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Swimming With Shoes On

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Swimming With Shoes On

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Abstract:

Swimming With Shoes On is a creative writing thesis containing four short stories all revolving around one central character, Lottie. Each story enters the reader into a different chapter of Lottie's life, and we watch as people move in and out of her life, as she learns more about herself and her friends, as she develops certain understandings about the construction of the world she's living in.

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The Favor

We had agreed to pick up Joey in the parking lot of the Winn Dixie in Port St. Lucie, the decided halfway point between downtown Miami and the northern reach of the Orlando metropolitan area. The rain, which started minutes after we passed the exit for Vero Beach, swelled into a steady shower that turned the dark roads slick and steamy, before it retreated into a misty drizzle that clung in droplets to my flyaway hair, to the pilling fibers of our shirts, as we stood shoulder to shoulder leaning up against the still-warm hood of the borrowed little car. I stared down at the pavement, watching as the pulsing red fluorescence reflected down from the store's neon sign rippled across puddles in the asphalt. Just seconds after the "D" in Dixie flickered out and died, the whole sign went dark, and the gangly silhouette of a bag boy switched off the interior lights, locking the glass doors behind him.

I pulled my hand from my pocket with the intention to slide it into Ben's at the same moment he swung his arm up to check his wristwatch. "Should be here soon," he said, a suggestion of impatience in his voice although we hadn't really been waiting long at all.

"Are you nervous?" I asked, looking sideways at him.

"I mean, I don't really know what's going on. I didn't get a lot of information on the phone." Ben paused, biting his lip. "I'm worried that whatever he went through in Miami will happen again in the car or something. I wouldn't really know what to do."

I looked down into the pavement, felt moisture collect on the back of my neck, which was left exposed for the first time in several years thanks to the choppy, above-the-ears haircut Ben's mom had given me earlier in the day. Then, as the cold blades of the scissors brushed up against my skin, I was surprised at how indifferent I felt, how lacking in sentimentality I was, full instead with some foreign sense of non-attachment. Ben had just started to run his hand through my hair when a car swung into the parking lot, its low headlights illuminating our jeans from the knees down.

Ben peeled himself off the hood and I felt the fabric of his shirtsleeve detach from mine as he stepped away. I listened to the opening and closing of doors, and looked up in time to catch the drawn out separation of a hug between the two boys. I made eye contact with Joey as he leaned back from the embrace-- his hand still clutching Ben's arm tightly-- and gave him a slight smile and an upward nod, that winning combination of gestures saved for acquaintances passing in hallways, friends of friends meeting for the second time. In the sallow light of the streetlamps, Joey looked sick, the shadows under his eyes heavy and dark. He looked smaller than he did the last time I saw him, years ago.

Ben wrapped an arm around Joey's shoulders, and together they walked over to say goodbye to the people standing by the other car. I recognized the driver as one of Ben's friends from high school. He was dressed head to toe in white, down to a pair of white patent leather loafers. Ben gesture wildly down at the shoes, his back shaking with laughter, and I heard his friend yell in defense, "when in Miami!"

Minutes later, Joey eventually slammed the trunk shut, stowing away the black duffle bag he had been shouldering. Next to him, Ben stretched tall, his arms reached up to the sky, where the rain had all but stopped. I caught a flash of a pale strip of waist, a glowing white waist that stood out specifically against the black pavement and generally against almost every other person I'd seen in Florida in the last few days, all of them instead golden and soft, like worn leather. The presence of so much skin had been almost jarring, coming from Massachusetts, where everyone was currently swathed in layers of bulky wool and quilted down, tucked into woven scarves and tall boots, their faces too, almost fully concealed behind high collars and turned down towards the street to avoid the winds that whipped so intensely it felt almost as if it were being blown through narrow, imaginary tunnels. I wondered if the storm that had cancelled both our original and rescheduled flight home had really delivered and dumped the four feet of snow and ice that had been promised, but I didn't really care either way. The inconvenience of the whole thing was strangely exciting, as it sometimes is when things go wrong.

I began to stretch too--suddenly feeling hot and claustrophobic at the idea of having to fold myself back into the car--just as Joey made a move to grab the handle of the front passenger door. He looked back at me and hesitated, and then sidestepped over to stand in front of the backseat door. I gestured too enthusiastically to the front seat and told him to take it, but Joey just shook his head quickly, looking sheepish, and said "no, no it's alright, I can sit in the back," protesting right up until I opened the front door and held it for him until he climbed through.

It took Ben a few tries to get the car started. We had borrowed his little sister's used Nissan, which likely needed a new battery, considering the two ever-present sets of jumper cables lying twisted on the floor of the back seat. But when Joey called, it was the only car available, sitting unused in Susan's driveway. When the engine finally turned over and came to life, and we U-turned onto a highway, leaving one strip mall behind us but advancing inevitably up a coastal stretch of more neon; fast food places and movie theaters, pharmacies and tourist shops that sell boogie boards and pool noodles during the day, past gas stations and a sex shop with heavy red curtains hanging across the windows and a sign that flashed once each between "COME IN" and "PEEPSHOW" before illuminating them both together. It wasn't until we were through the drive-in at Taco Bell and Ben and I were each halfway through Quesaritos, that Joey spoke up from the front seat.

"Thanks so much for this, you guys." Ben, his mouth full of food, smiled a closed-lip smile towards Joey, affectionately grabbing his shoulder and muffling something that sounded like "no problem." Joey continued, "you don't know how much of a relief it is" and I believed him totally, watching his face in the rear-view mirror, his eyes wide with an earnestness that struck me. When he said "It's really good to see you," I knew he meant it to sound like he was addressing the both of us, but I watched his eyes flick slightly towards Ben.

"We're leaving right now," I heard Ben say into the phone almost six hours earlier, standing in the middle of his mom's living room, clenching and unclenching the fingers of his free hand. When he hung up he looked worried, but not panicked, but still

spoke with an urgency that I took to mean he was afraid. "That was Alec," he said. "Alec?" I said, repeating back the name of someone I only knew of but had never formally met, a friend of Ben's from high school who I saw infrequently in the hallways when I was a freshman and they were seniors. "Something happened to Joey." Ben said as he crossed the room towards the front door, looking back at me with an expression that asked why I wasn't following him. Ben does this often, gives out minimal information and expects everyone to understand exactly what's happening. "*What* happened with Joey?" I asked, gently but not without a tiny shred of irritation. "I dunno... a panic attack or something? They were all in Miami and I don't know, Joey just, like broke down? He asked for me to get him.. bring him back here... so he can fly home with us tomorrow? Must've heard about the storm..." Ben also starts to speak in fragmented statements that end in questions when he's nervous, so I let the vagueness go and followed him outside. "We're not... driving all the way to Miami are we?" I asked, tentatively. He shook his head no, said the name of a town in Florida I'd never heard of, and got into the car. I slid into the passenger seat, slightly bewildered but filled with a strange and glowy excitement that left me feeling guilty. I leaned over to rest a hand on Ben's leg, but he was already climbing back out the car door and then running up towards the house. When he came back he had a stack of CDs in one hand, and a coffee big enough for the two of us to split in the other.

Shortly after the drive-through, after we had ascended an on-ramp and pulled speeding onto the main highway, I noticed the muscles in Ben's face begin to relax, his jaw unclench, his hands loosen their grip on the wheel, and I realized I hadn't noticed

how tense his shoulders had been, how tightly he'd been coiled in anticipation. Joey had loosened too, and I could sense his relaxation happening in real time, see just how every mile marker signaled a new level of comfort entered. I had expected them to begin polite conversation, to ask each other the kinds of questions one is required to ask someone they once knew very well, to nod and laugh at the appropriate moments. But after the first few initial minutes of existing in the space of an awkward and confusing circumstance, Ben and Joey fell back into being eleven years old again, under that special magic of childhood friendship that I used to understand.

Joey filled Ben in on Amy, his serious girlfriend, and the trailer they live in together on the property of her dad's house, and how that's not as bad as it sounds, although she really wants to move closer to Boston and they fight often about how much of a difference there could really be between living 45 minutes from Boston and living 25 minutes from Boston, and so far he's winning because they still live in the trailer. He talked about all of their old friends, how he keeps in touch with almost all of them, in fact he sees Alec and Jessi pretty much everyday, and they still fuck around in the skate park next to the high school, smoking spliffs rolled in white papers so they look more like cigs. Ben jumped in here-- he knew from Facebook that Jessi had "gone pro," done the impossible, mythical thing that they had all dreamed about as thirteen year old kids: getting paid to skateboard. Ben had told me this months ago, his voice was excited but tinged with an unmissable edge of jealousy. "That's why we were in Miami," Joey told us, almost breathless at this point, "because Jessi's making a video for a new board company, and he invited us all down."

I watched Ben shift in his seat, saw the corners of his mouth pull up in a small smile that made me so sad that I had to look completely away. When Ben's phone rang earlier with Joey's caller ID on the other line for probably the first time in years, I watched what I thought was a shadow of guileless exhilaration pass across his face, a brief moment of hopeful excitement at the promise of a chance reunion perpetuated by bizarre circumstances and coincidence. But Joey's anecdotes, and his mention of a string of names that once included Ben's (in a way that was spoken so frequently and felt so natural to say out loud that it became muscle memory for anyone who knew their group) as fellow participants in this Floridan boys trip exposed the distance, both physical and emotional, that had opened since Ben moved out of town and no one had followed him.

But Ben bounced back, his voice slipping into slangy easiness as he started telling Joey about his scholarship to school, his little sister's surprise pregnancy, the settlement his mom received eight years after a car accident that wasn't her fault, his first college gallery show, where he would show a film (his latest chosen medium) that he had shot in our hometown. I continued to tune into bits of their conversation between bouts of extreme focus on the road ahead. The earlier rain had still left the roads slippery and shining, and I spent several minutes widening my eyes until they blurred all of the oncoming headlights and their reflections in the dark tar, so that the entire highway looked like one big fuzzy glow, like streaked stills captured by a camera on the lowest exposure.

"My mom can't wait to see you."

I shifted back into the conversation at the mention of Ben's mom, Susan, a woman of easy spirit and good intentions, all genuine, always clad in flared thrift store jeans and soft flannel, her hair long and stringy from Florida saltwater. I liked her so much, and at times felt fully jealous of Ben for getting to have her his whole life-- a feeling I guessed I shared also with Joey, who was now fully animated, wondering out loud how many years it's been since he's seen her, maybe five or six, and a shadow of guilt that comes with realizing how much time you've let slip past moved over his features. Joey admitted to Ben then that Susan still sends him an email every year on his birthday, just as he does for her. And each December she sends him a Hanukkah card from the grocery store, always with a ten dollar bill and a gift card to Red Lobster tucked inside, and a few days after he gets his card from her he remembers to stop at his grocery store and pick up a Christmas card for her, usually one that has the manger scene-- and he knows there's a different name for this motif but can never remember-- on it and sends it to her, at first to her address in Massachusetts that he knew so well, and in the later years to her address in Florida, where she moved after her car accident, and inside his card is always just a handwritten note, scribbled during the seconds of break given by the red lights on the way to the post office.

Laying down across the back seat, watching beads of rain rush down the windows, I thought to myself that if I were ever in a crisis I would find the idea of going to see Susan immensely comforting. And with the incomplete details I knew about Joey's life from the things Ben had told me in casual passing, I knew he felt the same.

In our suburban Massachusetts town, Joey lived in a small house on a major highway that was not yet a major highway when his family moved. He grew into adolescence in this house because his parents could not afford to move, even though their very front yard became dangerous and loud, the rushing of cars a constant interruption in their lives. His mother left the family early, and Joey hears from her sporadically, usually around holidays both religious and not. Joey and Ben met in kindergarten, when they were lined up side by side on the first day of school for having alphabetically similar last names. Joey went to live with Susan when he was eleven, even though Susan was a single mom already raising five other kids. I asked Ben about this often, how his mother had the energy to open her house to the hordes of friends her children brought home, plus neglected eleven year olds, stray pets, etcetera, and he usually just replies with “that’s just who she is” with a misty gratefulness in his eyes that makes me love him.

Joey stopped living there when he was sixteen, as in he did not sleep and eat there every day, but he still was a frequent and familiar presence in the house, and he and Ben remained friends for a few more years, until Ben moved away to go to college and they lost touch in the way that you never think will happen but always and inevitably does.

I leaned forward to turn up the dial on the heat. Ben and Joey were smoking, and had rolled the windows down in an effort to be courteous but it didn’t really do anything besides make it cold inside the car and harder for me to listen to Joey and Ben talk about the years before I knew either of them at all. Even though I wasn’t behind the

wheel, I was delirious from all the driving, the brightness of the oncoming headlights hurting my eyes, and I tried to remember if the nature of that friendship informed by curt conversations had long ago with Ben (about the people we both grew up with but I hardly know at all) was true.

With another hour to go before we were even in sight of Orlando, we pulled off at an exit and stopped for gas and coffee. The night felt almost icy. The humidity hanging in the air from the earlier rain was cold and damp, and I could see small puffs of breath floating up in front of my face when I stepped out of the car. I started to wonder when the last time it snowed in Florida was, if it was one of those things that only happens once every century, like how it snowed in southern California in the 50s and not again since, but I really didn't have a clue and was just cold, waiting for Joey and Ben to come back with coffees and candy and a new pack of American Spirits to split between the two of them as they marveled at how cheap they were in this part of the country. The three of us leaned up against the car for a few minutes and took turns passing around a single cigarette until it became a stump.

"How you feeling?" Ben asked Joey tentatively, shifting from foot to foot.

"I'm pretty good," I answered, leaning into Ben. "Sort of cold though, getting hungry again, but generally okay." Ben looked down at me with half an eye roll.

Joey never answered, but paid to fill the tank completely with gas, said it was the least he could do.

We pulled back onto the road and assumed the a slightly uncomfortable quietness, the kind that filters in after a long batch of information has been breathlessly spilled out. I grabbed the CD case we had thrown in the back before leaving, picked out something in the dark, and reached over to push it into the player, and got semi-scolded from Ben for distracting him as he tried to get back on the highway. The scratchy alternative rock filled the car, and for a few bars we all sat back and just listened.

And then Ben broke the semi-silence when he turned, looked at Joey almost straight in the face, and asked him what the hell happened.

Joey didn't say much more than what was already known. He had been in Miami with his friends and suffered a panic attack-- he'd had anxiety for a long time, and had been having attacks more frequently lately, feeling them more intensely. He didn't feel like he could really even leave the room they had rented, felt like if he didn't get out of there he'd die. Joey sounded casual telling the story and I understood, empathized with the downplaying of it all, the effort to minimize the damage or even try and erase it all together. Their conversation shifted back to Ben, but I inevitably started to picture the events in my head, started to imagine the scenario in which Joey, locked in a room in a subleased loft in downtown Miami, descends into a wild episode of paranoia. I could see him there, alone, on the floor, in bed, pacing by the door, a nimbus of anxious energy.

He hadn't been outside skating around the pastel terracotta neighborhoods, cruising down the stretches of palm lined streets with everyone else. Hadn't been out at the clubs all night, hadn't walked home still drunk as the sun rose, watched geckos dart

out from under rocks towards the new light of the morning. No, instead he'd been left by himself, trying to stay calm but feeling a relentless wave of dread, the kind of grief that made him think about the access he had to the roof. I imagined Joey bursting through the door and stepping into view of the city, seeing the dark water past the line of glittering buildings, other roofs, boulevards of red lights. I could visualize the moment when he decided to make the call, watch him dial up a last resort, a fat chance, someone he hadn't seen in years who happened to have missed their flight out of state the day before. I could see him stop, freeze as the lock clicks in the door and his friends come in, see him shaking in a chair holding a cell phone to his ear. Imagine what's going on in his head when he sees us in the parking lot, thinking *they're nice, so nice*.

And despite my efforts not to, I began to feel a sick wave of undeserved pride wash over me, as if Ben and I were these gentle, modest heroes and I thought, *we are good people. I am good people*. I thought, *we might have saved him*. I was exaggerating, and I knew it, but heroism tasted good, made my heart beat fast. I was still full with the warmth of the fantasy when all the sudden we were pulling into Susan's driveway.

Susan was standing on the porch, waiting for us in bare feet, a six pack of beer in her hand. She embraced each of us as we made our way up to her, hugging Joey for the longest. Inside, we sat at the kitchen table, the lights turned low and a candle burning on the stove as we sipped our drinks and talked. Susan is a talker, and she filled any silences that formed between anecdotes with more anecdotes. I watched the three of them for a long time without saying anything, slightly buzzed and wondrous at

the way they could flow in and out of memories, conjure up stories from years ago that still made them gasp with great ugly laughter. I had the conscious realization that I did not belong there at that moment, and felt okay about that. I retreated to the couch right as Susan began to rifle through a box of VHS home movies that Ben and Joey made as children. The beer made me tired, and a headache had formed over my left eyebrow, and I fell asleep almost instantly.

We left for the airport right at dawn; the sky seemed to have morphed from a dark navy to periwinkle between the walk from the porch to the car, and the morning grass wet the cuffs of our jeans as we dragged ourselves tired through the dewey lawn. Joey and I each took a back seat. I placed the tip of my forehead to the cool glass of the window and watched the car swing slowly out of the driveway.

We took a curved ramp onto a long, low bridge that runs over a stretch of swampy marshes. The sun hovered inches above the line of the horizon, big and orange, and the water vibrated and refracted between patches of long grass. Susan took down the shade and pushed it to the driver's side mirror, bisecting the view from the window and blocking the light from getting in her eyes and shining on Ben's cheek, which he had left exposed to this brightness when he drifted back to sleep with his head resting in the cradle of his seatbelt.

Beside me, Joey stirred, and then sat upright, noticing the bridge, the height we've gained away from the ground, from the water. He turned to look at me, opened his mouth slightly as if to say something, but then closed it, smiled, and put his head

back down to drift into an uncomfortable sleep. Looking out the window, almost directly into the sun, I imagined again what he felt, what he could have said, what I wanted him to say. In my head, I watched him turn to me, open his mouth slightly as if to say something, and then speak quietly at me so that Ben and Susan don't hear from the front seats, and said, *This is what it feels like*:

“In the background of all your thoughts, of everything that passes through your head, even things as simple and as easy as wondering what you should eat for breakfast or what you want to watch on TV, buzzing behind all of it is this sense of altitude. Suspension. And wherever you are physically doesn't matter because there is always space below you-- empty, uncharted, open space. And it scares you that the space doesn't scare you. And all the time you think that you want to jump down into it, or let yourself fall, or just step off of the imagined edge into whatever it is. Between every single thought, every instance of processing that your mind does, is this lingering presence, this impulsive itch. Something is constantly telling you that the space is thrilling, absolved. That if you enter it everything in your world will feel better; the thoughts you can't control will stop, the things you have to do will go away, the future that scares you will be forgotten. That maybe you'll never hit a bottom but instead stay preserved in some state of self-serving cathexis. So it's a battle, between wanting some fabled clarity, some promise of blissful emptiness, and not wanting to face the reality that it might last forever. It's wanting to jump but not wanting to die.”

My imaginary hand touched his face gently, in understanding, or solidarity, as my real hand moved to rest atop my knee. The car made a right turn onto a shady street,

and then advanced onto the highway, where the green traffic signs flashed by, blurring seamlessly into the lines of palm trees.

The Beach House

The worn driftwood bench pushed up against the east wall of the Governor's Mansion wasn't the worst place to sit and wait for the door to be unlocked. It was mid-morning, and the sun had risen over the dunes just enough to cast the sea-facing side of the house in an easy unabrasive light, that became even more pleasant when paired with the salty mist of a south wind. She had been waiting outside for what felt like at least a half hour but she couldn't be sure, since the watch she usually wore to work was forgotten that morning on the bathroom counter, leaving her wrist fully exposed, a slender band of skin paler than the rest of her arm revealed in its absence. She stood from the bench, where she had been lying on her back with one leg hanging off the side, her foot swinging and brushing against the sandy brick, and stretched tall, yawning. Last summer, a middle-aged but spiritually-reborn man came with his braided ponytail to teach sunrise yoga on the beach, coaching his students through wobbly poses and abdomen-expanding breathing exercises with a voice like runny egg yolks, wavering with emotion and pride for his sacred craft. Immersed in himself, he was ignorant of the fact that many of the participants were having trouble balancing on the soft sand and were hopping around and falling just behind him. Unquestionably steadier now, on the solid ground of the brick patio outside the house, she began with what she remembered of sun salutations, bending over at the waist just to rise back up with her arms held above her head, vision blurred and dizzy. Just as she was about to release a belly breath, one of those loud exhales meant to dust off a chakra, she heard the small click of a car door closing from the other side of the house.

A few times a summer, when the political happenings of Massachusetts quieted down enough to allow the Governor a weekend off, or when he just wanted a weekend off, he would gather up his family for an excursion to the Mansion: the beach-side property situated a few miles past the line marking the state park and a few miles before the beaches designated for public access, set aside by the government to be used sporadically by members of the current administration. A mansion just in name and a more of a cottage in practice, the house was stout but airy, and was covered in the salt-worn shingles popular in coastal dwellings. Inside was even less impressive than out. The rooms, though full of sun, were furnished with aging gingham couches and cheap woven rugs— ideal for cushioning wet bathing suits and sand covered feet on summer afternoons, but not exactly chic. The current Governor was a severe Republican, elected two years ago in the wake of an economic panic that fueled the state's misguided but rapidly growing distrust of liberal politicians. He was consistently somber and very serious, with a thick brow that gave the impression that he was permanently annoyed, an assumption not helped by the fact that he stood 6'3 and weighed almost three hundred pounds. Naturally, his wife was a wafty woman, all skeleton, with a pointed face and pale hair pulled back tightly from her unwrinkled forehead. Their children, five of them spanning from ages 10 to 22, all resembled their father almost entirely— dark coloring and large waistbands.

When the large black car came to a stop in the seashell driveway of the Mansion, the three youngest of the Governor's children clamoured out, already dressed in red bathing suits and rash guards, their exposed skin slick with the white sheen of sunblock.

They clutched their iPhones and stowed their laptop cases under thick arms, and made their way towards the back gate. None of them turned around as the Governor's wife stuck a slender hand out of the window and waved them goodbye, wished them a nice afternoon and shouted out a tentative return time. The window was still in the process of sealing itself shut when the car made a quick U-turn out of the driveway, whisking away the First Lady and her slender hand along with her husband and older children, back down the long road that lead out of the park.

Lottie had not been expecting this. She knew that when the Governor visited, a lifeguard or two was sent down from the public beach to the Mansion property to watch the water should any guests want to swim or play near it, as was the policy of the state park. But the task was appointed so infrequently and competed for so fiercely, that the post seemed almost mythical to her. And in none of the pleasant anecdotes she had overheard about others' experiences at the house did the parental supervisors just *leave*. Under normal circumstances, everyone on the patrol would be eager to be sent down to the Mansion because the assignment promised a day removed from the usual chaos and crowds of the public beach in exchange for a few hours of sitting in the sand in the shadow of the Mansion, being held responsible for a just a handful of lives rather than a whole herd of them. Lottie had never been sent before, and she would have been secretly thrilled to have been selected for the special job, would have swelled with an embarrassing pride that she knew she shouldn't feel over something so small, had it not been for the fact that every other person on her patrol had been sent home this morning. The night before, Massachusetts lawmakers, stuck in a continued conflict over

budget spending that caused a highly publicized upset in status quo that the opposing parties vehemently blamed each other for, initiated a total shutdown of the state government until a decision or a compromise could be made. When Lottie came into work that morning, she was surprised by the very noticeable lack of other people there, and when she arrived at the guard headquarters, her captain was already telling her co-workers to leave and not return until further notice. Except for her and apparently, the Governor and his family. The call from the park's front gate relaying the message that the family would be spending the day at the Mansion coincided perfectly with Lottie's entrance into the captain's line of vision, and before she knew it she was being escorted down the beach on a quad and deposited on the back porch.

But she definitely did not expect the Governor himself to leave or take his wife with him. She watched from the patio as a pair of grubby hands pushed open the back gate, and found herself suddenly with three young and important children in her care.

The day had grown more gorgeous, had morphed into one of those forgiving midsummer afternoons where the brazen heat quells slightly, allowing a suggestion of a coming Fall to present itself. Cool winds blew through the crisp blue sky, and the sharp lapping of the sea hitting the shore blended with the squawking of gulls as they swooped down in delicate arcs to scoop small fish into their bills. As the oldest of the three children pushed the key into lock of the back door, Lottie found herself wishing not to be home like everyone else, but to be out near the shoreline, the only person for miles.

Their names were Eric, Samantha, and Billy, ordered in age from oldest to youngest. When she told them her name was Lottie, Samantha asked “What kind of name is *that?*” in a tone that in no way suggested a genuine question. She was about eleven and already similar in size to Lottie, almost a decade her senior. Lottie chose not to answer and followed the children into the house, pulling the door closed behind her.

They began to shed the burden of backpacks and tote bags stuffed with terry cloth towels, piling everything in a heap in the center of the living room. Lottie, still reeling from the shock of her unexpected abandonment, stood awkwardly off in the corner, watching as the two boys settled themselves into the musty couch cushions, unleashing electronics from their pockets. Samantha had kept her small sparkly purse with her, which Lottie found endearing. She recalled a memory of a pool party she attended when she was around the same age or maybe a bit younger than Samantha was now, where she had insisted on wearing her best pair of dress shoes and only set of earrings to go along with her bathing suit, strutting down the concrete sidewalk in tiny Easter heels, emerald studs in her ears. From the purse, Samantha pulled out a notebook also covered in glitter and began to leaf through the pages of it as she curled herself into a rocking chair. For a second, Lottie felt relieved-- she grew up just slightly before it became normal for five-year-old children to possess a tablet or cell phone all their own, and the sight of a young girl with a notebook prompted her to feel some mismatched righteousness for an analog age which she herself barely remembered. But Samantha (“it’s Sammy,” she corrected Lottie fiercely when she addressed her by her full name) was soon setting the notebook down so she could dig through her things,

eventually producing a glassy cell phone into which she plugged strawberry colored headphones and disappeared into the screen.

To the room, because she felt too timid to attempt to address all children directly, Lottie announced, "It's a really nice day today. And the tide should be going out really soon, so the water will be easier to swim in. So uh, just let me know when you want to go outside..." None of them looked her way. She was bothered by the lack of authority in her voice, her inability to feel confident in front of children and preteens. Lottie did not babysit much, had no nieces or nephews or friends with kids, and therefore didn't know how to act around them. In her head, the ideal child resembled a fussy houseplant, like an orchid that needed to be constantly moved to the sunniest windowsill-- something requiring a certain effort and care to produce the best and most beautiful reward. Looking at the human children before her, Lottie debated on whether or not to address them as if they were just other adults, or if she should be peppier in her tone, use upwards inflections at the ends of her statements, close off everything with an exclamation! But before she could decide what to say next or how to say it, one of the boys flicked on the dated television set and the hum of static filled the air. While he surfed through channels she set herself to a new task: attempting to wrench open the windows to let some air in. The house had been sitting unoccupied for weeks at least, and the atmosphere inside was inexplicably stale and humid at the same time. When she realized the latest coat of paint on the windowsill was effectively gluing the window shut, she resigned to propping the back door open with a rock found under the bench she'd been lying on peacefully just several minutes earlier. Standing in the doorway to

feel the breeze blow around her legs, Lottie began biting her fingernails, gnawing absentmindedly on the frayed flesh of her cuticles.

Lottie felt predisposed to dislike the Governor's children and felt slightly guilty for not making more of an effort to see them objectively, separate from their father. At 20, she had just really started to develop a conscious political identity, recognizing her values and beliefs, but wouldn't yet proclaim herself as savvy, or completely in the know. But it solidified her suspicions of the Governor's character that he would make the public decision to visit a beach shut down by his own doing, and then request a state employee to watch his children for him in this place that he made vacant.

The TV was broadcasting some off-brand reality show that aired probably before Billy was born and was definitely too mature in content for him to be watching, but Lottie did not say anything or make a move to turn it off. She had worked herself up into an uncomfortable anger and felt suddenly claustrophobic in the house. She listened to the vapid chatter of the pixelated images until it became white noise, which eventually took on the inverse effect of calming her down.

Growing increasingly more relaxed, she began to roll her neck in slow, stretched circles, remembering another thing from yoga she could actually do without falling over. Her head lolled lazily and her eyes closed, and soon enough she had worked herself into a rhythm of clockwise and counterclockwise, counterclockwise, and clockwise. And then she felt the unmistakable burn of eyes on her.

"What are you doing?" Sammy was looking at her intensely. Lottie decided to answer honestly.

“It’s something that I learned in yoga. It just stretches out your neck and loosens your muscles and stuff.” Then, feeling risky, as if the 11 year old before her was someone she was desperately trying to win over, which she sort of was, Lottie asked, “do you want me to show you how to do it?”

“Nope!” Sammy chirped meanly. All Zen that might have built up in Lottie over the last minute drained out. She felt a controlled rage building up that manifested physically in a loud clap that made the children jump.

“Okay!” Lottie exclaimed, a pointed sourness in her voice that the Governor's children hadn't expected from her, judging by the semi-startled looks on their small faces. “It is *really*, truly beautiful outside today. Even if I didn't have to work today I'd still want to be here! So I think we should all go outside and enjoy it. Before you guys know it you're going to have to go back to school and you--”

She was cut off by the two boys joining together in a loud chorus of “Nooooooooo!”s.

“But *why*?”

“We just don't *want* to,” whined the older one, Eric. “Are you just gonna hang around and yell at us all day?” he asked, rolling his head lazily across the couch pillow to look at her sideways.

Lottie, heat rising in her cheeks in embarrassment for again feeling intimidated by tweens, snapped back, “I am required by state law to watch every single move you make while you're here today. I'll follow you everywhere you go and keep an eye on

everything you do, with no exceptions.” Seeing Billy’s eyes widen, she understood that they didn’t entirely grasp the sarcasm.

“No...” she backtracked, “but if you do want to go play in the water or on the beach I have to come out with you.”

“We know how to swim,” the boys said in unison.

She didn’t feel like disputing with them, so instead she cheerfully asked, “is this the first time you’ve been here this summer? I’ve never been here before, even though I’ve worked on the beach for a few years now. It’s a cool spot for a day trip.” She could hear her disingenuous voice as if it were coming from somewhere removed from her own mouth.

“Not really,” Sammy said back, looking down at her phone. “The beach by our house is better, and we only really come here when Dad has work to do in the area.”

Lottie couldn’t help herself, and forgetting or ignoring the fact that she was communicating with an eleven-year-old asked, “What work is he doing? I thought he shut the government down,” her tone slick with judgement.

Eric flashed her an incriminating look and shot back, “How should we know?”

“Yeah, how should we know?” Billy echoed.

Lottie felt like she’d crossed a line, or rather drawn a line, separating herself farther from the Governor’s kids and into offensive territory. As the morning stretched on, the sun began to shine directly into the house, making the little living room feel hot and overwhelming. She tried to imagine what it would be like to have her father be a public figure, instead of the humble proprietor of a small landscaping company. She

also wondered what it would be like to grow up knowing her family possessed considerable and powerful wealth; having a real mansion to go home to, marble surfaces in the kitchen, jars of luxury creams and perfumes lining the bathroom medicine cabinets, cashmere cardigans swaying in the closet. Curiosity mounting again, she turned to the young girl who, after several long seconds of annoyed eye contact, begrudgingly pulled off her headphones.

“So what’s it like having a famous dad?”

All three of the children laughed, finally united in one big, communal, angry joke.

“Our dad’s *not* famous. People with famous dads get recognized in the street and sent free stuff,” Sammy huffed.

“So no one ever recognizes you? Not even in school or anything?” Lottie, trying to move the conversation back to familiar territory, hoped that the girl would like talking about the perks her social status gave her in whatever upscale, private middle school she attended. But Eric answered instead.

“People *know* he’s our dad, but no one really cares. We don’t get to meet anyone actually cool.”

“Yeah,” Sammy began, “I wish he was the Governor in like, California, instead.”

“I bet the beach house would be better there too,” Eric finished nastily.

Lottie thought of her small bedroom at home, how brown water stains blossomed in a corner of the ceiling. She could taste the sourness of old lies on her tongue, the ones that kept her wealthier friends separate from her real world. *We can’t hang at my*

house today, we're re-doing the living room. My brother has friends over tonight, so we can't sleep at my place. Sorry, we're painting the hallways.

“You know, I bet a lot of kids wish they had a house like this just as like, *a house*. Not even just as a beach house,” Lottie told them.

Eric looked at her as if she just told him that some people enjoy being run over by trucks. “Who would *ever* want to live in a house like this?”

“Lots of people! Literally so many people! There are people who don't have houses *period*. There are people who live on the *streets*. People who work all day and all night and still don't have enough money to even harbor the *thought* of owning a house like this!” Lottie could sense the positive correlation between adrenaline and dramatics, but kept going, her voice rising to a quiet yell, “Not everyone can have a ton of money and two houses and an iPad to watch stupid YouTube videos on all day long! Not everyone can just do whatever they want wherever they want to do it!” She took several puffs of air and finished with “that's not how *life* works!” as if she knew, exactly, how life did work.

The only thing her rant produced from Eric was a disgusted “whatever.” He shot her a look of pure malice and walked out of the room, little Billy trailing behind him. Lottie realized for the first time that she might get fired. She wondered if she should follow the boys, if it was really still her job to make sure they didn't get into danger even though they were still in the house. She decided against it. *I'm not a fucking babysitter*, she thought.

Sammy had been sitting on the couch the whole time, her headphones returned to her ears and her nose buried in her phone. Lottie sat in a chair across from her and looked out the window. She heard the mechanical twang of a video being played through a cell phone speaker and realized that Sammy had disconnected her headphones from the device. Lottie recognized the sound of the video as a clip from a popular reality TV show, the one in which serious adolescent dancers get yelled at by their parents and their instructors for the first 55 minutes, and then do routines full of perfect pirouettes for the last five. *Dance Moms*. Figuring she had berated these children for their pop culture tastes and lifestyles enough for one morning, Lottie decided to not make comment about the ridiculousness of the show. Instead, she told Sammy that she too, liked *Dance Moms*.

“Really?” Sammy said, surprised.

“Yeah,” Lottie answered. “I actually used to dance, so I like watching the girls do their routines.”

“That’s my favorite part too,” Sammy said, looking up from her phone. “They’re all really talented and will probably all get to dance for their careers and like, be Rockettes or something.”

“Being a professional dancer must be so cool. I bet they get to travel all over the world and wear really cool costumes.” Lottie made a mental note to stop saying *cool* so much.

“Definitely! But this show is just about kids, and they don’t really get to go to different countries yet.”

Lottie could sense common ground. After driving the boys fully out of her presence, this seemed like a victory. She felt compelled to connect to Sammy. Something about the sparkly notebook still tugged at her.

“Who’s your favorite dancer on the show?”

“Oh, *definitely* Maddy. I watch her videos all the time. I actually know a lot of her moves.”

“Woah, no way,” Lottie said, impressed. “Could I see?”

A shadow of embarrassment passed over Sammy’s face, and she seemed younger than she had all morning. She scanned the room, making sure her brothers were out of sight. “I guess I can show you a few things,” she said, getting up off the couch and walking towards the kitchen, gesturing for Lottie to follow.

Sammy pushed the wicker chairs and small table out of the kitchen and into the living room, clearing space on the floor. She walked into the middle of the room and posed like a Greek sculpture, her head tilted slightly upwards, her right shoulder thrust out, her spine curving inwards and twisting out simultaneously. She held the position for a moment, a calculated stoicism painted across her young features. Then, without music or a beat she burst into a series of practiced, pre-choreographed moves, all in perfect imitation of the young reality-show dancer. Sammy sashayed across the linoleum, leapt into wobbly jetes, pas de bourree-d into double pirouettes, all while keeping the young dancer’s mask of pained earnesty and severity perfectly on her face. Sammy’s technique couldn’t ever match the other girl’s, but Lottie could see in the ways she flung her body through the small space of the kitchen that she had understood

something inherent to her body language and channeled it into her own abilities. Lottie could see her in an elegant tutu, the ballerina pink tulle sprouting from her waist as Sammy ran in delicate circles, an outstretched arm leading the way, before entering into a sequence of four jetés, small jumps and plies, ending in a relevé in arabesque so grand and dramatic that it made Lottie erupted into applause, laughing in delight at both the accuracy of the interpretation and the boldness of the execution. When Sammy ducked into a deep bow Lottie clapped harder, extending her palm out for a high-five that Sammy returned.

“If I had a bigger space, I could show you some of the better jumps and runs and stuff,” Sammy confessed.

“Well,” Lottie contemplated warmly, “you’d definitely have more room if we went outside.”

The Bridge

The first noisy thumps rang out just before dusk tinged the sky purple. I heard them from the other side of town; dull echoes carrying through the neighborhood on nothing but their own loudness. The day was painfully stagnant, windless and thick, and the abrasive heat-- though cut slightly by the growing lateness of the afternoon-- forced moisture to collect in the creases of my abdomen and pool in the groove above my lip. As I got closer to the noise it became unclear to me as to why any of the hundreds of people who had planned to gather in the park adjacent to the bridge to watch the event had bothered to show up at all, to be so near one another and so hot. And yet I could hear the collective roar of crowd, smell barbeque. At the edge of the park, I felt something small and papery land on my shoulder and for a second I imagined I could see flecks of ashy snow gently falling into the June day before realizing that I was actually paused beneath a Callery pear tree in which two small girls were settling themselves into the higher branches to secure viewing spots for the show and sending petals floating to the ground.

The bridge, which in a matter of hours would be vanished completely from the landscape of the city, had stood to reconnect land split into a V by the river, and was really nothing more than a short line of steel allowing a single lane of traffic each way to travel back and forth from the north to the south edges of the neighborhood. From above, the area resembled the top half of a heart, the grey-blue water filling in the valley between rounded peaks, and the bridge a dark bisector cutting through it all. As waves of young professionals ushered themselves into long-term leases of renovated

townhouses on the south bank, and as the factories and garages were converted into shops and lofts on the north, the bridge became less and less capable of shuttling the increasing amount of crossers to-and-fro, and the city allocated funds towards tearing it down and building a new one in its place, bigger and stronger this time. And as soon as a destruction date was set, plans were formed to gather and watch the great old thing erupt into smoke and crash into the water below. Now here they all were, settling themselves into the grass, giddy and buzzing, passing around bright orange ear-plugs to children and manifesting beers from the depths of their backpacks.

Near the water, I watched two bearded photographers with their cameras hanging from their necks as they adjusted the collar of an impeccably but over dressed model, presumably waiting to capture her sullen features against the backdrop of the impending explosion. She hiked up her long dress above her knees and waded into the water, the river pooling around her calves, her friends laughing at her from the grass.

Late last summer while on a lunch break from my then-job in an office downtown, I accidentally walked into a large crowd of people who were all stopped at a street corner. Though the white outline of the WALK symbol was glowing, the people were unmoving. Frustrated, I tried to push through the congealed mass of summer linens, using my hands to gently move forearms out of my way, when I realized that everyone around me had their heads tilted skywards. I followed their gaze and found myself looking at a window-washer stationed almost halfway up the glass facade of a skyscraper. His right arm moved calmly up and down, his squeegee drawing slick

vertical lines of liquid on the bright glass. He seemed fine-- the cables holding up his cart looked taught and sturdy, the day was mild, his stance confident. I could imagine that several minutes earlier, one or two people had stopped on the corner to watch him, and their craned necks and planted feet attracted the curiosity of the passing others, and their numbers grew until a herd formed, and the window washer became something to look at.

Curious myself, I turned to speak to an older woman next to me.

"What is everybody doing here?" I asked, though I was sure the squeegeeist was the reason.

"Watching him," she confirmed, pointing up at the window washer.

"...But why?" I asked her.

She looked at me sideways and shrugged one shoulder slightly, defensively.

"Well, he's just up so high," she said, and turned her eyes back towards him.

"He is," I replied, also turning to look at him. I wondered if he could tell he had an audience, could feel our eyes on him, turning him into a spectacle.

The woman and I stood shoulder to shoulder for a few seconds more. As I was about to break away she whispered quietly to herself, "What if he falls?"

From what I could see, the blasts I heard on my walk over had been from the removal of the last bits of the middle section of the bridge. Earlier in the week, a crew had disassembled the center-- the part that hung freely over the water-- in pieces, lifting the big concrete slab away, grabbing it around the belly and lifting it slowly to the bank.

Now that the remaining fragments of middle had been bombed away, the destruction of the foundation and abutments could follow. This opened up an unreasonably fractured anger in me, irked me like dull itch. I found it annoying that the city wouldn't be dynamiting the entire structure all in one go, that the bridge wouldn't flare up in a glowing orange plume like I'd briefly imagined, annoyed at myself for being disappointed that the chaos of the evening would be mild, confused at everyone who showed up thinking they were in store for violent destruction and would be subsequently disappointed, annoyed at everyone who showed up knowing the middle of the bridge was already gone and still wanted to see the mediocre second tier of its eradication.

Looking at the fractured structure standing feebly in pieces in the river, I felt the weird hot grief of loneliness enter my chest. I realized at once that I didn't want to watch the demolition alone. So I made my way deeper into the park and began to look around for people I knew. I'd lived in the neighborhood a few years now and recognized many of the people who lived on my block, but I expected to see friends aside from them-- the RSVP list on the Facebook event someone had made for the day accumulated over 2000 names, and I had to assume some of them had to be acquaintances or old roommates or people I'd met only once at a party but would still recognize. I wasn't wearing my glasses, which normally wouldn't have been a problem, except for the fact that I had recently been in the habit of mistaking people I couldn't see clearly as my friends, assuming prematurely that I knew them because of the general shape of their hair or by the way they walked. I'd been waving at a lot of strangers lately, so I continued cautiously, only allowing myself to really look at people once I got close

enough to see them clearly. I stumbled around for a few minutes in the grass, stepping over patchwork blankets and the bare legs that were stretched out on top of them.

And then, only a few hundred yards from the base of the bridge itself, in the front of cluster of people holding up picket signs I couldn't read and loudly yelling chants I couldn't make out, I saw a face I knew, even as it was contorted in a holler presumably about whatever cause was painted across the small sign he held above his head. Even with his features blurry and abstracted, I knew it was him, was sure of it in my gut, how funny it is how that happens. Walking closer but shielding half my face with my hand, as at once I wanted to know what was going on and to not be recognized back by maybe the only person I could run into here that I didn't care to talk to, I began to make out the letters on the signs, hear the chants more clearly. At the edge of the pack, a tall, rail-thin girl wearing a long skirt low on her hips gripped hard to the wood handle of a sign that just had a picture of a baby raccoon on it.

I couldn't help it-- I erupted in laughter. I doubled over, my hands on my knees, guffawing into the grass. I could feel him watching me before I stood up straight, and when I finally unfolded myself his eyes were there, defiant. Close enough now, I could read his sign's message: SAVE THE FAIRFIELD BRIDGE RACCOONS! Still smiling, I raised my hand in a little wave, and after a few seconds, he did the same.

We went on our first and only date on Valentine's Day. He met me on the corner of 9th and 3rd-- a comfortable midpoint between his apartment and my job. I wore a skirt and open-toed heels, both bad decisions even though the day had been

exceptionally warm for February and I hadn't been on a good date in over a year. The skirt was wishful thinking (a half-size too small on my best days and pinching uncomfortably at my side) and the shoes did elongate my exposed calves but also left my feet vulnerable to the puddles of melted snow dotting the sidewalks. Truthfully, I hadn't expected to be outside so much, as the restaurant he picked was around the corner from our chosen meeting point. But when he approached me, he had a delirious look on his face, and lank curls bounced onto his eyes as he thrust a single sad daisy my way and asked if I'd like to take a walk before dinner.

"I saw a few really great pieces of wood around here earlier, I want to check and see if they're gone," he said to me as we started to walk east.

"Pieces of wood?"

"Yeah like, slabs. Or planks, planks of wood. Really good to paint on."

I was walking slightly behind him so he didn't see when my eyes rolled back. I didn't understand how I kept attracting these fritzzy, manic types, but I'd gotten paired up with my fair share of them by trusted friends and less-trusty dating apps for months. As he power-walked down the street I continued to trail behind, watched him wring out his hands in eager frustration. We'd crossed two blocks before he turned back to me and said, "Sorry to do this. I would have grabbed them earlier but my hands were full, and I knew I'd be back in the area later to meet you." We kept walking, sped around a corner to go north. "I know you already know this but I'm Charlie. Claire told me a lot of cool things about you."

I reached out and grabbed his arm lightly, to slow us both down, bring us back to a sort of square one. The uncomfortable beginning of a blister was emerging on my little toe. He fell into step next to me. “Thanks for the flower,” I said. “It’s cute.” His eyes moved up and down the block. “So. What did Claire say about me?”

“Oh, mostly stuff about your job,” he replied. “Publishing right? That’s sick.” *Sick*, truly one of my least favorite adjectives.

“Book publicity actually, but yeah I do work at an imprint.” We turned left again, headed back east. “Do you think we’re getting closer to the wood?” I asked, as though he could feel its presence spiritually, communicate with it through the vibrations of the misted night.

“Yeah,” he told me confidently. “It’s *gotta* be on this block. I remember passing that car.”

Twenty minutes and six blocks later we were standing in front of the restaurant, a sizable plank of wood each tucked beneath our right arms. He offered to carry both, but I figured I’d appear more game, more up for flights of ridiculous spontaneity, if I helped. Though when he insisted we bring the wood into the restaurant (“why go through all that work just to leave them back on the street?”) I began to lose some of my cool. He compromised and let me leave mine in the canvas vestibule separating the hostess station from the rest of the outside world.

Over penne alla vodka and seltzer water (“We’ll grab drinks after dinner!”) he told me more about why he wanted the wood. He was an environmentally-minded artist, he

only used “found materials.” When I asked him playfully where he “found” the acrylics and oil paints that I knew he used from preemptively scrolling through the last year of his Instagram feed he looked at me sternly, betrayed almost, and explained that mostly they were donated from friends, or, when he had the cash, bought exclusively from local manufactures. He distrusted large corporations, and felt that “corporate conglomerate” art stores were contributing to the rapid gentrification of the creative neighborhoods in our city. He seemed like the kind of person who sharpied cryptic political graffiti onto the walls of public bathrooms. I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket halfway through a monologue about how using materials from the trash made him feel connected to the city, as if he was reaping the pee-stained sidewalks for their best treasures, harvesting magic from within piles of rotting fruit. I checked it when he used the bathroom. It was a text from Claire, which I pointedly ignored, deciding that I wouldn’t talk to her for a few days as penance. My neck was starting to ache from nodding politely in his direction.

He returned with the realization that he hadn’t yet asked me anything about myself. He looked genuinely embarrassed, put his hand on top of mine as apology. He returned to the subject of my job, something I was less enthusiastic about as I should have been, as my parents were. I told him about the author we were working with, and her book about the migration of birds in and out of New York. She’d spent years studying and observing fowl, watching yellow-billed cuckoos as they called out in song as thunderstorms approached, whip-poor-wills tucking into themselves when the daylight rose, sandpipers running from the waves in Montauk. It was a difficult book to do publicity for, too niche for general audiences but with a voice and energy so

charming that it rose above the drier publications in its genre. Charlie was focused on me for the first time all night.

“Do you always work with books about animals?” he asked, resting his elbows on the table, chin in his hands.

“No, actually. This is the first nonfiction book I’ve worked with. Why?” I asked, baiting him. “Do you like animals?”

“Absolutely, man! But honestly I’m interested mostly in animals living in urban environments. Like, city critters.”

“City critters?” I tried to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

“Yeah, so, a few years ago I heard a *This American Life* episode about the animal communities that form in urban settings and it was totally cool. We never think about the city as a diverse ecosystem but it is— you have to imagine it like a forest, or a jungle even. Not just the rats and the mice and the pigeons but the foxes too, the doves, *deer* even. Would you even know what to do if you saw a fuckin’ deer crossing 59th street? I mean your probably wouldn’t because it would be scared by the noise but it’s possible! They live here just like we do! And you know, you’re talking about these birds, this book is full of beautiful birds, but does it cover the ones we have right here? Right in the city? There’s kestrels here, falcons!”

He went on for a few more minutes before breathlessly ending with the sentiment that we need to do more to protect animals, treat them like equals, simultaneously spooning a generous bite of bolognese into his concerned mouth.

I went home with him. More accurately, I went *to* his home with him. I had regretted accepting his offer for a “nightcap” the second the weary “Sure” came out of my mouth, but when we approached his building, all bets were off anyway. He lived in a fully renovated apartment complex, on one of the most expensive blocks in the neighborhood. Inside the softly glowing lobby a doorman sat behind a chrome desk. A modern chandelier swung lightly to and fro as residents entered and exited through the heavy glass doors, bringing weak gusts of the mild night inside.

“You live *here*?” I asked, truly surprised for the first time all night.

“Yeah,” he said defensively, “Why?”

I wished that I had the moxie it would have taken to verbally disassemble him right there beneath the neo-modernist overhang of the building, but instead I mustered some of the polite playfulness I had mastered earlier and said, “I just wouldn’t expect someone like you, who, like, cares about the environment and gentrification, and like, disproportionate power dynamics to take residence in a building that is contributing to the rising rent prices of the entire neighborhood. And because it was built on top of a public park.”

He reeled, his face a contorted mess of confusion and anger. “The park is still there...” he stuttered, “They built it *around* the park, so it’s in the center of the building now, like a courtyard!” I just shrugged at him, and as I walked away I hardly felt the pain from my shoes.

It took me until I had been on the subway for several minutes to realize that both of us had forgotten our pieces of wood at the restaurant, his lying flat under the table, and mine propped up against the ersatz door.

The protests of the bridge demolition on account of the family of raccoons that had taken up residence beneath it had started weeks before on online forums, and had grown just enough to get a small neighborhood rag to do a mostly bullshit interview with the movement's organizer, the skinny girl in the skirt. Their main goal was to get the city to hold off on tearing the bridge down for another 24 months, enough time for the baby raccoons to learn how to live on their own, away from their mother and the rest of their family. The article was accompanied by a picture of two of the babies and it was, admittedly, incredibly cute. They looked like tiny bears, their big dark eyes and long whiskers so innocent and sweet. People got angry, quickly. Enough people to organize a protest of the demolition, demanding more time be given to the raccoons, demanding respect for their environment, citing the hypocrisy of displacing one species just to convince another. They stood hip to hip beneath the bridge, righteous and defiant. I imagined Charlie in his glossy apartment, setting a mouse-trap against the wall of his bedroom, squishing a roach under one of his thrifted sneakers.

He stopped looking at me after he returned my wave, chasing instead to chant along with his counterparts in justice. The smallest part of me felt a weird pride that he was actually doing something instead of talking about doing something, and I felt immediately shameful to have set such low standards. I reached into my backpack for

the sweatshirt I had packed incase the miracle of breeze ever decided to descend upon the day, and laid it down on the grass. I sat, feeling the soft cotton on my bare legs, and watched three cops walk over towards the protesters. Within minutes, the impassioned crowd had been ushered away from the bridge. Most went willingly, their heads hung and fists clenched. But Charlie and the girl had to be escorted away, their biceps clutched in the gloved hands of the NYPD. They were deposited a few feet away, and as the police talked with them more officers unfurled yellow tape to mark off the perimeter between the crowd and the bridge. I could hear the whining sobs of the girl ring out above the white noise of collected chatter. I hoped someone would soon explain to her that raccoons would be okay, wanted almost to go over to her and personally promise that they would find a new home, but I didn't. I put my earbuds in, and waited.

Within minutes Charlie was settling himself into the grass next to me. His eyes were red and he was sweating, the skin of his arms glistening and flushed.

"Hey," he said, nudging me gently. "Lottie, right?"

I was offended that he pretended to forget my name, but I nodded and returned his "Hey" anyway, turning off my music and pulling the buds out of my ears. "Sorry about your protest." I said, half genuine.

"Yeah," he sighed. He wiped sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand.

"How's your friend holding up?" I asked, meaning the girl.

“She’s a little shaken, but she’ll be alright.” I mostly held in a snort. He continued, looking out onto the bridge. “I’m pissed though, because I think the cops took her sign. I wanted to keep it— I painted this sick little ‘coon on it. Turned out really cool.”

I said nothing, looked straight out towards the water. The sun was about to set— I imagined it hovering over some horizon, shimmering and wobbly and radiantly orange. The soft buzz of mosquitos passed my ears, and I scratched at a spot where the grass had been tickling my ankle. Beside me, Charlie fumbled with something in his pocket. When he pulled out a tightly rolled joint I laughed out loud again, arching an eyebrow so high it made my head hurt. He shrugged and lit it, did a quick left and right scan for cops before taking a hit. He passed it to me and I inhaled as the last tinges of yellow dissolved into the night sky.

When the joint had burned down to a stub, Charlie snuffed it out on the bottom of his shoe. I was feeling a little precarious-- my eyes had taken to focusing and refocusing themselves on their own free will. I concentrated on the long strands of grass Charlie was slowly braiding together in his lap, his fingers delicately bending them over and under until a slender rope started to form. When he came to the frayed ends of the strands, he took a deep breath and let out a long, shaky exhale. Tears streamed down his face in quick little streams, running off the tip of his sniffing nose. Before I could think about what to do, the great sound of collapse erupted, and the bridge, which just seconds ago had stood mostly intact before us was crumbling into the river below, sending up clouds of dark smoke and lines of shining sparks, and the crowd around us jumped to their feet, hollering and wooing, and yelling at the destruction, and beside me

Charlie wept harder, crying into his big awkward palms. I put my hands on his shoulders and pushed him down to the grass and yelled “THOSE RACCOONS WILL FIND NEW HOMES, I SWEAR” right in his face, into his whimpering mouth, but I wasn’t sure if he heard me because the crowd was still exploding, the bridge still smoldering, and when I sat back up I found that I had tears in my eyes too, and I let them fall, crying and laughing so hard my stomach hurt, whooping and clapping like I just watched a gold medal finish or a really great play, and laying flat on his back next to me Charlie started to laugh too, big huge gasping-for-air laughs, and the tears and laughter and smoke were all in my eyes and I couldn’t see, could hardly breathe, and when I stood up I pulled Charlie up with me and we grasped at each other, embracing in the tightest hug, and then we were hugging the people next to us, jumping up and down in hugs, yelling in each other’s ears, and that was when I overheard someone’s big deep voice scream “TWO LANES OF TRAFFIC!!!” and that sent me and Charlie back into ridiculous giggles, bent over at the waist, our noses running with snot, sweating and delirious.

We embarked on the great migration out of the park together, hand in hand. In the progressing darkness it became harder to discern where bodies began and ended, and soon I felt like everyone was intertwined like a great mess of buzzing vines. My cheeks hurt from smiling so I tried to frown, but it was impossible, and when I felt the returning shape of a grin form I let hang loosely on my face. Around us, everyone was reliving the moment or talking about what it meant for the future: *the smoke cloud was not as big as we expected, the bridge is going to clear up the traffic on the south side so much that everyone will start to buy cars and then we’ll have a traffic problem again and*

then the city will have to build another bridge with three lanes each way, the sound of the concrete splashing into the water was amazing. My whole body felt fuzzy, but I floated along in the clutter of voices and limbs with a clear and unrelenting understanding that some grand change had just occurred, that things were fundamentally different. I thought about how I'd probably never use the bridge. I didn't have a car, it didn't have a bike lane. Within weeks it would fade into the periphery of my thoughts, a two-by-four of maple wood forgotten beneath a table.

I didn't realize that Charlie's hand was no longer in mine until I saw him disappearing into the crowd a few feet away, getting led in a different direction by the tall crying girl, yet I didn't call out to him. I just kept walking out of the park and towards the street, the bridge a smoking ruin behind me.

The Drawer

Lottie swept tendrils of dark hair off the yellow linoleum floor, carefully scooping them onto a thick piece of paper. She separated the collected hair equally into two small plastic sandwich bags, and sealed them up with masking tape. On each strip of tape, she wrote in loopy cursive, "Mica / February 20, 200- / ~ 4 inches." She walked back over to the wooden stool in the middle of her kitchen, where Mica was running his fingers through his newly cut hair, his hands flinching slightly each time they found the end of his curls sooner than they expected to. As she approached him, he reached out to take the bags from her hands, but she shook her head and said, "one's for you, one's for me," before placing one bag tenderly into his palm. Mica pressed his thumbs into the plastic, moving the strands around between his fingers, and then slipped the bag into his jacket pocket and rose from the stool. He walked out of the harsh overhead light of the kitchen, and melted back into the smoky mix of friends and music in the dim living room.

The sound of laughter and soft applause flooded the room, momentarily drowning out the thump of a base line.

Lottie walked over to a small drawer in the corner of the kitchen and pulled it open. She placed Mica's curls on top of several similar plastic bags, all sealed and labeled, some containing thick tufts of hair and others just with a few feathery strands. She started to push the drawer closed and then paused, and began rifling through the collection, through years of trims and chops and impulsive bangs, until she found a bag labeled "Yoni / April 10, 2004 / almost all." She kept her hands on it for a moment,

remembering how it felt to transform his head of golden elbow-length hair into a sloppy crew cut. She looked past the kitchen into the living room at Yoni, sitting pressed up against the opened window, doing his best to exhale his cigarette smoke outside, instead of letting it float into the room like the others did. His hair hung down past his shoulders now, almost three years since he last let her cut it. Lottie looked back to the drawer, and returned the bag with Yoni's name on it to the pile. She let herself gaze at the labels, at the names of her friends packed inside a drawer in her kitchen. Some of those names were in her apartment at that very moment, just in the other room, nodding their heads to music and sipping beers. Others had moved out of the city, or lost touch with her. A few of them, maybe one or two, were dead, and the strands of their hairs locked in Lottie's drawer were now corporeal relics, remnants of bodies she had touched and spoken to and changed. Thinking of this for too long made Lottie feel sick with worry that the sentient, fleshy beings scattered around her living room would one day exist only inside tiny plastic bags.

She watched Yoni lean forward to flick a cigarette butt out the window, his hair falling like a curtain around the side of his face.

Pushing the drawer closed, Lottie let out a long, quiet breath. She leaned up against the kitchen counter and looked at her friends: Yoni returning to the group after waving away wisps of residual smoke and pulling the window shut, Mica still moving his fingers through his new hair, and Alice and Claire, her roommates from college, reaching their hands to Mica's head to tousle his curls. Yoni eyeing Mica, possibly imagining the way it would feel to drag his palm across Mica's warm forehead and up

towards his hairline, coming to rest at the back of his newly exposed neck. Yoni, coming out of his head to wave away a drink someone was offering him and then cave and take it anyway.

“Nice cut, Sash!” a voice called out to her from the group.

She smiled at the room and did a slight courtesy, taking credit for her handiwork. It was a good haircut, one of her better ones. Mica looked somehow more relaxed, more at ease in his body, with his hair cut short, like he had just stepped from the ocean and shook his head dry. She thought the same cut would look nice on Claire, whose seemingly soft, feminine features morphed into striking androgyny when her hair was pulled away from face.

Lottie had been cutting her friends' hair for the last few years, after she moved to the city. It started with Yoni. He came to her with his blonde locks tangled in fraying braids, begging her to cut them right off. It was the middle of summer and he was living with no air conditioning, and would often wake up in the middle of the night sticky with sweat, his hair clinging to his neck and chest. She pleaded with him not to make her do it. He had the most beautiful hair she had ever seen-- golden blonde and wavy, and when he twisted it into thick plaits he looked otherworldly, or medieval. When she was done cutting it off, she collected a handful of it from the kitchen floor and placed it in a small plastic bag, so she could remember the way it fell softly down his thin back in shimmering yellow ribbons.

After that, her friends began asking for trims when they didn't have the money or time to go get a cut. Soon, their requests became more complicated, more than just the

removal of an inch of split ends. It became rare for her to have people over to her house and not give a haircut, to cater to someone high on the possibilities that come with modifying the body in such a forgiving way (it always grows back). Lottie began cutting bangs into friends who had never had bangs before but always wanted them, crafting pixie cuts from cascading curls, turning shaggy boys into pompadoured men, all in the comfort of her apartment. She didn't think she was even that good at it, but she never charged and they never complained, even if she couldn't do what they wanted. She found that collecting snippets of their hair and dating them was more satisfying and easier than keeping a diary-- she could remember the friends of her youth by holding a true piece of them, by remembering the rush of being trusted fully by them, by the feeling of their hair between her fingers, the sound of the shears as they closed down, cutting through years of growth that then fell to her feet.

Lottie turned and pulled open her kitchen drawer once more. Inside, the small clear bags, their contents all varying in color and texture, together created a miniscule museum of curios, a library of the strangest and most innocent relics. In six months, when Lottie accidentally tosses a dish towel on the open flame of the stovetop, and the whole thing ignites in a narrow whip of fire, she will yank the drawer out in its entirety and set it down in the next room before running for the fire extinguisher. When she moves out of the apartment and into a new one, she will transfer the contents of the drawer into a box, which she will keep beneath her bed. Eventually, she will add to it less and less frequently, as her friends leave the city or leave each other, get new jobs that warrant more professional appearances, start taking themselves too seriously.

When her sister-in-law brings asks Lottie to give her daughter her first haircut, she will agree with tears in her eyes. It will take Lottie over an hour to cut off less than two inches of the girl's hair, she is so nervous to have scissors near her delicate, peach-fuzzed ears. Lottie will flip through the contents of her collection like she would flip through pages in a diary, trying to relive each night, feel the weight of each change. But tonight, she placed the pair of heavy scissors carefully on top of the bags, closed the drawer, and walked out of the kitchen into the milieu of the adjoining room.

