

TRIMESTER
Candace Walsh

Ten years before my father's birth, his parents lost their second-oldest son, Gregory. He drowned at age seven in an upstate lake. He was the alert, serious little boy in the black-and-white photograph on top of my Grandma Colleen's burlled wooden television console. First, I was younger than him, so young I asked where he was because I wanted to play with him. Then I was old enough to understand I could not and should hush up about it. Then we were the same age, and then he was increasingly younger than me. Each December, spangled Christmas cards crowded his picture frame.

Three years after my son was born, I found out more about Gregory's last day. I bring all this up not to blame or shame, but because I was raised in a family shadowed by loss and laced up with fraught intentions of keeping the small, soft bodies who followed safe. At this point I was ensconced in the rapids leading toward a divorce and couldn't stop thinking about the risks, so much so that I could barely see—my husband or what I should do.

When I enter Diane's earnest little house, I smell soup. She darts forward, places long, light arms around me. It feels like being hugged by a giant animated feather. Such a strange new kind of power: to bring out the girlish in this older woman who gets her hair cut by a barber.

I met Diane at a women's singles party. Jostled by kitchen revelers, we ducked into a home office and sat beside each other on a slipcovered sofa. I saw a silver-framed photo of two women, exultant in wedding dresses—one was the host. Guess that marriage thing didn't work out so hot for her either.

I noticed the tension in Diane's long legs, clamped close at the knee as her torso torqued so she could face me. Diane was a carpenter who flipped houses. Her obvious expertise with tools and their purposes comforted me, given I was poised to leave men behind. Then again, my dad and my husband were both utter

failures at handyman stuff. I'd spent my whole life looking past and stepping over abandoned repairs. I liked Diane's confidence, her enunciated diction, and her pinstriped pants.

A few days after the party, Diane asked me to come over for breakfast. Breakfast? If I said yes, we would be sharing a morning-after kind of moment at her house when we hadn't even kissed.

Diane didn't drink alcohol, so we wouldn't get together at the Cowgirl. She didn't drink caffeine, so we wouldn't meet at Iconik. She didn't eat wheat or sugar, so we wouldn't meet at the Santa Fe Baking Company.

Her hungers seemed regimented compared to mine. At that time, I was baseline eating once a day: a low-calorie frozen meal at night washed down with Guinness. When I did leave the house, I headed to cafés and restaurants that seemed to be frequented by lesbians, walking through familiar doors within an unfamiliar identity: single, available for dates with women.

In this strange land, as far as I knew, breakfast dates were *comme il faut*. Before, I'd been a habitué of preschool playdates and heterosexual dinner parties where even sturdy, short-haired women in overalls inevitably, disappointingly, had husbands.

I had clocked one indisputably out woman—a trapeze artist with candy-colored hair who ran the local mini circus. Our children went to the same dance lessons. The dance studio's drab waiting room took on a glittery tension with her in it, but I felt like my attempts at small talk hung in the air in a dorky typeface.

The trapezist's art took place in the air, defying gravity's pull with sparkle and grace. Mine is formed from clay I've dug out of the earth. I hand-build, paint, and fire clay dollhouse-scale furniture as art. Try explaining that at parties. I didn't feel confident enough to try to explain it to the trapeze artist, near other bored moms punctuated by a dad or two.

I follow Diane through her house at the start of our breakfast date. To the left: a dining-room table cluttered with bills and circulars. Her old dog sniffs my knees and then goes back to his bed.

"So, Kristen," she says, darting to the kitchen, "have a seat. I

made you some Red Zinger.” She hands me a blobby clay mug. My fingertips trace the unglazed rough of its base, feel the indentation of amateur initials. An ex-girlfriend? At the party, Diane had confided she’d had her fair share.

As I sit, my latest tiny sculpture—a Mission-style bedside table with a salt lamp—thunks against my leg. It’s in my cardigan pocket. My fingers stroke the geometric spindles, the oval drawer pull, the arched base. I’d traced wood grain into slim slabs of clay and mixed the glaze to mimic cherrywood. I probably tossed fifteen of them before I got it right.

I slide the little sculpture under a circular. Something for her to discover later.

Diane’s living room is furnished with a droopy couch, rattan side chairs, and vaguely tantric art. The rug is a faux Oriental, too soft, dimmed further by her dog’s hair.

She plunks our plates onto place mats and perches on a chair.

“Steamed acorn squash, with coconut oil and sesame seeds, and some plain yogurt!”

Patches of dark powder mar the squash’s flesh. I usually roast acorn squash with butter and maple syrup.

“What’s the powdery stuff?” I ask.

“Oh!” She jumps up and brings me a wee canister with a densely printed label.

“These are deep sea minerals, ground up with enzymes and Omega-3-rich South American rainforest nuts. I’m a distributor, if you’re interested. They’ll change your life. Just look at me!” She smiles and gestures, stopping just short of jazz hands. The light catches hairs at the corner of her mouth. I want to stick a wax strip there, rip it off, press a cold cloth on the blood-rushed skin.

“I’m looking at you . . .” I say.

“Don’t I look great for fifty-five years old?”

She looks okay. Fine wrinkles crimp her nostrils, above those hairs.

I told Paul, before I packed a red suitcase we’d once bought with far cheerier intentions—I would not date men. If I were to

try to make it work with a man, it would be with him. Not for him, but for three-year-old Miles, of dimpled elbow and gap-toothed grin, and lately, tearstained cheeks. But I wasn't inclined to try to make it work with a man. Since we were taking a break, I owed it to myself to find out if I was gay or just inexplicably couldn't come without thinking of women doing it.

Paul is a high-strung man. I spent years kitten-patting away his misery, triggered by states of uncertainty, and now I'm all dust flume, zero comfort.

On our first date, I told him I was "theoretically bi." He chose to file this away in the "increased chance of a threesome" pigeonhole in the rolltop desk of his mind.

I'd filed away my desire as well. The junior high sleepover when I lay head-to-foot in a single bed with my Sunday school friend and I couldn't sleep for wanting to rest my fingers on the fleece-covered place between her legs. The time in my mid-twenties when I crashed on a foldout couch after a party with someone's friend from out of town, and my fingers found their way to that place four seconds after she opened her mouth to mine. How someone said, "What are you *doing*?" and we stopped, how I woke up beside her, my fingers smelling like seaweed and shame and truth.

My realtor friend Jill found me a three-month sublet for the months of March through May. The time period appealed to me: the span of a first trimester, after which most happily gravid women start to share their tidings or mourn an early loss in private.

The Dutch landlord had furnished the cottage with luminous simplicity. I liked the white walls and dark wood furnishings, sky-blue linen curtains softening high desert light, the promise of tulips. I also liked the brackets around my time there, the only definite in my newly loose life.

"Gay, shmay," Jill had said. "What Paul did to your purple chair is reason enough. Come June, I can get you into an annual lease."

My new therapist said, "You deserve a future that's not contaminated."

And my mother said, "I feel like you just plunged a knife into my heart."

Paul said, “Well, get out there and let me know.”
I got out there.

Paul and I had almost named our son Gregory.

Gregory was the reason my father hesitated to let me go swimming with friends. I’d ask. He’d grow still. I’d wait. Sometimes he’d say no but if not, he’d walk up to me, look in my eyes, bookend my upper arms between his warm, dry palms. “You know why I’m concerned. I’m not going to be able to relax until you get home. You need to promise me you’ll be very careful.”

The salty ocean was freedom and wildness: wave-swept into spiral swirls, shaggy seaweed lacing my legs as the sea bowled me into its shallow floor. I’d stagger to my feet in the wake of its sucking flight, pull the swatch of wet hair off my face, rinse sand-mud out of my seat, and wade back in for more. How could you be careful with the ocean?

Summertimes of my father’s youth, the mothers and children, sisters and in-laws would leave Brooklyn to drive upstate to lakeside cabins. The husbands and fathers and bachelor brothers toiled in the city during the week and joined their kin on weekends, to drink beer on screened-in porches, grill meat, relax into darkness pierced by fireflies.

The children splashed and swam in the lake each day, minded by rotating mothers and teenagers. Perhaps Gregory was the only one who didn’t know how to swim, or he was just unlucky.

I also learned to swim late, despite years of attempts, and still recall the fine line between bouncing around in the ocean, pebbly sand underfoot, and sliding into depths. As my flexing toes sought purchase, brine would flush my mouth as I thrashed back to safety.

“It’s a confidence thing,” the last swim teacher said to my dad as I stood shamefaced among the kindergarteners who’d surpassed me.

I finally learned how when I was twelve at an upstate church retreat on a lake. A grandparent-aged couple had decided to make me their project. I didn’t know which lake Gregory drowned in; it could have been that very one. As I finally swam alongside

the buoy boundary, I felt the tragedy's weight subside with each stroke.

Yet here I was back on the edge, toes curling against a crumbling shelf of the known while mere inches away, all of queer womanhood was doing the crawl, backstroke, butterfly.

Grandma Colleen had pushed me off a different kind of edge right after she died. She came to me in a dream and said, "Have a baby."

I turned to Paul, told him about my dream, and even though I wasn't ovulating, I reached for him. It only took that one time. I interpreted my son's off-cycle, miracle conception as a message that she was up in Catholic heaven, making things happen for me.

Awash in the trippy bath of my pregnancy hormones, I thought naming the baby Gregory would both honor my grandmother and spin the straw of an old loss into the gold of new joy.

At my baby shower, I told my O'Connor cousins about the name choice, and they looked at me with Gregory's same alert eyes, unsmiling. Concerned. None of them had any sons named Gregory, rather Jaden and Kaden and Braden.

"Or maybe Miles," I said.

Paul and I first met at one of my gallery openings. He introduced himself, then asked a clever question about my creative process: of all the projects I started, how many survived? His sunny smile disarmed me, as did the diagonal tilt of his chin as he listened. Really listened. He was so sweet I thought he was gay. But after he came back offering a glass of the same wine I'd been sipping earlier, he mentioned something about an ex-girlfriend who didn't like red wine. I held his frank gaze a moment longer.

I'd been accustomed to men at my shows glomming on, dribbling kiln trivia, or assuming I was there to hear about *their* art. My gallerists were well-versed in ungumming me from such nonsense. But Paul got it. He knew how to disengage. I watched him smoothly chat up other people there, because yes, I hoped he

would stick around. He left each person better—less solemn—for the encounter. His delicate wrists made me ache. A year later we were wed.

We had been in no rush to have children. He worked as a wine distribution rep. My work sold steadily in a few galleries in Santa Fe and San Francisco.

Before I got pregnant, Paul and I had discussed the prospect of me getting a full-time job so we could show enough reliable income on paper to qualify for a mortgage and buy a run-down house to renovate. Enough rooms for children, or guest rooms and a studio. We didn't talk about his rages. How on our wedding night he grabbed my jaw and squeezed it to shut me up. How I was willing to let him apologize with make-up sex. How that coupling was so potent I'd been fully present, every nerve ending opaline with adrenaline and hope.

I believed what he promised afterward, as we picked up chunks of broken dishes, then vacuumed up the tiny bits: it was the last time. He had been drunk. Or stressed. Or if I only had sex with him more, or kept a cleaner house, or didn't snap at him about the broken cabinet he'd promised to fix.

About a week after our date, Diane asks me to go on a hike with her, but I beg off, citing cramps.

“Oh, I have the perfect oil for that. Why don't I come over?”

Miles is with Paul. I am lonely. “Okay.” My vulva throbs with faint mammalian promise.

She sweeps into my apartment and pulls a chinoiserie pouch from her beat-up PBS tote bag. Glass clinks together as she pokes around in it, then extracts a tiny vial followed by a larger, unlabeled bottle of wheat-colored oil.

“Why don't you lie down on this couch, face down.”

I move toward the sofa, dragging one of Grandma Colleen's patchwork quilts. Diane tugs down my yoga pants a few chaste inches and pushes up my shirt to the level of my bra strap. I try and fail to imagine having a male romantic interest over without changing out of my ugly housework outfit.

She drizzles unexpectedly warm oil in the hollow of my lower

back. I feel a splatter, close my eyes and smell eucalyptus and lavender. Diane rubs her palms together, then presses and pushes her palms up and down, tugging each tranche of ache out of its den.

Her strokes remind me of sleepover back rubs, me chalking a parallel line of “this is platonic” alongside my body’s thrumming response. There it is, over there, my inordinate pleasure. Here I am, over here, not creepy. Now a woman I am dating has her hands on my back and I can let myself feel it all without splitting. It’s almost too much, and not enough.

Wait, where’s Miles? I jolt. With Paul, with Paul.

My grandmother must have had similar startles after Gregory died, counting her children and coming up short. I hope he came to her often in dreams. Not frantic, but calm and wise. She lived for over seventy years after she lost him. I take a ragged breath. I don’t want to start crying.

“You know what I used to do, Miss Kristen?” Diane asks. “I would soak my cloth menstrual pads in water and then feed my plants the liquid. Those plants grew so fast and so strong . . . I mean, I had to soak them anyway. Why not do something useful?”

I mumble something noncommittal and imagine her tampon-gleaning through my trash to green her garden.

In the months after Miles was born, I doubled my efforts to pacify Paul. I had a lot more sex with him, which led to more time fantasizing about women. I hired a house cleaner to come over when Paul was at work. She sang Joni Mitchell songs while mopping the floor as I worked in my studio, and Miles snoozed warm against my breasts in his sling. I noticed how different it felt—I felt—to be harmoniously alone together with another woman in my house. It gentled me so much that I didn’t snap at Paul.

And still, his anger would find a thing on which to stub its toe: an unexpected bill, his father’s slight, running out of milk.

I never begrudged him the feeling of anger. I know it well, like every sentient being. Paul’s anger was different, like a freight train that picked me up and carried me for days. Listening for its

whistle meant I didn't hear so many other things. Like, *What if you made it this way?* in my studio, or *Mama, look what I made at school.*

I would keep extra pairs of shoes in my car, so I could pick Miles up in my arms and slip out barefoot before Paul noticed. At his favorite indoor playground, my body may still have been clenched, but Miles would go from slumped and fractious to gleeful.

But. Acting sedately pleasant in this antic realm of shrieking children, with a wild bird heart crashing around my rib cage and no home (as in *safe*, as in *love*) to speak of, sheared me off from myself. My body was there. But I was not.

Miles on a Tarzan vine soaring over the ball pit—as he let go and sought my gaze in midair—deserved a mother who noticed. And beamed like a lighthouse.

“Ahh!” Miles cries out, playing on the living room floor. “Help . . .” He places a pirate on the deck of his toy ship, pulls a lever, and the pirate falls through its trapdoor, which he pronounces *trap doy*. He laughs, does it again. To him the carpet is the ocean, and the hardwood is the shore.

I'm glad he's occupied as I do some online research for my dad. Recently he took a literature class for seniors, and asked me to find out if our long-lost Fitzgerald relatives were kin to F. Scott. “You're good at the internet. I think they're in Iowa.”

Sure, I'm separated, and working, and trying to be the best mother while ripping my son's family apart, and figuring out my sexuality, but why not add something else?

The phone rings. It's my mother. She wants to know how I'm doing, if I'm patching things up with Paul.

“You know, Kristen, no one you meet is ever going to love your kids as much as their father does. Another man will look at Miles, and no matter how hard he tries, he'll be reminded of your ex-husband. It's in their nature to be territorial.”

It's a good thing I'm dating women.

“It's like a death, but there's no closure. The wound keeps getting ripped open.”

“Mom, you’re making it worse.”

“Graduations, your wedding, the whole nine. I hated every minute. My face would hurt afterward from pretending. It was like being assaulted.”

“Nice to know that now.”

Assaulted brings to mind one of my dad’s favorite jokes. *Did you hear about the peanut walking in Central Park? He was a salted.*

“I just need you to know. I wish someone had warned me.”

On April Fool’s Day, I walk outside to see yellow tulips newly sprung, cupping their compact brown clots of pistil and stamen with red-stroked petals.

Later that evening, I attend a lesbian potluck at another woman’s house. The occasion: the festival of Hathor, Egyptian goddess of women, love, and fertility. I meet and have no idea what to say to a shy group of elders. They wear faded T-shirts and dungarees soft as hemp satin. My black-patent-leather slingback shoes feel preposterous on my feet. Then I see the circus lady with confetti hair, which makes me so nervous I blunder off into the kitchen, where I encounter Diane. She is manically picking rosemary needles out of a metal pot of mashed potatoes. A handheld mixer is on its side, chunky potato paste flush against Formica. The needles remind me of chin hairs.

After she asked me to join her dirt-seasoning direct-marketing sales team and I declined, our romance lost its sheen. But getting to know Diane wasn’t a total loss. My plants have never looked better.

“Oh hey, Kristen,” she says. “Feel like helping me with this? I added too much rosemary.”

“I’m just on my way to the ladies’ room,” I say. “But maybe in a little while.”

When I emerge, the circus woman is gone.

I thought my father would want to get in touch with Walter Fitzgerald, but after I excitedly forwarded him his first email

(which dashed dreams of being related to F. Scott), he didn't respond. And when I left him a voice mail about it, still nothing. Why wouldn't he want to reconnect with another relative who was also a retired attorney, who knew people my father actually met, remembered?

That was my dad. He had a way of fading out. And wouldn't he do the same to me if I told him the truth? (I kind of had, when he'd asked me, *Are you dating a new man?* And I'd responded, *No, a lass.* He heard *alas.* I think. He'd sighed.)

I hadn't waited a trimester to tell him we were expecting Miles. I'd wanted to share the joy as early as possible, knowing he would be there to share and assuage my sorrow. This was different.

Walter quickly moved from email to mailed letters.

I'm on a gentle mission, he wrote, to bring you back to the fold. You know you were baptized Catholic. I received the christening announcement from your grandfather, my cousin. When I turn the page of his letter, I see a photocopy: *For Baby's Christening*, in delicate script, with an illustration of a baby in a long gown surrounded with rosebuds, floating on a pale background, marred by little specks of darkness I believe to be glitter. Two angel babies, just as plump, but with wings, hover over the one in the gown, scattering rosebuds on the baby, who looks at the angels with a smile. The message is clear. So little separates the baby from the angel babies. They can even see each other. Maybe that's why newborns reach up and grab at the air.

I recall a photo of my parents holding my white-gowned form as the priest poured holy water on my forehead at the font. Grandma Colleen and Grandpa Joe beaming and solemn, dressed in their finest. I had been grumpy I didn't remember it, my occluded memory like a betrayal. *Did I cry? A little.* So much pomp. Walter is giving me one more reason to believe.

I'm tempted. It would clearly mean a lot to him. And I can feel the butterfly-wing breath of Grandma Colleen's encouragement—but once I passed through a Catholic cathedral's nave, my secular dilemmas would convert into deadly sins. And without telling Walter about my explorations, I couldn't truthfully explain why his intentions were doomed (although I had confessed I was worried about torching Miles's childhood and beyond). That's the

trouble with withholding information. People don't understand why you say no when you do.

For several years, he wrote, I fell away from God. Something happened when I was young that inoculated me for life against judging others. It also forged my life here in Iowa. For a while it was just a place to hide, but sixty years later, it's a place my family has called home for three generations.

I could never be grateful for such a terrible catalyst, but it's gone from haunting my every moment to an occasional ache.

Kristen, I was the one in charge of watching the younger children the day Gregory drowned. I was twelve, and sore I couldn't go off with the older teenagers. I wasn't attentive enough, nor did I perceive the gravity of my task.

I tell you this because if your grandparents could forgive me (and they did—not right away—but they did); if I could forgive myself, I hope you will hold yourself in grace and not conviction.

That doesn't mean I've given up hope of you going to Mass. I think it would help you. It certainly helps me.

I had always pictured a bare shore when I thought of Gregory drowning. A slim arm, a pale hand. Now I see a truculent kid absorbed in a comic book, his back to the lake. I wonder if my father knows, if that's the cause of his silence and Walter's acceptance of it.

The still-soft Malm fireplace waits, its banding wheel beside the fettling knife. What if I give it wings, or wheels? Or what if I change the smooth tube into a raised arm? What if I replace the firebox with an eye? Or cram it full of bone china in the shape of bones? I don't have to give this to anyone. I don't need it to please anyone but me.

The phone rings: Paul. I finish writing down my fireplace ideas, then call him back.

He wants to know if I've slept with a woman yet. I tell him no and to please stop pressuring me—and that if and when he sleeps with someone, I don't want to know.

"Oh honey," he says with the same warm tone he used to use on his way home from work when I was pregnant, to ask if I was craving something he could pick up at the store. It settled my pulse. "I already fucked someone the first week you moved out."

Trap doy.

My stomach roils and then a plume of pain clouds my rib cage. I hear a wounded animal sound—my own—and hang up. The phone whirs against the table like a hornet.

After I sullenly drop Miles off with Paul, I drive down my long, winding driveway. Gnarled piñon tree branches reach toward my car.

I pass Miles's preschool, dark and still on a Saturday, the way I often feel when Miles is with his dad. But not this time. I have a date with a woman named B.J. in Madrid, an old mining town.

Last week, Miles's teacher called to tell me he threw a terracotta sculpture of a ring of children holding hands over the fence. My desire to believe it was a preschool-level act of art criticism had no chance against my fear that this was the first of many juvenile delinquent acts. But then I remembered Walter's words. They calmed me like a warm arm around my shoulders.

With every mile on the two-lane corridor, Santa Fe's flat-roofed adobes thin out and then disappear. My car ascends, then glides into the Galisteo Basin. So easy to forget this dense, dry earth is an ancient ocean bed, juniper roots caressing ammonite, trilobites in rock formation layer cake. I crank a power ballad on the radio and let myself believe B.J. will sweep me off my feet.

"B.J.!" Jill had scream-laughed when I told her. We'd been drinking Bloody Marys at my house. Sidelong sun glazed the lace tablecloth. "You've gotta be kidding me. Her name is *B.J.*?"

"Yeah, yeah. The pickings are slim and I need to figure this out. I'm on a clock."

Jill picked up the tall red glass. "Whether you like women or not is beside the point. I hope you do fall in love with a wonderful-woman-not-named-B.J.—but I've seen Paul out at the Cowgirl, hitting on women with his big sob story about how his wife left him because she thinks she's gay. He even made a pass at me."

My private life, bandied about as pity-sex bait.

"You're not responsible. I didn't want to tell you, but you need to know."

B.J.'s profile told me she was a tall, buff EMT with an ex-wife

and two young children. She looked jacked in her photo, wore her hair in a crew cut. Maybe I liked tall, buff EMT girls with crew cuts.

In Madrid, I park and notice a roly-poly woman with spiky hair hop out of a new white pickup truck.

“Hi!” she says, looking me up and down and clearly liking what she sees.

Is everyone in Madrid this friendly?

“I’m B.J.!”

So her profile picture was old. And she isn’t five foot eight, as her profile stated. Maybe five two.

A cloud of synthetic air freshener billows toward me in the wake of her slammed truck door. She probably smokes and is trying to cover it up, even though my profile specified no smokers.

I pull out my best gallery opening smile. She’s delusional about her dimensions and expects me to just go along with it. I could get back in my car, but I don’t. Secondary embarrassment roots me to the spot. And Madrid doesn’t even have cell phone service, so texting Jill to call with a fake emergency is not an option.

She swings open the restaurant’s rough-hewn door with a flourish, bidding me enter first. The waitress leads us to a table beneath a wagon wheel chandelier. B.J. orders wings and a beer. I order a beer.

Her hands are small and plump. She keeps one of them closed up in a fist while she whips out a wallet-sized family photo. B.J.’s ex-wife has a billowing, feathered hairdo. The baby girl wears a satin garter-thing around her head. Her son’s eyes swim behind thick-lensed glasses.

“Beautiful family,” I say, and reach in my handbag. My fingers brush the cloth-wrapped ceramic Renaissance revival ottoman I’d brought in case I liked B.J.: a purple tufted cushion atop an oval base, finely detailed, then fired to a high gloss. It used to go with the chair Paul broke.

“Oh, darn,” I say. “I thought I had a picture of my son with me.”

“Next time!” B.J. says with a wink. “So Kristen,” she says, leaning forward earnestly, “before we go any farther . . .”

Further. We weren’t going to go any further! Where was my beer?

“. . . I want to let you know about this.” She unfurls her fingers. Four. Her ring finger isn’t there. “My dog got in a fight with another dog in the neighborhood,” she says. “I did what you should never do, I mean, I’m an EMT. I should know better.”

“What did you do?”

“I tried to break them apart.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“And it’s so ironic,” she says. “The other dog didn’t bite my finger off. *My* dog did.”

Not irony.

“Do you still have it?”

“My finger? Negatory. My dog, well, he ate it.”

I shake my head no, fast. “Do you still have your *dog*?”

“Of course! He ended up okay, the other dog didn’t kill him or anything.”

The waitress drops the wings and beer on our table as I excuse myself and go to the bathroom, passing through a Wild West swinging half door with a folk-art lady painted on it.

I try to pee but I’m too clenched up. *Breathe*. B.J.’s love for her dog who ate her finger reminds me of what I do not feel for Paul. She loves him even though he left an empty space where some of her used to be. She was maybe even closer to her dog *because* he had digested her body part. He probably didn’t even remember what he did to her, although he must have noticed at least for a while, that when she stroked his fur with that hand, it felt different.

I didn’t hear it when Paul shattered my purple chair. I’d put on my noise-canceling headphones instead of fleeing with Miles, who was lost in a children’s movie in his room. Soon he would be old enough to understand why we sometimes left the house barefoot.

The iPod was a birthday gift. Secretly, over a period of weeks, Paul had loaded my music onto it. He’d even had it engraved with my name. It was so thoughtful.

A tragic plot twist coiled in every one of his gifts.

You deserve a future that’s not contaminated.

The little chair whipped past my head and shattered against the wall. I walked to the bathroom, shook the fired clay out of my hair. A glint of glaze fell from my lashes.

Jill found me the sublet the next day.

I get up, wipe, and wash my hands.

The bathroom has another door. It's ajar, divulging a wedge of weedy ground pocked by cigarette butts.

When my father's sedan door wasn't all the way closed, a recorded female voice would intone, "The door is ajar."

And then he'd say, "No it's not. It's a door!"

Now I have to go back to the table, sit down, look pleasant, keep myself from telling B.J. anything she might seize on as another reason to find me charming, sip my beer, not order a second one because I have to drive, ask for the check, try to pay for my beer, agree to let B.J. because she will insist, ignore the texts she'll send before I even get home. Or tell her I don't feel like it's a romantic connection. And then she'll still want to be friends.

The door might as well be a jar in terms of how much I feel like I can walk through it.

I startle as a chef swaggers out of what I thought was a bathroom supply closet but is in fact a door to the kitchen. She nods her kerchiefed head at me and clogs outside.

I pull the tiny ottoman from my handbag, graze my thumb over its glossy dimples, flip it upside down. It will never not remind me of its ruined mate.

I've already done the hardest kind of leaving. I set it on the counter and walk outside.

"Can I bum a smoke?" I ask the chef, although I haven't lit up since college parties. "Do people still say that anymore?" God, what a knob. Shut *up*.

The chef smiles, flashing a rakishly spaced canine, crinkling the skin beside her sea-green eyes. "I bummed this smoke. Want a drag?"

"Sure." Our fingers brush, loosing scintillas in my spine.

I take a pull from the cigarette, get the whiff and satin of her cherry Chapstick. The smoke in my lungs reminds me I can hold something close, take its pleasure, and then let go.

"Have we met?" she asks. "You look familiar. You ever go to that circus?"

"No," I say, recalling the woman with the funfetti hair. "Not yet."

"You should come to our next show. I do aerial silks."

I imagine her twirling in midair, limbs winding in and out of long, liquid columns. Upside down and up again.

The spine scintillas dance on.

She winks and ducks inside.

On the way home, I call Paul and ask him if I can have Miles for the night, even though it's not my night. After a pause, he says yes.

He meets me at the door with a glass of red wine. I see him think about asking me if I'd like some, then decide not to. He is starting to give up hope. That hurts, but it's the healing kind.

Back at our place, Miles nestles into my lap, round belly peeping out of his shirt. I lay my hand against its warmth and place my nose against his salt-tang scalp. I have made his world into two, each with its own sun and shadow.

Paul and I have. Not just me.

"Butterflies don't poop," he says.

I laugh. He looks at me, surprised, then laughs like he meant to be funny all along.

"They also taste with their feet," I say, stroking his nubby toes.

"My foot says your hand tastes like apples," he says, and laughs some more.

"What else do you know about butterflies?"

"They see colors we can't see."

"What are the names of those colors?"

"I don't know!"

"Make one up."

"Um . . . cloud dream!"

We sit in silence visiting our cloud dreams. I see opalescence, eiderdown.

"Let's have a special sleepover," he says.

"Okay! Want to make a fort under the covers? We can play flashlight-light sabers."

"Yeah!" he yells, and jumps off my lap to find them.

A week later, the phone buzzes. I notice with a small heart-bounce it's Diane. I've just paid May rent and am still a woman-

dating failure. What does she want after all these weeks?

“Kristen. I was just in a car accident. Can you please come pick me up? I’m on the corner of Paseo and Grant.”

On the way to the car, I pause in front of the most recent tulip cluster, think about snipping one for her: a cabbage-edged bloom the color of rosé.

You could give a girl flowers. It makes my heart feel pleurably pressed like a flower in a book. I think of Victorian-era intimate friendship, *billet-doux*, brooches containing sections of braided hair exchanged.

A gray butterfly with sapphire-tipped wings settles on a nearby blade of grass, waiting for me to move on before it tastes tulips with its feet and sees colors I don’t see. I wonder what a tulip tastes like, what its secret colors are.

I decide not to bring Diane a flower. She’d never even mentioned the little bedside table I left on her dining-room table.

As my car approaches the corner, I spot Diane, tall and blurred around the edges. I feel her fragility in my throat. Her friendship cupboard must be pretty bare if I’m the one she rang after a car accident.

“Where would you like me to take you?” I ask.

“Just to my house.” A few blocks later, she says, “I might have a concussion.”

“Should I take you to the ER?”

“No. I know how to deal with them. You can just drop me off at home.”

The next day, she calls me and asks me to pick up some groceries for her.

I need to finish two Saarinen womb chairs for a client. “I’m working in my studio all day. Is it okay for me to bring them over this evening?”

“Oh yes, yeah. I have enough food to get me through the day. I just need some almond milk, nutritional yeast, liquid aloe, and acorn squash.”

On the way to my studio, I retrieve my mail. Another letter from Walter.

As the chairs fire in the kiln, I read.

Dear Kristen,

I prayed for you after reading your last letter. I have been

married for sixty-five years, and my children are also happily married. I write this at the risk of seeming vainglorious, but I mean it to apologize for not having any personally vetted advice. You might think as a Catholic, I'd urge you to make things work with Paul, but after so many years of practicing law, I know people always have their reasons. Someone as thoughtful as you must have tried, and tried, and tried some more.

I open Diane's door, let her dog out in the backyard, and put the groceries away.

She's settled on the bed, her forehead draped with a wet cloth.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No, just—I want to go to sleep. But could you help me take off my clothes?"

"Sure. Where are your pajamas?"

"I don't wear pajamas. I sleep in the nude."

I pull off her woolen socks, and she tilts her hips upward. I look at the wall as her pants slide down. I smell seashore and turned earth. The down on my arms zings upward. Soft hairs on her thighs, and fewer but coarser ones on her shins. As the fabric falls around her ankles, I pick up one narrow, delicate-arched foot. Her papery sole slides against my palm. I gather the fabric near her left ankle and slip it over her unpolished toenails. She gently kicks the pants off with her other foot. The bed below her sighs as her foot drops back.

"Would you like the blanket on now?"

"Yes, please," she says contentedly.

I drape her with the quilt from the waist down, then unbutton her shirt. She wears no bra. Her arms are freckly-tan beside a moon-pale belly. They bracket her shallow breasts, vague coronas of scattered hairs around the nipples.

I turn away with her shirt and shudder-breathe. Air rushes into my lungs with a whoosh. She rolls onto her side away from me. Her spine is beautiful and long, with faint, regular knots from neck to sacrum.

"Would you lie next to me and read to me?" she asks. "There's a book on my bedside table."

“Yes,” I say, as if it were the most normal thing in the world, gingerly arranging my body alongside hers. She’s so close to the edge that my hip and arm press against her back and small round butt.

“Is this okay?” I ask. “Would you like me to help you move over more? Or should I lie on the other side of the bed?”

“No,” she says. “Don’t. You’re warm. It feels good to feel you.”

I read from her book about a carpenter who moonlights as a private investigator. My body registers each point of contact, including the brush of her sandalwood-scented hair. I read with correct intonations, but without comprehension. With each sentence, her body settles more deeply into the mattress, and her breathing evens and slows.

My mind knows nothing is going to happen, but my body is ready. I am dandelion fluff and stardust, comet streak and vole nest, wind whistling through the densest copse. For the first time.

And that tells me what I need to know. I know what to tell Paul, too, but he can wait. Something old: I wasn’t safe. And something new.

I will go home and slide into my own bed, plunge my fingers into this new, dark, slick knowledge of myself. My back will arch as if I’m falling. Not accidentally: the way a trapeze artist drops one swing-rung to catch another.

When Diane’s first snore rolls over my voice, I wait a few minutes, then edge out of her bed. I pause at the dining room table. The mound of bills and circulars has grown over the last three months. My fingers slip beneath them to discover my little table beneath, unmoved and cool to the touch. I slip it in my pocket and let myself out.