have to have someone from work take her home and then her parents would be angry with her all summer for inconveniencing people, even though they already had agreements about whose kids would stay with whom if necessary. But those plans were for wars and deaths, not for fights with grandmothers about water use. She wiped her arms one last time and went back to the kitchen. There was still a glass and two plates left to dry.

"I can do that, Grandma."

Grandma passed her the towel and lowered herself into her chair again.

"When you're done, you should go outside and play," she said. Usually Grandma told Amy to "get some sun" or "read" or "deadhead the roses," not "play." She knew Amy wasn't a child.

Amy wiped the glass and set it in the cabinet. She did the same to the plates. The motions were the same as washing them and they lined up even more nicely in the cabinet than they did in the wire rack, but she didn't experience the same joy. She didn't look forward to her grandmother telling her mother about their day if she called anymore.

"I'm going to go play on the swing," she said.

"Good idea," said Grandma. "It's a nice afternoon." She was laying out one of her pretty, complicated games of solitaire. The cards were in a big wheel on the table. Rose had moved her small ball of yarn out of the way to accommodate it. Amy hoped that one day, maybe when it was raining, Grandma would teach her one of her games, instead of playing rummy like they usually did together. Everyone knew how to play rummy.

The swing was in the back yard. If she could get to the swing, she would feel better. If she could get to the swing, she would stop feeling like she wanted to throw up. Amy walked

down the dark hallway lined with pictures of her father, Scott, and his sister when they were younger: Scott and Cynthia at a lake with fishing poles, Scott and Cynthia in caps and gown, Scott and Cynthia on the front porch of Grandma's house, Scott and Cynthia dressed as cowboys. There was a particular picture that had fascinated Amy on this visit. Cynthia was visible as one of two shadows on the snowy ground, and Scott, who was about thirteen years old, was preparing to slide down a hill on a plastic saucer. After the photo was taken, Scott skimmed down the hill, head first, the wind whipping in his face, tears stinging his eyes. He slammed head-first into the neighbor's chain link fence, which left him with cuts along his hairline. But in the picture, he looked so happy. Cynthia and the parent supervising him had no premonition of the trip to the emergency room, or the thin, white scars Scott would have for the rest of his life, or how they would peek out from his hairline in middle age. Amy passed the pictures with barely a glance and stepped into the back yard.

The swing was a plank of wood with a piece of grimy rope threaded through a hole in the center. It was, as Scott loved to remind Amy, almost as old as he was. Amy sat on the swing and let her feet brush the top of the dry grass. When Scott and Cynthia were children, there was only a bare hollow of dirt underneath the swing where their feet had beaten away the dirt. In the intervening years, the hollow had filled itself in and grass had begun to grow over it again.

When she was away from Grandma, Amy was able to be angry at her. It wasn't fair of Grandma to be so mean when Amy was only trying to help and would have wiped up her own spilled water, obviously, she wasn't stupid or a child. Did Grandma want help or didn't she? She should make up her mind. Amy kicked off and set the swing in motion. She let the swing take her on a circular path, keeping her eyes on the ground until she was dizzy. When the swing slowed, she looked up to see Aunt Rose standing in the doorway. Rose didn't wear white

sneakers and pastel sweatshirts like Grandma did. She had grey and blue skirts and black shoes that laced up.

“You’re angry,” said Rose.

“I don’t think Grandma wants help doing the dishes. I think she just likes to complain,” said Amy. She let the swing stop. She wouldn’t let Rose talk her out of her bad mood, she wouldn’t. She had been insulted and she wasn’t going to give up on her anger.

“I think she might want both. I’m letting the heat in,” said Rose, closing the door and sitting on the bench.

“Well, I won’t spoil any more of her fun.” The words were bitten off, nice and snarly. Rose wouldn’t get to her.

“You should have seen the way she did dishes when she was your age. The counter was always flooded. The cats would jump up so they could look out the window and fling themselves right back off again.”

Amy laughed, despite her best efforts to hang on to her indignation.

“It’s just a superstition. There are lots of superstitions about housework. I think they’re to scare girls into becoming perfect housewives. If you drop silverware, company’s coming. If you sweep over someone’s feet, she’ll never get married.”

“Did she sweep over your feet? I bet she swept over your feet all the time.”

“She used to hide my math book so I couldn’t do my homework and once she borrowed my bracelet and lost it, but she never swept over my feet. If she had known I would never get married she would have done it all the time so that she could tell people it was her doing.”

“Will you teach me how to crochet later?” asked Amy. “If you’re not too busy?”

“If you want.” Rose nodded. “If you don’t think it’s too old lady-ish.”

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with being an old lady.”

“Good for you.” Rose stood up and brushed off her skirt. “I’m always afraid I’ll sit on something awful on this bench.”

Amy had an idea.

“Maybe you could bring your yarn and stuff out here. It’s so nice out,” she said.

Rose looked doubtfully at the bench again but she went inside and returned with her yarn and a dishtowel to sit on. They sat outside until the sun began to go down and the mosquitoes came out. Rose stood up and brushed off her skirt again.

“Are you ready to go back inside?”

Amy was getting cold, except for the burn of her new mosquito bites. She didn’t want to admit it. Maybe Rose would cajole her, just a little bit, and then she could give in and it would seem like she was going in because Rose wanted to, not because she wanted to. If she was only going in because of Rose, maybe she could ignore Grandma. It wasn’t like she was going in voluntarily. She was being considerate.

“I guess.” She climbed off the swing and adjusted her shorts, pulling the hems of the legs down so that they covered her thighs again.

“Margaret would scold you if she saw you do that,” said Rose.

“Grandma would scold me if I left them all bunched up.”

“You’re getting to be just a little too smart.”

Rose pushed the door open and Amy followed her down the dark hallway and back to the kitchen. Grandma was sitting at the kitchen table, playing cards by the light from the windows. Rose turned on the overhead light and sat at the table again.

“You’ll hurt your eyes,” said Aunt Rose.

“That’s an old wives’ tale” said Grandma, continuing to lay the cards out in a circle.

“Amy, do you want to learn how to play grandfather’s clock?” She pointed to the chair next to hers.

“Aunt Rose is going to teach me how to crochet, Grandma,” said Amy. “Maybe we’ll play another time.” Amy sat at Rose’s side of the table.

Rose put a big loop in her crocheting and cut the yarn with a pair of orange-handled scissors. She made a slipknot in the yarn and put the hook in Amy’s hand.

“When you crochet or when you knit, you take something that is plain and straightforward and snarl it into something beautiful or useful or interesting.”

The yarn slipped awkwardly through Amy’s left hand as she manipulated it with the hook in her right. After a few minutes, she had a chain of v-shaped stitches.

“It’s not very pretty,” she said.

“She’s not holding the yarn steadily enough, Rose. It’s lumping and bunching,” Grandma said, looking up from her clock of cards.

“It’s my first try,” said Amy.

“Now turn it, and I’ll show you how to build on the chain,” said Rose.

By the time Grandma began setting the table for dinner (a roast chicken, green beans, and mashed potatoes), Amy had created a small square of crocheting and pride was fizzing through her like bubbles in a root beer float. She showed the square to Rose, who took it from her and tugged at the corners, smiling.

“But what *is* it?” Grandma asked, putting the scissors in a drawer and plunking a plate on top of Amy’s yarn.

“A doll’s blanket,” said Rose. “A beer coaster. A pocket square for a pioneer gentleman. A swatch for a sweater. Really, Margaret, leave the girl alone.”

Grandma took the square of crocheted fabric away from Rose and tugged at the corners even harder than Rose had. The stitches remained all different heights widths.

“Your tension is all wrong,” she said, “and your stitches are uneven.”

“Everyone’s stitches are uneven when they start,” said Rose.

“Yours might have been, but mine weren’t. Set the table, Rose.” Grandma walked out of the kitchen. Rose and Amy heard her steps going down the hall. They looked at each other. Amy giggled. She and Rose were friends now, they had to be, after their heart to heart on the swing, and the crocheting lesson, and now being united by Grandma’s weird prickliness. She took her yarn out from under the plate Grandma had placed on the table. Rose went to the utensil drawer and began pulling out cutlery.

“What do you think she’s doing?” asked Amy. Rose passed Amy a handful of knives and forks.

“She’s about to prove us wrong,” said Rose, sighing and folding napkins. They used paper napkins with festive, seasonal designs. They had been using napkins with ducks on them all summer. Grandma had a new package of napkins with red and blue fireworks for summer, but she wouldn’t open it until all the spring napkins were gone. The plastic-wrapped bundle sat on a top shelf of the pantry until it was needed.

Amy finished clearing away the crocheting supplies and Rose put the food on the table. They could hear Grandma moving things around elsewhere in the house.

“The food’s getting cold, Margaret,” Rose called to her. “What are you doing? Leave it, whatever it is.”

But she had found it. Grandma returned carrying a large blanket bundled in her arms. She deposited it triumphantly over the back of her chair. It spilled over the arms and brushed the floor. Amy had never seen a blanket so big.

“Look! This was the first thing I crocheted.”

There were squares of all different colors sewn together: dusty rose, mint green, midnight blue, army green, palest yellow, shocking pink. Amy ran her hand over the lumpy, lacy fabric.

“It’s pretty,” she said.

“You’re not being fair, Margaret. That took you all of junior high to finish, not just forty five minutes. And it’s dusty. Get it away from the table,” said Rose.

“But it’s not uneven,” said Grandma.

“No, but it’s a health hazard. Move it.”

Grandma bundled it up in her arms again and carried it away, dumping it on the living room sofa temporarily.

“It is really pretty,” she heard Amy call after her.

Grandma didn’t acknowledge her. She returned to the kitchen and washed her hands at the sink.

“Do you want it?” she asked the kitchen window. Amy wasn’t sure who she was addressing or what she was talking about until Rose looked at her.

“Do you?” Rose inquired.

“For keeps?” asked Amy, instantly avaricious, imagining it on her bed at home. Her mother would be appalled, because her mother had selected everything in her room. The furniture was white wood and all the bedding and accessories were white or green or yellow. Amy thought that the blanket would be a cozy touch, and she knew her mother would not agree.

But what could her mother say? Her grandmother made it when she was young. It was an heirloom.

“Not for keeps, but while you’re here.”

The blanket was not as appealing when she imagined it on the bed in the tiny guest room, which was crammed with paperback books, had old clothes in the closet, and was always too hot. But maybe she could just put it on the end of her bed and look at it. She looked at Grandma, drying her hands on the green dishtowel that had replaced the orange one she used to wipe up all the water she had spilled earlier, and knew that the blanket was a peace offering.

“Yes, please. Just while I’m here.”

“You’ll have to wash it first,” Rose sighed. “That thing will give her black lung.”

“At least the stitches are even,” said Grandma.

“The stitches are even,” agreed Rose, and they sat down at the table



## FRIENDSHIP BRACELETS

It was Aunt Cynthia who suggested that Amy should spend part of the summer with her, Uncle Rick, and Cousin Lindsay. The previous year Amy had spent the summer with her Grandma Margaret and Aunt Rose. Aunt Cynthia called it being “cooped up with a pair of old ladies” and said that it couldn’t have been much fun. Aunt Cynthia’s family only lived forty five minutes away from Grandma Margaret and Aunt Rose; Amy didn’t know why they hadn’t offered to rescue her if they thought it was that bad, at least for an afternoon. Although Aunt Cynthia didn’t get along very well with Amy’s father, and Amy’s parents called Lindsay a little snoot and Uncle Rick a bore and Amy had thought being cooped up in a house with a pair of old ladies over the previous summer was just fine, two weeks after the end of seventh grade she somehow she found herself unpacking her suitcase in Aunt Cynthia’s nautical-themed guest room. The walls were blue, the furniture was white, and the bedspread was blue and white stripes. Amy shoved a collection of seashells to one side of the nightstand so that she could set her copy of *Emily of New Moon* on it. Cousin Lindsay bounded into the room and pounced on her, wrapping Amy in a hug that smelled of strawberry-scented shampoo. Lindsay was going to be a sophomore in high school. She was blond as a doll and her braces were already off. She didn’t seem like a snoot.

“Mom said I should help you.” Lindsay started pulling t-shirts out of Amy’s suitcase and refolding them. She stopped at a pair of denim shorts with embroidery on the pockets and around the cuffs. “These are cute.”

“Aunt Rose taught me how to do it.”

“She smells funny.”

This was true, she did have a musty, sweet smell, but Amy liked Aunt Rose and didn’t want to agree with Lindsay if Lindsay was going to be rude about Aunt Rose.

“I can teach you how to do it,” she said instead. “If you want.”

“Cool,” said Lindsay. “I think we have that embroidery stuff somewhere. Mom likes to think she’s crafty.”

When Amy’s clothes, except for one pair of shorts, were in the dresser and her other *Emily* books were on top of it, she stood back and imagined living in the room for the next month. She’d probably get used to the blue and white bedding, the framed pictures of boats on the wall, the monkey fist knots arranged decoratively on the dresser. She imagined describing the room to her friends at school. “They think they live in a boat, but they don’t seem to know what a boat is.” But would she still have friends at school next year? Maybe everyone would have forgotten her because she wasn’t around in the summer. She hadn’t kept up with everyone over last summer, when she was staying with Grandma Marjorie and Aunt Rose. When she got back to school, she found that her group of friends had split into two rival camps and didn’t know which side to ally herself with because every version of the conflict she heard was different. If she got to eighth grade and found that there were four groups, or eight, she didn’t know what she’d do.

Lindsay grabbed Amy’s wrist and dragged her to what she called her mother’s craft room. The craft room looked like no one ever touched it. There was a big, empty table and shelves of plastic bins with little labels on them. Origami paper. Buttons. Knitting needles. Ribbon. Stickers. Aunt Rose and Grandma Marjorie kept their yarn in plastic totes with crochet hooks stuffed down the sides so that when you opened the box, yarn would puff out at you and you had to pull out bundles of yarn with stray ends unwinding to find any hook, let alone the size hook you needed.

“Can your mom teach me how to knit?” asked Amy.

“I doubt it. She collects this stuff but the only thing I ever see her do is scrapbooking. What’s that thread called? Is it embroidery *floss*? That’s kind of gross.” Lindsay pulled out a box and set it on the table to rummage through it. She picked a few skeins and offered Amy the box. “What do you want?”

Should she take anything? Aunt Cynthia wasn’t her mother. But Aunt Cynthia didn’t seem to be using her embroidery floss. The little skeins still had their two black and gold paper labels, not a single one even folded or torn. Even if Lindsay and Amy took what they wanted, there was still enough for a tapestry. And how was she supposed to teach Lindsay if she didn’t demonstrate? She took yellow, green, and orange thread. Lindsay pulled a paper folder of needles and a pair of scissors from somewhere and shepherded her out of the room.

They sat outside at a glass patio table with their projects. Lindsay couldn’t even thread a needle. Amy wondered why Aunt Cynthia had never shown her. There wasn’t a shortage of needles in their house. Maybe she didn’t know how herself. But Amy liked being able to show people how to do things, so she taught Lindsay how to separate the threads of the embroidery floss and how to make stitches deliberately, so they would all come out the same length.

“This is easy,” said Lindsay.

They had moved on to flowers when Aunt Cynthia found them.

“I didn’t know you could embroider,” said Aunt Cynthia, looking over Amy’s shoulder. “Should I get my scrapbooking and sit with you?”

“Sure,” said Amy at the same time that Lindsay said “no.”

“We’re bonding, Mom.”

“Oh, okay.” Aunt Cynthia patted them each on the shoulder and went back into the house.

“She’s so annoying,” said Lindsay.

Amy didn’t know if Aunt Cynthia was annoying but she didn’t think that was the kind of thing you should say about your mother. What she did think was that Aunt Cynthia was a little bit sad, filling her craft room with all those things that she might not even know how to use. But if she said that to Lindsay, Lindsay would think she was a goody two-shoes, so instead of saying anything she connected her row of yellow flowers with a green vine. Could she put leaves on the vine? A leaf would just look like a single petal, right? She tried it and showed the result to Lindsay.

Lindsay smiled at her. “That’s so cute,” she said. “You’re good at this.”

Amy wasn’t convinced this was true -- it was easy, after all, Lindsay’s flowers were almost as good after half an hour of practice -- but she let herself be happy that Lindsay had said so and smiled back. Maybe Lindsay was right, and her mother was annoying. Lindsay would know. Maybe Lindsay wasn’t a snoot after all. The two of them could go to the beach together and she would meet Lindsay’s friends and Lindsay would lend her good books and the two of them would be sad when the summer was over and Amy had to go home.

A head started bouncing over the fence. Lindsay called the head over and introduced Amy to her neighbor Katie, who had a trampoline. Katie’s wrists and ankles were covered with friendship bracelets. She even had a lock of her hair wrapped with pink and yellow thread.

“This is right up your alley, Katie.” Lindsay explained what they were doing. Katie took a needle and sat down at the patio table, propping her foot on the chair to work on the shorts she was already wearing.

Katie was going into seventh grade and had read not only the *Anne of Green Gables* books and the *Emily of New Moon* books but L.M. Montgomery's books for grownups, too. Amy liked her right away.

Amy was lying face down on the beach on her hot pink towel, hoping for a tan. She knew it was bad for her, but she was only thirteen, she wouldn't get skin cancer for years and her legs looked longer when they were tan. She had recently learned that things like having your legs look longer were important. She was concerned about tan lines, though. Her bathing suit was a racing bathing suit, with straps that met in the center of her back. She had liked the bathing suit at home. It stayed on her shoulders when she went off the diving board and when she retrieved diving rings off the floor of the pool. The background was navy blue, so it was sophisticated, and it had a pattern of pink flowers, so it was summery. That was what she had thought before she saw Lindsay's collection of bikinis, which had straps so thin she could pull them down off her shoulders or ties that Lindsay could undo when she lay on her front, leaving her back one field of brown. Well, of freckles, but Amy knew that would be an unkind thing to point out.

Lindsay hadn't loaned Amy any books and never asked what Amy was reading. Amy took books to the beach but she had stopped trying to read them because Lindsay was always interrupting her to point out a cute boy or an ugly girl or both, together, which was the worst thing and required much head-shaking and tsking from Lindsay, or to ask her to put more sunscreen on her back. Amy began to wonder if maybe Lindsay wasn't as smart as she was. So Amy had started to tan, more out of boredom than anything. The books were useful headrests when she was working on her front.

Her eyes were closed. She could feel the sand cradling her forehead under the towel, and she could feel someone staring at her. When water dripped on her shoulder, she opened her eyes.

“What?”

Lindsay poked her in the side. Amy sat up on her forearms, and Lindsay smacked her gently in the tummy.

“Were you that pudgy when you got here?”

“I think so. Who cares?”

“I was just checking that Mom’s not accidentally fattening you up. Well, if you’re happy that way.” Lindsay lay down on her own towel and closed her eyes. She wiggled a little bit in the sand.

Amy was moderately sure she was happy that way. But Lindsay was older, and pretty, and thin, so maybe she knew something Amy didn’t know. At the very least, she knew how not to be fat. Amy lay back down on her towel and tried to find the little hollow for her forehead. She was aware of how her tummy squished under her ribs, which hadn’t used to bother her but suddenly did.

Lindsay’s neighbors, Katie and her older sister Erin, joined them on the beach. Katie put her towel beside Amy’s and Erin put her towel next to Lindsay’s so that they all lined up in age order. Katie and Erin were never at the beach before one o’clock in the afternoon because their mother made them wait an hour after lunch to even leave the house. She was convinced they would drown otherwise, even though Erin rarely even went in the water. Amy always wanted to point this out whenever Lindsay said her own mother was annoying, but she didn’t think it would help. Erin was too cool even for Lindsay, and Amy didn’t like the way Lindsay picked on her more when Erin was around. Katie was lending her L.M. Montgomery’s stories for grownups,

which were all deliciously tragic because no one could marry the person they wanted to marry, sometimes because that person was a ghost or had gone back to Scotland. Amy could imagine the two of them staying pen pals when summer was over.

“What’d we miss?” asked Erin, flopping down on her towel.

“Amy’s fat,” said Lindsay.

“Well, duh. We should thank her for wearing that old lady bathing suit. And at least she shaves and doesn’t smell bad, unlike some people.”

Katie folded her arms and told Amy that she’d found her copy of L.M. Montgomery’s autobiography. Amy tried to care. Was it true that shaving and not smelling bad outweighed being fat? She wasn’t convinced it was. From far away, for example, no one could tell that she didn’t smell, but it was obvious that she was fat, apparently. So Katie did have the advantage. If other clusters of girls on their beach towels were pointing out people to laugh at, they would laugh at Amy, not Katie, who looked like a stick insect even though her arms and legs were covered with downy hair.

“And her uncle pointed out that china dogs can’t hear,” Katie concluded. She was looking at Amy, obviously expecting Amy to laugh, so she did. What was Katie talking about china dogs for? The two of them were losers, and, improbably, Amy was a bigger loser, even though she used purple scented deodorant religiously and Katie seemed to spend all her time reading nineteenth century tearjerkers.

Katie must have been able to tell that Amy was brooding, because she said “don’t listen to them. Let’s go in the water.”

They went down to the shoreline. It wasn’t like getting into the pool, which smelled like cleaning chemicals and was clear and still. The ocean was rough and green, and after a few

yards, you couldn't see the bottom but you could feel that you were stepping on sticks, crabs, and who knew what else. Amy had to dip her toes in the foam, squeal, and jump back a few times before she could get in the water, but Katie ran in until the water was up to her waist and flung herself in face first. She ran back to where Amy was dithering on the shore, called her a wimp, and ran back into the ocean. Slowly, Amy waded out to thigh depth. Her bathing suit was wicking water over her pudgy stomach. It had never bothered her before, but now the sensation made her cringe. Goose bumps erupted over her arms and chest. She ducked her head under the water. It was cold, but at least all of her was the same cold now. Katie was doing flip after flip in the water, her bony, friendship bracelet-wreathed ankles flailing in the air. Amy swam out to her. The two of them jumped in the waves in silence. Amy liked the feeling of the wave picking her up and the drop down the other side. Katie preferred to go under the big waves, letting them break across her back and down her legs. Amy hated getting her face wet. She floated on her back, bobbing on the waves.

"I'll teach you how to body surf if you want," Katie said when she saw Amy taking a floating. "Well, we call it body surfing. It's probably not really body surfing."

Amy missed the first wave, and the second. She jumped up, but the waves went right past her. She swam along with the third, stopping when the water was too shallow to swim any farther.

"This is not that exciting," she told Katie.

"You're doing it wrong," Katie answered.

The next wave picked Amy up and although she thought at first, when it lifted her off her feet and she stretched her arms out in front of her that she was finally doing something right, the



wave tumbled her along, pressing her under the water and scraping her against sand and broken sea shells, filling her nose and mouth with salt water.

“It’s more exciting now, isn’t it?” Katie looked like a mermaid, Amy thought with envy. A mermaid with furry legs, she remembered.

“But I’m still doing it wrong.” Amy coughed. Heavy snakes of hair were hanging in her face. It was hopeless. She stood up and rubbed her forearms. She didn’t want to go back to her beach towel and have to listen to Lindsay and Erin make fun of strangers or, worse, her, but she was also tired of being kicked around by the ocean. At least Lindsay and Erin wouldn’t scrape up her arms. Probably.

Lindsay and Erin were sharing a *Belladonna* magazine. Lindsay had a whole stack that she took out of the recycling bin when her mother wasn’t looking, which was often, because Aunt Cynthia spent a lot of time on the phone with her friends who were having crises that they needed to tell Aunt Cynthia about in great detail. Amy thought that maybe Aunt Cynthia drew stories out of them that they would rather not tell. She wouldn’t tell Aunt Cynthia all about her insides, no matter what was happening to them. But maybe all Aunt Cynthia’s friends were as lonely as Aunt Cynthia seemed to be.

“You looked good out there,” said Erin. “Why’d you stop?”

Amy scrutinized her. She couldn’t tell if she was being mean. If she wasn’t being mean and Amy didn’t say thank you, then Amy was rude. But if she was being mean and Amy said thank you, then Amy was an idiot. She wasn’t sure why she had stopped. It had been fun, when the wave had first picked her up. Maybe she should have tried harder, maybe she could have felt that way all the way into the shore. But Erin had gone back to the magazine. Amy lay down on

her towel. She had just made a new dent in the sand for her head when Lindsay poked her in the shoulder.

“Fat shoulders?” she asked, without opening her eyes.

“Your shoulders are still okay. Isn’t this one of the books you’ve read?” Lindsay showed her a picture of a famous movie starlet wearing sunglasses and a bustle. “They’re making a movie of it.”

“She’s not pretty enough. Would you give up your inheritance to marry a girl with a chin like that?” Amy didn’t know why she’d said that. It was true, the starlet had a large chin, but the starlet was still a beautiful woman, and anyway, that was the kind of thing Lindsay and Erin said. Only they said it about real people, not pictures in magazines.

“That’s what we said. What about that one?”

They went through the whole magazine pointing out small eyes and fat ankles, and because they were only looking at pictures and the women were all prettier and richer than they were, it didn’t bother Amy at all. She liked the attention she got from Lindsay and Erin, who were finally agreeing with her about something and laughing at her jokes. When they’d exhausted the possibilities of the magazine, they turned again to the other people on the beach, and to Amy’s surprise, it was much easier to groan in disgust at wobbly thighs and bony chests. The other women couldn’t hear them, and if they did, they already knew they had wobbly thighs and bony chests. And it wasn’t like Amy was saying that the women were Nazis, or stupid, or something terrible like that.

Katie must have gotten bored with being bashed around by the ocean, because she came slowly up the beach and collapsed on her towel, pillowing her head on her backpack. The sun glinted off her leg hair.

“We were afraid a whale had eaten you,” said Lindsay.

“Amy, what does Katie remind you of?” asked Erin.

“A caterpillar climbing over a leaf.” It was out of her mouth before she could think about it. Amy was horrified, but Erin and Lindsay were laughing.

Katie stood up and slung her backpack over her shoulder.

“Come back!” Erin called. “It was only a joke. Tell her, Amy.”

“It was only a joke,” said Amy, but she knew that wasn’t true.

Katie scooped her towel from the sand and stalked off a little ways down the beach. She put her towel down on the ground by some other kids, who all smiled to see her. She said something to them, and they stopped smiling and turned to look at Amy, Lindsay and Erin, their eyes narrowed.

“I feel bad,” said Amy aloud, hoping someone would tell her that Katie wouldn’t be mad at her forever.

“Oh, let her sit with her little freak friends. She’s practically homecoming queen compared to them.” Lindsay was rubbing more sunscreen on her legs. “Come here, I’ll do your back.”

That made Amy feel worse. She’d assumed that Katie had other friends, but she hadn’t realized that they were right on the beach. They had probably been there all summer long. It was kind of Katie to sit with Lindsay and Erin, exposing herself to their jibes so that she could be around Amy, who had no one.

They left the beach when it got cold and the lifeguards went off duty. Amy could see Katie and her friends ahead of them and ahead of the families with too many coolers, beach chairs, and tired children. Katie’s friends went one way home, and when Katie was alone she

stayed ahead of Amy, Lindsay and Erin on the street. Amy hoped that Katie would wait for them. She and Erin were going to the same house, after all. But Katie walked straight home with her head down and didn't look for them once.

"She's still mad," said Amy as she and Lindsay climbed up the steps to Lindsay's house.

"She'll have forgotten all about it by tomorrow," said Lindsay. "You know how kids are."

Amy hoped she was right, but she knew that she herself could hold grudges. And Katie had made the first move to be nice to her. If she were Katie, she would never speak to her again. She showered the beach off her and put on clean clothes. The door to Aunt Cynthia's craft room seemed to beckon her across the hallway. Sure enough, there was a box marked "stationery." The card on top had a glittery butterfly on it. That would be a bad idea. The next one was plain with an embossed border.

I don't think you look like a caterpillar, she wrote. Can we still be friends?

She went to Katie and Lindsay's house and put the card between the screen door and the real door. Then she went home and watched a tearjerker movie on TV with Aunt Cynthia.

The next day the card was gone, but Katie sat with her real friends instead of Erin at the beach. Erin's ex-boyfriend was at the beach with his ugly new girlfriend.

"What does she look like?" asked Erin

"A pug, one of the ones whose eyeballs are always popping out" said Amy. Erin snorted with laughter.

“What do I do with Katie’s book?” asked Amy. “She never wants to see me again.” She and Lindsay were watching TV in the living room, which had a beach house theme. Amy wondered if a room could have a beach house theme when the house was walking distance from the beach, but Aunt Cynthia was so proud of her dried beach grass arrangements that she didn’t like to say anything. Lindsay was curled up on the sofa with her feet under her. Uncle Rick was asleep in his chair with his arm dangling over the side, the sports section in a tent on the floor.

“I’ll give it back to her,” said Lindsay. “I can’t believe she’s still mad at you.”

“I’d be mad at me, too,” said Amy. “I’d never forgive me.”

“Don’t be so dramatic. It’s those books the two of you read, they make you take everything too seriously.”

Uncle Rick snuffled, coughed and sat up.

“Lindsay, did you tell Cousin Amy how your Grandma Margaret was a baby bootlegger?” Uncle Rick always said something like that when he woke up from one of his naps. He must have thought it convinced people that he had been awake all along, though it did the opposite.

“No, Dad. Do you want to do it?” Lindsay sighed.

Uncle Rick leaned forward. “Your grandma’s grandpa distributed applejack from upstate New York. On Fridays, when the WPA workers got paid, he’d put the bottles in the bottom of Aunt Rose’s stroller, put Aunt Rose on top of them, and take Grandma Margaret and Aunt Rose to the WPA construction sites. He’d sell all his applejack and then stop at the candy store to keep Grandma and Aunt Rose from talking when he took them home.”

Amy looked at Lindsay. Lindsay had her head on her arm and was looking at the television. She had clearly heard this story many times before. Grandma Margaret wasn’t Uncle

Rick's mother, how had he heard the story in the first place? Amy's mother was right. Uncle Rick was a bore. It wasn't a bad story, but he told it badly. Did Grandma's grandpa only take them for walks on Fridays? Did their mother know something was up? Did he specifically tell Grandma and Aunt Rose not to talk about their excursions? What did the WPA workers think about an old man bringing two little girls to a construction site? What was the WPA, anyway?

"What's applejack?" asked Amy, because Uncle Rick was looking at her expectantly and she couldn't ask any of her real questions.

"Never mind," said Uncle Rick, picking his newspaper up from the floor.

"You could be pretty." Amy and Lindsay were sitting on Lindsay's gingham bedspread and Lindsay was tugging a comb through Amy's hair. She pulled Amy's hair any which way, so hard that Amy could hear the crackle of her hair breaking, and although Lindsay also scoffed at the halo of Amy's split ends when her hair was wet, Amy almost didn't mind. Lindsay was going to French braid Amy's hair. She could do regular braids, inside-out French braids, and even something she called a herringbone braid, which sounded horrible but looked pretty. "You could be pretty if you were just a little bit blonder. I can do that for you."

Amy thought of the pilfered *Belladonnas*. If Lindsay said that Amy would be almost pretty if she were blonde and that she, Lindsay, was capable of making Amy blonde, Amy assumed that Lindsay was right.

"Okay," said Amy.

Lindsay squealed and patted her on the back. She pulled herself up with Amy's shoulders and clambered off the bed, returning with a small spray bottle.

“Cover your eyes, okay?” Amy heard the splat of the plunger and felt her hair getting wet. The room smelled like lemons. Amy was sure she’d have a blonde waterfall down her back when Lindsay done. But when Lindsay was done, Amy was only damp. They would have to sit outside in the sun before she would see results. Lindsay pulled her down the stairs. She had cold, moist hands. Aunt Cynthia was on the phone again, hearing about someone’s insides.

“But are they going to have to operate? Oh, no. Oh, that’s awful.”

Erin was doing her nails in her backyard. Her mother was afraid of the fumes inside the house. Amy didn’t know how Erin did her nails in the winter when it was cold enough for gloves outside. Lindsay waved her over.

“We’re making Amy pretty,” said Lindsay.

“About time,” said Erin. “You’re going to need more than one application to get her blonde. Maybe five or so. Unless you want to use the hard stuff.”

“Where’s Katie?” asked Amy.

“Playing with paper dolls. I don’t know. Let me do your nails.” Erin’s bag of manicure supplies landed on the patio table with a thump. “I’ll put yellow flowers on your nails to match your shorts,” said Erin, grabbing Amy’s hand roughly and pulling bottles of nail polish out of her bag. Amy didn’t think she wanted her fingernails to match her shorts, but Erin had brushed blue polish on her thumb before she could say so. Erin held Amy’s hand roughly, so that Amy couldn’t pull away.

Begin text here.

## HEARTS

The summer Grandma Margaret didn't die of her heart, Amy found out what she'd been missing by being separated from her classmates in the summer. For the first time since middle school, she and her family didn't have to move as soon as school was over and no one had to go anywhere for training or any other purpose. Amy was able to see her friends not just in a few classes or after school but all day. In the early morning when the air was still cool and the last of the sprinklers were running, Megan knocked on her door so the two of them could go running before the teenage boys who prowled the suburban streets in their mothers' station wagons were awake to shout at them. She spent the afternoons with Megan and Heather at the public pool, reading magazines. Even during adult swim, when Megan and Heather were allowed to go in the pool without worrying about being kicked in the head by oblivious children because they were sixteen, the three of them stayed on their lounge chairs, squealing about embarrassing things happening to other people and furtively trading the sex tip articles.

"Amanda uses coffee and ice cream when she gives blow jobs," said Megan, passing Amy a column that recommended scarves for people unable to invest in handcuffs. Amy pretended that this was useful information to her.

"She would," said Amy, though she couldn't imagine how. She didn't know anything about Amanda's sex life, just that she rolled up the waistband her gym shorts more than any of the other girls and wore t-shirts that displayed a half-moon of belly hanging over her jeans. But Megan had been best friends with Amanda before she was best friends with Amy and Heather, and now devoted herself to assassinating Amanda's character. Amy needed Megan's continued approval, which seemed best gained by joining in against Amanda and whatever threat she posed to Megan.



“Yeah, she takes a drink of coffee so her mouth is hot, and then she eats some ice cream so her mouth is cold,” said Megan. “She must have seen that in a magazine but she says she thought of it on her own.”

“I’m not catering a blow job,” said Heather. Heather had a boyfriend who said he didn’t like blow jobs but promised it wasn’t because Heather was bad at them. She could afford to disregard about half of the sex tips in *Belladonna* magazine.

“Her mouth is hot? And then cold?” asked Amy. “That doesn’t sound fun.”

“It’s not like she does it to the same person more than once,” said Megan. “You’d think she’d stop bragging about it. It’s obviously not working.”

“So she leaves these guys in her room and comes back with refreshments? But doesn’t share,” said Amy. It all sounded too complicated.

“She kind of does share,” said Megan.

“I heard she keeps their underwear in a special box under her bed,” said Heather.

“Labeled with their names and the date. Because she’ll forget.”

“That’s just good organizing,” said Amy. She wanted to be fair to Amanda, who had a pencil sharpener shaped like a Polaroid camera and always let Amy borrow it in algebra. “You put labels in your photo album, don’t you? It doesn’t mean you’ll forget you went to Florida.”

“No, that’s not true,” said Megan. “About the boxers. Austin made that up because she wouldn’t blow him.”

“Austin’s not a gentleman,” said Heather.

“That’s exactly what Amanda said. Apparently he just walked up to her at lunch and asked about the coffee and ice cream trick.” Megan put down the magazine and picked up her book. All of the novels Megan brought to the pool had unicorns or women in very long dresses

on the cover. This one had both, the unicorn kneeling at the woman's feet, as well as the words "magical" and "enthraling" on the back cover.

An uncomfortable thought occurred to Amy. How would Austin have known, unless he heard it from Megan? She wasn't convinced that boys actually wrote things like that on bathroom walls, and in any case there were a lot of Amandas at school. Austin wouldn't walk up to all the Amandas in the cafeteria and ask about coffee and ice cream like it was code. Even if he made some educated guesses, there were still too many Amandas and too many other things to do at lunch. His hacky sack buddies would miss him. She looked over at Heather to see if this had also occurred to her, but Heather was rubbing a perfume sample on her wrist.

"Smell," she said, holding her arm out, but all Amy could smell was the adhesive from the magazine.

"Nice," she said.

"My grandma used to save these," said Heather, sniffing her wrist. "She put them in the medicine cabinet. I don't know why. She didn't use them or try to give them to people or anything. They just go bad."

Amy didn't know why, either, but it was the kind of thing she could see Aunt Rose doing. She didn't think Grandma Margaret was one for magazines. But she'd rather talk about eccentric elderly relatives than other people's sex lives.

"My grandma saves the rubber bands from broccoli," said Amy. "She has a whole drawer of purple rubber bands." She placed Megan's magazine on top of the other discarded magazines. Megan was absorbed in her book and didn't notice.

"That's practical, at least," said Heather. "I guess."

"I guess. She also never gets rid of books. She doesn't read them, but she has lots."

“It’s funny how they won’t let go of things. My grandparents are like that, too. They have normal books and large print books, and they won’t get rid of the normal ones even if they have large print versions. And my grandpa keeps bringing home more all the time.”

“Well, I do that,” said Amy.

“Oh, I do that too,” said Heather. “But I’m not practically blind.”

They put their shorts and t-shirts on over their sweat-dampened bathing suits and their new sunburns and left the pool at dinner time.

After Megan and Amy’s run the next Saturday, Amy came home to find her father, Scott putting a suitcase in the trunk of the car. She asked where he was going.

“Grandma’s sick. I’m going to see her. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Can I come?” asked Amy.

“It won’t be fun. She’s in the hospital.”

“No, I know.” Visiting Grandma Margaret was scarcely fun at the best of times. “Wait for me, I’ll keep you company.”

Amy showered as quickly as she could, put a change of clothes and her pajamas in her backpack, and joined her father in the kitchen. He was making peanut butter sandwiches and asked her to pick out CDs for the drive.

She didn’t know what to pick. Her father had CDs with psychedelic cover art, jazz, and folk music that Aunt Cynthia gave him for Christmas every year because she liked it when they were in high school. Amy’s mother had music that sounded like you were being taken to fairyland. Amy had CDs of mournful women with pianos and whiny men with guitars. Normally on car trips she sat in the back seat and listened to whatever music her parents played, unless

they were singing along, when she would close her eyes and pretend they were someone else's parents. In the end, Amy chose a selection of everyone's music, even one of Aunt Cynthia's CDs with bearded men in vests holding mysterious stringed instruments on the front.

When Amy sat in the passenger seat of the car, her father handed her a page of directions printed from the internet.

"You're navigating," he said.

The directions from the internet said the trip from the house to Grandma Margaret's hospital would last four hours and thirty six minutes. The route seemed straight forward and they weren't going anywhere completely unfamiliar. Amy put on one of her mournful women CDs as Scott backed out of the driveway.

"She went to Julliard," said Amy as the first song, a slow one with just the piano, started, in case her father thought it was garbage. "She writes poetry, too."

"Renaissance woman," said Scott. He took his right hand from the steering wheel to fumble with the travel mug of coffee between the seats. Amy handed it to him. He took a sip and gave it back.

Amy thought that maybe he didn't know what else to say about the music. She didn't know what else there was to say. She watched the trees go past as they drove to the highway.

They passed two women jogging. Either they didn't know how to avoid the boys or the boys didn't bother them. Amy thought it was probably the latter. The women weren't old, but they weren't young, either. The next song started. Scott tapped his fingers on the steering wheel and Amy smiled. He didn't think it was garbage.

By the fourth song, which had violins and cellos, they were driving on the highway and Scott was humming along with the music, even though he had never heard it before. Amy

looked out the window at the other cars, some of them laden with bicycles or beach umbrellas.

An upbeat, swinging song with horns came on. It sounded like something Aunt Rose would like.

“How sick is Grandma?” asked Amy, dreading the answer. She didn’t want Grandma Margaret to die. She hadn’t thought she was fond of her, but she wanted her to keep on terrorizing them all for a long time.

“She’ll be okay,” said Scott. “She probably just has to stop eating ham for every meal.”

“Don’t exaggerate. She doesn’t always have ham for dinner,” said Amy, remembering the midsummer Thanksgiving dinner Grandma cooked. Scott laughed.

Thinking of Aunt Rose and how Amy liked her better than she liked Grandma Margaret made Amy feel guilty. She didn’t know what kind of music Grandma Margaret liked, or if she even liked music. She remembered Uncle Rick’s story about bootlegging. She should really ask Grandma Margaret about that. If either of the sisters remembered, it would be Grandma Margaret. She was older, and Aunt Rose had still been in a baby buggy. She would get to know Grandma Margaret better. If she was up to it. She didn’t want to pester her with questions about trumpets and applejack while she was in the hospital.

When the first CD was over they put on one of Scott’s. He stopped the music to explain the lyrics, to reminisce about hearing the songs for the first time or seeing the band in concert, and to explain the political context of the music.

“Is that something that makes sense when you’re stoned?” asked Amy about a particularly obscure line.

“I don’t know. Ask Aunt Cynthia.” Scott paused. “Don’t ask her. And don’t say I said anything.”

Amy promised not to, delighted that Scott had shared a secret with her. Someone else's secret, and revealed somewhat maliciously, but a secret nonetheless.

They stopped at a rest stop with a small dog park. When Amy came back from the ladies' room, her father was talking to a man walking a large, fluffy dog. The dog bounded over to Amy when it noticed her. She knelt to pat its head and let it lick her ears. Its fur was soft, almost feathery.

"That dog is going to be a search and rescue dog for animals," said Scott as they returned to the car. "I wanted you to grow up with dogs," he added.

"Maybe when you and Mom retire and we stop moving all the time we can get a dog," said Amy.

"You'll be grown up. And we'll be too old."

"What should we listen to?" asked Amy. The CDs were in a pile by her feet. She didn't want to think about her parents getting too old for a dog, or about growing up for that matter. Those topics would probably lead right back to Grandma dying. Even if she didn't die soon, she was going to die eventually.

"Put on the Julliard woman again," he said. "She was good."

Amy put on the first CD again and paid close attention to the directions. They were reaching the point when she would have to do navigating. They exited the highway for a smaller highway, passing a series of strangely-named roads with too many letters and eccentric combinations of vowels.

"Did this area used to be Dutch or something?" asked Amy.

"No, just weird," said Scott. "But we're going to drive through a county that used to think it was Germany and one that used to think it was Italy."

“Do you think they ever get confused people thinking they’re in the wrong Mantua or the wrong Verona?” asked Amy, looking at the exits on the highway.

“I hope they have replicas of famous landmarks in the other city,” said Scott. But neither of them could think of anything famous in Mantua or Verona.

Grandma Margaret’s hospital looked like a fortress from the outside: tall, square, with tiny windows and surrounded by an expanse of parking lot. Inside it was a maze of hallways.

People in scrubs and lab coats mixed with people in hospital gowns and people in regular clothes, some hurrying, some creeping along with walkers, some pushed on gurneys. Amy followed Scott to a calmer section of the hospital. Elderly patients sat on wheeled, framed contraptions with seats or were led down the hallways by younger people.

Grandma Margaret was sharing a room with another old woman. The other woman was asleep facing the wall. Amy could see her scalp through her plum-colored hair. Her bony elbow was clamped over her blanket like she thought someone might take it from her.

Amy leaned down to kiss Grandma Margaret. She smelled like unwashed hair instead of her normal powdery, clean smell but looked better than Amy expected. Amy had imagined Grandma Margaret would be skeletal, or comatose, or maybe even dead when they arrived. She seemed tired but otherwise her usual self.

“I didn’t expect company.” She straightened her robe. It was yellow with a pattern of blue roses. Amy thought that there weren’t any blue roses.

“I told you I was coming,” said Scott. “Where’s your doctor?”

“I see so many doctors I don’t know which one is mine,” said Grandma Margaret. “The one here now is wearing a very low cut blouse. You can’t miss her.”

Scott left the little room. Amy sat on a chair next to the bed.

“I didn’t know you were coming.”

“I decided this morning. I didn’t know you were sick.”

“I’m old. I drink coffee instead of water. I eat ham at least once a day. I only want to outlast Rose.”

Amy laughed.

“Well, I’m glad you came to visit, anyway,” said Grandma Margaret. Amy had a sudden fit of inspiration and patted her hand. Grandma Margaret didn’t move her hand away from her.

“I’ve been meaning to ask about a story Uncle Rick told me.”

“About the bootlegging. Doesn’t he have his own dead criminal family members to talk about?”

“Right. Did your grandpa take you for walks at other times? Or just on Fridays?”

“Just Fridays, I think. He had someone else watch his store on Friday afternoons. He worked a lot. Obviously not all of the work was for the store. It was a treat to have him all to ourselves once a week. He wasn’t a grandpa who would play on the floor with you. He wanted to have grown up conversation with my parents.”

“Does it bother you?” Amy could feel a hole in the cotton blanket under her finger. She was tempted to make it bigger with her finger tip. Instead she tapped it a few times and left it alone. She thought of the huge blanket in the guest room closet. It wouldn’t be sanitary to bring it, and Grandma didn’t even necessarily want it. “Does it bother you that he was using you and Aunt Rose as camouflage?”

“Rose didn’t like sitting on the bottles. They were hard and she didn’t like the clink-clink-clink as we went over a curb, it made her cranky. But we went for a walk and he told us



stories, people told us we were pretty, and he bought us lollipops on the way home. I could think that he used us for camouflage, or I could think that he spent time with us regularly.”

Amy was unsatisfied with this answer, and wondered if Grandma Margaret was having a closer brush with death than she realized. First acquiescing to a hand pat, now this. It didn’t seem like the grouchy grandma she knew. She wanted Grandma Margaret to be indignant; she was indignant on Grandma Margaret’s behalf. She was half afraid that her grandmother was making it up, putting a kinder interpretation on the story than she otherwise would have when Amy wanted to get to know her. Or maybe this was the real Grandma Margaret, and she was grouchy before because she wasn’t getting treatment for whatever was wrong with her. Amy still didn’t know. She was grateful to Grandma Margaret for not immediately starting to talk about her insides.

There was a knock on the door and Cousin Lindsay came in. She had painted each of her fingernails a slightly different shade of pink, so that there were gradations. Amy thought her box of nail polish must look like Aunt Cynthia’s craft room, though used more often and not as well organized. She and Amy were both wearing white eyeliner as recommended by *Belladonna* to make their eyes look bigger. Lindsay’s eyes didn’t look any bigger than usual, and Amy realized that hers probably didn’t, either.

“Mom and Uncle Scott are arguing with the doctor,” she said. She closed the door most of the way behind her.

“I don’t think she’s really a doctor,” said Grandma Margaret. “I think she’s a stripper who got lost.”

“She has a stethoscope, Grandma.”

“Even strippers can buy a stethoscope.” Grandma Margaret asked Lindsay about the English class she was taking at the community college “to get her college requirements out of the way.”

“It’s okay. Not my favorite thing to do on a summer Saturday.”

Amy wondered if Lindsay didn’t get a good enough score on the AP exam or if she was taking a community college class in addition to her AP scores. Lindsay didn’t like to read anything but magazines, but Aunt Cynthia had pushed her into the AP class. She bragged about it at Christmas. Amy wondered if Lindsay realized that Aunt Cynthia was bringing attention to how she was failing Aunt Cynthia and Uncle Rick’s expectations of her. She thought Lindsay probably did realize, because she didn’t interrupt her mother and correct her like she usually did, even though several things Aunt Cynthia had said made no sense whatsoever, like Lindsay’s teacher being called out of class to talk to Aunt Cynthia.

It would never occur to Amy’s parents to pull strings and get her into different classes. They assumed that teachers knew their business and would no more have interfered with the school than they would have appreciated the school interfering with an aircraft carrier. Amy thought there had been situations when her school didn’t understand her patchwork of an education and she could have benefitted from her parents explaining that things were different at her last school. Nevertheless, she decided that Aunt Cynthia was tacky. Tacky for complaining to the school, tacky for bragging about it, tacky for saying in front of everyone that Lindsay wasn’t smart enough.

“Come sit,” said Grandma Margaret, patting the bed beside her. Amy felt a flare of jealousy. Would she have been invited to sit on the bed if she hadn’t selected the chair? Maybe

not. But then she remembered that Grandma Margaret smelled a little bit, not the old lady smell that she and Aunt Rose usually had, but a slightly unwashed smell. Then she felt better.

Lindsay was telling them about the real community college students, the ones with jobs and kids, when Scott and Aunt Cynthia came back and shooed Lindsay and Amy out of the room. They sat on plastic chairs in the hallway and watched the other patients go by.

“The other lady in the room has been asleep for two days now,” said Lindsay. “It’s probably easier than listening to Mom and Grandma arguing. Mom’s saying that she has to completely change her diet and go on all these medications and see an acupuncturist and maybe even move in with us and Grandma’s saying she’ll do what she wants and Mom should mind her own business. They don’t really disagree, except for Grandma coming to live with us, but Grandma doesn’t like being told what to do so she’s arguing.”

“Where would Aunt Rose go? The craft room?”

“Mom doesn’t really want anyone to move in with us. She just wants Grandma to feel obligated to her for offering to take care of her.”

“I don’t think that’s going to work.”

“Meanwhile, they’re torturing that other lady who only wants to recuperate or die in peace.”

Aunt Cynthia stomped out of the hospital room. Lindsay and Amy stood up.

“Say goodbye to your grandmother, Lindsay.” She took Lindsay by the arm and led her away.

“Bye, Grandma,” Lindsay called behind her. A man moved an older man out of Aunt Cynthia’s way as she continued to stomp down the hall.

“Grandma’s tired,” said Scott.

Amy waved from the doorway.

“Grandma’s not an invalid, Amy,” said Grandma Margaret. “Despite appearances.”

Scott and Amy went to Grandma Margaret and Rose’s house for the night. Aunt Rose seemed smaller and more tired than usual, but she made up the guest room for Amy, served them a very Grandma Margaretish dinner of goulash and woke up early to have breakfast ready for them before they left the next morning.

Amy didn’t enjoy the ride back as much, although the music and the names of the towns they passed were the same. They didn’t see the dog at the rest stop again, but that didn’t account for her gloom. No one was behaving correctly in response to Grandma Margaret being sick except maybe Aunt Rose. Not even Grandma Margaret. Not even her father, she worried. What had they accomplished by their visit? But what had she expected him to do? Grandma Margaret’s heart wasn’t a ship. He couldn’t demand regular updates from the engineers until it was working. There were no superiors to call and say “this heart isn’t right, it’s too old, it’s not seaworthy, it needs to be scrapped and we need a whole new one.” She wasn’t even convinced with her grandmother’s account of her bootlegging days.

“Where did you go?” asked Heather at the pool on Monday. Megan was at the orthodontist. Amy explained and Heather said she was sorry about her grandmother.

“She doesn’t seem worried,” she said. “But she was too nice.”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine,” said Heather doubtfully. Heather described her own grandmother as “persnickety.”

They read their books until a shadow fell across their pages. It was Megan, and she was pointing, her face transformed with scorn.

“Look who it is.”

It was Amanda, splashing in the pool with a pair of small children. One of them had its arms around her neck, the other was wearing inflatable things on its arms. There was nothing remarkable about it at all.

“It is a public pool,’ said Heather.

“I hope one of them drowns her.”

“You do not. You’re being ridiculous,” said Amy before she could stop herself. Megan drew herself up to her full height and looked down Amy and Heather on their lounge chairs.

“Sit down. Stop looming,” said Heather. “Stop being creepy.”

Megan sat on one of the lounge chairs and took her unicorn book out of her bag. She shifted in her chair so that she was facing away from Amy and Heather. Amy wondered if she was depriving them of magazines as punishment or if she was so committed to her snit that she had forgotten about them. Amy was relieved, either way. Megan never wanted to talk about the real articles or make fun of the clothes or guess what the models were thinking. She just wanted to spread gossip about their classmates. And not harmless gossip, like who was pining after whom and whose new freshman sibling was infinitely more attractive than they were and who didn’t get cast in the school play and what they were going to do with their afternoons instead -- tech? sulk? community theater? -- and whether anyone actually watched the Academic Olympics on the local access channel. Gossip that was none of their business, about things that you couldn’t tell by looking at a person. Gossip you would only know if someone had trusted you with a secret.

Amy didn’t like Megan, that was clear. But what was she going to do about it? She had been so happy not to lose any friends over the summer that it hadn’t occurred to her that some

friends were worth losing, were possibly not friends at all. And it was Megan, after all, who was clinging to Heather and Amy like they were animate, literate life rafts with a taste for scandal. Amy could just refuse to be a life raft.

But the part of her that had a taste for scandal dearly wanted to know why Megan had such venom towards Amanda. If she dropped her, she might never know. She hoped it was something more interesting than a boy, but she thought that might be giving Megan too much credit. It was none of her business.

But she could befriend Amanda and maybe Amanda would tell her side of the story and she could ask Heather to find out from Megan and between the two of them they could find out the truth.

No, that was worse. She resolved not to be friends with Megan and not to gossip about her. When it was time to leave the pool, Amy packed up her things, said a cordial but not effusive goodbye to Megan and Heather, and went home.

Actually doing the right thing had to wait, because Heather called after dinner and invited Amy to an impromptu party in the basement of someone she didn't know.

"Will Megan be there?" asked Amy.

"It'll be a party," said Heather. "We can talk to whoever we want." So Heather felt the same way. Amy really didn't want to not be friends with Heather, especially if her grandmother was going to maybe die, because Heather was a friend you could actually talk to, which had not been the case with most of Amy's previous friends. It would be wrong to try to convince Heather to ditch Megan with her, but maybe Heather was inclined that way.

"Okay." Heather would come get her and the two of them would go together.

Amy put on her shortest denim skirt, which was not a miniskirt but was above her knees and would have to do. She considered not putting on her ineffectual white eyeliner, but she did it anyway because she didn't have any other eyeliner and her mother's eyeliner was boring. She wasn't sure her mother would share anyway.

Heather's car had been used by two older brothers. The outside had sarcastic bumper stickers and the inside had a lingering smell of fast food and sweat that Heather's diligent vacuuming and use of air fresheners could never remove. She had put purple and green striped covers on the front seats and enforced a no eating rule, though, so Amy climbed in without second thoughts. They picked up Megan, who cringed when she opened the back door.

"What is this stain I'm going to be sitting on?"

"It's clean," said Heather. "It's just discolored."

"You didn't answer my question," said Megan and sat in the center seat. She leaned forward and told them who would definitely be at the party, who she hoped would be at the party, and who was absolutely not invited to the party. Amy didn't know how she knew; it wasn't her party.

There were parents at the house and two younger siblings watching a cartoon in the living room, which surprised Amy. For some reason she thought that she was being invited to a wild, illicit party, the kind the protagonists had in teen movies, and had been thrilled. But in that case, there would be no need to confine the fun to the basement. The basement was dim, but not sinisterly so, and not packed with people as Amy had imagined it would be. Someone had festooned the walls, ceilings, and a card table laden with snacks in yellow and blue crepe paper.

"My mom," said the host when he noticed them looking at it. "She wanted to use it up and there's really only one thing you can do with crepe paper. She wanted to use colored light

bulbs, too.” His hands were in his pockets. Amy did know him after all; she just didn’t know his name. His French name was Bruno, which didn’t suit him at all, and if you had to guess which student’s mother still organized his parties, you would have guessed him.

“Look, cupcakes,” said Amy, heading to the refreshment table and taking Heather with her because it seemed the kindest thing to do. They turned when they realized Megan wasn’t following them.

“What’s she doing?” Megan asked Bruno. Amanda was sitting on the couch directing a pair of boys to capture the gems in a video game. Bruno looked at Amanda and back, confused, at Megan.

“She’s playing next, it’s her game. There aren’t enough controllers for everyone. We can start a list if you want.”

“You know that’s not what I mean,” she said and went back up the stairs. Heather followed.

“What did she mean?” asked Bruno.

“They’re in a fight,” said Amy. “Right?” she said to Amanda.

Amanda shrugged and rolled her eyes. “Whatever,” she said.

Amy took a patriotic cupcake from the table and sat next to Amanda on the couch.

Amanda told her Bruno was next after her, but Amy didn’t care.

“Megan’s crazy,” she offered, hoping Amanda would respond with the whole story.

“She’s jealous,” Amanda replied. That was promising for getting the story but it sounded like the story would be about a boy. Amy waited. Amanda was watching the boys playing the video game as intently as if they were really climbing on parapets. “Don’t fall in the moat,”



Amanda said to one of them. He fell in the moat and Amanda took the controller from him to sit on the floor and take her turn.

Heather came back without Megan and beckoned Amy to a corner away from the television. Bruno was waiting his turn in an armchair he could quite easily eavesdrop from, but Amy thought he probably wasn't interested in girl drama.

"She's walking home," she said. "She doesn't want a ride. We're disloyal for not leaving with her, even though I did offer her a ride and we have no idea why she's mad at Amanda but Amanda's acting normal."

"We can't all leave," said Amy. "That would spoil Bruno's mom's party."

"It wasn't supposed to be a party," said Bruno gloomily. "I just asked if I could have some friends over and suddenly there were cupcakes." Amy thought Bruno's mom would make a good friend for Aunt Cynthia.

"Will she be mad forever?" Amy asked Heather. "And I think it's about a boy."

"She'll be back at the pool together the day after tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow if it's really hot. And of course it's a boy."

"It's not me," said Bruno, picking at his chin.

Amy didn't know what to say. "No, honey, of course not," was obviously unacceptable. She and Heather went to sit on the couch next to the boy who had fallen into the moat.

The next morning, Amy hoped that Megan would still be mad at her or that she could avoid her by going running without alone, but Megan caught up with her in the neighborhood.

"You didn't wait for me," she said.

“It’s not nice to say you hope someone drowns,” said Amy, puffing. It was the best thing she could think of. “At the pool yesterday,” she explained, because Megan looked confused.

“I didn’t mean it,” said Megan. They ran through a poorly-placed sprinkler that was watering the sidewalk and part of a driveway.

“I don’t think I should be friends with someone who says things like that about an ex friend, even joking. It seems like bad luck.” Amy wiped her face and sped up. Megan did, too, as Amy should have predicted. She wouldn’t be able to outrun her; it was Megan’s idea to go running every morning.

“Well I don’t want to be friends with someone who can’t take a joke,” said Megan. They continued running together. Amy expected Megan to speed up, but she didn’t. There was an intersection, but Megan didn’t go back to her house. She kept alongside Amy.

“Okay,” said Amy, when it was clear that an answer was expected of her. Megan sped up and turned at the next opportunity. Amy continued to run. She didn’t know what kind of revenge Megan would take, if any. There weren’t any plausible rumors to spread about her, and she hadn’t told Megan any secrets. She was sure she couldn’t be friends with Heather anymore. Megan would cling to her more tightly than before. That made her sad, she liked Heather. But there were other people, and high school wasn’t forever, and she was sure one of her parents would be getting orders the next summer.

Begin text here.

## NAKED PEOPLE

The model thought she was a Manet. Amy could tell from the dyed red hair, the pose with one knee crooked and her chin on her hand, and what the model probably thought was an aloof expression on her face. Amy thought she just looked bored. Amy sighed and tapped her brush against her hand. Closing her eyes, she tried to imagine that the folds of skin and fat were something else. Sometimes she pretended she was painting landscapes - glacier-sculpted mountains covered in yellow scrub grass, black pools and eddies of lava solidified millions of years ago - instead of the endless parade of pink and brown bellies, breasts and thighs that came through her art classes, all posing seated or reclining because the models were too lazy to stand. This model could be a stump with lots of fungi growing off of it or maybe a large rock. No one else seemed to mind the model. The rest of the class was busily painting. Amy sighed. Jeff, the boy at the next easel, took off an earbud and turned to her, smiling, his paintbrush still in his long hand.

“Did you say something?”

“I was just thinking about something I read once about the woman who modeled for Manet’s ‘Olympia.’ She was an artist who exhibited at the *Salon*. People just said she was a prostitute. ”

Jeff nodded.

“Right. Because women can take their clothes off or they can make eye contact, but if they’re doing both, there must be something criminal going on.”

“Exactly.” Amy smiled.

Jeff always understood. She liked when he set up his easel next to her and she always made an effort to do something with her hair on the days they had classes together. Turning back to her own easel, Amy began to draw. She used dark grey paint to draw the model’s

outline, making her a tree stump. The naked bottom of the model's left foot she would make a large, white mushroom. Jeff put his earbud back and returned to his own canvas. Amy worked through the rest of the class without another interruption, adding grass around the tree stump and a rabbit behind it.

The instructor, who was nice enough but a bit of a hippie, usually invited the model to walk through the space and look at the students' work. Amy didn't see the point. She wasn't paying for the model's opinion. She was paying the model to sit still. The model wore a flowered bathrobe, like something Amy's grandma would take to the hospital, and smiled at all the students as she looked at their work. She stopped at Amy's canvas.

"You made me a dead tree," she said. "Unless I'm the rabbit."

Amy crossed her arms over her chest.

"I'm not a figurative painter," she said.

"Good use of color," said the instructor, who never let anyone criticize anyone else in her classroom.

The model looked at Jeff's canvas and smiled. She and the instructor moved on. The students cleaned and put away their supplies and paintings and shuffled out of the classroom.

Jeff lingered by the door, disentangling the cord of his headphones, holding one earbud in each hand and slowly pulling the cord straight, watching the jack at the other end spin. He stopped fiddling with the headphones when Amy approached and left the classroom with her.

"Do you like the National Gallery?" he asked. "That's a stupid question."

"No, it's not. I hate it in the summer when it's full of strollers and people taking pictures of the Picassos with their cell phones. They should look at the real thing while they're standing in front of it," said Amy. "And in the school year it's full of kids running around."

They blinked as they left the cool, dark arts building and walked into the hot, bright street.

“You could break in in the middle of the night,” suggested Jeff. “It must be quiet at night.”

“It’s also dark at night,” said Amy. “I wouldn’t be able to see anything.” She walked to the crosswalk that would take her back to campus and hit the button for the signal to cross the street.

Jeff walked with her. Maybe he was going to the library or something.

“I’m going tomorrow. There’s an exhibit of photography from nineteenth and early twentieth century Paris I have to see for my other class. I thought of you when the professor told us about it. Anyway, I’m going tomorrow at two if you want to meet me there.”

“Oh,” said Amy. She looked down at her shoes and listened to the ticking crosswalk signal. “Okay.” The walk signal flashed and Amy began to cross the street. Jeff stayed on the sidewalk.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said, waving.

Amy waved back as she crossed the street and Jeff walked away. She adjusted her backpack. In the few minutes that she had been outside, her t-shirt had become a layer of glue between her back and her bag. She walked quickly to get under the shade of the trees in the amphitheater. Someone called her name. Amy turned and saw her painting instructor sitting on a grassy step of the amphitheatre.

“Come sit with me!” She patted the grass beside her.

Amy sat next to the instructor, setting her backpack on the grass. The instructor offered her a piece of oily vegan cookie, which Amy declined.

“Figurative painting isn’t just human figures, you know,” the instructor said. “Landscapes are figurative, too. What you do with the models is interesting, though I think some of them are offended.”

“It must be art, then.”

The instructor laughed.

“I do wonder, though, why you do it.”

“Misanthropy. I’m going to become a hermit as soon as I’m finished with college. I’m doing an independent study on raising goats and carrier pigeons in the fall.”

“I hope it works for you. Send me a pigeon.”

Amy said goodbye and walked into her dorm. She swiped her ID card and showed it to the receptionist, her friend Sarah. A crowd of twelve high school students, labeled with name tags and wearing business casual attire, was sitting in the common room on the main floor of the dorm. Sarah rolled her eyes.

“They’re the bestest friends that ever were,” she said to Amy.

“They’ve been here for six hours,” said Amy. “It took them long enough.”

The campus was flooded with high school students who were supposed to be learning about government or international affairs but were really running amok away from their families, forming passionate attachments to each other, and being pretentious and insufferable because they didn’t know any better. Amy had never seen them before but she had heard of them. They had to wear their tags at all times in case they got lost, like dogs, and they went everywhere in big groups, like ducklings. The university’s goal was to bring some of them back as college students, but no one knew why the university wanted them in the first place. They were loud walking to their classrooms and sometimes even when they were in their classrooms, they

blocked the waffle station in the cafeteria, they were always having sex in the stairwells and being sent home in disgrace.

Amy walked past the gaggle in the common room, overhearing a serious conversation about British dairy subsidies, and continued down a hallway, up a flight of stairs, and over the bridge that led to the dorm where university students and staff slept. She dropped her book bag in her dorm room and took her second best sketchbook and a book on French impressionists to the desk. It was a babyish book, a combination of a child's introduction to art history and a field guide to banned pigments. There were pictures of what lead looked like and an explanation of why you should never eat it and insets explaining perspective. It was good desk reading because there was no way she would become completely absorbed in it. Amy would never have bought it for herself and but her great aunt had given it to her as a high school graduation gift, so she had kept it.

"Our little high school friends are going to spend the afternoon on the Mall," Sarah said, standing up and stretching when Amy was behind the desk. "They are all very excited but I think some of them are excited because they think it's a shopping mall."

"If we're lucky, some of them will fall into the tidal basin," said Amy, sitting in the vacant seat and carefully avoiding the exposed metal edges of the chair's arm.

"Oh, we were both the same when we were their age. I spent ten days in Berkeley being pretentious and making out with a boy from Minnesota. Can you imagine?" said Sarah.

Amy couldn't imagine. She'd never been to Berkeley or met anyone from Minnesota, and for most of high school, she'd tried to ensure that no one would want to make out with her by being right all the time and scowling. Sarah gave Amy one last chance to go to the bathroom or get something from her room before Sarah left the desk for her evening class. There was only

the buzz of the air conditioner to listen to and only a few students drifted past the front desk.

Amy opened her book and read the four pages about Manet. She flipped through the rest of the book, but she didn't want to read about the development of ready-made paints or the physics of light. Amy opened her sketchbook to a new page and began to draw the bundle of pens standing in a blue plastic Residence Hall Association cup. It was almost like drawing flowers in a crystal vase.

There was a skinny, dark-haired boy sitting in one of the chairs by the window. Amy knew him by sight but had never spoken to him. He brought his books to the lobby when he was tired of his room or the library and sat on the chairs with his knees draped over the arm to read them, as if he was at home. Amy had often wondered if she should reprimand him. "Six on the floor!" she would shout, like her eighth grade English teacher would have done. But he looked so content, and he was less trouble than anyone else in the north side dorms, so she never did.

She began to draw the chair. It was a cheap armchair upholstered in gaudy fabric, probably selected because students liked to put their dirty feet on university furniture. She drew its round arms and its sagging cushion, which she didn't need to see because every armchair on campus had its seat cushion destroyed by innumerable rear ends. Amy paused, her pencil over her sketchpad. Quickly, she bubbled in the boy the way she learned in a cartooning class in elementary school. One large, elongated bubble for his leaning torso, two smaller bubbles for his thighs, two more for his calves. Smaller bubbles for his arms, kneecaps, feet and head. She looked at her handiwork.

"Looks like a drunk elephant drew it," she said aloud, though no one was listening, ripping the page out and setting it on the desk next to her art book.



She rested her head on her arm and looked out the window. There was nothing to see. During the school year there would be flocks of students passing the desk, going to class or to the cafeteria. The boy changed his position, leaning against the other side of the chair and pulling up his feet. Quickly, Amy did another bubble drawing. It was slightly better, but she wasn't sure why she thought that. She never knew why one drawing seemed better than another. It was just a feeling; she looked at one drawing and thought *yes*, or at another and thought *no, not at all*. There was no middle ground and she had no way of articulating the difference between a good and bad drawing. Sometimes she thought it was something like magic. Mostly, she thought it was chance.

The silly bubble drawings encouraged Amy, but the boy didn't move again and there was no one else to draw. She rested her head on her arm again and tapped the desk with one of the stolen pens that accumulated there. At around nine o'clock, the high school students and their handlers began to return, chattering and scratching mosquito bites. Some of them were teasing another for never having seen fireflies before. ("I'm from California!" he protested.) Someone was complaining that the Reflecting Pool smelled. No one had fallen into the tidal basin, as far as Amy could tell. Their footfalls retreated through the dorm and up the stairs.

One of the group leaders, a college student, stopped at the desk when he saw her art history book and the open sketchbook.

"I used to draw a webcomic," he said. "It was about a puffin with superpowers who fought evil polar bears in the Antarctic. Then my friend told me that polar bears are arctic animals and puffins are Antarctic and I stopped. But he was wrong, so I might start again."

"I'm a studio art major with minors in art history and graphic design," replied Amy crisply.

The boy recoiled slightly.

“But I don’t draw people,” she added.

“I have a book on drawing people, exercises and things. It’s with me now, but I don’t have a lot of time for drawing. Do you want to borrow it?”

Amy had books on drawing people. She had a blue plastic crate full of books about drawing people and another one of books of examples of drawings of people and a third crate that had several books on the philosophy of drawing in general. Part of her thought that there was a magic book out there that would teach her everything she needed to know about art and that after she read it she would be able to do anything she wanted with her paint brush. Maybe this kid had that book. Stranger things had happened.

“Sure,” she said.

The boy smiled and Amy smiled, too.

“I’ll just go get it.”

He went up in the elevator just as Sarah walked through the doors and approached to lean against the desk.

“Who’s the boy? Why are you smiling? Do you need a break or anything?”

“I’m just happy,” said Amy. “People can be happy without boys.”

Sarah snorted. The boy returned with a hardback book, its dust jacket soft at the folds and edges, and handed it over the desk to Amy. Sarah looked from the boy to Amy to the drawing book and back to Amy. Amy didn’t look at Sarah, but she knew exactly what kind of look Sarah was giving her.

“Just ignore the sketches on the inside cover,” said the boy. “They’re really bad and embarrassing.”

Immediately, Amy opened the book to the front cover and saw pictures of superheroes. Sarah leaned over the desk to see them.

“I’ve had the book since I was ten,” said the boy, blushing a little.

Sarah turned to look at the boy and asked his name.

“Tyler,” he said cautiously.

Sarah introduced herself and Amy, adding “Amy’s a really good painter.”

“I’m not really that good a painter,” said Amy, flipping the book and opening the back inside flap of the dust jacket.

“That’s probably not true,” said Tyler. “No, don’t look at those.”

Inside the book, hidden under the dust jacket, were several childishly-drawn nudes. She tried to close the book, but Sarah’s hand shot over the desk and held the book open.

“Our computer was in the living room when I was in middle school,” he said, looking down at the counter and brushing away dust. He was blushing. “I had forgotten I did that. You can give it back to any of the counselors when you’re done.” Tyler walked quickly away from the desk, his head down.

“I don’t think I’d touch that thing if I were you,” said Sarah, taking her hand off the book and wiping it on the back of her jeans. “Poor bastard,” she snickered, and went to her room.

Amy put the book in her cubby behind the desk and drew a pattern of flowers on a blank page in her notebook. Real students began to come back from classes and the library. Another desk receptionist came to take her place, and she went to her room to watch television and eat a sandwich for dinner.

Jeff was wearing a collared shirt and dress shoes when Amy met him outside the National Gallery. Except for his large backpack, he looked like a real grown up.

“Nice shoes,” she said, wondering if they were date shoes or internship shoes. She hoped they were internship shoes. She didn’t want him changing his shoes for her.

They walked up the steps into the building and stopped at security. The security guard took one look at Jeff’s backpack and made him leave it in the coat check. Amy and Jeff went down more steps into the cool stone foyer and into a warren of rooms hung with small photographs. Amy had only ever been to a museum with her family or an entire class. Could she make Jeff pick his favorite thing in each room, or ask him what he thought the people in the photographs were thinking? But he seemed to want to look at the photographs, working his way methodically around the perimeter of each room, occasionally making comments to her in an undertone. The flow of people shuffling around them forced Amy and Jeff into closer physical proximity than usual. The museum’s calmness imposed a companionable silence that she would rather have filled with talk. Instead she looked at the photographs, trying to hide her feeling of profound awkwardness.

“You don’t think of Paris as changing,” she murmured to Jeff as they looked at a picture of a Parisian dirt road. “You never think of all the things they knocked down so that they could make Paris look the way it does.”

“It was ugly,” Jeff whispered back, leaning down to her. “And probably filled with diseases.”

Biting the inside of her lip, Amy didn’t say that everywhere was filled with diseases in the nineteenth century. She looked straight ahead at the photograph and wondered if the long hair at the top of his head had flopped forward over his eyes when he leaned down to whisper to

her, the way it did when he bent his head over his notebook in class. They moved to another photograph, this one of an alleyway papered with advertisements photographed so that the alleyway stretched away from the viewer and terminated in a blank stone wall. Amy imagined the advertisements in color, their curled edges flapping in the wind, and how her feet would feel walking on the uneven stone sidewalks.

“Watch out,” said Jeff, putting his hand on Amy’s shoulder and gently tugging her toward him.

She looked over her shoulder and saw a man with a walker pass next to them. Jeff removed his hand from her shoulder, leaving a warm patch on her air conditioning-cooled skin. Her face felt hot. Were they date shoes or internship shoes? Amy moved to the next photograph and Jeff followed.

“I looked up Victorine Meurent,” he said when they left the photography exhibit and collected his backpack. “It’s amazing that everyone assumed she was a prostitute.”

“Not really,” said Amy.

“Do you want to go get some coffee? Or tea?” asked Jeff.

“I have to work at the desk this evening,” lied Amy.

But Jeff wanted to go to the library on campus, so she had to endure the Metro ride back to school together, crushed together by the first wave of commuters, and maybe they’d have to ride the shuttle, too. Amy looked fixedly at the emergency evacuation instructions in the Metro car. If there were an emergency, and they did have to evacuate the car, would she keep her head or try to trample the other passengers to get out first? Obviously, she would like to think that she would keep her head, help others first, and be a heroine, but she suspected she might be a trampler. If she stayed very still and looked at the same spot, she might become invisible. Jeff

was looking at her. She was sure of it. She looked up, and he was. She smiled back at him and looked at the Metro doors again. A woman standing next to her shifted her large purse from one shoulder to the other, hitting Amy in the arm and knocking her into Jeff.

“Sorry,” the woman said to Amy.

“That’s okay,” Amy answered. “Sorry,” she said to Jeff.

“That’s okay.”

After an eternity, Jeff and Amy got off the Metro and silently rode the escalator to the street. A shuttle was waiting.

“I’m going to walk to campus,” said Amy. “I’ll be stuck inside all evening.” She was compounding the lie.

“Oh.” Jeff looked towards the shuttle, where the last few passengers were boarding, and moved his backpack on his shoulder.

“Go ahead,” Amy said, patting his backpack, which didn’t move when she touched it and might have been filled with rocks. “I’ll see you in class.”

Jeff said goodbye and walked to the shuttle. Amy watched him board and saw his silhouette move to the center of the bus. She began trudging back to campus, her head down and her face burning. If she were a normal girl, she thought, she would be able to go out on one measly little outing with a nice boy where they didn’t even look at each other all that much without getting all weird about it and fleeing from him. She wondered if all the other girls went to special classes in high school, maybe while she was in her ballet classes so she never found out about them, and everyone else was learning how to flirt and hold hands and kiss people who weren’t family while all she could do was fouetté turns, and what good were they in the real world?

At any time that afternoon she could have said something funny to Jeff, or touched his arm, or asked him an interesting question or even a boring one. *Were* they date shoes or internship shoes? Would he have been embarrassed if she'd asked? She'd never know. She could email him. "Hey, Jeff, thanks for telling me about the photography exhibit. It was really cool. By the way, why'd you wear such nice shoes? -Amy xoxo" Was that as bad an idea as it seemed? Even without the hugs and kisses at the end? She could ask Sarah. Sarah would say something unhelpful like "you're thinking too hard." What if she *was* thinking too hard?

Amy stood up straighter. Maybe it hadn't gone that badly. She should still feel the weight of his hand on her shoulder. And he might have walked to campus with her, if not for his stupid backpack. She could have offered to carry some of his rocks, or whatever, in her bag.

Would that have been weird? Maybe weird in a good way, not weird in a bad way. Even if they had gone to campus together, there was the fact that she had said she was working. She would have had to excuse herself and go to a shift that wasn't hers.

Halfway to campus, she stopped in the middle of the sidewalk to take a deep breath and think about what was really wrong. Her feet hurt, she was thirsty, she was sick of the strap of her bag digging into her shoulder. If she could take care of those things, maybe she wouldn't feel so bad about the possible date. It was hard for her to remember that not all thoughts were about what they claimed to be about, that sometimes thoughts were symptomatic of her body's tedious physical needs. What she really wanted was to be a brain in a jar, but then, she supposed, she'd have to give up painting.

Flinging her purse on her bed so hard that it bounced, a glass of water, and changing her shoes for slippers had made Amy feel less wretched about the afternoon. Later that evening, she

moped her way behind the desk and flopped in the extra chair to tell Sarah about the possible date. Sarah was working all night and had brought snacks, her laptop, a selection of DVDs, and a draft of a paper about natural resource management to occupy her until the early hours of the morning. They watched the high school students and their wranglers come back from a field trip that required business attire. The boys wore colored dress shirts that clashed with their patterned ties. The girls wore short skirts and sheer blouses.

“What kind of business do these kids think they’re going into?” asked Amy.

“Clowning and prostitution,” answered Sarah. “Who can blame them?”

If Amy stayed at the desk, lying to Jeff was slightly less bad. She didn’t *have* to work, but at least she *was* working. She explained the whole situation to Sarah.

“You’re thinking too hard,” she said.

Amy folded her arms and put her head down on the desk. Sarah tapped Amy’s arm with a pen and slid the paper under Amy’s elbow, asking her to proofread it. There was nothing else to do at the desk, which made staying there seem like penance. She raised her head and looked at the paper.

“I’d rather spend a hundred awkward afternoons than look at another of these stupid things,” she said.

“Obviously not,” said Sarah. “Maybe you should offer to proofread Jeff’s papers in exchange for shoulder pats. That would be a compromise.”

“Shut up,” said Amy, taking the pen from Sarah and doodling a fish in the margin of her paper.

Proofing the paper and the subsequent discussion of resource conservation, a disappointing Jane Austen adaptation, and a bag of pretzels occupied Amy and Sarah while



students passed through the lobby, coming back from internships or going out for the evening. The high school students went to dinner and came back, looking their ages in shorts and t-shirts. The sliver of sky turned from blue to dark blue to orange-purple from the street lights. The traffic of people slowed as it got late. Amy recognized a silhouette approaching the building.

“It’s Jeff,” she said.

Sarah immediately threw herself to the floor behind the desk.

“What are you doing?” Amy hissed.

“Hiding,” Sarah whispered back. She huddled against the back of the desk, bringing her knees to her chest.

“You can’t hide there!”

Sarah scuttled across the floor on her hands and knees into the mail room, closing the door behind her just as Jeff knocked on the door. Amy opened the door using the electronic button and did her best to smile. Her skin felt hot and prickly, she was sure that she was blushing and she wanted to look anywhere but at Jeff’s face.

“I thought I’d come visit. I’m taking a break from the library.” He set his bag on the floor. Amy could hear the thump as it landed. He must be carrying rocks. Or bricks. They chatted about their art class.

“I wish she would just tell me I’m painting badly,” said Jeff.

“I don’t. I tell myself that already,” said Amy. She looked down at the desk and regretted it. Jeff’s hand was on the desk.

“You’re not a bad painter. You just can’t draw people.” The hand twitched, as if Jeff was going to touch her but decided against it.

“I don’t know why people think I can’t draw people. I choose not to. It’s not interesting to me.” She placed her own hand on the desk, and felt as if they were playing a boring children’s game.

“Well, that’s even weirder,” said Jeff.

“We’re not the only thing in the world, Jeff,” said Amy. Amy’s hand betrayed her and clasped Jeff’s hand. Jeff brought this other hand over the desk and took Amy’s hand in both of his. Amy’s lungs betrayed her and she sighed.

“That’s true.”

Had he really not noticed how she’d just blown air all over him or was he being polite? Amy couldn’t worry about that, because her other hand, which was clearly in a conspiracy with the first hand, was actually reaching up to stroke Jeff’s face. His cheek was warm and damp from the humidity outside and the walk from the library, and although it should have been gross, it was not. The long hair on the top of Jeff’s head flopped forward and he kissed her, which was simultaneously the thing she wanted most in the world and the worst thing that had ever happened to her.

“Do you want to come over some time? My only roommate right now is a fish, he won’t bother us. Or we could go get coffee? Or tea.”

Amy looked down at their joined hands on the desk.

“I don’t like you that way,” she lied, because she thought it would be easiest.

Jeff let go of her hands.

“But I like working next to you in class,” she said, which was true but irrelevant.

“Okay. I’ll see you in class.” Jeff shouldered his backpack again and left. Amy put her head in her hands so she wouldn’t tell him she didn’t mean it. It wasn’t easy to watch him leave,

but she was convinced that it was easier than having coffee with him. Or tea. The museum had been hard enough, because she did like him, but he would immediately cease to like her if she did anything about it.

A knock came from the mailroom and Sarah exited.

“You completely forgot I was in there. Why did you tell him you didn’t like him? Everyone knows you like him.” She sat at the desk.

“I told him I didn’t like him *that way*,” said Amy.

“You’re lying and you’re splitting hairs.”

“He doesn’t really like me.”

“You’re right. That’s why he wanted to go to a museum with you and why he came to visit you at the desk. He can’t stand the sight of you.”

There was no way to explain to Sarah her firm conviction that if Jeff got to know her any better than he currently did, he would be disgusted beyond expression and never speak to her again. It was better for them to stay classmates. Maybe they could be friends, but there was no way Amy was going to have coffee with him. Or tea. And she definitely wouldn’t be going to his dorm room, because who knew what would happen if she did? Sometimes she even thought that the only reason she and Sarah were still friends was because they mainly had superficial conversations making fun of other people. But that couldn’t be true, because Sarah, in her abrasive, misguided way, was trying to help her.

“It’s okay,” she said. She could tell from the way Sarah was sitting in her chair, leaning forward, that Sarah was not at all convinced that it was all right and was considering pressing the issue even farther.

“All right,” said Sarah finally.

At eleven o'clock, the dorm was quiet. Amy left the desk to go to the vending machines for a soda. She could hear voices in the dark lounge as she passed. Was someone having a séance? It wasn't unheard of. She approached her reflection in the glass door. Cupping her hands around her eyes, she could see two nude figures wriggling on the couch. It wasn't too late to continue to the vending machine and mind her own business, she thought, that was the right thing to do. But the light from the window glinted on a laminated name tag hanging around a neck. Amy pounded on the door. The kids shrieked. A pile of pajamas fell off the couch and onto the floor. Amy flung the door open and turned the lights on.

"What's wrong with you?" she shouted. "Put your clothes on!"

Amy turned her back to let them disentangle their clothes.

"Are you going to tell?" asked the boy when he was decent.

"What do you think? Follow me."

She led them to the lobby and pointed them to the chairs in the window. Sarah rolled her eyes and called the director of the program. The students sat side by side, clutching each other's hand. The girl sniffled and wiped her nose on the sleeve of her sweatshirt.

"These little nerds are just too sexy," Sarah said to Amy after she hung up.

Amy didn't laugh. Tyler came down to the lobby in his pajamas. The boy lived in the Maryland suburbs and his parents were coming to get him. The girl would have to go home the following day. She asked if she could wait with him. Tyler agreed and walked over to lean against the desk.

"How much do you hate your job right now?" asked Sarah.

"Enough," he said, rubbing his stubbled face.

The girl scooted her chair closer to the boy and awkwardly wrapped her arms around him, leaning over the arm of her own chair. He reciprocated after a few moments. Amy didn't want to feel bad for the kids, but she did. She even felt a little bad for snitching on them. They were having the inverse of her own problem: an inappropriate inability to keep their hands to themselves.

"I'll never forget you," the girl said to the boy's name tag.

The boy patted the back of her sweatshirt. Amy went to her cubby and pulled out the drawing book, then took it over to Tyler.

"I'll get it out of the library," she said, setting the book on the counter. "Thanks for lending it to me."

"You're welcome," Tyler said, taking the book from her.

The students were still in their tragic attitude in the corner when the boy's parents showed up. They began scolding him as soon as he stood up to greet them and didn't seem inclined to stop. Amy and Sarah could hear their angry voices retreat as they followed Tyler and the boy to his room to pack. The girl began crying anew, covering her face with her sweatshirt-sheathed hands. The fabric was drenched and probably snotty.

"Let me know if you want to throw that in the wash, sweetheart," said Sarah.

The girl lurched over to the desk and slammed her moist hands down on the counter. Amy recoiled.

"Don't pretend you understand," the girl shouted. Then she turned and ran to the elevator. She stood, sobbing, until the doors opened and swallowed her.

"I was pretending," Sarah said to Amy as the elevator ascended.

"Pretending," Amy agreed.



## RAMBLES

For reasons that were not clear to Amy after a whole three months of teaching English, her students loved grammar. More specifically, they loved verbs and did not consider her rigorous class on comparatives a grammar lesson because verbs were not the focus. The class she taught after her coffee break with Nicole was an upper intermediate class of students who worked at an accounting company. They were a computer programmer, a lawyer and two accountants between the ages of twenty four and thirty. Amy tried to conceal the fact that she was only twenty-three, but she thought the students could guess from her ponytail and jeans. She told herself that art students don't tend to acquire professional wardrobes, though she knew this was not necessarily true.

The students reviewed the first three conditionals, which they knew by number. Their grammar vocabulary astonished Amy. She wondered if they knew grammar terms in Spanish and Catalan, or if it was some kind of TEFL fad when they were in high school. It seemed like a foolish question.

According to all the experienced English teachers Amy knew, historical disasters lent themselves to teaching the third conditional. Amy thought this was equal parts amusing and morbid. She held up a picture of the Titanic to her four students and asked them what had happened to it. The students, all of whom had years of experience taking English classes where *guiris* asked them to explain weird pictures, summarized the sinking of the Titanic in a few minutes. Then Amy began talking. She talked, as she always did, quickly, at great length and with the feeling that she was getting farther and farther away from the purpose. She was not on the Titanic, she told them. She had not been anywhere near the Titanic, had not even existed when the Titanic sailed, but if she had been on the Titanic, she would have turned into fish food. She wrote this sentence on the board. "If I had been on the Titanic, I would have turned into

fish food.”

Silvia, the lawyer, began to chuckle. The other students exchanged dubious glances.

Amy looked at her sentence again and wrote “become” under “turned into.” Phrasal verbs were hard, one should use them sparingly. The accountants snorted. Still, Robert the computer programmer looked perplexed. Laura, one of the accountants, whispered to him, and he smiled. Good.

Amy wrote “3rd conditional” at the top of her whiteboard and wrote out the construction like a mathematical equation. IF + past perfect, modal verb + have + past participle.

“For Robert. What would you have done if you had been on the Titanic?” She tapped the board as she spoke.

“If I had been on the Titanic, I would have drowned,” said Robert.

“If I had been on the Titanic, I would have gotten in one of the lifesaving boats,” said

Laura, one  
of the accountants.

“Just a lifeboat,” said Amy. She wrote the word on the whiteboard. The students paused to copy it into their notebooks.

“If Laura had got in a lifeboat, I would have pulled her out and taken her place,” said Silvia.

The class erupted. Laura scolded Silvia in Catalan while Robert and Oriol, the other accountant, laughed. Amy tried to remember if “had got” was wrong in British English. She decided it wasn’t. She tapped on the table to get their attention and asked Oriol for his sentence in the third conditional.

“If I had been on the Titanic, I would have hide the captain’s whiskey.”



More arguing. “The captain of the Titanic wasn’t drunk!” “Yes he was!” “He must have been! Icebergs are big!” Amy complimented Robert on his use of “must have” and wrote “I would have hidden” on the board. The students ignored it. Some teachers corrected students by repeating the mistakes back to them with a quizzical expression. Amy’s quizzical expression obviously needed work. When she tried it, the student simply repeated loudly what she said. If Amy repeated it again, her brow furrowed more deeply, her head cocked at a sharper angle, the student would repeat whatever she said again, her brow more deeply furrowed and her head cocked at a sharper angle, and the whole thing could go on for hours if Amy let it, everyone getting more frustrated and no one getting better at English. Writing corrections on the board was less effective than a verbal correction, but also less disruptive.

Robert’s face became serious and he raised his hand.

“What is the expression about moving chairs on the Titanic?”

Amy laughed and wrote it on the board. “To rearrange deck chairs on the Titanic.” She drew a little picture of a deck chair. She drew an iceberg in the distance.

“It means someone’s priorities are completely wrong and the project is going to fail.”

The students copied down the expression. Some of them drew the pictures as well. Amy hoped that human resources or whoever was paying for these classes never asked to see their notes from her class. “To arrange deck chairs on the Titanic” was the kind of idiom that might come up in a contentious meeting with an English-speaking client, but “to cramp one’s style” was not. One would hope.

“What modal verbs other than “would” can we use for the third conditional?” asked Amy. Silence. The students looked at her. She might as well be talking to four cabbages propped up on sticks. “What other verbs express possibility?” The students looked at the table.

She was talking too much again, but she couldn't stop herself. "Could we use 'can'? 'If I had been on the Titanic, I can have turned into fish food?' Does that work?"

"No," muttered Robert.

"May," whispered Laura. Amy wrote "may" on the board.

"Must," said Robert.

"No," chorused the others.

They got the verbs on the board. Would, could, may, might, should. They surveyed their work and Amy checked her watch. Could she assign them homework of accosting tourists and asking them to speculate about the past? She'd give them a list of American and British historical events and the tourists would have to say what would have happened if Maryland had seceded from the Union or if King Whatsit had never come down from the oak tree. But then she'd have to teach them how to tell difference between Americans and Brits, and she didn't know what they'd do if they came across a Canadian. She decided not to and sent them back to their cubicles.

Terri, the training director of the school, asked Amy to see her in her office the next day. She was from California but had been in Barcelona so long you'd never guess. She pretended to the students that her name was Teresa.

"We've had some comments about some of your classes," she said, gesturing to the chair next to her desk. Her office was one corner of what used to be the flat's living room, partitioned off with wooden walls that nearly met the ceiling. Her glasses had pink plastic frames with a pattern of lighter and darker pink dots. "Some of the business English students don't find you

organized or challenging enough. They say you're very nice, but they're afraid they're not learning enough."

Amy didn't know what to say. She'd often thought the same thing. Terri frowned. Not at Amy, exactly, but as if she was frowning at the situation.

"They wanted me to get them a new teacher, but I told them that's not fair."

A cold feeling poured over Amy. None of the students had ever seemed less than happy with her classes. They were two-faced, all of them. Well, not all of them. Some of the classes, the training director said. But that still meant that an unspecified number of students in her three business English classes were smiling and laughing and doing their exercises and all the while secretly badmouthing her. Terri looked at her. She had to say something.

"What can I do?"

Terri helped her plan her next week's lessons. She made Amy write out the activity and what it was supposed to accomplish, a practice she had abandoned after she finished her month-long teacher training course. Clearly, it showed. Comparatives for the beginners, "used to" for the intermediates, and a game called sentence auction for the upper intermediate students.

"This'll confuse them," said Terri with glee. Amy looked at her. "I don't like it when people don't give other people a chance."

So it was her upper intermediates. Amy was devastated. She liked them. She thought they liked her. Then she wondered if Terri always used underhanded methods in her customer service. She decided she didn't mind, since it meant Terri wasn't going to boot her out. Still, she must have been pouting, because Terri repeated that the students said she was nice.

"Well, what good does that do if I'm not a good teacher?"

“You can give the students Monopoly money for the sentence auction if you want. There’s some in the supply cabinet next to the tiny index cards.”

Amy didn’t like that answer one bit. She had hoped that Terri would say, despite the mountain of evidence to the contrary, and not all of it in Amy’s head, as was sometimes the case, that Amy was a good teacher, or perhaps that it was too early to tell if she was a good teacher or not. She hadn’t expected Terri to dodge the issue entirely. And she never knew what they were supposed to do with the tiny index cards. The students could make their own flash cards.

The sentences to be auctioned were in an ancient book of English activities that Terri got from the massive bookcase in the corner of the living room that now had a large table and chairs for planning lessons, drinking coffee, and gossiping. Each page of the book was a handout for a class. There were matching games, discussion questions, trivia, even a board game. She knew she should make notes of things that looked like they’d go over well with her students. There was a page with open-ended questions about names. Everyone loved talking about names, their own and other people’s, didn’t they? She winced as she set it on the photocopier. The pages had gone soft at the edges, and some were barely attached to the plastic binding. Her colleague Elsie was drinking coffee and flipping through the English language magazine.

“It’s going downhill. Usually there’s one article I can make my students read, but the most interesting thing this month is about the people who pick up the things people leave on the side of the street.”

“Maybe you’ll students will want to talk about that. Maybe they’re dying to tell you all about the treasures they’ve gotten for free. People put their trash on the curb specifically so other people will pick it up. And you could use phrasal verbs.”

Elsie considered. “It’s just so gross.” She flipped the magazine so that Amy could see it and pointed to a picture of a handsome young man. “This guy estimates that seventy per cent of his wardrobe comes from the streets.”

“If he didn’t find newer clothes on the street, he might just keep wearing the same clothes until they get holes in them. Boys do that.”

“But he’s French,” said Elsie. Elsie noticed the fragile tome Amy removed from the photocopier. “That book’s amazing. There’s one where the students have to explain seemingly freakish events, like a kangaroo escaping and leaving cloven hoof-prints in the snow.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Amy wasn’t sure she would keep it in mind. She knew that the book was an untapped treasure trove of interesting and unusual exercises, but first of all the class was supposed to be business English and she wasn’t convinced that she actually would sit down to plan her classes every week. If, by some miracle, she managed not to lose the upper intermediate class, she thought it was very likely that she would slide right back to making photocopies of the textbook fifteen minutes before class and improvising. She wished that weren’t the case.

Amy cut apart the sentences to be auctioned, put them in an envelope, put the envelope in her backpack, and looked around. Elsie had gone to do some telephone classes, a mysterious practice that seemed like a terrifically bad idea to Amy. She had no more classes that day, and Terri had retreated to her office for her own telephone class. Amy could hear her laughing. Amy should go for a walk.

The school was in a former apartment building in the nineteenth century section of Barcelona, the neighborhood that started the fad for cities to be laid out on grids. She thought

that was what the historical museum said. Some of the translations in the exhibits were murky. The sidewalks also had paving stones with fossils and ferns on them, which Paris had not copied. She climbed down the staircase, clutching the iron handrail. The marble floor was sometimes slick under her shoes. Amy slipped into the afternoon pedestrian traffic. People in business attire going for late lunches, elderly people doing their grocery shopping or walking tiny dogs. There were no parents walking their children home from school; Barcelona elementary schools were in session until five o'clock, she had discovered when her Catalan class met in an elementary school classroom.

Amy decided to walk down to the water and decide how hurt she was that her students didn't like her. Or liked her, but didn't respect her. Or respected her, but not as a teacher. It was a mess, and worse for confirming her own doubts about her teaching. She passed boutiques for the first few blocks south, then a block of game stores, then second hand and rare book stores as she got closer to the university. She stopped outside one. There was a selection books for a euro each on the sidewalk. Did she need books in languages she didn't read? She probably didn't. She'd have to take them home and put them somewhere in her bedroom. And then probably never read them; she hadn't managed to finish a whole book in Spanish and she'd only finished half a Catalan course before she dropped out. She ran her fingers over the spines. The paper was crumbling from some of them. She picked one up and read as much as she could of the back. It was a novel and had been a sensation when it was first published. She put it down and picked up a collection of French novels in translation. She flipped through it and the dusty smell of old book wafted up to her. She suspected the novels were all about young women in Paris having sex with inappropriate people, their bosses and other people's uncles and so forth. But it was only a euro. She knew she'd never read them in the original French, either, so it

didn't matter that they were translated. She went into the store to trade a euro for the book and walked out, carrying the book in her hand.

The street ended at Plaça Universitat, where students sat gossiping on benches. Amy followed the awkward side streets to Plaça Catalunya, which was churning with people. She passed the cafe where people got into trouble in the twenties and went down the Ramblas, where you could buy anything: fans, musical instruments, parakeets, antiques, shot glasses. She stopped in front of a man who had painted himself green, outfitted himself with a pair of wings and a pair of horns, and was seated on a throne. Tourists gawped at him, placed money in the can at the base of his throne, and walked away. Amy wasn't sure what the people in costume on the Ramblas were supposed to be. Were they mythological figures she didn't recognize? Or clever Catalan puns? Were they randomly-assembled costume pieces and whatever stage makeup was on sale?

The Ramblas ended at the sea. Amy walked around the wooden model of the first submarine (invented by an eccentric Catalan and never successfully used) and sat on a bench facing the water. She didn't feel different. Her walk through Barcelona was no different than a walk at home. The only thing she missed from home was eavesdropping. She hadn't overheard anything interesting since a middle-aged American woman asked her husband if the medieval Catalan king Jaume I wrote the bible. The husband wasn't sure. Amy didn't tell them they were mixing up kings, geography, historical time periods, and languages. She had drunk coffee at the cafes, gotten lost and found her way back in the Metro, bought playing cards and nail clippers at the dollar stores she had to remind herself not to call *chinos*. Barcelona was home; her adventure had gone on too long or had possibly never been much of an adventure. She'd thought that

living in a city where she didn't speak the languages would make her smarter, or more interesting, or more outgoing by necessity, but it really only made her feel lonely and bored.

Amy opened her new book and looked over the top of it at the sea. It was a sea and not an ocean. That had been hard to get used to. She'd gone to the beach with some colleagues who had taken off their clothes and jumped in the water in their underwear -- they were English, it had shocked her -- and she had been nervous whenever one of them faced the shore to wave at the people who remained on the dirty sand. But it was the ocean that could kill you if you turned your back, not a sea. Not on a calm summer day. Amy hoped.

The air was just starting to get crisp. Amy had come to Barcelona with a summer wardrobe and a vague, ignorant idea that it didn't get cold in Spain. She ought to have known better; they said the same thing about California and it wasn't true. She'd have to get a jacket. She'd have to knit a scarf. She could buy a scarf, but then what would she do with her free time?

Amy hated when her heart started hammering in her chest and she thought she could hear, but probably couldn't really hear, blood rushing through her ears, but both things happened to her the day of her planned upper intermediate class. She'd had a cup of coffee before she got to school, and then another one with Elsie, and she regretted both of them, they weren't helping one bit. She wasn't going to fall asleep in class, even on her worst day, and she didn't know what had possessed her. It was too much coffee.

She greeted the class. They behaved as usual, talking about their weekends, their colleagues, their pets, and their mothers. Did they know that she knew that they had complained about her? She thought not. She unveiled her envelope of slips of paper and the students leaned



over the desk to see what she was doing. Every slip of paper had a sentence, some of them grammatically correct and some of them incorrect. Amy had forgotten the Monopoly money from the cabinet. It was the coffee's fault. She sat at the table, although she usually stood, and asked Robert to explain what an auction was.

"Like when you sell a cow," he concluded. He was from in a village that held an annual wild donkey riding festival. Amy was right to assume that he would know what an auction was.

She held the first sentence aloft. "Who wants this sentence? It's a good one. 'If she had stayed in a better hotel, she would have had a better vacation.'" Silvia reached across the table and snatched it.

"Easy," she said. The other students scoffed. The exercise seemed to be working.

"Now, this is a great sentence," said Amy, forgetting that she was annoyed with them. "Look at those clouds! It will rain soon." The students were silent. Amy read the sentence again, emphasizing "it will rain." She had only learned the difference between "it's going to rain" and "it will rain" in her teacher training. She wondered if it was a British thing or if it was just a point of TESOL pride to teach something incredibly fiddly that native speakers didn't even practice.

"Prediction," said Laura. She tapped the table. She didn't seem convinced that the sentence was a prediction or to know whether it was therefore correct or incorrect.

"Evidence," muttered Robert. He raised his hand. "I'll take it." Amy slid the slip of paper to him. The students looked uneasy. And well they should; according to the textbooks, the sentence should have been "it's going to rain."

Silvia acquired the most sentences, though she wasn't always right. Oriol only claimed a few sentences, but he joined in teasing Silvia, who tucked her feet under her in the chair and

flung herself over the table to leap on as many sentences as she could. He also tried, unsuccessfully, to convince Laura that she should take “I have been to Paris last August.”

“‘I have been to Paris in my life,’ said Laura. “‘I went to Paris last August.’” No one wanted that sentence anymore.

“That’s no fun,” said Amy. The students laughed.

Twenty nine of the thirty sentences were claimed, which surprised Amy. She thought, grammar lesson fans that they were, that the students would be able to avoid the incorrect sentences. When the hilarity of the auction subsided, Amy set about reviewing the sentences and getting the students to explain whether they were right or wrong. The students diligently copied Amy’s diagrams and illustrations-- squiggles for continuous tenses, arched arrows for talking about the future from the past, a window with blinds drawn next to another window showing thunderclouds for the difference between “it will rain” and “it’s going to rain” -- into their notebooks.

“That was funny,” said Robert as the class filed out. Amy’s heart leapt but did not override her teacherly instincts.

“Fun or funny?” It was a common mistake and she was helpless to explain why something fun was enjoyable but something funny made you laugh when it was so nice and intuitive that “fun” was the noun and “funny” was the adjective.

“Both,” said Robert smugly, after a moment of reflection. Smartass.

Terri materialized next to Amy when the class had filed out and back to work. “That was lively,” she said.

“Well, they’re always lively. What do you think?”

“We’ll see.”

Amy's next class was a group of senior learners. They had been lower intermediate students for fifteen years and didn't mind at all. She had taught them how to play go fish, which was useful for getting used to the structure of questions, and she was moving on to a unit on fairy tales. They had American grandchildren; she hoped these would be useful skills. They told her a story about a wolf that eats six of seven kids -- goat kids, not human kids, which was initially confusing, and how did they know the word "kids" for baby goats in the first place? -- and the seventh helps their mother cut the wolf's stomach open with scissors.

Amy wrote "they all lived happily ever after" on the board.

"The goat do not," said Lluís.

Everyone laughed and Amy dismissed them. They stayed to talk anyway. When they finally dispersed, slowly, Amy went to find Terri. She was in her little office with a stack of placement tests, methodically checking them.

"New classes? Anything for me?"

"An intermediate class on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons and some telephone classes Monday mornings. Those are fun. And funny."

The new intermediate class conflicted with her old upper intermediate class. Amy looked at the black and white tiled floor. She was a failure.

"Elsie will take that class. They said their old teacher could do accounting vocabulary," said Terry with the barest hint of scorn. Amy had never considered that anyone could impulsively run away to be an English teacher, even accountants.

"They know I'm not an accountant." She had told them that her undergraduate degree was in art and hoped that they would assume she also had a graduate degree she wasn't telling them about. "Elsie's not an accountant, either."

“They’re jerks,” said Terri, which surprised Amy. “Elsie’s too good for them.”

“I’m not,” said Amy.

“You’ll use the Market Leader books for the intermediate class and I’ll show you how to cut the lessons into twenty minute sessions for the telephone classes,” said Terri, who seemed to be making a habit of ignoring Amy’s pleas for reassurance. Amy couldn’t really blame her. She was starting to annoy herself.

Elsie was in the coffee room, her hand on the jar of instant coffee.

“Want to go out for coffee?” asked Amy. Elsie agreed.

They went to the cafe across the street from the school and sat outside even though it was chilly. It was still a bright afternoon; Elsie put on the biggest pair of sunglasses Amy had ever seen. The coffee arrived in cups advertising the brand of coffee and accompanied by packets of sugar and a tiny cookie in a cellophane wrapper, also advertising the brand of coffee.

“Once they forgot to bring me the cookie. I had just moved here and didn’t know anyone or speak any Spanish and I was so disappointed. The waiter was confused but we worked it out. Some days you just really need a miniscule, nondescript cookie.” She dunked the cookie and popped it in her mouth before it dissolved. Amy had given up trying to dunk the cookies. She just ate hers.

Elsie asked about the upper intermediate class. “Other than being two-faced.”

Amy wished she could say that they were lazy, or didn’t listen, or always skipped, or were rude, but they were perfectly delightful. A little rambunctious sometimes, but they had the most mind-numbing jobs Amy could imagine and their dress code only allowed them to wear white, navy blue, gray, and black. No wonder they sometimes got too exuberant when they were allowed out during the work day.

“They’re fine. Just two-faced.”

Elsie sighed and told Amy she was no fun. Amy told about their progress in the class and what she had been planning to cover next. She could feel that she was visibly moping.

“You won’t be out any money. You’ll have more classes, too, with the telephone classes,” said Elsie. The school was like a fishbowl where the fish wouldn’t stop talking about each other’s business.

Amy agreed with Elsie that it wasn’t the end of the world. It wasn’t the money. It was other people thinking that she was bad at something that she wasn’t really all that bad but thought she might be. She wasn’t a brilliant teacher. No month-long course that ended with an interview where the evaluator told you when you weren’t giving him the right answer could make you into a brilliant teacher. But she wasn’t the worst teacher, either.

Elsie had to leave to go to an *intercambio*. As far as Amy could tell, she had found a stranger on the internet and met him once a week to speak, first in English, then in Spanish. “It’s fun,” said Elsie, and Amy wished that she were the kind of person who would find it fun. She had moved to Barcelona to become the kind of person who would think stilted conversation with a stranger was fun, but she hadn’t succeeded. She thought about a second cup of coffee, which would be her fourth cup that day, or going back to the school to do some lesson planning, but instead she just went home and tried to read her French novels in translation.

Amy went to her first session of her new class with questionnaires for the students to fill out, handouts on phone etiquette, and a table of the phases of a lesson and the activities she would lead so she wouldn’t get lost or forget something. They seemed attentive and eager enough. It was always hard with a new class of beginning or intermediate students. It was like

teaching a class full of vocal dogs, you had to rely on facial expressions, body language, and the occasional bark or whine. They found out about each other's hobbies, pets, and vacations and presented them to the class. They chuckled when she asked them hold their hands, with thumbs and pinkies extended, to their faces and pretend to call each other across the table but they complied. They laughed when she demonstrated that in English, telephones go "*brring-brring*" not "*rin rin*." They even promised before they left the classroom to call each other at work and practice, but it probably wasn't clear to them that Amy was mostly joking. Still, if it got them practicing.

"That seemed to go well," said Terri, smiling. Amy squelched the urge to say that they all thought everything was fine before, and look how that ended.

"They're really nice. I think they like me."

Terri looked at Amy. "How long have you been here?" Amy told her it had been a few months. "Any friends?"

"Just Elsie," said Amy, which she hadn't realized was the case. She'd just assumed she had no friends in Barcelona except the five novels she'd brought with her and the four she'd managed to acquire. Not that she did much reading. She did a lot of sleeping. More sleeping than she'd like to admit. She wasn't sure if she was pleased or disappointed that Elsie was her only friend. Still, one friend was better than none, and Elsie was okay, as far as friends went.

"I see," said Terri and went back to her office.

Amy met Elsie on the stairs on her way out.

"Do you want to get a drink or something?" she asked. That was a thing friends did, right? "You can tell me how you like the traitor class."

“I’m going to my *intercambio*. This one’s a group one, not the guy from the internet.” A group one.

“Can I come?” asked Amy. “It sounds fun.” That wasn’t true, but maybe it would actually be fun once Amy got there.

“Sure,” said Elsie. “I’ll get a discount for bringing a new person.” It sounded more like a cult than meeting someone from the internet, but Amy kept walking beside her.

Amy wondered when she should tell Elsie that she could only speak enough Spanish to ask directions or buy groceries. She’d just improvise. People had conversations that revolved around how to get from one place to another all the time. Maybe she wouldn’t even talk, she’d just work on her listening comprehension.

## SHARED HOUSING

Amy didn't lie to Sarah, but she let her assume that Lindsay had asked to stay with Amy and Sarah while she did an internship in the city. Sarah only knew Lindsay as Amy's older, spoiled cousin, tormentor of Amy's youth and unfairly the favorite of their grandmother. This was, to a certain extent, an embellishment. Lindsay had always exerted a fascination over Amy, and Amy hoped that as adults, perhaps the two of them could be friends. Aunt Cynthia had insisted that they exchange cell phone numbers at Christmas, and when Lindsay acquiesced, Amy had taken to texting her silly things.

*It's too cold. I preferred global warming to global climate change.*

*There is a very well-dressed homeless woman in the park today. She has stylish shoes and a very bohemian hat.*

*Remember how Grandma used to listen to romance novels on tape while she cleaned the kitchen? It just occurred to me that those were porn.*

Lindsay responded back in kind and told her she was funny. Amy was delighted. Being funny meant she had power, that she was worthy of attention but not subject to scrutiny. Being funny was a scrim that allowed Amy to be glimpsed, in shadow. Which did not explain why, when Lindsay asked if Amy knew of anyone who needed a roommate for the summer, Amy suggested that Lindsay come stay with her and Sarah.

"She'll pay rent," Amy promised when she told Sarah. She hadn't discussed this with Lindsay, but Aunt Cynthia and Uncle Rick were probably sponsoring her anyway. Sarah was doing her dishes.

"But you don't like her. She called you ugly and dyed your hair by force." That was an exaggeration.



“It was a long time ago.” Amy opened a drawer and peered inside at the spatulas and stray chopsticks. Then she closed it. It stuck, so she opened it, shuffled the spatulas – why did they even have so many spatulas? -- and tried again. It closed.

“She’s not a vegan or a libertarian or something, is she?” Sarah opened the drawer that Amy had been playing with to put away her whisk. What had she used a whisk for? Sarah slammed the drawer shut, giving Amy just enough time to pull her hand away.

Lindsay was not a vegan, but Amy didn’t know if she was a libertarian. She said Lindsay wasn’t. Would Lindsey and Sarah ever talk about politics? But then, that was the problem with libertarians. They couldn’t shut up about why libertarians were right about everything and everyone else was wrong. Lindsay probably wasn’t a libertarian. Amy would know if she were.

“Just as long as she doesn’t leave hair in the drain,” said Sarah, putting away her cups.

Amy fussed for far too long over converting the living room, which had been in former times a third bedroom, into a guest room for Lindsay. They had a screen made of two doors Sarah had found in a dumpster that they used to partition off part of the living room. Their departed third roommate decided she would rather live with her oaf of a boyfriend in a studio apartment than in an imperfectly divided living room. Amy suspected it was she who was responsible for the glut of spatulas. She and Sarah had already covered the screens with prints and posters; Amy turned the divider so that these were in the room. She reassembled the departed roommate’s garment rack for Lindsay’s suits – surely one would have to wear suits to an internship, even at an art museum -- and covered the futon with Grandma Margaret’s enormous crocheted blanket.

“It’s a good thing we didn’t get rid of this stuff,” she said to Sarah, arranging some daisies in a salsa jar. Sarah sneezed. Amy didn’t ask whether the flowers or the blanket were to blame.

She couldn’t have explained it to Sarah, but it was vitally important to get everything right. Not false – she wouldn’t go out and buy Irish linen sheets for Lindsay or anything ridiculous like that – but she must present herself in the best possible light. She was not boring and silly, she read grown up nineteenth century novels and even some twentieth and twenty first century novels and only did a few crafts, she was broke in a post-college way but could still have fun, she would not make a big deal of her year – all right, closer to two years -- in Barcelona, because that would be gauche, she was the kind of person who would casually use “gauche” in conversation. And then Lindsay would like and maybe even admire her, and then she would know that she was worthy of admiration, and she could stop worrying about that and start worrying about something else instead, like when she was going to find a real job and a boyfriend. Obviously, only admirable people got jobs and boyfriends. There was someone handing them out to the worthy. Sarah liked her, of course, but Sarah didn’t admire her. How could she? It was impossible to admire someone you saw in a bathrobe. This was a scientific fact. She’d have to find something else to lurch around the apartment in at breakfast. No, it was impossible to tell Sarah any of it. Sarah didn’t care what anyone thought of her, or her job at a bakery which wasn’t even a trendy cupcake bakery, or her pajama bottoms that had holes in the seat.

“I’m wearing underwear,” she said when Amy told her.

So Sarah would not be at all sympathetic. Nevertheless, she helped move the television out of the living room and arranged the furniture so that it was more bedroom-like than living room-like.

“It’ll be fun,” Amy told her. “You’ll like her. She’s funny. I promise she won’t try to make you over by force.”

“If you say so,” Sarah said.

Sarah was watching television, sitting on the futon and eating chocolate the afternoon Lindsay was to arrive.

“She has to sleep there. Don’t leave wrappers,” said Amy, flicking her best plastic dresser with a feather duster neither she nor Sarah remembered buying. Sarah crumpled the pieces of foil and stuffed them in her pocket. “That’s gross.”

“There’s no pleasing you.”

Amy’s phone rang. She jumped. “It’s her!”

“She’s not a Romanov,” Sarah said as Amy answered her phone. “And anyway, look how they ended.”

Amy’s heart pounded as she took the elevator to let Lindsay in. The elevator didn’t smell quite as bad as it usually did, but she knew she was making a mistake. Lindsay would hate everything and tell her mother that Amy lived in a hovel and then Aunt Cynthia would call Amy’s parents and pretend to be concerned while secretly gloating. She could just imagine Aunt Cynthia on the phone to her mother. “Lindsay said there was graffiti outside the building, that the walls were scuffed, the carpet was filthy and the elevator smelled like foreign cooking. Does Amy need money? Is she on drugs?”

Lindsay was waiting outside the building. She had a cardigan draped over her arm and a single suitcase by her side. Amy marveled at how little she had brought, remembering how much Aunt Cynthia made them take to spend the day at the beach. Maybe the apple hadn't fallen as close to the tree as she had feared.

"Your neighborhood is very diverse," Lindsay said, giving Amy a hug. She had abandoned the strawberry shampoo.

"We like it," said Amy, somewhat taken aback. Was "diverse" code for "dangerous-seeming?"

"Friendly, too. Lots of young men wanted to make my acquaintance."

Was she indirectly bragging that she was pretty? Showing that she wasn't afraid of them and wasn't going to run back to the bus station, telling her mother about Amy's murderous neighborhood? Amy hoped it was the latter.

They talked about how hot it was on the way to the apartment. Lindsay took off her sunglasses and combed her fingers through her hair, which was a different blond than it had been at Christmas. It was hot, but the concrete and the cars made it worse. It was hot, but the humidity made it worse, too. Summertime in a city built on a swamp, what could one expect? Amy resisted the urge to say that the city was not, in fact, built on a swamp. She didn't want Lindsay to think that she was a showoff, though she knew that in fact she was a showoff, just one with precious little to show off about.

Amy dithered over the living room as she unlocked the door to her apartment. It wasn't too late to show Lindsay to her own room, and the living room, seen with fresh eyes, was pathetic. There was plastic furniture, for heaven's sake. The partition was clearly two doors found in a dumpster, thumbtacked prints of water lilies notwithstanding. Even the water lilies

were now suspect; would Lindsay think that Amy had tame taste in art despite her fancy art degree? After all, Lindsay's art history degree was fancier. And Sarah would still be sitting on the futon. That was weird. But, to be honest, Amy's room wasn't that much better and it didn't have flowers in it, either.

"You don't mind being in the living room, right?" she asked, leading Lindsay in.

"Of course not. It's cute. I don't want to wake anyone up when I leave in the morning."

"I work at a bakery," said Sarah. "It's not one you've seen on TV."

Somehow, Amy hadn't foreseen that Sarah would be a problem, which struck her as ludicrous and short-sighted. Sarah couldn't get along with anyone. How was she going to get along with a spoiled rich girl with highlights and a huge pair of sunglasses dangling from her hand? Sarah wouldn't know whether Lindsay was spoiled or not. She would just assume, and Amy's embroidered stories of young Lindsay would not help Sarah form a positive first impression.

"Want to trade, then?" asked Lindsay.

Sarah snorted. Amy thought Sarah was like a cat. Newcomers had to first exchange bats on the head with a paw before they were accepted. Until the day she left, the departed roommate responded to Sarah's barbs with bewildered silence. Amy hoped this exchange would be sufficient. Sometimes it wasn't. Lindsay opened her suitcase on the futon and began distributing gifts: an enormous box of saltwater taffy and a bottle of wine.

"Taffy was Mom's idea. The wine is pink and French. I don't know. The label's pretty. You like French things, right?"

"And pink things, in moderation," said Amy. She put the wine in the refrigerator. When she came back, Lindsay was sitting beside Sarah on the futon, running her hand over the blanket

their grandmother had made. Amy sat in a beanbag chair that the departed roommate had left behind.

“It’s going to be too hot for that, but Grandma made it, so I thought I’d share.”

“I didn’t know she’d given it to you.”

“In college. Because it’s ugly, I think. Aunt Rose made a new afghan for you, right?”

That seemed to perk Lindsay up. “She did. It’s at home.”

Sarah shushed them. A lion was staring intently at a gazelle on the television.

“Oh, come on,” said Lindsay. “You know how it’s going to end.”

“Yes, but I like to hear how many ways the narrator can say ‘the lion eats the gazelle.’”

“You’re weird,” said Lindsay. Sarah laughed.

It was as if a knife went through Amy’s heart. Lindsay and Sarah were sitting side by side making fun of each other and she was relegated to the beanbag chair with no one to make fun of and no one making fun of her. Somehow, even though Amy was the one who had set up the room and bought Lindsay flowers, Lindsay preferred Sarah. It was completely unfair, and Amy knew she was childish for even thinking that way. She folded her arms and sank lower in the beanbag chair, until her forehead was at the level of her knees. She had made a mistake in bringing Sarah and Lindsay together. She should have referred Lindsay to Craig’s List to find a place for the summer and kept her away from Sarah. That’s what she should have done, if she were smart.

Sarah leaned over to her.

“We don’t have to watch this if you don’t want. There’s plenty of other stuff on.”

“No, that’s okay,” sighed Amy. “Go ahead.”

Sarah squinted at her.

“Okay.”

Lindsay slipped smoothly into the apartment’s routine. She and Amy walked to the Metro together on their way to work, saying goodbye when Lindsay transferred trains. She didn’t hog the bathroom, the television, or the microwave, and she always folded the futon up in case someone wanted to sit in the living room, where she was a restful companion in watching nature documentaries, television adaptations of classic novels, and cooking shows.

Amy brought her plastic bag of knitting from her room and situated herself in the bean bag chair so that she wouldn’t poke anyone with her elbows. Lindsay flicked little glances at the pile of navy blue yarn her lap.

“What are you making? What is that needle?”

“The world’s largest sweater.” Amy explained how she was starting at the bottom and working up to the arms using a long, flexible needle and how she would knit the sleeves down when she’d finished the collar.

“So you’ve moved on from embellishing shorts,” Lindsay said.

“I still have some of those. I don’t wear them out of the apartment, of course, or I’d look like a time traveller,” Amy laughed.

“I wish Grandma or Aunt Rose had taught me how to do something,” said Lindsay.

“You can learn from a book,” said Amy. “Or the internet.”

“It’s not the same,” said Lindsay. “They didn’t even offer.” Amy didn’t say anything, because Lindsay was right. Lindsay might have been Grandma’s favorite, prettier and more confident, but Amy was the one Grandma and Aunt Rose had taught their skills to -- though

sometimes impatiently and with very poor grace on the part of Grandma -- and she thought that she must, for some reason, have been special to them.

“She’s not a princess,” Sarah hissed to Amy one evening. They were sitting on the futon, taking an intermission from a documentary about furniture that they were letting Lindsay show them because one of her professors was in it, talking about inlay. “She just likes princess furniture.”

“I told you she wasn’t a princess,” Amy whispered back, her heart sinking. It was one thing for her to tell Sarah that Lindsay wasn’t a princess, it was quite another for Sarah to come to that conclusion herself.

“You told me she used to be.”

“People change.”

“If you say so. Have you asked if she wants to go to Morgan’s party?”

Amy didn’t think that Lindsay would want to go to Morgan’s party, which would be a glorified kegger full of people they went to college with but no one else could stand getting all worked up about politics and beer, and hadn’t asked her. More importantly, she wasn’t sure she wanted Lindsay to go, lest everyone like Lindsay better than they liked her, just like Sarah did, apparently. But Lindsay also had no one in the city but her co-workers, who hardly counted, being art historians. And inviting Lindsay was the right thing to do. And maybe Amy would luck out and Lindsay would say that she had to stay home and make slides of medieval art or something.



Lindsay didn't have to make slides of medieval art. She was delighted when Sarah asked, as soon as she came back into the room and before she could begin the documentary again.

"I love parties," she said, sinking into the beanbag chair.

Who said that in real life, "I love parties?" Amy hoped that the scales would fall from Sarah's eyes and Sarah would despise Lindsay for being frivolous, but they didn't and she didn't.

"It's going to be a plastic cup and cheap beer kind of party," Sarah warned her.

"As long as there are no baseball caps," said Lindsay. Unfortunately for Amy, if baseball caps would dissuade Lindsay, there probably wouldn't be baseball caps. Khaki pants, maybe, but not baseball caps.

"It'll be fun," said Amy, though she didn't believe it. "You don't want all work and no play all summer, do you?"

Lindsay wanted to wear a sundress to the party. Amy didn't try to dissuade her, though it wouldn't be a sundress kind of party and it would be dark soon, anyway.

"Just don't wear sandals," she warned. "It's not the cleanest house at the best of times."

"Ballet flats?"

"Sure," said Amy, though she hated the trend that allowed women who would run screaming from a wall of mirrors to prance around, pretending to be ballerinas without doing any work. She hadn't taken a ballet class since high school, and in retrospect she didn't know why she had ever taken a ballet class, but as far as she was concerned she retained the right to scorn people who romanticized ballet.

The three of them assembled in the foyer, now a tiny nook bordered by the pair of salvaged doors on one side. Amy and Sarah were wearing jeans and t-shirts. Sarah had a bag of potato chips and Amy a bottle of cheap Spanish wine that only she would drink.

“I’m overdressed,” said Lindsay. She saw the party contributions. “Do I need to bring something?”

“You’re fine,” said Sarah. Sarah never told people that they were fine. “Let’s go.” But she did hate waiting around while Amy or the departed roommate fiddled with their clothes. Amy was relieved.

The party was a short walk away in the hot, damp evening. They passed other people going out on the town, some of them dressed up in brightly colored dresses and high heels. Sarah led them single file down the narrow, uneven sidewalk so as not to bump into anyone else.

“Who is this person? This person whose party it is?” asked Lindsay.

“He’s a friend from college,” said Sarah. “He has a house with some other guys and they invite people over to trash it every few months.”

“No. Really?”

“Not exactly trash it,” said Amy. “But they’re not good about trash cans and things like that, so it does get messy. But everyone’s drunk, so no one cares. And if cleaning up the next day bothered them, they’d put out recycling bins or something. I think it’s more likely that they don’t clean up the next day. It’ll be fun. They have a really eclectic group of friends.”

This was an overstatement. They had friends they went to college with and friends they acquired later. But Amy didn’t want Lindsay to know that even though she had graduated three years ago, she was still basically stuck in college. Maybe Lindsay wouldn’t notice that everyone was white, middle class, and between the ages of twenty four and twenty eight.

Sarah turned them down Morgan's street. A group of men was sitting on the porch of the house next to Morgan's. The air was subtly tinged with the smell of marijuana. Would Lindsay notice? Would that be something that got reported to Aunt Cynthia? Would Aunt Cynthia be hypocritical about it? Probably. Or would Lindsay keep it to herself, if she even recognized the smell at all. But of course she'd recognize it.

"Good evening," Sarah said to the men as they passed. The men waved back.

One of the house mates, probably not Morgan, had tried to do something with the front yard. Instead of the normal patch of dry grass, there was a spindly tomato plant in a green wire cage and a new blueberry bush. Although it had no blueberries, Amy knew it was a blueberry bush because it still had the label on. She pointed it out to Sarah and Lindsay.

"Boys," Lindsay said.

The door was open -- "Boys," muttered Sarah -- so the three of them walked into the dark, noisy house and were immediately swallowed by the crush of sweaty, twentysomething bodies. Amy looked around. There were more people she knew than people she didn't. Jeff was in a corner with his arm around a pretty girl's shoulder, talking to a guy who had once gotten drunk and started a fight at a Halloween party. When other boys broke the fight up, the guy ran away, his gold hot pants fading into the dark night. The story had become a legend, and Amy was surprised to see the guy drinking a beer in Morgan's living room. Part of her believed that he was perpetually fleeing, haunting the tree-lined neighborhood streets with his bloodshot eyes and his tennis shoes.

Morgan saw them from across the room and waved. They began to make their way slowly to the kitchen, creeping behind other guests and apologizing as they walked between conversation partners. Amy's ears were ringing when they were safely in the kitchen, a tiny

alcove at the back of the house. She set the bottle of wine on the counter with a clunk. Sarah deposited her bag of potato chips on a rickety card table outside the kitchen.

“Thanks,” said Morgan. He introduced himself to Lindsay.

Morgan handed Amy a corkscrew and a real wine glass. He was casual about trash receptacles, but he had the instincts to be a good host. As if by magic, another young man materialized beside them.

“This is Chad,” said Morgan.

“What kind of wine is that?” asked Chad.

“It’s a tempranillo. I’m the only one who likes it. It’s really cheap,” Amy warned him.

“I like tempranillo,” he said. “I studied abroad in *Sevilla*.”

“I’ll see you later,” said Morgan, edging sideways out of the crowded kitchen, suggesting that Lindsay follow him so he could introduce her to the other guests.

Chad took the corkscrew out of Amy’s hand and began to open the bottle. He was one of the khaki-wearing guests, probably someone’s friend from work, probably in some dismal but well-paid field. He probably had business cards, and might even give her one, not because he particularly liked her or wanted to keep in touch, but because he had so many that he didn’t have to conserve them. He poured some wine in the glass and began to swirl it in ostentatious circles on the counter. Raising the glass to his nose, he inhaled deeply.

“I usually just drink it,” said Amy. “It cost seven dollars.” She was getting hoarse already, shouting over music and chatter.

“Get another glass,” said Chad. “It’s not bad.”

“I’m glad you approve,” said Amy, opening the cabinets. She found wine glasses over the cutting board, which was frosted with a layer of bread crumbs. She wondered what granary

products the boys would have that would need cutting, then tipped the bread crumbs into the sink. Chad took the second wine glass from her and returned it, full of wine.

“*Salud*,” he said.

“Sure,” said Amy. She drank her wine. She wasn’t sure that she actually liked it, but she bought it all the time. She felt that she should like it. She inspected Chad, who was also drinking her wine. He had nice teeth and his hair curled against his neck.

“Do you want to go somewhere quiet?” she asked.

Chad looked around. “Is there anywhere quiet?”

She led him down the stairs to the basement, holding her wine in one hand and gripping the handrail with the other. Morgan had had a very stern talk with her about making out with her conquests in the bathroom -- he was a better host than one might guess -- and the landlord only used the basement for storing boxes and dusty furniture.

“I used to live in Barcelona,” she said when they seated on an orange and yellow love seat with a frame that looked like shipping cartons.

“Oh, *Barthelona*,” he said.

“No, we don’t lisp there. And we don’t trust people who do.” His hair was a satisfying tuft to run her fingers through. “Well, you can’t blame them.”

Chad tasted like cheap wine, cigarettes, and tortilla chips, and had no qualms about being seduced to talk of political autonomy.

“I used to be into that stuff in college,” he said later, into her neck. “Ethnic minorities. You could have asked me anything about the Roma.”

“Sexy,” said Amy, though she was hardly one to talk. She stopped his hand from moving under her waistband. “Not on the loveseat,” she said.

“It’s from the seventies. And I’ve met their landlord. It’s seen worse,” he said.

She laughed. This was normally the point when she would straighten her clothes, apologize to the loveseat, and go back to the party, to be followed by the wounded eyes of her conquest or not, depending. Chad wasn’t so bad. They could go back up hand in hand and act like it was normal. They could kiss each other good night on the front porch, in front of everyone. She imagined the pair of them sitting on her futon with her feet in his lap, the way the departed roommate and her oaf of a boyfriend had done while talking about comic books or whatever it was the two of them had to talk about, she really had no idea. But then she thought about using the name “Chad” on a regular basis, and couldn’t do it.

“I think we left the wine open upstairs,” she said. She hooked her bra and bounded up the stairs, leaving Chad behind her on the loveseat..

She poured herself another glass of wine and went into the living room. Morgan, Lindsay and Sarah were standing together, laughing. A wave of paranoia broke over her. Sarah caught her eye and Lindsay turned to look at her, still laughing. Were they talking about her? Were they gossiping about her admittedly pathetic habit of picking up and dropping strange young professionals at Morgan’s parties? She took a deep breath. What kind of thing was that to tell someone’s cousin? But what kind of person abandoned her cousin at a strange party so that she could get to second base on a loveseat that was twice as old as she was? It was hard to know who would be more in the wrong, if Morgan and Sarah had let this particular hobby of Amy’s slip.

But they probably hadn’t. They wouldn’t. They thought it was weird. (“What happened to you?” Sarah asked the first time she caught Amy. “Practice,” Amy replied, which was both witty and true.) Amy approached them slowly, dodging a flailing arm, a precariously held

plastic cup, and a strong opinion about campaign finance laws. Someone called her name. She turned to see Jeff beckoning her over.

“This is my girlfriend, Audrey.”

Audrey, damn her, was as beautiful and gamine as an Audrey should be. She held out a cool, slender hand for Amy to shake in her large, sweaty one.

“Nice to meet you,” Amy lied.

“You’re the one who doesn’t paint flesh, right? Jeff’s told me all about you.”

“Flesh is unreliable,” said Amy, crossing her arms and balancing the bulb of her wine glass against her chin. She was trying to hide her neck. Sometimes they bit or had bristles sticking out of their faces like wild boars.

“I completely agree.”

Amy wondered if she might be wrong. Jeff asked what she was doing.

“Back at school, actually,” she said, hoping he wouldn’t inquire.

“Grad school?” he asked.

“No, academic advisor. I might as well not be, the students don’t listen to me and then it’s my fault when they can’t graduate or fail all their classes or don’t get to study abroad because they missed the deadlines to apply.” Amy took a deep breath and asked what he was up to.

Teaching, the poor thing.

“I know exactly what you mean,” he said. “They expect me to write letters of recommendation overnight and they think that because it’s an art class I can’t fail them. And the parents.”

“Dear god, the parents,” Amy agreed. “Someone once drove eighty miles round trip to argue with me about how many credits her son had.”

“How many did he have?” asked Audrey.

“Not enough,” said Amy.

Sarah caught her eye from across the room again and yawned, raising her arms above her head, balling her fists and almost hitting someone in the face.

“I have to go,” said Amy. “I think Sarah wants to go home.” Amy bade farewell to Jeff and Audrey, who were now holding hands.

“Did Jeff pat your shoulder?” asked Sarah.

“No, he’s with his girlfriend.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Lindsay.

“Nothing,” said Sarah. “I’m exhausted, Lindsay’s feet hurt, you’ve probably had enough wine, let’s go home.”

“No, I haven’t.” Amy drank the rest of her wine and looked around for somewhere to deposit her glass. She should go and put it in the sink. But walking back that direction might take her past Chad. She tucked it behind the sofa.

“It’ll attract bugs,” protested Lindsay.

“The whole house attracts bugs,” said Sarah. “Let’s go.”

Sarah pushed through the crowd again and Lindsay and Amy followed in her wake. They passed Chad, who had switched to beer and was talking about baseball with another man in khakis. He looked at Amy as she shuffled past. She waved. There was no reason that they couldn’t be friendly. He stared. It seemed that he disagreed. Amy couldn’t regret him. His name was Chad and he snatched things out of people’s hands and took their wine glasses, for heaven’s sake.



“Who was that?” asked Lindsay.

“A friend of Morgan’s, I think. He wanted some of my wine.”

“Did he now,” said Sarah.

“Hush,” said Amy. They were outside, where it was still hot. The streets were quiet as they returned home, the silence broken only by Sarah’s muttered curses when she walked through a spider web. Amy unlocked the door of the apartment.

“I’m going to fall face down on my bed and fall asleep in my clothes,” Sarah announced, disappearing into her room.

“Have fun,” said Lindsay. “Where did you disappear to?” she asked Amy.

“I got to talking about Spain,” she said.

“When you wash your face, be sure to get those little splotches of lip gloss on your neck,” said Lindsay, smirking. “I hate lip gloss. It just gets everywhere, doesn’t it? They’ve got these new lip stains that don’t budge. Of course, you have to be careful putting them on. Let me know if you want to try one of mine before the next party.”

“Good night,” said Amy, dashing into her room.

Amy tried to be philosophical about Lindsay’s teasing. She had been wrong about wanting to be admired; being admired was not what got you close with someone. But now that Lindsay obviously thought they were close enough that she could tease Amy, Amy wasn’t happy with that, either. She wished she could go back to having a relationship based mainly on texting silly things, that she could go back behind her scrim of cleverness. But it was obviously too late. Lindsay was in her apartment, had noticed her absence from the party and the lip gloss on her collar. Amy recognized that she had put herself in an impossible situation, as far as Lindsay was

concerned. But that was her own fault and there was nothing to be done about it now. She washed her face, brushed her teeth, and went to bed.

Usually Amy and Lindsay met back at the apartment at the end of the work day, but one day the whims of the Metro put them on the same train and even the same car. Amy saw Lindsay first, sitting ahead of her in the carriage with her head against the window. Amy's first reaction was disgust. One could never tell what was on those windows. But then she saw that the visible portion of Lindsay's face was bright red and that her shoulders were shaking. Amy stood up and walked along the bouncing car to sit next to her. No one ever wanted to sit next to the crying girl on the Metro. People would rather walk.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Stupid day. Stupid boss. Stupid internship." Lindsay hiccupped and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, which was probably filthy from being in the Metro. Amy passed her her handkerchief. "This is a real handkerchief," said Lindsay. "You are a time traveller." Lindsay dried her eyes.

"The day's almost over. And maybe the internship won't be stupid tomorrow."

"The boss will be," said Lindsay.

"Well, they almost always are, aren't they?"

"That's true. I don't think I want to work in a museum. They're petty. And cold."

"You're going to be unemployed if you don't work anywhere petty," said Amy. "And you know more about inlaid furniture than anyone I know. Don't waste all that training."

Lindsay chuckled damply. Amy patted her shoulder. She could feel through Lindsay's cardigan that it was hot.

“I bragged to everyone about this internship,” said Lindsay. “I’m sure all my classmates hate my guts. I’ll have to go back and gush about it.”

“They don’t even remember,” said Amy. “No one’s worrying about your internship. They’re worrying about whatever grad students worry about. Money. Having sex with their classmates. Not having sex with their classmates. What comes after postmodernism.”

“At least I don’t have to worry about that,” said Lindsay. “I’m a medievalist for a reason.”

They got off the train at their station and walked home together, Amy feeling very wise and grown up all the way. She was delighted not that Lindsay was unhappy but that she had been able to help her. She would have preferred that Lindsay not cry on the Metro, but if she had to cry on the Metro, Amy thought it was a very good thing that she was there to see it and make her feel better. And the little glimpse into Lindsay’s life, that she was a braggart, apparently, and insecure and not doing particularly well in her internship didn’t hurt. She didn’t feel vindictive, more that Lindsay’s imperfectness made her more lovable. Just as her plan to be admired in order to foster friendship between the two of them was untenable (and who, really, would ever admire a little cousin, however big she was?) putting Lindsay on a pedestal had made her remote. They were home. The elevator smelled like garlic. Sarah met them at the door with a box of cookies.

“The customer rejected these for not looking enough like butterflies.”

Amy peered into the clear plastic box. “They look exactly like butterflies.”

“No, a specific butterfly. They’re too blue, or not blue enough, or don’t shimmer, or can’t pollinate flowers, or something. She explained loudly and at great length but with little clarity. They’re ours now.”

“I’ll get the wine,” said Lindsay, heading for the kitchen.

“Cookies for dinner?” asked Sarah.

“It’s been one of those days,” said Amy.

Lindsay handed Amy the wine and the corkscrew and put three wine glasses on the coffee table. Amy opened the wine with a pop and poured it into the glasses.

“*Prost*,” said Sarah, looking Lindsay and Amy squarely in the face. Sarah was a German minor.

“Why do you do that?” asked Lindsay. “She did it at the party, but it was too loud to ask.”

“It’s a superstition,” said Amy, opening the cookies and taking one.

“If you don’t look the other people in the eyes when you toast, you’ll have seven years of bad sex.” Sarah took a cookie.

“Is that true?” gasped Lindsay.

“Well, I don’t want to risk it,” said Sarah.

They put a cooking competition show on the television and stayed up too late, until Lindsay shooed Amy and Sarah out of her room and into bed.

